

UNIT VII: Ethnographic accounts

Module 3: The Material Culture of the Onges

OBJECTIVES:

The main objective of this module is to:

- 1) describe about the material culture of the Onge;
- 2) discuss about their economic activities; and
- 3) discuss about the food habits, housing pattern, weapons etc of the Onge.

SUMMARY:

Onges are one of the most primitive tribes in India. They belong to the Negrito racial stock and they have been relegated to the reserved pockets both at Dugong Creek and South Bay of Little Andaman island. They live in a remote corner of the country in a small pocket. They are the semi-nomadic tribes and fully dependent on the food provided by nature. They eat turtle, fish, roots, jack fruits etc. They have developed artistry and crafts. The present population of Onges is 105. The threat to the survival of this tribe cannot be denied any longer. The Indian authorities must act with alertness and promptitude to save the lives and ecological heritage of the endangered tribe of India.

TEXT:

Introduction

The Onges are one of the most primitive tribes in India. They belong to the Negrito racial stock and they have been relegated to the reserved pockets both at Dugong Creek and South Bay of Little Andaman island. They are also diminishing in number. They live in a remote corner of the country in a small pocket. They are the semi-nomadic tribes and fully dependent on the food provided by nature. They have now experienced the impact of outsiders. At the same time efforts at befriending them have proved to be successful. They have been provided with pucca hut type houses, food, clothes, medicines etc by the administration. They eat turtle, fish, roots, jack fruits etc. They have developed artistry and crafts. The Onges can make canoes. A primary school has been functioning at the Dugong Creek settlement of Onges. This tribe has become laid back and dependent in their ways. Also their rate of reproduction has become very low. These people have reached almost at the verge of extinction.

The religion of the Onges is simple animism. Neither ceremonial worship nor any kind of propitiation is practiced by them. They believe in different class of spirits-spirits of the wood, the sea, disease, storm and ancestors.

According to the 2001 census of India, only 5 out of the 96 Onges were Hindu and the remaining were “ Religion not stated”.

Physical features

The Onges belong to the negrito sub-race of the primary race, negroid. They exhibit the distinctive negrito characters such as pygmy stature(less than 150cm) and pepper-corn type of

hair. They have affinity with the Semangs and Sakas of Malaya, Aetas of the Philippines and Tapiro of New Guinea.

Material culture

The Onges are basically hunters and gatherers. As the islands are covered with a large number of rivers and as the sea is near to land, the people exhibit the habit of fishing. Sea and forest have played vital roles in the pragmatic life of the Onges. As a shrinking community, the Onges are at present looked after by the Andaman Administration in Strait Island. This administrative body has recently encouraged them in horticulture and domestication of animals. The people have shown no hesitation in accepting new ways of life as forest Reservation Act had already restricted their movement in the forest. However, all age and sex take part in economic activities. They have been trained in plantation, agriculture work and domestication. In 1858 before the introduction of dogs, the Onges had no domesticated animals. Now they breed pigs and fowls in captivity.

Present day Onges also show great cooperation between the sexes. Wives help their husbands in all economic activities. Traditionally the people are prone to sea fishing, so they have been great boat-builders. But they do not make rafts like other tribes. As rafts are not suitable in rash sea, canoes of different sizes are made by the Onges. However, the young generation shows a diverging interest, their attention has been shifted to other activities. Households goods include canoe, canoe making tools, fishing nets, wooden implements, earthen pots and baskets of different types. The pots and utensils are generally decorated in colour. Colours are obtained naturally from ores. The aesthetic sense of Onges is found to be reflected in various decorations. They are also fond of music and dance form an indispensable part in all communal feast and festivals.

From the account of Radcliffe-Brown we came to know that the Onges maintained strict division of labour. The male members of the community kept themselves engaged in construction of hut and canoe, in manufacturing of implements and weapons. They also go for hunting, fishing and honey collection. Fishing or turtle hunting keep them away from home for consecutive days. Women and children would go for local gathering. They collect fruits, flowers, edible roots, leaves and shrubs from the forest. Besides women fetch water, manage the cooking and other domestic jobs. Different kinds of ornaments were made by them and they were expert in tattooing.

Weapons and Implements

Bow and arrow are the favourite hunting implements of the Onges. They had learnt to make spears, particularly in the period when they started to employ the dogs for the purpose of hunting. For turtle and large fishes they still prefer arrows and harpoons with a float. Nets are used to catch small fishes, these are thrown either from the shore or from the canoe. The Onges know the methods of poisoning or stupefying fish in pools and rivers. Digging stick is an effective implement in digging the roots, just like a hooked pole for tearing the fruit from tall trees. Adze is sometimes used for obtaining molasses and for cutting honey comb. Use of string or thread is very popular among the Onges. They make it from the fibre of *Anadendron*, *Gnetum* and *Hibiscus scadens* as noted by Radcliffe-Brown. From the account of Radcliffe-Brown we also know that the people were expert mat-makers. Simple form of mat making was known to each and every person. The framework of a mat was made with

bamboo or cane strips. Strips of same size were placed parallel to each other. Inhabitants of Little Andaman used bamboo-mats to sleep on them. Traditional huts of the Onges were also made with mats. For making such a mat at first a strong mat had to be made with strong palm leaves. That was placed on a rafter and tied with strips of cane. Even the hunting shelters of the Onges at the top of the trees often utilized these huts.

House

Three types of camps are found among the Onges

- a) The chief or permanent camp used for the most part of the year, particularly the whole rainy season,
- b) Temporary camps, built up when the group is compelled to leave their permanent camp on the death of any member and
- c) hunting camp, when the hunting party has to live for a few days away from their permanent camp.

The permanent camps are communal huts. The shape is generally round or elliptical. The structure is built by trunks and branches of tree, thatched with palm leaves on cane frames. The thatching extends upto the ground. A communal hut is provided with a single doorway which is cut in the form of inverted “v” of the thatching mat.

Temporary camps are made in the form of a village. The huts are carelessly constructed and the thatching is done by simply tying the leaves in bundles instead of preparing mats. The hunting camps are extremely temporary which are used for a few days.

Fire

The Onges do not know how to make fire and for that reason every family preserves fire in its own fire-place. When a party moves for hunting or changing the camp they always carries smouldering woods along with them.

Food

The Onges are basically non-vegetarian. They eat flesh of various animals like deer, pig, fox, rat, snake, turtle, bird, etc. Fish and shells are also favorite to them. But their principal diet is often supplemented by fruit, roots, tubers, honey, baking, frying and boiling are the devices that they employ for processing the food items. There are certain food taboos for pregnant women, for instance pork, turtle and honey are forbidden to them. Administration provides the people with free ration but most of the Onges are in the habit of selling them back to the outsiders; they buy opium with that money.

Household utensils

The large part of utensils of daily necessity are made from different kinds of shells. The Cyrena shell is used as knife or scraper; large Pinna shell serves the purpose of a tray on dish and the Nautilus shell serves the purpose of a cup or drinking vessel.

Among other utensils, cooking pot, buckets and water vessels may be mentioned. The cooking pots are made of clay, dried in the sun and baked in the fire. The water vessels are

made of bamboo and the buckets for carrying water are made of scooped-out pieces of soft tree-trunk.

Dress and Personal Decoration

The Onges are virtually naked. Every man wears some sort of girdle round his waist which is usually made of Hibiscus fibre. Women wear a sort of small apron made of *Minuscopes litterales* leaves. Every married woman always wears a belt of Pandanus leaf which is never put off without substitute. Often a bundle made of several Pandanus leaves is hung from the belt which are used only by married women and also by men on some ceremonial occasions.

Ornaments of wrist and knee are made of spirally wound leaves . Sometimes shell of various size are suspended on it. Necklaces of shell or bones or bamboo are frequently worn.

During childhood every Onge boy and girl undergo scarification. The scars are made with a piece of quartz or glass at certain intervals. The scarification is always done by a woman. Besides scarification they also point their body. There are three kinds of clay - a) common clay which is either grey or yellow b) a fine white is either grey or yellow c) a red paint.

Transport

The forest-dwellers have no system of transport except some varieties of baskets by which they carry the cooking pots and other fragile objects. The baskets are made of different kinds of leaves, cane and bamboo strips-a) the Little Andaman canoe with one outrigger, propelled with paddles or with a pole b) the Great Andaman small canoe with one outrigger, propelled with paddles or with a pole; and c) the Great Andaman large canoe, without outrigger propelled with oars.

Conclusion

The Onges live over an area of 700 odd sq. km. in the Island of Little Andaman which is covered with ever-green forests. They are traditionally nomadic hunting and gathering tribe with a 50,000 years plus history. The government of Andaman and Nicobar look after them and their present home at Little Andaman Island covers only 1/3 of the area of their traditional territory. Coconut plantation has been raised for the benefit of the Onges. Medical care, free ration etc. are being provided at these two settlement areas by the administration.

The effect of encouraging the Onges to settle and rely on handouts has badly affected their sense of self-sufficiency and eroded their traditions and increased levels of malnutrition in what were once probably extremely healthy people. Their contact with civilization from the British to the present administration has been marked by disease (poor immunity to pathogens brought by outsiders) ignorance and casual racism.

The present population of Onges is 105. The administration has a virtual 'breeding programme' in place for the Onges but the future of the vanishing people is still unsure. It seems unlikely that a return to their traditional way of life would be acceptable to the administration as problems such as the pressure to 'civilise' the Onges to 'appropriate' Indian standards e.g. all covering clothes, despite the Onge's tradition of moving about unencumbered, seem to be intractable. Whatever happens, the Onges seem to have little say in it.

The threat to the survival of this tribe cannot be denied any longer. The Indian authorities must act with alertness and promptitude to save the lives and ecological heritage of the endangered tribe of India.

So, what is the solution? How is the government dealing with this indigenous people? Despite the question of their customs being extinct or not, the essential need is that we cannot leave them unattended.

GLOSSARY:

1. Onge: They are a negrito tribe of the Andaman Islands. Traditionally they are nomadic hunting and gathering tribe. The Onge inhabit at Little Andaman Island.
2. Racism : The term racism is concerned with the status of the races; people of race are consider as superior or inferior of others. According to R.F. Benedict (1940) racism is a doctrine, which says that “One group has the stigma of superiority and the other has those of inferiority “.
3. Semangs and Sakas : These people live in central region of the Malay Peninsula and in East Sumatra. They have dark skin colour, wolly hair with a reddish tinge. They have scanty body hair and short in stature.
4. Aetas : These people live in the Philippines Islands. They have sooty brown coloured skin, frizzy hair and short in stature.
5. Tapiro: These people are the inhabitants of New Guinea. They have yellowish brown skin colour, wooly hair and short height.
6. Digging-Stick: Digging stick is one of the most primitive agricultural implements used for tilling soil. This simplest type of implement consists of a wooden cylindrical handle, which gradually tapers down into a pointed end. The pointed end is used for loosening soil.
7. Adze: Adze resembles the axes closely with the main difference that these are thinner. These are triangular and made generally on a flake. This tool is flat on one surface, while the other is slightly convex and meets at the edge. An adze is essentially a carpenter’s tool meant for smoothing and leveling irregular surfaces of wood and hence it is hafted in such a way that the cutting edge is transverse, i.e., at right angles to the handle.
8. Quartz : A very hard form of silica that occurs in crystals or in a single mass. It is colourless and transparent in its pure state. Quartz is the most common of all minerals and is the principal constituent of sand.

(FAQs)FREQUENTLY ASK QUESTIONS:

1. Who are the Onges? Describe their habitat.

Ans : Onges are a negrito tribe of the Andaman Island. They are of small stature and superficially ‘African’ in appearance, with very dark skin and pepper corn hair, but are genetically remote from most of modern African peoples. This tribe is found in an island towards the south of the Great Andaman called the Little Andaman. The language of the Onges consists of 9 vowels and 19 consonants.

- Q.2. Briefly describe the subsistence pattern of the Onge.

Ans: The Onge are basically hunters and gatherers. The primary ways of livelihood for the Onge people are fishing and hunting in the forest. All members of the community irrespective of age and sex, take part in economic activities. They have been trained in plantation, agricultural work and domestication of animals.

Q.3. Describe the weapons and implements used for hunting and fishing by the Onge.

Ans: Bow and arrow are the favorite hunting implements of the Onge. For turtle and large fishes they prefer arrows and harpoons with a float. Net are used to catch small fishes. Digging stick is an effective implement in digging the roots. Adze is used for obtaining molluses and for cutting honey comb. Use of string or thread is very popular among the Onge.

Q.4. Write what do you know about the food habits of the Onge?

Ans: The Onge are basically non-vegetarian. They eat flesh of various animals like deer, pig, fox, rat, snake, turtle, bird, etc. Fish and shells are also favorable to them. Roasting, baking, frying and boiling are the different kind of food processing method use by Onge. Their principal diet is often supplemented by fruit, roots, tubers, honey, etc.

Q.5. Describe the dwelling house of the Onge.

Ans: The Onge make two kinds of huts-ordinary or temporary hut and communal hut. Ordinary huts were meant for a single family, whereas the communal huts were like a camp to accommodate a number of families.

Q.6. Describe briefly the religion of the Onge.

Ans : The religion of the Onge is simple animism. Neither ceremonial worship nor any kind of propitiation is practiced by them. They believe in different class of spirits – spirits of the wood, sea, disease, storm and ancestors.