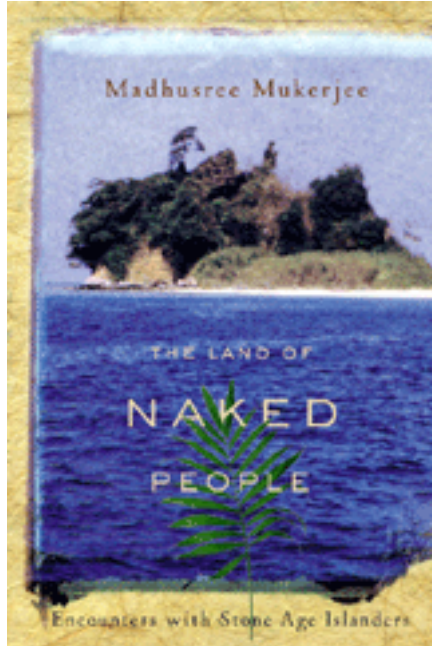


Press Release



The Land of Naked People

by Madhusree Mukerjee

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About the Book

"The four groups of Andamanese, having encountered outsiders at different times, provided a clear-cut experiment displaying the stages by which a dominant culture subsumes a marginal one — stages played out in virtually every corner of the globe." — Madhusree Mukerjee

In *The Land of Naked People*, Madhusree Mukerjee explores the debilitating effects of modernization and colonization on a group of isolated natives — perhaps the most secluded humans on the planet — living in a prehistoric "time capsule" on the Andaman Islands, located in the Bay of Bengal, off the coast of India. What the author observed firsthand brings to mind the exploitation and cultural loss that has characterized the development of nearly all nations, but for the Adamanese it is happening in the present.

Mukerjee, who received a Guggenheim Fellowship to research this book, chronicles the lives of four tribes of Andamanese who were introduced to modern influences at different periods, from the Great Andamanese (the most assimilated group) to the Sentinelese (the least integrated).

As a result of her exceptional access to the remote islanders, Mukerjee is able to offer unprecedented insights into the effects of colonization on undeveloped civilizations. She reveals how outsiders (first the British, later the Indians) have taken precious land and introduced pollution and serious diseases (influenza, measles, and malaria) that have decimated the population, so that now only five hundred natives survive. More broadly, Mukerjee examines the persistence of harmful myths about "savages" and the perennially fraught relationship between light- and dark-skinned peoples.

Combining anthropological findings with historical accounts and personal travel stories, Mukerjee's compelling and accessible narrative — with "an unusual, eclectic perspective," according to *Library Journal* — gives us a unique glimpse into a primeval, disappearing way of life. *The Land of Naked People* is the story of the Andamanese, but it is also the story of every culture that has ever had to adapt to encroachment by another. As Mukerjee comments in the attached interview, "The process I witnessed on the Andamans is part of the history of each one of us."

About the Author

Madhusree Mukerjee, a native of India, won a Guggenheim Fellowship to write *The Land of Naked People*. She had previously served on the board of editors of *Scientific American*.

A conversation with Madhusree Mukerjee

Q) How did you become interested in the Andamanese?

A) Growing up in India, I had heard of the Andaman Islands as the site of a notorious British prison where Indian freedom fighters had been incarcerated. Anyone who managed to escape was killed by natives who lived in the surrounding jungles. Years later, a friend mentioned that some of these "savages" still lived on one of these isolated islands, shooting arrows at boats that came too close. I had to find out what this was all about.

Q) Who are the Andamanese?

A) They are hunter-gatherers who have lived on the Andamans for at least fifty thousand years. They look unlike most other Asians, and much like African pygmies. Now, though, DNA studies tell us they are remnants of the very first humans in Asia. Seafarers of ancient times believed the Andamanese to be cannibals, because they killed most anyone who went ashore.

Q) How did the Andamanese live before they were contacted?

A) Very well, it seems. The islands and their shores had abundant food, and they had only to wade into the water to pick up clams or shoot coral fish with arrows. They were left alone by most outsiders. But there are ancient reports of the Andamanese having been sold into slavery, probably by Malay pirates who raided their islands. That might explain Andamanese hostility to outsiders.

Q) What changed with contact?

A) That's really what the book is about. For the Andamanese living on the main islands, where the British established a penal colony, contact meant defeat in war, loss of territory, and death by disease — the islanders had been so isolated for so long that they had no immunity to our diseases. In the mid-1800s their numbers were estimated at between five and eight thousand; now only forty-odd members of that group survive.

Those Andamanese who lived on more remote islands, or in dense interior forests, were less affected. Even in the 1990s one hostile tribe, the Jarawa, lived in jungles quite close to the main town, Port Blair, and would kill anyone who entered their territory. All the Andamanese taken together now number no more than five hundred, and only the one hundred or so living on their own island are relatively free.

Q) What, to you, was the most interesting thing about the Andamanese?

A) That they are pretty much like you and me. They look odd at first — few of us feel comfortable dressed only in ornaments — but you come to realize that their clothes and habits make sense, are a logical adaptation to their environment.

Most of all, it was fascinating to see the process by which the Andamanese were adapting to civilization, and the things they were giving up along the way — their material independence, their pride.

Q) What changes did you see between your first visit and your last?

A) I saw the Jarawa go from killing intruders to begging for handouts on the streets. From being phenomenally healthy — free of even the common cold — to dying of disease.

Q) What do you hope this book might achieve?

A) I wanted to understand, and to help others explore, the process of colonization, which seems to be fundamentally the same no matter where it occurs.

I had hoped that I could call attention to the Andamanese in time to help them. I now fear it might be too late for the Jarawa. Still, I hope the book will inspire debate on how best to help the Andamanese cope with civilization, and spark enough sustained interest to put the best ideas into practice.

Q) Was being a woman an obstacle?

A) Once you are on the Andamans, you need permission to meet the natives. I didn't get permission to go on official contact trips to meet the Jarawa, because I am female. The senior officials didn't think a woman should meet the naked Jarawa. On the other hand, I was able to have intimate conversations with Andamanese women about things like sexual abuse by outsiders.

Q) How has working on this book affected you personally?

A) It has made me wonder to what extent the things I have — financial security, education, and so on — are derived from those who don't have these things. In India I belonged to an upper caste that had for thousands of years lorded it over the aboriginals, who were the original owners of the land. While I went to school and college, my bed was made and my vegetables chopped by servants who mostly came from the lower, defeated castes. Coming to the United States, I benefited from a society built on the bones of Native Americans. I think the process I witnessed on the Andamans is part of the history of each one of us.

Praise for *The Land of Naked People*

"With a fierce devotion to her subject, Mukerjee renders every detail about the Andamanese fascinating . . . Intellectually weighty and immensely readable." — *San Diego Union-Tribune*

"The book's strength is its unflinching look at conquest and the loss of cultural identity . . . To read Mukerjee is to understand the emptiness of the age that will come soon enough when our species' historic vocation is no longer pursued anywhere on earth." — *San Francisco Chronicle*

"[Mukerjee] weaves her contemporary observations of the various Andaman tribes together with historical accounts of their contacts with outsiders, yielding a fabric rich with meaning about what vastly different peoples can learn from one another." — *Scientific American*

"Engaging, erudite . . . Insightfully portraying today's islanders, Mukerjee expresses boundless admiration for their resilience, reminding readers that ancient and successful cultures can teach us a great deal about survival." — *Booklist*

"Lucid and heartfelt . . . A book of engrossing images and ideas that resound long after the telling." — *Seattle Times*

"An unusual, eclectic perspective that will be accessible to readers with a general interest in anthropology and other cultures." — *Library Journal*

"An impassioned portrait of an ancient culture on the brink of vanishing." — *Publishers Weekly*

"Well-executed portrait of four cultures soon to be extinct." — *Kirkus Reviews*

"*The Land of Naked People* heralds the arrival of a major nonfiction talent. Madhusree Mukerjee has a rare combination of skills: she is an intrepid reporter whose prose is both poetic and precise. In this book, she bears witness to the demise of one of the most ancient — and least known — cultures on earth. While showing great empathy for her subjects, Mukerjee never succumbs to sentimentality or sensationalism." — John Horgan, author of *Rational Mysticism* and *The End of Science*

"I love this book. It is a wonderfully readable, poignant account of a people who never stood a chance (and of the people who never gave it to them)." — Ian Tattersall, author of *Extinct Humans* and curator of physical anthropology at the American Museum of Natural History

"A beautiful, heart-wrenching hymn to a lost world. Mukerjee writes with grace, intelligence, and deep empathy for a beleaguered people." — Steve Olson, author of the National Book Award finalist *Mapping Human History*