

2004 tsunami swept away Nicobarese traditions

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Kolkata: The tsunami that devastated the Nicobar Islands a decade ago and left a fifth of the population dead, maimed or missing also claimed its resident deities.

The 15m-high waves that lashed coastal villages early on December 26, 2004, swept away life-size wooden statues of ancestors that have been worshipped for ages by residents of Katchal and Nancowry islands. With the tsunami also claiming the sculptors who made the statues, referred to as 'fetishes' in British records, including the 1901 book by C Boden Kloss, the tradition has been given a quiet burial.

The only fetishes that remain outside the Anthropological Survey of India Museum at Port Blair and India Hall at London's British Mu-

seum are the ones at a site in Munack village in Kamorta, one of the three islands in the Nancowry cluster.

Naval ophthalmologist and researcher Tilak Ranjan Bera, who has been recording the changes in Andaman & Nicobar Islands — both topographical and social — for a decade and a half, was shocked when during his post-tsunami trips, he failed to find the fetishes that had been central to tribal society in these islands.

"The first time I saw a fetish was in 1999 when conducting an eye camp at Katchal Island. I was keen to know about local culture and asked the village captain or headman if they worshipped idols. He then invited me to a *golghar* or traditional Nicobar hut. In the smoky room were wooden sculptures of men sporting headgear. Offerings like food and local li-



These fetishes in Nancowry cluster's Kamorta Island are the only ones to survive the tsunami

quor were made to them. One even wore a sunglass and had a cigar," Bera recounted.

What the doctor did not know then was that the fetish heads contained the actual skulls of dead ancestors. He learned that the Nicobarese followed animism and worshipped wooden fet-

ishes of ancestors to protect the family and the village. The body of the deceased was buried and exhumed a year later so that the bones could be collected by the family as good luck charm. The skull was placed in a cavity in the head of the fetish.

"Till the 1960s, the prac-

tice was common in different islands of Nicobar but declined in the less primitive islands thereafter. In Chowra Island, it continued till much later. Though the number shrank, they continued to be worshipped till the tsunami arrived and took away the living and the dead," said Bera, whose book *Nicobar Islands: In Nature's Kingdom* published by Niyogi Books contains photographs of the final fetishes before the sea swallowed them.

Apart from the ancestors, there were seaside fetishes that resembled scarecrows. They had a monstrous appearance with big canine teeth, a protruding tongue and erect phallus. They were placed between the village and the sea to ward off bad spirits approaching the island. These have also disappeared post-tsunami.

While the tsunami wiped

out coastal villages and killed thousands, Bera says the calamity was followed by a tragedy. As aid and compensation poured in, little sensitivity was displayed to preserve the local culture.

"In the past 10 years, residents of Nicobar have taken a big leap and covered a distance they would probably have in 100 years. The traditional Nicobar huts have given way to modern cottages. Since the villages are now on high ground and not along the coast, the customs and practices are changing. Prior to the tsunami, they did not have electricity and contact with the outside world was rudimentary. Hence, they were immersed in customs. But with access to movies, serials and sporting events on TV, they have a surfeit of entertainment and no time for customs like worshipping fetishes," he rued.