Chapter 6
Materializations of Disaster: Recovering Lost Plots in a Tsunami-Affected Village in South India

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Introduction

The Asian tsunami that swept across coastal regions all around the Indian Ocean in December 2004 left innumerable affected communities at a loss. Thousands and thousands of people perished, many more were left homeless, personal and household belongings were washed away, and the afflicted populations' trust in their surroundings was seriously compromised. The South Indian village of Tharangambadi on the coast of Tamil Nadu was one of the places badly hit by the disaster (see F. Hastrup 2008, 2009). Out of the village's total population of about 7,000, the tsunami killed 314 persons, the clear majority of whom belonged to the 1,200 fishing households settled along the beach lining the Bay of Bengal.

In this chapter, I focus on the recovery process as undertaken by survivors in Tharangambadi in the wake of the tsunami. Anthropologists have recently noted that even seemingly disempowering experiences of disorder and fragmentation do not lead to passivity; in many societies, crises may simply constitute a context for subjective agency (Vigh 2008: 10–11). In times of trouble, people often display a remarkable talent for living and a degree of resilience, which prompts a need to rethink dominant models of trauma, as Nancy Scheper-Hughes has observed (2008). The capacity to act and exercise resilience in the face of overwhelming events was certainly apparent in the case of Tharangambadi, and on the basis of 10 months of anthropological fieldwork among men and women of the village's fishing community, conducted in 2005, 2006 and 2008, I explore how the villagers have worked over time to make their local world inhabitable in the face of a brutal and disconcerting experience.

More specifically, in the following sections, I analyze the conspicuous connections that the villagers of Tharangambadi made between ways of relating to the material residues of the disaster and ways of recovering from it. My main argument is that an important element of the survivors' recovery work has been to engage with

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a complex material register, in which objects that have disappeared, been destroyed, or that have yet to materialize play a central role. Attending to these objects, I suggest, serve more generally as a means for the villagers of presenting, processing and ultimately alleviating the strong sense of uncertainty brought about by the disaster. Even at the time of my most recent fieldwork, survivors would jump at the sound of shouting or hurried movements in the beach area, and they would often comment on any shifts in the sea or surf seen from their habitual settlement along the waterfront. The ongoing shifts in and discussions about people's housing arrangements in the wake of the tsunami also testified to a widespread sense of unsettlement shared by many survivors. Consequently, in both a figurative and literal sense, the disaster was seen as threatening to displace the villagers from their habitual paths and dwellings. Thus, fieldwork amply showed that the tsunami had not yet been assigned to the past; to many survivors, the tsunami was still an unclaimed experience, the character of which had yet to be determined. In the light of this, I suggest, engaging in various ways with missing, broken or unfinished artifacts and their ambiguous nature as both present and absent, served as common materializations of loss and seemed to function as a means for the survivors to reclaim their everyday life in the aftermath of the disaster. As I will show, the survivors' attending to the physical materializations of disaster was an element in an overarching recovery process.

As an experience continuing to feature in people's lives long after its occurrence, the tsunami was not seen by survivors simply as an event of the past but equally as a threat to a durable present and an anticipated future. The absences that I deal with here are therefore not just the concrete material losses suffered by the villagers on account of the tsunami, but additionally, the attendant absence of the ability to act in the present habitual social setting and to plan ahead for a time to come. In other words, long after the tsunami, the villagers of Tharangambadi were suspended in a matrix made of the presence of disaster and the absence of certainty.

Recovery and the Realm of the Ordinary

As Veena Das has observed with regard to the effects of collective violence in India, recovery after disruption is often not accomplished through grand ritual gestures, as much as through an everyday work of repair (Das 2007). Taking my cue from this insight, I locate the Tharangambadi fishing community's effort to recover not in formal acts of healing or in official commemorative displays, but in an ongoing practical process of letting the disaster descend little by little into the realm of the ordinary. Following Das, I am interested in the ways in which the disaster has attached itself to the lives of people engulfed in it. This perspective entails a focus not on the disaster as a singular event, but as an experience that has seeped into the survivors' lifeworld. As Das has noted, disruptions in social life do not merely consist in the dramatic events as such, but also in an ensuing sense among survivors that their access to a habitual context has been blocked or threatened (Das 2007: 1–12).

The lacking sense of accessibility to an everyday social context was apparent in Tharangambadi, as was the steady work to restore it. The sense of displacement was often pointed out to me; when I walked around the affected areas in the company of villagers, they would continuously point to ruined houses and tell me who had lived there, or which activities they associated with the damaged structures. “This was Vijay’s house, and over there was Latha’s home”, my field assistant Renuga would say, before indicating the destroyed house, on the porch of which she had often waited when she went to fetch water as a young woman. “Before the tsunami there were two rows of houses here with narrow paths between them. We used to play here when I was a child. Now the houses are gone, and the families have moved”, my friend Arivu said on a walk through the northern and most heavily damaged part of the village where he had volunteered to show me around.

Interestingly, the material register invoked to encompass the sense of disruption and displacement from habitual context was not only apparent in relation to objects that had been damaged, but applied equally to unharmed buildings and structures that for some reason or other were connected to the tsunami. Survivors thus continuously used material constructions as points of orientation and as objects central to their experience of the tsunami when moving around the areas of the village once flooded by the waves. As late as 2008, the villagers would point out rooftops, staircases and tall houses to where they had hastily fled when outrunning the tsunami waves. Several times when we were walking by, Renuga would say:

> “See that building over there. I ran and ran as fast as I could until I could climb onto the roof of it. So many people were already there when I came. I was saved by the St. Theresa’s Teacher Training Institute.”

In these cases and on countless other occasions during my fieldwork, the villagers thus connected material objects and buildings to the tsunami and made clear that for better or worse the disaster still constituted a point of orientation in their lives, forcing them to re-enact relations to their well-known settings; to be sure, the scars from the tsunami had become attached to life in the fishing community.

The local use of these material manifestations of the tsunami is perhaps not just a result of the sheer enormity of the disaster, which in itself could force it to the centre of the survivors’ attention, but also because, as Daniel Miller has suggested, human perception per se tends to comprehend through particular forms. According to this line of thinking, as human beings we have no way of perceiving except through specific form, and our access to the world is therefore always objectified (Miller 2005). In the light of this observation, the tsunami cannot be perceived of except through its material manifestations; or to put it simply, once the waves have withdrawn, to the survivors, the tsunami *is* its consequences. The villagers of Tharangambadi simply lived a life in touch with the disaster through its physical traces appearing in people’s daily lives, and by actively pointing to these, the villagers testified to the disaster’s encroachment on their everyday actions and movements.

In this light, recovery is not a matter of sealing off the disaster in an absolute past, but of restoring the accessibility of a habitual social context. In other words, rather than striving for a sense of closure after the disaster, which is necessarily a retrospective attempt at cleaning up in all senses of the word, the survivors seemed more concerned with recovering their sense of agency exercised in the present with a view to future prospects. To this end, the ambiguous material manifestations of disaster such as missing, damaged or incomplete objects seemed to lend themselves more easily to the task of reclaiming life than did symbolic and retrospective enshrinements representing the tsunami as an event of the past. Thus, as I show, the inherent human capacity of objectification notwithstanding, not any material object was apparently allotted a part in the recovery process. This became apparent through the villagers' reception of the official commemorative monument constructed in Tharangambadi during my fieldwork.

A Monument to Mourning

In many fishing villages along the coast of Tamil Nadu, monuments constructed in remembrance of the victims of the tsunami began to appear during my fieldwork in 2006. In Tharangambadi, a memorial monument to honour the deceased from the fishing village was completed and inaugurated on the second anniversary of the disaster in December 2006. The memorial, funded by the local council of elders governing the fishing community, is situated on the Kamarajar Road, the main street connecting the fishermen's part of the village with the busy market street of Tharangambadi, and the monument thus occupies a central spot in the village near the main junction, which most people from the fishing community would pass several times in the course of an ordinary day. The memorial is made up of a large black marble column with the names of the persons from the fishing village, who died on the day of the disaster, inscribed in Tamil on the sides at the base of the pillar. Around the column is a small grassy and neatly kept garden with flowers and figures of birds, all of which are enclosed by a fence with a large gate.

Even though the monument was decided upon by the local village council of fishermen, judging from my observations, the individual local villagers largely ignored the memorial in the course of their everyday routines. The central geographical location of the memorial did apparently not imply that the monument occupied an equally prominent position in the minds of the members of the fishing community. All through the construction phase in the end of 2006, and again during my fieldwork in 2008, I never once saw a local inhabitant of the fishing village stop to look at the memorial or even talk about it in any significant way, except to specify that this shop or that house was located near the monument. Save for an occasional gardener tending the flowers, I never saw anyone inside the fence encircling the column. The memorial, it seemed, had simply become a site on the map and not a station in people's everyday movement; the villagers could of course see the monument, but apparently they saw no point in actively engaging with it (Fig. 6.1).

Thus, even if the marble memorial provides a stone proof narrative of the tragedy caused by the disaster and thus testifies to a hugely important event in the lives of many, to the villagers such chiselled testimony of the tsunami seemed – as of yet – to

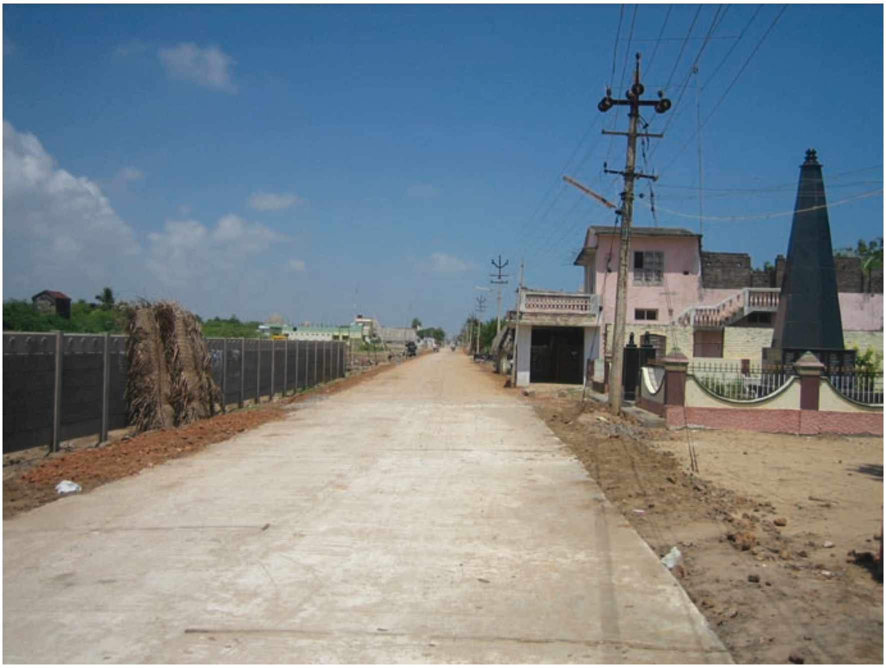

Fig. 6.1 The memorial monument to the right of a newly laid road. Photo by the author

play little role as a shared material expression of the experience of loss. As intimated in the above and as I will elaborate on in the following, the villagers made ample use of material objects and structures when they conveyed how the disaster had left its mark on people's lives. Hence, it is not the material quality as such of the memorial monument that caused the villagers to largely disregard it. Rather, the concept of monuments suggested by Michael Rowlands and Christopher Tilley might give a clue as to why the villagers in Tharangambadi paid little heed to the memorial. As Rowlands and Tilley have observed:

> "A monument is an object taken out of history, by history. Yet it stands for history in terms of what it has left behind, as a mnemonic trace that also separates it from the present" (Rowlands and Tilley 2006: 500).

Following this observation, memorial monuments are necessarily separate from the present by their inherent attempt at converting an event into something that belongs strictly to the past. Thus, by its very construction and design, the memorial represents the disaster as a concluded event, the lethal effects of which have once and for all been calculated, listed and engraved in stone. As such, I suggest, it does not mirror the villagers' experiences of still living in various ways and to varying degrees with the presence of the tsunami. If a sense of closure is still wanting, the tsunami cannot be taken out of history and turned into a monument; consequently, for the time being, the marble column somehow misses the point. Paradoxically, the monument is out of touch with the disaster.

What is essentially at stake here is the temporality of the experience of bereavement. In an effort to define the concept of loss, Eng and Kazanjian (2003), drawing on Freud, point to the role of melancholia and contrast this with mourning by distinguishing between how the two concepts imply different stances to the past. Melancholia as opposed to mourning entails an open relation towards history:

> "While mourning abandons lost objects by laying their histories to rest, melancholia's continued and open relation to the past finally allows us to gain new perspectives on and new understandings of lost objects (…) In this sense, melancholia raises the question of what makes a world of new objects, places, and ideals possible" (Eng and Kazanjian 2003: 4).

Indeed, at the time of my fieldwork, the bereaved were still in the process of recovering the ability to envisage a world of new objects and ideals, a world without what had been lost. The survivors were still engaged in restoring the access to everyday life; the effects of the tsunami were a source of melancholia featuring on a daily basis and were not mourned as a past story with a fixed design.

Insofar as the memorial monument symbolically enshrines the tsunami by representing it as a past event, it simply seems to fall short of encompassing an existing experience of having been displaced from a present habitual context and of being in a process of gradually reclaiming it. As I will substantiate further in the following, in their effort to present the prevailing absence of certainty, the villagers employed wholly different and much more complex materializations of loss than a purely retrospective memorial monument.

The Materiality of Loss

Even at the time of my latest fieldwork in Tharangambadi in the spring of 2008, the destruction caused by the disaster was still highly visible for all to see. Worldwide, the tsunami spurred the largest ever humanitarian emergency and rehabilitation response (Telford et al. 2006). Tharangambadi, too, was propelled into this massive relief effort, but the many reconstruction projects implemented in the village by numerous NGOs and other humanitarian actors have so far not entailed a simultaneous process of removing what was destroyed. Importantly, the villagers themselves have also done little to erase the marks of the tsunami from their local environment. As a result, broken and useless fishing boats, parts of ruined and abandoned houses, heaps of bricks and rubble, flooring and tiles and other such physical traces of the flooding lay scattered all around.

During all of my fieldworks, the co-presence of destruction and reconstruction was conspicuous. In the northern beach area of the village, which was most severely hit by the flood waves, the simultaneous presence of contradictory features in the landscape was particularly pronounced. Here, deserted and partly wrecked houses overgrown with shrubs and left to further dilapidate are crisscrossed by newly laid, straight and even “Emergency Roads” made during 2007 by the Tamil Nadu government in response to the tsunami. One explicit purpose of the roads was to facilitate evacuation from the coastal areas in the event of new tsunami alerts or floods – a function that by 2008 struck me as somewhat ironic given the seemingly permanent desertion of the neighbourhood ensuing from the tsunami and from the ongoing re-housing practices also authorised by the state. The newly constructed roads simply appeared to me as dead-ends on all accounts; not only do they end abruptly near the waterfront on the edge of the village; they also lead through ruined areas where no one lives anymore. As my friend Arivu, who had walked around with me in the deserted area, aptly remarked at some point during my fieldwork in 2008: “Sure, the roads are nice and even, but perhaps they would have been of more use if they had been made when people were still living here.”

The ill-timed road project notwithstanding, although the ruined areas were deserted they were clearly not irrelevant to the villagers. As already intimated, rather than being merely a consequence of a delayed or failed effort to clean up, closer inspection revealed that all the material remnants of the tsunami left more or less untouched were, in fact, significant to the survivors. In contrast to the villagers’ inattention towards the official memorial described above and as already illustrated, time and again the people I engaged with would point to the physical destruction apparent both outside the village and inside people’s homes in an effort, it seemed, to locate or pinpoint the otherwise overwhelming experience of disaster and the losses it had brought about in terms of both destruction and disconcertion. The various material residues of the tsunami appeared to serve as landmarks of orientation and were by their very ruined nature somehow expressive of the experience of dislocation, whether figurative or literal. What emerged was a particular and ambiguous materiality of loss.

Even when I posed quite general questions about how the tsunami had affected people’s lives, the survivors would at some point in the conversation almost invariably produce an elaborate and detailed listing of which household items and personal belongings had been washed to the sea. During a visit to Jayalathi’s house in the summer of 2006, when the family had long since returned to their original and reparable house in the heart of the fishermen’s settlement, she pointed out a blurred line on her living room wall indicating the water level at the time of the flooding. As Jayalathi said, while standing next to the neck-high mark on the wall:

> “Do you see this mark? Tsunami time, this is where the water was. All the way up to here, everything in the house was flooded. We can still see the line. The cupboard with all our clothes was swept from one end of the room to the other. When we returned to the house, the cupboard was upside down in the far corner over there. It was very bad. All the dresses were ruined. Too much cleaning had to be done before we could return.”

Interestingly, the cleaning effort that Jayalathi talked about had not implied washing off the line of dirt marking the level of water on the day of the disaster. She kept pointing to the line and shaking her head; clearly to Jayalathi, the tsunami had left its mark in more senses than one.

On several occasions, Renuga would show me a neatly folded silk garment now stained with blurred shades of blue, green and gold, merging with the yellow fabric. While carefully folding the ruined silk sari and putting it back in the trunk under the bed from where she had taken it, Renuga would say:

> "Look at this sari. The colours are all mixed because of the tsunami water. Before, I only had it dry-cleaned. I used to wear it at weddings and other functions. Now it is of no use."

In yet other private homes, people would show me water-damaged family photos and school certificates, ruined and partly dissolved Hindu images, rusty and inoperative electrical kitchen machines, and other such items that they had either been able to salvage when fleeing the waves or, more often, that had been found in the houses when the owners had returned after the water had receded.

All these objects – literally watermarked by the tsunami – were kept neatly folded, wrapped, covered up and filed on shelves or in cupboards even in the cases where they would never stand a chance of being restored, cleansed or put to use again. Surprisingly, whether in the temporary shelters, where the many homeless villagers would have to camp for years, or in the permanent houses, the owners produced the items from among other household objects that had either come through the disaster unscathed or that had been acquired after the tsunami. The damaged objects were thus not confined to any kind of shrine or special display for purposes of commemoration, nor were they being flaunted at the visitor for me to help the villagers replace them. Rather, the artifacts bearing the signature of the disaster were kept as integrated parts in a composite pool of domestic objects furnishing people's homes. Even during my latest fieldwork in 2008, it was apparently out of the question for the owners to just dispose of these ruined belongings in an attempt to exorcise the disaster from memory. What was lost in terms of functionality or aesthetics was seemingly conceptualized very much in terms of what still remained (cf. Eng and Kazanjian 2003; Hetherington 2004). To survivors, even if these objects had been rendered unusable for their original purpose, they had clearly acquired a different but apparently just as significant function. The very brokenness of the objects had transformed them into mundane mementoes of the disaster and seemed to be the reason the objects were valued.

At first, the meticulous listing of household items that had disappeared in the tsunami and the careful preservation of useless belongings struck me almost as inappropriate, not least because it contrasted starkly with the economical ways that people would talk about deceased relatives who were usually recalled only through laconic remarks, stating that a missing son would have been a good fisherman, or that a lost daughter studied well. In the face of such tragic bereavement, I was surprised that anyone bothered to even mention that a water vessel or some other replaceable household item had been washed away to the sea. A closer look at recent anthropological understandings of materiality, however, suggests that the prominence of the material losses is something other than a superficial and materialistic approach to human tragedy. What becomes clear is that the objects marked by the event of the tsunami formed an "ontological tool" of social remembrance and knowledge in everyday life (cf. Pedersen 2007).

Breaking with a long tradition within anthropology to see sociality and materiality as two distinct and opposing categories, the former of which constitutes the proper analytical object of the discipline, it has recently been suggested that the material world cannot be separated from the social world. According to this line of thought, rather than seeing materiality as a frosting on sociality, the two concepts ought to be kept in simultaneous view as equally integral to humans' engagement with the world. The point is that subjects and objects, concepts and things, meaning and its materialization cannot be clearly distinguished from one another but should be understood as mutually constitutive. In short, material culture is not merely the expressive mode of culture (for recent examples see Henare et al. 2007; Miller 2005; Olsen 2003).

In consequence, the significance allotted by the survivors in Tharangambadi to objects gone, damaged and replaced should not be taken to imply that material losses are the most hurtful. If, in fact, the material world is constitutive of any social world, engaging with the things affected by the tsunami might be just a way of conveying the pervasiveness and reality of the disaster rather than a symptom of a superficial approach to human tragedy. The absent and scarred objects were no longer of any practical use, but had become tokens by which past, present and future had become folded into one compound setting encompassing the experience of the tsunami.

For the argument at hand, what is important in the recent anthropological discussions of materiality is the revision of a merely representational view of material culture as the overt expression of underlying immaterial ideas, symbols or cultural structures (Miller 2005; Olsen 2003). Fieldwork made clear that to the villagers of Tharangambadi, the continued presence – indeed preservation – of the material traces of the tsunami all around the village, whether in the guise of lost property, damaged belongings, lines of mud, ruined clothes, or buildings that provided a safe haven on the day of the flooding, did not serve as representations of the disaster pointing backwards in time to an overcome past. To the contrary, the various traces of the disaster were elements in a general framing of everyday life in the wake of the tsunami; they encompassed a living history rather than a fixed legacy such as that chiselled into the black marble of the memorial. When the villagers showed me a blurred wedding photo damaged by water, it was definitely expressive of something more than the wedding as a past important occasion, just as a partly dissolved school diploma was illustrative of more than an educational accomplishment. As David Parkin has observed:

> "While art, artefacts, and ritual objects are conventionally located in predictable contexts of use, items taken under pressure and in crisis set up contexts less of use and more of selective remembering, forgetting and envisioning" (Parkin 1999: 304).

Accordingly, as parts constitutive of an unpredicted world, the items partly surrendered to the pressure of the tsunami or the structures that had saved the fleeing villagers served a purpose of pointing both back in time and ahead, and showed how the disaster had attached itself to everyday life. For my present analytical purpose, what is most important in Parkin's observation is perhaps that objects in times of crisis may become part of a changed context of envisioning. As I will further substantiate in the following, in the case of the tsunami survivors in Tharangambadi the issue of being able to envision a future and thus counter the newfound absence of certainty, emerging as a threat of comprehensive displacement from one's life course, was a vital element in the recovery process.

Interrupted Trajectories

In the course of my talks with the villagers, I repeatedly came across expressions of a sense that future planning had been impaired by the tsunami. In addition to washing away people's belongings, in the eyes of many survivors the waves had also flooded and sucked away the ability to make plans for a time to come. One fieldwork observation made this particularly clear. Towards the end of my stay in the village in 2006, I went with Renuga for a walk around the northern and severely damaged part of the village. At some point, we got to a rather large house, which had been under construction at the time of the disaster and which the owners had abandoned and chosen never to complete. Renuga froze at the sight. "Look at this", she said, "someone had carefully planned for this house. They saved up money, designed the rooms and everything, and then it was of no use". Amidst ruins, heaps of rubble and broken fishing equipment, the sight of an unfinished, but unharmed, building was apparently what most dramatically materialized the experience of having been robbed of the capacity to make plans for the future.

Furthermore, looking closer at the ways in which the bereaved parents usually talked about their deceased children, it struck me that although the children, as mentioned above, were often quite perfunctorily characterized, they were almost invariably presented by qualities that somehow pointed to their future lives that had sadly been cut short by the tsunami. The parents thus focussed on what the children could have become, for instance a capable fisherman, an educated bread-winner, and a caring adult for elderly parents and so on, and lamented the fact that these potentialities would never be actualized because of the untimely deaths of the children. By verbalizing memories of their children in terms of broken or at least interrupted life trajectories, the parents grieved for a confused present and a lost future as much as for a past tragedy to be looked back on. To go back to Eng and Kazanjian's distinction between different stances towards the past quoted above, in these cases, too, a sense of melancholia rather than mourning prevailed. While the remarks about lost children and destroyed things respectively differed very much in level of elaboration, both of these idioms maintained the disaster as a presence in the everyday lives of the survivors – as an unhealed event spurring a pervasive melancholia due to broken future promises.

Anthropological studies of disaster often focus on the affected communities' level of adaptability when faced with calamity. This is obviously crucial to understanding disasters because it points to the fact that existing patterns of social, economic and environmental vulnerability influence people's chances of recovery, or indeed of survival, and it emphasizes the need to see disasters as processual phenomena rather than singular events (Hilhorst and Bankoff 2007; Hoffman and Oliver-Smith 1999; Oliver-Smith 1999; Oliver-Smith and Hoffman 2002). Nonetheless, the notion of adaptability as the greater or lesser capacity to cope with disaster seems to me to imply a somewhat crude notion of a reaction as the mere outcome of a simple one-to-one relation between an occurrence and the ensuing activities. In the case of Tharangambadi, it became clear to me that we need an idea of reaction to disaster that is not exclusively retrospective. In fact, it can be said of all human agency that it necessarily entails a view to the future. As Kirsten Hastrup has observed:

> "Action is never simply a *re*action to what has already happened; it is also a mode of acting upon anticipation. Agency, in this sense (…) is closely tied to a vision of plot, to the anticipation of a story, a line of future development" (K. Hastrup 2007: 199).

Following this, living with the presence of disaster in everyday life and striving to recover the access to a habitual social context necessarily implies the restoring of a vision of plot. In that sense, as Sandra Wallman has observed, the future is always in some sense contemporary, in that present actions are undertaken with a view to realizing an expected course of events (Wallman 1992).

My observations during my fieldwork from the newly established construction site where the majority of the displaced fishing families have been offered re-housing substantiate the view that future plans are an inherent feature of human agency. As I will show in the concluding part of the chapter, yet other material manifestations pertaining to the newly built houses performed a central part in restoring a sense of plot in the wake of the tsunami.

Conclusion: On New Plots

By 2008, many of the new houses built to accommodate the affected families had been completed and handed over to their owners. This meant that at the time of my most recent stay in Tharangambadi in 2008, most of the temporary shelters where many displaced villagers had camped for several years had been vacated. Interestingly, contrary to people's old homes in the abandoned fishing village, the deserted barracks were not just left to wither away through the wear and tear of time. Usually within days of being vacated, the shelters would be dismantled, often by the former inhabitants themselves who would gather the building materials and bring them to their new houses in the tsunami village, which was the common colloquial name for the site where the fishing families were offered resettlement. Outside many of the houses in the new village, the house owners had thus piled up the bricks that had made up the flooring in the temporary shelters and collected the bamboo sticks that had held the roofs of the barracks and other such building materials. Quite literally, then, the villagers planned to incorporate the effects of the tsunami into their future lives. When I inquired about these stocks of building materials, the stated aim of this informal recycling practice was to enable the villagers to make future extensions to the donated houses. Invariably, the new house owners emphasized the possibility of adding future expansions to the houses as vital, and they praised the houses as much for what they might become as for what they were to begin with. As Tim Ingold has observed, to dwell somewhere is to actively engage with the world, whereby it attains significance (Ingold 2000: 153). As the resettled villagers in Tharangambadi amply demonstrated, it takes a practical effort to transform a building into a dwelling. The plans for extensions should not merely be seen as a matter of square metres. Rather, what seemed to be at stake for the survivors was an effort of appropriation, whereby the incomplete nature of the houses was seen as a token of an opportunity to regain a sense of agency; the attention directed at the features of the houses that had yet to materialize illustrated the effort of restoring an accessible social context and an ability to make plans for the future (Fig. 6.2).

Certainly, as the chapter has shown, the recovery of a life based both literally and metaphorically on a new foundation takes some time, and an experience as overwhelming as the tsunami is only gradually folded in to the everyday lives of the survivors. If the tsunami was at first an unclaimed experience spurring a comprehensive sense of displacement reaching way into the future, the gradual appropriation of the new houses seems to be a very literal illustration of the villagers' overarching effort to reclaim plots – in every sense of the word.

Instructed by my fieldwork in the Tharangambadi fishing community, I propose in conclusion that to the survivors the recovery work has been aimed not so much

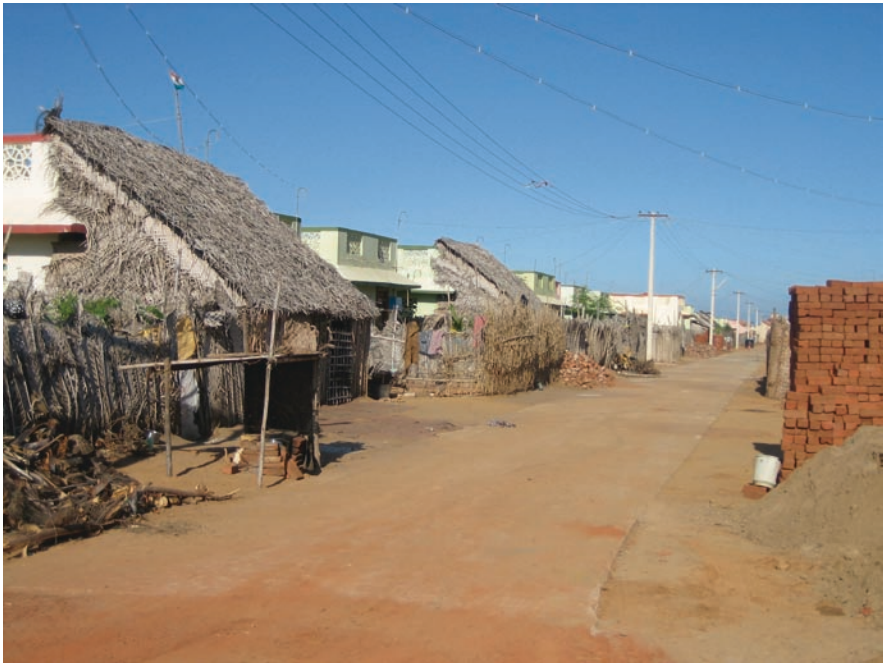

Fig. 6.2 Extensions and building materials in the new tsunami village. Photo by the author

at overcoming a dramatic event of the past as at restoring a present room to manoeuvre within a recognisable horizon of expectation. As I have demonstrated, among other things by way of the remarks from parents about what deceased children could have become, by the distress spurred by the fact that people have had to give up planned-for houses in the original fishing village, and by the widespread practice of appropriating the newly built houses, what has been at stake for the villagers in post-tsunami Tharangambadi has been to recover their future trajectories, which were brutally intersected by the disaster. To this end, the survivors' acute attention towards destroyed, missing or incomplete objects seems to have been a key component. The practice among the survivors of leaving rubble scattered around the village, of carefully listing missing and replaced household items, of pointing out and preserving damaged belongings, lamenting the physical destruction of projected building plans, and of emphasizing the incompleteness of buildings was ubiquitous exactly because it testified to the *process* of dealing with the presence of disaster in the everyday life and of countering the perceived interruption of plots for the future. Whatever their guise, the villagers in Tharangambadi used these ambiguous manifestations of disaster as a practical means of engaging with the presence of disaster and the attendant absence of certainty in the wake of the monumental event of the tsunami.

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