CHAPTER 5
LITERATURE REVIEW 2
THE POLITICS OF DISASTERS

... the State does not have an essence. The State is not universal, the State is not in itself an autonomous source of power. The State is nothing other than the effect, the outline, the moving cross section of a perpetual process of State formation... The State is nothing other than the changing effect of a multiple regime of governmentalties ... It is a matter of ... undertaking the investigation of the problem of the State starting from practices of governmentality.
—Michel Foucault, In 'The Birth of Biopolitics', 2004

This chapter builds a relationship the between post-disaster humanitarian response and the ensuing sociocultural change. It reviews research studies conducted on various disasters and elucidates how different agents politicize the disaster response to fulfill their agenda. It also gives a concise overview of the post-tsunami research conducted in the Nicobar archipelago.

5.1 Disasters and Sociocultural Change

Powerful communities have always been concerned about the culture of other communities. They have always deemed it a necessity to police the culture of those who do not have political power. In order to maintain status quo and eliminate the risk of political unrest, the politically powerful communities have been continuously shaping the culture of others through direct intervention or patronage (Storey 2008:17).

There are many significant changes in societies, which are the result of such a pressure from the outside. Those sections or classes in the society that dominate economically and politically also enjoy paramount ideological and symbolic power. They enjoy the power to set principles for change processes in multicultural societies and establishment of inclusion policies for newcomers and minorities under the auspices of the state, through democratic decisions (Sillitoe 2000:4; Brochmann 2003:2). Therefore, the idea of sameness among various cultures is oppressive for various cultural communities and this establishes the hegemony of cultural majority over the cultural minority (Mahajan 2003).
When people have freedom to make decisions about what to choose from neighbouring cultures and what to reject, the resulting changes are rarely disruptive. However, social disruption and loss of orientation take place, when one society moves into another’s territory, forcing it to change. In the past, powerful and technologically advanced societies dominated the less powerful societies evidencing the aforementioned trend of forced change. The intrusion of industrial societies has caused serious implications for non-industrial societies. This change is associated with economic development in the Third World. Technical changes, whether coercively or voluntarily adopted, have social consequences. Hasty technological changes disrupt the functioning of people who are caught in them. They are left confused and bewildered but they try to make sense of everything that is happening to them (Sillitoe 2000:4-6).

Culture in contemporary societies constitutes a set of stories, discourses, images and various cultural forms and practices that generate identities, meanings and political effects (Durham and Kellner 2004:6). Social communities enter into new relationships within their social context and with their environment during disasters, which have impacts on the pace of sociocultural change in these communities. In order to cope with the disaster, the communities are forced to readjust past structures, conventions and practices to changed circumstances (Oliver-Smith 1998).

Responses to the disaster events, as Parasuraman (2013:10) argues, could be of three kinds— (1) “urgent, localized, and intensive”, which is directed at collective of people, for instance, response in case of earthquakes and cyclones (2) disaster response dispersed over a longer period, which is directed towards the victims who are not essentially geographically liked, for instance, response in case of farmers’ suicide and HIV or AIDS and (3) “responses that are spatially and temporally dispersed to a significant extent”, for instance, response to climate change.

Parasuraman (2013:10-11) further argues that preventive actions for disasters could arise from two perspectives, which, however, are not water-tight compartments and there may be overlaps— (a) a more traditional and technocentric response, which involves socioeconomic development, improved education and logistical measures to respond to disaster situation; (b) the second response demands a systematic shift in actors’ perspective and transformations of ideologies of human growth, development and politics.

- the nature of the state (from being a provider of welfare to the manager of the risk),
- the nature of conflict (conflicts over the means of production to means of security)
- and social classes to risk categories.

Human politics play a crucial role in disaster management, especially in the case of regional disasters. Some disasters have multifarious political dimensions that are “extremely complex and unnecessarily tragic” (Parasuraman and Unnikrishnan 2000:8; Parasuraman and Wolff 2013: 175). The disaster induced sociocultural change occurs because disasters create an atmosphere for acceptance of change in a society. Once the government and other aid agencies intervene in a disaster-affected area, they are unlikely to withdraw quickly. The changes that these interventions bring range from changes in building styles, methods and material of construction, patterns of land ownership and tenure, economic and livelihood activities, urbanisation, land invasions and so on. Disasters also bring structural changes in the leadership of the community. The necessity of dealing with disasters leads to the birth of new organizations in the communities. New leaders emerge to replace the one who died or those who were incompetent in dealing with the disaster situation (Cuny 1983:12).

Disasters also lead to social and cultural changes by destroying the ability of a community to fulfill its needs and make new adjustments and arrangements (Oliver-Smith 1996). The multitude of events after disasters can lead to changes in attitude and promote new ways of viewing oneself and society, which advance cultural and social changes (Svensen 2009:87). Disasters cause both physical and psychological damage to the victims. The victims and survivors of disasters might experience another level of disaster through the very aid that intended to help them. Sometimes aid is provided in a manner that actually impedes recovery and leads to further hardships and marginalisation of the already marginalised community (Cuny 1983:3).

Most of the non-anthropological disaster research studies have portrayed traditional indigenous societies as being vulnerable to disasters, given their
inability to cope with them effectively. It is evident that modern societies have intervened and imposed various transformations on traditional societies. These transformations have increased the potential of disasters to alter the structure of indigenous or traditional societies. Sometimes, the changes imposed are so harmful that they result in total destruction of local societies. Much of such sociocultural change takes place during the reconstruction phase. Resettlement and relocation of people after a disaster is a common practice pursued by governments. Research has emphasised the significance of ‘place’ in the construction of identities, encoding and contextualization of time and history. ‘Place’ has an important role to play in the politics of interpersonal, community and intercultural relations. People have an attachment to their places; removal from which is profoundly traumatic to them (Oliver Smith 1996:308).

The culture of a community is directly linked with its identity. Identity is a social construct and there could be changes in the identity of groups, societies or nations, but these changes have their costs as well. This cost could be in terms of social changes that occur due to reordering of the surrounding networks, psychological disturbances and, disturbances involved in the reordering of memory (Winch 1958 cited in Preston1997: 5). Therefore, the questions concerning the speed of such change and the locus of control of such change are critical for a holistic understanding of the nature of the change caused (Sillitoe 2000:4).

5.2 Empirical Studies
Major disaster studies have researched the social, psychological, economic, political and spatial changes after disasters and their influence on the disaster affected people. Bates et al (1963) found that there was a formalisation of social relations and non-contractual relations were replaced by contractual relations in the communities affected by the Hurricane Audrey. Dyer et al (1992) and Picou et al (1992) studied the Alaskan villages affected by the Exxon Valdez oil spill and found that the disaster had transformed their social interaction and culture. Olson (1979) observed the sensitisation of the public after the blowout of an oil well off the coast of Santa Barbara. Drabek and Quarantelli (1967) have argued that it has become common to fix blame for disaster losses. Erikson (1976) concluded that fixing of blame after the Buffalo Creek Flood resulted in the loss of feeling of community. Fowlkes and Miller (1982), in their study of Love Canal
contamination, found that an important impact of the episode was distrust and skepticism towards the government. Goldsteen and Schorr (1991) argued that after the Three Mile Island accident, residents of the nearby township found themselves powerless to impact decision making and hence lost their faith in democracy (Nigg and Tierney 1993: 4-8).

Disaster could result in both negative and positive economic change. Dacy and Kunreuther (1969) found that economically, the Ita disaster turned out to be a blessing. Naidu (1989) observed that the aid given to the region during the 1977 Andhra Pradesh cyclone helped the households economically and indebtedness among farm labourers and fishermen declined due to relief assistance. Geipel (1991), in his study of Friuli earthquake, found that the damage compensation, government reconstruction funds, and low interest loans in the disaster-affected region resulted in modernization of manufacturing plants (ibid: 6-8).

Community leadership is jeopardised during disasters because of the death of experienced leaders and the appointment of new and sometimes inexperienced leaders can seriously affect rescue operations. Disasters also lead to the disruption of formal organisations and this disruption results in the breakdown of clear lines of authority. Wolensky (1984) found that the Hurricane Agnes in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, reorganised the power structure of local government. Hoover and Bates (1985) observed a change in the division of labour in seven communities after the 1976 Guatemala earthquake. Disasters could lead to several legal and political changes. Behler (1987) studied a town affected by the Three Mile Island nuclear accident and found that the residents became politically proactive after the disaster. Additionally, the power structure became more pluralistic. Walsh (1988), Flynn and Chalmers (1980), Goldsteen and Schorr (1991) found the same pattern of political mobilisation of communities after disasters (Cuny 1983: 8-56).

Disasters have imperative social and political impacts that underscore prevailing social struggles in a society and highlight inherent inequities in a political system. The tropical cyclone in East Pakistan in 1970, which killed half a million people, had a severe political impact on West Pakistan. The failure of the Pakistani government to respond to this crisis flared sentiments of revolt among the East Pakistan masses. Using disaster as a rallying point, a major political movement originated in East Pakistan and culminated with the creation of Bangladesh. The Managua earthquake of 1972 led to the overthrow of Somoza.
regime by Sandinista. The inability of the Somoza regime to deal with the disaster situation flared discontentment among the masses that toppled the regime. Relief and reconstruction work carried by relief agencies in the aftermath of the *Guatemala Earthquake* (1976) led to social change among the Indians. This led to a demand for structural changes which posed a threat to the existing oligarchs ruling Guatemala. Relief workers were warned and threatened by the military that they were being watched. Four years after the earthquake, Guatemala witnessed a civil war (Cuny 1983:54; Nigg and Tierney 1993).

Bates also studied the *Guatemala earthquake* (1976) and focused on understanding the relationship between disasters and social change on the one hand and the evaluation of the reconstruction programme on the other. Bates observed that people are open to change provided they get alternatives. There was a widespread change in the patterns of houses after the earthquake and this new pattern reduced their vulnerability to earthquakes. Bates observed that the speed of recovery of people varied from household to household and it was dependent on the kind of aid that was provided to them. The families, which received no aid recovered faster vis-à-vis the ones that were provided aid. Temporary housing that was provided to the victims seemed to impede recovery efforts. Earthquake recovery programmes created increased structural complexity and had impacts on the existent stratification system within the victim communities. Those communities that were integrated into the national economic and political structure recovered faster (Dynes 1988:106-7).

Bolin (1993) observed that the post disaster relocation of communities has negative consequences. Whereas Perry and Mushkatel (1984) suggest that relocation could be successful if adequate measures are taken to minimise disruption. Bolin (1982) argued that the housing arrangements after a disaster have an important impact on the social interaction patterns and it directly influences the harmony and conflict level in a community (Nigg and Tierney 1993:8-10).

Research conducted on the *Aitape tsunami* (1988) found that once people from disaster areas were settled in new locations, the donor organisations were pressurising the decision makers to make decisions quickly so that they could go ahead with their projects like water supply, housing and schools. After 24 months, the situation in new settlements grew grave and soon there were regular incidents of petty crimes and anti-social behaviour. Due to the interventions of outsiders in
the sociocultural sphere of these communities, people lost their independence, resilience, and became jealous. They experienced a dramatic alteration in their lifestyle, being habituated to living in a coastal region, inland settlements did not appeal to them (Davies 2002:28-39).

Mehta (2005) argued that the aftermath of the *Kuchchh earthquake* (2001) revealed that a second disaster occurs after a disaster because of flawed relief/rehabilitation measures and poor distribution of aid, especially by the state and the official agencies. Simpson and Corbridge (2006) also argued that there was a politics of reconstruction practiced by the right wing in the aftermath of the *Kuchchh earthquake*. The research conducted post the *Katrina hurricane* (2005) showed that class and racial differences determined the magnitude of the aftermath experienced by the victims (White et al 2007:523-34). The succeeding 'recovery disaster' that gripped the city in the aftermath of Katrina were of human, rather than natural origin (Tierney 2008:183 as cited in Williams 2008:1127).

Letukas and Barnshaw (2008) argue that post the Indian Ocean tsunami, a systematic social change was orchestrated through humanitarian aids by influencing the political and economic structures across long periods of time. Rigg et al (2005) also found that the post-tsunami reconstruction never meant the recreation of the pre-tsunami state of affairs in Thailand. Silva (2009) reasoned that reconstruction in Sri Lanka post the Indian Ocean tsunami was motivated by a neo-liberal ideology, which the research of Kelman et al (2008) also supported.

Hilhorst and Jansen (2010) also argued that the government of Sri Lanka and the rebels of Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) used the language of humanitarian space to reinforce their claims on territories and the people. The common concern with the Indian Ocean tsunami 'involved poor regard for a complex ecological system and the consequences of human action'. A flood of aid workers and attendant problems swept across Southeast Asia; Kennedy et al. (2008 cited in Williams 2008:1127) called it “the second tsunami” and Clark (2007 cited in Williams 2008:1127) termed it the “other tsunami”.

### 5.3 The Post-tsunami Aid in the Nicobar Archipelago: An Aftermath

The northern Sumatra earthquake was followed by eight gigantic tsunami waves that devastated the Nicobarese community. As the Nicobarese dwelled upon the coasts, they sustained major destruction in terms of human lives, huts, material
artifacts, plantations, livestock and cultivable land. The Nicobar Islands are topographically flat and spread out in the open sea. The tsunami waves washed away some of the islands from one end to the other, sweeping thousands of human lives and causing destruction to the built and natural environment. Post tsunami, some islands sunk two meters from their original level. The sea around the islands was clogged with accumulated biomass and the coasts were full of smashed corals and debris of the built infrastructure. Large portions of cultivable land were inundated and the islands were deformed and reduced in size (Singh et al: In press).

All these changes would have naturally created an adverse impact on the cultural identity of the Nicobarese. The demolition of age-old artifacts, natural resources, deaths of the elderly who possessed indigenous knowledge about canoe making, medicine and magico-religious practices have left a void in the Nicobarese society. With the destruction of kitchen gardens, coconut plantations and livestock, the Nicobarese livelihood suffered an irreparable damage (Sinha Roy and Datta Chaudhuri 2007:62; Das et al 2007:17-9; Sahani and Prasad 2007:75-8).

The tsunami marks as an incision in the Nicobarese memory and bifurcates their life into “then” and “now”, as the post-tsunami life of the Nicobarese does not resemble their pre-tsunami sociocultural and economic complexities (Singh et al: In press). Post tsunami, the community received humanitarian aid from the government and various national and international organisations. These external interventions in an isolated community had serious repercussions on the Nicobarese sociocultural milieu. In the words of Singh and Haas (2012), the “aid efforts that followed, while essential and valuable in the immediate aftermath, boomeranged to create a condition we term ‘complex disasters’, rendering the Nicobarese more vulnerable than what they had been before and after the catastrophe.”

The research conducted on the aftermath of the humanitarian interventions in the Nicobar archipelago concludes that the framework adopted for recovery and rehabilitation had little accounting for the socio-ecological characteristics and resilience of the native islanders. The dominant system of governance delayed the process of recovery and threatened the self-reliance of the community. The intervention of government and various other agencies created new social and
economic linkages, while various indigenous social networks came under pressure (Chandi 2006b).

The Nicobarese subsistence after the tsunami is not easy, Chaudhry and Thukral (2006:1-24) associated their sufferings with ineffective disaster management situation. The local administration had an overwhelming focus on immediate relief, but its long-term impacts on the recipient communities were not taken into consideration. Many agencies entered the affected zones, provided immediate relief and made an immediate exit. Such interventions left the communities to tackle the problems themselves, most of which were created by the post-tsunami interventions.

The manner in which humanitarian aid was provided to the community, a rupture in their sociocultural milieu was inevitable. The immediate humanitarian aid focused on rescue and relief for the victims. Some of the Nicobarese villages were evacuated and the inhabitants were resettled in relief camps and temporary shelters. The Nicobarese came to relief camps with a notion to return to their villages soon, but they were stuck in relief camps for too long (Gupta and Sharma 2006:71).

The Nicobarese were “extremely agitated” and “suffocated” in the relief camps and some of them had begun to say— “Leave us alone. We can manage on our own. We do not need biscuits and chips. We need to make our homes and plant our gardens. Give us tools, if you wish to help us”. Some Nicobarese also believed that the outsiders and the non-indigenous settlers had caused the tsunami. A leader from Katchal remarked that— “This is our land. Please leave us alone. Otherwise, we are sure to die” (Singh et al: In press). The humanitarian interventions also shifted the relations of power in the community, as the educated Nicobarese were preferred to participate in disaster management over uneducated, nevertheless experienced elderly (Singh 2009; Ramanujam et al 2012).

The Nicobarese were provided monetary compensations, but the very compensation that was supposed to help affected them adversely. The rules and norms adopted by the government in the distribution of relief resources overlooked the Nicobarese local context. The process of distribution of monetary aid packages and the conditions of the Indian legal framework were not in consonance with the traditional rules of the Nicobarese society (Singh and Haas 2012).
The government announced monetary relief of Rupees 2000 to every family, but when the administration realised that the Nicobarese live in extended families, the families were split into nuclear units. The package of cash compensation to the next of kin of the person who died or went missing also caused confusion and conflicts among the Nicobarese. The Nicobarese practice matrilocal marriage, whereby husband goes to the house of wife and lives there. It is a norm that he has to live there as a slave and thus exercises no right over her wealth or property. However, the compensation cheques of the women who perished during the tsunami were issued to their respective husband as the Indian law considered husband as the next of kin. These culturally insensitive maneuvers caused confusion, conflicts and disintegrated the Nicobarese joint families (Singh 2009; Ramanujam et al 2012).

Along with the government, numerous aid organisations also engaged in the distribution of relief materials and organization of training/capacity building workshops for the indigenes. The distribution of relief material such as household goods, utensils, clothes, tools, boats was essential for the Nicobarese. However, several products distributed among the Nicobarese were of little use and created conflicts, as all the indigenes wanted to possess these limited exotics. Various material goods were distributed which were both alien and unsuitable to the Nicobarese culture and conditions. For instance, radios (run with mechanical power), sari (the Nicobarese women do not wear), woolen blankets (unfit for tropical climate), ceiling fans (no provision of electricity) and bicycles (no pathways to ride them) (Singh et al: In press).

The magnitude of cash flow and material goods fueled consumerist behaviour patterns among the Nicobarese. The continuous flow of aid and adoption of affluent and high consumption behaviour among the Nicobarese have changed their lifestyle. They bought industrial products such as fancy clothing, motorcycles, mobile phones, DVD players, music systems, junk food, alcohol, mobile phones and so on from the compensation that they received from the government. The Nicobarese dependency on the market has increased manifold, but capital accumulation is not so visible among them. Only a few Nicobarese have maintained food gardens, while most of the Nicobarese consume purchased food items. Over-dependency on aid and new wealthy lifestyles have significant

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repercussions on their sociocultural life and environment (Singh 2006:54-6; Singh 2009; Fischer-Kowalski et al 2011:156; Singh and Haas 2012).

Wildenberg and Singh (2012) observed that the post-tsunami relief measures of the government and international aid organizations have “accelerated the ongoing process of transition from a hunter gatherer subsistence society to a more aid dependent, resource intensive and monetarised one.” The material goods and monetary compensations overwhelmed the Nicobarese, which led to an exponential rise in consumption level in the community and changed its lifestyle in a very short period. With the destruction of the pre-tsunami means of production, the community became dependent on aid (Singh 2011:173).

The tsunami was a severe blow to the Nicobarese, but the community had enough resilience to rebuild itself with initial humanitarian assistance. The post-tsunami intervention of the administration caused distress to the Nicobarese community as a whole by causing an unprecedented change in their internal institutions and power relations (Ramanujam et al 2012). These interventions were top-down and bereft of sufficient consultation with the affected communities. The administrative authority drew up plans in accordance with its convenience, which obscured the Nicobarese initiatives. It undermined the resilience of the socioecological systems and adversely affected the Nicobarese social, economic and ecological sustainability (Chandi 2006b; Singh et al In press).

5.4 Conclusions
The review of the literature on the aftermath of the tsunami in the Nicobar Islands shows that the drastic change in the Nicobarese sociocultural ethos cannot be solely attributed to the tsunami. Singh (2009) rightly reasons that the aid industry could also be responsible for such a change as it thrives on disaster, a phenomenon which Naomi Klein (2007) calls ‘disaster capitalism’. It is evident from the literature review that fear, shock and desperation caused by the tsunami were meticulously used by various agencies to bring a change that matched their agenda.

As reviewed in this chapter, there is some literature on the aftermath of the tsunami in the Nicobar Islands. However, almost all these studies were conducted in the northern and the central Nicobar Islands. The sociocultural milieu of the southern Nicobarese has remained unresearched and undocumented.