

EDUCATION

Educators think long term to relieve tsunami fears

Roysircar works with psyche of survivors; plans to remain involved

By MEERA RAJAGOPALAN
INDIA New England Staff

Educators are not just about teaching well—they are also about leading by example.

Three such educators of Indian origin have answered the call for help. When the tsunami hit South East Asia, they felt they could do something about it, and after trips to India, have achieved something valuable. Working in their field of specialty or interest, they have brought a feeling of security to millions of people.

They took their time deciding what they could do, their thoughts and ideas evolving over time.

The greatest fear of tsunami survivors remains, "What will we do if it happens again?" and these teachers and professors tried to answer that question to make them feel more secure.

Gargi Roysircar, a professor of psychology and founding director of the multicultural center at Antioch College New England, worked with non-governmental organizations in Tamil Nadu, India to help their clients deal with trauma and stress associated with the tsunami.

Avijit Gangopadhyay, a professor of ocean sciences at University of Massachusetts at Dartmouth, Mass. has teamed up with the Indian Institutes of Technology and other leading scientific minds to form a system in India to monitor the earth's many moods. Gangopadhyay is the author of the tsunami atlas for the region.

Raj Mundra, a teacher at Phillips Academy in Andover, Mass. in his visit to Chennai, helped fishermen rebuild their lives, while they were battling caste prejudices along with the loss of their homes.

The mind's eye

KEENE, N.H.— Gargi Roysircar, a psychologist, never imagined she could do anything for the country where she grew up, because she thought psychology was not yet accepted as a science in India. "I had siblings who were engineers and doctors. I didn't think I could contribute anything. Now I realize I might be able to do something for the country," she says.

Roysircar, with three of her students, ventured into the most traumatic zones in the world this summer— into a region where psychology was not taken seriously, and where they faced a significant language barrier. The objective of the trip was two-fold. "We wanted to make connections with local communities, government and private organizations to understand the relief work from the psychological point of view. We also had a manual with us, on how natural disasters affect the psychology and well being of the victims. We gave the manuals and CDs to the organizations," Roysircar says.

The manual, titled "Information Resource: How Disasters Affect People, Children, and Communities: Health, Help, and Assessment" was developed by Roysircar and her team, and explained various manifestations of problems that survivors of natural disasters face, and how best to identify and treat them.

The team worked with three very different types of relief

workers— from Nalanda Way, a mentoring service for orphans, Seva Bharati, a Hindu organization, and Public Concern International-India, a UNICEF funded organization.

During the course of the six-week trip, Roysircar, who used Chennai as a base, traveled to Cuddalore, Nagapattinam and Pondicherry, to work with tsunami survivors there.

"We were hesitant, in the beginning, to be amongst the tsunami survivors, but we were welcomed by them," she says. She saw them slowly rebuilding their lives, holding meetings where they discussed finances, and going to the bank. They also spoke about starting a garment shop and learning to tailor. Roysircar was impressed by their resilience.

Michiko Ishibashi, one of the students on the trip, was very impressed with the relief work. "One thing that many of the survivors were afraid of was what they would do if a tsunami struck again," she says. Raised in Japan, Ishibashi assumed that most people would know about the dangers of a tsunami. "The experience was really great, and very eye opening," she says.

A large part of the trip was devoted to understanding the modus operandi of the different organizations, and training the community workers using the manual that the team distributed.

Several people were diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder soon after the tsunami, but Roysircar rues the fact that there has not been any follow up. "Most of the organizations were very interested in the manual, and were open to discuss issues," she says, adding, "So I was cautious to bring up the issue [of lack of follow up work]."

Roysircar says, "I think that ongoing listening of people's grief and loss in a group form might be useful. When I spoke with the survivors individually, they all talked about their fears."

Many are unable to talk about their symptoms because of taboos, she says.

For example, many of the survivors have recurring dreams of images of naked sleeping bodies, and since that has a sexual connotation, they are unable to discuss it. The root of the dreams might be something more cultural, Roysircar says. "Many were not able to perform the last rites of their loved ones, which has been traumatic," she says, "Also, bodies have been washed away to the

next village, and the dreams are a manifestation of that experience."

Roysircar says she has learnt a lot from the experience herself, seeing the way culture shapes the way people react. "We do have a good social and family support system [in India]," she says, "but this may be too much for them."

Some of the team's work also involved interacting with the survivors, especially children, as the team involved the children in play activities, including drawing and sketching. Roysircar plans to market these drawings, and use the money back for their development. Many of the drawings, which look surprisingly bright, depict the killer wave washing away everything. Roysircar explains, "What is interesting is that the children did not use dark, gray colors that in the West we associate with death and pain. The tsunami waves came on a bright, sunny morning, totally unexpected. I think the pictures reveal the suddenness of the disaster, unlike the Hurricane Katrina disaster which was predicted for over a week."

She thinks it might be interesting to compare the psycholog-

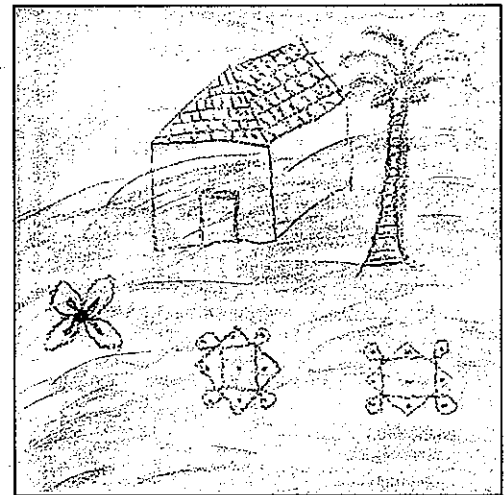


Image courtesy of GARGI ROYSIRCAR

Roysircar plans to market cards made by children affected by the tsunami and raise funds for their welfare.

ical effects of the two disasters.

Roysircar's work at Antioch has a lot to do with cultural differences. As director of the Antioch New England multicultural center, she studies and provides products and resources that help understand multicultural societies better.

A lot of Roysircar's work is focused on testing various measures in a multicultural society, such as adaptability and immigrant assimilation.

Roysircar designs psychological instruments for testing these parameters. For example, her "internal-external ethnic identity measure" calculates the level of "ethnicity" of a person, both internal (thought-wise), and external (dress, customs etc.). Some of her work turns the mirror towards psychologists and deals with their behavior.

Roysircar has a doctoral degree in education and counseling psychology from Texas Tech University and a bachelor's degree in English from Chennai.

Though her main interest lies in educational psychology in the field of measurement, she finds herself interested in personal assessment and PTSD, and she has educated herself in that field. "I would like to expand its meaning to see how it may be relevant to disasters that occur outside the U.S.," she says, "Not just natural disasters, but [also] in cases of war and continuous conflict. We cannot apply an American diagnosis to everything, and I would like to study that."

Roysircar says she observed children affected by AIDS in India and would like to work on that. "I will be going to India more often now," she says. Already, she has started work on helping the children affected by the tsunami, and has sent three pairs of shoes for them. "They need the support now," she says.

She has also learnt that the Indian way is to be resilient, very strong, and of accepting one's fate. "That might have helped them in their immediate coping," she says, "and they still say it's alright." Roysircar has a son, Tarit Sen, who lives in New York.