

Case 7: A Missionary Murder

The Sentinelese, an indigenous tribe residing on North Sentinel Island off the coast of India for the past 60,000 years, are the world's most isolated community. Their staunch refusal of contact with the outside world, enforced by arrows shot at fishermen who stray too close, led the Indian government to establish The Andaman and Nicobar Islands Protection of Aboriginal Tribes Act in 1956. This legislation makes visiting North Sentinel Island or coming within 5 nautical miles without explicit government permission illegal, safeguarding the tribe's safety and seclusion.

The tribe's unique way of life has attracted global attention, particularly from individuals like John Chau, an evangelical Christian missionary affiliated with All Nations, a group devoted to spreading Christianity to the last untouched civilizations. In 2018, Chau, driven by his mission, attempted to make contact with the Sentinelese, hoping to introduce them to Christianity and the Bible. Despite multiple attempts at engagement over three days, the tribe fatally shot him with an arrow.

In the wake of John Chau's death, Christian groups across the globe urged the Indian government to take action against the tribe, holding them responsible for what they deemed as murder. Their argument rested on the belief that murder is universally wrong, regardless of who commits it, asserting that the Sentinelese should be subject to Indian laws like any other inhabitants of the country. Additionally, according to these religious members, Chau posed no real threat to the tribe, citing the 13 immunizations and extensive quarantine he underwent in preparation for his trip, fueling their perspective that the tribe's actions should be considered criminal.

Conversely, the Indian government maintained its support for the Sentinelese, stating that since the tribe has no contact with the outside world and operates without knowledge of modern standards of right and wrong, they cannot be held to the same legal and cultural standards as the rest of India. Their argument rested on the principle of preserving the autonomy and cultural integrity of the tribe. Pointing to the Protection of Aboriginal Tribes Act, the government emphasized the explicit warnings conveyed to John Chau and other potential visitors to North Sentinel Island, framing Chau's demise as a consequence of violating this legislation. From the government's view, the tribe has every right to protect themselves and their isolation from the contact of unwanted visitors like Chau.

However, critics question the idea that the Sentinelese operate entirely without knowledge of modern standards of right and wrong, arguing that despite their isolation, the tribe has likely developed a set of ethical principles and norms that govern their

interactions within their community. This challenges the notion that the tribe should be entirely exempt from the legal and cultural limitations applied to the rest of India. Also, dissenters argue against the very creation of the Protection of Aboriginal Tribes Act, contending that while designed to safeguard Indigenous tribes, it may inadvertently perpetuate a colonial mindset. By treating them as passive recipients of protection rather than active participants in decisions regarding their own future, the act raises questions about the legitimacy of the Indian government's intervention in tribal affairs and its authority to legislate on their behalf. This critique suggests that the Indian government's actions may have contributed to an environment where John Chau was justified in disregarding established regulations.

In the ongoing struggle to balance cultural preservation and the pursuit of justice, a pivotal question emerges: Should the Sentinelese tribe be held accountable for John Chau's death?

Discussion Questions:

1. To what extent does the cultural and historical context of the Sentinelese tribe justify their exemption from Indian laws, particularly those about acts of violence such as murder?
2. Who bears the primary responsibility for John Chau's death - Chau himself, the tribe, or another actor in this situation?
3. If a different group, lacking the historical isolation of the Sentinelese, were to engage in similar actions today, would that change the morality of the situation?

Sources:

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