

A razed tribal hamlet rises again - in four days!

A few days ago, they lost everything they had. A devastating fire reduced to ashes their huts and all their belongings, including a few goats and countless hens. That was on Saturday, May 24.

Four days later, they have roofs over their heads again, new clothes to wear, and new hearths to cook food, besides much else they had probably not sought. Adding to their stupefaction are a hundred helping hands extended from all sides and a chorus of assurance: 'Don't worry, we are with you!'

Chichpod, a Kolam tribal hamlet of 35 huts in the district, 180 km from Nagpur (about 900 km from Mumbai), was a scene of accidental destruction and monumental resurrection in which commoners, NGOs and the administration joined hands to help the poor rise from the ruins and start a new life.

The hamlet, on a hilly terrain 25 km from Wani and Pandharkawda, two sub district headquarters of Yavatmal on two sides, was engulfed in a fire that started from a kitchen where the woman had put tea on the boil and gone out to fetch firewood.

When she returned to the burning hut that windy afternoon, she didn't have a chance to rush in and pull out her belongings. She alerted other women. They ran out of their homes with their children only to see the fire spread to the adjoining huts on both sides.

With most men out working in the fields and the women realising they didn't have water to douse the fire, they could do little other than watch the devastation. The boys, who didn't even have bicycles, not to speak of telephones, ran two kilometres seeking help.

Help came quickly and in full measure from the newly set up Gram Vikas Prakalp in Mulgavhan nearby. The project run by late Baba Amte's son Vikas aims at empowering the farmers in India's 'suicide capital' (nearly 460 farmers committed suicide in the last two years in this region) to stand up with courage and overcome the four-year agrarian crisis.

Amte's volunteers rushed to Chichpod with a water tanker and buckets to extinguish the fire. Sub divisional officer (SDO) Narendra Fulzele too rushed with fire tenders from Wani but all the huts had been razed by then.

Interns of the Sawangi Meghe Dental College, already in a Rotary International mobile van at Amte's Anandvan project in Warora, 90 km away, sped to the spot and joined the Prakalp volunteers. Two students, with their hands and shirts burnt, continued to douse the flames.

'The inmates of Anandvan (rehabilitation centre for leprosy patients), most of them short of fingers, and their brethren in Mulgavhan, are the living examples of Baba's preaching, not to stretch out arms to seek alms but to engage them in creative labour,' Vikas told IANS from the site.

As if spurred by the gesture of the NGO, college students and the government machinery, all men, women and children of the hamlet came upfront for the fire-fighting operation. Though untrained, they did an excellent job.

Helped by others, they also toiled hard to build the temporary shelters each morning and evening

over the next three days while going out for work during the day.

The Gram Vikas Prakalp volunteers took all 127 inhabitants of the razed hamlet to Mulgavhan and provided food and shelter. They lived there till Wednesday as new temporary shelters were built on their hillock.

Cutting red tape and mobilizing housing material suppliers, the SDO bought tin sheets and other building material for erecting temporary shelters from the contingency funds of Rs.4,800 per family sanctioned by District Collector Sanjay Deshmukh. Other NGOs, local political leaders and social workers did not lag behind.

The Indian Red Cross Society's Wani chapter helped with kits of daily necessities like sparkling new utensils and stoves beside saris, dhotis and kurtas. A social group, Manoj Sharma Sevarth Mitra Mandal, came out with food grains and another one with mattresses, bedspreads and food packets.

While undertaking to construct permanent houses for all 35 families, the Tribal Development Corporation sanctioned Rs.2,000 per family for temporary shelters.

Amte said he would like to construct low cost, permanent houses for nearly all-50 tribal hamlets in the area. 'Their bamboo and mat houses are vulnerable to fire and Chichpod can be repeated anywhere, any time', he said.

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