

Tsunami Relief and Rehabilitation Work: Weakening Civil Society?

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The relief and rehabilitation work that was supposed to have been commenced in the wake of the December 2004 catastrophic tsunami that claimed thousands of life—both human and animal and left many more thousands of people homeless and devastated their livelihood sources in the state of Tamil Nadu, India is yet one more example of the wrong way to build. While the construction of new homes and rebuilding the infrastructure was driven by the imperatives of the donor agencies and the NGOs who wanted to be seen to respond quickly, these imperatives met with a number of challenges coming not only from the state but also from the non-state actors themselves. While the lack of prior experience in managing a disaster of such a magnitude should necessarily be taken into account while evaluating the progress made in the relief measures, one wonders what prevented the state and the NGOs from consulting their counterparts in other parts of the world who had gained both positive and negative experiences and involving the actually affected people in meeting their actual needs and requirements. While the international donor agencies which rushed generous funds to the Indian NGOs within the shortest time imaginable, neither they nor the NGOs who received these funds had any culturally appropriate vision of how the catastrophe-affected areas should be rebuilt, though fortunately the former avoided sending pre-fabricated plans and kits. This problem was exacerbated by the bureaucratic lethargy and the whimsical approach on the part of the State government with the result large funds running into several millions of Indian rupees remain unspent or the house construction works have stopped half way through.

For one thing, the non-State actors involved in the disaster management are varied and motley group of persons and organizations endowed with varying amounts of funds and resources at their disposal. They are NGOs, charitable organizations, front organizations of the political parties, religious organizations and so on and each one has different cultural models and assumptions which informed their architectural perceptions and their process of decision making and implementation. These were overdetermined by the quantum of funds available to each of these outfits. Naturally, these resulted in wide disparities between the quality of lands chosen and/or bought by them, the plans and designs of construction and the infrastructure they have to rebuild or renew. The State Government, which started to gearing up its loins only with the recent change of guard in the state of Tamil Nadu, did practically nothing either in housing projects or infrastructure building. Lacking in a proper vision and commitment, it failed to evolve a uniform housing policy with a set of prescriptions, designs and models to be adhered to by those involved in building houses and other facilities.

No technical assessment of the land structure was made by the Government authorities and no prescription for the foundations to be laid for the houses to be built. Some of the organizations went ahead with putting up columns and some others did not. In fact, for the kind of houses built in the land and soil traditionally inhabited by the coastal people, there was no need for laying the foundations with columns. But since some of the organizations built the columns, those who did not came to be perceived by the locals as some who wanted to pocket a portion of the money donated by the foreign agencies. There were a number of instances where the local people stepped in and prevented the progress of construction as they insisted that without putting up columns, no superstructure could be erected. The Government that did not evolve any uniform policy and

prescribe a standard model seldom intervened to save the NGOs from the ire of the people but instead coerced the former into putting up columns and satisfy the people without realizing the hardships one would have to undergo in terms of applying for more funds from the donor agencies and enhancing the budget for each unit. The sizes of the houses built by different rehabilitation actors also vary. Some religious organizations, utilized this opportunity to imbibe the upper caste Hindu values in the fisherfolk who have their own folk tradition of worshipping local deities. These values were built into the houses these religious organizations built. That is, each house has a 'pooja room', a room where the pictures and statutes of upper caste Hindu gods and goddesses are kept and certain rituals are performed. Such measures helped to exacerbate not only the caste stratifications already extant in the society but also the stratification within the same caste communities. Those who did not have their new houses built by these religious institutions demanded that they too be provided with the same type of houses. In the perception of the common people, these religious institutions headed by Hindu men and women mobilized indigenous resources and spent the entire money for the local fisherfolk, while the NGOs exploiting the generosity of the white people in the west have pocketed a sizeable chunk of the funds. There were a number of instances where the technical personnel, especially the civil engineers engaged by the NGOs were abused in filthy language and beaten up by some members of the local fisherfolk community. The words hurled at them were: "The white man gives you the money. Why don't you spend it entirely for us?"

So, the NGOs were scapegoated for all the delays and failures in implementing the housing projects. Government has also not taken into account the rising cost of building material. The estimates for each unit were drawn on the basis of the cost of material that prevailed in 2004. So many factors contributed to the sharp rise in the prices of sand, cement, bricks, and electrical equipments and so on. When this fact was brought to the notice of the Government, it was hardly given any consideration. Added to this, the authorities also refused to provide infrastructures like electricity cables and meters to the newly built houses. Only the electricity posts would be given, the NGOs were told, and they should meet buy the cables, meters etc., from their funds. There are instances where the electricity department has flatly refused to even renew the old connections, which were only partially damaged by tsunami. There are instances of NGOs bribing through their way to get the approval of certain lower level bureaucrats for the construction works taken up by them.

The NGOs are to be mainly blamed for all their woes. When the Government sought their help and co-operation in the relief and rehabilitation work, they should have insisted on a clear-cut policy of the government, guidelines, prescriptions, selection of lands, study of soil structure, fixing responsibility for providing infrastructure etc. In the absence of any written commitment on the part of the Government, the NGOs unwittingly allowed themselves to abide by whatever whimsical decisions the former make from time to time.

With very rare exceptions, all those NGOs and other organizations that have taken up the building works have never thought of employing local workers, local material and local skills. One can see thousands of workers brought from such far-flung states as Bihar and Orissa. As these workers provide cheap labour, only the cost benefit aspect of the rehabilitation work alone was given importance. Employing local workers, talents and material would have generated new employment opportunities and served as stopgap livelihood resources to the local people. These NGOs and organizations never thought of involving the actual or potential beneficiaries of this housing project at each stage of construction. If they had done so, both the parties would have had enormous scopes for understanding each other much better and the locals could have appreciated the difficulties that would ensue if impractical demands are made on the donors and those who receive their funds. On the other hand, there were quite a few NGOs with hardly any feeling towards the affected people and a sincere commitment to build houses and infrastructures for which they had obtained

handsome funds from some donor agencies. They have simply deposited the funds they have received and enjoyed watching the interest gets accumulated. Some of the Government officials at a higher level, especially those like the District Collectors, have shown extraordinary concern for the tsunami victims and spared no efforts to get the progress made in the relief and rehabilitation work monitored to them. They have taken stern action against these NGOs and asked them to leave the scene.

In the perception of the state and non-state actors, only the fisherfolk have been affected by tsunami and the Dalits are non-existent. As we have observed elsewhere, even the worst kind of catastrophe like tsunami could not even touch the caste system, let alone abolish it. Dalits in the fishing villages are largely dependent on the fisherfolk as helping hands in shoring up the boats and catamarans, drying up the fishing nets and selling the fish and so on. Like in other villages and towns, they live in secluded places. That they also lost their kith and kin, houses and petty belongings was of course no concern to the government, NGOs and the religious institutions. AREDS can proudly claim that is perhaps the only NGO that had focused on the Dalits and as in the case in Vilunthammavadi, Thideerkuppam and Pudupalli, it did an extraordinary act of buying lands for building houses for these Dalits. And from the very beginning, these Dalit beneficiaries were involved in all the decision making. They were also involved in actual construction work thus creating a mutual understanding between them on the one hand and AREDS, its staff and the engineering personnel engaged by it on the other. Tragically, even after tsunami, they have again been ghettoized, though of course with the newly built houses and refurbished infrastructure. But they are happy to have their own small places where they will not be harassed by the caste-conscious fisherfolk who did not like their presence even in the refugee camps in the days immediately after tsunami struck their villages.

To sum up, the Civil Society which the NGOs are never tired of talking about has been weakened instead of being strengthened in the course of the reconstruction works undertaken by the NGOs who have by their lack of vision and forethought allowed themselves to be treated like low ranking public servants by the authorities in power rather than asserting themselves as an independent force representing the claims and rights of the people. They have thus far been able to make only negative impressions of themselves in the minds of ordinary people towards whom all their commitment, energy and time were directed. Thanks to CCFD, Ouest France Association, in assisting us in construction of houses and VIC Belgium and Oxfam Solidarity Belgium in assisting us for small livelihood resources. They are the ones stood with us and encouraged us to take up this reconstruction and rebuilding of houses of the victims of Tsunami with community participation, while many others did not even respond to our strategy and policy.

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