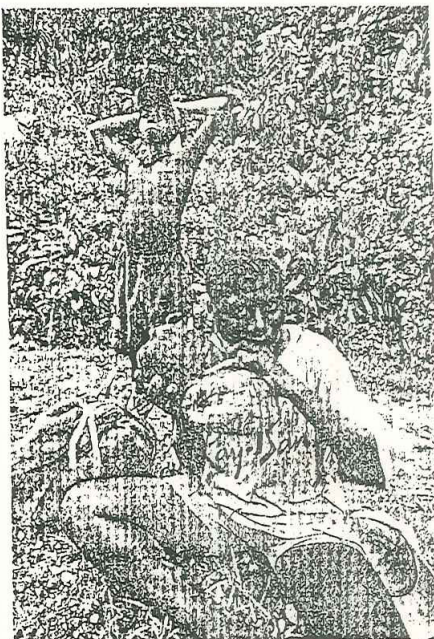


PORT BLAIR, ANDAMAN & NICOBAR

Going Blue In The Gills

by Jaideep Mazumdar

THEY'VE LIVED undisturbed for 60,000-odd years in the forests of the Andaman islands. But now, thanks to civilised man's misguided quest to 'protect' the ever-dwindling number of Jarawas (just 300-odd now), their numbers are dwindling. A measles epidemic is sweeping the islands, and right when the Jarawa children are most vulnerable. A similar epidemic had almost finished off the tribe in 1999. NGOs work-



SWAPAN NAYAK

Jarawa children in the forests: lost and vulnerable

ing with the Jarawas blame the archipelago's medical authorities for this epidemic. They point out that only children born after 1999 have contracted measles, so it's apparent that the immunisation programme of the Directorate of Medical Services has been an utter failure. In fact, they allege that the vaccination programmes, in the name of 'measured intervention' to protect the tribals from 'foreign diseases', has only weakened the Jarawas' immunity. Also, the Jarawa children affected by the measles outbreak live alongside or close to the Andaman Truck Road—now being widened in flagrant violation of a 2002 Supreme Court order asking the Andaman & Nicobar government to close the road since it cuts through tropical rainforests. Activists say the road-widening programme, leading to a large influx of outsiders into Jarawa territory, has led to the measles outbreak. They also fear the road will now provide easier access to outsiders into the forests—in short, to large-scale timber theft and environmental degradation. □

A similar measles epidemic had almost finished off the tribe in '99. And now this attack.