

Topic: Tribes of India: Jarawa

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**JARAWA** One of the four Negrito tribes of the Andaman Islands, they inhabit the west coast reserved area of 765 square kilometres in the South and Middle Andaman Islands. According to Radcliffe-Brown (1948), 'they are the descendants of emigrants who at sometime in the past made their way across from little Andaman and thrust themselves upon the inhabitants of Rutland island and the South Andamans, maintaining their footing in the new country by force of arms'. The earlier Aka-Bea tribe of the Great Andaman division had referred to them as the Jarawa or Yerawa, a name which is still used. The estimated Jarawa population of 275 persons is larger than the census (1981) enumeration of 31 persons, of whom 21 are males and the rest females. Their language has been included in the Andamanese family of languages. The Jarawa are monolingual, and do not know any other language apart from their mother tongue, Jarawa, and until now, they have not developed any system of writing.

Both the male and female Jarawa remain naked; however, sometimes they use strings made of bark and leaves as ornaments. The males use a special folded bark chest guard. They are of Negrito stock and are short-statured with a dark skin and frizzy hair. The occurrence of steatopygia (accumulation of fat giving a characteristic shape to the buttock) in post-puberty is a typical feature of their women. The data on somatology and dermatoglyphics show their close resemblance with the Asiatic Negrito and not with the African one (Sarkar, 1985). They are a hunting-gathering community living a semi-nomadic existence. The Jarawa eat pork, turtle meat, eggs, fish, molluscs, roots, tubers and honey. They do not consume any alcoholic drink or narcotics. Of late, some have developed a liking for coconut, banana and boiled rice, which they get once a month from a team of officials and experts who visit their area to establish contact.

The Jarawa are reported to have two major territorial divisions. They move in small groups within each territory for hunting and gathering food and get together at times. Adult marriage appears to be in practice among them as the couples are almost of equal age. They also appear to be monogamous. Their smallest social unit consists of a male, a female and their unmarried minor children. During the hunting and gathering expeditions a few families move together and each family gets a share of the catch. However, the items gathered by the members of a family are shared among them. Hunting, fishing and collecting honey are the men's jobs. They alone handle bows, arrows and spears. The women only do small-scale fishing

with baskets and also help in collecting roots and tubers. The broad three layered bark sheath worn by the menfolk, including very young boys, covers their belly and chest. This is used for carrying arrows and knives and for protecting the vulnerable parts of the body. This type of bark sheath is not worn by the women or by any other Negrito tribe or anyone else in the Andaman Islands. The females take an active part in their economic activities, except in hunting with a bow and arrow. The pattern of interaction of the women with their male members and with the non-Jarawas visiting their area suggests that the Jarawa women enjoy a status equal with the men, if not higher. Practically nothing is known about their life cycle rituals except that the small bones of dead persons are collected after the flesh decays, and one such piece is hung by the relatives around the neck or waist. The concept of individual leadership appears to be lacking among them. The 1981 census records the entire population of the Jarawas as not having stated their religion.

Though they live naked, both the males and females love to adorn their bodies with clay paintings and drawings of innumerable designs. Even their wooden buckets, chest guards and bows are ornamented with symmetrical zig-zag or criss-cross designs. Men, women and children paint their bodies with red ochre or white clay in various geometric patterns. This seems to be a kind of folk art of some social significance. The making of baskets and mats, shell necklaces and weapons of metal are part of the traditional craft.

For more than a century, in spite of the presence of the non-Jarawa people around them, the Jarawa, unlike their neighbours the Great Andamanese, have preferred to remain aloof, maintaining an unfriendly attitude towards others. It is only recently that a section of them has shown a friendly attitude. Even then, hostile encounters between the Jarawa and the non-Jarawa take place whenever the former get provoked by the activities of the latter close to the reserved area; steps are being taken to establish friendly contacts with them. This is being done cautiously with a view to ensure that a community which has succeeded in maintaining its unique culture against heavy odds does not become extinct.

(Source:Singh,1994)

#### References:

1. Singh, K. S. (1994). *The scheduled tribes* (Vol. 3). Oxford University Press, USA, pp.420-421