

[What Now? The Long Road to Recovery](#)

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DISASTER

What Now? The Long Road to Recovery

Money and manpower pour into tsunami-afflicted areas of India and Sri Lanka

Relief efforts commenced immediately at the Mata Amritanandamayi Ashram on the Kerala coast--even before the tsunami water receded from the ashram's grounds on December 26, 2004. Though right on the ocean, the well-built center easily withstood the waves, and the 10,000 ashramites gathered for a special program immediately began rescue efforts among the neighboring villages where many had been killed or injured. Similarly, across South India and Sri Lanka, Hindu religious organizations joined government efforts and those of secular and religious non-governmental organizations in instant response to the disaster.

Overseas, nearly every Hindu organization commenced fund raising in some form or another. The US-based India Development and Relief Fund was approaching US\$1 million by late January. The Amritanandamayi Ashram has pledged the huge sum of \$23 million--more than many nations--to the reconstruction effort. Small initiatives abounded also. In India itself, young professionals launched an immediate campaign via text messaging. In New York, one Hindu family collected a container load of supplies from local hospitals. Boy Scouts went door to door, and employees passed the hat at work.

Some organizations have well-honed skills in disasters, particularly the Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh (RSS), India's largest volunteer social service organization. Trained like an army to march toward the sound of battle, their local workers in Tamil Nadu arrived in the stricken areas less than two hours after the tsunami washed ashore at 8:45 am. Over the coming days they were joined by volunteers from all over India. Many local Hindu organizations, including Chinmaya Mission, the Ramakrishna Mission and Vivekananda Kendra, to name just a few, immediately joined the effort. Chinmaya Mission focused on providing food for survivors and

relief workers. The RSS, after initial rescue operations, set about the monumental and unpleasant task of collecting bodies and trying to provide dignified last rights. The RSS was one of the very few organizations able to operate in the Andaman islands.

More organizations rolled in, such as the Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha (BAPS), with their extensive expertise in relief work gained in the 2001 Gujarat earthquake and Orissa cyclone. Swami Chidanand Saraswati (Muniji) of Parmarth Niketan in Rishikesh arrived and immediately adopted the heavily damaged village of Cuddalore. A contingent of Sikhs arrived from Punjab and set up langaars, free kitchens.

In Malaysia, the Malaysia Hindu Sangam brought together many Hindu organizations for fund raising, material gathering and to send workers to afflicted areas. P. Wahthamoorthy of the Vivekananda Youth Movement, Seremba, arrived in Chennai on January 1 with a team. So great had been the Indian domestic response that they were told to go on to Sri Lanka, where the devastation was much greater. Once there they hooked up with local organizations including the Hindu Seva Sangam (the overseas branch of the RSS) who martialed a thousand volunteers. Meanwhile, temples and organizations across Malaysia raised money for the work. On a worldwide basis, Tamils in many countries sent money through the Tamils Rehabilitation Organization (TRO), which was formed to help victims of the country's long-running civil war and is able to operate in rebel-controlled areas.

It was in Sri Lanka where the tsunami hit closest to home for Hinduism Today. Our founder, Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami, was ordained by Siva Yogaswami of Jaffna Sri Lanka as his successor and has maintained close links with the Sri Lankan Hindus ever since. One special project of his was support of the Thirunavukkarasu Nayanar Gurukulam near Thirukovil in Batticaloa province. Just meters from the ocean, it was directly in the path of the tsunami. A smaller wave came first, and then the second was sighted. The director of the orphanage yelled to the 43 boys to run, and alerted the nearby villagers as well. Run the boys did, and all but one, who was handicapped, survived. Four adult staff perished. Many of their neighbors had stopped to get belongings at their home and drowned. Everything except one building was destroyed at the orphanage. Now funds are being collected to build a new facility further inland.

An interreligious problem surfaced a few weeks into the relief work--Christian

conversion efforts directed at survivors. This is, of course, nothing new. Christian evangelical organizations have for decades made use of disasters to "spread the Gospel." The difference now is the worldwide attention the practice has garnered. Critical articles appeared in the New York Times and other major US papers, as well as on the wire services and, surprisingly, even in the Indian press, normally so loathe to denounce Christians.

Two hundred tsunami victims in the town of Samanthapettai in Tamil Nadu, according to a report in The Pioneer, "saw the dark side of Christian charity as missionaries stomped out of their village without distributing relief after residents refused their faith-for-food deal." Even the Christian organizations which subscribe to the Red Cross policy of not using disasters to advance any political or religious agenda still hoped those helped would later be interested in changing their faith.

The attempt by one Christian organization to transport 300 orphaned children out of Bandh Aceh to be raised in a Christian orphanage in Jakarta enraged Muslims and the plan was quickly abandoned. It didn't help that the organization posted statements on their web site to the effect that these 300 orphans would be trained as missionaries and sent back to Bandh Aceh as adults to convert the province to Christianity.

The immediate rescue and relief operations, though harried and difficult, are relatively straightforward in means and objective--shelter and feed the victims, treat the wounded and cremate or bury the dead. Actual restoration of the communities is another matter. Take the example of the Batticaloa orphanage. Construction on replacement facilities can begin straightaway, because they already own land in a suitable location. But the Sri Lanka government has decreed no homes within 300 meters of the shoreline, meaning the previous site has to be abandoned, or used only during the day. Other residents along the coast now have to acquire new land.

BAPS workers acquired a lot of experience with this stage of reconstruction following the Gujarat earthquake. One of their swamis explained to Hinduism Today that organizations had built new housing, but failed to secure title to the land, making it impossible for the intended beneficiaries to take possession. Others built unsuitable, barracks-style housing that no one wanted to live in. Many worked for a while in the reconstruction and then simply left. BAPS' experience is that it requires very close coordination with the local government, and a clear understanding of the

needs of the people to accomplish satisfactory reconstruction.

Prayers and spiritual solace from around the globe are a significant part of the recovery, as families adjust to the devastating change brought into their lives, without warning, from the normally innocuous and bountiful ocean.