

# WHEN MOTHER NATURE STRIKES

If caught in the eye of a storm or the terrible effects of an earthquake, how equipped are we to handle it?



**W**e are reeling from the recent cyclone scare and the horde of casualties that came with it. Sure, a natural calamity is an eventuality. But how prepared are we to take on a natural calamity like this or of an even bigger scale? Are we well-equipped to handle such a dangerous 'eventuality'? Being in one of the world's most densely populated urban areas — and lacking in organized catastrophe protocols, personnel, and machinery — we don't seem to be too aware of what to do when nature does strike hard and fast. "Earnest governmental and non-governmental efforts occur, but they are seldom coordinated, the perfect evidence being the absence of well equipped, staffed, and functional emergency operation centers (EOC) across geographic areas in the country" shares Anoop Madhavan, founder of Survival Instincts, a Chennai-based outfit that provides urban survival skills such as disaster response, first aid and self defense.

## COMMUNITY EMERGENCY RESPONSE TEAMS

**N**ot many groups are present in major urban centres in the country to help NGOs, organizations, educational institutions, corporations, industries, and residential associations set up community emergency response teams (CERTs). Community Emergency Response Teams consists of ordinary citizens who have been trained to respond and swoop into a disaster-struck zone for aid and assistance. Survival Instincts provides classroom trainings, mobilization drills, and consulting services on a variety of safety topics enabling participants to respond to medical emergencies, hazards/disaster incidents, and crime waves.

(FEMA) for incident response. "Thus, even in the aftermath of a disaster, cut off from centralized communication and transportation grids, isolated

The main issue is the non-involvement of the community as a whole, feels Anoop, who explains, "The key missing point in our response capability is the involvement of the community" remarks Anoop. In the United States, for example, Community Emergency Response Teams (CERT) are funded, trained, and mobilized locally by the Federal Emergency Management Agency

communities will know how to rescue, recover, provide relief to, and rehabilitate their citizens."

So what exactly is required? How does one get the community involved when disaster strikes? "It's not much of a waste of your time or effort to just be prepared. For example, when you were holed up at home during the cyclone warning, did you know what to stock up on? Whether ample clean water or more food was your priority? What to use, what not to use during such situations ... And in case the cyclone did have devastating effects, how would you have kept your family and loved ones safe? These are not always taught in schools or any other educational institutions or even working environments," explains M Geetha, a working professional who has been part of rescue efforts after the devastating tsunami that hit the coast of Tamil Nadu in December 2004.

"Often, the major challenge while training a community is denial," explains Anoop. "Disbelief to technical facts is common, but being accused of ulterior motives was really an amusing experience! Surprisingly, many disaster protocols defy our common instincts. For example, during a flood, stepping into just 6 inches of moving water must be avoided. It is enough to make a person fall. Tying a tourniquet on a snakebite victim, to arrest the spread of hemotoxic venom, is actually a very dangerous first aid procedure that must be avoided, on contrary to what we've all seen or heard of before."

The planet's in a state of flux. And given the obvious issues such as pollution and global warming as resources are being stripped down, it can only be expected that the planet will lash back, sometimes in the most unexpected ways. Maybe we cannot prevent this one, but the cure is definitely within our reach. "Disaster movies from Hollywood are no exaggeration," says Anoop, reiterating the need for the procedures, drills, and equipment in the country to be state-of-the-art.

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