**The Killing of a Male Child of the Jarawa Tribe in the Andaman Islands, India: An Ethical Deliberation**

**The Moral Problem**

The Jarawas are a negrito tribe of dark-skinned, short-statured individuals living in the Andamans Islands. In March 2016, a light-skinned male child was born to an unmarried woman belonging to the Jarawa tribe. At 5-months of age, the baby-boy was killed by an elder of the tribe. The child was a result of an affair of a tribal woman with a mainland individual, who used to visit the island to gather lumber for a mainland lumber company in the protected land of the Jarawas. He and his associate got the elder Tatehane drunk and instigated him to kill the child to avoid all possible evidence of his illicit relationship with the said Jarawa woman. The child was taken from the woman’s thatched house by the elder, in a drunken stupor, and killed by drowning. The body of the deceased child was recovered on the sands. Tatehane then took the corpse of the child into the forest, where it would be left to dry until thebones were collected, as per traditional tribal practices. However, when the investigators spoke to him to retrieve the body to serve justice to the perpetrators, he said that he had “*offered the body of the dead baby to his ancestors*”. The two mainland individuals were arrested in the case and put behind bars. But, due to the lack of any evidence of the murder of the child, the case was dropped and the said individuals released. The Government of India (GoI) shrugged back from persecuting Tatehane for the murder of the baby boy.

Is the GoI’s decision not to interfere with the killing of the male child by the elder of the Jarawa tribe ethical?

**Morally relevant Facts**

The Jarawa tribe is an endogamous (1) tribe that has been living in the Andamans for close to 55,000 years after having migrated out of Africa around 70,000 years ago (2). The Y-chromosome Alu Polymorphism (YAP) insertion studies have indicated that they originated in Africa (3). The Y-chromosome analysis under the 1000 Genome Project has revealed that the Jarawas are genetically close to East Asia (4) and have descended from the early Paleolithic colonizers of Southeast Asia (5), who continue to follow their hunter-gatherer lifestyle dating back to stone-age in the habitat designated as ‘protected’ for them under the GoI (6).

**Health status**: Since 1998 when the tribe first made contact with the outside world, there have been two Measlesoutbreaks(7) that pretty much decimated most of the tribal population. Apart from this, research on their blood has revealed that while they have the Duffy group antigens(8)that protect them from malaria caused by Plasmodium vivax but not from Plasmodium. falciparum (9). Thus they are highly vulnerable to malaria caused by P. falciparum, which can be lethal (10). Similarly, 66% of the Jarawas have been found to carry the HBS Ag (genotype C) (11–13). Despite the presence of the HBsAg in their blood, the occurrence of the disease is not rampant. This is owing to the innate immunity that protects them from this debilitating disease (14). Apart from the above, the Jarawas have also been found to be facing a rapid decline in their population due to other endemic diseases, sexually transmitted diseases, and a low ratio of women in their population to advance their population (15).

To offer them some protection from these health diseases and for the fact that the Andaman Trunk Road passes through their territories, the GoI has made provisions to provide basic health services and vaccinations to protect them from diseases they may acquire by coming in contact with the mainstream population(14).

**Andaman Trunk Road**: is a road that was built by the GoI to connect all the islands in the Andaman cluster of islands. This ensures that food and other important amenities can be delivered to Jarawas and other tribes that dwell in these islands. Unfortunately, this has also encouraged human safaris, in addition to stripping the Jarawa land of their food and other resources (16). A wild pig which is the main source of protein for the Jarawas has been over poached, because of which now the Jarawas are depending on deer as their source of protein, for the first time in their history. The steady onslaught of tourists during human safaris and poachers has exposed this tribal population to unsafe sexual relationships, alcohol, tobacco, and drugs, exposing them to various diseases and disorders. Jarawas have been found with cell phones, wearing clothing, and using hammer and scissors as tools for other purposes in their daily life (17)

**Dwindling population:** Currently only around 400 members inhabit the protected areas of the Jarawas (2). The census conducted in recent years has indicated a steady decline in their population(18). This not only adds to their vulnerability status but may permanently eliminate this oldest known human population from our world.

Due to the above reasons, they are considered as “particularly vulnerable tribal group” (6)

**Ethical Deliberation**

Various approaches could be applied to ethically deliberate on this case. Invoking The UNESCO-Universal Declaration of Bioethics and Human Rights (UDBHR) to evaluate the case of the killing of a Jarawa tribe child by an elder in the Andaman Islands, India seems to be the most appropriate, as it is deeply linked to the issue of Bioethics and Human Rights of the indigenous population and their protection in our modern world(19). As the Scope in Article 1 explains, “*This Declaration is addressed to States. As appropriate and relevant, it also guides decisions or practices of individuals, groups, communities, institutions, and corporations, public and private*”.

**Article 3: Human dignity and human rights**

The Jarawas are known to have migrated out of Africa about 70,000 yrs ago and have lived in Andaman for over 55,000 yrs(6), while the mainland population has been in India for just over 5000 years. The Jarawasare human beings, just like the mainlanders, who have survived on their own without needing any assistance from any government or mainland population (14). There has never been an instance of any major disruption created by the Jarawa population in the area where they reside, even though ‘human safari’ occurs with no restrain(16). This fact needs to be acknowledged and reciprocated. Thus, the Indian Government should respect this aspect and allow the Jarawas to live their life as per their traditional and cultural norms within their designated territory.

The baby who was killed is a human being too, with every ounce of dignity and human rights applicable under the UDBHR.

**Article 8: Respect for human vulnerability and personal integrity**

In 1998 when Dr. Chandrakant Kar met the Jarawas for the first time as a medical officer at the primary healthcare center (PHC) providing them the much-needed health services, he encountered the tribal population that was in exceptionally good health. To quote him, “they were well built and apparently healthier than any other tribal community on the mainland, even better than the common rural people.” The typical lifestyle illnesses that plague the mainland population such as cardiovascular diseases, obesity, or mental health issues were not seen among them (14). However, constant contact with the mainland population due to the continued usage of the Andaman Trunk Road has left them vulnerable to contagious diseases such as measles, TB, and sexually transmitted diseases (14). Respecting vulnerable populations is a foremost responsibility of the Indian government in accord with the UDBHR; but, also for the fact that they have formulated a policy to protect the aboriginals (18)in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, as they are considered socially underprivileged ethnic minorities.

**Article 12: Respect for Cultural Diversity and Pluralism**

The verbiage of Article 12 of the UDBHR reads as, “*The importance of cultural diversity and pluralism should be given due regards. However, such considerations are not to be invoked to infringe upon human dignity, human rights, and fundamental freedoms, nor upon the principles set out in this Declaration, nor to limit their scope*”.

This explicitly states that cultural diversity must be respected and considered under all circumstances as long as they do not impinge on essentials such as human rights of any individual or fundamental freedoms. Having lived successfully on this earth much before the advent of modern civilization, the aboriginals such as the Jarawas should be allowed to live true to their traditions and cultures, more importantly as they are the last of the indigenous tribes from the early Paleolithic era(2). It is more important to not take offense at their cultural practice of killing a genetically different child to protect the purity oftheir genetic pool. This has deep rationale when you consider the inherent protection they get because of their genetic makeup. Any dilution or adulteration to the genetic pool may lead to complete obliteration of the tribe from the face of this earth. As co-inhabitants of this earth, we should give all our supportto protect and safeguard this ethnic and genetic minority and their interest in furthering their generation.

**Article 14: Social responsibility and Health**

The GoI has every responsibility to promote the health of this socially underprivileged tribe. It does offer health care services to the tribals including vaccinations (14) and maternal and child health (MCH) care, as the population of women is lower than that of males. This ensures not only to attain better health, as it is a necessity for life; but also to save the population from the brink of extinction. The child and his mother were protected by the health workers in one such health facility, until his killing. The Jarawas are also provided with vaccinations and medications to protect themselves from life-threatening infections and diseases so that they can survive and live a healthy life (6).

**Article 16: Protecting Future Generations**

Under this Article, the present generations have the highest responsibility to protect the future generation. This applies to protect the next generation of Jarawas too. Every measure required to safeguard the furthering of their generation should be indulged in while taking care to see that it is done in moderation and with the consent of the Jarawa community, as this is essential for the future of humanity.

**Article 17: Protection of the environment, the biosphere, and biodiversity**

Ethnic minorities such as the Jarawas live in the wild and feed on wildlife and forest products such as fruits, leaves, and roots (20)These also are required for their traditional medicines. To further the cause of their survival, we must safeguard their habitat, which is crucial to their existence. Maintaining healthy biodiversity is essential for their survival, as otherwise, depletion in their food products, may gravely endanger their existence. Aboriginals have a profound bond with their environment that is essential for the protection of their habitat. They utilize natural products in moderation so that they can be easily replenished, thus striking a perfect balance. They have a deep understanding of how to protect their environment for their future generations, as their elders did for them.

**Conclusion:**

The government of India has heeded the advice of experts like Dr. Chandrakant Kar and other experts in the field who warned that any attempts to “civilize” the Jarawa by giving them clothing or education were likely to put their very existence in jeopardy. The same applies to ask them to comply with our laws and regulations, as they are naïve to it.

Knowing their vulnerable status, the Jarawas should be left alone, as only this can ensure their good-health and continued survival in their protected land. No efforts should be spared in protecting this vulnerable population by providing them with the necessary medical care. Knowing that the main threat to them is contact with the mainland population, all access and entry of mainland folks to their territory should be restricted immediately. This will ensure that they can continue their life without any shortage of food, habitat, shelter, or being stripped of their culture and traditions, which are the very identity of the tribe. Moreover, the GoI came up with the “Policy on Jarawa Tribe of the Andaman Islands” to regulate and limit the interference with the Jarawa population. The policy further mandated that no efforts should be made to assist the Jarawas to follow the lifestyle or laws of the mainstream population or government against their choice(21).

Since the UNESCO-UDBHR recognizes ‘groups’ distinctly in their preamble, the Jarawas should be allowed their autonomy to practice their millennia-old culture, traditions, and practices, even though they may be diametrically opposite to what we believe in a civilized world, per Article 5. As an endogamous ethnic minority, they have every right to maintain the purity of their genetic pool, as they deem fit, even if it is eliminating any individual with clear signs of admixture of their indigenous genes, as per their age-old practices.

However, what would be helpful is to minimize the occurrence of illicit contact and/ or liaisons of tribal members with the members of the mainland, by strictly implementing the policies already in place for the protection of the aboriginals of Andaman Islands(22).

Finally, the documentary movie ‘We are Humanity’ rightly captures the sentiments of the Jarawas, who declare, “*We are born happy. We are happy living our life*” and ending with the poignant statement by the members of the community imploring the mainlanders saying, “*We do not want to be contacted*”(23). Their request needs to be honored.

Given all the above facts, the Government of India did a commendable job ethically, by averting the persecution of the Jarawa elder in the murder of the child.

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