

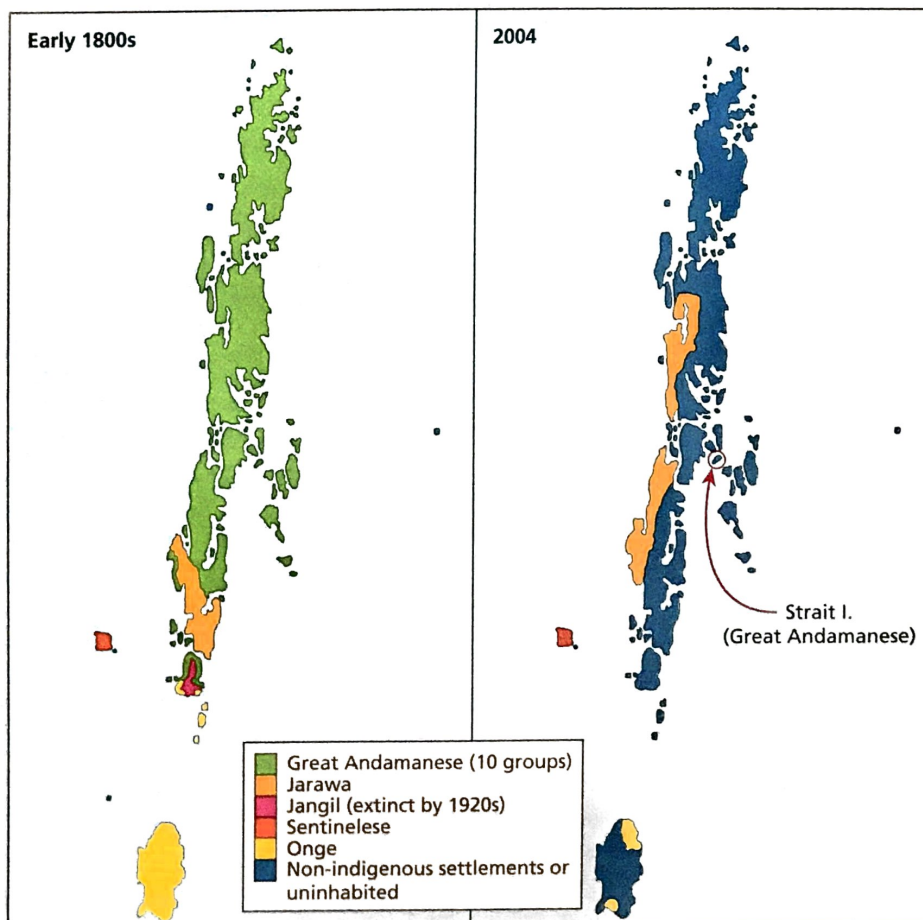
Cultural change in the Andaman Islands

The Andaman Islands, lying just off the coast of Thailand in the Bay of Bengal, are governed by India. The indigenous population has steadily declined from about 5,000 in the 18th century, at the time of first outsider contact, to about 1,000 today. The island chain was colonized by British settlers in 1858 and used for most of the next century as a penal colony. There are around 500 islands, 38 of which are inhabited. Indian settlers have poured in since independence, increasing the population to around 356,000.

One of the indigenous tribes, the Sentinelese, still lives uncontacted on a remote island. They were filmed firing arrows at a helicopter that went to check whether they had survived the 2004 tsunami. Tribes on some islands have retained their distinct culture by dwelling deep in the forests and resisting (with arrows) colonizers, missionaries and documentary makers. However, the construction of trunk roads since the 1970s has opened up the region to new forms of development.

These unspoilt islands are becoming a fashionable upmarket destination, as a result of which the Jarawa tribe is under serious threat. Until 1998 the tribe was protected by its ferocious reputation and it had little real contact with the outside world. But since then, not only have many Indian settlers moved into their forest home but the number of tourist trips into their jungle reserve has grown rapidly since 2000. Although notices at the entrance to the forest instruct visitors not to stop or allow the Jarawa into their vehicles, take photographs, or give them food or clothing, there is evidence that these practices are happening. The influx of tourists poses a potentially deadly danger for the 320 surviving Jarawa.

Moreover, plans for a luxury resort hotel at the edge of the Jarawas' protected forest were approved in 2009. The company building it, Barefoot, which already has a much-praised Andaman Islands eco-resort, says that it practises socially responsible tourism. Critics insist that the new resort has been deliberately chosen because it is near the Jarawa reserve, so that



▲ **Figure 5.9:** Distribution of the indigenous peoples of the Andaman Islands, early 1800s and 2004

Case study (continued)

holidaying guests can enjoy the thrill of seeing the tribespeople at close quarters. Two attempts to halt the new hotel development, brought by Andaman Islands' own regional government officials in the Indian courts, have failed.

The resort will bring an influx of workers and settlers to the area, increasing the pressure on the Jarawa and their land, exposing them to diseases such as swine flu, to which they have no immunity, and to alcohol, which has ravaged other tribes. Trips to see the Jarawa – officially on the pretext of visiting mud volcanoes that lie within the reserve – have become big business on the islands. Visitors are allowed to use the road through the reserve and, although they are not supposed to stop, invariably they do. The number of visitors from mainland India has increased as cheap flights to the Andamans have replaced the four-day boat journey that was once the only cost-effective way to get there.



▲ Photo 5.6: The Jarawa of the Andaman Islands