

# An Encounter with the Relatives of the Sea

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Dec 26 is yet another unforgettable day in human history. It is the day when Tsunami waves hit the coasts of the south Asian and African countries killing more than 1,60,000 people and destroyed properties worth Crores of Rupees. When we heard of the Tsunami hit and the conditions of the affected it was difficult for us to remain idle in the seminary following the regular timetable and the programmed academic pursuit. Since the immediate response to this tragedy was overwhelming in terms of the large number of individuals and agencies all over India and outside of India undertaking relief work, it was thought best to organize relief camp at a later date when there would be need of volunteers for rehabilitation work. Finally counselling camp for the affected people was proposed to be held during the summer holidays which was gladly welcomed by the students and the staff.

We were given instruction about the psychological state of the affected as we planned to undertake the ministry of counseling through house-visiting. A team of professors under the initiation of Fr. Hieronymus Cruz arranged the camp in Thiruppattinam near Karaikal. The camp lasted more than a month from 20<sup>th</sup> of March to 27<sup>th</sup> of April.

As soon as we reached the villages, where we were to work, we met the Panchayatars, the village officials, and introduced ourselves as

students who have decided to spend our holidays with them in a useful manner. We expressed our desire to teach their children and youth, English and Folk arts. The response was great. Our arrival was duly announced in the villages. The children and the youth assembled. We could see a lot of enthusiasm in them to learn new things. Here began our encounter with the relatives of the sea, the fisher folk of Karaikal which resulted in an enrichment of our lives as well as theirs. We taught them, played with them, visited their houses and shared their traumatic experiences. Our love and concern which reflected in our actions resulted in their relating with us as if we were somebody who belonged to their own families. They made us feel as if we were in our own villages among our relatives. We partook in their social functions such as marriages and feasts which brought them a lot of joy. We arranged for them different technical studies such as computed education, tailoring, driving, boat repairing which introduced them the other possibilities of earning their livelihood. Towards the end of our stay we organized a sports day and a cultural evening, which helped their children and youth to realize their potentials and exhibit their skills in different arts. Our stay with them became unforgettable for them and for us as well. We could bring joy into their broken lives and they into our lives.

### **Faces and Masks**

From the very day they saw the sea rushing furiously into their villages, huts and houses, they met with a flood of people who came in support of them in rebuilding their shattered lives. To their utter astonishment the Muslims whom they never cared for, never related with, considered as enemies of the nation and supporters of the terrorists sacrificed a lot for them and took care of them as though they belonged to their own families. The Christians whom they considered as alien to the land and culture shared their pains and sufferings and were the source of consolation and comfort. This resulted in a sea of change in their attitude towards the people who do not belong to their caste, creed and colour.

As they were affected, they met with experiences both positive and bitter. They experienced the love and concern of the millions of people around the world who sacrificed a lot for them and supported the rehabilitation programmers. They also had to face News Agencies and Non Governmental organizations (NGOs) some of which considered the Tsunami event a golden opportunity to earn a good fortune. Though here were a few NGOs who brought their heart and soul in rebuilding the lives of the affected together with the Government, there were many other NGOs who aimed at making money thus losing the credibility among the affected. The villagers expressed their deep felt hatred for such NGOs and people who went with papers and took down points when they shared their painful experiences.

### **The culture of the Fisher folk**

The fisher folk society that we related with is deeply rooted in caste sentiments. They want by any way to protect the purity of blood, they say. They never give a fisher girl to a non-fisherman in marriage. In the same way they do not tolerate a fisherman marrying a non-fisher girl. If they marry someone who does not belong to their caste he is excommunicated from their society and no one relates with him. If they are not converted and get out of that marriage bound, their family members too, are excommunicated together with them. They are rejected not only in their own village but also in all the other coastal villages.

They have a federation of all the coastal villages for which a village acts as Thalaikiramam, the head. Karaikal Medu was acting as Thalaikiramam in that area. When some one is excommunicated from the village, the message is sent first to the Thalaikiramam from where it is taken to all other villages and announced, and no one from any of these villages shares even a cup of water with him.

The problems of these villages are never taken to the police officials for legal proceedings. They are settled in the village Panchayat

itself. If there is any problem which could not be settled in the village Panchayat itself, it is taken to the panchayat of Thalaikiramam, which acts as Supreme Court for them. There the problems are settled and a sumptuous dinner is offered. The people of the Thalaikiramam wittingly say that they come with problems and we send them with dinner.

Every fifth year an election is conducted to choose the Panchayatars, the village officials. They are expected to have certain qualifications such as regard for the caste and a life of discipline, to contest in the election. The Panchayatars have a separate office to manage the affairs of the village. Once a week the villagers gather together to discuss the affairs of the village. The Panchayatars preside over the gathering. The outsiders are allowed to participate in the gathering only as spectators. The womenfolk of the village are not expected to be present at the gathering.

Not all the villages have good governance. There are villages where the panchayatars use their position to exploit the wealth of the village. In one of the villages it is believed that one of the panchayatar had stolen around Rs.50,000 and said that the money has been washed away by the Tsunami. In another village the engines, which were donated freely by NGOs, were given to the affected for Rs.10,000 which was strongly opposed by Fr. A. Ratchahar, the Parish Priest of T.T. Pattinam.

They do not entertain men and women freely relating with each other. They have a lot of restrictions in men relating with the women. There is always a suspicious look when a boy and a girl relate freely. If some one abuse a girl sexually he is punished with a heavy penalty of Rs20,000 to 30,000. If someone rapes a girl he has to pay 60,000 Rupees to the girl maintain her life long. There have been cases where the one who raped the girl could not pay the amount and committed suicide.

Their strong caste sentiments and restricted relationship with the women were challenged by our indifference to caste and gender differences. We among ourselves never cared for who belonged to what caste but remained united in our mission, which enkindled in them a strong admiration for us. Our total indifference to caste, which they had been considering very sacred, had its own effects in the belief system of the youth who, upon our departure, expressed their desire to many Muslim girls and break away from the caste system.

### **Relation with the sea**

Their pre-Tsunami relation with the sea can be compared to that of a mother and a child. They have been braving the sea for centuries. Though they had to battle the mighty waves and work very hard to keep their stomachs filled, they never grudged their lot because of their deep faith in their mother, the sea. Even though they had fight the gigantic waves roaring around their tiny boats, they felt secure as if they were in their mother's lap and told themselves that she would bring no harm to them. Their lives are inextricably interwoven with the sea and they know her with all her varying moods. Their relationship with the sea that had lasted for centuries has resulted in the emergence of a deep respect for the sea and for all that she provides. Such a wonderful relationship has been shattered within a few minutes by the Tsunami.

### **Economy**

The economy of these villages largely depends upon their womenfolk. Even though it is men who struggle hard with the sea and bring fish, it is women who market it and manage the household economic affairs. The men depend upon their womenfolk even for their daily expenditure. It is said that any economy that is controlled and guided by the women grows slowly but steadily. It is true of these villages too. We could see only very few who were desperately poor. They also could have avoided their poverty but for their inadequate perspective of the future. The Fishermen are blessed with both work and income. The only

difficulty is that they have to risk their lives everyday to keep their stomachs filled. Otherwise, their conditions are much better comparing to the farmers of the inland who rely upon the mercy of the monsoons and prices for their products in the market. "Though we struggle long and hard with the mighty waves, never were we gloomy until the Tsunami hit" the youth said.

It is said that the characteristics of the people is very much shaped by the land they relate with. The sea, which they relate with, is rough and generous. This roughness and generosity can easily be felt by anyone who relate with these people. It also has designed the way they use their income. They tend to live without adequate perspective of the future. If the catch is big, they spend all the money very generously within that very day's end. Thus they have ended up in never caring for the future. In times of need they borrow money from financiers who later become shylocks and exploit them by forcing them to sell their houses and belongings.

Their acting without any perspective of the future could be detected in the way they spend the relief fund they received. While a few used it for getting their girls married, others spent it on buying luxurious commodities such as motorbikes, televisions, refrigerators, which was strongly criticized by some of our students as insincerity of the people. Yet, it needs to be understood against the background of their traumatic experience. The sea, which they had been considering as loving mother and God, within a few minutes, turned out to be their worst enemy who all of a sudden killed their beloved ones, destroyed their properties and left them in utter misery. It is a tragedy that the girls who could have been saved easily did not come out of the water as they were left naked by the Tsunami. In spite of all these painful experiences they have to depend upon the sea for their survival.

The birth of a male child is celebrated as men power stands as the source of their income. Joint family system is still respected due to the need for male members to go together for fishing. Very few are there who have opted for higher education. Though there are ample opportunities for their children to study, they have been preferring to initiate their children at a very early stage into the traditional profession of fishing.

They had the feeling that their jobs were secure as long as the sea exists, but with the Tsunami hit this faith has been shattered and they have been forced to search for alternative professions. The youth are looking to abandon the sea and fishing in search of other occupations which they never dreamt of until the Tsunami event.

### **Their Religion**

The people among whom we worked were Hindus. Though they worship various gods, there is a special regard for Amman. Invariably in all the villages where we worked, there were beautiful temples for Amman. The feast of Amman is celebrated as the village festival with a lot of competitions and cultural evenings. Usually the celebration lasts for three days.

Many families had Murugan as their kulatheivam, the family deity. Once a month they go to the Murugan temple, together with their family members to offer sacrifices as well as to relax. They are very religious and the R.S.S with its fundamentalist ideology is slowly exploiting their religiosity.

Our love for the mother tongue, the culture of the land and the efficiency in the folk songs and arts turned their understanding infused by fundamentalists that the people of other faith are alien to the land and culture, upside down. Our longing for equality and justice that was expressed in the folk songs and arts that we taught challenged their indifferentism and insensitivity towards the oppressed class of the land.

## Conclusion

Gadamar says that when a text is read the contexts of the text and the reader interact and enrich each other and challenge each other. It is true not only for reading a text but also for relating with people. Our encounter with the Tsunami affected has enriched as well as challenged both

Whenever we recall the days we spent in the Tsunami hit villages we are reminded of the wonderful experiences with those people and the sea, their simplicity, hospitality generosity and unity. The final day of our stay became unforgettable. They treated us with a sumptuous dinner that evening. When we were preparing to bid goodbye to them they said, "Many came and gave us much, but it is you who stayed with us and related with us and shared our lives. When they departed we felt grateful, when you depart, painful. Now we feel grateful to Tsunami that has given us such a wonderful people like you. If it is possible to meet you once again only when Tsunami hits, we wish it comes once again." The children began to cry requesting us not to leave them. The youth expressed their hope that we would continue our relationship with them.

- It was one of the rare moments when we saw drops of tears in our cheeks.

Their simplicity, hospitality and approachability challenged our desire for a sophisticated life and our impersonal responses to those who approach us with needs. Their unity challenged our inclinations for individualistic isolated life and their joy, our pleasure-seeking tendency. Thus our stay with these people was indeed a prophetic presence not only for them but also for us.

Pondichery Multi Purpose Social Service Society follows up the ministries, that we had initiated, under the guidance of Fr. A. Ratchahar, the parish priest of T.R. Pattinam.