

After the Tsunami Disaster

Rebuilding the social life: a priority

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The tsunami which devastated coastal areas of Southeast Asia on the 26th December, 2004, was revealing both of tension as well as greatness in society. It uncovered problems that would otherwise have been hushed or ignored; vileness mixed with gestures of solidarity. And yet, out of these were born several projects and possibilities for future action. Over and beyond material rehabilitation, priority still remains the rebuilding of a normal social life and the psychological reshaping of persons.

In this supplement, we are reproducing the account of Lourthusamy Arokiasamy, Indian sociologist and president of the Association for Rural Education and Development Service (AREDS) which works side by side with the tsunami victims in Southern India, in particular with the Dalits [1]. This association is part of Centre Lebreton-Irfed's international network [2].

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The tsunami did not stop at separating wives from husbands, children from parents. It destroyed entire communities. People do not understand why this disaster happened nor why disasters always hit the coastal areas. In times of war, we know who the enemy is. But here, we do not know who to turn against. How could we fight against the sea!

For these persons who have always lived with it, the relationship with the sea has changed. Death came from this nourishing ocean on whom the livelihood of coastal populations depend. Now, fishermen who have stayed in the area are in deep shock. They go to the seaside and spend the whole day looking at the sea. They stay calm but watch continuously; even if you walked close to them, they would not notice.

All these regions have been destroyed economically, socially, psychologically. We will have to rebuild. There is need to gather a lot of courage and hope that these women, children, fathers and mothers will recover a normal social life. Collectively experienced shock, like this, cannot be treated like a common ailment, especially where most of the victims are poor.

Dalits once more excluded

Within this tragic context, Dalits find themselves once more excluded. They did not have the right to be re-lodged on equal terms with the others, to be sheltered in tents with other victims. They were given only the food rejected by the fishers after these latter were served. Moreover, they were sometimes forced to go to other places, to bury the dead, without gloves, without masks, without any form of protection.

In the fishing villages, Dalits are usually not allowed to go to the sea to fish, but once the fishing boats are hauled back unto the beach sands, they participate in tasks such as: collecting the fish; removing and drying the nets. In a number of tsunami affected areas, the bodies of Dalits killed by the waves had to be removed only with the help of sanitary workers brought in from far away places, since members of fishing communities were not willing to help dispose of these bodies.

Due to this attitude, Dalit victims often preferred to join their relations in neighboring villages rather than stay in camps and be subjected to discrimination. The caste system in India is so deeply imbedded in mentalities that, even within such a context, it is difficult to change things. For instance, in fishing-villages, drinking water, roads, health and communication services are being re-established whereas the quarters inhabited by Dalits have been left aside.

Even the fishers have found themselves in ugly situations; for them also there is no escape from the hierarchically organized prison system of the caste. According to Outlook (7 March 2005), the surviving fishers of Kallar village in Nagapattinam (where 103 died) are willing to be relocated in a wasteland. But a Hindu temple maintained by upper castes controls the wasteland. They don't want the fishers to come near them because, as in the words of a young fisher, *"we stink in their perception"*.

On the other hand, we saw the strong presence of fundamentalists who came to disaster areas in order to profit from the situation. Hindu fundamentalists took charge only of Hindu, not Muslim nor Christian bodies. *"Let each one bury his own dead,"* they said, *"but if you believe in us, we can promise you heaven for tomorrow."* In contrast, in Nagoor Dharga, which is a well-known Muslim pilgrimage area, when Dalits and fishermen were hit by the tsunami, the Muslims agreed to bury all the dead in the Mosque: Hindus, Christians and Muslims alike. On the other hand, when the army started to bury the dead, we noticed that many of the corpses lacked fingers, noses, or ears because of the jewels which were taken off them. And where 3000 rupees were allotted for each burial, 2000 went into the pockets of army soldiers.

Populations forcibly evicted

Cynically exploiting the post-tsunami situation in the coastal areas and manipulating the CRZ regulations, the State Government is blatantly trying to promote eco-tourism. It allows the corporate and multinational sectors to construct buildings, after forcibly evicting and relocating the people who traditionally live along the sea shores, using as pretext: to protect them from future tsunami attacks.

In fact the CRZ regulations do recognize the traditional rights of the fishers:

"Construction/reconstruction of dwelling units between 200 and 500 metres of the High Tide Line is permitted so long as it is within the ambit of traditional rights and customary uses such as existing in fishing villages"... But, in contravention of this provision, the Special Commissioner and Commissioner of Revenue Administration Department of Government of Tamil Nadu has addressed a letter dated 19.1.2005, to the District collectors of 13 coastal districts in Tamil Nadu. It instructed

them to compulsorily relocate even those living within 500 metre distance from the seashore and to take over the lands and buildings thus vacated.

The Tamil Nadu Government has already evicted the inhabitants of the Dideer Nagar slum area, which is close to the Marina Beach in Chennai. Around 1500 families were evicted. Families who were home-owners before the tsunami were given houses 20 Km. away from Dideer Nagar. Those who were renting before the tsunami have not been given alternate dwellings for re-settlement; they continue to live either in dilapidated houses, in open air, in the same slums.

Rebuilding hope

Our association, AREDS, works with the « forgotten » victims of tsunami, with the Dalits, in particular: 2000 families living in remote villages of Tamil Nadu, in the coastal regions of Nagapattinam, Thiruvarur and Kanyakumari. Everything needs reconstructing: economically, socially and psychologically. Everything, including hope.

We collect funds and objects; we give counselling services. But, and we must insist on this: it is not our association that rebuilds; it is the collectivity of inhabitants and the populations concerned who do the constructing. We cannot take their place. In fact, the rebuilding of houses has uncovered the problem of property control. As previously mentioned, the fishing industry and that of tourism want to profit from the situation, to strengthen their control over the devastated territories. In opposition to this, we want to create impetus towards collective action which will allow communities to regain control of their own future, to transform the economic system and the women's status in society.

Thanks to initial help from our Western friends, AREDS has been able to start rehabilitating a hundred families in the Nagapattinam, Cuddalore and Tuticorin districts. First of all, we have had to provide some means of livelihood such as fishing nets and carts to transport products from one place to another. Diverse small size economic activities were identified for Dalit families: a tea stall, sewing shop, a small "tiffin" restaurant, vegetable stalls, a flour-mill, a cycle repair-and-rent shop, a space for the rental of cooking utensils. We are also realizing documentaries on population displacement and expulsion, to support solidarity action. Of course, corresponding trainings necessarily accompany the putting up of such activities.

Women and the psychological aspect

There are particularly serious cases. For instance, there are pregnant women or young widows with first babies who are faced with problems, not only of coping with material needs but also with their status as mothers who suddenly find themselves alone. How will this family situation be taken by the community? You must know that in the Indian society which is male-dominated, property is in the hands of the man. If the husband dies, the woman loses all rights to the property and she cannot go back to her own family which is usually too poor to take her in.

For this reason, our association suggests that boats, which have been bought with aid-money, become property of women-groups who can then rent them out to fishers. This way, women develop economically, from an individual to a collective status. And from a position of social exclusion - mothers who could not work - they find themselves among the socially active. They who used to have nothing; now have something. They used to be alone; now, they are in a group with collective power. The status of women as well as that of the whole community are transformed.

We try to realize equality among populations by encouraging, for instance, dialogue between Dalits

and fishers, in the rebuilding of a future. The relationships evolve as workers affirm their autonomy before the powers that be. In form and in objectives, reconstruction should not be imposed from above but should be directed collectively. This type of action is now possible only because, for several years, our associations, militant social and political movements, have been struggling against fatalism.

The image that Dalits have developed of themselves has, for instance, deeply changed. The fruits of this undertaking were immediately felt after the tsunami disaster. First assistance came from women members of grassroots associations that came to settle in the area, assistance from the poor to the poor which the Indian media never mentions.

On their part, members of Women Mapovi-TN, a women's movement for poverty alleviation linked with AREDS, provide psychological follow-up and assistance for victims, to help them regain self-confidence, using the people's theatre as a tool. Material reconstruction is still the simplest task, though it should be careful not to reflect nor accentuate inequalities. It is the psychological rebuilding of destroyed communities which is the most difficult. And yet, collective self-organization and the strengthening of popular solidarities are helping us regain hope.

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P.S.

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Footnotes

[1] The word Dalit signifies "broken" or "oppressed" and has since been used to designate the Untouchables (a term which Dalits consider despiseful).

[2] In the past, AREDS worked with the Centre Lebret on a study about the spiritual dimension of development. The association is now preparing, with the Center, a regional seminar, beginning of August 2005, on Religious Fundamentalism and Globalisation: Dialogue of Civilisations and Development.