

**Fantastical Literature  
Is the Original Form of  
Storytelling — Literary  
Realism Is a 19th-  
Century Innovation"**

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Vajra Chandrasekera**

**'The Military That Fought  
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**– Exclusive Interview with Jaffna-  
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# This is Our Soil. And No One Can Take It From Us.



February 4th, Sri Lanka's Independence Day, is a day of both celebration and contention. As the nation marked 77 years of sovereignty, some Tamils—whose lands remain militarily occupied and whose sons and daughters have vanished without a trace—chose to observe the day with symbolic defiance. For them, it was a solemn reminder of unresolved grievances, systemic marginalization, and the continued erosion of their fundamental rights.

However, another faction—politically opportunistic Tamil nationalists—seized the moment for their own agenda. They operate in the spirit of the Tamil proverb "Gaining from a house on fire" (எரியிற வீட்டில் புடுங்குறது லாபம்). These elements, heavily bankrolled by segments of the diaspora, sought to manipulate the occasion, not for genuine advocacy, but to sustain their political relevance by perpetuating division. With calculated rhetoric, they deliberately sought to reframe Independence Day as a 'Black Day,' fostering resentment rather than reconciliation.

## The Hypocrisy of Tamil Political Opportunists

And then there's Gajendrakumar Ponnambalam—Colombo-born and bred, a product of Royal College and Colombo International School, an elite wrapped in privilege and affluence. More fluent in Sinhala than Tamil, he has spent much of his life surrounded by Sinhala friends, effortlessly navigating the very society he claims to oppose. And yet, the irony runs deep—his multimillion-dollar investments are not in the war-ravaged Tamil regions he professes to represent, but in Sinhala-majority areas, where his wealth quietly flourishes.

Standing beside him is ITAK President-elect Sritharan—once a political adversary, now a convenient ally. Their newfound camaraderie emerged not from ideological alignment but from political survival, triggered by the unexpected rise of the NPP, a Sinhala-majority party that made inroads into the North and East in the last parliamentary election. Sensing a threat, they set aside their differences, united by opportunism rather than principle.

On Independence Day, they staged a rally in Kilinochchi—an event that bore all the hallmarks of a diaspora-funded protest. Amidst the protest, Gajendrakumar Ponnambalam stood front and center, hoisting a placard that read: "We reject all political solutions under a unitary state constitution."

A bold declaration, one that might have carried weight—if only he truly believed in it. But here lies the glaring paradox.

### **The Oath of Loyalty: Words vs. Actions**

Every Member of Parliament in Sri Lanka is bound by an oath—a solemn declaration that affirms their commitment to upholding and defending the Constitution of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka. Gajendrakumar Ponnambalam himself has taken this very oath:

"I, Gajendrakumar Ponnambalam, do solemnly declare and affirm/swear that I will uphold and defend the Constitution of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka."

This Constitution, without ambiguity, defines Sri Lanka as a unitary state.

Given his staunch opposition to this framework, one must ask: Why does

Gajendrakumar Ponnambalam continue to hold a parliamentary seat within a system he so vehemently denounces? Why does his party actively contest elections under a Constitution he publicly repudiates? If his ideological convictions were sincere, would not integrity demand that he reject the very oath that binds him to this state?

The contradiction is glaring. On one hand, he benefits from the privileges and platform provided by the Sri Lankan Parliament. On the other, he relentlessly fuels Tamil discontent, leveraging the same system he claims to oppose.

If he truly rejects the unitary state, logic and integrity would dictate that he renounce his parliamentary position, reject the privileges it affords him, and stand by his purported beliefs in their entirety. Instead, his continued participation suggests a strategic exploitation of the system—one that sustains his political relevance while perpetuating division.

Such duplicity does not advance the cause of Tamil rights; rather, it undermines genuine discourse by reducing it to a tool for political survival.

### **Tamil Identity and the Struggle for Dignity**

As a Tamil, as a minority in this land, I carry the weight of history—the wounds of injustice, the scars of systemic discrimination that began long before my time. I have not forgotten the disenfranchisement of Indian Tamils in 1948, a cruel betrayal that stripped an entire people of their voice—ironically, with the backing of G.G. Ponnambalam, the grandfather of Gajendrakumar Ponnambalam. I cannot erase the memory of the Sinhala Only Act in 1956, which deepened our alienation and told us, in no uncertain terms,



that we did not belong. And I cannot ignore the decades of suffering that followed, the violence, the loss, the unfulfilled dreams of a people who only ever wanted dignity and equality.

But tell me—does that mean we must abandon our motherland? Must we turn away from the soil that cradled us, the rivers that whispered our ancestors' names, the air that carries the scent of our history? No. The sins of politicians do not define this land. It is not the earth beneath our feet that betrayed us—it was men, selfish and power-hungry, who divided us for their own gain.

This is our home. No politician, no policy, no oppression can take that away from us.

This is the same land where our ancestors shed their blood—not merely in defiance of the Sri Lankan state, but long before that, against foreign invaders who sought to subjugate us.

Are we to forsake our heritage because of the challenges we face, or should we stand our ground and fight for our rightful place within this nation?

Those who have brazenly declared February 4th a “Black Day” must confront a fundamental question: Was Pandara Vanniyan, our Tamil warrior-hero, a traitor for resisting British imperialism? Should we erase the legacy of countless Tamil warriors who valiantly opposed colonial domination? Is our history to be reduced to selective amnesia, dictated by transient political opportunism?

## **A Path Forward: Rejecting Separatism, Embracing Engagement**

For three harrowing decades, our community bore the brunt of an unforgiving war. We endured unfathomable sacrifices, widespread devastation, and the annihilation of an entire generation. Nearly 40,000 LTTE cadres—our own sons and daughters of Sri Lanka—were obliterated. Add to that the tens of thousands of Tamil civilians who perished, the multitudes who were displaced, and those brutally executed by the LTTE as ‘traitors,’ and the death toll soars to staggering, almost incomprehensible levels. And let us not forget—ours is a tiny nation. For the Tamil people, this war eradicated nearly 10% of our population. If that weren't enough, mass migration further hollowed out our communities.

Statistical records indicate that Jaffna had a larger population in the 1970s than it does today. Can we even begin to grasp the sheer magnitude of such demographic decimation? The scale of this decline is nothing short of catastrophic.

Today, the LTTE is no more. The armed struggle is extinguished and reduced to a relic of the past. There is no battlefield left, no military path to tread. The only pragmatic course is to accept Sri Lanka as our homeland and wage our fight for justice from within. Clinging to the mirage of separatism is not only a delusional fallacy but a suicidal folly—one that will condemn the Tamil people to perpetual stagnation and suffering.

History is filled with examples of minorities who embraced national identities and flourished. The Jews in the United States, the Chinese in Malaysia, Muslims in India—none of them dwelled in perpetual grievance. They engaged, adapted, and claimed their rightful place in their nations.

Likewise, Sri Lanka is our home. Why should we allow radical agitators—both within the diaspora and at home—to manipulate our destiny?

Tamils, the time has come to move forward. It is time to reclaim our rightful place in this nation—not as rebels, not as exiles, but as Sri Lankans. We must seize control of our own destiny, fight to secure our rights through democratic means, and build a future where our children thrive—not in displacement, not in uncertainty, but here, in the land we call home.

To the Tamil hardliners who demand I disown my country, and to the Sinhala hardliners who deny us our rightful place within it, hear me: I draw strength from the words of Jaguar Paw, son of Flint Sky, in

Apocalypto Movie: "I am Jaguar Paw, son of Flint Sky. My father hunted this forest before me. My name is Jaguar Paw. I am a hunter. This is my forest. And my sons will hunt it with their sons after I am gone."

"I am Kaniyan Pungundran, son of this ancient soil. My ancestors walked this land before me, their footsteps etched into its very soul. My name is Kaniyan Pungundran. I am a son of Sri Lanka. This is my land. And my children will walk upon it with their children long after I am gone."

Warm regards,

கணியன் பூங்குன்றன்  
**Kaniyan Pungundran**  
Editor-in-Chief,  
Jaffna Monitor

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# Fantastical Literature Is the Original Form of Storytelling — Literary Realism Is a 19th-Century Innovation”

## Exclusive Interview with Vajra Chandrasekera



BY:  
Our Special  
Correspondent

Vajra Chandrasekera is a Colombo-born writer who has risen to the pinnacle of speculative fiction, his name now synonymous with imaginative storytelling that transcends boundaries.

His debut novel, *The Saint of Bright Doors*, is a genre-defying masterpiece that has

captivated readers, critics, and award juries worldwide, earning him prestigious accolades, including the Nebula and Crawford Awards. It transports readers to worlds

where the ordinary and the extraordinary collide in a symphony of the surreal.

In this exclusive interview with Jaffna Monitor,





we journey into the heart of Vajra Chandrasekera's creative universe—exploring the genesis of his ideas, the inspirations that fuel his imagination, and his perspectives on the ever-evolving literary landscape. Join us as we step into the mind of a writer who dares to dream beyond the confines of reality.

**Your short story, *The Translator*, at *Low Tide* was recently translated and published in the Tamil literary magazine *Kaalachuvadu*. Could you share your thoughts on having your work translated and reaching Tamil-speaking audiences?**

I'm absolutely delighted to have the story translated! Translation itself is a creative art form and, in a way, a magical act. Having done enough of it myself, I understand just how subtle and complex the process can be. It's difficult to fully grasp how a story reads in a language you are not fluent in or well-versed with, as you may not be familiar with its literary history or the context in which the story will be received. Trusting the translators, along with the editors and publishers who bring the work to new readers, is an essential part of that process. I deeply appreciate the dedication and effort of all the translators who have worked on my books and short stories over the past decade. Nearly all of these translations have been into European languages. This, however, is the first time my work has been translated into a South Asian language, making it both a new and deeply gratifying experience.

**Your father was a writer, and you were involved in the publishing process from a young age. How did these**

**experiences shape your journey as a writer?**

In one sense, quite a lot—I gained an early understanding of the work involved from a writer's perspective, including the effort required to draft, edit, revise, and proofread. I also picked up some technical insights, such as hearing my father talk about how he approached dialogue, description, and other aspects of writing. But from the perspective of commercial publishing, my father's experience was entirely with local and regional small presses in the final decades of the previous century—a world that now feels almost like another planet. Knowing something about that didn't prepare me at all for the far more complex experience of working with Western publishers in the present decade. Those things, I could only learn by doing.

**Your novel *The Saint of Bright Doors* has received major accolades, including the 2023 Nebula Award, the 2024 Crawford Award, and the Locus Award for Best First Novel. It was also a finalist for the 2024 Hugo Award. What do these honors mean to you as a writer, and have they influenced your approach to future projects?**

They were all quite unexpected and deeply validating. I didn't expect the book to make waves—most books don't! I'm very happy for what the awards mean in terms of recognition, since these include both juried and popular awards. The award wins and nominations have significantly raised my profile as a debut author, and I believe have contributed to getting the book in front of more people in many practical ways: more

bookshops and libraries stocking copies, more publishers around the world making offers on translations, more book clubs, more media. All of this is wonderful, and far more than I expected. Luck plays a disproportionately huge role in a writer's career, and I've been very lucky.

**Traditionally, Sri Lankan writers have predominantly explored current or historical themes in their stories and novels, with science fiction being a rare genre within the literary landscape. What inspired you to take this unconventional path and write science fiction? Was there a specific moment, influence, or realization that led you to embrace this genre?**

I don't think of it as a particularly unconventional path. Quite a few writers from Sri Lanka (both living on the island and from the diaspora) have published speculative fiction in a variety of styles and spaces over the last twenty years: I made a list of some of these writers on my blog the year Saint came out. There are many more in South Asia in general, and around the world. Speculative and fantastical literatures are quite popular among both readers and writers. More technically, I prefer fantastical to naturalistic registers because it makes it possible to create a much more layered symbolic space. To me, strict realism is the exception. It can be a fruitful set of formal constraints, and certainly it remains the culturally highest-prestige form, but then again, the times are certainly changing: look at all the recent Booker winners that were in some way speculative fiction, including Shehan Karunatilaka with a ghost detective story.

**What is your outlook for science fiction in Sri Lanka? Do you perceive a growing interest in the genre, particularly among the younger generations?**

I don't really know. I've never published here and have very little insight into the local industry or readership—most of my readers are elsewhere. In general, I'd guess that, like everywhere else, traditional science fiction, especially space opera, might feel somewhat old-fashioned to younger readers, much like epic fantasy, since these genres have been mainstream for the past forty years. I think their core readership now skews older on a global scale.

My vague impression from the last Colombo Book Fair was that romantasy and shonen manga are just as popular here as anywhere else, alongside prestige literary fiction, including literary-speculative authors like Atwood and Ishiguro. These seem to be the most sought-after foreign fiction titles. Otherwise, the selection of modern speculative fiction across subgenres appears quite thin on local shelves, likely due to low demand. Whether that reflects an actual lack of interest or simply the fact that readers are opting for ebooks instead is hard to say.

**How do you view science fiction as a platform for exploring themes or ideas that might be difficult to address within the confines of more traditional narratives? In what ways do you think the speculative nature of the genre allows for a deeper or broader engagement with complex social,**



## cultural, or philosophical issues?

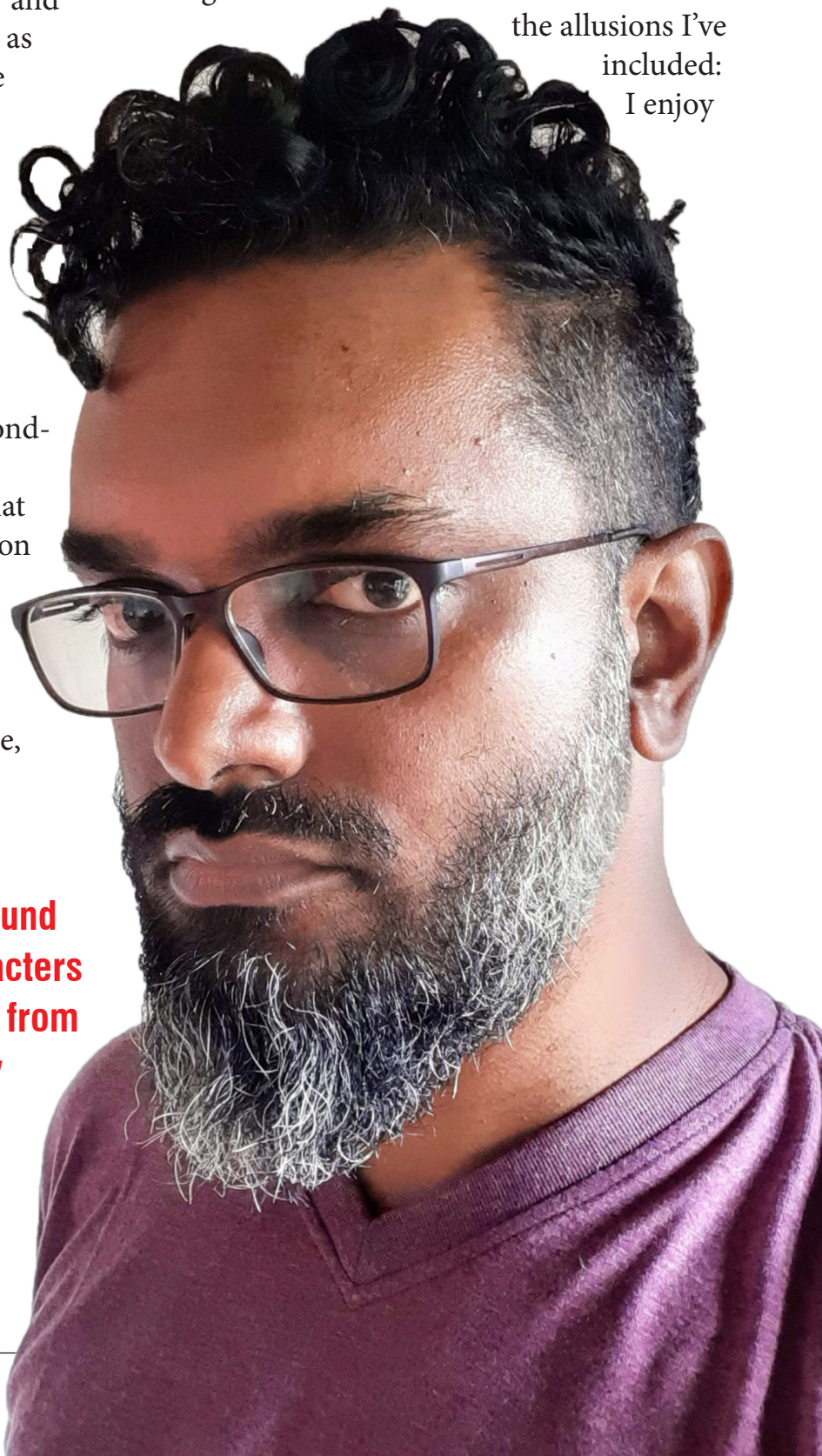
I don't think it does. I think any theme can be addressed in any form or genre. It's just that each writer and reader will find different approaches more pleasurable or interesting. Strict naturalism is a powerful technique, obviously, and has given us a wide range of social and political novels that have a great deal to say. Speculation is also a powerful technique, and in many ways an easier and more traditional one, if you think of it as drawing from allegory and satire more than design fiction. I think it appeals more to readers and writers who enjoy a greater degree of ontological freedom in their fictive dream. In strict naturalism, a door is literally a door and perhaps symbolically also a door. In the fantastic, the door's symbolic meaning can become real, which allows for the possibility of second-order speculative consequences: what could be on the other side of a door that can never be opened? Speculative fiction also increases the range of a kind of indirect political fiction, similar to the methods of the misty poets in China or the magic realists of South America. The difference is of technique, and therefore a matter of preference.

## How much of your personal experiences or cultural background influences the worlds and characters you create? Are there elements from Sri Lankan history or mythology that you consciously integrate into your speculative fiction?

Yes, of course! My books are full of Sri Lankan and South Asian

references, historical, mythic, and personal, to the point where western readers often say (and only some of them mean this as a complaint) that they have to look things up to understand them. In *Rakesfall* I make fairly direct connections to Sri Lankan folk tales and histories, as well as the *Ramayana*, and the *Kathasaritsaga*. In *The Saint of Bright Doors* I retell a version of the story of Prince Vijaya's arrival on the island. I do this sort of thing so much

I can't even remember all the allusions I've included:  
I enjoy





stories that make reference to other stories nearly as much as I enjoy stories within stories.

## **While you primarily write in English, what is your perspective on science fiction in local languages?**

I think it's a great thing, and I wish there were more of it—along with greater coverage. A thriving literary culture in any language should encompass many forms and genres, including fantastical literatures. I know there are science fiction novels in Sinhala, though they seem relatively rare. I'd assume the same is true for Tamil in Sri Lanka, though there's certainly more activity in India on that front.

One upcoming anthology I'm particularly excited about is *The Blaft Book of Anti-Caste Science Fiction* from Blaft Publications in Chennai, which features speculative fiction in English translation from Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, and other languages. I wish all our regional publishing industries, especially small presses, had more support and funding to publish and translate such works. The Blaft anthology was crowdfunded online, which might offer a viable path forward for similar projects. Interestingly, the publisher recently noted that a significant number of orders came from outside India—an encouraging sign of growing international interest in these literatures.

## **On a global scale, how have the science fiction and speculative fiction genres evolved over time? What significant trends or shifts have you observed, and how do they resonate with your own work?**

It's a long history, regardless on whether you

begin from the Epic of Gilgamesh or from *Frankenstein*—personally, I like to begin from Lucian of Samosata's *A True Story*, but it doesn't matter: this kind of story has been a part of literature for as long as literature itself has existed. I would argue that fantastical literatures are the standard and original form of the story: literary realism is the real nineteenth-century innovation, and has in turn spurred new kinds of fantastical literature using its toolkit.

There have been some big shifts in publishing over the 20th century as the industry itself evolved, and there are definitely many smaller movements and trends, but I think ultimately they don't matter so much. Many of the year-on-year trends are driven by marketing, in any case, and represent not much more than publishers attempting to reproduce recent successes by producing more of the same. This works to a limited extent and then they move on to something else. For writers, I think it's important to disengage from these cycles when writing. Even from a purely commercial standpoint, because given the extended timelines to finish a work, sell it, and then have it arrive in bookstores, you usually can't even catch a commercial trend that's already happening. On the plus side, it also means that for the most part you can just ignore the short-term trends and write what you want to.

The biggest changes in recent decades, I think, have been that first, modern novelistic fantastic literature is nowadays allowed much more freely into prestige cultural spaces (like the Booker, as I mentioned earlier) and these genre lines are much blurrier than they used to be, and that's a good thing in both directions.

Secondly, also as I spoke of earlier: especially over the last twenty years, there has been a distinct shift toward a more international field as the internet democratized access to

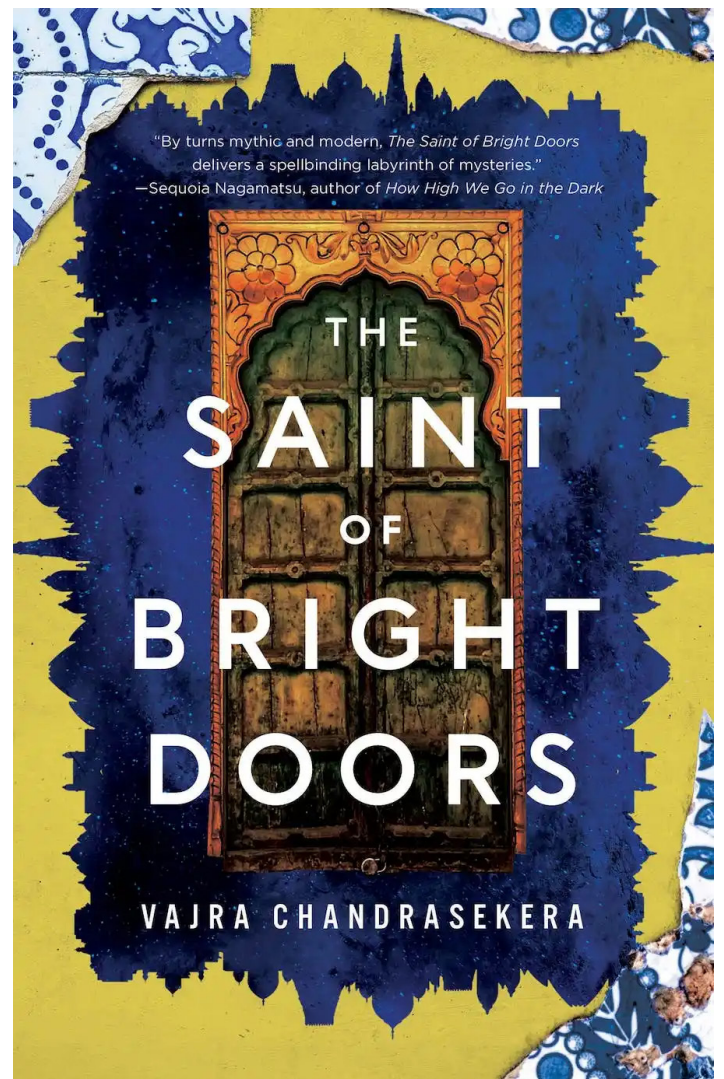
publishing. While the industry continues to have many problems, we can at least say that publishing is much less limited by location than it used to be. I think I've benefited from both of those changes, and I'm hopeful that they mean new opportunities for many more writers.

In a previous interview, you mentioned that as you grew older, your parents encouraged you to pursue what they considered "acceptable" careers—such as becoming a doctor, lawyer, or engineer.

**With the creative economy evolving in recent years, do you feel it has become more feasible for writers to pursue their craft as a sole profession while achieving financial stability? Moreover, does the mindset of parents encouraging traditional career paths still persist, and how do you think it impacts the creative aspirations and career choices of younger generations?**

I think that mindset is an understandable intergenerational disconnect under modernity. Technological and social change is constant and ever more volatile, and it's much easier to take career risks for yourself than it is to watch your loved ones do it, especially if you feel responsible for their future well-being.

One consequence of accelerating neoliberalism is that all jobs are worse than they used to be. You get paid less, relative to cost of living, and you have less job security, if any at all. Creative work is no exception: it's precarious, often exploitative, and extremely unpredictable. I would definitely say that writing is not a good



line of work if you want financial stability. Some other kind of paying work is still quite necessary if you want to pursue any kind of artistic career. My only modification to my parents' advice would be to think in terms of freelance or contract work where you get to set your own hours, rather than working toward the kind of full-time job which will demand all your energy and time. But even that modification is really just a reflection of the changing nature of work in general. Personally, my main side gig was freelance editing, mostly in nonfiction.

That said, I do think this is a particularly good moment for writers who live in the third world, because first-world publishing is far more accessible to us now than it has ever been, as the industry has very slowly adapted to the internet. All the information you need is online, you can email manuscripts, sign

contracts digitally, attend virtual events, talk to writers, translators, and people in the industry on social media—you no longer need to have physical access to major centres of western publishing like New York or London to be able to get an agent or get your work in front of an editor; you don't need to go to conferences or conventions on the other side of the world to meet people who can help you; you don't even need to spend money on postage to send your manuscripts out. It's not surprising to see the sharp increase in books written by writers from South Asia coming out in the US and UK markets now. Even a decade ago that was much rarer. I hope to see a lot more writers from this part of the world taking advantage of these opportunities in every genre.

**What opportunities and challenges do you think artificial intelligence (AI) presents for writers, particularly those working in the science fiction genre? Do you see the potential for leveraging AI responsibly in the creative process, and if so, how might that manifest in practice? Furthermore, some technology experts predict that AI could eventually write as effectively as human writers. Do you agree with this perspective, and how do you envision it shaping the future of writing and storytelling?**

I am strongly opposed to AI in any way connected to creative work. (I'm also opposed to AI in general, as I think it is an execrable technology that will only introduce and compound error wherever it is used, but I am more resigned to this as part of silicon neoliberalism's natural enshittification.)

Writing fiction is a very long sequence of decisions, some minor, some complex. AI-generated text represents the abandonment of all those decisions in exchange for a statistical smear that unthinkingly approximates the combined product of many such past decisions by many other people with wildly different concerns. It is an abdication of responsibility as an artist: why should anyone care to read something that you didn't care to write? The "product" may look the same at a distant, superficial glance. You can paint a brick to look like a cake. But it will not feed you when you are hungry.

I understand the appeal of AI to people who romanticize the idea of being a writer, as a social role (or a visual artist, or a musician)—people who believe that there is prestige or cultural cachet or money or something desirable about it other than the act of writing itself. They don't want to write but they want to be a writer, and to this end they persuade themselves that the writing itself is unnecessary. Like a middle manager who gives instructions to other people to do the work and then takes credit for what they produce. But ultimately the benefit accrues only to the upper management boss they don't even acknowledge: the companies that own the AI technology, who will use all that data to train the AI and make it more profitable.

The danger of AI is not in science-fictional apocalypses of the robots taking over. (If such a thing is possible, it's certainly not going to happen because we have a glorified autocomplete.) The danger is that this is a new weapon that employers can use to make work more precarious in many different fields. It gives them the means to fire more people and rehire them as contractors on worse terms to "fix" the AI's output. This turns more full-time jobs into contract jobs and drives down



freelance rates. It generates profit for people at the other end of this value-extraction chain, by making it much harder for a wide variety of white-collar workers (not only in the creative fields) to have stable work for decent pay.

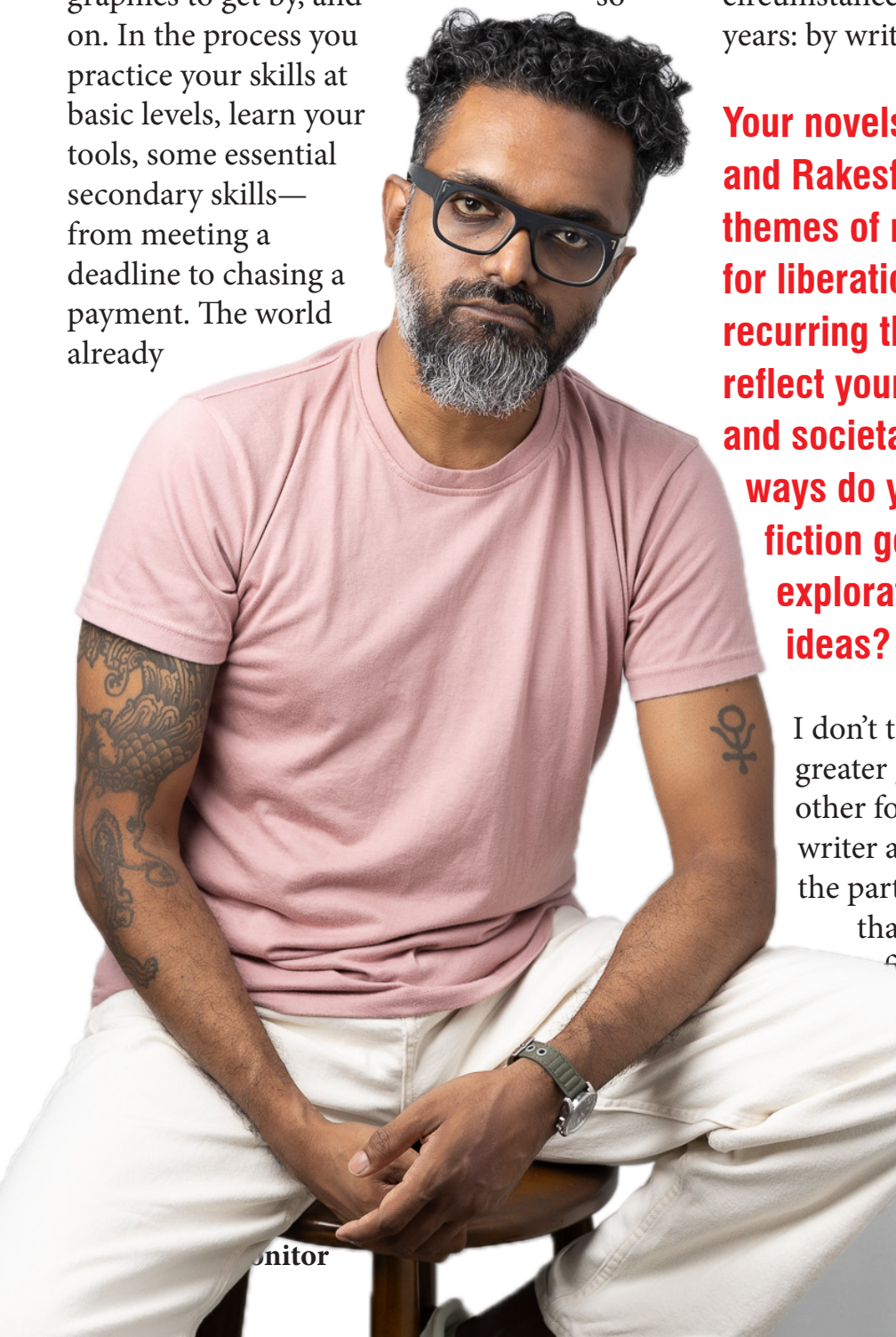
Specifically in the creative fields, an additional danger is that it will significantly damage the ecosystem of small gigs and side projects that many fledgeling artists use both as additional sources of revenue as well as an arena in which to practice and improve their skills. Many a writer has survived on copywriting gigs, many a visual artist makes posters and graphics to get by, and so on. In the process you practice your skills at basic levels, learn your tools, some essential secondary skills—from meeting a deadline to chasing a payment. The world already

strongly disincentivizes people from becoming artists. The real AI apocalypse is that we could lose a generation of potential artists and gain a generation of smug, illiterate dipshits in their place.

There are additional dangers and concerns with AI (environmental damage to both the earth and the internet, for instance), but this is probably already my longest response, so I'll stop here. My advice to writers in any genre is to treat AI as the revolting slop bucket it is, and to do your work the same way writers in every language and under every imaginable circumstance have done for thousands of years: by writing, one line at a time.

**Your novels, *The Saint of Bright Doors* and *Rakesfall*, delve into profound themes of reincarnation and struggles for liberation. What draws you to these recurring themes, and how do they reflect your perspectives on identity and societal structures? In what ways do you believe the speculative fiction genre uniquely facilitates the exploration of such multifaceted ideas?**

I don't think speculative fiction has a greater grasp of these things than any other form or genre, but I do—as a writer and as a reader myself—appreciate the particular tactility and purchase that the techniques of speculative fiction provide on their grippable surfaces. Though a great deal of ostensibly realist fiction also often makes space for unreal, symbolic irruption. Few stories are altogether straight. I think



it's more useful to think of genre as a set of traditions and some loose guidelines rather than something that has strict boundaries. And I've lived in Sri Lanka all my life, with an altogether too close-up view of Sinhala Buddhist supremacist culture, so it will probably always be impossible for me to write a book that doesn't talk in some way about power as I've understood it—the violence of empires and states through genocide, apartheid, and ideology.

**You have also published occasional poems alongside your fiction. How do you perceive the role of poetry in your body of work? Does it serve a different purpose or occupy a unique creative space compared to your fiction?**

I consider poetry in many ways the fundamental creative form in language, in the way that mathematics underlies physics but is also its own discipline. All prose derives from the poetic act: every word was once, and secretly still is, a poem. I don't write a lot of poetry qua poetry—I find it more difficult—or think of myself as a poet, but I do believe that one of the great pleasures of prose is in this revelation of obscured beauties, of secret rhythms.

**What can your readers look forward to in your upcoming works? Are there specific themes or genres you are eager to explore further, or perhaps new creative directions that you're considering venturing into?**

I'm working on a novel that I hope to have out soon (no earlier than '26), that will be formally and thematically similar to my first two

books. Broadly, I work freely with the various elements of “speculative fiction”—science fiction, fantasy, horror, and the weird—and integrate them with writing about place, culture, and history in a Sri Lankan and South Asian context. This is my project for at least a few more books to come, so I want to do more of it as well as do more with it. Oh, and I also hope to publish a collection of my short stories soon; they do tend to get overshadowed by the novels, and I think it would be nice to have a selection in book form that will hopefully reach a few more readers.

**Your command of English is remarkable, and it reflects beautifully in your writing. Could you share how you developed such proficiency? Was your education primarily in English, or did you learn and refine the language on your own? Additionally, what advice would you offer to younger generations aspiring to master English, particularly those who wish to use it as a medium for creative expression and storytelling? Are there specific practices or resources you recommend?**

Thank you! That's very kind of you to say. No, my formal education was entirely in Sinhala. I went to a government school in Colombo and stopped my education after my A/Ls, at which I did not score particularly well. My parents sent me to English classes at a young age, and were themselves fluent (though my father was not necessarily comfortable in it.) But most of all, there were a lot of English books at home. Some came from book fairs and second-hand bookshops; some came from

boxes of books inherited from dead relatives with eccentric taste. And of course, libraries. I progressed on my own from children's books to adult novels, and my love of speculative fiction probably helped nudge me toward English novels quite early. For example, I read Arthur C. Clarke for the first time in Sinhala translation, but I realised that if I wanted to read his other books, other classic writers of that period, or any newer writers at all, they were only available in English. And of course, as a historical consequence, there is just so much more fiction available in English, in every genre, including translations from other languages.

So my advice is primarily just to read as much as you can, and as widely as you can. Most people read at best a handful of books every year. A writer—at least, one who wants to get good at it—should be reading at least several dozen. There is no upper limit to reading except those imposed by time and money, but practically speaking, there is definitely a lower limit.

A specific practice I'd recommend for writers of short fiction in English—and I do think every beginning writer of prose fiction should at least try their hand at the short story, even if

you see yourself primarily as a novelist—is to actively send your work to magazines from the very beginning. You will get a lot of rejections, but that's normal. It's not personal: every writer collects hundreds of these. It just means that you're a working writer.

The rules of the game are simple: keep writing new stories (do not endlessly “polish” the last thing you wrote) and keep sending those stories out for publication (do not give up on a story unless its rejections are at least in the low double digits.)

Below are a few free resources that track opportunities for publication. Each will have their own submission guidelines, so be sure to read those and make sure you're giving them exactly what they ask for. Note: avoid anything that has a submission fee. You, the writer, should not be spending any money to get published, and there are a lot of scams out there. Links you find from the databases below should be generally reliable.

1. <https://manager.submittable.com/opportunities/discover?fee=false&page=1&tags=short-story>
2. [https://www.pw.org/literary\\_magazines](https://www.pw.org/literary_magazines)
3. <https://thegrinder.diabolicalplots.com/>

## Upcoming in Jaffna Monitor



*The final part of LTTE co-founder Ragavan's exclusive interview will be featured in the next issue. Stay tuned for insights and untold perspectives!*



# R. Bharathi, A Pillar of Tamil Journalism, Passes Away

The Tamil journalism community in Sri Lanka is mourning the loss of Rajanayagam Bharathi, who passed away on February 9 at the age of 63. More than just a veteran reporter, Bharathi was a driving force in Tamil media—a fearless advocate for his colleagues, a mentor to numerous young journalists, and a lifelong champion of journalistic integrity.

His career began in the turbulent 1980s with Eezhamurasu, and over the next four decades, his byline became a fixture in nearly every major Tamil publication in the country. From Murasoli to Thinakkural, EelaNadu, and most notably, Virakesari—where he served as Northern Regional Editor until his passing—Bharathi fearlessly documented the Tamil liberation struggle, the atrocities committed by the armed forces, and other critical issues.

Colleagues remember his unwavering bravery, particularly in his reporting on the abduction and killing of Murasoli editor Thiruchelvam's son, Ahilan—a crime allegedly orchestrated by a former death squad leader who now parades as a champion of Tamil nationalism, cloaked in self-righteousness, claiming that he wouldn't harm even an ant, not even in his dreams.

His colleagues recall that Bharathi faced numerous death threats for his relentless coverage of Ahilan's brutal murder, yet he



refused to be silenced, standing firm in his commitment to truth and justice.

Bharathi's influence extended far beyond the written word. As a founding member and leader of the Tamil Journalists' Union, he was a tireless advocate for press freedom and the rights of his peers. More than that, he was a mentor and guide, shaping generations of aspiring journalists with his gentle demeanor, sharp editorial acumen, and unwavering dedication to ethical reporting.

His passing leaves a void that will be deeply felt across the media fraternity.

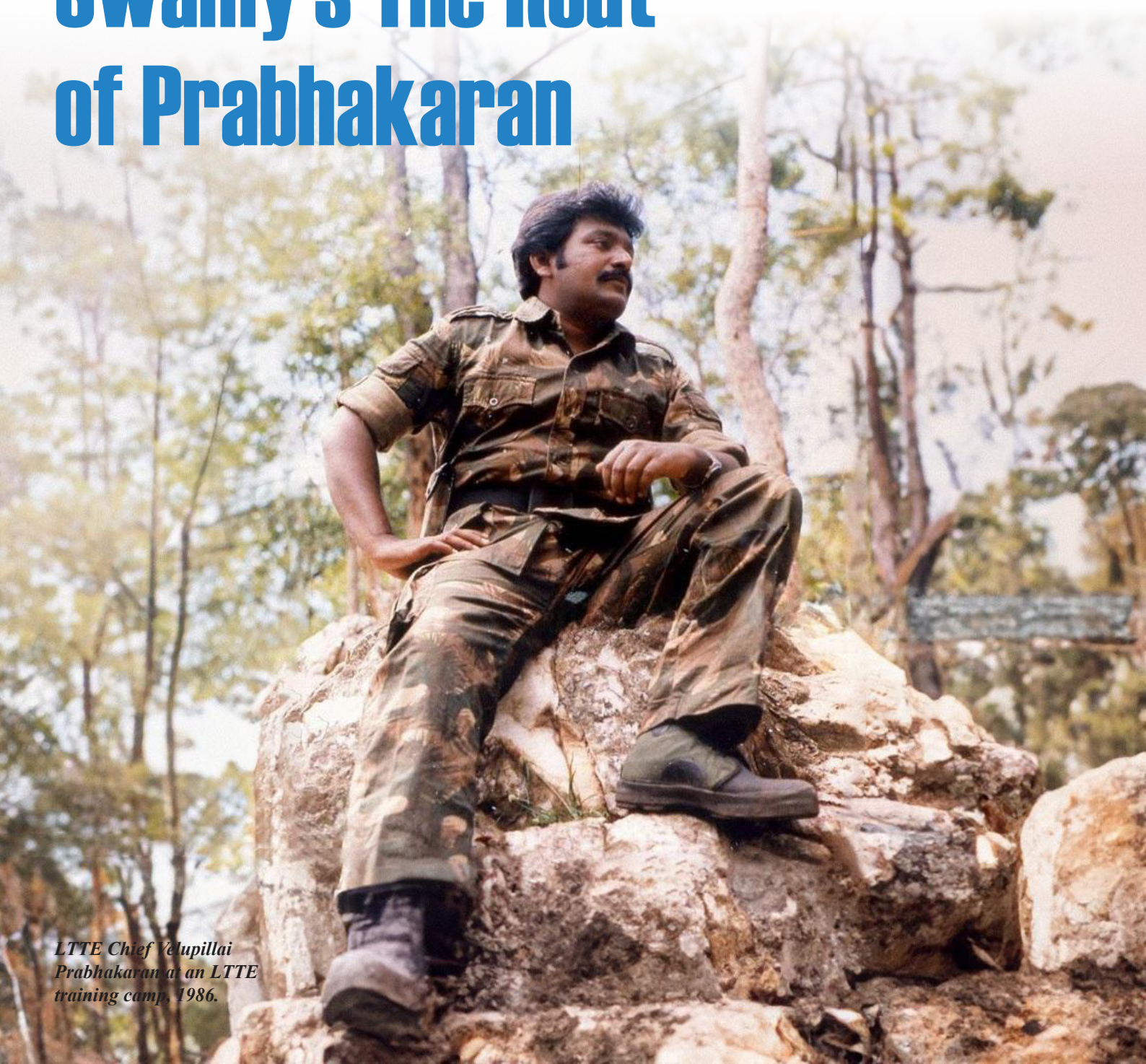
Jaffna Monitor extends its deepest condolences to his family, friends, and colleagues whose lives he touched. He will be deeply missed.



# The LTTE chief's rise and fall: Review of M.R. Narayan Swamy's *The Rout of Prabhakaran*



BY: Erik Solheim



*LTTE Chief Velupillai Prabhakaran at an LTTE training camp, 1986.*



What turns a young man, who leaves home to fight legitimate grievances in his community and nurtures big dreams on behalf of his people, into a dedicated killer who sees violence as the answer to every problem?

The Indian journalist, M.R. Narayan Swamy, who has followed the story of The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), sets out to answer this question in his timely and well-researched book *The Rout of Prabhakaran*.

As the chief negotiator in the Sri Lankan peace process, I asked myself the same question numerous times: How, as Swamy puts it, did “guns become the answer to overcome each and every obstacle in the chessboard of Tamil Eelam” in Velupillai Prabhakaran’s mind?

Prabhakaran was the main strength, as well as the principle weakness, of the LTTE. He created one of the most effective guerrilla



*M.R. Narayan Swamy*

forces in the world and turned the somewhat sleepy and unsexy Tamil struggle into one of the epic wars at the turn of the 20th century. No movement in human history has mobilised the suicide weapon in such a deadly fashion — killing a former prime minister of India, and numerous Sri Lankan leaders.

It all ended in an orgy of violence orchestrated by the Sri Lankan army in May 2009,

with the death of every LTTE leader who had not defected to the army years earlier. Prabhakaran and his entire family were killed. His 12-year-old son Balachandran was murdered in a blatant war crime even after being taken into custody by the army.

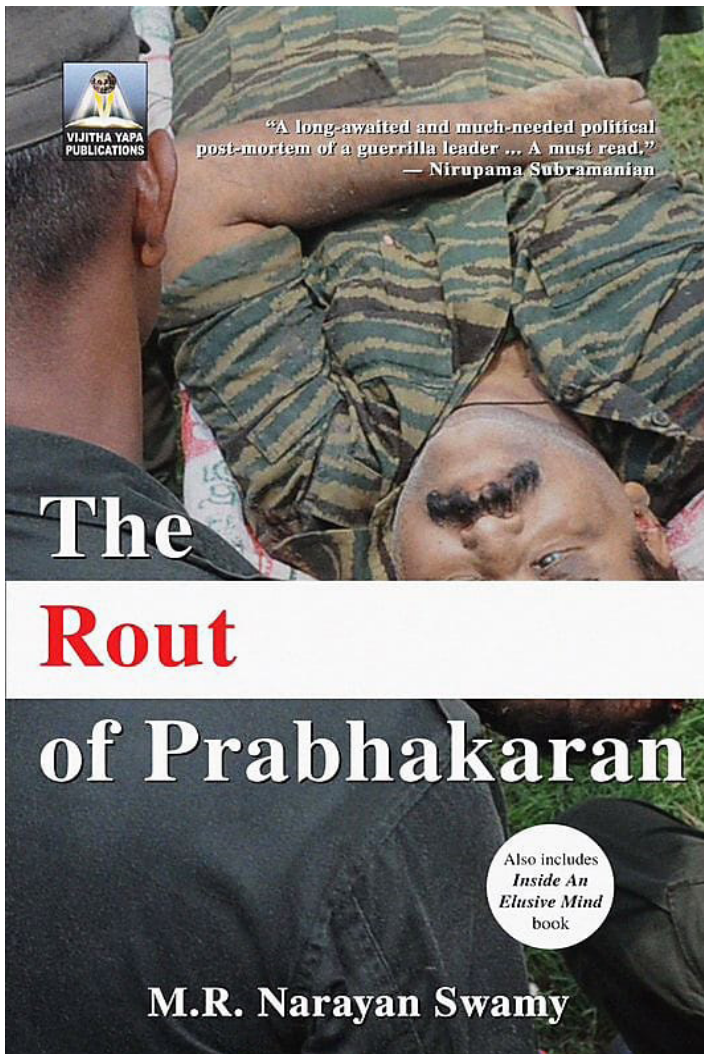
## A paradox

Though he was fighting for Tamils, paradoxically, Prabhakaran also became the big killer of Tamils. He annihilated



*From right to left: LTTE’s only deputy leader Gopalaswamy Mahendraraja (Mahattaya), LTTE chief Prabhakaran, his trusted bodyguard Thiyagu, and an Indian Army officer during the Indian Peacekeeping Force (IPKF) era. Ironically, Mahattaya was later executed by the LTTE on Prabhakaran’s orders as an alleged RAW spy, while Thiyagu and a female LTTE fighter were executed by the LTTE after she became pregnant with his child.*





all competing Tamil militant groups. He hunted down Sri Sabaratnam of the Tamil Eelam Liberation Organisation in Jaffna. His comrade-in-arms Mahattaya was shot as an Indian spy in the Vanni. The historic Tamil leader Amirthalingam was murdered in Colombo. My friend Neelan Thiruchelvam was blown up by a suicide cadre in Colombo, even as he was headed for Harvard. The LTTE later told me it was because he had refused to abandon the process of proposed changes to the constitution. Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar was shot in 2005 in what today can best be seen as the beginning of the end for Prabhakaran.

How does one explain this turn in Prabhakaran? Two explanations stand out in Swamy's telling. Prabhakaran had a very narrow horizon; he did not understand geopolitics or the workings of the big

neighbour, India. He hardly ventured to the south of Sri Lanka and had interacted very little with Sinhalese or Muslims. His perspective was that of the village. How else can you explain the stupidity of killing Rajiv Gandhi in 1991, who was India's prime minister from 1984 to 1989, at a time when India was the main source of support for his struggle? Would a successful rebel movement in Mexico attempt to murder President Trump?

The LTTE was also primarily a military movement. It did not mainly involve itself in mass work, political mobilisation, or humanitarian efforts. Did the early spectacular military success against the Indian army, later over-running the Elephant Pass, nearly wiping off the Palaly air base and attacking Colombo airport in an extraordinary raid with devastating effects on the Sri Lankan economy create a certain arrogance?

There is a history of guerrilla fighters turning themselves into successful political leaders, particularly when they understood the need for a broad front, and, even more importantly, that the gun was only a supplementary vehicle to the political struggle. Yoweri Museveni in Uganda and Meles Zenawi in Ethiopia, the Chinese and Vietnamese Communists won military triumphs against all odds, but at the end their victories were political.

Michael Collins, the founding father of Ireland, was an extraordinary assassin of the British, but he knew that the British empire could not be brought down with guns alone.

## An end foretold

Was the end preordained then for Prabhakaran? Swamy thinks so. But he doesn't try to explain why the LTTE entered into the



peace process, not out of weakness, but at the peak of its power in 2002. Why negotiate when you are strong?

I met Prabhakaran many times and saw softer aspects to the man. He was a film enthusiast and a dedicated cook. He adored his children and sent me to Ireland to secure a place at Dublin University for his beloved daughter Duwaraka. She was accepted, only to be caught up in her father's renewed war and perish with her family in 2009.

Prabhakaran's friend and partner Anton Balasingham was the good influence on him, always offering sound and critical advice. It was after Bala died in 2006, that Thambi or younger brother as Bala called him, started making many mistakes.

He strongly advised against the Tamil boycott of the 2005 election which brought Mahinda Rajapaksa to power. The Sri Lankan government also made a mistake by restricting access of foreigners to Prabhakaran. International diplomats like me had tried to guide him towards peace.

At the end, it all led to his last apocalyptic decision to fight to the last day — and the last Tamil. Through Kumaran Pathmanathan, KP, the LTTE 'foreign minister', we offered to bring out all the combatants and civilians from the war zone. When KP went to finalise the deal, Prabhakaran refused. The rest is history.

Swamy does not explain all aspects of the Sri Lankan crisis. The Sinhala war crimes are not centre stage; nor the catastrophic decisions of so many Colombo leaders who created a divided rather than united land. But Swamy masterly sums up the extraordinary life and legacy of Prabhakaran.

**The reviewer was chief peace negotiator between the LTTE and the Sri Lankan government.**

**Note: This review originally appeared in The Hindu. All credits go to The Hindu and the author, Erik Solheim, for the content.**

#### **Book Details:**

**The Rout of Prabhakaran**

**Author: M.R. Narayan Swamy**

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# NPP's 'Liquor Mafia' Crusade? Turns Out, It's Just a Mocktail of Excuses!



The National People's Power (NPP) government has pulled off a somersault that few would dare to attempt! "The NPP government has not issued any new liquor licenses, nor does it intend to. However, arbitrarily revoking licenses legally issued during the previous administration could lead to legal complications. Once a permit is legally issued, it becomes a binding document, and no amount of drama can turn it into a 'non-permit,'" stated the Leader of the House and Minister, Bimal Rathnayake.

This statement was made in response to ITAK MP Kavindran Kodeeswaran, who raised the issue during the recent parliamentary debate on the Clean Sri Lanka Initiative. He stated, "The people of Kalmunai-Neelavanai have



expressed their opposition to the opening of new liquor outlets in the area. The government had previously pledged to revoke liquor licenses issued by the former administration, but so far, no action has been taken."

## Empty Promises and Broken Trust

"The NPP's election campaign was like a blockbuster movie trailer, a political observer noted to Jaffna Monitor—packed with dramatic promises, intense music, and a catchy tagline that promised change. Among their bold pledges was: 'We're here to expose the liquor mafia and their political godfathers!'"

Voters, especially in northern Sri Lanka, were hooked, thinking, 'Finally, a party that isn't just



serving us the same old stale political biryani—one that actually speaks truth to power!"

But now, the observer remarked, the so-called blockbuster has turned out to be a low-budget spoof—no plot, no climax, and certainly no ticket-worthy moments."

The government's excuses—legal complications, administrative challenges—sound like a lazy student trying to explain why their homework is missing, another political observer remarked. A critic, in conversation with Jaffna Monitor, pointed out that the government's behavior resembles a classic Vadivelu comedy: "That was one mouth... this is the rotten mouth!" (அது வேற வாய்... இது நாற வாய்!!)

Another observer noted that instead of revelations, we're getting a masterclass in political gymnastics—twists, turns, and somersaults that would make even an Olympic athlete jealous. The only thing transparent so far is the government's ability to dodge its own promises like a pro, he concluded.

## The Legal Quandary

While the government's reluctance to revoke existing licenses may have some legal basis, critics argue that the NPP's campaign rhetoric suggested a far more aggressive approach.



During the elections, the party vowed to expose the names of new bar owners and the politicians backing them. Yet, no such list has been made public, leaving voters to wonder if the promise was merely a dramatic dialogue crafted for applause rather than action.

Adding to the frustration is the lack of clarity on the legal hurdles. How many liquor licenses were issued by the previous administration? What specific legal or administrative challenges are preventing the government from taking action? Without answers to these questions, the public is left to speculate, and trust in the government continues to erode.

The NPP now faces a critical choice, a political observer noted to Jaffna Monitor—double down on its commitment to transparency and take concrete steps to address the liquor mafia, or risk becoming just another political party that failed to live up to its own hype.

# ‘The Military That Fought the War Should Have Been Rehabilitated, Just Like the Surrendered LTTE Cadres’

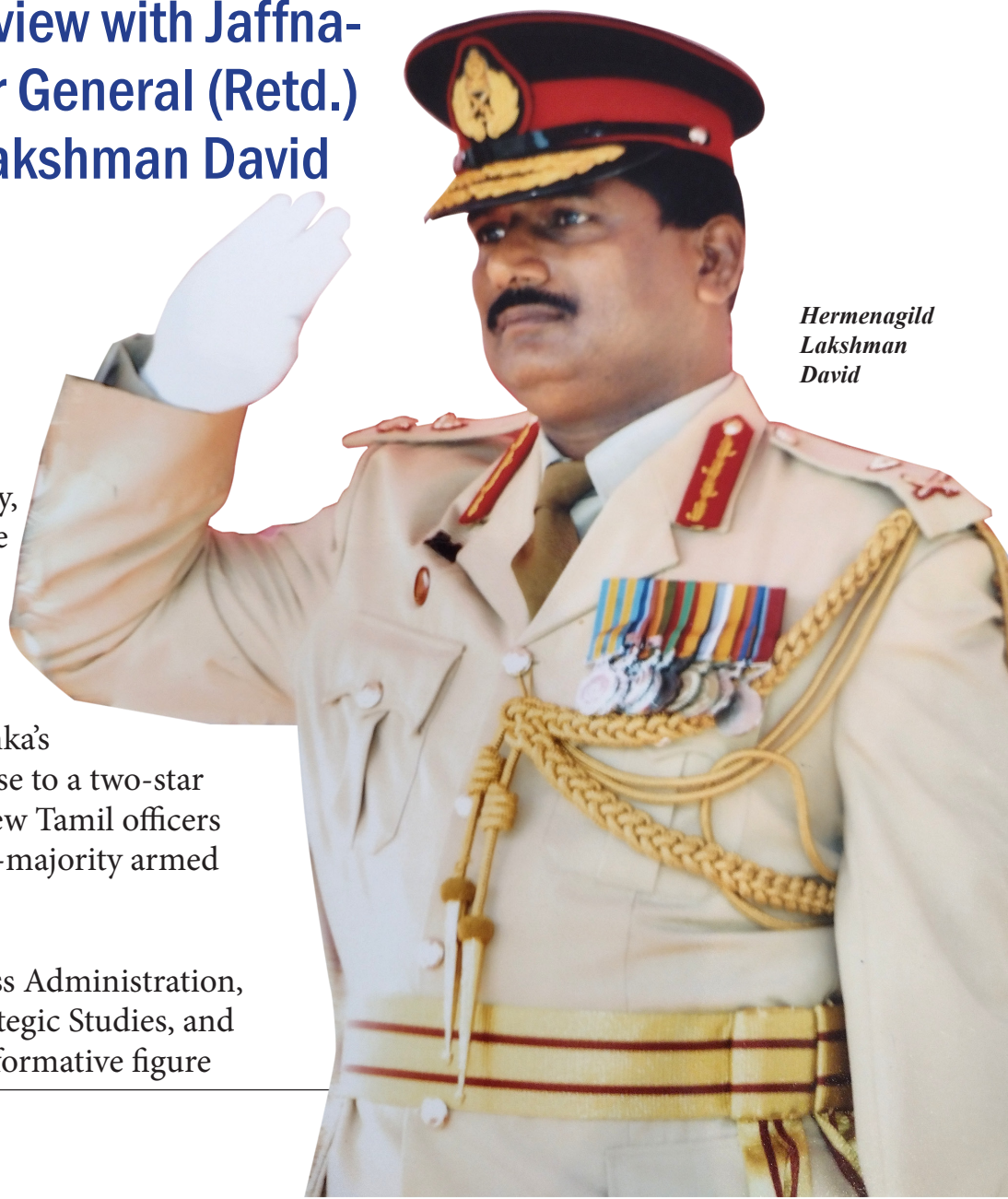
– Exclusive Interview with Jaffna-born Tamil Major General (Retd.) Hermenagild Lakshman David



BY:  
**Our Special  
Correspondent**

Sri Lanka's military history, often shaped by Sinhalese voices, has a rare exception: Major General (Retd.) Hermenagild Lakshman David. Born in Jaffna, the cultural heartland of Sri Lanka's Tamil community, David rose to a two-star General—an achievement few Tamil officers have attained in the Sinhala-majority armed forces.

With a Doctorate in Business Administration, an MSc in Defence and Strategic Studies, and an MBA, he became a transformative figure



*Hermenagild  
Lakshman  
David*



in Sri Lanka's military education system. His legacy is etched in the institutions he shaped: as Chief Instructor and Commanding Officer at the Sri Lanka Military Academy, Deputy Vice-Chancellor at Kotelawala Defence University (KDU), and Commandant of the Defence Services Command and Staff College.

But it was during his command in Vavuniya in the mid-2000s that David truly stood apart. In a region predominantly Tamil, his leadership was a stark contrast to the military's often harsh and oppressive approach during the civil war. Known for his humanity and generosity, he earned the respect and goodwill of the Tamil community—a rare achievement in a conflict marked by deep mistrust and suffering. While the Sri Lankan military's actions during the war remain a source of pain and trauma for many Tamils, David's tenure in Vavuniya offered a glimpse of what leadership could look like when rooted in empathy and fairness.

As the Founder Chairman of the Fr. H. S. David Foundation and former President of the Sri Lanka Institute of Training and Development, he has worked tirelessly to empower others. Now residing in Canada, he has taken on a new role as a licensed member of the Law Society, advocating for clients in tribunals and courts, and contributing to the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada.

In this intimate and revealing interview with Jaffna Monitor, Major General David breaks his silence and offers unparalleled insights into his journey.

## **Were there other Tamils who held the position of Major General in the Sri Lankan Army?**

Yes, a few Tamils have held the prestigious rank of Major General in the Sri Lankan



*Major General Anton Muttukumar*

Army. In the history of independent Sri Lanka's military, the first Ceylonese Army Commander was of Tamil origin—Colonel Anton Muttukumar—who served as the Commander of the Ceylon Army. However, he was promoted to the rank of Major General only after his retirement.

The first Tamil to achieve this rank while in active service was Major General E. George Thevanayagam, an alumnus of St. John's College, Jaffna. In addition to him, approximately three to four other Tamils attained the rank of Major General during their service.

## **Who were the Tamil Major Generals during the war with the LTTE?**

During the conflict, I was the only Tamil from the North to be promoted to the rank of Major General. Another notable figure was Major General Leonard Mark, who served as the Commander of Security Forces in Jaffna and





*Major General E. George Thevanayagam (right), in full ceremonial uniform, shaking hands with a fellow officer during a formal military event.*

Mullaitivu. His father was Tamil, but Leonard, who hailed from Puttalam, may have received his education in Sinhala medium, which makes it difficult for him to converse in Tamil.

**From the beginning, it seems that very few Tamils joined the Sri Lankan Army. When did you join, and what motivated you to enlist?**

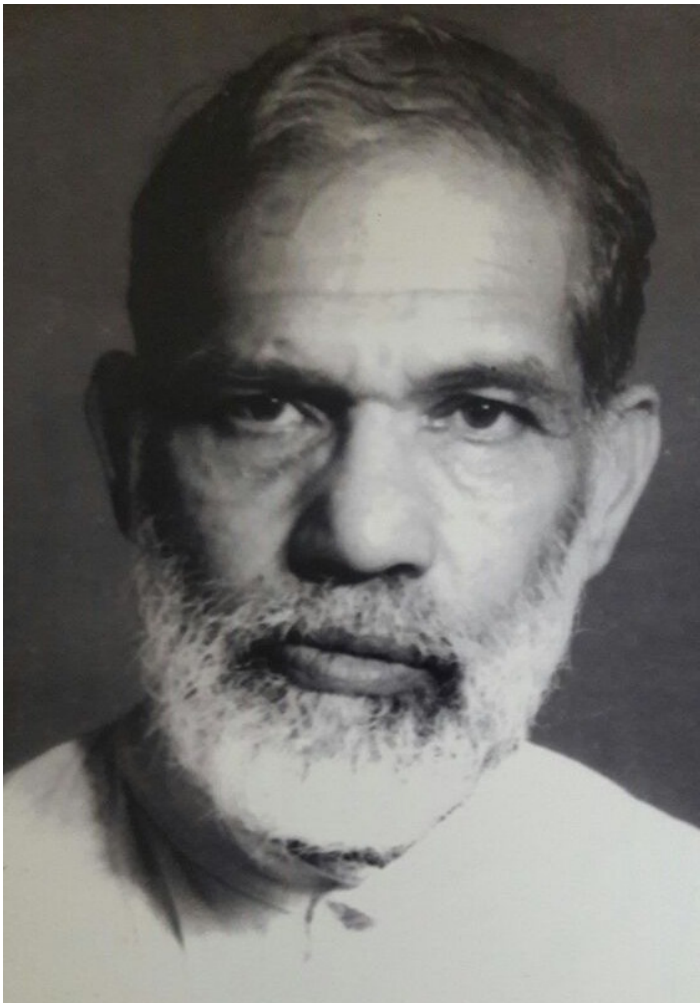
I joined the army in 1980, soon after completing my A/Ls. At the time, I was pursuing my ICMA qualification when I came across a newspaper advertisement announcing enlistment for Army Cadets to be trained in India.

My father, Ignatius David, a teacher and cadet master who served as a Lieutenant in the National Cadet Corps during his tenure at S. Thomas' College, Gurutalawa, had a profound influence on my passion for the



*Major General Leonard Mark*

military. Adding to this inspiration was a family friend and relative, Colonel Rajayogam, who was then serving as the Engineer Advisor to General Sepala Attygalle. In fact, we were staying at his house in Jaffna, and his visits, along with his stories of military life, played a



*Fr. (Dr.) Hyacinth Singarayar David*

pivotal role in shaping my decision to join the armed forces.

**By 1980, ethnic riots against Tamils in 1956 and 1977 had already created deep divisions. With Tamil liberation movements gaining momentum and allegations that the military was being used to oppress and target Tamils, did you not see the army as part of the anti-Tamil machinery?**

At that time, institutions like the army, navy, and air force were regarded as national establishments that primarily attracted sportsmen who joined the forces to advance their careers. These institutions were seen more as government services than as instruments of ethnic oppression.

Personally, I neither observed nor believed that they harbored systemic ethnic bias.

However, I did notice a growing disconnect between the public and law enforcement personnel. Firstly, many officers could not speak the local language. Secondly, Tamils were significantly underrepresented in the forces, not even in proportion to their ethnic ratio. Another contributing factor was the practice of transferring police officers to the North as a form of punishment, as these postings were considered difficult or undesirable. Many of these officers were sent on disciplinary grounds, and their lack of commitment naturally led to friction and misunderstandings, further damaging the image of the security forces in Tamil-majority areas.

Over time, this trend—combined with politically motivated decisions and the influence of certain commanders' promotions and appointments being tied to political agendas—began to alter public perception. These systemic changes gradually reinforced the narrative that the military was hostile toward Tamils. In fact, I was enlisted in the army while residing in Jaffna—something that, at the time, reassured me of the institution's impartiality.

**At the time you joined the army, wasn't it already seen as an anti-Tamil force?**

Honestly, no. That perception did not exist when I joined the army. In my opinion, the turning point came in 1983 with the ambush in which 13 soldiers, including an officer, were killed. I later heard that one of the survivors is still alive and recently recounted his story. In fact, his testimony highlights how a Tamil doctor, Dr. Xavier from Jaffna Hospital, performed surgery on him and provided full assurance of his recovery.



I joined the army in 1980 and lived near the Hospital Road-Kandy Road junction in Jaffna until 1985. During this time, I did not face any threats or adversarial remarks from any militant group. There were no attempts on my life, and I did not have any personal security, even though my friends knew I had joined the army.

Meanwhile, my father, who was a teacher and lecturer, was a close friend of C.E. Anandarajah, the then-principal of St. John's College, who was later assassinated by militants. After Mr. Anandarajah's death, my father suffered a stroke. He was a strict teacher, the kind who wouldn't hesitate to reprimand students, and he was devastated when he learned that the very younger generation he cared deeply for had killed such a respected educator. The loss shook him profoundly, leading him to decide to leave Jaffna. Until then, we had been living on Hospital Road, and I stayed with my family.

**You were the founder and former chairman of the Fr. H. S. David Foundation. What is your relationship with Fr. (Dr.) Hyacinth Singarayar David, the renowned scholar who mastered more than 30 languages?**

He was my periyappa—my father's elder brother—a man of extraordinary intellect and profound wisdom. His legacy is one that I hold close to my heart. Tragically, he passed away under heartbreaking circumstances.

I joined the army in the 1980s, a time marked by one of the darkest events in Jaffna's history—the burning of the Jaffna Library in 1981. That horrific event, orchestrated by political thugs under the direct watch of certain politicians, remains etched in my memory. It was not merely a cultural loss for our people; it was a deeply personal tragedy for our families.

At the time, my Periyappa was residing at St. Patrick's College. On that fateful night, other priests showed him the flames engulfing the library. Among the volumes reduced to ashes





was his own research, painstakingly compiled over the years. The sight devastated him. As this was not an era of digital records, he faced the irretrievable loss of his life's academic work. We believe the shock and grief of this event contributed to his passing that very night.

In his honor, our family, along with well-wishers, established the Fr. H. S. David Foundation. Under the leadership of the new chairman, Thushy David, the foundation has expanded its efforts, ensuring that Fr. David's enduring contributions to humanity continue to inspire future generations.

### **Regarding the burning of the Jaffna Library, do you believe the military was responsible for its destruction?**

It's important to approach this issue with nuance. The burning of the Jaffna Library was not an act sanctioned by the military. Rather, it was carried out by a small group of antisocial elements, compounded by political thugs who get assistance from stooges in the forces, who acted more like mercenaries than representatives of their respective organizations. Their actions in no way reflected the values or conduct of the broader military forces.

Similarly, there were isolated incidents of theft and looting by certain individuals. However, it would be neither fair nor accurate to hold the entire institution accountable for the misconduct of a few. The overwhelming majority of military personnel remained committed to their duties and had no involvement in these regrettable events.

### **Your military career spans the entire timeline of Tamil militancy, from its inception, including the rise of the**

### **LTTE, to its annihilation in 2009. In your view, what factors contributed to the early flourishing of militancy?**

After J.R. Jayewardene became President of Sri Lanka in 1977, he introduced the concept of an open economy, marking a significant departure from the socialist-oriented policies of previous administrations. While this economic liberalization aimed to attract foreign investment and modernize the economy, it also heightened geopolitical tensions, particularly with India.

Backed by the USSR, India viewed Sri Lanka's growing alignment with Western allies, particularly the United States, as both a strategic and geographical threat. In response, it resorted to covert measures to counterbalance this shift. One of India's key strategies was to exploit Sri Lanka's internal divisions. At the time, Tamil youth—disillusioned by the policy of standardization, systemic discrimination, state-sponsored violence, and political marginalization—were already gravitating toward resistance.

According to researcher Rohan Gunaratna, India seized this opportunity to keep Jayewardene's administration in check, using its intelligence agency, the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW), to provide training and support to Tamil militant groups. Ironically, while India was arming and training these groups, it was simultaneously providing military training to Sri Lankan armed forces.

Tamil militant groups received military training not only in India but also in Palestine, under the guidance of the Palestine Liberation Army (PLA). Without India's intervention, it is unlikely that the Tamil militants' armed struggle would have reached the scale and sophistication it ultimately did.

However, this intervention had far-reaching consequences. What began as an initiative under Indira Gandhi's leadership to counter Jayewardene's pro-Western policies eventually backfired. This miscalculated strategy culminated in the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi in 1991, as India's own creation turned into a Frankenstein's monster.

## **You mentioned the politicization of the military. How did the politicization of the Sri Lankan military come about?**

For much of its early history, the Sri Lankan military operated with minimal political interference, maintaining a professional and apolitical stance. However, this began to change under former President J.R. Jayewardene.

A key turning point came in 1981 when General Denis Perera, a widely respected and professional Army Commander, retired. Instead of adhering to the tradition of promoting senior officers based on merit, Jayewardene appointed his confidant and relative, Major General Tissa Weeratunga, as his successor. This decision marked the beginning of political influence creeping into the upper ranks of the military. Several senior Brigadiers were denied promotions, effectively forcing them into early retirement—a move widely perceived as politically motivated and aimed at consolidating loyalty within the armed forces.

Before becoming Army Commander, then-Brigadier Weeratunga played a pivotal role in the government's response to Tamil militancy in Jaffna. In 1979, he was appointed Overall Operational Commander with sweeping powers under the Prevention of Terrorism (Special Provisions) Act No. 48 of 1979. His aggressive approach, rather than quelling

tensions, further inflamed the situation, escalating violence instead of de-escalating it.

This trend continued in subsequent years, with political influence tightening its grip on military leadership. Only a handful of Army Commanders managed to resist this pressure. One notable exception was General Srilal Weerasooriya, who upheld professionalism and refrained from political involvement during his tenure.

While J.R. Jayewardene was the first to introduce direct political interference in the military, this influence reached unprecedented levels under the Rajapaksa brothers, particularly Gotabaya Rajapaksa. Under their leadership, the military became deeply politicized, fostering a culture where loyalty to political leaders often took precedence over national security priorities.

## **What Kind of Interference did the Rajapaksa Brothers Introduce in the Military?**

As Secretary of Defense, Gotabaya strategically positioned individuals within the military who were loyal to him and his brothers, aligning key military leadership with their political objectives.

One of the most evident examples of this interference was Gotabaya's favoritism toward the Gajaba Regiment, his former unit. Under his leadership, the regiment was elevated to a position of significant political influence. Promotions within the regiment—and for his political allies—were expedited, often bypassing traditional protocols and sidelining senior officers. This favoritism fostered a "my-man" system, where certain individuals were privileged while others felt marginalized.

The strained relationship between then-retired





Lt. Col. Gotabaya Rajapaksa and then-Lt. Gen. Sarath Fonseka, who was the Army Commander at the time, further deepened divisions within the military. Their dynamic was marked by clashing egos and competing priorities. Their disagreements became public, with Gotabaya actively working to undermine Gen. Fonseka. He promoted officers who were antagonistic toward Fonseka, bypassing both seniority and merit in favor of political loyalty and personal allegiance.

Competent officers deserving of promotion were overlooked in favor of those who aligned with Gotabaya's personal agenda. The Rajapaksas' approach institutionalized a culture where political loyalty took precedence over merit, fundamentally undermining the military's independence and integrity.

## Did the tensions between Gotabaya Rajapaksa and Sarath Fonseka arise

## while Fonseka was still the Army Commander?

This tension was separate from their later, more publicized fallout when Fonseka decided to contest the presidential election against Mahinda Rajapaksa. Their disagreements had already emerged during their overlapping roles in the military hierarchy.

The primary cause of their strained relationship appears to have been an ego clash. Ironically, Fonseka was a senior officer in the military while Gotabaya was still a junior officer. This prior dynamic influenced their working relationship later, when Gotabaya, as Defense Secretary, held greater authority over Fonseka.

Adding to the complexity was their regimental affiliation. Fonseka belonged to the Sinha Regiment, while Gotabaya was from the Gajaba Regiment. During Gotabaya's tenure



as Defense Secretary, his blatant favoritism toward the Gajaba Regiment—especially in prioritizing its officers for promotions and key positions—further deepened the divide between the two.

### **Do you believe Sarath Fonseka's arrest after his defeat in the 2010 presidential election was an injustice?**

The idea that we reap what we sow holds some truth, yet, setting aside philosophical perspectives, what happened to General Sarath Fonseka was undeniably a grave injustice.

According to military regulations, any allegations of treason should have been addressed through a formal court-martial proceeding, adhering to established protocols. However, in my view, the accused was not given a fair opportunity to defend himself. In Fonseka's case, due process was

blatantly disregarded. His arrest was abrupt and forceful, tarnishing the reputation of the military, while the subsequent legal proceedings lacked transparency, deviating from both military norms and the principles of natural justice.

It was later revealed that Gen. Fonseka was accused of acting against national interests, particularly concerning the White Flag incident. The Rajapaksas alleged that he attempted to disclose sensitive information that could have been detrimental to Sri Lanka.

However, at the time of the alleged incident, Fonseka was in China, raising serious doubts about whether he had been deliberately kept away as the conflict neared its conclusion—leaving many questions unanswered.

Regardless of differing opinions on Fonseka's conduct, the manner in which he was treated—stripped of his dignity and subjected



to a highly questionable legal process—was deeply troubling.

## Did the White Flag incident happen or not?

I cannot provide firsthand confirmation, as I was not present at the site during the events in question. However, based on widely discussed accounts within the military, it appears that the White Flag incident did take place.

From what I have heard, it is claimed that a deal was negotiated between Basil Rajapaksa and members of the LTTE's second-tier leadership, with assurances that they would be allowed to surrender safely. However, it is alleged that Gotabaya Rajapaksa later reneged on this agreement and ordered their execution. Whether this decision was justified remains a highly contentious issue, with conflicting perspectives and narratives.

Another critical aspect often overlooked is the role of internal betrayals within the LTTE itself. I have heard that some members of Prabhakaran's inner circle reportedly provided intelligence suggesting that allowing these individuals to survive posed a significant risk. This information is believed to have influenced the course of action that led to the White Flag incident.

During the final years of Prabhakaran's leadership, several cracks began to emerge within the LTTE. A significant illustration of this was the killing of Tamilselvan, the LTTE's political head. This incident is widely regarded as one that could not have occurred without insider information. The precision with which Tamilselvan's exact location was targeted during a Sri Lankan Air Force strike appeared almost impossible without highly specific intelligence.

## In your view, who is responsible for the victory against the LTTE? Was it Gotabaya, Fonseka, or someone else?

The downfall of the LTTE cannot be credited to any single individual—it was the result of a complex interplay between internal weaknesses within the LTTE and coordinated external efforts.

The LTTE leadership lacked the strategic foresight to sustain a prolonged war effort. Leading an armed struggle—especially one that claims to represent a minority—requires sustained international backing. Yet, the LTTE convinced itself that it could wage war in isolation, a miscalculation that ultimately proved fatal.

In its early years, the LTTE operated as a highly effective guerrilla force, making it nearly impossible for the Sri Lankan military to predict their attacks. But over time, they transformed into a conventional army, which demanded substantial external support in terms of logistics, strategy, and firepower. Their failure to secure this support turned into a major vulnerability.

Any armed movement that spans over two decades must evolve to remain effective. The LTTE's inability to adapt left even its supporters questioning the viability of their struggle. A pivotal moment in their decline was the defection of Eastern Commander Karuna, one of their most formidable leaders. His departure didn't just weaken the LTTE militarily—it exposed deep internal divisions, further accelerating their downfall.

Meanwhile, the Sri Lankan military held overwhelming advantages—superior manpower, devastating firepower, fighter jets dominating the skies, naval patrol boats securing the seas, and a vast logistical network



sustaining its operations. Most critically, it had the backing of powerful foreign allies, further tipping the scales in its favor.

By late 2008, when Kilinochchi fell, the LTTE leadership should have realized they were fighting a losing battle. Their last remaining stronghold, Mullaitivu, left them with just two choices—either defend it or face total annihilation. Instead of launching a direct assault, the military strategically encircled and isolated them, cutting off external support and squeezing them into an inescapable trap before delivering the final blow. The LTTE leadership, however, failed to comprehend the gravity of the situation and made no meaningful attempt to alter their course.

In the early stages, the Sri Lankan government, with India's alignment, leveraged U.S. counterterrorism strategies to dismantle the LTTE's international operations.

One of the most decisive turning points was the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi. That single act irreversibly turned India against the LTTE, stripping them of a crucial ally. The global landscape also shifted post-9/11, with international counterterrorism efforts leading to frozen LTTE assets and the systematic dismantling of their arms smuggling networks. Several of their arms shipments were intercepted and destroyed in international waters, crippling their ability to fight. Yet, even as they grew increasingly isolated, the LTTE leadership remained blind to the inevitable.

India, though not directly involved in the final phase, played a crucial role by providing intelligence and satellite imagery to the Sri Lankan military. International intelligence agencies, too, played their part in curbing LTTE funding and breaking their global networks.

Given these factors, the LTTE's downfall was

not the work of one man—it was a result of strategic military planning, international cooperation, and the LTTE's own internal flaws.

General Fonseka, a battle-hardened infantryman, played a key role in deploying snipers and long-range fighting patrols that severely weakened the LTTE's leadership. Gotabaya's role, on the other hand, was largely in assisting his brother, Mahinda Rajapaksa, by coordinating military operations to align with political objectives.

But if anyone truly deserves credit, it is the thousands of soldiers, sailors, and airmen who fought and bled on the battlefield. Many disabled veterans have been reduced to mere political talking points, celebrated when convenient and forgotten when not. The same fate befell members of the LTTE and other militant groups. They were the real warriors of the conflict.

I have always believed that the true heroes are the unknown soldiers who perished in battle. Many of those who now call themselves 'war heroes' do so for political mileage rather than genuine valor. Except for a few rare exceptions, these so-called war heroes are, in reality, nothing more than war zeros.

**Had the LTTE resorted to guerrilla warfare after losing Kilinochchi, do you think they would still exist today?**

If the LTTE had released the civilians and retreated into the jungles after the fall of Kilinochchi, they would have scattered, making it far more difficult for the military to eliminate them entirely. Guerrilla warfare would have allowed them to regroup, launch sporadic attacks, and prolong their survival. By avoiding concentration in a single location, they could have posed a continuous, invisible

threat, significantly complicating the military's efforts to achieve a decisive victory.

However, the military's key advantage during the final phase of the war was that the LTTE leadership and fighters were cornered into a small stretch of land. Crucially, there was no attempt by the LTTE leadership to revert to guerrilla warfare. Instead, they remained trapped, and their decision to stay in one place made them an easy target for the Sri Lankan military. Sporadic escape attempts were all thwarted.

Another critical factor was the physical and mental state of their second-tier leadership. Many of these commanders had joined the LTTE in their 20s and 30s when they were physically agile, resilient, and mentally sharp. However, by the final phase of the war, they were in their 50s or older, many with families.

After decades of fighting, they either should have transitioned leadership to a younger generation or adapted their strategy. In their 30s, they could endure the hardships of jungle warfare and engage in relentless guerrilla operations, but how many could sustain that same intensity and endurance in their 50s?

The LTTE leadership failed to implement a strategic transition, either in leadership or military tactics. They neither empowered younger leaders nor adjusted their approach to align with evolving global realities. Instead, they became predictable and vulnerable, ultimately sealing their fate.

From a military standpoint, the LTTE had lost its resilience in the final phase of the conflict, making it significantly easier for the Sri Lankan forces to eliminate them. Consider this: LTTE leaders and their fighters were





confined to a narrow strip of land, completely surrounded by the military on all sides. They forcefully held civilians with them, using them as human shields. For the Sri Lankan military, the strategy became straightforward—rescue the civilians and eliminate the LTTE.

When you know exactly where your opponent is and can effectively confine them with no viable escape strategy, the outcome becomes inevitable. From a military perspective, what more could you ask for? It was a situation perfectly set for the LTTE's total annihilation.

## **When were the strategies to annihilate the LTTE formulated?**

The foundation for the LTTE's ultimate military defeat was inadvertently laid by their own strategic miscalculation during the 2005 presidential election. By preventing Tamil voters in the North from casting their ballots—allegedly in exchange for financial incentives from the Rajapaksa camp—the LTTE effectively ensured Mahinda Rajapaksa's victory. This decision, aimed at blocking Ranil Wickremesinghe from gaining power, ultimately backfired, triggering a series of events that culminated in the LTTE's downfall in 2009.

The next phase of this strategy involved the return of Sri Lankan military expatriates with U.S. citizenship, including Gotabaya Rajapaksa, who played a pivotal role in leading military operations and providing strategic direction. This development signaled a tacit alignment between U.S. policy—particularly its efforts to freeze LTTE assets—and the Sri Lankan government's military preparedness and resolve.

## **What was behind the strategy to eliminate the LTTE, and why was the**

## **U.S. so invested in this effort?**

This was shaped by a confluence of geopolitical factors, particularly in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. These attacks fundamentally reshaped global perspectives on terrorism, prompting the United States to adopt a more aggressive stance against armed insurgent movements worldwide.

The involvement of Sri Lankan expatriates holding U.S. citizenship, such as Gotabaya Rajapaksa—who returned to assume the pivotal role of Secretary of Defence—further strengthened military cooperation between Sri Lanka and the United States. This collaboration facilitated intelligence sharing and strategic coordination, bolstering Sri Lanka's military operations.

Additionally, India's intelligence agency, RAW, played a crucial role by providing satellite imagery and logistical guidance, significantly enhancing the effectiveness of Sri Lankan military campaigns.

Collectively, these efforts culminated in a coordinated international strategy that severely weakened the LTTE's operational capabilities, ultimately leading to its defeat.

## **So, you mean to say the early assignment of eliminating the LTTE was crafted by America?**

Not by the U.S. alone—both the U.S. and India, which became strategic allies after the fall of the USSR, worked together. Based on the global geopolitical landscape at the time, it can be inferred that the CIA and RAW likely collaborated in assisting the Sri Lankan government in executing this plan.

## **Is it true that the LTTE was paid to prevent people in the North and East from voting in the 2005 presidential election, which led to Mahinda Rajapaksa's victory?**

Yes, in my view, this must be true. Reports suggest that the funds were sent to Vavuniya and collected by LTTE representatives. It is believed that the specific vehicles involved traveled via Puttalam, and the operation was allegedly known to the late Lt. Commander Sripathi Sooriyarachchi, who was then the MP for Chilaw.

Following his fallout with Mahinda Rajapaksa, Sripathi Sooriyarachchi publicly stated that he would reveal details of the transaction—specifically, how the funds were transferred to the North. However, before he could do so, he died under suspicious circumstances in an accident.

## **Who collected the money on behalf of the LTTE?**

The LTTE wouldn't send senior commanders to receive the money. They would have delegated such tasks to mid-level operatives or trusted representatives.

## **Sripathi Sooriyarachchi died in a car accident. Was there any mystery surrounding his death?**

As soon as Sripathi Sooriyarachchi began openly discussing the money allegedly given to the LTTE by the Rajapaksas, it became evident to many that his life was in danger. When news broke of his death in an accident, suspicions arose almost immediately—for obvious reasons. However, his

death remains shrouded in mystery, both in terms of its cause and the circumstances leading up to it.

**At a recent press briefing in Jaffna, Namal Rajapaksa reportedly stated that his father, Mahinda Rajapaksa, was deeply affected by the killing of Prabhakaran's 10-year-old son, Balachandran, after his capture by the army. A journalist who recently met Mahinda also noted that he remains troubled by this incident. Given these accounts, who do you believe was responsible for Balachandran's killing, and what could have led to the decision to execute an unarmed child in custody? Additionally, considering that the military**





## **spared Rohana Wijeweera's sons despite its brutal conflict with the JVP, how do you interpret this contrast?**

Allow me to outline the rules governing the conduct of hostilities, which primarily aim to protect civilians. A principle I firmly believe it states: "You cannot give life to the dead, nor can you take life from the living." Though I do not know the perpetrator or the coward behind this act, the killing of an unarmed person is absolutely unacceptable, and the murder of a child is an unforgivable atrocity. Such acts—whether committed by military personnel or militant groups—are reprehensible and dehumanizing.

Certain actions during armed conflicts can never be justified or excused.

Take, for example, the tragic death of 10-year-old Balachandran (the son of Prabhakaran) or the horrific Aranthalawa Massacre, where most of the victims were young novice monks—children who cannot be seen as combatants in any form. On July 24, 1988, I personally witnessed the remains of an infant, the child of a then-DIG's sister, after his ancestral home was burned down in Poddala, Galle. Similarly, the mass graves of murdered children from Embilipitiya Maha Vidyalaya in Sooriyakanda stand as a grim reminder of our disregard for humanity.

What do all these acts reveal? That our society has descended into a cycle of revenge, vengeance, and violence. During times of conflict, some perpetrators exploit the chaos to commit atrocities. If such acts are ignored or left unaddressed, society will inevitably face even worse consequences in the future. These actions are heinous and must be investigated—otherwise, they risk becoming an acceptable norm for all wrongdoings.

To answer the second part of your question, one must consider the circumstances—specifically, the location and intensity of the conflict, as well as where their families were residing at the time. From my understanding, in November 1989, Wijeweera was hunted down and arrested while living in disguise at a tea plantation. It was believed that Wijeweera's wife and six children were confined to a naval barracks. A similar course of action was taken for the Sea Tiger head Soosai's wife, with her children detained at Trincomalee Dockyard and subsequently released. While Prabhakaran's family was caught up and, following an assault, perished under battle conditions, contextually, these were two vastly different environments. However, one cannot comprehend or provide any explanation for the demise of Prabhakaran's son.

## **What is your estimation of Prabhakaran and the LTTE?**

One must acknowledge that Prabhakaran was a skilled fighter, and to a significant extent, the LTTE was a product of both the actions of successive Sri Lankan governments and India's geopolitical calculations. I can confidently say that Prabhakaran emerged as the most dominant leader among Tamil militant groups, but he made numerous strategic miscalculations. While I wouldn't say that the formation of the LTTE itself was a mistake—they may have had their reasons—the decision to eliminate other Tamil militant movements was a grave error.

I vividly remember seeing the bodies of TELO and other militant group members displayed near Windsor Theatre in Jaffna. When I saw that, I realized that these groups were heading in the wrong direction. Their actions convinced me that they could never succeed in their vision of a divided state.

Another significant issue within Tamil society

is the caste system—a deeply ingrained problem that no one wants to confront, even today. It is impossible to build a prosperous future while clinging to caste-based divisions and prejudices.

As for me, I am a proud Tamil. Had the LTTE taken a more pragmatic approach and pursued their cause more responsibly, they might have achieved something meaningful—similar to the JVP's political evolution. However, their rigid decisions and violent strategies ultimately led to their downfall. Their miscalculations overshadowed their initial intentions, causing them to lose the very support of the people they claimed to represent.

### **How do you assess the LTTE as a fighting force? Were they valiant fighters?**

They were highly skilled fighters, exceptionally trained and fiercely committed. The suicide bombers were prepared to sacrifice themselves without hesitation. The Sea Tigers, in particular, displayed remarkable dedication, excelling in naval warfare and introducing numerous innovative tactics at sea. The LTTE demonstrated extraordinary ingenuity, constructing submarines, assembling satellite stations, and developing improvised vehicles—such as motorbikes running on kerosene—while transforming ordinary materials into sophisticated weaponry.

However, while their innovations in warfare were undeniably impressive, my lingering question remains: why was such immense talent and capability not channeled into more constructive fields? The Jaffna Tamil community is inherently known for its resilience and industrious nature. I recall how farmers would climb onto a shadoof (சூலா) as early as 4 a.m. to draw water, toiling tirelessly until 10 a.m.—a testament to their unwavering

dedication and perseverance.

The LTTE undeniably altered the perception of Sri Lankan Tamils, who were once seen as a passive and docile community. They instilled a spirit of resistance and defiance, proving that they could fight back against oppression. However, this transformation came at an immense cost, with little tangible gain.

Their sophistication in arms development and strategic operations was truly remarkable. Yet, the ultimate question remains: why did such extraordinarily talented individuals choose this path?

The LTTE's fighters possessed the intelligence, creativity, and discipline to thrive in fields like technology, entrepreneurship, and innovation. Some of their brightest minds could have risen to global prominence—perhaps even reaching the heights of someone like Sundar Pichai, the CEO of Google. Instead, their potential was consumed by destruction and war—a path that proved to be a non-recoverable investment.

### **You identify yourself as a proud Tamil. We have even seen pictures of you wearing a Veshti and attending school functions while still serving in the army. Didn't you feel conflicted, given that the army was often viewed as an oppressive force against Tamils, while the LTTE was seen as fighting for the Tamil cause? Didn't you face a dilemma being part of that army?**

You can ask anyone who lived in Puttalam or Vavuniya during my tenure in the army—did any injustice occur to the Tamils or any other community under my command? The answer will be no. I did not allow any harm to come





to them. If there is any Tamil who claims that the army harassed or mistreated them while I was in charge in Vavuniya, I challenge them to come forward. It simply did not happen under my command.

I never identified myself as someone from the South. Even within the army, I always upheld my identity as a proud Tamil and openly stated that I was from Jaffna. I made it a point to visit religious dignitaries and places of worship in Vavuniya, showing my respect and actively participating in religious ceremonies.

Until the very end, I have stood tall, firmly asserting my Tamil identity—"Be a Tamil, stand tall, and never bow down." That has always been my principle, guiding my actions throughout my service in the army.

### **Were there any challenges being a Tamil in a predominantly Sinhala-majority army?**

Absolutely. Such challenges are inevitable anywhere in the world. Instead of seeing them as obstacles, take them as opportunities to move forward. Wasting time tackling every issue of justice will only slow you down.

During my service in southern Sri Lanka during the JVP insurrection, I encountered many instances where innocent Sinhala youth were detained on suspicion. After thorough evaluations, I ensured the release of several young men who had no proven ties to the rebellion. Likewise, while serving in the North and East, I adopted the same approach—working to release innocent Tamil youth who

had been wrongfully detained or held without sufficient evidence of any connection to the LTTE.

What stood out, however, was the difference in perception. When I secured the release of Sinhala youth in the South, it was regarded as routine justice and raised no concerns. But when I did the same for Tamil youth in the North, it often provoked suspicion and led some to question my motives. In fact, some even suspected me of having links to the LTTE.

Despite this, the soldiers under my command had unwavering trust in me. I had earned their respect, and they followed my orders without hesitation. My faith in God remained unshakable, and I carried out my duties with that faith as my guiding principle.

Being a Tamil in the army came with its own barriers—I was denied rightful promotions and other privileges. However, I never let that discourage me. Over time, God ensured that I received everything I deserved. I have always believed that if your principles and intentions are right, you will ultimately succeed.

Life, in many ways, is like a marathon—there will be slowdowns and moments of falling behind, but with resilience, persistence, and unwavering integrity, you will reach your goal and emerge victorious.

### **Before retiring from the army, we heard that you submitted a 13-point reconciliation plan to the then Rajapaksa government. What happened to it?**

I submitted a 13-point reconciliation and revival plan to then-President Mahinda Rajapaksa through the Army Commander at

the time. I believed the plan outlined a genuine framework to address the root causes of the conflict and heal the wounds of those affected by the war. However, there was no serious effort to consider or implement it. Instead of prioritizing reconciliation, the leadership chose to exploit the post-war environment for political gain.

The JVP insurgency in the South ended in a manner similar to—but with less intensity than—the LTTE conflict. Yet, there were no victory celebrations or medals awarded upon its conclusion. Why? Because it is not ethical to celebrate the demise, misery, or pain of others. This should not be confused with honoring fallen comrades or commemorating those who sacrificed their lives. When the JVP insurgency was quelled, the military established a genuine inquiry to investigate the events and hold responsible individuals accountable. Why was a similar effort not undertaken following the end of the Northern conflict?

The military's role is to protect and defend sovereignty and territorial integrity. In both cases—the JVP and LTTE insurgencies—the army was deployed to suppress an armed rebellion. However, what was lacking was a structured post-conflict rehabilitation process for those involved. Just as surrendered LTTE cadres underwent rehabilitation and reintegration into society, soldiers who fought in the war should have received similar psychological and social support. Their reintegration into civilian life was equally crucial but was largely ignored.

One of the long-term consequences of this failure can be seen in the "grease man" incidents—cases involving traumatized young men, many of them former soldiers, who engaged in erratic and criminal behavior due to unresolved psychological scars from the war. Even recent violent incidents in Mannar



highlight the lasting effects of neglecting post-war trauma.

Had a proper commission of inquiry been established after the war, it could have identified excesses and irregularities within the military, held individuals accountable, and provided rehabilitation where necessary.

This would have enabled both soldiers and ex-combatants to reintegrate into society with dignity and ensured they had the resources to rebuild their lives. If such measures had been implemented, Sri Lankan society today would look very different.

However, for political reasons, the Rajapaksa brothers chose not to take these necessary steps. This decision left lasting scars—not just on individuals, but on society as a whole.

### **On what basis do you say that the army should have been rehabilitated?**

Globally, it is well-documented that 5–10% of actively engaged combatants develop some form of mental strain or trauma, commonly referred to as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). This condition has been medically proven and widely studied.

Even after the war, I witnessed firsthand how soldiers who had participated in intense combat would instinctively hide or take cover at the sound of firecrackers. I had young soldiers in my unit who reacted in this manner, displaying clear signs of trauma. Many army personnel who took part in the war suffered from PTSD and should have undergone proper rehabilitation through structured mental health programs.

Although some NGOs attempted to provide counseling, these initiatives were largely ineffective due to a lack of adequate

government support. Unfortunately, proper rehabilitation was never prioritized, as the Rajapaksa administration was more focused on capitalizing on the war victory for political gain rather than addressing the mental health needs of its soldiers.

### **What were the key points in your 13-point proposal?**

Here are some of the most critical recommendations from my proposal:

#### **Justice and Accountability**

People, particularly within the Tamil community, seek justice and accountability for the atrocities committed by all sides. A fair, transparent, and balanced approach to justice is essential—one that addresses the full scope of human rights violations resolves cases of those missing in action, and facilitates the release of individuals held in prolonged custody, regardless of their political affiliations.

#### **Victory Parade**

The victory parade in 2009, following the defeat of the LTTE, was, in my view, highly unnecessary if the operation was genuinely a "humanitarian" mission. Such parades carried significant political and social undertones. After the war, where did we stand in terms of national identity as Sri Lankans?

The government used the event to assert its authority, framing the end of the conflict as a "victory." But victory over whom? The nation did not celebrate the conclusion of the JVP insurrection—why not?

Many, especially within the Tamil community, saw the parade as a symbol of their marginalization and a reminder of the heavy toll of the war on civilians, including concerns over human rights abuses and the treatment of

ethnic minorities. I believe this event became an obstacle to reconciliation. While military parades are important for national pride, I question whether they should be held after an internal conflict that cost the lives of our own countrymen.

### **Common War Monuments**

War monuments should honor all who were affected—armed forces, police, militants, and civilians alike. Only then can people truly reflect on the consequences of such a devastating conflict and its long-term impact.

### **Strategic Military Presence**

The army should not be completely withdrawn after the conflict, but its presence should be strategically reduced. Instead of maintaining a heavy military presence solely in the North and East, military cantonments should be established in each province, ensuring a balanced national security approach.

### **Future of Ex-Soldiers and Ex-Combatants**

The government should invest in the future of both skilled and unskilled ex-military personnel by providing career training and second-career opportunities. Given their discipline and training, they could be grouped for national projects, contributing to the country's development. Such initiatives should extend to retiring officers and soldiers to uphold societal integrity and long-term stability.

### **Return of Occupied Land**

All civilian lands seized by the military during the war should be returned to their rightful owners. The prolonged military occupation of private land fuels resentment and stands as an obstacle to true reconciliation.

### **Ethnic Representation in the Military**

There must be adequate representation of Sri Lankan Tamils in the military. Only then will the Tamil community feel a sense of ownership over the armed forces and view them as a national institution rather than a symbol of ethnic dominance.

As a retired military officer with three decades of service who has lived through the conflict, I see the journey of healing and rebuilding as both a personal and national responsibility. In the post-war period, the military engaged in numerous projects in the North and East, winning the hearts and minds of the people. Unfortunately, politicians have often been reluctant to acknowledge and appreciate such efforts.

The government faces a monumental task in ensuring peace, stability, and inclusivity while addressing the socio-economic and emotional scars of the past. A firm commitment to national unity and a long-term, sustainable reconciliation process will be key to Sri Lanka's healing and future prosperity.





# Richard de Zoysa's Murder and the Era of Fear: "Rani" Revisits Sri Lanka's Past



BY:

**Dr. Shane Halpe**

The haunting epigraph, "A mother stops living when her children are dead," forms the bedrock of Asoka Handagama's *Rani*, a stylish biographical drama thriller. The film provides a gripping portrait of Dr. Manorani Saravanamuttu's relentless quest for justice in the wake of her son's murder – the acclaimed journalist Richard de Zoysa. *Rani* delves into a harrowing period of Sri Lankan history, resonating with a chilling contemporary relevance concerning political violence and impunity.

Nearly 35 years have passed since Richard de Zoysa's abduction and

murder on February 18, 1990. A journalist, author, human rights activist, and actor, de Zoysa's death sent shockwaves through Sri Lanka. Widely believed to be the work of a death squad linked to elements within the then-government of President Ranasinghe Premadasa, his killing was not an isolated incident. It occurred within a broader context of escalating human rights violations perpetrated by the government in its efforts to suppress the insurgency. While the precise motive remains officially classified, speculation persists that de Zoysa possessed incriminating information regarding these abuses. Janaka Mallimaratchi's memoir, "Rathu Anguru," recounts de Zoysa's growing distress in the weeks leading up to his death, his despair over the mounting youth casualties, and his fervent desire to halt the violence.

"Rani" opens with the grim discovery of Richard's body on Moratuwa beach. For Mano, a dedicated medical officer delivering babies, the loss of her only child is devastating. Her now-famous statement, "I was lucky that my son was brought back to me by the sea," poignantly echoes the anguish of countless families of the disappeared who were never afforded such closure. Flashbacks depict the harrowing abduction, the armed men storming her home, and the terrified silence of neighbors – a scene that powerfully captures the helplessness of ordinary citizens in the face of state-sponsored terror. The film then follows Mano's arduous journey as she navigates a system designed to protect the perpetrators, not the victims.

For those born after this period, like myself, the film is a crucial historical document. "Rani" has reignited conversations about political assassinations and the pervasive climate of fear that gripped Sri Lanka during this era. The film offers a visceral and immersive experience, drawing the viewer into



Mano's world of grief, despair, and unwavering determination.

Swarna Mallawarachchi's masterful portrayal of Dr. Manorani is nothing short of breathtaking. She embodies the character's strength, vulnerability, and unwavering resolve, taking the audience on an emotional journey that spans the spectrum of human experience. Mallawarachchi's nuanced performance transcends mere acting; it is a powerful testament to a mother's love and a citizen's fight for justice.

Handagama skillfully weaves in recognizable figures from Sri Lankan politics – Lalith Athulathmudali, President Premadasa, Mangala Samaraweera, and a young Mahinda Rajapaksa – adding layers of historical intrigue. The meticulous attention to detail, from period newspapers and television programs to everyday objects like vintage cream soda bottles, creates a palpable sense of nostalgia and authenticity for those who lived through this era.

Rehan Amarathunga delivers a compelling performance as Richard de Zoysa, and Sajitha





Anuththara shines as his friend, Gayan. The makeup artistry, particularly in bringing Ranasinghe Premadasa to life on screen, is commendable. The film also excels in its portrayal of the burgeoning friendship between Mano and a young mother whose baby she delivers, adding a human touch to the larger political narrative. Mayura Kanchana's portrayal of Karu, Dr. Mano's loyal helper, further enhances the film's authenticity.

Richard de Zoysa's work as the Colombo correspondent for IPS (Inter-Press Service), reporting on human rights abuses, undoubtedly posed a threat to the government. Rumors of his involvement in a satirical play critical of Premadasa, "Mei Kawuda, Mokada Karanne," (Who is he and what is he doing?) which was never staged, further underscore the risks he faced. The disappearance and presumed murder of the play's producer, Lakshman Perera, adds another layer of tragedy to the story. The film subtly alludes to this connection, perhaps through the character of Gayan.

De Zoysa's assassination is meticulously documented in "Under Siege; Mass Media in Sri Lanka," which details the abduction, the flawed investigation, and the allegations

against high-ranking officials. The book also highlights the threats faced by Mano and her lawyer, as well as the attempts to link de Zoysa to the JVP. The fact that Richard's body was recovered, unlike so many other victims of enforced disappearances, underscores the significance of his case.

De Zoysa's legacy extends beyond his journalism. An award for independent journalism was established in his name by IPS. He is also the inspiration for Rajiva Wijesinha's novel, "Limits of Love," and features prominently in Shehan Karunatilaka's Booker Prize-winning novel, "The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida." His acting career, notably his role in Lester James Peries's "Yuganthaya," further cements his place in Sri Lankan cultural history.

While the film excels in many aspects, some casting choices fall short. Sanath Gunathilaka's portrayal of Lalith Athulathmudali, while technically proficient, feels more like an impersonation than a genuine characterization. Similarly, the portrayals of Mangala Samaraweera and Mahinda Rajapaksa lack depth and feel somewhat exaggerated.



The film effectively depicts Mano's friendship with Athulathmudali and her grief at his assassination, highlighting the perilous political climate of the time. History suggests a complex and ultimately antagonistic relationship between Athulathmudali and Premadasa.

"Rani" powerfully evokes empathy for Mano and the countless mothers who have lost children to political violence. However, the film's ending feels rushed and emotionally underdeveloped. While it effectively portrays Richard's abduction and Mano's pursuit of justice, it fails to fully capture the depth of her sacrifices and struggles. The resolution feels abrupt and unsatisfying, leaving the audience with a sense of incompleteness.

The film portrays the assassination of President Ranasinghe Premadasa on May

1, 1993, during the UNP's May Day rally in Colombo. He was killed along with 23 others by an LTTE suicide bomber at the Armour Street-Grandpass Junction in Hulftsdorp. The attacker was later identified as Kulaveerasingam Veerakumar.

A particularly striking moment in the film is Manorani Saravanamuttu's reaction to Premadasa's death. Believing him to be the mastermind behind her son's murder, she appears to find a sense of closure in his demise. This sentiment, however, was not hers alone. Several individuals have recounted similar emotions upon hearing the news. A friend's mother, for instance, recalled that she was watering her plants when the announcement came—she instinctively felt a surge of relief and reacted without thinking.

While the loss of any life should not be a cause for celebration, Premadasa's assassination was seen by some as the end of an era of state violence and extrajudicial killings. For many, it marked a turning point in Sri Lanka's turbulent history—one that, for Manorani and others, brought a sense of justice, however complex and unsettling it may have been.

Despite a few shortcomings, I commend the production and Swarna Mallawarachchi's exceptional performance. This film, more than a biography, feels like a tribute to her acting prowess. It's a departure for Handagama, known for exploring controversial themes. While "Rani" is commendable, it could have been more impactful.

Ultimately, I'm glad I saw "Rani" in the theater. It was powerful and moving, and I recommend it to anyone interested in reliving the 1990s, paying tribute to Richard de Zoysa, expressing frustration with corrupt politics, or witnessing a remarkable performance.





BY:

**Mahesan Nirmalan**

**MBBS, MD, FRCA, PhD, FFICM  
Manchester, United Kingdom**

It was no ordinary day in Jaffna. Sections of the Sri Lankan Tamil community – both in Sri Lanka and beyond, brimmed with a sense of pride mixed with unadulterated joy and anticipation. There was every possibility that the Jaffna peninsula was poised, once again in its long history, to become the seat of learning and reflective wisdom. They were aware that the age old wisdom of the ancient Tamil poet -Thiruvalluvar (திருவள்ளுவர் or திருவள்ளுவர்), was to be displayed in their land in a format that would resist the decaying effects of the forces of nature for hundreds of years to come. It was indeed a major landmark in the history of post war Jaffna, that a group of philanthropists, local academics and skilled sculptors had pooled their knowledge, time, effort, skills and resources to construct

# From Jaffna to the world with love: The Mavittapuram Thirukkural ‘Campus’

a lasting monument and research facility for the study of Thirukkural (திருவள்ளுவர் or திருவள்ளுவர்) – one of the oldest Tamil texts. The Thirukkural campus, was declared open on this sunny day and dedicated to the country and the entire humanity seeking the timeless wisdom of Thiruvalluvar on virtue (அறம் or குணம்), wealth (பொருள் or மனம்) and pleasure (இன்பம் or ஐயம்). The auspicious date was the 2nd February 2025, the location was Mavittapuram, a little inconspicuous village approximately 18km away from the Jaffna town and the agency that made this dream a reality was the Sivapoomi Trust – a highly respected local charity and its dynamic Chairman Mr Arumugam Thirumurugan. Of course Mavittapuram has had its hay days with its mythological links to the 8th century Chola princess – Mathurapuraveeravalli, who overcame her physical disfigurement

by worshipping at the Mavittapuram Kandaswamy temple and then bathing at the adjoining Keerimalai springs. The recent history of Mavittapuram however is marred by war, artillery shells, areal bombardment and the consequent displacement of the population resulting in the entire neighbourhood becoming an abandoned and desolate war-zone. The changes in the surrounding environment when the war ended and the resultant optimism of the population as the lands were handed over to their owners was most palpable. The news of the opening of the Thrikkural 'campus' was certainly the icing on the cake.

Built in the shadows of the above-mentioned Mavittapuram Kandaswamy temple and in close proximity to the Keerimalai springs and the ancient Keerimalai Naguleswaram temple, this landmark building, will no doubt draw the attention of scholars and laity with an interested in ancient literatures of the world. Commenting on the event, Mr Thirumurugan, expressed his wish that this facility would, over time, evolve into a fully- fledged research institute dedicated to the critical study of Tamil culture.



A



B

***A: Mr Arumugam Thirumurugan, Chairman of the Sivapoomi Trust which was responsible for the construction of the Thrukkural 'campus'. The Sivapoomi Trust commemorates its 25th anniversary in 2025 and during the past 25 years has been responsible for successfully completing many projects in many parts of the country aimed at protecting the Tamil and Hindu identity in the Island. The Trust has worked on the basis that post-war reconstruction needs to be multi-faceted and that cultural regeneration needs to be an integral component of this project.***

***B: The chief guest, Hon. Mr R Mahadevan, Judge of the Supreme Court of India and an outstanding orator who displayed his deep understanding of Tamil literature in his speech holding the audience spellbound.***

The facility will display all 1330 'Kurals' engraved by hand in thick black granite stone slabs, along with Sinhala and English translations of selected sections. The inclusion of Sinhala and English translations renders the possibility that this unique 'campus' can become part of the common heritage of all people living in Sri Lanka – owned by all and



cherished by all. It is unfortunate that funding available was not adequate to provide English and Sinhala translations to all 1330 Kurals. Nevertheless, what is on display is adequate to give a comprehensive feel of the book to those visitors wishing to explore this piece of Tamil literature further. The Thirukkural (திருவள்ளுவர்), or 'Kural', is estimated to have been written between 300 BCE and the 5th century CE. Whilst it is generally accepted that the 'Kural' is from the post 'Sangam period', the exact dating is still widely debated. The content of Thirukkural spans a wide range of topics including ethics, morality, love, governance, and spirituality in the form of couplets - each consisting approximately 8-10 words.

The author's religion has also been a subject of speculations with all major religions of the time - Jainism, Hinduism and Buddhism, being suggested by different authorities. This uncertainty has, at times led to disputes on whether, the statues of Thiruvalluvar should include symbols - such as 'Holy Ash' and the Rudraksha mala (chain made of rudraksha beads commonly worn by orthodox Hindus on special occasions), usually associated with Saivism. It is indeed an irony of our times that a personality such as Thiruvalluvar, who in his own life transcended ethnicity and religion, should evoke such parochial debates in our society. The religious background of Thirukkural is hard to determine. The verses are definitely embedded within a milieu of faith and divinity, though the exact nature of that divinity remains open to speculation. Attributes such as 'seated on the lotus of the heart' (மலர்மிசை ஏகினான்), 'free from likes and dislikes' (வேண்டுதல் வேண்டாமை இலான்), 'A lord without peer' (தனக்குவமை இல்லாதான்), 'An ocean of wisdom' (அறிவாழி அந்தணன்) and a 'Lord with eight attributes' (எண் குணத்தான்) have been used to describe this divinity and these descriptions have been

interpreted in different ways. The text also acknowledges the concepts of rebirth, destiny and the eternal journey of 'samsara' driven by abstract karmic forces. These concepts are however common to Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism. The Kural also recommends the path of devotion and abject surrender to the supreme (or god) as means of extricating oneself from samsara.

“பிறவிப் பெரும்கடல் நீந்துவர் நீந்தார்  
இறைவன் அடிசேரா தார்”

(Kural 10)

“Only those persons who hold on to the lord's feet will cross the great ocean of birth and deaths; it is impossible for the others to do so” (Thirukkural by S N Sri Ramathesikan, Gangai Puthaka Nilayam, Chennai 2006 ) is an example of this general sentiment. This emphasis on devotion as the path towards extrication from 'samsara', suggests a strong leaning towards Hinduism, even though this assertion is debatable. Within this general framework of spirituality more worldly issues such as household life, hospitality, humility, love, kind speech, fame, truthfulness, vegetarianism, honesty, non-violence, detachment, learning, wisdom, governance, friendship, nationhood, military strength and even sex are presented.

அஞ்சாமை ஈகை அறிவுக்கம் இந்நான்கும்  
எஞ்சாமை வேந்தர்க்கு இயல்பு

Kural 382

Bravery, generosity, knowledge and zeal- these four characteristics mark a person fit to be a ruler (Thirukkural by S N Sri Ramathesikan, Gangai Puthaka Nilayam, Chennai 2006) and ஊடல் உணர்தல் புணர்தல் இவைகாமம் கூடியார் பெற்ற பயன்

Kural 1109

The lover and the beloved meeting & separating, the consoling of the beloved by the lover after separation and then having intercourse; these three are rated as blessings to those living happily (Thirukkural by S N Sri Ramathesikan, Gangai Puthaka Nilayam,

Chennai 2006) are examples of kurals within a more secular framework.

The fact that these facets of life have been considered in detail almost 1500 years ago and expressed through succinct poetic language in order to influence wider society is clearly a measure of Thiruvalluvar's genius. There is consensus that Thirukkural is relevant to the whole of humanity across all ages. It is for this reason that the book has been translated into over 50 languages and immortalised through the installation of Thiruvalluvar's statue in many countries outside the Tamil speaking world.



A



B

***The statues of Thiruvalluvar at the University of London (A), United Kingdom and in the French town of Cergy (B)***

Thirukkural has been part of the curriculum in Sri Lankan Tamil medium schools for a very long time. Most public speakers frequently invoke sayings from Thirukkural to strengthen his/her arguments and such illustrations are savoured by the listening audience. As such Thiruvalluvar has been held in high esteem with several statues commemorating the poet in different parts of the country. However, creating statues and thereby making demi-gods out of such illustrious men (and women) from history, may potentially dilute their message to humanity. Gods (and demi-gods) are usually worshiped and subject to adoration rather than their teachings being subject to rational analysis in order to be internalised, so that they may positively influence human behaviour. By taking their messages away from the intellectual domain and placing them within the realms of the divine, the opportunity to influence ordinary human lives are missed. It is in this context that the new 'Thirukkural Campus' at Mavittapuram - encouraging the study, debate and further scrutiny of Thirukkural, becomes important. The far-reaching vision of Mr Arumugam Thirumurugan, in encouraging this critical approach needs to be seen as a positive example in post-war nation building. In addition to the granite engravings the Sivapoomi Trust volunteers have also sourced multiple translations and commentaries of Thirukkural and have made them publicly available to all those who seek wisdom. Hon. Mr R Mahadevan, Judge of the Supreme Court of India, participated as the chief guest at the opening day celebrations on the 2nd February 2025. In his speech he demonstrated his outstanding scholarship in Tamil and Sangam literature and emphasised the relevance of Thirukkural to contemporary society. The power of Mr Mahadevan's prose and his wide knowledge and ability to relate the lessons of Thirukkural to other Tamil classics such as 'Kamba Ramayanam' (or



‘Ramavataram’ the adaptation of Valmiki’s Ramayana by the Tamil poet Kampan in the 12th century) and Sangam literature mesmerised the participating audience. The legendary Tamil journalist and editor of the Tamil Nadu based news daily ‘Dinamani’ Mr K Vaidyanathan was the guest of honour at the opening ceremony. In his speech he observed that just as much as Mecca is a place of great significance to the Muslims, or Jerusalem is a place of piety and reverence to



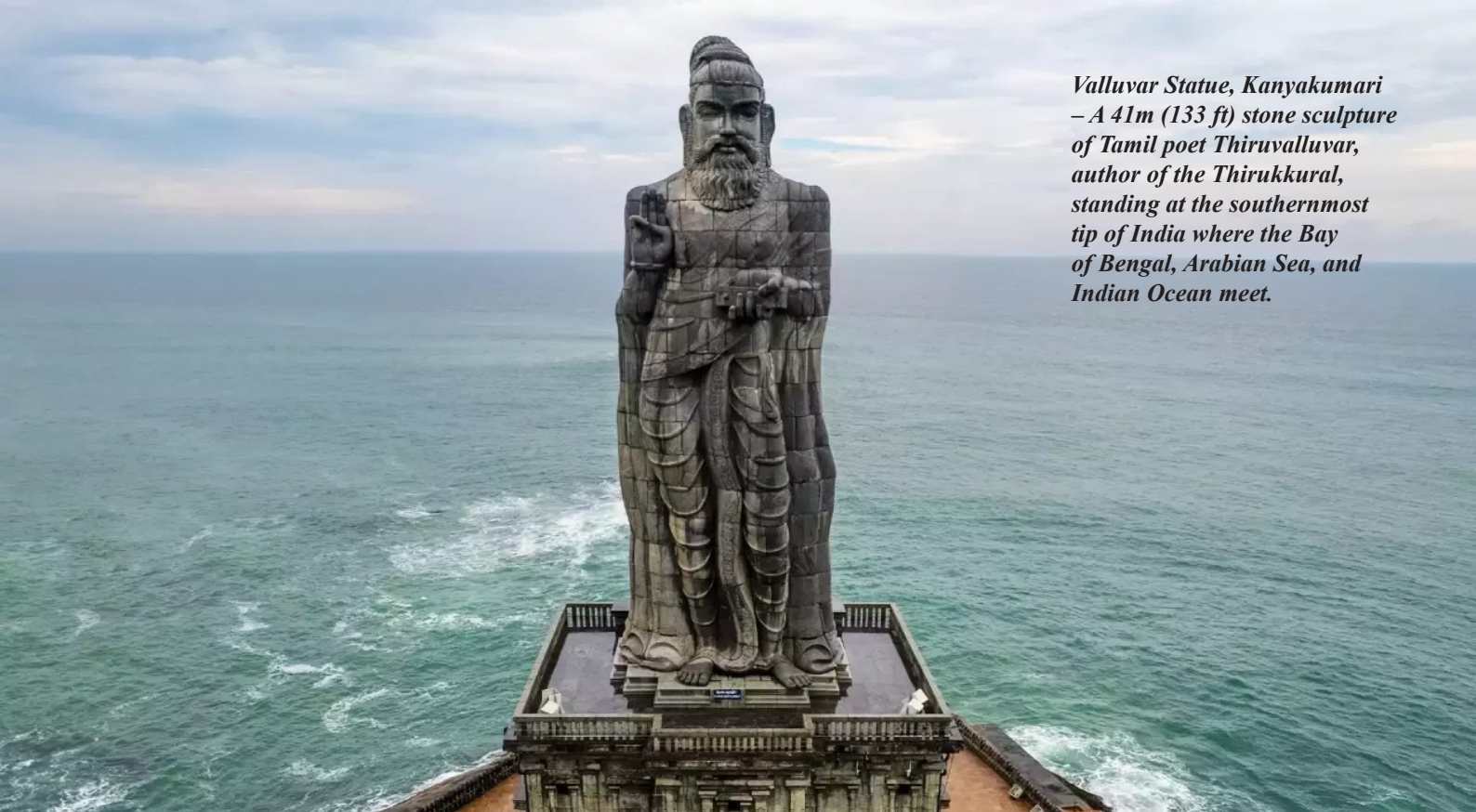
*The statue of Thiruvalluvar carved from a single block of granite stone on display at the new ‘Thirukkural campus’. The carving was done by an Indian sculptor who stayed in Jaffna for the entire duration of the project*



*From Left: Legendary Indian journalist and Dinamani editor K. Vaidyanathan, Chief Guest Hon. Mr. R. Mahadevan, Judge of the Supreme Court of India, and Mr. Aru Thirumurugan, Chairman of the Sivapoomi Trust. Dinamani Editor K. Vaidyanathan presents a cheque of ₹1 lakh on behalf of Supreme Court Judge R. Mahadevan to Aru Thirumurugan.*

the Christians, or Varnasi (or Kashi) is a place of devotion and salvation to the Hindus, Jaffna has a special significance to the entire Tamil speaking world. He went on to observe that the history of Jaffna – both ancient and contemporary, resonates strongly within the Tamil psyche and hence the construction of the Thirukkural campus in Jaffna was most appropriate and was a recognition of these sentiments. These observations, no doubt evoked very strong feelings in the minds of all participants. The event was also marked by music, debates and poetry with several other artists and academics from





*Valluvar Statue, Kanyakumari – A 41m (133 ft) stone sculpture of Tamil poet Thiruvalluvar, author of the Thirukkural, standing at the southernmost tip of India where the Bay of Bengal, Arabian Sea, and Indian Ocean meet.*

South India and Sri Lanka taking part. The campus building also has limited residential facilities for visiting scholars – internal and external, and the pull factor of the entire complex is bound to become a major tourist attraction in Northern Sri Lanka. The project has been undertaken through philanthropic funding and completed within

a relatively short time period – given the complexities inherent in transcribing a large volume of text into manual granite carvings. It is also most appropriate that this facility is being dedicated to the people of Sri Lanka in 2025, which marks the 25th anniversary of the Sivapoomi Trust. In dedicating this facility to the country, Mr Thirumurugan



***The display of Thirukkural engraved in granite stones on display with English translations. The mammoth task of engraving all 1330 Kurals and the relevant translations in English and Sinhala were done by a local sculptor Mr Vindodh, who lives in Bharathipuram in Kilinochchi district. Mr A Thirumurugan and a team of volunteers affiliated to the Sivapoomi trust, did the painstaking task of proof reading.***

expressed his hope that the community will cherish this facility and the underpinning sentiments of all those responsible for its successful construction for centuries to come. Thiruvalluvar's messages – like that of the Buddha, Jesus or Ghandi belong to the whole of humanity. He clearly transcended narrow boundaries and challenges us also to do so.....will we listen?



# University of Jaffna Confers Academic Excellence Award on Dr. S. Raguraman



The University of Jaffna has conferred the Academic Excellence Award on Dr. S. Raguraman, a Senior Lecturer in Obstetrics and Gynecology at the Faculty of Medicine. The award was presented during the university's 486th Senate Meeting in recognition of his contributions to academia, medical education, and research.

Dr. Raguraman holds an MBBS, MD (O&G), and MRCOG (UK) and serves as an Honorary Consultant at the Teaching Hospital, Jaffna. He is also a specialist in in-vitro fertilization (IVF), playing a key role in reproductive healthcare in the region.

In addition to his medical practice, he heads the Medical Education and Audio-Visual Unit at the Faculty of Medicine and chairs the Digital Transformation Committee. He

is also a member of several academic and administrative bodies, including the Ethical Review Committee, Student Well-being Committee, Project Monitoring Committee, Curriculum Evaluation and Development Committee, and Postgraduate Development Committee.

Dr. Raguraman is the son of Professor S. Sivalingarajah, former Head of the Department of Tamil at the University of Jaffna, known for his contributions to Tamil literature.

The University of Jaffna, in a statement, acknowledged Dr. Raguraman's role in medical education and research, stating that the Academic Excellence Award recognizes his dedication to teaching, research, and the advancement of knowledge in his field.

# Indigo Airlines Explores New Bangalore-Jaffna Flight Route in Meeting with Northern Province Governor



In a move to enhance air connectivity between India and Sri Lanka, a delegation from Indigo Airlines met with N.Vethanayagan, Governor of the Northern Province, last week to discuss plans for launching direct flights between Bangalore and Jaffna.

The discussions, described as “highly productive” by both parties, highlighted the growing demand for travel between the two cities. Indigo, which already operates flights between Chennai and Jaffna, is now eyeing the Bangalore-Jaffna route to cater to the increasing number of passengers, including over 25,000 annual travelers who make the journey for pilgrimage purposes.

The airline made history in September 2024 by becoming the second Indian carrier to launch Chennai-Jaffna flights, offering a swift 75-minute journey that has since gained popularity among travelers.

The proposed Bangalore-Jaffna route is expected to further strengthen cultural, economic, and tourism ties between the two regions. With Jaffna’s rich cultural heritage and its significance as a pilgrimage destination, the new flight route could unlock greater opportunities for trade, tourism, and people-to-people connections.

Governor Vethanayagam expressed optimism about the potential benefits of the new route, stating, “Enhanced air connectivity will not only boost tourism but also foster stronger ties between the people of India and Sri Lanka, particularly the Tamil communities in both nations.”

If finalized, the Bangalore-Jaffna route is expected to provide a significant boost to the Northern Province’s economy, which has been steadily recovering and rebuilding in the post-war era.



# Cuban Ambassador Meets JVP Leadership, Discusses US Sanctions on Cuba



BY:

**Our Reporter**

Colombo, Sri Lanka – In a significant diplomatic engagement, Cuba's Ambassador to Sri Lanka, Andrés Marcelo González Garrido, met with Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) General Secretary Tilvin Silva at the party's headquarters. The meeting, which underscored the longstanding solidarity between the two entities, focused on geopolitical concerns, including the economic blockade imposed on Cuba by the United States, sources told Jaffna Monitor.

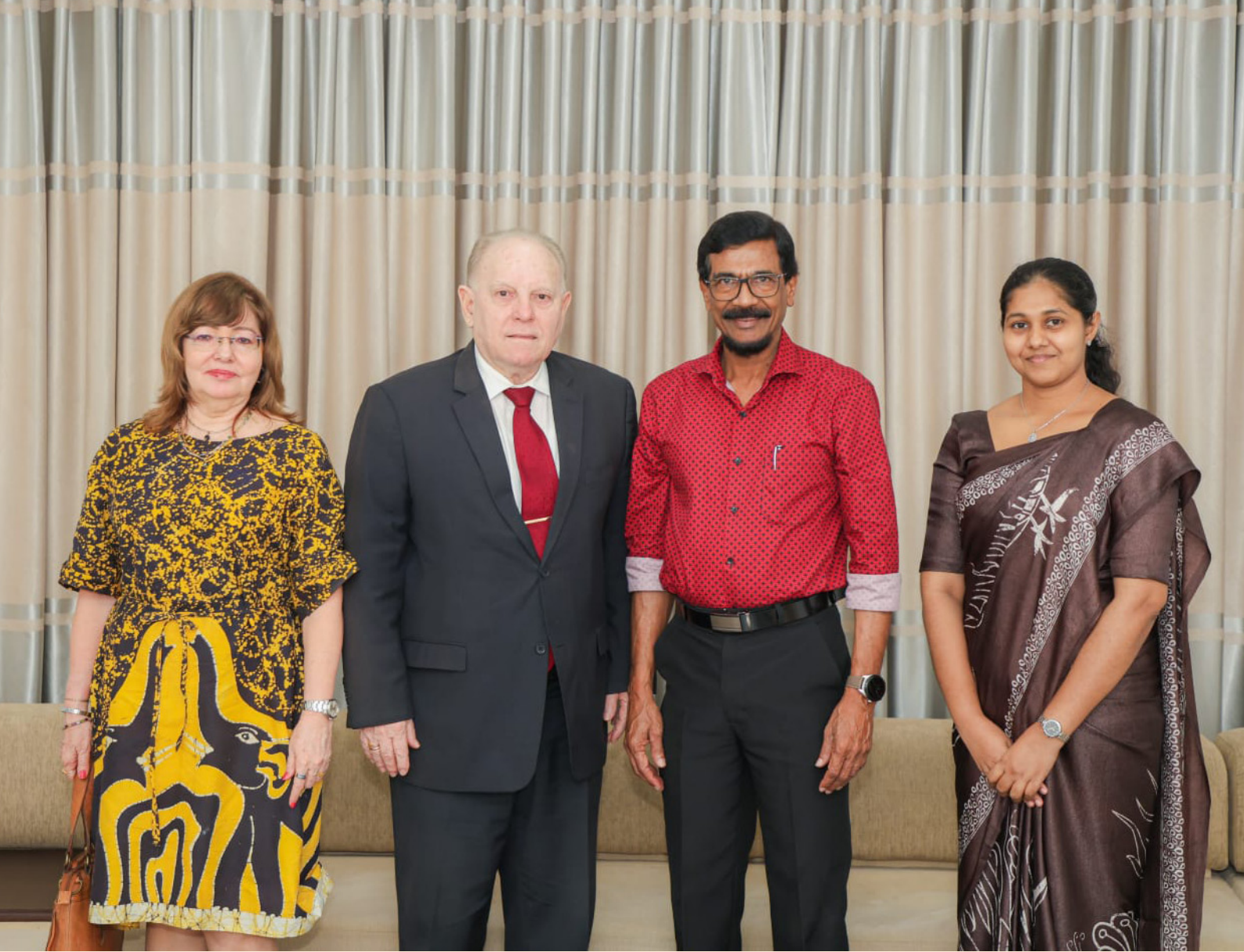
The JVP, a Marxist-Leninist political party and a key constituent of the ruling NPP coalition, has historically shared a deep ideological affinity with Cuba, particularly since the Cuban Revolution of 1959. The revolution, led by Fidel Castro and Che Guevara, inspired leftist movements worldwide, including the JVP, which was founded in 1965. Over the decades, the JVP has consistently expressed solidarity with Cuba, advocating for its right to self-determination and opposing foreign interference in its affairs. JVP founder Rohana Wijeweera frequently acknowledged that



*Cuba's Ambassador to Sri Lanka, Andrés Marcelo González Garrido, meets with JVP General Secretary Tilvin Silva.*

the Cuban Revolution was a major source of inspiration for him.

Cuba, in turn, has been a vocal supporter of anti-imperialist movements globally, including in Sri Lanka. The country has provided educational and medical assistance to Sri Lanka, offering scholarships for students to study medicine in Cuba, further strengthening



the bond between the two nations. The JVP has often cited Cuba's resilience in the face of U.S. sanctions as a model for resisting external pressures.

### **Discussions on US Sanctions and Geopolitical Concerns**

According to sources, during the meeting, Ambassador González Garrido expressed gratitude for the JVP's unwavering solidarity with Cuba, particularly its support for the Cuban Revolution and its opposition to the U.S.-led economic blockade. He highlighted the devastating impact of the embargo, which has been in place since 1962, on Cuba's economy and its people. Despite these challenges, Cuba has continued to prioritize social welfare, education, and

healthcare, earning global recognition for its achievements.

Tilvin Silva reaffirmed the JVP's commitment to advocating for the removal of the economic, financial, and commercial embargo imposed on Cuba. The Cuban envoy reiterated Havana's stance against what it considers unjustified international pressure, particularly the U.S. sanctions. He emphasized that Cuba remains committed to peaceful coexistence and mutual respect among nations, despite the challenges posed by the embargo.

Also present at the meeting were Maribel Duarte González, First Secretary of the Cuban Embassy, and Ruvini Kalpana Madhubashini from the JVP.



# “Nathaswara Osaiyile” (நாதஸ்வர ஒசையிலே): An ancient art form that defines a people

## Part-3



BY:

**Mahesan Nirmalan**  
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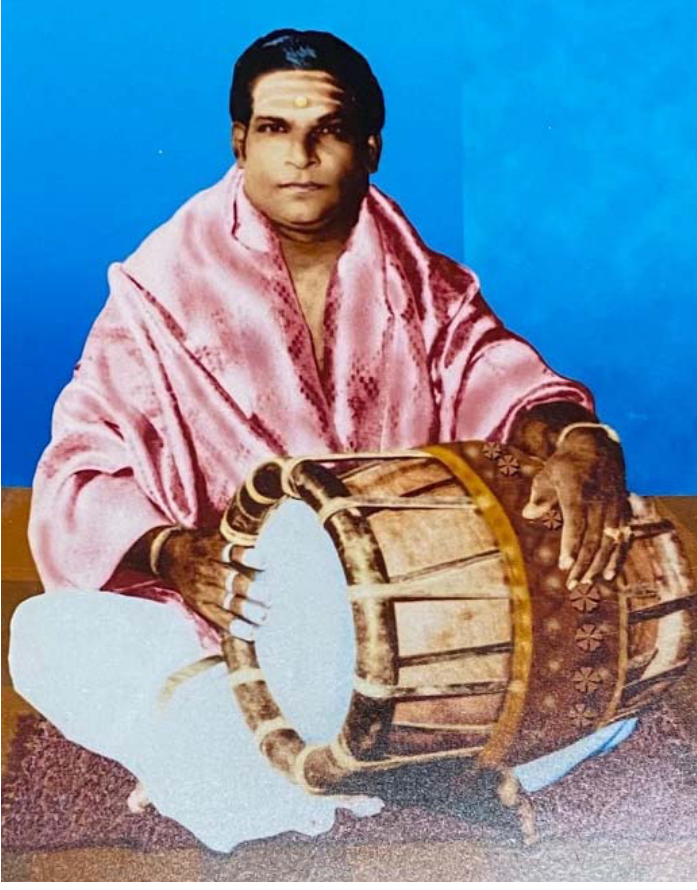


We now shift our focus on some of the frontline artists who have nurtured the nathaswaram and thavil in Sri Lanka through the 60s and 70s to the present day – the key objective of this series of articles.

### Frontline Thavil artists in

**Sri Lanka:** Nathaswaram recitals (referred to as ‘Kucheries or கச்சேரி’)

usually begins with a section dedicated to the thavil performance. This period sets in the ambience and the tempo which then seamlessly blends into the ragas and melodies that flows from the nathaswaram. The essential attributes of the thavil players are a deep understanding of the rhythmic cycles (‘Thalam’ or தாளம்) and the different percussive expressions that may be fitted into each rhythmic cycle. The rhythmic cycles may be performed at different speeds which are multiples (x1, x2 and x3 or even x4) of a baseline speed. Accomodating the different percussive expressions into these changing speeds requires a deep understanding of the basic rhythm. In order



***N R Sinnarasa (NRS) of Inuvil. NRS was the first cousin of Alavetti V Thakshinamurthy (See part 1: Jaffna Monitor 15th December 2024) and it is widely known that Thakshinamurthy would consult NRS about his rhythmic expressions and compositions before he performed them publicly. The theoretical counsel from NRS combined with his finger speed helped Thakshinamurthy to reach new heights. NRS has performed with all leading Nathaswaram Vidwans of his time. He was born in 1934 (24/03/1934) and died in 1991 (06/07/1991). His mastery and contributions live through his son N R Suthaharan, who continues to live and perform in Sri Lanka.***

to do so, the artists needs to be able to vary the finger speeds – sometimes to extremely high speeds, in order to accommodate the popular percussive expressions that will resonate with the audience. The artists’ imagination and creativity will determine the type of percussive expressions that are built into each rhythmic cycle. Furthermore, the Thavil player also needs to have a sound understanding of the lyrics of each composition, the flow of these compositions and the unwritten impromptu improvisations (Kalpana swaras or கல்பனா ஸ்வரம் and Raga alapanas or

ஆலாபனை) that the nathaswaram player is likely to come up with on the day. It is extremely rare for someone to possess all these attributes as there is no written template that are available for them to follow (unlike in a western orchestra). The nathaswaram and thavil communities in Sri Lanka was littered with people who brought all these attributes together and were seen as the ultimate masters of these skills. In Part 1 of this series (Jaffna Monitor 15th December 2024) we have already discussed V Thakshinamurthy and his reputation. It is however important to emphasise, that Thakshinamurthy was a product of his environment and there were many other equally skilled, but perhaps less well known, artists who played along with Thakshinamurthy. NR Sinnarasa (from the village of Inuvil - இனுவில் சின்னராசா), K Ganeshapillai (from Nachimar Kovil or நாச்சிமார் கோவில் கணேசபிள்ளை), M Nadarajasundaram Pillai (From Chavakacheri or சாவகச்சேரி நடராஜசுந்தரம் பிள்ளை) and Kamatchisundaram Pillai (From Jaffna or யாழ்ப்பாணம் காமாட்சிசுந்தரம்பிள்ளை) are four of the pillars of Thavil, whose names will live in the memories of all followers of carnatic music in Sri Lanka. Together they ruled the world of thavil/nathaswaram music in the 70s, 80s and 90s and their fame and reputation spread all over the Tamil speaking world. Even their counterparts in Tamil Nadu were frank and open in their praises and many decorations and accolades followed all these Thavil Vidwans. It has been reported that the legendary nathaswaram player ‘Karaikuruchi Arunasalam’ (காரைகுறுச்சி அருணாசலம்) stated that the nathaswaram vidwans in Sri Lanka were extremely lucky to have these thavil players backing them at their performances. (Personal communication with Nathaswaram Vidwan Kondavil Panchamurthy). They were commonly referred to as ‘Thavil Medai’ (or தவில் மேதைகள்) - meaning the ultimate experts, by their adoring fans in Sri Lanka, India and beyond.





A



B

**A:** A Key milestone in the professional life of N R Sinnarasa (Left), performing along with his maternal uncle Nachimar Kovil Ganeshapillai (R), at a combined clarinet/nathaswaram concert in Selam, Tamil Nadu in 1989. The clarinet player is the legendary Trichy AKC Natarajan (AKCN) who pioneered the use of the clarinet in carnatic music concerts. The Nathaswaram player who is accompanying AKCN is Vizhanagar Uruthirapathy (விளநகர் உருத்திரபதி).

**B:** At the concert the title “Layagnana Kalpana Sironmani” (or Renowned expert of rhythmic wisdom - லயஞான கல்பனா சிரோன்மணி) was conferred upon Sinnarasa

(Source: Personal communication with N R Suthaharan, the son of late N R Sinnarasa)

In the hands of these masters, the thavil became an instrument that formed the very foundations of an art-form that can only be described as divine. They caressed their instruments with their fingers of one hand and a short drum-stick in the other and the combination brought out rhythmic expressions that anchored, enhanced and synchronised with the melodies and improvisations of the nathaswaram players. Their appearance, outfits and general conduct became part of the temple traditions that defined an important component of the Sri lankan culture.

## Arasakesari Vidwan Alavetti M P

**Balakrishnan (MPB):** MPB or Allavetti Balakrishnan (அளவெட்டி பாலகிருஷ்ணன்)- as he is popularly known, was born in Karavetti – a vilage close to Point Pedro in 1938 (01/11/1938). His father;s name was Muthuswamy Periyaswamy and his mother’s name was Parvathy. MPB’s father was a renowned vocalist and a nathaswaram player who was firmly anchored within the carnatic music traditions. The family moved to Alavetti – known for its musical heritage, when MPB was very young and as such MPB came to be known as Alavetti Balakrishnan for the rest of his career. This gave MPB a very early start in his musical career – both in vocal music as well as in nathaswaram. His informal lessons with his father commenced at the tender age of 7 years and continued in a more formal manner at the age of 10. The early emphasis on vocal music laid the foundations for the style of playing which subsequently came to characterise MPB – the strong focus on the lyrics and the melodic flow (referred to as சாகித்யம் in Tamil). In effect MPB ‘sang’ through his nathaswaram.

Having had his early informal lessons from his father Mr Periyaswamy, he had his further advanced lessons with Thiruchendur Krishnamurthy (திருச்செந்தூர் கிருஷ்ண முர்த்தி) in Tamil Nadu in South India. He



A



B

**A: Nachimar Kovil Ganesha Pillai; Ganeshapillai was the maternal uncle of both N R Sinnarasa and V Thakshinamurthy**

**B: Chavakacheri Nadarajasundaram Pillai – the brother and long time playing partner of nathaswaram Vidwan M Panchapikesan (see part 1- Jaffna Monitor 15th December 2024) (Images courtesy of nathaswaram Vidwan Dr P Nagenthiran, son of Dr M Panchapikesan)**

made regular (almost 6 monthly) trips to South India where he learnt advanced/latest techniques and compositions in vocal/instrumental carnatic music. On his return from these visits he would - along with his colleague and mentor Alavetti N K Pathmanathan, translate these newly acquired knowledge, skills and compositions to enhance their joint nathaswaram/thavil concerts. Since the age of 17, MPB performed at Radio ceylon as a grade 1 artist in his own right. NKP and MPB performed as a pair for almost a decade and it is known that NKP considered this period as the peak of his career. Balakrishnan's influence on NKP was profound – both in terms of his emphasis on clarity of 'sahithyam' (சாகித்யம்) and the technical innovations he brought to their joint performances. In the 90s, as a result of the ongoing civil war MPB relocated to Colombo

where he created a niche position for himself within the local temples and at social/cultural functions in Colombo. Jintupitti Murugan temple and Ponambalawaneshwarar temple (பொன்னம்பலவாணேஸ்வரர்) in Pettah are some of the temples where MPB performed regularly.

Allavetti Balakrishnan was the pioneer in formalising the Guru-Kulam traditions within the local 'Isai Vellalar' community and as a result, many of the frontline nathaswaram artists in Sri Lanka were trained under MPB's mentorship. Panchabikesan's son Dr MP Nagendran (Canada) and P S Balamurugan (Jaffna) are some of his very famous disciples who went on to develop the art of nathaswaram to new heights in Sri Lanka. Through his initiatives a nathaswaram training school was set up in Karavetti, which



potentially widens the access to students from the non-Isai vellalar communities. MPB received invitations from many parts of the world – including Canada, USA, UK and in many European countries. Wherever the Tamil diaspora settled, MPB visited and performed with honours and suitable financial rewards following in abundance. Two of his sons – M P Segar and Late M P Suthahar, also became outstanding artists of great independent reputation. Recognising his contributions the Title ‘Arasa Kesari’ (king of kings) was conferred by the Governor of the Northern province in 2023. He also had received major national awards previously from the government of Sri Lanka and some of the spiritual giants of our times such as Thirumuruga Kirubanandavariyar (திருமுருக கிருபானந்த வாரியார்).

MPB emigrated to Canada permanently in 2016, where he currently lives with the rest of his family. His wife’s name is Pankasaleela (Date of birth 10/11/1944). The couple have 2 sons (M P Sekar and Late M P Suthahar) who are outstanding nathaswaram players and four daughters (Kanangangi, Chitrangi, Sarasangi and Rathnangi), most of whom currently live in Canada. Chitrangi – a graduate in Tamil language and classical music from the University of Jaffna, is a strong proponent of carnatic music amongst the Tamil diaspora community in Canada. She currently runs a school for carnatic music – ‘Padini Isaiyagam’ (பாடினி இசையகம்) in Canada, thus continuing the family traditions.

**Kondavil Ganamurthi–Panchamurthi brothers:** As nathaswaram players, the



*Alavetti M P Balakrishnan being honoured by the Government of Sri Lanka in the presence of the spiritual leader Thirumuruga Kirubanandavariyar (திருமுருக கிருபானந்த வாரியார்).*



**Governor of the Northern Province Mrs Charles, conferring the title *Arasakesari* (அரசகேசரி) on behalf of the Jaffna Municipal council**  
(Images, courtesy Mrs Chitrangi Sureshkumar, daughter of Mr M P Balakrishnan)

Ganamurthy-Panchamurthy brothers deserve a special mention in our list of eminent Vidwans of our time. Their relative youth and the spectacle they brought to the music scene in Jaffna - when coupled with the supreme authority that they displayed at their concerts, was greatly admired by an entire generation of fans. Their father Mr Kothandapani, himself was a widely respected nathaswaram player who was instrumental in teaching the brothers the art of playing the nathaswaram quite early in their lives. The older brother V K Ganamurthy was born in 1944 in the village of Moolai in Jaffna district. The younger brother V K Panchamurthy was born in 1948 in Vannarpannai. Moolai Arumugam pillai (ஆறுமுகம் பிள்ளை), Mavittapuram Raja (மாவிட்டபுரம் ராஜா) and Inuvil Kandaswamy (இனுவில் கந்தசாமி) are some of the teachers who provided the brothers with formal

nathaswaram lessons. Following their initial training in Sri Lanka, the brothers moved to India for further training where the likes of A V Selvaratnam Pillai (செல்வரத்தினம் பிள்ளை) and Koolikarai Pichaiappah Pillai (பிச்சையப்பா பிள்ளை) willingly accepted the brothers as their disciples. They moved to Kondavil in 1958 and since then acquired the name 'Kondavil Ganamurthy-Panchamurthy brothers' which would last their entire life times. The brothers held their 'Arangetram' (the first formal public recital) in 1963 and following this formal introduction to the music world, the duo became recognised as frontline musicians in Jaffna for the next 4 decades. They received many invitations from all over the world including Europe, Australia, USA and Canada where their energy and the deep interpretations they gave while expressing classical ragas and 'kalpana swaras' kept their audience spellbound. In addition to playing as a duo, both of them also accompanied almost all the frontline nathaswaram vidwans of their times. The brothers performed on a regular basis at the Ariyalai Sittivinayagar temple for close to 20 years and were named as the 'Asthana Vidwans' of this temple. The concerts played with N K Pathmanathan and others at some of the most prestigious venues in the world are highly valued amongst the rasikas. They blended classical carnatic music with some of the popular cinema songs that were based on the carnatic or hindustani traditions and these concerts were highly sought after by their fans across multiple generations. The civil war in the 90s forced the family to relocate to Colombo and during this period, Mr V K Panchamurthy performed at the Trincomalee Batrakali Amman temple for 19 consecutive years and was given the title of 'Asthana Vidwan' by this temple too. The relative young age at which they touched the pinnacles of their respective careers enabled them to interact professionally with nathaswaram and thavil vidwans spanning five generations. 25



years of service to nathaswaram music by the brothers was celebrated at a jubilee celebratory event held at the Jaffna University in 1989 by the university staff and their wider audience from across the world.

Following the early death of the older brother Mr V K Ganamurthy in 2008 due to chronic liver disease, Mr V K Panchamurthy has continued to perform – both solo as well as in partnership with other frontline nathaswaram and thavil Vidwans. He currently serves as the ‘elder’ of the community providing mentorship and guidance to the next generation of nathaswaram players from Jaffna. His son Panchamurthy Kumaran, currently is considered as one



*V K Ganamurthy and V K panchamurthy being honoured on their silver jubilee after joining forces as a cultural duo and the highly celebrated icons of Kondavil.  
(Figure courtesy: Mr V K Panchamurthy)*



*The Ganamurthi (Right)-Panchamurthi (Left) brothers from Kondavil.  
(Figure courtesy: Mr V K Panchamurthy)*



*Mr Panchamurthi (Left) in concert with the next generation of nathaswaram Vidwans Dr Nahendran Panchapikesan (right) at a concert in Sydney Australia in 2015.*

of the outstanding nathaswaram vidwans in the world and Mr Panchamurthy's guidance is considered pivotal in Kumaran's rise to fame and his attempts to adapt the world of nathaswaram/thavil music to meet the changing tastes of the rasikas all over the world. Kumaran's son Sasvihan is also an accomplished player who has also commenced his career at the tender age of 10, and will no doubt carry the name and traditions of Ganamurthy-Panchamurthy brothers into the future.

### **Cultural confluence and joint heritage:**

The study of the musical history of any given community, provides interesting insights into the various interactions that produce what we subsequently identify as that community's culture. Indigineous practices and equipment are usually shaped and modified by a wide variety of extraneous factors and the ingenuity of the local artists and the demands posed by the local population will usually determine what is adopted and what is rejected. In this context the study of the history of nathaswaram provides an interesting mixture of how an instrument which was native to nomadic populations within the Indian subcontinent (Pungi or மகுடி), had been transformed progressively

over centuries. In this context it is also worth observing that human history is similar to a river that continuously flows in one direction taking in and assimilating the flow of water from multiple tributaries. It is therefore fundamentally wrong for those of us living down stream to try and dissect out which part of the river is the 'original river' and which part is the 'contaminant'. The cultural purists of our time – wherever they are, must be weaned away from resorting to such futile pass times and be encouraged to see the commonalities in human needs and human endeavours which have resulted in a 'joint heritage' that belongs to the whole of humanity. The life stories of some of the giants of our times who have embedded some of these artforms within our communities and have shaped our musical history cannot be ignored in the process and recording their achievements for posterity is the duty of all of us with an interest in music. The nathaswaram/thavil vidwans who have been named in this article (and in Part 1 of this series: Jaffna Monitor 15th December 2024) are true giants in their fields – by any standards, and their names and achievements should be celebrated and cherished in our collective memories.

**To be concluded in Part 4 in the next issue...**



# Killings, Truth, Justice and Healing amongst Tamils

PART 02



BY:

**Jeevan Thiagarajah**

Former Governor Northern Province/  
Former Member Commissioner  
Election Commission.



## July 1983 Riots

Black July is generally seen as the start of full-scale Sri Lankan Civil War between the Tamil militants and the government of Sri Lanka. Due to the significance of its role in exacerbating the ethnic conflict, a detailed account of events is provided. On 23 July 1983 at around 11.30pm the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (the Tamil Tigers or the LTTE) ambushed the Four Bravo military patrol in Tirunelveli near Jaffna in northern Sri Lanka. A road-side bomb was detonated beneath the Jeep that was leading the convoy, injuring at least two soldiers on board. As soldiers travelling in a truck which was following the Jeep dismounted to help their colleagues, they were ambushed by a group of Tamil Tiger fighters, who fired at them with automatic weapons and hurled grenades at them. In the ensuing clashes, one officer and 12 soldiers were killed immediately, while two more were fatally wounded, bringing the total death toll to 15 along with a number of rebels. Kittu, a regional commander of the LTTE later admitted to planning and carrying out the ambush.

The Army, including its Commander Tissa

Weeratunga, did not want the soldiers' funeral held in Jaffna and they did not want to hand the bodies over to their families to avoid disturbances at multiple locations. The decision was made at the highest levels to hold the funeral, with full military honours, at Colombo's General Cemetery at Kanatte. Notwithstanding these measures the pre-planned riots of July 1983 unfolded with catastrophic consequences. The back of the nation of was broken and fodder provided for decades of fratricide.

July has become a time of mourning and remembrance amongst the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora around the world who come together to commemorate the loss of Tamils. This has happened in countries such as Canada, Switzerland, Norway, Denmark, Germany, France, Great Britain, Australia, and New Zealand. Eventually the Sri Lankan government put the death toll at about 300 dead. More than 18,000 houses and numerous commercial establishments were destroyed and hundreds of thousands of Tamils fled the country to Europe, Australia and Canada. Many Tamil youths also joined the various Tamil groups including the Tamil Tigers.







## Post 1983

The aftermath of the 1983 race riots brought a flood of recruits into the militant groups. The militant movements had become fractured in 1980 with the split between Prabhakaran and Uma Maheswaran. The latter went on to found the P.L.O.T.E. (Peoples Liberation Organisation of Tamil Eelam) and the former the L.T.T.E. (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam).

The other significant militant groups were the T.E.L.O, the E.P.R.L.F. and the E.R.O.S.

The trouble fomented by the government in the Eastern Province in 1984 found a large number of eastern province youths joining the militancy. The motivation of these youths was very different from that of their more intellectual and reflective predecessors from the University. Revenge, anger and utter helplessness were now leading motives. But the ground work had already been laid by the articulate students who had roamed the villages holding meetings. This suited the militant leadership. The new recruits would do what they were told, and not ask awkward questions. The L.T.T.E. could now drop its pretences concerning internationalism and



socialism and show itself as a tightly controlled military organisation. The T.E.L.O. never had any pretences about intellectual leanings. By September 1985 a large number of refugees from the Trincomalee district were flooding into Jaffna, and these refugees who were very desperate were widely used in demonstrations. Many boys in their early teens from the refugee population joined mainly the E.P.R.L.F. and the T.E.L.O. The E.P.R.L.F. was the first to recruit girls. The L.T.T.E. was however more discriminating in its recruitment.

Distraught parents became a regular sight around L.T.T.E. camps crying and begging for their children who had run away and joined the movement. The militant movement had come a long way from its origins amongst the undergraduates of Peradeniya, who talked, theorized and then went abroad. Death, disillusionment and assassination had removed most of the able and mature leaders from amongst the militants. Their average age dropped perhaps from 22 to 14 or 16. The few leaders who remained enjoyed absolute authority over their unquestioning ranks and individuals who joined were severely changed by the nature of the organization.

## **The Growth of the L.T.T.E**

In reprisal for the killing by Sri Lankan forces of 70 Tamil civilians in Valvettithurai and the damage caused to the homes of Prabhakaran and several other L.T.T.E. leaders, the L.T.T.E. on 14 May 1985 inflicted what came to be known as the "Anuradhapura massacre". A few L.T.T.E. men drove into Anuradhapura and gunned down about 150 persons with ruthless efficiency and got away.

Around January 1986, it was a general belief among Tamils that no single group could proceed alone against the might of the Sri

Lankan army. Attacks by the Sri Lankan Army in early 1986 on an L.T.T.E. camp at Suthumalai and a subsequent thrust into Tellipallai, were repulsed by all groups acting together, including the T.E.A. The T.E.L.O. provided critical help in saving the day when troops landed by helicopter and attacked the L.T.T.E.'s camp at Suthumalai. This was publicly acknowledged by the L.T.T.E.

However, by December 1986 the L.T.T.E. became the dominant militant group, after having alienated and disbanded the other militant groups. Its military task as a result became much heavier, and it faced a severe manpower shortage. Under these circumstances the L.T.T.E. was encouraging recruits even in their early teens. Jaffna's Old Park had now become a show case for the L.T.T.E., where children watched the drilling going on after school and would sometimes run away from homes to join. Others might first join their friends who were on sentry duty and later join fully for the thrill of it. By mid-1987 girls too were being trained for a military role.

It had been rumoured for some time that the "Das faction" of the T.E.L.O. in Vadamaratchi had some differences with the leader Sri Sabaratnam. Das was an able military man -- and this faction was said to form the military backbone of the T.E.L.O. The L.T.T.E.'s opportunity came when in April 1986 the Bobby faction of the T.E.L.O. treacherously shot dead Das and 4 of his colleagues. They were shot dead while visiting a colleague in the Jaffna Hospital. This resulted in the Das faction leaving the T.E.L.O. and going into exile, considerably weakening the T.E.L.O. Towards the end of the month the T.E.L.O. moved several of its men outside Jaffna, ostensibly for operations against the Sri Lankan army. At the same time the L.T.T.E. moved many of its men into Jaffna and the



word was put out that it was going to attack one of the Sri Lankan encampments.

A crucial advantage possessed by the L.T.T.E. was a modern communications system with wireless sets. The L.T.T.E. took on the T.E.L.O. at the end of that month. The pretext was a minor tiff arising from both groups calling for a hartal for the men they had lost at sea, about the same time. After one week of fighting the L.T.T.E. was supreme in Jaffna. The T.E.L.O. leader Sri Sabaratnam was killed on 7 May. The manner in which the T.E.L.O. members were killed, shocked Tamil people everywhere. Twelve were killed near Manipay while they were asleep. Several caught unaware were shot and burnt at junctions at Thirunelvely, Mallakam, and Tellipallai. Eight persons were killed at the camp behind the St. John's principal's bungalow. One person was thrust into a car, which was exploded, leaving severed limbs strewn around. Many of the T.E.L.O. members from areas outside Jaffna had to flee in fear without knowing the streets or where they were going. The people were so terrified, that few found the courage to give shelter to the fugitives. While this unprecedented display was on, people stood mutely at junctions and watched, as persons hardly dead, were doused and burnt. Hardly anyone protested, out of fear.. Some students at the University attempted to take out a procession to stop the fighting but had to abandon it. The fighting was over in less than a week and Sri Sabaratnam was killed in circumstances which are not clear.

A similar circumstance preceded the L.T.T.E.'s taking on the E.P.R.L.F. seven months later - namely, the split arising from differences between Padmanabha, the E.P.R.L.F.'s political leader and Douglas Devananda, the leader of its military wing.

Following the L.T.T.E.-T.E.L.O. clash, the

L.T.T.E. began to play on the fears of ordinary people. Loudspeaker vehicles went about telling people not to talk about or analyse what had happened. This was the first publicly announced act of censorship. Previously the L.T.T.E. and the T.E.L.O. especially had visited newspapers to tell them not to write about certain incidents.

An aspect of L.T.T.E. dominance that made it acceptable to the general public was that robberies virtually ceased. The poor and the middle classes were left alone. The L.T.T.E. made mutually beneficial arrangements with wholesale merchants and big businessmen to the satisfaction of the latter. They could now enjoy their profits without the nuisance of being occasionally kidnapped for ransom. Before May 1986, if a man allegedly committed a fraud, the first militant group to discover it would descend on him, most likely in the night, to carry out an investigation. Occasionally, the victim would be lamp-posted (shot after being tied to a lamp post), or would be let off after negotiating an appropriate fee. It was now expected that the L.T.T.E. would soon make a bid for sole dominance amongst the Tamil Militant Groups.

Arunagirinathan Vijitharan was a third-year commerce student from the University of Jaffna who was generally unknown until he was missing from his boarding house on 4 November 1986. An action committee was formed by the students. They did not accuse anyone. They simply maintained that the four functioning militant groups were responsible for the security of persons in Jaffna. Further, they had sentries everywhere, making it unlikely those persons could disappear without their knowledge. The militant groups were called upon to do their acknowledged duty and restore Vijitharan. Privately, the students admitted that they were afraid and were in no mood to confront any militant

group. On the other hand, the students felt that if they kept quiet, the chance of students disappearing one by one was greater. Not having received a satisfying response, the students commenced a campaign of fasting on 19 November in which six persons, both boys and girls began a fast in a temporary cadjan shed in front of the administration block.

At this point many diverse opinions came to be expressed, most of them agreeing that the students should give up their fast. Some felt that the students were performing a very necessary task; but the community did not deserve the deaths of those who were fasting. If they died, six prospective leaders would be lost while people would shrug their shoulders and go on as before. Some were hostile. They thought that the Tamils were being divided in the face of the main enemy, the Sri Lankan state, when they should be uniting behind the L.T.T.E.

The Jaffna press played it diplomatically by giving equal prominence to statements by all parties. The E.P.R.L.F. backed the students. The E.R.O.S. characteristically sat on the fence. The students were painfully aware that their protest could become interpreted as anti-L.T.T.E. and backed by rival militant groups who did not wish to confront the L.T.T.E. directly. A speech delivered by an E.P.R.L.F. leader at the University, the contents of which did not receive prior approval from the students, gave further room for this impression.

There was strong pressure on the students to give up the protest, and the L.T.T.E. too was embarrassed by it. But the problem was how to end it. A mutually acceptable formula had to be found. Even admirers of the protest felt that it had gone on long enough and that no further purpose would be served by its prolongation. A number of persons and organisations came to patch up a settlement,

including the University Teachers' Association (U.T.A.).

Eventually a formula for ending the fast was reached. For the University students, it ended for the time being their role in public affairs. With all their weaknesses and drawbacks, their role had been a noble one. They had been forced into tasks where others more mature and experienced than they ought to have been given the lead. For the Tamil people, another light had gone out. Vimalaswaran, the student leader who led the protest fast, paid a heavy price for his defiance of the new order. He was assassinated in July, 1988.

The natural defiance of the women remained a remarkable feature. Village women in the East went out with rice pounders to stop the internecine fighting during the L.T.T.E.-T.E.L.O. clash. When the L.T.T.E. took on the E.P.R.L.F. on 14 December 1986, women from some villages in Jaffna near Keerimalai and Mallakam defied the L.T.T.E. by sitting on the roads armed with kitchen knives and chillie powder.

## **Differences among the Militants**

The public had up to now thought of the L.T.T.E. as a monolith. But in the second half of 1986 differences, rivalries and personal ambitions within the L.T.T.E. which had a politics of its own began to surface and were talked about. Sources with good connections talked of differences between the Jaffna leader, Kittu and the then Vavuniya leader Mahattaya. The latter is said to have felt that those in Jaffna were being spoilt by glamour and a relatively easy life. Following the events of May 1986 several senior L.T.T.E. men left the group. One of them was Kandeepan who was in charge of the Islands. After leaving the organization he simply stayed in his home



at Ariyalai without wanting to see any of his former colleagues. The L.T.T.E. apparently wished to talk to him in order to persuade him to rejoin. Kandeepan was a competent military man who had pioneered the use of sea-mines. The lower ranks had been reportedly disoriented by the departure of several senior men. After refusing to see Kittu on two occasions the third time he was surrounded in order to force a meeting. But Kandeepan ran into his house and swallowed cyanide. The L.T.T.E. delayed the confirmation of his death and forced the family to perform the last rites in the early hours of the morning. Before his death Kandeepan had complained to one of his old friends that during the clash with the T.E.L.O., his organisation had promptly sent reinforcements to the Islands. But when the Sri Lankan government made an attempt on Mandaitivu, Kandeepan had submitted a plan which only required a modest quantity of arms. The organization had not, he had complained, responded to this request.

On 14 December, 1986, the E.P.R.L.F., the P.L.O.T.E. and the T.E.A. were disbanded by the L.T.T.E. In the Northern Province the E.P.R.L.F. fled its camps without a fight. Several E.P.R.L.F. leaders were arrested by the LTTE and many of them were tortured in order to make them disclose locations of hidden arms. The L.T.T.E. men were trained to carry out orders from the top blindly. There is no doubt that the other groups displayed the same kind of obedience when facing the Sri Lankan army. But when it came to an open confrontation with a fellow militant group, the other groups seem to have been handicapped by a certain amount of reluctance and confusion. There was a definite inhibition when it came to killing fellow Tamils. An observer living close to the E.P.R.L.F. camp at Uduvil said that there was a split amongst the ranks as to whether they should go in for a bloody fratricidal confrontation with the L.T.T.E. or simply go

into hiding. Before this could be resolved, the L.T.T.E. came and caught them unprepared. This left them with no option but to disperse. Like the split in the T.E.L.O. which the L.T.T.E. took advantage of, this time a split in the E.P.R.L.F. between Douglas Devananda, the leader of its military wing, and the leadership under Padmanabha was a chance the L.T.T.E. had been waiting for.

The P.L.O.T.E. in Jaffna, disbanded by the LTTE, had a political programme which emphasized work amongst the masses. These combined to give it an image in certain quarters of a disciplined organisation in dealings with the people. The P.L.O.T.E., however, had suffered discredit as a result of internal killings from at least two gruesome incidents in Jaffna. Five of its own women cadres were killed by members of the P.L.O.T.E. at Maniamthoddam, Jaffna, in 1985. Also in early 1985, seven L.T.T.E. sympathizers who were putting up posters in Chullipuram, were badly tortured and killed by P.L.O.T.E. men under Kandasamy (Chankili). At the same time, the P.L.O.T.E. cadre in Jaffna did earn the respect of the population for the sentry work it did around army encampments. It used its training to advance towards Jaffna Fort, along K.K.S. Road behind a barrier of advancing sand bags. Its men crawled through drains and other cover to install land mines fairly close to Jaffna Fort. When hints were given that the P.L.O.T.E. was to be disbanded the P.L.O.T.E. sentries withdrew from Jaffna town exploding their land mines.

By this time the L.T.T.E. in Jaffna, under Kittu, had established friendly personal relations with Captain Kotelawala of the Sri Lankan army and leading personalities amongst the Sinhalese, such as Vijaya Kumaranatunga, Vincent Perera and the Rev. Fr. Yohan Devananda. Kittu and his deputy Raheem became celebrated personalities in the South.

The L.T.T.E. and the government gave the impression that a move for a negotiated settlement was on. A set of proposals, called the December 19th proposals, which had been drafted with India's help were announced by the Sri Lankan government on the 26th of December for discussion. The L.T.T.E. announced that it was taking over the civil administration of Jaffna from 1 January 1987, although in practice this could have made little difference. The government announced a fuel and firewood blockade on Jaffna. Prabhakaran moved to Jaffna in early January 1987. The crisis had entered a new phase.

## The Eastern Question

By 1985 youths from districts in the Northern Province outside Jaffna and from the Eastern Province which had been ravaged by Sri Lankan military action which included massacres, were playing a numerically dominant role in the militant groups. Unlike the articulate youth of Jaffna who had joined in the early 1980's because of ideals of national liberation and a feeling of collective humiliation, these rural youths had been subject to some harrowing first hand experiences. By the end of 1985, those of the Tamil residents of Trincomalee district outside the city who were alive, had become displaced. The L.T.T.E. leader Pulendran, is said to have seen most of his family killed by Sri Lankan forces before his eyes. In such a situation the killing and counter-killing of Tamil and Sinhalese civilians became the order of the day. Yet the leadership of the militant movement was mainly Jaffna-dominated. The majority amongst the T.E.L.O. youths killed in May 1986 were from the rural areas. The E.P.R.L.F. continued to be active in the Batticaloa district after it was wound down in Jaffna in December 1986.

One factor which distinguished the militant movement in the East was that ideological and group differences were over-ridden by a feeling that they were all Eastern Province Tamils united through the experience of common suffering, who must stand together or perish. Group differences mattered far less than in Jaffna. Often, they shared camps and meals. When the L.T.T.E. was given orders by radio to go for the T.E.L.O. in May 1986, the killings in the East were far fewer than in Jaffna. At Sambur, according to a T.E.L.O. source in Trincomalee, T.E.L.O. members who were having a meal were called out by members of the L.T.T.E. who had been erstwhile friends. The T.E.L.O. men were unaware of such orders having been given and went out as if to meet friends, when their leader and two others were killed. At Sambaltivu, according to a Trincomalee resident, women went out with rice pounders to ensure that there was no killing. This was in contrast to suburban Jaffna where people watched mutely during the killings. However, during December 1986 when the L.T.T.E. went after the E.P.R.L.F., some villagers in rural Jaffna protected the E.P.R.L.F. cadre by blocking the roads, armed with knives and chillie powder.

The E.P.R.L.F. had begun to prove itself effective against the dreaded S.T.F. (Special Task Force). It had just carried out a series of successful landmine attacks against the S.T.F., thus restricting its movement. The L.T.T.E.'s protracted battle with the E.P.R.L.F. opened the field to the S.T.F. A consequence of these developments and the desperate plight of Tamils of the East, was that leaders of the Eastern Tamils were generally amenable to a settlement on the basis of the December 19th proposals which envisaged separate provincial councils for the Northern and Eastern Provinces. The powers devolved in policing and land settlement were generally deemed inadequate, but were the subject



of negotiation. In Jaffna which was relatively secure, a more hawkish mood prevailed, backed by L.T.T.E. propaganda, an enfeebled press and a section of the articulate intelligentsia. Those in Jaffna who felt that the Tamils, now dangerously weakened, must in the common interest use India's good offices to negotiate the best possible settlement, sometimes found through experience that they should not express themselves too loudly. Inevitably there arose a widespread feeling amongst Eastern Tamils, that the Jaffna based Tamil leadership had failed them. The Eastern Province Tamils will in the years to come have to resolve the question of their dealings with Northern Tamils and their relations with Muslims and Sinhalese in the East, whom they have for neighbours.

## Examples of killings of Tamils by Tamils drawn from UTHR reports

### Mr. Vimalasweren — 25 years old - a student leader. 18th July 1988

Vimalasweren's name came into prominence when he led the last great campaign for fundamental rights by the students of Jaffna University in November 1986. The occasion was the disappearance of the student Vijitharan when the LTTE was the controlling power. The protest attracted large crowds, and Vimalasweren was one of the six students who went on a fast. Kittu spoke to Vimalasweren, but conceded nothing. Vimalasweren then said that there could be no reconciliation without a change of heart and a new approach. It occurred against a background of much



popular sentiment for the LTTE as the physical defender of the Tamils. The protest was called off after ten days. A compromise was reached and the LTTE undertook not to harm the protesters.

Within about a fortnight the LTTE launched a campaign to suppress the E.P.R.L.F. which had also supported the students' protest. The P.L.O.T.E. had, by then, voluntarily ceased functioning.

Vimalasweren remained with peasants in Jaffna, who gave him protection for nearly a year. He sat for his Examination and lived with his wife in Chavakacheri, in order that he could earn a living by giving tutorials in Jaffna. On the afternoon of 18th July an assassin shot him dead as he came out of a tutorial in Nallur after finishing a teaching assignment. The same evening it was reported that two gunmen had entered the University of Jaffna, and had left after walking about for some minutes. The message to the students was clear.

During this period there had been much speculation about the disappearance of Mr. K. Kanthasamy on 19th June 1988. Kanthasamy was a leading Company Lawyer who had dedicated himself to refugee rehabilitation and human rights work. On the 12th July 1988, six days before Vimalaswamy's death, the Murali (one of two daily newspapers in Jaffna) published a statement with the front-page headline: "Kanthasamy cannot hereafter be seen - claims the Pasarai group".

### **Mr. Vaithilingam Paramanathan - a community leader: 1st October 1988**

Mr. Paramanathan was a community leader from Myliddy. At 10.30 p.m. on the night of 1st October 1988 some youths came to his house and called him out. Though cautioned by his wife, Paramanathan went out saying that he recognised one youth as a person he had sheltered. A little later a shot was heard. Within a short time, neighbours came out and Paramanathan's body was found. Angry villagers proceeded to barricade access roads into the village.

### **Saverimuttu Anton Douglas — 33 years old - Delft Island. 4th October 1988**

"On 4th October 1988 Anton was walking when he was pointed out by 'B' to two members of the (identity redacted) at about 1.00 pm. My husband Saverimuttu (65 yrs.) who later went in search of him found him tied to a Palmyra tree with his arms stretched around the trunk. The two (identity redacted) boys, identified as Kutti and Injur, were bludgeoning him mercilessly with poles. Anton was seen to be in a pretty bad state. My husband went up to our son, hugged him, and pleaded with his attackers. He was given a whack with a pole and chased away. The

attackers asked him to come back with the arms his son had hidden. My husband went back at about 4.00 PM and found our son and his attackers missing. It has now been surmised that Anton had died of the beating he received and was then buried. I heard that his attackers too subsequently died in action. Injur is said to have been the leader for the seven islands. I am told that he died in Karainagar in late November."

### **Justin Thevaraiah ('Thevan') - 19 yrs old - Chundukuli. 12th October 1988**

The reason for Thevan's killing is not clear. Thevan personally had no compromising connections. An assassin shot him dead near Rakka Road junction, leaving his fallen body in a pool of blood. His assassin is said to have been a young man who put his weapon back into his shoulder bag and fled.

### **Incident at Iddaikadu - Killings of Kasilingam Sivasubramaniam (40 yr) and Kanapathipillai Velmurugan (42 yrs). 18th October 1988**

Sivasubramaniam was a resident of Iddaikadu, near the army base at Palaly. During the time the Sri Lankan army was active, Sivasubramaniam and his family used to help the (identity redacted) with food and shelter. On the night of 18th October 1988, at about 10.30 PM, gunmen entered his house and attempted to drag him out. His brother-in-law, Velmurugan, went up to him and hugged him, pleading and crying. The gunmen first shot Velmurugan in the head. They then shot Sivasubramaniam and went away.

Sivasubramaniam and his wife Sivarani (36 yrs.) had two daughters and two sons: Kayalvili (14), Yalini (12), Sivaseelan (9) and Dwarakan



TNA Lawmaker and Spokesman M.A. Sumanthiran told Daily FT at the Palais des Nations in Geneva that the party hoped the Government would accept the UN report.

Sri Lanka must now stand up and accept this report and work with the world community. To that extent, we ask the 47 Member States in the Human Rights Council to adopt all the recommendations in the OISL report as a resolution. We ask the Government of Sri Lanka to agree to that so that we can go forward with one aim. To deal with the past properly, in a manner that will assuage the feelings of the victims and having dealt with the past in a meaningful way to move forward into a bright future for all of Sri Lanka's people," the TNA Parliamentarian urged.

*We also accept and undertake to carry out our responsibility to lead the Tamil people in reflecting on the past, and use this moment as a moment of introspection into our own community's failures and the unspeakable crimes committed in our name, so as to create an enabling culture and atmosphere in which we could live with dignity and self-respect, as equal citizens of Sri Lanka.*

(2). Velmurugan and his wife Parameswari (35) had a son and four daughters: Ganeshavel (13), Chitra (12), Subathira and Susnithira (twins, aged 8) and Sarithira (6).

## **The call for introspection**

M. A Sumanthiran PC in parliament on December 3rd 2013 was reported to have said amongst many other matters, 'I would also urge the Tamil people to use this opportunity for the long-needed introspection. Where did we go wrong? Was the Jaffna Youth Congress wrong in boycotting the elections in 1931 insisting on poorna swaraj? Were our leaders wrong in rejecting the demand for federalism put forward by the Kandyan League to two imperial commissions? Was G G Ponnambalam wrong in calling for 50-50? And then supporting the Government after the passage of the Indian-Pakistani Citizenship Act? Was S J V Chelvanayakam

wrong in calling for a federal state in 1951 and for a separate state in 1976? Were the leaders of the TULF wrong in accepting the District Development Council in 1981 and then not accepting the Provincial Council system in 1987? Were the Tamil political leaders complicit in the emergence of an armed struggle?

How can we then drag ourselves out of this quagmire and get on with our lives for the future? I suggest that we do this firstly by being honest with each other. Both sides must acknowledge that we did terrible things to each other, not just during the last stages of the war, not just during the 30-year period of violent struggle, but even before that.'

I argue we have had a terrible sequence of missteps since 1948 leading to a long period of conflict with ebbs and flows resulting in grotesque violation of human rights. I recall efforts of Neelan Tiruchelvam, Wilson, Chandrika Kumaratunga, the Committee

Reports of the APRC (Yogarajan and Nizam Kariapper), and Mangala Moonesinghe Reports, the Sansoni and LLRC Commission reports and Reconciliation Policy during the Yahapalanya Government to bring a lasting settlement.

Since the 1977 Constitutional feature for parity of languages and the 13th amendment in 1987 and the Official Languages Commission Act has a single word or line been added to either our Constitution or in Legislation which are legislatures firewalls equalising rights of all communities in Sri Lanka notwithstanding the colossal cost in 'trying'? What does that say? In this history Tamils must have the courage to look inwards and stand tall. The law demands every homicide or disappearance be uncovered. The examples of killings cited in this piece is a miniscule fraction of the total. How in heavens name can we not look at our past littered with grotesque abuses against our own people by us? E.g. there is a woman who brought up two girls and a boy with extraordinary hardship after her husband was summoned, interned and killed by a group on suspicion of being an informer. She was handed a watch and his wedding ring. Many parents and siblings silently grieve, when possible, by graves and tomb stones.

It is galling that hundreds of children were conscripted and forcibly turned into combatants. Many of whom never came back home. They can neither be found in either marked or unmarked graves. We cannot even estimate the number of children taken away in such manner. We have lived with this knowledge from the mid 70's. It is unacceptable to imagine we could ignore the elephant in the room. We should have the courage to take responsibility for our crimes on our people and listen to the testimonies of the survivors.

The world is replete with the 'how' to do so. The elements that should go into such processes have been mentioned here. There are very many more to consider. The manner in which a society decides to deal with past violations of human rights determines the extent to which long-term stability and reconciliation may be achieved. Interventions should aim to prevent the recurrence of conflicts while repairing the damage caused.

As Governor of Northern Province for 18 months I was acutely conscious of what had preceded 1983 when I started work, including behind the Governor's residence in a network of bunkers. Suma was right in asking we look inwards. It is by no means an easy task. A task very necessary if we the Tamils were to take high ground and ask 'others' to account for their foul deeds and acts of omission and commission. It is painful and can have uncontrollable consequences if handled poorly.

What is horrifyingly sad is that the Soulbury Commission brilliantly and wisely analysed what was wrong with us and in under 10 years (1956) we started sliding. The rest is history. A history we cannot erase however hard it is tried.

The Tamils need to feel a part of the nation, and if there are insufficient policies and laws to strengthen the confidence of the minorities in Sri Lanka, then a separatist agenda or violence will only flourish in future and could again entail violence within the Tamil community itself. It thus fundamental for governments to take steps to prevent at all cost any future relapse to violence and measures which are legislative, policy and in practice to achieve the highest form of tolerance, accommodation and democratic rule much in the manner set out by the Soulbury Commission and the LLRC.



# India Offers 200 Fully Funded Scholarships for Sri Lankan Students

**Colombo, Sri Lanka** – The High Commission of India in Colombo has announced 200 fully funded scholarships for Sri Lankan students for the 2025–2026 academic year. These scholarships offer an opportunity for aspiring students to pursue undergraduate, postgraduate, and PhD studies at renowned Indian universities and institutions across a wide range of disciplines.

The scholarships cover various fields of study, including engineering, science, business, economics, commerce, humanities, and arts. However, fields such as medicine, paramedical studies, fashion design, and law are not included.

### Comprehensive Scholarship Benefits

The scholarships, awarded under various schemes, cover full tuition fees, a monthly living allowance, annual grants for books and study materials, airfare to India, and funding for educational tours within the country. Additionally, selected candidates will be provided with hostel accommodation at their respective institutions, ensuring a fully supported academic experience, the Indian Embassy stated in a press release.

## Scholarship Categories

The scholarships are offered under four key schemes, each catering to different academic levels and disciplines:

1. **Nehru Memorial Scholarship Scheme** – Supports undergraduate, postgraduate, and PhD studies in disciplines such as



- Engineering, Science, Business, Economics, Commerce, Humanities, and Arts.
2. **Maulana Azad Scholarship Scheme** – Designed for postgraduate studies, with a focus on Engineering, Science, and Agriculture.
3. **Rajiv Gandhi Scholarship Scheme** – Exclusively for undergraduate studies in Information Technology, leading to Bachelor of Engineering (BE) and Bachelor of Technology (BTech) degrees.
4. **Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam Commonwealth Scholarship Scheme** – Covers undergraduate, postgraduate, and PhD studies in multiple disciplines, similar to the Nehru Memorial Scholarship.

### Selection Process and Application Details

The selection of candidates will be conducted by the Government of India in collaboration with Sri Lanka's Ministry of Education, ensuring a transparent and merit-based process. Details regarding eligibility criteria and the selection procedure will be available on the official website of Sri Lanka's Ministry of Education ([www.mohe.gov.lk](http://www.mohe.gov.lk)).

Sri Lankan students and parents interested in applying for these scholarships are encouraged to contact the High Commission of India in Colombo via email at [eduwing.colombo@mea.gov.in](mailto:eduwing.colombo@mea.gov.in) for further details. Additionally, they may consult the Ministry of Education, Government of Sri Lanka for official guidance and application procedures, as noted in a press release from the Indian High Commission.





# THE STORY OF A ROAD

Translated from the original Tamil short story *oru pātaiyin katai* (ஒரு பாதையின் கதை) from the 1964 collection of short stories titled *kōṭukaḷum kōlaṅkalum* (கோடுகளும் கோலங்களும்) by **Kuppilan Ai. Shanmugan.**

Translated by:  
**Eluttukkiṇiyavan**  
(எழுத்துக்கினியவன்)

This is a happy evening for all of us. We have met many evenings in our life's journey. Many more await. Many evenings past may rekindle sweet memories in your mind. Perhaps you got married one evening. Perhaps you met your soulmate for the first time in another. Perhaps you gave birth to your firstborn in yet another.

I remember clearly. He was born twenty-seven years ago on an evening during the waxing



moon. Someone brought the news to his father, who was plowing my land. I remember very well when he came before me with a wide grin and said, “Nayinār, I have been blessed with a son. I need to go home.” I remember that when I responded, “What if your son was just born? Are you the doctor taking care of him? Finish the work before you leave,” his face fell. Unable to bear that sight, I remember telling him, “Go, go,” and sending him off.

Now I am sixty years old. My hair has turned gray. My voice has faltered. The experience of maturity has creased on my face. I now understand people, their desires, and their ideals about what constitutes a worthy life. But back then, I did not have the same maturity. I was a fearless buck in those days, blessed with enormous wealth and accustomed to being treated like a lord....; I regret wasting those precious days. How much drama did I create! How many atrocities did I commit! How many lives did I destroy!

You might find it strange that I myself recount negatives about me. But I am not at all ashamed to do so. On the contrary, I think it is entirely appropriate that I talk about them. Many of you are educated, hold good positions, and are savvy enough to understand the duplicity, dishonesty, and selfishness that lie hidden beneath the facade of the great and the good; Many of you gullible innocents – hard workers; Many of you grew stronger because of your constant struggle with life. It is just fitting that all of you learn how a man who lived a flawed life was sainted. But I don’t want to make you weary on this occasion by delving into these topics at length.

It was yet another evening when he came to see me. It must have been a Saturday. I had had an oil bath, had a drink before my lunch, and had just woken up from my post-lunch

siesta. It was a lethargic dusk. I was sitting on the recliner in my front yard, staring at the eastern horizon. I was plotting to take revenge on someone or the other, root them out, and drive them away from their home.

It was then that he came to see me. He leaned his bicycle on the jasmine bush in the front yard and walked over to stand next to me. He was wearing a white vētti and a white shirt. He had a budding pencil mustache. His face was serene, sporting a smile that would instantly disarm anyone.

All of you know him very well. I need not describe his appearance at length. But I cannot forget my first meeting with him that drowsy evening, as my drunken stupor was subsiding. Although I had seen him on many occasions prior, the meeting that day is memorable because that was the first time I spoke to him; It was that meeting that drew me to him and his convictions. I started to transform into a human being only after that meeting.

I keep talking about myself. While his memories bubble forth in your minds, I think it is inevitable that I recall my memories of interacting with him. On this happy occasion, I think it is fitting, and is, in a way, a tribute to him.

That evening, when he met me, he started his conversation by greeting me with a “Vaṇakkam,” first. I didn’t return his greeting. I didn’t even invite him to sit down. I had a certain arrogance back then. I was the honorary chairperson of all the sundry clubs and societies in the village. Whatever I had heard of him until that day was not exactly palatable to me. I regarded him with distaste.

He did not seem to mind my ill treatment. He said, with the same constant smile, “I want to discuss a few matters with aiyā.”



It was probably around that time that he devised the plans for a road running right through the village, from the northern end of our village to the main street in the south. As I listened quietly, he started speaking. From beginning to end, he explained very clearly and in detail. It was as if he saw the road in his mind's eye and was relishing the experience of walking along the road. He spoke as though he was in a trance.

There is a lump in my throat when I say this. From your faces, I can see your sorrow, too. I can hear someone sobbing. Many of you are wiping your eyes. Even though his memories bring out your sadness, you must be happy to see his dream come true. You must not grieve as if there has been an irreparable loss or destruction because you know that he would not want that.

Back then, by crook or by hook, I owned half the land in this village. I inherited all that from my father. I was the master of my domain, the king of my hill. I laid down the law. I was at the pinnacle of my reign when he came to see me. He talked at length about the road he wanted to build, a road that will rip through my lands. I was mesmerized, listening with rapt attention as he held forth.

He spoke logically. He explained what righteous living is. He showed me the sorrows of people who struggle, explaining the lengths to which the residents of the high ground in my lands were forced to go to, in order to fetch just a pot of water. When he said, "This suffering is not permanent; It should be removed; It can be removed; Think of how elated the people would be when this suffering is removed!" I was engrossed in what he was



saying, oblivious to everything else.

I remembered the face of his father who came before me with a wide grin on hearing the news of his birth. I remembered the faces of the naive, innocent village folk who lauded me as the 'big-hearted farmer' when I used government funding to dig a community well in my property under the guise of helping the high-ground residents.

I marvel even now. I couldn't understand how my distaste and hatred simply evaporated when he started speaking. It cannot be said that I was delighted by his speech simply because I was in a drunken stupor. What was compelling for anyone was his speech, the thread of logic that ran through his speech, and his deep regard for his fellow human beings that made him strive to remove their suffering. Occasionally I compared him with great leaders like Vinobha, Gandhi, or Lenin. I am sure you will not disagree that the comparison is warranted. In truth, he would have blossomed into a leader who charts the course towards the emancipation of the suffering masses.

I know very well that wallowing in the memory of past sorrows is futile. But how can we forget his memories just because they are past?



I am blabbering at length. But I won't have another occasion to share these thoughts with you. I hear that many of you laud me as some great philanthropist. I am no philanthropist nor saint but just an ordinary human. I am an ordinary man who went from lacking humanity to being a person with love for his fellow humans. When he made me discover my humanity, I spent a big chunk of my wealth for the common good. I gave away a part of my landholdings for this road. The target of your gratitude for all of this should be him.

In a sense, I know that asserting ownership over one's assets is wrong. He said that if a person owns more than they need, then the excess should be made public property. He would assert angrily that those people who appropriate nature's wealth for themselves when millions of people struggle without food, clothing, or the means to live a full life, are the scoundrels of society. He would declare that there would come a time when everyone would live with fulfillment, and that we were going to strive to bring it into fruition.

I sense a bustle among you. I don't want to stand for long between you and the others who are waiting to speak. I am deeply honored to have been invited to give the keynote





address on this occasion of declaring this new road open. But my speech would not be complete if I didn't share a little more about his struggle for making this road a reality. You are now going to walk along this road. This road that cuts through palmyra patches, farming lands, shrubs, and small settlements, will become useful to you. Many of your inconveniences will be removed. Now you don't have to walk a mile-and-a-half to post a letter. You can put your letter into the little red box that hangs on a roadside pole. Pregnant

women need not be carried over to the main road but can be driven to the hospital directly. He was the one who saw your travails and dreamed up ways to address them. He was the one who planned them, worked for them, and ultimately sacrificed his own life for them.

This beautiful curving road cuts through the village. Those of you who are old enough will remember it when it was just a footpath. It was strewn with spurses and thorny shrubs with black claws that would grab you. He toiled by





himself to broaden the footpath to pave the way for the road. Eventually a handful of other youngsters his age joined him. He was injured at the spot where the mailbox stands now. He ignored it because it was a small scratch.

I am obliged to tell you what he told me when his injury became serious. His last message to me and you was this: “I will not survive aiyā...,” (from the beginning till the very end, he called me “aiyā”) “please tell

everyone that my death will not mean the end of this pilgrimage towards the salvation of our people. Tell them that the journey will continue until its goal is reached. Tell them that until every person in this world has the opportunity to live a happy, full life, this journey will not end.”

When I heard this word, I teared up. Your eyes would tear up, too. No matter how strong we are, some occasions call for crying.

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