

**Cultural sensitivities of fishing community as experienced by an NGO in
Keezhamoovarkarai and Poompuhar villages of Tamil Nadu in the
Post-Tsunami rehabilitation.**

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Throughout the world all forms of media flashed the Tsunami that devastated the costal regions of several south and south East Asian countries. India stands in the third place with regard to asset damage and lives lost. Within India the coastal fishing villages of Tamil Nadu were the worst affected. It brought many international and national nongovernmental agencies to work among the fishing communities with in a short time, but with a long-term perspective to undertake different kinds of rehabilitation program. One such national agency, St. Josephs Eye Hospital, in collaboration with a German funding organization adopted the Poompuhar village of Nagapattinam district for post Tsunami rehabilitation in the state of Tamil Nadu.

While many NGOs approached Keezhamoovarkarai fishing community, just after the Tsunami, they did not allow them to take up any rehabilitation activities. The main reason for not allowing agencies were due to the fear that the government will not come if an NGO is working. Moreover, they felt the relief in monetary terms would be more when implemented by government than NGO. But finally they were forced to welcome this particular NGO after a month since no one had approached.

Interaction with the coordinator of this project during the initial stage of their footing in this fishing hamlet gave the insight to probe their work and its progress; that enabled me to understand culture and local capacities of the fisher folk. My approach is that understanding the cultural dimension which, embraces all components like economic, technological and social factors would help to improve the material and intellectual life of the target group without forcing them to accept any new idea in their way of life or knowledge system, and at the same time contribute to the technical success of the development plans or projects. The use of the term 'culture' in this context is as defined by the world conference on cultural policies held at Mexico City.

The conference recognized that 'culture is the whole complex of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features that characterize a society or social group. It includes not only the arts and letters, but also modes of life, fundamental rights of the human being, value systems, traditions, beliefs and etc' (UNESCO1982).

This study is mostly based on the opinions and views expressed by the implementing NGO rather than the beneficiaries.

This study is comprised in two parts; that the first part addresses the various issues and conflicts between the NGO and the fishing community in the village of Keezhamoovarkarai. The second part would focus on how it was possible to address different issues through their traditional local administrative council in Poompuhar village. Finally concluding these experiences by analyzing their way of life based on their geographical, occupational, economic conditions, and their traditions and customs that have come down the generations.

The NGOs role as rehabilitation agency

The initial stage of expressing the NGO's interest in helping the fishing community suffered a lot due to its lack of experience in mobilizing the village community. The very nature of language and the style of addressing each other varied much. This gave an impression to the NGO staff that the fishing community as ruffians, who uses rude expressions. It led the process to be in continuous mistrust and led the partners to nowhere. Language is one of the most prized possessions of the human society. It acts as repository of wisdom, a propeller for the advancement of thought and knowledge and a telescope to view the future. Though human society has progressed remarkably, the use of language in communication is still not free from certain hazels like, regionalism, profession, ignorance, prejudice, superstition and etc.

Looking more closely at what is essential for cooperation between both parties, one the active or at the giving end and the other the passive or at the receiving end, is the process of communication.

After sometime when they managed to find a wavelength to communicate with each other the next hurdle emerged in defining the needs and deciding the requirements of fishermen. The NGO had a plan of action that clashed with fishermen's requirements and priorities. The fishing

community expected any assistance in cash rather than in kind. They were vehemently opposing the coordinator collectively and also individually for not giving the cash in their hands. By that time they had already received a sum of money from the government based on the human and material loss for each of the household. At this stage they also expected this agency to follow the same mode.

The NGO was very firm in not giving the cash as the news in media spread that the fishermen spent the money heavily on liquor. This took the situation to total disarray. The fishing community looked at the NGO as someone bound to give, as a duty and not charity. They do not want the NGO to decide their needs. They are not bothered about details of the donors or from where and how the money comes. Their intention was to receive hard cash not any material support. This attitude of fisher folk made the NGO to perceive that the fishing community is the one, which would like to receive support without developing any partnership, or reciprocate with an emotion of gratitude.

While comparing the fishing community with non-fishing communities their gratitude for receiving was almost absent among the fishing communities. On the whole they felt it is not help from the NGO; instead it is someone's wish to give some thing to them.

The survey conducted to find out the loss of the boats was not easy, because, the information provided by the fisher folk always varied from person to person. When someone says, "we had 500 catamarans" it can be a false statement, for the very fact that there lived only 300 active fishermen.

It was a difficult task to find-out the various data needed to assess the damages in the village. The NGO felt that for getting what they wanted the whole village would stand together and defended false information given.

Finalizing the numbers of the boats lost during the disaster was not that easy due to the confusions created by the big boat owners as felt by the other NGOs in the neighboring villages. The owners feared that they would not get labourers if every one gets a boat. The local administrative council also had many boat owners and also the divisions created by the members affiliated to different major political parties in Tamilnadu. Those fishermen who do not possess a

boat before Tsunami wanted a fiber boat from the agency. The agency decided to give boats to the laborers after a long series of talks held with the villagers.

The over all image about the fishermen suffered a lot in the beginning stage that discouraged the agency to march forward in the rehabilitation process. It made them to rethink at one stage whether to continue their work or leave the village. Tension and misunderstanding mounted slowly to a stage where they could not find solutions. Media also reported about the difficulties in coordinating task of a plethora of non-governmental organizations, most with little or no experience in handling the close-knit fishing communities.

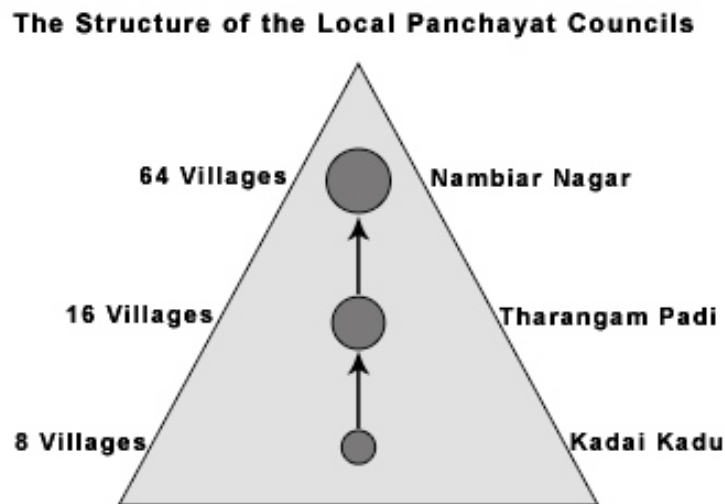
At this stage I met the coordinator Mr. Raja to hear about the whole complex of the situation. We had several discussions to understand the fishing community based upon their unique way of living. Our discussion centered on understanding the life style, customs and habits of the fisher folk. The blunt comparison of fishing and non-fishing communities posed a grave danger of under-estimating each other's cultural practices and values. Understanding the fishing communities and their priorities is not purely from being economic but also in terms of human dignity and respect for their cultural values and standard of living etc.

The break through in establishing proper communication was possible for the NGO after it identified some members of the community who came voluntarily to talk about the problems in Poompuhar village. These members were considered as people who could understand the concerns of the NGO.

They invited the coordinator to some hideouts to have an elaborate discussion without being seen by others. This was due to the fear of being branded by other members of the fishing community as people who betray the interests of the majority. When the NGO figured out their welfare schemes those individuals promised to support them in the meeting of local governing body of the fishermen. But this is not like the case of western mining companies that exploit resources on tribal land in Papua New Guinea, promote hierarchies within Melanesian societies by forcing them to select individuals as 'representatives' through whom they channel their negotiations that led to violent conflicts between local people and mining companies. The conflict arose over issues relating to compensation socio-economic change, land rights and environment degradation. (Alan Bicker 2003).

The traditional grass root governance system

At this point it is important to understand the pivotal role-played by the local fishermen Panchayat (this Panchayat is different from the one elected under local body elections) that functions only within the fishing community. A traditional village Panchayat system consisting of experienced fishermen exists in Nagappatinam district as follows supports the traditional governance of the fishing community



Every fishing village has its own unit of council that functions as a decision making body on the issues concerned with the fishing community. This particular body would take up any matter presented to them on inner and outer disputes and conflicts that affects the community. When a member of the community presents his problem with the other member(s) on any issue, the verdict of this council is final. The traditional values of shame and sensitivity to the council have its functional value. For example when a member does not repay the debt for any reason to the other and the matter is brought to this council. If the council finds the member willfully or for any reason try to cheat the other it levy heavy fines on the offender. The whole community is scared of the heavy fines that the council imposes on the faulty. Apart from the fines they mainly fear the insult and the shame that is brought in appearing before the council as offender(s). This insult and shame acquires importance because, the fishing occupation is a team effort and committing any such guilt would lead to isolation from the community, there by costing him the means of survival. And hence they fear and avoid being punished in such a way. The members of the councils are changed every year or in some cases once in two years.

Poompuhar, an ancient port town that was partly destroyed due to tidal waves during the Chozla period, is a tourist spot that attracts many tourists from India and abroad. The council punishes the youngsters of the fisher folk who indulge in Eve teasing or cause nuisance to tourists. Due to this, for almost a decade no such instances have been reported in that town. The council is a democratic body that allows equal participation of the members. Even the collector or any top official from the government in the local Panchayat is treated on par like any other members of the community. The hierarchical respect maintained in the non-fishing community is absent with the fishermen.

When a member of the community deceased the Panchayat will ban (*Oor marial*- preventing from fishing) the others from going to the sea. Also when a Panchayat is convened for any urgent reason the members are banned entering the sea. When an inter village dispute arises it is taken to the council that include 8 villages in the region. Conflicts and disputes often arise between two fishing groups on territorial demarcation for fishing and cross allegations of causing damage to fishing-nets.

Any such issue is represented in the above said council depending upon its magnitude and nature. Poompuhar village has a council with nine members. Though each nominated member has equal powers one member plays a dominant role, as he is the person with formal education.

The decisions for finalizing the various projects like repairing the boats or buying new ones and housing issues were dealt within the council through the supporters of the NGO. The atmosphere during the conduct of such council meetings invariably is much charged-up with raised voices and heated arguments and heckling by both elders and young alike. Any body can put forth his views fearlessly and one would have a thought that there is complete mayhem at one point or the other. One should attract the attention of the crowd while answering many logical and illogical questions of the entire community present at the council. At the end of the day the truth will prevail and a unanimous decision arrived at. Many schemes were approved after days of meeting with the council that lasted from evening to the early mornings of the next day. Here we must understand that the knowledge could not be separated from the social context in which it develops and that any analysis of the concept must include an appreciation of the power relations that underpin it. More over the knowledge acquired in the local Panchayat could

be treated in this context with reference to the knowledge interface between local communities (their practices and discourses) and external agents of change who have their own practices and discourses. Hence in the traditional set up of a local council, acquiring knowledge is embedded in social and cultural process imbued with aspects of power, authority and legitimacy. The act of acquiring knowledge involves social struggle, conflict and negotiation. Understanding the traditional strength of the local administrative council helped the NGO to proceed further with the fishing community. The volunteers from the community were of great help in educating the mindset of the fishermen to the NGO representatives.

Partnership and consensus to facilitate development

Now the project is advancing smoothly because of the trust that developed between the two parties. But the coordinator often says that even a small mistake on the part of NGO could flare up and create problems. He also said that, once they are convinced by the fact that we are here to help them sincerely we get extraordinary cooperation. Otherwise they throw you like dust. When trying to clarify the outlook of the fishing communities towards other mainland communities he said that for them they are non-existent. Their worldview is very much confined and limited to their own settings. The only links they have with the other sections of people are middlemen engaged in buying and selling fish in towns and cities. Even the relationship with these middlemen is often strained due to bargain and price-fixing. The fishing community feels these middlemen as exploiters. This view shapes their thought about the whole of the main land people. Their communication styles within and outside, their fighting spirit, behavioral patterns, mannerisms, inter-personal relationship and customs are to be understood in a deeper way.

Recalling the two incidents witnessed may give us some insights to understand the intricacies of the cultural values and behavior of the fishing communities.

We visited a boat-manufacturing unit to bring the finished boats, along with few fishermen to help in loading. While loading the boats in to the lorry an old man could not put equal energy in raising the boat. He was about the age of 70. We told to him to come out and asked another one to replace him. A young boy immediately yelled, “Why he cannot lift? Do I eat rice and he eat shit”. Though this might seem vulgar to us, it is quite common among them and it is for us to understand that the boy wanted to convey the message that he should work and age could not be

an excuse. This incident might bring surprise about the boy's attitude about the elders. But the other dimension of this incident help us to understand the fact that in fishing community one has to be always fit to work and survive. Once a person becomes disabled he is treated as a burden for others. We noticed lot of disabled children in this community, as they marry among kinships. Those children are treated as a liability, having done nothing for their enlistment. When this NGO wanted to help them with artificial limbs some members contented and instead asked money for those children. Once a fisherman becomes old he will have to make his earnings by selling dry-fish. It is the case for women too. The father will chase away his son as soon he finds his capabilities to survive independently. The inner sharing among the community members are not to be seen as in non-fishing communities. When I posed a question with some young people asking them how do they treat the old and elderly in terms of helping them at their last stage the uniform answer was like this "we ourselves suffer to survive and how can we help when we suffer".

The other incident to probe was when we were writing the names of the members for receiving the boats one middle-aged man looked in to our notebook and told that we have written his name wrongly. Since we wrote it properly we told him that it is written correctly. When we asked him, whether he is a literate, he told that he has not gone to school and do not know to read and write. But this shows his courage and confidence to make sure that his name is written properly. Also it could be addressed as he dealt in an offensive mood to make things all right though he is an illiterate.

The other observation made during my recent visit to Poompuhar is that they do not glorify the Tsunami deaths. Unless and otherwise reminded they do not refer to the Tsunami deaths with in their community. Few women talk about the loss of their children for which they do not want to stay in the shore. It is a community that always lives in the present to meet any kind of challenge for the very sake of survival.

When support of various nature after Tsunami was extended the fishing community tried to get maximum out of it. Many in the fishing hamlet had five or six kerosene stoves. Some times even without knowing the use of the article they brought them to their homes.

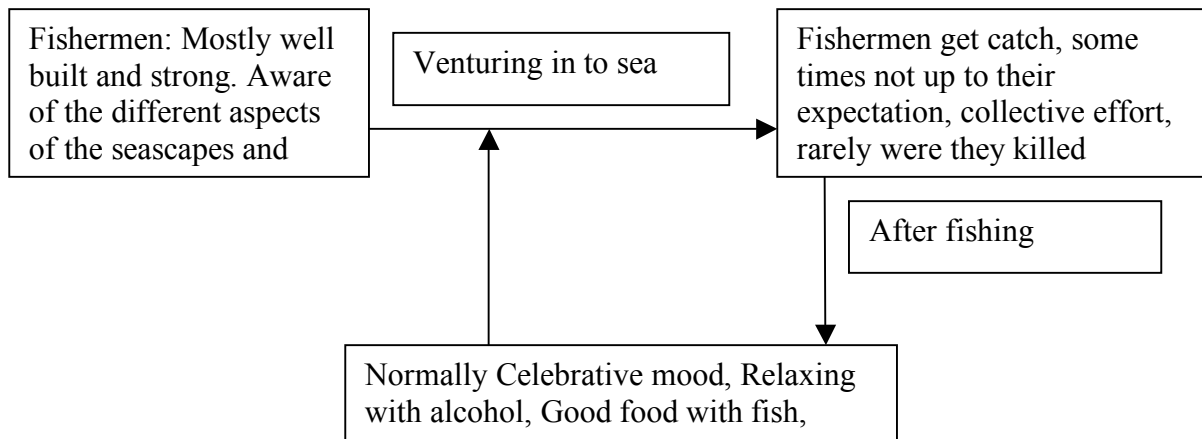
The best example is that the NGOs brought thousands of sanitary napkins to Nicobar Island. As the Nicobari women do not use the napkins, initially they used them as toilet papers due to the water scarcity in the island and later they made pillows out them (Rashid Yusuf. BBC.2005). Individually the fishermen received help in the beginning days of relief works from different agencies but now they are able to define their needs through their local councils.

Particular way of life and livelihood of fishing communities

The fishermen leave their houses in the evening and come back in the next day or the third day depending upon their expedition. They venture in to the rough sea that has many unpredicted dangers. Hard labor, traditional wisdom and coordinating different tasks are the basic needs for getting a good catch. Cyclones thunderstorms rough sea and unexpected damage to their boats and nets are the regular challenges they face in their occupation. Their lives are in continuous danger till they land up in shores. The life begins at the shore with a different dimension for the male members. Every safe landing gives them the joy of conquering and gives the spirit to celebrate. Easily they get attracted to the liquor, good food and rest. They also get attracted towards cinema. But the influence of cinema could be felt among the youngsters as they have fan clubs for many actors. Since it is a patriarchal community the male members influence the entire attitudinal pattern of the community. Their world-view, their behavior patterns and their culture merely reflect their difficult way of life.

The sea is to be understood as a huge hunting ground where unexpected dangers are in-built. The fishermen hunt in the sea for best catch. Following chart will help us to understand this comparison with the following diagram.

Fishing–Hunting in the sea...



The fighting spirit is one of the in-built traits of this community, is revealed from the fact that when a father and son goes to sea for fishing on their return they would fight each other comparing the quantity of their catch. The pride of this community can be assessed from their rejection of old cloths given to them during relief work. It is supported by the very fact that people in Poompuhar will sell any thing to get a work permit to Singapore. Even if they return empty handed, they are very proud about having visited Singapore. We could never come across any form of begging in the fishing village. The attitude of the whole community can be traced from the Mc Doughall's explanation of natural sequence of development of the mind (B.S.Sanyal' 1962), which is as follows:

1. Self-preservation-food-seeking, escape, constructiveness, curiosity, combat, repulsion, acquisitiveness etc.
2. Sex-mating
3. Parental-gregarious, self-assertion, submission, appeal, laughter etc.

Conclusion

The positive factor in the post Tsunami rehabilitation is the generosity of the external agencies in extending their enormous support for relief followed by rehabilitation. But unfortunately most of them lack sensitivity to participatory approach and field experience to facilitate participatory development. The NGOs are yet to respect local communities' perspectives on development and to keep them at the centre and consider them as their development partners.

Social mobilization and partnership development is a process, needs continuous dialogues, mutual respect, understanding, trust building etc among the agencies involved in the development process. The NGO in the field should make efforts to develop rapport and mutual understanding to work as partners.

Fisher communities have well functioning internal governing mechanisms. The mechanism could have been very well consulted to promote the development efforts and avoid conflicts.

The traditional communities have developed values and practices over generations; otherwise they are the guiding principles to lead their life. It is essential to understand these values and principles to make any development intervention. Fishing communities with a very tough daily routine with risks and dangers have different values and approach towards life, which very much differ, from the inland societies. Any external agency that works with fishing communities should develop a mind set to respect their life style, norms and prevailing values and norms of the society.

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Note.

The author of this paper Mr.S.A. Samy works as the Director of Centre for Culture and Development, a non profit organisation based in Chennai. The Centre is promoting a cultural space near Madurai Known as Kalaigramam with the mandate of Pro-poor .Pro-women, Pro-nature and pro-livelihood and Pro-Dalits. Generating awareness, Skill building, Livelihood security to the poor is addressed with the utilisation of cultural resources.