



Lessons from a tragedy

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Lessons from a tragedy-The indigenous communities and settlers in the Andaman & Nicobar Islands must be equal stakeholders in a common future

- The tragic death of a young American adventurer in the protected “tribal reserve” of North Sentinel Island in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands archipelago has triggered global media interest in the region once again.
- Much of the debates on the alleged killing of John Allen Chau by “hostile” islanders remains focused on the intent, circumstances and tragic upshot of his misadventure, while others raise larger and more disturbing questions about the North Sentinel tribal community at large and the efficacy of the Indian government’s tribal welfare policies.

Understanding ‘hostility’

- What is of greater significance is the commentary on the “hostility” of the Sentinel islanders and the many experiences of heroic “contact” by visiting anthropologists and government officials.
- The broader media interest is in the peculiar and almost brutal hostility displayed by the Sentinel islanders towards the outsider.
- Some see it as signs of a pathological “primitivity” and the result of “complete isolation” from “civilisation” while others interpret it as an effect of the historical memory of colonial brutality.
- Given the fact that we do not know their language nor have had any opportunity to understand their varied gestures of hostility, it’s hard to come to any definitive answer.
- But it is the question of “isolation” that demands more critical attention.
- We are not entirely sure if it can be established that the Sentinelese, or the “Sentinel Jarawas” as they were classified in colonial records, were or are completely isolated.
- Both colonial records and Census reports up to 1931 reveal that officials did set foot on the islands and were able to walk through it to collect

information.

- The Government of India's own official "contact" photographs from the 1970s onwards reveal interesting signs that question the "complete isolation" thesis.
- If we carefully analyse this visual record, we can see how the shape of Sentinelese outrigger canoes has changed and how they continue to use large quantities of iron to make adze blades and arrowheads.
- We also notice small glass bead necklaces around their necks.
- Where are these glass beads, trinkets, large tarpaulin sheets and ready supplies of iron coming from?
- Out of the Anthropological Survey of India's recorded 26 visits to the islands, it is stated that seven were met with overt hostility.
- In other words, the argument that the hostility of the Sentinelese is chronic or pathological needs to be seen in perspective.
- Evidently the Sentinel Islanders decide what kind of visitations pose a threat to their survival or dignity and what are "safe" or "useful".
- Their hostility towards the outsider is then to be regarded as "strategic" and deliberate and therefore key to their survival.
- Some have asked why the Indian state cannot devise a method by which the Sentinelese could be "pacified" and brought under the welfare net.
- Tribal welfare policy in the islands remains committed to protection and clearly "pacification" via coercion is no option.
- The policy today is to ensure "protection" but also to accept their right to self-determination.

Nuancing 'protection'

- Policies where the of "protection" demand strong surveillance infrastructures, empowered staff, coordination among police, forest and welfare agencies and, more importantly, investment in projects of sensitisation.
- The settler population on the islands clearly remains conflicted.
- Apart from a small segment of progressive citizens, there are clear marks of stress in settler-indigene relations on the islands.
- What aggravates such tensions are the skewed developmental priorities that mainland India imposes on these islands.

Looking ahead

- We hope that we will be able to draw a few lessons from the unfortunate death of John Allen Chau and question the ways in which mainland India

views the islands from its distant perch in New Delhi.

- We can only hope that the Prime Minister's forthcoming visit to the Andaman and Nicobar Islands and the announcement of new projects for "holistic" development take a context-sensitive "island view" of development and recognise settlers and PVTGs as equal stakeholders in a common sustainable future.

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