

THE PREMISE

Let us be clear about the philosophical premise of our position vis-à-vis the aboriginal tribes of Andaman, particularly the Jarawa.

Often the dilemma is simply put as this. Do we preserve and nurture the Jarawa as the most unique human societies on planet earth or do we allow them to integrate with the mainstream?

Arguments are strong on both sides. In either case we are accused of playing God. Who are we to deny them the fruits of civilization? India, poised on the verge of becoming a super power cannot keep the 'jungles' in the jungle as museum pieces. They should be provided with enabling means to step into the fast lane of development. Instead of running naked after wild boar, their children should avail of tribal reservations in the best educational institutions. This is one side of the picture.

The other side presents the Jarawa as human civilization's oldest tribe; 100,000 years old who migrated from Africa to Andamans 60,000 years ago. Today they are alive on Indian soil in the purest form; their genes are unaltered by strictly marrying within the tribe. They eat wild boar with all its fat content, but suffer from none of the life style diseases like hypertension. Their skin, despite their entire body being exposed to the sun, is very soft and glowing. In the entire world they are a unique; along with Sentinlese they are the most isolated community left on earth. A few years back their numbers had been reduced to 266; now they are 306.

Their counterpart tribes like the Onga and the Great Andamanese have long been in close contact with us and are living examples of what-the-Jarawa-should-not-become. The only word that describes their emasculation is *liber-angez*; its approximate meaning is "shattering lesson". The same goes for the Native Indian of Americas, the Polynesian of the Hawaiian Islands, the Maori of New Zealand, and the Eskimo of Canada; First Peoples who were taken into the warm embrace of civilization. Do we want the Jarawa to go the same way?