

HOW MADRAS FOUGHT

THE  ONE

1955

How Madras fought the Cyclone

Floods and famine, pests and pestilences; earthquakes and elemental disturbances—these are the eternal enemies of mankind. They periodically descend on them and besides taking a heavy toll, leave a trail of incalculable suffering and hardships behind. Despite the march of civilization and the advances in science, man is still helpless before such elemental calamities. It is on such occasions that the true mettle of a Government comes to be tested. A Welfare State has been described as a State in which the Government functions as father and mother to the people. The way in which the Madras Government tackled the cyclone calamity shows how strenuously they have kept to the Welfare State ideal.

India, from the hoary past, has had more than her share of elemental troubles, whether in the shape of flood or famine, pestilences like plague or cholera or earthquakes or earth tremors such as that had occurred

in Assam or Bihar. But as far as the Madras State is concerned, it has been largely spared such calamities. Once in a way, a flood or a famine comes perhaps to remind man of the superiority of nature. But the calamity that descended on this State on the last day of November 1955 was almost without a parallel either in the suddenness of its onset or the violence of its impact.

The calamity descends

The low-lying portions on the eastern coast of the Madras State are vulnerable points, in that they are always in danger of being subjected to elemental disturbances. Tanjore was first hit by the cyclone in November 1681 and since then, violent storms lashed this region more than half a dozen times during the second half of the last century. The present calamity

is the third misfortune it has suffered during the present century. The last cyclone in Tanjore was in 1952 and it accounted for the death of 400 people.

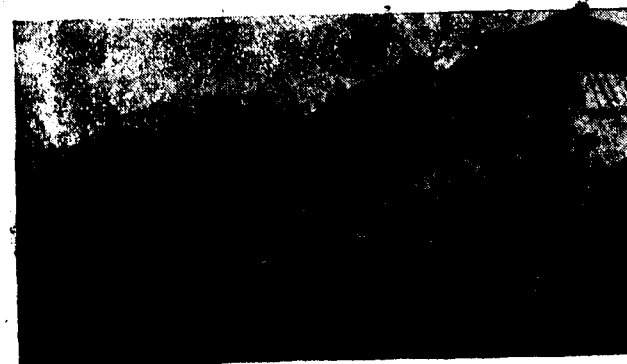
The present calamity hit not only Tanjore, but also Madurai, Tiruchirappalli and Ramanathapuram and descended almost without notice. On the night of 30th November 1955, a cyclonic gale blew across Tanjore and Ramanathapuram sea coasts. This was followed by unusual heavy rains of 23 inches on the 1st and 2nd December in Ramanathapuram district where the annual rainfall is only about this figure. The other affected districts—Tanjore, Madurai and Tiruchirappalli also recorded heavy rains on these two days. In fact, heavy rains continued in Tanjore district till about 5th December. As a result, there was heavy damage to life and property on a scale scarcely paralleled in the history of these districts. In Tanjore district, not less than 417 persons died, many of them being carried away by the waves. Corpses and carcasses littered every nook and corner emitting a woeful stench. Dead bodies bloated and darkened by sea water were beyond recognition. The huts all along the coast were washed away. Even



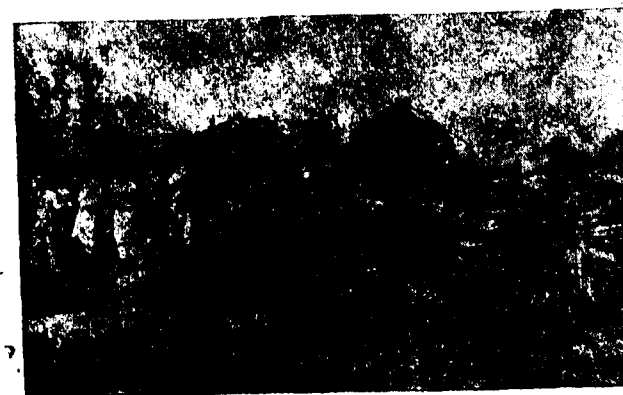
Huts reduced to debris.



Another view of the dwellings damaged by cyclone.



Uprooted trees and crumbled huts.



Ruins Ruins—Ruins.

the pucca buildings in these areas went down in debris killing many people including women and children. The total casualties in Tirucharappalli were 18.7 in Madurai and 86 in Ramanathapuram. Houses destroyed numbered 172,213 in Tanjore district, 50,297 in Tiruchirappalli district, 23,792 in Madurai district and 12,800 in Ramanathapuram district.



Thousands of trees were uprooted by the cyclone.

Thousands of coconut and plantain trees were uprooted; paddy fields; tobacco plantations and extensive stretches of arable lands had quickly gone under water. In the coastal villages, saline water had



Coconut tops suffered heavily during the cyclone.

surged into the fields and completely destroyed the crops. Salt stocks worth about Rs. 2 lakhs were washed away by heavy tides. Rice mills, groundnut mills and salt factories were damaged with their stored-up grains.

Loss of cattle wealth was by no means less. Ninety-eight thousand five hundred and eighteen heads of cattle including goats and sheep in Ramanathapuram district, 47,863 in Tanjore district, 5,378 in Tiruchirappalli district and 3,299 in Madurai district were lost.



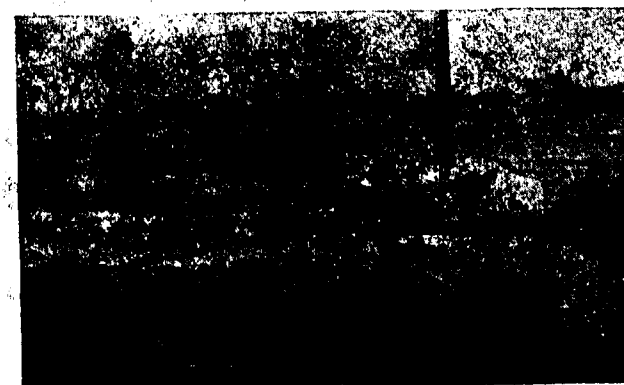
Loss due to cyclone was much, men, animals, plants—nothing was spared.

Minor irrigation sources also suffered devastating damage. Not less than 811 tanks breached in Tanjore, 847 in Tiruchirappalli district, 273 in Madurai and 519 in Ramanathapuram.

The total disruption of communication is another aspect of this grim tragedy. All roads looked like streams of running water. Almost all the trains had to be suspended due to the damage to the permanent way. Trees and telegraphic poles were uprooted snapping communication wires. It is important to mention here that this disruption of communication

had a disastrous significance, in that it made it impossible for the Government to get full reports of the havoc immediately after its occurrence.

As soon as the report was received in Madras, of the seriousness of the situation, the Chief Minister



*A lone man who has lost everything in the cyclone—
Typical of the many.*

rushed to the spot to make an aerial survey, accompanied by officials concerned. The party could only see large sheets of water in almost all the nine taluks of Ramanathapuram district. As the plane flew as low as fifty feet over the devastated territory, one could find innumerable houses ripped of their roofs. In Devakkottai taluk, vast areas of paddy fields were submerged practically destroying the recently transplanted crop. Touching scenes were witnessed as the villagers subsisting for the previous four days on what little they had gathered on their person waved their clothes and ran helter-skelter at the sight of the Dakota which they thought had brought them relief. It was the same story everywhere; people being stranded, people starving and people who had lost everything they had and awaiting help. The statistics of the damage caused by cyclone and floods in the four affected districts of the State are tabulated below and these give an idea of the magnitude of the disaster.

Name of the district affected.	Tanjore.	Tiruchirappalli.	Madurai.	Ramanathapuram.
Number of villages affected	1,542	373	337	3,994
Total casualties in each district	417	18	7	86
Number of houses destroyed	172,213	50,297	23,792	12,800
Number of other buildings destroyed	4,127	60	..	..
Number of cattle lost (including sheep and goats), etc.	47,863	5,378	3,299	98,518
Particulars of communications disrupted or otherwise damaged (roads).	82	26	..	92
Number of tanks breached	..	..	..	..
Number of other irrigation sources that were damaged. }	811	847	273	519
Acreage under which crops were destroyed	125,042	9,402	1,000	200,805
Loss in terms of money on each item and the total loss—	RS.	RS.	RS.*	RS.*
Houses	1,20,18,760	21,24,880	..	..
Other buildings	17,23,620	28,563	..	..
Cattle	19,23,180	1,53,466	201,710	..
Crops	1,35,10,035	5,40,530	..	..
Irrigation sources	1,67,500	4,61,215	..	..
Tanks	5,56,500	..	4,00,000	..
Roads	5,25,000	1,99,970	1,02,000	..
Salt, saltpans, etc,	8,73,800	..	..	..
Total	3,12,98,395	40,37,280	..	..

* Money value not furnished by Collectors.

These are only a few outstanding facts about the appalling tragedy. Human suffering on such an unparalleled scale presents the most rigorous test to a people's Government.

"First information report"

The first report about the cyclone was a telegram from the Collector of Tanjore on 1st December 1955. This was followed later by an official telegraphic report on the 2nd December from Pudukkottai in Tiruchirappalli district. A radio message from Madurai on 3rd December reported blocking of roads from Madurai to Ramanathapuram and heavy rains in Madurai City. Pending receipt of detailed reports, the Government sent telegrams to the Collectors of Tanjore, Tiruchirappalli and Madurai on the morning of 3rd December 1955 directing that urgent relief measures like feeding the homeless should be undertaken immediately, employing additional staff, if necessary, in anticipation of Government sanction. The subsequent reports received from the districts revealed the extent of the havoc caused by the cyclone. The Government also ordered that two Members of the Board of Revenue should proceed immediately.

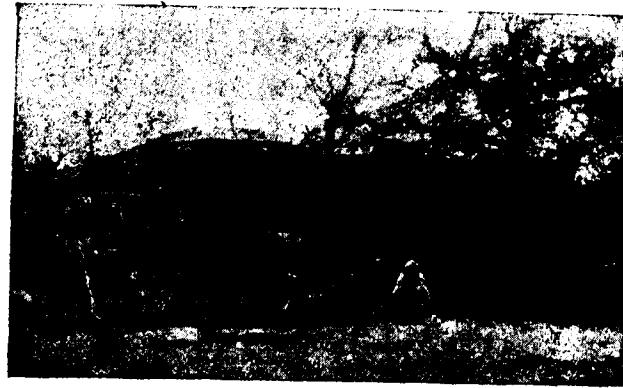
one to be in charge of Tanjore and Tiruchirappalli districts and the other in charge of Madurai and Ramanathapuram districts. The Collectors of the districts were authorized to incur expenditure in anticipation of sanction and subject to the orders of the Board Members in their districts.

Chief Minister's aerial survey and tour

Following this, the Chief Minister Sri K. Kamaraj accompanied by the Minister for Public Works and a party of officers left for Tiruchirappalli on 5th December 1955 by a special Dakota en route to the



Smashed to smithereens.



She is bewailing her sad plight.



Not only fragile huts but stronger ones also were smashed by the cyclone.

cyclone affected areas. Prior to his departure, the Chief Minister conferred with the departmental officials on matters of immediate concern relating to the relief of cyclone victims.

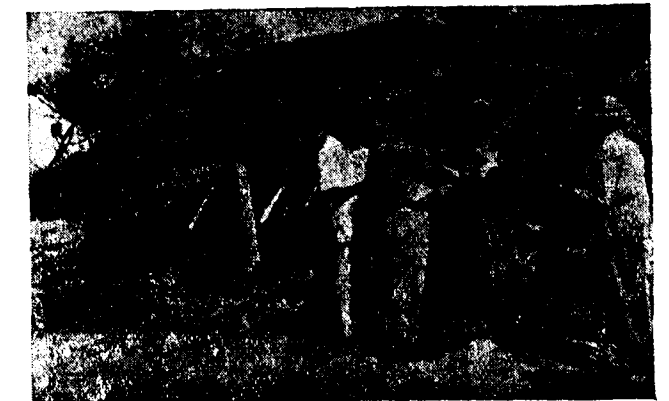
The impressions of the Chief Minister's party as revealed in the statement made by the Minister for Public Works. He described the damage caused by cyclone as a "gruesome sight and a thing unknown to him". The Chief Minister was moved by the sufferings of the victims and assured the sufferers that the problem of rushing food would be tackled on an emergency basis. He immediately set about putting in motion relief operations and in order to give an impetus to these operations, the Chief Minister stayed on in Ramanathapuram district while Sri S. Venkateswaran, I.C.S., Member of the Board of Revenue, was deputed to supervise the operations in Tanjore district. The Chief Minister and the party had to wade through knee-deep mud and water for miles on end. Undaunted, he gave directions on the spot to officials at all levels regarding the details of relief work. At Paramakudi, he ordered immediate steps to be taken to close the breaches in the tanks and in roads. He directed the

despatch of rice immediately to isolated areas in head-loads. Six tons of rice were air-dropped in Ramanathapuram district. Five hundred tons of rice and 100 tins of kerosene were despatched by steamers from Tuticorin to Mandapam from where they were taken to Ramanathapuram. About one lakh tons of rice held in Madras by the Government of India were released for distribution. The Chief Minister's, on-the-spot, supervision contributed much to restore the morale of the people, and considerably cheered them up. After Ramanathapuram, the Chief Minister proceeded to Tanjore district where he visited not only Tanjore, but many other places including small hamlets like Agastiyampalli, Vadakattalai, etc. He listened patiently to the tale of sufferings of the people and assured them of all possible help. He also addressed many public meetings instilling hope and courage into a despondent people reeling under the weight of a terrible calamity. He appealed to the educated people to assist the Government in the relief operations and expressed satisfaction at the unity of all political parties in the hour of crisis. He made an earnest appeal to them not to make political capital out of human misery. His assurances and appeals revived the drooping spirits of a

desperate people and made them stand up to their misfortune with faith and hope in the future. Wherever he went, he took with him fresh hope and cheer for the people.

Relief measures

The lead given by the Chief Minister galvanised the entire official machinery into vigorous action in no time. Relief measures were quickly conceived and promptly executed. The more important of these measures may be briefly summarised here.



Officials in Pattukkottai taluk distributing cash ranging from Rs. 15 to Rs. 30 for reconstruction of huts completely damaged.

The Government sanctioned the payment of a free house-grant up to a maximum of Rs. 30 per family for repairing or reconstructing their houses damaged by cyclone and a cash-grant of Rs. 50 each to such of those families as had lost their bread winners. Cash-grants were distributed from the third day of the cyclone. Simultaneously, rice was rushed to the scarcity areas.



Feeding the victims of the cyclone.



Milk being distributed to the victims in Ramanathapuram by social workers.

All the poor classes, mostly Harijans who had been rendered homeless were gathered and given shelter. Gruel centres were started in the affected districts and cash grants were paid to them. The details are as follows :—

	Tanjore.	Tiruchirappalli.	Madurai.	Ramanathapuram.
Gruel centres	802	315	3	520
Cash grants	Rs. 39,73,787	Rs. 8,17,858	Rs. 3,78,857	Rs. 24,56,610

In Tanjore district, 18 wagons of thatches and 10 wagons of bamboos were imported from outside and distributed to the affected people as part of the free house-grant. The Board of Revenue also asked the Collector of Tanjore to purchase and distribute utensils to the value of Rs. 37,500. Gift articles like clothes, blankets, rice, milk-powder, butter oil, cotton-seed oil, ghee, etc., received from various organizations and philanthropic donors were also distributed to the victims of the affected areas.

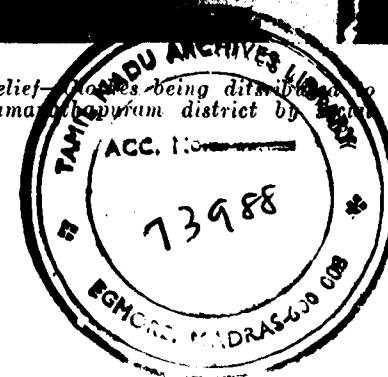


Cyclone relief articles being distributed to the villagers in Ramanathapuram district by social workers.



More distribution of cloth to the victims.

Free distribution of sarees and dhoties to those who badly needed them were also made by the Government to the value of Rs. 75,000 in Tanjore district. The corresponding figures for Tiruchirappalli, Madurai and Ramanathapuram are Rs. 40,000, Rs. 25,000 and Rs. 1,50,000, respectively. The Government also sanctioned the grant of school fees from December 1955 to April 1956 and S.S.L.C. Examination fees for pupils studying in the secondary schools in the affected areas whose parents had sustained serious loss to property and who were not in a position to pay the fees. Sanction



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was also accorded for the supply of free midday meals to children in the elementary schools in the affected areas of Ramanathapuram, Madurai and Vedaranyam in Tanjore district. Fishermen received special attention in the matter of relief. Relief measures in regard to them consisted in—

(1) Subsidy of 50 per cent of the cost of repairing damaged boats.

(2) Fifty per cent as subsidy and 50 per cent as loan for purchase of catamaran logs lost.

(3) Free supply of yarn for repairing the current season's nets and sail cloth for boats.

(4) Fifty per cent loan and 50 per cent subsidy for replenishing the reserve stocks of subsequent season's nets washed away during the cyclone.

Concessions to agriculturists

In addition to the above, Government also sanctioned numerous concessions for the rehabilitation of the agriculturists in the affected areas. These include—

(1) *Postponement of collection of kist and loans*—The collection of the unremitted kist of fasli 1365 in all the areas affected other than those under the

Cauvery and Periyar systems of irrigation has been postponed to fasli 1366. The collection of the loan instalments due in fasli 1366 in all the affected areas has also been similarly postponed.

(2) *Land revenue remission*.—This was sanctioned on the following lines :—

(a) Full remission where the percentage of coconut trees destroyed is 75 or more and half remission where the percentage destroyed is above 50 and below 75.

(b) Full remission for the extent of betel vines completely destroyed.

(c) Full remission where the percentage of fruit-bearing trees destroyed is 75 or more.

(d) Full remission for the lands cultivated with other crops where the outturn is four annas and below and half remission for lands with outturn of above four annas and below eight annas.

(3) *Subsidies and loans*.—(a) Free supply of gingelly seeds to ryots paying an assessment of Rs. 20 and below in Arantangi taluk at a total cost not exceeding Rs. 6,000.

(b) Free supply of seed and manure to ryots paying an assessment of Rs. 20 and below up to a maximum of Rs. 30 in each case.

(c) Supply of two lakhs of viable seedlings in all the affected areas, one half of the cost being treated as subsidy and the remaining half as loan.

(d) Interest-free loan for the replacement of work cattle and milch cows.

(e) Special loan up to a maximum of Rs. 3,000 to each family for repairing or rebuilding the houses damaged in the cyclone and floods.

(f) Loan to weavers up to a maximum of Rs. 50 in each case for the replacement of looms lost as a result of the cyclone.

(g) Free supply of tobacco seedlings to the tobacco cultivators in the Vedaranyam area up to a total amount of Rs. 5,000.

(h) Hiring out of departmental pumpset to ryots at half the usual charges.

(i) Hiring out of departmental tractors and bulldozers to the affected ryots at one-third the normal charges for replacement of sand-cast lands.

(j) Loans for planted topes up to an enhanced limit of Rs. 200 in each case.

Other measures

The Government have also sanctioned the grant of 50 per cent of the cost of repairs or reconstruction of the buildings of the aided educational institutions which have suffered damage in the cyclone or floods. It is also intended to give appropriate grants from the Madras Cyclone Relief Fund to those institutions which are not in a position to meet the other half of the cost.

Irrigation sources also received similar prompt attention. For the sake of expedition, repairs of irrigation sources under the control of the P.W.D., Food Production and Minor irrigation sections in the three districts of Ramanathapuram, Tiruchirappalli and part of Tanjore were centralised under the control of the P.W.D. staff. The estimated cost of the work is about Rs. 275.12 lakhs and the Government have sanctioned an amount of Rs. 2 crores towards expenditure under this item. Repairs of roads and bridges are estimated to cost about Rs. 20.91 lakhs and adequate allotments have been made for carrying out the repairs. For Ramanathapuram district alone, an allotment of Rs. 6 lakhs from Government funds has been set apart and the Chief Engineer will be in charge

of carrying out repairs to the damaged roads and bridges.

One of the most deplorable features of the calamity was the extensive destruction of houses. This was inevitable inasmuch as the house occupied by the poorer classes were mostly huts or fragile structures which could not stand even a normal elemental disturbance. The destruction of houses was especially tremendous in coastal belts or river margins or low lying areas. It was considered essential that the inhabitants of these vulnerable areas should be assisted to shift to safer and better sites or to build a better type of houses on the existing sites. A scheme was accordingly drawn up for building 6,236 houses for these poor people in the four districts at an estimated cost of Rs. 30 lakhs.

The loss of cattle wealth in the cyclone affected areas was heavy. The Government devoted special attention to make good this loss by assisting the agriculturists to purchase work cattle to replace the lost ones. Two Assistant Marketing Officers have been appointed to tour the cattle breeding areas in the other districts and in the adjoining States, to contact established dealers in cattle and to persuade them to bring large numbers of cattle to the markets and fairs in the

affected districts and to keep their prices steady. Special Marketing Assistants have been appointed for each specified group of weekly shandies and fairs to assist the ryots in the purchase of cattle at reasonable prices and to eliminate brokers as far as possible. The Government have also sanctioned a prize scheme for the award of prizes of Rs. 100 and Rs. 50 to the sellers of the largest numbers of cattle to ryots in the cyclone affected area at each shandy or fair.

The following statement shows the estimate of expenditure by the State Government in connexion with relief operations :—

Nature of expenditure. (1)	Estimated expenditure in		
	1955-56. (2)	1956-57. (3)	Total. (4)
	RUPEES IN LAKHS.		
1 Gratuitous relief ..	98.28	42.28	140.56
2 Repairs to Government property.	42.34	256.32	298.66
3 Repairs to roads and bridges of local bodies.	11.83	10.93	22.76
4 Loans and advances to agriculturists.	109.21	30.31	139.52
Total ..	261.66	339.84	601.50

Non-official help

The foregoing facts throw abundant light on the dimensions of this terrible catastrophe. No Government can have the resources in men and money to cope single handed with such an emergency. One of the most important thing in all relief operations is money and in the face of such calamities, the Government had necessarily to mobilise private charity. Soon after the calamity, the Government of Madras opened the Madras Cyclone Relief Fund. The receipts under this fund up to 19th April 1956, is Rs. 22,14,888-14-1. The District Cyclone Relief Committee was formed in Tanjore district with non-officials as members for raising funds. A sum of Rs. 21,811-5-0 has been collected as contribution from the district. This is apart from the gift articles, clothes, rice, straw, etc., collected by the members of this Committee. Taluk and village relief committees were also formed in many places. In Madurai, a sum of Rs. 40,722-3-9 has so far been received as donations towards the Madras State Cyclone Relief Fund. The Government also instructed the Collectors of all districts outside the affected areas to take immediate steps to form relief committees for the

purpose of collecting funds. They were asked to convene public meetings and constitute influential committees to undertake the task. The Collectors accordingly took action with tangible success. Not only money, but free supply of clothes, tiles, thatches, bamboos and other articles were received from Madras, Coimbatore, Malabar, South Kanara and other



A welcome relief at their old age..

districts. The Relief Committee in Madurai collected voluntary contributions in the shape of rice and supplemented by a grant of Rs. 1,000 from the Government, it arranged for the feeding of thousand and odd affected

families for a week. In Tiruchirappalli, several institutions and private bodies sent as gifts large consignments of milk powder, foodgrains, clothes, biscuits, safety matches, etc. Nearly a sum of Rs. 14,500 has been donated by the Tiruchirappalli District Relief Committee in the form of sarees. Besides, thousand tons of rice from Ceylon Government, 200 tons of rice from Burma as free gift and 236 tons of jowar from Madhya Pradesh under the price support scheme were received for free distribution to the affected people. In addition, a further quantity of 2,000 tons has been given



Gruel and cloth were distributed at a relief centre in Adirampatnam in Pattukkottai taluk.



Cyclone relief—A mother and child in Vedaranyam with a look of relief on their faces after receiving gifts of clothes and a milk powder tin.

by the Government of India for providing relief to the victims, the cost being shared by the State Government and the Government of India. Building materials were also received as free gift from some districts. From Malabar, along with clothes to the value of Rs. 2,000 were received, 5,000 kadjan leaves, 4 bundles of coir yarn and 14 bundles of cloth collected by the Guild of Service, Malabar. Six hundred and one teak poles collected by Ottapalam and Lakkidi Muslim League Committee were also received. A wagon load of bamboos was also received from a gentleman in Tellicherry in Malabar district. South Kanara supplied one wagon load of tiles.

Private agencies

It is a matter of great satisfaction that private agencies also came forward to assist the Government in the relief work. The Government owe much to these private organizations for their helping hand. Three non-official organizations under the leadership of Dr. Mrs. Soundaram Ramachandran, Ramakrishna Mission, Madras, and the Bishop of Madurai respectively, undertook relief work in Ramanathapuram district. The Ramakrishna Mission is also arranging

to resettle about 250 families of Vadakkattalai village in a colony to be formed at Vedaranyam. Observed our Finance Minister in the course of his Budget Speech ' Amongst the non-official relief organizations, the work of the Ramakrishna Mission stands out in high distinction. The workers of the mission were in the worst affected areas at Vedaranyam immediately after the disaster and practically set the pattern of relief, for which the people in those villages will ever remember them.' The Tamilnad Cyclone Relief Committee, Madras, undertook the running of gruel centres and the distribution of cloth and other gifted articles in five centres in Vedaranyam sub-taluk. Other organizations which did relief work include the Red-Cross, Guild of Service and the Bharat Sevak Samaj. The Districts Scouts also helped the Government machinery in the work of distribution of gift articles to the victims of cyclone in specified areas.

" The response from the general public has been most heartening, especially the fact that a large number of people of very small means and workers in organized industries have spontaneously come forward with their humble contributions in cash and kind " said the

Finance Minister, Sri C. Subramaniam in the Budget Speech. Most of the public organisations, social institutions, political parties, philanthropic bodies rushed to the affected areas to lend a helping hand. Relief committees were formed all over the State. Contributions were received by Government from all over India. Our Prime Minister took the lead and sent Rs. 2 lakhs from his relief fund. Our distinguished foreign visitor, King Saud of Arabia contributed Rs. 50,000 to the relief fund. Special mention may be made in this connection of the Indian business community in Singapore and Malaya who made a handsome contribution of over Rs. 3 lakhs. Indians living in far off countries also sent their mite.

Wholehearted co-operation of

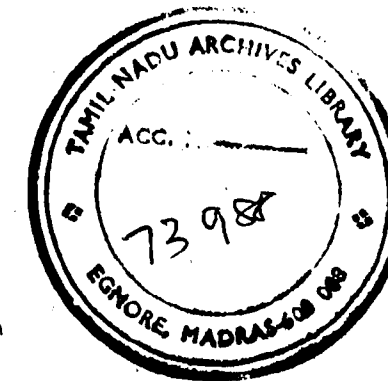
Thus, the co-operation from the general public has been splendid and a grave calamity was tided over as a result of the Government and the people pulling together as one man. It may not be out of place to refer here to the self-denying work done by the members of the different branches of public service. The ungrudging assistance given throughout by the railway authorities cannot be forgotten. Railway

communications were restored in record time. Valuable assistance was rendered by the Air Force in connection with the aerial survey undertaken by the Chief Minister and for the air-dropping of rice, milk powder, etc., in inaccessible places. The work done by the Highways has also been equally laudable. The Police also played their part heroically. They arranged a net work of wireless communications in the affected areas which helped the Government and the officials to get information promptly. The quick-



Cyclone Relief—Officials of the Health Department inoculating the people of Vadakathali village in Vedaranyam as a preventive measure against epidemics.

ness with which they assisted in clearing roads, of obstructions was remarkable. The special armed police did commendable work in Tanjore district, in Madurai town and other places. The Police often rushed to the rescue of struggling people. In some places, they took charge of valuable properties left in these areas by evacuated people. Thanks to the work of the Health and Veterinary staff; there was no epidemic of any kind. The District Officers and their staff also rose equal to the occasion with commendable promptitude. The wholehearted co-operation of Government servants on the one hand and the non-officials on the other have contributed vitally to the success of relief operations.



It is needless to emphasize the firmness, determination and perseverance with which the Government fought this natural calamity. Only a people's Government can do it; only a people's Government can identify itself so effectively with the affected people; only a people's Government can mobilize in a large way the enthusiasm of people both in and outside the State in the cause of the cyclone victims. Our Chief Ministers struck the right note when he said.

“ I have always felt that man is tested most in his adversity. If he stands up to that, he survives for a greater tomorrow ”. Surely, the people of the affected areas have stood the test and can well hope to have a greater tomorrow.