

**A Preliminary Assessment of Caste Discrimination in Cyclone Thane in Tamil  
Nadu and Pondicherry  
- NDW-NCDHR -  
18<sup>th</sup> & 19<sup>th</sup> January 2012**

**Cyclone Thane**

Cyclonic Storm Thane was the strongest tropical cyclone of 2011 within the North Indian Ocean. Thane initially developed as a tropical disturbance within the monsoon trough to the west of Indonesia. Over the next couple of days the disturbance gradually developed further while moving towards the northwest, and was declared a Depression during December 25, before being declared Cyclonic Storm Thane during the next day. As it was named, Thane started to turn towards the west under the influence of a subtropical ridge of high pressure before its development slowed down during December 27, as a strong outflow and marginally favourable sea surface temperatures fought with persistent vertical wind shear. After its development had slowed down during December 27, Thane became a Very Severe Cyclonic Storm during December 28, before as it approached the Indian states of Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh, it weakened slightly. Thane then made landfall early on December 30, on the north Tamil Nadu coast between Cuddalore and Pondicherry and rapidly weakened into a depression.

Cuddalore and Vilipuram Districts in Tamil Nadu and Pondicherry were the worst affected due to Cyclone Thane. All roads in these three districts are line by wreckage of fallen trees including large tracts of Casuarina plantations completely wiped out. The only trees that seem to have withstood the fury of the cyclone seems to be the *Borassus flabellifer* or the Palmyra Palm. According to government estimates at least 39 people have been killed by this cyclone in Tamil Nadu and 7 in Pondicherry. Apart from the loss of life, the Cyclone left huge destruction in terms of livelihood, particularly agricultural livelihood and ripped apart the green cover in these already arid districts. It is estimated that Cuddalore District alone saw a staggering loss of approximately 1,000,000 coconut trees and more than 28,000 hectares of cashew plantations amongst other cash crops. Apart from Coconut and Cashew – Paddy, Banana, Mango, Jackfruit and Sugarcane Plantations have been affected. It is estimated that 80 % of crops were uprooted by the Cyclone There is no estimate of the non agricultural vegetation affected by the Cyclone. This is apart from loss of industrial livelihood. Further around 750,000 thatched, tiled and asbestoed habitation have been affected over 650 villages. 45,000 electric posts were uprooted creating an electricity and resultant water crisis. In terms of relief apart from the immediate relief the Government of Tamil Nadu has offered INR 5000 (USD 101) per completely destroyed house, INR 2500 (USD 50.5). Loss of life compensation has been estimated at INR 200,000 (USD 4055). For farming losses apart from free

seed kit, an amount of INR 8000 (USD 162) has been announced per acre of plantation as one year support.

In Pondicherry, the damage includes around 17,012 hectares of paddy fields and also coconuts, bananas, casuarinas and sugarcane besides 80,000 huts and 124 power transformers. 75% of the total green cover of Pondicherry has destroyed. The long term relief scheme announced by the Government of Pondicherry seems marginally better than that announced by the Government of Tamil Nadu ranging from INR 10000 (USD 202) to 15000 (USD 304) for damaged houses and INR 15000 to 50000 (USD 1013) per hectare of destroyed crops depending on the type of crop.

Credit must be given to the Tamil Nadu Electricity Board (TNEB) which worked on a war footing and restored power in most parts of the affected districts within couple of weeks, while most parts of Pondicherry apart from the urban areas were reeling under acute electricity and water supply even two and a half weeks after the Cyclone when the NDW social assessment team visited.

In terms of the intensity of damage in the affected areas, many involved in relief work believe that Cyclone Thane has surpassed the 2004 Tsunami.

### **National Dalit Watch – National Campaign for Dalit Human Rights**

NDW is an initiative of NCDHR and was created in 2007 to monitor caste discrimination in disaster situations particularly in the light of the experiences during the 2004 Tsunami and the 2007 Kosi floods in Bihar.

NDW over the past two years has instituted tools and methods to identify, expose and document this form of discrimination. This has enabled many Dalit rights organizations, local activists and the community leadership to monitor exclusion effectively during disasters. NDW has initiated the process of advocacy and mobilization to pressurize the state to take corrective steps, institute a policy environment that recognizes and counters such discrimination and defines entitlement of survivors in manner that makes the state accountable.

NDW with its constituent Dalit rights organizations, at present, has its interventions in the flood belt of Bihar, Karnataka, Assam and Andhra Pradesh. \*

### **Social Assessment Team**

NDW constituted a Social Assessment Team comprising Ramesh Nathan, Director, Social Awareness Society for Youths (SASY), Tindivanam, Viswesh Sekhar, Advocate, High Court of Bangalore, Venkatachandrika Radhakrishnan, Campaign for Justice and Peace – TN, Chennai, Revathi Radhakrishnan, Film-maker, Chennai and Bobby Kunhu, Researcher and Writer – to do a rapid assessment of caste discrimination in the relief

and rehabilitation phase of Cyclone Thane. The constitution of the team was also spurred by reports of caste violence in the wake of Cyclone Thane in Pondicherry and Cuddalore districts. This team did a two day tour of the affected districts viz. Pondicherry, Cuddalore and Villipuram on the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> January 2012. Due to the nature and intensity of caste violence in Sathamangalam Pet in Pondicherry District and Palur in Cuddalore District, the team could visit only three affected villages in the three districts respectively. The team is extremely grateful to Murugappan and Babu of SASY and K. Prabhu, Bangalore for all the logistical and research help and inputs.

On the 18<sup>th</sup> the team visited Sathamangalam Pet in the Villianur Commune of Pondicherry District apart from meeting with various state officials representing the Government of Pondicherry. After addressing a press conference on 19<sup>th</sup> morning the team proceeded to Palur in Banruti Taluk, Cuddalore District and Sornavur in Kandamangalam Block of Villupuram District in Tamil Nadu.

This is the Preliminary Assessment report on caste discrimination during Cyclone Thane submitted by the above constituted team.

### **Sathamangalam, Pondicherry<sup>♦</sup>**

Sathamangalam Panchayat comprises three villages viz. Mel Sathamangalam, Keezh Sathamangalam and Sathamangalam Pet with a total of around 1500 families. Sathamangalam Pet is a Dalit colony situated nearer to Keezh Sathamangalam with around 70 households – 150 families. Most of the residents of Sathamangalam Pet are daily wage labourers<sup>♦</sup> – many depended on the labour from the landholdings of the dominant castes from the other two villages. The majority of the population in the other two villages mainly belong to the Vanniyar community and a small smattering of other dominant backward caste communities.

The traditional feudal land relationship and dependency of Dalits on the dominant castes for their day to day livelihood has also translated into discrimination in various spheres including access to NREGS employment which is regulated by the dominant castes. Apart from this there has also been a recent history of tension between Sathamangalam Pet and Keezh Sathamangalam in particular following the elopement of a boy and girl belonging to the two villages respectively.

Close to Sathamangalam Pet, right next to a temple constructed, managed and worshipped by the Dalit community, a Panchayat water tank was constructed with SC funds and a compound wall enclosure was built around the water tank and the temple. This tank is administered by the Sathamangalam Panchayat.

Following Cyclone Thane and the damage to electric poles, electricity was disrupted and without power for operating the pumps water supply was also disrupted. The

cyclone also had caused considerable and damage to the houses in Sathamangalam Pet. Without potable water for more than 24 hours, a few residents of Sathamangalam Pet approached the Panchayat President Mr. Paramasivam on 31<sup>st</sup> December early morning for access to the water tank near their colony. Access was refused on the ground that the key was with a Panchayat employee Mr. Varadharajan who was unavailable at that point of time. Having waited for some time without water, few of the residents of Sathamangalam Pet jumped over the compound wall to fetch drinking water. At this point the Panchayat President reached the spot and opened the gate. On being questioned about the key – he used an excuse claiming that he had a spare key which he was not sure would work.

The same evening at around half past six, a few youngsters of the dominant caste led by Mr. Varadarajan attacked the people from Sathamangalam Pet that they suspected had fetched water in the morning from the tank. When Mr. Ezhumalai, a resident of Sathamangalam pet tried to intervene and negotiate, he was abused using caste names and beaten up. Apart from Ezhumalai, some others including a woman were beaten up. All of this happened in the presence of Mr. Felix, the Sub-Inspector of Police, Mangalam station, which has jurisdiction over Sathamangalam, who remained a mute spectator.

When the victims went to the jurisdictional police station at Mangalam, the police refused to file an FIR or give them CSR. Anticipating further attacks they also requested for police protection for their village – which was refused. Responding to the request, Mr. Bhaskaran, the Inspector of Police in charge of Mangalam Police station is alleged to have told the villagers that he might as well give up his uniform rather than file cases and take action on behalf of the Dalits.

Early next morning, a mob of more than 200 men from the dominant castes dressed in their underwear attacked Sathamangalam Pet with weapons – almost all the houses and household items that the cyclone had spared were smashed up. Mr. C Djeacoumar, Member of Legislative Assembly, Mangalam who was visiting the cyclone affected areas in his constituency was present and tried stopping the mob, but his appeals were disregarded. One motorcycle was burnt, while 3 other two-wheelers and 2 four wheelers (commercial vehicles – one TATA AC & Mahindra Maxi Cab) were completely damaged. This is apart from assault and battery were caste abuses were hurled at the residents of Sathamangalam Pet and they were beaten up regardless of age and physical condition. A pregnant woman, old people and children were chased and beaten up. Those who could not run away took refuge in the community hall in the village which was shuttered and locked from inside. The mob tried to break into the hall and in the process broke almost all the window panes of the hall.

On the same day, the Deputy Collector (Revenue) Ms. A. Muthamma conducted an enquiry in her capacity as Sub-Divisional Magistrate and directed that appropriate action

had to be taken including management and distribution of water and necessary police action in the light of the violence.

This time the jurisdictional police filed a case under the Protection of Civil Rights Act (PCR) and referred the matter to the Pondicherry Civil Rights Cell – while registering cases against Mr. Ezhumalai and five others from Sathamangalam Pet for trespassing into the water tank and attacking Mr. Varadharajan. Allegedly cognisance of this complaint was taken over telephone on the next day after the residents of Keezh Sathamangalam had registered their complaint. This was admitted to by Mr. Felix, Sub-Inspector of Police, Mangalam Police Station. However the police did not take cognisance of the offences under the the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act (PoA).

It was only after the alleged perpetrators of the caste riots had obtained bail under the more lenient PCR Act and subsequent to pressure from local activists that provisions of the PoA Act was included as late as the 9<sup>th</sup> of January, 2012. Even then the copies of the FIR were not made available to the complainants. In the meanwhile Inspector Bhaskaran had proceeded on leave.

On the day of the visit of the Assessment Team, Mr, Felix, SI and the Inspector in-charge of Mangalam station were present at Sathamangalam Pet. On being asked why the provisions of PoA Act was not applied, they responded that they were not aware of the content and procedure under the legislation and did not know it was applicable in this case. Later Mr. V. J. Chandran, Senior Superintendent of Police, Pondicherry also admitted to the members of the assessment team that met him that many of the Pondicherry police force was unaware of the PoA Act.

In the meantime the dominant caste organisation started a public vilification campaign against Deputy Collector Ms. Muthamma disputing her findings with respect to the violence at Sathamangalam and demanding her removal from her post. This campaign also asserted that the residents of Sathamangalam Pet were soiling and dirtying the water tank and the campus around it.

Further, the Assessment team wants to point out that claims to access to the water tank seem to be slowly escalating into clashes around the temple within the water tank compound. As mentioned earlier this temple was constructed and traditionally maintained by the Dalit community. However subsequent to the cyclone related riots the dominant caste group has been claiming exclusive access to the temple. Around January 14<sup>th</sup> during Pongal the local police tried preventing access to the Dalit community from offering prayers at the temple and an incident was averted only because of the intervention of the SSP.

The Pondicherry Collector Mr. Deepak Kumar claimed that he was unaware of the incidents that had taken place as he was on leave during and after the cyclone and had resumed duty only on the day of the visit of the assessment team.

**Post Script:** During the preparation of this report, one of the assessment team members received a call from Sathamangalam regarding further violence related to the 31<sup>st</sup> and 1<sup>st</sup> riots at Sathamangalam Pet on the morning of the 29<sup>th</sup> January, when a woman called Bommaiyaal from Sathamangalam Pet walking back home was abused using caste name and assaulted by a group of youngsters led by , Paiyakutty alias Vaidyanathan from Mel Sathamangalam. She was badly injured and admitted to the local hospital. The police have once again refused to file a complaint and the SI informed the complainant that provisions of PoA Act were not applicable in this case

### **Palur, Cuddalore District**

The dalit habitation Nadu Colony of Palur Panchayat in Panruti Taluk of Cuddalore District, Tamil Nadu was yet to get drinking water and electricity more than 20 days after cyclone Thane, when the Assessment Team visited the place. This is not because the relief operation is hindered technically. This is because the Nadu Colony had the audacity to field a candidate in the last Panchayat election (open candidacy). The Panchayat president Mr. Saravanan, from a dominant caste, who also has a history of several criminal cases pending against him decided that Nadu colony had not voted for him as they had fielded a candidate from their midst were not entitled to cyclone relief that was processed through the Panchayat. So while 100 meters away on both sides, the neighbouring habitations to the colony enjoys drinking water and electricity, the villagers have to walk/cycle/bike to Aharam, a village 3 kms away to fetch water. Worse, with the collusion of the Police, Mr. Murugan a dalit villager has been arrested and remanded on a fabricated case under Sections 307 & 506 of the Indian Penal Code (Attempt to Murder and Criminal Intimidation).

Nadu Colony is one of the three dalit colonies with about 150 households. The cyclone Thane has affected the colony where trees were uprooted, thatched and shingled houses damaged and the whole village lost electricity as in every other village in the region. The drinking water supply to the village provided via the overhead tank was also affected because of lack of electricity. The village has three overhead tanks – two big tanks out of which only one is operational, and one a small mini tank.

After the devastation of the cyclone, the villagers with the help of the local MLA who loaned them a generator restored water supply in the mini tank, which was inadequate for the whole village. Even after 5 days, when the electricity was not restored, the villagers approached the Panchayat president who denied supporting them stating that 'You didn't give any vote for me. Now don't ask me for any favors". With no water supply

restored on 7<sup>th</sup> January, villagers Mr. Murugan and Jayachanran went to meet the Panchayat president at the Panchayat office where there were several people in the room. When they enquired about the water supply and electricity, the Panchayat president rudely abused them with reference to their caste. When they got upset and tried to leave, the group tried to tie them up and slapped them, but other villagers intervened and released the duo so they could return to the village.

On morning of 8<sup>th</sup> January 2012, a team of about 40 people including Mr. Murugan and Jayachandran went to file a complaint against the Panchayat Leader at Nellikuppam police station. Inspector Kumar who was on his way out refused to take the complaint and left the police station. When the villagers tried to file the complaint with the Sub Inspector, he told them that he cannot take the complaint without the inspector and asked them to go back to the village where he will come and sort out the issue. At the same time, Panchayat president and one Mr. Janardanan also came to the police station. The team from Nadu village waited at the police station till around 5 in the evening for the inspector to return.

The next day, early morning at 4:30 AM, a police squad of about 20 including the inspector surrounded Mr. Murugan's home and took him to the police station on the grounds that he and Jayachandran had broken the furnitures in the Panchayat office. When the villagers went to the police station shortly thereafter, they found that he had been remanded and imprisoned in Cuddalore jail. Bail has been denied and an audio recording of four people engaged in some kind of assault has been produced by Panchayat leader as evidence against Mr. Murugan.

When the Assessment Team visited the village on afternoon of 19<sup>th</sup> January 2012, three employees of the Tamil Nadu Electricity Board and villagers were restoring electricity only to one of the water tanks with all expenses paid by the residents of the colony. However, there was no indication as to when the power would be restored for the entire village. The villagers had to spend up to INR 650 to procure a small mini van full of water for a funeral on the day of the visit.

On the day of the visit of the assessment team, Mr. Murugan had not been granted bail, while no action had been initiated against the Panchayat President. Since the traditional River Festival was in progress in Cuddalore District, the revenue and police officers were not available for comment. When contacted later through telephone, the Deputy Superintendent of Police, Panruti refused to answer queries on the ground that the case was under investigation.

### **Sornavur, Villupuram District**

Sornavur Keelpathi has about 750 dalit households and is one of the three villages making up the Panchayat. The Panchayat Leader Suresh is a dalit from the same

village. The village is about 20kms inland of the sea. When cyclone Thane hit the village, there was no prior warning to the village. About 250 people had to be moved to the local school to be camped during the cyclone and the rest of the people especially in thatched and shingled houses moved to neighbors' houses. An electricity post fell on a house, killing one youth and critically injuring one girl. There was no way to provide immediate medical help to the girl, who had to be taken in a bike (due to the trees which had fallen in the road) to the General Hospital. There were two more people injured in related accidents due to the cyclone.

The villagers camped in the area for about 1 week and a generator was arranged to provide water. As there was no immediate relief operations, Panchayat Leader had to spend personal money which has not been reimbursed so far. Electricity was restored after 15 days when state weekly magazine Nakkeran highlighted the death and the issues about the village. The relief of 2 lakh solatium for the family of the boy is yet to be given. The VAO took a survey of the damaged houses and has given 460 tokens (for relief of Rs 2500) but the Panchayat Leader is unable to distribute the token as he may be accused of partisanship. This highlights the lack of transparency and villagers' participation in identifying and distributing relief. None of the neighboring villagers have been given the relief money yet though tokens have been distributed to them.

### **Conclusion:**

Time was a major constraint in making this assessment. The complex nature of the issue necessitated that sufficient time was spent in understanding the multiple layers in each location that was visited and therefor the visit was limited to three representative villages in three districts viz. Pondicherry, Cuddalore and Villipuram based on available information on caste discrimination from sources on the field.

In all the sites that the team visited it was quite clear that disaster has triggered violence along already existing caste fault-lines. Scarcity of resources during natural disasters exacerbates the caste fault lines particularly with respect to access to relief. Part of the fault is located in not taking into consideration existing strong caste hegemonies in disaster preparedness and mitigation.

Across the board in Cyclone Thane it appears that already vulnerable and marginalised communities were rendered more vulnerable as a result of the natural disaster. Both in Palur and Sathamangalam, this vulnerability has also resulted in overt violence. In the case of Palur, the violence seems to be also directly connected to resentment of political assertion by the Dalit communities.

Further, in both the cases the Police have acted with impunity both in refusal to entertain complaints from the Dalit communities and in their response to the complaint. Even where the district and police administration have acknowledged the mistake on



the part of the police officials on duty, no action has been contemplated or taken against the errant officials. Despite the gravity and tense nature of the situation the local media also seems to have ignored the violence though it had been brought to their notice.

Equitable and just disaster mitigation is possible only if the policy and law acknowledges the role that caste plays in exacerbating the vulnerabilities of Dalit and marginalised communities in disaster situations. This acknowledgement has to find its way into the National Disaster Management Policy and framework.

Given the gravity of situation that the assessment team witnessed in its limited travel, it is strongly recommended that an independent probe be conducted into caste violence during Cyclone Thane. Further, the responsible police officials have to be prosecuted under the PoA Act for failure to take cognisance of the caste violence.

The governments of Tamil Nadu and Pondicherry also need to make provisions for adequate compensation for the loss of livelihood, damage to property and injuries that were sustained as a result of the violence. A proper rehabilitation package also needs to be conceived especially given that most of the victims of the violence are daily wage earners dependant on the dominant caste for their livelihood.

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**Photos**



**Figure 1 Water Tank Sathamangalam**

**மிக கொடிய குற்ற செயல்**  
**குடிநீரில்**  
**இன்று மலம் கழிப்பு! நாளை**  
**விஷமா?!**

5000 வன்னிய மக்களின் குடிநீர் ஆதார தொட்டியினுள்  
புயல் பாதித்த நேரத்தில் மலம் கழித்து, மது பாட்டில்  
உடைத்து போட்டு கொடிய குற்றம் புரிந்த கீழ் சாத்தமங்கலம்  
பேட்டை சேர்ந்த தலித்துகளின் செயலுக்கு சட்டம் என்ன  
செய்ய போகிறது? PCR சட்டம் அதற்குத்தான்  
துணை போகுமா? சாதி வெறிபிடித்த துணை கலெக்டரை  
பதவி நீக்கம் செய். வன்முறையை தூண்டிவிட்டவர்களை  
உடனடியாக கைது செய். இவண்: வன்னியர்கள், புதுவை மாநிலம்.

Figure 2 Poster campaign in Pondicherry



Figure 3 Press Conference



**Figure 4 Palur, Cuddalore**

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\* For more details : <http://nationaldalitwatch-ncdhr.blogspot.com/p/about-national-dalit-watch-of-ncdhr.html>

^ Other reports can be found @

<http://www.ncdhr.org.in/latestinterventions/Atrocity%20against%20Dalits%283%29.docx> &

[http://roundtableindia.co.in/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=4564:brutal-attack-on-dalits-settlement-in-the-kizl-sathamangalm-of-pondicherry&catid=122:atrocities&Itemid=138](http://roundtableindia.co.in/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=4564:brutal-attack-on-dalits-settlement-in-the-kizl-sathamangalm-of-pondicherry&catid=122:atrocities&Itemid=138)

♦ None of the residents own land.