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Humanitarianism and Unequal Exchange

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Abstract

This article examines the relationship between humanitarian aid and ecologically unequal exchange in the context of post-disaster reconstruction. I assess the manner in which humanitarian aid became a central part of the reconstruction process in India's Tamil Nadu state following the devastating 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami. This article focuses on how the humanitarian "gift" of housing became a central plank of the state's efforts to push fishers inland while opening up coastal lands for various economic development projects such as ports, infrastructure, industries, and tourism. As part of the state and multilateral agency financed reconstruction process, the humanitarian aid regime provided "free" houses as gifts to recipients while expecting in return the formal abandonment of all claims to the coast. The humanitarian "gift" therefore helped depoliticize critical issues of land and resources, location and livelihood, which prior to the tsunami were subjects of long-standing political conflicts between local fisher populations and the state. The gift economy in effect played into an ongoing conflict over land and resources and effectively sought to ease the alienation of fishers from their coastal commons and near shore marine resource base. I argue that humanitarian aid, despite its associations with benevolence and generosity, presents a troubling and disempowering set of options for political struggles over land, resources, and social entitlements such as housing, thereby intensifying existing ecological and economic inequalities.

Keywords: gift, humanitarianism, disaster, coastal fisheries, artisanal fishing, marine fisheries, NGO, disaster capitalism, neoliberalism, economic development, Nagapattinam, Tamil Nadu, reconstruction displacement, commons, neoliberalism

This paper is concerned with the relationship between post-disaster humanitarian aid and ecologically unequal exchange. It critically examines the role of humanitarianism in mobilizing and deploying affect, primarily through the act of gift giving, in order to facilitate state plans to rebuild a devastated region by relocating its inhabitants and opening up land for investment. The specific context I examine is the aftermath of the 2004 tsunami in southern India, specifically Nagapattinam district in Tamil Nadu state and adjacent Karaikal district (in Pondicherry state) on the Bay of Bengal coast. Prior to the tsunami two important domains of economic activity —the near-shore fishery and the coastal commons —were sought by the state for the expansion of export-led commercial fish and aquaculture production, both activities resulted in substantial ecological damage. Numerically dominant but economically marginal, artisanal fishers vigorously defended their coastal and marine resource claims, on the strength of customary laws regulating the use of coastal land and near shore waters. Drawing on ethnographic research conducted in the region between 2007-2008, I examine how the humanitarian gift of housing, while presenting a problematic choice for artisanal fishers, offered a unique opportunity for the state to expand ecologically destructive commercial capture fisheries.[1] In addition to ethnographic fieldwork among relocated households spread across several villages in Nagapattinam town, I also conducted household income/expenditure surveys among four relocated communities, and a coastal beach-use survey across forty coastal fisher villages spread across Nagapattinam and Karaikal districts (see Swamy 2011).

For decades the Indian state promoted growth-oriented economic development strategies to modernize marine capture fisheries and promote coastal aquaculture. Both strategies had deleterious ecological impacts provoking conflicts with the numerically dominant artisanal fisher population along the coast. While initially justified as a "food security" strategy (Planning Commission, Government of India 1951:23), the commercial fisheries sector and aquaculture primarily serve affluent export markets in the E.U., Japan, and the U.S., while despoiling coastal land and near-shore waters, including vital ecological assets like mangroves and dunes, and imposing a host of ecological costs on fisher and agricultural communities (Martinez-Alier 2001). Through the 1990s massive political resistance to the above state efforts resulted, combining ecological critiques of development alongside demands for the democratization of policy (Campaign Against Shrimp Industries 2004). Among significant victories for coastal fishers and agriculturalists was a landmark Supreme Court ruling against shrimp farms in 1996 (Environmental Law Alliance Worldwide (ELAW) 2008). Thus state led development policy —

1. This paper draws upon an NSF funded doctoral research project conducted in Nagapattinam between 2007-2008 by the author.

in both the "development decades" and the post-1991 neoliberal era faced significant resistance as artisanal fishers and small-scale agriculturalists mobilized politically in defense of their claims on the coastal and marine resource.

The tsunami of 2004 presented an opportunity for the state to aggressively pursue a host of economic development priorities including those noted above since the very population that resisted these goals was now devastated and vulnerable. Critical to the state-led reconstruction program was the role of the humanitarian sector, represented by a host of international and domestic NGOs. Through a public-private partnership with the state, NGOs were charged with building houses for affected communities, but on lands that were to be identified and procured by the state (Government of Tamil Nadu 2005a). This enabled the pursuit of a strategy that could make use of the funds and resources brought into the reconstruction process by an unprecedentedly large number of NGOs, while at the same time setting formal constraints on the locational choices afforded to recipients of housing (Government of Tamil Nadu 2005b). NGOs engaged in the reconstruction process but abstained from advocating on behalf of their recipients on the issue of location, instead choosing to focus on meeting deadlines and providing quantified evidence of deliverables to both the state and to their donors (Swamy 2013).

The paper begins by making a case for the study of post-tsunami humanitarianism in Nagapattinam through the framework of ecologically unequal exchange. I then present two key sites pertinent to ecologically unequal exchange in Nagapattinam—the near shore fishery and the coastal commons—and then examine how humanitarian aid empowered state efforts to alienate coastal lands and encourage capital-intensive (and ecologically destructive) production strategies at the expense of artisanal fishers. I refer to artisanal fishers as household-centered producers who deploy negligible amounts of capital and inputs, organize work around social and communal ties (as opposed to wage labor contracts), use small fishing craft, and capture fish close to shore (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations 2014).

Why Ecologically Unequal Exchange?

On the face of it humanitarianism and unequal exchange seem to belong to completely different domains. If unequal exchange refers to the world of commodities, markets, exchange values, accumulation, and so on, humanitarianism is supposed to center on those domains explicitly excluded from that world of commodity exchange. Humanitarianism in other words views the giving and receiving of objects and services as activities that should occur necessarily outside the domain of the marketplace, shaped by the logic of the gift —conventionally understood to operate beyond the constraints and expectations of contractual exchange. Humanitarian gifts, however, are inextricably bound to structures and practices associated with the formal economy, and as such cannot be viewed in isolation from the domain of commodities, markets, exchange relationships,

and patterns of inequality that shape global, regional, and local relationships (Stirrat and Henkel 1997).

At the outset one might conceive of unequal exchange in terms of commodity production, exchange, and consumption. An ecologically focused approach to inequality in the world-system extends earlier concerns with the manner in which greater quantities of labor were embodied in commodities produced in the third world and exchanged with the global north at far below their real value, towards one that focuses attention on the resources and natural values embodied in these commodities (Foster and Holleman 2014; Hornborg 1998; Jorgenson 2016).

Jorgenson (2016:6) defines ecologically unequal exchange as the combined "obtaining of natural capital" and "usurpation of sink-capacity" at the expense of less-developed countries. The historical role of many developing countries as taps and sinks for the accumulation needs of western capital has continued to shape production, exchange, and consumption choices and strategies in developing countries. Furthermore the world-system's inequalities are shaped by historical patterns of extraction and production that advantage the global north, whose market demands disrupt and constrain production strategies across the world. Neoliberal states in the periphery of the world-system have had to aggressively adopt strategies that privilege export-oriented production and foreign direct investment as necessary conditions for development, leading developing countries like India to further entrench themselves within the world-system as taps and sinks for the accumulation needs of global capital, and in doing so intensifying assaults on local populations seen to stand in the way of a new market-oriented forms of development that prioritizes the needs of private capital (Chandrasekhar and Ghosh 2002:6).

The ecologically unequal exchange framework allows one to examine a broader set of socioeconomic phenomena such as the relationships people have with their natural environments, the conflicts shaping these relationships, the roles of powerful players such as the state, multilateral organizations, and nongovernmental organizations in advancing and shaping policies, priorities and outcomes, as well as the patterns of resistance and adaptation of local populations to these. As such it adds a much-needed framework for a consideration of how political ecological relations and conflicts at the local level relate with the political economy of production-consumption-accumulation on the scale of the world-system. For the purposes of this paper, EUE enables us to consider how local-level policies such as those pertaining to reconstruction reflect the needs and goals of wider world systemic entanglements, notably those tying coastal lands and near shore waters as sites of extraction, to affluent markets in the global north.

In Nagapattinam, two facets of ecologically unequal exchange are pertinent. One is the near-shore fishery where significant ecological damage has resulted from the proliferation of mechanized trawlers, leading to a decades-long conflict with artisanal fishers. Two, threats to the coastal commons, the beaches, dunes, vegetation, and resources (such as fresh water) posed by

state-encouraged shrimp farms, industries, tourism and infrastructure development such as commercial fishing harbors and ports. In both cases state-led policies resulted in ecological damage to coastal and near-shore waters, and also placed an unequal ecological burden on artisanal fishers, pitting artisanal fishers against mechanized boat owners on the one hand, and shrimp farm operators on the other.

Disasters and Humanitarianism

Scholars studying disasters from sociological and anthropological perspectives have expanded the scope of study to draw attention to the long-term patterns and effects of global unequal exchange associated with the emergence and global expansion of capitalism. Sociologists have, for instance, pointed to the need to take into account the world-system and its impacts on patterns and possibilities for social change (Letukas and Barnshaw 2008). Likewise, anthropologists have pointed to the need for more historical understandings of the role played by colonialism, racism, and imperialism in the constitution of disaster outcomes (Schuller 2016). In studies of disasters a shift away from treating disasters as singular events has accompanied a push towards more critical analyses that shed light on the ways in which vulnerabilities of populations are produced, and mobilized in specific ways following a disaster (Johnson 2011). More broadly, scholarship in recent years challenged the "event-centric" focus of disaster studies, which as Tierney notes, forecloses the question of how disasters themselves are related to the social order. Disasters, she argues, should be viewed as "episodic, foreseeable manifestations of the broader forces that shape societies" (2007: 509).

Letukas and Barnshaw (2008) extend the frame of analysis for the study of disasters to the long-term, posing the question of social change in terms of the long-term effects of capitalist development on a global scale over centuries. They contend that a world-systems approach might enable scholars to get a better sense of how perceptions of aid regimes are shaped by the specificities of how each nation-state has been integrated into capitalist accumulation strategies, that distinguish not only nation-states from one another but also place them within distinct economic zones in an unequal global order. While the uneven development of a world-system bound by a single market and the centrality of states in an (unequal) interstate system constrains the possibilities for cooperation and conflict between states, disasters offer a unique opportunity for change through macro-economic cooperation (a "neo-Marshall plan") that might both expand possibilities for international cooperation and improve public perceptions of American global power in host countries (Letukas and Barnshaw 2008:1072).

While this approach adds a necessary historical dimension to a consideration of disasters, its state-centric focus makes it difficult to assess the interplay of such forms of macro-economic cooperation with strategies of accumulation that pit states and global capital against populations.

The present era bears witness to semi-peripheral states engaged in violent efforts to wrest land and resources from populations, on behalf of capital. As such the extent of cooperation between core and semi-peripheral (as with peripheral states) also is an indicator of the effectiveness of the latter in facilitating accumulation through the "opening up" of resources and opportunities for investment. Nevertheless, the idea that disasters might offer openings for renewed international cooperation is also echoed in Fassin's (2012) "humanitarian government," which he describes as the "deployment of moral sentiments in contemporary politics " but also "as the response made by our societies to what is intolerable about the state of the contemporary world." Both formulations point optimistically to the power of affect in potentially reconstituting social relations, but do not address how these opportunities might translate into addressing structural inequalities of the world-system and the contradictions of humanitarianism.

The Humanitarian Gift

The increasingly important role of non-governmental organizations in disaster reconstruction raises questions as to how their activities facilitate the withdrawal of the state from social functions, but also regarding the substantial weakening of politics from below, as rights and entitlements are transformed into gifts from well-intentioned and resourced professional organizations. Scholars studying the phenomenon of the gift remind us that an object treated as a gift carries its own values that have to do with the social practice of giving and receiving gifts. A gift, for instance, carries with it the obligation to return a gift —and as Bourdieu (2010:5) reminds us, gift exchange involves a time lag between the original giving, and the return, and it also requires the selection of an object that is distinct from, in terms of objective qualities and embodied values than the original gift. Gift exchange is thus also about renewing social relations, including those that are founded on disparities of power, as for instance gift exchange between landlords and peasants. In fact, Mauss's (2002) pioneering early twentieth century study of the gift points out that giving between unequals is always about imposing obligations and thereby renewing socially recognized values such as loyalty and patronage (Mauss 2002). The gift, despite its explicit grounding outside the marketplace and its attendant inequalities, still presumes and thereby reproduces social inequalities, even when this occurs under the rubric of giving without expectation. Thus the gift exchange model can provide a useful framework for us to examine the relationship between humanitarianism and unequal exchange.

An immediate problem however presents itself: If a humanitarian organization provides a gift of a house, what is the obligation imposed on recipients as a result of receiving the gift of housing? Since many NGOs simply left the field after completing their housing projects, recipients were not necessarily bound to return a *counter gift* to their benefactors. Yet, there are two ways in which the humanitarian gift imposed itself as an obligation on recipients of disaster aid. For one, they

had to accept the terms governing the gift —specifically the choices made by the state with regard to the location of housing, the quality and dimensions of the received gift of housing, and the critical condition that accepting the gift of new housing signaled the formal abandonment of all claims to coastal homes and lands.

The gift was given by the NGO to the fisher recipient, but the counter gift was in turn expected to pass on from the recipient to the state. This transfer of livelihood resources includes not only lands, but also locational advantages, access to various coastal resources, and most importantly access to the near shore fishery. In short this is a form of enclosure facilitated by humanitarianism's "public private partnership" with the state. But it is at the same time a type of enclosure strategy that derives from a productive recalibration of politics, instead of a violent usurpation (as is common with so called "slum demolitions" or "evictions" of populations the world over). Since the house represents at the same time the single most important object required for everyday social reproduction, its transformation into a gift signals a radical diminution of democratic accountability —no longer an entitlement demanded of the state, which could be held accountable via politics, the house became an object of goodwill, given selflessly by well-meaning outsiders who expected nothing in return. Yet, one may also consider the ways in which the giver of the humanitarian gift obtained values from the act of giving —via the representation of the act of giving, and the circulation of such representations in ways that facilitate continued donor interest, the continuation of funding flows, maintenance of the institutional and monetary structures required for the functioning of an NGO and so on. Humanitarian gifts are powerful and transnational in their effects and values.

Framing the Terrain of Humanitarian Action

The terrain of humanitarian action was circumscribed by the ideological framing of existing inequalities advanced by multilateral agencies and state government officials. The World Bank characterized value production of the numerically dominant artisanal fisher communities as insignificant in relation to "the economy," since they contribute "a mere 0.6%" to the state's GDP (World Bank 2005). Thus the revival of artisanal fishing was seen to be a humanitarian consideration since fishing for hundreds of thousands of fisher households is a matter of subsistence. In contrast, the World Bank viewed commercial export-driven fisheries or shrimp farms as being properly integrated into "the economy" and therefore deserving to be revived as a matter of economic recovery. Assessment and implementation documents thus produced by the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, and the United Nations Development Program, in partnership with the state government advanced a latent divide between economic development and humanitarian aid, with the latter passed on to the non-governmental sector. While conceptually separate in planning documents (see for example (Asian Development Bank, United Nations, and

World Bank 2005), the humanitarian aid component was closely linked with "economic development" agendas such as the multilaterally financed expansion of ports, dredging of new harbors for mechanized boats, and the construction of bridges to serve the seafood industry, as the following example illustrates.

Development and Demolition

Keechankuppam bridge was built by state authorities in the 1950s, in response to demands from local fisher communities living to the south of the Kaduvayar river, adjacent to Nagapattinam port. This bridge was needed because the only mode of transport available for fisher communities needing to access markets, educational, health, and governmental services in Nagapattinam town, was a *Toni*, a reed boat rowed slowly across the narrow waters of the Kaduvayar. The bridge changed the fortunes of Keechankuppam, Akkaraipettai, and Kallar by connecting fishers to town, market, schools, hospitals, and government services, but also with other fisher communities north of the river's mouth. Reflecting the heady optimism of the early 1950s when state policy centered on expanding and deepening the benefits of modernization and development as the pathway towards addressing endemic problems of rural distress, poverty, and food insecurity, the bridge also became etched in the memories of local fishers as a symbol of a lost era when the state was seen to be responsive to the economic needs of local communities. In striking contrast the expansion of commercial fishing as an economic developmental priority driven by the proliferation of mechanized boats in the 1990s, rested on recasting transportation as a need tied to the emerging commercial seafood industries requiring efficient transportation of fish to their export-oriented processing and packaging facilities further south.

Thus when the 2004 tsunami partially damaged the old 1950s era bridge which served the transport needs of fishers, officials were quick to push for the completion of a large and "modern" bridge (already begun prior to the tsunami) further upstream, but insisted at the behest of the World Bank that the old bridge needed to be demolished in order to make way for a Bank-funded fishing harbor. To local fishers this posed a major threat since the bigger bridge was not suitable for everyday pedestrian and small vehicular traffic, but was designed for trucks racing across the coast transporting fish to seafood industries located in Tuticorin further south. Despite efforts to resist the demolition, state officials destroyed the old bridge, late at night. Now with the bridge gone those fishers who had resolved to stay on in their coastal homes despite the tsunami, had to reconsider accepting inland relocation. An NGO-built housing complex was located significantly inland, and without the old bridge many southern fishers could no longer entertain the idea of continuing to live on the coast. Let's take a brief look at this episode: if the promotion of commercial fisheries was viewed as an economic development priority necessitating the construction of a new high-velocity/volume bridge, the destruction of the old bridge was

simultaneously viewed as necessary for the deepening of the harbor to facilitate an increase in the traffic, docking, and landing of mechanized boats. But this also served a second purpose, to discourage fishers from entertaining ideas about staying on their coastal lands, which technically they had by and large agreed to abandon once they accepted new housing, but desired to reclaim as did thousands of fishers across Nagapattinam. Moving inland posed various problems which made it unattractive despite the promise of legal recognition, and the hypothetical and largely partially fulfilled promise of structurally superior houses, utilities, and so on. Yet, instead of allowing fishers to decide how they wanted to pursue recovery, the state decided to add a little coercion to the mix: if they do not have a means of accessing markets and services, they will be forced to accept inland housing.

In effect, despite the tentative split between humanitarian aid and economic development, the two processes worked in conjunction with each other; the NGOs that took on housing construction had little interest in engaging with the political and social concerns of their housing recipients, and soon enough had left the field to pursue other disasters elsewhere. Meanwhile the meaning of humanitarianism became blurred as well —now it was about managing the outcomes of relocation due to economic development, and not the disaster. The split between economic development and humanitarian aid is therefore also strategically intended to blur the boundaries between addressing the effects of the disaster itself and the needs arising out of dislocations necessitated by economic development. Humanitarianism therefore ends up working as a damage control mechanism rather than as a means to address the recovery needs of its intended beneficiaries. Left to fend for themselves, many fishers of Keechankuppam village decided to reintroduce boat transport to enable residents access to Nagapattinam town. This was ironically a return to the status quo that prevailed until the 1950s —they were in effect underdeveloped by reconstruction, having lost their bridge, and access to the beaches as a result of relocation. Humanitarianism therefore enabled the reproduction of existing inequalities shaping the fishing economy —between artisanal fishing and commercial harbor based mechanized boat driven fishing, even as it sought to project itself as a critical agent engaged in "recovery."

The Artisanal Fishing Economy—Neither Premodern nor Unchanging

Since independence successive governments of India have pushed for the "modernization" of marine fishing. Development, with its focus on food security was to be pursued through large dams, massive infrastructure projects, the introduction of mechanized fishing boats, electricity generation, chemical inputs in agricultural production, and so on. The small farmer, like the artisanal fisher would come to be viewed as an archaic remnant of a bygone era of vulnerable subsistence, whose displacement was viewed as a necessary condition of modernization, and not as a contradiction of democracy. Frankel (2015) notes with surprise how Punjab Agricultural

University agricultural economists in the late 1960s viewed the displacement of small landholders and agricultural laborers as a necessary and even positive outcome of the mechanization of agriculture. To these elite modernizers of postcolonial India the displacement of large numbers of primary producers was coterminous with the transformation of nature into commodified value (Kothari 1989). For the second to become possible, the first was inevitable.

Thus from the 1950s official policy towards artisanal fishery was one devoted to modernizing the practice by encouraging increases in production via the introduction of mechanized boats. Policy-makers expected these boats to fish in deeper waters than those of the near shore where beach-landed craft of artisanal fishers typically did. Deploying the reasoning of 1950s modernization theory, the idea was that once mechanized boats proved their ability to raise productivity, artisanal fishers would be encouraged to move away from the "traditional" form of fishing and adopt mechanized boats and technologically improved fishing practices. Thus artisanal fishers were viewed as subjects of development who could, with persuasion, be encouraged to adapt to the demands of modernization themselves thereby improving productivity, the availability of an important source of protein, and thus contribute to national development. Two things happened that made things far more complicated as far as planner expectations were concerned: one, mechanized boat operators found it easier and cost effective to simply fish in the near shore, in direct competition with, and soon enough, in conflict with artisanal fishers. This set in motion a long-term struggle between artisanal fishers and mechanized boat operators, sometimes leading to violence and necessitating the arbitration of the state government's fisheries department which quickly became more effective in dispute resolution than in regulating the fisheries (Bavinck 1998). Contrary to planners' expectations artisanal fishers quickly began to adapt to their existing beach-landed craft a slew of secondary technological inputs—better nets imported from Scandinavia, outboard motor engines from Japan, which enabled them to increase the range of fishing expeditions. Ironically during the decades of "fisheries modernization," instead of declining, the number of artisanal fishers increased rapidly, making this the dominant type of fishing in South Asia (Kurien 1998b). Thus, there is something to be said about the resilience and autonomy of natural resource dependent small producer populations such as fishers (Kolding, Béné, & Bavinck, 2014). The dismissal of their ways of live as "premodern," "archaic," or "static" signals a political move rather than an analytical one; yet it is a powerful discursive and crucially dissimulating move which enables the pursuit of policies of enclosure and dispossession in the name of disaster recovery.

Histories of Ecologically Unequal Exchange in Two Coastal Areas

For Nagapattinam's artisanal fishers the primary conflict from a political ecological perspective is one over sharply clashing notions of property. To artisanal fishers the beaches, like the near shore

marine resource, are common property, where pluralistic notions of shared and mutually recognized access shape "traditional" conventions that emphasize sustainable long-term use (Kurien 1998a). Shrimp farms, or commercial fishing on the other hand tend to view the coastal ecology in terms of maximizing individual yield with scant regard for sustainable long-term uses of coastal or near shore marine resources. As Longo et al. (2015:32) point out, the profit-driven focus of commercial capture fisheries and aquaculture on the unceasing commodification of nature results in "unsustainable social and ecological consequences." Far from addressing the food security needs of poor countries, they primarily serve affluent markets in the global north (Longo et al. 2015:162). This divide is in a sense the primary contradiction driving the conflict between small producers on the one hand and neoliberal capitalist production strategies on the other. It informs the inherent biases driving state and multilateral economic development strategies that perceive natural resource dependent small producer populations as a barrier to be overcome, or a problem to be managed rather than as legitimate claimants to a shared resource.

To assess the implications of humanitarianism and reconstruction for ecologically unequal exchange, we examine two important areas where ongoing ecological conflicts between artisanal fisher communities and state-promoted commercial activities shaped the landscape prior to the entry of NGOs and their humanitarian agenda after the tsunami. A consideration of these two zones of conflict helps us identify the key ways in which humanitarian aid was predicated upon and contributive to ecologically unequal exchange in post-tsunami Nagapattinam.

The Near-Shore Fishery

Nagapattinam's fish economy illustrates the conflict between artisanal and mechanized fishing. While the former has a longer presence on the coast and is practiced by a significantly larger proportion of fishers, the latter has been encouraged over several decades by successive governments with the goal of modernizing the fisheries. Artisanal fishing relies primarily on beach-landed craft with teams of five fishers typically venturing out to sea for several hours at a time about twice every week (Bharathi 1999). Mechanized boats on the other hand are harbor-based, and require larger teams that venture out to sea often for several days. While mechanized fishing is more firmly integrated into commercial production, artisanal fishing also serves commercial buyers, predominantly by selling dried fish as feed for the poultry industry, in addition to serving the subsistence needs of fishers. Mechanized fishing and the broader commercial fisheries with which it is associated, have been actively promoted by state policy makers and in the contemporary era are still viewed by state and multilateral agencies as being central to the fishing economy's contribution to the GDP (Department of Fisheries 2006).

The key conflict between mechanized and artisanal fishing is over the near shore fishery**:** under pressure to reduce operational costs, mechanized boat operators found it easier to compete

with artisanal fishers in the near shore than to fish in deeper waters as originally intended. The introduction of trawling further exacerbated this conflict as trawl nets seriously depleted near-shore waters of fish (Bavinck 2003). By scraping the shallow seabed, trawlers could increase their overall catch, but at the cost of substantial destruction of the ecology. These "externalized costs" of mechanized fishing were subsequently borne by artisanal fishers who saw a precipitous decline in near shore fish catch, as well as increased conflict over customary claims over these waters.

The Embattled Coastal Commons

While mechanized fishing boats imposed externalized ecological costs of near-shore fishing on artisanal fishers, commercial shrimp farming, actively promoted by successive governments at the urging of the World Bank, also imposed ecological costs on fisher communities (Stonich and Bailey 2000). Shrimp farming relies on the construction of ponds that use brackishwater pumped in from the sea where with the generous addition of a host of nutrients and antibiotics shrimp are harvested and sold to distant markets. Effluents tend to leak out of ponds, and are routinely pumped out into the sea damaging the fragile coastal ecosystem, especially fresh water resources, but also near-shore fishing grounds (Hein 2002). In addition to the ecological damage shrimp farms are associated with, their basis in the principle of private property which demands exclusive spaces in areas typically governed by common property conventions, understandings and expectations, raised the stakes for fisher communities over the decades preceding the tsunami of 2004.

The construction of power plants, industrial enclaves, and ports along the coast have also seriously threatened both coastal lands and near shore waters with the result that fishers not only lose out but are forced to factor in the costs of such activities into their own efforts to sustain livelihoods. This includes for example having to expend more time and effort in order to access beaches and markets due to erected barriers and fences, enduring added financial burdens due to the loss of access to coastal resources such as brush for fuel, clean drinking water, health costs resulting from pollution, physical violence from security guards, and so on. In this sense, one might argue that unequal ecological exchange between mechanized fishing, shrimp farms, and power plants on the one hand, and coastal artisanal fisher communities on the other results in the disproportionate imposition of costs on the latter, despite the fact that fisher communities have continued to fight back and contest such outcomes (see Society for Nutrition, Education & Human Action 1998). A few of these costs can be considered here for illustrative purposes.

The erection of fences and barriers to free movement on beaches by shrimp farms, ports, industries, and power plants, impedes a host of critical economic activities on the beaches. Boats are launched, landed, parked, and repaired on the beaches. The loss of access to these spaces results in increased risk of losses and damage for fishers since one of the most commonly cited advantages of having boats and gear within sight of the village is security. In addition, fishers also risk physical

violence if they attempt to subvert erected barriers as was frequently the case with shrimp farms throughout Nagapattinam.

The Impacts of Post-Disaster Humanitarian Aid on Ecologically Unequal Exchange: The Gift of Boats

While fishers suffered extensive losses of boats and gear, the solution offered by NGOs, while well-intentioned, turned out to be deeply flawed. Partly driven by the need to avoid the complex process of ascertaining who actually lost boats, and partly by the felt obligation to provide boats for even those who did not own them prior to the tsunami, NGOs flooded the coast of Tamil Nadu with thousands of small Fiber Reinforced Plastic (FRP) boats. While this generosity was touted as a sign of NGO success, fisher communities were negatively affected in several important ways. The idea that every fisher should be given a boat did not take into account the manner in which boats are deployed in artisanal fishing —they are handled by teams of typically five fishers, often including the owner of the boat. Given the risks involved, artisanal fishing requires teamwork, trust and mutual solidarity, with teams built over time among fishers who feel confident in each others' capacities when out at sea. The emphasis on individualized boat ownership resulted in competitive tensions between former team members and helped contribute to overfishing. In addition, given the poor quality of many of these hastily produced and delivered boats, many fishers reported increased risk of accidents, as well as costs of repair and maintenance.

Thus the proliferation of boats as a result of tsunami humanitarian aid exacerbated the ongoing ecological crisis of the near-shore fishery associated with the conflict between artisanal and mechanized fishing. Recent reports suggest that in some areas of coastal Tamil Nadu overfishing has dangerously depleted several species of fish, with catch now increasingly dominated by fish from lower in the marine food chain (Ghosh and Lobo 2017). FRP boats ironically enabled fishers to re-establish their visible presence on coastal lands as now the bright colors of hundreds of boats dotted the landscape, joining the smaller numbers of FRP boats and large number of *Kattumarams* already used extensively prior to the tsunami.

The Costs of Relocation

While the proliferation of boats impacted already unequal exchange relations in the near shore fishery between artisanal fishers and mechanized boat operators, NGO housing construction on inland sites identified by the government radically intensified the threat of alienation from coastal lands for artisanal fisher communities. The state government's framework for housing construction strongly favored the mass relocation of entire villages. Government orders issued in early 2005 called for NGOs to enter into "public private partnerships" with the purpose of building housing complexes on inland sites identified and procured by the government. This effectively restricted NGOs to the role of providers of housing, precluding them from engaging with local communities

on the critical question of location. While the state government pursued this explicit depoliticization of NGO work on its own accord, NGO practices also lent themselves to a convergence of goals with the state government. For one, it was easier logistically to undertake construction of rows of houses on a single site rather than individual houses *in situ.* Secondly many NGOs involved in construction had little to no prior experience in construction, which in addition to their lack of local ties made it easier to simply employ local contractors who tended to favor larger clusters over individual *in situ* houses. The state government's rules for housing eligibility articulated in Government Order 172 curtailed options for repair and reconstruction *in situ*, making it virtually impossible for poorer households to consider retaining their coastal homes. Most importantly the government explicitly tied eligibility for new housing to the formal abandonment of all claims to the coast including previous habitations. This criterion was inserted into the legal titles provided to recipients of new houses, alongside a host of other restrictive conditions that proscribed the use of new houses as security for loans, rental properties or as alienable assets.

For fisher recipients of new housing the most serious implication of relocation was the loss of proximity to beaches and the coastal commons. This was more pronounced where relocation distances were substantial as in the case of some sites located at distances of more than a kilometer inland. For many poorer fishers finding alternatives to easily available fuel from Casuarina groves on the beaches proved to be a difficult prospect. Inland sites generally were on or near agricultural lands where local communities already claimed sparsely available fuel sources such as wild brush. Similarly, access to fresh water and sanitation in new sites proved to be a burden for fishers accustomed to relatively abundant fresh water on familiar coastal lands, and sanitation practices tied to beaches and groves. Alienation from coastal homes also imposed costs experienced in terms of increased preparation time for fishing trips, longer commutes to the beaches and markets, and schools and services. Women fish vendors were disproportionately affected by the increased distances imposed by relocation since they manage the vital circulatory side of the artisanal fish economy, as were those who were too poor to pay for transportation options. There were also major locational costs having to do with the inability of poorer fishers to maintain their new houses given the added cost of metered electric and water connections. Some costs borne by relocated fishers were ecological costs, including living next to shrimp farms, from which toxic effluents seeped into the soil, polluting the air and peeling away the plaster off newly constructed houses in at least one site. Many new sites were located on low lying land with poor drainage, rendering them extremely unsafe during seasonal rains. Water-borne illnesses that fisher communities rarely experienced before became a recurring feature as stagnant pools of water remained flooding new housing sites weeks after heavy rains (see (Swamy 2011:343–346).

Conclusion

The key goal of the humanitarian gift of housing was to help facilitate the transfer of coastal land from the hands of artisanal fishers to the state. In doing so, the NGOs that dutifully built housing complexes of questionable quality on sites far from the coast, enabled the state to lay claim to lands that it had previously failed to enclose for a host of activities tied to already existing ecologically unequal exchange —specifically commercial fishery. The gift in effect was intended to not only enable the enclosure of coastal land, but to also bypass a crucial dimension of politics at the local level. The latter effect speaks to the broader phenomenon of depoliticization associated with the transformation of politics under neoliberalism (Fisher 1997). The withdrawal of the state from its social functions represents one core characteristic of this transformation, though as scholars have pointed out this "withdrawal" is also about radically undermining public influence on policy by directly or indirectly assaulting democratic and popular processes, typically using the term "reform" to push through what are deeply unpopular initiatives (Brown 2015). Depoliticizing the terrain of entitlements and rights is therefore a characteristic feature of neoliberal states, as they seek to neutralize any barriers to capital posed by public participation. This transition is important for us to consider in the context of post-tsunami housing. The house—a structurally, locationally specific object that serves as the primary basis of social reproduction has been long viewed by many poorer populations as an entitlement demanded and sometimes received from the state.

By handing a house to fishers as a gift, an object imbued with selflessness and generosity, NGOs transformed the terms governing the meanings of the house by decentering it from the subject-state equation. As noted by fishers in Nagapattinam, the difference was that now the house was given by somebody who did not have to act for their benefit but did so on account of their selflessness and voluntarism, as opposed to the state, which acts whether eagerly or reluctantly because it has to, it is obligated to. Thus, when fisher recipients sought assistance when NGO delivered houses turned out to have serious structural defects, they were repeatedly given the run-around by officials and NGO staff, and chided for not taking responsibility for their "own" houses. Fishers tended to refrain from directly challenging NGO staff also because they viewed the latter as having helped them with no expectation of anything in return. The housing gift therefore did have the sort of affective force Foucault (2009) describes as neoliberal governmentality, whereby potential resistance to state cutbacks and austerity policies are forestalled by encouraging modes of self-regulation and discipline. Citizen-subjects become in effect individualized, atomized bearers of capacities rather than rights (Lemke 2001).

However, the Foucauldian formulation articulated by Lemke (2001), presumes a level of passivity and acquiescence among subjects that did not prove to be the case in post-tsunami Nagapattinam. Aside from the state, multilateral agencies and NGOs, fishers too brought a range

of dispositions to the process (Bavinck 2008). While the conditions governing housing eligibility tied acceptance of a new house to the formal relinquishment of all claims to the coast, most fishers retained their coastal homes, repairing homes, or rebuilding despite legal proscriptions. The post-tsunami humanitarian gift economy was therefore also about the goals and aspirations of recipients, which included calibrating the implications of their decisions vis-a-vis relocation. When the choice came to deciding between "legality" via relocation, and a return to the quasi-legal status of encroachers as the only means to sustain livelihoods, fishers preferred the latter. Such a form of refusal can in fact be read as a strategy of defending the status quo which prevails on most coastal lands throughout India where artisanal communities —some with histories stretching back in time far before the advent of the modern Indian nation state or even its colonial predecessor —live as "encroachers."[2]

For the large numbers of fishers who accepted new houses and were unable to return to reclaim coastal lands the gift of housing became a permanent cost. In that sense, for relocated fishers the permanent costs of relocation became the return gift paid to the state as a result of having accepted the gift of housing from the NGO. This "permanent" repayment is not reducible to the aggregate monetary costs of trying to survive and sustain artisanal fishing livelihoods while living in far away, structurally problematic houses, but also the loss of the coastal commons. However, these losses and long-term costs should be factored into an assessment of ecologically unequal exchange linking Nagapattinam's fish economy to domestic and global markets as part of the ecological debt owned.

About the Author

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2. For example Nambiyarnagar, the head village of all of Nagapattinam's fisher villages, claims its origins in events described in the 10th century devotional poetry of Saiva saints (Peterson 1994)

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