

TRIBES OF ANDAMAN AND NICOBAR: POLICY PERSPECTIVES

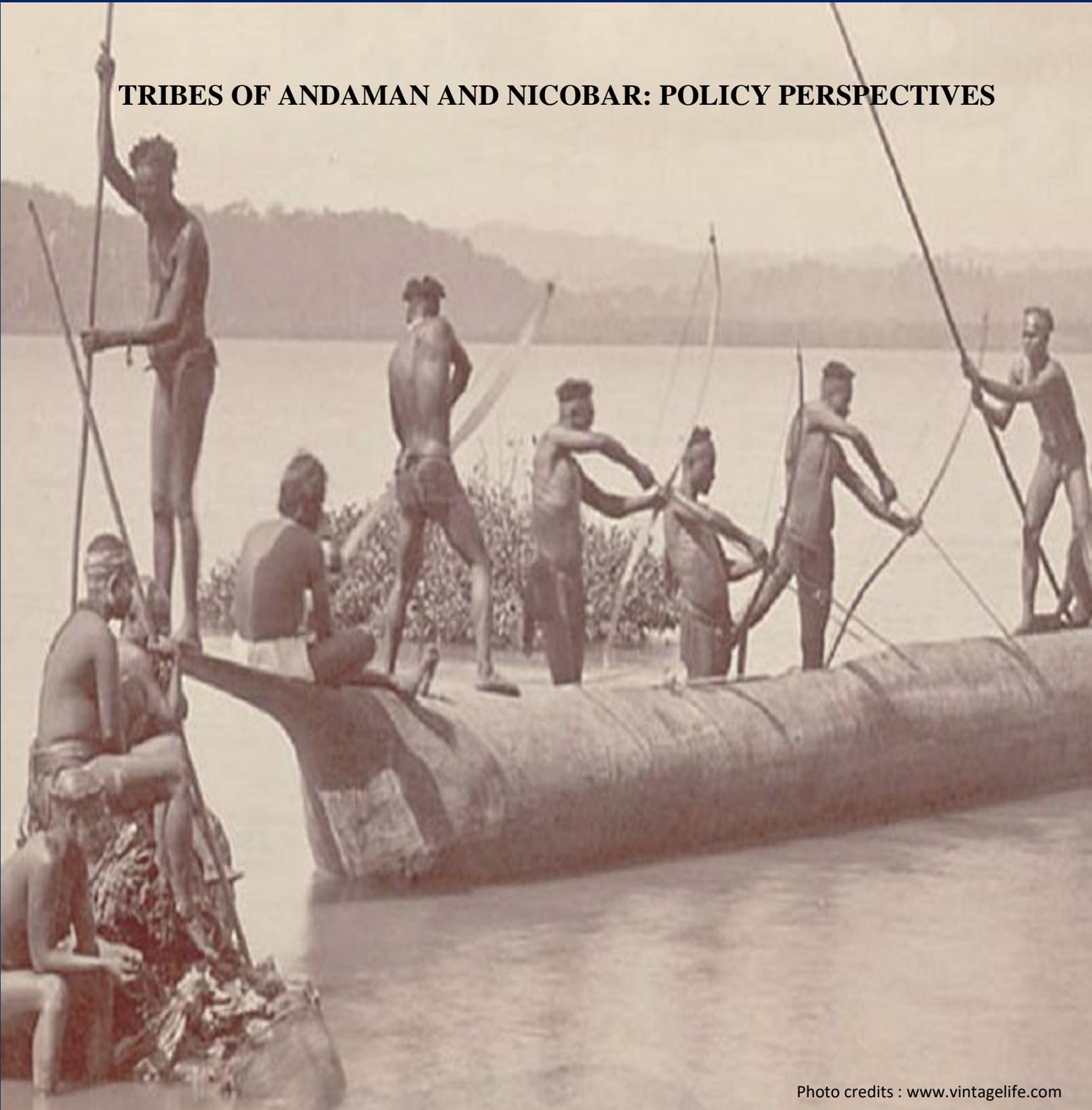


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Introduction

Tribal groups fall under the most marginalised and disadvantaged groups in India. The tribal communities by and large are forest dwellers or live close to forests as they derive their food and livelihood from the forest. While many tribals have migrated to cities or even the nearest rural areas in search of livelihood, some continue to inhabit their traditional dwelling place. Some of these forest dependent tribal groups do not practice agriculture and are mainly hunting and gathering tribes. As a result they may be completely isolated from the other communities. These groups have been termed as Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTG) in India in order to give them additional and specialised attention. The other characteristics of these groups are stagnant or diminishing population and low literacy rates. There are around 75 PVTGs in India over 18 states and the Union territory of Andaman and Nicobar. Separate policies have been made for the PVTGs in India but they have not had much of an impact on the lives of the PVTGs.

While the PVTGs are spread over several states in India, the ones in Andaman and Nicobar islands have been a subject of interest for social scientists and dilemma for administrators due to their isolation and cultural variation. Andaman and Nicobar Islands host six tribal groups, out of which 5 are in the PVTG category. Archeologists state that the tribes living in Andaman and Nicobar Islands from more than 2000 years ago are the Nicobarese, Great Andamanese, Jarawas, Sentinelese, Shompen and Onge. The population of the Nicobarese is around 27000 and they are seen as active participants in many sectors of the economy and administration. Hence they are not included in the category of PVTG. Nicobarese have also settled in

the cities and have a higher literacy rate than the other tribes of the Island. Scholars argue that the reason of the development of Nicobarese is the intervention of Christian missionaries whereas the other tribes have totally remained outside the missionaries' influence area.

The PVTGs of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands are currently facing a number of challenges and the administration has failed to issue immediate corrective measures. On one hand, natural calamities have destroyed their habitat and also claimed lives and on the other hand unprecedented health hazards have been offset due to contact with non-tribals causing deaths in large scale. The tribal habitat is usually rich in natural resources and hence has been subject to colonization, rehabilitation and encroachments. The core debate has been on the mainstreaming of tribals versus preservation of tribal way of life. Many scholars argue that in our zest to teach skills and provide employment we might totally change the culture of the tribal group. Others in favour of mainstreaming argue that since several of these tribes is already diminishing in population, isolation will eventually wipe them out. Also several tribal groups are facing starvation and health and hygiene issues which need to be addressed. There are strong opinions on both sides of the debate and there has been no unanimous decision on this. The answer to this is probably to tread a middle path through which tribal groups are able to continue with their life –livelihood, culture, and geographical location along, with government's assistance in ensuring that the tribes do not face exploitation and shortage of food, and are given due medical attention. The government needs to set new and effective ways to preserve and develop the tribal groups.

PVTGs in Andaman and Nicobar Islands

The tribal groups of Andaman and Nicobar Island can be divided as descendents of two races. The Shompen and Nicobarese belong to the Mongoloid race whereas Great Andamanese, Jarawa, Onge and Sentinelese belong to Negrito race.

The Great Andamanese:

Great Andamanese were the largest among the tribal groups of the Andaman Nicobar with a population of more than 10,000 in the beginning of the century. However the number reduced to 19 by 1969; it has increased marginally to 53 as seen in the last census. To preserve the tribe, the administration resettled them in Strait Island in 1969. Previously Great Andamanese was a group of ten distinct tribes each of which had separate languages of their own e.g Jeru, Bea, Bo, Khora and Puckickwar. Most of them are already extinct with the death of last member of Boa in 2010. Andamanese are mostly engaged in hunting and gathering but also consume cooked rice and dal. With the assistance of the government they have recently taken up vegetable cultivation and poultry farming. They are the first group to have contacted with people outside their community. Unfortunately, contact with outsiders has led to some negative outcomes like consumption of alcohol and opium. These were introduced to them for the first time by British along with the spread of communicable disease which had a negative effect on the health of the tribe.

Onge

The Onge tribe lives in the Dugong Creek in Little Andaman Island and call themselves '*En- Eregale*' which means 'perfect man'. They are semi nomadic

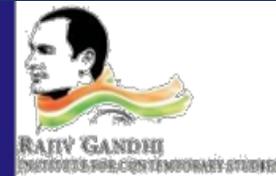


Source: Vekateswar, 1999

and fully dependent on food provided by nature. They avoided contact with the outsiders and reacted violently when a boat and crew first landed in the little Andaman in 1867. However now they have broken away from their isolation and now a lot of government schemes are executed in their habitat area. A primary school, hospital and electric generator have been functioning in the Dugong Creek area. Houses have been built for Onge families though they only use it during heavy rainfall. Little Island of Andaman was slowly populated by settlers like the Nicobarese, and outsiders through the rehabilitation programmes. This rehabilitation is leading to overcrowding and restrictions in the movement of the Onge community.

Jarawa

The Jarawas is another vulnerable group that lives in the Western coast of south and middle Andaman Island. They source food through hunting and



gathering- surviving mostly on pig, turtle and fish in the coral fringed reef. Given their dependency on nature, this group has detailed knowledge of about more than 150 trees and 350 animals. The first friendly contact of Jarawas with outsiders took place after a Jarawa boy 'Enmei' was found injured outside the reserve and was taken to G.B Pant hospital, Port Blair and kept in the hospital for nine months. This incident took place in 1995 and almost after one year, Jarawas were seen outside their habitats without their bows and arrow, giving an impression that they are out to contact and not combat.

The construction of the Andaman trunk road in 1978 through the middle of the Jarawa reserves in the region of Middle straits led to unprepared exposure of the tribe to the outsiders/non-tribals. The trunk road was resisted by the Jarawas and civil society groups. A number of construction labourers were killed and tourist vehicles were often attacked. In 2002 Supreme Court gave a set of orders for preserving the Andaman tribes, one of which was the closure of trunk road. However the road was reopened as it connects 400 villages from Baratang to Diglipur. As a result of the interaction with tourists, now the Jarawas are seen carrying plastic bags asking for food along the road. They have often been spotted wearing colourful clothes and sunglasses. Many Jarawas are also seen to suffer from skin problems due to the use of dirty, unwashed clothes (Pandya, 2002)

Sentinelese

The Sentinelese tribe live in the North Sentinel Islands and are completely isolated from the other communities. They are believed to be the only surviving Paleolithic community (people belonging to the stone age). They have reached the phase of

extinction as their population has reduced to critical low of 15. So far they do not face any major health issue which might be attributed to their non-interaction with the outside world. Their habitat is the North Sentinel Island which was recently excluded from the restricted areas along 28 others. They have been in news in 2016 for killing two fishermen and now for allegedly killing an American tourist who landed on the island. The Sentinelese tribe has responded violently to any presence on their island hence only a limited number of expeditions were done. The expeditions started long back under T.N Pandit and the first friendly contact took place in 1991 with the guidance of Dr Madhumala Chattopadhyay. The team had taken coconuts with them and handed them to Sentinelese people. In the next expeditions done in the same manner under T.N Pandit, Sentinelese were seen coming out of the forest without bows and arrows. The last of these expeditions was in 1994.

Tribes	Region	Activity
Great Andamanese	Strait Island	Hunting and Food Gathering
Onge	Dugong Creek	Hunting and Food Gathering
Jarawas	West Coast of South and Middle Andaman	Hunting and Food Gathering
Sentinelese	North Sentinel Island	Hunting and Food Gathering
Shompen	Great Nicobar	Hunting and Food Gathering

Shompen

The Shompen tribes live in the Nicobar Islands and currently have a population of 229. They can be divided into two groups. Mawa Shompen, who live near to the coastal region and are closely knitted to Nicobarese. The other group of the Shompen tribe live in the Alexandria and Galathia river side. They participated in the electoral process for the first time in 2014 when they voted for the Lok Sabha election for Bay Islands. They have mostly avoided contact with outsiders and appear to be extremely shy. This tribe is not familiar with agriculture and mainly consumes coconut, bananas, pandanus, and

tubers and other fish, pigs and lizards. They are experts in collecting honey, and interestingly store water in bamboo pieces. The Shompens suffer from several health problems and as a result are physically very weak. With the establishment of the settlement at Campbell Bay in Great Nicobar, Shompens have been visiting the settlers and they are gradually shaking off their shyness and indifferent attitude towards outsiders. The population influx in their territory in 1969 and the construction of East West Road in the territory has further been a threat to the tribe.

Major Challenges

Each tribe in the Andaman and Nicobar Island is seen to face different kind of challenges. However there are a few common challenges which are mentioned below.

Health and Population Size: The biggest challenge that the tribal groups of Andaman Island face is decreasing population and health hazards. Currently the Great Andamanese and Sentinelese tribe have a population of 44 and 15 respectively. It is extremely critical that the population of the tribes increase and for this the fertility rate has to go up. But as the tribes have been isolated till now, any attempt to introduce new techniques might backfire. Exposure to the outsiders in the past has proved to be fatal as the tribals are susceptible to all kinds of diseases that they are not immune to. The Great Andamanese tribe has been attacked by deadly sexually transmitted diseases and smack addiction. There are other incidents like the outbreak of measles amongst the Jarawas in

1999, and attack of mumps in 2001 followed by spread of tuberculosis in the later period. Genetic degeneration which is mainly caused by endogamy is also one of the concerns.

Land encroachment and Reserves: The other challenge currently faced by the tribes is the loss of land and habitat to outsiders and many times to Government. Though the 1956 Act had asked for the creation of the reserves for the protection of aboriginal tribes, their formation has only created restrictions for the tribe. The aboriginal tribes like Jarawas were semi nomadic and now have been limited to the reserve. Shompens and Onges used to live all over the Island but now they have been confined to a small zone. This in a way had opened up the other areas for settlers and cultivation. Now outsiders have crowded the region which intimidates the tribal population to come out of their reserve. The commercial use of forest products like timber has also led to the snatching of

resources from the tribal groups. There has been an increase in poaching inside the reserves. The poaching of deer, wild pigs has left the tribal groups insecure about food leading to violent encounters. The settlers have reported that the tribe groups have often raided their houses, killed animals and stolen food. These are consequences of the tribe losing their land and resources to outsiders.

Contact with outsiders: Another important challenge is the dependency on outsiders and the harmful consequences of contact with outsiders and many times to the government. There have been numerous reported incidents of tribal communities being harassed by outsiders. Very often the women of tribal groups have complained about inappropriate touches, and rapes. Under the effect of the alcohol, non-tribal men frequently attempt to enter and stay in the tribal huts. An incident was reported in 2016 where a Jarawa woman gave birth to a baby- evidently not a Jarawa; as evident by the skin colour of the baby. The baby was killed by the group but the incident was a reminder to safeguard the community and provide the women with security. The tourists in the Andaman trunk road often compel the tribe women to entertain them in exchange of food which they have apparently have got used to. The visits of

Shompen members outside the forest have increased the dependency on rice and other market commodities and this may not meet the nutritional requirement of their bodies.

Literacy Rate: The literacy rate among the tribal groups of Andaman and Nicobar is the lowest in India. It is a challenge to provide them with the benefits of the schemes and increase their participation in the plans. The introduction of modern education among the aboriginal tribes seems both difficult and irrelevant as they have their own distinct language and traditional knowledge. A few projects have currently marked the relevance of traditional knowledge in imparting education. A school in Tamil Nadu named as Vidya Vanam caters to the educational needs of the tribal community like the Irula Tribe. The curriculum includes the use traditional language and reference to the objects familiar to the tribal community. In another project a school is set up in the Tiger reserve of Madhya Pradesh for the Baiga and Gond tribe. This institution is using traditional language and tools for learning. As a result the number of students enrolled has increased and learning has fastened. This method could be considered for the tribes of Andaman and Nicobar.

Population change over the century

Tribe	1901	1911	1921	1931	1951	1961	1971	1981	1991	2011
Shompens	348	375	375	200	20	71	92	212	135	229
Onge	672	631	321	250	150	129	112	-	98	101
Great Andamanese	1882	1317	786	460	23	19	24	-	28	44
Nicobarese	5962	7991	8032	9589	11902	13903	17874	-	21172	27168
Jarawa	-	-	114	70	50	500	-	-	200	280

Source: (Chaudhury, 2002)

Government's Approach

The government policies in the past have affected the tribes to a large extent. The British used the isolation of the Island for political reasons. They used the island for the confinement of the prisoners who were convicted for serious crimes as the presence of aboriginal tribes in the island made it difficult for the prisoners to escape. The island was used for settlements and cultivation before and after independence as well. The Government of India made constant efforts to bring population into Andaman and Nicobar Islands to cultivate the lands. The refugees from East Pakistan who were made to settle in the Island were allotted houses and piece of land of land to cultivate.

However seeing the critical condition of the tribes, government of Independent India passed **The Andaman and Nicobar Island (Protection of Aboriginal tribes) in 1956**. This Act had paved way for the formation of tribal reserves for each aboriginal tribe. The Act said that no waste or unoccupied land of the reserve would be given for agricultural purpose unless it is for a member of the aboriginal tribe. The members of the aboriginal tribe cannot sell or exchange land with someone outside the aboriginal tribe. An amendment to this Act in 2012 introduced buffer zones i.e the area adjacent and contiguous to reserve areas, which was to be identified by the administration. The buffer zone was to be kept out of the commercial or tourist establishment. Promoting terrorism using the aboriginal tribes directly or indirectly was prevented by putting restrictions on taking photographs and videos.

Separate acts were passed for the Shompens and Jarawas by the Ministry of Tribal Affairs. **The Policy for Jarawas Tribe** formed in 2004 was set to protect

the Jarawas from exploitation and harmful exposure. It aimed to provide medical help, safeguard ecology, and the sensitization of the settler community. The policy seeks to preserve the Jarawas as unique human heritage. Maximum autonomy was to be provided to the Jarawas to maintain and develop their own traditional and indigenous life. On similar lines the **Policy to Protect the Shompen Tribe**, 2015 recognises the social, ecological and economic diversity among Shompens and aims to eliminate exploitation and dependency on outsiders through phased reduction. Other aims include promoting health and education facilities, ensuring their wellbeing and integrity by developing channels of ways of communication and consultation and participation only based on their willingness. The policy also emphasizes on preservation and protection their cultural heritage including language.

Andaman Adim Janjati Vikas Samiti (AAJVS) was formed as the apex body for the welfare of the tribal development in the Island in 1978. The Samiti consists of experienced administrators and social scientists. It has worked as the middle party for establishing contact between the administration and the tribes. The Samiti has now brought in members of some tribal committee to help them in communicating with other members and other tribes and identifying their issues. Andaman and Nicobar Tribal Research and Training Institute has been established to conduct studies which will help in promoting development of the tribal groups.

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Way Forward

The approach towards the tribes of the Andamans till now has been more bureaucratic and less relevant in terms of social and cultural realities. The administration needs to adopt more informed ways to connect with the tribes. The current gifting approach to contact the tribes has been termed by scholar T.N Pandit as a way to pursue the tribes for accepting the outsiders and moving forward for a co-existence. However a co-existence between two communities cannot be brought by forcing the smaller group to change on the lines of the majority. Many times in the past, any attempt to change the tribes has been proved to be fatal for them. The Great Andamanese and Shompens have seen the rapid fall in their population just after their exposure to the outside world. Considering that Sentinelese already have a low population, utmost care should be taken to not disturb their habitat or expose them to new diseases.

As the tribal groups have different needs and problems, they should be separately studied and separate policies and programmes should be made for each tribe. The Shompens living in the New Chingeh area are facing the scarcity of their traditional food sources where as the rest still have access to traditional resources for food. This kind of assessment is important as only Shompens who are facing the crisis of traditional food should be provided with rice. In the case of Shompens who depend on traditional sources of food, free rice only leads to dependency. As provisioning of free food and articles increases dependency and takes away bargaining power, the tribes should be provided with ways to grow food themselves. As the Shompens originally have been practitioners of

horticulture, land should be allotted to them to cultivate. This will keep them independent and preserve the traditional agricultural system.

The nature and relevance of the projects should be checked periodically. Under the policy of introducing horticulture and agriculture among the Onges, the Onges have now been turned into wage earning labourers. Introduction of poultry farming did not contribute much to the community as Onges have been traditionally ignorant about birds. Another example is the piggery programme which failed as the Onges do not consume meat of this breed or domesticated animals. Though Onges were provided with a school, they are still not able to read the denominations or count their wages.

More studies and research should be done to understand the pattern of behavior of the tribes. The tribes are seen outside their habitats asking for money only in certain time period. Not much information has been gathered about when and why do they make the visits. Studies also need to be conducted on the dietary and nutritional needs of the tribes. Since their bodies are used to a different diet, the government should study the nutritional impact of the food provided to them by outsiders/government.

More sensitive policies should be formed for tribal women. The medical staff should be given proper guidelines about treating tribal women. AAJVS should attempt to bring in more tribal women and train them in basic medicare. The interventions with the tribes should be managed with care and sensitivity through suitably trained personnel. Proper surveillance of the coastal areas should be done so that no trespassers can reach the restricted islands, causing harm to themselves and islanders.

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