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# AFTER THE TSUNAMI

Six months later, four girls who were touched by the tragedy remember that day. As told to Suzan Crane



Destroyed boats in Nagipattinam, Tamil Nadu, India

On December 26, 2004, an earthquake in the Indian Ocean, measuring 9.0 on the Richter scale, caused a catastrophic tsunami that left an estimated 300,000 dead or missing. Mathi, Rehka and Premavathi are all from the Union Territories of Pondicherry, India, where the official death toll is 590, with 75 still missing and 30,000 homeless. Akiladheswari lives in Tamil Nadu, India's worst-hit mainland state. Her state lost close to 8,000 people, and 300,000 people were given refugee status after the destruction of their communities.

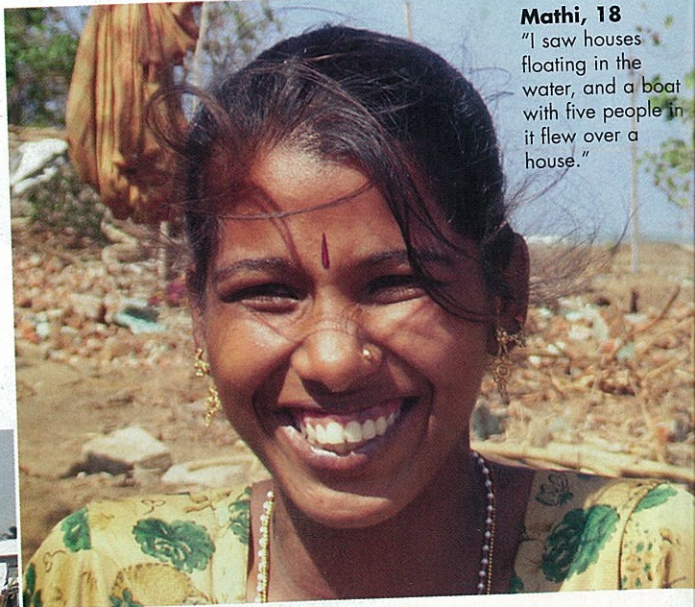
## MATHI, 18

**Village** Kalikuppam

My elder brother first saw the waves coming and directed us to run away to the fields. I was carrying my brother's three-year-old daughter, and he was holding the four-year-old. With us ran two sisters-in-law, the two children and my mother. We were carried out about 300 meters [985 feet] by the water, and caught hold of a palm tree. Water covered us as we hung on.

Then the tree slowly began to fall, and the second big wave started toward us. When the tree fell, I truly believed that no one would survive, that there was no chance of escape. I saw houses floating in the water, and a boat with five people in it flew over a house. Eventually the water drifted away a little, and we ran. We took refuge at a Shiva temple, until a van came to take us to a shelter where we were given tea and biscuits. As the messages arrived from the village about who was dead and missing, I experienced much grief.

When I returned to my village after 15 days, it was destroyed. But we were luckier than many. Only my mother



## Mathi, 18

"I saw houses floating in the water, and a boat with five people in it flew over a house."

was injured and treated at the hospital. We are still afraid of a tsunami coming again, and most of the villagers go each night to a relief camp in a nearby town. The level of panic rises when the sun goes down. But if it comes, I will face the tsunami and face the waves. I only went to school until the age of eight, but I am looking toward the future. I have been trained as a tailor and want to earn a living by stitching clothes, although I lost my sewing machine in the tsunami.

## REHKA, 19

**Village** Pattinacherry

I was in my house with my mother, who was preparing breakfast. She heard a sound and told me to go see about it. When I stepped outside, I saw water racing up the road. I ran away, and when I turned around I saw two boats, a coconut tree and the roofs of houses coming behind me. I continued to run, but the water hit me and threw me into a post. I just held on.

Then the second wave came and pushed an old lady, a pregnant woman and a three-year-old boy toward me. The pregnant woman was shouting, "Please help us, please help us," so I grabbed her with one hand while gripping the post with the other. I was holding her hand and she was holding the hand of the old lady and then the baby, like a chain. Then some village boys arrived in a boat that was pushed inland from the sea. They pulled the pregnant woman and young boy into the boat, but the old lady had lost her skirt in the water and refused to get in. I removed my underskirt and gave it to her. I was still holding the post and helping the people into the boat. When they were all in, I got in also.

Soon after, I saw a woman and her small child about to drown—the boys got the boat to them, and we picked them up. I saw children floating in the water. When I lifted them up, I found they were dead bodies and put them back in the water.

My five younger sisters had gone to get firewood, and when I got to the road, I screamed for them and my mother. I was crying and praying to God. I told God that I would help wherever I could, but to please save my family. We lost all our property—house, boat, money—but my family members are safe.

Normally, I am very calm in nature, and how I ended up helping these people, I don't know. I surprised myself. But I don't feel proud that I saved lives, because so many others



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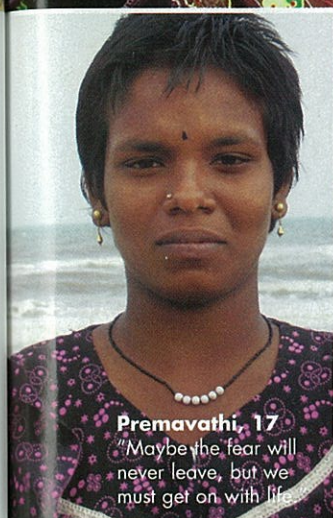
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PHOTOS: SUZAN CRANE



**Rehka, 19**  
"I told God that I  
would help wherever  
I could, but to please  
save my family."



**Premavathi, 17**  
"Maybe the fear will  
never leave, but we  
must get on with life."



These girls all  
live on the  
eastern coast  
of India.

died. Now we stay in the village in a tent provided by an aid organization. But with six unmarried girls in my family, there is much *laxmi* (dowry) to be paid, so our future is questionable.

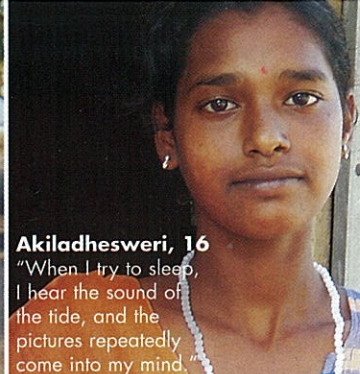
## PREMAVATHI, 17

**Village** Kilinjalmadu

It was about 9:15 on a Sunday morning. My father and brother were eating, and I was studying for exams. All of a sudden people were running away from the beach and shouting that waves were coming. My mother, who was at the seashore, ran back to the house. Then we went out and saw the water crashing toward us, and we all started running away.

As I was running, I saw three small children—boys ages three and four and a seven-year-old girl—in the water up to their heads. I lifted them out one by one and carried them onto the terrace of a two-story house. The parents were searching for the children, and later I told them where they were, that they were safe other than some scratches.

My family and I ran to Karaikal (an inland town about two kilometers [1.2 miles] away) and went to a marriage hall that had been set up as a relief center. We stayed in the shelter for a week before returning to my village.



**Akiladheswari, 16**  
"When I try to sleep,  
I hear the sound of  
the tide, and the  
pictures repeatedly  
come into my mind."

I'm scared to go to the seashore now. I won't go in the water. Maybe the fear will never leave, but we must get on with life. I am luckier than many. Our house was damaged and I lost many things, but I am happy that I was able to save three souls.

## AKILADHESWARI, 16

**Village** Keechankuppam

I was in my house watching TV with my elder sister, niece and younger brother when the tsunami came. My father was not in the village at the time, and my mother was at the seashore buying fish. Everyone was screaming from outside, and water rushed toward us. I ran as fast as I could in the opposite direction and climbed up on the roof of a building. When I thought it was safe enough, I returned to my house to look for my family. I saw that no one was there, and then the second wave hit and I ran to another building. I didn't find out until later what happened to the rest of my family. My mother, grandmother, aunt and cousin were all dead.

My grandmother, who was at a neighbor's house, was washed away. My mother was at the sea, and her body was never found. In one house, my mother's sister was trying to get into the room where her daughter had locked herself. She kept knocking, but my cousin was too scared to open the door. After a while, she opened it, and my aunt was swept away by the water's current. My cousin is severely traumatized because she believes she killed her mother.

My elder sister was thrown into a tree by the power of the water, but she survived. I found two of my aunts standing on the bridge after the second wave. We went back to the village and my house wasn't there. All the boats were demolished; bodies were everywhere. We then took a bus to a relief camp in [the nearby town] Thiruvavur. I was treated for some minor injuries on my hands and legs.

When I try to sleep, I hear the sound of the tide, and the pictures repeatedly come into my mind. We have no home and now stay in a relief camp. I am afraid to go back to my village.

I want to forget. I want to go to school, to continue my studies. I'm in 10th grade now and will go to government boarding school for grades 11 and 12. My father plans to send my younger brother to military school in Chennai (formerly Madras).

I must grow up and get a job. I want to become a lawyer. If my mother and grandmother were alive, I would be more supported, but I will go for employment and look after my life. □

**What you can do:** Log on to [redcross.org/tsunami/relief](http://redcross.org/tsunami/relief) and find out how giving \$15, \$5 or even \$2 can help the recovery operation.