A Sense of Direction: Responsibility and the Span of Disaster in a Tamil Coastal Village

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Abstract

On the basis of fieldwork in a tsunami-affected village in Tamil Nadu, India, this chapter argues that the inherently temporal nature of people's actions should be brought to bear on the understanding of resilience against environmental dangers. Ethnographic examples are presented to show that although the tsunami was an unprecedented disaster, the contours of the event are in no way clear for the local actors. To the survivors, events of different origin and date combine into an experiential whole, and acting in the aftermath of the disaster implies responding to an indefinite demand of reorientation on the basis of past experience as well as future aspirations. This chapter thus suggests that a concept of resilience as residing within social-ecological systems is problematic, not so much because it risks overlooking the creativity of individual actors, but because it rests on a spatial understanding of the expanse of disaster, which does not pay sufficient heed to temporality as a condition of subjective agency.

The Asian tsunami in December 2004 spurred by an underwater earthquake off the coast of Sumatra was an unprecedented natural disaster, and as a sudden calamity the tsunami obviously tested the numerous affected populations' level of resilience. Following

Melissa Leach, resilience can initially be understood as 'the capacity of a social-ecological system to absorb disturbance and reorganise while undergoing change so as to retain essentially the same function, structure, identity and feedbacks' (2008: 3). A focus on resilience in settings subject to environmental threats of various kinds has been highlighted for being a realistic means of analyzing reactions to unexpected events. As Neil Adger et al. have observed in an article dealing with coastal disasters:

> The concept of resilience is a profound shift in traditional perspectives, which attempt to control changes in systems that are assumed to be stable, to a more realistic viewpoint aimed at sustaining and enhancing the capacity of social-ecological systems to adapt to uncertainty and surprise. (2005: 1036)

To be sure, the assumption of an underlying condition of stability, to which social-ecological systems impacted by disaster can return by way of adaptation and reorganization, can rightly be labelled as out of date. Indeed, within recent anthropology of disaster, one of the main points is that disasters cannot analytically be seen merely as extreme events disturbing an inherent societal equilibrium, but should be approached as processual phenomena that are often but an intensification of existing and long-term conditions of vulnerability. Accordingly, the reason why natural hazards sometimes turn into disasters is that people in many places around the globe live in vulnerable environmental and social settings, where they are susceptible to calamity (Oliver-Smith 1996, 1999a, 1999b; Oliver-Smith & Hoffman 2002; see also Hilhorst & Bankoff 2007; Wisner et al. 2004).

However, even if the recent reconceptualizations of resilience mentioned above reject the idea of a social-ecological equilibrium, they still appear curiously devoid of people from an anthropological point of view. A 'social-ecological system' is portrayed as playing the leading role, to begin with as that which is disturbed and surprised by an unexpected event and, in consequence, as that which displays a more or less elaborate capacity to adapt and reorganize. In the following, I will show that a focus on resilience as residing within *systems*, even those qualified in one way or another as social, can be

complemented by a view of resilience as a fundamentally human agentive capacity, resting firmly with people acting continuously to sustain and recover a sense of direction in their everyday lives.

The problem with the systemic approach, as I see it, is not so much that it risks neglecting the dynamic and improvisational character of social life by assigning mere supporting roles to individual human actors. Rather, the real issue is, in fact, that such systemic conceptualizations of resilience build on a spatial mode of thinking about social-ecological organization and about the expanse of environmental disaster. Essentially, concentrating on an adaptive – or maladaptive – social-ecological system rests on an implicit identification of a closed circuit with a limited extent, within which the cause for the need to be resilient can be squarely located. As I will show, this approach to resilience does not pay sufficient heed to the work of time in people's resilient actions and to the adherent complexity of defining causes and effects.

In other words, my overall argument is that thinking about environmental threats in terms of *spatial expanse* is only one element in grasping resilience to calamities; if the concept is to make sense at all, an acute attention toward the *temporal span* of human responses to social-ecological challenges is equally required, not only because disasters must be seen as processes, but because human subjectivity is created with time as much as in time and is conditioned by duration (Das 2007: 95 ff). However systematic they may appear, social worlds need to be performed in order to exist, and this performance inevitably unfolds within temporal frames (K. Hastrup 2007: 193). Thus, drawing on these insights, the main purpose of understanding resilience as an agentive rather than a systemic property is to allow for apt recognition of the complex ways in which temporality features in people's practical responses to disastrous events.

The ethnographic basis for my claims is a total of ten months of fieldwork conducted in the coastal village of Tharangambadi in Tamil Nadu, India, which was badly hit by the Asian tsunami (see F. Hastrup 2008, 2009). My fieldwork spanned a period of just over three years from February 2005 to April 2008, during which the villagers, the majority of whom belong to a Hindu marine fishing community, acted in numerous and comprehensive ways to absorb the

disaster and get on with their lives. As will become clear, however, these actions were directed at a number of concerns that featured in people's lives both before and after the onslaught of the tsunami, and which were both directly and indirectly attributable to the disaster as such. Though unparalleled in scale and clearly datable in calendar time, the contours of the tsunami were not obvious at all. Veena Das' reflections on the complex relation between notions of time and event are relevant here. She has noted that:

> [T]here are publicly observable events for which we cannot name an observable "now" (...) The point is not that there are moment-to-moment beliefs and then there are stable temporal maps, but rather that the particular mode in which the subject is immersed in the temporal shapes the contour of the event. (Das 2007: 97)

With this notion of the subject as inevitably immersed in temporality in mind, I argue that from the point of view of the survivors in Tharangambadi, what was at stake in the aftermath of the disaster was not so much to react appropriately to the tsunami as a unique and identifiable event, the expanse of which was gradually diminished to the point of absorption by a resilient social-ecological system. Rather, as the three ethnographic cases presented below will illustrate, for the villagers of Tharangambadi resilience implied an overall sense of responsibility, which was in constant and indefinite demand.

The ties that bind

A week or so went by after the tsunami before my translator, field assistant and friend Renuga learned that her close relatives in the fishing community of the nearby town and district capital of Nagapattinam had been badly struck. At first Renuga had thought that all was well with her elder sister and her family in Nagapattinam, since their house was located in safe distance from the sea. To begin with, she had worried mainly about her other elder sister, who lived near the waterfront in the nearby town of Karikal, and in whose care Renuga's own three daughters had been on the day of the tsunami. The three girls and the rest of the Karikal family had all come

through unhurt, and Renuga's relief was immense. The shock was thus all the greater when she eventually found out that her sister in Nagapattinam, the sister's daughter, and her two granddaughters had all been swept away by the waves. Renuga's sister had gone to the beach with her two granddaughters to fetch some firewood for the cooking stove. When the first of the two waves to strike the coast hit the beach, Renuga's sister's daughter had gotten worried about her mother and her two children. In response, she herself had gone to the beach to look for her family, only to be washed away by the second of the two tsunami waves that struck the Tamil Nadu coast.

Four people from three generations were gone in a matter of minutes. Two boys, then aged six and eight, were left behind as the only survivors in the three-generational family unit. The children's father was already gone, as he had been shot dead in the summer of 2000 by the Sri Lankan marine police. On the suspicion that fishing boats from Tamil Nadu transferred arms and other supplies to support the rebellion of the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka, the marine police had started a policy of cracking down hard on fishing boats if they entered or came too near Sri Lankan sea territory, whether the fishermen onboard did this knowingly or not. With the father gone, the family had been in a precarious situation even before the tsunami, because the primary breadwinner was no longer there. The widow and her mother had struggled to keep economically afloat, supported by Renuga and by being enrolled local women's self-help groups establishing small businesses of various kinds.

Michael Moseley has suggested the concept of 'convergent catastrophe' to describe the fact that a disaster will have more serious effects if it occurs in close succession to other disasters, than it would have had if it had been suffered individually (1999: 59). While this idea aptly captures the fact that an existing level of social and environmental vulnerability shapes people's resilience in the face of calamity, the very idea of convergence seems to build on a delineation of disasters as definable events with certain expanses. In the case of Renuga's family presented here, one could of course argue that the two bereaved boys did indeed suffer a convergent catastrophe, where the death of their father and the devastation caused by the tsunami mutually aggravated each other. However, if the notion of conver-

gence is to make sense as a description of the boys' situation, we must, I suggest, extend this with a temporal dimension so that what is seen as (analytically) convergent must be matched by what is experienced as existentially simultaneous. Das has noted that 'the simultaneity of events at the level of phenomenal time that are far apart in physical time make the whole of the past simultaneously available' (2007: 97). In this light, the whole of the boys' story and that of their extended family was present all at once in the aftermath of the tsunami; a condition that once again complicates the spatially founded idea of resilience as absorption, because absorption basic- ally posits a *relation* between domains, where there is only a com- pound whole with an unlimited temporal scope.

With the two young boys being the only survivors in the nuclear family on account of both marine police brutality and the roar of the tsunami, it was clear that some other adult person had to step in and take charge of the boys' lives and make plans for their future. As Patricia Uberoi has noted on the nature of Indian families: 'Even if households are nuclear in composition, the members are still lo- cated within joint family spheres' (2003: 1070). In the case of the sur- viving boys in Renuga's family, however, the exact placement of them within a joint family sphere was contested after the disaster's brutal decimation of the family.

In order to compensate the surviving next of kin for the loss of family members to the tsunami, the Tamil Nadu government issued the following order four days after the disaster: 'The Honourable Chief Minister has announced an immediate relief at the rate of Rupees 1 lakh [100.000] per person dead in the family (next of kin) from the Chief Minister's public relief fund' (Government Order No. 574). The compensation, which was doubled by an equal com- pensation sum from the Federal Indian Government, was a huge amount of money by all local standards. As for the two boys in Renuga's family, the compensation was further multiplied because they had lost several family members, and discussion soon arose be- tween their maternal and paternal relatives as to who should be con- sidered next of kin, and who should thus be in charge of the sudden newfound wealth. Renuga wanted to enrol the boys in a well-reputed English medium boarding school and set the remaining fortune

aside for further educating the boys later on. Their paternal grand-mother and their paternal uncle offered to take the boys in and have them live with them, following the custom of patrilocal residence prevalent in the fishing communities on the Coromandel Coast (see Bharathi 1999). Renuga, however, complained to me during my fieldwork in 2006 that the boys' grandmother and paternal uncle might not be proper role models for the boys, and without going into details she hinted that she thought there was a so-called "value problem" pertaining to that side of the family.

Such conflicts of interest between different sides of an extended net of family relations were not uncommon, and although I was not able to extract the precise background for this particular disagree-ment, I gathered that it had a long history and that it had been am-plified by the murder of the boys' father in 2000. With the sudden acquisition of wealth after the tsunami due to the compensation money, the discord became full-blown and attained a new kind of urgency. In line with her overall view of the family that her niece had married into as having somewhat tainted morals, Renuga suspected that the grandmother and uncle only offered to care for the boys in order to get a share of their compensation money. Quite simply, Renuga was suspicious that the boys had become mere economical assets to the family on their late father's side. The grandmother, in turn, accused Renuga of using the boys as hostages in an attempt to practically rob her of her only surviving family.

Much to Renuga's relief, however, the two sides of the family eventually settled on a solution, which in Renuga's eyes put a wel-come stop to the draining family quarrel. Toward the end of my field-work in 2006, the boys had been enrolled in a good boarding school in Nagapattinam, and their paternal grandmother and uncle who lived close by had been given the status as the boys' formal guard-ians under the shared understanding that the compensation sums should eventually finance higher education. Thus, while submitting to Renuga's request that the compensation money be put aside for educational means, the boys' paternal relatives had kept a say with regard to their future.

The effects of the tsunami in this case were multifarious and played into a composite whole made up of past marine police brutal-

ity resulting in a tragic loss of life and dire financial consequences for the immediate family, and a long-lived family discord intensified by the sudden attack of the disaster. For the two surviving boys, the tsunami entailed an irreversible change of their lives within a matter of minutes. However, what the disaster also entailed – at least potentially and for the time being – was a newfound truce between fractions of a joint family network that otherwise had a history of collision. Abetted by a sudden financial wealth, which would have been completely inaccessible if not for the compensation sum, the actors in the extended family network joined forces to ensure the future of the boys left behind.

Although stories of discord can break out again without notice (Das 2007: 80), what was at stake in the wake of the tsunami seemed for the adult relatives of the boys to be both to mend the ties that bound the extended family relations together, and to take over the responsibility of charting a clear future course for the surviving children through the means of a funding that would otherwise have been unobtainable. In other words, ensuring a measure of durability in the lives of the boys took precedence over past family disagreement, which in a roundabout way was defused by the occurrence of the tsunami.

Certifying the future

The Hindu celebration of *Deepawali* is observed annually as a festival of lights throughout all of India to symbolically mark the victory of light over darkness, and the return of faith and goodness after a period of absence. In 2006, I was in Tharangambadi for the festival and I had seen how excitement about the holidays had been building up over weeks. Shopping for firecrackers, sweets, and new clothes had been on most people's minds, and all Hindu houses in the village had been thoroughly cleaned as is part of the practice pertaining to the *Deepawali* festival. I had been invited to the celebration by Renuga, and at five o'clock an October morning I made my way through the dawn to her house. After a small and homely *pooja* ceremony, her three daughters and I took turns in lighting small firecrackers in front of their house on the temple square in the

heart of the fishing community's settlement. Afterwards, according to the *Deepawali* custom, the girls went around to their friends' houses with sweets; neighbours came and went, and all along the handful of women gathered in Renuga's house showed me how to prepare the traditional snacks and foods that go with the festival.

Outside the house, the noise from the fireworks gradually grew louder as more and more people in the fishing area of the village joined in the celebration. A few hours later, while we were resting inside Renuga's house, a group of yelling children could be heard running by outside, rushing away from the nearby seashore. Renuga and her daughters were startled, as they usually were when someone ran away from the seashore yelling, because this was the way they had been alerted on the day of the tsunami, and we rushed outside to the temple square to see what was going on. Round a corner a few streets away we saw high flames sprouting into the sky. The roofs of two fishing houses were ablaze. Until the local fire fighters showed up after about ten minutes, we could see young men rushing back and forth between one of the burning houses and a porch on the opposite side of the street, carrying whatever items they dared to retrieve from inside the burning home. A big crowd had gathered, and shouts rang the air, as the plumes of smoke rose to the sky.

Word quickly got around that some fireworks from the *Deepawali* celebration had gone astray and had set a roof made of dry palm leaves on fire, which quickly spread to the neighbouring house. The house from where the various belongings were retrieved, I was told, belonged to a fairly well-off family with a member of the local fisherman caste *panchayat* – or council of elders – as the head of the household. Seen from where we witnessed the flames darting into the sky, I suspected that the other house on fire was that of Arivu's family. I had met Arivu because he worked as a watchman during the nights at the guesthouse where I was staying. He spoke English quite well and had helped me translate various texts from Tamil. Sometimes in the evenings I would show him photos of things I had seen and places I had been to during the day, and he would explain to me the meaning of a temple rite, a road sign, a flyer, a poster or other. Early on, Arivu had taken it upon himself to enlighten me about life in the fishing community of Tharangambadi, where he had lived all his life.

When I first met him in 2006, he was 19 years old and studied for a BA in physics at the local college in the neighbouring small town of Porayar. His father, who worked as a fisherman, had left the family when Arivu was five years old and was now living in a different fishing village, and as the oldest son in the household the responsibility for supporting his mother, younger sister, and younger brother weighed heavily on Arivu's shoulders. His mother, Jayanthi, had no formal employment but made a small and occasional income by producing and selling shopping bags made from knitted plastic strings and by stitching clothes for family, neighbours and friends.

As the primary wage earner in the family, Arivu had a very busy schedule. From ten o'clock at night until seven in the morning he was a watchman at the guesthouse. After this night duty, during which he would often study for college, he lead a tuition class in mathematics for some 10th grade students from the village, whereupon he went to the college until about two o'clock in the afternoon. During college holidays, he often helped out as a crew member on his uncle's fishing boat. According to Arivu, people outside his own nuclear family put quite a pressure on him to give up college and start working full-time as a fisherman, as this in their view would secure a better income for his family than his various part-time jobs. In Arivu's words, they simply considered his studies a waste of time. Arivu, however, had his mind clearly set on completing first the BA and then an MA degree, if he could get a scholarship. In Arivu's eyes, it was his responsibility to ensure not only the day-to-day survival of himself and his family, but also a long-term improvement of their situation. To this end, Arivu explained to me, formal education was the only chance he thought he had, even if the profit was not as immediate as it could perhaps have been if he had entered the fishing business.

The house that burned on the day of *Deepawali* was indeed Arivu's. When he showed up for his watchman night duty that evening he told me how he had been home alone sleeping inside the house and had suddenly opened his eyes to a roof on fire. Dry palm leaves burn quickly, and fearing that the roof would fall down on him, Arivu knew that he had very little time to get out of the house. What he did have time for was to collect his college and school certificates

and diplomas documenting the results and progress of his studies. These papers, to Arivu, were apparently the most precious belongings in the house. The fire fighters put the fire out and when taking stock afterwards, almost all the belongings in the house except the papers that Arivu had salvaged were more or less ruined, if not by the fire, then by the water that had put it out. As illustrated by Arivu's salvaging of his exam diplomas from the fire, in his eyes the papers were – quite literally –his tickets to a better future.

With financial support from the fisherman *panchayat*'s emergency fund, the leafed roof of the family house was replaced within a week. However, other traces of the fire were not erased that quickly. When I visited Arivu's house some time later, the smell of smoke and the sense of dampness were still evident, and the interior of the house was permanently dim because the electricity supply to the house had been destroyed by the fire and the water.

At the time of the tsunami in 2004, Arivu's house, which was located in the part of the fishing village furthest away from the seashore, had suffered only superficial damage. The family had returned to the house after a few weeks in a temporary shelter, and had lived there since then. From Arivu's point of view, the tsunami had not been nearly as destructive as the fire almost two years later, as he told me. For a person in Arivu's situation, the tsunami, though sudden and unexpected, was clearly but one obstacle in an ongoing struggle to make ends meet; a struggle which went back at least as long as to the time when Arivu's father had left the family many years before, and which was accelerated for shorter or longer periods of time by events such as the tsunami and the fire in the house.

To get by in this composite situation, Arivu had set his course and he kept expressing his luck that he had managed to get his exam certificates through the fire unharmed; indeed, he never for a moment seemed to doubt that these were the most valuable objects in the house. They were in a sense what certified his drawn-out endeavour to improve his family's conditions and create a durable everyday life for them all. As Arivu acted to push against the limitations structuring his life, he did not merely react to existing conditions; in a way he was acting to get the future back in place. Once again, re-

silence implies a measure of temporal envisioning. Sandra Wallman's observations are highly relevant here. She states that:

> Planned change is not possible without a view of how things might be, and even the rehabilitation of individuals or groups who survive disaster depends on their being able to visualise a better or safer time to come (...) Again, it seems that without a view of the future there may not be one. (Wallman 1992: 3)

At the time of my latest fieldwork in 2008, the Tamil Nadu State's official re-housing programme was well underway. Arivu's family had been allotted a solid brick house in what was known locally as the tsunami village, which neared its completion. When we discussed the prospect of moving to the new house, Arivu highlighted that the new house would have electricity. For want of money, the electric wiring in the old house had never been reconnected after the fire, and the family had gotten through the dark hours by way of kerosene lamps and candles. Although Arivu expressed that he was slightly saddened to leave the home where he had lived most of his life, he was excited by the thought of having electric lights in the new house, a feature which was part of the make-up of all the newly built houses to be paid for by the Tamil Nadu State authorities. The electricity, Arivu explained, would make it much easier for himself and for his younger brother and sister to study for their exams, just as it would make it easier for his mother to produce the shopping bags and do the stitching that she relied on as her personal source of income.

What this case story shows is that Arivu acted within a compound setting made up of a range of experiences, such as the father leaving the family to stay in another fishing village, the outside pressure on his educational plans, the appearance of the tsunami, and the destruction brought about by the fire in his house and the water that put it out. This, quite simply, was the composite situation, on the basis of which Arivu worked to improve the present and ensure the future for himself and his family. What Arivu was engaged in was a drawn-out process of replacing his father by taking on the financial responsibility for his family and, quite literally, the task of refurnish-

ing and improving the family home after the flooding and after the destructive fire. Interestingly, within this total situation, the tsunami turned out to be a kind of shortcut to Arivu's effort of improving his family's situation, as it had brought about an unexpected opportunity of re-housing, which again sustained his long-term struggle to acquire a sound profession on the basis of formal higher education. To put it shortly, in Arivu's case, the greater disaster had proved to be the lesser evil. Seen in this light, the tsunami supported Arivu's vision of a brighter future – in more senses than one.

Upward mobility

In the small town of Porayar neighbouring Tharangambadi, a large hostel houses about 300 girls, mostly orphans. After the tsunami, the hostel, which is funded mainly by private charity organisations from abroad, had increased the number of girls staying there with about one third, and the already full dormitories had become even more crowded. During my fieldwork in 2006, I paid almost daily visits to the hostel, because my Tamil language teacher worked as a director there. Upon ending our Tamil classes, she would usually call on a handful of girls staying in the hostel for them to help me practice the day's lesson. This was how I met Pressana, a girl from Tharangambadi who was then 17 years old and who had come to stay in the hostel shortly after the tsunami. Before the disaster, Pressana had lived with her father, who worked as a gardener at the hotel in Tharangambadi, and the two of them had been living in a small house close to the sea. The house had been damaged by the tsunami but had since been replaced with a small hut built in the same spot. For reasons unexplained to me, Pressana's mother had committed suicide when Pressana was 12 years old, and at that time her father had tried to get Pressana enrolled in a hostel in the area, primarily with a view to improving her educational opportunities. In addition to providing basic shelter and food, the hostels put strong emphasis on the children's schooling, and by way of an often rather strict regime of tuition and homework guidance the enrolled children are motivated to study hard in order to improve their situation on a long-term basis.

When the family had applied for admission to the nearby hostels at the time of Pressana's mother's death, Pressana could not immediately be accepted because her father was, in fact, capable of caring for her and because she was only semi-orphaned. Instead, she had been put on the waiting list of the hostel where I eventually met her. However, due to increased funding in consequence of the tsunami, the hostel had allowed more girls to come and stay, and this meant that after four years of waiting Pressana was finally admitted in the spring of 2005. For Pressana, the admission to the hostel was high time since she had only one more year to go in the public school system, but by the same token it was all the more important as a way of preparing for the final exams. In the summer of 2006 when I met her, Pressana had completed her schooling successfully and was awaiting a decision as to what would happen to her then and where she might continue further education. This decision, I gathered, was primarily in the hands of the managers of the hostel, who collaborated with various educational institutions all around the state of Tamil Nadu and saw it partly as their responsibility to have the girls enrolled in furthers studies, primarily within the fields of nursing and teaching.

When I left the field in December of 2006, Pressana had been admitted in a nursing school in the city of Coimbatore in the Nilgiri Hills about eight hours' bus-drive from Tharangambadi. When I talked to her father, who had been left behind in the village, he assured me that she was doing fine, studying well – and feeling a little cold in the mountainous region. Again, what this example shows is that, in a roundabout way, the tsunami helped realize an aspiration that had long been in the family, namely that of Pressana being admitted to a hostel with a view to improving her future educational opportunities. Even if the tsunami disturbed Pressana's housing arrangement because of the immediate destruction of the family home, this disruption was overwritten by the fact that Pressana was on her way to fulfilling a long-held educational ambition, conceived at least as long back as at the time of her mother's death, and which pointed clearly to a future beyond the immediate. If, at first glance, the tsunami might appear as a catastrophe that converged with the tragedy of Pressana's mother's death, each disaster exacerbating the

other, it became clear that to Pressana this was not so. What is interesting here is that Pressana, her family, and the managers of the hostel acted within a complex repertoire of possibilities for future upward social mobility, some of which were incidentally occasioned by the tsunami. Again, the identification of chains of causes and effects is difficult; the whole of Pressana's story was available to her at once, not just as a convergence, but as a simultaneity in which specific events did not necessarily aggravate each other, but could equally neutralize each other.

Conclusion: A sense of direction

The examples above clearly show that to the people of Tharangambadi, existing social structures, sudden disruptions and potentials for future progress are completely intertwined, making it impossible to identify the tsunami as a specific disturbance with a definable expanse. I do not mean to present this as a celebration of the will to survive by making the banal statement about being strengthened by that which does not kill. Rather, I have wanted to demonstrate in ethnographic detail that human subjectivity cannot be thought of as independent of temporality; this goes for post-disaster settings as well as other social worlds. In all three examples, the effects of the unique event of the tsunami are intersected by issues of complex family relations, educational ambitions and economic aspirations, among which the individual actors had to navigate to act responsibly. The point of identifying such merging of hardships is not just to say that the consequences of the tsunami were surprising and uncontrollable, spilling over into unexpected terrains. While this was undoubtedly often the case, my aim here has been to show that the villagers perceived and practiced their world as one whole social condition unfolding within an unlimited temporal span, that demanded a constant and indefinite ability of reorientation.

At a more general level this highlights the point that catastrophes hitting at various points in time may merge into a contemporary experience, framing the sense of urgency upon which people act. In other words, the impulse which, for instance, made Arivu choose to save his school papers before anything else, was occasioned by sever-

al events. In that sense, I argue that resilience can never be understood in spatial terms alone, but must be complemented by an analysis of temporality and the way in which events datable in different times are simultaneously present in people's lives. To avoid the circular argument that existing patterns of vulnerability are what transform natural hazards into disasters, and that resilience, conversely, is what stops hazards from becoming disasters, the work of time must be properly analyzed.

In this chapter I have focused on individual courses of life marred by diverse calamities and hazards of various scales and historical origin. This was a strategic device on my part, aiming at ethnographically demonstrating the limitations inherent in thinking about resilience in terms of a socio-ecological *system*. For all its merits of attempting to combine the social and the ecological dimensions of human life, the notion of a system cannot harbour the differentiated perceptions of and responses to the disturbances, which must be absorbed – as Leach saw as the key-element in resilience. The idea that responding to disaster is a capacity of the social-ecological system, as Adger *et al.* saw it, blurs the vision of individual people acting as best they can on the basis of past experience as well as anticipated futures. Even if in a bird's eye perspective, people's resilient actions may gradually sum up into a perceived social systemic change of a larger scale, social resilience takes off at the level of human agency and the individual responsibility taken at the conjuncture of pressure and promise.

If the concept of resilience is to be appropriately applied within the social domain, it must encompass the temporal dimension that conditions all human agency, unfolding in actions that bear the mark of a deep-seated ambition to sustain a sense of direction amidst the disturbing unknown.

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