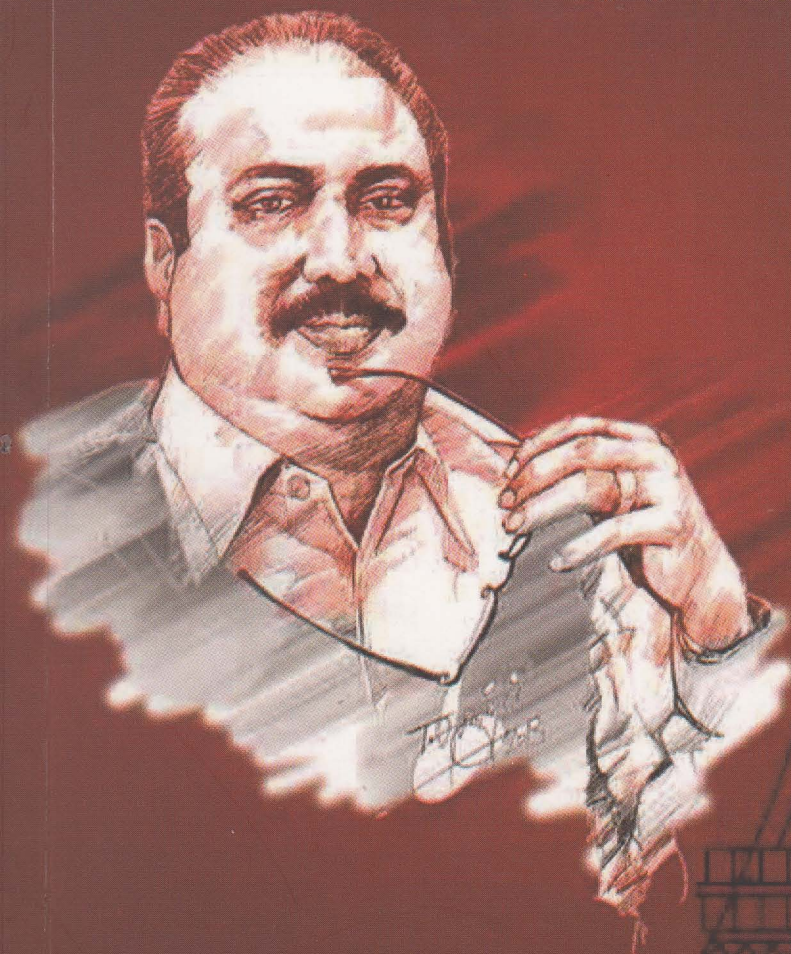
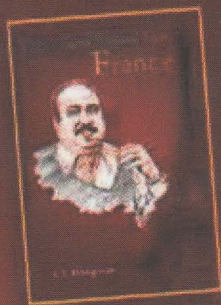


Tamil Stories from France



V.T. Elangovan

UMi
The Ultimate



His stories reveal the deep seated casteism , untouchability and a firm attachment to tradition and religious tenets even in the midst of the destruction caused by the ethnic war and their tendency to bid adieu to feelings of humanism. The stories spit fire and anger against such trends.

It nails our false sense of pride about how the displaced Tamils are earning in thousands and lakhs and leading high standard of lives. These stories shock us and leave us flabbergasted. They provoke thought and also spit out a new light.

Namakkal
S.India.
2012

- K. Chinnappa Bharathi
(Novelist)

When I read my friend Elangovan's stories, the term 'uncompromising realism' is the one that suggests itself to me. The mental state described by Elangovan is very clear. He simply tears open the distressing and disagreeable state of affairs resulting from displaced life. France has a firm place in the refugee Tamil literary history. When one takes an objective look free from likes and dislikes, one can see a deep multifaceted dimension in France's refugee Tami literature. We have to admit that this short story collection of Elangovan's does provide an extension to that dimension.

I congratulate Elangovan for the excellent characterization in evidence in these short stories.

- Professor. Karthigesu Sivathambi

Colombo.
2006

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V. T. Elangovan



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Foreword

I received training in old Tamil classic literature in the cradle itself very early in life.

Yes... I had heard any number of old literary poems, stories mythological, epic and moral stories from my mother who lacked basic education.

My parents, who knew by heart thousands of poems had a knack of quoting and explaining them at opportune moments.

I can say that it is this which caused members of our family to develop a flair for and familiarity with literature.

It seems that my eldest brother Naventhan (Thirunavakkarasan) used to read poet Bharathi's "Panjali Sabatham" (vow of Panajali) even at the age of ten and my mother would explain its meaning.

Thus did we grow..!

I wrote a few short stories and a novel in the middle seventies and showed them to comrade K. Daniel.

Along with social outlook, they must guide one in enrichment of life and infuse hope. We must be careful that obscene descriptions do not predominate, he said. He added, "your poetry is good. So, continue to pay attention to it."

At that time, a few stories got published.

I remember that a story won a prize in the competition conducted by the Tamil association of Colombo University.

Writings born out of mental turmoil and emotional outburst turned out to be poems.

In the country and after displacement too, the number of poems recited in Radio and Television seminars were plenty.

I had to write a lot of poems for these. For a short period of time, I did not write short stories.

On coming to Paris, I contributed my mite to enhance the literary pages of "Paris Eelanadu" at the request of the editor Mr. S. S. Kuhanathan who is an intimate friend of mine.

Although I have been living in Paris and the city of Toulouse for over twenty one years, I do visit several parts of Europe on literary trips.

The city of Toulouse is situated in south France and is famous for the manufacture of the best planes - Air bus. It is a beautiful and peaceful place.

Friends used to ask me, why I did not write that much. Amidst all the pressures of a mechanical life, I managed to keep awake till dawn at times and wrote a few stories moulded in my mind for a long time. They were published. I also added a few stories written earlier. I could not locate some stories written in the seventies.

Although I had been put in the way of arts, literature and politics by my elder brothers right from my childhood, when I was given to self thoughts which brought in me an awakening, I was attracted by progressive literary movement.

We brought into our literary team a lot of youngsters with the help of the camaraderie and friendship of bosom comrade K. Daniel, "Palkalai venthan" Sillaiyur Selvarajan, and "Bharathinesan" V. Sinnathamby.

I could also serve as the secretary of the people's association of arts and literature, which had K. Daniel as president.

Although I have already published three anthologies of poetry and a few collections of articles numbering sixteen in all, I derive a special satisfaction in publishing these short story collections.

All the stories found in this collection are not born out of imagination. They are the experiences gained from living and interacting with people.

I have put in black and white the expression of real life emotions and outbursts.

These stories comprise the virtues and defects of ordinary displaced folk, their desire for comforts of life and the change occurring in their family lives once they attain a comfortable level and evidence of humanism being given the go-by.

Earning money by any means false prestige foolish tendencies...

In the midst of such folk who plough such a tortuous furrow the very thought of trying to live as a writer full of humanism may look strange to a few.... What to do..... A life that has run along...

I must emphasize a few truths. It may be bitter to some.

The People's literature is defined as one which is taken from the people and returned to the same in a moulded form.

My thanks to the editors of journals, magazines and websites for publishing my stories readily.

My thanks are also due to K. Chinnappa Bharathi, one of the leading Indian novelists for providing a preface to this collection. Professor K. Sivathamby for giving his views on my stories and Professor S. Chandrasekaran who has always been encouraging me in my endeavours. And to UMI publishers for having brought out the original Tamil book so grandly.

Now readers... I solicit your views.

vtelangovan@yahoo.fr
0033 950 49 32 32
0033 601 73 82 27

- V. T. ELANGO VAN
(France)

Translator's Notes

While translating this collection of stories penned by Mr. Elangovan, I found that an avid average Tamil of Sri Lanka longs for normalcy and peace in the land besieged by ethnic riots. When he finds this elusive, he derives some solace and happiness from the fact that the displaced Tamils make a decent living in countries like France, Canada, London and Australia. But this joy of his is short lived as he is dismayed by the cultural decadence which wealth has brought with it.

Betrayals, elopements, extra-conjugal relationships, the concept of live- in couples and the law protecting disobedient children leave him utterly anguished. Traditional values of Tamil society are thrown to the winds and moral turpitude holds sway.

This kind of nosedive after being hounded out of their native soil by some of the cruellest ethnic riots in the history of mankind makes one wonder if it has been a case of 'from the frying pan into the fire.'

The first story talks of a sulky old woman thoroughly disenchanted with her life due to failing health awaiting her end, to be released from a jail -like life.

Then we have a father's vain attempt to correct an earring son who invokes the law against him. And the father resigns himself to his lot.

An association meeting is depicted as being a drinking bout and small talk.

A man who goes out of his way to help people dies by being hit by a vehicle in a cruel quirk of an unfair destiny.

A man finds himself unable to offer adequate help to the family of a close friend killed by a bullet.

One Udayan ditches a girl after having had his fill of her, once his marriage is arranged.

Then we have Sridevi leaving her would-be husband high and dry as she flits from one man to another until she settles down with one younger than her.

And Sakunthala abandons her husband Nathan soon after marriage to be a live-in couple with one Jegan, his friend. A distraught Nathan vomits blood as he is taken to the hospital when he learns Sakunthala is admitted in a maternity clinic for delivery.

Another story finds old man Karthikesu master beginning to feel young as he is excited about the arrival of his granddaughter from abroad.

The next story relates with poignancy how a five year old daughter has got used to alerting people at home about possible bomber attack in war ravaged Sri Lanka.

Story number 11 finds Balasingam making light of his wife's death as he continues on his mission of toil to earn enough to redeem his elder sister's lands as she has four daughters to settle.

The twelfth story is about the pining of a girl for her father's return and reunion with them from abroad.

Story 13 finds Anandan, a government servant championing the cause of the people to get them their civic amenities. And he has to contend with the foreign peace keeping forces who harass them.

Thiyagar runs a restaurant in France. A french customer after having failed to get his son to his custody from his divorced wife narats his tale of woes and gets consoled by Thiyagar. The customer admires the culture and the family life of the Tamil in the 14th story.

15th is a kind of love story.

16th and the last story is all about local politics and how a bully is pulled up by a wine shop owner who calls a spade a spade and points out his follies.

The author Elangovan's characterization stands out in all these stories and he is rather blunt in drawing attention to the foibles of his fellow men as he is saddened by their maladjustment of values. He employs a lucid style in his writing.

Let us hope and pray that Elangovan's dream of a peaceful and comfortable life of dignity and honour for his people in their own land and a return to an exalted life based on values would soon be fulfilled.

- S. Visweswaran
Chennai – 600 041

Preface

Short story is a very important literary genre. One must be able to take up a single incident from real- life happenings come across right in front of one's eyes and bring out the realities of man's life. This must be done in a clear cut manner. The words and style of language must pack punch and economy of words must be in evidence. It must be like lithe physique shorn of jugglery of words and needless details which are veritable flab that hang from the body. It must be like a healthy body with the nerves taut. To ensure this, one needs extensive literary training and memory power born of scholarship so necessary for command of language.

More than this a healthy outlook on life a capacity for love and capacity for love and affection and noble intention must cause in the reader's mind a tingling restlessness of thought.

I got the opportunity to meet my friend Elangovan for the first time at the international conference of Tamil writers held in Colombo in 2010. I could meet a number of displaced Tamil writers from various countries there. Notable among those who impressed me were Udayanan of London and V. T. Elangovan of Paris. But after the Colombo meeting with Elangovan , meeting him has become rare like a meeting during travel. He had given me a few books there. I had read them and pointed out the plus points and minus points. I had suggested that if he wrote a novel, narrating his wide experiences it will become one worthy of being talked about. I received no reply.

Suddenly last month, he telephoned and said, "I am Elangovan of Paris; I have come to Chennai." He visited me at

my house. It was then that he requested me to give a foreword to a book of short stories which he was going to publish.

Today, whether it is a novel or a short story, they discard realism which would bring out all the manifestations of human life, which is a literary trend. Instead, they create an illusion that ruins the human personality or makes it sick. Hailing this trend and bathing it in praise such perversities come to be worshipped. It looks as if that such terms as realism, critical realism and socialistic realism and such ideas are disappearing from the thoughts of critics and writers slowly but surely. We see even progressive writers substituting what they call modern literature in place of realistic literature. And one is at a loss to understand what exactly they mean by it.

Today in this world we find that monarchical capitalism is wearing a mask over its exploitation and parading it as privatization, liberalization and globalization and is masking its face of exploitation. One wonders if modernism also is moving about with a mask to oppose realism and socialist realism. The cruel face of exploiters consisting of privatization, liberalization and globalization is spreading its hand of modern exploitation. The writers who are unable to realize that the toiling masses are rising against this modern exploitation through struggles and protests are washing their hands off realism. One wonders if they are engaging themselves in twisting the ideas in the name of modernism and post modernism.

In this complex problem, amidst such scarcity of social outlook and ideological thought among the progressive writers, one gets a feeling of consolation on finding that the displaced Sri Lankan Tamil writers and others are exhibiting a healthy trend that continues.

Most of their creations come to our notice as an outlet for their keenness and indignation to express their determination to safeguard their lives, culture and values. This is a direct consequence of their long struggle to secure their rights.

His stories reveal the deep seated casteism , untouchability and a firm attachment to tradition and religious tenets even in the midst of the destruction caused by the ethnic war and their tendency to bid adieu to feelings of humanism. The stories spit fire and anger against such trends.

On the other side his stories expose the false lives being led by their displaced people. Showing contempt for their culture and tradition based on values, we find women begetting children without caring to maintain the structure called family. Choosing to live with another man as though in a rented house, sticking to him as long as he is wealthy and then parting both the sexes, indulging in drunken revelry a readiness to sell their body in order to get money for leading a life of luxury, seeking alimony from the husband if and when divorcing him in order to maintain self and children, the husband or lover abetting the crime of such a woman by paying up as per the law of the land, the children impertinently disobeying parents and invoking the local law against violence against children if they are pulled up, so on and so forth. One can see in his stories all the misery, tragedy, discontent and the urge to live at all costs- such unacceptable things are dealt with.

It nails our false sense of pride about how the displaced Tamils are earning in thousands and lakhs and leading a life of high standard. These stories shock us and leave us flabbergasted. They provoke thought and also throw out a new light.

It is the vicissitudes of life which would pave the way for people to achieve great things provided of course, they understand them in the right perspective. Thus has Elangovan begun to get moving. Let us expect he would live up to our faith without belying it. Let us wish him success.

Affectionately

Namakkal,
South India.

- K. Chinnappa Bharathi
(Novelist)

01 - 05 - 2012

Sun and Snow

It was the month of February; time was about four thirty in the afternoon. Thangamma who was lost in thought seated on the sofa, felt a sticky sensation in her throat. Her eyes grew misty and tear-drops fell. She cleared her throat and checked herself.

She caught her hip with one hand and the corner of the sofa with the other and got up. She slowly walked towards the kitchen table and drank a little water kept on it.

She returned to the hall, pushed the curtain near the balcony and looked out through the glass door. Snow flowers were flying about in the sky getting into the beauty of the hazy air. They looked like so many coconut flowers poured from the sky.

"Oh, what a lovely sight..." Thangamma forgot all her worries and lost herself in admiring the falling of dew-flowers. Even as her face touched the glass that had congealed in the cold and felt ice cool, she did not take her eyes off.

Only as the stiffness caused in her heel reached her shoulder along the spinal cord causing pain, did Thangamma take her eyes off the scene and slowly moved towards the sofa and resumed her seat.

That sofa could accommodate three persons. She slowly stretched her legs, improvised the cushion as pillow for her head and lay down.

"Although it is a beautiful sight, this kind of snow falling, can it ever be like our country..? They say our children have been arrested and locked up in prison. Will that prison life also be like this..?"

Once again, her eyes grew moist.

"If only my husband had been alive, will my plight be like this? Oh.. my God... .. He had just gone to take rest after taking food... .. Not even half an hour would have passed... .. He fell from the cot and became unconscious... .. He had gone away leaving us... .. With this month of May, twenty four years have passed..."

"How many scenes have I witnessed with this small eye? The agony undergone by me as I tried to bring up my children with his pension from his teaching job. We could maintain our life due to the good yields from the fields. I also put up a house garden, maintained all the family members and brought up the children with considerable difficulty."

"When he died my son was sixteen. He was not gifted to survive to see the good and bad in our lives."

"How many times did my elder brother Kannaiah ask him when he was alive will you give me your pretty girl Vasantha..? Shall take her with me and bring her up with due care.

Once he died we have become too low for everyone. All the three children of my elder brother are in Canada... It is as a result of the number of times I walked to his house in order to give Vasantha in marriage to his middle son that I must have developed the pain in my heel."

"In the end, the boy could not find a suitable match. And it is he who wrote to me asking for Vasantha's hand. My nephew is of my own blood. Even for that my brother wanted to know how much cash I would give..... He insisted and got four lakhs rupees. Did I send her without dowry? I had transferred the house and property in her name and also given a lot of jewels as per custom."

"The girl is also now in Canada fairly comfortable and well off. She has two children also. It is my son Balan who grabbed the pension money also from me and played out his trick. He also failed in studies... What to do? I pampered him and brought him up without allowing him to move with anyone. But, he fell into bad company and picked up all the vices and I felt uneasy hearing the gossip of the people."

"My son... .. do not roam about like this. The country is also becoming worse... ..Find some job and take care of your life... .."

I cried my heart out and pleaded with him daily.

"Oh mother... .. Arrange for money... .. I am going into the ship... .." He told me one day.

"How could I raise the money demanded by him..? I sold off my fields... .. for a low price. I sold all the jewels in my possession like the sacred nuptial ornament made of gold which I had in my husband's memory... .. Two pairs of bangles, chain and choker; only a single string chain remained in my neck.

He got employed in the ship only after having lived in Colombo for six months. Thus did he write to me in Bombay. No letters; for a long time; thereafter I had prayed to any number of Gods.

It was neighbour Rasamma who helped me. The country was also becoming chaotic... I heard postal communication had also decreased.

One year later, a boy from Kalviankadu came home... He said he was working with Bala in the ship and had come down on leave.. He gave a letter and rupees twenty five thousand sent by Bala. I thanked Lord Muruga and received it..”

“Madam.... I am going to Bombay next month and boarding the ship. The ship will go to Egypt and from there to France. Balan and I would get down there. It seems we can apply for refugee asylum there. It seems that there are employment facilities there... .. Do not worry for anything. Balan will write as soon as we alight at France... That boy told me... It was so comforting to hear... ..

Now it is sixteen years since Balan came to France.

Within two years, he is trying to make me shift to Colombo... .. things are very bad in our place... We had come away leaving things Pell-mell; who knows what has happened to the house and other properties.

We have been in Colombo for eleven years in two different places. My pension money will suffice for me only... .. Daughter Vasantha some time sends money... He also used to send like that only... .. Not much expenditure for me... .. I went to all temples there... .. I offered flowers and prayed the God to keep my children safe... ..

That time a family next door got introduced to us... They had three girls.... One of them is married and settled in Canada... The second one had a love affair or something; she said she was going to Swiss. They also had no father.... Only the girl from Canada sends money now and then it seems... ..”

“I do not know what I am going to do with these children... ..” “Thus would the mother shed tears whenever she saw me.... No jewel to adorn even the nose, she would say....

I was reminded of something then... I enquired in the neighborhood She turned out to be a distant relation of ours.....

I got the horoscope of the girl and with the horoscope of my son went to the Dehiwela priest to assess if those horoscopes were suitable for marriage.

He said there was eighty percent agreement and the marriage could be solemnized."

"I finalized the alliance when my son spoke on the telephone... then, he had not got even the nationality... He asked me to send the girl to Singapore. I could not go due to ill health. I sent the girl along with her elder cousin brother... All the expenses of marriage including the jewels for the girl had to be meted out by me.

However, the marriage went off well and my daughter-in-law came back to Colombo."

"Balan also got nationality a few days later... Six months after this, daughter in law also had gone to France. The mother of my daughter-in-law expressed her gratitude with folded hands... She is a good type..."

"Two years back from now my son came to Colombo, and somehow or other managed to take me to France.

When I come here and see he is always roaming about day and night saying he works in a restaurant. She also does the same saying she also works there... .. May be they are able to manage all the strain due to their possessing a car... .."

"She has given birth to two naughty boys... They are very problematic. They eat lunch at school and come only in the afternoon... It is I who keep food cooked and ready...

They won't eat rice and curry at night... .. I have to prepare sandwich and give them... or we have to roast bread and give it with a big ball of meat for side dish We have to fry it

along with small pieces cut from another such meat ball and give them.... At bed time we must boil milk mixed with chocolate powder..."

"They will watch TV till their parents return at midnight... As soon as they hear the knock on the door, they would cover themselves and go to sleep... If I complain... They would say grandma did not give us food.... The food is also not good.... She adds salt with milk... .. Thus would they carry tales... I do not know where they got this kind of character from... .."

"He would come at midnight and watch Tamil TV for some time... As usual I will not be able to sleep.. I shall watch the news. Similarly I shall watch news in the morning also in his company... When they go out, daughter-in-law would hide the remote.... .. Of course I do not try to find it. He does not know it. One day... they seem to have shown Tsunami and all the destruction on TV... Did you see.... He asked; I did not reply... You did not see that mummy. He asked repeatedly; what could I say, I could not find the remote I said."

She said... "If she goes on watching TV right throughout day time, how much will the electric bill escalate.... .." That night I heard a verbal fray ensuing between them in their room.... ..

For one week she was at loggerheads with me.... .. I was the one who had adorned her with nose studs, and all and sent her here.... Now she wants to check the expenses caused by me.

"It is due to her frugality they have purchased house and plot... They also buy Jewellery and live well... I have seen them happy.

As for me... I wish to die where my husband breathed his last... I am wearing one socks over another here.... Should I remain in this country and die in this cold....?

I have had to leave my country when will the problem end...? Oh... my Lord Muruga... .."

A long sigh... ..

"There is terrible pain in my feet, the nerves are tugging ... when I saw the doctor he said I am afflicted by diabetes and has given me medicine. My nose and eyes are watery... .. Also head-ache... Heavy cold and congestion. Unable to close my eyes and sleep even for a minute... .. I take five six tablets during the daytime and cry in my heart... .. Thinking of this and that... ..

My daughter Vasantha also is asking me to come to Canada... Once she visited me here. If it is so cold here... .. Hearing about the cold in Canada, I refused to countenance a trip there... ..

How long, this jail life in this way... .. How will I die... m m m..!"

Water and oil

People used to flock in great numbers to the car festival of Nainativu Nagabooshani amman temple, those days. Kurikattuvan of Pungudutivu and the ports of Iruppitti would overflow with crowds. In the same way , the Tamils flocked to Europe in the eighties.

It was the time when they were migrating to Berlin by the flight Russian Aeroflot plane at reduced rates via Moscow...

Selvaratnam also came to Berlin the same way.. From the camp he stayed here and there before reaching Paris. He squeezed into a room as one of twelve inmates.

He ran from pillar to post, pleaded with several people and registered for

visa with the police. He paid thousand Francs for writing the application for asylum in Tamil and one thousand two hundred Francs for translating into French and applied for refugee asylum. Those days, refugees had been given warm welcome. Of the Tamils who applied, a large number got their applications accepted. When visa card for ten years given Selvaratnam felt ecstatic as if he had won a lakh of money in the sweep.

One who had been working In a restaurant for a small salary for 14 hours, approached several restaurants already contacted once he received the visa card. He asked for a job showing his visa. He was greatly satisfied in getting a job in a French restaurant.

He had to wash the used cups, glasses, spades and all wipe them and arrange heaps of them in order. He had to cut vegetables, onion and all. He must carry out the orders of the chef.

Chef was in charge of the kitchen. Three others were next to him. Two assistants next, there were two others Thus eight people would work in the kitchen by turns day and night. It was a huge restaurant situated near a famous junction in Paris.

As he got his job confirmed on getting the visa card, he gave one thousand Francs to an important person, went to the UN office of refugees with him and gave an application to bring his family struggling in Colombo.

Selvaratnam's wife and daughter were staying in a room in the house of a Tamil family living in the Wattala area of Colombo. He sent 1500 Francs to them every month. It would be converted as 15000 rupees at their end.

He took up on rent in the outskirts of Paris a small studio house in the sixth and last floor in an old building. The rent was 2800 Francs.

After paying for the air passage by showing that he had a house, it took thirteen months for his family to reach there. Still he was happy beyond limit.

He worked day and night and was paying 1500 Francs for savings system.

He put his wife in a school for studying French where teaching was gratis to the foreigners. He was able to trace and find social service organizations and get some help. The French school was also got through their recommendations.

But, even three months of attendance could not make Thangamalar learn even the French alphabets. Then, he sent her to a school for teaching French run by the Tamils for three months.

Now, Thangamalar had learnt to express greetings, count numbers and fill in name and address in documents in French language. She had also got used to shopping and making purchases.

She also got a job in a small hotel as a cleaner of rooms. She would work there for four hours along with two Tamil ladies. Thangamalar, who had become pregnant in the mean time , wanted only a male baby.

A facility for all free tests right from pregnancy to the time of delivery..

The doctor scanned her in the fourth month and said it could be a boy. Selvaratnam and Thangamalar had been talking of aborting the child birth if it was going to be a girl baby. They had planned it would not hamper both of them working and earning money. But, when they came to know it was a boy they cheerfully decided to bring it up.

They worked hard, adopted a frugal life style and also bought an apartment house with three rooms through the money saved through savings system.

The elder daughter Malini was struck by cupid even in her fifteenth year. Their love ripening in two years, they went away to live separatley. Now, she works as a cashier in a supermarket.

They did not approve of them. 'A Christian Boy..' it seemed. Moreover, they did not know which caste he belonged to... .. Thus did they wail.

They who had said we have washed our hands off them, began to get somewhat close to them on hearing that a grandson was born. They wished to see the grandson often.

Selvaratnam's son Niresh is now fourteen. He is studying in college. A pampered child for whom they buy whatever he wants.

He does not like rice and vegetables. His favourites are Mcdonald's food and Pizza. He was now ruining their income slowly but surely.

He drinks in the company of his friends and also smokes. A lot of people complained to Selvaratnam thus. He had enquired of Niresh many a time. His answer was silence. He also tried talking tough and shouting but... ..

Any food desired by him must be provided. No rice and curry School canteen food in the afternoon.

One had to pay money for it Sandwich must be prepared at home. Only Mcdonalds food and Pizza now and then.... Sometimes, he would telephone and get 'Pizza' delivered at home.

Not only in food. He also teamed up with friends and spent money like mad on cigarette, Beer and all, ruining the family financially...

One day, Selvaratnam walked home after getting down at the Metro after a tiring day's work. His apartment was not too far away from the metro station just about 250 metres, It was four 'o' clock in the afternoon. He had to take some rest at home and start again at six' o' clock.

There was a park near the street; seated in the bench were four young fellows. They were talking aloud. Selvarathinam looked closely. A dark fellow, An Arab boy and a French chap and his son Niresh with them. All had cigarettes in their hands.... and Beer bottles lay on the bench.

Selvaratnam was furious..!

“Niresh.. your dad is coming..” said one of the boys.

“I have told him several times... Do not intervene in our affairs... This is our freedom... Don't worry... He will not come this side... ..”

“Let him come home... I shall show him... .. Selvaratnam walked homewards raving mad.

“Thangam... .. See how you have spoilt him by pampering him as the only boy... .. I bring everything by toiling in the heat of the kitchen and in snow - cold... .. I bought whatever he wanted... I brought up the elder one with great care and exclusive attention... She went away blowing in air all my traditional respect and honour... I survived due to my love for the little grandson... This fellow... He is recklessly going astray even at such a small age...

Thangamalar kept her mouth shut on finding her man so hot. She shed tears as she prepared and brought tea for him. As he picked up the tea cup, Niresh entered.

The tea cup went flying with a noise in the kitchen table. He got up, caught hold of Niresh's shirt and shook him hard full of anger.

“What kind of habit are you developing..? What sort of company are you mixing with... Such a disgrace... you need cigarette, beer and all at this age..? I find cigarettes in your table... Also in the balcony.... Have you become so big..?” So saying, he slapped him twice on his cheek and then thrashed him on his back by catching hold of his hair and bending him...

“Oh... Lord Muruga... don't kill the child...” Shouting thus, Thangam intercepted took a few hits on herself and then pushed the boy into the room and closed the door.

Breathing hard and noisily, Selvaratnam came and sat on the sofa and switched on the TV Tamil channel.

Hardly ten minutes later, there was a knock on the door. Thangam opened the door.. Three policemen entered.

“Who is Niresh... what is the problem..?” They enquired.

“I am the one who telephoned... There is problem in this house daily... Every day, my dad shouts at me.. Tries to hit me... see how he has hit me in my face now... There is the hand impression in my face...

I feel great pain on my back also due to the thrashing . I am not able to study in peace... He orders that I should not meet any one... I want freedom... ..”

“No problem with my mother.. Explain to him; he is my problem...”

Niresh complained in French language.

Selvaratnam was taken to the police station. He shed tears as he deposed in the enquiry that he was suffering a lot due to his children after having showered love and affection on them.

“It is a crime to beat children... Since there has been no charge against you so far, we are releasing you. We understand your position...” So saying , the police explained in a long lecture the law of the land, the rights of children and released him at about five ‘o clock the next day evening.

They also told him he had to seek advice from the consultant at the family wing of the social service centre.

Selvaratnam who came home did not stir out for a week. He also applied for leave to the restaurant on grounds of ill health. After receiving advice from the social service centre, he confined himself at home...

He would watch TV Tamil channal seated in the sofa in the hall ... and also lay in it...

He did not have the mind to drive his son out... Nor could he live alone. Could he live without seeing the children..?

He felt sad on seeing his wife Thangam... similar was her plight...

After a week, he shaved his prickly beard and went to work... on his way back home, he bought two big pizza pieces from the Italian shop.

Opening the door, his son came and said 'thanks a lot'. He planted a kiss on his father and went back to his room with the pizza box.

After a few days Selvaratnam got a week's leave as repair work was carried out in the restaurant. It was seven' o' clock in the evening on Saturday.

"Dad, three friends are coming today... Run up and get pizza, coco cola and sandwich... Mummy has to make good sandwich.."

Niresh said in a mix of French and Tamil.

And Selvaratnam took the basket and got down into the street.

An Administrative committee meets

Efforts are in full swing to conduct the meeting. The honorary secretary has already informed the members through telephone two days earlier. It was customary for the members to attend the meeting without fail. It facilitated everyone that the meeting was held on a Sunday..

The president of the association Anandan started as early as nine in the morning... He bought the necessary items and arrived at the meeting venue at ten minutes past ten.

The secretary informed over the telephone he would be coming late due to an unforeseen problem that had cropped up.

“Look at this man. He asks everyone to come on time. But he comes late.. The president vented his feelings.

Usually, the meeting will be conducted at the house of the convener of the association, Kularatna. Problems will arise if it was held in the homes of others. Sparks would fly at the meeting and there will be heated arguments. The housewives would of course object to the meetings being held in their houses...

Convener Kularatna calls himself a bachelor. He lives alone. Although he belongs to the brother community, he has a wonderful heart. Two big rooms, a big hall, kitchen... a problem – free place..!

A long table in the hall. Eight chairs around it. A sofa by its side in which three can sit. The president handed the basket brought by him to Kularatna. He took out the contents and laid them on the table.

Treasurer Paul Raj also arrived. He gave a bottle of “cœurbier wine” brought by him to Kularatna who received it with a smile of sorts. He took it to the kitchen and left it under the table there. He was a treasurer just in name. His contribution ends there. That is his lot . If asked about it, he would recite a veritable song of poverty. But, He was a harmless man... He will not speak much at the meeting. Sometimes at the climax, he would ask a few questions as if in a Listeners’ request session.

The convener asked the president to start the meeting as the secretary will come a little late. A few members including Vijayabala who had gone to ‘gambling’ also arrived..

What do you think this association meeting is about..?

Schools of Sri Lanka which have up to fifth standard have an old students’ association in the displaced countries.

They conduct administrative committee meetings. They advertise get-togethers. They announce a number of competitions. In those schools, those who have studied fifth

standard or lower class act as administrators. If one were to convert the money earned by all kinds of toil to the Sri Lankan currency, they themselves become wonder – struck without realizing it themselves. And arrogance and stiff neck result. What to do?

They arrange a number of get-together functions, take photographs of themselves clad in coat and suit and send them to many newspapers. They frame the published photos and reports and hang them at the entrance of their houses.

This “Humanists Association” is one with a difference. They would hold a meeting once every month on a Sunday. All kinds of international matters would be discussed there in depth. Strong views will be expressed. Silly matters will not be taken up there. All the members would disperse in the end only as friends without any bitterness... Again on a Sunday next month as usual..

Kularatna kept the Johnny walker whisky bottle brought by president Anandan and the Perrier soda on the table and called for the meeting to begin.

This association does not entertain ethnic and religious differences. Friendship is considered paramount. Still, sometimes some members do let slip some racial remarks without realizing it in the heat of the moment. On these occasions, the president or secretary would intervene and make them retract such words.

A few glasses also were cleaned and kept on the table. The president looked sharply at them.

Of course they are all well cleaned. Said kularatna in French language. And the president laughed...

The President opened the whisky bottle and poured it in equal amounts in each glass.

Everyone picked up the glasses. They said “ching ching.. for your health...” and then keeping the glass raised, eagerly began their first sip after dashing their glasses mildly.

The president had brought a bottle of Johnny walker whisky and four kilos of beef mixed with bones. He also had the “Dunhill cigarette case’ which he usually smoked...

Kularatna preferred only beef. So also the others... mutton did not agree with a few... Chicken was a thing of which they had grown weary... Oil fat would not agree with all of them; their health was such...

“Machang... Ananth... you prepare the meat curry... I shall prepare dhal curry, coconut sambal and rice already cooked... Ok..”

President Anandan began cutting the meat into small pieces. Although already cut as small pieces, he cut them again perfectly ensuring that there was not even a little fat deposit sticking to the bones.

Secretary Ulaganathan arrived as the first round was coming to an end.

“Sorry... people had come home suddenly. I managed to send them away and brought my car... Children looked askance.... you know that... Book problem... The “three letter” brigade stands at every junctions... The problem is due to this “Adayars..”

You have started the meetings oh, half the bottle is over, it seems..”

Anandan kept a glass near Ulaganathan. Ulaganathan mixed soda and whisky to it in proportion and consumed in one gulp.

Anandan poured a little sun flower oil to the meal, a little salt, onion, chili powder that was Jaffna special, a bit of aniseed and some spices and condiments. Stirring them well, he left it to settle for a while.

Kularatna mixed pepper and Maldives dried fish powder to the dhal curry and made it tasty. He took some coconut flower, pepper, dried fish powder, salt and chili-paste-mixer bought from the Chinese shop, tomato and small onion.

One bottle over another one was opened. Vijayabala felt a little hot. "Boss, meat curry will boil on its own... you come here... what do you say about this Iraq problem... Do you think that the American is doing the right thing... He asked in French mixed with Sinhalese.

Opening the pan in which meat was being heated and stirring it with the spoon, cutting tomato pieces and mixing them and then lighting his Dunhill cigarette near the table, the president began to speak.

"The American thinks he is the policeman of the world and continues to indulge in atrocities. He dropped the atom bomb in Japan and burnt lakhs of people. Even today, the children born there are handicapped.

He did a lot of atrocities in Vietnam and ensured no grass or any vegetation grows there for years, by dropping bombs there... What happened in the end... He lost lakhs of his own people and fled the place in hasty retreat... Even today, he is conducting search missions to trace his missing people there. And now, he is trying to put on a brave face after a heavy defeat ... He produces pictures like Rambo and is taking the gullible people of the world for a ride. They are the root cause of problems in all the countries... what business has he in Iraq? If Saddam Husain is a dictator, let his people or the neighbouring Arab people take care of it... or let the United Nations organization which bends to their whims take care... Why does he invade with his army?

Did he not go to Afganistan to test his bombs that can break concrete bases and penetrate deep and other missiles... In the mean time Taliban is also not acceptable...

Was he not the one who gave a feast to Bin Laden at the white house in order to break up the Russian troops in Afganistan and also help him with arms... Why the Iran-Iraq war was also their gift to Saddam Hussain. But seeing Hussain did not give room for their exploitation and looting they have started giving trouble..

Sadam is a real Iraq army man... He refused to surrender, you know... These are the fighting cocks and aggressors.. That is what he has said... Wait and see Iraq is going to be another Vietnam for them..."

Everyone was listening to president Anandan's speech nodding approval.

"What have you understood that you must nod your heads.? Although I do not understand Tamil, I could grasp the matter a little... But for a few ... "

Kularatna said so with a smile... President Anandan also smiled.

Anandan who went and took a look at the meat curry said, "Luckily., a few more minutes and it would have got stuck to the base of the pan.." and put it down.

Kularatna brought a little meat curry in a cup and kept it on the table. Vijayabala who was walking about in the Hall tensely, picked up a few pieces with knife and fork and put them into his mouth. The president also tasted it a little and was releasing ring shaped smoke.

Paulraj who always stretched his body lazily all the time went and sat on the sofa with a glass. He felt uneasy about all this talk. He said "come on, sing a song".

"Of course... .." Ulaganathan was fond of singing.

"Machang... .. when will the war end in our country... When will our people live without wars and problems..? Our fertile country is being converted into a cremation ground for the sake of their own benefits and to grab power... Whoever comes to power, they also do the same thing... People who think of the country are diminishing in number..."

As the president says the world policemen and his relations are in the background of everything... You know... .." Kularatna drawled.

The President felt like giving another explanation. Before that, Paulraj said in a loud voice "no need for politics, sing a song."

Ulaganathan grabbed the opportunity and got up. He began singing the song "For whom... It is for whom... .." with a glass in hand as if he had excelled Sivaji Ganesan the matinee idol and danced and acted as he sang. He followed it up with "Is this the same girl I had seen in skirt and half saree... .." another hit song and he sang with great feeling. He did sing well.

Quite possibly the songs had relevance to his life... Everyone including the President praised him greatly... Paul Raj also joined in the singing in a mild voice from the sofa.

Before the second bottle could be finished, occasional participant in the meeting Indran showed up along with his colleague at work Kanthan. Indran would work on Sundays. He worked as mason on contract basis in a construction company. Kanthan was his assistant.

Giving them the stuff in two cups, the second bottle also got finished. To get the next bottle, one had to go a long distance. After all it was a Sunday... Time was 2.30 pm. Since Indran and Kanthan wanted to go to work at three 'o' clock, Kularatna served them food. They ate in a hurry and left. That is how they would be. They will come sometimes, they would finish their work and leave. No problem with them.

Kularatna brought a Bordeaux wine bottle from the box under the cot. He always had a box of wine, that had six bottles in stock.

Normally when whisky ran out, wine would arrive. Third bottle of wine was doing the rounds.

"This man Theivendran has gone to London with family. I do not know what his intention is..?" drawled Ulaganathan.

"When did he ever stick to one place. Even in France, he was in Six places ... What use is there in going to different

places making a mess of the child's education... .." Before the President finished, the convenor announced Lunch.

Variety of food items came to the table. Like rice, curry, Sambal, Acharu from Kaluthurai and so on.. Every one helped themselves as they liked. Usually, Kularatna would take a huge quantity, first up. He will not have a second helping. The president was a food lover. He would eat a lot by taking two helpings... Ulaganathan would enjoy the food as he eats... Vijayabala would eat some rice and curry very fast and sit cigarette in hand as if he was looking for something he has lost. Paulraj would struggle to finish even the first helping. If he indulges in too much eating it became a problem for him.

Everyone finished eating... Some problem to be raised and the president explaining it.... If a stage was reached when it was difficult to continue the meeting...

"Let us postpone... I am going to work... If the president wishes, he can rest on this cot ... Ok.." So saying, Kularatna embraced his work, that is sleep on the cot. Ulaganathan fell fast asleep on the sofa... Vijayabala and Paulraj did likewise in the next room...

Everyone got up after seven p.m. in the evening. They took tea. Kularatna took them all in his car to drop them at their respective homes.

Thus ended the humanists association monthly meeting peacefully, happily and without problems that necessitated going to court, unlike the old students association administrative meetings.

How unfair...!

The fast express train that had started from Colombo Fort was speeding towards Kankesanthurai. It will stop only in Anurathapuram, vavuniya and Jaffna stations. Similar trains from Colombo Fort ply to Thalaimannar, Trincomalee, Batticaloa, Badula and Ampanthota.

These fast trains have been imported from France. They run at a speed of 250 kms per hour.

New education policy has been implemented in Sri Lanka. Sinhala, English and Tamil are taught as compulsory languages. From the sixth year, the pupils are taught these two languages also in

addition to their mother tongue. Every student is enabled to study the subject in which he shows an aptitude from the ninth year. There are facilities for that.

Sri Lanka has been divided into four administrative state regions. North-east region, Kandy region, Coastal region and hilly Tamil region. Within these, there is a separate stretch where the muslims live in a majority.

Tamil and Sinhala languages have been recognized by the Government as languages for official work. Appointments are made in all places only on the basis of merit. There is facility to interact with all parts of Sri Lanka in both the languages. Sri Lanka shines as a secular country. Maximum punishment would be awarded for the racial, religious and regional remarks which are considered as major crimes. Central government armed force, state volunteer force, state police force and municipal police are all active.

In the central government armed force, all sorts of people are brought together on the basis of merit. They are joined by state volunteer forces and they engage in development activities in the respective regions. Rivers, ponds and small ponds of villages are deepened, dams constructed, water stored and irrigation works are undertaken. And steps are also taken to safeguard from the onslaught of the soil flood of the hilly terrains.

Agricultural activities in full swing... Import of rice and bye products have long since been stopped. Self sufficiency has been achieved in agriculture and rice and other food bye products are being exported. Food products are being sent to famine stricken countries to their suffering multitudes as gift.

Hospitals at every village and Hospitals with all facilities in every district. Siddha and Ayurvedic wings too function in them with all facilities. Allopathic, Siddha and Ayurvedic doctors consult each other and prescribe the relevant medicines and give the necessary treatment.

Foreign students also undergo training in these hospitals. Medical volunteers go house to house in the villages and take initial steps in hygiene.

Child care centres and old age homes are provided with a lot of facilities. Average age is assessed as 91.

Industrial growth is in abundance. Right from pins to ship, everything is manufactured and gets ready for export.

President and two vice-presidents are chosen through elections. If the president belongs to the majority the vice-presidents will be from the minority community. There is provision in the constitution for the one from the minorities also to become president. Committing irregularities in elections is a big crime. The Judiciary is the supreme power.

Along with the National flag, the state flags are also hoisted in the states.

Mahavali Ganga merges with Thondamanaru in the north.

Nainativu island is visited by thousands of people. Kathirgamam is always full of pilgrims. Same with the Sivanolipadha mountain. Buddhist and Hindu devotees come here to the shrines and worship in unity. Although the political structure does not give priority to religions; people worship in their individual modes.

If one were to bring up new shrines for the public in addition to the big Temples, Viharas and Churches already existing, we have to get the permission of the State government. Employment schemes are implemented for all the people. Salary structure has been drawn up as per needs. The surplus properties of families are taken over by the state government and distributed to the needy.

Facilities have been provided to the people of each region to maintain their culture and carryout all their activities through their mother tongue. Seeing people of all kinds living unitedly

with affinity on the basis of fraternity and equality as the sons of the same mother in Sri Lanka, other countries are astounded.”

One man pined for such a change in Sri Lanka...

“How human life has become so cheap. Selfish people in power are converting the golden country into a mound of ash. They fan the flame of ethnic divide and religious differences. Our country is becoming a bunch of refugee camps. Those who think of the country’s future and development have diminished in number. How can people with humanism put up with the growth of planned sabotage and destruction leading to our country becoming a hunting ground of domineering powers.

Will the time never come when war ceases and people live with equal rights...?”

Thus would that man talk pouring out any number of thoughts... My friend... yes.. he lived in Toulouse city of France, a native of Kaluthurai... He would often tell me to think of such a change..

He was born as the only brother of six sisters in Kaluthurai and studied in the college in Colombo... He was the pampered child of a rich family ... Two sisters.. They are doctors... one of them is married also to a doctor and lives in London... It seems he had loved a girl when he was looking after the business inherited from his father. She was killed by so called Premadasa’s secret regime in his reign... Shattered by the loss, the boy met with a lot of stresses and pressures. And got displaced and came to France in 1991.

He suffered a lot for a few years in France. His friends were also in a similar plight. Then he learnt a little French and settled in a part time job, somewhat. He moved only with a few Tamil families closely. He would receive help only from those friends if and when he had financial trouble or he would get it from his elder sister who was in London.

The name of this friend is Kularatna... He is a wonderful man very innocent without any ill will or malice or jealousy in

his mind... His pet name is George... There was no Sri Lankan family in Toulouse city of France who did not know him. He was dear to all people .. So sweet... Good fellow... Always helpful as far as he could be whenever any one of us approached him.

It seems there were several vehicles in Sri Lanka on account of his father's business... So, he was a good driver even in his youth.. He would be the one to drive the vehicle if any close friend's family wanted to go to some European country or city from Toulouse.

Thus, when Ulaganathan's family went to Paris that day, he drove the vehicle... It was early morning three 'o' clock ... They stopped the car at a petrol bunk on the highway, took coffee, smoked cigarette and started again... Half an hour into the drive, the car was going at a speed of 110 kmp. The engine failed all of a sudden. He stopped the car on the side and was trying to start the engine. Thick fog outside. It was later part of November.. visibility was so poor that it was difficult to see the light of even the vehicles coming close... It was past 3.30 in the morning... The goods carrier vehicle coming from behind hit the car on the side and smashed it... Lo and behold..!

George was hit heavily on the back of his head... He was passing out... Luckily Ulaganathan sitting in the front seat had only a minor injury..!

"Oh my God..." Thus shouting, Ulaganathan who kicked the door by his side open, helped his wife and two children, moaning with injuries in the back seat, to get down... As he called out "George Machchan... George... .." the only response from him was a painful mumble... Ambulance .. helicopter... Everything arrived and took them all to the hospital.

Ulaganathan his wife and children came round somewhat with injuries... But George, he was in coma.. His elder sister and her husband, the doctor couple, came from London to see him... The day next to the beginning of the month of December, he passed away.

I went to see his body kept 600 km away from the city of Toulouse at the final moment.

I called out my friend... cried bitterly... I shed tears... I stood transfixed, lost in waves of thought which came gushing.

As per his wish, his body was taken to Sri Lanka and cremated in Kaluthura... His life had ended at the age of 52. But, we ... the family of Ulaganathan, We are all immersed in endless grief thinking of him..

When I last met him in his house, I said, "Machchan... do not switch off the telephone when you sleep.. You are alone.. Telephone is your only help... If the telephone does not work, we will be scared... We will wonder what has happened to you..."

As I said this he replied, "Machang... if anything happens, you people only will take care you know, inform my elder sister in London.. Send me to Kaluthura, ok..." Did he not say like this.. oh, see how it has happened just like that..

One and half years have passed and I am still thinking of that friend. I cannot forget him. when will peace and tranquility reign in the motherland Sri Lanka which had preoccupied his mind.? We need equality and fraternity ... After all, life is but hoping..

The tale told by a letter

Tsunami waves
attacking... .. It is six
months since it happened... some
people known to me in my village
had written to me in detail.

That day, as soon as I saw the
news on TV, I telephoned to my
brothers in Colombo and learnt all
the details.

My heart fluttered as the
scenes of destruction were flashed
repeatedly on TV.

Still, I am unable to forget it...

When I go to sleep... .. Giant
waves roaring... They come chasing
me along with thousand people.

What a tragedy...

I received a letter yesterday.
A comrade who had moved with me in the seventies...
I had gone to attend his marriage in 1981.

Loving wife.
Two pretty girls were born.
He was a good literary enthusiast.

He listened to my poems in poetry seminars and praised them.

He had been engaged in welding work and running a hire cycle shop.

One with a heart devoid of scheming, he had to get displaced many times due to the activities of the army.

Still , one day the gun of some unidentifiable person got him.

I came to know the news only after a few months.

Even then... I could not know the whereabouts of his family members...

The letter that came yesterday was written by his wife... ..

It read; "Dear brother, you would have come to know that a few years have elapsed since your friend died. My letter will cause surprise to you. I do not know the condition of your family.

It is a good man who knows you who gave me your Paris address. We have two daughters. You may remember seeing them as little children. Our life has become bad.

You would have come to know that our house has got caught in the Military Security Zone. We cannot even go there and see. After living in several places, now we have settled in the backyard of a small house due to the mercy of a house owner in Vaddukkodai.

We have been here for the past one year.

They have also indicated that they find us disturbing and given us strict notice to leave and seek accommodation elsewhere.

Children are grown-up.

I brought them up with extreme care.

They gave a little amount as relief fund. Now they have stopped that also.

No jewels with me. Only by selling them, we have been taking care of the children's education and our life and honour.

Both the children have passed the G.C.E ordinary level. Cannot afford higher studies.

Children and I are engaged in tailoring and catering and just about managing to stay alive.

Now, our position has become worse... a life of starvation... No dress for changing. Unable to sleep as I think of the children...

Some minor debt problems too... ..

We have reached a stage when we can no longer bear the sufferings...

Unable to approach anyone for help...

We would often feel like dying either by consuming poison or jumping into the well or pond... But his life teachings have not made us cowards.

Children must be brought up with honour... .. No way we can live a disgraceful life whatever our sufferings...

You will know about your friend's good heart and his self confidence...

It is his memories that are protecting us...

Can you help us for the sake of your friend considering me as your sister..? We have to move to a different house.

I have to live by doing some small job engaging in some profession. What can I do, dear brother..?

I look forward to any possible help from you. We will be staying at the above address until the end of this month."

I see my friend's family before me.

That letter is still in my coat pocket. I have sent one hundred Euros to a friend in Colombo and requested him to hand it over to the woman.

The money would have been received by her with a value of twelve thousand rupees.

But, my mind... ..

Will that money suffice for even their minimum needs..?

Do they know my position..?

I have two girls... grown up.

I had taken bank loan to run a business.

Business has ended in loss. The bank loan has not been cleared.

At present, I work in a food joint.

If I repay the bank due, rent, electricity bill and for water and all, not even some change will remain with me at the end of the month.

I feel like helping... What can I do..? No money with me... I cannot take a loan from anybody either.

People here who have money are keen on earning more and more buying houses, vehicles... .. And acquiring more comforts.

We cannot expect conscience and humanism from them...

After finishing the night's work , one has to walk some distance to take a bus. It is ten minutes to go for midnight. This is the last bus. I walk fast.

A pretty girl of about fifteen stood under a big tree and came towards me with a smile.

What does she need for life..?

I walk to the bus terminus rather fast pretending not to have seen her.

Passion

Udayakumar pressed the calling bell at the entrance. It was half past eleven at night. Sylvia who came forcibly putting on a smile opened the door.

"Good evening Chéri... .. Come in.." she received him kissed him on his cheeks, embraced him and led him to the drawing room.

The nine year old Jessica was sleeping on a cot inside the room. On the other cot the old mother was lying half asleep.

"Chéri... shall we take food...? She asked. He said,

I have finished, but she pestered him.

A little for my sake, at least sandwich. So saying, she took him by his hand and led him to the kitchen.

"Shall I give something to drink..?"

Give me some wine said Udayan.

She took out a bottle of Borderux wine and opened it. Udayan received it put it on the table in the drawing room and sat down. She brought two glasses. She poured the wine into them and handed over one glass to Udayan.

Udayan consumed it in a single gulp and lit a cigarette. She also sipped a little wine and lighted a cigarette.

It is more than fifteen years since Udayan came to Paris. Four years have passed since he got his French citizenship.

He had met Sylvia when he was working in a three star hotel as a cleaner, seven years ago.

One had to report at Seven O'clock in the morning at the cleaning section. The woman in charge there would allot the rooms to be cleaned for those who report. They would work for four hours, six hours and so on. They would clean about four rooms in one hour.

Udayan had been doing only a number of small part time jobs in the beginning after coming to Paris. Then he got this job as a result of a friend's recommendation. There, more than six women and two men worked. A Bengali also worked along with Udayan.

Before starting to clean and wash one had to collect rugs meant for rooms, Towels, the liquids for cleaning bathrooms, glass and table, shampoo pockets, small soap pieces and all well arranged and piled up in a push cart. Depending on needs one had to enter them in a register and go to every room and use the dust removing machine. One had to change the blankets; rugs

and pillow covers on the cots and clean everything including the lavatory, spick and span.

Usually, some would take away leftovers of food in the room discarded by inmates, concealed in a bag. They may not eat some of them, then and there. If the inmates had kept some change under the pillow rather willingly, they would also be picked up. Some would even steal costly things left in the room. Such an act in the past had caused an inquiry to be conducted and sacking of two persons.

The friendship with Sylvia whom he met there seven years ago is still continuing. She lives in the suburb of Paris.

Now, Udayan is working in a factory. He has to work from nine in the morning to five in the evening. Sometimes, he would also work overtime. Saturday afternoon and Sunday are holidays. If one wishes one can work on Saturday afternoon also. A factory where medicines and chemicals were packed in boxes. As far as Udayan was concerned, it was easy work. Good salary. More than 1650 Euros per month.

Udayan had been investing in two savings fund with some people for the past few years. He has deposited the money got from it in the bank. He has also lent money on interest to a friend who is running a shop. Just like the common desire of any Sri Lankan citizen, his ambition is to buy a house and then run a provision shop or a restaurant.

He has saved more than one lakh Euros in the bank by engaging in varied jobs. Of course there is considerable delight in multiplying it into Sri Lankan currency as one goes to sleep....

No wasteful expenditure. Drinking bouts are there during free time. That too is mostly sponsored by someone.

He is staying in a small studio room in Paris suburb from where he could go and alight in the Metro. Distant relation Eesvaramoorthy is his roommate.

Eesvaramoorthy works as a watchman in a supermarket. Sometimes it will be day duty and some other times night duty. Wife and children are in Colombo.. He has to send money every month.

Parents back home were extremely worried that Udayan, more than thirty eight years in age, was yet to be married.

They discussed an alliance with a graduate girl of the neighbouring village Urumpirai and wrote a persuasive letter to Udayan.

The girl a fine arts graduate of Jaffna University was thirty. The alliance that had dragged on due to issues like dowry problem and malefic planet mars in the horoscope, has taken shape only now. The parents have finalized on the basis of cash of twelve lakhs, house and so on.

Sylvia kept the sandwich on the table. One bottle of wine over, another one is also getting finished. He feels very sleepy. She took Udayan to the nearby cot leading him with an embrace.

Udayan tottered as he disrobed himself and threw away the shirt and pant . Then he reclined on the cot. Sylvia by his side...

It was four thirty in the morning... He got up to pass urine and returned to the cot and lay down. Sylvia's fair hands played around on his black chest that had bushy hair growth... He hugged her tightly and lay there running his hands over the reddish hair at the back of her head... ..

"Chéri... .. I wish to beget a child like you... How long have I been asking you... You have been dodging by saying 'let us wait until I start my own business' If you start a business... I can leave my present four hour job and will help you, you know... If a child is born, then, it will not be a hindrance you see... Jessica has completed nine years of age... She can look after her activities.

Sometimes, she is also asking for a brother...

Come on Chéri tell me...?"

"mm.. mm.. why not...?"

"Shall we go and get married...? How long can we be friends like this...?"

"What about your old Portuguese friend...? Are you not in touch with him now...?"

"He is a mad cap, drink addicted old man... He would drink and roll on the sofa...?"

"You are forty, But, still you are like a ripe tomato..."

So saying he hugged her tightly and kissed her.

"You have not answered my question..." She said coyly.

"Alright... .. I shall enquire at Municipal council and fix a date next month" He said.

She drew his dark lips with her mouth and kissed him.... ..

He flexed his body and sprang to life at ten in the morning...

His limbs ached...

"Sylvi... Sylvi.. Chéri... .. get up"

She got up, prepared coffee and brought it.

As he finished the coffee and got up, she asked him "do you have any money...? I have not paid the rent... The agent has sent a letter... If you have money... please give me... Chéri..."

"I do not have the entire rent amount now... I have only two hundred Euros..." He gave what he had.

Udayan who will not spend money outside, will be inclined to lose money this way.

Sylvia would often cajole him into giving her money for rent, electricity and water charge.

It was five 'o'clock on Sunday afternoon... Udayan lay face down on the cot in his room with his limbs stretched.

Eesvaramoorthy entered carrying whisky bottle, horse radish, Drumstick, small onion, mutton, broken Basumathi rice and a few more things. He got wild looking at Udayan's state.

"He has not come to the room at night. Has been to that woman... Now, he has come here and is weary..." He mumbled to himself.

He put down the meat and other things on the kitchen table and took out the water bottle from the refrigerator. He opened the whisky bottle poured some whisky into a glass, mixed cold water and drank it in a single gulp... He cleared his throat noisily and woke up Udayan.

"Come on Udayan.... get up... you have gone to the woman in the night and now you are thoroughly spent out... see... Your mother has written a letter to me... I got it only yesterday... I wanted to talk to you... But, you did not come to the room at night... .." drawled Eesvaran.

"What has she written..?"

"She wants me to advise you and get you ready for this marriage... Poor lady... They are worried about your age... Do they know about your escapades. Get married like a good boy... They have also agreed on a fat dowry..." Eesvaran was all kindness.

"I also received a letter day before yesterday... Am I a mad fellow..."

I sent a reply saying 'yes' and then only I went away to other work..."

"Other work means you went to her you know... She is fleecing you... Don't squander away all your money"

"With a purpose... She would often ask for a cheque to pay the rent... If I give a cheque in my name it will lead to danger... I only give her cash... She wants to bear my child. She also orders me to register the marriage. of course, she has a motive... If

a child is born, that means money... And she can also pester me for more money. She can also prove that I paid money for rent... That is her big plan. Won't I see through all these? I have abandoned her since last night..."

"Then.. when do you go to your native place.? You should not let your parents worry at the fag-end of life..."

"Don't I know all that..? I have written to them to bring the girl to Singapore by 15th of next month... I shall also talk to them on telephone tomorrow... I have also lined up with Madhavan's agency to book the tickets to Singapore... Then what..? Now only, you will also understand me well..." said Udayan.

Although he had citizenship, Udayan was a little scared to go to Sri Lanka. He had finished G. C. E. ordinary level exam in Jaffna Hindu college and passed only in four subjects. Then, he had roamed about as part of some movement, indulged in some kind of atrocities and collected some money and had just lived it up. When the situation got worse, the parents had sold away their lands at a throw- away price and sent their son abroad... So now he is still reluctant to go home.

His plan is to sponsor his wife's trip to France after a couple of months following the marriage in Singapore.

"All right... what is your plan after the marriage..?"

"The marriage takes place on the 20th of August... I shall start a restaurant in October... I have already paid the advance... The girl will also come here sooner or later. I have paid advance to an agent for a newly built house..."

Bank loan is also through... After the wife comes, peaceful life in the new house... She will look after the shop... Is she not educated..? I shall not leave my job... If the restaurant picks up, I can leave the job later.. I have ordered some jewellery for the girl in Mohan's shop.. What do you say now..?"

"Oh you are a devil... You would do everything rather well. I work here and there and send money to my wife and

children by toiling in this cold.. They live in comfort and luxury in Colombo. Will they know about our struggle... You are an intelligent fellow.. You will handle everything.. Then, what are your plans for this woman here..?"

"I told you I have washed my hands off her since last night. Nothing to do with her... Hereafter... she is like a tomato gone rotten. Should we not celebrate having abandoned her... I shall wash and come.. Do not finish the whisky... You are good at cooking meat tastily... attend to that..."

Udayan went to the bathroom, had a thorough wash and came back... He washed his mind and body off that Sylvia of Portuguese origin... And washed her odour.

Both poured the whisky and finished the glass by uttering "sing-sing". They drank it in a single gulp. They looked at the colourful light of Paris through the window and laughed... ..!

Inaugural Function

7.

A few months have passed since that lodge was opened in Colombo. The proprietor Dharmabalan has become one of the leading Tamil businessmen in Colombo. The young man also owns a Textile mart. He holds a share in a Jewellery shop as well. He often flies to countries like Singapore, Kualalampur and Bangkok for business purpose.

Nandan is the husband of his elder sister. He is forty one. Father of three children. He has worked as manager in an export and import company for many years. Fat salary and profits. A big spendthrift. He

would work until even eight or nine at night. After that, he would be drowned in alcohol before going to sleep. A lot of friends; no habit of savings despite huge earnings. He was honest and sincere in work. A man with a soft heart. His activities came to be disliked by the proprietor of the firm in course of time. And he chucked his job.

Dharmabalan who came to know that his brother-in-law has lost his job asked him to look after the lodge and began to concentrate on business activities.

Sridevi came to that lodge one evening. She came and stayed in a room with a distantly related uncle.

Next day, that man left for Hatton saying he had some work there. He was a teacher in a school in Thalavakolla estate, it seemed. As he left, he told the manager Nandan, "She is on her way to Paris; her marriage has been settled. The bridegroom-to-be has made travel arrangements from there. Let her stay here for a few days before she leaves. She would pay money. I have got to go and attend to my work. Please take care of her". But, the man never returned.

Since there was not much work in the lodge, Nandan went out with his friends even in daytime on drinking bouts. He would ask Sridevi to look after the lodge as she impressed him by acting like a good girl. A boy from the hills also was assisting in the lodge. Sridevi began to administer from the enclosed space in the front at the ground floor.

She would hug Nandan who came back drunk to his room and put him to sleep. She would give him food. If he did not want to eat, she even fed it into his mouth with affection like a wife.

When he was not in the lodge, she would telephone to Paris and speak. And Gunaratnam would talk to her from Paris immersed in imagination about his would-be wife.

He also had a few problems. Although it is eight years since he came to Paris, he has not got his permanent visa. But he had worked day and night and sent a lot of money home.

His parents had arranged alliance with a girl and he had agreed and booked with an agency to bring her to Paris.

Although the girl was dark, she was charming. She was past twenty four. But he was thirty eight.

Gunam had to spend a lot of money by way of telephone charges for speaking to Colombo lodge often. At Sridevi's request, he does not telephone that much now. It is she who talks for a long time on the telephone belonging to the lodge.

When he returned drunk at night, Nandan would bring another bottle also. When he drank in the room, she would feed the piece of meat from the food into his mouth. She pleaded fear of sleeping alone in her room and under that pretext, slept with him in his room like a wife.

Even as she was locked in embrace by Nandan, she would ask Gunam in Paris, "when do you propose to call me..?"

"How long can I be here thinking of you? I will be in peace only if I join you." So would she coo. At that instant Nandan would say, "do not cry darling" and pinch her mysteriously.

Four months elapsed thus. she simply sucked the earnings of the lodge. Nandan was also emaciated due to all kinds of intoxication.

As per the arrangement by the agency, she came to Singapore with a few others, got the Malaysia visa there and reached Kuala Lumpur.

Due to the arrangement by the agency, they stayed in a house on the ninth floor of a multistoried building. Six boys and three girls in all in a Kuala Lumpur suburb.

Along with other girls Sridevi was accorded special treatment. Although others had paid in lakhs, Sridevi was the one who had sent all the money got in Colombo to her home before leaving.

As per Gunam's arrangement from Paris, two lakhs of rupees was given to the agency's proxy in Colombo as advance

for Sridevi. The balance would be handed over, on her arrival in Paris as per the agreement with the agent's brother-in-law.

People there have a number of dreams to go to Paris, London, Canada and so on. Sridevi had an eye on the twenty year old young man there...

She was disturbed by his height and attractive appearance...

All the six young men would sleep in the central hall of that house. Girls were in a room... They would cook by turns.. The agency man would be staying in a hotel... He would come in between and give money to buy the victuals needed for cooking food.

Sridevi had her bed in the kitchen which was airy as opposed to the sultriness in the room. When she took food, she would invite the well- built youngster Linganathan to join her., calling him younger brother. He was also drawn to her and he kept calling her elder sister. In a few days, she took him inside the kitchen during nights.

The other youngsters got wind of these goings on. They also put the agency man wise. Next day, he came and took him by car to a forest and enquired Linganathan. Linganathan denied the whole thing. He was beaten up and asked to take off his dress. The car sped away leaving him nude.

Linganathan hid himself in the nude. The agency man who had left him at three thirty came back at seven thirty and took him home. He left him with a warning to behave himself.

The agency man Nadarajan took Sridevi away citing passport and other related business. They took food in a restaurant .

Sridevi began a new story saying she had a close relation in Nadarajan's native place and said thus Nadarajan was also a close relation of hers.

Agency Nadarajan is always clever and cunning. How many of her ilk had he taken from country after country. He said, " if that house is not comfortable for you... You can stay in a hotel..."

She stayed in the same room with Nadarajan in the hotel.

She stayed in the apartment house during day time and with Nadarajan in the hotel at night for a few days...

After six months, Sridevi was sent from there with a group. She reached Paris after one month via Iran and Turkey.. Everyone in the group showed respect to Sridevi..! For, she had bluffed that Nadarajan was a close relation of hers...

She would talk to Linganathan with special affection. Linganathan who had been hefty and attractive returned thoroughly run down as if he had been suffering from a bout of malarial fever..!

Two of Linganathan's elder brothers were in London for more than twenty years. They were well off... They had paid a lot of money to Agency Natarajan's binami(representative) and asked him to send Linganathan to London early.

After Sridevi came to Paris, Gunam was not able to pay the rest of the money to Nadarajan immediately. Attempts to pay through chit also proved futile. Sridevi stayed in the suburb of Paris along with others in a place arranged by Nadarajan.

It was planned that Linganathan would go to London by train with another person... Sridevi who had received a lot of money from London through Linganathan, asked Nadarajan to send her also to London at once and promised to pay the whole amount and handed over the money to Nadarajan.

Nadarajan was wonderstruck. How did she come into so much money..? Of course, he could guess... But how was he bothered..? Money should come, that is all... ..

Sridevi, Linganathan and another person on way to London by train with Malaysian passports containing their photographs... A journey without any hitch...

— Gunam in paris... Looking lost and despondent; full of pining... No permanent visa... The girl sent by his people

back home... causing so much expenditure and flying away... Blabbering thus, he hit the bottle hard and true... ..!

Sridevi has acquired refugee status in London. She is living in luxury and comfort in the house of Lingathan four years younger than her.

She sends money to her parents at home in Sri Lanka every month..! Lingathan is running about and slogging in two jobs day and night..!

"Devi textiles" will soon have its opening ceremony in London.

A nine year old girl is to make her first appearance on the dance stage in London.

The famous Tamil film actress who was coming to London to take part in this as Chief guest, would participate in the opening ceremony also.

Lapse

Nathan who returned from work, took a hurried bath and put on the pant and shirt which he had kept folded under the mattress. He would wear them only rarely on special occasions.

He removed the socks inside the shoes which was emitting a bad odour. He threw it under a corner of the cot and changed into washed tennis socks and also wore tennis shoes that was in a reasonably good condition.

He telephoned to friend Jegan to remind him to come fast within half an hour.

He stood in front of the mirror, combed his hair, studied

his reflection from different angles to check if he was young and looked at himself again and again.

"This fellow Jegan has not come yet... We have to go to the airport in time. How many times should I tell him...? Anyway, I should not find fault with him.

When I take his van, am I paying him...? Sometimes I will fill petrol... I have to adjust to him... I told him we have to be in Orly airport by 5.30 pm. Now, it is four 'o' clock... The road will become jammed... I do not know if we can reach in time...

My saku... would come here very much exhausted... If I do not go in time, she would be scared...

Nathan was restless walking to and fro, looking at the mirror and was clearly tense.

"Sadha machchan will come only at 6.00 pm. Then he would leave for another job at eight p.m. He spends more time at work than in the room... He cannot find time to come to the airport... He cannot take leave also... Somehow, I have managed to live in this room due to his mercy... He is slogging like a bull at the age of thirty nine... No marriage yet... How happy he is that Saku is joining me... Sadha is a real good fellow... .."

As soon as he heard the sound of horn downstairs, he locked the room in a flash and bounded down the stairs from the sixth floor.

Jegan's Renault van sped towards the Orly airport. In between, it had to crawl too.

"The road has become crowded even at 4.30. I do not know when we are going to reach." Nathan mumbled to himself.

They could reach the airport only at five thirty. Jegan ran in and took a look at the timing chart to check if the plane expected from Colombo had landed... He informed Nathan that the plane was twenty minutes late.

It was past six.. The passengers were going out dragging suitcases and other luggage. Nathan could not stay in one spot. He walked here and there and kept looking inside.

"Machchan... Jegan.., why Saku is not coming yet..?" He kept asking Jegan who said, "Be patient, she will come right now."

"Jegan... see there... Somebody in green dress.. It looks like Saku.."

"Oh, in a Punjabi dress.. Somebody comes looking like from our country..."

Nathan's face glowed as if struck by hundred lightnings.

"She comes so fast, But, why does she stand somewhere else?" Nathan asked with a certain pining.

"You do not understand these things... You came by Russian Aeroflot as if by a bullock cart... In ten years stay in Paris, you seem to have come to the airport only today... Be a little patient... I do not know how you went to Colombo and got married there... She has to collect her luggage and come. That is why sister is standing there..."

As Jegan said, Nathan laughed rather shyly and elegantly like a woman.

Sakunthala was dragging her huge suitcase with difficulty and was keeping her shoulder bag down now and then as she struggled to carry them. And she walked slowly.

"Saku..., saku..." Nathan shouted emotionally and was shedding tears and Sakunthala was also in tears. Fighting back her sobs, she said, "please pull this suitcase.."

"Why do you cry?" asked Nathan. He felt like wiping her tears but felt a little shy to do so. He took the shoulder bag from her and tried to pull the suitcase.

It felt terribly heavy like a huge rock.

"How did you bring it..? You must have found it very tough."

"I shall tell all that later. Please drag it for now."

"Jegan please help... .. Saku., this is my friend Jegan... I came by his van..."

"Hello sister..."

They both dragged it together, got it into the van and started.

"Terribly tired Jegan... Saku also looks very tired... Let us stop at the Tamil Restaurant at the coming junction and drink something."

On the way... Sakunthala saw long and broad streets, tall sky-high multistoried buildings with steam outlets, colourful lights casting a magic spell, a few half nude publicity cut out posters and the over bridges across the rivers which appeared to run underground. And Sakunthala who had been watching these from the van began to sweat even in that slight chillness.

Sakuntala said a plain tea would suffice for her.

"See this is a Tamil shop... You can have a few native snacks too..." But she turned down the offer saying she had a feeling of nausea .

It was nine 'o' clock at night when they reached home.

There were signs that Sadha had come home and left for his second job. His dhotie was found thrown on the cot.

That house was a studio in the sixth and last floor of an old building. There was a big room.

A small kitchen at the corner of the room. Bathroom on one side of the kitchen. A door opening out near that.

If we open the door and take two footsteps, a room. Now, there was a cloth curtain dividing the room and the kitchen. An old cot in the room. If you sat on it, it produced a creaking

noise. Behind the cot a cupboard with old cracks. On top of that small cupboard, a picture containing Lord Vinayaka, Muruga and Goddess Lakshmi together and a picture of mother Lourdes inside, all of which had a covering of smoke. Under the cot, two pairs of old shoes and a few dirty socks were emitting an odour.

The kitchen in the corner had an old rickety table, beside it an old aluminium vessel fog - smeared with coal and old iron vessel that had the scars of years with scratches. A similar small iron vessel and four glasses showing a dye of tea in them. On the other side of the table, a gas cooker with two stoves and under it a gas cylinder.

Close to the spot where the curtain hung between the kitchen and the room there was a folded table and two folded chairs.

"So, this is the house where you live..?"

Sakunthala who asked as she entered the room thought, our small house with one room back home is much better.

Jegan who drank the tea prepared by Nathan in a hurry, said he would meet them later and left.

His new Renault car, the stylish way he drove it, his preventing Nathan from paying for tea and paying himself, his attractive looks and kind talk did create a good impression about him in Sakunthala's mind.

"You do not know how rare it is to find accommodation in Paris. I am sticking to this place due to the mercy of friend Sadha. He is a good man who knows everything. He is allowing me to stay here as if it is my own house without minding what little I am paying.

I am the one who stays long here... He runs about all the time to work. If one were to take a house like this on rent, one has to show a pay slip for more than ten thousand Francs a month. The rent; we will have to pay an advance for three

months or more. The rent will come to more or less 3500 Francs. More than that electricity charges, residence tax and all will also be there causing heavy expenditure. Even so, somebody should recommend us to the agency for letting out houses. Then only, we would be given houses without minding our skin. Even for that we have to run from pillar to post and work for it. There will be eight of our kind even in such houses. That is our lot...

All right.., let those things be as they are. You bathe and change your dress... Your weariness will go away. I shall prepare food for you darling meanwhile..", said Nathan.

"How can I change my dress here..?"

"Why do you feel shy..? Pull the curtain and change... I will be here near the kitchen.." So saying, he took a chicken from the old Fridge near the table and put it into the water in the pot in the tub.

"Oh, the water is ice cold.." Shouted Sakunthala...

"Wait a little. Open the pipe with the red mark and the one with a blue mark to the correct level and bathe in normal temperature.."

"How will it be to bathe in the garden well back at home..?" Thinking thus, Sakunthala managed to finish her bath after struggling in heat and cold.

Nathan finished making yellow American rice, chicken curry, dhal curry and chilly fry in a short while.

As sakunthala wiped her hair, combed it and came, Nathan asked her, "shall we eat..?"

"Will the man of this house come to eat now..?"

"He will come only after two thirty. Let us eat now.."

"You have learnt to cook tasty food.."

It was eleven thirty at night when they finished eating.

"This is the cot. He has given it to me. Usually, I spread a bed sheet on the floor and sleep on it. Now only he has fixed the

curtain at the entrance. He has asked me to keep his pillow bed sheet and rug near the curtain. We can lie on this cot..”

As Sadha came and switched on the tube light above the kitchen tub, he found the aroma of chicken curry penetrating his nostrils. He left his shoes near the door, changed into his dhotie and had a go at the gram and chicken broth. It tasted like a feast to him.

Soon, he switched off the small tube light, lay down with his head in the direction of the curtain and stretched his legs towards the door.

In that still night, the cot made screeching noises like the rat even as whispering sounds were heard in between. Sadha went into deep sleep. He had to go to work at seven in the morning. He would start sleeping right away due to the fatigue. His snoring echoed everywhere in the house like the train noise.

Nathan was sleeping on a cot in the hygienic hostel in the house of the small village. It was situated in a hilly terrain some hundred kilo meters from Paris. The first day of that family life was visible like a film in his dream.

Suddenly, he appeared to find Sakunthala and Jegan who had a van, in the garb of newly married couple. And they were being blessed with the ‘holy rice’ by elders. Thoroughly shocked, he got up angrily shouting “you betraying prostitute...” He vomitted blood.

Nathan had gone to Colombo soon after getting Citizenship, brought the girl of “Sempaatu village” to Colombo and married her spending his own money.

Sakunthala had worn just four plastic bangles when she came to Colombo on that day... .. Today... ..?

In nine years time Sakunthala has become the mother of two children. She owns two houses.. She also owns an Indian Restaurant and a Provision shop. She has also got a driving license and purchased a new Renault car. There are also two vans for the work related to the shop.

When she came to Paris, she learnt the primary level French. She got many friends. She also got the job of Bureau cleaning with Jegan's help, for a while. Again with his help, she bought a three room apartment as well. Then, she also purchased a separate house in the outskirts of Paris.

Nathan lived with her only for five years with some problems. One, who used to keep his distance from drunkards, he now hit the bottle reasoning that it was medicine for mental worry and also one that was useful in inducing sleep. His condition grew worse. For more or less four years hospital, friends' houses and sometimes the street was his refuge. The liver got completely ruined and he had to be in hospital all the time vomitting blood.

When he desired to see the children, she seemed to have sent him away saying they were not his children.

After changing many hospitals, now, he is being kept in the health centre until death.

In the public functions involving Tamils in Paris, Sakunthala is to be found in the VIP row now a days... ..

Already married and forsaking his wife and two children in Sri Lanka, Jegan was moving about rather pompously in Paris. Sakunthala lived in the same house with him. And nobody can fault them, it seems. This is European life style.

Sakunthala is in a maternity ward with a book in hand titled "women's liberation." She is to deliver a baby in a few hours. Since it was the third child, she did not feel the agony that much.

News of Sakunthala having been admitted in hospital for delivery reached Nathan's ears also.

The Ambulance that was carrying Nathan who had swooned following blood vomitting, was heading rapidly to the hospital.

Streak of Light

It was past three 'o' clock in the afternoon. It was sultry inside the house... He switched off the Radio that was piercing the ears. Shaking the towel and throwing it on his shoulder, and tapping his stick, Karthikesu master got down the steps of the house and started walking.

The "Karutha Kolumban" mango tree has yielded plentifully this time. Fruits of the wood apple tree are lying scattered on the ground. The jack tree also has grown well with a big yield.

Eyes have dimmed a lot. Vision is not clear. It will look like a streak of light in the morning. It is difficult to identify any object in that light.

He can move to any spot with his walking stick by moving in measured steps without hitch. He tapped the easy chair under the mango tree a little and slowly reclined on it. A dried mango leaf came and hit his chest. As he pushed it down, his thoughts travelled to the past... ..

Eldest daughter Thamaraiselvi... Her three dear girls... memories of having carried them and their lisping flit across his mind-screen... A certain kind of sobbing... Eyes felt heavy... He cleared his throat once noisily.. He tried decreasing the burden of heart.

Karthikesu was a trained teacher who became principal of a high school later and retired. Unbending stubborn nature... His wife Yogeswari who had a submissive heart, never talked back to her short-tempered husband.

The first and last children were girls. Three boys in between. He educated the two girls in the leading famous women's college in Jaffna. The eldest daughter Selvi who had passed the G. C. E. advance level examination had a great flair for Tamil literature. She tried composing a few poems. She had gone to attend a Book release function in the educational institution in which she had studied, with her friend. The poet who thundered on the stage filled her heart. The way he pronounced the poems, the feelings and his appearance ...

Until that day, Karthikesu master used to consider his nineteen year old daughter, full of youthful beauty as a child and brought some sweet or fruit for her while coming back from school. He would delight in calling her "Selvi" with fondness.

He was shocked to hear about the love affair of his daughter. He could not believe it. He could not face his daughter on whom he had been raining affection. He struggled to eat for a few days. In his unshaven face the beard began to prick. He could not speak to his teacher colleagues as usual. His colleague and friend Veluppillai asked during the lunch interval...

"What is this master..? Why this kind of dejected look..? I have been asking you for a week... You say it is nothing. What is your problem..? Tell me .. I shall help you if I can.." He said.

"Nothing"... Karthikesu's eyes became moist. "master... my child the eldest daughter... How I brought her up pampering all the time... She says she loves somebody.."

His voice sounded like it was coming from inside the well.

Veluppillai sat erect...

"Karthi... Is this all..? are you growing a beard for this small matter. And brooding..? It is quite normal in these times man... Such things do intervene at a certain age... Shall I tell you one thing... marry off the child."

"To whom should I marry her..?" Karthikesu's voice was a little loud.

"You advise her and marry her to a good boy"..

"I had discussed with my elder sister and given word to her that after she grows up and starts working, I shall give her in marriage to her son. Now, when I heard this I could not believe it... She is a small child. Even last week, when I went to her school, she asked me, Daddy., have you brought chocolate for me..? How could she..?"

"What is this man..? You talk like a small child although you are fifty two.. What is her age now... She is a big girl. Nineteen years old..."

"All right do as I said... Do not think about anything.. If the child is stubborn, try advising her... Otherwise, do not think too much... Do not talk harshly.. She is a modern girl... Enquire about the boy and marry the two... .."

Veluppillai drawled.

"I enquired our friend Pandit Nallathambi. The boy seems to be from a good family... Pandit's relation, it seems."

"Then what... ..? Why all this thinking... They are a family of intellectuals... Well educated... Everything will go on well... Finish the whole thing... Veluppilai concluded.

Karthikesu became a little clear in mind. He went home with a packet of cantos. He called his daughter lovingly and gave it to her.

After a week, now only he is talking to his daughter with affection. Wife Yogeswari also felt happy. Seeing that the daughter was firm, Karthikesu indicated his consent. But it took six years for the marriage to be finished following talks between the parties in the proper way.

Daughter and son-in-law had started working in Government jobs. Three grandchildren in succession... ..girls.

"Eldest granddaughter Elanila... like a papaya fruit... Light yellow complexion. She was everybody's pet... Her beauty and intelligence made her everybody's darling. Second granddaughter... Lovely like grapes, favourite of the grandfather... Only if she is on the shoulder of the grandson day and night, she can sleep it seems... The third one was like moulded painting..

As he thinks of all these, he is unable to fight back his tears. He closes and opens his eyes... He closes his mouth with his hand... Clears his throat repeatedly and goes down memory lane.

War clouds... cruelties... Human lives have become cheap... Daily it is depression; life in the bunker... weapons have gained precedence...

Daughter's family has got displaced... So also the three sons. The last daughter having become a fine arts graduate has got married, settled down and got displaced too... Only wife Yogeswari... Empty life... Letters are the only link.

Even if a dog and a cat walk on the dry leaves causing noise, he would listen to it keenly thinking.. "Somebody is coming.. My grand daughters are coming.."

All the children are married and thirteen grand children have arrived.

"I am able to pass my time somewhat by taking to wife Yogeswari.. Children and grand children come to see me twice or thrice. But... .. My eldest child is not able to come yet...

"Her fourth boy... I am unable to see that grandson yet.. Let us see... They would also come when they find time... I think I will be alive until then... M..m..m...

"Although my eye sight had dimmed, Yogesh was my eye... She died of fever one day without uttering a single word... Like a lamp getting extinguished in a sudden wind... She died suddenly... Now, I live on talking to my walking stick... Even two years ago, I was attending to all the work by riding my bicycle.. Now this stick...

"In the afternoon... he came and gave me a bottle of Palmyra toddy... Now, there is scarcity for that also... I take a little glass of arrack in order to get sleep at night... But I am not getting proper sleep...

"After seeing the letter received yesterday, I feel a little excited. My eldest daughter is coming with her family. My granddaughter... How Elanila would have grown... I hear that she has finished university education. She has studied Law it seems. I hear she speaks English and French so well... She is going to do some research in Law with the help of her father's brother here who is a professor of Law faculty. It seems it is about the National Law of Jaffna... My granddaughter... she is going to stay here for some time, it seems...

"After that letter was read out to me, I feel thirty years younger...

"All right., I shall make all arrangements for their comfortable stay here next week. I have to keep mangoes and jack fruits ready... I must ask my house maid to buy chickens and cocks... I have to spruce up the house and keep it neat... .."

With a loud clearing of throat, Karthikesu walked towards the radio in measured steps swinging his walking stick and switched on the radio.

"From tomorrow there is going to be a regular deluxe bus service between Colombo and Jaffna city. The check point would function only in Omanthai. Passengers can travel day and night without any difficulty... .."

Thus went the news bulletin.

Master's eyes shone with a bright streak of light like a flash of a few lightnings...

He got up, took out a bottle of Mendis arrack which was within reach of his hands and consumed it at one go. With a little clearing of throat he carefully took the food left on the table by a lady living there. And only after a few days he ate it fully.

May be, he has really grown younger... ..!

They are fanning the flames

10.
I know him for a long time.
The villages in which we
were born, were adjacent islands.

He first took up a job as
teacher in our village.

It was the same Ganesha
Maha vidyalaya in which my
brother worked as principal.

He had a love marriage in
the same village where I too had
my love marriage.

Now his house is in front
of ours.

The latter part of 1990 was
a period when the bombers and
"Helicopters" wrought havoc

and destruction in all sorts of places. One day the time was about 11 afternoon.

I had gone to sign in the Asst. Government Agent's office in Chankanai. Three 'bombers' came making considerable noise. The office and shops were shut. People scattered running away looking for shelter. My friend Nada, post master of sub-post office and I had stopped at a corner in a building and were returning. The bombers went round twice in a long circle.

Visible from the narrow lane along which we were walking were four bombers diving down with a great noise, going up again and flying one mile away.

A pining and restlessness in the mind. After we reached the sub-post office, Nada gave money to two poor old people there who were waiting for charity fund.

My friend asked a boy who was coming along in a cycle, "where did the bombs fall..?"

"All the four bombs fell at the junction... Your master Ravi is gone.. A young girl too... Two small children... cannot bear to see it..."

Both of us went running "The young girl and children were cut to pieces, it seems.." Some passerby was saying.

It was then that some people brought Ravi into the house carrying him.

"A small piece got lodged in his stomach. The death was on the spot." I could not believe it as I heard somebody nearby say so.

My friend Ravi lay there with a cheerful face. Lot of blood had oozed into the cloth tied around the stomach.

I burst out crying aloud as I stroked his head. His co-brother Nallathambi who stood close-by embraced me.

We had talked standing near the gate until midnight, the previous night.

"People are struggling for food articles. We have to help. All of you must co-operate..," he said.

He did not engage in political work. He had done a sincere job in government. He thought only about people.

He had been going by cycle with friends to Chavakachcheri, Kodikamam and such places and purchasing food stuff. He had arranged to distribute them to each house in the village at a cheap rate. A place was selected at the junction to disburse them. Many villages followed this example.

"Should bombs be dropped when food products are being distributed..? With everyone running away seeking a hiding place, you who helped the poor and the innocent boys and the young women who had come to fetch them, have fallen victims..."

A thousand thought- streaks in my mind...

"Of course, we had a big difference of opinion as regards our principle . But, he loved people. He badly wanted to help them. He would speak with an open mind... So, a respect for him... Friendship.."

As per law the body had to be taken to the government hospital in order to be preserved until the next day and to get a Death Certificate after examination. He was the eldest son in the family. He had a lot of responsibilities. He also had three small children. Who will bear these responsibilities..?

There was nobody there who had not thought of this.

Our view was that the Government Death Certificate, if secured, would help his children at some later stage in their life. For, he was a government servant. A good teacher who never failed in his duties.

Many at home were not for it. That was the situation...

We took the body to the hospital in Tellipalai by a friend's car. On the way, bombers and helicopters were flying about...

Helicopter chased the car over a long distance. They kept shooting...

The speed at which the car ran hid it among the Tamarind trees... We were lying on the ground... The "heli" went away after a shooting spree... Then, the car entered the hospital at great speed.. Everything felt like a dream.

It was past seven thirty in the evening when we returned home after getting the body examined and securing the certificate.

There was no light for the car. But, it reached home at lightning speed. It was the efficiency of the driver. Of course, traffic also was scarce... My wife did not know where I had been. She had been worried about my absence. When she saw me in the courtyard she asked me..

"where did you go..?"

"Nallathambi is unwell. Should we leave him to go to the hospital alone at this time..? Moreover, Ravi... .." I could not speak. My eyes were filled with tears.

My three year old eldest daughter came and told me, "Dad.., I hear weeping noise in my friend Geetha's house... What happened..?"

I could not speak. Tears welled up and drops fell on the shirt. As Ravi and I were talking about a lot of things in the courtyard of his house, how many days they, my eldest daughter and his only daughter Geetha would be playing under the lights.

After many days had passed.., my daughter would wake up with a start at midnight and ask me "Dad, is Geetha's dad dead..? Will he never come again..? Geetha is also a father's pet like me... Poor girl..."

My eyes would shed tears as I hugged my daughter tightly.

Now, my daughter has not completed even five years. She alerts everyone to run into the bunker if the bomber noise is

heard. She also picks up the younger sister who is not yet one year old and runs into the bunker.

Toys inside the bunker also.

"The bomber that had killed her father... That made sister Geetha cry... One day... .." The toy gun which was Chinese make was in her hand.

The plane manufactured in china flies away after dropping the barrel bomb somewhere with great noise.

The noise has not left my ears yet. My daughter comes out and looks up.

Operation

"Slowly..... Slowly lay down carefully...

Do not worry boy... Cure yourself in Colombo. It is a great thing that we could get an ambulance at this juncture. Lay down safely.

Should not cry.. You must have faith..!"

As she laid the stretcher in the ambulance and sent him away, these kind words from that nurse with her eyes moist. His mind was grieving. He looked at that nurse with gratitude with his own eyes reflecting sorrow.

"Will I see them again..? Why are they trying to revive

me..? Why should I live.. For whom..? Would anybody have experienced agony like me..?

Is there a God..? If so, why so much suffering for me..?

What harm did I cause to anyone..? Oh., I have lost all my wealth.

My Mano... my darling... Should I be alive after losing you..? I have also lost the child borne by you who was like a little parrot.

Why should I live now..? To whom can I recount my plight and cry...oh.... .."

The ambulance speeds past the Paranthan junction.

At the spot where the tube had been fixed for urine to pass out, in that opening , there is unbearable pain. He felt like shouting in pain. He told the man by his side...

"Please detach this tube once.."

The ambulance stopped at the Kilinochchi hospital. The doctor came and looked at the paper given at the Jaffna hospital. Then, he looked at him.

"I will not detach it. Take him to Colombo. The instruction is addressed to Colombo hospital. I should not handle this.."

The ambulance runs again. He feels as if he is dying.

"Should there be so much trouble undertaken to make me alone survive..? If only I had been sure my wife and child would live., I would have put up with any amount of suffering. Sinner that I am... Why such a plight for me..?"

It is not even ten days since the child was born. There is fighting and problems everywhere. Noises that have not been heard before...

Thousands of incidents..... Shouting in Hindi language...

How long can one keep the mother and child brought from the hospital in the hiding trench...?

The shell goes flying above the roof with a shrill whistling sound.

It falls somewhere in the neighborhood; frightening noises are heard once or twice...

She shivers with fever. The child always has ears closed with cotton. Rather scared to go on like this. Shooting noises are also heard. Getting hold of a car after a search, he took them to a nearby village. He begged and got accommodation for a while in a house. Then, he took them to the hospital in Manipai. They would not attend. The main hospital was the only refuge now.

With great difficulty, he brought them to the main hospital and admitted them in a ward. There was only one doctor on duty for all the wards. Problem there too.

That doctor was also absent the next day. Shortage of staff also. Many people chose to stay in the hospital. Scared to go out.

A nurse came to him and gave a handful of 'Ampicilline capsules. Two capsules to be given every six hours. The nurse took a close look at the patient and literally flew to the other building.

Now, he was a veritable nurse there. He took care of his wife and helped others also to the extent possible.

He helped her to sit, wiped her tears and gave the two capsules. He washed the bed sores caused by continuously lying in bed. He was giving the food supplied in the ward and Horlicks.

She could not feed breast milk to the baby. Her milk should not be fed to the child. That is what the nurse had said.

He sent the child home through a known person.

Within four days, the child developed fever. With the problem increasing and decreasing in between, he could not take

the child to the Ayurvedic physician. No proper food. The child died on the fifth day. He did not know.

The nurse who came to the ward on that day looked at him with pity and said: "Balasingam... I feel sad looking at you... You said it is fifteen months since you got married.

Now, a worm has got into her blood. It is due to lack of proper care. No doctors here. Your bad time is that the good doctor was not available here when you came. He has left. The nurses are also unable to come regularly. I stay here only. I am more or less an orphan. That is my life. I am here in the belief that serving people is a service ordained for me by God. It is unlikely she would survive. Face it bravely. Try taking her home if possible. Even cremation will be difficult here. Continue to give these capsules as I had instructed. Do not worry..."

His head began to spin.

"Oh.., the shell falling elsewhere, should it not fall on my head..? If it does, I shall also die along with my darling. Did I struggle and bring her here for this..?"

That morning her eyes opened a little clearly.. "Give me food..," she said. She also wiped his tears. He managed to bring some food from some part of the ward.

He felt a little surprised and also encouraged that she who had refused food and water was now asking for food.

He took her in his arms, hugged her and fed the food into her mouth, like she was a child. She took two handfuls but could not take more.

Tears fell down from her eyes. He consoled her and wiped them.

He felt as if he was witnessing all the incidents since their marriage up to now. Tears fell from his eyes like drops of water from wet towel hung for drying.

She was lying reclined on his chest. All sorts of memories came gushing.

“I have no parents. You are everything to me. I will not allow you to go and work far away. Whatever our suffering, you have to be here. You are for me and I am for you...”

She had said so when giving him water and medicine when he was laid up with fever six months ago.

He washed her mouth.

Looking into his eyes, she said, “Do not cry... .. I feel perturbed. You must be well... We must retrieve your sister's fields somehow. They are suffering .. Think about it. I am your Mano., you know. Keep your hands in mine and close it...” She could not speak further.

He kept touching her hands. He would keep his hand on her nose. He would embrace her. He would check her chest. He would shed tears. It was about three 'o' clock in the afternoon. No breath from her. Her eyes stared at him transfixed.

He cried aloud. Not many people in the ward except a few moving about. Some people from the next ward came and consoled him.

The nurse came: “Balasingam, do not cry... Think of what has to be done. Do you have the money to take her by a vehicle to Villoondi and cremate her..? That is also difficult now. There is a problem on the way.. Do one thing... They have burnt a few bodies in this hospital premises.

“You also do the same by getting special permission. Do not hesitate; we have to see what has to be done. Get up and come. Let us try to get the permission for that”. With that nurse explaining the situation, permission was got somehow.

They roamed around in the hospital campus gathered broken cot legs, wooden pieces, sticks, batons, dried leaves and discarded cotton – heaps and cremated her under a big tree.

Throughout the night with an empty Jam bottle, he waited for the body to be reduced to ash. He collected the bone-ashes in that bottle for funeral rites.

He stayed in the hospital for two days with the ash bottle near his pillow. After things became somewhat normal outside, the nurse came, spoke to him and gave a hundred rupees. Although he refused to receive it, she said, "This sister is able to give you only this much now; take this. Go home and attend to what is to be done next."

She pressed the money into his hand and went away.

"It is due to such nice people..."

Another shock for him as he reached home. The news of the child's death. He remained at home for one month not knowing what to do.

A satisfaction in having finished the funeral rites with sister's husband.

"The last words of my darling were that the elder sister's field mortgaged for junior sister's marriage must be redeemed. It came to forty thousand with interest. How can I toil and redeem it. I must be alive if only to redeem it..."

As he thought of it, his head spun. As he fell off the cycle, a few people brought him home. There was no one at home to attend to him. The only brother-in-law took him by a vehicle to his elder sister's home. So much for that man's humanism.

"If my darling had been there, will it be like this..?"

He underwent treatment in the main hospital for a week...

Blood clot in the head, they said, some boil. An emergency major operation was necessary. That nurse recognized him and helped him. They sent him to the General Hospital in Colombo.

The ambulance stopped at the gate in the Colombo hospital.

"Oh my god.., please detach this.." An attendant came. He lifted him and laid him in the stretcher and detached the urine

tube. He felt as if he was dying. Blood and urine came out simultaneously.

He got a bed in the ward. Food was not bad.

The Sinhala language picked up while working in a shop in Colombo in the past, came in handy. He managed somehow.

"Nerves in the head had bulged. Boil... Operation..." He kept crying as he thought of his condition.

His head was completely tonsured.

He presented a strange sight... He was a little happy... Nobody can identify me, even if they come here."

The chief doctor was a Tamil. He went and greeted him as soon as he saw him. He narrated his story and requested him to send him to Jaffna soon.

"Mr... Do not talk to me like this... I pity you... But I cannot help you directly. This is doctor Amaradeva's ward. He is the one who would perform the operation on you. I shall tell him about you on telephone. Do not come to me like this. They would suspect me too. Lots of suspicious looks here. Be careful..."

His head was split into half near his cheek. A few days after the operation, they sent him away saying that the other half also needed operation in a private hospital in Colombo. He was asked to get an x-ray by paying ten thousand rupees and get operated.

The dowry house, sacred gold ornament, jewels, house articles, the ring and whatever he had bought through toil were all usurped by the wife's people. He got nothing except his old cycle...

"Elder sister's family... poor lady.. Four girls. Their fields have to be redeemed Forty thousand with interest. My darling told me as she breathed her last... It must be retrieved. I must be alive at least until then. I do not need any operation any more.

If death comes, so be it. I have to toil and redeem it..."

A mail came. It was the death certificate from the General Hospital Jaffna. It said his wife died a natural death.

Early morning... Sunrise... sound of bullock carts.. Balasingam gets up and rides on his old cycle towards the Chunnakam market.

Father will come...

“Dear father..,

I received your letter bearing a date of two months ago and the money.

Father.., be of brave heart. It is the same in our family as in others...

Your second elder sister - our dear aunt, died on 2nd of last month.

She had been to uncle Raja's house the previous day and returned home.

She developed fever one night went to hospital the next day. She died the same night. It could be brain fever, they say.

Raja uncle was shattered. "We have been proud that you had got a degree and were working in a good job living prosperously and famously. But, you have gone away, at half the age.." Thus did he cry bitterly.

Aunty's two children were inconsolable. They hugged me and cried. I feel so sad overcome by weeping. I am not able to write.

The last rites were performed in Raja uncle's house . Lots of office friends had come. Do not worry, father... Aunty has died in glory."

All the island teachers have been posted in Jaffna temporarily. There are classes being held for island children in the Hindu Ladies College in the afternoon.

Mother is also teaching there. Kutty uncle will take her there by cycle. No rest for mother. Of course, she is suffering. She has become dark and thin. Not eating properly. She has to attend to younger sisters. She has to finish school work, training and all. The younger sisters are causing confusion. They do not let mother do any work. I would carry the smaller younger sister. But, she would not come to me. She has already started walking. Speaks well. Other sister is a pet of grandpa. Has to be always carried.

"Everyone is affectionate to me. But, I do not reciprocate. Sometimes, I cry... If only dad was at home..? So I would think. Am I not father's pet..? Letters are brought to Point-Pedro by ship and then delivered here. Your letter reached here one month or two months later. I am studying well. I am also helping sister for studies.

Aunty is finishing her education in April. Of course if she starts staying at home, we will be very happy.

"Dad... The girl from that house at the junction. Viji, Ramanathan's granddaughter... She seems to have joined the Movement. You know her father toiled in Switzerland for a long

time and looked after the family. She had got good result in the G.C. E. Ordinary exam. She went away to the Movement not caring to study Advance Level. It seems her dad had written to her that he would send money for her A.L. studies. She had left.

“Writing individual letters to both her parents posing the question, If we do not liberate this land now, when are we going to do it..?

“The mother felt if the letter was sent to the father in Switzerland, he would go out of his mind and held it back. She is always crying.

“Viji’s elder brothers flying away abroad rather selfishly. She alone joined the Movement.

“It seems the family of your friend Ravi master was asked to come to Canada by Mrs. Ravi’s sister after he was killed by a bomb. They did not wish to go. How many days were you weeping over his loss.. Today my companion is his daughter Geetha.

“Geetha is also father’s pet. She would often speak about her father. I would recall to her about how Geetha and I played in their courtyard as you and Ravi master sat in chairs and discussed all the world affairs; and politics until midnight. Both of us would start crying.

“Also in the school each girl would narrate a tale of woe. And make us cry.

“When will our crying stop, daddy..?

“I feel sad looking at uncle Arasu. He has not yet got his pension, it seems. The loss of the dear aunt has also affected him badly.

He had written a touching poem titled ‘you would call me elder brother...’ One weeps as one reads it.

Now also, he drinks. When he came home, he spoke to me lovingly. I told him not to drink; not much hope of life here. Otherwise will I drink..? He said.

Lots of his neighbours have got displaced. A shell attack from Palali. I asked them to take a house near our place and come and stay here. His son Kannan got a job as librarian. But, he did not go. uncle says it will be better if he and elder sister go abroad for higher studies. But aunty cries saying she cannot live separated from the children. What to do..? Their situation is such.

Last month, three people died on the spot as four bombs were dropped at the junction near our house close to Murthy uncle's shop. The upper floor of Murthy uncle's shop was thoroughly smashed into bits and pieces. The walls have developed cracks. But, he is still selling vegetables there. Visvalingam of Kizhakkoor, injured in the bomb blast, died yesterday.

We have changed the roof tiles of our house which broke then. But, we have not changed the window glass. Grandpa said there is no need.

There is daily shelling from Karainagar Navy camp. Nothing fell in our area. But, a shell fell on a house in the west, a few days back. It seems father of the family died with his head split. The mother and two children, poor souls were seriously injured, it seems.

Grandpa receives his pension from the bank in Jaffna. He would cycle there with difficulty. It seems one has to be in front in the queue and push oneself to get the pension. With such pressure one can draw only one thousand rupees per day... ..

Suba's college of technology examination has finished. She has applied for a different course of study there. It seems classes are not to start this year in Vavuniya University College. Even if she gets permission, she does not wish to go there.

People are always expecting that the army would march in any time. They are dropping warning notices from the Helicopter. They announce on the Radio also from Palali. The people belonging to the movement also are alert.

People are under compulsion to face anything. No other alternative, you know..? Where can they run..?

Your friend Ratnam uncle's songs have come out in a cassette. They are wonderful. I like to hear them often. But, grandpa would stop me saying that one needs battery to listen to the radio.

Mummy comforts us daily saying "we can all go there shortly: dad will call." Of course, I want to be with dad.

Thambi uncle is as he was before. Heart patient. He does go to news paper office daily by cycle. Whatever the problem , he goes to duty daily without fail.

There is no news about Aachi(grandma). She does not know about the loss of dear aunty either. Red Cross is to go to the island this week. Raja uncle has spoken to them. We can know the details only on their return.

Sara aunty, uncle, cousin Thasan and all have come from the island and are staying in the house of cousin Balan. Thasan goes to Kopay Teachers' Training college; uncle is also not well.

Malar aunty is into studies and work. She is flying about . She gets through one test every year. She got a transfer it seems. The Government Agent has spoken in Colombo and stopped it. Raja uncle has talked it over and finalized a marriage alliance for her. Three lakhs rupees are needed, it seems. Mummy said we must also give and help.

"What do we have for giving..? You know that we had given the two bracelets and my chain towards the fund for struggle. Only the sacred gold ornament is there. Mummy said we have to sell it and help. What is your idea..? If the marriage comes off, everyone will be happy. Even in such a situation, people insist on dowry; see that..!

Daughter of Gunaratnam in the northern house has gone to Colombo to study, seeing the condition here where it is difficult to continue the studies. Her family also has gone to Colombo

last week. They would get money from abroad, it seems. They have gone to settle in Colombo. Now, we have made a family displaced from Kankesanthurai to stay there.

“We will soon join father..” So saying, mother is putting us to sleep with her eyes moist. I would feign sleep and cry as I lie silent.

I do not wish to come there, daddy. I think mother also feels like that. But, she would not write like that.

How can we be happy if we come there leaving our grandpa, grandma, aunty, uncles, aunties, sisters, brothers, Aachi, my friends, Geetha and all our people, Dad..?

“Dad... .. you only taught us that we must love our soil and our people . I have read many books from your book rack. Daniel’s Novel, “Kaanal” (mirage) Is great. We do not understand certain things. Mummy said she had read it a number of times in the past.

I am also studying my school lessons carefully.

“Dad... you come here. Come fast..! Let us live with other people. Am I not father’s pet? You will understand all my wishes, you know..?

Leela Anta has joined uncle there, you know..? Did you meet and talk to them..? Has Anta’s mummy reached Australia?

Here there are lots of news daily. What to write and what to leave..? Come and see.

When will my dad be with me..?

Vaddukkoddai
Sri Lanka.
05 - 03 - 1992

- Loving daughter,
Elanila..

Why did he shift his place...?

Why did he shift his place..?

It is two days since Anandan got the letter of transfer. It seems he has to travel to Colombo within twelve days. He appealed to the head office against the transfer.

He had completed only two years in his native place. He had the right to serve here for four years. But, this sudden transfer had come about.

He could not digest this transfer. He was an officer in the local administrative body, invested with authority. In accordance with his doctrines and what he had learnt, all the people were the same in his view. He tried to do his duty to the best of his ability.

He did the needful to the people who suffered without drinking water. He helped to set up Community Centre, Library and all wherever needed. He also engaged in services like prevention of contagious diseases, mother child welfare, Ayurvedic medical service and so on.

Anandan's close friend Selvam was a good photographer. When the foreign force was "keeping peace" in that province, Selvam's camera had photographed many incidents. Anandan had helped to get them published in local and foreign newspapers.

Once, Selvam had not only taken still photographs but also video graphed the murderous attacks carried out by the naval marines on Kumuthini boat. He had captured the horror of the victims. It is true that they reached local and foreign journals and Human rights organizations.

The atrocities perpetrated by the foreign forces locally and in the adjoining villages also did not escape Selvam's camera. It also did not escape the eyes of the members of the force.

One day, he and two of his friends were arrested and locked up in the peace keeping force camp. Different kinds of enquiries and tortures... People gathered in large numbers to get him released. He was regarded as a good man. Anandan was also with those people.

More than hundred people, most of them women went to that big camp as if on an expedition. They demanded the release of Selvam and his friends who had not indulged in any violence. The reply got by them was only a stern warning from the chief of the camp.

Anandan argued as much as possible. "Selvam and friends were not advocates of violence. They were only helping the press. So release them..." The result was a blank.

Still..? More than thirty men, fifty women, elders and children including Anandan engaged in protest at the entrance of the camp. Firm warnings came from the forces now and

then. Nobody really worried... It went on from nine in the morning to five in the evening. Once a truck tried going through their spot; nobody stirred.

Around five thirty, the chief of the camp, major, called Anandan aside. "It is all your handiwork..?"

"No.. it is, the people's will..", he said.

The major snarled like water drop fallen on a vessel with boiling oil.

He calmed down and enquired.

"I know you are a government official. I release them on the strength of my faith in you. But, if they continue to engage in activities against us, my action will be very severe.." The major said thus.

Anandan knew of some instances when some people, released from the camp, were sent to the place of no return by some unidentified few.

Not even two days had passed. It was six 'o' clock in the morning. Two jeeps and four trucks came and stopped in front of Anandan's house. They were full of troops. His house gate was opened forcibly and his door was knocked with a bang.

His wife was preparing tea in the kitchen. Their one year old daughter was sleeping with one leg of hers on her dad's.

The child woke up with a start due to the noise caused by the knock on the door. Anandan felt uneasy due to the knock on the door and the child taking off its leg. His wife came running.

"Run out and escape through the house of the Brahmin neighbour. The demons have come."

"Do not fear" Anandan came and opened the door carrying the child.

His wife by his side. The army men standing near the door asked him to come to the Major in the jeep at the gate.

As he got down by the steps, he looked around. They were there like trees along with other trees.

He went near the jeep.

"What is the situation like..?"

"No problem..." he said.

"Is that so? Come with me. Let us talk as we go this side.."

He could see several things clearly. He understood that they were targeting him.

"Let us talk here.." he said...

"That is all right. Give the child to your wife and get into the jeep. Let us talk as we go.."

Meanwhile as one of those men came and grabbed the child, another man caught hold of Anandan. His wife leapt, got hold of the child and shouted.

"Mr. Anandan, let us get into the jeep.." Major's voice sounded strict.

"I am unable to come now leaving the wife and child . Excuse me.."

After a few seconds.., "Anandan.., are you a big man here..? Do you think you can do anything against us..? Get into the jeep...!"

Suddenly four or five of them fell on Anandan and dragged him. They pushed the wife and child against the fence. The pet girl called out "daddy... .."

They dragged him towards the jeep.

Everyone was stunned... Where did these people come from..? More than hundred; most of them women.

More than twenty women, children and students around the jeep...

Anandan was surrounded by the women. People came and stood around all the vehicles.

The army men who stood among the trees also came running. As the army shouted warnings, the people also shouted "Release Anandan.."

The major jumped out from the jeep. He had his hand on his waist belt as he looked up, standing erect. The troops held their guns raised...

"If you want to shoot, shoot us... Do not touch the young man. Do not destroy our people... You who were born in the soil of the apostle of compassion. Don't you have any..?"

One young girl shouted at the major.

"Do not touch our brother Anandan.." the boys thundered.

"What did Anandan do against the law?" It was the sixty year old Brahmin lady screaming at the major.

The major laughed thinking of something.

"Do not lead away the children unfairly? If you want, you shoot me. Do not harm Anandan.."

The priest Markandeyar of Sivan temple, all of seventy seven years, told the major leaning on his walking stick..

All sorts of noises... Shouts... From among the women... Some had their hands full of mud. Many troops lined up opposite the people. Some people squatted around the vehicles.

"What is all this?, shouted the major.

"Go back" retorted the people.

The major said aloud that he would not arrest anyone and asked them to make way.

"This is my first such experience in my service... I shall meet you later." He told Anandan in a low tone.

The vehicles crept along slowly.

"Foreign vultures should not be given room in our soil. We must stand on our own legs". Shouted a girl student.

The dust rising in the street hid the vehicles.

He was among the people with tears in his eyes... ..

His dear child sprang towards him from his wife's hands.

The petition sent against the transfer brought some news in response the next day.

It was a communication asking him to join duty in the vavuniya office within a week.

He tried appealing against this also through the labour union. But people advised him that it would be safe for him to accept the transfer under the present circumstances.

Proceeding to Vavuniya, He wrote a letter to his friend Selvam, who went to Colombo the very next day after his release, about the services to be done to the village.

Selvam was making arrangements to start for Germany.

The western man who looked eastwards.

Thiyagar was engaged in closing the restaurant after lunch.

The restaurant 'Yathava' was near the main railway station in the city called Toulouse situated in the southern part of France. It was a South Indian Sri Lankan restaurant.

The Proprietor was Thiyagaraja called Thiyagar.

With him was his wife and a servant. These three were the ones running the restaurant. It was a small restaurant.

It had space for thirty people to eat at a time.

That afternoon, nine persons from nearby offices came and took their food. Most of them paid through tickets given instead of cash.

If these tickets are sent in bulk to the concerned office, the money meant for them would reach us after deducting a certain commission amount. Thiyagar will use the amount to clear some loan or payment.

This ticket book will be given to office goers at a big discount.

We can say this would benefit both the customers and restaurant people.

Suddenly one man came in. A well built figure, well dressed. We can say that he was an unadulterated French man belonging to North of France; pale blue eyes...

"Excuse me... I have come late... Can I eat?" he asked.

Even if it is late, why lose the income? So thinking, Thiyagar said in the French that he knew, "Yes, Sir.. sit down, you can eat."

"Salad, vegetable Samosa, Tandoori chicken, Basmathi rice, gram curry... And Bordeaux wine bottle with all these." Ordered the visitor after reading the 'Menu' and Thiyagar also served the good order, briskly and readily. Normally, most of those coming for afternoon lunch would opt for fast food which was cheap, eat and leave in a hurry.

Only a few among those coming for dinner would order the costly 'quality meal' along with varieties of wine. It is at that time that Thiyagar's profit would also increase.

Most of the money earned through toil will be taken away by the government as tax. An amount to be paid towards medical insurance pension, at 19.6% per one meal to the government as tax, tax for social donations, state, district, city taxes, gas, electricity and telephone. After meeting these expenses, it is tough making a profit in the present conditions.

But, since he could not get a suitable job, Thiyyagar started this business with the help of bank loan to be able to live independently.

He consumed a glass of wine and finished eating the salad. He drank a little more wine and ate the samosa. He said, "it is very good."

This is one of the good qualities of the French.

If something is good, they would praise with an open mind.

The vegetable samosa of Yathava restaurant is a little different from those supplied in other Indian restaurants.

It will be prepared like in the house by diluting the flour, mixing the 'masala varieties along with the roasted potato and frying the whole thing. Those who ate this used to praise it for the taste.

As the man was eating the mix of Basmathi rice and gram curry and taking a bite of Tandoori chicken in between, he was seen with his eyes moist. Thiyyagar wondered if the food was too pungent.

"Does the food taste very pungent?"

"No.. No. The food is very good... I was reminded of my son..." As he said so, his throat was suffocated.

He cleared his throat and coughed aloud. He drank some water.

"Are you from India or Sri Lanka?"

"We are Sri Lankan Tamils."

"Is that so..? You have a good culture. Your family life is wonderful.

"My friend has married a Tamil girl of Pondicherry and lives there. He would come once here during the holidays once a year. I have been there twice.

"He runs an Industrial establishment there. He also teaches French there. He knows both English and Tamil well.

"He is also learning Hindu philosophy and Ayurvedic medicine, to a certain extent. I praised their happy life with two children.

He finished eating and also drank the rest of the wine a little.

"You said you were reminded of your son. where is he"?

"That is a big story... If I tell you that, I will feel a little easy in mind, because you only will know the value of family life... And understand affection".

He sips the wine. The blue eyes shed tears.

"I belong to the Strasbourg city in the north east of France.

"Do you know Strasbourg city?"

"Yes... I have come there twice .. There are some of our countrymen there known to me".

"I am the managing director of a company there. Salary is more than four thousand Euros and perks too.

"I loved a girl for two years and married her."

"She worked as receptionist in another firm. I got her a job as a secretary in my firm. One year passed happily.

"We had a baby boy. I was very happy.

"But, she would spend my salary extravagantly and spend away her salary too."

"She tried to live, oblivious of the family. She knew nothing about thrift. She would not attend even to the son's needs.

"She also began to drink a lot."

"She needed my salary alone".

"It was I who had to prepare the son to start for school, feed him and put him in bed.

"She spent recklessly on disco, casino and the like."

"This led to problems in the family.

"She would say I should not interfere in her freedom and would roam about with new friends and return home late in the night... I put up with all these for some months for the sake of the son.

"Give me another small wine bottle... .."

He drank the wine and continued again.

"One day, I lost my patience. Provoked and getting emotional due to her words, I slapped her twice on her face.

"She called the police at once."

"The police took me to the court."

"She went away somewhere with her new friend. The son refused to go away from me."

The Police asked me to hand over the son to the mother. But, the son told them he was going to be with father.

"She argued that the son must be given to her. And the judgment was that the son must be given to the mother."

"And the son went with her crying."

"I felt as if my life had been grabbed from me".

"I spent any number of sleepless nights. I cried whenever I saw my son's toys."

"My lawyer explained my plight in the court and got permission for me to see my son once in a month."

"But, this did not continue beyond a month."

"I am paying a big amount for her and my son every month. I hear that she spends that money on drinks and is living it up with new friends..."

"Did you not get a divorce?"

"I have to prove in the court that she is living with her new friend.

"only if I do so, I shall get the divorce.. It is not an easy job."

"The laws here are such.."

"They give a lot of freedom to women and spoil them."

" All shouts of women's liberation are false."

"It is the men who have not received justice. What to do..?"

"Only if one looks at the problem from the point of view of a father like me, it can be understood..."

"Law should not be invoked in problems of attachment".

He was in tears. He wiped them.

"She has run away and come into Toulouse city here with her new friend."

I have not been able to see my son for the past few months. It was when I applied to the court that I learnt she is here.

"I came here to see my son. She hid him and brought the police alleging that I tried to assault her.

"I was produced in court. She had also come there. The judge asked why I tried to attack her.

"I went up to the entrance of her house only to see my son. I called him. She hid him and called the police." I told the truth.

I sadly expressed my worry that my son so attached to me would be harmed by her.

"Keeping in view the son's safety, he has to be with the mother for a certain period of time. Do not visit the house and cause problems. You can come here to this court and see your son once a month", said that judge who did not understand this thing called affection.

"First, show me my son", I shouted. She said she would bring him next time. It happened only last month.

This month was like one year.

They brought my son to me only this morning.

"My dear son came and embraced me calling out "Daddy".

"My son was with me only until the court session ended. He stroked my face and said:

"Daddy, do not worry. I will always be your dear son. I have completed seven years now. Wait for five more years. Then, I will come to you. Law cannot separate me from you thereafter. I narrated my woes to my teacher at school also. He introduced me to the psychology teacher. He listened to my problems and gave me some instructions. I can be with dad after five years. I am studying well now. Do not worry about mummy's activities.

"Dad, you must eat well and keep good health. Five years would pass quickly.. come and see me here when you find time. You should not worry... Dad..."

"Can I come here to the court from one thousand kilometers away every month?

"I have so much work there. This court and laws... our..."

He sobs and he is struck by hiccups.

I was invoked of a heart haunting feeling beyond expression and my eyes became moisty.

"Do not worry... five years would pass very fast... Your son is an intelligent boy. He has asked you not to worry... You should not worry. You must be patient if only for the sake of your son." I spoke words of consolation to him wholeheartedly.

"Indian soil is sacred.. one must consider being born there as a matter of pride... I like the culture there."

"of course there would be a few dissidents everywhere.

"But that earth... After my son comes to me, I intend going to Pondicherry every year taking him with me. My friend there will help in all ways.

"I know... there are political problems in your country too... So, lots of your people have come here.

"If the problems end there, we would go there too."

"Most of us are keenly expecting when that day will dawn", I said.

Paying five "Euros" more than the price of the meal, that man shook hands with me and took leave.

Smile that waited

It was the latter part of the seventies...

Prevention of terrorism act had been in force.

A Brigadier had been specially sent to Jaffna to quell terrorism in the Northern region within six months.

It was the beginning of the dark period when people coming by a black car kidnapped many people.

Two people of the same house in Navaly had been kidnapped at midnight by a black car and were tortured in unspeakable ways. They were thrown after death on Allaipitty - Pannai street. The news had shaken the people of the northern region.

Sivanandan was one of the students of the senior arts division of that college. He was an outstanding student liked by teachers. One of the subjects studied by him was Sanskrit.

The Sanskrit teacher praised his knowledge of Tamil and told him that by learning Sanskrit, his literary knowledge and language would be enriched. And he compelled him to learn Sanskrit.

Prizes would await Sivanandan in many arts and literary and drama festivals held in the college.

Another Similar one Swarnalatha... A beautiful creeper in keeping with her name.

She also shone in such competitions.

Although Sivanandan and Swarnalatha studied in the same class, they were rivals in everything.

The Sanskrit class was quite handy for their debates. For, boy students will be less in number at that time only. Girl students will be in majority.

The competitions and functions were making it impossible for them to forget each other in their hearts.

It was the college principal who taught the class European history. He liked that period very much.

One day, Siva flipped through the pages of his European history notes book and read about the French revolution eagerly. As he took a cursory look at the inside flap of the book, the sentence written in English there set him floating in thought waves...

“Remember Swarna until death..”

The writing kept swaying in his mind.

Still... .. more than that...

Not even four month to go for the examination.

The principal and teachers thought that many would get high grades in science and arts groups in the examination to be conducted in April.

Sivanandan had reformist thoughts, ideas, racial spirit and love of Tamil in abundance. His parents had considerable literary mastery.

In the same way, his brothers also were interested in the literary field.

Swarna did not like these extremist tendencies... We have to look for ways for livelihood. She had clear views on this. Her family situation was also like that.

Examination in April...

Sivanandan and two of his classmates were absconding since Christmas.

Swarna was extremely agitated.

"You have gone away without uttering a single word Siva..." She cried in her mind. Whenever she went to temple with her mother on Fridays, she would pray for Siva's welfare.

Siva roamed for many months in all parts of the country, forests and all. He met the people.

He had to semi starve and sometimes starve fully too. Although he faced dangers in succession, he escaped due to his intelligence and shrewdness. Several months were spent in India also.

He lost many companions and friends.

Continuous anarchy, atrocities and murders made him sad. He had considerable humanism.

He remembered everything and was concentrating on the literary field. Although he consoled himself somewhat by writing stories, essays and poems under his pseudonym, a fire was burning inside him.

His family often spoke of his marriage. He discouraged such talk strictly. He could not forget Swarna. He was working in a magazine. He also faced several problems.

He got a chance to go to London to participate in a Journalist conference.

He visited many countries in Europe at the invitation of friends. He decided to stay in Europe due to the insistence of friends.

Marriage talks went on for Swarna who had become university graduate. "The bridegroom liked her as soon as he saw the photograph. He does not want dowry also. You are lucky". The broker was all sweetness.

Of course, Swarna who has lost her father is lucky in this, thought her mother happily.

Swarna came to Paris at the invitation of Dharmarajan who had French citizenship and stayed in the house of a distant relative.

Within a month, Dharmarajan had told her that they could have a reception with friends alone and he also said they could take a small house on rent.

It was not even ten days since Swarna came to Paris. There was a telephone call.

A young girl called Jennifer said she would like to meet her.

The girl who came with a child said that she and Dharmarajan had been living in a house for five years as husband and wife.

She said that Dharmarajan was the father of her three year old daughter 'Olivia' and showed several photographs in which they were together. And she shed tears.

She said that her parents belonged to reunion islands and that her father's ancestors were from Tamil Nadu.

She said she was conducting herself as a Tamil girl as far as possible. She said she was not causing any disenchantment to him.

She requested Swarna not to allow the man to carry out his evil designs and betray her. She spoke in a mix of French English and Tamil.

Swarna felt uneasy. Her head ached.

“Go without any worries”. She sent her away saying thus.

She checked with the relative girls of hers in the house where she was staying. After getting confirmation, she telephoned to Dharmarajan.

Initially, he denied the whole thing and then said,

“It is a small matter. I moved with her only as a friend. She is a cross breed also.

“You are the bride. Why do you have doubts..? The marriage will be over in two weeks. We will go to a good house... Do not get confused by listening to the stories told by people.” As he drawled thus, Swarna got wild.

After shouting at him for a while “Ring off, you rascal”, she said.

Now, Swarna had acquired refugee status also. She had studied some French also and got a job in a ‘supermarket’. She also took Tamil tuition on Sundays.

One day after two years.

There was a book release function in Paris. When she went to attend it at the request of a Tamil teacher, a shock awaited her.

The advertisement said that a popular writer Anandan would preside. But, the man on the dais with the name Anandan!

Swarna was happy in a way; surprised...

She went close to the stage and greeted Anandan during a break.

“Are you not Siva..?” she asked.

“Yes , Swarna. I saw you as soon as you arrived but... “ He drawled.

“What is all that ‘but’.. I came here to get married. But, the man runs a family here... After I came to know that, I decided not to marry and I have been staying here with my aunt. I am also working..”

“How many years since I have seen you... No news at all about you.. I agreed to come here only due to mother’s cry... Now... there is in it a”

Sivanandan smiled and gave her his telephone number. And he got on with the function.

“How long in order to see this smile...”

Swarna was floating in bliss..!





I have known Mr. V.T. Elangovan since more than two decades back. He is a poet and one of the pioneers of the progressive front. He has wide experience in the fields of medicine, literature and journalism. He has contributed immensely to these fields. Despite living a displaced life, he never forgets his sacred land. He has been hailed as a versatile king of the younger generation.

Elangovan who has won several awards as a volunteer of United Nations (UNV) in Philippines had served as secretary of the pioneer of Dalit literature, K. Daniel's people's art and literary forum.

Writer, speaker, poet, critic, this multifaceted personality's book resulting from his progressive thinking would be welcomed and hailed by the Tamil literary world. That is my firm hope.

- Professor S. Chandrasekaran

Colombo
2006



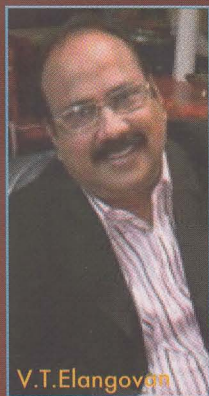
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V.T.Elangovan

Elangovan living in Paris with French nationality was born at Pungudutivu in north Sri Lanka. His father was a famous Ayurvedic physician in the islands. He has three elder brothers. Two elder brothers have won the Srilankan sahitya mandala awards. His younger brother is the Dean of the faculty of Law in the Colombo university. He is also a writer. Elangovan's wife too is involved in writing.

Elangovan began writing in newspapers and magazines even in his fifteenth year like the swimming of a young fish. He began working as Correspondent in front rank Newspapers and Radio. He worked as editor of the journal 'Tamizhan' with the guidance of his eldest brother. Then, he worked as chief editor of the daily 'Namnadu'. And also worked in 'Theevagam' newspaper and the magazine 'Naventhan'.

He published magazines 'Vaakai', (garland of victory) 'Mooligai' (root) and 'Sangappalakai' (Divine Tamil seat).

He worked as editor in the Training & Personnel division Government of North- East province. He also worked as producer of programmes in Radio and Television.

Serving as a volunteer of United Nations in Philippines, he won several awards there including the Western Mindanavo autonomous State Government's chief minister's award.

He has published more than nineteen books in Poetry, essays, short story, criticism and children's literature.

His 'Elangovan stories' has won the Ilangai Ilakkiya Peravai - Ilakkiya vatta virudhu -2006 (Srilankan literary association - literary circle) award.

This book was translated into Hindi last year (2012) and was released in Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi, in September.

It is worth noting that Elangovan who is a progressive thinker had also served as secretary of Makkal Kalai Ilakkiya Perumanram (People's Art and Literature association) for which the famous novelist K. Daniel was the President. At present, he is serving as the President of the Paris Munnodigai Ilakkiya vattam (The Pioneers literary circle of Paris - Tamil).

Paris
2013

- S. Karalapillai
(Rtd. Principal)

