

HOW TSUNAMI REHABILITATION ROBBED THE NICOBARESE OF HOME

Relevant for: Geography | Topic: Indian Demography including Tribes

During issoh, islanders set fire to the grassland to help regenerate it | Photo Credit: [Manish Chandi](#)

Chowra is an 8 sq.km. dot on the Andaman sea, part of the Nicobar archipelago. And on it live 1,350 people, the Nicobarese islanders of Chowra. They grow food in shared gardens, catch fish, rear pigs, dogs and chickens. Idyllic as it sounds, these islanders have struggled — primarily to make a living and find freshwater. But today they grapple with another challenge: their sense of home is under threat.

Chowra is a coralline sea-mount, on which a thin layer of clayey soil nurtures food gardens, plantations and grasslands. The Nicobarese used the grass to build their exquisitely thatched homes *nyi hupul* or 'beehive stilted houses' as the British colonials called them.

A dozen still remain on Chowra Island. A *nyi hupul* or 'round house' in the Nicobarese language looks like an inverted coconut shell, and is palpably cool despite the reflecting heat of the white coralline sand.

These are more than homes. They protect against the tropical sun, but have common hearths and house extended, joint families. The Nicobarese, over centuries, evolved a sense of common property rights to share and manage the island's limited resources.

But much of this changed with the 2004 tsunami. Almost every house, and the five ceremonial *nyi hupuls* representing five community collectives of Chowra, were washed away. And even worse, social and cultural changes began to sweep through the Nicobar Islands as the islanders were 'rehabilitated'.

Vanishing birds

Central government rehabilitation committees moved the families to a larger neighbouring island, Teressa considered 'safe ground'.

Here, they were lodged in houses meant for nuclear families rather than for joint families. This rehabilitation proposal was unacceptable. Using their knowledge of sea currents, the islanders, led by their chief, sailed back to Chowra Island in 2006. They built themselves shacks. But the rehabilitation agencies followed them, and built them 'permanent shelters' — nuclear housing units with metal roofs. The CPWD houses comprise a small living room, two bedrooms, a kitchen and a toilet that is generally never used because water supply is so erratic.

And worse, they built them on the grasslands. Construction material was brought in and over 250 workers from the mainland set about working. Today, more than a decade after their resettlement, the grasslands have diminished, much of it morphed into weedy woodlands dotted by part-deserted permanent shelters. Invasive weeds are everywhere. Seeds of unknown origin have taken root and colonised the ecosystem; toads never before known in these parts now croak through the monsoon.

Birds found in the grassland, cisticolas, munias and Nicobar quail, that fed and nested here, are

no longer seen as easily as they used to be. Parakeets have completely disappeared from the island.

And as the grasslands diminished, so did cultural practices: before the rehabilitation the grasslands were burnt every year by islanders. This ritual, called *issoh*, helped regenerate the grass they needed to thatch their houses before the monsoon.

The grasslands did more for the islanders than provide building material. They were also foraging space for free range domestic pigs, which are highly valued among the community. The pigs are fattened on fresh coconuts rather than food waste and are often cared for as pets and seen as an indicator of wealth. Pigs, like *nyi hupul*, have always had totemic status on the island, featuring even on election symbols and in their *hentakoi*, the traditional pictographs of culture and important events.

In constant fear

The permanent shelters in the grasslands have also physically divided consanguineous families who once used their common hearth to share wealth, labour and food.

The new social architecture of permanent shelters has drawn faultlines among kinship groups, disrupting resource sharing systems. And during the times *issoh* is still carried out, there is always the fear that their homes will be burnt down as they are now smack in the middle of the grassland.

My own home

The islanders I speak to tell me about their dreams to rebuild *nyi hupuls*. Others have resigned themselves to the changing landscape and say they are waiting for the trees to colonise the grassland so they can be converted into food gardens and woodlots.

Abner Simeon, member of collective Som au nyi Kamainj says, "If the trees take over the grassland leaf litter will help fertilise the soil, and we can convert that space into kitchen gardens."

Another islander tells me that while he is grateful for governmental attention after the tsunami he wished they were allowed to rebuild their own houses. "We have always built our own houses. The government houses were useful after the tsunami, but they don't feel the same as when our families lived together. If we were given materials, we can still build our own homes, and the younger generations will learn how to do so too," says Samuel Samut, an elder from the Som au nyi Takaru collective. "And perhaps then, the birds will return too."

The author works with the Andaman Nicobar Environmental Team.

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