



Simron Singh had earned a reputation as a top expert on the Nicobarese. Then disaster struck, and Singh made a fateful decision: to ditch any pretense of objectivity and help rebuild their culture and their lives

After the Tsunami: A Scientist's Dilemma

BANGKOK—Two days after a massive tsunami pummeled southern Asia in December 2004, a message picked up by shipboard radio reached Simron Jit Singh at his parents' home in Lucknow, India. It was from Rasheed Yusuf, a close friend in the Nicobar Islands, a little-known archipelago a few hundred kilometers from the earthquake that triggered the tsunami. The news was bad: "Central Nicobars entirely washed out. ... Do something as soon as possible."

Singh, a human ecologist and anthropologist at the Institute of Social Ecology in Vienna, had spent the previous 5 years chronicling the indigenous Nicobarese. He lived among them for weeks at a stretch, earning their trust and gathering a wealth of information. Now the society itself seemed to be slipping away: Out of a population of 30,000, about 4500 had perished in the tsunami; another 5000 were missing and presumed dead. Nine of every 10 homes on the 24-island chain were reduced to splinters. The islanders' economic lifeblood, coconut palms, was virtually wiped out. Most insidious, nearly every artifact—irreplaceable ossuaries and other relics preserved for generations—had been washed away.

The tsunami left the numbed survivors at a crossroads. Leaders were torn between either trying to restore their cultural identity or accelerating a fitful integration with the outside world in which many Nicobarese had already adopted Western clothing and other trappings of modern life, from television to pop music. Tribal elders sought the counsel of an outsider they knew they could trust: Singh.

That left Singh facing his own moment of truth. Until then, he had remained loyal to the scientific creed of minimal intervention. Yes, many research subjects had become friends and confidants. And yes, his work was influencing their lives in subtle ways. Now, however, the Nicobarese were asking Singh for much more: to cross the line between observer and participant and help make decisions that could determine whether the islanders would retain centuries-old traditions as a facet of their rapidly changing lifestyle.

It didn't take Singh long to decide. He flew to the Nicobars in late January 2005 and, since then, has assisted the islanders in restoring their culture and reshaping their economy. "He has literally single-handedly brought to the world's attention the cultural, social, and economic plight of the Nicobarese," says

Mahendra Shah, a sustainable-development expert at the International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis (IIASA) in Vienna. Shah and others applaud the path Singh chose. "He could not in good conscience do anything else," says Pernille Gooch, a human ecologist at Lund University in Sweden.

Singh had looked into his heart and knew, he says, that "I really had no choice."

Listening and learning

Singh, 36, became involved with the Nicobars by chance. His first project as a student at Lund in the mid-1990s had been a study of the Van Gujjars, a tribe of nomadic buffalo herders in the Himalayas. Then one day in 1998, an Indian historian tracked him down at a Van Gujjars camp and urged him to study the Nicobarese. He was intrigued.

Working in this remote community, Singh learned, would not be easy. Many Nicobarese view outsiders with suspicion—for good reason. They have been host to a series of unwanted visitors. Situated on the trade routes between India and East Asia, the archipelago was colonized by Denmark in 1756, then by Austria, and finally by Great Britain, which held the Nicobars until India's independence in 1947; they are now formally part of India. But it remained a "marginalized society that few people had heard about," says Gooch.

To protect the indigenous peoples of the Nicobar Islands, as well as those on the Andamans to the north, India places strict controls on outsiders' access. Singh has Indian nationality, which helped him get a research permit, but he had to promise not to divulge any information deemed sensitive to Indian security. Yet his nationality was also a liability: The Nicobarese are wary of Indian traders on the islands. What's more, tribal elders held scien-