The Battle of Aberdeen: A Struggle Erased by Time

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ABSTRACT: The *Battle of Aberdeen*, fought on 17 May 1859, was one of the earliest and most important uprisings by indigenous people against the British colonial rule in the Andaman Islands. The Great Andamanese, one of the original tribal groups of the islands, led this resistance. For centuries, they lived in harmony with nature, untouched by foreign powers. This changed after the British established a penal settlement at Port Blair in 1858, following the Revolt of 1857. The settlers cleared forests and interfered with tribal lands, leading to growing tensions between the British and the Andamanese. The situation reached a climax when around 1,500 armed islanders planned a direct attack on the British at Aberdeen. The plan was uncovered by Dudhnath Tewari, a convict who had escaped and lived among the Andamanese. Although he had married into the tribe and adapted to their way of life, he secretly warned the British authorities. His message gave Superintendent Dr J. P. Walker enough time to prepare defences. The attack was strong and sudden, but the British forces were able to defend the settlement. This battle resulted in the deaths of many islanders. The British suffered few losses and praised Dudhnath Tewari, granting him a pardon. After this event, the islanders never again launched a large-scale attack. Future British officials, such as Captain Haughton, worked on building friendly relations with the tribes. In independent India, 17 May is now observed to honour the bravery of

the Andamanese. The Battle of Aberdeen is a reminder that not only kings or armies, but also tribal people, have fought bravely to protect their land.

KEYWORDS: *Battle of Aberdeen, Great Andamanese, British Empire, Dudhnath Tewari, tribal resistance, penal settlement.*

INTRODUCTION

The Andaman and Nicobar Islands, a remote archipelago in the Indian Ocean, remained for centuries beyond the reach of major kingdoms, largely due to their geographical isolation, dense forests, and difficult sea routes. Independent and self-sustained communities lived here in harmony with the abundant flora and fauna, developing their own systems of survival and cultural practices. To the outside world, however, the islands carried an air of both allure and mystery. Old sailors, veteran voyagers, and legendary travelers described them either as the "Island of Gold" or the "Island of Good Fortune," while others feared them as lands of unholy secrets. Historical accounts mention the disappearance of ships in the surrounding waters, raids by sea marauders, and the fierce resistance of indigenous Negrito tribes who protected their territories from outsiders, giving rise to the fearful Indian epithet Kalapani. Today, this storied archipelago stands as a Union Territory of India, comprising 572 islands, of which only 37 are inhabited. Strategically positioned at the crossroads where the Bay of Bengal meets the Andaman Sea, the islands occupy a unique maritime location that has historically shaped their significance and attracted colonial interest. Figure 1 highlights this geographical distinctiveness, reinforcing the centrality of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands in regional history, navigation, and geopolitics.

In the 2nd century CE, the renowned Greco-Roman geographer Claudius Ptolemy (circa 100-170 CE) made early

mention of the Andaman Islands, describing their inhabitants as cannibalistic beings, a depiction that would echo through the annals of ancient cartography, casting the islands in a shadow of dread and mystery. Several centuries later, in the 7th century CE, the Chinese Buddhist monk and pilgrim I-Tsing (635–713 CE) chronicled his impressions of the islands during his voyages. He referred to the region as the Land of Naked People and used the term Andaban, a linguistic precursor believed to directly indicate the Andaman Islands as we know them today (Mathur, 1968). By the 9th century CE, Arab voyagers such as Abu Zayd al-Sirafi and Sulaiman al-Tajir, both active around 850 CE, recounted stories of the islanders' savage customs. Their accounts, passed along through maritime trade networks and oral narratives, often emphasized practices of cannibalism and hostility toward outsiders. In the late 13th century, the famed Venetian explorer Marco Polo (1254-1324 CE) encountered the Andamanese during his passage toward the East. He depicted the islanders as untamed and primitive, attributing to them beast-like features and a savage hostility toward outsiders, an image that deepened Europe's foreboding perception of these remote and enigmatic isles. The early 14th century brought similar observations from Friar Odoric of Pordenone (circa 1286-1331 CE), a Franciscan missionary whose extensive travels across Asia led him to the Andaman coast. He, too, depicted the native tribes in bestial terms, suggesting they bore resemblance to animals and practiced ritualistic cannibalism. In the 15th century, Italian traveler Niccolò de' Conti (1395-1469 CE) journeyed to the islands and documented harrowing tales of native hostility. He described scenes in which trespassers were seized, dismembered, and consumed, narratives that cemented the islands' reputation in early European imagination as a perilous and uncivilized frontier (Kar 17-23).

Figure 1. The Andaman and Nicobar Islands form a natural divide between the Andaman Sea and the Indian Ocean
Source: *andaman.gov.in*

The Andaman and Nicobar Islands are home to six ancient and culturally distinct indigenous tribal communities. Among them, the Jarawa, Onge, Sentinelese, and Great Andamanese are traditionally classified as of Negrito origin, while the Nicobarese and Shompen are generally regarded as belonging to the Mongoloid group. Though the Negrito peoples exhibit physical

features reminiscent of African populations, and the Mongoloid groups resemble Southeast Asian communities in appearance, the true origins of these tribes remained an anthropological mystery for centuries. Only in recent times have genetic and archaeological studies begun to unravel the deep migratory roots and unique evolutionary paths of these isolated peoples. One often-circulated theory echoed even by early colonial administrators such as Archibald Blair (1752-1815) suggests that the Andamanese may be the descendants of African slaves. According to this account, a Portuguese vessel transporting enslaved Africans was shipwrecked off the Andaman coast centuries ago, leaving the survivors stranded on the islands with no means of escape or return. However, this explanation does not reach far into antiquity, as the Portuguese only entered the Indian Ocean trade network in the early 15th century, following Vasco da Gama's voyage to Calicut in 1498. Given the relatively recent timeline of Portuguese maritime expansion, this theory lacks the deep historical grounding required to explain the genetic and anthropological distinctiveness of the Negrito populations of the Andaman Islands, whose ancestral roots are now believed, based on modern genetic research, to trace back tens of thousands of years to early human migrations out of Africa (Mukherjee 16). Genetic research reveals that the Andamanese are descendants of the earliest wave of modern human migration out of Africa, which occurred approximately 70,000 years ago. They stand today as the last living representatives of a pre-Neolithic Southeast Asian population, preserving genetic and cultural lineages that have remained remarkably isolated over millennia (Portman 1: 101; Mathur 156).

The Great Andamanese, one of the earliest known inhabitants of the Andaman Islands, exhibit distinctive physical and physiological traits that have long intrigued anthropologists and

ethnographers. Characterized by a deep skin tone, so dark as to appear nearly black and their complexion is smooth and consistent with tropical adaptation. Their hair is woolly and tightly curled, often growing in dense, spring-like tufts, a trait shared with certain indigenous African populations. In terms of physical stature, the Great Andamanese are notably short. Historical records document that a tribal male of unmixed lineage typically stood at an average height of approximately 4 feet 10.5 inches (around 149 cm), with a body weight of 96 pounds (roughly 43.5 kg). Females were even shorter, averaging about 4 feet 6 inches (approximately 137 cm) in height and weighing 87 pounds (about 39.5 kg) (Mandal 40). Their petite build is reflective of a long adaptation to the insular rainforest environment, where mobility and heat regulation are essential. One remarkable physiological feature consistently noted among the Great Andamanese is their elevated basal body temperature, which often hovered close to 100°F (37.8°C). This characteristic was particularly pronounced in younger men and women and may have been a biological adaptation to the humid, equatorial climate of the islands. Another notable physical characteristic is steatopygia, a condition involving the accumulation of fat on the buttocks, which is particularly prominent among the women of these communities. This feature, commonly found among several African autochthonous groups such as the Khoisan, is thought to be an ancient genetic adaptation for energy storage. (Stock and Migliano 720) In the case of the Andamanese, its visibility was further accentuated by their traditionally naked lifestyle, shaped by their tropical forest habitat and cultural norms that required no clothing.

The ten distinct tribal groups of the Great Andamanese were traditionally settled across defined territorial segments that stretched along the narrow arc of the Great Andaman archipelago. This island chain, running predominantly in a north-south orientation for

approximately 350 kilometers, is remarkably slender, measuring only about 50 kilometers at its widest point. Such a linear and constrained geography naturally led to the formation of isolated cultural zones, where each tribe occupied and maintained its own ecological niche and territorial identity. This segmented distribution fostered diverse linguistic, spiritual, and ritual practices among the groups. While they shared certain pan-Andamanese cultural traits such as a reverence for natural spirits and animistic traditions, each group developed its own unique cosmology, mythology, and clan-based belief systems. These were shaped by the specific resources, landscapes, and micro-environments of their territories. The groups including Aka-Jerah (or Jero), Aka-Bo, Aka-Khora, Aka-Pucikwar, Aka-Jowoi, Aka-Kede, Aka-Kold, Aka-Bale, Aka-Cari (or Chari), and Aka-Bea formed a culturally diverse mosaic of indigenous life. Each tribe maintained its own dialect, spiritual customs, totemic associations, and deep ecological knowledge (Radcliffe-Brown 98). The Khora, Jero, Cari and Bo resided in the northernmost areas, while groups like the Kede, Jowoi and Pucikwar settled in the central regions, and the Kold, Bale and Bea lived in the southern territories. As outlined in Figure 2, the Great Andamanese tribal communities were historically organized into northern, central, and southern varieties, each associated with specific geographic zones and linguistic identities. This classification supports an understanding of the complex sociocultural fabric of these ancient people.

For centuries, the Great Andamanese lived as hunter-gatherers, sustaining themselves through traditional means deeply rooted in their natural environment. As semi-nomadic tribes, their daily life revolved around the forests and coastal waters of the Andaman Islands. Using handcrafted tools, they hunted terrestrial animals and marine life, while foraging for fruits, roots, and tubers to meet their subsistence needs. Hunting, fishing, and gathering

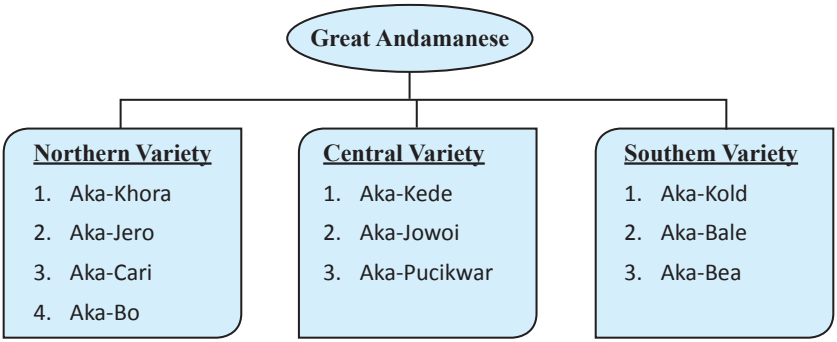

Figure 2. Ethnographic Classification of the Great Andamanese Tribal Communities

were not merely economic activities but integral to their cultural identity and rhythm of life. Due to their semi-nomadic lifestyle, the Great Andamanese, who have traditionally been classified as part of the Negrito racial group, did not build permanent shelters. Their movement across the forested archipelago was guided by seasonal availability of food and game, making mobility an essential aspect of their survival. They typically stayed in a given area for a few weeks, engaging in hunting, gathering, and fishing, before relocating to a new site. As a result, their dwellings were temporary and adapted to the natural environment. They often took refuge beneath large trees or built makeshift huts using palm leaves, tree bark, and other readily available materials. These structures were designed for easy assembly and disassembly, reflecting their deep ecological knowledge and adaptive skills. This nomadic pattern of habitation was not merely a reflection of economic necessity but also an expression of their close bond with nature and the cyclical rhythm of life in the Andaman forests (Portman: Portman 1: 215). The religious beliefs of the Great Andamanese have long intrigued ethnologists and remain a subject of deep anthropological interest. Their spiritual worldview can be broadly described as simple animism, rooted in a profound

reverence for nature and its forces. They believe that all elements of the natural world, both living and non-living, such as animals, trees, rivers, mountains, and even the wind, possess a spiritual essence. Central to their cosmology is an anthropomorphic deity named Puluga, who is not considered a distant or celestial figure in the traditional sense. Unlike gods who dwell in heaven, Puluga is believed to reside atop Saddle Peak, the highest mountain in the Andaman Islands, located on North Andaman Island. Puluga is considered the invisible overseer of human actions, a guardian spirit who punishes wrongdoing and ensures moral balance. This belief system is passed down orally through generations, deeply intertwined with myths, taboos, and ritual practices that reflect the Great Andamanese people's intimate connection to their natural surroundings and ancestral traditions. In traditional Great Andamanese society, the division of labour between the sexes is distinctly delineated, reflecting a structured yet cooperative way of life shaped by centuries of subsistence living. Men are primarily responsible for hunting and fishing, securing meat and marine resources for the group, while women gather wild fruits, roots, and tubers from the forests, ensuring a varied and nutritious diet. Communal cooking during feasts is usually undertaken by men, while the daily preparation of family meals falls to the women. The task of collecting firewood, essential for cooking and warmth, is carried out exclusively by women. The social structure of the Great Andamanese reflects a patriarchal pattern, wherein each local group is led by a male chief. Although a woman cannot assume the role of chief, the wife of the chief holds a corresponding position of authority among the women, albeit her status is acquired through marriage rather than personal distinction. Although male leadership is dominant, women retain specific rights: no husband can arbitrarily abandon his wife or claim her personal property. Divorce, while uncommon, is

Figure 3. Map of the Gulf of Bengal, taken from the Map of the Eastern Ocean Published by Order of Maurepas in 1740 (https://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-231616066/view)

permitted without social reproach if it occurs prior to the birth of the couple's first child. This pragmatic approach to social order and gender roles illustrates the nuanced balance within traditional Andamanese society, shaped by environmental demands and cultural continuity. Owing to their geographical isolation, the Andaman and Nicobar Islands remained largely untouched by the outside world and served as the ancestral home of the Negrito

populations for thousands of years. This seclusion endured until the latter part of the eighteenth century, when explorers and settlers from the so-called civilized nations began to take interest in the region (Radcliffe-Brown 102).

The *Carte du Golphe de Bengale*, created in 1740 by the distinguished French cartographer Jacques-Nicolas Bellin, was part of a broader French initiative during the eighteenth century to chart the Indian Ocean and its adjoining regions with strategic precision. Figure 3 exemplifies the colonial cartographic initiatives of 18th-century France, underscoring the strategic maritime interests in the Bay of Bengal and foreshadowing the imperial competition over the Andaman archipelago. Commissioned under the authority of Jean-Frédéric Phélypeaux, Comte de Maurepas, Bellin's map reflected France's growing maritime ambitions and its commitment to expanding geographic knowledge of overseas territories (Suwannathatsa et al. 185).

Several decades later, between 1777 and 1787, British marine surveyor John Ritchie carried out extensive surveys of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. His work, commissioned by the British East India Company, aimed to improve navigation and establish colonial control in the Bay of Bengal. Unlike Bellin's earlier efforts, which were largely based on second-hand reports and compiled cartographic sources, Ritchie's charts were derived from first-hand observations and systematic measurements. His detailed and accurate mapping of the region greatly enhanced British nautical understanding and facilitated safer maritime operations in these strategically important waters. Though unconnected to Bellin's French charts, Ritchie's surveys represented a significant advancement in British cartography and played a key role in colonial maritime policy. In 1783, Captain Thomas Forrest brought the Andaman Islands to the attention of the British East India Company, highlighting their strategic

importance in the Bay of Bengal. He formally requested the Governor-General to grant him a ship on freight, with the objective of undertaking a voyage to the Andaman Islands. His intent was to initiate peaceful contact and establish communication with the indigenous inhabitants of the archipelago. Forrest's proposal reflected the Company's growing interest in expanding maritime influence and securing navigational routes in the eastern waters during the late eighteenth century. In 1788, Captain Buchanan once again urged the Governor-General to recognize the strategic importance of the Andaman Islands and emphasized the necessity of their thorough exploration and survey. During his earlier voyages, Buchanan had observed sections of the coastline of Great Andaman, which prompted renewed interest in the archipelago. This time, the administration at Fort William responded with greater seriousness. Consequently, Lieutenant Archibald Blair of the Indian Navy was entrusted with the task of conducting an extensive survey of the islands. For this mission, he was placed in command of two vessels, the *Elizabeth* and the *Viper*, and was issued comprehensive instructions to chart the Andaman Islands, marking the beginning of a more formal British presence in the region (Portman 2: 101; Mathur 134). In 1789, Lieutenant Archibald Blair conducted a comprehensive survey of the Andaman Islands. Following this, on 12 June 1789, he attended a meeting of the Governor-General in Council, where it was resolved to establish a British settlement on the islands. The primary aim was to develop a fortified harbour at minimal expense, which could serve as a safe haven for His Majesty's naval squadron in the Bay of Bengal during times of conflict or distress. The settlement was also intended to provide refuge for shipwrecked sailors and protect them from potential attacks by the indigenous inhabitants. Furthermore, it was believed that a British presence in the Andamans would help curb the activities of

Malay pirates operating in the region. Importantly, the proposed settlement was not conceived as a penal colony, but rather as a civil establishment, modelled after existing British outposts in Penang and Sumatra, with labourers and craftsmen sent to prepare and cultivate the land. In September 1789, Lieutenant Archibald Blair sailed to the Andaman Islands with a group of artificers, labourers, and soldiers to establish a British settlement at Port Cornwallis (now Port Blair). Following the Governor General in Council's directive, Captain Alexander Kyd, then Surveyor General of India, along with Lieutenant Colebrooke, was tasked with conducting a comprehensive survey of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands and other harbours in the Bay of Bengal. Blair oversaw both the survey and the development of the settlement, and by 25 October 1789, a redoubt was constructed and the British flag was raised, marking territorial claim. In June 1790, approximately forty aboriginal islanders, likely of the Aka-Bea tribe, attempted an assault on the settlement, which was thwarted by the seizure of their canoes. In November 1792, on the advice of Commodore Cornwallis, the settlement was relocated from Port Cornwallis near Chatham Island to a more strategically advantageous harbour in the north-east of North Andaman. However, a severe monsoon in 1795 significantly deteriorated the health of the settlers. Many labourers, including the surgeon and officers, fell ill. Consequently, the settlement was abandoned in May 1796. At the time of its closure, the colony housed 270 convicts and around 550 men, women, and children, including European artillerymen and sepoy guards (Mathur 136). All were relocated along with their belongings, primarily to Penang.

In 1857, the First War of Indian Independence erupted, posing a significant challenge to British colonial authority. In the aftermath, numerous freedom fighters were imprisoned across various regions of India. Recognizing the strategic isolation

and geographical suitability of the Andaman Islands, the British administration identified them as an ideal location for housing convicts and political prisoners. Consequently, a committee was constituted to evaluate the feasibility of re-establishing a penal settlement on the islands. The committee comprised F.G. Mouat, G.R. Playfair, and J.A. Heathcote. Following the committee's favourable recommendation, the British Government instructed Captain H. Man, Executive Engineer, to proceed to Port Blair and undertake initial preparations for the settlement. Meanwhile, Dr J.P. Walker was appointed as the first Superintendent of the proposed penal colony. On 4th March 1858, Dr Walker arrived at Port Blair accompanied by 200 convicts, thereby formally marking the beginning of the new British penal settlement in the Andaman Islands. The aftermath of the 1857 uprising and the subsequent establishment of the penal settlement at Port Blair in 1858 brought forth a series of significant challenges (Chakraborty 45).

The establishment of the penal settlement at Port Blair in 1858 (Majumdar 87) was strongly opposed by the native Andamanese people. As the British tried to expand their control, several conflicts occurred between the settlers and the island's original inhabitants. In February 1858, two British officers and one Indian officer from a survey ship were killed by local tribesmen on one of the smaller islands in the Andaman group. During the first year of the settlement, many convicts tried to escape into the forests (Mouat 42). However, most of them died either from harsh conditions or were killed by the Andamanese, who viewed them as intruders. On 5 March 1858, another clash happened between the islanders and the crew of the British survey brig, in which one officer was killed. It was reported that the conflict may have been caused by a midshipman on the ship. More violence followed in the coming months. On 25 April 1858, an attack by settlers led to

another skirmish where several Andamanese were injured. Then, on 9 June 1858, a group of islanders armed with bows and arrows launched a sudden attack on a group of unarmed sailors, although luckily no one was killed. These early incidents showed the deep mistrust and resistance of the Great Andamanese people towards the British presence, as they tried to protect their land and way of life from outside interference. On 5 July 1858, Lieutenant Templer of the Indian Navy, who was stationed in the Andaman Islands, pursued a group of Andamanese canoes near the coast. During the chase, one of the islanders, frightened by the approaching armed boat, shot an arrow at the settlers. In response, the British party returned fire, killing the man. Templer seized three canoes and proceeded to a nearby Andamanese camp located close to the beach. There, his men destroyed several huts. In the resulting conflict, five or six Andamanese people were killed. Later, with official permission from Dr. J.P. Walker, the Superintendent of Port Blair, Lieutenant Templer went on to destroy around forty more huts belonging to the Andamanese. This incident highlights the rising tension between the British colonial settlers and the indigenous population, who were increasingly threatened by the occupation of their ancestral lands. The year 1859 marked the beginning of the second phase in the resistance of the indigenous people of the Andaman Islands against colonial occupation (Chakraborty 47). Determined to defend their homeland, the Andamanese launched three planned attacks on the British settlement within a short span of five weeks during April and May of that year. The first major attack took place on 6 April 1859. On that day, around 248 convicts, who had been deployed to clear the jungle, were suddenly attacked by nearly 200 Andamanese warriors armed with traditional bows and arrows. Three convicts were killed on the spot, and six others were wounded, one of whom later died in hospital. In addition to inflicting casualties,

the Andamanese seized a significant number of tools, clothing, and cooking utensils from the convicts before retreating into the forest. This event was one of the earliest coordinated efforts by the Andamanese to resist the growing intrusion of colonial settlers into their ancestral territory. On the afternoon of 14 April 1859, a large and well-organised group of approximately 1,500 Andamanese launched a sudden and fierce attack on the convict labourers (Mathur 166). Unlike earlier encounters, many of the attackers were armed not only with their traditional weapons such as bows and arrows, but also with knives and small axes, indicating a more deliberate and intensified effort to resist the colonial presence. The convicts, who were engaged in clearing land, were completely outnumbered and unprepared for such a large-scale assault. As a result, they were unable to defend themselves effectively. Three convicts were killed immediately, and six others sustained serious injuries during the attack. This incident highlighted the growing determination of the indigenous people to resist foreign intrusion into their territory.

On 23rd April 1858, nearly ninety convicts managed to escape from Ross Island and made their way into the dense forests of the Andamans. While some perished due to the hostile response of the aboriginal inhabitants, others attempted to flee the forest in search of safety. Among the few who succeeded in their escape was Dudhnath Tewari, a sepoy from the 14th Infantry of the Bengal Army, who had been convicted of mutiny and sentenced to imprisonment in the Andaman Islands. Tewari took refuge with the Great Andamanese and remained with them for over a year. During this time, he learned their language and assimilated into their way of life, adopting their customs and practices. He even married a Great Andamanese woman named Leepa, and the tribe treated him with remarkable kindness and hospitality (Mathur 170). While living among them, Tewari became aware of plans for

a coordinated attack by the Great Andamanese against the British settlement. On 16th May, he observed a group of Andamanese arriving by boat at the encampment where he had been living. These two boats were loaded with axes, tools, and utensils, items clearly looted from earlier raids on the colonial settlement. From this, Dudhnath inferred that the group was preparing for another attack, likely with the intention of plundering more tools and supplies. Soon after, a contingent of approximately 250 armed Andamanese men set off in around twenty canoes from that location. After reaching the shores of the main island, this group was joined by another band of aboriginal warriors, who were accompanied by Sadloo (Mathur 175), another escaped convict. Together, the combined force made camp roughly two miles from Aberdeen on the afternoon of 16 May 1859 (Saini), with the clear intention of launching a coordinated assault on the British settlement the following morning. Under the cover of night, Dudhnath Tewari and Sadloo (Sadloo was an escaped Indian convict who, like Dudhnath Tewari, had fled from the Penal Settlement at Port Blair) quietly slipped away from the Andamanese encampment. Moving with caution through the forested terrain, they reached the convict station at Aberdeen around 2:00 a.m. on 17 May 1859 (Saini). Without delay, they alerted the authorities about the impending attack by the Islanders. The warning was immediately conveyed to J.P. Walker, the Superintendent of the Penal Settlement. However, the information came with such urgency that Walker had barely enough time to take full defensive measures before the assault by the aborigines began.

The events of 17th May 1859 marked a pivotal moment in the history of the Andaman Islands. The confrontation between the British colonial authorities and the Great Andamanese tribes on that day is now known as the *Battle of Aberdeen*. It was the most

organised and large-scale resistance mounted by the indigenous islanders against colonial intrusion (Das and Mukherjee 70). Dudhnath Tewari's timely warning played a crucial role in averting disaster. Thanks to the intelligence he provided, the colonial authorities were able to act swiftly, divert essential resources, and reinforce vulnerable points across the settlement. His defection ultimately helped suppress what could have become the most formidable challenge to British authority in the islands. As soon as the warning reached him, Superintendent Dr. J.P. Walker ordered Lieutenant Colonel Hellard, commander of the Naval Guard, to proceed immediately to the guard ship. Lieutenant Philbrick was also dispatched to offer artillery support. At the same time, Walker instructed the convicts working in the settlement to bury all spare tools and implements and to gather on a hilltop near the coastline for potential evacuation to the ships. One group of aboriginal warriors, approaching along the shoreline, was halted by defensive gunfire. However, another group managed to break through despite heavy fire from Hellard, who had already reached the guard ship by then. This group succeeded in reaching the main convict station and held control over it for nearly thirty minutes. During this brief occupation, the aborigines took anything of value, including tools, clothing, utensils, and supplies. Their hold on the station ended when Lieutenant Warden and his team arrived to assist the defenders and eventually forced the attackers to retreat. Several members of the aboriginal group were killed or seriously wounded during the skirmish. However, none of the British settlers suffered significant injury. The assault was ultimately unsuccessful, and the British quickly regained control. Following this encounter, the colonists tightened their grip on the islands. Although minor hostilities continued, the indigenous people were never again able to launch an attack of such scale or organization (Mathur 174). The British proceeded with their

unchecked exploration, expansion, and exploitation of the Andaman Islands in the years that followed. Following the events of the Battle of Aberdeen, the British administration took the extraordinary step of recommending a full pardon for Dudhnath Tewari. Dudhnath Tewari was a sepoy in the 14th Regiment of Native Infantry. On 27th September 1857, during the Indian Rebellion of 1857, he was convicted of mutiny and desertion by a British military commission at Jhelum. As punishment, he was sentenced to transportation for life, along with penal labour in irons. In accordance with this sentence, he was deported to the Penal Settlement at Port Blair in the Andaman Islands, where he arrived on 6th April 1858. Upon arrival, he was registered as Convict No. 276. In an effort to demonstrate the perceived generosity and fairness of Imperial rule, the British authorities in Delhi officially granted Dudhnath Tewari a full pardon. By aligning himself with the British administration, Dudhnath Tiwari came to be remembered as the "Hero of Aberdeen." Having spent some time among the Great Andamanese, he became aware of their plans to attack the colonial settlement at Aberdeen. Choosing to inform the authorities, he played a decisive role in safeguarding the nascent penal colony. His timely intervention was recognized by the British as an extraordinary act of loyalty, and he was celebrated as a protector of the settlement (Saini). In acknowledgment of this contribution, the colonial administration granted him clemency, formally releasing him from his life sentence and setting him free.

The assault on Aberdeen later came to be known as the *Battle of Aberdeen* within the Port Blair settlement. Undeniably, it marked the most intense and serious confrontation between the British settlers and the indigenous Andamanese. It was the most resolute and determined offensive ever launched against the colonial establishment on the islands. The scale and organization

demonstrated by the Andamanese during this attack, particularly their unified hostility and tactical coordination, presented a significant concern for the colonial administration. As a result, such uprisings had to be considered carefully in all future security and administrative plans for the penal settlement. However, no such large-scale and concerted attempt was ever made again by the aboriginal population following the Battle of Aberdeen. It is believed that the Andamanese, having experienced the strength and retaliation of the colonial forces, came to recognize the futility of such armed resistance against the British Empire (Mathur 1968).

A new chapter in the history of British-Andamanese relations began following the departure of Dr. J.P. Walker in 1859. His successor, Captain Haughton, placed significant emphasis on establishing peaceful and constructive relations with the indigenous Andamanese communities. To this end, Captain Haughton issued a set of clear instructions to both officers and convicts, outlining the appropriate conduct during any interaction with the island's aboriginal inhabitants. He mandated that the Great Andamanese were never to be disturbed or harmed unless they made a clear and hostile move towards the settlement or work parties operating in the forested areas. At the same time, Haughton made it known that any unprovoked attacks by the Great Andamanese on the settlement would be dealt with firmly and without hesitation. Despite his readiness to act in defence of the colony, Haughton was equally committed to pursuing a policy of conciliation. He expressed his firm intention to make every possible effort to foster goodwill and cooperation with the tribes. Encouragingly, under his administration, the first signs of improving relations began to emerge. Faint indications of goodwill were observed particularly with the Aka-Bea-da tribe. This culminated in the first recorded friendly contact with them on 27 February 1860,

marking a significant step forward in the colonial government's attempts to build a more peaceful coexistence with the native population. M.V. Portman, a British officer and anthropologist closely associated with the Andaman Islands, observed that the Great Andamanese believed the British settlers to be too powerful to defeat in open combat. British officials gradually came to understand the sentiments and socio-cultural practices of the Great Andamanese and adopted certain preventive measures to avoid provoking hostility (Portman 1: 57). At times, tensions arose when British officers declined to provide additional food supplies to the tribes. Such refusals occasionally triggered anger among the Great Andamanese, leading to sporadic attacks. Nevertheless, the British administration, adhering to a broader policy of restraint, deliberately avoided responding with aggression or bloodshed. Their objective was to prevent the tribes from perceiving the settlers as enemies, which could have incited further plundering or violence. On 15th January 1861, during one such confrontation, six members of the Great Andamanese community were captured by British authorities. In an experimental move, three of them were sent to Burma (present-day Myanmar) for a few months to be trained in English, with the hope that they could serve as intermediaries in future communication between the colonial government and the indigenous population. Tragically, one of the three died shortly after contracting an illness. The remaining two, however, failed to acquire any meaningful knowledge of English during their time in Burma. Despite this, the experience left a significant impact. The compassionate treatment they received from the British authorities fostered a new sense of respect and trust. Upon their return, they shared their experiences with their fellow tribesmen, which led to a noticeable shift in perception towards the settlers. By 1862, this cautious and humane approach by the British administration had successfully laid the groundwork

for establishing more amicable and stable relations with the Great Andamanese (Mathur 169).

Figure 4. Memorial of the Battle of Aberdeen

Source:https://dt.andaman.gov.in/DetailNewsaspx?newsid=ru0BUv7CFWpX7OjkDB9RGI+0J5VZTz VmZAZJ/VE/mP0=

Figure 4 captures the commemorative site at Port Blair that honours the valiant resistance of the Great Andamanese during the Battle of Aberdeen. The memorial stands as a poignant reminder of indigenous resistance and postcolonial recognition of subaltern agency. After India gained independence in 1947, the Government of India officially recognized 17th May as a day of commemoration for the Battle of Aberdeen, one of the most significant confrontations between the indigenous Andamanese and the British colonial administration. This date is now observed

annually to honour the courage and resistance of the aboriginal Andamanese who fought valiantly against the oppressive forces of British rule. In tribute to their bravery, a memorial was erected in Port Blair to preserve the memory of those who laid down their lives to defend their homeland. The monument stands not only as a symbol of their indomitable spirit but also as a reminder of the resistance offered by India's indigenous communities in the broader struggle against colonial domination.

The Battle of Aberdeen was neither the saga of a king's conquest, nor a tale adorned with the grandeur of glittering weaponry or royal ambition. It was a battle fought by subaltern people, the indigenous Great Andamanese, against one of the most powerful imperialist forces of the time – the British Empire, then at the height of its global dominance. This confrontation was not a conventional war, but a symbolic act of resistance by a marginalized community determined to defend its land, culture, and autonomy against colonial intrusion. It revealed the resilience and courage of those who were historically silenced or ignored in the mainstream narratives of Indian history. Therefore, the Battle of Aberdeen must not be allowed to fade into obscurity within the pages of India's glorified past. It deserves rightful recognition as a testament to indigenous resistance and as a reminder of the lesser-known struggles that contributed to India's larger fight against colonial rule.

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