

INDIGENOUS TRIBAL COMMUNITIES OF ANDAMAN & NICOBAR ISLANDS — THE SHOCKING FUTURE OF NORTH SENTINEL

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Writing in Forbes recently Jim Dobson has drawn attention to the shocking future of the hitherto untouched and unapproachable North Sentinel Island in these words: “In recent months, fears have begun mounting that plans for a tourism boom beyond neighboring Andaman and Nicobar Islands may... pose a threat to all four Andaman tribes. The plans include the introduction of high-end **human safari** companies and resort developments.”*

It is indeed shocking to learn of the stupid action of the Government in trying to open up the North Sentinel Island after the disastrous result of construction of the Grand Trunk Road through the Jarawa territory. Interest in the five indigenous tribal communities of these islands grew after the publication of *The Andaman Islander* by Prof. AR Radcliffe-Brown in 1922. The twelve groups inhabiting the island which has the capital town of Port Blair, referred to cumulatively as the Great Andamanese tribe have completely lost their identity— racial features, language, customs, everything— particularly after coming in contact with ‘civilization’ and the Japanese occupation during World War II when these tribal women were exploited for sex and later they were shifted to the Strait Island. There they are kept as unauthentic museum specimens in houses built by the administration, depend on Government doles, having lost zest for life and still having some links with drug smugglers from Mynamar and Thailand. When I visited this island in 1978 their population had dwindled to 29 out of whom only one person was left with Negroid features. As if the experiences with the Great Andamanese tribe were not enough, the administration made foolish attempts to ‘develop’ the Onge, another small Negrito group living a semi-nomadic life on Little Andaman Island. First, following the Partition of India in 1947 hordes of refugees from East Pakistan were settled on this island creating a constant source of conflict with the indigenous Onge. When I visited this island in April 1978 with Mr. Bhola Paswan Shastri, the then Chairman of the newly created Commission for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, the Onges numbered

only 97 and the evil effects of contact with 'civilization' were already discernible.

The worst was the effort to 'develop' the Jarawa living in a contiguous area spread over two adjoining islands. In the literature this naked tribal community was described as 'ferocious' because when outsiders like the residents of the penal settlement would poach their limited natural resources the Jarawa would kill them with their poison tipped arrows. In his autobiography VD Savarkar who spent some years in the cellular jail at Port Blair and allegedly apologised to the British for getting released, has used all kinds of epithets for the Jarawa based only on hearsay. In 1974 a landmark was achieved by the Anthropological Survey of India by establishing the first friendly and limited contact with the Jarawa and the story is narrated in an authentic documentary captioned *Man in Search of Man* and made by the AnSI. The credit for this goes to a non-anthropologist, Sardar Bakhtawar Singh, Deputy Superintendent of Police, originally from Punjab with a sturdy commonsense. Later the administration adopted a policy of friendly contact with the Jarawa once a month on full moon day when a small number of the representatives of the administration would go on a boat and leave cooked rice and bananas on the shore for the Jarawa.

On our return from this tour I drafted a report on the conditions of these three Negrito groups and the Mongoloid Nicobarese containing many practical suggestions which was approved and sent by the Chairman of the Commission for SC&ST to the then PM and the Home Minister of India. We could not visit the Shompen. The farthest point in their island was just 70 miles from the tip of Sumatra in Indonesia. A visit to the Sentinelese was out of question at that time as the administration had luckily failed to establish any contact with this small Negrito group until then. The babus sitting in air-conditioned rooms in New Delhi had already planned a Grand Trunk Road passing through the Jarawa territory for commercial purposes as well as to cater to tourists wanting to go on a human safari. We in the Commission had opposed the harmful project.

I got two opportunities to revisit A&N Islands in 1982 and 1984 with the Parliamentary Committee on the Welfare of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. On the latter occasion, after the conclusion of the visit of the Parliamentary Committee, I accompanied Prof. LP Vidyarthi of Ranchi University and Dr. TN Pandit, SA of Port Blair Station of AnSI, who were visiting these indigenous communities under a project of the Ministry of Home Affairs, to meet the Jarawa of the Middle Andaman Island. It was a wonderful experience. Until then the 'development experts' had not dared to 'civilise' the Jarawa. The Jarawa males jumped into our boat out of excitement to partake of the gift of cooked rice and banana and allowed us to land on the shore. We had been warned not to wear anything but underwears as the Jarawa would tear off everything unknown to them. Thank God, I could save my spectacles. We were not allowed to go into the interior to see their temporary huts where

they stayed during the course of their wanderings within a limited forested area. We stayed there on the sands for about an hour and left after their initial excitement died down.

I cannot forget the utterly friendly gestures of the Jarawa whom the British and Indian authorities had painted as 'ferocious'. Having lumbosacral spondylitis I got a shock to find that an adult Jarawa had jumped on to my back and wanted me to carry him like a child. Another Jarawa came and sat on my lap. The most unforgettable fact was that a woman brought a small baby, forced it into my arms and wanted me to play with it or love it. In the 'civilised' Indian society women would normally keep an infant away from a complete stranger and apply kaajal on its face to protect it from an evil eye. The male Jarawas tried to pull out hairs from my limbs as they wondered what this unusual growth on our bodies was. They have hairless, muscular and supple bodies which enable them to climb trees and pluck fruits quickly. The modern society at Port Blair was surprised to hear my positive experiences with the Jarawa and Mr. Pantul, Station Director of All India Radio, Port Blair, requested me to broadcast a talk on my interaction with the Jarawas and other indigenous tribal communities of the area.

I have not followed up the subsequent developments regarding this matter but it seems that these have only been for the worse. There cannot be a greater mockery of the paradigm of development of these indigenous communities, which have attracted anthropologists from the world over, when the rulers treat the Sentinel Islands as a rich potential for tourism. There are so many areas like Uttarakhand and Himachal Pradesh in the Himalayas and many parts of India which yearn for development as world tourist destinations. Why cannot the uninformed bureaucrats leave these indigenous communities alone and let them develop in accordance with their genius— as envisioned in Nehru's Tribal Panchsheel?

I wish to mention a good missed opportunity for studying the indigenous tribal communities of Andaman & Nicobar Islands that came my way in the form of an offer from the National Geographic in 1997 when I visited their office in Washington DC with my geographer daughter Suprabha based in Denver. The requirements of sustained field work in an unchartered area at the age of 67 and my other commitments back home prevented me from availing of that generous offer that I regret even today. I am glad to know that despite odds some young Indian anthropologists have made good studies of the individual tribal communities of the region.