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Government of India
Ministry of Tribal Affairs

Shastri Bhawan, New Delhi-115
Dated: 12th August, 2009

To,

The Secretary,
National Commission for Scheduled Tribes,
Lok Nayak Bhawan, New Delhi


Subject: Draft Policy for Shom Pen, a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PTG) of A&N
Islands.

Sir,

As you would be aware, there are five Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PTGs) in the UT of Andaman & Nicobar Islands. So far there exists only a "Policy on Jarawa Tribe of Andaman Islands (2004)". Now the Ministry of Tribal Affairs has finalized a draft policy for the Shom Pen, PTG as well. However, before the Ministry finalize this draft policy, we shall be grateful if the comments of your Ministry/Department on the enclosed draft of the Shom Pen Policy are furnished to this Ministry within one month of the date of issue of the letter through e-mail at tribalaffairs@nic.nic.in or by post to the undersigned. This draft policy for Shom Pen is also available in the Website at www.nic.nic.in.

If no comments are received within the stipulated period, it would be presumed that your Ministry/Department agrees with the draft policy.

Yours faithfully,


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SHOMPEN POLICY

1. Introduction and present life style

The Shom Pen, according to Trivedi R. et al, are one of the most isolated and poorly understood contemporary hunter gatherer population that inhabit the southern most island of the Nicobar Archipelago. Genetic analysis provides evidence that they are an offshoot of the Nicobarese deriving their origin from at least two source populations in the Indo-Chinese/Malay origin.

The Shom Pen live a nomadic life moving from one habitation to another in search of fruit and hunt that is till now found abundantly and sufficiently in the thick rain forests of the Great Nicobar Island. According to one study, there is a degree of distinction between Shom Pen who live in the southern coast of Great Nicobar Island and the others who live deeper inside.

Their features are tanned Mongoloid and their hair is generally straight. The existence of curly haired Shom Pen, coupled with their comparatively dark skin, leads to the belief that they would have been a Negrito admixture, sometime in history.

Presently, the Shom Pen live in about twelve habitations made of bamboo and leaf thatch. They number just about 398 persons according to the 2001 census. A recent UT Administration survey, however, seems to put their number at 297 including 9 persons missing after the December 2004 Tsunami. It is generally believed that the Shom Pen did not suffer during the Tsunami because their habitations were at places located higher than the sea-level.

The Shom Pen live on fruit of the kewry tree (*Pandanus tectoria*). Besides, they eat fish, wild pig and sometimes reptiles and crocodiles. They love eating wild honey and now know that wild honey has a market in the surrounding non-Shom Pen areas especially at Campbell Bay.

The following safeguards, either in the form of legislation or executive orders, are available to the Shom Pen living in the Great Nicobar Island:

- (1) Andaman and Nicobar Islands (Protection of Aboriginal Tribes) Regulation, 1956.
- (2) Area reservation prohibiting only authorized persons to enter.
- (3) Ban on transfer of tribal land to non-tribals without the prior sanction of the Union Territory Administrator.

4. Policy prescription

(a) Survival:

(i) **Ensuring that the Shom Pen survive and grow in good health is the primary task before the Union Territory Administration.** The first intervention to ensure this is to immediately (within two years) build up a **non-intrusive data** base on each family, on a format that needs to be designed in consultation with experts from the Anthropological Survey of India (AnSI), the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) and other prominent national institutes/universities. It would be essential to begin the exercise by selecting personnel from these organizations **who could quickly learn the Shom Pen language** so that in the process of data collection it would be possible to learn about Shom Pen beliefs, attitudes to life and social relationship. As has been put by an expert from Calcutta University, "there is need for anchoring it (the policy paper) on a good data base of the Shom Pen; which is not available". It should also be possible to associate and train the Shom Pen youth in data collection and rudimentary analysis.

(ii) **All experts who have been associated in the drafting of the policy paper unanimously agree that contact the outsiders would be "dangerous, harmful and destructive", "no outside intervention in the life and culture of Shom Pen should be allowed", "if interaction with outsiders is not banned, the Shom Pen way of living would die out too",** but certain specific interventions that could be sensitively designed to improve their reported but

allowed to live in their own way and only when they seek outside interference/assistance, should these be sensitively provided. The fact that Shom Pen do not encourage outsiders to visit their settlements and their womenfolk hide in the forests whenever outsiders are in the area is the best indication available to show that **they do not like to be approached.**

(iii) On the other hand, Shom Pen males often visit Campbell Bay to barter various products they collect, especially wild honey. Sometimes, they go there to collect ration, whenever they feel the need for it, which they bring to their village. But most often, the Shom Pens are happy to remain in their habitat, undisturbed. Therefore, again keeping the Jarawa experience in mind, **the East-West Road inside the Shom Pen reserve should not be completed or repaired and the surrounding jungle should be allowed to encroach upon it. In the context of the easy manner in which the Shom Pen go to Campbell Bay there is no point in re-establishing the Shom Pen hut complex on that road, 27 kms from Campbell Bay.** One certain benefit the closure of all activities on this road will have on the Shom Pen will be the restriction of contact with unconcerned road labour and their ill habits.

(iv) Contact with tourists should be strictly forbidden, essentially because they and tour operators are unlikely to be aware of the dangers of even "humanitarian" gestures - like distributing sweets or creating unnatural expectations (Jarawa youngsters are known to demand bananas, biscuits and even chewing type tobacco from tourists by stopping their vehicles). **Boat operators should be made aware of government policy on this and violations strictly punished.**

(c) Protection of their natural habitat:

Luckily, most of the areas in the Great Nicobar island are protected under the Forest Act or the Wild-life Protection Act. This should continue and the Andaman & Nicobar Administration should not attempt any construction in the Shom Pen territory in the name of development. There are enough natural

Whereas the number of Shom Pen as per 2001 Census is only 398, the Nicobarese are 28653. Since the Nicobarese are more economically advanced and live along the coast, there will be pressure to link up the eastern part of the Island with the western through the East-West Road. **Again, taking a clue from the Jarawa policy, a route along the south of the island, along the coast should be the only option.**

(g) The AAJVS:

The AAJVS staff need special attention. The A&N Administration should make them feel special as ultimately, they are ones who are interacting with the Shom Pens. They should be continuously trained by competent organisations like the Anthropological Survey of India (AnSI) and given excellent service conditions. However, no leniency should be shown to them if they exhibit un acceptable behavioral traits (like heavy drinking, tobacco use, moral turpitude) that can have adverse impact on the Shom Pen. **Upgrading the standard of the AAJVS should be a legitimate charge on any development funding.**

5. Other issues:

(i) There are indications that the Shom Pen do not get good exchange for their produce when they go to barter these at various market points. Since the local administration are aware of the items they get on barter (essentially clothing, iron implements and plastic containers) pictorial representation of typical exchanges, placed at various points, and also distributed in the habitations, will make them more aware.

(ii) Interestingly, the Shom Pen feel the need to wear clothes only when they approach Campbell Bay. Só, administration and visiting (authorized) dignitaries should not distribute clothes, especially synthetic ones.

(iii) Full isolation is not feasible . Tubes of Pepsodent toothpaste have been found in remote coastal habitats (Laful) indicating that either the local fishermen or the AAJVS staff have shared such products with them. For the

- (g) **The notified Shom Pen territory should be fully and visibly demarcated and no curtailment, reduction or acquisition shall be made for any purpose. The possibility of recognizing their territory under the Constitution should be explored.**
- (h) **A 5 km. radius buffer zone on land and sea around the reserve area would be notified to prevent any commercial and tourism activity. Indeed, no major commercial activity should be encouraged or permitted in the entire Island as the potential of harming the eco-system and the tribals who live in such areas can potentially be very dangerous.**
- (i) **All encroachments in the Shom Pen territory shall be removed within a specified time.** Arrangements will be made to ensure that such encroachments do not take place in future.
- (j) No permanent residence for Government employees/ non-tribals/AAJVS in the Shom pen reserve area will be allowed. They can be temporarily accommodated, in camps, if their services are needed for any research or welfare intervention.
- (k) **Cross infection** from non Shom Pen during treatment of Shom Pen patients in hospital will be avoided through isolation.
- (l) **A plan/guide covering the action to be taken in the event of any medical emergency, like an epidemic,** should be prepared by the A&NI Administration involving doctors who have worked for long in the Islands, doctors who have experience of doing such work in other areas of the country and national level institutions like the ICMR.
- (m) **Officials/workers engaged in the protection and welfare of Shom Pen, as well as for research will be regularly screened** to ensure that they are absolutely free from any communicable diseases.
- (n) The Shom Pen have a dynamic relationship with the Nicobarese. Hence, attention has to be paid to such interactions and the interaction points. Further, the population of the Nicobarese is growing at a faster rate. So,

GREAT NICOBAR ISLAND



Map 2. The Great Nicobar Island