

Snapshots of a Disaster

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Every aspect of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands was affected by the earthquake of December 26, 2004 and the tsunami that came in the same week. 'Snapshots of a disaster' brings together four of the many different aspects of the islands and this unprecedented disaster.

The Great Cataclysm, A&N Islands, December 26, 2004

The Andaman & Nicobar Islands: A profile

The Andaman and Nicobar Islands are the largest archipelago system in the Bay of Bengal, consisting of 306 islands and 206 rocks and rocky outcrops, and covering a total area of about 8200 sq. kms. Only a few of these islands are inhabited; 11 in the Andaman group and 13 in the Nicobars. This large archipelago is separated from mainland India by about 1000 km. The nearest landmass in the north is Myanmar, roughly 280 km from Landfall Island, the northern most island in the group. The closest landmass to Great Nicobar in the south is Sumatra, which is located at a distance of 145 km.

The islands of the archipelago lie in a crescent that stretches from Cape Negrais of Myanmar to the Banda Arc of Sumatra (Indonesia). The Andamans are considered to be the extensions of the submerged Arakan Yoma mountain range of Myanmar, while the Mentawai Island to the south and south-west of Sumatra are presumed to be a southern continuation of the Nicobars.

The Andamans

The Great Andaman group of islands is made up of North, Middle and South Andaman Islands, with Baratang Island situated between Middle and South Andaman Islands. Ritchie's Archipelago is a group of islands located to the east of Middle Andaman while the Labyrinth group of islands is situated south west of South Andaman. 90 per cent of the total land area of 6408 sq. km of the Andaman group is constituted of Reserved Forests and protected areas. 36 per cent of this land is designated as tribal reserve. Narcondum and Barren are the two islands here which are of volcanic origin. The former is supposed to be extinct, while the latter is still active.

The Nicobars

The Nicobar group is spread over an area of 1841 sq. km of which 1542 are forests. The Nicobars are separated from the Andamans by the 10 degree channel, a wide gap of 160 km. This group consists of 24 islands in three distinct clusters. The northern group consists of Car Nicobar and Batti Malv; the central or the Nancowry

group consisting of eight islands, and the southern group which consists of the two large islands of Little and Great Nicobar together with Pigeon, Megapode, Kondul, Pilo Milo, Menchal, Teris, Trak and Meroe Islands. The entire Nicobars has been declared a tribal reserve.

The islands are situated in the equatorial belt, are exposed to marine influences and have a tropical climate, which is warm, moist and equitable. The temperature ranges from 18 C to 35 C and the islands receive rains from both, the North East and the South West monsoons. Average annual rainfall varies ranges from 3,000 to 3,500 mm and humidity varies from 66 to 85 per cent.

Located in a highly seismic zone and in the neighbourhood of the great earthquake of December 26, 2004 meant that the islands would be most badly hit. Property and infrastructure worth crores of rupees were destroyed in the disaster. The human toll too has been huge – official figures state the casualty around 3500, the majority of these being the Nicobari tribals across the Nicobar Islands.