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The Onges like to keep to themselves, and although many of the men speak good Hindi, they prefer not to. They speak it when they have to, such as to request rations. They are very protective of their language, culture and way of life, and are suspicious of outsiders (that is, of Indians). It took me all the time I had to break the ice and get some of them to talk to me.

When they did talk, they seemed resigned to whatever fate holds for them. They had only one complaint: that the children aren't learning anything. They said the teacher (who is not there for two months now) only teaches for half an hour or one hour a day and spends the rest of his time making coconut oil. They asked me to tell the authorities in Port Blair to send them a teacher who will teach. The children had no books or educational supplies that they could use while the teacher is gone.

The adult men could not distinguish a five-rupee note from a ten-rupee note, and did not know that three ten-rupee notes make thirty rupees. I was told that they get cheated when they go to Hut Bay to buy things.

I also felt that the Onge have no interest in the coconut plantation at all, only occasionally using the coconuts as food. This is just as well, because coconuts are very rich in hydrogenated fats and oils. Only the outsiders care about coconuts. It seems to me the Onges would be better off with more forest and less plantation.

If the administration wishes to review its policies towards the Onge, I believe the best persons to consult would be the Onges themselves. They have a fair idea now of what the outside world means to them, and what is required for their survival. They may be persuaded to state their problems and express their opinions if they feel it will make a difference to their lives. If sincerely undertaken, this approach could be more effective, and also more respectful of the Onge's status as human beings, than taking recommendations from observers, however expert. (On the other hand, if no concrete results come out of the venture, the Onge could feel betrayed.)

These impressions are based on only a few days' observation. I intend to go back and learn more.

42/4/54  
WTR