Almost nine months after American national John Allen Chau was allegedly killed by the Sentinelese on the North Sentinel Island of Andaman and Nicobar islands, a recent publication by the Anthropological Survey of India (AnSI) throws more light on the incident and also the ways of one of the most isolated tribes in the world.

Titled *The Sentinelese of the North Sentinel Island: A reprisal of Tribal Scenario in an Andaman Island in context of Killing of an American Preacher*, the paper published in the journal of AnSI discusses in detail the “mission” of the American national, the possibility of retrieval of the body and also the charge of murder which the police in the Andamans have pressed against “unknown tribal members of Sentinelese Community”.

“The tragic death of Chau is a matter of grief, but what is equally distressing is the report that the Andaman police have registered a criminal case for murder against the unknown tribesmen,” M. Sasikumar, the anthropologist who heads Maulana Abul Kalam Institute of Asian Studies (MAKAIS), wrote in the paper.

Not the first time
Dr. Sasikumar, in the paper running over 10 pages, stated that Chau’s death was not the first time that “blood was spilled on North Sentinel Island.” He pointed out that in March 1896, three convicts escaped from Andamans and drifted to the North Sentinel Island where they tried to escape in a raft made of bamboo. While two of them drowned, the third person was speared to death by the tribal people. The second incident took place in January 2006, when two fishermen, Sunder Raj and Pandit Tiwari, were reportedly killed by the Sentinelese when the latter were illegally collecting mud crabs in the protected area.

The publication states that there were attempts to reach out to the Sentinelese in the 1970s, which turned out to be futile. The earlier recorded visits to North Sentinel Island have been mostly for observational purposes (observation from a distance), and none of the visits were truly interactional, Dr. Srivastava said that Chau was the only person to have spent an entire day on the island, and saw the tribesmen from very close proximity, may be from an arm’s length.

“On November 14, Chau left Port Blair and reached the island at night. He spent the entire day of November 15 with the Sentinelese and on the night when he met the fishermen who had transported him to the island, he gave them the diary in which he had recorded his experience of the day,” the director said. Some bits of Chau’s diary, written in illegible handwriting, are in the public domain, said Dr. Srivastava.

V.K. Srivastava, Director of AnSI, however, feels that Chau was guided by some kind of “pathological curiosity” which led him to visit the island despite knowing the consequences. Explaining that the earlier recorded visits to North Sentinel Island have been mostly for observational purposes (observation from a distance), and none of the visits were truly interactional, Dr. Srivastava said that Chau was the only person to have spent an entire day on the island, and saw the tribesmen from very close proximity, may be from an arm’s length.

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He also emphasised that Chau’s journal was an extremely important anthropological document, which should be preserved.

Chau’s diary
In the AnSI publication, Dr. Sasikumar also refers to the 13-page diary entry of Chau and quotes from it. “Well I have been shot by the Sentinelese... By a kid probably 10 or so years old, may be a teenager, short compared to those who looked like adults... The little kid shot me with an arrow directly into my Bible which I was holding at my chest... His high pitched voice still lingers in my head,” the publication states.

“I don’t want to die. Would it be wiser to leave and let someone else to continue? No I don’t think so,” Dr. Sasikumar quotes from the journal.

Study sheds more light on killing of American by Sentinels
A recent survey by the Anthropological Survey of India says preservation of Chau’s diary is crucial as it seeks to throw more light on the incident

SHIV SAHAY SINGH
KOLKATA

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