This poem by the local author and academic S. Jeyasankar, posted a month after the tsunami, sets up an emphatic set of oppositions between the plight of the displaced in Batticaloa, at the heart of one of the most devastated regions in Sri Lanka, and the “trauma talk” that pervaded the town following the descent of international NGOs. Indeed, Jeyasankar represents their arrival as a second onslaught: “Tidal waves of/The artificial tsunamis/Attacking again and again.”

I use this poem as a starting point for a discussion of the relations between bare life, the state of exception and the business of trauma. Jeyasankar’s poem reminds me of Patricia Lawrence’s argument, in her discussion of the Butterfly Peace Garden in Batticaloa, that the Agambenian logic of the “language of order” employed by “the military apparatus, in the peace process and in some discourses of international non-governmental organizations” leads to the “production of killable bodies” (2003: 3). Taking its cue from Jeysankar and Lawrence, this paper considers whether the discourse trauma may be employed as a biopolitical practice (i.e., as a form of management of the life and health of the population) that also colludes with the necropolitical (i.e., the letting die of that which is identified as bare life in spaces of exception).

The paper goes on to explore intersecting of geographies of exception (war, disaster, reconstruction/development) as they are mapped on to Batticaloa and its surrounding regions in the aftermath of the tsunami.

1 “Talk of the town” Or “City of Batticaloa” by S.Jeyasankar