

Happy Tsunami - By Tanaz K Noble - The Light of Andamans :: Issue 49

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Happy Tsunami

While many lost much to the tsunami, there were many who gained much as well. A new report assesses one of those who stood to profit from it. The NGO sector.

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By Tanaz K Noble

The December 2004 tsunami that claimed over 7,000 lives from the Andaman and Nicobar Islands has undoubtedly seen much tragedy, but the tragedy proved to be a cash cow for some. Almost two years later, a report prepared by Mohammed A. Abid, former director, Social Welfare, Andamans, uncovers the mysterious role of the NGOs, and their rather unprofessional approach and dealings. The report found their role as dubious, and lacking in motivation, accountability and transparency, among other things.

Over 75,000 applications for tsunami compensation were sent from Port Blair itself to the administration. Port Blair, of course, was the least affected,

with thousands of those applications turning out to be hoaxes. Nearly 230 NGOs set up their stalls on every available inch of land. It seemed more of a mela than a tragedy.

"Eventually, about 25-30 organizations remained which have continued to work in the islands over the last one and half years..." says Abid's report.

The report goes on to describe the efforts of some organizations as "entirely supply driven" and that they failed to "take into account their actual requirements: There have been instances of NGOs sending consignments of Maggi Noodles, Pepsi, sweaters and blankets to the islands, which remained unused there."

One of the most disturbing findings of the report was that majority of the NGOs did not have any systems for ensuring any form of accountability and transparency in their functioning. The report states that majority of the NGOs "did not share any information regarding the quantum, sources or manner of utilization of their funds with the beneficiaries, elected representatives or the administration." It is common knowledge that crores of funding was donated at their disposal for ongoing tsunami work. "Only 22 out of 44 NGOs have responded to the administration's request for providing information regarding their activities, financial outlays and expenditure incurred on various projects."

The scathing report went on to list out the problems being churned out by the various NGOs varying from widespread concern for the quality of material and services provided by NGOs, to lack of initiative in lobbying with municipal councilors and civic authorities in ensuring child rights. The report states: "The quality of construction work undertaken by the Bharitya Jain Sangathan has not been found satisfactory in many places and other

organizations have been unable to show satisfactory progress of works undertaken by them... Interventions of NGOs have not been based on credible social research... Programmes have been formulated without doing adequate fieldwork and house-to-house surveys... Many NGOs have followed a policy of 'parity' in hiring local personnel offering them salaries much higher than the local employment rates...The role of 'child rights ' organizations has been the most problematic. One only has to make a trip to Hut bay to see what a mess children's groups have made there."

"In March 2005, the NGOs formed the 'child rights group' and requested the Director (Social Welfare) that they may be allowed to undertake a survey of orphan and single parent children. The data collected was never shared with the administration for more than a year..." states the report.

The report specifically disapproves of the work by NGOs in the Nicobar Islands. "These organizations are driven by their own agendas and they have heedlessly introduced new concepts, ideas, schemes and projects without taking into account the socio-cultural milieu of the district." He goes on to state that the ideas proposed by the NGOs were mostly "of dubious value for the local communities," adding, "Many of them actually end up undermining the resilience and social capacity of the people rather than strengthening them." The tribal leadership bitterly complained that OXFAM only made 'fake promises' and showed callous disregard for the social norms, customs and decision making systems of the community. "The toilets introduced by UNICEF-OXFAM, have been a virtual disaster since they did not take into account prevalent practices and water resource availability."

The report also questions the unwillingness of organizations to reach out to people in remote and difficult islands like

Chowra, Terressa and Katchal.
The programmes of most of the NGOs have been confined to Car Nicobar, Kamorta and the non-tribal areas of Campbell Bay."

But despite the report's endless list of problems, Human rights Law Network in the advocacy, the network of Nehru Yuvak Kendras, academic and research organizations like the **Tata institute of social sciences** and MS Swaminathan research foundation were praised to have made valuable contribution in the process of relief, recovery and regeneration. It was also suggested for NGOs, especially OXFAM-CEFI, to take the administration into their confidence before embarking on a project.

In conclusion, the report stated that, "An output budgeting of the activities of non-government organizations would perhaps reveal that the tangible results of social activism have not exactly been commensurate with the efforts and resources invested by different organizations and sometimes may even seem to contradict the very principles and goals espoused by them."

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