

The 2004 Tsunami and the Lessons Never Learnt

The Tsunami that struck the Indian Ocean regions on 26 December 2004 left more than 220,000 people dead, many of them women and children. According to estimates, more than half a million people were injured and over five million were made homeless. The coastal sketches of Indonesia, Sri Lanka, India including Andaman and Nicobar Islands, Thailand, Maldives and East Africa have also been affected. Livelihoods of millions of fisherfolk, farmers and their families in these coastal areas, were wiped out in a matter of minutes. Large numbers of people are traumatised and are trying to cope with the shock of the loss of their loved ones, the loss of virtually everything owned and is now faced with the painful prospect of rebuilding their lives from the wreckage.

Not the least important is the loss in cultural heritages, particularly in Sri Lanka, Tamilnadu, Indonesia and Thailand. The fragile cultural heritage of the Tsunami-affected regions may never even be attended to. Similarly, impact on tourism has been highlighted particularly on economies that survive on the Tourism industry.

A good thing about the bad Tsunami was that it brought forth one of the most generous and magnificent manifestations of human kindness. Compassion, decisiveness and heroism on behalf of the affected, be it in cash, kind or service, were the noble expressions of a common humanity. Heroic stories of good Samaritans, courageous efforts and genuine self-sacrifice have been pouring forth, ever since the tragedy. Similarly, a lot of attention has been paid to the post-traumatic disorders that have been found in the victims. Some have even gone to the extent of remarking that mental health has finally found its rightful place in the well-being of humanity, albeit in the wake of one of the worst disasters to affect mankind.

Tsunami, 2004 has raised some of the most painfully puzzling issues. The huge amounts of money and resources mobilised since the tragedy, have not reached the real victims. Most unfortunately, it is the money that has gone to the government that, apparently, has not reached anywhere near the affected. While there has been a literal competition among the agencies for the coveted relief work, the poorest and the weakest among the affected have largely been unattended to. So too, the communalisation of relief itself has been

obvious and deleterious. It was reported that there were camps where only specific community members were allowed to enter. In one camp a beggar who strayed into the food line was chased away by the Tsunami-affected. Human cruelty seems to know no bounds even in the face of tragedy.

The emergency helps have unevenly been distributed unsatisfactorily. The landlord who lost a hut received larger help than the poor who lost everything, it is alleged. The cash help that went to many particularly the poor has been squandered, in drinks and other wasteful expenditures. Very often relief materials were sold for cash. The affected particularly among the economically lower class do not seem to have profited from the relief that they received. The traditional fisherfolk are really afraid that the governments are going to use the natural calamity "to clean up beaches" and make them available for grand scale tourism and fish business.

A large number of lessons not learnt by us, particularly Indians, is the major concern of this editorial. When will we learn to handle a calamity like this? It is not as though we are unfamiliar with natural calamities. They seem to occur at predictable regularity. But, we are yet to develop the political will to handle crisis. Experts suggest that a competent, permanent and centralised Crises Management Team, with proper lines of communication is a must. This team then can watch out constantly for developing crisis situations and can become the coordinator of relief. 'It would be too late to build the ark when you hear the thunder', as they say.

No less important is the ability to predict natural disasters. This is an area where perhaps along with scientists media also has to play a substantial role. Armed with scientific information, journalists can provide the information and if various functionaries develop skills, our society would be better placed to face such disasters. As recent history shows, such disasters are increasing in their frequency.

Long term care of the traumatised needs priority. In a country where psychiatric and counselling resources are grossly inadequate, this will be another Herculean task. Tsunami and similar tragedies leave permanent emotional and psychological scars. Professionals have pointed out that Tsunami had much less physical health problems compared to psychological issues. Children and women are the worst affected. Acute grief reactions were seen even after months. Active counselling and social support during the immediate post-disaster period is essential and we need to train sufficient numbers of professionals or Para-professionals for such emergencies.

Need for scientific studies have arisen in the wake of such calamities. Impact of Tsunami and similar calamities on the lives of people, especially accurate and comprehensive assessment of

the losses—economic, social, ecological, cultural and psychological must be attended to. The effectiveness of relief and rehabilitation, the psychosocial effects, particularly the post-traumatic disorders, the political dimensions of relief, and others are prime issues for a disaster-prone country like India. The relief agencies, while focusing on rehabilitation, and even competing among themselves for the same, should also attend to this and substantial portion of resources should be allocated for the same.

It is time that we learnt the lessons that nature repeatedly tells us.

Chief Editor