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Leave Them Alone: On The Sentinelese

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(The editorial is based on the article “Leave them alone: on the Sentinelese” which appears in The Hindu for 26th November 2018.)

In context please refer: [US Citizen killed by Tribals in Andaman](#)

The death of a young American man at the hands of the tribes of North Sentinel Island in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands has led to dangerous lines of debate. **Some have called for the Sentinelese to be convicted and punished and others have urged that they are integrated into modern society.** But both of these debates can only result in the extinction of these unique people.

Background

- **The Sentinelese, a negrito tribe** that lives on the North Sentinel Island of the Andamans, **remains hostile to outsiders.**
- Based on **carbon dating by the Anthropological Survey of India**, Sentinelese presence **was confirmed in the islands to 2,000 years ago.**
- The Sentinelese have been fiercely hostile to outside contact. **But in 1991 they accepted some coconuts from a team of Indian anthropologists and administrators.**
- Some researchers argue that the Sentinelese have been mostly left alone even from colonial times, unlike other tribes such as the **Onges, Jarawas and Great Andamanese, because the land the Sentinelese occupy has little commercial attraction.**

How Sentinelese are Protected?

- The Govt. of India issued the **Andaman and Nicobar Islands (Protection of Aboriginal Tribes) Regulation, 1956** to declare the traditional areas occupied by the tribes as reserves, and prohibited entry of all persons except those with authorisation.

- Photographing or filming the tribe members is also an offence. The rules were amended later to enhance penalties. **But restricted area permits were relaxed for some islands recently.**

Why No One is Allowed To Enter?

- No one - whether missionary, scholar, adventurer is allowed to venture near North Sentinel Island without permission.
- **Permission is granted only in the rarest of circumstances** and with meticulous precautions in place to ensure that the Sentinelese are not disturbed.
- Having lived in isolation on an island in the Bay of Bengal for thousands of years, the **Sentinelese have no immunity or resistance to even the commonest of infections.**
- A large chunk of the population of the 10 Great Andamanese tribes was wiped out after the indigenous peoples caught syphilis, measles, and influenza on an epidemic scale following contact with the early settlers.

Tribal Rights in India

The Indian Constitution, the Provisions of the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996 or PESA, and the Panchsheel Principles of India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, all guarantee protection to indigenous people.

Jawaharlal Nehru formulated the following five principles for the policy to be pursued vis-a-vis the tribals also known as Tribal Panchsheel:

- People should develop along the lines of their own genius, and the imposition of alien values should be avoided.
- Tribal rights in land and forest should be respected.
- Teams of tribals should be trained in the work of administration and development.
- Tribal areas should not be over-administered or overwhelmed with a multiplicity of schemes.
- Results should be judged not by statistics or the amount of money spent, but by the human character that is evolved.
- North Sentinel Island and its buffer zone are strictly restricted under the Protection of Aboriginal Tribes (Regulation), 1956 and Regulations under Indian Forest Act, 1927.
- The Indian Constitution protects tribal interests, especially tribal autonomy and their rights over land, through the Fifth and Sixth Schedules.

- **In India, most of the tribes are collectively identified under Article 342 (1&2) as “Scheduled Tribes”** and their right to self-determination is guaranteed by Part X: The Scheduled and Tribal Areas – Article 244: Administration of Scheduled Areas and Tribal Areas.
- India is a signatory to **International Labour Organisation Convention on Indigenous and Tribal Populations** and voted in favour of **The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP)**, but has adamantly insisted that its own indigenous peoples cannot claim status or protection under these laws.

Why They Should be Contacted?

- The Sentinelese are perhaps the **most reclusive community in the world today**. Their language is so far understood by no other group and they have traditionally guarded their island fiercely, attacking most intruders with spears and arrow. **If they are left uncontacted, there is fear of their losing unique culture, language and ways of life.**
- At the heart of the issue is the survival of the Sentinelese. **According to the 2011 Census, their population was just 15. So, there is also a fear of their extinction.**
- Tribal Below Poverty Line rate is twice the national average. **They are far behind in education and malnutrition is highly prevalent.** Although in the past 10-12 years, PESA and the Forest Rights Act have made a difference but tribals are largely not aware of their rights. They continue to remain marginalized in Indian society.

Is It Ethical to Leave Uncontacted Tribes Alone?

- **They are also human beings, they don’t just exist to be left mostly in ignorance of the rest of the world. They at the least need to be aware of the outside world.**
- Tribes living in isolation, have chosen to do so for a variety of reasons, some of which we know and others we do not, and they should be the ones to choose when and if that isolation ends.
- History has taught that when outsiders - and their food, textiles, commodities, and germs – are introduced into indigenous communities that have not built up immunities to foreign life, whole societies have been wiped out.
- While a state certainly has a duty to advance its citizens’ human condition. Alternate methods of improving the human condition without disturbing their ingeniousness should be developed.
- **Lastly, since indigenous people have the right to determine their own futures and associated needs, then, therefore, they have the freedom to decide their own future.**

Way Forward

- **These tribes provide an occasion for the country to embrace its human heritage in all its diversity and to empathetically try to see the world from the eyes of its most vulnerable inhabitants.**
- Tribes like the Sentinelese face catastrophe unless their land is protected. **The recent tragedy acts as a wake-up call to the Indian government to avert another disaster** and properly protect the lands of both the Sentinelese, and the other Andaman tribes, from further invaders. Indian government should, therefore, enforce the protection of the Sentinelese and their island for the safety of both the tribe and outsiders.
- **Governments in post-Independent India have made the mistake of painting every tribe with the same brush.** Each tribe has a different typology and character and has to be treated differently. The condition of indigenous people in Central India is very different from that in the Northeast and the Andamans.
- **So, different policies should be tailored to suit the requirements of different tribes to achieve the dream of inclusiveness. Currently, there is a one-size-fits-all policy.**

Adverse effects of a one-size-fits-all policy

- Due to official policy, in a hospital for the Onge, milk powder had been given to them, which they were not able to digest.
- In another case, a Jarawa boy who was sent to a local school by his parents was sent back by the school authorities, who said they could not even touch him since official policy stated that he had to be left alone.
- Obesity and a sedentary lifestyle have also set in among them. Some tribes have even taken up smoking and drinking.

These are the flaws we must address and for that scientific evaluations (for development) should be done for each tribe separately before proposing any policy.

Tribes	Population
Sentinelese	15
Andamanese, Chariar, Chari, Kora, Tabo, Bo, Yere, Kede, Bea, Balawa, Bojigiyad, Juwai, Kol	44
Onges	101

Shompens	229
Jarawas	380
Nicobarese	27,168

Source PIB