

Enumeration of Primitive Tribes in A&N Islands – A Challenge

Census operation in the remote and far-flung Union Territory of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands had been a tough but fascinating exercise down the corridor of time. Barring Narcondam Island the archipelago forms an arch with a parallelogram located between 6 and 14 degrees of the north latitude and 92 and 94 degrees of east longitude. This is the homeland of six tribal groups, inhabiting for thousands of years in the verdant tropical rain forests.

Those living in the Andaman Islands are short in stature, dark skin colour with peppercorn hair and identify themselves as negrito (a sub-group of negriod people). They are Great Andamanese, the Onges, the Jarawas and the Sentinelese. They are however, quite distinct from the African Tribes. Each of this tribe has a different dialect and conventional territory division. However, when these tribes did come to the islands, in general or how other Negrito tribes populated the Andamans in particular, cannot be said with certainty due to the absence of conclusive paleontological evidences. In spite of their close proximity to certain foreign countries and lying close to the main commercial routes in the Bay of Bengal, their continuing primitive ways of life remains a riddle. In the absence of authentic details about some of them they remained an enigma to the mainlanders.

On the other hand, the Nicobar group of Islands is inhabited by the mongoloid group of tribes such as the Nicobarese and the Shom Pens having yellowish brown complexion, flat nose, broad lips with epicanthic fold in eyes and straight type of hair. It is indubitably true that for centuries they had remained isolated from other cultural influence and had in the process acquired an absolutely distinct identity. Nicobarese are the only aboriginals in these islands who continue to sustain themselves with vigor and vitality and have been flourishing as a vibrant ethnic group.

Because of their exclusiveness, they remained out of reach for years in matters social, educational and economics. They were for the first time specially mentioned as 'backward tribes' in the Government of India Act 1935. On that basis, the Constitution of India provided for their statutory recognition. Like in many other case in India the Census was one of the earliest to document them from as early as 1901 Census. In a pioneering attempt Sir Richard C. Temple, first Census Superintendent of this territory gave a detailed account of the ethnographic, anthropological, demographic, social and cultural aspects of the lives of the various primitive tribes found in these islands in the Census Report of 1901. The census report of 1931 by Mr. Bonnington also gave an account of the tribals of these islands. Dr. Hutton, the Census Commissioner of India in 1931 listed these primitive tribes in the 1931 Census Report.

The count of tribal groups of A & N Islands is however, debatable since cent per cent enumeration in the true sense of them was not possible but their numbers were estimated. In few cases, only headcount was possible for many years. However, all these tribes were variedly estimated between 8000 and 5000 around 1780s when the British first attempted to colonize these islands. As a result of contact with the advanced and civilized people, these tribes started dwindling very fast due to killing by the colonizers coupled with diseases and dissipation which resulted from such contacts.

Till the 1961 Census, enumeration of the Andamanese of the Andaman group and the Nicobareses of Nicobar group of islands was made only. At the 1961 census, the Shom Pens of Great Nicobar and the Onges of Little Andaman were also enumerated for the first time. At the 1981 Census, 31 Jarawas were enumerated for the first time during the contact tour, though their population was estimated to be 200 persons.

Great Andamanese

Among the four tribes of Andaman Islands, the Andamanese paid the heaviest toll of their lives on account of their contact with the early settlers of these islands. In 1858, their number was conservatively estimated near about 3500. In 1901 their strength depleted to 625. In 1971 they were found to be only 24 in all. Their numbers have increased steadily to 26 during 1981 and 1991 and during 2001 Census, 43 Andamanese were enumerated who have largely been concentrated in Strait Island now.

Onges

The term Onge means man. They are presently concentrated in settlement namely the Dugong Creek in the Little Andaman Island. The Onge, Jarawa and Sentinelese are said to have been one tribe originally. The natives of Little Andaman were reported to be hostile.

The Onges also suffered grievously at the hands of the colonisers and early settlers. In 1901 their number was estimated at 672 and in 1961 Census 129 of them were counted. In 1971 their count was 112, while in 1981 it further reduced to 97. In 1991 their count increased to 101, but, in 2001 it again fell to 96.

Jarawa

In the Aka-bea dialect the, Jarawa means "the other people" or "strangers", a term which is believed to have been given to them by the Great Andamanese. But, the Jarawa call them Ang. They are believed to be "descendants of emigrants who at some 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 Jarawa now confined themselves to the forested areas along the west coast of South and Middle Andamans, which is known as the "Jarawa Reserve".

Jarawas were the earliest to be contacted by the colonizers and were reportedly the worst hit during the Japanese occupation as the Japanese bombed the Jarawa territory in their effort to drive away the British, since they considered the Jarawa area to be a hiding place for the British army. Any Census of this tribe was impossible till 1981, but, even an estimate of the strength of Jarawas in these circumstances had been baffling the authorities all along as their numbers were swinging wildly between 1951 till 1991. During Census 1991, 89 Jarawas were enumerated in a joint expedition.

In August 1998 the Jarawas were reported to have suddenly become extra-friendly and established contact with the people of islands. It was therefore possible to enumerate the Jarawas during Census 2001, but, since, this nomadic tribe does not stay at one place and goes on shifting its huts depending upon the availability of food and water, there was every possibility of enumerating same Jarawa in different place. To avoid this duplication problem, help of photography of each Jarawa was also taken. During Census 2001, the enumeration of Jarawas was done through interview and observation method. In all, 241 Jarawas were counted during Census 2001.

Sentinelese

The term Sentinelese is derived from the name of the island they inhabit, viz. North Sentinel, which is located at a distance of 102 kms from Port Blair. The Sentinelese are believed to be an off-shoot of the Onge - Jarawa tribe but because they have remained isolated from other tribes for years, they have grown up as a distinct ethnic group.

Any sort of Census of the Sentinelese was impossible till 1991 Census and only estimate of their population could be made. From 1901 to 1921 they were estimated to be 117. In 1931 their numbers was estimated to be 50 only and this figure was adopted for 1961 Census also.

During Census 1991 their head count was 23. During Census 2001, the joint expedition was conducted during 23rd - 24th February, 2001 in two batches. The first batch could identify 31 Sentinelese. The second batch could count altogether 39 Sentinelese consisting of male and females adults, children and infants.

During both the contacts the enumeration team tried to communicate with them through some Jarawa words and gestures, but, Sentinelese could not understand those verbal words.

Nicobarese

This is a generic category for those tribal people, who inhabit the Nicobar group of islands. These people describe themselves in discreet terms, like Tari (native of Car Nicobar) and Som Bai (inhabitant of Chowra), The Nicobarese alone have had a natural growth of population and have made headway on the road to civilization.

The Nicobarese have been enumerated since long and have shown steady growth and they were enumerated to be 28,653 at Census 2001 with a healthy sex ratio (956).

Shom Pens

The Shom Pen is mongoloid hunting-gatherer community of the Great Nicobar Islands in Andaman and Nicobar Islands. Owing to thick hilly forest cover in the area, their settlements are not easily approachable.

Though, the Shom Pens were enumerated since 1961, it was a challenge to ensure complete coverage of this hunting-gatherer community. Hence, during 1971 Census the enumeration was supplemented with photo census, which was fruitful in some sense in giving better estimates.

Except at Census 1981, when their number was reported to have declined to 131 as compared to 223 in Census 1971, the Shom Pens population has increased to 398 in 2001 as compared to 71 in 1961.

The enumeration of Shom Pens is done through interview and observation method. Questions related to the household schedules viz. name of head and household members, relationship, marital status etc. were recorded as stated by the respondents and the information was also verified from official records available with the Administration.

(Based on inputs from the Director of Census Operations, A& N Islands in 2010)

Note: This article may be reproduced in part or in full. No copyright is applicable.