

ANDAMAN TRUNK ROAD AND THE JARAWA SITUATION

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It is not known when the Andaman Negritos arrived in the Islands. Analysis of the contents of the shell middens have put the oldest records at 2,200 years ago. But then, only a few of the middens were excavated and dated. Even the survey of the middens was undertaken only in a few areas. In much of the areas colonized during the last hundred and fifty years, the middens stand destroyed. The deposits in more than 250 lime stone caves spread all over the Islands, where the Negritos might have taken shelter, have not been surveyed, excavated or dated. So, how the Negritos, including the Jarawas, reached the Andamans remains shrouded in mystery. They could very well have arrived in the Islands ten thousand years ago or even more. Since the four Negrito tribes of Andamans appear to be of the same genetic stock and yet speak mutually incomprehensible language or dialect, they probably have been in the Islands long enough, although, separated from each other. Occupancy of land over a long period of time is the internationally recognised method of determining right of ownership of land. Compared to the 16-century-old claim of the Moslems on Palestine, the 20-century-old claim of the Christians and 30-century-old claim of the Jews, the Jarawas' claim on the Andamans is probably more than a hundred centuries old. And yet, in the past one and a half-centuries, they have consistently been pushed back and confined to an ever-shrinking reserve by others. The Jarawas certainly resented the opening up of their forest habitat for forestry operations including logging by the British colonial administration.

There are early British reports of encounters with the Jarawas without any untoward incident. It is possible that the Jarawas were attacked by the British, who mistook them to be the Great Andamanese, who were then hostile, and such incidents pushed the Jarawas towards hostility. But the big push came after independence when the Indian government brought large numbers of displaced persons from erstwhile East Pakistan and resettled them in the Andamans. Apart from a direct invasion of the Jarawa territory, the settlements were located near sources of fresh water, which effectively barred the Jarawas from accessing this vital resource. The consequent loss of territory and life sustaining resources must have made the Jarawas more and more hostile as more and more settlements were established.

The induction of the new settlers into the Islands brought with it the need of transportation and communication between the headquarters at Port Blair and the settlements and also between one village and another. The easiest method would have been communication by ships and boats and in the first decade of settlement, sea transport was the main means of mobility between Port Blair and the settlements. But the settlers themselves had a continental mind-set, distinctly different from that of a true islander. An islander is not afraid of the sea. In fact, an islander looks at the sea as a major resource base. He, therefore, is proficient in swimming and sailing. So most of the island peoples starting from Great Britain and Japan to Philippines, Indonesia and even our Nicobars are seafaring. But the immigrant Andaman islanders of today were mainlanders till yesterday. They did not come here by choice. They were either deported or resettled here after having been displaced from erstwhile East Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Myanmar. They were handicapped by a natural fear and mistrust for the sea after being traumatised by partition, war or riot. By and large they are not swimmers. Till today very few of them own or operate a boat. They conformed to their traditional natural resource use patterns that they practised in the continental system they hailed from. To them, roads are preferred means of transportation. More to the point, the administrators and the decision-makers in the independent era were also mainlanders with similar mindset and preferences.

It was, therefore, only a matter of time that the need for a road connecting all the major settlements was felt. A grandiose project was conceptualized and soon the survey work for the proposed 343 km long Andaman Trunk Road started. The road would connect the four major islands of South Andaman, Baratang, Middle Andaman and North Andaman, from Chiriyatapu in South Andaman to Diglipur in North. It is interesting to note that no archipelago in the world, the British Isles, Indonesia, Hawaiian Islands or Philippines use roads for inter-island communication. Most of Japan also do not, though in the last two decades of the 20th Century, Japan has connected a few of the densely populated and industrialised islands by road to handle the huge volume of traffic. This was, essentially, an economic decision.

The Andaman Trunk Road has marginalised the Jarawas like nothing else, admits the Master Plan for Tribal Development (Awaradi 1990). The Jarawas were traumatised by the large-scale tree-felling, use of noisy heavy machinery for construction of the road, which probably drove their prey species away and scared