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Udit Jyoti Swargiary

Ph.D. Research Scholar,
Department of History,
University of Delhi, Delhi,
India

Imperial expansion in the Nicobar Archipelago: Trade, piracy, and the consolidation of colonial rule

Udit Jyoti Swargiary

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Abstract

This article seeks to examine the historical significance of the Nicobar Islands by tracing the varied and often overlooked attempts by European powers to colonise the archipelago, culminating in its eventual annexation by the British colonial state and the consolidation of imperial control. While the Andaman and Nicobar Islands have attracted considerable scholarly attention, particularly in relation to the functioning of the penal settlement at Port Blair, the colonial treatment of Indigenous communities, and the resettlement of Partition refugees in the post-independence period, the long and complex history of European engagement with the Nicobar Islands remains largely underexplored. This has contributed to a broader obfuscation of the region's entanglement with European imperialism. In order to illuminate this neglected dimension, the article is structured in three sections. The first section examines early visits to the islands by European voyagers and traders; the second explores the growing European interest in occupying the archipelago; and the third analyses the eventual British annexation of the Nicobar Islands under the pretext of suppressing piracy and consolidating imperial power.

Key Words: Trade, imperialism, piracy, British expansionism, paternal despotism, surveillance

Introduction

This article seeks to examine the historical significance of the Nicobar Islands by tracing the varied and often overlooked attempts by European powers to colonise the archipelago, culminating in its eventual annexation by the British colonial state and the consolidation of imperial control. While the Andaman and Nicobar Islands have attracted considerable scholarly attention, particularly in relation to the functioning of the penal settlement at Port Blair, the colonial treatment of Indigenous communities, and the resettlement of Partition refugees in the post-independence period, the long and complex history of European engagement with the Nicobar Islands remains largely underexplored^[1]. This has contributed to a broader obfuscation of the region's entanglement with European imperialism. In order to illuminate this neglected dimension, the article is structured in three sections. The first section examines early visits to the islands by European voyagers and traders; the second explores the growing European interest in occupying the archipelago; and the third analyses the eventual British annexation of the Nicobar Islands under the pretext of suppressing piracy and consolidating imperial power.

Nicobarese as Traders

Historically, European accounts have predominantly depicted the Nicobar islanders as traders who were notably receptive to external contact and inclined toward peaceful interactions. This image of the islanders as active participants in regional trading networks finds support in some of the earliest textual references. Among the most prominent is the account of the Chinese Buddhist monk I-Tsing, who traveled to India in the late seventh century CE. Describing his encounter with the inhabitants of the archipelago, I-Tsing noted that upon the arrival of his vessel, numerous islanders, approximately a hundred, approached in small boats, offering coconuts, bananas, and handcrafted goods made of rattan and bamboo in exchange for iron, which they greatly valued^[2]. A similar portrayal appears in a ninth-century Arabic source, *Ancient Accounts of India and China* by two Muslim travelers, which records that local men would approach passing ships in various types of boats to trade items such as ambergris and coconuts for iron^[3].

European narratives from the early modern period, likewise, though still influenced by medieval Christian worldviews and their attendant judgments of non-Christian societies, consistently reinforced the portrayal of the Nicobarese as hospitable, peaceful, and actively

Corresponding Author:

Udit Jyoti Swargiary

Ph.D. Research Scholar,
Department of History,
University of Delhi, Delhi,
India

engaged in maritime trade. One of the earliest such accounts came from Master Cesar Frederike, an English sailor who visited the Nicobar Islands in 1566. He described a customary trading practice in which local inhabitants would approach ships with boats filled with fruit but refused to board the vessels or accept money for their goods. Instead, they preferred to exchange their produce for items such as old shirts or pieces of worn linen, which were lowered to them by rope. In return, they tied bundles of fruit to the rope and allowed the crew to pull them aboard ^[4].

This pattern of interaction is echoed in the 1599 account of Captain John Davis, who arrived at the Central Nicobars while piloting a Dutch vessel. He noted that the islanders brought ample supplies of poultry, citrus fruits, and even ambergris, which they willingly traded for linen cloth and table napkins. Describing the islands as fertile and ship-friendly, Davis emphasized their suitability for maritime contact ^[5]. Similarly, James Lancaster, visiting in 1602, recorded that the locals approached his ship in large canoes to trade items such as coconuts, hens, and amber ^[6].

By the late seventeenth century, Alexander Hamilton provided a more detailed inventory of goods exchanged, including hogs, preserved fish, yams, potatoes, and even parrots and monkeys. These were traded for old tools and metal items such as sword blades and iron hoops. Hamilton also praised the courteous and civil nature of the islanders ^[7]. William Dampier's 1688 visit further solidified this representation, with his account highlighting the honesty and peaceful character of the Nicobarese. He described them as "civil, harmless people," unaccustomed to theft, violence, or deceit, and emphasized their reliability and fairness in trade, regardless of the origin of the sailors they encountered ^[8].

This consistent depiction of the Nicobarese as amicable and trade-oriented endured into the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. It was reiterated by John Gottfried Haensel, a Moravian missionary who lived in the central Nicobar Islands, and by George Annesley, a British politician who visited the region during his travels to India. These enduring narratives collectively contributed to the construction of an image of the Nicobars as a peaceful, economically engaged society, situated within broader regional networks of exchange ^[9].

Haensel's observations indicate that the Nicobarese maintained not only regular interactions with European visitors but also sustained trade relations with regional actors, particularly Burmese and Malay merchants. These traders were attracted to the islands by their rich natural resources, especially coconuts and edible bird's nests. Haensel's account underscores the openness of the Nicobar Islands to external trade, as foreign merchants appeared to enjoy largely unrestricted access. In exchange for coconuts, the Nicobarese acquired highly prized metal goods—scarce in the islands and thus of great utility. Metal was indispensable to daily life: it was fashioned into tools such as spear and arrowheads used for fishing and hunting, and machetes like the Burmese *dah* were essential for cutting through dense forest, constructing shelters, and undertaking other subsistence tasks ^[10].

By the late eighteenth century, Haensel reported that approximately fifteen to sixteen vessels visited the islands each year to obtain coconuts and bird's nests, though this estimate likely underrepresents the true scale of trade, as his observations were confined to the central group of islands

^[11]. Trade was equally active in Car Nicobar to the north and Great Nicobar to the south. Supporting this, the 1788 account of Nicolas Fontana noted that many country ships en route to Pegu from both coasts of India routinely stopped at the Nicobars to procure coconuts. These goods were exchanged at standardized rates—four coconuts for a tobacco leaf, one hundred for a yard of blue cloth, and a bottle of coconut oil for four tobacco leaves—indicating a well-established system of barter ^[12].

Such evidence makes it clear that trade was not incidental but a core component of Nicobarese economic life. Through ongoing contact with traders from across the Bay of Bengal and beyond, many Nicobarese islanders developed working proficiency in Malay and Burmese. They also became conversant in European languages such as Portuguese and English ^[13]. This linguistic versatility served not only as a functional tool for trade but also as a form of strategic engagement with outsiders. Among the more experienced native traders—who often held leadership roles within their communities—the incorporation of foreign elements extended beyond language. The adoption of the term "captain" by these individuals signified not only their authority and commercial experience but also their standing in a transregional trading world. Collectively, these developments highlight the Nicobarese as active and adaptive participants in the broader commercial networks of the Bay of Bengal, exercising discernible agency in shaping their external relations ^[14].

European Engagement with the Nicobar Islands

The history of European involvement in the Nicobar Islands unfolds as a series of intermittent and largely unsuccessful attempts at colonization and conversion. Beginning in the early modern period and continuing into the late nineteenth century, these encounters reveal much about the nature of colonialism in the region, where imperial ambition often outpaced logistical capacity. This interest in the Nicobars can be traced back to at least the seventeenth century, and perhaps earlier. By 1688, the English mariner William Dampier noted that Jesuit friars had previously visited the islands—early ventures that, while couched in religious terms, also marked the beginnings of European penetration into the region. In the early eighteenth century, French Jesuits Faure and Taillandier documented their presence in the Lettres Edifiantes (1711), contributing not only to the Christian missionary project but also to the accumulation of strategic knowledge that often preceded imperial expansion ^[15].

These initial incursions were followed by a more overt assertion of European sovereignty in 1756, when Denmark formally claimed the islands, displacing an already tenuous French foothold. The Danish effort reflected the broader imperial competition unfolding in the Indian Ocean, where control over marginal territories like the Nicobars was increasingly seen as essential to securing trade routes and asserting geopolitical influence. The Danish colonization project was initially pursued through the Danish East India Company, but later relied heavily on religious missions rather than commercial or military infrastructure. The most significant effort came from the Moravian Brethren, who arrived in 1768 and remained until 1787. Their settlement, however, was plagued by poor planning and insufficient supplies, provisions, and medicines. Situated in a malarial region and ill-equipped for the tropical environment, the

mission suffered devastating losses. Only one member survived to recount their harrowing experience—a story emblematic of the larger pattern of European failure on the islands ^[16]. The end of the Moravian mission did not conclude Danish interest. In 1778, the Austrians attempted a brief and ultimately unsuccessful colonization, spurred on by the Dutch adventurer William Bolts ^[17]. This incursion angered the Danes, who maintained a token military presence in Nancowry Harbour from 1784 to 1807. Additional isolated Moravian efforts in 1790 and 1804 fared no better ^[18].

During the Napoleonic Wars (1807-1814), the British temporarily occupied the islands, only to return them to Danish control following peace treaties ^[19]. A renewed Danish missionary effort began in 1831 under Pastor Rosen, who attempted to re-establish a settlement from Tranquebar. Like his Moravian predecessors, Rosen's mission was severely hampered by lack of support and resources. By 1834, he had departed, and by 1837 the settlement had collapsed ^[20]. Danish presence on the islands effectively ceased thereafter, despite a brief visit by the Danish corvette *Galathea* in 1845-46 and an expedition by the explorer Busch ^[21]. In parallel, French Jesuits returned to Car Nicobar in 1835, claiming spiritual continuity with a mission from two centuries earlier. They endured severe privation on Car Nicobar, Teressa, and Chowra before finally abandoning their efforts by 1846 ^[22]. Denmark formally relinquished its claims to the Nicobars in 1848, ending nearly a century of sporadic and ineffectual occupation. Later, Austrian interest, through the *Novara* expedition in 1858, and even a Prussian proposal in 1867, failed to materialize into any concrete colonial foothold ^[23].

The Era of British Expansionism

Between the 1830s and 1860s, exploratory accounts documented repeated incidents of violence between Nicobarese islanders and visiting ships, particularly in the Central and, to a lesser extent, the Southern group of islands ^[24]. These sources indicate that islanders were involved in attacks on approximately 26 vessels, most of which sailed under the British flag and had ostensibly arrived in the Nicobars for trade, particularly in coconuts. These encounters were frequently characterised as acts of piracy by the British colonial state, culminating in a particularly violent episode in 1866 when the brig *Futteh Islam* was attacked off the coast of Great Nicobar. In that incident, 21 crew members were reportedly killed, with only three survivors managing to escape with the vessel to Penang ^[25]. Yet, these incidents did not occur without a historical context. Contemporary accounts—including those of British officials—acknowledged that Nicobarese hostility may have been provoked by the conduct of visiting traders. This suggests a more entangled and reciprocal dynamic than the reductive binary of indigenous “savagery” versus trader victimhood. Many of these traders, some known for exploitative, coercive, or even violent behaviour, likely incited local resistance. For instance than Commissioner of Tenasserim province, Broadfoot, while condemning the acts argued in 1844 that ‘in punishing them and providing for the future it would not be forgotten that our traders often detain and oppress unprotected savage, and for all we know, may have [sic] used in the first instance the atrocities government is now obliges to put down ^[26]. Nevertheless, such complexities were routinely downplayed or omitted in

official narratives, which instead foregrounded native aggression to justify imperial intervention and the subsequent imposition of colonial authority ^[27].

Following the violent episode of 1866, the British government acted swiftly to assert formal authority over the Nicobar Islands. With the Danish Crown's acquiescence—its nominal claim having long faded—the archipelago was officially annexed to British India in 1869. Administrative control was placed under the Superintendent of the Andaman Islands. This incorporation was rationalised on multiple grounds: the need to suppress what were described as the “piratical” tendencies of the Nicobarese, the protection of maritime trade, and the strategic imperative to preclude the emergence of any rival European naval presence near British territorial waters ^[28].

The annexation marked a phase of intensified imperial consolidation, driven by intersecting commercial, strategic, and geopolitical imperatives. Central to this process was the colonial construction of the Nicobarese as unpredictable and inherently violent—an image that served to legitimise coercive governance under the guise of paternal oversight. This representation enabled a regime in which expansive judicial and executive powers were concentrated in the hands of colonial officials operating with minimal accountability. The portrayal of the Nicobars as a lawless and untamed frontier further justified the suspension of normative legal constraints and the use of exceptional authority. These modes of governance were eventually institutionalised through the Andaman and Nicobar Islands Regulation Act of 1876, which formally centralised judicial, military, and executive powers in the office of the chief commissioner ^[29].

Simultaneously, the British undertook systematic efforts to restructure the region's economic life by dismantling the pre-existing trade networks, especially those connecting Nicobarese communities with Malay and Burmese merchants. These earlier trading relations, characterised by informality, mobility, and reciprocity, were gradually subjected to colonial surveillance and control. Authorities imposed limits on traders' movements, regulated the duration of their stay, ^[30] and restricted permissible goods, which evolved into a codified regime involving permits, registrations, and taxation ^[31]. The steamboat played a pivotal role in this process, serving not just as a transportation device but as a mechanism of colonial reach, enabling patrolling, surveillance, and enforcement across the archipelago ^[32]. By the 1920s, these transformations had culminated in a fully territorialised and tightly regulated colonial order in the Nicobars, with the state firmly entrenched at the centre of what had previously been a decentralised and fluid system of exchange. Beyond the imposition of colonial law, the state also institutionalised economic extraction through the collection of residential licence fees, trading permits, and export royalties ^[33]. This marked the consolidation of a colonial regime that not only sought to control territory and population but also to monetise and regulate the archipelago's economic life.

Conclusion

The history of the Nicobar Islands, as traced in this article, reveals a complex trajectory of external engagement, beginning with early accounts that depicted the islanders as open and active participants in regional trade. Far from being isolated or insular, the Nicobars were embedded

within wider networks of maritime exchange, where goods and relationships were governed by reciprocity and trust. Over time, however, this space of commercial interaction increasingly drew the attention of European powers, first as a strategic waypoint and later as a site of potential colonial control. Danish, Austrian, and eventually British efforts to establish a foothold in the islands reflected shifting imperial ambitions, underscored by concerns over sovereignty, commerce, and security in the Indian Ocean.

This long history of European engagement culminated in the formal annexation of the Nicobar Islands by the British in 1869, a move shaped as much by immediate security concerns as by broader geopolitical calculations. In the decades that followed, the British sought to consolidate their hold through legal, economic, and administrative restructuring. The introduction of a hyper-legal regime, the criminalisation of indigenous practices, and the dismantling of earlier trade networks all signalled a decisive shift in the governance of the islands. By territorialising the archipelago through both juridical and infrastructural means, the British transformed the Nicobars into a tightly regulated space of empire. This process of colonial consolidation, layered over centuries of contact, demands that we revisit the history of the Nicobars not as a footnote to the Andaman penal settlement, but as a critical site in the making of imperial order in the Indian Ocean world.

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