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## The Crossing

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## The Crossing

### Abstract

I began my journey at dead of night. In pitch darkness. Set out from Nallur where my home is. A voluntary journey. I come and go from the South to the North of the island. I return as often as I can to see my father and my younger sister. My only sister. I'm studying for my engineering degree in the south. The only people who matter to me live in the Peninsula. I have to assure myself of their safety. They long to see me too, my father and my sister. That's all they have to look forward to. My arrival. A journey fraught with risks and hazards. To reach the mainland the crossing has to be made across the lagoon in a motor boat or fishing vallam. We can no longer take the accustomed routes. It is a time of war. But the crossing grows familiar with these repeated journeys.

JEAN ARASANAYAGAM

## The Crossing. I

'O bhikkus ... the teaching is similar to a raft, which is for crossing over and not for getting hold of.'

*Parable of the raft*

MAN:

I began my journey at dead of night. In pitch darkness. Set out from Nallur where my home is. A voluntary journey. I come and go from the South to the North of the island. I return as often as I can to see my father and my younger sister. My only sister. I'm studying for my engineering degree in the south. The only people who matter to me live in the Peninsula. I have to assure myself of their safety. They long to see me too, my father and my sister. That's all they have to look forward to. My arrival. A journey fraught with risks and hazards. To reach the mainland the crossing has to be made across the lagoon in a motor boat or fishing vallam. We can no longer take the accustomed routes. It is a time of war. But the crossing grows familiar with these repeated journeys.

Neither the arrival nor the departure are easily accomplished. There are innumerable checkpoints along the way. Part of the journey is in an overcrowded tractor. Walking through what we call the 'Dead Zone'. Desert land. A no-man's land. At either point where we embark or disembark there are no quays. We have to wade out into the water, waist high, shoulder high. The Peninsula is now different territory. Divided from the South. A *de facto* state exists in the North. Under the rule of the most powerful militant group, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam fighting for a separate state for our people. Described by many as Fascist rule. There are Baby Brigades, Regiments of Women, the militants, the 'Boys'. The war has been going on for several decades. A never ending war which has resulted in the displacement of thousands of the different ethnic communities on the island.

The journey out of the Peninsula is a costly affair. Everything has a price. Every stage of the journey means money; thousands of rupees. Guarantees are needed. Someone stands surety for you when you leave the Peninsula. The militants are informed of all our movements. They exact their tolls and taxes too. Money. Gold sovereigns. Yet nothing deters the traveller. Children living in the South, studying or working return to visit their parents. Parents leave the North to see their children in the South. No journey is taken irresponsibly. The same imperatives

exist. It's only the routes that have changed.

There's an army camp on the mainland. At Palay. It's a separate world there with the Security forces of the other, the ethnic majority, encamped there. For them it's alien ground where they face attack from the militants. Two worlds exist in the North. They're hemmed in within that army camp. Supplies flown in by helicopter. Cargo planes. Or by boat. Each one has separate routes.

In the Peninsula people go about their business as best they can but they are cut off from the South. From the rest of the world too. Experience hardship. Embargoes imposed. No electricity. No petrol. Manage with natural light and oil lamps in their homes after dark. Can't see the newspapers from the South. Letters carried by friends, relations or the ICRC. Books too. The famous library in the town of Jaffna burned down. Political burning. A long time ago. Invasions. Military occupations. The diaries are invisible. Engraved on the mind.

I can't spend the rest of my life here. I am young. I have no intention of being a martyr to a cause. It's not that I am a traitor or that I have no sense of loyalty to my people. I'm not prepared for the great sacrifices, for showing my valour on the battlefield, for biting on the cyanide capsule. Once I get my engineering degree I will make my plans to join my brother in Switzerland. Arrange a marriage for my sister with someone who lives abroad. Hundreds of thousands of my people are part of the diaspora and are scattered all over the world. Asylum seekers. Political refugees. I know my father has aged beyond his years after my mother's early death. It's too much for him to plan my sister's marriage by himself. He's already given up on life ... it's difficult to say goodbye to the two of them when I prepare to leave my home in Nallur. But it's got to be done. What's most painful for them is not to be sure, never to be sure when they will see me again. For them to be left alone when the darkness descends early on the land, when they light the small oil lamp that will be their beacon.

My father and sister stand at the doorway, silent watchers, reluctant to go indoors until they know that my figure has vanished completely out of sight. Once the shadows swallow me up, they bolt and bar the doors and return to the silence, the darkness, the loneliness, each deeply absorbed in their own thoughts. But still, the Peninsular is home to them. My father will never be happy in any other part of the island, nor in any other part of the Peninsular except for Nallur. His history and the history of his ancestors lie here.

When will we see each other again? The question is engraved in our minds. Yet their minds are at ease that I spend the greater part of my days in the hills. The hill capital in the interior of the island is safer than Colombo. Horrendous happenings have taken place there. Ethnic and racial conflict between the majority community and the ethnic 'other', the minority Tamils. Destruction. Conflagrations in the city. Bomb blasts,

assassinations, suicide bombers have led to thousands of deaths, deaths of innocent civilians of all communities. Arrests. Detention camps. Torture and interrogation. Radical movements of the majority community too. Bodies fished out of waterways. And now with the problem of urban terrorists subtle paranoia of fear and suspicion. Mysterious deaths. Strangled with plastic handcuffs. Starved and tortured to death. History goes backwards and forwards. The Subversive movement and the Terrorist Movement swing like a pendulum between the eras. The whole city is caught up in that terrible feeling of insecurity. When will the next bomb go off and where? Where will the suicide bomber choose to strike? Whose body will be shattered in the explosion?

Other disruptive forces exist too in the universities. The ragging of Freshers. Strikes. Lectures and examinations postponed. University closures. Yet, there, in the South we are not separated by our racial identities. We live together in the Halls of Residence, follow the same lectures, sit the same examinations, gain the same qualifications. We are not seen as 'the enemy'. So, I return as I always do. The risk of the crossing is part of the journey. The return to that other life.

I wait for the arrival of the mini-bus to Kilaly, the embarkation point. The crossing will begin at midnight. There's no quay or dock for anchorage. We have to wade out in the waters of the lagoon.

The mini-bus arrives. Other travellers emerge out of the shadows. We begin the next stage. Everything is strategically planned. Quite a number of us tonight. All setting out for the South. Men, women, a few children.

The tide is high tonight. We get off the mini-bus and prepare to wade into the waters. Shoulders high. I carry my possessions in a urea bag. I feel the chilliness of the water creep up my thighs. Clothes already soaking wet. A surround of darkness. Sound of lapping water. Waves. Dangerous. No moon. Good for us. Helps lull the senses. Avoid detection. A motor boat awaits us. Tosses and rocks in the high tide. A rapid count of heads. About fourteen of us. Of all ages. Humanity. Nameless. All of them ordinary people with duties and obligations, leaving the Peninsula. Temporarily? Who knows? Sometimes the guerrillas get into the boats. Not this time.

The children are carried on the shoulders of the adults. Not a murmur from them. Absorbed. Each one intent on one purpose. Comfort in the silent presence of bodies. Wait your turn to clamber into the boat. Everyone will eventually get in. Not easy. Trying to grip the edges of the rocking boat, tossing your possessions in with one hand, clambering after them. Helping hands are needed.

We settle ourselves in. 'Nobody left out?' Talk in whispers. 'Yes, everybody is in'. Only the sound of breathing, laboured, agonized. Sighs. But no talking. Silence. Parents soothing young children. Stoical. Many have made the journey before. Know what it entails. We go on different missions. No discussions about their personal nature. No easy chatter.

No garrulous wagging of tongues. The journey becomes meditative. The usual questions leading to knowledge of your neighbour are absent. Questions like. Which area of the Peninsula, which island, village, do you come from, are you related to such and such a person? Have you got anyone abroad, sons, daughters? Anyone in Germany, Canada, Sweden, Australia, USA, UK? Are you married, widowed, lost any of your children in the conflict; sons, daughters in the Movement? Are you coming back to the North? Settling down in the South? Then what about your house and property? Have you had to give the house over to the militants? Any children in the university in the South? Did you pay in money or gold to leave the Peninsula? Anyone standing surety for you in the North? Medical treatment? Departure to 'foreign'? Unasked questions. Unanswered questions.

Huddled bodies. Taking up cramped positions in the crowded boat. An old man wheezes. Tremors of chilled bodies. Touch mine. Motor boat. Engine not in the best of condition. Speeding. Rocking from side to side. Thoughts ... in between ... Ananda ... my room mate in the South ... Buddhist conversations ... samsaric ocean ... ocean of sorrows ... life's journey ... man has to cross over ... to the other side ... this side ... it's dangerous ... other side ... safe ... builds his own raft ... crosses over ... Ananda ... interprets ... talking of the dhamma, the Buddha's teaching journey to enlightenment, after journey ... leave it ... leave the raft behind ... non-attachment ... also ... a changed person, leave hatred behind ... Ananda ... friend ... to him ... I'm ... no terrorist ... just myself ... human ... wish ... I ... hadn't ... a ... name ... is disguise cowardice ... anonymity deception ... ? To be followed only when we are with 'the other'?

Counting the hours of the passage. To reach the other side. Can't distinguish any object in the dark. Only sounds. The heaving of the boat ... the chugging of the motor ... the boat is overloaded. Hope it's seaworthy. A high wind tonight. The waves rise as the boat cuts a swathe through the waters. Spray engulfs us. Drenched to the skin. Shiver. Lips, skin, crinkle and pucker. Touch my face. Damp. Wet. Chill. A slight cough from out of the shadows. Quickly stifled. Words have no utterance. Choked on phlegm. Pity? No we feel no such pity for the other. Individual missions must be accomplished. Learn to be survivors. Protect my books and valuable lecture notes within their files in the urea bag. Study even when I come to the Peninsula. What else is there to do? Make use of every bit of the natural light. Conserve the small amount of kerosene oil for the one brass lamp we light at dusk in order to eat and find our way about the house. Although by now, each household object provides a familiar landmark. Even a blind man can feel his way about ... but now, the wind, the wave, the churning sweep of waters carry a message to each one of us, this is no ordinary crossing. A sliver of moon lays a white wing across the dark clouds. For a moment, I'm able to

discern the faces of the occupants in the boat. A middle-aged woman. A journey to see a son, a daughter? Who knows. All faces share one, common, expression. Devoid of individuality. Of expression. Anonymity. That's the garment everyone wears. Draped and concealed in those uniformly drab, grey, garments. Only our human lineaments are recognizable. We part as strangers, going into a greater anonymity. Leaving our familiar terrain. With fears of being thought 'the other', the terrorist, when the huge explosions take place and the innocent are buried beneath the debris, their bodies charred beyond recognition. When sometimes only the ashes remain. Guilt. It is as if we committed the act for are we not identified with 'the enemy'? There are martyrs too in these acts of destruction whose only statement of their cause is in death. For them there is only a brief acknowledgement of life. There are others to take their place in the enactment of the myth, of martyrdom, of that sacrificial offering.

I observe the middle-aged woman peering at my urea bag, the familiar symbol of the student. In a young man like myself there are only one or two masks of identification needed, the urea bag and the cyanide capsule worn round the neck. The more obvious sign in the AK 47. Tonight, no one bears a weapon in his hands, or hers either, although among your own no disguise is necessary. Unless? Yes, there are always informers.

The movement of the boat is irregular. An ancient motor in need of repair operates it. Thankful for it anyway I am enclosed within the temporary refuge of my own thoughts. But alert. Alert for other sounds. We look up from time to time at the sky. Helicopters may suddenly appear out of the skies. We're an easy target. We have to take the risk. The Security Forces are well aware that the guerrillas take the crossing too. They mingle with the citizens of the Peninsula. Risks, hazards, dangers on all sides. Fired on by militants and the Sea Tigers; planes and helicopters have plummeted into the waters of the ocean. No survivors. Or again, our boat could be fired on by naval vessels on suspicion that the ordinary citizens provide a blind for the guerrilla.

At the moment there is only one preoccupation in our minds. A total and absolute concern with our own survival. We have to be put to the test to discover whether we care about each other. We either make the crossing. Or don't. Perhaps we may this time. Fate. Destiny. Life. Death. Exchange my life for that of the other? Sometimes I have hallucinations. I see the man with the black mask. His body in a black diving suit leaps into our boat from another vessel and with a sharp bladed knife slashes at our throats. Death at sea. An empty boat left, bobbing on the waves. Death on land. In the jungles. The Border villages. Hacked to death. Shot. Mass graves. Burned houses. Ashes. The dead and the groans of the dying fill my mind. On either side. Laid out like dead fish. Obsessions. How much longer will this journey last?

Mind goes back to the campus in the South. Conversations with the

others in the Hall of Residence. Ananda, Sandun Raj Kumar, myself. Some of the Sinhala students are radicals. They try to understand the reasons for this conflict. Try to see our point of view. What is unacceptable to them is when the massacres occur in those remote border villages.

'Innocent people, no, machan? Women and children too. Hacking. Shooting. Burning their huts. Poor people, no?' Sandun observes.

'Reprisal killings too,' I interject.

'And the suicide bombers? The cyanide capsules?' Ananda questions.

'That's because they are fighting for a cause they believe in, not because they are unemployed youth, no chances for a better life, our village boys ...' Sandun persists 'Not that patriotism doesn't come into it. Before the soldiers go on their forays they are exalted by their commanders. "You are the heroes of the hour. Brave soldiers. Fighting to protect your motherland. Don't have any fears that you fight alone. We will follow, be with you", but your Boy's are fighting for a separate Homeland in the North and East ... yet you come and live among us in the South'.

Sometimes theories override explanations. The theory that the island will become a vassal of the subcontinent. We are surrounded by theories. They grow as thick as trees around us. Saplings sprouting up among the hoary old veterans. Most of my colleagues are highly politicised. With the exception of Ananda. Sometimes he says he wants to give up his studies and ambitions to become an engineer. Wants to become a bhikku. Things happen on the campus too. Ragging. Really extreme. A form of torture? Testing? There are some who say that the subversives, the Radical political parties are looking out for recruits for their Movement. The likely ones are those who do not break under the ragging, the physical the mental degradation and abasement they're subjected to. Strange though, even our people from the North do not abstain from ragging. Sometimes they are even more brutal in their methods. Power. That's how I see it. Gives some people pleasure to see others cringe beneath the whip.

My mind goes back to my room in the Hall of Residence. I share it with Ananda. My comrades – and here we do not drag the cumbersome baggage of identity – have been through their own struggles. Took place before I entered the campus. I listen. To their whisperings about the disappearances during the insurrection. The arrests. The detention camps. Torture and killings, the remains of bodies exhumed from the mass graves, shreds of cloth, bones, skulls. Many of the witnesses are still alive. Question. Answer. The aftermath. Recounting. Recounting. The beating to death with iron rods, the tyre burnings. An eye for an eye. A tooth for a tooth. I give ear to them. We don't belong to different camps here. But they're curious about our coming and going. The North is a closed world to them. The terrain is only familiar to armies of occupation. They know that we make our journeys, use different routes.



'Machan, how do you get across?'

'You cross the lagoon, no?' Sandun asks.

'Fishing boats, motor boats ...' I don't disclose too much.

'Tigers also come to the South, no? Others – how do all these suicide bombers operate? And you, how did you manage to keep out of the Movement ... they come to the schools to recruit their cadres, don't they?' Sandun is the most persistent questioner, always. I begin to feel caged. Too much interrogation.

Ananda usually comes to the rescue.

'When you come to the South, we see you as another colleague. Not as a Tiger. A koti. You're like the man who builds a raft to cross the sea of samsara,' he continues.

'Ah, bana preaching'. Sandun lolls on the bed clad in his sarong, drinking a mug of plain tea. Barebodied, relaxed. Sandun's eldest brother was arrested. Disappeared during the uprising of '89. His mother still believes he may be alive somewhere and will return home one day. Perhaps still locked away in an underground prison.

Ananda has not been deterred by the interruption.

'The man builds his own raft. Uses grass, wood, branches and leaves. Gets across. But he's got to leave it behind once he has crossed from this shore to that. From danger to safety. Can't carry the raft on his shoulders. Can't get too attached to it, to change too ... leave all that hatred behind.'

That's the way Ananda sees it. Or else he could not accept me; he has to see me as one who is no longer 'the other', living among them. He doesn't hate me. Nor do I see him as the enemy. I can't recognize myself for what I am ... but within myself I know how divided I am.

I think of my father and younger sister in Nallur. My father was once a wealthy business man. Dealing in gold. He had craftsmen working for him, creating traditional jewellery for every occasion, birth, attaining age, betrothals, marriage. All that had to be given up. We are now being supported by our brother who has sought political asylum in Switzerland. My sister weeps when she sees me. She feels so insecure, living alone with only my father. He too is now her responsibility. My mother had an untimely death. She never recovered from an attack of asthma. The necessary drugs and hospital treatment were not available to save her life. She was only in her early forties when she passed away.

When I go back to the North, to my home in Nallur, my father and sister know some measure of happiness. My sister cooks what she thinks I like and we share our simple meals by the light of a small oil lamp set on the table when dusk falls. There hasn't been electricity in the Peninsula for some years now. We use every bit of available light, rising early, at dawn. Even light is a resource to be utilized and conserved these days.

The chugging of the motor boat slows down. We are close to

Alangkerni, our point of disembarkation. Once more we have to step out of the boat into the water and wade to the shore. The landscape here is nothing but sand, sand, sand. There are others too who are waiting in scattered groups, resting for a while before the next lap of the journey. We have accomplished one part, the most important so far, in our crossing. Those who sit and wait for the tractor to arrive wear a patient and resigned expression on their faces. We bide our time. The woman whom I seem to have recognized in the boat appears to have vanished into a kovil that I glimpse before me. I had helped her out of the boat, her teeth were chattering with cold, her clothes clung wet to her body. We will all meet later on in the tractor. No other way to travel across this sandy waste. Sometimes there are as many as fifty people in it. All of us are wet to the skin. We have got to get to Omanthai from Alangkerni and from thence to Vavuniya, a three kilometre walk. The tractor journey takes about fifteen minutes. There are checkpoints to be gone through along the way. Militants on one side. Security Forces on the other. Once we reach Vavuniya we can take a bus or train to continue on our way to the South. It is only in Vavuniya that we can get any refreshments to assuage our hunger or thirst.

But here in this expanse of sand, it is all wasteland. A desert without hope of either oasis or mirage. No vegetation to inspire any kind of philosophy. A nullified, negated existence. Even a solitary cactus would offer some kind of symbol. Some kind of landmark of significance to the lost and solitary traveller. There's this temptation to give in. Stop here. Bury yourself in the timeless tumulus of sand. Let the sand cover you. Close your eyes. Sink into a hollow ... an eternal sleep.

But no the journey must continue. The raft, the boat in which I have travelled has served part of its purpose. I have used it as the voyager, whom Ananda spoke of, on the samsaric ocean of life but I have yet to fulfil the obligations towards those among whom I will live in the South. 'Leave all feelings of enmity behind and come as a human being to this side'. There will be other journeys. I do not know what impediments I am still to encounter on the way but firstly I've got to leave all this hatred behind.

We've got to listen to each other's grievances. For the moment I think mechanically in terms of movement, movement, movement – mini-bus, boat, tractor, mini-bus ... checkpoints which open flaps in the body, in the mind, with eyes, eyes of strangers that peer into the complex nerve structure within me. Sometimes through fear those conduits and arteries either race with a molten stream of blood or grow sluggish, forming a turgid pool.

Memory recurs. My sister's tearstained face in the faint glimmer of an uncertain and wavering flame, shadowed grotesquely. The lines of age on my father's sagging brow. Deep furrows etched like some archaic script for me to decipher on its surface. An old man. A young girl. Sharing a

life. Half of it spent in darkness. Half alive too.

Where is home, then, the true home, except in memory. Homes, that one day, will be empty of even our shadows.

My mind lapses into a wasteland too, with no recognizable landmarks in the uniformity of the shape of grains of sand, pebbles. Crushed over and over again by tractor wheels.

The stretch of water I have crossed separates my double lives. My double roles. Yet I cannot renounce either of them. I travel with my double identity but as I journey nearer South, I shall assume the one which will enable me to live with others. How can I say 'not of my own kind'? We share the same lineaments. Yet we are divided. Does anyone question the reasons for killings, the weight of history behind each of them?

I rub my skin absentmindedly, still feeling the saltiness of the briny water stinging those innumerable bruises as well as the slight scratches and tears, the surface lesions that abrade the skin on the boat journey. The pain somehow makes the senses more alert. Ah, what if bridges spanned that expanse of water? As a student of engineering I am always thinking of construction. I have been taught the ways to construct things that will endure. That are meant to endure unless the elements overcome the puny endeavours we make, or war destroys them. Routes that will lead to destinations. For whoever wants to make that journey – for the ordinary traveller, for the pilgrim, for the soldier, for the militant, the guerrilla, the terrorist. I see no distinction in each one except in the imperatives of the mission. Unless they are so overcome by the forces of evil that the malformations of hatred light up those crazed expressions. I cannot predict the end result of either the individual journey or the individual mission. Victory? Defeat? Holocausts, engendered out of unresolvable conflict? In this desert land all man-made construction is laid aside.

Whatever existed in the past, whatever we thought real, takes on the illusion of that longed-for mirage to erase out the emptiness. We seek even within the thought of that illusion the memory of that raft, that boat, the tractor, the mini-bus to carry out that endless journey. If nothing exists any longer we will walk, walk, walk however many miles are required of us, through a trackless pathway. Then we reach reality but by then that reality has lost all significance. We have lived most fully only within those moments of danger in the crossing. The wasteland too has its risks and hazards. When the peace negotiations failed Suresh and the others were off-loaded from the tractor and asked to run for their lives as the planes came over like a covey of birds.

All my intricate drawings, those notes in my file, the drawings in the lecture rooms on the whiteboards, of what use are they to us now? I have drawn with the most meticulous care, mathematically calculated, those routes, the roads, bridges, tunnels, like the blueprints of architects. To

build those soaring towers and solid structures.

Bridges will be blown up. Roadways mined. Those huge concrete structures cave in with the violent explosions that rock them. Glass splinters blind the eyes, sever necks and leave decapitated truncated bodies. Bodies buried in debris. A mutilated landscape. Bodies mutilated and crushed beyond recognition.

There's a church somewhere or other, they say. At Kilaly, where we began the crossing. A miracle had taken place in that spot during the occupation of the Portuguese invaders in the North. Long, long ago. Sixteenth century. One of the generals, one of our own kind, fighting on the side of the Portuguese forces was on a march with his band of troops. March? What kind of march? To attack his own kind? He was weary. So the story goes. Took some time off to rest and fell asleep. Beneath a tree. Dreamed a dream. A warning dream of an ambush. Forewarning. If he proceeded along a certain route he and his men would be annihilated. In his dream a saint, was it Sebastian, appeared to him and indicated that there at the very spot buried deep in the soil was a miraculous statue of a saint. Together with sacred relics. When the General awoke, he related the dream to his men. They unearthed the statue and the relics. He left his uniform and gear and took another route and ambushed the others, his own kind. A traitor? To commemorate the escape from certain death, a church was eventually built at that very spot by the General's family.

Until these troubled times came upon this land centuries later, long after the Portuguese power had been violently dislodged by the Dutch invaders and then again, the Dutch by the Imperial power of the British, the statue and the sacred relics were taken in procession at the annual church Feasts. The statue remained in the church. The older folk recounted the legend of the dream to us when they spoke of the crossing which began at Kilaly. The family had moved to the capital of the island long ago. They would never now return. The church is probably in ruins. The relics may still be in the possession of the General's descendants. And the statue? Ambushes are a common occurrence now. There is this talk though, which I hear, carried through the grapevine that the forces that have moved up to the North carry sacred words from the Bible before they go on their forays, sacred words that will protect them. There's this legend that a particular battalion which carries these words has the least losses. Must be like our sacred mantras. 'Om'. I say to myself too. 'Om'. Perhaps unconsciously the sacred mantra is embedded in my mind for protection.

No there was no church in sight. The landscape was enshrouded in darkness at any rate. There were other churches too in Kilaly. Built centuries before. But the pews were for the higher castes. The lesser in hierarchy had to sit on the floor. No such inequalities are followed in the boats or the tractor. Here at this moment, as we feel the press of bodies until every lurch, jerk and jolt, the wedged in bodies provide us with a

sense of security. A shared humanity.

At one point of the journey we had paused to rest briefly. I had seen my friend's mother slip into a kovil. I lost sight of her at that point. Who knows when, if ever, I will see her again? When we reach, finally, the South? Such encounters do take place, sometimes.

From Omanthai I prepare to walk to Vavuniya. It is something we must all do. It is a distance of three kilometres until we reach the main road and take a conveyance in which we travel to the South. But first, the checkpoints ... Ananda's raft has brought me on the most important stage of my journey. I leave that raft on the shore, continue the journey as a new being, a human one, leaving whatever hatred I have behind? Before the huge expected exodus begins where the millions will be enveloped in the dust of their own footsteps or be crushed to death. And when they arrive at the expanse of water, what raft will carry them across?

## The Crossing. II

WOMAN:

My clothes clung to my body. Wet with the water of the lagoon. The pink satin underskirt was like fishskin against my limbs. Slithery with smoothed down scales. Fish. Is my body undergoing some form of metamorphosis? Myths and legends surface in my mind. I have emerged from the lagoon, from the boat that has carried me to this point. From Kilaly to Alangkerni I have to disembark for the next lap of my journey. Fish. Recollections of fish struggling on the shore as the fishermen pile them on the sand, flung from their wide nets. And turtles too, lying upturned, the flesh within the cave-like shells, exposed to the sharp knives of slaughter. Clustering in my mind, images, their nebulous shapes floating, surging, fish shoals beneath the surface of the waters. Remembered myths, symbols, emerge from buried and hidden recesses of consciousness. Fish. Womb. The Yoni. Ancient source of birth, rebirth, regeneration. Words, phrases, stir in memory. Other tongues. Vesica Piscis. The vessel of the fish. The womb of Mary that bears the Christ Child. Ichthys? Greek word. Fish? Representing Christ? Fish. Feel their swirling movement against my body. My clothes wet, soaked. Smell of fish. My nostrils flare. Whiff of lagoon water. I must change into dry clothes ... but where? I take a few steps, apart, from the rest of the travellers who have alighted from the boat. Walk almost blindly along the sands, stumbling and half dazed. Fish. Hardly human. Wish I can slip back into the waters of the lagoon. Submerge myself in the waves.

I see a kovil. Enclosed in silence it appears to be empty of humans. Perhaps here I can change into dry clothes before I join the others for the next stage of our journey out of the North. Out of the Peninsula. I walk

towards the kovil. I push open the doors. I have to use some physical effort to do so. The doors are of carved, heavy wood. Fortunately for me, they have not been padlocked. My sandals, which I carry in my hands, are soaked and sodden, with grains of sand adhering to their soles. I place the sandals on one side of the entrance. I enter barefoot into the cool, womb like darkness. The stone flagged floor is smooth beneath my blistered feet. A strange feeling, some unknown emotion enters within me. I feel I enter into the body, the house of deities. The worshippers must now be few and far between but this is still the habitation of those sacred deities. The spirit of bhakthi, of love, pervades it.

The fragrance of camphor and incense clings to the walls. The feeling of bhakthi. Palpable. Feel it. A breath of wind, stirring within me, waiting for me to summon it forth. Buried. Deep in my innermost being. The psyche. Yet breathing. Still alive. Like the memory of the Golden Man in the ancient temples.

Older than time. The Golden Man. Where did I hear of him? From the stories of my grandfather, who heard it from his forebears. The Golden Man, the effigy of the ancient sacrificer in Vedic times. His breath emerging through the perforations of stone to reach the sky vault. His figure placed in a certain direction. His head towards the East and the sunrise. Buried thoughts. Feelings. Emotions. Surfacing in my mind. The fish. The Golden Man. Shiva-Shakthi. The Great Mother of the Universe. Also Kali, Durga. Goddess. Warrior. Creator. Preserver. Destroyer. Durga. Mother love. Maternal feelings and instincts. Protecting her young. Motherhood. The journey taken for that purpose. Why the Golden Man too? Gold will never perish. I still preserve the small amounts of gold I possess. The gold that decked me as a bride. I am a Christian yet I too had a dowry of gold. Inherited heirlooms. Brides adorned with gold, sit on the manaverai. But not the young women who now fight for The Cause. The warriors. For whom there is now a new kind of chastity. The gun is their symbol of both power and martyrdom. Gold. Gold sovereigns. We pay the gold sovereigns to purchase a life or even a passage from the North. There are different taxes. We comply. If we want to live.

The kovil. Temporary halting place for a transient like myself. For others too perhaps. This was the first time I was leaving the North in this manner, crossing by boat. Across the lagoon. In the past I had taken a train or bus. Special air-conditioned buses with piped-in music to enliven the journey out of the Peninsula. I had always passed through those familiar landmarks until, after all the predictable stops and changes, we reached the South of the island. Used to be such a long journey. We would take food wrapped in plantain leaf – red rice, stringhoppers, vegetables, fried fish, fish curry, a container of sodhi flavoured with dill seed to assuage our hunger. In the baskets woven from dried palmyrah frond. There were thermos flasks of hot coriander flavoured coffee and

bottles of drinking water from our wells, cooled in clay pots. And for our friends and relations in the South, the fruits and vegetables culled from our gardens - the different varieties of mangoes, nectar sweet when ripe, hand plucked from laden branches. Bundles of murunga with their tender flesh; odial kelengu, the crisp, hard and fibrous dried palmyrah root which we could break off into pieces like dried stick and crunch between the teeth, tiny woven baskets of jaggery made of palmyrah juice, the dark brown particles moulded into the plaited strips adding to that distinct flavour. Curd pots too. Gold jewellery crafted by the family goldsmith. I would sit by the window of the compartment watching the changing colours of the terrain, white, sandy dunes of Chavakachcheri giving way to the red earth of Chunnakam; palmyrah groves, their tall, straight palms with flourishing crests of fronds. Clusters of palmryah fruits, dark brown, like polished mahogany, shading into a golden yellow. The palmryah palm. Part of a familiar landscape. The 'Kalpa tree' - Tree of Life. Transplanted from Paradise to earth by Brahama directed by Shiva; 'Eight hundred and one uses'. A familiar landscape and one I could return to at will then, in the past; laden mango trees; vegetable and tobacco plots; the kovils and kerneys; the wellsweeps and the farmers working on their land in the early morning light before the hot sun came up. Scorching their bodies, scorching the earth; herds of goats wandering about searching for grass and leaves, fences made of the huge fan like fronds of dried palmyrah, the murunga trees with feathery branches. Like delicate green filigree. Murungas dangling their thick green whips. The past. All that was in the past. Reach the southern boundary of the Peninsula. Elephant Pass where once the elephants crossed the ford. Elephant herds from the mainland. To eat of the ripening palmyrah fruit that grew on the other side of the estuary. I remember the glistening white salterns and the old Dutch fort in the distance, converted into a resthouse, the waters of the ocean lapping the sides of the walls. Forts - this and others which are at close proximity to each other. Reminders of a different kind of conquest when the Dutch were in power ... now we have to take alternate routes out of the Peninsula.

My eyes, after the brilliance of the sun outside, take some time to focus their gaze in the darkness within to my surroundings. As I look round the temple I feel a great silence envelops me. I divest myself of all mundane thoughts such as changing my wet clothes and taking dry ones out of my small bundle of belongings. It is strange that no one else has followed me into the kovil. The others do not seem to mind the discomfort. Although I am wet and shivering, my throat is parched with thirst. I look at a single coconut in a corner of the kovil and wish I could drink of the water within it, search for the sharp blade that will crack it ... a single coconut brought for a pooja that was to be performed by the priest in attendance. Where was he anyway? The priest? The place was empty of any other human being but myself.

I pause to think of where I am. I have some time to be by myself. My jewels? My money? I have taken precautions. They have been secreted away in little pockets sewn into my bodice. These few things that are of some value to me are still intact. I need to purchase food, drink, tickets for travelling to the South.

I am a Christian but a place of worship whether it be the kovil or the church will always be sanctuary. The deities surround me here, so a part of my sense of loneliness begins to disperse. What is it that the believer comes in search of here? Moksha? The realization of the Absolute? Or to fulfil a vow? Or to pay penance for wrongdoing?

I myself am aware that I have several tasks to fulfil before I attain peace. For me, as a Christian, the path to salvation is one that is fraught with suffering; I see Christ as the Good Shepherd. Myself the lost sheep ... yet ancient racial memories arise within me. When I look upon the face of Shakthi, Dewi, the Great Mother, I think of my own motherhood which draws me on to endure all suffering on this journey. It is this great desire to see my younger son who lives and studies in the South and to be with him, look after him, to be re-united with him. My maternal instincts grow stronger with each step I take. I wish I could make an offering to Shakthi, the Great Mother. I know that I am not the only mother who does so, for the safety and protection of their sons, many of whom they will never see again. Both sons and daughters. For them, it is sometimes not the taste of nectar of the gods but of the cyanide capsule they bite on.

Each one of us has an individual mission. I know what mine is. But those young people, those whose bodies become the live explosions? Their missions become historical. Their names are sometimes a matter for conjecture but the act is recorded for all time. Then it is that the Great Mother becomes Kali, Kali the Destroyer who devours all existence. In the South too. Outside the Peninsula. In those remote villages where both mothers and their children die, hacked to death ... poojas ... for whom then? Avenging reprisals ...? In war is there all loss of humanity?

There is no one here, in this kovil to chant the Sanskrit slokas for the poojas. I would have listened as I used to, to the church litany and drawing comfort from that sacred chanting. No worshippers to sing thevarams. All I do is to sing, very softly, beneath my breath, hymns to the deity I worship. Stanzas, lines, words which share the same emotion of bhakthi. True, the deities were here, long, long ago. Before the Christian missionaries brought the worship of a Christian Saviour to the North. My own people were proselytised by them, yet I feel no sense of division, for within this temple, I attain the same kind of realization that the worshipper within a sacred sanctuary comes upon. That I too can become one with the Divine, with Dewi, with Shakthi, with the Great, the Universal Mother.

In the dim half-light of the temple, an invisible lamp seems to glow. I



do not know from what source the flame begins to glimmer unless it is the memory of flames that once burned brightly in the tiered brass lamps. But a strange glow illuminates the faces and limbs of the deities so that they are no longer concealed in darkness. They appear almost to breathe, to be gazing at me. I feel they are alive, yet their expressions possess a calmness and stillness devoid of the turmoil, the sadness and pain I had observed on the faces of my fellow travellers in the boat. The deities are silent yet they appear to be listening to the echoes of the chanting of Sanskrit slokas and singing of the thevarams whose memory clings to the walls of this temporary sanctuary. I try to learn, even at this stage of my life, something from them. In the churches where I worship I have gazed long upon the face of a crucified Christ who bears on his head a crown of thorns, whose hands and feet are nailed to the Cross. I gazed at the agony of the Mother of Christ, the Agony of the Pieta. My mind fills with emotions of pain, agony, sin, penance. Hope lies only in the thought of the Resurrection and of the knowledge that a living Christ walked with us in all our travails. The Christian missionaries imparted those messages to my people from churches which had been built by colonizers and conquerors. The pulpits were the pulpits of a different kind of conquest. Earthly conquest. Temporal power. The conquerors had invaded this land but the invasions had been for a limited space of time. Now we read historical documents to gain knowledge of their tenure. Wonder what kind of sermons they preached. All ghosts those preachers. Where I am concerned the Peninsula is my home but I go to the South. My return will perhaps never be assured. My home may remain empty, the rooms echo with hollowness but I make no predictions.

I am just one speck, one dot in this vast desert. If my life is snuffed out there will only be a few left to mourn my once existence. Everyone who has lived here, in the Peninsula, has known grief and loss. As they have in the South too. Those mothers in the South, do they even have the mortal remains of their sons for burial? But death makes heroes of the ordinary man, the man who would have been a farmer or perhaps a student. Heroic speeches are made to stir up the patriotic emotions of those who go out to battle and then we see the dead, the maimed, the mutilated. We see the rows so neatly laid out, of sprawling bodies with the grimace of death on their faces ... and we forget, except for those who have lost a son, a daughter who has meant everything to them – father, brother, son, daughter ... there are posters in the Peninsula to remind us of the martyrs. And in the South? When I go there, I will perhaps discover other names on white flags and banners. Where are some of those bodies? Lost in the depths of the ocean, boats mined and sunk in the deep, helicopters and planes shot down with their irretrievable cargo of humans.

The highways and byways mined. My consciousness becomes a crater which swallows up all thought of those deaths, burying them deep, deep

within its very depths to surface only in nightmares. I shudder for an instant. My two sons are not militants. They are ordinary young men although I do not know what thoughts they harbour in this struggle for a separate Homeland. My younger son has somehow managed to study, pass his examinations, enter a campus in the South, follow an Honours course in Engineering, win a coveted Class in his degree, become an assistant lecturer in the Faculty. What if he had been like one of those who had to bite on cyanide capsules at so young an age? Who prefer death to arrest and interrogation? Sacrifice. Isn't it part of all our religions? They say so much about these suicide bombers who detonate themselves? What if I had a daughter? What if she had joined the movement? The young girls too have broken away from all the constraints imposed on them by tradition. There are regiments of women. There are the suicide bombers. There are the Sea Tigers. Women now fulfil different roles. Yet they are someone's children. They have parents. They have suckled from the breasts of their mothers ... we have to try to understand them, their missions, their sacrifice of life, of youth ... we have to try to understand why such choices are made. We have to question ourselves. Why someone else's child and not mine? But within this space of time in which my thoughts wander endlessly, exploring different routes, alternate routes of the mind, my life has undergone a sea change. For perhaps the first time in my life since this war began, a sense of peace steals over me as I stand here, feeling the ancient rites which have permeated every part of this abode as well as my whole mind, spirit and body, reaching the core of my inner being.

I have forgotten that I entered into this kovil feeling a sense of self-pity, so chilled to the bone as if mortal rigors had overcome me. I have to change my wet clothes before I emerge to continue along the land route. Wouldn't it be an act of sacrilege to change before the gaze of the deities? What could I do? What shall I do? Find the darkest shadowed corner, conceal myself behind a pillar and unwrap the folds of my sari in such a way that nothing of my flesh would be seen? Wearing all these clothes, arranging each pleat and fold meticulously, I realize how constricting they have been all my life. Especially when I had to step off the sandy verge of the lagoon, wade shoulder high through the water for about a hundred yards and when I reached the rocking boat throw my cloth bundle into it; after which I clambered in with the others as best I could, clinging first onto the edge and then being helped in by willing hands. There was no other way for us travellers to reach a desired destination. Not at a time like this.

A time of war. Some of the travellers carry their possessions, bags, suitcases, baskets, on their heads. Others tuck up their clothes as high as they can, even draping their veshtis on their shoulders but that doesn't prevent our bodies from being soaked. I've made the wrong choice. Now, as I look around at the deities, I remember the great temple festival at

Nallur when they are all decked out in silks, satins, velvets and brocades embellished with silver and gold, gem encrusted padakkams, heavy gold chains, sovereigns dangling from every inch of their bodies, garland upon garland of fragrant flowers round their necks. Towards the end of the festival, they are taken out in the chariot, along the temple veedhi, the precincts which represent the real world to them. A refreshing airing out of the incense and camphor filled sanctum, their ears assailed by the incessant pleading of the penitents. Hasn't their view of the real world changed after the wars, the invasions, the occupations? Once, the penitent paid his vows and penance, rolling and rolling his body along the temple veedhi, clothed only in veshti, barebodied, limbs coated with the white dust stirred up by that movement. At his side stood the patient and silent comforter. Will that veedhi one day be empty of all worshippers? Who will blow the conch to echo over the deserted plains. And the ancient rites and rituals? Who will perform them? The gods will remain within their sanctum and perhaps the echoes of the slokas will still remain within it. But till then who will carry the pooja trays to them in a ghost town where shells rain down like bursts of lethal fireworks, where the bombs fall and the exodus begins, as someday it will. Perhaps an ancient poosari will remain to help the new conquerors to carry out the rites and rituals which they too believe in, sacred rites that still have significance to these warriors. And ourselves? We can only live from day to day. We predict time through light, through dark. Dawn. Midday. Dusk. Nightfall. And the passing of the seasons. The seasons of drought and rain. We keep moving. The guerrillas keep moving. They operate from the thick jungles. They have their hideouts, their strongholds, their underground networks. Everybody is constantly moving, within the Peninsula and out of the Peninsula. But the deities remain. Will always remain. Haven't moved off to Kailasa. Their ears are now accustomed to more than the chanting of the slokas. The bursting of the shells reverberate like the conches of the past to announce the commencement of each new battle ... but the deities are still the guardians of this land. They do not make the same crossings as we do, their garments drenched in the waters of the lagoon but the worshippers still carry them in the chariots of their hearts. Bombs fall on churches, kovils. Walls shattered by shells, but those whom we worship remain in spirit. Perhaps their presence even in the ruins are a solace to those who are left behind. For me, now, this kovil is a place of refuge. The face of Shakthi engenders in me a feeling of power. Shakthi. The Mother of the Universe. The Mother of all creation. But there are two poojas for her. Durga pooja. Kali pooja. Terrifying image of her. Stamping on the symbol of evil, a wreath of the heads of the giants she had slain and a string of skulls round her neck. These are the images that the believer bears. Life. Death. For me it is Shakthi's image as the Universal Mother who reminds me so forcibly of my own instincts of motherhood, that impels my journey to the South.

Now that we have to move away from the well tried paths and the convenient routes, the familiar passage which impedes our journey with obstructions and obstacles we have no other alternative but to find our way out. Somehow war transforms the safe road. It is now fraught with all kinds of dangers visible and invisible but we travel along it. There are no alternatives to reach a desired destination.

My mind turns to those biblical times when the waters of the Red Sea parted for the Israelites to make a passage to the other side ... 'Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea; and the Lord caused the sea to go back by a strong East wind all that night, and made the sea into dry land, and the waters were divided. So the children of Israel went into the midst of the sea on the dry ground and waters were a wall to them on their right hand and on their left ...' But it has not been an exodus for us, not yet. Perhaps very soon, that event will take place. Perhaps the crossing is an intimation of what will come to pass. I leave one son, a daughter-in-law, a grandchild, behind. I leave my home behind. I hope to return one day but the question I ask myself now is where do I really belong? We have the *de facto* rule of the militants in the Peninsula. My son remains in the South like many others whose homes are in the North but returns to see me. Does that make me a renegade when I want to leave my home in this manner, take the crossing? An illegal crossing. Though physically I belong to this terrain, I have to make this journey with all its attendant risks and hazards. Let me survive for as long as the time allotted to me. I have come through one part of the journey. The waters did not part for the passage of our boat but I reached somehow, dry land. This time, there was no drowning, no death at sea. I am not the only one, by no means the only one to brave this crossing. We who make our journeys must brave fire and ice, ocean and desert, whether it be here, in our own terrain or elsewhere in a far country where the millions of asylum seekers and refugees from their own war-torn zones trek into an unknown future. Many will never reach the Canaan land. Perish they will on the way. Bodies piled into mass graves. Frozen. Suffocated. Arrested. Deported. There is now no country which can be called Home if you become a perpetual wanderer on the face of the earth. I haven't moved out of this island ever but now I feel I have. Within this one country, two exist, one of them engendered by new imperatives, historical imperatives. We are divided by these forces. Too late to efface them. The conflict grows daily into monstrous proportions. Death and displacement are the inevitable results. Will the chasm be closed in one day by the piled up bodies of the dead?

Even a simple journey, which in the past needed no new philosophies yields such self-interrogation? Is it because I have been a teacher of history who always felt that I must question even the ready made answers and interpretations provided by the research of other scholars? Life in the past centred round journeys which were easy to take – family

reunions, marriages, births, death. When we were summoned, we went. No one looked upon us as if we were a different breed of people. Now we have to re-examine, re-assess our identities and ask ourselves the questions about those first beginnings – inroads, incursions and invasions and how we even arrived here. The documentation lies in those history books from which I myself once taught ... are we descended from those first colonizers from the sub-continent? Were those same colonizers responsible for the collapse of ancient civilizations and the drift to the South West of the island? Did the invader become one with the invaded? The conqueror with the conquered? The subjugator with the subjugated? Or will ancient grudges always remain? Submission is not easy for anyone to accept. To be under the yoke. 'Sub iugum', as I learned in my Latin class from the missionaries. To be sent under the yoke? The young anywhere in the world will not accept it. Have they been taught that all people other than themselves are seen as 'the enemy'. Each one calls the other, enemy. Displacement. Alternative routes. Departures. These new journeys must take place. We have to move from the North to the South to see our children set out on their own journeys as asylum seekers. But not our people alone. Others too. Their motives may differ. But for the moment we will seek out, in spite of all obstructions, the route to where we want to go. Towards that desired destination. The ordinary journey now ceases to be a commonplace, everyday fact of life. The journey becomes a mission. Just as the mission undertaken by the man who sets the ambush or the man who on his individual mission is caught in that ambush.

No names. Anonymous people. After capture, aliases. Women. Sea Tigers. Martial women. Women in battle. Nothing new. Throughout history armies of the past had women fighting side by side with the men. Armed women. Bearing swords. Uttering magical battlecries. Struck terror into the hearts of the enemy. The Bible. Book of Judges. Barak's army with its ten thousand men. Refused to go into battle without Deborah the prophetess. Wife of Lapidoth. To her Barak had spoken those words. 'If thou wilt go with me, then will I go: but if thou wilt not go with me, then will I not go'. And Deborah went with Barak to Kadesh. Gave him knowledge that the hour was right for battle. Defeated Sisera who fled, his men all put to the sword. What an end for Sisera with his nine hundred chariots of iron ... taking shelter in Jael's tent, she gave the battle weary Sisera a drink of milk ... fell fast asleep ... drove a nail into his temples ... fastened it to the ground ... Think of the young women in the movement in the Peninsula ... joined the armed struggle ... no distinction between men and women fighters, dressed in battle fatigues, shorn of their wealth of hair, forehead adorned not with red kum kum but with blood, embrace the gun ... not a man ... the new women generated by war ... the traditional roles ... wives ... mothers ... rituals ceremonies of marriage ... not for them ... round their necks, the

thali, that marriage bond ... no, no, wear instead a kuppi bearing a cyanide capsule ... bite into it ... when they have no other recourse ... sacrifice, sacrifice, ... death, martyrdom ... both sides ... when will there be reconciliation? Eyes that envision the tombs of the dead ... the vermilion silk marriage saris spill from the hands of their mothers ... streaming like blood in the supplicating hands.

And when I was young? Years and years before I became a woman of austere habits after the death of my husband. I wonder what I would have made of my life in these times, if I was a young woman? Probably widowed or in exile. Up to now I have stayed behind. Because my two sons remain here. I must go to one of them. I conceal myself in the darkest niche, hidden in the shadows. I begin to shed the garments that have clothed me for the lagoon crossing but as I do so a strange force takes over my body. I feel my flesh being transmuted into another substance. One other than this mortal flesh. The substance of which Shakthi's image is composed. I seem to share the same breath. I had become one with her. I would share her power. Even her name. Born out of this calamitous journey. I felt that the deities in this sanctuary had taken me in, accepted me, made me feel at home. It did not matter to me that there was no one to carry the pooja trays. They would return, the worshippers. I had lost, forgotten, my mortal hunger and thirst. I no longer needed fruit or nectar to keep me alive. The fragrance of those past rituals still lingered, the staling scent of a few flowers, now withered but no, there was no longer need for any of these things. The rites and rituals had taken place many times over and this was so sacred a place that my ordinary flesh and blood body had miraculously changed. I had come inside quite light-headed with exhaustion and hunger. I had thought of the white flesh of the coconut kernel, the coconut water that had poured from it, the ripe combs of plantains, the feel of silky hibiscus flowers against my fingers. Now everything had changed. I seemed to have become one of them. My hunger and thirst vanished. I heard a voice travelling from very near, soft, speaking in syllables that I could faintly understand, not the language of ordinary speech which human beings used in their raucous interchanges but the language in which the priest addressed the deities. I had to translate it, through my mind and imagination into that which could be comprehended for now we shared the same breath although I was the newly born one and they were the ancient, ancient deities. I was no intruder here. I was welcome.

'Make yourself at home within this sanctuary. We understand you are after a long journey. To us you have travelled through time, through memory, to reach us. We can create a space for you too here. Sometimes travellers enter and search for a plantain or two or even a little of the sacrificial offerings of milk in the vessels. The worshippers come seldom now yet they remain and when they come it is not empty-handed. People cannot forget their deities even in a time of war'.

I touched my body. The tremors that had shaken my limbs seemed to have passed. It was as if invisible hands had very gently unwrapped my wet clothes and out of the bundles I carried, taken out fresh, dry clothes which covered me. The wet clothes, still dripping with water lay humped about my feet. The money I carried with me was sewn in little pockets in my underclothes. Would I still need it? I wondered. I looked up at the faces of the goddesses. Which one had been speaking to me? Was it Shakthi, the consort of Shiva? They would belong to time without an age here. No hazardous journeys for them across the lagoon in a boat which at any moment might capsize, sink from either being overloaded or attacked. These journeys were not peacetime journeys. What patience they had cultivated day after day, month after month, year after year while the penitents themselves grew old and died; while the priests and poosaries changed. The slokas never changed, only the human voices that chanted them.

They were watching me, all of them. I did not importune them for anything for I did not feel myself a penitent. What a feeling of peace and tranquillity filled my spirit and yet did I not have my own God to turn to? And what about the rest of my journey? 'Take up your abode here', the voice continued. 'No shells fall here. You will be safe. There are no mines laid where you stand, take a few steps, walk towards that niche that stands empty and remain there for all time'. The idea was tempting to remain here, a deity among the divine. This was familiar landscape to me. I had known so much human suffering, widowed young, bringing up two sons alone, shells falling on the house. In fact one day the shells had landed on the roof of the house but fortunately the room in which we usually slept and had taken refuge in, escaped. When we found food we ate. Sometimes we would all rush to the church to take refuge. Ah, yes, I know the deities too are taken into the outer world at certain seasons, during the times of the ritual ceremonies. They too are accustomed to the sounds of battle. Yet, they endure. Always. They will always endure.

But time passes. I have to make my decisions. I had prepared myself in a different way to face the hazards of the crossing. I had first to prepare my mind and then my body to face it. Age did not matter. The aged ones, the ancient ones climb Adam's Peak in their pilgrimage for that is the Sacred Mountain where the Buddha has placed the impress of his foot. It is the inner strength of faith and belief that sustains each one of them. Here it is the passage through water, arid plain, jungle and the journey to the South. And my son at the end of it. Will he miss me if he never sees me again? But he is young. He will continue to live his life.

'Stay' the voice says, 'stay with us'. I stoop to pick up my clothes. My limbs feel warm. I have stopped shivering with cold. I feel a different kind of life flowing through my body. I am human again but I have a strange new strength to carry me through the next stage and the next and

the next of my journey as I walk out into the starkness of white sunlight and white sand.

#### GLOSSARY

- p. 107 vallam – Tamil word for fishing boat
- p. 111 urea – fertilizer
- p. 112 bhikku – a Buddhist monk
- p. 113 koti – is the Sinhala word for tiger. Now a term used to describe the Tamil militants who are sometimes called the Tamil Tigers (LTTE)
- p. 114 kovil – a Hindu temple
- p. 117 the yoni – symbol of the goddess Shakthi or Shakti
- p. 117 Ichthys – Greek word for fish. Claimed by some to be the acronym for Jesus Christ
- p. 118 bhakthi – deep and intense quality of spiritual devotion displayed by the devotee in worship of the deities
- p. 118 manaverai – ceremonial wedding platform/dais where the nuptial seat for the bridal couple is placed. Used at Hindu marriage ceremonies
- p. 118 sodhi – a gravy in which coconut milk is generally used
- p. 119 murunga – a vegetable Anglicised term 'drumstick'
- p. 119 pooja – worship, rituals
- p. 119 odial kelengu – the dried root of the palmyrah palm
- p. 120 Moksha – state of nothingness/ an ideal in which no rebirth recurs
- p. 120 slokas – Sanskrit verses
- p. 122 veshtis – waist cloth worn by Tamils
- p. 123 padakkams – elaborate appendage to a throatlet or necklace approximating to a locket. Studded with gems.
- p. 123 veedhi – passage/route/area, encircling a Hindu temple
- p. 123 Kailasa – the celestial abode of the Hindu deities
- p. 123 Durga pooja – rituals performed in the worship of the goddess Durga
- p. 125 kum kumum – the Tamil name for saffron powder worn on the forehead. An auspicious symbol. Used in temple rituals too. The red variety is the most popular. The mark on the forehead is called kum kumum pottu
- p. 126 thali – Hindu marriage necklace
- p. 126 kuppi – small vessel or container
- p. 127 poosaries – Hindu priests who carry out the pooja rituals