

Of Cyclone's and Bulls

Written by Mitra Ardron
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A story of how a little thing like a cyclone bring us into the moment.

December 28th I went to India to spend some time with a project we are helping there that trains village mechanics to make wind turbines. The plan was to sit around with the founder and the CEO I'd helped find and work on the business plan.

I noticed as we flew that the plane's track didn't go direct from Singapore to Chennai but flew north all around the Bay of Bengal, to avoid a storm, but we landed fine in some rain, and as we drove south a few hours the rain disappeared.

I arrived at Auroville, picked up a motorbike, and met some friends for dinner. I was told there was a cyclone warning, but not to worry as this happened several times a year, but that plans tomorrow might be disrupted a little.

Four hours later the light rain intensifies for about 5 hours it rained non-stop, there don't seem to be measurements but I heard 50cm (20"). Then 5 hours of wind from one direction, up to 140 km/h (90mph) - the wind blew straight through where I was trying to sleep as it only had mosquito nets. All around I could hear trees falling. Twice during the night people arrived looking for shelter as their places were in even worse condition. The bottom story was concrete but the bamboo walls of the room on top blew away and they evacuated with their baby.

Early morning we are "woken" (we weren't really sleeping, just huddled on the floor listening) by someone needing help - a tree had fallen on the cowshed which had fallen on the bull. It was lying in a weird position with hits eyes rolled back in its head, and we worked with hand-saws to cut the tree as we watched for wind-blown branches and bits of flying roofing. Amazingly it was alive, and started bucking wildly as we finished the job, making it even more hazardous.

Around this time the wind changed direction - so we knew we were half way - 5 more hours of wind, another 5 of rain and it was done. But .. the orchard was gone, the padi (rice and other grain) crop flattened, water everywhere, I was most worried as I waded through puddles in the farm about infecting a bad cut on my toe, but you have to stay focused so we started pushing trees back up and propping them with branches.

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The roads of course were impassable, trees down every 10 meters or so, it took till midday the next day to clear the trees (with hand-saws) so I could ride the motorbike into town with someone who had a flight to catch. 70% of the forest had fallen and it looked like a game of pick-up-sticks. Almost all the power poles had fallen, so there was no power for pumping water, or internet, or phones, and it took weeks to get the power back to everyone.

A trip like this brings me back to the reality of working in and for sustainable poverty alleviation, I learned what it means to have no toilet, no power, to be really unsure about water quality, to be out of touch with the world.

It also teaches you about the incredible personal resilience of people - very few were complaining, people first got on with fixing immediate problems and then got back to life, I'd sit with farm workers and someone would ask them how they were doing, they'd talk about the tree that flattened their house and then get back to work. Within a few days we had found where we could access clean water, power to charge laptops and phones and so on.