

BY DILIP D'SOUZA ('76 EEE)

NOTES FROM MY TRIP

A report, in Dilip's inimitable style, on the state of affairs in some of the Tsunami affected areas.

THERE must be hundreds of houses in Bommaiarpalayam, a small fishing village on the beach north of Pondicherry. The houses closest to the water are all simply gone -- a little shrine here, some bricks there, the only signs that they ever existed. The others are mostly badly damaged. Thirumurugan, showing us around, insists that we must see pretty much every damaged house. "Bombay-le *irindu* patrikar vandirkango" ("Journalists have come from Bombay"), he says over and over again as we walk about. I'm struck, and saddened, by the things the people here do to give the journalists from Bombay an idea of the monster that whacked them and to drive home that idea. It's hardly as if we need it driven home -- the destruction and pain is evident. And yet they do it.

There's 45-year-old Muthulakshmi. She tells me that a log from a catamaran hit her in her mouth, knocking a tooth out. She shows me the gap to confirm this. But the blow also loosened another tooth. She grabs that one and shakes it to confirm. Shake, shake, shake, until my appeals not to do it get through to her.

There's Anjalai, 60, who sits on the ground and wails gently, rocking back and forth. Her sari is pulled up to above her knees -- otherwise a shockingly immodest way for a woman to sit, but here I can see why. She

was hit by catamaran logs too, but on her legs. She has bandages on both knees. She wants me to see them, beckons to me until I go over. As I get close, she begins to untie a bandage, to show me the wound. Don't do that, I say. Then she starts to pull the bandage down. Don't do that, I say again, sternly this time. Then she tells me her teeth were also broken -- they look fine, but perhaps she feels she has to keep up with Muthulakshmi, who has just shaken her tooth for me -- and the wave has left her deaf.

There's Amurtham with the deep cut on her knuckle. There are signs of pus in it and it looks bad. Why haven't you treated it, or bandaged it, I ask. Doctors came, she says with an almost sly smile, but she didn't have them look at it. I get the impression she keeps it like this solely to find sympathy in visitors like me. My Tamil isn't good enough to tell her it might turn septic or gangrenous or whatever happens to untreated cuts, so I put it simply: you don't do something about your finger, it's going to drop off. She only smiles some more.

There's Chelliamma with the unhealthy pink cast to her face; on her cheek, a scar that looks like a broken blister. Catamaran logs hit her too. She says she has severe pain in her waist from the blow. She points to her waist. Then she actually pulls off the pallu of her sari, her blouse falls nearly fully open, she pulls it up substantially -- again, a shockingly immodest thing for a woman to do -- and points to her waist once more.

And there's Miniamma, just as we are about to leave Bommaiarpalayam. She offers us coffee. Nothing else. The color of the wave? Thirumurugan thinks for a moment, looks around him. There! He points to the painted strip on the bows of a fishing boat nearby. A dull orange, the strip. That colour, says Thirumurugan. I can't imagine a wave of that colour, but that's what he says.

I don't know if it's because of the colour or the misery the tsunami brought, but every time Thirumurugan and others refer to the wave, they also speak of the "fire" in the water. As in, it brought "fire" in its jaws as it swept into Bommaiarpalayam and out again. An interesting, and for what happened here, telling metaphor.

But the wave brought something less metaphorical as well, more real. Mud. Elsewhere in Tamil Nadu, we've seen evidence of that -- mud inside clocks, inside pots, plastered on the floor of a room, stinking, everywhere. But in Bommaiarpalayam, the fisher folk speak of it as *bhoomi* (earth), invariably with their hands cupped and doing a lifting motion, saying to me that the wave scooped up the very bottom of the sea, the stinky muddy bottom of the sea, and flung it violently at them.

Palani Arumugam's daughter Madina -- a gorgeous and alert two-year-old -- swallowed some of that mud from the wave. Over a week later, says Palani, she still brings bits of it out from time to time. Madina smiles up at me. I try not to think of her muddied insides.

And when this *bhoomi*-filled tongue of fire dressed up as a wave struck, it

circled the houses -- more explanatory hand motions -- and then went back, taking huge chunks of their lives out with it. How far out? Two kilometers, says Thirumurugan. That's right, he says the sea receded two km after the tsunami. A low tide to beat all low tides, and plenty of bhoomi was on display for a long time.

Tamil Nadu after the tsunami is the third time I've visited where a major natural disaster has struck: Orissa after the 1999 cyclone, Kutch after the 2001 quake, and now this. Something draws me to this, and by now, I often wonder what it is. I'll admit, a certain level of voyeurism is part of it all: a fascination for the fantastic damage nature can do to us.

But only part. In the end, I think my greatest curiosity is for the truly spectacular human spirit you see in these situations: the way all manner of people from every part of the country -- indeed, the world -- spontaneously offer their mind and muscles to help the victims of calamity.

The personification of this spirit, for me, remains a young man

called PK Gupta, whom I met in Orissa in 1999. Gupta worked then at Citibank in New Delhi. He seemed to have read the news about the cyclone, got up from his desk and caught the next train out to Orissa. With just the clothes on his back and a towel, he turned up and asked to be put to work. And how he worked: for the next week, he tramped tirelessly from village to village, collecting information, taking relief materials out, helping burn dead bodies, on and on.

Something about what drives a man like PK touches me somewhere very deep. And where great disasters happen, you see it every time. Young and old; Hindu, Muslim, Christian and everything in between; rich or poor; whoever it is, whatever their differences, for a few days they sink them all in the effort to help their fellow human beings who are in terrible distress. It's moving and inspiring, and that's why the days I've spent in these areas are some of the best days of my life.

But ... yes, there is a but. The sad thing is that it is too often goodwill like this that itself causes problems for the victims.

Misguided relief material and effort -- from old clothes that nobody wants, to inappropriate food, to campaigns that last only a few days -- are massive headaches. And yet they are visible after every disaster. We want to help, and that impulse comes from the best of intentions. But all too often, in trying to do so, we end up helping unthinkingly, therefore harming. Because the way we approach the business of relief, too often, ruins relationships, produces beggars, causes logistical nightmares, and compounds disaster.

Fred Cuny -- a thoughtful expert on calamities who was killed in Chechnya in 1995 -- once wrote: "For the survivors of a natural disaster, a second disaster may also be looming." He meant relief.

And this is why the greatest challenge after a disaster is two-fold. One, swiftly work out the best way to help the victims *in that particular situation*, and put that into practice. Two, work for the long-term.



BITSunami – The temple's destroyed but the idol remains