

Rebuilding Weligama



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Posted at 05:00 AM ET, 02/23/2005

Swimming in Sri Lanka, Part I

I have been swimming in the ocean for the first time since the tsunami. For a long time, I had no desire to go. The water had all been churned up by the waves and was dirty. I have also become more aware of all the raw sewage that ends up in the ocean -- and the speed with which even a small wound can become infected.

Not to mention bad memories from the [day of the tsunami](#).

My phobia of the ocean disappeared when I took a trip along the coast to Tangalle, the southernmost point in Sri Lanka. The water looked so clear and inviting that I couldn't resist plunging in. It was everything I have ever associated with the Indian Ocean: crystal clear blue waters, golden sand, green palm trees.

If I am hesitant to go back into the water, then you can imagine how many Sri Lankans feel, particularly if they lost their loved ones during the disaster. People here have a complicated relationship with the sea. For fishermen's families, in particular, it is the source of their livelihoods. But it is also a source of tragedy and sorrow.

Even before the tsunami, Sri Lankans didn't think of the sea as a place of relaxation, the way Westerners do. Except for the fishermen, most Sri Lankans don't know how to swim and never take organized swimming lessons. The girls never set foot in the water, and even teenage boys tend to be poor swimmers.

Had people here known how to swim, the death toll in the tsunami (some 35,000 Sri Lankans killed or missing) would probably have been reduced by at least half. (I estimate that 80 percent of those killed in the tsunami were nonswimmers, for the most part children or women.)

When my brother Geoffrey first told me he was thinking of raising money for public swimming pools in Weligama and two other towns, I thought it was a crazy idea. After all, there is an ocean nearby, and a host of other pressing needs in Sri Lanka, including the construction of thousands of new homes. But I am beginning to change my mind. A program to teach Sri Lankans how to swim might be a truly positive outcome of the tsunami.

As far as I know, there are no public swimming pools in Sri Lanka. A 25-yard, eight-lane pool, complete with changing rooms, would cost around \$75,000 to build, and \$5,000 a year to maintain (including salaries for two staff).

For the moment, it's a pipe dream, which may or may not come to fruition. If you have views about this -- pro or con -- drop me a line. -- Michael Dobbs

Posted at 05:00 AM ET, 03/ 8/2005

Girls Don't Swim, Part II

My posts on swimming, "[Swimming in Sri Lanka](#)" and "[Girls Don't Swim](#)," produced a lot of reader reaction. I estimated that four out of five tsunami victims, particularly women and children, were killed because they were unable to swim. As far as I know, there are no public swimming pools in Sri Lanka and little in the way of organized swimming lessons.

I was particularly interested to hear from Americans of Sri Lankan descent, such as Enoka Perrelli, a financial specialist in Washington:

Lots of Westerners are surprised when we Sri Lankans say we do not know how to swim when we live in a tiny island! I took swimming lessons as an adult in my 30's along with some adult colleagues, but I'm still a poor swimmer! Neither of my sisters can swim, nor my mother or my nieces!

Your idea of having a public swimming pool is a wonderful idea, but I am not sure how many people, especially women and children in the villages will want to take lessons. Sri Lankan women are very coy, and do not like to bare their bodies, and would never wear a bathing suit in public, especially not among males. In Colombo or other big cities, it's different. So it may be a good idea to run it by some of the females in the village and see their reaction!

Sanjeev Samarasinghe, an expatriate Sri Lankan from Galle (just down the coast from Weligama), wrote to say that he is not sure that he would have survived the tsunami as he can't swim, even though "my home is barely two miles from the sea." Another correspondent, who introduced himself as "a Sri Lankan male who can barely swim," warned that "you have to be careful introducing western lifestyles directly into Sri Lanka."

Laura Meissner noted that the inability to swim is not just a Sri Lankan phenomenon. She recalled that she was living in Senegal in September 2002 when a ferry boat sank, killing nearly 1,000 people.

The boat was overloaded at about double its capacity, but like Sri Lankans, many West Africans don't know how to swim, even those who live on the coast, and that definitely contributed to the death toll. There are public pools in Dakar, but they're in the nicest neighborhoods and cost about \$2 to get in -- not a big sum to us, but way out of the reach of most people.

My brother Geoffrey says he is pushing ahead with his idea to build public swimming pools in Weligama and a couple of nearby towns. He's calling the project [Swim Lanka](#). My feeling is that he needs to consult carefully with local people, particularly school principals, before committing himself. If the principals are willing to back the project -- and encourage students to attend swimming lessons (there would have to be separate lessons for boys and girls, of course) -- it

could have a huge impact. But if there's no public support, the swimming pools will turn into white elephants. But I've always been the cautious one in the family . . .

-- Michael Dobbs

March 8, 2005 | [Permalink](#)

Comments

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Hi,

interesting notion. I have heard this before: about islanders not being able to swim and how many would not have perished to the tsunami if only they could swim. I can't help but feel this is more a case of public perception than reality.

My sense is that the proportion who can't swim in 'Lanka isn't any different to, say those in Britain, another island. It would be good to have hard figures before people get too carried away with such notions or fan them. Secondly, from my experience and from what I have heard, being able to swim in a pool is quite a different matter from being able to withstand the unexpected currents of a tsunami. I think you were in the sea at the time and survived. But what would your chances have been if you were swept away suddenly from dry land, and got bashed about inside a building, amongst debris?

Btw I now live in Sri Lanka and manage to float in the sea despite being taken to swimming lessons as a kid in Colombo :)

Posted by: [Renuka](#) | Mar 18, 2005 2:39:11 AM

I live in Sri Lanka and I feel too swimming could have helped. May be not to survive a current, but to stay alive in 10 feet of water, for the current speed no one is able to swim, it comes at 500 km/h or so, but swimming has helped many of my friends who got caught to swim back or get back to a safer place before the second or the third wave came.

Posted by: [Nirosini Gulawita](#) | Mar 22, 2005 12:12:15 PM Can't agree. Seems to me too many men are saying "Don't rock the boat - we don't want western ideas of women (in swimsuits?) over here". Anyone asked Sri Lankan women if they would like to swim? My wife has and they desperately do want to swim. And we are talking about middle aged mothers with children, the backbone of any nation, not beach bimbos in bikinis. Christina has launched a swimming program specifically for women in Sri Lanka. See the website www.aidsrilanka.co.uk. Currently we are funding a scholarship for a young Sri Lankan lady to come here to the UK to qualify as an internationally recognised swimming teacher before she goes back to university in Sri Lanka in the fall. Is there anybody out there who would like to help fund the next scholarship, this time to train dozens Sri Lankan women as swimming teachers in country...
