

In a haven of peace

by Manohar Singh Gill

WITH my morning newspaper these days full of gory details of murder stabbing and arson, I find some cheer in the remembrance of an incident long past.

Some years back I went on a tour from Delhi to the Andamans. I had heard much of their green forests, snow-white beaches and clear emerald green waters. I was keen to see this paradise in the ocean.

There are more than 350 islands, big and small, inhabited and empty, lush green and barren, put together in a string of pearls, almost 300 miles long. The Chief Commissioner at Port Blair kindly placed his personal boat at my disposal, and accompanied by a few colleagues I took off on this sea holiday.

At night we ploughed through the calm winter

stretches of the Andaman Sea, and invariably, at first light, we landed on the coast of one of the islands. Cattermarans, with cheerful natives, would row out to our little ship.

We would go ashore and savour the delights of these pearls of the Indian Ocean. I felt like some minor Captain Cooke on a voyage of discovery. It was so far away and so different from the flat plains of Punjab, and, therefore, such a delight..

TINY VILLAGE

One morning, as usual, we anchored opposite an island which was only about three miles in circumference and had one tiny village. We rowed out to the beach and were greeted by the villagers and a few persons from a government post.

There was a man to look after the wireless, another one to give rudimentary medical aid, and a third was perhaps some kind of a teacher. There were also one or two policemen. They belonged to assorted parts of the country — Kerala, Punjab, Orissa and Andhra — and were Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs.

SERVED TEA

They took me to a hut which served both as an office and residence for all of them and served me tea. They were happy at my visit, for they were desperately lonely. Duty had truly marooned them on an island in the sea.

Nobody ever came to visit them, except that once every month a ship came to drop mail. For the rest they did not exist for the great men

in Port Blair. There was little to do, and this made matters even worse.

We chatted for a while, and then it was time to leave, for I had to go to a bigger island during the day. One of them stepped forward and said: "Sir, before you go you must visit our temple."

"I didn't know, you had one here." I said a little surprised. They walked me down to a little corrugated-sheet hut and opened the door. As I peeped in, one of them said shyly: "Sir, as a matter of fact, this is mandir, gurdwara and mosque, all in one. There are only a few of us here, and we prefer to have a joint house of worship."

I came away feeling a little ashamed of the mainlanders, for their last recent riot was still vivid in my memory.