

REMINISCENCES OF A VOLUNTEER

- SOUTMYA KUMAR.

The second twelve members team from Bangalore left on 31st October 1993 to Nandurga, where the CHAI-SANGHI Relief camp has its base. We reached this 'B' category disaster affected area around 6.30 P.M. on 1st November 1993.

Well, it was a very friendly reception by Bro.Varghese, the Co-ordinator of the relief activities, and there was, Chander, the 'Sanitation-general' too, eager to show the toilets and bathrooms he planned along with Mr. Nagaraj of HAL. After a hot dinner, we were assigned to different groups, in the assigned to different groups, in the regular 9.00 P.M. gettogether of the base camp volunteers. (Another camp had been set up at Sarani, a couple of kilometers away from Nandurga) But I was in an uncertain position. In suspended animation. Bro.Varghese was a bit puzzled about where to put this only non-medical person from the second Bangalore team. Trying to get to know other volunteers was the main side activity going all the time since our arrival. So the first couple of hours were spent of our first evening.

Second day started with a cold bath and I was assigned to one of three mobile medical teams, 'Team-C'. My group mates were, Dr. Shirely, Ms. Anita, Ms. Lavina and Sr.Pauline. Dr. Jose, Brs. Hermil, Lalit, and Francis stayed with us for a couple of days and left. We were given 3 villages to cover: Hasalgaon, Sankral and Wadi.

These three villages are mainly inhabited by the Maratha cast people; predominantly land holders and SCs from the labour class. A small minority of Muslims are also found. But a very friendly and warm atmosphere greeted us. Courtesy and amiableness welcomes the strangers.

Our first work day was reserved to Sankral, about 6 or 7 Kms. from Nandurga. A small village with about 65 houses, and as soon as the OPD began, there was a virtual believe of patients before the tent which we had temporarily occupied with our Hindi and very meagre Marathi, we were supposed to interact with the people. We managed somehow, picking up Marathi terms for common ailments and also routine questions like what's your name, age etc. Definitely much of our time was spent in trying to communicate with the people, - to make ourselves understandable and also to understand them. It was a very clear process of learning, in an enthusiastic way to all the group members. Perhaps it was this first day enthusiasm and eagerness which left every one cheerful by the end of the day despite the fatigue of constant talk. Sadly, none of us tried to be friend the people, or take some step towards it.

The second and third day saw us continuing our OPD sessions. But the change of thrust and priority was evidently in the air. Dr. Aravind Kasturi. Our team leader was actively guiding the team's approach away from the then dominant curative approach. The minority areas became health education, collaborating with the health authorities on under-5 immunisation ANC to a little extent, attention for the care of mentally traumatised people and assessing the available educational facilities.

So began the house to house under-5 immunisation survey, at Hasalgaon, with four of us involved in it-Dr. Jose, Ms. Lavina, Ms. Anita and myself. With an ebullient spirit, we decided to conduct health check up for under-5 children also, along with collecting information on immunisation status. The fervour was definitely confined to the first day itself. After about eight hours of work, we were able to cover just 30 children, and the village had more than 400 families! Survey became just an exercise of collecting data on immunisation status.

Sadly, atleast two other organisations had conducted surveys, (one on DDT coverage, other not known) and people were vocally unhappy about us asking the same questions, despite our best of efforts to explain the purpose of survey. I was scolded by a girl about 10-12 years age for asking what she called as useless questions again and again. Language was the main problem. Our Hindi and broken Marathi forced us to use ten words at the place of one. It left us dry and in the fag end, every member of our team felt bored, too bored. Members joined our group and left. But the survey seemed not to end. One good thing, perhaps, of this too much of talk with the people was that we became close, together. Especially in the villages of Sankral and Wadi, where we were able to spend more time than at the big settlement Hasalgaon. People enjoyed correcting our Marathi and smile aloud. Girl children and their mothers were very insistent that their girl child should get out to Bangalore. And unless specifically asked girl children were not mentioned at all while giving data.

Week or so after, every one of us was happy. We were able to cover each and every house, draw the maps of each village. And we were able to provide some basic data about the educational facilities available like, - infrastructure, attendance status, the urgent needs etc. Since schools were focus of distribution of relief materials- including full packets of 'Uncle chips' everyday, in a predictable manner, attendance of children to schools especially of girl children above 10-12 years range had shot up. We could find unused UK or USA manufactured soaps kept in houses for its fragrance and heard about the distribution of Johnson & Johnson baby lotion too. People knew not what to do with the latter. As Dr. Aravind narrated, a villager wanted to know whether to take J&J lotion with water or just plainly!

And then came the big news. We had pre-supposed that measles inoculation have been given on the thigh. But in a frustrating way, it was on the shoulders! All our data went into awry. We ended up providing only general information about the immunisation status.

Immunisation sessions along with ANC were planned. The idea was that volunteers should act as facilitators and motivators and leave the actual work of immunising to the health authorities. There was stiff resistance from the local ANMs. They were simply not ready to consider the issue seriously because, all of a sudden they could not demand vaccination supplies for children numbering more than a 100 in each village. The idea of issuing immunisation cards was also not well received. It was only the DHO who was interested. In spite of giving prior information about the approximate number of vaccines needed, only a few were brought. Added to this, most of the children had left to their grandparents' on account of Diwali. Perhaps one of the mistakes we made was that we had not taken the local health volunteers into confidence before starting our programme.

The whole experience was frustrating. We were not ready to pull ourselves and compile the data we had collected. Yet we did it for we were returning. Last minute work was done and the files were submitted.

On 12th November 1993, we had our funniest and horrifying experiences. Around 7 P.M. there was mild tremour, which lasted for 5/6 seconds. There was much excitement and feeling of achievement in every one of the Bangalore team, for a couple of seconds. It was only when we heard the sharp cries of children and women, saw the fearful faces of men we realised our folly. People were scared to death. Two aged persons died out of shock at the Nandurga Village. And they were expecting another Sept-30 on that night. Most of the villagers spent a sleepless night, like us, the volunteers. We visited the villages in which we worked and talked to them. There were no damages. But fear was thick.

And then the penultimate day gave a couple of poignant hours to us. We wanted to visit the villages, say good bye and return back in an hour or so. It became a whole day trip. Breaking the common rule of not preparing any sweets on Diwali day, a couple of persons from Sankral wanted us to join them in lunch. We had to choose one. A sumptuous one. And then at Wadi our evening tiffin. Everyone gathered to say good bye to us. A touching experience. The people, policeman, the children...

On 14th November 1993 the second Bangalore team, now consisting of seven members left Nandurga to Bangalore with both sadness and happiness we moved. Bidding good bye to Bro.Varghese, Bro. Sunil, and our driver Magbool we took the bus to Sholapur from Omerga.

With the grisly memories of still stinking Killari and Mangrol, the tearful faces of people of Nandurga, Wadi, Sankral and Hasalgan, the sweet memories of the hospitality of Bro.Varghese, all the new friends whom we met, and the sweetest tea offered by the sweet villagers, "the Hyderabad-Bangalore team" returned back.

So, the disaster. The relief. The experience. I returned with a much more assured heart that the caste and religious barriers are our own creations. With a new understanding that when we treat others as humanbeings, not as categories of people like villagers or city dwellers, and when we are sincere in our efforts definitely our work will pay. Perhaps the greatest service one can do to one's society is to be true to oneself, causing no harm to any one and try to change oneself.

What else? Ah! the indelible scene of a solitary reddish rose blooming in all its beauty amidst the reeky ruins and rubbles of Mangrol- heralding a new life for every one of us.