

14th Shodh Yatra in Nagapattinam District, Tamil Nadu
19 January to 24 January 2005



Shram and Shodh Yatra in aid of Tsunami victims (14 shodhyatra)

The fourteenth Shodh Yatra had been planned in Kerala. But after the tsunami hit coastal Tamil Nadu, it was decided to postpone the Shodh Yatra and instead undertake a Shram and Shodh Yatra in Tamil Nadu. The work was planned and co-ordinated by SEVA, Madurai, the regional collaborator of the Honey Bee Network. The district of Nagapattinam, which had sustained severe casualties with more than 6,000 deaths was chosen for relief operations. The villages of Tharangambadi, Kuttiandur, Vellakoil, Puhupettai, Perumalpettai, Thalampettai, Chandrapadi and Kesavanpalayam were chosen for service through our labour. The shodh yatra provided certain unique experiences for the participants. What was immediately noticeable was the essential satisfaction of most of the affected families. They were satisfied with the material given by the government and relief agencies. We could also observe the dynamics between the farming and fishing community. The fishing community had no doubt been most affected by the tsunami and the government began providing money for the loss of boats and nets almost immediately after the

disaster. The farming community had not received immediate compensation for the loss of crops. Moreover, the farmers claimed that not only were their crops washed away, but the soil would now have a high salt content due to waterlogging. This would cause problems in agriculture in the following years. They felt that the government was not adequately looking into their interests. When the district administration was contacted in this regard, they assured us that they would look into the matter. They had been able to grant immediate aid to fishermen because they had records of boats and nets possessed by people. The process of checking land holdings was taking more time.

We also noticed that some of the plants were still standing green while the rest of the crop had been destroyed. This gave us the idea that by selecting the seeds from these plants, we could, perhaps, develop salt resistant varieties. We discussed this possibility with the villagers. In one village, we were told that the roads need repair. We began the work to repair the roads. When the youth in the village saw us, they joined in the efforts and soon the road was built. The people confessed that though they

could have repaired the road even earlier on their own, they lacked the motivation to do it. From then onwards we insisted that the villagers participate in the repair attempts, as it was their responsibility and they had to start helping themselves.

Most of the fishing communities had not begun to go back to the sea yet although some boats and nets which had been out in the sea during the tsunami were salvaged. While some claimed that this was because of fear, a few others confessed that they felt that if they started going into the sea, the government would not provide them compensation. SRISTI contributed a fishing net in one village and encouraged the villagers to start going into the sea again, so that their livelihood needs would be met. We also suggested that part of the income generated from the fish catch be used to create a common fund for the maintenance of the net and also for providing daily needs of families where the earning member had died and for taking care of children orphaned by the tsunami.

Some of the demands of the villagers were quite interesting. One village asked for donation of computers because they felt that with computers, one could have got information of the earthquakes in advance and thus minimized the damage due to the tsunami. What was underlined through this request was the need for advance warning systems. In another village, it was initially decided that agricultural implements would be provided to the people. The ladies from the



village later insisted on accompanying us to the market and in the market chose to buy lamps to light before the deities in their homes rather than agricultural implements. While we had considered livelihood to be of primary importance, the people chose the security of a cultural core of their life as more important. This was an important lesson for us. One lady in the village pointed out that no one had as yet thought about providing school books and bags for children. A Shodh Yatri, Shri Parbatbhai Vaghani from Gadhada, Bhavnagar agreed to donate school bags.

Mr. Johl from Ludhiana had already sent a truck load of blankets, clothes and other materials for the affected



people in Nagapattinam district. One of the volunteers in Chennai had sent Rs.10,000 to SEVA for expenses towards relief work. SEVA had arranged for two trucks of immediate relief materials, including clothes, rations and medicine, as well as five volunteers, to be sent to Nagapattinam District, before the Shodh Yatra. In addition to this, we also had contributions from SRISTI staff and some contributions from abroad. David Martin, Robert Martin and Larry Stapleton had sent their contributions to us.

As a part of this rehabilitation work, women of the village expressed their willingness to learn sewing. Shri Bhanjibhai Mathukia and Shri Kiranbhai Dholakia expressed their willingness to donate one sewing machine each to this village. SEVA agreed to take charge of procuring and installing these sewing machines in the village, and will also be organizing a training program for the women. In many villages, the livestock had also been lost in the tsunami. SRISTI decided to donate one goat per family in one village to meet the requirements for milk. SEVA also helped procure cattle feed as the livestock were

feeding on the damaged crop which had become highly saline due to the intrusion of sea water. This was causing stomach disorders and other problems among the cattle.

We also discussed if the villagers had had any early indications of changes in the behavior of the sea, prior to the tsunami. A few villagers reported that their catch had almost doubled on the day before the tsunami. But there was no consensus of opinions about the indications.

Twenty five Shodh Yatris from Gujarat participated in this yatra. These included four grassroots innovators - Amrutlal Agrawat, Bhanjibhai Mathukiya, Ganeshbhai Dodiya and Parbatbhai Vaghani, three foreigners (fellows, AASTIK), six farmers/ villagers from Jungadh and Bhavnagar Districts, four students from Gujarat Vidyapeeth and four staff members from SRISTI. From Tamil Nadu, 15 students of Engineering College, Madurai joined for the Shram Yatra. Ten volunteers of SEVA, Madurai were also present to constantly support us throughout the relief work.

