This ethnography is a comparative analysis of three groups of Andaman Islanders with very diverse experiences of colonialism, based on my research and experience in the islands from 1989-1992 and, then again, in 2004. The ethnography examines the links between colonialism and ‘development’, and the many continuities between the policies of the earlier British colonial administration and the ongoing Indian colonization of the Andaman Islands. Within this framework, the situation of the Andamanese, Onge and Jarawa is analysed as integrally intertwined with and affected by shifting agendas of ‘development’. The book goes on to analyse how ‘development’ and the welfare policies of the present Indian administration are a fundamentally gendered process with profound albeit uneven effects on local gendered relations of power. Ethnographic data is explored to explain how impositions of particular masculine identities on the Andamanese and Onge have reconfigured gender relations in these groups, manifested as mundane but protracted struggles over power between genders. Finally, the book considers the location of the anthropologist in both constructing and determining the research process.

The situation of the Andaman Islanders is one that has been experienced by indigenous peoples across the world, brought about by the twin processes of colonialism and capitalism, destroying countless lives in their wake. The accounts of dispossession, disease and death are familiar ones, having been retold over the centuries in line with global patterns of colonialism.

The structure of the narrative to follow juxtaposes ethnographic encounters of the everyday alongside a discussion and analysis of the historical and contemporary administrative interventions in the islanders’ lives. I scan the documents compiled by the fascinating figure of Portman, the late nineteenth century administrator-cum-anthropologist, to read between the lines a continuum in the on-the-ground reality as well as to unearth ways in which the islanders may have resisted British interventions. In the light of their earlier experience with indigenous groups elsewhere, I assert that the British colonial administration in the Andaman Islands was complicit in unleashing a process of genocide in the islands.

I repeat the procedure for the contemporary period using the policy document of the tribal welfare agency, which provides a charter for the Indian government’s experiment with “planned change”. This is a mandate for a process of ethnocide that leads to a different kind of death, one that erases cultural groups and extinguishes lifeways, over-
seen by the Portman-like figure of the current Director of Tribal Welfare, yet another administrator-turned-anthropologist. The discussion then leaps forward to include the compelling turn of events in the final years of the twentieth century and into the next millennium, recounting some of the significant developments that have ensued in the affairs of the islands and its peoples. The judicial interventions by the High Court of Kolkata and the Supreme Court of India, brought about by a coalition of non-governmental organizations and activists taking the Andaman administration to court, has highlighted the significance of forging new coalitions within civil society and the potential for effecting change that lies therein.

Finally, the book includes a section of appendices consisting of a selection of policy documents that have played a crucial role in the unfolding of recent events in the islands.