Women Can’t Swim:
Tsunami, Survival and the Gender Dimension

S. Gautham
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And then I have to also thank WISCOMP, for accepting my application, for seeing the point that the security debate for women, must expand to include conflict with, and security from, Nature itself.

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Many Thanks

S Gautham
Awarded by WISCOMP for academic research, media projects and special projects, the Scholar of Peace Fellowships are designed to encourage innovative work by academics, policymakers, defence and foreign policy analysts, journalists, NGO workers, creative artists and others. The fellowships are seen as an important step to encourage work at the interface of gender and security, conflict resolution and peace. These studies are expected to provide new insights into problems pertaining to security, promote understanding of structural causes of conflict, suggest alternatives and encourage peace initiatives and interventions. The work of the Fellows is showcased in the form of the WISCOMP Perspectives and Discussion Papers series.

Women Can’t Swim: Tsunami, Survival and the Gender Dimension, nineteenth in the WISCOMP Discussion Paper series, is the outcome of a media fellowship awarded to S. Gautham in 2007. The project focused on a subject that has increasingly received attention since the 1980s – the relationship of disasters to socio-economic status, access to resources and barriers to choice and ultimately asymmetrical power relations based on gender. Gautham argues that lack of gender sensitive analysis of disaster management and disaster preparedness strategies have led to the neglect of the human security needs of women survivors. Using the post 2004 tsunami rehabilitation efforts in the state of Tamil Nadu as a case in point, he raises some fundamental concerns about silencing of women’s experiences, their needs and the contributions they make towards disaster mitigation strategies.

Over the last three decades empirical research by international organizations as well as reports from relief workers have established that in the aftermath of a natural disaster, women are often left without relief and compensation. Although, they are the focus of media attention, along with children, as victims of the disaster, their invisibility in the rehabilitation processes is appalling. Needs assessment and rehabilitation planning are generally entrenched in patriarchal norms, which render women even more vulnerable to poverty, hunger, sexual violence, domestic violence, forced marriage, labor exploitation and trafficking in the face of natural disasters.
Since effective disaster response and mitigation depend on accurate knowledge of vulnerabilities and capacities, community assessment and mapping is prescribed as an important aspect of disaster planning work. However, it is maintained that this mapping should include social as well as environmental factors and thereby create a knowledge base that ensures inclusive and comprehensive planning in which women are equal partners. Studies and reports which analyze these gender concerns and acknowledge the contribution of women to disaster management abound, but so far, there has been limited focus on documenting the survivors’ own voices on these issues. How do women survivors of natural disasters see their vulnerability? What explanations do they offer for the lack of attention by the state and the community to their condition? What role do they see for themselves in the aftermath of the disaster? This project lends voice to this silenced category of women.

*Women Can’t Swim* also marks a departure from the earlier WISCOMP publications based on the media fellowship projects. While earlier media fellowship projects culminated in the publication of a series of articles around a single theme, this publication in addition to a few articles in Section II, written by the author, also collates blog posts as Section-I, made by him during the course of his fieldwork, and after. Created as a cyber platform, the blog documents the many voices and concerns of women survivors of the Tsunami, simultaneously opening up a space for understanding the gendered impact of disasters, relief and rehabilitation.

A significant contribution this research makes is that it moves away from the standardized indices of measuring disaster impact with numbers and percentages. By focusing, instead, on analyzing the role of the Traditional ‘Katta’ Panchayats in the relief efforts or lack thereof, as well as the impact of so called state policies on environmental protection, or how even so called women-friendly initiatives can feed into stereotypes, and cultural biases, it provides valuable insight into the socio-political factors that dictate vulnerability and security; rehabilitation and displacement; reconstruction and transformation. In the process, it draws attention to the futility of disaster mitigation strategies that leave gender relations, in other aspects of the community, unaltered.

*The WISCOMP Team*
Introduction

Boxing Day 2004. Even as Christmas revelries were coming to an end in the western hemisphere, the sun rose bright and early several longitudes away, in the Far East. Far below the ocean floor, deep in the core of the earth, a tectonic plate shifted a mere 15 feet. But its impact literally shook the earth; the tremors that were recorded that morning had a magnitude of about 9.1, one of the largest recorded since the invention of the seismograph. The sudden vertical rise of the seawater caused by the earthquake, displaced massive volumes of water, resulting in one of the deadliest tsunamis, its impact being felt as far away as the east coast of Africa. Indonesia, Thailand, India, and Sri Lanka were among the worst affected countries.

At its epicenter, tsunami waves are shallow, and though they travel fast, they are of no real danger to seafaring vessels. But moving out in ripples, they slow down as they expand in concentric perimeter as they reach the coastline. They lose speed, but they gain height, and on this day, they rose as high as 100 feet – gigantic waves crashing upon the coast, consuming all in their wake.

The Indian Ocean is not a known tsunami region. People on the coast, were completely unprepared. The losses were colossal. It may perhaps never be possible to get an exact death toll, but estimates suggest upwards of 250000 deaths. Several thousands are still missing, five years since the tragedy. Over a million have been displaced. The losses to livelihood and property are still being quantified, as a bruised people slowly come back to terms with their life.

The appalling scale of the devastation, and the suffering of the affected, generated an overwhelming response across the globe; good people and governments together donated over 7 billion US dollars, for relief and rehabilitation. Volunteers travelled to the affected areas, their first mission to provide immediate succour to the displaced, helping them to cope with the trauma, and then, the slow and arduous task of putting people on their feet again.

Predictably there was much chaos and confusion immediately after the disaster. Many administrations and indeed volunteers had never experienced anything of this magnitude before. Before long, the gaps began to show. Ignorance, the lack of preparedness, systemic
inefficiencies, and local hierarchies, all began to reveal themselves. In India, women, children and dalits were the most vulnerable.

Natural disasters are anything but natural in their selection of victims. They are profoundly discriminatory. It is the existing social structure which determines who pays the higher price. But neither governments nor the media, which drives the public discourse, appear to focus on these gaps. They are quick to discuss the impact of disaster, on the economy, on tourism, even underwater archaeological treasures, but there is a deafening silence on the gendered impact of such disasters.

A few months after the tsunami, Oxfam, commissioned a study on the impact the tsunami had on women, and released the findings; they were stark:

In Indonesia, in the four villages in the Aceh Besar province surveyed by Oxfam only 189 of 676 survivors were female. That is a ratio of 3:1. In the worst affected village, Kuala Cangkoy, for every male who died, there were four females. In Cuddalore in India, almost three times as many women were killed as men, with 391 female deaths, compared with 146 men. In Pachaankuppam village, the only people to die were women.

The reasons for this are not far to seek. We all know that a tsunami is no great danger to people out at sea. When the waves struck the shore, the women were on the beach waiting for the catch to come in. They are the ones who sort it and take it to market. When the waters came, more of those who know to climb and swim, survived. It is no surprise that they were mostly men.

Emergency relief measures rarely respond specifically to women’s needs. Even the posting of women doctors and police officers in some camps in India, is a rare exception. At another extreme, a well-intentioned NGO flew in thousand of packets of sanitary napkins and distributed them to Nicobarese tribal women who had never used them. They were first used as toilet paper as there was a water crisis, and then as pillows. This only illustrates that even when women centric actions take place, they can be misplaced, if women themselves aren’t allowed to articulate what they want.

In India, the accent of post tsunami rehabilitation has been on providing fishing boats; little attention is paid to women’s needs. Preparedness
concentrates on high cost warning systems and distributing wireless sets to village men. There has been no support announced in terms of working capital for post harvest activities that women are normally involved in. In some villages, widowed survivors are unable to access the relief and aid packages because they are not members of the fishing cooperative.

The point of all this is that disaster management plans need to address gender in a focused manner. Like so many issues that affect security and conflict environment for women, this too has been largely unaddressed. There are several questions that arise. These range from security in survivor camps, where women are hopelessly outnumbered to issues of inheritance rights and access to means of livelihood. In several locations, there are instances of young women survivors being forced into rushed, non-consensual marriages. There is a clinically dubious recanalisation programme, which can allow sterilized women who have lost their children, to conceive again, but its details are foggy and obscured.

The debate on the gendered engagement with disaster planning and management has by and large been within the academy and relief organizations. By personalizing this narrative and framing it in the lived experience of the survivors, this research hopes to catalyze mainstream awareness and public engagement with the gender aspects of a crucial issue. It documents the lived experiences of survivors to provide a reflective appraisal of the place of women in mitigation and preparedness programs.

The project focuses on the ongoing post-tsunami rehabilitation programs in India to assess the levels of gender influence in the program. I have chosen to concentrate on the post tsunami rehabilitation both for the starkness of its gendered impact and the gigantic scale of the relief operation. By providing a series of in-depth reports from the ground, it seeks to stimulate debate. In doing so it reflects the concerns, challenges and biases both of those who live with the consequences of the disaster and of those who work with them.
SECTION-I

POSTCARDS FROM THE COAST:
selected posts from a field blog

This section features selections from a blog maintained by the author while traveling in Tamil Nadu during his fieldwork. Some of the posts have been edited to minimize repetition. Readers can access the full blog at www.womencantswim.wordpress.com
Why this Blog?
I hope readers find the title of the blog curious and are prompted to look in. I have named it for a specific purpose – to host stuff that emerges from my forthcoming travels, to draw attention to the real costs of women in South Asia not being able to swim.

I currently hold a Scholar of Peace fellowship for 2007 from WISCOMP, in New Delhi, India. WISCOMP (Women in Security, Conflict Management and Peace) is an initiative of the Foundation for Universal Responsibility (FUR) of His Holiness the Dalai Lama.

My project is entitled Women Can’t Swim: Tsunami, Survival and the Gender Dimension. I am just beginning, but I am hoping to be able to post a lot, and post frequently in the coming weeks. My first field trip will begin next week.

My project seeks to expand the dominant notions of security and conflict to embrace a crucial and ignored aspect of life in South Asia, and that is the gendered impact of natural disasters. I believe that this broadening of definition of conflict with, and security from, the forces of nature, is integral to the larger security and conflict resolution environment for women – indeed for society as a whole. Women victims of natural disasters are as innocent and vulnerable as victims of war, riots or terrorism.

I hope to travel and meet people, in the south Indian state of Tamil Nadu, which was worst affected by the 2004 tsunami, and write about my experiences. I will primarily be seeking to understand the specific ways in which the tsunami impacted women, and the levels to which their needs are recognized in the ongoing rehabilitation program.

I have a feeling that few people think about natural disasters in this way, that it can affect women more than men. People recognize perhaps, that the poor are affected more than the wealthy, but that your gender can be a factor is often ignored. I realized this some months before the tsunami when I was down, again in southern India, near the port of Kakinada. I was documenting case studies for the year end report of an International NGO, which had a cyclone preparedness program there.

One late morning, I was walking with Kavita, a local fisherwoman to see her casuarina plantations, which she was nurturing as a bulwark against a future occurrence of a cyclone. She suddenly said to me –
“In every cyclone, in every tsunami, you will find that it is girls and women who die the most. That’s because we are not taught to swim.”

It seemed obvious when stated, but equally shocking was the fact that it was entirely absent in mainstream discourse... it just wasn’t part of the preparedness plan. I don’t think that at this stage, people involved in disaster management were even thinking in these terms. They were, like all of us, I guess, inured by ‘received notions’ of local ideas of modesty and so on.

I remember being dazzled by Kavita’s reasoning, and thought often, and spoke to friends about how we so often ignore the obvious truths under our own noses, but did little. Kavita’s words were to prove grimly prophetic when the tsunami did arrive in 2004.

I first wrote a piece about this some days after I read the report. It was soon after the July 2006 tsunami in Java… it was also a time when West Asia was in crisis, the Israelis were also strafing Lebanese civilians, and the press by and large ignored the tsunami. Perhaps as George Monbiot once wrote, there weren’t enough westerners in the resorts at the time. The piece is republished in Section II.

Six months later, I applied to WISCOMP, was awarded the fellowship and I am happy to begin.

But they can swim and dive - and do

The doorbell rang at four in the morning. In Ramnad, the lodging houses have receptions but they don’t receive visitors. They allow them to walk right up. Palswamy, my local contact and the president of the fish-workers union had asked me to be ready for an early start, 4-30 sharp he had said. So I didn’t really mind the knock on the door. And also, I was beside myself with excitement because the adventure planned for the day was something I had long waited for. I had hardly slept.

This coastline along the Gulf of Mannar and the Palk Straits in Southern India, the stretch between Rameshwaram and Thoothukudy is paradise for a marine biologist. It is arguably the richest preserve of coral off India’s shores, and hosts a mind-boggling variety of life – estimated by scientists to be in excess of 3600 species. There are innumerable crustaceans, a hundred or so varieties of hard coral, many tons of constantly regenerating seaweed, dolphins and dugongs.
This is an ancient land, and people have lived on the coast for millennia, it is the setting for crucial episodes in the Ramayana. More than 50000 folks live in over 47 villages, going out to sea in their small valloms, rowing themselves out, or surfing on rudimentary sails. Some have an outboard motor, and a few luckier ones have joined the growing band of powerful mechanized trawlers. Fishermen in Tamil Nadu are a powerful lobby, an influential vote bank – not a group to be trifled with.

A lot of people depend on the fishermen and their catch. But they are for the most part substantially worse off, economically, working as they do as auxiliaries to the main fishers. They sort the catch, work as loaders who ferry the fish, repair the nets and fetch the diesel. Palswamy heads a trade union which represents the traditional fishermen, laborers on larger fishing vessels, and most interestingly, about 2000 women who dive into the waters to manually collect seaweed.

I first heard about these people from Arvind Narain of the Alternative Law Forum in Bangalore, and from his friend Revathi, a filmmaker turned full time relief worker in Nagapattinam, the area worst affected by the tsunami in India. It was a fascinating story. She too was besotted with them, and had sacrificed, in a tragic mix of enthusiasm and foolhardiness, a robust video camera while trying to film them. She used her goodwill to negotiate my access to the community. I was

Seaweed divers heading out; once joyous voyages are now furtive expeditions.
interested in them precisely because they swam and dived for a living and their lives contested received notions that women in so called traditional societies are not encouraged to swim – the original impetus for my research project.

The evening before Palswamy and I had chatted over coffee at the Union office. He thinks that these activities began more than a hundred years ago, when local traders began to realize the market value of seaweed and found buyers farther away who were interested in paying for it. A few processing houses were set up in Ramnad, and families encouraged to collect them both on the Palk Straits and the Gulf of Mannar. There are middlemen who collect the harvested seaweed and send it onto factories from where it is exported. The collectors are at the bottom of the chain, but they weren’t complaining. They were double-income families.

The women were put to the task because the waters where they collected the seaweed were shallow, along the many coral reefs that dot the several tiny Tivus, or islands in the region. In any case, the men went to fish, and this was seen as additional income. Over the years, however, the expansion of mechanized trawling saw the traditional fishers’ catch dwindle, and for at least 2000 families, seaweed became the primary breadwinner.

All this was to end however, in 1986, when the Government of India, decided to declare the region a National Park. In one deft move, this chain of 21 Tivus became inaccessible. In 1989 the area became the Gulf of Mannar Biosphere Reserve, driving the nail into the coffin and sealing forever the traditional access these coastal people had to their waters.

A treasured profession was now a crime and once-joyous voyages now became furtive and illegal expeditions. Like national parks across India, the conflict between state and people continues to simmer, here in the Gulf of Mannar. Whose waters are these? The notion of national property and ecological heritage means little to people whose life-support is the very water. The Government has argued that it is the indiscriminate collection of seaweed, which is harmful to the ecosystem. The collectors contest it. They explain that seaweed dies, and grows again – all they do is to pluck it with their hands, which aren’t strong enough to hurt the corals. But the law is implemented quite viciously. The islands are a no-go space, and anyone found there is an offender.
Park authorities say that the women are free to collect seaweed beyond a distance of 200 meters from the Tivus – and a fat lot of good that is, because no seaweed grows at that distance. And so it has remained, which is why, I was asked by Palswamy to be ready to leave at four in the morning, if I wanted to go out to sea with some of the women.

The knock on the door led to a bonus actually. The Lodge, having declined to make me coffee at the unearthly hour, the driver offered to nip down to the bus stand to fetch the caffeine fix. We were both suitably fortified in half an hour, and we made our way through a darkened highway to the fishing port of Keezhakarai, about 18 kilometres away. The atmosphere was tense, for not only was our little voyage wholly illegal, but just the night before, some local fishermen had been shot at by some strange men in a boat, and a couple had died. Some rumors suggested the Lankan Navy and some the Sea Tigers. But know all locals will nudge and wink while telling you that it could be someone else…

We were thankfully across the Palk Straits, but people expected increased patrolling. It is a real risk for these people, because they can be booked for poaching, for entering prohibited spaces and the fines can be crippling – as high as five thousand rupees. There are also stories of guards negotiating a hard bargain. They can be let off for less money, given as graft, but the sums are still high enough to cripple a woman with a subsistence wage. On occasion, the forest department personnel also reveal their boorish side, emptying the modest picnic-lunch packs

But they can swim! And also dive – seaweed collectors in Ramnad.
of the women into the Gulf they are meant to protect, or running off with their change of clothes. It is this, which makes the forest department the most reviled arm of the state in contemporary India.

Here in the peninsular tip of southern India, along the gentle coast of the Gulf of Mannar, the sunrise is spectacular.

Quasi-crimson rays shimmer from beyond the horizon, bouncing off the emerald green waters to bathe the bobbing country craft in a soothing, azure haze. We arrived as the sounds of the azaan sprang from speakers atop the modest minarets of the local mosque. In the stillness of the dawn, here in the silence of rural India, the clarity of the sound was almost perfect. We walked noiselessly, more in fear of the forest department, than in deference to the sleeping, to meet our hosts for the day – there were three women, and two men.

We didn’t waste any time, setting off right away. The only time I had been on a country boat at sea before was a touristy dolphin trip on the gentle lagoon at Palolem Beach in South Goa, several years ago. My swimming is rudimentary, and I must confess I looked around for life jackets. I cursed myself, thinking I would next ask to see if the boatman was insured to carry passengers like an ignoramus gora. But the camaraderie and conviviality soon ended all that, and I found myself enjoying the freshness of the air filling my tobacco tainted alveoli, and unworried about the very serious bobbing of the craft, despite the deceptive stillness of the waters.

It took us quite a while to get to the nearest Tivu, and we talked along the way. Manickam was our boatman, he had begun his career as a helper on a fishing boat, and was showing off his crab-bitten hands. They had weathered many storms, and he wished me to understand that he had a claim over the waters; that he had paid his price. He had taken a loan to rig his vallom with an outboard motor, and was now content to earn enough money to pay for diesel and then some. Going out with the women, did that for him. “In the past, when I was but a little lad, we would all go out together”, he told me when we were a little way out. “The men would fish, the women would get seaweed. We’d camp on the Tivu, sleeping in little thatch shacks we’d there. We would go with provisions, and spices, cook some of the fish we caught, and stay for as long as a month. The sea is my home, my school and university. It has taught me to live”, he said, insisting I write all this down.
By now the Tivu was in sight, and we could see the frothy foam clearly, energetic waves crashing on the coral reefs in the distance. The rest of the sea was gentle, even the exhaust from our outboard engine generated a mere lapping around the hull of the boat. The sight was electric; there was endless water all around, with just this one line of crashing waves, frothy foam. The women were also beginning to loosen up now. The first enquiries were about my wife and family, followed with updates about theirs. They had picnic lunch bondas wrapped in dried plantain leaves.

Manickam was by now warming up to the discussion. He began to give me a primer on the crisis facing his community. He had his arguments marshaled and ready. “Just look at the coastline, and see how it is bereft of all green cover. This has happened only after the National Park came into being.” He said explaining how the villagers used to once care for them, spending as they did several days on the island. During their sojourns on the island the people would take huge barrels of fresh water with them, for their use. When they left, they’d use it to water the shrubs on the coast.

He began his task of convincing me, his analogies becoming more and more eloquent. “If you have a house and don’t live in at all the time, and also leave it untenanted it will go to waste”, he said. “That’s what’s happening to the Tīvus, the forest department launches come in on occasion, stay a few hours, harass those of us they can find, and then they go away.” His colleagues greeted this cheerily and Selvi began to speak of the time when the department decided to build a compound wall and to prevent access to the island, and brought in several boulders at great cost. The high tide dislodged them and they have all rolled off.

The Sun was up now and we could see through the waters. The corals were a dark hue of brown, offset by the green of the weed. There weren’t too many fish. We could see the bottom of the ocean floor, crystal clear, in the slanting morning light. The boat dropped anchor. Technically, we were poachers; we were well within the proscribed 200-metre limit off the island. “Do you want to see our kit?”, asked Karpagam, untying a bundle in a corner of the boat. She whipped out a goggle, an oval mask of transparent plastic in a locally fabricated metal frame. She wore it, tying the elastic band around her head, knotting it with the ease of a boy scout. And then came out the desi flippers, circular cutouts of discarded tin, with another elastic strap. Wordlessly all three of them put them on, settled their backs on the edge of the boat, and
dived in, head first, with minimum splash. In that setting, it had all the elegance of a champion swimmer.

For the next two hours, they swam underwater, surfaced for breath, sometimes staying in for as long as four minutes. They tread water, to survey the surroundings, and in they went again. They mostly used their hands for propulsion, and on occasion their legs. Given that all of them were clad in sarees, that was no mean task. They had small net baskets, like a lepidopterist’s net, into which they put the seaweed they collected. They had no tools, using their fingers to pluck the seaweed. Time and again, they swam to the boat, to show me that they were being careful, that they left the roots untouched. They did this, they explained, because then the weed would grow again, and they could return to pluck some more, to earn some more.

They came up for a respite, some more of the bondas, savory snacks made with potatoes, and promptly dived in again. In between they explained to me that the seaweed would die anyway, after a few months, if it was left un-plucked. In all the years they have been harvesting the weed, they have never known it not to grow. “Why would we destroy what feeds us?” Karpagam asked, more than a trifle indignant. “The worst thing that could possibly be is that we may be making a mistake in the way we harvest the weed. But I don’t think that is correct, for we just use our hands and no tools at all. We are careful not to pluck

They don’t use Scuba. Goggles are fabricated locally.
the roots. But we are willing to learn. They could train us in how to do that, though between you and me we could teach them better how to preserve the coral. Do you see them saying anything to the big trawlers that bribe them? Do they realize how their hulls cut through the nets and the reefs, and even the spawning fish?”

After a second diving expedition, they are done for the morning. They decide to push their luck and take me to the island. We pass very near the coral reef, and stop again. Getting off the boat we wade across the water, still and gentle like a gigantic swimming pool. They point out the grave of some forgotten sufi; years ago, they’d pray there before setting off to collect the seaweed. Chandra finds a rare shell, with five fingers. It was only to show me, they say and promptly drop it back.

The sail back to shore was even smoother; lulling most us to sleep. The Sun was up now, a torrid blaze that gives South India its sweltering climate. Except for Manickam, the rest of us were rocked to sleep. Back on the beach we sat under an awning of cane and thatch to talk some more. “The forest department keeps telling us they will give us alternative livelihoods. They suggest that we start rearing sheep and goats. How many of these can this village support. Will they organize a market for us as well?” This was Chandra, the youngest and quietest of the three women. “Or they will give us tailoring machines and teach us to sew? Are they blind or barmy? Don’t they see that everyone buys ready-mades these days – and that too once or twice a year. The seaweed grows back, each time- how can they stop us from collecting it?”

There is an enormous global market for seaweed. The main markets are in the Far East – Japan, Korea, and Taiwan. The annual global trade is in the range of seven billion dollars. These women are at the very bottom of this pyramid. They make their subsistence living from the only resource they have known for centuries. They look out from the shore for their needs, it is not in them to look inland. The sea is integral to their identity.

Later that afternoon, Karupuswamy, the secretary of the union and Palswamy’s colleague explained to me that not one head of cattle has been distributed by the forest department in the 19 years since the National Park was formed. I decide to visit the Central Marine Fisheries Research Institute Campus nearby, to get a scientific opinion. Inside the Marine Algae research laboratory, I met with Dr. Eashwaran, a marine biologist specializing in seaweed and marine algae, and
overseeing a program of captive breeding of seaweed in the Rameshwaram area. There were 800 families that were meant to be participating in the program. He however, spoke with the caution of a Government officer, and wanted me to seek the permission of his superiors, ensconced in their campus in Bhavnagar, Gujarat, thousands of Kilometres and several ecosystems away, round the cape of Kanyakumari and up the Arabian sea, to the Gulf of Kutch. Palswamy has been trying to find out the revenues generated by the captive cultivation program, for some years now, but has no had no luck. I asked as well, but could expect no better for an hour of my time.

I decided to try and see if I could see and meet with the families working with the captive seaweed, and drove off to the Pamban Bridge which links mainland India with Kanyakumari. We couldn’t see anyone, not even the tourists who’d normally gather to see the railway bridge lift up to make way for returning fishing vessels. This continues to happen even though there is no train now, because of the gauge conversion work. It was either the wrong time of day, or the fear of unknown snipers killing innocent fishermen. What we did see though was a surveillance Helicopter of the Indian Navy.

On the way back, I dropped in to see Dr. Gopakumar, another marine biologist at another research station of the CMFRI. “I have been trying to negotiate between the seaweed collectors and the forest department”, he said. There is no doubt that the ecosystem is under threat, we need measures to protect them but seaweed collectors are not the problem. This is a renewable resource. The weed grows back again”,

Surfacing for breath during a seaweed collection exhibition.
he explained. “No one has assessed the damage from the increasing marine traffic, the exhaust from the powerful diesel engines and outboard motors that power the craft on waterways that once saw only traditional craft. Protection laws must be tailored to local conditions. We cannot forget that the coastal people have the primary claim to living on, and off the coast.”

The nub of the problem lies in this shortsightedness. What is happening in Ramnad is this: the government is blindly imposing already unpopular conservation laws created for terrestrial ecosystems, where it has no relevance. And the forest officers drive home the point. My last call was on S Shenbagamoorthy the chief wildlife warden of the Reserve – “My mandate is to uphold the law as it exists, not to reform it”, he said. Reform and Rehabilitation is not my concern.

**Overnight to Karaikal**

I have just reached Karaikal, after one of the most grueling days that I can remember. I haven’t slept for 28 hours. Coming back from my trip out on the Gulf of Mannar with the fisherwomen of Keezhakarai, getting up at 3 in the morning, to return well after noon, I was told that there was a state government sponsored *bandh* all over Tamilnadu.

The DMK, which is currently in power, has been one of the most consistent, strident, vocal and often violent supporters, and an exemplary pioneer of caste-based reservations in jobs and education in India. They were now protesting a recent decision of the Supreme Court, granting an interim stay on a new bill to allow for expanding reservations to what are called OBCs or Other Backward Classes.

*A bandh* is a general strike where everything comes to a standstill – no buses, trains, shops, etc. Groups of political goons (and sheer criminals too) roam the streets, caviling the toiling for keeping their enterprises open.

The upshot of it was that the manager of the Rupee Palace Hotel in Ramnad where I was staying, said to me that there would not even be a cup of coffee available, the whole of the 31st, I wouldn’t be able to leave the place or meet anyone, or even get out of town.

So, I decided to leave that evening itself, to try and get as close to Nagapattinam, my next destination. I had to change three buses, to get to where I am now, which is 20 kilometres away, and is a tiny former
French enclave – it is technically a separate province, and I thought that the *bandh* may not be as severe...

**The Journey**

As the crow flies, the distance from Ramnad to Nagapattinam, or Karaikal is not so great, but the East Coast Road is only half done, and I gathered that it would be a torture to take that route. I was advised to travel towards Tiruchi, due North from Ramnad, change buses at Puddukottai, and then onto Thanjavur, and then to Karaikal. And that is what I did.

At Ramnad station, heaving an attaché case of 20 plus kilos, I hung out for a bit. There wasn’t an enquiry counter, and all the boards were defiantly monolingual. And there I was speaking more than passable Tamil, in an accent that was fairly native, but unable to read. A couple of my co-passengers were quite incredulous at this ability of mine, and more than a trifle skeptic about my bonafides.

No buses in sight at the Tiruchi platform and very few passengers too. The one bus there was bound for Madras, it would go via Puddukottai I was told, and so I asked the conductor, if I may ride on it. “I can’t tell you now” he said. “I will only let you get on if I have no tickets”.

And then he busied himself in gossip with a few other cronies, sipping tea and munching boiled peanuts (I had some of the latter, delicious) all the time lamenting that he had no “tickets”. “See, no one is traveling because of the *bandh*, we will get to Madras only after 6 in the morning, and then where would they go? I have no tickets”, he kept repeating.

It took me a while to crack the code. Tickets meant passengers in the lexicon of the long distance bus business in Tamilnadu. Ergo, no tickets meant no passengers. And by telling me to hold on, till he was sure he had no tickets, he was trying to explain that his first duty was to allow long distance passengers to board first. He would first sell places all the way to Madras, and only if there were no takers would he let someone board for an interim destination. It made sense, I had to agree. I was being what was called a tube-light in my school days. It was euphemism for an idiot. Just a tube light flickered several times before lighting up, an idiot has to be explained the simple truth several times – he can’t get it in one go!
I got on quite easily, in the eventuality. There were no tickets, after all. I made my way to the rear of the bus, found a twin, reclining seat, placed the attaché in the aisle- and settled down for a bumpy four hour-drive.

I couldn’t see the countryside in the dark; it had been the same on my journey out as well. This is a part of Tamilnadu, I don’t know well – the drier inland plains having traveled in the past mostly on the coast, the Kaveri delta and the Western Ghats. I managed some sleep though, and was deposited at Puddukottai bus stand at 11 pm or so.

Tamil Nadu buses are famously efficient and its bus stands notoriously noisy and messy. At midnight the Puddukottai stand was no exception. Tea stalls, with the tea chef deftly handing out milky sweet *chai* to grateful customers, tired, sleepy but strangely un-irritable. There is a tired acceptance that travel is torture in the bus stands of Tamil Nadu. The way they make tea and coffee in these stalls is fascinating to watch. Even the tea here has a decoction, unlike in the north of India where they boil the leaves each time. This makes delivery faster, the turnover quicker. The decoction is first poured through a sieve made of dirty, stained muslin and then in act of artistic juggling, the milk is thrown in a perfect arc, to create the froth at the top. Picture this: the decoction is in a glass in the left-hand, a saucepan with boiling milk in the right. The tea maker has his hands wide apart, and flicks the milk up with his right hand, it rises up in a perfect arc, falling from a height above the level of the glass, mingling with the decoction to make the full cup of tea. This action is then reversed, and the mixture travels back from the glass to the saucepan. You can watch it for hours and the chaps never spill a drop. The whole process repeated a half dozen times, to dissolve the sugar as well.

Even the act of consuming tea, a simple and direct affair – aimed solely to de-fatigue the imbibers. A cuppa is not for idle chatter. It is the same in the restaurants. Eating is solely a business of fortifying yourself. Come, eat and leave. These are not places for social intercourse. Everyone seems to be in a hurry while eating in these parts. It is an interesting idea.

I didn’t have too long to wait at Puddukottai. There was a Thanjavur bus, idling on the ramp. The conductor was a friendly chap and decided from my Tamil that he would be better off fine-tuning his English. And so we had a tortured conversation for a while, with me playing along with him – till he gave up and switched back to Tamil but only
after ascertaining my background. He said it would be a matter of luck if I made it to Karaikal before 6 am, the time for the bandh. He explained the best connections that would get me there. And then he said something very, very perceptive.

“I am a beneficiary of Tamil Nationalism” he said “and a victim as well”. A child of landless laborers, he rose to become a graduate benefiting from both the reservations policy and free education. Armed with the degree, he got a job as conductor through the reservation as well. “But this package comes with a serious drawback”, he told me suddenly solemn. He was drawing my attention to an almost jingoistic engagement with literacy in Tamil that has marked much of the Dravidian movement. “This has opened us to influences and thoughts from other cultures and regions. These are translated for us but it has also crippled us by making the majority hopelessly monolingual... In a country like India, the least education could do is to make a person at least bilingual, it is so easy.”

I was struck by the strength of his argument. It was something I had noticed on several occasions before- from the trade unionist working with fisherwomen in Ramnad to the political theorist in Pondicherry, I have been meeting several articulate, intelligent conversationalists, all of whom have the same complaint. They really wish they could be at ease in at least one more language.

My friend, conductor on the Thanjavur bus, gave my attaché pride of place just behind the driver’s seat, and me a seat alongside. We sauntered on with frequent stops, as this was a shuttle and made the one hour journey in 90 minutes, He was even kind enough to drop me off at the Karaikal stand, so I didn’t have to lug my luggage. He returned after 10 minutes to show me the Karaikal bus, which had arrived from Trichy; it was hidden behind three others, and we could just glimpse it between the other buses. So, I lugged my self and luggage over, only to be told that I couldn’t board it, if I wanted to travel with my luggage. Across this whole trip, I found drivers consistently ruder than conductors or co-travelers.

I had to wait a while, having been refused access to a couple of buses to Kumbakonam, which would get me closer to Karaikal, and from where I was told there were likely to be more buses. It was well past one and now I began to worry. It would all be very silly if I didn’t make it. Getting another hotel, packing and unpacking, and moving again on...
Monday morning. Getting to Karaikal by Saturday morning, would give me a chance to begin working right away the day after the bandh. I toyed with the idea of getting a cab, but there were none visible and I was too lazy to heave my case out onto the main road – there was also the risk of missing the bus in the bargain.

This is where veteran co passengers can be of great help. One of them who had overheard my entreaties to the driver said to me – “when the next bus comes, just board it with quite confidence. Elbow your way in if you have to”. That is what I did, and no one complained. Again, I was in front of the bus and we began to snake our way through an ordinary district road. I had been on this road several times since childhood. Till I was about 15 my grandparents, on my mothers side lived in a village near Kumbakonam, and I used to visit every year. The closer I got to Kumbakonam, I began to acquire a comforting confidence, and began to worry less and less about making it to Karaikal in time. Once I was in Kumbakonam, I knew I would make it.

Located at the very heart of the Kaveri delta, Kumbakonam is a temple town, famous for its own version of the Kumbh Mela, the Mahamakam – held like the former, once every twelve years. Some years ago, there was a major stampede at the bathing tank, and several people died, here too there were more women, than men. Kumbakonam has somehow earned a reputation for being the nursery of the wiliest Brahmanism. I am inclined to think it is true, knowing what I do of the role of Brahmanism in the past of the Tamil country. An apocryphal story I had often heard growing up involved some one called Sir Karamchand Vaid, who had some sort of reputation of being a worthy North Indian bureaucrat posted to these parts – “The Brahmins of Kumbakonam are sanctimonious humbugs”; he is reputed to have said. I love that.

The bus to Kumbakonam was an antique compared to the one, which got me to Puddukottai. It disgorged a full load of us at a deserted bus terminus, and the crowds quickly dissolved into the darkness. Most were going home, I guessed, relieved to be in anchor in the hours before the bandh. It is ironic, how people scuttle into their own refuges at a time of an event of popular protest.

I wasn’t alone at the bus stand. Merely the only idiot hoping for a bus. I asked for the Karaikal stand – and it was pointed out to me, the far end of the other side. I wheeled my rather heavy attaché and waited a
while. I walked across for a tea, and got chatting with the tea-stall youth. “You must be naïve” he said, “to think that a bus will turn up just because it says so on the time table”. He had the tone of the tired wisdom of a ‘been there done that’ veteran speaking with a well-intentioned delinquent. “No bus that leaves now, can come back before six and only a fool would venture out. I suggest you sleep over somewhere here”. He obviously figured from my appearance that I could afford neither lodgings nor a taxi. He hadn’t seen my attaché, only my backpack. (It held my swanky new Mac book).

I wasn’t going to give up. So, I wheeled in my attaché and asked him to look after it, while I went to seek a cab. He perked up. His manner changed, he told me what the fare should be (500 INR) but warned that I would be fleeced, and that I should drive a hard bargain. Armed with this knowledge I sauntered out – there were a dozen ageing ambassadors, but only one awake driver. I told him where I wanted to go, and he named his price – 1100 INR. I said no. He said how much. I said 800. I told him I could take a room for 400, and go the next morning in a bus for 10. He wouldn’t budge. Then I had a flash of inspiration. I explained to him that he would earn nothing that day because of the bandh. By taking me along, he would make a little something. I said that I appreciated the risk he had to take and said I would offer him 50% extra. Then I changed my mind. He was a keen gangly youth, he wasn’t arguing with greed. I offered 800 and he went into a huddle with his mates who had all woken up by now. I spoke before they could finish. I repeated my reasoning. “Take me and make a bit,” I said. “Argue and loose it all”. They bit the bait. He drove the car into the bus stand. He wheeled my attaché. He turned the music up loud, and delivered me to Karaikal, at the gates of the most luxurious hostelry in town. They had an air-conditioned double room free, and I took it. I haven’t slept for 28 hours. Now, I can’t leave the room for another 14. Ho hum.

**Fisher panchayats and forgotten women**

I had two sets of meetings today, after spending the morning taking pictures at Akkarapettai harbor, just outside Nagapattinam, got some good sound too on the MD I think, women throwing prices at auction, made a mistake though, was so excited about the size and variety of the fish and the drama of unloading, that I forgot to take pictures of the auxillaries – these are the women who have actually been wholly untouched by tsunami rehab.
My first meeting was with a sort of activist couple, Kuppuswamy and his wife, who have been excommunicated from the Meenavar community in Namibiarnagar, also on the outskirts of Nagapattinam, further north of the coast. Their mistake was first in writing to the fisheries ministries to enquire on some eligibilities he had under a scheme. The other was in forming a fishworkers union. So no one would talk to them, their kids have had to drop out, and so on.

I have taped long interviews and I will be posting in detail, once I have transcribed them, and thought a bit more, but the nub of the story is this: the women, especially single ones – and by this I mean divorcees, deserted women and widows, were completely ignored by the all male traditional panchayats. For instance, a widowed woman, living separately from her children, because they are not able to live together for whatever reason, is not allowed by the panchayat to get a house under the resettlement scheme. The arguments are at best specious.

**End of trip one**

I leave Nagapattinam this evening and will drive to Kumbakonam or Thanjavur to take a train to Madras, I tried once again (this makes it three times) to speak with a panchayat member at Nambar Nagar, but no go. We had a fixed appointment. I have called him thrice now, I have gone physically and left a message.

So, Selvan my friend at the NCRC – which is the NGO coordination and Resource Centre, set up a meeting with another panchayat member, in a neighboring village, who was also called Selvam – there were three or four people there today and so, that was useful to a certain extent. But they were trying very hard to be politically correct. But they insisted that no government could mess with the way the Panchayat functions.

I also resumed my earlier conversation with Vanaja (which I haven’t written about yet). She is a sharp, friendly middle aged woman, who has perhaps walked every inch of the coast between Nagapattinam and Karaikal. She has strong opinions on recanalisation – which is a surgical process through which a vasectomised woman may be able to have children again.

There were a lot of these operations performed in Tamil Nadu under a scheme where the women were subsidized 25000 rupees, but the government is reticent about success rates. There is very often pressure
from husbands of women who have lost their children, threatening to make second marriages. Vanaja knows of one case where the girl committed suicide. It is a confusing issue. The women have a lot of pressure. The clinical success is uncertain and there are rumors of financial shenanigans as well. For e.g. many of the women, 18 months after the tsunami and unable to conceive are encouraged to go for expensive IVFs.

There is also no definite plan to counsel people to consider adoptions. There are several 100 tsunami orphans in institutions. I have some more information on this, and will write a longer post soon, hopefully.

**Alcohol abuse after the tsunami...**

A friend of mine said this to me in Chennai, during a transit stop – one of several I made on my way to the southern districts. She had been a volunteer in a relief camp, immediately after the tsunami. And she’d kept in touch with the rehabilitation process. She said that the incidence of alcohol abuse and dependence among the fisherfolk rose dramatically in the months after the tsunami. It rose significantly enough to become even more of a problem for the families than it already was. She also was of the opinion that the issue was a symptom of a larger ailment. To her, it reflected a rather subtle, and perhaps devious, sleight of hand; it had ended up with the state retrieving significant amounts of the monies it had disbursed as relief; the money was back in state coffers now as revenue and tax from liquor sales. Give with one hand and take with the other; the state is none the poorer, and the victims are just as vulnerable. This was her thesis, and I think she is right.

Liquor retail in Tamil Nadu is a government monopoly. In the popular lexicon, liquor vends are called TASMAC. That is an acronym for Tamil Nadu State Marketing Corporation. It controls both procurement and sale, both of Indian Liquor, and what they call IMFL – Indian Made Foreign Liquor. It buys them from distributors and manufacturers and sells them through its outlets, to consumers.

These little vends, are scattered throughout the state, at strategic locations. In the absence of competition, they are for the most part, dull and depressing, dark and dinky, holes in the wall- a wired cage, separating buyer and seller like a latticed Purdah. You cannot pick a bottle of your choice and take it to the till. It is like a transaction with a bank teller. It is meant, I think, to protect the staff, the inventory and
the cash from being looted by inebriated or criminal elements. The surroundings are filthy and unkempt, there is a nasty odor in the air, it reeks of both the pungency of potent spirits, and puke. A ‘TASMAC’ is at once, both the local pub and the public urinal.

Anyone wanting a drink has to work his way, often through a jostling queue, especially at peak hours, and slide his money through the mesh, and take what is on offer. This is a monopoly, not a market; there is no choice. Many take their drink home, but several others consume it right there. And like the ubiquitous Thekas of North India, these vends sustain a robust and thriving subterranean economy.

With the approach of the evening hour, an impromptu hive of activity springs to life in the vicinity of every TASMAC. Stand-alone tables are erected, and kerosene hearths are lit. Copious amounts of ice are shoved into metal containers. Boys and young men scurry about, dispensing plastic cups, water and flavored drinks to mitigate the burning and unpleasant taste of the spirits – as well as a range of snacks from boiled chickpea to fried fish... both the alcoholic and the occasional drinker support several families other than their own.

Of course, one could ask what all this has to do with the tsunami and relief and women. Can one reasonably deny a person, so recently bereaved, and dislocated, his life, as he knew it, destroyed with little trace of hope, the comfort of assuaging his grief with a drink? Are there not drinkers and alcoholics everywhere? Does not every government make money by taxing liquor? Correct. No arguments. But there is a story in the coastal districts of Tamil Nadu, and it needs to be told.

Fisherfolk and seafarers all over the world are known to be hardy drinkers. There is an old nursery rhyme that used to be popular in Kindergartens in England called “what should we do with the drunken sailor?” A Royal Navy report has found that alcoholism is more rampant in the Navy than it is in the civilian population. The comic-book character, that lovable nut, Captain Haddock once took ill, and fainted in the middle of a radio talk, because some one gave him water to drink instead of Loch Lomond Scotch. And the coastal folk of Tamil Nadu have been no different. They have always liked their drink.

But in the months after the tsunami, their boats lost, and nets damaged, their scarred souls unable to muster the nerve to venture back into the
sea, several of the fishermen and fish-workers were idle. And they had money on their hands as well, flush with the relief that was very often quite swiftly and efficiently distributed. This was more disposable income than their professions gave them, if you take a daily earning. They took the easy way out; they bought themselves a whole lot of drinks.

By their very nature fisherfolk do not have relationships with things further inland; it is not in them to look in that direction. It is the sea that they look out to. An old retired fisherman, with whom I was chatting at a fishing jetty a little way out of Cuddalore, a now-retired veteran of many voyages once told me that a fisherman’s borders ended at the nearest liquor vend. The other one was open, in the open seas, you went where your instinct, and your training told you to steer your boat. He had given up fishing but he still drank everyday.

So of course yes, some would argue that coastal folk are big drinkers anyway, so what is the big fuss. They may well have a point.

But what allows us to make the link is the fact that several of the volunteers, charity workers, and field level government employees I spoke to, were all of the opinion that the use of alcohol spiraled after the relief moneys were distributed. The terrible trauma and deep anguish, of having been destroyed and made dysfunctional by the waters that were their very provider, must have been an important catalyst. But they also say that they were able to discern a sudden expansion in TASMAC outlets along the coast. And TASMAC itself has reported an incredible surge in its sales turnover (and profits) since after the tsunami.

TASMAC began retail vending at the end of November 2003, just a little over a year before the tsunami. According to its website, TASMAC has had a steady growth in its sales turnover over the years. It sold an additional 8 million cases of liquor in the year immediately after the tsunami, as compared to just the year before.

That is not all. The Tamil Nadu Tsunami Resource Centre, which is a nodal forum at the state level, set up to facilitate the tsunami recovery process and coordinate information between various stakeholders commissioned a study on alcohol abuse immediately after the tsunami. This study too reported similar conclusions. There was a sharp surge in consumption immediately after relief was distributed, and later a fall, but overall consumption continues to remain higher than it was before the event. Infact immediately after the tsunami, as early as...
January 2005, The Tamil Nadu Commission for Women and the National Commission for Women, had jointly recommended in a report that TASMAC outlets be shut down for a period of one month, to ensure a limitation of the wastage of relief money on alcohol. I wonder if that would have helped. Denial has never stopped addicts, and prohibition has never worked anywhere in the world. And of course Tamil Nadu has its own share of illicit stills.

A Requiem for Pachaankuppam

In the Oxfam study, which I have kept referring to as one of the triggers for my project, there is a one sentence which hits me hard, every time I read it – “In Pachaankuppam village, every single person to die was a woman”. That makes it sort of special, it is the final proof, if one indeed did want it, of the gendered impact of this tsunami, or indeed, all other natural disasters are extremely selective in their choice of victims.

Early on in the project I had decided to visit Pachaankuppam, but my early leads were all taking me further south, to Ramanathapuram, and Nagapattinam – I had to see the seaweed divers of the Gulf of Mannar, I had to understand how the Katta Panchayats worked in Nagapattinam, I had to get my head around this whole idea of recanalisation (which I must confess, I still quite not have been able to do) and so it was some months before I actually managed to do that.

The village is not too far from Cuddalore, the ‘town by the sea’ an old port, just on the borders with Pondicherry. It is an ancient port, and Arikamedu, the archaeological ruins of a once thriving Roman-era port is on Cuddalore’s coastline nearby. They have found Roman coins, and settlements there, concrete evidence of a thriving Indian Ocean trade, before Vasco Da Gama, eventually arrived looking for ‘Christians and spices’.

Cuddalore could also be seen as the nursery of the British Raj in India, because unlike Surat, Madras, and Masulipatnam, which were then just ‘factories’ it was here that, unsurpassed looter of the Bengal hinterland, Robert Clive, first built, an administrative building, after he helped defeat the Nawab of Arcot. It’s called Garden House, and the district collector still lives there. All the colonial Europeans liked this part of the coast- the Danes were at Tranquebar, the French just next door in Pondicherry. The Portuguese, and then the Dutch were just across the creek in Porto Novo. The Tamils call it Parangipettai, it means the market of the foreigner, but we are digressing…
To get to Pachaankuppam, one has to drive fifteen minutes out of Cuddalore. Cuddalore is an expanding urban space, a born-again commercial centre, and the city and its suburbs are a muddled mess of construction sites that have an inveigled air of some promise of abundance about them; to me it looked like a cratered landscape that will remain chronically unfinished. But five minutes out of town, and your senses start to soothe, the rice-paddies, and coconut palms, a soothing refresher from the traffic snarl caused not by a profusion of tinny hatchbacks, and wriggling two wheelers, playing chicken with the rickshaws and pushcarts, but also by menacing earthmovers and concrete mixers.

There are many fishing hamlets all along the coast, many of them resting on the tiniest slivers of land, hemmed in by brackish water lagoons, and a few monsoon-fed estuaries. The sea is more than a trifle rough here, and there have been many cyclones, including Nisha, in the winter of 2008 that took at least 60 lives, and left 3500 people dislocated.

The Cuddalore coast also hosts some of the few mangroves on the Coramandel. In the region around Pichavaram, they cover about 150 square kilometers, a mere patch of green, compared to the vast expanse of the Sunderbans. Yet, it was they who protected several other hamlets from tragedy that fateful Boxers Day. Casuarinas too perform the same function. Together they act as a natural barrier between populated coasts, and the roiling sea. But Pachaankuppam is just a little beyond the coverage of the Mangroves; situated beyond the lagoon and the estuary, it was particularly exposed to the tempestuous waters when the tsunami struck.

There were 5 deaths that day, all female. Four adults and one child. That’s not much by numbers, but it is still telling. Pachaankuppam is not a fish-landing centre, merely the home of fisherfolk, who set off from the tiny beach at the end of their village. Unlike Silver Beach, in Cuddalore itself, where there were both fisherfolk and Sunday morning picnickers, and where a 1000 people died. What sets Pachaankuppam apart is that every single one was female.

My escort on my visit was Paul Patrick, a wizened, veteran volunteer in disaster relief, not only in the tsunami, but elsewhere as well. He now manages a field hospital run by an NGO. He has visited every village on the coast, and he knows Pachaankuppam, too – but he was taken aback by my assertion, and the reason I wanted to go there. He didn’t know, and so he rummaged in his files to find the document – he had a paper
there with the death toll across Cuddalore. And he found it, listed against Pachaankuppam the columns for men and boys read zero.

We set off immediately, leaving the main road outside Cuddalore to take an un-tarred coastal road. At one point, the road had collapsed, a temporary bridge over an estuary, which they were fixing – we waded across, and took an auto, which was marooned on the other side – the driver was happy for his customers. It’d take him another day to get back to town, once the connection was fixed.

Pachaankuppam is not a big village, but it is right on the coast, and the tsunami waters had come a long ways inland. Despite this, and perhaps because of the mangroves that are not too far away, the physical destruction was not so great. So not many houses were damaged, and those that were, were easily repaired. The aid has come by way of a school building, and a net repairing centre. Though it was the fishing season, we found the centre empty, except for an elderly fisherman, Anthony, sitting under the shade of a gently swaying palm. There were a few fishing boats, not the traditional catamarans, but new fiberglass reinforced ones which aid agencies have provided all along the coast.

We too sat down on the sand, beside Anthony and began to talk. He too wasn’t aware of the hamlet’s dubious claim to fame. When Paul told him about it, he immediately began to look distant, as he tried to remember that fateful day. He counted the names of those who had died, and yes, he agreed, they were all women. He was there that morning, and it wasn’t a terrifying, giant wave. It was a sudden gush of water, and it came a long way inland. So, in fact several people were able to swim to safety, and even rescue others. Many of the women and children had indeed been pulled to safety. But when I asked him if teaching the young girls to swim would have helped, he deflected the question. He began speaking about feeling left down by Kadalamma, the Goddess of the sea. He began speaking about how the men of the village did not want to fish on their own anymore… Infact at that very time, the village was almost bereft of men. Many of them were going away, on short term contracts to work as laborers on fishing trawlers in the calmer waters of the Persian Gulf. The boats remain idle most of the time, because the men don’t yet want to fish in these waters.

He kept dodging the question on whether girls could be taught to swim though. All he would say was that it hasn’t happened so far, and that no one had asked him before. Being close to the town though, most girls go
on to finish high school, and often do other courses too. Some of
them have jobs in town as well. They don’t go out on the water, he kept
insisting.

Paul had also arranged for me to meet with a small group of women in the
village. We met at a bus shelter, which too had been built with aid money
after the tsunami. Everywhere I went, the name of the benefactor was
announced boldly, over whatever infrastructure had been built. I saw it in
Nagapattinam, and it was here as well – on, the school walls, on the net
repair shed, and now here on the bus shelter. There were no buses though,
with the frail bridge across the lagoon under repair, just now. I couldn’t
help musing if all this was not simply because agencies need visual evidence
for their donors. Every board was outsize I have to say.

The women were easy conversationalists. Most of them weren’t
working anymore. They had family members working the trawlers in
the gulf, and were happy with the remittance economy it had spawned.
They got very excited when Paul told them about the deaths, and the
idea of swimming lessons. They did a headcount of the dead like
Anthony too and then they began to debate the swimming idea, many
were excited, many too shocked by the idea itself to react. I was however
struck by the fact that no one dismissed it. Some of them remembered
being dragged by the hair, by men who knew how to swim. They were
thankful to be rescued, but the idea of doing it themselves lingered.
I am not saying we would have had instant volunteers if we had offered
swimming lessons, but it is important to register that Paul and I were
not dismissed as some urban loons.

Then they sent for Malathi. And they told me her story – her father had
died long ago, and her mother was one of those who died in the tsunami.
She now looked after her younger brothers who were at school, and
she had a job in a photo studio in Cuddalore.

Some months ago, Malathi had accompanied some visitors from one
of the donor agencies on a boat out onto the water. They had steered
themselves quite some distance, and had stopped for a while before
they turned back to shore. Suddenly, and without warning she had
jumped into the water. She didn’t know to swim; she had to be pulled
out. She wasn’t in for long, the men with her were expert swimmers.
Over all the reprimands, she told them that she hadn’t been able to
control herself – the water was too inviting, she wanted to feel the
wetness all over herself, she wanted to feel the drench.
When Malathi came over to the bus shelter, she began giggling, thinking about the incident. She didn’t know what came over her; she just wanted to know how it felt. She said she’d do it all over again, it felt so good.

Buoyancy. It means more than just an ability to float. It also means resilience, and optimism. Malathi would happily enroll in swimming lessons, if she could.

**Recanalization: Choice or Coercion?**

There can be nothing more debilitating to a parent than losing a child. This is a tragedy of unspeakable horror and does not bear thinking about. There were several hundred families left in this abyss of emptiness during and after the tsunami. Several hundred young and vulnerable children were also orphaned. Relief workers, doctors, reporters and other observers have all reported the severe psychological trauma they encountered in bereaved families across the coastal districts of Tamil Nadu, and indeed all over the region affected by the tsunami.

What words of comfort can the human tongue utter, what physical gesture can a human limb make, what can even begin to share the aches of this empty abyss? How can we even begin to think that this is a healable wound?

There was one little way in which the Tamil Nadu Government tried to help suffering parents, a few months after the tragedy. The action, or rather the *sarkari* scheme, received some press, when it was first announced, but I fear it has not received the scrutiny it actually deserves. This was the rather ambitious recanalisation program.

At face value, it seems rather impressive and humane: restoring the possibility of having a baby to recently bereaved women—especially those who had had tubectomies before the tsunami. The program announced by the state government – Chief Minister Jayalalitha in fact announced the scheme on TV, offered free recanalisation operations in government hospitals, or a subsidy of 25000 rupees to women who opted to undergo the procedure in a private hospital.

What is Recanalisation? It is a clinical procedure that involves reversing the sterilization achieved by tubectomies to untie the knot, and surgically reconnect the fallopian tubes. This is meant to open out the possibility that a sterile woman may conceive again. Clinically however, there is no guarantee of success, and success rates have only averaged about
50%. There may be side effects as well but the doctors I spoke to were divided on the issue.

But there is more to it than meets the eye I think, and some of it more than just the mere restoration of choice, however noble it may be. It just hasn’t received enough attention. I was first told about this by Vanaja, who has worked for several years with a women’s group in Nagapattinam called Sneha. Vanaja, is an extremely focused, middle-aged woman, her greying hair and wrinkled weather-beaten face, silent apostles of a wisdom built on years of experience. Sitting across a table at the Sneha office, her countenance radiates a benign and soothing compassion, not betraying the overnight bus journey she’s just done. I do not exaggerate when I say that she has perhaps walked every mile of the coast from Karaikal to Velankanni. And she, along with her colleague Jesu Rathinam, and the firebrand filmmaker Revathi have perhaps done more to bring attention to the systemic exclusion in the post-tsunami reconstruction.

Vanaja has strong opinions on recanalisation, and she knows what she is talking about. She thinks the brouhaha over the restoration of choice is a mere chimera. To her it actually reinforces stereotypes, and existing cultural mores. I am not suggesting that she is unsympathetic to the tragedy of the women who have lost their children or indeed, how important the need for children can be for some people. She just thinks it has been done in the most hamhanded manner, she thinks there has not been enough counseling, and most galling of all she says there has been no help at all for women who went into the operation with their hopes rekindled, and did not conceive.

There were a lot of these operations performed in Tamil Nadu but no one knows quite how many, and what the rates of success were. The government, it has to be said has been extremely reticent after all the initial clamor. Vanaja has spoken to many of them, and followed their cases with some attention, and one sultry afternoon, in the relocated Kuppam of Parangipettai, we spoke of some of the issues which bothered her. Her first concern is that the scheme simply revalidated the notion that a woman is incomplete if she is not a mother. Women who survived the tsunami but lost their children were often blamed for the tragedy and made to feel even more guilty. She knows of many families where women were threatened to opt for the operation, because the husbands said they would marry someone else. She even knows one girl who committed suicide. Vanaja’s thesis is that such actions
feed into cultural mores that already exist. She believes that there should have been a concerted effort to find out if the women were ready for it, a strong element of counseling to make them understand the possibilities, rather than hold out promises of some clinical miracle.

She is particularly upset that there was little effort made to explore if some of the women could adopt and bring up tsunami orphans, a small balm that would have gone some way in soothing the pain of two individuals. As it is, she says several families are informally rearing orphaned relatives. But equally several children continue to be in institutional care because the government is unable to certify that they are officially orphans, because their parents are still classified as ‘missing’. It is a complicated and confusing issue. One of the few journalists to have written about this with some sensitivity is the Bangalore based American freelance writer, Margot Cohen. She says that what adds to the confusion is that Tamil Nadu has been one of the success states of India’s population control program. It has always exceeded targets for contraception. Even while the desperately poor in the North of India were reeling under Sanjay Gandhi’s infamous escapades in forced sterilization during the emergency, people in the south of India were somehow more enthusiastic. Government achieved dramatic results: By 2002, nearly 44 per cent of Tamil Nadu’s women had borne two children and been sterilized before their 27th birthday. And the state’s total fertility rate dropped from 3.8 in 1976 to 2.0 in 2002. But what is interesting is that again, it is the women who bear the burden. The statistics for vasectomies, for instance, are much lower. But it is much easier clinically to reverse vasectomies for men than it is to do for tubectomies in women.

Cohen also argues that in many cases doctors preferred to err on the side of caution, and in the past some doctors operating on poor women have tended to cut too much of the fallopian tubes, making it impossible to reverse the procedure. Ironically, this was done to forestall legal claims of method failure and the hassles of botched tubectomies.

Researcher Chaman Pincha too has drawn attention to the long-term implications of the surgery, and the fact that its limited success rate was not made clear to many women. She has also pointed out that the package was announced at a time when normalcy of life was not restored, a pre-requisite for a healthy pregnancy.
I spoke to a few women in Akkarapettai and Nambiar Nagar, two fishing hamlets in Nagapattinam. They had had the surgery, but had not conceived. One of them had spent several thousands of rupees on the treatment and the medication required, but had just not been lucky. She had been referred to an IVF centre in far-off Erode, but no one had explained to her what it involved. Her body has not taken it well, and she now falls sick very often.

“The government never means what it says”, she told me. “Clearly no one cares about us.”

She couldn’t be more right.
SECTION-II

REPORTAGE

Wall painting by children who survived the tsunami, Chennai
Teach the Girls to Swim: Tsunami, Survival and the Gender Dimension*

The wealthier tourists and luckier survivors have deserted the beaches of Java after the July tsunami. But rescue workers are still pulling corpses out of the rubble by the dozen. The mainstream media, convulsed by the man-made crises in Mumbai and Lebanon has paid scant attention to this calamity. The story lacks the atavistic viciousness on display in West Asia. It mourns the absence of a Robert Fisk. Agreed, the figures are thankfully nowhere near the chilling numbers of the disaster of 2004, but the toll is already 650 and rising. More than 70,000 people have fled their coastal homes; they are no less innocent and helpless than the fleeing denizens of Beirut or the hardworking commuters of Mumbai.

Some amount of aid has reached the survivors. Soon, there will be the usual complaints of corruption and pilferage as things go awry. There will be more talk of warning systems and hi-tech solutions, more opportunities for western ‘Technical Assistance’. This time around the Pacific Tsunami Warning System’s bulletin gave Indonesian authorities notice of a mere 24 minutes. There was little they could do.

As a bruised people slowly make what they can of their lives once again it will be the woman and the girl child who are ignored. As always.

This truly reflects the larger malaise in our attitude to disaster preparedness. We miss the wood for the trees. We make grandiose reconstruction plans, at the cost of ignoring simple local possibilities.

Forget governments, even the media, which drives the public discourse, is quick to discuss the impact of a disaster like the 2004 tsunami on tourism, on the environment, on the economy, on marine life, and even underwater archaeological treasures. There is a deafening silence on all fronts on the gender impact of such disasters, especially the toll they extract from women. They are not even worthy of a count when

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* This essay was first published on www.countercurrents.org. It was before the author formally received the Scholar of Peace Fellowship, but it deals with the same theme, and was one of the inspirations for undertaking the project. WISCOMP acknowledges with gratitude Countercurrents generosity in granting permission to reprint the article.
dead. There is very little effort made to disaggregate and publish a gender break down of the casualties.

There is a treasure trove in there for an intrepid demographer.

Natural disasters, despite the adjective are not random in their selection of victims. It is the existing social structures which determine who pays the higher price. Oxfam, the British relief and development agency conducted a survey and released figures, a few months after the 2004 tsunami. And they are stark:

In Indonesia, in the four villages in the Aceh Besar province surveyed by Oxfam only 189 of 676 survivors were female. That is a ratio of 3:1. In the worst affected village, Kuala Cangkoy, for every male who died, there were four females. In Cuddalore in Tamil Nadu, almost three times as many women were killed as men, with 391 female deaths, compared with 146 men. In Pachaankuppam village, every single person to die was a woman.

Why does this happen? It has been established that a tsunami is no great danger for those out at sea. The tectonic plates clash several miles below and the waves too pass under. It hits the coast the hardest. When the tsunami struck, the women were on the shore waiting for the catch to come in. It is they, who traditionally sort the catch and take it to market. And it is tradition too which dictates that young girls will not swim or climb trees. So, when the waters did come, more of those who could swim, and climb survived. It is no surprise that they were mostly men.

Emergency relief measures rarely respond specifically to women’s needs. The posting of women doctors, and police officers in some camps in India, was a rare exception. At another extreme, NGOs flew in thousands of packets of sanitary napkins and distributed them to Nicobarese tribal women who have never used them. They were first used as toilet paper because there was a water crisis, and then as pillows. This only illustrates that even when women-centric actions take place, they can be misplaced, if the women themselves aren’t allowed to articulate what they want.

The point of all this is that disaster management plans need to address gender in a focused manner. There are several questions that arise. These range from security in survivor camps, where women are
hopelessly outnumbered. There are issues of inheritance rights and access to means of livelihood. Some of the long-term rehabilitation programs have begun to address these, but simple local solutions to help women handle a future recurrence better, are for the most part, ignored.

Surely, while it may be unrealistic to begin swimming lessons for all women, a start could be attempted with younger girls? There can be training in the fabrication and use of low cost floating aids, and women encouraged to reach out and learn them.

In February 2006, the Vienna based Women without Borders sent two volunteers to Chennai. They wanted to teach women on the coast to swim. The idea was initially scoffed at and dismissed. But they persisted and managed to convince some key bureaucrats, and obtained local support. They leased a swimming pool, and spread the word around to the neighbouring villages. Over 80 women and younger girls enrolled. The memory of the tsunami, still fresh, was a powerful catalyst. However, many of them were reluctant to wear swimming costumes. So, these were discarded and replaced with T-Shirts and track pants. In the end, everyone who came had learnt to swim.

Teach people to swim and boost their chances of survival. It is a simple idea that can make a substantial difference to vulnerable lives. It doesn’t have to be another tidal wave; it can be a moderate cyclone or even monsoon floods, it will still help. The long-term rehabilitation work must of course, continue. But swimming lessons can be delivered locally at little or no cost. It is a whole lot better than not to try at all because of assumptions and pre-conceived notions of their traditions and modesty.
Katta Panchayats Denying Relief to Women*

There were six of them waiting for me in the forecourt of Radhakrishnan’s two-room, thatched-roof, home. This is on the outskirts of Nambiar Nagar, the dominant fishing settlement in Nagapattinam, Tamilnadu. This narrow sliver of sand on the Coromandel suffered the most in the tsunami of December 2004. It has also seen the largest volumes of aid. The waters ravaged many of the houses closer to the shore, but Radhakrishnan’s is higher up, on an elevated plane and was left unscathed. Radhakrishnan and his wife, therefore, did not get one of the new houses.

The new houses dominate the landscape on the approach road from town; only half the promised total have been built so far. They are arranged in the neatest of rows, an impossibly perfect grid, a playhouse array of Lego-like structures, each of them identical in every minute detail. Their contours are so ordered and perfectly aligned that they seem more like a film set from an ancient and kitschy period production and not the homes of a living, workaday people. An army cantonment awaiting a landscape architect perhaps, or coolie lines in a colonial plantation. These hamlets are all along the coast now, their one significant, enduring and common feature, the gigantic signposts heralding the name of the benefactor and builder. Several of those who live in them have quietly restored their original homes by the sea. That is where they used to live and where they’d rather be, closer to their boats and their fishing grounds.

We met at Radhakrishnan’s house because it was technically not a part of the village. The other women said they felt safer meeting a visiting researcher here. There would be no spies in an excommunicated household. The traditional panchayat of the village has excommunicated him and his wife Chinnaponnu. They claim that their fault lay in an application they made to the collectorate, seeking information on the fiscal performance of the local fishermen’s cooperative. This happened before the tsunami and the couple are still campaigning to be taken back.

Each one of the waiting women was single, and widowed in the tsunami. Kamakshi, Kuppamma, Sundaram, Vellachi and Nagaveni, all had their

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* This article first appeared in India Together (www.indiatogether.org) and is reprinted here with permission.
houses damaged during the disaster. And not one of them has been able
to register as a beneficiary of the new housing scheme. They have had
no help in restarting their trade as fish sellers. They are back at work
now, servicing usurious loans from local moneylenders. In their struggle
to rebuild their lives after the tsunami, they have one common complaint:
being ignored by the traditional, or Katta Panchayat of the village.

“We get nothing from the panchayat. They are the ones who supply the list of
affected people to the government. It is they who coordinate the relief with the
agencies and volunteers. They claim that they act in the interests of all the villagers,
but it is a lie. They are prompt in imposing fines on the women though, if we make a
mistake, or rather what the panchayat thinks is a mistake”, said Kuppamma, the irony in her voice
unmistakable.

Nagaveni, however, was the most vocal of them all; with her greying hair just a
trifle unkempt after a long walk to market and back, she smiles wearily through her
brittle, pan-stained teeth. She also has the verve of a professional performer. She
flails her arms with gusto and amidst some seriously dramatic and vocal breast-
beating, she says – “I am truly single, I have two daughters but neither live in
the village. But the men in the panchayat are blind to that. They either never give in my name, or remove it if it
is found on the housing list. If only I had been a man...” Everyone
giggles at her performance, but it belies the grim and harsher daily
reality. They are laughing at the farce of it all. The futility of their
situation has reversed their rage. The fact is that the tsunami
notwithstanding, women are below the radar in every aspect of
coastal life.

**Systematic exclusion**

In the Kuppams of the Coromandel, the fishing hamlets where the
meenavars live, amidst the damp of the foam and the gurgle of the waves,
the traditional or Katta Panchayats – which on paper have no legal sanction – are the supreme power. In many villages, these were hereditary positions. The leaders, or thalaivars were called Natars and the baton passed on from father to son. Some of this has changed over the years and in many places now, an informal electoral system chooses the leaders; not surprisingly they are almost always the wealthiest boat owners.

These traditional panchayats have endured many storms. They are not to be confused with the fishermen’s cooperatives, which first emerged in the 1960s, or the elected gram panchayats that came via the 73rd Amendment to the Indian Constitution, which came into force in 1993.

The Katta Panchayats are the strongest because of their vaarikaarar system, where every member, normally the male head of the household, pays a vaari or tax for management of community affairs, and for access to fishing rights. Tax collection is the backbone of the panchayats’ fiscal health and local clout. The traditional panchayat is the organization to maintain communal peace, and social order. It celebrates religious festivals, and rules on local disputes. It therefore becomes the custodian of village well being. It plays an explicit role in village politics and is the paramount institution for decision-making.

The cooperative society on the other hand is a professional body, a guild, a lobby group. It regulates cooperative activities that can bring material benefit. This allows paying members to participate in programs of the fisheries department of the Tamil Nadu state government.
The elected gram panchayat itself is more recent, with elections monitored by the Election Commission. But it is absent from local discourse. Though the membership lists of the first two (the Katta Panchayats and the cooperatives) are often the same, the cooperatives sometimes omit fish-workers who don’t own boats. Their arbitral domains also differ.

The structure of the panchayats may have changed over time, but its essence remains the same. In the southernmost districts, like Kanyakumari and Thoothukudy, for instance, the church has in many cases, replaced the panchayats and the ‘taxes’ are paid to the parish.

The membership system of all these however, rests on three well-entrenched pillars: fishing, patriarchy and local residence. Together these guarantee that the members’ list coincides with the list of adult men in the village. Women have never been eligible for membership. This is in tune with their ‘undesirability’ in public spaces. The one exception to this rule is their crucial role in actually monetizing the catch the men bring in. They are the ones who sort the fish, and ferry it to market. That is welcome.

But here, as we sit and talk on the outskirts of Nambiar Nagar, there is nothing enabling about the panchayat for the women. Nagaveni continues her ranting – “There are disputes all the time in the village and the panchayat becomes the arbitrator – but nothing excites them more than a wayward woman. If I were to leave my husband and go off with some one else, they will fine me, not the man. They will never ask me why I did that, whether my husband is a drunkard, or if I am beaten at home. In adultery, she is the only criminal. That is fairness and justice at the panchayat.”

In his compelling novel *The House of Blue Mangoes*, set, almost presciently, in a coastal village on the Coromandel, publisher and writer, David Davidar has written eloquently and with deep insight of the politics of gendered exclusion in the traditional panchayat. In one of the early scenes in the story, a young girl, Valli, on her way to a local fair, exuberant and eager to buy a few trinkets for herself and her cousin, is assaulted in the most brutal fashion. Over the next few days the collective task of the panchayat is geared towards assuaging the seething rage of the men, incoherent and thirsty for revenge. The focus is on preventing what could become a caste clash. Little is said about the feelings of the girl herself. To the women, the incident is only a reminder.
of the misfortune of being born a woman. When the leader’s wife, a woman of privilege and some education, tries to raise the issue over dinner, well within the confines of home, she is thrashed by the thalaivar. He is a man portrayed as being otherwise decent, a benign leader of men, committed to village peace. The implication is that women must simply do their anointed work, and be neither seen nor heard. And tradition must be accepted, not trifled with or contested. In the story, Valli hangs herself, hours after the Panchayat meets.

Davidar has set this scene in his novel in the late nineteenth century, but he may well have been writing about the Coromandel today. At every stage in my conversation with local women, I was reminded that it was not a woman’s place to ask questions of any kind – soft or searing. Acquiescence was the mot juste.

The tsunami widows of Nambiar Nagar are unanimous about one thing. They have received no aid but for the interim cash relief they were given immediately after the disaster. They also got food at the transit shelters. “When we ask the panchayat why we are not getting the houses or other things, their argument is that they cannot give it to us because we do not pay the tax.”

The traditional panchayats of the Coromandel have always collected the vaari or tax. The members of the body are called varrikarars, which translates both into taxpayers and shareholders. The tax collection works in several different and confusing ways. Sometimes the fishing rights
in a particular village are auctioned off to the owner of a larger vessel like a trawler. He then charges smaller boat owners a fee each time they venture out to sea. In some villages everyone pays a fee to the panchayat, each time they go out to sea. And then there are panchayats, which sometimes take a day’s catch at regular intervals as tax.

The panchayats have argued that since women don’t pay the tax, they are not members of the community; that they will be looked after by family. This system however, doesn’t have space for deserted or separated women, or those whose children have turned their backs on them. There is no allowance for the possibility that a woman may just want to live on her own.

The grinding poverty of life in the Kuppam today, and the daily struggle have made the memories of the past fill up with pleasant nostalgia. Chinnaponnu claims that in her younger days, there was much more harmony and that social bonds were stronger. She uses the word kattupadu, meaning, well knit, tightly woven – also well behaved, disciplined. “I remember the panchayat persuading people who wanted to leave to stay. It was possible to approach them and get a hearing. But now it has changed. They are not sympathetic to questioning at all.” Suddenly the days of the Natars seem to be much better, until someone reminds her that this is the way it has always been.

Now, Nagaveni lets go in another barrage of invective. She says that the men have historically conspired to render the women idiots. They are now incapable of anything. “Mandailai vennai rombi irruku” she tells me, “Our brains are addled now, all made of butter.”

**Tsunami relief on the traditional panchayats’ terms**

The aftermath of the tsunami saw an unprecedented outpouring of goodwill. There was such a rush of NGOs to Nagapattinam that they were often crossing swords with each other, rather than delivering help to the affected people. It was a time of misery and chaos, and for many of the well-meaning volunteers, the traditional panchayats were a convenient way of negotiating access to the community. “We had no experience in this kind of thing, It was the first time we had seen such havoc and destruction,” says R Kandaswamy, Deputy Collector, Relief and Rehabilitation, at Nagapattinam.” People were raiding relief vans, assaulting volunteers. We eventually handed over the responsibility to
the community itself.” This meant the panchayats became the controlling interest and the existing power structures took over. The exclusions were noted early on, but little was in fact, done. The excluded were of course, the most marginal – dalits and women.

To stem the confusion, the UNDP has incubated a special coordinating agency, the NCRC, (The NGO coordination and Resource Centre) to moderate the information flow between agencies, government and the affected people. In a report released in September 2005 the NCRC acknowledges that traditional panchayats often used their own formula to distribute aid, deriving from their own ethical and traditional values. It agrees that these can sometimes seem unjust to the outsider. The report seems to imply that this is something that cannot be avoided.

“When the traditional structures took over the decision making, it was inevitable that the process would be based on their idea of equity. There can be no denying the fact that these were inherently patriarchal,” agrees Annie George, the CEO of the NCRC. But this realization has had little impact on ground reality; two and a half years of rehabilitation have made no dent.

“It is cowardice to simply accept that this is a tradition and it is difficult to interfere, change or challenge” says Revathi Radhakrishnan, a filmmaker who came to work as a volunteer and stayed on, horrified by the systemic exclusion of the weakest. She now runs Vanavil, the rainbow, a school cum shelter for children of Adiyans, a Dalit community. They too were victims of the tsunami but saw little relief. She has been trying to introduce a debate on systemic exclusion at every forum she can access locally, and elsewhere at the risk of becoming unpopular. “The traditional panchayats are a well entrenched system of exploitation and this fact must be recognized and battled”, she says.

At the core of all this are two problems. One, a shortsighted policy which sanctions only an asset based definition of a victim. Only those who have lost a house or a boat, or had them damaged, are seen as victims. People who worked in auxiliary trades, and who too, lost their livelihoods are ignored. So, the fishermen get boats and nets, and male heads of families get new homes. But the woman who sold idlies in the fish market, or the laborers who carried the headloads, and indeed women who actually traded in the fish are all forgotten.
Two, neither the district administration nor the gram panchayats have their own list of all the people – men and women – who live in these kuppams, their full names, and their occupations. If the government does not have a system to track down and identify people, how can they, during times of disaster, have an independent beneficiary identification policy that does not rely on the traditional panchayats’ network with the vaarikarars?

**The men and tradition**

What do the men think of all this? It took me three days of trying to get one meeting with a male panchayat member. Kandaswamy, the main thalaivar of Nambiar Nagar, failed to turn up at the panchayat hall on two successive days, after fixing appointments. The hall itself has been taken over by a temporary fire brigade battalion stationed there in the aftermath of a fire that further destroyed the already fragile homes. Many local activists believe it is part of a more sinister conspiracy to evict the fisherfolk from their coastal homes, in an act of land grab but that is another story.

I finally managed a meeting with Selvam, another member of the panchayat. He sees the self-respect of the community as the biggest challenge. This, he explained, was more important than anything else. His vocabulary is that of a correctional officer. He liberally uses phrases like “only with punishment can we reform the errant.” He explained that the rule of the panchayat was outside the ambit of government. “We are older than the Indian state.” He says with fervor. “And we are not extra-legal. We do not adjudicate crimes, so if there is a murder, we go by the law. But when things affect village peace, like adultery or elopement, then it is we who decide the punishment. It can be a fine, or even excommunication.”

We begin to talk of specific actions taken by the panchayat in the relief process. “After the tsunami, it was the panchayat which organized and supervised the relief. We are the ones who control the village and no one can work here without our help and support,” he said. When I asked why the single women were not nominated for housing benefits, he began by saying that they were forgotten in the confusion. He recanted to blame the government for not listening. He finally said that traditionally women did not own property. Their children would look after them and that was that.
Endless abuse, toothless government

Traditional panchayats all over India have been in the thick of controversy for several years now. Every now and then, reports filter through of caste panchayats in the Gangetic plain lynching young lovers who dared to elope, or a father in Purulia shooting his daughter dead. Some years ago, a harassed Superintendent of Police in Muzzafarnagar even set up a counseling cell in his office. He was desperate to stem the tide of caste rage in such cases. A recent newspaper report cited 16 such deaths in Uttar Pradesh alone in one year.

These were merely the cases reported in 2005. It is also, by no means a phenomenon only of the rural hinterland. More recently, in Bhopal, there was a diktat from the Sindhi Panchayat banning their girls from using cell phones, riding two wheelers, or covering their faces. It is an epic and endless litany of atavistic abuse, control and vicious and violent obduracy.

Months before the tsunami ravaged the Coromandel, the Madras High Court had passed severe strictures on the traditional panchayats. In effect, it directed the government to pass an ordinance to ban them. Justice M Karpagavinayagam was as blunt and unsparing as he could be in his final order. He called it a “nauseating system”. The judgment, as quoted in The Hindu also says that the “actions of Katta Panchayats result in deprivation of social status, access to food, water and shelter.” He said that they amounted to a violation of human rights. He went on to ask the government to publicize the evils of the panchayats.

There is in fact a Tamil Nadu Government Order issued in December 2003. It explicitly states that Katta Panchayats have no legal sanction. It also mandates in words that are crisp and clear, that government servants should “neither participate in nor pay heed to their decisions.” It takes less than a walk along Nagapattinam beach to realize that this is not worth the paper it was dispatched on, floating out, as it did along with the debris that followed the waves of wrath.