

War and Grief, Faith and Healing
in a Tamil Catholic Fishing Village in Northern Sri Lanka

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ABSTRACT

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Sri Lanka's thirty-year civil war brought about tremendous suffering upon the lives of the Tamil civilian population in northern Sri Lanka. In May 2009, when the war ended, not a single civilian remained within the Vanni, the former rebel territory, as they had all been killed or displaced. More than one hundred thousand civilians were dead or disappeared and three hundred thousand survivors were held in so-called "transit camps" without freedom of movement. The data for this dissertation is based on extensive anthropological field research conducted in northern Sri Lanka during the last phase of the civil war and into its aftermath over a period of two and a half years between July 2007 and May 2010. It sets out to explain the experience of suffering among a Tamil Catholic fishing community, which, due to the war, had been displaced from its coastal home, Perunkalipattu in 1999, and has been relocated to the City of Santa Marta, an internal-refugee camp. Between July 2007 and May 2009, this community was part of the four hundred thousand Tamil civilians trapped in so-called "no-fire zones," where they suffered violence at the hands of the state as well as the rebels. This dissertation takes a unique approach to the exploration of the community's suffering by incorporating the effects of the war on the community's Catholic devotion and the possibility of healing of traumatic experiences of war through that devotion. The study thereby opens up a new field of anthropological investigation of displacement, social suffering, faith and healing. It contributes, among others, to the anthropology of violence, South Asia studies, and the anthropology of

Christianity, and provides unique materials for anthropological reflection on ethnographic writing and the art of fieldwork.

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To Jude
&
(in memory of) *Amma*

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

“[I]f for no other reason than that an Auschwitz existed, no one in our age should speak of Providence.”—Primo Levi¹

“Before there can be a science of man there has to be the long-awaited demythification and reenchantment of Western man in a quite different confluence of self and otherness.”
—Michael Taussig²

War in the Vanni

The thirty-year conflict between Sri Lankan government forces, dominated by the island’s Sinhalese majority, and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), a guerilla group fighting for an independent state for the island’s Tamil minority, ended in early 2009. When the last battle began in June 2007 in the western part of the Vanni in northern Sri Lanka, there were more than four hundred thousand Tamil civilians living in the rebel territory. By January 2009, government forces, far superior in military power to the rebels, and equipped with forty-thousand ground troops, Kfirs, artilleries and cluster munitions had successfully cornered rebel fighters to a narrow coastal strip in northeastern Vanni called Mullaitivu. The LTTE, in a desperate attempt

¹ Primo Levi 1996, 157-8.

² Taussig 1987, 134-135.

to retain its hold on Tamil *Eelam* (“homeland”), took all the civilians in its territory as human shields, forbidding them to flee to government territory. As a result, during this last battle in Mullaitivu, the entire Tamil civilian population was trapped with the rebel fighters in so-called “no-fire zones.” The government rained bombs upon both the civilians and the rebel fighters. With the killing of the rebel leader Velupillai Prabhakaran the war ended on May 18, 2009. By then, more than one in five civilians had been killed and many more disappeared in the “no-fire zones.”

This dissertation sets out to explain the effects of Sri Lanka’s prolonged conflict on the lives of Tamil Catholic fishing villagers, who had been displaced from their native coastal home, Perunkalipattu, by the war in 1999, and have been living in the City of Santa Marta, an internal-refugee camp in Mannar in northwestern Sri Lanka. Between July 2007 and May 2009, one-third of the villagers was part of the four hundred thousand Tamil civilians trapped in “no-fire zones” in Mullaitivu, where they suffered violence at the hands of the state as well as the rebels. The data for this dissertation was collected during extensive anthropological field research that I conducted in the City of Santa Marta (the Santa Marta Camp) during the last phase of the civil war and into its aftermath between July 2007 and May 2010. The chapters in this dissertation explore: the history of the community’s displacement; the manners in which the villagers continued to live and rebuilt their lives in the wake of the war in an internal-refugee camp (chapter 2); the experience of the villagers in a so-called “no-fire zone” in Mullaitivu during the last battle (chapter 3); the entailments of their lives in a new global political-economy (chapter 4 and 5); and the effects all of these experiences had, not only on their material and social being, but also on their Catholic devotion (chapter 6).

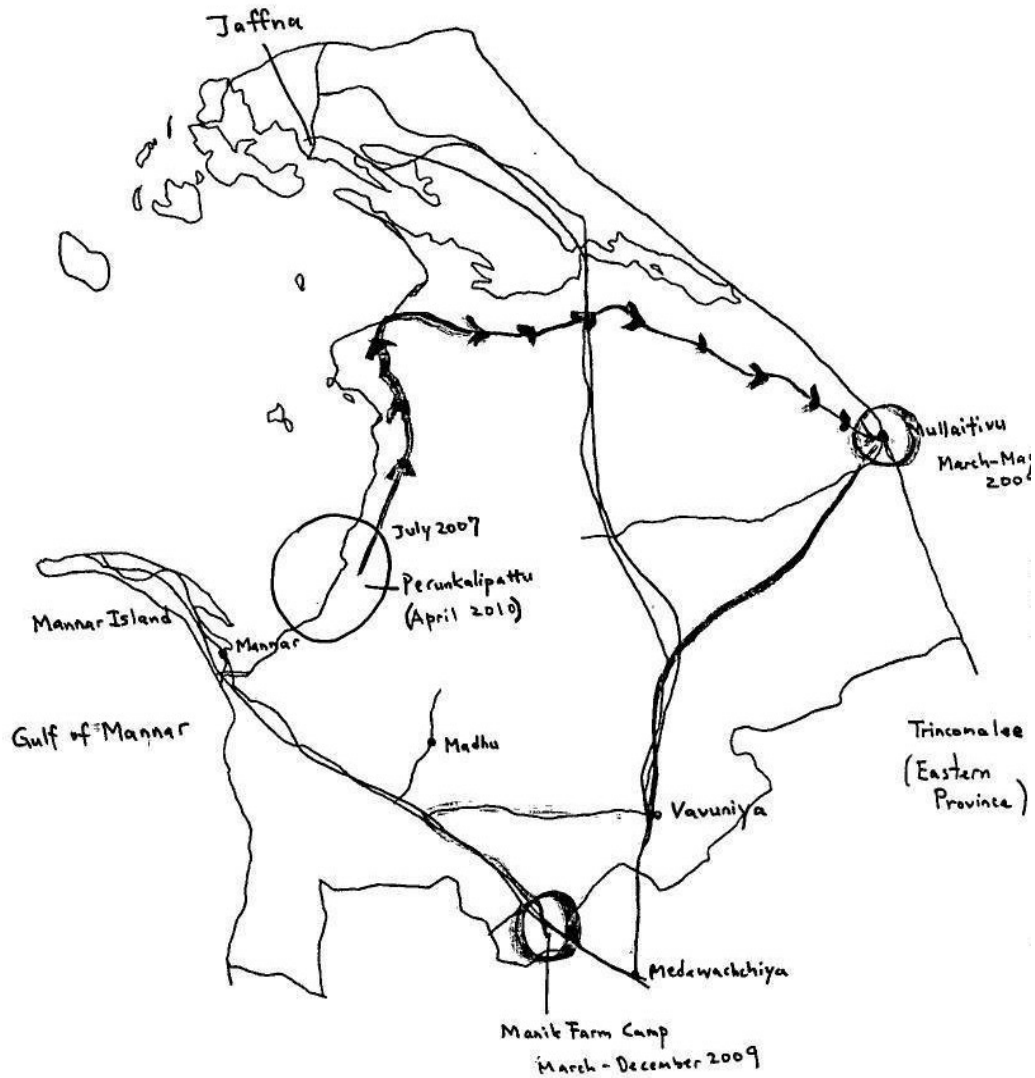


Figure 1 Map of Northern Province. The line of arrows shows the route of displacement of the one-hundred-forty Catholic Perunkalipattu families between July 2007 and March-May 2009. The distance covered by the families (the arrow line) is about one hundred miles long. The Manik Farm Camp is the largest of government's "transit camps," where the Tamil civilians who fled from the "no-fire zones" in Mullaitivu were kept without freedom of movement between March and December of 2009.

As Lubkemann (2008) and Thiranagama (2011) emphasize, “[O]ur understanding of what war involves as an experience for subjects and societies. . . tends to be organized almost exclusively around our understanding of what coping with violence involves” (Lubkemann 2008:10-11; quoted in Thiranagama 2011:7). During my fieldwork, my understanding of what coping with violence involves has changed. In the beginning, my interests lay more in the material and social aspects of the villagers’ lives than in their religion. I considered Catholicism as it was practiced by the villagers a marginal aspect of their lives, not significant enough to be included in the analysis of a people’s suffering. Moreover, I was observing their religion with skepticism, considering it as just one way of understanding reality, seemingly a *false* one, compared to a secular scientific understanding of reality. However, as the war approached its tragic end and the immediate threat of death due to the war disappeared, faith came to play a significant role in the war-torn world of the survivors, who had to face the loss of their loved ones and the loss of *Eelam* to the hands of, what they called, the “Sinhala government.” It was then that I began to see their Catholic devotion differently—not as a false conception of reality, but as a reality to which conventional social scientific research of religion has no access. First, my understanding of “what coping with violence involves” was focused around the villagers’ poverty and grief; later, my focus shifted to faith.

Søren Kierkegaard defines faith as “the highest passion in the sphere of human subjectivity” (Kierkegaard 1968, 118). As Chapter 6 of this dissertation demonstrates, this definition of faith applies to the Catholic devotion that I observed in the war-torn world of the Perunkalipattu survivors. The central thesis of this dissertation is that, in the case of the Tamil Catholics in northern Sri Lanka, as much as their Catholic devotion shaped the manner of their

suffering, the war shaped their devotion. The war not only brought about the greatest suffering but also “the highest passion.”

“The state of exception” (Agamben) as a condition of possibility for faith in extremis

During the last battle, the Vanni was a world where the Sri Lankan state allowed its Tamil subjects who were in rebel captivity to live for many months in constant fear of their own imminent death, to witness their family members getting killed, and, in some cases, to die of starvation and thirst. One of the witnesses of this extreme human condition is Rita-amma, a 65-year-old. I met Rita-amma less than a week after she fled the Mullaitivu “no-fire zone” in April 2009. She was hollow-cheeked, dark-skinned, malnourished and sick.³ For almost two years, after she fled Perunkalipattu in June of 2007, she and other villagers had been held captive by the rebels and suffered the government’s bombings. For a long time, Rita-amma remained silent and I heard nothing but her dry coughs. When she finally spoke, she said, in the Vanni, the rebel territory, she was made to witness how people ran here and there out of hunger and fear, like animals; how her grandchildren cried from hunger, but she had nothing to feed them—“The world where I lived until a week ago and from which I *came* is a totally different world.” In that world, she explained, out of hunger and fear, people did what they would otherwise never do: they left behind the weak, the wounded, those who could not flee under their own power. She too had fled leaving one of her relatives who was injured lying in the lagoon that separated the rebel and the government territories. This experience traumatized Rita-amma. She had witnessed herself doing what she thought she would never do. After the war, like-Rita-amma, many

³ According to the survivors, the reason for their dark-skin was due to the color of the soot from the munitions used in the Vanni.

survivors lived with trauma, feelings of guilt, and loss of trust in the world around them (see Chapter 3).

Bruce Kapferer (2004) notes that the Tamil civilians in northern Sri Lanka, who were caught in the fighting between the state and the rebels, are in the status of what Giorgio Agamben (1998) calls “bare life.” However, the lives of the Tamil Catholic villagers stopped short of becoming “bare life,” as described by Agamben: living in the “zone of indistinction,” where the human-animal distinction is obscured, because in that zone, sovereign subjects, who have been subjected to the extremes of the sovereign’s punishment, are stripped of every element of political freedom. Despite having been placed in conditions where the only life possible would seem to be “bare life,” the Perunkalipattu-Catholic survivors among them were not reduced to the figure of “bare life.” When they were reduced to the status of “bare life,” these villagers were most markedly human in their capacity for grieving, feeling guilt, and having compassion. Moreover, after all their suffering, upon their release, in January 2010, from government captivity in the Manik Farm “Transit” Camp, one of the first things that the villagers did was to embark upon an arduous pilgrimage, thanking and praising God. Their suffering and faith in Christ, they claim, have totally detached them from the worldly kingdoms of Sri Lanka and *Eelam* and transformed them into a community of the faithful, attached to the kingdom of God.

Agamben’s concept of “bare life” therefore does not quite apply to the villagers, who, after having been displaced by the war and suffered its consequences in loss of life, home and dignity, claim that they have been able to bear the tragedies that befell them because of their faith in and understanding of the figure of Jesus Christ. I argue that this is not due to the extraordinary nature of the villagers’ experience; rather, it is due to Agamben’s understanding of what the human being is. For Agamben (1998), man is, first and foremost, a political animal, the subject

of a worldly sovereign. He does not include in his analysis the aspect of man's being as a subject of God. According to Kierkegaard (1968), the essential being of the human being is *ethical*, which is derived from man's nature, not as a political animal, but as the subject of the transcendental sovereign—"There is nothing between [man] and God except the ethical" (Kierkegaard 1968, 122). As Agamben suggests, the war has made these civilians indistinguishable from animals—politically speaking; but, in their relationship to God, in that very "state of exception," the villagers' were markedly human.

For many anthropologists and those who are seasoned in the discipline's secular discourses, this "theological move" that I make by inviting Kierkegaard's work and the understanding of the human being as the subject of *the* heavenly sovereign may seem problematic, unreflective, and even foolish—especially when it is taken to explain a non-Western, non-Protestant, Tamil Catholic fishing village in South Asia. However, according to Evans-Pritchard (1960), Milbank (1990) and Cannell (2006), these reactions that other anthropologists might have about embracing a Christian understanding of the human being reflect anthropology's relationship to Christianity since the inception of the discipline.⁴ In 1960, Evans-Pritchard writes in *Blackfriars*:

All the leading sociologists and anthropologists contemporaneous with, or since, Frazer were agnostics and positivists—Westermarck, Hobhouse, Haddon, Rivers, Seligman, Radcliffe-Brown and Malinowski; and if they discussed religion they treated it as superstition for which some scientific explanation was required and could be supplied. Almost all the leading anthropologists of my own generation would, I believe, hold that religious faith is total illusion, a curious phenomenon soon to become extinct and to be explained in such terms as 'compensation' and 'projection' or by some sociologicistic

⁴ "Christianity has functioned in some ways as 'the repressed' of anthropology over the period of the formation of the discipline" (Cannell 2006, 4).

interpretation on the lines of maintenance of social solidarity. (Evans-Pritchard 1960, 110)

The founding fathers of social anthropology, according to Evans-Pritchard, shared a particular way of looking at religion and religious faith. Their attitude, according to him, was a product of a particular intellectual movement led by Sir James Frazer and his work, *The Golden Bough* (1922)—an attempt to disprove Christianity’s claim that there is only one God, by presenting voluminous data on religious beliefs and practices from around the world. Frazer thereby claimed that there are as many gods as there are different peoples (languages) and cultures. Moreover, those who followed the Frazerian approach to religion maintained that gods, including that of Christianity, are human creations. For example, Emil Durkheim’s idea that religion is the product of “society” and gods are human “projections” is part of this intellectual movement (Durkheim 1995, 421, 424). According to Evans-Pritchard, early social anthropologists were positivists who found science to be a truer means of accessing reality than transcendent faith, and they were agnostics.

The discipline’s positivist start and the legacy of agnostic old masters brought about an irreconcilable contradiction to the way anthropology relates itself to religion: on the one hand, the discipline insists on being the first hand informer about “the native’s point of view,” which includes the native’s religious experience; on the other hand, the discipline maintains that a scientific understanding of reality is truer and more objective than a religious understanding of reality. Evans-Pritchard’s remark made in 1960 still applies today—“Religion is superstition to be explained by anthropologists, not something an anthropologist, or indeed any rational person, could himself believe in” (Evans-Pritchard 1960, 110). In anthropology, in order to observe the religious sphere the anthropologist must refrain from full participation. Thus, Michael Taussig

writes about the dilemma that he faced in Colombia of writing about the practices of exorcism among the Indians, who are the victims of the long history of colonial terror in rubber plantations of Columbia.

It is the ultimate anthropological conceit, anthropology in its highest, indeed redemptive, moment, rescuing the “voice” of the Indian from the obscurity of pain and time. From the represented shall come that which overturns the representation. But this very same anthropology tells us that we cannot take our place in the charmed circle of men orating through the night around the tobacco pot, chewing coca. It is said that the stories about the rubber boom are dangerous, “histories of punishment” meant only for sorcerers who, in interpreting such histories, gain evil power. *There is no place for us here, and anthropology, the science of man, confounds itself in its very moment of understanding the natives’ point of view.* (Taussig 1987, 135; italics mine)

Secularism: the metamorphosis of agnosticism

Today, in anthropology, I maintain that agnosticism has taken a new form—secularism—and what lies at the heart of the discipline’s secularism is, as was the case with agnosticism, a Frazerian cultural relativistic attitude toward religion, which rejects Christianity’s claim of one true god, and considers all religions to possess the same validity. According to Evans Pritchard, this relativistic attitude toward religion was at the heart of James Frazer’s intellectual revolution:

Following the success of comparative philology, comparative mythology and comparative religion (a science of religion) began to turn the pagan gods and goddesses, and by implication those of the higher religions as well, into sun and moon and stars and to treat all religious beliefs and rites as phenomena of the same order and, again by implication, of the same validity. This pointed to a relativism in which Christianity was not the one true faith but just one religion among others, all equally false. The famous Max Müller, it is true, trod warily—the Bishop of Gloucester had already condemned attempts ‘to put into competition the sacred boobs of India and the Holy Scriptures.’ Not so some of the others, who represent an intellectual movement culminating in Sir James Frazer. (Evans-Pritchard 1960, 109)

A century after Frazer's intellectual revolution, today, this relativistic view of religion—that Christianity is “just one religion among others” and all religions are “phenomena of the same order” and “all equally false”—has become the dominant view in anthropology. Along with the relativist attitude towards culture, race and gender, relativistic attitude towards religion is often presented and proselytized in anthropological discourse *as if religious equality is of the same order as the equality of language, culture and race*, and as if maintaining a relativistic attitude towards religion is an *ethically correct thing to do*. This is because the field of anthropology is considered a *secular* public space. An anthropologist can be a believer in private, and will be allowed to practice religion as long as she does not bring her belief into anthropology, understood as a field of public scientific debate. As Fenella Cannell writes, “[T]here has been a widespread although not total disciplinary bias within anthropology in favor of the claim to be exercising a completely secular analytical approach.” Cannell cautions us, quoting John Milbank, that, “This is a fiction: ‘Once there was no ‘secular’. . . . The secular as a domain had to be instituted or imagined’ (Milbank 1990, 9)” (Cannell 1997, 3).

In her introduction to *The Anthropology of Religion* (2006), Cannell writes that anthropologists excel in unbelief in, not any faith, but in Christian faith. “Anthropology, as part of social science, defined itself in its origin as what theology was not; since the theology it was repudiating was specifically Christian theology, anthropological theory has always carried within it ideas profoundly shaped by that act of rejection, from which there can therefore never be a complete separation” (Cannell 2006, 45). What lies at the heart of the discipline's moral system is still the Frazerian counter-thesis to Christianity's one-true-God claim. In *Theology and Social Theory* (1990), Milbank, a theologian, makes a similar claim regarding social science's relationship to Christianity in general. Milbank maintains that the rise of “the secular” is a

historical product, which coincides with the emergence of political science (and later sociology); the origin of “the secular” can be traced as far back as the work of Hobbes’, *Leviathan*, which modeled the notion of the subject of the sovereign (modern) state to the subject of the transcendental sovereign. For Milbank, political science and sociology is nothing but “a new theology” (Milbank 1990, 4)⁵:

[Political science (and later sociology)] interprets the theological transformation at the inception of modernity as a genuine ‘reformation’ which fulfils the destiny of Christianity to let the spiritual be the spiritual, without public interference, and the public be the secular, without private prejudice. Yet this interpretation preposterously supposes that the new theology simply brought Christianity to its true essence by lifting some irksome and misplaced sacred ecclesial restrictions on the free market of the secular, whereas, in fact, it instituted an entirely different economy of power and knowledge and had to invent ‘the political’ and ‘the state,’ just as much as it had to invent ‘private religion.’ (Milbank 1990, 10)

According to Milbank, anthropology is part of this new theology (i.e., “sociology”), a church that promotes the doctrine of the secular. Therefore, the kind of challenge that the anthropology of Christianity faces is: How can anthropology, a discipline that does not *theologically* agree with Christianity, give “voice” to the native (believer’s) account of Christian faith?

This dissertation faces the challenge of giving voice to the native’s account of devotion through ethnographic writing. Interestingly, however, anthropology contains within itself some ethnographic approaches to religion that succeed in salvaging the “native’s perspective” of religious experience. These are approaches taken by authors who are suspicious of anthropology’s secular scientific approach to religion, and they are female writers such as Maya

⁵ “In effect, theology encounters in sociology only a theology, and indeed a church in disguise, but a theology and a church dedicated to promoting a certain secular consensus” (Milbank 1990, 4).

Deren (2004[1953]), Laura Bohannan (1954), and Alice Henderon (1998[1937]), whose work lie on the borders between anthropology and fiction, anthropology and art, anthropology and poetry.⁶ This dissertation too is written from a perspective that is critical of the discipline's secularism.

Anthropology of Violence: the Sufferer as the "Dispossessed"

In the field of anthropology, the dominant scientific approach to religion has certain effects on the discipline's approach to the study of social suffering. Anthropology of social suffering tends to portray violence as something that has exclusively negative effects on victims' lives, and the effects of violence that brings about positive changes are often outside the scope of its study. Such underestimation of the potential of the victim's relation to violence on the part of anthropologists is evident in Das and Kleinman (2001). In their introduction to *Remaking a World: Violence, Social Suffering, and Recovery*, Veena Das and Arthur Kleinman, at one point, compare the "sufferer of violence" with the victim of spirit possession (2001:21). According to them, both the victim of violence and the victim of spirit possession are "dispossessed" of agency. They write, "Dispossession. . . refers to an experience of splitting in cognitive and affective states so that the person becomes nearly completely absorbed in that focus"; and "During dispossession what is inner and inexpressible can be projected outward into a culturally authorized voice" (2001; 21). This view of the victim of violence as an unconscious, unaware, and unable individual is problematic because, even before investigation begins, authors preclude

⁶ See also Edith Turner (1992).

from their analysis the “conscious I” of the victim, just as they do with “the conscious I of the possessed” (De Certeau 1996).⁷

As Thiranagama (2011) emphasizes in her work on Sri Lanka’s civil war, war is “a subjective and transformative experience” for the victims and the victims are active agents; the victims are by no way unaware and unable, “dispossessed” subjects as Das and Kleinman imply by comparing the sufferer to the possessed. As Chapter 6 of this dissertation reveals, the Catholic victims of Perunkalipattu are not “dispossessed” sufferers: they mobilized their devotion to their God as they faced their most heartbreaking experience of the war—the loss of loved ones and the guilt of leaving the loved ones behind in the battlefield.

The “conscious I” of the victim and survivor’s spirituality is an important theme of Primo Levi’s masterpiece, *If this is a man* [*Se questo e’ un uomo*], as well. Like Thiranagama (2011), himself being a survivor, Primo Levi is aware of the “conscious I” of the survivor, and talks about how the experience in Auschwitz for him and his fellow inmates was “a new Bible” [“una nuova Bibbia”] (Levi 1996, 73). For example, they called the Carbide Tower in the Buna Camp in Auschwitz the “Tower of Babel” (*Babelturm*), because the Carbide Tower represented “the insane dream of grandeur of our [German] masters, their contempt for God and men” (Levi 1996, 72-73).⁸

⁷ According to Michel De Certeau (1996), it was the birth of modern science (including medicine, philosophy and even theology) that gave birth to the very idea that the possessed are “dispossessed.” And this particularly modern attitude towards possession (in the case of De Certeau’s work, *The Possession at Loudun* in seventeenth century France) emerged once “Skepticism” crept in and God was no longer considered true.

⁸ Another reason that the Carbide Tower seemed *another* Tower of Babel, according to Primo Levi, is because there was a “confusion of language” when the tower was built. In the case of the

The Tamil Catholic survivors in northern Sri Lanka too had “seen” the works of God in their own experience during the war. For example, James, a Catholic survivor wrote in a letter addressed to his sister, soon after he and his family had fled the “no-fire zone” in Mullaitivu in March 2009—“It was all God’s work.” The letter read:

My wife, my daughter and I are fine [i.e., We survived.] We are anxious to know whether you are well. When we fled [walking through the lagoon], the water-level was up to our neck. We came with only the clothes we were wearing. We won't be able to thank God sufficiently for protecting our lives.

In their understanding of their suffering, and in their praising and thanking God, the villagers are not “dispossessed.” Many of these Catholic survivors, like James, understood their suffering in terms of Providence. And their Catholic devotion is not simply a “culturally authorized voice,” to which the victims blindly and unconsciously submit themselves. The devotion to Jesus Christ is a conscious activity of each survivor. By surrendering their suffering unto Christ, the villagers found relief from their suffering. And to surrender is a conscious choice that each villager makes in his or her relationship to the transcendental sovereign.

In the remaining part of this introduction, I introduce the background of war in northern Sri Lanka and a brief history of the village, Perunkalipattu, and the context of my fieldwork.

Tower of Babel, God made men speak different languages and thereby prevented them from communicating with each other; and due to the confusion of languages, men did not finish building the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11:1-9). In Auschwitz, since the Jewish inmates were from all over Europe, the building bricks of the Carbide Tower had at least seven different names: *Ziegel, briques, tegula, cegli, kamenny, mattoni, téglak* (Levi 1996, 73).

The Vanni and Sri Lanka's Civil War

According to the 1981 national census, a significant majority (74 percent) of Sri Lanka's population is ethnically grouped as "Sinhalese," and seventy-percent of the island's population is Sinhalese-speaking Buddhist. The Sinhalese Buddhist population lives mostly in the island's south.⁹ The rest of the country, the Northern and Eastern Provinces, are inhabited mostly by a non-Buddhist, Tamil-speaking population. The majority of the people of the Northern Province are Tamil-speaking Hindus and Christians, who are ethnically grouped as "Tamils," and Tamil-speaking Muslims, who are ethnically grouped as "Muslims."¹⁰ The Eastern Province is ethnically more heterogeneous than the Northern Province, and has roughly equal proportions of Tamils, Muslims and the Sinhalese.

⁹ Sri Lanka today consists of nine provinces. With the term "the south" I refer to the vast geographical area of Sri Lanka, consisting of seven provinces: North Central, North Western, Central, Western, Sabaragamuwa, Uva, and Southern Provinces.

¹⁰ In Sri Lanka, Muslims constitute a distinct ethnic identity, in contrast to the Muslims in Tamilnadu in India, who identify themselves as Tamils.

At the time of independence (1948), the Northern Province was divided into three parts: the Jaffna District in the north, the Mannar District in the west, and the Vavuniya District in the east. Later, in 1978, the Vavuniya District was divided into the Vavuniya and the Mullaitivu Districts, and in 1984, the Jaffna District was divided into the Jaffna and the Kilinochchi Districts. Both the Mullaitivu District and the Kilinochchi District belong to a geographical area called “the Vanni,” and the Vanni includes parts of the Jaffna, Mannar and Vavuniya Districts as well. While Jaffna enjoys high population density, the Vanni is sparsely populated.¹¹ The Vanni, a seemingly less significant geographical area than Jaffna, is what in 1990 became the heart of Tamil *Eelam*, a semi-autonomous state established by the LTTE. Tamil *Eelam* existed in the Vanni for two decades until May 2009. Perunkalipattu, the original village of the Tamil Catholics among whom I conducted my fieldwork, sits in the western part of the Mannar District, inside the Vanni.

Historical Background

The LTTE was formed in the late 1970s to fight an armed liberation struggle for a separate state for Tamils within Sri Lanka. The LTTE was just one of half a dozen Tamil militant youth groups formed for the same cause at that time (see Thiranagama 2011). Behind the rise of various Tamil militant youth groups, there is a history of political discrimination against the Tamil-speaking minority in Sri Lanka. Post-independence Sri Lanka and its electoral democracy is led by “Sinhala Buddhist nationalism,” an ideology built upon the myth that Sinhalese

¹¹ In 1981, there were 830,552 people in the Jaffna District (including what later became the Kilinochchi District), while the total number of people living in the Mannar, Vavuniya and Mullaitivu districts was 278,852. (The Mullaitivu District used to be part of the Vavuniya District). (Department of Census and Statistics 1985, 33).

Buddhists were the original settlers of Sri Lanka and Tamils were alien late-comers to the island, and therefore, Sri Lanka traditionally belongs to Sinhalese Buddhists and not to Tamils (Moore 1989; Spenser 1990a; Peebles 1990). According to Moore (1989), this national myth first came to dominate the minds of the Sinhala nationalist elites before the country's independence, and later through propaganda, the minds of ordinary Sinhalese. After independence, pro-Sinhala language, pro-Buddhism policies—such as the Sinhala Only Act (1956) that limited Tamil-speaking students' access to higher education—were implemented by these Sinhalese elites at the expense of the island's Tamil-speaking minority. Moreover, the Sinhalese-led governments have introduced land settlement and irrigation schemes in predominantly Tamil-speaking areas of northern and eastern Sri Lanka, and have given Sinhalese settler-farmers favored access to the land and irrigation water in these areas. These land settlement and irrigation schemes yielded grave consequences and exacerbated ethnic conflict in northern and eastern Sri Lanka (Tambiah 1996; Peebles 1990; Manogaran 1987).¹²

Referring to the Accelerated Mahaweli Irrigation Development Scheme implemented in the late 1970s by J. R. Jayewardene's 1977 United National Party (UNP), Patrick Peebles writes:

The UNP consciously evoked the image of an idyllic Buddhist past in which Dry Zone irrigation provided the resources for a prosperous and cultured civilization. Officials of the Accelerated Mahaweli Programme appealed directly to this mythical past, in which

¹² In 1977, the new UNP government was born in a state of emergency when riots against Tea Plantation Tamils in the country's south displaced tens of thousands of Tamil families from the tea plantations. These riots followed the 1977 election, because in that election, the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF), which fought the election by calling for a separate Tamil state in north and east, became the opposition party. As a result of these riots, about ten percent (90 thousand out of 975 thousand) of displaced Tea Plantation Tamil families came to settle in the district of Vavuniya, south of the Vanni. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, in Vavuniya, the settlement of these Tea Plantation Tamil refugee families coincided with the government's settlement scheme for Sinhalese families to address the increase in the district's Tamil population .

Tamil Hindu invaders were hated enemies, to mobilize [Sinhalese] Buddhist support. Tamil separatists countered this with a myth of their own, a “Tamil Homeland” (*paarampariyamaanta ayakam*, literally “hereditary motherland”) in the Northern and Eastern provinces. (Peebles 1990, 41)

From the late 1970s onward, the government-led land settlement and irrigation development schemes were funded by foreign development aid. Under President J. R. Jayewardene, the previous governments’ socialist welfare projects were replaced by capitalist, market-oriented, development projects such as free-trade zones, expansion of the military and massive irrigation development projects—all funded by foreign development aid. After the late 1970s, as a result of economic liberalization, Sri Lanka therefore became economically and politically dependent on foreign donors. Moreover, economic liberalization resulted in the militarization of the country.¹³ The Accelerated Mahaweli Scheme, when it was introduced, was expected to solve two major problems that Sri Lanka faced at the time: the Tamil secessionist movements among Tamil youth in the north and the Marxist movements among the Sinhalese youth in the south. The Scheme did not succeed in eradicating either of these.¹⁴ The government introduced the Prevention of Terrorism Bill in November 1979. Four years after the introduction of the anti-terrorism bill, in 1983, under the UNP rule, the country saw the largest anti-Tamil riots in its history—the 1983 Black July Riot in the capital city of Colombo and other parts of

¹³ In November of 1979, another critical step taken by the President J. R. Jayewardene is the introduction of the “The Prevention of Terrorism Bill.” The introduction of this anti-terrorism bill was immediately followed by the passing of the 1980 budget, and the largest portion of money in the budget was allocated to the Accelerated Mahaweli Irrigation Scheme (Ministry of Plan Implementation 1981a). In retrospect, therefore, the UNP government seems to have introduced the anti-terrorism bill in 1979 in response to pressure from foreign investors in the Accelerated Mahaweli Scheme.

¹⁴ For an in-depth work on the Sinhalese youth insurgency, see Thushara Hewage (2012); for the militant Tamil youth movements, see Thiranagama (2011).

country where Tamils and Sinhalese co-existed for centuries (Tambiah 1984; Daniel 1996; Hoole 2001; Thiranagama 2011). Many of the Sinhalese participants in the massacre of Tamil civilians were ordinary Sinhalese whose livelihoods were impacted by the social and economic reforms of the late 1970s and early 1980s. Tambiah (1996) therefore suggests, “[The Tamils] were convenient victims [for the Sinhalese majority], against whom aggression that could not be directed at the state could be displaced” (Tambiah 1996, 100).

Perunkalipattu: the Village

Perunkalipattu is a coastal village in the Mannar District of Northern Province. It was not until 1984 that Mannar District experienced the death of ordinary civilians due to ethnic conflict. The first ethnic violence targeting ordinary civilians in December 1984 followed a landmine attack, reputedly by the LTTE, on an army jeep in Mannar Town. After this incident, a group of Sinhalese soldiers went on a shooting spree in the town and in nearby villages and killed more than one hundred fifty Tamil civilians, who were farmers, bus passengers, and postmen. It was the first time that people in the district experienced displacement. They fled to India, only a couple of dozen miles away from Mannar Island. In the late 1980s, there was fighting among various Tamil militant youth groups, and fighting between these groups and the Sri Lankan Army. In 1987, the arrival of the Indian Peace Keeping Forces from India brought more displacements and misery upon the lives of the people in the district. In 1990, the LTTE brought the entire district under its control, and thereafter, the district remained divided: government territory in the east and LTTE territory in the west. The latter part of the district was part of the Vanni, and it was where Perunkalipattu Village is located.

Perunkalipattu used to be a multi-religious Tamil-speaking community, and demographically, the village was like a peanut, containing two nuts: on the one side, there were

Muslim paddy cultivators, on the other, Catholic fishermen, as many as the paddy cultivators, and in the middle, in the narrow part, a small number of Hindu shopkeepers. The Hindu shopkeepers lived in “the Town,” in between the Muslim and Catholic sections. The village was equipped with a natural harbor, and in the late 1980s, Perunkalipattu became strategically important for government troops, the Indian Peace Keeping Force, and the LTTE. In June 1990, the LTTE came to occupy and use the village as its naval base. Four months later, the LTTE evicted by force all the Muslim villagers from Perunkalipattu along with all other Muslims living in northern Sri Lanka at that time. Of the seventy-five thousand Muslims displaced in October 1990 from Northern Province, about thirty thousand were Muslims from the Mannar District. In the Mannar District, about thirty percent of the population was Muslim, and most of the Muslim families were paddy cultivators.¹⁵

After the Muslim families were evicted by the LTTE, Perunkalipattu became an exclusively Tamil, mono-ethnic village. Whenever fighting erupted, the villagers (Catholics and Hindus) had to abandon the sea and the village to find refuge elsewhere. But they each time returned to their village after their temporary sojourn in the surrounding coastal villages in the rebels’ territory. In 1999, however, during an attack, the villagers crossed the military border and fled to government territory because the LTTE fired at them. The villagers had disobeyed the rebels’ order to abandon the village and the coast and flee inland, because they could not imagine life without the sea. The LTTE then fired an artillery rocket into the village church where all the villagers were taking refuge. After this incident, two-thirds of the villagers, three-hundred-and-fifty families, went to live in government territory on Mannar Island; the rest, about hundred-

¹⁵ For a comprehensive ethnography of the Muslims displaced from Northern Province in October 1990, see Thiranagama (2011), chapters 3 and 4.

forty families, remained in rebel territory. Those who fled to government territory, to Mannar Island, later built and settled in “the City of Santa Marta,” an internal refugee camp on the islet. The Santa Marta Camp is separated by only eight sea miles from Perunkalipattu, and the seaway between the two locations served as a natural divide between rebel territory and government territory.

Fieldwork

My first visit to the Santa Marta Camp on Mannar Island was in July 2003 during the Norwegian government-led ceasefire. It was right after the villagers, who had been displaced from Perunkalipattu in 1999, built the Santa Marta Camp. (Prior to building the Santa Marta Camp, the villagers had stayed in a government-run camp on Mannar Island between 1999 and 2002.) My second trip to the Santa Marta Camp was four years later, in July 2007. This time, I was back to conduct fieldwork. At about the same time, however, the war, which had resumed a year earlier in another part of northern Sri Lanka (Trincomalee, in the east), reached the Mannar District. During the same month, government forces attacked Perunkalipattu, a naval stronghold of the LTTE, and the families that were still in the village, had to flee. The LTTE, however, forbade these families to flee across the seaway to government territory, and the villagers were forced to find refuge in the Kilinochchi District in the Vanni, the rebels’ stronghold at that time. It was only a matter of time before the war would reach the Kilinochchi District.

In July 2007, due to the security situation, I had to give up continuing my fieldwork in the Mannar District. After having stayed in the Santa Marta Camp for only eight days, I left Northern Sri Lanka and traveled to Tamilnadu in India, where I carried on my study among a

group of Sri Lankan refugees.¹⁶ The following summer, in July 2008, I could not return to the Mannar district at all, due to the fighting in that part of the country, so I conducted fieldwork in the Al-Mannar Camp in Kalpitiya in the Puttalam District. The Al-Mannar Camp is a home for a community of Tamil-speaking Muslim families, who had been displaced by the LTTE in October 1990 from the village of Talaimannar on Mannar Island. While my fieldwork in Tamilnadu and in the Puttalam District are not directly related to the part of my work discussed in this dissertation, my stays with these different displaced communities broadened my perspective on the long-term consequences of isolation for communities in camps, especially the effects that the prolonged conflict has on children who were born and grew up in camps.

My last and extended stay in the Santa Marta Camp began in mid-March 2009, by which time the LTTE had lost almost all of their territory except for a thin strip of coastal land in Mullaitivu. In April 2009, the government's ground troops broke through the so-called "no-fire zone," where the civilians were held by the LTTE, and rained bombs on them all. Thousands of civilians then fled the LTTE's captivity. The LTTE shot these civilians from behind and the government troops fired back at the rebels through the civilians (see Chapter 3).

The tragedy of the survivors did not end after they fled to what they thought was the refuge and safety of the government's side. Immediately after they reached the government's territory, they were bussed directly to the "transit camps"—except in the case of the severely wounded, who were first sent to hospitals and then to the camps. In these "transit" camps, the

¹⁶ In 2007, according to the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS), the number of Sri Lankan refugees remaining in the camps in Tamilnadu amounted to seventy-six-thousand. Those who remained in these camps were poor families who had no financial and social network to move out of the camp, and many of these refugees were the Tamils from tea plantations in Sri Lanka, who, after the 1977 riots, came to settle in Vavuniya. For a comprehensive sociological study of Sri Lankan Refugees in camps in Tamilnadu, see Arockiam (2007).

government kept the survivors behind barbed wire fences “for security purposes.” The number of civilian survivors held in “transit camps” amounted to as many as three-hundred-thousand. It was not until December 2009, eight months after the end of the war, that the government granted the Vanni civilians in these camps freedom of movement.

The period of my extended fifteen-month fieldwork ended in May 2010. Due to the war and security situation in Northern Sri Lanka, my stay in the Santa Marta Camp during my extended fieldwork was limited to three periods: the last phase of the war (March-April 2009), six months after the war (October-November 2009), and a year after the war (March-April 2010). Except for one week in April 2010, I could not conduct any fieldwork in Perunkalipattu, the original village. Whenever I was not residing in the Santa Marta Camp, I conducted field research in Al-Mannar Camp in the Puttalam district, and in Munnakkaraya, a Tamil-speaking Sinhalese fishing community in Negombo on the southwest coast. The purpose of my fieldwork in the latter was to study the impact of the industrialization of Sri Lanka’s fishery as well as that of the war on southern Catholic fishing communities.

Chapters

I have arranged my chapters in chronological order. Chapter 2 documents the history of the village, including the history of the displacement of Muslim families. It also explains the manner in which the villagers built the Santa Marta Camp and their everyday life in the camp in summer 2007. The data are based on Mannar district administrative documents collected at the Mannar Department of Fisheries and at the Mannar Kachcheri (district secretariat) in 2006. I also used oral histories. Chapter 3 is based on the data collected between March and April 2009 in the Santa Marta Camp. In March and April 2009, the war continued in Mullaitivu, seventy miles east of the Santa Marta Camp. The chapter explains the villagers’ experience during the last phase of

the war both inside and outside the battlefield. Chapters 4 and 5 are about life in the Santa Marta Camp in November 2009, six months after the war. At that time, the Catholic families of Perunkalipattu were living in two different locations fifty miles from each other: four-hundred families in the Santa Marta Camp on Mannar Island and one hundred families in the Manik Farm Camp. These chapters examine how the villagers faced the cruel reality of the missing bodies of their lost loved ones and mourned their death, as they had to face dire poverty, exacerbated by the country's astoundingly high rate of inflation. Chapter 6 is based on the data collected during Holy Week in April 2010 in Perunkalipattu. I was given a rare opportunity to visit Perunkalipattu, where the survivors, who had been released from the Manik Farm Camp, had just returned. By following the survivors' enactment of the way of the cross from one station to the next through the ruins of their homes and streets, the chapter examines the relationship between the villagers' traumatic experiences of war and their Catholic devotion. Finally, Chapter 7, by way of conclusion, revisits the theme of social science's relationship to Christianity. It discusses the theological nature of anthropological discourse of man by building upon Heidegger's concept of "ontotheology." In addition, the chapter draws upon Kierkegaard's notion of *Ex-sistere* ("to stand out from") and explores the possibility of writing ethnography of the being of the believer.



Figure 3 Map of Mannar District. (Source: Mannar Department of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources)

CHAPTER 2

VILLAGE AND CAMP

“Now we live as *akatis* [“refugees”] in the City of Santa Marta. Each family is allotted 10 *peechchi*. The land however belongs to the bishop. Thus, we are now negotiating with the bishop whether we can purchase land for Rs. 40,000¹⁷ per family. However, even when we could live in Santa Marta as villagers and not as *akatis*, it’s hard to make a living in Santa Marta as fishermen.”—Peter

This chapter provides historical backgrounds for the chapters that follow. It first introduces the setting of the village, Perunkalipattu, prior to 1984, the year when the ethnic conflict reached the Mannar District in northwestern Sri Lanka. It explains the village’s history, demography, the relationship between the Muslim and Catholic villagers, self-sufficient village economy, and the villagers’ diet and health. The chapter then explains the history of the village’s falling apart—first, the eviction of the Muslim families in October 1990 by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE); then, the June 1999 Catholic exodus. Finally, it examines the manner in which the Tamil Catholic fishing community began rebuilding itself in the City of Santa Marta.

Mannar District (- 1984)

Mannar District is one of the smallest districts in Sri Lanka, and it occupies only three percent (771 square miles) of the landmass of the country. The district, however, possesses the

¹⁷ Sri Lankan Rs. 100 = US\$1.00

most fertile sea in all of Sri Lanka, and sits in northwestern Sri Lanka in the Gulf of Mannar. Mannar Town, the district's capital, is located on Mannar Island, an eighteen-mile-long crescent-shaped islet. From the western tip of Mannar Island, Rameshwaram Island of the South Indian state of Tamilnadu is only 29.8 miles away. The Gulf of Mannar was renowned for pearl fishery until the early twentieth century, and Mannar Island was the first territory in Sri Lanka where the Portuguese established its *padroado* in 1560 (Quere 1995, 6).¹⁸ In Mannar today, the largest fishing communities belong to *Paravas*, who are the descendants of Catholic Parava fishermen whom the Portuguese had brought from the southeast coast of Tamilnadu for pearl fishing during the sixteenth and early seventeenth century (Quere 1995, 144). As far as the Catholic fishing families in Perunkalipattu are concerned, however, they are not *Paravas* but *Mukkuvars*¹⁹ who converted from Hinduism to Catholicism during the eighteenth century under the Dutch persecution through the work of the Oratorian missionaries from Goa (Antoninus 1956, 101-102).²⁰ In the Mannar District, in Manthai, Muslim communities existed as early as eighth and ninth century after the arrival of merchants from Arabia and Persian Gulf (Quere 1995, 3-4).

¹⁸ The Portuguese took control of Mannar Island in 1560, and this royal Portuguese *padroado* lasted nearly a century till 1658, at which point the Dutch took control of the islet (Quere 1995, 143).

¹⁹ The *mukkuvars* are a Tamil matrilineal caste engaged in farming or fishing (Raghavan 1971; McGilvray 2008). In India, *mukkuvars* are Catholics, who converted to Catholicism during the sixteenth century. In Sri Lanka, the majority of *mukkuvars* are Hindus. In India, *mukkuvars* live on the southwest coast of Tamilnadu as well as along the coastal belt of Kerala, and are traditionally fishermen (Ram 1991; Busby 2006; Subramanian 2009). In northern Sri Lanka, in Jaffna, *mukkuvars* are fishermen or farmers. In Eastern Sri Lanka, in the Batticaloa and Amparai districts, *mukkuvars* are farmers (McGilvray 2008).

²⁰ The Oratorians were non-European, Brahmin priests from Goa. During the Dutch Period in Sri Lanka, under the protection of the Kandyan Kings, the Oratorians, under the leadership of Father Joseph Vaz, rebuild the Catholic community in northern Sri Lanka. Their mission center was located at Madhu (Perniola 1983, xx). There are Catholic historians who suggest that there was

Geographically, the Mannar district looks like a maple leaf, with Mannar Island as the stem, and the Mannar Mainland as the lobed leaf. Its seaboard boundary is eighty-five miles long. In the north, east and south, the district shares borders with five districts: the Kilinochchi district in the north, the Mullaitivu district in the northeast, the Vavuniya district in the southeast, the Anuradhapura district in the south, and the Puttalam district in the southwest. In 1981, the population of the district was 105,042. Forty-two percent of them was Catholic, 27 percent was Muslim, another 27 percent was Hindu, and 0.3 percent were was Buddhist (Mannar District Secretariat 1988, 14).

Until the mid-1980s, the district was self-sufficient in rice production, and it had one of the most fertile alluvial plains in the country. It was the area watered by Giant's Tank, a weir, and the water from Giant's Tank irrigated 25 percent of the acreage in the district.²¹ The great majority of the district's population was therefore either farmers or fishermen, and the number of farming families was four times greater than that of fishing families. There were people doing shop-keeping businesses, both Muslims and Hindus, but their number was very small. In the district, there were three major highways. The Mannar-Sangupitti Road was the busiest highway, connecting Mannar to Jaffna, through the coast of the Kilinochchi district. The Mannar-Medawachchiya A14 Road ran parallel to the Talaimannar Pier-Medawachchiya railway. Medawachchiya, located 53 miles southeast of Mannar Town, was the northern-most Sinhala-

already a Catholic community in Perunkalipattu as early as mid-seventeenth century. For example, Quere (1995) suggests that the Church of Saint James in Perunkalipattu ("Pereangali") was built by the Franciscans as early as 1629 (Quere 1995, 158-159).

²¹ Despite the fact that the district was located in a dry-zone, the land was covered with hundreds of irrigation tanks for paddy cultivation. Including the Giant's Tank, there were ten major irrigation tanks, having a command area exceeding 200 acres; there were 225 minor tanks (Agroskills 1987, 66).

speaking town in the Anuradhapura district. There was also a highway branching off at the Mannar-Vavuniya border on A14, toward the east, to the town of Vavuniya. Until April 1990, from Talaimannar Pier, there was a daily ferry service to India, to Dhanushkodi on Rameswaram Island in Tamilnadu. From Talaimannar, the passengers from India who crossed the border by ferry and arrived at Talaimannar Pier would then travel by train to various destinations within Sri Lanka.

Perunkalipattu (-October 1990)

“Perunkalipattu is a village surrounded by sea on three sides” (Majeed 2007, 14). The village sits on Mainland Mannar, at a juncture of the Indian Ocean and two rivers, the “North River” and the “South River.” Until October 1990, demographically, Perunkalipattu was like a peanut, containing two nuts. On the one side, there were paddy cultivators, on the other, fishermen (as many as the paddy cultivators), and in the middle, in the narrow part, a small number of shopkeepers. The paddy cultivators were Muslims, the fishermen were Catholics, and the shopkeepers were Hindus.²² In the western half of the village, or the sea side, in the “Catholic quarter,” lived the Catholic fishing families. In the “Muslim quarter,” located in the east, lived the Muslim paddy cultivators. The Hindu shopkeepers lived in “the Town,” in between the Muslim and Catholic quarters.

²² “There were, at the maximum, about forty Hindu families in Perunkalipattu” (Peter, pers. comm., April 24, 2009). In the year 1986, there were 332 fishing families in Perunkalipattu. (Mannar District Secretariat 1986, 32); In the year 1990, the number of family registered in the Perunkalipattu Mosque Record (Muslim families) was 375 families.

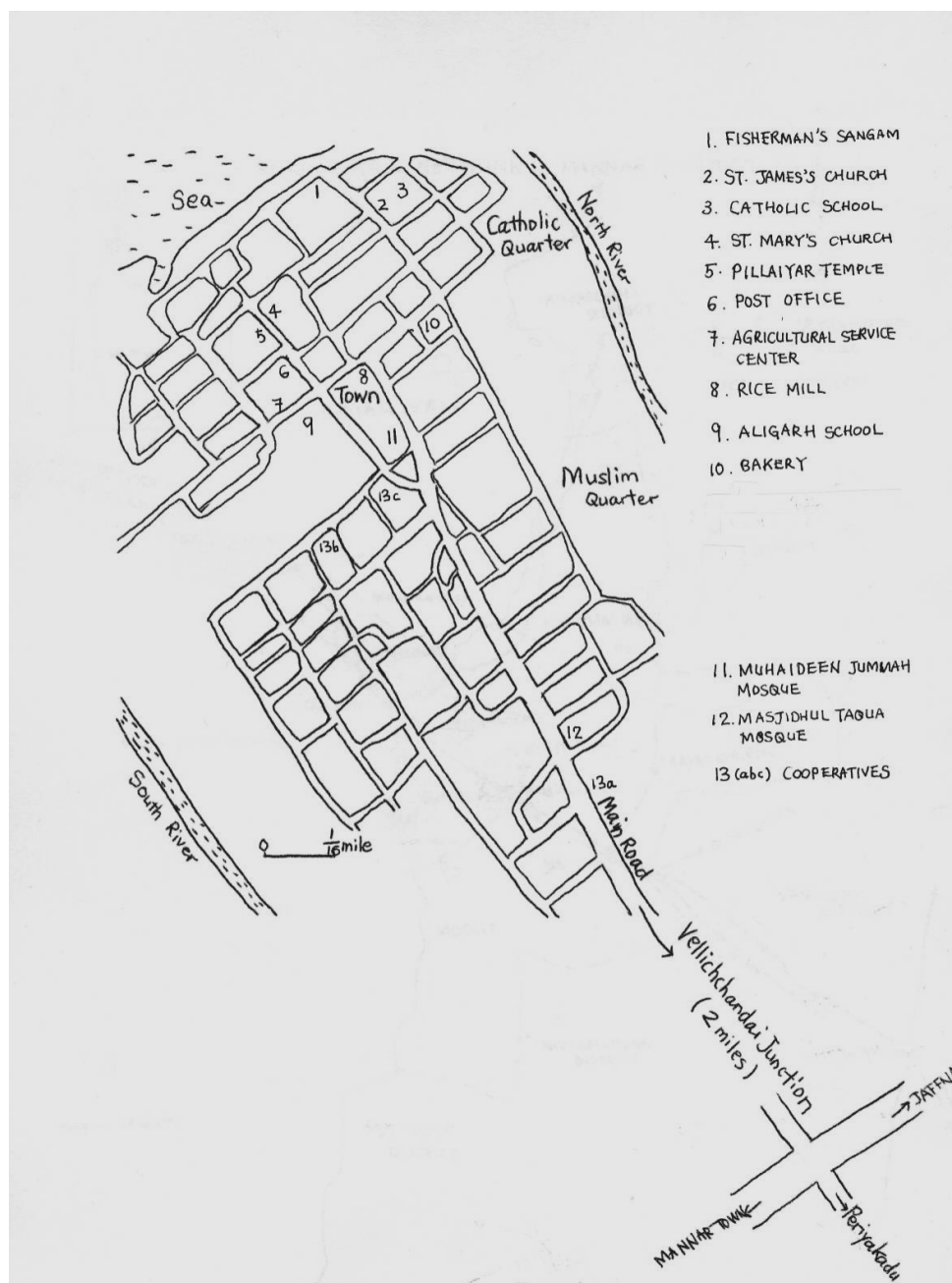


Figure 4 “Perunkalipattu.” (Note, the map is drawn with west on the top; the sea, the Indian Ocean, is in the west. The upper half by the sea is the Catholic Quarter, and the bottom half is the Muslim Quarter. Town is in the middle.) (Source: Majeed 15)

In the heart of the village, in “the town,” there was the rice mill and the Agricultural Service Center, a service branch of the Department of Agrarian Services, which provided subsidies and distributed fertilizer to the farmers. The post office was located behind the agricultural service center (Majeed 2007, 15). Not far from it, was the village hall, where meetings were held by the Women’s Co-operative Society. In the Muslim quarter, where farmers lived, there were three co-operatives: one for paddy producers, one for cottage industry (mostly cigarettes) producers, and one for grain legume and vegetable producers (15). There were two mosques. One was the Muhaideen Jummah Mosque, foundation laid in 1937 and completed in 1940, located not far from the town. It was a *jummah* mosque, where weekly noon prayers were held on Fridays, and there was a madrasa attached to the mosque. Another mosque, the Masjidhul Taqua Mosque was located on the village’s main bus road in the east of the Muslim quarter (87). Compared to the Catholic quarter, the Muslim quarter was large, and its houses were bigger, its streets wider—and this meant that the “Muslim villagers were, on average, better off than the Catholics” (Isabel). The Muslim school was located near the town, and offered education up to the Advanced Level.²³

In the Catholic quarter, there were two churches. Saint James’ Church (*Ayyappar ālayam*) was built in the eighteenth century, stood next to the sea, and a school (a junior secondary school²⁴) stood next to the church. Another church, Saint Mary’s (*Mariyāl ālayam*),

²³ General Certificate of Education (GCE) Advanced Level, or grade 12 and 13; students between the ages of seventeen and nineteen.

²⁴ GCE Ordinary-Level, or Grade 10 and 11; students between the ages of fourteen and seventeen.

was built in the 1920s or 1930s, and was only 300 yards from Saint James' Church. The reason there were two churches in Perunkalipattu, according to Isabel was,

“When I was very small, there was only one church, Saint James' Church. But then, there was a dispute among the Catholic villagers and one group *walked out* of Saint James' Church and built a church of its own, Saint Mary's Church. . . . Thereafter, the Catholic villagers were split into the two opposing groups, with an equal number of families belonging to each church” (Isabel, pers. comm., April 3, 2010).

According to Father Sebastian, who served as the parish priest in the 1990s,

“This communal hostility among the Catholic families survived well into the mid 1990s. All the peace treaties proposed by the successive parish priests had failed miserably. In Perunkalipattu, parish priests had to conduct two separate masses every Sunday at each church, as if there were two distinct communities within that small village” (Father Sebastian, August 7, 2007).

In the town area, there was a Hindu temple, called Ganesh Temple (*Pillaiyār kōyil*), not very far from Saint Mary's Church. The Hindu temple belonged to the Hindu shopkeepers who lived in the town area.

Vellichchandai Junction

There was no ground water available in Perunkalipattu, and this made the villagers walk every day for water to the Vellichchandai Junction, two miles east of the village, where there was a minor irrigation tank. The villagers traveled daily to bathe and wash their clothes at the Vellichchandai tank. After taking a bath in the tank, women fetched water from the Vellichchandai well for drinking and cooking purposes, and then carried the water back to the

village.²⁵ The Vellichchandai Junction is located on the Mannar-Sangupiddi (Jaffna) Road. From the junction, Mannar Town is fifteen miles south, and Jaffna Town is 100 miles north. At the junction, there was a police station and a rural hospital.

Muslim farmers

In Perunkalipattu, the Muslim families owned paddy fields as well as highlands and goats, cows and some tractors. Their paddy fields were located outside the village to the east, northeast, and southeast of the Vellichchandai Junction. “None of the families had large industrial farms” (Majeed 2007, 110). The average size of paddy field owned by a farming family in Perunkalipattu in 1987 was 3.19 acres. In addition to paddy field, many families owned some “highlands,” where the villagers cultivated vegetables and fruits. The main vegetables were chili peppers, tomatoes, brinjal, okra, and cucurbits, and the main fruits were mangos, bananas and limes. Some farmers also planted chilies, red onions, greengram, blackgram, cowpea, soyabean, groundnut, maize, finger millet (*kurakkan*), and sesame. “The villagers raised goats and cows for milk, milk products (*ney, tayir, mōr*), meat and cow dung.”; “The climate was very favorable. Some areas had plenty of rain, and other areas had good irrigation systems” (99-100). The Muslim villagers of Perunkalipattu were therefore employed in paddy cultivation; plowing, sowing, harvesting, milling, storing and selling. After harvesting, the villagers would make use of the land and straw to feed their cows (99).²⁶ Some Muslim families ran small businesses in the village. These shops sold condiments (curry masaras, chili, pepper, etc), purchased in large

²⁵ There used to be a man responsible for weeding the bed of the tank and the water was always fresh and clean (Isabel).

²⁶ “An important feature is that in the Mannar district, a significant number of [small] holdings tend livestock with crops (64 %) and 15 percent rear livestock only” (Agroskills 1987, 69).

amounts from Mannar Town, as well as vegetables and fruits purchased from the surrounding villages. They also had a saree-shop, a bakery, a bicycle repair shop, and a couple of teashops (112).

Catholic fishermen

The other half of Perunkalipattu was occupied by Catholic fishing families who were employed in the small scale fishing industry; fishing, shrimping, knitting nets and crab boxes, sea urchin (*aṭṭai*)-hunting, icing, transporting, and selling the catch to fish merchants. The sea around Perunkalipattu was rich in marine creatures. “The Perunkalipattu Sea was a shallow sea of coral reefs (*pavaḷap pārai kaṭal*) as opposed to ‘ocean’ (*samuttirak kaṭal*). The seawater came only up to a man’s bellybutton” (Paul, a 68 years old, pers. comm., April 7, 2009). The villagers fished at the “joining of the rivers and the sea” (*kaḷi mukattiṭal*) (Majeed 2007, 114). In Perunkalipattu, fishermen could fish all year-round, and the villagers did not have to migrate to other parts of the country to hunt for fish. This year-round fishing near home applied to Mannar fishermen, but not to fishermen in other districts in the country. Every year, fishermen from the country’s southwest coast, Negombo, and some from Jaffna had to migrate to the Mannar Sea.

Like the rest of Sri Lanka, two monsoons marked the beginning of the two annual seasons. The North East Monsoon marked the Maha season, and the South West Monsoon marked the Yala season.²⁷ The North East Monsoon brought abundant rain in the months of November and December. The monsoon rain was the promise for an abundant paddy harvest as well as an abundant fish catch, and the villagers called this northeast monsoon season the “rain

²⁷ Approximate annual precipitation during the North East monsoon is 967mm, while during the South East monsoon, it is only 182mm. The mean annual temperature in the district is 82.4 F with a mean minimum and maximum of 77.4 F and 86.7 F respectively (Agroskills 1987, 63).

season.” Joseph, a retired fisherman from Pesalai, the largest fishing village in the district, said, “Between the 23rd of September and the 21st of January, with the melting of ice in Antarctica, fish will come to the Mannar Sea. . . The Gulf of Mannar is the richest sea in Sri Lanka. There are great pearl banks in the area, and they are extremely rich in minerals. At pearl banks, plenty of fish, shrimp, cuttlefish, crabs, oysters, ornamental shells [*caṅku*] are found” (Joseph, pers. comm., August 6, 2006).

Women and shrimping

While Muslim men went to paddy fields and Catholic men went to the sea for fishing (there were a dozen or more Muslim men who went fishing with the Catholics²⁸), many Muslim and Catholic women went to the estuary located within the village for shrimping. Isabel used to take her daughters to the estuary to catch shrimp. She said,

“Everyone could catch shrimp because for that we didn’t need any equipment. Many female Muslim villagers would come and join us, and we’d use our hands to catch shrimp. . . We would spend hours in the morning and catch shrimp, 1kg, 2kg, 5kg, like that. Once we caught enough shrimp for the day, I mean, enough shrimp to exchange for some rice, sugar and other food items that my family needed for that day, we’d go back to the village and get those items. The next day we would return to the estuary to do the same” (Isabel, pers. comm., April 5, 2010).

Besides shrimping, Isabel dried fish and sold them in the village. (Isabel had thirteen children.)

²⁸ Majeed writes, “With the help of Christian friends [*kiristava nanparka!*], they were able to enter into small fishing activities also. They were catching shrimp and sea urchins. Some did fishing as full time fishermen, others were part time fishermen” (Majeed 2007, 112).

Children and ecology

“Perunkalipattu was an ideal place for children, especially during the rain season,”
Ismail, a 40-year-old Muslim Perunkalipattu villager, said,

“Perunkalipattu by nature was an interesting place to grow up for children, because it had the rivers and the sea. During the rain season, the water level of the rivers would rise, and with water on ‘all sides,’ the village would become like an island. Then, as children, we used to jump into the North River and let ourselves drift to the Indian Ocean. So wonderful was that experience that we would do it again and again. We’d jump into the river—we could start anywhere along the river! — swim downstream to the sea, come back to shore, and walk back, and, again, jump into the river and back to the sea. We all loved that” (Ismail, pers. comm., April 18, 2010).

The Muslim-Catholic relationship

For the villagers, the fact that Perunkalipattu was a multi-religious village is important. “We were living in harmony!” (*Nārīka ottumaiyā iruntōm!*)—be it a Muslim, Catholic, or a Hindu, any Perunkalipattu villager who lived in Perunkalipattu in the 1970s and the 1980s has uttered this sentence. The villagers have their own understanding of what made these different groups (Muslim paddy cultivators, Catholic fishing families, and Hindu shopkeepers) lived in harmony. They would summarize the inter-religious harmony in a single sentence, “The only thing we did not do was intermarry” (*Kalyāṇam maṭṭum kaṭṭayile.*)

As to why villagers were living in harmony, the most frequent answer that the female villagers would give was “Because the village had no water, everybody went to the Vellichchandai tank and well for water, and by sharing the tank and well, women were united”

(Gabiella, pers. comm., March 25, 2010).²⁹ The villagers shared water, the source of the most basic necessity of life. Gabiella said, “Regardless of religion, be it Muslim, Catholic or Hindu, every morning, women walked two miles to the Vellichchandai tank, where they did laundry, bathed, and bathed their children, and fetched water. The only thing that mattered at the Vellichchandai Tank was whether you were a man or woman. Men bathed at one side and women bathed at the other.”

The primary reason for the inter-religious harmony in Perunkalipattu, according to Majeed, a retired school principal, was because all the villagers spoke the same language. “The Tamil language was the basis for the Tamil-Muslim relationship. For historical reasons, Muslims had Tamil as their mother tongue. This speaking of the Tamil language bound them beyond any separation” (120). The villagers also studied together in Tamil language medium. The Muslim school in Perunkalipattu was not built until 1902. Until the Muslim school was built, the villagers studied together at the Catholic school (built in 1768). “It was the Catholic school that served as a bridge between the two communities” (Majeed 2007, 119). The Hindu children, even though their number was very small, also attended the Catholic school. In the course of time, however, the Muslim people’s intellectual careers went far beyond those of the Catholics. “They were extremely educated!” (Catholic villagers). While the Catholic school remained a junior secondary school, the Aligarh School, the Muslim school, became the senior secondary school, and produced countless numbers of teachers, as well as some doctors, engineers and ministers. After completing junior secondary education at the Catholic school, the Catholic students attended the Muslim school for their senior secondary education.

²⁹ “Another factor which united Tamils and Muslims was the drinking well at the Vellichchandai Tank” (Majeed 2007, 122).

Not only did they share a language and schools, but the villagers also shared a history; even before the British brought slaves to the Mannar sea from faraway lands (many from Africa) for pearl fisheries in the early nineteenth century, all three communities had been living in Perunkalipattu. The slaves brought by the British colonizers are still remembered in the village's oral history—"Our great grandfathers used to tell us that these slave men brought by the British were about 'four times bigger than us'!" (Sebastian, a seventy-year-old former Perunkalipattu village officer, pers. comm., April 4, 2010). Ismail, a Muslim, told me exactly the same, "Our great-grand fathers used to tell us that they had heard from their fathers about the slave men who were brought for pearl oyster fishing. These men were four times bigger than us" (Ismail, pers. comm., April 18, 2010).³⁰

The villagers were also joint-engineers in the village's welfare. "In establishing schools, and other institutions, we had joint ventures" (Majeed 2007, 119). Whenever necessary, the villagers came together and chose leaders to represent the whole village in negotiations with the Kachcheri, the district government authority. The villagers had a joint-economy as well. The great part of the village's economy was a barter economy, based on the exchange of fish for rice and vegetables and vice versa, across the Catholic and Muslim communities. Gabriella said,

"When I was a teenager [the 1960s and the early 1970s], instead of selling and buying things with money, we bartered fish for rice and vegetables. The Muslims villagers would

³⁰ Perunkalipattu, due to its unique geographical character, was equipped with a natural harbor. These testimonies of Sebastian and Ismail are likely to be true, because the British had slave laborers fishing pearl oysters in the Gulf of Mannar in the nineteenth century. The British colonizers brought slave laborers for pearl oyster fishery, and exploited the sea of the Gulf of Mannar. At the turn of the century, once pearl oysters in the region disappeared due to overfishing, the British sent fisheries inspection vessels to work on the pearl banks "for dredging, trawling, and hydrographical investigations." (Ceylon Administration Reports 1924, IV, Marine Biology, F2). The vessel "Nautilus" was the second of such inspection ships to be used in the Gulf of Mannar.

give us rice and vegetables in exchange for our fish. That type of exchange without money's mediation left contentment after the transaction, and enhanced interdependence and an affectionate relationship between the two communities. When there was a shortage in rice and vegetables, because of a drought or flood, the Muslims could get protein from fish from the Catholics, and vice versa.” (Gabriella, pers. comm., March 25, 2010).

The villagers respected village elders from each of the communities. “When there were problems among the communities, since we knew each other well, our elders could solve these problems” (Peter, pers. comm., March 29, 2009). “In Perunkalipattu, the Tamil people always paid respect to our Muslim elders” (Majeed 2007, 119), and vice versa, “The Muslim villagers always showed respect to our priest. For example, when a Muslim villager encountered our priest on the street, he would neaten his sarong, which he was wearing like short pants, cover his entire legs with the dress, and greet the priest, ‘*Vañakkam* [Hello] Father” (Vera, pers. comm., November 4, 2009).

Finally, the villagers also believe Perunkalipattu's peculiar geography contributed to its distinct inter-religious harmony. The village is located two miles off the highway, and between Perunkalipattu and the Vellichchandai Junction, there was no village, but a dry land, with a couple of palmyrah trees standing here and there. Except for the early morning rush hour when all the village women went to fetch water and the Muslim men cycled to their paddy fields, the Perunkalipattu-Vellichchandai road was quiet. (In the evening after work, men went to bathe.) And to the west of the village was the Indian Ocean, to the north and south, there were rivers. Due to this geographical feature, the village life in Perunkalipattu was “rather isolated” (Father Sebastian), and in isolation, a peculiar village life flourished.

The villagers maintain that the art and culture of both communities were rich and unique in the district. While the Muslim villagers celebrated their religious cultural-heritage through the “lectures” (*virivurai*) on *Sīrapurānam*, the life history of Prophet Mohammed, the Catholic villagers celebrated theirs through the Passion Play. The Muslim villagers claim that their cultural heritage shared little with other Muslim communities with the district, it shared a lot with the cultural heritage of the Muslims in Batticaloa in the East” (Ismail). Likewise, the Catholics claim that because they were the only *mukkuvar* community in the district, their culture was distinct in the district where *paravar* culture was dominant.

“Culturally, the Muslims invited their Tamil friends for the Ramadan and *hadj* feast days and shared feast meals. Simultaneously, during Christmas, it was customary that the Muslims were in turn invited. Apart from that, when there was a funeral or a marriage, they would invite each other without making any differences” (Majeed 2007, 119).

“We did not intermarry, but we did everything else together!” (*Kalyāṇam maṭṭum kaṭṭayile.*) is the most frequently uttered sentence by both Muslim and Catholic villagers when they recall “the good old days” in Perunkalipattu. The meaning of the sentence is well illuminated in the following use by Ismail. He said,

“One evening, I was returning to the village by bicycle. I saw Rose, a Catholic, walking in front of me. She had gone to Mannar and gotten off at the Vellichchandai Junction, and was walking back home. I was a teenager and she was my age, too. I stopped my bicycle, told her to get on, and drove her home. Her mother was glad that I gave her a ride. Just like that. This was normal back then in Perunkalipattu. There was no *ketta palakam* [‘bad habits,’ i.e., sexual misconducts], never between a Muslim and a Catholic. . . , *Kalyāṇam*

maṭṭum kaṭṭayile. [We never considered each other as prospective brides and bridegrooms]” (Ismail, pers. comm., April 14, 2010).

Just like one’s mother’s sisters’ children (and also one’s father’s brothers’ children) were one’s sisters (*akka, taṅkacci*) and brothers (*aṅṅaṅ, tampi*), for male Muslim villagers, female Catholic villagers were their *akkas* and *kuṭṭis* (“little sisters”), and for female Catholic villagers, male Muslim villagers were their “*kakas*” (brothers)³¹

Rice and vegetables of Periyakadu

In Perunkalipattu, villagers had good vegetable protein, thanks to fresh vegetables and fruits that came from Periyakadu, their settler colony. Because of its geography (a “peanut-village” surrounded by water), Perunkalipattu had no space for expansion. So, in the 1950s, with the help of the government, about one third of the villagers, both Muslims and Catholics, went to settle in Periyakadu, located ten miles east of the Vellichchandai Junction. Gabriella said,

“After our people went and settled in Periyakadu, agriculture there thrived, and in Perunkalipattu, we were getting fresh vegetables and fruits daily from Periyakadu. . . .Our life in Perunkalipattu, while I was a teenager [the 1960s and early 1970s], was the complete opposite of the life we have today [March 24, 2009]. Back then, we had rice, fresh vegetables and fruit. We could get fresh milk, *ney, tayir*, and *mōr* (yogurt and other milk products). We used to exchange fish for these land products from Periyakadu. There was milk and yogurt at every villager’s house. Since these were so plentiful, at the end of the day, our villagers used to go around the village and freely distribute whatever there

³¹ For male Catholic villagers, female Muslim villagers were their *akkas* and *umma-kuṭṭis* (older sisters and ‘little *umma* daughters’); for female Muslim villagers, male Catholic villagers were their *aṅṅaṅs* (brothers).

was extra. But today, our children can hardly get milk and yogurt in Santa Marta, in the camp” (Gabriella, pers. comm., March 24, 2009).

Nutrition and health

The 1987 Mannar District Baseline Survey (Agroskills 1987) attests to Gabriella’s claim that the people of her generation had a better diet back in the village. The survey reveals that except for the consumption of rice, tea and sugar, the average quantities of basic foodstuffs that the people of the Mannar district consumed differed radically from the National level (Agroskills 1987, 53). Compared to the average fellow Sri Lankan, they ate twice as many eggs, ate five times more fish, a lot more meat, and drank more milk. Their consumption of vegetable protein, or “pulses,” which include green gram, black gram, cowpea and soyabean, was more than double the national level. Thus, “the consumption of pulses (vegetable proteins) and meat/fish/eggs (animal proteins) was very much higher in the project areas [in the Mannar district] compared to the National level” (54).

Fishing before the displacement

Traditionally Perunkalipattu fishermen were *vallam*-fishermen. A *vallam* is a large dugout canoe, often made of a jack tree, and its length ranges from 20 to 35 feet. In 1988, in Perunkalipattu, there were 110 *vallams*, 22 fiberglass boats (23-27ft) equipped with out-board engines, and 5 multi-day fishing boats equipped with large inboard engines (Mannar District Secretariat 1988, 22). In Perunkalipattu, there used to be two major types of fishing: *vallam*-fishing and “big boat”-fishing. Peter explained,

“Since our sea was so fertile, we did not really need big modern crafts as long as we were able to fish freely around Perunkalipattu, say up to five to ten miles. At around 6:00 p.m. fishermen would leave to the sea by *vallam*. A couple of miles off the coast, they’d

spread the nets, leave them in the sea and return home. They would sleep at home, and the next morning they would return to the sea to draw their nets between 3:00 a.m. and 8:00 a.m. This was called *vallam*-fishing.

“In the 1980s there were a couple of big fiber-glass boats, equipped with Japanese, Yammer inboard-engines. We used to call these big boats ‘*Paraha* boats.’ During the time when our villagers owned *Paraha* boats, and when there were no ethnic problems (*piraccinai*) or fighting, our fishermen used to go to Talaimannar, Iranativu and Parativu and catch a lot of fish. This was fishing on a larger scale, called ‘big fishing.’ For the big fishing, fishermen would leave for the sea at around 2:00 p.m. to 3:00 p.m. They’d spread their nets, and spend the night at sea. The next morning, at around 8:00 a.m., they’d draw in their nets, and by 10:00 a.m. they’d return to shore. These boats would bring *kaṭṭā* (queenfish), *arakuḷa* (Spanish mackerel), *pārai* (trevally), *cūrai* (tuna) and other big fish. We would then clean *kaṭṭā*, salt them and make dry fish out of them. *Kaṭṭā* is very good when it is dried, but almost tasteless when it is fresh. We’d put *arakuḷa* and *pārai* in ice and send them off to Colombo by lorries. There were *mutalāḷi* (owners of nets and large boats) in Perunkalipattu and they used to own these lorries. In those days, lorries carried fish straight to Colombo!” (Peter, pers. comm., April 27, 2009)

In addition to fishing by nets, in Perunkalipattu, fishermen caught crab and shrimp by trap nets, and hunted sea urchins.

“Perunkalipattu fishermen were famous for crab-traps. There were great craftsmen among us who wove these crab traps. And sea urchin-hunting brought big money, because sea urchins were caught purely for export, and many Muslim villagers did this work, too” (Peter, pers. comm., April 27, 2009).

Stephen, a former sea-urchin hunter in Perunkalipattu explained,

“Sea urchins would be just lying at the bottom of the sea. They were harmless. Before the introduction of goggles, sea urchins were caught during the day. Fishermen would take oil from the livers of ray fish and spread the ray-fish oil on the surface of the sea. With that, the sea-surface became fully transparent and they could catch sea urchins lying at the bottom of the sea. Around 1971, goggles were introduced and sea urchin hunting became a night work. Two fishermen used to go in a *vallam* [canoe], with a ‘*maṭā*’ *kampi* [a bifurcated spear for sea urchin hunting].” (Stephen, pers. comm., April 28, 2010)

In Perunkalipattu, there were also various types of group fishing. One of them was called *curri valai* and the other was *viṭu valai*.³² By *curri valai*, fish could be caught in great quantities, so great that the fishermen would count the catch in *vallams*. Four *vallams* of fish, five *vallams* of fish, just like that, *vallams kaṇakku* [*vallam*, the canoe, as a unit of measurement]!” (Peter)

Mannar District after December 1984: The Kent and Dollar Farm Massacre

³² *Curri valai* and *viṭu valai* were traditional fishing techniques that required an army of fishermen. The owners of these nets were called *sammādis* and twenty fishermen would be called for a *karankatti valai* and ten fishermen for a *viṭu valai*. In both cases there were a big *vallam* and two small *vallams* and the laborers were grouped into three. At sea, to corner fish, the fishermen use *kurutu kair*, which is an extremely fine line of thread with many floaters weaved into it. The floaters, each ten inches long with ribbon-like appearance, were made of dried *palmyrha* leaves and tied to the thread. Fishermen in two separate *vallams* held each end of the line, and rowed their boats. As the thread touched the sea surface, the floaters gave a false impression to the fish in the sea, that a school of fish was swimming ahead of them. The largest group of fishermen was on the big *vallam*, and operated two big nets. the smaller groups of fishermen in small *vallams* operated one small net each. Both *karankatti valai* and *viṭu valai* required good teamwork and leadership (Stephen).

The Kent and Dollar Farms, located on the border of the Mullaitivu, Trincomalee, and Vavuniya districts, were resettlement villages for the Estate Tamil families, who had been displaced from the tea plantations in southern Sri Lanka due to the 1977 ethnic violence. In November 1984, the government evicted these Estate Tamil families and brought a group of Sinhalese prisoners and their families to settle in these villages. Shortly after the Sinhalese settlers arrived, on November 30, 1984, the LTTE went in and killed these families, including women and children. A total of 62 people were killed. It was the first massacre of Sinhalese civilians at the hands of the LTTE (Hoole 2001). With the LTTE's massacre of the Sinhalese families at the Kent and Dollar Farms in the northern dry zone, Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict took a new turn: civilian population, including women and children, became frequent targets of massacre by the state and the rebels.

Four days after the LTTE's massacre at the Kent and Dollar Farms, there was a landmine attack on a Sri Lankan army jeep in the heart of Mannar Town. One soldier was killed and eleven were injured. The attack was most likely done by the LTTE. In retaliation, however, a group of army soldiers massacred hundred to hundred-fifty ordinary civilians in and around Mannar Town. With this ethnic violence at the hands of the army soldiers, the displacement of people from their homes and villages began in the Mannar district. Moreover, the massacre of civilians at the hands of Sinhalese army soldiers gave the best opportunity for the LTTE and other Tamil militant youth groups to recruit fighters in the district.³³

³³ Paul, a 75-year-old Perunkalipattu villager recalled, "In the early 1980s, the LTTE was just one of many militant groups organized by Tamil youth. This group, that group, several of them were formed. TELO, EPDP, LTTE, PLOTE, EROS and EPRLF. In Perunkalipattu, five different groups came to recruit. Soon these groups started fighting among each other, killing each other. Ultimately, the LTTE, after killing and sending other groups to India, remained" (Paul, pers. comm., April 7, 2009).

In 1987, like other parts of northern and eastern Sri Lanka, the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) was dispatched to the Mannar district.³⁴ The arrival of the IPKF added more terror and misery to the lives of the people of the district. The following year, about half of the district's farmers were displaced before planting paddy for the Maha 1988 season (September/October 1988). The rest fled before the harvesting of paddy for the same season (February 1989). During the 1988/89 Maha season, the extent of paddy harvested in the Mannar district dropped to 15.8 percent of the average extent of paddy harvested during the Maha seasons of 1983-1985.³⁵ In the year 1989 alone, more than half of the district's population was displaced.³⁶ Many fled to the Madhu Church, a Catholic sanctuary in the eastern part of the Mannar district inside the LTTE territory. Tens of thousands of displaced families, Hindus, Catholics and Muslims from various parts of Northern and Eastern Sri Lanka also fled to the Madhu Church during this period. The church serves as a temporary shelter for those who were fleeing to India. In April 1990, the train service between Talaimannar-Mannar-Medawachchiya stopped; two months later, the LTTE exploded the rail bridge between Mannar Island and the Mannar Mainland. The LTTE also destroyed the road bridge, which was used by busses and

³⁴ In July 1987, following the Indo-Sri Lanka Agreement, signed by Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and Sri Lankan President J.R. Jayewardene, the IPKF was dispatched in Northern and Eastern Sri Lanka, and controversy surrounding the agreement led to an armed confrontation between the LTTE and the IPKF.

³⁵ NEPC Chief Secretary's Secretariat 1997, 54-64; for Maha 1986/87 and 1985/86, the Central Bank of Sri Lanka Department of Rural Credit 1988; for Maha 1981/82-Maha 1984/85, Agroskills 1987, 71.

³⁶ The number of displaced families in the year 1989 in the Mannar district is 13,796. The estimated population of the district, estimated from the 1981 census, is 24,000 families. (North East Province Planning Secretariat 2002, 346.)

other vehicles. With the bridges cut off, displaced families could no longer easily flee to India by sea, and the number of displaced families seeking shelter at the Madhu Church sanctuary swelled.

Eviction of the Muslim families from Perunkalipattu

While all this was happening in the district, in Perunkalipattu, the Tamil villagers were not severely impacted by these terrible events; they were able to remain in their village for the most part, except for the months immediately following the December 1984 massacre. This was because, geographically, the village was not located directly on the trunk road, where military bunkers and checkpoints were set up by the Army, and because there were the Muslim fellow villagers who provided them with shelter when necessary. However, this situation changed when the LTTE came to occupy the village.

“The LTTE came to Perunkalipattu at 6 p.m. on June 9, 1990” (Paul, pers. comm., April 7, 2009). Perunkalipattu became part of Tamil *Eelam* (“homeland”). The LTTE’s Tamil *Eelam* was built on a belief that this new political territory belonged only to Tamil-speaking Hindus and Catholics and not to Tamil-speaking Muslims. In Perunkalipattu, on October 25, 1990, the LTTE officially announced that they were evicting all the Muslim families.

“All Muslims have to leave the Northern Province. Muslims should begin surrendering all their vehicles (tractors, motorbikes, bicycles), radios, wall clocks, sewing machines, petrol mex [sic], and other costly equipments.” (Majeed 2007, 126)

Majeed, a Muslim retired principal writes in his memoir, “Even though the Hindu and Christian leaders requested that Muslims not be driven away empty handed from their own lands,

the LTTE rejected their request. In order to secure their lives, Muslims left their homeland” (Majeed 2007, 126). Following the LTTE’s order, the Muslim Perunkalipattu families, like all the Muslims in the Northern Province (the Jaffna, Kilinochchi, Mullaitivu, Mannar, and part of Vavuniya districts), were evicted from the village. Isabel recalled,

“The *ummas* [“Muslim female villagers”] knew about the impending deportation. In Perunkalipattu, a day before the LTTE ordered the Muslim villagers to leave, Vandika-*umma* called me and took me to her house. Vandika-*umma* and her husband Avbakkal-*kaka* owned a shop. They were my great friends. At their house, Vandika told me, ‘The LTTE is going to force us out of Northern Sri Lanka. We’ll have to leave sooner or later. So, after we leave, take these eggs, chickens, the mirror over there, and the *ammī* (grinding stone) from this house. I’ll hide them and keep them for you. . . . Vandika knew that I needed these things. She did not want the LTTE to take them. Then she and I both cried” (Isabel, pers. comm., November 4, 2009).

Isabel said that when the LTTE announced the eviction of the Muslim villagers from Perunkalipattu, “No Catholic villager could argue with the LTTE against the deportation of Muslims, because everybody was afraid of the LTTE. All that we could do, when the Muslim villagers were being sent away, was to watch them leave. They (the Muslims) stood on that side, we (the Catholics) stood on this side and we all cried.”

Ismail recalled,

“Following the LTTE’s announcement, we (the Muslim villagers) brought all our belongings, including our tractors, to the mosque and surrendered them to the LTTE on the same morning. Then, the Catholic villagers requested of the LTTE that the Muslim villagers be provided with transportation, and the LTTE then allowed the Catholic

villagers to use our tractors. So the Catholic villagers drove our tractors and brought us up to a place called Poonthoddam in the Vavuniya district. There, they dropped us and drove our tractors back to Perunkalipattu. The Perunkalipattu Muslims were treated better that way, because our Catholic brothers gave us a lift, but other Muslim villagers from the surrounding villages had to walk.” (Ismail, pers. comm., April 14, 2010)

The Northwest Monsoon had already started and the Muslim villagers were all soaked in rain.

Another Muslim villager recalled,

“We reached the Pandivirichchan School by tractor (25 miles from Perunkalipattu) in severe rain. We were all crying. We carried our children and ate on the way whatever we had prepared in the morning in Perunkalipattu. The LTTE checked us on the way. . . We stayed there at the Pandivirichchan School that night, and the next afternoon, around 4 o’clock, we went to Poonthoddam, Vavuniya, where we stayed for the second night. Our women were kept in a Tamil friend’s house. The men slept on the lorries that were there. The next day, we walked on foot to Vavuniya Town. Those who were not able to walk, the old people, we carried in carts. Then, at Vavuniya, we went through the Sri Lankan Army checkpoints, and after the Army allowed us to pass, we were sheltered in a large hall in Vavuniya Town, where we stayed for two days” (Majeed 2007, 128-129).

Majeed writes, “Nothing worse had ever happened to the Muslims of Northern Sri Lanka than what happened to them in October 1990. Hundreds of villages and settlements, 15,000 houses, 428 mosques, shops, paddy fields and vegetable fields, jewels and other properties—about 75,000 Muslims were forcefully driven away by the Tamil militant group (L.T.T.E.) at gunpoint” (Majeed 2007, 126). The estimated number of Muslims who were forcefully deported

by the LTTE from the Mannar district in October 1990 amounts to 34,978 persons—almost three out of ten people in the district.³⁷ After the eviction of the Muslims from the district, the cultivation of paddy dropped to less than one fifth of what it was in the year 1987 and earlier. After Muslim farming families were sent away from the district, and with many Tamil farming families taking shelter at Madhu as well as in India, the paddy cultivation in the district—which had already been disrupted by the arrival of the IPKF and the fighting between the LTTE and the Sri Lankan Army—never returned to its pre-1987 levels. The majority of Muslim Perunkalipattu families then sought shelter in the Puttalam district, in one of a hundred “refugee” camps (*akati mukām*) and they became part of “Northern Displaced Muslims” (See Thiranagama 2011).

Tamil Eelam (1990-1996/97)

Perunkalipattu, without the Muslim families, was now part of Tamil *Eelam*. It was a nation of its own, with its leader, Velupillai Prabhakaran, who led a totalitarian, military government. *Eelam* had its own national anthem, flag and language, calendar, its own judicial system, prison complex, military, police and tax system—all different from and independent of the Government of Sri Lanka. Kilinochchi Town became the nation’s capital. However, public employees, employed by the Government of Sri Lanka at various levels within Tamil *Eelam* (whether the high-level government agents and assistant government agents, or lower-rank officers at district government offices and branches of departments, or teachers, doctors and nurses at government schools and hospitals), all received their salaries and pensions from the Government of Sri Lanka. The Government of Sri Lanka did not recognize Tamil *Eelam* as a

³⁷ The estimated population of the Mannar district in the year 1989 is 126,000. (Note, due to the war situation, no population census was conducted in the late 1980s. The number of the district’s population in the year 1989, provided in the district handbook, is the number “estimated based on the 1981 Census Population” (Mannar District Secretariat 1997, 17).

separate state and levied a heavy economic embargo in the area that fell under the LTTE's control. As a result of the government's economic embargo, petrol, kerosene, medicine, soap, and other imported items were difficult to get in Tamil *Eelam*. The LTTE relied upon local production of paddy and fish, as well as the smuggling of various goods from Tamilnadu, India.

The Divided District (February 1997-June 2007)

The LTTE ruled the entire Mannar district between 1990 and 1996. In early 1997, the government forces took back half of the district. Thus, the year 1996 was a year of fierce fighting between the government forces and the LTTE, and the district witnessed the largest displacement.³⁸ After the government brought half of the district under its control, for the people of Mannar, there existed "two countries" within the district, the Sri Lankan state and Tamil *Eelam*. Borders were drawn in the land and the sea, and to cross these borders, the villagers had to go through Army and LTTE checkpoints. The people could travel by land in and out of Tamil *Eelam* through the Uyilankulam Checkpoint on the Medawachchiya-Mannar A14 Road. At the Uyilankulam Checkpoint, the movement of goods and people were severely controlled by the both warring parties. Hence, instead of traveling by land through this checkpoint, people attempted to travel by sea. There was always a lack of food, medicine, kerosene and petrol in Tamil *Eelam* due to the economic embargo, and there were always families attempting to flee Tamil *Eelam* in fear of the LTTE's forced conscription.

The Catholic Exodus

³⁸ In December 1996, the largest percentage of the population in the district was found at the Madhu Church sanctuary in the LTTE-controlled Madhu Division (Mannar District Secretariat 1997, 1; Mannar District Secretariat 2000, 22, 141).

The exodus of the Catholics³⁹ from Perunkalipattu happened in June 1999, nine years after the Muslim families were sent away. In June 1999, the villagers were caught in the crossfire. Ryan, a thirty-years old, recalled,

“It was a full moon night. The time was 7:45 p.m. The government forces were attacking the LTTE from the Talladi Camp by artillery rockets, and the LTTE too was firing artillery rockets from behind Saint Mary’s Church. One of the bombs fired by the Army reached Saint James’s Church, located only 300 yards away, but the Army was not firing at Saint Mary’s Church where all the villagers were taking refuge” (Ryan, pers. comm., July 30, 2007).

Vera said,

“I had just finished preparing an early dinner when the shelling started. Leaving everything behind, we all rushed to the church and waited for the shelling to stop. All the villagers took shelter at the church and it was full. People were also in the churchyard. We were thinking that the shelling was like any other exchange of artillery shells that would stop after some time and that we would be able to go back home. But the shelling went on continuously” (Vera, pers. comm., November 4, 2009).

Isabel said,

“The LTTE then brought two artilleries and placed them right behind the church, within the church premises, and they began firing towards the Army line. ‘*Ēcuvē!*’ ‘*Mātāvē!*’ ‘*Tāiyē!*’ [‘Jesus!’ ‘Mother Mary!’ ‘Our Lady!’] the church was filled with people’s

³⁹ According to the *1998 Mannar Statistical Handbook*, in Perunkalipattu, there were 487 fishing families and a fishing population of 2,426. There were 22 outboard-engine boats (17.5ft-23 ft, fiber-glass boats) and 260 *vallams* (Mannar District Secretariat 1988, 41-42).

outry. What do you think the Army would do when shells were fired at them from a particular place? Tell me, what would the Army then do? The LTTE began firing at the Army from inside the church, where all of us were taking shelter” (Isabel, pers. comm., November 4, 2009).

While all this was happening, Tambi, Vera’s son began crying. He was then 9 years old. Vera said,

“Then, Tambi began crying form hunger. And there was nothing to give him, because I had left the dinner at home. Then, looking at my helpless situation, Peter (Vera’s brother) stood up and told us that he was going back home to get the dinner. And he left! You know how much Peter cared for Tambi. But outside, the shelling continued and indeed it became even more severe after he left. We were then terribly worried about his safety and had already begun crying when he finally returned. When he returned, his clothes were torn and mud was all over his body. But he was carrying the pot in which I had prepared curry. He had put rice on top of the curry and brought the pot. The mud had entered the pot, so we removed the top layer of rice and gave rice and curry to Tambi. We then continued to wait in the church.”

And this was what Vera later learned,

“Across the seaway, in the army’s territory, at the Bishop’s House on Mannar Island, the Bishop was speaking to the Army Commander at the Talladi Camp on the phone and was repeatedly telling the Commander that the villagers were taking shelter inside the church and the Army should not fire into the church. The Army Commander was responding to the Bishop, ‘My troops are not targeting the church.’

“Father Stephen, our parish priest that time, was with us. His residence was right next to Saint Mary’s Church. The Bishop had ordered Father Stephen to gather all the villagers inside Saint Mary’s Church. At the same time, the LTTE had been sending red-inked letters to Father Stephen. But Father Stephen did not tell us about these LTTE letters. My friend and I, and one more member of the church committee decided to go and meet father Stephen at his residence, because he had been withdrawn inside and was not coming out. When we entered his office, we saw him seated in the chair and trembling. We said,

‘Father, we’ve heard that you have received letters from the *Iyakkam*.’

‘No, I haven’t received anything like that,’ Father Stephen replied in haste. We knew that he was not telling the truth, so we implored him,

‘Father, please tell us the truth! Have you received any letters from the *Iyakkam*?’

‘No, I haven’t,’ he repeated. But in truth, he had with him three letters, all from the *Iyakkam*, and all the letters read, ‘*Move villagers immediately to the interior of the Vanni*.’ The last letter was the ultimatum!

“It was already dark and we were still in the church, disobeying the order of the LTTE that we should vacate the church and vacate the village and move towards the heart of the Vanni” (Vera).

Ryan recalled,

“All I remember is that suddenly many crows fell from the sky. A shell exploded. Then scream of villagers filled the entire church. Three villagers were killed on the spot, one family, including a small boy. People were trying to escape from inside the church and they were stepping on those who had fallen on the ground. I fell on the ground, too,

because my back was injured because of the blast. When I regained consciousness, I was not able to find any of my family members. Thirteen other bombs followed the first one, but these did not hit the church.”

Vera said,

“We were bombed. Not by the Army. The LTTE fired at us. They were so cruel. They knew that we were inside, and they brought the artillery and fired at us from close range. One family died by the attack. Immediately after that bombing of our church, we fled. Father Stephen told us to raise both our hands when we ran, so we all ran with our hands up.”

The villagers knew that under normal circumstances the LTTE would not allow them to flee to the government’s side by crossing the sea (just five sea-miles separated Perunkalipattu from the government’s side). After this bombing, however, many villagers attempted to flee to Mannar Island, to the government’s side. Isabel said,

“My husband Aiya was sitting under a tree in the churchyard, in front of the parish priest’s house. He was almost eighty years old and weak. He could not walk. But Vera had to run to save her son. I had to go with her. Peter told us to go ahead and run away to save our lives. He said he would take care of Aiya. So Peter brought a cart and a friend of his. They put Aiya and the belongings of Father Stephen on the cart and fled the village by land. Father Stephen said that he would not worry about his fate and he would leave only after all the villagers left the village. So he was the last one to leave. He left by motorbike to Illupaikadavai.

“Vera, carrying Tambi in her arms, and I reached the jetty. Right there, we found the last *vallam* departing. Inside, there were a young couple and their children. ‘Please

take us in!’ I called them. They said, ‘This *vallam* has a hole on the bottom. We cannot take you. Not possible!’ It was the last boat. We showed them Tambi and begged them again to take us with them to Mannar Island. The couple was not willing, but at the end, they had to concede. It was quite risky. We got in and we fled. Soon, the seawater filled our boat and we had to scoop water by our clothes and throw it out of the boat. We continued throwing out water like that until our boat approached Mannar Island” (Isabel, pers. comm., April 4, 2010).

Vera said,

“As we approached Mannar Island, people from Pallimunai came by boat to rescue us. So we got into one of these boats of Pallimunai people and landed on Pallimunai. The Bishop and Father Martinez, a Perunkalipattu native, were there to receive us. The Bishop said to me,
 ‘I’ve been calling Talladi many times, telling the Army Commander that all of you were inside the church, and not to fire into the church. And from Talladi, the Commander was telling me, “We are not targeting the church. We know that the villagers are inside.”
 Despite that, they attacked you!’

‘No! It was the *Iyakkam!*’ I told the bishop.” (Vera, pers. comm., November 4, 2009)

Ryan said,

“Three quarters of villagers fled on foot to Thevampiddy, a village outside the reach of the Army’s artillery, while the rest fled to Mannar Island by boat. There were also people from the surrounding villages in the crowd of ‘refugees.’ My family, like many others, more than 2,000 people, walked twelve hours through the night and finally reached Thevampiddi at 9 a.m. the next day. From Perunkalipattu, we first walked to Kalliyadi,

then through Illupaikadavai and Moontrampiddy, we reached Thevampiddy. During the following four weeks, from Thevanpiddi, the villagers fled to Mannar Island. My family left Thevampiddi after a month. We paid a fisherman from Pallimunai for transport by boat and reached Pallimunai on Mannar Island (the government's side). From Pallimunai, we were brought to Pesalai, to the Pesalai Open Relief Center, a 'refugee' camp (*mukām*). On our way, the Special Task Force (STF) of the Army threatened us" (Ryan, pers. comm., July 30, 2007).

The City of Santa Marta

In 2003, after three to four years of "refugee" life at the Pesalai Camp, the Bishop gave the Perunkalipattu villagers a plot of land to build a temporary shelter of their own—"the Santa Marta Camp." Santa Marta is a 36-acre camp. The land belonged to the local Catholic Church, the Mannar Diocese. The camp was set up by the displaced families themselves. Each acre was allocated to 16 families, and according to the Government's standard of temporary shelters for displaced families, each family was allowed to build a 12 ft x 15 ft hut.⁴⁰ Since Santa Marta was to remain a temporary shelter, anything in the camp that would make the families permanently settle in the land was prohibited: they had no rights to own land in the camp, no cement-block house, no tiled roof, and no individual toilet. The material permitted to build the houses and kitchen-sheds was *cadjan*, thatched palm leaves. In 2007, as a rule, five families shared one makeshift toilet. The toilet complex was located at the end of each lane, and as a rule, every

⁴⁰ Ministry of Shipping, Ports, Rehabilitation and Reconstruction, 16.11.1995, Circular No: CGES/ER/95/01, "Emergency Relief for Displaced Persons due to Civil Strife arising from Ethnic Violence and Terrorist Activities."

family was given a key to their respective toilet. (Vera, 42-year-old widow, with whom I lived in Santa Marta had no key to the toilet because she, being a widow, could not build her *cadjan* hut as fast as others and came to settle in Santa Marta later than others.) The makeshift toilet booth marked the outer border of the camp, and in the heart of the camp, there was “the ground,” a large empty lot, about the size of an American football field. The church, the Church of the Body of Christ, was also a makeshift building, about 60 ft x 20 ft, and was built with twelve poles made from recycled abandoned train-rails from the former northwestern branch of the Ceylon Railway, which stopped its service due to war in 1990.⁴¹ Except for the wall behind the altar, the church had no walls. It had a tin roof, on top of which stood a small wooden cross and a light-bulb to illuminate the cross in the night.

In 2007, there were 350 families living in Santa Marta (30 families were single-mother headed households). There were 600 students attending junior secondary school (O-level), twenty male students studying A-level (senior secondary level) at St. Xavier’s College in Mannar Town, and four or five female A-level students attending senior secondary school in the next Muslim village.

Fishing after displacement

“In the Army’s territory fishing is very much restricted” (Peter, pers. comm., April 27, 2009). After moving to Santa Marta, the Perunkalipattu fishermen succeeded in resuming their fishing activities albeit on a much smaller scale than in Perunkalipattu. Santa Marta, their camp, was not located near the sea. After a series of negotiations with the fisheries department and the local fishing communities on Mannar Island, the Perunkalipattu fishermen were given

⁴¹ The train service between Talaimannar-Mannar-Medawachchiya stopped on April 12, 1990 (Hossain, pers. comm., July 3, 2008, Al-Mannar Camp, Puttalam).

Chinnamuttom Beach, near Mannar Town, six miles from Santa Marta, to use as their jetty. Thus, from Santa Marta, the fishermen daily commuted to Chinnamuttom Beach to go to the sea for fishing. However, there were many checkpoints that they had to cross every morning. On the 18-mile long islet, Mannar Island, the occupying government forces set up military checkpoints all over. Besides the largest army camp at Talladi, across the bridge from Mannar Town, there were army camps at Pesalai, 9 miles from the town; at the Sunny Village, 4 miles from the town, and at the Mannar Technical College, 2 miles from the town (no sooner had the college been built, than the army occupied the building). There were also navy camps at Talaimannar Pier, 18 miles from the town, on the other end of the island, as well as at Thaluvupadu, 5 miles from the town.

From Santa Marta, the fishermen would leave every morning at 4:30 a.m. by lorry to go to Chinnamuttom Beach. The two small trucks, fully packed, with some men even sitting on top of the vehicle, would need to cross, one by one, every army and navy checkpoint until they reached Chinnamuttom Beach. At Chinnamuttom Beach, the fishermen then had to register their “Navy Passes,” fishing permits issued by the navy with the police. At 6 a.m. they would launch into the sea for fishing, and by 6 p.m. all fishermen had to be back on shore.

“Now, imagine how radically different our fishing is today compared to the fishing in Perunkalipattu.” Peter said,

“Traditionally, the fishermen fished during the night time, but now, night time fishing is banned. Earlier, in Perunkalipattu, the fishermen would leave in the afternoon after 6 p.m., and the next day between 3 a.m. and 8 a.m. they would draw their nets, because fish are plentiful in the night time. And their *vallams* would bring a variety of fish. The fishermen would then put these fish with ice in boxes and send them off, straight to

Colombo, by lorries that they owned. Now, the fishermen have to go through the Navy checking when we return to shore. The Navy will of course ask for some fish, and then the fishermen have to sell their fish to middlemen (fish dealers called *viyāpāris*, or ‘*yāvāri*’) from outside the district, such as middlemen from Vavuniya and Anuradhapura who come by lorry and transport the fish to Colombo. This way the Mannar fishermen are forced to sell their catch at a lower price.” (Peter, pers. comm., April 27, 2009)

Furthermore,

“Fishing is allowed only up to four miles from the shore. Earlier, the fishermen would go fishing up to twenty-five miles off the coast of Perunkalipattu. Today, between the Perunkalipattu and Mannar Island, there’s a sea border. The Navy is on this side and the LTTE is on the other side. Since the sea around Mannar Island belongs to other fishing communities, the CMM fishermen are going to their traditional fishing territory toward Perunkalipattu, but only the area that falls under the control of the Sri Lankan Navy. The CMM fishermen are not allowed to cross that border to reach the Perunkalipattu shore, which is occupied by the LTTE” (Peter).

Gabriella said, “When the CMM fishermen go fishing, we don’t know what will happen to them. Whether they will come to the shore of Chinnamuttom safe. When they don’t come back, they just don’t come back. The LTTE is recruiting our youth at sea” (Gabriella, pers. comm., July 31, 2007).

As if these weren’t big enough obstacles, on December 29, 2006, President Mahinda Rajapaksa (before becoming the President, he was the Minister of the Ministry of Fisheries)

banned motors beyond 10 horsepower in the Northern and Eastern seas.⁴² Thus, large-boat fishing became illegal, because large boats needed inboard-engines, which were normally larger than ten horsepower.

Ironically, however, in the Mannar sea, where the distance between Sri Lanka and India, at the closest point, is only 18 miles, this rule of 10 horsepower applied only to Sri Lankan fishermen and not to the Indian trawler fishermen who often crossed the sea border between India and Sri Lanka and came to fish in the Mannar sea. “The problem of Indian fishermen is very serious” (Peter et al.). Joseph, the head of the Pesalai Fisherman’s Cooperative, said,

“The Indian fishermen are taking advantage of our situation. The Mannar Sea is very rich in fish and the Indian fishermen know that we, the Sri Lankan fishermen, have severe fishing restrictions and are not operating much. Thus they come here and fish. The Sri Lankan Navy takes little action against these Indian fishermen who violate the sea border.

. . . While the Mannar fishermen cannot remain at sea at night and keep watch over their

⁴²A “public security ordinance” of December 2006 states:

(1) Within the Administrative District of Jaffna, Kilinochchi, Mannar, Vavuniya, Mulativu, Trincomalee, Batticaloa and Ampara and the Divisional Secretary’s Division of Kalpitiya in the Administrative District of Puttalam, no person shall, in the interest of national security, possess any craft or boat which has been fitted with, or on board of which is carried an outboard motor or motors, the aggregate horsepower of which exceeds ten (10) horsepower or any water scooter or swimmer delivery vehicle, nor shall any person use on the adjacent to the Administrative District of Jaffna, Kilinochchi, Mannar, Vavuniya, Mulativu, Trincomalee, Batticaloa and Ampara and the Divisional Secretary’s Division of Kalpitiya in the Administrative District of Puttalam, any craft or boat which has been fitted with, or on board of which is carried an outboard motor or motors, the aggregate horsepower of which exceeds ten (10) horsepower or any water scooter or swimmer delivery vehicle horsepower or any water scooter or swimmer delivery vehicles.

(2) Any person who contravenes the provisions of paragraph (1) of this regulation shall be guilty of an offence. (The Gazette of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka, Extraordinary, December 29, 2006, No. 1477/24, Part I: Section I—General, Government Notifications, Chapter 40, “The Public Security Ordinance.”)

nets, the Indian fishermen come in at night and scoop the bottom of the sea with drag nets. Drag nets (trawler fishing) are forbidden in Mannar, because these nets catch baby fish—a whole fish family—and also destroy coral beds” (Joseph, pers. comm., August 9, 2006).

Peter said,

“These Indian fishermen drag the nets that belong to Mannar fishermen to other places during the night. The next day, when Mannar fishermen return to the sea to draw their nets, the nets are no longer at the same place. When the Mannar fishermen do find their nets, the nets are often torn. If the Mannar fishermen cannot return to the sea the next day, it means they lose their nets. Just like that, the Mannar fishermen lose not only fish, but their nets—a huge financial loss. The Indian fishermen, when they come, come in large numbers, say 200 trawlers.

“In order to make a living out of fishing, the fishermen need to be able to fish five days a week. I mean, that’d be ideal. But now, they can go fishing only a day or two per week. There may be fighting between the Navy and the LTTE at the sea; there may be bad weather; and there may be a mourning observation in Santa Marta. When any of these things happens, we cannot go to sea” (Peter, pers. comm., April 27, 2009)

At Chinnamuttom Beach, there were no longer any *vallam*, traditional canoes, in use (in 2007 as well as in 2009). The villagers had lost all of them (Peter). Except for some fishermen who owned fiberglass boats (17.5ft-23 ft, equipped with outboard-engines), the CMM fishermen did not own fishing crafts or nets, and were laborers. As a laborer, a fisherman would earn Rs. 200 (\$2) and some fish to feed his family in return for a day’s work. (In 2007, in Santa Marta, one kilo rice cost Rs. 55.) Gabriella said, “The fishermen can get Rs. 200 only on the day when

they can go fishing. When it rains severely, or when there's fighting, or when the Navy for whatever reason does not allow our fishermen to go fishing, that day, the fishermen get nothing. And these things happen. When husbands cannot go fishing, on that day, their families have no fish to cook." (Gabriella, pers. comm., July 31, 2007)

Women

"Women are the most affected" (Gabriella). The fishing permits, the Navy Passes, were given only to male fishermen, therefore only men could go to Chinnamuttom Beach (all beaches on Mannar Island were under the High Security Zone). Peter said, "In Perunkalipattu, women used to go to the estuary and catch shrimp, small crabs and small sea urchins, and they gathered salt. Today, women do not have any possibility, even to put their feet in the seawater!" (Peter, pers. comm., April 27, 2009). Gabriella said, "Women's health is thus very much affected. Our daily movements are very limited. Earlier, in Perunkalipattu, we all walked two miles back and forth to fetch water. Today, women just sit inside their houses. Women are not allowed to go anywhere near the sea, so we don't get to feel the breeze, which we used to get every day in Perunkalipattu. Sea breeze (*kaṭar kāṛru*), or saline wind (*uppuk kāṛru*) was what kept our body healthy. In CMM, we feel like we are kept inside a box. There's very little wind in Santa Marta."

CHAPTER 3

WAR, April 2009

“I am certain that the Tamil race is going to be extinct.”—Gabriella

Palm Sunday in Santa Marta, Mannar (April 5, 2009)

In April 2009, the battle continued in Mullaitivu on a narrow stretch of shore that lay eighty miles east of the Santa Marta Camp (Santa Marta). On this land, three-hundred-thousand civilians were held by the LTTE fighters as the government forces rained bombs down upon them. By the end of the month, as the army closed in on them from the north, the south, the west, and from the sea, the size of the area on which the LTTE and civilians sat had shrunk from 17km in length and 1.5km in width to 4 km in length and 0.8 km in width, about the size of the Central Park in New York City. Among the civilians trapped there were a hundred Perunkalipattu families. These families were all close relatives of the residents of the Santa Marta Camp.

On April 5, in Santa Marta, the day began with a morning mass. Vera, a 45-year-old leader of the church choir, put on a plain white saree, her best saree, reserved for the day's special Palm Sunday mass. Vera is a widow. Her husband was killed, in 1989, by the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF). Her married life lasted only three months. Since her husband's death, she had been living with her only son Tambi, her mother Isabel, and her bother Peter.

By 6 a.m. the villagers had gathered at “the ground,” a large empty lot at the center of the camp. Father Sebastian, the special guest for that day's mass, arrived. When the villagers saw him, they were delighted, for Father Sebastian had served in Perunkalipattu as the parish priest, between 1994 and 1998, when the villagers were still living in their own homes in the now-

abandoned village in the Vanni. Father Sebastian was a reminder of their history; he was a living witness that they used to belong to Perunkalipattu.

The mass began. Palm leaves were distributed among the villagers and everyone held a leaf in hand. Father Sebastian, at a makeshift altar at a corner of “the ground,” read, “Do not be afraid, city of Zion! Here comes your king, riding on a young donkey” (Zech 9:9). Symbolically, the Lord Jesus was triumphantly entering Jerusalem. The procession began. “*Hosanna!*”, Vera led the choir. “*Hosanna!*” (“Save now!”), the villagers followed. Then they sang Psalm 23:

The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing. He makes me lie down in green pastures, He leads me beside quiet waters, He refreshes my soul. He guides me along the right paths for His name's sake.

Men and women, children and the elderly, all walked as the long, green leaves they carried waved in the air. Father Sebastian held a cross, about two feet tall, upright in front of him and led the procession.

Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

“*Hosanna!*” “Save now!” Now that the Messiah had come, God would intervene to save His people. The procession went into the makeshift church located on the other corner of “the ground.” At the church, the passion narrative was read, with three persons taking the part of Christ, the narrator, and the people. Father Sebastian took the part of Christ. It took a long time

for them to finish. Then a sermon followed. Father Sebastian spoke, “This is the time of the greatest suffering. Just as our Lord suffered at Calvary, the culmination of His suffering, in Mullaitivu, at this moment, our people are suffering. Let us pray that this war will stop, let us pray for all those who are now running for their lives in Mullaitivu. Our Father in Heaven, we pray to you that you keep them all safe in your hands.” A long silence followed.

At the end of the mass, the villagers folded the leaves that they held in their hands and made a cross out of each leaf. These crosses would stay at the villagers’ houses as reminders of Christ’s victory until the following year when they would be gathered, burnt and used on Ash Wednesday.

Vera and I returned to her house. Since we had only been eating breakfast *pittu*⁴³ for almost four consecutive weeks—there was nothing else to eat—Vera suggested that I buy and eat a bread roll. A bread roll was now a luxury breakfast that cost Rs. 50, or one fourth of the average man’s daily income (\$2) in Santa Marta. Vera and I walked to a shop next to the church to purchase a bread roll. Across from the shop was Vera’s brother Savio’s house. Savio lost his daughter Emma in Mullaitivu two months earlier in January. “Let’s go to Savio’s place,” Vera said and we visited Savio.

From inside the house, Savio, a tall, skinny man with some gray hair, came with a small boy and sat on a little elevated floor in front of the *cadjan*-thatched house. Vera and I sat on plastic chairs. We greeted them. Vera said to the small boy, “Giovanni, you’ve got a picture of your mother, haven’t you? Bring it here.” Giovanni brought a large framed, color picture. There were two women in the picture, one young and one about fifty years old. Vera pointed at the young woman and said, “This is Savio’s daughter, Emma. See, how beautiful she was. She was a

⁴³ Steamed flour with some grated coconuts.

great singer and a dancer.” The date of birth, written next to Emma’s picture, read March 16, 1982. The older woman next to her was her mother-in-law. Both women had the same date and place of death: “January 26, 2009. The Vanni.”

Emma was born at the Mannar General Hospital in Mannar Town, thus, the place of birth on her national identity card read “Mannar (Town).” Her place of death, “the Vanni,” however, was a strange name for a place of death. The word “the Vanni” described a vast geographical area in Northern Sri Lanka, between the Jaffna Peninsula in the North, Vavuniya in the South, and Mannar Island in the west. “The Vanni,” a “jungle” in Tamil, is not the name of a village or a district. It was the name of a region, which, since 1990 has been the heart of Tamil *Eelam*. Emma died in Tamil *Eelam* in January, a “homeland” that was about to disappear.

I returned the picture to Savio. In return, he gave me another picture and said, “This is my grandson.” I saw a little child standing as he held the handle of a tricycle. On his face, there was the smile of Emma, the boy’s mother, whose picture I had just seen. The mother and the son looked very much alike. Even though Savio said that the picture was taken not long ago, it looked old and just about the boy’s face, it had watermarks. Then I lifted my face from the picture and looked at Giovanni, who was standing next to me. Giovanni looked exactly like Savio, his grandfather, a narrow face and rather small eyes, gentle and reserved. Vera said, “The one in the picture is Chellam. This boy, right here, is Giovanni. They are brothers. Giovanni had just turned nine-years old.” I studied Giovanni from head to toe. Even though he was skinny, the boy did not seem to have any wound or scar on his body. Giovanni was unhurt, even though his mother was killed and his young brother was injured in the Vanni. Vera and I then left Savio’s and returned to Vera’s place.

At noon, Vera and I cooked lunch together. It was often while we sat together in the kitchen, next to each other, tending to the fire that Vera and I talked about “things”—about poverty, about the “good-old-days” in Perunkalipattu, about her relatives, about ourselves. I told Vera about my recent visit to Teresa, a 64-year-old widow, and a nightmare she had. I said,

“At Teresa-amma’s place, in the middle of the night, I suddenly woke up to find her having a nightmare. She was shivering and shouting, struggling so much that I worried she would choke to death. So I held her, saying, ‘*Amma! Amma!*’ The next morning she told me that she had a dream of an old woman gripping her by the throat.”

“*Amma* also has nightmares often,” Vera said, referring to her 86-year-old mother Isabel. Vera then placed the curry pot on the stove. She said, “I suppose old people dream like that because they think about death often.” Then in silence we watched the curry boil for some time. Then, as if something reminded her of Savio, she began telling me about him and his dream. Vera said,

“Savio had a dream of Emma. It was three days before we got the news of her death. That day, Savio came to visit my sister, Akka’s place. He looked pale and troubled. Akka asked him, ‘Why are you looking so worried?’ He answered, ‘I had a dream. In that dream, I saw Emma dead. I am afraid that it may be true.’ . . . Akka said to him, ‘What a foolish idea you’ve got! Of course Emma is alive!’ Savio then repeated that he saw her dead. . . . Akka said, ‘It’s just a dream. Emma is alive. She’ll soon come out of the Vanni!’”

According to Vera, her sister repeatedly told him that Emma would “come out alive from the Vanni,” but Savio did not believe what her sister said and looked even more worried. Then

Savio sat and took an album that was on the table at Akka's house. On the very page he opened, he found the picture of Emma. Immediately, Savio began crying. Vera said,

“He immediately began crying, because for him it was a sign (*adaiyaalam*). He sensed that something was happening to Emma, because, otherwise, he thought he would not find her picture like that in the very page of the album he had just opened. In order to stop Savio from crying, Akka told Savio, ‘Stop crying! What’s happening to you? How can you believe that the dream is true?’ But he looked even more worried. And that very night, Savio had yet another dream. Again he saw Emma dead.”

According to Vera, since Savio's dreams and the sign (Emma's picture in the album) were all “telling” that something might be happening to Emma, and this was how they would interpret dreams and signs, all that she could do was not to believe in them, “knowing that these signs could be true” (Vera).

It was the following evening that Savio got the news about Emma's husband Andreas and their child Chellam. The news said that Andreas and one-year-old Chellam had come out of the Vanni by ambulance through the Omanthai checkpoint. According to the news, the baby had lost both his feet by shelling and his father Andreas was unhurt. However, there was no information about Emma.

The next day, a Catholic priest came from Vavuniya and visited Savio's family in Santa Marta. Vera went to Savio's place to meet the priest. The priest, after repeating what he had informed Savio of the previous day, left the house without saying anything about Emma. Vera said,

“I knew the priest was hiding something terrible to tell us, because he could hardly look straight into our face. And he was trembling. So I ran after him and stopped him, as he was about to start his motorbike. I asked him, ‘Why did only the husband and the child come out of the Vanni? Where’s the mother? Where’s Emma?’ The priest remained silent. Finally, when I asked him whether Emma was dead, he nodded in tears. I fell on the ground (fainted).”

The priest then told Savio and his family *the story*, which Andreas had told him at the Vavuniya Hospital:

It was on January 26, 2009 at Suthanthirapuram in Mullaitivu in the LTTE territory.

Andreas, his wife Emma, their baby, Andreas’ mother, his brother and the brother’s family, and his sister and the sister’s family were all seeking shelter under a tree. It was at about 6:00 a.m. Emma was preparing tea. Andreas was cutting firewood and was therefore standing a short distance from everybody else. Suddenly he saw a shell fly in and explode right at the place where his family members were gathering. The shrapnel set free a shower of fragments that hit his wife, his baby, his mother, his brother, the brothers’ son, his sister and her husband and their children—nine people hit by one shell.

Andreas rushed to his family. He first found his mother, who was on her way to get her share of tea and was hit by the shrapnel. She was on the ground with her body bent forward and was breathing heavily. Under her stomach, he found his baby, crying, with blood gushing from his legs. He took the child, and tried to lift his mother also but in that instant she died in his arms. He then placed his mother on the ground, lifted his child,

and rushed to his wife, and found that the back of her neck was cut open. But she was still breathing. He put the crying child on the ground and tried to lift his wife but her head was about to fall off. She told him, "Take me to Mannar. Take me to Mannar." "—Sure, I shall take you," Andreas replied. (Mannar was seventy miles away from where they were. In Mannar there was their village, Perunkalipattu, from where they had fled a year and a half earlier. In Mannar, in Santa Marta, were Emma's parents.)

When Emma heard the baby cry, however, she said, "Is the baby alright? Is he hurt? Don't worry about me. Please take the baby." So Andreas put his wife on the ground and again lifted the child who was bleeding seriously, and brought him to his wife. "My dear baby, my dear baby," she said. She reached her hand to touch the boy's small knee, and she died.

Andreas placed her on the ground and was about to lift the baby again when he found his brother scarcely breathing. When Andreas approached him, he died. "Just like that. One after the other, they all died" (Andreas). Then he heard the dead brother's son crying out, "Uncle, give me water! Give me water!" He turned his face to where the voice was from and saw the child with his body cut in two pieces. There was no water to give him. While carrying his son in the one arm, Andreas lifted his brother's son in the other. He stood there, "not knowing what to do" (Andreas). Soon the legs of his brother's son had spasm and the child died.

A stranger was standing nearby. Andreas asked him to help dig a grave for eight people. After burying them, Andreas ran for a hospital carrying his son.

"The shock of seeing all my loved ones die like that would have been enough to kill me. It was for my baby that I left them all behind in that foreign place and came.

Hereafter, I'm not going to tell anyone about what happened that day. If somebody were to force me to tell what happened that day, I warn you, I'd go mad" (Andreas).

After telling this story of Andreas to me, Vera's eyes were full of anger. She said, "See, what they have done! What the government is doing! What the LTTE is doing! Never should they fight when civilians (*caṇanka!*) are inside the war zone! . . . They killed Emma and Andreas' family in January. And even today, they are still continuing the shelling in Mullaitivu!" Vera dumped her anger and terror, all that she had been keeping to herself, upon me.

Vera said that she did not tell her 86-year-old mother Isabel about Emma's death, because Isabel was suffering from high blood pressure, but Isabel soon learned about it because everybody was grieving. But there was one person who did not know about Emma's death till the day of the funeral—her nine-year-old-son Giovanni. On the day of Emma's funeral—even though there was no body of Emma, the family conducted a church service. Vera said,

"My sister and I were crying, scooping sand from the ground and pouring it on our heads. (This is how Perunkalipattu women mourn.) Looking at us doing that, Giovanni came and said,

'You, Aunties, have all of you gone mad or what?' So I knew he did not know about his mother's death. I called him and said,

'My sweet boy, can't you understand why we are covering ourselves with sand and crying?'

'Because you've gone mad!' he answered.

'No! Listen to me, because you're a good boy, aren't you. Your Mom is dead. She was killed in the Vanni.'

‘Lies! ALL LIES!’ He shook his head and said, ‘Everybody tells me that my Mom is in the Vanni. You alone are telling a lie!’

“So I grabbed his small shoulders, took him to my side, and said, ‘Listen carefully. I repeat. Your Mom is dead.’ Then his small face turned pale. He was speaking to himself, ‘Maybe that’s right. Everybody’s lying to me. My Mom is dead. Yes. Maybe you are right, Mom is dead.’ He then suddenly burst into tears.”

By now, both Vera and I were in tears.

It was four years earlier, in 2005, that Savio had gone one night to Perunkalipattu by sea and, in the darkness of the night, smuggled Giovanni out from the LTTE-controlled Perunkalipattu into the government-controlled Mannar Island, to Santa Marta. The LTTE was not allowing Emma and Andreas—any family for that matter—to leave the Vanni. As Savio took Giovanni on board the boat that night, Emma told Savio, “Take this child, *Appa*. At least he should be safe.” It was the last time that Giovanni saw his mother. Since then Giovanni has been living with his grandparents in Santa Marta.

According to Vera, some days after the funeral, Savio again had a dream of Emma. This time, she said to him, “*Appa* (Dad), please look after my boys. Please do look after them.”

“See, that’s the story,” Vera said. The story of Savio’s dream was over and we both stood up and left the kitchen.

Northern Sri Lanka in April 2009

Andreas and Chellam were in one of the last groups of Vanni patients to cross the Omanthai checkpoint by ambulance in January 2009. The LTTE then lost control of the entire

Kilinochchi district and moved further east to Mullaitivu. From February 2009 on, therefore, no postal service and no humanitarian aid were delivered through the Omanthai checkpoint to the civilian population trapped in the crossfire in the Vanni. By April 2009, all of the Vanni have come under the control of government forces except for one strip of land, the Mullaitivu shore. The entire Vanni population was living on this narrow strip of land, yet, the government continued aerial and artillery attacks into the area. Those who had survived the bombing and succeeded in crossing over to the government's side were then sent, after a series of security clearances, to the Manik Farm Camp (and other small camps in Vavuniya, Trincomalee and Jaffna). Therefore, in April 2009, all the citizens of the LTTE homeland—more than 450,000 people—were living either in bunkers on the Mullaitivu shore or in tarp shelters in the Manik Farm Camp-complex.⁴⁴

Letters from the Manik Farm Camp

Vera has eight brothers and four sisters. James, one of her brothers, his wife Jenina and their only daughter Sonia were living in Perunkalipattu when the war resumed in 2007. At that time, all together there were 140 families living in Perunkalipattu under the LTTE's rule. James

⁴⁴ In these camps in the government territory, the number of people who were interned far outnumbered the number of temporary shelters that were being built. On April 28, 2009, the *Thinakkural* newspaper reported:

Steps are taken to erect 36,000 temporary sheds in Manik Farm, Vavuniya and 15,000 sheds are already erected now, said Mahipala Hearth, Chief Minister, Sabragamuwa Province. While military and police are engaged in physically erecting these camps, [Sri Lanka] Red Cross and United Relief Commission have come forward to supply these camps. Steps are being taken to get another consignment of 20,000 sheds from Pakistan. Permanent housing units are being constructed for 16,000 families. ("15,000 Temporary Sheds in Vavuniya," *Thinakkural*, April 28, 2009, 7)

and his family, like many others, were then displaced seventeen times, until they reached Mullaitivu-Maththalan in February 2009. In March 2009, the family fled to the government's side. In Santa Marta, Vera received a letter from James and his family from the Manik Farm Camp on March 30, 2009.⁴⁵ The letter was written by James' wife Jenina.

*March 30, 2009
xxx Unit, xxx IOM
Arunachchalam Camp⁴⁶
Cheddikulam, [Vavuniya]*

Dear loving Vera-machcha (sister-in-law), Isabel-mami (mother-in-law) and Peter-machchaan (brother-in-law),

We are fine. We are anxious to know how you are doing. Vera-machcha, when we fled [to the government's side], the water level was up to our neck. We came with only the clothes we were wearing. We won't be able to thank God sufficiently for protecting our lives. I'm writing (this letter) in haste. We had to give the name of one of our relatives to the Army. So we gave Peter-machchaan's name. Please send us some food.

*Yours,
James, Jenina, Sonia*

When the first letter arrived, Vera and Isabel cried and thanked God, "Thank you Lord! [Nandri aiyaa!]" (Isabel). Isabel had been worried about James and his family to the extent that she could hardly eat until she heard that they had come out of the Vanni safe. Five days later, the second letter arrived. It was written by Sonia, the eleven-year-old daughter of James.

⁴⁵ The camp-complex is located in the Vavuniya district, and is, therefore, also known as "Vavuniya camps." The distance between the Manik Farm and Santa Marta is about fifty miles.

⁴⁶ The letter was sent through a Santa Marta villager who had visited the Arunachchalam Camp, located within the Manik Farm Camp-complex near Cheddikulam on the Medawachchiya-Mannar A14 Road in the Vavuniya district.

*April 5, 2009
James, Jenina
xxx Unit, xxx IOM
Arunachchalam Camp
Cheddikulam*

Ever beloved Gramma Isabel, Auntie Vera, and Uncle Peter,

We are fine. May God bless you in the same way [we receive his blessings]. Auntie Vera, kindly send a notebook and a pen for my scholarship exam. It's been six months since we ate fish. Kindly send us 1/4 kilogram of dry fish, a small cooking pan, and a black underskirt for my mother.

*Yours,
Sonia*

The family's address had changed. Even though the unit number was the same, the number before the three capital letters, I.O.M.⁴⁷ is increased by seven hundred. (This probably meant that within these five days that separated the first letter from the next, at least, in James's camp, seven hundred additional families had come to live there. Vera and Isabel prepared food and sent it to James's family in the Manik Farm Camp (Arunachchalam Camp) through Peter. According to Peter, since the food distributed by army soldiers was not sufficient, some inmates began cooking by themselves with whatever was available inside the Manik Farm Camp, which is why James's family was asking for a cooking pan. Vera brought all that Sonia had requested to the camp when she visited the family on April 18 in the Manik Farm Camp.

The third letter was written by James:

To Vera, Amma (Mom), and my other sisters and brothers,

We came out safe. That was all God's doing. Hi Vera, I received the money, Rs. 5,000, that you sent. We did not buy anything with it. We came here with only the clothes we were wearing. So the dress you sent for Sonia is not enough.

⁴⁷ IOM stands for the International Organization for Migration.

*You can't meet us. When they permit visitors, I'll send word for you. The meals are not alright. When you come, bring an undershirt. When Savio's daughter died in Suhandipuram [sic], we couldn't get out.*⁴⁸

James

According to James, “it was all God’s doing [that he survived].” When he said so in his letter to Vera, he was referring to his narrow escape from a shell that happened while he and his family were still in Mullaitivu. One morning, when James was resting behind a tree, a shell suddenly fell near him and exploded. James said, “But the tree shielded me. I survived without a scratch, while the same shell killed all together seven members of another family who were on the other side of the same tree” (James, pers. comm., April 3, 2010).

James’ family was asking for an undershirt. “You can probably guess what else was lacking there in the camp. Those who had their families outside the camp, like those of us from Mannar, were able to at least get things from our relatives. This was not the case for the people from Mullaitivu and Kilinochchi, who usually had very few, if any, relatives living outside the Vanni” (Jenina, pers. comm., April 3, 2010).

Vera and Isabel’s Manik Farm Camp Visit

On April 18, 2009, Vera, her son Tambi, and her brother Peter took Isabel, and visited James’s family in the Manik Farm Camp. They left Santa Marta the night before the visit, spent the night at Vera’s niece’s place near Mannar Town, and the next morning, they took a Mannar-Medawachchiya bus at 6:30 a.m. When they arrived at Cheddikulam, where the Manik Farm Camp is located, it was not yet 8:00 a.m. However, there was already a large crowd waiting at

⁴⁸ James’s family and Emma’s family were in the same place when Emma and Andreas’s family members were killed by the bomb.

the entrance to the camp. “We saw army soldiers doing construction work. The camp was still being built” (Vera). It was past noon when Vera and her family finally got to the army’s security check post to register themselves and enter the camp. “Until then, all of us, including my mother, waited under the burning sun.” Vera said, “I’d heard about the magnitude of the camp, but I never thought that it was that huge. Thousands of tarp shelters filled the place up to the horizon. There was no tree inside the camp to provide shelter from the burning sun and people were just kept there.” According to Peter, “That’s because the government simply bulldozed everything and with that all the trees went. The area is not fit for humans to live. It’s where the elephants lived for centuries.”

At the security check, Vera was told to leave everything that she had brought from Santa Marta for James’s family.⁴⁹ “So I had to leave the undershirt for Jenina, the textbook for Sonia, and some homemade sweets that Amma had prepared. The Army announced through a loudspeaker, ‘From Santa Marta, the relatives of James and Jenina from Perunkalipattu are here. James, Jenina from Perunkalipattu, come here immediately!’—something like that, they announced.” But when James and his family finally came, Vera and Isabel could not recognize them. “Peter pointed them out to us. James’s family had changed so much. They looked just like the other inmates” (Isabel). Vera said, “For us, all inmates looked alike, because the color of their skin was the same—very dark. I mean, a strange dark color. According to James, people got that color on their skin, not because of the sun, but because of the shells that the Army was using.” James told Vera that after a shell blast, before he even knew it, his body was covered

⁴⁹ According to Vera, this was because the previous day, some visitor brought alcohol drinks to one of the inmates, pretending that he was just giving a bottle of water, and the man who received it got severely drunk and “troubled” the Army.

with soot, and from then on, the color of soot remained on his skin. “It was the same with others” (James).

There was barbed wire between visitors and camp inmates. Vera said, “After seeing them, *Amma* (Isabel) just kept on crying. She thought she could hug and kiss them. I thought that too, and that’s why I took her with us in the first place. But it was just not the case. Barbed wires separated them from us. We’d stretch our hands from this side through the barbed wire entanglement, and they’d stretch theirs from the other side, but we could hardly touch each other. We’d then take back our hands and kiss our fingertips that had touched theirs. They did the same on the other side.”

James and his family had been in the camp already 28 days, but they were still wearing the same clothes that they wore when they came to the camp. “They were not getting enough water to bathe, enough food to eat, enough space to sleep. No personal space, because several families shared one tent” (Vera).

The Army allowed Vera and others to see James’ family only for twenty minutes. “After twenty minutes, an Army officer whistled—they were using whistles!—and shouted, ‘Go! Run! Run! Run!’ When I begged a soldier, ‘Please! Please give us a little more time!’ the soldier lifted his stick and frightened us, as if he was going to beat us. So we ran.”

George and TV Footage

The TV news was reporting from Maththalan in Mullaitivu, where the government forces were attacking the LTTE, and where civilian victims were fleeing to the government’s side. In Santa Marta, the villagers preferred to watch the Rupavahini, the government channel, because it had the ‘broadest’ (longest) coverage as part of the state’s war propaganda, to show the Army’s

bravado of rescuing civilians. It did not matter to the villagers whether the news was in Sinhala, Tamil or English. Neither did it matter to them that the news was reporting the government's war propaganda. All that mattered was the images of the civilians; they watched the TV news to learn about the plight of their relatives from the footage of the civilians fleeing from the battlefield.

Here's how George came to learn about the whereabouts of his relatives in the Vanni from the TV news. Among his close kin, George was the only one living in Santa Marta and the rest of his family (except his wife and children) was in the Vanni. The last time George had heard about the plight of his mother, his two sisters and their families was in late December or early January when they called him from a village in Kilinochchi. As the news of deaths and casualties flooded Santa Marta, he spent many months worried about them. George said,

“It was on April 9, at 5:00 a.m. Somebody knocked on my door. A voice said, ‘Turn on the TV! I just saw your mother and sisters!’ It was my mother-in-law (*māmi*) who lives across the street. My wife and I and the two daughters were still sleeping when she called us. I turned on the TV (the Rupavahini channel), but the TV was reporting some other news. After some time, I heard a loud cry across the house. I turned my face back to the TV screen, and there, I found my mother, my sisters, and my sisters' children amid the swarms of dark and emaciated people, all drenched to the skin, walking in line. But it was my mother's face. I immediately recognized her. She and the others appeared to have no belongings except the clothes they were wearing. And one of the children who was with them looked injured.”

George rushed out of the house to catch a bus to Vavuniya. The TV footage was from the day earlier, so he thought that his mother and sisters had arrived in Vavuniya already. While he was traveling to Vavuniya, however, his sisters and their families were transported by bus by the Army to the Manik Farm Camp in Cheddikulam (two families placed in two different camps),

and his mother was transported by ambulance with the injured boy to the Mannar General Hospital. George had just missed his mother and sisters on the way.

The next day, George visited his mother at the Mannar General Hospital and took her later to the Vavuniya Court and petitioned for her not to be sent to the Manik Farm Camp, because she was above sixty years old.⁵⁰ George and his mother waited two days in Vavuniya, and finally got the court's approval and returned together to Santa Marta. Even though George tried to keep the injured child of his sister with his family in Santa Marta, the child was sent after his treatment to the Manik Farm Camp.⁵¹

Rita-amma (A Survivor)

On April 13, George brought his mother, Rita-amma, to Santa Marta. The very next day I went in the morning to George's place to borrow an iron to iron my dress. Ann, George's wife was preparing lunch outside. I walked into their house, took the iron. Then I came out of the house. I asked Ann where Rita-amma was.

"Amma is inside. You didn't see her?" I turned around and looked inside the house. There, I found Rita-amma, looking at me—she coughed. She was seated on the floor in the corner, with her arms wrapped around her knees, kind of folded in on her self. She was hollow-

⁵⁰ Just a week earlier, the government had decided to release those who were above the age of sixty from these camps. The *Thinakkural* newspaper reported on April 2, 2009, "537 civilians coming under the category of elders, handicapped and patients who are staying in 13 welfare camps in Vavuniya will be released and we have received permission from the defense sector, said additional GA [government agent], Vavuniya district. We have already released 367 elders, he added." ("Another 537 Civilians Released From Welfare Centers, Vavuniya," *Thinakkural*, April 2, 2009, 8.)

⁵¹ The same was true with Chellam, the child of Emma who lost his foot. Chellam and Andreas (his father) were to be sent to the Manik Farm Camp after Chellam's treatment at the Mannar Hospital. Peter went to appeal to the Mannar Bishop about the case of Chellam so that the baby and his father could be spared the internment.

cheeked. The over-sized dress that she was wearing made her look even skinnier. I had walked past her earlier without having noticed her. Her presence was so unpronounced, her existence, almost transparent. Her face and arms were very dark. Again, she coughed.

Rita-amma was the first Vanni victim I met, a living witness of what was taking place in Mullaitivu, seventy miles away from where we both then stood.

“I used to be more fat and strong,” Rita-amma said, when I returned to George’s place in the evening. She then stretched her arms slowly and said, “But now, as you can see, I’m terribly weak. I’ve got bad coughs, too.” Then, she sat among us, with no particular interest—it seemed to me—and watched us, listened, and remained silent. She seemed to be looking beyond where we all were, at a faraway place that was not here and now, with no emotion. But occasionally, when the TV screen showed footage from Mullaitivu-Maththalan, she would repeat, “That’s where I was. I walked in that water, just like them, I came to this side.”

The next day when I visited her, she told me, “Thank you.”

But for what?

“George told me that it was you who sent my granddaughter a bottle of honey to the Manik Farm Camp.”

She was talking about the bottle of infant vitamin-mix that I had given to George.

Ann, George’s wife, had told Rita-amma,

“Amma, tell Kaori what you lived through in the Vanni, how you were displaced, how you managed to flee.”

Rita-amma’s cough was not getting any better and she took some traditional herb medicine (syrup). Then she said,

“I’ve never seen such a thing happen in another place and time. I’m 67 years old, but I’ve never heard about such tragedy as I’ve witnessed during the past nine months in the Vanni.”

A long silence.

After a long coughing—we all watched her—she said,

“Our life in Perunkalipattu was good. My son-in-law had a small business and he even had a van. My other daughter’s family was also living a good life. There were jobs and that was the reason we remained in Perunkalipattu.

“When we first got displaced, it was June 2007. We went to Moontrampiddi (toward Kilinochchi border). We loaded our pots and pans and many other things on the van and traveled, thinking that after some time, as has always been the case, we would be able to return to Perunkalipattu. In June 2007, there were about 140 families in Perunkalipattu. Some forty families succeeded in fleeing to the Mannar Island. But the rest, about a hundred-families did not flee to the Government side, because they had teenagers with them, and if they’d been caught by the LTTE attempting to cross over to the Government side, the LTTE, without mercy, would have taken their teenagers.”

Rita-amma picked at the nails on her toes. It made a clicking sound, and she seemed to be listening to that sound. Again, a long silence. Then she resumed her recollection,

“None of us thought that the war situation would turn out that way. We left Perunkalipattu in June 2007 and went north to Moontrampiddi, stayed for eight months. Then, as the Army advanced, the shelling became worse, and we had to move further north along the coast to Naachikulam. But after four days we had to move again. We then went northwest to Jeyapuram (a small village the Kilinochchi district, located away from

the coast). At Jeyapuram, we stayed for one month, then went further northwest to Kanahapuram and stayed there for one and a half months.”

“We’ve never heard of those names of the villages in Kilinochchi,” Ann interrupted.

“No. We had never heard of them. We never knew that these villages existed. But we went. There were many snakes and some people died from snakebites,” Rita-amma said,

“Then from Kanahapuram, we went east to Valavanur and stayed for two months. We always moved eastward, because the Army was in the north and in the west and in the south. We could only move eastward, and that was toward Mullaitivu. We were then displaced to Suthanthirapuram and stayed for another month. After Suthanthirapuram, we reached Maththalan, where we stayed for one and a half months.”

Rita-amma said that these were names of places that she could recall then, but there were many more names that had to be added. It was on April 8, 2009 that she and her daughters fled from Maththalan to the government forces.

I asked Rita-amma why she and others fled to the government forces. She said that was because of starvation and the LTTE’s forced conscription and the government’s shelling.

“My younger daughter gave birth in January, four months before we fled from Maththalan. The child was born, but the mother could not breastfeed the baby. She couldn’t breastfeed, because she herself was malnourished. And there was no milk powder for the baby.”

Rita-amma and her daughters had many children with them. Besides the four months old, Rita-amma’s younger daughter had another daughter who was nine years old. Rita-amma’s older daughter had three children and the oldest among them was 16 years old. The 16 years old (already married) had a nine month old baby. And there was hardly any food available to feed these children. Rita-amma said,

“The lack of food was a terrible experience for the adults. I mean, the experience of seeing one’s children crying because of hunger pangs when there isn’t anything to give them. You feel so helpless and it is such a horrifying experience. The food was just not there. It was not available even when you were ready to pay any amount. It was the children who suffered the most. They cried and cried, of course, because hunger is a hard thing for small children to bear. We could bear it, but not the children.”

One day, a bomb fell next to Rita-amma. She said,

“That was a narrow escape. It was just a week before we fled from Maththalan. It was night, but the shelling was continuing. Suddenly a shell fell. We could hear the aerial attacks by the Kfirs (bomber jets) but we could hardly hear the attacks by shells (artilleries). So, it came suddenly and fell just three feet away from where I was sleeping. But instead of exploding, the bomb went inside the sand, under the mat on which we were lying down. We immediately fled, but later they (the LTTE) came and exploded it.”

Rita-amma said that it was out of “starvation and fear of death” that people fled; out of the most basic instincts that humans share with animals (hunger and fear).

Starvation and the government’s indiscriminate shelling were not the only reasons that the people fled the LTTE’s side and crossed over to the government’s side. Rita-amma said, “The more the LTTE lost its soldiers, the more it thirsted for teenagers. The LTTE did not allow us to flee to the Government side. Not only that, the LTTE was in want of teenagers to use as their fighters. My daughters had two teenage girls, one was sixteen years old and the other was fourteen years old. Had the LTTE seen them, they would have been caught by the LTTE. The LTTE then would have cut their hair and sent them

to the battlefield, just as it did to others. So we were extremely worried about these teenage girls. Every time we moved to a new place, we would dig a bunker and hide them inside. Of course the LTTE knew all about these tactics of ordinary people to save their children, so the LTTE would even come inside bunkers to hunt for teenagers.”

Luckily, Rita-amma’s granddaughters were not caught.

“These girls were in the bunkers all the time. They hadn’t seen the sun for many months. We would bring food to them and they would eat inside the bunkers. When we moved to a new place, we moved in the night. We were hearing the cries of young girls captured by the LTTE. The first thing the LTTE would do to these girls was to cut their hair. By that act, these girls could no longer flee to the government’s side, they dared not to flee, because a short-haired teenage girl, for the Army, was the sign that she belonged to the LTTE. At least, that’s how people in the Vanni thought that the Army would see them.”

For those who were in the Vanni war-zones with the LTTE, who were suffering from starvation, the government’s indiscriminate shelling and the LTTE’s forced conscription, the figure of a government soldier in the distance (the Army uniform) ironically was the promise of liberation. “It was enough for people to see these Army uniforms in the distance; they ran toward them to escape” (Rita-amma).

Rita-amma said,

“We were at Maththalan and one morning the Army was near us. So we decided to flee to the Government side. We took the girls out of the bunker and started moving. We had to walk through water (lagoon water or river water). As we were crossing the water, *they* began firing at us. My uncle’s daughter’s husband was carrying a child in his arms, shielding the child at his chest. Suddenly, he was shot and then the baby too was

shot. This way.” (Rita-amma slowly lifted her hand, pointing at the right side of her head first, and then moved the finger to the left side. It was her way of demonstrating the direction that the bullet ran through the man’s head. Then she bent forward as if she were holding a child in her arms and shot a bullet through where the head of the child was supposed to be.)

“The man fell immediately,” Rita-amma said, “We took the child out of the water and continued running.”

She stopped—a long pause.

“Who shot them?”

“The LTTE.”

A long pause.

I did not ask Rita-amma what happened to the man who was shot dead and fell in the water. His body might still be in that Maththalan water with many other bodies killed in the same way. “We ran for our lives,” she said, “Because the LTTE was firing at us from behind, and the Army was firing back at the LTTE.” Rita-amma and her family left the man in the Maththalan water and came.

Loss of Things

Rita-amma said, “When we left Perunkalipattu in June 2007, we loaded many things onto the van and left, thinking that we would be able to return home after some time. In the end, we lost everything. All that we had with us in the end was some plastic bags in which we carried our dresses. But we lost those bags also when we crossed the water. When we finally reached the government side, we had nothing except the clothes we were wearing. The army then transported

me with the injured child to the Vavuniya Hospital by ambulance, because I was very weak. My daughters and their families were taken by bus and were later brought to the Manik Farm Camp in Cheddikulam. They did not come by ambulance with me. At the hospital, I was given a shirt, because the clothes that I was wearing were torn. They also gave another woman a shirt. Things were just like that.”

Christine, a forty-year-old woman, from Perunkalipattu, is another survivor who fled Maththalan. (I met her in November 2009 after she was released from the Manik Farm Camp.) She fled Maththalan as late as April 20. On the same day, as many as 65,000 people fled to the government’ side. She described her experience in the Vanni and Maththalan as follows.

“We got displaced to seventeen different places. Shells followed us and started falling from all directions. We would move to one place, spread the tarp shelter, and within the next two weeks, we would be moving to the next place. Can you understand how much money it costs to move to a new place? In the end, nothing was left with us. People were keeping their gold chains and bangles in plastic bags and holding them. Many lost these bags when they crossed the water. There were many dead bodies just lying on the ground as we fled. People were grabbing gold chains and bangles from these dead bodies. In the end, people broke open storages and carried away food items.

“We no longer had anything to eat, no firewood, and the bunkers were filled with people. Nobody dared to go out. And all that we got was some water in which we soaked dhal. Since that was all that we were eating, we could hardly stand on our feet. And it was on this swarm of exhausted human beings that the government was firing. Upon crossing over to the government’s

side, we were told, ‘Run! Run!’ but it was impossible to run” (Christine, pers. comm., November 15, 2009).

Rita-amma and Christine were part of the hundred Perunkalipattu families who remained with the LTTE. Among all the Vanni victims, these Perunkalipattu families and villagers from surrounding villages got displaced for the longest period of time and traveled the longest distance in the Vanni, from west to east—from Perunkalipattu, facing the Indian Ocean, eastward to the dead end, Mullaitivu-Maththalan, facing the Bay of Bengal.⁵²

Mullaitivu-Maththalan and the surrounding area were designated as “No-Fire Zones” by the Sri Lankan government. However, the name “no-fire zone” meant nothing as the area soon became the target of government forces’ aerial and artillery attacks.

Makkal TV vs the Rupavahini (April 21, 2009)

⁵² The timing and the route of the displacement of these villagers correspond to the Army’s advance and the LTTE’s retreat. During a period of about twelve months, from July 2007 to July 2008, these families first moved northward along the west coast for twenty miles from Perunkalipattu via Mōntrampiddy, Vēllankulam (Mannar District), to Mullankāvil (Kirinochchi District) and Nachchikudah. Then they turned northeastward to the interior of Kilinochchi District to a village called Jeyapuram, a place name that they had never even heard of. Within the next thirty days they were displaced for about another twenty miles, through the jungles of Amaithipuram and Uruththirapuram, until they reached Kanagāpuram near Kilinochchi Town in late August 2008. Then they moved to Tharmāpuram, the border between Kilinochchi and Mullaitivu District, where they stayed for some months until they moved to Visuvamadu in Mullaitivu District (January 2009), only to be displaced to Suthanthirapuram within the next couple of weeks. This was another move of twenty miles. Many of the displaced people from Mannar, Jaffna and Kirinochchi Districts were now finding shelter in Suthanthirapuram in Mullaitivu District in mid-January 2009, and it was about this time the Government intensified aerial and artillery attacks as part of its Vanni Operation. (Savio’s daughter Emma died on January 26, 2009 in Suthanthirapuram.) Then, these fishers, along with many other IDPs were displaced to Iranaipālai, from where they again fled to “Māththalan” (Palayamāththalan and Puthumāththalan) in February 2009, the seashore villages designated by the Government as the “safe zone” (“no fire-zone”), the terminus of their displacement. Beyond Māththalan, there was no village to the east, just the Bay of Bengal.

While the shelling of the no-fire zone in Mullaitivu was continuing, in Santa Marta at night, at Vera's house, the topic of our conversation was the bombing of the civilians by the government forces. That night, after watching the Rupavahini channel with us, Vera went to her niece's place. When she returned, she said, "When I went to my niece's place, I found her crying in front of the TV. So I looked at the TV screen and found that she was watching the Makkal TV." (The Makkal TV is a news channel from Tamilnadu in India, banned in Sri Lanka at that time. However, since Mannar Island is located next to Tamilnadu, people have access to many Indian channels.) Vera said, "I sat and watched the news. The Makkal TV was reporting the same news that we watched on the Rupavahini, the news about the 31,000 civilians who had fled from Maththalan.⁵³ We both cried, because there was an image of a mother, wailing as she held her injured child. The child was around the age of twelve or thirteen and appeared to have lost all its limbs! The mother was saying (in Tamil) 'The Army told us to come to this side, so we all came and sat under a tree. Then, all of a sudden, they, the Army, fired a shell at us.'" Vera felt that finally she had heard some truth about what was happening in Mullaitivu. She felt that she finally had heard a true voice from an ordinary mother accusing the Army of the indiscriminate bombings of civilians (which, of course, the Rupavahini was not reporting). Isabel said in an angry voice,

"Can you believe what the Army is doing? After leading the people (*sanangal*) to their side, firing at them!"

⁵³ On April 21, 2009, the TV news reported the number of civilians who had fled from Maththalan to the Government Forces the previous day (April 20, 2009) as 31,000. This number was later increased to 65,000 then to 75,000.

Peter and I did not respond—all we knew was that both the warring parties were terrible. We also heard that there was an LTTE suicide attack on the civilians who fled to the government forces. (An LTTE cadre, camouflaged as an ordinary fleeing civilian, joined the line of civilians to go through the Army checkpoint and exploded herself, killing those who stood near her.) Vera continued,

“Another film was of a three or four-year-old, a boy, sitting with a baby on his lap without mother or father!”

“God forgive us!” Isabel joined in and said, “All the high-ranking officers of the LTTE have gone hiding and the people are left to suffer! The Sinhala Government is as bad as the LTTE. . . !” Isabel was emotionally charged and said, “The Rupavahini didn’t report it. It only said that many civilians had fled from the LTTE’s area and reached the government’s area and the Army was protecting them. ALL LIES! Every time, things are just like this. When can the Tamils live without fear in this country?” She dropped open her medicine box she was holding on the floor and the tablets fell out of the box, yet, she continued, “Where’s our army? Where’s the LTTE?”

“Well, we’ve got one here, a ‘dog’ (*nāi*), right here, in our village (*ūr*),” Vera said in a low voice, pointing at her neighbor’s place. (She obviously meant the LTTE deserter in the next house. See next section in this chapter.)

Vera then told us of yet another image from the TV footage from Mullaitivu-Maththalan—an image of a man sitting on the ground (sand) with two dead children on his lap; one on the right, the other on the left, as he attempted to bury himself by pouring sand over his head.

Peter, who was so far silent, finally opened his mouth and said, “No doubt that some suffered like that. It’s terrible. But many were saved (by the Army’s rescue operation).”

An LTTE Soldier’s Home Coming

At Vera’s place, there were dozens of chickens but no rooster. Her neighbor had a rooster and everyday the rooster came to Vera’s place. Only a thatched wall separated the two gardens, and whenever the rooster switched yards it jumped onto the wall, the wall would shake from the rooster’s weight; the houses were built so close to each other that one day Vera heard her neighbor cry. Vera went to the neighbor’s house and inquired. Vera recalled,

“It was last Sunday, the feast day. At about 5 p.m., I heard my neighbor cry, so I went and asked her what happened. She said that one of her nephews, who had been in the LTTE, suddenly came home to her place—an LTTE deserter. He was there when I went. Though he told us that he had been in a jungle for six months without food, he was dressed like a returnee from abroad, wearing a new shirt and white pants, and even socks and shoes. He looked as if he had come from the airport! He was a tall, little fat even. I was tempted to say to him, ‘Hey you, you don’t look like a poor LTTE soldier who suffered starvation in the jungles in the Vanni!’ But I didn’t. The neighbor was feeling the same, so she made him remove his socks and shoes and wear a pair of sandals, and instead of pants, she made him wear a sarong, like the kind that my son wears.”

Vera then asked the LTTE deserter how he had managed to creep into the government side. Vera said, “Because he did not possess any identity card (ID).⁵⁴ Then he said that he came through this and that road where there were no Army checkpoints, but he was holding copies of an ID belonging to one of his brothers. That brother of his was killed by the Navy, in August 2006, when he went fishing. My neighbor thought that his presence would create a huge problem for her family, so she took her nephew to the parish priest. The parish priest then suggested she take the boy to a higher-ranking priest. But then, the man did not go and he’s still here in Santa Marta, hiding.” Vera said, “He should leave this place. His presence will create problems for all of us if he remains here.” I asked her,

“Where can he go?”

“To India or a foreign (foreign country).”

Peter, who was also listening with us, said, “Earlier, it was impossible to run away like that once you joined the *iyakam*, because of the LTTE prisons and the kind of punishment they would give to deserters, which was worse than what you’d get from the government (the Army).”

After joining the LTTE, the neighbor’s nephew had never returned to Perunkalipattu. (LTTE soldiers did not serve in their native village or district, and were dispatched to places far from their home.) Vera said, “I saw him after fifteen years. When he left, he was a little boy. But now, what a beautiful young man he has become!”

⁵⁴ Whoever joined the LTTE had to surrender their national identity card to the LTTE as a sign that he or she no longer belonged to the Government of Sri Lanka but to the LTTE’s Tamil Nation.

A couple of days later, Tambi said that the people who had gone to Cheddikulam to the Manik Farm Camp had told him that the LTTE deserter's father was now interned in the camp, and a couple of Army soldiers came to the father and flogged him, saying, "Your son was a member of the LTTE! Where is your son?!"

New Security Complex (Manik Farm Camp and General Hospitals)

George's Family's Manik Farm Camp Visit

On April 14, 2009, George, Rita-amma (his mother), Ann (his wife), and his daughters visited his sisters' families in the Manik Farm Camp. The crowd of visitors was such that, even though they reached Cheddikulam in the morning, they had to wait until 4:00 p.m. to enter the camp where the families of one of George's sisters was interned. "We stood beneath the scorching sun and waited," Ann said. "In the camp we visited that day, the number of families amounted to 16,000. They said that there were too many visitors and George was not given a pass to enter." Thus, leaving George outside the camp, Rita-amma, Ann and the daughters visited George's sister and her family. Ann was able to hand over twelve lunch packets (fish and chicken curry and rice) that she had prepared in the morning. She also gave them some clothes and money. George waited until 7:00 p.m. to get permission to enter the camp—because he had not seen his sister and her family after they had come out of the war-zone—but he was again denied entry. Ann said, "In the camp, people are not given breakfast. Lunch is given at 4:00 p.m., and what they are given is only the worst quality of rice and dhal. That's all. And dinner is distributed at 12:00 a.m., midnight when children are too tired and weak to wake up."

A weekend tabloid paper called *Lanka* reported on Sunday, April 26, 2009, “A Problem in Providing Food to the Civilians Coming in From the No War Zone” (‘No war-zone’ or ‘No fire-zone’ was in and around Maththalan in Mullaitivu):

The food distribution to the civilians arriving from the no war zone has been confined to one meal. 25,000 packets have been supplied at one time for about a 100,000 who have flocked in. *Even though the army has done their maximum to feed these people the government has ignored its responsibility.* Allegations have been made that the pertinent Ministers have not focused on the issue because they have been engaged in election work. *The army has fed the people from their stock of food.* (“A Problem in Providing Food to the Civilians Coming in From the No War Zone,” *Lanka*, April 26, 2009, emphasis added.)

“The End of the Tamil Race” (The Mannar General Hospital)

Isabel’s thirteenth child, Lenin, is married to Geetha. On April 19, I woke up next to Isabel at the house of one of her granddaughters, which was next to Geetha’s house. It was still 5:00 a.m., but I could hear Geetha, in the next house, listening to the radio. The radio was reporting the plight of civilians in Maththalan, Mullaitivu, where her brother and his daughters were still living. While Geetha’s brother and his daughters were in the Mullaitivu battlefield, his wife had been evacuated from Mullaitivu by the ICRC ship, and was now being treated at the Mannar General Hospital.

Geetha said, “My sister-in-law was brought to the Mannar Hospital by ambulance with her baby. She got injured on her left thigh and the leg is cut off from its root. The baby is there with her at the hospital. There’s nobody to help her and she’s there all alone with the baby. That’s why I’m going every day to the hospital. Some of her relatives are in the Manik Farm Camp, but, of course, they are not allowed to visit her.” Geetha was cooking for her sister-in-law every day and bringing a lunch packet to the hospital, where she also tended to her sister-in-law,

bathed her and cleaned her wounds. Geetha said, “My sister-in-law just keeps on crying because her pain is such. And she’s worried about her husband and daughters who are still in Mullaitivu.”

At the Mannar Hospital, the Vanni patients (the victims of the war in Mullaitivu) besieged every floor and hallway. The scarcity of doctors, beds and meals and medicine was severe. And the wounded civilians were daily transported from Vavuniya (also from Trincomalee, where the ICRC ship was transporting wounded civilians from Mullaitivu) to the Mannar Hospital. The flood of Vanni patients was creating serious problems for local patients, and Geetha said that her twenty-year-old son, a heart patient, needed his heart to be operated on, but his operation date had gotten postponed several times, because all the doctors were now tending to the Vanni patients. “Not only at the Mannar Hospital, but at the Vavuniya Hospital and the Anuradhapura Hospital, the situation is the same. So my son cannot even get transferred to other hospitals, because all the hospitals are full.”

The plight of the wounded who arrived in their amputated bodies to the Mannar Hospital broke the hearts of Santa Marta residents, who went to visit their kin at the hospital. From the conditions of the wounded and from the terrifying stories they told, in Santa Marta, the villagers learned about the magnitude of tragedy that was unfolding upon the lives of their kin and other ordinary Tamil people in Mullaitivu. Gabriella said, as soon as she saw me back in Santa Marta, “I am certain that the Tamil race will be extinct soon.” The plight of the wounded from the war front was a constant theme of conversation in Santa Marta. Many maintained that what they were witnessing at the Mannar Hospital was just the tip of the iceberg of the realities of the wounded in the recent war between the Government and the LTTE. Peter said that since the number of patients transported by ambulance was so great, the Government, in its attempt to minimize the

severity of war casualties, has ordered ambulances not to put sirens on. And these ambulances now arrived in large numbers (20 ambulances on a single day, carrying 225 patients).⁵⁵

When Gabriella first told me, “From what I see at the hospital and what is happening now in Mullaitivu, I say, in ten years’ time, the entire Tamil population will be wiped out from this country!” I assumed that she was exaggerating, even though Gabriella, I knew, was not a person who would exaggerate. She was quite clear that the Government had no interest in protecting Tamil civilians and that “The government wants us all to die. First, it will kill the LTTE and those who are left in the Vanni. Then, it will come to kill us, the remaining Tamils in Northern Sri Lanka.”

From early that morning, Gabriella was at the Mannar Hospital. “I’m dead tired,” she said. “I bought two kilos of fish and brought them to the hospital. I helped with the preparation of meals and bathed some patients and came back.” According to Gabriella, at the village level, women had started organizing themselves to help the patients and the staff at the hospital. Gabriella, as the head of the Santa Marta Widow’s Society, was the initiator of this movement in Santa Marta. She said, “Today, 15 women came with me from Santa Marta to the hospital. From Pallimunai, another village, 35 women came, and from another, ten women. Each of us scraped (grated) ten coconuts and together boiled 150kg of rice. And we prepared eggs, fish and

⁵⁵ According to *Sudar Oli*, on April 1, 2009, 55 patients from the Pulmoddai Hospital in Trincomalee were transferred to the Mannar Hospital by ambulance. “2,300 injured patients have been taken to Mannar general hospital up to now.” (“55 Patients from Pulmoddai Hospital Transferred to Mannar,” *Sudar Oli*, April 2, 2009, 7.) A month later, the same paper reported, “225 patients receiving treatment at Pulmoddai hospital were brought down to Mannar general hospital in 20 ambulances on Thursday. Around 3,000 patients as a result of clashes taking place in Vanni were brought to Mannar hospital. Of them, around 300 patients were treated and taken to welfare centers in Vavuniya.” (“A group of Pulmoddai Patients Arrive in Mannar,” *Sudar Oli*, April 28, 2009, 6.)

vegetable curries. Without the help from outside, the hospital cannot provide food to patients at all.”

Then, Gabriella repeated, as if to make sure that I remembered her words, “In ten years time, all of us will die! I have seen people without hands, arms, legs and other body parts. I saw a woman with a severe face injury—a sharp piece of shell (shrapnel) went through her cheeks from right to left.” At the hospital, she said, people told her that there were 6,000 people who had limbs amputated in the Vanni. “It’s because the government is using what they call ‘cluster bombs.’ At the hospital, people are using the word ‘cluster bomb,’ the English word, to describe the kind of bomb (*kunṭu*) that the Government is using. Each bomb has smaller bombs inside and inside these smaller bombs, there are many more bombs” (Gabriella).

Lenin

While many villagers in Santa Marta, like Gabriella, were now certain about the future of the Tamils in Northern Sri Lanka, that the government would not want them to live there, there were people like Lenin—so rare that I found only Lenin—who had a different assessment of the situation. Lenin came when Isabel and I were listening to Vera explaining her visit to the Mannar Hospital. Vera said,

“There were patients everywhere. On the beds, on the floor, and in the hallways. I heard a small boy’s voice from behind, saying, ‘*Akka! Akka!* (Big Sister! Big Sister!)’ When I turned around, there was a boy with all limbs amputated. That boy, looking at me, said, ‘Tell me what I am to do from now. I lost all my limbs.’” Vera said that she got frightened. “What could I tell him? I just hugged him and came back. That’s all I could do.”

Upon listening to Vera, her younger brother, Lenin, said, “Pirabakaran is no different from Hitler! Even though the Sinhala language is a foreign language, their army is the army that protects us. The LTTE, though they are Tamils, they make our life miserable.” He said,

“The Tigers even grabbed the Madhu Mother (the statue of the Our Lady of Madhu) from Madhu Shrine and carried it off to Thevanpiddy, to the further interior of their territory (in April 2008). That time, the Sinhala Army attacked them from the sea and got the Madhu Mother back! Today (April 2009), just as they ran after the Madhu Mother, the army is running after the civilians in the Vanni.”

Why are they running after civilians? I asked him.

“To get them back!”

For Lenin, “The problem is the Tigers. Its leaders are only interested in maintaining their power. They are after money and power. See, even today, in the midst of bombing, the Tigers are allowing only the rich to flee, but not the poor.”

Now, Vera was reminded of her own experience with the LTTE. Sometime in the 1990s, Vera was suffering from a terrible headache and was on her way to Colombo to get treatment. On the way, the LTTE stopped her bus. They told her to get off the bus and go home. They grabbed the ‘pass’ (permission issued by the police to travel to Colombo) from her hand and tore it into pieces. Vera said, “I cried and begged them to give me back the pass, but they didn’t even listen to me. But I saw a rich man from our village coming by a motorbike. The Tigers easily accepted the bribe (the gold watch he was wearing) and he got through the checkpoint.”

Lenin said, “What the Tigers want is money! Gold! Gold! Gold! You will know how much people hate the LTTE when you visit Manik Farm. When you enter there and start talking about the Tigers, the 60,000 inmates will all tell you, ‘Get out of here! Get out!’ They don’t even

want to hear the name ‘the Tigers,’ because they know it is the Army (the Government Forces) who protected them.”

Lenin, 45 years old, joined TELO (Tamil Eelam Liberation Front), one of the Tamil militant groups in 1984. He was arrested by the army in 1986 and remained imprisoned in Borella, Colombo until 1990, where he was tortured. He showed me his hands and feet. His fingernails were deformed and his ankles had striated scars around it. After his release, he got married to Geetha, an ex-LTTE fighter and the two of them fled to India, where they stayed for thirteen years. In 2003, Lenin and Geetha returned with their two sons, born in India, to Mannar and settled in Santa Marta. His opinion that the LTTE’s leader, Pirabakaran, is no different from Hitler is, of course, not based on his first-hand experience in the Vanni, because he had been away from northern Sri Lanka for a total of seventeen years, while the great majority of the villagers in Santa Marta had been living under the LTTE, at least until 1999. For the villagers in Santa Marta, the Sinhala Army was never their protector.

Yet, at the same time, even among ordinary Tamil people, the LTTE was now losing its legitimacy. As the number of civilians fleeing the LTTE-held Mullaitivu increased, and as those who succeeded in fleeing reported the situation in the Vanni to their relatives, which included the LTTE’s forced conscription, its prohibition to flee to the government side, and the execution of those who did not listen to these orders, people started to more openly express their disapproval of the LTTE.

The LTTE’s refusal to let people flee to the government-side, and its use of violence for those who refused to obey its orders, were nothing new to the villagers in Santa Marta. Many said, “How can you say that what happened ten years ago won’t happen again this time?”—referring to the LTTE’s bombing of their church in 1999. What was surprising and shocking to

them was, however, that the Government was now really engaged in the annihilation of the Tamil population in the Vanni!

Hospital as a Security Complex

In April 2009, in the Mannar and Vavuniya districts (where the Manik Farm Camp was located), wherever the Vanni civilian victims lived, the area was marked as a high security zone. In Mannar Town, the Mannar General Hospital was a high security zone, and access to the wards where the Vanni victims stayed, was limited to the close relatives of the victims. The hospital was heavily guarded by security personnel, including not only the military in uniform, but also intelligence officers in plain clothes. In short, the government controlled the access of outsiders to the Vanni victims. This was because, according to Gabriella, “It is obvious from the kind of casualties these Vanni patients have—their amputated bodies—that the Government is using cluster bombs and the Government does not want outsiders to know that.”⁵⁶

The Killing of Dr. Meera Mohideen

On April 20, 2009 at 7 p.m., in the Vavuniya Town, Dr. Meera Mohideen, a Muslim gynecologist who worked at the Vavuniya Hospital, was shot dead by a group of armed men in

⁵⁶ Dr. Martin Herman was an ICRC surgeon who worked at the Pulmoddai Hospital in Trincomale. Between February 10 and March 31, 2009 he treated over 1,900 Vanni victims, along with an ICRC anaesthetist and nurse and a group of Sri Lanka Health Ministry staff. According to Dr. Herman, the patients from Mullaitivu were suffering from “shrapnel injury” and he had to amputate many patients, sometimes remove shrapnel from their bodies. Many patients suffered “heavily infected wounds,” the kind of severe infection that, he understands, was possible in a situation where there are no antibiotics and new dressing to change. Instead of dressings he saw “strips of sarong or T-shirts” on the patients. “Pieces of wood are often used as splints to immobilize a fracture and spare the person a lot of pain.” “Sri Lanka: ever more sick and wounded evacuated from conflict area to hospital,” International Committee of Red Cross (ICRC) Resource Center, March 31, 2009.

<http://www.icrc.org/eng/resources/documents/interview/sri-lanka-interview-310309.htm> (accessed January 27, 2012).

front of his hospital. According to the hospital staff, “He has been providing a remarkable service to a large number of expectant mothers arriving from the conflict zone.”⁵⁷ This killing caused “panic and fear among the medical staff,” because Dr. Mohideen was targeted by a group of armed men who succeeded in its murder operation in the Vavuniya town area—the area heavily guarded by Army soldiers and other intelligence personnel. To organize a gang murder in the presence of the Sri Lankan Army and intelligence personnel is only possible if the murder was back by the government intelligence authority. Thus, the killing of Dr. Mohideen sent a clear message to the doctors and hospital staff at the Vavuniya Hospital that their service to the Vanni victims was not necessarily appreciated by the higher authorities in Colombo, and that they may be the next target of this type of killings. The following day, the doctors and staff at the Vavuniya Hospital, as well as doctors at hospitals in Trincomalee and Mannar, protested and “threatened to withdraw from their posts and return to Colombo if the Health Ministry failed to provide adequate security to the hospitals and make arrangements for their protection.”⁵⁸

⁵⁷ The *Thinakkural* newspaper reported, “Dr. Meera Mohideen (50), a Gynecologist attached the Vavuniya Hospital was subjected to gun fire last night around 7:00 p.m. at the entrance of a private hospital, Vavuniya. Armed men opened fire when he was returning from the private hospital. He received a bullet injury to the chest and was rushed to Vavuniya hospital and an emergency operation was performed. However, he died at around 8:00 p.m. He has been providing a remarkable service to a large number of expectant mothers arriving from the conflict zone, say hospital circle. The killing has brought panic and fear among the medical staff.” (“Doctor Shot Dead in Vavuniya,” *Thinakkural*, April 21, 2009, 1.)

⁵⁸“Doctors of Vavuniya Hospital threatened to withdraw from their posts and return to Colombo if the Health Ministry fails to provide adequate security to the hospital and make arrangements for their protection following the killing of Dr. M. Mohideen on Monday night. Dr. Mohideen, a consultant Obstetrician and Gynaecologist was returning after private practice around 7PM when he was gunned down by a gang.” (“Following Doctor’s Killing by Armed Gang. Vavuniya Doctors Threaten to Withdraw If Protection Not Provided,” *The Island*, April 22, 2009, 2.)

Number Politics

The ‘no-fire zone’ (also called the ‘safe zone’) was where the government had encouraged civilians trapped in the fighting between the two warring parties to flee to, and where the LTTE was hiding amidst civilians.⁵⁹ On April 3, Defense Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapaksa, in an interview with the Reuters news agency, said, “The troops are in no hurry to proceed to the ‘no-fire zone.’ Soldiers will not be in a hurry, especially when intelligence reports show dissension against the LTTE brewing in the area” (Defense Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapaksa).⁶⁰ In other words, while the civilians in the no-fire zone were desperately waiting for the government’s shelling to stop and to be rescued from the conflict area, the government wanted to take time in its rescue operation of the civilians. The government forces continued firing into the no-fire zone for another 45 days until May 18, when the President announced the war victory.

With respect to the number of civilians trapped in the no-fire zone, the government had different numbers than the numbers estimated by the United Nations. On April 1, 2009, “The United Nations was maintaining that there had been 100,000 to 250,000 civilians trapped in the ‘No Fire Zone’ in the Wannai [sic] region but the government maintains that the figure was less than 70,000.”⁶¹ The government intentionally understated the number of civilians in the Vanni.

⁵⁹ The “Safe Zone” proclaimed by the Government consists of the villages along the Mullaitivu coast, which include Palayamaththalan, Puthumaththalan (which ordinary people like Rita-amma called “Maththalan”), Ampalavanpokkanai, Valaingermadam, Mulliwaikal West and Mulliwaikal East.

⁶⁰ “No Hurry for ‘No-Fire Zone,’” *Daily Mirror*, April 4, 2009, 1. Defense Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapaksa was a brother of President Mahinda Rajapaksa, and the latter was also the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces and the Minister of Defense, Public Security, Law & Order.

⁶¹ “IDP Camps Now Under Resettlement Ministry. No Clear Headcount in Safe Zone: Minister,” *Daily Mirror*, April 1, 2009, 2.

Even the government's own statistics read that in 2000, there were 139,921 people displaced within the Mullaitivu district and 120,550 people displaced within the Kilinochchi district.⁶² The number of displaced people within these two districts already amounted to 260,471. And among the Vanni civilians, there were also people from the Mannar district, Jaffna district and Vavuniya district (because parts of these districts were located inside the Vanni). More recent statistics by the Department of Census and Statistics showed that in the year 2008, the population of the Kilinochchi district was 147,000 and that of the Mullaitivu district, 135,000—thus, the total number of people in these two districts was 282,000.⁶³ And, as stated earlier, civilians in the Vanni included, not only the people of these two districts, but also those who were living in parts of the Mannar, Jaffna, and Vavuniya districts.

However, the Government's number, "70,000 in the no-fire zone," was the official number, used in all the communications between the Sri Lankan Government and international community. In the country's south, the majority of Sinhalese people believed the government's number, which was repeated in the southern media. Even at the Parliament, Sinhala politicians emotionally refuted an alternative number provided by a Tamil member of parliament (MP). On April 23, 2009, the *Virakesari*, a Tamil newspaper, reported,

⁶² North East Province Planning Secretariat 2001, 345, "Number of displaced people in welfare centers and outside the welfare centers in NEP 2000."

⁶³ Sri Lanka Department of Census and Statistics, n.d., "Estimated Mid Year Population by Sex and District 2000-2010," <http://www.statistics.gov.lk/PopHouSat/Mid%20Year%20Population/midyearsex&district.pdf> (accessed January 27, 2009).

Some of the government MPs jointly shouted to disturb the speech of Sri Kantha MP, saying that Sri Kantha MP must withdraw the statement he made on the number of people killed in the safety zone area. The proceedings of the House were disturbed for ten minutes. When Sri Kantha MP pointed out the large number of deaths that took place owing to the shelling by the forces, the ruling group MPs shouted at him, calling him a Tiger [LTTE], and threatened and demeaned him as giving false data supplied by the Tigers. (“Ruling Group MPs Shout Disturbing Sri Kantha’s Speech,” *Virakesari*, April 23, 2009.)

Anuradhapura Government Agent’s Confusion

Father Augustine, a senior Catholic priest, was one of a dozen Catholic priests who in the Vanni remained and served among the civilians trapped in the fighting. In late April, Father Augustine was injured by the government’s shelling and was transported by ship from Mullaitivu to the government’s side. The ship belonged to the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). It was April 22. By April 22, the Government Forces had captured two-thirds of the no-fire zone and the area in which civilians were trapped in the fighting between the government forces and the LTTE was “less than 12 square kilometers.”⁶⁴

When Father Augustine reached Pulmoddai in the Trincomalee district by the ICRC ship with another six to seven hundred patients, the Pulmoddai Hospital was already full. So Father

⁶⁴ (“End is Near. No-Fire Zone Less Than 12 Sq.km., Hunt For Prabha Gathers Pace,” *Daily Mirror*, April 23, 2009, 1.) On the same day, another paper, *Sudar Oli*, reported, “Minister, Keheliya Rambukwella, spokesman for security issues, . . . said that Tigers are now cornered within an eight kilo meter land area. Meanwhile, the military commander had already announced that Prabhakaran, the LTTE leader and his remaining cadres would meet their own fate within hours if they failed to surrender (That is- before noon day before yesterday). However, the LTTE has already announced that they would not surrender under any circumstance. We could infer from these statements that there is a possibility of 99 % for an impending final battle in the Government designated safety zone. Immense human disaster and unfortunate consequences would be expected if such an intense battle takes place, warned Pierre Krahenbuhl, ICRC director of operations.” (“Final Battle in Puthukudiyiruppu, ICRC Official Warns,” *Sudar Oli*, April 23, 2009.)

Augustine was transported to a hospital in a place called Padaviya. Now, Padaviya was a town where three districts shared their borders—the Mullaitivu district (Tamil district), the Trincomalee district (a mixed district with an all Tamil, Muslim and Sinhalese population) and the Anuradhapura district (Sinhalese district). “The Padaviya Hospital was also overcrowded with patients.” Father Augustine said,

“At the Padaviya Hospital, I was lying on the floor because there was no bed available. Like that, I was bearing pain. The next day, or two days later, two gentlemen came to visit me. One of them was the Anuradhapura government agent (GA) and the other was a high-ranking army officer. I sat on the floor and welcomed them. The Anuradhapura GA then asked me,

‘Father, how many civilians are still remaining in the Vanni?’

I was astonished by his question because I thought he knew. But he did not. The GA was asking me that question because the government appointed him to be in charge of the government’s humanitarian assistance for the Vanni IDPs in that area. The government did not choose the Kilinochchi GA or the Vavuniya GA, who would have known the ground situation better, but chose the Anuradhapura GA, a Sinhalese, to be responsible for the humanitarian operation in the Tamil area.”

Father Augustine continued,

“The Anuradhapura GA did not have a slightest idea of the actual number of the civilians trapped in the Mullaitivu. I told him,

‘At least 275,000 people are still left in Mullaitivu.’

But the GA said, ‘No way. It cannot be true!’

The GA could not believe me, because from Colombo, the government was giving him totally different numbers. The government was saying, as early as in January 2009, that there were only 80,000 civilians left in the Vanni and was continuing to insist on that number. The GA asked further,

‘Father, then, what about the 75,000 civilians who were rescued from Puthumaththalan area yesterday?’

The GA was referring to the people rescued by the Army a day before I left Mullaitivu. In that operation, the Army advanced by land as well as by sea and rescued 75,000 people from the Puthumaththalan area. I did not know that, so I replied to the GA,

‘Then, Sir, you subtract that number 75,000. There are still 200,000 people left in the Vanni.’

‘It cannot be true, Father. There cannot be so many people left in the Vanni. I can hardly believe what you are saying.’

So I told the GA, ‘If I am sharing with you false information, you could very well bring me to a court and try me there. But I am telling you the truth. At the moment, there are 200,000 people left in the Vanni. Since you are in charge of the government’s humanitarian assistance to these displaced people, I urge that you immediately prepare provisions of water, food and medicine, and sanitation facilities and shelter for these 200,000 people. If you fail to do so, an even greater tragedy might unfold.’

The GA said that he would discuss it in a meeting that was scheduled for that afternoon or the next day” (Father Augustine, pers. comm. August 5, 2008).

Father Augustine left the Mullaitivu shore on April 22. The ship by which Father Augustine was evacuated was the second to last ICRC ship that reached the Mullaitivu shore.

The last ICRC ship was on April 29.⁶⁵ Father Augustine said,

“That was the end of the ICRC’s evacuation mission. No more ships went to the Mullaitivu-Puthumaththalan shore, carrying food and medicine, and no more ships came away from that beach carrying the wounded on board to the government’s side. Well, then, you can imagine the kind of fate that awaited those who were left in the Vanni. When they were wounded, that would be the end of their life. Food and medicine were no longer available.”

According to Father Augustine, the government was deliberately giving the number, 70,000, for mainly two reasons. First, the government wanted to reduce the amount of food and medicine that had to be supplied and distributed to the people in the Vanni.⁶⁶ Second, the

⁶⁵ The first ICRC ship for the evacuation of the sick and the wounded from Mullaitivu arrived at Puthumaththalan, Mullaitivu on February 10, 2009. The ship arrived from Trincomale, carrying some food and medicine for civilians. One attendant per patient was also allowed to board the ship. The ship then returned to Pulmoddai in the Trincomale district. Between February 10 and April 29, 2009, for a period of 11 weeks, the ICRC ship sailed 28 times between Mullaitivu and Trincomale and evacuated close to 12,400 people (Roughly 2.5 ships per week; 442 people per ship). (“Sri Lanka: Thousands of civilians still trapped,” ICRC Resource Centre, April 20, 2009, <http://www.icrc.org/eng/resources/documents/update/sri-lanka-update-300409.htm>, accessed January 27, 2009.)

⁶⁶ “All the relief operations by humanitarian agencies and the Government’s dry ration distribution to these civilians in the Vanni were done based on this number 8,000” (Father Augustine, pers. comm. August 5, 2008). Father Augustine said,

Now, the ICRC ship was large enough to carry as much as one hundred lorries-full of food. However, the amount of food that the ICRC ship was carrying to Mullaitivu during this period was as little as two lorries-full. I was quite astonished by this, so I once asked the ICRC. I said, “Since you work in the Vanni, you must know how many people are remaining here. Don’t you feel ashamed to carry such a meager amount of food for these people?” The answer I got from them was, “Even to continue carrying this meager amount, we are finding extremely difficult. We are negotiating with the Ministry of Defense over and over again to get the Ministry’s permission to carry food so that we can

government wanted to avoid responsibility for civilian deaths in the Vanni. Indeed, there were always more people fleeing the conflict zone than the number of people that the government said remained in the Vanni.⁶⁷

The Manik Farm Camp

“Today’s problem is the problem of the soul,” Gabriella said and handed me a letter from the Manik Farm Camp. It was from her brother’s daughter. The letter read, “If only God had taken our lives along with all the things we’ve lost, we would be living an afterlife! But God spared our lives—only lives and nothing else. We have no idea how to continue living.” Gabriella said that the inmates of these Cheddikulam camps were “a mass of human beings imprisoned in a state of depression. And the situation worsens day by day as their depression grows” According to her the biggest problem was that the inmates did not know when they would, “if at all,” be released from the camp and return home. “Every day, they just sit there, having no job, nothing to do. They survived the Maththalan water, but got drowned in depression in the Manik Farm Camp” (Gabriella, pers. comm., April 5, 2009).

continue our operation of evacuation of the wounded. But we are now in a situation even to carry on with this mission is becoming impossible.” [Father Augustine, pers. comm. August 5, 2008.]

⁶⁷ On April 26, 2009, a weekly tabloid paper, *Revira*, reported “The operation of freeing hostages had by the 24th of April saved 108,000 hostages according to the army commander Lt. Gen. Sarath Fonseka.” Twenty-four days later, on May 19, 2009, *Daily Mirror* reported, “UNHCR said Monday that 265,000 people had fled the conflict zone in north-eastern Sri Lanka in the last several months” (“UN: 265,000 Have Fled Conflict Zone,” *Daily Mirror*, May 19, 2009). The Media Center for National Defense reported that between May 15-18, 2009, “in the last 84 hours of war, 65,647 persons were saved” (“251,861 Civilians Had Been Saved From Vanni,” *Virakesari*, May 19, 2009, 2).

Pirakasi-amma, a Perunkalipattu native, was interned in the Manik Fark Camp until November 2009. (I met her in November in Santa Marta. Those who were leased in November 2009 from the Manik Farm Camp, according to many villagers in Santa Marta, “either had rich relatives to pay money,” or “had good connections.” Except four or five families, all the Perunkalipattu families who were interned in the Manik Farm Camp were released in January 2010.) According to Pirakasi-amma, there were fifteen people in her shelter. “Usually, three families shared a shelter of 10 x 10ft. Some shelters were made of tin walls and roofs, others were just tarp shelters. There was no personal space. Every single space was shared: place to rest, place to eat, place to chat, place to bathe, and toilet. Ten liters (2.64 gallons) of water was given to each inmate per day, with which he or she had to cook, wash their clothes and wash themselves” (Pirakasi-amma, pers. comm. November 7, 2009). These tarp shelters, which each housed fifteen people, consisted of a 10 x 10ft plot of earth. In the rain season, the earth became mud.

For the first couple of months, Army soldiers cooked food for the inmates. Later, the government decided to have the inmates cook for themselves. Each ‘block’ (about 300 people) was given a kitchen. Every day ten people took turns to prepare meals. “Disputes over food, because of its utter scarcity, took place every day among the people in the same block” (Pirakasi-amma).

In September 2009, the Army stopped the kitchen-system. Each family was responsible for cooking their food in the allotted space. “Families that had no money could no longer cook or eat. Those who survived starvation in the Vanni suffered further lack of food.” According to Pirakasi-amma, each person was given, per week, the following items as dry rations. (Vegetables were given only once between September and October 2009.)

Rice	1kg
Sugar	20g
Flour	1kg
Dhal	1/2kg
Coconut oil	20ml

In the Manik Farm Camp, there were no jobs, no home, no sea, no vegetable garden, and no paddy field. The whole day these 300,000 inmates would wait in line for food and water to be supplied to them and would fight over this food and water.

CHAPTER 4

GRIEF, November 2009

“*Kavalaippatticcu*. [‘Empathy has found you.’]”—Andreas

In Northern Sri Lanka, six months after the war had ended, in November 2009, the survivors of the war were still held behind barbed-wire fences in the Manik Farm Camp. The bodies of those who had died in the war still lay on the Mullaitivu battlefield. The entire Vanni, the former territory of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) was now a high security zone, and the former inhabitants of the Vanni were not allowed to return to their villages and towns. In the Santa Marta Camp (Santa Marta) on Mannar Island, the month of November, for the villagers, was a month of mourning in their Catholic calendar. On November 2, All Souls Day, the villagers’ concern focused on the souls (*āṇmā*) of the dead. On that day, dedicated to the souls of the dead, the families were reminded of the significance of the absence of the graves for those who died in the Vanni. The bereaved families were distressed, because, they thought, those who died in the Vanni—“killed by the shelling like insects” (Vera)—had not been treated the way they deserved to be, even after their deaths. Isabel said, “We believe in life after death (*nittiya vāzvu*). We conduct funerals and pray for the dead person’s sins to be forgiven, for the person to be sanctified, and, ultimately, be received by God. That is why we call priests and solemnize the burial” (Isabel, pers. comm., November 2, 2009). However, the Vanni victims had no solemnized funeral. After the war, what the Vanni victims were deprived of was the right to be buried by their loved ones; and what the bereaved families were deprived of was the right to bury their dead, which, for them, was part of their responsibility to their loved ones who had died.

All Souls Day (First Mass of the Month of Mourning)

The mass was held at 6 a.m. at the graveyard, located a mile away from Santa Marta. The graveyard had been built in 2007, when, due to the fighting in the Vanni and the closure of the Uyilankulam checkpoint, the transportation of the bodies of the deceased members from Santa Marta to the graveyard in Perunkalipattu in the Vanni had become impossible. At the Santa Marta graveyard, the graves were all fresh and, because many bodies had to be abandoned on the battlefield, few. The villagers decorated tombs, or rectangular sand mounds, with hibiscus flowers on top. None of the male villagers went fishing on this day, and all the villagers, who could walk two miles, came to attend the mass. I was “sandwiched” in amid the female members of the crowd, close to the makeshift altar. The first reading of the mass was from the Book of Lamentations.

I have forgotten what health and peace and happiness are.

I have not much longer to live; my hope in the Lord is gone.

The thought of my pain, my homelessness, is bitter poison;

I think of it constantly and my spirit is depressed.

Yet hope returns when I remember this one thing:

The Lord's unfailing love and mercy still continue,

Fresh as the morning, as sure as the sunrise. (Lam. 3: 17-23)

Later, back at home, Vera would explain to me. The mass at the graveyard was offered in remembrance of four groups of the dead. The first group was those who died with no one present and the souls that nobody mourns for. The second group was the souls of those who had gone

missing in the war. The third group was the souls of the dead whose bodies were never retrieved. And the last group was the souls of all (the rest of) the dead.”⁶⁸

The day’s reading continued: “The Lord is all I have, and so I put my hope in him. The Lord is good to everyone who trusts in him, so it is best for us to wait in patience—to wait for him to save us” (Lam. 2: 24-26).

Vanaja-amma, an old woman who sat behind us, began crying. The next reading was from the Second Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians:

For we know that when this tent we live in—our body (uṭal) here on earth—is torn down, God will have a house in heaven for us to live in, a home he himself has made, which will last for ever. So we are always full of courage. We know that as long as we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord’s home. For our life is a matter of faith (vicuvācam), not of sight. (2 Cor. 5:1, 6-7)

After the mass, the villagers whose kin had been buried in the graveyard went to their graves and wailed. However, many of the families that lost their kin in the previous year, who were supposed to be the principal participants in the mass, remained mostly bystanders. The absence of graves for the Vanni victims did make the villagers feel, even though the mass was also offered in remembrance of them, that they could not honor their dead in the way the victims deserved. Therefore, on our way back from the graveyard, Vera remained silent. I knew she was

⁶⁸ This list of people to be mourned was made the previous night by the church committee. Among the dead who were remembered, there was also a small boy who had just died in the Manik Farm Camp from fever due to dehydration.

thinking of Emma, her niece, whose grave too was absent. I asked Vera whether she had seen Emma's father Savio and his family. Vera said, "They attended the mass at the graveyard, but stood far in the back. After the mass, they immediately left."

When we reached Vera's home, Isabel put down the broom and blessed us at the gate as if a holy crowd has arrived. Vera fell into a chair. Then the neighbor's rooster flew in and Isabel was about to hit it with the broom when it ran past us and out through the gate. I went to close the gate and found Savio across the street, parking his bicycle against one of our neighbors' fences. He then disappeared into the house of a TV repairman. A minute later, I saw Savio came out of the house and return to his bicycle. The second I said to Vera, "Vera, look! That's Savio," she called him in a loud, desperate voice, "Savio! Savio! Come here please!"

"*Ooi?*" Savio responded as if he was caught in the middle of mischief. "Come here please!" Vera pleaded. He removed his hands from the bicycle and came through the gate. I stood up to give him a seat, but before he reached the chair, Vera threw herself against his chest, like an angry small girl, hitting him with her fist, and began sobbing, "*Ah! Haha! Ah Haha!*" Vera then pushed him inside the house. The minute they went in, Isabel followed as if she was sucked by a magnetic power. I heard Savio let out a lament. Isabel, too, began sobbing. Their lament burst out as if a fire was lit and everything was in flame.

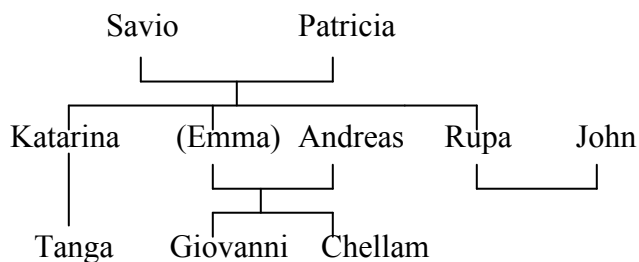
After the mass, at the graveyard, there was no possibility for Vera or Savio to let out a lament, because there was no grave for Emma. Now, however, they were all crying.

It was just a matter of three minutes. Then the sobbing stopped inside the house and Savio came out. He walked toward some clothes that were hanging outside to wipe away his tears. After Savio left (he left as if he was running away), Isabel said, "At least we have to put a cross for Emma. We cannot just go on like this. It's been ten months since Emma died."

Family Visits

It is a custom of the villagers to visit the bereaved families on All Souls Day. Vera, Isabel, Tambi (Vera's son) and I all visited Savio's house later in the day. Emma's husband Andreas and their 22-month-old son, Chellam, were both now living at Savio's. They had come to live with Savio after their three-month stay in Colombo for the medical treatment of Chellam's feet, and another two-month stay at the Mannar General Hospital.

As we entered through the gate of Savio's house, I saw Chellam in the arms of Emma's sister Rupa. Chellam looked healthy. With a wide smile he parroted Rupa's words, "Come in! Come in!" His nine-year-old brother Giovanni stood next to them. Inside the house, since there was no light except the light that came through the front door, it was very dark. Andreas and Savio were not at home.



Rupa, Savio's youngest daughter, and her husband John had married three years earlier but had no children. So they had recently moved to Savio's place in order to look after Emma's children. Rupa's husband John was also a fisherman, like Andreas, and the two young men now went to work from Savio's place. All together, nine people were now living with Savio in November 2009.

Inside the house, we all sat, but nobody spoke. All of us knew why we were gathering there—to remember Emma. However, nobody even mentioned Emma’s name. None of us cried. “Savio’s family has not really begun accepting Emma’s death,” Isabel would later tell me.

Emma’s mother Patricia was largely responsible for the silence. Vera, Isabel and I were afraid that when we mentioned Emma’s name, we might offend Patricia, who did not want us to repeat what all the others had told her and that which she was still refusing to accept—Emma is dead.

The silence soon became overwhelming and almost unbearable, I hoped that Chellam would say something and break the silence. But Chellam remained silent, watching us with his big round smile.

“When did she come?” Finally, Patricia spoke. She was asking about me.

“About a week ago,” Vera answered.

Again, back to silence.

Patricia said, “Chellam, show this auntie your feet.” She made me the center of attention. Even as Chellam was too small to comprehend, I was too alien to comprehend, the suffering of the family. Even though I did not want to see Chellam’s wounded feet, I had to cooperate with the rest of the crowd. I stood up.

Rupa carried him closer to me and held his two little feet in her hand. Chellam did not resist.

“This boy is really outgoing and shows his feet to strangers without hesitation. He got used to showing his feet, because he has seen many doctors and nurses in Colombo,” Patricia said.

Since the room was too dark I could not see his feet. I was glad, because I had heard the story of what happened to this child in the Vanni. Everybody else in the room, however, was curious to know how I would react and what I had to say about the baby's feet. I remembered that Savio had told me a few days earlier—and he pretended that he was just telling a joke—“Bring a camera and take a picture of my grandson. Show it to the world and bring us back some money so that we can buy powdered milk for him.” “I don't have a camera with me,” I had answered at that time. “Ah! Your being here is of no use then!” he said, smiling.

Rupa led me nearer to the front door, where there was more light. This time I could see clearly. Chellam's feet were tiny; the left foot had no toes and the form of the toeless foot was a strange triangle; the wound had dried. The right foot was more severely injured. It was cut off by the shell blast at the ankle—a shrapnel injury. Then in Colombo, doctors transplanted some flesh from his thigh to reconnect the foot to his leg. Even though it had been already ten months since the injury, the wound had still not healed; the part of his leg, just above the ankle, where the flesh was transplanted, looked like a piece of dried minced meet; it had a labyrinth of tiny narrow tunnels that flies and other insects had created. I could see some tiny flies moving around inside the wound.

Vera had bought and brought a Swiss roll for them. Chellam opened the wrapping and began eating, giving his brother a share. After a few minutes, the whole cake was finished. Vera whispered to me, “They were hungry.” Indeed, the boys seemed hungry. I asked Rupa, “Where's Savio?” “*Appa* (Dad) is gone to Mannar Town,” Rupa answered, as if her father was working in the town. Then we left Savio's and returned to Vera's.

Savio's Night Visits

When Savio said to me, “Bring a camera and take a picture of my grandson, show it to the world and bring money back,” since I did not know the family’s financial situation, I thought he was just joking. It was only later that I learned about the significance of these words of Savio.

Six months earlier, in April 2009, during my stay at Vera’s house, Savio did not come to visit Vera’s place. However, in October and November 2009, he came daily, always after we finished dinner. Savio was, like Peter, not going to the sea to fish. His job was to wash fishing nets by boiling them. When he was not doing this work, he would go to Mannar Town and spend his day and return by the last bus to Santa Marta at 7 p.m. After arriving at Santa Marta, he would briefly return home to give Chellam and Giovanni a candy or a biscuit. (In Santa Marta, biscuits were sold in pieces, not in packets, just as cigarettes were sold individually and not in packets.) After giving his grandchildren sweets, Savio would then go to the home of one of his brothers, watch TV news there, have a cup of tea, and at around 8:30 or 9 p.m. he would come to Vera’s house—to eat leftovers.

For example, on the morning of October 31, as Vera and I were preparing *pittu* for breakfast, Vera said, “Last night Savio came and ate leftovers and went.” I asked her whether there was enough food left. Vera said, “Some *sodi* (coconut soup).” The next morning, Savio came to Vera’s place. It was unusual for him to visit us in the morning. I stood up and went inside the house. When I came out of the house, Savio was no longer there. I asked Vera why he had come. She did not answer straight and said he was watching TV, the previous night, at his brother’s place and then because the electricity went out, he came to our place. I said to her that I was not asking why he came the night before, “Why did he come just now?”

“He just dropped by to say hello,” she said. She was hesitating to tell me the truth. I asked Isabel, “Why did Savio-*annan* come just now?”

“Excuse me?” Isabel pretended that she did not hear me clearly. She too did not want to tell me. I said, “*Ammamma* (Granny)! What did Savio-*annan* tell you?”

She said to me, “Have you got money?” (*Unkiṭṭa kācu irukkā?*)

“Excuse me?” This time, I pretended that I did not hear her clearly.

Savio had come for money and both Vera and Isabel were finding it embarrassing to tell me; besides, they knew I could not help Savio. Isabel asked me again, “Have you got money?”

“For heaven’s sake!” (*Tch! Pōṅka!*) I said. I had given all the money I had brought to Vera, which she then used to repay her debt.

Isabel said, “He came asking for money. He said he needed Rs. 7,000 to repay his debt. Savio knew that Vera and I have no money to give him. So he came to ask us whether you can give him some. We said no and sent him back.”

The next day, in the evening, there was little curry left from lunch. (At Vera’s place we usually cooked enough food at lunch for two meals, and ate whatever was left from lunch at dinner.) Vera fried some pieces of dried ray. I ate some of it with rice, stood up and said, “Alright, it’s time for the English lesson.” By then I had acquired the habit of eating dinner at other villagers’ houses to spare food for Vera’s family and Savio.⁶⁹ Even though I did not tell Vera why I was going to give English classes at dinnertime, she knew my intention and was finding it embarrassing. She would often send Peter to George’s place, where I often went, and Peter would come and tell me, “Class is over? Your dinner is ready at home. Vera is keeping your portion for you.”

⁶⁹ I would visit either Gabriella’s place or George’s place. Both at Gabriella’s and George’s places, they now had only daughters with them; they were also financially better-off than many others.

The next day, in the morning, George called me for breakfast. So I went and ate at George's place. Since neither Tambi nor I was at home, Vera and Isabel skipped breakfast. (Tambi had left at 4 a.m. for Chinnamuttom Beach for work.) By the time I returned home, Vera had already left for the nursery to teach.

At 11:20 a.m., Vera came home. She put the curry that Isabel had prepared on the fire stove, and as soon as the food was ready, began eating. It wasn't even noon. Vera said she was hungry, because "Yesterday, there wasn't enough for dinner. And Savio came. There was hardly anything left. But even that, he ate and went."

Like this, several days went on. All I knew was that Savio was eating leftovers at Vera's but I did not think it was because he had nothing to eat at home. Finally, one night, Vera said, "At Savio's place, they don't have enough to eat. Since Andreas and Chellam came from the Colombo hospital, many people are living at Savio's place. Savio; Patricia; their daughters Katarina and Rupa; Katarina's daughter; Rupa's husband; Giovanni; Chellam, and Andreas—all together nine people. It's hard to feed so many people. And the powdered milk, which the doctors say Chellam should take, costs as much as Rs. 1,000, and he finishes a tin within a week. So every week they need Rs.1,000 for Chellam alone. Savio doesn't have work in Mannar Town, but he goes there to spend his day. You know why? To save food at his home. The whole day he will be at the Mannar bus stand."⁷⁰

After lunch, all three of us lay down to take a nap. Once Isabel fell asleep, Vera continued telling me about Savio:

⁷⁰ Enfakid A+ was the infant milk powder that Chellam's doctors recommended. In the country's capital Colombo, in 2009, a tin of Enfakid [400g] was Rs. 840. The prices of other tinned infant powders varied from Rs. 940 to Rs. 1,200.

“Last Saturday, I went to the market in Mannar Town. I saw Savio. When I was getting into the bus, he came and helped me to load my stuff. He then asked me whether I had twenty rupees, his bus fare. I gave it to him and he came back with me. Every time I meet him in the town, I give him money for his bus fare. Inside the bus, he will ask, ‘Have you got some change?’ So I give him whatever change I have with me—but what do I have? Twenty rupees, thirty rupees. It doesn’t matter how little it is, he always takes the money. Give him ten rupees, and even that he’ll take.”

After saying this, Vera buried her face in the pillow. She was crying. (Ten rupees is enough to buy two candies or biscuits for Chellam and Giovanni.)

In November 2009, Savio was thus spending his day in the town and his night at his siblings’ places, to spare food for his family members, while the same time he struggled to cope with the pangs in his own stomach. Even after the war, Sri Lanka’s economy did not improve from the severe inflation in 2007 and 2008 (see chapter 5). When Savio said to me, “Bring a camera and take a picture of my grandson, show it to the world and bring money back,” he was going far beyond what he would otherwise do as a man of his age and as a grandfather. Though Savio uttered that sentence half jokingly, he was going so far as to beg money from me—and who was I? A stranger, half his age—to make me feel pity for him, to plead with me, to feed his grandson. Given an option, Savio would not have done this humiliating act. Given an option, he would never have his grandson’s picture taken for the purpose of begging money from strangers.

Even though Savio spent more time at his brother’s place watching TV, Savio would not eat leftovers there. It was only Vera who shared her family’s meals with him, because Vera, knowing very well the reason behind Savio’s late night visits, could not help but keep some food

aside for him and wait for him. All of us at Vera's place knew it, and even Tambi, her son, who otherwise would demand all the leftover food, was restraining himself to save food for his uncle. "Not everyone is like us," Vera said. One of her sisters-in-law, for example, even though she knew that Savio was struggling, did not help. "She gives only tea and sends him here" (Vera). Vera also said that Savio's wife was not "a kind of woman who would go out of the house and beg money from her relatives. So all the time, Savio had to struggle alone for the family. That woman (Savio's wife) doesn't mind that."

All Souls Day (cont.)

On All Souls Day, in remembrance of the deceased family members, bereaved families distributed bread rolls and *idiappams*⁷¹ in Santa Marta. This helped some bereaved villagers to share the burden of mourning. It was not only a duty but a right to visit other villagers' houses and grief in their arms. One such mourner was Vanaja-amma, a 64-year-old woman.

Vera, Isabel and I were inside the kitchen, preparing *pittu* for breakfast, when Vanaja-amma came with her last packet of *idiappam*. As soon as she reached our kitchen, Vanaja-amma, twice as big as Isabel, threw herself into Isabel's arms and began sobbing. No sooner had Isabel heard her wail, "*Ach, haha! Ach, haha!*" Isabel too began wailing. I was surprised at Isabel's sudden change, because a second earlier, she was cheerfully chatting with Vera and me. Isabel did not seem to be acting, however. There was an instant transmission of Vanaja-amma's grief to Isabel, who then served like an amplifier, reproducing Vanaja-amma's grief. Like the case of two small children, when one starts crying, the other also starts crying, even though nothing happened to him, except that he heard the other child cry.

⁷¹ Steamed rice noodles.

Once the wailing was over, Vanaja-amma handed a packet of *idiappam* to Isabel, saying, “Older Sister, please receive this. I’m distributing this for my sons.” Since Vanaja-amma had no more *idiappam*, Vera immediately wrapped some *pittu* and gave it to her. I thought with this, Vanaja-amma would leave. But she stayed on, telling Isabel, “All my sons are gone. I’m all alone here. I have no idea when I can be with my daughters.”

Since there was no place for her to sit inside our small kitchen, Isabel told her to sit outside, where there were our usual, three plastic chairs. I followed them. Vanaja-amma wanted us to listen to her story, and she was ready to leave Vera’s place only after we listened to her. She said,

“My family was living in Perunkalipattu. We didn’t move to Santa Marta. In August 2006, there was a wedding of one of my nieces in Jaffna. So I traveled from Perunkalipattu to Jaffna by land to attend the wedding. After the wedding, when I tried to return to Kurusukuppam, both the Government and the LTTE had already closed their checkpoints⁷² and there was no way for me to return home. So I had to wait in Jaffna. I thought that the [Muhamalai] checkpoint would reopen sooner or later, but it remained closed from then till the end of the war. So till the end of the war I was trapped in Jaffna. And while I was in Jaffna, all these terrible things were happening in the Vanni. Soon I got the news that my two sons had died. Two of them by one shell.”

“*Aiyoo! Aiyoo!*” Isabel cried, even though she already knew about it. Vanaja-amma continued,

⁷² At Muhamalai, the only entry-exit point to the Vanni from Jaffna on A9 Road (Jaffna-Kandy Road) at that time.

“I had three more sons. But they were all in the LTTE and had died earlier. These two sons who were killed by the shelling were all that I left.”

I asked her whether she was distributing *idiappan* for her two sons.

“Yes. That is what I’m doing. But I don’t have any strength these days and, to tell you honestly, I don’t want to do anything. But I felt that, since this is All Souls Day, at least this day I should do this for my sons. Since I have nobody else, I distributed them all by myself.”

Vanaja-amma said that the rest of her family were now all in the Manik farm Camp in Cheddikulam:

“While I was in Jaffna, unable to return to Perunkalipattu, my daughters and their families got displaced to Kilinochchi, then to Mullaitivu. Now, they are in Cheddikulam. After the reopening of A9 Road [July 22, 2009], I finally left Jaffna and came to meet my daughters in Cheddikulam. One of my daughters and her family are in the Arunachchalam Camp and the others are in the Manik Farm Camp. I went there and asked the Army to keep me also in the camp with my daughters.”

Surprisingly, Vanaja-amma wanted to be held in the Manik Farm Camp with her daughters. Of course, nobody wanted to be interned in these camps, given an option. But Vanaja-amma had no other options, “Where else can I be? My daughters and their families are all in these camps and they are not allowed to leave.”

After telling us her story, Vanaja-amma lifted herself from the chair and left our place.

Even though the month of mourning had begun, Vanaja-amma had nobody to mourn with. Her tragedy was not limited to the tragedy of a mother who lost all her five sons in the war; she was separated from her remaining children during the period in which her remaining children and their families were living side by side with death—the Vanni bombing. After the war, the

Manik Farm Camp-complex further separated her from her children, who were all kept inside barbed wires, while Vanaja-amma alone stood outside. Vanaja-amma lifted herself with great difficulty and left Vera's place.

There was also a family that distributed, instead of bread rolls and *idiappams*, copies of death anniversary notices. After Vanaja-amma left, a little boy brought one such copy. On that paper, there was a photo of a young woman with the date of birth and death written on both sides of the photo. She was born in 1986; her date of death was November 2, 2008. "Can you tell that she was in the *Iyakam*?" Vera asked me. I looked at the paper once again, but could not find out where it read that she was an LTTE soldier. "Look. She has a short hair, just like boys." I could not tell because of the low quality of the print. Vera said, "The first thing that the LTTE used to do to our girls was to cut their hair. Once their hair was cut, it would be almost impossible for these girls to run away."

The paper was not only a reminder of the girl's untimely death, but also a reminder of a sense of worthlessness of her death. "She died without ever getting married and having children" (Vera). It was also a reminder of the *Iyakam*, the liberation struggle that she had fought for, which failed miserably with the defeat of the LTTE. The young woman's body was not buried in the Santa Marta graveyard, because the LTTE had its own cemetery in Kilinochchi. (After the war, the Sri Lankan government completely bulldozed down the cemetery.)

At night, at Vera's house, the topic of conversation was the former LTTE leader Prabhakaran. Tambi said that Prabhakaran was still alive and that media reports that he was dead

were wrong. He insisted that he had heard from fellow boys in Santa Marta that some days earlier, a dozen mutilated Sinhala army soldiers were brought to the Mannar Hospital.

“I haven’t heard something like that,” Vera said.

“It’s a true story!” Tambi said.

I said, “Prabakaran is dead.”

“That’s not true!” he said, “He’s alive. Everybody says that he’s alive.”

“It’s a lie. He’s dead,” I said, because I did not want Tambi to be misled. “It’s a lie!” I said. Vera and Isabel watched me as if they too were hearing it for the first time.

“He’s alive!” Tambi said, “Wait and see. On November 27, he’ll come and make a speech. Then you’ll know that *he (avan)* is alive.”

November 27, the Great Heroes Day, celebrated annually, was the day that Prabakaran used to appear in front of the people of his Tamil Homeland and pay homage to the dead LTTE cadres. This tradition had continued since 1990 in the Vanni. Therefore, on November 27, 2009, in Santa Marta, many waited for Prabakaran to appear, or at least to speak to them by whatever means, but in Santa Marta the electricity service was cut on that day.

At Vera’s house, when a couple of women came together earlier in the day (November 2, 2009) they also spoke about Prabakaran. One woman said, “I heard that the war started again in Mullaitivu. They say that’s why that the Army is now transporting soldiers from the Talladi Camp to the Vanni.”

Vera responded, “How bloodthirsty *he (avan)* is! Even after so much blood has been shed, Prabakaran is still not satisfied.”

“Indeed, *he* won’t be satisfied until all of us die. Soon, they [the LTTE] will come to recruit our children. They are just waiting for the Vanni villagers to be released from the Manik Farm Camp and return home,” another woman said.

It was clear that the LTTE had lost its support among the people of the Vanni during the final phase of the war. The LTTE lost their support largely due to the forced conscription (see chapter 3). People of the Vanni no longer respected Prabhakaran, but, at the same time, it was difficult for them to accept that he was now dead, because he had failed to deliver what he had promised—an independent land for Tamils. It was difficult to accept that the Leader was now dead, because while he had received all the sacrifices from the people, he failed to leave anything in return. The people of the Vanni has lost everything—their sons and daughters, their villages, seas, paddies, education, jobs, and dignity. (“*Uḷḷatellām koṇṭupoooyaayirrutu*” [Like Tsunami, the war has taken everything away.]) If Prabhakaran was dead already and the LTTE was already a thing of the past, they now had to come to terms with the meaninglessness of the loss of everything, especially of their loved ones.

Andreas

Like many husbands, who had lost their wives in the war and turned to alcohol, Andreas said that his main problem in November 2009 was alcohol. I learned about this problem of his by talking to him one evening in November 2009 in Santa Marta. The condition in which I came to learn about his alcohol problem is worth narrating, because it illuminates the nature of the trauma that the war experience has left in him, which could not be translated in words, but could be felt through empathy/sympathy. Andreas said, in January 2009, four days after he lost his wife and his family members, “Hereafter, I’m not going to tell anyone about what happened that day. If

somebody were to force me to tell what happened that day, I warn you, I'd go mad" (Andreas, quoted by a priest; see chapter 3).

The act of recalling the tragic event for Andreas was a terrifying experience. Vera, however, knowing very well how terrifying an experience the act of recalling was for Andreas, went to meet him in June 2009, and made Andreas recall his experience. Vera said,

"It was back in June that Andreas and Chellam, after their three-month stay at the Colombo hospital, came to the Mannar General Hospital to continue Chellam's medical treatment. When I went to the hospital ward, Andreas wasn't at Chellam's bed, so I looked for him. Then he returned with a load of laundry. Just looking at him carrying that laundry made me cry, because it was the sign that he now had no wife to do that for him. He was looking after Chellam all by himself. I made Andreas sit, and like this, I touched his shoulder, and said that I was worried about him all this time, because he had suffered a lot. *I told him that I was there for him if he needed someone to listen to him.* Then, Andreas slowly opened his mouth and told me what had happened to him in the Vanni, how in that shelling, everybody else died, how he alone, with severely injured Chellam, survived, how his wife Emma struggled and died, how much he wanted to be with her. He told me much more in detail than what the priest had told us earlier." (Vera, pers. comm., October 25, 2009).

According to Vera, this rather forceful act of hers, to make Andreas recall his experience, was important. "Otherwise, he would be keeping everything to himself and that is very difficult. I told him my own experience, because, as you know, I lost my husband when I was 23. Andreas is now 29. I told him I can understand him" (Vera). Vera said that Andreas spoke almost non-

stop, “poured out his terror” upon her, and finally, “cried like a child in my arms.” Once this recalling and crying was over, Vera felt that “I have done what I was supposed to do for Andreas.” So she returned home.

After listening to her, I thought it was a great opportunity for me to get more information about what had happened to Andreas and his family in the Vanni. So I asked Vera to share the additional information Andreas had told her at the hospital. However, Vera replied, “It’s between Andreas and me.” For Vera, the story was too personal for Andreas, and, therefore, she had no right to tell. To my surprise, her attitude toward Andreas’s experience in April 2009 and October 2009 were different. In April, when Vera told me what she had heard from the priest (Andreas’ story) she did not seem to be considering the story as confidential. But now, after listening to Andreas in person, she suddenly declared that what Andreas had shared with her was between him and her. She said, “But you’ll meet him and at that time you can ask him yourself.”

Vera did tell me, however, about Emma’s wedding chain (*tāli*). A *tāli* is the sign of marriage vow in Tamil tradition. It is what at the wedding the bridegroom ties around the bride’s neck. According to Vera, after Emma died, Andreas had to bury her and carry Chellam to a hospital. So he removed the *tāli* from Emma’s neck and took it with him. It was the only thing that belonged to his wife that Andreas was able to carry out of the Vanni. She said, “Andreas had the *tāli* with him at the hospital. He showed it to me. It did not look like a *tāli*. It was charred, broken into pieces, still, he was keeping it with him. When you see that *tāli*, you will know the lethal power of those shells that were used in the Vanni.”

The Interview

Since Vera had suggested that I meet Andreas by myself in person and ask him to tell me about his experience in the Vanni, on November 22, 2009, I interviewed Andreas. I sent Vera to

Andreas to ask if he could come to Vera's house and sit with me and tell me what he had experienced in the Vanni. Andreas agreed. I asked Peter to be with us (Vera had left for the church for the choir and Isabel was out). All three of us, Andreas, Peter and I went inside the house and I told Peter to close the door. Though it was early afternoon, when the door was closed the sunlight was shut and Peter had to open the door slightly to get the light. I was very nervous.

Andreas sat against the wall and Peter sat next to him. I sat across from them—all of us on the floor. I explained to Andreas that I was not going to use his or others' real names. "Write real names in your notebook," Peter said, "The world should know what has happened to them." I looked at Andreas. Andreas, after a pause, said, "Yeah. Go ahead and use my name. Indeed, use my wife's name." I asked Andreas if Peter could be in the room, Andreas said he did not mind. But soon Peter grabbed the betel-leaf box and left, saying to Andreas, "Answer all the questions that *Kaori* asks."

From the church loudspeaker, we heard Vera's voice. She was singing for the dead. (This was a custom among the villagers to pray for the souls of the dead every evening during the month of November.

Lord, give them eternal rest,

Let Your unending light shine upon them.

O Lord, it is right for us to praise you in Zion,

In Jerusalem offering will be rendered to You.

I felt very nervous, because I remembered what Vera had told me about her meeting with Andreas at the hospital. She had said that Andreas struggled to recall his experience in the Vanni. I was afraid to hurt Andreas by making him recall what was so painful for him.

“Now, ask.” Andreas said gently. He had read my mind.

I said, “Andreas, would you mind telling me what happened on January 26, 2009?”

“No. Sure, I will tell you,” he said,

“We were in a village near Puthukkudiyiruppu, Mullaitivu. It was at 6:46 a.m. My wife was preparing tea when the shell fell and blasted. It was only two days after we had come to that village. My wife was preparing tea. When the tea was ready, she called my mother to bring the baby (Chellam) to her, because she knew that the baby was hungry, she wanted to breastfeed him. My mother stood up, held the baby in her arms, and began walking towards my wife. At that instant, the shell fell.

“I rushed to my mother and found that she was about to die (*uyir pōykkonṭiruntatu*). But I thought that the baby was not hurt because she was covering him with her upper body, so I lifted the baby. Then I found that one of his legs was cut in half and the foot was just hanging from the ankle. And from another foot, three toes were blown off. Later at the hospital they cut the remaining two toes, so he lost all the toes on that foot. Then, my brother’s wife, his ten-year-old son, another sister-in-law and brother-in-law, one by one, they all died. That single shell killed eight people. There was a small church nearby and I dug a long hole and buried all eight of them. Then I rushed to the nearest hospital. There, they told me that the baby’s condition was critical and he had to be transported to the Vavuniya Hospital. ‘Are you ready to go?’ The doctors asked me. I answered yes.

“Three days later, January 26, 27, 28 and 29—on the 29th, we reached the Vavuniya Hospital. There, the doctors said that they were sending us to Colombo. So the

baby and I were then transported to Colombo to a hospital in Borella and we stayed in Colombo for three months. The people there, the Sinhalese people at the hospital, looked after us well. Especially the people in the same ward, they knew that I was alone and I had to look after Chellam. So they were very kind to us.”

Within two minutes, Andreas finished answering my question. I was expecting that the interview would take longer time and he would tell me in detail about his experience. Based on that assumption, I had told everyone else to leave the house. But that was all that he spoke about what had happened that day. He did not mention Emma’s death. We both then remained silent.

“Does your wife appear in your dreams?” I asked.

“Yes,” he made a shy face and said, “After I returned to Mannar, I saw her five times in my dreams and we talked about many things.”

“Many things?”

“Yes. Quite many things.”

Then, again, we both remained silent. I did not want to ask further, because I knew that Andreas wanted to keep to himself those “many things” that he discussed with Emma in his dreams.

At the church, Vera’s singing continued.

On this mountain the Lord of hosts will provide for all peoples

*The Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces.*⁷³

⁷³ Isaiah 25: 6a, 7-9.

After some time, Andreas said, “Recently I started drinking.” That second I heard him say that, tears overflowed from my eyes. Even though the room was dark, Andreas knew that I was now crying. I felt embarrassed.

“Why are you crying?” he was surprised. But soon he added, as if he now knew me better, “You are feeling empathy.” (*Kavalaippaṭṭiccu* [‘Empathy has found you’]).

“Empathy has found you,” he repeated.

Once I had shown him my tears, I felt a huge relief. I felt that I was free to express my emotions. There was no longer any need to pretend, on my part, that I could conduct an interview—a scientific or objective, whatever it was I was trying to do, and because of which I was restricting myself not to show any emotions. Still in tears I said,

“I am crying. Not because I feel sorry that you lost your family, but because I feel sorry that you are now drinking.”

“Why?” This time, he was even more surprised.

I said, “It worries me, because you have a long way to go in this life.”

“But, what can I do?” Andreas said, and he was now talking to me as if I was his good friend, “What can I do? Whenever I go to Chinnamuttom Beach for work, others buy me drinks, because they all know what happened to me in the Vanni. They think that drinks can give me some consolation. I started drinking these days because of that.”

Thus, I learned about Andreas’ current problem, alcohol, but almost no additional information about his experience in the Vanni. After Andreas left and Vera, Isabel and Peter were back at the house, we talked about Andreas. I suggested I take Andreas to Father Sebastian, who was running a rehabilitation center for alcoholics. I said, “Because if Andreas is drinking

and cannot look after his boys, the boys will suffer.” However, all of them were against my idea. Vera said, “Leave him. He needs time. Its’ very natural when we consider what happened to him.”

*

Notes on the Financial Situation at Vera’s House

Vera’s financial situation was not any better than Savio’s. Vera, a nursery teacher, was working from Monday to Friday from 8:30-11 a.m. for Rs. 3,500 a month. Tambi, Vera’s twenty-year-old son, had been jobless since 2007, after his unsuccessful attempt to work in Qatar. It was not until November 2009 that he finally found a job thanks to his uncle Peter. Tambi now worked at Chinnamuttom Beach, the jetty for the Santa Marta fishermen. Tambi’s work in November 2009 was not fishing, however. “I cannot send him to the sea, because he is my only son and the sea is dangerous” (Vera). His job at the beach was to refill gasoline into the engines of boats belonging to fishermen; and in return he was getting Rs. 6,000 per month. Peter, Vera’s brother, was staying at Vera’s because “His family deserted him” (Vera). Peter, a gentle, patient and submissive man, did everything that Vera and Isabel (and even I) asked of him. “Whatever we ask, he’ll do that for us” (Isabel). Peter, however, had no job, thus no income. He had no fishing boat or nets of his own, and was now too old to be hired as a fishery laborer to go to the sea for fishing. Therefore he could not contribute financially to Vera. To compensate for his financial inability, Peter would run errands for other village women and bring little extras back home.

For example, one day, Ann, the wife of his friend George, gave him Rs. 200 and asked him to go and purchase a kilo of fish and bring, Peter went to the fish market in a nearby fishing

village, spent Rs. 24 for the roundtrip bus fee, another Rs. 150 for Ann's fish, and with the balance, he bought some small fish for Vera and return home.

Once Tambi began his work at Chinnamuttom Beach, Vera's financial situation improved significantly. "The best part is that we can ask for weekly pay for Tambi. So, every week we have some money" (Vera). However, even with Tambi's contribution, it was still difficult for Vera to make ends meet.

Vera's monthly income, Rs. 3,500 and Tambi's Rs. 6,000 made the total income of the family Rs. 9,500 a month. However, Vera's household monthly expenses amounted to Rs. 11,550 in November 2009.

To feed four people, plus the anthropologist, Vera had to purchase daily:

Coconut (one and a half)	Rs. 35
Fish	Rs. 150
Mixed chili powder (10g)	Rs. 10
Rice (1kg)	Rs. 80
Sugar (200g)	Rs. 20
<i>Jaggary</i> (coconut sugar)	Rs. 10
Fresh green chilies (8-10)	Rs. 10
Tea leaves	Rs. 10
Betel leaves	Rs. 10
Total	Rs. 335

For dietary needs the family needed Rs. 335 a day. Plus, Vera had to purchase a laundry soap (Rs. 20) and Tambi's commute fee to Chinnamuttom Beach (Rs. 30). Therefore, in order to live, the family needed Rs. 385 daily and Rs. 11,550 (Rs. 385 x 30 days) monthly. Since the monthly income of the family was Rs. 9,500, no doubt, Vera was struggling financially. When the Santa Marta fishermen caught plenty of fish, Tambi would bring home fish in exchange for some labor such as cleaning of nets, and Vera would be spared the money for fish. But on Sundays Vera would spend Rs. 300 for beef (500g). What all this means is that there was no extra money at Vera's house for expenses such as medicines or hospital visits to a private doctor. The latter cost Rs. 500 per visit. At Vera's house, there was not only no stock of staples (rice and flour), but also there was no stock of chili, tea and sugar. Except for a packet of salt that she bought some time earlier, some turmeric flour, and a bag of flour that Peter had brought from James's family in the Manik Farm Camp, there was no stock of anything inside Vera's kitchen. Vegetable proteins that they enjoyed back in the village until the 1980s—green gram, black gram, cowpea and soyabean, etc.—were not in their diet. Neither was there any fresh milk, powdered milk, yogurt or fruit.

Peter's Errand Business

Peter's errand business flourished after the government set up the Manik Farm Camp. In November 2009, six month after the end of the war, the Catholic Perunkalipattu families were living in two geographical locations, separated roughly by fifty miles. One was Santa Marta, where four hundred families lived, and the other was the Manik Farm Camp. The number of Perunkalipattu families in the Manik Farm Camp was about one hundred. Many hired Peter to run errands between these two places and, in November 2009, Peter daily traveled to the Manik Farm Camp. Vera, of course, sent things to her brother James' family who were still held there

through Peter. Even though James, one of Isabel's eight sons, had many siblings other than Vera and Peter, it was always Vera and Peter who helped James' family in the Manik Farm Camp. For example, on November 1, 2009, Vera sent with Peter the following items for James' family: four pieces of dried ray fish, which Isabel bought from a neighbor out of the money she saved from her peanut-roasting business; a large guava fruit from a guava tree in Vera's garden (the only tree that bore fruit in the garden); seven eggs from Vera's chickens; and chilli powder (250g), which was half of what Vera had bought recently at the Mannar market. These were what Vera was able to afford to send James' family.

James' family in the Manik Farm Camp was, however, not only on the receiving end of this exchange. They would also send things in return through Peter. For example, on November 5, 2009, Peter brought the following items back home: 2 kg of dhal (two different kinds of imported dhal); 3kg of dried whitebait fish (*nethili*); 3kg of red rice; 2kg of Corn Soya Blend (CSB) with a World Food Program logo on the packages. Peter, who had left at 6:30 a.m., returned home that day on the last bus, at 7 p.m., from the Manik Farm Camp. I asked Peter, "Why did it take so long today?" Peter said, "I visited the camp twice today. I first met them in the morning (meeting time permitted was thirty minutes). Then I went back to the end of the line of visitors and got the second chance to enter. When I met James; family the second time, they gave me all the things." I pulled out CSB and asked what it was. Isabel said, "This gives you good energy. In the Vanni, people used to make portable, preservable food with this." They said that LTTE soldiers used to take a similar kind of food along with them when they went into battle. The two kinds of dhal that Peter brought from the Manik Farm Camp were unfamiliar to Vera and Isabel. I asked whether James' family had enough to eat in the Manik Farm Camp. Vera said that the government was planning to release the victims and send them back to their

original villages. “The government is already distributing ration items that were originally planned for distribution in the coming months. But the people in the Manik Farm Camp are afraid that they, obviously, won’t be able to carry everything with them when they get released. That is why James’ family sent these.”

The Manik Farm Camp

I asked Peter to explain the situation in the Manik Farm Camp. He said,

“When the camp was first built, there were barbed wire fences. We used to stand on this side and they would stand on the other side. We could hardly touch each others’ hand.

Now, there is a metal fence so high that we can hardly exchange things. But people

exchange things over the fence. When we stand on tiptoe, we can throw things over the

other side. Today one of the camp inmates tried to give a sack of rice to a woman,

probably his mother, who had come to visit him. The visitor failed to catch the sack and it

fell on the ground and the sack was torn and rice spilled out. When the woman tried to

pick up the sack, an army soldier came over and trampled on it with his rubber shoe. He

shouted something in Sinhala, perhaps, ‘Who allowed you to exchange things!’ The

woman was frightened and ran away. The sack was left like that on the ground and crows

descended from the sky and had a feast. We have no idea how these soldiers will act.

Things forbidden yesterday are permitted today, and things permitted yesterday may be

forbidden tomorrow. We never know. It seems like it all depends on the soldiers and their

moods. It just doesn’t make sense.”

On November 2, 2009, President Maninda Rajapaksa announced that, within a month’s time, the 300,000 survivors, who were held at the Manik Farm Camp-complex and other camps in Jaffna, Trincomalee and Vavuniya, would be released from these camps (*Daily Mirror*,

12/02/2009, “IDPs Welcome Freedom of Movement in North”). The president’s promise did not apply to the Perunkalipattu families in the Manik Farm Camp, for on November 18, the government transferred the families to a new camp in a place called Irupakulam. On that day, there was a ‘SOS-call’ from Irupakulam camp to the relatives in Santa Marta that these families in the new camp were “hungry, without any food.” So Peter went with Ann (George’s wife) to the Irupakulam to deliver food along with others in Santa Marta. These families were held in the new camp until the beginning of January 2010.

CHAPTER 5

BURIAL, November 2009

“I am not going to see Rebecca’s body, because I could not see my own daughter’s (Emma) body.”—Savio

This chapter, like the preceding chapter, records the events that occurred in November 2009, six months after the war, in the Santa Marta Camp (Santa Marta) on Mannar Island. In Santa Marta, while none of the bodies of those who died in the Vanni was returned to the relatives, there was a body that returned from Kuwait. It was the body of Rebecca who worked in Kuwait as a domestic. The retrieval of the body of Rebecca and her solemn funeral revealed the importance of funerals and the responsibilities the living have to bury and conduct funerals for their dead. Moreover, her funeral revealed that, for the villagers, funerals were communal acts to sanctify the dead and send them to the arms of God. The presence of the body played an important role, because, traditionally, after a member of the community died, the villagers gathered around the corpse at the house of the deceased and sang *oppāri* (requiem) for the soul of the dead. The *oppāri* -singers would then stay the whole night at the house of the deceased and sang *oppāri* without a break.

Here, before moving on to the main part of the chapter, I shall explain the economic situation in the country from 2007 to 2009, because the circumstances of Rebecca’s death in the Middle East are inextricably tied to the family’s poverty. The role that Rebecca played in her family as the primary provider for the family and her work as a housemaid in the Middle East were roles commonly imposed on poor mothers all over Sri Lanka in 2009. At this time, more than one in five Sri Lankans in the workforce was working overseas, 62 percent of these were

women, and ninety percent worked in the Middle East.⁷⁴

Sri Lanka's Economy Since 2007: "No Breakfast For Poor Students"

In the year 2008, Sri Lanka had the highest fiscal deficit in Asia and the Pacific regions. The country was classified, along with Bangladesh, Cambodia, Mongolia, Nepal and Papua New Guinea into a group called Low-Income-Countries (LICs).⁷⁵ During the same year, the price of goods skyrocketed due to the world food crisis, and poor households in the country were the worst hit by this unprecedented financial crisis. From April to June 2008, the country's inflation rate was above thirty percent (SLCPI)⁷⁶, "far exceeding," according to the IMF, the rates observed in other countries in South Asia and South East Asia.⁷⁷ The price of rice increased by

⁷⁴ This number includes only those who registered themselves to the Sri Lanka Foreign Employment Bureau: "about 5 to 10 percent of those who register with the Foreign Employment Bureau do not leave the country while 30 to 40 percent of migrant workers do not register with the bureau." ("Domestic Labour Force Shrinks, Migration Increases—IPS Study," *The Island Financial Review*, May 6, 2009, 1.)

⁷⁵ An IMF report, "The Regional Economic Outlook: Asia and Pacific. . . has placed Sri Lanka together with Bangladesh, Cambodia, Mongolia, Nepal and Papua New Guinea into a group called Low-Income-Countries in Asia (LICs). The IMP report shows that Sri Lanka has had the highest fiscal deficit among these countries since 2007." ("IMF: Sri Lanka Fiscal Deficit Could Expand to 9 Percent GDP," *The Island Financial Review*, May 8, 2009, 1.)

⁷⁶ This inflation rate is based on the Sri Lanka Consumers' Price Index (SLCPI). ("Index Rule," *Lanka Business Online*, December 19, 2009. <http://www.lankabusinessonline.com/fullstory.php?nid=913491249> [accessed December 20, 2011]).

⁷⁷ Souvik Gupta and Magnus Saxegaard, International Monetary Fund, Asia and Pacific Department, August 2009, "Measures of Underlying Inflation in Sri Lanka," <http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/wp/2009/wp09167.pdf>. Italics mine.

24 percent in 2007 and by a further 61 percent in 2008 (Colombo retail price).⁷⁸ The price of dhal is another example. Dhal had been the most basic vegetable protein for the poor in Sri Lanka; however, in 2008, it became the rich people's food as its price shot up from Rs. 99 in 2007 to Rs. 184 per kilo.⁷⁹ The greatest irony of the high price of rice in Sri Lanka was that in the LTTE's territory in 2008, rice was sold at almost half the price of rice sold in the rest of Sri Lanka.⁸⁰

By January 2009, the government abandoned the welfare project to provide free meals at schools to poor students, which had been in place for more than half a century.⁸¹ The Education Ministry admitted that this was a "critical situation," but stated that it "had no control over the matter and was unable to provide any solutions." In 2009, despite the fact that soaring inflation

⁷⁸ Department of Census and Statistics, *Bulletin of Selected Retail and Producer Prices 2006-2009*, p. 9, "Annual Average Retail Prices of Rice in Selected Districts 2006-2009."

⁷⁹ Department of Census and Statistics, Ministry of Finance and Planning, 2008, Bulletin No. 16, *Weekly Retail Prices, Colombo City, January to December 2007*, and *Bulletin of Selected Retail and Producer Prices 2006-2009*.

⁸⁰ This was because, in the Vanni, in Tamil *Eelam*, during the ceasefire (2002-2006), in order to become self-sufficient in rice and fish production, the LTTE supported paddy and fishery production in its territory. As a result, during the ceasefire period, the rural economy in the Vanni was rehabilitated and developed under the rule of the LTTE, through the works of the Tamils Rehabilitation Organization (TRO). When the world food crisis hit Sri Lanka in 2008, while in the rest of Sri Lanka, 1 kg of rice sold for more than Rs. 60, in the Vanni, the retail price of rice was Rs. 30. (Soon, however, due to the escalation of the war, the Vanni farmers and fishermen had to abandon their paddies and jetties.) See Tamils Rehabilitation Organization (TRO), "TRO Situation Report from TRO Head Office Kilinochchi," March 2008, http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/2E17D54E52A8635B4925741F0003621C-Full_Report.pdf [accessed December 20, 2011]).

⁸¹ Mr. Chandrakumara, the general secretary of the Ceylon Principals Service Union (CPSU) is quoted by saying, "With no meals most of the [poor] students are known to faint which affects their physical and mental well-being." (Ceylon Principals Service Union [CPSU]). ("No Breakfast For Poor Students," *Daily Mirror*, April 16, 2009.)

was “put on hold,” and the war ended on May 18, the economic situation in the country further deteriorated. In the international market, the demand for Sri Lanka’s tea as well as textiles and garments, which used to be the biggest forex earner, decreased drastically.⁸² As a result, people began losing jobs in unprecedented numbers.⁸³ When the textile and garment factory industry showed a growth rate of - 8.9 percent, Ranil Wickremasinghe, the Opposition Leader, remarked, “President Mahinda Rajapaksa was closing down factories at the same pace at which the late President Ranasinghe Premadasa opened them.”⁸⁴ This statement, no doubt, close to reality, was ironic. It was Ranil Wickremasinghe’s opposition party, the United National Party (UNP) that, in 1977, opened up Sri Lanka’s economy and embraced a capitalist, open-market economy. The closure of these factories at the onset of the 2008-2009 global financial crisis was precisely the consequence of the actions of the late UNP leaders who set up these purely export-oriented garment factories three decades earlier.

The jobless rate in the country was so high in 2009 that the Sri Lanka Labor Ministry understated the actual jobless rate in the country in 2009. Despite the fact that the Department of

⁸² The GDP growth rate (at Constant 2002 Prices) of the 2009 Second Quarter was as low as 2.1 percent, compared to 7.0 in the 2008 Second Quarter and 6.4 in the 2007 Second Quarter. (Department of Census and Statistics, Bulletin of Quarterly National Accounts of Sri Lanka, Volume 17, Second Quarter-2008, and Volume 21, Second Quarter-2009.)

In the second quarter of 2009, the export value of textiles and garments—63.5 percent of the total industrial exports in the same quarter—decreased by 6.7 percent, and the value of industrial exports as a whole decreased by 18.5 percent.

⁸³ The textiles, garments and leather factory industry (within the manufacturing sub-sector of the industry sector) showed negative growth rate (- 8.9 percent) while it recorded 0.1 percent growth the previous year, in 2008, during the second quarter. (Department of Census and Statistics, Bulletin of Quarterly National Accounts of Sri Lanka, Volume 17, Second Quarter-2008, and Volume 21, Second Quarter-2009.)

⁸⁴ “More victories, more challenges and more taxes,” *Sunday Times*, April 26, 2009, 11.

Census and Statistics revealed that more than 250,000 people had lost jobs in the second quarter of 2009 in the country, the Labor Ministry stated that the total number of those who had lost jobs since July 2008 was 50,000.⁸⁵ In a similar manner, during the final phase of the war, the President understated the number of the Vanni civilians as 80,000, while in reality there were more than 400,000 civilians in the Vanni, the Labor Ministry was now understating the numbers of those who had lost jobs in the country. The poor families whose breadwinners lost their jobs, with free meals no longer available at schools, had no means to feed their malnourished daughters and sons.

“It is easier to manage the war than bankers” (President)

The officers at the Central Bank and foreign hedge funds further exacerbated the country’s financial situation in 2009. On May 17, a day before the government announced military victory in the Vanni, the *Financial Times* reported that President Mahinda Rajapaksa “jokingly” uttered the statement that appears at the beginning of this section.⁸⁶ The President had just returned from Libya with a promise of US\$500 million loan from Libya, and having secured a year’s postponement in an oil payment. The President’s statement, albeit made jokingly, held a certain truth. The high petrol price in Sri Lanka in 2009 was due to the hedging contracts that the Ceylon Petroleum Corporation had with five commercial banks, including

⁸⁵According to *The Sunday Reader*, “[While the Department of Census and Statistics said,] there have been 155,000 jobs in the industrial sector and 99,000 in the services [sector] that have been lost in the second quarter of 2009. . . ., Labour Relations and Manpower Ministry Secretary Mahinda Madihahewa said an island wide survey has identified 50,000 individuals who have lost employment since July 2008” (“Unemployment Rate Soars,” *The Sunday Leader*, September 27, 2009).

⁸⁶“Hold Dollar at Rs. 115-President,” *Financial Times* (The Sunday Times), May 17, 2009, 1.

Citibank, Deutsche Bank, and Standard Chartered Bank.⁸⁷ Furthermore, faced with the country's persistent trade deficit, the central bank officers had decided to market the government's treasury bonds to investors in the US, Europe and East Asia. The bankers then succeeded in selling the treasury bonds to a single US-based hedge fund in August 2009, in the week after the IMF decided to invest US\$2.6 billion in Sri Lanka. That foreign hedge fund then poured US\$ 1.2 billion into Sri Lanka's reserves. With this additional money, the reserves amounted to US\$3 billion.⁸⁸

Wives and Daughters

During Sri Lanka's financial crisis and speculation by foreign hedge funds, the single labor force that provided some "stabilizing effect" to Sri Lanka's persistent trade deficit consisted of the Sri Lankans working in the Middle East, mostly women like Rebecca who worked as "Sri Lankan housemaids." In 2008, this workforce's remittances amounted to about US\$3 billion, 8 percent of GDP, which was enough to finance about three months imports. This money from Sri Lankan migrant workers abroad brought "higher foreign exchange inflows into Sri Lanka than Foreign Direct Investment and Official Development assistance."⁸⁹ Michael's mother Rebecca, therefore, had been part of this most important labor force in Sri Lanka.

Rebecca's Funeral

⁸⁷ Devan Daniel, "State Pumped in Half a Billion Rupees to Defunct Public Enterprises," *The Island Financial Review*, June 15, 2009.

⁸⁸ Devan Daniel, "Reserves Exceed US\$ 3 bn: US hedge fund invests US\$ 1.2 billion in govt. T-bonds," *The Island Financial Review*, August 21, 2009, 1.

⁸⁹ "Domestic Labor Force Shrinks, Migration Increases-IPS Study," *The Island Financial Review*, May 6, 2009, 1.

Prelude

In Santa Marta, in November 2009, the Catholic month of mourning (cont. from previous chapter), Father Newton was temporarily appointed to replace the parish priest, who had gone to India for retreat. Father Newton was not happy with the children's poor attendance at daily masses in Santa Marta. To motivate them, he decided to launch a youth choir.

Two days before the villagers received the news of Rebecca's death from Kuwait, on November 3, Father Newton held an audition after the mass. He asked Vera, the leader of the church choir in Santa Marta, to serve as a judge. I was his honorary guest. First the boys sang and then the girls. They were told to sing whatever song came into their mind. Among the twenty girls who sang, there was a girl who caught Vera and my attention: Rebecca's daughter Meena, a chubby nine-year-old. I noticed that while all the other girls wore colorful *chudidaars*⁹⁰ for that day's special mass (the villagers conducted a procession, carrying a statue of Saint Mary), Meena alone wore a worn out, long-sleeved T-shirt and a long skirt. Vera would later tell me that while all other children sang happy songs, Meena alone sang a sad song.

After the church choir audition, I went to Gabriella's place, located three blocks away from Vera's, for dinner, and as usual Gabriella and I sat inside her shop, among huge sacks of sugar, rice, and flour, surrounded by loaves of bread, piles of biscuits, boxes of chocolates, candies, notebooks, pens, and bars of laundry soap. It was around 7:00 p.m. Since there was no streetlight, the light from Gabriella's shop illuminated the lane.

A boy came to the service window and asked for half a loaf of bread. Gabriella stood up from the sack of rice, took a loaf of bread and cut it in half, "Twenty-three rupees," she said and

⁹⁰ A popular, female dress of North Indian origin.

wrote it down in her notebook, in which she kept records of her customers' debts. Apparently, the boy was running an errand for one of her customers. The price of bread had tripled during the previous five years.⁹¹ When I commented on the price of bread, Gabriella said, "You see, how hard it is to live here. The price of everything is shooting up." Then she asked me why things were getting twofold to threefold expensive. I mumbled.

I saw a little hand pop up and place ten rupees on the service-window. Bending over to the other side, Gabriella asked the small customer, "How can I help you?" "A packet of red chili powder," the little customer said. While Gabriella was weighing chili powder on the balance, two men appeared; a tall, skinny, twenty-year-old man called Michael, and a round, flat-faced man probably in his late forties. The old man was fair and looked like a Malaysian. "*Kaori-akka!*" Michael was delighted when he saw me. He said, "I just saw someone like you among a group of white people who came from Colombo to visit our team."

"Which team?"

"The de-mining team. There was one person who looked just like you."

"He's working for a foreign NGO," Gabriella said. Michel was clearing landmines in the Vanni.

I looked at the old man standing next to Michael and asked, "Who is this gentleman?"

"He's my father."

"That's hard to tell," I said, because they did not look alike. I asked, "You've got no mother?"

"Of course, I do" (*Irukirānga*), Michael said.

⁹¹ Department of Census and Statistics, 2006, Bulletin No. 14, "Weekly Retail Prices, Colombo City, January to December 2005."

“She’s there, she’s there” (*Irukirānga, Irukirānga*),” his father repeated after him, “She’s abroad” (*Velie irukirānga*).

The mother of Michael, who was abroad, was Rebecca.

Two teenage girls passed by, saying to Michael, somewhat contemptuously, “Michael! Haven’t you gone to bed?” The girls laughed.

“Fools!” Michael responded, “Why don’t you ask *Kaori-akka* to give you some of her color on your face? Look at you! You are so black!”

Michael turned back to me and said, “These girls have no mother.”

“No, you are joking.”

“That’s true,” Gabriella said. “They have no mother. Their father is alive, but he’s in Jaffna.”

“Where do they live?” I asked.

“At our place,” Michael said.

The increase in the number of motherless and fatherless children was now bringing changes to families in Santa Marta. Many close and distant kin came to live together as one big household to fill various missing roles—such as a sister of a deceased mother looking after the children of the deceased sister, or grandparents raising grandchildren without parents. At Michael’s place, there were not only his family members (his father, his brother and his sister), but also his father’s sisters, their husbands and their children. In addition, a 11-year-old boy laborer was staying at Michael’s, as were the two Jaffna girls. There was also a 90-year-old woman, *Āchi. Āchi*, a destitute woman, had come to live at Michael’s from the Manik Farm Camp. How she ended up at Michael’s remains a mystery, but *Āchi* said, “I had no where else to

go, nobody to take me back to Jaffna.”

The Church Bell (November 5, 2009)

Dong . . . dong, dong. . .dong. At about 2:00 p.m. the church bell rang. It rang twice, and after a short pause, again twice, and continued. It was *thukkamani*, the bell that announced death. “Did you hear that?” Vera asked me, “Somebody is dead.”

A complete silence fell in Santa Marta. Even children stopped playing. All the villagers’ thoughts concentrated on a single point, “Who can this be?” Soon, the women began saying, “Who?” “Really?” “Oh, no!” (The majority of the men in the camp were out at work at the Chinnamuttom Beach, six miles away from Santa Marta.)

Vera said, “Poor man! No doubt, it’s the Ice-cream Man. After that accident, the ambulance brought him to Colombo and he was kept in a *cool room* (intensive care unit). But I heard that he hasn’t regained consciousness.”

The man they called “the Ice-cream Man” was in his fifties. He sold ice cream on his bicycle. “Back in Perunkalipattu, he was selling ice-cream, too” (Vera). It was three days earlier that we heard about a bus accident on the Madawachchiya-Mannar A14 Road. The Ice-cream Man had taken a bus from Mannar to Vavuniya in order to buy ice-cream cones in the Vaninuya town. When the bus approached the town of Murunkan, a couple of Army soldiers suddenly signaled the driver to stop in order to give them a lift. The bus braked suddenly and a large truck crashed into it from behind. The Ice-cream Man was sitting on the back seat of that bus. He and another person, a woman from Murunkan, also in the back seat, were severely injured. The woman was sent to the Anuradhapura Hospital and the Ice-cream Man was sent all the way to the Colombo General Hospital by ambulance. That very day, the news reached Santa Marta that the Ice-cream Man had suffered a grave head injury, and that he had undergone surgery in a

“cool room” and had not regained consciousness.

“Poor man,” Vera said, “Just like that, the Ice-cream Man died, leaving six children, many daughters, behind.”

Then she stood up and called her neighbor through the opening of the thatched wall between the two houses, and asked,

“He’s dead, isn’t he? The Ice-cream Man?”

The neighbor came and said, “Well, it seems like it’s not him. They say it’s Rebecca, the one who works in Saudi.”

“What?” Surprised, Vera fell silent for a moment. She then said, “No, it cannot be. No, not Rebecca. She’s been working in Saudi. She has three kids. The oldest son is Tambi’s age.” Vera said that the oldest son of Rebecca was working for a de-mining NGO, that he was the one whom she had hired to build a water tank at her place a couple of months earlier. “I hired that boy, because I knew his family needed some money. Poor Rebecca!”

(In fact, many villagers in Santa Marta mistook the death of Rebecca as that of the Ice-cream Man and rushed to the latter’s house to console his family.)

On the same day, in the evening, at Gabriella’s shop, I learned that Rebecca was Michael’s mother. With Gabriella’s daughters, I visited Michael’s place just across the narrow lane. Inside the house, I found Kennedy, the round, flat-faced husband of Rebecca, sitting inside the house, surrounded by children—not only his, but by many children. No adult person was with him. Kennedy looked exhausted; he sat there motionless, emotionless. I could not look at Michael’s face. Other children who would usually surround me and make me laugh were all quiet. There was nothing to be said; they all just sat there. Children are sympathetic beings, I thought, because they sat there, that whole evening, with Kennedy and his children, encamped

around them as if they were an army of angels.

After a while we left the house, just like that, without having uttered a word. Once we were out of the gate, one of Gabriella's daughters told me,

“There was a call from Colombo today. They said Kennedy should call a certain number when he returned home. When Kennedy called the number, the woman at the other end verified his name, his three children's names, and said, ‘Your wife Rebecca M. died on October 26 in Kuwait.’ That was all. The woman hung up. He said that the voice sounded like the one from the embassy. After that, he tried to call the same number several times, but the call didn't get through. If Rebecca had died on October 26, it's already been nine days.”

The other daughter said, “The last time Rebecca called home was a month ago. On that occasion, she said that she had to change the family she worked for because the salary she was getting was not enough. She said that she was coming home to Sri Lanka soon, but because she did not have enough money to buy her ticket, she would work for two more months and then come home.”

“So she wasn't in Saudi, but in Kuwait?” I asked.

“Yes, in Kuwait. Do you think they will send the body? Can we retrieve the body from abroad?”

“I'm not sure,” I said “but since Kuwait is a Muslim country, they might spare the body. If it was in Japan, I suppose, they would have cremated the body already.”

“They burn it?”

“Yeah. They burn it.”

The girls were shocked. In Santa Marta, everybody was debating whether Rebecca's

body would arrive or not. Many remembered a recent case of the death of a young man from the next village, who died in the Middle East. His body was sent to his family in a coffin by aircargo.

Back at Gabriella's shop, she said,

“I'm very sad to hear about Rebecca. Because her kids always come to my shop and treat me as if I were their own mother. That is because, even though they had a mother, she was always away. And now their mother is dead. . . . Rebecca had to work in Kuwait because of Kennedy's debts. It's been more than a decade now. Kennedy collected money from about six people, promising them to send them to the Middle East for work; he was asked to do so by a broker, an agent. Then the broker ran away with the money. Now Kennedy has to repay the money to these people. It even became a court case. Kennedy has many health problems and is unfit to work. So Rebecca decided to go and work in the Middle East and did so soon after her youngest daughter Meena was born. Thus, Meena, her daughter, doesn't know her mother's love. When Rebecca went to work in Kuwait, the family was in a refugee camp in India.”

Gabriella added,

“Michael, the oldest son, too has been working to repay his father's debt. A couple of months ago, the parish priest encouraged him to go and work for a foreign NGO involved in clearing landmines. He's doing that now, because the pay is good. But it's quite risky. There are many accidents. Nobody does that job in Santa Marta except that boy. . . . I don't know why Rebecca's family has been so unfortunate. There are a lot of children in that house. But only three of them are their own kids. The rest are Kennedy's sister's kids. . . . In 1990 his sister's family became refugees and went to India. They stayed in India, in a refugee camp. While they were in India, his sister died of some illness. In

2006, after the ceasefire (2002-2006), the father and his children returned to Sri Lanka and settled in Perunkalipattu. But the father was later suspected of being an LTTE member and was shot dead by the Navy on the beach. So the children are now all living with Kennedy, because they lost both their parents.”

The Ice-cream Man's Death and Rebecca's Body's Whereabouts (November 7, 2009)

Two days later, the monsoon wind that brings rain to this region was in full force. “Shelters in the Manik Farm Camp are flooded but people are not allowed to leave that place” (Vera). In Santa Marta, about thirty miles northwest of the Manik Farm Camp, at Vera’s place, we used all the aluminum and plastic pots and pans on the floor of the house to catch the raindrops falling from the ceiling. Outside, young rooster twins that Peter had brought home a day or two earlier, took shelter under a bundle of young banana tree trunks. It was about noon. *Dong. . . dong, dong. . . dong.* The church bell rang, bringing the news of yet another death. This time it was the Ice-cream Man. Without regaining consciousness, he had finally succumbed to the brain injury.

In the afternoon, I helped Father Newton with a group of children to carry sand for the construction of a new church in the playground—the Church of the Body of Christ. After this work I was soaked and muddy. I came to Gabriella’s place to bathe. Since I had no dress to change into, Gabriella’s daughters gave me one of their dresses. I then sat inside Gabriella’s shop.

Gabriella thought that my hair was not sufficiently dry, so she called her daughter Lily to dry it one more time. It was already dark outside. Suddenly Gabriella and Lily stood up and looked out from the service-window.

“Come here! Hey, wait a minute! Come here!” they said aloud. Someone caught their

attention. From the dark, narrow street, Michael appeared. He seemed to be there against his will, and he appeared ready to run away at any moment.

“Ha! You thought we couldn’t find you when you walk on that dark side of the lane?”

Lily said.

“No, it is not that way,” Michael said.

For the previous days, he had taken a leave from work, and hadn’t been eating. Lily tried to give him a cup of tea and a *vadai* (fried dhal cake), “Here, have some!”

“No, thank you.”

“Have some!” she tried to force a *vadai* into his mouth.

Michael stepped back, saying, “No, thank you, Big Sister. Nothing goes through my throat. I can’t eat anything now.” The shock of the news of his mother’s death had seized his throat.

“Have some, only this! You, good boy!” Lily was insistent. “No!” he pushed her away, “Sorry,” he said, but “You don’t seem to understand what’s happening in me. When food enters my stomach, I have to start crying. It makes me miss my mother. That’s why I don’t want to eat.” He left.

After an hour or so, when Lily was no longer at the shop, Michael came back. This time, he seemed to be greatly distressed. Despite that, he looked at me and said, “You look pretty in that dress.”

I almost fell from the chair, because all my thoughts at that moment were concentrated on his worries. I looked at my dress—a tight, hand-stitched, summer dress. I blushed.

“Indeed, you look great with that dress,” Gabriella said and winked at Michael. The latter finally smiled. I was relieved to see him smile.

Then Michael told us a strange story:

“I heard that there’s a news article on Kuwait on the Internet. A woman was killed, a Kuwaiti, a rich lady, and her body was found. The Kuwait police had been looking for the murderer and found three suspects, all women. One of the suspects, they say, is a Tamil. And this woman was found dead, hanging, I mean, suicide. The people who read this online article say that there’s a picture in the article of the alleged Tamil murderer. They say that the woman in that picture is my mother.”

O God, I don’t want to hear this. I said to myself. Gabriella was silent. Michael continued,

“But, according to that article, the day the suspect was found dead was October 6th. It contradicts when the embassy says that my mother died on October 26th. I doubt that the woman in the picture is my mother.”

“No, that cannot be your mother.” Isabel and I said in unison.

“I went to check the article on the Internet, but they said it cost Rs. 200. So I gave up and came back.”

Michael was nervous. He grabbed a little key holder-cum-flash light (a new product that Gabriella was selling) and turned it round and round. He said,

“Nobody knows why my mother died. People tell me many different stories.”

Gabriella said, “Listen, Son! Nobody knows why your mother died, except God (*kadavul*). People say different things, but you don’t have to listen to what others say and trouble your heart. You are doing all that you can. God knows what you are going through. You’ve got a long way to go in life. You eat well. You live well!”

Gabriella must have felt a strong urge to relieve Michael of his distress. All the men in the village knew about Gabriella’s faith. Every morning, by 4:30 a.m., even in rain and thunder,

by the time they were ready to leave for Chinnamuttam Beach, Gabriella would already be at the church, praying. She was someone who, after her husband's death, "wrestled with God," and became who she was today. ("My strength? —Prayers. It's all coming from God. Otherwise, how do you think it is possible for me to support myself and my five daughters without a husband?" [Gabriella])

Michael was silent. It seemed that Gabriella's words had cleared the cloud of doubt that was upon him—at least for a moment. He stopped turning his key-holder round and was now looking straight into our faces. "That's true, nobody knows," he said. He then left.

Gabriella and I knew that Michael then went to "the ground," a large empty lot, where boys played, which was the only spot where mobiles phones could get signals. Ever since he had received the news from Kuwait about his mother, Michael spent all his time there; day and night, he remained, waiting for a call from Kuwait.

That same night, Vera went to "the ground" to meet Michael. When she returned home, she said, "Poor thing. Michael was still there, all alone, with the phone. He was so distressed. I sat next to him and said, '*Tambi* (My dear), God knows what you are going through. He knows that you are trying your best for your mom. Don't worry about anything. Rebecca's body will arrive soon. Now you go home and rest.' Then he cried in my arms. I sent him home and came here."

The Ice-cream Man's Body (November 8, 2009)

Death was the only relief for the Manik Farm Camp inmates. The death of relatives residing outside the Camp was the only condition under which the government permitted the inmates to leave the camp—for a funeral. Everybody waited for an opportunity to leave the camp, to be given freedom of movement, even for a day; they waited for news of funerals.

Thus, on the day of the Ice-cream Man's funeral, more people than usual had assembled in Santa Marta. They were the parents and kin of the Ice-cream Man from the Manik Farm Camp, and they came with the permission of the army. Many Perunkalipattu villagers who were interned in the Manik Farm Camp had told the army that they were related to the Ice-cream Man. These "visitors" from the Manik Farm Camp to Santa Marta, after many months, if not a year, bathed with plenty of water at their kin's house and slept on a cement floor.

Another reason for the crowd was because there was a celebration of menarche in another villager's house across from Vera's. People were running between these two houses. Some of the visitors, when they saw me scraping coconuts as they passed Vera's house, were stunned at what they saw: a "white" woman sitting on a coconut scraper at the foot of a very old Tamil woman (Isabel). "White woman! White woman!" they said as they passed. Sometimes children simply stopped walking, staring at me. "Go away!" (*Po!*), Isabel told them. "They've never seen you, because they just came from the camp this morning," Vera said.

Soon, Peter came and said, "The body has just left Cheddikulam." The body of the Ice-cream Man was on its way from Colombo and was arriving at Santa Marta.

Sometime later, Peter came back and said, "The body has just arrived by ambulance and people are gathering at the Ice-cream Man's house." Vera and I stood up, leaving the *pittu*-making to Isabel, and rushed to the house of the Ice-cream Man.

The house was located on the other side of "the ground." There was an ambulance parked in front of the Ice-cream Man's house and two men in trousers stood next to the ambulance. They were ambulance drivers from Colombo. (Later I heard that the Ice-cream Man's family had to pay Rs. 29,000 for the transportation of the body by ambulance. Though no mistake of theirs, they lost the breadwinner of their house and were charged this amount.) When Vera and I

entered the Ice-cream Man's house through the gate, more than two hundred people were already there. A large white nylon sheet was spread above the crowd to shelter the visitors from the burning sun. The crowd was such that I could not move an inch. I stood on tiptoe and tried to see the body inside the coffin, but all I could see before me were hundreds of heads. What frightened me, however, was the shouting and sobbing of the women near the coffin. They were the Ice-cream Man's daughters. I soon felt a strong urge to get away from the scene as quickly as possible. I looked for Vera and found her holding one of the daughters of the Ice-cream Man. I had no idea how Vera had gotten there. The daughter was violently crying in Vera's arms, almost beating Vera's chest. Vera tried to make her stand up straight, but soon the girl went almost out of Vera's control; at which point, Vera lifted her in the air and carried her inside the house. Now, I got even more scared and felt like I was in a hospital ward where all the people were suffering from the same mental illness. Only I was sane. I gave up waiting for Vera and ran back home.

Back at Vera's house, I found Isabel.

"What happened?" she asked.

"Well, that was not for me." I said and told her how crowded it was, how much sobbing was going on. I even told Isabel not to go there, because she was suffering from high "pressure" (blood pressure).

"It's not that way. I am not frightened. You are frightened because you don't know about death."

Vera came back much later, with a chunk of beef. "That *kaka*-butcher is so nice," she said, "He waited all this time for me, and when I finally came out from the Ice-cream Man's place, he was standing with this piece of beef in hand, his last piece, saying, 'Vera, I kept this for you.' He asked me only Rs. 150 for this big piece." I remembered that it was a Sunday, the only

day of the week Vera bought beef. The *kaka* was from the next Muslim village.

Then, pointing at me, Vera told Isabel, “I knew Kaori would disappear soon from that place. It was very intense.” She asked me, “Did you look at his face?”

“No, I didn’t.” I answered.

“I knew you wouldn’t.”

“This girl (*Intha pillai*) came back pale,” Isabel said.

Vera said, “The face did not look like that of the Ice-cream Man at all. It was very swollen, the head was wound in a bandage, with only ears sticking out, one ear here and the other there, very far apart from each other; he looked like an alien.”

“*Yēsu vē!*” (Jesus!)—Isabel.

“Furthermore, he was wearing a new white shirt and a pair of black ‘jeans’ (trousers), and this was what his daughters found outrageous. A daughter was shouting, ‘My father never, in his life, wore a pair of pants!’ (He wore only sarong.) She was shouting at her dead father, “This is not *Appa!* (my dad) Give me my real *Appa* back!’ In Colombo, at the hospital, they of course had no idea about what the dead man wore in his home village” (Vera).

Vera also said that the date of the funeral was not yet confirmed, that they were waiting for the two sisters of the Ice-cream Man to arrive from Canada. She also said, “There will be a whole night of singing *oppāri*⁹² at the Ice-cream Man’s house tonight. Only the *mukkuvars* do the *oppāri*-singing at funerals, first at the house of the deceased, then at the graveyard.” When I asked her to sing some *oppāri* for me, she said it was something only sung at funerals, and

⁹² A traditional Catholic requiem.

usually not by women but by men. “Every time a villager dies, the *oppāri* singers will go to the house of the dead and sing *oppāri* the whole night. That’s how we honor the dead and pray to the Lord” (Vera).

The celebration of menarche was still going across the lane. Vera said, “I haven’t seen such a big celebration of menarche in years. Perhaps, it’s because that girl is the only daughter of that family, they can afford to spend that much on the celebration.”⁹³

“Are you going to attend that?” I asked her.

“I’m supposed to. But if I go, I’d have to go with some money and a wrapped gift. I’d better keep that money for the two funerals, because we all give some money to the families of the deceased.”

“How much are you supposed to give?”

“A hundred rupees, usually. But usually I can only afford 50 rupees.”

Vera and I then watched people pass our place to visit the house of celebration. “You know,” she said, “James’s daughter Sonia had her menarche recently. But because they were in the Manik Farm Camp, we couldn’t go to celebrate it. Poor Sonia.”

Shortly after Isabel left for the Ice-cream Man’s home, heavy rain started and the electricity went out. Inside the house, Vera practiced songs for the Ice-cream Man’s funeral.

Lord, give them eternal rest,

Let Your unending light shine upon them.

⁹³ The celebration of menarche, for the female members of the community, is the most important rite of passage before marriage.

O Lord, it is right for us to praise you in Zion,⁹⁴

In Jerusalem offering will be rendered to You.

Lord, answer our prayers

May all people come to you!

Tambi came in, drenched to the skin. Since the Ice-cream Man's daughter was his classmate, he had been helping the Ice-cream Man's family to paste the funeral notice on utility poles the whole morning. Tambi said he was going to "bathe in the rain at the playground" and for that he needed another T-shirt. "No, I'm not giving you the T-shirt," Vera said, "When it too gets wet, how are you going to work tomorrow?" He, of course, did not listen to her, because bathing in the monsoon rain was a "cool thing" to do for the boys of his age.

Isabel came back.

Now, all three of us were seated inside the house. Since the electricity had gone out, the area was very silent with no sound of Tamil Cinema (popular movies from Tamilnadu) coming from the TVs. From inside the dark room, we watched the puddle just outside the door. As the water-level increased, our sandals started floating. "I hope that mad-water won't come inside," I said. Vera said, "Imagine, how James's family are surviving in the Manik Farm Camp in this heavy rain."

After some time, we heard Tambi say from outside, saying, "Ach! It's always only on this lane that the electricity goes off!" He came in and lay down beside Vera, and she held him in her arms. Isabel stopped chewing betel leaves and said, "Now you understand why this boy came running back home from Qatar," she said. "I can't understand why they sent him in the first

⁹⁴ Psalm 65: 1.

place.”

Tambi and Vera just laughed. He asked Vera, “Did the Ice-cream Man raise his six children solely from the income he got from selling ice-cream?” (Among his six children, four or five were daughters.)

Vera answered, “Yes. Just by selling ice-cream. He worked very hard to raise them. And look at his children. They are all good.”

He said, “Yeah. That’s why I was wondering. His children are exceptionally good.”

“He worked so hard that his children could finish their schooling. He sent everyone—all six of them—to school. That was incredible. His children are good because they all know how hard their father worked for them.”

“But the Ice-cream Man’s brothers and sisters are rich. Two of them are abroad. Only the Ice-cream Man’s family is poor.”

“That’s right. They all came to his funeral and cried.”

“I saw them, too.” Tambi said, “The rich older brother of the Ice-cream Man, who was wearing a shirt and trousers, was sobbing. People were all surprised to see him cry, because while the Ice-cream Man was alive, that rich brother of his did not visit the family.”

The next morning (November 9, 2009) I woke at Vera’s place to the voice of a stranger—a man, perhaps in his fifties. I heard Peter calling him “Paapaa.” Paapaa had come the previous day to Santa Marta to attend the Ice-cream Man’s funeral, I figured, and was about to go back to the Manik Farm Camp. Peter was offering him one of his three shirts, saying, “Take this. It’s a new one. It’s too small for me, so I’m giving it to you.” Vera was saying to Paapaa, “I heard the rumor that you all (the Perunkalipattu families in the Manik Farm Camp) will be shifted to

Adampam soon.” Paapaa replied to Vera, “We’ve got to get out of that camp. It doesn’t matter to where, but we’ve got to get out of that place.” Like Paapaa, those who came from the Manik Farm Camp to attend the funeral had to go back to the camp. And before leaving, they made it clear to their kin in Santa Marta that the situation in the Manik Farm Camp was beyond what they could bear. Paapaa left.

Soon, we heard that the Ice-cream Man’s two sisters from Canada had arrived, and his funeral would take place in the morning.

The Ice-cream Man’s funeral was conducted on November 9, and the same day, Michael got a call from Kuwait regarding the whereabouts of his mother’s body and the reason for her death.

Rebecca’s Body

It was a Muslim *kaka* called Jawahir, who discovered the whereabouts of Rebecca’s body in Kuwait. When the group of Muslim urchin hunters who were staying in Santa Marta learned about the death of Rebecca, they contacted Jawahir, a Muslim man originally from the village next to Perunkalipattu, who had moved to Kuwait some twenty years earlier. They explained to Jawahir that the family got a call from the Kuwaiti Embassy telling them Rebecca was dead, but the family had no idea where her body was, how she died, and whether she was really dead and asked him to collect whatever information he could get about Rebecca in Kuwait. Immediately from Kuwait, Jawahir contacted Rebecca’s family and requested that Rebecca’s picture be sent by fax. Michael sent Rebecca’s picture, which was ten years old, taken in India when she was visiting her family in the camp for a short time. That was the only picture he could find.

After receiving the faxed photo of Rebecca, Jawahir, in Kuwait, visited the Kuwaiti

family where she had been working as a housemaid. When he asked the family, “Was there a Sri Lankan maid working at your home? I am looking for her. We heard that she is dead.” The family replied, “We didn’t know that she is dead. She left our house about a month ago, saying she had found a better deal with another family. We haven’t heard from her since then.” Then Jawahir visited hospitals in the area and finally found Rebecca’s body at the morgue of a hospital.

Jawahir called Michael. It was two, three days after Michael faxed his mother’s photo that he received a call to his mobile from Jawahir in Kuwait, who said, “Listen, son, I found the body of your mother. She died due to an illness at a hospital here in Kuwait.” Michael was greatly relieved. His mother did not die of an accident or because she committed murder or suicide. “Everything the others had said was wrong” (Michael). He was relieved because now he knew how to remember her—she died of an illness—and that was how he was going to remember her death all through his life, and that was how others would tell of his mother’s death thereafter. He was relieved also because he finally found his mother’s body.

Jawahir then told Michael, “I sent her body today by air cargo. Her former employer-family volunteered to pay for the coffin. For sending it by air, all together it cost around US \$4,000. I will pay that money, so you don’t worry about these expenses. However, you have to pay for the transportation cost between the Colombo Airport and Mannar. That’ll be around \$250. This, I ask you to prepare immediately. Come and receive the coffin at the airport. I am going to tell you the receipt number. You’ve got a pen? Write it down.”

Michael, while holding the mobile, wrote, in the sand of “the ground,” the ten-digit number that Jawahir gave. With the ten-digit receipt number in hand, Michael’s father, Kennedy, accompanied by a relative, left Santa Marta the next morning by bus for the Colombo Airport.

Rebecca's Parents

While all these things were happening in Santa Marta, Rebecca's parents, who were interned in the Manik Farm Camp, were not allowed to come out of the camp; the only day that they were allowed to go out of the camp was the day of Rebecca's funeral; and then only for a day.

Meena

At Vera's she asked me, "Do you remember the girl who sang a sad song that day while all the others were singing happy, cheerful songs? That was Meena." Vera was meditating upon Meena and the song that she had sung at the girl's church choir audition the other day. She said, "Now, when I think back, that was a sign (*adaiyaalam*). To me, Meena clearly stood out that day. And the song that she sung rightly represented her feeling"

Rebecca's Funeral (November 12, 2009)

On November 11, late at night, Rebecca's body arrived in Santa Marta from Colombo. Her funeral took place the next morning. I visited Rebecca's house, even though Isabel had warned me, "Don't go, Sweetie, remember what happened to you at the Ice-cream Man's funeral? Vera told me not to send you. You'll get frightened." I did not listen and left the house.⁹⁵

⁹⁵ My attitude towards dead bodies starkly contrasted with the men and women of my generation in Santa Marta. For example, "We are used to seeing dead bodies," Chinnakutti said at Gabriella's shop (November 9, 2009). Though Gabriella still called him Chinnakutti (little child), he had turned twenty-five years old that year. He had been working at the Mannar Hospital as a security guard until recently; but he quit that job after six months, because "It was scary. Every night I had to sleep next to dead bodies." He said that his security booth was located next to the hospital's morgue. "You quit, because you were afraid of seeing the dead bodies?" I asked him. "It's not that way," he said, "We are used to seeing dead bodies. But sleeping next to many bodies is a different thing."

According to him, the men in Santa Marta were used to seeing dead bodies. After they

In front of the funeral house, there were many unfamiliar male faces. They were from the Manik Farm Camp. When I entered from the gate, the house was filled with women. Above them, there was a large white tent to provide them with shade. From the center of the crowd, I heard women wailing, but I could not see anything because of the crowd. It was boiling hot.

I found Kennedy standing, a few yards away from the crowd of women, holding one of the tent's poles. He was the only man under the tent. He looked as if he was hanging from the pole. His eyes were swollen and his flat face made them appear even more swollen. He stood alone, it seemed as if his profound sadness prevented people from approaching him. I wanted to go closer to him to console him, but my feet did not move an inch; such was the power of his grief.

Someone waved at me, I sensed. It was the two girls from Jaffna. I continued walking. I saw one of Gabriella's daughters. I greeted her with my eyes. They did not greet me back. Then I saw Selvi, a mother of four sons, who was now nine-month pregnant. Selvi was my age. I could see her navel and oversized stomach beneath her dress (*nighty*). She was standing almost at the threshold, between the crowd and an empty space. I stood next to her.

"The coffin hasn't been opened," Selvi said. "What?" I did not understand her. "The

left Kurusukuppam in 1999 and started living in Santa Marta, "every time when we heard that the bodies of dead LTTE soldiers were transported from the LTTE territories by the Red Cross, we would all run to the hospital to look for the bodies of Kurusukuppam youth among dead LTTE cadres. (The LTTE had been recruiting one child per family in the Vanni, so many villagers had their kin in the LTTE.) "The state of these bodies from the Vanni used to be very bad," Chinnakutti said, "Be they male or female, these bodies would arrive naked. A lot of headless, legless, naked female bodies would be just lying there. We search for our kin among bodies like that, so we are used to seeing dead bodies."

"You mean female bodies arrived also without clothes?"

"Without clothes. Since it was so cruel, the Mannar Judge told the army to bring female bodies with clothes on. After that female bodies arrived with clothes on."

coffin is closed. We can't see the body. Rebacca died on October 6. So the body is almost forty days old."

"She died on October 6, not on October 26?"

"October 6."

"That old?"

"Yes. People here are afraid that the body may be badly spoiled inside the coffin. They say the coffin is sealed with some kind of metal. After the mass, they'll take the coffin to the graveyard. There, they are going to open it and decide whether it is displayable or not."

Having been relieved of seeing Rebecca's body, I again started roaming around. Since I had miserably failed to record the Ice-cream Man's funeral, this time, I wanted to record as much detail as possible about Rebecca's funeral. "It's not right to keep a smile on your face here," Selvi said, when I came back to where she stood. I must have been smiling, without my knowledge, as I greeted people I knew. "Nobody else is roaming around," she added. I decided to stay next to her.

Suddenly, the crowd at the center of the tent spit out a little girl. It was Meena. She was wearing a one-piece dress with gray polka dots. Since almost all the children of the village were away at the school and, inside the tent, there was no child except Meena, she looked really tiny. Her eyes were swollen, but she looked emotion-less. She quickly passed us and went behind the house. All of us retreated like the ebb tide as she walked through us. Some women were concerned about Meena and kept looking in the direction in which she disappeared. Others told me by gestures that she must have gone to drink some water. After some time, Meena came back and the crowd swallowed her inside. From the center of the tent, the sobbing continued.

About twenty-minutes later, the crowd of mourners was rent in two and a woman came

rushing out. It was Lily, Gabriella's daughter. She appeared to be very tense. Lily disappeared in the same direction that Meena had disappeared in some twenty minutes earlier. The sobbing at the center continued. Lily came running back with a jar of water in her hand, passed me, and the moment she stopped in the middle of the crowd, *splash!*, she threw the water to the ground.

When the crowd dispersed for a second, I saw Meena on the ground—she had fainted.

Her small body was lying on a blue sheet. Lenin's wife Geetha was attending to Meena, massaging her legs to help her regain consciousness. There was a small circle of women around Meena, but most of the women appeared not to be bothered at all about Meena's fainting.

A few minutes later, Meena came back to her senses and I saw Geetha giving her some water. When Meena regained her strength, Geetha took her hand, raised her from the ground, and disappeared with her. Geetha used to be an LTTE soldier. Everybody knew it; as an ex-LTTE fighter, she must know better than others how to attend to this kind of situation (Selvi).

After some time, suddenly, a dozen men appeared under the canopy. They grabbed the shoulders of the women mourners, who were throwing themselves over the coffin, and literally "peeled them away" from the coffin. Then, these men snatched the coffin from the women, forcefully lifting it high in the air and carried it away from the house. The sobbing by the women became louder and shriller; they refused to let the coffin go. Even after the coffin was carried away, these women remained in the same position and kept on sobbing. I stood there for about five minutes, not knowing what to do, but decided to follow the coffin and leave the mourners behind.

Those who had waited outside, mostly men, were walking towards the church following the coffin. Inside the church, the coffin was placed in front of the altar, and next to the coffin stood Kennedy, Michael, Tony (Rebecca's another son) and Meena. Since many of the women

were still in Rebecca's house, and women were the ones who were given a place to stand inside the church, the church was quite empty, and its front yard was filled with men. None of the Santa Marta fishermen went to the sea that day, as it was their custom to mourn the dead member of the community together by taking a leave from fishing.

Gabriella's neighbor called me from inside the church and I sat next to her, close to the coffin. The coffin was a simple wooden box, without any decorations, and was sealed by metal bands in three places. (Later, Lenin, who was one of the men who carried the coffin, told me that the coffin was astonishingly heavy, even though six or seven men were lifting it together.) The coffin also had a label at one corner, "Air Cargo," and there was the ten-digit receipt number written on it. At the bottom right of the seal, there was a picture of a peacock, the emblem of the Sri Lankan Airlines.

The priests entered and the funeral mass began. Vera led the church choir. The women were no longer sobbing but only sniffing. The second reading read:

. . . We are all full of courage and would much prefer to leave our home in the body and be at home with the Lord. More than anything else, however, we want to please him, whether in our home here or there.

For all of us must appear before Christ, to be judged by him. Each one will receive what he deserves, according to everything he has done, good or bad, in his bodily life. (2 Cor. 5:8-10)

On the right side stood seven children, and among them, Meena, who rested her face on her arms, which were folded over the coffin, right above her mother's head. During the mass,

whenever people sat down, I saw Meena throwing her upper body over the coffin, and a little girl next to her occasionally pulled Meena's hand, trying to make her sit "properly," pointing at the priests in front. Even though the coffin was closed and no flies could fly in to spoil the body, the children who were sitting on the right side of the coffin were taking turns fanning the coffin with margosa tree leaves to drive away flies. They were fanning the leaves so earnestly and kept on doing it all through the mass. They made me believe that flies were gathering around the coffin, sensing the stench of the decayed body inside.

At the end of the mass, when the priests offered the smoke of burning incense and circled the coffin, the little girl next to Meena pulled Meena away from the coffin so that the priests could pass. Meena did not resist, but was about to fall. It seemed that there was no strength left in her. Then, all five priests who attended the mass sprinkled Holy Water onto the coffin. As soon as Vera started the hymn for the body's departure to the graveyard, several men came inside the church. Without removing sandals, they lifted the coffin, and carried it away.

The crowd outside the church was now even greater. The coffin was carried into the lorry, which the fishermen in Santa Marta used for their daily transportation, and then as many people as possible got into the truck. When the truck started moving, suddenly the crowd disappeared. I could see a line of people in the distance, heading to the graveyard. Even though it was customary for only men to go to the graveyard and for women to remain at home, Rebecca's case was an exception. Since the coffin could not be opened in Santa Marta itself, they allowed women to go to the graveyard.

At the graveyard, the men told the women to wait until they found out the state of the body inside the coffin. There were about two hundred men and a hundred women. The women were standing at the neighboring village's graveyard, near the road where the truck carrying the

coffin was parked. Half of the men surrounded the truck; the rest of the men were about hundred yards away, standing at the graveyard itself. The priest was walking back and forth between these two groups of men, and finally it was decided that the coffin would be opened, not on the lorry, but in the grave, where it was going to be buried. So the men carried the coffin to the graveyard, passing the crowd of women. Some of the women were sobbing severely. Men shouted to them, "Don't come close to this side. No woman is allowed." I heard women saying among themselves, "Can they see that all of us are here, on this side? Why do they have to tell us like that?"

For a while we heard the stark sound of hammering; men were trying to remove the metal sealing from the coffin. The sound continued quite a while and when it stopped, suddenly all the men who were surrounding the coffin fled from the coffin, as if a soundless explosion had occurred right in the middle of them. The women around me said, "Gas. That's gas."

To the men's surprise, "The body is in a good state!" They then carried back the body and placed it by the well at the center of the graveyard. All the women except me went to see inside the coffin. I watched from a distance.

A group of bullies surrounded the coffin, and they were conducting a kind of traffic-control, bullying the women, making them wait in line and allocating each woman limited time to say "good-by" to Rebecca. Whenever a woman-mourner started sobbing and appeared to have lost her self-control, they would order, "Carry this one away! Go! Go, get away!"

Michael was among the men around the coffin, sitting in an elevated place, on the edge of the well, looking down into the coffin from above. He was crying. Right next to him was the man, who was most cruel to the women-mourners. He was longhaired, wearing a black shirt, and a couple of silver chains and a rosary around his neck. He wasn't even giving enough time to

these women to be at Rebecca's side, shouting at each of them, "Stop crying!" "Get away!" "Go! Go!"

I saw Meena being lifted from the women crowd and brought to her mother's coffin by a couple of men. The crowd around the coffin absorbed her and I could no longer see her.

Kennedy and Savio

All this time, Rebecca's husband Kennedy was standing away from the crowd, away from the coffin, under a tree, not very far from where I stood. He was alone, and was holding a branch with one hand above his head to keep himself from falling. It looked more like he was hanging from the branch. I saw him wipe tears from his face with the other hand. Then Savio approached Kennedy. Savio gently removed Kennedy's hand from the branch, let him squat down on the ground. Then he too squatted down, beside Kennedy. Like two birds, they sat there, away from the crowd. Soon, Savio reached out his arm and held Kennedy's shoulder.

Savio had lost his daughter Emma ten months earlier in the Vanni. Perhaps he was the best person to sympathize with Kennedy. Kennedy could not bear to see his wife in the coffin; Savio could not bear to see Rebecca's body, because, according to Savio, "I have decided not to see any dead body because I could not see my own daughter's body" (Savio, quoted by Vera, pers. comm., November 11, 2009).

After seeing Rebecca's body, most of the women left the graveyard. Gabriella told me as she left, "The body is in a good state. Her hands are held on her chest, and some Kuwaiti money was held in between her fingers. Her face was turned to one side. I think that is how they bury people in Kuwait, a Muslim way." Others said, "Rebecca was beautiful." "You cannot tell that the body is more than forty days old. It is in such a good state." As it is the custom in Perunkalipattu, they put her wedding sari on top of her in the coffin.

Then they closed the coffin. As the coffin was lifted and was about to be carried away for burial, Michael resisted with all his might. Now it was his turn. He resisted in such a way that a couple of men lifted him by force and carried him away from the coffin. He was carried to where I happened to be standing. Michael was still resisting being carried away, trying to get away from five men who were holding him. Suddenly I saw Michael throw himself down on the ground. He too then ran out of strength and fainted. The men who until then held him by force stood around him. They kept Michael lying on his stomach on the ground and waited till he came back to his senses.

As they were burying Rebecca, I heard the men sing requiem. One woman asked me whether I wanted to go and bury Rebecca. I agreed, and we left Michael (still on the ground) with the crowd of men.

*

The next day was a whole new world: when I visited Rebecca's place, her family and relatives were smiling. "Five priests came, the funeral was good," they said. Kennedy was holding a baby-relative in his arm, speaking to her with affectionate and playful facial expressions. The woman, who was sobbing most loudly the previous day, was applying oil on her leg, smiling, and saying, "When I fainted yesterday, I even broke my leg." Michael too was smiling, making me carry a baby-relative, and asking the audience to compare the color of the skin: "See how the two contrast!" Everybody laughed. It appeared as if the mourning was a thing of the past. Meena, the little daughter of Rebecca, however, looked as lonely as ever, walking among the people, trying to find a place where she could belong.

"The family has fulfilled its responsibility to bury the dead," Gabriella would later tell me. "They'll now cook meals and distribute them in Rebecca's honor," she added.

CHAPTER 6**EASTER IN PERUNKALIPATTU, April 2010**

“We are Easter People; and Alleluia is our song.”

—Saint Augustine

The Pilgrims (March 26, 2010)

Not long after I left Santa Marta, I got the opportunity to cross the Uyilankulam Checkpoint, the gateway to the Vanni, which was opened for all civilians only two and a half months earlier. At about 8:30 a.m., we crossed the checkpoint and entered the former LTTE territory. There were very few signs of life; all I could see was uncultivated fields, in what used to be one of the most fertile, if not the most fertile, lands for paddy cultivation in the entire island of Sri Lanka. As we drove a couple of miles further into the interior of the now desolate territory, I saw at a distance a group of people walking towards us. They were the first sign of human beings we saw, other than Sinhala Army soldiers. As we approached them, our van slowed down, and I saw about seventy people, men and women, children and the elderly, all Tamils, walking under the scorching sun in the manner of a procession. With their sun burnt skin and poor dresses, they looked like refugees to me. But they all looked resolute, even unswerving, and were in a great hurry. At the end of the procession, the very old and weak were sitting in the rear section of an old tractor-trailer. At the very front, I saw a young Catholic priest in his white cassock.

“Who are they?” I asked the driver.

“Those are the people of Perunkalipattu. You saw the priest in the front? He’s Father

Thomas. They are walking all the way from Perunkalipattu. Some communities do this because it's Lenten season before Easter.”

This was the first time that I was meeting this group of Perunkalipattu villagers who were the survivors of the final battle in Mullaitivu. Where I met them was at least eight miles south of Perunkalipattu and they were heading still further south, away from the village. I was not able to understand what motivated them to set out on such an arduous walk after having lived through the war. Less than a year earlier these pilgrims had been running for their lives in the jungles of Kilinochchi and Mullaitivu in the Vanni; not three months earlier they had been released from the Manik Farm Camp where they had been held after the war. For me, their act of pilgrimage, even the idea of undertaking it, seemed no different from Sisyphus's toil.

Isabel and I on our way to Perunkalipattu (April 1, 2010)

I had never before visited Perunkalipattu, the native village of the residents of the Santa Marta Camp on Mannar Island. This was because Perunkalipattu is situated inside the Vanni, the area that have come under the occupation of the government forces after the war. The occupying forces prohibited civilian re-entry into the area until January 2010. For my part, I had always desired to visit Perunkalipattu and decided long ago that if I got a chance to visit Perunkalipattu, I was going there with 87-year-old Isabel, who had lived in Perunkalipattu the longest. The opportunity to visit Perunkalipattu with her came unexpectedly. It was a Holy Thursday (April 1, 2010).

It was not easy to persuade Isabel, because I had no vehicle except local busses to take her with me to Perunkalipattu—a tiresome trip for an 87-year-old. However, since Vera was in

charge of the choir in Santa Marta and had to stay for Easter observations there, Isabel agreed to come with me. She was visiting her native village after eleven years.

On April 1, 2011 at 3:30 p.m., Isabel and I were standing at the central bus stand in Mannar Town in front of an old government bus bound for Perunkalipattu. Isabel was wearing a saree—dressed up for this occasion. I carried my small rucksack on my back and Isabel’s sports bag in my left hand. Isabel’s bag was heavier than mine, even though I was carrying all my belongings (i.e., a notebook, pens, a towel and soap, and two pairs of *churidaar*). Isabel said that she had packed all her other saees (five of them). We were the first to get into the bus, which meant that the bus was not going to start any time soon.

We waited one hour at the bus stand. I left Isabel inside the bus and went to buy some vegetables for James’s family in Perunkalipattu. Even though we had not been able to inform James (Isabel’s son) of our arrival, Isabel and I did not doubt that we would be staying at his place. Besides vegetables, I bought Isabel some betel leaves, dried tobacco leaves, and *pākkū* (dried areca nut), which all came together in one bag. When I returned to the bus, there were about a dozen people already inside the bus, and almost all of them came to greet Isabel. They said, “What a surprise! How are you *Māmi* [‘mother-in-law’]?” “How are you *Āchi* [Gramma]?” They were from Periyakadu, and had been released from the Manik Farm Camp only a week earlier.

I told Isabel, “Everybody knows you.”

Isabel said, “Because Periyakadu was our new colony, a settlement that the people of Perunkalipattu went and built half a century ago. The people in these two villages are all related to each other.”

I handed her the bag of vegetables that I had just bought. Looking inside, Isabel said,

“You didn’t buy eggplants?”

“Shall I go and get it?”

“Yes. I can make white curry for you.”

Eggplants were her favorite vegetable, though we could not afford to purchase them in Santa Marta. “Back in the 1980s, we used to eat plenty of vegetables,” Isabel said.

I stood up, and before getting off, I gave her the other bag in which betel leaves and other “delicacies” were kept. Isabel opened it like a child would open a Christmas gift; looked inside and covered her mouth with a surprised face, yet a delighted look. When I returned with the eggplants, she said, “I shall prepare delicious dry fish-eggplant curry for you.”

By the time the bus started, it was full and there were many women, their children and some men, all gray-haired. Not a single young man. Because earlier that day, for whatever reason, the government had ordered that all better quality buses be sent to Vavuniya, our bus was a very old vehicle. The driver, an elderly man, was literally riding it as if it was an unruly horse.

Our bus stopped at a checkpoint. I then knew that we had come to Uyilankulam, the gateway to the Vanni. The driver told everybody to get off and go through the checkpoint. However, about half of the passengers remained inside; especially the elderly women. Isabel and I too remained inside the bus. Soon, a soldier in uniform got in and started checking the identity cards (IDs) of those who were on the bus. I held my passport in my hand and asked Isabel,

“Where’s your ID?”

“I left it at home. They won’t ask for it. You watch and see.”

“Oh, *Ammamma* (Granny), you should have brought it with you. What will happen to me if you get arrested?”

“Arrest me? Impossible! I’m very old.”

Isabel was sitting by the window and I was sitting next to her in the aisle seat. The soldier approached and began checking the IDs of the women around us. My heart began beating fast. To my great surprise, however, the soldier did not even look at us. I felt like I was made of a transparent substance. Isabel said, "I told you he wouldn't check."

Our bus entered the Vanni.

From Uyilankulam to Perunkalipattu, there were a couple of villages to which people had returned from the Manik Farm Camp and begun re-inhabiting. Many were living in blue and white tarp shelters. Guard posts belonging to the Sri Lankan Army were placed every three to five hundred yards along the road, and these military posts were equipped with new tiled roofs. At the entrance to the village (Perunkalipattu), at the Vellichchandai Junction, there was a police check post.

Isabel and I in Perunkalipattu

Isabel and I arrived in Perunkalipattu on Thursday April 1, 2010 at 6 p.m. We got off at the stop located near Saint James's Church, the last stop within Perunkalipattu. After dropping off most of its passengers, the mail, and some loaves of bread, the bus turned around and departed for Periyakadu, its terminus. When we reached the gate of Saint James's Church, right at that instant, Father Thomas came out from his residence. He was in his cassock and was on his way to the church, where his altar boys were already waiting. He saw us standing at the gate with our bags and vegetables. He looked surprised and troubled.

"Good evening, Father! Were you informed of our visit?" I asked in Tamil, as he approached us.

There was a subtle change in him when he heard my Tamil. He stood right in front of me. "No," he said. The church phone was not working. Then he said, "I remember you."

“You know me?” I was surprised.

“We met in 2003 in Alawakkai.” He even remembered the name of the village.

“Would I be able to stay here?” [*Nān ingē irukalāmā?*] I asked him.

Father Thomas was finding it difficult to respond. He seemed to be in a great hurry. I told him that I was planning to stay only for a week. “We’ll talk later,” he said and guided us into his residence. He told us to leave our bags and vegetables in his office, and led us through his bedroom to his bathroom. Inside the dark room, I saw a brimful of water shimmering in the water-tank. He said, “I have water here. You are free to use it.”—I must have looked terribly unfit to attend the mass—and, “I have to go for mass, so after the mass, we’ll talk.” He then left.

Now, Isabel and I were inside the dark bathroom of the parish priest’s residence. When Isabel saw the brimming tank, ‘*clap!*’ she clapped her hands as if she had found a treasure trove. Indeed, it was a treasure trove, because the village did not have underground water, therefore no drinking or bathing water. (Water was available one mile away at the Vellichchandai Junction,) Isabel was glad that I was able to bathe, because at her son James’s place, they would not have water for me. “Take a bath, immediately!” she said, and sat at the entrance to the bathroom so that nobody would walk in while I was bathing. I was dirty with dust from the reddish-brown earth, because I had spent the night before in the village of Arippu, located about eight miles (bus road) from Mannar Town. Starting from there in the morning by bus, I had traveled, back and forth, almost forty miles that day. After I finished bathing, Isabel quickly washed her face, feet, and arms. “Are you in a hurry to leave?” I asked.

“Yes, we are going to the mass. It’s already started and we are late.” After bathing, I was so refreshed that I felt like my spirit was renewed. We walked to the church.

The Twelve Villagers

The Saint James's Church was white in color, about five times larger than the current church in Santa Marta. From beneath the whitewashed surface of the church's walls, I could see reddish-brown bricks. The church looked old and therefore graceful.⁹⁶ It was filled with the villagers from Perunkalipattu as well as people from Periyakadu, the sub-station of the parish. I saw Father Thomas, wearing an outer garment of silver over his cassock, at the altar, conducting the mass, flanked by his two altar boys. On the left side of the church, there were choir members. The leader of the choir was a man. Some members were carrying traditional drums. "*Gloria in excelsis!*" they sang, "Glory to God in the highest, and peace on earth to men of good will!" The solemn sound of drums accompanied the hymn. Isabel and I sat in the hallway between the main hall of the church and the churchyard, not far from a handsomely decorated small table inside the church. I brought Isabel a plastic chair, and I sat on the floor. We were at the fringe of the crowd attending the mass. There were several others like us, sitting at the fringe; they were mostly very old women, but I also saw a forty-year-old woman, whom I had met earlier inside the bus. She was from Periyakadu, and had been living alone ever since her husband got arrested in India in 1990. Other than this woman and Isabel, I was surrounded by unfamiliar faces. I felt lonely. I missed Vera and the people back in Santa Marta.

Father Thomas, who until then had stood behind the altar, moved to the front of the altar along with the altar boys. The first boy was carrying a basin, the second boy a jar of water and the third a towel. After walking away from the altar for a few yards, they turned around to face

⁹⁶ Isabel would later tell me that earlier, before cement was introduced, all the buildings in Perunkalipattu, including houses, were built of these building blocks. She said that these blocks were made firm by extracts from a particular tree that grew in the village.

the altar. Between the altar and where they stood, there were twelve men, some gray-haired, seated in chairs. It was clear that these men had chosen their best shirts and sarongs to wear for this most grand occasion, the best clothes of their meager wardrobe they now possessed, after having lost all their belongings in the war. Father Thomas then tied a towel around his waist, poured some water into the basin and began to wash the feet of these parishioners and dry them with the towel. I looked at Isabel, hoping that she would explain to me what this strange mass was all about, but Isabel was so attentive to the mass that she did not even look at me. It was the Evening Mass of the Lord's Supper. The twelve men who were seated on chairs did look like Jesus' disciples, with their tanned skin, wrinkled faces, and gray-hair, which, however, was not a sign of old age but the result of their experience in the Vanni. Indeed, the whole crowd, about five hundred of them, looked like the people who were following Jesus towards the end of his earthly life. These villagers had lived through the terror, beyond comparison, of imminent death during the Vanni bombings (January-May 2009); they had been held in the Manik Farm Camp (March- December 2009). These villagers had very few possessions and, perhaps, attachments in this world. It was not my newness to the place but their experiences, which only they shared, that was making me feel a stranger to the place.

After washing the feet of the twelve villagers, Father Thomas returned to the altar.

“Do you understand what I have just done to you?”, he read. Jesus was speaking to his disciples. “I, your Lord and Teacher have just washed your feet. No slave is greater than his master. You, then, should wash one another's feet. I have set an example for you, so that you will do just what I have done for you” (John 13:12-16). “The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve”(Mark 10:45).

Then Father Thomas consecrated the communion wafers and began distributing them.

Towards the end of the distribution, Father Thomas went to the older villagers and gave them the Host. Isabel too received one. The choir sang:

*The bread of angels has become bread for mortals,
heavenly bread puts an end to symbols:
A wonderful thing, the Lord becomes our food
poor, a servant, and humble.*

Following the post-communion prayer, Father Thomas carried the Blessed Sacrament, led by an altar boy bearing a cross, and followed by other boys carrying incense and candles. The procession went through the church and came towards us. It stopped right in front of the small, decorated table—the place meant for the reservation of the Blessed Sacrament after that day’s special mass, which would remind people of Jesus taken into custody for trial in Pontius Pilate’s Palace. Father Thomas bowed and offered incense. He then opened the door of the tabernacle and placed the Blessed Sacrament inside. The choir sang *Pange lingua*:

*Hail our Savior’s glorious Body, which his Virgin Mother bore;
Hail the Blood which shed for sinners, did a broken world restore;
Hail the sacrament most holy,
Flesh and Blood of Christ adore!*

After the mass, many people came to adore and pray before the Blessed Sacrament. Many saw me standing close by. But none of them spoke to me, none of them knew me, nor were interested in me. I held on to Isabel.

An old lady came to Isabel and reached her hand to Isabel’s chin, patted it for a couple of times. No words uttered, but her gesture meant, “I haven’t seen you for so long. How are

you?”—a primordial act.⁹⁷ Isabel knew the lady and she was responding to her with smiles. They hadn't seen each other for at least eleven years. Many people were indeed delighted to see Isabel and came to greet her. Isabel's presence reminded these villagers of their past, the memories of the time before the 1999 displacement.

I stepped aside. The church was surrounded by a sea of darkness. Only the church had light, lit by a generator. Isabel came to me and said, "I'll go and look for James's family. Stay here darling. Don't move." She went towards the church gate. Due to the crowd, she was soon out of my sight. Since anywhere else was dark, I looked inside the church. There, I saw a woman, perhaps the caretaker of the church, stripping the altar. After she left, nothing was left, except the bare altar.

Isabel came back and said, "James's family is already gone. So I asked a known person to go to their home and tell James to come." Then Isabel and I sat inside Father Thomas's office and waited for him to finish speaking to his parishioners. He seemed terribly busy instructing the choir members and the cantor about the technicalities of the next day's mass. Isabel stood up and left. She must have caught sight of James. I too stood up, followed her into the dark churchyard, and found James, about whom I had heard so often in the past, but whom I had never before met. He was not lean, as I had thought he would be, but was muscular and had a round belly. Since all of Isabel's other sons, whom I knew in Santa Marta, were tall and skinny and looked alike, I thought James would look like them. In fact, one of her sons was as thin as a rail, and I

⁹⁷ To me, however, this act of the old lady seemed primitive. This was because, Perunkalipattu was part of the Vanni, the area that had belonged to the LTTE and not been conquered by the Sri Lankan Government until the year earlier. The act of chin-patting, therefore, seemed an act that belonged to the people who have not been touched by a civilized government. This made me feel even lonelier.

remembered Vera telling me that, before the 1999 displacement, back in Perunkalipattu, this brother of hers was chosen to play the role of Jesus in a Passion play and “there was no need for him to fast, because he was already so lean.”

I heard James’s angry voice, “You should have called us first. Why did you come suddenly so late in the night?!” He was speaking to Isabel.

“To show this child Perunkalipattu. I volunteered to accompany her,” Isabel said, pointing at me, in a peaceful tone of voice. She told James that Vera’s phone was not working because she had stopped paying the fee. Then Isabel turned towards me and said, as if there was no problem, “Shall we go to James’s place?”

“Let’s inform Father and go,” I said and while we waited for Father Thomas to finish talking to his parishioners, James went back home, saying, “I can’t wait any longer. I’ll send my wife and daughter. Does she eat bread?” His irritation was not because we came to visit him suddenly, but because he had to start worrying about my food and accommodation.

James gave us the flashlight he was using and left to buy bread, saying to Isabel, “If you [nee] had told me earlier, I could have at least asked Jenina to prepare dinner for her.”

I told Father Thomas, “We are going to stay at *Ammamma*’s son, James’s house.”

“Sure?” he said and asked Isabel, “Do they have sufficient facilities?”

Isabel nodded, but, of course, she had no idea.

Father Thomas was kind enough to say, “If you have any difficulty with water and a bathroom, don’t hesitate to come here and use mine.”

“Oh. No, thank you. I’ll be fine,” I said, assuming that people’s houses were like the ‘well-equipped’ parish priest’s residence, with a door, roof and windows, not knowing his was the first building repaired in post-war Perunkalipattu.

When we returned to the church, James's wife Jenina and their thirteen year-old daughter Sonia were already there, waiting for us. Both of them looked like James, with smiles on their round faces. Jenina helped me to carry Isabel's bag. She said, "Let's go," and led us out the church gate. Except for the light that was coming from a small shop across the church on the right side of the street, there was no light. "There's no electricity?" I asked. "No. At the church they are now running the generator," Jenina said. I looked past her at the small shop. It was where Isabel and I had gotten off the bus. Now, we were walking along the bus-lane, away from the church, sharing one flashlight. I held Isabel. After walking straight for two or three blocks, we turned right. There was total darkness, as if the electricity had gone out from the entire earth.

"Watch out! There are barbed wires!" Jenina said and flashed out the air right next to me. Indeed, it was a narrow escape. In what I had thought was an empty sidewalk, I saw barbed wires planted like a hedge. After about fifty yards, when the density of wires increased, I heard her say, "Here we are. This is our house." We had arrived at James's place.

In between the house and where we stood, there was a large empty yard surrounded by barbed wires. Only after a couple of steps, I could see the house, which looked like the ancient ruins of a white house with only the walls remaining. The house had no roof and half of the ceiling was covered by tin sheets. The house had no front door or back door; but one of the rooms had a new door with a lock. James said, "It was just this morning that I managed to fix a door to this room!", which meant that since their return to Perunkalipattu in January, the family had been living without doors. An extremely skinny forty-year-old woman called "Diana Teacher" was also at the house. All of us, women, locked ourselves in the room that had a door and slept, while James slept alone in the roofless main hall under the night sky.

The Stations of the Cross (April 2, 2010)

Before I lifted myself up from the floor, where we all slept next to each other, I saw Diana Teacher go out of the room. When I stood up, Isabel, who was sleeping next to me, heaved herself from the floor. It was past 5 a.m. Jenina (James's wife) was no longer in the room. Sonia, the thirteen-year-old, was still sleeping, lying on the floor on her back. I saw her stomach move up and down like a balloon as she breathed in and out.

I went out of the room. It was still dark outside. Next to the entrance to the house, there stood a number of plastic basins containing water. I washed my face and rinsed my mouth with the water remaining inside one of these basins. Then I used the toilet that was in the back of the house. After changing my clothes, I went inside the kitchen, a newly built tiny thatched hut, located next to the house. Jenina was preparing tea. Jenina, who was from Jaffna, married late in her thirties. Sonia was her only daughter. Since Isabel (and Vera and Peter) had said only good things about me, Jenina was treating me like her sister-in-law, with respect.

“Today, there's the Stations of the Cross [*Siluvai Pādai*] at 6 a.m. Shall we go together?”

“Sure,” I answered, and thinking it was a mass service that we were going to attend, I asked, “Is *Ammammā* [Isabel] coming with us?”

“It's funny you call her *Ammammā* [one's mother's mother],” she said. In Perunkalipattu, at her place, nobody called Isabel that way. For Sonia, Isabel was *Appammā* [one's father's mother]; and for Jenina, she was *Māmi* [mother-in-law]. I then explained to her that, back in 2007, I was calling Isabel *Ammā* [mother], but after Tambi came back from Qatar, and I heard him calling Vera *Ammā* [mother] and Isabel *Ammammā*, so I too started calling Isabel *Ammammā*.

“*Ammammā* won't be coming with us,” Jenina said, “because she won't be able to walk. We are going to circumambulate the village in a procession, carrying the cross.”

“The whole village?”

“No. The Catholic half.”

Just as Jenina had said, Isabel told me with a cup of tea in hand, “You go, darling. I’ll stay here.” So Jenina, Sonia and I left, leaving Isabel with James. Sonia soon found a friend of hers and went ahead of us.

No other place on earth could have looked more suitable a stage to enact the Stations of the Cross than Perunkalipattu that day. The village looked like the one from Jesus’ time: old and broken. In fact, the previous night, if the village had had lights and I had seen its miserable state, I would have run back to Santa Marta. Perunkalipattu was a ghost town. The village even seemed to be more affected than its inhabitants by the displacement.

Many people were already at the Church. We left in procession following a man carrying a huge wooden cross on his back. It was still dark. Right by the entrance on the church’s wall, there was a small colorful statue of a man, about one foot-tall, riding on a white horse and raising a sword over his head. (Later that day, when Isabel and I passed the same place. I asked her, pointing at the rider, “Who is this?”

“He’s Saint James the Apostle [*Iyahappār*].” Isabel answered.

“Why is he raising a sword over his head?”

“He defended our Christian land against the Muslims.”⁹⁸ I laughed, because the statue looked quite unfit for this community of Christians, who loved their Muslim fellow villagers.)

Our procession stopped right in front of the statue of *Iyahappār*, alias *Santiago*

⁹⁸ As legend has it, in the year 844, when Galicia was the only kingdom of the Iberian Peninsula left unconquered by the Muslim army, there was a battle between the Christians and the Muslims. The Christian king asked Saint James, the patron saint of Galicia for help defeating the Muslims and won the battle. Since then, according to this tradition, Saint James became *Santiago Matamoros*, the “Muslim slayer.”

Matamoros, the “Muslim slayer.” Fresh flowers adorned the statue. This was Station 1, *Jesus is condemned to death*. The man carrying the cross stood at the center and another man read prayers while we all knelt down. Once we finished praying, we stood up and walked another twenty yards along the bus lane, and again stopped. Station 2, *Jesus carries his cross*. On the right side of the street, there was a small table, covered with a white sheet, decorated with flowers. The villagers were taking turns to carry the cross. This time, the cross bearer was a younger man. Jenina must have seen me struggling to kneel down on the road; she whispered to me, “Put your sandals underneath your knees. That way, even when you put your weight on your knees, the stones won’t hurt you.” I told her that I would do so starting at the next station on.

We walked straight and arrived at a T-intersection. Station 3, *Jesus falls for the first time*. The intersecting street was what divided the village in half, the street where Hindu families had been living (some were now resettling). We knelt down and prayed. At each station we spent about five minutes in silent prayer. Jenina was right; this time, my knees did not hurt.

We stood up and from the T-intersection, we turned right. “Ach!” I was about to exclaim in shock, being frightened by the view that had opened up in front of us in the morning mist before dawn. Carcasses of houses! We found ourselves in the middle of a totally devastated village. Half of the ruins of the houses were older; they had been abandoned before the year 1999, which was the year when all the remaining villagers (Hindus and Catholics) fled the village. On their darkened walls, I saw impressions of bullets as old as the walls. Other ruins of houses were younger. Nonetheless, trees had grown taller than the walls inside these houses. This experience of walking through these carcasses of houses was bone-chilling. It all looked other worldly, as if a terrible punishment, God’s wrath, had befallen this place. Our procession stopped and we knelt down. Station 4, *Jesus meets his mother*. This time, the cross-bearer was a

young woman. In the middle of prayer, a man walked up to her and helped her carry the cross, for the weight of the cross was about to make her fall.

Back on our feet, we walked further south along the street. We came to what is known as the “Town,” an intersection, the navel of the village. There were two “*hotels*,” or small shops selling *parotas* (flat wheat bread) belonging to Muslim villager-returnees. There was a small sign of the Muslim crescent on the walls of the shops. I saw also a barbershop. On our left, there was a broader street running east. From here began the Muslim half of the village. On the southeast corner of the intersection, there was an old ruin of a rice mill. Then we came to an intersection where there was, what looked like, an abandoned large playground. It was the ruin of the Aligarh High School, the Muslim school, built in 1905, the biggest school in this part of the district. Many Muslim boys and girls from surrounding villages attended the school. And earlier, when there was only elementary level education available at the Roman Catholic School, the Catholic boys and girls too attended the school, joining their Muslim friends. The school was the heart of Perunkalipattu Muslim identity—the material proof of their intellectual tradition that produced civil servants, lawyers, doctors and renowned teachers in the district. The school had been the pride of Perunkalipattu villagers, not only of the Muslims but also of the Catholics. The miserable remains of this school were now twenty years old, hemmed in by overgrown trees and grasses.

Our procession passed the school and stopped at Station 5, *Jesus is helped by Simon, and* Station 6, *Jesus' face is wiped by Veronica*. Again the same procedure was repeated. We then walked to the end of the street and turned right. We were heading back to the Catholic half of the village. There, we knelt down for Station 7, *Jesus falls a second time*, and Station 8, *Jesus speaks to the women*. On the left side of the street, about ten yards away, there was a cluster of huts. I

saw two women with their children. Somehow they looked “new” to the village. Perhaps they were more recent returnees from the Manik Farm Camp? Perhaps they did not belong to Perunkalipattu?—I wondered. Somebody whispered from behind, “Pentecostals” [*Sabai, Sabai*], which, in the Perunkalipattu Catholic language, meant nothing but the “heretics.” As they watched, we stopped for Station 9, *Jesus falls a third time*. After walking further down the narrow street, we came to yet another turn. A dense cluster of mangrove trees stood in front of us. Before I realized that we had come to the seaside, the procession stopped for Station 10, *Jesus is stripped of his clothes*, and Station 11, *Jesus is nailed to the cross*. There was a small statue of Mother Mary, adorned with newly picked red hibiscus flowers. That was where we knelt down and prayed. The huts and houses had already disappeared from both sides of the street. On the left side, the sea side, thick green mangroves hid the sea from our sight, and I still did not know that we were walking on the beach road. (I was expecting that Perunkalipattu would also have a beach like many other fishing villages in the district, a long strip of fine sand lying before the large blue sea with a wide horizon beyond.)

Then we came to a little bridge, which was built above an old canal. From inside the village, through the canal, water reached what looked like a pond in between the mangroves. There were a couple of colorful, fiberglass fishing-boats parked at the edge of the “pond.” “Sea. That’s sea.” Jenina whispered. She told me that the sea was behind the mangroves. Then I saw a small concrete building for fish auctioning. Of course, there was no fish-auctioning going on that morning. No one went fishing on Good Friday. (Later in the week, I went inside this building. It was not equipped with ice or any food processing machines, but with only a scale, balance stones, and a bunch of fish boxes.) There, our procession stopped for Station 12, *Jesus dies*.

We stood up again and proceeded for about twenty yards. Then we came to a foreboding

complex of concrete buildings on our left (seaside). It was foreboding because these buildings were surrounded by a very tall, newly thatched wall which continued up to the end of the street. It read, in ominous block letters, “Sri Lankan Navy Camp #XXX.” Through the holes in these thatched wall, I saw young Sinhala soldiers come out of these concrete buildings with guns. Some of them were yawning as they came out. They sensed us. They were alarmed, perhaps by the eerie dragging sound of our feet. Now they started watching us in turn from the other side.

When they saw us, many of them were taken aback. A strange “foreign army” surrounded their drowsy naval camp. A silent, solemn procession of human beings, who appeared to be completely detached from worldly concerns, grieving—for whom?— with a cross-bearer at the front.

“These soldiers look afraid and the villagers are not afraid of them,” I strongly felt so. In terms of numbers, of course, the villagers gathered for the procession outnumbered these soldiers at the camp. However, it was not their number per se that was making the villagers feel protected. There was something in the air, which made the villagers see these armies of the earthly kingdom tiny and powerless, even though they had already spread to all over northern Sri Lanka, occupying every village. The air was fear-free.

The mist cleared and the day broke.

Part of beach the Navy now occupied used to be the Perunkalipattu jetty, the place from where the villagers went fishing. It was located behind the Saint James’s Church. (Earlier, before they went fishing, the fishermen used to make three rounds, facing the church, by boat with burning incense, praying for their safe return.) It was the part of the shore that was free of mangroves. After passing the Navy camp, we stopped for Station 13, *Jesus is taken down from the cross*, and Station 14, *Jesus is laid in the tomb*. In front of us, I could see the Saint James’s

Church. We had come back to the place where we began. The Stations of the Cross was over. The villagers returned home.

I asked Jenina, “How many stations are there in the Stations of the Cross?” I felt we had not quite finished all the stations.

“Fourteen stations,” she said, “But I think we skipped some.” I saw some Navy soldiers behind the church. Between the sea and the church, they also had their patrol posts.

After taking a nap in the afternoon at James’s place, Isabel told me about the *Kurusukovil*, or Holy Cross Church. She said, “Saint James’s Church and Saint Mary’s church take turns celebrating Easter. This year, it’s at Saint James’ but next year it will be held at Saint Mary’s. Saint Mary’s is even closer from here, so I’ll take you there tomorrow. And there is of course, the Holy Cross Church.”

“Where is it?”

“It’s located outside the village. We have to walk through the estuary and water will be sometimes up to our knees. It’ll be about forty minutes walk, or even more, depending on the condition of the estuary.” She said that the only access to the church was by foot and no human beings were living around the church.

“Shall we go and see, *Ammamma!*” I asked, but she said she was too old to make that trip.

“In that case, I have to carry *Ammamma*,” James said. He had been listening to our conversation.

“Please do carry! We’ll all go.”

James said that he had meant it as a joke. Jenina brought tea for us.

After taking tea, Isabel and I went to the parish priest's house and used Father Thomas's bathing room. I was glad that Isabel got a chance to bathe (without Father Thomas's knowledge), because she would not be able to walk to the Vellichchandai tank, located a mile away. She wrapped herself with her underskirt and I scooped and poured water on her and washed her small, lean back with soap. We then went back to James's place.

At around 5:30 p.m., thirty minutes before the mass was scheduled to begin, Jenina and Sonia left for the church. "There'll be a huge crowd today," Jenina said as she locked the room that had a roof and a door to it, and left the key with James. Before they went, Isabel asked Jenina to give her some of the white string that Jenina had in her hand. Jenina shared whatever she had. Isabel said that it was for tying around our wrists.

Looking outside (we could only look outside because there was no roof, no window, no door in the house), I asked James why his house was surrounded by so much barbed wire. He said, "These wires were for the next house. The LTTE was occupying it."

"They were in that house while you were living in this house?"

"That's right. But they never spoke to us. The LTTE soldiers followed very strict rules and they were not allowed to talk to villagers unless their superiors ordered them to do so. Those soldiers who lived in that house were all from faraway places like Batticaloa." (Batticaloa, or *Mattakalappu* in Tamil, is in the southeast corner of Sri Lanka, whereas Mannar is in the northwest corner of the island.)

I asked why the houses in Perunkalipattu were all roofless, windowless, and, most astoundingly, door-less.

"Some, of course, because of shelling, but mostly because of looting."

"Looting by whom?"

“The Army. After taking over the village, they needed construction materials for their camps, posts, bunkers, and houses. That’s what happened here. [*Appadi thān inge nadanthathu.*]”

There was a jumble plum tree just in front of our house on the other side of the lane. Just as Isabel and I were leaving for the mass, we saw two thirteen year-old girls standing under the tree, hitting the brunches with sticks to get some fresh jumble plums.

“Go and get ready for the mass!” Isabel told them. These children were strangers to her, but being an elderly member of the community of the faithful, it seemed to me that she had full right and responsibility to admonish all children. The two girls stopped collecting fallen fruits from the ground. They were both wearing worn out T-shirts and dusty long skirts; many leaves and small dried brunches had landed in their hair. Their mouths were purple-colored. “Go home and get ready!” Isabel said. Then the two girls said something to Isabel, which I did not understand.

“Pentecostal? Are you Pentecostals?” [*Sabai? Nī sabai ā?*] I heard Isabel say in shock.

“Yes, Granny” [*Ōm. Ārchi*], they answered as if they had done something wrong. Isabel covered her mouth in surprise. Then she said,

“Well, right. Then, go back to your mother. You are good girls. Go home.” Isabel did not want to offend them; at the same time she did not want them to be playing while the mass was going on in the church. Then she asked them, “Who’s children are you?” The girls told her the names that Isabel had not heard of. We left the girls behind and went to Saint James’s Church.

I was reminded, that back in 2007, on the very first day when I arrived at Vera’s house, Isabel was leading me inside the house: she asked, “You too are a Christian (*Vēdam*), aren’t

you?” I said, “No.” Then Isabel turned around, looked at me and covered her mouth. Then she had said, “You must not tell that to anyone here.”

Good Friday Evening Mass

At the church, Isabel and I got a space close to where we had sat the previous night, in front of the Blessed Sacrament (the small decorated table), which has been placed in the midway of the church, on the far right, next to the hallway. Since we had arrived late, there was hardly any space left where we could sit. When people near the Blessed Sacrament saw Isabel (and me), they moved back and gave us the space. (There were no benches in the church; we all sat on the floor.)

The mass began and Father Thomas (in a red outer garment) and his altar boys proceeded to the altar. There was no singing. When Father Thomas reached the altar, he prostrated himself. I was surprised and looked at Isabel. She looked at me, whispered, “Did you take note that?” [*Pāthiyā?*], and closed her hands in front of her face and gestured me to pray. I knelt down as all the others did while Isabel sat on the floor. After a responsorial psalm and chanting, they read the Lord’s Passion from John’s Gospel. Father Thomas then gave a homily:

Before it all happened, Jesus predicted the betrayal of Judas and Peter’s denial. By way of giving up his own life, he made his Father known to his people, and he gave the New Commandment: love one another. Since no greater love than this exists, he said, “I Am the Way to the Father.” He predicted that the world would hate his people, because his people do not belong to the world. Jesus said, but, “do not be afraid” (14:28) because “the ruler of this world has already been judged” (16:11).

Jesus said, “Do not be worried and upset. I am leaving, but I will come back to you”; “I have told you this now before it all happens, so that when it does happen, you will believe.” (14:28- 29).

After the homily, they remained in their silent prayers. Then a veiled cross, about three feet tall, was carried to Father Thomas, who was standing behind the altar. Everybody’s attention

was on the cross. When it was unveiled, Father Thomas held and raised the cross. On the cross, there was the crucified Jesus, about the size of a Japanese traditional *kyōruri* puppet, small, about two feet tall, man-made, with a fixed facial expression, but to those who had a heart to see, it represented the highest mystery of humanity. The cantor started “*The Reproaches*”:

GOD: *My people, what have I done to you? How have I offended you? Answer me!
I opened the sea before you, but you opened my side with a spear.
I led you on your way in a pillar of cloud, but you led me to Pilate’s court.
My people, what have I done to you? How have I offended you? Answer me!*

The cross was then carried to the front of the altar, so solemnly and dearly, as if Jesus had just been crucified. Two altar boys stood and held the cross on each side; the cross was held in a reclining position. Villagers, the old, the young, women and men, all lined up in the middle of the church. The line ended at the feet of Jesus. One by one they knelt down and adored him. Women touched the feet of Jesus and made a sign of the cross from head to chest and across. Men kissed the feet of Jesus and made their accompanying children do the same. It was men who carried small children in their arms; I was surprised to see so many young men.

I looked at Isabel and asked what they were doing. She spoke as if she was speaking to a small child, “Have a good look. *Jesunathar* [Jesus] suffered for *you*, me, and everyone here. He died for us and gave us life. People are going there to adore him.”

The villagers looked meek and obedient; but what they were showing to Jesus was a totally different kind of meekness than what they would show to an Army or Navy soldier. They were all dressed up for this most solemn occasion; they all looked dignified and proud—a group of human beings whose appearance was completely in contrast to the appearance of those who were kept behind barbed wires in the Manik Farm Camp.

Everyone, after adoring the cross, placed some money wrapped in papers and envelopes into a white bag placed next to it. This continued until all the villagers—except Isabel and me—finished adoring. The altar boys had to empty the large money bag two times in between.

After the Lord's Prayer and the distribution of communion, people started leaving the church. I thought that we were then all going home. I saw the altar being stripped. They then placed the cross on the altar with four candles.

“Shall we go?” I asked Isabel.

“You go and come.” [*Nī pōittu vā.*], she said and took out her small prayer books from her saree blouse (this was where women often kept their wallet) and began praying.

Then Jenina came and said, “Come. We'll go together.” I followed her, leaving Isabel behind.

Outside the church, all the villagers were gathering. Each of us was given a small candle. People then formed a procession with lit-candles in hand. “Come, come!” Jenina said and we too joined the procession and left the church. It was a very long procession, as long as the trains in the cities of India, and took the same route as the Stations of the Cross that circumambulated the Catholic part of the village.

At first, it was a silent procession. The crowd before and after us was only women and children. Most of our attention was on our candles, because they were often blown off by the wind. But after making the first turn and as we came to the street where the Hindu people kept their shops, I heard singing from behind us. I listened carefully. Soon, women around me, especially old women, started picking up the words of the song on their lips. It was *oppāri*, the traditional *mukkuvar* Catholic requiem.

I slowed down. I wanted to hear the men sing. Jenina sensed that I was slowing down.

She told me to catch up with her. I wanted her to go ahead of me, so I walked to an old lady who was walking slowly, and made a gesture to Jenina that I would be walking with that woman. Jenina agreed. The old woman held on to my arm. We were very slow; one after another the villagers overtook us. I watched them carefully. Then, a moment of *déjà vu* came over me: the blind man and his wife! (I strongly felt that I had seen them together before.) A year earlier in Santa Marta, we got the wrong news that she had died in the Mullaitivu lagoon. We had rung the church bell and mourned her ‘death’ at that time. But, the blind man’s wife was later found alive! Indeed, she had many sores on her body; indeed, she was leading her blind husband by the hand! The blind man sang *oppāri* with much emotion. I saw his head swing side to side.

The singing became louder and louder. I knew that the men’s crowd was behind us. I saw the cantor, in a white shirt, leading the *Oppāri*-singing. Above him, two light bulbs illuminated a large transparent coffin, carried by many men, and in it, a statue of the reclining body of Jesus. “*Aiyoo! Aiyoooo!*” sang the cantor; “*Aiyoo! Aiyooooooo!*” others followed. In between I heard the sound of a machine generating power to light the coffin.

MEN: *Aiyoo! Aiyoo! . . . Holy is God! Holy and strong! Holy Immortal One, have mercy on us!*

Their adult male voice singing requiem was solemn and grand, quite in contrast to the women’s sobbing that I had heard so often at funerals in the Santa Marta Camp. In Perunkalipattu, *oppāri* singers were traditionally men, and the villagers insisted that this requiem was most beautiful and powerful when sung by men—mournful and heartfelt. The coffin of Jesus was lit like an oasis in a desert of darkness. The caravan of mourners proceeded through the abandoned, broken houses (some abandoned since 2007, some back in 1999, and others as

early as 1990). There were no bystanders, except the Navy soldiers. Unlike the morning procession of the Stations of the Cross, where only one-fourth of the villagers participated, now the entire village—the Catholic half—was moving in “sadness and gladness.”⁹⁹ The sick and very old were in the church. Not a single one was left.

The procession returned to the Saint James’s Church.

Isabel was still sitting at the same place. The coffin was brought back and placed at the center of the church. People then went up to the coffin, prayed and placed white strings and went back home. Many women, however, remained in the church, kneeling down in lines and crying. I was watching them like a child, surprised to see so many mothers cry at one time. Then Isabel handed me the white string. She said, “Since I cannot walk, on my behalf, go to the cross, to the altar, and pray. You go and come.”

“I’m not a Christian. Better you go.” I responded.

Isabel looked at me with a face that read, “Ah! My child, you still don’t understand.” She then tried to stand up, but since she had been seated for hours at the same place, she could not. So I took the string, stood up and, just as the others did, went to the coffin, placed the string, saw Jesus lying there, surrounded by strings, took my string back, and went to the cross. I prayed, “Dear Jesus, thank you for taking me here to Perunkalipattu. I pray for *Ammamma*. Please give her good health.”

When I returned to Isabel, she tied half of the string around my wrist. The rest of the string she said she would keep for Vera. After that, we left the church. Many were still inside the church. Many crying. It was already very late in the night.

⁹⁹ “In a little while you will not see me anymore, and then a little while later you will see me.” (John 16:16)

“Alleluia Sani” [Holy Saturday] (April 3, 2010)

The next morning, before 5 a.m., leaving Isabel who was still lying on the floor, Jenina, Sonia, Diana Teacher (who me every night to sleep with us, because she was unmarried and had no family members in Perunkalipattu) and I—four of us—went to the Vellichchandai tank to bathe. We took our towels and dresses; Jenina took the laundry. It was before dawn. We took a flashlight with us. The reason why we left so early in the morning was that “the earlier, the cleaner” the tank’s water (Jenina).

About a hundred yards after passing the “Town,” we heard the sound of an animal or human moving. We turned our face in the direction of the sound. Our figures were then illuminated by the light of a flashlight. A couple of Army soldiers were moving behind the light. We stopped. After a little pause, they told us, “Ok. You may go” [*Hari. Yanna.*] in Sinhalese.

Between Perunkalipattu and Vellichchandai, there was no settlement. As we approached the tank, Jenina said, “The water on the men’s side is actually cleaner. Our side, the women’s side, is very much weed-filled.” I asked her whether any men would be already there bathing. She said, “I don’t think so. They’ll come later. Though, Army soldiers may be there.” The men’s side had stairs leading to the water and was located right next to the bus road. But we went to the women’s side, climbing up the grassy slopes of the tank’s mound, slipping here and there. Indeed, the water around the women’s side stank a little. Sonia grabbed Diana Teacher’s hand and went to the men’s side, where there were no men, but a couple of women, who had arrived before us. Jenina remained with me and started washing the laundry. After she finished the laundry, she and I took a bath in the tank’s water. The day was dawning. Right behind the men’s bathing area, I saw a couple of Army soldiers or policemen walking inside their camp. After

bathing, I felt refreshed and watched a young mother with five children coming to bathe. When they reached the tank, all her children rushed into the water and began playing. The mother called her children one by one. She would then wash the child's head and body, and the child would run back into the water to rinse himself.

Indeed, it was refreshing to walk back to the village for another mile. Many women were only then coming to the tank. Women usually went to the tank early in the morning before the sun rose high; men went after work, early in the evening. By the time we reached Perunkalipattu, it was already 7 a.m.

At home, Isabel was sweeping the garden. "Mother-in-law, you don't have to do that." Jenina said. Isabel tried to give the broom to Sonia, but Sonia refused to take it, saying, "That's my mother's job." Isabel responded, "You do it! You shouldn't be like this at this age." Since Sonia was the only child of Jenina and James, she was, for Isabel, a completely spoiled child. Sonia indeed did not help her mother at all with housework. Jenina went to the kitchen and started preparing breakfast—*pittu* with dry fish. *Pittu* because there were very limited cooking utensils. There was no *doosai/appam* skillet, *ammī* (grinding stone), or metape beans (*ulundu*) to prepare *doosai*. Jenina said that she was grateful to Peter that he had visited them "many, many times" in the Manik Farm Camp when they were interned there for eight months (March – November 2009). She said that she would never forget Peter coming with food in November, immediately after the family had been transferred to the Irupakulam Camp and when they had nothing to eat. "Wherever we went, he came to see us. We can never forget that." Then I remembered Peter telling me the same sentence back in November when he came home to Vera's place in Santa Marta after visiting James's family in the new camp. He took these words of Jenina as a great compliment.

After breakfast, we all sat on the floor of the empty living room under the blue sky. I asked whether the LTTE did not come to take Sonia in the past. Jenina said “No,” because she was the only child and only eleven.

“But they came to take James,” she said.

“James?”

“Yes.”

“To fight?” I was surprised because James was almost fifty-years old.

“No, as a coolie. That time, the LTTE needed laborers to construct defense mounds along the shore. But Sonia did not allow them! She was shouting at them, ‘My mother is a pressure patient. My mother has got only my father. She has no one else!’” James was already in the back of a van, onto which the LTTE soldiers were forcefully loading new labor-recruits, threatening them with guns. But, Sonia was not scared. She kept on shouting, ‘Leave my father! Release my father!’ It was the LTTE soldiers who got frightened, because a small girl was shouting for life; at the end, it was they who gave up James.” [*LTTEdān payanthu, chinna pillai dāne; kadēsīle, avunga-dān vittānga.*] Jenina laughed. Indeed we could now laugh about it.

Then James recalled and told me about his struggle with Sonia in Kilinochchi and Mullaitivu last year, about one of the cruelest faces of the war that made him and others hunt and fight for the smallest morsel of food. “My child would cry from hunger pangs. But there was nothing to give her. Every day, I would be desperately searching just for food. [*Ovuvoru nālum tēdi, tēdi, sāppādu dān tēdurathu.*] To feed the child, I was running here and there for food.]” His food-hunt and food-fight for his daughter, of course, did not end when they survived the Vanni, and continued for another eight months in the Manik Farm Camp. James then held Sonia in his arms, lying side by side.

In the early afternoon, I helped Jenina to carry water from a temporary water tank placed on the main bus lane. We carried water in plastic water containers, and I saw names and a number written on one of these containers (“James-Jenina, #XXX”). She said that they were using the container in the Manik Farm Camp—a remarkable souvenir that reminded them of the memories of homelessness and internment.

In Perunkalipattu, drinking water was now delivered daily by a water-van. (The villagers used to take water from a common well in the Vellichchandai tank. However, the Army and Police were now occupying the area around the well. During the ceasefire period, a water tank was built inside the village. It was however destroyed by the LTTE when the LTTE fled from Perunkalipattu in 2008, to deny the Government troops, who were coming to occupy the village next, easy access to drinking water). In the afternoon I went to the church and met the water-van driver, in charge of the area in and around Perunkalipattu. He was a Sinhalese man from Medawachchiya. He was boastful about his work of delivering water to Tamil villagers in the area, as if they were getting water at his mercy. Even water—the most basic source of existence to the villagers—was now under the control of a Sinhalese supplier. The villagers said that they had been informed that they would have to start paying for water from the following week onward. (Later in the week, I found out that not only water, but also fish transport was under the control of a Sinhalese fish transporter. The Perunkalipattu fishermen no longer possessed lorries to transport fish by themselves; instead, a Sinhala transporter came daily to Perunkalipattu beach to buy their fish.)

Outside the church, some male villagers ran the generator and read Psalms through loudspeakers. And there was another group of men who were spraying black ink on some light-brown colored, large wrapping papers. I asked them what they were doing.

“This is for tonight’s Alleluia Saturday [*Alleluia Sani*] mass,” a man said.

“What are you going to do with these papers?”

“Lord Jesus would be resurrected, wouldn’t he? For that celebration.”

They then started crumpling the papers as if they were going to throw them away, and brought the creased papers inside the church and began arranging the small table in the center right corner of the church, where the Blessed Sacrament had been for the past two days. They made a small grotto (about three feet tall) out of these papers.

“Do you think this is good enough?” they asked me. I nodded but I felt decorative flowers like the earlier nights would be more beautiful than the creased paper-cave.

When I returned to the church at around 7 p.m., I saw the hole of the grotto on the table was closed with a yet another paper, which was hanging from the top. Near the grotto, there were three women, all distanced from each other, facing the grotto and sobbing. They remained there until the mass began at 11:30 p.m.

The Easter Vigil

Isabel could not accompany me to the 11:30 p.m. mass, because she was too tired. Jenina wanted to come but had to stay home for Sonia who would not be able to stay awake. So I came to stay at the church. With me, there were Maria, who cooked for Father Thomas, her children, and an elderly lady. When it was time for the mass, we gathered in front of the church. Even though it was so late, there were more than a hundred people gathered at the church. There were no children, except for the altar boys. There were more women attending this ceremony than men; many men stayed home with their children. There was hardly any light. Father Thomas held a big candle in his hands, and when it was lit, suddenly a big candle frame illuminated Father Thomas and those around him. Following Father Thomas and the pillar of fire at the front,

we entered the church in procession. Maria handed me a small candle too.

Inside the church, we said, “Thanks be to God! [*Iraivanukku nandri!*]”, in response to what Father Thomas sang. And the light from the big candle was passed to the candles in our hands.

“This is the night,” Father Thomas was still singing, “when the pillar of fire destroyed the darkness of sin. Father, how wonderfully you care for us! How boundless your merciful love! To ransom a slave you gave away your son . . . a flame divided but undimmed, a pillar of fire that grows to the honor of God.”

By the time he finished singing, the candles had almost melted in our hands. I wanted to hold on to the flame till the very end, but Maria gestured me to blow it out, or else my fingers would burn.

Then there were readings from the *Parisuththa Vēdāham* (the Sacred Scripture), from the Old Testament, about their ancestors, the people of Israel, beginning with Moses and all the prophets. They read:

The Lord made the king of Egypt stubborn, and he pursued the Israelites who were leaving triumphantly. Now the Egyptian army, with all the horses, chariots, and drivers caught up with them by the Red Sea. When the Israelites saw the king and his army marching against them, they were terrified.

“Weren’t there any graves in Egypt?” they said to Moses, “Did you have to bring us out here in the desert to die? Look what you have done by bringing us out of Egypt!”

“Don’t be afraid!” Moses answered, “Stand your ground, and you will see what the Lord will do to save you today; you will never see these Egyptians again.” (Exod. 14: 8-13)

“*Gloria in excelsis!*” the church members began singing. *Dong, dong, dong*, we heard the bells outside.

Then there were readings from the New Testament. After these readings, we all stood up and acclaimed, repeating Father Thomas,

Alleluia

Alleluia

Alleluia!

Alleluia!

Alleluuuuuuuia!

Alleluuuuuuuia!

Now I understood why the villagers called this day “Alleluia Saturday.” Then Father Thomas walked to the front of the altar, bowed before the candle on the altar, turned around and came with his altar boys to the grotto that the villagers had prepared earlier in the afternoon.

“Praise the Lord, all Gentiles; praise him, all peoples!” (Romans 15:11). As the choir sang, Father Thomas removed the paper that was covering the hole of the cave. Inside stood a colorful statue of Jesus, about two feet-tall, holding a blue flag in hand, surrounded by white flowers—the risen Christ!

Back at the altar, Father Thomas read, “We know that our old being has been put to death with Christ on his cross, in order that the power of the sinful self might be destroyed, so that we should no longer be the slaves of sin. Since we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. For we know that Christ has been raised from death and will never die again” (Romans 6: 6, 8-9).

Father Thomas blessed baptismal water. Then the renewal of baptismal promises began. Even though it was chilly outside, I was almost sweating from the waves of “heat” that were coming off the women around me. They were all crying, as if they had not cried in years. What

was making me sweat was, however, not the heat of their bodies, but it was the “heat” of their humble will to live against all odds, despite all that had taken place in their lives. The women were responding to the mass service from their experience—the survival in the Vanni—and it was the moment of their spiritual regeneration. Finally, I understood why I felt so alien in Perunkalipattu. I was surrounded by the survivors of the Vanni, whose experience of suffering for the past two and a half years could not be translated into the everyday language. James had said that, in his case, it was a tree that saved him from a cluster bomb. Each of these villagers had their own story of how they had survived the last phase of the war; how they escaped from the Mullaitivu shore. Maria, who was standing next to me, said that all her children—five of them—went missing because of the crowd while they were crossing over to the Army side. It was only a few days later that she learned that all her children “came out alive.” “It was all God’s work,” I remembered the very first letter that Vera and Isabel received from James and his family from the Manik Farm Camp. It was a year ago.

On March 30, 2009, they wrote:

We are fine [i.e., We survived.] We are anxious to know whether you are well. Dear Vera, when we fled, the water-level was up to our neck. We came with only the clothes we were wearing. We won't be able to thank God sufficiently for protecting our lives. I'm writing in haste. . . Please send us some food.

Like James, Jenina and Sonia, everyone here, in this church, came out alive (*velie vantha*) out of the Vanni battlefields, where they were running here and there to escape from the government’s shelling, hunting for the smallest bit of food and for the smallest chance to escape.

They had to think of themselves first. They had to leave behind everything. They had to leave behind everyone else.¹⁰⁰ They still remembered the miserable state of those who perished. They were still living with the memories and dreams of the ones whom they had loved, but whom they had to leave behind (see chapter 4 “Andreas”). And after the Vanni and the Mullaitivu shore, these villagers had undergone the humiliating experience of internment, under the eye of the Army, in the Manik Farm Camp. Even now, they were living side by side with Navy soldiers.

But these soldiers seemed so little, so petty, against the other. The other?—*Jēsunāthar* [Lord Jesus]. Now the villagers seemed to enjoy, child-like, simple certainty that the Government, and even the LTTE, were nothing before their Lord. The Easter Triduum reminded them, more vividly than in any other years, of their roots—the people of Israel. They were reminded how He had led their ancestors out of Egypt. In the same manner, He had led them out of the Vanni battlefield. He was spitted, beaten, accused and crucified, not for His sins and failures, but for *their* sins to be forgiven, for *them* to receive the eternal life—the villagers mourned his death. And now, He was risen from the dead.

Inside the church, these women’s sense of guilt, sense of terror, and despair were then *washed* by the water that came upon them. I saw Father Thomas sprinkling us abundantly with water as he passed us. They sang “*Vidi Aquan*” (and Psalm 117):

I saw water flowing from the right side of the temple, *alleluia*;
and all they to whom that water came were saved,
and they shall say, *alleluia, alleluia*.

¹⁰⁰ “Don’t call us victims. The real victims are those who perished. We are survivors, and survivors are those who *sur-vived* others” (Rita-amma, pers. comm., April 12, 2009).

Praise the Lord, for He is good; for His mercy endures forever.

There He stood, all encompassing, all understanding, and all forgiving. In fact, the villagers won the victory; “The ruler of this world has already been judged” (John 16:11). These women gathered that night to offer thanks and praise, and worship *Jēsunāthar* for the better future they still desired and hoped for.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSIONS

TOWARDS A NEW ANTHROPOLOGY OF CHRISTIANITY

Cecilia Busby (2006) discusses popular Christianity in a *mukkuvar* Catholic fishing community in Kerala, South India. She argues that the *image* of the Sacred Heart of Jesus best represents the general aspects of popular Catholicism in the village. Busby writes: “For the fishing community, the central Christian deity is Christ himself rather than God the Father. It is perhaps not surprising then that this image of the adult Christ [the image of the Sacred Heart of Jesus], a Christ who moreover promises them blessing and power rather than his own self-sacrifice, occupies a central part in their worship” (Busby 1996, 95). The worship of “the adult Christ,” or the image of the Sacred Heart of Jesus for the blessing and protection of the house from any natural disaster, is a common practice among Catholic households in South India.¹⁰¹ To Busby, this image of the adult Christ in a kingly robe represents the general aspect of Catholicism practiced in the community: the villagers have little idea about God the Father; Christ for them is like the image, “pleasing to the eye,” so to speak, and serves a decorative purpose in their houses. In short, in Busby’s village, Christ is the giver of protection and blessings rather than the one sent by God the Father and suffered his death on the cross.

¹⁰¹ This practice was promoted by the Vatican several decades ago “in the context of a more general move away from Marian worship and toward making Christ a more central figure in the church” (Christian 1992:14-15; Busby 1996, 95).



Figure 5 A framed image of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. (Kanyakumari, Tamil Nadu, 2012.)

Busby's careful observation of popular Catholicism in the mukkuvar village in Kerala provides an important object of comparison to Catholicism that I observed among Tamil Catholics in war-torn northern Sri Lanka. Like the fishing village where Busby conducted her fieldwork, Perunkalipattu in northern Sri Lanka is a mukkuvar Catholic fishing village. However, in Perunkalipattu, the veneration of the Sacred Heart of Jesus is not the central worship among the villagers. In Kerala and also in Kanyakumari in Tamilnadu, almost every mukkuvar household possesses an image of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, and until recently, priests visited each household annually and conducted the enthroning of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Across the sea, on the other side of the Indian Ocean in northern Sri Lanka, this annual practice of enthroning the Sacred Heart of Jesus did not continue, where due to the war people were constantly displaced from their homes and villages. In northern Sri Lanka, in Perunkalipattu, the

central devotion is to the Christ who suffered death on Calvary. As R. L. Stirrat (1992) demonstrates in his study of the emergence of the popularity of a charismatic priest and his exorcism practices at a Sinhalese Catholic shrine in the 1970s in Sri Lanka, the emergence of certain forms of devotion reflect general social change in society. In the case of the Tamil Catholics in northern Sri Lanka, as much as their Catholic devotion shaped the manner of their suffering, the war shaped their devotion.

Towards a New Anthropology of Christianity

By way of conclusion I explore the possibility of a new anthropology of Christianity, a study of Christianity that examines the being of the believer by incorporating Søren Kierkegaard's writings into Heideggerian existential philosophy. The Heideggerian concept of *Dasein* has three axes: being-alongside-things (*Sein bei*); being-with-others (*Mitsein*); and being one's self (*Selbstsein*) (Heidegger 1962). What is missing from these three axes is what Kierkegaard describes as *Es-sistere*, the being of the believer. The word *Ex-sistere* ("to exist") is carefully chosen by Kierkegaard and means "to stand out from" (Lowrie 1968: xviii). Walter Lowrie (1968) explains it as follows in his editor's introduction to Kierkegaard's *Unscientific Postscript* (1968[1846]):

The reader will not fail to observe that, in [Kierkegaard]'s language, "to exist" does not mean simply "to be." The difference becomes clear when the etymological meaning is stressed. *Ex-sistere* means to stand out from. Heidegger in his Existential Philosophy strives to render the essential thought by *in-der-Welt-sein* [being-in-the-world], and by *Da-sein*, thus indicating the *there-ness*, the concretion of the ego in relation to its environment and its task" (Lowrie 1968, xviii).

As Emmanuel Levinas points out, Heidegger's *Dasein* is "the being *dem es in seinem Sein um dieses Sein selbst geht* ['for whom Being itself is an issue in its being']."¹⁰² Heidegger's *Dasein* is "befallen" [*verfallen*], in the sense of fall in love with the world, and is all the time concerned about his task [*Aufgabe*] in the world.¹⁰³ Kierkegaard's concept of "*Ex-sistere*" is as "befallen" as *Dasein*, but not in world but in God; and what Kierkegaard's *Ex-sistere* "stands out from" is the world-befallen-ness of *Da-sein*.

Building upon Hannah Arendt's work (1996), I argue that Heidegger's concept of *Da-sein* reflects his conception of world. In her dissertation *Love and Saint Augustine* (1996) [*Liebesbegriff bei Augustin* (1927)], Arendt writes that Heidegger's idea of being-in-the-world does not include the understanding of world as God's creation. According to Arendt, Heidegger, when he interpreted Saint Augustine's idea of *mundus* (world), omitted one part of the twofold understanding of *mundus* by Augustine. For Augustine, "[O]n the one hand, it is *ens creatum* (which in our context coincides with the divine fabric, heaven and earth), and on the other, it is the world conceived as the lovers of the world" (Arendt 1996, 66 n80). According to Arendt, Heidegger (1996) takes up only the latter, "living with the world at heart"—"World, therefore, means the *ens in toto*, as the decisive How, according to which human existence relates to, and acts toward, the *ens*." (Heidegger, *E. Husserl-Festschrift* [Halle 1929], 86-87; quoted in Arendt 1996, 66 n80).

¹⁰² Levinas, "Reflexions on the Philosophy of Hitlerism," 62; quoted in Agamben 1998, 152.

¹⁰³ "For Heidegger, the central category of facticity is *Verfallenheit*, fallenness, which characterizes a being that is and has to be its own ways of Being. Facticity does not mean simply being contingently in a certain way and a certain situation, but rather means decisively assuming this way and this situation by which what was given (*Hingabe*) must be transformed into a task (*Aufgabe*)" (Agamben 1998, 150-151).

While Heidegger's *Da-sein* is "living with the world at heart," Kierkegaard's *Ex-sistere* is "living with God at heart." The main thesis of this dissertation is that Sri Lanka's civil war gave birth to a new mode of being—*Ex-sistere*—among the Tamil Catholics in northern Sri Lanka.

Ex-sistere

As I have narrated in Chapter 6, it was in April 2010 during Holy Week in Perunkalipattu, about a year after the villagers' "culmination of suffering" on the Mullaitivu battlefield, that I bore witness to an expression of the villagers' devotion to Jesus Christ as the sufferer *par excellence*. These Tamil Catholic survivors of the war had just returned to the village after the government released them from the Manik Farm Camp. The village had been abandoned for two and a half-years and in the villagers' absence, first the LTTE and then the Sri Lankan Navy had used the village as a naval base. During Holy Week, the villagers, who had returned to the village, were living in broken, roofless, doorless homes and the Navy resided at the village's jetty. When the Maundy Thursday mass began, however, these villagers looked very different from how they looked a year earlier. When they came out of the battlefield, they were drenched to the skin and all they had was the clothes they were wearing. They were all dark-skinned, malnourished, and there was no trace of dignity in them. In the Manik Farm Camp, a gigantic detention center, stretching over a thousand acres, the villagers were kept behind barbed wire fences with hundreds of thousands of other survivors, They were living in tarp shelters. They appeared to be less than human. However, on that Maundy Thursday evening, during the mass of the Lord's Supper, the survivors looked serene, dignified and full of courage. The next day, on Good Friday, the villagers were adoring *Jesunathar* (Lord Jesus), a statue, and, again, their appearances different: though meek and obedient, they wore a totally different kind of

meekness than the meekness that they would show to the occupying Navy soldiers. The villagers “stood out from” the rest of the war-torn world.

The emotional release of the villagers’ suffering came during Easter Vigil, and most intensely during the sacrament of reconciliation when these survivors told God that they had to leave behind their loved ones who had died, gotten injured, or been taken by the rebels that they had survived but others had perished. It was these moments that they were most emotional, full of passion, thanking and praising God. And it is this figure of the villagers that I intend to describe by using Kierkegaard’s concept of *Ex-sistere*. The Heideggerian concept of *Da-sein*, I argue, cannot sufficiently explain the being of the villagers during Holy Week.

The Perunkalipattu survivors stopped short of becoming “bare life” (Agamben 1998), because what is markedly human in the human being is not his political freedom, but what Kierkegaard calls “the innermost sphere of human subjectivity”—which is faith (Kierkegaard 1968, 118). It is where, according to Kierkegaard, conscience sits.¹⁰⁴ The survivors’ guilt, resulting from the experience of having witnessed one’s own human condition, that in a given situation, one can even leave loved ones behind, therefore sits in this sphere.

In Christianity, the human being is first and foremost an *ethical* being, and the human being is subjected to God’s authority before he or she is subjected to world authority. World is not merely the world on earth, it is first and foremost a divine fabric—“[T]he concept [of world by Augustine] is twofold: first, the world is God’s creation (heaven and earth), which antedates all love of the world; and second, it is the human world, which constitutes itself by habitation and love (*diligere*)” (Arendt 1996, 66). Man, by inhabiting it, makes world worldly, but the

¹⁰⁴ “There is nothing between him and God except the ethical” (Kierkegaard 1968, 122).

worldliness of the world is before God. “[According to Augustine,] it is from the divine fabric (*fabrica Dei*), from the pre-existing creation, that man makes the world and makes himself part of the world” (Arendt 1996, 66).

Social Science and Christianity

What is at stake here is the definition of world and the definition of man. Heidegger and Agamben do not include in their analysis the transcendental aspects of the being of the human being. I argue that is why Agamben arrives at the figure of “bare life” as someone who is animal-like without political freedom and protection. And his pessimistic views of the figure of “bare life” and the future of humanity have become popular in contemporary social theory. This is because social theory and social science in general tend not to include God or transcendental aspects of the being of the human being into analysis. As John Milbank writes in *Theology and Social Theory* (1990), social science is a “church” that has its own “theology” built upon certain definition of man.¹⁰⁵ Be it Heidegger, Agamben, contemporary social theory, the roots of their intellectual secularism is rooted in the history of Western Philosophy.

It is worth revisiting here Kierkegaard’s critique of Hegel’s understanding that man is the “subject of world history.” As Pippin (1989) writes, “Hegel’s science, often also called ‘Speculation’ . . . has succeeded in thinking of traditional substance [mind] ‘as subject,’ and by doing so has completely rejected any notion of the metaphysically real beyond, or behind, or ‘more real’ than what can be understood in ‘Spirit’s experience of itself,’ or, now, by ‘thought’s examination of itself’” (Pippin 1989:175). For Kierkegaard, such philosophy was “paganism”—

¹⁰⁵ “In effect, theology encounters in sociology only a theology, and indeed a church in disguise, but a theology and a church dedicated to promoting a certain secular consensus” (Milbank 1990, 4).

“The pagan and the natural man have the merely human self as their standard” (Kierkegaard 2008, 98).

Kierkegaard's Critique of Hegel

It was in the mid-nineteenth century, when many “wise men” were attracted to the Hegelian school that Kierkegaard “nailed on the doors,” so to speak, to the school of Hegelian philosophy his *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the Philosophical Fragments* (1968[1846]).¹⁰⁶ Kierkegaard’s point was not to prove Hegel’s philosophy wrong, but to show that Hegel, by changing the question of immortality, had come up with a new definition of man, the “subject in world history” as well as a new definition of “the ethical.” Kierkegaard feared that such philosophical practices would obscure the fundamental question that each individual had to face: “*what it is to be a man*” (Kierkegaard 1968, 163). To respond to this question is the

¹⁰⁶ In “The Task of Becoming Subjective,” Kierkegaard writes satirically about a “remarkable event” that happened on an Easter morning in the mid-nineteenth century Germany:

Dr. Hartspring! According to his own singularly well-written account it was at Streit’s Hotel in Hamburg, on Easter morning, that by a miracle (of which the waiters were unaware) he became an adherent of the Hegelian philosophy. . . . Marvelous sign of the times, more glorious and significant than the conversion of Paul. For the fact that Paul was converted by a miracle to the doctrine which proclaims itself to be a miracle is more obvious; but by a miracle to be converted to a doctrine which assumes that there is no miracle, is more preposterous. (Kierkegaard 1968, 163-164)

Though he writes with a satire, when Kierkegaard describes Dr. Hartspring’s conversion to the Hegelian philosophy as an alarming sign of the age, Kierkegaard is serious. For the problem is not Hegel’s philosophy itself, but a new disposition of intellectuals—Speculation:

To think about the simple thing of life, about what the plain man also knows after a fashion, is extremely forbidding; for the differential distinction attainable even through the utmost possible exertion is by no means obvious to the sensual man. No indeed, thinking about the highfalutin is very much more attractive and glorious. (Kierkegaard 1968, 116-117).

task of each man, but Hegel, gave up studying himself and occupied himself with what Pippin calls “the satisfaction of self-consciousness.” Kierkegaard writes:

Almost everything that nowadays flourishes most conspicuously under the name of science (especially as natural science) is not really science but curiosity. In the end all corruption will come about as a consequence of the natural science. . . . But such a scientific method becomes especially dangerous and pernicious when it would encroach also upon the sphere of spirit. Let it deal with plants and animals and stars in that way; but to deal with the human spirit in that way is blasphemy. . . . (Kierkegaard 1968, xv)

For Kierkegaard, Hegel’s philosophy was man’s trespassing into the sphere of God’s authority. “All honour to him who can handle learnedly the learned question of immortality!” (Kierkegaard 1968, 153). According to Kierkegaard, Hegel understood immortality in terms of the metaphysical category of the “immanental system.” It was not God’s immanent presence but the immanental presence of the law of phenomenology (“appearance” [*Erscheinung*]). Hegel writes in the preface to his 1807 study of the phenomenology of “spirit”:

Appearance is the arising and passing away that does not itself arise and pass away, but is “in itself” [i.e. subsists intrinsically], and constitutes the actuality and the movement of the life of truth. (Hegel 1977, 27) [*Die Erscheinung ist das Entstehen und Vergehen, das selbst nicht entsteht und vergeht, sondern an sich ist und die Wirklichkeit und Bewegung des Lebens der Wahrheit ausmacht.* (Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, Suhrkamp Verlag, v3p46)]

For Hegelian philosophy, the truth is the being of the eternal phenomenology (the matter of the appearing) of the “I.” Hegel called this movement “eternal,” because to him, this movement of the appearing of the “I” was showing “the cast of presence [*Anwesenheit*] and permanence [*Beständigkeit*] in the sense of enduring (*ousia*) (Heidegger EP 3/ NII 403)” (Thompson 2005, 40). Kierkegaard objected to this Hegelian idea of an eternal process as “the

life of truth.” Kierkegaard writes, “the question [what it is to be a man] is about the immortality of a mortal which is not answered by showing that the eternal [“appearance”] is immortal, and the immortality of the eternal is a tautology and a misuse of words” (Kierkegaard 1968, 153). Kierkegaard calls the Hegelian phenomenology a “doctrine” of spectators, concerned with appearance. “In the world-historical process [Hegel’s philosophy] God is metaphysically imprisoned in a conventional straitjacket, half metaphysical and half aesthetic-dramatic, that is, the immanental system. It must be the very devil to be God in that manner.” (Kierkegaard 1968, 140)

Kierkegaard’s critique may sound “divinity-school prattle” (1968: 118). However, his understanding that philosophy is, like religion, responsible for defining what it is to be a man is also pointed out by Heidegger; namely, his understanding of metaphysics as “ontotheology.”

Thompson (2005) writes that for Heidegger, the history of Western metaphysics is a history of a series of epochs, each claiming different supreme entity of one sort or the other. In other words, words such as “man” and “world” have their own, what Reinhart Koselleck calls “conceptual history” [*Begriffsgeschichte*], derived from that particular epoch’s understanding of the “being of entities” [*das Sein des Seienden*].¹⁰⁷ Thus, for Heidegger, strictly speaking, philosophy is not science. Each metaphysics is a result of a quest for a supreme, all-founding entity. And once an entity is so defined, it becomes the basis of understanding of man and world. Thus, metaphysics is ontology plus theology. The nature of philosophy as ontology is what many

¹⁰⁷ “In the inception of its history [in pre-Socratic times], being clears itself as emerging (*phusis*) and disclosure (*alêthein*). From there it acquires the cast of presence [*Anwesenheit*] and permanence [*Beständigkeit*] in the sense of enduring (*ousia*). Thus begins metaphysics proper. (Heidegger EP 4/NII 403)” (Thompson 40). After (Aristotle and) Plato, the permanent presence of *ousia* (“substance”) thus became the supreme, all-founding entity in the tradition of metaphysics (Thompson, 40).

would agree to. For Heidegger, “metaphysics is ontology when it ‘thinks of entities with an eye for the ground that is common to all entities as such’ (Heidegger I&D 70/139)” (Thompson 2005, 14). Examples of these are Hegel’s “phenomenology,” Peirce’s “sign-process,”¹⁰⁸ early Heidegger’s “being of entities” [*das Sein des Seienden*] in *Being and Time*. For Heidegger, however, metaphysics is not merely ontology but theology: “metaphysics thinks *theologically* when it ‘thinks of the totality of entity as such. . . with regard to the supreme, all-founding entity’ (Heidegger I&D 70-71/B9)” (Thompson 2005, 15)¹⁰⁹

According to Thompson, by calling metaphysics ontotheology, the crucial point that Heidegger makes is that “by giving shape to our historical understanding of ‘what *is*,’ metaphysics determines the most basic presuppositions of what *everything* is, ourselves included” (Thompson 2005, 55). For Heidegger, “every scientific discipline with a discrete subject matter is a *positive science*,” in the sense “each rest[s] on an ontological ‘posit,’ that is a presupposition about what the class of entities it studies *is*”; “no science can get along without at least an implicit ontological understanding of the being it studies” (Thompson 2005, 106, 107).

¹⁰⁸ Charles Peirce, critically building upon Hegel’s three stages of the “appearance” [*Erscheinung*] of *Selbstbewusstsein* (*Sinliche Bewusstsein, Wahrnehmung, Verstand*), developed his own theory of sign process—“*semeiosis/semiosis*” or “the theory of sign.” Peirce writes in “Some Consequence of Four Incapacities”:

Thus, we have in thought three elements: 1st, the representative application which makes it a representation; 2nd, the pure denotative application, or real connection, which brings one thought into relation with another; and 3rd, the material quality, or how it feels, which gives thought its quality. (Peirce 1955, 237)

¹⁰⁹ “Historically, different metaphysicians determine this universal ground according to a wide variety of different “historical molds [*Prägung*]: *Phusis, Logos, Hen, Idea, Energeia*, Substantiality, Objectivity, Subjectivity, Will, Will to Power, Will to Will” (Heidegger I&D 66/134), and, of course, ‘*Ousia*,’ the proto-substance, that ontological ‘mold’ of the being of entities with which, as we will see, Heidegger thinks ‘metaphysics proper begins’ (Heidegger EP4/NII 403)” (Thompson 2005, 14)

But, in the positive sciences (including religious studies and anthropology), “The researcher operates on the foundation of what has already been decided” (Heidegger 1962, 30). The discipline of religious studies as a positive science rests on a presupposition about what a religion *is*; the discipline of anthropology as a positive science rests on a presupposition about what a man *is*—and the researchers in these positive sciences do not question their ontological presuppositions (Thompson 2005, 111). For Heidegger, the single most important role in science (as a gigantic system of presuppositions) is played by philosophy. “Philosophy is not science, . . . but rather the *origin* [*Ursprung*] of science” (Heidegger 1996, 17-18, 221; quoted in Thompson 2005, 112). Philosophy “must run ahead of positive sciences, and it *can* do so,” while all other sciences do not question the *being* of the objects of investigation (Heidegger 1962, 30; quoted in Thompson 2005, 106).

The all-founding entity in Kierkegaard’s time was Hegel’s *phenomenology* of consciousness. This was, for Hegel, an “entity beneath or beyond which no more basic entity can be ‘discovered’ or ‘fathomed’ (*ergründt*)” (Thompson 2005, 14). Heidegger’s understanding that metaphysics is ontotheology and that metaphysics determines our understanding of “what *everything* is, ourselves included” in no way contradicts Kierkegaard’s understanding of the Hegelian philosophy as a “doctrine.” Insofar as the new Hegelian ontotheology shaped people’s conception of what truth is, what immortality is, for Kierkegaard who understood man and world differently, the doctrine was misleading, “a stumbling block for salvation.”¹¹⁰

¹¹⁰ Hegel’s idea that phenomenology is the “life of truth” reflects the idea about “life” and “process” in political economy. In *Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt asks, “why Locke and all his successors, their own insights notwithstanding, clung so obstinately to labor as the origin of property, of wealth, of all values and finally, of the very humanity of man?” (Arendt 1998, 105) This, according to Arendt, was because all these philosophers saw the growth of wealth as a

The ethical

According to Kierkegaard, what these new ideas of truth and immortality brought about is a new definition of man, and man as the standard for the judgment of good and evil. (Kierkegaard was not wrong, because in the subsequent history of social science multiple definitions and multiple standards of good and evil would emerge, and Derridian deconstructionism that leaves out any definition and standard). Kierkegaard calls Hegel's philosophy a doctrine of "the way of becoming objective," which posits that the history of man and the history of world can be objectively contemplated. This understanding of man as the observer of world history emerged because God was no longer conceived of as real. "For it is regarded as a settled thing, that the objective tendency in the direction of intellectual contemplation, is, in the newer linguistic usage, the *ethical* answer to the question of what I *ethically* have to do; and the task assigned to the contemplative nineteenth century is world history" (Kierkegaard 1968, 119).¹¹¹ Kierkegaard's point is not that Hegel is not objective

natural process. The notion of "life process" was such that they came up with the idea of "the life process of society":

If any human activity was to be involved in the process at all, it could only be a bodily "activity" whose natural functioning could not be checked even if one wanted to do so. To check these "activities" is indeed to destroy nature, and for the whole modern age, whether it holds fast to the institution of private property or considers it to be an impediment to the growth of wealth, a check or control of the process of wealth was equivalent to an attempt to destroy the very life of society. (Arendt 1998, 112)

Arendt maintains that the idea of life process was crucial for the degradation of human beings to the level of *animal laborans* and the elevation of labor to the source of morals (Bentham's "twin sovereign of pleasure and pain"). She argues that in the modern world, labor is considered to be the source of human beings, and is elevated to the level of the "creator" of the species.

¹¹¹ Kierkegaard makes a reference to Hegel's "Philosophy of History" (1837) and writes:

enough; Kierkegaard's point is that the idea that becoming objective is an ethical thing to do is a problem.

In other words, it is not the degree of objectivity that Kierkegaard is concerned about, but the very notion of the objective observer. After Hegel no longer *becoming subjective* is conceived of as ethical as in Christianity, but *becoming objective* is what is considered ethical and a closer approach to the truth. Thus, Hegel's understanding of subject radically differs from the subject in Christianity. For Kierkegaard, Hegel's subject of world history is "being something like a subject so called," "the abstractly understood man in general, man being understood fantastically as the race," "the human race." For Kierkegaard, such phantoms have no existence (Kierkegaard 1968, 117, 154). The Hegelians could no longer see the distinction between being a subject (a mortal before God) and "being something like subject so called" (the subject of the world history). Kierkegaard writes:

When one overlooks this little distinction, humoristic from the Socratic standpoint and infinitely anxious from the Christian, . . . it becomes wisdom, the admired wisdom of our age, that it is the task of the subject increasingly to divest himself of his subjectivity in order to become more and more objective. It is easy to see what this guidance understands by being a subject of a sort. It understands by it quite rightly the accidental, the angular, the selfish, the eccentric, and so forth, all of which every human being can have enough of (Kierkegaard 1968, 117).

If one is so fortunate as to be of service within the given presupposition, by contributing one or another item of information concerning a tribe perhaps hitherto unknown, which is to be provided with a flag and given a place in the paragraph parade; if one is competent within the given presupposition to assign China a place different from the one it has hitherto occupied in the systematic procession—in that case one is made welcome. But everything else is divinity-school prattle. (Kierkegaard 1968, 118-119)

Christianity, according to Kierkegaard concerns “the essential, the inner spirit, the ethical, freedom,” all of which are the opposite of “the accidental, the angular, the selfish, the eccentric.” Kierkegaard’s essay “Becoming Subjective,” was thus his counter-thesis to Hegel’s objective tendency. In Hegel’s philosophy, “God does not play the role of sovereign; just as the ethical fails to appear in it, so God also fails to appear, for he is not seen as sovereign he is not seen at all” (Kierkegaard 1968, 139-140). Today, in social science, we still practice the objective approach to the study of suffering and faith. However, this approach, probably derived from Hegel’s approach to “the truth,” does not provide us with sufficient explanation as to why, in the “zone of indistinction,” human beings are distinctly human.

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