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## Musings from a North Paw

-- Jennifer Hyndman

[Pradeep Jeganathan's 'Philanthropy after the Tsunami' \(February 2005\)](#) asks vital questions about the impetus 'to give' so much to one cause in the wake of the December disaster. While I concur, for the most part, with his analysis that blameless tsunami victims appear more deserving than other casualties and that a representational politics of people-like-me is at work in this context, I want to offer up another framing of philanthropy that extends Jeganathan's postcolonial impulse.

Philanthropy is broadly about giving voluntarily to those in need. Historically, contributions to charity and those it assists have been private affairs. The accident of one's class position and nationality largely dictate whether one will be a donor or a recipient. Unwritten rules about worthy recipients divide them into tacit categories of the 'deserving' and 'undeserving', though as Jeganathan points out, such hierarchies were largely erased in the eyes of donors during the tsunami when its violence was democratically devastating [which is not say that all were affected equally].

I want to suggest, however, that much of the tsunami aid pledged might be thought of not solely as philanthropy – despite the hundreds of thousands of people who privately gave substantial sums from their own pockets – but also as part of humanitarian and development

projects that operate more explicitly at the scale of the state and in the domain of the public. That is, the monies pledged by states are politically distinct and part of a long history of the 'West' helping 'the Rest', a geopolitics of alignment if you like whereby recently decolonized countries of the 'third world' avoided siding with the 'first' and 'second'.

'Development' has long been framed as an altruistic project of promoting economic and social advancement in 'poor' countries, but it has always and everywhere been a geopolitical tool to curry favour in and with countries like Sri Lanka. While tsunami aid from donor governments is admittedly less conditional than most development dollars, both embody a neocolonial sensibility that devastated states need to be 'saved' from themselves. Development, and its more impartial sibling humanitarian aid, are however public investments made by states, usually the rich ones.

The billions of dollars that states in the global north have offered to reconstruct social and physical infrastructure in post-tsunami Sri Lanka are public funds, so I contend that they are not philanthropy. Rather, they generated from national tax bases in states of the global north and collected by law rather than given voluntarily. Jeganathan is not necessarily concerned with state contributions in his musings, but politically, such aid cannot be ignored.

The line between the private offerings of individuals and the public allocations of states is fine. The many international NGOs that dot the Sri Lankan landscape take money from both sides, blurring any easy dichotomies I might want to draw. But it is the rise of the (neo)liberal welfare state and its values of entitlement for all (or a selective some), rather than of charitable distinctions of deserving/undeserving that make it a distinction worth drawing. This is not, of course, to endorse such aid but to ponder its meaning in the current context.

Is post- tsunami reconstruction not an expression/imposition of the Western/northern liberalism and its international welfare state, more than it is philanthropy? I think so.

A larger question remains: what will the effects of such a huge infusion of foreign funds be? Jeganathan and others have hinted at the 'NGOization' of a recipient society, in this case Sri Lanka. What are the implications for Sri Lankan 'civil society', to borrow a trendy term in the current aid parlance, if the critical voices and organizers of political dissent accept great salaries to administer the post-tsunami funds? On the one hand, who can blame them? We all need to earn a living. On the other, is this not a part of the project of political liberalization that

follows Sri Lanka's economic liberalization dating back to 1977?

The reframing of philanthropy as a project of liberalization, through 'institutional strengthening', 'good governance', and 'enhanced civil society' accentuates different if equally pressing political questions.

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