

Kerala: The tsunami and after

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The infamous Indian ocean tsunami hit three states of India--Tamil Nadu, Pondicherry and Kerala, as well as the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. Tamil Nadu was the worst hit state. The tsunami hit the Kerala coast at about 11am, 26 December 2004. By then, many people were aware of its impending arrival through television broadcasts and ran away from the coast, an act that saved considerable lives. Government officials, such as personnel from the state observatory and department of natural disasters responded as if they were unaware of what a tsunami is. In fact, most of the government officers arriving at the coastal villages did not even comprehend the magnitude of the impending danger. This lack of awareness and understanding was also reflected in the manner of their assistance after the tsunami.

In Kerala's Kollam district, Alappad village, 132 persons died, while 39 persons died in Alappuzha district, Aratupuzha village. Considerable property was destroyed in other districts and villages, but there was no loss of life. Fishing boats, nets, houses, shops and other establishments were destroyed or severely damaged along the coast. Four thousand houses were reconstructed in Alappad and 1500 in Aratupuzha.

The tsunami's immediate devastation was far outweighed by its long term damage. Large areas of land for instance, were rendered useless due to salinity. This affected local farmers, particularly those dependent on paddy cultivation. The government's response was limited to oral rhetoric such as, 'We will give everything back to the people other than the lives lost,' declared by state finance minister Mr K M Mani in a public meeting. In reality, other than the mandatory deduction from government salaries for two months, the state government's tsunami relief fund was filled by public contributions.

The real relief work was carried out by political parties, welfare groups and human rights organizations; a mixed bag of good, bad and evil measures. The food distribution for instance, in camps setup to house those who lost their homes, was done by a private charity trust who did a good job. Other groups however, such as the RSS, the Communist party cadres and some groups within the Congress and the Muslim League tried to make use of the opportunity for political propaganda. They approached the tsunami victims with promises, but only helped those who subscribed to the party membership. These political parties canvassed funds throughout the state, but there is no account of how this money was spent. It was certainly not spent on the victims.

The RSS was the worst of the political/religious groups. They only helped Hindu victims, while threatening human rights groups and activists assisting in the relief and recovery process. In the guise of charities, other religious groups came to sell their beliefs to the affected communities. Within a few months of the active relief operation, these communities were divided along religious and political lines.

In the meantime, although the state government declared it had received adequate funds from the central government and other sources to support the victims, it provided them with a mere pittance. The government later spent this money to subsidize planters in the high-range areas. Finance minister Mr Mani, himself a planter, thus spent money on his constituency, rather than on the victims. There were even debates in the legislative assembly about this, but their outcome was of no help to the victims.

The tsunami did not just take away some lives and property; it changed the lives of many families forever, particularly when they were given no government assistance for rehabilitation. Farmers near the coastal region for instance, had to stop farming as their land was salinated. Those who had made their living by fishing lost everything to the sea. When these farmers or fishermen approached banks and other financial companies for loans, they were given conditions of exorbitant interest, the

repayment of which was an impossibility. They had no choice but to give up their traditional way of life.

When the tsunami hit, Communist Party cadres visited the affected areas in Kerala, promising that when they come to power they will assist the survivors in every way. While the Communists did in fact come to power soon after the tsunami, they did nothing for the people.

It is important to note that before the tsunami hit, the state government was facing a financial crisis. After the tsunami however, funds poured in to the government treasury for assistance to the victims. Most of these funds were intentionally unused (within the prescribed period of time) so that the government could later spend it at its discretion. The money was therefore spent on government salaries, subsidies to large-scale rubber and spices planters and even to pay travel and telephone bills of state ministers. In short, the tsunami was a boon for the Kerala government, which was trapped in a financial crisis.

T K Naveenachandran worked for Jananeethi, a human rights organization based in Kerala at the time of the tsunami. He spent three months in Kerala to assist in the relief and rehabilitation of the people. He is now the secretary of Nervazhi, another human rights group in Kerala.