

# Tribal people and preserving prime forests

Vikram Soni

**P**RIME FOREST is perhaps our greatest resource and heritage. It is the repository of our living history. It is precious and fast becoming precariously rare. In India, we are in a situation where in the last 50 years our dense canopy forest area has shrunk markedly, from 22 per cent to eight per cent, and our population has bounded, three times, to a billion.

The proposed Scheduled Tribes (Recognition of Land Rights) Bill 2005 if passed will let the tribal people (seven per cent of the population) settle in the prime forest (eight per cent of the land area). This will be the end of the forest. Equally, it will be the end of the tribal people since their identity derives from the forest. It may end up as a ploy to get the forestland in the name of the tribal people and then grab it from them.

We now turn to forest dwellers and their predicament: a classic example is at hand. From ancient times the nomadic wilderness dwellers, the Gujjars, have retained their distinct identity, living apart in the forest as graziers who seasonally migrate to the upland fastnesses in the summer and down to the Terai foothills in the winter. They are a romantic people, tall with deepset blue eyes and hennaed beards moving with their herds of cattle along their traditional routes in the forest. Year after year they return to their camps with the feared and hardy Bhotia dogs turning the cattle in for the night.

They have come a long way today. In the Rajaji National Park, near Dehra Dun in the western extremity of the Terai, is a large population of Gujjars. For whatever reason, probably because of shrinking habitat, they have become more fixed and less migratory. Mostly, they still look magnificent in their traditional flowing embroidered robes. But now as we take a turn on the

The proposed Scheduled Tribes (Recognition of Land Rights) Bill 2005 could sound the death-knell for prime forests. This could also result in the end of the tribal people's identity, which derives from the forests.

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forest road we run into the incongruous — a Gujjar speeding away on a motorbike. Around Chila, near Hardwar, it seems things have gone even further. On seeing a bunch of tall men walking along a dry riverbed in the forest in ill-fitting trousers, carrying transistor radios, we were surprised to learn that they were Gujjars returning home after a day's work. So the assimilation into the outside world has now even made them discard their traditional wear. Even a stranger will not fail to be disturbed by the traffic going in and out of the forest. Here is the breaking of their integral forest identity and a transformation to conventional livelihoods. Yet they retain their bivouac in the forest. It seems things may have gone too far.

This shows that a community that retained its distinct identity for a millennium has strayed and lost some of its links to the forest. And it means that unfortunately in this day and age even such a community may not necessarily remain guardians of the forest. It is unfortunate that history has brought the forest dwellers to this. They have had a kinship with the forest from the beginning and so have been sensitive to the health of the forest. They have been spartan users of the forest for their simple livelihood.

However, such is the force of technology, industry and development that in a few decades these sections have aggressively exploited all the

forest they could lay their hands on. They have drilled into the forest to mine for stone or ore. They have logged for wood and bamboo. They have, for their use, pushed for more monoculture plantations like eucalyptus. In short, they have brutally laid the forest low. It is a classic case of permanent loss for transient gain. Whereas industry can just move out after clearing out the forest, the forest dweller is stuck there to face a bleak landscape and an equally bleak future.

## People and parks

We have homed in on the very substantive debate on parks (or primary forest) and people. Both parks and people have their separate defenders. The most conservative park protector is the forest service, which is rapidly losing credibility. In the people's park, the human rights activists are the most vocal.

The debate is set in today's idiom of human rights or people's rights. The forest dwellers are perceived as the oppressed and the forest as their heritage or sometimes even inheritance. The fact is that the problem is diminishing habitat. This is perceived as usurping the forest from the rightful owners, the forest dwellers, by the development-oriented industry with the active collusion of the state machinery.

Often, one finds cogent and sensitive appeals

that we would never have come to such a pass if the forest people had managed the forest. Traditionally in India forests and people have been linked. One cannot but agree that the forest dwellers would not have allowed the pernicious forces of development to pillage the forests. However, the forest officers, even the upright and committed, are seen in this light of being corrupt, rapacious and interested only in raising revenue.

There was only recently a time (50 years ago) when there was no debate and no problem. The forest was healthy and secure and the dwellers happy within. Most of the protagonists do not go back that far. Most have not been intimate with those forests and those times. Most lack the old experience and the old knowledge.

It may come as a surprise but much of the knowledge and the preservation of the forests is due to the old forest officers. Even today, it is the committed minority of forest officers who stand in the firing line to save the forests. It is wrong to write off all forest officers as being sold out to the exploitative interests. It may not be right to identify the righteous only as the forest dwellers. It may not be right to think of the forests as their inheritance alone. It is true that violence has been done to both the forests and their tribal inhabitants. Both need defending. Development has always gone against both. It professes to be for the people but then it wipes out the forest and leaves the people at a loss. The forest or 'nature' is even more vulnerable than the people as it has to take the axe of the exploiting outsiders and the forest dwellers as well.

To the here and now. Reportedly, about seven per cent of India's population is tribal or wilderness based and only 8 per cent of the country's area is left with dense forest cover. If these two are to go together our prime wilderness will have the average population density of the country. By no account is this the definition of a wilderness and by all accounts it is a recipe for disaster.

There is so little prime forest now (and so many people) that if we do not watch out, the debate may continue even as the forest is gone.

It is clear from this that the Tribal Bill will first kill the forest and then the tribal people. Many concerned people have authored reports that make a very strong case for people's involvement in forest management. They even quote many examples of forest dwellers jointly managing a protected area successfully; from Kakadoo in Australia to Yellowstone in the United States, from parks in Zimbabwe to those in South America. All these have happened where the population of tribal people, aborigines or 'Indians' is tiny and the wilderness area is enormous. Today's India is different as we have pointed out: the tribal populations are large and the forest area has come down. If the tribal people were to settle in the dense forest area, the population density would be the average for the country; it just does not square up. Certainly, tribal people should have a stake in the management of the forests; the Bishnois in Rajasthan with their conservation ethos are some of the most passionate and effective protectors of forests and wildlife, but it is clear that all forest dwellers cannot live in the prime forests.

Perhaps, it is appropriate to recall that we now have areas of degraded forest that account for the same fraction of the area of the country as that for the dense forests — around 10 per cent. Given the lasting links and identity that the forest dwellers have with the forest they could contribute importantly in the renewal of the degraded forest and themselves.

It is here that joint forest management programmes with the forest department could be most effective. On no account should this land fall into the hands of industry, as is being suggested in some circles. Is it too much to ask that human beings leave a tiny fraction of this planet to nature — that is, all of creation excepting them? Remember, it is only in silence that you hear the sounds of the jungle.

(The writer is UGC Professor, Theory Group, National Physical Laboratory, New Delhi.)

THE HINDU

# Flaws alleged in tribal rights Bill

Special Correspondent

**NEW DELHI:** Jan Sangharsh Morcha, a network of people's organisation in Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh, has strongly condemned the Centre for serious flaws in its proposed Scheduled Tribes (Recognition of Rights) Bill that, according to it, will result more in the denial of rights than in their recognition.

Unless fundamentally modified, the Bill will prove detrimental to the interests of both forest communities and forests, the Morcha says.

In a statement issued here on Saturday, Morcha representatives said that though the Central Government had finally recognised that "historical injustice" had been done to the tribal people by the continuation of colonial laws and that there was a need to rectify this injustice, "we are dismayed to find that the Bill fails to do this, and in fact is likely to increase the injustice done to adivasis. Through some token concessions, the Bill seeks to "settle" once and for all the politically sensitive question of adivasi rights, so that the way can be paved for the takeover of forest resources by industrial and commercial interests and global "big business."

The Jan Sangharsh Morcha will, along with other people's organisations, launch a campaign for a new legislation that fully recognises the legitimate historical rights of all forest communities, while stringently preventing destructive large-scale commercial exploitation and the diversion of forestland to industry and large projects. "We demand the full and unequivocal recognition of rights that forest dwellers have been fighting for over the past two centuries, through a legislation that will recognise all land holdings of all forest dwellers on an 'as is where is' basis and the full recognition of rights over minor forest produce."

The Morcha is opposed to imposition of arbitrary, irrational and impractical limitation of conditional rights only to those adivasis who can prove their claim of the land before 1980, exclusion of non-adivasi traditionally forest dwelling communities from the purview of the legislation and "tyrannical" control of the Forest Department over the forest among other things.

**BILL** ■ Forest Dept given 5 years to relocate tribals from wildlife sanctuaries

# Cabinet clears Forest Rights Bill

**NIRMALA GANAPATHY**  
NEW DELHI, DECEMBER 2

**T**HE Cabinet today cleared the Scheduled Tribes (Recognition of Forest Rights) Bill but neither the Environment Ministry nor the Tribals Affairs Ministry have emerged clear winners.

The Bill seeks to give temporary land rights to tribals living in wildlife sanctuaries and national parks. But to the delight of wildlife activists, the Forest Department has been given five years to relocate them.

Failure to do so within this period would ensure tribals get permanent *pattas* over their piece of sanctuary land. The Environment Ministry

had wanted these protected wildlife sanctuaries to be outside the Bill's ambit while the Tribal Affairs Ministry wanted permanent land rights to be granted.

Today's compromise paves the way for the Bill to be introduced in the winter session of Parliament itself.

"The sanctuaries will be protected... the environment and revenue officers will take care that the Bill is implemented in its spirit," Environment Minister A Raja said.

The settlement of tribals inside sanctuaries had led to controversy. In the first bill prepared by the Tribals Affairs Ministry, permanent land rights were bestowed on tribals in sanctuaries, angering tiger activists.

After a long battle that ne-



cessitated Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's intervention, the two ministries tried to hammer out a middle path.

Sources in the Environment and Forests Ministry said tribals who live in core sanctuary areas where animals breed or might be dis-

tribed will be relocated. Relocating all tribals in sanctuaries might be impossible.

Another new provision incorporated at the Environment Ministry's behest is that the cut-off date for recognising the tribals' rights has been set as October 25, 1980 — the date the Forest Conservation Act came into being. In the original Tribal Affairs Ministry bill, the date was flexible.

The Environment Ministry has failed to have its way on including non-tribals in the ambit of the Bill and making the gram sabha the arbitrator of all land disputes. The ministry had wanted a quasi-judicial body to handle land disputes.

Sources said Raja brought up the exclusion of non-trib-

als at the meeting. His ministry maintains that excluding non-tribals could trigger social unrest.

The Bill will now be introduced in Parliament and be referred to a standing committee and a Group of Ministers.

A release said: "(The) Enactment of the Bill will undo the historical injustice by recognising and vesting forest rights to the forest-dwelling Scheduled Tribes who have been residing there for generations and who are integral to the very survival and sustainability of the forest eco-systems... This would also strengthen the conservation regime by recognising permanent stake of the forest-dwelling Scheduled Tribes."

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## Jungle raj

The tribal bill will nurture bitter conflicts, not big cats

**H**ARD work has gone into hiding the stripes of the tribal bill, cleared by the cabinet and ready for Parliament now. But the result will still be the same: once enacted, the proposals will effectively end conservation. This is simply because conserving the tiger and protecting tribal rights are separate objectives. So, land allocation for the two should be separate too. No one has successfully challenged the tiger task force's data that show human habitation and wildlife preservation are mutually exclusive. Forests are impossible to police and the money to be made from poachers impossible to turn down. Had this been recognised, the government would have instead worked only on relocation of forest reserve villages. The cost of relocation, experts say, is Rs 10,000 crore. India can easily afford this, especially given what's at stake.

What's on offer, via the bill, is a big administrative mess. Even leaving aside the argument that as far as conservation efforts go temporary land rights are no different

from permanent ones — in five years of temporary rights, a reserve forest can be emptied out of prized fauna; remember Sariska — the bill gives local administrations an unenviable, possibly unachievable, job. Since five years of stay will ensure permanent property rights, those living in forest reserves will have little incentive to relocate. The job of persuading them falls on local officials.

These poor souls will also have to distinguish between tribals and non-tribals. The bill makes this distinction with great panache. But on the ground, and with land ownership in a familiar territory at stake, the disputes will be at least sharp. And who will monitor whether permanent land rights in forest reserves are not sold off to "outsiders"? Having once introduced the premise of private property in conservation areas, the government can hardly hope that the usual incentives and profit maximising behaviour won't apply in this asset class. Expect plenty of bitter conflict — and very few big cats.

# 'No attempt to dump Bill giving land rights to Adivasis'

■ **Despite being rich in resources, the States in the North East lag behind in economic development. Insurgency in most of the region has deterred MNCs from setting up operations there. How do you plan to bring about economic growth and reduce unemployment in that area?**

(V P Damodar)

Yes, the North East is rich in both natural resources and manpower, but comparatively poor in economic development. We are determined to exploit natural resources like water, which has an identified potential of generating around 50,000 MW of hydel power. We have tapped only 2.33% of this total potential so far. The potential of economic development through resources like minerals, petroleum, gas, bamboo is huge too. We are according top priority to development of basic infrastructure like roads, airlines, railways, telecom.

On the other hand, while extremist outfits operate in certain parts of the region, it is not correct to say that insurgency is delaying economic growth in the entire region. The UPA Government has made it clear that tackling insurgency and terrorism in the North East are national priorities. Today there is a movement towards peace in the region.

Through the North Eastern Council, we are in the process of preparing Vision Document 2020 for the region. It will be a blueprint for holistic development which will address economic growth as well as unemployment. For the latter, we are formulating



**FIRING LINE: PRAVANDIAH, Minister for Tribal Affairs and Development of North East**

programmes to enhance the income of rural people, add value to existing products and outsource preparation of database to the educated unemployed and university students. Private investors shy away from the North East mainly because of the distance from the marketing centres and lack of adequate incentives. We are looking into these issues.

■ **With the tsunami disaster still fresh in our minds,**

at their own pace. The foraging area of the Jarawas has been increased so they can live in their natural habitat. The Nicobarese suffered extensive damage, losing 3,077 lives. Around 10,000 shelters for these families have been built in suitable locations.

■ **It is an established fact that the North East stands isolated from the rest of the country. What will you do to change this and motivate social integration?**

Gaurav Dua

Although, the North East is physically connected to the rest of the country by a narrow land corridor, we have taken steps to develop infrastructure in order to bring about true connectivity. The emphasis has been on a road network, railways, airlines and telecommunication. The North East is the only region in the country where almost all the development blocks are connected to the internet through community information centres. Guwahati Airport has been made an international airport. We are taking steps to open trans-border trade and commerce to bring about economic prosperity to the region and mitigate the feeling of social and psychological isolation. At the social level, we encourage and promote art and culture through exhibitions, seminars, cultural exchange programmes.

■ **Crores of money allocated for development of North East have gone down the drain. What are you doing to improve the system so that the funds trickle down**

A Rana

The primitive tribes in Andaman are all safe. The government has decided not to interfere with the lives of Jarawas and Sentinlese, so that they can develop

the tribal communities. I would like to emphasise that a tribal is the most active conservationist of forest and lives in the forest, depends on forest produce for his livelihood and knows that his sustenance is by the forest.

■ **Thousand of tribals have faced displacement due to the developmental projects. How about the legislation banning such injustice?**

Ravi Kumar

The Government has notified a National Rehabilitation Policy for people displaced due to mega projects. This policy provides a rehabilitation package for all displaced persons, giving some extra benefits to the STs. The measures include allotment of agricultural land or cultivable waste land sub-jacent to availability, allotment of house site, grant for construction of houses and cattle sheds, monthly allowance for up to three years at the minimum agricultural wage. In cases where the tribal land has been alienated in violation of laws and regulations, the benefit will go to the tribal owning the land and not to those who have got possession by violation of laws. It also provides that tribal families in the project-affected areas having fishing rights in the river/pond/dam shall be given rights in the reservoir areas of the project. The package is the minimum that has to be provided, and the State Government or the acquiring agencies may also provide enhanced benefits.

■ **The government has a commission for tribals, but it does not even have a proper office. Are there any plans to convert bodies like the Tribal Commission into pro-active institutions to help the tribals?**

Rathin Dass

The commission is located in Lok Nayak Bhawan and has adequate office space. The National Commission for Scheduled Tribes is a constitutional body with wide powers under Article 338 (A) of

**FIRING LINE**  
NEXT WEEK

**UMA BHARATI**  
BJP LEADER



**UMA BHARATI**, the "firebrand" remains one of the most colourful — and controversial — personalities in Indian politics today. She led the BJP to unprecedented two-third majority in Madhya Pradesh but was forced to give up the post of minister. She launched her "Anga Yatra" but fell foul of party's patriarchy. Her father's televised walkout led to suspension from the BJP last year. She was reinstated but left without any work for six months. The latest twist is her appointment as *sah prabhu* for the Bihar polls. Is that a notion of demotion? Will she stick to her promise "to be a minister" or is another outburst in the offing? Ask her what the latest assignment means to her future in the BJP at [gline@expressindia.com](mailto:gline@expressindia.com).

institution. It has powers to gather any information pertaining to Scheduled Tribes, and can ask officials to inquire about related to them. The National Commission is a pro-active institution which can take cognizance of issues related to atrocities against Scheduled Tribes and investigate them.

## Bodo militants sign peace pact with Union govt

**New Delhi:** In a major boost to the peace process in the north-east, Bodo militant outfit NDFB has signed a ceasefire accord with the Centre and the Assam government, leading to suspension of operations for the first time in two decades of insurgency by the group.

As per the accord signed on Tuesday, all three sides will suspend operations for one year beginning June 1, 2005, and the Bodo outfit will maintain peace during this period and not carry out any hostile or violent activity against the security forces or the civilians. The security forces will, in turn, not carry out any operations against the NDFB.

The NDFB cadres will not carry arms or move in uniform in this period, and will not give assistance to any other militant group. The agreement was signed by special secretary in Union home ministry, Assam's home secretary B K Gohain and general secretary of the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB), ending 20 years of insurgency by the group in which over 1,000 people have been killed.

After his meeting with the Bodo leaders on Wednesday, Union home minister Shivraj Patil said the accord would help in strengthening the peace process in Assam and other states in the north-east region. He said the ceasefire would help in all-round development of the area and in fulfilling the legitimate desires of the people. PTI

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THE TIMES OF INDIA

# Bodo militants sign tripartite accord

New Delhi  
25 MAY

**I**N a major boost to the peace process in the North East, Bodo militant outfit National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) has signed a cease-fire accord with the Centre and the Assam government, leading to suspension of operations for the first time in two decades of insurgency by the group.

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In addition, the NDFB cadres will not carry arms or move in uniform in this period, and will not give assistance to any other militant group. The agreement was signed by special secretary in the Union Home Ministry, Assam's home secretary B.K. Gohain and general secretary of the NDFB. In the past 20 years, over 1,000 people, including NDFB activists and security force personnel, have been killed in clashes in the state.

After his meeting with the Bodo leaders today, Union Home Minister Shivraj Patil said the accord will help in strengthening the peace process in Assam and other

states in the North East region.

"It is a step forward in the peace process and will encourage other insurgent organisations to come forward and form agreements," the Home Minister told reporters.

He said the ceasefire will help in all-round development of the area and in fulfilling the legitimate desires of the people. Mr Patil said a Joint Monitoring Group (JMG) would be formed to oversee the implementation of the agreement. The JMG will comprise equal representatives from the Centre, Assam Government and NDFB. The Joint Secretary (North East) in the Home Ministry will chair the group.

As per the agreement, the NDFB will stay in designated camps and the list of cadres and weapons in these camps will be given to Assam police. Responding to a peace offer by Assam Chief Minister Tarun Gogoi, the NDFB had

declared a unilateral ceasefire on October 15. It had later renewed the ceasefire for a second time on April 15 this year.

They later sent feelers to the Centre for talks which took place in the capital. The NDFB was formed in 1986 and its armed wing is known as the Bodoland Army. The organisation has been demanding a separate state for the Bodos. The group is active in Kokrajhar, Bongaigaon, Nagaon, Nalbari, Barpeta and Kamrup districts of Assam. It has nexus with other groups, including NSCN(IM) and ULFA. —PTI

The cease-fire agreement is expected to strengthen the peace process in Assam and other states in the North East region

26 MAY 2005

*The Economic Times*

# Andaman tribes at risk of extinction

Stanley Theodore  
in Hyderabad

May 16. — The Andaman & Nicobar tribes are in great danger now than ever before due to inbreeding among them, director of Centre for Cellular and Molecular Biology, Dr Lalji Singh, said.

"Many animals are critically endangered due to inbreeding. What holds good for animals holds good for humans too. The tribes in these islands are at great risk of extinction," he told a press conference.

The six tribes in the 572 islands are regarded as the "windows to the past" in the sense of how the world's population evolved after the first batch of migration out of Africa and towards India 50,000 to 70,000 years ago.

The Great Andamanese is 20-member strong, Onge — 98, Shompens — 180, Jarawa — 200 and Sentinelese — 250. The only tribe with relatively substantial numbers are Nicobarese — 22,000.

The tribes are hunter-gatherers and need natural habitats like forests to exist. Dr Singh said during



Jarwas (top) and Shompens.  
— File photographs

wiped out, but fortunately several of them survived.

Dr Singh led a path breaking DNA study of these tribes, barring the Sentinelese, to lend weight to the "out of Africa" theory. The five-year study showed that the tribes do not share genetic similarities with mainland Indian tribes, but with the African population.

"The evolution of the tribes may be due to the initial penetration of the northern coastal areas of the Indian Ocean by modern humans in their out of Africa migration. Therefore they are the windows to the look into the past and hence they need to be persevered," he said.

his interaction with Onges they expressed happiness at going back to the jungles instead of living in settlements organised by the government.

The Sentinelese are primitive, hostile and strongly dislike any interaction with the world. After the 26 December tsunami there were fears that they were



# Armed tribals attack steel hub

**SOUVYAJIT Pattnaik**  
Bhubaneswar, May 10

EIGHT POLICEMEN and a senior administrative official in Kalinga Nagar were seriously injured in an attack by tribals, demanding compensation for loss of their land, acquired by the government to set up steel plants.

Kalinga Nagar — the steel hub of Orissa in Jajpur district — is home to a number of existing and proposed steel plants including Mid-East Integrated Steel, Nilachal Ispat Nigam, Tata Steel, Jindal Stainless and Visa Industries. The tribals, armed with bows and arrows, surrounded the site of the *bhoomi puja* of Maharashtra Seamless steel company in Kalinga Nagar on Monday, as a symbolic target and placed their demands for suitable compensation.

Additional district magistrate (ADM) S. Gopalan urged the tribals to disperse but when

they refused, he declared their gathering illegal. This infuriated the tribals who then started pelting stones and targeting the cops with arrows. They also set a police vehicle on fire.

ADM Gopalan and inspector-in-charge Suresh C Mohapatra along with seven other police officers were seriously injured in the attack. Gopalan and Mohapatra have been shifted to the SCB Medical College and Hospital in Cuttack.

Jajpur collector Surendra Kumar told *Hindustan Times*, "The protesters remained insubordinate to carry out negotiations directly with the officials of the Maharashtra Seamless. Under the law, the government acquires the land and provides compensation to the affected people, the money for which is collected

from the project promoters. Thus, there was no scope for the protesters to negotiate directly with the promoters of Maharashtra Seamless".

Kumar said this plant was in fact not affecting the villagers who had gathered at the site to disrupt the Bhoomi Puja. Since they attacked the officials without any provocation, the police resorted to a "mild" cane charging to disperse them.

Industry minister Biswa Bhushan Harichandan told HT: "The government will make a detailed study of the simmering tension and hostility by the local people and will ensure proper compensation to those who lost their land".

With a number of steel plants acquiring land to set up plants in Orissa, the face-off between the oustees and the project promoters is now on the rise. It is also alleged that though the promoters are handing over the money to the government for disbursement among the oustees, it is not reaching the beneficiaries.

## ORISSA LAND RIGHTS

1 MAY 2005

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES

# Andaman tribals want mainlanders to leave

By Aarti Dhar

**CAMPBELL BAY (NICOBAR ISLANDS), FEB. 16.** Apart from the destruction caused by the tsunami, the Andaman and Nicobar Islands are witnessing another problem — a divide between the local tribal population and the mainland settlers.

The tribals want the mainlanders to leave. The tribal heads have given a written petition to the Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh.

The issue also came up during the three-day trip of the Union Home Minister, Shivraj Patil, to the archipelago over the weekend. Mr. Patil, however, dismissed it as temporary fear of exploitation by the non-tribals. "Sometimes the local tribal people feel that they would have to share their natural re-

sources and land with the mainlanders. They have also complained of indiscriminate felling of trees but they will have to get over it," he told reporters.

Talking to *The Hindu*, Ayesha Begum, chairperson of the Tribal Council of the Nicobar group of islands, alleged that the non-tribals were "eating" into their resources and even exploiting the local population. "The mainlanders are wise and clever, and easily exploit us. Their presence has also influenced our culture and tradition." She said they wanted the Defence personnel and the Government employees to stay and the businessmen and the retired people to leave.

Ayesha Begum's great-grandmother, Rani Ison, was crowned the "tribal queen" by the British. The title went to Ra-

ni Ison's daughter, Rani Lakshmi, as she was the only child. Rani Lakshmi's only daughter, Fatima, converted to Islam after marrying a Muslim but continued to carry the title which then went to her daughter, Ayesha, the eldest of her nine children.

Ayesha Begum expressed unhappiness with the Central Government for its failure in helping the tribals to start afresh after the tsunami. "We are dependent on Government relief, which is not coming. If we were given tools to clear the debris and construction material like bamboo, we would have built houses in our own way," she said.

On the other hand, a large number of Sikh families, mainly retired servicemen who settled in the Car Nicobar Islands in 1969 under a Government

scheme, have expressed their desire to go back to the mainland. "If we have to start our lives all over again, we might as well do it in our villages," many of them said. There were unconfirmed reports that many families, who were living between Campbell Bay and Indira Point, had left for good.

The Government scheme envisaged settling 500 retired Defence personnel on the Island by giving them incentives such as free land for farming. However, the project was abandoned midway. Of the 100 Sikh families brought here, 70 made the island their home. The Ex-Servicemen Settlers of Campbell Bay have also given a memorandum to Mr. Patil, demanding the status of tribals and reservation in jobs and educational institutions.

THE HINDU

17 FEB 2005

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# We are safe, say Jarawas

9-tribes

JIRKATANG, JAN. 6. Carrying bows and arrows, members of the ancient Jarawa tribe emerged on Thursday from their forest habitat in the Andaman and Nicobar islands for the first time since the tsunami tragedy.

In a rare interaction with outsiders, the Jarawas said all 250 of their tribe had survived by fleeing inland. "We are all safe after the earthquake. We are in the forest in Balughat," said Ashu, an arrow-wielding tribesman.

Even though the Jarawas sometimes interact with local officials to receive government-funded supplies, the tribe seemed wary of visitors. "My world is in the forest," Ashu said in broken Hindi through an interpreter in a restricted area at the north end of South Andaman island. "Your world is outside. We don't like people from outside."

There are only an estimated 400 to 1,000 members alive today from the tribes of Jarawas, Great Andamanese, Onges, Sentinelese and Shompens who live on the islands. Some anthropological

DNA studies indicate that the generations of tribes may have spanned back 70,000 years. They originated in Africa and migrated to India through Indonesia, anthropologists said.

Government officials and anthropologists believe that ancient knowledge of the movement of wind, sea and birds may have saved the indigenous tribes from the tsunami. Seven Jarawa men — wearing only underwear and amulets — emerged from the forest to meet government officials to say they had all managed to flee to the forest when the deadly waves came. They said they survived by eating coconuts in the aftermath of the tsunami, which killed 901 people and left 5,914 missing on the Andaman and Nicobar islands.

Two reporters and a photographer for Associated Press were allowed to accompany officials to an outpost in the isolated northern region.

Ashu, who said he was in his early 20s, gave his name and those of three others of his tribe as Danna, Lah and Tawai. Like

many South Indians, they use only one name.

The men stopped an AP photographer from taking pictures. "We fall sick if we are photographed," Ashu said. In the past, tourists who have tried to take their photo had their cameras smashed by upset tribesmen.

When asked how his people survived the tsunami, Ashu just shook his head. He didn't want to talk about it. But he showed off his bow, arrows and a metal box tied around his waist with a thread containing ash with which he smeared his face and forehead during ceremonies.

He gestured with his hands and asked for "khamma" — water in the dialect used by the Jarawas — and drank from a bottle offered to him. When asked what they typically eat, Ashu said pork and fish caught with their bows and arrows. "And we like honey."

He said tourists sometimes throw packages of cookies at them from buses. "We don't like when tourists throw things at us. They should give it in our hands," he said. Also, the pack-

aged food upset their stomachs, he added. "We prefer to eat raw and roasted bananas. Ripe bananas make us sick," he said.

Jirkatang police have had a love-hate relationship with the Jarawas. In 1997, a year after the tribe made its first-ever contact with, they stormed the Jirkatang police outpost and killed a guard dead with their arrows. But things have since improved.

A police officer who asked that his name not be used called the Jarawas "good friends."

Relations with townspeople seem more prickly with ethnic Indian residents expressing wariness of their neighbours. Both sides remain as far apart as they were nearly a decade ago when contact with the tribe was first made.

During the height of summer, when water holes dry up, Jarawas often come into town, looking for water. Their presence generates total panic, and police are called in, said one resident who refused to give his name. It is then up to the police officers to persuade the tribesmen to return. — AP