
[India: Wave of poaching and exploitation hits isolated tribes](#)

Outsiders are invading the reserve of the isolated Jarawa tribe in the Andaman Islands, India, and stealing the game on which they depend for food. There are also increasing reports of Jarawa women being sexually exploited. Despite a Supreme Court order to the islands' administration to close the highway which runs through the reserve, it remains open, bringing disease and dependency.

The Jarawa are one of four 'Negrito' tribes who are believed to have travelled to the Andaman Islands from Africa up to 60,000 years ago. Two of the tribes, the Great Andamanese and the Onge, were decimated following the colonisation of their islands – first by the British, and later by India. The population of the Great Andamanese tribe fell from 5,000 in 1848 to just 41 today. Both the Great Andamanese and the Onge are now dependent on government handouts. The Jarawa resisted contact with settlers from the Indian mainland until 1998. The fourth tribe, the Sentinelese, live on their own island and continue to shun all contact.

The Jarawa are hunter-gatherers, and number around 270 people. They use bows and arrows to hunt pigs and monitor lizards, and catch fish and turtles. Now, hundreds of Indian settlers and Burmese poachers are hunting and fishing along the road and the coast, depriving the Jarawa of vital game. The problem has become so acute that in some areas the once abundant wild pigs and fish are now scarce. The Sentinelese tribe are also experiencing the theft of their food sources, particularly of lobster from the rich waters around their island, North Sentinel, and the Onge tribe say they cannot hunt enough pigs as these are being stolen by outsiders.

The main highway which runs through the Jarawa reserve, known as the Andaman Trunk Road, is also bringing exploitation of the Jarawa. There are numerous reports of poachers and other outsiders sexually exploiting Jarawa women, and outsiders are introducing alcohol, tobacco and alien food items on which the Jarawa are starting to depend. Those entering Jarawa land also bring outside diseases to which the Jarawa have no immunity. The tribe has already experienced one measles epidemic - prompt action by the authorities helped prevent a catastrophe.

The Administration of the Andaman Islands is making some attempt to restrict contact between the Jarawa and users of the road. This is a step in the right direction, but will not alone be enough to secure the Jarawa's future. Participants in a recent Indian government seminar on the future of the Jarawa concluded that intervention in the Jarawa's lives should be minimised, and that their development should be at their own pace and in the direction they themselves choose. However, some within the establishment still favour forcible assimilation. The then-Minister for Tribal Welfare said in 2003 that his ministry planned to 'reform the tribals and assimilate them with the mainstream' because 'it is not right to leave them as is.' Until the Jarawa's rights to their land and to make decisions about their future are respected, they remain in serious danger.

Lichu, one of the few surviving Great Andamanese, fears for the future of the Jarawa. 'I think what happened to us is going to happen to the Jarawa too... lots of settlers are hunting in the Jarawa area. There is not enough game left for the Jarawa. Their fish are also being poached. Public interaction with the Jarawa should end. The Andaman Trunk Road must be shut.'

If you wish to support the Jarawa of the Andaman Islands, please join Survival International's action at http://www.survival-international.org/jarawa_action.htm

By: Miriam Ross, Survival International, e-mail: mr@survival-international.org