

Site Visit Report: Tsunami Relief (Bharathi Nagar) and Home Sweet Home (Palayamkottai) Cuddalore District

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It might be a good idea to take a look at photos from the visit before reading this document. They're here.

Bharathi Nagar:

<http://picasaweb.google.com/shankar84/TsunamiReliefBharathiNagar>

Palayamkottai:

<http://picasaweb.google.com/shankar84/HomeSweetHome>

I reached Bharathi Nagar around 11AM. Siddamma was not available to accompany me on the visit as she was busy organizing the Asha fellows conference. An employee of Bharathi Trust, Mr. Vaidyanathan, the Sarpam Cuddalore district president, Mr. Balakrishnan and some other people from Bharathi Nagar showed me around.

Briefly:

- Saw the place where the fire accident took place. I was informed that 58 houses used to exist and all was lost to the fire. There was pretty much nothing out there, apart from some charred remains from the fire, when I went.
- The EMC that used to function before the fire accident has now been shut down. The thatched building that used to house the EMC still remains, and can be seen in one of the photographs. It is now used for some temporary shelter, if the need arises. It will be pulled down soon to construct a new one with proper roofing and what not².
- 97 new houses (all identical) are being constructed in a piece of land just near the accident site. The construction work is almost over, and they hope to hand over keys formally on 26th Jan. However, people have already started residing in these houses as they don't have anywhere else to go to. Other than the families whose houses got burnt in the fire, some more families (also Irula tribals) from a couple of neighboring villages (Sakkangudi and Sothi Kuppam) will also benefit from this. In addition to the 97, work has also recently begun to build 40 more (also identical, but of a different design) houses in the same space. They're likely to get completed sometime towards the middle of 2008.
- The houses looked good, particularly in comparison to tsunami relief housing provided by the government. Later in the day, I got a chance to see what kind of houses the government builds for the affected, and they definitely looked inferior in quality, not to mention the fact that some of them had already started falling apart. Bharathi Nagar houses get doors made of Malaysian teak wood, "retra-band" roofing (some new design concept that offers some advantages in keeping the house naturally warm or cold, don't remember) and strong walls. Each house comes with two rooms, a front open space and a terrace.
- Currently, there are only muddy roads around the houses. But once the formal handover happens, the land where these houses stand (which is currently property of Bharathi Trust) will be given

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² I was a little surprised to learn that the EMC was functioning like that (with thatched roof etc.) until the fire accident. Not so long ago, in 2004, Tamil Nadu (and pretty much the whole of India) was shaken by the tragedy at Kumbakonam, where 92 children died due to a similar fire accident. Following that, the state government had passed strict laws declaring schools with improper roofing and lacking other facilities thereby coming in the way of children's safety to be shut down. When I enquired, I was told that they were completely unaware of such rules.

away to the residents. Then, the government will start work to lay concrete roads and install street lights around the houses. I was told that this shouldn't take too much time and that the collector had already given an assurance.

- I asked some of the villagers what kind of relief they received after the fire accident.
From the government: Rs.2000, 5 kg rice, 1 liter kerosene, 1 dhoti and 1 saree. (for one family)
From Bharathi Trust: 15 kg rice, 2 kg dhal, 2 kg oil, soap, cosmetics and other needs for one month. (for one family)

Like I said before, the EMC that used to function has been shut down until construction work can get completed. The students who used to attend this EMC (less than five years old) don't do anything now in the mornings. In the evenings (may be not daily), they gather for a brief learning session in one of the houses that are being constructed. Tuition classes also happen (for the older kids, I guess) at the same time. Older students go to government schools nearby, as usual. The construction work on the new EMC is yet to begin. In the new EMC, there will be more kids than before. This is because more families are moving in to the area to occupy the houses being constructed.

The villagers were happy that their permanent homes were getting built as planned, but were worried about their employment. Among other things, the fire accident also destroyed four shops (rice shop, groceries shop, idli stall, radio service) that used to function and many fishing nets, and the villagers would like to have them back. Currently, it is a good season for catching fish (prawns, I think) in the region and they're losing out on a lot of income. They also used to have a motor boat which used to be of great use in getting into the sea and catching fish but someone stole the motor (not sure when this happened) and so the boat is also of no use. Without nets and the boat, they just manage to catch the fish they can with bare hands and without venturing deep into the sea. The villagers said they'll greatly appreciate any help in getting the nets and the motor boat back. Fishing apart, they also get some little income from catching rats. (It seems they used to catch snakes earlier, which used to get them more money. But that source of livelihood stopped after the government had declared catching and killing of snakes as illegal.)

I was then shown images (a plan) of how the permanent housing would look like once everything is complete. These pictures are included in the site visit pictures.

Miscellaneous:

1. I was given the list of students (5 years or older) from Bharathi Nagar who attend the various government schools. This is a center-by-center (five government schools) break up of students.
2. I was also given the list of students (less than five years old) from Bharathi Nagar (who used to attend the EMC, before the fire accident took place) and their parents' details³.
3. Here are the contact details of the Sarpam chief (Cuddalore district president) who had accompanied me on the visit:
L. Balakrishnan (Cell: 99761 75057)

We then decided to proceed to Palayamkottai and have lunch along the way. Palayamkottai is about an hour away from this place, and is located further west (more interior) off the coast. It's a pretty small village; I wouldn't expect the population to be more than a few thousands.

On our way to Palayamkottai, I was curious to find out more about the Irular community themselves (since this was the first time I had heard of them!) and most of my questions were related to only this. Since this is not something directly related to the site visit itself, and probably would have already gotten documented very well in Austin's archives, I'll keep this part very short. Irulars are STs (scheduled tribes) and have traditionally lived a very ill-informed and intimidated lifestyle, thereby making themselves easy targets for exploitation. As a result, they manage to very easily fall off the government's radar, and are mostly left on their own to fend for themselves. Following the efforts of a few people like Siddamma, they have started to rise up in the recent past, and slowly 'getting in' to the society. For example, they never used to have voting rights in the country until about six months back when a few of them managed to get it. The problem, I was

³ I can have both (1) and (2) mailed to Asha Austin. Just let me know an address I should mail these to.

told, is that they had to face a lot of difficulties in getting their ST certificates, without which it becomes extremely difficult for them to get into several places like schools, government offices, ration cards etc. In fact, it seems they didn't even used to have a proper funeral ground, until a short while back. Taking note of these conditions, certain reforms were begun recently (by Siddamma and others) and the setting up of 'Sarpam' was an important step in this direction. It is essentially an Irular union that fights for the rights for these people, and also serves to unify the community to fight all the unfair treatment with a strong voice. The Sarpam chief says that things have considerably improved ever since their organization came into existence – for example, he is now part of a 'fairness committee' that oversees policy and other decision making (mainly with respect to employment opportunities) in the villages, keeping in mind the best interests of the various castes and tribes. The committee consists of the MLA from the region, district collector, and people representing various sections of the public (Muslim, Dalit, Irular, women etc.). It seems, until a while back, out of the 60,000 Irulars who live in the district, only 300 are registered with the employment exchange for jobs (I'm not sure how many of the 60K are actually eligible to get registered, because you'll need at least a 10th standard qualification to get registered at the government employment exchange). The Sarpam chief is optimistic that things will slowly change, but only with helpful intervention from people in the 'mainstream'.

On our way, I also got to see a few houses that the government had built in an SC village nearby. Though it was not part of tsunami relief, I was told that the houses the government builds for Tsunami relief look very similar. The houses, like I mentioned earlier, looked not very impressive, and much inferior to the ones I saw in Bharathi Nagar. I am told that nowadays, following several complaints from the people, the government just gives money (Rs.37000, minus Rs.2000 commission) to the people and they build houses on their own.

We reached Palayamkottai close to 3PM. Part of the objective of my visit to find out about the recent flash floods that had hit the region a week or so back. Here, Asha also works with a small village (consisting of eleven families) to provide them with permanent housing.

This village is located in some obscure corner of the bigger town, which I'm sure is not visited by anyone else apart from the villagers themselves. The village has about five or six houses, made of mud and thatched roofs (pictures would describe them the best), in which these eleven families live. Obviously, some houses accommodate more than one family.

On the recent floods⁴: This is a problem which the villagers encounter almost every year, usually twice a year. There is a dam nearby, and when it becomes full, water overflows from the sides of dam (in addition to proper outlets) and this affects the villages. This cannot be checked by increasing the flow of water from the proper outlets as that will affect the agricultural fields in the path of the water. This happened this time around as well, and these houses had gotten partially submerged in the water about a week back. Not all of the houses got affected, only those (two) which were close to the waters. In these two houses, the walls had gotten damaged and had broken down. Also, as a result of water getting in, they also lost a few vessels and some clothes.

Relief given so far from Bharathi Trust (for each family): 15 kg rice, 1 kg dhal, 1 kg oil, 1 kg tamarind, 100 g mustard, jeera, and some other grocery stuff that I didn't note down. No money given. These are expected to keep the families afloat for about a week to ten days. The hope is that they will be able to get back to normalcy by then.

I was also told that there is hope to receive Rs.1000 from the government (per family), as the government had announced relief to all flood affected victims in the district. But nothing is certain as yet. Also, if history and experience are anything to go by, they're likely to not receive the money or only receive a fraction of it.

⁴ All of my observations are from only this village in Palayamkottai. There are villages nearby which were also affected by the flash floods but I couldn't get the chance to see or gather information about them.

Since the past week had been pretty sunny, most of the water had dried up by the time I went there. I asked the Sarpam chief if everything is now normal, and he replied yes. People have started going back to work and things are now fine. It was only during the past one week that the situation looked grim, especially during the two days following the floods, when they were literally without food and proper shelter. Someone (the panchayat chief, I guess) had provided them with shelter at a nearby school or marriage hall and food after that for a day or two. It was only after all this relief from Bharathi Trust arrived.

The new houses will come up in the same space where the current ones stand. The work is expected to begin shortly (January, I was told), and should get completed by the middle of 2008. When work is going on, the people will be moved to some temporary housing in front of the current houses (just a few feet away). I asked them if the new houses will have the capacity to withstand these floods which are likely to happen next year. They replied that the new ones will be constructed at a height significantly higher than the existing ones and will therefore not be affected by floods.

On rat-catching and employment opportunities: Rat catching is their main source of livelihood. They go to agricultural fields nearby and help them catch and destroy rats. I was told that sometimes the rats even become a part of their food! This income is not great but is pretty much the best they can get in the area at this point of time. Also, this is only a seasonal thing as agriculture does not happen all round the year. During the off-season period, they just go and do some menial work like those of maids in nearby houses, building construction work etc. They're not particularly happy about what they're doing right now, but are rather helpless. I asked them what kind of alternative employment they would be willing to consider. The women are willing to consider basket weaving, goat and cattle rearing, and similar activities that can be done from home, if someone is willing to help them by providing money and other facilities. They're however not willing to relocate for reasons primarily sentimental. For some of them, the place where they're living right now had been inherited from their fathers, who in turn got it from their fathers, and thus they feel strongly connected to the area and simply rule out the possibility of relocating to nearby places, even if faced with floods and poverty here.

Better rat traps: I asked them about this.

<http://www.hindu.com/2007/11/30/stories/2007113058152200.htm>

They were simply not aware of this but weren't very enthusiastic about the idea. Firstly, it was clear that they weren't all that fond of machines – they saw them as something that takes away their employment opportunities. Secondly, in this case, they were pretty confident that it's rather hard for a machine to replace man because the maximum a machine could offer is to catch a lot of rats, but not actually go to the source (their hideout) and destroy it. These people do the latter and they feel that it is much more effective. I wasn't very aware of the details of this new rat trap and hence couldn't have a prolonged conversation with them on this or allay their fears. But they've requested that we let them know if we found anything impressive about these machines and we're confident that it can be of help to them.

And finally, the Sarpam chief had a request. It seems Asha is working to provide 1200 houses (Tsunami relief) somewhere nearby, and these people have gotten a chance to take a look at the houses. They're very impressed by the houses and would like Asha to consider the possibility of building similar houses to other Irular folks in their area who still do not have good housing.

Somewhere here is where my visit ended. The drive back to Madras was to take five hours from Palayamkottai (since we didn't go via ECR, which might have saved about 30 to 45 minutes, and also because of traffic near the city), and since I had to catch a flight early in the morning the next day, I decided to leave a little earlier than planned, around 4:45PM.