Ethnobotanical Studies of the Tribes of Andaman and Nicobar Islands, India. I. Onge

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This paper deals with the ethnobotany of the Onge tribe. Brief accounts of the geography of the island, ethnology, and history of ethnobotanical studies in addition to the methodology of the present work are given. Plants used in everyday life, such as for bows and arrows, dugouts and canoes, fibers, food, medicines, and shelter, are described and discussed. The 40 species dealt with in the paper have 52 uses. The present study indicates that the Onge tribe shows certain similarities with other southeastern Asian Negrito races.

The Onge tribals are the aboriginal inhabitants of the southernmost island of the Andaman group known as Little Andaman, which lies between 10°33'-10°55'N and 92°20'-92°35'E, in the Bay of Bengal. It is a flat, coral island stretching 41.8 km N–S, 25.7 km E–W, with an area of about 730 km². The average annual rainfall is approximately 330 cm. The average minimum temperature is about 25°C, while the average maximum is about 30°C. It has a tropical rain forest. The administrative headquarters of the island is at Hut Bay.

ETHNOLOGY

The Onge tribe belongs to the Negrito race. The members of this tribe are of dark complexion, short-statured, sturdy, and with wooly hair. The Onge tribe has close physical and cultural affinities with some tribes of southeastern Asia, viz, the Semang of Malaysia and the Aeta of the Philippines (Pandit, 1976). Formerly, the Onge tribe was seminomadic, roaming around the shores of the island in response to different seasons. The population of the Onge tribe is declining for unknown reasons; they now number only 112 individuals, and are settled mostly at Dugong Creek, Jackson Creek, and South Bay.

Earlier, in their history the tribals were hostile but they became friendly by the end of 19th century. After 1966, the tribals were isolated by the rough sea, the wide Duncan passage, and thick impenetrable forests. The introduction of Bangladesh and Sri Lanka refugees (after 1966) and the institution of different development schemes for the island have exposed the Onge tribals to the modern civilized world. Formerly, the tribals wore no clothes but now some of them may wear clothes while visiting the more urban civilized townships. Besides using their own dialect, most of the tribals can understand and speak a little Hindi.

Among the significant anthropological studies of the Onge tribe made recently are those of Cipriani (1966), Dutta (1978), Ganguly (1966), Lal (1976), Nigam (1956), and Pandit (1976).

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2 Botanical Survey of India, Northern Circle, 3 Laxmi Road, Dehra Dun-248001, India. The studies were made during the author’s stay at the Botanical Survey of India, Andaman-Nicobar Circle, Port Blair-744102, India.
**HISTORY OF ETHNOBOTANICAL STUDIES**

Kloss for the first time in 1902 referred to the dugout canoe, made from the wood of *Sterculia campanulata* Wall., Cipriani (1966) supplied some ethnomobotanical information in his book *The Andaman Islanders*, Thothathri (1966) reported on *Orophea katschallica* Kurz, the Tonyoge plant, used for protection when collecting honey, and Sangal (1971) listed some food plants consumed by different tribes of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. More recently, Bhargava (1981) reviewed the plants used in folk life and folklore on the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. In general, the Onge tribe has remained relatively unexplored from the ethnombotanical point of view.

**METHODS**

During the botanical exploration of Little Andaman Island, the author visited Dugong Creek, an Onge settlement, which is just at sea level, in August–September 1976, and in January–November 1977. During these stays, contact was established with several older Onge men. Everyday 1 or 2 Onge men were taken to the forests as guides and informants. The Onge tribals are very good tree climbers, and they helped in the collection of plant specimens, even from trees as tall as 30 m. Inquiries regarding the Onge names of plants, with their different uses and methods of uses, were made and recorded on the spot along with other botanical field notes. Queries were repeatedly made at different times either from the same person or different persons in order to verify the accuracy of the information.

Data recorded from the Onge tribals was checked against the available literature (Anonymous, 1948–1972; Burkill, 1951; Chopra et al., 1949, 1958; Kirtikar and Basu, 1935; Tanaka, 1976; Watt, 1890). The uses not previously recorded or improperly known are marked with an asterisk (*) in the enumeration.

In this enumeration, the listed plants are grouped under various categories, viz, Gymnosperms, Angiosperms (Dicotyledons, Monocotyledons), then the families, genera, and species are enumerated in alphabetical order. Data on each species are presented in the following sequence: correct botanical name; synonym, if the correct (valid) botanical name is not familiar; dialect or vernacular name(s) in bold type (the abbreviation of the dialect or vernacular language is given in parentheses, first the Onge name(s) with phonetic signs, followed by the Hindi name if any); habit; information on use(s), along with method(s) of utilization; followed by the collector’s name(s), and field number with the code designation of herbaria where the specimens are deposited. The uses among the tribes of southeastern Asian countries, if known, are also appended.

The following abbreviations are used in the text: CAL, Central National Herbarium, Botanical Survey of India, Howrah (Calcutta), India; H, Hindi; L, Rijks herbarium, Leiden, Netherlands; O, Onge; PBL, Herbarium of Botanical Survey of India, Andaman-Nicobar Circle, Port Blair, India; Syn., synonym.

**ENUMERATION OF SPECIES**

**A. GYMNOSPERMS**

*Cycadaceae*