

TSUNAMI Relief and Rehabilitation

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Introduction

December 26, 2004, the day after Christmas, is said to be a 'Black Sunday' in the recent history of the South-East Asian Countries. Massive ocean waves triggered by an under-sea earthquake caused thousands of deaths and enormous destruction in India, Sri Lanka, Indonesia and other South Asian and South East Asian countries. For the first time the common people along the coast of the Indian Ocean came to know the word tsunami. January 14, 2005, issue of 'Frontline' rightly names it the 'Killer Waves', for it has taken the lives of more than two lakh people, most of them women and children.

Tamil Nadu was the worst affected among the Indian States. On the whole, nine lakh people were affected by tsunami in the coastal districts of the state. Over 8000 people were killed, around 3500 injured and nearly 5,000,000 people rendered homeless. About 17000 heads of livestock perished. Thousands of hectares of land covered with sand and salinated, became unfit for cultivation (*Frontline*, Mar. 6, 2005). In Kaniyakumari district 31 coastal villages and six interior villages were severely affected. The total death toll was 908 and 124 were missing. About 5500 houses were washed away and the total damage of the nets, boats and other fishing equipment was estimated to be Rs. 283 crores (*Thenoli*, Jan. & Feb. 2005).

In this article I aim at making a few reflections on the response to this Himalayan tragedy and few proposals for rehabilitation programmes. I must however honestly admit that my experience and involvement in the said area is very limited. I mostly base my reflection on the experience in Kaniyakumari district. The reflections are arranged under the following two heads:

1. Rescue operation and relief measures
2. Rehabilitation and restoration policy

1. Rescue Operation and Relief Measures

The most challenging part of the tsunami relief work was its first phase, the rescue operation. This phase involved brave attempts to save lives wherever possible, massive search, removing the bodies caught beneath the debris and the burial / cremation of the dead. The next phase of relief work was providing food and clothes for the survivors through various organizations by means of relief camps, providing for their medical needs, clearing the debris and preventing possible outbreak of epidemics. The third phase of relief operation was shifting the affected people from the relief camps to temporary, individual shelters. It goes without saying that alerting the people of the possible danger is also part of the rescue operation.

1. Where were our big bothers?

For the millions of people living along the Indian Ocean there was no foreknowledge of the waves of massive destruction. This is not the case with the rest of the world. Tsunamis are relatively rare in the Indian Ocean region, but not unprecedented. During 1990's as many as, 82 tsunamis were reported worldwide. The last 10 major tsunamis have consumed more than 4000 lives.

The other advanced countries including the United States and Japan had experienced this phenomenon and have established tsunami alert centres all along their coast. Although the massive under-sea

earthquake measuring 9 on the Richter scale along the coast of Sumatra on 26 December, 2004 was registered in Seismic Laboratories in different parts of the world, no warning was passed on to those who were going to be the victims of this deadly waves.

Now the questions before us are these: Why have they failed to pass on the information to the rest of the world? While establishing military base all over the world under the pretext of guarding the civilians from international terrorism, why did our big brothers, the United States and United Kingdom, fail to establish tsunami alert centres to protect the people from nature's fury? Has the ruthless globalization space only for selling F-16, and F-17 fighter planes and not for sharing the life saving technologies?

The United States had announced a 350 million dollar relief package. This is not even half the amount budgeted for Bush's inaugural bash in January 2005. And yet the United States is not willing to channelize the money through the UN. Frontline's world affairs correspondent John Cherian provides an account of the United States' geo-political maneuvers in Indonesia in the guise of providing humanitarian relief in the region, where a separatist political movement has established its presence. So much so, the Indonesian Government had to make an official request to foreign troops on relief mission to leave the province by March 26, three months from the date of the disaster. So it is evident that the United States has an axe to grind in its entire so-called 'Humanitarian Aid'. It wants to make use of this occasion to establish a military base in Indonesia.

2. India's magnanimity and unpreparedness

India, in spite of its own losses, announced Rs. 100 crore assistance to Sri Lanka, and another Rs. 5 crore to the Maldives. Helicopters were dispatched to take part in the rescue and relief effort in Sri Lanka and the Maldives. India sent its ship to Sri Lanka and Indonesia with medical

relief and other supplies. And it was widely commended by all the political parties. And we are also happy to learn that the Indian ship was the first to arrive at the Indonesian coast for rescue operations and the first to leave the shore without an official request from the Indonesian government to do so.

Prevention is better than cure. And we all know the good game we propose and the poor game we play. The same can be said of the Centre and the State governments. I believe that alerting the people about the disaster also forms part and parcel of the rescue operation. In the case of the disaster on December 26, 2005, the governments have thoroughly failed. At least few more lives could have been saved if the governments were a little more watchful.

Tsunami with its killer waves challenged the Andaman Nicobar Islands around 7.30 a.m. and hit Singapore around 8 a.m. It attacked Chennai about 8.40 a.m. It reached Kerala around 10.30 a.m. Though there was sufficient time for the governments to send a red alert to save the lives, yet the governments both Central and State failed as they were totally unprepared to meet this challenge. We cannot, however, lay the blame squarely at the door of our governments.

3. Learning from the common people

We have remarkable stories of the wisdom and responsibility exhibited by the ordinary common people caught in the calamity. In Veerapattinam, a village near Pondicherry, village elders as soon as they saw the sea level rising, opened the booth which housed the village public address system and evacuated the people away from the coast. As a result, there were no deaths in that village of 6200 residents. In another incident a man living in Singapore immediately communicated this message of disaster to his village near Pondicherry and thus saved all the 3600 residents of his village (*Frontline*, Jan. 28, 2005). So the

governments with all their highly sophisticated information technology could have done a great lot.

After this destructive tragedy, the Central government announced the setting up of a Disaster Managing Agency. Advanced countries like Japan and the United States have very effective Disaster Management System. But also small and developing countries like Bangladesh, Cuba and Mangolia have established successfully disaster management institutions. In Cuba an effective disaster response system kept the casualties to minimum during a cyclone in 2004, which claimed a large number of lives in the neighbouring state of Florida, USA.

4. State governments initial lethargy

The way the state administration handled the most challenging first phase of the relief and rehabilitation programme, particularly its relief machinery, has received wide acclaim from across the country. The very fact that the people were protected from any outbreak of epidemics was seen as a big achievement. Though there is a reasonable truth in it, I have my own reservations.

On the very first day we could really feel the absence of the government. The government officials were practically missing. The military, the para-military, the police and the fire fighters were supposed to be trained people to make brave attempts to save lives in a situation like this. But they were not found in the scene. For instance, the very same day there were about 2000 B.S.F. Personal on a training camp in Kanyakumari district head quarters. They could have very well rushed to the shore to save the civilians.

5. Did humanitarianism last long?

The first phase of tsunami relief work witnessed the outpouring of humanitarianism. People from all walks of life rushed to provide help.

Tsunami has washed away the dirt like the man made barriers of caste and creed. The churches, mosques and mutts joined hands in an unprecedented show of solidarity and social responsibility in providing relief. In the beginning, the NGOs and INGOs were also vying with one another.

However humanitarianism exhibited at the time of tsunami raises some questions in my mind. Why are people and agencies then so insensitive to the suffering of the day-to-day life? Thousands of children die every day due to poverty, famine and malnutrition. And yet we are quite comfortable with the situation. How to explain this – hardness of heart or inability to help?

Another question is that: ‘Why are there so many competitions and rivalry among the INGOs in rendering humanitarian aid?’ Everybody wanted to work in the same most affected village only. So much so the district collector had to intervene to allot different villages to the INGOs and NGOs. And the local NGOs with little fund had no place and yet they had strong roots in the villages!

In the European history we learn that the British, the French and the Spanish were fighting for colonies in the South East in the 15th and 16th centuries. I think now a neocolonization has started with the arrival of these INGOs. Not all of them are fake, some seem to be genuine, and some have already left the villages with the photos and videos of the disaster. But certainly some want to raise fund for their organizations using this destruction.

6. Were the churches qualitatively different?

The Catholic Church in Kaniyakumari district played a vital role in channeling the humanitarian help to the affected villagers. Comparing to the 1992 flood in Kanyakumari district in which there was practically no

casualty but very serious damage to 7000 houses, the presence of the Catholic Church in the Tsunami relief work is much more visible. Of course one should not forget that the 1992 flood never drew the attention of the international community nor was ever considered to be a national disaster.

In 1992 the Catholic Church over here was involved in a modest way. But this time there was a qualitative change in its involvement. It came out to the streets and formed committees for relief works. It is mostly because, most of the victims are Catholics. At the same time one must mention with sadness that there were Catholic religious institutions along the coast of Tamil Nadu, which employed the police to guard their property to prevent the possible entry of the tsunami victims seeking shelter in their lands.

In spite of all its efforts and commitments, the church is not totally free from criticism. It did not care for the inland victims of Tsunami – most of them, Hindus and Muslims – as much as it cared for the coastal victims. It could have involved the priests and catholic lay people working in the inland more. I think the Catholic Church has missed a wonderful opportunity.

During the relief operations, at times, the Catholic Church has given the impression of being a parallel government, which in turn makes the people more dependent. It is the duty of the local Church to make the people more independent. Perhaps it may have to lose some of its power. I think there is nothing wrong in losing its power in civil matters to empower the people.

2. Rehabilitation and Restoration Policy

i) Rehabilitation Programme

For a long term rehabilitation and restoration, the Central and State governments have set aside huge sum of money. The amount of money pledged by the governments and the amount of money channeled

through NGOs and INGOs makes one believe that except for the loss of lives, all the rest could be restored. But one must remember that we need lasting solutions and not merely an ad hoc fire fighting approaches. Money is not all, there are other serious factors to be considered.

Rehabilitation package ranges from the technological and scientific to the social and economic areas. The focus should be on the stakeholders including fisher-folk, salt-pan workers and others who are dependent on the sea for their livelihood. Towards a sustainable rehabilitation DR. S. Swamynathan, Chairman, National Commission for Farmers, has proposed a five point agenda – two short term and three long term agenda – which are worth discussing.

1. Psychological rehabilitation

The affected people, orphaned children, destitute women and others should be helped to be integrated into society. Dr. D. Nagaraja, Director of the Bangalore based National Institute of Mental Health and Neurological Sciences (NEMHANS) is of the opinion that once affected people realize the gravity of the situation, they go into depression and develop panic and anxiety. The affected people say that, 'nothing is done'. This is to be understood as an expression of their anxiety. We have to make the affected people cope with the abnormal situation. They need a healing touch.

2. Rehabilitation of immediate livelihood

The first phase of this rehabilitation relates to the immediate needs of the affected people, such as food, shelter, boats, catamarans, nets and other fishing utensils. The next phase relates to the permanent houses and the final phase is to cover the reconstruction of infrastructures like fishing harbours, boat landing places, hook-shaped jetties at suitable places etc.

Although 90 percent of those affected by the tsunami are fishermen and the focus must be rightly on their rehabilitation and the revival of fishing operations, the damage by the killer waves caused to agriculture should not be underestimated. And in very many places this dimension of the rehabilitation work has not been given proper attention.

3. Ecological restoration and rehabilitation

Foremost among the issues thrown up by the December 26 tragedy is the need for a permanent protective shield along the coast to minimize the loss of lives and property in the event of future killer wave attacks. Environmental experts are of the opinion that natural fences of mangroves and other trees are preferred to a concrete or stone structure. A seasoned agriculturalist, Moosa of Chidambaram has expressed his apprehension that the sea wall would prevent the flow of rain water into the sea. This would result in flooding of agricultural land and degradation of land owing to stagnation of water. Trees and shrubs along the coast have saved the lives of hundreds of people in some places.

A Nagapattinam based social activist, Jesu Ratnam who has been working among the coastal people for over 15 years, is of the opinion that a sea wall would be a hindrance to the movement of boats. Stressing the need for strengthening the environmental defence system as a long-term post tsunami programme, the agricultural scientist M.S. Swaminathan has called for steps to initiate a coastal bio-shield movement. "Beyond Tsunami An Agenda for Action" (*The Hindu* Jan.17, 2005). And he says that mangroves are very efficient. They will also be very useful in addressing the global warming.

4. Rehabilitation in the field of Agriculture

The issues of removing salinity from the agricultural land inundated by the sea waters need to be addressed. Soil analysis is needed to measure the extent of salinisation. Soil should be restored to its original state. A proper survey needs to be done first. It is important thereafter to study the degree and the nature of salination.

One can grow some salt-tolerant crops like halophytes. There are some rice varieties that are salt-tolerant too. So, as part of agricultural rehabilitation, we must have a land reuse planning for the next few years to grow salt-tolerant varieties of crops, fruits and vegetables.

5. Restoration of Livelihood

The most important problem along the coastal villages of Kanyakumari district is one of over-exploitation of the fishery resources and an alarming increase in craft and gears meant for further exploitation. The tiny district has the highest number of marine fisherfolk numbering 149,607 and also the highest population density, 1929 humans per sq.k.m. Very few people among them are interested in finding alternative employment. And alternative employment is seen to be a worthless dream. It is mostly because of lower education level.

A paradigm shift from unskilled to skilled work is needed. Establishment of coastal information centres is the need of the hour. Education and social mobilization for the community to collectively protect the coast can become very much part of the restoration of livelihood process. The coastal management programme should include the 'Coastal Regulation Zone' plans. The positive development due to tsunami is the interaction between the inland community and the fishing community. This community by the very nature of its work remained practically isolated from the main stream. This interaction should be seen as an opportunity for alternative employment.

ii) Restoration Policy

The question of establishing an early warning system, a feasible technological mechanism, must be regarded as the primary preventive measure that would be preferable to the proverbial cure. It is for the Indian Institute of Oceanography to undertake necessary studies and inform the fishermen of their findings. Apart from these scientific ventures the following four aspects are of prime concern from our experience.

1. The Bad religious influence

In Kanyakumari district all the coastal villagers are Roman Catholic. Comparing with the inland Catholics, the religious leaders in the coastal villages exercise much more influence on the people. The religious leadership in the fishing villages did not help the community to go out into the main stream or develop a liberating class consciousness. The religious leadership pretends to be the saviour of the people in the place of the state. And the coastal system of religious set up does not help lay leadership to emerge from among the fishing community.

Professor John Kurien of the centre for Development Studies, Thiruvananthapuram advocates a master restoration plan, which although formulated by the state government, would be implemented in participatory manner. Now in the tsunami relief and rehabilitation programmes the Catholic Church behaves like a parallel government and naturally the priests become the centre of the show. The restoration process should be seen and used as an opportunity to make a shift from the church to the state and from the priests to the lay leaders.

2. The money lenders

There are money lenders in the major fishing centres of Kanyakumari district, who advance funds for mechanized boats and informally hold a claim to almost all the fish catch from these vessels. In addition, the fish trade in coastal Tamil Nadu is being increasingly controlled by a handful of powerful individuals, companies, or their agents. The commission agents appointed by these individuals literally set the prices of the marine products by controlling the auction mechanism and by demanding the entire catch for the loans already given.

Very often the village administrative system too indirectly perpetuates this exploitation. The fishermen are utterly helpless in this matter. The Catholic Church, though it claims to have full control of the

village, has no control over this issue. In fact the church, too, has a share in the growth of this exploitative system in the coast, by indirectly disallowing any trade union to grow in the coast. The restoration plans need to pay special attention in this area, in order to be effective. Co-operatives should be encouraged.

3. The Coastal Regulation Zone (CRZ)

It is obvious that several thousand lives could have been saved, if the Coastal Regulation Zone plans had been implemented in letter and spirit. The regulation insists that all fishing settlement be kept 500 meters away from the high tide line. The Pichavaram mangrove forest is a living example to the question why CRZ should be implemented. The provisions of the Coastal Regulation Zone are only part of the Environment Protection Act but have no teeth of a formal legislation exclusively meant for this purpose. The government's opposition to CRZ is so great that it has been diluted 17 times since its notification in 1991.

Of course, the fishermen see in the CRZ a sinister move to rob them of their right to live close to the sea. The fishermen want to be near the beach to carry on their fishing activities such as fish landing, sorting, auctioning and drying the nets. And they demand exemption to fishermen from the Coastal Regulation Zone stipulation against construction within a distance of 500 meters from the coast.

The housing safety issues of the fishermen should not be neglected. The 500 meters pullback zone should be a 'no development zone'. No construction activity should be allowed here. It is important to recognize that fisherfolk contribute as much to the economy as tourism does. We need to look at the livelihood concern and food security of the local communities and ensure that commercial interests do not destroy the existing sustainable livelihood of the local community. The CRZ could be a barrier to protect human habitation from nature's fury. And so the government or private owners should not occupy this space.

4. Orphans of the Waves

The worst victims of tsunami are children. According to UNICEF children account for one third of the victims of the calamity and in Tamil Nadu it is 50 to 60 percentage. The Aid organizations talk of 1.5 million children, dead, orphaned or made homeless in the disaster. No doubt that the relief plans must give high priority to find out the children who have lost their families and reunite them with their families.

Orphanages are mushrooming in Kanyakumari district since the tsunami. New trusts are being founded only to channel tsunami funds. Orphanages seem to be the safe investment place. In a statement, the Tamil Nadu Chief Minister Jayalalitha also said that new homes each sheltering at least 100 children would be opened in Nagapattanam, Cuddalore and Kanyakumari. Large scale trafficking in children have been reported, under the guise of adoption.

It is far better for a child to remain with in the home community. However you may name it, "Happy Home" or "Mahizhvu Illam", an orphanage is an orphanage. It cannot replace a home. Our restoration plan should bear this in mind. Why not we learn from the Andaman and Nicobar Islands? They aim at doing things in such a way that none among them should feel orphaned. The community takes whole responsibility for all the children who lost their parents. The main land concept of bank balance, property and private ownership has no meaning for them. Among them community comes first and everything belongs to the community.

Conclusion

The fishermen are overwhelmed by the spontaneous and generous flow of aid and moral support from people all over the country. No one can compensate the lives lost. No doubt, property and livelihood loss can be restored to a considerable extent. Many of the affected people

complained that relief materials did not actually reach those who needed them badly. They alleged that vested interests are cornering the aid materials. It is high time for the communities and the public to watch over whether the allotted funds are being used properly for the reconstruction of the affected communities.

As our Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh said, we should see an opportunity to build back better by adding a quality dimension to reconstruction and to services that are being restored. In the words of Dr. Swaminathan, we should not only rehabilitate the affected people to their original level, but also go a step forward and try to bring them above the poverty line. Let us deem the tsunami as an occasion for a change for the better.