

The Give and Take of Disaster Aid

- Social and Moral Transformation in the Wake of the Tsunami in Sri Lanka

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Abstract

The act of giving reflects the most basic principles of morality and has therefore constituted a classical anthropological field of inquiry. The importance of giving, receiving and reciprocating for the shaping and consolidation of social relations has long been recognized. This thesis uses these insights to explore the way in which the gift of disaster aid, which derives from outside the community, impacts upon local social and cosmological relations in a village. The main objective is to investigate how the Boxing Day 2004 tsunami and the immense wave of aid that followed it and subsequently receded, affected the local moral economy in a Sri Lankan village. Fieldwork for this thesis was carried out in a coastal community over a period of twelve months.

The study asks how the 'gift' of aid was understood and valued by donors and recipients and suggests that it set in motion or accelerated processes of change that benefited some people and relationships but marginalised others, thus evoking disorder and moral uncertainty. Local life-worlds were shattered in multiple ways and the recovery process became caught in the tensions between several, sometimes competing, moral discourses concerning tradition/modernity, the individual/collective and the local/global. The thesis provides a thick description of a community before and after exposure to large scale natural disaster and shows that disaster aid not only had fundamental bearing upon social relations but also impinged on vital human and non-human relations - with the earth, sea and supernatural beings - that were important for recovery and meaning making in the local context. The study finds that the catastrophe not only destroyed and altered physical habitats and livelihoods but it also disrupted the dynamic interplay of local social and cosmological relations.

The tsunami exposed some of the power structures that people perceived as problematic in their society and the wave of aid sometimes fed into these or brought about new disparities. Aid thus not only helped with material recovery but also engendered frustration and fragmentation, particularly of the moral and social order; the tsunami gifts were therefore both (re)constructive and destructive. People did not experience the recovery process as simply restoring their community to its pre-disaster condition nor was it, for them, rebuilt in a way that was unquestionably better. The thesis thus shows that the assumption that post-disaster contexts offer a window of opportunity for risk reduction and improved redevelopment - 'the build-back better approach' - depends upon whose perspective is adopted. This thesis contributes to an understanding of how people in the wake of natural disaster use familiar cultural resources to transform experiences of disquiet and powerlessness and it reveals that local morality and cosmology influence how disaster and foreign aid is interpreted and managed.

Key Words: Anthropology, Sri Lanka, disaster, aid, cosmology, giving, receiving, morality, economy, Buddhism, ritual, local religious life, philanthropy