

# Between nurture and neglect

The Ongee are one of three 'Primitive Tribal Groups' inhabiting the Andaman Islands in the Bay of Bengal. Although questions over their survival continue to generate concern in the global media, for all intents and purposes they remain 'protected' under the laws of the Indian state. A welfare regime has been instituted to look after their physical well-being and ensure the preservation of their distinctive culture and life practices. Vishvajit Pandya takes a closer look into the ways in which this state provided welfare mediates the lives of the Ongees and shapes their identities.

Vishvajit Pandya



Above:  
Ongees at the Dugong  
Creek coastal camp,  
Little Andaman,  
1984. Photograph by  
Vishvajit Pandya.

FOR THE SEVERAL INDIAN COMMUNITIES that live in villages on the fringes of the Ongee 'tribal' reserve on the Islands, 'tribal' welfare is a much resented practice. Settlers who have made their homes in these parts of the Islands, perceive the structure of welfare as expensive, as partial and inherently flawed. For them the so-called 'primitive' communities are no longer 'primitive'. They seek to be modernised, they want to be educated and enjoy the material markers of civilised existence. This is an argument that has also received much attention in the Island media, as well as in online discussion forums that debate the future of the 'tribal' communities of the Andaman Islands. The 'Light of Andamans,' a local weekly newspaper, for instance, has repeatedly published articles criticising the intent, structure, and policies of tribal welfare. Notwithstanding the veracity of these arguments, it is clear that this critique of 'tribal' welfare is ad hoc, prejudiced and very often uninformed. Indeed, issues of 'tribal' welfare only make news whenever they seem to impede larger projects of Island development. Though 'Tribal Welfare' and 'Island Development' as such are seriously at odds with each other, what unites them is a dogged refusal to acknowledge the history and agency of 'primitive tribal groups' such as the Ongee. Representatives of the state and civil society vie with one another to speak on behalf of the Ongee but refrain from any attempts to acknowledge their capacity to decide the course of their own lives. What emerges from both the public and private discourses of 'tribal' welfare in the Andaman Islands, is an ambiguity that throws the community into a liminal zone of existence sustained by postures of nurturance but flawed by inherent neglect. It is this zone of ambiguity that I seek to explore and address.

## Self-destructive encounters with outsiders

Until about 1885, nearly 700 Ongee hunter-gatherers were the sole occupants of Goubalambabey (Ongee name for Little Andaman), a 732 sq km circular island, which is part of the Andamans group of Islands. By 1895, following a series of violent encounters with the British colonisers, the Ongees were, as colonial official records put it 'pacified'. These instances of violence, as well as the allurements and gifts provided by British colonisers, are remembered even today by Ongees in myths and songs that condemn the outsider and caution against further contacts for fear of more violence and eventual extinction. This history of Ongee fears of the outsider is complemented by a felt sense of disorder within the community. Feelings towards a condition of disorder are exemplified by an acute demographic imbalance in the Ongee community, which has resulted in a growing inability to find marriage partners in compliance with clan exogamy regulations. These regulations are based on a four-clan division, associated with distinct parts of the forest and the surrounding coastline. (See Pandya 2009: 29-70). The historical and cultural impact wrought upon their community

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by the outsiders is often symbolised and commemorated by the Ongees by visually marking specific rocks or *kugey* on the shores. The *kugey* are meant to signify the tragic fact of the Ongees' self-destructive encounters with the outsiders. For the Ongee these memories are also meant to reinforce the belief that conditions of disorder and flux are culturally given.

Notwithstanding these Ongee perceptions of their condition, the question that arises is how, and to what extent, the Ongees have been able to pursue their sense of order and balance in a context where an increasingly intrusive regime of the Outsider takes control of their bodies, their living space and their life-practices? A large number of studies have shown how historically the structure and practice of colonial rule, the outbreak of disease and the constant influx of settlers on the island have compounded the complexity of problems faced by the Ongees. Settlers increasingly undertake illegal poaching and extraction of forest resources from the Ongee reserve forest. By 1981, it seemed as if the Ongees were under siege. The number of non-tribals on Little Andamans had grown to a staggering number of 7,214. They seemed to encircle the 100 or so Ongees restricted to the protected reserve territory; this was an unprecedented development as at any given time in order to manage the small community of Ongees, only about 20 welfare staff would be officially allowed within the reserved settlement. They would be under the strict surveillance of the administration and restrained from any practices that would jeopardise the cultural integrity of the Ongees. In the context of the growing demands of settlers on the Islands, a change in official policy *vis-à-vis* Ongees was evident. It was made implicitly clear to the Ongees that they would have to restrain or modify their hunting and foraging practices as areas of the already degrading forests had to be portioned off and allocated as cultivation fields to settler communities.

## State gestures of welfare

Yet, much of these problems remain unacknowledged to the Indian state, that with its gestures of welfare and nurturance had settled the community within the purportedly protected confines of the Dugong Creek Tribal Reserve that could be only entered with official permits. By 1950, the total population of Ongees stood at 150. In 1956 the Ongees were guaranteed governmental care under the Tribal Protection Act (Article 243, Clause 2 June 1956) and subsequently the Ongee had been classified as a 'Primitive Tribal Group' by the administration. 'Tribal' development institutions were directed to follow a strict policy of 'non-interference' *vis-à-vis* the Ongees, the Jarawas, the Great Andamanese and the Sentinelese. It may be noted that all these groups formed a very small and unique Indian population that was completely dependent on

traditional hunting and gathering practices. Regardless of the stated policy of non-interference, the thrust of the Indian state was to protect these communities as 'Primitive Tribal Groups' on the one hand, and to groom them into modern subjects of welfare on the other (See Awaradi 2002). The assumption being that such subjects would participate in modern economic practices within the protected regime of state welfare. The Ongees for instance, were settled at Dugong Creek not merely as protected subjects but as custodians of a newly-introduced economic enterprise— the coconut plantation. In order to reduce their dependence on foraging activities the administration also provided 100 Ongees food rations through the state's welfare agency *Andaman Adim Janjati Vikas Samiti* (AAJVS) established in 1976. The primary role of the AAJVS was to oversee the protection and promotion of those cultural institutions and practices deemed essential for the survival and growth of the Andaman tribal groups. The contradictions inherent in this philosophy of welfare and the flawed nature of its practice were soon evident in the gradual narrowing of the state's concerns to a point where all that seemed to be politically significant was to keep the Ongee community alive. They were to be nurtured as a demographic entity of 100 Ongees irrespective of the consequences such a regime of 'state imposed nurturance' would have on their lives and their sense of themselves.

The utter purposelessness of governmental institutions of welfare becomes evident when scrutinised closely. The benches in the community school remain vacant; the medical centre remains dusty with a local junior doctor who is often on leave. The social worker stays in his quarters waiting for the next pay check to arrive. The man in charge of the plantation, in consultation with the social worker, makes sure that each day at least some Ongees are marked as present for 'work' at the coconut plantation and certifies that those absent or abstaining from work are either pursuing 'traditional forest work' or have retreated into the forest to prepare for an imminent child birth in the group. State officials are known to welcome news of childbirth and welfare staff on the ground are seen to allow more rations and gifts if the Ongee promise to work at the plantation, or if they promise to make children.

Looking back at state welfare over the last 40 years, however, what stands out are solely governmental rituals of protection. On the arrival of a state visitor, Ongees scattered in the forest are herded towards the helipad and there they are given biscuits as incentives and fresh clothes to make them presentable. They are ordered to stand in a line, witness the unfurling of the national flag and listen to the speech made by the dignitary. Most of the Ongees today understand simple Hindi language commands and demands, but not the grand speeches made by the state officials and visitors. The rituals of welfare remain mired in mutual incomprehension but the show goes on. Concerns are expressed, demands are made, and the administrative ceremony comes to a ritual closure. Ongees scatter and often scuttle away to the forest till the time they feel the need to come to the settlement again to collect free rations.

## Of death and demography

Apart from official visits, what makes 'news' related to the Ongee settlement is the birth of a child in the community. Ironically however, irrespective of periodic births the total population always remains around a 100. It was only during the Asian tsunami of December 2004, that a huge national and international concern about the survival of the Ongees was raised. It was found to the surprise of many, that the Ongees had survived the natural disaster (see Pandya 2005). Officials expressed their relief, but made little or no effort to understand their precarious conditions in the aftermath of the disaster, apparently content with the knowledge that the numerical strength of the community remained unaffected.

Moving away from official thinking on the subject, it may be noted at this point, that birth rate in the community has remained low as a result of a particular cultural logic that has come to define rules of marriage and remarriage in the community. This logic translates into a practice that allows the eldest single man or woman in the community to marry the first available individual from a prescribed band, irrelevant of age difference. In 1984 when the total Ongee population was 101, there were 26 married couples. Sixteen married couples were formed out of remarriages of individuals who had lost a spouse. Among the 26 couples, the age difference between the husband and wife was in most cases nearly 10 to 15 years. This imposed an almost inevitable limitation on the childbearing capacity of the married couple.

On December 9th 2008 the breaking news from the Port Blair administration was that over the preceding three days five Ongees had died. The cause was attributed to their drinking some chemicals found in plastic containers that had washed up on the coast of Dugong Creek ([http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/Pollution/Andaman\\_tribesmen\\_die\\_of\\_toxic\\_drink/](http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/Pollution/Andaman_tribesmen_die_of_toxic_drink/))



## Providing welfare to the Onges of Little Andaman Island



articeshow/3813023.cms). Suddenly, the population had dropped from the magical figure of 100 to 95. In subsequent days three more deaths occurred and the number was pushed down to 92. The figure of 100 that somehow been maintained for over 40 years was suddenly blotted out. The administration flew an emergency medical team to Dugong Creek on the afternoon of 10th December. The situation was developing rapidly as by the time the visiting medical team had arrived 16 more Onges were fighting for their lives after they too had consumed the lethal concoction. There were real fears that the Ongee numbers could decline to an all time low of 77. The 16 Onges who needed intensive medical attention were flown into Port Blair to be treated at G.B. Pant Hospital; while undergoing treatment another death was reported. On 13th of December 2008 15 Onges were discharged and sent back to Dugong Creek. The administration had succeeded in holding the total number of Onges at 92, thereby staging a successful damage control exercise.

The press statement from the administration emphasised that the Onges consumed something they thought was alcohol. Implicit in this is the fact that alcohol is a substance known to Onges. Predictably however there was no attempt to explain why or how alcohol could have been known to the Onges over the years. To do so, the administration would have to admit that only four kilometres away from the Dugong Creek settlement, outsiders ran a lucrative enterprise of the production and sale of locally made illicit liquor, which ethnographers working among the Ongee have known about since 1983 (See Pandya 2009: 37-39). The administration was either in denial or being deliberately oblivious of the fact that welfare officials on the settlement knew of the Onges being consumers of hooch (See Venkateswar 2004: 166-169). However, statements by the administration sought to sustain the image of the Onges as innocent 'primitives' who accidentally consumed the lethal contents of a jerry can that washed up on the shores of Dugong Creek.

### Nurturing a population

In the flurry of state rituals of welfare that followed, the authorities announced that they would henceforth enforce stricter measures for ensuring the safety and security of all the 'tribal' people on the Islands so that such incidents would not take place in future. The Lieutenant Governor of the Union Territory ordered a forensic analysis of the liquid traces in the containers found by the Onges. On December 14, 2008, top officials of the administration from Port Blair went down to Dugong Creek and arranged a 'counselling camp' for the bereaved Ongee family members. In course of another state organised power drama, the Onges who have historically depended on gathering from forest and coastline were advised to avoid consuming unidentified items and other

**Above:**  
At the request of a representative of the Indian state, Onges have decorated themselves with clay paint to receive Lieutenant Governor Mr Kampani at the Dugong Creek coastal camp, Little Andaman, 1984. Photograph by Vishvajit Pandya.

harmful items found on the seashore. As I write, in November 2009, no reports from the forensic investigation have been forthcoming or able to confirm the official statement that the cause of the Ongee deaths was poisonous chemicals washed up on the beach. This silence has meant that the fact of the supply of spurious liquor into the Ongee settlement cannot be refuted. The watchful gaze of the Island administration notwithstanding, and in spite of the control of movement into or out of the Ongee reserve territory, it is evident that the survival of the remaining Onges remains uncertain.

To dispel the shadows cast on its welfare practices, the AAJVS announced, on the January 31st 2009, that they had organised a unique event. Four of the Ongee widows who had lost their husbands in the December tragedy were remarried to eligible members of their community. The state welfare authority patted itself on the back for a great accomplishment, seeing itself as a matchmaker carefully calibrating the choice of partners among the 24 adult males and 32 females. The obvious objective of the exercise was to increase the number births in the community, thereby raising the possibility of pushing up the population to the pre-December 2008 figures.

The point to note here is that even if the state wanted to point to the uniqueness of the event of Ongee widow re-marriage, there is nothing unusual about it within the community. Out of the 94 remaining Onges, the percentage of male and female children since 1983 has always hovered between 65% male and 35% female. In fact, 82% of the Ongee adult women in the community at Dugong creek were married at least once before and 60% were married twice or more before (See Pandya 1993). In other words, widow marriage has been a historical practice with the Ongee.

Yet, the way the AAJVS organised the re-marriage ritual was far removed from Ongee tradition. The traditional mourning period was not adhered to and the marriage was arranged at the state's behest and not by community elders. Making it a state spectacle replete with senior administrative officials as guests - although officials added the qualifier, that the marriage rituals were performed in accordance with the communities' conventions and with the consent of elders - meant that the very act of arranging and staging such marriages became a self-contradictory proposition. The AAJVS had ignored its own fundamental directive - not to interfere with or attempt to mediate the cultural practices of the 'Primitive Tribal Groups'. Furthermore, AAJVS's paradoxical attempt to conserve Ongee culture actually re-invented or redefined Ongee traditions and the bases of Ongee identity. The administration has declared that it will soon be organising similar ceremonies for all the widows in the community.

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The December 2008 tragedy stands out as a case of prime neglect that is yet to be explained by the state. The subsequent act of nurturance does little to change this reality. The AAJVS officials who visited and arranged the ceremony to marry widows do not yet seem to be able to come out with the truth of the 'mysterious' deaths of the Ongee husbands. Today the Onges remain colonised by state agencies that oscillate between blatant neglect and zealous nurture in response to the demands of welfare book-keeping. In the process, what goes unnoticed is the fact that the institutions, practices and the very logic of welfare, slowly but gradually deepen Ongee vulnerability.

In accordance with the states' representation of the Onges as a 'threatened primitive culture' the welfare agency sustains the construct of Onges as a people who need to be protected and nurtured through a subtle yet elaborate machinery of intervention. The state is seen to work on the premise that any recognition of the Ongee capacity to change or question the construct of the 'primitive' would be tantamount to an acknowledgement of its failure to preserve the 'primitive' in its authentic condition. The refusal to look beyond the demographic imperative of welfare into the agential imperative of welfare is what makes the state's policy of protection so ambivalent. It is at this point of ambivalence that the logic of nurturance translates into fatal neglect and threatens the lives of those who are deemed to enjoy the unceasing protection of the state.

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