

TSUNAMIKA: Life on Strings

ANURUPA ROY

She is a symbol, a living symbol with her own life.

As her name suggests, she is a child of tsunami;
the tsunami that changed the lives of millions.
She is the memory of Tsunami...

She has been hand-made by women,
The women who live by the ocean,
The women whose lives changed forever after the tsunami,
The women who are exploring a new way of living,
The women who are empowering themselves.
Tsunamika is an expression of their creative fire;
Through Tsunamika they enter a new & wider world.

She is made out of bits and pieces of cloth
Left over from other works;
Made from what is known as waste.
There is nothing called waste in Nature,
Everything has its creative role.
Everything can be living & beautiful,
As Tsunamika is ...

She is a living message,
A message of a new way of living
In which Life is respected.
A message of the Oneness of Life
In which love has a place.
A message of the sacredness of life
In which we can celebrate, together.

And life can be very simple
Like Tsunamika is.
She is our beloved,
She has touched many lives.
Now, she is here.
With you!

Tsunamika
Born in Auroville

(By Manoj Pavitrán, Upasna and Auroville Tsunami Relief Work Livelihood Project)



Holding the Earth and the Sky

The whole APPAN Tsunami project for our team started with a chance meeting on the internet with an activist group in Auroville that shared our desire to meet and work with lives which had been affected by the Tsunami wave that hit the southern coast of India along with Indonesia, Sri Lanka and Thailand. Shanta Serbjeet Singh had first contacted Puran Bhat, Rajasthani Puppeteer and this writer, at the beginning of 2005. We had a couple of preliminary meetings and exchange of ideas and discussed the formation of a group of artistes who could work in the Tsunami affected areas of India—the Andaman Islands and the Southern coast of India. We also discussed the possibility of such workshops in Sri Lanka and Indonesia. The project took almost seven months to materialize, since the first meeting. Then, suddenly there was a phone call from a friend, Samreen Farooqui, who is a film maker. She had been chatting online and had come across the Tsunamika website. The website talked of a project called “Tsunamika” which was being run by a group of fashion designers of an organization called *Upasna*, based in Auroville, Pondicherry. The project had started soon after the Tsunami waves hit the coast of Tamil Nadu in the south eastern coastal region of India. People from the villages of Pondicherry district had run for shelter to Auroville.

Upasna decided to start their own relief measures for these villagers. Most of the villages had lost their fishing boats and their livelihoods. Some lives had also been lost even though the loss was not as high as in Nagapattinam in Tamil Nadu. *Upasna* decided to adopt six villages in Pondicherry area and train the women folk to have certain other skills, which could generate income. As designers they naturally turned to handicrafts. When they started interacting with the fishermen, they found out that these men and women did not remember any of their traditional folk arts and crafts. Most of the men were fishermen and women either sold the fish in the market or were housewives. They did not know how to stitch or weave. So *Upasna* began the task of teaching them how to make dolls using residual material from their studio, like cloth, bits of wool, thread etc. The process of first learning to make dolls on one end and actually mass manufacturing them on the other took about six months. These dolls were then packed by *Upasna* and sent to all the supporters of the project who in turn distributed it further. Over the last few months, the project has spread quite wide and dolls are being used as utility goods like bookmarks, pins, badges, hair clips etc.

When this Tsunamika group found out about APPAN and puppetry in Delhi they were very excited to have us over at Auroville to do a workshop with the women in order to explore further possibilities with the dolls.

Shubha Patvardhan and Miriam, the members of other APPAN group, reached Auroville a few days before us and did a survey. Their main conclusion was that this area had not been as badly affected by the Tsunami as others and most of the experiences of loss were linked mainly to loss of livelihood and property. We went to Auroville with this knowledge.

Our preparation before the workshop was mainly planning some exercises with storytelling involving the sea, waves and the Tsunami. Also we intended to use the Tsunamika doll in our interaction. We also purchased raw materials for making puppets with the fishing women. Samreen Farooqui and Shabani Hasan Walia who had been setting up our contact with

Upasna Designs and the Tsunami Project were to accompany us as the documentation team of the project.

The Workshop

Upasna design team gave us a presentation and showed us a short film, which had been made on the project. They also explained how the entire structure of the Tsunami project worked. There were 6 villages in the project. The women of the villages would gather together once a week. They would be given supplies like needle and thread, strips of cloth etc. These women used rags to make tiny dolls. The face of the doll is made of stuffed cloth. The dolls are made in 3 sizes ranging from 1 and a half inches to 3 inches. Each village had two women leaders who co-ordinated the process of making and delivering them to the studio. The most unique feature of the Tsunami project is that the dolls are not sold but distributed as gifts. The Tsunami dolls have now reached 35 countries across the globe. Volunteers have made websites, made donations and set up network links.

The women were provided raw materials by *Upasna* and then paid for each doll that was made. The funding was provided by Concern India. The project was at a point where each woman was earning Rs. 1000–1500 per month through Tsunamika alone. Most importantly we found that this financial independence had led to tremendous change in the social dynamics in these five villages. We could only see the consequences of the Tsunami project and unfortunately had very little idea of what had happened a year earlier to be able to compare situations.

After our interaction with the *Upasna* team we went to the villages to meet the women. We went to Nadukuppam where our workshop was to be held. We met at the village temple courtyard. Our workshops included 40–45 women from two villages, Nadukuppam and a neighbouring village. Along with Puran Bhatt, this writer performed a short demonstration with our own puppets and explained what we did. They seemed quite taken by the puppets. Soon the word spread through the village and there was a sea of children who had arrived to see and inspect the puppets. Though these people had not been affected directly in the sense of loss of lives, they had had property loss but most importantly they had had a complete loss of livelihood. Now that their boats etc. were back they seemed quite unaffected by everything. But in the following days, through intensive interaction, we discovered that there was more than what met the eye in the first meeting.

The next day we met post lunch in the courtyard of Nadukuppam's village temple. We began by talking about the Tsunami and Tsunami and asked them how Tsunami had affected their lives.

Almost everyone came up with the same answers. Most women said it had brought them extra livelihood. Some said it was a blessing after the Tsunami because they had no fishing boats, thus no fish, no work and all they did all day was to sleep or watch TV. Some women said that before the Tsunami project they did not know most of the women in the village. Not anymore.

Now, these women came out once a week to the courtyard, all dressed up and chatted with each other, as they created Tsunamika. The women had found a space for interaction and exchange. They had also found a reason to come out of their homes, not for household chores but for a purpose, which included creative leisure. This had boosted their confidence. The most notable aspect of this group was their energy. Another thing that almost all the women said about the Tsunamika project was that it had brought them closer to the outside world because now people like us visited them and their dolls travelled all over the world thus taking a part of them to other places. This became the starting point of the workshop for us.

We decided to tap into the emotional relationship the women had with the Tsunamika doll and built up a story around her. Further, we wanted to explore their relationship with the sea and the Tsunami wave. So over the next 6 days we built up a series of activities, which culminated in a Tsunamika story told with puppets to the entire village.

Activity 1 – We asked these women what they felt for the doll they were making. Who was she? Where had she come from? Was she just a piece of cloth?

Some said they felt she had brought better times so she was like a friend or a helpful relative. One woman said she had three sons and the doll was like the daughter she had always wanted. Slowly relationships were revealed. Making the dolls since the last seven months, beautifying them, dressing them etc the women had grown attached to the symbol but so far, they had not articulated their experiences, either of Tsunami disaster or of the Tsunamika phenomenon, subsequently. Some of them talked of the sea in anger and said it had taken everything away and that they were sometimes fearful when they saw the water rise. One of them pointed out that if the Tsunami wave had not come, Tsunamika would never have entered their lives. She concluded that for anything good to happen sometimes-bad things must precede them. This view was further reflected in the stories the women created.

Activity 2 – We divided the whole group into groups of five and asked them to create stories of who Tsunamika was and where she came from.

One of the stories was that Tsunamika was a young girl who lived deep within the sea; she was alone and had a lonely life. She was depressed and angry. She felt that people should suffer, so she pushed the waves up in anger and came out of the sea. But when she saw the devastation she had created all around, she felt terrible. She asked the fisher folk to forget the Tsunami and promised to make them happy.

Another story said Tsunamika was a sea angel. She came from deep sea to speak to women and change their lives. She saw lazy women and wanted them to change their lives but they would not listen to her voice. So she turned into a big Tsunami wave. If she had been a small wave they would not notice her as waves came to the shore each day. She came to change their lives. The disaster was bad but much good came out of it.

One more story said Tsunamika lived in the sea and wanted to make friends. So she came out of the sea but when she saw the devastation and unhappiness she had caused, she decided to give the fisher folk something back. She gave them work. First the whole village



Face to Face with Tsunamika

became friends, then six villages became friends and then she brought the whole world and the villages together.

Another story spoke of Lord Shiva and Parvati doing the *tandava* dance which caused this natural calamity. So Tsunamika the angel came out to do good work. She was not born from the sea but got her name from it. Tsunamika is a reminder that some good always comes out of bad things. Happiness can be appreciated if suffering is felt.

The most interesting story was where one group said Tsunamika was a sea angel who came to help the fisherwomen. She wanted fisherwomen to do good work, find their own strength and capability. So she became different things to different people-daughter, friend, sister and hope. The fisherwomen made Tsunamika, dressed her and played with her. Tsunamika could not return this love. So she became a puppet that could hug fisherwomen and thank them.

Activity 3 – We picked portions from each group's story and then asked the groups to create their own storyboard.

Each group was given sheets of paper on which they sketched/drew a part of the story. We then collected all the pictures and tried to put them in some order so that a visually continuous story would emerge. This is what emerged.

Tsunamika was a sea angel who lived under the sea but occasionally came up on the waves. She was disappointed to see the lazy fisherwomen. She wanted to talk to them but they would not listen. They were too busy at the marketplace or sleeping or watching TV. So she became a big wave and came to the coast. There was terrible devastation. The people were very unhappy, women were crying. Tsunamika felt terrible. She came to the beach and saw a crying, inconsolable woman and fell in her lap. At that time she was only a ball. The woman stopped crying, picked her up, made clothes for her, decorated her and she became her daughter. She then taught all the other women how to make Tsunamikas. In this way the doll brought back their happiness and took their message all over the world. But Tsunamika could not physically hug them back so she turned into a puppet that could sing and dance with the women and hug them.

Creating Tsunamika Puppets:

Using plastic pipes and rags we taught the women how to make Tsunamika glove puppets. We used small 2-3 inch pieces of pipe to make the neck of the doll. On one end would be the puppets head on the other end the puppeteer could insert her/his finger. The heads were mainly stuffed with white cloth shaped as a ball. Then pieces of black cloth were used to make the puppets' hair and the eyes, nose and mouth were stitched using black thread. The dress was mainly a long piece of cloth gathered at the neck and attached to the base of the head.

The next important and interesting task was to teach these women, how to use the puppets. We created a stage using a clothesline and a sari and gave a demonstration of how the puppet is worn on the hand and how the head and the arms can be moved. Then the women



Making Tsunami puppets



Women at work

were taught how to move the puppets, how they could be made to walk, sit, lie down etc.

The women looked at their storyboards again and with our help translated the visuals to scenes. They also provided their own sound effects for the performance. There was of course much giggling and laughing at the puppet manipulation stage but some of them turned out to be quite good puppeteers.

Having done that, the next stage was teaching these women how to make Tsunamika rod puppets since we felt there was a need to teach them to make slightly larger puppets, that could be more life like. So we used plastic balls and rods. The balls were punctured and a wooden rod was pushed through the hole and fixed with a strong nail. Then we covered the ball in white fabric. After that the process was much the same. We used black *bindis* (ceremonial dots on the forehead) to make eyes and half a red *bindi* to make a smiling mouth. The dress was the same pattern of gathered pieces of large cloth. The head was manipulated with one hand and the other hand of the puppeteer became the puppet hand. The women spent a lot of time decorating these puppets. One lady even put perfume on her Tsunamika puppet!

The women made their own performance and performed for the entire village. At the end of the 6 days the women had prepared a small presentation of the story. We had an audience of about 150-200 people. The husbands and families of the women were a major part of the audience. The children also joined as the women manipulated the puppets, singing and dancing in the performance. So, the process involved not just the women but also their children and their men folk. Thus our workshop turned into a community gathering and eventually a big celebration.

Seeing the talent, patience and gut involvement of these women, it was tough to imagine the courage they had in starting their life all over again. Seeing them, the puppets too smiled!

