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In the Wake of a Cyclone

A first hand account of relief efforts by BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha sadhus in villages rampaged by the calamitous storm that struck Orissa

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Nature's devastating wrath overwhelmed Orissa, ripping the state apart on October 29, 1999. On that nightmarish day, a savaging cyclone emerged from the Bay of Bengal. With winds of up to 300 kilometers per hour and 30-foot-high waves, it thrashed and battered the state for more than 36 hours. Veering back to sea, it left behind a trail of untold death and destruction--the worst in the history of India.

Over 20,000 people and 700,000 cattle died, 90 million trees were uprooted or damaged, 20 million people were made homeless, five million farmers had 1.2 million hectares of standing crop destroyed. With telephone and electric lines destroyed, roads washed out and rail tracks wrenched and upturned, the extent of the damage was still unclear after two days. The media telecasted horrific video footage and photographs of the devastation. With such widespread damage, where does one begin to help?

His Holiness Pramukh Swami Maharaj, head of BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha was residing at Junagadh, in Gujarat, when he heard about the cyclone. He phoned his Calcutta center, but their information was incomplete. He instructed Sadhu Purushottamjivandas, administrator of the Calcutta BAPS Swaminarayan Mandir, to set up a relief team consisting of sadhus and volunteers from Calcutta and Orissa to reach Orissa immediately with primary aid.

The problem was that only one train was operating from Calcutta. That, too, only went as far as the state border. Beyond that, 100 kilometers of rail lay tangled. Eighty percent of roads leading into Cuttack were flooded, and those that were useable had village folks looting and robbing all the aid that was sent. Despite the risks and odds of reaching the victims, BAPS sadhus and volunteers headed out by road with food, clothes, blankets, first aid emergency medicines--and hopes and prayers.

Meanwhile, India's government sent relief with the armed forces, navy and air force. In four days, the air force had carried 750 tons of material, which is hailed as "an unprecedented feat in the history of aviation." Other government agencies and NGOs also started for Orissa. Honorable Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh, Chandrababu Naidu, sent a special team of engineers to repair the entire telecommunication system. The Gujarat government sent 133 doctors and a trainload of supplies. Large and small NGOs, like the Bharat Seva Sangh, RSS, Ananda Marga and the Ramakrishna Mission, were all quick to volunteer help. Sant Baba Man Singhji of Pehowa Wala sent 500 trucks of relief aid with 230 Sikh volunteers from Haryana. Foreign agencies like

UNICEF provided plastic tarpaulins. There was so much aid and so many organizations involved, the state government didn't know how to handle it.

The 280-strong sadhu team reached Cuttack after 36 hours and a lot of detours. The situation was grave, and it proved extremely difficult just to decide where one should start. Officials pointed in different directions and that, too, with uncertainty. It was quickly decided that we should conduct our own search. Pitambar Jain, a forest officer living in Cuttack, related his stories about the winds and flooding. His family lived in the village of Chakulia, situated in the Erasama Block of the district of Jagatsinghpur. On that fateful night, a 30-foot-high wall of ocean water had smashed the village and surroundings, flooding the area for 24 hours with 18 feet of water. One must note that Chakulia is 6.5 kilometers from the coast!

Enough said. The BAPS team headed straight for Erasama Block. It was an area that the army had not yet entered. Chakulia is one of 15 small villages in the Badaipur region. BAPS was the first relief organization to reach here. People hadn't eaten for five days, and there was still three feet of water in the lowlands, where one could view corpses and carcasses floating.

After distributing supplies, the Sanstha remained in the area for three months, extending its help to 84 villages in the district in which more than 61,000 individuals found relief. Other organizations, seeing the dedication, devotion and determination of the sadhus and volunteers, simply handed

over their supplies to the Sanstha for distribution. Baba Man Singhji entrusted some 70 truckloads to the Sanstha. When he visited the area, he commented, "Your organization is massive. Every volunteer is dedicated, disciplined and devoted to the cause. Every sadhu and volunteer is educated. Some are doctors and engineers. If it wasn't for your organization, we would not have been able to distribute our materials here."

In the first three months, BAPS with 280 volunteers distributed 100,395 kg of food supplies, Rs.2.8 million worth of medicines and disinfectant powder, 66,270 household items, 14,485 liters of kerosene and 43 large trucks of used and new clothes. The Sanstha also performed 160 cremations for the dead and burials for 500 cattle carcasses.

Beginning in 2000, Pramukh Swami instructed the sadhus and volunteers to adopt villages for total reconstruction and rehabilitation. Out of Erasama's 200 villages, 35 had been completely wiped out, with no shelter or means of livelihood. Many organizations had begun to leave, as rehabilitation work was not easy. BAPS concentrated on long-term rehabilitation of the neediest and most vulnerable in Erasama by rebuilding homes and schools. Under the Sanstha's officially sanctioned program, two villages, Chakulia and Bada Billari, were adopted. Sanstha sadhus and engineers, led by Sadhu Purushottamjivandas, Sadhu Purnaprakashdas and Sanjay Kacha, have begun constructing 100 cyclone-proof houses, measuring 16 feet square with kitchen and bathroom. Each house has been designed using solid cement bricks made on site to withstand future cyclones of similar magnitudes. The Sanstha plans to adopt two more villages in the near future.

Homes are not all that are on the agenda. More than 20,000 schools were destroyed or damaged by the cyclone, so the Sanstha has already started construction of two schools and repairs to eleven more in the district. To help farming families to rebuild their livelihoods, the Sanstha has provided two tractors with a plough and trailer, one power tiller and four water pumps. To help compensate for the trees damaged during the cyclone, the Sanstha will plant 450 coconut trees in Chakulia alone.

Today, by the grace of Bhagwan Swaminarayan and the blessing of Param Pujya Pramukh Swami Maharaj, work in Orissa is proceeding with great speed. Those who come to the District Collector's office in Jagatsinghpur hear only one thing from the Collector: "If you want to know how one should serve mankind, then go and see the Swaminarayan sadhus serving in Chakulia."

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Sadhu Divyamurtidas was witness to the cyclone's ravage and involved in the relief work.