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Sri Lanka's Post-Tsunami Recovery: Cultural Traditions, Social Structures and Power Struggles

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The Indian Ocean Tsunami of December 26, 2004 killed over 220,000 people and affected two million more in Indonesia, Thailand, Sri Lanka, India and other Indian Ocean nations. As the world reels under the impact of more recent disasters in Haiti, Peru and Pakistan, we consider lessons learned about post-disaster relief and recovery from the aftermath of the tsunami in Sri Lanka.

The tsunami waves caused by an undersea subduction earthquake off the coast of Sumatra devastated 70% of Sri Lanka's coastline and killed 35,000 people. Days after the disaster, Dennis McGilvray joined forces with Michele Gamburd to organize an interdisciplinary team funded by NSF's Human and Social Dynamics program to conduct research on the aftermath of the tsunami. The team included a political scientist, a demographer, and three cultural anthropologists; two disaster studies specialists later joined the group. All team members had prior experience working in Sri Lanka and South Asia, and collaborated on a project implemented in 2005-06 to compare the importance of cultural, regional and political factors in post-disaster governmental and NGO efforts. Results of the research appear in the volume *Tsunami Recovery in Sri Lanka: Ethnic and Regional Dimensions*, edited by McGilvray and Gamburd (2010). Here we discuss what anthropology—in collaboration with related disciplines—has to offer discussions of post-disaster development and diplomacy.

Anthropological Approaches and Expertise

In the new millennium, anthropologists increasingly find themselves challenged to deal with violence and disorder in the aftermath of manmade crises and natural hazards. As we grow more engaged with the study of disaster, we often find that our methodological traditions position us to offer a unique perspective on this field of study. Relief workers and journalists often move around the globe from disaster to disaster. They are “here today, gone tomorrow.” In contrast, in the tradition of long-term intensive Malinowskian fieldwork, anthropologists are often “here to stay” for longer periods. Using anthropology's hallmark holistic perspective, we can see the turbulence that disaster creates in a society within a wider context.

Long-term, ethnographic perspectives from anthropology can inform and enhance development efforts to mitigate the impact of disasters or improve quality of life and infrastructure on a broader level. Drawing on their prior research experience and familiarity with their field sites, the anthropologists on the tsunami team were able to offer longitudinal pre- and post-disaster analyses of their study areas. This insight proved useful for comparing recovery efforts on Sri Lanka's Sinhala-Buddhist southwest coast and the Tamil-Hindu and Tamil-Muslim east coast, and for situating this comparison within the preexisting economic and political context of the island as a whole.

Members of our team examined the politics in Sri Lanka that defined the nature of the disaster and the power dynamics inherent in deciding who took responsibility for managing crisis response. Recent anthropological studies of governance highlight the value of identifying whose expertise governs a disaster situation, and whose agenda items receive time, attention and funding. In Sri Lanka, complex interactions occurred between local, regional and national governments, local and international NGOs, and intergovernmental organizations. In general, disasters increase citizens' needs and simultaneously decrease their governments' abilities to help them. In Sri Lanka, as in other disaster-stricken locations, the influx of expatriate NGO personnel generated some cross-cultural frictions. In addition, criticism and suspicion arose over the use of aid money. The windfall (a “golden wave” of aid) raised questions of accountability and transparency. Fine-grained ethnographic understanding of local dynamics provided

valuable data to investigate claims of misuse of funds on the southwest coast. In this case, discourse analysis revealed complex politics of representation at play as individuals negotiated stigma, prestige and social status through accusations of corruption and claims of generosity.

Uneven Impacts of Disaster

Disasters often expose the stratified nature of local society. As amply illustrated in the aftermath of January's earthquake in Haiti, underdevelopment increases vulnerability to natural hazards. Disasters often affect the poor, marginalized and disempowered more than the rest of the population. In Sri Lanka, anthropological studies help explain why some segments of the tsunami-affected population were worse off than others before the disaster, thus raising issues of social justice, moral integrity, human rights and entitlement. Similarly, a political economy theoretical perspective led the anthropologists on the tsunami team to investigate whether interventions at the critical moment of disaster could cause fundamental changes in Sri Lankan culture and society.

Aid distribution helps people refine and re-imagine their social status, and anthropologists are uniquely situated to understand how gender and class identity politics play out in a disaster. For example, gender proved an important variable in understanding who died in the tsunami. Women died disproportionately in Sri Lanka and in other tsunami-affected locations; their long hair and saris hampered their escape, as did cultural traditions that keep women from learning to swim or to climb trees, and family norms that place women in charge of taking care of (and saving) children. In addition, the tsunami was profoundly spatial, directly affecting only a relatively narrow band of coastline. Socioeconomic status is zoned along the coast, with stark hierarchies displayed along the beaches, which are occupied by the poorest fishermen, the richest Sri Lankans, or wealthy tourists visiting five-star hotels.

Post-tsunami development of the tourism industry raises interesting anthropological questions about disaster capitalism. Studies in Sri Lanka and elsewhere suggest that post-disaster relief measures may inadvertently exacerbate exploitation and inequality and enhance neoliberal economic agendas. Along with material aid and technological advice, outsiders bring in economic and political ideologies. In emergency situations, reforms can be implemented without local participation and debate. In Sri Lanka, the tsunami had a dramatic effect on property ownership. For example, the tsunami altered land-holding patterns along the coasts by consolidating property in the hands of hotel developers in some areas with intensive tourism. In the agricultural and fishing region on the east coast, allocation of house reconstruction funds to male members of the family threatened to undermine local traditions of female-owned dowry houses and the widespread Tamil and Muslim custom of matrilineal marriage, placing dwellings in the hands of male instead of female kin. Drawing on prior knowledge of the area, anthropologists pointed out these changes to development workers, and subsequent fieldwork revealed that the matrilineal household system is likely to be preserved in practice, despite these post-tsunami housing policies. An eventual return to local Tamil Hindu goddess worship was also documented despite the immediate post-tsunami loss of faith in protective seashore temples and shrines.

Political Fallout

Disasters always unfold within preexisting political contexts. Sri Lanka's recovery from the tsunami provides multiple lessons about disaster diplomacy and the importance of political conditions to the success of short-term relief and long-term rebuilding operations. The tsunami occurred during a long-standing conflict between the Government of Sri Lanka (GoSL) and the separatist guerrilla movement of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Sri Lankans will likely spend another decade assessing the impact of the tsunami on Sri Lanka's entrenched ethnic conflict and the ceasefire that had been signed in early 2002. Scholars already concur that the lack of trust between the two sides adversely affected the distribution of relief supplies. Instead of building trust through collaborative humanitarian efforts, the GoSL sought to centralize distribution of international aid, while the LTTE hoped to control distribution in the territories under its authority.

The stakeholders were keenly aware that the microcosm of relief administration carried implications for territorial control, political legitimacy, and national sovereignty. Aggressive Sinhala

nationalists categorically refused to devolve power in the distribution of aid, believing that this step would grant undue legitimacy to the LTTE's de facto state in the north. Unable to agree on power-sharing for the administration of humanitarian aid, the warring parties fell deeper into conflict. Mistrust skyrocketed as delays in deploying relief to the north and east (areas already adversely affected by the civil war) increased perceptions of inequity. By 2006, the 2002 ceasefire had disintegrated. Increasing hostilities led to the official abrogation of the cease fire in 2008 and the GoSL's seizure by military campaign of all LTTE-occupied territories by mid-2009. In the final analysis, our tsunami research team watched as the aftermath of the disaster enhanced the authority of the central government instead of promoting peaceful reconciliation between the warring factions.

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***Dennis B McGilvray** is professor of anthropology at University of Colorado at Boulder. His most recent books include Muslim Perspectives on the Sri Lankan Conflict (with Mirak Raheem, 2007), and Crucible of Conflict: Tamil and Muslim Society on the East Coast of Sri Lanka (2008).*