

Destination Tsunami: Stories And Struggles From India's Southern Coast

By: Karen Dabrowska

A photo exhibition: Destination Tsunami, created a penetrating flash of insight into the plight of the fishermen of southern India. The photos by Sohrab Hura accompanied by the displaced peoples' stories were on display in the Guardian Gallery, London during February and March 2010.

Panchayat meeting place, Kaipanikuppam



After the tsunami the people of India's south coast face the threat of displacement from their land, loss of livelihoods, environmental degradation and alienation from traditional ways of life. Despite

massive aid-flows to the region, many families are still waiting for their tsunami-damaged homes to be rebuilt. Others endure cramped and undignified living conditions, while the funds that were meant to assist them are channeled instead into beachfront beautification schemes for tourists.

The exhibition paid tribute to the many brave individuals and groups which are resisting the powerful developers and government

policies that promote tourism at their expense. It created a unique space for the voices of Indian fishing and farming communities, activists, displaced families, the old and the young, the dispossessed and the defiant, to be heard by holidaymakers and tourism policy-makers in the UK.

"My husband and I sold our five-roomed house and land to developers after the tsunami", Mary from Allepey in Kerala

Rebuilding has been slow





Tsunami victims

Unprecedented destruction after the tsunami

explained. "The sea came right up to our doorstep. We were afraid that another tsunami would come. We also had big dowry debts from the marriage of our daughters. We thought we were getting a good price for our land, but the money was only enough to buy a temporary wooden house with two rooms. We need a proper house, but we don't have any money. My husband must now walk several kilometers to the beach so he can fish. He can't afford the transport

costs, His job was better there. I don't know about tourism. I just want whatever will be helpful for us".

James from Allepey described the pressure from developers. "We're being offered a lot of money by the developers. They come and visit us regularly. Last time, six of them came at once to try and persuade us to sell. They can cut off my head if they want, but I'm not moving. I just want to be beside the sea and fish".

Father Joseph an activist in Kerala also complained about land speculation. "Some 700 families in the area have now sold up. However, it is very difficult for them to find work once relocated inland. First, the agents try to tempt people with money. Then they bring in the 'rowdies' to step up pressure. There was one instance of a widow being terrorized at night. She was threatened and her house was vandalized. It's a common process".

Destination Tsunami posed challenging questions about who is paying the real cost of tourism development:

- Can the drive to develop coastlines for tourism in the name of economic growth justify the dislocation of poor people from their land and traditional livelihoods?
- How can tourism be developed in a way that provides sustainable benefits to local communities and the environment?



Fishermen resting on nets, Kaipanikuppam, TN



• Why are so many people still struggling to rebuild their lives despite huge tsunami aid flows to the region?

Tourism Concern, an NGO which organised the exhibition, is actively supporting efforts in India to protect land and livelihoods from unsustainable tourism development. It has partnered with local groups in a project to raise awareness around tourism issues and empower coastal people to secure protection for their land and livelihoods.

Photographer Sohrab Hura was born in 1981 in India, and studied for a masters degree in economics at the Delhi School of Economics. Although he has no formal training in photography, he's been photographing since 2001.

He takes inspiration from the work of many photographers...such as « James Nachtwey's endeavour to illustrate social injustice, the perfect moments captured by McCurry, the photos of kids by Fransesco Zizola, the contrast

between Raghu Rai's works on «Mother Teresa» and «The Bhopal gas tragedy» and at the same time their similar deep impact; all of it has inspired me. I «ve chosen to start my work with underprivileged children because they are closer to my age group and childhood is a phase that I've already been through; I hope to capture moments

that tell us about their dreams, despairs, and joys. I intend to slowly extend the subject of my work in the future...»

The Destination Tsunami exhibition is moving to Amnesty International's Human Rights Action Centre (HRAC) in London from 7th - 20th April, 2010.

Mary from Allepey

