



Ananda Foundation

Field Notes: India

Kanchipuram District, Tamil Nadu: We have no boats.

No one will forget the tsunami, the day that nature became violent. That ominous morning of December 26, 2004, the ocean swallowed buildings, cars, trains, buses, churned and then spat out bodies of people, animals and shattered boats.

Having grown up on an island but having experienced a tsunami warning, I can comprehend perhaps an ounce of fear compared to that horror palpable that day. Though Ananda Foundation has two projects in the Indian State of Tamil Nadu, our projects were inland and were thankfully not exposed to the fury of nature. There was not one person in the world to which this tragedy did not resonate.

Though it is not Ananda Foundation's direct mission to provide emergency assistance and disaster relief, we realize that the rebuilding the lives of survivors is a long-term process. I wanted to visit the tsunami areas to witness with my eyes not only the destruction, but the creation of new life. Or so I thought.

We drove two hours from the city of Chennai on the road to Pondicherry past the resorts and seaside temples of Mahabalipuram to the village of Uyallikuppam. It was two days before the third month anniversary of the big wave that would change people's lives forever.

I was accompanied by a woman who had flown in from Pune, Maharashtra and worked with battered women for the NGO Action for Self-Reliance, Hope and Awareness. With a background in clinical psychology, she recently conducted an evaluation on psychosocial services in tsunami affected villages. We were joined by another woman who operated a children's shelter for babies through teenagers and a short-stay rehabilitation home for unwed

pregnant women needing a safe haven to give birth and whom were trying to build a live for themselves. In having these knowledgeable women accompany me, I realized the importance of NGOs leveraging their skills and expertise to collaborate for the greater good.

On the way we passed several banners and placard cards of well-known NGOs. Part of me was very happy that they had come to help. When you think about it—the coastline is dotted with village communities. It is no small task to orchestrate who gets help, when they get help, and by whom.

We drove down a dirt road that opened up to a vast space of brown. Sand and dirt dotted by a few trees and rows of brown tents shaped like pieces on a monopoly board. At the far left side of the camp was a long open hut. We were invited to sit and talk with the local villagers. I have to admit that although Tamil is the prevalent language—a local village man communicated in English about the needs of his community, what had been done thus far and the help that was promised and not yet fulfilled by a nonprofit foundation based in the west.

We are fishermen---fishing is all we know. We don't know anything else,” Mr. Anbe said. He was 33 years old and had one child. One by one the villagers confirmed that they sit around idle all day, hoping that the nonprofit will return to help them build their boats, fishing is the only source of employment they know. Their children are attending school in a structure that was set up for them. The people of this village were particularly distressed that the village next to them Pudupattinum had received new boats whereas they didn't have any. One fishing boat, equipped with a motor engine and net could employ five families (about 20-25 people). The total cost for a single boat was around \$4,000 USD.

From the windows of the white-washed school, I saw little girls in crisp white uniforms wearing bright red ribbons in their hair. There were two volunteers teaching at the blackboard. Having seen the road signs for about five different non-profit foundations, somehow I was expecting to see more.

No one could have anticipated the magnitude of this disaster, but I felt myself contemplating ethics and humanitarian aid. At which point does an organization decide to leave? There are guidelines and indicators, but wouldn't it seem appropriate to at least establish a means for economic viability in the community to empower people to gradually sustain themselves? If you enable people to be dependent on food and supplies but don't give them a job for which to earn their own money to buy food and supplies—then they will be no better off than in the immediate aftermath. It could be the difference between dependency and independent sustainability.

I do not doubt that assistance provided is appreciated, but I'm being honest. The only request the villagers made to me, was sadly, could I please contact the western nonprofit and follow-up on their verbal commitment. "When will they return to this village?"

Outside of the long community hut, an elderly woman began describing what happened to her during the tsunami. She was in her house. When the wave came, she curled into a fetal position and sat hugging her legs to her body as tightly. The wave so forceful, it pulled her sari right off her body.

Like walking on hot coals, the sand burned beneath my feet. A smashed three wheeled auto lonely in the sand open to the sky stood as a testament and memorial to this community. On our way to the beach we passed children scooping the last bit of rice from a round aluminum plate. A woman combing her friend's oiled hair.

They were sitting aimlessly next to another woman with a big basket of fruits for sale. Past the grass hut with clothes hanging on the line and just across from the two children peering out of the trees, a patch of brown dying trees stood, ugly and raw in their shattered trunks. As we got closer to the beach there was a long line of boats with borders of different colors. On the boats were the painted names of each of the aid agencies that sponsored the boat, at least twelve of them. A man pointed out to me that they belonged to the adjacent village, Puttupatinam. Next to me sat a group of wiry men slowly mending a tattered net. “We have a net, but no boat,” they told me.

**Notes by Levani March 2005*

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