

Tamil Nadu

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She trudged through tsunami-hit villages to help rebuild them

Deepa H Ramakrishnan

Shyama V. Ramani sees the tsunami as a good opportunity to build afresh



MAKING A DIFFERENCE: Taking away the Ts from Tsunami, Shyama V. Ramani. — Photo: T. Singaravelou

PONDICHERRY: "If I become Prime Minister of India I will build toilets for the people." This was Shyama V. Ramani's dream, as a student in a school in Delhi, some 30 years ago. Although she has not yet achieved her first dream,

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she has made the second part come true. Shyama, who is in the French Research Service and has specialised in the economics of innovation, says she has always wanted to do developmental work.

Every few months, for the past one-and-a-half years, Shyama has trudged through three tsunami-battered villages near Pondicherry and Nagapattinam, building toilets, fishing auction yards and persuading people to pitch in.

With the help of Un-Ami, or, Friends of the Needy, a volunteer body she founded after the killer waves roared through the region, she has visited the villages of Chinna Mudaliarchavady and Periya Mudaliarchavady (PMC) and Kameshwaram in Nagapattinam, selling her model for rehabilitation. Unlike rehabilitation packages of many other groups, the one touted by Shyama has a catch: the beneficiaries have to repay in some way.

Shyama was on a visit to the villages recently and *The Hindu* spoke to her.

"In PMC, though the project started in January 2005, it took a year for the people and the NGOs (FEED and SCOPE) to get a moral understanding of reciprocity," says Shyama, who earned a doctorate in economics. "But, in the end we did. We got a written agreement from the headmaster. We are repairing the toilets in the school, at a cost of Rs.2 lakh. The toilets had been shut down after being used for five years because nobody would clean them.

"We will also open new toilets that will be quasi eco-sanitary (the solid and liquid wastes are separated). The water will be recycled and used for the school garden. Under the deal, the staff and students have to clean and maintain the toilets for five years. We will provide the gloves and boots and brooms for the first two years. Then they will have to find an auto mechanism to fund the gloves and boots."

In Kameshwaram, near Nagapattinam, a fish auction yard has been built, which has boosted the income of fishermen. In return, they have built a roof over the yard and provided employment to a widow. "Earlier, they used to lose out on 10 to 15 percent of the price because the fish would fall on the sand. We have also taken young girls, who are normally not let out of their homes, on day trips. Two French students will stay among them to see what kind of activities they can be involved in," she says.

Shyama sees the tsunami — she calls it creative destruction in line with Shaivaite philosophy — as an opportunity to build anew. "It was an opportunity for me to do academic work, extra professional work and link the two and do something for India in the process. We plan to do a study using French students as to what kind of garbage is generated, how it can be managed and the study will be given to the Tamil Nadu Government."

As an economist, Shyama has looked at the evolution of the biotechnology sector in various countries, and especially in India. She, along with her students, has created a firm, Technometrix, at the suggestion of the European Union to give indicators that help decide where and with whom to invest in emerging sectors like biotechnology or nanotechnology.

Shyama's family has been a great support during the past 18 months, spending every evening and weekend connecting with contributors and NGOs. She says it would not have happened without the support of her family in France and India. "My children Divya (16) and Vivek (13), my husband Jean Francois-Claver, who is responsible for the operations of three units of a Franco-Canadian MNC in France, my mother-in-law Odette Claver, my mother and even my maid at home helped during the project."

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