

'ANY EXPLOITATION OF SENTINEL ISLAND WILL WIPE OUT TRIBALS'

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Rights & Welfare of STs, SCs, and OBCs - Schemes & their Performance, Mechanisms, Laws Institutions and Bodies

Cut off: The Sentinelese live in complete isolation.

Any exploitation of the North Sentinel Island of the Andamans for commercial and strategic gain would spell the death knell for its occupants, the Sentinelese, a most secluded, particularly vulnerable tribal group (PVTG) who reside in complete isolation on the island, the Anthropological Survey of India (AnSI) has said.

In a policy document, which comes almost two years after American national John Allen Chau was allegedly killed by the Sentinelese on the island, the AnSI says the "right of the people to the island is non-negotiable".

"These rights are unassailable, non-negotiable and unfringeable. The prime duty of the state is to protect these rights as eternal and sacrosanct. Therefore, their island should not be eyed for any commercial or strategic gain, for if it were to happen, it surely would be a death knell for its occupants," the policy document said.

The Sentinelese, with a population of about 50 to 100 on the North Sentinel Island, are not only among the most isolated of nearly 70 PVTGs across the country, but also among the five in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands which include the Great Andamanese, the Onge, the Jarawa, and the Shompens.

Along with maintaining the territorial integrity of the North Sentinel Island, the document also calls for building a knowledge bank on the Sentinelese. Since 'on-the-spot study' is not possible for the tribal community, anthropologists suggest the 'study of a culture from distance'.

Speaking to *The Hindu*, M. Sasikumar, Deputy Director of AnSI and among the few anthropologists who have circumnavigated and conducted an aerial survey of the North Sentinel Island as late as 2015, said this is first detailed policy draft for the Sentinelese island, prepared at the request of the Andaman and Nicobar Administration.

"The Andaman administration had written to us to come up with a policy document. Then all of us who have worked on the tribe sat together, held discussions and prepared the policy. We have sent the policy to the Andaman administration for their consideration." Mr. Sasikumar said.

The document calls for an insightful study of the 'journal' of John Allen Chau who spent a couple of days on the island, encountered the Sentinelese from close proximity and registered his observations. According to Mr. Sasikumar, Chau's 13-page diary — parts of which are illegible and has sketches of the settlements — is an extremely important anthropological document. Chau had handed it over to the fisherman who transported him to the island in November 2018, a day before he was killed.

"We don't know what is happening in the island. During the British period M.V. Portman had visited it, followed by few anthropologists of the AnSI after independence in 1967 and then it is this American (Chau). These are the only occasions when outsiders have landed on the island. The rest have been observing the inhabitants from a distance," Mr. Sasikumar said.

Goodwill missions

The anthropologist said that till the 1990s, there were goodwill missions whose contact was limited to standing in shallow waters around the island at a distance and offering gifts to the members of the tribe.

The policy document suggests that members of the goodwill missions should be interviewed for what they remember seeing during their circumnavigations as also fishermen from Wandoor, Manglutun, Chidiatapu, and others, about their visits to this island and any meeting with the tribal community.

The AnSI has published the policy inputs in a paper titled 'Draft of the Policies for Great Andamanese and Sentinelese' published in their journal, recently.

Along with Mr. Sasikumar, Vinay Kumar Srivastava, Director AnSI, anthropologist Umesh Kumar, Shiv Kumar Patel and Priyanka Airi Goyal are co-authors of the document.

"Though both Sentinelese and Great Andamanese are classified as PVTG, the tribes live in two completely different contact situation. While in the case of the Sentinelese their contact to the outside world is almost nil, the Great Andamanese had decades of exposure to the world outside their Island," Mr. Sasikumar explains.

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