

The gift of the tsunami

Patek is a coastal village in Aceh Jaya district of Aceh Province in Indonesia. Aceh Province, situated at the northern tip of Sumatra Island, was relatively unknown to the world until we heard about its devastation in the giant tsunami of December 2004. Patek village is situated about 100 kms east of the epicenter of that treacherous earthquake which triggered the tsunami and bore a very heavy brunt. Driving through the village recently, the wayside verandahs are daintily festooned with dry fish dangling like mobiles and swaying incessantly in the strong wind. Behind them elderly women sat relaxed, waiting for the now frequent passing travelers like us to make a sale.

Before the tsunami, Patek, like most places in Aceh province, was strictly out of bounds to foreigners. Even Indonesians from other parts of the archipelago needed to produce proof of purpose to visit. The separatist movement known as *Gerakan Aceh Merdeka* or GAM, which was fighting for Acehnese independence from Indonesia, was being hounded by *Tentara Nasional Indonesia* (TNI), the Indonesian armed forces. The Acehnese population was thus under various forms of *de facto* military rule over the last three decades. Despite several conflict resolution efforts – national and international – no solution was in sight for the issues being raised by GAM. But what humans could not resolve for decades, nature achieved in 2 hours that fateful December morning.



Dry fish for sale like mobiles in the wind

The devastation wrought by the monster waves was incalculable. Half of Patek's population, most of the fishing boats, over two-thirds of the houses and much of the coastal forests were devoured by the sea that sunny Sunday morning. Such an overwhelming scale of death and destruction, spread all over Aceh province, made it hard to fathom how things could get any worse. Surprisingly, the disaster triggered an immediate change in approach by both Jakarta and GAM towards the conflict. GAM

called for a cease-fire to facilitate the recovery of corpses. Jakarta lifted its ban on foreigners from entering the province to allow for the distribution of international aid. The hostilities ceased and the widespread presence of media brought greater transparency to local events and issues.

We stopped near the *kedai kopi* (coffee shop) – the village institution so typical of Aceh. Men sipping strong black coffee and pulling heavily on cigarettes hardly took notice of our arrival assuming that we were from one of the many aid agencies now ubiquitous in Aceh. I was on a mission funded by the American Red Cross (ARC) and implemented by the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (UN-FAO) to assess the possibilities for human capacity building related to fisheries and aquaculture along this west coast of Aceh Province. This was the right place to meet villagefolk and converse with them about the rehabilitation measures and their future hopes.

I got of the UN-FAO vehicle, entered the *kedai kopi* and performed the usual Acehnese courtesy of shaking hands with everyone sitting in the place saying, '*Salamat pagi*' (Good morning). This cultural practice by itself is a great ice-breaker. Foreigners visiting Patek was usually whites, so my brown skin, grey French beard and FabIndia kurta evinced curiosity. Though facially I looked every bit Acehnese, I clearly was a stranger. When I announced, '*saya datan dari India*' ('I am from India'), there was a warm response on the men's faces. Visitors from India are rare. But the close, ancient trade and religious links of Aceh with south India, as well as the current craze for Hindi movies, made a great starting point for conversation.

After exchanging pleasantries about Amitabh Bacchan's latest movies and the popularity of the song '*kuch, kuch hota hai*' we talked about the ongoing rehabilitation efforts. The sea had devoured most of the old village. A whole new settlement was taking shape near a hill further upland from the old coastline. The mosque was quickly rebuilt. The permanent wooden houses nearing completion were well planned and sturdily built. The people were happy with the results and the efforts of the participating international NGOs. As eating out was a common practice, a restaurant catering to the food needs of the community had been built and named after the birth place of the owner's wife who had died in the tsunami. The traditional village institutions had been quickly revived – proof that despite the individual losses the social capital in the village was quick to re-accumulate. This formed the basis of the community's strong collective resilience in the face of unimaginable individual tragedies. Most men and women who had lost their spouses had been remarried through the mediation of the *imam*, the village chief and other village elders. Wherever possible the orphans had been adopted by the families of relatives. Others were taken in by friends of the family.

We talked about the fishery, the mainstay of the village economy. Many aid agencies had gifted boats and nets. But there was a gross mismatch between what the fishers needed and what was gifted. In their haste to help, aid agencies with no experience in fisheries, hardly discussed with the community about the appropriateness of their assistance. Any boat and net was thought to be adequate for the fishers to get on with their lives. That coastal morphology, wave and wind patterns make some boats dangerous to use was

unknown to most donors. The story was the same with nets. Not every type of net can be used to catch fish in specific areas and seasons. Consequently, despite the large amounts of material assistance on the fishery front, the fishers were still not back to old form. Boats and nets apart, the loss of many able bodied men created a major labour shortage.

We also talked politics. The Helsinki Agreement between GAM and the Government of Indonesia signed on 15 August 2005 finally brought political peace to devastated Aceh. The goal of GAM to gain independence from Indonesia was not achieved through the Agreement. However, the GAM give up its arms and the TNI was withdrawn by Jakarta. Aceh was assured greater autonomy to utilize the earnings from its large natural resources – oil, gas, forests and fish. The first truly free elections held in Aceh in December 2006 saw two very popular separatist leaders, Irwandi Yusuf and Mohammed Nazar -- one-time university academics and guerrilla tacticians -- elected by an overwhelming majority as Governor and Vice-Governor of the province. (Irwandi was languishing in a jail in Banda Aceh when the tsunami flooded it and raised him to the roof. He escaped into freedom that morning and returned to Aceh after the Agreement was signed!) The prospect for a brighter future for the next generation seems more clearly in sight today than ever before.

After another round of coffee was served to all present in the *kedai kopi* (note the Tamil influence) the discussion moved to the topic of the tsunami itself. Why did this devastation happen to them? How did they psychologically cope with the trauma of the event and its aftermath? How did they react to the fact that following the tsunami Aceh was peaceful, more politically and economically autonomous and open to the world? Everyone gathered had an opinion. The role played by their strong Islamic traditions and faith in Allah in coming to terms with the tragedy – both individually and collectively as a community -- was apparent from the total lack of bitterness about the events. They recalled the traumatic events with calmness and sagacity. Pak Shaifuddin, epitomized the feeling of the group when he said, “The tsunami was not God’s punishment. It was God’s training for us”.



Later as we walked over for lunch to the village restaurant the imam told me that Pak Sahifuddin was the only one in the village who had lost everything he could call his own -- his wife and three children, his parents, his house, all his fishing assets and his dog. He remained unmarried, for he loved his wife too dearly, and is gradually putting his life back in order. I was so humbled by the man's indomitable faith.



In the restaurant it was a self-service system. You are served with rice in a plate with a banana leaf placed on it. The rest of the dishes are yours to serve -- but they are exclusively composed of a large variety of fish, other seafood, chicken and lamb in fried, roasted and curry form. (A vegetarian would be hard pressed to survive in rural Aceh) Everyone eats with their hands. Meals are always accompanied by an amazing variety of fresh fruit juices. I chose *mangga* (mango).

The lunch time clientele was only slowly arriving. A crowd of young women arriving on Honda bikes livened up the place with their chatter and laughter. Most of them were sporting T-shirts and blue jeans but wore black jilbabs (head scarf) -- a reminder that Syariah law had been imposed in Aceh by Jakarta before the tsunami.

The most interesting part of the meal is the manner in which the bill is settled. The owner comes up to you and asks what you have eaten. Whatever you declare is what you are billed for. The system is a reflection of the preponderance of trust which marks rural life in Aceh.

The drive from Patek northwards to Banda Aceh, the capital city of Aceh Province, took us along stretches of coastline which had been swallowed by the sea -- bridges, coastal roads and fishing villages. The whole coastal configuration had been radically altered. The alternative road being built by USAID was complete only in parts. Flash floods in

the numerous rivers flowing to the sea continued to damage the even the new road. The hills close by were densely forested. Many detours and deviations later we were close to our destination. Suddenly the vehicle began to shudder. I thought it was the effect of the bad road. Only when the driver threw open his door and ordered us out did I realize it was an earthquake. The iron bridge in front across the river was swaying like a crib. A few bystanders ran helter-skelter. Ten seconds and it was over. When the initial excitement subsided it was business as usual. We were back on the road and reached Banda Aceh safely at dusk.

Next morning the local newspaper *Serembi* announced that the quake was 6.9 on the Richter scale. Its epicenter was just west of where we had felt the impact. But it was too deep in the sea to trigger a tsunami. Knowledgeable persons informed me that the after shocks of the December 2004 quake will continue for much longer. But I was sure that this will certainly not deter the Acehnese people from going ahead purposefully with plans to rebuild their province in the new found peace and freedom. In a way, this was a gift of the tsunami.

John Kurien

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