

A voice for vulnerable groups in Tamil Nadu

by Max Martin

Many vulnerable people in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu lost homes, livelihoods and access to schooling in the tsunami. Assistance to these already marginalised groups must be more sensitive to their particular needs.

When the tsunami inundated the small village in which she lives, Mariammal lost her catamaran and fishing nets. Her village – inhabited mostly by Irula tribal people – is on a small strip of land between Pulicat lagoon (60 km north of the state capital, Chennai) and the Bay of Bengal. Nobody from the *adivasi* (tribal) or *dalit* (so-called ‘untouchable’) communities nearby is allowed into the sea – the traditional preserve of the non-tribal fishermen. When two years ago some Irula men challenged the ban and went fishing the ensuing clashes claimed two lives. “Our people had to give an undertaking to the district authorities that we will not fish in the sea,” Mariammal said. The women traditionally fish in the backwaters to catch prawns, lagoon crabs, mullets and catfish, oyster and clams. In her village, there were about 40 catamarans, 28 of them owned by women. Almost all the boats were lost or damaged in the tsunami.

Although Mariammal now lives on charity from a local church, she is the secretary of a savings and credit group organised by a local NGO and wishes that there would be similar initiatives to help restore the villagers’ livelihoods. She also hopes that NGOs and others offering assistance would address the women’s needs; fishing craft and equipment are usually supplied to men only. Across the backwaters, NGOs are moving in to assist fishing communities but they do not cross over to this tribal hamlet or the nearby *dalit* community.

Men and women from certain castes are denied access to the sea all along the coast of Tamil Nadu. The role of *dalits* and tribal people in fishing communities tends to be supportive; they clean and maintain fishing equipment, load, transport and sell fish, build, thatch and clean fishermen’s huts. NGO assistance in restoring their livelihoods is still determined by the menial roles tra-

ditionally assigned to them. Women like Mariammal who are engaged in fishing face double discrimination – being a woman and belonging to a marginal group.

Living on the streets

The pavement of the road leading to Chennai’s scenic Marina beach came alive at sunset everyday. One could see young Krishnamurthy spreading out his schoolbooks on the pavement in his family’s open-air ‘home’ between two lampposts. At Pattanapakam, over 500 families displaced by the tsunami lived without shelter beside the busy road for over two months. The rubble of their houses can be

seen by the shore. Poles and ropes demarcate boundaries in case an official arrives to assess the damage. When around half of those living on the pavement moved to temporary shelters 12km away Krishnamurthy’s family preferred to stay put. “It is difficult but we make sure that he gets some time to study,” said Bhanu, Krishnamurthy’s mother. They hope that they will be provided with a shelter nearby – and, later, a permanent house. Rehabilitation programmes are not addressing displaced children’s educational needs. Remedial schooling and places to study for those who are not in formal settlements are only now being discussed.

After two months on the street almost all the families were shifted to the temporary shelters far away. At the time of writing in early June they live there in hot, humid sheds, with little water and very bad sanitation facilities. The camp was flooded during the summer rain. In a month there will be monsoon rains and more floods. The government and NGOs are planning to shift them again – to a better camp.

In search of a cool place

In Muttam village in Kanniyakumari district at India’s southernmost tip, Mary, a mother of four, has one of 24 temporary shelters built by a local NGO. As the summer grows hotter and more humid, the shelter has become too hot to be comfortable. Mary spends most of her time outside. “We all – men, women and children – sleep at night out in the open,” said Mary. “I have left my youngest child, a two-year-old, at a neighbour’s house, as it is too hot to spend the afternoon in this shelter.”

Mary is not happy spending the day out in the open especially when men – with no work to go to – hang around. She tries not to complain but the lack of privacy is a major concern. She is embarrassed by having to take her child to the neighbour on a daily basis. Worst of all, they

Questions of minimum standards have been ignored

have to sleep outside in public space when the nights get too warm and humid. The tar-coated shelters retain heat and are poorly ventilated. The black plastic wrapped over the roof to prevent the light roof sheets from flying off make the shelters even hotter. Because of the heat women are obliged to cook either in the open air or in shared kitchens. Questions of minimum standards of comfort and privacy – which impact particularly on women – have been ignored in the rush to build temporary shelters. Several NGOs promised to provide fans for the shelters but, in closed structures like these, fans will only serve to circulate the hot air.

NGOs are starting to realise that they were wrong to follow the example of some of the government contractors when choosing building materials. “We did what they said,” said a programme officer from the NGO ActionAid India. “We need to correct it.”

“We had to go as far as Ernakulam in Kerala [six hours by road] to get these light roof sheets,” said Cleatus Ubald, director of the local NGO

Social Education and Development (SED). “We could have made thatched huts with local material, like coconut or palm leaves, and generated some local employment.” NGO representatives said that district officials prevented them from building traditional thatched structures, as memories of a major fire a couple of years ago that killed many children in a thatched school shed were still fresh in people’s minds.

Indiadisasters.org¹ has reported on the “oven-like” temporary shelters. Inter Press Service (IPS)² has also documented the problem of “sauna-like” temporary shelters. While technological solutions – such as a heat-resistant shields, better ventilation or air ducts – are becoming available, the issue of women’s space in shelters has yet to be addressed effectively. Only the more

experienced agencies are providing separate spaces for cooking, washing and bathing. Oxfam provides cooler, thatched huts in Cuddalore, with space allocated for such activities. Some Cordaid-supported shelters include a room specifically for adolescent girls. To be acceptable and appropriate, shelters must be constructed with at least a minimum degree of planning and consideration of comfort and privacy requirements.

Conclusion

Social, cultural and biological factors make women and children, especially girls, more vulnerable to adverse health effects and violence in the aftermath of a disaster. Lack of adequate shelter makes them all the more vulnerable. Women in traditional South Asian communities may

be unable to access assistance safely and to make their needs known. Denying education to children will make the next generation still more vulnerable. To address all these concerns, any approach to disaster response should be gendered and sensitive to the particular needs of women and children. Those involved in provision of assistance need to have a clear understanding of the local environment and appreciate the particular needs of all sectors of the community.

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1. www.indiadisasters.org

2. www.ips.org/

Temporary shelter in Kanniyakumari district at India’s southernmost tip.

