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ABOVE: Vikram Singh Bisht at Chandrashila peak on the new year day of 1997;
BELOW: The mystical slopes of the alpine meadows overlooking the Shokharakh camp

that he worried a lot about me and had fainted a few days earlier while he was preparing to leave for our camp. I again visited Vikram the next day. While I sat holding his motionless hands, consoling him that he will be fine soon, a tear trickled down the side of his cheek. He had recognised me! With great

difficulty, I went back to the campsite. It was very difficult to find someone to assist me, since everyone in the village believed that Vikram was attacked by a mountain spirit, but at last I managed to find another person. Vikram passed away on January 27 at the hospital; the reason remains a mystery.

The following months during field work, I sensed Vikram's presence around me all the time. The slippery parts of the trail where he would put out his hand to help me, the pile of stones atop the Chandrashila peak, the vantage points atop the cliffs where we would sit together and look for monal, and missed the hot *rotis* that he would serve. He had become an integral part of my life and it was very hard to accept that he would never return. Many years have passed since I met Vikram, and the paint marks that he left on the trees and rocks have faded away, but I can never forget the enthusiasm for fieldwork and the thoughtfulness and caring nature of this simple mountain man. Even today the view of the mountains, its snow covered peaks and the distant ringing call of the monal, instantly brings back vivid memories of Vikram Singh Bisht.

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Surviving the Tsunami

Manish Chandi

Although a part of the Republic of India, the Nicobar Islands are closer to the Indonesian island of Sumatra. The River Galathea drains into the sea in a large cove called South Bay on the southern tip of the Great Nicobar Island. The beach at the river mouth was a significant nesting site for leatherback sea turtles and this was where the Andaman and Nicobar Islands' Environmental Team (ANET)

ran a research project since the year 2000. Since the research camp lay 41 km along the main trunk road that led south out of the shantytown of Campbell Bay, it was called Point 41.

In December 2004, the leatherback nesting season was at its peak and a quiet, shy, young wildlife biologist from Orissa, Dr Ambika Tripathy, was studying them. This was his first visit to the Nicobars, a

long awaited opportunity. His assistant was Saw Agu, a young Karen (a tribe originally from Burma settled in the Andaman Islands by the British in 1925), with several years of experience on the sea turtle project. The camp also included visitors from Pune – four middle-aged amateur ornithologists, and two guards from the Andaman and Nicobar Forest Department - Sameer and Abdul Aziz.

After dinner on Christmas day, Ambika and Agu left the camp to walk the long stretch of beach, recording data on nesting turtles, returning exhausted just before sunrise. They were deep in slumber when a tremendous shaking jolted them awake.

The Andaman and Nicobar Islands lie on a fault line and earthquakes are common. But this was a big one! Sprinting to the beach, they found their guests and the forest guards watching the sea receding into an abnormally low tide. Just as quickly, the tide rushed into camp, scattering their things on the flooded beach. Meanwhile it continued to quake and it was difficult for any of them to stand upright. The sea ebbed again leaving fish flopping on the shore. Sensing that the worst was yet to come, Agu pointed to the hills and shouted 'Bhago!' (run). Instead of heeding his warning, the four naturalists from Pune began to photograph the scene, while the two guards rushed around collecting their dispersed belongings, including precious certificates of achievement. Only Ambika took Agu seriously but compelled to play the host, he waited for the older men, wasting valuable time.

The tremors continued and the sea ebbed and surged in small bursts. When the waves started to engulf the land they stood on, the group finally decided to move. As they approached the road, the nearest high ground, the sea was surging ashore with greater intensity and they witnessed the forest check-post being washed away.

However, by the time they reached the road it had gone underwater too. There was water as far as the eye could see. The only thing that stood above the water was the bridge that spanned the River Galathea. But when they got to the bridge, it was already under thigh-deep water that was rising rapidly. Running to the hills in the distance was not an option anymore, as they would never make it in time. The only thing they could do was to climb a large pipul (*Ficus religiosa*) tree nearby. Agu and the guards assisted the naturalists in getting above the reach of the waves, before climbing up to "safety" themselves.

Sitting nervously on the tree, Agu recalls the sound of the tsunami as it approached. It began with an enormous roar, accompanied by the sound of branches snapping and trees falling. That's when Agu saw the huge phalanx of dark water, perhaps 15 m high, effortlessly crashing down giant coastal trees in its path and coming straight at them with the force of a celestial sledgehammer. That was the last time Agu saw his companions. The tsunami smashed the pipul tree like a matchstick and sucked Agu underwater, knocking his breath out and tangling his legs amongst tree branches. As he gasped for air and struggled to free himself, he snorted and swallowed mouthfuls of the dark, smelly water. When he managed to surface, he found himself bobbing amidst huge uprooted trees. Land was far in the distance. Before he could gain his bearings the next wave pulled him underwater again. The force of the tide whipped away his shorts leaving him totally naked. The waves walloped him against the trunks of huge uprooted

trees and other debris and every part of him took a beating. He felt like a rag doll being tossed by a malevolent force which he couldn't escape. He ached all over and was scratched and scraped everywhere. Each time he went under, he gulped more of the filthy water. When he tried to haul himself up a standing tree, it gave way and fell right on him. His shoulders and chest hurt especially badly, and every breath he drew hurt even more. There seemed no end to the fury of the sea.

Agu struggled to stay afloat through the turbulence until he was finally able to climb onto a floating tree. The battering had left him totally drained, but concern for others was uppermost in his mind. He scoured the watery landscape and shouted for the others; there was no response. The waves and the pain had wrung him of all energy. Seeing the camp underwater, it seemed unlikely anyone had survived that destruction. Eventually the fury abated; it was eerily

Saw Paung and Saw Agu aboard the MV Makara enroute Little Andaman Island, to set up a sea turtle monitoring camp in 2006



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quiet except for the harsh sound of rough waves crashing on fallen trees, pushing flotsam and Agu towards land. There wasn't a whimper of life anywhere, not even birds. The bridge across the Galathea had disappeared; only its columns rose above the water. Trees shorn of leaves stood naked against the sky. Agu was disoriented - the coast as he knew it was missing and the rainforest seemed to rise out of the sea - but he realized that the raft of the fallen tree he was sitting on had once been part of a lowland tropical forest next to a large mangrove creek, the Galathea River. He pondered his next move. The forest was too far in the distance - he didn't think his fractured, bruised and aching body could get him there. There were no fishing boats at sea. He was all alone on that long trashed coastline, with no sign of any help coming his way. He wondered if any of his friends from Chingenh, the nearest Nicobarese village, would remember to look for him, or if indeed any of them had survived. Helplessness washed over him. He knew he had to get back on land, but how? He told himself that he would wait, rest and recover his strength. After nightfall, it began to rain leaving him cold, tired, hungry and aching, but sleep was not an option. He felt compelled to maintain a vigil for any further developments.

The next day dawned and he was still bobbing in the middle of nowhere surrounded by rafts of logs and debris. The carcass of a turtle floated by and moments later a turtle swam past. These were the first creatures Agu saw in the immediate aftermath. Debris was piled up everywhere. There was no place to hide from the sun's relentless heat. It made him thirsty and when he could stand it no more, he was driven to drinking the dirty, stinking seawater. He slept fitfully and woke up to the same nightmare.

Hours wore on into days. Helicopters and planes occasionally flew overhead

but there was no way of alerting them. He had weakened from lack of water and food. Small sips of seawater were all he had. One moonlit night he saw a saltwater crocodile swim close to his pile of logs, and circle it. He looked around for something to fend it off in case it came close, but mercifully it swam away. He could see other crocodiles circling the debris of the mangrove forest that had once been their home. Sand flies bit him during the day and mosquitoes made the nights miserable. The crocodiles and the insects were the only signs of life. He had no idea what had happened to the people in the surrounding villages or just how massive the devastation was.

Rain brought relief from the heat and he gulped it eagerly, but the cooler temperatures that followed froze him at night. He kept count of the days; a week had already gone by. He lost consciousness frequently from dehydration and exhaustion. On the tenth day he tried swimming to another raft of logs closer to land, but when his aching body protested, he abandoned the effort.

The helicopters stopped flying past and Agu suffered a crisis of hope. Then one day, a water monitor lizard visited him and smelt his feet with its long forked tongue; Agu realized with a start that it was checking if he was carrion. He knew that he if he wanted to live he would have to go ashore, or become lizard food and die there. He was determined to live even if the effort killed him. He had regained his bearings to some degree and remembered that there was a forest trail that led to a village called Shastri Nagar 35 km away. He picked a small branch to support his badly wounded arm and swam over to the next logjam and rested. The pain was excruciating and every movement was time-consuming. He stumbled on the branches and slipped on the smooth trunks but he kept going. The effort knocked him unconscious

a lot of times, and it took him several hours to crawl ashore.

The shore was no longer the beautiful beach he remembered. It was unrecognisable - clogged with huge uprooted trees, lianas, broken branches, and slush. Climbing over this debris was going to be difficult, so he decided to make his way through the forest along a hilly slope. He was delighted to find the stream still flowing and drank his fill of fresh water for the first time in thirteen days. When he stepped on an old areca nut he couldn't resist the temptation to chew on it. There was nothing else around that seemed edible. On seeing a skull, he shivered, but realized it was old and had probably been unearthed by the waves. It was less than seven km to Shastri Nagar but it took him three days of hobbling and crawling to get there.

On January 11, 2005, Agu staggered into the village. It had been sixteen days since the tsunami. He couldn't see a soul around, but household wreckage - tin roofs, mangled furniture, window frames, clothes, and utensils - lay scattered everywhere. He stared, trying to comprehend the devastation; he knew some of the villagers and wondered what had become of them. He put on a pair of green trousers and a white shirt that he found lying on the ground. As he picked his way agonizingly and gingerly through the mess he heard a shout. It was Sriram - it was a strange relief to hear that familiar voice. Sriram was a villager, who had returned with a few others to collect some of their belongings.

Sriram narrated the terrible tale of the devastation that had been caused in just a few hours on that sunlit but fateful day. Sriram took Agu to an old couple who had stayed on after the tsunami. During his years working at the research camp, Agu had seen the couple going about the village and recognised them; they however couldn't identify him - sixteen

days of being ravaged by the sun, rain and sea had taken their toll. The old lady fed him his first meal since the tsunami. That was when they heard a helicopter flying low overhead and Sriram ran out to wave it down.

By an extraordinary coincidence, a search party from ANET had received

permission just that day to conduct a search for the members of their sea turtle research camp. As they flew in the Indian Navy helicopter surveying the damage below, they saw a few people gathered in an opening waving at them. The team requested to be dropped there and the villagers led them to Agu. There was shock and relief when they saw him

sitting under the coconut trees of the desolate village. Before being whisked away to a hospital, Agu told the search party that he had not seen Ambika or the others since the tsunami, but he asked them not to give up hope. However, despite many searches over the following months, none of the other members of the ANET sea turtle research camp were ever found.

The ANET Network

I am not a field biologist but work among human communities largely in the Andaman & Nicobar Islands attempting to understand aspects within society and its environment. During my 'fieldwork' among human communities, I have had the good fortune of being assisted by helpful people who either joined on their own or more rarely, were assigned to help in my assignments. Besides my primary work, I have also been part of surveys for sea turtles and crocodiles in the Andaman Islands, as a team member of Andaman and Nicobar Environmental Team (ANET), a division of the Madras Crocodile Bank Trust (MCBT).

The genesis of field assistants at ANET began during field surveys for crocodiles and sea turtles by the MCBT in the mid 1970s. At ANET, people from the Karen community in the Andamans have played a crucial role through the years. The field assistants at the ANET station have often doubled as boatmen, cooks, data collectors, and accomplices on journeys by boat and on foot. Field surveys for sea turtles, saltwater crocodiles, or even visiting a community in South Andamans invariably entails the use of a boat. 'Being in a tub' for extended periods of time certainly results in camaraderie, periods of doubt and tension, fun and discovery of 'things and places', and even 'self discovery' for some. Over these many years of association, a strange rapport has developed that is not easily explained. Of the many people, the main crew who have worked and some who continue to work with us are Uncle Paung, Uncle Pambwein, late Saw Shwether, Saw John, Saw Nelson, Saw Agu, Montu Bhowmik, and Naveen Ekka. On more than one occasions, people in the Andamans have become associated with our work purely by chance. They have guided generations of ANET researchers through cyclones, mud swamps and the tsunami. They continue to have a steady interest in research, despite many lucrative offers from recent developers in the islands. Even our 'retired' fieldassistants, like Uncle Paung who is past 70, have a passion for exploration and natural history that is hard to come by these days, and an incredible asset for an organisation working on biodiversity conservation in the islands.

ANET has often acknowledged the role of its field assistants by including them as co-authors of articles, notably one on sea turtle surveys. Whether their greater contribution is in terms of their skills and resourcefulness, or indigenous knowledge, or the warm companionship they have provided to the many generations of ANET researchers, is debatable. What is indisputable is that they have been an invaluable and integral part of a team, with great loyalty to the institution, the people and their work in the islands.

Agu was treated for his injuries and dehydration at Dhanvantri, the Naval hospital at Port Blair. He had broken both collarbones, fractured a few ribs and bruised his body very badly. After spending a few months with his family, recuperating at his home in Webi, North Andaman, Agu returned to work at ANET where he works even today.

It is a testament to his strength of will that Agu narrated this story with no sense of drama, but as if it were a tale of a long forgotten hero in a distant land. He is a source of courage to all of us.

On that fateful day, the sand at South Bay sank several metres, destroying the beach and the mangroves. The sea turtle camp lay about 125 km northwest of the epicentre of the 9.1 Richter earthquake of December 26, 2004, and about 150 km from totally devastated Aceh in Sumatra. Today there is a slow accretion of sand on the beach and soon ANET researchers will be able to determine if the leatherbacks will come back to nest here.

Ambika Tripathy's contribution to sea turtle research in the Andamans and Nicobars will go a long way towards the conservation of sea turtles, and enable future researchers to evaluate how the tsunami has affected the leatherback nesting grounds in the Nicobars.

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