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**PUBLIC ANTHROPOLOGY AND [POST]COLONIAL  
POLITICS: PERSPECTIVES ON 'CRISIS CONJUNCTURES'  
IN THE ANDAMAN ISLANDS**

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**Public Anthropology and [Post]Colonial Politics: Perspectives on ‘crisis conjunctures’  
in the Andaman Islands**

**Abstract:** In this paper, I suggest a vision for Public Anthropology that offers the potential to transcend the limits of our mandate as a merely academic enterprise, challenging us to consider ethical forms of action and intervention within the current global conjuncture.

Drawing on my ongoing involvement with the indigenous groups in the Andaman Islands, this paper examines the post tsunami conjuncture in the islands when the postcolonial politics of internal colonization subverted the opportunity for radical transformation in the situation of the indigenous groups. I map a necessarily provisional and contingent topography for such a project, while taking note of some recent developments that can lead to radically altered modes of engagement with government and institutional processes in India.

As I circled the theme for this seminar, ruminating on it, to tease out a linking thread to tie it to my ongoing thinking and research, the basis for a connection emerged from a discussion during a postgraduate class that I taught before travelling to Portugal. One of the students wanted to know when they could be considered as having made the transition from a student of anthropology to an anthropologist. As I pondered a response it struck me that one can consider oneself an anthropologist when one recognizes that anthropology provides the lens through which we habitually view the world. Not just within the academy, but in all areas of our lives. “So do you mean to say that you live and breathe anthropology all the time?” was the student’s subsequent query, in a tone laced with some disbelief. I will admit to some embarrassment in conceding to her that, that was in fact how I operated in the world. I wasn’t an anthropologist just while I was at Massey University or while conducting field research. Anthropology infiltrated and permeated *all* aspects of my life, whether at work, in the field or at home wherever that may be. I was at home in the world as an anthropologist.

I am convinced that anthropology does not just enable us to be at home in the world, it also provides us the means to act in it. It is such a conceptualization of the discipline that I

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<sup>1</sup> School of People, Environment and Planning, Massey University, Aotearoa/New Zealand. Conference presented at CES OSIRIS Seminar Series on 11<sup>th</sup> November 2009.

want to present here, informed by the insights garnered from the research that I have conducted over the years.

This paper will be narrated in two parts: in the first section, that I name “Public Anthropology”, I present a framework for a mode of engagement that is responsive to our current global conjuncture. The second part has the title: “Postcolonial Politics: perspectives on ‘crisis conjunctures’ in the Andaman Islands.” Here, I go on to discuss my involvement in these islands in the period leading up to the tsunami of 2004 and its aftermath.

### **Part I: “Public Anthropology”**

The paper advances a vision of the discipline of anthropology that offers the potential to transcend the limits of our mandate as a merely academic enterprise. Taking action as an anthropologist has an established tradition within the discipline, in the extensive involvements that many anthropologists have had in working with indigenous and marginalized groups across the world. But these kinds of interventions have been separated into a different branch constructed as the “applied” wing of anthropology. I want to advance two propositions here, one, that such engagements should be integrated as an essential core of the discipline within *any* research environment; two that they extend beyond the groups with whom the anthropologist has a research based relationship, to include the wider society within which we and our research participants coexist. Taking a deliberately eclectic approach to define and construct a vision for a public anthropology, I map a necessarily provisional and contingent topography to engender action towards a more radical and substantial conceptualization of democracy.

### **Tracing Lineages**

As a starting point for such an engagement, I look toward some recent thinking within the social sciences and humanities, which seek to rework and re-appropriate Aristotle’s elaboration of *phronesis* (Flyvberg 2001, Kingwell 2002, Nussbaum 1990, 1994, 2001, Polkinghorne 2004). In his classification of the “intellectual virtues,”<sup>2</sup> Aristotle named “*phronesis*” as the virtue that dealt with “context, practice, experience, common sense, intuition, and practical wisdom” (Flyvberg 2001:54). It is in the richness of Aristotle’s vision

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<sup>2</sup> In enumerating mental activity or “the ways in which the soul arrives at truth,” Aristotle advances the following fivefold distinctions: science (*episteme*), skill (*techne*), practical wisdom (*phronesis*), intuition (*nous*) and wisdom (*sophia*) (NE 1139b17-1141b20), cited in Kingwell, 2002: 98.

of our humanness, an encompassing holism that includes our senses, our passions and attachments, as well as our life among friends and in communities, which forms the basis for thinking about a contemporary anthropological ethos. And it is anthropology more than any other discipline that allows the fruition of the various facets of knowing contained within such a description of *phronesis*.

To illustrate this unique affinity between *phronesis* and the anthropological understanding of humans in their worlds, I draw on Donald Polkinghorne's lucid exposition of Aristotle's thoughts which illustrate the use of *phronetic* reason, which is highlighted below:

- a. Human beings are committed to *multiple values*, and therefore multiple consequences must be considered in deliberation.
- b. In the human realm, *particular* instances have priority over general rules, so in deliberation, the unique and special requirements of each situation must be taken into account.
- c. Emotions provide guidance to and motivation for action, so deliberation must include *felt* understanding (Polkinghorne, 2004: 108, *my emphasis*).

Anthropology's cognizance of multiple values, its emphasis on the particular together with the significance of emotions to reflection and understanding of the world, all of which traditionally marked its tension with the 'hard' sciences,<sup>3</sup> may be seen as an integral component of *phronesis* or practical wisdom.

*Phronesis* is to be distinguished from *episteme* and *techne*, the other virtues, because it concerns itself with variable things and the fact that it emerges from action rather than production. "The proper end of practical wisdom, then, is action: doing well based on the available evidence and reasoning about my human purposes" (Kingwell, 2002: 98). Aristotle goes on to conclude by pointing to the importance of *phronesis* to an ethical life as suggested below:

It is the governing virtue, the one without which the others remain impossible, for without correct practical deliberation there is no ethical action, and hence no ethical character. It is not possible to be good in the true sense of the word without *phronesis*, or to be practically wise without moral goodness (Kingwell, 2002: 98)

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<sup>3</sup> 3. These include some of the social sciences that have modeled their self imaginings and practices on the natural sciences.

Although conceived as an individual virtue, it is also integrally implicated within wider political concerns. Or, as Danish planner Bent Flyvbjerg argues, “Aristotle, in discussing *phronesis*, is mainly talking about ethics in relation to social and political praxis, that is, the relationship you have to society when you act” (Flyvbjerg, 2001: 55).

Hence, *phronesis* as conceptualized here, lends itself specifically to the social sciences and humanities in terms of their emphases on values and interests. In his eloquent and path-breaking elaboration of a *phronetic* approach for the social sciences, and the methodology that it entails, Flyvbjerg incorporates a more Foucauldian element by including a focus on power and conflict missing in Aristotle’s account. When transposed to the contemporary context of social science research, Flyvbjerg’s rendering of Aristotle can be summarized in the following questions, which then becomes the basis for undertaking *phronetic* research:

- 1) Where are we going?
- 2) Is this desirable?
- 3) What should be done?
- 4) Who gains and who loses, by which mechanisms of power? (Flyvbjerg, 2001: 60).

I will return to these questions later in this discussion, but first, I want to revisit the conceptualization for a Public Anthropology prefaced in Robert Borofsky’s Public Anthropology website.

Public Anthropology demonstrates the ability of anthropology and anthropologists to effectively address problems beyond the discipline - illuminating the larger social issues of our times as well as encouraging broad, public conversations about them with the explicit goal of fostering social change. It affirms our responsibility, as scholars and citizens, to meaningfully contribute to communities beyond the academy - both local and global, that make the study of anthropology possible (Borofsky, <http://www.publicanthropology.org>).

It becomes immediately evident how seamlessly his framework for engagement and action articulates with an Aristotelian rendering of *phronesis* as a basis for intellectual action. It emerges from within a long and hallowed tradition of the role of the public

intellectual<sup>4</sup> in any society, which has its roots among the ancient Greeks. It incorporates the role of a socio-political commentator or the cultural critic who writes op-ed pieces, and the variety of writing and public speaking that we embrace, “encouraging [the] broad, public conversations” referred to above. But a puzzling omission in that call to action is the lack of mention of the objective of social change, *i.e.*, toward what end are we advancing social change? The inclusion of “social justice” or, better yet, “human flourishing,”<sup>5</sup> or Aristotle’s *eudaimonia*, would firmly ground it as a “good” that is derived from an ethico-moral framework that is more likely to generate widespread consensus as an appropriate utopian hope.

Having traced a genealogy for our role as “scholars” in such an endeavour, I want to go on to explore what Rob Borofsky’s preface implies for us as “citizens.” Is the “citizen” referred to above bound to a specific nation? Or is it more of a transnational citizenship that is being conceptualized here, reflecting the diversity of our allegiances as anthropologists, straddling varied field-sites, or shifting between ‘home’ and the ‘field’? These are not merely rhetorical questions. I pose them as expressions of a dilemma that I am certain most anthropologists will acknowledge, as we struggle to define the ‘field’ of our actions and interventions. The “citizen” as expressed above has an already expanded ambit of existence and action in addressing both local and global communities, and therefore, suggestive of a repudiation of a territorially circumscribed space. More important is its reversal of the citizen from a passive, legal constituent of rights, to the more radically

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<sup>4</sup> It is also the strand that can be discerned in the final Foucault as he elaborates his meta-ethical framework. In articulating the work of the intellectual he says: “The role of the intellectual is not to tell others what they have to do...The work of the intellectual is not to shape other’s will; it is through the analyses that he carries out in his own field, to question over and over what is postulated as self-evident, to disturb people’s mental habits, the way they do and think things, to dissipate what is familiar and accepted, to re-examine rules and institutions and on the basis of this reproblematicization (in which he carries out his specific task as an intellectual) to participate in the formation of the political will (in which he has his role as a citizen to play)” (Cooper and Blair, 2002: 263). Foucault’s final writing clearly enunciates a concern for an ethical framework and its implications for political praxis, exemplified in his own practice. A similar vein is also visible in the later Derrida as he harks to an “unnamed humanitarianism” while reflecting on the contours of the crises circling the globe (Derrida, 1997: 273). “[W]hat would the definition of “humanitarian” be in its unheard-of-forms with respect to what Kant calls - let us recall - ‘the friend of man’, a concept that Kant intends to keep separate from the ‘philanthropist’? In what respect does the humanitarian participate in this process of fraternizing humanization that we are questioning here? Another question: what would be today, in a new system of law, a crime against humanity? Its recent definition is no longer sufficient.” It is no coincidence that both of these luminaries existed within the French intellectual landscape, notable for its institutional structures which reinforce the role of the public intellectual and their interface with the larger society.

<sup>5</sup> An alternative to ‘human flourishing’ is the goal of ‘human emancipation’. I hesitate to posit that here because of its association with Western liberal ideals, and more likely to be contested.



construed identity envisioned in Chantal Mouffe's work among others, which includes "the practices through which individuals and groups formulate and claim new rights or struggle to expand and maintain existing rights" (*apud* Isin and Wood, 1999: 4). Mouffe's vision of a radical and plural democracy is highlighted here:

... combin[ed] the ideal of rights and pluralism with the ideal of public spiritedness and ethico-political concern [towards a] new, modern, democratic conception of citizenship, [which] could restore dignity to the political and provide the vehicle for the construction of a radical democratic hegemony. (Mouffe, 1992: 238)

While such a citizen demands a more active intervention in the polity, she is still bound within the territorial demarcation of the nation-state, which maps the terrain of her rights and privileges. Some insights can be derived by observing how the citizen is to be constituted and re-envisioned in the unfolding of the European Union.<sup>6</sup> But my concern at this stage is not the issue of rights<sup>7</sup> which are ascribed on the citizen, as much as defining a legitimate field of action which extends beyond the scope of our territorially constituted citizenship and spans the globe. That, to my mind, is the landscape in which the public anthropologist is positioned. Notwithstanding the critics of the "global citizen,"<sup>8</sup> whose arguments are based on interrogating the sphere of *rights* which can be legally conferred to such a person, suffice it to say that for the public anthropologist, it is the *idea* of an active global citizen impelled by Mouffe's "ideal of a public spirited and ethico-political concern" (Mouffe, 1992: 238) that she responds to in her allegiances to numerous communities across the world.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> See also Chatterjee (2004: 147) for the pitfalls within the postcolonial context of conceptualizing citizenship from the vantage point of the European Union.

<sup>7</sup> This is not to disclaim the importance of the rights that are imputed in a citizen, but to suggest a move away from formal liberal conceptions that tend to focus on narrow legal definitions. Bryan Turner's (1993: 1-18) definition underscores the centrality of those rights: "Citizenship can be defined as that set of practices (juridical, political, economic or cultural) which define a person as a competent member of society, and which as a consequence shape the flow of resources to persons and social groups.

<sup>8</sup> And I am mindful that there are many!

<sup>9</sup> A version of such "borderless activism" will be familiar to many in their responses to the numerous appeals and calls to action that find their way into our inbox from far corners of the world.

### Envisioning a Public Anthropology

All this suggests that I have extended the scope of our ability as anthropologists that Rob Borofsky outlines, in ways that denote more than just “encouraging, broad, public conversations” although that too is a significant part of our contribution. I am alluding to *other* interventions here, that draw on our uniquely anthropological mode of appraising any situation, to explicitly engender forms of action that are directly implicated in various radical, emancipatory projects underway in many parts of the world. Our task as public anthropologists on the global stage is to work in tandem with citizens<sup>10</sup> elsewhere towards a vision of a more plural and equitable social order “which seeks social justice through a transformation away from capitalism as currently expressed”(Hickey and Mohan, 2005: 238).

But how are these to be translated into action in the many instances that compel our attention and demand a response? As anthropologists, we are already interpellated within a variety of contexts through our research and our personal lives. Therefore the forms of intervention emerge from those circumstances, and will vary according to what is demanded at a particular point in time. I want to return here to Flyvbjerg’s summary of questions brought up earlier in the discussion, as a methodological framework guiding a *phronetic* approach especially suited to our identity as public anthropologists.

- 1) Where are we going?
- 2) Is this desirable?
- 3) What should be done?
- 4) Who gains and who loses, by which mechanisms of power?

I hold that these queries provide a contingent and provisional starting point for any action. They require to be addressed alongside the various communities whom we ally with in the “publicscape” (Appadurai, 1994) of our interventions as public anthropologists. They also demand that we embrace the wisdom of the injunction contained in a Maori adage:

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<sup>10</sup> Charles Tilly cautions that “the grounding of citizenship in actual political communities also helps avoid the risk of imputing a specifically Western conception of citizenship into different contexts” (cited in Hickey and Mohan, 2005: 254).

## **Te haro o te kahu**

and look beyond the immediate horizon to the expansive views seen through the eyes of a hawk.

### **Part II: (Post)colonial Politics and ‘crisis conjunctures’ in the Andaman Islands**

I have placed the *post* within parenthesis deliberately here with the intention of problematising the allusion to colonial temporality. In this section I want to trace a process that has occurred in the Andaman Islands since the tsunami of 2004, and use that as a basis for reflecting on the post colonial political processes in such places.

I will start this section with an epigraph from Lewis Carroll. The lines succinctly convey the multitude of directions which have emerged over the course of reflecting on the current political conjuncture in the Andaman Islands.

"The time has come," the Walrus said,  
"To talk of many things:  
Of shoes--and ships--and sealing-wax--  
Of cabbages--and kings--  
And why the sea is boiling hot--  
And whether pigs have wings."  
(from *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There*, 1872)

Shrouded within the disaster that culminated in the tsunami and its spiralling aftermath of destruction and despair, there lurked a brief space charged with immanent possibilities. As the tsunami smashed through the physical and human landscape of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, an unimagined opportunity presented itself, one that had been, only a distant vision for the various individuals, involved in a variety of initiatives pertaining to the indigenous groups in the Andaman Islands.

Just a fortnight prior to that unforeseen event there had been an unusual gathering in Kolkata, of academics, activists, NGOs, journalists, writers and policy analysts, *i.e.* all those who had been involved over the years in writing, research and activism on issues pertaining to the indigenous groups in the islands. This was a network that had crystallized over the course of the year 2004 as a result of judicial interventions, leading to a series of forums convened by the High Court of Kolkata, to formulate policy on the Jarawa.

The Jarawa are one of the indigenous groups who had laid down their weapons and emerged from the forest into contact with the larger polity of Indian settlers encapsulating them. Within minutes of the earthquake and then the tsunami impacting on Port Blair, that network was on high alert and in a position to transmit information across the globe.

But when the same network of individuals gathered in Kolkata from December 12<sup>th</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> 2004, to plan strategies for the following year, there was no sense of the impending crisis that would snuff out and destroy so many lives in south and south east Asia, and extend as far as the east coast of Africa. The existence of such a set of contacts meant that prior to the official media releases, and in advance of much of the discussion in the national and international media, information was being relayed across the globe, while preparations for humanitarian aid mounted. It enabled connections between national and international NGOs, aid workers with grass-roots activists and community organizations, identifying and sourcing the various supplies and assistance required across the island archipelago. The scale of the destruction as it gradually became visible, and the locations that it encompassed within its sweep, wrung emotions worldwide, linking human lives and geography in a way that had not occurred since the previous World Wars.

Completely unanticipated however, was the hubris of the Indian government, or its posturing and jockeying for supremacy on the global stage, as it sought to affirm a pre-eminent position in the region. Shunning any offers of international assistance, ignoring the distress within its own borders, the Indian government preferred instead to flaunt its ability to hold its own among other “Western” nations, speedily sending an aid package to Sri Lanka and the Maldives, alongside the other nations rushing assistance across the globe. “India has finally arrived” or words to that effect was the rallying cry of many a nationalist media coverage, revelling in a misplaced pride in India’s economic might, rather than seeking to jointly alleviate the misery, or deliver assistance where it was needed, in the tsunami stricken parts of mainland India and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands.

The photograph of a Sentinelese shooting an arrow at a helicopter hovering overhead, drew a resounding cheer worldwide, and became a metaphor for human survival and the indomitable human spirit. It also piqued international curiosity, bringing in its wake, hordes of media personnel seeking to uncover more about the descendents of the world’s oldest known human population. These are the descendents of the first group of humans to have

left Africa and populated various parts of Asia, as early as 65,000 years ago. But that's a different story and I will not dwell on it here. Instead, I will unravel some underlying threads which connect this event to an earlier one, which had momentous consequences for a different indigenous group of the Andaman Islands, the Onge.

But first, I want to harness again the wisdom postulated by a different indigenous group, the Maori of Aotearoa/New Zealand, and insert a *whakatauki* or a Maori adage here, one that, in my view, emphasises the importance of learning from history:

Me titiro whakamuri tatou  
Kia mohio ai  
Me pehea haere ki mua  
(*Māori adage*)

which translates as: We should look backwards, so we can determine, how to go forward.

In 1976 a devastating cyclone ripped through the island of Little Andaman, home to the remaining groups of Onges scattered across the length and breath of the islands. Little Andaman had become the target for a desultory programme of colonization by the Indian government since the mid sixties, which had left the indigenous inhabitants of the island relatively untouched. The destruction left in the wake of the cyclone, and the humanitarian assistance directed towards the Onge, became the basis for a strategy of sedenterization of the semi-nomadic, hunter-gatherer-fisher territorial groups of Onge. Elided within the rhetoric of effective delivery of assistance to the Onge lay a more politically charged mission, one of opening up vast tracts of the rainforest to other purposes, while confining the Onge within demarcated reserves. The successful and successive process of accomplishing such an end, with its bleak and visible outcomes for the Onge, has been documented at length in my ethnography entitled "Development and Ethnocide: Colonial Practices in the Andaman Islands", launched in Kolkata just a fortnight prior to the tsunami.

In a neatly constituted ironic twist, 28 years later, the 2004 tsunami in turn, destroyed every trace of administrative intervention directed towards the Onge: homes, habitations, offices, equipment, breakwaters, jetties were flattened or rendered non-existent. It was ground zero on Little Andaman, but, without a single fatality among the Onge. Every last one had survived the onslaught, having known to read the signals that intimated to them

what was to eventuate. It was a different story for the surrounding Indian population who had taken over their lands, and it was their suffering that was ignored or prolonged by the political manoeuvres of the Indian government.

But for the Onges, the tsunami and its unforeseen consequences to the structure of their lives meant that there was a sudden opportunity to put in place something very different. It also offered the possibility for engaging in a collaborative and consultative process, which had, until then, seemed a misty dream for many of us who had worked among them. The existence of the network mentioned earlier, meant that unlike the situation during the 1976 cyclone, this time it was possible to work in concert with the administrative structures in the islands, to ensure that the Onge and the anthropologists were integrated within the planning and decision-making processes for rebuilding their habitations and their lives.

More fraught, however, was the situation regarding the Jarawa whose circumstances were the basis for the network to have emerged in 2004. In my ethnography I discuss some of the initiatives in which I was involved over the course of the year 2004. These were connected with the judicial interventions by the High Court of Kolkata and the Supreme Court of India, brought about by a coalition of non-governmental organizations, activists and scholars, who took the Andaman administration to court. It highlighted the transformative potential of forging new coalitions within civil society, and the possibility for effecting change that lies therein. The tsunami, however, provided the pretext for the Andaman administration to suspend or reverse many of the hard won rulings of the Supreme Court of India, which ensured the integrity of the environment, demarcated as the Jarawa reserve forest, and the protection of their life-world.

In a nutshell, the crisis precipitated by the tsunami has made it possible to present the rights of the Jarawa and other indigenous groups in the Andaman Islands, as in conflict with the needs for restitution and rehabilitation, of the dominant, majority, settler population of the islands. It is a theme played on by wily politicians of varied political persuasions, who have seized on an opportunity to strike a popular chord, with the majority electorate in the islands. The rights of the Andaman Islanders to a mode of subsistence and cultural practices embedded in the forest and adjoining seas is, therefore, perceived as a threat to the current and future needs of the swelling ranks of settlers, seeking to make a life

for themselves in the islands. It is also presented as an obstacle to the future development interests in the islands.

### **Envisioning a Radical Praxis**

This situation echoes recent work by Nancy Fraser (1997) which examines the ways in which the demands for cultural recognition have been pitted against issues of social justice and distributive justice. Her cogent and prescient argument for a consideration of a radical democracy is quoted at length here:

What are the differences that make a difference for democracy? Which differences merit public recognition and/or political representation? Which differences, in contrast, should be considered irrelevant to political life and treated instead as private matters? Which kinds of differences, finally, should a democratic society seek to promote? And which, on the contrary, should it aim to abolish? (Fraser, 1997: 174).

Fraser's solution is to "resituat[e] cultural politics in relation to social politics, and link demands for recognition with demands for redistribution." (Fraser, 1997:174). A renewed engagement with political economy is also recommended by Sam Hickey and Giles Mohan (2005) in their elaboration of a critical modernism.

Extending their argument to the Andaman context, I contend that the rights of the Jarawa to determine a future in their own terms should not be imperilled by the rights of the settlers to distributive justice, or vice-versa. Nor should the Jarawa expression of a version of modernity, grounded in a semi-nomadic subsistence life-world crafted over millennia, become obliterated by the demands of the sedentary settlers, as they attempt to piece together a life wrecked by the tsunami. Neither of these different forms of modernity are static, either-or options, nor should they be prescribed as the means to acquire recognition, as fully cognizant human beings, with equally compelling rights and demands.

My ongoing involvement in the islands is sensitive to these imperatives. I am aware of the ways in which the politics of the dominant majority operates in the islands. It intersects with the process of ethnocide, and the unfinished internal colonization of the indigenous groups of the islands. My task also includes attention to the issues of social justice with respect to the various settler populations in the islands. The presence of this vocal majority in the islands is also historically contingent, and an outcome of first, the

British colonization of the islands, and then the subsequent Indian bid to repopulate them. The regulations imposed by the Supreme Court have created a perception of injustice towards the settlers, further polarizing the settlers against those pressing for environmental concerns, which are intimately linked to the rights of the indigenous groups in the islands. All these are, in turn, perceived as inimical to the interests and livelihood opportunities, available to the settlers. These events have become the breeding ground for resentments that are likely to be nursed over generations, and contrary to the long-term wellbeing of all the inhabitants in the islands.

### **An Epilogue: Reflections in 2009**

On November 16, 2006, almost 2 years after the events recounted above, violence erupted on Little Andaman. It occurred during a protest led by the Indian settlers on Little Andaman, demonstrating against the delays, the poor quality, and often completely inappropriate structures provided for them by the government as a part of the post-tsunami rehabilitation. The relatively mild report by the BBC at the time was countered by the rather more charged narration sent from the Action Aid offices in the islands, who presented a different view of the event. The details from Action Aid recount the sudden assault on an unsuspecting public by the reserve police, when a day long peaceful protest<sup>11</sup> in front of the police station, disintegrated when someone threw a bottle inside the station. In an unforeseen retaliation, the Indian Reserve Battalion platoon started striking people with their batons. Nearly 200 people were injured, with the platoon entering people's homes and hitting them there, including women and children among their targets.

But what of the Onge, whose situation sparked so much hope in the wake of the tsunami? Despite the successful construction of a new model home for the Onges, collaboratively designed and built, using a blend of "traditional" and modern materials and structural features, it went no further than the one model edifice that now graces the front lawns of the Governor's residence. Instead, they were consigned to their old, repaired houses, and by the "symbolic distribution of pressure cookers, bicycles and water purifying appliances" (Pandya, 2006), the targets for tsunami rehabilitation as set by politicians and

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<sup>11</sup> This was a protest led by the Indian settlers on Little Andaman who were protesting against the delays, the poor quality and often completely inappropriate structures provided for them by the government as a part of the post-tsunami rehabilitation.



various sectors of the government bureaucracy were met. The circumvention of that bureaucracy, by granting the Onge the capacity to independently design and construct their own homes could not be condoned, not when there were enormous profits at stake in securing building contracts.

I want to quickly summarise here and posit that there are two simultaneous, contradictory impulses which characterise the postcolonial conjuncture in places like India. Such a conceptualization explains the emergence of the progressive National Common Minimum Programme of the UPA government currently in power in India, or the passage of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act of 2005, alongside the series of farmer suicides across the country, and the steady, almost stealthy acquisition of rural landholdings, by large corporations buying on the cheap. It also explains the actions of the longstanding Marxist government in West Bengal, known for its radical, rural land reforms when it first came to power in the late 70's, but now associated with the brutal violence to evict farmers from a fertile, crop growing regions to offer to multinational corporations. Or, the escalating violence unleashed across the tribal belt on mainland India. This situation confers an understanding of how the promise of the Right to Information Act of 2005, with its potential for a more participatory democracy, can coexist with the increasing establishment of Special Economic Zones across the country to facilitate manufacturing and business activities. This is the terrain of the two Indias ironically described in an editorial in the *Down to Earth* (Narain, 2006), "countries within countries," where only the very affluent will reside and prosper, "built on the backs" of that 'other' India, the poor who are dispossessed of their livelihoods.

It is the ability to enact such measures that lies enshrined within the notion of sovereignty, and constitutes the precondition for the current iteration of the democratic nation-state. This is the insight suggested by Giorgio Agamben's (1998) writing on "the bare life" whereby the very sovereignty vested in a nation-state permits the processes of exclusion that denude, deprive and dispossess some groups of any rights, or nominates which set of citizens can be included within the realm of the human.

And it is in this context that I want to again retrieve the landscape of radical possibilities for praxis sketched in the earlier section of this paper. Can one sustain a Public Anthropology as elucidated earlier, under these circumstances? At the end of 2009,

reflecting on the events recounted here, the provisional and contingent response is to take the long view, and more modestly envision our task on the global stage. Now more than ever, we must use every means available to us to undermine and subvert the kinds of inequities and exclusions that render a life 'bare.'

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion I want to muse on the fact that the papers that one writes often have unforeseen origins and sometimes, unintended destinations. I have allowed myself to be led by the words where they took me, and in following such a path it behoves me to reveal its source. It lies in the well-spring of emotion unlocked by a film. Directed by Bahman Ghobadi, the film *Turtles Can Fly* is about Kurdish children in a refugee camp in the Iraq-Turkey border, during the weeks preceding the US occupation of Iraq. The outpouring of grief that I experienced at the end of the film was mirrored in the faces of the rest of the audience, as we remained seated in stricken silence long after the credits had finished. I recalled John Donne's lines, and with blinding clarity I understood what he meant when he wrote these lines: "No man is an island, entire of itself...any man's death<sup>12</sup> diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind..." (Meditations XVII). It is from the paralysis of despair in which I was mired for days afterwards that the direction for this paper emerged. It served as a catalyst towards a realization of what the role of the anthropologist *must* be in this world.

Within the current global conjuncture, whether turtles can fly or pigs have wings, the public anthropologist assists in mobilizing social change. She operates as an agent for change within the academy, in the crucial work of shaping minds, imparting an appreciation for diversity, and the myriad ways of being in the world. Harnessing an array of skills and resources, she makes common cause with others in the wider world beyond, towards a more plural and radical vision of democracy. And hawk-eyed as she scans the distant horizon, she is certain she can contribute towards eventual human flourishing however distant such a utopian vision.

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<sup>12</sup> The 'death' that is highlighted in this quote is not so much the loss of life (as much as that is a tragedy), but the inability to realise the potential of any human life, closer to Amartya Sen's usage of human capacity.

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