The book being reviewed is in the garb of a novel, which may surprise many people. The protagonists are Harish, who is from the mainland, and Seema, a ‘local-born’ girl, set in the backdrop of the Andaman Islands and both are researchers working in a local institution. The term ‘local-born’ has a special significance in the Andamans, meaning offsprings of those who came from mainland India but settled down in the Andamans. The connotation is important because later various groups of people - Bengali refugees, Burma evacuees, Sri Lankan Tamils and others were resettled there under the Colonisation and Rehabilitation Schemes and the ‘local-borns’ steadfastly opposed such colonisation. The Andamans, of course, refer to the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, an archipelago of 572 islands, only 38 of them inhabited, divided into two groups - the Andamans and the Nicobars, separated by the 150 km wide Ten Degree Channel. The storyline, however, takes one entirely through the four major islands of the Andamans and hardly refers to the Nicobars. Nevertheless, one gets a feel of the total isolation of these islands - 1300 km south of mainland India and closer to parts of Myanmar, Thailand and even Indonesia. The very isolation heightens the drama played out by various groups in the islands - the refugees, the Karens from Myanmar, the ‘local-born’s and the various aboriginal groups, mainly the Jarawas. The author has deftly woven environmental, developmental and cultural issues of the tribals into an intricate mesh. This review does not cover the storyline in detail but attempts to cull out the problems of the Andaman tribals from the book.

The background of the author, of course, determined the environmental and social backdrop. Pankaj Sekhsaria has a very interesting background - B.E. in Mechanical Engineering from Pune, M.A. in Mass Communications from JamiaMilia and a PhD in nanotechnology applications from Maastricht University, Netherlands, he is now an Assistant Professor at IIT, Bombay but had been an NGO activist and researcher in the Andamans for a long time and has been writing almost incessantly for more than twenty years. His interests listed in his website make interesting reading - Science and Technology studies and policy making; History of Technology; Environment and Development; Citizen Science; Media Studies; Wildlife Conservation; Island Studies; and Andaman and Nicobar Islands. His publications till date include Troubled Islands: Writings on the environment and indigenous peoples of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands (2003); The Jarawa Tribal Reserve Dossier - Cultural and Biological Diversities in the Andaman Islands (edited 2010); The Last Wave: An Island Novel (2014); a couple of edited volumes on the state of wildlife in Northeast India and Maharashtra (2013, 2020); Islands in Flux - the Andaman and Nicobar story (2019); Instrumental Lives (2019) and a couple more under production. Practically all his interests are reflected in this small book of fiction.

The book deals at length with the tribals of the Andamans - Great Andamanese, Jarawas, Oges,
Sentinelese and Jangils (extinct by 1931) who had resided undisturbed there for nearly 30,000 years. Their first contact with the outside world came in the late 18th century and, in less than 250 years, these interactions have reduced their population from 10,000 to less than 1000. The book deals with these interactions as the protagonists grapple with their own problems. The most valuable part of the book is a timeline of the Jarawas in the context of these interactions, presented in a tabular form at the end. Much of their history was totally unknown.

The earliest reference to the isolated islands could be found in Ptolemy’s Geography (1st century BC) where he referred to them as Agadaemon and the residents as demons. King Rajaraja Chola in the 11th century referred to these islands as ‘islands of impurity’. Later, Marco Polo (13th century) gave fantastic descriptions of these isles (Angamanian) and their residents, who were described as dog-faced and cannibalistic. Nothing much was known of these islands or their natives but there is documentary evidence that, by the late 17th century, Andamanese slaves were found in Sumatra, Malaya and Siam. In 1791, two slaves were brought to Calcutta to be sold. The consistent hostility of the Andamanese to outsiders could be explained by the raids of pirates to supply the slave market but there is no record of their being cannibals.

The British arrived on the scene by the late 18th century and decided to set up a colony and a naval base on Chatham island in 1789. The British expedition was led by Captain Blair, who was assisted by Lt. Colebrooke. It was then that the first interaction with the Jarawas took place. Colebrooke met some of the Jarawas, reported on their culture and language and also concluded that they were not cannibals. Health problems, however, compelled the British to abandon the settlement in 1796 but they took with them an aboriginal (possibly Great Andamanese) boy named Tom who was taken to Penang but became addicted to alcohol and died shortly. In 1840, an attempt was made by a Russian doctor Dr Heffer to study the dog-faced and cannibalistic. Nothing much was known of these islands or their natives but there is documentary evidence that, by the late 17th century, Andamanese slaves were found in Sumatra, Malaya and Siam. In 1791, two slaves were brought to Calcutta to be sold. The consistent hostility of the Andamanese to outsiders could be explained by the raids of pirates to supply the slave market but there is no record of their being cannibals.

By 1857, it was decided to survey the isles again to decide on the establishment of a safe harbour and a penal colony to house the prisoners of the ‘Sepoy Mutiny’. An ‘Andaman Committee’ was set up under the chairmanship of Dr F.J. Mouat and they revisited the Andamans in late 1857. They surveyed the smaller islands and decided in favour of the ‘Old Harbour’ on Chatham and Ross Island but, in the process, they came across a group of Andamanese at South Reef Island who attacked them with bows and arrows and Mouat’s party responded with rifles. The Andamanese retreated, leaving three of their compatriots dead and one young man was made a prisoner. Named ‘Andaman Jack’, he gradually responded to friendly treatment and was even presented to Lord and Lady Canning. He was the first Andamanese to be photographed, stayed as Dr Mouat’s guest, got used to Western food and dress and his physical features were published in various journals. Unfortunately he fell seriously ill and was returned to Interview Island. Nothing more was heard of him but the peace-making effort appeared to have failed.

In 1858, the penal colony was ultimately set up at Ross Island with 773 prisoners - within a few months, 151 died, 1 committed suicide and 140 had escaped (declared missing, believed dead). This included the case of Dudhnath Tiwari, a mutineer who was harboured by the Andamanese and even married one of their girls but who betrayed their plans to the British to secure his own freedom. The final assault of the Andamanese on Aberdeen Harbour failed with severe loss of life and this was the beginning of the end for them and, as they retreated, the Jarawas occupied some of the territories vacated by them.

The British started cutting a track through the forest and extracting timber and this brought them into contact with the Jarawas. The first unfriendly attack by the Jarawas came in 1863 and British forces and convicts made retaliatory raids. By 1875, there were recorded deaths on both sides from these conflicts, but, apart from this, the Jarawas suffered from measles epidemics and syphilis, other contributions of the outside world. The British set up ‘Andaman Homes’ under Rev Corbyn for establishing friendly relations with the tribals. M.V. Portman was in charge of this from 1879 to 1900 and he wrote a couple of books containing systematic studies of the tribes. Portman documented the legends of the Andamanese also. By the 1890’s, the Jarawas occupied parts of Middle Island and Baratang Island. The Jarawa population was estimated at 585 in 1901 but crashed to 70 by 1931. British had decided to shift the jails from Ross Island to Port Blair and the Cellular Jail was completed by 1906. This brought about renewed interactions and punitive expeditions. Some Karens and Moplahs were resettled in the Andamans in the 1920’s but more sweeping changes were ahead.

In 1942, the islands were occupied by the Japanese who even resorted to aerial bombing of the Jarawas. After independence, the remnants of the Great Andamanese (about 20) were shifted to Strait Island but the Jarawa
population still came down to about 50 by 1951 and the total tribal population of the Andamans was still barely 1.5% of the total population. Separate tribal protection regulations were notified by the Government of India by 1956 and tribal reserves notified for Jarawas and other tribals. Was their fate going to change at last? However, something else changed simultaneously - the population of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands increased by 105% over 1951-61 and 81% over 1961-71 due to the Colonisation and Rehabilitation schemes. New settlements came up at Mayabunder, Rangat, Diglipur, Farrargunj, Jirkatang and many other places. This brought added pressure on the tribal population and the resources of the Andaman forests. Friendly contact was established with the Jarawas in 1974 and a couple of them in need of medical attention were brought to Port Blair, treated and returned to their area. While these yielded good results, forest clearance, swamp reclamation, denotification of part of the Jarawa Tribal Reserve, encroachments into the reserve and construction of the North-South Andaman Trunk Road over 1988-89 brought additional pressure points and the Jarawas attacked several villages, bush police camps and timber extraction parties. Incidents of encroachment, enticement of Jarawas and even sexual molestation of Jarawa women came to light. Legal action was initiated by some NGO’s and judicial intervention has resulted in declaration of a Jarawa policy, announcement of a buffer zone next to the Jarawa reserve, even closure of the Andaman Trunk road to tourists for some time and establishment of a Tribal Research Institute. Actual population count of Jarawas was possible in 2011 and their population had come up to 383. Friendly relations have also been established with Onges and the Sentinelese. Only about the Great Andamanese, there is still uncertainty about their long term survival.

While the interests of the local-born, the settlers, the Karens, the Andaman tribals and commercial interests are still often at cross-purposes, there seems to be some optimism in the air. Sekhsaria’s book starts with a long quote from MV Portman which begins: “All Andamanese tradition dates back to some great cataclysm which submerged a greater part of the land. The Andamanese say before this cataclysm they were all one tribe and spoke the same language, but after it, the survivors became separated into tribes, their languages gradually differed until at last they became mutually unintelligible as at present...” This talk of the cataclysm inevitably reminds one of the 2004 tsunami which tore the islands apart, killing thousands and destroying the infrastructure. The story also reaches its climax, with Seema losing her life and Harish trying to rebuild his own broken life.

It is known that the Andamans are seismically sensitive, with the epicenter of the great tsunami at Aceh only 1200 km away, a live volcano at Barren Island and mud volcanoes at Baratang. On top of that, we seem to be sitting on top of a human volcano which might erupt any time. Pankaj Sekhsaria has given us a glimpse of this almost unknown world, fascinating yet terrifying in parts, a world where nature has been on collision course with ‘civilization’ for over 200 years. And while we discuss these issues, the Niti Ayog is known to be grappling with the idea of vacating Little Andaman (homeland of the Onges) and rebuilding a luxury resort there! We trust that the nation will take the right decision so that the children of nature can live in peace.

Prasadranjan Ray
IAS (Retired),
Former Additional Chief Secretary and Former Chairman, WB
e-mail: prasadranjanray@gmail.com