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 distinct social 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

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 state sponsored welfare 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 unfounded. Indeed, issues of ‘tribal’ welfare only make news whenever they seem to impede larger projects of island development. While ‘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 common people’s livelihoods sustained by practices of nurture and flayed by inherent neglect. It is this zone of ambiguity that I seek to explore and address.

Traditional hunting and gathering practices. Regardless of the stated policy of non-interference, the threat of the Indian state was to protect the ‘Primitive Tribal Groups’ on the one hand, and to groom them into modern subjects of welfare on the other (See Awardi 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 Dungun Creek not merely as proto-colonialist’s to be introduced with a newly introduced economic enterprise—the coconut plantation. In order to reduce their dependence on foraging activities the administration also provided the Ongee food rations through the state’s welfare agency Andamand Adomin Jopyi Vikas Samiti (AJVS) established in 1976. The primary role of the AJVS was to oversee the promotion and protection of those cultural institutions and practices that maintained 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 exemplified in the perceived narrowing of the state’s concerns to a point where all that seemed to be politically significant was to keep the Oongee community alive. They were to be nurtured as a demographic entity. The sheer unlikelihood 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 one looks closely at the welfare bureaus. 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 systematic 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 that no one is 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 converse in terms of numbers of childbirth and welfare staff on the ground are seen to allow more rations and gifts if the Oongee 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 helpdesk and there they are given biscuits coupons and incentives that are passable. 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 mixed in mutual incomprehension but the show goes on. Concerns are expressed, conditions are noted, but no 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.

By 1985, following a series of violent encounters with the British colonisers, the Ongees were allegedly treated as colonial official records put it ‘poured’.

State regimes 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 Dungun 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-a-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
Providing welfare to the Ongees of Little Andaman Island

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 did not seem to be able to come out with the truth of the ‘mysterious’ deaths of the Ongee husbands. Today the Ongees 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 Ongees as a ‘threatened primitive culture’ the welfare agency sustains the construction of Ongees 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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