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A Community of Dependents?: ‘Doing Politics’ in Post-tsunami Sri Lanka

On December 26th 2004, a tsunami of unprecedented proportions decimated much of the coastal regions of Aceh Province in Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Southern Thailand, Andaman and Nicobar Islands, and South India with repercussions of lesser magnitude being experienced in the Maldivian Islands as well as Somalia and Kenya. In Sri Lanka, the tsunami struck a relatively thin but extremely long swathe extending over 1,000 kilometres, approximately two thirds of the island’s coastline, densely populated with primarily lower income housing as well as many hotels and guest houses along the southern and north-eastern coasts. It left 33,000 dead, 3,800 missing and 15,000 injured. It reduced around 75,000 houses to rubble and damaged even more leaving over 900,000 persons displaced and entire districts without power, water, roads etc.

Three times more women died than men, more than a third of the victims were children and entire families were wiped out thus irrevocably transforming family structures and kin networks. The acute grief, constant mental trauma and daily suffering the tsunami engendered defies similar enumeration and computation.

The areas worst affected by the tsunami, the northern and eastern regions of the island has for the past twenty five years been the site of a civil war between the government of Sri Lanka (GoSL) and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) while most of the Southern regions affected were limping back from a youth insurrection, from 1987-1990, which had led to the ‘disappearance’ of around 40,000 persons. These embattled regions were now not only re-inscribed by

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the ferocity of the ocean but subsequent waves of reconstruction, rehabilitation and memorialisation which reiterated socio-political tensions and fissures.

The international response to this loss and destruction was overwhelmingly generous and unparalleled, leading to a massive influx of aid as well as INGOs (International Non-Governmental Organizations), some with no previous presence or experience in this region, seeking to deliver material and non-material humanitarian assistance to the survivors.

The devastation of the tsunami and rehabilitation of homes, livelihoods and lives, in its aftermath, also intersected with and shaped the politics of the ongoing civil war leading to militant groups and government forces launching new battles over control of people, land, livelihoods and humanitarian/development aid. In addition, an extremely large influx of new INGOs further de-stabilized the precarious balance among central and regional state authorities, militant groups, and already existing UN and international humanitarian and development organizations providing a variety of services to those displaced/affected by the conflict. While all rehabilitative efforts are contingent on the volatile and shifting scenario of political conflict, the effectivity of INGOs and NGOs is further hampered by constantly having to negotiate with and placate parties to the conflict in order to continue with their aid programs.

Yet, at the same time, the massive presence of UN and other international humanitarian and development organizations also raises questions about sovereignty and governance in a context where INGOs, rather than governments, are the chief conduits of tsunami aid, and frequently take on administrative roles and seek to restructure government bodies on the premise of better enabling the distribution of this aid. Thus, a certain emasculation of the Sri Lankan state has been engendered within this newly emergent framework of financial distribution leading to a backlash from the Sri Lankan state as well as some Sinhala nationalist parties, taking the form of accusations that UN and International Organizations of interfering in national issues, financially and materially supporting
militant groups, and are themselves corrupt, wasteful, non-transparent and guilty of feathering their own coffers rather than helping the affected.

Indeed, post-tsunami pressure from such international aid organizations is commonly believed to have been the primary reason for the Indonesian government signing a ceasefire agreement with the rebel group, GAM. However, in Sri Lanka, even the tenuous ceasefire that existed between the GoSL and the LTTE came close to breaking down over disagreements regarding the sharing of tsunami aid, despite pressure from INGOs and other international bodies to settle this amicably.\(^2\)

Such a situation makes fraught the relationship between those who provide humanitarian/development aid as well as those who receive it, particularly in the regions where the GoSL, the LTTE, and LTTE breakaway groups continue to vie for control and governance. The varied ethnic make up of the populace and their geographical configurations, the different regimes of governmentality that differentially impinges on each of these communities along with a multiplicity of INGOs working in each locality -- often overlapping in terms of aid programs and services and thus constantly competing with each other-- further complicates this rehabilitative and reconstructive scenario.

Several reports --based on short-term surveys, focus group discussions etc-- issued by international as well as local organizations, in the tsunami’s aftermath, have also revealed that my earlier contention (prior to the tsunami) that humanitarian aid was producing a community of dependents (de Alwis 2004) is now an undeniable reality with additionally troubling ramifications such as the increase of apathy, envy and dissension (over perceived inequalities in the distribution of relief goods and services, resettlement options etc) among local communities, the breakdown of leadership structures and kin networks and a return to moral policing of vulnerable groups such as women and children, in the face of such anxieties. While many of the findings of these reports seem to be based on rather cursory evaluative methodologies and also operate on the premise that these were idyllic village communities, prior to the tsunami, my own, more in-depth interactions

\(^2\) The reasons for this are unfortunately beyond the scope of this paper.
with communities of tsunami survivors does confirm some of these findings.

However, I wish to address these new configurations of relationships here by focusing on the consequences it has had for ‘doing politics’ or in other words, engendering political struggles, in Sri Lanka. I have extrapolated elsewhere on the notion of the ‘political’ that I mobilize here (de Alwis 2005, 2007) but suffice it to say that it is an engagement with Judith Butler’s (1992) re-working of the ‘constitutive outside’ of political fields that enables the placing of the parameters of the political itself into question. Such a formulation thus offers us a conception of the political which is both contingent and oppositional.3

In a post-conflict, post-tsunami context where humanitarian and developmental discourses and practices seem to have overdetermined the conditions of possibility of ‘doing politics’ in Sri Lanka, I wish to highlight two crucial analytical trajectories which frame my own discussion. Firstly, Heiko Henkel and Roderick Stirrat’s (2001) illuminating genealogy of ‘participation’ and innovative insight that ‘empowerment,’ a crucial category mobilized in humanitarian/development discourses, is a form of secular subjection and Rob Jenkin’s (2001) provocative arguments that aid agencies not only seek to create ‘civil society’ (a popular buzz word today) in their own image, but also mistake ‘governance’ for ‘politics’. Such framings enable us to raise important questions regarding what actually constitutes radical political struggles today; that is to say, struggles which are not articulated in the terms or agendas of aid agencies as well as struggles which have not been instigated/usurped by nationalisms (extending in some cases to armed struggles) or political parties.

A case in point is the collective, local responses to the unilateral institution of a buffer zone by the Sri Lankan state, post-tsunami, resulting in the banning of all reconstruction as well as new construction up to 200 metres from the shoreline, in all tsunami affected areas.4 The responses took many forms and significantly varied according to region and

3 I am using oppositional in its productive, Laclau-Mouffian (1985) sense of involving mutual antagonisms.
4 The LTTE imposed a buffer zone of 300 metres in the areas they control, in the northern and north eastern regions of the country.
ethnic grouping. While there was widespread dismay by those affected by this buffer zone ruling, the most significant agitations took place in certain areas in the south which were predominantly Sinhala and certain areas in the east which were predominantly Muslim.

These pockets of resistance in themselves illuminate prior contourings of the Sri Lankan polity: A Tamil minority which has been cowed into submission by a prolonged war where they have been at the brutal butt end of both the Tamil militants and the Sri Lankan state; they have learnt at great cost that the LTTE does not tolerate dissent, that the GoSL perceives them all as collaborators, and that both parties to the conflict are indifferent to their wants and sufferings and are quick to use them as pawns whenever the opportunity arises. A Muslim minority which is often caught in the crossfire between Tamil militancy and Sinhala hegemony but who have tenaciously struggled against both and are now well represented in the GoSL as well as the Opposition by different factions of the powerful Sri Lanka Muslim Congress. And a Sinhala majority with a strong sense of entitlement that the predominantly Sinhala GoSL is there to serve them and with a history of rebellion whenever this contract is considered to have been broken.

One of the central concerns of those whose homes fell within the buffer zone was that while the majority of them --particularly those who had small children-- were willing to re-locate to higher ground or the interior of the island (especially after several new tsunami scares and inspite of the fact that it would make the plying of livelihoods such as fishing very inconvenient and time consuming), they were extremely concerned that the ‘tsunami goldrush’ of foreign aid would pass them by as the government was delaying to allocate new land where their new houses could be built. Thus, many of their agitations took the form of picketing outside local government offices, taking over government offices for several days, taking over land by force, erecting billboards on the roadside to publicise their concerns, performing religious ceremonies calling for revenge on a tardy government, noisy demonstrations and public meetings, and the blocking of the key southern coastal road for several hours. These agitations, along with several other factors, including the visit of President Clinton to Sri Lanka and the GoSL being hard pressed to
find so much buildable land in the interior of the island, is credited with making the government back down on this unilateral ban and the institution of a more equitable, variable and viable buffer zone compatible with prior coast conservation regulations.

These agitations were originally initiated by men from the local communities who were directly affected by the no-construction ban. Several of them had honed their political teeth in trade union actions in their workplaces, as local representatives of mainstream political parties and as office bearers of community organizations such as fishermen’s cooperatives, welfare societies, and temple and mosque management committees. However, their leadership was soon usurped by more organized political parties such as the United National Party (in the south) and the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (in the east). It is my contention that the reason these agitations were so quickly usurped was because there exists very little space in Sri Lanka today for autonomous struggles of this sort; much of this space is either dominated by mainstream political parties or ‘civil society’ organizations such as micro credit societies and ‘conflict transformation’ groups who have been ‘empowered’ by NGOs and INGOs.
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