

# AFTER THE WAVE

- Sunili Govinnage

It is six months ago to the day when since the massive tsunamis hit Sri Lanka and all but wiped out significant parts of the country's coastline. Driving through Sri Lanka on my first visit back in nearly 5 years on research for my Arts Honours thesis, I try to cope with feelings of sadness, guilt, helplessness.

Amongst the lush tropical vegetation and alongside the pristine beaches which attract so many visitors to the country sit innumerable tiny wooden shacks or bright blue tents donated by international aid agencies, where thousands of families live after the wave swept away their families and their homes.

However, it's not just in the tsunami-affected areas where families are living in poverty. The disparity in standards of living in Sri Lanka is frightening – people drive around in BMWs to exclusive clothes stores while mothers and their children beg for loose change on the pavement. The contrast with what I would see driving through Perth or Fremantle is disturbing.

Back in the 1970s, Singaporean President Lee Kwan Yu declared his goal to make Singapore as developed as Sri Lanka, which should be seen as an example for all develop-

ing countries. Unfortunately, Sri Lanka has been forced – as a result of civil war and seeming governmental ineptitude – to watch Singapore stride further and further ahead.

The visible poverty here sits alongside abandoned construction sites, derelict half-completed mansions which to me is a metaphor of the country's predicted prosperity which never eventuated. I have been told the tsunami is a main reason for this - most of the labourers who would be employed for construction work of this nature were swept away by the wave, and all available building resources have been diverted to reconstruction efforts.

Along with luxury beach-front tourist hotels (most of which now sit destroyed and/or empty), the coastal districts of Sri Lanka in the East and South was home to significant proportions of the country's poor.

One of the clearest memories I have from my first visit back here when I was seven is of driving down Galle Road in our air-conditioned car and seeing kilometre after kilometre of shanties lining the absolute beach-front and hundreds of children my own age running around and playing on the train-tracks wearing old, frayed and dirty shorts.

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The first thing I feared when I heard about the tsunami while I was at a Boxing Day Pool party last year was the safety of my mother, who was there visiting my grandmother who lives right by the coast (all my family was safe). The next thing I realised was that the poorest of the poor living in those shacks by the beach would have been the worst hit. It was often the people who had nothing who lost everything.

We saw it all on the news in December and January, but nothing prepared me for what I saw driving down south this week. There must be many words I could use to describe it – carnage, devastation, destruction, annihilation, demolition, obliteration, ruin – but I feel they can not do justice to the vision before my eyes. How can you even start to describe what has happened to people’s lives here? And these are the ones that still have lives.

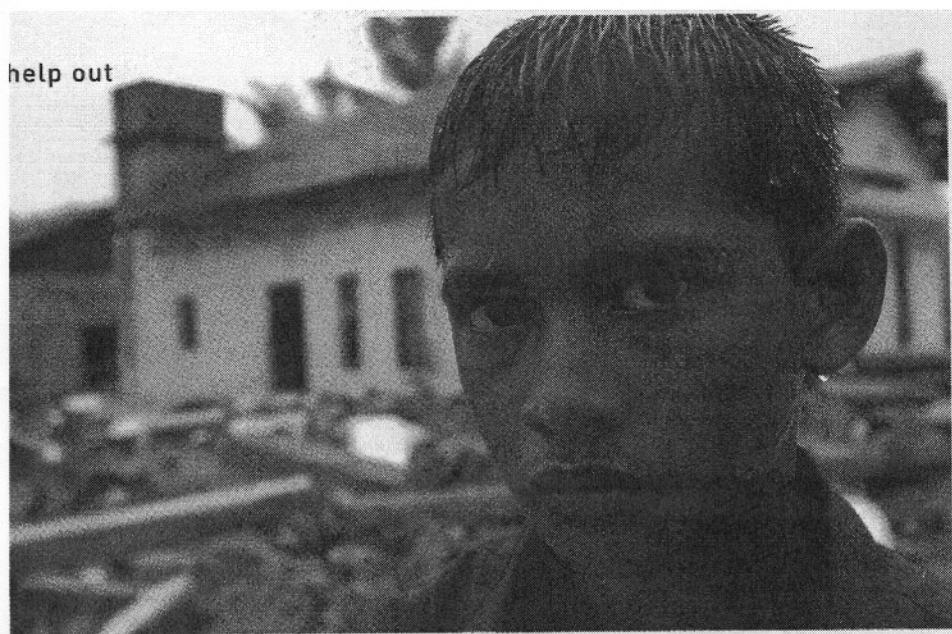
My mother had arrived a week before me accompanying a Buddhist nun, Venerable Ajahn Vayama, the abbot of Dhammasara Nun’s Monastery in Gidgegannup. Sister Vayama had been ordained on the South Coast about 15 years ago and wanted to return to visit the community which had supported her. They visited the site of the world’s worst railway accident where over 1600 people were trapped on a train while the wave hit them. Sister Vayama recounted the sorrow which was still palpable in the air around the shells of the train carriages.

Driving along the coast, the sea was so beautiful; it was a clear day and the water was crystal aqua blue, and the gentle waves were smaller than the ones at Cottesloe Beach. It was so hard to see the rubble where people’s houses once stood and try to imagine the force of the wave. You can clearly see where concrete walls were just ripped off foundations, but you just can’t imagine a 40-foot wall of water.

Beyond the rubble sit the temporary housing projects. Reconstruction processes appear to have stalled, with people arguing that the government have failed to put the country back together while the authorities are insisting that a project of such a massive scale requires planning for the long-term, which of course takes a long time. Furthermore, the various groups seeking power in Sri Lanka – Sinhala, Tamil, Muslim – have only just agreed on a scheme to share international aid between themselves on 24 June 2005.

Reconstruction is not a new phenomenon in Sri Lanka. The concept has been the focus of international attention in Sri Lanka long before the tsunamis of 2004 as a result of the civil conflict which ravaged the island nation for nearly two decades. Many organisations have focused on assisting families displaced from villages destroyed by the civil war between the government and rebels seeking a separate autonomous territory in the north.

The cease fire of the civil war has held for about two years, but the tension between the groups continues. So while those with power (or wanting it) sit around arguing, innocent people - refugees of a natural disaster - try to live their lives out of blue tents and wooden huts.



help out

PHOTOGRAPH BY JEFFREY M. HARRIS