

# The Sentinelese of the North Sentinel Island: Concerns and Perceptions

M. Sasikumar\*

**Abstract:** *The Sentinelese is one of the six aboriginal tribal communities of Andaman and Nicobar islands. They live in the North Sentinel Island of the Andaman group of Islands. Perhaps, they are the only truly isolated hunter-gatherers in the world today. Till now, the Sentinelese have maintained their independent existence, repelling all attempts to engage with and contact them. They remained steadfast in opposition to all the efforts of the colonial and post-colonial administration to contain them with the might of their bows and arrows. In that respect the isolation of Sentinelese is unique by itself. In the present paper an attempt has been made to understand the life of the community based on the observation by the author from a distance during his two visits around the island.*

**Keywords:** Sentinelese, North Sentinel Island, Tsunami, circum navigation, forest fire.

## INTRODUCTION

The Sentinelese who live in the Sentinel Island of the Andaman group of Islands in the Bay of Bengal are, perhaps, the only truly isolated hunter-gatherer tribal community in the world today. Most of the other contemporary food gathering people living in isolation are not fully in no-contact situation with the 'other' people living around them but prefer to be remain isolated because of the past atrocities meted out to them by their civilized neighbours. Till today the Sentinelese have maintained their independent existence, repelling all attempts to engage with and contact them. They remained steadfast in opposition to all the efforts of the colonial and post-colonial administration to contain them with the might of their bows and arrows. In that respect the isolation of Sentinelese is unique by itself. Incredibly they also managed to survive the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami which had a devastating effect on the people of Andaman and Nicobar group of Islands.

We do not know what they call themselves. We call them "Sentinelese" because the Island they inhabit is known as the Sentinel island more precisely as North Sentinel and the people living there are therefore called "Sentinelese". We also do not know their perception about the 'others'. The 'others' include

---

\* Address for correspondence: Dr. M. Sasikumar, Deputy Director, Anthropological Survey of India, 27, Jawaharlal Nehru Road, Kolkata- 700016. E-mail: [msasi\\_asi@rediffmail.com](mailto:msasi_asi@rediffmail.com)

different categories of people with whom they might have had occasions of interfaces in the historical past, like the Jarawas, the Great Andamanese and the Onge on one side, and the different sets of people like the poachers, the fishermen, and the 'goodwill mission' people of the colonial and the post-colonial era, on the other. This is to be understood in the context of "ang' vis-a' vis "enen" categorization of Jarawas. For the Jarawas themselves "ang" and the others are seen as "enen". For the so called negrito tribes like the Great Andamanese and the Onge they have a different term "yono".

## THE NORTH SENTINEL ISLAND AND PEOPLE

The North Sentinel Island is located at the south west coast of South Andaman. It situates only about sixty kilometers away from Port Blair, the Head Quarters of Andaman and Nicobar Administration and about thirty six kilometers away from Wandoor, a famous tourism destination in South Andaman. The Island has an area of about sixty sq km. It remains isolated without the presence of any administrative machinery since its inhabitants prefer to avoid social contact with rest of the world. As per the Andaman and Nicobar Protection of Aboriginal Tribes Regulation (ANIPATR), 1956, the Andaman Administration have declared the entire North Sentinel Island as Tribal Reserve. The Andaman and Nicobar Administration has also declared three miles round the island as 'exclusion zone' to protect the inhabitants of the island from poachers and the other encroachers. Air traffic across the island has also been regulated.

The earthquake and the Tsunami of 2004 impacted on the geomorphology of the island by tilting the tectonic plate under the island, lifting it by one to two meters. The coral reefs under the water were exposed as an impact of these natural phenomena and became permanently dry land. The shallow lagoons visible during Pre-Tsunami period near the island vanished and replaced with exposed coral reefs. Because of this the boundaries of the island were extended all around (Justin, 2007:141). Though the landscape of the island has been altered as an impact of tsunami, the people in the island remained safe.

### Contact Expeditions

With the establishment of penal colony in Andaman in 1858, the British Administration in India started efforts to pacify the forest dwelling tribal communities of the island, including the Sentinelese. The tactics adopted by the British was to abduct few tribesmen, bring them to Port Blair and treat them well. After this they were relieved into the forest with a lot of gifts. The British expected that by this friendly gesture they would befriend the hostile tribesmen. They repeated the same gesture till few of them were befriended. Portman, the colonial administrator posted in the Andaman, made first such attempt in 1880 to befriend the Sentinelese. He landed in this Island with his heavily armed party. The tribesmen disappeared in the forest deserting their huts and after several days of halt they could find one old couple who were incapable of hiding in the forest and four young children. Portman brought

all of them to Port Blair. In Port Blair, the old couple died out of disease and the children were released back to Sentinel Island loaded with gifts but never ever seen them by any outsiders again (Portman, 1990: 727). The British administrators who visited the Sentinel island included Homfray (1867), Portman (1880), Rogers (1902) and Bonington (1926) (Pandit, 1990:15).

Once the Andaman and Nicobar groups of islands became a part of the Republic of India, the new Government followed more or less the same policy of British to befriend the still hostile tribes, like Jarawa and Sentinelese, but with a more rational and sympathetic attitude. They were treated with benign neglect till 1967 and friendship mission started from 1974 onwards. During 1970s and 1980s, the Andaman Administration made several attempts to establish friendship relations with them by sending goodwill missions which a section of the media and international NGOs termed “picnic trips” (Pandit, 1990). The first visit to the island after India became independent was in March 1967 by a team, including an anthropologist. Subsequently, several such visits to these people have been arranged by the Administration as a gesture of goodwill in 1970, 1974, 1981, 1982 (five visits), 1983, 1985 (two visits), 1986, 1987 (two visits), 1988 (two visits), 1990, 1991, 1992, 1993, 1994, 2003, 2004 and 2005 (Justin, A 2016:663-666). Till 1994 the contact expeditions undertook regularly and were discontinued after that. Two visits have been made in 2004 and 2005 in order to assess the aftereffect of tsunami on the island and the islanders. The last visit to the island was in 2014 to appraise the impact of a forest fire broken out in the island. The present writer was also a member of the team constituted for this purpose. During the contact expeditions that lasted for about five decades since 1967 there observed rise and falls in their gestures of friendship shown to the contact parties. Even then there was a marked change of attitude since 1988. After 1988 no attempt was found made by them to afflict the contact parties.

### **The Sentinelese**

No one knows for sure the exact number of the people living in the North Sentinel Island and their way of life. Based on the material cultural objects collected during the early years of friendship-making expeditions and the observation made by the contact team from a distance, it is assumed that, they continue to lead a self-contained and foraging way of life. Their number is estimated to be around fifty to one hundred. Extensive land area is required for a foraging community to survive. It has been estimated that one to twelve and half square miles of land area per individual is required, depending up on the resource base of the region, for such communities to survive (Anderson, 2005). On that count the per capita availability of land per Sentinelese is lesser than the estimated minimum since the North Sentinel Island has only sixty sq km land area. In addition the surrounding coastal area of the island also form part of the resource base of the people as they also depend up on the marine resources for livelihood.

Based on the population figure observed during the 2014 circum navigation round the island it can be assumed that the male-female ratio is reasonably balanced and they have a good percentage of children among them. Out of the sixteen people seen on the shore during that visit, six were female, seven male and three children below four years of age. All the adults seen on that particular day appeared to be below the age of forty. It shows that the community is not in any threat of extinction. The higher proportion of young individuals, fertile women and the reasonably balanced sex ratio as per the observed fact on that particular day suggest a progressive trend and possible population expansion. If the assumption is correct there are certain emerging potential risks of food insecurity. The system of social organization and the type of kinship relations existing among them are still unknown. The social group must have been very small divided into three or four bands based on a wide network of kinship and reciprocity considering the area of land under their occupation and the resource base available to them.

It is known that they are using arrows with iron tips but with no clue where from they are getting the iron. We make the wild guess that they tip their arrows with metal salvaged from shipwrecks. But these are hypothetical assumptions and in order to ascertain it we need to know how long the Sentinelese are using implements made of iron. In the recent history of the island, the first ship wreck happened in 1977 and the second in 1981. The cargo ships MV Rusley and MV Primrose ran aground on the North Sentinel Island reefs in 1977 and 1981 respectively. It was on 2nd August 1981 that the ship Primrose was stuck on a submerged coral reef near the island. The remains of these two ships are still visible near to the shore of this island. There is also no clue of whether they have any knowledge of making fire.

The Sentinelese live in small huts which are sometimes visible on the shore without any sides and with a slanted to one side roof covered with leaves erected on four poles. These huts seem to be temporary. The material culture, as far as one could observe during the visit, included spears, adzes, bows and arrows, daggers and baskets. They make and use small single outrigger canoes and propel it with small poles. When the contact team dropped the coconuts in the sea, they floated on the water without reaching to the shore, then two youths dragged a canoe through the sandy channels of the exposed coral reefs and steered to collect the coconuts by picking them with their dagger. These canoes can only be used in shallow water. Both men and women wear bark strings round the loin and wear necklaces and head bands. Men were found keeping the dagger tugged into waist belts.

It is known that they earn their livelihood by hunting and gathering, and by fishing in coastal waters. But there is no clear idea of the flora they collect and the fauna they hunt. No coconut trees are found in the island but they cherish its nuts. When the contact party dropped the coconuts in the water, they showed great interest in collecting them. It is interesting to note that though the soil is suitable for the growth of coconut palms, no coconut trees

are found in the island (Portman, 1990:728). They also eat bananas but it is not known whether banana plants are available in the North Sentinel Island. When bananas were dropped on the shore by the contact parties they were found accepting and relishing them. The earlier contact teams which landed on the island reported that they could find pig skulls in their hamlet. It shows that wild boar is an important source of food for the Sentinelese as it is for the Jarawas. They also depend heavily on sea for their food. Besides the roots and tubers, they also eat honey, turtle, turtle eggs, and different varieties of fish.

### **The Forest Fire and the Aerial Survey in 2014**

In the first week of April 2014, there was a report on the occurrence of wild fire in North Sentinel Island. This was first reported by the fishermen who pass over this island while going for fishing. Thereafter different rumors spread and a section of the media were skeptical of the safety and security of the inhabitants of the North Sentinel island. Quoting the fishermen there also spread the news that the 'chaddahs', that is the burning torch which the Sentinelese keep outside their huts, visible during nights were not seen those days. The Andaman administration then constituted a team to make an Aerial Survey to assess the situation.

A team of Officers from Andaman Adim Janjati Vikas Samithy (AAJVS), Anthropological Survey of India and Forest Department constituted for the purpose made an Aerial Survey of the North Sentinel Island on 8th April 2014 by a special sortie helicopter. Due to the existing Air Travel regulations the helicopter did not cross the island but made the Aerial Survey through the shore. No man was found on the shore of the sea. But traces of some foot paths leading in to the forests could be observed which suggested human presence in the island. Forest fires and smoke were visible at many places but all were near the shore and not in the middle of the island. No traces of huts, which the Sentinelese used to erect suiting to the nomadic life of the tribe, were visible on the sea sides. Even at the spots which were identified by earlier official tour parties in 1980s, like south east near Constance isle, westward of the cliffs, Allan point in south west, etc., such traces of hutments could not be seen. As the party did not cross the island, presence of human habitation in the interior of island could not be seen. Large areas of exposed coral reefs, surfaced as an impact of the tsunami, were found all around but more prominently at the southern, western and eastern sides. The remains of the two ship wrecks were also clearly visible near the island.

### **Circum navigation of 2014**

As the Ariel Survey team could not see any inhabitants, the Administration constituted another team to circum navigate the island. A team of officers constituted for the purpose made a circum Navigation of North Sentinel Island on 18th and 19th of April, 2014. The team started its voyage from Port Blair by around 10.15 PM on 18-04-2014 by M. V. Shompen.

The Ship anchored very close to the North Sentinel Island on 19-04-2014 at 6.15am at the GPS location of N 11°30'07.6" and E 92°19'16.6" on the southern coast between Constance and Jarawa Isles. From this point by a fibre boat the team made several trips round the island. Extreme care was taken not to go very near to the island and intervene in any way in the life of the islanders. The objective of the circum navigation was to assess the situation in the island and to see whether the forest fire disturbed the islanders in any manner. During the first trip two Sentinelese were seen on the shore very near the Jarawa islet. Meanwhile another Sentinelese was sighted near the Constance isle from the ship, equipped with a spear and a basket hanging behind. During the second trip, two Sentinelese were seen at the same spot near the Constance Islet with an adze in their hands, where a Sentinelese was seen from the ship. They were waving their hands with friendly gestures. During the 3<sup>rd</sup> trip to the same spot, two Sentinelese women were seen sitting on a rock with a child and a little far away three men were found standing at waist level of water for collecting the coconuts dropped by the team and keeping the dagger in their bark belt and Adze on their shoulders. The men were wearing shell necklaces and a bark belt above the loin. They were waving their hands with friendly gesture. By appearance their height was closer to 5ft 3inch to 5ft 5 inch. Their skin colour is dark, shining black, teeth in good alignment. Both male and female have no sign of obesity and their muscles were very prominent. Slowly the number of the people increased to around fourteen. Two boys between the ages of 18 to 20 years were found dragging a canoe through the sandy channels of the raised coral reef to the sea and started picking up the coconuts dropped by the team with the help of their dagger. Another two men, aged approximately 30- 32 years, were also there in another single outrigger canoe and they were equipped with spears. Besides them, four adult men were found standing at the sea shore. This time they did not show the friendly gesture, for may be busy collecting the coconuts but did not show any signs of hostility as well. Yet another trip was made but we could not go very near to the shore due to high waves but the number of people on the shore was found more or less same. Altogether sixteen of them were seen during this trip.

At around 3 pm another trip was made to the northern side of the island but could not see any of them. At 5.30 pm the Ship started its return journey for Port Blair by making a round of the island. Now the forest fire was found subdued compared to the earlier visit but smokes were still visible at many places. At 10.45 pm MV Shompen anchored at Port Blair.

## **OBSERVATIONS AND CONCLUSION**

The observation made during this visit, though from a distance, provides some deep insights into the life of these people. The forest fire which occurred in the island did not affect the life of the people in any manner. They are found as agile as earlier. They are found healthy without any sign of obesity. It shows that as of now the people in the island is not suffering from any resource crunch.

The sex-ratio is also found balancing. Almost all of them found on the shore were young below the age of forty. The higher proportion of young individuals, fertile women and the reasonably balanced sex ratio as per the observed facts on that particular day suggest a progressive trend and a possible population expansion. Out of the total sixteen people seen three were children below the age of four. In the material culture of the community we could not find any significant addition. Another important aspect is that the location they have been sighted is more or less the same where the contact teams of 1970s and 1980s seen them, that is, one near the Jarawa islet and the other adjacent to the Constance isle. All the sixteen people seen on that particular day probably may be members of a single band or local group. Since all the people sighted at the shore were young below the age of forty, so it may be assumed that the aged among them might have preferred to remain at the camp itself or might be observing what was happening hiding themselves behind the jungle. Considering the geographical area, there is a probability of existence of three to four such groups. The source of drinking water might be small streams, but no such streams flowing in the sea could be found during the visits. They dig small water holes in dry weather (Portman, 1990:728). There is every chance for scarcity of fresh water in case of prolonged summer and delayed monsoon. There is also probability of landing of poachers and fishermen in the island in times of adverse weather conditions and in search of drinking water. Hence there is a need for assessing the resource base of the island including the source of fresh water making use of modern technologies without affecting the life of the islanders. Constant vigil is required to avert any probability of landing of poachers and others in the island to save them from any adverse effect of contact.

Team members who have visited the north Sentinel island to assess the impact of tsunami on the island and the people in 2005 have raised some serious doubts; how the Sentinelese would negotiate with the raised coastal land and the vanished lagoons in the southern coastal area which is the major source of marine resources for them? The Sentinelese canoes are suitable only for shallow water fishing and sea worthiness of their canoes is feeble. During the present circum navigation we could see the Sentinelese canoeing up to about half a kilometre away from the shore in the open sea. They could adapt themselves to the geo-morphological changes the tsunami has brought to the island.

The Sentinelese though not in a friendship relations with outsiders require protection from poachers and unexpected natural disasters. The contact expeditions which was a regular exercise in 1970s and 1980s have been discontinued as part of a policy decision taken by the Administration. However, in the event of natural calamities the Administration kept a watchful eye on the island. The "hands off" policy of the Administration needs to be re-looked in the context of natural calamities. Constant vigil is required to keep the poachers away from the island.

The present policy of no-deliberate contact and intervene only when threatened by natural calamity is to be continued. State protection may be required in times of natural calamities but they are also entitled to respect and their freedom to change at their own pace as autonomous units with in the overarching framework of a larger society and the nation state. To understand what they want is an issue for in-depth research. Their expectations from the outside world cannot be ascertained except through a long term observations.

The Sentinelese are devoid of many critical problems faced by contemporary foragers, living elsewhere like conflict with their neighbours with shrinking land base, insistence to subordinate themselves to state politics, and the pressure to assimilate with the neighbouring dominant cultures, thanks to the positioning of the community in an isolated island, and the policy decision of the Government not to intervene in the matters of the community. Though they are contemporary to modern society we often designate them as 'primitive' forgetting the fact that the primitiveness is only in terms of livelihood and technology. Even then the modern society is increasingly becoming sensitive and sympathetic to their vulnerability.

## REFERENCES

Anderson, M . Kat. (2005). *Tending the wild: native American knowledge and the management of California's natural resources*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Justin, A. (2007). Post earthquake assessment expedition to North Sentinel Island. In *Tsunami in South Asia*. Kolkata: Anthropological Survey of India.

Justin, A. (2016). The Sentinelese of Andaman and Nicobar Islands. In *The Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups in India*. Kolkata: Anthropological Survey of India

Pandit, T.N. 1990. *The Sentinelese*. Kolkata: Seagull Books.

Portman, M.V 1990. *A history of our relations with the Andamanese*. Vol II (Reprint). New Delhi: Asian Educational Services.