

The answer is not as simple as it first appears, neither is the question. Interaction with the outside world would not be a problem perhaps if this interaction happened on an equal footing. But we all know that this can't be. Our decision has to be informed by the fact that we are a great democracy where the security and self-respect of even the smallest and most vulnerable groups is ensured; where the tiniest voice is also heard; in this case the voice of the voiceless Jarawa. The question asked then is what does the Jarawa 'voice' say?

No one really knows, except the humble AAJVS workers who have learnt the Jarawa language and who interact with them on a daily basis. They say that the Jarawa prefer to stay by themselves; all they express about the civilized world is curiosity. Meanwhile, all the experts – anthropologists, social scientists, and biologists concur that if these 306 people make the "civilizational" leap - from hunter-gatherer culture to 21st century, no matter how calibrated or gradual the process, they will surely be destroyed physically, socially and culturally.

So do we allow them to live as they have been used to for many centuries and offer help only when asked and in conformity with their lifestyle? Is this possible? We believe it is. We are neither for integrating the Jarawa nor for completely isolating them; we stand for limited interaction with them on their terms, in a manner which empowers them, protects their linguistic, cultural and ecological identity and does not threaten them in any way.¹

Let us not forget that on this minuscule number of people many stakeholders' hopes are pinned; there are the Settlers who are waiting for the Andaman Trunk Road to become a national highway, a concrete swathe running through the Reserve forests. There are environmentalists all over the world who are also waiting and watching what India does with this most unique and precious human society.

¹ There was difference of opinion within the sub-group on this point. Prof K.B. Saxena very strongly felt that the only interaction with the Jarawa should be minimum intervention by a sensitive administration in areas of health, food security and counselling. He maintained that interaction with others has to be prevented because administration cannot modulate such a limited interaction and given the situation of the Jarawa, it cannot be in a manner that empowers them or protects their identity. It would only threaten their survival.