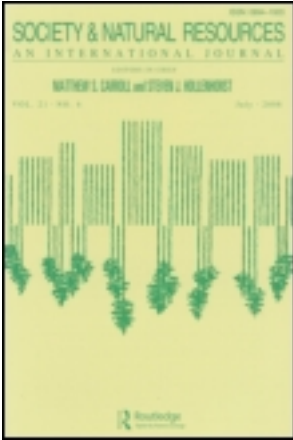


This article was downloaded by: [Venkat Ramanujam]

On: 26 September 2012, At: 10:10

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Society & Natural Resources: An International Journal

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/usnr20>

From the Ashes into the Fire? Institutional Change in the Post-Tsunami Nicobar Islands, India

R. Venkat Ramanujam^a, Simron Jit Singh^b & Arild Vatn^c

^a Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the Environment (ATREE), Bangalore, India

^b Institute of Social Ecology, Alpen-Adria University, Vienna, Austria

^c Department of International Environment and Development Studies, Norwegian University of Life Sciences (UMB), Aas, Norway

Version of record first published: 14 May 2012.

To cite this article: R. Venkat Ramanujam, Simron Jit Singh & Arild Vatn (2012): From the Ashes into the Fire? Institutional Change in the Post-Tsunami Nicobar Islands, India, *Society & Natural Resources: An International Journal*, 25:11, 1152-1166

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/08941920.2012.669516>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: <http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions>

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae, and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand, or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

From the Ashes into the Fire? Institutional Change in the Post-Tsunami Nicobar Islands, India

R. VENKAT RAMANUJAM

Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the Environment (ATREE),
Bangalore, India

SIMRON JIT SINGH

Institute of Social Ecology, Alpen-Adria University, Vienna, Austria

ARILD VATN

Department of International Environment and Development Studies,
Norwegian University of Life Sciences (UMB), Aas, Norway

This article critically analyzes institutional change as a consequence of humanitarian intervention in the tsunami-affected Nicobar Islands in India. It shows that the state and aid agencies distributed resources on the basis of formal rules and norms different from those observed by the Nicobarese. This has created social upheaval by diminishing the stature of the joint family system and imparting greater agency to political representatives. Written communication has overridden the sanctity of the spoken word. Younger, educated Nicobarese, especially men, have been privileged by the new institutional arrangements and are active participants in social change. Thus, humanitarian intervention has resulted in shifting relationships of power and equity. Moreover, the ecological consequences appear to be unsustainable. The article suggests the need for enhanced sensitivity to cultural specificities and inherent human capacity in designing humanitarian intervention.

Keywords disasters, institutional change, institutions, Nicobar Islands, tsunami

The Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004 was followed by a humanitarian aid effort involving the transfer and deployment of an unprecedented volume of resources. This article investigates the impact of humanitarian intervention in the Nicobar

Received 14 December 2010; accepted 15 December 2011.

We thank Marina Fischer-Kowalski, Willi Haas, Richa Kumar, and Prakash Kashwan, as well as four anonymous reviewers for their comments. Much of the post-tsunami data was collected within the framework of the project RECOVER funded by the Austrian Science Fund (L275-G05). Acknowledgements are due to the Andaman and Nicobar Administration for their invaluable support in facilitating this research in the field. We are grateful to the Tribal Councils of Nancowry, Chowra, and Teressa, as well as to Mark Paul, Ameen Ismail, and Daniel Richardson for valuable discussions and field support. We are particularly grateful to the RAI fellowship in Urgent Anthropology (2009–2011) awarded to the second author that facilitated the writing-up of this article.

Address correspondence to Simron Jit Singh, Institute of Social Ecology, Alpen-Adria University, Schottenfeldgasse 29/5, 1070 Vienna, Austria. E-mail: simron.singh@aau.at

archipelago, a part of India's badly affected Andaman and Nicobar Islands. It examines institutional change in indigenous Nicobarese society resulting from the post-tsunami relief and rehabilitation effort. We argue that by overlooking the unique cultural characteristics of the Nicobarese, as well as their internal diversity, the tsunami response has undermined existing institutions and local capacities. This is reflected in social upheaval and an unsustainable reconfiguration of the relationship between the Nicobarese and their environment.

Were the consequences of tsunami aid more catastrophic than the tsunami itself? The aim of this article is to critically reflect on this question. In their overview of the tsunami response, Telford and Cosgrave (2007, 22) conclude that the "exceptional funding did not lead to an exceptional response [because] the international humanitarian community [sought to] implement its own set of agendas lead[ing] to a dearth of accountability and quality." We attempt to explore whether the Nicobarese experience supports such a conclusion. We build our analysis on the first two authors' sustained engagement in the Nicobar Islands. The institutional change framework is used to examine the outcome of humanitarian intervention. Beginning with a theoretical discussion on institutions, the article examines two key institutional structures in the Nicobar Islands: the Nicobarese joint family and the political representation system. We illustrate the socioecological impact of tsunami aid by considering how these structures were affected by humanitarian intervention. As the article demonstrates, the institutional change framework helps not only to better appreciate the consequences of the aid effort, but also to tease out process-related aspects of social change.

Institutions and Institutional Change

Institutions play a core role in organizing societies; typically they are categorized as conventions, norms, and legal rules. They offer meaning to social relations, and protect and produce interests (Scott 1995; Vatn 2005). They also play important roles in simplifying interaction and serve as coordination mechanisms informing behavioral expectations and codes of conduct. Institutions are collective creations, being formed as groups of people attempt to solve the problems they face when interacting with each other. In the process, they are imprinted upon people and become a part of their cultural identity. Some institutional aspects are easily observable in the cultural variations across communities, but others may be deeply embedded or "invisible" so that it may be "almost impossible for people to subject them to conscious scrutiny" (Clever 2002, 21).

At the same time, institutions are a medium through which a range of forces—political, cultural, and economic—act to manifest and modify human perceptions and interests. Hence, an institutional understanding is inadequate without accounting for asymmetries of power and equity that are an expression of the social and economic context within which they are embedded (Baviskar 2008).

This article is a study of institutional change. While Clever (2002) argues that institutional change is a continuous, improvisational and incremental process, it may be driven both by internal and external processes often acting in concert and feeding into each other. Internal changes arise from shifting balances of power or local biophysical changes, while external pressures include large-scale biophysical changes, market forces, and changes in external policies. External influences may also arise from development projects that influence governance systems and favor certain

sections of society (intentionally or otherwise). Institutional change can create and reinforce hegemonies, but it can also challenge them, especially if internal agents are already disposed in favor of such change.¹

There is extensive documentation to show that the introduction of new institutional arrangements by external agencies is a demanding process that requires an adequate understanding of existing structures to avoid confusion and conflict (Ostrom 1990). For instance, Mosse's study of the community-managed tank irrigation system in south India (Mosse 2003) suggests that the indifferent success of "participatory" irrigation projects is owed to the inability of development agents to appreciate the role of preexisting water distribution practices as an expression of caste privilege and religious authority. Similarly, Riseth and Vatn (2009) show that reindeer pasture degradation in northern Norway partly stems from a uniform state policy that has failed to grasp the institutional distinctiveness within two groups of Sami herding communities. Development agents often tend to think in terms of standardized, homogeneous structures of governance. This leads them to overlook institutional diversity, which imparts stability to governance structures through the accommodation of variations in values, interests, and power relations.

Since interests, values, and power are not static, institutional change is a continuous process. It may occur through processes widely accepted as being legitimate (such as a parliamentary lawmaking process), and be welcomed by compliance. Alternatively, it may produce disruption and upheaval when newly created institutions emphasizing formal rules and a distinct set of norms override existing, socially embedded ones.

The capacity of a society to change its institutional structures in the face of external pressures is of great importance (Riseth and Vatn 2009). A high capacity for transformation enables smoother adaptation, and the challenge posed by new conditions may be said to be successfully met. However, problems arise if the capacity of internal transformation does not match the force of external pressures.

Methods

The article is based on fieldwork totalling 2½ person-years in the Central Nicobar archipelago by the first two authors between 1999 and 2009. This was supplemented by research carried out in the library archives of Copenhagen, Vienna, London, and Cambridge. Before the tsunami, research was aimed at gaining insights into the biophysical exchanges between society and nature (in terms of material, energy, time, and land-use) and the role of sociocultural, political, and economic institutions in organizing these flows. One of the main objectives was to understand the impact of development programs on the sustainability of the local socioecological system.² Research relied on anthropological and socioecological methods. In the case of the latter, physical accounting methods were applied to local scales. Trinket Island with 399 inhabitants was chosen as the core sample for in-depth enquiries related to biophysical flows.³ With respect to the study of institutions for this article, the neighboring islands of Kamorta and Nancowry (population: 2,518) were included in the sample since the three islands together (henceforth called Nancowry) form a close kinship network and a cohesive political unit. Here the methods used included participant observations in household and communal ceremonies and festivals, and 32 in-depth semistructured interviews with the organizers of these events, priests carrying out the rites, prominent village elders, elected representatives, and finally heads of

about 30% of the households.⁴ The goal of these interviews was to understand family and communal institutions with respect to property and usufruct rights, as well as obligations, taboos, sanctions, and inheritance rules. Family genealogies were drawn with the help of household heads and mapped with property rights and access patterns. Together the methods led to deeper insights into institutions governing the Nicobarese joint family and political representation as described in the following sections.

In the post-tsunami period the first two authors, besides their role as researchers, offered voluntary support in the reconstruction process.⁵ They were privy, as participant observers, to deliberations within the Nicobarese community, discussions between community representatives and government, and discussions between community representatives and NGOs. The science project RECOVER⁶ allowed the continuation of the research and data collection after the tsunami between 2005 and 2009. Research was aimed at searching for viable future options for the islands in the wake of the tsunami. Official data relating to reconstruction-related material flows were gathered in order to facilitate a comparison with biophysical exchanges in the pre-tsunami period. Structured interviews were carried out with 286 respondents to understand the livelihood options envisaged by them. In addition, data on institutional change were collected to gain insights into the effects of tsunami aid on society–nature interactions and future socioecological sustainability. Ethnographic methods, especially participant observation, were a major source of information. Furthermore, 24 informal interviews and 6 semistructured interviews were conducted with Nicobarese youth, joint family heads, and key informants. In addition, 14 aid workers, 6 government officers, and 5 non-Nicobarese informants were also interviewed. The authors also interviewed local journalists, aid workers, and government officers. The interviews were combined with a perusal of (1) contemporary correspondence between Nicobarese community members, and government offices and aid agencies, and (2) documentation relating to relief and reconstruction produced by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and the government.

By virtue of their involvement in development intervention in the post-tsunami period, the authors were very much “a part of the world” that the article seeks to describe (Mosse 2005). Their engagement influenced their perception as researchers, and is reflected in the representation of issues discussed here.

The Nicobar Islands: A Pre-Tsunami Overview

The Nicobar Islands belong to India’s centrally administered territory of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, which stretch, arc-like, from Myanmar to Sumatra in the Bay of Bengal. The Nicobar archipelago comprises 24 islands, of which 12 are inhabited. The indigenous Nicobarese, who belong to the Southeast Asian cultural complex and speak an Austro-Asiatic language, are the dominant inhabitants. A Scheduled Tribe under the Indian Constitution, they number nearly 30,000.⁷ Over the past century a large number of them have converted to Christianity, and a smaller number to Islam, but animistic elements continue to be reflected in their belief system and cultural practices. Nonetheless, the Nicobarese are far from a homogenous group. The internal diversity among them takes the form of four distinct cultural groups.⁸

From the 18th century onward, the Nicobar Islands attracted the attention of colonial powers (Danes, Austrians, and British) due to their strategic position on the sea route to Southeast Asia. In 1947 the islands were taken over by independent

India from the British. In 1956 the Indian government introduced the Andaman and Nicobar Protection of Aboriginal Tribes Regulations (ANPATR), which restrict entry into indigenous peoples' habitats in order to protect their cultural integrity. The ANPATR, together with a partial provision of infrastructure, has limited the Nicobarese's direct intercourse with the rest of the world and promoted their relative isolation in the last half-century.

The Nicobarese of Nancowry subsist largely on hunting and gathering, fishing, raising pigs and chicken, and maintaining coconut plantations and horticultural gardens growing an assortment of tubers and fruits. Nearly half of the coconut production is converted into copra (scooped and dried coconut meat) and exchanged for rice, sugar, cloth, toiletries, and other articles of need (Singh et al. 2001). Money rarely exchanges hands and capital accumulation is absent, since copra is produced only when the need for market goods arises (Justin 1990; Singh 2003; Syamchaudhuri 1977). The profusion of elaborate festivals and rituals reinforces social stability, hierarchies, and rights and access to ecological resources and property (Singh 2006). However, this is not to suggest that the pre-tsunami Nicobarese lived in a pristine state of existence. The islands were in a state of transition combining elements of "tradition" and "modernity," although the pace of transition was circumscribed by their relative seclusion (Fischer-Kowalski et al. 2010).

The Joint Family System

In Nancowry, the *kamuanse* is the basic socioeconomic unit of Nicobarese society. Each *kamuanse* consists of multiple nuclear families (comprising wife, husband, and children) extending across three or more generations and led by a head called *chial nyi*. It may thus be spoken of as an extended or joint family. Ownership of property, including land and pigs, is vested in the *kamuanse*, but usufruct rights are defined across smaller units within a *kamuanse*. A *kamuanse* splits when it grows too large and the property is accordingly redistributed. Such related *kamuanse* together constitute a *kamunchia* (Singh 2003).

In Nancowry, women enjoy higher status than men and take crucial management decisions relating to livestock and land. For instance, they decide when the pigs are to be fed and when the coconuts harvested for preparing copra. It is common for men, who come to be called *ungrung*, to take up residence in the wife's family upon marriage without acquiring any rights to property. However, the *chial nyi* can be either male or female. In choosing a *chial nyi*, members of a family consider the person's knowledge of cultural norms and history of land ownership, ability to mediate in conflicts, and competence in managing the family's resources.

The *kamuanse* is a repository of institutions that simultaneously perform economic, social and cultural functions. Thus, while the *chial nyi* is responsible for apportioning land to individual family units for horticulture, family members reciprocate by contributing a part of the harvest to the common pool. The economic role of this norm is embedded in its cultural value: Failure to make a contribution can invite social ridicule. The successful organization of festivals, which entails extensive gift-giving and feasting, is essential for the *kamuanse* to appease malevolent spirits, to maintain its social standing, and to reemphasize rights and access to property. This cannot happen unless individual family units collaborate since the quantum of resources involved often necessitates months of assiduous planning and accumulation.

Resource use is tempered by cultural beliefs. Many parts of the forest and sea, regarded as the abode of spirits, are considered taboo for harvesting food, and periodic bans are observed on hunting and fishing. The *kamuanse* plays an important role in safeguarding these norms. The burden of violation falls upon the *kamuanse* to which the transgressor belongs and a community feast may be organized in expiation.

Reciprocity is the most characteristic of social norms. Usufruct rights over a plantation may be awarded as a gift for a limited period of time to a member of another *kamuanse* in exchange for a service. Offering presents or making contributions in kind during both joyous and solemn occasions is common. Through such acts reciprocity emphasizes a rationality context in which the distribution of material possessions is valued over their accumulation. It serves as a demonstration of the *kamuanse's* honor, and signifies its wealth and standing; at the same time, it binds the community together.

The smooth running of the *kamuanse* depends considerably on the *chial nyi*. They must ensure that the productive potential of the *kamuanse* is realized insofar as ritual obligations are fulfilled and social standing maintained. Often they become part of a wider conflict-resolution process in which disputes are settled by mutually acceptable arbiters chosen for their “wisdom” and integrity. Furthermore, a *chial nyi* who is articulate and widely traveled may be nominated as a political representative (discussed later). This reflects the complex overlap of roles embedded in the *kamuanse*. As an institutional structure, it supports multiple rationalities inducing behavior that reaches beyond the individual interest. It acts as an authority structure while fulfilling the social and material needs of its members, and serves as a bulwark of social stability.

The System of Political Representation

Referring to the historical lack of central authority among the Nicobarese, it was said of them as recently as the early 20th century that “there is no one who has power to exercise control over even a single village” (Kloss 1903, 41). But shortly thereafter, the colonial British administration fostered the rise of a central leadership in Nancowry by awarding the title “Rani” or Queen to Ishlon (d. 1954), and the title passed on to her daughter, Lachmi (1904–1989). Both women came to wield considerable authority over the islands.

The historical context suggests that the necessity to deal with foreigners, namely, traders and administrators, rather than self-governance, underlies the rather recent origins of Nicobarese political representation relative to the joint family system. With the arrival of Europeans in the region from the 16th century onward, Nicobarese representatives who negotiated the terms of barter trade with passing ships began calling themselves “captains” (Kloss 1903, 241; Singh 2003, 91). The missionary Reverend Haensel, who lived in Nancowry between 1779 and 1787, had this to say of the captain in his memoirs:

The natives of these islands are a free people, perfectly independent, but have a captain in every village. There are, indeed, several who claim the rank of captain, as being more sensible and clever than their neighbours. . . . Yet no one is bound to obey him, for all of them, male and female, consider themselves under no control whatsoever; and the captain must

take care, that he does not offend, by pretending to command. He is sure to be disobeyed, unless they are pleased to listen to friendly representation. All the preference given to him, consists in this; that when a ship arrives, he is allowed to go first on board, and to make the bargain, if they have anything to barter. (Haensel 1812, 45)

The British granted formal recognition to the captains, treating them as village representatives, in order to “simplify the procedure of controlling the natives” (Kloss 1903, 241). The intent is evident from the following instructions given to the local officer-in-charge on the appointment of headmen in 1882:

The distribution of these certificates might be made the occasion of some little ceremony to show the Nicobarese that we are desirous of investing headmen with influence. . . . It is probable that the appointment . . . will not at first effect any material change in our relations with the Nicobarese, . . . but once appointed all intercourse with the villagers should be conducted through these headmen, whose influence through their connection with Government would, in course of time, be recognized by the villagers. (Temple 1903, 239)

Since the late 1970s, such headmen, called village captains, are elected through adult franchise (Dhingra 2005). In 1992, the Indian government introduced the concept of a tribal (or island) council with village captains as members and headed by a chairperson (Singh 2003). This occurred in the context of the Jawahar Rozgar Yojana, a high-profile national poverty-alleviation program of the time, in order to ease the introduction of development activities in the Nicobar Islands. Now each island or related group of islands has a distinct tribal council.

As it stood prior to the tsunami, the political representation system was a supplement to the *kamuanse*, acting as a formal channel of communication with the government, and facilitating internal consultation on development and political issues. Individual captains dealt with village-level issues, meeting visitors and government officials, and organizing village meetings. Being socially embedded, they could also be asked to mediate disputes, either directly or by arranging for arbiters. Issues of larger scope were the concern of the tribal council, which dealt with higher levels of government. However, decisions were taken after popular consultation, usually through community meetings, and the tribal council did not have unilateral decision-making powers. Consequently, the captains were neither seen as lawmakers nor as “leaders” balancing social and political concerns. To date there are no political parties and, in fact, no canvassing for votes during tribal council elections. In addition to their knowledge of social norms and rules, and their ability to resolve conflicts, the competence to parley with the government is a key consideration while voting. Villagers take into account factors such as level of education, fluency in Hindi (the language of government officials), “foreign” trips (an indicator of exposure to the world outside the islands), and “smartness” (the ability to deal appropriately with officials and outsiders). A growing preference for younger candidates with some education and good articulation was particularly visible during the village elections in Nancowry in 2003.

The political representation system plays the role of guard, mediator, and negotiator but is not an authority structure in the manner of the *kamuanse*. The nature of this distinction, however, has not been grasped by the outside world. Administrators,

who come from mainland India, perceive elected political representatives as “leaders” extending patronage to their people. Their understanding of the Nicobarese is further influenced by the island of Car Nicobar, where a relatively different social structure accords greater powers to the village captain and the tribal council than in the other islands. Consequently, administrators view the captain as the leader of the village and the tribal council as the supreme representative of the community. The implications of such misinterpretation, evident even earlier, increased considerably amid the intense activity following the tsunami.

The Tsunami Response

The tsunami consumed 3,480 lives in the Nicobar Islands, mostly Nicobarese, and damaged 5,625 ha of land, including plantations, of which only half is reclaimable (Porwal 2006). The aid effort in India, which began soon thereafter, was led by the state with support from national and international NGOs. Immediate relief was followed up in the long run with provision for boats, community infrastructure, and housing.

Accommodated in relief camps following the tsunami, the Nicobarese were quick to recover their agency. In the interviews conducted to elicit their views on prospective livelihood choices, more than 60% asked to be allowed to return to their village sites so that they could build makeshift homes and ensure food security by clearing land and raising fresh horticultural gardens before the monsoon arrived. This was clearly a strategy devised to cope with the new circumstances and displayed a determination to prepare for the future despite the recent suffering. However, a cautious government refused to let them leave even as aid agencies aggressively competed with each other to deliver relief material. While acknowledging the contribution to individual security and dignity made by humanitarian organizations, a key government report points out the inappropriate and supply-driven nature of relief aid, while providing examples of NGOs’ self-justifying assessments (Abid 2006).⁹

Unaware of the notion of humanitarian aid, the people were overwhelmed by the influx of goods accompanied by officials and aid workers. Interviews with community members brought to light the fractious contestation over the fairness of distribution of relief material, which provoked deep resentment and led to the erosion of trust among the people. Distributional conflicts arose as economic stratification began to emerge. Some NGOs made promises but did not keep them. Members of the Nancowry Tribal Council complained that a prominent international NGO promised an advanced water supply system and agricultural assistance in Nancowry, but neither materialized. A UN agency distributed rainwater harvesting equipment, a great necessity in the prevailing conditions, but the numbers made available fell short. The consequence of broken promises was borne by village captains and the tribal council, who faced the ire of the community since they were the ones responsible for negotiating with the government and aid agencies.¹⁰ The repeated complaint, “we did not get it,” came to represent people’s aid dependency as well as the mounting anger against their political representatives.

The government’s role was substantial. Correspondence between the government and Nicobarese political representatives shows that cash transfers were made on various counts: loss of property, death of kin, and damage to agricultural land. Efforts were made to reach out to vulnerable persons such as widows and orphans, to provide boats to fisher-folk, and to distribute loans for self-employment. The

government commissioned the building of about 7,000 housing units. Key livelihood support activities included wage employment, and technical assistance for vegetable cultivation and plantation cropping.

The valuing of life, property, and labor in terms of a single all-purpose currency was a new phenomenon in itself, as was the introduction of large amounts of cash. As the people struggled to cope with the situation, their early resilience was replaced by aid dependence. A phase of conspicuous consumption set in (Singh 2009). Being unaccustomed to capital accumulation, the people rapidly spent compensation money on high-end motorcycles, fashionable clothes, expensive electronic appliances, and bootlegged alcohol. Shops in Nancowry were soon well stocked and prices rose manifold. Businessmen, largely non-indigenous, emerged as among of the main beneficiaries of tsunami aid.

Institutional Change

Looking at the institutional dynamics, we observe that the post-tsunami period overlaid new institutions on existing ones without adequate appreciation of the latter. The state and aid agencies acted without a critical understanding of the far-reaching effects of their actions. Although the tribal council's participation was solicited, complex factors defied a smooth engagement. As this section argues, the new institutions came to embody a set of interests and power relationships permeated by a sense of superiority, and produced unintended consequences. The following analysis draws on the results of our post-tsunami ethnographic fieldwork as explained in the Methods section.

The Rise of the Nuclear Family and the Disenfranchisement of Women

The extensive scale of post-tsunami state involvement brought the Nicobarese under a high degree of bureaucratic control. People were mapped onto name lists, and organized into male-headed *nuclear families*, comprising the wife and minor children, with widows and elderly persons treated as dependents. That the Nicobarese lived in joint families was acknowledged in principle, but the fundamental socioeconomic character of the joint family was not grasped. Bureaucratic ease and the pressure of quick outcomes acted to make the lists the blueprint for the distribution of relief material and long-term rehabilitation. This had a two-pronged impact. First, by overlooking the centrality of the *kamuanse* the tsunami response empowered individual members at the expense of the *chial nyi*. Monetary compensation to male nuclear family "heads" in the form of checks bearing their names conveyed a powerful message in this direction, endowing nuclear families with economic independence and legitimacy. This was accentuated by the new houses commissioned by the government. The fact that these were designed to accommodate only nuclear families led to a physical redefinition of living space for a people used to communal living. As Ahmed, a young Nicobarese from a large joint family mused, "Earlier we lived together and ate from only one kitchen. But look at us now, we have all become separate [*sic*]." ¹¹

Second, the privileging of men undermined the position of women, who possess high status in Nancowry. Nonindigenous men dominated the aid effort and reproduced their gender ideologies in the course of their work. They also overlooked internal cultural differences in the islands and tended to use Car Nicobar, where men

have a relatively higher status, as an archetype. Although the partiality for men was a preexisting tendency, it was accentuated during the reconstruction process. When officials went out to relief camps and villages, their body language and greater attentiveness to the words of the men betrayed their preference. To this was added the shyness of many women toward “foreign” men. Consequently, Nicobarese men rather than women tended to deal with aid workers and officials. Public and political spaces were implicitly identified with men, and regarded as superior to the “feminine” spaces of the private and domestic. The reordering of gender spaces implicitly underscored a gradual disenfranchisement of women.

Youth Agency and Disavowing the “Oral”

Bureaucratic “rules” dominated the reconstruction process. The emphasis on “formal” procedure and the written word overwhelmed the Nicobarese’s moral universe where oral communication was bound by sanctity and trust. Tasks such as acknowledging written receipt of relief articles and drafting petitions to government offices involved paperwork that brought home to the average Nicobarese the compulsion of wielding the pen. Young, educated Nicobarese came to the fore while senior members were relegated to the background. In the new circumstances, the ability to deal with government and aid agencies severely diminished the importance of intracommunity managerial skills and knowledge of cultural norms. For instance, the elderly Davidson, who moved to the administrative headquarters in Kamorta, went without electricity for a whole year simply because he was unable to articulate his predicament to the officials concerned. One of the authors helped him draft a petition; however, he was too mild-mannered to push his way through the various offices involved. In the end, he gave up in sheer frustration and returned to his isolated hamlet, where he lived without electricity anyway.

The humanitarian response tended to reinforce the perception of the Nicobarese as “tribals” in need of a “civilizing” touch. Thus an official interviewing potential beneficiaries for a self-employment program exclaimed, “They are so innocent! We have to improve them.” Indeed, the written word symbolized an “improvement” over the oral universe of the illiterate Nicobarese. It is little surprise that younger Nicobarese, who are taught at school from standardized all-India syllabi by largely non-Nicobarese teachers, emerged as the vehicle of the civilizing project. Some Nicobarese respondents repeatedly stated that young people emerge from schooling with low self-esteem and a sense of shame at being “tribal.” This is accompanied by a fascination for the “modern” world. The humanitarian response unwittingly played upon these factors. Thus, younger people became active participants—almost protagonists, in the social change unfolding in their islands.

Aggrandizement of the Village Captain and Tribal Council

Post-tsunami, aid workers and officials viewed village captains as community “leaders.” As in the case of women, the understanding was flawed. The relatively powerful Car Nicobarese political representative again served as an archetype for administrators and aid workers, who expected the captain to help them take quick decisions as they rushed from one engagement to another. Many older captains who died in the tsunami were replaced by young, inexperienced ones. With their limited comprehension of the world beyond the islands, the latter struggled to satisfy the

demanding haste of decision making, or to understand its implications, while simultaneously meeting popular expectation. The tsunami response failed to appraise the capacities of the people it sought to reach out to, posing a serious challenge for village captains and the tribal councils in serving as effective partners.

Captains found themselves in demand, which instilled in them a degree of self-importance. This led to arbitrary decisions, particularly in matters concerning compensation for damaged property, where some captains dealt directly with government officials without consulting landowners. Given the complex nature of property rights, and the fact that this was not a competence area for captains, conflicts broke out when compensation checks were awarded. People approached the Nicobar Youth Association, a community-based NGO that contributed to the reconstruction process, to help them draft petitions of complaint to the local administrator. The volume of complaints was so high that eventually a template was designed so that only basic details were required to be filled in.

Some captains influenced aid distribution in favor of family members, giving rise to a patron–client relationship. The government delegated to them the responsibilities of distributing government-supplied rations and deciding upon the sites of the new houses for their fellow villagers. This gave them the ability to suppress dissent. One particular village captain decided that the village would be relocated entirely to land owned by him. This turned him into a powerful landlord overnight. An often-repeated comment, a manifestation of widespread resentment, was: “The captains have become all-powerful. We have to beg in front of them.” Conceding the widespread insecurity in meeting basic needs, the tribal council chairperson observed, “Both food and shelter are now in the hands of the captain. People are dependent on them. It was not so earlier.” While the importance of the Tribal Council rose in regard to its dealings with the government on reconstruction issues, its credibility declined among the very people that it sought to represent.

Socioecological Implications

So far, rather than being purely economic in nature, resource use has reflected the need to maintain social prestige, and the privileging of communal well-being. However, the distribution of monetary compensation for damage to land and plantations has, for the first time, imbued land with an overt economic value. Monetary compensation and cash-for-wage employment programs have produced heightened reliance on a cash-based market economy. Consequently, there is a declining necessity to be responsive to feedbacks from the natural environment. Younger Nicobarese now actively participate in state-led wage-employment programs centered on commercial horticulture. Village captains support such activities since they are seen as constituting “development,” and also because they help entrench their position as community “leaders.” But, as has been observed elsewhere, the transition to market-based intensive agriculture has important gender implications as it requires higher inputs of labor for which women and children are the first to be called in (Boserup 1965; 1970).

The present aid-supported lifestyle shows a sixfold rise in per-capita material consumption compared to the pre-tsunami period. Fossil fuel imports have multiplied by a factor of 30, and the construction of 7,000 new housing units alone requires 200,000 metric tons of construction materials from outside (Singh 2009). Moreover, younger Nicobarese aspire to a life offering urban-style comforts. At a meeting with administrators in 2006, the tribal council spokesman complained: “We want our island to

become as grand as Port Blair but the Forest Department is not letting us build even a road.” Port Blair, the capital of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, is frequently juxtaposed with the “jungle of Nancowry” to reinforce their own aspirations. However, as Wildenberg and Singh (2012) show, merely sustaining the present household income demand on a single island (Kamorta) will require the cultivation of about 4,000 ha of additional land, and 4,500 tons of additional fuel-wood extraction. Mounting ecological pressure will exacerbate the fragmentation and loss of forests and biodiversity, decrease soil fertility, and affect the island’s hydrological system.

Discussion and Conclusion

Our analysis of institutional change in the Nicobar Islands corroborates findings drawn from other tsunami-affected regions. In both Sri Lanka and Aceh, humanitarian organizations disregarded the capacities of local communities and promoted aid dependency (Pandya 2006; Silva 2009). The race for visibility engaged NGOs in a spirit of “competitive humanitarianism” to which cultural sensitivity often fell victim (Stirrat 2006). As in the Nicobar Islands, inappropriate aid was a key issue elsewhere too, with Muslim Acehnese receiving tinned pork (Telford and Cosgrave 2007). In Thailand, where the state directed the tsunami response as in India, Tan-Mullins et al. (2007) point to “the state’s inability to operate as an equitable distributor of crisis largesse.” The shrinking of space for women in Nancowry finds resonance in eastern Sri Lanka, where matrilineal inheritance laws have been undermined as newly built houses were awarded to husbands rather than wives (Thurnheer 2009). Likewise, Korf et al. (2010) echo the rise of the Nicobarese captain-as-patron by showing how aid became entangled in patron–client relationships involving political representatives and tsunami victims in Sri Lanka.

The main contribution of this article lies in understanding the dynamics of institutional change following post-tsunami humanitarian intervention. While the tsunami was a hard blow to the Nicobarese society, the existing social organization seems to have been sufficiently resilient to facilitate self-rebuilding following initial humanitarian assistance. The extended tsunami response, however, seems to have preempted such an outcome. The way aid was organized and distributed has resulted in substantial changes in internal institutions and, hence, power relations. In itself, the massive transfer of resources foreshadows significant ecological implications for the islands. We emphasize four interrelated issues.

First, external aid—through both its form and volume—had a profound effect on local institutions. By favoring captains as representatives of the local community and disregarding the role of the *kamuanse*, it has caused a shift in the balance of power between local institutions and local actors, influencing the dynamics of local processes as well as the distribution of the inflowing resources. The lack of sensitivity to specific local institutional conditions has resulted in conflict and increased distrust.

Second, the case illustrates the importance of internal factors for the impact of external factors. Village captains and young people were often willing agents of change. The volume of external economic resources created new relationships of dependence between captains and the rest of the population. So, while the preexisting institutions of the local Nancowry society may not have been fundamentally challenged by the tsunami itself, they were not able to adapt to the post-tsunami resource flows.

Third, we see substantial changes in the principles of distribution, language, and values. As many captains were young, we observe an institutional shift toward their

values and capacities. The position of the *kamuanse*, which was previously the central entity in decision-making, has eroded. This is also true of women, who were crucial to the process of resource management. In parallel, we observe an effacement of oral culture in favor of formal, written communication. This was an important element in enhancing the position of the captains as they quickly adapted to the new situation by virtue of their formal education. As important was the transformation of the Nicobarese into receiving supplicants driven by the format of aid. Telling evidence comes from the official language used for compensation: *ex gratia* payment, implying that compensation was offered as a discretionary favor rather than as a matter of right. The values of the more powerful actors, the state and aid agencies, became established as the “ideal” ones, with decision making being directed through formal bureaucratic structures in which people’s involvement was only partial. Consequently, there is a lesson to be learned from the Nicobar Islands for improved disaster aid efforts in the future: the imperative for a calibrated response to humanitarian crises that is sensitive to cultural and ecological contexts, respects inherent human capacities, and approaches every individual as an equal, rather than in the hierarchically ordered positions as benefactor and recipient.

Lastly, the Nicobar Islands show that institutional change emerges as a product of people actively negotiating their lives with the available resources, and making contingent choices to break with the past in planning for the future. As observed earlier, preexisting intergenerational differences helped shape the impact of the aid effort in the Nicobar Islands. Although the transformation of the captains has been visibly opposed, other changes have been resisted less strongly, with young Nicobarese inclined to accept a new way of life they believe to be in tune with the times. For this reason, answering the question that we posed at the beginning is not as easy as it appears. The aid effort has caused distress to the community as a whole, but individuals may have found opportunities for mobility. Nonetheless, given the ecological fragility of the islands, serious questions of sustainability persist.

Notes

1. Certainly, a society may be fully subsumed under an external force or political system. This is, however, rare.
2. Part of the pre-tsunami data formed the basis of the second author’s published doctoral thesis (Singh 2003).
3. The biophysical analysis of society–nature interactions on Trinket Island has been published elsewhere (Fischer-Kowalski et al. 2010; Singh 2003; Singh et al. 2001; Singh and Grünbühel 2003).
4. An ethnographic description of some relevant ceremonies, rituals, and festivals in the Central Nicobar Islands has been published as a book (Singh 2006).
5. The first author was trained previously as a social work professional and involved in community mobilization in the Nicobar Islands.
6. RECOVER stands for “Research on Coping with Vulnerability to Environmental Risk” and was funded by the Austrian Science Fund (FWF).
7. The Nicobarese, along with more than 600 indigenous communities in India, have been awarded the constitutional status of a Scheduled Tribe and are entitled to a policy of state protection and affirmative action. Population figures are derived from the 2001 census.
8. These are the islands of (a) Car Nicobar, (b) Chowra, Bompooka and Teresa, (c) Katchal, Nancowry, Kamorta and Trinket, and (d) Little Nicobar, Kondul, Pilomillow, and Great Nicobar.
9. In a prominent example of inappropriate aid, Nicobarese women, who wear sarongs, were sent *sarees*, which are worn by mainland Indian women.

10. This was not specific to the Nicobar Islands. An overview of the tsunami response notes, “A tragic combination of arrogance and ignorance has characterised how much of the aid community . . . misled people” (Christoplos 2006, 83).
11. Pseudonyms have been used to represent people’s voices.

References

- Abid, M. A. 2006. *Relief and rehabilitation: Role of civil society organisations*. Port Blair: Andaman and Nicobar Administration, Directorate of Social Welfare.
- Baviskar, A. 2008. Culture and power in the commons debate. In *The contested commons: Conversations between economists and anthropologists*, ed. P. Bardhan and I. Ray, 107–124. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Boserup, E. 1965. *The conditions of agricultural growth: The economics of agrarian change under population pressure*. Chicago: Aldine.
- Boserup, E. 1970. *Women’s role in economic development*. London: Earthscan.
- Christoplos, I. 2006. *Links between relief, rehabilitation and development in the tsunami response*. London: Tsunami Evaluation Coalition.
- Cleaver, F. 2002. Reinventing institutions: Bricolage and the social embeddedness of natural resource management. *Eur. J. Dev. Res.* 14(2):11–30.
- Dhingra, K. 2005. *The Andaman and Nicobar Islands in the twentieth century: A gazetteer*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Fischer-Kowalski, M., S. J. Singh, L. Ringhofer, C. Grünbühel, C. Lauk, and A. Remesch. 2010. *Socio-metabolic transitions in indigenous communities and the crucial role of working time: A comparison of case studies*. Vienna: IFF Social Ecology (Social Ecology Working Paper 121).
- Haensel, J. G. 1812. *Letters on the Nicobar Islands, their natural productions, and the manners, customs, and superstitions of the natives; With an account of an attempt made by the church of the United Brethren to convert them to Christianity*. London: W. M’Dowall Press.
- Justin, A. 1990. *The Nicobarese*. Calcutta: Seagull Books on behalf of the Anthropological Survey of India.
- Kloss, C. B. 1903. *The Andamans and Nicobars: The narrative of a cruise in the schooner “Terrapin” with notices of the islands, their fauna, ethonology, etc.* London: John Murray.
- Korf, B, S. Habullah, P. Hollenbach, and B. Klem. 2010. The gift of disaster: The commodification of good intentions in post-tsunami Sri Lanka. *Disasters* 34(S1):S60–77.
- Mosse, D. 2003. *The rule of water: Statecraft, ecology, and collective action in South India*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Mosse, D. 2005. *Cultivating development: An ethnography of aid policy and practice*. New York: Pluto Press.
- Ostrom, E. 1990. *Governing the commons: The evolution of institutions for collective action*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Pandya, C. 2006. Private authority and disaster relief: The cases of post-tsunami Aceh and Nias. *Critical Asian Studies* 38(2):298–308.
- Porwal, V. K. 2006. *Living with hope: Life in Nicobar post-tsunami*. Port Blair: Action Aid International, India.
- Riseth, J. Å., and A. Vatn. 2009. Modernization and pasture degradation: A comparative study of two Sámi reindeer pasture regions in Norway. *Land Econ.* 85(1):87–106.
- Scott, W. R. 1995. *Institutions and organizations*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Silva, K. T. 2009. ‘Tsunami third wave’ and the politics of disaster management in Sri Lanka. *Norsk Geografisk Tidsskrift—Norw. J. Geogr.* 63:61–72.
- Singh, S. J. 2003. *In the sea of influence: A world system perspective of the Nicobar Islands*. Lund, Sweden: Lund University.
- Singh, S. J. 2006. *The Nicobar Islands: Cultural choices in the aftermath of the tsunami*. Vienna: Czernin Verlag.

- Singh, S. J. 2009. Complex disasters: The Nicobar Islands in the grip of humanitarian aid. *Geogr. Rundsch. Int. Ed.* 5(3):48–56.
- Singh, S. J., and C. M. Grünbühel. 2003. Environmental relations and biophysical transitions: The case of Trinket Island. *Geogr. Ann. Ser. B Hum. Geogr.* 85B(4):187–204.
- Singh, S. J., C. M. Grünbühel, H. Schandl, and N. Schulz. 2001. Social metabolism and labour in a local context: Changing environmental relations on Trinket Island. *Population Environ.* 23(1):71–104.
- Stirrat, R. L. 2006. Competitive humanitarianism: Relief and the tsunami in Sri Lanka. *Anthropol. Today* 22(5):11–16.
- Syamchaudhuri, N. K. 1977. *The social structure of Car Nicobar islanders: An ethnic study in cognation*. Calcutta: Anthropological Survey of India.
- Tan-Mullins, M., J. Rigg, L. Law, and C. Grundy-Warr. 2007. Re-mapping the politics of aid: The changing structures and networks of humanitarian assistance in post-tsunami Thailand. *Prog. Dev. Stud.*, 7(4):327–344.
- Telford, J., and J. Cosgrave. 2007. The international humanitarian system and the 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunamis. *Disasters* 31(1):1–28.
- Temple, R. C. 1903. *The Andaman and Nicobar Islands. Report on the census, Vol. III*. Calcutta: Government of India Central Printing Office.
- Thurnheer, K. 2009. A house for a daughter? Constraints and opportunities in post-tsunami eastern Sri Lanka. *Contemp. South Asia* 17(1):79–91.
- Vatn, A. 2005. *Institutions and the environment*. Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar.
- Wildenberg, M., and S. J. Singh. 2012. Integrated modelling and scenario building for the Nicobar Islands in the aftermath of the tsunami. In *Human–nature interaction in the Anthropocene: Potentials of social-ecological systems analysis*, ed. M. Glaser, B. Ratter, G. Krause, and M. Welp, 161–189. London, UK: Routledge.