
UNIT 4 SENTINELESE OF SENTINEL ISLAND

Structure

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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. Their 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?

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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. Their 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 molluscs, 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 spaciouly 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 5400mm. 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 is highly combustible. 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 Sentinelese 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.

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