

Impact of Development Strategies in Response to Globalisation on the Onge Tribal Society, Little Andaman Island, India

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Abstract

Globalisation generates a social identity crisis amongst the community residing in remote pockets complacent with nature and who does not have any interest in intermingling with the outskirts world. The tendency of the planners in order to sustain their immediate benefitting policies abstain them from thinking at the grass root level. One amongst the development strategies was the rehabilitation programme that was undertaken in this island by settling refugees from mainland India and surplus Nicobarese from Car Nicobar Island.

The present author after a precise survey on the present island, compiling the primary with the secondary data and relating with the past literature, has come through several disappointing observations.

Such a study was carried out within the undemanding Onge community, residing in the Little Andaman Island of the Andaman Archipelago, in order to extract the impact of globalisation within their periphery. Development strategies in the tag of globalisation are unknowingly portraying a label of monotony by ignoring the latent values within the Onge's diversified livelihood. Thus, the main objective was firstly to outline the imposed developmental policies in the several sectors of the Onge's livelihood in the name of globalisation. Secondly, it was to find out the impact of those developmental strategies on the Onge community as a whole.

The Onge tribal community as adhered to the nature for ages together has attained a deep essence of understanding the natural dynamics of their surroundings to make hunting and gathering their means of sustenance. Inculcation of foreign policies as sought after by the planners as an apostle of development has been weakening their community philosophies from its root. The author would like to intimate her humane suggestion to the planning systems to think before leaping into the issues of this sensitive tribal community.

Key words: *Virgin Island, Hunters and gatherers, Developmental policies, Identity crisis*

Shadow of Globalisation

The main genre of globalization is to believe that all people are equal and deserve equal rights and opportunities. With the advent of globalization and the introduction of new technology, these principles gained importance not only in protecting human beings from the ill-effects of change but also in ensuring that all are allowed a share of benefits. If viewed from the other angle, this once again implies that all are labelled with the same logo– homogenous, uncategorized and thus follows up with an identity crisis. Globalisation generates a social identity crisis amongst the community residing in remote pockets complacent with nature and who does not have any interest in intermingling with the outskirts world. The tendency of the planners in order to sustain their immediate benefitting policies abstain them from thinking at the grass root level.

In this materialistic advancement state of our world there still exists a few handful pockets of groups of people who are still living with their thousand years of primitive background and knowledge, being carried down from ages together totally virgin without any intervention from the outer world. The modern people assume that these primitive groups who follow a different track of sustenance off beat from the present rhythm are backward and need their extended helping hand. Not only this, but the modern world has even extended their helping hands to prove a support to the misnomer backward community. This is still being done in the name of globalisation. So, by the name of development, the intervention within their community with certain alien concepts have jeopardized them and loosened their socio-cultural knit. Similar exalted scenario is portrayed by the present researcher from our much known part of India - The little Andaman Island where such a pristine traditional community called the 'Onge' survives.

Cult of Globalisation on the Onge Community

Diversities make a place unique and appealing. If all things look and feel the same without any variation it would lead to monotony. The Onge are India's treasure from the point of view of their genetic origin, their typical cultural behaviour, their unique ethnic character, their social bonding, and their age old traditional wisdom about nature. These characteristics make them unique. Thus, instead of being ashamed of them we must feel proud that our country possesses such an enriched community that still bears the essence of an ideal socio-cultural fabric in harmony with nature. In the name of globalization, the modern world has the urge to see a similar rural character all throughout Indian villages, the government has arranged several developmental strategies so by imitating the main stream without a proper groundwork on the Onge's actual life patterns.

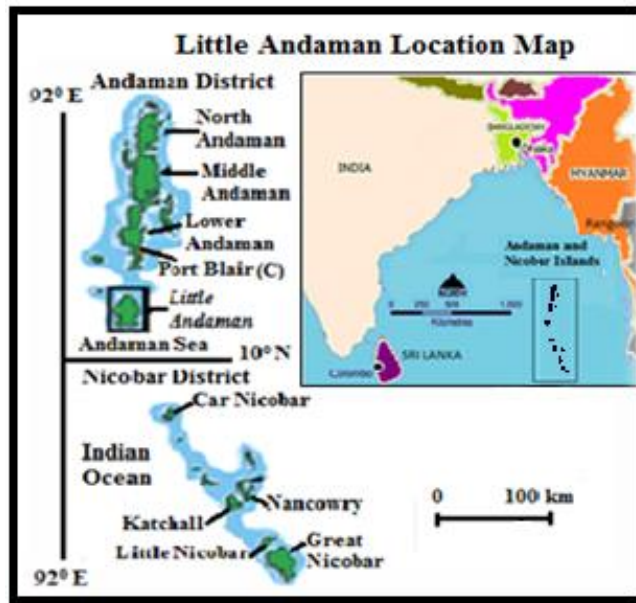


Figure 1: Location of Little Andaman in respect to India and its neighbouring countries

These have been hampering their eco-friendly adjusted lifestyle whereby in the name of economic development the modern man has always tried to commercialize them. These are crippling them from their daily sustenance and have made them greedy and lazy as well. Hence, intentionally invading within the domain of an undemanding, self-nurtured and complacent natural community in the name of sharing benefits goes against their actual development.

Homeland of the Onge

Little Andaman Island is the homeland of the Onge tribe from time immemorial, presently numbering only a hundred and two people (2001). The present population is 108 according to the 2011 census. The Little Andaman is a part of the Andaman Archipelago situated very close to the Equator, about 128 km. south west of Port Blair, the capital of the Union Territory. The indigenous Onge at present inhabit Little Andaman Island. The topography is flat with the north central part being a little higher, with a peak of 190 meters and covered with thick tropical rain forest. It is hot and humid with incessant rainfall almost throughout the year, the average rainfall being over 3,000 millimetres.

Chronological invasion within the Onge territory

The earlier references to this archipelago are in the Ramayana, the great Hindu epic. The origin of the name Andaman has been traced to Hanuman, the

monkey God of the Hindu mythology. In the 2nd century, Ptolemy had mentioned the name of this archipelago. Marco polo in the 13th century and many travellers during later periods also wrote about these islands (Buchi, 1973).

The recorded history of Little Andaman is rather new. Outer contacts with the Onge communities started in the year 1867, when a ship named 'Assam Valley' anchored near Little Andaman. The captain and seven crew members of the ship landed there and never returned. Later two ships were sent in search of them. Crew of the second trip had to face a fight with the Onges, resulting in the death of seventy Onge people along with a few outsiders (Cooper, 2002). Later, in 1873, another expedition was conducted, led by Stewart, with a view to take revenge by burning the community huts, killing a few Onges and capturing one Onge who was brought to Port Blair town. After this massacre the Onge became furious and did not allow anyone to enter this island. In 1880, Colonel Cadell and Portman gave them many useful things. This was the first historic event of acceptance of the outside world by the Onge community (Mathur, 1968).

After this, frequent expeditions were carried out for bridging the communication gap which created a hospitable environment in favour of colonization. All credit for such change goes to M.V. Portman. He dedicated his life to create harmony. During 1886-87, he lived with the Onges in their environment and he was the pioneer in preparing a report on them.

Onge's Perception about Nature

The Onges have taken nature as the main string on which they have judiciously arranged their beads of social activities. They deal a face to face interaction with Nature through their daily activities which have installed a fairly good knowledge of their own habitat. The root of their success in sustaining themselves with the blatant Nature was through their expertise and adjustment to the rhythms and reaches of nature. They attained them through the traditional wisdom developed from the in-depth knowledge of their habitat. Their eco-perception enabled the author to come to know about the geography and extract the latent science within their survival strategies in that remote area.

Truly, the Onge community people belong to nature and are solely subordinate on food provided by the same. They belong to the class of nomads besides being food gathering tribes. They search for food by moving from one place to another. Their household management is still going on in the same manner as it used to continue during their first existence. They are still making their typical earthen pots and canoes. This dexterity or the skill is still maintained but losing its alluring beauty day by day.

Lt. Colebrook (1790) was the first man who defined this community as 'Onge'. But the Onge call them 'En-iregale', meaning 'Perfect Man'; they considered themselves superior to all, as they live in harmony with the environment. But through an irony of fate, nowadays, they are considered as one of the most backward communities of the world. It has been noticed from various studies that the Onges are one of the purest of all the surviving groups of the Negroid race in the world.

The Onge categorizes the island of little Andaman into three geographical territories namely:-1) *Gire-makangey* 2) *Gire-darey* 3) *Enga-kwalakangey*. These territories are bequeathed by their own respective natural resources for their self existence. The Onges have proven themselves to be intelligent because of the fact that the territories that they have divided according to their opinion are almost of equal size and each territory receives equal proportion of coasts, forest resources, creeks and streams.

Onges also classify the course of a year into four distinct seasons of almost equal time duration and their given designation to the particular four seasons are *Toraley* (Feb-Apr), *Darey* (May-Jul), *Kwalakangey* (Aug-Oct) and *Mekangey* (Nov-Jan). On the basis of the perception of different types of weather changing phenomena, this division of seasons is made.

Metamorphosed Social Safeguard as a wing of development

The Onge are concentrated only in Little Andaman. Earlier, three distinct places were inhabited by this tribe and they were the Dugong (name derived from the herbivorous sea mammal found in this creek). Creek, Jackson Creek and South Bay within this particular island. Prior to independence, this island was very much invaded by the British expeditions, but the Onge were capable enough to repay them. The Onge of the Little Andaman were constantly disturbed by the British from different places. This invariably proved to be a hindrance to their daily schedule.

Pseudo Globalisation – Rather induced Imperialism!

After independence, the Government of India followed the plundering approach of the British and started taking strategies to encroach upon the arena of these hunting gathering groups within this island. It was the perception of globalisation installed within the planning personnel of mainland India that infused within them to introduce the norms as followed by the whole world in the name of development. For this purpose there had been the emigration of official personnel from the mainland. They settled all over the Hut Bay area.

Due to the chronological decline in the population of the Onge tribal community, in the year 1957 Little Andaman Island was declared as a tribal reserve which was subsequently constituted into “Reserve Forest” during 1963. In fact, the forests of this island remained practically untouched and undisturbed till about 1964-65 when some suitable forest area were cleared under rehabilitation scheme for the settlement of refugees from mainland and Car Nicobar Island. As according to globalization, all the resources should be open for all. Thus, this conception made the planners to overlook the livelihood of the Onge.

Biotic Imperialism- A newer dimension in the name of Globalisation

In the year 1970 timber extraction began in this island. This was carried out in the name of Andaman Canopy Lifting Shelter wood System and was recognized of being a scientific system of forestry. In 1972 about 20,000 hectares (roughly 30 percent) of the island was identified from its tribal reserve status. In the year 1974 assessment of the timber productivity of the forests of the Little Andaman Island was carried out.

This was not the end where the Government stopped itself. In 1977 the Andaman and Nicobar Islands Forest and Plantation Development Corporation (ANIFPDC) established an intensive field station in Little Andaman to expedite the forest exploitation programs by taking over some 19,600 hectares of the forest in the name of timber harvesting. The Andaman administrators encouraged private traders to extract timber under ANIFPDC supervision. Little effort was made, however, to control illegal tree cutting. In the year 1979, the Government of India (GOI), also entrusted the project of raising red oil palm (ROP) in Little Andaman forest land to the Corporation and transferred ROP in 160 hectares (ha) already raised by Andaman Forest Department in the year 1975-76.

These ROP plantations that were leased out to the Forest Corporation were further extended to 1593 ha in the year 1985-86 for 30 years (Sekhsaria, 2003). This ROP was grown all over the forest area hence squeezing out the Onges of their hunting spots. In this plantation area the government hired labourers from the mainland and out skirted the aboriginals allowing them to be at stake of the limited resources left out at mercy by the government. As the fruit bearing period is going to get over by 30 years i.e. by 2015, the productivity is in its decline. Even the plants are infected with diseases due to mismanagement and improper maintenance. Now the Forest department after a failure have decided to cut off the planted area and return it back to the natural forest once again. This decision is totally vague as a period of 30 years being invested for an exotic species has led to the destruction of the natural ecosystem of the forest.

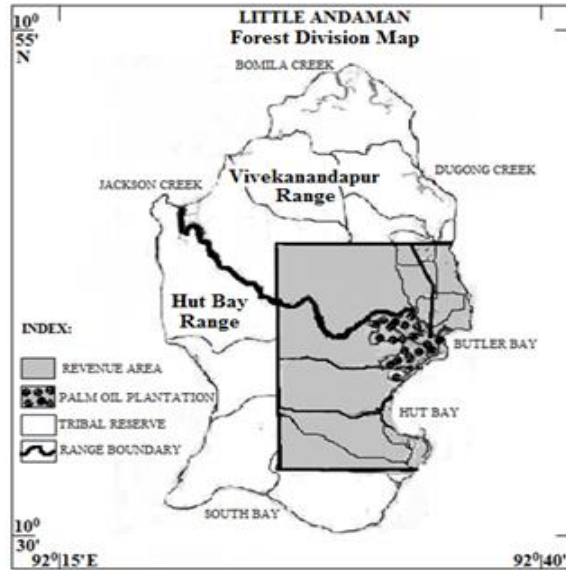


Figure 2: Little Andaman Forest Division Map

Source: Working Plan for Little Andaman Forest Division (for the period from 2011-2021), Vol.-I

Development and Reciprocation from the Tribal Folk Culture

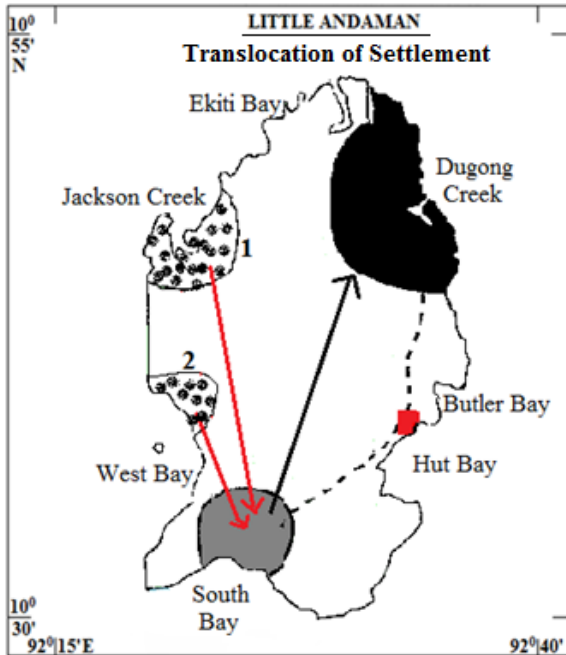
The Onge are concentrated in Little Andaman. Earlier, three distinct places were inhabited by this tribe and they were the Dugong Creek, Jackson Creek and South Bay within this particular island. Prompted partly by the changed situation in the aftermath of the colonisation of the Little Andaman Island and partly by the intension to do good to the Onge, the Government took the decision to settle the Onge at Dugong Creek in 1976-1977 and South Bay in 1980. But after the tsunami, 2004 they all were shifted to the Dugong creek alone.

Impact on the Folk Spirit hood – a Feeling of Topophilia

Another treacherous impact on the habitat of the Onge was visualized after the tsunami hit this island on 26th December 2004. The tsunami affected the South Bay camp much more than the Dugong Creek due to its geographical location. Though they were successful enough in escaping the wrath of the nature with their rich oral tradition, the administration persuaded them to join the Onge of the Dugong Creek. However, the Onge of the South Bay had showed unwillingness to settle together with the Onge of the Dugong Creek.

On the contrary, they wanted to be resettled near South Bay due to Topophilia attachment to their traditional habitat where the spirits of their ancestors exist.

Further the Onge of South Bay informed that for observing certain rites and rituals they require to go back to their traditional site where their ancestors are buried. But the administration paid no heed which gave a serious threat to the mentifacts that bear an important aspect within the Onge's folk spiritual culture.



After their island was "opened to settlement" by the Indian authorities in the 1950s the Onge were moved into four areas.

Spotted grey area: Two Onge populations, including the one at Jackson Creek (1) and (2) were moved to the South Bay reservation (**medium grey area**) in the 1970s.

After the devastating tsunami of 24th December 2004 the survivors of South Bay reservation were moved to Dugong Creek reservation (**dark grey area**) which is now the only remaining Onge area.

Dotted line: main road.

Square: Administrative headquarters of the Indian administration.

Figure 3: Chronological translocation of the Onge tribal settlement

Source: Anthropological Survey of India and modified by the author

Impact on the Onge Customary Folk Appearance

The uniform pattern of clothing once prevalent amongst the Onge has undergone drastic change after the interference of the developmental strategies within each and every pursuit of the Onge community. In the past, the children remained naked, the men wore only a small strip of fibrous loin going over the genital organ and tucked in the back in a narrow string going round the waist; the women wore nothing but a fibrous tassel, *Naquineghe* made out of fine germinal apex of a particular plant. The tassel hangs against a string going around the waist and over the hips. The tassel is large and covers the genital parts of the women.

A very significant part of their culture is body painting done with red and white clay. They are very fond of painting their body with thick layers of clay and such painting is an integral part of their culture. After marriage, the wife adorns her husband with these clay paintings and it is regarded that more beautiful the paintings are the more care the wife would take of her husband all throughout his life. Painting on the body is also done for various other purposes such as the red clay is used for healing diseases, to decorate for various occasions, in mourning, in menses and for killing pigs. Initially they did not like to cover their bodies with the clothes supplied to them by the administration as the clothes cover up the integral paintings of their body. But later on they were insisted to wear clothes when they were produced before the higher officials at Hut Bay. They were supplied with shirts, *lungis*, pants, *sarees*, blouses, and petticoats that ultimately destroyed the folk socio-cultural values and integration as well (Mukhopadhyay, 1999).

Impact on the Folk Housing of the Onge

Initially, there were two Onge camps designated for the Onge as stated earlier one at the Dugong Creek and another at the South Bay. Wooden pile houses were built for the Onges. Altogether there were 22 at the Dugong Creek and 5 at the South Bay camp. Wooden huts with raised platforms have been distributed among the heads of the Onge families. The houses provided to the Onge do not bear any structural resemblance with their indigenous temporary hut *Korale* or the communal hut *Beyra* of the Onge. The floor area of the *Korale* was traditionally made with split bamboo and cane by the Onges to allow proper aeration from below so as to withstand the hot and sultry weather prevailing there. The structural form of the floor has been borrowed from the *Korale*, but one can mark the difference between the floor of the *Korale* and its modern imitational distortion. The raised floor area of the pseudo *Korale* is so finely made with the wooden plank that there is hardly any opening seen on the floor. This prevents the flow of air from below. The houses are roofed with asbestos sheet with one room and one open balcony. All these constructional menaces make these huts uncomfortable for dwelling during the daytime as these houses become too hot to stay in the hot and humid environment of the island. Earlier to avoid the scorching summer season, the Onge used to migrate deep into the interiors of the forest where they found to be much cooler under the vast canopies. But now as they are within an invisible wall of the strategies, they have to get along with the system. To escape from the heat, the Onge have been observed raising their open and airy *Korale* near these pseudo-settlements to avoid the sultry summer season. It is only during the heavy monsoon do they prefer to live in the wooden houses.

Impact on the Food Culture

Generally the Onge's hunting and gathering arena consists of both terrestrial and marine sources. Wild boar is the only terrestrial species that the Onge hunt. The other terrestrial diet comprises of Pandanus, wild roots, tubers, fruits and honey. The marine food resources comprise different kinds of fishes, turtles, crabs, shell-fish and lastly but most importantly, the dugongs (a sea mammal known as Sea Cow). Turtle eggs are also gathered from the shore areas. It is within their folk custom that whatever the individual hunt or group gathering is they generally share zealously with the whole community. There is a well organised division of labour among the folk, as outlined by the community head, to prepare the food for the whole community. They particularly know 66 plant species of Little Andaman and out of these 24 for food, 27 for medical applications, and the leftover 15 for different useful utilization (Reddy & Sundersan, 1990).

But with the developmental strategies their domain of hunting and gathering got a thud. This was followed through several stages. Firstly, during the first half of the '70s a huge number of refugee families from Bangladesh (then East Pakistan), repatriates from Sri Lanka (then Ceylon) and Myanmar (then Burma) were shifted there. Each refugee family were handed over with some 5 acres of land that were derived by clearing the tropical rainforest. Not only that but those lands were also planted with coconut and betel nut trees which were alien amidst the rainforest lands. In the present day the refugees are gradually encroaching upon the forest land and are increasing in number at a rapid pace. They were allotted with 5 villages at Hut Bay, Netaji Nagar, Rabindranagar, Ramkrishnapuram, Vivekanandapur stretching for 28 kms from South (Bose, 1994). All these rehabilitated settlements were developed at the expense of forest areas, which were once the hunting grounds and gathering fields of the Onge. Secondly, during the second half of the '70s around sixty Nicobarese families were rehabilitated here from Car-Nicobar as population of the Nicobarese over spilled the Car Nicobar Island. Last but not the least the Forest Government in the year 1975 took over some 19,600 hectares of the forest in the name of timber harvesting. Eventually it started Red oil palm plantation over 160 hectares of the already cleared plots which further extended to 1593 hectares.

Adjusted with the shrunk forest area, the Onge were in a dilemma as how to sustain them within the limited sphere. As a result, the Onge suffered from a dearth of fruits and animals, which were their traditional food items and these posed a threat to their customary folk diet. But with the imposition of the immediate urge for development, this hard-working community had been supplied with the ration system where they are supplemented with grains, spices, tea, tobacco, sugar and oil which were absolutely alien to their diet and

affected their health immensely. The provision of food at their doorstep made them become oblivious of their hunting-gathering tactics and folk knowledge about their forest with which they easily accessed the jungle that was within their grasp.

With the introduction of a market culture, in the name of *Onge Multi-purpose Cooperative Society*, they are encouraged to sell their gathered items, mainly, coconut, honey, resin, cane to the co-operative Society for cash. The people who were absolutely unaware of any sort of economic processes were forcefully threaded to get within it (Basu, 1990). This encouraged them to extract more forest products. As a result, they deviated from their original livelihood pattern and this disturbed their folk integrity and serenity.

Impact on the Material Culture

The introduction of modern equipments due to globalisation has shattered the traditional material culture that is being replaced by the use of modern utensils. For example, *Toleh* is a kind of cane bucket, mainly used during hunting and fruit gathering. But, with the introduction of the plastic 'carry bag' the Onges are losing interest in making such traditional articles for their daily use. The person who could prepare the finest *Toleh* was appreciated in their society, but with the poly vinyl culture those skilled people are losing their self confidence and folk respect as well. *Ookoo* a dugout wooden bucket has a very significant role in the social material culture, where a husband prepares this bucket tenderly for his wife. The replacement of the *Ookoo* by the ubiquitous plastic bucket and carry bags has immensely affected their customary culture. Further, small to medium sized *Tolehs* and *Ookoos* have a tourist attraction, and now the government has equipped their material culture for the purpose of selling them in the market. Thus, the effort that had an essence of tender for the beloved was so easily commercialised.

Providing radio and other electronic items is perhaps a mistake; these tend to make the Onge idle. Almost every day they keep their radio sets on. But the artistic activities that had been part and, parcel of their skilful livelihood had a touch of amusement and they entertained themselves from such performances. Through their tough life of sustenance they were complacent enough. They were amused at the hunt of turtles, wild boars and the adventure within their livelihood were a part of their folk entertainment. But these supplementary gadgets in the name of globalisation divert them from their own rich folk culture.

Impact on the Economic Culture

Government then recognised that the Onge are not globally correct according to the settled format as justified under the banner of Globalisation. So it came up with several developmental strategies. The initial task was to allocate them an area which would be recognised as the tribal reserve and various programmes related to their modernisation would be carried out easily.

Hence, a tribal welfare agency named '*Andaman Janjati Vikas Samity*', assisted by the Government of India, Ministry of Home Affairs, was formed in March 1976 for undertaking welfare measures. As a first step, the Onge of Jackson Creek and Dugong were rehabilitated at the Dugong creek in 1976-1977. The other rehabilitated settlements were set up at South-Bay in 1980 (Mann, 1978) which is the southern periphery of the island. These regions were demarcated with an invisible fencing whereby their activities were regularly monitored and controlled. In the Dugong Creek reserved area, coconut plantations are being carried out where the Onge people are employed in the farm clearance activities with a daily wage of Rs. 4 per day in the early years of 1980s. They are also being taught to separate the copra from the coconut fruit. The strategies undertaken in this part infused the non objecting Onge community within an alien livelihood and translated it as development (Basu, 1990).

After injecting this culture within their system of livelihood, the government realised that it is not functioning as expected. At present, this Society is engaged in distributing the rations and other daily purpose articles. Now they are planning to introduce agriculture in the new settlements which they think would be more desirable since the Onges are already familiar with the forest and soil. (Gangwar, Mongia and Singh, 1984).

Snatching an eco-adjusted life pattern brings Despondency!

Snatching the livelihood and monitored life pattern not directly but the other way round created a feeling of despondency amongst the community. It was a fortune on the part of the Indian government that the Onge were not hostile, hence could easily be treated as guinea pigs under the sticker of development. But many a times they have shown their resentment in a friendly tone, but in vain. The government was deaf to their desires and the encroachment within their livelihood made them depressed. The mental reluctance cropped within them as they are going through an identity crisis which had a crucial impact on their population generation (Myka, 1993).

Table 1: Temporal change of the Onge population

Year	1901	1911	1921	1931	1941	1951	1961	1971	1981	1984	1987	1988	2008
Populati	672	631	346	250	N.A.	150	129	112	N.A.	102	98	101	92

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Note: **Estimated**, Enumerated;
Source: Census Reports of India

A century ago the population of Onges numbered 127 but thereafter due to different kinds of campaigning, the number dropped from 127 to a mere 98. For the past 20 years these poor tribal inhabitants had to face a great deal of disruption in their mode of living due to the arrival of different groups of people from different regions including the 700 mainland settlers and among them the prominent were the Nicobarese, transferred from Car Nicobar to Harminder Bay in 1973. The gradual decline in the population was due to the physiological as well as the psychological stress that has been impounded on this humble community.

Conclusion

The Onges lead a simple and contented life within their pristine ambience. They have appropriately adjusted themselves to nature's amplitude as well as caprices. Amidst all odds, they have balanced their needs and demands judiciously. To lead a simple life in consonance with their age old traditions and customs is a legitimate right of the Onges. Rather they behave like neo-determinists in which they stop to hear nature's verdict and then frame their steps ahead. Then why the Onge is detained from leading their pristine life? To have an answer to this question it ensures an obvious right to have a free sustenance with nature, without being usurped by the outers. The author feels that they should not be compelled to accept an alien culture in the name of so called global development, which will amount to a violation of their basic human rights. At this stage the government is still incapable of recognizing its fallacies. The author, during her field research, had witnessed how the artificial makeover of the Onge is having a disastrous impact upon their socio-cultural life. The decision taken by the government to bring them into the mainstream, according to the author, is erroneous. The contact of the Onges with the outer world tends to have an adverse effect on their health, mental state and social status resulting in a declining population.

The present author through this paper has thrown light on the rights of the Onges to practice a simple life. The imposition of modern ideologies on their daily life style in the name of development strategies would lead to the molestation of the norms of human rights.

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