



Michele Ruth Gamburd, *The Golden Wave: Culture and Politics after Sri Lanka's Tsunami Disaster*

Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2014. xii + 216 pages. Illustrations, b/w photographs, 2 maps, notes, bibliography, index. Cloth, \$80.00; paper, \$28.00; ebook, \$23.99. ISBN 978-0-253-01138-1 (cloth); 978-0-253-01139-8 (paper); 978-0-253-01150-3 (ebook).

THE MASSIVE earthquake triggered by the slippage of the Sunda megathrust fault and the consequent Indian Ocean tsunami of 26 December 2004 unleashed waves of destruction in multiple directions, devastating coastal communities across South and Southeast Asia. In the wake of the tsunami, many of these same communities were struck by a second series of “waves”—this time not of water, but of aid. In response to the disaster, an unprecedented amount of funding and resources for relief and reconstruction was deployed across the region, stimulating complex social transformations in communities damaged by the disaster. The 2004 tsunami and its aftermath have also attracted considerable scholarly attention in recent years, and with the tenth anniversary of the disaster upon us a number of new conferences and publications are bringing forth a new burst of academic work on the topic.

Within this broader body of scholarship, Michele Ruth Gamburd's new book contributes rich views into the micro-dynamics of local experiences of relief and reconstruction projects. Her attention to these particular voices has grown out of a long-term engagement with one particular affected community—one to which Gamburd is no post-disaster newcomer. She is, in fact, a second-generation anthropologist who has for decades worked and remained in contact with people in the same Sri Lankan village setting where she spent part of her own childhood while her mother was conducting her fieldwork in the 1960s. After the tsunami, this community found itself suddenly “on the front lines of the relief and rescue operations” (22). Returning to her former field site, Gamburd has endeavored to hear their personal reflections on the experience of both the disaster and the work of recovery.

The stories she relates are compelling. Some come in the form of longer narratives of how individuals and families survived the disaster. Others tell of the ways in which survivors negotiated the altered social landscape of the aftermath. Taken together, the stories included in the book constitute a wealth of new material of a kind that is rare in much of the professional literature of disaster studies. Such narratives are potentially of great value to scholars who, arriving after the fact, struggle to understand the diverse experiences, memories, and aspirations of both disaster victims and their neighbors who attempted to assist them. The body of stories told in this book is particularly rich for including a diverse range of voices, including those of a soldier, a retiree, a monk, a housewife, a hotel worker, and a physician (among others). Gamburd makes a particularly important contribution here through her work of presenting the personal narratives of a number of local-level civil servants that provide rare glimpses of frontline views from behind the counter of government aid administration (168).

The “Golden Wave” of the book’s title derives from a local idiom that some of her interlocutors in Sri Lanka used to refer to the ways in which some Sri Lankans were believed to have embraced the idea that “the tsunami was good because it provided easy wealth” (138). In response to such perceived tragic opportunism, local discourses of critique emerged on the “immorality” of those “who asked for what they did not deserve” (11; this local trope of moral critique was also used in the title of Gamburd’s chapter on the distribution of aid in the 2010 book that she edited with Dennis MCGILVRAY on tsunami recovery in Sri Lanka (2010). *Golden Wave* expands on this basic theme over a series of nine short thematic chapters, interspersed with translated transcriptions of “stories”—narrative disruptions that the author inserts with the intention of “allowing a little of the tsunami’s chaos to disorder the book” (12). This intended effect is not, however, as jarring as it might have been, due to the fact that the chapters also generally stick close to the presentation of ethnographic voices, without much threat of a sustained order of critical analysis dominating the book as a whole. Still, the inclusion of these narratives does provide a rich sampling of firsthand narratives of the experience of the disaster and its aftermath.

Attention to local cultural dimensions of the tragedy and the way in which they inform developments during periods of post-disaster reconstruction remains the central feature of this book. Gamburd draws on her interviews to map new hierarchies of social status elaborated in the idioms of both receiving and giving aid, the perilous position of intermediaries—and the complex implications of choices made during relief efforts (116–30)—as well as the re-inscription of mythic narratives read and deployed in the wake of disaster. Unfortunately, however, this careful attention to local discourse is not complemented by any comparable engagement with external agents of development at higher levels of scale. Granted it has been precisely these dimensions of post-disaster reconstruction that have received the lion’s share of scholarly attention to date—often to the exclusion of the kinds of local voices presented in this book. The response to this state of current scholarship, however, need not be a full pendulum swing in the other direction. Gamburd’s rich ethnographic material might, for example, have been even more powerfully presented by integrating its stories into more sustained critical discussion of a wider range of the factors that informed their context.

Disaster relief brought with it a crash of complex interactions with “outside” actors working from diverse scales that shaped discourses at the village level. Readers of this book could have benefited immensely in their ability to hear important things in these conversations—if the ethnographer could have done more to help us appreciate how they were configured in relation to the other diverse discourses that they intersected with at national, regional, and global scales. We are, however, left on our own to try and piece together the connections and the meanings that they produce for the various parties involved. Still, the rich narrative and interview material present here does give us something to work with in further developing our understandings of the ways in which massive projects of disaster relief impact local communities in ways far beyond physical reconstruction.

REFERENCE

- McGilvray, Dennis, and Michele Gamburd, eds.
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