

The Indian Ocean Tsunami Preliminary Field Report on India

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The Social Science Reconnaissance Team surveyed Tamilnadu (India), which was one of the areas most impacted areas by the tsunamis, from January 23rd to the 27th, 2005. It is important to note that during the team's stay in India, Dr. A. Subramanian (a Political Scientist in Madras Christian College, Chennai) was the team's escort and interpreter. He has conducted research in some of these communities and was also actively engaged in disaster relief work in some of the areas that the team visited. Dr. Subramanian's insights, contributions as well as all the background information (cultural, historical and political) that he provided were extremely important for the team's field research and the observations and conclusions that were generated for this report.

During our field research in India, the team visited fishing communities that spanned the coast from Chennai to Point Calimere (Coramandel Coast). In total, the team traveled 742 km over 5 days. The team spent considerable time in eight fishing communities and one mixed fishing/urban community. In addition, we spent shorter periods of time in areas throughout the region, including visits to ports with hundreds of damaged boats, bridges that sustained substantial damage, a salt harvesting operation along the roadside that was impacted, the Nagapattinam Office of the Collector, and an emergent tsunami-related protest regarding perceived inequities in distribution of relief.

The communities where we conducted lengthy field observations included: Sulerikattu Kuppam (Kancheepuram District); Mudaliar Kuppam (Villupuram District); Kannappachetty Kulam Kuppam (Pondicherry, Union Territory); Pattinacherry, Velankanni, Kameswaram, Pushpavanam, and Kodiakkarai (all in the Nagapattinam District).

While one community did not suffer any loss of life, many suffered losses in the range of 20-40 deaths; one community (Velankanni, a pilgrim and tourist center) suffered over 5,000 deaths. All these communities suffered significant losses of property and experienced great disruption. Housing stock consisted of a variety of construction types, ranging from stone and wood-frame to lashed timber with thatched roofs. As might be expected, the lashed timber structures showed great vulnerability while other structures – though not destroyed – suffered severe damage from water intrusion and destruction of most interior contents. All of the fishing villages suffered significant losses related to

their industry – boats, catamarans (which the fishers distinguish from boats), engines, nets, auction houses, etc. – thus impacting the productive livelihood of the community.

The fishermen we spoke with consistently articulated a desire to return to the sea, to strive toward independence and self - sustaining activities - in other words, to get their boats and nets and return to work. At the same time, many expressed a hesitancy to return given persistent fear generated from their experience with the tsunamis.

Given the extent of physical damage and loss of economic capacity, a number of social science implications are evident:

- 1) We noted a high level of social cohesion in most communities that we visited. According to reports we received from village residents, no one had permanently left the villages or immediate surroundings, even though fishing had not yet resumed and they were dependent on governmental and non-governmental organizations.
- 2) The villagers appeared to be living in a state of persistent uncertainty regarding when they will be able to resume their work, build new houses, procure locations for those houses, resume normal community rhythms, and even determine whether or not it was safe to return to the shore. Rumors of the possibility of additional tsunamis had spread widely and were reported to us by residents of many of the villages. They reported impacted sleeping patterns, increased stress levels, and interruption of daily activities. As an additional measure of uncertainty, the amount of compensation promised by the government for a destroyed boat is far less than the replacement cost. Moreover, there is a high level of skepticism regarding the extent to which the government will fulfill the promises made regarding disaster relief aid, although many expressed hope that the government would follow through.
- 3) A number of fishermen from different fishing communities indicated that the tsunamis have transformed their landscape and ecosystem; that extensive damage has been caused; sand dunes have disappeared; the ocean has not recovered its original color (it is light brown), etc. One villager reported that he has caught species of fish that are not normally found in those areas. They are concerned that all these changes may have a significant impact on their fishing activities. We also observed and documented extensive coastal erosion in almost all the communities that we visited.
- 4) The construction of temporary shelters varied greatly between camps, some consisting of donated tents, others of makeshift tarp tents, some of thatched houses, others of fiberglass or aluminum roofing, and some combining these materials. Concerns included the extent to which villagers found the shelters appropriate due to heat conditions and size as well as safety concerns (particularly for thatched shelters). Nevertheless, some communities constructed their own temporary (primarily thatched) housing to meet their needs given that, for

example, some tents provided by NGOs retained an extreme amount of heat and were too small to accommodate their all family members. This example, among others, manifests some signs of community resilience to disasters.

- 5) NGOs have played a significant role in the distribution of material resources as well as community development and addressing the social psychological needs of the community. Some activities included construction of temporary shelter, distribution and preparation of food, debris removal, and repairing damaged boats.
- 6) Despite the loss and devastation that villagers experienced, we encountered residents who were open, generous, and hospitable. They were willing to share their experiences and welcomed the presence of outsiders as a sign that it may be safe to go near the water. While one may envision those who had recently experienced such devastation as “victims,” residents in several communities demonstrated the more ‘routine’ behavior of hosting visitors, serving coconuts to drink, offering seating to visitors, and explaining that it was the hospitable thing to do.
- 7) Signs of returning to daily routine activities were present in several heavily damaged areas, including the washing of clothing outside, gathering in front of houses, children returning to schools, and even limited fishing in some communities. Still, there were areas where this was less evident, recovery was less underway, and people were less actively engaged in community processes.
- 8) We received reports of certain challenges in the provision of relief and recovery services. For example, in some instances, NGOs duplicated efforts or provided assistance not suited to the locale or to the varying population sizes. Nevertheless, many communities indicated that the contributions made by NGOs was extremely important and contributed to meeting many of their basic needs, including the repair of damaged boats and/or provision of new ones.
- 9) Emerging from our observations is the overall impression that the recovery process is closely linked to existing economic conditions; recovery efforts are also impacted by development issues and strategies and by the social and political context that characterize these communities.