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Jarawas – what lies ahead for them?

Opinions are divided on what the proper approach to deal with Jarawas should be. While Ecologists, conservationists and NGOs like SANE in India and elsewhere seem to support the closure of ATR and total isolation of Jarawas, the ground realities force many like Manoranjan Bhakta ex-Member of Parliament from A&N, to oppose any move to close the ATR. Bhakta who played a crucial role in convincing Prime Minister Indira Gandhi on the necessity of the road, argues that, it was the inability of the A&N administration to preserve the food resources of the Jarawas, that forced them to venture out in the open. Secondly, to ignore the interests of the thousands of non-tribal population living the nearby areas will be difficult for the Administration, as widespread protests are expected in the event of closure of ATR. Presently the ATR is the only route that connects the Northern islands with the rest of the Andamans. Then are several projects, which have been conceived, keeping in view the existence of the ATR. Work on Austin Creek Bridge that will connect Diglipur and Mayabunder, two separate Islands of North Andaman, is near completion. Constructed at a cost of Rs 10 Crores, it is a part of the ambitious project to bring road connectivity among the different islands of North Andaman. Thus in the absence of ATR many projects will receive a severe jolt, as their purposes will remain half served.

A consensus is possible only when the basic problems of the tribals are attended to, is the general perception. The problems, which these tribals are facing, have their origin in the doings of non-tribal settlers of the Andaman Islands. Lack of food resources remains the main problem. Although the Administration says that steps have been taken in this regard which includes afforestation and planting of edible fruit bearing trees in the tribal belt, the claims like these lack conviction and self sufficiency in their own land seems to be miles away for the Jarawas.

Opinions vary when losses to the modern world in the event of disappearance of this race, are estimated. With them may disappear the ancient knowledge of herbs, which have let them survive for thousands of years in the rugged jungle life. With them may disappear a primitive gene pool, relatively uncontaminated and so will disappear any scope of further insight on the evolution and migration process of man.

Prof Mitchell Stephens, who teaches Journalism at University of New York observed "opinions may vary on what the present world stands to lose with the extinction of Jarawas, that only time can tell, all we know now is, that the most innocent among the entire humanity will be gone forever." True enough