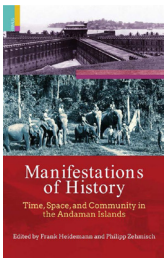

Frank Heidemann and Philipp Zehmisch, eds.,
Manifestations of History: Time, Space, and Community in the Andaman Islands
Delhi: Primus Books, 2016. 187 pages. Cloth, $59.95. ISBN 9384092045.

THE CULTURAL history of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands is a crucial, yet underestimated, key to understanding British colonial practices, Indian constructions of nationalism, as well as the mobility of people and diasporas in the Indian Ocean. This interesting volume presents original views to make sense of the complexity of the history of the Andaman Islands, and demonstrates a recent growing interest in

the academic study of this area. It appears shortly after the similarly structured *New Histories of the Andaman Islands* (Anderson, Mazumdar, and Pandya 2016), with which it shares a similar premise and methodological commitments. The contributors to the volume reviewed here remain curiously silent about the other twin publication, perhaps because both books were in press at roughly the same time.

The book begins with two maps, symbolizing the authors' focus on place and space as markers of popular historiographies. It also introduces readers to the particularities of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, where seventeen different ethnic and linguistic communities coexist in a territory of 8,249 km² (less than Cyprus) divided into 349 islands.

As explained in the introduction, the common thread for the multifarious essays contained in the volume is the concept of "manifestations" of history: manifestations are intended as objects of the present—for example, monuments, flowerbeds, museums, community names, toponyms, and so on—that embody certain historicizations of the past. The process of manifestation indicates a transition from mind to matter, and thus it reveals imaginations and constructions of history physically enacted in a place, or in a community; however, it can also indicate a transition from matter to mind. For instance, as analyzed in Claire Wintle's essay, the politics of the display of material culture behind the glass of a showcase has a specific role in bolstering particular views of history and the present. The history of the ideology behind the display of Andamanese and Nicobarese objects in ethnological collections reveals that museums contributed to the caging of indigenous people into the forced paradigm of primitiveness. The essay by Satadru Sen is equally powerful in deconstructing the discourse on aboriginality. Sen explains how Andamanese tribes came to be known in modern India almost exclusively through British mediation, tinged with exotic representations as primitive people out of time and out of place. Being aboriginals and citizens simultaneously poses a dilemma. Excluded from the nationalist project of inclusion of the folk and tribal elements in the making of the modern nation, tribes of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands are forced into isolation and do not share the same rights enjoyed by the mainland tribal groups (Adivasis), who can access the legal and bureaucratic portal toward citizenship accorded to the so-called Scheduled Tribes.

Oral literature of the indigenous inhabitants is taken as a central reference by Manish Chandi, whose essay on the ethnohistory of some uninhabited Nicobar Islands reflects upon the significance of folktales and legends for environmental sustainability and for regulating the exploitation of natural resources. He underlines the dichotomy between a society where space, land, and resources are the propriety of a collectivity as opposed to an individual owner, and a scheme for development and housing that does not take into consideration emic concepts concerning the use of land.

Apart from giving space to the voices of native storytelling, the book gives a polyphonic presentation of the history of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands as well as their mosaic-like society, presenting the point of view of ex-convicts and early settlers, of British families, of Ranchi contract laborers, and of Tamil repatriate families from Sri Lanka. Kanchan Mukhyopadhyay's essay disentangles the composite category of people formally classified as Pre-42. The Pre-42s are those who inhabited the island before the Japanese invasion of 1942: ex-convicts of the penal settlement, persons deported individually, such as dissenters and freedom fighters, but also entire tribes accused of rebellion, such as the Moplahs of the Malabar Coast, or those of habitual criminal tendencies (for example, the Bhantus of the United Provinces). Decimated by

the Japanese occupation, these groups now claim recognition as martyrs and builders of the modern Andamans.

Particularly infamous as *kāla pānī*, the dangerous black waters, the Cellular Jail of Port Blair was the place where political enemies of the British Raj were imprisoned. Prison literature produced in the Cellular Jail, also known as the "Indian Bastille," constitutes an interesting source on the history of pre-Independence Andamans. Jamal Malik examines the Arabic poems composed by the Muslim scholar Fadl-e Haqq during his incarceration, and discusses how his tomb came to be venerated as a Sufi shrine as well as a local symbol for Hindu-Muslim harmony. It also serves as a material symbol of composite and multicultural nationalism.

Often portrayed as a "mini-India" because of the "unity in diversity" of their social puzzle, the Andaman Islands host a diverse range of ethnic, linguistic, and religious groups that, on the one hand, peacefully coexist as equal citizens of the Indian nation, while on the other hand, compete and negotiate for the use, occupation, and ownership of local spaces. Frank Heidemann focuses on the history of the repatriation of Tamil families. Previously displaced and resettled in Sri Lanka as laborers under the British dominion, the government of India had to transfer them back after Independence. Half a million people were thus translocated with little choice and little information in an alien environment located in the middle of the ocean. In Katchal (one of the Nicobar Islands), the Tamil repatriates from Sri Lanka were coercively placed on rubber plantations, occupying a tribal land over which their families had no rights. Tensions and notions of social injustice are often underlined through the comparison with their Bengali neighbors, who are refugees from (present day) Bangladesh that were granted a few acres of land each to cultivate as so-called agricultural pioneers. They now constitute a demographic and linguistic majority.

Similar to the displaced Tamils and Bengalis, the tribal laborers consisting of heterogeneous ethnicity who were hired from Chotanagpur are indistinctly classified as Ranchis (after the city in Bihar). They arrived only to inhabit the islands without any of the supporting measures provided to the other communities, as Philipp Zehmisch shows. These "invisible architects" (122) of the modern Andamans cleared the forest and erected infrastructures that prepared the ground for the settlement of other migrants, but the authorities denied a subject position to those who wanted to remain on the islands. The families who occupied forest lands were thus treated as squatters. Still suffering from little social mobility and unequal representation, the Ranchi community represents the third largest group on the islands, and seeks recognition and visibility at present.

A strong claim that remains consistent throughout the book is the necessity to surpass the assumption that history is a series of chronologically ordered events placed in linear time. In the case of the cultural history of the Andaman Islands, history is better understood when it takes spaces and places, rather than time, as reference points. The identity of communities and their status does not depend on the historical moment of their arrival, nor on their temporal developments, but rather on spatial dimensions: their access and rights in relation to land resources, their ancestral homes and places of origin, and the space they inhabit on the island: *bājār* (urban space), *bastī* (village), or *jaṅgal* (forest). In popular conceptualizations of history, spatial aspects overshadow temporal aspects, for "space matters, time passes" (8). A delicate ecological as well as social area whose history was traced by innumerable actors, from native

societies to colonial programs, from immigrants' claims to governmental schemes, trans-disciplinary and innovative historical studies on the Andaman Islands, such as those offered by *Manifestations of History*, are rare and most welcome. While it excels as a volume on history, ethnology, and diaspora studies, a lack of contextualization in the broader sphere of multicultural societies and newly occupied spaces can be noted as one theoretical and methodological oversight of this work. The introductory chapter alludes to this oversight (for example, "we see parallels to other places that have experienced large-scale migration. Societies with a heterogeneous migrant population, such as Israel, Singapore and California, display origin and movement in space as more important than timelines" [3]), but the comparative dimension remains unexplored.

General notions on the history of the Andamans and its infamous Cellular Jail are delineated in the introduction, and then repetitively appear throughout the book. The lack of specific historical information on the domination and domestication of the Nicobar Islands is juxtaposed with a general redundancy in background information on the Andamans, which may help the nonspecialist reader, although the reiteration sounds unnecessary at times. At the end of the core of the book, the afterword, authored by Sita Venkateswar, who worked extensively on indigenous tribes, colonial practices, and ethnocide on the Andaman Islands, reflects on the positionality and subjectivity of the scholar through the lens of *hindsight*, somehow sounding disconnected and self-referential in respect to the overall cohesion of the rest of the volume.

The general theoretical orientation that emerges throughout the book is a fresh perspective on history. Stepping beyond traditional notions of archival material, the essays include as primary sources ethnographies, oral histories, material culture and folk narratives, photographs, and personal correspondence. Successfully fulfilling its declared intentions, the book's underlying methodological premise fills the gap between history and anthropology by giving special attention to the connection between understandings of the past and their significance in the present. Much more than simply "manifestations of history," Heidemann and Zehmisch offer us alternative histories drawing upon identity-making processes that are closely connected to the history of the shaping of a space that rapidly transformed itself from a penal settlement to a global destination of mass tourism. It is now a battlefield for activists and their romanticized vanishing primitives.

References

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