

A family's road back

As fishermen in one Indian village return to the sea, a father learns to parent again and a mother's fortitude helps steady her clan

By Kim Barker

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NAGAPATTINAM, India -- Valliammai sits cross-legged on the hospital floor, her forehead wrinkled in worry. Her pregnant daughter is curled up on a nearby bed, but that is not what bothers Valliammai.

She worries whether anything is going wrong back home. Because at the tsunami shelter, another daughter is ready to give birth, swollen and uncomfortable. Heavy November rains continue to fall. And children and grandchildren need to be fed.

"I have to get back," says Valliammai, who uses one name like many in South India. "I don't know if they can manage."

Since the tsunami destroyed the village of Akkaraipettai a year ago, killing Valliammai's husband and throwing the lives of her grown children into chaos, this thin grandmother has been the one person her large extended family can count on.

Her patience, perseverance and love have kept the family together through struggles with money, grief, even mental illness. Only now, as fall rains turn the village streets to mud, are any signs of hope emerging, both for Valliammai's family and Akkaraipettai.

Permanent homes are finally being built, solid two-story buildings a half-mile from the coast. All the people who live in Valliammai's shelter will be able to move there, most likely by spring, officials say.

Fishing, the main livelihood of Akkaraipettai, continues to rebound. Many men already have gone back to

work. Relief agencies have donated fiberglass boats; government loans and grants have helped build and repair about half the number of large trawlers that fished the ocean before the tsunami.

Valliammai, though, is still counting every rupee, worried about how she will feed everyone since her husband, a fisherman, was killed. Her plight is not unique.

Nearly all tsunami victims worldwide are still living in temporary shelters or with their relatives, according to a survey released early this month by the San Francisco-based Fritz Institute. The problems are bureaucratic, but in India they are compounded by flooding. The survey also shows that most families here make much less money than before.

For tsunami survivors, the emotional burdens have been as trying as the financial ones. But in Valliammai's family, glimmers of progress show the resiliency of a population that has overcome hardship before.

The children and teenagers in Valliammai's family no longer have nightmares, no longer stand up crying in the middle of the night. The teenage son once given anti-psychotic drugs for a mental breakdown has not had a relapse.

Even Ramachandran, 35, Valliammai's oldest son, has accepted that his wife is dead.

Few changes symbolize the new hope in this family like the two pregnant sisters, Chandrakala and Kalaivani. Both

women were married off shortly after the tsunami, in arranged marriages dubbed "tsunami weddings." On her wedding day, Kalaivani couldn't even remember her new husband's name.

Now Kalaivani, 19, is more than eight months pregnant. As part of cultural traditions, she has returned to her mother's shelter room from her husband's home, about an hour north. Here, she will wait until she gives birth. Valliammai will help take care of the baby for the first three months.

Chandrakala, 25, about six months pregnant, is in the hospital with some kind of infection, but doctors say she will be fine. They say her unborn baby is healthy.

This hospital stay does not worry the family much, even though no one knows what is wrong with Chandrakala.

But within weeks, what happens to her is yet another reminder about life, death and grief.

Living in chaos and hope

Valliammai, who estimates her age at 55, supports her family however she can. A relief group gives \$33 a month to help her children in school, but Valliammai uses the money to buy food. She sells fish when she is not busy taking care of her family.

The government compensation for the death of her husband is long gone. Among the big expenses: an old fishing-boat debt and the cost of weddings for her children.

Mainly, Valliammai runs from one child's crisis to another. After one son lands in the hospital for kidney problems, she takes her family's horoscopes to an astrologer. He tells her that her family is just going through a bad time.

Her son Mano, 15, seems better since his tsunami-related mental breakdown in the spring. But he still talks too loudly and reacts angrily to minor problems. He behaves strangely, waking up his family in the middle of the night by turning on the light, combing his hair and powdering his face. Mano was almost expelled from school two weeks earlier, because of poor attendance.

"You're going mad," Kalaivani tells Mano, who hit her on the back because he wanted a pencil.

"I am mad," he responds.

The shelter, built to last only until August, continues to deteriorate. Walls the consistency of cardboard rip apart; doors fall off hinges. Rats have moved in, scurrying along support poles on the walls or behind bags of rice.

One afternoon, Valliammai sits in her dingy shelter room. There are dirty dishes in one corner, and a pile of firewood in another.

Valliammai is watching three granddaughters, the children of her son Ramachandran. He has largely neglected his daughters and his mother since the tsunami killed his wife and two other children. He turned to self-pity and alcohol, while Valliammai watched over his daughters the best she could.

Outside, a storm brews. Winds thrash the thatched roofs. Ramachandran walks in, and begins to joke with his daughters.

He is curt with his own mother, yet this is a milestone of sorts. It is the first time he has visited his mother's room since the family moved to the shelter.

Almost every night, Ramachandran puts away about six shots of alcohol; he says he does this so he will not dream of his wife and dead children. But his outlook is less gloomy than in the previous months.

He has decided not to put his older daughters in a hostel, a cross between an orphanage and a boarding school. He says he cannot live without his daughters nearby, even if they spend their nights with Valliammai.

Most of the time, he keeps a towel over the framed photograph of his dead wife, whom he married for love, rare in the village.

Ramachandran is now an oddity in the tsunami shelter, one of the few men widowed by the tsunami who has yet to remarry, one of the few fishermen who has refused to return to the sea.

Instead, he sets up a loan business, using the government compensation for his dead wife, daughter and son. So far, business has not been good.

He has lent about half the \$13,800 from the government, but his customers are not repaying him on time. He has spent most of the other half--on savings accounts for his daughters, a motorcycle, a mobile phone, a sister's wedding, a brother's hospital costs, alcohol.

In a bow to family wishes, Ramachandran agrees to an arranged marriage with a woman from his own fishing caste. The ceremony is set for January. Ramachandran even tells his older daughters and shows them a pic-

ture of her, wearing the red-and-gold sari that he gave her.

Maybe his daughters will live with him. Maybe with Valliammai.

But he spends more time with them, acts like the father they need. One afternoon, he drives all three--9-year-old Kamali, 6-year-old Ambarasi and Tamarasi, who is now 16 months--on his motorcycle to get their family picture taken, necessary for aid from a relief group.

Ramachandran asks the photographer to take an extra photograph, of just the girls, all dressed in their nicest outfits, their hair combed into straight parts with coconut oil.

"This one is for me," he says. "Look here, look here, look here," he tells Tamarasi.

The toddler, found in her dead mother's arms after the tsunami, smiles sweetly and looks at her father.

Weddings of opportunity

Not everyone in the family has adjusted.

Chandrakala, Valliammai's second-oldest daughter, was forced to wed Selvam in late February. His mother died in the tsunami. His father wanted someone to cook, someone to care for Selvam's four younger brothers.

Chandrakala cried when Valliammai told her she had to get married. Her marriage was one of dozens arranged in the village. Without the tsunami, Chandrakala and Selvam would never have married. Neither would many other new couples, thrown together by disaster and opportunity.

Their marriage was never good. By

April, the cracks were obvious.

"There's no happiness in the marriage," said Selvam, 25, sitting next to his bride in their shelter room.

"That face doesn't seem to like this face," Chandrakala added.

The next month, she ran away, to Ramachandran's shelter room, complaining that Selvam did not treat her well. Eventually, she returned to her husband.

But she told Valliammai that she wanted out of the marriage. She said she wanted to kill herself. Then she got pregnant, and Valliammai told her that two lives were involved and she had to hang on.

Privately, Valliammai concedes that the marriage was a mistake. But in this environment, divorce is rare; no one in the family has ever been divorced. Pregnant and unhappy, Chandrakala's future seems written out.

Kalaivani was already pregnant. Unlike Chandrakala's marriage, Kalaivani's seemed to be going well. She missed her family but liked the quiet of her new tsunami shelter, where she shared a room only with her husband and father-in-law.

Now, Kalaivani sits in her mother's shelter room, waiting to go to the hospital.

And her sister Chandrakala sits in the hospital, waiting to go home.

"They won't tell us what is wrong," Valliammai complains.

Chandrakala is being given shot after shot of antibiotics--18 in all--because she has an infection, a sexually trans-

mitted disease: gonorrhea. The truth is difficult. The baby should be fine, but Chandrakala is sick.

Her family, though, does not know any of this.

Six days after she is admitted, Chandrakala is released from the hospital. Her husband takes her to Valliammai's shelter room, where Chandrakala sits stone-faced in the corner.

If her brothers knew what had happened, it could be her ticket out of the marriage--for such an insult, her brothers would likely run Selvam off and allow a divorce. But she will opt to stay quiet, to preserve her husband's secret. Only a brief flash of anger shows that she knows.

"Go finish cleaning the house," she tells Selvam.

He smiles. "Why are you angry?" he asks. "Come back."

"I don't want to come there. I'm not coming there."

They argue about this, Selvam pleading, grinning, pulling at Chandrakala's hand. She won't look at him.

"For you, I am no different than a prostitute," she tells him. "You don't need a wife. You need something to sleep with."

Sad legacy of tsunami

Valliammai packs quickly, but she does not seem to realize what she's taking. "I need clothes, where are some saris?" she says to herself, and grabs a metal canister for tea and two metal cups to take with her. She tries to stuff large saris in a small bag.

Her daughter Chandrakala is back in the hospital, her unborn baby in trouble. And Valliammai is acting as if everything is normal, as if tea will be the answer. She will go to the hospital alone. None of her sons has visited Chandrakala since she first got sick. They don't know that she was released, or that she's now back in the hospital.

"None of them have even come to check on her," Valliammai says.

This is tough for her, this realization, that the sons she counted on are not reliable. Her two married adult sons are now living separately from her, rare in this culture, where sons typically take care of their parents and younger siblings. Ramachandran may be acting nicer but he still is not helping much.

When Ramachandran's children are sick, Valliammai takes care of them. When another child bites Tamarasi, Ramachandran refuses to take her to the hospital and sends the baby back to Valliammai. When Ambarasi wets the bed, Valliammai or a daughter cleans it up.

This makes her philosophical and she starts to talk about her life, what she wanted out of it, what she got.

"I never wanted anything for myself," she says. "I only wanted for my children to be happy."

Her older sons are fighting with each other. Valliammai fears her three younger sons will not help her, either. One of them, Jeeva, 17, stopped going to school in the 4th grade. Since the tsunami, he has no interest in fishing. He loafers, allegedly helping Ramachandran with his new loan business. Neither Mano nor his younger

brother wants to be a fisherman.

"It's a very difficult life, trying to depend on your sons," Valliammai says. "I can't go to my sons and say, 'Look, I need this, do this for me until the day I die.'"

With Chandrakala, as with everything else, Valliammai is essentially on her own.

She walks down the alleyway between the shelters, ducking beneath clotheslines and sleeping mats drying in the sun and then beneath the bridge that survived the tsunami. She takes a cab to the hospital.

There, Valliammai finds Chandrakala, one of 20 pregnant women sitting along a stained yellow wall, waiting for a doctor and tests.

In the middle of the night, Chandrakala's water broke, the amniotic fluid leaked out. She has been waiting for 3 1/2 hours to see a doctor, but no one has told her what happened. Chandrakala carries a notebook, where all her doctor visits have been recorded. She flips through the pages, the notes on the health of her fetus. She

stares, vacantly.

Valliammai stands apart from her daughter. She does not know what to say.

The scan shows that the fetus is alive. But it is unclear what is happening. Finally, Chandrakala is sent home.

"If you find it difficult, come to my house and rest," Valliammai tells Chandrakala.

They visit another doctor, who does more tests and prescribes a combination of antibiotics and steroids. The doctor says the fetus is fine but must be monitored closely.

"The kid is super," Chandrakala tells her mother. The young woman is lying down in her shelter room, where a poster of a baby proclaims, "You'll always be the one I love."

"No problems with the kid," she says.

Valliammai does not say anything. She can tell the doctor thinks the fetus is in trouble.

Days later, Chandrakala's baby, a legacy of the tsunami, will be born. Premature, he will live for five days and then he will die.

His body will be buried in a sandy graveyard on the south side of Akkaraipettai, near where Ramachandran buried his wife and daughter on the day of the tsunami.

But Valliammai does not know any of this now, none of the grief still in store. All she knows is that she has to work and that she has to be ready for whatever happens next.

She bathes Tamilarasi, Ramachandran's daughter, and feeds her warm milk. She washes the family's clothes, trying to figure out how she can make fish curry for dinner even though she has no money for fish.

"Wait, I'm coming," she says when Tamilarasi cries to be held. "I just need some rest. I'm not dead yet."
