Glimpses of a Pre-Neolithic Civilization: The Great Andamanese

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She has carried out first-hand field research on all six language families of India extending from the Himalayas to the Andaman Islands. She identified the sixth language family of India, viz. Great Andamanese. Her results were later corroborated by the geneticists. She has widely published in the areas of areal typology, language change, language documentation, structures of tribal and minority languages, language policy and education, and analysis of ethno-linguistic aspects of language use.

In the past, she has occupied positions of Guest Scientist at the Max Planck Institute of Evolutionary Anthropology at Leipzig, Germany, Leverhulme Professor at SOAS, University of London, England, Distinguished Visiting Fellow at La Trobe University, Melbourne, Australia, and Visiting Professorships in Heidelberg and Wuerzburg in Germany and at Simon Fraser University at Vancouver, B.C. Canada. She has been advisor to the UNESCO on language issues. She was the founder Director of the Centre for Oral and Tribal Literature at Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi. Currently she is busy documenting the endangered languages of the Nicobar Islands.

An author and editor of 21 books published nationally and internationally, Dr. Abbi's work on tribal and other minority languages of South Asia has been exemplary and she is the recipient several national and international awards including the *Padma Shri* in 2013 by the President of India and the *Kenneth Hale Award* in 2015 by the Linguistic Society of America for 'outstanding lifetime contributions to the documentation and description of languages of India' and *Rashtriya Lok-Bhasha Sammaan* in 2003 for her contribution to tribal languages of India.

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About Great Andamanese

The Great Andamanese is a generic term used to refer to ten different tribes who spoke closely related varieties of the same language in the entire set of the Andaman Islands in the Bay of Bengal. Their language is known by the same name, i.e. Great Andamanese. It constitutes the sixth language family of India, the other five being Indo-Aryan, Dravidian, Tibeto-Burman, Austroasiatic, and Tai -Kadai, all of them spoken in the mainland India.

Great Andamanese people, according to the population geneticists are the remnants of the first migration from Africa that took place 70,000 years ago. They are the very first settlers of Southeast Asia and have lived in the islands in isolation practically with no contact with the outside world till the late 19th century when the British made the Great Andaman the penal colony commonly known as *kaalaapaanii* in 1858.

The genetic history of Andamanese tribes in general and the Great Andamanese specifically, is of seminal importance for understanding of the evolution of modern humans. All living non-African human populations in South, South East Asia, New Guinea, and Australia are derived from a single dispersal of modern humans out of Africa, followed by subsequent serial founder effects. Great Andamanese are descendants of one of the founder populations of modern humans.

Map1. Migration route of early humans out of Africa.
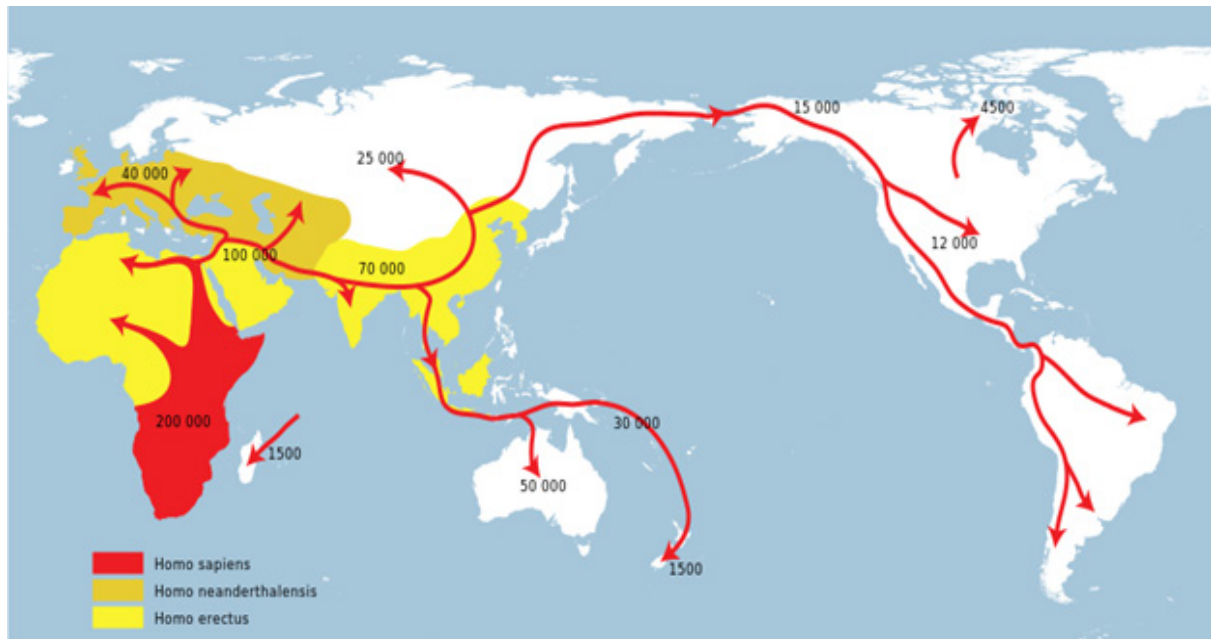
They belong to the hunter and gatherer Negrito ethnic group. Their history of contact with colonial rule is marked by the genocide of their culture, language, and human existence. The Great Andamanese lived in the island called Great Andaman speaking ten different languages that were mutually intelligible like a link in a chain. Thus, the two ends of the chain were distant from each other but the links in between were close to each other in mutual intelligibility scale.

The present population of the Great Andamanese tribe lives a sedentary life and is dependent on the government subsidy system. A few men hunt in the sea as and when possible but not for subsistence. There was one male member of the tribe by the name Nao Jr. in mid-fifties who remembered his language and had a good experience of hunting in the forest and in the sea. It was sheer devotion of Nao Jr that we could extract much information on the civilization of the ancient community.

When I first met the Great Andamanese community in 2001 there were ten speakers of the language who claimed to speak the language commonly known as Jeru. None of them were fluent in their language as Great Andamanese had become a moribund language by the time we reached the island. All of them preferred to speak in a variety of Hindi

*Anvita Abbi collecting data
from Nao Jr.
(Image: Alok Das)*

*Map 2 - Geographical
distribution of Andaman
Islanders in the present times.*

known as Andamanese Hindi, however, they were willing to remember and teach their heritage language to the members of our team.

My subsequent research on their speeches established that the language was a mixture, a kind of a *koiné* of four North Andamanese languages as the speakers of the North Andaman were dislocated from their ancestor places and were relocated in one small island named Strait Island. Because the language is a mixed one the term Present-day Great Andamanese(PGA) was used to refer to this language which had drawn its lexicon from Khora, Bo, Jeru, and Sare languages, the four North Andamanese varieties but the grammar was based on Jeru.

Great Andamanese community at Strait Island. (Image: Alok Das)

Unfortunately, in the span of the next ten years, we lost some key speakers of the language and at present, there are only four semi-speakers of the PGA. Our zeal and their cooperation facilitated us to be informed about their ancient civilization. Our approach had been to look into their society through language as we believe language encodes traditional knowledge, stories of migration and habitat, the world-view of a community, their way of life, beliefs, values, and the secrets of sustenance. In the absence of any written record (other than what the British regime left behind in the form of anthropological accounts, one dictionary of Aka-Bea (a south Andamanese language) and comparative word lists of some of the ten languages then spoken there was no other course but to study and research the existing language to get a glimpse of one of the oldest civilizations on this earth. I spent long time with the tribe in Strait Island as well as in Port Blair to learn their language and the grammatical structure.

In addition to Great Andamanese, another tribe that lives on the western coast of Great Andaman is known as Jarawa and speaks a language of the same name. Little Andaman is home to Onge and speak the language of the same name. Both Jarawa and Onge call themselves *ang* and hence, I refer to their languages as Angan languages. Their languages are genealogically related to each other but distinct from the Great Andamanese

languages. It has also been established culturally that the Great Andamanese differ in their design and construction of huts, weapons, boats and canoes, ornaments, and customs from Jarawa and Onge. The Ongeab and Jarawas differ from the rest of the tribes of the Andaman Islands by an absence of the practice of tattooing.

(Left): Map 3 – Strait Island and the Andamans.
(Right): Map 4 - Little Andaman.

(Left): Waistband, 19th Century – The Great Andamanese.
(Right): Jarawa, 19th Century – The Great Andamanese.
(Source: Grassi Museum of Ethnology, Leipzig, Germany)

Shirbele, waistband - 2005.
(Image: Anvita Abbi)

We cannot rule out the possibility of multiple dispersions from Africa at different times, and also from different locations. We may also consider positing not one but two separate migrations out of Africa into the Andamans; the first one by the Great Andamanese and the second one by the Angan family." (Abbi 2008)

Another tribe, residing in the Sentinel Island west of Great Andaman is called Sentinelese. They have protected themselves from outside intervention so far and thus, our knowledge about them is very minimal. All four tribes belong to the Negrito ethnic race. Refer to Map 2.

A Word about the topography of the Islands

The Eurasian and the Indo-Australian tectonic plates meet in the Indian Ocean. Over geological time scales their collision-dynamics resulted in the formation of a long mountain range. The same collision-dynamics was responsible for tsunami in 2004. The Andaman & Nicobar Islands are the numerous peaks jetting out of the sea while most of the mountain range lies submerged underwater. This perhaps is the reason why it is believed that our 'ancestors' the Great Andamanese walked on foot to the area from Africa.

The World of Great Andamanese

In the subsequent pages I am going to inform the readers of the world and culture of this pre- Neolithic tribe not through artifacts, written documents (which are almost non-existing), excavations, inscriptions but by analysing words and grammar of the present language which is on the verge of extinction.

The nature of the language and loss of narrative ability

As stated above, Great Andamanese is a moribund language that has ceased to be passed on from one generation to the other. Apart from the loss of language the Great Andamanese also suffer from the loss of cultural heritage, loss of ancient practices and rituals, as well as loss of the art of narration. The few persons, who speak the language now, did not

2 Anvita Abbi. 2008 Is Great Andamanese genealogically and typologically distinct from Onge and Jarawa? *Language Sciences* 31:6 (2009) 791-812.

remember any native stories or folk tales. Neither the mothers nor the old people of the community ever narrate any story to their children. A thorough investigation of the linguistic behaviour of the Great Andamanese towards their language and culture presents a bleak picture and points towards a future when they will become a group of people who would lose their language and culture, and, hence, their symbols of identity.

While the art of narration perishes in the process of language death, songs and singing are not as adversely affected. Music is a memory-based activity and narration is language-use and grammar-based, and this difference in their cognitive processes has a serious impact on their retention, as exemplified by the case of Great Andamanese.

It was a challenging task for our team to elicit any information in the language whose speakers were dwindling, had low competence in the heritage language because of depleting language use domains, offered several linguistic variations coupled with the melancholy attitude towards losing their heritage speech.

What does the Oral tradition symbolize?

It is not difficult to realize that ancient civilizations primarily those which are represented by oral expressions and have lasted for thousands of years represent:

- Consciousness of Self
- Consciousness of society
- Consciousness of Environment
- Amalgamating all--to project the universe as one.
- The factor of inalienability or inherency of actions, attributes and states with 'self' propels life.

Some of the aspects mentioned above are represented here to give a glimpse of a civilization that considered the cosmos embracing all that we see, feel, experience, and are an inalienable part of 'self'.

Concept of Space

Space is a cultural construct that can be defined by the movement of spirits, animals, and humans along the vertical and horizontal axes. In the

world-view of Great Andamanese, space and all-natural elements in it (sun, moon, tide, winds, earth, and forest) together constitute the cosmos. This factor strengthens the holistic view of the world of the Great Andamanese, where birds and other creatures are essential and inter-related. Not only the living and visible elements but also the presence of the ancestral spirits constitutes the concept of space. Interestingly, the Great Andamanese believe that all the objects of the world have a distinct smell. The only elements that don't smell are the spirits who protect them from destruction.

Concept of Time

The model of temporal categorization is known as the **honey calendar.** It is based on the names of the blooming flowers of that particular time of the year and the associated honey that the bees collect during the blooming of this flower. This naming process is related not only with seasonal change but also with the flower's inherent relation with the availability and smell of honey. Thus, the sub-categorization of primary seasons into minor seasons is closely related to the availability of honey and its taste or smell.

Interestingly, the Great Andamanese elders of the Strait Island claim to know the origin of honey i.e. the specific kind of flowers that bees used in making the honey. They can identify this by tasting it. Blooming of each flower is then associated with the change of the season and hence the specific time of the year, i.e. calendar.

NAME OF FLOWERS	ASSOCIATED SEASONS
jili toro	Onset of summer
tipok tolo	Mid-summer
phocho tolo	Intense summer
ret cher	End of summer and onset of rains
rea tolo	Onset of mild rains
chokhoro tolo	Heavy rains

Table 1. *Honey calendar*

The onset of rains is symbolized by the compound word 'bamboo + rain' Here no name of the flower is mentioned. Girls are also named after the seasonal flower that blooms at the time of their birth.

3 I recorded 18 different names of smell in this dying language. I am sure there were many more but got extinct by the time I reached the Island. For detail see Anvita Abbi 2012. *A Dictionary of the Great Andamanese Language. English-Great Andamanese-Hindi* (with CD Rom) Delhi: Ratna Sagar P. Ltd.

Parameters of temporal categorization are divided into four phases.

1. Natural Time. It is measured by movement in the sky, waning or waxing of the moon, tide formation, blooming of flowers and fruits, and hunting and gathering criteria.

2. Life cycle viz. age of a person is measured by puberty rites, turtle eating ceremony, the marriage of a person, the birth of a child, and death.

3. Historical time is measured in the context of the Pre/Post British era identified by the introduction of dogs in the area.

4. Evolutionary Period is seen by mythological sources such as the origin of the earth, the origin of humans, the great flood, the great drought, creation, and saving of fire and transformation of animals or birds into humans and spirits.

Great Andamanese comprehend life in some sort of hierarchy

The foremost distinction is between living and nonliving—*tajio* 'living', 'existential' and *eleo* 'not living'. Thereafter appears the living domain of sky, i.e. 'birds' *tajio-tut-bech* (living objects with feathers). After that, the living entities, which walk on four legs *tajio-chola* (the domain of land) and many subcategories appear. The domain of water is the next *tajio-chaur* (living bodies with scales), i.e., 'fish' and other water creatures. And the last two in the list are *i-shongo* 'human-body' 'humans' and *tong* 'plants, trees' (forest). We could through their mythical beliefs decipher that the creator resides in the sky: *mautkochua* which is not equivalent to the concept of 'God' as the community neither believes in God nor worships any deity. Only the north-west wind *bilikhu* is remembered before taking a journey in the sea to calm the tides and the wind. Although the art of narrative as said earlier in the article was decaying, Nao Jr. could render ten stories to us out of which two of them had a clear mention of cannibalism.

Empirical classification of the names of the Great Andamanese birds

I am now going to discuss the indigenous knowledge about birds that the Great Andamanese, especially one speaker, Nao Jr. shared with me. For

4 Anvita Abbi. 2020. *Voices from the lost Horizon. Stories and Songs of the Great Andamanese*. Niyogi Publishers Delhi (In press).

details on this and to see pictures of each bird identified by the tribes readers may consult Pande and Abbi (2011).

Folk system of ornithological classification and nomenclature gives us names for birds of ocean, shore, prey, forest-floor, doves and pigeons, parakeets, mynas, kingfishers, bee-eaters, birds of forest canopy, birds of omen, birds of warning, household birds, tiny birds, birds of roof, birds related to ancestors and residual taxa, e.g. heron, vulture etc. One may notice that specific names of birds in the Great Andamanese nomenclature often consist of contrast-sets which in turn have a certain underlying meaning. Pande and Abbi (2011) have classified various dimensions or attributes in the Great Andamanese bird names into ornithological and pragmatic categories based on their semantic properties. One bird name may have more than one attribute and such names are constructed by compounding.

Ethno-ornithological descriptions

a) **The primary attributes** of the detonata are size as in *phuro* (big one, to clap on thigh) 'owl' and shape of the bird or its body parts like head, beak, legs, tail e.g. *bala* (a kind of cuckoo with a broom) 'Andaman drongo', perch sites, loud calls and habitats where birds are seen. Our analysis of Great Andamanese names shows that 52 bird species are recognized by primary attributes.

b) **The secondary attributes** of denotata essentially require in-depth observations and a higher level of ornithological understanding. The various secondary attributes are behavioural bird vocalizations (voice-related and onomatopoeic names), food and feeding habits, as in *baue* (found in pairs, attached to ground because this kingfisher is often seen away from water and therefore subsists itself on terrestrial food than fish.) 'Oriental Dwarf Kingfisher', and *chelene* (the one who eats harmful wild crabs) 'crab plover', nesting behaviour, movement, repetitive movement, conjugal behaviour, and status whether residential or migratory such as *laotei-tut-bech* (foreign blood-bird) 'migratory bird'. The habitats where birds are seen, e.g. an ecological aspect of bird life, are also included in this category, e.g. *bolmikhu* (the one which eats *bol* fish and perches on cane tree) 'Stork-billed Kingfisher'. There are 66 bird species known to the Great Andamanese recognized by secondary attributes.

Phuro – Andaman Owl. (Source: Book 'Birds of the Great Andamanese. Names, Classification and Culture')

5 Satish Pande and Anvita Abbi 2011, *Birds of the Great Andamanese. Names, Classification and Culture*. Ela Foundation with Bombay Natural History Society and Oxford University Press. Pune.

Bolmikhu - Stork-billed Kingfisher.
(Source: Book 'Birds of the Great Andamanese. Names, Classification and Culture')

c) **The Pragmatic Category** includes bird names with analogies drawn with human culture and the human way of life and relating to the human sphere of observations. The Great Andamanese have related birds to their own lives by giving them the names of their ancestors-etic names (such as, *benge* 'Andaman serpent eagle', *kaulo* 'Brahminy kite', *phatka* 'crow', *mithe* 'dove') or naming them as toponyms. They have also named birds by associating them with animate objects such as related species of birds or to other unrelated animal species based on some common characteristics. Great Andamanese have also drawn analogies with shape, colour and other properties of inanimate objects known to them (harpoon, the bark of a tree, jewellery and human body parts.). Birds are conceived as objects of beauty as in *bemokatap* (the one who has a small waist) 'Andaman bulbul' or as life forms that arouse some kind of sentiment in the human mind. There are 26 bird species known to the Great Andamanese that can be included in the pragmatic category. Pictures of some of these birds are given here.

(Right to left):
Mithe - Andaman Cuckoo Dove.
Benge - Andaman Serpent Eagle.
Bemokatap - Andaman Bulbul.
(Source: Book 'Birds of the Great Andamanese. Names, Classification and Culture')

Birds are woven in folklore and culture and are perceived as warnings and omens, e.g. *chetale's* call is a good omen for hunting in the sea or *baue* warns of approaching enemies or Jarawas. Birds are also symbolically perceived based on spiritual virtues and mythological significance.

Birds are not considered eating objects but are looked upon as 'living objects with feathers'-***tajio-tut-bec***. The other reason why birds do not constitute their diets is that birds are seen as their 'ancestors'. Interestingly, although birds are not their regular food, the Great Andamanese recognize several species of birds.

Contrary to general belief Great Andamanese had a very keen sense of perceiving colours and different shades. The heightened perception of hues

and shades of colour reflects in the names of birds. They recognize several species of birds after their prominent plumage colour or colour of a body part. The Great Andamanese also recognize the properties of colour. The glittering nature of the plumage is recognized for species like Nicobar Pigeon and Emerald Dove which is called *milidiu*, 'glittering' where *mili* means 'shaking', *diu* means 'to glitter/shine/ sun'.

Each picture of birds has a caption of Andamanese name followed by English names or scientific names for easy identification. Pictures were taken on location by our team. The most important fact which came to light was that when compared to scientific names many Great Andamanese names for birds came very close to the scientific nomenclature. The following table is self-explanatory where the literal meaning of the names of the Great Andamanese birds is given in the last column while the meaning of the scientific names are given in the third column.

Milidiu - Nicobar Pigeon. (Source: Book 'Birds of the Great Andamanese. Names, Classification and Culture')

Common Name	Latin Name	Meaning of Latin/ English name	Meaning of GA Name
Pied Triller	*Lalage nigra*	Beautiful shiny black bird	Shiny plumage
Storm Petrels	*Puffinus, Fregetta sp.*	Birds that walk on water	Splashing water surface like a water fall
Plovers	*Charadrius sp.*	Plover substrate for food	Pointed object (bill) move to and fro
Eurasian Curlew	*Numenius arquata*	Bow-like beak	Foreigner with curvy beak
Woodpecker	*Dendrocitta sp.*	One who strikes the tree	Woodpecker
Orange-headed Thrush	*Zoothera citrina*	Yellow like citrus	Of vinaceous colour
Oriole	*Oriolus sp.*	Yellow bird	Yellow bird

6 Refer to the folk tale on birds *Jiro Mithe* by Anvita Abbi, 2012 New Delhi. National Book Trust.

7 I saw once Boa Sr. the eldest person in the community who was the last speaker of the Bo variety of the Great Andamanese language, talking to birds. When asked she responded that they (birds) alone understood her.

8 I am thankful to Niranjan Sant and Umeed Mestri for the pictures.

The Geat Loss of Knowledge-base

If languages are repositories of human perception, human history, human civilization and migration, then depleting indigenous language speaking population of hunter and gatherers in the Andaman Islands signifies loss of large scale knowledge-base. The contact between the Great Andamanese and food-producing communities have led to a loss of old cultural practices as well as diminishing indigenous vocabulary about specific hunting activities, local flora and fauna, medicinal plants and their uses, boat-building and diverse gathering activities. The author believes that languages carry evidence of earlier environment, habitat, and practices which are no longer in the memory of the community. Hence language death signifies the closure of the link with its ancient heritage. I will cite a few more examples from flora and fauna as evidence of what we have lost and what more we are going to lose.

Crabs

The Great Andamanese have known varieties of crabs each with a distinct name. The following list of thirteen types of crabs is no longer being identified by the younger generation. Consider: *keo* 'edible large crab'; *tauro tarakar* 'a kind of sand crab'; *phong* 'large crab'; *roxo* 'a kind of crab'; *kol* 'small edible crab'; *kaurob* 'very tiny non-edible crab'; *keyatto* 'small edible crab'; *kal* 'small sea variety crab'; *kae* 'black crab found near the volcano in Barren Island'; *le* 'a kind of crab which is extinct now'; *khurum* 'medium size red edible crab'; *munu* 'a kind of crab'; *korai* 'a kind of crab with a shell' etc.

Leaves

Similarly, a variety of leaves and their uses and names known to the elderly people of the community are lost to the younger generation. Consider a few examples from our list of florae. *Ondech* 'leaf used for wrapping the meat before steaming'; *farako* 'used for making thread'; *en* 'used for fishing as when these leaves are strewn in water fishes become senseless and float up'. The bushes of *en* are no longer in the Island as they have been washed away by the Tsunami in 2004; *choro* 'the juice of this is consumed to cure malaria and other kinds of high fever', *bana* 'leaf that causes itching when touched',

9 Abbi, Anvita 2012. *A dictionary of the Great Andamanese Language. English-Great Andamanese-Hindi (with CD Rom)* Delhi: Ratna Sagar P. Ltd.

botech 'a kind of leaf used for making tea in earlier times', *eletech* 'leaf used as a mosquito repellent, or used as a plate for serving food, *khibir tech* 'paste of these leaves is applied on the body to ward off honeybees while collecting honey', *kot* 'cane leaf used for making houses' etc.

The ecological knowledge of hunter and gatherer societies is deep and wide which is gradually being wiped out by loss of ecological balance on the one hand and loss of language on the other. A kind of sea fish by the name of *moroy* which is believed to follow the movement of the sun is no longer known to people. A very telling example of the loss of vocabulary in the realm of words about kinship terms and thus designating human relationships is the one which was used till thirty years ago is *ropuch*. The word refers to a person who has lost his/her sibling. None of the languages I have worked so far has any word designating this concept. Words for a person who loses his or her parents such as 'orphan' or the one who loses her husband such as 'widow' are common in every language but never do we find a word for a person who loses his/her brother or sister.

The Grammar of the Great Andamanese Language

The conceptualization by Great Andamanese is anthropocentric. They use human categorization to describe and understand non-human concepts. The human body provides the most important model for expressing concepts not only of spatial orientation but also of relational nouns, attributive categories, inherently related objects of actions and events, or any two objects and two events which are conceptually dependent upon each other. Human body is divided into seven zones each housing several body parts. These zones are marked by abstract symbols which are obligatorily attached as body division marking prefixes to all grammatical categories of content words, e.g. nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs signifying the inalienability or inherent relationship between the grammatical category (i.e. parts of speech) and the seven zones or between the host and the anchored entity. For instance, zone symbolized by *er-* is reserved for external body parts, but zone *e-* refers to internal body parts. If someone has to describe the external beauty of a person it will be *er-bungoi* but if someone has to describe internal beauty or the concept of 'nice' the language offers *e-bungoi*. Similarly, the word for 'blood' has

10 Ibid

11 For details refer to Anvita Abbi. 2013. *A Grammar of the Great Andamanese language. An Ethnolinguistic Study.* Leiden, Boston. Brill.

several forms depending upon from which part it is oozing out. Thus, if the blood comes out from the lower part of the body it is known as *o-tei* but if it comes out from finger or toes it will be *ong-tei,* if it is internal bleeding it is known as *e-tei*.

The system is indicative of the early times when human beings conceptualized their world through their bodies and body divisions. The evolution of prehistoric language and its structure is compelled by the consciousness of the human body, the primordial one. The perspective that human beings are central governs the structure of the modules of grammar. This could be the best evidence of the structure and evolution of the "possible human language" that has become the central concern of linguistic theorising ever since Noam Chomsky.

Culture of a community has a big role in shaping the language and subsequently, language encodes artefacts of civilization, values, beliefs, judgment, and world-view. This is in tune with the co-evolutionary approach which establishes understanding language within the context of the interactions between culture and human biology.

The body division class markers could have originated as a culture-specific trait of the Andamanese languages. These seem to have been retained for a long time, perhaps for tens of thousands of years because

(Left): Buckets - The Great Andamanese.
(Right): Basket – The Great Andamanese
(Source: Grassi Museum of Ethnology in Leipzig, Germany);

*Buomo, The Great
Andamanese sounding board
(Image: Anvita Abbi)*

structures change very slowly especially when there is no contact with outsiders. These are rather archaic structures.

Such structures are not attested in any language of the world so far; however, they were present in other Great Andamanese languages which are extinct now. Considering the socio-historical aspects of the Great Andamanese, speculation can be made here. These are the signs of the possible first human language and sheds light on the earlier stages of language evolution. Great Andamanese saw the patterns and processes in the microcosm as being similar to those in the macrocosm. Most importantly, it represents a symbiotic relationship that exists between the processes, actions, and attributes and human existence.

*Reya, Anvita and Renge -
The picture depicts how the
modern generation is adopting
Hindu culture with sindoor
in the parting and bindi.
(Image: Alok Das)*

Images source Anvita Abbi unless mentioned otherwise