

'Let disaster come, we are prepared to face it'

A bumpy ride down a muddy undulating dirt track off one of the chaotic arterial roads of the city takes one to the squalid Sriram Nagar Mohallah on the fringes of the Bharat Coking Coal Ltd. (BCCL), a subsidiary of Coal India mines.

The area is no usual mine zone with hutments of the poor. Here, in Ward No. 22, death lurks beneath with an empty stomach of the earth left hollow by years of unscientific mining. It is a habitation where death can come calling any moment in the form of subsidence and suck into it thousands.

Dhanbad falls under the seismic zone III of the earthquake prone areas, and the repercussions of a tremor elsewhere can be devastating in terms of human toll. At any time 30,000 miners work in these mines. So community-level preparedness is essential and that often means rescuing a trapped person with a ladder found in every household.

On a morning in September, people in the area swung into action. Microphones blared out music, under a 'shamiana' pitched for the day and men and women were engaged in animated discussions and camaraderie. Food packets were distributed and tea served. Everyone was enthused, ironically about a clear and present danger in the area. But it was indeed a special day.

As Deputy Commissioner (DC) Beela Rajesh arrived, the enthusiastic members of the Literacy Mission, who double as Community Based Disaster Preparedness volunteers under the DRMP (Disaster Risk Management Programme), began their programme.

With the DC's arrival began a mock show. A dummy victim of a likely mine disaster was tied to a ladder and brought down from a roof by five men. Victim Vipin Kumar Verma's face and body were blood spattered-actually red paint. The mock drill was carried out without a hitch.

Under the same roof from where Vipin was brought down, another member of the 'Bipad Bandhu' (Friend During Danger) group showed the visitors and the DC a map of the locality made of 'rangoli'.

Rangoli is used to map the localities so that in case of disaster the locals can rush to the spot with a clear idea about the area. Here every input in the programme is locally conceived, from mapping with rangoli to use of home ladders.

United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) project officer Sampurnananda Mahapatra said: 'The good thing about this initiative is that the DC herself is a participant. The administration here indeed thinks it is their job.'

'The most tedious part of the preparedness is the mapping exercise. Villagers use rangoli on floor and prepare the map with a trial and error method and full involvement of the people. We are very happy that everyone is taking part with a lot of pride and sincerity in the programme,' he adds.

Krishna Devi, who belongs to the programme's Sadma Paramarshi Dal (Trauma Counselling Group), said: 'People start wailing immediately after such a disaster. They cry and then it is essential to pacify and support them in every possible way. So we are all prepared to take care of the traumatised people, if there is an accident.'

'I did not have to do anything in the past two years, but I am ready to join the action and am confident that I will be able to offer succour to people in distress and trauma with my counselling,' she said in unison with members of her group.

Volunteer Management, a part of the City Disaster Management Plan, works at three levels. The mission for Community Level Disaster Management in Urban Areas comprises of Prakrut or Vastabik Bandhu (Real Friends) at the municipal level, then Apda Bandhu (Friends During Disaster) at the ward level and Bipad Bandhu at the neighbourhood level.

According to the system, 64 key volunteers at the municipality level from all the 32 wards, identified as Vastabik Bandhu, head the hierarchy, followed by the Apda Bandhu at the second level who are members of Disaster Management Clubs, followed by the Bipad Bandhu. The 32 Prakrut Bandhus, all Apda Bandhus and Bipad Bandhus report to their respective ward, Disaster Management Committee.

Pradeep Kumar, secretary, Literacy Mission of Dhanbad Anchal Nagar Nigam, said: 'Two years back I was inducted in the Vastabik Bandhu group and since then I am working on the programme with great pride. We are 64 altogether, including 32 women, working as real friends. We are training the community at the level below and offering them all the guidelines of a crisis situation.'

'When there is an accident it takes time for the administration to reach the tragedy zone and offer assistance. So we are training the community how they can join the rescue operation themselves without waiting for the administration,' he says. 'In this 'mohollah' (neighbourhood) the people are so enthusiastic that I feel always charged and elated.'

'In every ward we have made teams with 15 to 20 people in the Apda Bandhu group. Now we are extending this group to all the districts with the approval of the DC,' he informed.

The zeal to work in the Disaster Management Group seems infectious in Dhanbad. Take, for example, Kumar's colleague Gurjeet Singh, who said they are planning to train people working under 871 Continued Education Centres (CECs) in the districts, which is an extension of the Literacy Mission programme.

Said Ramkeshwar Sao of Ward No. 17 in the Nagar Nigam: 'I enjoy this work very much. I now feel that only this is my life. I forget everything else when I do this work.'

Echoed woman volunteer Anjali Hembram of the Prathamik Chikitsa Dal (First Aid Group), 'I feel so confident. It gives me satisfaction that I am doing something for the community and can be of some help when disaster strikes.'

'We are ready round the clock,' she said as her colleague Rita Kumari pitched in, 'People whom we are teaching are learning fast. Let disaster come, we are prepared to face it,' she said.

Rita Devi, another natural woman leader of the community from Ward No.10, added, 'Activism is in my blood. We are gearing up and whatever inadequacies we have in the system we will remove with experience.'

Sujoy Dhar (© IANS / India eNews)