Profiles of the Case Study
Communities

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REPORT 2
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Research that is reported in the accompanying research reports (3 to 6) was conducted in four different local areas in Sri Lanka and in an area of northern Chennai where residents from eight former fishing villages were eventually relocated into two adjoining permanent settlements. Each area and its local community or communities can be taken as a case study for this research and this report presents a profile of the people and places in each of the case study areas. This helps to set the context for what took place in each area in the wake of the tsunami.
Entry story

Azmi Thassim was looking for ways to create a record of how the Hambantota community responded to the terrifying impact of the tsunami.

‘We must learn some lessons from this experience,’ he told Martin Mulligan in January 2006, ‘so we know what to do better in the event of another disaster. I think the world can learn from our experience because civil society played a good role in Hambantota.’

Azmi was in Colombo when the tsunami waves swept through his home town on the morning of December 26, 2004. He got a phone call from someone in Hambantota telling him that the sea had come in and that he should return home as soon as possible. Someone in the background started screaming and the phone conversation ended. Azmi was alarmed and confused but when he tried to phone other people to find out what had happened he could not get through. He learnt later that a major communication tower had collapsed just minutes after he received that first call and all telephone contact had been cut.

In a state of shock, Azmi and his wife got in their car and started on the five-hour journey home. They stopped to collect their daughter and their son who were staying in different places along the way but they knew nothing about what had happened either. As they travelled they heard on the radio that there had been a massive earthquake in Indonesia and that a tsunami wave had hit Sri Lanka, killing around 500 people. However, Azmi had no idea what a tsunami was and he didn’t know if anyone at Hambantota had died.

As Azmi and his family got closer to Hambantota they picked up two other people on the road who were trying to get back home and they finally approached the town just as it was getting dark. There were people with sullen faces heading out of town—by vehicle or on foot—and as they approached the town it felt like a ‘curfew day’ with no-one on the streets. As they got closer still they could see there were huge crowds of people in and around the main mosque, temple and hospital and as they walked to the mosque they began to see hundreds of dead bodies. Distressed people were crowded around the bodies and people who knew Azmi and his family said to him; ‘Sir, this is my wife, this is my son, this is my daughter….’ It was now more than eight hours since the disaster struck and yet people were still recovering the bodies of their loved ones and bringing them to the mosque.

Azmi and his family started working in the mosque to tend to the injured and to make sure that everybody had some space on the floor to sleep for the night. People who were recognised as community leaders began to take control, Azmi explained, and when everyone seemed to be reasonably settled they held a meeting at the mosque to talk about what needed to be done. They still knew little about the extent of the damage and they had only just learnt what a tsunami was. The town had no disaster management plan and it was not clear who would take responsibility for co-ordinating the relief effort. They were able to establish that the District Secretariat building had not been damaged and that the District Secretary was already in contact with government and emergency services. The Army was dispatching soldiers to all the affected areas to help with rescue and recovery and to clean up debris. Clearly the community leaders had to attend to the needs of all those taking refuge in the mosque and the main Buddhist temple.
After they had been working in the mosque for a while, Azmi Thassim and his family went to see what had happened to their own house. At first they couldn’t even identify the area in which it stood because there was so much open space. It took them a while, in the dark, to realise that most of the houses had been swept away completely and that many trees had also fallen. There were few landmarks left to help them orient themselves. Eventually they found the remnants of their house, with some of the walls still standing. There had been no-one in the house when the waves struck and yet some bodies were picked out of it later. The neighbour’s house had vanished completely. Across the road they saw a close family friend rummaging through the remains of her family home. This was the house where Azmi’s own daughter had always stayed whenever he was out of town and the two families were very close. They young woman rummaging through the refuge had lost both her parents but, even worse, she had lost her two young children. ‘Uncle,’ she told Azmi, ‘I held on to my two little ones but after a while the heavy waves came and I just couldn’t hold them, and they went.’ There were hundreds of stories like that, Azmi added sadly.

Azmi Thassim said that community leaders did a magnificent job looking after all those who had taken refuge in the mosque and temple, distributing the aid as it arrived in lorry-loads from Colombo. ‘For the first week or so we met every night at the mosque to co-ordinate what we were all doing,’ Azmi remembered. ‘After a while we started meeting at the Hambantota District Chamber of Commerce building because it was one of the few that had a generator for electricity and it was close to the mosque and temple. It was decided early on that there must be a representative of all the religious and community groups and even the political parties at these meetings so that everyone could have their say about what the priorities were. Initially the priority was to ensure that all the aid that was arriving was distributed fairly and to those in most need. However, people began to panic when they started to hear that the government had decided that they would have to be relocated away from where their homes had previously stood and so the ad hoc community committee organised a meeting with the District Secretary and the police to make sure that people could build temporary shacks at the sites of their old homes until more definite settlement plans could be negotiated. After a while, the ad hoc committee meetings changed from daily to weekly and after a few months they moved to a monthly schedule. In November, 2005, the majority of people attending the meetings decided that they were no longer needed because all the separate community-based organisations were now back on their own feet and working well enough. The ad hoc committee had not even adopted a name and yet it had set up a bank account when ‘a mayor of some Belgian city’ insisted on giving them some money to continue their co-ordinating role. Some of that money was still in the bank account when the committee stopped meeting and the members decided to leave it there in case there was a need to reconvene.

Azmi Thassim thought that it might have been better to continue with an even less regular schedule of meetings. However, he wanted Martin Mulligan to know that he was proud of the way that ‘civil society’ worked in the aftermath of the tsunami to make sure that the community did not become divided by the tragedy. Azmi was the first and only person to talk to the researchers in this project about the role of ‘civil society’ in disaster recovery.
History and place

Hambantota has an important role in the history of Sri Lanka because the dry climate and the presence of shallow coastal lagoons have made it the ideal place for harvesting sea salt. Of course, there had been people living in the area long before the salt pans—or lewayas—started to be mined and there is evidence that Buddhist settlements were established in the area that they called Ruhuna from about the third century BCE (Abeyawardana 2001, p. 2). According to the Mahavamsa—the famous chronicle of Buddhism in Sri Lanka—Ruhuna was named by a Prince Rohana who had accompanied Princess Baddakaccana from India in the fifth century BCE and by the 12th century AD it had become one of three principle Sinhala kingdoms in Sri Lanka with its headquarters at Tissamaharama, not far from Hambantota town. By this time road linkages had been established between Tissamaharama and the centres of two other Sinhala kingdoms at Polonaruwa and Kandy and this opened up trade for salt and fish from Hambantota into the hill country. Brohier (2000) has noted that the Dutch used the supply of salt as a weapon in their efforts to subdue the Kandyan kings, blocking the supply from Hambantota in 1791. However, Brohier suggests that the Kandyan kings managed to find ways to smuggle salt across the blockades and they continued to contest the British occupation of the area around Hambantota after 1796, briefly occupying the settlement themselves in 1803.

Arab trading vessels began to arrive in Sri Lanka in the 14th century AD (Cook, 1951). The natural harbour at Galle, in the southern province of Sri Lanka, was the focus of this trade and it remained the main trading port in Sri Lanka right up until an artificial harbour was built at Colombo by the British in 1885. The Portuguese arrived in what they called Point-de-Galle in 1587 and soon afterwards they had occupied most of the southern province, before being displaced by the Dutch in 1640. As in India, Muslim traders—known in Sri Lanka as ‘Moors’—began to follow the long-distance trading routes to Sri Lanka and there were already some small Muslim communities in ports and towns of Sri Lanka when the Portuguese arrived and they continued to grow during the time of the Portuguese. Of course, Sri Lanka was already known to the Europeans long before the
Portuguese arrived and there is a record of a visit to ‘Taprobane’ (a very early name for Ceylon) by a Roman ambassador in 75 AD. In the 1990s, German archeologists excavated around 2,700 coins—dating back to the third century AD—at a place called Godavaya, near the mouth of an important river, the Walawe Ganga, not far from Hambantota (Roth 1998). This suggests that the small harbour at Godavaya was already linked into important trading routes—in what has been called the ‘Silk Road of the Sea’—from the third century AD.

It is interesting to note that a clear link was established between the ports in the area of Hambantota and trading ports further east along the Silk Road of the Sea. Indeed, it is generally believed that the name Hambantota derives from the amalgamation of two words: *sampan*, referring to the flat-bottomed boats that are still commonly used in countries such as Malaysia and Vietnam; and *tota*, which is the Sinhalese word for ‘harbour’. No doubt it was realised early on that the natural port at Hambantota was ideal for fishing and a Muslim community began to cluster around the port—with a mixture of Sri Lankan Moors and people who had come from the Malay peninsula. Perhaps the ‘Malays’ were the ones who concentrated on fishing and there are still many Muslim people living in Hambantota who speak the Malay language, as well as Tamil and Sinhala. A similar Muslim community—with a strong Malay influence—also took root around the natural harbour at Kirinda, further east from Hambantota.

According to a very old man living in Hambatota, the town was almost entirely Muslim when the British arrived to establish their district headquarters on the high ridge overlooking the port. However, Hambantota town and Kirinda were like Muslim enclaves in the wider district because Tissamaharama—which lies between Hambantota and Kirinda—and all the villages in the rural hinterlands were 100 per cent Sinhalese Buddhist. The small British enclave on the point at Hambantota included a law court and a site for public hangings. Among those who served in the post as British Assistant Government Agent in Hambantota—which, in part, meant tasked the role of magistrate in the court—was Leonard Woolf, who later gained fame in England as a politician, publisher and husband of renowned writer Virginia Woolf. Leonard Woolf drew on his experiences in the Hambantota district, in the period from 1908 to 1911, to write a rather penetrating novel about village life and the impact of British administration called *A Village in the Jungle*, which is still considered a classic in Sri Lanka. There was probably still a majority of Muslims living in Hambantota town when Sri Lanka became independent in 1948. However, more Sinhalese have settled in the town in recent decades and by the time of the tsunami the population was fairly evenly divided between Muslims—whose main language has been Tamil—and Sinhalese.

While the Hambantota district is situated in a relatively arid zone, in terms of rainfall, it is well watered by several major rivers flowing out of the central highlands, most notably the Welawe Ganga. This enables the cultivation of rice and vegetables that prefer a fairly dry climate. There is still a heavy emphasis on fishing and the harvesting of salt but the areas is also renowned nationally for the production of curd made from the milk of water buffalos and also for Muslim sweets—notably *dodol*. Areas to the east and north-east of Hambantota remained rather sparsely populated and this allowed for the creation of the large Yala National Park and the Bundula bird and wildlife reserve. Hambantota is also about one hour’s drive from an ancient temple at Kataragama, which is revered by both Hindus and Buddhists and, historically, people making pilgrimages to Kataragama from the direction of Colombo have passed through Hambantota on the way.
Hambantota is at the centre of a district that has obvious appeal for tourists—with wildlife reserves, the Kataragama temple, the ancient capital of Ruhuna at Tissamaharama, and appealing stretches of coast. Plans have been implemented to make the old town of Hambantota even more attractive to tourists—by creating a ‘beach park’ where there had been a dense settlement before the tsunami, cutting the flow of through traffic, and turning the old British kacheri into a designated tourist precinct. This plan seemed ambitious at a time when the civil war in Sri Lanka was keeping international tourists away. Furthermore, plans to turn old Hambantota into a tourist centre have been somewhat overshadowed by the construction of a new harbour for container ships. The government of China funded and oversaw the construction of the new harbour, presumably because they see it as a well-located harbour for ‘trans-shipment’—i.e. the loading of cargo from large vessels into smaller vessels that can go to a wide range of destinations in Asia. What may be most important for the future of Hambantota is the extent to which it can reclaim its importance as a stopping point on the Silk Road of the Sea.

**Demographic profile**

According to the national census of 2003, there were 525,370 people living in the broader Hambantota District. Of these there were 7,385 ‘Malay’ Muslims and 5,506 Sri Lankan ‘Moors’ living mainly in Hambantota town and Kirinda. For ‘urban’ Hambantota the census showed that there were 5,137 ‘Malays’ and 2,830 ‘Moors’. Almost 45 per cent of those living in ‘urban’ Hambantota listed their religion as Islam, while just over 50 per cent listed themselves as Buddhist. A further eight per cent listed themselves as Hindu. While females made up a clear majority people living in the Hambatota District as a whole—at a ratio above the national ratio—the proportion of females living in ‘urban’ Hambantota was just under 49 per cent. While the proportion of people aged under 18 was just over 36 per cent for the Hambantota District as a whole, the proportion was a little less in ‘urban’ Hambantota, at just over 34 per cent. As the accompanying Report 4 (by Shaw) points out, employment data in Sri Lanka is very unreliable, however the 2003 census suggested that for the Hambantota District as a whole the unemployment rate was 13.4 per cent when the national figure was 8.3 per cent, while an unemployment rate for ‘urban’ Hambantota was not available. The Hambantota District Chamber of Commerce (2006) claims that the unemployment rate for the district was the worst in the country at the time of the 2003 census and that an estimated 32 per cent of households in the district as a whole live below the poverty line.

The area centring on Hambantota town is divided into four District Secretariat (DS) Divisions and the Hambantota DS Division, in turn, is made up of 30 Grama Nilhadari (GN) Divisions (the smallest administrative unit in Sri Lanka). According to a survey conducted by the Department of Census and Statistics in 2005, six out of the 30 GN Divisions in the area of Hambantota town were directly affected by the tsunami. Prior to the tsunami the 2003 census recorded that there had been 6,730 people living in these six tsunami-affected GN Divisions, while at the time of the 2005 survey there were only 3,616 still living in these areas, with a further 1,949 people temporarily living outside the affected area. Local community leaders estimate that about 80 per cent of the people in Hambantota town who were affected by the tsunami were Muslims. This high proportion of Muslims in the affected population reflects the fact that there was a large,
and densely packed Muslim community living on low-lying land between the harbour and a large coastal lagoon and this was where the tsunami damage was most severe.

For the Hambantota DS Division the 2003 census suggested that there were 99 people directly employed in fishing and a further eight employed in ‘fishery related industries’, such as mechanical repairs to boat engines. A further 146 people were employed in government agencies, 15 in the ‘tourism industry’ and just three in the coir industry. However, these figures appear to be very low and the census suggested that 469 people were employed in ‘other employment’, possibly including the salt industry and the retail sector.

**Tsunami impact and recovery**

In a report released in 2006 the Hambantota District Chamber of Commerce claims that more than 3000 people died in the tsunami in the Hambantota District and that about half of the bodies were never found after being washed out to sea. Perhaps half of the deaths occurred when an eight-metre wave swept through a crowded market place—the Sunday Pola—being held on the narrow stretch of land between the sea and the large coastal lagoon lying behind the town. Many of those attending the Pola had come from villages and towns outside the Hambantota urban area. As HDCC Director-General Azmi Thassim told Martin Mulligan in January 2006, it is impossible to know exactly how many people died in Hambantota because of the weekly market and also because people passing through town may have stopped to eat or to pray at the mosque that was badly damaged. Figures released by the Department of Census and Statistics in 2005 suggest that for all of the Hambantota District 1,102 residents died in the tsunami and a further 1,236 were injured, however, these seem to be very low estimates.

The figures released by the Department of Census and Statistics may be more accurate when it comes to tsunami damage to infrastructure and the 2005 report suggest that 480 housing units in the Hambantota Division were completely destroyed in the tsunami, while a further 33 were badly damaged and 186 were damaged but able to be used. A total of 181 buildings other than houses were destroyed, 25 badly damaged, and 70 damaged but still able to be used. The entire fishing fleet was almost completely destroyed—with the loss of about 1000 boats across the Hambantota District. A big problem for Hambantota town was that a major telecommunications tower was knocked out and a whole telephone exchange washed away, meaning that there was no telephone communication for several days.

According to a report released by a research team from the University of Colombo in 2007 (Dissanjayake 2005), there were more deaths among women and children than men in the Hambantota District—as for other districts in Sri Lanka. The report noted that the worst affected were children who lost both parents yet, the report notes, most of them were taken into the homes of relatives. As in other parts of Sri Lanka, the report notes, there were more women and children among the dead than men and women—who were commonly self-employed before the tsunami—faced the greatest challenge in securing an income after the disaster.

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2 Figures on employment are taken from Preliminary Report 2: Census of Buildings and Persons Affected by the Tsunami—2004 that was released by the Sri Lankan Department of Census and Statistics in 2005.

3 Figures taken from a survey conducted by HDCC and reported Annual Report in 2006.
Hambantota attracted a lot of attention in the wake of the tsunami. This was partly because news of the heavy loss of life in the Sunday Market soon reached the outside world and people started to get glimpses of the severe damage caused by waves up to eight metres high. The death and destruction in Hambantota also attracted interest in the Muslim world and aid agencies from Kuwait and Saudi Arabia arrived to offer aid. Even the Pakistani army sent a team to help out in Hambantota because the Muslim world wanted to show that Muslim ‘brotherhood’ is real. However, the attention paid to Hambantota in particular also related to the fact that the prime minister of the time, Mahinda Rajapakse, came from the district and he was able to convince the government to make the rebuilding of Hambantota a symbol of the nation’s desire to ‘build back better’. Plans were quickly put in place to build an entire ‘new town’ for tsunami survivors in an area called Siripopura, several kilometres inland from the sea and on the other side of a lagoon to the old town. As we shall see, many more houses were built in the ‘new town’ than were needed to house tsunami survivors and when Mahinda Rajapakse became president in late 2005 he announced that plans to make Hambantota a much larger regional centre would be fast-tracked.

Of course, it was not just a matter of building houses for the tsunami victims. A large number of international aid and humanitarian agencies were involved in relief and rehabilitation work, which included the delivery of fishing boats and fishing equipment, housing repairs, the provision of sewing machines and bicycles, support for children to return to school and more. The Hambantota District Chamber of Commerce launched a Back to Business strategy including the building of temporary shops, direct assistance for small and medium businesses and skills training courses for nearly 600 participants.

National issues and influences

As already mentioned Hambantota attracted attention in the wake of the tsunami because Mahinda Rajapakse, who moved from being prime minister to president within a year of the disaster, made ‘Rebuild Hambantota’ the centrepiece of his government’s efforts to ‘build back better’. Not to be outdone, the son of a former president—Ranasinghe Premadasa—who represented an electorate in the Hambantota district in the national parliament for the rival United National Party (UNP)—got directly involved in raising money for building houses in the ‘new town’. At the same time, the Hambantota District—if not Hambantota town—had long been a stronghold for the Janata Vimukti Peramuna (JVP) political party and JVP ‘cadres’ played a big role in the post-tsunami relief operations in the area. Competition between Rajapakse’s Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), the UNP and the JVP has meant that the Hambantota District has long been heavily ‘politicised’ and a range of tsunami survivors told the researchers that too many politicians and political party representatives interfered with the reconstruction work and the allocation of houses in the ‘new town’.

Azmi Thassim told the researchers that people living in Hambantota town have long been proud of the way that the ethnic and religious communities have managed to get along and, in the context of bitter ethnic divisions elsewhere in the country, this might be seen as a model for peaceful coexistence. Will that tradition of peaceful coexistence survive the plans that the national government has put in place to make Hambantota a more important hub of economic development?
References


Entry story

It was late afternoon when Yaso Nadarajah and Martin Mulligan first arrived at the gates of the Jummah Grand Mosque in the eastern Sri Lankan township of Sainthamuruthu. We were accompanied by three local people—including a lecturer in geography at nearby South-Eastern University and a man who had formed an NGO called Natural Environment and Sustainable Development Organisation (NESDO). The historic Jummah Grand Mosque is the centre of attention for the community which, according to the national Census of 2001, was 99.9 per cent Muslim. Sainthamuruthu lies just to the south of the old coastal town of Kalmunai, which is more religiously diverse.

On arrival at the mosque we paused at the door of an office in which four men were deeply engrossed in conversation. As soon as we were noticed one of the men jumped up with a welcoming smile on his face. He looked to be in his late 50s although we had learnt by this time that people living in the coastal communities of the tsunami-ravaged Ampara District often looked older than they were. Our local guide introduced us to one of the men, who then introduced the others; all members of the mosque’s board of trustees. They included Al-Haj A.L.M. Mohodeen, JP, who had been secretary of the board for more than 40 years, and his colleagues Al-Haj Dr. I. M. Sheriff, JP and Quazi Judge; assistant secretary Al-Haj J.L. Uthumankandu, JP; and administrative officer Al-Haj M.M. Athambawa. Over a cup of tea and biscuits we said we would like to know more about the history of the grand mosque and Mr Athambawa took out a copy of a ‘souvenir document’ that had been prepared to mark the opening of the renovated mosque building on December 26, 2003—precisely one year before the tsunami disaster.

Mr Athambawa began to read, in Tamil, from the document:

Our great town of Sainthamaruthu, beloved of God, is located to the south of Batticaloa, the sweet city where the fish sing. Its boundaries are—to the east the Bay of Bengal, to the west the fertile land of Karaivahuvaddai to the north the town of Kalmunai and to the south, Kaaraithivu.

We learnt that the Jummah Grand Mosque was previously known as Muhaideen Masjid (Mosque) and it was the main link to a long history of Muslim settlement in the area. Mr Athambawa pointed out that people associated with the mosque believe its history dates back to the eighth century when historians suggest Muslims first began to settle in the area, but the first recorded reference to it may have come from the 12th century when the souvenir book notes:

We learn from history that in the 12th century Muhaideen Abdul Kadir Jeilani (or his disciples) came to Lanka from Bagdad for thalwa duties. When he cured the son of the Sinhalese king Gajabahu of an incurable disease, he was, as a reward, given the Karaivaahu region and it was ordered that the mosque there be henceforth known as Muhaideen Mosque.

Towards the end of the 16th century Muslims in the south west of the island fled to Kandy to escape persecution by the Portuguese, who had labelled them all ‘Moors’ in reference to the Muslim people who had invaded Spain in the eighth century. While some of the Muslims stayed in the area of Kandy, where there is still a significant Muslim population, the Kandy kings told them they could have safe refuge in the Karaivaahu region near the Muhaideen Mosque. The first record of administration of the mosque dates back to 1691
and soon after this a revenue officer for the British administration located in Batticaloa, Mr Sathaku Lebbe, became the first chief administrator, with members of his family serving as mosque administrators for the next 300 years. It is interesting to note that the mosque administrators were assisted by the Mariars, who were chieftains of the maternal clans that were commonly known as kudi. In particular, the Mariars were responsible for the construction and maintenance of waqf properties, set up as a religious endowment to benefit poor and needy Muslims in the name of Allah. As several anthropologists have noted, Muslim communities in the Ampara District of Sri Lanka display strong matrilineal characteristics and it soon became apparent to us that this influenced the administration of the Jummah Grand Mosque. Even though one of us was a woman and neither was Muslim we were invited to visit the inner sanctum of the mosque and to look at plans for the development of a new wing.

On our tour of the mosque we were told that the original building had been replaced in 1870 and that further extensive renovations were carried out in 1961. As mentioned above, further renovations were completed in December 2003, but a year later the mosque became the centre of a major disaster relief operation. First the dead were collected and brought to the mosque for prayers and communal funerals. Then thousands of living survivors took refuge in the large building and it became a key centre for the distribution of relief supplies arriving by the truckload from Colombo. Mr Athambawa pointed out the many broken tiles in the main hall of the mosque and explained that they had been shattered by the wheels of the aid trucks that had been driven right into the building in order to have an orderly distribution of the relief supplies. Mr Athambawa told us that representatives of the mosque board of trustees served on a district-wide Disaster Management Council but they were poorly prepared for what they confronted. ‘The number of people who had died was so large,’ he noted. ‘We did not have any resources other than what we pulled out from around us, from our own homes and other mosques. And finally some of the aid started to flow in after a few days and we had to do our best to make sure it was properly distributed.’

As we walked though the inner sanctum of the mosque in the company of Mr Athambawa occasional devotees came in to spread their mats and begin their prayers. Their glances told that they were a little surprised by the presence of strangers but certainly not overly perturbed as they continued with their prayers. Mr Athambawa said that the board of trustees was still trying to raise funds to repair the damaged floor tiles and to complete a new wing of the building, however this had become much harder after post-tsunami aid money had dried up. ‘This beautiful mosque expresses the identity of this town’s community,’ Mr Athambawa stressed. ‘We have to make sure we hold on to our tradition and our main place of worship and history.’

It is hardly surprising that the Jummah Grand Mosque became the centre for the post-tsunami relief effort in Sainthamuruthu. However, some people from two smaller mosques in the area said that it had become too dominant and that the role of the smaller mosques had not been appreciated. When we later went to a partially restored seaside café within the 65 metres no-build buffer zone to speak to people who had set up an association to draw attention to the plight of those tsunami survivors who had been left without a permanent home, we were told that the smaller and newer mosques had taken the lead in trying to get justice for the neglected survivors while the grand mosque had become preoccupied with the restoration of its own building.
History and place

Sainthamuruthu and the adjacent village Maligaikadu are located on a narrow coastal strip of land—about 1.5 kilometres in width—between the sea and an extensive area of paddy fields. A long stretch of sandy beaches makes up the eastern boundary of the settlement and both the beaches and the adjacent seas are dotted with numerous fishing boats. The main coastal highway, from Kalmunai in the north to Akkaraipattu and Pottuvil further south runs near the western edge of the settlement, where the Jummah Grand Mosque is also located. Approaching the coast from the direction of Kandy and Colombo—passing through the Sinhalese township of Ampara, which has served as the district centre since independence—a long and narrow road ‘bridge’ traverses the large area of wetland and paddy field to join the coastal highway. A distant view to the north and south reveals that new, post-tsunami, housing estates have invaded the eastern edge of the extensive paddy fields, but the area of new housing at the ‘back’ of Sainthamuruthu is noticeably smaller than for adjacent towns.

As a whole, the Ampara District covers an area of 4,431 square kilometres and the district population comprises 41.6 per cent Muslim, 39.3 per cent Sinhalese, and 18.8 per cent Tamil Hindu (with a very small percentage of ‘others’). However, as mentioned above, 99.9 per cent of the population of Sainthamuruthu is Muslim. As you pass down the coast from Kalmunai towards Pottuvil you pass adjacent communities of Muslims and Tamil Hindus, with occasional pockets of Sinhalese. But rarely are they mixed. Many of the Muslims are descended from Arab traders who were confined to the coast because the inland villages in Ampara District are predominantly Sinhalese. As mentioned earlier, historians suggest that Muslims have lived along the east coast of Sri Lanka since the
eighth century AD. Yet, while Muslims have been actively involved in politics in south-eastern Sri Lanka for centuries, it was only in the lead-up to independence in 1948 that ‘Ceylon Moors’ were seen as being ethnically distinct from the broader Tamil-speaking communities of the area, following campaigns by Muslim leaders to establish a separate history and identity. Scholars of the area—such as McGilvray (1982, 1998, 2008) and de Silva (2009)—have noted that the Muslim and Tamil Hindu communities along the coast have become increasingly segregated since independence, and especially during the period when the Tamil Tigers (LTTE) were fighting for a separate state of Tamil Eelam. It is interesting to note that the Muslim and Tamil Hindu communities in south-eastern Sri Lanka share cultural and linguistic practices and structures, including matrilocality and the practice of the kudi system of naming and inheritance (McGilvray 1982, 2008, and de Silva 2009). Indeed, the Moors of the eastern region of Sri Lanka are among the relatively small number of Muslim communities in the world who trace descent in the female line and who establish post-marital residence in the home of the wife. However, relations between the Muslim and Tamil communities in the Ampara District began to erode when the power struggle between the Tamil Tigers and the Sri Lankan Armed Forces began to erupt in the 1980s.

The name Sainthamuruthus is thought to date from around the 17th century AD because a drawing housed in a Dutch museum depicts a scene from 1602 when an emissary of the Dutch East India Company, Spilbergen, arrived in a place of this name. According to local legend the name is thought to have derived from a particular, leaning, tree—marutha—which stood near the site of the historic mosque. Legend has it that Muslims arriving from Kandy gathered under this tree and that they later gratefully received the visiting King Senerat of Kandy, who had given them land for their settlement. However, McGilvray (1998) notes that King Senerat’s resettlement of ‘Moors’ to Batticaloa and the Sainthamuruthu area is poorly documented and there are no firm dates for the founding of such settlements. He notes, however, that ‘preponderance of Muslims in medieval coastal trade leads me to assume they long predate the Portuguese arrival’ although there has been very little Sri Lankan scholarship on this particular history.

The fact that Muslim and Tamil Hindu communities living in south-eastern Sri Lanka share some cultural and linguistic practices confirms that they had a long history of coexistence. However, McGilvray (2008) has suggested that the wakf system in the Muslim communities created competition over land ownership which may have led to forceful, even violent, eviction of low-caste Tamil residents from the Muslim settlements. Furthermore, when fighting between the Sri Lankan army and the Tamil Tigers erupted in the 1980s Muslims again seized land that had been owned by Tamils, now forced to flee from the conflict zone. So Muslims as well as Tamil separatists can be held responsible for the increasing segregation of the coastal communities, and, of course, the tensions have been further exacerbated by support from the Sri Lankan government for the establishing of new Sinhalese settlements in the same area. However, McGilvray notes that Muslims have good reason to feel especially persecuted because, ‘While the period of Portuguese and Dutch colonial rule was onerous to all Sri Lankans, it was especially harsh for the Moors, who were subjected to special penalties and restrictions because of their Islamic faith and the threat they posed to the European monopoly of overseas trade.’

A surprising development took place in March 2004 when the Batticaloa leader of the Tamil Tigers (LTTE) split from the organisation and when the ‘Karuna Faction’ eventually morphed into a registered political party, the TMVP—which subsequently formed an
electoral alliance with the dominant Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) within the United People’s Front—the political landscape had shifted dramatically. Of course, the LTTE tried to crush the Karuna-led rebellion and reprisal attacks in former LTTE strongholds were still occurring when the tsunami hit in December 2004. In conducting fieldwork across the Ampara Districts in the period 2006-09 it was clear that the local communities were still reeling from political shockwaves as well as those that came from the sea and many open wounds were yet to be healed.

While the twists and turns of the Tamil struggle for a separate state of Eelam helps explain the growing segregation between Muslim and Tamil Hindu communities in the Ampara District, the changing political landscape has also led to political splits within the Muslim communities. Sainthamuruthu had been a stronghold for a reasonably coherent Sri Lankan Muslim Congress but infighting over ministerial appointments to the national government and over alliances for provincial elections has led to the political splits and the demise of the united SLMC.

Demographic profile

Much of the demographic data presented below comes from the 2001 National Census, as published by the Sri Lankan Department of Census and Statistics. Some has been taken from a more limited survey conducted in Ampara District in 2006. Other material has been taken from various government websites, including those of the South-Eastern Provincial Council. Data is also taken from a report compiled by a non-government organisation called Practical Action and from reports published by the Sainthamuruthu and Maligaikadu Tsunami Disaster Management Council.

The Ampara District covers an area of 4,431 square kilometres and at the time of the 2001 Census it had an estimated population of 635,332, with Muslims making up 41.6 per cent, Sinhalese 39.3 per cent, and Tamils 18.8 per cent. There are 20 District Secretariats (DS) divisions in Ampara and the tsunami affected 10 of these divisions, located along the coastal belt. The worst affected communities were mainly comprised of Muslims who had worked in the fishing industry.

According to the 2001 Census, Sainthamaruthu itself had a population of 24,018 people, living in 5,233 household units. According to the report by the NGO Practical Action the population had increased to 25,528 by the time the tsunami hit in December 2004. The Kalmunai Municipal Area, which includes the Sainthamuruthu DS division, has long been very densely populated, with the 2001 Census showing that it had 4,498 people per square kilometre, compared to the national average of 299 per square kilometre. Sainthamuruthu is the smallest DS division in the Kalmunai Municipal Area and it has been the most densely populated of the three DS divisions. While Kalmunai itself is divided into separate Muslim and Tamil DS divisions—with a substantially higher number of people in the Muslim Division—the Sainthamuruthu DS division was almost entirely Muslim. As mentioned before, the congregation of Muslims in Sainthamuruthu relates to the fact that the historic Jummah Grand Mosque is located there but it also reflects the fact that early Arab traders were able to purchase land along the narrow coastal strip and establish a prosperous fishing industry. The density of population in Sainthamuruthu also reflects the fact that ‘matrilocal’ practices meant that a woman’s parents had to provide a house for her and her husband and so multiple buildings were commonly built on fairly small plots of land, sometimes extending upwards.
Sainthamaruthu is bordered by the Kalmunai Muslim Division to the north and the Karaitivu Tamil Division to the south. Within the Sainthamuruthu Division there are 17 Grama Niladhari (GN) divisions and it has been estimated that the tsunami impacted badly on nine of these GN divisions, in which 14,217 people had been living in 3,276 housing units. According to a survey conducted by the Sainthamuruthu DS office in 2004, 50.4 per cent of people living in Sainthamuruthu were men and 49.6 per cent were women. This survey suggested that 42 per cent of the population was less than 18 years old, 48 per cent were between the ages of 19 and 64, and 10 per cent was above 65 years in age.

As noted in the accompanying Report 4 by Judith Shaw, employment statistics in Sri Lanka are very unreliable. According the 2004 survey conducted by the Sainthamuruthu DS office, most people were working as labourers in either fishing or agriculture and around 13 per cent were unemployed. Since a separate DS Division was created for Sainthamuruthu in the year 2000, it has become more of a commercial centre, with an upgraded post office, an upgraded market place, and a fully equipped base hospital. Sainthamuruthu also has an Agriculture Productivity Centre to serve the farmers of this area and it is a busy transport hub, with the main coastal highway passing through its commercial centre. However, the economy of Sainthamaruthu is still limited and relies heavily on agriculture, inland and ocean fishing, and livestock rearing.

While fishing has been a bedrock industry for people living in Sainthamuruthu, shallow water sea fishing has not been popular because of the presence of dangerous rock formations. Deep sea fishing provides the best returns but this requires expensive boats. Those who are not able to get work on deep sea fishing boats often work as on-shore labourers—fixing boats and nets—or they use sea canoes or engage in beach fishing. Traditionally those who have filled non-lucrative roles in fishing often supplemented this income by undertaking casual work as agricultural labourers (especially during the harvesting of the paddy) or as labourers in the building industry. There is some coir production and a host of small businesses in the commercial centre where trading traditions are maintained. Remittances from family members working overseas—most commonly in the Middle East—have become a more important source of income.

Tsunami impact and recovery

A community elder Aliyaar Musammil has provided a rather chilling account of the time when the tsunami arrived in Sainthamuruthu in a document titled ‘Sea, Have you no compassion?’

It was Sunday … All were engaged in their daily activities. It was about 8.45 am. The masons were laying the foundations to build a house for my son Firdaus Musammil. I was standing in our courtyard and turned a while towards the street. There was disturbance on the eastern side. On the west side of Kalayaana Street … people were running fast this way and that. Vehicles were going at speed. Everyone was saying ‘The sea is coming, the sea is coming.’ At once I took my motor cycle and rode towards the east. The sea had come up to the north end of Ahamed Street … Screams, dying sounds, fear and terror. The ocean waves had come into the town, rolling like a mountain … I went on my motor cycle from Malikaikkadu to Sainthamaruthu Zahira College and observed what had happened. The condition of the people was pathetic and tragic. There was a stream of dead bodies. I turned back and reached the Jummah Mosque in Sainthamaruthu.
Volunteers brought the dead bodies to the mosque in open trucks. Thousands of dead bodies had come to the mosque... I was given the task of finding the planks needed to bury the dead. I took a carpenter with me and left to find planks....

I went looking for planks. Jemil, the owner of Jemil Timber Depot and the owner of Bismillah bakery gave planks free of charge. As these were not enough, I purchased planks for 8,700 Rs from the timber depot in Zahira Street. As was searching around for nails, I met Iqbal Hajiar, the manager of Usha Showroom. When I told him that I was looking for nails he took me to where his car was parked and both of us got into his car and went driving around looking for nails. Having looked around in Saainthamaruthu, we went to Sammanthurai ...

Iqbal Hajiar parked his car near the Sammanthurai Karuvaaddukkal Al-Marjan Girls School and went to look for his wife and children. I went looking for nails. Then I heard a young child calling ‘Ummaa, Vaappaa, Ummaa, Vaappaa’ and turned to look. Hasinabanu, the daughter of Hirunnisa, the eldest daughter of my elder brother Aliyaar Mohideen Bawa, was standing there with her mother ...

... Then I took them and returned to Sainthamaruthu in Iqbal Hajiaar’s car. On our way, near the Karuvaaddukkal mosque, some relatives of Iqbal Hajiars also got into the car. The car was struggling to pull as it was by now quite overladen.

Thus we brought the nails and commenced placing the large covering planks in the ground itself to bury the dead bodies together. The prayer for the first burial was done by Moulavi U. L. Samsudin. I stood in the front row. Many of my family relatives had disappeared, such as the wife and two sons of the son of my younger brother Marhum Aadamba. They had lived near the sea. Burying bodies continued until the night. The remaining dead bodies were sent to Sammanthurai and buried at the mosque there ...

According to a survey conducted by the Sri Lankan Department of Census and Statistics in 2005, 645 people died when the tsunami hit Sainthamuruthu, although the report itself says this is likely to be an underestimate. An earlier survey conducted by the Sainthamaruthu and Maligaikadu Tsunami Disaster Management Council found that 1,334 people had died and this is likely to be more accurate. The Census and Statistics survey suggested that a total of 4,216 people died in the tsunami across Ampara District as a whole. While this is also certain to be an underestimate it suggests that Sainthamuruthu probably accounted for 20 to 25 per cent of all the deaths across the whole district. The Census and Statistics survey is likely to be more accurate when it comes to the number of displaced people and damage to housing units in Sainthamuruthu. It found that 4,346 people had to be relocated away from where they had previously lived while 9,026 were able to return to tsunami damaged areas, if not to their previous houses. The survey found that 764 housing units were completely destroyed, 332 were damaged to the point they could not be occupied, while another 1,447 houses were damaged but remained usable. This means that 80 per cent of housing units in the part of Sainthamuruthu affected by the tsunami were damaged and 50 per cent of housing units in Sainthamuruthu as a whole were damaged. Putting all this together we can see that Sainthamuruthu suffered the worst loss of life and the worst damage of any settlement in the Ampara District and it is well known that Ampara was the worst affected district. In other words, Sainthamuruthu was the worst affected settlement in all of Sri Lanka and this is not surprising given that so many people lived in very close proximity to the sea.
As will be discussed in accompanying Report number 3 (by Mulligan and Nadarajah) the researchers found that in February 2009 there were still 666 families who lost their homes in the tsunami who were living in poorly constructed ‘temporary shelters’ waiting for a new permanent home. While nearly 200 houses were still under construction on reclaimed land behind Sainthamuruthu at the time, the District Secretary for Sainthamuruthu, A.L. Mohammed Saleem, told the researchers that there would still be more than 400 families left without adequate housing even though the national government had said that all tsunami aid money had now been spent. Obviously there was a problem in finding enough land beyond the 65-metre seaside exclusion zone to house the tsunami victims in Sainthamuruthu, yet in nearby Kalmunai around 1000 housing units had been constructed on reclaimed land in former paddy fields and many more units could have been constructed behind Sainthamuruthu in the same manner. Many local residents fear that the national and provincial authorities have been determined to break up the densely packed Muslim settlement at Sainthamuruthu for political reasons and many of the tsunami victims were offered housing that was around 20 kilometres from the sea. However, nearly all of them wanted to stay close to the sea and the historic Jummah Grand Mosque.

Halitha was only 12 years old when the tsunami struck. She and her sister had been at a tuition class several kilometres away from the sea but they lost seven members of their extended family, including their mother, sister and brother. Some time after the tsunami, Halitha’s father married his eldest niece in order to keep the family together and they gradually repaired the badly damaged family compound in which their loved ones had died. They were also planning to build upwards to cater for the growing family because Halitha and her sister would be expected to bring their husbands into the family compound after they married. Elsewhere in Sainthamuruthu, beyond the 65-metre exclusion zone, extended families were trying to restore shattered buildings and shattered lives four years after the disaster, yet they were determined to stay in Sainthamuruthu. As one resident said; ‘We still have the same neighbours and we still use the old mosque. My children’s school was rebuilt in the same location. So this is where we want to stay.’ Sadly, most of those who had lived within the 65-metre exclusion zone were still living in ‘temporary shelters’, although some people were beginning to re-occupy some of the shattered houses and shops behind the beach. Several women living with children in the ‘temporary shelter’ camps told the researchers that their children had become demoralised and had stopped attending school. It had become harder for the adults to find work as labourers in the fishing and agricultural industries and they had to wait on the street in the hope that a truck would come to gather up some workers for the day.

During 2008 residents of Sainthamuruthu formed a Tsunami 65 Metres Affected Area People’s Housing Association and sent a letter to relevant government ministers asking for an assurance that all of those who had lost their homes in the tsunami would be provided with adequate housing at Sainthamuruthu. Despite several meetings, including one in Colombo with President Mahinda Rajapakse’s brother, Basil Rajapakse, there was still no plan to build more housing at Sainthamuruthu when this report was completed in April 2010, more than five years after the tsunami.
National issues and influences

With its long history of well-established Sinhalese, Muslim and Tamil settlements, the south-eastern province is the most multi-ethnic in all of Sri Lanka. The Tamil Tigers (LTTE) included much of the south-eastern province in their claim for a separate Tamil state of Eelam and this annoyed Muslim communities who outnumber Tamil communities in the Ampara District. In general the Muslim communities deeply resented the fact that the civil war between the Tamil Tigers and the Sri Lankan armed forces spilled over into the Ampara District. At the time when the tsunami hit in December 2004, a rather fragile ‘Ceasefire Agreement’ was in place between the LTTE and the Sri Lankan government and the Sri Lankan army had asserted its authority in the Ampara District. At the same time, the former leader of the Tamil Tigers in the Batticaloa area, ‘Colonel Karuna’, had split from the LTTE to form his own political party (TMVP) and this group continued to operate as a paramilitary force in the Ampara district, with the tacit approval of the Sri Lankan army. The political situation in the Ampara District was in great flux and this badly affected the delivery of tsunami aid. Many international NGOs simply decided that it was too dangerous for them to work along the east coast of Sri Lanka and so the Ampara District got a much smaller share of international aid compared to the Sinhalese-dominated districts across the nation’s southern province.

Before the tsunami there were already new housing settlements in the Ampara for ‘war refugees’ coming from the northern province, where the civil war had been much more intense. With the added impact of the tsunami the Ampara District has to deal with large numbers of internally displaced people (IDPs) and this also made the tsunami recovery work more difficult.

Muslim communities living along the coast of south-eastern Sri Lanka feel disenfranchised by political developments that have unfolded over the last 20 years or more. The rather shoddy treatment of the tsunami victims who had previously lived within 65 metres of the sea at Sainthamuruthu, in close proximity to the historic Jummah Grand Mosque, has intensified this feeling of marginalisation within the nation. Sadly, there is now a generation of young people living in Sainthamuruthu who have known nothing but armed conflict and political division and they have little confidence in the future.
References


Entry story

It seemed a little surreal to be sitting in an elevated pavilion overlooking the lush green Seenigama cricket field, watching a team that included both the British High Commissioner to Sri Lanka and the Australian Chief Consul take on a team from the Foundation of Goodness (FoG), captained by Kushil Gunasekera. As if scripted, the FoG team—resplendent in white pants and navy tops—won the match and Gunasekera was undoubtedly the man of the match. After the match visitors were treated to excellent southern Sri Lankan cuisine, served up by smiling FoG volunteers.

Before the match the two diplomats had opened a nearby sporting complex, which included accommodation cottages for visiting teams and for international volunteers interested in working with the local children. They also opened the Olympic-size Bryan Adams Swimming Pool, made possible by a donation from the famous English rock star. After the celebrations were over, the author4 was taken on a tour of the MCC Centre of Excellence—which had attracted generous funding from the MCC Cricket Club at the famous Lords cricket ground in London—and its impressive Rainbow Health Clinic. On the walls in the entry way to the MCC Centre of Excellence were photographs of visiting international cricket stars, including Shane Warne, Steve Waugh, Ian Botham and Kapil Dev.

As researchers we had been advised to check out the work of the Foundation of Goodness at Seenigama by Peter Frost, who was employed by Victorian Premier Steve Bracks for about one year after the tsunami to make sure that aid money directed through the Victorian government would be put to good use. Peter Frost had advised Premier Bracks to direct a significant chunk of aid money into building permanent houses for tsunami survivors because he was confident FoG could create model resettlement villages that could demonstrate a good process for post-disaster community development. As a result, the government decided to construct a settlement for 84 families who had lost their homes in the tsunami in a place that FoG called ‘Victoria Gardens’.

As soon as you visit the headquarters of FoG at Seenigama in Kushil Gunasekera’s old family compound you can see that he is very well connected internationally. As the manager of Sri Lanka’s most high profile cricketer—Muttiah Muralitharan—he has extensive cricket contacts and a considerable amount of money raised for the reconstruction work in Seenigama was raised through cricket networks. However, Kushil had previously run a guest house in his family compound—named Lahiru—and after the tsunami he appealed to his former international guests to raise money and encourage people to come as volunteers in the recovery effort. As a result, the honour board of donors at the MCC Centre of Excellence includes community groups, schools, individuals and particular organisations such as the Box Hill TAFE College in Melbourne.

Volunteers—some with skills in medicine or building—came from Australia, USA and Europe. Kushil had a significant link to Australia because his two daughters were attending secondary college in Melbourne.

4 Martin Mulligan
Kushil Gunasekera was very good at cricket when he was young and this helped him to get a scholarship to attend a private school in Colombo. Later his cricket contacts helped him to get established in a sugar exporting business which rewarded him well. He started the Foundation of Goodness in his home village in 1999 because he thought more people from the village should have opportunities to break free from the poverty of normal village life and he was particularly determined to help to enforce a government ban on coral mining by finding other forms of employment for villagers who had invariably turned to the environmentally destructive yet quite lucrative livelihood.

On the day of the tsunami, Muttiah Muralitharan had been due to attend a special ceremony in the village to award school scholarships to children who had completed the primary education. Fortunately, he slept in that day and managed to stay out of harm’s way. However, Kushil remembers that he was alerted by a huge commotion outside his office at Lahiru and he rushed out to see ‘50 or 60 people running, carrying possessions and children as they ran’. ‘Please run sir,’ the villagers said to Kushil, ‘the sea is coming.’ Within minutes he found himself in about one metre of swirling water and he remembered seeing an old lady swirling in the waves but he knew he could not help her. He rushed to the back of Lahiru where there was a play area for children and herded up the children and their parents so that they could run towards high ground at the old temple nearby. As he was running he said it was like a ‘thousand funerals’ because parents were telling him that they had tried to grab two children but had to let go of one and one young man was saying he tried to save both his parents but had to let go of his father. By the time they had reached the safety of high ground Kushil looked down to see that the entire village was now under about three metres of dark swirling water.

While the events of that day could never be ‘erased from my mind’, Kushil decided immediately that FoG would create an even better village for those who had survived. He activated his international networks and by the time the Victoria Gardens settlement was completed in late 2007, FoG had built nearly 600 homes for people in Seenigama and surrounding villages and had repaired 400 other homes damaged in the tsunami. As well as building the impressive sporting facilities they continued raising money for scholarships for the children and set up a Goodness Club to teach young children how to be compassionate towards others. They consolidated the computer training and English language training centres they had established before the tsunami and develop a new skills training centre for women. By September 2008 FoG had given direct assistance to 21,000 beneficiaries. The Rainbow Health Clinic—set up on the initiative of two medical volunteers from USA—was a particular success with people coming from 25 different village to use it. In 2008 it was able to add a dental clinic to the general medical service, pharmacy and ‘psycho-social counselling’ service.

The success of the FoG’s international fund-raising even surprised Kushil and he talked of the way that the tsunami waves had been followed by an even bigger wave of compassion. In 2008 FoG had 84 staff members working in 32 different programs. In the nearby village of Udamulla they had built a smaller version of what they had established at Seenigama—with more modest facilities and fewer programs—and Kushil was promoting the Udamulla Village Heartbeat project as one that could be replicated in poor villages right around the world, for a total cost of around $US100,000. As the post-tsunami aid money began to dry up Kushil faced a huge dilemma in working out how to sustain all the community development initiatives he had begun with the aid funding,
Many advised him to prune his operations and develop a long-term business plan based on projected income. However, Kushil decided to push on and concentrate on raising enough money to consolidate and even expand the work of FoG. He quit his position in the sugar-importing business to work full-time for FoG and looked for ways to raise its profile internationally. Kushil told Martin Mulligan and Yaso Nadarajah in October 2008 that his Buddhist beliefs led him to feel that ‘unconditional compassion’ would always be rewarded and that is why he decided to hoist a spinnaker rather than trim his sails when the driving winds of funding got weaker and more flukey.

History and place

Seenigama is a much older village than either Ambalangoda to its immediate north or Hikkaduwa, to its south. Ambalangoda had grown to become the service centre for the district and that is where children leaving the Seenigama primary school had to go to attend secondary school. However, it was Hikkaduwa—built primarily to serve tourists interested in nearby coral reefs and attractive surf beaches—which came to overshadow the old village. Seenigama is now in the Hikkaduwa District and most people would think of it as being one of a number of rather poor villages stretching north and across the river from Hikkaduwa. Most people passing by on their way to either Hikkaduwa or Galle know that there is a famous temple, located on an outcrop of rock now surrounded by the sea, at Seenigama, but few would know its real significance.

The old island temple is thought to be located at the home of a rather powerful deity, known as the Seenigama Dewale. It is mentioned as Sakkara Sobha in the 14th century chronicle of Buddhism called the Mahawamsa and it is linked, by legend, to other important sites across Sri Lanka. According the Kapu Mahatmaya Lionel De Silva—a keeper of stories and a kind of head priest at the Seenigama Dewale temple—the story of the Seenigama Dewale goes back to the time of Kona Gamu Buddha—who preceded the more famous Gauthama Buddha. At that time there were seven people who gave robes to the Buddha and this enabled them to become gods. At the time of Gauthama
Buddha these seven gods were reincarnated as sons of an Indian king called Ramasinghe. According to legend, King Ramasinghe had 700 wives but seven of them were his main queens and each of these seven gave birth, on seven consecutive days, to a prince. The seven princes grew to become young men and they saw that traders who travelled overseas were coming back with fabulous wealth so they told the king that they planned to travel together by boat to a foreign land. However, on their seventh day at sea their boat was destroyed in a terrible storm and the young prince/gods clung to bits of wood from the wrecked boat and floated to shore in Sri Lanka. The princes landed at different places along the southern coast, from Kirinda in the east to Balapitiya in the west.

One of the princes arrived at Seenigama but he discovered that this place was already inhabited by a goddess called Patthini Amma, a woman who became deity because she had treated her husband with great love and respect. When the young prince/god arrived Patthini Amma set the shore on fire and said that if he really had special power he would be able to subdue the flames and come ashore. He was able to do this and this is how he became the Dewul Dewale of Seenigama. Those who believe in the Dewale feel that he has the power to help them get some kind of revenge against people who have done them an injustice. Those who stop to pray to the Seenigama Dewale—some of them on their way to Kataragama—hope to get help to right an injustice. The power of the Seenigama Dewale may have been enhanced by the fact that the island temple survived unscathed when the tsunami waves swept over it.

To honour the Seenigama Dewale, people connected with the temple began to organise a special annual celebration in 1968. At first this focused on people from Seenigama and surrounding villages bring flowers as an offering. However, in 1975 it turned into a Perehera street parade which grew to become the biggest of its kind in the Galle District. For the first two years after the tsunami, the Seenigama Perehera could not be held because people were too busy with reconstruction work. However, in 2007 it was reinstated with the biggest parade to date and in 2008 it got even bigger with 50 dance troupes and a total of 14 elephants participating. In 2008 the parade stretched a total of 3.5 kilometres from those at the front to those at the rear. It seemed that the Perehera had become an important symbol of recovery after the tsunami.

According to Lionel De Silva, local kava—folk songs—suggest that sugar was grown in Seenigama in ancient times and that people from the village offered sugarcane as well as flowers to the Dewale. At times when strong waves have dumped sand from the sea onto the coast at Seenigama people are said to have found old Chinese and Indian coins and even one that came from the ancient kingdom of Polonnaruwa, made at the time of King Nissankamalla in the 12th century AD. The locals think this indicates that pilgrims from distant places stopped to offer such coins to the Seenigama Dewale. Lionel De Silva certainly thought that Portuguese and Dutch ships docked near Seenigama either on their way to Galle harbour or on their way back. As they grew, villages in the area of Seenigama developed some kind of specialisation. For Seenigama itself, Lionel De Silva said the main industry centred on the production of coconuts and coconut oil, while people living in nearby Udamulla said that in old times their village had specialised in the keeping and killing of pigs; a specialisation that gave them a rather low status with Buddhists.

The growth of tourism at Hikkaduwa obviously created some jobs for local people but those living in Seenigama and surrounding villages said that there were very few opportunities for them in the tourist industry (see below). Furthermore, only around 15 per cent of those employed at Seenigama before the tsunami worked in fishing or
fishing-related work focused on Hikkaduwa. Despite the history of Seenigama, it seems that people living in Hikkaduwa have a tendency to look down on people living in the northern villages. A big majority of people living in Seenigama had worked in the coral mining industry, which a former diver in the industry, Shanti, said had lasted for around 200 years. According to Shanti, men working in the industry, which turned crushed coral into lime, could earn around 1,500 Rs a day while women could earn around 500-700 Rs a day. When the coral mining started, Shanti reckoned, the coral probable came to within two metres of the surface of the sea. Now the remaining coral is about eight metres from the surface, meaning that around six metres of coral reef was removed by the industry.

The government announced a ban on coral mining about 10 years before the tsunami but the ban was not enforced and the industry continued, largely unchecked. People living in Seenigama now understand that the tsunami damage was much worse because the protective coral reef had been largely removed. It took the tsunami to make the ban on coral mining effective but there is now a huge challenge for people who had worked in the industry to find alternative forms of employment.

**Demographic profile**

A survey conducted by the Sri Lankan Department of Census and Statistics in 2005 indicated that there were 1,398 people living in the two Grama Niladhari Divisions in Seenigama that were affected by the tsunami and no doubt there would have been a couple of hundred more living there before the tsunami hit (although this figure is not available). While it is not indicated in the census data nearly all of those living in Seenigama would identify as Sinhalese Buddhist. According to the 2005 census data, the proportion of people over the age of 60 is significantly higher in Seenigama—at 10.2 per cent—than in the other Sri Lankan case study communities included in this study. By contrast, there were only 3.4 per cent over the age of 60 in Thirukkovil. There was also a slightly higher proportion of females to males in Seenigama than in the other Sri Lankan communities. Of course, it is not easy to draw a sharp boundary between Seenigama and surrounding villages and the Foundation of Goodness reports that it has a constituency of around 2,500 villagers in Seenigama and nearby.

As the accompanying Report number 4 (by Shaw) points out, employment data in Sri Lanka is very unreliable. However the census data for 2005 estimated that 14.7 per cent of those living in Seenigama before the tsunami were engaged in fishing or fishing-related work, while 9.2 per cent were engaged in the production of coir (rope made from coconut fibre). The census data suggested that 16.2 per cent had been in ‘government employment’ while 59.2 per cent were listed under ‘other employment’, which presumably includes the large number of people who had been working in the illegal coral mining industry. The point about this data is that a census survey conducted in 2005 showed that almost all the sources of employment had collapsed after the tsunami with more than 50 per cent of survey respondents indicating that they derived their income from ‘own account’ compared to 29 per cent of census survey respondents in Hambantota who ticked this option. It was not clear which category people working for the Foundation of Goodness would fall under but it had become a significant employer in Seenigama by 2008 with 84 employees. It is interesting to note that when people in the two Seenigama GN Divisions were asked to state their occupation, a very high 25.8 per cent said ‘plant machinery operators’, compared to only six per cent who listed this occupation in Hambantota. A high 20.7 per cent in Seenigama listed their occupation as ‘professional’—compared to just 6.4 per cent in Hambantota—and this probably did reflect the presence of the Foundation of Goodness in Seenigama.
Tsunami impact and recovery

The Department of Census and Statistics has recorded that a total of 740 people in the Hikkaduwa District died in the tsunami and a further 115 were listed as ‘disappeared’. Most of those deaths occurred at Seenigama and nearby Peraliya. The Foundation of Goodness recorded around 200 tsunami-related deaths for Seenigama itself. What complicated matters in regard to tsunami deaths in this area was that up to 1000 people died when a train heading for Galle was trapped by the tsunami waves at Peraliya, just to the north of Seenigama. Many hundreds of people were buried in mass graves at Peraliya and Seenigama but not all of them came from the area. What is clear is that more people died in the Hikkaduwa DS Division than in any other Division of the Galle District and this was partly because coral mining had made the villages to the north of Hikkaduwa particularly vulnerable. As well as the number of people who died, the Department of Census and Statistics listed a further 142 people living in the two Seenigama GN Divisions as being disabled, injured or made sick by the tsunami. The figures show that for the whole Galle District almost twice as many females as males died in the disaster. Significantly more females were ‘disabled’ in the tsunami, while more males were ‘injured’.

Figures released by the Department of Census and Statistics suggest that a total of 318 housing units within the two Seenigama GN Divisions were either destroyed or partially destroyed in the tsunami. However, the number of people who were made homeless in Seenigama and surrounding villages was worse than this and the Foundation of Goodness quickly assessed that it would have to build more than 500 new units to ensure that all tsunami-affected people could be adequately housed. According to the census figures, a big majority of people living in Seenigama itself (92.8 per cent) had been living in housing units that they had owned but FoG decided to provide new houses for those who had previously lived in rented accommodation as well.

At Seenigama, the main Colombo to Galle road runs close to the sea and the tsunami wiped out all the shops and businesses along this busy road. Figures are not available for damage to building other than housing but not much was left standing other than the Dewale temple, another old temple built on high ground, and, thankfully, the primary school, which was damaged but not destroyed. Indeed there was little infrastructure left in Seenigama once the waves subsided and Kushil Gunasekera had to carry out major repairs to Lahiru before it could serve as the headquarters of the local relief and recovery operation.

While funding came from a wide range of sources for relief and recovery work in Seenigama most of it was directed through the Foundation of Goodness. FoG made plans to build three new sub-villages, all of them more than 100 metres from the sea. A problem occurred when the Sri Lankan government subsequently relaxed the 100-metre ‘no-build’ buffer zone because some people who were listed to get a house in the new settlements planned by FoG also managed to get themselves on lists for other NGOs promising to build houses inside the 100-metre buffer. One man who managed to get himself on a list for a second house took offence when Kushil Gunasekera removed him from the list of people to receive a unit in the Victoria Gardens and he insisted that Kushil black out the name of the two children he lost in the tsunami from the honour board near the gate of the FoG headquarters.

The new sub-villages took the names of the major sponsors of new housing: ‘AVIVA Village’ recognising the major contribution of the US corporation called AVIVA; ‘LOLC/
KPMG Village’, recognising the contribution of Sri Lankan financial services company LOLC and the international financial services company KPMG; and ‘Victoria Gardens’ recognising the major role of the Victorian government. One of the streets in AVIVA Village was named ‘Perth Street’ to acknowledge a substantial contribution by Perth City Council. The unfortunate thing about this practice is that local names have largely been replaced and the relevance of the new names may fade with the passage of time.

Places in the planned settlement at Victoria Gardens were reserved for 84 families deemed to have suffered the most because their old houses had been closest to the sea when the tsunami struck. The Victorian government promised to build more substantial dwellings than those first constructed in AVIVA Village and it also promised to install a complete water recycling system in the sub-village. The problem was that it proved difficult to find enough land to build 84 units together with the water recycling system and so Victoria Gardens lagged well behind the other two sub-villages. The people deemed to be most in need had to wait for an additional year to move into their units in Victoria Gardens and while the two-storey townhouse style units were certainly solidly built they had tiny kitchens and small plots of land, compared to the houses in the LOLC/KPMG Village in particular. Victoria Gardens was also further from Galle Road and the sea than the other two sub-villages. It was difficult to see the benefit gained from the longer wait.

National issues and influences

Seenigama has been far less affected by the civil war than the communities located in the Ampara District, although there were men from the village serving in or with the Sri Lankan Army in the northern part of the country in 2008. On the other hand, the ongoing war had severely reduced international tourism by the end of 2008 and nearby Hikkaduwa was badly affected with many hotels, restaurants, and shops rather empty of customers. The ending of the war in the north in May 2009 may lead to a revival of tourism at Hikkaduwa but few people from Seenigama have been able to find employment in that industry in the past and it remains to be seen if it will benefit them in the future.

The national ban on coral mining was the outside ‘issue’ that most directly affected people living in the village and when this ban became more effective after the tsunami it posed a big challenge in regard to finding alternative forms of livelihoods.

The secretary of the committee at the Seenigama Dewale Temple, D.H. Sampath Viraja Prasanjana, told Martin Mulligan that the committee was working to make more people in Sri Lanka aware of the significance of the Dewale and the history of the temple, although he acknowledged that this would be hard to achieve. He also thought the Seenigama Perehera parade could play a significant role in protecting traditional art and dance in the southern region, although he noted that, unlike the very famous Perehera in Kandy, the much smaller Seenigama Perehera promoted some new dance forms alongside the traditional ones. Sampath said that he wanted to see a space set up in Seenigama to promote both traditional and modern dance.

Of course, another thing that attracts attention to Seenigama is the presence of the Foundation of Goodness and Kushil Gunasekera was trying to encourage a form of tourism in which people volunteer to offer their skills to poor communities. That may be the form of tourism that could benefit Seenigama rather than nearby Hikkaduwa.
References

Entry story

In early 2007, Yaso Nadarajah and Martin Mulligan travelled with three local guides along the tsunami-affected coast of the Ampara District in order to select our case study sites for the post-tsunami study. We had travelled south as far as Pottuvil and were on our way north again when we stopped in the Tamil Hindu township of Thirukkovil and decided to go in search of its historic temple, the Citira Velayuta Cuvami Kovil (temple) which had given the town its name. It was late afternoon and the temple compound was closed as we pulled up next to its surrounding wall. As is typical of Dravidian temples, the walls surrounding the temple compound were painted with red vertical lines and there were familiar statues peering out above the wall. What was different was that the front of the compound had been badly damaged by the tsunami and was now under repair and there were few signs of life in surrounding houses which had largely been turned into shattered fragments of what they once were. People who had once lived in the vicinity of the temple had been relocated as a result of the ‘buffer zone’ policy and an eerie silence was made more poignant by the fact that the tsunami had opened up new spaces by sweeping away fences, walls and even trees. As we peered through the gate of the temple precinct we noticed a caretaker sweeping stray pieces of paper and debris from the sand surrounding the inner walls of the main temple. When asked, he said that the temple would be reopening at 5.30 pm for evening prayers but when told that we had come from Australia and were passing through the area he said he would inform the head priest immediately.

A short time later a temple priest—pucari—appeared and introduced himself. He seemed to be in his early thirties and he told us that he was the last of a long line of a matriarchal lineage which was charged with the custodianship of the temple. After some short introductions, Yaso Nadarajah asked the pucari about a well-known and highly revered Tamil poet who had lived in Jaffna in the late part of the 19th century and who had written of this temple. In the process of conversation, she explained that she was descended from this poet. This revelation evoked a strong emotional reaction from the priest and the caretaker who had fetched him and they said they felt honoured to welcome the great man’s great granddaughter to their temple. The priest suddenly became much more effusive in his introduction to the temple and its history and what had been envisaged as a short visit turned into a three-hour discussion. Just before the tsunami hit, we were told, the sea had pulled back to reveal an older structure that was once part of the temple. While houses around had crumpled under the impact of the waves and the temple’s ‘protective wall’ had collapsed, the main temple buildings had survived largely intact, as if in a gesture of defiance. Sadly the head priest had lost his only child and his mother in the disaster and it took him years to recover his enthusiasm and energy. Yet a much wider Hindu community decided the building must be fully restored so that the temple could resume its place as a vital stopping place for pilgrims travelling around the most sacred sites in Sri Lanka.

It is thought that the Veddas—the indigenous people of Sri Lanka—were closely associated with the sites at which several historic temples, including the one at Thirukkovil, were built in the eastern littoral region of the island (Parker 1990, Seligmann et al 1911, Krishnapillai 2001) and that the Veddas assumed the duty also to protect pilgrims and guard the temples against bandits. After we had made the decision to
include Thirukkovil as a case study area in our post-tsunami study, Yaso and Martin Mulligan interviewed a respected local historian and schoolteacher, Mr Navanayaga Moorthy, about the history of the temple and he confirmed that worship at the temple site began as far back as the sixth century BC and that those who began this practice were Dravidians and members of the Naakar Tribe—another name for Veddas. As Navanayaga Moorthy explained it:

The location of the temple was known as Naakarmunai and there was an old harbour there known as Naakarmunaiththurai, which preceded the new harbour in front of the temple now. At the time of the formation of this temple here, there was only jungle and no human settlement. There was a spring (chunai) and the Vedda hunters found a spear—‘vel’—under a naval tree and worshipped it in a temporary hut-like structure. The king at that time, when informed about this ‘vel’ worship by the Veddas, built a small temple of clay and wood around this ‘vel’ and its location.

According to one myth, the Veddas worshipped this place as the site where the arrow sent forth by the great warrior god Murugan, from his battlefield near Kathirkamam, split the Vahura mountain and this also broke the arrow into three splinters. One splinter landed at Ukanthai Mountain (in south-western Sri Lanka), the second at Mandur, and the third at Thirukkovil. Velupillai (1990 and 2008) has said that temples associated through mythology with the temple at Thirukkovil were worshipped by Veddas until about three centuries ago and that ‘Vedda type’ worship continues at some sites up until today. Clearly the temple is associated, through mythology, with the many Murugan temples across southern India. Over time, the temple at Thirukkovil has lost some of its profile as other temples have been built along the coast. However, Navanayaga Moorthy has pointed out that when the tsunami waves destroyed some of the later renovations to the temple, carried out since the early 20th century, this revealed older structures that had been left as a kind of historical record and this then reminded worshippers of the temple’s ancient significance.

On our first visit to the Thirukkovil temple in 2007 we walked through the inner sanctum and saw that there were three gopurams, which are the rising towers featured in all Hindu temples, exquisitely decorated with painted sculptures and carvings that depict themes from Hindu mythology and tell something of the fabric of life that surrounds particular deities and their people. The three gopurams stood as a symbol of resilience and yet there was also a pervading sense of sadness in the temple. When we visited the temple again in late 2008, it was obvious that a lot of renovations had been completed and there were signs of life in the place again. Some of the women who accompanied us to the temple on this occasion said that they were looking forward to the next Skanta Shasti festival, an important Tamil festival dedicated to celebrating Lord Murugan’s victory over demon Surapadma. This festival takes place over the Tamil month of Aippasi—i.e. late October to November—and it involves six days of fasting followed by a celebration of Lord Murugan’s victory. We couldn’t help thinking that this festival would also be a celebration of the community’s victory in bringing the temple back its former glory.
As already demonstrated above, the history of Thirukkovil is closely bound up with the history of the Citira Velayuta Cuvami Kovil (temple) and it can trace its origins back to the eighth century BC. The name Thirukkovil means ‘God’s temple’ and the association between the temple and the town is well known across Sri Lanka. However, we have noted above that the temple lost some of its early prominence as other temples were established in other towns and villages along the coast. It has been documented that in the latter part of the 19th century the temple went through tough times through a lack of income caused by a general economic depression. At this time the son of a wealthy man from Batticaloa—who had originated in Jaffna—took over the management of the temple. Markandu Mudalali himself had become a coconut plantation owner in Batticaloa and at Thirukkovil he began an export trade in desiccated coconut, shipped out from the Thirukkovil harbour. Because chariots are famously associated with Murugan temples in South India, Markandu purchased a huge chariot for the Thirukkovil temple. In the early part of the 20th century Markandu initiated the building of four walls at the front of the temple, which were eventually demolished by the 2004 tsunami. Markandu’s son, KVM Subramaniam, now resides in Pottuvil and is a wealthy property owner there. However, following the death of Markandu the temple has been managed by a committee and one consequence is that it is not longer the centre of art development that it was under Markandu’s patronage. It still hosts annual festivals but these are now the rare occasions when the temple becomes the centre of community life.
While Thirukkovil is strongly associated with Tamil Hindu histories and associations, older residents speak nostalgically about times when they lived in a more plural society with close connections to nearby Muslim communities. As noted in the Social Profile for Sainthamuruthu, Muslim traders have long settled around ports along the east coast of Sri Lanka and Navanayaga Moorthy has pointed out that Muslims settling near the harbour at Thirukkovil married into the surrounding Hindu community:

From around 1545 AD there were marriage relations between Muslim immigrants and Tamils here and it is the progeny of these relationships who are now settled in Maruthamunai and Sammanthurai. Because of this the Muslim progeny in Sammanthurai have the right to have poojas in the Thirukkovil temple. There is really no difference between us – for ‘big’ people like us. We respect all equally. For instance when we pass the mosque we pass it respectfully. Whether it is the mosque, church or temple we respect them equally. They are all gods’ places.

However, such relationships began to change as soon as European colonisation began in earnest. The British established coconut plantations along the coast and particularly around the Thirukkovil area and brought in workers from other areas. Whereas people around Thirukkovil had depended heavily on their own rice cultivation, chena cultivation was introduced with the introduction of corn and a range of groundnuts. Livestock rearing grew to include cows, goats, buffaloes, hens and ducks and bigger industries were established in coastal and lagoon fishing. Timber mills grew up alongside rice mills and a new building industry was established.

The violent conflict which opened up in the Jaffna region in 1983 between the Tamil Tigers (LTTE) and Sri Lankan government soon spread into the south-eastern province and the Ampara District became a militarised zone. As mentioned in the profile for Sainthamuruthu, the situation became even more complicated when the former LTTE commander in the Batticaloa District, Colonel Karuna, split from the organisation to form the ‘Karuna faction’ and eventually the Tamil Makkal Viduthalai Puligal (TMVP) political party. New conflicts opened up between TMVP militants and LTTE loyalists eager for revenge and the Tamil community at Thirukkovil was sometimes caught in the crossfire. Eventually Thirukkovil became a TMVP stronghold as the party’s influence reached a high point with the election of TMVP leader ‘Pillaiyan’ as Chief Minister of the Eastern Provincial in elections held in May 2008. By this time, however, Karuna had fallen out with Pillaiyan and the TMVP soon suffered a debilitating split itself. The tensions and divisions have not ceased in Thirukkovil despite the end of the war between the Sri Lankan army and the LTTE in May 2009.

Before 1990, there had been an important Milk Chilling Centre in Thirukkovil, but it was completely destroyed during the civil war. Despite later efforts to establish a number of milk collection centres, that particular industry was effectively destroyed. The civil war drained the region both socially and economically and it has left a difficult legacy.

When the tsunami hit Thirukkovil many people ran to uninhabited hills at a place called Mandanai, about seven to eight kilometres from the sea, and many decided to stay there. As one resident put it:

The sea that we had trusted so much betrayed us and took away our loved ones. We can no longer live with it; we must learn new ways of living away from it.

Even though some people who took refuge at Mandanai left to return to their houses in the old part of Thirukkovil, plans were soon drawn up to house around 355 families.
in a new permanent settlement. The research team responsible for the study on rebuilding communities in the wake of the tsunami (see accompanying Report Number 3), conducted fieldwork in Mandanai on two separate occasions and on the second occasion we were advised that the TMVP had effectively become the local government for the settlement and that we should seek permission from the head of the TMVP office at Mandanai to conduct our research there. At this time the TMVP was taking up matters on behalf of the Mandanai community with the District Secretariat in Thirukkovil and it had helped to establish a Rural Development Society and a Women’s Association in the community. When we subsequently went to speak to members of the Women’s Association, we were accompanied by an armed ‘guard’ from the TMVP. We also interviewed a young man, Aravintham, who was playing a role in the Rural Development Society. He seemed a little more optimistic than older residents at Mandanai but, as he rather wryly observed, he was born after the war began in 1983 and he had never known what it was like to live without war.

A smaller new settlement was also established after the tsunami at a nearby place called Kudilnilam. While there was a similar concern in this community about the future for young people who had known nothing but war for all their lives, the atmosphere at Kudilnilam was noticeably more positive and this was undoubtedly due to the role of people from the People’s Church in Colombo who had helped to establish the new settlement. The story of Kudilnilam will be told in Research Report Number 3 (by Mulligan and Nadarajah). Clearly the establishment of the two new settlements, away from the sea has made a significant difference to Thirukkovil as a whole.

Demographic profile

The Thirukkovil District is bounded by the Pottuvil District to the south, the Alayadivembu District to the north and the Thammanna District to the west and it is made up of 17 Grama Niladhari (GN) divisions. While Ampara District as a whole is ethnically diverse—with 44 percent ‘Sri Lankan Moors’, 37.5 per cent Sinhalese and 18.3 per cent Sri Lankan Tamils—census data suggests that Thirukkovil is 99.8 per cent Sri Lankan Tamil and just 0.1 per cent Sinhalese. The 2001 national census indicated that Thirukkovil District had a population of 23,739 people. With an area of approximately 202 square kilometres, it had a population density at the time of the 2001 census of around 120 inhabitants per square kilometre. This was lower than the national average of 140 people per square kilometre and lower than the figure for Ampara District as a whole, which was 300 people per square kilometre.

A Department of Census and Statistics Report from 2006 indicated that Thirukkovil has a large percentage of its population in the 0-14 age bracket (44.8 per cent), with just 3.4 per cent aged over 60. Remarkably, this report indicates that only 15.3 per cent of the population was in the age range 35-60 and this low number might indicate the impact of the long and costly civil war.

Tsunami impact and recovery

According to national census data from 2005, a total of 13 Grama Niladhari divisions in Thirukkovil were affected by the tsunami. Prior to the tsunami, national census data suggested that these 13 GN divisions had a population of 12,809 people living in 3,299 housing units. However, the focus on 13 GN divisions narrows the picture in regard to tsunami damage because, for a broader Thirukkovil area it is thought that around 500 people died and around 19,000 people were left homeless. As mentioned above, thousands of people headed inland to take refuge in the hilly country at Mandanai.
New York Times reporter David Rohde visited Thirukkovil just days after the tsunami and in his first report he wrote:

Standing on the rain-drenched grounds of the Thambiluvil elementary school on Friday afternoon, Vaniyasingham Jayanthan, 47, a soft-spoken school principal, watched as young men carried dozens of sacks of rice, sugar, lentils and clothing into a makeshift storeroom. Hours earlier, Mr. Jayanthan had been near panic. The food supply for the hundreds of refugee families at the school was nearly gone. He had scaled back rations as best he could, knowing that very soon he would have no food for his already miserable charges. All of that changed when a new Toyota Land Cruiser worth roughly $50,000 rolled in on Friday afternoon. It was the personal vehicle of a wealthy family from Colombo, Sri Lanka’s capital, that had set out two days ago determined to deliver food to Sri Lanka’s tsunami victims. The delivery was one of thousands, possibly tens of thousands, by members of the country’s business elite who rented vehicles, filled them with food and drove toward the ravaged coast. One man even turned the trip into a family outing by bringing a 15-year-old son, who recorded every moment of the delivery with a top-of-the-line Sony video camera. Suspicious that the aid would be stolen if it is channeled through the government, the businessmen insisted on delivering it themselves.

The problem in this area was that the prolonged civil war had drained the local economy and war-related migration had resulted in skill shortages. Many young men had either died in the war or moved away from their homes. Local residents told the researchers that in the immediate aftermath of the disaster Sinhalese soldiers had stood shoulder-to-shoulder with former Tamil Tiger rebels to bury the dead and restore basic infrastructure. A joint committee, including old enemies, was established to oversee the local relief effort. As David Rohde’s report made clear, local community leaders then began to wonder how they might feed all those who had taken refuge in schools and other community buildings before supplies started to dribble in from Colombo. Indeed the crisis did create some rather extraordinary temporary alliances, with former combatants working together and Colombo businessmen reaching out to help disaster victims on the other side of the island. The problem is that much of the international aid, channelled through international NGOs flowed into the southern areas of the island that were easier to reach and seemingly safer to work in. Much less aid reached the stricken communities in the east and when the immediate crisis passed, old divisions and tensions began to re-emerge. High levels of security—including frequent roadblocks with separate army and police security checks to negotiate—made it harder to deliver aid and to sustain aid efforts from afar.

As mentioned above, the former leader of the Tamil Tigers (LTTE) in the Batticaloa District, who was known widely by his nom de guerre Colonel Karuna Amman, had split from the Jaffna-based leadership of the LTTE in March 2004 to form his own ‘faction’, which eventually became a separate political party, the TMVP. The TMVP adopted a more conciliatory approach to the Sri Lankan national government and this made it easier to deliver aid to places like Thirukkovil but the LTTE launched some reprisal attacks against TMVP supporters in the area and this ensured that the heavy security presence was not eased.

Data from the Thirukkovil Divisional Secretariat indicates that the cost of tsunami damage—primarily to fishing boats, gear and nets—was estimated at about 25.22 million Rs. Furthermore, the Ampara District Agricultural Office at Kalmunai has said that in the Thirukkovil DS Division damage to paddy fields and other crops destroyed the
short-term livelihood of 1,923 individuals who had previously worked in agriculture. The Thirukkovil Agrarian Services Department has estimated that about 39 hectares of agricultural was badly damaged, with the consequence that around 53 farming families lost their primary source of livelihood and income. The Thirukkovil DS office estimated that damage to retail and wholesale businesses resulted in loss of livelihood for about 460 individuals and that around 700 people lost their jobs in the manufacturing sector, before reconstruction work helped to revive that sector. While few international NGOs worked in the Thirukkovil area, the DS office acknowledged the particular contributions made by Oxfam Australia and German Red Cross, alongside the work of Sri Lankan NGO Sewalanka. The work of the Sri Lankan People’s Church at Kudilnilam was not mentioned.

Of course, local builders and craftspeople benefited from the reconstruction work, but it has been noted that they had little training in the work required and gained limited skills from the work they undertook.

**National issues and influences**

With its long history dating back to the indigenous Veddas and covering waves of immigration by Tamil Hindus and Muslim traders, Thirukkovil offers a case study in the way that plural communities were torn asunder by nearly 30 years of civil war. Despite an initial unifying response to the disaster, the long-term response has probably exacerbated the existing social divisions. The formation of the TMVP, and its rather surprising electoral alliance with the ruling Sri Lanka Freedom Party of President Rajapakse for elections held in 2008 and 2010, confused the picture even further and left former Tamil Tiger supporters in a strange kind of limbo. Local support for the TMVP seemed to fall away dramatically after a split in that party in 2008/9. Yet people were still living with the legacy of the civil war when the researchers visited the area in late 2008 and early 2009. Young people expressed anger that every time they travelled on the highways in their home district they had to show proof of their identity to young Sinhalese soldiers manning the army checkpoints and whenever they wanted to leave the district to travel to places such as Kandy or Colombo they had to go to the police stations at Kalmunai or Ampara to get police clearance. They said they felt that they were living in an occupied country. One mother living in the new settlement at Kudilnilam told the researchers that most mothers felt anxious when their children were not at home in case they did not return. She suggested that the community lived in a fairly constant state of fear:

> Every day there is bad news and the future is a question mark. I am worried not just for my children but also for myself. Any day, the [Sri Lankan] Army soldiers might come into the village and if a soldier ever gets killed or injured other soldiers will kill people in the village in revenge. In a divided nation we are seen as enemies.

The bitter legacy of the long and costly civil war made it even harder to overcome the anxiety caused by the tsunami.
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Entry Story

It was Thursday, October 4th 2007. Together with Dr. Gunaselvam (Madras University), and two research students—Jayapal (Madras University) and Jamil Rahemtula (McMaster University, Canada), Yaso Nadarajah visited Tsunami Nagar, a temporary housing scheme for tsunami survivors. These survivors had primarily been slum dwellers, living in eight separate squatter communities along the coast in northern Chennai, where they could find labouring work in the fishing industry. Upon arrival at Tsunami Nagar, we walked into the main area in front of the rows of concrete shelters. To the right of the main entrance was the now abandoned Karunalaya Education Centre.

As we walked through the compound we met various community members (mostly women) and as we walked in and out of the laneways, many of the residents approached us with an identity form which identified their allotment, including their name and door number. It was obvious that the people living in this temporary shelter were in constant fear of being evicted by the private corporation that owned the land on which the settlement had been built.

The state of Tamil Nadu on the Indian mainland was the worst affected by the 2004 tsunami. More than 2.5 million people along the Tamil Nadu coast were affected by waves reported to reach heights of up to seven metres. More than 12,500 deaths were recorded and around 650,000 people were displaced. This meant that India ranked third among the most affected countries (Ben et al 2005) although few people outside India knew how serious the impact had been. Chennai is, of course, the capital of the Indian state of Tamil Nadu and it is bounded on the east by the Bay of Bengal. Formerly known as Madras, it is one of the oldest capital cities in India and the city was one of the 13 districts of Tamil Nadu officially declared ‘tsunami affected’. Nearly 100,000 families live in the approximately 44 villages along the coastal front of Chennai and more than half of these families had been compacted densely into thatched huts within 500 metres of the high-tide line at the time of the tsunami. Most residents of these coastal villages did not even own the land on which they lived. It is estimated that around 8,030 of them died and, of course, they all lost their rather flimsy houses. The loss of fishing equipment and infrastructure also deprived nearly all of them of their former livelihoods (Dipankar 2005).

The survivors in northern Chennai were initially housed in an area called Kargil Nagar, which was nine kilometres away from the sea. According to reports by Karunlaya (2006), 2,196 families from eight fishing villages or settlements along the coast were forcefully evicted from the affected areas and relocated to this temporary shelter. The Kargil Nagar temporary shelter also included a few families from another village called Anna Nagar. According to Karunlaya, the forced evictions were very unpleasant for the affected families and the distance from the sea at Kargil Nagar made it very difficult for the men to find work in the fishing industry. To make matters worse, fire ravaged the settlement at Kargil Nagar on June 15, 2005, and a second fire broke out on June 23. Arson was suspected and this raised safety concerns among the tsunami survivors. Those who had started to regain a measure of independence were once again made dependent on relief

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Karunalaya Social Service Society is an Indian NGO established in 1995 to work for the protection, education and development of street and working children in Chennai city, with a particular focus on children in the poor fishing slums of north Chennai.
supplies and they had to endure minimal facilities before they could be relocated to the new temporary settlement at Tsunami Nagar six months later.

At the time of our visit to Tsunami Nagar it was evident that the residents were still traumatised by what had happened at Kargil Nagar. But worse still, they had endured flooding during monsoon times at Tsunami Nagar and Karunalaya has estimated that around 250 people in the settlement died because of the flooding. A further 50 lost their lives during two stampedes at government relief centres in Chennai. Furthermore, in October 2007 – more than 33 months since the tsunami disaster – those people we met at Tsunami Nagar were still unsure about where they would be settled on a permanent basis. There was palpable anxiety about being included on the list for new housing units and life in Tsunami Nagar was deteriorating, with few people able to find employment and rising levels of crime. Some of the units had already been abandoned as tsunami victims went in search of other temporary accommodation outside the deteriorating settlement. Others said that they did not dare to leave in case they were deleted from the lists for permanent new housing units.

**Place and History**

As mentioned above, we began research on the resettlement of tsunami victims in Chennai when over 2000 families from eight former coastal villages were living in the Tsunami Nagar temporary settlement. Tsunami Nagar was located several kilometres from the sea and this was causing serious problems for people who had worked in
the fishing industry before being relocated. Indeed it was a very big change for people
who had lived all their lives next to the sea—and had depended on it for most of their
livelihoods—to be so separated from it. The tsunami had washed away their homes
and possessions but it also washed away their former way of living. Of course, people
who had lived with the sea now feared what it could do and this intensified their
sense of dislocation. One survivor later told Yaso Nadarajah that no-one knew what
had happened when the tsunami came because at first they assumed it was the kind
of king tide that happens fairly regularly. People left to find higher ground, many
crowding onto overpass bridges, and the survivor told Yaso that they simply stood
around waiting to return to what remained of their houses, not realising that they had
lost everything. ‘We were like orphans abandoned,’ the survivor said, ‘We had no clue
of what was happening around us.’

The eight coastal villages from which the people relocated to Tsunami Nagar came
were: Power Kuppam, Thideer Nagar Kuppam, Anna Nagar Kuppam, Poonga Nagar
Kuppam, Pallavan Nagar Kuppam, Masthan Kuppam, Srinivasapuram Kuppam and
Akbar Nagar Kuppam. The word ‘kuppam’ translates as small village of fishermen and
other low caste people\(^6\). The dwellings were all within 8 to 15 metres from the ocean
and they had been home to many of the families for over three decades. Even before the
tsunami such areas had been designated as ‘objectionable slums’ on the basis that they
were located on ‘hazardous sites’ and contravened existing planning regulations. For
example, Pallavan Nagar was located on a beach close to a fishing harbour and in the
path of a planned new road access to the port of Chennai and Anju Kudasai was located
next to the heavily polluted Cooum River. Both these sites were threatened by flooding
during monsoon rains and high tides and associated storm surges. As Bunch et al, (2005)
pointed out:

As with all objectionable slums, these settlements suffer[ed] from insecurity of tenure,
from lack of services (especially sanitation, water, drainage, and waste disposal),
and they experience[d] severe overcrowding. The housing [was] poor (often self-
constructed thatch huts). Like most such situations, the residents of Pallavan Nagar
and Anju Kudasai suffer[ed] from threats to personal safety. Violence [was] common,
and substance abuse and prostitution [were] endemic. There [were] rapidly increasing
numbers of HIV-infected people ... especially women. There [was] a significant lack
of experience in collaboration and organizing among the residents of these particular
slums. Existence depend[ed] on the ingenuity of women, mutual support within
extended families, and minimal income derived from intermittent, informal sector
jobs. Political parties and religious organisations [were] the primary outside bodies
entering and influencing such communities.

Initially the tsunami survivors in Chennai were evacuated into government schools
and provided with food packages and blankets. Food aid began to arrive from around
the world and the Tamil Nadu government provided cooking stoves, kerosene and
rice. After a couple of weeks they were all relocated to Kargil Nagar, where temporary
tarpaulin shelters had been erected by a German aid organisation. This site was on low-
lying ground, under an overpass bridge and it was regularly inundated in heavy rain. As
mentioned earlier fires in June 2005 reduced the settlement to ash and enraged residents
took to the streets and blocked a highway in protest. A group of women later told Yaso
Nadarajah that:

\(^6\) University of Madras, Tamil Lexicon http://dsal.uchicago.edu/dictionaries/tamil-lex/ accessed February 16th, 2009
Life at Kargil Nagar was very difficult especially since it was far from the sea and we had to spend 10 to 15 Rs every time we wanted to go somewhere. Previously we did not have to worry about food because all we had to do was cook rice; we got the fish for our curry from the sea. Then to make things worse the rains came; and we were all flooded out. Before the rain there was the fire at Kargil Nagar. We lost all that we received from the government in the fire and the rest to the rain. We were meant to stay at Kargil Nagar only for 6 months but ended up staying there for more than a year and a half. The houses had roofs but leaked all the same.

Many of us fell ill; contracted chickenpox fever. The government had promised houses but towards the end they scared us by saying that we may not get one. After this all the women in the community, without the help of our men or other higher officials, came together and decided to protest and let our problems be heard by the public. We gained support from college students, reports from newspapers and other media. Also we had our own documentary recorded as a mark of protest. We knew that we had to rely on ourselves to get things done. After this the government took notice of us.

In very early 2006, a UK-based NGO—Action Aid—built semi-permanent blocks of units at Tsunami Nagar and approximately 2200 families were shifted there in three phases. Tsunami Nagar was built on a tract of land donated by a businessman and it was closer to the sea than Kargil Nagar. However, it was away from public transport and had no water or electricity supplies. Furthermore, it was near a colony which was known to house local goondas (thugs) and other infamous characters. As the families moved to Tsunami Nagar the stories about the goondas increased their anxieties. Many of the young men started to form, or join, gangs for protection and, like many before them, they turned to illegal activities to get money. Levels of violence within the community began to increase, along with the use of illicit drugs. Drug peddlars became more prevalent and more women turned to prostitution. They were forced to live in this imploding community for two years before pucca houses in the two new settlements became available.

The two new settlements were called VOC Nagar and Thillagar Nagar and they are within a couple of kilometres of each other in a Chennai suburb called Tondiarpet. It takes around 40 minutes by car to travel from the centre of Chennai out to the two settlements and the route passes through low-income housing areas in some of the city’s oldest parts. Near the northern outskirts of Chennai, Tondiarpet includes a bustling commercial centre providing retail and export outlets for manufacturing in the areas of textiles, plastics, and metals. The southern part of Tondiarpet houses some key public institutions, such as the Cooperation of Chennai, which is responsible for municipal services across Chennai in areas such as sanitation, housing and the provision of public services. Buildings in this area were mostly constructed in the 18th and 19th centuries when Chenna, then called Madras, was being established.

VOC Nagar was built on 13 acres of vacant land previously used for various small industries and donated by Hindustan Lever Ltd.. By contrast, Thillagar Nagar was built in very close proximity to an older, overcrowded, public housing settlement. To express their anger about the increased congestion, residents from the older settlement began to dump their rubbish in front of the new housing blocks. It took the new community some time to have the rubbish removed and once this was accomplished they used the site for a religious shrine that grew, slowly, into a community temple.
Demographic Profile

Demographic data is not available for the eight coastal villages (slums) in which people had lived before the tsunami. Only now that the survivors are settled in VOC Nagar and Thillagar Nagar can we get an idea of the community’s demographic profile. VOC Nagar is home to 960 families or approximately 2220 residents. The age breakdown of the community is as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age group</th>
<th>Number of people</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(In years)</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0 - 5</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 - 13</td>
<td>293</td>
<td>182</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 - 18</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19 - 25</td>
<td>292</td>
<td>323</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36 - 59</td>
<td>261</td>
<td>253</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60 and above</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1154</td>
<td>1066</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

About 40 percent of the residents are Christian and about 60 per cent are Hindus—although there are doubts about the accuracy of this breakdown. Although employment figures are not reliable, existing figures suggest that around two-thirds of the population is involved in fishing and fish vending, while the rest hold a myriad of jobs, including ‘coolies’ (labourers), automobile drivers, autorickshaw drivers, domestic workers, and tradespeople. Outside fishing, the biggest number worked as either rickshaw drivers (around 18 per cent) or labourers (around 18 per cent). Average earnings appear to be around 30-60 Rs per day. Some households were forced to take out high-interest loans to secure housing and it has been reported that women were forced into prostitution and men and women forced into selling their kidneys on the black market in order to repay such loans. A quick survey conducted in the fishing hamlets of north Chennai in 2007 indicated that 26 men and three women had sold their kidneys within a period of several months (Kumar 2009). According to the report on this survey:

In addition to large sums of money, brokers also dole out false promises like life-long care for the donor. Twenty-nine-year old Bhuvaneshwari of Thideer Nagar sold her kidney for Rs 45,000 in 2005. ‘I believed the broker who assured me that the family would look after me for the rest of my life. But it was a big lie,’ she laments.

K. Murugan, who lives in VOC Nagar, sold his kidney in 2005 for Rs 45,000. His broker took him to a hospital in Tirunelveli for the operation. ‘The recipient’s son told me to contact him in case I needed any help. He gave me his address but it was false,’ says Murugan.

While talking to a group of women at VOC Nagar, Yaso Nadarajah and Guna Selvam asked what the community felt about women taking up prostitution and also about the menace of drug abuse and peddling which were both extensive in Tsunami Nagar. The women said that the prostitution had come down significantly since they left Tsunami Nagar but it still happens because, as one woman put it, ‘women who have no other means of survival and have kids to feed, go out and make a living through prostitution’. Another in the group said it is just like ‘going out for a job’. A third said, ‘we do not make a judgment, because we ourselves are poor and cannot do anything to help them’.
However, others in the group suggested that people should go outside the community if they wanted to engage in prostitution or drug-taking.

There are about 432 housing units in Thillagar Nagar and they were built with funds provided by the Asia Development Bank. Thillagar Nagar is about two kilometres from the sea coast at Tondiarpet but this is too far to walk to see if conditions for fishing are right and the distance to the nearest fishing port is much further. Men who had previously worked on fishing boats were turning to jobs such as loadsmen (labourers), rickshaw drivers, truck drivers, watchmen, and construction workers, while women were generally employed as domestic maids, or as fruit and vegetable or fish vendors.

There are some government sponsored welfare programs for the health of women, children and old people at Thillagar Nagar but interviews conducted in 2009 suggested that few people had used such facilities. The age structure for the community at Thillagar Nagar was as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age group (in years)</th>
<th>Number of people</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0 - 5</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 - 14</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 - 18</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19 - 35</td>
<td>125</td>
<td>129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36 - 59</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60 and above</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>386</td>
<td>365</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Before the tsunami people living in the coastal slums had been clearly segregated along caste lines. Such distinctions could not be maintained in the temporary settlements and when people were allocated housing at VOC Nagar and Thillagar Nagar they were also scattered into different blocks with no consideration given to caste. It was obvious in interviews that this caused irritation to women who were of a ‘higher’ caste affiliation and it is likely to be a continuing source of tension within the communities.

Money lenders are commonly seen in Thillagar Nagar giving loans to the people at exorbitant interest rates. There is also a category of people—called Tandal—who give loans at an interest rate of 12.5 per cent. Those who need money for celebrating functions—such as birthdays, wedding, puberty functions, ear piercing ceremonies, death rituals and for some emergency medical treatment—commonly approach the Tandal people.

**Tsunami Impact and Reconstruction**

The state of Tamil Nadu has 1,076 km of coast and reports indicate that nearly 1,000 km of this coastline was affected by the tsunami. Around 362 villages in Tamil Nadu were damaged. The tsunami hit the villages in two waves, the first washing away most of the structures and the second one washing away whatever remained. The Marina Beach in Chennai, the East Coast Road between Chennai and Mamallapuram, and the coastal area of Nagapattinam, were the most severely affected in India (Kuppusamy 2009). Not surprisingly, the population density in the areas affected was highest along the coast of metropolitan Chennai where there were an average of 1,752 people per village compared...
with the Tami Nadu average of 1,247 people per village. While population density per square kilometre averages 478 along the Tamil Nadu coast overall, the density in affected fishing villages was estimated at 1,338 per square kilometre.

Krishakumar (2005) estimated that 25 villages in Chennai— with a total population of 65,322 people— were affected and 17,805 dwellings were damaged. According to Krishakumar, factors that made the impact in Chenai particularly severe included ‘population density, rudimentary housing, dwindling ways of making a living, poor sanitation and health care … and lagging literacy and education’

Relief efforts from the Tamil Nadu government came within 24 hours. The villagers were evacuated to government schools and supplied with food packets and blankets. Food relief started to arrive from around the world and then the government provided the survivors with Rs 2000 and basic amenities, such as cooking stoves, rice and kerosene. Initially the survivors expected to be able to return to their home villages but after two weeks they learnt that they would be permanently relocated under Tamil Nadu’s ‘slum clearance’ program and they were first relocated to Kargil Nagar, as discussed earlier.

The ‘tsunami rehabilitation’ program was taken up under the Emergency Tsunami Reconstruction Project, supervised by the Tamil Nadu Slum Clearance Board, with funding from the Asia Development Bank to the tune of Rs 50 million. Apart from constructing permanent housing blocks this money was also designated for livelihood support programs— such as formation of Self-Help Groups; skill training; and monetary support to start small economic activities such as tailoring and fish vending. People were provided with carts, tricycles, ice boxes and some SHGs were able to purchase LPG-run autorickshaws, and solid waste management units on the basis of grants and loans.

It is not easy to find significant areas of vacant land in a city such as Chennai and shortage of land largely determined that the people would be relocated into high-rise home units several kilometres from the sea. Over 2,000 families lived in temporary settlements for more than two years before the housing blocks were completed. The Kadaloravl Makkal Padugaphu Kulu— Coastal Community Protection Committee (CCPC)— tried to represent the interests of the tsunami survivors in negotiations with the Tamil Nadu Slum Clearance Board, without much success. Eventually CCPC asked the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Adequate Housing, Miloon Kothari, to investigate the way the relocation was being handled and the report of that investigation concluded that the tsunami survivors were not consulted or given any choice about where they would end up. The Tamil Nadu government had declared that it would not relocate people within 200 metres of the high tide mark. The government also announced that it would spend 1.5 lakhs ($A36,000) on each housing unit in the new settlements but it is hard to imagine how the units built could be worth that much.

Most of the people relocated to Thillagar Nagar formed an association— named the Tsunami Affected Community Members of Thillagar Nagar Association— in order to collect information about community needs and lobby the TNSCB to provide more community facilities. Some residents were pushing for a community learning centre for children while others argued that the highest priority should be a temple. When the TNSCB rejected both proposals the community association decided to push ahead with the building of a temple, starting with a modest structure to house a shrine that they purchased. A spokesperson for the association told Yaso Nadarajah ‘Having a temple is important to us because it makes us moral and strong and it helps to protect us.’ By 2009, it was clear that the temple had indeed become a focus for the community, especially
for women. On the other hand, it was also clear that people in both Thillagar Nagar and VOC Nagar were becoming demoralised about the difficulty in finding paid employment and in getting access to fresh food, including fish. There was no supply or water or electricity to the housing units and it quickly became evident that the buildings were rather poorly constructed. Public transport was unreliable and too expensive for those with little or no income. Indeed, some people continued to walk all the way to the sea to find work, which took them about an hour in each direction.

National Issues

At the time of the tsunami the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu was Dr J. Jayalalitha from the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK). However, the government changed two years later and Mr M Karunanidhi from the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) party became the new Chief Minister. At the election the residents of VOC Nagar had stayed loyal to the AIADMK and two ministers in the outgoing AIADMK government were re-elected to represent Tondiarpet. One resident told Yaso Nadarajah that ‘at the time of elections the DMK promised us televisions and cooking gas connections but we still haven’t received them’. When residents subsequently asked a DMK representative what had happened to that promise he replied that it would not be honoured because not enough people had voted for the DMK. Residents said that most of the tsunami survivors had supported AIADMK ever since its formation and that they felt Dr Jayalalitha had done a lot to help them after the tsunami. Political parties in India tend to demand fierce loyalty and political patronage is rife.

While relocation away from the sea has caused many problems for the tsunami survivors in northern Chennai, there is clearly a case for better coastal management in India. A post-tsunami report produced by the Asia Development Bank, the United Nations and the World Bank (2005) noted that coastal mangrove forests had declined by 40 per cent in India over the last 120 years while coastal indigenous forests had declined to just one per cent of their former coverage. Furthermore, the report continued:

There is also significant pollution of near shore marine habitats due to sewage and industrial emissions. Coastal geomorphology has been altered through the development of large infrastructure such as highways, industries, ports and harbours. Other disturbances include sea-defenses such as breakwaters and groynes as well as defenses to protect coastal settlements. In some places, both human settlements and major infrastructure are located extremely close to the high tide line, up to within 20 meters, partly as a result of coastal erosion. [pp.36-37]

In 1991 the national government had introduced Coastal Regulation Zone legislation that required Coastal Zone Management Plans. The tsunami revealed that such plans had not been implemented. However, the relocation of people after the tsunami was handled in a very heavy-handed way.
References


