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Sabuj Dwiper Raja: A Fight for the Rights of Jarawa Identity and Culture

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Abstract: The present paper is an attempt to study Sunil Gangopadhyay's prose narrative *Sabuj Dwiper Raja (The King of the Green Island)* which may be treated as a short fiction to fight against the violation of human rights of the *Jarawa* tribe. The *Jarawa* land is as though an independent nation within a nation. The ancient tribal people of Andaman Nicobar Islands have to strive hard to protect their habitat, identity and culture from the clutches of the outside people who even consider them no better than barbaric animals. The article highlights the fact that the *Jarawa* people are human, not cruel animals and they have also the human right to protect their identity and culture. Their land is haunted by the so-called civilized world for the greed for natural resources. Even though the colonial rule is over, the sufferings continue. They are brutally murdered and deprived of the wealth of nature that survives them since ancient times. Yet their land is exploited by the outsiders despite they lead a life synchronized with nature.

Keywords: *Jarawa* Identity, Culture, Human Rights, Nature, Exploitation, Survival.

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Introduction

"The doctrine of human rights is the articulation in the public morality of world politics of the idea that each person is a subject of global concern. It does not make matter what a person's spatial location might be or which political subdivision or social group the person might belong to. Everyone has human rights, and responsibilities to respect and protect these rights may, in principle, extend across political and social boundaries." - (Charles R Beitz)

It is the right of every individual regardless of their nation, location, language, religion, ethnic origin, or any other status to live with some dignity. Everyone should have the right to live, the right to freedom, the right to cultural and religious practices, the right to debate, the right to protect the identity crisis etc. In India, National Human Rights Commission is an autonomous body that protects and promotes human rights relating to liberty, equality, and dignity guaranteed by the constitution. The commission enquire about any kind of violation of human rights or negligence by a public servant and suggests court proceedings relating to human rights. It also recommends relief to the victims and suggests appropriate remedial measures. Despite all these, things do not always go right. Sunil Gangopadhyay's *Sabuj Dwiper Raja (The King of the Green Island)* is a case in point to prove the violation of human rights of the *Jarawa* culture in its severe form in the Andaman Nicobar Islands.

Andaman Nicobar Islands

Setting in an isolated location, the Andaman Nicobar Islands comprise one of the seven union territories of India at the juncture of the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea. The territory consists of two island groups, the Andaman Islands and the Nicobar Islands. The Andaman Sea lies to the east and the Bay of Bengal to the West of these islands. The total area includes 8,249 square km covering grasslands, forests, and wetlands.

According to the genetic study, the Andamanese have been isolated from the other populations since the Palaeolithic Period which ended 30, 000 years ago. The tribal people have their distinctive linguistic and cultural identities. On the other hand, the Nicobar Islands have been inhabited by people of various backgrounds due to the European intrusion into the islands. The indigenous people were back-footed by the intervention of the people outside the islands. History says The Cholas used Andaman and Nicobar Islands as a strategic naval base to make an expedition to *Sriwijaya* Empire in Indonesia from 1014 to 1042 AD. The Colonial domination started with the Danish East India Company which arrived on the Islands in 1755. Later the British entered the islands and established a colony at Port Blair. They made the infamous Cellular Jail for the convicts throughout India. The freedom fighters had to suffer life imprisonment in that infamous jail with tremendous torture. The Andaman Nicobar Islands were united under the chief commissioner at Port Blair in 1872. During World War 2, the Islands partially came under Japanese control under the authority of Arzi Hukumate. Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose visited the islands during the war and called them “Shaheed-Dweep” (Martyr Island) and “Swaraj-dweep” (Self-rule Islands). Bose and the Indian National Army made General Longanathan the Governor of the Islands. However, the British re-occupied the islands and the Japanese garrison was made to surrender in 1945. The British Empire in the Indian sub-continent too was on the wane due to the immense pressure of the glorious freedom struggle by the Indians. The British intended that the Anglo Indians and the Anglo-Burmese of these islands should form their independent nation. But this never materialised and it became an integral part of independent India in 1950 and was declared a union territory of the country in 1956.

Bio-diversity of the Islands

Andaman and Nicobar Islands represent the richest repositories of biodiversity in India. The area comprises 1962 km of coastal zone apart from 6 lacs sq. Km of marine mater zone and 7171 sq km land of deep tropical rain forest. The total area comprises two types of ecosystems with several kinds of microhabitats- (i) Island Ecosystem, and (ii) Marine Eco-system. The island eco-system consists of forests and the coastline including mangroves and littoral forests, beaches, and other intertidal zones. More than 2000 species of plants grow in the Andaman Nicobar Islands and almost 1300 of them are exclusive as they are not grown

in the other parts of India. The islands have a wide variety of flora and fauna including life-stocks like the tortoise, buffalo, goat, pig, rabbit, deer, and many more. According to the Botanical Survey of India, the faunal diversity of the islands includes 62 species of mammals, 284 species and subspecies of birds, 88 species of reptiles, and many other lower forms of life. The mammals include Andaman Spiny Shrew (*Crocidura hispidia*), Andaman Wild pig (*Sus scrofa andamanensis*), Barking Deer (*Muntiacus muntjak*), Blue Whale (*Balenoptera musculus*), Sperm Whale (*Physeter catodon*), Chital (*Axis axis*), Common Dolphin (*Delphinus delphis*), Dugong (Seacow) (*Dugong dugon*), Palm Civet (*Pagumalarvata*) etc. The variety of birds include Andaman grey Teal (*Anas gibberifrons*), Andaman Tree Pie (*Dendrocitta belyi*), Andaman wood Pigeon (*Columba palumboides*), Cotton Teal (*Nettapus coromondalica*), Crested Serpent Eagle (*Spilornis cheela*), Emerald Dove (*Chalcophaps indica*), Green imperial Pigeon (*Ducula aenea*), Hill Myna (*Gracula religiosa*), Lesser Whistling Teal (*Dendrocygna javanica*), Swiftlets (*Collocalia fuciphaga*), White Bellied Sea Eagle (*Haliastur leucogaster*) etc. The reptiles include Andaman Banded Krait (*Bungarus andamanensis*), Green Sea Turtle (*Chelonia mydas*), Hawksbill Turtle (*Eretmochelys imbricata*), Leather back Turtle (*Dermochelys coriacea*), Olive Ridley Turtle (*Lepidochelys olivacea*), Salt Water Crocodile (*Crocodylus porosus*), Water Monitor Lizard (*Varanus salvator*) etc. The marine eco-system comprises the vast sea and the coral reef. Because of its crystal-clear water along the endless coast the island is a home to colourful and natural sea shells and exotic corals. About 179 species of corals are found here including Plate corals, Taghorn corals, Brain corals, Finger corals, Mushroom corals etc. Besides 147 types of Coelentrates, 100 types of Molluscs and 70 types of Sponges are also available in this region. With these abundant natural resources, the islands provide enough to the tribal dwellers living over there. The sea also provides them enough subsistence for living. In short, they are happy with fishing, hunting, fruit gathering and so on. They feel at home in their territory and consider the outsiders as evil forces for they use to exploit their identity and cultural practices.

The Tribals in Andaman Nicobar Islands

The original population of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands consists of the 'indigenous' people. These tribal people have been living in the forest of the islands for thousands of years. They lead a hunter-gatherer lifestyle dwelling in substantial isolation. The so-called civilised people came to their land only a few hundred years ago. The tribals of the islands are broadly divided into two groups- the 'Negrito' whose home is the Andaman Islands; on the other hand, the Nicobar Islands are home to the 'Mongoloid' tribes.

The 'Negrito' tribes consist of the Great Andamanese, the Onge, the Jarawa and the Sentinelese. They had reached the Island 60000 years ago. They are all nomadic hunters who earn their livelihood by hunting wild pigs and monitor lizard and catching fish with bows and arrows. They

also collect pure honey, sweet roots and berries from the dense forest. The Mongaloid tribes intruded on the islands from the Malay Burma coast thousands of years ago.

The Jarawa- a primitive tribe with unique identity

The Jarawa tribe is one of the largest tribes in Andaman. The primitive tribe has shunned all interaction with the outsiders. They are called 'the hostile one' or 'the people of the earth'. They are still in the wild stage entirely depending upon the forest and sea for food. They hunt wild boar, monitor lizard for meat and eat various kinds of fruits, honey and tubers etc. The Jarawas of both sexes are comfortable without dresses. However, some homemade ornaments with shells and palm leaves are worn by them though not in a sense to cover their nudity. The Jarawas lived in the south east part of Andaman but after the British regime they shifted to the western and middle Andaman regions.



Fig 1: "Tribes of Andaman and Nicobar Islands." Go2andaman.Com, www.go2andaman.com/andaman-nicobar-islands/tribals-and-tribal-visits. Accessed 18 Mar. 2022

Sunil Gangopadhyay a Humanist

Sunil Gangopadhyay who wrote under the pet names of Nil Lohit and Sanatan Pathak was a great Bengali writer and a versatile genius. He was a famous poet, a novelist, a historian and a writer of short stories, travelogues, literary criticism and children's literature. He was a great humanist who wrote with a pen as if dipped in the blood of humanism. His famous novels include *Sei Samoy*, *Pratham Alo*, *Purba Paschim* etc. which serve as historical documents of Bengali society during the renaissance. His *Purba Paschim* is a historical novel based on the partition of Bengal dealing with the age old cultural heritage of the Bengalese. It serves as a bridge to join two Bengals (The East and West Bengal) together both emotionally and culturally. The partition novel reminds the Bengalese of the both sides to maintain a sense of fraternity as envisaged by the humanist Sunil Gangopadhyay. The secular self of Gangopadhyay is evident in his great work *Maner Manush* an epitome of communal

harmony and humanism. The work was transformed into the film form by Goutam Ghose in 2010 and got enough popularity. But he is most famous for his creation of *Kakababu* a series of 36 Bengali novels which became very significant in Indian children's literature. *Kakababu* is a physically challenged fictional character whose real name is Raja Roy Chowdhury who is a brave heart and whose passion is to solve mysteries. His character is rendered immortal by Gangopadhyay as his adventure continues throughout the country as well as the world. The *Kakababu* series provides a brilliant insight into the history and culture of the people of various locations on the earth. *Sobuj Dwiper Raja (The King of the Green Island)* is a short fiction of *Kakababu* series and the prose narrative got translated into motion picture by popular Bengali film director Mr. Tapan Sinha in 1979 depicting the Jarawas in the Andaman Nicobar Islands.

Gangopadhyay's *Sabuj Dwiper Raja (The King of the Green Island)*

Sabuj Dwiper Raja (The King of the Green Island) is a detective story included in *Kakababu* series written by Sunil Gangopadhyay. A gang of foreign criminals along with a Panjabi set for a mission of stealing a meteorite that dropped in the remote area of the Andaman Islands. The Jarawas consider it as a divine gift of nature that provides them with constant light. *Kakababu* alias Mr. Raja Roychowdhury along with his young adult nephew Santu, followed them into the jungle of the island and discovered many unknown things about the Jarawas. They came to know how the illegal poaching and hunting by the outsiders enraged the ancient tribal people. They often got killed by the poachers therefore having strong envy against the non-tribal. In the story, we see how the young detective Santu eventually stumbles against a bullet injured Jarawa who was obviously shot by the *sahibs* entering their land to steal their resources. The incident clearly shows that the outsiders use to haunt their place for stealing their resources and they even do not bother to kill them to satisfy their greed.

The Jarawa got a king to protect their culture

As the fiction develops, we find, an escaped convict of the British ruled India Gunada Talukdar a revolutionary who was subject to imprisonment in the cellular jail in the Andamans somehow managed to reach the land of Jarawa. The fierce tribe treated his wounds and took him to their lonesome territory. Fortunately, he was regarded by the Jarawas as their king as he had no evil intention to harm them. Although Mr. Talukdar went there from an alien land, he could well understand their sentiment, culture, and life style and remained with them for a long time, pleaded for their human rights, guided them to fight against the foreigners and non-tribal people who went to exploit them. The king got unquestioning

support from the Jarawas and they unanimously made him their king. *Kakababu* who was sent in the intelligence survey to Andaman, enters the land to discover why the jarawas were so furious about the outside people. He got acquainted with the king and together they fought the foreign intruders who with an evil motive want to steal the secret source of energy from a meteorite that had landed in the Jarawa land and after a series of incidents the sahibs got arrested by a rescue helicopter and cunning intellect of Santu. The novel also shows how the Jarawa people are self-supporting with the resources they get from the islands.

The Ending – A message

Unlike the film version, Gangopadhyay has made a very pathetic ending to the story. The sahibs were arrested after a drama of events and taken into custody. The climax is over and Mr. Roychoudhury along with Santu is now making an earnest request to Gunoda Talukdar to pay a visit to his motherland Kolkata which is now free from the British. The Government of India also wants to honour him in New Delhi. Sabuj Dwiper Raja unwillingly goes back to his motherland on request. He was also got promised by the Home Secretary of the Govt. Of India, Mr. Kousik Varma, that the outsiders would not disturb the Jarawas anymore; nobody would try to take away their mysterious stone, producing everlasting flame; the human rights of Jarawas should not be disturbed at any cost. In the film, Mr. Talukdar denies going back to his native home and vows to remain unto the last with the Jarawas. He is happy to spend the rest of his life in the Jarawa land. But in the short fiction, we see Mr. Talukdar's farewell to the Jarawa land. The parting session was most touching as Jarawa people looked sombre during the time of his departure. They hide their faces in mud as a sign of their grief. The Jarawa women encircled him to request that he should stay there forever. The old man Mr. Talukdar consoled them and vows to return to the Jarawas again. At first, he was supposed to go to Kolkata. He went there after a long time. But what did he see there? Kolkata had completely changed. Although a huge crowd gathered in the airport to greet him with slogans, although there was a lot of enthusiasm regarding Gunada Talukdar's return, the onetime revolutionary did not himself feel at home. The trees had been replaced by the jungle of concrete. The city was overflowed with population and dirty air. People suffering from hunger were begging and they were lean from starvation. The air was polluted and there was a lot of noise. It was as though he had been displaced in an alien land. He felt suffocated in the city for the lack of fresh air. When everybody was busy thinking that he should be hospitalised, Mr. Talukdar requested them to take him back to the Jarawa land. He lamented that he cannot breathe the dusty air here in Kolkata. He said to himself, "Why I came here! How beautiful the place was! How fresh the air was there! There was hardly any noise other than the sweet notes of the birds, murmuring sound of leaves and pleasant sound of the waterfall. Nobody begs there, how peaceful the place was, that is my heaven!" ()

And immediately the Jarawa king breathed his last. The death of the King was a message to us. He found a contrast in the lifestyle of the Jarawa community and that of the city people. The Jarawa people lived in the heavenly abode of nature on the people living in cities live in the drab dreary atmosphere. With their natural resources the Jarawas are hale and hearty while the poor people in Kolkata are begging with hunger, therefore, sickly. The independent India has no doubt progressed yet the people are living in abject misery. On the other hand, the life of the Jarawa becomes miserable only with the intervention of the so-called civilised world into their land. Had they been not disturbed by the outsiders; their life would have been more protected as they had been enjoying since thousands of years. So, there is an apparent progress in free India but the people of the free country are not free from poverty and hunger unlike the Jarawas.

Present Condition of Jarawa Tribe

The novel foreshadows the struggle for the existence of the Jarawa tribe because of the repeated attempts by their exploiters from the outside world. Even though the colonial rule is over, the post colonial domination still remains as it is evident from some recent incidents violating their human rights. Although the endangered tribe is apparently protected by the law of the state, the intrusion of the non-natives in the Jarawa territory tells upon their indigenous culture. Several contact attempts have been made to enter their territory. But any attempt of mainstreaming the community proves disastrous consequences. They are happy in their own way. But illegal poaching and land encroachment and human safari into the Jarawa land especially after the construction of the Andaman trunk road make their life miserable. The visitors treat them like animals in a zoo. The Jarawa girls are being raped and exploited by the bus drivers, travellers, and foreigners. Their resources are stolen away. So they do not believe the outsiders who often get a fitting reply from them. In most cases the intruders got killed as the primitive tribe gave them hostile treatment with their indigenous weapons. But the situation is changing now. The number of people of the primitive tribe is ever decreasing. The construction of the Andaman trunk Road is a case in point. The road cleaves through the Jarawa Forest land dividing their habitat. The *Jarawa* children might fall an easy prey to the gifts and rewards of the outsiders thereby forgetting their indigenous culture and independent profession. But one thing is clear that the human rights of the tribal people should be protected by the nation. They are humans, a tribe having their own identity, culture, language etc. They are not hostile to everybody. In 1975 a friendly contact was made by an anthropologist Madhumala Chattapadhyay whom the Jarawas treated as their doctor as she provided them some ointment for injuries during their hunting and fruit gathering. She boldly reached their land and offered some bananas and coconuts. Like *Sabuj Dwiper Raja (the king of the green island)*, she was welcomed by the community as a queen of the green island. In November 2018,

an American named John Chau in a frenzied mood of transforming the Sentinelese into Christianity got killed by the primitive tribe.

Conclusion

‘Nil Lohit’ Sunil Gangopadhyay being a humanist has written for cause of the tribal people of Andaman Islands who are deprived of their own rights to their perennial resources for living in their own way. The stealing motive of the mysterious light in the novel is a case in point. The study shows how the protagonist of the short fiction Mr. Gunada Talukdar, an escaped convict of the British ruled India and a man from the civilised world could well understand the sentiment of the *Jarawas* and thereby became their leader. The job of the king is to protect his subjects and look after their welfare. The *Jarawas* believed him as their master who could provide them salvation from the torture of the outside people violating their human rights to survive. They do not depend on any organisation or even a nation. Living in small communities they like to live far from ‘madding crowd’s ignoble strife’ without disturbing anybody. They violently react only when they are unjustly hurt. Since ancient times they have been healthily living in those lands. Nature is not hostile to them rather they know how to overcome certain natural disasters. Settling in the isolated places of Andaman Nicobar Islands of India, they have their unique way of living without doing any harm to the others. They stand as they are united and share the common joys and sorrows of their tribes. They hit the outsiders only when they are hurt illegally and not before that. They even never invade other’s land. They are tuned with their ecosystem to lead a healthy life. Government is, no doubt, making attempts so that the primitive tribes may survive in their own way by making some of the islands forbidden for outsiders’ entrance. Yet there ever remains a gap in the official system. Sometimes it is seen that the policemen deployed there to protect their rights are indulging in violating their human rights. A picture seen on YouTube shows a policeman enticing a Jarawa girl to dance instead of food. The visitors are often seen as hostile to them. The making of Andaman Trunk Road is also causing a lot of harm to their age-old cultural practices. The message of the book or its film adaptation is – “Let the Jarawa live their life undisturbed in the most isolated places of Andaman and Nicobar Islands and never exploit them to corrupt their style of living as it will harm their culture and thereby, making a disorder in the ecosystem of the territory resulting in the extinction of the tribe.” Implementation of strict laws regarding the well-being of the *Jarawa* tribes may protect their human rights to survive. Mass awareness should be made in this regard so that nobody can play with their destiny and any kind of exploitation of the endangered tribe may lead to their ultimate extinction.

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