

Far from Over; 21 days after the Tsunami, India's coast still waits for aid

Katharina Love 2005-02-10 11:02

A firsthand account of the situation on the ground in Tamil Nadu state of India. This is from a visit made 21 days after the Tsunami struck.

Far From Over

I

I didn't want to move. I wanted to stay sitting in the passenger seat of the car where the impossible was possible; I could escape reality there.

I stood facing west. Everything was gray. Tragic gray. Gray sand, gray waves, gray human figures moving about in the very periphery of my vision. How strange it was to be looking at an empty ocean while standing among steamboats. There were many of them, lined up like beached whales, still breathing.

One of the team members came and stood next to me. He was a part of the Relief Action Network that had burned and buried bodies directly after the tsunami had struck.

"There were bodies everywhere when we first came here," he said gesturing towards our feet. "There were also many floating in the water." He paused and turned to look at me. At that moment, a huge wave crashed over me.

"Are you ok?" he asked with concern.

"I'm all right, just sad." I was about to cry. The gray energy had saturated my being, through my feet, circulating to my head. I felt death.

We wandered about the beach, surveying the scene. The ground moved under me as I picked my way through the ruins. Brick, scrap of fishing net, an article of child's clothing covered in sand. I stepped up to a large piece of concrete that jutted angrily out of the smaller debris. All of it was so surreal, so unnatural. Entire palm trees, roots and all, lay on their sides, dead as logs.

We moved out to what had been a T-shaped dock but now resembled nothing more than a crumbling I. There were many people on the dock, coming out to stare at the empty gray sea.

I turned back to face the shore and walked towards the vehicle. I made sure to avoid the jagged, rusty metal piece that stuck out of a broken block of wood. As I left the dock behind, I saw shreds of scaffolding lying in a pile under a partially built concrete structure. The thought of what might be under the rubble scared me; many people were still missing.

A woman hurriedly collecting scraps of wood caught my attention, and I realized she was the first person I had noticed. As we walked over to meet the vehicle, I brought humans into my conscious perception. A single group of three men were laying bricks; however, other people were not busy. Instead, they seemed aimless, idle, drifting as if ocean waves controlled the quality of their movement.

II

The vehicle took us a short distance to Keechkuppam. I was told that the village had once been a small, bustling harbor. Unlike the drought-ridden districts that had no reliable source of income, this village had fishing if nothing else. But now, fishing was also lost for Keechkuppam. The six of us walked towards the water.

A man clad in a blue uniform climbed into the back of a truck to join others. There were more uniformed men sitting in a circle nearby. All of them were talking loudly and laughing.

A group of young men approached our team and greeted us with hellos in Tamil. Rengaraj Ramaswamy, the managing trustee of the Indian Social Services Institute, introduced them as the youth that had joined forces with the Relief Action Network to take care of the bodies after the disaster. I said hello back in English.

They were young; none of them older than 20. They all had dark clouds hanging over their heads, washing away any chances of optimism. Life isn't fair, it's a series of both illusory and actually destructive waves that lead us all to wonder why we take the intervals of calm for granted.

Rengaraj and I sat on the edge of a small, beached boat that seemed to be in one piece, a rarity among the rubble. The

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youth poured out their thoughts in fast-paced Tamil, which sounds like an underwater language to me. Their furrowed brows and eyes that burned of intensity made their anger and hopelessness obvious.

As I did not understand Tamil, I imagined what they might be saying. They were speaking of their loss. The terrible waves that had changed their lives forever, those that were taken so abruptly, the nightmares they now have every night. Yet, when Rengaraj translated, a different story was told.

"They say that they have been listening to the radio and reading the news, and neither source of information is accurate about the aid they receive," translated Rengaraj. "Also, the government didn't even arrive to help in this area until the 30th or 31st."

Several other youth crowded around to listen to the conversations. One young boy, about 15 years of age, approached the group. His eyes were downcast and he had a dismal presence. The conversation stopped. He spoke a few sentences in Tamil. Rengaraj explained that he had lost both of his parents in the tsunami. He had shaved his head to show his mourning.

The youth continued to speak about the lack of relief aid from the government. They had heard a government announcement about how the government was on their way with coats, yet none had arrived. "Every day, they wait for the coats to come," translated Rengaraj.

As the conversation continued, I saw something out of the corner of my eye. I turned my head to the left and brought to the center of my vision an orange, dirtied sari, about 50 meters away, and within it, an old woman. Partially hidden from my view by a mound of debris, she was crouched at the base of a palm tree that had been bent by the force of the waves. The woman would appear motionless to the inattentive eye, but she was in fact rocking slightly back and forth, weeping. Her sense of loss rippled out in forever widening rings that flattened out into the air.

"The government has only given out aid once," said Rengaraj.

It was the 16th of January. I did the calculation in my head; it had been 21 days since the tsunami.

I couldn't help but glance back to my left. A man dressed in western clothing approached the weeping woman. Stooping down, he raised a camera with a huge zoom lens to his eye, and took her picture. She was oblivious to his presence, lost in her loss.

I sighed.

Impassioned Tamil continued to pour down in torrents among the group. Rengaraj translated, "They say that the aid they received has not been what they need the most. Many of them want to be out on the water, fishing and bringing in their own income. The aid has not helped them regain self-sufficiency."

A small child with mucus dried on her top lip and a matching runny nose started to cry. One of the team members made faces at her, and she started laughing instead.

Our team had to move on. I asked the youth what their names were. The three that had spoken the most introduced themselves as Shubash, Shuresh, and Sujukuma. I nodded.

Rengaraj told them about how I would try to get their voices heard.

"You will help us?" asked Shubash in slow, Tamil-accented English.

"I will try." I was beyond overwhelmed and felt unsure that I could do much of anything.

"Don't try. Do," he said with an encouraging smile.

"Ok...I will." I was just reminded of my personal responsibility for the well-being of others, and by someone whose well-being was at stake.

As we walked back towards the vehicle, I asked Rengaraj for a piece of paper to record what I had heard. He handed me the only paper he had on him: an advertisement for a home water purifier that cost 44,000 RS (over 1,000 US dollars). The irony of the moment struck me: I was about to write notes on an advertisement for a water purifier that no average Indian or tsunami victim could afford.

III

The air felt cool against my face. Through the small open window I could see the enormity of the damage, rolling by like nothing more than a film projected in Technicolor for my viewing distress. Large rusted bulldozers leveled out the wreckage, and pieces of beige bamboo stuck out of the ground expectantly, awaiting further building materials. Blue plaid, bright pink,

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dusty orange clothes lined the hand railings of a two-story children's school that served now as a temporary shelter. A woman dumped a bucket of dirty water from a second story window while a child played in some mud below. If there are people living in the schools, where are the children learning?

The vehicle pulled up to the roadside, and this time I got out without hesitation. We had arrived at the Ambgigabathi Marriage Hall in Nagatputtinam, a private hall that was being used as a tsunami victim's camp.

We walked through black iron gates that enclosed a large space in front of the hall. Several clusters of chairs seated groups of uniformed men. They shouted something in Tamil in our general direction. Rengaraj said that taking pictures at this camp was strictly prohibited.

A marble stairway led up to an entryway that opened to a giant white room with marble floors and clouded glass windows. Ceiling fans lazily spun on the high ceilings. It was a place for joy and celebration, or at least had intended to be.

Reddish brown dirt had found its way into the creases of the marble. Children, women, and men alike lay on the floor to sleep. White plastic chairs seated some, but most sat in groups on the floors, comfortably close to one another, providing a living web of moral support. One small girl, about six years of age, was rambunctiously running around the hall, smiling and laughing. She was a small ray of sunshine in the gloom.

Our team approached a woman who skillfully balanced a baby on her hip. Rengaraj asked about the tsunami aid. After a brief conversation, Rengaraj translated that she also said the government had only given aid once. She was particularly concerned because, along with other mothers, she had only received a half kilo of milk powder for her small child. Rengaraj asked their names. The mother was named Kalivani and the little one, just shy of six months old, was named Shivini. I looked into Kalivani's eyes and saw the soul of a tsunami survivor.

As I climbed into the vehicle and we drove away, I felt as though I were not truly leaving. I was still breathing with the steamboats, talking with the angered youth, weeping with the woman, and taking care of my children through Kalivani. I realized that although the waves had returned to their natural place, lapping up on the sand, part of the gray, the effect of those waves was far from over.

THE END

The tsunami victims of the Nagatputtinam district of Tamil Nadu face obstacles to receiving aid. If you are interested in donating to an NGO that will utilize funds without political, secular, or caste-system-based motivations, please go to www.indianssi.org.

Katharina Love, the author of "Far From Over," recently graduated with two bachelor of arts degrees, one in philosophy and the other in political, legal, and economic analysis from Mills College in Oakland, CA. Currently, she's a tsunami relief volunteer with the Indian Social Services Institute (www.indianssi.org) in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu.

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