

# Dalit Dreams and Nightmares : Caste, Class, and Disaster in South India

By David Blake Willis

The Dalits are a minority of great importance among the societies and cultures of India, comprising perhaps 20–25% of the entire population of this vast country. The myriad castes and sub-castes of Dalits are now undergoing major sociopolitical changes, despite the enormous tensions generated throughout India by their moves into politics and their fight for social justice. The various communities which comprise the Dalits have strengthened their voices and actively campaigned for change at the local and national levels, creating important waves in the caste system and in local societies. These activities have especially meant an awakening and resistance to traditions.

How might we map these changes in real time, with real people, and in meaningful ways, for these people formerly called Untouchables or Harijans and now referred to often as either Dalits or Scheduled Castes? The roles of social mapping are clear here : to help us understand the social and cultural spaces of a people or peoples, to make us more aware of the cultural and social capital which certain communities have or do not have, and to document the transformations taking place, especially those which progressively and constructively address serious questions of poverty and the lack of access to educational, economic, and political resources.

With the Dalits, as with other communities around the world who are similarly abused and marginalized, one way to understand the possibilities for their future is to focus on the theme of crossing borders. It is in these crossroads of change and transformation that we see the creation of new cultures. For the Dalits in particular, victims

of a severe and continuing apartheid, we must first try to understand what is a complex and unaccountable system generated by history : caste and its counterpart colonialism.

The goals of ending apartheid in India, of upsetting the rigid system of casteism, and of ending colonialism, are admirable indeed. These include not only external, but also and especially, internal colonialisms, those colonialisms of the mind which hamper progress and healthy communities. Dalits are gradually moving in these directions, one indication being transcaste marriages and another being social activists who strive to create a new, more humanistic culture.

Dalits could be said to be contemplating the creation of a new culture, something which their myths foretell in the different origin stories they have compared to Hindus. Some of those interviewed even emphatically said, "We are not Hindus! We are Dalits!"

By sheer, terrible coincidence, J. Krishnammal and S. Jaganathan, the subjects of much that follows in this paper and great social activists when it comes to Dalit causes, have their NGO LAFTI and its operations in the zone of the Great Tsunami of December 26, 2004. They were among the first on the scene to help, as indicated by the photographs that accompany this text. This disaster and its aftermath have much to do with Dalits and urban/rural policy for Nagai and Nagappatinam Districts, for the city of Nagappatinam, and for the surrounding towns and villages.

### **Organization of the Paper**

What follows is the report of fieldwork conducted in February-March 2005 in South India, including an edited blog from which the field notes were originally taken, as well as ongoing fieldwork conducted in the Madurai area of South India in the late 1970s, the late 1980s, and 2002-2004. The ethnographic interviews and observations discussed here help us understand the context of violent oppression traditionally visited upon Dalit communities and some of the ways this oppression has been resisted. These are reports of social activism and efforts at community empowerment and renewal of Dalit communities in South India led by two powerful individuals and their NGO LAFTI (Land for Tillers' Freedom).

On a personal note, combining research with social activism has always been important for me. Doing whatever I could to help with

the aftermath of the Great Tsunami, when there was an immediate need for aid and help, was especially compelling. Informing people about Dalits and Dalit liberation movements, like those of Amma and Appa, seemed just as critical. Seeking social justice is thus one of the themes of my research, a search for the power of ideas and social action that can lead to healthier cities, villages, and communities and their surrounding societies.

### **Dalit Nightmares : The Continuation of Apartheid in India and Its Historical Roots**

Dalits have not only been victims of poverty, but as various scholars and activists have reminded us, of historical and continuing acts of extreme violence (Racine and Racine 1998, the International Movement Against All Forms of Discrimination and Racism IMADR 2003, Gorringer 2005). The tragedy of Kilvenmani in Thanjavur District, Tamil Nadu, in 1969, drew national attention in India to the situation of the Dalits. The violence has hardly abated since then. Every week, every day there continue to be acts of violence perpetrated against Dalits throughout India.

This violence and abuse has continued throughout the society. Separate drinking glasses in restaurants, public shunning, and discrimination are commonplace. These are, however, the least of Dalit worries, which also include murder, kidnapping, and rape. Such nightmares continued even after the Great Tsunami of 2004, when India's coastal communities were devastated. The Dalits not only suffered some of the worst casualties, but they were turned away from refugee shelters and placed in shabby, segregated, and out-of-sight relief camps organized almost as an after-thought.

A great shame for India, this treatment is in many ways an apartheid of the spirit as well as of daily social relations. What is changing in Indian society now, however, is the response and the impact of Dalit entrepreneurs on social, commercial, and cultural activities in the larger society. The ritual purity of Brahminical ideology, with its emphasis on purity and pollution, traditionally crushed the Dalits, who were expected to do all the menial jobs for other castes, with the only return being the building of good karma, which would supposedly lead to a better rebirth.

Now there is an increasing political consciousness, with open dis-

plays not only of pictures of the Dalit hero B.R. Ambedkar in public places like post offices and schools where Dalits congregate (see Figure 17), but with the organization of nascent political movements such as the Dalit Panthers (Gorringe 2005). Ambedkar, of course, led the mass conversion of Dalits to Buddhism in the 1930s–1950s (Zelliot 2001), while other leaders have led conversions to Islam and Christianity as well. Among the three Dalit subcastes in the Madurai area where some of this research was conducted, for example, only the Chakkiliars, sandal makers and cobblers, are not represented politically, whereas the Pariyars and Pallars have turned their own caste associations into political parties. Some organizations, like the Dalit Panthers and LAFTI, have gone even further.

### **Dalit Dreams : Dalit Social Entrepreneurs**

Two extraordinary people who have made a real commitment to Dalit dreams through the pursuit of peace and justice are S. Jagannathan and J. Krishnammal. They have taught us the meaning of compassion and social action in an age of corruption and despair. Through the power of their lives, these two direct disciples of Mahatma Gandhi also continue to teach us the virtues of humility, hard work, self-reliance, and service to the poorest of the poor. Jagannathan and Krishnammal have devoted their lives to *Gram Swaraj* (village self-rule) and Gandhian social activism. Their social and political work has uplifted over 12,000 poor, mostly Dalit families, helping them to help themselves to receive land and homes. Their lives have been chronicled in *The Color of Freedom*, a biography by Laura Coppo and David Albert (2004).

Krishnammal and Jagannathan have exposed and questioned the roots of poverty, the caste system, and globalization directly, followed quickly by a quest for the most wide-ranging solutions to social problems. Whether rich landlords, multinationals, or the Indian Supreme Court, Jagannathan and Krishnammal have confronted them all, winning more than their share of battles. These two spiritual workers of light and power who have humbly shown the way to a more just society have woven the understandings of Gandhi into the fabric of today's needs, in a powerful response to a society more destructive to the natural environment and to the human spirit than could even have been imagined in the heyday of colonialism.

Krishnammal and Jagannathan are fighting an imperialism of the soul and the belly that they know can and will be stopped with the gentle teachings of the Mahatma. Two saints indeed, Jagannathan and Krishnammal light the way for young revolutionaries committed to the best of the human spirit and the prospects for change and social justice.

From the beginning of their work in the 1940s, Krishnammal and Jagannathan have engaged in transformative activities which have empowered and organized the poor. Utilizing Gandhi's *satyagraha* (truth-force), they worked first to build self-confidence in the Dalit communities in which they were working. They then worked not only for land-gifts but to purchase land and to build houses. Amma's first act was purchasing not only land, but a house, something which had previously been completely off-limits to Dalit people. This house then became a community center. The symbolic nature of such a change, in a community where Dalits were not even allowed to walk on the road in front of that same house, cannot be underestimated. Through a combination of clever financing and active struggle, Krishnammal thus brought a successful movement for these Dalits to the Cauvery Delta which has resulted in the active recovery of village community.

Included in these activities are the drive to end prawn farming as destructive of the natural environment and disruptive of traditional agricultural cycles. They have also been involved with the creation of schools and nurseries, house building projects, orphanages and children's hostels, women's self-help associations, farm implement cooperatives, agricultural experiments, small industrial workshops, and campaigns against alcoholism and other social ills (Coppo and Albert, 2004). Seeing globalization from the perspective of the local level, of the poor and of the victims, has been an important overall approach of their activities. The work of Jagannathan and Krishnammal presents an alternative to the greed and desolation of the new East India Company, of the neo-colonialism of multinational corporations (Rigby, 1997).

In cases like the social entrepreneurship of Amma and Appa it can be said that what they have done should be viewed not as a function of opportunity but as a function of cultural perceptions of opportunity (Dana, 1995). Adventurous social entrepreneurs like them are characterized by innovative behavior and the employment of strategic

management practices. Like Barth (1963, 1967), we can also see Dalit individuals as having a special impact on their communities, as essential brokers in the context of contacts with other cultures and castes. They are actively pursuing the transformation of society.

### **Local Indigenous Enterprise : The Beginnings of Social Change**

Social entrepreneurs who are successful at what they do give us pause, compelling us to consider new ways of seeing social activism. While the Dalit communities and individuals discussed in this paper reflect various theories of entrepreneurship, they also move beyond each of these, spanning in complex ways not only their own communities but those of other castes with whom they are intimately linked. The ties of persons here, despite taboos of caste and other restrictions, are actually imaginative venues for surprisingly creative enterprises.

All of these entrepreneurs cause positive social change through their creativity, skills, and determination as they transform ideas into reality (Bornstein, 2004, and Johnson, 2000). Possessing keen foresight, unflinching belief, and bold visions to build something new or to change institutions that have become outdated, they help us understand the new dimensions of entrepreneurship for the 21st century, where innovation and profits are not only those that are economic and monetary, but social, civic, and political, as well. These activists are, in fact, laying the groundwork for a new conception of entrepreneurship in which the ties of oppression are replaced by a new citizenship envisioned beyond caste and class.

Bill Drayton, the founder of Ashoka, a creative entrepreneurial network, has profiled these entrepreneurs, creating a database of effective change-makers which is invaluable if we are to understand the direction of ethnic minority entrepreneurs who would reach beyond their current status and society ([www.ashoka.org/home/index.cfm](http://www.ashoka.org/home/index.cfm)). As Bornstein notes from his study of 100 social entrepreneurs, what is most important about them is that “one walks away after hearing their stories with the conviction that big problems can be solved. Their stories create a sense of possibility and hope and they encourage action because their ideas are practical and doable.” ([www.csrwire.com/mediabuddies/article.cgi/2391.html](http://www.csrwire.com/mediabuddies/article.cgi/2391.html))

Dalit entrepreneurs are visionaries of change, too, of seeing how

something new can done. That they have been able to profit from their assigned roles, expanding and challenging them in new ways, even as they are strongly discriminated against as an ethnic or caste group, gives hope and meaning to other ethnic revival movements in India and in other societies which experience oppression and discrimination.

Although marginalized, the Dalits reported here reveal new strategies for entrepreneurial activity as they obtain competitive advantage by seeking innovative transcaste niches for their activities. Resources can then be found in a number of different possible contexts. More markets are then served by these strategies, as well. Even as the effects of discrimination have an impact on decision-making, we also see that creative planning in response to this discrimination encompasses larger and newer fields of opportunity and entrepreneurial success for Dalit innovators and their communities.

For Dalits, the awakening and resistance to traditions they are undergoing can also mean the creative utilization of new opportunities available in their own communities (economic, cultural, and social), giving hope where hope did not formerly exist.

## **Searching for Dreams and Nightmares : An Indian Journey**

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 19, 2005

### **An Apartheid of the Society and the Spirit**

Osaka-Singapore – En Route to India

From Japan in winter to the tropics is a welcome change. To go back to my home, one of my homes, in Madurai, South India, is special indeed. This may be a somewhat different contribution to the blogs on NGOs and Dalits, coming as it does from an Iowan from Japan, an American who lived five years in Dravidian India, an anthropologist who is also an educator.

Thank you first of all to my sponsors for this research trip, Professors Lim Bon and Julie Higashi of Ritsumeikan University in Kyoto, Japan, as well as to the Study Group for the Recovery and Renaissance of Ethnic Community and Japan's Ministry of Education for their support. The Great Tsunami disaster has made work like ours even more important, and this visit is also an opportunity to share with LAFTI the generosity of people in Japan and their outpouring of support. I had originally planned this research trip last fall to visit Madurai, then Krishnammal and Jagannathan with my research project concerning Dalits, the untouchables of India, and change-

makers in communities. Now the Great Tsunami has made this work even more important, for it is the poorest of the poor, the Dalits, who have suffered the most.

A special thank you, of course, to the authors of the LAF'TI blog, David and Aliyah Albert and Donatella Baggio for their writings, their reflections, their warmth, and their passion for India, and for sharing with us news of our brothers and sisters in Nagapattinam and environs. And most of all for a deeper understanding of the works and lives of Krishnammal and Jagannathan, two veritable saints of our time who have opened our hearts to some of what is happening in deep India. They are two living giants who have given us pause to consider the larger picture of where our lives comingle with those affected by the tsunami, by haves and have-nots, by class, by caste, by the oppression of an economic and social system that upholds tradition in the service of, let us be very open about this, apartheid.

An apartheid of the society and the spirit, it also an apartheid of our spirit as humans, as our actions cleave us off from our environment. Nature has been literally torn asunder from us, the prawn farms of coastal Asia wreaking havoc on what had been more or less balanced eco-systems being just one example. The ripping apart of local cultural fabrics that has ensued cannot be underestimated.

It is easy to think otherwise, however, when we look upon some new scene for the first time, imagining that it has always been that way. Journalists are like that, reporting only on the thin layers of cultures and histories. Those of us with the perspective of time on a particular environment are drawn in, on the other hand, to the enormous meddling with the environment which is going on these days. Of course, humankind has always manipulated environments, the pristine natural environments of North America or even the African savannah prior to the coming of the Europeans, having been shown to have actually had the deep imprint of man shaping his environment. Often in the past, though, our ancestors also demonstrated wisdom and balance, a sensitivity when approaching the environment, which was often honored and held sacred as a trust for all the community and all sentient beings. But it is different today.

But I am getting ahead of myself. I am 'the Other David,' a name which suits me fine as I have been that 'Other' for most of my life. I come to this place through a serendipitous path. David Albert, the first David, and I were fellow travelers, as the old and apt expression goes, back in the early 1970s in Chicago. We were both students at the university there, David in the Committee on Social Thought (the name always bemused me) and myself in another transdisciplinary melding of the Social Sciences (anthropology, history, political science, geography, and, above all, South Asia). David had come to the University of Chicago because it offered the best in contem-

porary philosophy and social praxis ; myself because it was the best place to study South Asia in the world. What we were really studying was the street and life in Chicago, however, watching the world, readying ourselves for the plunge.

We had some memorable times together, working with the FOR (Fellowship of Reconciliation), the AFSC (American Friends Service Committee), and in general stirring up trouble when it was necessary and called for in the society. The Vietnam War was raging and there was much work to do : of course protesting the war that had killed our friends and so many others, the B 1 bomber, nuclear weapons and nuclear power, environmental disasters. At the same time supporting movements for racial reconciliation, Amerasian orphans in Saigon, racial and economic justice in our own country. We hung out in the blues clubs of the South Side on the weekends, and in the early hours of Sunday mornings found ourselves on funky Maxwell Street. Much of the rest of the week, we could be found in the Regenstein Library, that fortress of academia on the site of the first sustained atomic chain reaction, commemorated there by a large Henry Moore sculpture in brass that could be interpreted variously as a mushroom cloud, a skull, or the beginning (and end) of us all.

But let's get back to where we are now, in 2005, at the beginning of a new year, only a week old on the Chinese lunar calendar, a year that we hope and pray is better than the last one. The Great Tsunami and its aftermath have been present in so many ways this past month for me, even in snowy Japan. I knew when the first reports came to the Japanese media that this was not a typical tsunami. The range was too great, the devastation likely huge. Those of us who live in coastal Japan realized this immediately. Tsunamis are part of life in Japan, and occasionally they deal a blow so devastating that the terror of the event is deeply, indelibly etched in our minds.

Those of us who live in Japan are thus hyper-vigilant at the least sign of shaking in our natural environment especially those of us who live in Kobe. Earthquake reports flash across the top of our TV screens in a matter of minutes, literally two or three minutes after they have happened, with an audible beep-beep alarm. Tsunami warnings follow very quickly (the word is Japanese, as some people in the area of Great Tsunami seem to have already forgotten).

Soon after any earthquake above a 4 or 5 on the Richter Scale in Japan there is on everyone's mind the question : Will there be a tsunami? If there is one coming, and that happens often, will it be like the common storm surge, maybe a meter (two to three feet)? Or will it be something far worse? We cannot take chances.

I live on an island off the port of Kobe in western Japan, knowing that the

second floor where my apartment is located is not going to be of much help when something happens out in the water in Osaka Bay. Even Osaka Bay has been visited by tsunamis in the recent past. During the past three hundred years there have been five tsunamis here, three of them involving significant casualties and loss of life. Most folks do not know this, assuming we are free from such calamities. I learned about it after reading histories of the Kansai some years ago, information buried in arcane books but made all the more real now by what has happened off Sumatra. Still, we know tsunami only too well in Japan.

But there has never been a tsunami in Japan like the Great Indian Ocean Tsunami of 2004.

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 20, 2005

### **Roots**

Singapore

On the way from Singapore's Changi Airport to my friends Paul and Louise yesterday, to their old colonial bungalow on Holland Road, I had a Malay Singaporean taxi driver named Mohammed Ismaili. People, by the way, do not appreciate the very deep diversity in Muslim cultures that there is much diversity among Muslims. Ismaili, for example is worth looking up. With the Ismailis we see a Muslim community that belies many of our media stereotypes of Muslims, for the Ismailis belong to what has been for centuries a transnational, transcultural, hybridized, Creolized culture.

Anyway, what did my taxi driver friend think of the tsunami? "Ah, I'm fed up with the tsunami," he said, "Too much news about it, la." "Yeah, I said, there has been a lot of news." And then, after some silence he said, "Do you know what was most amazing about the tsunami?" I started to answer, but he immediately spoke, taking the words from my mouth :

"What was most amazing about the tsunami? It was that everybody in the world got it. They all understood what it was about, that we needed to come together, that this affected all of us. And people's generosity was so great. No more fighting, no more using the military for that. Instead they are where they can really help. And are helping."

For me, this linkage, the bonds like these between people, really began appearing in my landscape when I went to India in 1970. My first visit to Tamil Nadu was in late December of that year, when I arrived after a four-month trek overland from Europe, through the Middle East, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Northern India. The epic nature of this journey only gradually began to dawn on me during those travels. It was a different era and a different kind of travel, more adventure than tour. We did not know

where we were going or staying. There was almost no road map other than word of mouth, which there was a lot of, and certainly no Lonely Planet travel guide. And it was not always very safe. But something was calling me, maybe my pioneer Quaker roots, maybe my ancestors way back wandering on the savannah.

My great-great grandfather Harvey had walked to California from the East Coast. The year was 1849. He found gold. A friend who traveled with him wrote 'Guide to the Goldfields' so we know about this, and then Harvey came back to Iowa to found a town with his brother John that they named Perry (not, Thank God, Willisville, which they had first thought of, though the main street still is Willis Avenue). They had been dissenting Quakers, their ancestors going first to Nantucket from England (the New England whaling families, including my relatives the Macy's, were all Quakers), then the mountains of Tennessee and North Carolina, where they founded the Lost Creek Meeting, the first religious body in the South calling for immediate manumission of all slaves. Soon after that we find them in Richmond, Indiana, the atmosphere having become a little "hot", I imagine, in the South. So, my pioneer roots are there, I guess, and at least partly what compelled me to search for and discover new worlds. Only this time it was new worlds in old worlds.

During my life in an Indian village outside of Madurai called Naraynapuram, "the village of the primeval cosmic man," I met many remarkable people, among them my brother J. Rajasekaran, who will be traveling to LAFTI with me next weekend. I found my career, too, anthropology and a love of the life and diversity of peoples. So that is what I do. Being an anthropologist, an educator, and someone who does cultural studies (more English than North American in my approach) has been rewarding and challenging as has been working for nearly twenty years in a Japanese Buddhist university in Osaka. But I have not been able to forget my other roots in South India.

Three of the most remarkable people I have ever met were Dick Keithan, Krishnammal, and Jagannathan. Keithan-ji (the Indian honorific after a name is -ji) had been an American missionary who had worked with Mahatma Gandhi and was thrown out of his mission for his revolutionary activity. He became an Indian citizen. Dick walked the walk, and talked the talk, with the Gandhians, becoming one himself along with his friends Krishnammal and Jagannathan. I met Dick in Kodaikanal in 1976, where I had gone to teach in a mission school in the process of becoming international. He and I spent hours in his bungalow up on the road to Pillar Rocks talking about social change and the Gandhian movement. Of course, the Mahatma himself. And Krishnammal and Jagannathan, his friends down on the plains.

Dick encouraged me to meet them. Not long after that my friend David Albert, who was in India for a conference, let me know that he was going to Gandhigram to stay with new friends he had met, and would I like to join him. Their names were Krishnammal and Jagannathan.

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 22, 2005

**Madurai**

Madurai, Tamil Nadu, South India

The early morning departure area in Chennai is abuzz even at 5 : 30 a.m. with flights going all over India. The heat of the day means that most flights in India take off or land as early or as late as possible. The signs of a newly invasive capitalism are everywhere. India like China has chosen to open the flood-gates for a new economics. It is a different India than the one I knew in the 1970s, when it could take up to three hours to get out of the airport. Last night I was out in 50 minutes. Some benefits come with this new wave, but there are many outside who cannot even come close to these benefits.

My flight to Madurai is on a propeller plane, and all I can see is the haze and clouds, the smoke of fires from burning straw, the dust, always the dust. Landing in Madurai, which has a small airport some seven kilometers from the city, I am met by my brother J. Rajasekaran, who will help me with interviews and visits as well as accompany me to Nagapattinam and LAFTI on Thursday, after we have done some work in Madurai.

Sekar greets me in Tamil and I reply, my Tamil rusty from so many years away. It is good to see him. Sekar is an anthropologist and fieldworker who was born and brought up in Madurai and who is now the coordinator of the University of Wisconsin program in Madurai along with his wife Vidya, who is the Director. We have known each other 35 years. He is also an impressive vocalist of classical Carnatic music, a collector of folklore and folk-songs, and a rock-and-roll musician who is famous all over Tamil Nadu.

Madurai is a temple city for the Goddess Meenakshi. Worth looking up on the net, and you will be especially rewarded if you check for images. A pilgrimage site for people from all over India, Madurai is the home to perhaps 1.6 million people. When I first came to Madurai in 1970, there were 400,000 people. The village I lived in outside the city has now become part of the city. There are people, and there has been development, everywhere. The wild ride into the city, which is one of my three hometowns (the others are Perry, Iowa, USA, and Kobe, Japan), feels as comfortable as it is eye-opening.

India is full of life everywhere. In the space of a few hundred meters, you

will encounter children going to school, cows wandering on the street, grandmas watering down the dust in front of their homes, vendors of numerous goods from bicycles, bullock carts, goats, dogs, water buffalo, cars, trucks, buses, and more. The cacophony, the din, is intense. When you drive in India as our taxi cab driver is doing, you constantly lean on your horn and keep your eyes open everywhere for something or someone darting out in front of you or turning towards you. The rules of the road in India are to follow the flow and be ready for anything.

After crossing over the Vaigai River, we go to the apartment Sekar has found for me on the northern edge of the city. Madurai has a history that goes back somewhere around four or five thousand years. This is a rich multitude of cultures, with Hind predominating, but many Muslims, Christians, and others as well. After getting me settled and having a talk about our plans, we go the University of Wisconsin program house, where I meet the five American college students, all of whom have interesting projects and speak good Tamil. My own Tamil is somewhere in the recesses of my mind, and I feel the lesson of disability that comes with not being able to participate fully in what is going on around me. It is an important lesson for all of us. As the day goes on my Tamil slowly comes back, always in encounters with local folks. It is a fluid language like Japanese that pays more attention to exchanges between people than preciseness about tense or descriptive adjectives.

I hit the ground running with Sekar. He is nothing if not energy, curiosity, and warmth. I am lucky to have a brother like him. Soon after lunch we begin our research forays for interviews, collections of materials, and so on. The first interview is at the Tamil Nadu Theological Seminary (TTS), an activist institution with ties to the Christian community in Germany, America, and elsewhere. TTS has both a Social Analysis Center and a Dalit Resource Center. I will spend time during the next two days at these centers interviewing various people, but the first person I want to meet is Gabriele Dietrich, a remarkable Indian scholar-activist.

Garbiele has worked with Krishnammal and Jagannathan, something I discovered after I had found her writings on the internet. You can see an important essay of hers if you type her name or the title of this paper, one among many as she is a prolific scholar: "Inculturation Versus Globalization?" The title says it all, but the depth of theory and the urgent, compelling flow of the writing, impatient at times, is an activism like that of Amma and Appa, though expressed in different ways.

We enter the compound of TTS after a dusty bike ride through the crowded, dusty, hot, and fantastic streets of Madurai. Nothing prepares you for India, least of all for Madurai, but I am right at home, happy dodging bullocks, hearing the loud bulbous honks from trucks equipped with a horn out of the

Model T era, watching children coming home from school in their uniforms, smelling the 'hotels' cafes with their banana-leaf meals. You cannot get bored in India.

I feel a little sorry for Gabriele as we are arriving unannounced. I had tried to contact her by an email address I found on the web, but the messages kept getting bounced back. Not suprising, I guess, there being many more important matters than computers in India. Sekar has called ahead to the Social Analysis unit where Gabriele works, or perhaps the Dalit Resource Center, and learned that a good time to catch her is around 3 : 30 or 4 : 00 after her midday nap, something all sensible Indians have.

We knock on the door of her bungalow and are greeted in Tamil by a handsome, young, European-looking man, apparently her son. After some time Gabriele appears in her sari, a bit groggy, just waking up, peering at us through her glasses. She seems to be in her late 40s or early 50s, but I learn later she has already had a festschrift published for her, something usually done after you reach 60.

Who are these strangers in my house? She seems to be thinking. All of the initial greetings are in Tamil, mostly by Sekar, with me saying a bit before switching into English. I explain who I am and why I am in India this time for research. She listens quietly, intently. I feel myself being judged, calculations of time and energy and efficiency. Who is this random guy and how quickly can, or should I, send him off? But I am intent on my story and my purposes. And her work is elegant, sparse, hard-hitting, and always returns to what use is it, her writing, for the activist works at hand and the needs of the oppressed. There is much I can learn from her, I can tell, just from this essay I have found on the web. Please listen, Gabriele, if you will, to my story.

Gabriele came to India around the same time I did, in the early 1970s. She and her husband stayed, became Indian citizens (she from Germany, he from the Netherlands), and approached the problems of Indian society and the enormous needs that are out there through social democratic and theological approaches. But this is not the time she is going to tell me any of this. "What can I do for you?" is the direct question after my brief introduction, which I thought I had already told her.

Then I tell her that we are journeying in a few days to Nagappatinam to see Krishnamal and Jagannathan. I can feel a wholesale change in the tenor and atmosphere of the room. Ah, Krishnammal. . . Coffee appears and we get to the point, how we would like to learn more about her writings and what she sees as her key works. It is rather a cheeky approach of mine, but I am keen to learn from her, as I said.

Gabriele's scholarship is deep, wide-ranging, and always comes around to the question of how knowledge can be used. I am reminded of my friend and colleague James Banks, the great scholar of multicultural education, who has a similar concern for the construction of knowledge. We have a discussion that goes from Dalits and violence to gender, transgression, and transcendence.

Then post-colonial feminist theory. Women as the last colony? An important and clearly hard-hitting discourse today, but Gabriele thinks we need to realize that it is much more challenging, that what is really happening is a neo-colonization of the spirit of all societies. You don't need external colonization any longer if you have internal colonization. The question is, is it possible to build alliances between internal colonies? As she notes in her writing, "Production for Life and Livelihood vs. Production for Profit is the sustained focus in the struggles of marginalized women and in the National Alliance of People's Movements."

Oh, and by the way, can you get me some good pictures of Krishnammal? We need it for an award we are applying for, for her and other activist women. (We find out later that this is for a nomination for the Nobel Peace Prize).

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 23, 2005

### **Dalits : Struggle and Caste Liberation**

Madurai, Tamil Nadu, South India

Last night we talked with Sri Ambuselvam of the Dalit Resource Center in Madurai. A young, handsome man deeply concerned with the terrible impact of caste, especially as it relates to untouchability.

Terminology is of course changing, and Dalit is the word Dalits use for themselves as well as the name most commonly used in Indian society today for those formerly called "untouchables" and, by Mahatma Gandhi, "Harijans" (Children of God). Even Amma, a staunch Gandhian, uses the term Dalits. I have never heard her use the word Harijan. "Dalit" means a scattering or dispersal, but it also implies a liberation from a system. Krishnammal has of course been working closely with Dalits for many years. In many ways, as she will tell you, they are the focus of her efforts.

Ambuselvam tells us that the most important goal in the liberation struggle now is to form an alliance of Dalits, what he calls the "Movement for Integrated Dalit Liberation Rights." There are numerous SC in India, the so-called Scheduled Castes, a term which the government, popular and academic media use for Dalits. SC describes the reservations accorded to government jobs, to places in university admissions, and to other benefits for

Dalits. The number of SC in Tamil Nadu alone is 374, when all subcastes and others are included, 110 according to the government (which subsumes many categories). The most urgent need is thus to unite these various groups against the domination and oppression of other communities as against well as historical structural injustice.

The Dalit Resource Center, located at the Tamil Nadu Theological Seminary, where much political activism is taking place, is concerned with learning strategies and legal support as well as cultural activities. They have work in 1700 villages around Madurai. Every year they hold a massive arts and music festival with 800 activists that goes on for 24 hours non-stop. Lots of drumming! The thappu, a large round drum made of cow-skin, is a special symbol of the Dalits and was traditionally used when the village crier, always a Dalit, walked around the village announcing the news. We note, too, a growing concern for gender and women in the Dalit movement in general and certainly in terms of the arts. Women drummers are a new and powerful sight for India. For Ambuselvam, and certainly for Amma, too, the most difficult challenges now are how the Dalits can emerge as a large, united movement.

Perhaps 20–25% of the Indian population is Dalit. If Dalits can overcome their differences (intercaste marriage, even is still more or less unknown) it will be a force to be reckoned with in Indian society and politics. Two of the most effective groups at the center of this change are Dr. K.S. Krishnasamy and the Pudhia Tamilzakam, the New Tamil Party, and the Dalit Panthers of India (DPI), led by Sri Thirumavalavan (and begun around the same time as the Black Panthers in the United States).

Dalit goals are the annihilation of caste, the promotion of Dalit identity (here, a Tamil nationalist identity), and Dalit integration, as Ambuselvam tells us. Echoing sentiments like those of the DPI, Ambuselvam says very emphatically that “Dalits are not Hindu! We are Dalits. We have our own religion, our own community.”

Thursday is a day of transition, preparing for the journey to Kuthur and LAFTI. I am asked to give a talk on ethnography in India to a group of American college students doing homestays with Indian families. We talk for two hours about caste and many other issues, a primary concern of theirs being gender roles, which are rapidly changing in India. They are a bright and curious group.

Sekar and I head to the northeast bus stand around three, beginning a six-hour journey through the traditional ancient districts of Madurai and Pudukottai to the heartland of Tamil Nadu in the Cauvery River Delta around Tanjore (Thanjavur) and then the coastal districts of Nagai and Nagappattinam where LAFTI is located.

Nagappatinam, mentioned in many ancient chronicles from around Asia, is the fountain-head of a great cultural transmission, one that would forever change the societies of Southeast and East Asia. It is from here, where Amma and Appa have located themselves, that so much of the culture and religion, especially Buddhism and Hinduism, as well as the social structures, social values, and political statecraft of India, flowed freely to Indonesia, Malaysia, Cambodia, Thailand, Vietnam, the Philippines, China, Korea, and Japan.

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 24, 2005

**Learn from the Moment**

Madurai, Tamil Nadu, South India

When I first met Amma and Appa in late 1977, I had just taken a long dusty bus ride down to the plains from 7,500 feet in the Southern Ghats, from Kodaiakanal International School where I was working as a teacher of Indian history and society. We walked the last kilometer or so into “Gandhigram Deemed Rural University” and found their bungalow, an open breezy space.

Krishnammal warmly greeted my wife Fumiko and I, asking how the journey had been. I was struck my how typically Tamil she was, a Tamil mother who would take care of anyone within her reach. And that she did.

We slept on grass mats with sheets and awake early, as all people in rural India do, just before sunrise. Jagannathan was already spinning, mediating tafter his early morning yoga. I felt a little sheepish getting up so late. My main goals were simply to get to know Amma and Appa and to learn what they thought of the Sarvodaya movement, the central Gandhian force and movement remaining in India and Sri Lanka.

Jagannathan was, and is, Sarvodaya. This is his legacy from Vinoba Bhave and the Mahatma. Later I volunteered to do an article for the *Far Eastern Economic Review* out of Hong Kong on Sarvodaya. What I came away with, I now realize, went far beyond the straight-forward matter-of-fact information which Americans are always demanding. Amma and Appa, in their kind, gentle, Dravidian Tamil way, had shown me that change need not be fancy or complex. That we need to get back to some of our roots as human beings together.

Our days in Gandhigram then, and when we visited later, were filled with simple routine, what the Japanese call *kata* or form. The routines of the day of Amma and Appa were like the asanas of yoga, the exercises designed more for breathing and experiencing our inner selves than for physical effects. What we learned from sitting around the Pongal Harvest Festival cir-

cle, waiting for the milk to boil, signaling the presence of spirits and ourselves in a special celebration, the women in their saris with lines and dots of Shiva, Parvati, Vishnu, and Lakshmi on their foreheads ululating a call of 'here and now,' was to learn from the moment, reflect upon it, and seek action.

I had originally planned to visit Amma and Appa from last October for the purposes of trying to understand change agents and the many social and cultural issues facing Dalits and other oppressed communities in South India. And then the tsunami came. My main goals are simply to raise consciousness in a continuing way as David Albert and Donatella Baggio, perhaps taking a different tack, that of the anthropologist activist.

Tomorrow Sekar and I will go to Kuthur and the LAFTI Ashram.

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 25, 2005

**"Have You Eaten?" Arriving at LAFTI**

Kuthur Village, Nagai District, Tami Nadu, South India

We arrived late last night in Kuthur, sometime around 10 : 30 pm. The ride from Thanjavur was more than harrowing, the wild game of passing and near-misses played out on Indian roads between overloaded buses, lorries, and cars, always intruded upon by the unexpected : herds of cattle, goats, water buffalo, sheep, donkeys, people of all shapes and sizes, bicycles, motorcycles, scooters, even the occasional elephant. We saw all of these on our journey yesterday.

Kuthur is a remote village, but it is connected to a main road. We had no idea where we were going and had to stop frequently to ask, even our taxi driver on this last leg not knowing. Finally a signboard appeared for LAFTI. We swing around into the village and soon found ourselves facing a compound wall with a large painting of Mahatma Gandhi and sayings of his written in Tamil. All was dark and quiet, but some young men appeared as we entered the LAFTI compound. Smiling, always smiling in Tamil Nadu, they took us to our room, where we soon went to sleep.

Rising at 5 : 30 am just before dawn, I start out of LAFTI's main building and suddenly Amma appears, arms outstretched, reaching for my hands, her wonderful smile beaming. She clasps my hands, looking deeply in my eyes with her charismatic sparkle, a big smile on her face, immediately asking how my children, my two sons, are doing. This is characteristic of Amma, asking after your family and then you, before anything else. Amma's selflessness. We talk for some time, my asking after her and Appa, their children Sathya and Bhoomi, and then her work recently. We will go see it, she says.

"Then, have you eaten?" In the very Tamil form of greeting, it is one of the first

things you ask the other person. Everyone must be well fed! And Amma's cooking, as we are to find out, especially with the help of Jyothi, Mani, and others, is superb. Slow food in action.

We noticed during our stay in Kuthur that to eat is very close to the Gandhian philosophy of to live. Simple, wholesome country food, the ingredients all from local fields, trees, and plants. This is village food and vegetarian. The philosophy of nonviolence has permeated eating with Gandhians, too, and one will not see tandoori chicken at any Gandhian gathering! I do note, however, that many of the Dalits whom Amma is working with are meat eaters, including beef, though this meat-eating is also considered at least partly responsible for their low status, according to various caste origin myths.

Sekar's daughter Rohini has admirably translated some of these myths and their commentary, and shown them to me, the inevitable gloss being that something bad happened and they therefore ended up as meat eaters. There is, thus, an aspiration for vegetarianism and the higher status which it confers. At the same time, the protein in meat of course helps people who must do a lot of hard manual labor in the sun. We notice that the usual concerns with purity and pollution associated with eating practices in South India are very much absent at LAFTI, aside from washing one's right hand before and after the meal. Everyone sits and eats together, using the same plates and cups. There are no individual utensils, of course, since all the food is eaten by hand.

David has spoken earlier of *sambar* powder, the base of the gravy or sauce that usually accompanies rice or other foods in South India. A *masala* or mixture of dry spices, it is the foundation of what is called curry powder. *Garam masala* is another word for a *masala* of dry ingredients, and every house has their own recipes depending on the type of curry that is being cooked. Curry, by the way, simply means food, like *gohan* in Japanese. There are also wet *masalas*.

We eat in a large thatched shed, sitting on the ground on woven straw mats all together with round stainless steel trays as plates. Amma is very on-task with all the cooks in the preparation of the food, and we notice her often directing the general preparations for meals. She is involved in many aspects of the operations of LAFTI, but this duty she seems to especially relish.

Morning is usually *idli*, the round Tamil steamed rice/dal cake. We typically eat four or five of those. Part of the batter is ground rice and part ground dal (lentils), ground in a large granite mortar and pestle and then left overnight to slightly ferment. It is a nutritious and tasty batter used to make *iddis* and the thin crepe called *dosai*. *Sambar* gravy with vegetables, which also has a dal base, and freshly ground coconut chutney with mustard seeds and green chillis are the accompaniment for *idli* and *dosai*. We also have a rice mixture with mustard seeds and curry leaves. The curry plant provides fresh or dry leaves that are a pungent and important part of all South Indian curries, two other major

ingredients being chilli powder from red chillis and turmeric root which gives the characteristic yellow color of every.

South Indian food is rice-based, and the main meal of the day is lunch, when a large mound of rice with two or three side vegetables, some curds (yogurt), sambar and *rasam*, fiery pepper water. Second, third and fourth servings are expected. And after lunch there is a long nap of one to two hours. Quite sensible given the intense heat of the middle of the day in South India.

Some variations on dosai with sambar and chutney or perhaps the northern wheat-based *chappati* or deep-fried *puri* breads, along with a potato or other vegetable curry, are evening meals. Indians also love sweets, and Sekar and I bring sweets into the landscape! They are not typical in LAFTI, but everyone is happy to see them nonetheless! Appa in particular has quite a sweet tooth.

Sugar cane is originally from India, by the way, and I think the attraction of sugar was as great as spices to the early Europeans coming to Asia. They did not have sugar. Nor did sugar exist in the Americas. Indian sweets are very sweet, usually ghee- (clarified butter) or milk-based. But they are not often seen in village South India, where day-to-day struggles for food and getting something on the plate is the highest priority and, for some, a difficult one to meet.

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 26, 2005

### **Let's Beat the Drums! Motivating and Mobilizing**

Kuthur Village, Nagai District, Tami Nadu, South India

After breakfast we sit and talk with Amma about her work and our plans for our stay in Kuthur and the area. We begin with talk of the tsunami, which she says she has carefully watched. She has not rushed to give aid in the manner of many international and national NGOs, which seemed so bent on competing with each other to see who could do the most good. While she praised UNICEF for their work in getting potable water quickly to the affected areas, she is somewhat doubtful of the motives of other NGOs, seeing them as being here either for the purpose of conversion or the siphoning off of aid to the black market. Tons of materials piled up at the Collector's Office (the highest official in the district), and much of it has not been released. What has been released has gone only to the fishermen and not to other groups.

But what is most important for Amma is to put everything in perspective. As she says, for the poor there is a tsunami every day.

"I won't give anything for free. You come and sit and work. For yourself. Make bricks!" Amma explains her perspective. There should be some kind of work for self-help, making bricks or building homes being the most appar-



**Figure A. UNICEF moved quickly in bringing potable water to communities.**

ent at this time. There are also struggles against temple lands, or so-called benami lands held in other people's names to avoid the land ceiling laws, as well as the devastation of prawn farms.

Amma describes her work of the moment, of which there are many projects. Symbiosis wherever possible seems to be an important goal. For example, waste lands that have lain fallow and become covered with weeds and thorn forests can be cleared after they have been transferred to LAFTI, the wood obtained then being used to fire bricks that have been made for houses, that will be built.

Her current projects include trying to get more lands from Sikkal Temple, a large temple in the area. She always has her eyes and ears open searching for lands that are being wasted or hoarded. With enough of the right kind of persuasion she has been able to get the titles of these lands transferred to LAFTI. In turn she does not simply give lands to those in need but enlists them in her Army of Compassion to build homes, clear other lands, and do other jobs.

Before starting this work it is important to get the workers motivated, too, and she later brings one of her workers who is a musician and song-writer to sing for us. Hard-driving village-oriented music meant to inspire: "Let's beat the drums! Let's change the huts! Beat the drums for the land revolution! Poverty and caste must go away! Thatched roof mud huts must go! Your hands must do it!"

"First we have to motivate them," she says. "Then we mobilize their manpower. We mobilize them, and not just with money. We make it in their self-interest, and before starting work we have self-help groups. It is also not just food-for-work: there is 75% rice and 25% money. Practice, local practice using local materials and know-how is then utilized as a strong founda-

tion.”

For Amma there are two kinds of work that LAFTI is doing : Movement Work and Constructive Work. The Movement Work is about protests against the ecological damage of prawn farms and so on, largely led by Appa. The Constructive Work having to do with houses, lands, and crafts are what Amma has been working with. With both of these, organizing people’s power is the key. We notice, too, that one of the key points of Amma’s approaches is to deeply involve the women in what is happening. With them and with the people she works with in general, there are great psychological needs to be appreciated, to be given dignity and respect, to be honored as human beings, all of which have been left out in the traditional society. Amma puts into practice this approach as the base for her work.

Later in the morning we accompany her to a remote brick-making site. We spend the morning with the workers there, talking with them and taking their pictures. Amma is busy talking with individuals about their particular stories.

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 27, 2005

**Constructive Work : The Brick-Making Site**

Kuthur Village, Nagai District, Tami Nadu, South India

Amma gestures towards her Army of Compassion, the lean, handsome, black young Tamils whose muscles speak for both hard work (and meat-eating in their diet). Amma feeds them breakfast and lunch, including her special *urugai* (fabulous South Indian pickle of lime, garlic, onion, and plenty of chilli powder), *tayir* (curds, yogurt), and rice. But as she says, “I feed them in the morning and at noon. Let them eat what they want in the evening,” an obvious reference and tacit nod of approval to meat-eating.

We arrive at the brick-making site after a long bumpy trip along roads that could hardly be called more than bullock cart tracks, our driver Muttukumar deftly sliding through each pot-hole and head-on with another vehicle in a space of centimeters with precarious sides slipping off to a river, a thorn forest, a paddy field. He is, along with Gandhi – LAFTI’s secretary ; Thamba – LAFTI’s photographer ; Kalyappan and Muniand – LAFTI’s chief accountants and office workers ; and the wonderful cooks, led by Jyothi and Mani, the heart of LAFTI’s operation.

The workers gather respectfully, knowing Amma has come and would have instructions, cajoling, and questions. Men, women, children. The adults seem to be from 20–35 and the children, generally pre-school age. Amma is concerned about the children baking in the heat, standing by their mothers and occasionally helping with the brick-making by kneading the clay or get-

ting ready to fill a frame, always for two good-sized bricks, of which there are thousands drying in the sun.

This is a wasteland, or rather it is a tract of land that was left unused and has gone to thorn forest. These are particularly nasty thorns, having personal experience of them in the bottoms and side of my feet in previous time spent in villages around Madurai. Not only can they give a piercing wound, some of them are tipped with a poison that especially smarts. Not for the meek, living in these conditions. Most of the workers, and of course the children, are barefoot. Dalits generally have a minimal amount of material possessions, maybe a few sets of old clothes, perhaps a set of sandals, some cooking pots and plates. Again, from personal experience, I can tell you that sandals do not provide much protection either, as the thorns easily go through any leather or rubber.

Three chairs are brought, one for Amma and the others for her guests. There are three of us, including myself, Sekar, and Ramuthai, a field development worker from the Gandhigram Trust, which is situated at Gandhigram Rural University, and who has been brought in to evaluate and consult. I realize in talking with her, and later with Amma, that I have actually known Amma and Appa earlier than David and I thought, as I had attended the opening of Gandhigram Rural University in December of 1976 and stayed with them at that time. And I have a memory of meeting them with Dick Keithan in Kodaikanal and perhaps at his ashram in Oddanachattram as well. I then visited Amma and Appa a number of times after that in their workers' home, which I now realize was a branch of the early beginnings of LAFTI.

Ramuthai (Rama's mother) is shining in her gold sari, an attractive woman whom I thought to be around 30 but who is actually 50 and already has grandchildren. We talk with her and her colleague Ramesh later about the problems of the rural poor. She has been involved in projects such as a World Bank-sponsored scheme for community-managed drinking water supply. Better to have them funding something on our side at least is the conclusion, not busy aiding the privatization of water.

Amma sits down. Our composer and songster Murugaraj sings a brief song of encouragement to the workers, and Amma begins asking questions. She spends perhaps two-and-a-half hours talking with many of the workers, making it very clear to those who ask for boons (cows, lands, homes, etc) that she expects them to help themselves first and then, this is very important, to help others. Amma has the allegiance of tens of thousands of Dalit laborers in the countryside for maybe 50-60 kilometers in any direction. She can produce a demonstration of more than ten thousand in less than a day if necessary. And they have done that for the campaigns against prawn farming and the endless rounds of pressure for the release of lands to the

poor.

The cell phone has come to India, too, leap-frogging the laborious and capital-intensive need for land-lines. Amma and Venugopu, one of the next generation of leaders along with a gentleman we get to know later named Veerasamy, are often on the phone, the tune of an Italian opera loudly announcing each time a call comes in (“All around the cobbler’s bench, the monkey chased the weasel.”)

Here I would like to bring in an aside, another account of the brick-making, also from the blog, and this time by the Italian social activist Donatella, written on February 14, 2005 :

*“The brick-making program is proceeding full-speed!” Krishnammal tell me, shining with joy. So now I understand what has been going on in the last couple of days very early in the morning in LAFTI’s courtyard. The Army of Compassion is made up by an ever-increasing number of volunteers coming from different village. They are given food under the large, shady shed in LAFTI’s courtyard. and the women in the kitchen are working incessantly to cook mountains of rice and fill buckets and buckets with sambar and vegetables, as well as producing hundreds and hundreds of idlis (steamed rice and lentil cakes) in the morning, whilst lodging is provided in the adjacent workers’ house.*

*Immediately after sunrise, the Army corps members board the truck that takes them to the brick-making site. They will return only after sunset, when tasty and abundant meals will again be served to them by those kitchen angels that never seem to get tired of working. I woke up today to the workers’ voices, getting ready to board the truck, and found out that Amma had been out at the villages since 4 o’ clock in the morning. Now that she’s back, I sit with her in the breezy verandah in front of her house to listen to all that she has been living, experiencing, and doing since last night.*

*Sometime before 2 a.m. she woke up and couldn’t possibly go back to sleep . So she prayed to God and asked Him what was there that was so urgent He wanted to tell her, to prevent her from sleeping. She sat thinking and praying and meditating for a while until finally at 4 o’ clock she decided to go to Palankallinedu, where LAFTI has organised a brick-making unit. When she got there, she found out they were waiting for her to help them solve the fuel problem : what could they fire the bricks with?*

*Just then, Nataraj turned up from a nearby village, bringing the good news that the Sub-Collector is giving them a large piece of bushland to be cleared, so that there will be wood for them to bake the bricks. Krishnammal had visited the Sub-Collector a couple of days ago and he had indeed mentioned the piece of land he intended to give her to get wood, but she hadn’t yet been in-*

*formed that this had actually happened. So there is she, arriving at the brick-making site just at the right moment to announce the good news and give the people powerful motivation and inspiration to carry on with the job so that, with LAFTT's support and God's blessing, they will soon be able to live in decent and solid homes.*

*"You see," she says, smiling with joy, "I've always sought divine guidance in my work and always believed that nothing is impossible. Anything is possible as long as you have faith!"*

*But her faith is proactive in nature. She is definitely not sitting and waiting for miracles to happen and for gifts to be dropped from heaven. She is taking the challenge, constantly, daily, unshakably with the amazing energy and determination which are indeed the gifts God provided her with. And, in days like this, she feels and is indeed rewarded and once again confirmed in that radiant and inspiring faith that keeps her "running, running, organizing, organizing" non-stop, every day and night, all along her generous life which we all wish will go on forever!"*

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 28, 2005

### **Touching**

Vallivalam Village, Thiruvarur District, Tami Nadu, South India

We notice that there is no power distance between Amma and others. She is very physical, often touching people in a society which has long practiced untouchability. This touching is especially important for those she is working with, a demonstration that there is an alternative path to this rigid, seemingly uncompromising social system and its skewed hierarchy of values.

Touching. It is a significant part of her message, whether holding hands with those she is talking, putting her arms on their shoulders, grabbing their forearm. Always looking deeply and directly into their eyes. And when she touches you, you are drawn to her space and place, to the needs that are there and the question of how/what are you going to do about it!

Amma and the workers, Amma and her staff, Amma and visitors like ourselves, Amma and Dalits working at brickmaking or other activities.

I am reminded, too, of Amirthamai, the "hugging guru" from Kerala who has assembled devotees in the hundreds of thousands, giving as many as ten thousand hugs a day from morning to night, and who has done very good work around her ashram in Kerala (including tsunami relief work, that part of the Kerala coast where her ashram is located having been affected badly, too, as Matt, one of Sekar's University of Wisconsin students

who was there when the tsunami happened, has told me).

Amma treats them all alike, speaking with affection at times and chiding them like a mother at other times. Power distance is based on fear, and Amma will have none of that. That does not mean she will not speak her mind. She is very strong in responding to anyone she thinks is looking for a hand-out or a free ride, scolding them sometimes in coarse and rude language that would be unthinkable from anyone else: "What kind of beggar do you think you are??? If you think like a beggar you will become one."

But somehow she gets away with it, partly because of her age, and certainly because of the enormous respect she has from everyone for what she has done over the years. We do get comments and grumbling from some of her workers later about this, but it sounds more like children complaining how their mother is treating them, the real issue being her attention and affection. I have to say that my own ears have been burned on a few occasions!

But who else can motivate people to build 26 houses in 30 days? That is the time she told us which one Self-Help Group recently took for the construction of new houses. "Now we are asking them to help others," she says.

It is this community-building, the larger issue of working together against oppression and the system, that Amma is so good at. A few harsh words here and there can be tolerated and forgiven. We also noticed and later talked with two older people, a man and a woman, loners who were hangers-on in the LAFTI compound. Each had lost everything to money-lenders or poor life decisions. Each often tries to get Amma's ear when they can to ask for lands or a cow, and, we might add, each seems to not quite be all there. And each time Amma roundly chides them and gets them to do odd-jobs around the compound, feeding them, and all who come to LAFTI, if they have the courage and the will to help themselves.

We return for lunch to the LAFTI compound, but before we begin Amma sends us off to the LAFTI girls' hostel. LAFTI runs both a girls hostel and a boys' hostel, the latter at the LAFTI ashram itself. These are places for children from remote villages to stay in order to get them closer to the schools they attend.

"I do not want them, the next generation, to just do what their parents did. That would be ok, too, if they choose it. But they should have a choice."

In fact, as we see from later interviews, that is precisely what happens to the more successful families whom Amma and Appa have helped. Not only are they able to build a successful lifestyle, but their children marry up and often move to the city. Ramu, one Dalit farmer who has been successful enough to purchase his own lands after receiving some small plots from



**Figures B and C. Vallivalam School children and presentation from Kobe Elementary School (Vallivalam, February 2005)**

Amma, shakes his hands in the Tamil gesture of “What to do?” and says clearly that the land and farming will go out of his family with this, his generation, despite the successes he has made with Amma’s help.

We arrive at the Vallivalam hostel after a bone-shaking ride of 40 minutes, and then see the buildings and gardens with the warden, Ms. Kannagi, and her teachers. The students, who range in age from 6 to 17, grow their own food and have some lessons at the hostel as well as those of the nearby schools. Vallivalam Primary School, about a ten minute walk to the south, past a large irrigation tank/pond, and the Vallivalam Higher Secondary School are both highly-rated schools in the area.

I am searching for the right place to give the many drawings and paintings which the students of Kobe Elementary School, Kobe, Japan, have made for victims of the tsunami as well as monies they have raised. Kannagi helps us to deliver these later to the Vallivalam Primary School.

We return to LAFTI exhausted, have our ‘sapadu’ rice lunch with curries and sambar, and then take a quick nap. Soon the door swings open, Mutukumar telling us Amma wants to take us to three or four projects, some right along the coast where the tsunami damage occurred. We rouse ourselves and get back in the Tata Sumos, those rugged SUVs, that are the vehicles of choice for Indian “roads.”

These later afternoon visits take us to *benami* lands (lands held illegally in

someone else's name) that are even deeper in thorns, and I find myself pulling the *mullu* from my *chapels* (sandals). There are also temple lands which are pointed out to us and which lie fallow in another location, another target for Krishnammal's efforts. She wants us to document a Dalit village of thatched mud huts packed closely together, too, which she says she is going to change, and another not far from the coast where the tsunami came up to the tops of the doors.

She speaks disparagingly of the mud huts which are the standard dwelling for most people. They leak, harbor insects and vermin, and are washed away during heavy rains. Their roofs are collapsing, their mud floors turning into a soup mixed with all the dust and dirt of the street and nearby fields. Don't forget, there are no toilets in Indian villages generally, the expectation being that the nearby fields work fine early in the morning. One does have to watch where one walks.

When the summer comes the dust that blows around is potent. So it is not only stomach but also respiratory ailments that are easy to get. The people living in these villages demonstrate a remarkable resiliency in the face of these challenges. But their life expectancy is short and there is little solace if one becomes ill, the nearest hospitals being far away and there being little or no money in any event for any treatment. Infant mortality in these circumstances is, not surprisingly, somewhat high and also one reason for parents to have many children. You don't know how many will survive.

TUESDAY, MARCH 1, 2005

**The Kilvenmani Massacre**

Kilvenmani Village, Nagai District, Tami Nadu, South India

I'm determined! No living in mud huts! It is a sign of poverty."

Amma has awoken this morning at 3 a.m., gone into Nagappatinam on some jobs, and is back by 6:30 a.m. for morning ablutions and supervising the breakfast preparations. She seems to sleep only a few hours every night. Some nights she wakes with a vision at 2 a.m. and calls for a driver to take her to a village or official's house, to sit, wait, and gently but forcefully plead for lands or other help for the Dalits for whom she is working hardest.

I ask our driver Muttukumar, who seems very good at getting close with all visitors CAFTI receives, if he is the one who was summoned early this morning to do all that driving. His eyes widen, and then roll, and he says, "Oh no, nobody can keep up with Amma like that! She called another driver!"

What is this energy and resolve? Much of it comes from Krishnammal's de-

termination after the horrific massacre of 44 Dalits, mostly women and children and one baby pinned to a tree with a knife, that took place on December 25, 1968, in Kilvenmani, a village not far from LAFTI. It was this incident that sparked a fire under and within Amma that is unquenchable and that has led to numerous struggles and then changes in the area around Kilvenmani.

Today we are being taken to Kilvenmani to witness what happened. We journey down bumpy back roads to a village shaded by coconuts and peepul trees. In the middle of the village there is a stark white cement building with red trim, a memorial which the Communist Party of India Marxist-Leninist (CPI-ML) has erected, along with a large memorial arch where the road to Kilvenmani splits off from the main road. The Communists were very active in this area, at least until relative prosperity set in recently, and Krishnammal has worked with them on occasion since they share similar goals. Amma's goals seem to trump the CPI-ML, however, and they cannot be happy losing members, as livelihoods improve and the circular nature of political parties gets compared to the direct self-help promoted by Amma.

We meet Subramanian and Velusamy, two older men who directly experienced the massacre and lost family members. The women had told the men to flee, they tell us, expecting serious trouble, trouble that was again very much about caste and their Dalit status. Local landlords came in search of what they said were Naxalites, radical Maoists who were active in the area in those days in Thanjavur (and who are still active in areas around the Andhra Pradesh/Orissa border). Suspecting that Naxalites were hiding in a long shed, but probably really knowing it was Dalit women and children and others, they set fire to the shed burning everyone alive and shooting those who tried to escape.

The next day the story was spread all over India, and it was at this point that Amma decided to take the struggle from Gandhigram near Madurai to Kilvenmani near Thanjavur. This was the beginning of LAFTI.

And as Amma tells us again when we return later to discuss Kilvenmani, "Dalits are always attacked by tsunami."

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 2, 2005

**No Conflict, No Compromise**

Kuthur Village, Nagai District, Tami Nadu, South India

No conflict. No compromise.

That is the ethic and approach of Amma and Appa to social, ecological and economic problems. You approach the women first. Get them on your side.

The power of shakti, female divine energy, will carry you far. You approach women partly because this is not about political parties, which men are so quick to become involved with and which suck up resources that could more effectively be used elsewhere. The DMK, the Communists, and others may speak a good line, but end-results are what Krishnammal is really looking for. The men will be brought along later by the women.

The women are also the end-point victims for many of the problems caused by social and economic injustice, including alcohol which Amma and Appa, being good Gandhians, completely oppose. For women there are communal struggles every day, and then the struggles with their own men who may gamble or drink away what little there is. Not all men, of course, but the record is decidedly one-sided.

We notice that Amma is constantly asking women and men wherever we stop about the ownership of the lands we are looking at, especially inquiring about those lands that look to be illegally owned or are lying fallow when they could be used.

And in the end it is about some deeply felt human needs. As Amma told us, "People are attached to me and I to them. Fellowship. It is fellowship they are starving for." The basic dignity and respect which Amma accords to all people, whatever their age or wherever they come from, follows her belief in the 'unity of the light' that 'the spirit is one.' "Where is there poverty?" she asks simply. And then answers her own question. "Where is there poverty?" "We will find it."

There is work to do.

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Thanks again to David Albert for this opportunity to write some of my comments on my visit to Amma and Appa. I have returned to Madurai and will soon go back to Japan. My final thought: by all means try to support Amma and Appa in whatever way you can. I would especially encourage you to try to visit LAF TI. It is an arduous journey but you will be rewarded by seeing up close the work of two truly inspired human beings. And you get to see Amma in action. There are many smiles and there is much touching in this land of untouchability.

*Poyte varrenne* : *Going, I will come . . .* (humble form)

(The traditional Tamil greeting when leaving, hands held together in a gesture of prayer and respect.)

*Poyte vaange* : *Going, please come (back) indeed* (honorific form)

(The reply that is always given in Tamil, in the honorific, honoring those

who would continue to be part of our lives and the circle of life. Notice that this is not a goodbye, because you promise you will always return.)

Special Thanks : I would like to especially thank Macesocust, (Madurai Centre for Social and Cultural Studies, which supported research in India), for all the logistics they have provided for this research and especially my colleague Sri J. Rajasekaran, Resident Coordinator, University of Wisconsin, College Year in India, Madurai Programme, Madurai, Tamil Nadu, South India, for his help with this project. Sekar is a highly skillful, persuasive, persistent, and deeply inquisitive field ethnographer. I have learned more about South India from him than from any other source. His early guidance in my South Indian fieldwork led to my career in Cultural Studies and Anthropology.

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### **Appendix 1. A Message from Amma – March 13<sup>th</sup>, 2005**

Kuthur Village, Nagai District, Tami Nadu, South India

#### **A Message from Amma – March 13, 2005**

Dear Friends,

LAFTI is sending grateful greetings to you.

From June 2004, LAFTI passed through many ordeals and difficulties in the form of prawn struggle, court cases, natural calamities floods and lastly the worst disaster of Tsunami. It is a wonderful experience, a great many good compassionate souls from all over the World come forward to take part in the relief work. It seems the people have developed the tendency to receive help from others without any effort. LAFTI felt it is not a healthy attitude. The workers went round to awaken the people for joint efforts to resolve their own problems. It is a well-known fact that the floods caused great to the rural poor rendering thousands and thousands homeless. LAFTI efforts are fruitful. The village people have come forward for a joint venture to make their own bricks and put an end to the life of living in the wretched mud huts, which demand every year repairing.

About in 15 centers some 250 families have started to make bricks. The day 13 th March is a happy day for LAFTI and to the area people. In one place called Kohur they have achieved a great success in making 300,000 (3 lakhs) bricks for their own houses. From 6 villages nearly Sellur, Kothamankalam, Kohur, Porkalakudi, Peruchathankudi, Moonkilkudi people are happily engaged in brick making.

During the summer the people used to spend their time in social functions, but LAFTI is able to create an atmosphere for the people in 15 villages to use their time in fruitful way. Now they have realized their self-help spirit. This news has reached to many villages. Hope the summer will be a happy occasion for many rural poor and LAFTI.

With love and kind regards,

Krishnammal Jagannathan  
Secretary – LAFTI

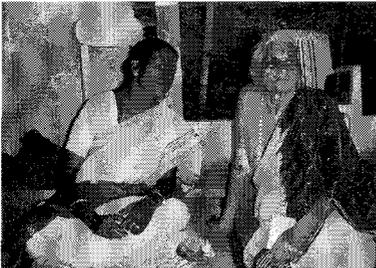
As always, LAFTI still needs resources for the housebuilding projects. You can see pictures of what is being built at [www.lafti.net](http://www.lafti.net) as well as other information. At that address, there is also a list of how to contribute, whether you are in North America, Japan, Europe, or Asia. Please give generously. You may also contact the author at [DWillis108@yahoo.com](mailto:DWillis108@yahoo.com) for LAFTI-related questions.



**Figure 1** Jagannathan and Krishnammal at LAFTI NGO, 2001 (LAFTI)



**Figure 2** Amma and Appa, LAFTI Gandhian Workers, and Author, Kutnur, 2005



**Figure 3** Amma and Ramuthai, Social Activists, at LAFTI, Kutnur, 2005



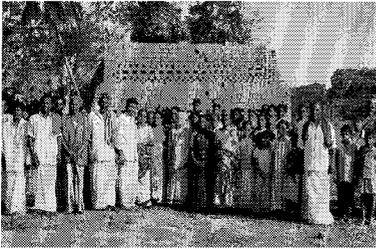
**Figure 4** Amma Leading a Demonstration in the 1990s (LAFTI)



**Figure 5** LAFTI Leaders Amma and Venugopu Going to Brick-Making, Kutnur, 2005



**Figure 6** Dalit Women Workers and Children at Brick-Making, Nagai District, 2005



**Figure 7** Krishnammal and LAFTI NGO Workers at Brick-Making, 2005 (David Albert)



**Figure 8** Tsunami Destruction, Nagappatinam, Dec 26, 2004 (LAFTI)



**Figure 9** Tsunami Aftermath, Nagappatinam, Dec 26, 2004 (LAFTI)



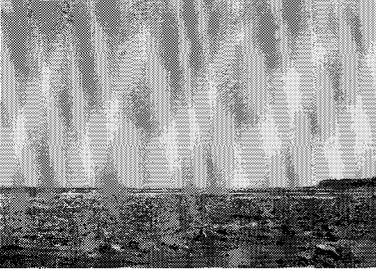
**Figure 10** Tsunami Victim Who Lost Family with Amma, Dec 26, 2004 (LAFTI)



**Figure 11** Tsunami Destruction, Nagappatinam, Feb. 2005 (Waves reached tree tops)



**Figure 12** Refugee Housing Post-Tsunami (Dalits Excluded), Nagappatinam, Feb. 2005



**Figure 13** Tsunami Destruction, Village Site, Vellenkanni, Feb. 2005



**Figure 14** Tsunami Destruction, Village Debris, Vellenkanni, Feb. 2005



**Figure 15** Amma with Cell Phone Pencil Box for Primary School Students, Kutnur, Feb. 2005



**Figure 16** Amma and LAFTI Staff, Kutnur, Feb. 2005



**Figure 17** B. R. Ambedkar, Dalit Leader, Madurai Post Office, 2005



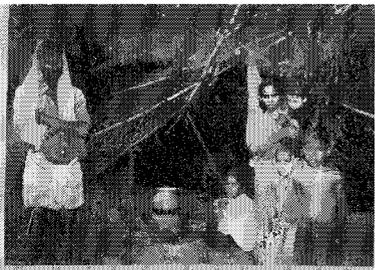
**Figure 18** Chakkiliyar Dalit Cobblers, Madurai, March 2005



**Figure 19** Dalit Transexual Activists Mohana, and Friend (anon.), and Interviewer J. Rajasekaran, Madurai, March 2005



**Figure 20** Vallivallam School Teachers, Ms. Kannagi, Author, Vallivallam Feb. 2005



**Figure 21** Dalit Mud and Thatch Hut Destroyed by Heavy Monsoon Rains, Dec. 2004 (LAFTI)



**Figure 22** BEFORE Typical Dalit Mud and Thatch Hut, Nagai (LAFTI)



**Figure 23 AFTER House Built By LAFI and Dalit Community (LAFI)**



**Figure 24 BEFORE Dalit Ceri Hamlet, (LAFI)**



**Figure 25 AFTER Dalit Ceri Hamlet, New Houses by LAFI (LAFI)**



**Figure 26 Before - Dalit Mud and Thatch Hut (LAFI)**



**Figure 27 During - Building New Dalit Home (LAFI)**



**Figure 28 After - New Dalit Home (LAFI)**