



## Isolation as resistance: reimagining post-colonial identity through the Sentinelese tribe

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### ABSTRACT

Identity is an integral part of human being's existence. It gives a vivid picture of how individuals and communities perceive themselves and the world around them. This research paper aims to explore the relationship between identity and existence through the lens of the Sentinelese people, an indigenous group living on North Sentinel Island. The tribe represents a unique assertion of cultural autonomy by preserving a way of life and social identity that contrasts with the modern society. It further underscores how self-imposed isolation plays a vital role in shaping the identity of the tribe and contrasts with traditional frameworks of identity formation. This research aims to bring to fore the tribe's unique perspective of how identity is formed without hybridization or through external encounters. It also takes into account this tribe's deliberate isolation and conscious choice to preserve cultural purity and autonomy by resisting the pressures of globalization and post-colonial cultural imposition. In doing so, the tribe defines 'self', its existence independently of the external factors discussed in the anthropological theories.

**Keywords:** *Self-imposed Isolation, Sentinelese Tribe, Identity, Post Colonial, Cultural Autonomy.*

### Introduction

Identity encompasses a person's sense of self, belonging and cultural affiliation. It is influenced by both internal factors, like personal experiences and introspection, and external experiences, such as societal expectations and historical circumstances. The societies that are isolated are believed to be deprived of the opportunity of proper identity formation. In such cases, identity is often formed through the close-knit social structures, shared traditions and deep connection with the environment. Among such few tribes, the Sentinelese population is also famously known for living in complete isolation. This research paper examines the lives and the social structures of the tribe which further gives a better insight into how identity can be formed and preserved in the absence of social contact. The tribe intentionally lives in isolation from the modern society which has contributed in the formation and preservation of their unique identity. This deliberate isolation can be seen as a form of resistance against the global forces of cultural integration and hybridity, which often reshape indigenous identities through forced or voluntary associations. The Sentinelese rejects the concept of hybridization which is understood through

Homi K. Bhabha's concept of hybridity. By maintaining the status of isolation, this tribe resists the external factors that would alter their way of life by asserting their own cultural beliefs. Identity according to the post-colonial contexts is shaped by both internal and external factors, while the Sentinelese offers a unique perspective on how identity can be formed and preserved with the help of internal factors.

### **Historical background of the Sentinelese tribe**

The Sentinelese tribe is perhaps an indigenous tribal community which lives on North Sentinel Island, part of Andaman and Nicobar Islands, located in the Bay of Bengal. The name 'Sentinelese' is derived from the island they inhabit, but the tribe's name for themselves remains unknown to the world. The dwellers of this island existed in anonymity until researchers paid attention to them. As a result, a further exploration into their way of life has begun to get encouragement. This tribe does not have any contact with the outside world. They are among the most isolated human populations on Earth. Due to this no interaction, little is known about their language, culture and social structure. As far as their origin is concerned, it is shrouded in mystery. From the information gathered, it is believed that the people of tribe are descendants of early African Migrants who settled on the island around 60,000 years ago. They have their own distinctive language, customs and survival mechanism which makes them the most isolated and unique tribes in the world. The tribe's strong resistance to the outside contact is evident in their unwelcoming responses to the intruders. People from the outside world must have attempted to approach this island, whether with boats or helicopters, have often met with arrows, highlighting their desire to remain undisturbed. The Indian government recognizes the tribe's determination to stay far away from the outside world. It has implemented strict regulations and policies which have aimed to protect the tribe from external threats, including the spread of diseases and cultural degradation. Consequently, this tribe is among those few tribes which avoid the influence of globalization, modernization or external societal norms on their existence. This paper aims to find response to the complex issues revolving around their isolation. First and foremost the paper aims to investigate how this isolation preserves their cultural and identity due to no external influence for years. Besides these, the paper aims to further understand the contrasting nature of this tribe which unlike others does not seek recognition, political rights, and integration into the larger global framework.

The absence of any outside contacts and external influences has failed to affect the existence and identity of this tribe. Very little could give glimpses into their existence because of their deliberate isolation. What is known about them is that they are thought to be the direct descendants of the first human populations from Africa. As mentioned in an article titled *The Last Isolated Tribe: Demystifying the Lives and Culture of The Sentinelese*, "their origins are uncertain, though they are believed to be descendants of early African migrants who settled on the

island around 60,000 years ago. And have been dwelling in the Andaman Islands for 55,000 years. As per the 2011 census as reported in the article titled Everything, We Know About the Isolated Sentinelese People of North Sentinel Island, “There are probably somewhere between 80 to 150 people on North Sentinel Island, although it could be as many as 500 or as few as 15. The Sentinelese people are related to other indigenous groups in the Andaman Islands” (Disha Bijnoi, 2019).

They have no written record of their origin. The narratives of their survival are passed down orally from generation to generation. Their existence is defined by their strong connection with their environment and their social bonds with the people of their own community. Their existence is deeply rooted in traditions and their own practices which make them the true example of human societies that exist outside of the modern global system. As they do not conform to the social pressures and global ideologies so their sense of self remains purely indigenous. The article published in WRM Bulletin 2013 says, “the Sentinelese live in three small bands. They have two different types of houses, large communal huts with several hearths for a number of families, and more temporary shelters, with no sides, with space for one nuclear family” (Who-are-Sentinelese, 2018).

About the attire of these Sentinelese women it is said that they wear fiber strings tied around their waists, necks and heads. The men also wear necklaces and headbands but the belts they wear are thicker and hence act as armour. The men also carry spears, bows and arrows. Article published in the India Today published on November 23, 2018 states, “According to BBC report, these people are descendants of the first people who left Africa and have been living in isolation on the island for over 60,000 years. These people use rudimentary methods to eat food. They hunt animals using bows and arrows, survive on mud crabs and seafood” (Who-are-Sentinelese, 2018). According to welfare of Primitive Tribes of Andaman and Nicobar Islands, this tribe does not even know how to light the fire. They survive on metalworking and agriculture. National Geographic Society visited the island in 1974 and found that these people have scavenged metals to create tools and weapons. The Sentinelese people speak their own language and there is nobody who can translate their language. It is said that the physical features of this tribe show a resemblance to the neighbouring tribe Jarawa.

The choice of the Sentinelese to stay uncontacted directly contrasts with the post-colonial struggle for identity and recognition. The tribe’s decision to stay away from the outside world is because of the fear of corrupting their originality. They do not wish to mingle up with other and dilute their traditions and customs in the light of modernity. They aim to live in close affinity with the environment which is based on the island’s ecosystems and reciprocal relationship with nature. Their identity is intimately tied to the land and the practices that have sustained them for thousands of years.

Over the millennia, they have created their own vocabulary, practices and survival methods. Despite occasional visits from outsiders, the Sentinelese refuses any attempts at contact, employing bows, arrows, and other means to restrict intruders. It is very difficult to talk about a tribe that is not only far from the advanced technology and digital connectivity but also far from the range of other communities and societies. This group lives in isolation from the rest of the world. Not much has been discovered about the tribe. Firstly because of the tribe's reluctance to be included and the other was the island's dense forests and surrounding reefs to make it difficult for outsiders to approach. Whatever little is known about this tribe is through limited observations and the occasional attempts of outsiders and the government to gather information by making contact with them, many of whom have encountered resistance and violence. The Sentinelese aim to guard their territory and maintain their way of life.

This tribe is relying on the island's natural resources for survival. They are hunter-gatherers. Another occupation of this tribe is hunting and fishing for which they use very simple tools such as bows and arrows. Irrespective of the limited interactions with the outsiders, it is known that the tribe lives in temporary shelters and the group functions as a small and egalitarian society.

Many indigenous groups around the world are actively seeking recognition from the other communities. Among the most significant challenges faced by them, land displacement, loss of cultural heritage and environment degradation. They, for instance the Massai people of east Africa, the Sami of Scandinavia and the tribes of Amazon rainforest, fight for their rights and aim to gain representation. Due to this, they encounter the risk of cultural assimilation by adopting the external norms to survive economically and politically. In contrast to these groups, the tribe does not yearn for any external validation or acknowledgment.

The tribe has earned the reputation of being brutal and ferocious because they prefer living in isolation which they continued because the dwellers of this island feel that they would contract deadly diseases and infections from the outsiders like the Jarawas, another tribe of Andaman. There are instances of friendly contact with them by these are very few. They are steadfast in their resistance to modernity. They believe that an attempt to gain recognition, to seek political representation, legal protection and access to resources can expose them to exploitation, cultural erosion and loss of freedom. (Sentinelese-in-shadows, 2018).

### **The role of self-imposed isolation**

The choice of the tribe to remain uncontacted is this tribe's assertion of cultural autonomy. In the contemporary time where globalization is blending different cultures and forming identity from these associations, the tribe's isolation is standing in opposition to hybridization, a typical feature of post-colonial identity formation. This refusal is not only serving as a defense against the external pressures but is also effective in preserving their traditional practices, beliefs and

values in order to maintain a distinct way of life that has persisted for centuries. They are shaping their identities within their own community by embedding themselves in traditions, rituals and communal practices. Geertz's concept of identity supports this assertion of self. He says, "The way we understand ourselves and the way others understand us" holds the notion of identity as both self-perception and social recognition" (Geertz, 1973).

The tribe is vehemently opposing any contact with the outside world but this does not mean that their sense of self is static. They are actively cultivating themselves through their interactions within their tribe and their close association with the land, water and earth. Clearwater's concept of "a territorialisation of space" analyzes how the tribe's isolation preserves their distinct identities. Territorialization implies assigning identities within structures of power, and further categorizing and individualizing people. Their choice to stay away from the outside world has created their own space with their own beliefs and cultural practices. His idea that "to territorialize means to assign identities for collective subjects within structures of power, and, therefore to categorize and individualize human beings" (Geertz, 1973) further explains the tribe's preserved cohesive sense of identity, shaped by their own values and experiences. They chose to protect their own narrative and also aim to reinforce their personal and collective identity without any attempt to contrast and compare themselves with "others". Unlike other tribes or populations, this tribe does not intend to compare itself with others because it is not dependent on the others to determine its identity. Hubel asserts, "We are the same in different ways; we are also different in the same ways" (Hubel, 1988) He suggests that we all are formed by the fundamental entities like nature, culture, society and our experiences, but we all exhibit uniqueness in our way of living due to distinct circumstances. This tribe is biologically similar but their way of life is incredibly different. They have evolved themselves differently culturally. Their language, cultural practices and survival tactics are unique because of their isolation from the rest of the world.

According to Homi Bhabha, "The construction of the colonial self is always up in identification with and against the other, and this dependency on the positioning of the other offers a space for subversion and transgression" (Bhabha, 1994). The tribe and its people are often addressed as "other" because of their decision to stay away from the world. The identity as "Other" is also a way to assert their identity. The concept of 'self' and 'other' are the outcomes of the colonial relationship between "Colonizer" and the "Colonized". Hence the tribes' determination to maintain their cultural autonomy clearly rejects the subversion to the external factors. The tribe refuses to be identified or discovered by any outsider or to say the colonizers.

The concept of identity of the Sentinelese can be viewed from the lens of cultural persistence. Jean Paul's existentialism suggests that identity is formed by personal choices and actions, aptly applies on the tribe. The tribe has chosen to maintain their identity by rejecting the influences of the outer world and

asserting autonomy through isolation. The actions taken by the tribe in order to maintain their customs and also by resisting any association with the outsiders affirm their identity. This implies that even isolation is a continuous process of self-definition. Sartre in his lecture on Existentialism is Humanism says, “Existence precedes essence” (Sartre, 1946). This challenges the traditional philosophical views, particularly those influenced by religious or essentialist thinking which supports the argument that humans are born with a predefined essence or purpose. Individuals discover their purpose through their choices and actions, by asserting their freedom and responsibility in the process. This implies that this concept supports the life style of the tribe in a unique way. The relation may not reflect Sartre’s philosophy directly but to some extent it does. Sartre’s notion of freedom sides with the tribe’s determination to live on its own terms. Their decision to remain unaffected by the external factors has continued to shape their existence within their own territory, environment and traditions. Their decision to live without the interference of the modernity aligns with Sartre’s concept of freedom. Sartre also asserts that freedom comes with responsibility. This also goes in line with the tribe which is working for the collective survival. The feeling of isolation and abandonment, which explain the concept of existentialism, is their strategy to survive. The philosophy further speaks of uncertainties and worries which is faced by the tribe too but only because of the survival challenges, intrusions from the outer world or potential threats to their resources. The tribe is grappling with the existential issues but in a unique way.

### **Cultural autonomy of the tribe**

The life style of this tribe as well as their cultural practices supports their decision to live in isolation. Their close connection with environment, community and heritage enable them to maintain their autonomy and preserve a cultural identity. Their tools and mechanism of survival underline their self-sufficiency and resilience. Their proficiency to hunt, fish and rely on natural resources is an essential feature of their culture and traditional practices. This also shows that they maintain their autonomy by relying on internal systems of knowledge and skills. This also proves that the tribe is self-reliant. The glimpses of their identity can be seen in their attire, bark strings, necklaces and headbands. These adornments express their culture through daily practices. Their music and dance, especially through thigh-beating and rhythmic motions, further highlight their communal identity, belongingness, unity and cultural stability. The geometric designs on their weapons also serve as symbolic makers of their identity, reflecting a deeper connection to their environment and the spiritual significance of the tools they use. The tribe’s attempt to stay connected to its ancestral heritage and traditions is a powerful assertion of cultural resilience and self-determination.

Another attempt of the tribe to live in harmony with the environment is their assertion through their dwellings. Their homes are simple –lean –to-huts with

slanted roofs, their choice to have fire outside their dwellings reflects their reliance on the natural elements and an intentional detachment from modern comforts. Whatever has been gathered about their eating choices collectively confirms that, “Honey, wild pig, coconut, fruits, turtle, eggs are their staple food items”. Their close association with nature is further supported by the common claims of various sources and researchers that, “they eat eggs, seagulls or turtles, wild fruits” (Balakrishnan, 2018).

If the tribe’s decision to stay away from the outer world is viewed from the perspective of Erik Erikson, a German-American Psychologist, then also it supports the choices and decisions of the tribe. In this context, Erik’s theory of psychosocial development highlights the importance of identity formation and freedom. In close association with society, human beings develop a sense of self by navigating societal roles and the external influences such as family, culture and society. This truly agrees with his theory of “identity vs. role confusion” because the existence of this tribe can be viewed as a perpetual negotiation of identity in relation to the factors associated with their society and environment. He firmly believes that social interactions and the society play a significant role in shaping a person’s identity. According to this, the identity of this tribe experiences a serious threat as it is socially inaccessible to the outside world. On the contrary, their sense of self develops itself by associating with their community, traditions and the natural environment. Their identity is reinforced by adhering to the communal tribes and values of their tribe. (Erikson, 1968). However, Erik’s theory “identity vs. role confusion” works on this tribe very differently. The isolation of Sentinelese society implies its disassociation with various outside influences such as modern media, technological advances or other cultures that typically challenge the notion of search of identity because here the process of forming an identity does not depend upon external factors but on the very internal. However, this population has shaped its identity not from the cross-cultural interactions but from their own communal norms, traditions and connection with the natural environment. (Erikson, 1982).

The tribe’s identity formation resonates with the ideas of Clifford Geertz, an American anthropologist. Clifford Geertz too supports the role of symbolic symbols such as rituals, language and beliefs in forming the collective identity of a group. He argues that culture is deeply rooted in rituals, traditions and beliefs which are instrumental in shaping identity. In case of this tribe, all of these play a significant role in defining their collective identity and marinating cohesion. The self-imposed isolation of the Sentinelese tribe has played a significant role in preserving their identity. It could be interpreted as a means to preserve their cultural identity and enables its population to sustain its control over its development without external influences. As they are not or very less exposed to the outside ideas, religions, or advancements so they have managed to protect the purity of their traditions and customs from being diluted from modernity. Hence, their identity is inextricably tied to the symbols, rituals and shared meanings that structure their culture. The tribe’s deep connection to their

land, community and traditions forms their identity in much the same way as advocates Geertz. The tribe has shaped itself by its culture which is its way to assert right to exist without any alteration. Clifford describes identity as the “thick descriptions” (Geertz, 1973) of their lives, in which their cultural practices, language, rituals and relationship to nature are constantly reaffirmed within their community.

### **Hybridity and the post-colonial struggle for identity**

Bhabha’s Hybridity advocates that the cultural intermingling of two different cultures is a means for the indigenous cultures to adapt to new political, social or economic conditions. However, this tribe believes that any contact with the outside world could jeopardize their existence which could be in any form. It could be an outbreak of disease, economic exploitation, cultural assimilation, etc. This would culminate in the erosion of their traditional way of life. By remaining isolated, the tribe is not only asserting its right to exist as they wish to but also rejecting the post-colonial notion of Stuart Hall who asserts that, “Cultural identity is not fixed, but is a process of ‘becoming’ as well as ‘being’” (Hall, 1990). Hall argues both the past and the future of an individual play a vital role in shaping a personality. He believes that identity constantly undergoes transformation, and is never static or transcendent of time, place or culture. Rather than simply recovering the past, identities are formed through the narratives of history, with individuals and communities continuously repositioning themselves within these narratives. In this sense, the tribe’s choice to live in isolation shows their decision to preserve their cultural identity, refusing to allow external forces to define or transform it.

Hall’s perspective on cultural identity underlines the notion that identities are not fixed, singular, or static. They are fluid, fragmented and ever-evolving through historical, social and cultural processes. This supports the Sentinelese’s deliberate isolation from the outside world as an act of maintaining their own cultural identity in the face of globalizing forces. This further suggests Hall’s belief that identities are about the process of becoming rather than simply about being or origin. For the Sentinelese, their choice to remain isolated can be seen as a way of ensuring that their identity is not shaped by external influences but an evolving process in its own right. This decision to preserve their culture and originality intact clearly indicates their resistance to the imposition of external discourses and representations.

Globalization and migration are constant threat to the “settled” nature of identities. This can lead to fragmented identities. Such disruptions can result in the erosion of culture or force the adoption of external identity constructs that may not align with traditions. The Sentinelese avoids this external imposition in order to protect their tribe and population from the destabilizing forces. Hence, this deliberate isolation is a way to resist the forces of globalization and modernity that Hall argues have restructured many populations and cultures.

Consequently, they are not subjected to any kind of external categorization or objectification that could influence their identity as perceived by the outer world. This effort to avoid the interference of the broader global discourses that often shape the identities of many cultures, the tribe ensures that their identity remains self-constructed and internally represented.

Hall's idea of "coming –to-terms-with-our routes" does not imply returning to 'roots' (Gillory, 1993). This refers to the fact that cultural identity is not about finding a singular origin but about navigating various paths or routes that one takes throughout history. The tribe has chosen the path of isolation and that their identity shapes itself and further strengthens itself by following their own traditions and practices. Their allegiance to their roots, ancestors, land and environment has defined them. This deep-rootedness in their practices and culture has maintained their sense of who they are and who do they choose to become.

Many have attempted to contact them but have repeatedly failed. T.N. Pandit, an anthropologist, attempted to establish a contact with the tribe but failed. In 1974, a National Geographic team had to step back after their Director was shot with arrows. In 2004, The Indian Coast Guard had sent a helicopter to help the dwellers after the tsunami but was hit with arrows. The tribe's continuous attempt to safeguard itself from the external influences has remained unchanged for thousands of years. Their resistance serves as a powerful message to respect their decision to live in isolation. They do not wish to leave any scope for the resource extraction by the external agencies. Subsequently, they continue to attempt the safeguarding of both their land and the traditional ways of life.

## **Conclusion**

To conclude, the Sentinelese tribe embodies a unique form of assertion by way of self-determination, resistance to external factors and the preservation of their autonomy. Their isolation exemplifies their resistance through their deliberate isolation and there by resisting globalization, colonialism and modernity. They assert their identity in a manner that is entirely self-constructed and utterly based on their internal and historical contexts. The choice of the Sentinelese to remain uncontacted can thus be seen as a form of "self-representation" in post-colonial terms. They do not conform to the Western-centric notion that societies must evolve or modernize in order to be seen as legitimate or progressive. Instead, they assert their right to exist on their own terms, defining their own reality without the influence or interference of outside forces. This form of resistance mirrors the broader post-colonial challenge to the idea that all cultures must conform to global norms or development standards. In this way, the Sentinelese offer a unique model of assertion that aligns with post-colonial theories. Their deliberate isolation and refusal to engage with the outside world is a powerful act of resistance against colonial histories, modernization pressures, and the globalizing forces that seek to erase cultural diversity. Through their isolation, they assert their right to cultural preservation, self-determination, and autonomy,

making them a powerful example of how post-colonial assertion can take the form of silence, isolation, and resistance to external imposition.

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