

**Fifty Years of Development Journey of Harinagar Gram Panchayat of Middle Andaman
From 1970 to 2020.**

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ABSTRACT

This research paper presents a comprehensive historical and development analysis of Harinagar Gram Panchayat, situated in the Middle Andaman region of the Andaman & Nicobar Islands spanning four decades from 1970 to 2010. Establishment as unit of local self-government under the broader framework of India's Panchayat Raj system, Harinagar Gram Panchayat has undergone significant socio- economic, infrastructural, educational, and political transformation during this period. The paper traces the historical origins of the settlement, the demography of its inhabitants — predominantly Bengali-speaking settlers from erstwhile East Pakistan (now Bangladesh —and the evolution of governance from a nascent administrative unit to a functioning participatory democracy at the grassroots level. Drawing upon archival records, government reports, oral histories, and secondary literature, the study examines how development policies at the national, territorial, and local levels shaped the lived experiences of the people of Harinagar over five decades. The paper argues that while the Panchayat witnessed considerable progress in areas such as infrastructure, literacy, health and agricultural productivity, significant challenges— including geographic isolation, limited fiscal autonomy, and dependence on mainland government allocations— continued to constrain holistic development.

Keywords: Harinagar Gram Panchayat, Middle Andaman, Panchayat Raj, Development, Local Governance, Andaman& Nicobar Islands, 1090-2010, settler Communities, Infrastructure, Socio-economic History.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Andaman & Nicobar Islands, a union Territory of India located in the eastern Bay of Bengal, occupy a unique position in the country's political, strategic, and administration history. Comprising over 570 islands, of which only 38 are permanently inhabited, the archipelago presents distinctive challenges and opportunities for governance and development. Among the inhabited islands, Middle Andaman stands as the largest single island in the chain, stretching approximately 100 kilometers from north to south. Its interior forests, fertile coastal plains, and river valleys have attracted successive waves of settlers since India's independence in 1947, giving rise to a mosaic of communities with diverse linguistic, cultural, and occupational backgrounds.

Harinagar is one such settlement, located in the interior regions of Middle Andaman. Originally carved out of forested land through government- sponsored resettlement schemes during the late 1940s and 1950s, it was constituted as a formal gram Panchayat unit in the post-1959 framework of local self –government as the Andaman & Nicobar Islands Administration sought to bring structured governance to its expanding rural population. By 1970 —the starting point of this study — Harinagar Gram Panchayat had taken shape as a recognizable administrative and social entity, home to several hundred families engaged primarily in agriculture, forestry-related labour, and small-scale trade.

The four decades between 1970 and 2010 witnessed transformative changes not only in Harinagar but across the Andaman Islands as a whole. National policies such as the Green Revolution, the Panchayati Raj constitutional amendments (particularly the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992), the expansion of primary education, and successive Five-Year plans Brought new resources, Institutions, and aspirations to remote communities. At the same time, the islands' geographical

isolation, dense forest cover, limited connectivity, and the special administrative status of the Union Territory created a unique development context that differed substantially from mainland India.

This paper aims to systemically document, analyse and interpret the developmental journey of Harinagar Gram Panchayat across five specific thematic dimensions: historical and demographic evolution; agriculture and economic development; educational and social progress; infrastructure and connectivity; and political and administrative transformation. By doing so, it seeks to contribute to the still nascent historiography of grassroots development in the Andaman & Nicobar Islands, and to illuminate the broader dynamics of post-colonial local governance in India's peripheral territories.

2. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND SETTLEMENT HISTORY

2.1 Colonial Legacy and post-Independence Resettlement

The Andaman Islands entered the modern era as a penal colony under British colonial administration, established in 1858 following the great uprising of 1857. The indigenous population—the Great Andamanese, Onge, Jarawa, Sentinalese, and Shompen peoples—inhabited the islands for millennia before colonialism drastically disrupted their ways of life. After Indian independence in 1947, the islands were incorporated into the Indian union, and the newly formed government faced the twin challenges of administering a remote territory and rehabilitating large numbers of displaced persons, particularly from the partition of Bengal.

From the early 1950s onward, the Government of India and the Andaman Administration initiated organized settlement programmes, bringing families—predominantly from West Bengal, Bihar, Orissa, and from erstwhile East Pakistan (later Bangladesh)—to cultivate forest clearings on south, Middle, and North Andaman islands. Middle Andaman, with its vast interior tracts of relatively accessible forested land, became a major destination for these settler communities. Families were allotted land, provided basic agriculture inputs, and given modest assistance to construct houses, creating a pattern of dispersed agriculture villages across the island's interior.

Harinagar was established as part of this broader settlement drive in the early to mid-1950s. Named after the Hindu goddess Hari (an epithet of Vishnu), reflecting the predominantly Hindu Bengali Cultural identity of its founders, the settlement was initially a small cluster of home steads surrounded by dense tropical forest. The settler cultivated paddy, vegetables, and coconut on cleared land, while some engaged in timber extraction under licences granted by the forest department. The early years were marked by considerable hardship—malaria, poor connectivity, inadequate medical facilities, and the psychological burden of displacement weighed heavily on the pioneer generation.

2.2 Administration Constitution of the Gram Panchayat

The formal constitution of Gram Panchayats in the Andaman & Nicobar Islands began following the enactment of the Andaman & Nicobar Islands (Panchayats) Regulation, 1966, and subsequent rules framed under it. Unlike the states of mainland India which had their own Panchayat legislation, the union territory's panchayat system was governed directly by central regulation, with the Andaman & Nicobar Administration exercising oversight over local bodies. Harinagar Gram Panchayat was formally constituted during this period, bringing a structured administrative identity to the Harinagar Gram Panchayat and its surrounding hamlets.

By 1970, the Harinagar Gram Panchayat encompassed the main Harinagar village and several adjacent revenue villages and hamlets in the Middle Andaman Jurisdiction. Its elected Pradhan (head) and panch members constituted the principal forum of local governance, responsible for the maintenance of village roads, sanitation, dispute resolution, and the coordination of government welfare schemes at the village level. The block-level administrative headquarters at Rangat provided the next tier of governance, and settlers in Harinagar related to governmental authority primarily through the Rangat Block Development Office.

3. DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE AND SOCIAL COMPOSITION

3.1 Population Growth, 1970-2010

In 1970, the population of Harinagar Gram Panchayat was modest, estimated at a few hundred households comprising approximately 1,500 to 2,000 persons. The census data for the Andaman & Nicobar Islands from 1971 onward provides a useful macro-level baseline. The total population of the islands grew from 115,133 in 1971 to 356,152 in 2001—a more than threefold increase—driven primarily by natural among settler communities and continued in- migration from the mainland, though the latter was significantly curtailed by government policy in the 1990s due to ecological concerns. Harinagar's population growth broadly mirrored these islands-wide trends, with families expanding across generations as land was subdivided among adult children and new hamlets emerged at the fringes of the Panchayat's jurisdiction.

By 2001, the population of Harinagar Gram Panchayat area had grown considerably supported by natural increase and the settlement of second –and third –generation descendants of the original settlers. The sex ratio, which in the early settlement era had been skewed in favour of males due to the nature of frontier agriculture colonization, gradually normalized over the decades as families became established and women participated more fully in community life. By 2010, the Panchayat had a relatively balanced demographic profile, with children and young adults constituting a substantial proportion of the population.

3.2 Ethno-linguistic Religious Composition

The social fabric of Harinagar is woven from the backgrounds of its founding families. The overwhelming majority of residents are Bengali- Speaking Hindus, descendants of settlers who came from the districts off Midnapore, Nadia, Jessore, Khulna, and other areas of Bengal. This gives Harinagar a districts cultural character: Bengali language, cuisine, festivals (Durga Puja, Kali Puja, Saraswati Puja), and folk traditions permeate daily life. A smaller number of families from Orissa (Odia- Speakers) and Bihar (Hindi- speakers) are also present, alongside a handful of Christian families from south India who arrived as government employees or skilled workers.

This ethno- linguistic homogeneity has both strengthened community cohesion and, in certain respects, created social distinctions between Harinagar and neighboring panchayats with different demographic compositions. Inter-community marriages while not common in the early decades, became more frequent by the 1990s and 2000s reflecting a gradual process of social integration across the broader Andaman settler society- scheduled caste and scheduled tribe communities constitute a small but important segment of the panchayat's population, with government reservations in education and employment playing a significant role in their social mobility over the study period.

4. AGRICULTURE AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

4.1 From Subsistence to Commercialization

Agriculture has been the economic mainstay of Harinagar since its founding. In the 1970s the principal crops were paddy (rice), coconut, and a variety of vegetables, cultivated primarily for household subsistence with modest surpluses traded at the Rangat market. The cultivation practices were traditional, relying on manual labour, bullock ploughing (where terrain permitted), and rain-fed irrigation from seasonal streams and tanks. Paddy yields were low by mainland standards, constrained by the laterite-rice Andaman soil, irregular rainfall, and limited access to agriculture extension services.

The 1970s and 1980s saw the gradual introduction of improved paddy varieties through the Central Andaman Agricultural station at Garacharma and its satellite units, which disseminated high yielding varieties (HYV) ADAPTED TO ISLAND CONDITIONS. The Department of Agriculture of the Andaman & Nicobar Administration ran input subsidy programmes, crop demonstration plots, and farmer training camps that, by the 1980s had made a discernible impact on productivity in Panchayats

like Harinagar. Coconut cultivation expanded significantly during this period, with mature groves providing families with a dependable source of copra and coconut oil for sale.

The 1990s brought new cash crops into the picture. Betel leaves (pan), arecanut, and banana emerged as important commercial crops for Harinagar farmers, linking the panchayat's economy more firmly to Andaman-wide market circuits. Fishing both artisanal and in the creek networks that border parts of middle Andaman, supplemented agricultural income for some families. The gradual improvement of roads connecting Harinagar to Rangat Town—the main market and administrative hub of middle Andaman—was a critical enabling factor in the commercialization of agriculture as farmers could now transport perishable produce to market without the prohibitive losses of the earlier era.

4.2 Non-Agricultural livelihoods

Beyond farming, the expansion of government services from the 1970s onward created an important stream of formal employment for Harinagar residents. Teachers, anganwadi workers, health workers, panchayat employees, road construction labour, and forest department staff drew regular that provided economic stability to a growing number of households. By the 2000s a significant portion of the younger generation was employed in government service—either in Harinagar itself, in Rangat, or in port Blair—representing a major structural shift from the agricultural economy of their parents. Small-scale trade and commerce also developed gradually. Tea stalls, grocery shops, hardware stores, and cycle repair shops appeared along the main road serving Harinagar as the population grew and purchasing power increased. The establishment of a weekly market (haat) in the vicinity enabled farmers to sell produce and buy goods without the lengthy journey to Rangat. These local commercial activities though modest by urban standards, represented a meaningful expansion of the rural economy over the study period.

5 EDUCATIONAL AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

5.1 Growth of Educational Institutions

Education has been a central concern for the settler communities of the Andaman Islands, who brought with them a high regard for literacy and schooling rooted in Bengal's intellectual tradition. In the early years of Harinagar, children attended a single-teacher primary school operating in makeshift premises. By 1970, a government primary school had been formally established with a dedicated building, multiple teachers, and a curriculum aligned with the national primary education framework. Enrolment, though not universal, was substantially higher than in many comparable rural communities on the mainland.

The establishment of a Middle school in Harinagar during the late 1970s or early 1980s marked a significant milestone, allowing children to complete class VIII without leaving the village. Previously, families wishing to educate their children beyond primary level had to send them to boarding arrangements in Rangat or Port Blair, which was economically burdensome and socially disruptive. The middle school dramatically expanded educational access, particularly for girls, whose enrolment rates rose sharply once secondary schooling becomes locally available. By the 1990s the school had been upgraded to a high schooling level, offering education up to class X under the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) curriculum. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment and the subsequent devolution of certain education-related functions to panchayats added institutional momentum to local education governance. The Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), launched in 2000-2001, further reinforced universal elementary education goals across the islands, and Harinagar benefited from additional teachers, infrastructure grants, and mid-day meal programmes under this national initiative. By 2010, literacy rates in Harinagar were estimated to be well above the national average, consistent with the Andaman Islands overall literacy achievement.

5.2 Health and Social Welfare

Health infrastructure in Harinagar evolved from minimal facilities in 1970 to a functioning primary health care system by 2010. In the early decades, residents relied on occasional visits by medical

staff from Rangat and traditional remedies for common ailments. Malaria was endemic and represented a major cause of morbidity and mortality, particularly among children. The Andaman & Nicobar Administration's malaria eradication and control programmes, intensified from the 1970s onward using DDT spraying, anti-malarial drug distribution, and vector control measures, gradually brought the disease under greater control, though it remained a concern well into the 1990s.

A Sub-Centre of the primary health Centre (PHC) system was established in or near Harinagar, providing basic outpatient care, Maternal and child health services, and immunization programmes. Anganwadi centers under the Integrated Child Development Service (ICDS) scheme, established from the late 1970s onward, played a vital role in improving child nutrition, pre-school education, and maternal health outcomes. By 2000-2010, key health indicators—infant mortality, maternal mortality, and under-five mortality rates—had improved considerably, though they still fell short of the more favorable figures recorded in Port Blair and more accessible communities.

Women's empowerment emerged as an important social dimension of development during the 1990s and 2000s Self-Help Groups (SHGs) promoted by NABARD and the Andaman & Nicobar Administration enabled women in Harinagar to Access Microcredit, undertake small entrepreneurial activities, and develop a degree of economic independence. The mandatory reservation of one-third of panchayat seats for women—enacted through the 73rd Amendment—brought women into formal governance roles for the first time, challenging traditional patriarchal structures and creating new leadership pathways.

6. INFRASTRUCTURE AND CONNECTIVITY

6.1 Roads and Transport

The development of road connectivity has been arguably the single most important infrastructure determiner of Harinagar's development trajectory. In 1970, the settlement was connected to Rangat by a Kutcha (unpaved) track passable by jeep in the dry season but frequently impassable during the monsoon. The absence of reliable road access meant that agriculture produce could not be marketed efficiently, medical emergencies involved life-threatening delays, and the community remained effectively isolated from the administrative and commercial mainstream of Middle Andaman.

Successive Five-Year Plans, particularly from the fourth Plan (1969-74) onward, allocated resources for road development in the Andaman Islands. The Andaman Public Works Department (PWD) progressively upgraded the Rangat- Harinagar road from a Kutcha track to a motor able metalled road, though the process was slow and frequently interrupted by financial constraints and monsoon damage. By the late 1980s, a pucca road connection was operational for most of the year, and the subsequent introduction of regular bus services by the Andaman & Nicobar Islands Administration significantly improved the mobility of Harinagar Residents.

The Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak YOjana (PMGSY), launched in 2000, provided further impetus to rural road development, funding the construction and upgrade of village-level roads within Harinagar Gram Panchayat. By 2010, internal connectivity within the panchayat had improved substantially, with main hamlets linked by paved or graded roads, enabling jeep and two-wheeler access throughout the year. This transformation fundamentally changed the geography of opportunity for Harinagar's residents.

6.2 Electricity and Water Supply

Electrification of Harinagar was a long-drawn process, characteristic of the challenges facing remote communities in the Andaman Islands. Diesel generator sets provided limited and unreliable electricity to the settlement from the late 1970s and early 1980s restricted to a few hours in the evening. The extension of grid electricity from the Andaman Islands' main power system involved considerable investment in transmission infrastructure across difficult terrain. Harinagar received grid-connected electricity progressively during the 1980s and 1990s with coverage expanding to include most households by the early 2000s. The Rajiv Gandhi Grameen Vidyutikaran Yojana (RGGVY), launched in 2005, further extended and consolidates rural electrification in areas like Harinagar.

Drinking water supply presented a different set of challenges. The Andaman Islands receive substantial annual rainfall, but the laterite terrain does not retain water well, and seasonal streams run dry in the summer months. Hand pumps and dug wells served Harinagar's water needs in the early decades, supplemented by rainwater harvesting in household tanks. The installation of piped water supply schemes—drawing from stream or deeper bore wells and distributing treated water through standpipes or household connections—was under taken by the Andaman & Nicobar Administration's Rural Development and Panchayat Department in phases during the 1980s and 1990s. By 2010, the majority of households had access to improved water sources, through the reliability and quality of supply remained areas requiring continued attention.

6.3 Communication and Connectivity

The history of communication in Harinagar mirrors the broader story of modernization in remote India. In 1970, postal services—slow but reliable—were the primary means of communication with the outside world, linking Harinagar residents with relatives on the mainland. A post office serving the area provided saving bank facilities alongside mail services, playing an important social and economic role. Telegraph facilities were available at Rangat for urgent communications.

Telephone connectivity arrived in Harinagar relatively late. The extension of the STD/ISD telephone network to remote parts of the Andaman Islands was a priority of the Department of Telecommunications in the 1990s, and public telephone booths were established in Harinagar, giving residents their first experience of voice communication with Port Blair and the mainland. The dramatic proliferation of mobile telephone from the early 2000s—enabled by the installation of cell towers in Middle Andaman—transformation communication norms rapidly. By 2010, mobile phones were common even in rural panchayats like Harinagar, connecting residents to family, markets and information networks in ways inconceivable a generation earlier.

7. POLITICAL AND ADMINISTRATIVE TRANSFORMATION

7.1 Evolution of Panchayati Raj in the Andaman & Nicobar Islands

The political and administrative development of Harinagar Gram Panchayat cannot be understood without reference to the broader trajectory of Panchayat Raj in the Andaman & Nicobar Islands. Unlike mainland states, where Panchayati Raj Institute (PRI) was established under state legislation following the Balwantray Mehta Committee Report of 1957, the Union Territory of Andaman & Nicobar Islands operates under centrally promulgated regulations. The Andaman & Nicobar Islands (Panchayats) Regulation, 1996, provided the legal foundation for gram panchayat, with subsequent amendments expanding their functions and powers over time.

The landmark 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992, which gave constitutional status to Panchayati Raj institutions across India, had a significant though somewhat delayed impact on the Andaman Islands. The amendment mandates regular elections, reservation of seats for scheduled Casts, scheduled Tribes, and women, devolution of functions across 29 subject areas to panchayats, and the creation of state Finance Commission and District Planning Committees. For Harinagar Gram Panchayat, the -1993 period brought more regular electoral cycles, a clearer delineation of panchayat functions, and greater formal accountability mechanisms

7.2 Local Leadership and Political Participation

The political history of Harinagar Gram Panchayat from 1970 to 2010 is characterized by evolving patterns of leadership, participation and contest. In the early decades, the Pradhan was typically a senior male figure from a prominent land owning family, whose authority derived as much from social standing as from electoral mandate. Panchayat elections, while conducted, were often uncontested or decided by factional loyalties rooted in the original settlement groups and family networks.

The introduction of multi-party competition—with the Indian National Congress, the communist Party of India (Marxist), and later the Bharatiya Janata Party all extending their organization presence to Middle Andaman brought a more clearly ideological dimension to Panchayat politics from the

1980s onward. Party affiliations, while not always the primary determinant of local political allegiances, linked Harinagar's panchayat politics to the wider democratic arena of the Andaman & Nicobar Islands and, through the single parliamentary constituency, to national politics.

The mandatory reservation of panchayat seats for women post-1993 opened a new chapter in Harinagar's political history. Women elected as panch and, in reserved-seats elections, as Pradhan, initially faced social scepticism about their capacity for governance. Over time, however several women leaders demonstrated effective administration, skill in accessing government schemes, and the ability to articulate community needs to higher authorities. By 2010, women's political participation in Harinagar, while still facing informal barriers, had become a normalized feature of panchayat life.

8. CHALLENGES AND CONSTRAINTS IN DEVELOPMENT

Despite four decades of progress, Harinagar Gram Panchayat's development journey has been marked by persistent structural challenges. Geographical isolation remains the most fundamental constraint: located deep in the interior of Middle Andaman, Harinagar is far from the political and commercial centre of Port Blair, which lies hundreds of kilometers away by road and sea. All major government services—hospitals, colleges, district courts, banks, and administration headquarters—are concentrated in Port Blair, creating a powerful centripetal pull that has drawn away many of Harinagar's most educated and ambitious young people.

Fiscal limitations have been a consistent impediment to local development. The Andaman & Nicobar Administration controls the primary revenue streams of the Territory—land revenue, forest royalties, and tourism fees—leaving gram panchayats with minimal own-source revenues. The panchayat's capacity to implement development works has therefore been almost entirely contingent upon grants from the Andaman and from centrally-sponsored schemes. While these flows increase substantially over the study period, their irregular release, the requirement of matching funds that panchayats could not generate, and the bureaucratic complexity of scheme implementation frequently hampered timely execution of development projects.

Environmental constraints have also shaped the development trajectory of Harinagar. The Andaman & Nicobar Islands Administration, responding to escalating concerns about deforestation, ecosystem degradation, and threats to tribal communities (particularly the Jarawa people of south and Middle Andaman), progressively tightened restrictions on forest clearance and land alienation from the 1980s onward. These restrictions, while ecologically necessary, limited the expansion of agriculture land and constrained certain livelihood diversification options for the farming communities of Harinagar. The tension between ecological conservation and rural development has been a recurring theme in the panchayat's history.

Healthcare access, despite improvements has remained a challenge. The sub-Centre level health facilities available locally are inadequate for secondary and tertiary care, meaning that serious illnesses require a journey to Rangat's Community Health Centre or, for complex cases, to GB Pant Hospital in Port Blair. The 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, while its epicenter effects were more severe in South Andaman and Nicobar Islands, causes disruption and anxiety across Middle Andaman, highlighting the vulnerability of island communities to natural disasters and underscoring the importance of disaster preparedness and resilient infrastructure.

9. CONCLUSION

The fifty-year development journey of Harinagar Gram Panchayat from 1970-2010 presents a nuanced narrative of achievement and constraint, aspiration and limitation, transformation and continuity. Beginning as a frontier agriculture settlement on the forested interior of Middle Andaman, the panchayat evolved over four decades into a recognizable community with functioning schools, health facilities, road connections, electricity, and mobile communication—amenities that its founding generation could barely have imagined.

This journey reflects the multi-layered character of development in India's remote territories. National politics—Five-Year Plans, the green Revolution, the 73rd constitutional Amendment Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, PMGSY, RGGVY and others—provided essential resources and frameworks. The

Andaman & Nicobar Administration adapted and implemented these policies within the specific constraints and opportunities of the island context. And the people of Harinagar—resilient descendants of displaced settlers who built new lives a new land —brought their own energies, values, and aspirations to the project of community –building.

Yet the history of Harinagar also illustrates the limits of development in geographically marginal regions. Isolation, fiscal dependence, ecological constraints, and the persistent pull of urban Centre’s have meant that the panchayat’s progress has been uneven, with gains in some domains offset by stagnation or regression in others. The challenge of the decades after 2010 will be to deepen and sustain the gains made, while addressing the structural inequities that have constrained more holistic development.

For historians and policymakers alike, the story. Harinagar Gram Panchayat offers valuable lessons about the dynamics of grassroots governance, the importance of connectivity and local institutional capacity, and the enduring significant of communities identity and social capital in shaping development outcomes. It is a story deserves to be told, documented, and analysed—not only for its intrinsic historical importance but for what it can teach us about the possibilities and limits of development at India’s margins.

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