

Tribal policies should be reviewed with sensitivity, says a report

Port Blair, April 24

According to a special story published in the Frontline (dt. May 7, 1999), the Andaman Adim Janjati Vikas Samiti (AAJVS), the official tribal welfare body of the administration, introduced welfare measures that were completely unsuitable for the Onges. Frontline published the special report based on a news story published in Andaman Herald, dt. February 26, 1999, captioned "FLASH, FLASH, FLASH".

According to the report, foodstuffs such as rice, dal, oil and biscuits were introduced to a community whose traditional food included the meat of the wild boar and turtle, fish, tubers and honey.

The report also says that the agency even offered each adult 250 grms of tobacco as a "welfare" measure. In a blatant attempt to move the forestry operations deeper into the forests of Little Andaman, authorities have sought to settle the nomadic Onges at Dugong Creek in the northeast of the island and at South Bay at the southern tip. Wooden houses on stilts and with asbestos roofing were constructed from them at these places. These structures were not suited for the hot and humid tropical environment of the

islands and the Onge people preferred to live in their traditional huts in the forest nearby.

Simultaneously, the report further added, attempts were made to introduce a cash economy in the community, which did not have even a barter system.

Ill-conceived schemes, such as the raising of a coconut plantation (in which the Onge people were made workers), cattle-rearing (the community does not consume milk) and pig-breeding, were introduced. All of them failed. Environmentalist Bittu Sahgal noted that during one of his visits to the Onge settlement a few years ago, the Onge people were found being used to do menial chores, such as fetching water for welfare workers appointed by the

administration.

A visit to the Onge settlement of Dugong Creek has become mandatory on many a VIP itinerary. Not only are the Onge people expected to perform for the pleasure and entertainment of the VIP, but they are put to work weeks in advance to tidy up the settlement.

The settler communities, which have been handed over the lands and resources of the Onge people, have not treated them any better. They exploit and look down upon the tribal people. Alcohol was introduced and many Onges have become addicts. This addiction is now exploited - the Onge people exchange with the settlers valuable resources such as honey, turtle eggs, wild boar meat and ambergris for liquor.

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