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How civilized are we?



The 'human safaris' to ogle at the Jarawa tribe— a small population of less than 400 in the remote Islands of the Andamans, through routes that cut through their forests – much like the lion safaris, in which we sit inside vehicles and drive through the pathways frequented by the animals. The Jarawas go back some 60,000 years as one of the four indigenous group of inhabitants of Andaman Islands. An extremely shy tribe of people, they have, and want to have, minimal contact with the outside world, with their contacts with outsiders essentially restricted to a handful of Andamanese groups.

The Jarawas are among the earliest populations to migrate out of Africa to fan out wider, and have largely retained their racial purity to date. Clearly, the invasion of the

privacy of the Jarawas never gained centre-space in our social space earlier, as it should have.

But it should, if we fancy ourselves a civilized people. It should have attracted serious attention of the nation, when the Supreme Court gave its unfortunate judgment a week ago, allowing tourism to reopen through a major highway, the Andaman Trunk Road built in the 1970s which cuts through the Andaman Islands. A brief history of the issue may be in order. While the tribes remained relatively unmolested until the turn of the century, there has been a spurt to tourism to the Andaman Islands since the onset of 2000s, with a heightened interest to gawk at these distinctively different looking people. About 10 years ago, addressing an environmental law suit, the Supreme Court the road closed for tourism. However, the Lt. Governor ignored the order on the specious premise that the road was 'too important a lifeline for the settlers'. Why that was not an act of contempt of court is anybody's guess. Tour operators and cabbies took to luring the Jarawas with cookies and candies! Such was the traffic through this road that one Jarawa boy had to have his hand amputated following an accident.

The degeneration of our conduct, like much else in our country, reached such pits that in 2012, a police officer was caught on video ordering some Jarawa women to dance in

exchange for food. The matter was brought before the highest court once again by a tribal rights organisation Survival International earlier this year over plans to build a tourist resort near the Jarawa reserve, which was giving a further boost to “human safaris”. Unfortunately, the Supreme Court in its wisdom rescinded the January stay, opening the road to tourists. This was a crippling blow to the efforts of Survival International to save the privacy of the Jarawas.

The Survival International’s campaign is not without good reason. As recently as 2010, the last person of the Bo tribe – one of the four indigenous tribes – died. If we really care for a different culture, and if we imagine ourselves a civilized society, would we rather gawk at them like wild animals in a safari park, or will we respect their way of life and help them continue their tradition in privacy, as is their desire? We pride ourselves as a civilization that is thousands of years old. And yet, we do not blanch at the fact that we are reducing our so-called civilization to profit from ogling at people whose ways of life may be different from ours. What kind of ‘civilization’ can we call ourselves? Are we “civilized” at all?