



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Christian contribution to tsunami victims in kanyakumari district**T. Kala Rani****Department of History, Nesamony Memorial Christian College, Marthandam-629 165, Tamil Nadu, India*

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Abstract

Kanyakumari the southern – most district in the state of Tamil Nadu in South India is located in between 77.05 and 77.36 degrees eastern longitude and on 8.03 and 8.35 degrees northern latitude [1]. It is quite within the equatorial belt. Bounded by Trinaveli district in the east and Trivandrum in the north it is washed by sea in the west and south. The coastline extends over 42 kilometres [2]. Except for some points of land projecting into the sea, the coastline is regular. There is nothing in the district to equal the beauty of Cape Comorin, the place of meeting of the Way of Bengal, the Indian Ocean and the Arabian Sea. The meeting point of the oceans are the place, where continent ends in a swan song of broken rocks and mingling with oceans [3].

Keywords

Cape Comorin

Tsunami

Coastline

Palmaria

Introduction

Regarding historical background, many kingdoms like Ayi (B.C. 250), Titiyan (A. D. 25), Nanjil Porunan (3rd Century A. D.), Pandiyas (560 - 900 A. D.), Cholas (920 – 1200 A. D.) and Venad (Chera kings – 1200 to 1949) ruled Kanyakumari district [4]. There are many varieties of sights for the visitors in these district coastal areas. There are places for the historians to find out the most ancient ports like Chinna Muttam, Colachel, Muttam, Kadiyappatinam, Midalam, Enayam and Thengappatinam [5]. The encroached Anantha Vitoria Marthandan Canal visualised places like Mullurthurai, Ramanthurai, Enayam, Midalam, Vaniyakudi, Kodimunai, Colachel, Manavalakuruchi and Kadiappatinam [6].

There are always a place for any inquisitive mind to observe, learn and assimilate many things from this ancient wonderful place of India, the rudiment of the oldest Lemurian Continent, the land of Lemurs. The land where the humankind first appeared was widely accepted as the Indo African continent which was popularly known as the Lemurian continent. The Lemurian continent was subjected to some continental drift due to natural calamities like Tsunami [7].

Content

TSUNAMI is a Japanese term signifying 'huge waves of harbours'. Tsunamis have been historically referred to as huge tidal waves. Likewise the larger part beyond the

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present Kanyakumari is said to have submerged under the sea thousands of years ago. This sorrowful incident is lamented in *Cilappathikaram*. In the period of Sangam age several names were mentioned in the ancient Tamil literature. These are *Pralaya, Deluge, Oozhi, Peralai* and *Kadalkol* etc. [8]. Accounts of Tsunami extend back almost 4000 years in China, 2000 years in the Mediterranean, where the first Tsunami was described in 479 B.C. and about 1300 years in Japan. The Mediterranean Sea has one of the longest records of Tsunami. Over three hundred events have been recorded since 1300 B.C. [9].

Once, in Tinai culture, Minavar and Nulayar region was called *Neithal* and their God was *Varunan*, the God of the sea. They worshipped *Varuna* and other gods and goddesses before their conversion. Their dependence upon sea made their craving to gods and goddesses and they lived in small huts made of coconut palms and Palmyra leaves. Since their quarters were very near to the sea, they were very often subjected to the inversion of the sea waves and sea erosions. Their staple food was rice and tapioca which they got out of selling their products in the interior. Since the Hindu religion is based upon caste system, the fishermen were considered lower caste people [10]. They were considered untouchables mainly because of their profession. Though their occupation was adventurous and even dangerous at times, it did not redeem them from the stigma of untouchability. Even their religious practices did not help them much [11]. This cruel practice affected only those fishermen who used to come to the quarters of the non - fisher caste for selling their products and mostly their insular life-style saved them from this evil practice of the caste system. As in all other lower castes they were also allowed only minimum dress and the women were not allowed to wear upper garments. Christianity came to Kanyakumari District in 52 A. D. and became part of the District. Within the tiny Kanyakumari District, there are five Catholic dioceses viz. Kottar, Marthandam, Thuckalay, Thirvandrumbur and Tuticorin, and other four Christian denominations viz. Church of South India (CSI), The Lutheran Mission, and The Salvation Army Missions established their mission centres. All coastal communities come under Catholic Church.

All are aware of the fact that the killer Tsunami tidal waves hit the coast of the South Asian countries and had caused heavy damages to the coastal villages of Kanyakumari District on 26 December 2004 [12]. The undersea earthquake, the world's strongest in 40 years, occurred at 06:28 IST about 250 kilometres off Indonesia and generated ocean waves that travelled at a speed of more than that of a jet plane to reach the Indian shores, 2,000 kilometres away, bare two hours later [13]. The assault was unexpected and

unprecedented. It has not been experienced in recent history of the District. There are forty three coastal villages from Arokiyapuram to Neerodi Colony in Kanyakumari District, which were hit by the Tsunami tidal waves and some of these villages suffered heavy damages. The coastal neighbourhood knocked down by the Tsunami went through the same horror, devastation, trauma and distress.

That morning people could sense that something had changed all on a sudden in the District. There were too many people overtaking one by one on the coastal road. They were gasping for breath – women, several of them dressed informally and clutching children, bare – bodied men running faster, egging them on. They felt utterly powerless as they watched children, men and women “rolling by”. If they extended a hand, the sea would take them too, they were sure. People saw bodies strewn all over the beaches, as in a battleground. Cries range out from every part of the villages [14].

Affected people were taken to nearby hospitals like Thengapattinam, Colachel, Rajakkamangalam and Kanyakumari. Seriously affected were taken to the general hospital in Kuzhithurai and the Medical College hospital at Nagercoil. More and more bodies were dumped at the hospitals and hospital verandahs. Kanyakumari District Collector Ramesh Chand Meena came to know about the tragedy at 11 a.m. In the morning there were reports about the sea rising in Chennai. Then about a large number of people, including Supreme Court Judge, were stranded at the Vivekananda Rock Memorial in Kanyakumari. Medical Department received the SOS by 11 a.m. By noon, doctors were at the coastal villages, along with several others from neighbouring government and private hospitals. It was an unbelievable sight that greeted them [15].

By 2 p.m., volunteers were pouring into the coastal villages, even from neighbouring Kerala, as the impact of the tragedy became known. The Jamaat, the Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh, the Democratic Youth Federation of India, the Youth Congress, and a large number of non-governmental organizations, charitable organizations and Christian Communities merged at the villages after the disaster. They joined the army of voluntary workers who were helping shift the bodies from the hospitals [16].

The Christian Communities started to work as an expression of the humanistic solidarity of historic proportion from people of all walks of life. They first did relief works in the affected areas. They provided shelter, food, clothes and friendship. With the help of Parish Priests, Rev. Sisters, Parish Council members, the youth and the volunteers they moved to the Tsunami affected areas the next day to initiate relief

work. The initial task was to assess the loss and needs of the affected communities. Police estimate of damage and loss to fishing equipment in the coastal villages were as follows: mechanised boats 17,000; catamarans 13,000; *vallams* (small wooden boats) 3000; motors 2000; fishing nets 17,000 [17]. It was very much traumatized to hear the lamentations of the people all over these places. About 1000 people were killed, but only 837 bodies were recovered and many more were missing [18]. Many people had lost their houses in many villages. They had lost all their fishing equipments. The tidal waves washed away their important documents like the ration cards, certificates, etc. The students of the Tsunami affected areas lost their study materials. Two Churches in two villages namely Manakudi and Kottilpadu and two schools had been destroyed [19].

Inspired by the lives of Jesus Christ and Mahatma Gandhi, Christian leaders believe the Church and other such institutions are meant to serve the tsunami affected people. As they are well established communities in Kanyakumari, they contributed a lot for the Tsunami victims. They materialized the saying of Jesus Christ, "Whatever you do to the least of your brethren, is done to me" [20]. People living in the coastal belt were given free water supply by NGOs and streets and roads were maintained by Christian organizations and government. Relief and rehabilitation activities were started and 30,000 people were sheltered in 76 camps [21].

Though the Kottar Diocese played a significant role in the religious and spiritual history of humankind in the District since their inscriptions, it attended to human issues, after Vatican Council II held in 1965. Vatican Council II had brought out wider and deeper changes in the church. The Catholic Church began 'to open its windows' towards new trends which had occurred in the secular world. The Council's document reminded the faithful that the duty of the church in the world was to work for the enhancement of human dignity and common good. And the council urged "everyone to consider it his sacred duty to count social obligations among man's chief duties today and observe them" [22]. Such openings of the Council and its new understanding of social realities influenced on the Kottar Diocese.

Even as evangelization was the end of their mission, social service to the poor and the neglected was one of the main means to achieve the desired end. At this juncture, the challenges ahead were to assist the affected coastal communities. The coastal Christians are highly dependent on the leadership of Catholic priests in their social as well as religious spheres of life. Rev. Leon Tharmaraj, Bishop of Kottar gave the public message that there is a false and unfounded rumour being spread that fish cannot be eaten for three months. Scientists affirmed that there was no scientific basis to this propaganda. This has endangered the livelihood of

interior fishermen and denied the fish food to the people of the District. He probed not to give credence to this rumour [23]. In order to coordinate the financial assistance of those generous, kind-hearted faithful, he called upon the Parish priests and Parish Council members to arrange for a special collection during the Sunday Mass on 16th January 2005 [24]. The amount of money collected should be remitted in the Kuzhithrai Integral Development Social Service (KIDSS) and Kottar Social Service Society (KSSS) offices and this money would be spent for the rehabilitation of the Tsunami affected people on the basis of the need. Surely spiritual personality Bishop Leon Tharmaraj in Kanyakumari District packed such fiery emotions into words, simultaneously affected people and merging as a beloved spiritual father figure [25].

The Christian Missions took part actively in the tsunami programmes and they contributed relief and rehabilitation activities among the coastal villages. The entire coastal villages are served by Kottar and Trivandrum dioceses. Kottar Diocese is one of the biggest missions in Kanyakumari working for 42 coastal villages from Thenkapattinam to Arokiyapuram. Trivandrum Diocese committed for seven coastal villages from Eraiman Thurai to Neerodi Colony. Among the several occupational groups, fisher people constitute the second largest population in the district. The fisher communities are the most economically disadvantaged and socially marginalized groups in the district. As the sea resources have gradually declined over the years, the total development of coastal communities has been significantly hampered.

Christian volunteers, with the support of Caritas India, Catholic Relief Services and NGOs initiated systematic rescue operation in all the affected areas [26]. People irrespective of caste and creed rushed to render their help. Kottar Diocese established temporary camps for the tsunami victims. Food, clothing and medical facilities were provided to the camp inmates with the support of Caritas India, Catholic Relief Service and Caritas Swiss. Family kits were distributed to 20,000 families in thirty one coastal villages and in addition Rs. 200 was given to each of the 10,000 families. Dry ration was supplied to ten thousand families [27]. After Tsunami, the people were psychologically weak. In order to build their confidence and hope for the future, a well-thought out counselling programme was designed with the active participation of experts in Tsunami counselling by KSSS in collaboration with NGOs and government [28]. Ten animators visited all the Tsunami hit villages and gave counselling to the affected children. They carried out the child line central government programme. Their periodical visits to parishes encouraged children. The child line scheme was for the

benefit of nutrition, food and medical help to the children [29].

Regular supply of food materials was arranged in the tsunami affected villages by the Christians. Rice, edible oil, lintels, groceries, milk powder, sugar, tea powder, toiletry items, etc. were provided. Further household utensils for five villages – Colachel, Kanyakumari, Manakudy, Pillaithopu and Pallam were also provided. This helped the affected people to maintain good health condition [30]. To be truly effective, one Kottar Diocese force is not enough; each Christian denominations and NGOs must build and maintain its own parish – and village – level response units. Government guidelines said that affected villages must have a contingency plan that ranged from making vulnerability studies to preparing lists of sources that could be tapped for trucks, food or blankets; list of doctors who can be called for trauma duty.

Relief and rehabilitation activities were also done with the support of Caritas India, Catholic Relief Service, Caritas Swiss and Christian Churches. Uniforms, garments and schoolbags were distributed to 4000 children studying from IX to XII standard in twelve Tsunami affected schools in the coastal villages to the tune of Rs. 20,00,000. Play materials worth Rs. 8,00,000 were distributed to the temporary shelters. Students from Mela Manakudy, Kodimunai, Pallam, Annai Nagar and Melmidalam were benefitted. At the request of the District Collector, Christian Organizations, in collaboration with Caritas India and Christian Relief Service, took up the improvement of temporary shelters built by the Government to make them more livable. Bore-wells and Toilets were constructed at Kootumangalam and Chinnavilai to the tune of Rs. 1,01,362/- [31]. Permanent houses in twenty two villages were designed to construct a house with a plinth area of 360 sq. feet that includes two bed rooms, a hall, a kitchen, and a toilet. The house design includes provision for future expansion too.

The Christian Organizations independently selected different villages and planned to implement the following activities like improvement of temporary shelters, infrastructure construction, permanent shelter construction, livelihood rehabilitation, repairing houses, educational support, construction of children's park, psychological intervention and Self Help Group formation on 10th June 2005 [32]. They started relief, rehabilitation and welfare activities for the development of coastal communities. In 2006, the Christian organisations shifted their emphasis towards education, conscientisation, integrated development, empowerment of the poor and women's issues.

At this difficult juncture, the devastation caused by Tsunami has also affected the means of livelihood and

destabilized the economic life of the interior fisher people, whose main life work is fish vending. These people, more than 5000 families, are badly affected, since fishing came to a complete halt. Kottar Diocese worked for the success of demand placed before the government to provide famine relief to these people. The KSSS and Kuzhithurai Integral Development Social Service (KIDSS), with the help of Interior Fisher People Organization (IFO), which are units of KSSS and KIDSS, organized rehabilitation materials with the help of the Government and NGOs. Marthandam Integral Development Society (MIDS) has been quite successful in working with Tsunami affected interior people. MIDS intervention in these villages are focused mainly on women and children [33].

The impact of tsunami waves was visibly seen from the number of houses that had been heavily damaged in terms of wall crack, broken windows and doors, and pealed out floors. Heading the request of the District Administration, the Christian Missions have involved in repairing works at Colachel, Simon Colony, Arockiapuram, Chinnavilai, Puthoor and Kottilpadu from the period 2005 – 2010 [34]. To prevent this kind of disaster, Disaster Management Act 2005 was established by the Government. It is the planning and coordinating body and it has the manpower, equipment and training to handle relief works [35]. For instance, trained personnel from the police, fire services, civil defence, and home guards must be available on call along with equipment.

KSSS is the lead agency in Kanyakumari District as regards to development action to the tsunami victims [36]. Trusting the capabilities of KSSS in development work, the Christian Organizations have entrusted construction of permanent houses in the following villages: Kottilpadu, Benedit Colony, Azad Nager, Indira Colony, West Manakudy, East Manakudy, Simoncolony, Puthoor, Mela Kurumbanai, Enayam and Chinnathurai. The shelter programme aims to provide quality housing to the tsunami victims. The house construction activities are accelerated with a view to settling the homeless before 26th December 2005 [37]. Caritas India and CRS have collectively engaged shelter experts to provide expert consultancy service to the implementing partners like Kottar Social Service Society. Besides KSSS has also availed the expertise of a professional architect M/s David Associates to meticulously plan and execute the housing scheme as required by the government and international sphere standards [38].

Bhoomi Pooja has already been conducted at Colachel Salt-pan on 15th June 2005 and Kottilpadu new sites on 10th August 2005. Tenders had duly

been called for and after strict scrutiny three contractors at Colachel and four at Kottilpadu were awarded [39]. The Christian Organizations have consented generously to support the housing scheme to the tune of Rs. 2.9 lakhs per house at Colachel Salt-pan and 1.85 lakhs in other locations. The house was designed in consultation with the community and it was decided to construct a house with a plinth area of 360 sq.ft. that includes 2 bedrooms, a hall, a kitchen and a toilet. The house design includes provision for future expansion too [40].

It is significant to note that one among three fishermen in Tamilnadu State hails from the coastal villages of Kanyakumari District. It is, therefore, evident that tsunami phenomenally hampered the fish economy of Kanyakumari district. The fishermen lost their livelihood implements in large numbers. Consequently the fish economy was paralysed for three to four months continuously. At this juncture, temporary shelters were built for the people whose houses were destroyed. Christian organizations attempted to facilitate livelihood restitution in line with the communities' needs.

People –young and old continued to be in a state of shock and in great distress. Children and youth were provided with recreational items – Carrom Board, Badminton set, Volley balls etc., to help them overcome psychological distress, mental trauma and rebuild their peer groups. Various activities such as painting, cultural events, games and sports were also organized to ease the impact of the disaster [41]. One of the felt needs was to respond to the psychological depression, fear, shock, lack of motivation and lack of health awareness among the affected people. The Christian communities came out with a novel idea of responding to the above problems through the performance of Cultural programme “*Meendum Meendum Ezhuvoom*” [42]. They performed it in nearly 25 villages affected by Tsunami. The response has been very positive. People shed tears, laughed out their worries, became aware of many fact related to Tsunami and the rebuilding of their lives and were motivated to look ahead with hope and trust in God.

The effect of Tsunami on the mental health of people is so significant, that needs to be addressed with the restoration of livelihood and shelter. It is found that the core beliefs of helplessness and empowerment of coastal communities are rising after the tsunami disaster. In such a sociological context the individual boundaries have become sharper and the sense of community has decreased. In this context CRS and Caritas India felt the need of psychosocial intervention in Tsunami affected areas. Saarthak team from Delhi was engaged to design psychosocial intervention programme on 24th April 2005 [43]. The programme has attempted to strengthen the communities through

capacity building and supporting the service delivery. Primary community workers from 13 villages were trained in capacity building to facilitate the community to normalise, validate and understand the experiences of all survivors.. Five secondary counsellors were trained in professional counselling skills and techniques to establish linkages with tertiary support systems. These primary and secondary animators are already working in the field setting up and supporting peer support and debrief groups in 13 villages where community building activities are supported in 2007. The Tsunami rehabilitation team has already organized vulnerable groups like children, youth, widows and Women Fish Vendors include Community Based Organizations (CBO).

It was assessed that Tsunami had generated disorientation among the coastal youth. Since individual boundaries increased at the cost of community collectiveness, it was read that the coastal youth could become a divisive force. Hence, youth programmes were organized by Young Christian Students (YCS) at coastal villages to regenerate a sense of community belonging and to restore community spirit among the youth on 9th January 2006 [44].

Pregnant women of the Tsunami affected areas were supplied with supplementary food. Women benefited out of this programme have gained better health condition. Supplementary nutrition in the form of protein mix comprising cereals and pulses. This has yielded better result in the health and nutritional status of the children. Health and Sanitation of women were given importance by MIDS, KIDS TMSS and KSSS till 2010 [45].

As part of village development plan the women were grouped into three such as head load fish vendors; widows and young women. They were given orientation during 2006 - 2010. Each group has selected its respective office bearers. Rules and regulations have been framed. They started regular monthly savings from December 2006 [46]. Each group has opened bank account and deposits the savings in the bank. Caritas Swiss has given seed money for each group. After six months, the groups started income generation programmes. The head load fish vendors accessed to capital for their work. The young women and widows also started group income generation activities. Besides, income generation activities, they play an active role to build a value-based community [47].

A few individuals who lost their business base in tsunami were assisted to start their business. The following groups were identified as the vulnerable sections of the village. They were widows, head load

fish-vendors and above 18 up to unmarried women. In all the villages these three groups of women have been organized Sangams and they have started small savings and opened Bank accounts. All members of the group need to have the possibility of availing the loan before one can avail the loan for a second time. In-order to enhance the credit activities among the Sangam members for income generating activities the first installment was released to the Sangams in 2006 [48].

The widows groups formed by KSSS animators have started a restaurant at the house construction site in Mel Manakudy. It is a good effort. Over 400 workers are at the site during 2007 - 2010. Most of them use this restaurant. The widows work in the restaurant in shifts. The district collector has appreciated this effort of women and made arrangement for some utensils for the restaurant. The women are able to run a small business in cooperative manner [49].

The drinking water in Manakudy went fully damaged due to Tsunami waves. Water supply was carried out by the Christian Organizations for domestic and house hold needs, as a initial step they assisted cleaning and repairing five open wells in the village. These wells were cleaned by technical team and the side wall was built newly. The platform of the well was constructed with amenities to draw water and with proper drainage system near the open well. These arrangements have paved way for the cleanliness and better hygiene in the surrounding areas. Over 400 families benefit from these five open wells [50].

Village Development Councils (VDC) were formed in the affected villages with the support of Christian Organizations in 2007. Each Village Development Council was given one computer. This computer was used by the village development council for their developmental activities for the village [51]. This computer may be useful to improve their information storage system and for ready reference of data for the villagers. This may also help them to improve their communication with the government department in arranging government service to the people. Village level inventory can be prepared and can document the details of Tsunami relief and rehabilitation programmes.

Entrepreneur Development Training was conducted for the members of Widow's Sangam in Annai Nagar, Pallam, Eraimanthurai, Thuthoor and Vallavilai. This 3 days training was attended by 145 members on 2nd, 3rd and 4th December 2008. Since the members were very much interested in starting up the potential income generating activity, the training was an imperative. The training objectives were such as 1. To educate the women on entrepreneur development programme, 2. To equip the women on entrepreneurial skill, 3.

To motivate the women on the need and importance of women entrepreneurship, 4. To facilitate them on identifying the viable enterprise/income generating programme and 5. To inculcate the participants on identifying the suitable Marketing strategies [52]. The Village Development Council (VDC) members of Kodimunai and Melmidalem were given one day training on 10th March 2009. The content of the training was Role and Responsibilities on VDC members in the development of village [53]. This training could deepen their understanding on village development and their role.

From the Tsunami experience, the following follow – up action plans were designed by the Catholic Diocese of Kottar. At the village level, groups were formed to create awareness about the symptoms of Tsunami. At the taluk and District levels, environmental defence system was created with the support of government. It will motivate the coastal areas to grow Mangrove trees. Tsunami education was planned with NGOs to give in the schools and colleges. At the State and National levels, a separate Ministry of Disaster Management was created for the proper coordination and effective relief and rescue operation and rehabilitation programme [54].

Thus, it is the Tsunami Mission of the Christians to protect the coastal communities and to promote affected areas to the standard of urban areas in the provision of basic amenities; they have shown a generous heart at the time of Tsunami catastrophe. Partners in the quest for excellence were the members of Christian Missions, whose dedicated work was coordinated by the Catholic Church. The challenges before the tsunami victims, as committed in a special socio-economic development programmes by Christian Missions are enormous. With the promise of meeting challenges, Christian Missions have pressed the rewind button, over to the Tsunami researchers.

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