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Gender/Power: a view from the ‘outside’

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The husband cannot interfere with the decisions of women. (Cipriani 1954: 72)

Introduction

This chapter considers gender relations in the Andaman Islands in the specific forms visible among the Onge and the Andamanese, against the context of interventions by the Indian Government. The chapter is organized into two sections, each one separately addressing the issue of gender *vis-à-vis* first the Onge, then followed by the Andamanese. The framework for each section is dissimilar: in the case of the Onge, I interrogate the efforts by Onge women to maintain a domain autonomous from the infringements of the Indian welfare administration; with the Andamanese, I examine gender relations in terms of their links to the sites of power within the group. In each instance, I appraise the basis of my interpretations, exploring these constructions as a product of my specific positionality in relation to each group.

But before starting the discussion, a brief word on who the Andaman Islanders are, and the current situation in the islands. The Onge and the Andamanese are two of the four existing groups of indigenous people of the Andaman Islands, a group of islands located in the Indian Ocean close to Myanmar and Indonesia. The islanders are a part of the dwindling semi-nomadic, hunter-gatherer, Negrito populations of south and south-east Asia. The four groups of Andaman Islanders inhabit different islands of the archipelago. These groups have been separated long enough to have developed substantial linguistic differentiation, and are now referred to in the literature as four distinct tribes.

For the Andaman Islanders, it has been a continuous history of colonization since the mid-19th century when the British established a penal settlement in the islands, with India taking control of the islands in 1947, following a brief Japanese occupation of the islands during World War II. The British version of the colonial economy was one which trafficked in the circuit of tobacco, tea, sugar, opium and alcohol, bringing the islanders firmly within the ambit of the British empire. The subsequent Indian variant, also colonial in its dimensions as it pertains to the islanders, further deprives them of control over their traditional resource base. There was merely a transfer of power between two colonial regimes, with very little to differentiate the two. The colonizer changed from the ‘white man’ to the ‘brown’ one after 1947; the latter, like the former, proceeded to shoulder the ‘white man’s burden’ of undertaking to ‘uplift’ the ‘backward primitives’.

The Andamanese at present add up to approximately 35 people. They have been

settled on a small island called Strait Island, which has been given over to them, although it remains doubtful as to whether there are any legal documents to that effect. The ravages of the earliest and longest enduring period of 'contact' have been borne by the Andamanese. Their resettlement on Strait Island is perceived by the Andaman Government as some measure of reparation for the historical injustices that they have undergone.

The Onge of Little Andaman were unhindered in their hunting-gathering-fishing way of life until the mid-1960s. A program for the development of Little Andaman was announced in the late 1960s, and the former inhabitants were sequestered in two permanent settlements at opposite ends of the island: Dugong Creek, the larger settlement in the north; and South Bay at the southern tip of the island. Their population has dwindled steadily, and they now number approximately a hundred people.

Both the Andamanese and the Onge currently lead a sedentary life, and have rations allotted to them by the Indian Government. But the Onge, more than the Andamanese, continue to hunt, gather and fish. They have coconut plantations, planted for them as part of a program to interest them in cultivation. They are paid wages for keeping the settlement cleared of undergrowth, and for picking coconuts. The proceeds from the sale of the coconuts go into a cooperative society which is operated on behalf of the Onge and the Andamanese. There is an ongoing effort to interest the islanders in working for wages, and some talk of dividing the settlement between individual Onge and Andamanese in the future.

Part A

The gendered anthropologist

A significant dimension of my relationship with the Onge was predicated solely on the basis of my gender. In a different paper (Venkateswar 1999), I detail the obstacles to physically living with the Onge. I explain the problems I underwent as an aspect of Onge dissembling behaviors related to the maintenance of a domain exclusive to themselves. Such a conclusion is imbricated onto my own efforts at dissimulation, and the reasons for resorting to a measure of secrecy.

After my first, preliminary trip to the Andamans in 1989 to explore the possibilities of undertaking research there, I decided that when I returned I would present myself as a married woman. This seemed to me a practical strategy that would eliminate many of the problems that I had encountered during my initial trip. Hence, when I returned in 1991, I wore on my person some of the signifiers that convey marriage in India. The strategy proved effective in deflecting any unwanted attention from the Indians around me. In the case of the Onge, however, it was another matter. As I realized to my dismay later, my presentation of self as a married woman was crucial in determining the course of my fieldwork experience.

The Onge found it hard to understand how I could remain there alone, separated from my family, for such a long time. It seemed unthinkable to them that a parent, at least

a sibling, if not my husband, was not with me for some part of that time. This was a matter that elicited some comments from the Indians as well, but it was shrugged away as 'Oh, she's from America', and that was reason enough. I was at pains to explain that I had traveled to America to pursue my graduate studies quite recently, that my family lived in Calcutta, and that I still considered Calcutta *home*. But that made my solitary existence more puzzling, and the only possible reason for the bizarre situation was the 'American' connection.

On interrogation by the Onge women as to how long I had been married, I surmised that it was less of a misdeed to be away from one's husband after several years of marriage, and I responded accordingly. But that led me into deeper waters. I was asked how many children I had, and I countered with 'None', since I gauged accurately, that to have had children and not have brought them with me was the greatest offence of all. That didn't let me off the hook either. I received a long harangue from more than one woman castigating me for my strange behavior: to be married for as many years as I admitted to being, and not have produced *one* child!¹ I weakly promised to do my best as soon as I finished my work with them and returned to my husband. And that was followed by another long rebuke of my errant husband who consented to my living alone, so far from any family. I was frequently reminded that I should send for my husband soon, to ask him to come and take care of me.

The matter did not end there. Well into the months of my stay at Dugong Creek, I realized that, at some level, the Onge women felt a certain alienation from me by my persistence in living alone at Dugong Creek. It was not an issue that I could resolve in terms that would make any sense to them. More frustrating was the behavior of the Onge men, who broke appointment after appointment with me after having assured me that they would meet me at a certain time² at the 'guest-house'. Towards the latter part of my fieldwork, when it was almost too late to rectify matters, Bara Raju, one of the Onge men, confided that the men did not show up because they were unwilling to spend long hours alone with me interviewing at the 'guest-house'. Such an action on their part would be considered a transgression, and may have given offence to my absent husband. Even though he was so far away, it was necessary that the men show him adequate respect.

I was relieved that I finally had an answer for what had been an inexplicable element of my interaction with them. But, seizing upon an opportunity to berate them about their efforts to avert my living with them in the settlement, an issue that I had not yet forgiven them for, I shot back that all these problems could have been avoided if I had been permitted to live in the empty house in their settlement. There would always be children and other Onge in and out of my house, and the issue of any man spending time alone with me would never have arisen. This, in turn, revealed to me yet another tier of protocol that would have been violated had any of the Onge men constructed the furniture that I needed to live in that house. As a married woman it was a task that was to be undertaken only by my husband, or other male kin. The Onge men were cognizant of the respect befitting my husband and family. At that moment, I would have forsworn husbands several lifetimes over, if I could have retraced my steps and amended my marital status.

A view of Onge gender relations

Against the backdrop of the problematics of my own gender reconstructions, is the day-to-day unfolding of Onge gender relations. The Onge experience of colonization, with its typically sharp exclusion of women from the domain of 'official' politics and the more formal decision-making bodies of the administration, has challenged and shaken the basis of Onge women's traditional structure of authority within the community (Cipriani 1954). The loss of Onge territory has simultaneously corresponded with the fragmentation of their hunting-gathering modes of subsistence. These were wedded to patterns of rituals which reaffirmed and endorsed the complementary roles of Onge women and men within their conceptual world (Pandya 1993). All of these factors have inflected the conduct of gender roles and relations among the Onge.

Intersecting with these quotidian practices is the Indian administration's penetration of their domestic space, in an attempt to assimilate the Onge to the mores of Indian society. In the aftermath of sedenterization, with its consequent displacement and marginalization, this is a project in which Onge men are complicit. Sometimes willing, occasionally unwilling, the men's collaboration with the welfare authorities is shifting and fluid.

To maintain their independence and autonomy in the face of the many incursions by the Indian administration and the welfare authorities, Onge women have resorted to the diverse strategies discussed below. As Okely (1991: 8) notes, 'specific incidents, anecdotes, individual acts or in some cases clusters of women, ...revealed an awareness, albeit fragmented [of the ways in which they were subordinated]'. I will go on to discuss the particular incidents that mark the Onge women's claim to autonomy, despite the displacement of their sphere to the periphery, away from the site of decision-making as drawn by the welfare authorities.

I argue that with the use of language as well as other prosaic strategies, Onge women assert a separate and autonomous space for themselves. An intriguing offshoot is the developing awareness in Onge men of the contradictions between Onge and Indian perceptions of gender. The assertion of independence by Onge women, purportedly established in Onge traditions (Cipriani 1954; Pandya 1993), appears to have accrued a connotation of diminished masculinity for Onge men. In the throes of intoxication, the behaviors exhibited by Onge men suggest that alcohol is a means to subvert or recast the pattern of gender relations extant in Onge society. Since drinking usually occurs outside the settlement, in the forest or nearby towns where the men often disappear, through drinking Onge men appropriate a space from which Onge women are excluded. Simultaneously, the men assert a masculinity that attempts to replicate Indian patterns of gender behavior.

Language and power

Onge women never speak Hindi but their comprehension of the language is never in doubt, since all communicative events suggest that their knowledge of the language is inclusive of even its colloquialisms. However, a question posed to a Onge woman in Hindi will in every instance, only bring forth a response in Onge, even when the woman

knows that her interlocutor may not follow a word of that language.

Likewise, Onge men also comprehend Hindi, but their speech exhibits different degrees of proficiency, a range of variation that we are not given a chance to detect among the women. A question posed in Hindi to an Onge man may initially bring forth a response in Onge, but on indicating difficulty with that language, an attempt is made to respond in Hindi, however halting. Onge women, on the other hand, insist on a grasp of their language since any communication with them *has* to be always conducted in Onge, thus subtly underscoring their control over the interaction.

A number of interpretations may be given to this behavior: one, Onge men are more obliging and willing to help out when someone has difficulties with their language; or two, Onge men perforce had to engage with an outside world within which there was never any possibility of setting the terms of the discourse. Following this line of argument is an alternative rendering of the English term 'pacification'. Onge men relinquished any semblance of control over their lives after their resounding defeats in battles with the British. But their post-defeat collaboration with the colonial administrations³ through the medium of Hindi provided entry into the domain of the colonizers. A knowledge of Hindi had the potential for more power/material rewards, since successive colonial administrations have consistently recognized and rewarded linguistic ability. Hence, language becomes the primary vehicle for the process of 'subjection' (Foucault 1983), making available new opportunities and routes to power. This analysis is given support by recalling that the appointment of a 'chief', or *Raja* in Hindi, by virtue of which authority and power is vested in an individual, has been determined by linguistic ability, first by the British and then by the Indian administration. A third interpretation, often offered by Onge men, is that the women are shy and feel bashful about speaking in Hindi. Though this explanation does give me pause, it is not corroborated by other elements of women's behavior.

Shifting to a different arena, the problematic of language constituted both the potential and the perimeter of my own interaction with the Onge, particularly with the women. In the case of both men and women, there was some modification of their speech when chewing *bebe* (betel leaves) or *cibari* (areca nuts). The excessive salivation produced during this process confers a greater guttural sound to their language. But there was a further marked transformation effected in the speech of Onge women according to whether they were conversing among themselves or were in mixed company. Speaking with greater rapidity and apparently adding an additional consonant to every syllable, speech among women acquired a coded quality that appeared to be indecipherable even to the men. When summoned to translate, the men's standard response was that the women were conversing among themselves. Further prodding as to what the content of the discussion was produced the same answer, namely, that the women were conversing among themselves. Repeated occurrences of this phenomenon led me to suspect that the men did not completely follow the women's discussion when they spoke to each other. Alternatively, by virtue of the women's marking off a private domain, even if the men comprehended the conversation, they were reluctant to divulge the contents.

Such a 'closing of ranks' never occurred with the men, whose language I could

follow despite the throaty inflection acquired because of mouths engorged with *bebe* or *cibari* and spittle. The additional option of switching between two languages (Hindi and Onge) provided greater fluidity and ease of conversation with the men. Concurrently, such a practice inserted an additional impediment⁴ to my efforts to engage in and maintain a separate interaction with the women.

The obstacles⁵ posed by these attenuations to women's conversation meant that I was always 'outside' the anthropological invocation of empathy with 'the people', within a historical conjuncture that, in this context, linguistically implicated me with the colonizer. I never gained entry into the sphere of individual thoughts and confidences with any Onge woman, as was relatively quickly possible with the Andamanese women. Thus, my naive assumption of a facile rapport premised on shared gender was quickly dispelled by the exigencies of fieldwork at Dugong Creek.

Clothes make/unmake the Onge woman

Conversations with Onge women conveyed their dissatisfaction and resentment with the intrusions into their domains of everyday living. An example that several mentioned was the issue of clothing. Clothes appear to have become a sensitive issue at various levels. Every Onge is given two sets of new garments every year as an item in the welfare system of which they are beneficiaries. During the period that I was at the settlement, everyone received one of these yearly handouts. All the Onge women were given identical sets of printed skirts and blouses, and the men shorts and shirts, with some variation between them of color, print and texture.⁶ Soon afterwards I noticed that some of the men tried on their new attire, but none of the women were to be seen in theirs. When questioned, some hawked and spat, while others simply shrugged and in tones of great contempt said '*gibiti ga*' ('They're bad'), and demanded that I get other outfits for them. Many women made repeated demands for new apparel, like the ones I wore, until finally, in exasperation, I replied that they already had a set of new garments, which the administration had gone to some expense to make for them. Moreover, anything that I obtained for them would be purchased from the limited stocks available at the same stores from where their much maligned clothing had originated.

I was instructed on the niceties of discernment and good taste, perceived as lacking in the welfare administrators. I was told that I could be relied upon to exercise the same discrimination that they showed when selecting outfits for themselves. I would keep in mind their likes and dislikes, their individual personalities, and get items specific for each person, not the uniform trash that the *entale* ('foreigner' or 'officer') had given them. Furthermore, they, the womenfolk, should be granted the prerogative of choosing clothes for their families.

The Onge women's comments pose a contrast to my own perception of the locus of my anthropological operations on the fringes of familiarity. By their admission I was in a more proximal relation to them than the 'others' who surrounded them. I was included as 'one of the womenfolk' who *could* select clothes for 'their' families. Therefore, at least in this context, I was granted some common plane of gender. Yet, my aspiration to the anthropological construct of shared empathy as the basis for understanding remained an

unrealized goal, and the gestures of congeniality professed by the women cannot suffice to assert a confident claim to that realization.

A different but related aspect of the vexed subject of apparel is linked to the Indian construction of the 'savage'. The Onge are often described as *junglee*, which approximates to 'forest dweller', on a par with the other creatures inhabiting the forest. Both the British and the Indian construction of savagery as a social-evolutionary category was founded on the absence of clothing. Therefore, the first step en route to civilization was the donning of cloth.

Formerly, Onge women were mostly bare-bodied except for a girdle around their hips with a tuft of dried rattan leaves, the *nakuinege*, in front of their genitals. Most women now have some covering of cloth on their bodies, and many continue to wear the *nakuinege* underneath. There is a certain delicacy and modesty in the women's comportment such that the genitalia are always concealed.⁷ That the use of external garments has not become completely internalized is apparent by their removal when the women are completely relaxed and feel their privacy will not be intruded upon. Privacy is, however, something that is hard to establish for the Onge. Friends and family of the welfare staff, government officials of various denominations, arrive to gawk at the *junglees*. They demand that the Onge shed their garments, so that the visitors can take back 'authentic' photographs of the Onge in their 'traditional' attire.

The power of women

One day, in the late afternoon, at Dugong Creek most of the Onge men were engaged in wage labor. It was around 3:30 p.m. and the settlement was deserted except for groups of women sitting together and talking. Suddenly, a crowd of militant Onge women, armed with brooms, congregated at the place where the men were working, and set about sweeping vigorously around the area where the men were gathered. Each woman in turn railed and stormed; about the lack of *tambonuya* (wild boar) and *choge* (fish); that they were '*tambonuya mando ulecebe*' (famished for pork), but all the while the men were engrossed in *totale*.⁸ The men broke into smiles and soon put away their implements and made their way back to the settlement, expecting their wives to follow. But the women continued their vigorous cleaning. Each man, in turn, went up to his wife and tried to talk her into returning with him. But the women collectively ignored the men and continued their sweeping for at least another hour.

A disconsolate group of men trailed a slow retreat back to the settlement. I followed the men back and found them sitting in front of their houses, calling out as I walked by that they were very hungry. I suggested that they start eating, and they replied that they were waiting for their wives to return so that they could eat their meal together. The next morning, shortly after daybreak, I arrived at the settlement and found that all the men had left for hunting at dawn. Wage labor at Dugong Creek came to a halt in the ensuing weeks.

During my stay at Dugong Creek, I can recall one incident which exposed the convergence of the various conflicting domains at the settlement. Sheila was a recently widowed woman with several children. One of the children, 'Rocky', had been ailing

since his birth and had always remained frail.⁹ From the beginning of my fieldwork at Dugong Creek he had been ill, and six months after my arrival there he seemed to sink to a point where his death appeared imminent. Meanwhile, the medical officer appointed during this period had chosen to ignore the child's condition until the child's precarious health alerted the medical officer to the possible consequences for himself.

Due to the Andaman Islanders official status as an 'endangered people', every birth of an Onge child is rewarded with a sum of Rs.1,000 to the parents, and every death has to be explained to the highest authorities in the Government. The person held accountable for each life is the medical officer, and the possibility that he would be found negligent in the discharge of his duties produced a flurry of panicky responses on his part. He signaled the Directorate of Health Services at Port Blair that the child was critically ill and had to be removed to Port Blair immediately for more specialized treatment. Then he convinced all the other welfare staff that they too would be held responsible if 'Rocky' died. Therefore, they should all help persuade Sheila to take 'Rocky' to Port Blair. Only then would they be let off the hook. This was a particularly formidable task since Sheila's husband had earlier been sent to Port Blair for treatment and not returned alive. All the welfare staff in turn coaxed, cajoled, and pleaded with Sheila. Sheila and her family were offered every kind of inducement, an advance of money, new clothes for the whole family, any gift that they wanted and a new suitcase to carry everything to Port Blair.

For Timai, Sheila's father and one of the heaviest drinkers among the Onge, this was an opportunity to avail himself of money that could be spent on alcohol. For Tambole, the *Raja*, who, coincidentally, was also the son of Sheila's late husband by a former marriage, the situation was more equivocal. On the one hand he still grieved over the loss of his father, and perceived Port Blair as a place of death; on the other hand, as *Raja* he had to hold his end up and endorse the welfare authorities.

Sheila, troubled by the pressure on all fronts, was reluctant to leave. At a loss for any further excuses that would justify her refusal, and somewhat tempted by all the inducements offered, she appeared to give in.

Meanwhile, the fact that something else was afoot was suggested by the small knots of Onge women who were conferring together. Later that night I asked Sheila about her decision. In a tone that brooked no further argument, she replied that she was not going. All the older women had rebuked her and there was nothing further to be said. Then I went to the welfare staff who told me that everything was arranged; Sheila had agreed to take 'Rocky' to Port Blair. The medical officer would accompany them, and the helicopter would arrive early the next morning to take them there.

At six a.m. the next morning the helicopter arrived. It landed with much difficulty, since Dugong Creek is a particularly rough terrain. This is why each such trip costs the administration as much as Rs.50,000. The medical officer, carrying his suitcase, accompanied by the other welfare staff and the helicopter crew, trooped to Sheila's house to get her. Sheila had locked herself inside her house and refused to come out or talk to anyone. Everyone in turn banged on her door, offering blandishments and threats, but Sheila remained mute inside. Finally, the helicopter got ready to leave and the medical officer, enraged and embarrassed, viewing the situation as a personal affront, was told

that he would have to send explanations for the debacle.

All the Onge were vastly amused by the spectacle. When charged by the welfare staff with duplicity, they shrugged and replied that the women had decided that it would not be appropriate for Sheila to go to Port Blair and, therefore, there was nothing further to be said about the matter.

Meanwhile, as a result of the medical officer's attempts to ingratiate himself with the Directorate at Port Blair by his assiduous attention to his duties at Dugong Creek, 'Rocky' recovered. But the medical officer was transferred shortly afterwards on other charges of misconduct.

The merriment provoked by the medical officer's discomfiture kept the Onge in good humor for a while. But over time the occasional jibes and taunts from the welfare staff that they were all dominated by their women stung. The mood among the men changed to disquiet. The Onge men who seemed most vulnerable to such jeers were the 'helpers' assigned to the welfare staff. The dilemma posed by the demand for a simultaneous negotiation between two discordant sets of expectations exposed some of the pressures that these men were under as they dealt with their wives and the *entale*. The several derogatory variations (in Hindi) of 'henpecked husband' tried the customary agreeable dispositions of the men, leading to an increasing standoff with their wives as they sought to match an alternative image made available by alcohol.

Pleasure as subversion

I have mentioned in passing elsewhere (Venkateswar 1999) the growing incidence of drinking among Onge men. Here I want to draw attention to the various levels at which the practice of drinking, with its attendant intoxication, is enmeshed within the Onge social landscape.

The overriding impression that I obtained from talking to Onge men about drinking was the immense pleasure and fun that they derived from it. The experience of intoxication was described as *tikitikige*, which in Onge means 'like a spinning top', and the sensation invited repeated attempts to rediscover it (Pandya 1992). When recounting their drinking exploits their manner took on a mischievous air, as if they had indulged in an enjoyable prank. But it was an enjoyment that was cultivated, and which they slowly learned to relish. All described their initial experiences with alcohol as disastrous, and it was only over time that the sensations changed and were recognized as pleasurable.

Onge men were aware that their drinking behavior provoked disapproval at all levels of the Andaman administration. I read the traces of subversion in this act of drinking, manifest in their delight at not conforming to the image of the 'good',¹⁰ docile, Onge (in contrast to the more 'willful' Andamanese) that the authorities would like to promote. Moreover, the pleasure that they derived from the consumption of alcohol, negated the efficacy of any morality constructed around abstinence. Hence, the 'moralization' of the issue (Escobar 1984-85), applied or invoked as a form of coercion, was ineffective in this context. Therein lay the tragedy and the perpetuation of the practice.

Besides its embodiment as pleasure, the itinerary that I have traced for drinking in

the context of the ongoing discussion above suggests that it was also intimately intertwined with power as deployed between the genders.

The path to collusion

Onge women were vehement about their exclusion from any decisions regarding the supplies stocked in the small shop in the settlement. The designated 'helpers' to the welfare staff were frequently consulted about what they desired to buy from the shop, but the women were never asked to indicate their preferences. While individually, within the domestic space Onge men concurred with their wives' grievances, as a group they tended to keep separate this area of interaction with the welfare personnel. This was the arena of collusion which provided access to alcohol, and with alcohol they could all be 'men' together. A dramatic transformation is effected in the behavior of Onge men once they have consumed alcohol.¹¹

The remarkable feature of this change was how closely they mimicked the behaviors they had seen displayed by the welfare staff or the drunken exhibitions they had witnessed in the nearby towns. When drinking, Onge men spoke only Hindi, the most halting speaker discovering an amazing facility with the language. In that language, their conversation acquired a certain lewdness and the kind of discussion they engaged in was one they shied away from when sober. All tended to gossip about the sexual dalliances of the Onge and a certain pattern emerged from these discussions. In each case, the men who were involved in these extramarital affairs were married to older women beyond child-bearing age, who had either never borne any children or had lost those from earlier marriages. The women who were purportedly indulging in affairs with such men were relatively young, and had several children. How much of this talk had some truth to it and to what extent it was fantasy is debatable. But the element that stood out was that, to a great extent, these accounts mirrored the escapades of the numerous welfare staff who had stayed at the settlement over the years.

For the Onge women, who in other respects tended to keep a firm check on their men, drinking and alcohol became spheres through which the men evaded and eluded them. The deference shown to them by their husbands in their daily lives was erased at a single stroke by alcohol.

A note on generalizations

I want to digress briefly at this stage to qualify the homogeneity implied by the use of generalizations such as 'the Onge men' or 'the Onge women', since there is substantial variation between individuals, both women and men. Each person's correspondence to the main elements of my representation is a matter of degree, some more, some less.

I have highlighted certain trends, but every single Onge is *not* subsumed by the principle features of my depiction, which exists as a composite. For instance, as I have noted, among the Onge men there are those who are at a specified extent of propinquity to the welfare authorities based on their fluency in Hindi. Much of my representation above applies to this group of people. But, here too there were striking dissimilarities. Tambole, fluent in Hindi, the incumbent *Raja*, a heavy drinker, married to an older woman, was *not*

one of those perceived as dominated by his wife, yet was one of the men gossiped about by other Onge. Tambole's explanation for his induction into drinking was, 'The LG always has a glass of whisky by him when there are meetings at Port Blair. I'm the *Raja*, I also drink'.¹² But Bara Raju, who was articulate in Hindi and a claimant to the position of *Raja*, never drank and always deferred to his wife. He was not vulnerable to any jeers from the welfare staff, nor was there any hint of gossip attached to him.

On the other hand there was Tai, a 'helper', at ease in Hindi, married to Kakeyi, who had never conceived again after the death of their child, a sly drinker and, as portrayed by the welfare personnel, always at his wife's beck and call. He was one of those presumed to be in an extramarital relationship. Then there were Berogegi, Totanange, Kimboi, and others, each of whom had his own distinct permutation and combination of the attributes listed above.

In the case of the Onge women, too, there was similar variation in terms of the authority they wielded among other women or with their husbands, and in the extent of resentment expressed towards the welfare staff and their husband's drinking. Botalai, Kamegi, Koilaboi, Kwankitui, Nabimboi, Bagali, and others, were all older women and comprised the core group of women who influenced Sheila. Most of them were married to younger husbands, some of whom drank, and only Botalai and Bagali had any surviving children. The common thread that tied together all the women, without any deviation, was their eschewal of Hindi.

Before concluding my disclaimer on the use of generalizations in this account of the islanders, I want to allude to the tension that exists between the particular and the general. Even Abu-Lughod's (1991) call to an 'ethnography of the particular' does not elude the demand for those particulars to make a statement that harks towards the general. Hence, my generalizations are a shortcut, avoiding the necessity of nominating in every instance specific individuals, and a claim to legitimacy.

Towards a theoretical framework

To return to my narrative on the politics of gender among the Onge, is it possible to arrive at some theoretical frameworks that accommodate the incidents described earlier? Are these stray events that have no relevance beyond the telling of a tale? What are the theoretical options that best suit the circumstances of the Onge?

A central insight of feminist theory is the extension of the arena defined as the 'political', denoting a move that has been underway in the West since the 1960s. Hart (1991: 94) notes that the expansion of the definition of 'politics' has resulted in its being used in a broad sense 'to refer to the processes by which struggles over resources and labor are simultaneously struggles over socially-constructed meanings, definitions and identities'. The feminist call to a 'politics of everyday life' implies an examination of power as instantiated in mundane social practices and relations, and presages the development of interest in 'everyday' forms of struggle.

In view of the growing popularity of 'resistance', particularly as informed by recent work on its unconventional, unlikely 'everyday forms' (Scott, 1985; Scott and Kerkvliet 1986), my feminist self is tempted to give in to 'the desire to find a resistant presence'

(O'Hanlon 1988) in the figures of Onge women. 'The romance of resistance' (Abu-Lughod 1990) carries with it a powerful appeal in its suggestion of the indomitable human spirit, and a strategic political significance as evidenced in the work of the subaltern studies group. Abu-Lughod's (1990) methodologically astute argument for a shift in perspective in the way we read resistance, using it as a 'diagnostic' of power, leads beyond debates over what constitutes resistance, or the forms of consciousness that validate its existence. Taking her cue from Foucault's proposition that resistance be used 'as a chemical catalyst so as to bring to light power relations, locate their position, find out the points of application and the methods used' (Foucault 1983: 211), Abu-Lughod (1990) goes on to show how everyday resistances can expose the complex intersections of changing structures of power. And, the ways in which people are enmeshed within these structures.

Along these lines, if we read the incidents described above as indicative of the sites where struggles over power occur, what can we then infer about the workings of such power? At the outset, it is clear how the system of welfare that regulates the lives of the Onge, with its attendant concern to assimilate the Onge into a more mainstream 'Indian' lifestyle, has penetrated into the 'private' domestic existence of the Onge. The disparate positioning of Onge women and men *vis-à-vis* the welfare system and its practitioners, gives rise to the complexities that are evident in their everyday actions, and in the contrasting behaviors of women and men.

Moreover, their distinct positionality in relation to the welfare system also throws light on the forms of 'subjection' (Foucault 1983), and the ways in which Onge women and men are implicated in them. As stated earlier, the system of social classifications conferred on Onge men, for example, *Raja*, 'helper', and so on, in its linkages with nodes of power, 'opens up avenues of enablement, that seduces [the Onge to conform] to its rules, and thereby shapes new outlooks and behavior patterns' (Biolsi 1995: 30). But there are no new routes to power that are available to Onge women within such a perspective. In addition, with the dismissal of women from the sphere of 'official' politics, and the accompanying lack of awareness of women's influence and participation in decisions that affect the Onge, the 'traditional' status that the women have enjoyed is placed at risk.

The final element that remains unsettled by this argument is the process by which alcohol appears to have reconfigured gender relations among the Onge. An easy response is to dismiss the transformation effected in men's behavior as a release of inhibitions. This may feature as an element of the whole, but I believe drinking has a more complex signification within that totality. Mbembe's (1992) discussion of the 'banality of power' offers some resolutions. According to Mbembe, the trappings of power typically involve a conspicuous consumption of food and alcohol, and are inclusive of the demonstration of sexual prowess. For Onge men, these manifestations have become integral components of their 'subjection'. In emulating these practices, they can elide the lived reality of colonization and aspire for membership within the larger world of men with power.

Having formulated the above argument, it behooves me to point out that the entire edifice that I have constructed is the 'partial' view of a feminist anthropologist, and a

product of the specific circumstances of my research. Despite these qualifiers, I assert my preferred view of the current configuration of gender relations among the Onge, albeit one particular and positioned perspective.

Part B

A brief note on the Andamanese

It is not insignificant that the last anthropological research conducted on the Andamanese dates to the 1970s, soon after they were resettled on Strait Island (Chakraborty 1974). After documenting the standard anthropological categories of kinship, ritual, material culture, and so on, which permit the compilation of 'exotic' details, what is left to say about 35 or so people whose most prominent attributes are excessive drinking and sexual promiscuity, uncertain health and an astute eye towards material advantages? Is it possible to conceptualize these features within a larger perspective, not provided by empirical canons derived from the days of *Notes and Queries on Anthropology*?¹³ This is my attempt to take cognizance of the uncomfortable and distressing elements of the lives of the Andamanese, and to find a way to articulate and explain those factors. I have opted *not* to follow the strategic response of several anthropologists in recent years of blandly ignoring the ongoing existence of the Andamanese by eliminating them from the discourse.

Within the framework of my interest in the dynamics of power, especially as these are deployed in commonplace quotidian behaviors and practices, I will examine here the links that exist between drinking and sexual promiscuity, and the structures of power among the Andamanese. But first, a word on the fabric of my relationship with the Andamanese. Unlike my position with the Onge women, in this instance I speak with an awareness of the intentions of the protagonists, made known to me in extended conversations, facilitated by the fluid medium of a common language and the anomaly of my solitary existence¹⁴ in the Andamans. But these circumstances also constitute the conditions of my own ethical dilemmas, as I tread a judicious course between a breach of confidence and the interests of anthropological analysis.

In the Andaman Islands, there exists a culture of drinking among men which cuts across class, regional, and the mainland-based 'tribal' divide.¹⁵ All men drink. It is a hobby, a pleasurable activity and a practice that is often enforced among men. To be a man, one must drink. As suggested in the case of Onge men, and perhaps for Andamanese men as well, consuming large quantities of alcohol has become an integral component of their male identities. Andamanese boys are inducted early into the practice of drinking, often by their fathers, or by other older males.

Anthropologists have studied constructions of masculinity in many parts of the world, and have tried to analyse the implications of the consumption of alcohol for cultural definitions of male identity. Marshall's (1979) research on drinking among Trukese men revealed that the ostentatious, obnoxious comportment of young Trukese men was inextricably interwoven with basic Trukese beliefs about strength, courage and

manhood. Chinas' (1992) work on the Zapotec, and Gilmore's (1990) cross-cultural survey 'on the subject of manhood' confirm heavy drinking and sexual aggressiveness as closely linked to notions of male *machismo* in many parts of the world.

An additional strand of complexity related to the symbolic power of alcohol emerges in gender relations among the Andamanese. As demonstrated by the married Andamanese men, the consumption of alcohol is also an admission of impotence.¹⁶ It is an expression of an awareness that they have been cuckolded, have lost control over their wives and, thereby, the future. Andamanese women seek to have children by non-Andamanese men, often plying their husbands with large quantities of alcohol before going to their current paramours.

Producing more children is a recurrent theme in the community, justifiably so in view of the fact that there are only 35 people who can claim some 'Andamanese' descent. Except for the children of one couple, all the other children have been fathered either by non-Andamanese men or 'illegitimate unions'¹⁷ within the society, but every offspring is listed as 'Andamanese' by the community as well as the welfare authorities.¹⁸ Such a course has some immediate monetary returns, since the couple (namely, the 'legitimate' couple even if the child is born of an 'illegitimate' affair) is 'rewarded' by the Andaman administration with Rs.1000 for every birth. This money, in turn, leads to bitter altercations between the registered couple over who has greater rights to it.

Bourdieu's (1977; 1990) discussion of a 'generative habitus', provides guidelines for contextualizing the behaviors of the Andamanese. Through practices guided by a practical logic, in pursuit of objective interests, social formations tend to reproduce themselves. According to his concept of 'matrimonial strategies', certain 'types of behavior [are]...directed towards certain ends without being consciously directed to these ends, or determined by them' (Bourdieu 1990: 10). By that argument, the discrepancy between a rule, as it exists in the form of rules of kinship or marriage, and the 'logic of practice' in the strategic practices of sex, as demonstrated by the Andamanese, can be historically situated. In the interests of reproducing themselves, to exist as a viable community, the Andamanese have generated an infinite variety of sexual strategies. Their 'feel for the game, for a particular, historically determined game' (Bourdieu 1990: 62), has produced the practical sense of both playing in conformity with the rules and bending those rules. The simultaneous existence of 'legitimate' and 'illegitimate' unions allows the promise of more offspring, with immediate monetary gains thrown in for good measure. But such a 'double strategy' also has repercussions on social relations among the Andamanese, between genders and across genders, further complicated by the ambiguities of alcohol abuse, whereby battle lines become sharpened between men and women.

Three conflicting centers of power exist amongst the Andamanese, and the contesting rivals are all women, each one with varied domains of supremacy. For example, Nao's power emanates from sexual conquest. By virtue of her affairs with every male in the settlement, both Andamanese and non-Andamanese, she has been given the license to get away with anything, every male being apprehensive of her sharp tongue and what she could reveal if provoked.

By contrast, Lichu's chosen sphere is her contacts and access to people in Port Blair. As a child, Lichu used to accompany her grandfather Loka, a former Andamanese *Raja*, in his travels around the islands. Loka was respected and held in high esteem by all the government officials of Port Blair. Perched on her grandfather's back or knee, Lichu acquired familiarity with the apparatus and procedures of the administration at Port Blair, and won the affection of the officials there. At the time of my research she preferred to live in Port Blair¹⁹ with a non-Andamanese, leaving her husband and children on Strait Island.

On the other hand, Prem Kumari, a non-Andamanese,²⁰ to all appearances, played a more conventional feminine role. As a 'loving' wife, 'obedient' daughter-in-law, 'doting' mother, and 'affectionate' sister-in-law, she has won the allegiance of her family and menfolk. The tussle between Prem and Nao engenders a complex situation for the men - at various stages all have been Nao's lovers. These contestations acquire another level of signification in the labels attached to the behaviors of the women by both the Andamanese men and by the welfare authorities.

Hodgson and McCurdy's (1996) work explores how the stigmas attached to women, labels of 'misfit' or 'wicked' by their communities or other authorities, are reflections of struggles over power. Their work suggests that these stigmas are assertions of patriarchal power, and that

despite social, cultural and economic coercion, these 'wayward' wives, 'misfit' mothers, and 'disobedient' daughters refuse to become 'good' women. Instead, they continue to live their lives outside the boundaries of 'acceptable' rules and behaviors, thereby shifting their community's expectations about gender roles and relations in new directions. (Hodgson and McCurdy 1996: 2)

This provocative analysis provides an intriguing new slant for comprehending how the 'deviant' behaviors of Lichu, Nao, and others, feature in the configuration of gender relations among the Andamanese. 'Themes of morality and responsibility' are a recurrent trope in the 'noise' (Hodgson and McCurdy 1996: 5) surrounding the (mis)deeds²¹ of the women. The standards of 'good' behavior embodied in the person of a non-Andamanese, Prem Kumari, confuse the sites of the conflict, with many of the Andamanese women ranged on one side, and several Andamanese men on the other with Prem Kumari. The battle lines are further complicated by the interventions of the welfare authorities on Strait Island and at Port Blair, many of whom have intermittently been involved in affairs with Andamanese women. The 'moral' stance assumed by these men is raucously challenged by the Andamanese women, who then proceed to expose the hollow morality which the *lau* are incapable of affirming in their practice.²²

The predicament in which the Andamanese men find themselves is somewhat similar to that of the Onge men, but the pressures are different in each case. The standards of 'good' behavior that the former prescribe for their wives are drawn from the norms set by non-Andamanese. By stigmatizing the behaviors of their women, they collaborate in the representations of Andamanese women as women of 'bad' character, with 'loose'

morals. This precipitates the wrath of their wives, in turn leading to violent scenes with them. Concurrently, the animosity of Andamanese men towards the *lau*, many of whom they know are engaged in affairs with their wives, finds expression when they are intoxicated. Intoxication gives Andamanese men the license to vent their hostility and aggression towards the women and the *lau* without penalty. Such behavior, in turn, perpetuates their own stigmatized representations by Andamanese women and the *lau* as 'shiftless alcoholics'. Many of the Andamanese men sidestep a sober confrontation with the problematics of these alternatives by adopting a perennially hazy state, from one alcoholic binge to the next, the monotony periodically broken by scenes with their wives or the *lau*.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored the landscape of gender relations among the Onge and the Andamanese as manifest in their everyday behaviors and practices, against the backdrop of the interventions of the Indian welfare authorities. I have traced the shifting fields of power deployed between and across genders in quotidian ethnographic contexts that are inclusive of the anthropologist. In linking the dynamics of gender to an analysis of subjection, I have demonstrated the imbrication of the administrative strategies of the welfare system, with the processes by which the Onge and Andamanese are incorporated into specific structures of power. The differential and multiple articulations of Onge and Andamanese men and women with these linkages inflect the mode of complicity and extent of contestation. The more marginal or excluded from the routes to power, the greater the resentment expressed and opposition to government initiatives. But of greater significance are the ways in which the terrain of gender has been recast, thereby reconstituting it as a bitterly contentious site for/of power, as is acutely evident in the case of the Andamanese.

Such a 'complex interlocking of political, social and cultural forces' leads to an analysis which extends beyond the nexus of subjection and power to 'the whole substance of lived identities and relationships'. The concept of hegemony, as it is simultaneously 'constitutive and constituting' of 'relations of domination and subordination', refers to the 'pressures and limits of a given form of domination' and the extent to which it is 'experienced and in practice internalized' (Williams 1994: 595-600). Hence, Williams' reformulation of Gramsci's concept of hegemony makes possible an interpretation that is at once more comprehensive of, as well as more attentive to, the ambiguities of power than an analysis of subjection allows. As a lived process that is 'continually renewed, recreated, defended and modified', the hegemonic is also 'resisted, limited, altered, challenged by pressures not at all its own'. Thus, it is alert and responsive to 'real and persistent elements of practice' (Williams 1994: 595-600) and enables a perspective that incorporates the ways in which specific individuals' aspirations and practices are both shaped and creatively negotiated.

By this argument then, if subjection suggests an explanation of how power can shape identities and interests, the hegemonic alludes to the whole complex of domination and subordination which is never finished, always in process, and never total or

exclusive. This leads to an understanding of the ambiguities and ambivalences of Onge and Andamanese men's reforming masculinities as constituted by structures of power, yet neither totally complicit nor entirely contesting in their articulations with power.

A perspective on individual agency within the terms of the discussion so far is suggested by the incorporation of Bourdieu's notion of 'generative habitus'. At once a combination of habit, inhabit, and habitat, 'habitus' is central to Bourdieu's 'theory of practice' (Bourdieu 1977: 78-87). Existing in the gap between the constitutive and the constituting, and seeking to transcend such an opposition, habitus alludes to the process of improvisation that is inscribed by cultural processes and individual personalities. These intersections lead to an intuitive sensibility for the 'game' of social interaction. Thus, Bourdieu captures the practical sense that people have of their social situations, a competence that is itself socially grounded.

This line of reasoning enables an interpretation that can admit the divergences between the Onge and the Andamanese, and the ways in which specific individuals in each group 'play the game'. It also permits a view of the very different modes of competency exhibited by Lichu or Nao, and the distinct trajectories of Bara Raju or Tambolai as they each envisioned and negotiated their claims to power.

The Andamanese and the Onge exist along a continuum of intensity of exposure to colonial interventions and their impact on social dynamics within each group. In my introductory comments I mentioned that the framework for each group is dissimilar, and that these frameworks have been juxtaposed by virtue of my fieldwork with both groups. Thus, I have included them within the same study because this adds ethnographic richness to an analysis of gender relations in the Andaman Islands, although the theoretical framework for each group is necessarily separate because of the specificity of each social context.

In my conclusion I have finally tied up the different threads of the argument, and revealed the ways in which the analysis of subjection and hegemony that I applied to the Onge can be linked with habitus as used for the Andamanese. For each group I have addressed issues of gender and power as it intersects with the use of alcohol. Although in general, most anthropologists who have conducted research in the Andaman Islands have tended to focus on only one group, I thought it important to include as many groups as I could access for my research.

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Notes

- 1) I did not have the heart to point out that there were many among them who had been married for longer but were childless.
- 2) Time was determined by the position of the sun in the sky.

- 3) The reference to the 'colonial administrations' here is inclusive of the British and the Indian regimes. As argued earlier, for the islanders the experience of colonization continued after the British left the islands.
- 4) I have suggested that my solitary existence at Dugong Creek was a factor that led to a certain amount of alienation from the Onge women.
- 5) While I could engage in banter with the Onge women, or serve as a recipient for complaints about the welfare authorities/system, I was not privy to intimacies that could establish the grounds for an awareness of any woman as a personalized individual.
- 6) This mode of constructing a gendered homogeneity/heterogeneity in the execution of the welfare system is striking.
- 7) This led to some problems when, as requested, I purchased a *salwar-kameez* (a type of dress) for each of them, after approximating the sizes that they would wear. They were unable to get into them with their *nakuinege* on. This occasioned much laughter among the women. Finally, they discarded the *nakuinege*, and with their new outfits proudly paraded the length of the settlement.
- 8) All work that is performed for non-Onges is referred to as *totale* by the Onge, which translates as 'cleaning'. By contrast, there is a specific term for every other kind of activity that they perform which is not related to wage labor. The sweeping by the women lends greater weight to their ironic subversion of the men's work.
- 9) All the names of the children in the settlement have been conferred by the welfare staff after popular Indian filmstars, although these names are never used by the Onge among themselves. Onge forms of appellation are based on kinship categories or some unique characteristic of the individual which distinguishes that person from others. I, too, had a personal nickname conferred on me: *orananjaba*, one with a long nose.
- 10) Despite the widespread practice of drinking among the Onge, both at Dugong Creek and South Bay, a recent demographic survey of the Andaman Islands published by the Anthropological Survey of India (Pandit and Sarkar 1994), makes the bland assertion that the Onge do not drink, which is a gross misrepresentation of the existing state of affairs.
- 11) A somewhat similar transformation is noted by Kennedy (1978) among the Tarahumara, although the context in which their altered behavior occurred is very different.
- 12) 'LG' stands for Lieutenant Governor, the highest executive authority in the Andaman Islands.
- 13) The recent series on the Andaman Islanders produced by the Anthropological Survey of India scrupulously reproduces the same precepts followed by Man (1885), Portman (1899), and many others.
- 14) My breach of the norms prescribed for a 'typical' Indian woman eased my association with the Andamanese. In their view, my atypicality meant that I would be more sympathetic and less critical of their purported 'deviant' behavior than other women.
- 15) An individual's place of origin on mainland India is maintained as relevant in the Andaman Islands, so that people are referred to as, for example, 'the Tamilians', 'the Moplahs', 'the Bengalis' or 'the Ranchi tribals'.
- 16) For some of the men impotence exists at the level of actuality, as a consequence of addiction to opium in the past or hereditary syphilis.
- 17) Despite proscriptions against marriage between particular degrees of relatives, sexual liaisons exist across the board, between generations, between close relatives, within the community. Also contributing to the state of crisis is the inability of the Andamanese to maintain permanent stable relationships with non-Andamanese of the opposite sex.
- 18) The Indian administration registers these births as part of the benefits accrued by the Andamanese from the welfare efforts for them.
- 19) However Lichu also makes regular appearances on Strait Island to claim her share of the

- rations, profits from the sale of coconuts or anything that she feels is owed to her.
- 20) She is the only non-Andamanese woman married to an Andamanese who lives on Strait Island. Prem Kumari, like Lichu and everyone else there, is alert to the monetary rewards of living on Strait Island, regularly collecting everything that she can claim by virtue of her marriage to an Andamanese.
- 21) 'In the "old days"', intoned Jirake, the incumbent *Raja*, 'Lichu would be tied to a tree and beaten. But there are no more strong elders left to do that anymore'.
- 22) The Andamanese term that refers to non-Andamanese, formerly also alluding to 'evil' spirits.

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