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Kameshwaram – First Review – letters from Annabelle and Antonin

Bonjour to all and Best wishes for 2007!

It is almost four months since we have been living in Tamil Nadu, dividing our time between Trichy, where our partner SCOPE is based and Kameshwaram, the fishing village. The time has come for a first review of the village two years after the tsunami, on the work that has been undertaken and our own experience.

In order to understand the present note, it is necessary to recapitulate the context of our presence in Kameshwaram. We are two students from the Grenoble School of Management, France (Ecole Supérieure de Commerce française or Grenoble Ecole de Management) and the ex-coordinators of the students association for local and international solidarity called SOS. Our mission here is to assist in research, carrying out a study on the current situation in Kameshwaram and exploring the perspectives for development in the future. Even though we are well aware of the issues tugging at the heart of development, we are not specialists of rural Tamil Nadu. We have only now started to analyze the phenomenon that we observe correctly. Furthermore, it was necessary to take the time to un-learn the French points of reference that we came with in order to adopt another one, different on almost all counts.

We have been lucky to have had the opportunity to meet a number of local actors active in the development dynamics, with whom we could discuss different themes and the stakes involved: gender based discrimination, caste system, child labour, organic farming, rural development, economic strategies and modes of governance.

Our own research is improving as a result. We have already finished a considerable amount of work on two important parts of our project: a global study of the situation in Kameshwaram (environment, politics, economy, education, health...) and a case study of the factors that influence the utilisation of toilets, Eco-San, designed and constructed by SCOPE and financed by FINT (Friends-in-Needs Trust), UNESCO, the Tamil Nadu government and the recipients).

We began our case study on toilets, by a qualitative micro-study of 10 families, after which we interviewed about 50 families gathering information of a more quantitative nature. We were greatly helped by the students of the “Centre for Women’s Studies” of the Bharati Dasan University, Trichy. We have just started to analyze the results in order to assess the rate of utilisation of toilettes by families, the impact of the education imparted by SCOPE and the influence of the family on behavioural patterns. The next step will be to identify other factors related to

individual motivations, cultural parameters, toilet features, and perceptions of needs (need for privacy, habits, fear of leaving alone at night etc.)

Globally, we have been able to collect data and discuss with the residents of Kameshwaram well, gathering valuable information on the habits of fishermen community and farmers in terms of work routines, life style and collective organisations.

Through discussions with the local Panchayat and Self-Help Groups (SHG), we should soon be able to formulate the vision of the residents for future development, understand the difficulties encountered, envisage collective solutions, while coordinating with the other actors involved in the development process of this same zone.

In this letter, each of us has decided to present different aspects of our project. The first part concerns the life style of the residents of Kameshwaram and our integration in the village. We hope to share with you our perceptions vis-à-vis a culture and a community organisation that is different from others, while taking you on a guided tour of the zone covered by the project.

The second part concerns the changes initiated by the tsunami, the actions undertaken by the different actors and the first results of Project FIR. In effect, it is imperative to understand the global context and identify the impact of the project in order to improve our strategies, while integrating all members in the process of change.

Annabelle's Letter

It often takes more than one and a half hours to cover the few kilometers that connect the little village of Kameshwaram (5300 residents) to Nagapattinam. On a small road sorely in need of repair due to years of use, the bus driver zig-zags at top speed, deftly avoiding potholes marking the path, pulling up just on time to the side to avoid



A farmer's house : At Shanthi's place

the motorcycles whizzing head-on the same road.

These jolts however don't bother our contemplations of the vast fields on both sides of the road that have been transformed from semi-arid terrain to emerald green fields barely a month after the monsoon. Adding to the scene, are the specks of saris of the women, who work in single columns in the middle of the fields, gathering the first

harvest. The men carry the rice stalks on their heads, going on to dry them on selected roads.

On reaching the sign announcing the village, in this season, we must get down and continue by foot till the outskirts of the village. Soon we start seeing the first houses from afar, recognizing them by their thatched roofs woven from the branches of the coconut trees. They are single storied and rarely made up of more than two rooms. Very often there is a goat, and sometime a cow, tied to a coconut tree or to some other tree around the house. Bricks lie in piles here and there, between mounds of the coconut tree branches drying in order to be used as fuel. At the corner of the road is the common water pump to collect water for washing and cooking. Further down, the houses are further and further apart, separated by plantations of trees and bushes.

One passes then before the church, which also serves as a pharmacy providing first aid to the villagers. Then come a few little tea shops, followed by provision stores offering a variety of goods, after which comes the Marieamman temple, the temple of the goddess who protects the villagers from all sorts of maladies.

At the school there is a real collection of cycles at this hour, and we get a glimpse of one of the classes, where the children are sitting in a circle on the floor, listening to the lessons taught by the master in the middle of the yard. Out of the three schools in the village, this is a private school (others are public) and the children of fishermen as well as farmers are enrolled here.

Within the farming community, when the men are in the fields, the women largely have enough work to keep them busy at home. From six in the morning, they start preparing tea and cooking breakfast. Thereafter one task after the other is performed during the day: washing dishes, washing clothes, cooking, cleaning, shopping, taking care of the children, taking care of the animals....The women play an important role in decision making, both at the level of the family and at the level of the village, getting together every week in small committees called "Self Help Groups" (SHG) made up of about 20 people, to discuss about the common problems of the villages and search for solutions. Finally, women contribute to the joy and conviviality of the village, so that any one can go and chat, pay a visit or ask for a little favour from the neighbours. The doors are never closed, and any one can enter freely in another house, sometimes even when nobody is around. It is in fact difficult to associate a person to her/his household. Daily life is essentially carried out outdoors, the village itself being more the centre of their lives rather than their own homes.

A bit further away we come to the fishermen community zone, where construction is taking place full swing to re-house the families, whose homes were washed away by the Tsunami. Finally, we encroach on the forest of coconut trees, with rudimentary, little houses scattered all around with roofs made up of corrugated metal and coconut leaves, at the edge of the sea. Each fisherman's family has its own little space outside, two bits of metal sheets serving as screen panel to have a wash, a goat is tied to the closest palm tree and the pots are stacked outside the door. The men are back from fishing around noon and then they spend the rest of the day repairing the nets. Then the relay is taken up by their wives or other women of their entourage, who wash the fish and put it up for auction in the fish market.

Whichever zone we find ourselves, our presence always intrigues. At a loss for words by which to express their interest, the women smile at us, while the children ask the usual questions : “ What’s your name ? From ? Age ? » and listen carefully to our answers. However, while they often try to understand our presence here vis-à-vis the occasional tourists visiting the temple of Vellanganni or the town of Pondicherry, they don’t seem much bothered about the purpose of our visit.

It is also true that our level of Tamil doesn’t permit us to launch into long discussions, but mixing some English with our limited Tamil and especially through gestures it is possible to have an exchange of ideas. The families are very proud to have us enter their homes and offer us coconut milk, tender coconut fruit, tea or biscuits. One must be ready to eat at any and all times and in all quantities!



It is the same at Shanthi’s place, who welcomes us with open arms in her little house. Nearby, a shed has been offered to us as a guest room to lay out our mattresses. After a few days in the village, we end up adopting Sivasangar, a 9 year old, and Sivasangari, a 5 year old, who are very shy at the beginning, but who as time passes, won’t let us out of their sight even for a second.

Moreover, the goodness of Shanthi and her mother prevents us from participating even in the most elementary tasks like washing our cup after drinking tea or bringing the water in buckets to the toilets. Even when we want to wash our hands, one or the other children run to push the handle of the water pump up and down !

It is sure, that we in Western countries have a lot to learn from these people in terms of hospitality and sharing, whether it is with strangers or with neighbours from the same floor. Let us stop locking our doors and instead open them out to others!

Annabelle

Antonin’s Letter

December 2004, a Tsunami beat the coasts of Asia. It claimed 35 lives in the little Tamil village of Kameshwaram. 35 dead in a community of 210 families. Needless to say, every one lost a brother, a father, a wife, a sister, a child, a neighbour or a friend.

Across the world, millions of people made donations to help those whose lives had suddenly come undone by the very elements of nature. Money, which could never bring back loved ones, permitted in some measure, normal life to reclaim itself

more quickly. On the ground, most of the international and national organisations tried to respond to the urgent needs that emerged in the humanitarian crisis. Many launched their projects more or less in isolation; the NGOs were called upon to act and given contracts and the jobs were done. Unfortunately good motivations do not provide sufficient insurance against making mistakes.

In Kameshwaram, for instance, there is a fish market at a corner of the beach far far away from the edge of the sea. Absolutely empty of fishermen or anyone else for that matter, it was never used and today it has reached such a state of dilapidation as to have become unusable. The wives of the fishermen returning to this side of the beach, prefer to spread the fish on the sand and clean it up, rather than tire themselves out carrying it to a covered market place too far away. A few metres to the side, there is a little park for children, with the usual swings and see-saws as we see in the towns. Today they lie rusted and in disarray. That's because nobody asked the children of Kameshwaram what they wanted. Though the kids may like to swing, the local passion is not see-saw but cricket. From 4 PM in the evening, the beach and fields resonate with thrill like a stadium on the day of a big match.

The fossils left by the do-gooders are there for all to see. The question that hits my mind and spirit again and again is: Why? Why did all this waste happen? The postulate of waste is hard to accept and yet its evidence speaks for itself. Very simply because emergency aid is targeted to satisfy immediate and essential needs for food, clothing and shelter.....but development is something that cannot be conceived and planned in a hurry or with the regard of a foreigner or even a stranger.

Fish market place financed by project FIR



Thus, it is not surprising that our project succeeded, because we had as our partner Mr.Subburaman of SCOPE. Being a Tamil, with an intimate knowledge of local culture, it was possible for him to understand the parameters of the situation and to respond to needs with solutions adapted to local technical constraints and socio-cultural norms.

The fish market whose construction was financed by project FIR is consequently a big success (in contrast to the other one), so much so that it is now necessary to think about its possible extension. The solar drier is now in place, the first round of training has been given, the ladies groups can start using it soon, 100 toilets have been finished, all are not being used in the most optimal manner, the women adopting it much more enthusiastically than the men, but the process is long and the efforts continue. SCOPE's method is well adapted to the local context: trial, discussion, correction, innovation, new round of trials...etc. These methods could seem slow or unscientific, but actually this is the efficient way to construct and realize socio-technical innovations involving the local population in every step, such that over time optimal functioning is arrived at.

At the risk of disappointing some of you, it must be noted that « Association Un-Ami » and « FINT » are terms unknown to the locals, or to be more precise, the villagers associate certain people to toilets rather than institutions. Thus, Mr.Subburaman is known, Shyama is known and so are we, but FINT and even SCOPE are not. But then, I don't think that's what we expect anyway when we make a donation. One thing is sure for me and it's a fact that needs to be known more abroad, India as many other countries, is absolutely capable of responding and finding solutions to its myriad problems. There is a resource constraint, and therefore a more equitable distribution of world riches and riches within India, are necessary to be able to mobilize the resources to invest in large scale implementation. Clearly, with such investment, India will trace its path to development with dignity, respecting its people, its cultures, and its environment.

Antonin



Rajeswari and her children in front of Eco-San toilets