

In conversation with Sudeep Jain (BITS '86), former District Collector of Nagapattinam

Who/What inspired the initiation of the project?

Several NGOs and individuals devoted themselves to the immediate relief effort. I even found small associations from Gujarat who, despite their own fiscal situation, had come down to *Nagapattinam* and committed to spending a few months and whatever money they had. BITSians, in sharp contrast, are certainly far more blessed in many ways. While many saw the Tsunami only as a tragedy, we saw not just the unfortunate aspects but also the opportunity to devote ourselves to a massive re-building exercise. While most of us live for ourselves, it is also true that each of us do want to contribute to society at large. This is the time to realize our broader goals – by contributing generously, sharing knowledge and ideas and leveraging our networks to devise innovative solutions. The cumulative effect of these ideas is what I'd speak of as our collective inspiration.



The First BITSunami Expedition

(L to R): R Nagarajan, Sudeep Jain, A Shankar, Krishna Mudaliar and KS Venkateswaran

How does your involvement, given the fact that you were the former District Collector, enhance the project?

My personal involvement dates back a couple of years during my tenure as District Collector of *Nagapattinam*. I was fortunate to work with the local community on almost all projects because of which I knew a few people personally in most of the villages. Because of my background today I am more effectively able to communicate the value of the BITSunami Project to all the citizens, the local politicians and the officials. By positioning this as my personal project I've ensured that we receive the complete support of all stakeholders. My colleagues and I are also in touch with close to 100 companies and individuals for sponsorship.

Why these two villages?

The Tsunami claimed 6600 citizens from my erstwhile district. As summed up by one of my deputy collectors on 28th Dec from Ground Zero - "Sir all our good work and that of all our predecessors has been washed away in a few minutes". Today my nine-year old daughters are afraid of visiting *Nagapattinam* because the city is not what they had known it to be.

Why is long-term rehabilitation critical to this effort?

Because after the debris is cleared, the bodies removed and the living have been provided food for a month, we still have to ensure that thousands of these psychologically devastated people have shelters as well as a means of livelihood. This is also an opportunity for us to ensure that we build model villages for those who've not been quite as fortunate as we have. ♦