

DIVI TALUK:

The cyclone-ravaged people smile again

By Harji Malik

WELL over one year after the cyclone and tidal wave transformed Divi Taluk in Krishna District of Andhra Pradesh into a landscape of death and devastation, nature and men have, together, achieved a near miracle. For today the countryside and the people have again come back to life.

Roads, empty of life, even two months after the disaster, carry a constant flow of people going about their business. And the canals, the water lifeline of this delta area, which were still clogged with rotting vegetation and broken trees in January, their banks covered with a heavy deposit of ashes for mile after mile where the dead, human and animal, had been buried, once again run clear and full, the vast cremation ground clothed with fresh vegetation.

The thousands of tattered, withered palm fronds, killed by wind and water, sport fresh green crowns, the paddy fields, which were a desolate expanse blackened by salt and silt, are a sea of green ripening into gold. Fishermen are back at their nets, and farmers are preparing for a rich harvest. And, yet less than a year ago, in January, they had despaired that the land would not yield for months, that with boats and nets gone there would be no fishing in Divi this season.

How did the "miracle" happen? B. Sitaram Swamy, village munsiff of Mandapakala in the heart of Divi, has his own way of explaining. He lost everything when the tidal wave hit his brick home on the edge of the village, totally demolishing it, sweeping away all that he possessed. When he saw the great wall of water rushing across his fields, Sitaram ran for his life to the Panchayat Garh, the only "pucca" building in the village. About 80 persons were drowned there when the water entered, but he was among those saved. His seven year old son was swept out of his arms, and he lost his wife and both the parents.

Mandapakala had a high death toll, 684 persons from 534 households. But even here, a year later, although the

signs of destruction remain a grim reminder, the village shocked into apathy as were so many others, is alive again, and humming with activity. The CARE houses of palmyra leaves on bamboo frames, roofed with asbestos sheets, which came up almost immediately after relief work started, now have a weathered look.

Sitaram still lives in his temporary home. In time, he plans to build a four-room RCC house on the foundations of his old home. A year ago, after he and his brothers had salvaged only 50 bags of rice from their 16 acres of the tidal-wave ruined crop, he had no such hopes. The normal yield is 15 to 20 bags per acre (each bag weighs 75 kgs.) With the land covered with a deposit of salt and silt, with farm implements lost, how would they be able to cultivate this land at all?

Agricultural extension workers and a specialist from the Diva Seema Social Service Society, (DSSS) which has done fine work in the Divi area, supplied the answer. With their advice Sitaram leached every field six to 10 times. In most parts of Divi the State Government carried out two canal water leachings, but farmers augmented this with their own efforts. As advised, Sitaram also used more fertiliser than normal. The Intensive Manuring Scheme which gives loans in the form of fertiliser to farmers has played an important role in agricultural rehabilitation. The land reclamation required above-normal doses of fertiliser which the hard-hit farmers would not have been able to buy.

Ploughing posed a major problem for Divi farmers who had lost animals as well as implements. Although the Government had announced a programme of replacing livestock at subsidised rates plus compensation as far back as January, this scheme has been slow to get off the ground and is speeding up only now. But unless the land was ploughed in time there would be no sowing for Sitaram and his fellow cultivators. Again, the DSSS stepped in with timely assistance. It acquired ten tractors for hiring out to farmers. So Sitaram was able to sow his seed, bought with the help of bank loans, in time.



The water tank in Zinkapalem is clean and full again. The evening ritual is carried out as the women carry home the water.

Other farmers hired bullocks and ploughs from more fortunate neighbours. And, somehow, all through the tidal wave and cyclone hit areas, except in the worst affected parts, the paddy was planted.

Sitaram expects to get his normal yields from the luxuriant green fields which are his promise for the future. He has remarried, a young woman from a nearby village. Without a wife there would be no one to look after his three sons, the eldest 14 years old, or his household. He needs help to care for his livestock—he lost 10 head, but hopes to replace them soon—and to help him with the farm work. Many men and women have remarried in Krishna for similar reasons. Widows have married widowers, for as Sitaram says, nothing can compensate for the loss of human life. Life must go on for those who survived.

In some ways, life in Mandapakala and other villages has changed from the pre-tidal wave days. The medical services started by volunteer medical teams in this village right after the disaster have now become a permanent feature. A daily clinic run by the DSSS, has established another one in the village of Kammanamolu a few kilometres away, bringing medical attention to the very homes of the villagers, something unheard of before. (Social services in the Divi taluk unfortunately are almost nil, even now after the disaster.)

Another important long-term development for Mandapakala is the newly built road winding through the fields to Chintakota, three kilometres away. A short distance but an important

part of the extensive road network undertaken by the administration to link up all villages in Krishna District with the main roads, this new road represents the Government's pledge that last year's tragedy will not recur. A year ago emergency relief could not reach many communities for several days because there were no roads, not even jeepable tracks.

All over Divi the landscape is changing, for entire villages are being rebuilt and the indigenous mud and thatch houses being replaced in these by RCC structures. Voluntary organisations are engaged in this work, with the State Government contributing Rs. 2500 for each home. In Mandapakala there will soon be a cyclone relief shelter, a gift from the Thirumala Tirupati Devasthanams.

Some criticism has been voiced about the worth of such shelters. But Sitaram and others who have saved themselves or saw others being saved in the handful of "pucca" buildings in the delta, will not question their usefulness. A chain of such shelters, again being constructed by voluntary organisations, with the Government giving Rs. 50,000 for each building, will run along the entire coast. In normal times it is hoped that these will act as community centres for social services.

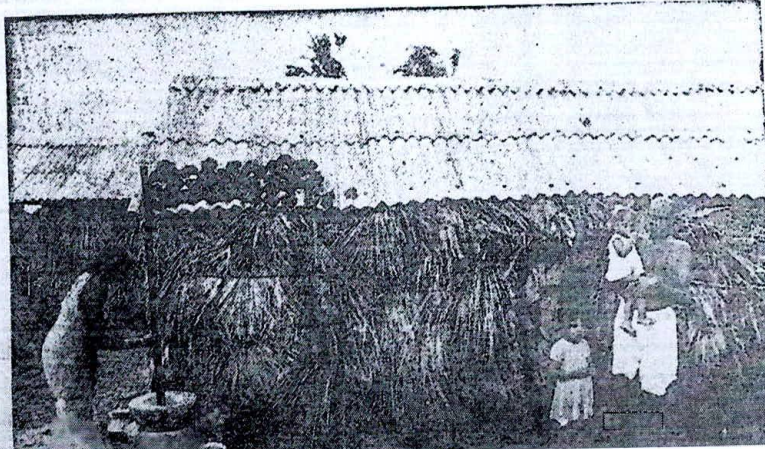
The basic explanation for the Divi miracle is that the economic life of the fishing and farming communities, which came to sudden stop last November, has been restored in an incredibly short time. Sitaram's story is one of thousands of such stories. And the little fishing village of Zinkapalem

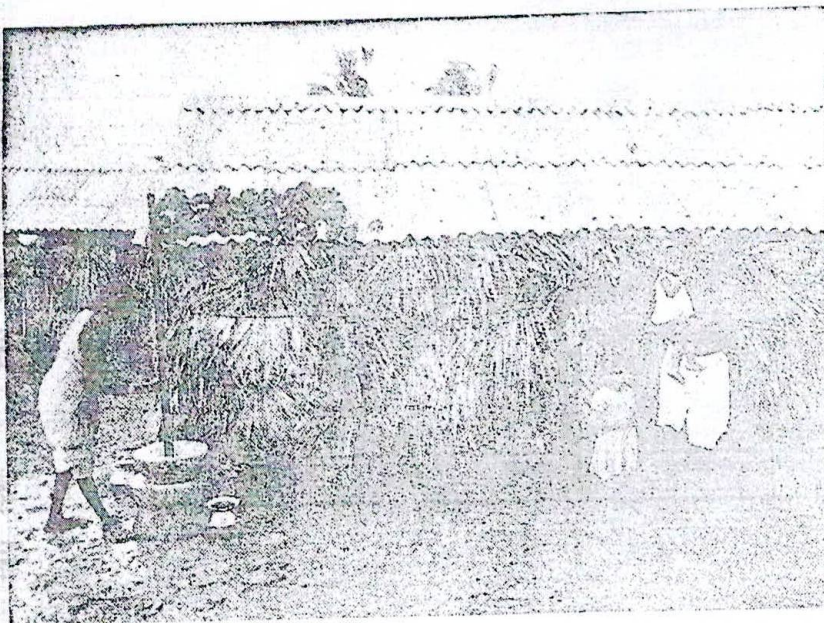
of the population being very poor, only three were serviceable after repairs. Nets had all been swept away, along with fishing tackle. The disaster occurred when the best of the fishing season lay ahead, and with no hope of replacing boats or expensive equipment, everything they possessed swept away and their fields covered with salt, the homeless families of Zinkapalem wondered how they would survive.

One year later, Zinkapalem looks as if the tidal wave had never been. All its 73 houses have been rebuilt in the traditional circular design which has proved that it can survive coastal disaster. Having been encouraged by housing experts of an international relief programme, the same design, with a few minor modifications, has been recommended for Divi and similar conditions. The RCC houses and cyclone relief shelter of an octagonal design being put up as part of the Tata Relief Committee's rehabilitation programme follow basically the same principle.

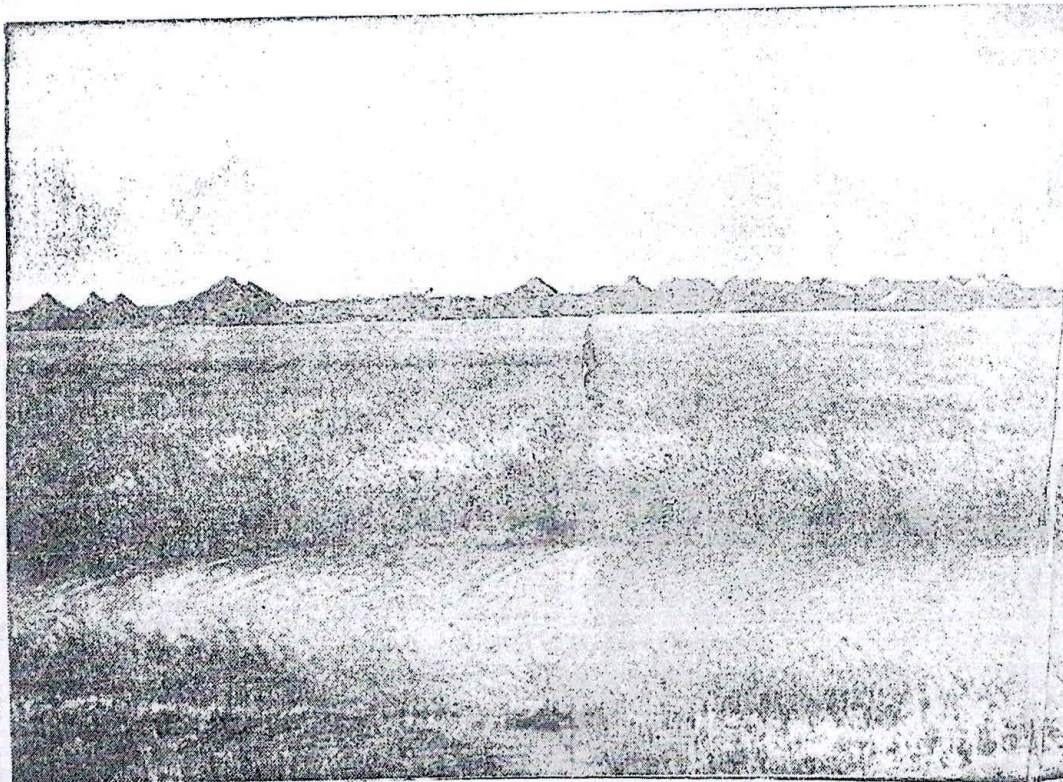
As in Zinkapalem, Golamunda, another village on the same island, fishermen worked hard on their homes, helped clear up irrigation ditches and build the water tanks. They were assisted by a small group of young volunteer workers who urged them to stand on their own feet and not wait for relief which was slow to come. These and other fishing villages which can be reached only by boat and on foot. The young volunteers did their bit by helping villagers to obtain rations and other essentials.

One sees few possessions in Zinkapalem houses, for to replace all that was lost is not





Life is back to normal for Venkatasubharao and his family. His CARE house is now a year old. His daughter-in-law pounds rice for specialities.



Zinkapalem village has been completely rebuilt and the paddy fields, caked over with a crust of salt only one year ago, are yielding a fine crop for this harvest.

buting Rs. 2500 for each home. In Mandapakala there will soon be a cyclone relief shelter, a gift from the Thirumala Tirupati Devasthanams.

Some criticism has been voiced about the worth of such shelters. But Sitaram and others who have saved themselves, or saw others being saved in the handful of "pucca" buildings in the delta, will not question their usefulness. A chain of such shelters, again being constructed by voluntary organisations, with the Government giving Rs. 50,000 for each building, will run along the entire coast. In normal times it is hoped that these will act as community centres for social services.

The basic explanation for the Divi miracle is that the economic life of the fishing and farming communities, which came to sudden stop last November, has been restored in an incredibly short time. Sitaram's story is one of thousands of such stories. And the little fishing village of Zinkapalem represents the experience of many fishing communities. The tidal wave flattened all but a few houses in Zinkapalem. But of some happy chance, whereas in many villages like Mandapakala, the death toll was tragically high, only nine lives were lost in Zinkapalem.

But of the 39 boats, all but them non-mechanized boats

constructed by housing officers as an international relief programme, the same design, with a few minor modifications, has been recommended for Divi and similar conditions. The RCG houses and cyclone relief shelter of an octagonal design being put up as part of the Tata Relief Committee's rehabilitation programme follow basically the same principle.

As in Zinkapalem, Golaman-da another village on the same island, fishermen worked hard on their homes, helped clear up irrigation ditches and rebuild the water tanks. They were assisted by a small group of young volunteer workers who urged them to stand on their own feet and not wait for relief which was slow to come. These and other fishing villages which can be reached only by boat and on foot. The young volunteers did their bit by helping villagers to obtain rations and other essentials.

One sees few possessions in Zinkapalem houses, for to replace all that was lost is not possible so soon. The important thing is that fishing is in full swing and the catch will be as good as it once was. Just like the farmers in Krishna who attend to various things, like housebuilding, "after the harvest," the fishermen also are waiting for the end of the season.

Up to October, this year the local administration says that it has distributed 1132 boats in Krishna District. In Zinkapalem, of the 36 boats lost, 30 have been replaced so far by the Government on the basis of long term loans and a 50 per cent subsidy. (In areas affected only by the cyclone the subsidy is 25 per cent.) Boats, nets, equipment have all been replaced through the efforts of the State Government and volunteer agencies.

All those who are responsible for the rehabilitation of the district have done a fantastic job. The Government, local administrators, volunteer agencies all share the credit, but without the will to survive of hundreds of thousands of men and women who less than a year ago seemed numb with shock, without a sense of purpose or direction, having lost not only material possessions but also those who were of their own blood and flesh. Krishna District would not be what it is today. The miracle of Divi is a tribute to human courage and endurance and faith.

In January, two months after the disaster, there were tragically few babes in arms in the villages. The loss of life in children was apallingly high. Today that familar and beautiful sight is again taken for granted, as gentle hands cradle infants with the protection only a mother gives. This along with the lush green of the paddy, and the shimmer of fish in nets is the promise of the future for the people of Krishna.

(Photographs by T. S. Nagarajan)