

After the wave

December 25, 2005

The people of the tsunami and quake-affected regions of Tamil Nadu, Kerala, and the Andaman and Nicobar islands take stock a year after the disaster that killed 2,30,000 people across several nations. A.J. Philip reflects on that tumultuous day and the immediate aftermath of the tragedy, while Sridhar K. Chari finds that affected families are still in the process of locating firm ground under their feet.

WHAT do you do at the Chandigarh airport on a Sunday afternoon waiting for a flight? Visit the BBC site on the mobile. The news had just come in: hundreds feared killed as "tidal waves" hit Indonesia. Every two minutes or so, the BBC was updating the news. The toll figures were going up and among the countries hit was India.

The BBC was consistently referring to "tidal waves" or "sea surge" till late afternoon that day, which means neither its editors in London nor its correspondents in the countries concerned, knew the word tsunami. By the time the BBC used "tsunami", I had reached Delhi and was on way to Kolkata to attend a meeting of the Kolkata Group Nobel-laureate Amartya Sen had constituted.

At Kolkata, I was shocked to know that among the areas hit by tsunami was my native town, Kayamkulam in Alappuzha district of Kerala. By then the enormity of the phenomenon had begun to sink in, more so when I saw the horrifying images on the TV in the hotel room.

As I retired for the day, the nagging doubt arose: was my family all right in Kerala? I soon called home and to my

horror found that the call was not going through. Every time I tried, the result was the same.

Fortunately, I had the telephone number of my relation in Kurukshetra, whom I woke up late that night. I felt a sigh of relief when he told me that some areas near Kayamkulam were badly hit but nothing had happened in the town.

The day after, Science and Technology Minister Kapil Sibal was with us taking part in the closed-door meeting. Every now and then, his mobile would ring and he would go out to take the call. He was in a tight spot answering questions from the media and giving policy directions to his staff.

Over breakfast, I asked Sibal whether he had ever heard about tsunamis. He was frank enough to admit that he had not heard the word until it struck on December 26. Though textbooks do mention "tsunami", people realised how devastating it could be only when over two lakh people were washed away by the killer waves.

Saturation coverage of the disaster by various television channels brought home the horrendousness of the death and destruction caused by the tsunami. They also telecast video clips of the waves, shot by amateurs, which showed huge walls of water capable of lifting up cars and throwing them hundreds of metres away, devouring vast stretches of land.

For all the interest with which I read the news, the information obtained remained secondary. For once, I decided to visit a tsunami-hit area. Finally, after several months a friend in World Vision, an NGO working in the

area, facilitated my visit to such an area near Kayamkulam.

Though the tsunami-struck area in Arattupuzha in Alappuzha district was half-an-hour's drive from Kayamkulam, the journey was time-consuming. The famed backwaters, which lend to Kerala the sobriquet "God's own country", were a nuisance here because they cut the area from the mainland. A bridge had been in the making for years without any material progress.

We had to board Gurudevan, a ferry, which was large enough to carry four cars and several two-wheelers. When the tsunami struck, many of the victims could not be rushed to the hospital because of this bottleneck. At least some of the 40 people who died here could have been saved had prompt medical attention been provided to them.

We reached the other side only to realise that it was pointless to bring the car. The only road in the village had been washed away by the waves. Skeletons of buildings – shops and houses – stood alongside what was once a motorable road. Somebody with a sense of humour had put up a signboard – Tsunami Junction. Waves were incessantly lashing the shore as we walked along the coast, throwing droplets of salty water on us.

The sand was black, full of rare minerals, which have applications in atomic plants. The people have been protesting against the mining of the minerals because they believe, not without reason, that if it is not stopped, the whole area will soon become part of the sea. "We want a seawall to protect the land, not mining", they said in a chorus.

Our arrival attracted a small group of people. The most vocal among them was Antony, a bearded, emaciated daily wage earner, who lost his house but saved his family. He was at his garrulous best when he attacked the government for not doing anything for the victims. Suddenly, a huge wave hit us, drenching us from below the waist. Fortunately, I did not fall.

"You were shocked when you got a mild treatment from the Mother Sea. Imagine our plight having to face the sea 24 hours a day", Antony said advising me to move to a higher area.

The people were promised houses at least 200 metres away from the sea. Antony took me to his new house, which was being built by the Malayala Manorama group. The new house was on the same site where his old house stood. "Look, the sea is not even 10 metres from here". Fear was writ large on Antony's face.

The new house would be two-storied. So if the tsunami comes again, he would be safe in the upper floor even if the ground floor is washed away, so went the reasoning trotted out by the government.

Life in the tin-shed, built as a temporary shelter for the victims, was horrible. In the sweltering heat, it was impossible to sit inside. Everywhere we could hear only a litany of complaints.

At the relief camp in Alappattu panchayat in Kollam district, I met a bundle of joy called Tsunami, named after the disaster because she was born on that very day. Her grandmother told me that the delivery was induced by the tsunami, which kept Tsunami's pregnant mother floating for a while when the seawater gushed into their brick and mortar house. When the water receded, she found herself clutching at

her new-born.

Outside the disaster area, we heard about influential non-victims cornering the benefits while the victims developing what is known as the dependency syndrome, expecting the government to do everything for them.

But nothing mattered to Tsunami, who kept smiling at me and holding my thumb. She reminded me that while tragedies come and go life goes on forever.

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It was on a placid, sunny morning on December 26 last year that shorelines across southern Asia erupted in a series of killer waves. There were three big ones, and the towering walls of water, several stories high, smashed into people and buildings, fracturing thighbones, spines and skulls, demolishing walls and roofs, depositing school benches on trees, and flooding homes and hearths in a stunning, merciless assault. The waves continued to kill even as they receded, leaving strewn behind the remains of the dead and the debris of broken lives.

The Indian state machinery responded, as did India's people, and though there were clearly several lacunae, especially in the difficult-to-reach areas of the A&N islands, the effort was widely lauded. India declined international aid, even allocating resources for Sri Lanka and Indonesia. It was clear, even early on, that this was not false pride, but the confidence, amidst grief, of a large, growing nation.

The US-based Fritz Institute, in a study released recently, found that aid beneficiaries in India were the most satisfied in every category of aid, in comparison to Sri Lanka and Indonesia (Indonesia fared the worst). Relief

services over the first 48 hours were found to be above average.

The sobering point, however, is that nine months after the tragedy, at the time the study was conducted, a significant decrease in household income was observed in all affected areas. Nagapattinam, Kancheepuram and Chennai are the worst hit, and the fishing community the most affected. In the Fritz study, a third of the surveyed families have reported a 51 to 75 per cent decrease in income. Another 37 per cent reported a 26 to 50 per cent income loss, while 17 per cent reported a 76 per cent to 100 per cent income loss.

Many people are still living in makeshift shelters. While 17 per cent of the populace in the affected coastal districts lived in such shelters before the disaster, the figure has now gone up to 72 per cent. Families in Villupuram, Ramanathapuram and Cuddalore are in temporary shelters in the same location, while those in Kancheepuram and Nagapattinam have also had to endure displacement. Both local and international NGOs are the "primary service providers." The corporate sector also has a presence in some areas. Fritz representatives in Chennai, however, have expressed dissatisfaction over the lack of proper accounting of the massive aid money that has come in.

A key deficiency that has been identified is poor counselling services or a lack of "psycho-social" support, and inadequate sensitivity towards the location and disposal of dead persons/vicims bodies, an emotional priority for survivors. Interestingly, when the survivors were asked to rate aid providers, the central and state governments came out on top along with World Vision and SNEHA, an established local NGO.

Also deserving of special mention,

though absent as a factor in the Fritz study, is the role played by the Indian armed forces and other outfits like the Coast Guard. But for their presence, especially in the far-flung areas of the Andaman and Nicobar islands, the relief efforts would have had a hard time getting off the ground. In places like Car Nicobar, the forces had to shrug off stinging losses of their own personnel to respond to the needs of the larger populace.

Tamil Nadu State Relief Commissioner R. Santhanam declared recently in Chennai that the areas would undergo "total transformation" by March 2008, when various rehabilitation projects funded by the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank (ADB) would be completed. These include new disaster-resistant houses and public buildings, bridges, schools and roads.

As much as Rs 876 crore has been released from a sanctioned Rs 1136 crore, with Rs 630 crore having been spent. The World Bank has lent Rs 166 crore, while Rs 561 crore has come from the ADB.

In the first phase, 46,000 partly and

fully damaged houses are being replaced at a cost of Rs 1.5 lakh each. NGOs intend to construct 32,207 houses, of which only 1,564 had been completed. In the second phase, an estimated 40,000 houses not actually damaged but considered vulnerable due to their proximity to the water line are to be reinforced.

In the much-affected fisheries sector, Rs 143 crore had been disbursed as relief, and replacement of boats, repair of boats and engines, and supply of nets had been completed, the Commissioner stated. While these disbursements have helped, reports have come in about the inappropriateness of the expensive fibreglass boats that have been supplied in many cases.

Santhanam states that psycho-social support had been provided to 46,000 persons in 14,000 families. Agriculturally, 8,460 hectares were affected, and reclamation treatment is on; the aim is to render them fit for cultivation in about three years.

Clearly, a full return to normalcy, however one might define that, is going to take time. The situation is not very dif-

ferent in the Andaman and Nicobar islands.

The Disaster Management Bill has now been passed by both Houses of Parliament. The Act provides for a National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA), state and district-level authorities, a national plan to be reviewed annually, and a National Institute of Disaster Management (both the NDMA and the institute have already been set up by ordinances and government orders) that looks at aspects of funds management and auditing.

The key will really be to ensure fast, flexible and networked response, especially at the local level, where available resources can quickly be mobilised and the relief chain made to work optimally. No Act can do that job by itself. Hopefully, lessons have been learned that will percolate to the ground sooner. As the year has shown, nature is not very forgiving if taken for granted.
