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Nēthrā

A non-specialist journal for lively minds

**INTERNATIONAL CENTRE FOR ETHNIC STUDIES, COLOMBO**

Nēthrā

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Nēthrā

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When the oceans flood and overflow

– Al Quran, Surat al Infitar, 3

The great nation will be devastated by earthquakes, storms, and great waves of water, causing much want and plagues. The ocean will also flood many other countries, so that all coastal cities will live in fear, with many destroyed.

St Hildegard 12th Century.

In Hindu mythology, Kali Yug is the apocalyptic age of darkness, which sparks the annihilation of mankind. On the 26th of December 2004, it seemed that Kali Yug had indeed come, when an earthquake off the coast of Sumatra caused tidal waves to ravage shorelines across south and south-east Asia killing thousands and leaving many more homeless.

That day, from the beach in Hikkaduwa, as I watched the waves crash inland and flood over the Galle Road, I thought I was going to die. It is a feeling that is indescribable. It is one of the many faces of death that we may encounter throughout our lives. It is fear and fatalism and for me, a bizarre sense of morbid exhilaration. There is no rational logic to explain why I was saved and others were not. We were engulfed by a wave of death that killed and spared indiscriminately. It left orphans,

widows, widowers, and grieving parents in its wake. What then do you do? What then *can* you do? What then does the world do, in the face of such enormous grief?

This was a catastrophe that made individuals struggle on a multitude of levels: spiritual, emotional, psychological and not least, physical. It made us question everything we have known or taken for granted. It made us ask, if for just an instant, why we are on this earth.

It is to the credit of mankind that people across the globe acted with solidarity. Medical teams and volunteers - many of them from overseas - left their families to travel to the impacted regions, children collected coins on street corners, private individuals dug deep into their pockets, companies and NGOs marshaled resources, and government's loosened regulations to facilitate and accommodate the flood of humanitarian aid.

When the Tsunami struck, Sri Lanka was slowly recovering from the effects of war and preparing for the dividends of peace. Hotel and infrastructure development was concentrated on the coastal belt in anticipation of a boom in tourism. If the Tsunami wasn't a baptism by fire, it was certainly a dousing by water, which washed away lives and carefully laid plans.

Eight months later, the government of Sri Lanka is squabbling about Building codes, Joint Mechanisms and P-Toms while the luckless survivors of the Tsunami languish in refugee camps. After much vacillation, President Chandrika Kumaratunge authorised the Govt. of Sri Lanka to sign an agreement that would establish a joint body to dispense foreign reconstruction aid in the Tsunami devastated North and East of the country. P-Toms, which promised relief, plunged the United Freedom People's Alliance into crisis.

This special issue of Nethra deals exclusively with articles, opinion pieces, short stories and poetry inspired by the Tsunami of December 26th. Some of our writers experienced the Tsunami first hand and had narrow escapes, while others were moved by the magnitude of the disaster to offer help

and/or write about it. Many of our writers were personally involved in the spontaneous eruption of post-Tsunami relief work. This issue brings together philosophers, writers, poets, environmentalists, film makers, political analysts, scholars and teachers who write about a phenomenon that affected the world.

As Farah Ahmed says in her first person account, the scale of humanitarian aid for Tsunami survivors was in itself a tidal wave of disparity when compared to other humanitarian crises such as Sudan or the AIDS orphans in Uganda. Why so? What was it about the Tsunami of December 26th 2004 that overshadows unjust wars, famine, epidemics and other man made disasters? For Sri Lanka as in many of the countries that experienced the devastation of the Tsunami, the tragedy erased differences of caste, creed, gender and political affiliation. And yet that moment of compassion was not to last. Now we have a situation where Tsunami aid and reconstruction only exists in that obscure realm of political jargon seemingly untranslatable into tangible aid. But perhaps it is enough to remember that we once acted humanely after all.

Each article in this issue of Nethra reflects that humanness. While you read Indran Amirthanayagam's poetry or Mahangu Weerasinghe's short story, you may reflect on the emotional sensitivity that highlighted the events during and after the Tsunami. Sriyani Miththapala mourns the lack of a solid environmental policy and Robert Crusz illustrates the media feeding frenzy of an Event!

A saying that has long been attributed as an old Chinese curse declares 'May you live in interesting times'...for many people interesting times are too much; for them, it will be enough if they are just safe.

Ameena Hussein

To the Sea

*(Moratuwa-Unawatuna, January
* Balapitiya, March * Point Pedro, April.)*

Jeremy Gantz

sea-shaped landscapes
licking salty wounds,
streets shattered and sculpted
into anonymity
by nothing
but water waiting
to be braked—

all our hidden
mental maps discovered
and made irrelevant
by one moment
two hours and six-hundred kilometers long
stretched halfway around
this fragile island

*

tired buildings and lives
scattered in terrible humility—
these bricks held
worlds together,
their mortar stolen by the sea—

tearful wreckage
carried deposited and planted
like fertilizer, an ugly topsoil,
strange grist thrown
headlong into nakedness,
this gaping horizon

*

an old foundation is swept clear,
one bare and smoothed pallet
staring blankly upwards
from another empty fishing village—

here the horizon is nothing
but the sea and pillboxed soldiers:
sleeping, guarding
this clean empty hand

into a nameless future

□

First Person

The Salt of the Earth

Bina Srinivasan

One morning the sea bounded into land. A wall of salt water seeped into the earth.

The worst ever earthquake spreading across thousands of kilometers, spreading across the ocean.

Salt upon salt upon salt.

The news trickled in on Dec 26. My skin went bumpy with goose pimples. 9.1 on the Richer scale. Enough to send shivers into anybody who has gone through 7.9 on the Richer scale in Gujarat, India.

Sri Lanka is the worst affected in all of South East Asia.

The North East of Sri Lanka more so than the South. And the North East is also the worst affected- in more ways than one-by the so-called Sinhala-Tamil conflict.

Ravaged by war. Ravaged by nature.

I am in a small suburb of Colombo as the sea rises once more. It rises and slams against everything in its way.

Animals, deep-sea trawlers, trees, houses. Hundreds of children, women, men. Dashed against rocks, wedged in trees. Naked bodies dangling on rocks, coconut trees. We saw picture after picture on television. We refused to believe it. Our response was to go into immediate denial.

The Sri Lankan horizon. Beaches, mangroves, boats. Oceans.

Does anybody want to hear the word again?

Sea. Waves floating calmly against the shore.

Sea. Waves forcing themselves into the shore.

In the immediate aftermath there was analysis galore; breast beating galore: people from the South will get relief what about those from the North and East, namely, Batticaloa, Trincomalee and Ampara.

It is a difficult terrain as many parts of the devastated North and East are controlled by the LTTE. And everybody is afraid to say much. Because they can be killed even now.

Still.

Spare me the breast beating then.

News traveled in little itsy-bitsy pieces. Floating around even now like wispy clouds.

A friend was stranded in Unawatuna. He clung to a fan and saved his life. Even as he saw people die, even as he despaired. He clung to dear life. It had a lasting impact on him. As expected.

Unawatuna: where the sea turned into an enemy. I was there a few days before the tsunami. And a couple of days after. Changed beyond recognition.

Before and after.

I went back to Unawatuna again and again. Hoping to see something more. And each time I do. Life does endure, human resilience does surface.

I met somebody in Unawatuna this time. A man who catapulted me into emotion I cannot describe. Quite by accident he appeared at the table where I sat nursing a beer, staring into the sea. A wiry, grey haired man. He gesticulated to me and I figured from his body language that he could not speak. He waved his hands, shook his head, rolled his eyes and described to me what happened when the tsunami struck. In eloquent silence he drew a sketch, and I was reduced to tears.

So was he.

I have never heard such a moving description of the tsunami and its terrible aftermath.

A disaster of epic proportions. It demands epic responses.

Yet.

We live through weird times. When some lives are more dispensable than say for example, leaves disturbed by the wind. When relief is imprinted along so many lines of differentiation that it is difficult to keep track. Religion, ethnicity, gender. And sometimes the sheer idiocy of political drama.

Recently I had the privilege of hearing a Sri Lankan scholar draw comparisons between the tsunami survivors and the survivors of the 20 year old war. A relentless picture. A passionate picture. An indignant picture.

Yes. That is all I have to say.

Yes, to the ways in which the war has killed tens of thousands. Yes, to the brutalization of a society, of communities, families, and individuals. And yes to the blind manner in which the powers-that-be have utilized this history for their petty games.

I also met another Sri Lankan woman who just burst into tears at the sight of sunset at the Indian Ocean in far away India. A trust betrayed, a deep wound. She just stood bravely and faced the sea. The courage in her eyes made me turn away into my own shoulder.

Sri Lanka is replete with possibilities for research. Doubly so after the tsunami. Triply so, if I may say so.

Whatever happens then to all those tens of thousands of brave women who have faced so much and more? Whatever happens to all those children so traumatized by the war that even the sound of fire crackers sets them wailing?

There are theories. So many of them: Sri Lanka simply has to sit up and take notice of what is happening in the name of relief, in the name of the war. A small part of Sri Lanka has always taken notice. But there is so much that needs to be done.

Perhaps being an outsider allows me to hold forth like this. However, I do not believe that I have the right to do so. This cannot be an unconditional observation, it cannot be a response bereft of social responsibility.

I bear the cross of being part of a privileged elite of a privileged South Asian country that is breathing down Sri Lanka in more ways than you can imagine. As an Indian I am aware of what it means to be Indian in any other South Asian country. India responded the way it did to the tsunami because of many individual traits of the politicians in power currently. It also did so because it has a position to maintain, and its own political calculations regionally.

India has its own horror stories. Dalits being systematically deprived of relief. Reports of violence against Dalits even in the midst of so much tragedy.

What is it about human nature that allows for such a thing? What is it that allows us to seize upon a moment of complete and total vulnerability and twist it to our gains?

What is it about 300 years of history? Where the so called upper castes reign abuse on the supposed lower castes?

It simply takes your breath away.

It is time to end this tale. It is time to make a new beginning. How and where it will start I don't know. But I sure would like to be around when it does happen.



Power of the Destroyer-Dancer

Ranjan

I am about 300 kilometers South of Chennai in Nagapattinam District under the aegis of the Hope Foundation. This is one of the worst affected areas of South India. The building where I work is a two-storey banquet hall used for weddings and similar occasions, all decorated with Christmassy tinsel streamers, which create a brightly coloured if incongruous ceiling for the bedraggled crowd it shelters. In the daytime the ground floor functions as “medical camp”, at night it houses about 2000 tsunami survivors who are homeless. Stainless steel banquet tables have been pushed back against the walls and here and there on these tables, a child, a girl, a youth lies variously asleep, curled up with a friend, or staring vacantly into space.

Assembly-line Healing; for the Body

In my 25 years of working as a healer I have found I get particularly good results with pain. So when I am invited to work at a tsunami relief camp I naturally gravitate to work with those in pain. When I enter the hall, Brinda is there. She is one of my fellow volunteers. Within minutes I am working on her shoulders to release the tension of five days of working with displaced persons. I get her to do a yoga neck-stretch. The children come to watch. By the next day they will be creeping up behind me and grabbing my shoulders in a repetitious kneading action, to the accompaniment of gales of laughter! Today for the most part they are silent, watching, unsmiling when I smile at them. A woman has been watching Brinda, who is now smiling and reporting that her shoulders feel SO much better. She shakes herself and shows she is moving more loosely. The watching woman has black eyes and her face is bruised from when

the tsunami dashed her against a pillar. She had lost consciousness and her six-year-old daughter who she'd been hanging on to. She never saw her child again. She doesn't know how she herself survived. Her whole body hurts. She goes to Brinda and questions her, "Can he help me?"

Her eyes are vacant and have a glazed look. I learn she can't sleep properly. She sits on the bench with her back to me. I lay my hand on her shoulders. They are heaving with every breath. She desperately needs to shift her breathing from costal to diaphragmatic, but it is too early for her to do breathwork. As I continue working, her breathing gets a little more even and the rockhardness in her shoulders abates. Twenty minutes later she is reporting that the pain is easing up. Brinda is sceptical. She questions the woman more closely. "No, really, the pain has eased up". In another ten minutes she reports that the pain has stopped. Suddenly there is a line of patients waiting for treatment. All women. The men keep their distance. Each patients reports their bodily pains clear up after the treatment. I work non-stop till 1.30 pm. Do I need lunch? I had a good breakfast and still feel full. No, I just couldn't eat a thing.



A child of 11 has been sitting in the line on the bench. Her unsmiling face has paid no attention to the goings on around her. Unlike me. I am conscious of the doctors just six feet in front of me. For every time I work on a knotted muscle and achieve some kind of release, out comes a loud burp! From me. When I concentrate on the energy work, my face has a tendency to contort. Whatever the doctors working just six feet in front of me may think, my behaviour has not gone unnoticed by the kids, who think it a great lark. The kids are everywhere, their quietness and shyness of the morning is a thing of the past by late afternoon. In whatever direction I look, there they are, making faces back at me!

As soon as I start working on the little girl with the unsmiling face the tears start welling up inside me. I don't know where to look. I bend over as much as I can, face down. And there are the faces of the surrounding kids, making faces back at me. Then they notice the tears. And they fall back. Silent now. Asoka, who has taken over the translating from Brinda, tells me the girl says she can't cry. She turns to look up at me and I see her eyes are bright with unshed tears, welling up, but not spilling over. She can't cry. So I must. I am racked with sobs that I try to be as unobtrusive about as I can, the tears just pour down my cheeks. Finally her body relaxes. She tells Asoka that her mother and father were "washed away". She has no living adult relative in the camp. She is quite alone. All attempts to elicit information about any adult relative fail. When I finish she goes over to the nurses and I see her conversing animatedly with them. Still no smile. But the glazed look and disassociation from her surroundings are gone.

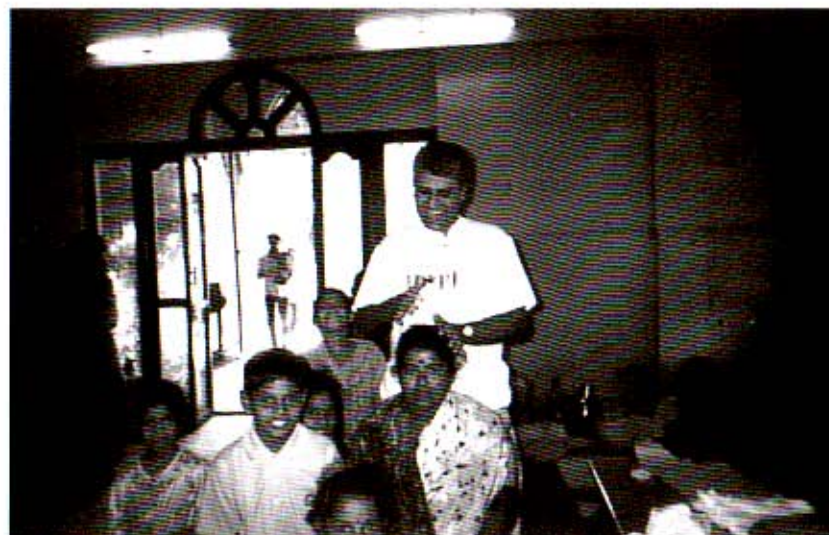
When I notice the little girl being quizzed by the nurses as to what on earth I have done, I am already working on an old woman. Her body too is all aches and pains. When I finish, Asoka asks her how she feels. Has the pain cleared up? She tells him she has not felt so good since 1958, the day she got married. Everybody laughs. It's the first laugh of the day. The next time I look up it is

4 pm. I need a pit stop. I visit the toilet: not bad, not bad at all; so much cleaner than I expected given two thousand people are using them. Clearly, the relief organisers have the logistics well in hand. I drink a litre of water and it's back to work till the clinic closes.

Sebastian, one of the volunteers from a church in Bangalore, is experiencing shoulder, back and knee pain. He has been working in Nagapattinam since the 26th December, the day of the tsunami. He's observed my efforts at the medical camp and asks whether I will help him. His shoulders are rock hard and his breathing costal. First we work on the breathing. It takes a while; I am tired and he is overtired. But in the end he gets it. I work on his shoulders till he reports that he has no pain in his shoulders. Now will I do his back and knees? But I am too tired. It is now after 11 pm. His back and his knees will have to wait.

It is difficult not to feel guilty. So I try to remember all the things I have heard and said to others about pacing and not over-extending oneself. I have never in my life worked like this. Typically I spend one hour on re-training, for example a patient's breathing, and roughly one hour for treatment. Here I've been working for roughly half-an-hour per patient, non-stop through the day. An unprecedented marathon for me! *It's been a hard day's work, and I am bappy as a dog. It has been a hard day's work, and I will be sleeping like a log.* (Sorry, Beatles!) And do I feel alright? The answer is a clear "Yes!"

The next morning, on arrival I am mobbed by a bunch of children. My hands are severally grabbed and I am physically dragged to a boy of about 9. The child is weeping because of a toothache. A chorus of little voices: Please, please, please! Help our friend! I call in a dentist. Yes, there is a cavity that needs a filling but there are no facilities for that here. The child can only be given a painkiller. But that is not enough for the children. They want me to work on him. I am besieged, tiny, trusting hands clutching mine. Pulling, pulling, pulling. Please, please, please.



OK, let's see what I can do. The boy comes over to my bench and I give him a treatment. By the time I finish he has fallen asleep. The children are satisfied.

Today the bench where patients wait to be seen by me is filled up not just with women but also with boys and men waiting for treatment. It seems that word has percolated through that these treatments, though so unfamiliar, do seem to help. One youth has been listening to what the translators are being told at the end of each session. Today he tells me, "I don't understand what you do, but I see the pain go away." That is enough for him; he wants a treatment for a painful gash in his leg. Once again, I am kept busy till the clinic closes.

I am fascinated by the pragmatic and empirical approach of these supposedly uneducated villagers. As they watched me get results with those I treat they come forward. With each patient here, they have reported that the pain has subsided and then gone completely. As others hear of the results I get, it gradually dispels their initial suspicion of what on earth am I doing and how could it possibly help? Clearly they have never encountered anything like it before

Mass-Produced Healing; for the Body Politic?

“Washed away” is how everyone speaks of those they have lost to the tsunami. Reflecting on what I have seen and experienced in Nagapattinam, I realise that I stand at the conjunction of major themes of human life: construction, destruction and re-construction, birth, death and re-birth. The devastation, of fisherfolk’s humble but beloved homes, gives us an unprecedented opportunity to start anew. A chance to stop beaches being treated as an open air toilet by providing sanitary facilities inside the homes we re-build; for schools and shops and roads to be built wisely, and for local people and officials to work together. Herein lies the challenge: Will history report that after washing away so much, the tsunami left us as a community *washed and cleansed* or *washed up and shamed*?

The tsunami has washed away life and loved ones and much else. But in its wake has come the greatest relief effort the world has ever seen, where individuals have dipped so deeply into their private pockets they have shamed their governments’ mangy contributions. Literally 100’s of millions of dollars have been raised by humans across the world, transcending all man-conceived divisions of creed, nationality and ethnicity. The media report that organisations like Oxfam, UNICEF, and “Save the Children” have stopped collecting for tsunami relief. This is historic. In the whole of human history there has been no comparable demonstration of our common humanity. It is not just the lives on the beaches that have been touched by this tragedy. Its magnitude is such that it has reached into every corner of the earth. We are all touched by it. And forever changed.

This disaster is challenging the very heart of bureaucracy. The real question is, has it got one? “A warning that would have alerted countries in the path of the Christmas tsunami was not sent because of red tape,” Geoffrey Lean writes in a British newspaper, disclosing that had the tsunami been a mere typhoon a warning would have been sent. UN officials have revealed that the scientists did not use the World Meteorological Organisation’s global telecommunication system to contact Indian Ocean countries because the “protocols were not in place”. Animals were smarter. Wildlife Parks report they moved to high ground and safety. It seems that the tsunami’s unprecedented death toll was not a result of God and Nature, but

sheer human ineptitude. Environmental scientists report a direct correlation between past ecological destruction by humans, both inshore and off-shore, and level of tsunami destruction. Colombo, for example, escaped unscathed because of a reef barrier we have not yet destroyed. At lunch with the son of a Sri Lanka Government Minister I am told of the owner of a small guesthouse on the Southwest Coast who had a dream that led him to tell all his guests to leave the coast and go inland, thus saving their lives.

Hollywood’s disaster movies project a picture of Western scientists as brilliant people committed in their endeavour to help people. Black Sunday proved the black heart of the bog of bureaucracy into which we train and nurture our *public sector* “public servants”. If this does not move us to action for change, what can? How do we bring to our public sector the dynamism, the entrepreneurial verve, the risk-taking vigour that builds up a society worth living in?

We see the cosmic duet of the Destroyer and the Dancer, the eternal Shiva in human life, in the stories of bureaucratic murder and stagnant brains that run side by side with stories of humanity; in the detail of the pathetic (non)response of both meteorologists and international politicians and in the profundity of the response of humans across the world: in the stories of looting that run side by side with the stories of heroism and selfless giving.

There are some hopeful indicators. When some paltry aid was offered, India had the self-respect and the resources to say to Bush, “Thank you, but no thank you”. India is doing a splendid job on her own. *The Hindu* newspaper quoted a man named Obed Tara of the 10th Madras Regiment of the Indian Army: “The sea took my uniform, my ration card, my service card, my tribal papers; it took everything;” that included his house, the phone booth that supplemented the family income and his car. The people in the Andaman Islands have no papers; not land, not bank accounts, not identity, not anything. They’ve all been washed away. The people are so indoctrinated into 19th century colonial bureaucracy that without papers they feel they have no identity. But are we going to let bureaucracy smother these people or have we got the humanity

to smother the bureaucracy instead? What kind of brain, what kind of training, what kind of functioning, what kind of heart are we going to demand of our government officials?

Major Roy is an example of the kind we need. He told me that he had recognised Obed Tara from his photograph as someone he has known for ten years. In a mere five telephone calls Major Roy's proved false Tara's belief that his identity in India depended on his papers. The man was picked up by the Army, flown to Calcutta and reunited with his regiment. Lost identity restored. Humanity triumphant!

So has this tsunami reached into all our lives, touching us with tears of a variety of hues as with challenges of a variety of hues. How appropriate that I stand in the primal territory of Shiva; find myself in the land that gave birth to the oldest living religion in the world and the oldest spoken language in the world in which is enshrined the concept that human life is a dance of birth, death and rebirth, a recurrent cycle that has no beginning and no end: alpha and omega.

Shiva shakti: power of the Cosmic Destroyer, power of the Cosmic Dancer. We are all challenged. What will we make of the world left behind? Will we continue in our loyalty to the superstitions, like nationalism and bureaucratic government, that divide our common humanity, or will we learn the lesson of this tsunami? Will we see that our humanity transcends all the man-made theoretical boundaries that divide and rule our humanity? Will we learn from the massive response across the world, human to human? For it transcends all the fragmentations of race, colour, class, creed and such theoretical divides with which we are conditioned to fracture our common humanity? Will we learn that humanity is indivisible?

The humans of our world have demonstrated this as fact in their spontaneous and openhearted response to this disaster. Can we teach our governments the same? Mother Earth may not give us humans another opportunity to learn this lesson.



A Question of Trains

Indran Amirthanayagam

Cheran writes, from the beach
in Bentota with his sister
and her children Boxing Day,
they saw the furious sea
and began to run
ahead of the first wave,
up the hotel stairs
to their third floor room
just in time. The wave knocked

out the first floor, then returned
for the second. The staircase stood.
Cheran and family stood
for twenty minutes, then waded
through the receding flood
to the highest ground,
Bentota Railway Station,
which by some miracle
still sent off trains.

By the time the third wave hit,
they were on their way back
to Colombo, while further south
the *Queen of the Sea*, the famous
honeymooners' train, was bludgeoned
off the tracks at Peraliya and passengers,
and villagers who climbed aboard
trying to escape the rising waters,
almost 2,000 people died.

The Sea Forsaken:

Reflections of a tsunami survivor

R. Cheran

I was born in Jaffna, in northern Sri Lanka. We had no mountains, no rivers. Monsoon rains were insufficient and unpredictable. Nothing grew naturally in my beloved but barren land, except perhaps men's beards. But we grew up with the sea. Songs about the sea by our fisher-folk permeated my childhood. The only beautiful natural asset we had was the sea; the vast, open sea. It was not always blue.

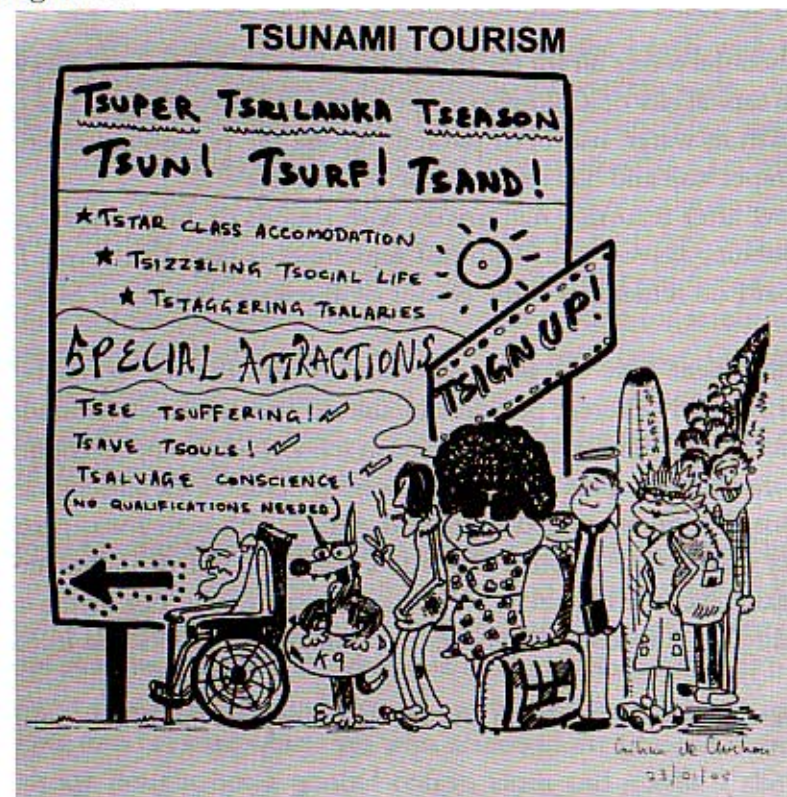
Many people know me as a sociology professor and researcher. While this is true, a more appropriate description would be to say that I am a poet – I work with words and imagination.

My first published poem appeared in a Sri Lankan literary journal in 1975. It was titled "The Sea". Ironically, my seventh collection of poems, released in India just a few days before the Asian tsunami, was titled "Return to the Sea". My fantasies, imagination and dreams have always been inseparably linked to the sea in all its forms, sounds, colours and depth.

On Dec. 26, 2004, I was on the beach with my sister, her two children and my brother-in-law, in a small village called Bentota, on the southern coast of Sri Lanka. Bentota is a fishing community with many beach resorts along the coast. It was the time of the full moon and many Sri Lankans had come to these resorts and the adjacent public picnic areas with their families to celebrate. It was about 8:45 in the morning and we had just returned from our breakfast. The children wanted to be in the pool and we pondered

the possibility of going for a swim or a enjoying a lazy, sit-back-and-read-snooze session. When we started walking on the beach trying to locate a few deck chairs, I noticed something strange. Suddenly the water was rushing towards us with ferocious speed.

My intellect did not light up but my instincts did. We ran and the sea chased us. I have never run that fast in my entire life, even when chased by gun-toting Sri Lankan soldiers in the mid-1980s. Putting her own instincts to work at the right moment, my sister managed to grab her daughters and run. With great difficulty we negotiated the rising water, floating debris and sinking hope. Our rooms were on the third floor and we got there just ahead of the surging waves below. By the time we reached our rooms, the first floor was gone. Within 20 minutes or so, the sea crawled back, taking everything on the ground.



What followed in the aftermath were moments of silence. I had no idea what had happened. All I could sense was that this was not ordinary. This body of water was not the one I had come to know, love and cherish.

We decided to leave, but before we could pack up, the sea came back for a second time – with a vengeance. This time the waves were giant monsters. They struck the second floor of our hotel with such power that all the glass windows, doors and patios were broken and tossed away like plastic toys. Fortunately, the third floor, where we were, remained untouched. Then the sea receded again. We made our way downstairs and waded through the waist-deep water that was moving less quickly by then. We scrambled up to the platform of Bentota's railway station – the highest terrain we could locate. The rest was just a dream.

When the waves hit for the third time, we were safely on our way to the capital city of Colombo in my brother-in law's Toyota. The car, awash in water, had been parked outside the compound beside a parapet wall and had its own story of survival.

Now, after recurring nightmares with sounds of broken glass and pounding waves, what I do not remember is how I survived. But what I do remember is the colour of the wave. It was not blue.

I no longer have the same relationship with the sea. It has been permanently altered, perennially shifted and perilously wounded. The classical Tamil poetry I studied in school had potent descriptions of three catastrophic tsunami submerging Lemuria, the ancient Tamil lands that once bridged India and Africa. Although I was certain this was just a fanciful legend, I have second thoughts now. Meanwhile, the imaginary web that once mediated our myths and reality lies ruined on the shores of Sumatra, Sri Lanka and India.

Strangely, I feel fragile and empowered; sleepless but still dreaming.



The Tsunami

Nafisa Thahirally

Ranmali did not how she came here. The last memories she could remember were of a cloudless sky, a calm tropical sea stretching into infinity and warm yellow sand between her toes. It was a perfect morning.

Someone gave her a blanket, soft not from here, '*pitarata adhaara*' Leela next to her said. It was velvety smooth like the cheek of her Sudoo...Where was he? Probably playing on the beach with his sister... Making *polkatta* pies...running into the water to wade...feet bare, shirtless body burnt berry brown in the sun. They never ventured too far: the sea their livelihood they respected it...knowing it's choppy waters in rough weather and its deceptive undercurrents. Hadn't Michael *Mama* lost his boat and life to it? Every evening they gathered in front of the statue of Mother Mary in the alcove in their hut bowing their heads in reverence, asking for safety and protection. Mostly the prayers went out for their father, Quintas, who spent most of his time at sea fishing. That morning, the day after Christmas he had been sleeping, having a late lie in after a night of celebration it being Christmas.

A good catch means money, food, drink, song and laughter. Then Quintas her man would get red in the face and amorous. His rough leathery hands creeping into her blouse and giving her breasts a gentle squeeze, a prelude to what was to come, He never beat her however drunk he got. He loved her, stroking her curly locks and looking into her care worn eyes with affection. At Christmas time he always bought her a printed cotton cloth and maybe a shiny

trinket to tie round her neck, which would soon be pawned or sold for some much needed necessity.

When had she wrapped herself in a blanket like this? The rough hand woven mat sufficed for her and Quintas. For the children it was a cloth that the lady of the big house who she helped with the housework had given her. Yes must separate the children soon...she thought. It was not good letting them sleep together any more as Tikiri was growing up fast, Her breasts budding, her limbs getting long and lanky...Where were they?

How often she had looked at the *'Iskola Hamines'* neat brick house and longed for a place like that for her self. Not like the makeshift cadjan hut of theirs reinforced with planks for protection against the weather. She worked hard to repair the patches in the roof that got damaged by wind and heavy rain. So my Sudoo and Tikiri never had to run around holding plastic cans like the children of the other fisher families when there was a heavy shower. One day, maybe a very good catch ...an abundance of silvery fish prancing about in the net, glistening like afternoon rain in the sun on jagged black rocks on the beach...The rope of the net patched and repaired by Quintas' wiry hands, as he merrily whistled a tune between the gaps in his teeth. The mesh bulged like the stomach of a pregnant woman struggling to keep its catch. How often had she and Quintas talked...lying side by side dreaming of better times...no more interest to pay the moneylender...? No more pawning the meager jewelry she possessed...or obtaining a loan from the bank to buy one of those fiberglass boats. Then they would harvest a bigger catch of fish. Then they would have enough money to buy a few bricks and plaster their home.

They would never sell their children like others. The local policeman had taken Sudoo's small friend Benedict to work in his house. Sudoo too would be a fisherman like his father and father before him, *The Sea* would sustain them like it always did. They would not stretch out their hands to anyone but to it. Her *'kelle'* Tikiri would be a

fisherman's wife just like her, helping her man to mend the nets, frying white rings of cuttlefish for tit-bits with his tot of arrack. They would exchange loud foul language over a disagreement when he had too much to drink and makeup in the dark of night under the blue black sky lit up with pinpoint stars.

Where was Quintas? Was he with the children? She could remember a wall of water, as she stood still mesmerized by its ferocity. Watching the sea rise in mighty waves from the flat rock where she was drying some sprats she had run, the roars giving chase.

Someone stretched out a hand. Here eat, you have to.
Nobody can be blamed for what happened.
Blame our sins.

She looked at the biscuit held: she saw a kind face. It was *'Podi Hamduruwo'* from the temple on the hill. She knew him and smiled. Her Sudoo loved the cream centered biscuits. His sharp teeth biting into the crunchy delicacy bought whenever she had an extra rupee from the sale of her mats.

She looked around her and noticed the packets of food by her side. Dhal, rice, noodles; *'Maggi'* her Tikiri used to call them after a popular brand, milk powder, sugar and tea leaves. Enough to last a month of full moons. She noticed a towel, white fluffy, clothes brand new still in their cellophane packing, underwear pink panties she blushed what would Quintas say, she usually never wore any. She heard her house would be rebuilt "brand new" Leela said.

Where were they? Her Sudoo? Her Tikiri? And Quintas? He was a strongman he should have saved himself. She got up as Podi Hamaduruwo beckoned her. You have to identify the bodies; we have to start burying them He told.

Blessings of the triple gem you are saved.
She looked out at the sea

Leela let out a cry...

Then they all wailed, they cried. They lamented

They cursed, they said they would never go back, never live by the sea again.

They hated it the black monster it had become, evil, devouring, sparing no one rich or poor, strong or weak, adult or child. A *Yaka*. But she, Ranmali, only saw life in it She saw her flesh and blood, her livelihood. She saw her Sudoo's laughing face, her Tikiri's soft eyes and her Quintas' love. They lay deep in its bosom dreaming the dreams that in flesh they never could, living the life the brown earth never gave them. Why should she not share their life and happiness? She got up and walked to its edge.



Fishermen Boxing Day 2004

David Amirthanayagam

Fault lines are cracks in a teacup
Earthquakes are an old lady's hiccough
And the prophetic tea leaves floating in the dregs
Fitfully tossed and finally side-stuck
Are so many dead fishermen.

Wives and sons and lonely daughters
Are laid on human biers,
Wail in strange agony with no lesson,
Clamber through the bric-a-brac
Become prey for the fishers of men.

How do we find the cause of this
Strange upswelling, this sea surge?
The farmer caste and the mountain dwellers,
Darkling ponderers, would call them back
These fishermen, for questioning.

But they are gone, the way of graveyards,
Gone to flowers, an ocean bodily blooming;
And I stumble upon a vacant shark,
Remnant of the surge on a sea street
And question his dying, gasping, fish dignity.

"Sir Shark," I said, "why these wafting fishermen,
This surging sea calamity, ionospheric discharge
In a cracked teacup? Why the fish slaughter,
And the lonely daughter?" "Fool," he replied drily-
"Ask me at home. I am a fish out of water."



The Water this Time

Dayan Jayatilleka

Perhaps TS Eliot was wrong. Perhaps April is not the cruelest month, December is. Last December, mobs of Sinhala-Buddhist fanatics attacked Christian churches, and Christmas Mass had to be attended under armed Police and STF guard. The surge of fanaticism ensured a dishonourable mention for Sinhala Buddhist extremism in the US State Department's International Religious Freedoms Report 2004. This December the same forces rioted against a concert by India's most popular entertainer, the day's street battles culminating in a lethal grenade attack. And then on the day after Christmas, came the tsunami.

James Baldwin's masterpiece *The Fire Next Time* carried on the flyleaf a verse from an old 'Negro spiritual', from which it derived its title:

*'God gave Noah the rainbow sign
No more water
The fire next time'.*

It may well be the reverse in our case. The Tsunami may have delayed or deflected Prabhakaran's war due to logistical considerations as well as those of world opinion, but the separation of Sri Lanka may occur more or less peacefully and speedily, a casualty of the earthquake in the sea-bed that registered 9 on the Richter scale, more powerful than a hundred thousand Hiroshimas. Not by fire but by water.

Who will better harness the power of that quake - the Sri Lankan state, to build a united country, or the Tigers, to accelerate separation? That will determine our destiny. *While the Tigers are hoping that a humanitarian crisis will develop in the North east*, the Sri Lankan state must

strive to pre-empt that, manifestly functioning as the state of the whole people, representative of all and responsive on the basis of *need*, not of electoral numbers, ethnic affinity and socio-political 'voice'.

Both the state and the international community must consider the country, the island, a single unit and the affected as people, human beings, irrespective of ethnicity, profile, location or electoral clout. The basis of relief, rehabilitation and reconstruction must be human need.

The state and the international community must work in tandem, not counter-clockwise or to checkmate each other. The state must not look after principally the South while the international relief effort prioritizes the North-east. This could result in symmetrical Southern and Northern backlashes, driving the tectonic plates of our society and state further apart. We could wind up a de-facto Cyprus or Yugoslavia.

If the international community is sagacious, it could neutralise Southern xenophobia in one go, not simply by throwing money at the problem, but by a dramatic, massive, prompt presence, efficacious and hands-on assistance, engagement and commitment. The tsunami has broken down the walls; we are ready for the world's embrace. If it is not forthcoming, the populist forces of vulgar egalitarianism, which have readily mobilised in this crisis, will irreversibly gain ground in the tsunami's wake. Nature's levelling down will be followed by its social equivalent, initially among the displaced but more generally in the relief, rehabilitation and reconstruction phase.

A Separate State of Mind

This disaster could be an opportunity for drawing together but it probably won't be. The catastrophe could be a full-stop to LTTE plans to wage war but I wouldn't bet on it. It may only have receded, to come back with greater force, like the tsunami's second wave.

The dialectics of nature exacerbate the contradictions of society and state. The fault lines in our society are as deep as those under the sea off Sumatra. The disaster hit Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim,

underscoring our common humanity and our common destiny on a small island. However, while the worst affected in relative terms (in proportion to population), were Tamil and Muslim, the reportage and reaction, the complexion of structures set up in response, have not yet adequately reflected that reality.

In fact it reflected another reality. We died as human beings, but mourned our dead as South, North and East - as Sinhala, Tamil, and Muslim. Tectonic plates shift more easily than attitudes. The main reason some of us were concerned about another community was just to reassure ourselves that they were worse or at least as badly hit as we were.

This natural disaster may therefore have the same effect as the Managua earthquake of 1972, the aftermath of which ripped open Nicaraguan society. If we, as a society, treat the North and East as a separate country, leading a separate existence, condemned to second class citizenship and a different destiny, a separate country is what it will have become once the rubble is cleared. The people there will have rebuilt their lives as inhabitants of a separate state.

Therefore what is crucial now is how the state handles the aftermath; how it is perceived to have handled the crisis, how sensitive, honest, efficient, committed, ethnically non-aligned and ethno-regionally equitable it is seen to be. *What is at stake is the moral standing of the state.*

Second Wave

Right now Mr. Prabhakaran must be doing the math: which side, which military machine was most affected? Which side can absorb the shock more? How many fighters should he deploy for relief and reconstruction efforts and for how long? Dare he go for it or should he wait for a decent interval? Would that mean passing up a great advantage, given that the Sri Lankan armed forces are wholly preoccupied with rescue and relief? Can he use the disaster to reinforce his propaganda, and should he wait for that propaganda offensive to unfurl? Prabhakaran will rethink, making a detour

through the rubble of the tsunami, reinforcing his claim to the ISGA, reaching out even further, to the world.

I think that Prabhakaran will seek to use this disaster in five ways:

1. *Permit a humanitarian crisis to develop which can reinforce the argument of the need for an ISGA*
2. *Use the absence of the ISGA and the travails of the Tamils as moral argument for a final leap to separation*
3. *Establish stronger ties with the international community especially international civil society, and attain de-facto recognition*
4. *Siphon-off funds and relief materials for his army.*
5. *Use the issue of resettlement of the now vastly greater number of displaced, as a battering ram against the high security zones.*

This can be prevented or minimised if the Sri Lankan state steps into the vacuum and is the engine of relief and rehabilitation for all its citizens, Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim, in a transparently fair, equitable and efficient manner. Right now the state is facing two contending gravitational pulls, emanating from two power centres: egalitarian-populist demands on scarce resources from/for the sensitive South, and an internationally sensitive North and East. This historic disaster has not obliterated our essential bipolarity. The waves having receded, that reality is more starkly visible.

If relief and reconstruction are done wrong we shall end up with a more populist-xenophobic Sinhala South and an even more domestically alienated and internationally networked Tamil and Muslim North-east. Done right, we can, with the international community, restructure while we construct, not simply re-construct: we can construct a new country and its precursor, *a new consciousness*, or at least remould and reform the old.

We now have the world's unprecedented attention, solidarity, sympathy and support. Conceived in pain and tragedy, this moment is unique, historic and precious. It is also fragile, and will never come again. Meanwhile our ethno-regional tectonic plates are moving.



The Ocean

Shireen Senadhira

A plethora of life's colours
 Akin to a palette
 Reflected on rippling translucence
 An orchestrated rhapsody
 Is the ocean
 Then the big bang of
 Vehement fury
 The tyranny of cracked coastlines and feelings
 The wave receded leaving behind
 Hollow shells of abodes and mud crates,
 Survivors denuded of family,
 Dwelling and neighbour
 Ghostly whispers drip from
 Damaged rafters and around corners
 In bleared towns

Once again the ocean is serene and inviting
 Luring us with the lull of music of shimmering waters
 But we view it with apprehension
 Trying to combat the dirge
 It left in its wake

The generosity of tragedy: the response to the Tsunami

Farah Mihlar Ahamed

I had previously hardly ever conversed with my French speaking neighbour in the apartment building we live in, here in Geneva, so seeing her standing at my door step clasping a bunch of flowers was somewhat a shock to me. She was rather emotional, rattling away how she heard we were caught up in the Tsunami and how worrying it had all been, I was struggling to respond, partly because I only have a basic knowledge of French and partly because I was still coming to terms with the grief.

When our rooms, little beach huts, in the holiday resort we were staying at, on that fatal day, began flooding, my family and I were enthralled, making jokes that the sea was coming in. If it had not been for a hysterical receptionist and an emergency alarm I probably would have simply stayed back dramatizing the incident to my two little nephews. Even as we were all crammed into the reception of our hotel, which was at a slight height, I was largely unaware of what was happening. But the fear slowly crept in as we heard successive waves crash into the buildings, breaking concrete, people shrieking, crying, trying to run away... nowhere.

I was ecstatic upon my return to Sri Lanka; I remember looking down from the plane at the vast Indian Ocean overwhelmed with emotion of seeing my family and friends, holidaying by the beach, simply enjoying the familiar. I think that level of euphoria was simmering in me even as we were evacuating our rooms walking through the flooded garden, some broken furniture and a muddy

breakfast room. There were half drunk coffee cups, kiribath and lunimiris on the plates; the furniture was in disarray some toppled chairs, the mucky pool. We had little idea of what had happened, only acknowledging that our holiday had ended and planning to go back to the room take our bags and leave, after all the pool was unusable. But trapped in the reception with water gushing past us carrying parts of furniture, frenzied people, some injured insisting others had died, fearing the unknown...we had to wait. Eventually when we decided to go and recover our baggage and some of us, on our own risk, climbed over debris and made our way to the rooms all we saw was flattened cabana's, piles of bricks, toilet parts floating at our feet, we had lost everything- or so we thought.

Wanting to move inland we waded through nearly a meter of water and made it to the main road. For hours we attempted get a call across to Colombo but had no luck. Our cars were flooded and could not be moved. Some hotel staff had already begun evacuating people to a temple nearby but as our turn came water poured in across the road blocking our escape. After about five hours we managed to get a call through to Colombo and about 3 hours later we were home. Reports at the time indicated that some 2000 people had been killed by the tsunami and several thousands had lost their homes, it suddenly dawned on us we had not lost anything at all.

By next morning the death toll had escalated to 14000 and in the days ahead as it soared the world begun to realize the enormity of the disaster.

It was because of this realization that I stood at my apartment door accepting a bunch of tulips and why for weeks we were inundated with calls and kind messages from across the world. It was because of the scale of tragedy that thousands of Sri Lankans simply loaded their cars with anything and everything they thought useful and drove to the affected areas, why millions of people across the world, some who had not even known where Sri Lanka was on a map, pledged money and goods to help victims, why a country so familiar

with killings and death publicly mourned, why a city that celebrated even through two decades of war went silent for the first time when the new year dawned.

Whilst we in Sri Lanka were trying to get a grip of the disaster, help the victims, bury the dead, across the world people were mobilizing themselves, collecting emergency relief items, pledging finances and passing on whatever expertise were needed at the time. Many Western governments that hesitated to help were shamefully forced to increase their pledge of aid because their generous public in an emotional outburst had collected millions more.

There were two initial lessons learned from the Tsunami. Firstly that people had immense power in steering their governments to act on international disasters and secondly that the world was still capable of displaying humaneness.

In Geneva, better known as the humanitarian capital of the world, weeks after the tsunami part of the debate in academic circles centred on why the incident had attracted so much international sympathy and aid when other tragedies like genocide in Rwanda and mass killings in Sudan did not earn similar reactions.

Many say that it was the enormity of the calamity, the extent of area it destroyed and its immediacy. Critics have argued that the international media initially displayed a slight sense of post-imperialistic attitude, focusing mainly on areas where westerners were killed or injured. It was also holiday season in many parts of Europe and the US, people were at home, simply watching the television and were bombarded with the news that talked of increasing death toll every hour. There was also some affiliation on the part of the west to these countries; Sri Lanka and Thailand in particular, are popular tourist destinations. People were able to relate to the areas and sympathise with the victims. Or perhaps, more so it is the larger distinction made in the minds of the public between natural disasters and man made disasters.

Though the quantum of aid that the tsunami attracted was pleasantly shocking, it can still be argued that many western states have been channelling huge funds across the developing world and international charities have always survived on contributions made by thousands of philanthropists. But such organised funding is incomparable to what happened after the tsunami, the impulsiveness, the genuineness and the lack of agenda marked the distinction.

However, whilst appreciating the exceptional momentum, it is difficult to ignore that there appeared to be some disparity between the reality of the disaster and the impact it had on people. As I returned to Geneva I was bursting with emotion on the intensity of damage and highly consumed over how much needed to be done to help the victims and bring back a sense of normalcy. I recall how shocked I was when a week later I attended the bi-weekly press conference held at the UN office in Geneva and realized the dilemma international humanitarian agencies were facing because so much aid had been channelled for Tsunami relief at the expense of other needy countries and critical issues. Rains were expected in Sudan, millions were displaced there was no funding for tents nor sufficient food for people who had fled the killing fields. I also remember another instance whilst writing up a letter appealing for assistance for tsunami orphans, I came across a UN report on Uganda where because of HIV/AIDS alone 25,000 children had become orphans, and another several thousand were orphaned by the conflict. The appeal I was typing out talked only of a total of 900 tsunami orphans in Sri Lanka.

There are no limits to tragedy in the world and no novelty in its extent. Yet there clearly has been a gap in responding to global disasters and many tragedies have gone unnoticed. The tsunami caused successive waves of western altruism as billions of dollars flooded into the affected countries but the world is capable of far greater assistance. Whilst we value the international benign reaction to the tsunami, it must not cloud the reality that the sum of public aid is highly disproportionate to the excessive spending power

displayed by other segments of society. According to media statistics available on the Internet this year an estimated \$12.8 billion was spent on Valentines Day gifts through the Internet. Last year in the UK an average 744 pounds per person was spent during Christmas and it was largely publicised in the media that celebrations to mark a second term for George Bush topped 40 million dollars.

What is for some people a routine expense could be a means of survival for others.

The Tsunami was certainly one of the biggest tragedies the world has seen in recent times, but it is not the only and it will not be the last. Natural disasters from earth quakes to floods plague many countries and hundreds of thousands of people suffer in situations of violence and conflict every day. UN Special Rapporteur on the situation in the Democratic Republic of Congo in a recent article on Mass Rape and sexual violence in the country in the Human rights newsletter 'Respect' quotes UN Under-Secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs Jan Egeland as saying that there is more than one Tsunami ravaging humanity today. He goes on to quote author and Rwandan genocide survivor Yolande Mukagasana who asks, "Is the international community more comfortable intervening in cases of natural catastrophe than manmade disasters because the former do not raise fundamental questions regarding the responsibility of government?"

The impact the tsunami had on millions in terms of the sympathy and assistance it generated was unparalleled at the time, but it must not be turned into some rare phenomenon.

Sri Lanka plays a critical role as a catalyst in continuing this momentum of mass generosity. We have often been classified a country of lost opportunity but the magnitude of devastation can overemphasise the prospects for change. We have an opportunity to start again, to unite, to develop, to ensure equality, to promote human rights, to do things right.

Most importantly to give faith to the millions of people who impulsively pledged their money, to let them know that their generosity was not in vain.

Perhaps there is too much idealism in this prospect, to believe that deep-rooted problems that have gripped Sri Lanka for decades can be wiped out by the tragic events of a tidal wave, or to expect that one charitable reaction will snowball into an initiative to end global poverty.

But it is probably better to grab the opportunities that are staring at our face than bury ourselves in the tragedy.

Standing at my apartment door I went back recalling the events of that fatal day to my neighbour. I realise just how lucky we were. A string of seemingly simple moves saved our lives that Sunday morning, getting up late, going for breakfast instead of a walk by the beach, staying together, leaving our room in time. Just a second's hesitation could have made every difference.

The tulips she gave me died some days later but she and I are getting to know one another a little better.

The tsunami brought death and destruction to the lives of many people across borders but it also brought enormous opportunities. For survivors like me, a chance to value life. For Sri Lanka a chance to start again and for the world perhaps a chance to bridge the gap.



FACE

Indran Amirthanayagam

Imagine half your face
rubbed out yet
you are suited up
and walking
to the office.

How will your mates
greet you?
with heavy hearts,
flowers,
rosary beads?

How shall we greet
the orphan boy,
the husband whose hand
slipped, children
and wife swept away?

How to greet
our new years
and our birthdays?
Shall we always
light a candle?

Do we remember
that time erases
the shore, grass
grows, pain's
modified?

At Hikkaduwa
in 1980 I wrote a ditty,
a sailor's song
about rain
in sunny Ceylon.

I don't know
what the Calypsonians
would compose
about this monstrous
wave, this blind hatchet man;

don't know
the baila singers' reply;
we're a happy
and go people
yet the fisherman's wife

knows
her grandfather
was eaten by the ocean,
fisher communities
have suffered in time;

and what's happened
now is just another feast
for that bloody,
sleeping mother
lapping at our island;

but what if the ocean
were innocent,
the tectonic plates
innocent, what if God
were innocent?

I do not know
how to walk upon the beach,
how to lift corpse
after corpse
until I am exhausted,

how to still the tears
when half my face
has been rubbed out
beyond
the railroad tracks

and this anaesthetic,
this calypso come
to the last verse.
What shall we write
in the sand?

Where are gravestones
incinerated? Whose
ashes are these cupped,
floating through the house
throttled by water?

Shall we build
a memorial,
some calculated distance
from the sea, in a park,
in the shape of a giant wave

where we can write
the names of the dead?
Has the wave lost
its beauty, considered
now obscene?

Yet tomorrow
we must go to the ocean
and refresh ourselves
in the sea breeze
down in Hikkaduwa

where it is raining
in sunny Ceylon.
Tomorrow, let us
renew our vows
at sunrise, at sunset.

Let us say, the next time
the ocean recedes
and parrots gawk
and flee, and restless
dogs insist their humans

wake up, let us not peer
at the revelation
of the ocean bed,
nor seek photographs.
Let us run to higher ground,

and gathered there
with our children,
our cats, dogs,
pigs, with what we've
carried in our hands

—albums, letters—
let us make a circle,
let us kneel, sit,
stand in no particular
direction, pray

and be silent,
open our lungs
and shout thanks
to our gods
and our dogs.

Opinion

Seductions of the Event Disasters, Human Solidarity and Broadcast Television

Robert Cruz

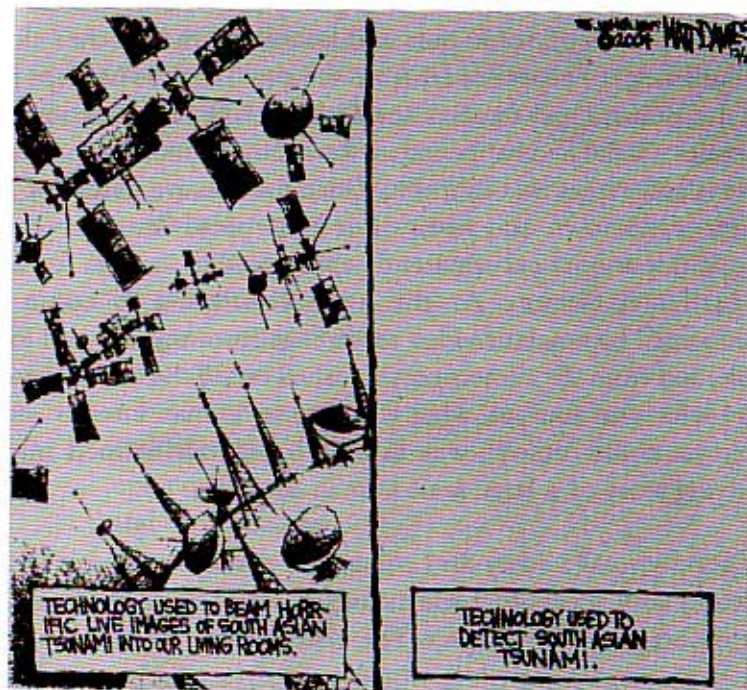
"The medium's gaze is brief, intense and promiscuous" - Michael Ignatieff (1997)

Among the countless anecdotes about the tsunami on the morning of December 26th in Sri Lanka is the one about a local television newsreader in Colombo who apparently asked viewers (in Sinhala) to "enjoy" (*rasa vindinna*) the footage the station had obtained of a surge of sea water that was lapping gently at that time around the base of the walls of some huts and houses on the beaches along the south western coast not far from the city. This was perhaps just after the tsunami had struck elsewhere. He/she did not know the true scale of what had happened on the southern and eastern coasts of the island earlier that morning. Once the massive nature of the disaster was known and news of it had spread throughout the country, this announcer apparently apologized to viewers for his/her earlier statement. As the news continued to come in, accompanied by amateur video recordings from tourists and local people, and from the camera crews rushed out to the affected areas by the television stations, what was a mere 'human interest' story which we could 'enjoy', was rapidly been transformed into a horrifying story of a large scale human tragedy.

Very soon virtually every Sri Lankan and perhaps every person in the world with access to a television set was glued to the near 24-hour coverage of the disaster. The visuals, which were becoming more sophisticated and professional as the days went by, were being

provided by television crews from most of the leading broadcasting networks around the world who had descended on the country within a day or two of the first waves striking the shores. It was this near blanket coverage and world-wide dissemination of the pictures that created the massive response in local and international aid from governments, institutions and individuals. The money, goods and services coming into the country was unprecedented. Foreign journalists, television crews, aid workers etc. arrived in the country and spent money in the hotels, restaurants and supermarkets, and on house rents and local transport and other amenities. This virtual flood of cash distorted our economy and apparently in the weeks after 26/12/04, Sri Lanka's balance of payments went from the red into the black through no effort of its own.

People around the world responded to their consciences and felt a moral duty to do something immediately. Hence the influx into the country of money, goods, and personnel with various skills, wanting to help. People overseas who couldn't make the trip, organized



collections of cash and essential items to be flown or shipped over. The horrific yet stunning pictures being broadcast throughout the world roused in Ignatieff's words "the conscience of ethical universalism" that urged people into moral solidarity with the stranger. Michael Ignatieff argues that "television has become the privileged medium through which moral relations between strangers are mediated in the modern world".

The notion of an "ethical universalism" which suggests that all human beings are equal and have moral obligations towards each other, first appeared during the early Christian era in Europe. It was however compromised by the Reformation and by European colonial expansion. The disunity of Christianity after the Reformation threatened the universality of the "all men are brothers" ideal. Different Christian denominations had different and conflicting laws and ethical values. What were arguably socio-political acts such as blasphemy, heresy and disobedience, were defined as sins against God and used to justify the Inquisition and the wars and slaughter amongst the Christians of Europe. The modern doctrine of toleration emerged from a disgust with this state of affairs within Christendom where the so-called sins against God were used to justify grotesque sins against men, women and children. Toleration, mainly between the different Christian communities, was therefore based on a "shared adherence to the idea of natural human dignity and equality". But with the colonial / imperial expansion of Europe into the Americas, Africa and Asia, the notion of "natural human dignity and equality" was found to apply only to white Europeans (and primarily male at that). The belief in the division between 'us and them' (between white and black, Christian and 'heathen', 'civilized' and 'savage'), led to the genocidal decimation of native populations in the colonized (and Christianized) world. The fierce criticism of this resulted in the gradual emergence of a sense of guilt and of a moral 'conscience' among sections of the colonizing peoples. One of the earliest results of this version of a universalist solidarity was the agitation (but not denying the economic reasons as well), which led to the abolition of the slave trade and of slavery by the 1850's.

But this universalist solidarity was compromised by another issue. From the Middle Ages, Christian Europe had grappled with what one's duty was towards relieving the needs of the poor. Was it compulsory or voluntary? It was argued that if it was compulsory then the poor would have a justifiable right to the property of the rich. This would have upset the rights to private property, which had become the basis of social order itself. So the Church argued the case for the voluntary relief of the needs of the poor. But this made the poor dependant on charity, which might not be given always - they could get poorer, even more deprived and starve to death. Eventually Christian teaching opted for limits to 'ethical universalism' and European natural law made moral obligations towards the poor a voluntary exercise. A hierarchy of moral obligations were also put into place. One's first concerns had to be for kith and kin ('charity begins at home'), next came one's neighbours, co-religionists, co-citizens and finally the stranger, the outsider. This hierarchy of moral obligations and solidarity still continues today. As Ignatieff's says:

"There is thus a great deal of moral confusion in the supposed outflow of charitable empathy overseas. And it reflects a long-standing conflict between the conscience of ethical universalism and the demands of a private property system, and between the known subject of need and the stranger at the gate".

The tsunami of 26/12/04 roused this mostly dormant "conscience of ethical universalism" within people around the world. They were seduced by broadcast television's Event of the tsunami's aftermath. For a few days and weeks, the conflict that Ignatieff talks about between this conscience and the demands of a private property system were temporarily put aside. The more horrific the visuals, the greater the stirring of conscience, and greater the donations. Seduction is perhaps the right word. It is a process carried out via television for the simple (or perhaps not so simple) reason that the greater percentage of human beings on this planet continue to be

in an endless 'disaster' state defined by poverty, homelessness, starvation and injustices of various kinds. There is no great urgency or rush to come to their assistance by the greater world community. They have to be seduced into doing so. Only a huge spectacular visual Event such as a tsunami could make people pay attention. In the very tsunami hit areas of Sri Lanka, tsunami refugee camps came up in close proximity to refugee camps of people made homeless due to the nearly 23 year ethnic war in Sri Lanka. The former received all the immediate attention and the aid. The latter were resigned to not having visits from foreign television crews. But it took just a few weeks for the television cameras to stop visiting the tsunami camps as well. As the weeks and months piled on and the tsunami relief effort got bogged down in bureaucratic inefficiency and political inertia and intrigue, the spotlights moved away and today we see very little coverage of the tsunami story on television. It's not an Event anymore. Television's "gaze was brief and intense" and this "promiscuous" medium moved elsewhere.

Broadcast television feeds on the 'Event', the 'happening' - anything out of the ordinary, anything that is not a part of routine daily life. Spectaculars like Royal Weddings, funerals of famous people (like for instance the recent death and election of the Pope), Independence and May Day celebrations, the State opening of Parliament, Elections, sporting events like international cricket and tennis finals, beauty contests, etc, etc, etc. Many of these are at the 'feel good' end of the Event scale. Most of them guarantee large television audiences and large revenues from advertisers.

The nature of the Event and its scale are important. Television's response would be in proportion to its size and immediacy. It has to happen now before our eyes. It has to be "spectacular" in the sense that it has to have visual appeal. It has to be an immediate and short term experience. The more long-term and long drawn out it gets, audiences would lose interest and their attention would shift to the next 'Event' television chooses to broadcast. Which is why the television coverage of 'feel-good' events are easier. The coverage of 'feel-bad' events like huge natural disasters which prick the

conscience and require a moral response, are different, if not harder. They have special characteristics. If the broadcasters dwell too long on them they would be accused of giving into voyeurism and in some cases be held responsible for causing mental distress among viewers, especially children. Such cases of anxiety and panic attacks even among children living deep inland, away from the coast line, were being reported by doctors in Sri Lanka in the days following 26/12.

Television news wouldn't tell us that today the buses and trains ran on time. It would tell us about the out-of-the-ordinary Event of a bus and train colliding at a rail/road crossing killing a number of people. Similarly, reports of the daily deaths in battles during the height of the twenty or so years of war and the extra-judicial killings taking place now with increasing regularity, during the so-called peace, do not warrant special 'breaking news' treatment on television. They have to take on the nature of an 'Event' to make the headlines on the box. They have to be big, like for instance, suicide bombings, large scale massacres, the big battles in Mullaitivu or Elephant Pass, and the killing of important people like Neelan Thiruchelvam and recently, 'Taraki' Sivaram and Nizam Muthaliff. It was 'Events' like these which were given time and space. The killing of ordinary foot-soldiers and cadres in daily skirmishes, the regular abductions of children, the homelessness of whole families and communities due to the war - all of these barely made the daily headline news. On the other hand if a government agency or NGO officially announces some statistics which showed the 'out-of-the-ordinary' nature of some of these happenings - for example the increase in the number of refugees in the camps or the number of child abductions - this would then take on the nature of at least a 'mini-Event' and make the television headlines. Similarly the abduction and murder of a known 'name' like Sivaram brings the other little-reported killings also into the limelight. For a brief period the broadcasters start seeing the patterns and the scale of these murders and they take on the characteristics of an 'Event' and they get reported. But not for long. Television is promiscuous - it needs to move on to the next Event, and we move with it. There is a profound

contradiction within broadcast television. According to Philip Abrams it can make us pay attention, and prick our consciences in the process, but this is short lived because it is also superficial, causes boredom, and tends to trivialize. If anything is too horrific to watch, it is so easy to switch off or switch channels.

We have a common sense belief that it is mainly through the so-called 'mass media' that individuals are drawn into solidarity with each other, become socialized and made aware of their moral duties towards others. We assume that it is mainly through these media that moral concerns and moral issues are created and expressed in modern social and cultural situations, and that the media are important channels through which individuals and audiences become aware of what is said to be right and wrong.

Taking television as an example, programmes like news bulletins, current affairs, documentaries and dramas are believed to be able to report on and create situations where audiences, through being made aware of each other in their own localities, and of "strangers" in other parts of the world, are invited to reflect on, respond to, and take positions on a variety of ethical and moral issues. This awareness of strangers in other parts of the world is considered of immense moral importance today, it raises the issue of what our moral obligations are to them. But the problem is that in seeing solidarity like this, is it the same as doing something about it? The problem is that the role of the media as channels of communication of moral values is not the same as the role of the media in instilling moral behaviour or as an agent of moral progress, as Keith Tester says - "Because it can happen does not mean that it does happen". We can be moved by pictures of human suffering but do we do enough about it? Even if we can do something, is it enough?

The now legendary Live Aid Concert in 1985 to raise money for famine relief in Ethiopia is one well studied example of how human solidarity and moral relations were negotiated between strangers on the broadcast media like television. It gives us an analytical context within which we can understand the relationship between the media

coverage of the Event of the destruction caused by the tsunami of 26/12/04 and the reaction of people around the world. Keith Tester argues that the message of the 1985 LIVE AID concert was not famine relief but broadcast television and its abilities. The linking of audiences worldwide via satellites, the massive scale of organization that went into getting the various big name pop stars to participate, and transporting them across oceans to appear in the two concerts in the UK and the USA only proved the efficiency of the television institutions and their ability to send pictures from virtually anywhere on earth. The concert also confirmed the efficiencies of the international banking system. Donations were transferred from all over the world via telephone and other instantaneous electronic means. Debits and credits were handled with ease. We were kept updated every few minutes during the concerts about the growing total of money being collected.

It is true that many people around the world were moved to send money, and that millions of dollars were collected for Ethiopian famine relief. Ignatieff claims that this concert, helped by the “promiscuous voyeurism of visual culture” had a huge impact on western charity. Suggesting that it was “a hopeful example of the internationalization of conscience” he calculates that nearly 60 million sterling pounds was given to famine relief agencies. Also public pressure was put on governments to act fast, and scandals like the huge grain surpluses of the European Union, kept in warehouses to control prices, were exposed on television. Television forged direct people-to-people links, which helped overcome government-to-government inertia, and it reduced the time lag between pressure and action. More lives were saved.

However the outpouring of moral solidarity was short lived. The root causes of the famine had not been and never could have been solved by the Live Aid Concert. Ignatieff argues that television ignores disasters like famine only till they acquire epic proportions like in Ethiopia in 1983. Also the horrors drop out of the news when another disaster appears. By the early 1990's there was famine again in Ethiopia and Somalia. The civil war had escalated. And the

disgraceful television coverage of the infamous landing of US troops on 8th December 1992 on the beaches of Somalia ostensibly on a humanitarian mission to relieve the starving and dying population who were at the mercy of warring warlords, was an expensive media exercise, allegedly far greater than the amounts collected for famine relief itself. Famine once again threatens Ethiopia. And poverty in Africa as a whole and around the world has increased so rapidly that Bob Geldoff, the driving force behind Live Aid 1985, feels compelled twenty years later to organize the LIVE 8 protest concerts in June 2005 to coincide with the meeting of the leaders of the world's 8 richest countries, the G8, to prick their consciences and get them to make decisions which will eradicate world poverty. The by-line of this concert is ‘make poverty history’. But we know these are mere words. We will be seduced once again by this huge television Event, with its galaxy of stars from the world of popular music. The root causes of poverty around the world will never be solved by another rock concert.

Because of the massive television coverage of the aftermath of 26/12, huge amounts of cash were donated and goods and services poured into the country. Television also covered the fund-raising concerts organized by celebrity musicians from all the musical genres, classical, pop etc., and the matches and games played by the world's famous sportsmen - cricketers, footballers, rugby players - to raise funds for rebuilding and rehabilitation. The Event of the tsunami itself and the subsequent Events held thereafter in its name saw broadcast television at the height of its capabilities. The human disaster was too huge to be ignored. Globalized television had to react. The voyeurism and the consciences of people were fed by these events. People reacted, they helped and donated funds. But now the broadcasters have moved on. And the world community, with a few exceptions, has stopped watching, stopped reacting and stopped donating.

Tester is quite scathing in his analysis of the media and its ability to ensure continuing moral solidarity among people. He argues that there is no basis for which it can be taken for granted that the

audiences watch the news and other programmes with the kind of moral seriousness and commitment that moral philosophy presupposes. As we become more and more familiar with pictures, which should inspire a moral response – they actually lessen our ability to respond positively. We are desensitized to the enormity of it all, we become anaesthetized to media images. The very success of the media to tell us so much about the world (its claims to universality) actually diminishes our ability to act in the world.

The “anaesthetic effect” of the media over our abilities to identify and communicate moral problems and values instills tolerance – the more shocking an event or an episode is on television, we go and make a cup of tea instead of enduring it. We might be disturbed enough to make a contribution to the relief effort. This effect makes us incapable of doing anything serious about it. A moral exhaustion sets in. With international broadcasting as it is today, the minute a disaster happens somewhere in the world, we see it on our screens, “even before the wounded are carried out”. This effect is caused by the very nature of the programming. The most disturbing items are framed between the most trivial. We forget the horror the minute the images or the programmes change.

It is not necessarily the case that pictures on television and stories in our books and magazines are capable of adding anything at all to the course of moral progress. Whether the reaction of the world’s people to the tsunami relief effort has done anything concrete and long term towards this is debatable. It is argued that many issues that should be of moral concern do not come before us in the media. Through institutional media processes like editorial control and corporate decision making and other aspects of social and cultural relationships of power, it is possible for institutions to operate in such a way that decisions never have to be made about certain issues. According to Bachrach and Baratz this “non-decision making” is a means by which “demands for change in existing allocation of benefits and privileges in the community can be suffocated before they are even voiced”. In the way media institutions operate, certain issues never come before the audience so as to become moral problems. The case of increasing poverty in

our part of the world is a case in point. From just an analysis of the world presented to us through advertising on the media, one would think that the poor do not exist.

The philosopher of culture Jean Baudrillard argues that “we are in a universe where we have more and more information and less and less meaninginformation is directly destructive of meaning and signification, or neutralizes it. The loss of meaning is directly linked to the dissolving and dissuasive action of information, the media and the mass media”. The science of Sociology once used to assume that human socialization was measured by exposure to media messages, and that underexposure meant one was asocial or desocialized. Now sociologists believe this to be one of the enduring myths of our times. “The fact is that (our social organization) is collapsingjust where we think that information is producing meaning, it is doing the exact opposite”.

Media cause both meaning and the social to disappear. As Tester claims “When technology promises the making of the greatest possible solidarity between humans – all that results is a moral boredom and dullness”. Media audiences have become unconcerned about the goodness or badness of what they see. The possibilities are immense of the media being the best channel for making moral solidarity between people. But the very forms of the organization and reception of the media means their content could never have that profound moral effect. Terrible events become banal. The more they are reported, the less of an impact they make. The media do not sensitize us to moral problems – they anaesthetize us. The media do not promote solidarity between ‘us’ and ‘them’ – it irrevocably prejudices it, it hinders it.

This is a shortened and revised version of an article by Robert Cruz titled “Are the Media Detrimental to the Ethical Community?” published in *Dialogue (New Series)*, Vol. XXX (2003).

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Opinion

When the Wind Blows. . .¹

Dr Sriyanie Miththapala

The waves came. The waves damaged. The waves receded. Amid the destruction, the debris and the dead, amid fears of recurrence, scientists assured us that tsunamis were rare in the Indian Ocean, and that the last tsunami to reach Sri Lanka occurred way back in 1883.

Many queries have been raised about whether some of this damage could have been avoided by an early warning system. Much has been debated about how the coastal towns and villages should be rebuilt and where they should be rebuilt.

Very little is being discussed about how our country should be prepared for *recurrent* natural disasters. It seems that every year, we, as a nation, struggle to deal with floods in the south, landslides in the Sabaragamuwa province, cyclones in the east and droughts in the southeast. It seems that every year, we are caught unprepared.

Very few people know that climate experts predict that extreme weather events such as floods, cyclones, storms and droughts *will* become more frequent in the future.

Very few people pay attention to climate change and global warming.

1. This article first appeared in the Sunday Times of March 6th 2005. An adapted version of this is posted on the IUCN's Website at www.iucn.org

There is now solid data that that human activities are resulting in the warming of our planet, faster than any time in the past 10,000 years. Emissions of carbon dioxide (CO₂), nitrous oxide and methane (collectively called greenhouse gases) have increased since the time of the industrial revolution. These gases function much like glass panes in a greenhouse, allowing light in, but preventing heat from escaping. This greenhouse effect, as it is commonly called, is important: without it, the earth would be too cold for humans to live; too much of it and the earth becomes too hot.

During the last century, the concentration of CO₂ in the atmosphere has risen by twelvefold. Our excessive use of coal and oil, our innumerable vehicles that guzzle petrol and our factories are spitting out enormous quantities of CO₂ into atmosphere. Meanwhile we are decimating forests that soak up CO₂. Every year, about 23 billion metric tonnes of CO₂ are emitted into the atmosphere.

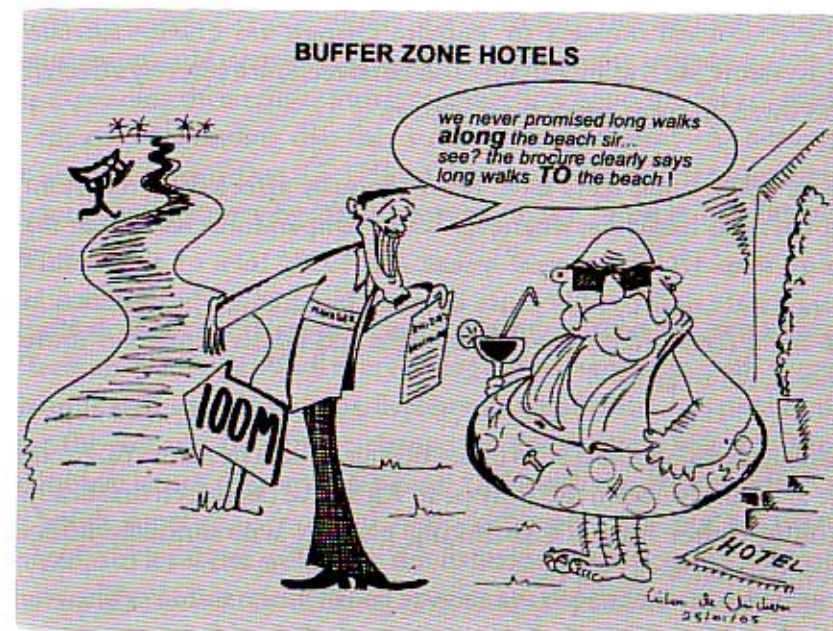
The result of these emissions and the resultant increased greenhouse effect is a distinct warming of the earth. During the last century, global temperature increased by about 0.5°C - measured as the largest increase in thousand years.

The records are startling: the five hottest years on record are in the last decade and this one. The 90s were the warmest decade in a century, with 1998 as the hottest year on record.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has estimated that global temperatures could rise by 1.4°C to 5.8°C during the next century.

So what is the big deal if the earth warms and the 90s were the hottest decade in a century? So what if it gets hotter still?

The IPCC predicts that climate change could set off extreme weather events such as intense rainstorms and cyclones, which result in



floods, and increased heat, which result in droughts. Fires, El Niño and La Niña occurrences will become more frequent they say, and arid regions in tropical countries like Sri Lanka could become deserts. Temperate regions, on the other hand, could become tropical.

Indeed, 2003 recorded extreme heat waves in Europe and India, with the consequence that as many as 20,000 and 1,500 died of heatstroke in Europe and India respectively. It was also the year where cyclonic activity caused floods in Sri Lanka and left 350,000 homeless, 300 dead and many missing. Last year, there was a higher-than-expected frequency of hurricanes in southeastern USA. In total, the WHO reported that climate change caused the deaths of 150,000 people in the world in the year 2000. (These numbers pale into insignificance compared to the magnitude of deaths and displacement due to the tsunami, *but note that these disasters, unlike the tsunami in the Indian Ocean, are predicted to recur and recur frequently.*)

The ecological impacts of climate change are grave. Certain ecosystems, such as mountains and coral reefs, are severely affected and these, in turn, affect their species.

Since 1979, coral reefs have been seriously affected by recurrent global mass bleaching whenever water temperatures have risen for more than 1°C for several weeks. In 1998, 16% of the world's corals were destroyed because of mass bleaching. The destruction of coral reefs affects coastal fisheries and leaves shorelines more vulnerable to erosion.

Global warming also results in melting glaciers. The extent of Arctic ice and the glaciers in the European Alps have decreased drastically. Among other impacts, shrinking glaciers will seriously affect downstream water supplies.

Melting glaciers in turn, result in sea-level rise. The current rate of sea-level rise is three times the historical rate and sea levels have already risen by 10-20 centimetres in the last century. The IPCC predicts that global sea levels will rise between 0.09 to 0.88 metres by 2100. This could mean that many coastal countries and cities such as Bangladesh, Mumbai and Bangkok could become inundated by seawater.

In addition, climate change will affect the planet's hydrology, causing changes in seasonal flows. Dry areas will become drier, wet areas could become wetter.

Warming temperatures have been shown to result in changes in the patterns of the flowering of plants in the spring, colour changes of plants in autumn, migration of animals, hatching of young and animal hibernation. When different species react differently to this change in different patterns, interactions between species could become disrupted. If many interactions are so affected, then entire communities could become disrupted, and with them, their ecosystems.

Further, warmer temperatures are affecting the natural range, distributions and densities of many species. Some tropical species are expanding their ranges into temperate areas, and species adapted to the cold are finding that they can't tolerate the heat. A startling projection reveals that 15-37% of species from different regions may become extinct by 2050 because of the impacts of climate change.

If the ecological effects are clearly alarming, then the economic effects are terrifying. With every change in an ecosystem, with every disruption of natural patterns, livelihoods are affected. It is predicted that the impacts of climate change on arable lands will result in economic losses of some 56 billion US\$, with the greatest effects in South America, Africa and Asia. Although it has not yet been valued, sea level rise will affect the fisheries sector because 70% of the world's commercially fished species are dependent on estuarine or nearshore habitats for completion of their life cycles. It is predicted that by 2050, if present trends continue, four billion people will be affected by water shortages. This increased use of water will be seriously exacerbated by climate change. The costs of decreased agricultural production, altered flows of rivers and irrigation systems, storms that ravage coastal areas and floodplains will be astronomical.

These projected agricultural losses could increase the percentage of hungry people in the world, while the projected impacts of water supplies will leave 1600 million people without adequate water by 2020.

With the warming of the earth, mosquito species have expanded their ranges so that mosquito-borne diseases such as malaria are spreading to higher altitudes in Asia, Central Asia, Latin America; dengue to Mexico; and yellow fever to Colombia. Climate change is therefore also already affecting human health.

In short, climate change will not only be damaging to livelihoods, to nature, and to economic security, but will also ultimately

undermine development. It is imperative therefore, that we must know what is being done to mitigate the impacts of climate change and how we can adapt and live in a world that will be so severely affected by climate change.

At the famous 'Earth Summit' held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, the reality of climate change was accepted by the environmental community. A Framework Convention on Climate Change was drawn up by the United Nations. Subsequently, in 1997, 180 countries signed an amendment to this framework convention in Kyoto, Japan. Called the Kyoto Protocol, this legally binding amendment committed 38 industrialised countries, once they ratified the Protocol, to reduce the emissions of greenhouse gases in the world by 5% from 2008 to 2012.

In order to become effective, the Kyoto protocol had to be ratified by 55 parties to the Convention, and also by parties whose greenhouse gas emissions accounted for 55% of the total. It took two long years and considerable political manoeuvring for both these clauses to be satisfied, and it finally came into effect on February 15th this year. Sadly, but perhaps not surprisingly, given President George Bush's environmental policies (or lack of them), the USA, the greatest emitter of greenhouse gases in the world, has not ratified this protocol.

Hearteningly, some major corporations such as British Petroleum among others have already reduced their emissions. Others are manufacturing Energy Star appliances that use less energy and therefore emit less CO₂. Climate change has been put on the agenda as a major issue of concern in organizations such as UNEP and IUCN-The World Conservation Union.

Unfortunately, even if the targets of the Kyoto Protocol are met and other companies reduce emissions, the current trends will probably continue for another half century, because greenhouse gases remain active in the atmosphere for a long time.

What then should be the response to climate change? At local levels, the single most important response is adjusting or responding to climate change - i.e. adapting to climate change.

Being prepared like the proverbial boy scouts is possibly the most important thing we can do to deal with climate change. Comparisons show that the impacts of the same hurricane, which hit Florida and Haiti, were felt more in Haiti because Haiti was less prepared for natural disasters.

Reacting to an extreme weather event, as we are doing now as a response to the Tsunami, is one thing; anticipating climate change, planning in advance to minimise damage from an extreme weather event and responding to it in a pre-planned manner that minimises risks is the way forward. For example, when the National Weather Service issues a hurricane warning in south east USA, for an entire day, all public media stations - TV and radio - blare out a test emergency warning signal - with clear instructions on how the real warning would be played. All inhabitants are expected to tape their windows to prevent glass panes from flying and causing harm if it breaks. There are set evacuation routes and set evacuation centres which reduce panic when the warning is given. Volunteers of essential services are called in. As a graduate student in Florida, I have personally experienced the effects of a clear and planned response of an early warning system to an extreme weather event. Damage to property may not be prevented, but certainly, human lives are saved.

We have learned many lessons as an aftermath of the tsunami but we need to learn to plan and be prepared for those extreme weather events that affect us year in year out. For unlike Ruskin who said that 'there is no such thing as bad weather', we know different.



A wake-up call for humanity

Tasneem Akbarally

The tragic disaster of the 26th of December 2004 should, I think, be seen as a wake-up call for the people of Sri Lanka. This is the time to put aside all our differences of race and religion, of language and creed, politics and ethnicity and stand as one to rebuild our nation. The tsunami is the worst natural disaster to hit Sri Lanka in recorded history. With the death toll standing at just over 30,000 at present, it is biblical in its proportions of destruction to life, property and the nation's infrastructure. We have no time now for petty differences, for worthless squabbles. We must pull together as one.

When the tsunami hit, it did not consider if we were Hindu or Buddhist, Sinhalese or Tamil, Muslim or Christian, rich or poor. Fame and fortune, high or low caste, none of these labels mattered. Call it what you will, the wrath of God, the wheel of destiny, whatever – it took life without division. This is a lesson to us all – when death comes calling, none of us can resist.

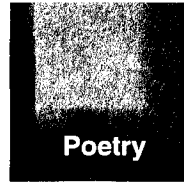
The way the bodies are being buried too is significant. Now at this juncture, there are no differentiations of religion, or class. All are buried in mass graves with nothing but the barest of ceremony. Where then are the lengthy tributes and mourning that usually accompany funerals – all that remains now, is the reality of the grave.

What troubles me most is that many seem to have ignored the lesson we should have learnt through this disaster. I read reports

of theft, of looting, of victims being raped and abused, and I wonder; have they still not learnt? When officials use precious drinking water to clean their homes, or when political organisations take the aid provided by the citizens of our land to further their political campaigns I feel powerless and angry in the face of such callousness and inhumanity. The corruption and the lack of understanding of human suffering is so vast, and so disheartening. This compounded with the growing fears that the children who survived the tsunami may be taken by people to be turned into slaves or domestic workers, shames me. The reports that people are carrying away children from camps are so revolting. Some say they want to adopt the children, and I wonder: do you want them to love, and bring up as your own with all the comforts that you would give your own offspring, or do you want them to be babysitters and kitchen helpers? I want to ask these individuals, are you going to keep them in dignity and affection, or in heartless cruelty and/or indifference? This is one of the many issues and questions that the authorities should look into and answer.

Yet, amidst all of this shameful behaviour there is a rainbow of hope. I see people who never understood what it means to suffer, volunteering to go south, north and east with relief efforts. I see people giving generously of themselves, their money and their time to aid their fellow man. I hear the miraculous stories of the survivors, of how people have helped one another escape the devastation of the wall of water, and I feel there is still a chance for us after all. We survived, we escaped. Now we must do all we can to glorify our creator for the gift of life and reach out to the victims. We must do everything in our power to help. This is not the time to look at what the other person did – we must look into our own hearts and examine our souls. Do we acknowledge the fortune that kept us healthy, safe and without want. If we do, should we not repay that good fortune by helping those less fortunate? It is something each of us should ask ourselves.

Thomas Jefferson said, "Say nothing of my religion. It is known to God and myself alone. Its evidence before the world is to be sought in my life: if it has been honest and dutiful to society the religion which has regulated it cannot be a bad one." And that is all that matters really – not what you are, but what you do. Not what you believe, but what you demonstrate. There are three choices staring us in the face today. Do we act positively, do we act negatively or do we do nothing at all. Choose.



Words and Orchids

Indran Amirthanayagam

We had gone for a sea bath
and had just sat down to eat
mangos and pittu and a spicy
poll sambol. My husband
was thrilled with home food
and sea air, the orchids
the waiter placed
in an elaborate arrangement
on our table. I wanted
the flowers moved

because they blocked
my view of the sea,
but my husband insisted.
He said the waiter had
taken such trouble
and in the States
how often would we eat
mangos by an ocean
framed with orchids.
Those were his last words.

When the first wave roared
over us, I held on to a palm tree,
then as the water receded
ran and ran up hill. Met
our friends there but my husband
did not make the trip. He stayed
behind. I do not have his body,
just these words about the flowers
and his grin as he sucked
the mangos with his hands.



Upheaval: A Review Tragedy, Fiction and Timing

Lisa Kois

The new short film, *Upheaval*, is dramatist and scholar Sumathy Sivamohan's filmmaking debut. She has written and directed the 18-minute Tamil film (English subtitles), which was screened in Colombo in March. *Upheaval* tells a story of war, but it tells this story within the context of the December 26th Tsunami, with a vengeful Sea Goddess playing the lead role. The story of the film, shot on digital video, unfolds in a fairly typical fiction film style. However, Sumathy also uses actual footage of the tsunami and post-tsunami destruction to dramatize her story.

A Story of War

By isolating one family's struggle to negotiate the metaphoric no man's land that exists between the government forces and the LTTE, *Upheaval* attempts to give a human face to the anonymous facts, statistics and debates surrounding the war. This is done through the story of a mother, who has been widowed during the war, and her struggle to keep her only daughter out of the clutches of the LTTE. The story unfolds primarily through two conversations – the first between the woman and a member of the LTTE and the second between the woman and a friend. A poor woman who struggles to provide for herself and her daughter, the mother is desperate and wonders whether marrying off her teenage daughter might be a better alternative than losing her daughter to the LTTE. This is the story of a mother's fight and a mother's anguish; the story of suffering and survival; the story of the choices that exists when you are standing alone with two guns pointing at your head.

Invisible to most, the uncertain space-between in which individuals, families and communities exist in Sri Lanka's North and East is best captured through individual stories, such as the story told in *Upheaval*. Personal stories of struggle and survival are the best hope for breaking the conspiracy that has surrounded the rhetoric of the war – a conspiracy comprised of official statements, statistics, and silences that have sanitized and obscured the reality of war. Sumathy has made a praiseworthy attempt to give expression to such a story in her film, although the story is necessarily incomplete and, perhaps intentionally, overshadowed by the Sea Goddess.

Tsunami as Metaphor

It is, regrettably, the story of the Sea Goddess that causes Sumathy's film to falter. The melodramatic portrayal of a wild-haired, blood red-lipped sea goddess that stalks the seaside community detract from the story Sumathy is trying to tell. Repetitive shots of the Sea Goddess as she walks deliberately down the beach do little to advance Sumathy's story. While clearly intended to heighten the drama and suspense, time is wasted with these shots, taking up too much of the precious limited 18 minutes of story-telling time.

By juxtaposing shots of the Sea Goddess and shots of a female soldier with unspecified military links (presumably LTTE) similarly walking down the beach, Sumathy seems to make a comparison between the Sea Goddess and female militancy. While it is left to the viewer to draw conclusions, often with very few but the most obvious clues, it seems that Sumathy is drawing parallels between the destructive capacity of both the tsunami and the war; of both natural and man-made disasters. Seemingly obvious points about the nature of natural disaster versus man-made disaster, the trivializing capacity of nature over man, and the absurdity of killing and war are made through the juxtaposition of the story of the war and the story of the Sea Goddess.

The film's climax finds both the Sea Goddess and the female militant back on the beach. The two become confused and almost indecipherable. The Sea Goddess picks up her thrishul and seems to take aim, turning slowly towards the camera as the thrishul

transforms into a gun, which ends up pointing at the camera, the viewer, and, presumably, the village. This mixed up and melodramatic ending, ripe with metaphor and meaning, is perhaps the perfect ending to Sumathy's rather mixed up and metaphor-laden *Upheaval*.

Tragedy, Fiction and Timing

Released in Sri Lanka less than three months after the Tsunami, *Upheaval* raises interesting questions about timing and fiction in the wake of a mass tragedy such as the Tsunami. How much time must pass before sensitive and meaningful fiction, whether that fiction is presented in written or visual form, can arise from lived tragedy? There is no formulaic answer to this question. The question of timing, tragedy and fiction is one grappled with by artists the world over.

In some cases, such as the American War in Vietnam, decades had to pass before that war could become the subject of popular fictionalized novels and movies. Although some of the path-breaking anti-war films about the American War, including *Apocalypse Now* and *Deer Hunter*, were released during or soon after the war, a spate of popular box office hits came only in the late 1980s – almost two decades after the war – appealing to a mass audience that seemed ready to contemplate the horrors of that lived experience. The passage of time helped to create space in the public discourse and the public psyche to address the collective trauma of that experience for the American people.

Only in the last few months, three years after the September 11th attacks in the United States, have novels been released that treat that event through fiction. Although there have been volumes of writing about September 11th, including a cartoon rendition of the event, the overwhelming majority of such writing, including the cartoon, has been autobiographical and hence realist in nature. It has only been with the passage of time that sensitive fiction has emerged.

Similarly, in Sri Lanka, a decade passed before the war in the North and East became the subject of popular fictional films like *Saroja*

and *Purabanda Kaluwara*. Likewise, fictional written accounts have become increasingly popular with the passage of time, thus signaling a readiness within the populace to critically contemplate these experiences in a way that is unique to fiction.

Art, Tragedy and Capital

Artists hold unique positions within society that can be called upon in times of collective tragedy to assist processes of individual and collective grieving and healing. Artistic expression has the potential to break down barriers, bring communities together and provide space in the individual and collective imagination to make tragedy transformative. The form such artistic expression takes, as well as the timing of the artistic intervention, may hold the key to its transformative potential. In the immediate aftermath of mass tragedy, when words seem insufficient to convey the horror of lived experience and as those directly affected by the tragedy grapple to piece together their own stories, non-verbal forms of expression such as music or art may prove to be powerful outlets for expression.

At what point does a writer or filmmaker assume the power to take and translate into fiction lived experience when that experience is of the magnitude of mass tragedy? The premature use of an event like the tsunami in fictionalized accounts threatens to trivialize lived experience and the emotional content of the experience through simplistic renderings of those experiences. Further, premature use of tragic events threatens to co-opt and capitalize on the lived experiences of others. The tragedy becomes capital to be traded upon, popular perhaps with funders, many of whom have likewise cashed in on the tragedy of the Tsunami.

While the sensitive retelling of the stories of the 2004 Tsunami will eventually come in numerous artistic forms, it may be that a pause is yet needed – a collective breath of prolonged grief and reckoning – before fiction can help give meaning to that which will forever be beyond comprehension.



Two Minute Silence

Mahangu Weerasinghe

I was trying to observe the two-minute silence when they came. The sound of big jeeps and brand new boots on the clay floor. That unmistakable foreign smell, wafting through the kadé.

“Do you have cigarettes,” he asked, and *Jamis Mudalali* scurried under the counter, looking for the margarine tin in which he kept his Gold Leaf.

“How many sir?”

“Two packs please.”

The radio was silent, and all I could hear was the sound of the waves hitting the *modara*, far away. The woman was growing impatient.

“Fred, we’re already behind time by two hours – couldn’t you buy your stupid smokes in Colombo?”

Silence. Fred doesn’t answer. He cracks his knuckles. *Jamis Mudalali* is in a frenzy.

“Saman malli,” he yells at me, “Saman malli, run to Nimal’s shop and bring two packs of Gold Leaf for this *mabattaya*.”

Jamis Uncle has broken in to a light sweat. The radio is still silent.

Hitching my sarong up, I jump over the low parapet and make my way down the footpath by the river. It’s high tide, and I watch as the water from the sea slowly makes its way past the broken breakwater through the delta and up the river.

Nimal Ayya wants to know who has come.

“Some NGO fellows Ayya, they just popped in and Jamis Uncle has run out of fags,” I related.

Nimal spits out his betel and walks behind the counter.

“From where? What’s written on the jeep?”

I tell him the name, and he nods as he hands me the packs.

“*Adey malli*, you doing ok right?”

“Yeah I’m fine.”

“How’s the little fellow?” His eyes are sympathetic.

“I left him with Amma and Thaatha in Wattegoda.”

“If you ever need any work, you know I can use some help building. I managed to get the cement and sand – bloody expensive though.”

I nod, and wave over my head as I walk away from him. Deciding the Suddas can wait, I take the footpath down towards the beach. I look at the patch of pure white sand where once our house stood. I remember coming in from the sea and seeing you standing there, holding your enlarged stomach – and smiling. I remember handing you the little one as the water swelled around our feet. I remember you running away towards the road, your feet strong against the current.

By the time I get back, the Sudu Mahattaya and his companions are sitting around the carom board drinking tea. I hand Jamis Uncle the cigarettes and lean back against the parapet. The radio is now blaring Hindi music, the silence over.

"Fred, we really must find out where this chap gets his tea leaves – they're so much better than the watery stuff they serve us down in Hambantota."

He uses the wrong stresses on *Hambantota*, killing the beauty of it.

"Yes, they're quite nice – wish they had this stuff in England."

"I say, old chap," starts Fred, before realizing that his English accent is lost on Jamis.

The Sudu Mahattaya turns around.

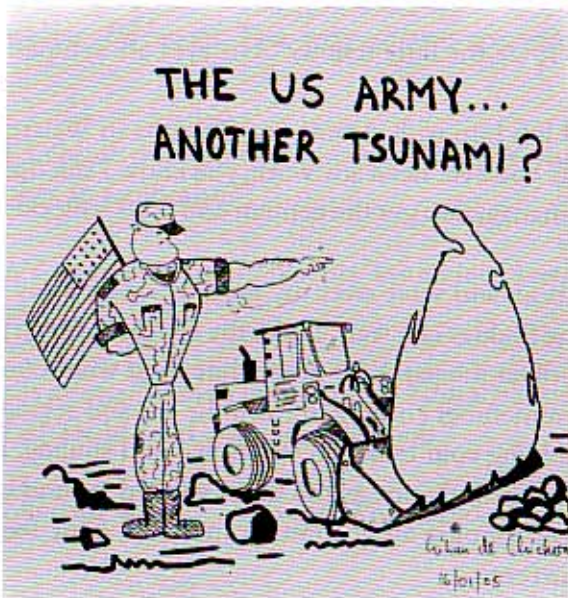
He turns to me. "Tea. From where? Drink tea? Leaves?" he gestures, showing me his cup and then signalling towards the battered teapot on the parapet.

"Jamis Uncle buys his tea from the Deniyaya fair every Sunday," I say.

Fred is shocked. So is the Sudu Nona.

"So, you can speak English." Smiles all around.

"Yes, I can."



"Do you smoke?" he offers me the first Gold Leaf from his pack.

"No thanks."

"Well how about this," says Fred, reaching inside his bag and extracting a baseball cap, their logo brightly plastered across the front of it.

"Here, for you. Keep it." He's trying to be nice.

"No thanks."

I clink four rupces down on the glass counter and step out in to the morning. Jamis tries to stop me. He needs me there to help with the Mahattayas. I need to get away from the sea, from them, from everything that reminds me of you. I walk down the main road, past the culvert and down the river path on the opposite side.

As I leave I hear Jamis say,

"*Geni maruna. Tsunamiyata abu vuna.*"

Translations

Sudu Mahattaya – White man

Mubudu rela awa – the waves came

Adey – a rural greeting.

Malli – younger brother (also used to denote younger male friend or relative)

Ayya – older brother (also used to denote older male friend or relative)

Modara – River delta

Kumari – Common southern female name

Maruna – died

Post-Tsunami Tamil Literature in Sri Lanka

Gérard Robuchon

One of the most popular representations of Vishnu depicts the god under the sea reclining on the body of the serpent Ananta, quietly sheltered under the many-headed upper-part of the same serpent. Vishnu's legs are massaged by his wife Lakshmi, and from his navel rises a lotus-stalk on which Brahma is seated. Vishnu is a solar god, and the serpent is associated with chthonic and lunar gods such as Shiva. The picture of the reclining Vishnu is indeed a relaxing one, that of a timeless scene, a comforting symbiosis of the three constituents of the Hindu *trimoorthi* (Brahma the Creator, Vishnu the solar Continuator, and Shiva the lunar Destructor).

According to Sukumari Bhattacharji: "Once Vishnu's association with the ocean became an established fact, the serpent image became a natural corollary, especially as the rolling waves rushing towards the shore actually look like a myriad-hooded serpent. To say that the supreme spirit dwells in the bottom of the ocean, passively reclining on the many-hooded Endless (Ananta) serpent is in mythological language to associate him with the ultimate potential energy and the unfathomable mystery of the universe. The picture evokes the latent and potential energy which lies dormant between two creations." Once the world has been destroyed again by Shiva, and before it will be re-created by Brahma.

And as S. Bhattacharji still points it out: "Popular mythology in India has it that the Nâga Vâsuki holds the earth on its many-hooded head, and when he is tired and shifts the burden from one hood to

another, we have an earthquake. Vâsuki dwells in Pâtâla, the nether region, and is thus a serpent of the deep¹."

At Verugal, South of the Trincomalee bay, the tsunami wave destroyed the walls of a shrine but left untouched the very statue of Vishnu reclining on the multi-headed Nâga.

Recently, a Brahmin in charge of the Krishnar Temple (associated with the Vishnu cult) at Vallipuram in the Eastern coast of the Jaffna peninsula, still maintained to the visitor that the tsunami wave spared the sacred building by splitting and rolling on either side of it.

Given the extent of the December 26 catastrophe, each one tries to find, if not a justification, at least some clues for an attempt at understanding, or simply accepting what had happened. A Tamil Catholic priest at Kalkudah addressed his shocked and mourning flock in the days just after by saying that no one, no humble human being, could pretend to clearly read God's intentions – while a Christian employee in a bank of the neighbouring township of Valaichenai asserted to his client that all this which was now happening was written in the Bible, that the Time of the End had come, jotting down the Biblical reference on the reverse of the bank receipt. In Kattankudy, a Muslim father who narrowly escaped from the wave which had struck him while he was going fishing, spent all his forces to help other people around him. As he was far from his house, he could not know that wife and children were taken away. Later on, he repeatedly sustained that if he could save several other people's life, it has been "with the help of God", "thanks to God" – even though at the time of narrating his own experience, he was mourning his family members whom no one could save.

¹ Sukumari Bhattacharji, *The Indian Theogony*

– *Brahmâ, Vishnu & Shiva* (1970), Penguin Books India, 2000, 397 pages

– pp. 299, 150.

The belief here acts as a refuge amidst a feeling of absurd, when any one can see how the disaster strikes the meritorious as well, and in so large a number. What was probably the most famous tsunami in the world history had been interpreted as a rejoicing event for generations and generations: the great crossing of the Red Sea by the Jews fleeing from Egypt, the Passover – which was transformed by the Christian tradition as a symbol of Resurrection, another pass-over: *Pasqua*, or Easter. But the harshest tsunami of modern times in Europe, that of 1755 which killed tens of thousands of inhabitants of Lisbon, Portugal, raised the scepticism of many philosophers of the Enlightenment, Voltaire, Diderot and others: How could God destroy the whole capital city of the most Catholic country in the world?

Among the literature in Tamil, which appeared in Sri Lanka in the aftermath of last December tsunami, I'll refer to two kinds of text, representing opposing Tamil schools of thought. One refers to the legend of a curse, which is said to have fallen on the Tamil civilisation from the start; the other is simply the most scientific approach, and resembles the modernist trend of the 20th Century Tamil culture.

January 2005 – The submerged original Tamil Country, and the curse on the Tamil civilisation

An article in Tamil signed M.T. Gowry and published in the Sunday edition of the Sri Lankan newspaper *Thinakkural* on 2nd January 2005, i.e. one week after the Tsunami, put forward the question: “Is it a fourth tsunami destroying the prosperous Tamil life?” This article refers to the Tamil tradition conveyed in old Tamil texts: the legend has it that Tamil language, Tamil literature (associated with the *Tamil Sangam*), and Tamil culture are cursed from their inception by “great flooding” or “swallowing by the sea”. A sort of founding myth equivalent to that of Atlantis, or to the original Deluge.

Gowry recalls the Tamil tradition which says that before the modern times, i.e. the past 2,000 years, there has been three *sangams*, or Tamil Academies, which produced a very old Tamil literature, but all that

has been destroyed over three instances by flooding of the Tamil land, the old Pândiyan kingdom. It is said that the original Tamil country, called in old Tamil writings *Kumari kandam* (“the Continent of the Virgin”, referring to Kanniya Kumari, the Tamil name which became in English Cape Comorin, the most Southern end of India), or Lemuria according to British writers in India in the 19th century. In Tamil, it is also called “the Southern country which has been taken by the sea” (*kadal konda tennâdu*). It is believed that it was a vast continent attached to the present-day TamilNadu (Tamilaham), which has been progressively submerged. According to the tradition, the capital of the first Tamil sangam was the Southern Mathurai along the banks of the river Pahruli. After its submersion several thousands of years ago, the capital was shifted Northward to Kabâdapuram – and that was the time of the second Tamil sangam, until it was submerged as well. Then the Tamil capital was established at Manavoor, the writer says, on the bank of the Kumari river: that was the seat of the third Tamil sangam. It has also been destroyed by a third “killing wave” (*kadarkôl*, in fact: “slaughter by the sea”). Thence the writer's final question: “Isn't it today a fourth killing wave?” Understood in this context, the question indeed raises the fear of a recurring curse against Tamil culture.

The writer also evokes Lemuria, which is believed by Westerners, he says, to be the original continent or cradle of humankind. When it was submerged, the people who escaped to Indian soil became the Dravidians; those who went to Africa became the Africans; and those who spread through Java and Sumatra to China became the Mongolians. Thus all “races” would have originated from that lost South-Asian continent.

He still recalls that South India and Sri Lanka were once linked, as parts of the same lost continent, but now separated by the sea. He asserts that all these events modified the coastal configuration of Sri Lanka, as it probably did this time too even though at a micro-level – but the dynamics is here, a threatening dynamics of a progressive submersion of Tamil lands. A sort of Tamil eschatology.

A large map is annexed to the article, supposedly showing the “ancient Lemuria” or “submerged Tamil Nadu” covering almost all the Indian Ocean and linking Madagascar, Sri Lanka and South India, with Australia. Moreover the said map details the supposed position of a chain of mountains from the Deccan to the mythical Mount Meru far South, and the four submerged rivers (South to North: Kanni, Pahruli, Pêru, Kumari) as well as cities and regions of the lost continent.

All this is stressed by the use of the Tamil words for “history” (instead of: “legend”, “myth”, or even “tradition”), “geography”, and “geology”

The account of the legend as given here is somehow confused. There is no clear account of it available, and modern Tamil commentators face difficulties in interpreting the text related to it.

This legend is intimately associated with the history of the oldest known Tamil writings. It supposes still older texts previously composed but not available as written materials. It states with its own precision, that the First Sangam, or Academy, lasted 4400 years under the reign of 89 kings and was composed of 549 poets including Shiva, Muruga, and Ahatthian. It “held its sittings in the ancient sea-sunk Mathurai”, according to M.S. Purnalingam Pillai (*Tamil Literature*, 1929). The Second or Middle Sangam “met at Kabâdapuram or Alaivây or Vayiloor/Puthaloor or Mutthur and was also submerged and washed away by the enraged sea.” It lasted 3700 years under 59 kings. “It had 59 syndics and judged the poems of 3700 poets.” The Third and Last Sangam lasted 1850 years under 49 kings. It was composed of 49 members, with Nakkîrar as their president, and the poets numbered 449, including the sage Agasthiar.

Purnalingam Pillai writes, of “the first two deluges that submerged Tamilaham” and of “the volumes swept away by the floods from

Mathurai and Kavatapuram”. But he points out that the manner this third sangam ended is not clear – whether it was for internal and human reasons (Buddhist and Jain influence; Nakkîrar’s management which led the god Shiva to curse him) or because of the destruction of Mathurai by fire due to the wrath of Kannagi, according to the later epic *Silappathikâram*. He finally mentions the 4th, 5th, and 6th sangams, which did not last as long for lack of valuable works, the final one being extinguished by the year 600.

Purnalingam Pillai also gives an account on Lemuria, which is distinct from the legend of the three sangams. He writes that the Tamils “were certainly the natives of the ancient Tamilaham, or Lemuria, a continent in the Indian Ocean about the equator submerged a hundred centuries ago.” He refutes the theory that they came from the Tibetan plateau or from Elam between Tigris and Euphrates (the most credible one now).² Lemuria, he says, was bordering Africa, Australia and even Kamchatka (the Siberian peninsula North of Japan) far East. This explains why, according to some writers of Purnalingam Pillai’s time, languages such as those of the Maoris in New Zealand, of the people in Kamchatka, are akin to Tamil, if not a dialect of it (sic). Moreover, he says, “the adventurous Tamils who had escaped the floods in their boats seem to have founded colonies in Africa and Europe and proceeded to the farthest west as America.” The still unclassified language of Italy, Etruscan, is said by the same writer to be also “a dialect of Tamil...” And even the Scots, the Scandinavians, and some Africans, could be considered

² This theory, first proposed by Edwin Norris in 1853, then Trombetti (1913), Pedersen (1924), Diakonov (1967), David McAlpin (1974), and many others over the past one and half century, came back to the surface following the most recent archaeological, linguistic, and multidisciplinary researches (Colin Renfrew, Merritt Ruhlen, Joseph Greenberg, L. & F. Cavalli-Sforza). I made a critical account of the various theories in my PhD thesis of Linguistics (in French): *Synapse, nodules et recomposition en langue – Le cas du singhalais dans le contexte multilingue de Sri Lanka*, Inalco, Paris, 1999, 558 pages. .

as akin to Tamils, for having spread from Lemuria after the Deluge.³ Even the three classical languages of the world, viz, Sanskrit, Hebrew, and Greek contain Tamil words in their vocabularies⁴.”

Clearly, for Purnalingam Pillai, “Tamilaham, or the ancient Tamil Country, was a submerged continent of Lemuria in the Indian Ocean on both sides of the equator.” In support of Lemuria, he mentions Western writers of the end of 19th century or early 20th century such as Haeckel, and his *History of Creation*, who “assures us that the Indian Ocean formed a continent which extended from the Sunda Islands, along the coast of Asia, to the east coast of Africa,

³ Common features between Tamil and European or even other languages (Japanese, Wolof...) have been suggested from a long time by Sri Lankan Tamil amateurs such as Fr. Gnanaprakasara, or Paulinus Tambimuttu (*Europe and the Dravidians*, 1979). For instance they infer a similarity between languages by comparing many words, such as ‘mac’ for ‘son’ in Celtic languages as well as in Tamil (‘makan’). Exuberant as it seems, it is now somehow accepted, after Greenberg’s and Ruhlen’s works in Linguistics: nonetheless the similarities are attributed to a common prehistoric substratum, that of *all* languages, while Tambimuttu and some others strongly maintained that Dravidians had occupied Europe before the advent of the Indo-Europeans... I worked on many of these prehistoric roots which are common to French (and European languages) and to Tamil, such as, for the most widespread, ‘kal’ for ‘stone’, ‘tal’ for ‘head’, ‘mal’ for ‘mountain’, in an previous article: “ ‘One of the most venerable roots of the language’ – The root *kal* of Proto-Dravidian Type in French Linguistic Prehistory”, in *Honouring Martin Quéré*, G. Robuchon Editor, Viator Publications, Negombo, (Sri Lanka), 2002, pp.181-220.

⁴ The case of borrowings of Dravidian words by Sanskrit is now well enough asserted (M.B. Emeneau and T. Burrow). As for Hebrew, those are loan-words due to trade connections from the Phoenician period. I commented on these Tamil words in the Bible in another article: “King Solomon, the Phoenicians and Ophir”, in *I want to Speak of Tenderness – 50 writers for Anne Ranasinghe*, G. Robuchon Editor, Published by ICES, Colombo (Sri Lanka), 404 pages, 2003, pp.256-296.

Concerning Greek, it is also due to importation of goods and knowledge: Aristotle is among the first to mention rice from samples sent to him by Alexander’s troops and scientists in India: then the English words for ‘rice’ derives from Tamil *arisi* through Greek *oryza*. Cf. Robert Caldwell, *A Comparative Grammar of the Dravidian or South Indian Family of Languages* (1856, 1875).

and which is of great importance as having been the cradle of the human race.” Or Sir Walter Raleigh’s *History of the World* which “strongly supports the hypothesis regarding the first nursery of man”, and affirms “India was the first planted and peopled country after flood.” Or the magazine *Science of Man*, Australia, December 1900: “The locality of the origin of the earliest race from the most recent researches appears to have been on lands now submerged beneath the Indian Ocean.” In 1897, Sir John Evans, referred to Southern India as “the probable cradle of the human race.”

Purnalingam Pillai here follows a certain tradition by flattering the Tamil psyche: “The Tamils were adventurous, and hospitable and tolerant in religion. They were civilised and polished and they had towns and forts, and arms (...). Unlike the migratory Aryans who were polytheistic in religion (...), the Tamilar were monotheistic.”

Another of Pillai’s contemporaries, P.T. Srinivasa Iyengar, in his *History of the Tamils – From the earliest times to 600 A.D.*, written in 1929, has a longer discussion, with a deliberately incredulous stand, referring to rationalism as well as to the technique of analysing texts, or critical method. The words “absurd”, “incredible”, or “ridiculous”, occur quite often.

The legend of the three sangams, or the three successive Tamil Academies destroyed by the fury of the sea, appeared, as he stressed, only in the late commentaries of *Agapporul*, which is a treaty on the *Tolkāppiyam*, the oldest known Tamil grammar. This grammar is understood to have been written according to a previously produced Tamil literature, but these earlier works are not available any more in a written form: this is the ‘lost literature’ of the said first sangams, supposed to have been held during the last ten thousand years of the era BC. Meanwhile the commentaries, mentioning the sangams, date from a period between the 8th and 13th century, according to Srinivasa Iyengar, who favours the later date. It is, a commentary on the previous and famous commentator Nakkīrar (9th century) who himself gave an appreciation on the *Agapporul*, which explains the *Tolkāppiyam*.

Rationalist as he is, Srinivasa Iyengar refutes the duration of the sangams, as “incredible”, observing that: “The length of the period of each sangam is a multiple of 37, and the total duration is 37 x (120 + 100 + 50). This shows how artificial the figures are.”

After pointing out many “glaring absurdities” on what we can call here the Sangam Theory, Srinivasa Iyengar gives credit to the fact that the Pândiya kings changed their capital twice, first of all from a Southern “Mathurai that was swallowed by the sea.” He refers to two texts dating from the very beginning of the Christian era: the *Kalittokai* (“When the surging sea stole his territory...”, 104, 1-4), and the *Manimêkalai* (“...because the cruel sea swallowed the Comorin hill to which is [sic] attached many ranges of hills, along with the river Pahruli...”, XI, 17-22).⁵ Excessively rationalist, Srinivasa Iyengar interprets the said rage of the sea, not much as a tsunami which swallowed a part of a continent, but as mere erosion: “The rivers Kumari and Pahruli were probably two small hill rivulets flowing down to the sea and the strip of coast between them must have been lost. (...) Hence what was swallowed by the sea was a small bit of the modern Travancore, the southern part of which belonged to the Pândiyas in ancient days.” And he infers that the first of the three capitals was a Mathurai on the sea side; and that after its drowning in the sea, it was shifted to Kabâdapuram, a Tamilized name for the Sanskrit Pândyakavâtam, “the door of the Pândya country”, otherwise the city known in Tamil as Korkai. Then it was abandoned for the actual Mathurai inland.

Then, in a crucial turn, Srinivasa Iyengar proposes to understand that the concept of *sangam* has been introduced in Tamil culture by the Jain and Buddhist movements in the early centuries of the Christian era – the word *sangha* itself being Sanskrit. We are here at the source of the Dravidian Buddhism which spread southwards

all over Andhra Pradesh, TamilNadu, and of course Sri Lanka (Kantharôdai and Nâgadîpa in the Jaffna peninsula). Indeed, the twin epics which are at the very foundation of the Tamil literature, around the 2nd century AD, are, one a Buddhist treaty (*Manimêkalai*), the other a Jain text (*Silappatikâram*, which relates the story of the woman-saint Kannagi whose cult later became shared by Sri Lankan Hindus and Buddhists in the Eastern Province). Then Iyengar suggests that the concept of sangam has been borrowed *afterwards* by the Hindu revivalist denominations (Shaiva and Vaishnava) and that a legend has been invented of older Vedic sangams in order to assert the ancientness of organised Vedism, or at least Shaivism, on Dravidian lands over the Buddhist “Drâvida Sangha” such as that one “established by Vajra Nadi in 470 AD.”

Thus the legend of the sangams is now dissociated from that of the flooding of Mathurai and other Tamil cities. The “flooding legend” is older than that of the sangam. The sangam acts as a posterior justification of Hinduism and the Flooding Theory gives a justification for the non-availability of supposedly older Tamil texts. If it is so, we have here an adjunction of two legends from two different periods.

That Tamil literature is very old is out of any debate: it does not mean that texts were ever *written* before the treaty *Tholkâppiyam*. Oral literature must have preceded any such written treaty. But in this case no “volumes” were “swept away”.

It is as a rationalist that Iyengar dismisses the amplitude of the facts (the tsunami on the Tamil land), if not the facts themselves (the ancience of the Tamil Sangam).

Anyhow the tsunami referred to in the legend, whether it occurred, once or several times – and this is probable over a long scale of time –, or not, would have also acted here at a more ideological level, i.e. as a mythical explanation for the loss of books which never existed.

⁵ Another translator interpreted the same text as: “...the ocean in fury which, in its rage, devoured the river Pahruli and the stream Kumari, as well as the surrounding mountains”. This is Alain Daniélou’s French translation as *Le Roman de l’Anneau*, Gallimard/Unesco, 1961.

Srinivasa Iyengar is sceptical where Purnalingam Pillai is exalted, on the idea that the submerged continent would have been the cradle of the whole civilisation, of humankind – and originally a Tamil kingdom...

If the Lemurian Theory can no more be sustained according to present-day scientific knowledge, if the Sangam Theory has been, in a sense convincingly, de-constructed by Srinivasa Iyengar, the myth of the “flooding of the Southern Mathurai” can be read as the vestige of any event(s) which may have really happened long ago, i.e. sorts of tsunamis which have remained rooted in the collective consciousness. First of all, if the fact of naming a “tsunami” is recent in Sri Lanka, as discussed earlier in this paper, tsunamis might have occurred at several periods of the historic or proto-historic era.

Tsunamis do not occur regularly, and if it does, this is over a span of several centuries, and not with the same amplitude. As for Atlantis, the basis of the myth could also have been a prehistoric marine catastrophe such as what could have occurred following the rising of the sea-level some 10,000 years ago, due to the melting of the poles’ glaciers, as an effect of the warming of the atmosphere (knowing that we are presently in one of those geologically brief periods between two Ice Ages). It seems that the Mediterranean Sea was an enclosed sea separated from the Atlantic Ocean by a sort of wall linking present-day Morocco and Spain. This wall, the columns of Hercules, broke down under the pressure of the rising level of the ocean, letting its water pour into that inner sea – it is admitted that the Mediterranean Sea level was lower than it is now, and the recently discovered coastal submerged caverns displaying prehistoric art, in Southern France, is a reminder of this earlier state of affair.

But this can’t have worked in the case of TamilNadu and Sri Lanka, because it is not situated in an inner sea. Nonetheless, the Tamil tradition, as we saw it, speaks of the “cruel sea”, thus of a marine catastrophe – indeed indicating something rather like a tsunami.

That what had happened was a tsunami is thus left possible. That there is no other word for it in the Tamil texts than the turn: “cruel sea swallowing the land”, is not surprising. After all in English too, there was no word for it: *tsunami* is a very recent borrowing from Japanese in lieu of “tidal wave” which is definitely an incorrect composition. This lack in terminology is in a sense understandable, as tsunamis occurred extremely rarely in the same region, while nowadays the global network of communications gives a higher frequency, or even simultaneity, to phenomena, which are otherwise isolated in time.

Concerning the Red Sea tsunami, that of the Pass-Over, if it is not given a name as such, as a natural phenomenon, this is for another ideological reason: the said tsunami, which had probably no precedent in the Jewish history if we except the Deluge, has been re-interpreted as a miracle of God in favour of the Hebrews, the same way that the Mount Sinai eruption has been described as an intervention of God towards Moses. That tsunamis happened on Western shores, we know it with the case of Lisbon, 1755. And, unlike in English, there exists a very precise, even though composed, word in French for such a specific phenomenon, that is: *raz de marée*. It is derived from *raz*, which is a Breton word (i.e. from the Celtic Brittany in Western France) – and if the British were greater sea-faring people than the French, so it is that the Bretons, sailing from France, were still greater sea-farers than the British... And they had their own terminology related to the sea.

In Sri Lanka too, no word was available in Sinhala or in Tamil either. It is only after December 26 that it had to be coined or borrowed. First of all, in the emergency of printing the news, it has been the periphrastic “land grabbing sea”. The now accredited term in Tamil is *kadalkôl*, a composition of two words literally meaning “killing by the sea”, “killing sea”, or “killer wave”. Otherwise, the word used in news items is simply the Japanese name rendered into Tamil letters as *sunâmi*. M.T. Gowri, in the article discussed above, rather adopted the Tamil form *kadalkôl*.

February 2005 – “Tsunami, the Killing Wave”: A Rationalist Approach

The rationalist movement has been firmly anchored in Tamil thought throughout the whole of the 20th century. In the field of literary criticism, it is well represented by a writer like Srinivasa Iyengar, as opposed to Purnalingam Pillai, also in the 1930s' India. In the domain of science, we have to mention at least: Srinivasa Ramanujan (1887-1920), one of the most reputed mathematicians of modern times; Sir Chandrasekhara Venkata Raman (1888-1970), Nobel Prize of Physics, 1930, and the first Indian Nobel Prize; Subrahmaniam Chandrasekhar (1910-1995), his nephew, astrophysicist, Nobel Prize, 1983; and also, among so many others, the present Scientist-President of India, A.P.J. Abdul Kalam.

Here we come now to Dr. Kandiah Kunarasa, in Sri Lanka, who published in February 2005, his latest book in Tamil: *Sunâmi – The killing wave*, 26/12/2004. The feat is that this 192-page book has been produced (written and published) between not even two months after the tsunami happened. And the least we can say is that it could not have been pre-programmed. Indeed Dr. K. Kunarasa is well known as the most prolific (fiction and non-fiction) writer in Tamil in Sri Lanka, based in Jaffna. Moreover, he has been Registrar of the University of Jaffna, and is now Municipal Commissioner at the Jaffna Kachcheri.

The 2005' book on “Tsunami, the killer waves” contains 12 chapters. We clearly identify two parts in it, written on two different, but complementary, registers.

The first part covers the first 8 chapters and 63 pages. It details with scientific precision: the structure of the earth, the plate tectonic, what is an earthquake, what is a tsunami, and finally, scientific data related to the tsunami from Sumatra. In what appears clearly as a second part, it deals with: (chapters 9 & 10) the effects of December

26' Tsunami in Sri Lanka from already available data in term of human and material losses, then an overview on the other countries also affected; and (chapter 11, almost 90 pages) a detailed account of the losses in various locations of the Jaffna peninsula, in Mullaitivu, Trincomalee, Batticaloa, Amparai (the longest section), then in Southern Sri Lanka (also a long section), followed by a long as well as interesting series or records from eye-witnesses and survivors in Sri Lanka. A 12th and concluding chapter deals briefly with the needed techniques of prevention.

Against the very scientific (and up-to-date) background of the first part, the second part of the book is totally different in its style: this is, transcribed in direct speech, the human perception of people affected by the tsunami. This is of great importance for the collective memory, for such a testimony is genuine, and also, as we have already observed, society will forget.

In the first section, we observe that the author follows scientifically accredited theories, and the subsequent terminology: Pangea, Tethys, earth crust, mantle, barysphere, continental drift and plate tectonic, the names of the geological eras. The author does also mention the theoreticians: Keith Bullen, Gutenberg, Mohorovic, Mercalli. All proper foreign names are given in English and are also phonetically rendered in Tamil letters.

Otherwise, in other chapters, the author resorts to the Tamil terminology, which is particularly efficient by using easily understandable Tamil roots associated together in order to coin a scientific term. Examples: *erimalai* ‘volcano’ (literally ‘fire-mountain’); *puvinaḍukkam* (‘earth-trembling’) or *pûkampam* (‘earth-vibration’) ‘earthquake’; *pârai kuḻhampu* (‘stone gruel’) ‘magma’; *erimalai kuḻhampu* (‘fire-mountain gruel’) ‘lava’; *perukkuvisai* (‘increase’ > ‘tide’ + ‘force’) ‘tidal force’; *kuvimaiyam* (‘cone’ + ‘center’) ‘focus’; *mênmaiyaṁ* (‘high center’) ‘epicentre’; *kadarkîḻ mukadu* (‘sea’ + ‘under’ + ‘peak’) ‘submarine ridge’; *uyirchuvadiyal* (‘life’ + ‘trace’ +

‘science’) ‘palaeontology’; *kālanilaiyiyal* (‘time’ + ‘condition’ + ‘science’) ‘climatology’; *puvicharithaviyal* (‘earth’ + ‘history’ + ‘science’) ‘geology’; *takaddôdu kolkai* (‘plate’ + ‘shell’ + ‘theory’) ‘plate tectonics’; *karkôlam* (‘stone-sphere’) ‘Lithosphere’, while the English ‘Asthenosphere’ is phonetically rendered into Tamil letters; *puvinadukkaviyalmani* (‘earth’ + ‘trembling’ + ‘science’ + ‘meter’) ‘seismometer’; *amizhum kavasathakadu* (‘going down’ + ‘shield’ + ‘plate’) ‘subduction plates’ etc.

As Dr. K. Kunarasa is a professional geographer, this book is reliable, precise and complete in its scientific account. Numerous colour illustrations with Tamil terminology are added to the explanations. Photos of victims go accordingly with the second part. This book definitely stands opposite to the Lemurian Catastrophe and the Theory of the Curse against the Tamil Sangam – which it does not mention at all. It is a clear product of the Tamil Rationalist school of thought. It avoids any reference to the myths, or legends of the Tamil tradition. The contrast with M.T. Gowry’s article published the month before is clear.

On a more practical level, the book is a complete picture in terms of necessary scientific data. Nonetheless, it would have been interesting to develop a little more on the Maldives (instead of the few lines on the losses). For the Maldives have been ‘strangely’ spared, and the scientific reason is particularly interesting in order to understand by contrast the amplitude of the catastrophe in Sri Lanka. The Maldivian atolls are coral rings formed around submerged peaks of former volcano. As we have volcanoes which once emerged, then sunk, and the coral reefs, which formed around them and subsided, there is no continental plate around any of them, unlike other islands like Sri Lanka. Thus the tsunami appeared only as a limited rising of the sea plus a wave-movement under the surface: it washed the atolls, but as no wave did break and roll by rubbing along any continental plate, there was no crashing, crushing, or whirling effect reported. Damages were particularly limited.

Finally, we can observe that the bibliographical references are badly missing in this book. For the second part (accounts of eye-witnesses and victims), names of the local journalists and their respective newspapers are given in the first pages of the book. But no reference is given concerning the first, scientific part: this is surprising from an academic, and it is difficult to believe that such a book is a totally original writing completed in so little time. Moreover, internet references (addresses of websites) are nowadays part of any bibliography.

Post-Tsunami literature in Tamil in Sri Lanka is already multifarious. Besides oral literatures, the mythological-like accounts rendered to the visitors, the journalistic printed immediate reports, I introduced here two opposite sorts of writings, which both suppose a view distanced from the event, but which were anyhow written and printed in its very aftermath. Between the quasi-paranoid, anxious self-compassion of M.T. Gowry’s January article, and the Positivism, Rationalism, of Dr. Kunarasa’s February book, space is left for other aspects of ‘Tsunami Literatures’. For instance, the Sunday edition of the Tamil paper *Vīrakēsari* published on 15.05.2005 a short story in Tamil written by Kattankudy Fatimah, ‘Some real facts’ – fiction to conjure the reality. In the collective imagination, the Tsunami finds more and more ways, more or less oblivious of the tragedy, with time passing. Thus, a Jaffna three-wheel driver christened his vehicle: “SUNAMI” (in English letters), with, in blue paint before the name, the picture of a rolling wave...

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