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Centre for Indigenous Governance and Development

Of Cyclones, Tsunamis and the Engaged Anthropologist:
Some Musings on Colonial Politics
in the Andaman Islands

Sita Venkateswar

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Biographical Note

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I want to start this paper with an epigraph from Lewis Carroll's *Through The Looking Glass and What Alice Found There*. The lines succinctly convey the multitude of directions which have emerged over the course of reflecting on the current political conjuncture in the Andaman Islands.

"The time has come," the Walrus said,
"To talk of many things:
Of shoes--and ships--and sealing-wax--
Of cabbages--and kings--
And why the sea is boiling hot--
And whether pigs have wings."
(from *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There*, 1872)

Prologue

Shrouded within the disaster that culminated in the tsunami and its spiralling aftermath of destruction and despair, there lurked a brief space charged with immanent possibilities. As the tsunami smashed through the physical and human landscape of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, an unimagined opportunity presented itself. It was one that had been, until that point, only a distant vision for the many individuals involved in a variety of initiatives pertaining to the indigenous groups in the Andaman Islands.

Just a fortnight prior to that unforeseen event there was an unusual gathering in Kolkata, of academics, activists, NGOs, journalists, writers and policy analysts i.e. all those who had been involved over the years in writing, research and activism on issues pertaining to the indigenous groups in the islands.[1] This was a network that had crystallized over the course of the year 2004 as a result of the forums convened by the High Court of Calcutta to formulate policy on the Jarawa.[2] Within minutes of the earthquake and then the tsunami impacting on Port Blair, that network was on high alert and in a position to transmit information across the globe.

But when that network gathered in Kolkata to plan strategies for the following year, there was no sense of the impending crisis that would snuff out and destroy so many lives in south and south-east asia. The existence of such a set of contacts meant that prior to the official media releases and in advance of much of the discussion in the national and international media, information was being relayed across the globe while preparations for humanitarian aid mounted. It enabled connections between national and international NGOs and aid workers with grass-roots activists and community organizations, identifying and sourcing the various supplies and assistance required across the island archipelago. The scale of the destruction as it gradually became visible, and the locations that it encompassed within its sweep, wrung emotions worldwide, linking human lives and geography[3] in a way that had not occurred since the previous World Wars.

Completely unanticipated however, was the hubris of the Indian government, or its posturing and jockeying for supremacy on the global stage as it sought to affirm a coveted pre-eminent position in the region. Shunning any offers of international assistance, ignoring the distress within its own borders, the Indian government preferred instead to flaunt its ability to hold its own among other

"Western" nations, speedily sending an aid package to Sri Lanka and the Maldives, alongside of the other nations rushing assistance across the globe. "India has finally arrived" or words to that effect was the rallying cry of many a nationalist media coverage, revelling in a misplaced pride in India's economic might rather than seeking to jointly alleviate the misery or deliver assistance where it was needed in the tsunami stricken parts of mainland India and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. I will not reiterate here the many lives that were lost or the ways in which suffering was prolonged as a consequence of such a stance. It has been amply and eloquently articulated by the writer Amitav Ghosh and others, and has a permanent place at www.andaman.org.[4]

That site is also the repository of other now familiar images and accounts of when the international spotlight shone briefly on some, until then, little known people, i.e. the indigenous groups of the Andaman Islands. The photograph of a Sentinelese shooting an arrow at a helicopter hovering overhead drew a resounding cheer worldwide and became a metaphor for human survival and the indomitable human spirit. It also piqued international curiosity, bringing in its wake, hordes of media personnel seeking to uncover more about the descendents of the world's oldest known human population, i.e., the descendents of the first group of humans to have left Africa and populated various parts of Asia as early as 70,000 years ago. But that too is discussed at length in the website mentioned above and I will not dwell on that any further here.

Instead, I will unravel some underlying threads that connect this event to an earlier one, which had momentous consequences for a different indigenous group of the Andaman Islands, the Onge. But before that I want to insert a *whakatauki* here, one that, in my view emphasises the importance of learning from history:

> Me titiro whakamuri tatou
> Kia mohio ai
> Me pehea haere ki mua

which translates as : We should look backwards, so we can determine, how to go forwards.

The lessons of history

In 1976 a devastating cyclone ripped through the island of Little Andaman, home to the remaining groups of Onges scattered across the length and breath of the islands. Little Andaman had become the target for a desultory programme for colonization by the Indian government since the mid sixties, which had until that point, left the indigenous inhabitants of the island relatively untouched. The destruction left in the wake of the cyclone and the humanitarian assistance directed towards the Onge became the basis of a strategy for the sedenterization of the semi-nomadic, hunter-gatherer-fisher territorial groups of Onge. Elided within the rhetoric of effective delivery of assistance to the Onge lay a more politically charged mission, one of opening up vast tracts of the rainforest to other purposes while confining the Onge within demarcated reserves. The successive process of accomplishing such an end with its bleak and visible outcomes for the Onge has been documented at length in my ethnography, launched in Kolkata just a fortnight prior to the tsunami.[5]

In a neatly constituted ironic twist, 28 years later, the 2004 tsunami in turn, destroyed every trace of administrative intervention directed towards the Onge: homes, habitations, offices, equipment, breakwaters, jetties were flattened or rendered non-existent. It was ground zero in Little Andaman but without a single fatality among the Onge. Every last one had survived the onslaught, having known to read the signals that intimated to them what was to eventuate. It was a different story for the surrounding Indian population who had taken over their lands, and it was their suffering that was ignored or prolonged by the political manoeuvres of the Indian government. The narratives of the survivors from Banda Aceh in a November 2005 issue of the *New York Times* Sunday magazine can be easily transposed elsewhere, whether in the Nicobar Islands, the Tamil Nadu coast or Sri Lanka.

But for the Onges, the tsunami and its unforeseen consequences to the structure of their lives meant that there was a sudden opportunity to put in place something very different. It also offered the possibility for engaging in a process which had until then seemed a misty dream for many of us who had worked among them. The existence of the network mentioned earlier meant that unlike the situation during the 1976 cyclone, this time it was possible to work in concert with the administrative structures in the islands to ensure that there was a process of consultation with the Onge as well as with anthropologists regarding the process of rebuilding their habitations and their lives. Vishwajit Pandya, formerly of Victoria University, has made available an account of his work among the Onge during this period at a number of internet sites, notably the AAAnet and the Andaman site referred to earlier. His involvement in the process was a significant step with the promise of remarkable outcomes.

More fraught, however, was the situation regarding the Jarawa whose circumstances were the basis for the network to have emerged. In my ethnography I discuss some of the initiatives in which I was involved with over the course of the year 2004. These were connected with the judicial interventions by the High Court of Kolkata and the Supreme Court of India, brought about by a coalition of non-governmental organizations and activists who took the Andaman administration to court. It highlighted the transformative potential of forging new coalitions within civil society and the possibility for effecting change that lies therein. The tsunami, however, provided the pretext for the Andaman administration to suspend or reverse many of the hard won rulings of the Supreme Court of India which ensured the integrity of the environment demarcated as the Jarawa reserve forest and the protection of their lifestyle.

In a nutshell, the crisis precipitated by the tsunami has made it possible to present the rights of the Jarawa and other indigenous groups both in the Andaman and Nicobar islands, as in conflict with the needs for restitution and rehabilitation of the dominant majority settler population of the islands. It is a theme played on by wily politicians of varied political persuasions who have seized on an opportunity to strike a popular chord with the majority electorate in the islands. The rights of the Jarawa to a mode of subsistence and cultural practices embedded in the forest and adjoining seas is, therefore, perceived as a threat to the current and future needs of the swelling ranks of settlers, seeking to

make a life for themselves in the islands. It is also presented as an obstacle to the future development interests in the islands.

Envisioning a Radical Praxis

This situation echoes recent work by Nancy Fraser which examines the ways in which the demands for cultural recognition have been pitted against issues of social justice and distributive justice. As she cogently argues in her consideration of a radical democracy,

> What are the differences that make a difference for democracy? Which differences merit public recognition and/or political representation? Which differences, in contrast, should be considered irrelevant to political life and treated instead as private matters? Which kinds of differences, finally, should a democratic society seek to promote? And which, on the contrary, should it aim to abolish? (Fraser 1997:174).

Fraser's solution is to "resituat[e] cultural politics in relation to social politics and link demands for recognition with demands for redistribution." (*ibid*). I would extend her resolution to include attentiveness to the specific context in which these demands exist and the issues of power at stake there.

A renewed engagement with political economy is also recommended by Sam Hickey and Giles Mohan to provide "an understanding of the relational formation of group identities [that] do not ignore claims by groups which we find oppressive, but look at how their presence shapes and is shaped by those groups seeking emancipation." (Hickey and Mohan 2005:255). Their elaboration of a critical modernism "seeks to balance a normative vision with a political praxis that is sensitive to different rationalities and modernities." (*ibid*). It is alert to "the encounters between multiple and divergent modernities" as elaborated by Arce and Long and "provides a basis for alliances and connections between different groups." (Arce and Long 2000:159).[6] Hence the rights of the Jarawa to determine a future in their own terms should not be imperilled by the rights of the settlers to distributive justice or vice-versa. Nor should the Jarawa expression of a version of modernity grounded in a semi-nomadic subsistence lifestyle crafted over millennia become obliterated by the demands of the sedentary settlers as they attempt to piece together a life wrecked by the tsunami. Neither of these different forms of modernity are static, either-or options, nor should they be prescribed as the means to acquire recognition as fully cognizant human beings with equally compelling rights and demands. Furthermore, those rights remain valid despite the shifting context or altered relationship between these groups.[7]

My current engagement with issues in the islands is sensitive to these imperatives. I am aware of the ways in which the politics of the dominant majority operates in the islands. It intersects with the process of ethnocide and the unfinished internal colonization of the indigenous groups of the islands. My task also includes attention to the issues of social justice with respect to the various settler populations in the islands. The presence of this vocal majority in the islands is also historically contingent and an outcome of first, the British colonization of the islands, and then the subsequent Indian bid to repopulate them. The regulations imposed by the Supreme Court have created a perception

of injustice towards the settlers, further polarizing the settlers against those pressing for environmental concerns which are intimately linked to the rights of the indigenous groups in the islands. All of these are, in turn, perceived as inimical to the interests and livelihood opportunities available to the settlers. These events have become the breeding ground for resentments that are likely to be nursed over generations and contrary to the long-term wellbeing of all the inhabitants in the islands. But more promising are the ways in which these issues can be advanced with the recent developments in India. These are related to decentralization and local governance which strengthen and devolve decision making to local bodies enabling greater participation by communities in the decisions which affect their quotidian lives. The scope of the Right to Information Act 2005 significantly improves citizens' access to information with the potential to advance transparency and accountability in local and national structures of governance. The Scheduled Tribe Recognition of Forest Rights Bill 2005 which restores large tracts of forests to the traditional, forest-dwelling, tribal groups on mainland India intersects with the developments regarding historical justice and restitution elsewhere in the world, as eloquently presented in Janna Thompson's work.[8] All these developments provide a basis for formulating strategies which challenge the existing constitution of rights for 'tribal' groups and other citizens both on mainland India and in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. The outcome of these developments is the expanded and empowered role of civilian groups and their ability to shape local structures and processes of governance. In addition, such strategies connect laterally with similar processes elsewhere in the world, (for instance across South America), enabling provisional coalitions that are contingent to the issue at hand, which create a basis for international solidarity with other civil groups. Such strategic coalitions are in the best tradition of contemporary feminist practice and exemplify a pragmatic wisdom well suited to the current global conjuncture.[9]

Public Anthropology and Radical Praxis

Finally, I want to briefly suggest here how engagement in the mode indicated in this paper can be the basis for outlining a vision for a Public Anthropology. It also resonates with the project for a Public Anthropology prefaced in Rob Borofsky's website:

> Public Anthropology demonstrates the ability of anthropology and anthropologists to effectively address problems beyond the discipline - illuminating the larger social issues of our times as well as encouraging broad, public conversations about them with the explicit goal of fostering social change. It affirms our responsibility, as scholars and citizens, to meaningfully contribute to communities beyond the academy - both local and global, that make the study of anthropology possible. (www.publicanthropology.org/Defining/definingpa/htm)

My response to that call to action is to envisage our task as public anthropologists on the global stage, working in tandem with progressive social movements elsewhere, towards a vision of a more plural and equitable social order. It includes our work within the academy in the crucial work of shaping minds, imparting an appreciation for diversity and the myriad ways of being in the world. And it also includes the kind of praxis that I have alluded to in the wider world

beyond. Thus, whether *pigs have wings* or not, within the current global conjuncture, the public anthropologist as an agent for social change *can* contribute to eventual human flourishing.

I want to conclude with another *whakatauki* which, in the ways that adages do, perfectly summarizes what I see as the main point of this paper:

Te haro o te kahu –
(Look beyond the horizon and to the expansive views seen through the eyes of the hawk)

Notes

[1] The gathering was the occasion of the 2004 Inter-Congress of the International Union of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences where I had convened a session on the Andaman Islands.

[2] The Jarawa are one of the indigenous groups of the Andaman Islands, who had recently laid down their weapons and emerged from the forest into contact with the larger Indian settlers encapsulating them.

[3] That very same geography was also the basis for the Andaman and Nicobar Islands becoming enmeshed in the history of the Indian subcontinent. It connects with our own disciplinary history and the contributions of our intellectual forbearers. Its strategic location in the Indian Ocean with its baggage of British colonialism and the Indian variant that followed on its heels continues to inflect the lives of all the indigenous groups spread across the island archipelago.

[4] The website is maintained by the polymath George Weber, who is based in Switzerland. Some of the most useful and up-to-date information and resources on the Andaman Islands and its indigenous inhabitants is available on this site.

[5] Sita Venkateswar, *Development and Ethnocide: Colonial Practices in the Andaman Islands* (Copenhagen: International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA), 2004).

[6] The activism around indigenous issues in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands has provided a basis to build alliances with the more numerous Nicobari groups, especially those in the central Nicobar Islands. See Simron Jit Singh's recent publications for more discussion on the Nicobari. Simron Jit Singh, *The Nicobar Islands: Cultural Choices in the Aftermath of the Tsunami* (Vienna: Oliver Lehmann, 2006), Simron Jit Singh, *In the Sea of Influence: A World System Perspective of the Nicobar Islands* (Lund: Lund University, 2003).

[7] Such a view is based on the rapidly changing circumstances of the Jarawa brought about by their increasing contact with the settlers surrounding them and the outcome of that contact in disease, loss of important resources and the sheer scale of exploitation that is currently underway. It is no longer possible in 2007 to insist on the protection of their right to isolation as we did during the 2004 forums because of the extent of breaches to that protection. These have resulted in a series of consequences which are impossible to rectify. Hence isolation is no longer a viable option for them.

[8] Janna Thompson, *Taking Responsibility for the Past: Reparation and Historical Justice* (Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers, 2002). It is interesting to note the differences in the politics of environmentalism between mainland India and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. The Scheduled Tribe Recognition of Forest Rights Bill 2005 has pitted the environmentalists in conflict with the tribal rights activists, whereas in the islands the two interests are indistinguishable apart and clearly in alliance.

[9] Building provisional coalitions is a predominant feature of international feminism since the late eighties and early nineties. It was an outcome of interventions by third world feminists and women of colour. See particularly the writings by Chandra Mohanty, Biddy Martin, Jacqui Alexander, Gloria Anzaldua and Norma Alarçon during this period.

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