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Jaffna monitor

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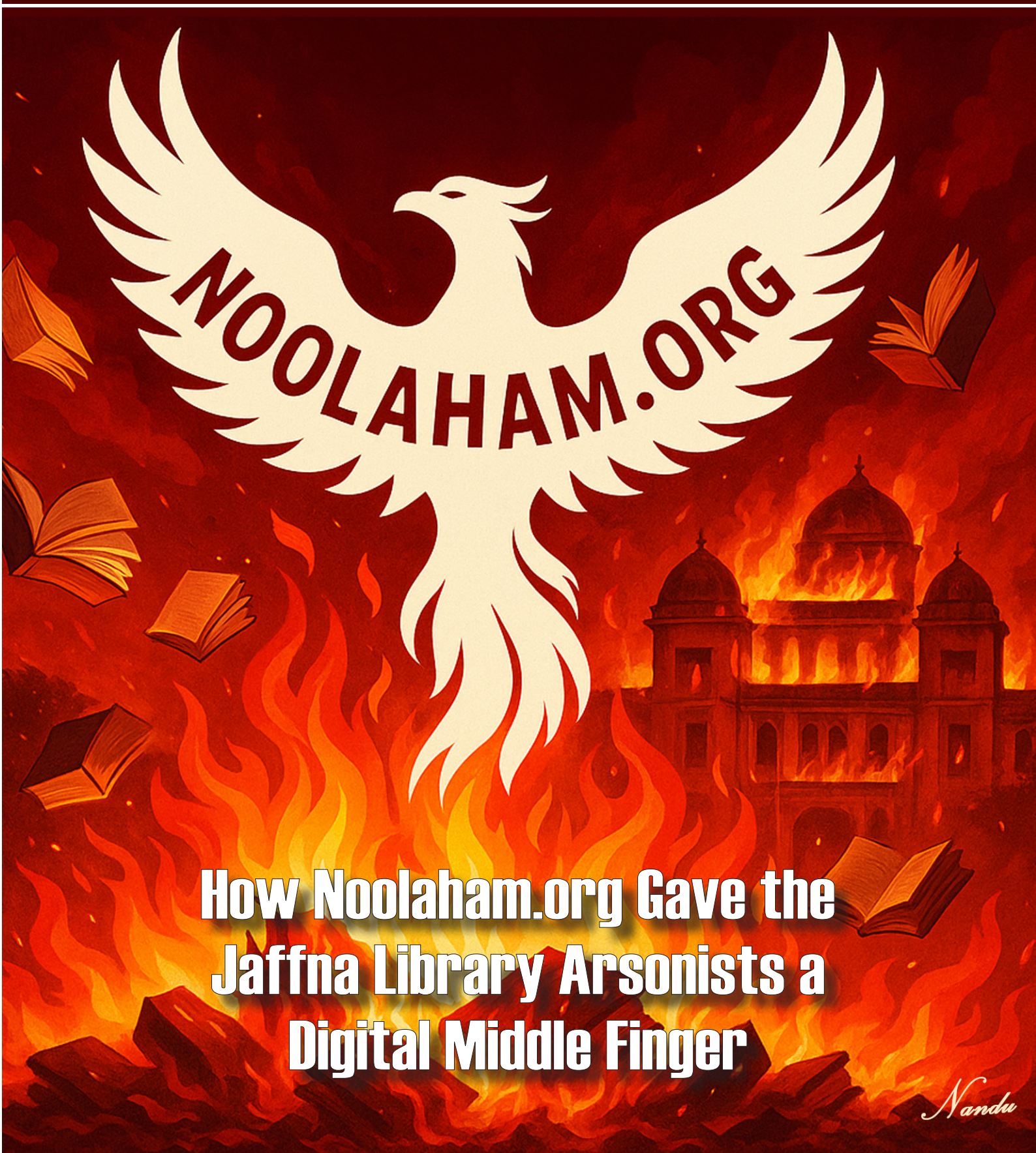
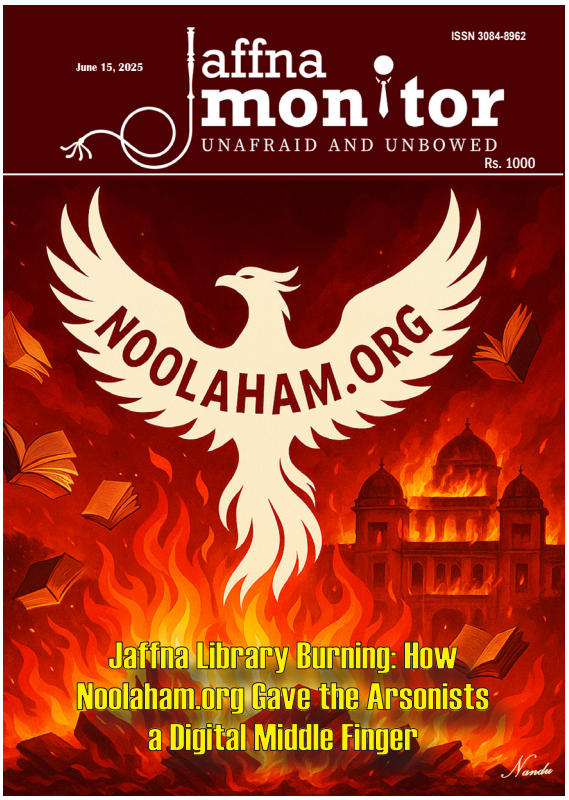


How Noolaham.org Gave the Jaffna Library Arsonists a Digital Middle Finger

Nandu

Monitor's Map

Chemmani: Where Justice Was Buried



The dead do not speak - but the earth does

A few years ago, I visited Cambodia. My original aim was to see the Angkor Wat temple complex. But, as always, my journalistic instincts led me deeper - into rural Cambodia, where I found myself in quiet conversations with a few former soldiers of the Pol Pot regime, now living ordinary lives as toddy tappers, farmers, and small shop owners.

One of them - a former henchman of the Khmer Rouge - opened up after a few glasses of toddy. In a hauntingly calm voice, he described how they were ordered to kill anyone seen as an enemy of the communist revolution. And then, with a chilling emptiness in his eyes, he told me how they would fry and eat the pancreas of the dead at night, washing it down with country-made rice wine.

As he poured himself another drink, he leaned closer and said: "You know, there's a saying in Cambodia - The dead do not speak - but the earth does."

He paused, his voice dropping to a whisper: "It means, wherever you dig - to build a house, to dig a well, even a toilet - you may unearth human remains. That's how we wreaked havoc on this land," he confessed, with a strange mixture of guilt and detachment. That grim truth - the dead do not speak, but the earth does - is not Cambodia's alone. Once again, the cursed soil of Jaffna's Chemmani has whispered its dreadful testimony: "We are no different."

Nineteen skeletons - or rather, nineteen souls

Nineteen skeletons - or rather, nineteen souls who once breathed, loved, and hoped. Among them, the fragile remains of an infant - tiny bones that never had the chance to grow, a life extinguished before it could even begin to grasp the world's cruelty. This baby knew nothing of the LTTE. Nothing of the Sri Lankan Army. Nothing of politics, flags, or ethnic divisions. Its only "crime" was being born from a Tamil mother's womb - in a land where, for some, that alone was enough to seal their fate.

How many more silent graves lie beneath the bloodied earth? How many more infants, neonates, and mothers will emerge as we peel back the layers of dirt that have long concealed Sri Lanka's crimes? The question hangs heavy - and the earth, patient and merciless, will keep answering.

When a Schoolgirl's Death Exposed a Nation's Machinery of Death

The story does not begin with excavations. It begins with the savage destruction of an 18-year-old girl's dreams. On September 7, 1996, Krishanthi Kumaraswamy - a brilliant student of Chundikuli Girls' College who dreamed of becoming a doctor - was dragged from a military checkpoint into a nightmare that would expose the industrial-scale machinery of death operating in Sri Lanka's north.

Eleven uniformed predators gang-raped this young woman, dismembered her, and buried her broken body like garbage in a shallow pit. When her 16-year-old brother Pranavan, her mother Rasamma, and family friend Kirupakaramoorthy dared to search for her, they too were abducted, butchered, and dumped into Chemmani's cursed soil.

But Krishanthi's murder refused to vanish into the abyss of state-sponsored denial that had swallowed thousands of other Tamil lives. Too many people had seen her stopped at that army checkpoint. She was a schoolgirl from an educated, respected family; the community could not be silenced. Her brutal killing became a burning torch that illuminated the machinery of darkness through which the Sri Lankan state conducted its campaign of mass killings.

Testimony Written in Blood

I know these horrors not as distant headlines, but as memories that live within my own blood. During the same period when the Chemmani atrocities were unfolding, I once accidentally met a distant relative of mine. She was performing adiyadithal - a painful vow where the devotee repeatedly prostrates around the temple premises, pleading with the gods - at Nallur Veeramakali Amman Temple.

One round itself is exhausting, but she was doing three rounds every day. She was visibly drained. When I gently asked her why she was doing

this, she whispered that her younger brother had been taken by the military for "investigation" and had not yet returned. She was invoking the divine, hoping against hope that her brother might somehow return alive. But to this day, he never came home. His fate remains unknown, perhaps lying beneath one of the very mass graves we are now unearthing. His sister still waits - waiting for a brother who will never again walk through her door.

Another distant relative - a widow whose only son, an innocent young man who was the center of her world - watched helplessly as military personnel arrested her boy. Unlike my other relative, her son was eventually released after several weeks of detention. When he returned home, his grieving mother thought her prayers had been answered. But the young man who came back was not the same boy who had been taken. For days, he vomited and passed blood, his body carrying the invisible scars of whatever horrors he had endured in custody.

Within a few days, he died.

Even now, I can still hear the raw, haunting screams of his mother at his funeral - a sound that never fades. The kind of wailing that pierces your soul, a grief so deep it leaves you gasping in helpless rage.

I remember when my own family - like thousands of others - was displaced as the Army captured Jaffna in late 1995 and early 1996. President Chandrika Kumaratunga had ordered a massive military operation to recapture the peninsula, and the Army advanced with overwhelming force. But the LTTE, unwilling to allow the military a propaganda victory by capturing Jaffna with its civilians inside, ordered the entire population to evacuate. They wanted Chandrika to capture a ghost city - and, of course, they wanted to keep the people with them, a brutal strategy they employed until their final days in Mullivaikal. As the Tamil poet Sugan would later write, "Prabhakaran took even the 80-year-old grandmother from Jaffna for his safety."

We became part of that endless stream of displaced souls. For six months, we lived scattered and uprooted, uncertain of where life would take us next. Later, as the LTTE moved its operations into the Wanni jungles, they urged the displaced families to follow. I still recall - I was just a child - standing, if I remember correctly, somewhere near Chavakachcheri, where LTTE cadres stopped us, warning: "If you go back, your sons will be tortured, your daughters will be raped."

But like Krishanthi's family, and like many others who badly wanted to go back to Jaffna - and perhaps still clung to a fragile hope in the Sri Lankan state - we chose to return to Jaffna.

And I also know - because I have seen it with my own eyes - how this one heinous crime of raping and murdering a schoolgirl terrified hundreds of Tamil youth across Jaffna. Many of them, broken and enraged, eventually joined the LTTE with one desperate purpose: to defend the dignity of their sisters, at a time when the state itself had become the predator - or, worse, the concealer of predators.

Among them was a fragile youth - a boy people used to joke about, saying he couldn't even bite a betel leaf. He was soft-spoken, shy, and unable to argue with anyone. But after Krishanthi's brutal murder, something inside him broke. Disturbed and consumed by rage, he joined the LTTE. Years later, I heard that he had become a suicide bomber. Such was the chain of horror this single crime unleashed.

Death Row Confessions: The Architect of Annihilation Speaks

Before the Rajapaksa brothers would later devastate the Tamil people on a grander scale, it was Somaratne Rajapakse - not a politician, but an ordinary Lance Corporal of the Sri Lankan Army. He was the man who stopped Krishanthi at the army checkpoint on the Jaffna-Kandy Highway at Kaithady that day, and who, along with his fellow military personnel, raped and murdered her, then butchered her family.

Before sentencing him to capital punishment for his unspeakable crimes, the judge asked whether he had anything to say. Somaratne Rajapakse chose revelation over silence. Perhaps he felt remorse, or perhaps he thought: why die alone when men far more powerful than me committed even worse crimes? In a confession that should have shattered Sri Lanka's carefully constructed edifice of denial, he exposed the Chemmani killing fields and told the world of the blood-soaked soil where 400 to 600 young Tamil men and women had been systematically abducted, murdered, and buried.
Rajapakse didn't merely point to unmarked graves - he named names. He identified the puppet masters behind this machinery of killing. He revealed operational details, chains of command, and the bureaucratic precision with which living human beings were processed into corpses and statistics.

"Almost every evening, dead bodies were brought there [to the Ariyalai SLA camp] and the soldiers were asked to bury them," Rajapakse testified. A friend of mine who lived in Ariyalai often recounts how they would hear painful, helpless cries almost every evening. A girl later wrote on social media how her mother, terrified by the sounds, would never step out of the house after 5 p.m. and never allowed her children to go outside.

The Continuity of Carnage: From JVP to Tamil Genocide

The Chemmani killings weren't aberrations-they were the logical evolution of a system perfected during the late 1980s annihilation of 60,000 Sinhala youth in the JVP insurgency. The same security apparatus, the same operational methods, the same culture of absolute impunity were simply redirected from southern Sinhala villages to northern Tamil communities.

Sooriyakanda mass grave, containing the corpses of murdered school children, demonstrated that the state's appetite for young blood transcended ethnic boundaries. The institutions that had consumed Sinhala youth were never dismantled-they were merely retooled

for a new harvest of Tamil victims.

The Theater of Simulated Justice

Sri Lanka has mastered the art of "simulated transitions"- elaborate performances that mimic accountability while preserving impunity. The Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission, the Paranagama Commission, and countless other bodies have produced towers of paper that serve as tombstones for buried truth.

These mechanisms follow a depressingly predictable script: initial promises of transparency, comprehensive documentation of atrocities, international praise for "progress," and eventual abandonment of all accountability measures. The performance is always the same, whether the victims were JVP supporters in the south or Tamil civilians in the north.

Critics might argue that these commissions serve important functions - providing platforms for victim testimony, creating historical records, and maintaining international engagement. This perspective deserves acknowledgment. Yet the pattern is unmistakable: decades of commissions have produced libraries of documentation but not a single high-level prosecution.

A Blueprint for Breaking the Cycle

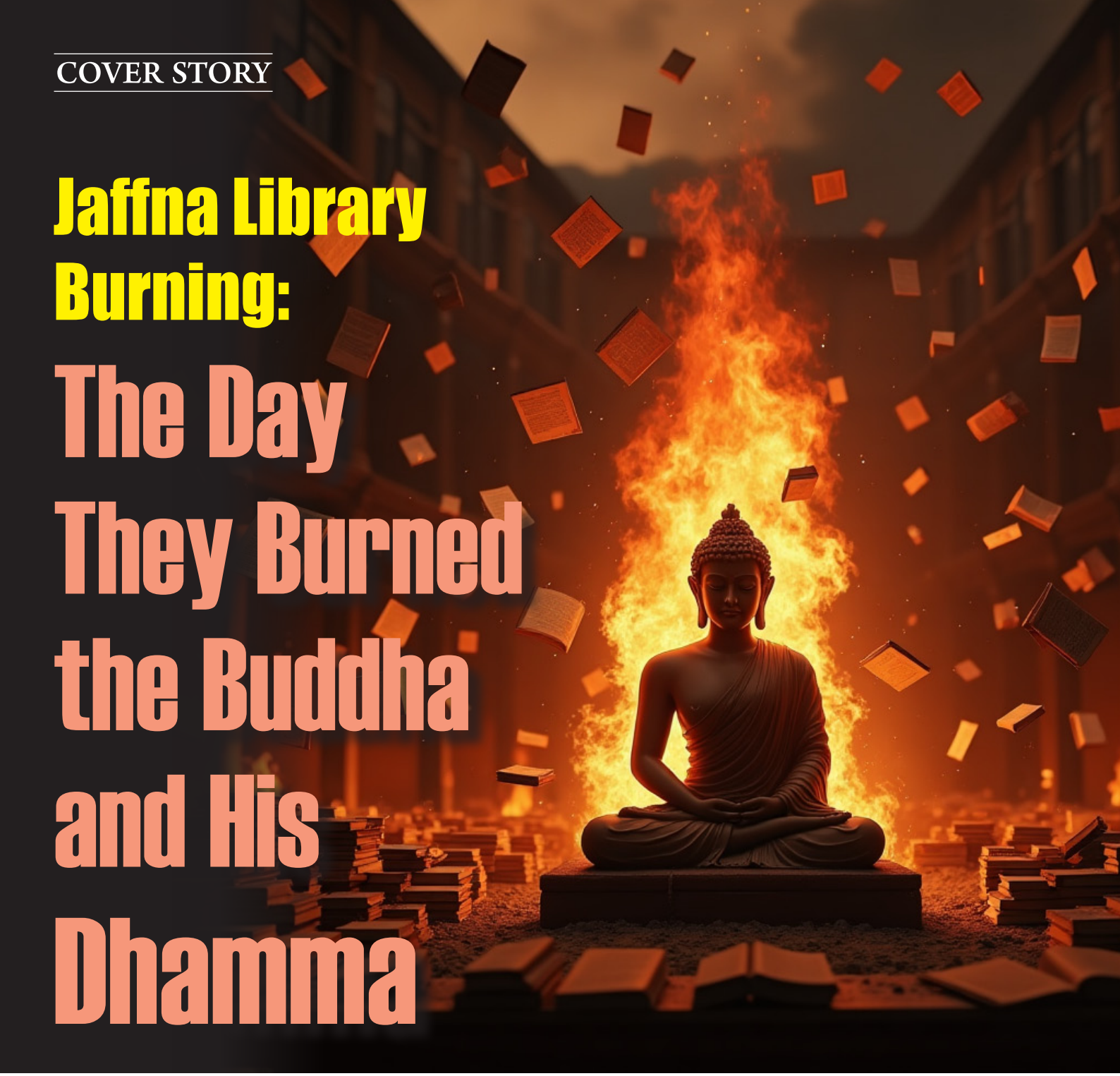
The families who have spent decades searching for their disappeared deserve more than hollow condolences and political theater.

Today, power rests with a government led by the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP). And the JVP, if anyone, knows what it means to lose loved ones to state terror. They know the agony of mass graves, of enforced disappearances, of a brutal state machinery that once turned its guns on their own youth. They know precisely how state machinery manufactures death with surgical cruelty.

Will this government - born of a movement that once suffered the full force of state violence - finally break the cycle? Will they deliver justice to the Tamil victims of Chemmani, whose families have waited for decades? Or will they, too, follow the same familiar script: commissions without consequence, reports without accountability, and silence without justice - just as every government before them has done?

Only time will tell. But history will not be forgotten. And the earth will not stop speaking.

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



Jaffna Library Burning: The Day They Burned the Buddha and His Dhamma

கணியன் பூங்குன்றன்
Kaniyan Pungundran

Why South Asia Reveres Books-and Fears Their Destruction

Irrespective of religion, across the Indian subcontinent, books have long held an exalted status. In the indigenous spiritual traditions that emerged from this land-Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism-knowledge is not merely valued; it is venerated in the highest order. In homes, temples, and schools across the region, people treat books with profound reverence-never touching them with their feet, and if done accidentally, offering an immediate gesture of apology. Even the

accidental burning of paper is considered blasphemous by many, as it symbolizes disrespect to knowledge itself.

This deep cultural sanctity makes the destruction of books in South Asia exceptionally rare," a historian told Jaffna Monitor. "And when it does happen, it is both spiritually and emotionally devastating." He elaborated that such acts are believed to invite long-lasting karmic consequences, reverberating through cycles of collective consciousness. "That's why," he said, "people are afraid-even those with power hesitate to commit such a sacrilege.

Nalanda to Nazi Germany: Fires That Still Burn in Humanity's Conscience

The surviving ruins of Nalanda University - alongside a digital reconstruction illustrating how the ancient seat of learning may have once stood in its full glory.

Before 1981-before the burning of the Jaffna Public Library-the last recorded destruction of a major library in the Indian subcontinent occurred nearly 800 years earlier, in the 12th century, when the Central Asian invader Bakhtiyar Khilji attacked Nalanda University in present-day Bihar.

Nalanda, a globally renowned Buddhist center of learning, housed an immense three-block library complex-so vast that one of its towers was said to rise nine stories high. It contained hundreds of thousands of handwritten manuscripts on science, medicine, logic, philosophy, and more, accumulated over centuries. When Khilji's army set it ablaze, the fire reportedly burned for days. Even after centuries, the loss of Nalanda is remembered as a civilizational wound-one that the Buddhist world has never truly healed.

In global history, deliberate acts of violence against repositories of knowledge are rare-but when they occur, they carry chilling symbolic weight. The burning of the Great Library of Alexandria-whether by Julius Caesar's forces in 48 BCE or through later destruction attributed to Christian zealots or Muslim conquerors-marked the irreversible loss of a vast trove of ancient wisdom. The destruction of Baghdad's House of Wisdom by Mongol invaders in 1258, during the sack of the Abbasid Caliphate, was another civilizational catastrophe; legend has it that the Tigris River ran black with the ink of drowned books. Closer to our time, in 1930s Germany, the Nazi regime conducted public book burnings across cities-targeting the works of Jewish intellectuals, Marxists, pacifists, and any writer or thinker the regime feared.

A dreamlike evocation of the Great Library of Alexandria — where scrolls whispered the wisdom of civilizations, before fire silenced their voices forever. (Image credit: Fine Art Images)

Nazi youth brigades torching "un-German" books by Jewish and leftist authors at the Institut für Sexualwissenschaft, 1933 — another deliberate attempt to erase ideas, identities, and inconvenient truths.

Historians have long noted that these attacks on knowledge were condemned even more fiercely than the mass killings that accompanied them. The death of scholars and civilians was tragic, but the annihilation of accumulated learning-meant for generations yet unborn-was viewed as a crime against humanity itself.

Where the Dhamma Was First Written-And Then Burned

Buddhism has always revered knowledge. The greatest man ever to walk this earth, Gautama Buddha, preached wisdom, rational thought, and non-violence. "Wisdom dispels the darkness of ignorance," he said-one of many teachings that place paññā (wisdom) at the very heart of the Dhamma. The Buddha did not demand blind faith; instead, he urged inquiry, introspection, and understanding. "Do not accept anything by mere tradition… but after observation and analysis, when you find that it agrees with reason and is conducive to the good and benefit of one and all, then accept it and live up to it," he told the Kalamas (Kalama Sutta).

For centuries, Buddhist monks were the guardians of

knowledge. Monasteries across South and Southeast Asia functioned not just as spiritual retreats, but also as de facto universities and libraries. Monks served as scribes, translators, preservers, and teachers of texts-from palm-leaf manuscripts to meticulously copied parchments.

Unlike many other religious traditions, Buddhism was not spread by conquest, but through teaching-rooted in logic, compassion, silence, discipline, and devotion. It was the quiet endurance of the written word-books and texts-and the spoken truth that carried the Dhamma across oceans and centuries.

In fact, it was here in Sri Lanka, at Aluvihara in Matale during the 1st century BCE, that the oral teachings of the Buddha were committed to writing for the first time. This act-carried out by monks fearing the loss of the Tripiṭaka due to famine and war-resulted in the Pāli Canon: the world's first complete written Buddhist scripture. It remains one of the greatest contributions Sri Lanka has made to global civilization.

In Buddhist tradition, the act of burning a book transcends the mere destruction of parchment or palm leaf. It signifies the extinguishing of truth, insight, and the very path toward liberation. Such an act stands in direct opposition to everything the Buddha and his Dhamma represent.
The Buddha himself profoundly warned against ignorance as humanity's greatest enemy, stating: "There is no fire like passion, no shark like hatred, no snare like folly, no torrent like craving" (Dhammapada). In this context, the destruction of a library is not simply a worldly crime; it is a karmic betrayal of everything the Dhamma holds sacred.

It's a searing paradox in Sri Lanka's history: an ideology claiming to embody Sinhala-Buddhism-a tradition supposedly grounded in compassion, wisdom, and enlightenment, and one whose collective memory still mourns the devastating loss of Nalanda University to a foreign invader-was twisted to commit, justify, or silently condone an act of unparalleled barbarism against knowledge on the island.

Eight centuries after Nalanda burned, in 1981, it was Sinhala-Buddhist mobs, backed by state power and emboldened by two bloodstained UNP Cabinet Ministers present in Jaffna, who, with the silent inaction or tacit approval of the Army Commander and Police Chief also in Jaffna that night, torched the city's most cherished symbol of learning: the Jaffna Public Library. Over 97,000 books, including irreplaceable ancient ola-leaf manuscripts, Tamil literary classics, and historical records, were reduced to ash. In that single night of unspeakable vandalism, they did more than burn books - they spat on the very soul of what the Buddha and his Dhamma stood for.

A State-Sanctioned Crime

Sinhala nationalist forces and the Sri Lankan state often find themselves at a loss when it comes to the 1981 burning of the Jaffna Public Library-because, unlike many other atrocities, they can't pin this heinous act on the LTTE, nor can they claim that the LTTE provoked it. At the time, there was no declared war, and the LTTE was merely an emerging group-a handful of young men scattered across a few hideouts, far from the formidable force it would later become.

"One observer told Jaffna Monitor that the presence of two Cabinet Ministers, along with the Army Commander and the Police Chief-all in Jaffna on the very night the library was set ablaze-was no coincidence, but a calculated show of state power. By orchestrating the

destruction of one of Asia's finest libraries, the then UNP-led government sent a chilling message to the Tamil people: 'If you dare to raise your voice-if you demand dignity, rights, or recognition-we will silence you. We will go to any extent to erase your culture, your memory, your very identity.'" He further noted, "It was a calculated act of terror-designed to intimidate an entire community into submission."

More Than a Library: Jaffna's Temple of Knowledge

The burned Jaffna Public Library had housed over 97,000 books and irreplaceable manuscripts-including the only known original copy of the Yalpana Vaipavamalai (The History of the Kingdom of Jaffna), miniature editions of the Ramayana, accounts by early explorers in Ceylon, and a trove of ancient palm-leaf manuscripts vital to Sri Lanka's Tamil-speaking communities.

A Sinhala observer once wrote, after visiting Jaffna, that the Jaffna Public Library stood apart from every other library in the country: "It's not just considered a library. It is treated like a temple of knowledge. I have visited many libraries across Sri Lanka and the world, but this is the only one where you are expected to remove your shoes or slippers before entering. You enter this library the same way you would enter a Buddhist vihāra or temple - with reverence."

My father once told me, "For me, and for many young people of my generation, the most revered place in Jaffna wasn't a temple - it was the Jaffna Public Library." To him, it was a sanctuary, a sacred space where dreams were born and minds were shaped. He would often share stories of his youth - how, as a teenager, he cycled for miles from a remote village, braving sun and rain, just to spend precious hours inside that hallowed hall of knowledge. He spoke of the silence, the scent of old pages, and the feeling of stepping into a world far beyond the confines of oneself. He would sit there for hours, lost in books - until, like clockwork, the kindly librarian would walk up with a gentle smile and say, "Thambi, we're closing now." For him, those hours were not just about reading; they were about being part of something far greater than oneself.

The Origins of the Jaffna Public Library

K.M._Chellappah

S.R.-Ranganathan

The story of the Jaffna Public Library began in 1933, when scholar and philanthropist K. M. Chellappah launched a modest initiative-lending books from his home in Puttur. Joined by a group of like-minded community members, he formed a local committee and served as its secretary. What started as a single-room collection of roughly 1,000 books soon sparked a far more ambitious vision.

The dream of a permanent, purpose-built library quickly gathered momentum. Community leaders mobilized support, securing donations from local well-wishers and from the Tamil diaspora in Malaysia and Singapore. Their collective determination laid the foundation for what would soon become one of Jaffna's most iconic landmarks.

Among the early champions was Dr. Isaac Thambiah, a lawyer and intellectual, who served as vice-chairman of the committee established in 1934 to formally found the Jaffna Public Library. His personal collection of books significantly enriched the growing repository.

The shattered statue of Fr. Timothy Long in front of the Jaffna Library

Renowned Indian architect V. M. Narasimhan was commissioned to design the library in the graceful Indo-Saracenic style-a sophisticated fusion of Mughal, Hindu, and colonial architectural influences. Its soaring domes, sweeping colonnades, and pristine white façade bestowed a sense of timeless elegance upon the city. To ensure the library adhered to international standards, the eminent Indian librarian S. R. Ranganathan-widely regarded as the father of library science in India-offered expert guidance on cataloguing and organizational systems.

But the effort was not limited to India and Ceylon alone. Fr. Timothy Long, an Irish priest and rector of St. Patrick's College from 1936 to 1954, played a critical role in bringing the library to fruition. He traveled extensively, including to the United States, to raise much-needed funds for the project.

Jaffna's first mayor, Sam A. Sabapathy, was instrumental in translating vision into reality. He laid the foundation stone for the new library on March 29, 1954. Five years later, in 1959, the first major wing of the Jaffna Public Library was officially inaugurated by then-Mayor Alfred Duraiappah-marking the birth of what would grow into one of South Asia's most revered centers of learning.

By the 1970s, it had grown into one of South Asia's largest and best-equipped libraries. Its influence reached far beyond the Jaffna peninsula-Sinhala students, Indian scholars, and international academics all came to access its unmatched resources and pursue serious intellectual work.

Never Exclusive to Tamil Culture

Though it stood in the heart of a Tamil city and was deeply cherished by the Tamil people, the Jaffna Public Library was never exclusive to Tamil culture. Its vast collection reflected a spirit of intellectual openness-housing not only Tamil literary treasures but also Sinhala texts, Buddhist scriptures, and works in English and other languages. It was, at its core, a monument to pluralism.

Cyril Mathew, then a cabinet minister of the UNP — a known Sinhala-Buddhist hardliner and key figure during the period of rising ethnic tensions.

Elders who frequented the library told Jaffna Monitor that researchers from India and beyond would travel to Jaffna specifically to access its archives, often marvelling at the depth, rarity, and diversity of the materials it held. "This library was a cultural shrine," one elderly man recalled. "It embodied the pride and dignity of the Tamil people, yes-but it also welcomed Sinhala texts and rare Buddhist manuscripts."

He went on to explain that, just as Nalanda University had once been the epicentre of Buddhist learning in ancient India-drawing seekers from across Asia-the Jaffna Public Library had become a beacon for Tamil scholarship in modern Sri Lanka. Its very presence, he said, was an act of cultural self-respect in a nation increasingly dominated by Sinhala majoritarianism.
And perhaps that, more than anything else, is why it was burned-to erase a living symbol of Tamil knowledge, heritage, and intellectual power.

The Anatomy of a Cultural Crime

On the evening of May 31, 1981, tension hung heavy over Jaffna. "The town was already on edge," recalled an elderly witness who spoke to Jaffna Monitor. That day, the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF)-then the leading Tamil political party advocating for autonomy-was holding a major election rally in the heart of the town.

In what many believed to be a deliberate provocation, the ruling United National Party (UNP) sent two senior Sinhalese cabinet ministers-Cyril Mathew, a known Sinhala-Buddhist hardliner, and Gamini Dissanayake, a powerful figure

Gamini Dissanayake (right) with his master, President J.R. Jayewardene

within the government-to "observe" the event. Their real motive, many felt, was to provoke and disrupt.

They arrived in Jaffna accompanied by hundreds of heavily armed Sinhalese police officers and paramilitary personnel. The atmosphere quickly turned volatile. Eyewitnesses reported confrontations between Tamil civilians and security forces-some of whom were intoxicated, hurling anti-Tamil slurs, and behaving aggressively.

Amidst the rising tension, gunmen believed to be from the Tamil militant group PLOTE (People's Liberation Organisation of Tamil Eelam) opened fire, killing two policemen. While the details of the shooting remain unclear, it became the spark-or rather, the pretext-for what appeared to be a pre-planned campaign of violence. The security forces and paramilitaries, already on standby, seized the moment as a green light to unleash chaos.

For the next 72 hours, Jaffna plunged into anarchy, witnessing a chilling display of systematic, state-sponsored destruction. Police and organized mobs, acting under the direction of political actors, unleashed coordinated attacks across the town. Dozens of Tamil-owned businesses, homes, political offices, and newspaper presses were either burned, looted, or both.

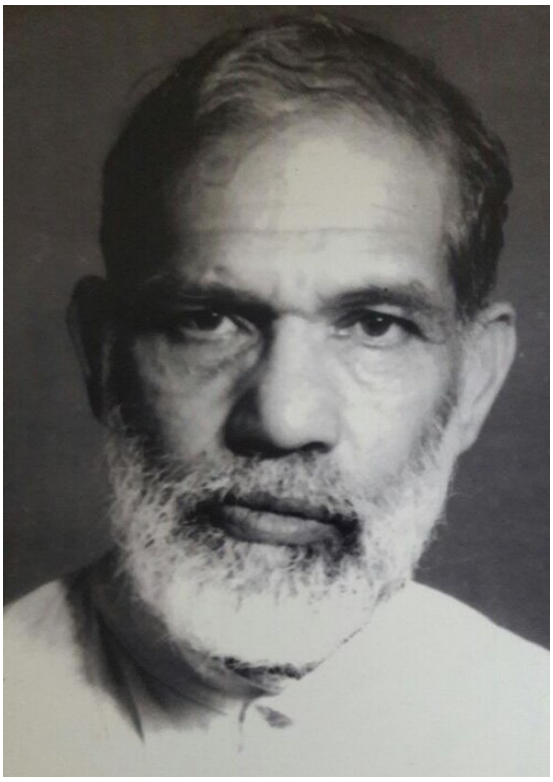
That night, scores of Sri Lankan police and government-sponsored paramilitaries fanned out across the city on a rampage It began with targeted reprisals: the downtown office of the TULF was stormed and set ablaze, as was the home of the local TULF Member of Parliament, V. Yogeswaranen. The attackers did not stop there.

The Cultural Genocide

On the second night of the pogrom-June 1, 1981-Jaffna had already been scarred. Its homes smouldered, its streets were littered with the ashes of Tamil businesses and newspapers, and its people trembled in disbelief. But the arsonists, backed by political power, were not finished yet. There was one final target, one ultimate symbol left to destroy. Whether they had initially overlooked it, or whether a call from Colombo gave the final instruction, they turned toward the beating heart of Tamil intellectual and cultural pride-the Jaffna Public Library.

According to numerous eyewitnesses-many of whom are still alive and spoke to Jaffna Monitor-the scene that unfolded was terrifying in its precision. After dusk, uniformed policemen and plainclothes men, carrying kerosene cans and sacks, began to gather around the library. Just past 10:30 p.m., flames began to rise. Jaffna's fortress of

The outside view of the burned Jaffna Library before its renovation



Rev. Fr. (Dr.) Hyacinth Singarayar David

knowledge, its temple of learning, was deliberately set ablaze.

Attempts by then-Jaffna Municipal Commissioner C.V.K. Sivagnanam to dispatch fire trucks were thwarted, as armed forces encircling the Jaffna Public Library turned them away. By morning, all that remained of the iconic institution were scorched walls and the haunting scent of charred paper.

To ensure the building was completely destroyed, metal torches were used-alongside kerosene and, according to some accounts, chemical accelerants. The inferno raged unchecked throughout the night, with plumes of thick black smoke curling into the sky, visible for miles beyond Jaffna town.

Residents stood helplessly on rooftops, balconies, and in gardens - eyes brimming with tears and anger - as they watched their cultural pride and intellectual soul reduced to ash. Among them was Rev. Fr. (Dr.) Hyacinth Singarayar David, who witnessed the blaze from his school balcony. Stricken by shock and grief, he went to bed that night and passed away in his sleep due to a massive heart attack.

Multiple eyewitnesses even recall seeing the ministers standing calmly on the veranda of the Jaffna Rest House, a government guesthouse just across the street, silently observing the inferno as it consumed the library.

An independent fact-finding mission from the Movement for Inter-Racial Justice and Equality (MIRJE) visited Jaffna shortly after the atrocity and issued a clear, unambiguous conclusion: “There is no doubt that the attacks and the arson were the work of some 100–175 police personnel.” The perpetrators were not an uncontrollable mob-they were agents of the state.

Silence, Denial, and Mockery: The Aftermath of Jaffna’s Inferno

The next day, government ministers downplayed the attack, suggesting that a few policemen had acted irresponsibly and that the violence had escalated beyond their control. The narrative that the destruction was the unintended consequence of spontaneous disorder was repeatedly promoted by state media and echoed by government officials for years.

Most damning of all was the silence of President J. R. Jayewardene. He neither condemned the atrocity nor ordered any serious investigation. National newspapers gave the incident only minimal attention, treating the burning of one of South Asia’s greatest libraries as a minor news item.

In Parliament, when Tamil Members of Parliament raised anguished questions about

the incident, they were mocked and heckled by government benches. Several Sinhalese hardliners openly suggested that if Tamils felt aggrieved or discriminated against, they should leave Sri Lanka and go to India - a refrain that had become a frequent insult hurled at Tamils throughout the 1970s and early 1980s.

The burning of the Jaffna Public Library concluded with denial and impunity; no one was held accountable. This lack of justice, combined with the heinous crime of destroying a library, effectively terrorized an entire generation of Tamil youth.

The Day They Burned the Buddha

The heinous act of burning the Jaffna Public Library transcended the mere destruction of books; it shattered the very soul of a civilization. In that inferno, memory was extinguished, wisdom suffocated, and truth brutally murdered. For countless horrified witnesses, it was tantamount to burning the Buddha himself.

In one of the most haunting literary responses to this cultural crime, renowned Tamil poet and scholar Prof. M. A. Nuhman captured the raw, unyielding agony and gravity of the act in his searing poem, Murder of Buddha, poignantly translated into English by S. Pathmanathan. This is no mere lament for a lost building; it is a blistering, unforgiving indictment of a nation's conscience. It lays bare the profound betrayal of Buddhist values by the very hands that claimed to defend them, exposing the grotesque, soul-crushing irony of setting fire to sacred knowledge in the ruthless, consuming blaze of power.
We end with this poem - not merely as literature, but as testimony. It speaks with a moral clarity that no article can fully match.

Murder of Buddha

by Prof. M. A. Nuhman
(Translated by S. Pathmanathan)

Last night I dreamt
Buddha was shot dead
by the Police —
guardians of the law.

His body, drenched in blood,
lay upon the steps
of the Jaffna Library.

Under cover of darkness,
the ministers arrived.

"His name is not on our list.
Why did you kill him?"
they asked, anger rising.

"No, sir.
There was no mistake.
Without killing him,
it was impossible to harm a fly —
therefore…"
they stammered.

"Alright then.
Hide the corpse,"
the ministers ordered,
and departed.

The men in civvies dragged the body
into the Library.
They heaped the books —
ninety thousand in all —
and lit the pyre
with the Sigalovada Sutta.

Thus,
the remains of the Compassionate One
were burned to ashes,
along with the Dhammapada.

COVER STORY

Noolaham.org: A Digital Middle Finger to the Arsonists Who Burned Jaffna's Treasure Trove

BY:

Our Special Correspondent

In the decades since the Jaffna Public Library was reduced to ashes-its nearly 97,000 books and manuscripts deliberately set alight in what remains one of the most egregious acts of cultural genocide in Sri Lankan history-a quiet yet determined renaissance has taken root. A new generation of Sri Lankan Tamils, both at home and across the diaspora, has come together to build a library that no racist mob can ever burn again.

That library is Noolaham.org-Tamil for "repository of books." Today, this expansive digital archive holds more than one and a half times the number of documents, books, and rare manuscripts that once lined the shelves of the destroyed Jaffna Public Library.

More than just a collection of texts, Noolaham.org stands as a defiant digital middle finger to the state-sponsored arsonists and chauvinist forces who once tried to incinerate a people's memory and intellectual heritage.

This vital digital repository of Tamil knowledge cannot be looted, cannot be banned, and certainly cannot be set ablaze. It's a defiant act of preservation, ensuring that the rich tapestry of Tamil culture and intellect endures, unyielding against the flames of oppression.

The First Sparks of a Digital Renaissance

In the 1990s, as computers began to flicker to life across South Asia and its diaspora, a quiet digital awakening was taking root among Tamil scholars and tech enthusiasts. Inspired by global initiatives like Project Gutenberg, a handful of Tamil visionaries began to imagine a future where their literary heritage could be preserved online.

R. Pathmanaba Iyer

The turning point came in 1998 with the launch of Project Madurai-the first online Tamil digital library, modeled after Project Gutenberg. It was a modest, volunteer-driven initiative, but it marked a bold leap into the digital era. A year later, in 1999, R. Pathmanaba Iyer, widely regarded as the pioneer of Sri Lankan Tamil digitization, began digitalizing Sri Lankan Tamil books. He digitized 40 titles-13 of which were later contributed to Project Madurai, marking the earliest known integration of Sri Lankan Tamil literature into a global digital archive.

In the early 2000s, with growing access to personal computers and the internet, Small but determined projects like Eelanool and E-Suvadi emerged between 2004 and 2005, quietly digitizing Sri Lankan Tamil publications with whatever tools, time, and bandwidth their volunteers could muster. These efforts were scattered and largely

uncoordinated-but their importance was undeniable. Together, these early experiments lit the path toward something far more ambitious and enduring.

The Birth of Project Noolaham: A Community's Digital Leap

In January 2005, a new chapter in the preservation of Sri Lankan Tamil heritage quietly began with the launch of Project Noolaham, founded by Thillainathan Kopinath and Muralitharan Mauran. The initiative built upon and integrated earlier digitization efforts-most notably the pioneering work of R. Pathmanaba Iyer. It also incorporated the contributions of Eelanool.

By August 31, 2005, the formation of the Noolaham Google Group brought together a vibrant network of contributors, laying the groundwork for what would become a global volunteer movement. Pathmanaba Iyer was appointed an advisor to the project. Others like K.T. Pratheepa, P. Eelanathan, K. Raminitharan, Mathy Kandasamy, L. Natkeeran, and Kanaga Sritharan soon joined. The project also attracted the support of S. Thevaraja, representing the Thesiya Kalai Ilakkiyap Peravai, whose organization agreed to contribute its materials to Noolaham.

To support this growing initiative, Noolaham purchased its first server in August 2005. By the end of 2005, the digitized archive had crossed its first major milestone: 100 books preserved and accessible online.

They Were Born When the Library Burned

When asked how it came to be that many of the founders of the Noolaham initiative were of a similar age, Kopinath offered a reflection.

Thillainathan Kopinath (in blue shirt) breathing digital life into a rare manuscript

"Those who worked with us-Eelanathan, Natkeeran, Mayuran, myself, Shaseevan-we were all roughly the same age. Born within a few years of each other, between 1980 and 1982," he told Jaffna Monitor. "When you ask that question, it strikes me-we were all born around the time we lost the Jaffna Public Library."

"We were in our early twenties in the early 2000s. Coincidentally, that was when computers-though still expensive-were becoming just about accessible. Unicode was gaining ground, and around 2001, Wikipedia entered the scene. We were the right age, at the right time."

"That was when we were just getting introduced to computers, learning to type, and experimenting with platforms like Blogspot. If we had been 15, we'd still have been in school. If we'd been 25, we might have been caught up with jobs, families, and responsibilities. But at 20-you feel that drive, that energy to start something. To act."

The Bold Reinvention of Noolaham

The man widely credited with transforming Noolaham from a volunteer-based initiative into a formidable institution is Shaseevan Ganeshananthan, now a software entrepreneur living in the UK. Speaking to Jaffna Monitor, he traced the turning point back to his school days.

"Kopi-Thillainathan Kopinath-and I were classmates at Jaffna Hindu College from the sixth standard. After our A/Ls, we even brought out a little magazine together called இசை புதிது -A New Direction," he recalled. "In 2006, just as Project Noolaham was finding its feet, Kopi had to leave for Malaysia to pursue higher studies. It became painfully

Shaseevan Ganeshananthan

clear to us that if Kopi left, the entire project could grind to a halt."

Though Shaseevan had previously volunteered with Noolaham, it was only in July 2007, that Kopinath formally handed over the coordinating role to him. "In my mind," Shaseevan said, "if something has to be done, it must be done in a structured way. One of the biggest problems I see in our society is that good initiatives-especially those driven by community passion-remain small because they're not structured. They're not institutionalized. So they can't scale."

The Birth of the Noolaham Foundation

Shaseevan set about transforming Noolaham from a purely volunteer-run effort into a structured, project-centered organization. For the first time, the idea of paid staff was introduced. Until then, every single page had been digitized by volunteers working from homes, rooms, hostels, and sometimes even internet cafés.

But such change didn't come without

செம்பதாகை

மலர் 2
இதழ்: 6–7
1981 ஆனி-ஆடி
விலை சதம்: 75
புரட்சிகர வெகுஜன ஏடு

யூ. என். பி. ஆட்சி கட்டவிழ்த்து விட்ட

தார்மீகப் பயங்கரவாதம்!

கடந்த மே மாதம் 31ம் திகதி தொடக்கம் யூன் 7ம் திகதி வரை யாழ் குடா நாட்டில் நடந்த தார்மீகப் பயங்கரவாதம் தணிவிற்கு வந்துள்ளது. இட்டபிட்டே நடத்தப்பட்ட இப்பயங்கரவாதத்தால் கொலை, கொள்ளை, நிலையப்பு, தாக்குதல்கள், வழிப்பறி, சொத்துக்கள் சேதப்படுத்தப்பட்டமை போன்ற வன்முறைச் சம்பவங்கள் இடம் பெற்றன. இச்சம்பவங்களின் பின்னணியில் அரசாங்க, யூ. என். பியும் தொடர்பு இருக்கின்றன என்பதில் எவ்வித சந்தேகமும் இருக்க முடியாது.

பாதிக்கப்பட்டோருக்கு நஷ்டஈடு வழங்கு!

மேலதிகப் படைகளை வாபஸ் வாங்கு!

ஆணைக்குழு என்பது வெறும் கண்துடைப்பு

Newspaper clippings preserved on Noolaham.org, chronicling the night when the Jaffna Library was reduced to ashes

ஈழநாடு 7/8

வைகாசி/ஆனி — மாத இதழ் — விலை ரூபா 1-00

மீண்டும் எரிந்தது யாழ். நகர்

- வீடுகள், கடைகள் எரிக்கப்பட்டன
- பொது நூலகம் தீயினால் முற்றுக சேதம் அடைந்தது
- 'ஈழநாடு' பத்திரிகை அலுவலகம் தீக்கிரை
- சந்தைக் கட்டிடங்கள் தரைமட்டம்
- மருந்துக் கடைகள் எரிக்கப்பட்டன

எரிக்கப்பட்ட நூலகம்

எரிக்கப்பட்ட கடைகளில் ஒருபகுதி

Curfew in Sri Lanka

From Our Correspondent
Colombo, June 2

A state of emergency with a 5 pm to 5 am curfew was declared today in the Tamil-speaking Northern Province of Sri Lanka where police went on a rampage on Sunday assaulting residents, setting fire to buildings and looting after one policeman was killed and four were injured at an election rally near Jaffna.

The rally was held by the Tamil United Liberation Front in connexion with the Development Council elections due to be held on Thursday.

Last night the public library, which is one of the biggest buildings in Jaffna, the administrative capital of the province, was set on fire.

resistance. “There was pushback internally,” he admitted. “And I understood where it came from. Around that time, the global conversation was heavily influenced by models like Wikipedia and the Free Software Foundation. They stood for flat hierarchies, pure volunteerism, and anarchic collaboration. Many within Noolaham were drawn to that ethos and wanted to preserve it.”

“But once you start institutionalizing,” he added, “hierarchy becomes inevitable. You need structure."

Thankfully, Kopi supported the shift. He had spent years manually digitizing books-typing and scanning them page by page. He understood the amount of labor it took.

Then came an idea that somewhat rewrote the script. “With donations, we bought 16 scanners-each costing about Rs. 3,000 at the time,” Shaseevan explained. “We gave them to 16 university students, with one condition: each had to scan 3,000 pages. Once they met that target, the scanner was theirs.”

The painstaking process of digitizing rare, damaged books

It was a simple bargain-but it worked like magic, Shaseevan explained to Jaffna Monitor. "At that point, we didn't even have a proper office, But that one move brought in a new kind of energy. The students took ownership. The digitization rate exploded. The project had found its second wind."

By the time 2007 drew to a close, the numbers told their own story. When Shaseevan took over, Noolaham had 406 digitized books. By the end of the year, that number had ballooned to 1,618.

The methods evolved too. "We introduced editing and post-processing," he said. "Earlier scans were often raw-some pages crooked, some smudged. We cleaned them up. We made sure what we published was readable and complete. If we digitized a book, we also tried to track down related material." What came next was the biggest leap yet. "Until then, we were mostly scanning literary works," he said. "We asked-why stop there? Why not preserve magazines, newspapers, research papers, and even event souvenirs? Why not build a complete record of Tamil printed history?"

And so, in 2008, the project took a bold new turn. Shaseevan laid the groundwork for what would eventually become the Noolaham Foundation. That same year, the Foundation's first Board of Trustees was formally appointed, with R. Pathmanaba Iyer serving as Chairperson, Shaseevan as Coordinator, and five others-including Kopinath-contributing as directors. In May 2010, the initiative was officially registered under GA 2390, marking the formal birth of the Noolaham Foundation.

"Giving Everything to Everyone": How Noolaham Challenges Tamil Norms Around Knowledge

"What sets our library apart-perhaps the most significant aspect-is that we went against a deeply ingrained Tamil mindset," explains Kopinath. "We made everything open access. Free for everyone. In truth, the idea of openly sharing information has never been part of Tamil culture. We tend to be hoarders of knowledge-guarding it, preserving it, but not necessarily sharing it." Noolaham was built in direct opposition to that mentality. "We're here to give everything to everyone," he says.

"Every society functions in its own way. In our community, knowledge has traditionally been passed down through songs, stories, and oral traditions. That's how it reaches the next generation. So, I wouldn't say we entirely lack a documentation culture-but it's certainly not strong or structured".
"We've never really had a comprehensive, archival approach to preserving our collective memory." "But today's world operates largely within a Western framework," he continues. "If we want our history and identity to survive-and to be acknowledged-on the global stage, then we have to engage with that model of documentation." "That's exactly what we did," he told Jaffna Monitor.

"What About Us?": The Missing Archive of Our Own Pain

Take Australia, where I now live," says Kopinath. "White settlers committed massacres against Aboriginal people, carried out atrocities, and implemented the 'Stolen Generations' policy-where Aboriginal children were forcibly removed from their families and raised in white institutions. But there was extensive documentation. That's why today, their genocide is acknowledged: the evidence exists."

"But what about us?" he reflected. "What have we documented about 2009? Even now, we haven't done it right."

Roadmap 2020

In 2012, Noolaham developed its first Strategic Plan (2012–2014) alongside a long-term Roadmap-2020. At the heart of that roadmap was an audacious goal: to digitize 97,000 documents by the end of 2020.

At first glance, the number seemed more like a dream than a realistic target. But as Shaseevan explained to Jaffna Monitor, there was deep symbolism behind it. "The Jaffna Public Library was burned with 97,000 books inside," he said. "So we chose that number not just as a target-but as a way of quietly reclaiming what was lost."

In 2012, Noolaham had only 12,000 digitized documents. The idea of archiving another 85,000 within eight years felt almost absurd. "We laughed when we drafted the plan," Shaseevan admitted. "Logically, it didn't make sense. It had taken us seven years to digitize 12,000 items, and yet we were setting a goal that was seven times greater within nearly the same span."

But the team did more than dream. "We created a roadmap-a strategic plan with clear timelines, targets, and methods. Looking back now, we didn't just wish. We engineered a way to get there," he said.

Against all odds, they did. By the end of 2020, Noolaham had reached the milestone: 97,000 documents digitized-matching exactly the number lost in the burning of the Jaffna Public Library.

Noolaham.org's office in Jaffna

The physical storage of books at Noolaham's Jaffna office

Noolaham and the Long Shadow of Jaffna's Loss

When Jaffna Monitor asked whether Noolaham could be seen as a response to the 1981 burning of the Jaffna Public Library, Kopinath recalled that when Noolaham's first website (noolaham.org) was launched in 2005, it featured an image of the burned library on its homepage. Although that version of the site is no longer active, the symbolism, he said, was deliberate.

"So yes," Kopinath told Jaffna Monitor, "whether consciously or unconsciously, the urge to respond to the loss of the Jaffna Library was definitely within us."

Yet he was quick to draw a distinction. "It would be wrong to say that Noolaham is a direct replacement for the Jaffna Library. There was certainly a communal desire to respond-to protect our records, to build a library that wouldn't drown in a flood or burn in a fire. That feeling was in the air when we started."

For many, the destruction of the Jaffna Library remains a powerful emotional trigger. "It's etched deeply in the collective conscience of our people. You could say it wounded the Tamil soul," Kopinath said.

But Noolaham, he emphasized, was also born from a deeper realization: the community's lack of an archival culture. "Our community doesn't have a strong instinct for documentation. Yesterday's newspaper is forgotten by today. So our goal became: let's build a culture of preservation. Let's archive whatever we can."

Fundraising, however, has never been easy. "You can easily raise funds for an elders' home, a school, or a temple," he noted. "But when you tell someone you're publishing a book or digitizing old documents, fundraising becomes extremely difficult." Still, around 400 to 500 individuals continue to contribute financially every year. According to Kopinath, for many of them, the emotional catalyst-the reason they give regularly-is the memory of the burning of the Jaffna Library.

"An Ethnic Duty": The Moral Imperative Behind Noolaham

Kopinath, Shaseevan, Natkeeran, along with a

few others, dedicated the prime years of their youth to building Noolaham. In an era when they could have easily focused on launching private ventures or advancing their careers, they chose instead to invest their time, energy, and talent in a cause larger than themselves. It was a question Jaffna Monitor felt compelled to ask: what drove such a profound commitment?

"It was a critical communal need-to preserve our people's records, books, and memories," Kopinath said. "Someone had to step up and take responsibility. Our documents weren't just lost by accident-they were deliberately destroyed. And sadly, due to our own negligence, documentation has never been a systematic part of our culture."

Kopinath believes the work of Noolaham fills a longstanding void. "We see it as a vital responsibility-to collect, safeguard, and pass on our people's records to the next generation. For us, this is an ethnic duty. Even if those involved don't fully recognize it in the moment, when you step back and look at the bigger picture, that's exactly what it is."

He noted that Sri Lankan Tamil society has not historically prioritized archiving or record-keeping. "That's precisely why this work became essential," he said. "At some point, it felt like holding a tiger by the tail-we simply couldn't let go. The project had grown so large, so complex, that creating something of this scale again would be nearly impossible."

He added, "This is a massive responsibility. If a new generation steps up and truly takes ownership, we'll gladly hand it over and step back. But that moment hasn't come yet."

Shaseevan shared a deeply personal story that reveals the extent of commitment and sacrifice that underpinned the project. "When I first took up the responsibility in 2007, my plan was simple," he told Jaffna Monitor. "I thought I would give two solid years-2007 and 2008-to help stabilize and sustain Noolaham, and then I'd move on."

But that plan quickly changed. "I ended up staying until 2015 as Executive Director. That was a crucial period in my life, especially in terms of my academic and professional development. I had to let go of my career path in the field I had originally studied," he reflected. "That's actually how I moved into business-there was a gap in my professional trajectory because of this commitment."

We wanted to Build an Ideological Fortress.

"Another reason for doing this was to create an ideological fortress," said Shaseevan, reflecting on the larger purpose behind Noolaham's work. "I believe a fortress built on ideas is far stronger than one built with weapons or ethnic sentiment."

Shaseevan said the vision behind Noolaham was not only to archive documents but to foster a form of activism rooted in knowledge. "Initially, most of what we preserved was literary in nature. But I chose to include Economic Review, the publication of People's Bank, in our archive. MLM Mansoor-a brilliant banker and Tamil writer-was the Tamil co-editor of that publication. That marked the first time we brought an economic perspective into Tamil archival work."

He explained how the project matured over time: "We began by archiving literature, then moved into political publications. But literature and politics alone do not define a society. A community is far more complex.

Gradually, our scope expanded. It became more diverse and inclusive."

"I believe the knowledge we produce and

The Jaffna Library in its ruined state after the cultural genocide

preserve this way will one day take its rightful, central place in society," he said.

"What If It Disappears Tomorrow?" The Question of Digital Permanence

Given the painful collective memory of the Jaffna Public Library's destruction in 1981, a natural question arises: can Noolaham, the digital archive born from that loss, be destroyed too? What if a cyberattack were to wipe it out overnight?

When Jaffna Monitor posed this question to Kopinath, he responded with calm assurance. "Anyone can download the entire digital collection if they wish to," he said. "In fact, many already have. The content exists in multiple locations, and in some cases, the entire archive has been mirrored."

Unlike traditional libraries housed in vulnerable buildings, Noolaham is intentionally decentralized. It exists not just as a website, but as a distributed knowledge system safeguarded across multiple formats and geographies. "Our content is backed up in several ways-cloud servers, external hard drives, and even physical storage in secure bank lockers," Kopinath explained. "Even if the main site were taken offline, the archive would still live on."

To further protect its holdings, Noolaham has partnered with institutions such as the British Library and maintains backups stored abroad. These offline and international redundancies are part of a comprehensive strategy to ensure continuity, even in the face of cyber threats or geopolitical disruption.

Grassroots Funding and Radical Transparency: The Noolaham Model

In its formative years (2005–2007), Noolaham operated without a formal budget. Volunteers

contributed personal equipment, and core expenses-like server and domain costs-were covered out of pocket. As the initiative grew, it began to rely on small-scale donations from the global Tamil diaspora. “Most of our funds come from small donations-$10 or £10-from many supporters,” said one long-time volunteer. This decentralized, community-driven model has ensured widespread ownership and helped the archive avoid dependence on any single benefactor.

By 2009, Noolaham formalized a monthly sponsorship scheme, where 12 donors-often cultural associations or alumni networks-would each fund a month’s operational costs. Alongside this, the organization began securing institutional grants for specific projects. Support from the Neelan Tiruchelvam Trust, the U.S. State Department, the British Library’s Endangered Archives Programme (EAP), and the Wikimedia Foundation has enabled major undertakings, including the digitization of palm-leaf manuscripts and multimedia documentation initiatives.

However, Noolaham remains clear-eyed about the limits of project-based funding. As Shaseevan explained to Jaffna Monitor, “There have been historical cases where an entire organization ended up as the de facto property of a businessperson simply because they funded it. We didn’t want that to happen here.” To safeguard its independence, Noolaham ensures that day-to-day operations-staffing, infrastructure, and maintenance-are sustained by collective fundraising and volunteer-led campaigns, not institutional grants.

Transparency as Principle

Transparency is another cornerstone of Noolaham’s ethos.“We’re open not just financially, but in every operational aspect,” said Shaseevan. “The only thing protected is the admin password-everything else is in the public domain. In doing so, we’ve become a model for other organizations.”

"Just as I was firm about making the library completely transparent, Kopinath was equally insistent that the accounts be watertight-even down to the last rupee," said Shaseevan. "Kopi’s reasoning was clear: anyone can be accused of financial misconduct, so our accounting must be impeccable."

Shaseevan added, “I believed that if we embraced full transparency, things would naturally fall into place. Look at Wikipedia-early on, they made everything public, even internal minutes. Open-source organizations also operate with a high degree of openness. That inspired us.”

That commitment appears to have paid off. “To this day, we haven’t faced a single allegation of financial fraud,” another long-time volunteer noted. “But still, in personal conversations, people ask us: what’s the benefit of all this? Is there some financial gain involved?” The volunteer explained further: “Among our people if someone is working hard or making sacrifices, the assumption is often that there must be some hidden agenda-financial or political. They find it hard to believe anyone would do something purely out of conviction.”

A Global Effort: Diaspora, Volunteers, and Partnerships Fuel Noolaham’s Growth

In many ways, Noolaham functions as a transnational organization. While its headquarters are in Jaffna, its human resources are scattered across the globe, wherever Tamil-speaking professionals reside. Volunteers coordinate through email,

Salvaged rare manuscripts — sorted, restored, digitized, and returned to their rightful owners, preserving fragile knowledge for future generations.

WhatsApp, and online forums-and meet in person whenever possible.

"Diaspora volunteers are deeply embedded in our digitization workflows," said one overseas volunteer. "We have teams based in different countries who collect documents for the Noolaham repository." In London, for example, a volunteer might salvage Tamil books from recycling centers and send them in. Some rare books have arrived through public libraries, private donors, or even parcels mailed in for scanning.

Members of the Tamil diaspora are also actively involved in governance, fundraising, and technical development. Volunteer hubs have emerged in Canada, the UK, and Australia-organizing outreach initiatives, hosting events, and offering specialist expertise. Notably, the 2007 fundraiser in California and the 2009 event in Australia were led by diaspora groups, underscoring the strength of global Tamil solidarity.

Diaspora professionals have also lent their expertise: IT specialists in Europe assist with server infrastructure, while trained librarians in North America provide guidance on metadata standards. One of the Foundation's key technology leaders, L. Natkeeran, operates from Canada. As Shaseevan recounted with a smile, "We had been working closely with Natkeeran for years before we even saw his photograph. That's the level of trust that binds us-and allows us to achieve the impossible."

Back in Sri Lanka, a committed team of local staff and volunteers manage Noolaham's daily operations-scanning documents, cataloguing

entries, maintaining the archive, and overseeing outreach efforts. It is this seamless synergy between global contributors and on-the-ground personnel that has made Noolaham not just sustainable, but remarkably scalable.

Impact on Scholarship and Cultural Continuity

Over the years, Noolaham has evolved from a modest digital initiative into a cornerstone of academic research and cultural preservation, according to a senior lecturer at the University of Jaffna, speaking to Jaffna Monitor. “It has transformed how Sri Lankan Tamil history is accessed, interpreted, and archived,” he noted.

“For historians, linguists, and social scientists studying the Tamil community in Sri Lanka, Noolaham offers access to a wealth of primary sources that were once nearly impossible to locate"

“This level of archival access is rare,” the lecturer emphasized. “Students of Tamil literature can now access out-of-print novels and poetry that even major university libraries lack. Scholars researching the civil war or diaspora politics can construct entire narratives using sources that were previously fragmented or forgotten.” With citations to Noolaham now appearing in peer-reviewed books and academic journals across the globe, the platform’s scholarly credibility is firmly established.

Noolaham’s influence has also subtly permeated Tamil political discourse. During a recent online clash between ITAK and TNPF, screenshots of decades-old newspaper clippings and magazine articles-sourced from Noolaham-were exchanged on social media to highlight ideological inconsistencies. Australian-based writer Theivigan Panchalingam captured the irony with dry wit: “Noolaham now supplies the weapons for our political wars.”

The archive’s breadth makes it equally valuable for interdisciplinary research. Its holdings extend beyond literary texts to include social science monographs, statistical records, legal documents, oral histories, and manuscripts on indigenous medicine. Anthropologists, economists, and legal scholars alike have turned to Noolaham as a vital resource. Its dedicated Dalit and Up-Country Archives offer crucial insight into historically marginalized communities, while curated collections on Muslim heritage, women’s movements, and regional folklore reflect the archive’s growing commitment to inclusivity.

A Digital Triumph Against the Odds

Comparisons may be drawn to global initiatives like the Internet Archive or the Digital Library of India, but within its niche, Noolaham stands out. As of 2025, the platform hosts more than 173,000 documents encompassing over six million pages-arguably the most comprehensive digital archive maintained by any minority ethnolinguistic community in South Asia.

Built on a foundation of volunteer labor, community contributions, and post-war resilience, Noolaham has succeeded where even well-funded state or academic institutions have sometimes faltered. “Archiving has traditionally been the responsibility of governments,” a longtime Noolaham volunteer told Jaffna Monitor. “We are doing the work of a government,” he explained.

The platform’s success has begun to inspire other communities around the world. One foreign user-himself a Tamil language learner-

Inside Noolaham's Scanning Lab

The early documents were typed manually in basic .htm formats. "One person would read aloud while another typed," Kopinath recalls. "It was slow and painstaking-so much so that in our first year, we managed to digitize only about a hundred books." But as technology advanced, so did their methods. By the end of 2006, scanning technology had been introduced, dramatically speeding up the digitization process and improving fidelity to the original texts.

Today, Noolaham employs three distinct scanning techniques, each tailored to the type of material being digitized. Flatbed scanners are used for rare and fragile books, with pages scanned individually. Sheet-fed scanners handle more common titles, where pages can be gently unbound and scanned in batches. But for the most delicate items-such as ola-leaf manuscripts-a more sensitive approach is essential.

"Ola leaves are extremely fragile-you can't feed them into a scanner," explains Kopinath. "To preserve them, we use a specialized method involving DSLR cameras and controlled lighting. It's the same process followed by the British Library."

"When scanning books, we follow international standards," he adds. "Some people might think it's enough to snap photos with a phone-but that's not how we operate. We aim to meet the same documentation standards used by institutions like the British Library."

"Of course, we don't have their advanced equipment," he acknowledges, "but we ensure our methods align as closely as possible with theirs," he told Jaffna Monitor.

praised Noolaham as "a rare example of how a people can digitally reconstruct their cultural identity when their physical heritage has been under assault." It demonstrates that even in the face of violence, displacement, and neglect, digital tools can become powerful instruments of preservation and resistance.

No Censorship, No Bias: Noolaham's Commitment to Archival Integrity

"Though each of us may have our own political leanings, we never censor or show bias in what we archive," said Shaseevan. "We document whatever is available-without prejudice. If someone were to publish a book tomorrow calling Noolaham a den of thieves, and they gave us permission to digitize it, we would archive that too."

Kopinath echoed the sentiment, recalling a defining moment in Noolaham's early journey: the decision to archive Murinthapanai (The Broken Palmyra)-a book that sharply critiqued Tamil militant movements. "That was our 1001st archived item," he noted. "It was our way of saying that this project is committed to preserving all perspectives, not just the convenient or popular ones."

The decision was not without controversy. "Some of our major donors-who were instrumental in Noolaham's early growth-questioned us," he said. "They asked, 'Why would you archive The Broken Palmyra? Isn't it anti-Tamil?' Our answer was simple: Whether it's anti-Tamil or not is irrelevant. It's a book. It exists. It deserves to be documented."

That principled stance, he explained, gradually earned the trust of the broader community. "Over time, people came to understand that we're here to document history-not to rewrite it. And that understanding brought even more support to the initiative."

Safeguarding the Future: Noolaham's Next Chapter

As Noolaham moves into its third decade, the challenges ahead are as real as the achievements behind. Scaling digital infrastructure, ensuring sustainable funding, training new volunteers, and adapting to rapidly evolving technologies are all part of the road ahead.

"As long as there are Tamil people who cherish their heritage, the spark that ignited Noolaham will continue to burn bright as an eternal flame of knowledge," one core team member told Jaffna Monitor.

When asked what could significantly improve Noolaham's capacity, one of its founders, Kopinath, explained: "What we need most is land and a permanent building. Right now, we're operating out of rented houses on a temporary basis. We've been entrusted with thousands of rare books and manuscripts, but we don't have a secure space to store and preserve them."

He added, "Our people often donate land to temples and religious institutions. If someone could offer us just a small plot, we could raise the funds ourselves to build the facility we need. At the moment, our office is crammed with shelves and overflowing cabinets. We don't even have enough space to carry out daily work efficiently. A dedicated space would change everything-it would unlock new possibilities for conservation, training, and outreach."

The appeal is modest. The vision is far-reaching. The question now is-will our society listen?

Living Through Four Revolutions: How Computers, Internet, Mobiles, and AI Redefined the Human Story

BY: **Prof. N. Asokan**

Prof. N. Asokan was invited to give a short "morning assembly talk" at his alma mater, Trinity College, Kandy. The following is the transcribed version of his inspiring speech, reflecting on the four major technological revolutions that have shaped our world-and his life. He writes under the pen name 'eḻuttukkiṉiyavaṉ', including for Jaffna Monitor.

Forty-five years ago, I walked into this assembly hall thrice a week for morning assembly. My classmates and I always sat over on that side. Today, I thought I would share with you four technological revolutions that happened between then and now. They are intertwined with my career. For all of us, this is an exciting time to be alive. I think it is not an understatement to say that never before in human history did people have the opportunity to engage with multiple technological revolutions within their lifetimes.

In telling the story of these four revolutions, I hope to draw your attention to cautionary tales. As young people full of hopes and dreams, I want you to marvel at the magical wonders that technology brings us. But I also want you to be aware of potential concerns they raise, and why you should equip yourself with the knowledge and skills you need to navigate the promises and pitfalls of new technologies.

The four revolutions are: the computer and software revolution, the Internet revolution, the mobile phone revolution, and the artificial intelligence revolution.

The Computer and Software Revolution

The first, the computer and software revolution, was already under way when I sat there forty-five years ago. Until the 1970s computers were expensive and rare. They cost hundreds of millions of rupees and filled entire rooms. Only select organizations like governments and universities and big companies in rich countries could afford them. By the late 1970s, technology had advanced so far that computers could fit on a desktop. They were then called "microcomputers". Many companies sprang up, building the hardware and software for microcomputers. The first Apple computers arrived in 1976. IBM introduced a microcomputer in 1981, calling it a "personal computer" or "PC" for short. That name stuck. A new startup company began writing software for microcomputers. That was how Microsoft got its name — they wrote microcomputer software.

By the late 1970s, ordinary people in western countries were able to buy home computers. Their kids started to grow up with computers. Forty-five years ago, computers were still extremely rare in Sri Lanka. But we all knew about them. I borrowed a book from the library and tried to teach myself to program. Without access to a computer, it was a little futile. Imagine trying to learn how to drive a car or ride a bicycle by reading a book! Trying to learn programming without a computer is a little like that.

I saw my first computer at the University of Peradeniya. When I had to switch to Indian Institute of Technology, Kharagpur, I was sufficiently hooked to want to study computer science and engineering.

Fast forward to now, computers are everywhere. They run all aspects of our lives. You may be carrying several of them right now: your watch, your phone, your tablet, your laptop; if you came to school in a vehicle, it likely had multiple on-board computers, even bicycles have them. Learning computer science turned out to be a good decision.

Internet revolution

The second was the Internet revolution. People realized early on that interconnecting computers will open up a whole new world of possibilities. By 1980, there were already different types of networks to interconnect computers. The Internet was conceived as a network of such networks. By 1990, ordinary people could connect their computers to the Internet. E-mail and file transfer existed already back then. Soon, the World Wide Web was invented, providing an easy way to navigate the information on the Internet. Suddenly there was an explosion of Internet activity. Companies big and small are connected to the Internet. New startups built entirely new businesses on the Internet, like Google, which provided an easy and effective way to search for information on the World Wide Web. Companies like Amazon began selling products over the Internet. This was known as "electronic commerce." I went on to work at IBM in 1995 to do my doctoral research on electronic commerce just as Internet access began to be available in Sri Lanka.

Today, it is difficult to imagine life without the Internet. One cannot really fully participate in society if one doesn't have Internet access. Every aspect of human life from work to play found its manifestation on the Internet. The Internet lets people work remotely, do their shopping, watch their favorite sports, listen to music, and so on and so forth.

The World in Your Pocket: The Mobile Phone Revolution

The third was the mobile phone revolution. The idea that a telephone could be a portable handheld device dates back to more than a century ago. But it became technically feasible only in the 1970s and was widely deployed only in the 1990s, but just for phone calls and text messages.

People realized that mobile phones are little computers and can be made to do everything a computer could do. That led to the smartphone. The first smartphones, like the Nokia 9000 Communicator, began to appear in the late 1990s.

I went to work for Nokia in its heyday. The Nokia motto was “Connecting People”. That was exactly what mobile phones made possible. You could connect to people you care about much more easily than before, at any time, from any place. At Nokia, I saw the mobile phone revolution unfolding in front of my eyes and was fortunate enough to be part of work that went on to benefit billions of people today, like helping to design Bluetooth pairing protocols that allow two Bluetooth

devices to easily and securely establish a connection.

Today, mobile phones are universal. For many people, they are their first computers and their only means of connecting to others over the Internet.

The Age of Artificial Intelligence

The fourth and final revolution I want to discuss is the artificial intelligence, or AI, revolution. We are all living through it right now. People have always wondered about designing machines that can think and act like human beings. The term "AI" dates back to the 1950s. AI techniques became practical enough in the early 2010s when three things aligned: new approaches for training AI were developed, computers became dramatically more powerful than before, and, thanks to the Internet, large amounts of all sorts of data had already been collected which could now be used to train AI models quickly and effectively. By 2011, AI models could outperform humans in simple tasks like recognizing objects in pictures. Now they have become "generative," capable of producing new content. We have generative AI models like ChatGPT and Midjourney and many more. They can generate text or images or videos when prompted. You have all seen how stunning the results are: they can generate text that looks flawless, images that look lifelike, and videos that are simply mind-blowing.

Today, every profession and every aspect of human life are being impacted by AI. We don't know how far this revolution will go. But we can already see that it will have a far greater impact on humanity than all of the previous three revolutions combined. AI will change the nature of work itself. Your careers will not follow the traditional paths that your parents and their parents followed, that is, starting as a junior and working your way up. You need to be nimble and proactive to succeed in this new workplace. Those of you who learn how to use AI in your own profession are more likely to succeed. But AI will also bring you new types of opportunities. For example, you may have heard of the concept of "solopreneurs" — entrepreneurs who successfully establish and run companies alone, without partners or employees. Being a solopreneur is very difficult; it requires an incredible breadth and depth of talent, dedication, and grit. But AI will allow more people of your generation to be solopreneurs.

The Flip Side of Innovation: Fighting the Silent Threats

There is no doubt that these revolutions have been stunning. They have brought great benefits to humanity. But they have also brought about new concerns or exacerbated existing ones.

The first concern is the potential for security breaches. People were excited about the possibilities promised by these technologies. But they did not at first account for how "bad actors" would try to use them. Experts realized that they need to make these technologies robust against intelligent adversaries who are looking for ways to compromise the systems. This is the field known as "cybersecurity."

I have spent the last thirty-odd years doing research in cybersecurity, trying to understand what makes software, mobile phones, and AI vulnerable and how to make them more robust.

The second concern is privacy. The Internet and mobile phones allowed service providers like Google to collect an enormous amount of data from the way you interact with their services. This data helps them profile you precisely. For example, all your Google search queries taken together can tell Google

a lot about you: your gender, age, interests, financial status, political and religious beliefs and so on. They can use it to improve their services to you. If you and I search Google for the same thing, it can and often does give different results based on how their algorithms have profiled you and me differently. But the data can be misused in ways that people might not expect.

Ten years ago, a company called Cambridge Analytica used such profiling information gleaned from mountains of collected data to influence elections in the US and the UK. Governments have now realized that they need to regulate data collection and use. For example, the General Data Protection Regulation in Europe has brought in stringent requirements on how companies can collect data and what they might use it for. As you can see, this is no longer a purely technological concern. It is a policy question that requires expertise in law and policy making.

A third and even bigger concern is ethics. When I trained as a computer scientist, my curriculum did not include philosophy or ethics. But the runaway success of information technology means that computer scientists are now faced with ethical dilemmas increasingly often. Taking AI as an example, they grapple with questions like: Will AI systems become so advanced that they turn against humanity? What can we do to align the goals of AI systems with ours so that they don't turn against us? How can we prevent misuse of AI, such as the creation and dissemination of fake news? How do we stop AI companies from unfairly using creative works from artists to train their AI models?

Facing new revolutions

I chose those four revolutions because they were closely intertwined with my own career. But several other major revolutions also took place during the same period—genetic engineering, quantum computing, nanotechnology… the list is truly mind-boggling. Your own careers will be shaped by new technological revolutions. All of you will live through them, and some of you will help shape them. These revolutions will enrich human lives in countless ways—but they will also bring new risks.

To participate in and shape those revolutions, humanity needs all kinds of expertise. Not just technologists, but also lawyers, teachers, journalists, policymakers, poets, and so on. Choose your path and learn your trade well. But at the same time, equip yourself with the knowledge and skills you need, to figure out how you are going to face and overcome those risks. How do you do that? There is no one way. Even as you specialize, learn topics outside your specialization. If you want to be a scientist or engineer like me, make sure you learn some philosophy and ethics, too. If you want to be a lawyer, learn some technology. Learn not only in classrooms and libraries but also from others. Talk to your elders at home. Talk to experts whenever you get the chance. Talk to your teammates on the sports field. I am sure Trinity has already made you realize the importance of a well-rounded education. Build on that!

All of us are privileged to live during such an exciting time. Enjoy the fruits of these revolutions and go forth into the world to shape new ones so that your children can enjoy their rewards.

Acknowledgements:

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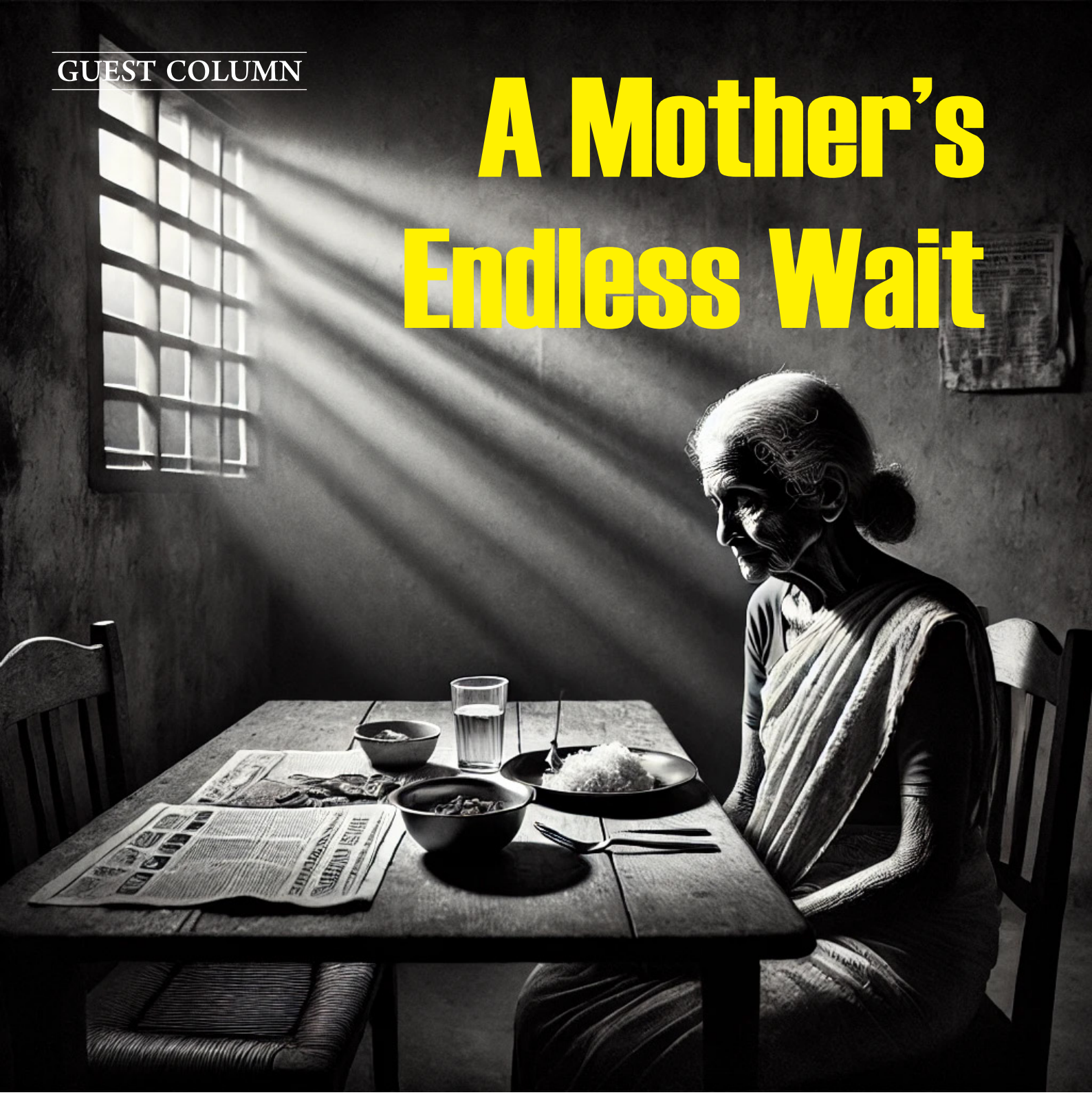
GUEST COLUMN

A Mother's Endless Wait



BY:
Dr. Nalayini Jegathesan

"You look better today," I said as I absentmindedly began writing her prescription. She was one of my regular patients-a gentle old lady who had been coming to my clinic for years.

Her main complaint had always been her lack of appetite. Each time she mentioned it, I reassured her that it was likely due to her chronic lung condition. I never thought to ask beyond the surface, never questioned what lay beneath this persistent symptom.

Then, one day, she quietly revealed something that shook me.
"I haven't had lunch in 22 years."

I looked up in disbelief. Had I misheard? Twenty-two years without lunch? Guilt crept over me. How had I never asked her about her meals, her daily routine, or her family? I knew she had three daughters. I knew her eldest daughter had been widowed at a young age-a sorrow that weighed heavily on her. But I had never asked about her son.

Hesitantly, I asked, “Why?”

She took a deep breath, her frail hands trembling as she reached for the worn purse she always carried. Her eyes filled with tears, but she did not let them fall.

“I was waiting for my son to come back.”

The words hung heavy in the air.

Her son-her youngest, her only boy-was just 19 years old when he left for a tuition class one Sunday in the year 2000. He never returned.

A friend had seen him being taken into a military bus along with a few others. “He will come back,” the friend had assured her.

But he never did.

She refused to believe he was gone. She could not believe it.

And so, she waited.

Every single day, she cooked his lunch, just as she had on that fateful Sunday. But she never ate. How could she, when the plate meant for him remained untouched?

She searched for him tirelessly. Alone, she visited every police station, every army camp, pleading for answers. She collected every newspaper that printed his name in the lists of the disappeared, clinging to each mention as proof that he was still out there somewhere, waiting to be found.

The International Red Cross sent her a pocket calendar every year-a small reminder that they had not forgotten. That they would help her. That maybe, just maybe, one day, she would find him.

She carried with her a collection of torn, faded newspaper clippings-each one a fragment of hope-tucked safely in her purse, always close to her heart.

She attended every protest, every meeting held by families of the disappeared. She traveled miles whenever there was even the faintest whisper of new information. Recently, she had been called to a distant district and was given a serial number-some kind of record, but not the answer she longed for.

She did not allow herself to grieve. To grieve would mean accepting that he was gone. And she could not do that.

She believed that her son was alive. That he would return.

But time was slowly betraying her.

Her body was growing weaker. Her weight was dropping, though her hope never wavered.

At her last clinic visit, she told me softly, “I will see my son before I die.” Then, as if sensing my silent doubt, she added, “And if I don’t, I have left a letter with the Grama Sevaka. My body must not be cremated until my son returns to do my last rites.”

I sat in silence, listening, as I always did.

Her frail frame worried me. Each visit, the scale confirmed what my eyes could already see-her body was fading, even as her hope burned bright.

Each time I gently urged her to eat, she would smile faintly and say, “Don’t worry, doctor. I will not die until I see my son.”

And I knew she was not alone.

There were so many mothers like her. So many wives, sisters, and daughters who had spent decades waiting, searching, clinging to memories-and to hope.

Their stories, their suffering, their quiet endurance-slowly fading from the world, just like them.

But for those who still waited, hope was their lifeline. It was the only thing keeping them-and the untouched meals of their lost loved ones-alive.

And so, I prayed.

Not just for her son to return.

But for the flame of hope in her heart to burn strong until her last breath.

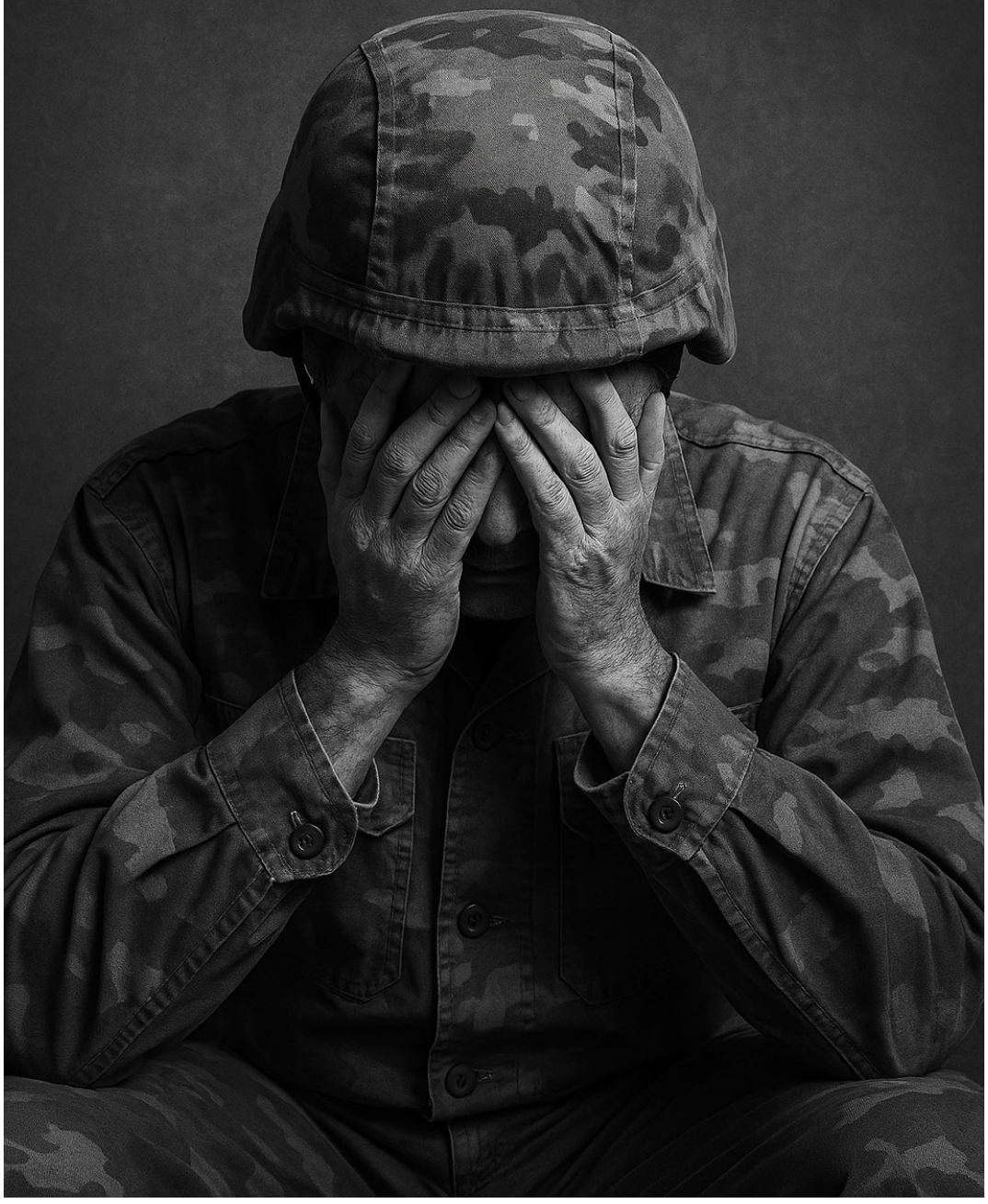
Because as long as she hoped, she lived.

And in her heart, the lunch she made for her son 22 years ago remained warm, untouched-waiting, just like her.

Dr. Nalayini Jegathesan, ***a consultant physician at Jaffna Hospital, distills years of clinical acumen and intimate encounters into evocative narratives that illuminate the quiet resilience of the human spirit.***

Untreated War Trauma Can Turn Soldiers Into Agents of Violence

Dr. Ruwan M. Jayatunge on Rising Crimes by Army Deserters and Veterans



BY:

Our Special Correspondent

Dr. Ruwan M. Jayatunge is a Sri Lankan-born medical doctor and mental health professional whose work has spanned continents and conflict zones. A former commissioned officer in the Sri Lankan Army, he treated soldiers at the Colombo Military Hospital, becoming one of the first in the country to study and document the psychosocial effects of PTSD.

With advanced training in psychiatry, trauma-informed therapy, addiction psychology, and neuropsychology from institutions in Canada, the UK, and the USA—including Harvard and the University of Toronto—Dr. Jayatunge brings a rare blend of field experience and academic insight. He holds a PhD in Psychology and has authored numerous books and peer-reviewed articles in collaboration with global experts, including Prof. Daya Somasundaram and Dr. Neil Fernando.

Today, he serves as the Clinical Director of Maple Cerendib Rehab in Canada and supervises internships for the University at Buffalo. A member of the American Psychological Association and the PTED International Scientific Committee, Dr. Jayatunge continues to lecture globally on war trauma, PTSD, and healing.

Do you feel the state and public health system adequately responded to the civilian mental health crisis following the war? What, in your opinion, could have been done differently?

Unfortunately, the state and public health

Dr. Ruwan M. Jayatunge

system failed to adequately address the mental health crisis that emerged from the armed conflict. A significant number of psychological casualties remain—among military personnel, former LTTE members, and civilians alike. Many trauma-related psychological wounds remain unhealed, undiagnosed, and untreated.

Our society continues to bear the deep scars of war trauma, which manifest in various forms such as self-harm, social unrest, crime, child abuse, domestic violence, substance addiction, and political violence. These are not isolated issues—they are symptoms of a society grappling with unresolved psychological pain.

We are living in a traumatized society that urgently needs healing, structured psychosocial support, and genuine reconciliation.

Is there sufficient mental health support for trauma victims today in government hospitals and public clinics in conflict-affected areas?

There is a prevailing notion among authorities

that the armed conflict ended in 2009, and therefore, there is no longer a need to address war-related issues. This mindset has led to a convenient forgetting of the psychological and social consequences of the war. However, the reality is quite different. We are still not providing adequate support or treatment for war victims.

The trauma of war continues to echo across Sri Lankan society. The conflict has become embedded in our collective social experience and memory. Many of the social problems we face today—whether directly or indirectly—are rooted in unresolved war trauma.

Based on your experience in trauma psychology, how deep and widespread is untreated combat trauma among Sri Lankan soldiers after 2009?

The very first study on Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) among Sri Lankan combatants was conducted by Dr. Neil Fernando, Consultant Psychiatrist to the Sri Lanka Army, and myself. Between 2002 and 2006, we clinically interviewed 824 soldiers who had been referred to the psychiatric unit of the military hospital, using the DSM-IV criteria. From this group, we identified 56 individuals with full-blown PTSD.

However, it's crucial to note that our sample was not randomly selected. These were not ordinary troops but individuals who had already exhibited psychological red flags—such as symptoms of depression, sudden behavioral changes, disciplinary issues, or psychosomatic complaints. They had been referred specifically for psychiatric evaluation, meaning our study did not capture the broader prevalence of PTSD among the military.

In reality, we believe the incidence of PTSD among soldiers rose significantly by 2009, and likely escalated further after the war ended. A substantial number of combatants continue to suffer from war-induced psychological distress—many of them undiagnosed, untreated, and enduring their pain in silence. Delayed PTSD is a well-documented phenomenon, and it remains a critical concern in post-conflict settings like Sri Lanka.

Throughout the war, soldiers were repeatedly exposed to severe psychological trauma. Most acute stress reactions went unnoticed or unaddressed. Emotional overwhelm was common, yet there was no robust system in place to detect trauma early or provide psychological first aid. Many soldiers continued to operate in high-stress combat zones, quietly carrying the burden of invisible wounds. For some, the diagnosis of PTSD came only years later.

A particularly stark indicator of this mental health crisis emerged in the immediate aftermath of the war. Between 2009 and 2012, the military spokesman confirmed that nearly 400 soldiers had died by suicide. This staggering figure offers just a glimpse into the depth and scale of psychological trauma borne by our servicemen. Even today, we hear of ex-servicemen involved in violent crimes or social disturbances. These visible cases are only the tip of the iceberg. Beneath them lies a vast, largely hidden crisis of unaddressed psychological trauma among Sri Lanka's war veterans.

In what ways does unresolved trauma among ex-soldiers manifest in civilian life—particularly in terms of violence, substance abuse, or erratic behavior?

It is like a time bomb—it may remain hidden for years, but it can explode unexpectedly,

harming not only the ex-combatant but also their family members and others around them. These deep, untreated mental wounds don't always stay buried. They often resurface in various ways—sometimes as aggression, either turned inward as self-harm or outward toward others.

Family and relationship problems are common. Many struggle to reintegrate into society, often feeling alienated or emotionally distant. They may turn to addictive behaviors to cope, while also avoiding people, situations, or even memories that trigger their pain. Occupational challenges are frequent, as are distorted beliefs about themselves and the world around them. Alarmingly, some begin to distrust the very systems designed to support them—including healthcare providers and therapists.

There's also a recurring sense of being re-victimized, accompanied by an overwhelming need to constantly protect themselves. In some cases, this leads to attempts to control or even victimize others. On a deeper level, many lose their core beliefs, and their inner sense of identity. They grapple with intense emotions—rage, despair, guilt, shame, and deep self-loathing—yet find it hard to express what they're going through. Some even suffer from alexithymia, the inability to describe their feelings in words.

Have you encountered signs of institutional or collective denial in addressing the psychological impact on Sri Lankan soldiers? Why do you think this remains under-addressed?

For a number of years, the Sri Lankan authorities were reluctant to believe that combat-related PTSD was emerging in the military. PTSD was regarded as an American illness, and there was an unofficial taboo to use the term PTSD. The tension of combat trauma was mounting in the military over the years, and there had been suicides and self-harms reported from the battlefields. The soldiers affected by war trauma had behavioral problems, and their productivity was plummeting. Many soldiers who had positive features of combat-related PTSD without any physical wounds were compelled to serve in the operational areas and engage in active combat. They were psychologically wounded soldiers with severe avoidance.

In the early days of the war, soldiers were sometimes charged with malingering when they tried to seek medical attention. Because of this Many traumatized veterans deserted the army or joined underworld criminal gangs. Throughout the war, the Army had no military psychologists and had no full-time psychiatrist until 2007. Major concern was placed on physical wounds, and psychological wounds were not taken seriously. These factors caused a higher number of psychological casualties in the military.

In an interview with Jaffna Monitor, former Army Major General Lakshman David stated that the military should have been rehabilitated just like surrendered LTTE cadres. What is your view on this? Why do you think successive governments failed to initiate meaningful rehabilitation for military personnel?

There was no effective psychological debriefing system in place following traumatic military operations. Likewise, there was no proper screening process for combat trauma. As a result, many military personnel who experienced severe psychological stress went without the support they desperately needed. These individuals left the military undiagnosed and untreated, carrying the weight of their emotional wounds into their homes and families.

Sri Lanka lacked a structured system to support the transition of veterans back into civilian life. This absence created significant readjustment difficulties for former combatants, many of whom struggled to reintegrate into society. They faced a wide range of emotional and social challenges as they attempted to rebuild their lives outside the military.

It's important to recognize that the impact of combat stress does not always surface immediately. In the postwar era, delayed reactions to trauma are common, and symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) can emerge long after the initial exposure. For some veterans, these residual effects can become serious, long-term mental health issues, often developing years after their service has ended.

We've seen a rise in violent incidents involving former soldiers, including recent shootings. Do you believe there is a direct link between these acts and unresolved combat trauma — such as PTSD, moral injury, or other complex psychological conditions?

Some traumatized individuals experience a compulsive urge to re-expose themselves to situations that resemble their original trauma—this phenomenon is known as "compulsive exposure." It is a distinctive marker of combat-related Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

Soldiers suffering from war trauma may later become involved in violence or criminal behavior. This pattern has been observed in various post-conflict societies, including the period following the Vietnam War. When combat trauma goes untreated, it can become a vicious cycle, increasing the risk that affected ex-soldiers will engage in acts of social violence and criminality.

One example from Sri Lanka is Malavi Kankanamage Jinasena, also known as "Army Jiné." A former Commando with exceptional combat skills, Jiné served in the elite Sri Lanka Army unit. However, as a result of intense combat stress, his behavior deteriorated. He was eventually charged with multiple disciplinary violations and went AWOL (Absent Without Leave).

While living in hiding, Jiné used his military survival training to evade law enforcement and sustain a life of crime. He was implicated in numerous violent acts, including highway robberies, murders, and sexual assaults. According to some reports, he was responsible

for as many as 27 rapes. Jiné lived deep in the jungle for years before he was finally tracked down and killed by police.

Does Sri Lanka have the institutional capacity to track or support army deserters today? Or has the country created a "lost generation" of men trained for war but denied reintegration or care?

I think we have the institutional capacity to track or support army deserters. It can be done with knowledgeable professionals and officers with empathy. These army deserters have postwar war readjustment problems and are experiencing issues with their living, working, and social environments. They need individual therapy, family therapy, and psychosocial rehabilitation.

Do you think stigma within the military — especially around admitting emotional vulnerability — has worsened the psychological toll on soldiers? How can this barrier be broken?

Indeed. War trauma is often associated with stigma, and some individuals with combat trauma were reluctant to come for psychological services. They feared it would affect their dignity and military career. We have detected PTSD reactions among the senior military officers, and yet they did not seek professional support. Some of them were compelled to come for treatment when these stresses became unbearable and when their lives were at risk.

Has the state, in your opinion, failed its own armed forces by not providing adequate postwar rehabilitation and reintegration support?

Army Jiné

I would say that, as a nation, we failed to provide adequate post-war rehabilitation and reintegration support to the soldiers who fought in the 30-year armed conflict.

If you were advising the Sri Lankan state today, what would be the most urgent steps to prevent future violence from traumatized ex-soldiers and to reintegrate them constructively into society?

I would restructure the Rehabilitation Department and recruit knowledgeable and empathetic professionals to work with war-affected individuals. It is essential to train personnel from both the military and health sectors, equipping them with a

deep understanding of war trauma and its psychological and social consequences.

We need to provide specialized training for those working in the military's psychological and psychiatric units. This should include identifying early signs of combat trauma in soldiers, preventing issues such as desertion or criminal behavior, and improving the recruitment process by selecting psychologically stable individuals for military service. It is equally important to introduce modern and effective psychotherapeutic approaches to support war-affected combatants and their families.

Furthermore, we can utilize the existing network of MOH (Medical Officer of Health) divisions to extend these services islandwide. All ex-combatants—including former LTTE members—should undergo regular psychological screening to assess their mental well-being.

We must also establish comprehensive reintegration programs for soldiers leaving the military and returning to civilian life. At present, there is a serious gap in these areas, and Sri Lankan society is already suffering the consequences. We cannot afford to let this situation persist.

You've worked in countries like Canada and the U.S., where veteran support systems are more developed. What models or practices from those systems could be meaningfully adapted to Sri Lanka's post-war context?

From the very beginning, we reported on the war—but we never truly studied it. We failed to examine the armed conflict through

clinical, psychological, and sociological lenses. Regretfully, Sri Lankan universities made little effort to conduct in-depth research on the 30-year war and its psychological and sociological impacts. Ironically, it was foreign universities that carried out substantial studies on the Sri Lankan conflict and learned a great deal from it.

Over the past three decades, we were unable to train professionals capable of addressing the psychological wounds left by the war. Sadly, the average medical officer still lacks an understanding of combat-related PTSD and how it affects both physical and mental health. These are bitter truths we must confront.

Another pressing issue is that many decision-makers lack insight into war trauma and its devastating consequences. Their knowledge of the psychological impact of war is minimal at best. Some authorities are difficult to

convince—they remain insulated in their comfortable offices, detached from the realities on the ground. Professional jealousy and insecurity further cloud their judgment and obstruct sound decision-making. These negative factors have caused immense social harm and delayed the treatment of war trauma in Sri Lanka.

In contrast, the United States and Canada have developed highly effective systems for treating combat trauma. In these countries, trained professionals with relevant knowledge, experience, and skills handle the work. They continuously study war trauma, publish research, and develop evidence-based therapeutic methods to support those affected. Importantly, their work is free from political interference.

Mental health services in these countries are geared toward treating both active-duty personnel and veterans. I have visited several Veterans Administration (VA) hospitals in Kansas and Philadelphia, where both serving soldiers and ex-servicemen receive care. These institutions excel at identifying combat-related psychological symptoms and providing appropriate treatment. There is much we can learn from them—not only from their successes but also from the mistakes made during the Vietnam War era.

Speaking to a Northern audience — many of whom were both victims and witnesses to combat trauma — how would you explain the psychological impact of carrying such complex, unresolved experiences?

The people in the North, who were exposed to combat trauma, were among the collateral victims of the armed conflict. They endured pressure from both the government forces and the LTTE. Many became war casualties, suffered material losses and displacement, and had their children forcibly conscripted by the LTTE. Civilians in the North witnessed the true horrors of war.

Many were forced to flee the country, while others became trapped within the war zone. Numerous individuals lost family members; some went missing. To this day, many victims continue to live with distressing memories of their traumatic past.

War-related trauma continues to affect the

population in the North. There is a visible loss of motivation, widespread alcohol and substance abuse, domestic violence, cynicism, and a deeply pessimistic outlook on the future. Many feel a sense of a foreshortened future—believing their lives will be cut short or lack meaning. At times, these unresolved traumas manifest as social violence. For instance, in the immediate aftermath of the war, the emergence and violent activities of the Aava Gang in the North served as a stark indicator of the psychosocial consequences of the three-decade-long conflict.

These are signs of deeply unhealed wounds. If not addressed through effective and sustained interventions, the impact of this trauma could carry forward to future generations.

What kind of trauma-informed justice or healing frameworks does Sri Lanka urgently need to address the psychological wounds of both victims and perpetrators of war-related violence?

I believe we need a Truth and Reconciliation Commission, similar to the one in South Africa, where affected individuals can come forward to share their stories, find catharsis, and receive empathy and validation. There is little point in chasing down the perpetrators because, in some way or another, we all share a portion of the responsibility. What our society needs is healing—not revenge or recrimination.

We cannot allow this conflict to pass on to yet another generation. It is high time we act responsibly and with wisdom.

I would like to share the words of an army officer who served during the final phase of the war. His reflections offer profound insight:

"I have lived with this war for many years. I've seen fallen soldiers and dead LTTE cadres—each one a child of this land. The final days of the war were traumatic. I witnessed immense human suffering. I have seen enough blood. Those who glorify war from the safety of Colombo should have been there. Then they would truly understand what war means.

I felt deep sorrow for the Tamil civilians who were led by a noxious mirage. When I first visited the North as a schoolboy at the age of 16, I was moved by the warmth and kindness of the Tamil people. The people of Jaffna were cultured and educated. They belonged to a great civilization rooted in non-violence. But when the conflict erupted in the early 1970s, everything changed. I had to return to the North, this time in combat gear.

The Tamil people in the North paid an enormous price for the war. Their homes and livelihoods were destroyed. Their children were forcibly recruited. They faced death, poverty, and displacement. What happened to the millions of dollars sent by NGOs and the Tamil diaspora to support the North? The people of Wanni lacked even basic infrastructure. Malnourishment was rampant. Had those funds been used effectively, the North could have become a little Singapore.

I'm relieved that the war is over. Now we must focus on rebuilding the North and fostering ethnic harmony. We must rise above petty racial divisions and work toward peace with our Tamil brothers. If we fail, I fear that within 20 years, we may witness another bloody conflict."

SPECIAL ARTICLE

Dmitri Strotsev receiving the IPA Prix Voltaire award at the World Expression Forum (WEXFO) in Lillehammer, June 2025

They Tried to Silence a Language - These Publishers Fought Back: Belarus's Literary Rebellion

BY:
Special Arrangement

A Suitcase and a Mission

On a brisk Lillehammer evening in June 2025, Dmitri Strotsev stood under the bright lights of the World Expression Forum (WEXFO) stage, speaking in his native Belarusian. Just moments earlier, he had been handed the IPA Prix Voltaire – a prestigious international award for courage in publishing – jointly with fellow Belarusian publisher Nadia Kandrusevich. Accepting the honor, Strotsev recounted the day he fled Belarus: "In March 2022, I left for the West with one small suitcase. I was fleeing political persecution, but I was also preparing for a new mission — to use thirty years of publishing experience to create a free Belarusian publishing house in exile". Those gathered in the Norwegian hall fell silent, hanging on his every word.

Strotsev's journey from Minsk to Berlin – from prisoner to Prix Voltaire laureate – is as extraordinary as it is heartbreaking. Back home in Belarus, his independent publishing house had its license stripped by authorities. Undeterred, he operated underground, printing books in secret and circulating forbidden Belarusian literature samizdat-style to readers hungry for uncensored words.

In October 2020, amid the regime's brutal post-election crackdown, Strotsev was arrested and threatened for his work. By early 2022, facing mounting harassment, he made the painful decision to flee. "I left… with one small suitcase," he told the WEXFO audience. He eventually found refuge in Germany and founded a new press in exile, Hochroth Minsk, as a platform where Belarusian writers could publish freely once again.

Even in exile, Strotsev did not work alone. "Today, about thirty Belarusian publishing houses have re-emerged or restored their work in exile, and we are all closely connected. We have a publishing community," he said, describing a remarkable phenomenon – an entire literary culture uprooted and replanted abroad. Scattered across Europe, these exiled publishers share manuscripts, and resources: to ensure Belarusian stories survive beyond the reach of an authoritarian state.

Strotsev's voice cracked with emotion as he thanked the International Publishers Association for the Voltaire Prize: "This is important support for the Belarusian democratic resistance; this is an open invitation to Belarusian independent publishers to join the global publishing family. In the audience, many wiped away tears. It was clear that this award – more than the CHF 10,000 prize money or the trophy – signified to Strotsev and his colleagues that the world hears them, that they are not forgotten.

The Quiet Power of Words

Hundreds of kilometers away, in a safe house somewhere in Poland, Nadia Kandrusevich watched a live stream of the Lillehammer ceremony. Unable to travel to Norway, she had sent a statement that was read aloud as she and her family huddled around a laptop. Kandrusevich, founder of the Belarusian children's publisher Koska, spoke of hope in the face of oppression. "Thank you for the great honor of receiving the Prix Voltaire," her message began softly. "This recognition affirms not only the importance of publishing and translating books for children but the belief in the quiet power of words to shape minds, to open hearts, and to build bridges across languages, cultures, and generations" For Kandrusevich, who specializes in books for Belarusian youngsters, the act of storytelling itself has become a gentle form of defiance. "Even the smallest readers deserve stories

that speak truth… This award belongs to all the translators, publishers, and writers who keep working despite all circumstances," her statement continued, "to all the children who read or listen to bedtime stories and to all the parents who believe in the power of a good book."

Those words carry the weight of Kandrusevich's own experience. She founded Koska Books in 2018 with a simple dream: to give children access to literature in the Belarusian language—literature full of imagination and free thought. But under President Alexander Lukashenko's regime, even that became a subversive act. Belarus's publishing market is dominated by Russian-language books, and independent presses face strict state controls.

After Lukashenko's disputed re-election in 2020 sparked mass protests, the government turned ever more hostile to Belarusian-language culture. Any publisher promoting Belarusian national identity, printing history books that challenged official narratives, or simply releasing books in the Belarusian tongue became a target. "In 2020, Belarus' government intensified its campaign of censoring publishers that promoted Belarusian identity, language, or history, or published texts in Belarusian," notes an IPA report on the country's worsening climate.

Kandrusevich lived this crackdown firsthand: police seized Koska's publications, and officials threatened to shut her office down. Imagine picture books – storybook tales for kids – being treated as dangerous contraband simply because they were printed in Belarusian. As unrest roiled the nation, Kandrusevich realized even her gentle mission put her in peril.

By 2021, the pressure was unbearable. Kandrusevich left Belarus for Sweden

Dmitri Strotsev

Nadia Kandrusevich

(after a stop in Poland), carrying with her the manuscripts and artwork of upcoming children's books. In exile, she refused to let Koska die. Since 2022 she has continued her work abroad, still managing to send new Belarusian books to children back home – often through underground networks and brave volunteers who smuggle storybooks across the border.

Language, Censorship, and Resistance in Belarus

In Belarus, the sidelining of the Belarusian language and the promotion of Russian is a result of decades of political choices rooted in identity politics, Soviet legacy, and authoritarian control, says a Belarusian literary friend of Jaffna Monitor who wished to remain anonymous—for obvious reasons.

He went on to explain that after Belarus gained independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, there was a brief cultural revival. Belarusian was declared the sole state language, and efforts were made to reintroduce it in schools, media, and public life. But all of that changed dramatically when Alexander Lukashenko—who still holds power today and is often described as Europe's last dictator—came to power in 1994.

Lukashenko, a former state farm director with strong Soviet leanings, won the country's first post-Soviet presidential election by projecting himself as an anti-corruption populist who promised stability amid economic chaos. But once in power, he quickly consolidated authority and steered Belarus back toward Moscow's orbit.

Lukashenko openly championed a pan-Slavic identity—an ideology that envisions the unity of Slavic nations, particularly under Russian leadership. In this worldview, the Belarusian language is seen as provincial or divisive, while Russian is portrayed as a unifying and "superior" Slavic tongue.

Belarusian dictator Alexander Lukashenko embracing his ally, Russian President Vladimir Putin

In 1995, Lukashenko held a controversial referendum that made Russian an official language alongside Belarusian. But as our source explained, "Though both were declared official, the real motive was clear: to push Belarusian into the background and re-establish Russian as the dominant language in all spheres of life."

Our source continued: "There were several reasons for this shift. Throughout the 20th century, Russian was the language of power, prestige, and education in Soviet Belarus. In contrast, Belarusian was associated with peasants and the rural poor. Russian was spoken by the educated; and Belarusian by the common folk. That created a lasting perception—Russian was modern, Belarusian was backward."

But beyond the colonial hangover, the true reason, he said, lies in raw political control. "Lukashenko's deep attachment to Russian over his own mother tongue reflects his willingness to go to any extent to remain in power," the source told us. Promoting Russian ensured tighter alignment with Moscow and helped Lukashenko stay in the Kremlin's good books, thus keeping Belarus within Russia's geopolitical grip.

"He knew that reviving the Belarusian language would inevitably lead to a revival of Belarusian nationalism," our source said. "And with it, a stronger sense of national identity—something that could eventually threaten his rule. He was never going to let that happen."

To suppress that possibility, Lukashenko systematically undermined Belarusian culture.

He publicly called the language "primitive" and "unnecessary". That mindset, combined with deliberate policies to underfund Belarusian-language schools and media, gradually pushed the language out of public life.

"Today, most Belarusians speak Russian at home, especially in the cities," he explained. "Schools operate mostly in Russian. Belarusian is now mostly confined to poetry, folklore, or nationalist activism. Speaking, writing, or publishing in Belarusian today is more than just a cultural choice—it is an act of quiet resistance."

In late 2020 and 2021, authorities raided publishing houses, confiscating books printed in Belarusian and jailing publishers on trumped-up "extremism" charges. The very act of printing in Belarusian – one of Europe's oldest languages – had been criminalized.

It was during this frenzy of repression that Belarus's independent publishing community essentially went into exile. Some fled to Poland, Lithuania, or Ukraine; others to Germany or Sweden. They carried with them boxes of books and hard drives full of manuscripts.

Inside Belarus, the regime tries to fill the void with state-sanctioned, mostly Russian-language material. But clandestinely, many Belarusians seek out the literature of their own language. Every time a Belarusian buys a smuggled book of local poetry, or a parent surreptitiously reads their child a Belarusian bedtime story, Lukashenko's effort to erase a national identity is subverted. As one Belarusian poet noted, "preserving the Belarusian language and culture [is] continuing their fight for a democratic and truly independent country". In Belarus today, publishing in Belarusian has truly become a form of political resistance – a way of saying we exist in the face of a regime that wishes otherwise.

A Ceremony of Solidarity and Hope

Back in Lillehammer, as the 2025 IPA Prix Voltaire ceremony drew to a close, the significance of the moment extended far beyond the two Belarusian laureates. The WEXFO gathering itself bore the theme "Year of Resistance," and there could hardly be a more fitting embodiment of literary resistance than Kandrusevich and Strotsev. "In this story of resistance, we all are also characters. 2025 IPA Prix Voltaire laureates are central characters," said Gvantsa Jobava, the IPA President, praising the pair. "At great personal risk, they are inspiring hope, demanding reflection, carrying culture. It is an honor to celebrate them."

In the crowd was a Palestinian bookseller whose shop in Gaza was bombed and rebuilt; a Turkish publisher who had endured prison for printing "unpatriotic" novels; an Afghan editor who evacuated her entire press staff when the Taliban took over.

The Prix Voltaire, awarded annually by the International Publishers Association, has highlighted such heroes from every corner of the world. Past laureates include Belarus's own Ihar Lohvinau (2014), whose Minsk bookshop was shut down for selling an "undesirable" photo album, Mazin Lateef Ali of Iraq (2023), who disappeared after publishing books on government corruption, and Samir Mansour of Palestine (2024), who rebuilt his Gaza bookshop from rubble only to see it targeted yet again in war. By honoring Kandrusevich and Strotsev in 2025, the award shone a spotlight on Belarus's plight and sent a message of solidarity: the free world stands with those who risk everything to keep truth alive in print.

"The Quiet Power of Words": Jaffna Monitor Speaks with Nadia Kandrusevich

Nadia Kandrusevich

Jaffna Monitor speaks to Nadia Kandrusevich-children's book publisher and co-recipient of the 2024 IPA Prix Voltaire-about censorship, courage, and why quiet storytelling can be the loudest form of resistance.

The IPA Prix Voltaire honours publishers who have faced pressure, threats, and harassment in the pursuit of free expression. When you learned you had been named a co-recipient, what was your immediate reaction? What does this recognition mean to you personally-and to the wider community of Belarusian publishers still resisting censorship? The award citation spoke of the "quiet power of words to shape minds, open hearts, and build bridges across languages, cultures, and generations." Do you feel your work-especially with young readers-embodies that quiet power?

Jaffna Monitor posed these questions to Nadia Kandrusevich.

She responded: "When I learned that I had been named a co-recipient of the IPA Prix

Voltaire, I felt a deep mix of emotions-honor, disbelief, and a quiet sadness. It's not an award anyone sets out to win. It means that your work has come under threat simply because you chose to publish stories, to speak freely, to give voice to something that others want silenced. But it also felt like a powerful moment of recognition—not just for me, but for everyone who has worked in Belarusian publishing under pressure, in exile, or in hiding.

It felt like the world was finally saying: we see you, and we know what you're fighting for. Personally, the award is a reminder that our work matters, even when it feels small or vulnerable. It's easy to doubt yourself when you're working far from home, when you face roadblocks, when you wonder if your books will reach the children they were meant for. This recognition gives strength. It tells me-and others like me-that quiet, persistent work can have a lasting impact. The words in the citation-"the quiet power of words to shape minds, open hearts, and build bridges"-because that's exactly how I see the mission of children's literature. When we publish a story in Belarusian, we're not just printing pages; we're creating a space where a child can feel seen, heard, and connected to their language and culture. It's not loud, it's not confrontational—but it is powerful. Yes, I do believe my work embodies that quiet power.

In a world that often rewards noise and spectacle, there is a different kind of strength in gently telling a child: Your language is beautiful. Your stories matter. You belong. That's how bridges are built—not just across borders, but across generations. And in times like these, that quiet power may be the most important thing we have.

MONITOR MEMO

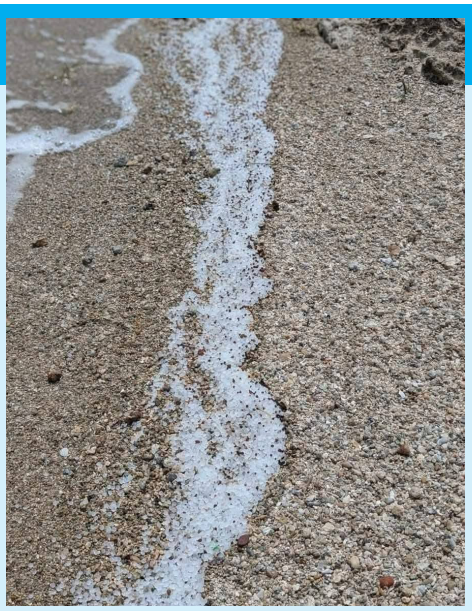
Plastic Nurdles Wash Ashore Across Jaffna's Island Coasts

Large quantities of plastic nurdles—tiny raw pellets used in plastic manufacturing—have washed ashore along multiple coastal areas in Jaffna's island regions, raising serious environmental concerns.

District officers from the Marine Environment Protection Authority (MEPA) and local fishing communities report significant deposits along Pungudutivu's southern coastline, as well as in Kurikattuwan, Nainativu, and Neduntheevu, including the latter's vulnerable white sand beaches.

These industrial-grade microplastics pose substantial risks to marine ecosystems and the food chain, potentially affecting both marine life and human consumers through contaminated fisheries.

"This is not ordinary plastic waste," an environmental officer told Jaffna Monitor. "Their presence in such volume suggests they may have been discharged during shipping or



improperly disposed of at sea."

The spill's origin remains unknown, highlighting concerns about maritime pollution controls along regional shipping routes. Environmental groups warn of potential long-term damage to Jaffna's coastal biodiversity without swift containment action.

Why Emphasize 'Genocide' Over 'War Crimes'? Sajanthan Questions Gajendrakumar

"Why does Gajendrakumar Ponnambalam—leader of the Tamil National People's Front (TNPF) and General Secretary of the All Ceylon Tamil Congress—choose to focus on 'genocide' and 'ethnic cleansing,' but not address 'war crimes'?" asked senior ITAK figure and Sumanthiran's close confidant, Advocate Kesavan Sajanthan.

In a televised debate featuring TNPF's S. Kajendren and Sajanthan himself, the latter offered one possible explanation. He pointed out that during the final phase of Sri Lanka's civil war, several senior officials from the LTTE's political and peace secretariat—including Nadesan and Pulidevan—surrendered while carrying white flags.

Despite this, they were reportedly executed by the Sri Lankan Army.

According to Sajanthan, Gajendrakumar Ponnambalam is believed to have played a mediatory role during these surrender negotiations. He reportedly urged LTTE leaders to surrender at a designated time and place, carrying white flags, as part of an understanding reached between the LTTE and the Mahinda Rajapaksa government.

"War crimes don't refer only to violations committed against civilians," Sajanthan stated. "They also include how the military treated the opposing side during the war—especially those who surrendered. The treatment of LTTE cadres who came forward with white flags falls squarely within the scope of war crimes. Even if someone is a combatant, once they surrender, they must not be treated inhumanely or in violation of international humanitarian law."

He went on to argue that Gajendrakumar's role in the white flag incident places him in a morally and legally significant position.

"If there were a serious investigation into war crimes—particularly one focusing on what happened to those who surrendered—he would be a key witness. But to this day, he has remained silent. That's why he will never support a genuine investigation into war crimes. Because such an inquiry would compel him to reveal what really happened during that time."

Sajanthan continued: "A credible investigation into the white flag incident would raise critical questions: What exactly happened in those final hours? What was Gajendrakumar's role? Why has he remained silent until now? These are questions he would be obligated to answer. That's why he avoids the war crimes discourse and instead shifts focus to the broader—and less personally implicating—narrative of genocide."

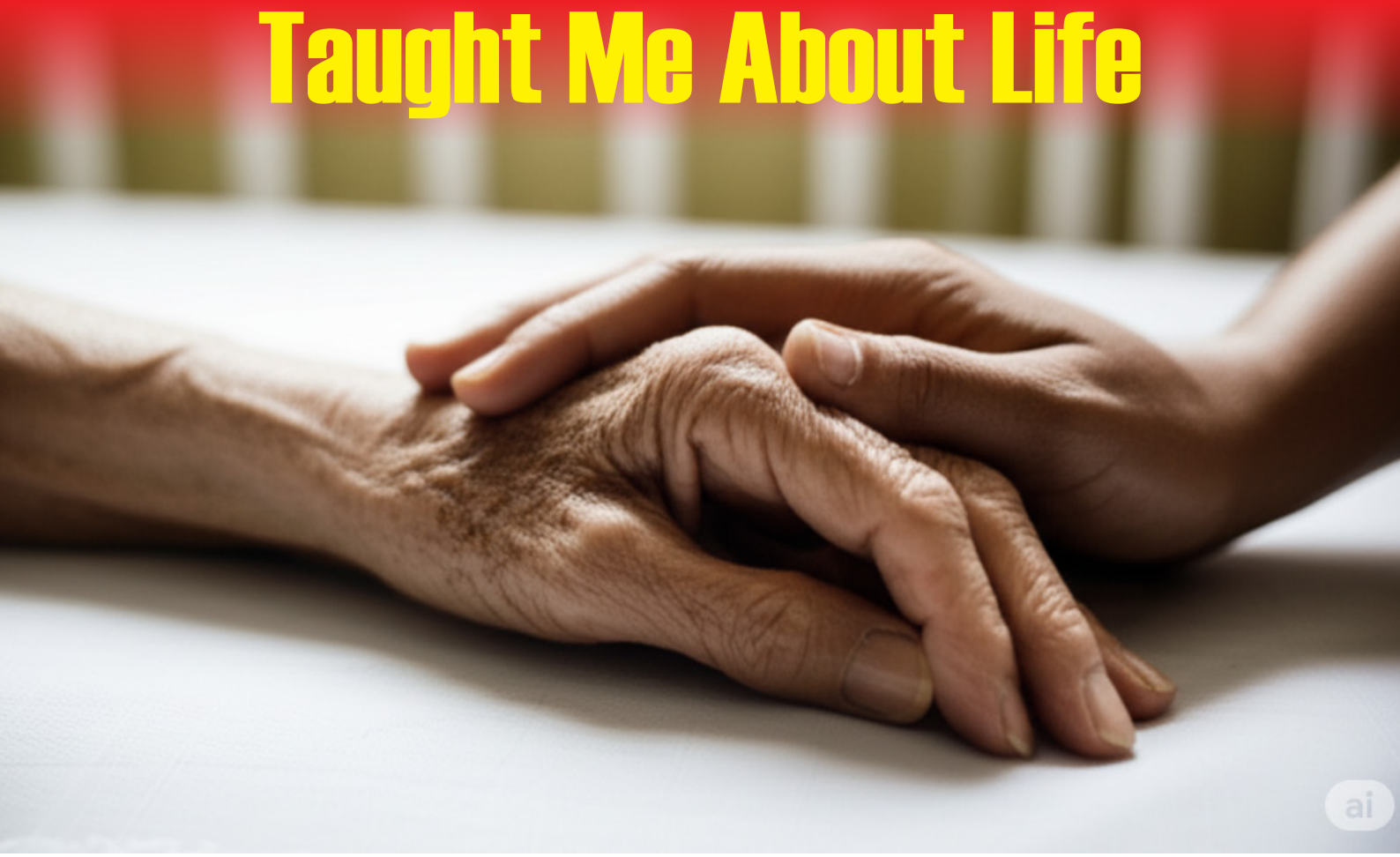
The so-called "white flag" incident has been the subject of international attention for years, including in UN expert reports and investigative journalism such as Channel 4's 2011 documentary Sri Lanka's Killing Fields, which spotlighted alleged extrajudicial executions of surrendering LTTE members.

Political observers argue that rather than sidestepping these allegations or engaging in deflection, Gajendrakumar must come forward with a transparent explanation. Did he genuinely play a part in encouraging LTTE leaders to surrender in hopes of protecting them? Was he misled by Sri Lankan state actors? What communication took place between him and the LTTE leadership at the time?

If he continues to conceal the truth, critics warn, his moral authority to accuse other political leaders of complicity, deception, or betrayal will be seriously undermined.

As of publication, Gajendrakumar Ponnambalam has not publicly responded to these allegations.

A Beacon Amidst the Bleeding: What Jaffna's Doctors Taught Me About Life



BY: **Abbi Kanthasamy**

I've spent most of my adult life building things. Businesses, brands, homes, arguments. Always chasing—the next goal, the next deal, the next piece of validation in a world that measures worth by margins and milestones. But this past week, watching my mother fight for her life in a small hospital in northern Sri Lanka, I was reminded of something I had forgotten: not all heroes chase.

It began in Kumulamunai. A heart attack. A real one. Silent but severe. My mother—diabetic, hypertensive, and until that moment, unstoppable—suffered what doctors later described as a near-total

occlusion. A 99% block in the right circumflex artery. She had been slipping quietly into danger for days. No textbook symptoms. No drama. Just a quiet march toward a cliff.

The team at Mullaitivu Hospital moved with speed and certainty. They administered a thrombolytic agent—what the rest of us call a "clot buster"—and bought her precious time. She was then transferred across district lines to Jaffna, where a team of doctors and nurses, in a system with barely enough gloves to go around, performed a high-stakes angioplasty and placed a stent that saved her life. Not once did I hear the word "payment." Not once did I feel we were anything but in capable hands.

Now here's the part that truly knocked the wind out of me: they didn't have to do any of it. Two thousand doctors have left Sri Lanka in the past three years. They've gone to the UK, Australia, the Middle East—anywhere that offers better pay, better hours, better everything. The doctors who stayed behind? They're the outliers. The stubborn. The selfless. The ones who choose purpose over perks.

I spent time with them. I watched them scrub in and out without a pause, without fanfare, without complaint. I saw a cardiologist explain a procedure to an elderly villager in fluent Tamil, without condescension. I watched a nurse adjust a patient's pillow like she was tucking in her own child. I saw joy in the act of healing—real joy, not performative compassion. And I realised something quietly devastating: these people are happier than most of us.

There is peace in purpose. A kind of wealth that isn't counted in digits but in dignity. And it is abundant here.

My mother was in the ER in Canada just weeks before this trip. High blood pressure. Worrying signs. But the system—hamstrung by protocol and overregulation—missed the looming heart attack. The very thing that a government hospital in war-scarred, budget-strapped northern Sri Lanka caught and treated with surgical precision. I don't say this to score points. I say it because it humbled me.

We often talk about what's broken in Sri Lanka. We talk about corruption, collapse, and crisis. And there's truth in that. But somewhere amid the bureaucracy and broken roads is a public healthcare system that works. That shines. That makes you proud. And sometimes, it takes a stent in your mother's heart to see it clearly.

To those doctors in Jaffna and Mullaitivu - to the nurses, the orderlies, the drivers who transported her between towns and hope—I owe more than gratitude. I owe perspective.

We may have built a world that worships money. But in those fluorescent-lit hospital wards, I met people who worship life.

And they are the richer for it.

SPECIAL INTERVIEW

"We've Funded Temples. We've Funded Bullets. Maybe It's Time We Fund Trauma Centres and Teacher Salaries":

Abbi Kanthasamy Speaks to Jaffna Monitor

BY:
Our Special Correspondent

When entrepreneur and strategist Abbi Kanthasamy published his deeply personal essay, "A Beacon Amidst the Bleeding: What Jaffna's Doctors Taught Me About Life," he may not have anticipated the resonance it would spark. Yet within hours, the piece went viral across social media — striking a nerve in a nation numbed by crisis.

Born in Jaffna to a Director of Education father and a university lecturer mother, Abbi spent much of his early life in the North. Today, he is a dynamic figure in global business circles: an entrepreneur, restaurateur, writer, and photographer, with ventures spanning from Malaysia to North America.

Though widely known as “Abbi,” his given name is Abethan — a name bestowed by the legendary Tamil scholar and journalist K. Kailasapathy. Abethan, meaning "one who does not discriminate," would prove quietly prophetic for someone who would later bridge cultures through cuisine, commerce, and creativity.

He is internationally recognized as the founder of Nadodi and Aliyaa, the first Sri Lankan cuisine-inspired restaurants to receive Michelin recognition. His flagship venture, Nadodi, operates within the prestigious Four Seasons Hotel in Kuala Lumpur, delivering an award-winning fine-dining experience that seamlessly fuses Jaffna, South Indian, Sri Lankan, and Western culinary traditions. The restaurant's signature tasting menu offers a sophisticated reinterpretation of ancestral flavors for the contemporary palate.

His diverse business ventures extend beyond culinary excellence to include The Sticky Wicket sports bar — a vibrant social hub where entertainment and hospitality converge.

He has also established a flourishing North American furniture distribution enterprise, specializing in premium upholstered products under an internationally acclaimed brand. This sophisticated operation spans the continent with its Toronto headquarters anchoring showrooms in the entertainment capital of Las Vegas and the commercial nexus of North Carolina.

Yet his artistic vision transcends the corporate milieu. His evocative photography—replete with texture and emotional gravitas—transforms his restaurant spaces into immersive galleries.

In this compelling discourse with Jaffna Monitor, Abbi elucidates the deeply personal motivations behind his literary endeavors, shares his perspicacious observations about the unexpected efficacy within public health systems, and delivers a provocative exhortation to the Tamil diaspora, advocating for a paradigmatic transformation in how the community approaches its philanthropic allocations.

What inspired you to pen “A Beacon Amidst the Bleeding,” and how has the public’s reaction influenced your perspective on Sri Lanka’s healthcare system?

It wasn’t planned. I was raw—emotionally and personally—watching my mother survive a near-fatal heart attack in the north. What moved me most wasn’t just the medical care; it was the quiet defiance of those who gave it. The doctors and nurses in Mullaitivu and Jaffna worked without drama, without complaint—just calm, unwavering professionalism. Writing was the only way I knew how to thank them. The public’s response has only reinforced my reverence for those who stay and serve, even when the world tells them to leave.

You vividly describe the dedication and selflessness of the Jaffna and Mullaitivu healthcare professionals. What specific actions or interactions truly left the deepest impression on you?

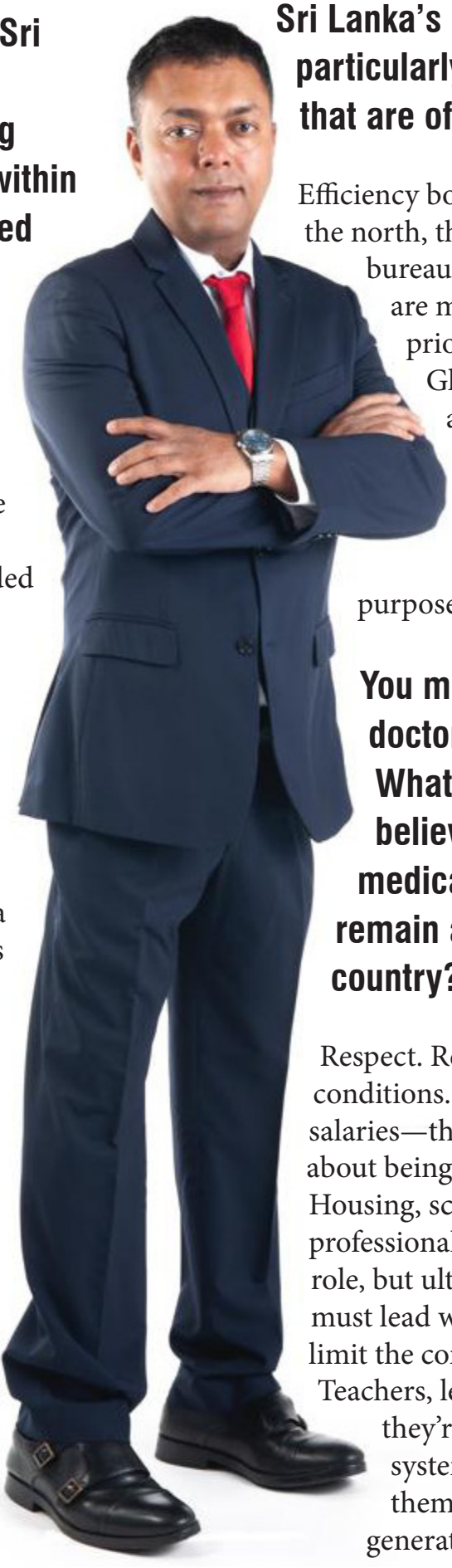
A young doctor—barely 30—coordinated my mother’s transfer between districts like a general in a warzone: no ego, no theatrics, just unwavering focus. The nurses and orderlies moved with a rhythm of quiet competence.

None of it was a one-off. It was systemic excellence amid scarcity.

The article has gone viral in Sri Lanka. What has been your reaction to this overwhelming response, particularly from within Sri Lanka? Were you surprised by its impact?

Floored. I wrote it in a single sitting, unedited, unsanitized. Actually while on a drive from Mullativu to Jaffna. I didn't expect it to land the way it did. But maybe that's what people needed—truth without spin. The response reminded me that even in a fractured world, there's still a hunger for dignity, not just outrage. Someone even unearthed an essay I wrote when I was 13 at Jaffna Hindu College—about the Titanic, written when they found the wreck. I've been fascinated with storytelling ever since. Back then, I couldn't afford a camera. The ads for Nikon F-series cameras in the back of National Geographic haunted me. Today, I have all the gear I dreamed of. But the heart of photography—and writing—is the same: it's about choosing what to include, what to blur, what to sharpen. Storytelling is curation. And I hope the next generation picks up their phones and starts framing their own truths.

You draw a powerful contrast between the healthcare systems of Canada and northern Sri Lanka. What do you see as the core strengths of Sri Lanka's public healthcare-particularly in emergency care-that are often overlooked?



Efficiency born of necessity. In the north, there's no time for bureaucratic red tape. Decisions are made fast, lives are prioritized over paperwork. Global perceptions often assume that brilliance needs budget. But what I witnessed was something else entirely: care powered by purpose, not privilege.

You mention the exodus of doctors from Sri Lanka. What measures do you believe could encourage medical professionals to remain and serve in the country?

Respect. Recognition. Real working conditions. It's not just about salaries—though those matter—it's about being seen and supported. Housing, scholarships, and professional development all play a role, but ultimately, the government must lead with vision. And let's not limit the conversation to doctors. Teachers, lecturers, counsellors—they're all bleeding out of the system. We either invest in them now or pay the price for generations to come.

Your father, Mr. Kanthasamy, who served as a Director of Education in Jaffna, and your mother, Mrs. Parvathy Kanthasamy—a former lecturer at the University of Jaffna and now a social worker and activist in Canada—have both been influential figures in education and social activism. How have their values and life experiences shaped your own path and worldview?

They taught me that success without service is hollow—and that the most meaningful lives are built quietly, with conviction.

My father, Mr. Kanthasamy, served as Director of Education for Sri Lanka's North and East during some of the region's most fragile years. He wasn't just running schools—he was preserving the future for communities under siege, making sure that even in the darkest moments, children had a reason to hope. His leadership was quiet, firm, and deeply rooted in principle.

My mother, Dr. Parvathy, was a linguistics lecturer at the University of Jaffna. She later won a senior Fulbright scholarship, did postdoctoral research, and taught at Stanford University. While she was at Stanford, I completed high school in Palo Alto, then went on to earn my engineering degree at McGill University in Canada. But no academic institution ever taught me what I learned the day we lost our home.

I still remember standing in Kantharmadam, watching our only house burn—set ablaze by the military, right before our eyes. I was just a nine year old boy. And in the middle of that inferno, my mother turned to me and said: "They can burn our house, but they can't burn your mom's PhD."

Perhaps the best lesson I've ever had.

That moment, more than any classroom, taught me what resilience truly looks like. My parents gave without applause. They endured without bitterness. They showed me that dignity isn't inherited—it's practiced. That service, not success, is the highest calling. And that even when everything is taken from you, no one can touch what you've built inside.

How do you navigate and integrate your Sri Lankan heritage within your global business ventures?

I don't compartmentalize it—I weave it in. Whether I'm designing a piece of furniture or building a restaurant brand, there's always a thread back to Jaffna. Culture isn't a museum piece. It's a remix—heritage in motion.

Given that Nadodi offers a unique fusion of Sri Lankan and Indian culinary traditions, what inspired this blend, and how do you ensure the soul of both cuisines is preserved?

It wasn't about novelty. It was about movement—people crossing borders, bringing recipes, losing homes but keeping spices. Our chefs don't just cook. They investigate. They sit with elders, document oral histories, and travel into the Vanni. That's how we ensure

Though Che's image fades on the crumbling walls, the revolution still breathes - seen through Abbi Kanthasamy's lens in the timeless alleys of Old Havana.

Black and white bulls, shoulder to shoulder, hauling hay across Karanagar Bridge - Jaffna's quiet poetry in motion, captured through Abbi Kanthasamy's lens.

authenticity lives inside the innovation. Today, Nadodi operates out of the Four Seasons in KL. Seeing our name on that elevator button—it was personal. It meant our story mattered.

How do you envision the evolution of Sri Lankan cuisine and culture on the global stage, and what role do you hope to play in that journey?

We're just getting started. There's such regional complexity, so much soul. If I can be the guy holding the flashlight while others take the stage—great. Let the world see what we've known all along: our food, our rhythm, our people—they're world-class.

Holding 42 U.S. design patents is a remarkable achievement. Can you share insights into your creative process and what fuels your innovation?

I look for friction—what annoys people, what doesn't work. Then I sketch, test, destroy, rebuild. I treat design like storytelling: rooted in empathy. Most of my patents are design patents—meant to protect form and deter copycats. But here's the truth: patents aren't cheap. They only matter if you can defend them. So you'd better love what you're protecting. I do.

Your photography spans everything from street cricket in Sri Lanka to culinary artistry. What stories are you most passionate about telling, and how does photography fit into your broader creative life?

Edges. That's where my lens goes—where tradition meets change, where beauty rots and reinvents itself. Photography slows me down. It teaches me to see. It's the same instinct I apply in business and writing. All three are about framing something invisible. My site-www.abbiphotography.com—shows that I've always valued narrative over technical perfection. But I learned the old-school way: film, darkrooms, fixer chemicals. I still have a darkroom. I shoot black and white. And I'm trying to get my son Cheran hooked on it. To me, monochrome is still the purest form.

What role do you believe the Sri Lankan diaspora can play in the country's development, particularly in sectors like healthcare and education?

We've funded temples. We've funded bullets. Maybe now it's time we fund trauma centres and teacher salaries. The diaspora has the intellect, the networks, the capital. What we lack is coordination—and sometimes, compassion in the right direction. An NGO once told me that in Jaffna, you can raise RM200,000 for a temple festival, but struggle to get RM10,000 for disabled children. That has to change. It's not a money problem. It's a priority problem.

What advice would you offer to aspiring entrepreneurs and creatives who want to make a meaningful impact in their communities?

Start ugly. Start now. Don't wait for perfect. Solve one small problem with big heart. And if you mess up—mess up with volume. That's where the stories live. I'm still learning. That's the point.

V. Nalliah Master

S.J.V. Chelvanayakam

CVK Sivagnanam Closes the Circle That S.J.V. Chelvanayakam Opened

BY: **M.R.Stalin Gnanam**

In Eelam Tamil politics, few words have caused as much damage—or claimed as many lives—as the word "traitor." And it was S.J.V. Chelvanayakam, founder of the Ilankai Thamil Arasu Katchi (Federal Party) in 1949, who first slipped this venom into the bloodstream of Tamil political discourse.

Until then, the Tamil Congress and its leader G.G. Ponnambalam had struggled to make inroads in the East. They remained a northern force—Jaffna-centric, both in character and reach.

In the East, the man of the moment was V. Nalliah Master—a respected leader who served as Deputy Minister for education, health, and postal services. But to plant the Federal Party's flag in the East, Chelvanayakam launched a smear campaign, branding Nalliah as a "kaikkooli" (a political stooge)—someone blindly loyal to the Sinhalese-led government.

Stage by stage, rally by rally, the insult echoed across the East. And only after bringing Nalliah master down did the Federal Party finally step into the region.

Years later, Chelvanayakam's political heir A. Amirthalingam would refine the rhetoric. "Kaikkooli" wasn't sharp enough. He needed a word with blood on its edge. And so, "traitor" entered the lexicon—with Alfred Duraiappah,

ITAK Acting President C.V.K. Sivagnanam with EPDP Leader Douglas Devananda, after their meeting at EPDP's office in Jaffna.

Amirthalingam's rival in Jaffna, as its first public victim. That word became a bullet—fired by a young Velupillai Prabhakaran, barely in his twenties.

What began as a slur soon evolved into an ideology. Prabhakaran used the label "traitor" not merely to justify assassinations, but to silence dissent, dismantle rival militant movements, and consolidate Tamil nationalist power under the LTTE. In a grim twist of fate, he would eventually turn the gun on Amirthalingam himself—the very man who first taught him to see Duraiappah as a traitor.

Thus was born a politics of moral absolutism—where to disagree was to betray, and to betray was to die.

No one has worn the label "traitor" more often than Douglas Devananda. For decades, Tamil nationalist media hurled the word at him with unrelenting force. Yet, for all the LTTE's reach and firepower, they never managed to silence "traitor Douglas." Nor could they ever claim the satisfaction of having done so.

And now, history turns a curious corner.

The party that first unleashed this rhetoric—the Federal Party—must now be the one to bury it. And the man leading that quiet burial is none other than C.V.K. Sivagnanam, Acting Leader of the party and once a trusted figure in the eyes of Prabhakaran himself.

By walking into Douglas Devananda's office in Jaffna-by asking for his support to form local government bodies-Sivagnanam did more than strike a political deal. He challenged a legacy. He stepped into the shadow of Chelvanayakam and began the long, painful work of undoing the curse his party had cast.

What Chelvanayakam began, Sivagnanam is now trying to end. In doing so, in his own quiet way, he is seeking to wash away the sins of his party, the legacy of his political ancestors, and the bloodstains they left behind.

Destiny, it seems, has its own strange rhythm.

Editor's Note:

We welcome alternative viewpoints. If you'd like to respond to this article, email us at hellojaffnamonitor@gmail.com. We will consider all submissions-except those that glorify violence, deaths, or assassinations.

Healing in Jaffna: What the North Taught a Southern Doctor About Empathy

Kondavil: A Masterclass in Compassionate Care

BY:

Dr. Shane Halpe

When I first stepped into the Family Health Center (FHC) in Kondavil, Jaffna, I had no idea that this quiet, unassuming facility in Sri Lanka's Northern Province would become one of the most formative classrooms of my career. It quickly revealed itself as a living model of what a family health center should be across the island.

Family Health Centre – Kondavil

As a family physician from Wattala, I arrived with curiosity, humility, and not a word of Tamil. But what I lacked in language, I made up for through observation, empathy, and the willingness to listen with both my eyes and heart. And in return, FHC Kondavil didn't just welcome me—it shaped me. It continues to shape not only my career but also my deeper understanding of what truly compassionate, community-rooted healthcare can look like.

The Spirit of Family Medicine

Under the thoughtful mentorship of Consultant Family Physician Dr. S. Kumaran, I began to see family medicine not just as a medical specialty, but as a living, breathing philosophy of care. At the Family Health Center in Kondavil, medicine transcended the conventional boundaries of diagnosis and prescription. Each patient encounter was rooted in context—care here meant understanding not only the illness, but the individual behind it. I learned to ask: Where does this patient come from? What are their daily struggles? How do their social, economic, and emotional realities shape their health? Dr. Kumaran demonstrated that true healing begins when we treat people, not just symptoms. It was a revelation—one that reshaped how I viewed my role as a physician and deepened my sense of responsibility to the communities I serve.

The Family Health Center in Kondavil stood out as a true hub of integrated, community-oriented care. It wasn't merely a place where people came to seek treatment—it was a proactive health ecosystem. Within its modest walls were a range of thoughtfully organized services: a dedicated space for counseling that offered emotional and psychological support; a healthy lifestyle clinic that promoted nutrition, exercise, and preventive habits; and a responsive outpatient department that managed everything from acute conditions to long-term follow-ups. What impressed me most was the center's forward-thinking approach—it placed equal emphasis on prevention, early detection, and patient empowerment. Chronic disease screening was not an afterthought but a routine priority. Even the recordkeeping reflected this ethos: notes were handwritten with care, and duplicate copies were given to patients. This simple gesture not only bridged communication gaps but also cultivated a sense of mutual accountability and trust between provider and patient. It was a subtle reminder that healthcare works best when it's a shared journey.

From pregnant women navigating the uncertainties of motherhood to elderly individuals living in quiet isolation, the Family Health Center in Kondavil opened its doors to everyone. No one was left behind. The center's local staff, fluent in Tamil and deeply familiar with the community's culture and rhythms, ensured that every patient was heard and understood without barriers. One of the most striking practices I observed was the routine home visits—a seemingly simple act, but one with transformative power. Visiting a patient in their own living space offered a window into their world: their support systems, daily challenges, and the unspoken truths that don't always emerge within clinic walls. It gave every clinical decision a deeper layer of meaning.

In Ariyalai village: Family physician and community health worker engage with an elderly woman — community-centred care in action.

What moved me most was the truly holistic nature of care. Health here wasn't treated in isolation. Emotional suffering, substance dependency, poverty, and domestic dynamics—all were considered vital parts of the clinical picture. Even the smallest details—a hesitant glance, worn-out clothing, or the way someone sat—were interpreted with empathy and care. The Family Physician's intimate understanding of the local environment allowed for care that was not only personalized but profoundly human.

Reaching the Margins: The Rural Clinic in Myliddy

My journey through Sri Lanka's Northern Province then led me to Myliddy, a remote village nestled on the northern coast. There, within the walls of a small Primary Medical Care Unit, I witnessed medicine in its most raw, stripped-down—yet profoundly impactful—form.

The facility itself was basic: no examination bed, minimal privacy. Yet, patients—a tide of mostly elderly and economically vulnerable individuals—

Clinical consultation at Myliddy Primary Medical Care Unit

came in droves. Their ailments painted a vivid picture of rural life: pervasive musculoskeletal pains, chronic gastritis, reproductive issues, and the tell-tale oral lesions from betel chewing.

Delivering Care Against the Odds

Despite the glaring limitations—a sparse supply of medications and a lean staff—care was delivered with an undeniable sincerity that touched me deeply. We focused on empowering patients, educating them on crucial aspects of posture, nutrition, cancer screening, and essential self-care.

However, the stark reality of inadequate infrastructure hit hard. I distinctly remember two cases: one of recurrent miscarriage, another of persistent vaginal candidiasis. Providing dignified care in such an environment was a painful, constant reminder that healthcare equity truly begins with fundamental facilities. It highlighted the invisible barriers that often stand between patients and the quality care they deserve.

What stayed with me most, however, was the unwavering dedication of the young Medical Officer in Charge. Tireless and committed, she had become the lifeline of that fragile clinic. Yet behind her calm efficiency lay a silent struggle—managing an overburdened facility with minimal support, and facing an impossible choice: to pursue her long-delayed postgraduate dreams or stay behind, unsure of who would carry the torch if she left. Her dilemma reflected a larger, systemic crisis. In a country where over 4,600 health professionals have migrated in recent years, rural outposts like Myliddy are being stretched to breaking point. Her voice—firm, yet laced with worry—echoed the urgent need to rethink how we support, retain, and uplift those who choose to serve in the most underserved corners of our healthcare system.

The Quiet Revolution in Neurorehabilitation

Another chapter of my Northern journey unfolded at Green Memorial Hospital in Manipay, where Dr. S. Kumaran introduced me to a remarkable neurorehabilitation unit. This haven for children with cerebral palsy, autism spectrum disorder, genetic syndromes, and more was driven by a multidisciplinary team—and powered by hope.

The unit offered free, intensive therapy. Structured play, self-care training, and creative expression were woven into daily routines. A sensory garden helped children with touch sensitivities. Cultural events and dance performances celebrated their progress. Parental support, too, was prioritized with workshops and one-on-one counseling.

What I witnessed here went beyond rehabilitation—it was a quiet resurrection of hope, self-worth, and human potential. I saw children once thought to be limited begin to flourish, their parents rediscovering confidence with every small milestone. Therapists moved with unwavering patience, not merely treating conditions but nurturing possibilities. In those moments, I was reminded that the true calling of medicine is not only to mend the body, but to restore

Children and staff of Neuro rehabilitation Clinic at Green Memorial Hospital-Manipay

lives—to help people believe in themselves again.

Facing Darkness with Light: Mental Health and Prison Rehabilitation

An outdoor therapeutic neurodevelopmental activity for the differently abled children

At the Family Health Center in Kondavil, I witnessed a rare but vital integration of mental health into primary care. A dedicated clinical psychologist served patients grappling with grief, depression, psychosexual concerns, and post-traumatic stress disorder—conditions often left unspoken in many Sri Lankan communities. Through a combination of in-person counseling, telemedicine consultations, and community-based group therapy, the center created a safe space for healing the mind as well as the body. It was here that I came to appreciate mental health not as a separate discipline, but as an essential pillar of holistic care.

Rehabilitation Behind Bars: A Glimpse of Hope in Jaffna Prison

This commitment to emotional well-being extended even beyond the clinic walls—to places often forgotten in discussions of public health. At Jaffna Prison, I encountered a profound and often overlooked dimension of medicine: healing behind bars. Many of the inmates I met were not hardened criminals, but individuals caught in cycles of poverty, addiction, and unaddressed trauma. There, within the stark confines of prison life, they were receiving primary medical care, guided meditation sessions, and vocational training—all designed to support rehabilitation rather than simply enforce punishment.

Substance abuse rehabilitation was a major focus of the prison's efforts. Drawing from a holistic framework, the program combined individual and group counseling, skills-building workshops, and psychosocial support. For young men in the Northern Province battling addiction, this model offered a second chance. The work being done within those walls was quietly revolutionary, targeting not just the symptoms of substance abuse, but the underlying causes—displacement, unemployment, familial breakdown—and charting a new course for recovery and reintegration.

What struck me most was the ethos of the entire system: one of restoration, not retribution. These were not isolated interventions—they were threads in a broader tapestry of hope. In a region still healing from the scars of war, this was a bold and compassionate attempt to break cycles of suffering and offer light in places long overshadowed by darkness.

A Day of Listening

One quiet morning back in Kondavil, I was

asked once more to step in and assist at the Family Health Center. My Tamil was still hesitant, my vocabulary limited—but I had learned to listen with more than just words.

A temple caretaker came in, worn down by fever and worry, convinced he needed antibiotics. A simple explanation and a touch of reassurance were enough to ease his mind—a quiet triumph of trust over unnecessary medication.

An elderly woman shuffled in with chronic knee pain, her body tired but her spirit defiant. She had outlived war, loss, and hardship, and needed more than analgesics—she needed to be seen, to be acknowledged as a reservoir of resilience.

Then came a young father, sleepless and anxious, troubled not by disease but by a habit—spicy late-night snacks that disrupted his rest. A gentle dietary intervention brought him relief, proving once again that not all suffering requires a pill.

A woman, nervous and hopeful, spoke of her struggle to conceive. Her burden was heavy—but so was the silence of her partner. With empathy, we reminded her that fertility is a shared journey, not a solitary burden.
A restless teenage boy followed, his energy misread as a disorder. Suspected of ADHD, he was, in fact, a passionate karate student—bursting with potential and desperate for validation.

Finally, a schoolteacher—poised, educated, and diabetic—sat unaware of the silent damage progressing within her. Her blood reports hinted at looming complications, but she had never been told what they meant. With careful guidance, we began the journey of lifestyle change—before medication ever became necessary.

Each encounter that day reaffirmed a truth I had come to cherish: family medicine is not about the drama of emergencies or the prestige of complex procedures. It is about presence. It is about seeing the whole person, not just the illness—choosing conversation over prescription, insight over assumption. In Kondavil, I learned that healing often begins not with action, but with listening—with showing up fully, even when words fall short.

The Future We Must Build

Undoubtedly, my time in Northern Sri Lanka both challenged and transformed me. I witnessed a model of healthcare rooted in trust, compassion, and continuity—despite glaring gaps in infrastructure and support. The spirit of family medicine is alive, but its foundation urgently needs strengthening.

If we are to build resilient health systems, we must invest in rural clinics, empower local staff, expand community outreach, and address the growing crisis of professional migration.

After three decades of brutal war, the North is healing—steadily and with quiet strength. But for it to truly thrive, it needs our collective commitment. From Kondavil to Myliddy, from prison wards to playrooms, family medicine in Jaffna is not merely surviving—it is reshaping what it means to care. The government must also rise to the occasion by supporting these unwavering medical professionals and prioritizing the development of essential healthcare infrastructure.

About the author: Dr. Shane Halpe is a Senior Registrar in Family Medicine.

NPP's Garden Lizard Lesson in Northern Politics

If you're looking for a metaphor to sum up the NPP's misguided political saga in the North, look no further than the old Tamil saying: "வேலியில் போகும் ஓணானை எடுத்து வேட்டியில் விட்டுட்டு குத்துதே, குடையுதே என்றானாம்" ("They took the garden lizard headed for the fence, tucked it into their veshti, and now complain that it's biting and scratching.")

That, in essence, is the story of Naveena Ravanan—real name Pon Suthan—a self-styled firebrand Tamil nationalist who briefly honeymooned with the NPP at a time when the party was hell-bent on fielding anyone with a pulse for the local government elections. He didn't contest himself, but his sister and a few ready-made

loyalists ran under the NPP flag.
In recent weeks, Ravanan has returned to the streets of Iyakkachchi, staging dramatic protests against the very party he was recently feasting with.

It's worth recalling what we wrote in our last editorial: in their desperate bid to secure local seats, the NPP flung open its doors to opportunists, political crooks, and jokers like him. And now, predictably, it's come back to bite them. After the NPP came to power, Ravanan repositioned himself as their face in Pallai. The once-fiery nationalist—who used to shout slogans of ethnic purity and hail Prabhakaran as Suriya Devan to keep his diaspora funders happy—suddenly began quoting Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, as if he were born waving the red flag. His once-fringe meetings quickly became headline events, attended by no less than Prime Minister Harini Amarasuriya and NPP's Northern organiser Bimal Rathnayake, who even visited his farm for a meal—an event Ravanan triumphantly flaunted on Facebook.

But the romance soured fast. After the NPP refused to appoint his sister to a representation seat in the local council, Ravanan flipped. He launched a crusade—staging press conferences, leading protests, and now portraying himself as the aggrieved victim. And so, people are asking the obvious question: Why was he welcomed into the NPP in the first place?

One can only hope that the NPP's Northern leadership has learned a lesson or two from this absurd episode. If not, they'd better keep their veshtis tighter next time.

MONITOR MEMO

NPP's 15% Power Hike Highlights Governance-Management Gap

Sri Lanka's Public Utilities Commission (PUCSL) has approved a 15% electricity tariff increase, adding fresh financial strain to households still recovering from the country's worst economic crisis since independence.

The revision impacts consumers across different categories: industrial users face a 14.9% increase, government institutions 16%, hotels 15%, and general-purpose users 14%. For domestic consumers, low-usage households will see an 8% increase, medium users (91–180 units) face a 15% hike, while heavy consumers will bear a 17% increase.

The adjustment responds directly to International Monetary Fund demands following the Ceylon Electricity Board's (CEB) LKR 18.5 billion loss in Q1 2025.

The situation highlights a stark governance paradox. Under Ranil Wickremesinghe's administration, despite widespread corruption allegations, the CEB achieved remarkable profitability - recording 93 billion rupees in profits used to settle debts. The previous government implemented harsh but effective tariff increases: 75% in August 2022, 66% in February 2023, and 18% in July 2023.

The NPP government, elected on unprecedented anti-corruption credentials, has seen the CEB return to losses within months of taking office. The institution recorded a 3.0 billion rupee loss in December 2024, forcing today's tariff reversal that undermines their relief promises.

This raises uncomfortable questions about governance effectiveness. How could an allegedly corrupt government successfully manage a complex state enterprise while a clean administration struggles with the same institution?

Ageless Ace: Jaffna's Shan Thayalan Dominates Masters Athletics at 66

While many people—let alone athletes—at the age of 66 have long hung up their boots, settling into retirement and relying on medications to ease joint pain, Northern Province's sporting stalwart Shan Thayalan is rewriting the rules of aging. A legendary athlete and proud alumnus of Jaffna Hindu College, Thayalan continues to defy expectations with remarkable energy and determination. Far from slowing down, he remains a fierce competitor on the international masters athletics circuit, proving that passion and perseverance don't come with an expiry date.

Shan Thayalan

His recent performance at the 11th Sri Lanka Masters Athletics Championships once again reaffirmed his status as a living icon of Sri Lankan sport. Competing in the 65–69 age category at last weekend's championships, held at Colombo's Sugathadasa Stadium, Shan Thayalan delivered a truly remarkable multi-event display. He clinched a gold medal in the pole vault with an impressive leap of 2.1 meters, demonstrating precision and agility. Not content with a single podium finish, he also secured a silver medal in the javelin throw, launching the spear a commendable 28.87 meters. Rounding out his formidable outing, he placed fourth in the discus throw, registering a distance of 24.95 meters.

The championships attracted a robust field of seasoned athletes, drawing participants not only from across Sri Lanka but also from international contingents including India, the Maldives, Canada, and several other nations. Amidst such diverse and experienced competition, his achievements stood out, reaffirming his widespread reputation as one of Sri Lanka's most versatile and persistently successful sportsmen.

This recent triumph is far from an isolated incident. Shan. Thayalan is no stranger to breaking records. In the 2024 edition of the very same tournament, he shattered the existing national record in the pole vault for his age category, clearing a remarkable 2.32 meters – a full two centimeters beyond the previous benchmark of 2.3 meters.

From his formative school days, Shan Thayalan consistently excelled across a broad spectrum of sports, including cricket, football, hockey, basketball, and track and field athletics. Remarkably, during his youth, he achieved the rare distinction of representing the Jaffna District in all four major team sports—cricket, football, hockey, and basketball—a feat seldom matched in Sri Lanka's extensive sporting history.

His versatility transcended the playing field. He became a certified umpire in cricket, football, hockey, and basketball, and also served as a qualified athletics official, timekeeper, and starter.

Beyond his personal athletic accomplishments, Shan Thayalan made enduring contributions to sports administration and education. Before retiring, he served with distinction as a Deputy Director of Physical Education. In this influential capacity, he mentored generations of young athletes and played a pivotal role in shaping and institutionalizing sports development across the Northern Province. His legacy is one of tireless dedication, both on and off the field, to the elevation of Sri Lankan sport.

The toll of the missing: narratives of impunity, homicides and grief

BY: **Jeevan Thiagarajah**
Former Governor Northern Province/
Former Member Commissioner
Election Commission.

People becoming unaccounted for as a direct result of, or in connection with armed conflicts and other situations of violence is unfortunately, a common phenomenon throughout the world. The continuous emotional struggle endured by families of missing persons is an incomparable suffering.

Absence of credible answers on the fate and whereabouts of their missing relatives drives the families to search relentlessly for meaning and for: knowledge of the exact circumstances of the disappearance; Families face the dual challenge of carrying on with their daily lives and, at the same time, dealing with the absence of their loved one. Moreover, the uncertainty over their relative's fate leaves them perpetually torn between hope and despair.
The 2011 report of the Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission (LLRC) in Sri Lanka recommended that "a comprehensive approach

to address the issue of missing persons should be found as a matter of urgency as it would otherwise present a serious obstacle to any inclusive and long-term process of reconciliation".

Adopting all feasible measures to account for persons reported missing as a result of armed conflict, and providing their family members with all available information thereon, is a legal obligation imposed on states by International Humanitarian Law (IHL). Families of missing persons constitute a sub-group of victims of armed conflict, and as a general rule, some of their needs are shared by some or all other victims. Nonetheless, families of missing persons face

a specific reality of having to wait for an answer about the fate of their missing relative(s), and in light of that develop specific needs. Therefore, it is essential to assess the needs of missing persons' families before embarking upon any action in their or their missing relatives' favour.

Key accomplishments and progress from 2018 to 2025

Activity	2018 – 2020*	2021 -2022*	2023 -2025*
Number of complaints received / Transferred	14,702	20,876	23,752
Number of complaints verified and included in the list	14,988	14,988	21,374
Number of complaints acknowledgements sent	11,255	14,988	21,374
Number of Preliminary inquires conducted	68	395	6,449
Number of COAs / CODs referred	-	220	3,121
Number of family revival payments referred	51**	218	4,611

*: Figures are in cumulative basis

**: Interim relief payment of Rs.6000 on monthly basis

The needs expressed by the families of the Missing can be broadly categorised as:• The need to know the fate and whereabouts of the missing person, as well as circumstantial information related to his/her disappearance • Emotional needs • Economic needs • Legal and administrative needs• Needs relating to acknowledgement and justice.

The families of missing persons often want acknowledgement of: • the missing person's dignity and intrinsic value; • the fact that the disappearance took place; • the perpetrators' responsibility; and• the steps that need to be taken to address the occurrence of disappearances.

The Office on Missing Persons (Establishment, Administration and Discharge of Functions) Act No. 14 of 2016 (OMP Act) was enacted in August 2016. On 28 February, 2018, His Excellency the then President, Maithripala Sirisena, on the recommendations of the Constitutional Council board members as the Commissioners established the Office of Missing Persons (OMP).

The OMP has categorized its data of 14, 988 cases into three major phases, prioritizing the incidents of the missing persons that have occurred more recently.

The first phase: cases between 2000-2021l; Second phase: cases between 1981-1999; Third phase: cases occurred before 1980

The Act outlines the functions of the Office (OMP Act, Section 13): To search for and trace missing persons and to clarify the circumstances; To make recommendations to the relevant authorities to ensure non-recurrence; To protect the rights and interests of missing persons and their relatives and To identify proper avenues of redress; to collate data from existing sources and centralize all available information in a database.

In accordance with the Cabinet decision dated 14th March 2022, the OMP has managed to conduct a total of 6,449 inquiries. The inquiries led to the following outcomes:

- o 2,521 families referred to Registrar General to obtain Certificates of Absence.
- o 428 families referred to Registrar General to obtain Certificates of Death.
- o 3,752 families supported with family revival payments. (Annexure 03)
- o 18 missing people were located and reported to the relevant authorities.
- o 1,280 complaints referred to relevant agencies for further investigations.
- Complaints regarding missing and disappeared persons received directly by the OMP's Head Office (2018-2023) NO of files 1,377
- Complaints regarding missing and disappeared persons received directly by the four Regional Offices of the OMP (2018-2023) 1,354
- Reports regarding missing and disappeared persons received from MNIR 14,702
- The lists of armed forces personnel who went missing in Action, forwarded by Sri Lanka Army 3257
- The lists of armed forces personnel who went missing in Action, forwarded by Sri Lanka Navy 452
- The lists of armed forces personnel who went missing in Action, forwarded by and Sri Lanka Air Force 34
- Reports regarding missing and disappeared persons received Sri Lanka Police 5,307
- Reports regarding missing and disappeared persons received from WGEID 12,664
- Reported to various institutions and commissions (unverified) 39, 417

The need to address the effects include:

1) Psychosocial issues of the members of the family, consequent to the loss of the family member,
2) Post traumatic condition of the relatives of Missing Persons,
3) The next–of–kin's belief that their loved one/ones are still living and being held in custody,
4) Inability to exercise the legal rights of the missing persons in their absence and absence of a death certificate,
5) Reluctance of relatives to obtain Death Certificates/Temporary Death Certificates due to the fact that the missing person/persons will come back home one day and due to misinformation given by NGOs and some people for monetary gains,
6) Abuse of the rights of Women and Children,
7) The existence of a large number of widows due to missing of their husbands, who were the bread winners in the family, on–availability of a permanent source of income/meaningful livelihood for them,
9) Difficulties in continuing educational needs of the children,
10) The presence of disabled person/persons in the family and difficulties in feeding them and fulfil their day to day needs including medical treatments and related facilities. Some of them are either elder brother or sister or both who were the bread winners in the family,
11) The huge responsibility of women in Women-Headed Households towards maintaining the family by fulfilling their day to day needs. This has become a serious issue to the women who have no proper income and no relatives to help them,
12) Drug Abuse, increasing trend of consumption of liquor and related crimes,
13) Culture related issues,
14) Loss of self–esteem and dignity,

Understanding Suffering.

People who have undergone terrible ordeals have the unshakable convictions that Only someone who has endured the same experience can properly understand others and when the extent of their suffering has been fully grasped enables them to share it uninhibitedly. This attitude helps people to form bonds of solidarity, which in turn may alleviate their suffering and help them to eventually social ties.

Ending Psycho Social Isolation

When affected persons share their experiences with others, family members come to realize that they are not the only ones carrying such a burden. They can talk freely about personal experiences and more importantly mention their missing relatives without fear or burdening others. Being able to express their distress of their relatives' absence can have a significant impact on their ability to cope.

Symbolic measures to be initiated immediately • A National Day to remember all the victims of the conflict should be declared. • The government should issue a public apology in recognition of past violence and initiate political and constitutional reform to resolve the conflict. • Commence discussions across Sri Lanka on what should be part of a memorialization initiative, with space provided to remember and acknowledge the violence of the past. Source (KEY ISSUES TO CONSIDER FOR TRUTH, JUSTICE AND REPARATIONS IN THE IMMEDIATE AND LONG TERM Centre for Policy Alternatives (CPA) May 2015)

LAST RITE

Translated from the original Tamil short story ***kadaicik kaiṅkariyam*** (கடைசிக் கைங்கரியம்) from the 1964 collection of short stories titled ***akkā*** (அக்கா) by **A. Muttulingam.**

Translated by:
Eḻuttukkiṉiyavaṉ
(எழுத்துக்கினியவன்)

Cry, Thaṇigāsalam, cry. Don't stand silently like a tree. Your own wife, that saint who bent her head to receive your thāli in a promise to share in your joys and sorrows till death do you part, now lies here as a corpse.

But you stand there staring at a distance. Is your heart made of stone! Or have you petrified into a statue?

You human worm, cry; you ought to cry.

Tears, flood forth! Stream out of his deadened eyes!

He must indeed cry.

Thaṇigāsalam sits leaning against the eastern pillar, like a piece of dead wood. His left hand bent to support his chin. With eyes reddened like kōvaippaḻam, and hair disheveled, he looks spent.

Who wouldn't? Who could sit up with pride after having lost one's wife?

There on the bed, they have laid out Kamalā, nay the corpse, like a bag of skin and bones.

A clean white sheet is draped over her. Sandalwood paste in her eyes! Dried thirunīṟu on her forehead; vermillion on top of it; they have taken care to do all the ritual decorations worthy of a high-status corpse without leaving anything amiss.

Someone had even tied her feet together with a jute rope, Criminals!

A lamp by the headboard of her bed flickers as though it would go out at any instant, illustrating the impermanence of life.

She is unaware of all these 'festivities.'

She is a corpse!

"aṇṇai, where is the room key?"

Thaṇigāsalam raised his unkempt head to lift his gaze up to the top of the opposing pillar.

The key was safely ensconced there.

"dī… Kamalā! When you left that key there, did you realize that you would never pick it up again?

What patient imagines death? Everyone believes that they will get better.

Sāmpasivam stopped by. "What is this Thaṇigāsalam, you sit here crestfallen. This isn't a sudden shock, is it; she has been bedridden for days … … … "

"What can we do; When we took her to hospital, she appeared to be stable… … mmm … … this is the nature of tuberculosis."

Who said tuberculosis is the cause of death? Who would know the real reason why she died?

He looked at Kamalā; He looked at the humongous satinwood box that lay next to her with its mouth gaping open.

It was silently inviting her, "Come, come."

Her cracked lips. Once they were red like kōvaippaḻam.

A housefly flew in from somewhere and perched itself on her lower lip. A second one followed suit.

Her slender fingers did not attempt to gently shoo them away as usual. Nor did her eyes well up, saying "would you come here and fan me? Why do you not pay attention to me now?"

She remained dead.

How illness changed her! Earlier, he couldn't even go near her. He could never tell when her temper would flare up. "Kill me, I will die," she would scream.

Perhaps all that screaming probably led to half of her life energy storming out of her body.

Why was she plagued with doubt, why was she quick to anger, even as she was emaciated, and her body was without strength? From brushing her teeth at dawn, till giving her medicines at bedtime and gently massaging her legs, he took care of her. His respite was

only when he was at work.

Nevertheless, she could not stand the sight of him.

Why? Why?

That day, Thaṇigāsalam was buried in never-ending work at the office. Not just that day, but for a month, the new manager at work cursed the old manager, and turned all the old files upside down in the name of streamlining.

Until his lady Muriel intervenes to say, "darling it's too late," he would not leave the office. How would he know about Thaṇigāsalam's darling wife and the rare illness that plagued her?

When Thaṇigāsalam stepped into the house, his wife was the devil incarnation herself.

"Why so late?"

They were ordinary words. But the tone in which she uttered them was enough to shake heaven, earth, and the netherworld!

Thaṇigāsalam felt as if someone had slammed his heart with an iron rod.

"You don't have to tell me anything. I know. The whole town's laughing at your dalliances. I am indeed on my way to death…. you and that Mary … …"

"Kamalā!"

"Why are you shushing me… … I will ask… … that is exactly how I will ask."

She screamed like the devil.

Thaṇigāsalam did know what he would do if he succumbed to his anger. But he restrained himself. He touched her shoulder gently and tried his best to console her saying "Kamalā, don't shout, Kamalā! This screaming has devastated your body. How many times did the doctor tell you so? Lie down, my darling Kamalā."

But her suspicion was never quelled.

She was convinced that Thaṇigāsalam had betrayed her and was now trying to pull the wool over her eyes.

Was she wrong to suspect him? She certainly had a shrewd understanding of the male psyche.

adi Kamalā, you were not wrong at all. You were completely right. I betrayed you. I betrayed you wholesale!

The paṟai drum thundered "dum dum dum". He felt as though someone was pounding his heart with a sledgehammer. He wanted to drag those paṟai drummers out by their collars.

He could not come to terms with the fact that his house is now a funeral house.

Did Kamalā really die? Will she never open her eyes again?

What if there was a sudden miracle and she could raise herself up again?

"Indeed māmi, for how long could the husband suffer? He was torn between taking care of his job and the household … he was driven witless… at least her passing will relieve him of this stress… …"

"Still, she had good karma. Not everyone is fortunate enough to die wearing a thāli."

"Was it just a month or two? A whole year – who knows what hardships she had to endure."

"Did you not know?", then in a hushed voice "It seems their horoscopes did not match at all."

“That is the bane of love marriages … ..”

Thaṇigāsalam felt the anger surge within him. He wanted to tear that dirty mouth to pieces.

Thaṇigāsalam was startled when a lone voice started to lament, “did you leave me, my precious queen.”

It was Rāsam from the house across the street.

If only Kamalā were alive now … …

* * *

He had taken the day off that day. Thaṇigāsalam was at home. Kamalā’s health had improved somewhat. He had given her the morning medicines, put her to bed in the living room, and was pacing in the outer veranda.

Suddenly his instincts telegraphed him. He turned abruptly and was shaken by what he saw.

She stood holding on to the window bars, her hair undone, looking like terror personified.

“Why are you grinning at her?” she demanded angrily. He turned back around. Only then did he notice.

In the veranda of the house across the street, Rāsam sat combing her wet hair, oblivious to her surroundings.

She refused to believe Thaṇigāsalam despite his earnest and heartfelt proclamations of innocence.

Within a month of her becoming bedridden, she drove away the woman who was the household help. Calling her a “woman” borders on hyperbole.

She was a withered old grandmother.

`Kamalā how did the devil of doubt enter your heart? Do I look like a scoundrel? Do I look so degenerate?’

You did not make a mistake Kamalā. You were completely right. I am a sinner! A sinner unworthy of forgiveness! I realized it today. You realized it long ago.

You are smart, very smart.’

The funeral bustle got going. The menfolk spread out a piece of cloth under the tamarind tree and started playing cards.

Those who knew how to play the game, or those who didn’t get a spot in the game, circled around those playing, and were offering free advice from time to time.

Some of the older folks secreted a couple of cigars for later use, and started smoking one while complaining “what an awful cigar is this? If one were to smoke, one must smoke the VK cigars… … how bitter”. Some others were proffering their chins to the barber for shaves.

Yet others sneaked around to the side yard, and returned smacking their lips, unsteady as their feet refused to move.

On the women’s side, the tray with betel leaves and old gossip kept their jaws in perpetual motion.

A stunning funerary palanquin was taking shape by the main entrance. Māṇikkam, the dead woman’s father, was supervising the preparations. What other opportunity would he get to dazzle the village?

The funeral lamentation was reaching a crescendo. Ensemble and solo performances alternated.

Some women weaved in the petty village squabbles into their lament songs. Others thought of their own dear departed ancestors as a shortcut to summon tears on demand. Those with a constitutional inability to produce tears simply stopped worrying about it. Their stance was that it was enough to reel off the words of the lament fluently.

No one paid any attention to Thaṇigāsalam. He was the only one who truly appreciated the loss of his wife.

Who else would know the unfairness of her meeting her demise helplessly.

* * *

When Kamalā was admitted to the hospital, he dreaded wondering how he was going to cope. But the events in the hospital unfolded in a way that he did not at all expect. She stopped snapping at him and grew silent. Perhaps she had descended into a deep inner trance.

When the nurses stopped by her bed, he made himself scarce. He was deathly afraid of the possibility that she would say something inopportune. But she did not succumb to her usual doubts and suspicions about him. For some reason she observed a fierce silence.

Kamalā… … adi Kamalā… … why did you change that rare trait of yours? Did you suddenly develop total trust in my behavior?

Did you even trust me?

* * *

When the new nurse showed up for night duty, Thaṇigāsalam felt a pang. She smiled needlessly. She spoke up for no reason.

You fool Thaṇigāsalam, did you sense what was going on even then?

When the doctor came to examine Kamalā, he said they needed to be vigilant until midnight that day.

At midnight, they would inject the precious medicine that was obtained from Germany. Once that was administered, she was likely to survive.

Hope flowered within Thaṇigāsalam's mind. Night; Thaṇigāsalam was restless.

The nurse was nowhere to be seen.

Thaṇigāsalam went inside in search of her.

She was standing there. She laughed, "Did you think that I forgot? Put this vial in your pocket. I will go fetch the syringe and cotton wool."

Whatever she said, her gay laughter, like the needle in her hand, killed him.

"Sister, what do you say, will she survive?

He stood there looking piteously as if the tears in his eyes would breach their dam imminently.

He yearned to be hugged and consoled like a baby.

It was clear that he thirsted for consolation.

"You are a man. If you are shaken even for this… when I see you, my heart is shaken, too…. Look … look here –"

As she said these words, her hands clasped his.

What did he say; What did she ask?

He became a cobra swaying under a magic spell.

The flood of time breached its bounds and rushed forth timelessly.

He first saw that dome lamp at a great distance, covered so that the bright light didn't blind one.

His sixth sense must have alerted him to something. He bolted without looking back, but his heart kept pounding.

What he was afraid of had come to pass; she lay in an untidy heap. Half in bed, and half outside, she hung there helplessly.

Her slender long hands lay there abandoned.

* * *

Does he have the right to conduct her funeral rites?

One or two people who were keen to send Kamalā to the cemetery on time were busy bustling around assisting the Hindu priest overseeing the rites.

"Where is Thaṇigāsalam?"

He did not budge.

"eda thambi, Thaṇigāsalam, pour a couple of buckets of water over your head and come; the priest is waiting."

Perhaps at least the outer appearance ought to be holy.

He stood rooted to the spot.

"Get up, thambi, the corpse is going to stink."

Thaṇigāsalam felt like knocking his teeth off.

Corpse? Stink?

He felt like sobbing.

"Remove your shirt, Thaṇigāsalam."

He shifted a little and removed his shirt in disgust.

Something fell at his feet and shattered.

It was nothing but that medicine vial that the nurse had given him. That famous German medicine that had the power to arrest a departing soul and prevent it from leaving the body.

He became petrified again.

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