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Ecology, Adaptation and Social Structure: A Comprehensive Study of The Jarawa Situation

By Anthropological Survey of India

Introduction

The study of human adaptation, particularly of a foraging community in an island environment, is of special significance considering the relative isolation of the island and its inhabitants. Considering the isolation, it would definitely be of immense interest to see if the community is demonstrating those adaptive strategies that foragers possess in other parts of the world, or the isolation has helped them to develop something unique to them.

The Jarawa inhabiting the western part of the South and Middle Andaman Islands are perhaps one of the best examples of full time hunter-gatherers. The continuation of unfriendliness between the Jarawa and the non-Jarawa till the end of the last quarter of 1997 has helped them to retain their isolated existence to a great extent. In the post 1997 period there was greater interaction between both the groups and the process of adaptation by the Jarawa to a new and changed situation has begun. The available literature suggest that islander communities like the Great Andamanese and the Onges have been reduced in number from about 5000 to nearly 50 and 600 to nearly 100 respectively. While the Great Andamanese have almost abandoned foraging practices, the Onges on the other hand continue to practice foraging to some extent. The society and economy of the Jarawa might undergo changes if subjected to similar conditions. The Jarawa have moved closure to the settlers and other groups of people crossing the barrier of century old enmity a few years back. Still we have insufficient knowledge about their socio-cultural life, subsistence activities, nutrition and health practices and traditional knowledge system pertaining to utilization of resources. Such information is required to be collected for more than one reason. One cannot deny the academic interest in a contemporary hunting-gathering society, how it could withstand the onslaught of so many odds. Since time immemorial the Jarawa have adapted them to the tropical environment of island ecology. A detailed study of their customs and traditional knowledge system pertaining to management and utilization of natural resources would help us not only to learn about the people, but about their physical environment from their perspective. Since in a foraging society the social system is very closely related to the economic practices, it would throw light on the human adaptation to its environment. Knowledge about their indigenous health practices would enable us to know about the ethno-medicines, an area which might hold clue to the treatment of many diseases. Finally, it is necessary to learn about the impact of the contact and interaction with their neighbours and representatives of the government. Even though it has been decided that we should not interfere into their life and affairs, it is extremely urgent to keep us informed about the state of society and culture, their nutritional status and sufficiency of resources in their habitat. It is also important to keep track of change of the social-cultural spheres of their life that might occur due to their interaction with the non-Jarawa neighbouring population. The proposed study would produce the required benchmark information that would help any study in biosocial dynamics in days to come.