

ACCOUNTABILITY OVERDUE

LEARNINGS FROM
PARTICIPATORY ENGAGEMENT
WITH THE TSUNAMI AFFECTED



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INSTITUTE FOR
PARTICIPATORY
PRACTICES

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About Praxis

Praxis- Institute for Participatory Practices is a not-for-profit, autonomous, development organization, committed to the democratization of development processes. Praxis is devoted to advocating for community-led development initiatives and governance practices, that centralize the perspectives of poor men, women, boys and girls.



To achieve these goals, Praxis has partnered with communities, national and international development agencies, and governments and non-governmental organizations, from across the world. In the recent past, the organisation has conducted a number of participatory studies, poverty profiling exercises, and micro-level plans, while also training of a large number of development professionals and institutions in participatory approaches. For additional information on Praxis, please refer to our website: www.praxisindia.org.

The views expressed in this book are that of the authors, and do not necessarily reflect Praxis' views.

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For Praxis Publications contact our offices:

DELHI

C-75 South Extension, Part II

New Delhi 110049

Tel/Fax: +91 11 5164 2348/49/50/51

E-mail: info@praxisindia.org

RANCHI

Opp. Ali Imam Kothi

Dipatoli, P.O. Bariatu

Hazaribagh Rd., Ranchi - 09

Tel: +91 651 309 4196

PATNA

18A, Patliputra Colony

Patna 800 013

Tel/Fax: +91 612 2267 557/58

AFGHANISTAN

Hs #74 Main Street

Qala-e-Fatullah, Kabul

Tel: +93 793 21441

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to the memory of the tsunami victims and to all the inspiring girls, boys, women and men who are piecing together their lives and livelihoods with great dignity. Their resilience amidst these trying circumstances has been a source of strength for all those involved.

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These learnings would not have been possible without the hard work of all the researchers and village volunteers who worked tirelessly with the Praxis team. The co-operation of South India Federation of Fishermen Societies (SIFFS), Social Need Educational and Human Awareness (SNEHA) and NGO Coordination and Resource Center (NCRC) requires special acknowledgement, as they played a crucial role in local facilitation. These exercises greatly benefited from the guidance of Ephrem Soosai, V. Vivekanandan, Vijay Kuppu of SIFFS; Jesu Ratnam of SNEHA; and Ram Mohan, Ajay Kuruvilla, Vinay Raj, Annie George of NCRC. Praxis is especially grateful to American India Foundation for their partial financial support.

Background

The tsunami that swept lives and property off the shores of many countries caused devastating damage on the Indian coasts as well. The devastating disaster has forever changed the lives of fisher people, farmers, traders, and other fishing and agriculture dependent communities residing along the Coromandel coast. Support for relief and rehabilitation from around the world has been unprecedented. The affected communities are embarking upon the long, difficult process of rehabilitation. It is critical that the actions taken towards rehabilitation are directly responsive to the affected community's pressing needs, and actively incorporate the invaluable wisdom and expertise of those affected.

Praxis -Institute for Participatory Practices recognized the need to facilitate the community's participation in the rehabilitation process, and strongly believes that community involvement in these planning processes is a non-negotiable prospect. Praxis therefore undertook intensive Village Level People's Planning and Social Mapping exercises in tsunami-affected villages across Nagapattinam, Tamil Nadu and Karaikal, Pondicherry.

The Village Levels People's Plans specifically focus on involving the affected communities in the planning process, and actively captures their realities, aspirations, and challenges. The plans serve as powerful statements, directly from the communities, and can be utilized as planning/reference documents by all investors, government and non-governmental.

Praxis chose to engage in Nagapattinam and Karaikal districts, the worst affected areas on the mainland of India. All of our efforts have been in close collaboration with SIFFS and SNEHA, two leading NGOs who had pre-tsunami relationships with the affected coastal communities, and the NCRC, the NGO Coordination and Resource Centre. In the Village Level People's Plans, we sought to 1) Profile the village, its political economy and the post tsunami



realities, aspirations and challenges of the affected communities, and 2) Create community-led pre-tsunami social maps, in order to establish a public document detailing the property ownership that existed before the tsunami.

In order to gain a comprehensive understanding of each village's dynamics, and the challenges and aspirations of different community groups, Praxis facilitated the following meetings in villages across Nagapattinam and Karaikal.

PROCESS STEPS¹

- ◆ Introductory Meeting with Traditional Panchayat
- ◆ Social Map: A large group of community members map the status of the village, and the properties of the community before the tsunami
- ◆ Participatory Census: Detailed household-wise information collected on different indicators.
- ◆ History: Discussion with Elders and panchayat members
- ◆ Fish Market Dynamics: Discussions with Fishermen and Women Vendors
- ◆ Focus Group Discussions: Men, Women, Young Men, Young Women, Boys, Girls, Widows and Women Headed-Households, Disabled, Elderly, Kudipillai, Dalits, Religious Minorities, etc.

Through Village Level Planning we gained a great deal of insight into initiatives that the communities are interested in pursuing, while also gauging other dynamics that organizations will have to contend with as they implement programs across Nagapattinam and Karaikal.

Accountability Overdue attempts to synthesise the key learnings from the entire Village Level Planning process conducted in 28 villages and brings to the fore the overall key issues. This analysis is only a starting point. The challenge lies in how we incorporate these perspectives into rehabilitation programmes. We hope that the perspectives presented will serve as a foundation, and will be further built upon to aptly respond to the needs of the affected communities.

¹ Throughout the entire process, Praxis utilized PRA tools such as venn diagramming, card sorting, mobility mapping, among others, to facilitate discussions with community members.

CHAPTER 1

About Learning and Unlearning...

TOM THOMAS

INVOLVEMENT OF THE affected communities in disaster management is a fairly nascent concept, however surprising it may seem. There is an urgency and sense of immediacy that is intrinsically entwined to disaster response. Therefore, practice has it that natural disasters and calamities are dealt with from a supply side management and logistics perspective. (Characteristically, ex-military personnel are in great demand temporarily with organisations that venture into relief and rehabilitation efforts, however much they would otherwise frown upon the top down, delivery-at-all-cost approach to aid and care!) This despite the fact that the description, 'on war footing', to rescue and relief efforts hold currency for no more than a week into the disaster. Systematic relief delivery and arduous rehabilitation programmes are today planned efforts, encapsulating a long-term perspective and strategic vision. This is born out of the experience that natural calamities that engulf whole regions and communities, killing thousands of lives and depriving lakhs of livelihoods, demand efforts of years to nurture the affected back on their feet.

How critical is it to facilitate the participation of the affected communities in the planning and decision making processes linked to disaster response? Indeed too critical, which is what the Village Level Planning exercises that Praxis facilitated in the tsunami-affected regions of Nagapattinam and Karaikal bear out. Stand alone booklets¹ capture a representative sampling of the individual

¹ Separately published as Village Level People's Plans for 28 villages included in the enclosed CD



Given the magnitude and multi-national nature of the tsunami disaster, there has been an unprecedented generation of aid money from across the globe.

The post-disaster situation, regretfully, demands of several agencies to expend their allotments quickly, irrespective of ground realities.

The indiscriminate use of money and the tendency to spend on visible things is thus built into the international emergency aid framework itself.

village level plans that Praxis facilitated. This compilation, on the other hand, seeks to capture the learnings from the exercise which transcend the confines of the village as overbearing characteristics, general trends and tendencies, overall processes in motion, or which retain overarching policy implications.

As this compilation places on record at several instances, the immediate relief efforts that followed the tsunami disaster in Tamil Nadu stand out for their efficiency, reach and corruption-free delivery. This is an achievement that has few parallels in disaster management in the country, the credit for which must truly be apportioned in equal measure among the Government, the

traditional Panchayats and the scores of relief agencies. This cannot however make us oblivious to some of the disturbing trends that have set in, following the phase of immediate rescue and relief operations. The scramble among NGOs for capturing operational areas reached the point of direct lobbying with the Government. Deliberate undermining of NGOs that have had a long term presence and consequently an intricate understanding of the local milieu became common. The job market in the voluntary sector got overheated, with several national NGOs losing their staff to INGOs.

Given the magnitude and multi-national nature of the tsunami disaster, there has been an unprecedented generation of aid money from across the globe. The post-disaster situation, regretfully, demands of several agencies to expend their allotments quickly, irrespective of ground realities. The indiscriminate use of money and the tendency to spend on visible things is thus built into the international emergency aid framework itself. The indiscriminate distribution of fishing gear in complete disregard for the carrying capacity of the sea (and, now worse still, trawlers!) is just one manifest example. What it underscores is the need for interventions to take onboard the question of downward accountability to communities and not just the upward accountability to the donors. Even the latter has, in several reported instances, been reduced to telling the donors that 'x' no. of communities / people were covered and 'n' no. of things were distributed all within record time! The reality cannot be skirted: emergency relief and rehabilitation have assumed proportions of a full fledged sector or industry in the development world. And there is a compelling case for a thorough re-look at the framework of accountability associated with emergency money.

The political economy of the coastal communities, especially the fishing community, seems to have been lost on several agencies involved in relief and

rehabilitation efforts. Agencies with no previous experience of engaging with the coastal communities end up superimposing their agrarian analysis onto the fishing community. The bane of this genre of rehabilitation efforts has been the rather crude quest for social re-engineering. This enthusiasm springs from the mindset that development agencies are mandated to use disasters to re-engineer the social fabric in favour of the disadvantaged. The attempt sadly demonstrates the clear lack of even a basic understanding of the political economy within which the re-engineering is attempted. Thus, boats are being given out under group ownership schemes, the avowed objective being, turning 'boat-less' labourers into boat owners. All the while assuming that it is akin to turning a landless labourer into the land owning class! Part of the same stipulation is that a widow/woman need be added as one of the owners of the boat. No matter that in a culture where sharing is done only amongst those who toil and battle it out in the sea, the women's names will remain merely on paper with no share in the catch or from its proceeds.

A more acute problem has been the callous disregard shown by some relief agencies to the traditional governance structure of the coastal communities. Traditional Panchayats are not archaic feudal structures, but a living reality for the coastal communities. It is important for aid agencies to move beyond the stereotype when assessing the role and relevance of traditional institutions of self-governance. The immense role that the Panchayat and the collective consciousness of the fishing community played in rebounding back from the tragedy needs to be deciphered for its true import. But that can only be possible when the pet themes of the NGO world are assigned its proper place against the realities at the grassroots. It is this lack of humility that leads organisations to assume that they can engage with a fishing village on their own terms, without properly consulting the traditional Panchayat. There have been instances of attempts at demonising the traditional Panchayat as 'katta panchayat' (meaning a corrupt Panchayat where decisions are taken based on caste and money power). In more than one instance this has degenerated into conscious re-engineering attempts to dismantle traditional Panchayats and work directly with families and even form alternate groupings that subvert the authority of the Panchayats. By-passing leaders in the community, and making assumptions about the relevance and responsiveness of the traditional governance structure are risky when formulating relief and rehabilitation initiatives. Aside from inappropriate short-term relief efforts, this misjudgment is on recurring display when relating with the institution of the traditional Panchayat in long-term rehabilitation plans.

The compilation also addresses aspects related to exclusion. While much of the exclusion related to relief distribution has been subtle, it brings up some of the entrenched discrimination that prevails in the coastal communities. Caste and gender discrimination has been the undercurrent in Dalit and women-headed households having had a disproportionate share of relief assistance. The



understandable focus on the fishing community, who were literally in the mouth of the tragedy, has tended to ignore the agricultural community, where disparities in compensation for crop loss, land reclamation, etc. have been highlighted.

But exclusion of a different kind is waiting to unfold in the coastal areas. Tunnel visioned attempts at pushing the entire coastal community inland would be disastrous for their livelihoods. It would also lay open the beachfronts for capture by various vested interests, including the prawn farm lobby and the tourism industry. The demand of the fisher people that they will only shift away from the coast if their beachside dwellings are retained, is vigorously championed in this compilation.

Due caution should be exercised against the ill-conceived plans of governments under the guise of implementing safety measures. The mega plans for indiscriminate construction of sea walls, is a case in point. Attempts of this nature, which are only meant to fill the pockets of the contractor lobby and could possibly irrevocably alter the marine environment while offering little protection against natural disasters, need to be approached with caution. The critical importance of natural protection measures such as sand dunes and mangroves, and native as well as scientific wisdom such protection measures embody are also well captured in the compilation.

The Village Level Planning exercise took onboard some critical developments that are bound to impact the lives of the tsunami-affected in particular and the coastal communities in general. The over-saturation of the coast with fishing gear when fishing has been reduced to a zero sum game is one instance. The prawn farms play havoc with the coastal eco-system and pose a continuing threat to peace in the coastal areas. The threat of the Sethusamudram project looms large, aptly described by organisations of coastal communities as another tsunami in the making.

But ultimately, this compilation reiterates the crucial importance of having affected communities as active participants in planning and monitoring rehabilitation and reconstruction efforts that are using the money raised in their name. We sign off from this truly enriching learning experience with the conviction that community participation in post-disaster planning is a non-negotiable prospect.

CHAPTER 2

Tsunami Fact File

Origin	Earthquake off the western coast of northern Sumatra
Date	26-Dec-04
Scale	9.0 on the Richter scale
Countries affected	20
Countries suffering major casualties and damage	Indonesia, Sri Lanka, India, Thailand, Malaysia, Maldives
Countries suffering some casualties and damage	Bangladesh, Kenya, Myanmar, Seychelles, Somalia, South Africa, Tanzania, Yemen
Countries suffering damage only	Australia, Madagascar, Mauritius, Oman, French Reunion, Singapore
People dead	153,000
People missing	143,000
People Affected	over 2.2million
People displaced	1,135,000

Country	Dead	Missing	Displaced
Indonesia	105,162	127,774	441,041
Sri Lanka	30,959	5,563	555,298
India	10,749	5,640	112,558
Maldives	82	26	12,698
Thailand	5,388	3,120	N/A
Malaysia	68	6	8,000
Somalia	150		5,000
Seychelles	3		40
	152,561	142,129	1,134,635



State	Deaths		Injured	Missing	Evacuees	Refugees
	Official	Estimated				
Tamil Nadu	7,960	8,000	—	—	500,000	310,000
Andaman & Nicobar	1,310	7,000	200	5,544	17,000	37,000
Pondicherry	590	665	—	75	70,000	6,100
Andhra Pradesh	105	116	—	11	34,000	0 (All returned)
Kerala	171	171	700	—	25,000	25,000
Total	10,136	16,000	900	5,630	650,000	380,000

Factor	Tsunami damage in India				Total
	Andhra Pradesh	Kerala	Tamil Nadu	Pondicherry	
Population affected	211,000	2,470,000	691,000	43,000	3,415,000
Area affected (km ²)	7.9	Unknown	24.87	7.9	40.67
Length of coast affected (km)	985	250	1,000	25	2,260
Extent of penetration (km)	0.5 - 2.0	1 - 2	1 - 1.5	0.30 - 3.0	
Reported height of tsunami (m)	5	3-5	7-10	10	
Villages affected	301	187	362	26	876
Dwelling units	1,557	11,832	91,037	6,403	110,829
Cattle lost	195	Unknown	5,476	3,445	9,116

Note: Given the nature of data, there are discrepancies between figures reported by various units of the respective Governments as also by sections of the media.

Nagapattinam - DAMAGES SUMMARY AS ON 29.01.2005	
1. Human lives lost	6065
2. Total No. of persons missing including fishermen	791
3. Fishermen missing	—
4. No. of boats missing	11122
5. No. of persons evacuated	1,96,184
6. Number of relief camps opened	10

Karaikal Region-DAMAGE SUMMARY	
Loss of lives (Upto 03/01/2005)	471 Persons
Estimated Missing	105 Persons
Population affected	25,000 Persons
Houses Damaged	7,371 houses
No. of Persons Evacuated	15,000 Persons
No. of Relief Camps	22



CHAPTER 3

Area Profile

AUROMALA DAS

TAMIL NADU, ONE among the four southern Indian states, shares its borders with Andhra Pradesh towards the north, Karnataka on the northwest side and Kerala on the western side. With the Bay of Bengal towards the east and the expanse of the Indian Ocean forming the southern coastline, Tamil Nadu forms the tip of the Indian peninsula. The total area of the state is 130,058 sq. km., the population stands at around 62,110,800 and Tamil is the official language. Statistically, the literacy rate of Tamil Nadu is 62.66 per cent.

TOPOGRAPHY

The land mass of the state can be divided into two natural divisions:

1. The Eastern coastal plains
2. The hilly region along the North and the West

On the western side, which is part of the Western Ghats, the Palghat Gap is the only marked break in the whole mountain range. To the south of the gap, is the Anamalai range or the Elephant hills. On the east are the Palani Hills famous for the Kodaikanal hill station. The Nilgiris and Anamalai ranges are home to lush evergreen forests and the peak Doddabetta in Ootacamund. Ootacamund is popularly known as Ooty, the 'Queen of hill stations' in India, and is 2640 metres above sea level. The eastern coastal plains include the Cauvery delta. The

rivers of the state flow eastward from the Western Ghats and are entirely rain-fed. The perennial river Cauvery flows across Tamil Nadu and is the largest river of the state.

EARLY HISTORY

RECORDED HISTORY REVEALS that the Dravidians inhabited the area since the 4th millennium BC. With the coming of the Aryans, the Dravidians were pushed deeper towards the south where they ultimately settled around 1500 BC. From 4th century AD, the dynasties of the Cholas, Palavas Cheras, Pandyas and the Chaulukyas ruled the region, and extended its influence to Ceylon, Indochina, Malaya, Java, and Bali. During the 14th-16th centuries, the Vijaynagar empire ruled the region. Later, smaller autonomous states emerged. In 1640, the British East India Company established what was to become its chief trading post at Fort St. George. Its proximity to the sea had established the Tamil Country on the maritime map of the world even before the dawn of the Christian era. The Tamils had trade links with ancient Egypt, Greece and Rome.

RECENT HISTORY

THE STATE OF Tamil Nadu, formerly part of the Madras Presidency under the British, came into being with the State Re-organisation Act of 1956, based on language. The state is divided into 26 Administrative Districts. These in turn are further divided into smaller divisions and subdivisions that give it a total of 17,272 villages. The state capital, Madras renamed Chennai in recent years, is the fourth largest city in the Indian sub-continent.

ECONOMY

TAMIL NADU IS one of the most industrialized states in India and industries are concentrated in Chennai, Coimbatore, Salem and Tiruchchirappalli. The state has a good deal of mineral wealth including coal, iron ore, chromite, bauxite, limestone, and manganese. Cotton, leather, and sugar refining are long-established industries.

Agriculture is the main source of livelihood for the majority of the population in Tamil Nadu. It depends largely on irrigation. There are more than 20,000 km. of irrigation channels, which form a complex network. Cash crops include tea, coffee, spices, sugar cane, oilseeds and coconut. Rice, millets, groundnuts are cultivated largely as subsistence crops and depend on tank and well irrigation. Flower cultivation for exports as well as for the domestic market is, recently, a major source of income for many.

Apart from agriculture, the 1000 km. long coastline, with its equatorial



climate, gives rise to year round fishery and farming. The state, with abundant skilled labour, well operated freezing plants and cold storages has a fairly stable presence in the fishery sector. With over 200 registered exporters of marine products, investment opportunities are high in areas such as shrimp farming, crab culture, seaweed culture, etc. The fishing industry is the second largest among the Indian states, after Kerala.

The film industry in Tamil Nadu is also the second largest in India.

NAGAPATTINAM

PRESENTLY, THE DISTRICT Nagapattinam comprises of eleven blocks, none of which were spared by the tsunami that struck in December 2004. The eleven blocks are: Vedharanyam, Talainayar, Kelaiyur, Keelvelur, Nagapattinam, Thirumarugal, Sembanarkoil, Kuthalam, Mayiladuthurai, Sirkazhi and Kollidam.

The district headquarters is the city of Nagapattinam, with a population of about 100,000. Located along the coast, it is home to some highly revered places of worship like the Soundararajan Perumal Koil, Neelayatakshmi Amman Koil, church of Vailankanni and the mosque at Nagore. Within its geographical limits, it also encompasses the remains of a Buddhist monastery believed to be from 3rd century B.C.

During the 16th and 17th century, this coastal land saw the arrival of the Portuguese and the Dutch. The church of Vailankanni meaning Virgin Mary, dates back to that era. It is believed that a Portuguese merchant ship while sailing from Macao to Colombo was left adrift in the Bay of Bengal and was miraculously saved by Mary the 'Star of the Sea'. A shrine was dedicated to her, which is now one of the most important places of pilgrimage for Christians in India.

These stretches of the Indian coastline are no strangers to the ravages of the sea. There are records of a tidal wave washing away a Buddhist monastery in Nagapattinam in 900 A.D. A similar story of an enraged sea is also recorded in the Tamil Buddhist epic Manimekhalai. It narrates how Puhar or Kaveripattinam, an ancient port-city located at the confluence of the Kaveri River and the Bay of Bengal, bore the wrath of a goddess when a Chola king, bereaved by the loss of his son, failed to mark the annual Indra festival celebrations. The legend recounts that she cursed the city, and since the sea obeyed her orders, the entire place was engulfed by waves.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC PROFILE

PATTINAVARS AND VANNIYARS are the two most prominent communities in Nagapattinam district. Apart from these communities, Pillais, Naidus and Chettiars also inhabit the district. While fishing and agriculture remain the main



livelihood options for the various communities, there are many who earn their living by running small shops, working as daily wage labourers or as hawkers.

FISHING COMMUNITIES

ALTHOUGH ONE CAN come across a few agriculturists and traders within the fishing community, by and large, fishing remains the primary livelihood choice of the community. Division of labour between men and women remains traditionally demarcated. Men venture into the sea while women sell the catch. Agents who buy fish on behalf of export companies are also a common feature of the fishing community.

The common fishing vessels used include sail kattumarams as well as kattumarans with engines. Fibreglass boats with engines, also referred to as Maruti boats, are expensive and typically have high operating costs. Maruti boats are able to venture deeper into the sea than kattumarams and therefore the catch consists of larger fish varieties that fetch better prices at the market. One distinctive feature is that fishermen earn shares of their vessel's catch, rather than only wages.

Fishing has its high and low periods and season-wise, the months of March, April and August are the best in terms of size of catch. The fish catch reduces between October and December as the sea is rough and very few households are able to venture into the sea during this season. Migration is common during this lean phase and the fisherfolk generally migrate to areas with comparatively gentler waves, such as Kodiakarai.



AGRICULTURAL COMMUNITIES

IN NAGAPATTINAM, farming is predominantly rainfed and the community is made up of marginal, small, medium and large farmers as well as landless labourers. Large or rich farmers are only a handful. Paddy is the most common crop grown and its cyclic duration is between March/April and mid-January. Ploughing is done with tractors, animal drawn ploughs, as well as manually with spades.

Other than bulk paddy cultivation, there is cultivation also of mangoes, coconuts, cashews, groundnuts and vegetables. Most of the paddy in the agricultural villages is for self-consumption. Vegetables and the other crops are however sold in the market.

Monsoons are a low period for the agricultural communities and most survive through this difficult period by relying on the Public Distribution System (PDS).

Farmers in the region predominantly belong to the Vanniyar and Naidu communities.

GOVERNANCE

IN FISHING COMMUNITIES, the traditional Panchayat is the supreme body of governance and its role extends to all spheres of life. Although the statutory Panchayat bodies are in place, they play a subservient role to the traditional body and cannot go against their decisions.

The Panchayat is the main representative of the village to the outside world, particularly when it involves interface with government officials. It takes decisions on behalf of the entire village and settles disputes and conflicts both within its community as well as those involving neighbouring villages. It is the sole arbitrator of all disputes. For instance, no member of the community can directly approach the police when in trouble. Any deviation from the norm calls for strictures and even penalties. There exists a strong bond among village-to-village traditional Panchayats which enables a great deal of solidarity between the fishing communities along the coast.

On the other hand, in agricultural communities, the traditional Panchayat is almost non-existent. Hence, the constitutional Panchayats are more active.

KARAIKAL

(Details related to fishing communities, agricultural communities and governance apply to Karaikal as well as Nagapattinam)

KARAIKAL LIES ON the east coast of Tamil Nadu, about 140 km. south of Pondicherry and 300 km. south of Chennai. Located on the Coramandel coast

of the Bay of Bengal, Karaikal is one of the four regions of the Union Territory of Pondicherry. It is surrounded by Nagapattinam and Thiruvavur districts of Tamil Nadu state. The dominant language is Tamil.

The Union Territory of Pondicherry was colonised by the French as well as the British. The French ruled the district till 31 October 1954. The de facto transfer of power to India took place on 1 November 1954 followed by de jure transfer on 16 August 1962.

Pondicherry is constituted out of the four erstwhile French establishments of Pondicherry, Karaikal, Mahe and Yanam. Karaikal region is embedded in the Nagapattinam and Tiruvavur District of Tamil Nadu State.

Karaikal town, about 16 km. north of Nagapattinam and 9 km. south of Tharangambadi, is the regional headquarters of the Karaikal region. Karaikal region is made up of the communes of Karaikal, Kottuchcheri, Nedungadu, Tirunallar, Niravi and Tirumalarajanpattinam.

Revenue Administrative Sub-division

Name	No. of Revenue Villages
Karaikal Firka	9
Kottuchcheri Firka	5
Nedungadu Firka	5
Tirunallar Firka	11
Niravi Firka	3
Tirumalarajanpattinam Firka	5
TOTAL	37

The region comprises of an area of 161 sq. km. and has a population of 1,70,640 as per the 2001 census. It is among the few regions in the east coast of the country that has a favourable female sex ratio of 1023 women to every 1000 men. The literacy level stands at 74.9 per cent.

Forming part of the fertile Cauveri delta, the Karaikal region is nurtured by the numerous tributaries of the Cauveri. Covered completely by a thick mantle of alluvium soil of varying thickness, the topography of the region is flat, having a gentle slope towards the Bay of Bengal in the east. It is limited on the north by the Nandalar river and on the southeast by the Vettar river. The group of rocks known as Cuddalore formations is within the area contiguous to Karaikal region in Nagapattinam District. The main agricultural crops of the area are: paddy, pulses, cotton, groundnut, banana and vegetables.

Hindus form the largest religious community in this region. In total there are 99 temples in Karaikal region. There are Saivite shrines, Vaishnavite temples, Amman shrines, Ganesh temples and various other temples dedicated to other deities.



The Christian population is around 10-11 per cent and considering the Union Territory of Pondicherry, the highest percentage of Muslim population is in Karaikal. They are supposed to have settled here several centuries ago. Most of the Muslims in Karaikal belong to the Sunni sect.

The devastation brought about by the tsunami left 471 dead in the Karaikal region. A total of 720 hectares of crops was lost, along with a severe loss of animal husbandry.

CHAPTER 4

In The Mouth of the Tragedy

The Immediate Response

AUROMALA DAS AND RAJESHWAR DEVRAKONDA

THE TSUNAMI THAT struck the east coast of India on 26 December 2004 with tidal waves that were 7-10 metres in height, penetrated 300 metres to 1-1.5 km. inland and left in its trail massive destruction. It devastated the coastal communities by killing thousands, destroying houses, boats, fishing gear, agricultural lands, salt pans and wiping out the livelihoods of tens of thousands of households. Women and children constitute $\frac{3}{4}$ of the total dead. Tamil Nadu was the worst affected Indian State with over 7983 people killed as per Government reports. Of the 12 coastal districts that bore the impact of the tsunami, Nagapattinam was the worst affected, where 6,051 people died. Over 824 died in Kanyakumari and 612 were reported dead in Cuddalore district. In Pondicherry, 591 deaths were reported. In Karaikal, 484 persons were reported dead and 66 missing. The all India death toll in the tsunami was around 10,749 people and 6,913 were reportedly injured. It was also reported that 5,640 persons are still missing.

The consequence has been a large number of families homeless, many as widows and widowers, children as orphans, and physically and emotionally shattered people. Although the fishing community was the worst hit, the livelihoods of other coastal communities are also equally affected by this disaster. Assessments given with regard to damage or the death toll are only estimates and the actual loss is immeasurable as the information keeps changing. Information on the extent of physical damage is to a large extent unreliable.



Scores of NGOs landed in the affected districts in the days immediately following the tragedy providing substantial relief to the affected communities. The challenge did not seem to be in mobilising resources to carry out the relief and rehabilitation work, it lay rather in coordinating the efforts of the scores of governmental and non governmental initiatives.

The response to the tsunami that struck in December of 2004 was unprecedented. In India, as elsewhere, the Government, various non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and individuals poured in relief material and exhibited concern and care. Volunteers flooded to the Nagapattinam district, one of the worst affected areas in India, to offer help. The tsunami disaster brought to the fore not just a surge of human compassion, but also the unsung heroism of many who are working for the affected in spite of the numbing nature of the tragedy.

EFFECTIVE ROLL OUT OF THE GOVERNMENTAL MACHINERY

IT WAS THE Government and NGOs however that undertook the bulk of relief and rehabilitation efforts. The Government and the NGOs were taken aback by the enormity of the disaster initially. It may even be fair to say that the Government, in particular, was clueless for the first few days. But once the enormity of the tragedy dawned, it responded with uncharacteristic alacrity. The Tamil Nadu government was quick to ensure efficient disaster management by deputing senior officers with adequate flexibility and resources under their command. (IAS officers were reportedly sent out with briefcases full of cash to meet demands for food, clothes, interim relief, etc).

The Government also distributed relief materials in the form of groceries, rice, clothes, mattresses, oil, etc. In addition to compensation, the Government also provided subsidised loans to help the affected get back on their feet. Although the Government is often considered tardy in its response to many disasters in India, the efficiency with which the governmental machinery in Tamil Nadu responded to the crisis is today a matter of record. The record of the Tamil Nadu government has to be seen against the reports from Nellore in Andhra Pradesh and Karunagapilly in Kerala, which reported instances of police violence against those affected who were protesting the denial of basic relief.

The Tamil Nadu Chief Minister directed the officials of the Revenue Department, under the Relief Commissioner, to co-ordinate search, rescue and relief efforts in collaboration with the District Collectors and the police, fire and rescue services, medical and health services and other associated departments. The State Relief Commissioners opened control rooms to disseminate information to the public, and state government web sites relating to tsunami rescue and relief operations were set up. Supported by the Army, Navy, Air Force and Coast Guard and senior civil servants deputed to affected areas, the district administrations identified and disposed of the dead, removed debris,

rescued and moved people to safer locations, worked to prevent outbreaks of epidemics, and restored basic services such as power and water. In addition, relief camps were opened. Initially, 44,207 people were placed in 58 relief camps. Senior officers also set-up mechanisms to receive feedback of ground realities from NGOs and others. Daily meetings took place between NGO representatives and the government officials for co-ordinated disaster management efforts. Swift action followed when instances of corruption were brought to the notice of senior officials. Stray instances of pilferage of supplies were also immediately plugged. The release of immediate relief and compensation money was notably corruption-free. Similarly, under the circumstances, a transparent process was also followed while accounting for the dead and the injured.

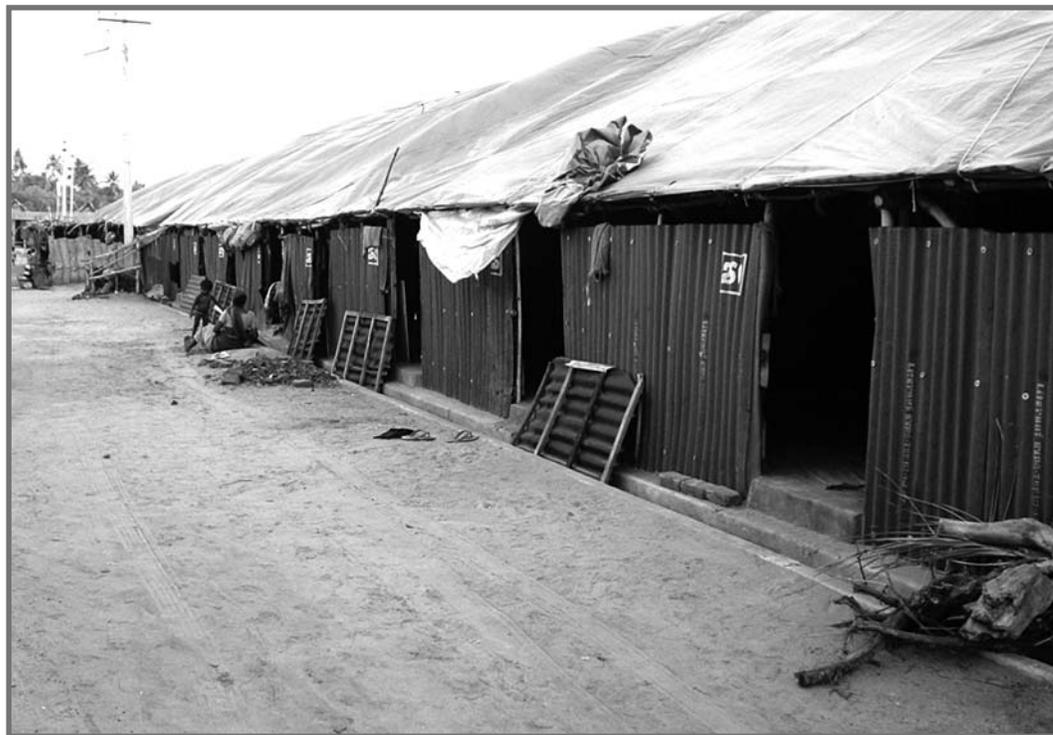
The government announced the following relief measures to the tsunami affected:

- (i) The State government to adopt orphaned children and admit them to state-run childcare centres. The orphaned children would be provided with five lakh rupees comprehensively.
- (ii) The State administration to provide a similar financial package of Rs.5 lakhs for each orphaned adolescent girl in the age group 14-18. They are likely to be admitted to the care service homes run by the State Government to enable these girls to become self-reliant through vocational and technical training.
- (iii) The State and national government will each provide 1 lakh compensation for those who lost their lives.
- (iv) Each person who suffered grievous injuries in the tsunami was given an ex-gratia of Rs. 25,000 and free health services.
- (v) The State government has announced a new pension scheme of Rs. 200 and free rice to the tsunami-affected women and aged.

RESPONSE OF NGOS

IN PARALLEL, THE work done by NGOs has been most appreciated by the affected communities. NGOs were instrumental in providing relief materials, boats, nets, constructing temporary shelters, and providing cash for work programmes. In agricultural communities, they facilitated desilting old ponds, constructing trenches, and so on. Many others concentrated on psycho-social rehabilitation by counseling the affected, whilst others focused on physical health needs by conducting health camps, initiating immunisation drives, and providing medicines.

Scores of NGOs landed in the affected districts in the days immediately following the tragedy providing substantial relief to the affected communities.



The challenge did not seem to be in mobilising resources to carry out the relief and rehabilitation work, it lay rather in coordinating the efforts of the scores of governmental and non governmental initiatives. District NGO Co-ordination Centres were set up that met regularly to coordinate efforts, with varying degrees of success. The construction of temporary shelters, providing rations and livelihood support were taken up as immediate challenges. Livelihood support has been extended to fishermen who have lost boats and nets, and need assessments for other sectors are going on. There has been an attempt to address the issue of education mostly by NGOs through education centers, play schools, amusement centres and Balwadis. Uniforms and books have also been given to children.

SUCCOUR UNTO THE LAST?

AS HIGHLY COMMENDABLE as these efforts have been, the inclusiveness of relief efforts still remain a matter of concern, especially of the Government, arguably the principal actor in the situation. While some exemplary stories are being reported of co-ordinated relief work, the stories from areas outside the glare of disaster cause concern.

Caste-based discrimination has been part of the system for years. Coastal communities are also marked by the discrimination. The relief and rehabilitation activities of the State have started reinforcing these differences, knowingly or unknowingly, to the extent that many of the Dalit communities can no longer work and live with the fishing communities.

While the universal nature of the tragedy needs to be acknowledged, not enough attention has been accorded to the acute vulnerability of women and children. It also highlights systemic gender inequalities that disadvantage women in such processes. It is clear that women's safety and their needs becomes low priority for the community. Even in the case of relief, handled largely through community panchayats, single women were the last to be provided the relief. In the case of widows, they were treated as part of their son's families, despite living separately. Even the compensation for the death of a husband was not provided to the widow but provided to the son, in most cases. Common toilets have been constructed close to the settlements, with little concern for privacy and security of women, lack of adequate health care to women, inadequate attention to the livelihood needs of the erstwhile fresh-fish and dry-fish selling women, lack of women's representation in the traditional panchayats, are only some of the concerns.

Similarly, securing the livelihoods of the coastal agricultural communities and marginalized communities is another task. While the majority of the affected are undoubtedly fisherfolk, scant attention is being paid to the fact that in Tamil Nadu alone about 26,000 hectares of agricultural land has been destroyed and animal husbandry has been lost. The focus on the fishing community, in some ways hampered visibility of the agricultural community, which was not an organised.

It is evident that many groups and communities, including the inland/backwater fishing and para fishing communities, non fishing and coastal agricultural communities have been either excluded or discriminated in the relief and rehabilitation processes of the State. Since they did not suffer from visible physical damages, these communities have not been listed as eligible for relief. Even though they have lost their livelihoods sources and in many cases these losses are irrevocable, their needs are not being met.

Relief and rehabilitation claims are always a contentious matter calling for great sensitivity both in the identification of the truly affected and in the inclusion of the sections who cannot on their own make their voices heard. The reports of fake claims that would eventually deprive the genuinely affected are a matter of concern.

WHITHER NGO CO-ORDINATION?

VOLUNTARY RELIEF EFFORTS have not been spared criticism. Accusations ranging from some agencies and celebrities taking advantage of the situation to



advertise themselves, without accomplishing much work, to criticism regarding community non-participation in planning have come to the fore.

There have been many reports of NGOs politicking with government officials to get villages allotted in their names. The competition among external NGOs created many problems for several local NGOs.

Whilst a level of NGO co-ordination has been reported from Tamil Nadu, several other agencies, including corporate houses, religious institutions, and a host of other players including several NGOs themselves remain outside the scope of this co-ordination. This has resulted in aid and relief over-reach in some pockets (which has sometimes created problems for the recipients themselves as in the instances of multiple vaccinations and administering of the same pills over and over by multiple agencies!). But more importantly, areas that did not present a spectacle have been by and large ignored by relief workers despite the people suffering a great deal.

THE STRENGTH OF SELF-MANAGED COMMUNITIES

THE STRONG COMMUNITY structure of the fishing community helped in avoiding some of the post emergency ills, especially the trafficking of women and children (something which happened in Orissa soon after the super cyclone with pimps roaming the villages to pick up stranded women and children). The decisiveness of government action in quickly setting up check posts had a deterrent impact.

The effective streamlining of relief and rehabilitation was to a large extent facilitated by the traditional Panchayats of the fisherfolk. The mandate and authority of the Panchayat could be viewed as the primary enabling ground condition for the systematic distribution of relief. The authority of the Panchayat was at telling display when many NGO/INGOs insisted in by-passing the Panchayat and dealing with individual households. While many agencies distributed tokens to each household against which relief materials were distributed, the Panchayats ensured that every one pooled the material together which was then redistributed under its aegis!

CHAPTER 5

No less a plight

The crippling impact of the tsunami
on fishing-dependent communities

ANURAG SINHA

THE TSUNAMI THAT swept the coastal belt of Tamil Nadu on 26 December 2004 caused colossal damage in terms of loss of lives and property. The fishing community bore the major brunt of the disaster due to the proximity of their habitation to the sea. Thousands of people belonging to the fishermen community lost their lives and many more lost their houses, vessels, fishing equipment and other key assets. The loss of vessels and fishing equipment created a severe livelihood crisis for the fishermen community. The fairly quick response of the State and other development actors to the natural disaster is indeed a matter of record. The mobilization of funds and material by skilled personnel of the non-profit sector was also unprecedented.

It is unacceptable that after decades of experience, relief and rehabilitation, workers tend to seek out the visible face of tragedy and devastation. The plight of the fishing dependent communities, as distinguished from fisher people themselves, is a telling case in point. The losses faced by these communities were not as blatant as those faced by the fishermen, as they stayed away from the sea, hence the tsunami did not cause any major loss of life or property. However, the impact of the tsunami was equally debilitating as it crippled their livelihoods. The relief and rehabilitation measures, both of the State and non-profit organisations have almost invariably bypassed this section of people.

A classic example of a fishing dependent community would be the cycle fish vendors who used to visit fishing villages daily to purchase fish, which they would later sell in different markets. Cycle fish vending is not a traditional occupation of any particular community and several people belonging to poor families are engaged in it. A large number of youth from the Dalit communities



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in the tsunami affected region were involved in this occupation. The cycle fish vendors were small time traders who could not compete with big merchants and company agents and hence purchased small and inexpensive fish to sell in the local area. Their livelihoods were severely affected by the complete halt to fishing activities in the immediate aftermath of the tsunami. Despite the crisis, they did not receive any relief from the Government or any voluntary organization. They were forced to resort to new and different occupations such as wage labour or as vendors of fruits and vegetables in different markets. Susai Raj, a seasoned cycle fish vendor feels that

being unorganised, unlike the fisher people, forfeited them many relief entitlements. Despite the strength of the numbers of fish vendors, they lacked the bargaining power and collective voice that their counterparts in the fisher people community so effectively put to use.

Labourers engaged in loading and unloading fish on the harbours suffered from a similar plight. The big commission agents at Nagai harbour used to employ several men and women for loading, unloading and cleaning fish. Several labourers from the Dalit communities used to work for the commission agents and earn around Rs.150/- per day. While the women were hired to clean fish and stack it in boxes of ice, the men were engaged in unloading the fish from the trawlers along with the crew, packing the fish into boxes and loading it into the vehicles sent by the trading firms. The livelihoods of these Dalit labourers were completely disrupted due to cessation of fishing operations.

Several young boys, from both the Pattinavar and Dalit communities, worked as trawler watchmen. Each trawler owner employed one watchman for his vessel, while it was parked at the Nagai harbour. The job of the watchman was to take care of the trawler. Their responsibility included cleaning the trawler, looking after nets, engines and icebox as well as draining water from the boat floor. The watchmen were paid Rs.150 per day, but only when the vessel was parked at the fishing harbour. With the majority of the trawlers having been damaged and the others out of work, these watchmen became jobless.

Apart from the impact on labour, the tsunami has also affected several small-time mobile vendors who used to sell eatables, tea and miscellaneous items at the harbour. As fish was not being auctioned, the harbour remained deserted and hence there was negligible demand for the products sold by these vendors. Apart from affecting their livelihoods, this has resulted in added drudgery for these vendors who had to go to Nagapattinam to sell their products.



Several big time traders, such as ice factory owners, have incurred major losses due to lack of demand for ice as well as damage caused by the tsunami to their ice factories. Although most of the factory owners have the capacity to bear the losses caused by the tsunami, the situation of ice factory workers, hailing mostly from Dalit communities has turned precarious.

CONCLUSION

ON THE FACE of it, the losses suffered by the fishing dependent sections may seem to pale in comparison to the fate that befell the fishing community. However, these communities have become vulnerable due to the extended livelihood crisis, accentuated by the scant attention paid to them by relief and rehabilitation agencies. Though their losses were not as visible, they were equally traumatic and crippling for these communities.



CHAPTER 6

On the Fringes of Tsunami Aid

The Neglect of Agricultural Communities

AUROMALA DAS

THE TSUNAMI THAT struck with devastating fury on the Tamil Nadu coast in December 2004, left in its trail massive destruction, the chief victims of which were the fisher people of the coastal region. Understandably, relief and rehabilitation efforts have focused on offering immediate succour and rebuilding the lives of the fisher people. As has invariably been the case with calamities of such nature, there are communities and sections of people on whom the disaster left an equally debilitating impact, but whose plight seems to receive meager attention. Removed from the visible face of the tragedy, and consequently out of media glare, these sections are left to wait their turn and even when relief arrives, it is seldom commensurate with the losses suffered. The plight of fishing dependent communities, discussed elsewhere in this compilation, is one such segment. Another section of people that has been severely affected by the tsunami disaster but on whom the compensation programme of the governments or the rebuilding efforts of the NGOs are inadequately focused are the farmers. Scant attention is being paid to the fact that in Tamil Nadu alone, about 26,000 hectares of agricultural land has been affected by the tsunami, with standing crops almost completely destroyed.

Nagapattinam district that bore the brunt of the destruction, while being a major fishing district, is also an important agricultural district of the state. Approximately 80% of the people of Nagapattinam district continue to rely on agriculture for their livelihood. The condition of the farmers was already

precarious in the district, even before the tsunami struck, with consecutive near drought situations prevailing for the previous three years. Three crop failures in a row, inadequate drought relief measures of 2003-2004 and the ever nagging problem of untimely release of water from the Mettur dam on which the crops crucially depend, had all but created a situation of desperation upon which the tsunami landed as the proverbial last straw.

The water that was used to irrigate the fields is now saline. The lands have sand and mud deposits. They are also saline and baked hard in the sun, which prevents germination of seeds. Assessed for its true impact, the resumption of full scale agricultural activities require tending back the earth over several years and the consequence on the lives and livelihood of the agricultural communities remains to be assessed.

Despite these circumstances, after the tsunami, the State Government fixed Rs. 400 per acre as compensation for an affected farmer. Its meagerness has to be compared with the fact that on an average a farmer in the region spends upwards of Rs. 6,000 for an acre of paddy crop. Considering the inadequacy of Government compensation, there is a danger that the revival of agriculture in the silt covered farms will be indefinitely delayed.

The help from the NGOs quarter was in the form of relief materials and services. The services included removal of mud from ponds, building of trenches leading to the sea, construction of toilets, digging of new ponds, and formation of SHGs which were provided vocational training and loans. Some NGOs also provided household requirements and provisions.

While impact assessment of the extent of damage on the fishing communities has been aplenty, there is dearth of information on the impact of the tsunami on water sources, drainage channels, water harvesting structures, etc. to assist long-term planning. These must receive priority from governmental and non-governmental quarters.

Surprisingly, while several NGOs/INGOs have attempted social engineering under the garb of tsunami rehabilitation in the fishing sector, they have shied away from any such attempts in the agricultural milieu in Nagapattinam. Despite the fact that the attempt at turning every fisherman into a boat owner had taken its cue from the agrarian reality of landless agricultural labourers! While it is completely misplaced and counter productive in the fishing sector, the organisations would do well to divert some money into the agriculture

The fact that reclaiming lands affected by the tsunami is a long and arduous task is probably lost on the Government in particular, as well as the aid agencies. Comparisons to the better deal that the fisher people got, while unwarranted, are understandable. This often stretches to arguments that the resources in the sea have not been affected by the tsunami, as opposed to agricultural lands that must now be reclaimed at great cost and time.



villages and attempt their social re-engineering here - buy land for the landless labourers and provide rolling capital. In fact, the opportunity that post-tsunami reconstruction provides is apt also to engineer other social equity measures such as equal wages, payment of minimum wages, etc.

The fact that reclaiming lands affected by the tsunami is a long and arduous task is probably lost on the Government in particular, as well as the aid agencies. This is the main cause of resentment among the affected farmers. Comparisons with the better deal that the fisher people got, while unwarranted, are understandable. This often stretches to arguments that the resources in the sea have not been affected by the tsunami, as opposed to agricultural lands that must now be reclaimed at great cost and time. Individual farmers cannot reclaim agricultural fields, as costs involved are prohibitive.

The importance of restoring the livelihoods of the farmers at the earliest cannot be over emphasized. This necessarily involves compensating for loss of standing crops, providing resources and machinery for reclamation (desilting, desalination, regeneration, etc.) of the land and irrigation sources, and provision of finances for investing in the land - seed, fertilizer, pesticides, etc. It is as important as replacing damaged boats and nets. The provision of assistance must also extend to regenerating common properties such as ponds, drainage structure, rivers, water harvesting structures, grazing land and other common resources.

CHAPTER 7

Beyond the zero sum game of fishing

Exploring alternate livelihood options

MADHURA PANDIT

THE REALITY OF the finiteness of marine resources is still only conceptual, going by the relentless efforts at marine exploitation. Over fishing is yet not recognised as the bane of marine ecology, as evidenced by the over zealousness with which new and improved fishing gear is being introduced to replace traditional country boats that facilitated a more sustainable exploitation of marine resources. The problem is most likely to get accentuated post tsunami in the coastal belt of Tamilnadu. Exaggerated claims of loss of fishing gear is only to be anticipated in situations of this nature, but the recklessness of dumping brand new fishing gear far in excess of the carrying capacity of the local marine ecology by several relief agencies has ominous portents. (See elsewhere in this compilation the assessment about the deleterious impact of reckless relief dump, especially of additional fishing gear.) Ironically, this is happening at a time when serious thought is being given to divert at least a small portion of those traditionally engaged in the fish trade to alternate livelihood options in the aftermath of the tsunami. Non-governmental organisations with the experience of decades of work in the coastal belt and indeed some of the mass movements and trade unions of fisher people themselves have been opining that serious consideration should be accorded to reduce the overexploitation of marine resources and whoever is willing to look at alternate livelihood options removed from fishing, should be encouraged to do so.



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However no homilies about sustainable fishing and reducing the overexploitation of marine wealth would carry weight unless meaningful and viable alternate income generation avenues are offered to the communities. The appropriateness of such avenues to the local milieu cannot be overemphasised.

The temporary halt on fishing and related occupations in the wake of destruction caused by the tsunami offered scope for quite a few men and women, especially the young, in the affected villages to look at alternatives to fishing to make a living. The overarching reality though must not be missed: the vast majority of fisher people are temperamentally unrelenting,

and rightly so, to explore livelihood options removed from fishing. The mindset is more entrenched among the men and women of the older generation from amongst the traditional 'Meenavars' compared to the youngsters.

However, there were sections of the youth who were willing to explore alternative livelihood options. The options expressed by the women and men are naturally different and influenced by their specific cultural context of traditional occupations and mobility patterns amongst other factors. The youth who expressed a desire for change are drawn from amongst the Meenavars as well as the Dalit communities. While several looked at shift in occupations in their local milieu itself, a significant number looked at acquiring new skills as precursor to overseas employment in the Gulf countries and the Far East. Overseas employment is already prevalent in the coastal villages, with young men finding employment at construction sites, as dock workers, electricians, masons, painters and taxi drivers.

Following is a list of the popular choices of occupation given by the young men:

1. Welders
2. Electricians
3. Mechanics
4. Jobs in boat repair sheds
5. Masonry
6. Drivers (trucks, taxis and private vehicles).

The formal education levels aren't particularly high amongst the youth. The majority have been to primary school, some have progressed to a little beyond middle school, and few make it to university levels. Formal schooling is perceived as contributing little to the employability of the youth. There are unemployed graduates living in the affected villages. Educated youth are more attuned though to seeking alternate employment.

Quite a few Dalit youth want to move out of fishing. They are dragged down by obligations such as debts and feel frustrated in their efforts to move out. They too do not wish to move out permanently from their village for the sake of earning money. Dalit men have been using a combination of options to sustain themselves, combining work as boat labour with temporary forays as construction labour and rarely even doing a couple of years' spells overseas in manual labour.

In the fishing community, the mobility of young women is usually restricted by social taboos. In Nagapattinam and Karaikal region, they do not work as fish vendors until their marriage. There were few families that allowed their unmarried daughters to move out of the village to earn money. Therefore this has also limited the choice of livelihood options for young women. There is a need to generate not just wish lists with this group but to work out viable options. A list of a few popular options as listed by young women is as follows:

1. Tailoring & handicrafts
2. Pickle making
3. Making of decorative items (baskets, candles, etc.)
4. Running beauty parlours / working as beauticians.

The younger women, in some instances do venture out for jobs, which they find as cleaners in canteens, labour in textile factories, etc. These women belong to families in desperate need of extra income than that comes from regular fish selling or other means. However poor working conditions and the long distance from their native village have made several such young women to give up these jobs and return home. It is this group which has had a glimpse of the opportunities/ possibilities of the outside world who are eager and enthusiastic to try out a variety of work options. These include trading of cloth, working in shops as receptionists and saleswomen and even as computer operators in big stores. Both these groups, irrespective of their mobility needs support. They have the inclination but they lack capital and support.

In the present scenario of reconstruction and resettlement there are several organisations who feel it is the time to support the communities that wish to enter alternative livelihoods.

Not surprisingly, it is the older women from fishing communities who are driven by the practical considerations and now wish to capitalise on the support that is envisaged from such organisations. They talked of plans to take up



remunerative income generating work in groups. There have been women self help groups in existence for a few years in these villages. Newer groups have been formed now, post tsunami. The group members wish to enter small trades and earn money for their family's upkeep. The work options are seen as means to cope with the sudden upsetting of their otherwise busy lives by the tsunami.

However this phenomenon should not be viewed as a major shift in occupation base amongst the fishing communities, in particular the Meenavars. The women are clear in their view that alternative options would work only upto the point of resumption of fishing. Elsewhere, such as amongst the Dalit women residing in the tsunami affected villages, there was little money coming

in anyway from the work of catching prawns and scampies. They too migrate temporarily in search of work as skilled and unskilled labour. These women show keenness to engage in small businesses. The options seem to have evolved out of the familiar and the practical. These include buying prawns from women within the village and then selling them outside, preparation and marketing of pickles, spices, dried fish and dried prawns. These are activities that they wish to engage in more individually than in groups. They need support and an initial push as they already have the determination to support themselves through hard work.

The Village level Planning exercises that Praxis undertook has thrown up several ideas regarding the pursuit of income generating opportunities as an alternative to fisheries related activities. The range of ideas include, but is not limited to tailoring, laundry, beauty parlour, cycle repair shops, provision shops, tea shops, barbershops, boat engine workshops, electrician, plumber and fitter.

It would serve the reconstruction agencies well if a basket of such alternate income possibilities are subjected to scrutiny to ascertain whether support to such ventures are socially justified and economically viable.

The scrutiny could be facilitated by a simple checklist which could include:

- Whether the village is in need of such facility/ service? Whether there is effective demand?
- The social acceptability and desirability of the venture.
- Whether the village already has such a service / facility and whether the proposed venture would jeopardise the survival of the existing facility?
- A broad take on viability - would there be enough clientele? Would the economics add up? (It would be ideal if this were done against some thump rule figures on investments, working capital and required Return on Investment figures.

A common refrain from the people was that organisations tend to provide support for training in new income earning activities but shy away from supporting them in the venture itself. A complete frame with both backward as well as forward linkages needs to be worked out with the people, to ensure that alternate income generation ventures meaningfully impact on the lives of the entrepreneur men and women and the economic vibrancy of the village itself.

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CHAPTER 8

Expanding livelihood options

Two Pointers

TOMY MATHEW

THERE IS LITTLE new, but everything pressing about the concerns raised regarding the over exploitation of marine resources jeopardising the replenishing capacity of the sea. Over the last decade and more one critical new facet that the phenomenon has assumed is that over exploitation is no more posited as one where the rich trawler lobby is pitted against the hapless country boat owner. On the one hand, there has been a significant dispersion of ownership of trawler boats within the traditional fishing community that the problem is not to be seen any more as wrought by 'outsiders'. On the other hand, vessels fitted with outboard engines and FRP boats have increasingly replaced country boats and catamarans, whose proliferation in itself is an environmental concern.

The increasing pressure on the sea only underscores the need for chalking out imaginative and yet extremely practical alternate livelihood options. These should sub serve the larger twin objectives of increasing the livelihood choices of the traditional fisher people community and ensuring the sustainable harvesting of marine resources by increasing scope for community management and regulation. The following are two pointers to explore alternate income generation avenues for traditional fishing communities:

1. EQUITABLE TOURISM

AMONG THE VARIOUS ideas thrown up regarding alternate livelihood options that could be suggested to the fisher people, Eco tourism seems to have captured the imagination of several people. Against the backdrop of the unbridled tourism expansion that has deprived several thousands of fisher people of the

east coast of India of their traditional means of livelihood, the scope of devising environmentally sensitive tourism opportunities, organically blended in to the dwelling and livelihood reality of fisher people is definitely alluring. Tourism, though, it must be remembered is a double-edged sword, even if it be peddled with an 'eco' label. The idyllic and rustic setting that would nestle ecologically sensitive tourism need to be de-romanticized and its cultural impact rigorously ascertained. Questions of equity and sustainability are considerations that would need to be actively factored in while conceptualising eco tourism models that can be offered to the community. Of equal importance is the need to ascertain the cultural readiness of the community to welcome visitors in to the community. It would therefore be more appropriate to use the term Equitable Tourism to describe the initiatives proposed here. To place the distinction in perspective:

Commercial Tourism	Equitable Tourism
Revolves around the facilities created to commercially tap the traveller.	Centred on what the land, people and its culture have to offer as a whole, warts and all.
The accent is on the commercial tourism facility. Showcases artifacts and nature's bounty within or against the backdrop of the tourism facility.	The accent is on facilitating cultural exchange and true exposure to the land.
Commercial benefits, the predominant consideration	Cultural impact, the predominant consideration. Commercial benefits, however substantial, are incidental.
Akin to clear felling of forests	Akin to letting the forests be. Benefits will follow in the long run/perpetually.

REALITY TOURS/ LIVE IN EXPOSURE DURING THE RECONSTRUCTION AS A PRELUDE TO EQUITABLE TOURISM

THE DYNAMICS OF relief/rehabilitation as it unfolds in the coastal villages has made the local communities reconciled to the constant presence of 'outsiders' in their midst over the next 2-3 years. A horde of INGO personnel will inevitably descend on the villages through the phase of reconstruction for purposes of monitoring, evaluation, documentation, etc. Agencies seriously exploring eco-tourism as an alternate income generation option could look at this reconstruction phase (with its attended inevitable presence, on and off, of several foreigners in their midst) as a period when the community is facilitated to make informed choices about the prospects of engaging in tourism. Instead of treating the presence of outsiders as incidental to the process of reconstruction, it should be possible to make a conscious effort to invite people to live in exposure with the affected communities. If found practical, they could be invited also to engage in manual labour contributing to the reconstruction. This would serve as an ideal prelude to a more systematic and planned foray in



to the eco tourism - offered to the visitors necessarily as a reality tour or live in exposure programme.

Almost all villages seem to have some spare space in the temporary shelters that have been created, which could house the visitors. While it can be left to the ingenuity of the agencies involved in reconstruction to package the programme and market it through their donor constituencies or directly, the programme should aim to achieve the following:



- Helping each local community make an informed choice about the need or otherwise of exploiting the tourism potential of their village.
- Culturally acclimatizing the community to equitable and sustainable tourism prospects and dignified hosting.
- Identifying entrepreneurial potential from among the community who could offer guest facilities appurtenant to their houses.
- Drawing up a checklist of basic guest facilities that should be made available to visitors, including evolving bare minimum hygienic standards amidst the inevitably spartan facilities on offer to visitors.
- Evolving a do's and don't list for visitors anchored on local cultural sensitivities.
- Preparing in detail a micro business model, including cost and return reckoning and viability parameters.

The reality tour/ live in exposure programme that can be steered parallel to the reconstruction efforts could culminate in the establishment of basic tourism facilities both in the private and in the community domain. The following can be considered among the several options that are possible:

- Guest rooms attached to private dwellings whose construction costs are paid for by the owners.
- Guest rooms attached to private dwellings financed initially by the reconstruction agency, which could be ploughed back in convenient equated monthly/ quarterly installments to the community fund.
- Guest rooms created as adjuncts to the community structures being built by the relief agency and left in the ownership of the traditional Panchayat (which could in turn lease it to private initiatives, women or youth groups in the village to run).

2. FAIR TRADE IN FISH

HOW THE SCALES of trade are tilted unfavorable to the primary producers is acutely manifest in the case of a perishable commodity like fish. The iniquitous nature of the trade is more pronounced in the case of exports and processed frozen fish sold in the urban markets. For several decades now, the NGO interventions addressing this problem has centered around direct market interventions or market interventions through the aegis of fisher people's co-operatives, both with mixed results. There is definitely a case for exploring the prospects of fair trade in fish, not just for the international markets but for the urban domestic markets in India as well. The concept of fair trade is built on principles of equity and justice, of course within confines of the limited maneuverability that the international commodity market, offers. A fair return to the primary producers, taking in to account the cost of production of the product is at the core of the fair trade principle. Ensuring equity and fair deal to all the stakeholders on the production front is the other end of the spectrum. Institutionalising the framework of fair trade in the harvesting, processing and marketing of fish has thus the potential to address maladies at the twin ends of the marine economy: the iniquities on the marketing front and the discriminations and injustices prevalent at the level of production and processing. Coupled with that is the added advantage that the fair trade premium could be utilised to finance some aspect of community welfare by the relief/ rehabilitation agencies.

Attention of NGO conglomerations or INGOs should urgently turn in the direction of urging agencies like Max Havelaar or the Fair trade Labelling Organisation (FLO) to look seriously at evolving fair trade standards for fish from India. The manner in which the conscientious middle classes in the first world loosened their purse strings in the face of the unprecedented human disaster might be a pointer to the reception fair trade fish products would receive in the shop shelves of the first world.

Equally significant would be to try and develop fair trade standards for fish in the domestic market, targeted, to start with, the processed frozen fish market in the urban areas. Corporates involved in the fish processing industry could be roped in to join the effort, attracted, as much by the positive marketing spin offs the fair trade label could fetch them.

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CHAPTER 9

The Coastal Republics

Nuances of self-governance practices of the Tamil fishers

ANURAG SINHA

THE NEAR TOTAL demise of village self-rule traditions of India is being lamented in every quarter. The two vibrant traditions of the same that have outlived systematic attempts at their dismantling remain among the tribal communities and the fisher people of India. While the power and authority of traditional village self-rule institutions have considerably eroded over the years, among the Pattinavar community of Nagapattinam, the institution still retains its vibrancy. A fisher people's village in the region retains much of the characteristics of a village republic, with the traditional Panchayat at the helm of affairs. The institution has entrenched itself even in the modern milieu with its own systems of revenue generation, dispute resolution mechanisms and adjudication procedures, public relations and interface systems with the outside world, etc.

Neither is the traditional governance system here a fossilised version of the century old tradition. It has shown the dynamism to change with the times, the most notable of which has been the change-over from the hereditary Nattar system of leadership to the more representative form of consensus leadership that has come in vogue almost uniformly across all the traditional Panchayats. In several respects, the traditional Panchayats have evolved into a more meaningful and truer form of democracy. Further, the deliberations and decision-making process is more akin to direct democracy models, where almost every major decision is taken in a larger consultative process involving the members of the whole community (albeit the absence of women), and the

decisions are invariably consensual and not by majority head count.

The Pattinavar community of Nagapattinam has been engaged in fishing since centuries and is proud of its identity as fisher people. Traditionally, the community has been governed by its own caste panchayat. The traditional governance system of the Pattinavar can be considered unique in the sense that, while in most traditional systems the community is given precedence over the individual, the Pattinavar community recognizes the importance of individual enterprise and supports the spirit, which it feels is necessary for fishing related activities. As

much as the Panchayat plays a vital role in developing norms mainly pertaining to fishing, its role extends to almost every aspect of the fisher people's lives. The traditional Panchayat system primarily draws its strength from the social acceptability that it has garnered over the ages.

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EVOLUTION OF THE TRADITIONAL GOVERNANCE SYSTEM

THE TRADITIONAL GOVERNANCE system has undergone major changes, especially in the last three decades. Earlier, community leadership was in the hands of a few influential families, known as Nattars. The leadership was handed down from one generation to the next and was exclusively controlled by Nattar families. This dynastic nature of the Panchayat, in the last three decades has undergone a change and has been replaced with a Panchayatar system wherein the leader is chosen on the basis of his leadership skills, popularity and respectability in the community. The selection of members is done on a consensus basis after rounds and rounds of consultation among the community members. Elections are deliberately avoided as they are believed to cause division within the community. In many panchayats there is flexibility around the length of the panchayat members' terms, although a few villages have fixed tenures for their leaders. They continue in office so long as the community members are satisfied with their functioning. A member is removed only if there is a case of corruption or mismanagement involved in his functioning.

The transition from Nattar to Panchayatar system had been a contentious one. It resulted in bitter conflicts in many places. Having enjoyed leadership status for generations, Nattar families were unwilling to forgo the powers traditionally endowed to their families. Even after the completion of transition, Nattar families still hold a special status in certain villages. In Madathukuppam



village for example, members from the Nattar families are still nominated in the Panchayat as a mark of respect and are always referred to as Nattar to indicate their lineage.

Each Pattinavar village has its own unique system of functioning pertaining to its traditional Panchayat. While the members are selected by consensus in all the villages, there are variations in terms of structure of governance. In some villages, like Chinnakottaimedu, for example, a distinct hierarchy exists and there is a President and Vice President selected from among the members. In others, like Chinnangudi village for example, there is collective leadership and no single person heads the Panchayat. There are villages that prefer collective leadership, and villages like Madavamedu have switched from the hierarchical structure and have a collective leadership in place with a five member Panchayat with equal powers given to each member.

The age profile of the leaders has also changed over the years. The commonly held belief that only elders should govern has given way and youth leaders are commonly selected.

ROLE AND POWERS OF THE PANCHAYAT

THE TRADITIONAL PANCHAYAT forms the most powerful institution in the village with its influence extending to all spheres of life. The Panchayat acts as the sole representative of the village in all interfaces with the outside world and

also arbitrates over all conflicts and disputes in the village. All disputes are first reported to the Panchayat. The community members cannot approach the police or any other outside agency without prior permission from the Panchayat. The decision of the Panchayat is final and binding on all the residents of the village and the villagers have to abide by the penalties and fines imposed on them by the Panchayat.

The Panchayat's role extends to various ceremonies and festivals as well. Whether related to marriage, birth or death, the Panchayat has responsibilities. From finalising programme schedules to mobilising funds for temple festivals, the Panchayat is always at the vanguard. Involvement of this nature helps a great deal in inducing a sense of solidarity among the people. Before every major decision is taken, all *male* adults of the Pattinavar community take part in the deliberations and only then a final decision is arrived at by the Panchayat. This decision-making and consultative power is but near totally unavailable to the womenfolk of the community.

WOMEN AND THE TRADITIONAL PANCHAYAT

THE PANCHAYAT IS a male dominated bastion. Women of the Pattinavar community are absent from the Panchayat. They are neither elected office bearers, nor do they participate in the Panchayat meetings. They can only approach the leaders when in need. The 'need' itself is sort of defined. The Panchayat does not recognise incidents of domestic violence. The solutions for sexual atrocities against women too are simplistic. A man who sexually abuses a woman, is asked to marry the woman and in case either of them is already married, then the norm is to impose a fine of around Rs.10,000/- on the man. Any man intervening in quarrels between women is also fined. The temptation to dismiss the institution is therefore widespread. A cursory glance at the historical evolution of the institution through phases of democratisation would serve to temper such judgements and leave its internal evolutionary dynamic undisturbed.

REVENUE GENERATION

THE PANCHAYAT HAS an elaborate revenue generation system in place. It levies a certain sum on all fishermen as well as any outsiders (like the cycle fish vendors) who engage in business within the village. Taxes are collected from all the fisher people of the village during each trip to sea or per headload of fish, for example. Cycle vendors, tea/grocery shop owners and mini-bus owners have to pay tax on a daily basis. The amount of tax levied varies from village to village. The Panchayat members do not collect the tax themselves but organize an auction and select a collector through a bidding process. The bidder, who commits the highest amount of money, gets the contract to collect tax from all



quarters. The Panchayat gets a fixed income and in local parlance, this system of collecting tax is called *Kothugai Panam*.

Fines and penalties too are a major source of revenue for the Panchayat. Non-compliance with any rule or deviation from any socially acceptable norm is a punishable offence and fines are slapped on the offender. The fine amount varies from anywhere between Rs.1,000 to Rs.10,000 depending on the nature of violation.

TRADITIONAL PANCHAYAT VS. PANCHAYATI RAJ INSTITUTIONS (PRIs)

THOUGH STATUTORY PANCHAYAT bodies are in place in the villages, they play a completely subservient role to the traditional Panchayats. The members of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRI) do not have any role in the local governance and act merely as agencies that help in getting government schemes and programmes to the villages. The PRI members invariably work as per the decisions of the traditional Panchayat. For example, if there are beneficiaries to be selected for a particular government scheme, it is the traditional Panchayat that decides on who they should be. The statutory representative's role does not go beyond filling up forms and completing the paperwork involved.

HEAD VILLAGES

A UNIQUE FEATURE of the traditional caste Panchayat is also that it is strongly linked at the intra Panchayat level through a strong federating structure. The efficacy of this model comes into sharp focus when disputes arise between villages. Beyond the village boundaries and beyond the local Panchayat, there are the 'Head Villages'. Nambiar Nagar is referred to as the 'Head Village' of all the 64 villages of the Pattinavar community in Nagapattinam. Apart from Nambiar Nagar, there are other 'Head Villages', which have around 16 village Panchayats each under their jurisdiction. The 'Head Village' Panchayat steps in when the disputes involve different villages. A meeting of Panchayat members from all the villages is organized to take a final decision. The decision taken is binding on all the parties concerned. The expenses for such meetings have to be met by the villages in dispute but no fee is charged by the 'Head Village' Panchayat members for the services rendered in resolving the dispute.

Nambiar Nagar, being the Head village for all the 64 villages of Pattinavar community enjoys a prestigious position. No major temple festival or function begins before the arrival of the Panchayat members of Nambiar Nagar. Of late however, a bitter struggle for supremacy has erupted between the Panchayats of Nambiar Nagar and Akkaraipettai. Akkaraipettai has proclaimed itself as the Head Village of the Pattinavar community on claims that their village has a higher population and wealth and therefore deserves to be the Head Village.

TRADITIONAL PANCHAYAT - POST-TSUNAMI SITUATION

WITH ITS PROXIMITY to the sea, the fishing community was directly hit by the tsunami. The traditional Panchayat of the community was in the forefront of all relief and rehabilitation efforts that were being undertaken in their respective villages. The Panchayat members worked to relentlessly locate and identify the dead and in making arrangement for their last rites. The Panchayat was the nerve centre on whom officials of various departments, be it the district collectorate or the fisheries department, depended in culling out details of damages, loss of lives, etc. They were also the contact point for external agencies that were engaged in distribution of relief and planning for the rehabilitation of the tsunami affected. The key role played by the Panchayat after the tsunami clearly indicated the acceptability and respect the traditional governance system had amongst the community members. However, the mammoth damage and unprecedented flow of funds and relief material resulted in turmoil and dissatisfaction against the functioning of many Panchayats in several tsunami-affected villages. Instances of corruption and exclusion, especially of women-headed families came to the fore in several villages. There were a number of corruption charges levelled against some Panchayat members.

The sudden upheaval resulted in the Nambiar Nagar Panchayat being dissolved. Indeed a major blow to the traditional system. The trawler labourers of the village were dissatisfied with the Panchayat's stand of not exaggerating the losses of engine kattumarams and fiberglass boats, and only showing the labourers as owners of small vessels. They formed a labour union to protect their interests. The formation of the labour union was a major departure from the traditions of the Pattinavar community. It indicated a loss of faith in the Panchayat's ability to represent the interests of all sections of the community. While the members of the labour union saw the formation of the union as an attempt to take up the legitimate concerns of the labourers, the Panchayat and their supporters perceived it as a revolt against the traditional institution. The Panchayat members stepped down from their posts as they felt it would be difficult for them to function effectively given the polarization of the village. The Panchayat thus stood dissolved.

There is no gainsaying the fact that, despite its all pervasive presence, discord has come about within the system. The changed production relation in the fisheries sector, most notably, the shift from livelihood fishing, which rests on a sharing mechanism among those who

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jointly venture into the sea, to the trawler economy has had a telling impact on the authority and power of the traditional Panchayat. The community being divided as owners and labourers as opposed to fellow fishermen, has cut at the roots of common sense of purpose that bound the members of the community together. The erosion of power from Nambiar Nagar and the fight for supremacy by the Keechankuppam trawler village, in deference to their new found economic status are a case in point. The post-tsunami scenario has thrown open the door to many 'well-meaning' interventionists who would love nothing more than the window of opportunity the conflict has opened up to attempt social re-engineering, even if the unique institution of self governance is damned in the process.

CONCLUSION

TO SUM UP, the traditional Panchayat enjoys the status of the most powerful and respected institution for the Pattinavar community. The changes undergone in the last three decades or so has strengthened the system and has brought it closer to the community. The turmoil relating to relief and rehabilitation in the post-tsunami situation in several locations is, in some ways, a major indicator of the democratic nature of the system wherein instances of non-performance or corruption by a Panchayat member is instantly raised and addressed by the community members themselves. How the new dynamics of relief and rehabilitation with its attendant inevitable interventionist role of external agencies will impact on the institution is to be keenly watched. What is under test would not just be the agility and adaptability of the system to the new situation but in equal measure the sensitivity of the external agencies to allow natural evolutionary processes to work in the further democratisation of a living self-rule tradition. Attempts at forcing that pace or artificially circumventing the process run the risk of being detrimental in the long-run for this age-old institution.

CHAPTER 10

Protection from the Sea Natural and Man-made

The Government's, Experts',
and Communities' Perceptions

AUROMALA DAS

JUST 2.5 KILOMETRES from the town of Vailankanni that witnessed severe destruction and devastation due to the tsunami, is the village of South Poigainallur. The village was visibly less devastated than its neighbor. Gandhi, a farmer from South Poigainallur says: "It has been there from ancestral times. If not for it, everything would have been washed away. Its size and length held sway."

Gandhi is referring to a sand dune that is 30 to 40 ft in height, piled just 15 meters from the sea behind which South Poigainallur is sheltered. How the sand dune came into being is steeped in oblivion. One version of the local lore has it that the sand dune has accumulated over the years on the original sand deposits from dredging done for the historical port of Nagapattinam about 5 centuries ago. What is non contentious though is that the natural accumulation on the dune is a continuing phenomenon, and the barrier is being reinforced through the passage of time.

The micro level planning exercises that Praxis facilitated in the tsunami affected villages of Nagapattinam brought into sharp focus the uneven nature of destruction wrought by the tsunami across villages. The severity of destruction



The severity of destruction and devastation was inversely proportional to the natural protection the village had along the coast against the marauding waves. The most common forms of natural protection have been the sand dunes and mangrove forests, both of which have proved to be effective barriers against the killer waves.

and devastation was inversely proportional to the natural protection the village had along the coast against the tidal waves. The most common forms of natural protection have been the sand dunes and mangrove forests, both of which have proved to be effective barriers against the killer waves.

Chinnurpettai, Madathukuppum, Nayakar-kuppum are some among the several villages along the coast where the devastation has been buffered by sand dunes or canals along the seashore. Another village, Naluvethapathy about 15 kilometres from Vedaranyam, hit the headlines the world over some time ago when its residents, supported by the district administration, set a Guinness record by

planting uninterruptedly for the length of a day, 84,200-odd casuarinas saplings along a stretch of 2 kilometres of the coast. When the tsunami struck, four women and a child who were unfortunately on the beach the morning of December 26 succumbed to the waves, as against hundreds of lives lost in the neighbouring villages. A few hutments suffered minor damages when seawater flooded Adapparau, a river that has its confluence point in the village, and entered the colony of agricultural labourers through an opening in the river bund. Although the trees were planted as part of a drought relief program, the Naluvethapathy community is convinced that their afforestation drive prevented the waves from directly hitting the colony and wreaking havoc.

Said N Subbaiyan, the then Deputy Collector who coordinated the planting in 2003: "the initiative drew an enthusiastic response from the villagers. With 300 volunteers, we started planting at 7 p.m. on Dec 14 and completed the exercise at 7 p.m. the next day. This record is still unbroken. As a Special Officer on duty here, I went to the village to see how the plantations minimised the damage."

Kotaiyan, a fisherman in the village of Kottaimedu concurs: "If we plant saplings about half a kilometre from the sea, the plants will help hold the sand which in time will form into sand dunes. This will gain height over the years to as much as 10 to 12 ft. I suggest planting some thorny bushes, since they have a better grip on the sand; trees were easily washed away by the tsunami. Although we had some sand dunes, they were scattered on the village coastline, hence the waves washed them away. In neighbouring villages, the dunes were not washed away as they were big and covered the entire stretch of the seashore."

Another farmer from Naluvethapathy points out that the plant 'Ravana meesai' is excellent to create sand dunes. The sand being blown by the wind gets caught and a dune forms gradually. Dunes can form easily if the plants get a grip

in the ground. He dismisses all other artificial methods of creating sand dunes as unworkable and counterproductive.

As expected, a calamity of such ferocity leads many to be sceptical about natural protection and rely on quick fix engineering and 'built-up' solutions. Ramalingam, a fisherman from the village of Madavamedu comments: "If huge rocks are placed to form hills as it were about half a kilometre from the sea, that would break the force of the waves. We have made this suggestion to the Government as also other officials, although, to date, nobody has taken any action. These same officials had promised to plant trees after the tsunami but they have not done so. Had they even created sand dunes, it would have been effective. If we have a stone wall, we can put our boats on higher ground near the stones and our boats will survive another tsunami."

Chief Minister Jayalalithaa requested the Centre to fund the construction of a 1,067-km long sea wall along the Tamil Nadu coast from Chennai to Kanyakumari! The Chief Minister also claimed that wherever sea walls and groves were in place, the areas had survived nature's fury.

However, even the experts and fishermen associations that have welcomed the State Government's keenness to implement a Coastal Zone Protection Scheme (covering 1,076-km coastline at an estimated cost of Rs. 5,000 crores) have called for long-term solutions without disturbing the natural protection system. Many also feel that this cannot be achieved by merely putting up seawalls. They feel that the cost of the construction of a sea wall is too prohibitive and that there is no guarantee that it would withstand the force of a tsunami. Former Union Minister for Environment and Forests, Maneka Gandhi is categorical: "The Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu has asked for money to build a coastal wall. The Maldives did that and it didn't help. The only wall nature provides is coral reefs and mangroves. And the coral reefs don't last very long unless there are mangroves to filter the water that flows into them from human settlements." A seasoned agriculturist, Moosa of Chidambaram, expressed the apprehension that a sea wall would prevent rainwater run off into the sea. "This will lead to the flooding of agricultural land. The land will also be degraded owing to stagnation of water," he said.

Despite the overwhelming evidence about the efficacy of mangroves and sand dunes, some experts are not too enthusiastic about its implementation for entirely different reasons. They are afraid that the unbridled developmental activities on the coast will destroy such natural protective measure in no time. Deprivation among the communities would also make the mangroves easy targets for destruction, leaving people still vulnerable to the unhindered advance of waves in the future.

Despite these divergent views, the votaries of mangroves as the first line of defence against tidal waves have made their point. The majority view among experts and the villagers is clearly in favour of a natural fence of mangroves and other trees in preference to a concrete or stone structure. Many of them point



out the 'failure' of the stone walls raised along the coast of North Chennai to provide any effective resistance to even cyclones. On the other hand, they say, the trees and shrubs along the coast had saved the lives of hundreds of people in some places. Dr. M.S. Swaminathan though, leaps from what is essentially a simple lesson of nature to genetic engineering wizardry: he suggests that salt tolerant genes from mangroves be transferred to selected crops grown in the coastal regions to augment protection!

Nagappattinam-based social activist, Jesu Ratnam, points out that the villages Muthupettai and Thillai Valagam were protected because of the Vedaranyam mangrove forests. Jesu Ratnam, who has been working among the coastal people for well over 15 years contends that the general opinion among the fishermen is that a seawall would be a hindrance to the movement of boats.

Suggesting, among other things, the strengthening of environmental defence systems as a long-term post-tsunami programme, the agricultural scientist M.S. Swaminathan has called for steps to initiate a coastal bio-shield movement. In the article, "Beyond tsunami: An agenda for action" (The Hindu, January 17), he says: "This involves the raising of mangrove forests, plantations of casuarina, salicornia, laucaena, atriplex, palms, bamboo and other tree species, and halophytes that can grow near the sea. These will serve as speed-breakers under conditions of coastal storms, cyclones, and tsunami. In addition, they will serve as carbon sinks, since they will help enhance carbon sequestration and thus contribute to reducing the growing imbalance between carbon emissions and

absorption." "Mangroves," Swaminathan continues, "are very efficient in carbon sequestration. They also promote sustainable fisheries by releasing nutrients in the water. Further, they will provide additional income and make coastal communities eligible for carbon credit." In his opinion, the bio-shield movement will confer multiple benefits to the local communities as well as to the country as a whole.

Maneka Gandhi buttresses the argument further: "Mangrove forests protect land from storm winds, cyclones, waves and floods by enabling overflowing water to be absorbed into the expanse of forest. They improve water quality by filtering pollutants. Clear water washes out into the sea, allowing the coral reef ecosystem to flourish. They also produce nutrients for sea creatures. The tides carry these out to the ocean-bottom dwellers and fish. So no mangroves no seafood for humans. Unless the fisherman has the mangroves, he cannot have the fish. We need to stabilise the shorelines and protect them from erosion, ensure a livelihood for the thousands who live on the shoreline and defend ourselves against natural calamities. Re-establishing mangrove ecosystems works for all three. Mangroves turn into forests in four years."

Standing at the mouth of tragedy, it is easy to be swayed by the urge to expend every conceivable human effort to prevent the occurrence of calamities in the future. And these are times when simple solutions evolved in tandem with nature get bypassed for mammoth engineering feats. Months after the tragedy, it is now time to uphold the native wisdom that has proved its efficacy repeatedly during natural calamities.



CHAPTER 11

The Choppy Waters of Nagapattinam

Problems relating to over-saturation of fishing vessels of the Coromandel Coast

ANINDO BANERJEE

THE ENDURING STAGNATION of fish production in Tamil Nadu¹ despite an unprecedented surge in the concentration of fishing vessels over the last two decades warrants a cautionary approach towards restoration of fishing activity after the tsunami. The bulk of the fish catch is amassed by mechanized trawlers, which operate exploitatively to hamper the prospects of thousands of livelihood-oriented fishermen in the region. The fleet of trawlers in Tamil Nadu is the largest in the country and disproportionately oversized in view of the stagnating fish resources along the 1076-km. coastline. According to the Tamil Nadu Marine Fisherfolk Census of 2000, Nagapattinam district alone has 1,465 trawlers. As a matter of fact, many of the trawlers in the State have begun to face great economic hardship and are known to stray into the territories of Andhra Pradesh, Kerala and Sri Lanka for survival.

The upsurge in the intensity of fishing operations is reflected well in the mammoth increase in the concentration of fishing vessels in villages like Tharangambadi (Nagapattinam district), particularly during the last two decades. Till the onset of the eighties, the village had less than a giant fishing vessels, comprising predominantly of manually operated kattumarams.

¹ Annual fish production in Tamil Nadu has been stagnant around the 4-lakh-tonnes mark during the last decade.

However, the decades of the eighties and the nineties brought about a giant jump in the number of mechanized vessels, mainly trawlers and motorized fibre boats. Trawlers started operating off the coast of Tharangambadi from 1982, when two trawlers belonging to Shri Subramani and Shri Aadimoolam entered the sea. The number of trawlers burgeoned to 60 by the onset of the nineties. Box 1 recounts the changes in the concentration of fishing vessels operating off the coast of Tharangambadi – from the perspective of local fishermen. Tharangambadi today has nearly 1670 active fishermen, registered as members of the local cooperative society.

Changes over time in the concentration of fishing vessels in Tharangambadi

Box 1

Numbers	Around 1960	Around 1970	Around 1990	2004
Trawlers	–	–	60 (the trend started in 1982 with 2 trawlers)	30 (the number down as many trawlers moved away to the southern part of the district).
Mech. fiber boats	–	–	–	4 in 1994 200
Kattumarams	50	80	100 (e)*	200 (eng)* in 2000; 100 (eng)* in 2004 (many kattumaram owners switched over to fiber boats by 2004)
Fishermen in Tharangambadi	500	750-800	1100	1670 (no. of registered members of coop society)

*[eng]: refers to boats fitted with engines

The decade of the nineties witnessed rampant increase in the number of motorized fiber boats. With trawlers ruling the roost, many kattumaram-bound fishermen felt the heat of the competition and were forced to switch over to mechanized fiber boats to safeguard their prospects. While there were only 4 mechanized fiber boats in Tharangambadi in 1994, their number shot up to around 200 by 2004. Such was the frenzy to own the motorized fiber boats that many kattumaram owners discarded their wooden vessels and switched over to the fiber boats. As a result, the number of operational kattumarams in Tharangambadi is estimated to have halved between 2000 and 2004. At the same time, many trawlers moved away to the southern part of the coastline of Nagapattinam, while some stopped operating on account of increasing costs of



It needs to be understood that trawlers not only appropriate a lion's share of the fish catch, but also exploit the same in a non-sustainable manner. Mechanized fishing chases fish away from the shore, making fishing even harder for the non-mechanized kattumarams.

operations. This was attributed to a steep hike in the price of diesel during the last two decades and steady decline in the fish-density off the Nagapattinam shore.

It needs to be understood that trawlers not only appropriate a lion's share of the fish catch, but also exploit the same in a non-sustainable manner. Mechanized fishing chases fish away from the shore, making fishing even harder for the non-mechanized kattumarams. Trawlers use nets of very tiny mesh-size, which not only catch small fish but also wipe out fish-eggs from the deep trenches of sea. This is particularly true of

trawlers that use intricately woven nets to catch fish. There is strong need of regulation to this effect, in order not to endanger the fish population in the long run. As a matter of fact, many fishermen in Tharangambadi mentioned how fish movement has been shifting away from the coast, after mechanization.

Several small and marginal fishermen of Nagapattinam recalled a steep increase in the price of fish after the entry of mechanized vessels in the fishing arena. This was attributed to an acute decline in fish-catch. For instance, the availability of Kannagaluthi fish, a local favourite was recalled to have declined alarmingly after the trawlers started operating, pushing its price many times in the local market, from Rs. 55/- in 1980 to Rs. 500/- in 2004 for every bunch of 100 fishes. Box 2 captures the upward trend in the market price of Kannagaluthi fish, which symbolizes the alarming resource crunch brought about by mechanized operations during the last two decades. Similarly, the price of a thousand pieces of Kola fish - another popular variety - was recalled to have increased more than a hundred times, from Rs. 13/- in 1960 to more than Rs. 1500/- in 2004. While a hundred pieces of Iral (prawn) cost only Rs. 1.25 forty years back, the price today stands at a whopping Rs. 500/-. However, with the share of smaller fishermen in the catch of popular species declining alarmingly, the advantages of higher prices were largely reaped by owners of mechanized boats.

Increase in market price of Kannagaluthi fish over time

Box 2

Year	Market rate
1950	100 pieces for Rs. 3/-
1970	100 pieces for Rs. 30/-
1980	100 pieces for Rs. 55/-
1990	100 pieces for Rs. 300/-
2005	100 pieces for Rs. 450-500/-

Vaiyapurai, a 60 years old fisherman of Tharangambadi recalls how the fish-density off the shore of Nagapattinam has steadily declined over the last few decades. According to him, while a kattumaram-bound fisherman could easily return with a catch of a thousand units of Kola fish on a good day forty years back, it is practically impossible to catch more than 100 or 150 pieces today. Several species of fish, e.g. Savalae and Kattavira have completely disappeared over the years, and the average catch of Kannagaluthi has declined to less than one-third of the catch of about 600 pieces forty years back. Several fishermen attributed the steep decline in the fish-density of the area to highly exploitative modes of fishing during the last two decades, with more than 60 trawlers plying on the sea around 1990.

Volume of fishing activity in Tharangambadi and the share of different kinds of vessels

Box 3

Fishing transactions at Tharangambadi	Peak season	Off-peak season'
Value (Rs) of fish transactions per day at Tharangambadi	Between 5 - 7 lakh	Between 3 - 4 lakh
Value (Rs) of fish transactions per month at Tharangambadi	Approx. 1.8 crore	Approx. 1.08 crore
Value (Rs) of estimated fish catch of 30 trawlers per month (40% of all transactions)	Approx. 72 lakh	Approx. 43.2 lakh
Value (Rs) of estimated fish catch of 200 mechanized fiber boats per month (55% of all transactions)	Approx. 99 lakh	Approx. 59.4 lakh
Value (Rs) of estimated fish catch of 100 kattumarams per month (5% of all transactions)	Approx. 9 lakh	Approx. 5.4 lakh
Value (Rs) of average monthly catch per trawler	Approx. 2.4 lakh	Approx. 1.44 lakh
Value (Rs) of average monthly catch per mech. fiber boat	Approx. 0.495 lakh	Approx. 0.297 lakh
Value (Rs) of average monthly catch per kattumaram	Approx. 9000	Approx. 5400

That intensive trawling operations are detrimental to the interests of small fishermen is evident from the fact that the 30-odd trawlers (out of the total operational fleet of 330 vessels of different kinds) plying off the coast of Tharangambadi account for 40% of total fish catch in the coastal zone (ref. Box 3). Nearly 55% of the fish catch is appropriated by the 200-odd mechanized fiber boats, while the cumulative share of about a hundred kattumaram-bound fishermen is to the order of only 5%. One can understand therefore why several of the fisher people argue that trawlers should not be compensated for their losses due to the tsunami.



In addition to endangering the fish stock of the coastal waters and eroding the livelihood base of thousands of subsistence-oriented fishermen in the area, trawlers have also caused a dent in the social fabric of the strongly unified and largely homogenous fisher people's community that is historically known for sharing resources in an equitable manner. Most of the trawler owners today hail from the highest category of well-being in the fisher communities, and indiscriminate commercial exploitation of marine resources has enabled many of them to amass manifold greater wealth than the cumulative gains of many smaller fishermen. Besides, economic prosperity has helped many trawler owners to gain substantial clout in local political circles over the last two decades. As a result, they also occupy a large proportion of key positions in the traditional panchayats of fishermen.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

FISHER PEOPLE'S ACCOUNT of rapidly declining fish stock off the coast of Nagapattinam on account of uncontrolled growth in the number of mechanized trawlers warrants a re-look at the State's regulatory policy vis-à-vis large-scale, exploitative operators that cut into the livelihoods of thousands of small and artisanal fishermen. Under the existing circumstances of over-saturation, there appears a great need for caution while planning measures aimed at restoration of fishing activity off the shore of Nagapattinam. There is a need to guard against slapdash moves seeking to revert back to the unviable pre-tsunami situation. The large fleet of fishing vessels operating off the Nagapattinam shore has already exhausted the carrying capacity of the sea, and there is a need to provide an incentive to at least some of the trawler owners to explore alternative

businesses. They need to be encouraged to invest the amounts received as compensation into other businesses, and trawler workers could be urged to join the artisanal fishing sector. Conditions need to be created to promote purchases of second hand trawlers rather than new vessels, so that the pressure on the resources is not increased.

A large number of NGOs and development-support agencies (e.g. Rural Development Trust (RDT), Hope Foundation etc.) have been distributing mechanized fiber boats free of cost to the tsunami-affected fisher people. While the extent and severity of the tsunami devastation might make it appear that any and every stream of compassion is justified, there is a need to guard against over-saturation of the coastal area with too many vessels, in view of the declining per-capita catch of fish for small and marginal fishermen. Fishing off the Coromandel Coast is evidently a 'zero-sum' game, and no incremental catch is possible without denting the catch of fellow fishermen operating in the area. As a matter of fact, many of the INGOs/ NGOs and Government agencies are only adding to the problem by:

- Superimposing an agrarian understanding on fishing, equating landless labourers with fishermen who go fishing on others' boats and thereby equating distribution of boats to those who do not own boats as equivalent to land re-distribution.
- Not understanding the fact that there is adequate equipment already existing to exploit the available fish resources - as evidenced by the stagnation of fish harvest despite increase in vessels. And the fact that it is the trawlers, which are taking the lion's share through unsustainable fishing methods.
- Insisting on compensation being given only if trawlers are replaced/repared, even when some of the trawler owners are willing to move out of trawling and use the compensation amount for pursuing other investments.

Despite active lobbying from several quarters on the last point above, it is a matter of regret that RDT has in fact gone ahead and introduced brand new steel trawlers and even set up a unit to manufacture and proliferate them. This type of indiscriminate distribution of vessels without acknowledgement of the dynamics of artisanal fishing will undoubtedly have detrimental long-term effects on the entire fishing community.

Fisher people's account of rapidly declining fish stock off the coast of Nagapattinam on account of uncontrolled growth in the number of mechanized trawlers warrants a re-look at the State's regulatory policy vis-à-vis large-scale, exploitative operators that cut into the livelihoods of thousands of small and artisanal fishermen. There is a need to guard against slapdash moves seeking to revert back to the unviable pre-tsunami situation.



CHAPTER 12

Another Slow Tsunami in the Making

Sethu Samudram Project

TOM THOMAS

CONCEIVED ORIGINALLY IN 1860 by British Commander A.D. Taylor of the Indian Marines, the 'Sethusamudram Ship Canal Project' (SSCP) has got final cabinet nod in May 2005. The Sethu Samudram Project seeks to cut a ship canal through Rameswaram island, connecting the Gulf of Mannar with Palk Bay providing a continuous navigable sea route around the Indian Peninsula. Currently, ships from the east coast of India to the west coast have to circumnavigate Sri Lanka. This is because of a sand stone reef called Adam's Bridge, at Pamban, near Rameswaram, where the depth of the sea is hardly 11 feet.

Independent India first took up the project in 1955 and commissioned the Ramaswamy Mudaliyar Committee. The committee recommended linking the project with the Tuticorin Port project and pegged the financial outlay at 998 lakhs, which contemplated a draft of 26 feet. After the canal is constructed, the distance between Kanyakumari and Chennai would be reduced to 402 nautical miles from the present 755.

The Sethu Samudram Project as sanctioned by the Union Cabinet in May 2005 envisages dredging to a width of 300 meters through a 44 nautical miles long stretch with a draft of 12 meters enabling 10,000 to 12,000 GRT vessels to pass through. As per the present plan, the total length of SSCP would be about 260 kms about 120 kms from Tuticorin Port to Adam's Bridge (in Gulf of

Mannar), and about 140 kms north of Rameswaram from Adam's Bridge to the Bay of Bengal channel (in Palk Bay). It is estimated that 32.5 million cubic meters sand will be dredged in the Adam's bridge area and around 52 million cubic meters in Palk Strait. The project is estimated to cost upwards of 2000 crores. The greatest beneficiary of the project will be Tuticorin harbour, which has the potential to transform into a transshipment hub such as those in Singapore and Colombo.

However, it is likely to have a disastrous impact on the marine ecology and the fortunes of fishermen. Environmental activists have been opposing the idea for a long time. While they are fighting on the plank of its impact on the environment and ecology, for the fishermen, the problem literally translates itself into a livelihood issue.

The Gulf of Mannar (GOM) falls in the Indo-Pacific region, considered to be one of world's richest marine biological resources. The Gulf has been chosen as a biosphere reserve primarily because of its biological and ecological uniqueness. The region has a distinctive socio-economic and cultural profile shaped by its geography. It has an ancient maritime history and was famous for the production of pearls. Pearl has been an important item of India's trade with the Roman Empire as early as the first century A.D., while Rameswaram, with its links in legend to the Ramayana, has been an important pilgrim centre. The region has been and continues to be famous for its production of chank (Indian conch). The GOM is famous for its chanks, although irrational chank fishing has severely depleted the stock. In addition, the biosphere reserve in the area has 17 different mangrove species. The GOM thus constitutes a live scientific laboratory of national and international value. It has 3,600 species of plants and animals that make it India's biologically richest coastal region. It is, of course, especially known for its corals, of which there are 117 species belonging to 37 genera.

Adam's Bridge, which is to suffer the devastating impact of the proposed dredging is a chain of shoal, nearly seven in all, 30 km long. Sir Emerson Tennet in his book Ceylon writes -" The barrier known as Adam's Bridge which obstructs the navigation in the canal between Ceylon and Ramad, consists of several parallel ledges of conglomerate sand dunes, hard at the surface and growing coarse and soft as it descends till it rests on a bank of sand, apparently accumulated by the influence of current at the change of the monsoons". Also according to geological survey, it is apparent that Miocene Era limestone beds are under the Adams Bridge which connects Jaffna peninsula in Sri Lanka and Rameswaram in India. [Ref: The pre-history of Sri Lanka by S.U.Deraniyagala].

From across the coastal Nagapattinam district, fishermen say that the project is bound to have devastating impact on the fish wealth along the coast as the project would destroy the coral reefs which is essential for fish breeding.



The project area is India's only major biosphere and the canal will adversely affect fish breeding. The biosphere reserve is home to 17 mangrove species, 3,600 species of plants and animals including the highly endangered dugong, dolphins, whales, and over 117 coral species

belonging to 37 genera. The region to be dredged will pass six kilometres from the Van Tivu island in the Marine National Park, violating the 10-km. eco-sensitive belt.

The dredging is to take place in a 260 km. long and 12 m. deep passage (for two-way traffic), causing the excavation of about 84.5 million cubic metres of sand and soil. Nobody yet knows where this will be disposed off. Apart from mere dredging, small harbours too will need to be built. This would violate the Coastal Regulation Zone (CRZ) Rules.

By current reckoning, the 2,300-crore project will take almost 20 years to break even (assuming there is no inflation). In any event, the canal will only allow general purpose and mid-size ships (up to 30,000 deadweight tonnage). Therefore, it is entirely possible that in the future, this channel will be bypassed by vessels.

In their detailed critique of the Sethusamudram Project, the human rights and environmental protection group Manitham [www.tamilinfoservice.com/manitham], spelt out among the several disastrous impacts of the project, the following:

Geological: The sea floor will be dredged to a depth of 12.8 meters and with a width of 300 meters for 2 way traffic. Its impact could include, sudden tilt in the sea bed that can trigger off numerous violent process like a major change in drift, possible change in gravitational pull, etc.

Biological: The whole Sethu Samudram Canal Project area is biologically rich and rated among the highly productive seas of the world. The zooplankton was dominated by copepod. Macro-benthos were represented by 78 varieties, meiofauna comprised larval polychaetes, nematodes, worms and shrunken bodies of new forms.

Coral Reefs: Coral reef systems as also the ecosystem of the tropical rain

forest, are the most matured marine ecosystems of our planet. They play an important role in global biochemical processes and in the reproduction of food resources in the tropical regions. Coral reefs act as a barrier against wave action along coastal areas thus preventing coastal erosion. In addition, coral reefs protect mangroves and sea grass beds in certain areas, which are the breeding and nursing grounds of various economically important fauna. Coral reefs are also important breeding, spawning, nesting, and feeding areas for many economically important varieties of fishes and other marine organisms. Coral reefs are a distinctive shoreline habitat of stunning visual appeal found only between latitudes 30°N and 30°S. They grow only where sea surface temperatures are above 20°C, the seabed is kept silt-free by prevailing currents and waves, and there is intense surface sunlight. Most living coral communities do not grow at depths of more than 50 m, although some grow at depths of 100 m. The people living along the coast obtain a considerable proportion of their food and earnings from the productivity of coral reefs. Coral reef ecosystems are very sensitive to external impacts both natural and manmade, which violate their homeostasis (Sorokin 1992).

Marine Mammals: Rare species like sea turtles, dolphins, sea cows, sacred sharks, thorny sea horse*, dugongs and whales are already located here and these areas are said to be their natural habitat and grazing region. There are also dangers of oil spills and other forms of pollution.

Oceanographic: A fear has also been expressed that after the Gulf of Mannar is dredged to cut the ship canal, nearly 85 islets in the Western coastal region of Sri Lanka will be submerged into the sea. According to oceanographers' view, the Indian Ocean around the tip of the Indian peninsula is an ancient area in natural transition which has not yet completed its full formation. This section is the most complex relief and the earth crust is still in motion. According to Mr. K. Arulandam, oceanographer at the National Aquatic Resources Research and Development Agency [NARA], since implementation of the project would cause an impact on environment affecting marine life, remedial measures should be taken (Hindustan Times, 15-06-2004).

Fishermen already feeling a substantial reduction in the fish wealth over the years are completely opposed to the project. From across the coastal Nagapattinam district, fishermen say that the project is bound to have devastating impact on the fish wealth along the coast as the project would destroy the coral reefs which is essential for fish breeding. The fishermen point out that the Government's claim that it will not affect the fishermen, as the dredging will be undertaken 20 nautical miles away from the coast, does not hold any water. While it is true that the small boats often fish within 20 nautical miles, the impact of reduced fish wealth will impact all irrespective of whether they fish in the canal region or not. The trawlers in Nagapattinam area do fish up to 100 nautical miles off the coast and they say that the poles that will be erected along the canal to indicate the depth of the canal to the ships will come



in the way of their laying the nets. Once the canal is opened for navigation, they will not be able to lay nets in that region as the passing ships would cut the nets resulting in heavy losses for the fishermen which at times cost over a lakh. Also, the fishermen fear that once the canal is open, deep sea fishing vessels will start fishing in the region further dipping into an already reduced fish resource.

This is one issue where both the artisanal fishermen (kattumarams with sail and kattumarams and FRP boats without board motors) and trawler fishermen are united in their opinion. While the fortunes of big businesses are likely to get a boost with reduced transportation costs, the livelihood of fishermen stand to be affected. The Government has chosen to strike when the fishermen are reeling under the impact of tsunami. The fishermen say that the Government is creating another slow tsunami for them even as they are piecing together their lives from the impact of nature's fury.

Acknowledgments: www.tamilinfoservice.com/manitham and Sanctuary Asia.

CHAPTER 13

Prawn Farming in the Coastal Areas

Past and Present

RAJESHWAR DEVRAKONDA

THE STRUGGLES WAGED by artisanal fishermen and environmentalists against commercial prawn farming on the east coast of India has been an ongoing saga for the last 2 decades. Universally recognised as an environmental disaster, judicially condemned in several pronouncements, stringently legislated against by the union government, prawn farms still thrive. They are nestled not merely in the fragile ecosystems of the coastal estuaries, commons and once fertile agricultural lands, but more importantly, in the patronage of provincial political bigwigs. The tsunami disaster brought to the fore, yet again, the callous disregard for environmental protection that facilitates the prawn farms to continue to thrive, and the true impact of the havoc it has caused to the marine environment.

Prawns are basically marine. Prawns are also called shrimps. In commercial jargon, marine prawns are referred to as shrimps and freshwater ones as prawns. Prawns and shrimps are invertebrates and are crustaceans. The sea is their home and they breed and grow to adulthood in the sea. The progeny start their life by drifting into estuaries and such other brackish water areas for feeding. In about 4-6 months, the larvae grow into adolescence and go back to their real home of birth, the sea.

Aquaculture has been practiced for many centuries by small farmers and fisherfolk in Asia. Traditional aquaculture, including shrimp, is usually small-scale, using low inputs, and relies on natural tidal action for water-exchange. In some countries, including India, there is a tradition of rice/shrimp rotating, with rice grown part of the year and shrimp and other fish species cultured the rest



of the year. In this low-yield, natural method, the harvest is small but sustainable over long periods. It has no adverse effect on the environment and ecology.

However, there is a vast difference between the traditional methods and the new commercialized system. Chemicals,

antibiotics and processed feeds are not used in the traditional method. The modern method, on the other hand, is larger in scale and intensive or semi-intensive in nature. It is usually owned and operated by commercial and often foreign-owned companies which mainly export the shrimp. In intensive aquaculture, selected species are bred using a dense stocking rate. To maintain the very crowded shrimp population and attain higher production efficiency, artificial feed, chemical additives and antibiotics are used.

Despite the popularisation of prawn farms in India, their negative impact on local water supply is undeniable.

The activities for feed water supply to the aquaculture ponds result in:

- Loss of fish catch (except in the case of feed water supply through sea water canal system). Across all locations and especially Pudukuppam village, the villagers have reported disappearance of native fish species due to increase in salinity of the creek water. They have also complained that the increase in salinity has reduced the ingress of shrimp seedlings in the creek.
- Seepage of pond effluent deteriorates the soil quality in the adjoining aquaculture fields. It has also contaminated potable water in surrounding villages. Deterioration of groundwater quality in villages that are over one km. away from the pond sites was reported by the villagers.

The above aspects among others were considered by the Honourable Supreme Court of India which directed (in 1996) that:

- Prohibition on conversion of agricultural lands and salt farms into commercial aquaculture farms must be enforced with immediate effect.

- No groundwater withdrawal must be allowed for aquaculture purposes.
- Free access through aquaculture unit to the sea coast must be provided to the traditional fishermen.
- No aquaculture farm based on brackish water should be installed on inland brackish water bodies.
- Wild seed collection from creeks and the sea must be prohibited. Seeds must be procured from hatcheries. If seed collection is noticed, it must immediately be seized and dumped back into the creek.

VOICES OF THE PEOPLE

THE MOST VISIBLE and common issue of contention between fisher people and commercial shrimp farms is the denial of free access to the sea for fisher people. The shrimp farms do not provide access to the beach for traditional fisher people who have to reach the sea from their villages. As farms are located along the shore and entry is restricted, the fisher people have to take a longer route to the sea for their operations. The case of Thalampettai village discussed elsewhere in this compilation is not an isolated example. Across coastal Tamil Nadu, cases abound of vast tracts of what was originally common land with traditional usufruct rights to fishers being cordoned off by commercial shrimp farms. The problem has in several places snowballed into violent confrontations, with the ensuing State interventions generally biased against the traditional fisher people.

Though the shrimp farmers state that only sea water is pumped in for shrimp culture and that they do not use groundwater, it was reported that deep bore wells do exist to pump ground water as the sea water has a higher salinity than the tiger prawn can tolerate and therefore shrimp producers have necessarily to dilute it to bring down the salinity by adding freshwater.

The villagers state that the sea water remaining in the pond for a long period invariably seeps into neighbouring agricultural fields and the soils lose their productivity for crops and become unfit for agriculture. This is further aggravated due to the lack of ground water in the area. Conversion of paddy fields to shrimp ponds also affects local rice production as most of the shrimp ponds are constructed on fertile agricultural land or on marginal lands whereon crop is raised. The shrimp industries have acquired agricultural land through inducement, persuasion and high pressure on revenue authorities. Salination of soil and water adjoining the shrimp farms is very well documented for Perunthottam Village, where the villagers have recounted the visit of a Central team investigating shrimp farms.

Shrimp farms use both sea and freshwater to replenish their ponds. This brings them into competition with other users of these water resources. In areas where commercial shrimp ponds have been constructed, there is frequently insufficient freshwater left to meet customary needs for irrigation, drinking,



Shrimp farms use both sea and freshwater to replenish their ponds. In areas where commercial shrimp ponds have been constructed, there is frequently insufficient freshwater left to meet customary needs for irrigation, drinking, washing or other household and livestock related uses, in addition to contamination of fresh water sources.

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Groundwater salination has been reported in several places. This often means that people - most of the time women - have to bring water from more distant wells. Women have complained that on days when the water supply is affected they now have to walk two to three kilometres to fetch drinking water that previously was available nearby before the expansion of shrimp farms. The salination of drinking water in Pudukuppam, Nayakarkuppam,

Perunthottam and Pudupetta of Sirkali Taluka of Nagapattinam attributed to the presence of large shrimp units is notable.

The shrimp ponds are cleaned after each crop cycle and the sediment is often discarded in waterways leading into the sea, or they are sometimes used to build dykes. Their putrefaction inside and outside the ponds causes a foul odour and turbidity of water courses and estuaries. The narrow sandy beach at Pudukuppam is dark brown in colour and foul smelling due to the effluents of the farms being released into the sea. People have complained that the "Uppanar" river is also contaminated with effluents.

The villagers also recounted that the availability of water for domestic use (non-potable water) has decreased due to the bunds created by the farms and release of effluents. Canals and drains once used as a freshwater resource for bathing and rechargers for the wells for the fisher folk in several villages reportedly became saline because of the cessation of flow as noted in Pudukuppam Village of Sirkali Taluk and Pudupetta Village Tharangambadi Taluk of Nagapattinam district.

Fishermen have reported that their average quantum of catch of marine shrimp catch has reduced. Though marine shrimp still enjoys a premium in contrast to cultured shrimp, the distinction between the two is often blurred or concealed in the distant markets, adversely affecting the fisher people.

In the days immediately after the tsunami, the people observed that huge cyclone protection dykes and peripheral dykes constructed by the shrimp farmers adversely affected the drainage of water. The ponds are constructed right on the bank of the creeks that are the natural drainage areas for floods without leaving any area for draining of flood water. Due to physical obstruction caused by the dykes, the natural drain was blocked and water accumulated/stagnated in the hinterland villages for longer periods.

The overall debilitating impact of intensive commercial shrimp can be summarised as:

- Severe degradation of the marine ecosystem, particularly of the mangroves, estuaries and agricultural land in the vicinity.
- Destruction of the coastal bio shield, leaving the coastal communities extremely vulnerable to the vagaries of nature.
- Destruction of marine life, especially several fish varieties and reduction in the price of marine shrimp.
- Salination/contamination of agricultural lands, water bodies and overall reduction in fresh water availability.
- Conversion of agricultural land and land under salt production to shrimp farming adversely affecting the livelihood of people who depended on these for their livelihood.
- Denial of free access to the sea for fisher people, impacting on livelihoods and accentuating tensions in the coastal belt.

Post tsunami relief and rehabilitation efforts will end up being cosmetic for vast stretches of the coastal belt, unless efforts to set right the environmental and social imbalances wrought by commercial interventions, such as the shrimp farms are not accorded priority.



CHAPTER 14

When Fishermen Vacate the Beach . . .

Experiences of resettling a fishing community inland

CATHERINE KANNAM

OVER 20 YEARS ago, the villagers of Thalampettai, Tamil Nadu faced the circumstances that many coastal communities in Tamil Nadu confront today: the proposition of resettlement and the scheme of uprooting a fisherfolk community that has for generations been intimately connected to the sea. Heavy rains in 1980 severely damaged the houses in Thalampettai, and prompted the DMK government to shift the community 500 metres from the sea shore. In order to compensate for their damaged houses, the Government agreed to build the villagers "pucca" colony houses. The small village was equipped with little negotiation power in the face of the Government, and the lure of colony houses was quite seductive for the community.

Years later, the villagers of Thalampettai have paid a heavy price for shifting away from the sea. By every barometer, their lives have suffered significantly, and a community that was once quite prosperous and comfortable is now struggling. The newfound distance from the coast inherently compromised the delicate, instinctive relationship that the community once shared with the sea. Traditional practices such as "mappu" sighting, where the fishermen catch glimpses of fish movement on the shore thereby determining when to go out to sea, have been totally interrupted by physical distance. The inability to have direct access to sea (whether it be for "mappu" sighting or for on-shore fishing activities), and the burden of transporting equipment, both severely complicate and essentially paralyze the patterns of fisherfolk. Consequently, now the



fishermen of Thalampettai only venture out to sea once a day, whereas previously they would fish as many as three times a day.

A few years after Thalampettai shifted inland, government and private parties were preying on the precious coastal land that the village had inhabited for generations. Lucrative prawn farm owners were the first to capitalize upon the available land. The people of Thalampettai furiously protested the infiltration of prawn farms, specifically because their presence blocked the community's access to the sea, while also devaluing the market price of prawns for local fishermen. The prawn farm owners inspired the community to mobilize in protest, and the struggle reached an impassioned moment of confrontation. In order to negotiate the situation politically, Thalampettai formed a PEACE committee of 19 community leaders to negotiate the village's interest with the relevant authorities. At a critical moment, the PEACE Committee was called to the police station for a meeting with the prawn farm owners. Instead of taking part in civil negotiations, the meeting was a trap and the community members were consequently imprisoned, under the pretence of having no right to raise concerns about private land.

Although the State should be utilizing its power and influence to arbitrate in favour of the poor and act as a bulwark when the playing fields are uneven, this is a blatant circumstance where State power was exercised to serve capital interests. Even though the two parties eventually reached a compromise of



The rich traditions of the fishing community along the Tamil Nadu coast dictate that they have had an inseparable relationship with the sea. Although circumstances of a tsunami threat may warrant that the coastal communities shift inland, that should not overshadow the necessity for the fisherfolk to retain their land along the coast as well.

providing the Thalampettai community with a small access road to the sea, this was by no means a viable solution to this fundamental problem.

In addition to the economic impact, the social status of the Thalampettai villagers vis-à-vis the other fishing communities has drastically deteriorated. They are looked down upon by other fishing communities for their distance from the sea, and are ridiculed for "moving west." In the eyes of the fishing community, mingling with outsiders serves as a direct threat to the communities' inherent nature and its customs. These sort of

intangible effects cannot be underestimated, considering the close-knit nature of the fishing community along the Tamil Nadu coast, where a high premium is placed on social acceptability amongst one's peers.

As the Tamil Nadu government implements its recently announced resettlement policy for tsunami victims, it is necessary to consider the struggles of Thalampettai. The disappointing string of events in the village demonstrates that despite the presence of an age-old community that has historical rights to the coastal land, eventually the right combination of power and money can trump thousands of years of history. The rich traditions of the fishing community along the Tamil Nadu coast dictate that they have had an inseparable relationship with the sea. Although circumstances of a tsunami threat may warrant that the coastal communities shift inland, that should not overshadow the necessity for the fisherfolk to retain their land along the coast as well.

There are enough indications that despite the reservations expressed from several quarters, the rehabilitation plans that the Government would finally unveil would mandate relocating fishing villages beyond the stipulated distance from the High Tide Line (HTL). The fears that have been expressed about usurping of the commons by vested interests like the tourism and shrimp-farming lobby, once the fisher people vacate the beachfront is now all the more real. The general consensus that seems to be emerging among the officialdom regarding resettlement beyond the mandated distance from the high tide line may be difficult to be surmounted. The demand of the fisher people that they be allowed to retain their beach-front dwellings even as they are provided new houses away from the coast on safety grounds needs to be accorded greater seriousness than it today receives. It cannot be treated as part of the fancy wish list that affected communities threw up before the Government and rehabilitation agencies. Efforts must therefore be initiated to protect the beachfront as the primary preserve of the fishing community even if

construction of dwellings beyond the stipulated distance from the HTL becomes inevitable.

One effort in this direction that would serve to assert the primacy of the rights of the fishing community over the commons, would be for agencies involved in reconstruction to plan and build some structures on the beach that would serve as rest and recreation place for the fisher people, when they are not at sea. Recall that the Village Level People's Plans have thrown up instances of fishing forays in a day reducing because dislocation from the beachfront has hindered sighting of fish movements and immediate launching of fishing vessels into the sea. These structures would serve to enable the presence of fisher people through the day on the beach and could double up as a work shed for mending nets, minor repairs, etc. and could even serve the purpose of a fish-landing centre. Given the power and authority that the traditional Panchayats wield, the maintenance and upkeep of these facilities should not pose problems.

Concerns of safety notwithstanding, it is critical to ensure that the tragic circumstances of the tsunami is not further compounded with the loss of the fishing community's ancestral land to the hands of Government and corporate poachers. Let the debate around these pressing issues begin, prioritising the views and experiences of Thalampettai and other communities along the coast of Tamil Nadu.



CHAPTER 15

Resettlement Dilemmas

Who will finally inherit the coastal land?

CATHERINE KANNAM AND RAJESHWAR DEVRAKONDA

ON DECEMBER 26, 2004 the tsunami tore through coastal settlements along the Southeastern coast of Tamil Nadu. In an instant, settlements that had existed for generations were absolutely devastated. For centuries, the fishing community has had an inseparable relationship with the sea, where their lives and livelihoods have been dependent upon their position along the coast.

The provision of immediate relief to the tsunami affected should logically have been followed by addressing with an undiminished sense of urgency the issue of permanent housing and other sustainable support. However even after nearly nine months, most of the affected families are still stuck in temporary shelters, with complaints abounding of faulty material and unhygienic conditions cropping up not too infrequently.

Permanent solutions to housing and restoration of infrastructure are an immediate priority and require commitment of resources that may not be delayed. Resettlement issues are still under active discussion, particularly in the context of the interpretation of the provisions of the Coastal Zone Regulation with regard to settlements along the coastline. Despite having a large number of INGOs/NGOs that have adequate money and willingness to construct houses, the State finds it difficult in allocating lands/villages for them to begin their work. In addition, the State has not yet declared its policy/intentions on ensuring disaster resistant technology in rebuilding of houses.

The fishing community's urgency around the issue of resettlement revolves

around the present intolerable nature of most temporary shelters that have been constructed across affected areas. In reality the term "temporary" is quite a misnomer, considering that the families will most likely be forced to live there for 1-2 years. Particularly in the midst of the summer heat, it is impossible for families to stay inside their shelters during the day. "It is too hot. Because of this there are lot of diseases like chicken pox, dysentery and vomiting. When it rains, the place gets waterlogged. Water is a problem. Those who are slightly well off buy water to drink and wash. Otherwise, if we use pond water to bathe our skin itches."

(Temporary Shelter resident, Nambiar Nagar) Considering all the trauma and hardships that the affected victims have suffered, everyone is anxiously awaiting the opportunity to resettle and begin the next phase of their lives in their new houses.

Investments and the location of the new infrastructure (in terms of relocation of housing, restoration or construction of urban and rural infrastructure and resilience-increasing measures such as locally-adapted and environmentally sound coastal protection) are tied to overarching policy decisions. These decisions deal with appropriate coastal regulation and risk management, some of which have significant costs and financial implications in the districts and states affected.

Despite having occupied the coastal land for years, it is quite common for members of these fishing villages to not possess official paperwork stating ownership of their land holdings. It is generally looked upon as community land that has been passed from family to family for generations, and the traditional Panchayat has monitored the residents of each village. Up to this point, this arrangement has rarely emerged as a problem for the fishing community.

Following the tsunami, the coastal landscape has changed, and it has become a plausible prospect for external parties to gain possession of the coastal land. Prior to the tsunami, openings to that precious land were few and far between. Now, an opportunity has presented itself for various vested interests to encroach upon this land. This is a new risk for the fisher people, as there are countless lucrative "development" initiatives that could take place along the shore.

While relief and rehabilitation measures had not fully reached the victims and the reconstruction process was yet to get its footing, the coastal communities were being convinced for eviction, according to unconfirmed reports. The Village Level Plans brought out that signatures were ostensibly obtained from community members by the Government (without clearly

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informing them of the purpose of the signatures) to relocate them beyond 1000 meters. There has been however no information on the position of industries, resorts, hotels and other corporate projects along the coast. These trends give rise to apprehensions that market forces are using the tsunami as a pretext for relocating the coastal communities from the coast. Earlier too there is a precedent of this nature in the case of the (in)famous Marina Beach of Chennai. What would happen to the innumerable resorts and entertainment parks dotting the East Coast Road (ECR) most of which are within the CRZ? Would these also be forced to relocate?

Despite the numerous complicated scenarios that are emerging in the post-tsunami landscape, the fishing community is quite decided about their position towards the controversial issue of resettlement. One can see how the traditional Panchayat's solidarity across Nagapattinam and Karaikal has played a role in solidifying that positioning. As the Government and countless NGOs prepare to intervene to build permanent housing, the community is unified about how they would like resettlement arranged.

After the tsunami, safety has become a paramount concern for the fishing community. The necessity to protect the women and children of the community is of utmost importance, and therefore they would like to rebuild their permanent houses at a safe distance from the coast. The government is suggesting resettling communities up to 1 kilometre away from the sea. Although many villagers are interested in permanent settlements away from the sea, it is accompanied by the very clear condition that they will maintain possession of their coastal land. As they see it, they have an inalienable right to the coastal land that has been with their community for generations, and is an inseparable aspect of their lives and livelihood. Although concerns of safety may warrant shifting inland, retaining possession of their coastal land is essential for their fishing activities.

"We need houses 500 meters away from the sea, but we also need the houses that we already had. We need these for storing boats, nets, engines, etc." (Anandraj, Karaikalmedu Panchayat Leader). Considering that normal fishing activity brings the fishermen out to sea between 2 - 3 am, it is unfeasible for the fishermen to transport their equipment 1 kilometre in the middle of the night. Aside from mere storage of the equipment, a critical aspect of the artisanal fishermen's technique is the ability to monitor the fish movement from the shore. Traditional practices such as "mappu" sighting is where the fishermen catch glimpses of fish movement from the shore thereby determining when to go out to sea. "People will stay in a building along the sea to find out where there is a good catch of fish or prawns. If they see any one catching fish, people will immediately take their kattumarams and go in. If we stay away we cannot see that." (Fishermen, Karaikalmedu)

Safety considerations have prompted the fisherwomen to prefer resettlement at a distance from the sea, despite the increased manual workload for them that

the added distance entails. But they too are categorical that retaining dwellings on the seashore is critical, which would allow the men to sleep in the shore side huts during the night. They have even worked out in their minds, how they would arrange to bring their husbands food along the shore, and transport back fish from the beach.

The village of Nayarkarkuppam, Tamil Nadu has been living for generations the way in which many fishing villages are proposing to organize their resettlement. Years ago, after a devastating cyclone struck the village, the villagers were forced to resettle 500 meters away from the sea. Although the occurrence of natural disasters prompted them to move away from the sea, the village creatively managed this distance. Along the Nayarkarkuppam shore, the fishermen keep small huts. These allow the fishermen to store their nets and equipment, and also provides them a space to sleep when they are planning to go out to sea early in the morning. As the fishermen admit, "It has been a traditional practice of putting these shelters on the shore to protect and store our nets. Our forefathers did this and we are still following the same practice." (Fisherman, Nayarkarkuppam)

Over the years, Nayarkarkuppam has managed to retain possession of the land between the sea and the village. The villagers see this as a critical aspect to their successful arrangement over the years, as their access to the sea has not been blocked by external forces. "We have to go 500 meters from our houses to the sea. In this space, if you put a park or something, how will we be able to go to the sea?" (Fisherman, Nayarkarkuppam) The land remaining common property has allowed the community to thrive, and establish a living arrangement that best suits their unique needs.





Interview with Muthuraman, Fisherman of Thalampettai

WE DON'T HAVE the same level of business as we had 20 years ago. The reason is our shift away from the shore. We are unable to go to the sea as before, because we can no longer "sight" the fish from here. Once we come back from the sea, there is no interest to go back till the next day, as the sea is far. There is lack of interest and a general attitude of 'let's do it tomorrow.' Even if there is a large fish movement, we end up staying at home, not knowing about it.

The village of Thalampettai, TN, also in the district of Nagapattinam has not been so fortunate. Over 20 years ago, the community was resettled 500 meters away from the sea after consistent cyclones were damaging their houses. The Government offered the alluring proposal of brand new, pucca houses for all of the villagers. Soon after their shift away from the coast, the village lost possession of the land between the sea and the village. The common land that used to be available to the entire community, was taken over by prawn farm owners. By every barometer their lives have suffered significantly, and a community that was once quite prosperous and comfortable is now struggling. The newfound distance from the coast inherently compromised the delicate, instinctive relationship that the community once shared with the sea. Traditional practices such as "mappu" sighting have been totally interrupted by physical distance. The inability to have direct access to sea (whether it be for "mappu" sighting or for on-shore fishing activities), and the burden of transporting equipment, both severely complicate and essentially paralyze the patterns of fisher folk. Consequently, now the fishermen of Thalampettai only venture out to sea once a day, whereas previously they would fish as many as three times a day¹.

Thalampettai village is a critical example of how in the debate surrounding resettlement, maintaining possession of the coastal land is a non-negotiable prospect for coastal communities. That access to the sea is too critical to every aspect of their lives, to even consider a compromise.

In discussing the conditions for the construction of new houses, the fishing community is also quite clear about their terms for building the new settlement. Most importantly, communities are hesitant about the involvement of

middlemen or contractors in the construction of the houses. Many villages have had first-hand experience with the poor quality of colony housing that the Government has built in the past, so they are quite sceptical about what type of housing will be provided after the tsunami. In the past, the Government constructed colony houses were in quite poor condition, with the roof and walls requiring replacement after only a few years. Therefore the community is quite clear, that the process of rebuilding houses is something the community should be heavily involved in. Some groups are welcome to the idea of NGOs constructing houses, but the communities are against the control lying with the Government. They are interested in the Government or relevant agency providing the necessary funds/materials. Allowing the community to self-manage the reconstruction process and build the houses as per local needs, will also allow for individual families to put in additional money to their house. Their ability to self-manage the process will also provide families the opportunity to share their perspectives on the design of the house.

As the panchayat leader, Pakriswamy of Chinnangudi states, "After the tsunami some people are not scared and are ready to have houses between 200 and 500 meters from the sea. Others are asking for a house about 1 kilometre from the sea. But they are all asking for their old houses as well" Although between villages, the distance may vary regarding the distance to which villagers are willing to shift, the unifying factor is that fisher folk across Nagapattinam and Karaikal want to retain possession of their coastal land. Their intimate connection with the sea cannot be underestimated in the aftermath of the tsunami. The resettlement debate encapsulates a great deal more than merely the new location of houses, but instead it involves having a holistic understanding of the unique lives and needs of the coastal communities. Therefore, although tempting offers may arise for external forces to build upon the precious coastal land, it is absolutely essential that the strong opinions of the affected communities are acted upon, to ensure that they maintain possession of their coastal land.

Although between villages, the distance may vary regarding the distance to which villagers are willing to shift, the unifying factor is that fisher people across Nagapattinam and Karaikal want to retain possession of their coastal land. The resettlement debate encapsulates a great deal more than merely the new location of houses, but instead it involves having a holistic understanding of the unique lives and needs of the coastal communities.

¹ see separate article, When fishermen vacate the beach, on page no 72



CHAPTER 16

To not knowingly do harm

Long Term Impact of Post-Tsunami NGO Interventions

CATHERINE KANNAM

THE TSUNAMI DISASTER was an eye opener to many about the futility of techno bureaucratic solutions that ignore and ridicule native wisdom. The indigenous tribes of Andaman and Nicobar islands in the Indian Ocean almost entirely survived the tsunami relying on their intimate knowledge of the sea and the deciphering of the biological responses of animals. Ironically, it is this native wisdom and traditional knowledge that is being ignored, by default or design in the relief and rehabilitation efforts currently underway.

In the wake of the tsunami, we face an ironic circumstance, where the post-tsunami relief and rehabilitation efforts could be just as damaging to the coastal communities of Tamil Nadu and Pondicherry as the disaster itself. In this day and age, manmade interventions have the potential of being far more dangerous than nature's fury. Despite the inconceivable material losses, and most importantly the thousands of lives lost in the tsunami of December 26, 2004, one needs to think about long term effects of external post-tsunami interventions.

Prior to the tsunami, the fishing community's remarkable independence and self-reliance was a trademark of the age-old community. Although some believe that the social fabric of the fishing community is akin to a tribe, the key differentiating characteristic is that the fishing community has a high level of interaction with other communities, commonly referred to as "inlanders". This

is particularly relevant when it comes to their economic activities, and the nature of the fish market economy. Despite the extensive interactions with external forces, the community has managed to nonetheless maintain a level of cohesiveness, and political independence that is unprecedented. Over time it is clear that these distinctive political and social practices have not been compromised.

Yet, now one can sense a shift in this trend in the Nagapattinam area. Suddenly the inevitable politics of post-disaster interventions are impinging upon the Nagapattinam and Karaikal coast. The

communities are jockeying for ultimate influence in the allocation of funds; INGOs are trying to find their place in a community where they had minimal presence in the past; the commitment of longstanding, reputed NGOs are being questioned, and the Government is treading in uncharted waters with their post-disaster rehabilitation efforts. At this point, it is impossible to predict how these converging forces will play out in the long term, but there are already preliminary signs that these dynamics will have a worrying impact on the coastal communities.

Suddenly an influx of organisations have arrived on the scene, each with their own agenda and funding to utilize. Although bearing the best of intentions in their work, their approach is threatening the pre-existing dynamics, while also undermining the work of committed groups with a longer term presence. In the past, only a handful of NGOs had a presence in the coastal communities. Those few NGOs that have been there for years (particularly groups such as SNEHA and SIFFS) have a clear mission and an intricate understanding of local social, economic and political dynamics. Considering these NGOs' in-depth knowledge and prior presence in the affected villages, their approach towards post-tsunami relief and rehabilitation has been distinctly different. Their plans are uniquely informed by the previous status of the community, while also bearing in mind the aspirations that the communities hold for the future. This insight has resulted in some controversial decisions by the NGOs in relation to the relief packages that they are distributing.

In the rush to rehabilitate, the communities have identified a window of opportunity where they may be able to claim for additional relief materials. Across villages, there have been instances of exaggeration of losses, particularly in relation to the number of houses and fishing vessels/nets. From the beginning, the communities, under the direction of the Panchayat, have been thinking strategically about how to secure the future welfare of their village, and

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strategically consider the best utilisation of these opportunities. This is an understandable position, and considering the unimaginable amount of resources pouring into the communities, it is clear that the affected should be the direct recipients of such aid. The problem arises when INGOs and NGOs are unfamiliar with the local realities, and approach relief and rehabilitation without any sense of the local context.

As an example, a small dispute arose in Thalampettai, when SNEHA attempted to provide food packets to the village following the tsunami. SNEHA has been working in Thalampettai for the past 15 years, and has gained a great deal of respect within the village for its initiatives with pre-school and women's self-help groups. When SNEHA negotiated the distribution of groceries with the traditional Panchayat, the Panchayat demanded groceries for 150 households. SNEHA knew that there were only 122 households in the village because of their previous work, and therefore only agreed to provide food packets for 122 households. EFICOR, an NGO working in the village post-tsunami, agreed to provide food for 150 households, and prompted the Panchayat to be indifferent towards SNEHA's assistance. It is clear that the community prefers new NGOs, so that pressure can be exerted to gain additional relief materials for the village. Suddenly, the groups that have a proven track record and a longstanding commitment in the region are no longer welcome in the same capacity.

While in this discussion it could probably be seen as an aside, the post tsunami poaching of staff from genuine local NGOs, has to be viewed with concern. The artificial inflation of the job market is making it almost impossible for local NGOs to retain their staff. Unfortunately, what the migratory NGOs buy out is neither an understanding of the local milieu nor a perspective on the

inner dynamics of the community that they are working with, but more often than not, a familiar face that facilitates access to the community.

Along similar lines, following the tsunami, the vast majority of NGOs are getting involved in the rehabilitation of the fishing sector, despite their minimal knowledge of the dynamics of livelihood fishing. Contrary to popular opinion, rehabilitation of the fishing sector is not entirely a simple straightforward issue of replacing fishing gear. Fish wealth is a finite wealth and the fishing boats and gear that existed in this region before the tsunami were more than adequate to harvest what is available in a sustainable manner. Therefore, providing an excessive numbers of boats and equipment in the post-tsunami rush to rehabilitate will not ensure additional fish catch or livelihood generation for fisherfolk. Also, additional equipment will consequently negatively affect the fish resource base itself. Although many villagers are interested in utilizing this opportunity to acquire their own equipment, caution needs to be taken. The specialized skill involved, lack of adequate crew to man the units, high operating costs with potentially low returns, etc., are all factors that need to be considered in this process. Already there are reports that the kattumaram fishermen who have been upgraded overnight to Maruti boats, have started incurring losses with the changed mode of production - earlier if he merely had to expend his labour, he is now unwittingly forced to reckon with the cost of diesel that every foray to the sea involves, irrespective of the catch.

What is lost on the well-intentioned donors is also that the upgradation to mechanised boats for fishermen is an involved process, least facilitated in the aftermath of a disaster, when they are picking up the pieces of their lives from the debris of total destruction. It takes time to upgrade to mechanised gear because: (a) the need to learn to steer the new vessel - for example it's a totally different skill to deal with a capsized Maruti boat and a kattumaram, (b) the need to learn basic troubleshooting of the engine to be able to manage mid-sea (c) the kattumaram fishes nearer shore, while Maruti boats go deeper where the oceanography is very different. This of course is not unmindful of the fact that in villages where there were many Maruti boats pre-tsunami, there would probably have been cross fertilisation of skills and maruti skills might exist in many fishermen, even when they were predominately sea-faring in sail kattumarams. But instances of direct upgradation from sail kattumarams to Maruti with engine have been rampant as well.

SIFFS, an NGO that has been strictly focused on the technical aspects of livelihood fishing, is well aware of these dynamics and is cautious of over-saturating the sea with fishing vessels. They are adamantly advocating for maintaining the pre-tsunami levels of equipment. This is in direct opposition to other organisations, such as RDT, who are indiscriminately distributing boats throughout the area with total disregard to the pre-tsunami numbers. These visible signs of relief and rehabilitation allow for these particular organisations to have their names plastered on countless boats along the coastline. Many of





Suddenly the inevitable politics of post-disaster interventions are impinging upon the Nagapattinam and Karaikal coast. The communities are jockeying for ultimate influence in the allocation of funds; INGOs are trying to find their place in a community where they had minimal presence in the past; the commitment of longstanding, reputed NGOs are being questioned; and the Government is treading in unchartered waters with their post-disaster rehabilitation efforts.

the tsunami relief organisations are entering the fishing community for the first time, and are coming from an agrarian context in India. It is not appropriate to equate the crew members on a kattumaram or Maruti boat with a landless farmer - where giving land to a landless farmer would improve his circumstances tremendously. There is an instinctive reaction to utilize this as an opportunity to do some social equity engineering, and uplift the crew members to the boat owning class by providing them equipment. Livelihood fishing rests on a totally different paradigm altogether, where the profits are shared between the boat owner and those who join him in the fishing expedition, as opposed to the exploitative wage system of agriculture economy. If boats, motors and nets are now distributed indiscriminately, with the

intention of improving the livelihoods of fishermen, there will be severe economic repercussions in the future.

The over enthusiasm to distribute fishing gear totally unmindful of its consequences to the marine environment was tellingly evident in RDT's most recent initiative of distributing steel trawlers to fishermen. According to newspaper reports, RDT has also put in place a trawler manufacturing facility, indicating that the deluge of the destructive vessels will assume menacing proportions in the days to come. This planned proliferation, an affront to established wisdom of marine sustainability is happening despite expressed opinion to the contrary from organisations of fisher people. They have been clamouring for paying cash compensation to the trawler owners for the destroyed vessels, so that they can pursue alternate livelihood with the compensation, instead of repairing the damaged boats or introducing new vessels. The diminishing returns from the sea had made several trawler owners actively consider this option, deterred only by the Government's insistence that the compensation would only be for purchase or repair. It is the scope of a consensus emerging on this score in the interest of the trawler owners themselves and the marine ecology that RDT seems to have callously ignored.

Carefully planned distributions of boats, motors and nets are essential for maintaining the health of the fishery and ensure profitability in fishing operations. In generations to come, fishing will no longer be a secure and prosperous profession if the sea is over-saturated with fishing equipment in a hurried rush to rehabilitate. At the moment, few organisations are embarking upon this careful planning. Therefore, organisations such as SIFFS, who are

incorporating these principles into their rehabilitation are unfortunately, facing some hostility in certain areas. Considering these circumstance, villagers are only interested in engaging with groups that can provide the village with as many fishing vessels and nets as possible. In the game to secure as many relief materials as possible, each village is strategically engaging with NGOs, and the truly committed NGOs with an in-depth knowledge of the communities are facing the greatest challenges.

This newfound dynamic is directly related to the unprecedented amounts of funding pouring into these communities post-tsunami, and its accompanying impact on power relations. Although it is fully understandable that the fishing community would like to take full advantage of all the relief and rehabilitation offered, some analysts are concerned that it may create a dependency amongst a community that was entirely independent before this disaster. It is natural to become comfortable with the service delivery mechanisms of NGOs, to expect such services from organisations engaging in the area. At the moment it is difficult to decipher whether the fishing community is only seizing upon this opportunity for extra materials, or whether a more deep-rooted pattern of dependency is being established. Over time it will become clear how these post-tsunami interventions are influencing the psyche of the affected communities.

At the very least, it is necessary to be highly critical of the many organisations engaging with the coastal communities following the tsunami. With little knowledge of local dynamics, their good intentions can quickly be overshadowed by poor programming that does not address the true needs of the affected. Let us follow the lead of the respected organisations within the area that have spent years investing in these communities, and will be present for years to come. It is by listening to the communities themselves and learning from the work of existing NGOs, where we can help ensure the positive nature of interaction between external organisations and the coastal communities.

The compulsions of most NGOs/INGOs are easy to understand. The dynamics of international calamity relief are such that most NGOs/INGOS land up in the disaster geared up to exhaust their appeal funds (raised through appeal to general public) quickly and move on to other tsunamis/Katrinats. The DEC (Disaster Emergencies Committee, a grouping of UK NGOs that appeal to the public jointly during emergencies) for instance, used to stipulate that all monies raised need to be spent within six months to one year. Though the period has now been increased under immense pressure, the approach still continues to be quickfix in nature and lacks long term commitments.

It can be argued that the money should be spent quickly to restart the lives of the affected at the earliest; in practice, such expenditures are often at the cost of an understanding of the local culture/economy/social structures. Often such expenditures translate itself into visible hardware such as boats, houses, at the cost of fundamental softwares required such as disaster preparedness, understanding of the political economy, etc.



The disaster and the aftermath point to the need for interventions, with a participatory, equitable, flexible, decentralized and transparent approach beyond livelihood restoration. There is need to take into consideration the history of the coastal communities and their own coping strategies along with the inequitable distribution of power (decision-making and access to resources be it political and/or economic) along with the societal dynamics before any rehabilitation attempts are made.

CHAPTER 17

Humbled by the Experience

Institutional learnings for Praxis

CATHERINE KANNAM

POST - DISASTER SITUATIONS are complex, unpredictable circumstances. The need for immediate action to assist the victims requires urgent decisions to be made. In an instant, lives are turned upside down and necessitate an immense amount of rebuilding. There are a variety of agencies - both government and non-governmental - that specialise in disaster response. Given their experience and expertise, it is often easy to overlook the perspectives of the affected communities, despite the fact that no two disaster situations are similar.

Against the numbing tragedy that visits whole communities in disasters of this magnitude, the capacity of communities to become central strategists in the post-disaster planning process is difficult to fathom for many. Yet, the Village Level People's Planning that PRAXIS undertook in the tsunami affected villages of Nagapattinam and Karaikal have proved that community centered planning in post-disaster scenarios is not only feasible, but is necessary. Crucial perspectives that make or mar effective rehabilitation are available only through inclusive planning processes that accord primacy to the views of the affected community.

Despite the trauma and complexity of the recent tsunami, the affected communities would like to begin the difficult process of rebuilding, and get heavily involved in decision-making processes. Particularly considering the money-intensive nature of relief and rehabilitation, the communities are ready



The Village Level People's Planning that Praxis undertook in the tsunami affected villages of Nagapattinam and Karaikal have proved that community centered planning in post-disaster scenarios is not only feasible, but is necessary. Crucial perspectives that make or mar effective rehabilitation are available only through inclusive planning processes that accord primacy to the views of the affected community.

and willing to get involved, to ensure that their perspectives are heard and acted upon in this process. The need to facilitate community involvement was particularly pressing in the tsunami situation, considering how few organisations had any knowledge of the coastal community dynamics.

As Praxis conducted its Village Level Planning exercise in villages across Nagapattinam and Karaikal, it became clear how eager the communities were willing to contribute. Amongst the coastal communities of this area, there is an immense amount of pride. Prior to the tsunami, the fishing community, in particular, rarely sought assistance from outsiders and were known for their incredible self-reliance. Therefore, these communities were not merely interested in

being passive recipients of relief and rehabilitation efforts, but instead wanted to get involved and take responsibility for relief action. Many communities were not expecting the Government to do everything, and were finding creative ways to take their own initiative. Whether it be in Chinnangudi village where the community wanted to contribute their labour to assist in the construction of permanent houses, or in Vizhunthamaladi, where the villagers were willing to purchase land for housing themselves - affected communities are seeking different avenues to get involved.

Understandably, the exigencies of timely rescue and relief immediately upon the calamity striking do not brook indecisiveness. It is the time to act. In fact, the agencies of the State and the NGOs have vindicated themselves quite well in this phase. The quiet efficiency with which immediate relief has been reached to the people has been looked upon by other countries (for e.g.: Sri Lanka) as worthy of emulation. But this phase of rescue and immediate relief over, the most urgent task at hand should have been to engage the affected people for short, medium and long-term relief and more crucially, in long term rehabilitation efforts. Creating mechanisms for community leaderships in relief and rehabilitation processes will undoubtedly ensure that the efforts are conducive to community dynamics and will actually fulfill genuine needs within the community. Across the affected areas, there are countless examples of organisations that did not make efforts to understand the community's genuine requirements, prior to initiating relief support. Community participation in planning relief and rehabilitation is not merely a romantic concept that should remain in the realm of good intentions; instead it is a non-negotiable prospect that needs to be incorporated into all post-disaster planning initiatives.



INSTITUTIONAL LEARNINGS FOR PRAXIS

THE VILLAGE LEVEL Planning exercises that it undertook was Praxis' first involvement in a post-disaster scenario. The challenge of attempting to incorporate participatory methodologies into this process brought a number of institutional learnings for the organisation. A critical review of how the Village Level Planning Process unfolded brought to the fore for Praxis a number of critical lessons:

1. In the eagerness to conduct Village Level Planning exercises in every affected village across Nagapattinam and Karaikal, Praxis did not conduct proper sampling in the initial stages. In anticipation of covering the entire district, we began our processes from the north of Nagapattinam. This led to Praxis not adopting a maximum variance approach when choosing our initial villages to conduct the Village Level People's Planning exercises. In many ways, it would have been most beneficial to strategically look at varying circumstances, both social and economic, that exist in the tsunami-affected areas. These include factors such as: artisanal fishing villages, trawler villages, mixed populations, agricultural villages, small commercial towns, etc. Particularly when exploring such key factors as political economy, it is critical to know the differing situations across the region. Also, considering the high necessity to establish an overall understanding of the key issues across the



The difficult circumstances post-disaster should not prompt organisations to shy away from involving the affected communities in the planning process. In many ways, the urgency and sensitivity of such circumstances is all the more the reason to directly involve the communities as strategists in the rebuilding process.

districts urgently after the tsunami, the results from an intensive sampling planning exercise would have been highly beneficial to the countless number of organisations working with these communities for the first time. Once the villages were appropriately sampled, and the key issues were understood, wide-scale planning processes in each village could have been undertaken.

2. Although it is clear that the affected communities were ready and willing to take part in the planning processes, considering the sensitive post-disaster circumstances

this could not be approached as a conventional micro-level plan. One cannot expect the same type of detail, and overall project outlining from this type of a process. Considering the intensive bargaining that was taking place in every village, to secure relief and rehabilitation materials, it became impossible to conduct an accurate planning exercise with every village jockeying for as many relief materials as possible. The communities were strategically interacting with organisations that may be able to provide them materials. This is a phenomenon that is completely natural in the midst of a money-intensive relief and rehabilitation process. The nuances of such a delicate situation demanded that a more iterative process needed to be adopted in the Village Planning exercise. Praxis was able to establish a comprehensive understanding of individual village dynamics (including the history, socio-economic profile, governance structure, etc.), and detail out the post-tsunami aspirations of different community groups, with a special focus on the vulnerable groups. Therefore, the circumstances were not conducive to conduct a typical micro-level planning, where a detailed programme can be formulated directly from the exercise. Nonetheless, it is still feasible to involve the communities, and simply requires the need to be flexible and a willingness to utilize a design that is sensitive to the situation.

3. In a post-disaster situation, decisions are being made so quickly by all parties involved, that there is a high premium on information being available at an early stage. Since funding agencies in particular are facing deadlines of when they need to utilize their funds, this type of exercise which provides an understanding of community dynamics and ideas from the community on how to move forward, is most valuable early on. Praxis strategically avoided entering the tsunami-affected areas immediately following the disaster, because the organisation had no expertise in circumstances of relief.

Although the timing of when the study was undertaken was appropriate considering the circumstances, it is critical to begin releasing findings as early as possible. These types of findings are most useful to external organisations as they are still in the process of formulating their rehabilitation programmes. Therefore, in a disaster situation it is critical to recognize the premium on releasing information in a timely manner.

The most important learning for Praxis from the Village Level Planning process is that community-level planning in post-disaster situations is feasible and critical. The difficult circumstances post-disaster should not prompt organisations to shy away from involving the affected communities in the planning process. In many ways, the urgency and sensitivity of such circumstances is all the more the reason to directly involve the communities as strategists in the rebuilding process. Utilizing community knowledge and expertise is the only way to ensure that the relief and rehabilitation efforts are responsive to the unique needs of the affected communities. Despite challenges that may arise when taking part in such planning exercises in a post-disaster circumstances, the Village Level Planning exercises have ensured that community participation in post-disaster planning is a non-negotiable prospect, and can be undertaken efficiently with positive results.

ACCOUNTABILITY OVERDUE

Against the numbing tragedy that visits whole communities in disasters like the recent tsunami, many find the capacity of communities to become central strategists in the post-disaster planning process, difficult to fathom. Yet, the participatory engagement that Praxis undertook in the tsunami-affected villages of Nagapattinam and Karaikal have proved that community centered planning in post-disaster scenarios is not only feasible, but is necessary. Crucial perspectives that make or mar effective rehabilitation are available only through inclusive planning processes that accord primacy to the views of the affected communities.

Accountability Overdue synthesizes insights gained through an intensive community engagement in tsunami-affected areas. It underscores the need for a thorough re-look at the framework of accountability associated with emergency money. It also reiterates the need for interventions to take onboard the question of downward accountability to communities and not just upward accountability to the donors.



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