

*Abirami became a child soldier in Sri Lanka at the age of 13. Her narrative was recorded in 2002 by staff working for the Quaker United Nations Office.*

Abirami

I was born in a village. I grew up with a relative. I was told that my mother died and sometimes they said she had left me and run away. I don't know anything about my mother. I have seen a photograph of my father. But I have never met him. They say that he lives in the city. I don't know anything about him. When my relative died I was brought to another relative's house. The wife is a very cruel woman.

I went to a school close by, when I was about five or six years old. The wife never liked to send me to school. My relative insisted that I go to school and I went to school with their children. I studied hard and I have got prizes, I wanted to show the wife that I too can study. School starts at 8.30 in the morning and is over at 1.30 in the afternoon with a half an hour break at 10.30. The master who taught maths used to hit me. I was weak in that subject.

The wife used to give me stale food, kept overnight like old rice and curry, whereas her children used to be given pittu and string hoppers freshly made for them. I suffered and suffered in her hands. She was very very wicked. I was often pinched and pushed and beaten up. She used anything at hand to hit me, even a broomstick. I have got hit till I got swollen all over the body. If in the kitchen she uses the ladle. When I was older the wife kept me home and didn't allow me to go to school.

I did all the work at home from cooking to cleaning, washing and everything I could possibly do and what I could not do was forced on me. I suffered. I was angry with my mother and my father. I didn't ask details about my parents – I haven't seen my mother even in a photograph. When her children are treated differently and favored I get very hurt. I feel the wife doesn't belong to our caste. I hear husband and wife fighting, where the caste is mentioned.

My relative drinks — when he comes home drunk, wife used to hit him. One day I remember he came home drunk and asked for food. Wife refused to give food and this time he hit her very badly. Later he said sorry but she was angry for a long time. She gets angry when he comes drunk. My relative never hits me. Wife hits me with the ladle or anything she can lay hands on. Nobody wants me.

I like Christmas and the New Year. All festivals make me sad. Especially when people take family photographs I feel sad and want to cry. Sometimes I cry. It is then I miss my own parents.

When I was 13 years old I wanted to run away from cruel people who kept me. I started thinking — if I join the movement I'll have a place and I can also do something useful. I joined the movement. I was contemplating on this for about one month. There were brothers and sisters who did lot of propaganda to make young people to join the movement. Looking at those sisters they were very smart, they wore uniforms and carried guns that I thought would make people respect me also. They also said we should save our land. I thought that was better than being badly treated by my aunt. My relative was wicked to me all the time, ill-treating me. I got an urge to join the

movement. I told her I was leaving; she didn't even bother to stop me. In fact she ignored me when I got ready and was watching me leave home.

They took me to a jungle where there was a camp. I was given food. There were small sheds built and I slept on the ground. I was given an empty sack to sleep on. There were no pillows. I used to keep my clothes bag for my head. I continued to sleep that way. At times I have felt that I shouldn't have left home. At least there I had a place to sleep on. In the morning the sisters showed me the place where they go for the morning ablutions. When I washed and got ready they first of all introduced me on how to escape the army if they happen to meet or invade. They also said that the army is bad if they catch you they will abuse you, if they see you they will kill you. We have to kill them. If we fail in this duty we will get hit, disabled or we'll die.

I was placed in the ladies group. We had a leader and I was trained in this group. I was trained in the jungle on how to enter the enemy territory and collect information, the use of guns, grenades, compasses and spotting distances for shelling and writing detailed reports. I was harassed to write so many things in detail I did not like that as that was difficult and I did not like shooting and killing after I saw what was happening. Outwardly I behaved brave; inwardly I was scared. Apart from the difficult training I had to walk a long distance without food to places where the army camps were. We were so close that we could even hear them.

Once I was in the midst of fierce fighting. As we were fighting there was lot of shooting and we were losing and finally we knew that the army had surrounded us. This attack came upon us in an unexpected manner. The army had been fully prepared. They very slowly came towards us may be at about four a.m. I think they thought we

were dead — they had very big guns. They called out. I did not understand the language. They shouted at us and asked us to drop our arms. One leader who didn't have the cyanide bit a capsule already bitten by another and that bit of cyanide got mixed with the blood and she died. I still get frightened of that sight. It is as though they suffer from fits. I saw convulsive jerky movements and a frightful death. I could not bear it and then I decided that I would not bite the cyanide capsule at all. One leader was also a doctor, she was wounded and she fell. At that terrible moment — she wanted to live prayed and cried to the Gods and told me to pray to Jesus. I prayed and asked God to save us. She ordered us to take the cyanide, I didn't. The thought of the others — the way they died flashed before my eyes and I didn't want to take cyanide. She stared at me and shot at me, her aim was not so accurate, it went through me. After she shot me — she put the gun at her throat and killed herself. That was a terrifying experience. The sight of her body that lay there was terrible I cannot now even tell you. I didn't want to die. I was bleeding. I didn't know what to do. I thought I was alone.

Then from among the wounded another sister who was badly hurt cried out. She too did not want to die she said., "Save me, bullets have pierced me don't let me die." It was dark we were thirsty and in pain. I knew the leader, the doctor, had a pack with glucose and medicines. We had nothing to eat for two days. I dragged myself and found the pack and we both ate glucose — drank the water. At a distance — we found one of the brothers who was wounded come limping towards us from the other side. Only we three of us were alive. All three of us decided to surrender ourselves to the army.

By morning the bodies smelled. It was a terrible sight. Army shouted at us and they asked us to put our hands up. I could not put up one hand. Sometimes that scene comes rushing into my mind. There is still anger in me for what she did.

When I came here... I have forgotten dates and things. What do I want to do with my life? ... All that I want now is to study and study well. Anything, to study anything... Maybe dancing; I like dancing and music. I have studied in school. I like but will I ever get a chance?

There is a person who likes me, he said he would marry me, but I don't want to think of marriage. Now he has gone abroad. His mother comes to see me — even though they are the only people who like me. I cannot like him. I feel that he is too old. There is a difference of many years. I cannot love him, he writes letters — but how can I marry him? I am unable to decide anything now, I have fears and I am scared.

Here they have planned to send me out of this place, this week — I am scared. I am not keen to go. They said that there is a dancing teacher and that I could learn dancing. I will have to help out with the nursery school. I will be given training and I can become a teacher. This looks good. I have fears.

All that I know is — wherever I am, they (people in the armed movement) will kill me. In my mind I am always with the feeling that I will be killed. I know I should think of living but there is a feeling that death is hanging over my head. I am alone — I have no one. What can I do? I can't find any meaning... There's no life ... No feeling towards marriage... I have nobody. Sometimes I feel frustrated. I have no happiness. Whatever I aspire for or need... I won't get. I like to be like other children. How can I be? I don't want to think of my future. I don't want to dream of anything. For anything at

all, as I won't get anything. Yes there was one thing I wanted. I had a feeling of wanting to see my father at least. That will never ever happen. I know the thought of them is not going to bring them back — never... ever will I see them. I cried even yesterday. I have to leave this place... I am used to this place. I am scared because within three days I have to leave this place. How will my future be?

I cannot forget all the painful things that have happened to me, now I am beginning to understand things and life seems different and clear. I feel I have done the wrong thing in choosing the wrong path of destruction. What to do? What has happened has happened. I cannot erase everything, I have to do something meaningful and good and that is one way of beginning to start to be happy. That is why I want to start a day care center for children.

Nobody wants me; even here they are going to send me away, they say it is to a convent. I am nobody's child! I don't trust people. I don't want to get close to anybody. If I get hurt even a bit I can't bear that. So better I keep off. When people scold me I bear it up. I don't talk back or anything.

When I think back... Yes after I spoke to you and was thinking and thinking. Why did I get into to all that I did? All those actions were hardhearted actions, now makes me sad. Maybe I could have stayed at home. Everything was wrong from the beginning. Maybe I could have put up with my relatives' cruelty; after all one of them was good to me. I know he liked me. If my grandmother had lived I would have never left home. She was the only one for me and she died.