

Refugees of Sea

Having mercilessly devoured the shores and nearby dwellings, the sea continues to roar. As the torrential rains and waves angrily lash the sea shores, the fisher folk are driven to another sea –a sea of starvation and deprivation.

The sad plight and cries of these people on the coastal areas of Kerala, the southern most state in the west coast of India, are often generalized as occasional tragedies that come and go. Free rations of grains, a make shift shelter– there ends the society’s concern and care for these marginalized fishing community. As the sea continues its dance of death, they grab their belongings from their huts and run for their life to the nearby school or shift to sheds that turn to be relief camps for years.

These families in Poonthura, Poovar and Anchengo, are being forced to live like aliens, destitute and homeless, even as millions of Rupees in the Tsunami Fund donated by international agencies remains unused. The state government turns a deaf ear to their grievances. Social and political organizations, who claim to be vanguards fighting for the rights of the poor, stand mute.

133 fishermen families live in two shacks made of Tin sheets in an open ground in Anchengo. These sheds are like simmering cauldrons within and outside under the scorching heat of the tropical sun. They are the refugees of sea. Many of them are joint families and are forced to have miserable lives in relief camps after their houses were destroyed by fire and sea erosion. Though food is a rare thing to be found in relief camps, it may seem ironical that most of them have to spend at least 10 Rupees as fee per head for using toilets for a day.

Another set of 31 families living in the BB Primary School in Anchengo, are little bit lucky. The state government provides them food and electricity. Each one is given a mat to sleep on. It has been many months since these families moved to the classrooms and the students are being confined to two class rooms. The parents of the students have warned the authorities that they would not send their children to school if the refugees are not evacuated.

These families had been forced to move to a prawn factory building in 1992 when the road was widened. The road widening was part of a development program, but the lives of 31 poor families were never taken into consideration. And these hapless victims became refugees of development, as they didn’t have any place to go. They were later shifted to the school building, as the factory building was in a dilapidated condition. Some families who refused to be shifted to the school built huts in the factory compound. They too lead miserable lives as neither water supply nor sanitation facilities are available. Families living in the school get into fights with each other frequently. There are sick people who cannot afford to have treatment and women, who are deprived of any privacy, even to change their clothes.

Holding Victoria (85) by the arm, her son Pankaradas said: “If only I could take my mother to a house where she would be protected from cold.” Victoria, suffering from a number of diseases, stood silent.

The 140 members of 31 families have to manage with just one latrine. The overflowing septic tank makes health hazards to the students and the refugee families. When will

these poor refugees be able to live like humans? Government officials and politicians as usual give false claims that new houses will be constructed soon. But so far nothing has happened.

It has been a year since 72 fishermen families of Anchengo beach lost all they had in a coastal fire. The authorities promised to build new houses within three months. Later it was extended to six months. And now it has been a year. The 72 families were temporarily shifted to sheds with Tin sheet roofs. Each family is given only one or two rooms depending on the number of members. But most of them are joint families. The physical and mental problems that arise when many family members are forced to sleep in one room are many.

The shed is like a furnace in the scorching summer heat. Women and children sit outside the shed, unable to bear the heat. Men have either gone fishing or taken refuge under some shade. The heat causes many diseases among children. On most of the nights, the parents run to the hospital, carrying their children in their arms. Food-poisoning is a regular problem.

“The whole family starves when a member catches diarrhea. You have to pay to use the latrine. We pay one Rupee to use the public latrine once. To take bath it costs two Rupees. We take bath once a day. But we need to use urinals many times a day...” said Mary, mother of a big family.

“We don’t have enough money to buy food and clothing for the family; then how can we pay for using toilets?” she stopped abruptly. It is the right of every citizen to have access to safe drinking water and toilets. Both these things are denied to these people (as the hate to be called refugees).

Grandfather shouts at a child who has taken off his trousers and is about to answer the call of nature, in front of the house: “Run to the beach.” The child, throwing off his trousers, darts to the beach.

The government didn’t bother to provide sanitation facilities, reckoning that fisher folk, being the children of the sea, could always defecate on the beach. Even if this option be made use of in the case of men, what about women? They have to wait for the fall of dark to go to the beach. To use the nearby public sanitation facility, they have to pay for each use and most of the families don’t have money for it. Some three or four families have built their own makeshift latrines with coconut leaves and old clothes. The unhygienic latrines pose serious threat to environment and breed diseases in the refugee camp and nearby areas.

Benedict, who had gone fishing and come back without any catch was sleeping outside the shed. He suddenly woke up and spoke like a wail: “Had it been a hut made of coconut leaves, it would at least have protected us from this horrible heat. I spent 57000 Rupees to build my house, which unfortunately was devoured by fire. I would not have lived in this hell if I had any other option.” Benedict’s grandchildren, Soumy, Sajany and Sanal returned from school. They too stayed outside the shed as the heat in the shed was unbearable. They seemed to be accustomed to the miseries of living in a refugee camp! The relief camp in Poonthura is built in a waste yard. Some 30 families who had lost their houses in the sea erosion are living there. The nauseous smells emanated from Parvathy Puthanar (the trunk river), where the sewage of the city converges, give them company at nights along with the battalion of mosquitoes. They too are not provided with any sanitation facilities. Nobody knows how they suppress the call of the nature at day time.

As a result, the women of the coastal areas are an easy prey to ailments like urinary infections and other uterus-intestine related diseases. Many of them do not seek medical treatment as they do not have money to afford. Many families cling to the hope that the government may build houses for them one day.

Climate Change: Fishermen Worst Hit

The Secretary General of World Meteorological Organization (WMO) Mr. M. Gerard cautions that the victims of climate change would mostly be the fishermen who live on the coast. He also draws attention to the fact that the signs of climate change had already appeared in the coasts of India, especially in Kerala, during the last monsoon. WMO also gives the alert that sea erosion and storms would become more severe in the coming years. This may occur at unexpected times and seasons.

Ahro a fisherman in Poonthura says that after Tsunami there have been changes in the habitat system of fish. So, fishermen go for deep sea fishing, with the help of gas lamps. This is highly risky as they have to cross the navigational route of ships. Whatever loss fishermen incur, they go to the sea, with the dream of a bountiful catch. They believe that the sea would bless them one day, and that they would be able to pay off their debts. But they are wary of the changing mood of the sea, due to climate change. They see changes in the wind, the waves and the under currents. The fishing community is unaware of the causes and consequences of the phenomenon. Neither do they have any means for disaster management.

How is Kerala prepared to face natural calamities from climate change? It is true that some committees have been formed. We need to take precautions to minimize the loss of lives and properties of the people living along the coasts. Full fledged hospitals and relief camps are of foremost importance among them. And sadly the state government machinery is not ready to face a calamity.

[The State government and local government institutions are not happy with any news reports on fishermen deprivation. They are afraid of fishermen anger and the damage it makes in the public life. Fishermen will go for warpaths or rampages at any time on issues related to their lives. It may result in human casualties too. So, the government machinery and the politicians who run the government always try to put fishermen problem under the carpet and indicts the media. It repeated when this report got published, leaders of the ruling political party got angry. There were angry phone calls, press statements and party meetings to offset the expose and the impact, the report has made.]

The Impact: *The feature has forced the state and local governments to go for protective measures and house building for fishermen. Millions of rupees have been ear marked for their welfare and house construction has begun. NGOs have come forward to construct safe toilets in fishermen hamlets. A debt relief commission is also announced to release fishermen from the clutches of money lenders.]*