



Troubled Islands: Writings on the Indigenous Peoples and Environment of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands.

Pankaj Sekhsaria. Kalpavriksh, Apt. 5, Sri Dutta Krupa, 908 Deccan Gymkhana, Pune 411 004 and LEAD-India, 66, Hemkunt Colony, Near Nehra Place, New Delhi 110 048. 2003. Second Reprint, June 2007. 89 pp. Price: Rs 120/US\$ 10.

This book is a collection of articles written by Pankaj Sekhsaria, an environmental activist who has travelled widely in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. The articles cover three broad themes – the impacts that ‘modern civilization’ has had on the indigenous tribals of the Andaman Islands, the controversies surrounding logging in the islands, and the major ecological problems that they face today.

While the book was originally published seven years ago, the messages it carries are still relevant today. Many of the predictions made in it have come to pass, and it provides a baseline to measure Government action on these issues over the last few years: though perhaps ‘inaction’ may be a more appropriate word under the circumstances.

The alienation of the indigenous people of the islands began with the British presence there. The initial attempt to settle in the islands, in the late 18th century, failed because of disease. In the mid-19th century, it was decided to establish a penal colony there. The later Indian claim to the islands arose from the fact that freedom-fighters against the Raj had been incarcerated there, and that the Indian flag was raised for the first time there – even if it is conveniently forgotten that this was done under a Japanese

regime still remembered for its brutality. Even the name ‘Andaman’ is now explained as a variation of ‘Hanuman’. That Arab geographers of the ninth century, possibly Ptolemy, as well as Marco Polo (who called them ‘Angamanain’) had described them earlier, does not fit into this narration.

The tribal situation in the Andamans took an odd turn in 1997, when the Jarawa tribesmen decided to turn ‘friendly’. Prior to this, they attacked any outsider they saw. Mothers used to frighten their children to good behaviour with the threat of calling Jarawas. When we drove along the Andaman Trunk Road, we were told to roll up the windows, to escape from the arrows that might be shot at us. The Jarawa Reserve, an area of over 700 sq. km (now increased) that had been designated exclusively for the Jarawa, remained relatively free of disturbance since people were generally scared to enter it, though armed poachers were occasionally reported to have killed the Jarawas and destroyed their camps.

Sekhsaria describes the start of this process of ‘becoming civilized’, and expresses his apprehensions as to the likely consequences: encroachments, disease and proud tribals being reduced to begging along the road. After all, we have seen it happen with the Great Andamanese tribes: nine out of 12 are extinct, with the remainder of around 25 individuals from three tribes being ‘resettled’ on the Strait Island and dependent on Government doles. It also happened with the Onge of Little Andaman: around 700 in 1900, the number has dwindled to 100 now, with large chunks of their territory being used to resettle people from mainland India, and to farm oil palm.

India has perhaps among the most progressive laws in the world for the protection for indigenous people. They fail totally in the execution here. I see two possible reasons for this. One is the mindset of the bureaucrats. The tribal cannot possibly be happy living in the forest. He has to be taught how to wear clothes, live in houses and eat ‘our’ food. That this has always resulted in the decimation of such populations is, well, regrettable, but surely it has nothing to do with the policies (whose failure, incidentally, was documented as early as 1899)! Secondly, at the ground level, the employees of the Tribal Welfare Department tend to be social workers, with service to poor people dinned into them.

Food handouts are seen as being totally normal and in the spirit of social service. Employing anthropologists would definitely be more appropriate.

On the other hand are forces that are slightly more sinister. These see the land of the Jarawa Reserve as ripe for timber extraction and agriculture, to feed the new settlers flooding into the islands, and incidentally to create a vote bank for the politicians who aspire to be in Delhi. Civilizing the tribal is a constant refrain in their speeches. These are also peppered with demands for a better road, a railway line. Have you heard of something called the sea? Have you heard of water transport? The best argument I have heard in favour of land transport is that people might get seasick!

The above also touches on the issue of logging, which has got enmeshed with the fate of the tribals. In 2003, the Supreme Court, acting on a public interest litigation, appointed a one-man Commission (Shekar Singh) to go into the issues raised by the litigation. Based on the Commission’s report, it passed a judgement stating that timber could only be cut for local use. It also endorsed the Shekar Singh Commission’s suggestion to have the road through the Jarawa Reserve shut down. Another ruling was that all encroachers of forest land post-1978 have to be evicted.

Sekhsaria, who was party to the case leading to the judgement, is happy about all this, and hopes that a new chapter in



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governance will be opened based on sustainability. Several years down the line, reality has hit us. Not only has the road through Jarawa Reserve also been shut down, there are demands to widen it. This has led to the development of a new activity called 'Jarawa tourism', where literally hundreds of tourists drive through the Reserve each day, paying exorbitant prices, ostensibly to see mud volcanoes, but actually in the hope of seeing a Jarawa (and may be feed him biscuits if there are no police in the vicinity). The encroachers are back in many places. The ban on export of timber remains, but this was conveniently interpreted as a ban on felling after the tsunami, to justify developing and building obscene structures with expensive materials brought in from outside as 'tsunami rehabilitation'. It did not matter that the recipients (in this case the Nicobari community) were not consulted; they do not approve of these structures.

Finally, the book deals with a myriad of environmental problems on the islands. One of the more obvious problems is the impact on beaches, of sand 'mining' for construction. Although this purports to have a scientific base, in reality the beaches disappear after a while. The consequences for tourism are obvious – who will go there when the beaches are gone? The irony is that the sand that was used to build the tourist resorts depleted the same beaches.

Less obvious are the impacts on the sea turtles. Four species nest there. Galathea beach in Great Nicobar is one of the most important sites worldwide for the leatherback turtle, a behemoth of the sea. Apart from the reduction in beaches to nest on, they have to put up with lights that deter them, feral dogs that eat them and also with human predators.

Feral dogs are just one of the species of animals that have been introduced to the islands and then become invasive. Others include chital, which seriously

hamper rainforest regeneration, and several species of birds.

From the environmental viewpoint, a roadmap was prepared in the early 2000s – the National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan for the Andamans (as it was for the whole country). It was approved at the local level. However, it was never implemented.

For the more legally minded, the book has as annexures, the entire text of the Shkhar Singh Commission Report, and the Supreme Court judgement based on it. The book is a quick read. Anybody going to the islands and is interested seeing beyond the tourist merry-go-round, should get a copy of this book.

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