

Tribal artifacts of *Nicobari* folk of Nicobar Archipelago

MU Sharief

Botanical Survey of India, National Orchidarium & Experimental Garden,
Yercaud 636 602, District Salem, Tamil Nadu
E-mail: sharief bsi@yahoo.co.in; bsisc@md4.vsnl.net.in; bsisc@rediffmail.com

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Studies on material cultures of aboriginal tribes of Andaman & Nicobar Archipelago are rather scanty. *Nicobari* culture represents true psyche of the Mongoloid race and their cultural life is illustrative. They show excellent craftsmanship in making various tribal artifacts and are skilled artisans, house builders, carpenters, carvers and potters. Ethnobotanical information of *Nicobari* tribe pertaining to hut building, canoe making, brooms & mats preparation, sitting stage making and pandanus fruit processing are presented besides highlighting their ethnoecological and cultural influences.

Keywords: *Nicobari* tribe, Tribal artifacts, Traditional handicrafts, Traditional huts, Nicobar Islands, Ethnobotany

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Fragile ecosystems, aborigines and their traditional knowledge of the flora and fauna are apparently on the verge of extinction. Since time immemorial, Andaman & Nicobar Islands (A&N Islands) are popular for their rich and diverse biological heritage^{1,2}. A & N Archipelago is the home land of 6 aboriginal tribes inhabiting for thousands of years in the evergreen tropical rain forests. The Nicobar islands (6°–10° N Latitude and 92°–94° E longitude) lie in the Bay of Bengal between Sumatra and the Andaman group of island (Fig. 1). The Nicobar Archipelago comprises 7 large islands, viz. Car Nicobar, Teressa, Bompoka, Kamorta, Katchal, Nancowry and Great Nicobar along with 12 small islands and 42 very small islands. The topography is generally flat with slightly indented or undulating coastline surrounded by coral reefs and shallow seas. Long stretches of sandy beaches are salient features of Nicobar Islands and Nancowry is perhaps the finest harbour among the whole of A & N group. It is believed that the very name of Nicobar has been derived from *Narikel Dweep*, i.e. 'Island of Coconuts'. The details of history of Nicobars can be found in the decennial census reports and its indication being made in the travelogue of Ptolomy, the great geographer of Roman Empire, who visited the island during 2nd century AD. However, the reliable historic reference to the Nicobars is in the writings of Tsing (672 AD), a Chinese Buddhist monk, who calls it as *Lo-Tan Kvo* – 'the land of naked

people'. The Nicobar Islands have also been referred to as *Nakavaram* in the great Tanjore inscriptions of 1050 AD. Marco Polo (1292 AD), the renowned voyager of Chinese king referred these islands as *Necuveram*³. Tribal artifacts have been created as a basic need to meet the day to day requirements and they are man made objects of prehistoric origin. Studies on material culture of all the aboriginal tribes of A&N islands are meager⁴. The paper deals with some unique and interesting tribal artifacts of *Nicobari* tribe made from the ambient plant resources of the islands.

Ethnoecological and cultural influences

The inhabitants of the Nicobar Islands are known by the generic term the *Nicobarese* (Fig. 2). *Nicobarese* are no more hunter gatherers as they have entered in productive economy. They live in a closed community and are very honest people⁵. *Nicobarese* and *Shompens* are the two *Mongoloid* tribes and conversely appear to have originated some where in Far East or the near East and made the Nicobar their home skipping the Andaman islands⁶. *Nicobarese* are darker in complexion than the average Mongoloid and have less prominent cheek bones, less straight hair and more prominent noses (Fig. 3). They are of median height and strong build with scanty beard and body hair. *Nicobarese* language seems to belong to the Austric or Mon-Khmer linguistic group. Six different dialects are in existence as naturally the

geographic isolation of various islands leads to the origin of new dialects⁷. The major life rituals observed among the *Car-Nicobarese* are connected with birth, the naming ceremony, marriage and death. Most of the Nicobar villages have a separate birth house, *Chukkamyo* on the periphery of the village. The *Nicobarese* are fond of children and they have a high birth rate. The traditional marriage customs of *Nicobarese* were devoid of the rituals, but it involves a grand feast. The *Nicobarese*, who at one time numbered less than 200, live along the coasts of islands and have evolved into a semi civilized community. Presently, they are numbering more than 26,000 and represent a generic category for those tribal people, who inhabit the Nicobar group of islands.

The *Nicobarese* have village councils with the headman called *Captain*. The various village captains constitute the island council and one of them officiates as the *Chief captain* or *Rani* (if woman is elected to the post). Women enjoy a very high degree of equity with men. This includes the freedom to marry a person of her choice within the prescribed norms. Their religion was an animistic belief in many nature spirits of whom they lived in constant fear. Their indigenous religious faith still prevails in some parts of the archipelago in spite of the Christianity in the northern most islands. Presently, about 80 % of the *Nicobarese* have accepted Christianity. About 62.1% of *Nicobarese* live in Car Nicobar and they are very fond of sports and games. They possess a talent to pick up the new games easily. Besides their traditional sports such as canoe racing, wrestling, pig fighting and cock fighting, they like to play modern games like football, volleyball and cricket. *Car-Nicobarese* also have great love for music. They take keen interest in music and dance as songs and music constitute a part of their daily life. During festival season men and women perform group dancing and folk songs separately. Most of the folk songs are about canoe, pig and coconut palms. Foreign influence has also affected the traditional music of *Car-Nicobarese* and they have started playing modern musical instruments. Thus, *Nicobarese* are highly advanced in comparison to all other tribes of the islands.

Nicobarese cultivate coconut, banana, pineapple and tapioca. Coconut tree is a *Tree of Life* for *Nicobarese*⁸. Presently, *Nicobarese* sell large surpluses of coconut and arecanut for money in open

market. They also develop gardens of jack fruit and pandanus. Pandanus is a staple food for *Nicobarese* as the pandanus fruit is still considered to be a bread fruit. The heavy ball shaped fruits of *Pandanus leram* Jones ex Fontana (Figs. 4, 13) are harvested from the surrounding forests, coasts as well as gardens. They are transferred to the settlements by slinging at each end of the pole one or two fruits and balancing the pole comfortably on shoulders. Fruits are cut into pieces and kept inside the vessel on a thick layer of leaves of *Macaranga nicobarica* Balakr. & Chakrab (Fig. 5), which are also covered at the top with these leaves. Fruits are cooked for 1-2 hrs and later removed (Fig. 6). Fruit pulp is scooped off using small tin sheets or spoons and mixed with other materials like pig fat and sugar to prepare different types of dishes (Fig. 7).

Methodology

Excursions to the areas inhabited by the *Nicobarese* tribe were undertaken to almost all hamlets of Nicobar group of islands. Car Nicobar, which is remarkably flat and concentrated with over two thirds of the total population of the *Nicobarese*, was repeatedly visited for the study. Contacts were established with several experienced and elderly men, who were having sufficient knowledge of craftsmanship and plants of their traditional life. *Captains* of the respective islands were also taken to different areas to collect more information about the ways and plants used for different craft purposes. *Nicobari* teachers and forest guards as well as local people acted as interpreters. All plants, which are used under folk crafts were collected, identified and confirmed with the PBL herbaria of BSI, A&N circle, Port Blair. The specimens were deposited in the PBL, Port Blair after proper taxonomic identification⁹⁻¹².

Results

The plants used in the preparation of different artifacts by the *Nicobari* tribe are categorized and enumerated with botanical names, family, tribal name, purpose and islands, where the observation is made (Table 1). Sufficient information is obtained with regard to hut construction, canoe making, mats & brooms preparations, sitting table preparations and coconut processing unit. Houses of *Nicobarese* are typical huts, which are more elaborate, semicircular or rectangular in shape (Figs. 8–10). They are propped up on piles about 2–4 m above the ground and

generally have trap doors to which ladders of different sizes are fixed in accordance with the height of the huts. Floor of the huts consists of intricate network of split bamboo, areca stem and canes, which permits enough light and ventilation in the hut, which is very cozy. The trap doors are generally not closed, but they simply lift the ladder such that nobody can enter the hut without ladder. During construction, stems and branches of the plants like *Artocarpus gomeziana* Wall ex. Trec., *Syzygium samarangens* (Bl.) Merr. & Perry (Fig. 16), *Garcinia nervosa* Miq. and *Desmos dasymaschalus* (Bl.) Safford are used as posts, roofing & thatching beams and wall sticks. The split stems of *Dinochloa scandens* (Bl.) ex Nees, *Areca catechu* L., *Areca triandra* Roxb. (Fig. 11) and *Calamus andamanicus* Kurz (Fig. 12) are used for making the floor of the huts. Leaves of coconut, *C. andamanicus* Kurz, *P. leram* Jones ex Fontana and *Nypa fruticans* Wurumb (Fig. 15) are used for thatching. The strips of bark of *Gnetum gnemon* L. (Fig. 14) is used for ropes and cordage purpose. Thus, *Nicobarese* construct typical traditional huts without using iron nails and screws though some bamboo or timber spikes were fixed at strategic joints.

Nicobarese are skilled in canoe making, which are called *Odis* (Fig. 17), which is a very important item of the island trade. They show excellent craftsmanship in making dugouts and canoes, which are used for transportation and fishing. Canoes vary in their size and capacity. Some of them are small measuring 4-6 m, which can carry only 2-3 persons. The larger ones measures 15-20 m in length, which can easily accommodate 30-40 persons. Canoes are manufactured in Car Nicobar, Chowra, Teressa and Bompoka islands. Bigger canoes are particularly made in Chowra Island. For making a dugout, the selected tree is cut down and log is hollowed out with the help of chisels and axes. The hollowed log is shaped in the form of a canoe with both the ends slightly curved and pointed. The canoe is inverted and its bottom is shaped like the draft of a ship. Subsequently, fire is ignited below the canoe and the surface is slightly roasted. This is done as a substitute for paint and canoe become black. Once the body of the canoe is done, a number of cross bars are fixed on it to provide sitting place as well as to strengthen the boat. The canoes are about 2/3rd of the thickness of the original log and are therefore quite deep. Every canoe has outrigger for securing balance (Fig. 18). The canoes, which are used for racing, are generally

fitted with prows. In the front end of the canoe the prow has a forked edge and in the rear it ends in the form of a small knob. The canoes are also decorated and designed with different striking colours. Festoons of small cloth flags in bright colours and tender coconut leaves are also fixed. Various plants like *Aphanamixis polystachya* (Wall.) Parker, *Barringtonia asiatica* (L.) Kurz, *Calophyllum inophyllum* Linn. and *Sterculia rubiginosa* Vent. (Figs. 19 – 22) are used in making dugouts or canoes (Table 1).

Nicobarese prepare two types of brooms, which are smooth and rough type (Fig. 23). For handles of the brooms, they use stem pieces of *D. scandens* (Bl.) ex Nees and *A. gomeziana* Wall ex. Trec., whose length varies from 1.21-1.82 m. To these handles are tied the brooms made of finely dissected leaves of *P. leram* Jones ex Fontana (for smooth brooms) or the split stems of *Calamus* (for rough brooms). In the rough brooms, the split stems of *Calamus* are spread by placing 2-3 horizontal strips of bamboo stem to get a fan like structure which assists in sweeping. For tying brooms to the handles, they use the bark fibres of *G. gnemon* L. and even some of them use plastic wires (Fig. 23). For mat preparation, leaves of *P. learm* Jones ex Fontana, *P. tectorius* Soland and coconut were collected from the surrounding coasts, forests and gardens. Leaves were dried in the sunlight and spited with the help of a knife removing the mid rib. The strips obtained are knitted finely folding one across the other to prepare mats of required sizes, which are used inside the huts for different purposes (Fig. 24).

For sitting purpose and to carry some day to day work, *Nicobarese* prepare a sitting stage just towards one side of the hut. The stage is also used by the children as sitting and study place (Fig. 25). The stage is about 60-90 cm above the ground. The frame of the stage is prepared using the stems of *A. gomeziana* Wall ex. Trec., *G. nervosa* Miq. and *B. asiatica* (L.) Kurz. In the center of the frame, an intricate network of split bamboo, areca and cane is provided. In some places the frame is seen painted. In some of the *Nicobari* houses of Katchal and Chowra islands, coconut processing units were noticed, which are used to roast the kernel for easy removal from the nut and to use it for oil extraction. These coconut processing units are made using stem pieces of different trees available in the surrounding forests (Fig. 26). Four stem pieces of 60-90 cm height are fixed in the four

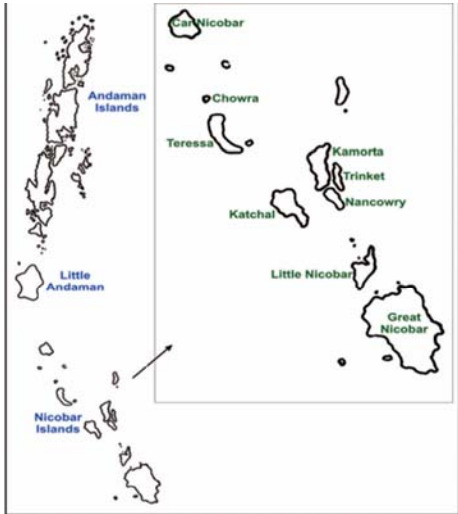


Fig.1 Map of Andaman & Nicobar Islands



Fig.2 Nicobaris at Chowra island coast



Fig.3 Nicobaris busy in shifting the fruits



Fig.4 *P. Ieram Jones ex Fontana* fruit



Fig.5 *M. nicobarica* Chakra.& Balak.



Fig.6 Cooking fruits with *M.nicobarica* leaves



Fig.7 Scooping out the pulp



Fig.8 Semi circular huts



Fig. 9 Circular huts



Fig.10 Rectangular huts



Fig.11 *Areca triandra* Roxb.



Fig.12 *C. andamanicus* Kurz



Fig.13 *P. Ieram Jones ex Fontana*



Fig.14 Bark strips of *Gnetum gnemon* L.



Fig.15 *Nypa fruiticans* Wurumb



Fig.16 *S. samarangense* Merr. & Perry



Fig.17 Small sized canoes



Fig.18 Out rigged canoes



Fig.19 *A. polystachya* (Wall.) Parker



Fig.20 *Barringtonia asiatica* (L.) Kurz



Fig.21 *Calophyllum inophyllum* Linn.



Fig.22 *Sterculia rubiginosa* Vent.



Fig.23 Nicobari lady displaying the brooms



Fig.24 Mat from *Pandanus* leaves



Fig.25 Sitting stage



Fig.26 Coconut processing unit

Table 1—Plants used for tribal artifacts preparation by *Nicobari* tribe

Plant name	Family	<i>Nicobari</i> Name	Uses	Island, where the observation is made
Hut construction				
<i>Areca catechu</i> L.	Arecaceae	<i>Sita-a, Niyah</i>	Split stems for making hut floor; leaves for thatching	Katchal, Car Nicobar, Chowra
<i>Artocarpus gomeziana</i> Wall ex. Trec.	Moraceae	<i>Ku-Yi, Ufak'</i>	Stems & branches as posts, roofing, thatching beams & wall sticks	Car Nicobar, Katchal
<i>Calamus andamanicus</i> Kurz	Arecaceae	<i>Woolaiya</i>	Leaves used for thatching	Car Nicobar, Katchal
<i>Cocos nucifera</i> L.	Arecaceae	<i>Taoko</i>	Leaves used for thatching	Car Nicobar, Katchal, Chowra
<i>Desmos dasymaschalus</i> (Bl.) Safford.	Annonaceae	-	For framework of huts	Car Nicobar, Katchal
<i>Dinochloa scandens</i> (Bl. ex Nees)	Poaceae	<i>Kinpap</i>	Split stems for making floor of the huts	Car Nicobar, Katchal, Nancowry, Trinket
<i>Garcinia nervosa</i> Miq.	Clusiaceae	<i>Payuh</i>	For frame work of huts	Chowra, Teressa, Great Nicobar
<i>Gnetum gnemon</i> L.	Gnetaceae	<i>Lin-Kong, Hittuch</i>	Strips of bark for ropes, cordage	Car Nicobar, Great Nicobar, Katchal
<i>Hibiscus tiliaceus</i> L.	Malvaceae	<i>Tauku</i>	-do-	Great Nicobar, Chowra
<i>Nypa fruticans</i> Wurumb	Arecaceae	<i>Raylo</i>	Leaves used for thatching	Nancowry, Trinket, Katchal
<i>Pandanus leram</i> Jones ex Fontana	Pandanaceae	<i>Kuvuy</i>	-do-	Car Nicobar, Katchal, Great Nicobar
<i>P. tectorius</i> Soland	Pandanaceae	<i>Tarecho</i>	-do-	Katchal, Car Nicobar
<i>Scolopia spinosa</i> (Roxb.) Warb.	Flacourtiaceae	<i>Piku</i>	Stems & branches as wall sticks, posts, roofing, thatching & beams	Nancowry, Katchal
<i>Syzygium samarangense</i> (Bl.) Merr. & Perry	Myrtaceae	<i>Milul, Ipoh</i>	-do-	Car Nicobar, Teressa, Kamorta, Trinket
Canoe making				
<i>Amoora wallichii</i> King	Meliaceae	<i>Kinya</i>	Trunk is scooped out to make canoes	Katchal, Nancowry, Car Nicobar
<i>Aphanamixis polystachya</i> (Wall.) Parker	Meliaceae	<i>Kinya</i>	-do-	Car Nicobar, Chowra
<i>Artocarpus gomeziana</i> Wall.	Moraceae	<i>Ku-yi, Ufak</i>	-do-	Car Nicobar
<i>Barringtonia asiatica</i> (L.) Kurz	Barringtoniaceae	<i>Kingavalamai, Kin-yav</i>	Dugout canoes are made	Car Nicobar, Nancowry, Teressa
<i>Buchanania splendens</i> Miq.	Anacardiaceae	<i>Pep</i>	Trunk is scooped out to make canoes	Car Nicobar, Teressa
<i>Calophyllum inophyllum</i> Linn.	Clusiaceae	<i>In-Yanng, Lamonk</i>	-do-	Car Nicobar, Trinket, Nancowry, Teressa
<i>Canarium euphyllum</i> Kurz	Burseraceae	-	-do-	Katchal, Nancowry
<i>Cordia subcordata</i> Lamk.	Ehretiaceae	-	-do-	Nancowry, Teressa
<i>Garcinia nervosa</i> Miq.	Clusiaceae	<i>Payuh</i>	Branches used for paddles of canoes	Katchal, Nancowry
<i>Gnetum gnemon</i> L.	Gnetaceae	<i>Lin-Kong, Hittuch</i>	Stem used for outriggers of canoes; bark for cordage	Car Nicobar, Kamorta
<i>Hibiscus tiliaceus</i> L.	Malvaceae	<i>Tauku</i>	Bark for tying canoes bars	Car Nicobar, Katchal
<i>Macaranga indica</i> Weight	Euphorbiaceae	<i>Kinrul</i>	Stem used for outrigger of canoes	Chowra, Car Nicobar
<i>Syzygium samarangense</i> (Bl.) Merr. & Perry	Myrtaceae	<i>Mi-lul, Ipoh</i>	Trunk scooped out to make small canoes	Car Nicobar, Chowra, Katchal
<i>Terminalia catapa</i> L.	Combretaceae	<i>TaPongong</i>	Stem used for Dugouts	Chowra, Teressa
<i>Sterculia alata</i> Roxb.	Sterculiaceae	<i>Tohangko</i>	Balance beam is made from trunk	Katchal, Great Nicobar

Contd..

Table 1—Plants used for tribal artifacts preparation by *Nicobari* tribe—*Contd.*

Plant name	Family	<i>Nicobari</i> Name	Uses	Island, where the observation is made
<i>Sterculia rubiginosa</i> Vent.	Sterculiaceae	<i>Fuk</i>	-do-	Car Nicobar, Katchal
Brooms making				
<i>Artocarpus gomeziana</i> Wall.	Moraceae	<i>Ku-yi, Ufak</i>	Stem pieces for handles	Car Nicobar, Great Nicobar
<i>Calamus andamanicus</i> Kurz	Arecaceae	<i>Woolaiya</i>	Strips of stem pieces used for making rough brooms	Car Nicobar, Katchal, Kamorta
<i>Dinochloa scandens</i> (Bl.ex Nees)	Poaceae	<i>Kinpap</i>	Stem used for handles	Car Nicobar, Nancowry, Katchal
<i>Pandanus leram</i> Jones ex Fontana	Pandanaceae	<i>Kuvuy</i>	Split leaves used for making smooth brooms	Car Nicobar, Katchal, Great Nicobar
Mats preparation				
<i>Cocos nucifera</i> L.	Arecaceae	<i>Taoko</i>	Leaves are weaved into mats	Car Nicobar, Katchal, Great Nicobar
<i>Pandanus leram</i> Jones ex Fontana	Pandanaceae	<i>Kuvuy</i>	-do-	Car Nicobar, Katchal
<i>P. tectorius</i> Soland	Pandanaceae	<i>Tarecho</i>	-do-	Car Nicobar, Katchal
Sitting stage preparation				
<i>Areca catechu</i> L.	Arecaceae	<i>Sita-a, Niyah</i>	Split stems for making sitting stage	Katchal, Car Nicobar
<i>Areca triandra</i> Roxb	Arecaceae	<i>Kahkoh</i>	-do-	Car Nicobar, Kamorta, Nancowry
<i>Barringtonia asiatica</i> (L.) Kurz	Barringtoniaceae	<i>Kingaval-amai, Kin-yav</i>	Stem pieces for making frame & legs of the stage	Car Nicobar, Great Nicobar
<i>Calamus andamanicus</i> Kurz	Arecaceae	<i>Woolaiya</i>	Split stems for making sitting stage	Katchal, Teresa, Nancowry, Car Nicobar
<i>Garcinia nervosa</i> Miq.	Clusiaceae	<i>Payuh</i>	Stem pieces used for frame & legs of the stage	Katchal, Kamorta
<i>Syzygium samarangense</i> (Bl.) Merr. & Perry	Myrtaceae	<i>Mi-lul, Ipoh</i>	-do-	Katchal, Car Nicobar, Kamorta
Plates, covers & baskets making				
<i>Calamus andamanicus</i> Kurz	Arecaceae	<i>Woolaiya</i>	Strips of stems for basket making	Car Nicobar, Katchal
<i>Macaranga nicobarica</i> Balakr. & Chakrab.	Euphorbiaceae	<i>Kinrul</i>	Leaves as plates & cover for <i>Pandanus</i> fruits	Katchal, Great Nicobar, Kamorta
<i>Macaranga tenarius</i> (Linn.) Muell- Arg.	Euphorbiaceae	<i>Kamong</i>	-do-	Katchal, Chowra

corners of a square and on these the horizontal stem pieces are placed and below this the fuel is ignited. The split coconuts are spread on the horizontal stems, which are covered above with coconut leaves and after 5-6 hrs of roasting, the kernels were collected, which are used for oil extraction.

Discussion

Ethnotechnology is an emerging field of the tribal studies, which concentrates on the equipment culture for acting upon the environment in order to provide their subsistence. Archaeological remains, rock carvings and ancient scriptures furnish abundant evidences of close relationship between man and

bioresources¹³. Plants provide food, fuel, medicines and fibers from long ages. Ironically, during the utilization of these products, man is forced to create certain artifacts or accessories to suit their requirements. These artifacts may pertain to utensils, weapons, ornaments, musical instruments, hut construction, transportation materials, and household articles like brooms, mats, sitting stages, medicine preparation units and agricultural produce processing units. These artifacts display the characteristic style of living of the particular tribe. So, artifacts are manmade objects of existing traditional societies¹⁴. Nevertheless, study of tribal artifacts is a part of ethnobotanical research, but the area remained at its

infancy as many workers concentrated on food and medicinal plants¹⁵. Aboriginal tribes of A&N islands have been noticed to traditionally use a variety of artifacts like honey collection tubs, baskets, bows & arrows, harpoons, spears & hatchets, canoes, chest guards, neck & waist girdles, bulls to cover the genitals and fishing nets along with which a precious ethnobotanical knowledge is associated. These artifacts may also serve as a key to trace out historical and evolutionary aspects of the various tribal communities besides depicting the economic utility of wild plant species in material culture of the tribes under consideration.

Ethnobotanical studies of *Nicobari* tribe pertaining to artifacts preparation are meager except few reports on canoe making and arms & ornaments^{4,16}. The paper reveals the application of 28 plant species in preparation of various artifacts by *Nicobari* tribe. Diversification of knowledge of these plants under folk crafts is of utmost importance as they have been categorized as experiential and utility is a major factor in plant classification. Some of these plants are rare and endemic. Documentation, cultivation and conservation of these indigenous plants have to be made before their disappearance leading to a collateral damage. There is a need of intensive work in this direction, which will also be of help for the tribal development of these remote territories of India.

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