

Archive of Memory

Reflections on 70 years of Independence

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Introduction

Sri Lanka marks 70 years of Independence on February 4th 2018. While there is much to celebrate in our overthrowing a 500-year yoke of colonial rule and embracing democratic politics, it is undeniable that Sri Lanka's post-Independence trajectory has been both turbulent and bloody. Communal riots, youth insurrections, natural disasters and a protracted civil war has cast a long, brooding shadow across recent decades.

The Archive of Memory seeks to interrogate this celebratory imperative by focusing on 70 narrative fragments that offer compelling, personalized perspectives on these past 70 years. They recall turning points in our history through mundane, everyday objects as well as unique artefacts and souvenirs. Such an exercise not only entails the collection of oral histories but also looks at objects as aide-mémoire or mnemonic devices.

An archive is both a collection of documents and records as well as the repository of such collections. However, it is not a static entity out of which an overarching, monolithic history can be constructed. An archive can contain multiple narratives, even counter-narratives; it may also be the repository of silence and refusal. Any discerning reader of an archive should be able to fathom this but we have sought to be proactive by curating a collection of memories that foreground the complexity and contradictions that inhere in historical narratives and collective memory.

This booklet is a forerunner to this ambitious initiative. We hope to use it as a public notification to solicit stories from every nook and cranny of Sri Lanka as well as from Sri Lankans domiciled abroad, from the young as well as the old, from all ethnicities, classes, castes, religions and sexual orientations. We are publishing this booklet in all three official languages of Sri Lanka as we would like to encourage people to write or speak to us in whatever language they are most comfortable. We look forward to hearing from you and speaking with you.

Malathi de Alwis & Hasini Haputhanthri

Curatorial Note

The seven narrative fragments we offer you here have been collected from/are grounded in different parts of Sri Lanka – the Northern/North-Western, Southern, Eastern and Western Provinces—as well as abroad. They are recounted by men and women from a variety of ethnic groups –Tamil, Sinhala, Borah and Moor.

The thread that entwines all seven objects is their familiarity and mundanity—a tea cup, a pair of spectacles, a diaphanous saree, a grinding stone, a fish bun, a swing, a slate pencil. Of these, only the latter now retains the quality of a curiosity due to leaps in time and technology. For most of us, they may be everyday objects of scant regard, but for each of these seven raconteurs, they are deeply meaningful, often redolent of painful memories. These objects also signify different temporalities and historico-political moments –the anti-Tamil riots of 1983, the World cup victory of 1996, the tsunami of 2004 etc. Tellingly, of the seven, only one is a happy memory.

The narrative fragments have been distilled from much longer stories that were shared with us. We have tried our utmost to retain the 'voice' of the speaker as well as the simplicity and lucidity of their speech. Two written narratives that were shared with us were also significantly edited. All final texts were approved by the speakers/writers before they were published. Many of the raconteurs wished to remain anonymous and/or preferred that the person they recalled remained anonymous. We have honoured these requests.

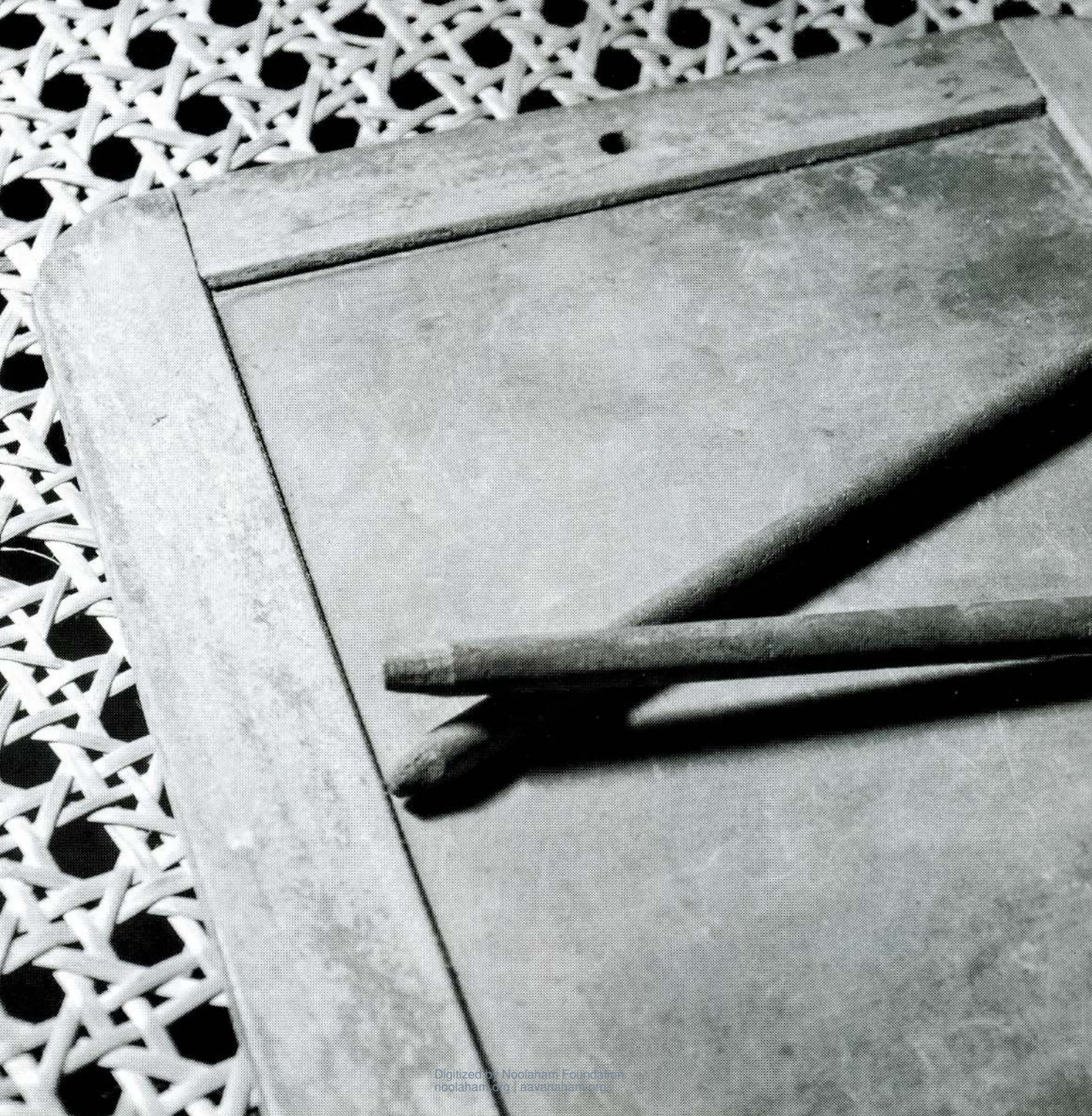
Gal Koorā

Though I was born in Ratnapura, my earliest memories of school are from Kehelella where I was adopted and attended the Hunumulla Kanishta Vidyalaya. My best friend was Prabhakaran - during those pre-civil war days, in 1957, there was nothing special about that name! I didn't even realise he was Tamil. His most distinguishing feature, to me, was the hole in his left earlobe.

When we were in 4th grade, we were taught about the Dutugemunu-Elara war. The story was told from Gemunu's point of view so all of us assumed Elara was an evil guy. Our teacher also described a memorable incident from Prince Gemunu's childhood; when his mother, Queen Vihara Maha Devi, asked him why he was curled up in bed without sleeping with his body comfortably outstretched, he had replied: *Uthurin hedi demelu-Dakunin golu muhuda* (filthy Tamils to the North, a mute ocean to the South).

Afterwards, we went outside to play as usual. A boy in our class got into a quarrel with Prabhakaran and stabbed him in the cheek with a pointed *gal koorā* --the six-inch slate pencil we used to write on our *gal lelli* (slates). Sadly, Prabhakaran and his family left our village after the anti-Tamil riots of 1977, and I lost touch with him.

Parakrama Niriella,
Kehelella, Divulapitiya



Spectacles

Mr. Thurairajah (pseudonym) was an outstanding Science tutor. He taught me, my brother and most of our friends. I used to look forward to his weekly visits on his Bajaj scooter not only because he could unravel mysteries of science for me, but also for his endless supply of jokes. He wore large, square-framed spectacles which were invariably dislodged from his nose or fell off whenever he took off his helmet.

On the morning of July 25th 1983, I was out cycling with my friends when we heard about the rioting. Mr Thurairajah's house was looted and burnt. He and his family had been rescued by our family friends whose children were also taught by him. When we went to see him, we had to ring the bell several times before our friends opened their door. I walked in eagerly expecting to see Mr. Thurairajah and his family seated in the living room sipping tea. But there was no one.

We were ushered into one of the bedrooms at the back but there seemed to be no one there either. Then I heard a soft rustling sound and Mr. Thurairajah crawled out from under the bed on all fours. He had hidden when the doorbell rang. Our respected Mr. Thurairajah with the cheery face, laughing eyes and mischievous smile was on his knees. As he struggled to get to his feet, his spectacles fell to the ground.

Faathima (pseudonym),

Colombo



Saree Pota

I was 8-years old during the *bheeshana kalaya* (time of terror), in 1988. Most schools were closed though mine opened for a few hours per day to teach us Maths and Science as the management thought they were the most important subjects. I hate these two subjects to this day because of that! We couldn't wear uniforms to school and were also drilled on how to take cover under our desks, in case of an emergency.

In the night, we would often hear gunshots and the elders would speculate how many had been killed and where their bodies might be found the next day.

One day, I was accompanying my mother to a parent-teacher meeting in school when she suddenly covered my eyes with her saree *pota* (fall) and asked me to pinch my nose tightly. It was a beautiful morning; the sun was shining and people were going about their routines but through her diaphanous, rose-patterned saree *pota*, I glimpsed several young men burning on a pile of tyres.

This was the first time I had seen anyone naked, let alone dead.

Nayana (pseudonym),

Panadura



Grinding Stone

When the LTTE announced on October 24th 1990 that we were going to be evicted from our homes in Mannar, I felt like an earthquake had pulled the ground from under my feet! I had been married for less than a month and had never left the mainland. All the jewelry and saris that my parents had scrimped and saved and collected for my dowry were grabbed by LTTE cadre at different checkpoints along the way to Kalpitiya.

Fortunately, my husband had been able to find a lorry to transport us and many of our relatives. I managed to sneak this grinding stone onto it by sitting on it. Once, when a LTTE cadre tried to pull it off the lorry, I wrapped my arms around it and cried: 'it was given to me by my *umma* (mother) who got it from her *umma*, what use is it for you? You have taken everything else from me, please let me keep this with me.'

He laughed contemptuously and asked '*paiththiama?*' (are you crazy?) but he let us go.

Zubeida (pseudonym),

Kalpitiya / originally from Mannar



Fish Buns

I am a serious cricket fan and have cheered on our national team during their losing streaks as well as their winning ones. This was a challenge when I was studying in the United States of America where there was no TV coverage of cricket--this was in the pre-100 cable channels and live streaming days! Fortunately, an enterprising Indian student managed to set up a satellite connection so that we could watch the 1996 World cup matches in the Biology Department auditorium at the University of Chicago. Due to the time difference, I would often have to get up at 3am and trudge in the pitch dark through snow, sleet and freezing winds to watch these matches, along with another 25 die-hard South Asian cricket fans.

However, on the day of the final between Sri Lanka and Australia, which began at 4am CST, I was taken aback to find the auditorium jam packed with diasporic Sri Lankans, with squalling kids in tow! They would all stand up whenever the Sri Lankan national anthem was played and would pull out sandwiches, cutlets and patties at half time, and share among themselves. One lady had even made *maalu paan* (fish buns)! I recall that memorable day whenever I see these buns now.

Pradeep Jeganathan

New Delhi



Swing

When the tsunami hit our home on December 26th 2004, I was visiting an office colleague in hospital. My mother, my pregnant wife, my 6-year old daughter and 4-year old son were swept away. Our house was just by the sea so the waves had rolled over it like a steam roller, flattening it. I was able to recognize where it had stood only by the swing I had made for my kids. That was amazingly intact, still hanging from a branch of the Suriya tree in our garden!

After staying in a refugee camp for about six months, I eventually re-located to another neighbourhood. However, the bus I took to and from work still passed our old home. Every time I saw that swing I would hear a loud roaring in my head and my eyes would blur. One day, on my way back home, I got off the bus, cut the ropes and threw the swing into the sea.

I now have two sons with my second wife. They keep begging for a swing but I have not been able to make one for them.

Wimalaratne (pseudonym),

Hikkaduwa



Tea Cup

Kumaran (pseudonym) and I fell in love during our school days. However, it took many years before we could convince my parents to consent to our marriage. Even then, we could only register our marriage as it was decreed in my horoscope that I should wait until I was 25, on November 30th 2009, to have a Hindu wedding ceremony. A beautiful son was born to us in 2007 and life seemed to have finally taken a turn for the better until Kumaran was 'disappeared' during a sudden cordon and search operation in our neighbourhood, on May 23rd 2009. A friend needed his help urgently, that morning, so Kumaran rushed out of the house without even drinking the tea I had poured into his favourite teacup, a gift from me. This tea cup was gifted to me by my father who had in turn been gifted it by his Saudi Arabian boss when he used to work in Riyadh.

An elderly neighbour had seen Kumaran being questioned by army personnel, that afternoon. I found his toppled bicycle and the milk powder for my son and some groceries he had bought for our household strewn on the ground, near the railway tracks. I visited every army camp and police station in the East in search of him. His lips did not touch this tea cup that fateful morning but I am keeping it carefully in my almirah until the day he returns to drink from it again.

Thillai (pseudonym),

Chenkalady



How to submit your story

If you would like to share an interesting story with us that is linked to a treasured object associated in some way with an important political, cultural, economic or historical moment in post-Independence Sri Lanka, please get in touch with us via any of these methods:

Write to us to: Historicaldialogue.lk, 25 Elibank Road, Colombo 5.

Call us on: 0764521768 (10am—5pm)

Email us to: archiveofmemory2018@gmail.com

Share your story on facebook:
<https://www.facebook.com/archiveofmemory2018/>

Or Instagram: [#archiveofmemory2018](https://www.instagram.com/archiveofmemory2018)

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