### Block 2

**ANDAMAN AND NICOBAR TRIBES**

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EXPERT COMMITTEE

Prof. Virginius Xaxa  
Director – Tata Institute of Social Sciences  
Uzanbazar, Guwahati

Dr. Archana Kaushik  
Associate Professor  
Department of Social Work  
Delhi University

Dr. Saumya  
Faculty  
School of Social Work  
IGNOU, New Delhi

Prof. Hilarius Beck  
Centre for Community Organization and Development Practice  
School of Social Work  
Deonar, Mumbai

Dr. Ranjit Tigga  
Department of Tribal Studies  
Indian Social Institute  
Lodhi Road, New Delhi

Dr. G. Mahesh  
Faculty  
School of Social Work  
IGNOU, New Delhi

Prof. Tiplut Nongbri  
Centre for the Study of Social Systems  
Jawaharlal Nehru University  
New Delhi

Prof. Gracious Thomas  
Faculty  
School of Social Work  
IGNOU, New Delhi

Dr. Sayantani Guin  
Faculty  
School of Social Work  
IGNOU, New Delhi

Dr. Rose Nembiakkim  
Director  
School of Social Work  
IGNOU, New Delhi

Dr. Ramya  
Faculty  
School of Social Work  
IGNOU, New Delhi

Dr. Archana Kaushik  
Associate Professor  
Department of Social Work  
Delhi University

Dr. Saumya  
Faculty  
School of Social Work  
IGNOU, New Delhi

Dr. Rose Nembiakkim  
Director  
School of Social Work  
IGNOU, New Delhi

Dr. G. Mahesh  
Faculty  
School of Social Work  
IGNOU, New Delhi

Dr. Sayantani Guin  
Faculty  
School of Social Work  
IGNOU, New Delhi

Dr. Ramya  
Faculty  
School of Social Work  
IGNOU, New Delhi

COURSE PREPARATION TEAM

Block Preparation Team  
Unit 1 to 5  
Dr. Marianus Kujur

Programme Coordinator  
Dr. Rose Nembiakkim  
Director  
School of Social Work  
IGNOU

PRINT PRODUCTION

Mr. Kulwant Singh  
Assistant Registrar (P)  
SOSW, IGNOU

August, 2018

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ISBN-978-93-87237-70-4

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Printed and published on behalf of the Indira Gandhi National Open University, New Delhi by Director, School of Social Work.

Laser Typeset by : Graphic Printers, Mayur Vihar, New Delhi
The block titled ‘Andaman and Nicobar Tribes’ consists of five units. It studies the five major tribes that are found in the Andaman and Nicobar Island as well as their practices and customs that many do not know still.

Unit 1 is about the ‘Great Andamanese of Strait Island’. In this unit, emphasis is given to the historical background of Andaman and Nicobar islands. The life and culture of the great Andamanese has also been discussed along within the culture context and change among the tribal groups.

Unit 2 about the ‘Onges of Little Andaman’ provides information about the origin and background of the particular tribe. It also highlights the social organisation as well as the religious beliefs, rituals and ceremonies apart from the socio-economic and political life.

Unit 3 is about ‘Jarawas of South and Middle Andaman’. It talks about the life and cultures of the Jarawas as well as throws light on the threat and atrocities committed towards the Jarawa tribe.

Unit 4 is about the ‘Sentinelese of Sentinel Island’. It discusses about the socio-economic and religious life of the Sentinelese. Information about the linguistic identity along with the life situation and the material culture of Sentinelese has been provided in this unit.

Unit 5 ‘Shompens of Great Nicobar’ provides general information about the tribes. It discusses the living conditions of the Shompens apart from the social and economic organisation. The politico-cultural organisation and education have also been discussed in the unit.
UNIT 1 GREAT ANDAMANESE OF STRAIT ISLAND

Structure

1.0 Objectives

1.1 Introduction

1.2 Historical Background of Andaman and Nicobar Islands

1.3 The British and the Tribes of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands

1.4 The Great Andamanese

1.5 Life and Culture of the Great Andamanese

1.6 Culture Contact and Change

1.7 Let Us Sum Up

1.8 Further Readings and References

1.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit is primarily about the Great Andamanese of the Strait Island, who are the first of the five tribes to be discussed here. In order to situate the present Block in its proper context, we will first have some general information about the land and its people, a historical background, and general socio-economic and political life in the islands. After going through the chapter you should have:

- A general understanding of the land and its people in the Andaman and Nicobar islands;
- Knowledge of the historical background; and
- An understanding of general socio-economic and political life of the Great Andamanese.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

The Andaman and Nicobar Islands are classified as “an India outside India, outside the mainland in the Bay of Bengal, but one which is as much a part of India as any other” (Bhatt, 1998: 27). During the colonial period the British took over the islands and at Independence handed them over to India. These were the islands turned into dreaded ‘Kala Pani’ meaning ‘black waters’ with their cellular jail for the freedom fighters. Life Imprisonment of the Kala Pani was given to the dreaded criminals from the perspective of the British. During the Second World War, the Japanese occupied these islands and symbolically handed them over to Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose’s provisional Government of Free India. At that time, the cellular jail was closed and the prisoners freed. After the war, the British reoccupied the islands but had no time to reopen the cellular jail. The scholars and anthropologists are not clear about the background of the main tribes of the Andaman and Nicobar islands, namely the Great Andamanese, the Onge, the Jarwa, the Shompen, and the Sentinelese.
There is paucity of authentic historical information of the Andaman Islands before the 18th century. However, according to Majumdar (1975: 35-38), the geographical situation of the islands facilitates one to believe that this region must have been known to the navigators from a very early period. According to him, the earliest reference to the Andamans probably occurs in the Geographica, a Greek work background on Geography, written by Claudius Ptolemaeus, the celebrated Greek astronomer, mathematician and geographer of the 2nd century A.D. Ptolemaeus seems to mention a number of islands with naked people, who were cannibals. The account of a Chinese traveler in the 7th century A.D. of the ‘Andaban’ is said to represent the Andamans, and the ‘country of the Naked People’ refers to the Nicobar Islands. The first authentic and detailed account of the Andamans, are from the writings of two Arab travelers of the 9th century A.D., namely Abu Zaid Hasan and Sulaiman. Marco Polo, the Venetian traveler who visited the Andamans on his way to China in 13th century A.D., refers to the islands as ‘Angamanain’. A few European travelers, who visited the Andamans have their own accounts. Friar Odoric of the 14th century A.D., calls the islanders “dog-faced, cannibals, also traders”. Nicolo Conti of the 15th century A.D., mentions the Andamans as ‘Andamania’ which according to him means the “Island of Gold”. Ceasare Federici of the 16th century A.D. in Ramusio, speaks of the terrible fate of the crews wrecked on the Andamans.

Although Majumdar finds it difficult to assess the value of the above accounts, he observes the availability of fairly authentic account of the Andamans in the writings of Archibald Blair, Col. Syme’s ‘Embassy to Ava’, and R. H. Colebrook’s two accounts towards the end of 18th century. The Calcutta Monthly Register (November, 1790) contains a brief account of the Andamans evidently written by a member of the Party sent by the Government of India to survey the Andamans. The works of Mouat (1863), Radcliffe-Brown (1922), and other scholars, according to Majumdar, are also very informative. After the Independence of India Government-sponsored ‘Anthropological Survey of India’ carried out a series of surveys followed by some publications. In contemporary times there have been some researches by various institutions and organizations on the tribes of the Andaman and Nicobar islands. They enlighten those who would like to have some background knowledge of the life and activity in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. According to Census (2011) the tribal population in Andaman and Nicobar island is 28530, which constitute 7.49 per cent of its total population.

1.2 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF ANDAMAN AND NICOBAR ISLANDS

Brief History of Andaman and Nicobar

The documented history about Andaman and Nicobar is limited. It is believed that Marco Polo was among the first from the West to set foot on one of the islands. Kanhoji Angre, a Maratha admiral had his base on the island in the early 18th century. From there, he attacked the passing Portuguese, Dutch and English merchant vessels on their way to or from their various Asian colonies (http://www.newkerala.com/states-of-india/andaman-nicobar.php).

In 1713, his navy even succeeded in capturing the yacht of the British Governor of Bombay. Despite many efforts by the British and later a joint military force of the British and Portuguese naval forces, Kanhoji Angre was never defeated (http://www.newkerala.com/states-of-india/andaman-nicobar.php).
Penal Settlement in the Andamans

The British had conceived of an idea of maintaining a penal settlement for Indian criminal convicts far away from their motherland across the seas. The British established their first colony in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands in 1789. The first settlement of their dream was the Fort Malborough at Benkoelen, west of Palembang in the Sumatra Island, established in 1787. It was later removed to Penang. Penal settlements were also established at other places like Malacca, Singapore, Arakan and Tenasserim. A penal settlement was also established in 1789 in the Andamans and was called Port Cornwallis. It was abandoned in 1796, but was reestablished at Port Blair in 1858 (Majumdar, 1975: iii).

The Andaman penal settlement was established soon after the Sepoy Mutiny in 1857 for confining the prominent rebels who were considered by the Government, as too dangerous to be allowed to mix with ordinary criminal convicts. The Wahabi fighters against the British, and the Burmese rebels were also sent to the Andamans. In view of restricting the political prisoners to solitary confinement the notorious Cellular Jail was constructed (Ibid.). The construction of the infamous Cellular Jail was completed in 1908. Hundreds of anti-British Indians were tortured to death or simply executed there.

During the Freedom struggle of India the journalists with seditious writings were confined in the Cellular Jail. The revolutionary convicts were also imprisoned in the Cellular Jail. At least on three occasions the Government of India announced to abolish the penal settlement but was later compelled to reverse the decision due to various circumstances. When the Japanese captured the Andamans on 23 March 1942, during the Second World War, it was a deathblow to the penal settlement. However, when the British reoccupied the Andamans after the Japanese surrender on 16 August 1945, the penal settlement was finally abolished (Ibid. iv).

Check Your Progress I

Note: Use the space provided for your answers.

1. What have you learnt about the land and people of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands?
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1.3 THE BRITISH AND THE TRIBES OF THE ANDAMAN AND NICOBAR ISLANDS

The British, according to Majumdar (1975: 79), were faced with two problems by the creation of the Penal Settlement: first, the general policy to be adopted towards the tribes; and second, the creation of a suitable machinery of administration for control over the convicts to regulate the relations between them and the tribes.

The British formulated a sympathetic policy of behaviour for their officials towards the natives. In fact, the Government of India issued instructions to P. Walker, the Superintendent of Port Blair, to adhere to the “conciliatory line of conduct” and to “prohibit any aggression upon them, and not to use any force on them “unless it be absolutely necessary to repeal their attacks (as in Majumdar 1975: 79).
Majumdar observes that though P. Walker, the Superintendent of Port Blair was instructed to adopt a “conciliatory approach” towards the aborigines, and he came to the conclusion that there was not a “slightest chance of taking a conciliatory approach. Hence, he adopted a policy of “coercion and chastisement” or “blood and iron” towards the Andamanese (Majumdar, 1975: 81). On account of the faulty policy of P. Walker there were so may skirmishes and even armed attacks. The tribes felt threatened as the aliens were penetrating into their territories. As a result the tribes carried out a series of organized, pre-meditated, unprovoked attacks on the British and Indians in quick succession during the months of April and May 1859 (Ibid.: 82-83).

There was a change in the British attitude when P. Walker was succeeded by Captain Haughton. Haughton instructed his people not to attack the Andamanese without any provocation. Despite his conciliatory moves there were a few cases of skirmishes. In the year 1860 things improved with Dr. Gamack, the Civil Assistant Surgeon of Port Blair, who made friendly gestures to a few men of Aka-Bea-da tribe on the Chatham Island in Port Blair. Gifts were offered to the aborigines and they were received. Later on, in spite of the gifts given to them attacks were conducted on the settlement, but now there was an opening to befriend the tribes and employ them in the settlement. This process of earnest efforts of making friendly relations with the tribes passed through many ups and downs.

There were two reasons as to why the British policy failed: first, persistent hostility of certain tribes, and second, outbreak of various types of epidemics among the friendly tribes. The Jarawa continued to be hostile. On many occasions they attacked the settlements. It was also observed that those who were friendly with the outsiders got a variety of diseases. As far back as 1866, there was a noticeable increase of sickness among the tribes. Not a single child out of one hundred fifty, born in the Andaman Home during 1864 to 1870, lived for more than two years. The tribes outside the Andaman Home fell victim to malaria that became epidemic due to clearance of forests. The tribes suffered from the dangerous disease of syphilis, presumably contracted from the convicts in charge of the Home. Even the children suffered from hereditary syphilis. The whole race was faced with extinction and the Government confessed that it was beyond its power to check it. Apart from syphilis there were other sicknesses in quick succession. First came the epidemic of opthalmia which broke out in July 1876. It lasted for about six months and made many aborigines partially or entirely blind. The measles broke out in March 1877, and this disease was also brought by the convicts from the mainland. The boys of the orphanage caught it and passed it on to the tribes in general. Fifty one persons died of this. Attempts were made to segregate the aborigines affected with measles, but they fled in fear, and even patients fled from hospitals. Thus the disease spread rapidly and within two or three years half the original inhabitants of the Great Andaman Island and almost the entire population except the Jarawas of South Andaman between Port Campbell and Middle Strait died of measles. The work of destruction of the tribes was accelerated by the epidemic mumps that broke out in August 1886, and that of influenza in April 1890. The infection of influenza, like that of syphilis was believed to have been brought by the convicts from India and it spread rapidly throughout the islands. Disease gonorrhea first appeared in an Andaman Home in July 1892. By the end of the 19th century these diseases practically exterminated the tribes of the Andamans except the two hostile tribes, Onges and Jarawas. The population of none of the twelve tribes except these two and the Yere exceeded 100 in 1901 and six of them numbered less than 50. By 1931 even the number of the Yere was reduced to 46 (Ibid: 88-90).
According to Census 1951, the gradual extinction of the Andamans tribes is shown in the table below. After 1961 census we see the presence of some new tribes. This is an indication that the terrain and people of the islands being hostile, they were not fully explored to come to a definite conclusion about the demography of the tribes.

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Note: Figures in brackets are estimated figures.

* Contacted and enumerated only.

NE – Not Enumerated

Commenting on the above Census figures from 1958 to 1961, Majumdar observes that it cannot be accepted as far as the Jarawa and the Onges are concerned, for these were the hostile tribes living in isolation, and it was difficult to count their number. In 1961 only six of the original tribes existed of which four were Negrito tribes in the Andaman Islands and two, namely the Nicobarese and the Shompens, were the Mongoloids, who lived in the Nicobar group of islands.

Of the six tribes in Andaman and Nicobar Islands, the Jarawa and the Sentinelese still lived in isolation. The Administration had been trying to befriend them by sending contact parties. In some cases the political and criminal prisoners after their release continued living there, joined by their families later.

### 1.4 THE GREAT ANDAMANESE

The Great Andamanese have been rehabilitated in a small island named Strait Island. They were once the largest in population amongst the various tribes inhabiting the Andaman Islands. Their estimated population in 1789 was 10,000. However, by 1901, their number had decreased to 625 and by 1969 their number had further reduced to 19 only. According to the Census of 1971, only 24 of them were around, but by 1991, their number had increased to 45.
The language they speak is Andamanese belonging to the Andamanese group of languages. The link language is Hindi and the script Devanagri. They exhibited predominance of blood group A (59%) followed by B (23%) and O (9%). They are short statured, the average height being 148 cm, and broad-headed (cephalic index: 82) with true pepper corn type of hair. The females had steatopygia (Singh, 1994: 363-366). The Administration claims to be doing its best to protect and preserve this tribe.

Eating and Drinking Habits

They eat rice, dal, chapati and other modern food items. They can cook food using spices. They smoke beedis, cigarettes, chew betel leaves with lime, areca-nut and tobacco leaves and drink tea often (Ibid.). At times they still go hunting and gathering. Their traditional diet consists of fish, dugong, turtle, turtle eggs, crabs, roots and tubers. They also eat pork, water monitor lizard, and so on. As coastal people, they relish octopus, molluses taken out from shell of marine animals like turban shell, scorpion shell, sundial, helmet, trochus and screw shell, besides various types of crabs and fish. Lately some of them have taken to cultivating vegetables and have also established poultry farms. They have been found to be quite vulnerable to communicable diseases. They are said to have acquired unhealthy drinking habits after contact with the non-tribal, urban, dominant and advanced communities (www.Andaman and Nicobar.gov.in).

Situation of Great Andamanese

The Great Andamanese are said to have their major encounter with outsiders in the eighteenth century. It is believed that in 1789 Lieutenant Archibald Blair of the British navy landed in these islands. The records by Radcliffe-Brown (1948) show that these islands were dreaded because the outsiders had no access to the islands and they had virtually no information about the inhabitants there. The number of the Great Andamanese, however, is vanishing fast and there is a danger of them being wiped off completely in the near future, according to Radcliffe-Brown (1948).

1.5 LIFE AND CULTURE OF THE GREAT ANDAMANESE

Social Organization of the Tribe

Tribes and sub-tribes

According to Radcliff-Brown (1948), the Great Andamanese earlier comprised of 10 different tribes, namely Cart, Bo, Jeru, Kede, Puchiwar, Bale, Bea, Kol, Juwoi, and Kora. Each of these tribes was said to be further divided into two sub-groups, namely Ar-yoto (coastal people) and Erem-taga (forest dwellers). According to Singh (1994: 363-366), however, in 1981, there were only three tribes left, namely Jeru, Cari and Bo.

Marriage Rituals

In Singh’s view, group exogamy was strictly observed prior to their permanent settlement in the Strait Island in 1970. However, now the population has considerably decreased and hence the group exogamy is no more in practice. In the past a boy and a girl with the same name could not marry even though they were no blood relations. The post-marital residence now is neo-local (Ibid.). There is a practice of divorce and remarriage. However, on account of small number now there is a decrease in the incidents of divorce. There is a practice of arranged marriage by the elders without the consent of the bride or the bridegroom, because the choice is limited.
There are strict rules about the monogamy and nuclear type family is common. The inheritance is in the name of the person bearing the name of the deceased (Ibid.). During the marriage ritual, the bridegroom, in the presence of the people is made to sit on the lap of the bride and both of them embrace each other. When invitees came to meet them on social occasions in 1981, they offered them tea along with turtle meat and the traditional eatable items. The exchange of garlands by the bride and bridegroom during a marriage is a recent phenomenon among the Great Andamanese.

**Death Rituals**

The Great Andamanese are believed to bury their dead along with the personal belongings at a place adjacent to the settlement. This practice is a manifestation of their belief in the life after death. In their worldview the body dies but the soul continues living. There is no period of death pollution. This period may last from one month to a year. On the last day of pollution, they hunt a turtle and arrange a feast.

**Economic Organization**

The Great Andamanese still belong to the hunting, gathering, and fishing economy. However, it is observed that it is no more in their traditional form. They collect firewood and edible items. Some of them are now employed as salaried staff in government nurseries, health centres, and other sectors. They also make use of the plantation and horticulture facilities provided by the government.

**Political Organization**

It is observed that since the population of the Great Andamanese has declined, the traditional political organization has also ceased to exist. The oldest person in the community is selected as the chief. The next senior person is the vice-chief. These two persons are the mediators between the people and the administration. They also coordinate the social affairs of the community.

**Religious Organization**

The Great Andamanese follow their traditional religion according to Singh (1994). They worship a deity called Bilikhru, and have special sacrificial ritual during birth, marriage and adolescence ceremonies. Now it is observed that some of them keep pictures of Hindu gods and goddesses in their houses and offer prayers to them. When they visit Port Blair and other places, they are seen attending local fairs and festivals and also visiting some Hindu temples. In 1961 census of their total population of 19 persons, 13 were Christians, while 2 were Buddhists and 4 were the followers of ‘indefinite beliefs’. According to 1971 census, out of their total population 4 persons were enumerated as Hindus, 1 person as a Buddhist, and 19 as followers of other religions. In 1981 census out of their total population of 42 persons, 25 were Hindus and 17 Buddhists. According to 1991 census their population was 45, while in 2001 census they further declined to 43 persons only.

**Position of women**

The women in the community of the Great Andamanese participate in all social, economic and religious activities and enjoy the right of inheritance. They are the gatherers of fuel, fodder, roots, tubers and honey and wood. They observe taboos on certain food items and their movements during pregnancy, adolescence and death.

The old and experienced ladies manage the childbirth using their indigenous knowledge.
A baby, according to their culture, is named before it is born. The Great Andamanese perpetuate an elderly person’s name by giving one’s name to the newborn in the community. A ceremony is observed to mark the onset of adolescence for both males and females.

### 1.6 CULTURE CONTACT AND CHANGE

There has been an impact of modernization on the culture and life of the Great Andamanese. They have come in close contact with outsiders and have been able to adapt to the new environment to some extent. They have forgotten almost all their folk songs, folk lore, art and crafts related to hunting and food gathering activities. One of their professions, namely the basketry handicraft still exists today.

It is also observed that the Great Andamanese maintain a harmonious relationship with the government officials at their settlement in Strait Island who are posted to look after them. They earn their living by selling coconut, fish, honey and sea shells to the Bengali and the ‘local born’ communities residing in the nearby islands. Sometimes they are seen participating in certain public functions organized by the Andaman and Nicobar administration and the settlers. They are said to have marriage relations with the Burmese settlers earlier. They now seem to be politically conscious and take part in the elections.

The entire community of the Great Andamanese lives in a permanent settlement provided by the Andaman and Nicobar administration. The Government has provided them with concrete houses and electricity. The settlement includes a community hall, nursery, dispensary, well, co-operative store, and other facilities. The ferry launch service connects the Strait Island to Port Blair and Rangat. The Great Andamanese seem to be positive about the development projects initiated by the Government. They are the beneficiaries of the facilities of formal and non-formal education (Singh, 1994:366).

#### Check Your Progress II

**Note:** Use the space provided for your answers.

1. What do you know about the living condition and the eating and drinking habits of the Great Andamanese?

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#### 1.7 LET US SUM UP

This unit is about the Great Andamanese of the Strait Island, who are the first of the five tribes to be discussed here. In order to situate the present Block in its proper context, first of all some general information is given about the land, its people, history, and general socio-economic and political life in the islands. The Andaman and Nicobar Islands are classified as “an India outside India” but one which is as much a part of India as any other. The scholars and anthropologists are not clear about the background of the main tribes of the Andaman and Nicobar islands, namely the Great Andamanese, the Onge, the Jarwa, the Shompen, and the Sentinelese. The British had conceived of an idea of maintaining a penal settlement for Indian criminal convicts far away from their
motherland across the seas. During the Freedom struggle of India the journalists with seditionous writings and the revolutionary convicts were imprisoned in the Cellular Jail.

The Great Andamanese have been rehabilitated in a small island named Strait Island. They were once the largest in population amongst the various tribes inhabiting the Andaman Islands. The Great Andamanese are said to have their major encounter with outsiders in the eighteenth century. They had their own way of life, culture, social organization, religious practices, and so on. They have their own attitude towards women, different from non-tribal groups. In spite of their distinct culture and worldview, the Great Andamanese are now fast changing due to the impact of modernity. They now maintain a harmonious relationship with the government officials at their settlement in Strait Island who are posted to look after them. They also seem to be politically conscious and take part in the elections.

1.8 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES


Statistical Handbook on Andaman District and Nicobar District 2005-2006, Directorate of

www.Andaman and Nicobar.gov.in. “A Brief Note on Vulnerable Tribal Groups”. 

Great Andamanese of Strait Island
UNIT 2  ONGES OF LITTLE ANDAMAN

Structure
2.0 Objectives
2.1 The Origin and Background
2.2 Social Organization
2.3 Rituals and Ceremonies
2.4 Socio-Economic and Political Life
2.5 Religious Beliefs
2.6 Culture Contact and Change
2.7 Let Us Sum Up
2.8 Further Readings and References

2.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit is primarily about the Onges of Little Andaman. After going through the unit, you should be able to:

- Have a general understanding of the origin and background of the Onges;
- Understand the social, cultural, religious, economic, and political life of the Onges; and
- Spell out the impact of culture change on the Onges.

2.1 THE ORIGIN AND BACKGROUND

It is believed that the Onge, Jarawa, Sentinelese and Great Andamanese, travelled to the Andaman Islands from Africa some 60,000 years ago. The Negritos and the Mongoloids are said to have occupied the Andaman and Nicobar Islands for centuries. The first Andaman Primitive tribes to have come into contact with the Indian settlers were the Great Andamanese followed by the Onge and finally the Jarawa. Barring Sentinelese, all other other tribes of the Islands have come into contact with the Indian settlers (http://www.andamantourism.in/tribals-andamans-india.html#ixzz19NpYvHRh).

Before the coming of the British, the Onges in their habitat were the sole masters. After the British came in control of their island in 1890, they were still not disturbed as far as their traditional life was concerned. However, in 1957, the entire island was declared a tribal reserve. A little later, a plan was made to clear 40 per cent of the forests of the islands in view of settling 12,000 outside families for plantations and other purposes. In 1980, these autochthons were settled in two sites—Dugong Creek and south Bay. During the last tsunami, the habitation of the Onges at south bay was destroyed and they had to move to Dugong Creek. A tribe which numbered 672 at the beginning of the twentieth Century, has today less than 100 members (Planning Commission. 2008:101).

According to Singh (1994: 944) the term ‘Onge’ means man. These people belong to the Negrito racial stock. They are now concentrated in two settlements, both situated
The Onge were formerly distributed across Little Andaman island and the nearby islets on Rutland island and the southern tip of south Andaman Island. This tribe used to be a fully hunting and gathering primitive group. The Onge population has substantially reduced from 672, in 1901 to 101 in census 2011. One of the major causes of their decline in number is said to be the changing food habits brought about through their contact with the outside world (http://en.Wikipedia.org/wiki/onge.-people).

The first friendly contacts with the Onges with the outsiders on their traditional home Little Andamans were made in 1885. It is believed that prior to that there were no efforts of any contacts for fear of getting killed (http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2005/01/0125050125_tsunami_island_2.html).

They Onges are short statured, with a broad head shape. They have a short and broad face, pepper corn head hair. They have scanty hair on the body and face, and a broad nasal profile. The presence of steatopygia characterizes the Onge women. The Onge had a high rate of mortality and also greater homogeneity for eleven red cell enzymes and serum proteins, which might cause harmful effects (Singh, 1994: 945).

The Onge had developed skills of seamanship to travel across the open sea. They engaged in fishing and hunting regularly on and around the uninhabited islands between Little Andaman and Rutland Island (Weber, http://www.andaman.org/BOOK/chapter8/text8.htm#onge).

**Tsunami**

The tsunami of December 24, 2004 did not affect the Onge much as they had an intuition about the impending danger and had already vacated the place before the tsunami struck their area. They did not suffer any losses during this natural calamity (Ibid.). All 96 tribesmen of the semi-normadic Onge survived the tsunami caused by the 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake, by taking shelter in the highlands (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/onge-people).

### 2.2 SOCIAL ORGANIZATION

There is division of the Onge society in terms of three territorial groups: first, Girmekagobeule; second, Engakwale, and third, Girera-gabeule. Each of these groups is constituted with a number of patrilineal descent units. Each patrilineal unit is composed of five to seven nuclear families. These families are linked through agnatic relations.

Marriage between different patrilineal units is the norm. Marriages are monogamous. Their rule of residence changes from patrilocal to neolocal. An important feature of the Onge community is that there is absence of bride price and dowry in the whole process of marriage. Mutual consent is the pre-requisite of the Onge marriage. Parental approval is also very common among the Onges. There is no social recognition for divorce, but separation is permitted. The nuclear family is becoming more and more common in the Onge society.

**Food and Drink Habits**

The Onges live on fish, wild boar, turtles, dugong, roots, tubers, fruits and honey. Wheat and rice have become staple food in recent years and tea is their favourite drink. Since
Andaman and Nicobar Tribes

they still live in a hunting and gathering stage, they live primarily on the forest produce. They have not yet engaged in intensive agricultural activities. The onges are said to be expert in honey gathering (Raghaviah, 1969: 124-125).

Language Spoken

Onge is a language spoken by the Onge people in Little Andaman Island. It is one of two languages together with the Jarawa, known to belong to the Ongan branch of the Andamanese language family. (http://www.freelang.net/dictionary/onge.php). The Onge language is without any script. Some of the Onges are reported to be conversant with the colloquial Hindi.

Check Your Progress 1

Note: Use the space provided for your answers.

1. What have you learnt about the origin and background of the Onges?

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2.3 RITUALS AND CEREMONIES

The rites of passage of the Onge tribe are similar to those of the other tribes and primitive tribes. Thus there are rituals and ceremonies associated with the initiation of boys into adulthood. Rituals at the onset of puberty for girls are also significant.

The birth rituals are simple. As soon as a child is born, the placenta is buried on the spot where the baby was born. There are some restrictions imposed on the mother concerning the food she eats after delivery. Marriage rituals are also conducted in a simple fashion. After the traditional method of greeting, the bride sits on the lap of the bridegroom, followed by mutual embrace. This is an important aspect of the Onge culture. A feast is hosted on the occasion to honour the couple and the guests.

As for the ritual of the dead, the Onge bury the dead inside the hut, under the cot of the deceased person. According to their traditional practice they exhume the lower jaw of the corpse after some period.

2.4 SOCIO-ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL LIFE

The Onge primarily depend on forest produce and sea resources for their livelihood. They are primarily hunters-gatherers. They live by hunting, fishing and collecting. Nowadays, they are also employed as wage labourers on the plantations in their own settlements. They are also given some essential food and other items freely.

Some of the Onges are engaged in salaried jobs. According to the 1981 census, 71 persons of the total population of whom 43 were males and 28 were females, were returned as workers. Of them 69 persons were engaged in the collection of forest produce, hunting, fishing, etc, and the remaining two persons were engaged in other jobs.

The Onge have no traditional political organization. The Pradesh Council, the Legislative body of the Union Territory, regulates the socio-economic affairs of the community.
The Onges are skilled makers of basket, mats, and wood containers for the collection of honey. They are also good at the canoes dug out from a single tree trunk and fitted with out-riggers. They can skillfully prepare two types of baskets with thin cane strips. The smaller type shows their artistic expertise and is used for storing cooked meat, roots and tubers. Men and women both are involved in weaving these baskets. Women are experts in making strings for their ceremonial dress from the bark of a particular tree. These dresses and waist belts across the chest are very significant from ceremonial point of view. These are offered to the men by their women relatives.

2.5 RELIGIOUS BELIEFS

The Onge believe in the existence of spirits. These spirits, in their worldview, are said to dwell in the jungle, the sea and the sky. According to 2011 census out of their total population of 109 persons, 93 had been recorded as followers of ‘other religions’, which referred to their traditional faith. The rest of the persons are following Hinduism. In the census 1961 and census 1971, the census figures showed their population following ‘indefinite belief’ denoting their indigenous religion.

The painting of their face and body with clay signifies their relationship with nature. It symbolizes their symbiotic relationship with nature. The white clay is painted on the face and body practically everyday as a protection from evil spirits and mosquitoes. Red ochre mixed with lard is smeared during the mourning period as this colour is associated with their belief in the continued living of the soul even after the physical death of a person.

They are also known for decorating their ceremonial hunting bows and arrows with bark strings. The honey container is made from the Kwallalu tree. The outer part of the container is decorated with cane straw strips after blackening it by slowly burning the layer of wax pasted on it.

Check Your Progress II

Note: Use the space provided for your answers.

1. What do you know about the religious beliefs and rituals of the Onges?

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2.6 CULTURE CONTACT AND CHANGE

The Onges are said to have developed contacts to some extent with the Bengali, Nicobarese, Tamil, Telugu, Mopillah, Ranchi tribes, and others. They are reported to frequently visit the Bengali refugee settlers and they also engage in the exchange of their forest produces for the gifts from the outside world.

The Administration undertook some welfare and development measures for the Onge since 1976. There was authorization of only one local organization called Andaman Adim Janjati Vikas Samiti (AAJVS) for carrying out the developmental and welfare activities. It has been observed that some of the development works are appreciated by the Onge. The Samiti has taken pains to make available to them drinking water,
crèches for the children, health care services, electricity, and a few more amenities in Dugong Creek. These efforts have been well taken by the Onge. However, it has also been observed that such facilities need to reach some areas in the South Bay settlement as well (Sekhsaria, 1999).

The 730 sq. km. Island of Little Andaman and Nicobar islands, which was home of the Onge, was exclusively chosen for the settlement of the outside population from India. Forests had to be cleared to make the land cultivable for the settlements. There were large-scale planned plantations. Timber based industries were also opened for the support of the settlers. Further, a red oil palm plantation was created over an area of 1,600 hectares. Logging of the trees started. About 12,000 families were expected to be brought into Little Andaman, but fortunately only 3,000 families could be brought as of today (Ibid.).

Little Andamans, the habitat of the Onges, has received hundreds of thousands of settlers from outside the island, primarily from the rest of the Andamans and Nicobars in view of forestry, plantation, and settlement.

The 12th General Assembly of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) adopted a resolution regarding the protection of tribal societies providing useful guidelines for safeguarding the tribes in the Andamans. It speaks about the psychological importance of hunter-gatherers’ adequate environment and the dangers of their sudden exposure to the outside world. In 1975, the then Prime Minister, Mrs. Indira Gandhi, during her address to the people of the Andamans and Nicobars is reported to have said, “Neither resettlement nor development should be made an excuse to uproot tribal groups, or cut down forests. The tribals are the original inhabitants and any disturbance may threaten their survival” (as in The Times of India, in http://www.cultural survival.org/ourpublications/csq/article/the-andaman-trib). One of the reasons for her observations was obviously due to indiscriminate deforestation. Although the threats to tribal groups in the Andamans and Nicobar islands have been brought to the attention of the administration, recent processes of development have neglected the advice of the late Prime Minister.

The recent developments on Little Andaman include clearance of 3,000 hectares of virgin forest for settlement and plantation, construction of roads from Hut Bay north and west, construction of jetties at Hut Bay and Dugong Creek, settlement of Nicobarese at South Bay, establishment of a match splint factory, consolidation of the Onge to one area and construction of tin sheds for them to live in, to name a few (Ibid.).

A poisoning incident in December 2008 further reduced the number of the Onges. It was reported that eight male tribal members died after consuming a toxic liquid-identified as methanol, apparently mistaken for alcohol. The toxic liquid reportedly came from a container that had been washed ashore at Dugong Creek near their settlement. A few more Onges were admitted to the hospital with one of them critically ill. This kind of callousness has been responsible for the decline in the Onge population down the decades (http Encyclopedia://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/ong-people).

Apart from incursions in the Onge territory by the settlers, diseases and deforestations have threatened their survival. In their indigenous knowledge the Onges have a cure for the deadly black-water malaria. However, the Western pharmaceutical companies are engaged in exploiting the flora of the Onge territory for profiteering. (http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2005/01/0125_050125_tsunami_island_2.html).
After their resettlement in Dugong and south Bay, the Onges were given rice, dal, oil, biscuits, which were totally alien to them, who traditionally lived on tubers, honey, and wild boars. Traditionally, the Onge lived in huts, but the Administration in order to make life ‘more convenient’ for them, made wooden houses on stilts with asbestos roofing. This apparently made the Onges lazy and dull. They became dependent on the administration. Meanwhile, outsiders lured them with alcohol and tobacco for their precious commodities from flora and fauna (Planning Commission, 2008: 102).

Some of the measures for the socio-economic development of the Onges were coconut plantations, cattle rearing and pig breeding. However, the community rejected these measures. The school in Dugong Creek did not have much success either. Interestingly, Onge of all ages, father and son, mother and daughter, are in a classroom to learn the Hindi alphabets. Though they have not shown interest in education, they have been able to learn Hindi film songs. They have also fallen prey to diseases. They also work as menial labourers for the settlers. They have the traditional practice that any widow or widower is able to remarry a young Onge. The person approached for remarriage cannot refuse (Ibid.).

**Living Conditions**

Every household has its own fire place. Their dwellings are built with tree trunks and branches of the canes which are grown throughout the islands. The raised platforms of the house are built with bamboos. The floor is made of wooden planks. They use bamboo ladder to climb their house. The spaces below the platforms are used as grave yards, place for delivery and space for dogs and pigs (Raghaviah, 1969: 129).

**Position of Onge Women**

There is division of labour among the male and female members of the Onge household. Men go hunting and collecting honey, while women collect roots, tubers, shells, and also go fishing. The Onge women wear a fibrous tassel made out of fine germinal apex of a particular plant, which hangs against the string going round the waist and over the hips. The body of men and women is painted with white clay to protect themselves from insect bite. The red paint serves medicinal purposes. Red ochre paint is a taboo during the time of mourning. The Onges have a practice of early marriage. The widows are looked down upon. The Onge children live with parents, however the adolescent boys prefer staying separately (Das, H. & Rath, R., 1991: 25). The Onge women command a good deal of influence and respect in the community.

**Check Your Progress III**

**Note:** Use the space provided for your answers.

1. What have you learnt about impact of development on the life and culture of the Onges?

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Onges of Little Andaman
2.7 LET US SUM UP

The term ‘Onge’ literally means man. The Onges belong to the Negrito racial stock, who are now concentrated in the Dugong Creek and the South Bay. This tribe used to be a fully hunting and gathering primitive group. Their population has substantially reduced from 672, in 1901 to 101 in census 2011. Some of the major causes of their decline in number are said to be incursions of the outside settlers, developmental activities, and changing food habits brought about through their contact with the outside world. The Onge had developed skills of seamanship to travel across the open sea. They engaged in fishing and hunting regularly on and around the uninhabited islands between Little Andaman and Rutland Island.

The Onge society is divided into three territorial groups: first, Girmeka-gobeule; second, Engakwale, and third, Girera-gabeule. Each of these groups is constituted with a number of patrilineal descent units. Each patrilineal unit is composed of five to seven nuclear families. These families are linked through agnatic relations. They have a norm of marriage between different patrilineal units. They practice monogamy. The Onge depend on forest produce and sea resources for their livelihood. Nowadays, they are also seen employed as wage labourers on the plantations in their own settlements. They believe in the continued existence of the soul even after the death of the physical body. The rites of passage of the Onge tribe, namely the initiation, marriage, and death rituals, are similar to some of those of the other tribes. The Onges have come in contact with the settlers from outside the region, who have come primarily in view of forestry, plantation, and settlement. The present development measures by the Government and the process of modernization have adversely affected the identity and culture of the Onge.

2.8 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES


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The Times of India. “The Andaman Tribes-Victims of Development,” in ‘Whitaker,


The Times of India. “Tribes older than Onge found,” in http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/hyderabad/Tribes-older-than-Onge-found/articleshow/35207187.cms?ixzz19gO2ovVj


UNIT 3  JARAWAS OF SOUTH AND MIDDLE ANDAMAN

Structure
3.0 Objectives
3.1 Introduction
3.2 Life and Culture of Jarawas
3.3 Threats to Jarawas
3.4 Atrocities on the Jarawas
3.5 Efforts of the Government
3.6 Culture Contact and Change
3.7 Let Us Sum Up
3.8 Further Readings and References

3.0 OBJECTIVES
This unit is about the Jarawas of South and Middle Andamans, who are one of the five primitive tribes of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. After going through this unit you would have:

- A general understanding of the Jarawas of the Andaman Islands;
- Knowledge of the threats to the Jarawas;
- Government’s efforts for their developments; and
- Knowledge of impact of culture contact.

3.1 INTRODUCTION
The Jarawas are one of the indigenous people groups of the Andaman Islands. They are one of the oldest surviving tribes of the world. The Andaman archipelago is home to the Negrito tribe called the Jarawa. Recent studies conducted by the Centre for Cellular and Molecular Biology, Hyderabad, showed that this tribe settled down in the islands some 60,000 years ago. The Jarawas, who are primarily hunter-gatherers, are among the most isolated communities in the world. Their numbers are fast dwindling. Planned and imposed development and over-exposure to the outside world has introduced them to various diseases and addictive substances. This has also been responsible for the depletion of their resource base, threatening their very existence (Planning commission, 2008).

The Jarawas are one of the four Negrito tribes of the Andaman Islands, who inhabit the west coast reserved area of 765 square kms in the South and Middle Andaman Islands (Singh, 1994: 420). Radcliffe-Brown (1948), who made an extensive study of the islands, observes that the Jarawas were the descendants of emigrants who at some point in time in the past made their way across from little Andaman and thrust themselves upon the inhabitants of Rutland Island and the South Andamans, maintaining their footing
in the new country by force of arms. The Aka-Bea tribe of the Great Andamanese division had referred to them as the Jarawa or Yerawa, a name which is still in use. Their population is very small now. Their mother tongue is included in the Andamanese family of languages. They are monolingual and do not know any other language apart from their mother tongue Jarawa. They have no system of writing.

There is the concept of collective leadership among them and not individual. The 1981 census records did not show any religion stated by the Jarawa. The Jarawas live naked, but they decorate their bodies with clay paintings of innumerable designs. Their wooden buckets, chest guards, and bows are also ornamented with symmetrical zig-zag or crisscross designs. Men women, children paint their bodies with red ochre or white clay in various geometric patterns. This is a kind of folk art of some social significance.

The male and female Jarawas, both used to remain fully naked until recently. It is only now that they have begun to somehow cover their essentials. Sometimes strings made of bark and leaves are used as ornaments. The males use a special folded bark chest guard. They are short statured with a dark skin and frizzy hair. Steatopygia (accumulation of fat giving a characteristic shape to the buttock) is a typical feature of their women.

### 3.2 LIFE AND CULTURE OF JARAWAS

The Jarawas live a carefree life. Some of the features of their life and culture can be described here.

**Economy and Food Habits**

The Jarawas are a hunting gathering community. They live a semi-nomadic life. They are reported to have two major territorial divisions. They move in small groups within each territory for hunting and gathering food. They also engage in some traditional craft making, such as baskets, mats, shell necklaces, and metal weapons.

They live in groups of about 40 to 50 people as hunters and gatherers. The Jarawas are very fond of pork, turtle meat, eggs, fish, molluscs, roots, berries, tubers and honey. They are reported not to consume any alcoholic drink or narcotics. Of late, it is reported that some of them have developed a liking for coconut, banana and boiled rice, which they occasionally get from a team of officials and experts visiting their area to establish contact. They have no concept of personal property. When they visit the settlements they pick food items. When they are on the road side, they normally stop the vehicles and ask for eatables (Mohanty, 2004).

**Marriage and Family**

The Jarawas practice adult and monogamous marriage. Their smallest social unit consists of a nuclear family with a male, a female and their unmarried minor children. During the hunting and gathering expeditions some of the families move together and each family gets a share of the catch. The items gathered by the members of a family are shared among them. There is a division of work among men and women. For instance, hunting, fishing and collecting honey are the men’s jobs. They handle bows and arrows and spears (Singh, 1994). During the hunting and gathering expeditions a few families move together and when they are able to hunt some animal, each family gets a share of the catch.

**Place of Women in the Community**

The women in the Jarawa community engage in small-scale fishing with baskets. They
Andaman and Nicobar Tribes

also help in collecting roots and tubers. While their men traditionally wore the broad three layered bark sheath covering their belly and chest, this type of bark sheath was not worn by the women or by any other Negrito tribe or anyone else in the Andaman Islands. The Jarawa women take active part in their economic activities, except in hunting with a bow and arrow. They enjoy equal status with the Jarawa men, which is manifested in their interactions with the non-Jarawas visiting their areas.

Rituals of the Dead

Very little is known about their life cycle rituals. They have been observed collecting small bones of the dead after the decaying of the flesh. One piece of the bone is hung by the relatives around the neck or waist.

The Jarawas and the Reserve

Tribes’ symbiosis with nature and the sustainable nature of their economy had sustained them for centuries before their exposure to the intruders’ from outside. In order to preserve the Jarawa way of life and culture, a Jarawa tribal reserve was established over a 700-sq-km area. Its objective was to keep the tribal population confined to the reserve as to prevent settlers from encroaching into it. The Bush police was established. The police basically indulged in restricting the Jarawa to the reserve area. But many illegal encroachments have come up in the reserve areas with political patronage. Job-seekers settlers, who have come to the island, are now serious contenders for allotment of house sites and agricultural land. Sekhsaria (1998: 69-70) claims that since the political system goes with the number, no political party is in a position to contradict its demands. There seems to be a lack of sensitivity and also an attitude of aggression that leaves the aborigines to be pushed to the brink.

Check Your Progress I

Note: Use the space provided for your answers.

1. What have you learnt about the origin of the Jarawas of South and Middle Andamans?

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3.3 THREATS TO JARAWAS

The Andaman and Nicobar Islands are rich in natural resources. However, there is also a cut-throat competition to have control and management over them. It is difficult for the Andamans tribes to withstand the pressure of the outsiders who outnumber and outsmart them. They are becoming endangered species primarily due to rampant deforestation and environmental degradation. Thousands of hectares of forest cover have depleted in the past and it continues even today.

As far as the Jarawas are concerned, their forests and resources on their territory were cleared by the settlers. The Andaman Trunk Road (ATR) was constructed cutting through
the heart of Jarawa territory. Large-scale logging operations continue even today. The Jarawas, once the masters of the land, have been confined to a small 720 sq. km. reserve on the western coast (Sekhsaria, 1998: 67). Thousands of hectares of deciduous forests have been depleted with adverse impact on the climate, health, economy and culture of the people. The studies of the late 1980s show that there was soil erosion due to the indiscriminate felling of the trees. Clearing of the trees resulted in the death of coral in the surrounding seas (Sekhsaria, 1999b). All this resulted in a sharp decline in the numbers of the endemic species such as the Andaman wild pig, endangered sea turtles that nest on the island’s beaches and the dugong that was once common in the coastal waters (Ibid.).

The drive to develop the tourism industry to attract foreign tourists has serious impact on the life and culture of the tribes. Diseases such as epidemics of pneumonia in 1868, measles in 1877, influenza in 1896, and syphilis, almost wiped the Great Andamanese off. It is reported that in August 1999, there was an outbreak of measles and subsequent respiratory complications, including tuberculosis and conjunctivitis among the Jarawa (Venkateswar, 2000: 38).

The main sources of the threats are the industries, trades, settlements, and so on. It is observed that due to the increasing human pressure on the islands, and the continued encroachment into their territory which is their prime hunting and fishing land, the Jarawas have started visiting the settlements. Meanwhile the administration continues to allot land to settlers, or legalize encroachments along the borders of the contested forest tracts (Venkateswar, 2000: 37).

In case of the escalating tension between the Jarawa and the settlers, the Administration admits that they are unable to do anything. The two groups are locked in a tussle over land rights, and the atmosphere has been vitiated by some administrative policies of the past. The Jarawa are the original inhabitants of the land and they have the first right over this land, but not many people are ready to concede this. The solution of this problem requires tremendous political will (Sekhsaria, 1998: 71). The “contact efforts” of the Andaman Adim Janjati Vikas Samiti (AAJVS), anthropologists, and police officials to establish friendly contact with the Jarawa community, and leaving behind gifts of bananas and coconuts, tobacco, etc., have been looked by the critics as “scattering rice to ensnare birds”. They argue that these efforts are aimed at making them “dependent on the administration” (Ibid.: 70).

### 3.4 ATROCITIES ON THE JARAWAS

It has been often alleged that the Jarawas are hostile by nature and that they attack people from other tribes or communities. They are stereotyped as naked, carrying bows and arrows, ready to shoot anyone and everyone. However, that is not the whole truth. It has been observed that the Jarawa are not hostile by nature and that they do not attack anyone without reason. They attack only in self defence or retaliate when they feel that their resources are being encroached upon. Sarkar (1990) reports that the Jarawa and the non-Jarawa encounters are not very uncommon. According to him, even since the British tried to establish friendly contacts with the Jarawas during the second penal settlement (1858-1946) and later on by the authorities of the Andaman Administration, there was no real breakthrough. Contrary to the non-Jarawas, the Jarawas maintained a tense relationship with the non-Jarawas. These were some of the experiences of the past between the Jarawas and the non-Jarawas:

“It is observed that the Jarawa situation during penal settlement was better than during
Andaman and Nicobar Tribes

the second penal settlement. Earlier a friendly relationship prevailed between the Jarawa and the British. During the first settlement Colebrooke (1789-90) and Blair (1789-96) came in contact with the Jarawa. Their identity as a separate tribe was not known. Cotebrooke met the Jarawa in December 1789 at Dandas point. He kept a wounded person on the ship Ranger for three weeks, went up the Bumlitan creek as far as Bumlitan, and met another Jarawa and at Mount Pleasant hill near Viper Island. He also met another Jarawa, who exchanged his bow and arrow for a knife. At Dandas Point he again met the same Jarawa with a woman and a girl and once again found him friendly” (Andaman and Nicobar Gazetteer, 1908: 31).

However, during the second penal settlement, efforts to establish contacts were unsuccessful. The Jarawas had become hostile. The second penal settlement was established in 1858 in Ross Island. Initially the Jarawas were not impacted by the establishment of the penal settlement. The Great Andamanese also had to suffer due to the Penal settlement. There were frequent incidents of fighting. The British were trying to make reconciliatory approaches toward the Great Andamanese and not towards the Jarawa. The British started a Home called the ‘Andaman Home’ for their experiment with the tribes in 1863 when they came to know of the Jarawa. They took help of the Great Andamanese and the armed police. They had several expeditions in which the Jarawa habitat was invariably attacked and damaged. Consequently, the Jarawas also retaliated whenever they could in self-defence. Thus, the Jarawa attacked only to safeguard their own interests to protect themselves from the outsiders (Ibid.).

There were cases of continuous molesting of the Jarawa and the inciting the coastal Andamanese against them that triggered off the Jarawa offensive. Cipriani (1966: 6) wrote, “It was our fault if the Jarawa became hostile”. Sarkar (1990) further gives chronological anecdotes to show how the ‘outsiders’ from the time of the British were responsible for attacks on the Jarawa, their murders and the destruction of the Jarawa habitat.

During the time of the British regime, there was a lot of encroachment and deforestation. The Jarawa were afraid that this would threaten their very survival. Hence they were hesitant to accept any offer from the civilized world. Encroachment on their territory was a provocation and resulted in fighting.

The British used their tactics of ‘Divide and Rule’. They manipulated the hostility between the Jarawa and the Onge or between the Jarawa and the Great Andamanese. The Great Andamanese took advantage of the firearms provided by the British to settle scores with the Jarawas. A large number of Jarawas were invariably killed and their habitat damaged in every expedition.

The hatred of the Jarawa towards the outsiders increased due to the Japanese occupation (March 1942-1945) and indiscriminate bombing and firing in several parts of these islands, including the Jarawa territory, damaging their habitat.

After the Independence in 1947 the practice of expeditions was abandoned and about 765 sq. km of the South and Middle Andaman, forest was declared as Jarawa Reserve Forest. The idea was to provide them with their own area for their hunting-gathering economy and also to give them some protection. The Jarawa had no knowledge of it. They felt provoked by several developmental activities. With a view to make them self-sufficient in the matter of food, the policy of colonization of these islands was adopted. The Central Government accepted the West Bengal Government’s proposal to rehabilitate the displaced persons in the Andaman Islands from East Pakistan. About 178 families came into the Islands in 1949 and settled down in the Andaman Islands. In 1950
and 1951 two more batches were brought to settle down in the vicinity of the Jarawa area. The new settlements made the Jarawas insecure and suspicious about the outsiders.

The outsiders encroached the Jarawa land, but the minority Jarawa had no way of protesting. As a result, there were constant tensions between the Jarawas and the settlers.

According to Census of India 1961, about 86 cases of the Jarawa raids between 1946 and 1963 were reported. In these raids, in 10 cases 14 non-Jarawas lost their lives and in 3 cases 5 Jarawas were killed and three captured (Census of India, 1961: 121-124). There is an interesting account of the 11 January 1952 incidents at Lakda Lungta by S. K. Gupta in Census of India 1951 (Vol. 17, Part I & II, 1955: Appendix A).

According to Gupta, the Jarawa did not shoot before they were shot at and came out in the open, in front of the camp, where they were four Bush Policemen. This is quite contrary to their ambushing habits. This resentment has, however, been described as incorrect by A. K. Ghosh, Chief Commissioner (Ibid.). According to him, the Jarawas were in bark armour and were evidently scouts. As soon as they were sighted they shot arrows at the policemen, slightly injuring one of them. When the police fired, one Jarawa dropped dead while others ran away injured, into the forest.

According to Gupta the Jarawa came out in the open early morning and walked right into the camp, making no attempt to shoot, indicating of their friendly visits. His explanation is that after the 1949 incidents the Forest Department bottled them between Lowis Inlet and Lakda Lungta on the west and in a zigzag along Yaratil Jig to Rangat and Happy Valley to the east, very narrow at certain points. This restricted the existence for people who had been moving within 25 miles of Port Blair. There was an overture for peace. But this shooting of the Jarawa might in all probability stiffen them up (Ibid.).

Cases of the Jarawa attacks after Independence mostly occurred close to their territory. Large number of labourers came into the Jarawa land for the construction of the Andaman Trunk Road through South andaman. The whole area was disturbed by felling of trees, blasting by explosives, and construction of labour camps. Many outsiders came into their territory and they had only two options either to surrender to the larger society, or to continue fighting ferociously for their own survival.

The Bush Police, who were to protect the settlers from Jarawa raids, were also friendly with the Jarawa area of Middle Andaman. They dropped gifts like coconut, pieces of iron, strips of red cloth, and so on. During the second and subsequent Five Year Plan provisions were made for continuing such practice of dropping the gifts in the Jarawa areas.

In 1968, three Jarawa boys were captured near a village in Kadamtala and were brought to Port Blair. They were treated well for about a month and then set free near their area with a large quantity of gifts (Pandit, 1970). Some 20 Jarawa men came down to Kadamtala from the nearby forests. Their intention was to take away iron tools, like agricultural implements, nuts and bolts of doors. They were also looking for coconuts and bunch of bananas. They were unarmed. When the dogs barked in the middle of the night, the villagers got up. All except three escaped. Next day they were brought to Port Blair and kept there for a month under the observation of two anthropologists of the Anthropological Association of India (ASI). They were released with gifts including a pig (Razeq & Pandit, 1969). There were some successes in befriending the Jarawas in the course of time. For instance, in February 1974, due to the efforts of a contact party led by the Bush Police, a Jarawa man swam across and came on board and collected the gifts.
Thus, there was a break-through, but occasionally there were some setbacks as well due to the misdeeds by poachers in the Jarawa area. After the breakthrough in February 1974, there were at least 3 major incidents of the killing of poachers by the Jarawas.

In March 1977, two Jarawas, one of them with an old punctured bullet wound on his right thigh, expressed their willingness to remain with the Contact Party. They were brought to Port Blair and kept in the Government Guest House. They were taken to different places in Port Blair. On 7th February 1977 they were taken back to Yadita Point near Chhotalingbang Bay when they expressed their desire to return. On their return, the 21 Jarawa who were on the shore embraced them. They embraced their respective female partners and children. They displayed pleasure and affection on being reunited with their loved ones, and there was happiness all around (AAJVS 1977: 77-79). In spite of these breakthroughs there were skirmishes every now and then due to some unpleasant happenings or unwarranted provocations.

On the basis of the above experiences with the Jarawas, it is observed that first, the Jarawa were not unfriendly and hostile towards the outsiders by nature; second, they felt threat to their survival due to the indiscriminate clearing of the forest during the second penal settlement; third, the efforts to capture the Jarawa either as part of punitive measure or for befriending them were made with the help of the Great Andamanese with whom the Jarawa had traditional rivalry. Thus they became non-acceptable to the Jarawa; fourth, a number of measures for development, such as road construction, clearance of forests, etc. adversely affected the Jarawas; fifth, provocative incidents in the Jarawa territory was the prime cause of tension.

**Check Your Progress II**

**Note:** Use the space provided for your answers.

1. What have been the main threats to the Jarawa existence?

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**3.5 EFFORTS OF THE GOVERNMENT**

The government constituted a study team on the Negrito Communities of the Andamans in 1969. The Bush Police was recommended for alternative function as its objective. On the advice of the Ministry of Home Affairs, the Government of India, an advisory committee on ‘Primitive Tribal Groups’ was set up. Its aim was to get the expert opinion on tribal development policies for this area.

In order to implement the Government policies for tribal development, a voluntary organization called the ANDAMAN ADIMJATI VIKAS SAMITI (AAJVS), was established in March 1976. The Samiti is financed by the Central Government through the Andaman Administration.

After the formation of AAJVS, a Jarawa cell was constituted to consolidate friendship with the Jarawa. There was also an effort to learn their language in a planned way. The cell comprised of representatives of the Andaman Administration, the Bush police, experts from Health Department, and Anthropological Survey of India.
Implementing the recommendations of the study team in 1969, the AAJVS formed a sub-committee in view of proposal of a new role for the Bush Police. Based on the recommendations of the sub-committee, the following roles were prescribed for the Bush Police: first, protect the Jarawa tribals, though not at the expense of the non-tribals and prevent any untoward incident involving tribal and non-tribal; second, assist and protect official parties workers visiting or working around reserved areas; thirdly, make effort to develop better relations with the Jarawa and learn their language; third, prevent violation of laws in all tribal areas of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands; fourth, prevent unauthorised persons from entering, shooting, fishing, killing wildlife and otherwise poaching by land or sea in the tribal areas of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands; fifth, prevent unauthorised contact with the Jarawa and with other tribal people who are still to react favourably to modern civilisation in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands; sixth, prevent entry or intrusion of unauthorised people into the Jarawa and other tribal areas in Andaman and Nicobar Islands; and seventh, prevent removal of any jungle produce by unauthorized people from any tribal area of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands (AAJVS, 1977: 61).

In 1980, a high level committee was constituted as desired by the Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi, to study the effect of the construction of the Andaman Trunk Road which would pass through the Jarawa area in South Andaman. Construction of a 23 km. stretches between 87 km and 110 km points of the Andaman Trunk Road. After the study the committee suggested that though the absence of any road would be the ideal condition for the Jarawa, the next alternative would be to realign the road so as to orient it as far away from the boundary for the Jarawa Reserve as possible. In the last decade, lots of efforts have been made by the Government for the protection of the Jarawas. However, the outside influx and pressure of the limited land keep growing thereby making the Jarawas more and more vulnerable.

3.6 CULTURE CONTACT AND CHANGE

The Jarawa preferred to remain aloof, maintaining a hostile and unfriendly attitude towards aliens for centuries. However, it is only recently that a section of them showed a friendly attitude. In spite of this there have been occasional encounters between the Jarawa and the non-Jarawa whenever the former have been provoked by the activities of the latter close to the reserved area. Steps have been taken to establish friendly contacts with them. This is being done cautiously to ensure that a community which has succeeded in maintaining its unique culture against heavy odds does not become extinct (Singh, 1994: 421).

In 1999 their population was about 250 individuals and unlike the Great Andamanese and the Onge they escaped devastation primarily due to their hostility to the outside civilization. In October 1997, for the first time, the extremely hostile Jarawas came out of the forests to interact with the settler populations. The official explanation for this change of attitude among the Jarawas was that they faced an acute shortage of food in their territory. Sekhsaria (1999b) observes that it was a very convenient explanation which ignored the policies that the administration had followed in the past few decades. Like the Onge, the Jarawa also have been pushed to the brink from all sides.

The areas inhabited by the Jarawas have some of the largest sources of timber. Once they are tamed or ‘domesticated’ by the so-called civilized society, the mainlanders hope to extract and exploit the resources. The mining of sand from the beaches within the Jarawa reserve has begun quite some time back. There has been infiltration in the Jarawas of South and Middle Andaman
Andaman and Nicobar Tribes

Jarawa areas. However, ironically, when the Jarawa go to the settlements they are looked down upon as intruders. There have been many incidents of conflict situations of the Jarawa being thrashed by the settlers. Since the settlers have the superior arms and ammunition power, the Jarawas cannot resist them. The settlers offer them, tobacco and gutka to befriend them. A major change that has taken place in the Jarawa community is that they have started wearing clothes, and dancing to the tunes of Hindi film songs.

Outside influence has definitely devastated the social fabric of the Jarawa life. In the last few years, it is reported that a group of young Jarawa girls and orphans has broken away from the tribe and taken up residence near the settler villages. This group is extremely vulnerable and they are reportedly being exploited by the settlers. In spite of various processes of change affecting them, the Jarawas have expressed no desire to give up their traditional way of life. They have started using aluminum utensils for cooking. They also use plastic and cement bags to store food and water. They have also started using second hand and new clothes gifted to them by outsiders. This has apparently made them more prone to diseases and infections (Planning Commission, 2008: 100-101).

The two biggest threats to the existence of the Jarawa come from poaching and continued use of Andaman Trunk Road. In spite of the order of the Supreme Court in 2002 to close the portion of the Andaman Trunk Road passing through the Jarawa Reserve, no serious action has reportedly been taken. Meanwhile, the Jarawas continue to be victims of unmindful interventions of the outsiders. Of late, the Home Ministry has proposed a Jarawa policy which calls for immediate removal of all encroachments from within the Reserve. It has recommended minimum and regulated intervention. Two recent expert groups have also recommended that there should not be any effort to bring the Jarawas to the mainstream against their “conscious will” (Ibid.).

Check Your Progress III

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answers.
1. What have been the Government’s efforts for the development of the Jarawas?

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3.7 LET US SUM UP

The Jarawas are one of the four Negrito tribes of the Andaman Islands, inhabiting the west coast reserved area of 765 square kms in the South and Middle Andaman Islands. They are one of the oldest surviving tribes. They are believed to have settled down in the islands some 60,000 years ago. They are primarily hunter-gatherers and, are among the most isolated communities in the world. Their numbers are fast dwindling. They are monolingual and still have no system of writing. There is the practice of collective leadership among them and not individual. The male and female Jarawas, both used to remain fully naked until recently. It is only now that they have begun to somehow cover themselves with the clothes gifted to them. Sometimes strings made of bark and leaves are used as ornaments.

The Jarawas live a carefree life. They live a semi-nomadic life. They practice adult and
monogamous marriage. Their smallest social unit consists of a nuclear family with a male, a female and their minor children. The Jarawa women take active part in their economic activities, and enjoy equal status with the Jarawa men, which are manifested in their interactions with the non-Jarawas visiting their areas.

The main sources of the threats to the existence of the Jarawas come from the industries, trades, and settlements. On account of the increasing human pressure on the islands, and the continuing encroachment into their territory which is their prime hunting and fishing land, the Jarawas have started visiting the settlements. The drive to develop the tourism industry to attract foreign tourists has serious impact on the life and culture of the tribes. There have also been atrocities committed on the Jarawas provoking them to engage in attacks in self-defence.

3.8 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES


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UNIT 4  SENTINELESE OF SENTINEL ISLAND

Structure

4.0 Objectives
4.1 Introduction
4.2 Socio-Economic and Religious Life
4.3 Linguistic Identity of Sentinelese
4.4 Life Situation of Sentinelese
4.5 Material Culture of Sentinelese
4.6 Culture Contact, Change and Threats
4.7 Let Us Sum
4.8 Further Readings and References

4.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit is about the Sentinelese people of the Sentinel Island, who are the most inaccessible of the given primitive tribes of the islands. After going through the unit you would have:

- A general understanding of socio-economic life of the Sentinelese;
- Life situation of the Sentinelese;
- Material culture of Sentinelese; and
- General Information about culture, contact and threat to their identity.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

The Sentinelese is perhaps the most isolated tribal community of the county. It is still not known by which name they identify themselves. The name Sentinelese is derived from the name of the island they inhabit. They had virtually no contact from outside world until very recently. They have exclusive inhabitation in the Andaman island of North Sentinel situated 64 km south-west of Port Blair in the Andaman and Nicobar islands. The Onge call this island Chankute. Their population was about 100, although the census 1981 could not record any (Singh, 1994: 1067). According to Sekhsaria (1999), the Sentinelese in 1999 estimated about 100 individuals and they were hostile to the outside civilization. It is popularly believed that the Sentinelese, like other Negrito tribes of the islands, have migrated here in the prehistoric times. Some scholars suggest that their ancestors drifted to this island during a cyclone, when they came out of Little Andaman Island for fishing on small out-rigger canoes. Their tongue is called Sentinelese, which is not understood by other Negritos. This language is said to belong to the Andamanese family of speech. The Sentinelese men traditionally wear a bark waist-belt, which was specific to this community. Both men and women wear nothing except leafy ornaments. In physical appearance, they are dark-complexioned, are of medium height, and are not different from other Negritos.
According to the Planning Commission, the Sentinelese tribe has often been termed as 'hostile', but the fact is that their hostility is the consequence of incursions upon their territory and its natural resources. The survival of the Sentinelese is threatened due to poaching in their territories. There have been violent reactions on the part of the Sentinelese only when they have felt threatened for their own lives. It is precisely due to this that very little is known about the origin, life style and language of the Sentinelese. There is no accurate estimate of their total population either. It is believed that the Sentineles belong to the Onge-Jarawa family of tribes. It is believed that at some point in time they either got stuck in or drifted to the North Sentineles Island, where the treacherous seas and coral reefs surrounding the island ensured that they were cut off from the rest of the world. Although the Sentinelese have reportedly become less aggressive now, it has also been observed that they have not shown any inclination to interact with outsiders (Planning Commission, 2008: 102).

### 4.2 SOCIO-ECONOMIC AND RELIGIOUS LIFE

The Sentinelese is a hunting-gathering community. They hunt wild boar, turtle and fish with bows, arrows and spears. They also use single out-rigger canoes for fishing and turtle hunting. Their main food items are wild boars, sea turtles, different kinds of fish and molluscs, fruits, roots and tubers. Compared to the two other hunter-gatherer communities of the Jarawas and the Onge, their dependence on sea-food is more prominent.

The Sentinelese are said to live in the communal huts. It is reported that only a large encampment of 18 small lean-to type huts were seen in a forest clearing in 1967. Each hut had a fire place. The presence of small huts with separate hearths indicated their semi-nomadic nature and gathering pursuits. Some fruits were also seen dumped at a place in an earlier party. The presence of more than one fire place in the long huts suggested that occasionally more than one family shared such a hut.

Men seem to carry bow and arrow for their hunting expeditions. Men and women both seem to engage in collection of fruits, tubers and other edibles. Women engage in fishing with small round nets in shallow water. They also make baskets, mats, bows and spears, and bark belts for men. The bark belts for men are much narrower than those used by the Jarawa and cover only the waist region. They also make shell necklaces and headbands. They paint their bodies with white clay. They also wear leaf ornaments. Culturally, they do not seem to be any different from the other Negrito hunter-gatherers in the Andamans.

According to Pandit (1990), it is difficult to say anything about the kind or territorial divisions among the Sentinelese. It is sheer lack of accessibility to the tribe that makes it difficult to have an understanding of their family, marriage, kinship, and other aspects of their society and culture. Some of the inferences about their society are based on the observations of Pandit, who also says that during the visit to the island of the Sentinelese, they did not see or encounter the Sentinelese each time they visited the island. If at all, they saw only a few of them, who kept moving around in search of food. It appeared that they were much more dependent on the sea food than were the Jarawas (Pandit, 1990: 22-23).

According to Mohanty, the Sentinelese are mostly the hunters of the wild animals and birds and gatherers as well (Mohanty, 2004: 588).
Social Control

When there are disputes of any kind involving the members of the tribe, the eldest person in the tribe has the authority and mandate to take a decision and settle the problem. There socio-economic system is guided and safeguarded by the customary laws (Ibid.).

Their ritualistic practices remain still unknown to the outside world. The dead infants are said to be buried. They place a nautilus shell and smaller seashells on the graves (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sentinelese_people). The Sentinelese may have their own beliefs and practices, which may look crude to the outside world. Mohanty (2004) is of the opinion that the Sentinelese like other primitive tribes of the Andaman and Nicobar islands worship local deities. They have their own festivals of the clan. Their celebrations are accompanied with songs and dances.

Check Your Progress I

Note: Use the space provided for your answers.
1. What do you know about the origin and background of the Sentinelese?

\[\text{Check Your Progress I} \]

4.3 LINGUISTIC IDENTITY OF SENTINELESE

Mohanty observes that the Sentinelese speak their own language which is not understood by other Negrito groups. Their language may be called Sentinelese as it is spoken by the Sentinelese people. Since they are geographically close to Negritos, their language is considered to be a member of the Andamanese family of languages. However, it is quite surprising that it is not understood by other Negritos. One of the reasons for this impasse is that no one outside the community can speak Sentinelese. Consequently, there have been no materials, language samples, and word lists, published in the Sentinelese language. It is considered to be one of the endangered languages in the world (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sentinelese_people).

Language and Social Practices

It was noticed that the Sentinelese delightfully took the buckets of red colour but rejected the green ones. The research team found that pig skulls were deposited in quantities near settlements or were decorated with ochre and kept for trophies. They seemed to be very fond of the red colour. There was absence of any artwork in the Sentinelese society, except for the simple linear patterns applied to bows and javelins.

4.4 LIFE SITUATION OF SENTINELESE

According to the Planning Commission, the autochthonous group called Sentinelese is very limited. Not much is known of their origins, lifestyle, language, and their numbers. There number is estimated to vary between 100 and 300 (Planning Commission, 2008: 102).
After the Indian Ocean tsunami in 2004, there was a fear that the Sentinelese might have been wiped out. However, they miraculously survived the natural calamity relatively unscathed (http://atlasobscura.com/place/sentinelese).

**Eating and Drinking Habits**

Food habits of the Sentinelese tribe are unique. They seem to be fond of coconuts, wild honey, fruit, and nuts. Sapodilla and pandanus are also gathered by these Sentinelese tribes. They eat raw meat of the animals. According to Mohanty, they eat wild boars, sea turtles, different kinds of fish and mollusks, fruits, roots and tubers. They depend on sea food more than their counterpart Jarawas and Onges (Mohanty, 2004: 587).

**Life Cycle and Related Customs**

The Sentinelese are said to practice marriage within the clan. Some rituals and ceremonies are conducted at the time of birth of the child. The pollution period continues for a few days after which there is the normal period. At the time of death too the dead body is buried with local rituals of the clan. It has been observed that some rituals are performed by their priest. There is a communal meal for the members of the clan (Mohanty, 2004: 586).

**Dress and Ornaments**

Mohanty observes that the Sentinelese men wear a bark waist belt, which is typical of their community. Men and women both wear nothing except leafy ornaments. They paint their bodies with clay which reveals their artistic disposition (Ibid.). The Sentinelese are observed not to wear any clothes. They are said to wear leaves, fiber strings or similar material as decorations. Their men seem to like the headbands made from vines (http://atlasobscura.com/place/sentinelese).

**Traditional Crafts**

Their traditional crafts include baskets, mat, bows, arrows, spears, and bark belts for men, and so on. They also make shell necklace and headbands (Mohanty, 2004: 587).

**Occupational Distribution**

The main occupation of the Sentinelese is hunting and gathering. This is their form of economy. They hunt wild boars, turtle, and fish with bows, arrows and spears. They also use single out-rigger canoes for fishing and turtle-hunting. While men folk engage in hunting and fishing with bows and arrows, women and men both are involved in collecting fruits, tubers and other edibles. Women go fishing with small round nets in shallow water (Ibid.).

Since the Sentinelese are still not easily accessible, whatever information about them, is based on observations from a distance. They seem to exhibit physical characteristics similar to those of the Africans, such as dark skin and peppercorn hair. However, Sentinelese on an average appears to be taller than other Andamanese peoples (http://atlasobscura.com/place/sentinelese).

There are no signs of the Sentinelese engaging in agricultural activities. Most of their tools and weapons are made from stone and animal bones, however the Sentinelese seem to make use of metal objects washed ashore (Ibid.).
4.5 MATERIAL CULTURE OF SENTINELESE

Since the Sentinelese is still not very friendly with the outside world unlike some other primitive tribal groups of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, most of their known material culture is on the basis of observations during attempts to contact them in the course of the twentieth century. They are basically hunter-gatherers without any knowledge about agricultural operations. Their dwellings are shelter-type huts and larger communal dwellings. The shelter-type dwellings are with no side walls and a floor sometimes laden with leaves. These dwellings are big enough for 3–4 persons of a nuclear family. The larger dwellings, on the other hand, were sparsely constructed with raised floors and partitioned family quarters.

The Sentinelese does not seem to have much idea about the metalwork. However, they seem to have extensively used metal objects washed ashore, for their weapons. Some of the weapons that they possess are javelins, flatbow, arrows for fishing and hunting. The fishing arrows are different from hunting arrows. The Sentinelese seems to know knives as well. Among other tools, the Sentinelese has woven baskets, wooden containers, fishing nets, basic outrigger canoes for fishing and collecting shellfish (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sentinelese_people).

Traditional Material Culture

T. N. Pandit (1990: 18-20) makes an extensive study of the material culture of the Sentinelese from his expeditions in the Sentinelese settlement. He claims to have collected a few artifacts from the Sentinelese in exchange for gifts placed in their huts. Some of the artifacts discovered by Pandit and his team are as follows: (a) **Bow** – Two specimens of bows were found. One of them was plain and the other had small, straight lines etched vertically and horizontally with simple geometrical designs. The bigger bow was 1400 mm long and 500 mm in width. It had a thickness of 160 mm in the middle. The bowstring is made of twisted bark fibres fixed to the two tapered ends of the stave. The bow is used for hunting, fishing and also as a weapon for self-defence against animals or hostile humans. (b) **Multi-pronged wooden harpoon spear** – This is meant for harpooning larger fish. This has a flexible shaft 1860 mm long like that of the arrow. It has hard and pointed wood harpoon heads of varying lengths. (c) **Grinding and hammer stones** – In the settlement of the Sentinelese two rounded stones were discovered. One of them, it looked, was used for sharpening iron blades, as it had the markings of it. The second stone was more rounded and there was a kind of grip. This looked like a hammer stone which was apparently used for hammering iron pieces into shape. It also gave the impression of being used to make arrow and spear heads. (d) **Plucking stick** – It is a straight cane shaft 2200 mm long, with a small stick 260 mm long tied to one end. It appears to be used to bend branches of trees in order to pluck fruits, leaves, flowers, and so on. (e) **Arrow-cum-spear** – The arrow of the Sentinelese is very long and hence is also used as a spear. It has a long wooden flexible shaft with smoky rings around it, which is caused by a slow fire for strength. At the top end, it has a diameter of 480 mm, in the middle 430 mm, and at the bottom end 330 mm. It has a U-shaped notch at the butt end to receive the bowstring. It is wrapped around with fibre strings for strength. The head of the arrow or spear is made of iron. The arrow-cum-spear is used for hunting pig and larger fish. (f) **Bamboo pot** – The bamboo pot is a container about 100 mm high and 1260 mm in diameter. It is used to store the clay used for painting bodies. There is no workmanship of any kind in the making of the bamboo pot. (g) **Nautilus shell** – This is a shell used as a pot for drinking water. It is also used for bailing out water from the dug-out canoe. (h) **Fishing net** – It is quite
obvious that the fishing net is used to catch fish. It is woven from bark fibre thread and is supported by a cane rim and handle at the top. The net is held in the hand and immersed in the water to trap the fish around the coast. (i) **Cane basket** – The cane basket is woven finely. The basket which has been found is somewhat damaged. It has a diameter of 12400 mm and a height of 5400 mm. It is woven around 17 vertical sticks held together at the base. It is also rounded off at the top to form a thick rim. It looks like a basket for collecting, carrying and storing fruits and tubers from the forest. (j) **Waist band** – The Sentinelese seem to be fond of the waist band. It is 6900 mm long and 900 mm wide. It consists of two bark sheets sewn together and serves as a waist band or belt. The waist band is used by the men to keep arrows during hunting. (k) **Bark Fibre** – These are long strips of bark fibres used for bowstrings or rope. (l) **Resin** – This is black and hard plant product collected from the forest. When burned it gives fragrance. It appears that the Sentinelese use the resin for lighting purposes. (m) **Pig skull** – The pig skull is painted all over with red ochre. It is tied up with cane strips. It is kept suspended in the hut. It is a trophy which the hunter has earned or won for himself as a mark of his bravery and competence. Heaps of turtle shells and pig skulls have been found near the Sentinelese settlement. There seems to be some deep spiritual significance for the tribe, which is not yet known. (n) **Chess board** – The 5200 mm long, 3700 mm wide, and 23 mm thick wooden board is made of soft porous wood. The top surface is engraved with 64 squares and alternate squares are studded with pieces of shell and stone. It very much looks like a chess board, but it is not clear whether the Sentinelese have made it themselves, or if it has been washed up by the sea. (o) **Dug-out canoe** – The Sentinelese use a dug-out canoe, which is smaller in size than that of the Onge. The Onge canoe is much sturdier and is meant to carry many people. The Sentinelese canoe was observed carrying only one or two people. It is a single outrigger dug-out canoe. The Sentinelese dug-out canoe is used for transportation, fishing and turtle hunting in the waters around the island.

### Check Your Progress II

**Note:** Use the space provided for your answers.

1. What do you know about the linguistic identity of the Sentinelese?
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### 4.6 CULTURE CONTACT, CHANGE AND THREATS

The Negrito hunting-gathering communities have been exclusively dwelling in the Andaman Islands for thousands of years. They did not like the outsiders disturbing them there. They vehemently resented and resisted the establishment of a permanent settlement here by the British in 1858. It took the British several years to settle themselves and establish friendly relations with the tribes of Great Andaman, but they left the Sentinelese alone.

The Anthropological Survey of India and the Andaman and Nicobar Administration made serious efforts at making contacts with those tribes only in 1967 through joint expeditions, and this continued through the 1970s and 1980s.
The Sentinelese initially resented the intrusion of outsiders. They used their bows and arrows on many occasions to defend themselves when they felt their domains were being encroached upon. On any suspected aggression either by the state of the settlers, they tried to defend themselves aggressively. The contact teams have been offering them gifts of coconuts, bananas and pieces of iron from a distance, which they seem to have a liking for. They reportedly accepted those gifts, which were very discreetly dropped ashore by the official parties visiting them occasionally. However, they did not allow them to reach hand shaking distance. The Administration and the Anthropological Survey of India succeeded in making friendly contact with them in early 1991. During the joint expedition to the North Sentinel Island on January 4, and 22nd February 1991, the Sentinele for the first time approached the lifeboat and received a gift of coconuts. A few of them also boarded the lifeboat during the February visit. There were men, women and children in these groups. The officials stood in the water near the shore and gave them more gifts. The Sentinelese demanded more gifts. A few women showed their annoyance at not receiving their adequate share (Singh, 1994: 1066-1069).

Contact expeditions among Sentinelese continued under the direction of T. N. Pandit. These expeditions were a series of planned visits with gifts for the Sentinelese in view of coaxing them. While there was some breakthrough, in 1990s these expeditions had to be discontinued due to the hostility of the Sentinelese. As late as 2006, the Sentinelese reportedly killed two fishermen who were allegedly illegally fishing within the range of the island. When the helicopter tried to recover the bodies, the Sentinelese drove them off by a hail of arrows. Those bodies have still been not recovered to this date although it is believed that those bodies were buried in shallow graves by the Sentinelese themselves (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sentinelese_people). The Andaman and Nicobar Administration has tried to befriend the Sentinelese by offering them gifts of coconuts, bananas and pieces of iron from a distance by a team of officials and experts (Mohanty, 2004: 588).

Threats Faced

The Andaman and Nicobar islands is a land of paradoxes with rich land with flora and fauna but poor and fast vanishing Indigenous Tribes. There are unexplored minerals and a rich cultural heritage of the indigenous populations. Civilization has not yet overwhelmed them. The indigenous populations of Andaman and Nicobar islands were able to sustain themselves as long as they were out of the shadow of the so-called civilization. However, the moment the process of ‘civilizing’ and ‘domesticating’ began their number started to decline. In the case of the primitive tribals of the Islands the Great Andamanese, the Onge, the Sentinelese and the Jarawa, the external forces pose the biggest challenge to their physical survival. Here an attempt will be made to examine the threats which are applicable to the Sentinelese and other tribes of the Islands.

Deforestation

It has been reported that the main threat to the indigenous tribes is the environmental destruction in terms of deforestation and damaging of the seashore. On account of deforestation trees are being felled, rare animals, plants and bird species are fast vanishing. The new settlements for outsiders are at the cost of the local primitive tribal groups. As a result, there is depletion in the forest cover. Clearing of forests accelerated the diseases like malaria, as cleared forests have become breeding sites for mosquitoes.
Encroachment

There has been encroachment into the territories of the indigenous people primarily by the settlers. The State and the Administration can avoid this if they want. However, due to the pressure on the land, more and more outside populations keep infiltrating into the land of the indigenous population, thereby threatening their very survival.

Tourism

Tourist resorts, guest houses, and hotels are constructed at the cost of the indigenous population. It has been reported that a lot of land has been acquired in the name of tourism without really being able to use those lands. There have been plans in paper by the India Tourism Development Corporation for Andaman and Nicobar Administration for the expansion of the tourism industry in these islands in view of increasing the foreign exchange. Foreigners are not allowed to visit the tribal areas and other restricted areas. There are laws to protect the flora and fauna of the land, but unfortunately there are too many loopholes. The indigenous people who were the real masters of the land have now become paupers in their own country. They used to go about with bows and arrows freely hunting and gathering for their livelihood, but now they cannot even carry their traditional weapons. Those who taught others about the sustainable management of natural resources are on the verge of extinction. Contrarily, the settlers have the superior know-how and they are thriving in the islands.

Welfare Measures

The nature of development and welfare measures undertaken by the State in view of planned development of the Islands, has taken a toll. The nature of development seems to be oriented towards the safety and security of the settlers alone. Crores of rupees are being pumped into the Islands by the State for the development of the local people, but the Sentinelese, the Jarawas, the Onges, the Great Andamanese, and Shompens are surely not the prime beneficiaries. The dream of the indigenous tribes still remains too far-fetched to be realized concretely. There is the same lacuna in the fields of education, health, mortality, human rights, basic amenities, and so on. Rampant corruption as in the mainland India has left the island indigenous groups marginalized.

Assimilation of the Tribes into the Mainstream

Various efforts by the State and the researchers are oriented towards assimilation of the Andaman tribes into the mainstream. Whatever expeditions have been undertaken by the contact parties of the researchers and anthropologists have no doubt been well intentioned. However, these efforts seem to have adversely affected the tribes. Force has also been used to subdue the tribes. Various strategies have been used to subtly put pressure on the tribes to accept the modern civilization under the garb of bringing them to the mainstream. It has also been observed that some tribals from among the Great Andamanese and the Sentinelese are in the state police or in the government working as class IV employees. Physical violence has been a common means of exercising control over the Andaman tribes.

Defence and Economic Interests

A few years ago, the Government announced setting up of a tri-services command on the strategically located Andaman and Nicobar islands. It was in order to clamp down on increasing arms and narcotics running by insurgent groups through sea lanes in the Bay of Bengal. The rationale for increasing the forces in the region was to protect the 300 odd uninhabited islands along with the Malacca Straits. It is alleged that this region
has become a haven for smuggling and piracy on high seas, using some of the uninhabited islands. The implication of the increased force level is obviously the availability of more men and material in the region. Economic reason is also given as the main rationale for the above defence programme. Malacca Stratis, said to be the busiest trade route, is infested by pirates and smugglers. The trade route passes hardly 30 miles from the Indian Territory. The Navy Base is expected to neutralize the menace created by the smugglers.

Until recently there were more than 1,119 registered small scale village and handicrafts units, apart from four medium sized industrial units. The engineering units have been engaged in the production of saw dust, briquettes, polythene bags, and so on. There are also production units for paint and varnishes, fibre glass and mini flour mills, soft drinks and beverages, aluminium doors and windows, and so on. Small scale and handicraft units, apart from engaging in shell crafts, bakery products, rice milling, and furniture making, are also involved in the production of oilseeds crushing. Apart from these there are many other establishments engaged in the manufacturing of goods, which benefit the settlers, but have proved to be detrimental to the identity and culture of the primitive tribal groups.

Check Your Progress III
Note: Use the space provided for your answers.
1. What have you learnt about culture contact and threats to the Sentinelese identity?
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4.7 LET US SUM UP

The Sentinelese is perhaps the most isolated tribal community of the county. The name Sentinelese is derived from the name of the island they inhabit. They had virtually no contact from outside world until very recently. They have exclusive inhabitation in the Andaman island of North Sentinel. The Sentinelese is a hunting-gathering community. They hunt wild boar, turtle and fish with bows, arrows and spears. The Sentinelese are said to live in the communal huts. When there are disputes of any kind involving the members of the tribe, the eldest person in the tribe has the authority and mandate to take a decision and settle the problem. Their socio-economic system is guided and safeguarded by the customary laws. Their ritualistic practices remain still unknown to the outside world. The Sentinelese is one of the endangered languages of the world. Since the Sentinelese are still not very friendly with the outside world, most of their known material culture is on the basis of observations during attempts to contact them. The Sentinelese have been living in the Sentinel Island for hundreds of years without any disturbance until very recently. They vehemently resisted efforts by various agencies to penetrate their region.

4.8 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES


http://atlasobscura.com/Place/Sentinelese, “Sentinelese of the Andaman Islands.”


UNIT 5  SHOMPENS OF GREAT NICOBAR

Structure

5.0 Objectives
5.1 Introduction and Background
5.2 General Information
5.3 Eating and Drinking Habits and Living Conditions
5.4 Social Organization
5.5 Economic Organization
5.6 Politico-Cultural Organizations and Education
5.7 Let us Sum Up
5.8 Further Readings and References

5.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit is about the Shompens of Great Nicobar. After going through the unit you should be able to have:

- a general understanding of the Shompens of Great Nicobar; and
- a knowledge about their life and culture in terms of food habits; and social, political, and economic organizations.

5.1 INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Classified as a Primitive Tribal Group (PTG) along with the four other tribes, the Shompen, unlike the other primitive tribes of the Andaman Islands, are not of Negrito but of Mongoloid stock. Their light yellow-brown skins, straight hair, narrow eyes and stocky build give them a strong resemblance to the people of Myanmar and Indonesia. Like the Jarawa, they are skilled hunter-gatherers, but unlike them, also raise plantations of various crops such as pandanus and lemon and colocasia. They subsist primarily on these plants, wild boar, wild fruits, honey and fish. Like the Jarawa, they are, by and large, disease-free (Gupta, 2007).

Only 50 years down the line, their lands have been occupied, their forests chopped down, their animals hunted and they themselves outnumbered by people from an alien culture. Unlike the major islands of the Andamans and some Nicobar Islands, Great Nicobar was, by and large, undisturbed by incursions of outsiders until the late 1960s. The Shompen lived in the interior of the island, inside the forest and along the rivers; the Nicobarese lived along the coast, to the north of the island. The two tribes lived in a kind of armed truce after intermittent skirmishes (Ibid.).

A major influx of population started in 1969 with the settlement of several hundred ex-servicemen from the mainland on the south-eastern coast of Great Nicobar, and a proposal to settle several hundred more on the western coast (Mukharjee, 1974: 107-113).
Even more damaging, the East-West road (measuring 43 km in length) was constructed through pristine Shompen territory. Thus a tribal reserve area under the Andaman and Nicobar (Protection of Aboriginal Tribes) Regulation, 1956, was opened to outsiders (Chaudhary, 2005: 533).

**Shrinking Reserve Area**

The area of the reserve has also shrunk over the years. The ‘reserved area’ in Great Nicobar, which initially covered the whole island (1044.54 sq km as per the notification dated 2nd April 1957, issued by the Chief Commissioner of the Andaman and Nicobar islands), has been reduced to 853.19 sq km. The population of outsiders has been growing steadily since 1969, while the number of the Shompen, which is alarmingly low, has remained stagnant or is shrinking (Ibid.: 531-537).

According to the Census, the population of the Shompen was 212 in 1971, 223 in 1981, 131 in 1991, 398 in 2001 and 229 in 2011. According to census 2011 male constitute 61.5% of total population.. These figures are, of course, estimations and the discrepancies, particularly in the last figure, are quite obvious, as the Shompen, being forest-dwelling, nomadic hunter-gatherers and averse to the entry of others into their settlements, do not lend themselves to easy or accurate counting (Census 2001).

Several development activities are currently happening in Great Nicobar, all with an inevitable deleterious impact on the Shompen. Some are security-related given the strategic location of Great Nicobar almost at the southern end of India and its proximity to many international shipping routes. Such activities cannot, perhaps, be avoided (Ministry of Tribal Affairs, 2009).

**Three Dangers**

But the three issues that pose the greatest danger to the Shompen are not defence or security-related: the burgeoning population of outsiders, the renovation and continued construction of the East-West road through the heart of the Shompen reserve, and the free food and other items being given to the Shompen by the government (Chaudhary, 2005: 531-537).

Even though Great Nicobar was severely affected by the 2004 tsunami, it does not seem to have had any permanent impact on the number of people who wish to live there; the population today has grown considerably from that in 2001. Apart from the impact on the Shompen, the numbers need to be controlled and reduced from the point of view of the Island’s carrying capacity. The Island’s ecology will definitely be destroyed by such large numbers and so will the people who live in harmony with it (Ibid.).

The construction and repair of the East-West road is an even greater threat to the Shompen. This road, which had been constructed long ago and abandoned, fell into disrepair and was not used for several decades. Indeed, there was no real need to maintain it since the settlement on the western coast which the road was supposed to link, never came up. Since the tsunami, however, repair work on a lot of structures was taken up, including the East-West road. Thus the Shompen are faced with the renewed danger of incursions into their territory. Moreover, the labourers from the mainland bring with them a totally different culture. Even more worrisome, they bring diseases to which the Shompen have little or no immunity. Such diseases can spread like an epidemic, as happened some years ago when diarrhoea killed a large number of the tribe (Ibid.).

But, by far, the most damaging activity is the administration’s practice of doling out free rations. This has been in operation for some years, but increased after the tsunami, in
the mistaken belief that the Shompen were being protected from hunger and starvation (Ibid.).

The Shompen, who are a totally self-sufficient hunter-gatherer-grower people living on wild animals, fruit, tubers, fish and honey, are being given rice and biscuits and alien food products. They are also being given cloth, though the Shompen have an ancient tradition of making cloth out of tree bark, which they wear swathed around their waists. Thus an insidious culture of dependency is being created, undermining the self-sufficiency of these people (Ibid.).

**Specialized Handling**

The issues of the tribes of the Andaman and Nicobar islands are so different from that of other tribes that it calls for extremely sensitive and specialised handling. Unfortunately, most senior officials in the Andamans and Nicobar come to the islands from the mainland, for a brief period and do not have a clue about the approach required for these rare heritage tribes (Rizvi, 1990: 40-42).

When there is a conflict between the interests of the few hundred tribal people and that of the few lakh people who have settled there, the administration tends to decide in favour of the larger number, though such decisions might have a direct and extremely adverse impact on the primitive tribal groups. Such officials also resist any kind of sensitization (Ibid.).

Unless the administration wakes up to the fact that they have a very uncommon and precious commodity in the form of these heritage primitive tribes, one that needs extremely delicate and sensitive handling, it is more than likely that these few hundred people will, in due course, disappear (Ibid.).

### 5.2 GENERAL INFORMATION

Shompens are one of the most primitive tribes of the Andaman and Nicobar (A&N) Islands and constitute one-sixth of its total population (Rizvi, 1990). The Shompen tribe is one of the dwindling Mongoloid aborigines and presently it is an ethnic oddity. It is a forest-dwelling tribe inhabiting the Great Nicobar Island which constitutes ‘the home of Shompens’. However, the island does not provide much clue about the origin of the Shompens. Probably, they might have migrated several years back from the nearby Malaysian regions and made the Great Nicobar Island their home (Radcliffe-Brown, 1948: 320-336).

Shompens are semi-nomadic food-gatherers and hunters with stone-age civilization. They live in small groups in the dense interior forests of the island. Being suspicious and shy, they have rejected all contacts with the outside world. However, they are not hostile. They are well-built and taller than the Nicobarese. They have slightly dark complexion and their features, especially their noses and jaws are quite prominent. The term Shompen might be the outcome of the British pronunciation of the Nicobari term ‘Shamhap’ meaning ‘one who lives in forests’. The Nicobarese call them ‘Shompehan’ and ‘Champion’. Perhaps Shompens are the last remnants of the Malay race who maintains a separate existence in dense forests and have their primitive culture and own language (RCCS, 2007). Like the Great Andamanese and the Onges of the Andaman Islands, the Shompens are a dying race being ravaged by diseases and a primitive way of life. Among their economic activities related to subsistence, the major ones are hunting, fishing, food-gathering and pig-rearing. Hunting and fishing are mostly carried out throughout the year. Though the 1981 census enumerated their population to be 214, subsequently their number reduced to 134, as an epidemic break of gastroenteritis.
eliminated nearly 100 individuals. However, their population according to the 2001 Census has risen to 395 (Census 2001).

Till the end of the 19th century, the Nicobar Archipelago remained isolated from all points of view. It was annotated with phrases like ‘the paradise of the pirates’ or ‘the land of naked people’. This island represents one of the greatest emporia of ethnobotanical wealth, where aboriginal native tribes of ancient culture remain in their virginity. Shompens are the original inhabitants of the Great Nicobar Island, which is the southernmost island of the A&N Archipelago, situated between 6°45′–7°15′N lat. and 93°37′–93°56′E long. The island covers an area of about 1045 sq. km, and is about 55 km long from Murray Point in the north to Indira Point in the south. The island presents a varied natural panorama of Great Nicobar Island. It is covered with virgin lush evergreen dense tropical forests extending from the sea coast to the hilltops (http://www.mnsu.edu/emuseum/cultural/oldworld/asia/nicobarese.html).

The island occupies a phytogeographical strategic position between the mainland, Myanmar and Thailand on the one hand, and Sumatra and the Malay Peninsula on the other. The island is highly rugged with narrow, flat land along the sea coasts and hill ranges running in northsouth direction. Five perennial rivers – Alexandra, Dogmar, Amrit Kaur, Jubilee, and Galathea, with their tributaries, constitute the main drainage system of the island. The soils of the island are loose in texture, poor in drainage and low in moisture-retaining capacity. The climate is that of the humid tropics with temperature ranging from 22°C to 32°C, with mean relative humidity of about 82%. Annual rainfall in the northern part of island is 3800 mm, while in south it is about 3000 mm. April is the hottest month of the year. Rainy season begins in April and continues up to December. January to March have more or less dry weather. The island is subjected to gales and cyclonic winds blowing west to east and east to west (Ghatak, 2009).

The Shompens were the sole occupants of the Great Nicobar Island until the arrival of the settlers. They are entirely dependent on forest resources and sea products for all their needs. In the present work, ethnobotanical aspects pertaining to food, medicine, shelter, hunting and canoe-making are presented. The Shompens were found to depend on rhizomes, bulbs, tubers, roots and fruits of wild plants present in the surrounding forests. Animal based diet of the Shompens included several kinds of fishes, turtles, lobsters, prawns, mussels, octopus, wild pigs, eggs of megapode birds and wood insects. The men generally go out for fishing, hunting, food-gathering and honey collection. The Shompens like hunting wild pigs in the forest of Great Nicobar Island. They also hunt monkeys, crocodiles, frogs, snakes, birds and lizards. Their fishing and hunting are of the most primitive type. They use harpoons made of pointed iron rods for fishing and hunting turtles and crocodiles. For hunting wild pigs, monitor lizards, snakes and monkeys, they use spears and hatchets. The food collected becomes the property of the whole community and the women usually prepare food for the men (Lal, 1985: 18).

Fruits of Pandanus leram Jones form the staple food. The Shompens use several wild plants for treating various physical ailments. Methods of application are simple as in most cases, the Shompens simply chew a particular plant either raw or at times it is pounded and applied externally. Plant decoction is also used. However, no attention is given to the quantity of plant parts used in the prescription (Awasthi, 1988: 128-131).

The Shompens build temporary huts propped on stilts 2–6 m above the ground. Inside the huts, crude mats made from pandanus and cane strips are used and leaves of Leea grandifolia Kurz serve as bed sheets, while a piece of bamboo is often used as pillow. The Shompens prepare indigenous dugouts or canoes called ‘horis’, which are of two types. Small canoes having carrying capacity of two or three persons are used for
crossing creeks and rivers. Big canoes having carrying capacity of 2–7 persons are used for transportation and fishing in the sea. These canoes which vary in size from 6 to 10 ft are generally fixed with an outrigger for balance and moved using paddles. The Shompens appear to be an intermediate group between the Andamanese (hunters and food-gatherers) and the Nicobarese (gardeners and herders), as they combine their food-gathering and hunting habits with some gardening and herding as well (Mukharjee, 1974: 107-113).

The Shompens generally live in places close to a drinking water source and where abundant pandanus fruits are available, which form their staple food. The Indian region with its innumerable tribes and ethnic groups offers ample scope for ethnobotanical studies. The A&N Islands are the abode of hunter-gatherer nomadic tribes leading a contented life with limited forest resources. The Nicobarese live closer to the coast and are sea-dependent, while the Shompens are forest-dwellers. Thus their lifestyles blend harmoniously with nature, and they are considered as ‘eco-friendly people’ (Ibid.).

The Shompens like many other tribes suffer from various ailments like malaria, microfilaria, elephantiasis and other fatal diseases. Strangely no tribal medicines for such diseases exist amongst them. Ironically, these ailments together with lower population of females, low birth rate, high rate of infant mortality and malnutrition have placed the Shompens almost on the verge of extinction. During the last two decades, the Tribal Welfare Directorate of the A&N Administration and Botanical and Anthropological Surveys of India, Port Blair are involved in studying and documenting the different dwindling sociocultural, ethnobotanical and historical aspects of the aboriginal tribes of the A&N Islands respectively (Current Science, 2010: 907).

Check Your Progress I

Note: Use the space provided for your answers.

1. What have you learnt about the background of the Shompens?

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5.3 EATING AND DRINKING HABITS AND LIVING CONDITIONS

Eating and Drinking Habits

The Shompens are totally unaware of agriculture and mostly depend on forest products, fishes from sea, a bit of horticulture and rear pigs for their livelihood. The favorite food of Shompens is the fruit of screw pines (Pandanus lerum Jones ex Fontane var. andamanensis (Kurz) B.C. Stone) and honey from wild bees, fishes and games meat (Current Science, 2010: 907).

The Shompen chew “paan” leaves abundantly found in the Nicobar forests. They also chew beetle nut. However, nowadays they also chew tobacco introduced by outside labourers engaged by the Border Roads Organisation. It is believed that they do not drink alcohol (Ministry of Tribal Affairs, 2009).
Living Conditions and Situations

The Shompens build their huts on the raised platforms. The hut is of the lean-to type and meant for individual families. They do not have community residential hut, like Onge and Jarawa Tribes, but they sometime build such huts for dance in commemoration of their ancestors. Men wear only loincloth and women the scant to cover their private parts. Both men and women are topless. The cloths of Shompens are traditionally made out of the bark (Pandey, 1997).

5.4 SOCIAL ORGANIZATION

What Radcliffe-Brown found about the social organization of the Andaman tribes more than sixty years ago seems to be still valid for today. The social organization of the Shompen is based on tradition, kinship and locality. The members of a band are related to one another through blood or marriage. There are no classes among the Shompen who are divided into small groups of men, women and children (Radcliffe-Brown, 1948: 320-336).

The family is the most important social unit in Shompen society. The major economic, social, and reproductive activities are centered on the family, usually composed of husband, wife and unmarried children. The moment a son is married, he makes his own hut in the same village and lives with his wife. When a Shompen marries more than one woman, both the wives and their children share the same hut and hearth (Ibid.).

A Shompen family is controlled by the head of the family. The eldest male member of the family becomes the head. All the activities carried out by the wife and unmarried children are under the direct control of this head. The wife and children follow the instructions and guidance of the head of the family. All members of the family are responsible for maintaining good relations and discipline within the band. Women are not supposed to move freely outside the settlement without the permission of the head of the family or headman of the band. The husband-wife relationship among the Shompen is very informal. They eat together from the same leaf-plate and sit together or near each other even in the presence of other elderly persons of the community or outsiders (Ibid.).

The phenomenon of leadership among the Shompen is well established. Under the traditional authority of village head, the village life is managed smoothly and the villagers feel a certain sense of security. Disputes and dissensions are settled by themselves. The Shompens are divided into a number of small ‘Bands’ including men, women and children. Usually the elder man of the band becomes the head of the particular ‘Band’. These band members split and make further smaller bands from time to time for different purposes viz. meeting requirement of food, requirements after marriage and for defense purposes (Ibid.).

The head of a ‘Band’ is selected on the basis of his honesty, faith, intelligence, capacity of social control and knowledge of the area. It is observed that generally the headmen of the local Bands construct their huts in such a way that it works as the main entrance of the location. Usually they keep dogs in their huts as caretaker. The reason for constructing huts in such a position is in fact to avoid the entry of outsiders. As soon as any outsider comes the dogs start barking and the headman gets the idea that someone is coming. He immediately informs the other members that someone is coming. By getting the hints from the headman all people including men, women and children move away silently inside the forest to avoid the outsider. The headman guides other ‘Band’
members in day-to-day work e.g. hunting, fishing and food gathering. Then headman never allows the ‘Band’ members to contact or meet outsiders as well as Shompens of other ‘Bands’. During monsoon the Shompen Bands of the village change their location and build their huts on the slopes of the mountain (Ibid.).

Tribes and Sub-Tribes

The Shompens consist of two sub-divisions: the hostile Shompens and the Mawa Shompens. The majority of the Shompens belong to the first category. The hostile Shompens live in the regions through which the rivers Alexendra and Galathia flow and the interior of the Great Nicobar Island in the east coast (Mohanty, 2004: 589-592).

The Mawa Shompens dwell at a place very near the coast. The people of these two sub-sections have contrasting nature. The hostile Shompens, as the name suggests, are very aggressive in nature, while the Mawa Shompens are quite bashful. However, the Mawa Shompens have a great deal of interaction with the hostile Shompens. There have been instances in the past in which the hostile Shompens have declared wars with the Mawa Shompens. However, such wars are now a story of the past (Ibid.).

There are two groups distinct with the geographical distribution. The west-coast Shompen call themselves ‘Kalay’, whereas the East-coast Shompen call themselves ‘Keyet’. One Shompen band calls people of the other Shompen band Buaveia. In other words, “the inland tribe is split into two main divisions. The larger inhabits the interior proper, and is still hostile. The members of the other division, who form small settlements near the coast villages, are known as ‘mawas Shompen’ (quite, or tame Shompen), and are on intimate terms with the Nicobarese” (Rizvi, 1990: 40-42).

Rites and Rituals

Rites and rituals are important aspects of tribal life since their life is related to the nature and the spirits.

Birth rituals

The period of menstruation and childbirth are considered as unclean among the Shompen. A separate hut is constructed for the delivery of the child. When labour pain starts, the woman is shifted to this hut. During delivery only the old women of the locality are allowed to attend and stay inside the hut. After delivery the mother remains confined to this hut for about a month (Pandey, 1997).

Except for the mother and the elderly woman attending her, nobody is allowed to touch the new-born baby on the first day. On the second day the child is given a cold water bath in an indigenous vessel. The food for the neo-mother is served in this hut. An elderly lady looks after the child and the neo-mother. During this period the neo-mother puts on a bark-cloth. The bark-trays and troughs made for the use of the new-born baby are not mixed up with the family basketry and discharged after their utility is over. In one corner of this small hut a stone hearth is made in which fire is kept burning. The hearth is used for preparation of herbal medicines required for the new born baby. Paste of some bark is applied on the head and forehead of the newborn baby. After a month or so the neo-mother and the baby leave this hut and stay in another hut. The neo-mother now discards the bark-cloth and puts on cotton cloth. The deserted hut is dismantled. In the second hut they stay for another month or so and then come to their own hut. During this period the husband is not permitted to stay with the wife (Mukharjee, 1974: 32).
**Marriage**

Among the Shompens monogamy is the commonest form of marriage, but a few cases of polygamy have been also reported and it is socially sanctioned hence tolerated among them. The Shompens are endogamous and inter-ethnic marriages are usually not contracted. A man is free to marry his wife’s elder as well as younger sister. Similarly, a woman is free to marry her husband’s elder as well as younger brother (Rizvi, 1990).

A Shompen acquires his mate in different ways. The traditionally approved means of entering into matrimony are through capture and negotiation. The latter form of marriage is arranged by the parents, who invite the opinion of the girl and the boy concerned. After the marriage couples can either live along with girl’s family or with boy’s family. Couples can even move out and join a different band altogether (Lal, 1985: 18).

**Death rituals**

Certain rituals are performed in the event of a death. When a person dies inside the hut, the dead is immediately taken out of the hut and placed on the ground in front of the house. No hymns are recited and no alms are given till the burial is over. When the person breathes his last, the members of the family start weeping and crying especially when the deceased is a young man or woman. During this time the dead body remains in the ground (Rizvi, 1990: 42).

The Shompen bury their dead. A wooden bier is prepared from a log of fresh wood. Then body is kept on the bier and tied with cane or pandanus fibers. The arms are placed vertically on the sides and the hands are kept open. Before the dead body is taken away from the village a party goes into the forest to catch a pig. Only two persons carry the bier from the village to a place at a little distance from the village. The pall-bearers place the bier on the ground and come back to the village, to return to the dead body with the pig and the implements of the deceased. Before placing the dead body inside the grave, the pig is sacrificed. The dead body is then untied from the bier, placed inside the grave on komba leaves, and covered by the same kind of leaves. All the implements are kept upside down inside the grave along with the dead body. After these rituals the grave is closed and the members return to the village. The next day they leave the locality where death occurred, and move to another place (Ibid.).

### Check Your Progress II

**Note:** Use the space provided for your answers.

1. What do you know about the social organization of the Shompens?

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### 5.5 ECONOMIC ORGANIZATION

The human method of obtaining a livelihood is affected by both environmental opportunities and the stage of development of the technology and the society. Both of them impose limitations on the range of effective choice of the society. To the earliest human population the surface of the earth, the immediate and obvious source of food was provided by the wild plants and animal life which were also a source for their
clothing, utensils, implements and shelter. Thus hunting, fishing and fruit gathering constituted the primary occupations to meet the simple needs of the primitive society (Chaudhari, 2005: 531-537).

In a population where the entire economic life rotates around food gathering, hunting and fishing and where no other means of utilization of resources is known, the forest assumes an all-important dimension. The economic system of the Shompen is technologically backward. They are nomadic and their livelihood depends upon food gathering, hunting, fishing, and domestication of pigs and a bit of horticulture (Ibid.).

There are three kinds of economy among the Shompen, subsistence economy, barter economy, and gift economy, categorized on the basis of the nature of their activities particularly the amount of labour and time put therein, on an average everyday. The subsistence is the predominant activity, barter economy is subordinate activity, and the gift economy is no activity on the part of the Shompens. It is not an evolutionary classification, since the subsistence and barter economies are contemporaneous though the gift economy is the latest (Ibid.).

**Subsistence Economy**

The food sources of the Shompens are both plants and animals. They are the hunting-fishing, arboriculture, practicing the apiculture too. The hunting and arboriculture are complementary to each other, while the fishing and apiculture are the supplementary activities in their diversified subsistence economy. As subsistence economy demands whole time activity, the Shompens are found engaged in one of these activities or those related to them most of the time. The Shompens use a variety of plants as the source of food as indicated by ethno-botanical survey (Awasthi, 1988: 129-131). The edible parts of most of the plants are gathered by the Shompens from the forest where these grow in the wild. Only a few of the plants are grown by the Shompens.

**Arboriculture**

Shompens raise Pandanus, Colocasia, Banana, Chilli, Lemon, Betel, Betel Nut, Tapioca and Coconut. These plants are raised with care and attention. The Pandanus is the single important plantation crop as it is a major source of food for the Shompens. Pandanus is raised along the stream valleys at plateaus above the water level. Such plateaus are fertile as the humus eroded from the valley slope and hills accumulates thereon. The Shompens sow the ripe nuts of the pandanus fruit on such a fertile tableland and plantation comes up very well. There are varieties of pandanus fruits, some of them ripe in the rainy season and others during the summer and as such Shompens get food from this source round the year (Chaudhari, 2005: 531-537).

Each group/band of Shompens has a number of pandanus plantations within its territory in such a way that at any point of time they would not face dearth of pandanus. The pandanus fruits are collected from the plantation by the men; the women at the camp disarticulate the nuts from aggregate fruit by using the machete, then nuts are boiled in the bark casserole and finally dough is extracted out of the boiled nuts using molluskan shell. The dough thus extracted contains nut fibers, which are meticulously removed by twirling a fine thread around the spherical mass of dough repeatedly. The dough, which is free from fibers, is made into balls weighing 4-5 kgs. The Shompens eat the pandanus dough as such or with honey or with pork or meat. The dough could be preserved for many days and eaten (Ibid: 31-38).

Colocasia is the next important source of plant food for the Shompens. Colocasia is raised on hill lops by clearing the jungle and erecting a palisade around the garden.
Chilies are grown in small garden near the camp. Green chilies are cut into pieces and boiled along with pork as the Shompens eat chili flavored meat or pork (Awasthi 1988: 128-131). Lemon is raised in small plantation. They consume lemon juice regularly along with best portable water. Betel nut plantations are also raised by the Shompens along the stream valley slope. The ripe nuts are sown to raise plantation or alternatively the seedlings are transplanted. It is not a food item but ingredient of the most cherished item for their oral consumption with paan chewed by the Shompens (Chaudhari, 2005: 531-537).

All the bands/groups of Shompens grow tobacco. It is not raised separately but in their camps itself. Small palisades are raised around few seedlings. Intense care is taken to grow tobacco and sometimes crude thatched roof is put over the palisade to protect the seedlings from sun (Ibid.).

The coconuts are the mainstay of the coastal Nicobarese and as such the Shompens bands/groups that interact with Nicobarese often raise a few coconut plants in their camps. They, however, do not raise the coconut plantation like the Nicobarese (Pandey, 1997: 31-38).

**Hunting**

The Shompen diet is mainly composed of animal meat. They do not return home unless they get a hunt. If they do not get meat or fish they rather go without food. The pig, crocodile, monkey, monitor lizard, megapod and other birds, bat, snakes are some of the animals that Shompens hunt. Pig is the only big hunt available in Great Nicobar and is an important source of animal meat for the Shompens. Dogs are of immense help to them in their hunting activity and they are specially trained for hunting. Dogs locate pigs from a distance due to strong smelling power and dogs chase the pig till the fatigued prey try to hide within the buttress. When the pig is cornered Shompens spear it to kill. In the course of hunting only adult pigs and sows are speared and the piglets are always spared. They gather the little ones and carry them home alive, treat the injured piglets with their herbal medicines and rear them. Hunting, dissecting and cooking of this major hunt is the job of men (Chaudhari, 2005: 531-537).

The crocodiles are also hunted by the Shompens. The hunting of crocodiles is quite ingenious. Shompens incite the crocodile basking in the sun on the bank of the stream-creek by bating a long but very soft pole into its mouth. The crocodile clutches the pole and its teeth penetrate into the pole as the pole is soft and pithy and thereby the jaws are effectively locked together and thus the battle turns utterly defenseless, then it is speared and killed. The crocodile hunt is a rare occasion in comparison to pig hunt. The monkey is also at times hunted by the Shompens. The Megapod bird and its eggs are also eaten by them. The monitor lizard is another important game for shompens. It is next only to pig as far as its importance is concerned. Shompens often return from their hunting expedition with the pig as well as the monitor lizard. Like pig hunting, dog is an aid in monitor lizard hunt too. The dog seizes the lizard and the Shompens kill it with spear (Ibid.).

**Fishing**

Fishing activities of the Shompens are generally restricted in stream-creek waters and not in marine waters. They fish in the fresh as well as brackish waters. Spears are used in fishing activities. The Shompens go for fishing in their inland-water outrigger canoes. They mainly fish prawns, crabs and varieties of fresh and brackish water fishes. The multiheaded wooden spear is used for fishing the prawns (Ibid.).
Honey plays an important role and is a supplementary food as well as exchange commodity in the barter economy of the Shompens. The Shompens practice simple and natural apiculture. It is neither just collecting of honey nor an artificial bee keeping. The Shompens in a way help the bees in the forest. The bees require a suitable spot sheltered effectively against the rains to build their hives. The hollow tree trunks serve as ideal places for bee-hives. Such trees could be found in forest in large numbers. The bees find their way into such hollow places if the trunk has some opening through which they could move in and out. The Shompens in this context are instrumental to help the bees. They locate such hollow tree trunks by resonating it with blunt edge of the machete that they carry while moving in the forest. Then they cut an opening into the hollow trunk and leave it as such. In due course the bees may locate this tree and build their hives therein. The Shompens after some weeks may come back to harvest honey. If a Shompen desires to claim the personal right over the honey, he would mark the hollow tree that he located and other Shompens would not harvest the honey from such identified trees on seeing the marking (Awardi, 1990: 59-62).

Barter economy

In spite of living in the interior forest of the Great Nicobar Island Shompens never had been in absolute isolation. Their economic relation existed with Nicobarese living in Great Nicobar from very beginning. The Shompens would visit the Nicobarese with their commodities and exchange them with their required items, i.e. tobacco, machete and cloth in person (Ghatak, 2009).

Gift Economy

Till recently the gift giving practice was an aid in establishing the contacts and rapport with the Shompens during explorations organized occasionally and moreover the gift articles were generally restricted to the items of beads, cloth, machete, etc. and as such this practice had no adverse bearing on their self contained economy. However, the gift economy introduced very recently includes the practice of giving away such articles as rice, pulses, edible oil, spices, cloth and machetes on regular basis (Chaudhari, 2005: 531-537).

The gift economy would be ‘slow poison’ for the shompens, observes Chaudhari. The food items supplied are new to them and long term effects of their consumptions are not known. The free distribution of ration will render the Shompens finally dependent on such charity and weaning them from their characteristic independent existence. Therefore it would be wise to stop the free distribution of ration to the Shompens in the initial stage itself. And moreover the gift economy is not self-sustained and hence not a viable system (Current Science, 2010: 907).

5.6 POLITICO-CULTURAL ORGANIZATIONS AND EDUCATION

Political Organization

The Shompens have no idea of government. In each band of mawa and hostile Shompens, there is a recognized head, who attains his position by willing consent of others on account of some admitted superiority – material, physical or knowledge. He grows to this position gradually and there is no election or any other formality for this purpose. He has a great experience and is well acquainted with the forest. He has certain privileges
in terms of tribal influence and immunity from drudgery. His wife also commands the same position among the women. Each subgroup possesses a stretch of territory for hunting ground with definite recognized boundaries. Any intrusion to this hunting ground is regarded as sufficient occasion for outbreak of inter subgroup warfare, even if they are related by marriage (Das, 1991).

**Religious Beliefs**

The Shompens believe in good and evil spirits. They perform magical rites, the details of which they do not generally disclose to others. When they plan to go for hunting and for fishing to distant places, they worship a particular type of tree to avoid danger. Before the burial of the dead also they do certain kind of rituals (Pandey, 1997).

**Position of women**

On the Nicobar Islands, men and women have approximate equal status. The women have a lot to do with their own choice of husbands, and after marriage they are free to live with either of the couple’s parents. The Shompen men value the women economically because they not only take care of household duties, but also tend to the piggeries and gardens (http://www.mnsu.edu/emuseum/cultural/oldworld/asia/nicobaresc.html).

**Their Place in Indian Constitution**

According to Ministry of Tribal Affairs (2009), the following safeguards, either in the form of legislation or executive orders, are available to the Shompen living in the Great Nicobar Island:

1) Andaman and Nicobar Islands (Protection of Aboriginal Tribes) Regulation, 1956.
2) Area reservation prohibiting only authorized persons to enter.
3) Ban on transfer of tribal land to non-tribals without the prior sanction of the Union Territory Administrator.

**Education**

In 1984, Andaman Administration made a Shompen complex which consisted of a school, a medical dispensary and a community hut. But the result was still disheartening. Rizvi observed that an Ashram type school for the Shompens was started by the Andaman Administration in the Shompen Hut Complex but till May 1987 there were neither Shompen enrolled in the school nor was there a teacher posted there (Rizvi, 1990). Twenty years have gone by ever since that observation of Dr Rizvi and there are many changes now in the infrastructure. However, only the coming years will show how much progress the Shompens will make in education and other areas of development (Planning Commission, 2008: 102-103).

**Check Your Progress III**

Note: Use the space provided for your answers.

1. What have you learnt about the economic, social, political, and cultural life of the Shompens?

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5.7 LET US SUM UP

Shompens are classified as a Primitive Tribal Group, but unlike the other primitive tribes of the Andaman Islands, are not of negrito but of mongoloid stock. They are skilled hunter-gatherers, but also raise plantations of various crops. The Shompen, live on wild animals, fruit, tubers, fish and honey, and are now being given rice and biscuits and alien food products. They are also being given clothes. The biggest threats to the Shompens are the population of outside settlers. The Shompens like many other tribes suffer from various ailments like malaria, microfilaria, elephantiasis and other fatal diseases. Their social organization is based on tradition, kinship and locality. The members of a band are related to one another through blood or marriage. There are no classes among the Shompen who are divided into small groups of men, women and children. The family is the most important social unit in Shompen society. The husband-wife relationship among the Shompen is very informal. There are two sub-divisions in the Shompen community: the hostile Shompens and the Mawa Shompens.

Among the Shompen monogamy is the common form of marriage, but a few cases of polygamy has been also reported and is socially sanctioned. They are endogamous and inter-ethnic marriages are usually not contracted. There are different ways of acquiring mates. There are birth rituals among the Shompens. They consider the period of menstruation and childbirth as unclean. The Shompens are organized under a recognized head. They believe in good and evil spirits. They perform magical rites. Before every hunting and fishing venture, they have a ritual for their protection and success. Men and women have relatively equal status among the Shompens. There are legislations to safeguard them and for their development, but the results has not been very encouraging.

5.8 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES


Census 2001, Government of India.


http://www.mnsu.edu/emuseum/cultural/oldworld/asia/nicobarese.html


**Ministry of Tribal Affairs. 2009. Draft Policy for Shom Pen PTG of AN Island, No. 17014/5/08-C&LM-II (Part), Government of India.**


RESEARCH COMMUNICATIONS CURRENT SCIENCE (RCCS), VOL. 93, NO. 11, 10 DECEMBER 2007.
