





# Tsunami Stories

FROM TAMIL NADU  
AND THE ANDAMANS

## **DanChurchAid**

DanChurchAid is a faith-based and ecumenical, non-missionary organisation working with churches and non-religious civil organisations to assist the poorest of the poor. Aid is given regardless of race, creed, political or religious affiliation.

### **Object and Values**

The objective of DanChurchAid is to help the poorest of the world and strengthen their possibilities for a life in dignity. We work with relief and development aid and we speak on behalf of the poor so that the structures behind their need can be changed.

### **DanChurchAid believes in a life before death**

DanChurchAid believes that all human beings are created in the image of God and are therefore equal; that even the poorest of the poor have capacities to build on. We believe that assistance should be given, with respect, to the individual and his or her dignity regardless of race, religion or political affiliation.

# TSUNAMI TALES

*from Tamil Nadu and the Andamans*



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# FOREWORD

The Tsunami tales were collected by an evaluation team, that visited 20 villages in Tamil Nadu and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands in October–November 2008 to assess the DCA India Tsunami Programme 2005–2008, which was developed and implemented by DanChurchAid (DCA) and 11 Indian partner organisations. The stories tell us about the most important changes brought about by the efforts of six partner organisations as perceived by the affected people and communities themselves. Based on these stories and visits to the villages, the evaluation team presented a number of findings to the DCA Tsunami programme partners, who collectively reflected and discussed these findings, and then agreed on a number of recommendations for future responses to large-scale disasters, all of which are found in the DCA India Tsunami Programme Assessment for Learning (TPAL) Report, DCA 2009.

The tsunami hit Asia on 26 December 2004. DCA was able to respond immediately to the disaster, because some of DCA's Indian partner organisations were already operative and active in the coastal belt of Tamil Nadu before the tsunami. Within days after the disaster struck DCA and partner organisations were on the beaches of Tamil Nadu in India assessing the damages and needs of the survivors.

The Indian government provided substantial relief immediately and took charge of coordinating all relief provided by the civil society in India as well as by private organisations throughout the world. Coordination of relief response took place at the district levels, where the District Collectors allotted villages for the different NGOs to work in. For the first few months after the disaster, all activities focused humanitarian aid towards saving lives, providing food and ensuring temporary shelters.

DCA responded to the tsunami with relief and rehabilitation efforts as part of Action by Churches Together (ACT). The national ACT partners in India issued appeals and subsequently received support from the ACT funding partners all over the world. The ACT coordinating office in Geneva has continuously monitored the collective work and has undertaken a mid-term review as well as a final evaluation in 2007. ACT's Indian partners — Church's Auxiliary for Social Action (CASA), Lutheran World Service - India (LWS-I) and United Evangelical Churches of India (UELICI) — were three of DCA's partners in the Tsunami Programme and therefore assessed as part of the ACT evaluation in 2007. In agreement with its ACT partners, DCA therefore built on the findings of the ACT evaluation



and only included the secular partners in the final DCA Tsunami programme evaluation. A complete list of partner organisations and their websites are found on the inner back cover of this book.

DCA's initial response was conducted as individual projects. However, in the second half of 2005 DCA felt that it was important to link relief and rehabilitation to long-term development efforts. Based on lessons learned from the initial months of work with people and villages directly and indirectly affected by the tsunami, DCA developed a DCA Tsunami Programme Document for a period of four years (January 2005 – December 2008). The programme addressed the needs of the poor and marginalised fishing, Dalit and tribal communities with a focus on women and children, who had been by far the most affected by the tsunami in terms of loss of lives. The overall aim of the DCA Tsunami Programme was to enhance people's capacity to mitigate the impact of the tsunami on their houses and their livelihoods, and to strengthen their coping mechanisms through risk reduction and disaster preparedness training. The innovative element of the programme was the focus on rights and entitlements, and the support to organise the deprived communities. The value addition of the DCA Tsunami Programme was the establishment of a platform of partner organisations with different core capacities and strengths, who all met twice a year to report on their individual achievements as well as to discuss collective initiatives.

DCA's response to the tsunami was supported by the people of Denmark, who generously contributed to the largest collection ever made by DCA. The funds collected for the tsunami victims were distributed through relief work in Indonesia, Sri Lanka and India. Apart from the substantial private funds collected, DCA was also able to raise funds from the Directorate General for Humanitarian Aid (ECHO) European Commission for the emergency phase as well as the rehabilitation phase.

In the case of most disasters, humanitarian aid contributes towards saving lives and providing temporary shelters and

food for a period. Due to the flexibility of the tsunami funds, it became possible for DCA to respond over a period of four years, not only to save lives and rehabilitate people, but also to support re-establishment of the lives of the victims in a more comprehensive manner. There was enough time to identify not only the obviously affected people, but also the secondary affected people, who did not lose assets (because they never had any assets to lose) and therefore did not receive any compensation. The secondary affected people, however, had lost their livelihood on which the survival of their families depended. The DCA tsunami funds made it possible to address the needs of these secondary affected communities and to contribute towards the re-establishment of their livelihoods and, in some cases, to start new lives — better and more dignified than before the disaster. An important strategy was to create democratic organisations at village level, besides the already existing political and administrative organisations (gram sabha, panchayat), which are very often dominated by the upper castes.

From the stories collected it seems that the long-term impact of DCA partners' efforts has been the impact of the democratic spaces created by Village Development Associations (Village Development Sangams), where many new local leaders emerged, the improved status of women — specially Dalit women, and the increased skills, self-esteem and status of the Dalits in general.

The tsunami work in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, which were hit really hard by the tsunami and the accompanying earthquakes, educational institutions as well as legal aid to access the government compensation schemes and aid programmes.

These tales demonstrate more concretely how the secondary affected people perceived the interventions of DCA and its partners.

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April 2009

# COMMUNITY BRICK KILN — A LIVELIHOOD WITH DIGNITY!

Kumminithoppu, a village in the Nagapattinam district of Tamil Nadu, is located 1.5 kilometres away from the sea and is surrounded by agricultural lands. Forty-five Dalit families live here in houses with thatched roofs made of dried coconut leaves. One-third of the families used to earn their living by working as labourers in private brick kilns owned by upper-caste Hindus during the off-season. During the agricultural season, they all worked as agricultural labourers in fields owned by other Hindu castes — Vaniyar, Naidu, Pillaimar and Chettiar — who have been landlords for several generations.

People recall even now, with happiness, the prosperous state of the village 25 years ago! There was never any shortage of food in Kumminithoppu, because the village is situated on the banks of a river and so they could grow three crops every year. Over time, however, the river dried up and agriculture became increasingly dependant on the monsoon. Agriculture became a seasonal occupation, so the Dalit community had to look for employment outside the village, and started migrating to neighbouring areas

for work — often in brick kilns. Initially, children and old people would be left behind in the village, but later a large majority of the families migrated to the neighbouring state of Kerala and other places for work, and they would take their children along with them. They worked on a contractual basis and usually took an advance from the brick kiln owner on the condition that they work only for this brick kiln owner at very low wages until the advance was paid back. Thus, in reality, they ended up as bonded labour. As a result, poverty, along with lack of awareness and lack of collective bargaining power, made this Dalit community very dependant on the upper-caste Hindus.

When the tsunami struck in 2004 there was no loss of life reported in Kumminithoppu village, but the thatched huts with mud walls got damaged, and the agricultural lands, where they worked, got salinated due to the ingress of seawater and marine deposits. As a result, cultivation of the fields became impossible and people had no work, which meant no incomes. This problem persisted for two years after the tsunami.

Kumminithoppu did not receive any immediate aid after the tsunami either from the government or from the NGOs, since it was not directly affected by the tsunami, and no deaths had been reported. Initially, none of the secondary-affected villages caught the attention of relief workers. People's Watch, a rights-based NGO, was the first organisation to

identify this village as tsunami-affected. People's Watch launched a project, which helped the people of this village to organise a Village Development Association, and open a bank account for the community fund, which the village got from DCA, through People's Watch. The goal was that the village development association should include everyone and should function democratically. Even the poorest in the village were encouraged to speak about their problems in the meetings of the village associations. The fund of the association was to be used to help families, not individuals. On its part, People's Watch was careful not to interfere. It simply facilitated the community into a democratic way of functioning.

The crystallisation of these ideas led to the formation of the Village Development Association — or Village Development Sangam (VDS) — in Kumminithoppu. The aim of VDS is to give the community self-respect, dignity, collective bargaining power and thus help the people pave their way towards a better life. When the VDS was formed, People's Watch provided them with a community fund of 100,000 rupees. The VDS decided to utilise this money for livelihood enhancement. They came up with the idea of starting a brick kiln, which would be run as a community enterprise. Since the villagers were already familiar with the technology of running a brick kiln and had done a fair bit of research on marketing, this project was expected to be a success. The community handled all the work of the kiln, from planning to production and marketing. In the first year, the people earned enough from the kiln to deposit 100,000 rupees in the bank. The income of the workers almost doubled in this period. All the households were given a share in the brick kiln. On seeing the success of the project and the drive of the community, People's Watch decided to give this VDS a second grant of 100,000 rupees.

Initially the kiln faced a lot of opposition from the upper castes. Not only did the kiln provide employment to members of the Dalit community, it also gave them ownership of capital assets, something, which had earlier seemed impossible in this area. The upper castes constantly threatened the project and objected to sand being carried through their lands, which was the only available route



to the Dalit communities, they even complained to the government officials. Nonetheless, the Dalits stood unified and this enabled them to resist the threats and ultimately to coerce the upper-caste Hindus into a compromise on the marketing of the bricks. The Dalit community today proudly share among themselves the various benefits that have accrued because of this community enterprise. The aspirations, commitment and hard work of this community in running the brick kilns as well as the facilitative support of People's Watch have brought significant changes in the socio-economic conditions of the Dalits.

The kiln provides employment to 30 out of the 45 Dalit families for about six months a year. All the 45 families are engaged in agricultural work for the rest of the year. Part of the profits from the enterprise are reinvested in new assets for the kiln. The remaining profits are shared by the community at the end of the year, including the families that do not work in the kiln. The larger part of the income goes into the hands of the women and is spent on the family. The

operation has raised the status of women as they now play an active role in discussions and decision-making related to the kiln. They are proud of the fact that they are now able to send their children to school and give them nice clothes to wear. Many of them even have mobile phones. Not only this, caste distinctions in the area have been reduced and the Dalit community and upper-caste families now attend each other's celebrations and family functions. They are confident that they will be able to run the enterprise even without external support. The number of families migrating to other places in search of work has been drastically reduced, and the community brick kiln has created a sense of solidarity amongst the Dalits.

The Dalit community in Kumminithoppu has played a key role in establishing the Federation of Dalit Villages Livelihood Rights (FDVLR), which includes Dalit communities from 47 villages. When asked about their future plans, the people of Kumminithoppu say in one voice that they will continue to fight for their rights, purchase a separate piece of land for brick-making, a tractor for the committee and establish the brick kiln in a big way. They take pride in the fact that they have become a model village and that they have demonstrated that a community enterprise can be a success.

# I REALISED THAT I HAD A VITAL ROLE TO PLAY

Elavarasi is a 36-year-old Dalit woman, a happy and contented mother of three boys, living in Kumminithoppu village in the Nagapattinam district. The population of her village is 210 people – 109 men, 85 women and 16 children – all of them living in houses with thatched roofs. Elavarasi came to live in Kumminithoppu after marrying a young man called Moorthy in 1986. Prior to the tsunami, Elavarasi and her husband worked in a privately owned brick kiln in Tharangambadi for nominal wages. She could not spend time with her children and her income was too meagre to make both ends meet, but now the new brick kiln in the village – a community enterprise – provides her with an income of 3,000 rupees per month! Elavarasi's life and that of her family completely changed with the tsunami livelihood programme and the creation of the Village Development Sangam.

She took on the responsibility of being the treasurer of the Village Development Sangam with a lot of scepticism. She was worried about how to strike the balance between her family responsibilities and the management of the community fund. She had taken on this responsibility with the preconceived notion that her role would be as passive as that of the treasurers of self-help groups. But after getting acquainted with her role and functions, she could gauge that she had a vital role to play. The community members had entrusted her with important decision-making powers because they had a lot of confidence in her. Fortunately her husband and the rest of her family also encouraged her a lot. This motivated her to take the job and work with passion and zeal, although she took quite some time to equip herself with the needed qualities.

They did not find fault or criticise her when, at times, she had to put in more work for the committee which made her compromise on the time and effort she spent on her domestic responsibilities. Instead they shared the house chores with her without giving the slightest hint of the contributions and compromises they made in order to help her out.

The executive committee of the Village Development Sangam is made up of a president, secretary and treasurer, and they all have many responsibilities. Elavarasi handles the income and the expenditure accounts of the village committee and the community enterprise, besides signing cheques, facilitating



monthly meetings and pronouncing the details and the status of their financial position at the end of every month in the village committee meetings. She says that she never encountered any difficulties with respect to the management of funds. She adds, 'if I can manage funds at home I can certainly also manage my community's funds!'

Before taking on the position of the treasurer, she was confined to her house, unaware of even her basic rights; but now she has gained confidence and the ability to work for her village. The training workshops, especially those dealing with human rights increased her awareness levels and she started actively contributing towards her family and the community. She says, 'I feel proud to work for my community and I will do my utmost to help with their upliftment.'

She adds that the Dalits were never given the opportunity to own assets and that their sources of income had always been uncertain, but now, instead of being on the receiving end, they have become owners who can pay wages to others. She asserts that they are by no means lesser than the other Hindu

castes. Women, initially, would never participate in any of the village activities, but now the trend has changed; women actively participate in all the activities that help their village to develop. They attend all the monthly meetings and they enthusiastically participate in these meetings. Mostly it is the women who maintain and administer the source of livelihood that is obtained through the community fund. The women say that although the tsunami had left them with many nightmares, it was now transforming their lives into a wonderful reality and they foresee a blissful future for themselves and their future generations.

She is well acquainted with the Right to Information Act, Domestic Violence Act, NREGA and the special component plan. She knows about the importance of the gram sabha meetings, village panchayats and D.K. Basu's guidelines. She has learned about effective accounting systems, maintenance of accounts, monetary transactions in banks and the formalities involved in these transactions through her own experiences in the past years. She was instrumental in spreading awareness about the rights of women and helping the other women in the village to understand and adopt them.

Elavarasi says that the tsunami livelihood programme has given the villagers a taste of liberty. People's Watch had sown the seed of development in the Dalit communities and she now advises these communities to help them demonstrate that they are worth the confidence placed in them. It is crucial that they believe in their rights so that their solidarity can never be broken. She encourages women to be a part and parcel of the development activities in the village and in order to do so they must be assertive and aware of their rights. She urges them not to be discouraged by the domestic or social problems that come their way. With her eyes sparkling, she adds, 'I have a dream for my village. I want to establish a brick industry with transport and other facilities, and in the process provide employment to all the Dalit communities in the vicinity.'

# SHE IS OUR DAUGHTER-IN-LAW



Mythili, an 18-year-old young woman from a Dalit family, got married to Vijayabalan, a youth born and brought up in Kumminithoppu village in Nagapattinam district. She met Vijayabalan prior to their marriage. They fell in love and

their relationship was soon formalised by marriage and they came to live with his family in Kumminithoppu village. But after three years of married life, when Mythili had a two-year-old son and was three months pregnant with her second son, her husband deserted her and married another woman. Mythili is now 24-years-old and has two sons who are four and two years old. All single women in India – deserted, divorced and widowed – are in a very vulnerable position economically, socially and emotionally. For some time, Mythili was depressed and worried, but fortunately her in-laws and the villagers supported her, so she regained her fighting spirit and wanted to prove that she could manage independently without a husband.

Being a secondary tsunami-affected village, it took some time before Kumminithoppu got any outside support after the tsunami. At one point the NGO People's Watch — supported by DCA — started working in the village

supplying some relief funds that were to be managed by a village development association. The association decided to use much of these funds to start a community-owned brick kiln, and Mythili — being a single woman with children — was so vulnerable, the association decided to provide her with training in brick-making. Brick-making then gave her a solid source of income and became a stepping-stone out of her desolation. She now works six months in the community brick kiln earning some 3,000 rupees a month, and the next six months as an agricultural labourer earning some 1,800 rupees a month. Mythili's children are too small to go to school, but her elder son goes to the village day care centre, and other women look after her baby when she is away at work.

Today, Mythili is a confident woman. She says that the moral support extended by the village committee and the other women, often makes her forget that she is single and lonely.

# ODD-MAN-OUT

Samiyarpettai is a big coastal village, located at a distance of about 500 metres from the sea. The 1,240 families living in Samiyarpettai all belong to a fishing community. While some of these families live in thatched and tiled houses, the rest live in concrete houses. Fishing is the main occupation for the men and fish vending for the women,

and their business was flourishing before the tsunami. Twenty-seven people from the village lost their lives in the tsunami and a majority of those who died were women and children because they were on the shores when the tidal wave hit. Many houses were damaged, and all the fishing gear and equipment was damaged or destroyed.



Fifty-three-year-old Ramesh is one of the few people in the village, who has chosen not to become a fisherman, but has opted for an alternative source of livelihood, namely ironing clothes. In spite of objections from his family, all of whom were engaged in fishing, he was determined to have a different source of income from the rest. Before the tsunami Ramesh's day started early in the morning and continued till late at night, but he managed to support his family, as well as send his children to school from the money he earned.

Then the tsunami came and ravaged the lives of thousands. Ramesh's family was no exception. Their house was ruined and his productive assets — the pushcart and ironing box — were destroyed. Ramesh and his family struggled to regain their primary source of livelihood, but with little success. It became difficult for him to send his children to school. While Ramesh benefited from the humanitarian aid, that poured in initially, when it came to livelihood support, compensation was extended to the fisherfolk rather than the other communities. It was not easy for this odd-man-out to get funds to re-establish his ironing unit.

It was at this time that the NGO Arcot Lutheran Church (ALC) identified Ramesh as an individual in need of support and bought him a pushcart and an iron box worth 8,000 rupees to enable him to resume his livelihood. Ramesh began to work towards getting back to normalcy and started sending his children to school again.

Ramesh's business is now doing very well and he earns between 150 and 200 rupees a day. He says, 'Had I not been given this equipment free of cost I would have had to take a loan from the local moneylenders and a large part of my profit would have gone to them as interest. I would have been in continuous debt. But for this loan support we couldn't have come out of this situation with flying colours!'

# A STRONG WOMAN

Rani was married off to Azhi before she turned 12. At that time marriage had felt like a game to her. A year after her marriage she went into puberty, which put an end to all her playing and running around. Her freedom was restricted and she had to do all the household work and take care of her husband and his family. She began fulfilling the role of the traditional daughter-in-law, who had to take care of everything in the house.

In quick succession she gave birth to five children, two boys and three girls. Her husband caught prawns in the backwaters, worked as an agricultural labourer and also climbed trees to fetch coconuts in order to earn some extra money. Still, he managed to earn very little. He was a heavy drinker and would come back home drunk every evening. Then one day, after consuming alcohol, he climbed a tree, fell down and died. Thus, at 26, Rani became a widow and was left with the responsibility of bringing up five children, earn a living as well as manage the house. She started going to the backwaters for fishing, standing in the water for three hours at a stretch — once during the day and once at night — leaving her small children at home. Several cases of sexual harassment have been reported by those women in the village

- especially the younger ones - who go to the backwaters late in the night and early in the morning to catch prawns. Apparently, some men come in groups, tease these women and misbehave with them. But Rani says, 'No one could wag their tail with me. I was very strong, bold and intimidating when I was younger.'

Rani had to struggle a lot to bring up the children on the meagre income that she was able to earn, but insisted that she would continue to live on her own and take care of her children. Two of her daughters fell ill and died, and she was left with three children, who eventually got married. Some years later, one of her sons, who had gotten married, died at a young age because of heavy drinking. He too left a young wife behind, who would have to bring up three children all by herself. Indeed, alcoholism is a common problem in this village. A survey shows that out of the 150 families in this village, 58 of them are headed by widows, their husbands having died of alcoholism or related diseases!

Rani has always fought against injustice, especially crimes committed against women, as she wanted all the women to be safe, so that they could be on their own and take care of their children. She would get very upset and angry with the men for not shouldering the responsibility for their family seriously, but just drinking the money away and killing themselves.

Rani is very active in the Dalit Women's Movement and she is now the president of the movement in the Villupuram district. She is a very good public speaker and has delivered several speeches at state level conferences. She has been working keenly to eradicate dowry and alcoholism, and she is vehemently opposed to caste-based discrimination. She wants to do away with atrocities committed against Dalits, but says that although trends are changing, their fight is far from over.



Rani, who is affectionately called Rani-amma (Mother Rani) by her co-villagers, is now 52 years old and has become the leader of the village.

‘The people of Muttukadu were much better off some years ago,’ Rani-amma explains, ‘The villagers were primarily agricultural labourers, who could earn a regular income. But now, all the agricultural lands have been converted into plantations with casuarina trees, therefore there is no work for people. The prawn company established nearby has also affected prawn fishing as a livelihood, because of the chemical waste that is flowing into the backwaters and killing all forms of life. Earlier, the villagers would sell one tumbler of prawns for two rupees in the neighbouring villages of Muttukadu, Thazhampattu, Kottaikadu, Vennagupatu and Marakkanam, which would fetch them a minimum of 20-40 rupees a day. But now, they hardly catch anything that they can sell.’

The tsunami in 2004 brought more havoc to Muttukadu than any flood ever has. The backwaters rushed into this low-lying area and people had to run to the nearby sand dunes. There was no loss of life in the village, but many of the thatched houses got damaged, many cows and goats were lost, and it took them many days to clean up the area. Still, the state government did not step in to help them, because Muttukadu was not a primary-affected village, therefore this village — like other secondary-affected villages — remained invisible and excluded. The agricultural land, where they used to go for work, got submerged in salt water, thus the agricultural labourers were no longer needed.

Later on the NGO called SRED selected Muttukadu village for disaster preparedness training, and various disaster preparedness committees are now functioning for early warning, first aid, coordination, communication and social equity.

The women in the village felt the need for a multi-purpose community shelter-cum-centre, and hence they approached SRED. A community shelter was built by the villagers on a piece of land given by the community, facilitated by SRED and funded by DCA, which donated 300,000 rupees for this purpose. The community shelter is now owned and managed

by the women, but the men wanted to use it for playing cards and drinking alcohol. This Rani-amma opposed vehemently, and made sure that the shelter remained with the women. Relief materials are safely stored and distributed from the shelter, and some of the community assets are also kept there for safety reasons. Community functions are held here, and the children attend tuition classes here in the evening. So the community shelter is indeed a multi-purpose space.

After the tsunami several coastal villages have had their houses remade of concrete. Rani-amma is actively pushing the government to bring this change to her village too. She says, 'Petitions have gone. We will fight till we get them! Earlier we have had to struggle to get our dues from the ration shop, to have street lighting installed and to have a bus stand constructed. We were able to plant mangrove saplings along the banks of the backwaters to prevent the entry of water into the village. If we have been able to do all this, we will also succeed in getting houses of concrete, from the government.'

Rani-amma is a woman all committed and empowered standing tall and majestic in the community!

# I AM TREATED AS ONE OF THEM

Anjammal is a 45-year-old, single woman living in Thillaividangan village in Chidambaram sub-district in Cuddalore. Thillaividangan is located in a low-lying area five kilometres away from the sea. The village is enclosed by a lake on three sides and fields on the fourth side. Being located in a flood and cyclone-prone area, the village has been ravaged by many floods and cyclones over the years. The uniqueness of this village is that while it has 50 families, out of which 45 are Dalit families and the other five belong to Backward Castes (Padayachi, Pillaimar and Chettiar), all 50 families get along well together. They attribute these bonds of friendship to their peaceful co-existence for many years. Anjammal says, 'Though there are no differences between the Dalits and the Backward Castes in our village, there is discrimination of the Dalits in the neighbouring villages, where the Dalits are a minority.' Besides Anjammal, all the other villagers in Thillaividangan are

landless agricultural labourers working on pieces of land owned by Muslims.

Anjammal is part of the women's group which was very active earlier in eradicating the production of illicit liquor within the village. But the men do go out to the other villages sometimes to drink. Anjammal now runs a tea shop in the village which was started by her father. She took over the shop after her father's demise in 1992. She did well and expanded the tea shop into a petty shop. When the tsunami struck, Thillaividangan was badly affected as the water from the rivers flowed into this village and the surrounding lands got salinated. As a result, agricultural production became impossible and people lost their employment as agricultural coolies. Since the village is located in the interior parts of Tamil Nadu, it did not get any attention from NGOs or the Government for a long time. These villagers lived in misery for a longer period than those living in the accessible tsunami-affected villages. Anjammal recalls that they would rush to pick up the food packets thrown down by the helicopters. When everyone's source of income was lost, Anjammal's business too suffered. Nobody had the money to buy the things she sold. She was totally dependent on this income for maintaining her family which consisted of a chronically-ill and aged mother and a widowed sister. She had even decided not to marry and sacrificed her life for them. But the post-tsunami situation in the village made

her close the tea shop and keep the petty shop open though even that brought in no money. She had to really struggle to make ends meet and take care of her family.

This was when People's Watch Tamil Nadu—an NGO identified this excluded community and started working to form a Livelihood Development Sangam here. As a rule, People's Watch focuses on Dalit communities and when they identified the five Backward Cast families who lived in this village, they left it up to the other villagers to decide whether they would like to include them in the Sangam or not. Anjammal recalls with gratitude that the Dalit families included them in the Sangam. She says, 'I belong to the Chettiyan community by birth, so I am not

a Dalit but I am a Dalit by thought and feeling. I see no difference between them and us. We are all equal.'

She was selected as a member of the Sangam committee and is happy to contribute to the village. When the Sangam received a grant for reviving the sources of livelihood, Anjammal took a loan of 10, 000 rupees with which she revived her two shops. Other families also took loans and became engaged in occupations like goat rearing, rearing of milch animals, jewellery making, ironing, etc. As a result, the people of the village started earning well again, and in turn, Anjammal's business too picked up. Her repayment has become easy over 12 installments. She is only using the profit for the household expenditure and



seems to be managing well. The thought of being able to make more money once all her loans are repaid makes her happy. She had also taken loans from moneylenders, who visit their village and lend money at very high interest rates. Now she has finally been able to pay back the full amount to them. She proudly says, 'I am out of the clutches of moneylenders!'

She remembers that before the tsunami, there used to be small fights within the village. Insecurity about life and livelihood had made people take the law into their own hands at times. But now they have settled down and the formation of the Sangam is the main reason for this development. She says the cooperation between the families has increased enormously. Speaking of the Sangam, she shares that they have already made a profit of 27,000 rupees. 'If we cooperate it is possible to remain in the same village and completely eradicate poverty. I strongly believe this can be done.'

# 10,000 RUPEES!

Sriram is 23 years old and hails from a Dalit settlement called Ambedkar Nagar, which is situated in Tharangambadi sub-district of Nagapattinam district in Tamil Nadu. He has eight siblings and is the fifth among them. His parents used to work as agricultural labourers, but now his father, who is 60 years old, finds it difficult to work due to poor eyesight, and his mother, who is 50 years, takes care of the family, but also works in the house of some landlords, where she earns 40 rupees a day. His three elder brothers and one sister are married and live separately. His younger brother stopped going to school and is now working as a painter, but earns only a small income. Sriram's family belongs to the class of landless labourers, like all the other families in that village, and they live in simple houses with thatched roofs.

When the tsunami struck in December 2004, Sriram was 19 years old and pursuing his graduate studies. Ambedkar Nagar was a secondary tsunami-affected village. The agricultural lands, where the backward communities worked, got salinated by the seawater that rushed in. This deprived the agricultural labourers of their

livelihood for more than a year, but they got no compensation from anybody. Many were forced to migrate to other states like Kerala, but Sriram's parents were not able to do this, because they were too old. Although Sriram was studying at that time, the responsibility of managing the family shifted to him, because his parents had lost their livelihood and his brother's income was insufficient to support the entire family. Sriram successfully completed his BA in History and then started taking care of the family. However, his aspirations of higher studies had to be put on hold, because none of his family members could afford to pay for further studies for him at that time.

Then the NGO People's Watch arrived in the village, and the Village Development Sangam (VDS) was established. The Sangam had the 45 Dalit families from Ambedkar Nagar as its members, and could provide loans to its members from a community fund of 100,000 rupees, which had been given to them by People's Watch. Sriram was forced to earn an income, but he also wanted to pursue his education, so he decided to approach the VDS for a loan. His plan was to repay the loan by selling clothes in the nearby villages and use the profit for household expenses as well as to pay for his education. Giving due consideration to his situation, the VDS gave him a loan of 10,000 rupees for cloth trading. His business picked up very well because of his commitment, hard work and integrity, and he was able to earn an income of 4,000 to 5,000 rupees per month. With this income he is currently doing his MA (final year), as well as supporting the family. Over the last six months he has already repaid a part of the loan he had taken from the VDS, and he is very confident that he will be able to repay the

entire amount in the near future. Every day, before going to college for his classes, he allots three hours to his business. Travelling on his bicycle, he sells clothes in 10 surrounding villages. When his classes are over in the evening, he goes back to work. On an average, he works for nearly 13 to 14 hours a day, apart from catching up with his studies at home.

Besides giving access to credit for all families so they can diversify their sources of income, the Sangam has also introduced a number of new income generation programmes, like rearing milch animals, goats, chickens and turkeys, opening of small eateries, cloth trading, sale of tender coconut,



iron scrap sales, upholstery stitching, etc., leading to a reduced dependency on the landlords. Now that each household can develop productive assets at the value of the 10,000 rupees they can access as loans, migration is no longer the only option. The status of Dalits in their society has improved and the villagers are no longer dependent on the upper castes for financial aid. Thus, even the upper-caste people treat the Dalits with respect and dignity.

Still there are not enough opportunities for the young people in the village, and many young people choose to migrate to urban areas or further away for work. Attempting to change this trend, a meeting for the youth from all the neighbouring villages was organised, and this resulted in the founding of a Dalit Youth Committee and a Youth Centre. By organising the youth, they have become more vocal in local affairs, and they are now involved in many development activities in the village as well as in elected assemblies, such as gram sabha and village panchayat meetings. The Youth Centre also helps organising village meetings, and assist the village sangam in carrying out its functions effectively. The committee members also serve the village by providing tuition to school children on a volunteer basis.

Sriram is proud to be a Dalit. He does not remember ever being denied access to education, friendship, growth, liberty or any of his other rights because he is Dalit. He says, 'When I make use of all the welfare schemes reserved for Dalits, I identify myself as a Dalit. So why should I hesitate to declare my caste to the external world.'

Sriram recollects that before the tsunami, only four Dalit students had gone for college education. The tsunami has changed this trend, because nine Dalit students from the village are now pursuing their college education. There is not even a single child below 14 years, who is not going to school. He is confident that the youth development centres will nurture the overall development of the youth in the villages and he hopes that other Dalit boys, who are working hard to make a living, also will get an opportunity to prove their skills.

Sriram wants to complete his M. Phil and work as a lecturer in a college. He wants to educate his brothers, help the poor, and create opportunities and sources of self-employment for the youngsters in the village.

# AND NOW WE EVEN HAVE A CHILDREN'S PARLIAMENT!

Sangendhi village in Nagapattinam is two kilometers away from the sea, located in a low-lying area and is one of the secondary-affected villages of the tsunami. There are 85 Dalit families and 15 backward class families in the village. 90 per cent of the backward class community in the village live in concrete houses, whereas 90 per cent of the Dalit families live in thatched houses. Half of the Dalit villagers lease small pieces of land from the temple, while the other half is landless. The men earn 60 rupees a day and the women 40 rupees as agricultural labourers – doing the same jobs! Before the tsunami, all the Dalit families owned two or three goats. Although there was no loss of life due to the tsunami, the thatched houses did get damaged, and 25 per cent of the livestock died, and the rest were sold because people were afraid of diseases. The agricultural lands got salinated by the seawater, which came pouring in, so agricultural activities now are impossible.

Aparna, a 17-year-old Dalit adolescent girl from Sangendhi, is full of energy, laughs a lot and shares her enthusiasm with

everybody around her. When asked about the most significant change after the tsunami, she spontaneously replied, 'I was only 13 when the tsunami struck my village. I cannot even begin to describe the good things that have happened in the last four years since the tsunami! Remembering the tsunami does not upset me, because it gave our village a golden opportunity!'

Prior to the tsunami, Aparna's activities were restricted to her home and her relatives. She was denied the opportunity to socialise with others in the village because girls after puberty were not allowed to even talk to boys. Many girls dropped out of school after puberty. They were not aware of sanitation and personal hygiene; anemia and reproductive tract infections were common. Many adolescent girls faced problems due to this lack of awareness. There were many myths and misconceptions about health issues. Due to this many girls kept all their health problems to themselves. Aparna narrates how the people in the village were never united. There were often caste-related fights and this hindered the interactions between the children of different castes.

Aparna proudly informs us that all the children in her village go to school now. After the tsunami several changes have taken place in her school. The amount of support they get is overwhelming! They get a monthly fee that is paid by the government, notebooks are given to them free of cost and the teachers take extra initiative as the children are motivated to study more than before. The tuition classes in the evening are a great help as most families cannot afford a tuition fee. Studying motivates Aparna and her friends to strive towards becoming successful like other educated people.

‘And you know what?!’ she exclaims with sparkling eyes. ‘The children in our village have formed a children’s parliament with a prime minister and other ministers! Isn’t it great! This parliament looks after the sanitation of the village, they have an information committee and they have even been able to generate some savings. This money has been used to help two poor students to purchase books and return to school. The members of the children’s parliament even counsel parents to send their children to school.’ She laughs and adds, ‘Nobody can stop the kids from coming to the meetings in the children’s parliament!’

‘As for myself I am helping my brothers and sisters and some of the other children of the village with their studies. After the houses have been properly repaired the children are now able to study and do their homework regularly. This was not possible for many months after the tsunami.’

While she was talking about the disaster preparedness

committees some children wanted to demonstrate how to survive in floods. They tied some plastic bottles around their waists and simply jumped into a nearby pond, one after the other. They even demonstrated how to give first aid. ‘We are very happy that the Organization for Eelam Refugees Rehabilitation (OfERR) is helping us!’ the children shouted in chorus, and their enthusiasm was so infectious, that all joined them in their excitement!

Aparna concludes by saying, ‘I live happily in a joint family with my parents, siblings, uncles, aunts and grandparents. The tsunami has opened up new possibilities for me, and I am now participating in various programmes and meetings. My skills and knowledge have been built through leadership programmes and I would gladly pass this on to others. I teach the village children in the evening at the community centre. My ambition is to prove to my family that I am a responsible daughter, serving the society meaningfully. I owe all my gratitude to OfERR!’







# INVISIBLE

Muttukadu is a Dalit village situated in a low-lying area, which gets flooded year after year. Muttukadu wasn't directly affected by the tsunami, so the villagers did not get much attention – except for some relief, that came in quite late. SRED, an NGO working for Dalit women's rights, reached this village quite some time after the tsunami, and initiated various awareness programmes on rights and disaster preparedness. SRED also built a community shelter, which became a multi-purpose centre for the residents of this village.

39-year-old Rethna is a resident of this village. She sat quietly for a long time in the meeting we had organised to hear from the women on their experiences of the tsunami. Then she started crying and told her story in a feeble voice, crying most of the time.

She is a widow and her husband died just before the tsunami due to some problem in the stomach. When the tsunami came in 2004, her 14 year old son was playing near the sea with his friends and luckily escaped death by running away. All the same, while running he fell and hurt his knees. He was treated locally but did not get cured.

Rethna sold her small piece of land which was her only asset and also her small piece of jewellery and paid 38,000 rupees for further treatment in a hospital in Chennai. He came back home, struggled for a year with the leg and finally died of septicemia all of a sudden when he was 17. But he was not compensated for, though he died because



of the tsunami, not immediately but later. By then he was already working in an enterprise making potato chips and earning 3,000 rupees. Now Rethna is left with her two daughters and a son (all young and not ready to earn) and is struggling, trying to meet both ends alone. She works as a labourer in the construction industry in order to feed her family of four.

When asked why she has not taken a loan from the women's Self-Help Group (SHG), she says she is not a member of the SHG because she cannot afford to pay the regular savings. Only those who could save the agreed amount are eligible to become a member of the SHG. This became an eye opener for all present at the meeting, because the 'poorest among the poor' are left out of the SHG just because they cannot afford the savings, even though they are the ones who are the most needy!

Rethna lives in great poverty. She says, 'The irony in my life is that I build houses for the tsunami-affected people in neighbouring areas, yet I do not have a house for myself, though I also was affected by the tsunami!' Unfortunately, she was invisible for both the NGOs and the government.

# KAUSALYA'S RESILIENCE

Kausalya was born and brought up in a village named Pillumedu in Cuddalore district of Tamil Nadu. She and her six siblings spent most of their time as children playing on the sea shore. Her father died when she was young and it was their mother who brought up all seven children. While she had a happy childhood, Kausalya could not go to school as the nearest one was a three-kilometre walk from their home. Kausalya tells us that most of the parents in this area were unaware of the value of education and the girls especially were brought up with many restrictions. Coming from a fishing family and having grown up so close to the sea, water was what Kausalya did know very well. As they grew older, other girls of Kausalya's age started getting married, but Kausalya remained unmarried till the age of 30, which is when the tsunami struck their village.

The entire area around the nearby Pichavaram mangrove forests was affected by the tsunami, and 40 people — 26 women, 10 children and four men — died. Kausalya says her

family was the most unfortunate, as she lost her elder sister, who died along with four of her children. Her brother-in-law survived with one child aged four. The survivors received help from several NGOs and the government in the form of immediate relief materials and temporary shelters, which were built within a few days. The government also announced a compensation of 200,000 rupees for each life lost. Kausalya's brother-in-law received 1,000,000 rupees as compensation for the five deaths of his immediate family. She says, 'He could not believe it! He had never seen such a big amount in his life!' He started drinking heavily and spent about 1,000 rupees every day on alcohol.

Three months after losing her sister, Kausalya was forced to marry her brother-in-law. She says, 'I did not want to marry him. He was much older than me, and I was still depressed about losing my sister and her children. But I wasn't given a choice. Everyone told me that I would have security with him since he'd just received a large amount of money from the government. They also said that I would be able to care for my sister's surviving son better than anyone else. So I agreed and we got married.'

However, her husband Manogaran continued to drink heavily using up all the compensation he had received from the government. He did not save any part of it and flatly refused to Kausalya's suggestion that he do so. As a result, he lost all the money in two years! Meanwhile, Kausalya became pregnant and gave birth to a baby boy. Even this did not matter to her husband, who continued to drink. He finally lost his life when one day he went fishing after drinking heavily and drowned.

Kausalya was left with two boys, her sister's eight-year-old and her own two-and-a-half-year-old son.

Before the tsunami, Kausalya used to make money by collecting fish from the seashore and prawns from the backwaters and selling them in the marketplace. But the house she had been relocated to after the tsunami was far from the sea, and the backwaters had been filled with sand, so Kausalya lost whatever little income she used to make. Without any income, Kausalya was unable to provide for the children and finally had to take the difficult decision of putting her older son in a government orphanage in Cuddalore. She weeps as she says, 'We had so much money and now our child is in the orphanage.'

Kaushalya tells us that the NGO OfERR has been working in Pillumedu village and there has been a lot of development after the tsunami. All children are now going to school; there is water and electricity, a net-mending centre and community centre, things people could only dream of earlier. She says that even though she doesn't have money now, she will stay in the village for the sake of her children and their future. She is determined to learn some new skills and start earning soon.

She says, 'I am penniless right now, but I am extremely happy that I have a house in my name, so at least I have a home! This is my biggest asset, and I thank the NGOs and the government for their efforts!'



# OVERCOMING MY FEARS

Joan Silvia is 23 years old and lives in a village called Sangendhi in Nagapattinam district. She is the fifth child of her parents. Her father worked as a labourer and it was very difficult for him to make ends meet and send his children to school. Many people tried to dissuade him from sending his daughters to school. According to them, it was a waste to spend money on a girl's education, because a daughter ultimately would get married and stay at home in her in-laws' house.

But even though her father dropped out of school at an early age, he wanted all his children to have a good education. Today, one of Joan's brothers is a teacher and the other is an engineer. Joan was ridiculed by the people in her village for continuing school after puberty, but managed to finish class 12 in spite of a lot of pressure and criticisms. But she could not pursue further education, because the family was too poor. Her parents always felt bad for not being able to afford higher studies for her.

Joan was 19 years old and had just completed school when the tsunami struck. Her village was one of the secondary-affected villages. Many organisations came forward to help them, but only one of them offered education to the tsunami-affected people. Joan approached the staff of that organisation

and told them about her interest in education. She was given a barefoot teacher's training, however she was not given any opportunities for employment. That was when she happened to meet the staff of OfERR (Organisation for Elam Refugees Rehabilitation).

OfERR offered her training in counselling skills. Within a few months of this training, the organisation called her for an interview for the post of a counsellor. She attended the



interview and was selected. Today, she works with OfERR as a counsellor for the people of her village.

With the salary from this job, she has continued her education. Joan's sisters have also been employed by OfERR and use their salaries to sustain the family. Because the sisters had a regular income they were even able to help their brother study engineering and today he works in a private firm.

Prior to the tsunami, Joan would rarely venture out of her house. Her parents would not allow her to go anywhere alone. One day while she was returning home all by herself a man came out of nowhere and threatened her for being out of the house alone. From then on the people of the village started scaring her. Their rudeness would scare her, and little by little she stopped trusting anybody.

The post-tsunami training in counselling, leadership and communication that OfERR has given has changed Joan completely. She now knows her own strengths and weaknesses. The fear that resided in her has disappeared and she is now a confident young woman. She has developed counselling skills and she is proud to be able to help people in solving their problems.

After the tsunami, several committees — like the youth committee, disaster risk reduction committee, agricultural groups and self-help groups — have come up in the village. Based on their training in community-based disaster management, they have formed task forces for rescue and safety, first aid, health, early warning, etc. The vulnerable locations in their village have been identified and they now understand the need to include the vulnerable sections among the villagers in training and relief work. Most importantly, they know where and who to contact during an emergency, and they are in a position to face disaster in a prepared manner if it should strike again. Joan passes on the skills that she has gained from the capacity building programmes to the members of these groups and committees. The members of these groups have become role models for the entire village population.

The people in Joan's village now have a lot of respect for her and she has a good relationship with all of them. Joan's parents

are very proud of her. She says, 'I will continue serving the people of my village. My life and future seemed dreary before the tsunami, but after OfERR came into our village, my life has changed. I owe my happiness and satisfaction to the members of the OfERR staff.'

When asked about the most significant changes in her life she said, 'I am not scared to face people anymore. I can go anywhere I want fearlessly. I am able to understand other peoples' problems and I can find ways to address them. My efforts have been recognised by the community and that drives me to achieve more and more. The best part of it all is that I never knew I could sing so well, but thanks to the appreciation and encouragement from others I have also become a very good singer. People say I have a sweet voice!'

# TAKING THE OFFER FOR A LIFE WITH DIGNITY

Deivanai from Singarakuppam in Chidambaram sub-district had an unhappy childhood with a father who would get drunk every day and harass her mother. She says that she could not concentrate on anything as a result of the problems at home. She failed in the tenth standard and was under-qualified for any decent job. Neither had she learnt agricultural work so it was also difficult for her to earn a living. Deivanai was so disturbed by the situation in her home that she even tried to commit suicide by setting herself on fire, but her neighbours luckily saved her. Her parents continued to fight in spite of this.

When Deivanai was 18 years old, a man called Muralidharan asked her to marry him. Deivanai says, 'He promised to take care of me and love me, and I was desperate to get out of my parents' home so I accepted.' But her parents were angry when they found out, and her mother beat her for falling in love. Muralidharan's family was unhappy with the relationship, too, and ridiculed Deivanai for her looks. In spite of all this Deivanai and Muralidharan continued to meet each other. But her parents had other plans for her. They tried to force Deivanai

to marry her mother's brother, but she bravely resisted and this marriage was finally called off. Her parents, however, threw her out of their house.

'So I went to my grandmother's house to live with her, and also stayed in touch with Muralidharan, who started giving me 100 rupees every week for food. He assured me that he would make arrangements for both of us to stay together. When the day came, I left with him with nothing but the clothes I was wearing and a pair of gold earrings, and we went to stay at his friend's house.'

As time passed their families finally agreed to let them marry, although they were not happy about this. Deivanai and Muralidharan had two children, a daughter and then a son. But there was more trouble ahead.

'I don't know what changed in Muralidharan, but he started behaving differently,' she says. 'He didn't seem to care about me or even about his children. We lived with his family and there were days when we would not get anything to eat.' As the problems in her marriage increased a depressed and hopeless Deivanai decided once again to end her life.

But as she walked towards the sea with her children Deivanai met Shanthini, a volunteer with OfERR. Shanthini worked as a counsellor for tsunami victims and Sri Lankan refugees, and realised that Deivanai was very distressed. Not only did she stop



Deivanai from committing suicide, she also helped her further by conducting counselling sessions with her. Deivanai says, 'I became more positive and realised that I did not need to end my life because of others. In fact, I actually wanted to help other people in distress and OfERR gave me an opportunity to realise my potential in doing this. I received training from OfERR in counselling, disaster risk reduction, women's empowerment, leadership and development and even in yoga.'

Seeing that Deivanai was truly committed to her work OfERR gave her a job working for tsunami recovery in secondary-affected villages. Deivanai has been working at OfERR for one-and-a-half years now, and counsels other people in distress. One of the people she has counselled is 11-year-old Parvathi, who belongs to a poor Dalit family and who lost her mother in the tsunami. Her father and stepmother sent her to work as a

domestic help in a house. Deivanai tells us that though she was treated well initially, this did not last and soon she was thrown out of that house. Deivanai met Parvathi when this young girl was watching the tuition classes conducted by Deivanai for the children of Thaikal Killai village. As they spoke, Parvathi told Deivanai that she also wanted to study. Deivanai helped Parvathi by referring her to the NGO Ekta, which runs a home called Nambikkai Illam for tsunami orphans. Parvathi now stays at the home and has gone back to school in Class VI.

Deivanai is happy that she can help people and she gives credit to Shanthini and OfERR for helping her reach where she is today. She continues to live in her husband's house and is determined to see that her children are brought up well.

# STITCHING A NEW LIFE



Kanaha is now a skilled tailor making clothes for the people of her village. She is passionate about her newly acquired skills and is able to help her mother in taking care of their family. She has utilised the opportunity given to her to overcome her disability, equip herself with the required skills, and in the process found self-esteem and become an active and productive member of the community.

Kanaha works on the sewing machine available at the training centre of OfERR. She is able to earn 50-100 ruppees per day by stitching clothes for people from her own and neighbouring villages. Her mother is very happy, because she had thought that Kanaha might become a permanent burden because of her disability, but Kanaha has proved her mother wrong. Now her mother is very supportive and so are the other young girls in the community. An unexpected incident turned her life around and enabled her to start earning her own living.

Kanaha was 17 when the tsunami struck. She was in Chennai at the time with her brother, sister and mother. She had lost her father when she was much younger. Before the tsunami, she and her family were very poor as her mother

only could earn a little bit by selling dried fish. Soon after the tsunami, the family could no longer make even a meager living in Chennai and decided to return to Kuttiyandiyur, her mother's native village. Kuttiyandiyur is a big coastal village, some 200 metres from the sea. Out of the 360 houses in the village, 150 are thatched, 100 are tiled and 50 are concrete houses. Kanaha and her family lived in a thatched house. The tsunami damaged and destroyed all the houses in the area where they lived. As Kanaha's mother was in the process of moving from one place to another, the family missed out on the support that was being given to the victims of the tsunami for shelter. Therefore, they had to struggle a lot to get a house. They got a loan of 50,000 rupees from an NGO, and borrowed some more money to rebuild their house. After the tsunami, the fishermen did not go to the sea for a long period, and with no catch it was very difficult for her mother to keep up her dry-fish-selling business and Kanaha's disability prevented her from helping her mother. The total income was very meagre and it became increasingly difficult for her mother to make ends meet.

It was around this time that the Organisation for Elam Refugees Rehabilitation (OfERR) included Kanaha in a training that provided livelihood skills. She was taught how to stitch clothes and was then sent to Pudhupettai, where she improved these skills so that tailoring could become her career. After three years of training, she is confident that tailoring is going to be her profession. The only thing left for her to learn is to stitch pants. 'More importantly, I need to buy a sewing machine of my own,' she says and hopes to get a grant or take a loan to buy this machine. Kanaha's life has changed after learning this skill. Even though she started with a small ambition, she can now dream big.

# MEN'S SELF-HELP GROUP

Selvam is a 27-year-old fisherman hailing from Kameshwaram village situated 26 kilo-meters from the district headquarter Nagapattinam in Tamil Nadu. Before the tsunami, Selvam lived with his parents and four siblings. Both his brothers were students at the local school. There were about 210 families in the village, located 200 metres from the sea, and all of them lived in thatched huts. All the men went out to sea to catch fish and the women handled the vending of the fish, and also managed the housework. These fisherfolk were not very keen to send their children to school, and the boys usually dropped out of school at the age of 12, when they were initiated into fishing. Selvam was no exception; he was initiated into fishing when he was in Class VIII. This coastal village had 105 wooden catamarans and 36 fibre-reinforced plastic boats and the people made a decent income from the seasonal fishing trade. The village had drinking water and electricity, but there

was a lack of roads, bus services, health care centres, toilets, etc. Credit was available only through informal sources and at high rates of interest.

Selvam says, 'It was a nightmare when the fateful waves of the tsunami struck on that December day in 2004. Our village lost 36 people — 7 men, 7 women, 11 boys and 11 girls.' Selvam's own niece and nephew died in the disaster, and his father was severely injured. Apart from the loss of lives there was significant damage to property, and people's capacity to earn their livelihood also suffered. Selvam owned a fiber-reinforced plastic boat with an outboard engine, which was badly damaged by the tsunami. Although he managed to have the engine and boat repaired with the support from an NGO he did not have enough money to buy the expensive fishing equipment he needed. Selvam was the key breadwinner of his family so it was very important for him to try and increase his income. He is also an active member of the traditional Fishermen Panchayth of Kameshwaram, where all the important decisions in the village are made.

In the post-tsunami period, women's empowerment got attention from a number of development workers and it was common to see women's self-help groups (SHGs) in the tsunami-affected fishing villages. However, in Kameshwaram village, Project Concern International

(PCI), with support from DCA, took the unusual step of creating a men's SHG. The group started with 20 members, all fishermen, with the aim of increasing their income and enhancing their business opportunities through loans, which were extended to all the fishermen in the group. Selvam too was chosen to be part of this group. PCI also helped in other matters, like repairing boats and engines, distributing nets and fishing gear, and organising vocational training. Although the idea of a men's SHG was considered unusual to begin with, gradually more people began to show an interest in joining the group, although Selvam admits that the members took some time getting used to the idea of being in a SHG.

Selvam began to participate in many of the capacity-

building programmes, which the PCI organised, such as health services and support, awareness campaigns and community-based disaster preparedness programmes. He also got married around this time and had the additional responsibility of taking care of his family. Luckily Selvam was able to take a loan of 7,500 rupees at a 12 per cent per year interest from the men's SHG. He utilised this money to repair his damaged tools and nets. He says this came as a bumper prize to him, because he caught a big catch within a few days from which he earned 10,000 rupees. He managed to pay the loan back in instalments as he had committed to do. Selvam is now making profits from his work and he says, 'Had it not been for this loan, I would not have been able to overcome the financial crisis in my house. We have also realised that it's very useful to be part



of a men's group where we can also discuss other fishing-related matters.'

According to Selvam, the most important benefits of the SHG are access to credit from formal sources, reduction in interest rates, timely credit availability and flexibility in repayment. He is thankful to PCI and DCA not only for these credit-related benefits, but also for the infrastructure they have built for the village. The open-air auditorium built by them is used by the men to hold their meetings and also for other village functions. In fact, the SHG members use the auditorium even when there is no official meeting just to sit together and talk, something that was not very common earlier in this coastal area.

Another positive change in this area after the tsunami was that the fishermen were able to change from catamarans to fibreboats, provided by different civil society organisations. Though it was difficult in the initial period to pay for the maintenance and fuel required for these boats, as time passed people started managing much better. Selvam believes that in spite of the disparity in income levels and earnings, the tsunami aid and responses have actually improved the condition of the fishing communities.

# I CAN DO ALL THIS WITH MY HUSBAND'S SUPPORT

Padma, a 36-year-old woman, hurriedly came to meet us from the neighbouring village across the road and told us that we could not leave without visiting her village. As soon as we arrived at her village, the villagers received us with tender coconut water and Padma's face lit up with a broad smile. When we asked them where their houses were, she pointed towards a bunch of houses spread out in the vicinity and said, 'These are the houses.'

Panichamedu is situated between Chennai and Pondicherry on the East Coast Road (ECR). The village is just three kilometres away from the sea. There are 29 families residing in this hamlet with a total population of 280 people. 'Come and see our village! We are doing really well now, and very many things have changed!' She is so positive and proactive! The villagers admire her and proudly say, 'Padma means everything to us!' It was only after a while that we got to know that after the tsunami the people of this village did not have houses to live in, and that there was no drinking water here either.

The people of this village strongly believe in the caste system. Therefore, all available water pumps are used only by the upper castes, while the lower castes fetch water from places far away



from their homes. The Dalits have lived under oppressive conditions for a long time. They did not even have a burial ground to bury their dead! The Dalits used to work as bonded labourers for the upper caste landlords. They also worked with the fishermen, helping them to dry and sell the fish.

In recent times, agriculture has been replaced by fish hatcheries and other businesses, like manufacturing toddy for the upper-caste men. Many of the men have become unemployed, and a majority of them, therefore, take to drinking. The women work as agricultural labourers, they clean the fishing nets and do other odd jobs for the fisherfolk. However, they earn less than the men. The women also let the men and children eat first, and thus poor women do not get enough to eat and often suffer from nutrition-related diseases like anaemia.

The village was badly affected by the tsunami. After the tsunami many organisations helped the villagers to rehabilitate, and then left. But the Society for Rehabilitation and Education of Dalits (SRED) stayed on in the village. They have provided relief, skills training, disaster risk reduction management training and training on rights-based issues. Capacity-building sessions were conducted with the women to enhance their understanding of the judicial system and awareness about Indian laws.

The villagers have now started demanding their rights, like proper roads and transportation facilities, safe drinking water, a burial ground, housing and ration card. As a result there have been several developments in the village. For instance, the government has built a water tank to provide drinking water to the village.

Women have become income generators using the skills provided by SRED. For instance, SRED taught five women how to stitch and tailor clothes. Using this training these women now generate income from this new occupation. Some women also sell dry fish and work in the yarn factories. With the income earned, they are able to fulfil the needs of their families to a large extent.

Earlier, the village did not have a community hall where meetings to discuss common problems could be organised.

The villagers would have to go to Pondicherry to organise and participate in any gathering. They requested the authorities that a community hall be constructed; the request was heeded and now the village has a community hall which is being used in several different ways. Students take tuition in the evenings and marriage ceremonies are conducted in the hall. It is also used for training sessions and it is also a shelter where the homeless can sleep at night.

The village still has to face many challenges. The government has plans to develop parks along the East Coast Road and in the process many have lost their jobs as agricultural labourers. The Dalits were initially denied the 100-days employment scheme offered by NREGA (National Rural Employment Act). And they have not got the two acres of land incentive announced by the government, because their livelihood is fishing in the backwaters.

Padma's husband is always encouraging her and supporting her. This has helped her in work towards bringing about some remarkable changes in this small village. For instance, she is in charge of making all the arrangements for the Gram Sabha meetings, writing petitions for the village and meeting administrative officers in order to bring welfare schemes to the village. Her bold proactive stance helped save a 7-year-old girl, who had met with an accident on the East Coast Road. She herself carried the child to the hospital and ensured the completion of the child's treatment. After this incident she successfully got a speedbreaker put on the accident-prone East Coast Road. Her active participation in all the meetings and conferences of the Tamil Nadu Dalit Women's Movement is seen as one of her biggest achievements.

She has three sons, all of them students, because she believes that education is the only way to development! She says, ' I will continue to do these things as long as the villagers benefit from the fruits of my efforts, and we are able to get rid of the tag "Dalit", that is attached to us.' She says anything is possible if women act together. Her achievements within such a short period have been remarkable!

# BE PREPARED!

'I am a woman and I am proud to be part of the rescue team', says Kamala, a 51-year-old from Kuchipalayam in Chidambaram sub-district, Cuddalore. Kamala, educated till Class VI and a mother of two boys and four girls, talks with refreshing confidence. She is the leader of a self-help group, and a strong woman capable of taking decisions and acting on behalf of the group.

Kuchipalayam village is surrounded by rivers and agricultural land and lies at a distance of three kilometres from the sea, between Lake Pichavaram and some mangrove forests in the delta area of the Cauveri River. Due to its location in a low-lying area, the village gets flooded every year because the river overflows during the monsoon season. The 148 families that live in Kuchipalayam all belong to the Most Backward Community (MBC) and stay in thatched houses. However, the community is very conscious of its status and extremely particular that others do not find out their real condition. 'We are poor and own no land or homes, but how can we show this, especially when we belong to the Vanniar caste?' say the women, most of whom are dressed very well. They add, 'Whether we eat or not, we would dress up well and maintain the façade of being well to do.' Before the tsunami most of them were involved in farming and worked on the small pieces of land taken on lease or for wages on other people's agricultural lands during the

agricultural season. During the off-season they would travel to other areas, such as Chennai and parts of Kerala in search of work. As there was no alternative source of income they took loans from moneylenders pledging their few pieces of hard-earned gold and silver jewellery and brass vessels. These loans were given at very high interest rates ranging from 60 per cent to 120 per cent per annum.

The tsunami made the situation even more difficult for the villagers. As water from the rivers as well as backwaters flooded the village, the villagers lost their houses and livestock. The agricultural land was also destroyed due to the saline water. The people were forced to shift to the local school for more than two weeks. There was no work for more than a year and they were not compensated as they were not the landowners.

Kamala was identified by OfERR as a woman with leadership potential, who could be trained to guide the disaster management projects in her village. The Organisation for Elam Refugees Rehabilitation (OfERR) normally works with Sri Lankan refugees but after the tsunami OfERR provided relief and rehabilitation to affected people and villages in Tamil Nadu. OfERR trained Kamala in Community Based Disaster Preparedness (CBDP) and in communication, which helped her to take on her new leadership role. She encouraged everyone to take part in village affairs and this made a difference especially to the lives of the young women whose participation in meetings and training programmes now became equal to that of the men. Kamala is a democratic leader and she says, 'I have learnt how to be a good team player which has helped me

to keep up the spirit of our self-help group (SHG). This also helped me build relationships with other women in the group. All this has helped in the effective functioning of the SHG.’

The CBDP training organised through OfERR aims at capacity building at the grassroots level for people in vulnerable locations. The participants are encouraged to understand the special features of their area as well as be aware of certain groups, who normally are excluded from relief efforts or forgotten altogether. Not only did Kamala attend all the training sessions, she also took some volunteers and panchayat members from the village with her. After she returned to the village in September 2008, she formed a team of six members and trained the villagers in Risk Vulnerability Assessment (RVA). The RVA provided the community members with hands-on experience in developing their own social map, vulnerability map, resource map, evacuation route map and the seasonal calendar. Under her leadership the villagers have taken the initiative to map who the vulnerable people are and where they live, and to develop disaster management inventories, a disaster management resource directory, a comprehensive village profile, and in general work towards strengthening the community’s coping mechanisms. They finally formed Disaster Management Teams for early warning, search and rescue, first aid and medical aid, shelter management, water and sanitation, relief coordination, damage assessment and social equity. The social equity group is an innovative addition introduced through DCA’s partner organisations. This team collects data on people with disabilities, pregnant and lactating women and children below the age of five years. Kamala says, ‘We have learnt about first aid and rescue techniques and we know our responsibilities. Since our village is hit by natural disaster every year we are spreading the message on how to take measures to protect ourselves from these disasters among the villagers.’ She says there is improved awareness and capacities to cope with the situation in case of future disasters and she considers that to be the most significant change among the villagers after the tsunami. Kamala has also been the force behind the evening tuitions held in the village for children, and she has motivated them to learn the skills needed to save themselves if disaster strikes again. She is ready to work in rescue operations in spite of her age, and says that it is

important that all women learn these skills.

But despite all her achievements Kamala still has one major concern. She is worried about the declining spirit of voluntarism among the people and the competition among the different NGOs working in the village. While a lot of good has come from the relief work, Kamala believes that people have become too dependent on the help they started receiving after the tsunami. Kamala has once again taken the lead in trying to rebuild this spirit and hopes that the others will follow her.



# REALISING THE IMPORTANCE OF EDUCATION

V. Vijayalakshmi is teaching in the Senthamizh Vidyalaya School at Erukkatancheri in Nagapattinam District. Her face lights up with a bright smile when she talks about the children in her class.

‘Prior to the tsunami school attendance was erratic, and during the harvest period many children were kept at home by their parents to look after the house as well as their younger siblings. We, the teachers, used to visit their homes, requesting the parents to send their children to school. Often the parents, who did not value education, would get annoyed and yell at the teachers, but the teachers never gave up, although we understood how difficult it was for the parents to provide for their family during the harvest period. But after the tsunami, parents realised the importance of education and now absenteeism is minimal even during the harvest period. I do not have to go into the village and counsel the parents to send their children to school, as I used to do before the tsunami. Now all the villages have a pre-school initiated by the NGOs and the children are getting into the habit of going to school. The evening tuitions run by the NGOs in the villages are very useful for our children, as they cannot afford tuition fees. Today our children are a motivated lot! After the tsunami I feel a complete change in the attitude of parents and children. It is great to see that education has been given

priority after the tsunami, both by the fishing community and by the Dalits.’

The Senthamizh Vidyalaya School was started in 1886 by Swaminatha Iyer for the development of the backward communities, particularly for Dalit children, and has classes from standard I-VIII. Children from nearly 18 villages in and around Erukkatancheri are enrolled in this school, and 72 per cent of the 358 students come from the Dalit villages of Simon Nagar, Kumminithoppu, Vadakumaytutheru, Anandamangalam, Ambedkar Nagar and Erukkatancheri. Special attention is given to students with disabilities.

The school is supported by the government, and after the tsunami each student has been given an education grant of 300 rupees a month.

‘After the tsunami the quality and standard of education has improved and NGO support has been crucial for this change. The level of interest among children to come to school has increased and the dropout rate has decreased considerably. There is a friendly atmosphere between the teachers and the students, and the Dalit children are not discriminated against. In fact, ten motivated Dalit students have been given assistance to pursue higher studies. And luckily an NGO based in Denmark provided support to make a new building worth 5 million rupees for the school!’ adds Vijayalakshmi. ‘There are many contributing factors

for all these changes. The awareness about rights provided through the tsunami programme initiated by People's Watch has enabled parents to understand the value of education for their children. Furthermore, livelihood support from the project has placed the communities in a better position to provide education to their children. Finally, the school enrolment drive organised at the village level by People's Watch through FDVLR (Federation of Dalits Villages for Livelihood Rights) has helped tremendously.'



# HARD WORK HAS NEVER LET ANYONE DOWN!

Though she is 62 years old, Kamatchi is a lively and energetic woman, who vows to remain active and work for her village till the day she dies. She is a fountain of hope for the villagers who affectionately call her Mother Kamatchi.

Kamatchi's family was among the first families who migrated to the coastal village of Kodiyakarai. About 50 years ago a few families settled near the forest adjacent to the seashore. The settlement grew and later became known as Kodiyakarai village, which now consists of 45 Dalit families.

Kamatchi says, 'We are not from the community of fisherfolk. We are Dalits, who have been helping the fisherfolk in their work. We work as labourers for the fisherfolk, but we don't own any boats.'

Mother Kamatchi and her 75-year-old husband live in a thatched hut in the village. 'I have always turned down invitations from my daughter and both of my sons to go and live with them. I do not want to be dependent on anyone. I will work for my own food till the day I die.'

Kamatchi adds, 'Now I am rearing goats and do backwater prawn fishing. But my fellow villagers serve as a kind of bonded labour, because all of them have taken money as advance from the boat owners, who belong to the Backward



Community. And you know the boat owners regularly abuse the Dalits, and beat them up when they do not come to work on their boats due to sickness or other commitments.’

The villagers in Kodyakarai, who were already burdened with debt and ill treatment by others, were badly affected by the tsunami. The level of the backwaters rose and entered the village and damaged the thatched huts. Women, who had gone out for backwater fishing, rushed back, many of them with injuries. Kamatchi was also injured. All the villagers left the village for safer and higher grounds only to return after a week. Kamatchi lost all her fishing gear and therefore also her livelihood. This was a story that we heard repeated in every household in the village.

Later People’s Watch, an NGO supported by DCA, identified this village as tsunami-affected, and started its rights-based livelihood programme. People’s Watch formed a Livelihood Development Sangam with all the families of the village as members. Considering her active nature, commitment and motivation, the villagers entrusted Kamatchi with the post of treasurer of the Sangam and she accepted. People’s Watch gave a grant of 100,000 rupees for the Livelihood Development Sangam, and this money has been distributed among the 45 families in the community, mostly to purchase nets and fishing-related equipment. The Sangam has so far made a profit of nearly 20,000 rupees, which will go back to its own members.

Kamatchi has actively participated in Sangam activities and also facilitated many of its meetings. She goes cheerfully to the bank, visits members and deals confidently with money matters. Her role as a treasurer is an inspiration to the youth in the village, who marvel at the swiftness with which she operates. She manages the financial transactions accurately and all by herself. She visits the bank to deposit the money and maintains a systematic accounting book to enter all the monetary transactions. She facilitates the monthly village committee meetings and ensures the participation of the entire village. ‘She is an ardent leader’, the villagers say. ‘She manages the Sangam’s credit programme with 100 per cent recovery!’

Kamatchi says, ‘Our dependency on people outside our community has been reduced due to increased access to local credit. Some of our people are owners of new boats as well as other livelihood resources, such as milch animals, goats, fish dryers, small grocery shops, and fishing nets. The income of the villagers has increased, which has improved the economic status of people due to diversification of income sources besides fishing. Our dignity and self-esteem have improved and so has our social status.’

She relates that People’s Watch approached them at a crucial stage when the community needed support for consolidating and sustaining livelihood efforts. It was important to increase awareness, improve capacities and to realise one’s rights. Kamatchi has attended all the training sessions related to rights, and under her leadership the villagers have fought for their rights and entitlements from the state. They have been able to bring drinking water into the village along with individual connections to each house, which had always seemed like a distant dream! She has been instrumental in getting identification and eligibility cards for all the families by organising an enrolment campaign in the NREGA. And she feels it is very important to give the children a good education. And she wants the children in her village to grow up in a better atmosphere than when she was a child.

When asked about her dream Kamatchi says, “My dream is a peaceful and self-reliant village, which does not need government support. What I want is that the villagers themselves create opportunities through innovation and hard work. With increased income the youth will have a chance to make a better life. But people should also know their basic rights, so they can avail what is rightfully theirs from the state. But this can never replace hard work. So this is what I say to the young people of my village: Hard work is the only way to success. Hard work has never let anyone down! Another dream I have is that there be unity and solidarity between the different caste and religious communities - and I believe this is possible!”

# LIGHT IN DARKNESS

The tsunami struck Wandoor village in the Southern Andamans at 6.20 am on a Sunday, a time when almost everyone was asleep. When people heard the screams that a flood wave was coming, they ran for their lives towards the hills behind the village. That morning changed everything in their lives. When the water receded after two days, they went back to the village only to be met by complete devastation – lives lost, people injured, houses destroyed or filled with sand and mud, loss of belongings, documents gone, livestock killed, and, above all, their small fishing boats and shops smashed to pieces. Everything had been lost to the waters! They were left with absolutely nothing – no homes, no belongings, no livelihood.

Before the tsunami some of the villagers had worked for the Forest Department, while others were shopkeepers or fishermen. Among them were also some migrants from Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and West Bengal, who had settled in Wandoor several decades ago. The houses in Wandoor had electricity, water, bathrooms and toilets.

After the tsunami the administration put the 15 families of Wandoor in tented camps — without any water, toilet or electricity — and provided them with food. The officials said that proper temporary shelters would be provided within three months. But the villagers first stayed in one tented camp for two months, and then in another for four, but no temporary shelters were in sight. The monsoon was approaching with heavy rain and strong winds, and under such conditions a tent is no place to stay.

When the Wandoorian villagers started to put pressure on the government, the deputy commissioner directed them to build their own temporary shelters. ‘We will provide timber and tin sheets, and we will pay each of you 4,000 rupees to do the job.’ The villagers - eager to move into better housing before the rains, agreed to this.

The land allotted for the temporary shelters was hilly forest land, and the people had first to spend quite a bit of time clearing bushes and trees. After this initial work was done, they built small huts containing two rooms and a tin roof. Although the administration had promised to give them electricity and water, this was not provided, and the families had to first spend a year without either facility. To get water they had to dig a kind of pond behind the village, whose muddy water they had to use for both drinking and household purposes. But even if life in the temporary shelters were inconvenient and cumbersome, and even posed

some dangers: people were bitten by snakes, poisonous centipedes and the like, the worst thing was that they had lost their livelihood and had no income.

It was at this time that people from Human Rights Law Network (HRLN), an NGO supported by DCA, approached the Wandoor families to learn about their living conditions and problems. The villagers shared with them what they needed and what the authorities had promised, and HRLN told them about their rights. The result was that a case was filed in the High Court in Port Blair asking for electricity and water for the shelters. On the first day of the hearings the court directed the authorities to provide water and electricity to the Wandoor shelters. The authorities, however, did not comply with this order, and it was only after the court had issued a contempt of court notice, that the facilities were finally provided.

# FULL ENTITLEMENTS PAID OUT AT LAST!

Smiti Alma Belong from the Andaman Islands is a 70-year-old widow with two sons. Her only daughter, who had gone to Calcutta to study, had had an accident and died. Alma did not have the money to bring her daughter's body back to Port Blair. This painful experience scarred her so badly that she still lives in misery. She had dreamt that her only daughter would be well educated and a working member of the family, who could support her mother in her old age. One of her sons is physically challenged and is completely dependent on Alma.

Alma is illiterate. She was married off when she was only 14 years old. She belongs to a tribal community named Ranchi, which originally hails from the state of Jharkhand in India. Her husband brought her to the Andaman and Nicobar Islands as a young bride in 1960 to work for the Andaman and Nicobar Forest Department to clear the forest for building new settlements. The administration started this policy after independence to increase the population on the islands. Alma and her husband lived in the forest like so many others, and spent their entire lives clearing

these forests for the development of other communities. In 1970 they were allotted two hectares of land fit for paddy cultivation, which has been their primary source of livelihood ever since.

Alma recalls that back when she and her husband were younger, they never had to buy rice, because they cultivated paddy in their fields. Along with rice, they used to grow vegetables for their own consumption and, all in all, they led a life where their basic minimum needs were met. She says that the only things that she used to purchase were oil and soap. As she smiles you can see that with age she has lost her two front teeth. When her husband died this land became her only source of support. She was not dependent on anyone as she was healthy enough to do the field work by herself with some help from others for which she was able to pay.

When the tsunami hit the Andamans, the seawater gushed into several hectares of agricultural land. Alma's land did not escape this attack. Her two hectares of low-lying land got submerged in salt water and even after four years the stagnant sea-water can be seen in large portions of her land. The land has become useless and it will be difficult to reclaim it for agricultural purposes. For these last four years, when it has been impossible to grow anything on her land, all she has been able to do is look at the fields and weep. With her only asset and source of livelihood becoming useless, her

confidence to save her son and herself has been shattered and she has slipped into depression.

The administration of the Andamans gave the tsunami survivors a sum of 9,000 rupees as relief. She was furthermore entitled to receive 80,000 rupees as compensation for her salinated land. A part of this amount was paid to her, but the remaining amount was still due, and she did not know how to get it. Then Alma heard about the Human Rights Law Network (HRLN) and went to their office to ask for legal support. HRLN met her a few times, collected all the relevant facts and found her to be a deserving case. They decided to take up her case and fight for her rights in court.

A writ petition was filed before the High Court as a result of which the administration was ordered to give the balance compensation and allied relief to Alma. She received the full 80,000 rupees due to her as well as the dry ration (an entitlement as a tsunami victim), which earlier had not been supplied to her by the administration.

When we ask her what she had done with the money, her reply is that she has spent it, and then she adds with a smile, 'I purchased rice and other food items for the present and the future.' She was packing lunch while talking and explained that she had to leave. 'There is a very old and disabled man living next to my paddy field in a small hut without any family support. I go and give him food every day!'

# OUTRIGGERS: OUR LIFELINE!

The tsunami caused heavy casualties on the Andaman and Nicobar Islands in the Indian Ocean, where the tribal populations were already dwindling. The flat island of Katchal in the Nicobars was one of the worst hit: nearly 5,000 out of its 8,000 inhabitants and one third of the island's territory were taken by the sea! The new coastline looks desolate – everything has been flattened.

The administration first shifted the survivors to temporary shelters two kilometres inland. For the Nicobarese the small sheds of corrugated iron sheets allotted to them felt suffocating. The supplies were also both small and not the food they were used to. They started agitating, and shouted, 'Leave us alone. We can manage on our own. We are not beggars. We do not need biscuits and potato chips. We need to make our homes and plant our gardens. If you really want to help us, give us boats and tools and building materials! This is our land, so please leave us alone!'

A large number of boats — outrigger canoes, or hoodies — had been smashed or carried away by the tidal wave, and the administration had not compensated or replaced them. There were a number of other compensation packages for the tribals, but none for the boats, which are really the essence of their island life. Without boats it is impossible to live on these islands.

Another problem was the coconuts. Copra, coconut fibres, is an important source of cash income for the Nicobar islanders, and the tsunami had flattened almost all the coconut palms along the coast. But the administration had not compensated adequately those who had suffered these losses.

At this stage the Human Rights Law Network (HRLN) visited the Nicobar Islands including Katchar, and started interacting with the tribals, who were at a loss regarding what to do. HRLN held several meetings with the tribal captains and as a result, a PIL (Public Interest Litigation) case was filed in the Supreme Court (Kranti vs. Union of India). The case finally resulted in an interim order, which clearly directed the administration to provide the Nicobarese with replacement boats. The HRLN then filed 450 claims for the replacement of the outrigger hoodies, that had been lost in the tsunami, and these claims were presented to the local governing body, the Lok Adalat, of the Nicobari tribes. These claims were granted, and the Fisheries Department was directed to allot replacement for the outriggers to all the households living in the Nancowry group of islands, who had lost their hoodies.

Four years have gone by, but despite the decision by the court and the direction by the Lok Adalat to provide outriggers or replacement boats to the islanders, not a single one has been given till today. This has affected the islanders very adversely as they have now become isolated. They are not able to travel to other islands, something which is a part and parcel of their day-to-day

life, especially for the exchange of consumable goods. Communication has come to a standstill. And their most important tribal event — the ‘outrigger race’, where the different island groups assemble and compete — has not taken place for the last four years!

For HRLN it has been a challenging task to follow up this case, because it is now extremely difficult to communicate with these islands. On top of this, the authorities have always had a restrictive policy regarding visits to the island, partly to protect the ‘natives’, and partly because the Nicobars are regarded as a sensitive border area, with important naval installations. For this reason the Andaman and Nicobar islands are a Union Territory, and are ruled directly from Delhi.

# COMPENSATION FOR TARUN ROY

Prior to the tsunami, Tarun Roy was living in Car Nicobar, the northern-most island in the Nicobar Archipelago, with his wife and two children. He was a cloth trader and had a shop allotted to him in Car Nicobar by the administration. He was doing very well, earning a profit of some 15,000 rupees per month.

Any non-tribal person who is engaged in business or any other activity in Car Nicobar is required to have a tribal pass. What people usually did was that they took a tribal pass for the initial three months. After three months they were supposed to renew it, but many people failed to renew their permit. The police was supposed to keep track of this but instead people bribed the police with 500 rupees. Tarun Roy did the same as everybody else. But when the tsunami came he lost everything, including his business.

After the tsunami Tarun and his family, along with other victims, were shifted from Car Nicobar to Port Blair, the capital of Andaman and Nicobar Islands, where they were kept in a separate camp for non-tribals located in a school. After six months he was shifted to the Bambooflat tsunami shelter, but did not have any means of earning a livelihood in the new area. Along with him there were 34 other shop owners in the shelter, who had been brought to Port Blair after the tsunami. When they asked for compensation for the loss of their shops, they were denied

by the administration, and the reason given was that they had resided illegally in the tribal area. Tarun and the 33 others have been suffering for more than a year without any means of earning their livelihood, having lost all assets in the tsunami. It became very difficult to manage the situation and they quickly sank into debt. While they were struggling a journalist visited Bambooflat and after hearing their stories he referred them to the Human Rights Law Network (HRLN). With the help of this reference Tarun Roy and the other shop owners, who were living in temporary shelters, approached HRLN for legal aid. HRLN is a human rights organisation that creates awareness among people about their basic rights as citizens, and provides legal aid to people who would normally never be able to access the courts for legal justice. HRLN was the first human rights organisation to work in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands.

HRLN filed a case in court and all 34 got a damage compensation of 10,000 rupees per head. Using this money Tarun started a small business of wooden work, which since has grown well, fetching him an income of some 10,000 rupees per month.

While he is grateful to HRLN for the legal aid, he says given a chance the family would like to go back to Car Nicobar.

# ‘DUCK, COVER AND HOLD’

The Naval Children School is located in Port Blair, the capital of Andaman and Nicobar Islands. It has 780 students, is well-equipped, and is regarded as one of the best schools (in the Andamans)



The earthquake followed by the tsunami happened on a Sunday when there was no teaching, and the school was not damaged except for some minor cracks in the water tank. The building was safe because it had been regularly maintained.

Sustainable Environment & Ecological Development Society (SEEDS), an NGO, approached the principal of the school, Anita Devi, and suggested that a School Safety Programme be initiated, and Anita Devi thought this was a very good idea, and told the teachers and students of the importance of the programme and the training they were to receive.

The teachers and students were trained in several sessions and the training concluded with a mock drill on earthquakes. 'It was a wonderful programme and the whole experience was good. We have internalised the drill sequence so now we know what steps to take during an earthquake. This is definitely necessary for our school, so we can protect ourselves. Earlier we had only heard about the dos and don'ts. But now we have practical knowledge and skills.' says the social science teacher Saravanan.

When the emergency bell rings, all the students follow the safety technique called 'Duck, cover and hold', that is, bending and covering their heads with the chairs in an upside-down position in their classrooms. Once the bell stops they come out of the classrooms and form a single line, before they start to evacuate one by one into safe and open places. Here, they are reminded of the Dos and Don'ts that pertain to an earthquake. The teachers then start the head count of all the students through which they get a missing report and the missing report is submitted to the Search and Rescue Task Force and Fire Safety Task Force. Then the Search and Rescue and Fire Safety Task Force start the Search and Rescue Operation in the school building and find victims, who are brought to the Safe Assembly Area to the M.F.R Station (Medical First Aid Responder) where the First Aid Task Force team is ready to provide treatment based on the injury of victims. Once again the Dos and Don'ts are pronounced for further internalisation.

'We know enough about earthquakes now. We will follow the procedure of "Duck Cover Hold", which we have practised well, and we can follow the evacuation routes. We have done the earthquake Mock Drill and all our children know what to do.'

The principal is happy about the training. She says that this type of training is necessary for all students and should be given to all schools. However, another principal shared some challenges he had faced, 'We have undergone this training, but sometimes the teachers feel burdened as they have to teach extra classes to make up for the time used on the safety drills.'

Anita Devi, the principal started laughing as she described the first time this drill was conducted in her school. 'In the beginning, during one of the first mock drills when the bell rang, some children thought it was for real and started running out of the classrooms and some even reached their homes which led to anxious parents coming to the school and enquiring!' She is very satisfied with her teachers, students and her board, all of whom are cooperative. She says it is not possible to do this kind of an exercise, and do it frequently, unless there is full cooperation from all quarters. Her emphasis is on the importance of including Disaster Management in the school curriculum. She has ensured that all the structural mitigation standards are followed in the new building under construction for 11 rupees crores and that the evacuation routes are laid properly.

'It's easy to talk but difficult to do... many people talked about training us but never returned! We are very happy we got trained and are ready to face any disaster. We owe our gratitude to SEEDS!' Anita Devi is obviously making a difference as this is not the same with many other schools in Andaman.



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**Photo credits:** Sumit Dayal and Poul Madsen

**Page Design:** Vatsa Heera  
**Cover Design:** Trinankur Banerjee  
**Printed by:** EIH Limited, Delhi

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ISBN 978-87-91972-11-9