ME, MYSELF & DISASTER

Season 2 - Episode 6
Aftershock - the Complexities of Disaster Aid

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SPEAKERS
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Voiceover 00:07
This is Me, Myself and Disaster the show all about disasters with a human focus. From hurricanes to humanitarian issues. We journey across fault lines to explore trends in disaster preparedness, response and recovery and understand how our guests became involved in disasters. Over to you Josh and Andrew.

Joshua McLaren 00:28
Hello, and welcome back to Me, Myself and Disaster, the show where we talk all things disaster with a human focus. Today we're heading to a tranquil archipelago in the Bay of Bengal, the Nicobar Islands. The area was devastated by the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, which not only destroyed infrastructure and the natural environment, but change the local culture of the island forever. After the disaster, donations poured in from around the world, bringing televisions, mobile phones and Coca Cola to the island. Today, we're going to explore the challenges with aid efforts following disasters. Andrew, who's joining us on the show to unpack this complex topic,

Andrew McCullough 01:09
Josh on the show today we're talking with Simron Singh. He's a professor at the University of Waterloo in Canada in the School of Environment, enterprise and development, Simron spent five years before the tsunami and another five years after the tsunami research the indigenous Nick Marie's people and spent long periods of time living on the islands, the Nicobar is lived a very traditional way of life and Simone help rebuild the island mobilizing funds from the sustainable indigenous futures fund to support

recovery efforts. We're going to talk with Simron today about the challenges and complexities of aid and donations following a disaster, as well as how emergency managers can work with communities with a distinctly different culture to their own during the recovery from a disaster.

Joshua McLaren 01:51
Simron is featured in the documentary 'Aftermath, The Second Flood', but we're fortunate enough to have him on the show today. Let's talk about the flood of aid in the Nicobar Islands here on Me, Myself and Disaster. Simron Singh. Thank you for joining us today and welcome to the show.

Simron Singh 02:12
Thank you for having me.

Joshua McLaren 02:13
Now, before we talk disasters, I'm really interested to learn a little bit more about the Nicobar Islands and your connection to the area. You I think, arguably have one of the last experiences on this earth to experience a culture that really has been untouched. You know, there's a there's a few minority in the world's history that have had that opportunity and to witness and observe, you know, a civilization of people who largely haven't come into touch with modern civilization. You know, what is that connection for you and what prompted you to become involved with the Nicobar Islands?

Simron Singh 02:49
Yeah, so that's, that's a that's a very good question. And the connection is very deep. I mean, from what I have been going through those islands, is it's now over 20 years since I've established you know, it was in 1999. When I first went to the Nicobar Islands. And it was, you know, the way it happened, when I, how I started is a very interesting story. So, it's like before the Nicobar Islands, I was conducting fieldwork in the Indian Himalayas, I was working with a pastoral nomadic tribe called one good years there and the, in the in the Indian Himalayas. During my fieldwork, I met an Indian historian, a very prominent Indian historian, who was quite interested in what I was doing and she had just been to the Nicobar Islands and told me that there was so little documentation on those islands. There was so little material. Now, there were some some writings some works that related to one island called car Nicobar, but there was so little known about the people, the culture and the Islanders who lived south of car Nicobar. And so she was asking if I would be interested actually to go there and spend, you know, extended periods of time living with the people and documenting their culture. At first, I was sure if this was something I wanted to do, because Nicobar Islands are very, very remote like they are the sudden and the easternmost territory of India. And to get there is takes takes a lot of time. It's not very well connected. Infrastructure is not only poor, it's almost non existent. And on on the other hand side, it was quite exciting to think of going to such a remote place it would be like, could be quite an adventure. And so I took some months to think about it and then I called her finally Well, you know, I think I'd like to have a conversation, I think I want to learn more about this offer. And so I met her in Delhi. And she was very responsive. She says, Yes, she's very willing to help make the connection to the Indian government, and facilitate my journey to the islands to start this work. And so it took over a year, basically, you know, having different meetings, and, you know, establishing contact with the government officials getting, you know, some funding. And also for me to read about the islands, because there was so little, and, you know, internet at that time wasn't very common in India. So to find information from very limited sources. So, basically, I said, Yes, and I was ready for an adventure, it took about a year for me to actually arrive, which was in April 1999. And yeah, with very little information, I just went for it. And that was the beginning of a very long relationship to those islands that have become so central to

my life. I mean, I've been impacted because, because whatever happens there has an impact on me as well, because of these long relationships with people. And you know, all that I did on those islands. For all those all those years.

Andrew McCullough 06:28
Simron I'm really keen to understand what it was like approaching the communities for the very first time, can you take us through and describe that experience, your feelings, your thoughts and how you connected with and became accepted by the residents of those Island communities?

Simron Singh 06:42
Yeah, you know, my entry into the Nicobar Islands, and my acceptance wasn't very easy. It took quite a few months. So how it was that I took a ship from Port Blair, which is the capital of the Andaman Islands that took me to car Nicobar first. And from car Nicobar was after that, the journey was to the unknown. And I had my finger to work on trinket Island. And I just knew, like, intuitively, that would be a good place to go. It was pretty remote, small, remote island, and not easy to get to. So you needed to take a small boat, and then a canoe to get there. So I thought, yeah, it was just to the map. I thought that since there is so little like there was almost nothing about, you know, about trinket Island, I thought that's the place I want to go. And I just had to take it one step at a time because there was no clear timings of when ships leave and when they arrive, and and then I arrived on Komodo Island, which is the, the, let's say, the harbor, the main harbor of central ecommerce. And after I arrived there with the ship, I got off and I contacted the local government administration who was in charge of the Centrelink bars. And I expressed my wish to meet the chief of the central Nicobar, the tribal council, Aisha Majeed. And so I was able to have a meeting rather quickly. And very quickly, I said that, look, I want to go to trinket Island. And they looked at me, and they thought I was just wanting to go for a day trip, and then be back in the evening. So I said, Well, you know, I asked to sell to ask, Okay, where can I stay there? Or, you know, so then they realized that I was actually going to be staying there. And I said, Yes, of course, I'll be there for a few months. And that was that wasn't received very well. There was a lot of concern, as to verbalize stay there. How will what will I eat? What language you know, how will that communicate to the people and they are not used to having outsiders. So how will it be for the people? How will it be for me, but I was quite insistent, and I was really kind of stubborn, I said, I would really like to go there. It's very important. And I could not come back to the harbor and go back because I really need to build trust with the people and building trust meant that I have to live there. And how this is all going to unfold. I have no idea but that's what I want to do. So the arrangements were made, and a boat was arranged, but I could go to the trinket Island and there was one officer and couple of other people who were going to escort me there and drop me there. So the only way to access trinket Island is at high tide, because Drinkard Island is surrounded by mangroves and lot of coral reefs which So the water is very shallow, don't drink it, it's only at high tide, you can access that island. So, so on one fine day when it was high tide, we set sail. And you know, after a while, we turned off the engines, then we had to sail very, very slowly because the the person who was kind of managing the boat had to really know where the corals are and where the stones are and arrive slowly and to the trinket Island. And I could see from a distance that there were a lot of people at the shore, they were like, very curious what this boat, you know, coming here, you know, who's who's coming here to the island. And by the time I landed ashore, that all disappeared. So they were there was nobody to be seen, either they were gone to the forest, or they were hiding, you know, in their hearts just peeping out and the shy people so and then, you know, I found myself to walk to the home of the chief of trinket Island and Zacchaeus Zacchaeus karate, so I had a chance to talk to him. And I said, I want to stay here. And he was also quite concerned how that all worked out. But I made my point clear that I'm happy to, you know,

whatever means wherever I could stay doesn't matter, I will manage. I can live on coconuts and bananas, that's also fine. But that's what I would like to do. So finally, they gave in and, and that started a nice long journey, which was it was quite interesting.

Joshua McLaren 11:30
What's, what's that? I want to know what that feeling is like, I mean, arguably, very few of us will ever get the chance to be put in a situation like that. I'm really interested to, you know, from your point of view, what did you feel like you're going into a total unknown into a into a culture into a community that that has not been touched? Really by the outside world? Did you? Did you feel safe? Like, how did you go in you talk to the chief, you start integrating into the community? What was that? Like? Was it you know, as a instant kind of acceptance after that, once you kind of had chase the chase blessing? Or was it this long process of building trust? And I guess, did you actually feel safe? Like, did the community take you on as one as the own? Or was it kind of a period of time where you kind of really had to prove yourself?

Simron Singh 12:21
I had to prove myself over several months? And years, eventually? Yes. It takes, it took a lot of time, for sure. But I did feel safe. I somehow had the trust, but that I'll be fine. And you know, you're at a stage of your life where you have nothing to lose. Yeah. And, you know, this is just going to be something you don't know. It's, it's, it's everything is uncertain. It's unknown, but, but it's where it'll be interesting, it will be insightful it will be it's something like it was a calling, I just knew that I had to go there be there. I couldn't explain exactly what the pool is. But I felt safe. I felt that this is the right thing to do. And it wouldn't be easy, for sure. And I was just, you know, filled it was at the right place, at the right time,

Joshua McLaren 13:25
I just want to before we get too far in and start talking about what really is an amazing story, and a lot of lessons to unpack. I think one of the important lessons here, we've obviously got a lot of got a lot of listeners from New Zealand and from Australia who would be working with, you know, remote indigenous communities in their own ways. Do you have any, I guess, you know, tips or anything that you'd go here, here's the three key things you need to be aware of when you're working in these indigenous communities or remote communities. What are those key things that you could kind of what would be your words of wisdom to some of the practitioners that are out there today, seeking to do similar work?

Simron Singh 14:09
The key thing I felt is that if you reach out in a very genuine way, if you are sincere, you really care for the people. You don't need to know the language. You don't need to know everything about the people the culture. I I knew nothing. I mean, there was there was nothing that I could fall back on. But I knew that I was reaching out to those people. I was curious about their lives and and respectful. And I was going there in a very genuine way. I was not there to judge them or to tell them what to do or how to live. I was going there to learn myself. And I think that makes a big difference because I've worked with other indigenous communities as well. Oh, that spoke different languages, different contexts entirely. But I know that humans wherever they are they, they are able to sense if you are sincere. It doesn't matter if you can speak the language, if not, but you know when if you're sincere, your smiles, your body language, your you know, the way you reach out the way you move, the way you look at them. And I, I think this is this is universal. I just believe that if you're genuine, you're sincere, you're you, you're there to learn and not to judge them. I think that establishes a bond instantly.

Joshua McLaren 15:45
So want to take us back then. Because I guess this is this is where the story really starts. 2004 am on Boxing Day, when a powerful 9.1 magnitude undersea earthquake occurred off the coast of Sumatra, which then generated one of the deadliest tsunamis in history and in from reports a 15 meter high wave crashed over the Nicobar archipelago. Can you take us through? What were those immediate impacts for the Nicobar Islands? And I guess, for you having that connection to the place to place into community? What were your initial thoughts? When you first heard that information? Can you take us through the you know, the minutes, the hours, the days after that happened and how that unfolded,

Simron Singh 16:34
when when the tsunami struck. I mean, most of the world did not know that it was a tsunami or what really happened, they knew something had happened in in the Bay of Bengal. And I got a call. I was in India at that time. And I was heading towards the Nicobar Islands. I was on the way chosen the Kubarz. It was December 2004. And it was going to be my next fieldwork. I got a call on 26th of December, from a friend and colleague from Austria, where I was living at that time. And she worked at the museum, and she heard the news. And she called me and she says, Did you hear about this? I said, I haven't. So I'll open the news. And, and I was quite shocked with the information that something had happened in in the area in the Nicobar in the Andaman Islands, but most of the news were about tourists. Who were being strapped like to these tourists, or stranded in Andaman Islands, and Sri Lanka, in Thailand. And about two, the focus was really about how to evacuate the tourists. But there was no information about an environment. I started to make calls. I mean, I couldn't call the local bars I couldn't call the Andaman Zimin. But I started to call people, anyone the mainland, if anybody could provide more information. But there was really no information for a couple of days. And on 28, I went to the media. And the Times of India covered a story for me, where I was expressing my concern that the indigenous Nicobar trees and some of those threatened communities on these islands may have been wiped away forever. So this was made kind of headlines and and it was still real, no news, until I got one message through a friend who had received a message from another person who had received another message from one Nicobar Study leader, with one line saying central islands entirely washed away, please do something as soon as possible. That was the only message I got this was just one line. And I can imagine I just was shocked. And I didn't know what I could do with this one line. What does it really mean? And there were no means to go to the islands. The whole connection was broken down, there was no lights, there were no ships. There was no communication. And it took a few days to like establish some contact to Port Blair to a friend who is who was actually a journalist and he managed to get me some more information and get on board the first rescue ship that went to the Nicobar. This was on 30 to four days later, the first rescue vessel was leaving potplayer Mariana Islands to go to the mega bars. And then I started to get more information about what was happening, but it was still very, very limited. And yes, I mean, when I looked back, it was it was quite devastating. When you say what, when you're asking what the impact was, it was quite devastating. The Nicobar Islands, like, basically, you couldn't recognize Nicobar anymore. Wow, it was totally transformed. The islands had sunk about a metre and a half. So there was a shift in the tectonic plate. So the animals had gone higher, and an Aquarius had gone lower. And so the entire coastline entire, you know, the geography of the islands was formed. All villages villages have washed away because the tsunami came with, you know, high waves of 20 meters. So few times, washing the islands from one end to the other. And so these Nicobar is villages are along the coast. And these villages were washed away along with their coconut palms. And there was lost two lives and to property. The official number is around three and a half 1000 Nicobar trees were either dead or missing. But we know that this number is much higher. And about 20,000, livestock

were were were lost. And about 6000 hectares of coconut plantations. And nearly all of the cultural artifacts that were in those old homes, all those you know, or you know, all the material culture that was there for generations, those old objects, those ritual objects, custom objects, they were all washed away. And, yeah, it was it was a complete transformation of the islands.

Andrew McCullough 21:52
What was the initial response to the community to this disaster? And I'm particularly interested understand that in the context of a very traditional way of life in the Nicobar Islands, and say, in comparison to another country who might have really well established emergency management infrastructure, and how they would have responded differently, can you take us through that, and what that approach and some of the differences in key challenges looks like.

Simron Singh 22:15
So the nickel bodies have never been subject to humanitarian aid, or even no development aid from non government organizations. I mean, they used to be small amounts of in development work from the Indian government, like infrastructure, in terms of harbors and some sanitation or can some primary schools, but generally, they have been not exposed to this type of aid that was just overwhelming for them. And it's, it's something that's even outside the worldview, that some people, some organizations would come to them and say, we have, you know, all this money, we have the ability, the resources to rebuild everything, to give you houses, to give you boats to give you money to give you food. It was totally unthinkable, because that's that kind of situation they had never experienced. And they had no idea why somebody would want to help them so much. What did they want from them? And usually, they have been the history of Nicobar has been that they have been, you know, in the, you know, there have been colonial expeditions, you know, people coming to take something, there were traders, historically coming to do trade with them and coconuts where it was quite unequal. So, Nick worries are always at the receiving end of an unequal relationship. And so this was here a situation where there was some organizations were coming to give so much, and they had no idea what this meant, should they say yes? Should they say no? And that was really quite confusing. And so when I came there, when I arrived there three weeks after the tsunami, the first question I was asked by the tribal leaders, because of the trust they had in me, they could ask very openly, they said, What is this NGO? And it was very difficult for me to explain what an NGO is and how it operates and what the whole system of aid and you know, where the money comes from, and what's the interest and so it's already complex, it's, it was nowhere easy to explain except to get involved in with the with the with the community. To talk about the needs, you know, what their, what the needs would be. And all that Nicobar 's were telling me in the early months after my arrival is that they want to be left alone. And if somebody really wanted to help them, they would be fine, they would be happy with some tools. Because the tools had been all washed away. They said, If I could have sickle and x and some other tools to build our homes, with which we can also establish our coconut plantations, again, they would be they would be happy with that. But apart from that, they felt that outside interference was actually the main reason for the tsunami. Because there has been people coming from outside for different purposes, very regulated, for sure. But even they felt that it's the outsiders who brought this bad luck to the islands. And they'd rather be left alone and grieve and rebuild their lives. But they did they were not interested in cookies, or you know, junk food, or electronics, or all these surveys, all these questions were being asked, you know, how many people died in your home and their names? And, you know, what did you lose? And what did you own? So how are you related to this person? And who is the nearest of kin? So there were all these questions. And they were like, for the most part, out of, you know, it was culturally inappropriate and also out of context, because Nicobar is families are organized very, very differently. What is next of kin?

And what is a family structure? What, what they own, I mean, what they what they lost, it's these are, these are numbers, and they don't keep track of those things. So they were already traumatized by the experience, and then was coming this way of aid, asking questions and bringing goods and materials. And they just wanted to be left alone.

Joshua McLaren 27:20
I think it's a really interesting and, you know, the overall western view of NGOs and aid is often quite positive, you know, you see things on on the media, and, you know, as individuals, we have an emotional reaction or an emotional trigger to want to help. I think that's innately you know, by Essence, that's humanity. But I guess it'd be really interesting to understand here, because I know, there's been some work done, and by all means, I think, want to make it really clear that, you know, aid and NGOs definitely have have have positive in the world, and they have a place. But I guess we want to understand in this context in the Nicobar Islands, where could have things been done better? I'd be interested to hear Cimarron from your point of view. What was some of the, you know, some people describe it as the second disaster? And I think even yourself has has kind of described it as the second disaster from the initial impact. What were some of those impacts of, you know, you just want to pick a little bit more, because you're talking about, you know, cookies and electronics. And, you know, the community's really going well just give me tools. You know, what, what did what actually happened? What did NGOs bring in onto the island? What were they trying to give people?

Simron Singh 28:47
It's a very interesting question, too. I mean, one side, we see aid as something very sacred, very, very noble, because it's intended to help people this is the idea of being, you know, human and when there's a crisis that, you know, the community comes and you know, helps. I think that that intention is good, but I think the big question is, what is good help and who decides what is good help? Is, is it the people who want to help? Or is it the people who are being helped? And how the, our humanitarian aid structure is organized at this point in time is that the aid organizations have a preconceived understanding of what is good help, there is the seem to be very convinced that there is a one size fits all solution for everyone. And there is a certain standard, which is you know, it's also called the SPHERE standards of humanitarian aid, where you know, there is a certain fundamental need for, you know, for everyone On this planet, that they need a certain amount of waters, they need a certain amount of living space or, you know, sanitation or, you know, and, and access to infrastructure. But this may not be true for every place on the earth, because certain things, they may consider some of those things that is, yeah, they're, they're essential. But not everybody will prioritize those things. You know, and maybe they have different priorities, maybe, maybe they want to be helped differently, maybe it is their priority, but they want to do it on their own, maybe they want a different types of support, maybe they want something that is more culturally appropriate, maybe something that is not suited to the local geography. For example, you know, if you give them blankets in a tropical environment, they don't need those blankets, because it's already very hot. If you want to give them you know, shelters made of tin, it doesn't work in a tropical climate, because 10 houses are very hot. And you can have skin diseases because of that. And so, so, there are different needs of people in a certain geography in a certain culture, and also the respect for gender relations. Because, you know, as outsiders when we are when we are making these judgments, we are already assuming what a good gender relation or what a good family like for example, the whole understanding was a family is a nuclear family is there is a husband, there's a wife, and there's, you know, and their children. But in Nicobar is this is very different. There is no nuclear family, there's joint families there about 40 people living in 50, people living together. And children don't always belong to that. Couple, maybe they're not even married, maybe they're not even

together. But when a child is there, they belong to the community. And they're raised by the community. And if a parent dies, they are not orphans. So we attribute a stigma, to for as an orphan who is a widow, we attribute the idea of sense of family, the compensation packages, the checks, the compensation checks are given in the name of the husbands, the men, assuming that the man is always the head of the family. In the central Nicobar, this is not the case, it's a woman who is in charge. And by giving, by always communicating with the men by giving them the money, you're changing the gender balance, you're changing society, you are empowering groups that were not you know, in that role. You're not talking to elders, because they do not speak Hindi or English, you speak to younger people, who you can communicate to and so, you easily get influenced by their values, by their ideas of development, by their ideas of need, by their ideas of history, but by their ideas of their community. When these other people, yes, they might be able to communicate to the outside world, but they have no understanding of their own culture, but it is just easy. So, there can be so many misunderstandings, when we bring our own biases and our own understanding of how the world is and should be, what the needs are. What is a good family structure, what is what what is primitive and what is what is developed. So if you live in huts, like Nicobar is do this would be considered primitive. But if you live in concrete houses, if you live in, you know, if you have flowing water like a tap inside a home, and electricity, then you're developed. And, and 7000 houses were constructed. And these were constructed not by the Nicobar ease, but by contractors who were given contracts, who came from outside the broad construction material from the outside, tons of cement steel, gravel was transported under very difficult conditions with rafts and you know, they're to construct roads or transport all that stuff, to build these homes that were not suited for the local condition. Just because they're modern. And this is what development is about. And when you are introducing new ways of living, new ways of thinking you're giving money for which people have no Use initially, because Nicobar is never used cash. But they got cash compensation because this is what happens when you have, you know, go through disaster, there is compensation based on how much you lost how many people died in your family. So Nicobar is had to open bank accounts for the first time in the lives because the checks had to be deposited in the banks. And for that you need passport photos. So you can open bank accounts. So, I was there for days taking pictures of people. So, I'm printing them passport photos through my own little infrastructure. So they could have bank accounts. And the money that had the Nicobar is do not understand the value of money because it is it is just a number. All they would do is take the passbook to the trader and say, Well, you know, take it, and I would like this, and I would like a television and I would like a mobile phone. And I would like this coke, and I would like this chips. And they would get it. And the Creator would tell them how much money is left because the creators kept the past books. So they would maintain the account and the commodities had nothing to do with that. They just gave the passport to them. And they just took whatever, but Vader was willing to give them based on what money they had in the bank. And, yes, what happens is that Nicobar, he started to have health problems. They got diabetes, they got hypertension stress, the immunity went down. These people who never had malaria, even though it's a malaria infested area, they never had malaria, they started to, they started to have malaria. And there's a lot of inequalities in haves and have nots. So there were people who had more compensation because they lost more people or more land. And there were others who lost less. So they had less money. So there was a big gap in the resources they had during open with aid. And this was a big issue. They have a lot of conflicts in the society that was not there before. What changed also was the relationship to the environment, because they realized that if they could buy everything from a shop, you know, they had all they had to do is to take the passbook and go to the crater and get food, why did they have to work anyway? And why did they have to respect any relationship with nature, for example, there used to be taboos on fishing and what you can harvest in a certain season what you cannot harvest in a certain season. And there were some restrictions around overfishing and about seasonality and about allowing

nature to regenerate over time, by giving them space over the year. But these tables were taken away because there was no need to maintain that relationship to nature, because food is something you get from the store and fishing you do whenever you have the time and whenever the fish was there, and that could be sold eventually and so, so basically a breakdown of system of meaning. There was a breakdown of traditional institutions, the breakdown of the cultural fabric, breakdown of of relationships, break down a family structure. This is very context specific. And it is very difficult to to arrive at a place like Nicobar, and I'm sure there are many communities, indigenous communities who have very unique characteristics and culture, cultural expressions and ways of living and knowing and seeing the world. And if you come with with preconceived notions, and if you come with the same idea of what how the world should be and how everyone should be, then this is a serious problem.

Andrew McCullough 38:59
This tsunami clearly generated that much interest around the world and the global community to send aid to Southeast Asia and further afield to help with the consequences of this disaster. How do you think we can we can better maintain cultural or do we not maintain culture and accepted in a globalized world things are going to change? Like what what are your thoughts on on maintaining or changing the culture of these countries and, and maybe if there's a better way of doing this in the future,

Simron Singh 39:27
I have documented so many instances, they have incorporated things from outside because they have been engaged in historic trade for hundreds of years. So they have adapted to those situations by creating new institutions. When they were interacting with the outside world, they created new artifacts that I've seen. I've seen the material culture, the ritual objects, that actually illustrates Creating ships, or an English man with a hat and a tie. And they have given meaning to those relationships to those interactions with outsiders. they've internalized those changes around them in their own culture. And they have ritualized them, and created new institutions to respond to those situations. For example, they created the institution of the captain, because they noticed that when ships are coming, every ship has a captain on board. So they created a person who would be a captain from the island, who would be knowledgeable enough to go on board that ship to make a deal when the ship arrived, so, there used to be some kind of barter trade. The Nicobar is would give coconuts and bananas and chickens, and the captain would strike a price. So this captain's job was to make a good deal with the ship. You know, I've written this book called in the sea of influence. And in this book, I have explained how the Nicobar E's have adapted to the missionaries who came there, to the traders who arrived there regularly. So I've been documenting how Nicobar is have been adapting and how they've been responding to those interactions. I'm confident that the Nicobar is would have continued to do so. But this aid was very, very unique, and very unusual. It was very top down very, very powerful. Those Nicobar is who could get away from it. And there are examples of maghaberry families who actually could escape this aid. And these islands look very, very different.

Joshua McLaren 42:02
There's two things I want to unpack here. Because I think, when we approach this conversation, obviously, we want to approach it with some sensitivity, because I think, you know, aid and NGOs do do some do some great work around the world. And I guess, as I said, before, we're not necessarily talking here about, you know, every piece of aid or every program that NGOs taking, we're talking about a specific context here, where it just didn't it, you know, it didn't hit the market, it didn't work well for the cultural context that it was operating within. But I guess, from the conversation today, Simran, I really hear there's two tensions here. And I'd love to hear your feedback, or your you know, from your

experience, how we can do this better. But I think the two major tensions here is that this notion of build back better, is something that's been so ingrained into us now. And I think sometimes can be misrepresented or understood, not correctly around how that actually is, you know, applied within communities. And secondly, I think, one of the key measures, and I think this is just, you know, part of our Western society or our Western culture, it's always around, how can we move with speed, something's happened, we must get in there, we must start things flowing that two key KPI for us, how much have we been given? How much have we distributed? And how can we do that in the shortest amount of time? Because we think that that's, you know, we've got to get that help down to people as quickly as possible in the future, from from your learnings, how do you think we could manage those tensions better? Or how do you think we could operate better in those paradigms?

Simron Singh 43:36
So maybe, I should specify that there are different phases of responding. The first is the rescue phase. And, and that's very important, as you know, like in a crisis like tsunami, we need to send ships or any transport. So there has to be a rescue operation. And this has to be done as quickly as possible. The second is relief. And relief is also very important because there are basic needs that have to be met rather quickly, like food and water, and first aid. And these have to be addressed very, very fast. But when it comes to start to build the blueprint for development, whether it's for the short or the intermediary or long term, they has to be a different process. It's not enough just collecting data from people like your names and what your age is and who you lost in the tsunami and how you're related to one another. Instead, these aid organizations should be interacting more with the with the local community and If there is a local organization, or an anthropologist or any other expert they could talk to even better, they can talk to the community elders, by, by whatever means possible to understand the local context, there has to be a priority to understand the local context and to understand what the needs are, rather than to say, here is what we can give you. And, you know, this is what you need. I think this has to be done in the right way, to start with a needs assessment, to aid and to recognize that aid has to be need driven and not supply driven. Most of the time we see aid, which is supply and demand that they are these prefabricated homes, or, you know, because they are these big suppliers or contractors and who want to build something very, very quickly. We have to realize that we have to respond to the victims. And our first accountability is more downstream and not upstream, not to the donors. And we should be focusing more on the downstream aspect of people's needs, and what is it that they really require? Maybe the people just need some sort of soft support, maybe in the case of the knuckle bars, because just tools that were needed, because the people have the knowledge to build their homes, they they have the knowledge to make their own plantations, they have been doing this for a very long time for generations. And so it's an assumption to say that they cannot build their homes or that somebody else has to come from outside and build the homes. So this is inappropriate aid, in a sense that it's undermining local capacity. It is undermining local culture. It is undermining local institutions. It is undermining local wisdom. When when I was doing fieldwork, just in the first few weeks after the tsunami, I was quite impressed that people were telling me exactly what their plans are, what they would be doing next. And when they would make their homes and when they would plant the gardens. And when they would build their boats. And they have very clear idea of the next steps. But but this information was never collected and utilized. It was it was just very, very top down. And most of these decisions on how to help people are often very far away from the local context. They're made by people who are living very far away. And, and so I think that help is very important. And the we we have to first distinguish between rescue and relief, because I think that's quite immediate. And that's priority. But when we want to engage in more intermediate and long term planning, then it is just imperative that

we ask what the what the local context is, what the needs of the people are, and what would be culturally appropriate aid.

Andrew McCullough 48:42
And I think there's a lot of lessons in that for all of us in terms of how we involve the community in the really that the long term recovery for regardless of where it is not just in Australia or New Zealand, but across the world. I wanted to talk now briefly around today, even Nicobar Islands, it's been almost 17 years since the tsunami came through on Boxing Day. And such a huge event such a huge consequence. And it was in so much cultural change. How's life on the islands today? I've been back and what's what's different now?

Simron Singh 49:14
So yes, I was on the islands recently, basically, in March 2020 At the time when the pandemic was just breaking out. So I was there briefly and I had to leave because of the pandemic. And I have been in touch with the islands with the people through phone remotely. And I'm constantly in contact with them to learn about what's going on there. How people are doing and one of the main issues and you know, just keeping in touch with with a number of people I have very good relations with the islands will never be what they were before the tsunami So that's one thing is clear, it will never be the same. There's big differences in how the nickel bars look like today. For example, char Island, which is a bit north of the central nickel bars, is one that resembles the past the most. They're the ones who rejected aid from the very start. And they went back on their own, from the relief camps that were on the neighboring island called Teresa. So these people from Chara, they built their own boats on on cannons. And they decided to leave to this island, and go back to Chara to rebuild their own lives on their own. They refuse to accept things. And very soon, they were able to build the villages and revive the plantations. And they even brought back their festivals. They have very strong leadership there on this island. And that's the one island I can say that resembles how it was before the tsunami. So with the other islands, there are big differences in in terms of the problems they are facing. Because whenever I'm talking about about the Nicobar, I'm usually talking about their problems. And I often hear about conflicts, and I hear about different types of diseases like hypertension, or stress or diabetes, and a lot of inequalities. Some islands also report crime, which was totally unknown before, young people are leaving the islands. Now, to go to the animals or to go to the mainland. And before they refuse to leave, because for them, at that time, outside was a dangerous place. And even when the government of India was encouraging young people to go to the mainland, to study, and they were schemes from the Indian government, that was all paid. But the young people did not want to live there. And they would come back very quickly because they would rather stay on the Nicobar Islands. But now, more and more young people don't see a future on the neck of ours, because they have been exposed to a different life through television, and they are seeing what a good life is very differently. And they would like to have a lot of material goods like cell phones and money and, you know, junk food and they would like to have a certain lifestyle. And the only possibility to have those things they believe is that if the left the islands and pork in whatever conditions, even if they are not very good conditions, and they would rather work as a restaurant waiter or, or as a lift operator, or even a door opener, or a boatman or any small job in the neighboring islands or on the mainland. Because because that is better, because it brings money. And that's what the young people today are after. So, there is out migration and they bring back new values to the nickel bars, when they when they come visit. So, things are quite in flux at the moment. And so, the nickel bars are going through major changes. And I mean that these are going to be long lasting changes, not just temporary, there is introduction of new value systems and a new understanding of what a good life is and a new understanding of what the needs are and things what was not considered

before that they needed is now they would consider that is a need for them. So we see in the mega bars, a situation with where they're moving away from unlimited means to limited wants to a situation of limited means and unlimited wants, which is the starting point of all modern economic activity. That is scarcity.

Joshua McLaren 55:00
Just last question before we finish up, and it's just triggered me what we're just having conversation about then around, you know, there's the initial, obviously disaster of the tsunami. In the Nicobar Islands, we saw the second disaster, through through the aid and some of the cultural challenges and how that was navigated. Do you think they'll ever be an opportunity? Simran? Or do you think there will ever be an appetite globally to do something like a social recovery? Do you think they'll ever be the opportunity for the Nicobar Islands to recover some sort of their culture? I know, you said that one island, obviously, you know, kind of divorce themselves from the aid in the NGO. And then they've almost been able to go back to some sort of a resemblance of what they were before the tsunami. But I guess, for some of those islands that have gone down the path of, you know, the other path, do you think they'll ever be the opportunity? Or do you think it's ever possible to almost embark on a on a cultural or a social recovery?

Simron Singh 56:04
It might happen. And there are individuals who are very interested in preserving their culture, some families like so you see examples of families who want to preserve their lifestyle, and the way they lived and their value systems. They're also individuals who are also asking to document to, like the language, for example, and the stories and, you know, those we are that their music, for example, and a lot of old people have died in the meantime. But, but fortunately, I was able to document a lot of their pre tsunami life. So I was conducting fieldwork for several years before the tsunami. And I have done extensive documentation of the music, of the language of their festivals of stories, like, you know, narratives of the origins. And so I have many boxes of material, which includes videotapes, and audiotapes, and a lot of like, tons of notes and photographs. And so I am at the moment trying to kind of dig, slice all that material. And there is a lot of interest from the Nicobar East tribal council to have a copy of their digital archive. Because there is going to be interest in the future, there is maybe not so much interest now, but the elders, the tribal council, feel that in the future, you know, when young people when they're older, they will want to know who they are, where they come from. And and that could be a starting point. Because if there is no, if there is no resource, if there's no archive, if there is no material to refer to, how would they ever find out? So I'm not saying that this archive, or this type of documentation may revive things, exactly how things were. But I'm hopeful that in time, you know, as people, you know, add Generation Change, as people get older, they will be interested in their roots in their own history, in their own culture. And because everything was lost with a tsunami so rapidly, and there was there has been no formal documentation, like besides, you know, few instances, like in my case, I think this will be valuable starting point that could create some kind of nostalgia and respect for those cultures. And there might be efforts by these very young people at a later stage to start, you know, more awareness sensitization, maybe have a small museum or some kind of a Heritage Center on the islands where they could see this material, they could listen to the music of the elders, they could see videos of these festivals that are no longer there. And they could see how it was done and how things were explained and why they did those things and how they lived and what they ate. And then it might create a lot of nostalgia and they might may not revive it exactly to that extent, but they might start to have more respect, Muslim, maybe start to nurture value those things and at least be proud of where they come from, and pass it on to the next generation and to the next generation. And I think that itself would be a

worthwhile effort. So that it's not just like a black out what was before tsunami that they have no idea what was before, and this is what we are but I really want want them to have a point of reference. And this is my current effort at the moment is to give them this point of reference that they could fall back on and what they will do with it. It's totally up to them.

Andrew McCullough 1:00:13
And I think those initiatives are talking about this and Monica be really helpful for those communities that may have left the island to chase work in other parts of the world and come back and console sort of be part of their, their original culture and heritage and say that and what the islands were previously, which is, which is so important to understand what happened and what was there, what was there prior to the tsunami, it just made me think today, when we're talking about this tsunami, how much it cuts through everything like this is a disaster that has just cut through the social fabric, the economic fabric, everything that holds communities together, has been impacted by this disaster. And we see this everywhere that the disasters cut through and impact all aspects of our life. It's just, it's this place, particularly we've learned a lot. And while the outcomes have been have been tragic, and a lot of lives were lost, and, and and culture was lost, and we've seen significant change the Nicobar Islands, hopefully some lessons we've learned out of this to take forward into the future.

Simron Singh 1:01:11
Yeah, you're you're very right, Andrew, when you say that, disasters are cross cutting, and I do make a distinction between disaster and a complex disaster, and I've been writing about complex disaster quite a bit. And what the way I distinguish the two is that there is a disaster, which is, what happens during a disaster is a physical destruction. So for example, in the case of tsunami, there is a massive earthquake and comes then these waves that kill people that destroy the material life, they destroy artifacts, they, you know, wash away villages, this is what you'd call a first order disaster, or it is a physical, you know, destruction of what was there. But then what happens afterwards is, you know, how you respond to that physical destruction. And when you respond inappropriately, through, you know, a system of aid that we were talking about. If it is inappropriate, then what it could cause as a complex disaster means it could trigger off a series of events and processes, that has less to do with physical destruction, but more to do with the destruction of our culture. It is this, the complete disaster is really about the loss of the immaterial attributes. It's a loss. It's a breakdown of institutions. It's a breakdown of family structures, breakdown of relationships, breakdown of system of meaning, and breakdown of a social cultural fabric. So this is exactly what what is needed to rebuild after disaster. But if there is inappropriate aid, then you're actually undermining you're taking away that very critical infrastructure that still exist, even after a normal disaster, is you're taking away the ability of a community to organize themselves and to rebuild their lives. And, and to show their own resilience.

Joshua McLaren 1:03:32
It's It's so interesting, and I think this this episode Simran has really, I guess, opened up modern Andrews eyes, you know, having probably very much a you know, domestic interaction with disasters, and, you know, domestic experience, understand, but I guess it's really interesting, because we've almost seen the same things, obviously, on a domestic level, seen where programs and it's not just even after a disaster when, you know, organizations or individuals go into communities to prepare, and actually do damage through that actually do more damage than what they're preventing. So I think it's a really it's a really important subject that I think, and I hope that a lot of our listeners, take away some key points from today. And I think there are a lot of, you know, tangible points from today that people can go out tomorrow and start implementing, you know, the fact around, focus on being genuine. Focus

on building relationships, focus on on building trust, you know, put put put, put the community before yourself, your own biases, your own perspective and context, understand where they're coming from and understand how you can then apply solution to that, rather than coming in with preconceived ideas. So, for me, really thankful and appreciative for you sharing your learnings because I know for Andrew And I you know, we've actually learned a lot just through you know the documentary and doing our own research on some of your some of your work learned a whole lot of new material that I know that Andrew and I will definitely implement in our day to day work.

Andrew McCullough 1:05:15
Similar has been great talking with you today and learning so much about aid and disasters and just a different culture that we just don't often think about as emergency managers in this space. Often these are the elements that we forget and and really there's there's so much out there in the in the industry we need to learn so thanks for sharing your insights and experience with us. We've shared a link to the documentary we mentioned earlier on our website at me, myself and disaster.com along with some of your photos from the Nicobar Islands Simron Singh. Thanks for joining us on Me, Myself and Disaster.

Simron Singh 1:05:46
It's been a pleasure talking to both of you.

Voiceover 1:05:53
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