

T. GNANASEKARAN

The Volcano



ERIMALAI Tamil Novel

Translated into English by

V. THILLAINATHAN



T. Gnanasekaran is a multifaceted personality. Besides being a medical practitioner, he has obtained a degree in arts from the University of Peradeniya. As a prolific writer of both fiction and non-fiction, he has had many books published comprising novels, short story collections and travelogues. Two of his novels have won State Literary Awards. His novel 'kuruthi malai' depicted the deplorable conditions of the disadvantaged Tamil Plantation workers. It is a prescribed text for M.A. degree programme offered by the Madurai American College in Tamil Nadu, India. This book is now translated into Sinhalese. One of his Short story volumes titled 'Alshesanum oru Ponaikudium' is a text for the Bachelor degree programme conducted by the Sabragamuva University of Sri Lanka since the Year 2000. He is also well known as an orator, a publisher of Tamil monthly, a critic, and a presenter of informed articles at various literary symposiums.

The Volcano

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(Erimalai)

'Erimalai', a historical
Tamil novel that depicts the
recent political history of
Northern Sri Lanka, won the
Godage Literary Award as the best
Tamil novel published in 2018

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S. Godage & Brothers (Pvt) Ltd.

First Print - 2019

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ISBN 978-624-00-0531-9

Page Setting and Cover Design by

Memonkavi

Published by

S. Godage & Brothers (Pvt) Ltd.

661/665/675, P. de S. Kularatne Mawatha, Colombo 10, Sri Lanka.

Printed by

Chathura Printers

69, Kumaradasa Place, Wellampitiya, Sri Lanka.

22631/6775/300

Dedicated to

Late Mr. Upali Leelaratna

***Who contributed enormously towards promoting
reconciliation and
ethnic harmony through his literary creations and
translations***

Translator's Note

'ERIMALAI', by the well known Tamil writer, Gnanasekaran, depicts the history of the Tamil areas under the clutches of Prevention of Terrorism Act at a period during the nineteen eighties.

While the novel deals with the travails of the Tamils and the emergence of a call for a separate state by the militants, the author has not lost sight of the fact that one man's meat is another man's poison. As a result he expresses the viewpoints of the various stake holders, be it the majority community or the various factions of the Tamil speaking people such as the muslims and the hill country Tamils, not to mention the plight of the Srilankan Tamils settled in the southern part of Sri Lanka and analyses the alternative to a separate state for the Tamils and the ways to achieve it.

I strongly feel the novel should reach the majority community, especially its intellectuals and hence my desire to translate it into English.

V.Thillainathan
(M.A. (Kel.) Dip. Ed - ELT (Exeter)

Foreword

Ayathurai Santhan

During the 70s and 80s, I had the privilege to work for more than ten years at the Public Health Engineering Division, Colombo, with Kalubowila Cyril C. Perera, the master translator, who brought many treasures from world literature to his mother tongue, Sinhala. Mr. Perera had a passion for translation. 'Translators are like angels; the angels who bring perception and peace to the people of the world through their works,' he used to say.

He was always concerned about the local situation as well. 'There should be an understanding among the masses in our country and knowing each other's grievances, fears and suspicions will help clear away such things and forge goodwill and trust, which are essential to solving our problems. For this, we have to do our best through literary translations,' he said many times.

Even after more than four decades, despite a few efforts by some of our meritorious translators, there is still a dearth of mutual literary translations between Sinhala and Tamil – which is quite unfortunate. So far, the grievances of a part of the Sri Lankan population have not been brought in full through creative writing to the attention of the other part. Besides mutual translations between them, not many of Sinhala or Tamil works have been translated into English, either.

With this backdrop, *The Volcano*, a translation of the award-winning Tamil novel *Erimalai*, by the veteran writer

Thi Gnanasekaran is now published. Gnanasekaran, a retired medical doctor and still an untiring ‘social doctor’, is one of the leading contemporary Tamil writers of Sri Lanka. Furthermore, he is well known all over the Tamil speaking world, being the editor of a long-standing literary monthly Gnanam. Several works authored by him earlier have earned distinct honours including the State Literary Awards.

Erimalai, the winner of the Godage award for the best Tamil novel published in 2018, is considered extra-ordinary creative writing because of its subject matter. The work is the outcome of an attempt to encapsulate the whole history of the Sri Lankan ethnic crisis within a novel, revealing the agony and ambitions of a section of the people of this country. Though there have been works that dealt with different periods and handled particular aspects of the development of the problem, no other work has ventured so far in dealing with the full history of the tragedy.

Gnanasekaran’s outlook is broad. As a writer, he never confines himself to any restrictions. His exposures, experience, and empathy help him to make his works humanitarian. The sincerity and success of his earlier novels Kuruthi Malai, Kavvaaththu, and Layathuch Siraikal, depicting the life of the hill-country Tamils, are good examples of this since he hails from Jaffna. Even *The Volcano* portrays him as a righteous human and a sincere Sri Lankan.

The story moves around Mr. and Mrs. Wimalasiri from Colombo visiting Jaffna at a time of turmoil during the early-80s. The original, the author admits, was written in 1984, but was unable to see print until 2018. The subtle love story in the background not only adds flavour to the main ‘political’ story but equally substantiates his hope and sense of goodwill to bring about compassion and unity among the people.

The reader can see that the challenge to prove himself as a good novelist and an equally good historian is met successfully by the author. His technique of using friendly dialogues and serious exchanges of ideas between characters helps to bring about political history, without hindering the tempo of the main story in any way.

The role of the translator of this work is no second to that of the author. Thillainathan, an 'angel' according to Perera, and a creative writer himself has done an admirable job. Once I finished reading both the original and the translation, I felt an urge that the 'volcano' referred to in the novel is to be made permanently extinct by finding a reasonable and lasting solution to the ethnic crisis at the earliest. Efforts such as the present translation cultivate much-needed energy to expedite the process.

Annamalai Road,
Suthumalai,
Manipay.

21st Oct., 2019

Preface

T. Gnanasekaran

I have authored five novels in Tamil so far, but this is the only novel which is being translated into English for a wider readership. This novel gained Godage Sahitya award for the best novel published in Tamil for the year 2018. I am very much delighted that the same organization Godage Publishers have come forward to publish the English version of this novel, 'Erimalai'. At the outset, I wish to thank the Godage publishers for their award and their undertaking to publish this novel.

This novel, penned in the year 1984, seeks to analyse the background of the Sri Lankan Tamils' agitation against the government turned fully – fledged armed conflict.

The novel was written at a time when a large number of young men joined the militant movements. I was personally aware of several youngsters from my own village, Punnaalaikadduvan, who were induced to join up. One of them a prominent member of the movement known as Pulithevan happened to be among those who were shot dead while trying to surrender themselves to the forces, carrying a white flag. I knew him from his childhood as he was the son of a friend of mine. Youngsters choosing to be militants from almost everywhere in the Tamil areas was a burning question at that time. As a member of the community in the locality and as a writer, I was deeply affected by this mad rush and hence the genesis of this novel. Some of the characters in this book are real people I knew, bearing fictitious names.

In the wake of two of my successful previous novels winning the Sahitya Academy award, I ventured to write this story but the rejection slips I received from publishers did not come as a surprise, considering its sensitive theme and the tense situation prevailing then. Taking the advice of a few of my friends, I, therefore, let it lie dormant for a while.

Since the time our country gained independence, Tamil people had been preoccupied with the shabby treatment meted out to them by the political leaders of the south and began in earnest a peaceful agitation to free them from the clutches of the majority community. The novel documents this and the armed struggle that followed, speaking elaborately about the feelings of the masses, the torching of the Jaffna public library and the killings on both sides of the divide with an emphasis on the views of the various stakeholders without taking sides as much as possible.

For three decades following the transition into armed struggle, I did not get the opportunity to have the novel published. In the mean time there emerged many novels authored by both the supporters as well as opponents of the armed struggle. Some of them were written by former militants, themselves, taking refuge in foreign soil. They were valuable documentations in their own right.

As for the present novel, it depicts the overall situation prior to the beginnings of 30 year armed struggle in which the Tamil leaders were engaged in peaceful agitation against Sri Lankan Government and in addition, it deals with the political situation which prevailed in ancient and pre independent times.

When I reread it recently, its importance as a valuable document struck me and hence its publication.

I wish to express my sincere thanks to Mr. Iyathurai Santhan Who was awarded the title of Sahitya Ratna by the Sri Lankan Government this year for his literary contribution both in English and Tamil. He has magnanimously written a very valuable forward to this novel

As far as the English translation of the novel is concerned I am deeply indebted to Mr.V.Thillainathan, a well – known Tamil fiction writer, for coming forward to do it of his own volition. He has also written a few short stories in English two of which were carried by “Channels”. One of them won the second prize in an island wide short story contest.

Chapter 01

1984

A jeep screeched to a halt outside Dr. Mahesan's residence, breaking the silence of the night. The front door opened and two young men jumped out of the jeep. They helped another youngster moaning in pain to get down from the jeep gently and the jeep roared to life again and vanished from the scene.

The noise outside stirred Dr. Mahesan from sleep. He went to the window and peeped out to see the two young men supporting the weight of someone. The doctor hurriedly put on his shirt, went out and switched on the light in the front portion. In the mean time, one of the young men jumped over the parapet wall into the doctor's compound and managed to carry the injured person over the wall with the help of his friend who climbed over the wall himself.

"Who the hell are you?" shouted the doctor. He was thoroughly upset.

"Please stop shouting, doctor. We badly need your help to attend on our injured friend. He has hurt his leg.

Mrs. Mahesan left her bedroom sleepily and surveyed the scene.

The injured youngster was seated gently on the cement floor. His right foot was bleeding. The shirt which was wrapped around his foot was soaked in blood. He was clearly in a lot of pain.

The doctor took a careful look at the young men. They appeared to be in their early twenties. They were very tired and their hair was ruffled. They were also dressed alike in black shirt and black trousers. The injured young man's shirt was used as a make shift dressing and there were blood stains in the clothes of others too.

The doctor collected himself and said, "Come on. Tell me what happened" addressing the youngsters in front of him.

"Please doctor, kindly stop probing and attend on our injured friend right away", he said in desperation.

"Please switch off the light." said one of them.

Mrs. Mahesan, who was in shock ventured to say. "He is bleeding profusely. It looks like a major injury. You'd better take him to the General Hospital". Mrs. Mahesan is a doctor, herself. The couple is running a private hospital of their own at a place nearby.

"Sorry madam, we depend on you to help him. We are not in a position to take him to hospital immediately."

"Please understand. We don't treat such cases. It's advisable to take him to hospital immediately".

"Doctor, we can hardly go out at the moment. Neither can we take him out".

"There is no way we can treat him here. Are you going to take him away or not?" Mrs. Mahesan flared at them. "There is no sign of the blood receding. His life is in danger. Hurry up and take him to hospital. We have no facilities to treat him here".

"Give him first aid at least, doctor".

"Can't you understand what we say? You keep repeating whatever you say unnecessarily." Mrs. Mahesan's voice hardened.

“Are you going to help us or not?” the injured man, who had been silent up to that point said fiercely.

The doctor turned to his wife. “We have to give him first aid, Mala. I will get my first aid box.” He went back into the house and his wife followed suit.

Dr. Mahesan was on the point of calling somebody on the phone when he felt something pressing hard on his back.

“Who are you calling, doctor?” One of the youngsters was behind him pressing his revolver on his back.

The doctor was shaking. His face became pale and he started sweating. The wife was dumfounded with shock. “I was trying to get down some medicine from the nursing home,” the doctor stammered.

“No doctor, you were calling the police and now you are trying to fool us. You are making a fatal mistake, mind you”.

“Hello, police station here,” there was a voice from the other end.

“Wrong number, please,” the doctor hung up. His hand was trembling.

“We will never betray you, doctor. “Please help us,” the youngster withdrew his gun from the doctor’s back.

The front light had been switched off. “We don’t want to trouble you, doctor. We have come to you because we have no other alternative. You must do this favour. It is your responsibility to treat him until we make alternative arrangements.”

How can we treat him here?. It is risky taking him to the nursing home where people will be inquisitive.” The doctor said and came out of the house reluctantly.

“We don’t like to take him to the nursing home, either. There won’t be any setback if he remains here”, said one of the intruders. Dr.Mahesan and Mala were at their wits’ end. They could see the army trucks plying in succession disturbing the peace of the night.

“We can’t remain here any longer, doctor. We are leaving the patient in your care”. Dr.Mahesan felt the pulse of the patient and said, “There is nothing to worry.” He took a look at Mala’s face.

“He has gunshot injuries, doctor. We wonder whether there are any bullets to be removed”.

“If we treat him without informing the police, we will be in danger,” said Mala.

“Are you positive that you will ensure your safety by not helping us?” the injured youngster said menacingly. Mrs. Mahesan was silenced.

“Well, in that case, we will attend on him in the room adjoining the garage at the back of the house. You must make it a point to take him away in a day or two,” said the doctor.

“Are you going to give him accommodation in the room of our driver, Marimuththu?” said Mala.

“There is no other way, Mala. Chandran and his friends are expected in the morning. So how can we have him in the house while they are here?”

Mala agreed with her husband. Their house was large with modern facilities. There were four rooms upstairs. There was a pathway from the main gate to the backyard, wide enough for the car to be taken. In the backyard was the garage with two adjoining rooms about two hundred yards away from the house. The driver occupied one of the rooms and the other room was used as a warehouse.

“Who is expected to come tomorrow, doctor?” one of them said.

“My brother, Chandran, is coming from Colombo. His landlord and his family members are supposed to accompany him.”

The young men looked troubled at this news but they kept cool considering their immediate need.

“Bring him along,” the doctor said and preceded them with a flashlight in his hand. The hideout was to the entire satisfaction of the youngsters and they seemed to be somewhat relieved.

The doctor tried to wake up Marimuththu, pounding at his door and calling him. The doctor’s voice disturbed Marimuththu’s slumber. He put on the light and opened the door in a state of nervous tension.

Marimuththu, an orphan, had been working for Dr. Mahesan for seven years as his cook to begin with when he worked in Kandy and then as his driver. Two of his elder brothers were working on a tea estate. The doctor treated Marimuththu as a family member because of his honesty, obedience and dependability.

“What is all this, Sir?” Marimuththu seemed to be surprised to see them all at an ungodly hour.

“I will explain later, Marimuththu. I have to accommodate this patient in your room for two or three days and treat him”.

“Tell me what I should do now, sir”.

“Let us make arrangements to make him sleep comfortably in your room”.

Marimuththu tidied his bed right away and the patient was bedded down.

“Go and fetch my kitbag from the front room Marimuththu. Hurry up.” the doctor said and then carefully removed the makeshift bandage.

Mrs.Mahesan felt the patient’s pulse. “Let us give him a pethidine injection first and then do the needful depending on his condition,” said the doctor and examined the injured leg.

Marimuththu came back in a short while with the kitbag. Mrs.Mahesan injected pethidine intravenously and checked the blood pressure of the patient.

“The B.P. seems to be low. Unless we arrest the blood flow immediately, there may be problems”

The doctor cleaned the wound using savlon with the help of Marimuththu.

“The bullet must have gone out through the ankle. There are no signs of any pellets remaining in the wound,” the doctor told Mala.

“In that case, will you be able to cure him, doctor?” one of the intruders questioned the doctor.

“It’s too early to say anything. What we are giving him now is nothing but first aid. Depending on his condition, you may have to take him elsewhere later on,” said the doctor. He sutured the wound and bandaged it after applying medicine.

The blood flow had completely stopped. Marimuththu brought soap and water for the doctor to wash his hands. A youngster bent down and asked the patient how he was. The patient tried to smile bearing the pain, but said nothing in reply.

“Stop worrying. The doctor assures us that there is no bullet in the wound. He will take good care of you.”

"If we stay here any longer, we may find it difficult to leave this place. Please make sure he is safe until we take him away," one of them told the doctor.

"We can't have him for more than two days. When the guests are here, it won't be easy for me to check him from time to time," said Mrs. Mahesan.

"Don't you worry, Madam. We are always mindful of our responsibilities. Nothing will go wrong."

"You haven't told us who you are.....," the doctor queried studying their faces.

"Can't you guess who we are, doctor?"

"Forget it. How come he is injured?"

"You will be shocked to hear what happened. I am sure you will come to know about it by tomorrow." Just then they heard a bicycle bell chime.

"Well, it is time we left, doctor". They patted their friend's shoulder and left. Before they left, they cleaned and tidied the room. Marimuththu accompanied them up to the gate, bidding farewell to them.

The doctor checked the patient's pulse and B.P.again and said, "Everything is normal".

"I wonder how we are going to manage while the guests are here", Mala looked worried.

"There won't be any problem. I'm sure they will be spending most of the time sightseeing. Nobody comes to this room, anyway," the doctor comforted Mala.

"We must tell Marimuththu not to leave the patient alone for a couple of days."

The patient was in deep sleep. "They have left, sir." Marimuththu was at the door.

"Remember, the presence of the patient here is a top secret. Besides, you will have to take good care of him." Mala warned Marimuththu.

"Mind you, you must keep it secret even from my brother and his guests. Nobody is supposed to know about it," the doctor cautioned Marimuththu.

Marimuththu was panicky. "Why are you doing all this, sir? You will run into trouble unnecessarily," Marimuththu pleaded.

"If this leaks out, you will be nabbed by the police, yourself. So be cautious," the doctor warned him. "We are leaving. Keep us informed if something crops up. O.K.?" The couple left leaving the patient in Marimuththu's care.

Marimuththu seated himself on the bench by the bedside. The time was past 3.00a.m. The doctor and Mala turned in their bed sleeplessly. They were haunted by unpleasant thoughts.

Chapter 02

Dr.Mahesan was walking restlessly up and down the platform at the railway station in Jaffna. The mail train was delayed by an hour, people were informed. He was highly disturbed by the unexpected incident of the previous night. He was panic stricken to hear the story of a bank robbery circulating from one person to another at the station.

Six or seven youngsters were said to have robbed a bank in a nearby village.

There was a gun fight between the robbers and the policemen who were patrolling the area. As a result one policeman was killed on the spot and the young men had escaped, carrying the injured.

He was more and more disturbed when the truth struck him that those who sought his help in the dead of night were none other than the young men who robbed the bank.

The arrival of the train was announced. Dr.Mahesan stood on the platform waiting for the visitors. Chandran's head appeared stretched out of the window. He was waving at his brother and the doctor walked up to his compartment.

Chandran got off the train first and he was followed by his landlord, his wife and another young woman. When his friend's wife was about to get down, Chandran relieved her of her basket, assisting her to get down with ease.

Chandran introduced them to his brother in English and they continued their conversation in English. "This is

Mr. Wimalsiri, a Business Management Consultant and this is his wife, a Professor of Sociology at Kelaniya University."

Dr. Mahesan smiled and said, "This must be Mrs. Wimalsiri's sister," turning to the young woman who was with them and shook Mr. Wimalsiri's hand.

"Yes, you are right," Mr. Wimalsiri said, laughing. "She is a stenographer and she stays with us in Colombo".

"Was the journey comfortable?" the doctor asked Mr. Wimalsiri.

"The journey was not tedious because of the sleeperettes. However, we couldn't sleep well".

"Oh come on. You can rest your eyes at home".

When they got into the car, Chandran said, "Where is the driver?"

"Marimuththu has some work at home. That's why I brought the car." Mahesan said and started the car.

"Is this your first visit to Jaffna, Mr. Wimalsiri?"

"No, doctor. I happened to tour Jaffna with my classmates fifteen years back. Even my wife has been to Jaffna once as a small girl."

"We have to make a vow at the Buddhist temple in Nagadeepa. We have now had the opportunity to fulfill our duty. My sister Anula has never visited Jaffna. So she wanted to come with us and hence her presence," said Mrs. Wimalsiri.

"As a matter of fact, Mrs. Wimalsiri is allergic to Jaffna. She is terrified because of news reports about Jaffna," Chandran chuckled.

"No, he is lying. He enjoys teasing me."

“I disagree. Chandran is not entirely wrong. There is some truth in what he says,” Anula broke her silence and contradicted her sister.

“I have told these people several times not to judge people by unfavorable press reports. They will change their minds when they see for themselves what is happening here.” Chandran told his brother.

The doctor was driving the car without making any response. When the car turned at Nagavihara junction they could see a small crowd of people there. Two of them tried to stop the car. The doctor braked the car and pulled in abruptly. When he peeped out, one of them said, “The soldiers in a passing truck had attacked two young men on their bicycle with a rifle butt. One of them is bleeding from a gash on his head. Could you please take him to the hospital in your car?”

The doctor was hesitant. He could see a bicycle lying on the road. Beside it, a bleeding youngster was found lying on the lap of another young man who was explaining what had happened to the crowd of onlookers.

Wimalsiri knew a little bit of Tamil. He told his wife and Anula what was going on in Sinhalese. They sounded frightened. In the meantime somebody brought a car to take the injured person to hospital.

“We have found a car. You can leave,” someone told the doctor.

“Is the army still harassing people?” Chandran turned to his brother.

“I understand that there was a bank robbery last night and hence the army patrolling. Whenever something of this sort happens, it is customary for the soldiers to assault young men with the butts of their guns.

“What happened, doctor,” Anula asked the doctor.

“It’s not clear what really happened. There is supposed to be a bank robbery last night and in the ensuing gun battle between the robbers and the police a policeman was killed, I hear.”

Mrs. Wimalsiri and Anula looked troubled. “Is the dead constable a Sinhalese?” Anula queried.

“That is what the people at the railway station said”.

“We are here at such a bad time,” Wimalsiri was excited.

“You need not fear for your safety. Why worry, you are going to be with us, aren’t you?” Chandran tried to comfort them. “Such untoward incidents occur from time to time. The people are gradually getting used to such things. Nobody is certain what is in store for them or when will normalcy return. So please stop being flustered.” In spite of his assurance, the silence of the couple betrayed their worry.

When the car reached the next junction, they could see about five or six trucks parked one behind the other. Some soldiers were sitting behind these trucks, having their guns ready for any eventuality. Some were engaged in checking vehicles passing that way. Many vehicles were waiting for their turn to be checked. Some passengers were asked to alight from their bus, with their arms raised while they were being frisked and their belongings checked. An armed soldier stopped the doctor’s car and four soldiers surrounded the car with their guns ready.

“Okkoma bahinda,” a soldier said, pointing his gun at the doctor. The doctor stopped the engine and got down. Chandran got down from the other side. Others remained seated not knowing what to do.

“Are you people deaf? Didn’t you hear my order?” A soldier pulled the back door open angrily, yelling in Sinhalese.

“Ape minisuwage penawa,” his companion said softly.

“They are my friends from Colombo. I am bringing them from the railway station,” said the doctor.

Ignoring what he said, one soldier opened the boot. Another soldier opened the suitcase in the boot and checked it nonchalantly. Wimalisiri intervened and said, “There are nothing, but our clothes in it,” in Sinhalese.

Without taking any notice of Wimalisiri, he dropped the suitcase and paid his attention to the plastic basket. The Thermos flask in the basket fell on the road breaking into pieces. Mrs. Wimalisiri was furious. “They must be blind. They are behaving like brutes,” she said under her breath. The soldier glared at her and went over to another car. All of them got into the car and left.

“People suffer whenever anything untoward happens,” the doctor said.

Chandran felt guilty. He shouldn’t have brought his friends here at a time like this. He was very much embarrassed. Anula appeared to be more upset than others. He kept looking at her again and again.

“It is because of the terrorist activities that the army behaves like this. Is there no end to terrorism?” said Wimalisiri.

“The government says the armed forces are here to curb terrorism. On the contrary, it is the savagery of the forces that incites the youngsters into more and more violence,” said the doctor.

“How about the dead bodies of the soldiers frequently sent to the South?” said Mrs. Wimalisiri.

“It is rather unfortunate, I admit. At the same time, you have to take into consideration the severe torture the youngsters suffer. It has been the practice since 1970. Their confessions are made under torture. Many have become jailbirds.”

“The tortures they suffer make them inhuman. They are determined to avenge themselves on the perpetrators of torture. They take the law into their hands as they are highly frustrated,” said the doctor.

“Is there no remedy to this problem”? Anula said.

“Unsolved ethnic problem is the cause for the aggravation of violence. The government’s first priority is to tackle the root cause of the problem. Merely setting the army against the people won’t serve any purpose,” said the doctor.

“The general public is badly affected by that,” Anula pondered over the doctor’s words.

“You are absolutely right. Whenever the tension mounts, the armed forces take the law into their hands. They enter the tea shops and eating houses and help themselves but they refuse to pay for the meals. If the owners insist on their paying, they smash everything. Under the guise of checking, they harass people to the point of being disobedient to their superiors.”

“It is because of the public’s support to the terrorists, that they are ruthless, I think,” Mrs Wimalisiri opined.

“Most of the high ranking officers in the armed forces are political appointees. Strict discipline is not imposed on soldiers. They feel that their primary duty is suppressing the Tamils. As they are ignorant of the language of the area,

there is a lack of communication. The people live in a world that has become alien and dangerous.”.

“Whatever it is, my wife has a lot of things to think about and write about here. I am sure she will be looking for themes for her stories,” Wimalsiri chuckled.

“Yes, I forgot to tell you something. Mrs.Wimalsiri is not only a professor but also a well-known writer. She writes research articles, fiction and newspaper columns. She has won quite a number of awards, too”, Chandran told his brother.

“Chandran is singing my praise for no reason. I am not so famous. I scribble something when I am free, that’s all,” Mrs Wimalsiri said.

“If so, please write about the things you have witnessed here. Your readers will be exposed to our grievances which may be news to them”.

If I am put to wise about the difficulties you face as an ethnic minority, I can pass the message to the Sinhalese readers,” Mrs.Wimalsiri told the doctor.

“Unfortunately, my parents have gone on a pilgrimage to India. My father is very much interested in politics. He would have quenched your thirst.”

“Yes, Chandran said so, too. I hear they have taken your daughter with them as well”.

“Yes, she is just five years old. She can’t part from her grandparents. Neither can they part from her,” the doctor said.

The doctor reached home to see his wife at the entrance with a welcoming smile, but he didn’t fail to see her troubled eyes.

Chapter 03

Marimuththu served their breakfast and they dined together. The subjects of their conversation were mainly the bank robbery and the experience they had on their way back from the railway station.

Mala was in a state of shock to hear the news and so was Marimuththu. Dr.Mahesan and Mala were in the habit of leaving together for the nursing home. but Mala had to stay at home that day to take care of the guests.

It suited Mala as she was not in a mood to work in the nursing home.

The guests were given two adjoining rooms upstairs. The husband and wife used one room while Anula occupied the other. Chandran used to stay in one of the rooms downstairs whenever he came home. Wimalsiri couple were so tired that they went upstairs soon after breakfast to rest for a while. Anula accompanied them. Chandran spent some time with his brother and sister-in-law talking about this and that.

The doctor was ready to go to the nursing home at 8.30. He took Mala aside and said before leaving, "Mala, call me in case of emergency. I will bet here in no time. Tell Marimuththu to go and see the patient from time to time."

Chandran was tired after the journey, but as he was not used to sleeping in the day time, he wanted to go out.

As he didn't want to disturb the guests, he went into the kitchen where Mala was discussing the menu for the day with Marimuththu.

"I am going out. Do you want me to buy anything?"

"No, Chandran. We have everything. Besides, Marimuththu is here to help me. You must be tired after the journey. Why go out in the sun.

"I just want to while away the time. Can I have your bike, Marimuththu?" He turned to Marimuththu.

"I will get it for you, sir." Marimuththu came forward to help him.

"Don't you worry. I will get it myself," Before leaving, Chandran looked up. Anula was looking at him from the balcony. She was in a blue gown. She looked very attractive in the gown

As if she expected to find him, Anula smiled at him. He waved at her and smiled.

"Kohetha yanne," she gestured. Chandran looked here and there to make sure that Mala was not around.

"I will be back in an hour. You'd better rest," said Chandran using sign language.

"I can hardly sleep," she moaned. "Mala might come this way. Let me take leave of you. What do you want me to buy for you?"

She pressed the cheek with the tip of her tongue, making a lump. Chandran gave a flying kiss and signalled whether that was what she wanted. Her facial expression showed fake anger playfully and she pointed to the lump. "Oh, you mean toffee?" Anula nodded smiling.

The ethnic riots in 1977 were behind Dr.Mahesan's decision to start a private hospital. The fight between the security guard and some policemen who tried to forcefully enter a carnival on St.Patrick's ground without producing

their tickets erupted into an ethnic riot all over Sri Lanka at a time when Dr.Mahesan and Mala were working for the government hospital in Anuradhapura.

The talk of the town and the hospital centered on the riots. Rumours spread like wildfire.

“BUDDHIST MONKS ARE BUTCHERED IN JAFFNA”

“NO SINHALESE CAN STAY ALIVE IN JAFFNA”

“SINHALESE UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN JAFFNA ARE RAPED BY TAMIL THUGS”

“THE BAKERIES BELONGING TO THE SINHALESE HAVE BEEN BURNT DOWN.”

“SINHALESE WOMEN ARE MASSACRED AND HANGED”

Some Tamil employees at the hospital had left for Jaffna in time to safeguard themselves.

One of Dr.Mahesan's friend, Dr.Silva, advised him to leave but another friend said, “Leaving without police escort is dangerous at this time.”.

Some minor employees were seen talking about the couple in subdued tones whenever they caught sight of them. When the couple returned to the quarters in the evening, Marimuthu looked troubled. “Sir, I hear attendant Ranathunga, clerk Piyasena and some others are planning to plunder our house,” he said anxiously.

“Ranathunga and Piyasena? They are very loyal to me and they wouldn't do a thing like that. Some rumour mongers must have concocted this story.”

“Anyway, it is better to be careful,” Mala said. She was panic stricken.

“I talked to the Inspector of Police on the phone today. He assured me that the situation is not so bad and he promised to send two policemen for protection.”

“It is said that the police look the other way when Tamil people are assaulted.” Marimuththu said.

“We have harmed nobody, Mala. We have saved many lives and cured countless patients. As a result we have earned a good name. So, don't be scared. Nobody will touch us.

The doctor tried to comfort Mala, but he couldn't help being frightened himself.

Mala was by the radio listening to the newsflashes. “Nowhere in Jaffna or elsewhere Buddhist temples have been attacked. Sinhalese people and in particular Sinhalese students are unharmed. Don't be deceived by malicious rumours,” bulletins in quick succession by the Ministry of Defence cautioned people.

By about 10 o'clock in the night the lights went out suddenly, but the doctor found to his consternation that the lights at the hospital were on.

“Somebody has turned off the lights, sir,” Marimuththu came running in fear. They could see people running towards the house carrying torches.

“Come, let's go to Dr.Silva's place,” said Marimuththu and tried to open the back door

A group of thugs pounded on the back door. Mala hid herself behind a cupboard in the kitchen. One of the hooligans dealt a heavy blow on the doctor's head with an iron rod. Another thug kicked him in the abdomen and shouted, “para themulo”. The doctor lost consciousness. Blood gushed out of his head.

Mala's heart throbbed uncontrollably. She was trembling but she kept silent. Two of the thugs were busy plundering with the help of the torches they carried. A cupboard was broken open by an axe and the valuables were robbed by them.

Marimuththu managed to escape through the back door and alerted Dr.Silva. Some of the thugs were looking for Mala everywhere. As all of them were drunk, they were staggering. A petrol bomb was thrown on the doctor's car. It was blazing.

Because of the urgent telephone call by Dr.Silva, troops were dispatched to the spot. When the thugs saw them, they escaped with the loot. The doctor was regaining consciousness when Marimuththu returned on finding the miscreants retreating.

Dr.Silva took the couple home and looked after them. They had lost everything except the clothes they were wearing. When the situation was back to normal, Mr.Silva had them safely sent back home with the help of the troops. The soldiers escorted them up to Vavuniya. When they reached Vavuniya, they were able to gather much more information about the riots.

Colombo was badly affected. Tamil refugees from places like Kalubowilla, Galkissa and Ratmalana were sent to a refugee camp at Colombo Hindu College. Unlike in the riots of 1958, the people from the hill country were not spared this time. They too were badly affected.

Tamils all over the island had their share of losses. Many had lost their lives. The rumour mongers were clearly the source of the anarchy.

Many telephones at the various police stations were said to have been used to spread rumours about the rape and murder of innocent Sinhalese, stirring the people to react.

The people who lost their seats at parliamentary elections, communal minded people, those who were against the ruling party and those who were keen on plundering had been working overtime spreading malicious rumours. Dr.Mahesan and Mala got a rude shock after the unexpected happenings.

Mala refused to get back to work and Dr. Mahesan was highly frustrated. It was then that his parents and relatives suggested that he should start doing private practice.

Dr.Mahesan liked the idea and hence the nursing home.

They took immediate action to resign from their posts and had a private hospital built.

Dr.Mahesan reminisced about his private practice until he entered his office in the nursing home.

An R.M.P. was in charge of the hospital at night. Two nurses and an assistant helped him. Whenever he had patients who were critically ill, he called Dr.Mahesan. As soon as the doctor took his seat, Dr.Pranawan and the nurse Sumathy, rushed into his room. They looked worried.

“I had a phone call from the army camp just now. They wanted to know whether we treated any injured person. I said, no.”

“Subsequently someone else called to find out whether we treated any one with gunshot injuries last night. I gave them the necessary details.” Dr.Pranawan said.

Dr.Mahesan was nonplussed for a moment. Then he collected himself and said, “Thank you. You may leave. I will answer any further queries.” He then got ready for his ward rounds.

Chapter 04

When Dr.Mahesan went home for lunch, he saw Mala talking to Anula on the verandah. Chandran had not yet returned. Wimalsiri and his wife were sleeping upstairs.

He wanted to check the condition of the injured young man and he took Marimuthu along with him.

The patient rose when he saw the doctor with some difficulty. "How are you today?" the doctor said and pressed the wound gently with his index finger. The patient pulled his leg back in pain.

"It is more painful today and I find it difficult to raise my arms because of the injection," he said.

"I have to give you injection twice a day to make you better soon. In addition, I will give you pain killers to ease your pain. You have to take them six hourly," the doctor said and gave him an injection. "You haven't told me your name yet?"

"You can call me 'Bala', doctor"

"Is it your real name or the name assigned by your movement?" The patient kept silent without betraying his emotion.

"Your friends kept me in the dark about what happened. There is a talk about a bank being robbed and a policeman killed." The patient remained silent.

"Why are you getting involved in such terrorist activities?"

The young man hesitated for a moment.

“Well, if you don’t want to talk, I won’t force you, Bala”, the doctor rose.

“No, please wait. I should have been a doctor myself like you. As a bio-student I scored 276 marks at the A/L examination. I had high hopes of entering the medical faculty and so did everybody at my school. That was the year when standardization was introduced. It was ethnic discrimination, pure and simple. My whole world shattered into million pieces. That was when I realized that the struggles of the Federal Party were justifiable.

I became a member of the student federation of the Federal Party and participated in the civil disobedient movement, ‘satyagraha’ etc. organized by the party. When the government declared a ‘state of emergency’ in 1979, I was arrested and tortured.”

“Didn’t you expect to be arrested?” “I expected it because it was the time when two young men called ‘Inpam’ and ‘Chelvam’ were arrested in the dead of night, murdered and their body parts thrown under the Pannai bridge.

Another young man by the name of ‘Indrarajan’ was admitted to hospital with his nails pulled out and 37 injuries below the waist and his face burnt beyond recognition. He died in the hospital.”

About ten o’clock one night, the forces rounded up five villages and carried out a house to house search armed with machine guns. All the young men were lined up and frisked. Three masked spies were employed to identify people supposed to be engaged in terrorist activities. Seventeen such suspects were identified that night. Some others were arrested in offices and homes, not to mention the streets at the whims and fancies of the forces.”

“Some of us planned to leave the country to escape arrest. But I was arrested before I could make my escape. I was taken to the Government Agent’s quarters, chained and tortured by the army. I was made to stand under hot sun. My throat was dry and when I asked for water,

I was kicked. I was stripped and assaulted to make me disclose the names of my friends.

They also used burning cigarettes to scorch me below the waist”.

He raised his sarong to show the burn marks and said, “See for yourself, doctor.” There were more than fifty burn marks. The doctor closed his eyes being unable to bear the pain of mind.

“As a result of the torture I suffered. I have become stony, doctor. ” We no longer believe in non violence that is propagated by our leaders. Thousands of youngsters have become clear headed.”

How many such frustrated young men have become militants, the doctor wondered.

He could not help sympathizing with the young man in his care.

“It is risky for me to stay here any longer. I will see you in the evening. The forces are hunting for the militants who were injured in the bank robbery. They called our nursing home to find out whether we had been treating anyone with gunshot injuries,” the doctor said leaving.

“Yes, sir. The army has intensified its patrolling,” Marimuththu said.

“It is no news to us. They roam about and then arrest some innocent people and torture them.”

“My brother has come from Colombo with some of his friends. It is a problem having you here without their knowledge. To make matters worse, the forces are involved in a house to house searching. They may be here at any moment.”

“Marimuththu has been telling me about your fears. Please stop worrying, doctor. My friends will take me away as soon as possible.”

“How about your treatment then?”

“They will be making some arrangements. And I assure you that you will never be betrayed.”

“But we don’t know when they will be here.”

“They may be here at any time. They also know about the precarious position we have put you into. They will be prudent, I can assure you.”

“If any of your friends are caught.....?”

“It is not so easy to catch us. Even if they do, they won’t be able to gather any information from us.”

“I hear the robbers have left some clues. Wouldn’t it be easy for the police to catch them?”

He laughed. “We purposely left those misleading clues to sideline the police.”

“Is it possible to do such a thing?” Marimuththu was interested in the topic.”

“It is the only measure available to get the police sidetracked,” he said. As if he was reluctant to talk about it, he added, “Marimuththu is taking good care of me. You are very lucky to have such a person to help you.”

“Marimuththu is very much dependable. Otherwise we can't have you here.”

“You are godlike in Marimuththu's eyes.”

The doctor beamed and got to his feet.

“Take your medicines without fail. I will see you later.”
The doctor left.

Chapter 05

Seated in a half circle in front of the house, Mr.Wimalsiri, Mrs.Wimalsiri, Anula and Chandran were engaged in an animated conversation. They could watch from there the traffic and the pedestrians on the road.

Marimuththu was watering the flower garden with a hosepipe. There were crotons and roses in the garden.

Mala was walking towards them after making arrangements for the evening tea, when Mr.Chelliah, a retired school master dropped in.

“Welcome, sir,” Chandran got to his feet and received him happily. “I was planning to visit you, but you are here yourself,” he said delightedly.

“I heard that you are here. So I made it a point to see you.” Chandran gave his chair to Mr. Chelliah and brought two more chairs from inside the house.

They are Chandran’s friends, visiting us,” Mala introduced the guests to Mr. Chelliah.

Chandran sat beside Mr.Chelliah and introduced him to Mr.Wimalsiri. “He was my English teacher. Whenever he started teaching Shelley or Shakespeare, he immersed himself in their poetry and took us to a world of his own,” he said and introduced the guests to Mr.Chelliah. Chelliah master shook Wimalsiri’s hand and bowed to the women.

“Mr. Wimalasiri is a business tycoon. Most of the politicians are his friends and some are his relatives,” said Chandran.

“Don’t believe Mr. Chandran. I am just an ordinary person,” Wimalasiri smiled.

Mala intervened and said, “If you start talking politics with Master, you wouldn’t realize how time flies.

“Is that so? We too are interested in politics. I’m sure we will enjoy Master’s company,” said Mrs. Wimalasiri.

“I must tell you something, sir. Mrs. Wimalasiri is a professor in sociology and a well-known writer. I am sure you will be very useful to her,” Chandran said.

“Take care, He might make you a supporter of ‘Tamil United Liberation Front’,” Mala said laughing. Everyone laughed.

“Can you remember my asking you to find employment for somebody? Master’s son is the person I recommended,” Chandran said.

“Done. When the company I invested on recently start their production, I will contact you through Chandran,” said Wimalasiri.

“Master has two unemployed sons. So he is highly worried,” said Mala.

Marumuththu brought tea and Mala served them.

“What are your sons’ qualifications?”

“Both of them have passed the A/L Examination. Because of the standardization, they couldn’t enter the university.”

“Haven’t they been trying for Government jobs?”

“The elder son keeps sending applications. The younger one is simply idling.”

“It shouldn’t be encouraged. He might go astray.” Wimalsiri said.

“Master, why is there political turmoil in Jaffna? We hear of quite a number of untoward incidents happening here?” Mrs. Wimalsiri queried.

“I become emotional sometimes. My ideas may not be palatable to you. You shouldn’t misunderstand me.”

“No problem. I want you to be frank. The exchange of ideas among the educated always promotes understanding. I am planning to share my observations with the Sinhalese readers through my column spaces in a newspaper. You can talk without any reservation. I am sure your contribution will be useful,” Mrs Wimalsiri said pleasantly.

“We want very much to make peace with the Sinhalese brethren. That is the very reason that Mr. S.J.V. Chelvanayagam, the leader of the Federal Party, insisted on a Federal set up at the outset. But the politicians had always turned their backs on us, the Tamils, refusing to recognize our rights.

“You mean to say that there has been systematic racial segregation. Please be more explicit.”

“We gained independence in 1948. The very next year, 40,000 Sinhalese were colonized in the eastern province changing the name of Tamil area known as ‘Pattipalai’ to ‘Gal Oya’, which is a Sinhalese name. In the same way, ‘Paraiyanaru’, which was a Tamil area became ‘Padaviya’, a Sinhalese area. Doesn’t it amount to ethnic cleansing?”

“You are referring to something that happened thirty five years ago,” Wimalsiri said laughing.

“Do you know that the land grabbing which started then has up to now swallowed about 3000 square miles of Tamil settlements.”

“What! 3000 square miles”, exclaimed Chandran.

“Seruwilla electorate created for colonizing the Sinhalese swallowed two thirds of the district of Trincomalee which was predominantly a Tamil area. Tamil villages there are now surrounded by Sinhalese colonizers and the ocean. In the same way many border areas are deliberately colonized by the Sinhalese.”

“Do you mean to say that Sinhalese people and Tamil people living together is a bad thing?”

“Looking at it that way is misleading. When the Sinhalese are colonized in the predominantly Tamil areas, the Tamils lose their identity. During communal riots we have to fight for our lives and our property. Tamils lose their chance of being adequately represented in parliament. When that happens, our voices are silenced. There will be political and economic dominance by the Sinhalese representatives. During the height of ethnic tension in 1958, 1977 and 1983, the victimized Tamils were able to take refuge in their own areas, I mean the Tamil areas. Otherwise they would have had to jump into the sea,” Master elaborated.

“There is a concentration of Tamils in certain Sinhalese areas. So, I can’t understand why the Sinhalese can’t live among the Tamils?” said Mrs. Wimal Siri.

“What I am totally against is the deliberate attempts to change the ethnic ratio. Unlike in the past, there is no territorial contiguity between the Tamil areas. When one is travelling from one Tamil area to another, one has to pass through Sinhalese settlements because of the planned colonization.”

“Can you deny there is a little Jaffna in Colombo? Have you ever stopped to think in which area it is located? It is a Sinhalese area.”

“Well said,” Chandran pounding on the chair and laughing.

“I admit, but it is not something pre-planned by the government to change the ethnic ratio, mind you.”

The guests remained silent with a smile.

Master continued, “In 1956, Prime Minister Bandaranaike got the ‘Sinhala only bill’ passed in parliament to the consternation of the Tamil speaking people, fully supported by the UNP, the opposition party.”

However, some Sinhalese intellectuals were not in favour of the ‘Sinhala Only Bill’. They maintained that it was a dangerous move.

“Do you mean to say that some Sinhalese people opposed the act? I can’t believe my ears,” Chandran was surprised.

“Are you referring to the speech made by Dr. Colvin R de Silva, who said in parliament, “Do we want an independent Ceylon or two bleeding halves of Ceylon, which can be gobbled up by every ravaging imperialist monster that may happen to range the Indian Ocean? These are issues that in fact we have been discussing under the form and appearance of the language issue- One Language - Two nations; Two Languages - One nation”, said Mrs. Wimal Siri.

“Remarkably, Leslie Gunawardene and Dr.N.M.Perera too supported Colvin in opposing the ‘Sinhala Only’ bill in Parliament.”

“How prophetic are those words! But they failed to change the stance of the ruling party or the opposition that supported it. Their words have come true. There is chaos in the country.”

“Yes, I remember the ‘satyagraha’ staged by the Tamil leaders like Chelvanayagam, Amirthalingam and Naganathan

in the Galle Face Green when the 'Sinhala Only Act' was passed. I was a school girl then," said Mrs. Wimalisiri.

"I hope you know, professor, what happened to the Satyagrahis."

"Yes, I heard that some thugs were set upon them.

"Not only that. When the bleeding Tamil leaders entered the parliament they were harangued by certain Sinhalese politicians." Master said.

"I didn't hear about it."

"What happened then?" Wimalisiri said.

The Federal party politicians campaigned vigorously against the act peacefully. So there was growing unrest between the two communities. 150 Tamils were massacred in Gal Oya in the East. As a result, Bandaranaiake was forced to start 'peace talks' with the Tamils and a pact known as 'Banda - Chelva Pact' was signed in 1957."

"It was also the time when something called the campaign against the Sinhala letter "SRI" was launched, wasn't it?"

"Yes, in 1957, a law was passed that the Sinhalese letter 'SRI' should be used on the number plates of vehicles instead of English letters. So the Tamils rose against it."

In 1958, the Federal Party got the Tamil people to cover the Sinhala letter 'SRI', using tar. As a consequence, Tamil people were assaulted by Sinhalese thugs. Some Buddhist priests were in the forefront propagating the idea that this was an attempt on the part of the Tamils to destroy the Sinhalese language.

"Do you mean that the 1958 riots started because of this campaign?" Wimalisiri said.

“No, on the contrary, the riots started because the Mayor of Nuwara-Eliya Municipal Council, Mr.D.A.Senevaretna was killed in Batticaloa, a Tamil majority area. It was announced over the radio that a Sinhalese was killed in the Tamil dominated area of Batticaloa and a riot broke out against the Tamils all over Sri Lanka. In certain areas, it took the form of ethnic cleansing. It was the first time when communal riots broke out against the Tamils. If Bandaranaike had declared a state of emergency, many lives would have been saved. More than three hundred people lost their lives. In addition, much property was destroyed because of his callous attitude.”

“It later transpired it was a dispute between Mr.Seneviratne and the watchman on his estate that actually led to the killing of Seneviratna.”

“Do you mean to say that the fact that the Sinhalese was made the sole official language was behind the ethnic violence in the country?”

“Is there any doubt about it? The Sinhala Only Act affected the non Sinhalese speakers in many ways. The salary increments of state employees were stopped if they failed to achieve the required level of proficiency in the Sinhalese language. If they failed to meet the deadline for obtaining language proficiency, they were fired. Many resigned from their jobs before they reached their age of retirement. Many migrated to foreign countries in search of employment. Even promotions were denied on that ground. As a result there was bitterness among the Tamils.”

“If they could learn English during the British rule, why are they reluctant to learn Sinhalese?”

“English is an international language. We can go anywhere with a knowledge of English. It is so widespread that the people are willing to learn it. Even the Tamils who are

proficient in Sinhalese are discriminated against on grounds of race and religion.”

“Because of a serious deterioration of racial relations, two pacts were made between our leaders and two successive governments in 1957 and 1965. I am sure you know that ‘Banda - Chelva Pact’ of 1957 and the ‘Dudley - Chelva Pact’ of 1965 were torn up under duress”

“What were those pacts about?” Wimal Siri said.

“The pacts were based on the territorial and linguistic claims of the Tamils. The pacts recognize the territorial integrity of the northern and eastern parts of Sri Lanka and the claim of the Tamil speaking people’s exclusive rights to inhabit the northern and eastern parts. In addition, Tamil was given the pride of place as one of the official languages of administration in the north and east.”

“Why were those pacts torn up then, sir?” Chandran asked.

“Buddhist priests and hard line Sinhalese nationalists were totally against those pacts. Particularly the members of the main opposition party, the UNP, under the leadership of J.R.Jeyawardane organized a protest march from Colombo to Kandy on foot protesting against the ‘Banda-Chelva Pact’. So Bandaranaiake was compelled to tear up the pact. Whenever the ruling party was prepared to give concessions to the Tamils, the opposition would vociferously oppose the move. That is the deplorable state of affairs in this country as regards the rights of the Tamils. We are merely used as pawns”

“What you say is true up to a point,” conceded Mrs. Wimal Siri. To make matters worse, clever Tamil students have been denied access to higher education since the time standardization was introduced in 1971. While a Sinhalese student with an aggregate marks of 227 can easily enter the

Medical Faculty, his classmate, who happens to be a Tamil student with an aggregate marks of 249 is denied admission to the Medical Faculty.”

“What is wrong in maintaining ethnic ratio when the Sinhalese are in the majority?” said Wimalsiri.

“The selection of students to medical and engineering faculties must be restricted to the most intelligent students. Giving priority on ethnic grounds would prove to be harmful to the country.”

“It is said that the students from backward areas are benefitted by standardization.”

“There may be some truth in it, but care must be taken to see that the cleverest students are not affected in any way when the students in the backward areas are taken care of.”

“I agree with you there, Master. It is wrong to ignore able students,” said Mrs.Wimalsiri.

“Current economic climate does not allow business to prosper in Tamil areas. Under the guise of nationalization, the Sinhalese are given pride of place. The Tamils are denied employment in certain places of work. Oppression, denial of basic human rights and ethnic cleansing seem to be the order of the day as far as the Tamils are concerned. Please tell me how the Tamils can be saved from such terrible ordeal they are through.”

“Well, let us say that you are right for the sake of argument. Is separation the only way to solve your problems?”

“We believed at the outset that there could be parity of status between the two communities under a unitary rule. But the Sinhalese politicians have never been prepared to make even the slightest concessions to the Tamils. So, the Tamils are left with no choice other than demanding separation.”

“You are only blaming the Sinhalese leaders. Aren't the Tamils communal minded too? Don't they raise their voices against the Sinhalese?” said Wimal Siri.

“My dear friend, the voices of the oppressed people can hardly be considered as communal in nature.”

“Do you mean to say that the Tamils are free from communal prejudice?”

“It is not prejudice. They have every right to claim their rights.”

“It is funny. The Sinhalese are supposed to be oppressive, when they are outspoken but the Tamils are always righteous.”

“The measures taken against the minorities by the rulers are nothing but prejudicial. The oppressed minorities have the right to raise their voices against oppression.”

Just then the doctor's car was pulling up at the entrance. He came towards them smiling.

“Your conversation must be interesting. When Master talks to you, you can hardly realize how the time flies,” said Dr. Mahesan.

“It is indeed very interesting. We were talking about politics with Master,” Wimal Siri said.

“Politics is Master's favourite subject. It is difficult to gainsay his arguments. He has a thorough understanding of many subjects. He can quote chapter and verse.”

“You are quite right.” Mrs. Wimal Siri laughed.

“Carry on. I will have a wash and come,” the doctor went into the house.

“My husband and Master are in the habit of having long political discussions. Neither would give in.” Mala said.

Master smiled and said, "Dr.Mahesan was my student. He was interested in Marxist ideology even during his student days. He is well versed in Marxism, Leninism and Maoism. Whatever he talks about, he always thinks in terms of Marxist idealism. He thinks Marxism has the answer to every question under the sun. As a result, there is always confrontation between him and me. However, I have high regards for him. I appreciate my student's deep knowledge and I am proud of him."

Mala went into the house to prepare tea for her husband.

"What! The doctor is interested in politics? I can hardly wait for the opportunity to hear his views as well," said Wimalsiri.

"Do continue, Master," Mrs Wimalsiri urged him.

"I have to stress another point. The concept of Tamil Eelam, a separate state is propagated to rid ourselves of the continued violence. As the pleadings of the Tamil leaders fell on deaf ears, our struggle reached the point of fighting for Tamil Eelam. Some Sinhalese leaders themselves from the south have openly admitted this fact."

"Which leaders are you referring to, sir?" Chandran queried.

"The manifesto of U.N.P., a major party in the South says that the U.N.P. accepts the fact that the Tamils are compelled to fight for a separate state because they suffer many hardships. The party is also prepared to call an 'All Party meeting' to discuss our problem. Doesn't this reflect the thinking of the U.N.P. leaders?"

"Almost all accept that the Tamils face many difficulties, but there is no consensus in finding an appropriate solution," said Mrs. Wimalsiri.

“In talking to you, we have lost sense of the time passing,” Wimalsiri said.

“You are here to enjoy yourselves. I’m afraid I have wasted your time, discussing serious affairs,” Master said apologetically.”

“No, not at all. We are resting today. We are planning to go to Nainatheevu tomorrow,” said Wimalsiri. “It might be interesting if we can take Master with us,” he added.

“What are your plans for tomorrow, sir? Why don’t you join us tomorrow if you can manage it?”

Master was hesitant. The doctor who was within earshot said, “We are so busy that we can’t go anywhere for a couple of days. It would be helpful, Master, if you could find the time to accompany them?”

“I am sorry. I have some important work tomorrow. Maybe some other time I will be able to join you,” Master got to his feet. It’s time I left. If possible, I will pay a visit tomorrow evening,” Master took leave of them..

At that time there was an announcement over the radio. ‘The jeep connected with the bank heist has been found burnt on the beach of Valvettithurai. A man who was loafing about suspiciously on the beach was arrested by the police.’

The doctor and Mala were stunned by the news.

Chapter 06

The boat was waiting for the first bus from Jaffna. The boatman knew that there would be many on the bus eager to catch this boat which was about to leave for Nainatheevu.

Chandran, Wimalsiri, Mrs. Wimalsiri and Anula were in the boat. Marimuththu had dropped them on the coast of Kurikkadduwan. He resisted his temptation to join them in the trip as he had to keep watch of the car.

Wimalsiri and his wife were in the lower deck. Anula was in the upper deck on the pretext of enjoying the boat trip

“Chandran, you’d better join Anula. We can’t leave her alone in the upper deck.....” said Mrs. Wimalsiri.

Chandran went up at once and sat by the side of Anula.

“My ploy has worked out, hasn’t it? I left my sister and brother-in-law to be alone with you,” Anula whispered delightedly in his ear.

Chandran looked here and there and then gently stroked Anula’s fingers. “This is not Colombo, Anula. If somebody noticed us caressing each other, they would carry tales to my brother.”

“You are a coward,” Anula said pinching his hand.

“Ouch,” Chandran rubbed his hand pretending to be in pain.

“Are you badly hurt? Even if I touch you, you scream in pain,” she chided him playfully.

They enjoyed the cool sea breeze. "Thank God, your bald headed Master hasn't come with us. He is very boring. He keeps talking palaver. The moment you set eyes on him, you become a very obedient child. I am bored to death"

"You feel that way. Couldn't you see how totally your sister and Wimalsiri were absorbed in his talk?"

"Sister must have gone out of her mind. She is looking for a good topic for her writing."

"Everyone is crazy about something. What are you crazy about?"

"....."

"Shall I come out with it?"

"Please do."

"You are madly in love."

"Stop talking rubbish. It is foolish of me to talk to you." She turned her face in anger.

"Are you angry, my queen?" I am in the same boat. I am madly in love with Anula."

Anula's face turned crimson. Her cheeks glowed in the rays of the morning sun. They could see at a distance on the sea-shore, two pairs of birds caressing one another. Anula gestured meaningfully with her eyes at the sight.

"They are as mad as us," Chandran said and both of them laughed.

Those who came by the Jaffna bus just then boarded the boat in a mad rush. The boat started moving. It was a novel experience for Anula. The gentle sea breeze in the morning was soothing.

The boat was full of people of all sorts. A middle aged man was reading the latest newspaper.

"Is there any news about the bank heist?" An older man asked him eagerly.

"Yes, there is a news item about it on the front page in block letters. One suspect is caught and it looks like the others will be caught soon. He will be tortured until he makes a confession. Others will be caught one by one."

"I hear that the dead body of the murdered policeman is to be taken to his home in Matara today. I wonder whether there will be any violence against Tamils."

"These young fellows act rashly and put the people outside north and east into trouble."

"Don't talk rubbish. They know what they are doing. Maybe what they do is not wrong." another passenger batted in.

One of the three young men seated opposite them said, "Our leaders are responsible for inciting the young ones. They asked for our support for 'Tamil Eelam' on every election platform. After inciting the young people, they are now trying to make peace with the government."

"Exactly. What have they achieved by their close relationships with the ministers? The Tamil race is on the brink of extinction."

"How many have suffered torture? How many have been killed? Those who incited them must be made answerable for their actions."

Chandran took a long look at the couple in the lower deck. Wimalsiri was busy translating the views expressed by the passengers to his wife now and then.

Anula was admiring the shoal of fish swimming about.

“The orations made by our leaders in order to come to power have sent our young men into the jaws of death.”

“Don’t be harsh in passing judgment,” a person who had been listening silently to the views expressed started talking. It was evident that he was a supporter of the ‘Tamil United Liberation Front’

“What is wrong with that? The TULF requested the voters in the north and east to vote for them in favour of establishing a secular socialist regime and the voters supported them overwhelmingly.”

“However, the TULF has failed to make any attempt to achieve what they promised.” another person said.

“You are talking rubbish. It is not something that can be achieved in a day. It is a long term process.”

“Tamil Eelam is nothing but a slogan to win the election. Achieving Tamil Eelam and making Trincomalee its capital are all nothing but mere empty words. As a result of their rhetoric, the government is on alert and the problem has intensified.” One of the young men said.

“Think deeply, young man. When a race fights for its rights, it is the duty of the leaders to see that the thirst for liberation is not blunted.”

“But it has been done in excess,” the person who was reading the newspaper said.

“No, you have to accept the fact that the young radicals are now beyond the control of the leaders.”

“The leaders must be held responsible for such a state of affairs. The leaders who said they wouldn’t budge an inch from their demand for ‘Tamil Eelam’ are now talking about

district councils and regional councils. The young radicals are badly disappointed. They are firm in their determination to fight for separation”

“How about the Tamils living outside the north and east of the country? Shouldn't the leaders be mindful of their safety? They have to be patient until the time is ripe to avoid loss of lives.”

“I wonder when the time is going to be ripe.”

“Our first priority is to win the support of other countries. Then only will they come to our rescue in times of need.”

“Won't they help us now?”

“We are gaining their sympathy little by little. There are as many as eighteen movements in London to speak for us. Likewise, we have our supporters in America, France and Germany.”

“Vaikunthavasan held the floor for a little bit of time in the U.N.O to draw the attention of the members to our suffering.”

“Yes, he was bold enough to do that. He has also met some world leaders to win their support for ‘Tamil Eelam’.”

“The member of parliament for Chavakachcheri, V.N.Navaratnam, was also seen issuing pamphlets in support of our cause.”

“There is vigorous propaganda everywhere. So we have to be patient until we have considerable support.”

“Do you mean to say we are jumping the gun?”

“Look, young man. We are in this boat now. It is the navigator who has to decide how to sail the boat. He is the person who knows about the obstacles such as the current

and the rocks on the way. He is the one who can take us to our destination safely. If the passengers start navigating the boat as they like, the boat might capsize. I hope you understand what I mean," said the elderly person.

As the elderly man was talking, a wave crashed on the boat rocking it from side to side, splashing sea water on Anula's face. She wiped her face with her handkerchief and smiled at Chandran.

"Granted, but isn't it wrong to drop the idea of 'Tamil Eelam' and talk about District Councils and the development of the district?"

"It is not fair to say that the leaders have abandoned their goals. What they want to do is to achieve the goal step by step. The District Council is nearer to their goal by one step. Getting nearer to the goal is better than staying far away from it. Above all, the borders of 'Tamil Eelam' are marked by the District Councils."

"The young radicals come into conflict with their leaders in deciding whether liberation comes first or development comes first. As for the young men, they feel that development is not permanent. It can be stopped by the other side at any time. Development was hampered in 1977, 1981 and 1983 by violence. Their stand on development seems to be sound," the person with the newspaper in his hand said.

"You all know what happened to the uprising of the Sinhalese youth in 1971. Sixty thousand young men were massacred and fifteen thousand arrested. Some foreign governments helped Sri Lanka to crush the uprising. Not a single country helped the insurgents. Why did they lose their fight? Because they chose the wrong time and the wrong modus operandi. Our young radicals must take into consideration all that," said the elderly person.

“So in your opinion they should be inactive?”

“I don’t say so. ‘Tamil Eelam’ is not something that can be achieved overnight. It will take time. Until then they must slow down. Their struggle for freedom can continue unabated. They have to fight when it is absolutely necessary but they have the responsibility to hand over the struggle to the next generation.”

“Don’t forget that it was because of them that the government started the peace talks and the Tamil people have become a force to be reckoned with.”

“There is some truth in what you say,” the elderly person agreed.

The boat came to a stop. Many on the upper deck jumped out and so did Anula. Her footwear got caught in a stone and she was about to fall. Chandran, caught her and embraced her to stop her from falling.

“Thank God, you would have fallen into the sea if I had not caught you.”

“No problem, my hero would have rescued me.”

“I wouldn’t have raised a finger to save you. I can’t swim, you know.”

“It was wrong of me to have come to Jaffna, trusting you to save me when I am in danger,” she pretended to simmer with resentment.

“What are you fighting about?” Wimalsiri, who was coming out of the boat said laughing.

“I saved Anula from falling, but she resented my holding her arm.”

“You should have thanked him, instead, Anula,” Mr. Wimalsiri said.

“But he held my arm roughly and hurt me.”

“Take it easy, Anu,” Mrs Wimalsiri comforted her.

“The lower deck became a political platform. We had been listening to a long discussion,” said Wimalsiri.

“Mrs.Wimalsiri wouldn’t have understood anything, I take it.” Chandran grinned.

“I translated the discourse for her from time to time. She couldn’t understand certain things. She wants to get clarifications from Master.”

When they reached Nagapooshani Amman Temple, it was time for the poojas to begin.

“Let us go there first and then go to the Buddhist temple”, said Wimalsiri.

Chandran took them into the temple.

Mrs.Wimalsiri explained the similarities she found in poojas between Hindu temples and Buddhist temples.

“Look, Gana Theviyo is being worshipped here. Even the Buddhists do that, don’t they?”

“We call the Gana Theviyo- Vinayagar and Gananathan is another name for Vinayagar, “ Chandran elaborated.

“We worship God Murugan as well. Both the Buddhists and the Hindus go to Kataragama and Sri Pada.”

“There are many such similarities. We worship Vishnu and so do you.”

Chandran handed over the tickets obtained at the counter to the priest and got him to pray for all of them. They piously received the holy ash, sandalwood powder mixed with water and kum kum given by the priest in return.

When Chandran got the tray from the priest, Anula picked up a lotus petal from it with relish.

“Mr.Chandran, I have heard Lord Murugan was born on a lotus flower. We too consider the lotus flower to be sacred. We offer lotus flowers at the foot of the Buddha.”

Mrs. Wimalsiri was surprised at the cultural similarity between the two religions. They came out of the temple and put on their footwears.

They were enchanted with the sandy soil and the soothing sea breeze. The sea breeze that embraced the margosa trees was soporific.

“Shall we sit under the margosa tree for a little while?” said Wimalsiri and sat down under one of the trees. Mrs. Wimalsiri sat beside him.

“With the religious symbols on your foreheads and flowers adorning your hair, both of you look like Tamil women,” Chandran grinned.

“Except in the way you are wearing your saris,” said Wimalsiri.

“We have a photograph of my grandmother at home. She is wearing the sari just like the Tamil women. Even some of her jewels are like those of the Tamil women. When I mentioned this to my grandfather, he said in certain areas our women dress just like the Tamil women,” Mrs.Wimalsiri said.

“Perhaps your grandmother was Tamil. Your grandfather lied to you, I think,” Chandran laughed. Everybody joined him in his laughter.

“You know, Chandran, there was a time when many were interested in marrying Tamil women. Many royals such as

King Vijayabahu, King Parakrama Bahu and the very last Sinhalese king were married to Tamil women.”

“In that case, Sinhalese princesses must have had a terrible time,” said Wimalsiri.

“They themselves had married Tamil kings. Mixed marriages were common in those days. A Sinhalese princess known as Anula had a Tamil lover whom she made king.”

Anula glanced at Chandran and beamed.

“Your sister seems to be interested in this topic. She must be poor in History.”

“These topics are found in books like Mahawamsa.”

“She has never learned History,” said Mrs. Wimalsiri.

Then they saw a bus pulling up at the bus-stop.

“Come on. Let us get on this bus and get off at the Buddhist temple,” Chandran urged them.

The Buddhist monk in charge of the temple welcomed them. They handed over the things for the ‘dhana’ to the monk and fell at his feet.

Chandran took part in their prayers. Soon after their prayers, Wimalsiri and wife had a heart to heart talk with the Buddhist monk.

“I want to do some shopping. I might be able to buy something for you as well,” Chandran left.

“Where are you staying?” the monk said. “We are staying with one Dr. Mahesan. It is his brother who brought us here.”

“There is tension in Jaffna now. That’s the reason I had to know where you are staying.”

“We are in a safe place. Have you been here long, Sadhu?”

"I have been here from the seventies."

"Are you affected in any way because of the present climate?"

"No, not at all. The people here are very helpful."

"There are all sorts of rumours in the south about Jaffna."

"It is the politicians who make the mountain out of a molehill. That is why there is no end to the present crisis."

"You are absolutely right," said Mrs Wimalsiri.

"I have observed many things while I have been here. There are many cultural and religious similarities between the two races. There are also many loan words in Sinhalese from the Tamil language."

"There are even some similarities in the shape of some letters of the alphabet."

"What we badly need is amity between the two races, but what we find unfortunately is disturbance everywhere"

"It is the duty of the leaders to see that the problem is resolved. As long as the Tamil problem remains unsolved, there will never be peace in the country," the monk insisted. "Fifteen minutes left for the bus to leave. Better if you can leave. There was nothing much to buy in the shops" Chandran hurried them.

"Yes, this bus connects with the boat. If you can catch it, you will be able to reach Jaffna well in time for lunch," said the monk.

They took leave of the monk.

Chapter 07

Dr.Mahesan and Dr.Mala were in the Nursing Home. Mala is usually in charge of the outpatient clinic. Dr.Mahesan does the ward rounds. The day to day administration of the hospital is also the responsibility of Dr.Mahesan.

There are only forty beds in the hospital to take care of the inpatients. On many occasions, as the beds were full, patients had to be turned away. Realizing the need for a maternity ward, the doctor had taken the necessary steps to put up a building.

He had also sought the help of a friend, an experienced gynaecologist, to run the gynaecology ward.

Dr.Mahesan wanted to finish the ward rounds as soon as possible to be of help to his wife in the outpatient clinic. The Head Nurse, Manjula, was closely following the doctor. She had been working in the nursing home since its inception. She was very sharp and so she was held in high esteem by the doctor.

On his way from one room to the next he said, "Why is this place so dirty, Manjula. Flies abound the place. Wasn't it cleaned using disinfectant?"

"No, sir. Attendant Manickam is yet to come".

"Cleaning must be done as early as 7o' clock in the morning. We can't afford to wait for Manickam. Somebody

else must be entrusted with the job of cleaning. I need prompt action.”

Just then Manickam was seen hurrying with the utensils for cleaning.

“Manickam, you should have done this before I started my ward rounds. I shouldn’t see you walking here and there with your broom in my presence. Do you understand?”

“Sorry sir, I will finish my work before 7o’clock in the morning hereafter.” Manickam started his work.

The doctor entered the second room. The old woman who was lying in bed greeted him. Her right leg and right arm were paralyzed. She was diabetic and her blood pressure had shot up.

“How are you now?” “I can raise my arm a little, but I can’t move my leg at all.”

“Her blood sugar is under control. We give her ‘parantarovite’ intravenously.”

“Give her rastinon instead of insulin. Give the injection every other day. She will be alright.” The doctor made a note on the bed ticket.

“Don’t worry. In about a week you will be able to move your leg as well.”

He went into the next room.

“This patient’s fever hasn’t come down. Samples of blood and urine have been sent for testing.”

“Hasn’t he been given penicillin injection?” the doctor checked the bed ticket.

“No, sir, he is sensitive to penicillin. Dr.Pranavan prescribed erythromycin.”

“You can give it until we get the blood report. We will see later”.

They entered the next room. The boy there was being given saline intravenously. Seated on his bed was an elderly woman. She was grief-stricken. The boy was skinny and his eyes were sunken.

“He has had diarrhoea for two weeks. They had taken treatment somewhere else before he was brought here last night. He was dehydrated, so Dr.Pranavan recommended saline infusion.”

“Didn’t you send the stool for testing?” “We did. He is being given bactrim now.”

“Wintromycin will answer better,” he said and made a note on the bed ticket. The elderly woman spat out the betel from her mouth and came back. Her eyes were in tears. The doctor took a look at her. She was pale faced and white haired and she was about sixty years old. Her back was slightly bent. She was wearing thick glasses. She must have had cataract surgery. Her teeth were betel stained, but they were intact.

“This is my grandson, doctor. His mother died in childbirth. I look after him and two of his elder siblings. His father is not here, either. I am scared, doctor. I depend on you to save him. She brought her hands together in supplication. She was in tears.

“Where is the father?”

“He is abroad. I am helpless if something goes wrong.”

“Don’t you worry. We will do everything possible on our side,” he turned to Manjula and said. “It is not advisable to have him here. We’d better take him to one of the two rooms at the back. He mustn’t come into contact with other patients.” He left the room.

He noticed betel stain smeared spittle in several places near the flower plants. "What is this?"

"The old woman has spat all over the place, doctor." It had escaped her notice before.

"What, all this is spittle?"

"....."

Manjula was reminded of a funny incident in the dead of night. There was a knock on the door and the old woman was standing there. Manjula thought that the boy was seriously ill.

"What's wrong?" she asked the old woman. The woman was hesitant.

"Come on. Out with it."

"My mouth tastes bitter. I need some lime for chewing betel. So I just wanted to find out whether you have any lime on you."

Manjula couldn't get angry with her. She wanted to laugh. In her professional life she had never had such an experience.

"Nobody is allowed to chew betel here."

"Who, do you think, will be able to give me some lime?"

"You can't get it at this time of the night. Go to your room."

Manjula shut the room on the woman. The old woman must have borrowed lime from someone, Manjula thought.

The doctor turned to the old woman, "What is this you have done? Don't repeat it. He admonished the old woman and proceeded to see the next patient. Manjula called the attendant who was close by and told him to clean the place.

When the doctor finished his ward rounds, it was past 11 o'clock. He sat opposite Mala, attending on the patients when the telephone rang.

"Hello, Dr. Mahesan here."

"Dr. Suntharalingam speaking".

"Hello, Suntha, how are you?"

"Did any army officers come that way?" Suntharalingam was his batch mate at the Medical College. He was himself running a private hospital on his own.

"No, nobody came this way."

"My place was checked today. I understand that one of the young men who robbed the bank was injured. They are trying to find out whether he is being treated secretly somewhere."

"Oh, really? What did you tell them?"

"What can I tell them? I have no choice other than allowing them to do the checking."

"It may prove to be a nuisance in time to come. The day after the incident, somebody from the army called us too."

"I hear there are spies everywhere," said Dr. Suntharalingam.

"We are helpless in this matter, so we can't interfere."

"You are quite right."

"I will call you back, Suntha. I'm rather busy at the moment."

"Ok., then, bye."

"Bye". When he hung the phone he found Mala's face cloudy. However, she didn't want to say anything in the presence of the patients.

She broached the subject while they were returning home for lunch.

“What did Dr.Suntharalingam tell you?”

“His house had been checked.”

“I thought as much when you were on the phone. I am thoroughly scared. What are we supposed to do in case our house is checked? The boys said that they would come back in two days, but they didn't come.”

“I think they are in a precarious position. I hear somebody has been arrested. If he spills the beans, I can very well imagine what will our fate be?”

“They arrest people on suspicion. Please collect yourself.”

“If he happens to be the culprit, he will betray us, I am sure.” Mala was on the point of crying.

“When Bala is hardly able to walk, how can we send him out? It will take at least three days for him to start walking.”

“I don't think it is advisable to continue to have him at our place, especially when we have the guests. If something goes wrong, what are we supposed to do?”

“What is the alternative, then?”

“I think we'd better take him to the nursing home.”

The doctor gave some thought to her suggestion.

“The nursing home is always crowded. What if somebody gave information to the police about Bala?”

Mala was silent for a moment and then said, “We can do one thing, though. We can admit him to one of the rooms at the back of the hospital. He will be safer there.”

“A diarrhoea case was transferred to one of the rooms there. Let’s not be hasty. We must first explain the situation to Bala and then come to a decision.”

“Now that the forces are on a house to house search, we have to be mindful of the risks involved. I feel something must be done immediately.”

The doctor was thoughtful as he got off the car. He was highly distressed.

Chapter 08

It was past 9 p.m. Chelliah master was lying on his easy chair on the verandah enjoying his cheroot after dinner. It was a small two room house with a front verandah. His wife was doing the washing up. His elder son Sivapalan was reading a book lying down.

“Sivagami, where, do you think, Thanapalan has gone? It’s getting late,” said Master.

“I saw him hopping on his bicycle around four o’clock. I haven’t seen him since then,” replied Sivagami from the kitchen.

“I told him I needed the bike to get a letter from the G.S. but he left nonetheless,” said Sivapalan.

“Did he say where he was going?”

“No, father. He would jump on me if I asked him any questions.”

“I wonder why he leaves the house at a time like this when people are harassed by the army.”

“I hear that some youngsters were badly beaten even today at the nearby junction. One of them is said to have a torn lip,” said Sivapalan.

“He won’t mend himself unless he is badly beaten,” said Master.

“The day before yesterday, he went to a late show with some of his friends and came back home around 3 a.m. The

bank was robbed that night. The soldiers would not have believed him if he had said he had been to the cinema in case he had been arrested," said Master sorrowfully.

"Who knows if he really went to the cinema or not. He lies through his teeth," said Sivapalan.

Master looked confused. Sivagami finished her chores and came out then.

"How can you blame him when you are not at home most of the time? You are at the library or at the doctor's house blabbering on instead of trying to mend his ways," said Sivagami.

Master's anger knew no bounds.

"Why the hell are you shouting at me when I ask you about your son's whereabouts?"

"When the youngsters have nothing useful to do, they will be like that. Why don't you find him a job with the help of some of your friends?"

"Do you think it's so easy to find a job nowadays, you silly woman. You are talking rubbish without knowing what's going on around you."

"How come, Velupillai found his son a job in the bank last week?"

"He spent twenty thousand rupees, bribing a member of the ruling party. I am not rich enough to do such a thing."

"I know of some people who were swindled out of their money after offering a bribe to get jobs. They are still jobless and at the same time they find it difficult to get their money back," Sivapalan said.

“Yes, there are many who are left in the lurch after selling either their property or their jewellery and offering a bribe with the hope of getting a job.”

“How about your TULF politicians you support whole heartedly? Won't they be able to help you?” said Sivagami.

“Rubbish, their mission is not to find employment to people. I wouldn't do such a thing as asking them for a job.”

“People go to Germany with the help of their letters of recommendation, I am told,” Sivapalan said.

“Some people get letters from them to prove they are political refugees, but the recommendation of the M.P. is not enough. They need the money to travel overseas.”

Thanapalan came home while they were discussing him.

“Where are you loafing about?” Master said angrily.

“I am not loafing about. I was at a friend's house.”

“I was told that you had been distributing pamphlets with your friends,” Sivapalan accused him.

“I did no such thing,” Thanapalan leaned the bicycle against the wall.

“I have been trying to find a job for you with the help of Chandran, the doctor's brother. Why don't you go and see Chandran. He is at home now.”

“What sort of job?”

“Some job in the Free Trade Zone. A friend of Chandran's is going to help you.”

“I don't want that job,” Thanapalan was aloof.

“What do you mean by that?”

“Those who work in the Sinhalese areas are submissive all the time. More than anything else, they have to live in fear for their lives. How many times have they been attacked? They have learnt nothing from the riots of 1958, 1977 and 1983. They have lost the sense of self respect. That is why they keep returning to the south.”

“What are you planning to do then? Merely eat and sleep and loaf about?”

“I won’t be a burden to you for long.”

“What are you planning to do?”

“I will do farming. Get me a piece of land on lease.”

“Did your father spend so much money on your education to make you a farmer?”

“As a farmer, I am not answerable to anyone. I need not lead a life of servility, either. I can be independent and preserve my self-respect”

“You have changed a lot. It may be because of the company you keep.”

“What I say is nothing new. It is nothing but the truth.” He went towards the well ignoring his parents.

“Like father like son. You talk politics all the time. Thanapalan follows in your footsteps,” said Sivagami.

“Stop talking rubbish. You are an ignoramus. Do you think I have nothing better to do other than talking politics?”

“Thanapalan doesn’t want a job. What do you propose to do about it?”

“We have to be patient. I must make him realize what his responsibilities are and try to get him to find a job.”

“Father, his behavior is not at all acceptable. He goes here and there with his friends. There are all sorts of rumors about him,” said Sivapalan.

“What do you mean?” Master smelt a rat.

“Be more explicit,” said Sivagami highly agitated.

“I hear he is friendly with some of those who were arrested and released by the army.”

Master was stunned. He thought he must find a job for Thanapalan as soon as possible. Otherwise he will be led astray. Master was very much disturbed.

Chapter 09

When Dr. Mahesan went to Bala's room to check his condition, Bala and Marimuththu were talking animatedly. He found the latest newspapers and some books in the room. Marimuththu must have brought them, the doctor thought. Marimuththu had also brought Bala a transistor radio.

The moment Marimuththu set eyes on the doctor, he got to his feet excitedly and Bala tried to raise himself on the bed using his arm.

The doctor sat down by the bed. Bala greeted him and said, "I could get some sleep last night and the pain has subsided a little bit."

The doctor pressed his leg and said, "There seems to be less swelling. I think you will be on your feet in two or three days."

"Shall I remove the dressing, sir?" Marimuththu said.

"Yes," the doctor said and opened his kit and proceeded to clean and dress the wound.

"I find it difficult to raise my arm because of the injection, doctor."

"Didn't you give fomentation, Marimuththu?"

"He did," Bala said, "He takes good care of me."

"In that case, I will give you injection on your thigh today. By the way, your friends have failed to keep their word. They haven't come for you yet," said the doctor.

“Maybe they are not in a position to come. I am sure they would have taken me from here if they had felt I was endangering your safety in any way.”

“I hear somebody has been arrested on suspicion. I fear he might be made to talk.”

Bala laughed. “My friends would lose their lives rather than betraying anyone. Have no fear. You can count on their determination.

“In case they can’t bear the torture.....?”

“Many of our members have been caught, but still our movement has been growing in strength day by day.”

“Newspapers say that there are splits in your movement.”

“What are you referring to, doctor?”

“I hear there was a gun fight in India between two factions.”

“Yes, what you hear is true. However, now the leaders realize that enmity between leaders will lead to irreparable damage.”

“People having the same aspirations must make it a point to settle their disputes amicably rather than killing each other,” opined the doctor.

Bala laughed and said, “Some people in India feel our gunning down the opponents is based on the fact that we are used to settling our differences at gun point.”

“You must give careful thought before using the gun as the consequences will be irreversible,” said the doctor.

Bala was in deep thought for a little while. Then he said, “Our leaders fighting among themselves may be wrong, as you say. Anyway, we are not terrorists. We are revolutionaries determined to free our oppressed people.”

“You keep moving away from Tamil politicians. They are not happy about it. You blame the politicians and they in turn blame you. *So people are confused.*”

“We get the support of the public as do the politicians. The common man is determined to achieve ‘Tamil Eelam’ somehow or other. However, we have lost confidence in the politicians.”

“Why is that so, Bala?”

“What have the Tamil political leaders achieved in the last thirty five years? Their struggles based on hunger strikes, processions, peaceful protests and so on have borne no fruit. What they have done is making the government more aggressive.”

“So in your opinion, waging war against the government is the only way to achieve your ends?”

“Yes, we are sick of these peaceful agitations. We cannot help carrying arms. We continue the struggles initiated by our leaders thirty five years ago in our own way. Only we have changed our tactics.”

“The land under cultivation by small kids will produce no harvest, as the saying goes. Your recklessness will, I am sure, bring nothing but destruction to our race.”

“You are wrong, doctor. Our struggle is part and parcel of the awakening of the masses. We are not carrying arms recklessly.”

“What! Struggle of the public?”

“This is nothing but guerilla warfare. It is used in many parts of the world today.”

“As far as I know guerillas hide themselves in the jungle, but you live among those for whom you are fighting.

endangering their lives. Have you ever stopped to think about this difference?"

"This situation has emerged from historical compulsions. Destruction or death is inevitable in our fight for freedom."

"You call yourselves 'freedom fighters', but do you know what the government calls you?"

"Yes, we do know about it. We are identified as 'terrorists' who are against national integration and an act against terrorism has been passed to curb our activities. It is not us who are terrorists."

"Then, in your opinion, who are the terrorists?"

"The people who sow the seeds of communalism in the minds of innocent Sinhalese and the government forces are really the terrorists."

"....."

"I guess from what you say, that you have no confidence in our struggle. Isn't that so?" Bala looked crestfallen.

The doctor got to his feet, smiling.

"I am afraid there is a deadlock which cannot be easily broken. As for me, I want to avoid death and destruction as much as possible whenever we embark on something."

"You sound just like our leaders, doctor. Violence must be met with violence. There is no other way."

"I don't like the TULF, either," the doctor smiled again.

"In that case, do you want the Tamils to be life-long slaves?"

"I didn't say so, Bala. Don't jump the gun."

"How are we supposed to solve our problems, then?"

“Through dialogue. The two races must come to some understanding. Otherwise this problem can never be solved.”

“I think you are against the concept of ‘Tamil Eelam’.” There was anger in Bala’s voice.

“I don’t want the struggle between the two races end up in a full scale war between two nations.”

Aren’t you assuming things, doctor?”

“The Sinhalese have a fear that if ‘Tamil Eelam’ becomes a reality, then the Sinhalese will be decimated by the Tamils with the help of India.”

“Why don’t you come out with a solution, then?”

“It’s getting late. Let’s discuss it some other time,” the doctor left Bala’s room.

“Some people keep opposing whatever proposal we put forward, but they have no solution to offer. The doctor is one of such people,” thought Bala as he turned over.

Chapter 10

Chandran had gone to the library on Marimuthu's bicycle. Mala was preparing the evening tea with the help of Anula. They were talking animatedly.

Wimalsiri was talking to his wife about their trip to Nainatheevu when Master turned up. Mrs. Wimalsiri was glad to see him. She wanted to get many things cleared by Master.

"Come on in, Master. I want to talk to you about many things," Mrs. Wimalsiri smiled, welcoming Master enthusiastically.

Master made himself comfortable in a chair and said, "I was wondering whether I had displeased you in some way."

"No, on the contrary, you have provided my wife with enough materials to think about and write about," said Wimalsiri gleefully.

"After listening to the discussions on the boat, I have many doubts to be cleared in my mind."

"Is that so? Wherever you go in Jaffna, you will be exposed to such discussions. They are bound to continue until the conflict is resolved."

"Most people seem to believe that separation is the only answer to the problem. I don't think it's a viable option," said Mr. Wimalsiri.

"I myself think some other option is preferable to separation," said Mrs. Wimalsiri.

"If you can contemplate in terms of the history of Sri Lanka, you will have to accept that the demand for separation is rational," said Master.

"Out with it, please"

"From the time of Ellara up to the time of Sri Wickrema Rajasingan, the last king of Kandy there had been clear cut areas of domination for Sinhalese people and Tamil people."

"Yes, even chronicles like the Mahawamsa say that the Northern part of Sri Lanka was called 'Nagadeepa'," said Wimalasiri.

"Ptolemy's comments, Manimegala, stone inscriptions of the Chola period and so on confirm this," said Master.

"This is something beyond my knowledge," said Mrs. Wimalasiri.

"Not only that, we speak different languages and we belong to different faiths".

"We are different culturally, too," said Mrs Wimalasiri.

"Our economic policies were not the same and we were governed by different laws."

"What were the differences as far as the laws were concerned?" said Mr. Wimalasiri

"I can give a single example. The Kandy people followed the rajakariya but a completely different system of taxation was in practice in the Tamil areas

"So I heard," said Mrs Wimalasiri. "I think it was in practice in King Sangili's time," said Mrs Wimalasiri.

"It cannot just be confined to King Sangili's regime. His forebears known as the 'Aariya Chakravarthees' had ruled 'Tamil Eelam' for about 350 years with Nallur as the Capital. They also had their own laws in practice."

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“I can bring back to my mind something else. Tamil areas were under the Portuguese and the Dutch rulers between 1619 and 1658. However, Kandy was captured about two hundred years after Jaffna was captured.”

“It was easier for the troops of the Kandyan kingdom to ambush the enemies from the jungles of the cold and hilly areas.” Master said.

“Kandy was ceded to the British in 1815 by means of a treaty,” said Mrs. Wimalsiri.

“The last king of Kandy was Sri Wickremarajasingan, a Tamil. He signed the treaty in Tamil along with his nobles.”

“Is that so?” This information took Wimalsiri by surprise.

“One of the ancestors of Srimavo Bandaranaike, Ratwatte, was one of the nobles who signed in Tamil.”

“Unbelievable,” said Wimasiri in surprise.

“One thing is crystal clear to me. There was no ethnic discrepancy at that time leading to clashes,” said Mrs. Wimalsiri.

“On the contrary, Tamil Kings from South India had invaded our country many times. Sinhalese kings were put into trouble by those invasions, as far as I know,” said Wimalsiri.

“Sri Lanka was ruled by King Vijaya’s progeny. When Vijaya landed on our shores, our country was inhabited by Yakkas”

“According to history, even Vijaya came from India,” said Master.

“We are all descendants of Indian settlers. Vijaya married princess Kuveni. After a time, he got rid of Kuveni and her two children he fathered.”

“What happened then?”

“Vijaya married a princess from South India. She was childless. So he made his nephew, Panduwasan, king. Seven of Panduwasan’s cousins were put in charge of the various regions of his kingdom. Those chieftains were of Indian origin. There were of course invasions from the North of Sri Lanka and South India, but they were not ethnic based.”

“What was the purpose of those invasions then?”

“In search of resources. It is the practice everywhere at any time. Even if there had been Tamil kings instead of Sinhalese kings, this country would have been captured by our neighbouring countries.”

“That is your position, but the position of the southern politicians today is entirely different.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“When a minister responded to the demands of Tamil leaders a few years back, he said, ‘Don’t be under the impression that Dutugemunu is dead. He lives in the heart of every Sinhalese. The Dutugemunu of our land will rise up against you if they come to know of your demands’”

“This is a deliberate misinterpretation on the part of some Sinhalese politicians. Elara, the Tamil king, killed by Dutugemunu, was a just king. He respected Buddhism. When Elara died, Dutugemunu had a tomb erected for Elara and made a proclamation that all his citizens must pay homage to the tomb and the people willingly did so.”

“That shows the magnanimity of Dutugemunu,” said Wimalasiri.

“Do you think Dutugemunu would have made such a proclamation if he had hated the Tamils?” said Mrs. Wimalasiri.

“It is a point worth thinking about,” said Master.

“There is no basis to say that ethnic animosity was behind the war between Ellara and Dutugemunu,” said Mrs. Wimalasiri emphatically.

“Ok. If there was no ethnic diversity then, have you any idea, Master, when these problems cropped up?”

“The Portugeese and the Dutch treatd the Tamils and the Sinhalese as two different races within their own kingdom. The British did the same for a long time until the Colebrook commission merged the two domains to form a single country by force in 1833.

“In your opinion, the British were the cause of the present mess?”

“Of course, yes. Sangili, the last King of Tamil Eelam, was arrested by the Portuguese. Sangili reigned over Tamil Eelam until June, 1619. We want the last kingdom back and hence the struggle for a separate state.”

“You should have got it done by the British when they vacated the country.”

“They sought the opinion of the people when they decided to hand over the power to the Government of Ceylon through Soulbury Commission.”

“What proposals did the Tamil leaders submit before the Soulbury Commission?”

“Unfortunately, they didn't have the foresight to insist on a separate state or a federal set up with the right of self determination.”

“Even if they had made such a claim, the Solbury Commission would not have come to a decision without taking into consideration the views of the Sinhalese leaders. Don't you think so?”

“What I mean is Tamil leaders should have fought for their rights. In this respect, the Kandyan Sinhalese had a

strong conviction. They demanded a set up within the federal system. However, G.G.Ponnambalam, one of our leaders was not against a single unitary state, but he insisted on parity between the two races. What he asked for was 'fifty fifty', equal representation in parliament.

"I can't believe my ears when you say that it was the Sinhalese who broached the subject of Federalism first. I was under the impression that S.J.V.Chelvanayagam, another Tamil leader, was the first person to ask for federalism," said Mr. Wimalasiri."

"Kandyan Sinhalese had thought about it well before Chelvanayagam. He asked for a Federal set up in 1949. The Sinhalese recommended federalism to the Solbury commission as far back as 1944," Master said.

"Do you think if the Tamil leaders had insisted on a separate state for them, the Soulbury Commission would have accepted their demand?"

"There is no doubt at all about it. They did it in India. Jinna, the leader of the Muslim League in India remained steadfast in his determination to carve up India to form a Muslim country and succeeded in his venture. Our leaders had miserably failed to acquire anything substantial. They left us in the lurch as a matter of fact. The Soulbury Commission recommended the formation of a unitary government, landing us in the soup."

What I can gather from your argument is that your problems started since the time the Soulbury Commission was appointed..," said Wimalasiri.

"No, even when the British amended the constitution as far back as 1920, they didn't take into consideration the interests of the minorities. When the British didn't give in to their demands for one third of representation, the leaders

relinquished their positions. As you know, the British are well known for their 'divide and rule' policy."

"If we think deeply, we can see that the Tamils have increased their demands from time to time," said Mr.Wimalsiri.

"I don't understand what you say," Mrs.Wimalsiri turned to her husband.

"Yes, their demands have increased from one third of representation to fifty - fifty to federalism and now to outright separation," Wimalsiri burst out laughing.

Mrs.Wimalsiri's eyes became wider in surprise.

"My dear friend, the demands of the Tamil leaders have always fallen on deaf ears. It is not something to be ridiculed. You must compare our demands with the concessions your leaders are prepared to make."

"Be explicit, please, Master."

"Initially the Sinhalese were prepared to accept Federalism. But in 1950, they talked about Regional Councils. Ten years later, they were for District Councils. Now they say what is needed is nothing but development. Their support to our demands has been gradually waning."

"You are right in a way," said Mr.Wimalsiri.

"There seems to be no correlation between demand and supply," Mrs.Wimalsiri laughed.

"You must take into consideration another matter. The rights of the Tamils have been denied gradually since the time the country achieved independence from the British. The political machination of D.S.Senanayake, the first prime minister, laid the foundation for this sad state of affairs."

"What are you referring to?"

“The very first thing D.S.Senanayake did was to annul the citizenship of the hill country Tamils thereby disenfranchising them. In 1947, when they had the right to vote, the hill country Tamils elected seven representatives and they helped about 28 leftists to win their seats,” said Master.

“There were certain reasons for their disenfranchisement,” said Mrs.Wimalasiri hesitantly.

“What are the reasons you think of?”

“The English passed the Barren Land Act and grabbed the land that rightfully belonged to the Sinhalese because of their need for plantations. As a result, there was an uprising in 1848 and the Sinhalese refused to work in the land that was taken away from them.”

“Yes, that was why Indian Tamils were brought to Sri Lanka,” Master said.

“The Sinhalese hated the Indians who worked for a mere pittance in their own lands. The British saw to it that the hatred remained intact. They kept the Indian Tamils and the Sinhalese villagers apart.

“Do you think that the Indians were disenfranchised because of the hatred towards them?” said Master.

“No, but it may have had some influence. Times have changed now. There is amity between the Sinhalese villagers and the Indian Tamils at present .They live together amicably,” said MrsWimalasri.

“The disenfranchisement was a great injustice that was done to suppress the Tamils.”

“How can you say that it was the major factor that harmed the Tamils?” said Wimalasiri.

“The parliamentary seats that were assigned to the Tamils were re-assigned to the Sinhalese, but in a way that was not

in keeping with the ratio of the population. They got more seats than they deserved.”

“Do you mean to say that constituencies are delimited taking into consideration the number of people living in an area?”

“It is the usual practice in Sri Lanka, but the areas where the Indian Tamils lived were an exception. At present eighteen Sinhalese parliamentarians represent these areas where there were only eight Indian Tamil parliamentarians then.

“More than that, not a single leftist is able to win a seat now.”

“Do you think Indian Tamil franchise would have helped the leftists to win more seats?”

“The proletarian power would have definitely helped them to win quite a number of seats. The Communist party and the Lanka Sama samaja party vehemently opposed the move to disenfranchise the Indian Tamils. Colvin R de Silva said the act was against the proletarian in his speech against the act.”

“You haven’t said how the disenfranchisement affected the Sri Lankan Tamils,” said Mrs. Wimalasri.

“The Indian Tamils have been living here for about 150 years. It is time we stopped setting them apart from the Sri Lankan Tamils.”

“O.K. Tell us how the disenfranchisement affected you.”

“I told you about the discrimination in favour of the Sinhalese. If the Tamils were able to elect more parliamentarians, no ruling party would be able to pass the laws which are harmful to Tamils.”

“I take it that you want us to think deeply about the machinations underway to change the majority into the

minority in the hill country in order to change the laws in favour of the Sinhalese," said Mrs. Wimalisiri.

"Yes, this has been happening since 1952, enabling the government to change the constitution with a two third majority."

"Don't forget that some Tamil leaders supported the disenfranchisement of the Indian Tamils," said Mrs. Wimalisiri.

"That is the very reason why Chelvanayagam left the Congress Party and formed the Federal Party."

"What he insisted on then was federalism. Why did he switch off to Tamil Eelam overreaching himself," said Mr. Wimalisiri.

"In 1972, the Srimavo Bandaranayake government proclaimed that Sri Lanka is a Sinhala Buddhist country. Tamil leaders rejected the constitution and set fire to a copy of the constitution."

"If I remember right, it was the time when Tamil United Liberation Front was formed," said Wimalisiri.

"Yes, S.J.V. Chelvanayagam, G.G.Ponnambalam, C.Suntharalingam, S.Thondaman and Devanayagam, all leaders of the various factions came under one umbrella and formed the T.U.L.F. in Trincomalee. They submitted a six point proposal to the government, but the government paid no heed to their demands."

"So the Tamil leaders were compelled to ask for separation?" said Mrs. Wimalisiri.

Being ignored by the government, Chelvanayagam, doyen of Tamil politics, resigned from his post and challenged the government that he would contest the constitution on the premise that the Tamil people do not accept the constitution and they want to be liberated at the forthcoming by-election."

“I remember the by-election held for Kankesanthurai electorate and the rallying cry for ‘Tamil Eelam.’” said Wimalisiri.

“Chelvanayagam won the by-election in 1975 with an overwhelming majority, proving that the people did not accept the constitution of 1972 and they wanted to be liberated from the majority rule. And a new order emerged for the revival of the Tamil Eelam Government.”

“I remember their putting forward the demands for Tamil Eelam when they contested the parliamentary elections in 1977, too,” said Mrs. Wimalisiri.

“Yes, even before that, in 1976, a special convention of the TULF unanimously decided to accept a proposal for Tamil Eelam. In 1977, Chelvanayagam hoisted the flag of the ‘rising sun’, proclaiming Tamil Eelam.” said Master.

“You can ask for Tamil Eelam, but is it possible to achieve it? Is it practicable? Shouldn’t you think about these questions?”

“Yes, what you say is true. Do you know what Chelvanayagam said in his final speech?”

“What did he say?” said Mrs. Wimalisiri.

“We are advancing towards our goal. We know it is not so easy to achieve Tamil Eelam. But our motto is ‘do or die’. We are firm in our decision. Somehow or other, we will achieve Tamil Eelam,” said Chelvanayagam in his final speech.

“Is it right for only the people in the North and East to decide on it? The TULF has failed to get the consent of the Tamils living outside North and East. Is it acceptable?” said Mrs. Wimalisiri.

“Many have asked this question. It is not practicable to get the overall opinion. And Tamil Eelam is mainly concerned

with the problems of the people of the North and the East. Their opinion is more valid than that of others."

"So what fate is going befall the Tamils living in other areas," said Mr. Wimalsiri.

"They can become citizens of Tamil Eelam."

"In that case will the Sinhalese be driven away from here?"

"Never, the official language of Tamil Eelam will be Tamil, but the Sinhalese will have their medium of instruction as Sinhalese. Their right to communicate with the government in Sinhalese will be preserved. We will also try to get the Sinhalese rulers to guarantee the basic human rights of the Tamils living among them."

Mala and Anula served them tea then.

"Master is absorbed in his political theories," said Mrs. Wimalsiri.

"It is difficult to gainsay him," said Mala. All of them laughed.

Chapter 11

Chandran turned the bicycle suddenly towards Master's house.

Thanapalan, who was pumping up his bicycle tyres got to his feet and welcomed Chandran. He was reminded of the job that Chandran was going to arrange for him and his father's advice to see Chandran.

"How are you, Thanapalan? Where is Master?" Chandran leaned his bicycle against a tree, went inside and sat down.

"Father has gone to temple. He will be late, I think," Thanapalan went into the house with the pump.

"I was on my way to some place when I heard there is some problem at Thambiaiya's tea shop. I heard that some soldiers had tea and then assaulted Thambiaiya, refusing to pay for the tea. They had also warned him that they would come back in a truck. So I came this way to avoid trouble."

"This is news to you, but we are used to such happenings. There is no end to the army's harassment."

"Colombo is much more peaceful, I think. It is because of those young fellows that the army behaves in this way," said Chandran and wiped his face with his handkerchief.

"You live comfortably in Colombo, so you are averse to think about what is happening here."

Chandran did not expect such a barrage of words from Thanapalan. He collected himself and said, "If all the Tamil

people in the south come over here, will the rebels be able to feed them all?"

"People living in the South are thick skinned. They are prepared to suffer any discourtesy as long as they are able to lead a luxurious life. We have been at the receiving end since 1958. Whenever our people are assaulted, they come running here."

"Do you want us to come here and carry begging bowls then?" Chandran teased him.

"You haven't suffered enough at the hands of the Sinhalese ruffians. You have lost your dignity. You are so selfish that you are prepared to lead the life of a slave. You are not in the least worried about the plight of the Tamils."

"If the soldiers and the policemen on duty are shot like dogs, do you think there will be no retaliation?"

"You are being partial towards them. Are you aware of the tortures, killings and arson attacks the police and the army are indulged in?"

"Yes, I have read about them in the papers. But the Tamils brought it upon themselves because of their claim for 'Tamil Eelam'."

"You don't understand. Tamil Eelam is our country. When we ask for it, why can't they give it to us. They want to treat us like slaves. They want to suppress us. That is why Tamil Eelam is anathema to them."

"We lived together peacefully under the British. Why can't we live together now?"

"Was Sinhalese the official language then? Can you say that the Tamils were discriminated against by the British?"

"I hate this narrow mindedness. Sri Lanka is our country.

We must be able to live in any part of the country freely. Why should we live in a corner and call it 'Tamil Eelam'?"

"You say Sri Lanka is your country. Are you able to reply the letters you receive in Sinhalese in Tamil? The government says that the Sinhalese is the only official language. Buddhism is the primary religion. When our language and religion are not given pride of place in this country, you shamelessly say this is your country. Nonsense!"

The attention of Master's wife, who was picking leaves for the goats was drawn by the voices she heard and came to see who Thanapalan was talking to. When she found it was Chandran, she smiled and said, 'Please take your seat. My husband will be here shortly' and disappeared into the kitchen.

"Thanapalan, you shouldn't leave sight of one thing. Whatever the youth do here will endanger so many lives of the Tamils who live outside the North and East and cause destruction to much property."

"You don't seem to understand the type of warfare the youth wages."

"Do you think the problem could be solved by killing some people intermittently here and there?"

"It is known as guerilla warfare. It is a new trend."

"How do you plan to achieve Tamil Eelam by your hit and run tactics?"

"If the troops are killed, the Tamils in the South will be avenged and eventually they will have to leave the South. The Sinhalese in their turn will be scared to settle down here and Tamil Eelam will evolve in the long run."

"How about the loss of lives and property?"

“It is inevitable. Hundreds of people throughout history have lost their lives in their fight for independence. Don’t forget that the radicals fight at the risk of their own lives.”

“But there seems to be more destruction on our side. Unlike in the past, now even people in the north and east fear for their lives.”

“That is what is expected of us. If the death and destruction continue, there will be an uprising against the government. They will find it difficult to rule over us.”

“In that case, people will never be able to live in peace in the Tamil areas.”

“No, this is a temporary setback and the government will be compelled to find a solution.”

“How come?”

“The government will find it difficult to run the administration. They will be having problems in getting foreign aid. The government will have no alternative but to give in.”

“You are daydreaming. Can a handful of young men fight against the mighty government? They won’t be able to succeed unless a powerful country backs them.”

“You only know the strength of the government. People all over the world have come to know of our struggle. Wherever the Sri Lankan leaders go, they are asked about our struggle. They can’t help answering the question put to them.”

“I find that everybody in Jaffna is in favour of Tamil Eelam, but I have my doubts about its feasibility.”

“Outsiders have their misgivings. They will come to their senses sooner or later. There is hope because of the rebels. The people will rise against the government in the near

future. Colonization of the Sinhalese in our areas will cease. The government is compelled to resolve this issue. If you think carefully, you will admit the rebels are powerful.”

Master came in just then. “Father has come. You can talk to him”, said Thanapalan and went out.

“Hello Chandran, have you been here long?” said Master and sat down.

“No, sir, I came just now and spent some time with Thanapal.”

“What does he say?”

“He wants to achieve Tamil Eelam like you, but his methods are different from yours. He doesn’t want to adopt peaceful means. He is after his opponents’ blood.”

“All the young chaps feel that way. The armed forces take them for terrorists. The youth think the forces are out for their blood. As far as they are concerned, peaceful struggle is out of the question.”

Chandran mulled over what Master said. The impact of the harsh reality of life on him made him pensive.

“I have to leave, sir. I am expected to be back in half an hour,” Chandran got to his feet.

“Why the hurry?”

“I’m sorry, sir. We are planning to go to Jaffna tomorrow.” You must join us. See you tomorrow.”

“See you tomorrow, then.”

Chapter 12

When Dr.Mahesan and Dr. Mala reached the nursing home, they found many patients waiting for them.

“Mala, I will finish the ward rounds quickly. Send nurse Manjula along.”

When he was in the first room, Manjula entered the room in a state of agitation

“Somebody asked for you on the phone a few minutes back.”

“Who was it?”

“The caller refused to identify himself.”

“What else did he ask?”

“He wanted to know when you are expected. I said eight o’clock and he hung up.”

His brow furrowed. He was wondering who the caller could have been while attending on the patient.

Attendant Manickam came running and said excitedly, “There are three jeeps full of soldiers”.

Dr.Mahesan went out to see the nursing home surrounded by armed soldiers. Three of them were walking towards his office. Dr.Mahesan hurried to his office. One of them, who appeared to be an officer was questioning the clerk harshly. When the doctor entered the office, the army officer stared at him for a moment.

“What can I do for you,” said the doctor.

“We want to check your hospital.”

“Your men are giving a scare to the patients and our employees.”

“You are surrounded for a reason. You have to accompany us when we do the checking.”

“You are sullyng the good name of our hospital, officer. Why don't you just check the admission register rather than searching the patients.”

“It's no use checking the register. We have to check every room thoroughly.”

A crowd of people consisting of outpatients, the relatives of inpatients and some employees were watching what was going on.

Dr.Mala, who was busy examining the patients, was in two minds whether to go to the scene of action or not. She tried her best to hide her fear.

Dr.Mahesan dispersed the crowd of onlookers and took the soldiers to the ward first. They checked every patient in each of the room.

The patient in room No.5 was a young man. His sister was seated near him on the bed. The patient was in deep sleep. When his sister saw the soldiers, she got to her feet in fear. One of the soldiers tried to wake the patient up.

“Please don't disturb him. He found it difficult to sleep, so I gave him something to make him sleep,” said the doctor.

“How long has he been here?”

“For fifteen days.”

“What's wrong with him?”

“He has pneumonia. He’s getting better.”

It appeared that the officer was not satisfied with his answer.

“What’s his name?” The doctor couldn’t remember his name.

“Sivakumaran,” said the patient’s sister.

“Sivakumaran?, I thought he was dead.” The officer removed the blanket and checked the patient’s legs.

The patient suddenly woke up from his slumber to find the soldiers in front of him. He was scared stiff and he broke out in a sweat.

The doctor was furious, but he controlled himself. A soldier who could speak Tamil questioned him.

“What’s your name?”

“Sivakumaran.”

“How long have you been here?”

“Two weeks.”

The soldiers left the room.

The soldiers paid more attention to the young men who were warded and checked whether they were injured. When they had finished checking all the rooms, one of them said,

“Are there any more rooms?”

“Yes, there is one at the back. We have a diarrhoea patient there”

“Let’s go there.”

“When they went there, they found the old woman at the door, chewing betel.

“Please allow the officers to check the room,” said the doctor.

“No, I won’t let them in. My grandson is sleeping,” the old woman blocked their way.

The doctor didn’t know what to do. The army became suspicious. That room was not part of the main ward. Besides, the old woman was keen on preventing them from entering the room. One of the soldiers peeped over the woman’s shoulders but he could not see the patient as the bed was in a corner.

“Let me go in, old woman,” said one of the soldiers fiercely.

“No, you will scare the child.”

“Hey, let us in, will you?” The old woman’s eyes flashed with anger.

The soldier tried to push the woman aside.

“Who the hell do you think you are?” said the old woman trembling. Her spittle spilled on to the soldier’s uniform.

The soldier entered the room forcefully. The old woman screamed abuse at him and pushed him away. The soldier was taken aback. He was furious, but he checked his anger considering her age.

The doctor was surprised at her boldness.

“Don’t get excited. Please keep cool,” the doctor comforted the old woman. The soldier took a look at the boy and came out of the room.

As he was coming out, he scowled at the old woman and said, “Bloody old bitch.” The old woman glared back.

"I will talk to you leisurely," the doctor told her and followed the soldiers.

"Don't let the bastards in, doctor," shouted the old woman.

Then the search party went to the outpatient section.

The soldiers made a survey of the people there. Dr.Mala was examining the patients taking no notice of the presence of the army.

"Who is this lady doctor?"

"She is my wife."

One of the soldiers went to her and said, "Excuse me, doctor"

"Yes, can I help you?" she asked hiding her excitement.

"Do you remember treating any youth with an injured leg four or five days back?"

She pretended to think, rubbing her forehead and said, "Yes I remember treating a young chap."

"What nonsense is she talking?" thought Dr.Mahesan, alarmed.

"Can you remember what sort of injury?"

"Just a minute," she said, ringing the bell for Manjula.

"Manjula, can you remember my prescribing tetanus toxoid injection for a patient? What sort of injury did he have?"

"No, madam, I remember giving the injection, but I didn't ask him what he was suffering from."

"We treat so many people. It is difficult to remember each case." Mala said showing signs of thinking.

"They need clear cut description of the injury. Why don't we check the prescription," said Dr.Mahesan smiling.

"Yes, we'd better ask the dispenser," said Dr.Mala and got down the dispenser.

"Can you remember the patient who came with his leg hurt?"

"Yes, madam, he had trodden on a shattered glass. I remember cleaning the wound and dressing it."

"Oh yes, I remember now. Fearing there might be pieces of glass in the wound, I didn't want to sew up the wound," said Dr.Mala.

She instructed the dispenser to show the soldier the prescription.

By that time the soldiers had lost all interest in the patient in question.

"Don't worry about it. We are leaving," said the officer and left.

The doctor who accompanied them saw to his horror that Thanapalan was being questioned by two soldiers in one of the jeeps. The doctor wondered why they were questioning Master's son.

"This fellow was spying on us," said one of the soldiers in Sinhalese.

"No, not at all. Actually I came for treatment," said Thanapalan.

"Do you happen to know him, doctor?"

"Yes, he is the son of one of my friends."

"I came for treatment, doctor. They have arrested me," said Thanapalan .

“I think your suspicion is groundless. I am their family physician. His father was my teacher. You are being hasty, I think.”

“OK, OK, release him,” said one of the officers.

Thanapalan looked at the doctor thankfully and went into the nursing home.

“Thank you for your co-operation, doctor. We are leaving,” said the military officer.

“If you keep doing this, we will be losing our patients.”

“We have to do our duty.”

“Please see that you don’t trouble us any more.”

“Sure, we won’t trouble you any more”

The jeeps left as soon as the soldiers boarded them.

When the doctor returned to his office, Thanapalan came to see him.

“If it were not for you, they would have nabbed me, doctor.”

“What were you doing there?”

“I was wondering why so many soldiers were here, so I was watching them”

“So, you didn’t come for treatment.”

“No, doctor.”

“O.K, stop being inquisitive hereafter,” said the doctor and went to see Mala.

Dr.Mala had finished her work at the outpatient clinic and she was on the phone.

“Whom did you call?” said the doctor when she finished.

“I called other nursing homes to see whether they had the same experience.”

“What did they say?”

“They were not checked.”

“Really?” He was in deep thought.

“Why only us? On a tip off they had? There was somebody who was caught, you know?”

Mala looked troubled.

“Maybe they will check our house, too,” said Dr.Mahesan.

“Bala must be sent away at any cost,” said Mala anxiously.

“He can’t walk. We can do one thing. He can be admitted to the vacant room at the back,” said Dr.Mahesan.

“Do you think it is safe?” said Mala.

“It’s not likely that the army will check the hospital again. Let’s remove Bala with the help of Marimuththu.”

“Do you think Bala will agree with us?”

“Let us explain the situation to him. I am sure he can be persuaded to leave our house. Let’s get Marimuththu to take Bala to that room. If somebody becomes inquisitive, we can say Marimuththu’s cousin is warded as his foot was caught in the bicycle wheel.”

When they were returning home for lunch, Mala was in deep thought.

“What is eating you, Mala. When I saw the army, I was panic stricken, but you were clever enough to put them at ease.” Dr.Mahesan was cheerful

Mala’s face cleared and she smiled.

Dr.Mahesan started telling her about the old woman’s clash with the army.

Chapter 13

The car was moving towards the town centre in Jaffna.

Master and Chandran were seated in front. The guests were sitting behind them.

“Where are we bound for? To Naga Vihara?” said Anula.

“We can go there on our way back. Let us first go round the town,” said Chandran.

“If that is so, take the car to Regal Cinema first, Marimuththu. That could be the starting point for our sightseeing,” said Master.

Marimuththu pulled up under a kumbuk tree. Master took them to the pillars erected in memory of those who lost their lives during the Tamil Research Convention.

“What do these seven pillars call attention to?” said Wimalsiri.

“These are the memorials of the victims who lost their lives during the World Tamil Conference,”

“Yes, I remember reading in the papers that seven people were electrocuted,” said Mrs Wimalsiri.

“I’m afraid you had been misled, Mrs Wimalsiri.” Master stared at Ms Wimalsiri.

“Out with it, please, Master.”

“The government was not in favour of the idea of holding the World Tamil Conference- 1974 in Jaffna. They insisted

on holding it in Colombo. Tamil intellectuals, on the other hand, wanted it to be held in Jaffna as it was supposed to be the capital city of the Tamils. The government persisted in its refusal to grant permission. Finally, Prof. Vidyananthan, Mahadeva and some others went on a deputation to the government hierarchy and convinced them that it was preferable to hold the conference in Jaffna. Emotions were running high among the Tamils and the conference was a success.

“How come the conference ended up in disaster, then?”

“Some bootlicking elements of the government couldn't bear the thought that the conference was in full swing. They set the police against the conference on the last day of the conference.

“Did the police fire on the crowd?”

“No, they used teargas and when people were running here and there, they fired in the air. As a result, the electric cables above gave in, killing seven people on the spot. These pillars were erected in their memory.”

“Why are some of them shattered into pieces?”

“The pillars were an eyesore to some bad elements, so they were demolished by the forces in the thick of the night.”

“What! Even the memorials are not spared?” Mrs Wimalsiri was aghast.

“Anything related to the history of the Tamils are vandalized as a rule.”

“Come on. Let's proceed to the public library, it is close by,” said Chandran.

They walked towards the library along a lake.

The shadows of the kumbuk trees on the west of the lake fell on the water that was serene.

The clock tower on the east of the lake was standing majestically. Its inverted image in the water made the scene more attractive. The breeze that brushed the lake was soothing them.

The Fort on the west with a trench and meadows around it were feasting the eyes.

“The lake here is very fitting,” admired Mrs Wimalsiri.

“Alfred Thuraiappa, the former mayor, wanted to make this lake a swimming pool.”

“He was the one shot dead by the militants, I suppose?” Said Wimalsiri

“He was an able man. He tried his best to beautify and develop the Jaffna town. However, as he was very close to the politicians in the Srimavo’s government, there was a confrontation between him and other Tamil politicians. It was the time when many young men were arrested and tortured. So the militants were under the impression that as the mayor was hand in glove with the members of the ruling party, he was behind the cruelty to the youth. This led to the plot to assassinate him.”

“So, the political killings have become a routine since then, haven’t they?”

“That must have been the starting point. Since then government supporters, no matter which government was in power, have been killed.” said Master.

“Even during the last local government elections some contestants on the ruling party ticket were killed, weren’t they? Said Wimalsiri

"I have a feeling that the youth have become more and more aggressive. They are now opposing even the TULF, I mean the Tamil politicians," said Master.

"I know, I read in the papers that the TULF did not pay heed to their request not to contest in the local government elections. So, they disrupted a meeting while the first Tamil leader of the opposition, Appaapillai Amirthalingam, was speaking. They even went to the extent of setting fire to his jeep," Said Wimalsiri.

"Whatever said and done, I think the elections reflect the support of the people that a party has. It was because Amirthalingam became the leader of the opposition, many leaders came to know about the demand for Tamil Eelam. Moreover, Hansards record the speeches made by Tamil parliamentarians. Considering all this, I feel that the TULF must contest all elections," opined master.

"I hear there was a gun battle between the policemen guarding a polling booth and the militants."

"Yes, two policemen lost their lives in the fight."

"What is surprising is the militants always manage to escape, but the forces don't survive," said Wimalsiri.

"The militants challenged the guards face to face at the polling booth but not a single one of them could be shot down," said Mrs Wimalsiri

"The policemen work to earn a living but the militants are prepared to die for a cause. It is very difficult to stand up to them," said Master.

"Yes, you're right."

"It is because the terrorists killed some air force personnel in Vavuniya that the riots broke out all over the country," said Mrs Wimalsiri.

“Tamil leaders believe in Satyagraha but the youth have taken up arms. Anyway, as the government seems to be keen on finding a solution to the problem, I believe that there is a solution on the cards.” said Master.

“If a solution can be found, I’m sure the country will prosper, but Tamil Eelam is a remote possibility.” said Wimalisiri.

“Why do you say so?”

“The leaders in the south say that they will never allow the country to be divided. They are prepared to go to any lengths to prevent it.”

“Yes, that is their mantra, but their decision is not final. Even great Indian leaders like Gandhi and Nehru couldn’t prevent the emergence of Pakistan however hard they tried. Yahya Khan couldn’t stop Bangladesh being liberated from Pakistan. You must give careful thought to these happenings.”

“It has been many years since Sri Lanka achieved independence but there is no solution to the ethnic problem in sight. Don’t you think it will lose momentum if it drags on any further,” said Wimalisiri.

“A beggar doesn’t want his wound to heal. It is a blessing in disguise. In the same way, the longer the ethnic problem remains unresolved, the better their political future for most politicians in the south. The Irish fought for their independence for many centuries but it was under the leadership of de Valera that they were liberated. A freedom struggle cannot be weakened by letting it drag on by ignoring it.”

“What you refer to as Tamil Eelam is a tiny area, about 8000 square miles in extent. How do you propose to be on equal terms with other countries?” intervened Mrs Wimalisiri.

“Israel was 8000 square miles in extent at its beginning, but now it is in a position to challenge the super powers. The Jews were spread out in sixteen different countries, forgetting even Hebrew, their mother tongue. If the Jews with a population of 60,000 people can do that, why can't we do it with a population of four million people?”

“Everyone quotes Israel as an example, but didn't Israel have the support of some super powers?”

“There are more than twenty countries smaller than Tamil Eelam. All of them didn't have the support of the super powers, did they?”

“Some people argue that when two economically unstable provinces of north and east are merged to form Tamil Eelam, there is no way it can survive.”

“Israel was nothing but a desert in its formative years, but it has become very fertile now. Take the case of Singapore and Maldives, two countries with no resources of their own. Though they depend on imports for survival, aren't they economically stable?”

“I feel there will be bloodshed because of the demand for Tamil Eelam,” said Mrs Wimalsiri.

“Singapore separated from Malaysia on a constitutional settlement. If our problem could be solved in the same way with the help of southerners, there won't be any trouble.”

When they reached the burnt public library, it was in a state of repair. Mr and Mrs Wimalsiri were awestruck when they saw the library.

As Chandran and Master were already familiar with the scene of crime, they remained calm.

“Oh. What a heinous crime,” said Ms Wimalsiri forgetting herself.

“It was an act of barbarism by the police,” said Master.

“Hundreds of books must have been burnt to ashes,” said Wimalsiri.

“It was supposed to be the largest library in Southeast Asia. 95, 000 books were reduced to ashes, not to mention the manuscripts of great Tamil intellectuals.

“This library must have catered for thousands of research students,” said Mrs Wimalsiri.

“You must know how the leader of the opposition reacted in parliament.” He said, “Even Hitler left strict instructions to the troops not to damage Oxford and Cambridge Universities during the war. In the same way British Prime Minister instructed the air force to avoid bombing Heidelberg University in Germany. Thus the seats of higher learning remained untouched during the World War. But our government had the public Library of Jaffna burnt down. How barbaric an act it was.”

In the presence of the Inspector General of Police, Brigadier Weerathunga and some officials of the ministry of defence, armed policemen carrying torches set fire to the public library. The moment he heard about the torching the well-known academic and researcher Rev. Father David died of shock. He was a linguist who was fluent in thirty-two languages. He was also a remarkable student of Father Gnanapragasar.” While narrating about the incident, Master’s voice cracked and his eyes filled with tears.

“I remember that an employee of the library went mad on finding the library in flames,” said Wimalsiri.

“Now they are reconstructing the library, but what is lost is lost, I mean the books.”

Marimuthu brought the car round, then, and they resumed their journey.

This is what the oppressors do when dissenting voices are heard. They bring the press under their control. They kill the academics, and other intellectuals. Even libraries are not spared. As you are aware, Yahya Khan tried it in Bangladesh,” said Master.

Marimuthu, please take us to the market,” said Chandran.

“The house of the MP for Jaffna was also burnt down, I think,” said Wimalisiri.

“Yes, Yogeswaran MP escaped the attempt on his life astutely.”

“But he was compensated for his loss, wasn't he?” said Wimalisiri.

“Money can't buy everything. He lost all his valuables and important documents of the youth in the fire. Can these be compensated for?”

On the way to the modern market, they saw many damaged statues.

“They were the statues of well known sages, weren't they? Once again it was the handiwork of the forces, I guess,” said Ms Wimalisiri.

“Yes, these things are not uncommon in the Tamil areas. Other areas are free from such atrocities.”

“At a place known as Urumpirai, there was a statue of a young martyr, Sivakumaran, which appeared to be trying to break the shackles. That statue is now hanging upside down.”

“Are there statues of militants, too in Jaffna?” asked Mrs Wimalsiri in surprise

“Sivakumaran was the forerunner of the militants. He was infuriated by the acts of the forces and became very violent. He made a vow to kill those whom he considered traitors to the cause. When he was caught and tortured he killed himself. Many young men followed in his footsteps. They also erected a statue for him. Every year, on his commemoration day, they explode hand grenades as a mark of respect for him.”

When they reached the new market, Wimalsiri said, “These buildings were not here when I visited Jaffna before.”

“The old market and many shops in a row were burnt down.” said master.

“They must have been renovated,” said Mrs Wimalsiri.

“Yes, it is a vicious circle, of destruction and reconstruction”

Wimalsiri and wife exchanged glances.

“This is something that often happens during the general elections in the south,” thought Wimalsiri.

“My dear friend, Jaffna has been burnt not once, but three times, mind you,” said Master

“I wonder whether it is possible to take a look at the statue of Sangili, the last King of Jaffna?” asked Mrs Wimalsiri

“It is in Nallur where he reigned over. Let’s go there,” said Master enthusiastically and proceeded to the place where King Sangili’s statue was displayed.

“This statue looks like a new one. Was it erected recently?” asked Mrs Wimalsiri.

“Yes, in 1974, but the entrance to his palace and the residence of the ministers are preserved in their original form at Sangiliyan Thorpu. Come, let us take a look at them,” Master took them with him.

Mrs Wimalsiri was taken aback for a moment. She looked sorrowful.

She was reminded of what she learnt from her history book about King Sangili. He fiercely resisted the Portuguese. To capture Jaffna, the Portuguese had to conscript 5000 troops from Colombo and Goa. After defeating Sangili, they took him to Goa. The deposed king of Jaffna was hanged in the year 1621.

“The last remaining relic of King Sangili’s reign is neglected without proper maintenance. Why is that so, Master?” Said Mrs Wimalsiri with chagrin in her voice.

“There are valid reasons for it,” sighed Master, but he refrained from revealing the reasons.

“How about some shopping? When I came here last time, I bought some Palmyra products and mangoes. I hope they are available even now,” said Wimalsiri.

“Yes, of course. After shopping, we can go to Naga Vihara on our way home,” said Master and took them to Jaffna Market.

That evening when Master parted from the guests, he turned to Mrs Wimalsiri and said in a voice shaky with emotion “You are leaving tomorrow. We may never meet again. I’d better tell you about a bitter experience I had during the ethnic riots of 1958. My father was a trader in Panadura then. He was soused in petrol and burnt alive by thugs. They also burnt a Hindu priest alive on that day. I was a school teacher in Nawalapitiya then. It was ten days later

that I came to know the fate that befell Father. I was his only child, but I couldn't even perform funeral rites for him."

"Why didn't you talk about it sooner? There is nothing wrong in saying it," Mrs Wimalisiri said sadly.

"If you had felt sympathy for me when we were discussing ethnic problems, you would have been hesitant to talk freely with me. Now I know how compassionate you are. When you met me you wanted me to be transparent. I can talk freely with you. That's why I want to talk about it now."

"We are very sorry to hear about your loss, Master. In the columns I write, I will definitely write about you and your views in detail," said Mrs Wimalisiri.

"I'll see what I can do about your son's job when I get back to Colombo," said Mr Wimalisiri.

"Master, we have learnt much from you. I agree with you about certain things. Some of your ideas are thought provoking. I don't see eye to eye with you on some of your views, but I admit that the Sinhalese are misled by the propaganda of our politicians," said Mrs Wimalisiri.

"We are determined to visit Jaffna again. I hope to see you then," said Mr. Wimalisiri.

Both of them shook hands with Master.

Chapter 14

Doctor Mahesan went to see Bala.

Bala's room was next to the diarrhoea patient's room. There was no possibility of people coming that way, except the old woman who was with the boy suffering from diarrhoea.

Marimuththu was clever enough to bring Bala to the hospital without attracting the attention of anybody, using the path leading to the back of the hospital.

Nurse Manjula followed Dr Mahesan.

"Who is this patient?" the doctor questioned Manjula as if he did not know Bala.

"Your driver brought him here. He said you would attend on him."

"Yes, I remember now. Marimuththu told me that one of his cousins has difficulty in walking as his leg was caught in the wheel of his bicycle. I told him to get his cousin admitted."

He pretended to examine Bala. He went closer to him.

"What is wrong with you? How did you hurt yourself?"

Bala sat up on his bed. "My foot got caught in the bicycle wheel. The wound was sewn up at Kilinochchi hospital. There is nobody to take care of me there. So I'm staying with my cousin, here."

“Let us check the wound, Manjula. Fetch me the dressing tray.”

As soon as Manjula left the room, Dr Mahesan cautioned him. “Make sure that you don’t arouse suspicion.”

“I will be very careful, doctor. You can count on it.”

“I have told Marimuththu to come and see you often.”

“Is there any possibility of the army coming back, doctor?”

“I don’t think so. They assured me that they would not trouble us anymore.”

“If they see me, they are sure to identify me.”

“You need not be scared.”

There was somebody lurking behind. The old woman was standing there.

Was she listening to everything he said? The doctor got angry. Is she a trouble maker?

“Why have you come here? I don’t want anybody to be with me when I examine a patient. Do you understand?”

“O.K., doctor.” There was no change in her face. She returned to her room. ‘She couldn’t have heard anything,’ the doctor thought.

Manjula came back and helped him to dress the wound.

“I can’t undo the suture now. It’ll take time for the wound to heal.”

“I was given daily injections in Kilinochchi, doctor.”

“Let us give him penicillin injection in the mornings and evenings, Manjula. Call me if you have any problems.

Marimuthu will be pleased if I pay personal attention to the patient.”

“O.K, doctor”

When they left the room the old woman came in.

Bala eyed her suspiciously.

“Why are you all alone? Is there nobody to take care of you?”

“I don’t need any help, ammah.”

“Where are you from?”

“From Kandy.”

“You came here all the way from Kandy?”

“My cousin is working for the doctor, you know. So I came to stay with him when I got hurt.”

“Ae you from upcountry?”

“Yes, ammah,” he laughed.

“You say you are from Kandy, but you speak like us,” the old woman laughed showing her betel-stained teeth.

“I have been in Kilinochchi for a long time. That’s why I speak like you.”

“There was some problem here yesterday. Did you hear about it?”

“No, I came just now.”

“These army fellows were a headache. They didn’t care a hoot about the patients. I pushed him out of my room.”

“Who did you push, ammah?”

“Who else, the army fellow. He was scared. He didn’t come into the room.”

Bala looked at her puzzled. He didn’t believe her.

“If he has a gun, can he do anything he likes?”

Bala was in thought, keeping mum.

“What are you thinking about ? Are you scared of the army?”

Bala was worried. He thought she was being sly.

“No, ammah. I’m not scared.”

“They don’t trust young people like you. To make matters worse, you are injured. If they saw you, they would tear into you.”

Bala thought that she was assessing him through her thick glasses.

He wanted to change the subject. “Don’t you think your grandson will be looking for you?” he said.

“He is fast asleep. He wouldn’t get up for a while.”

Nurse Manjula showed up then with a syringe. When the old woman saw her, she left the room quietly.

“What does the old woman want?”

“She was gossiping.”

“She is a bold woman. She manhandled a soldier yesterday when the army came here for checking.” said the nurse, and gave him an injection.

“What is the army looking for?”

“They are like that. They harass the innocent, but they fail to catch the real culprits.”

Yes...., it is true.”

Marimuthu requested me to take good care of you. If you need anything, please send word.”

“O.K, Bala rubbed his arm and lay down.

He heard the nurse berating the old woman.

“You must stay in your room, ammah. You shouldn’t disturb other patients!”

He couldn’t hear any response from the old woman, though.

Chapter 15

Master was reclining in an easy chair on the front verandah. He was in deep thought.

He was disturbed by something that happened at Madaththady that evening. He thought Sivapalan, his son, might have some information about the incident.

“Come here, Sivapalan,” he called out.

Sivapalan came to his side.

“Where is Thanapalan?”

“He is out since morning.”

“Where is he loafing about? I hear he is in bad company.”

“I remember warning you about it before. You must have heard about some young men setting fire to a bus. It is rumoured that Thanapalan was one of the arsonists.”

“Yes, one of the passengers on the bus confirmed it. When I questioned Thanapalan about it, he flatly denied it. He said he had seen the bus burning on his way back from the cinema and somebody from the onlookers who saw him must have misunderstood.”

Sivagamy heard them while walking towards them.

“Whether there is some truth in the rumour or not, it is not advisable to have him here any longer. Otherwise, we will come to harm.” said Sivagamy.

"I have been thinking about it myself. It doesn't matter if he is jobless, we have to send him somewhere for a while," said master.

Then they saw Thanapalan come speeding on his bicycle. He was sweating heavily. He leaned the bicycle hurriedly against the veranda. He was panting and looked horror-stricken. "The soldiers are hunting for me, father," Thanapalan bemoaned.

Master was thunderstruck. Sivagamy squatted down with her hands on her head.

"What are you going to do now?" said Sivapalan

"I am going to escape through the back door. If they come in search of me, tell them that I am away in Colombo." Thanapalan rushed through the back door.

The parents were dumbfounded.

In a few minutes, two trucks came blaring the horns and stopped in front of their house. Some soldiers jumped out of the trucks.

Four of them came in with their guns stretched out.

Suddenly two of them held their guns against Sivapalan's chest.

Master and Sivagamy were stunned.

"Are you Thanapalan?"

"No"

"What's your name?"

"Sivapalan"

One of the soldiers who appeared to be an officer checked his diary and furrowed his forehead.

“Who is Thanapalan, then?”

“My younger brother.”

“Where is he?”

“He has gone to Colombo.”

“Don’t lie,” growled the officer.

“He left this morning, by train,” stammered Master.

“Who are you?”

Master said in English, “I am Thanapalan’s father. This is my wife and Sivapalan is my elder son.”

“Why did he go to Colombo?”

“Seeking employment.”

“Give us his address in Colombo.”

“He said that he is staying with some friends. We don’t know the address.”

“Aren’t there any of your relatives in Colombo?”

“No, there is nobody there.”

“If you keep on lying, we will have to take you all into custody.”

“There is no need for me to lie.”

“When is Thanapalan expected back?”

“In about four or five days.”

“Where was he on Wednesday night?”

Master thought for a while and said, "He was here."

"You are lying. We have reliable information that he was away from the house that night."

"....."

"We want to search your house."

"Please go ahead. Someone has misled you, I gather."

Four soldiers went round the house.

Three soldiers were engaged in checking the house. They checked every room.

"Which is Thanapalan's room?"

"He has no room of his own," said Master.

They did a thorough checking, looking for clues, even leafing through books and notebooks.

There was a locked cupboard in a corner which attracted their attention.

"Where is the key of this cupboard?"

Master searched the place where he usually leaves the key, but it was missing.

"Hurry up!"

"I have misplaced it somewhere. You will find nothing but old books in the cupboard."

"If you can't find the key, we will have to break the cupboard open."

Master turned to Sivapalan. The key is missing. Have you any idea where it is?"

"I have no idea," said Sivapalan hesitantly.

A soldier broke open the door of the cupboard using the bayonet.

While they were checking the books, one by one, they found a plastic bag behind the books.

The officer opened the bag. Master and Sivapalan were wondering what could there be in the bag.

The officer took a bundle of papers out of the bag. They were leaflets issued by a banned movement.

The officer was gloating.

“What are these?” he snarled.

“This is the first time I’m setting eyes on them. I don’t know what they are about.”

“I have enough clues to take you all to the army camp and question you.”

“Neither father nor mother knows about them,” said Sivapalan.

“Do you know anything about them, then?”

“I am ignorant myself. Thanapalan must have put them there.”

The officer guffawed. Thanapalan had them without your knowledge! You don’t know his whereabouts. You don’t know his address. How odd?”

Master was in a state of shock.

“Hey, you come with us,” the officer ordered Sivapalan.

“He is innocent. Why are you taking him unnecessarily?”

“We will find it out in the camp.”

“When Thanapalan shows up, I will hand him over to you. Please release Sivapalan,” pleaded Master.

The officer shook his head.

“When Thanapalan turns up, bring him over to the camp. Until then, Sivapalan will be held hostage.”

Without waiting for Master’s reply, they dragged Sivapalan to the truck.

Master was stunned. Sivagamy started wailing.

Sivapalan was moved to tears. A terrible thought about the stories that had gone round about the type of torture the arrested young men suffered flashed through his mind.

Will Thanapalan ever come back home?

Chapter 16

Dr Mahesan and Dr Mala returned home from hospital earlier than usual that day.

Marimuththu served them tea. Chandran and the guests planned to leave the following day.

Chandran was about to take the doctor's car to the town.

"Anula, I remember your saying that you wanted to do some shopping. Can I be of help to you?" asked Chandran

"I prefer to make the selections myself. Thank you for your offer to help all the same."

"Why don't you go with Chandran, then, rather than idling here," said Ms Wimalasiri.

Chandran and Anula left together overjoyed.

"I'm sorry I couldn't spend much time with you because of heavy workload," the doctor apologised to the guests when Chandran and Anula left.

"We do understand, doctor. We are in the same boat. We rarely have a break like this to enjoy each other's company," said Wimalasiri.

"We had a nice time with Master in the evenings," said Mrs Wimalasiri.

"Talking about politics is his hobby. I do not always go along with his views. As a result, he has heated arguments with me sometimes."

“What are your views about the ethnic unrest?” asked Mrs Wimalsiri.

“Ethnic relationship has gone sour because the politicians in the south use racism as a means to come to power.”

“You can’t paint the entire politicians in a bad light.” said Mr Wimalsiri.

The doctor smiled. “I see no exception to the rule, I have no doubt at all that racism is their sole weapon. S.W.R.D.Bandaranayake was for parity between the Sinhalese and the Tamils to begin with.”

“Then he came to power on the promise to make Sinhalese the official language within 24 hours,” said Mrs Wimalsiri laughing.

“When he made a speech in Jaffna, Sir John Kotelawala promised to give equal status to both the languages, but at the Kelaniya UNP conference he propagated the policy of Sinhalese as the official language.”

“Perhaps you will spare the leftists,” said Wimalsiri.

“Even they began to change in the sixties. Didn’t they form a new constitution which was disadvantageous to the Tamils with the connivance of Srimavo Bandaranaike?”

“What is that supposed to mean? Our country becoming a republic is disadvantageous to the Tamils?” Wimalsiri was annoyed.

“Article 29 in the previous constitution safeguarded the rights of the minorities, but it was rescinded by Srimavo whose party was in alliance with the leftists.”

“So, your opinion tallies with the opinion of Master. Both of you say that all governments since independence have been against the Tamil speaking people.”

“That is not what I mean. Even the parties that were in favour of granting equal rights to the Tamils to begin with were compelled to resort to racism to come to power. However good hearted they are, nobody can come to power without resorting to racism. A sad state of affairs, don't you think?”

“Well, can the ethnic problem be resolved by giving equal status to the Tamil language and the Sinhalese language?”

“No, there are other problems like land grabbing, inadequate employment opportunities and denial of higher education to competent Tamil students. They need to be tackled as well.”

“Do you think reintroducing article 29 will be of any help?” asked Ms Wimal Siri.

“Article 29 was introduced by the British to give protection to the minorities. But successive governments took no notice of article 29 when they disenfranchised the Indian Tamils or when they dismissed the public servants for want of proficiency in the Sinhalese language”

“The minorities could have sued the government, couldn't they?” asked Wimal Siri.

“Can you remember one Kodeeswaran filing a case against the government?”

“No, please tell me about it doctor,” said Wimal Siri.

“Kodeeswaran was denied salary increment on account of non-proficiency in the official language. Article 29 helped him to win the case. Subsequently the government amended the constitution revoking article 29.”

“Do you mean to say that they amended the constitution at their whims and fancies to harm the Tamils?”

“A constitution must take into consideration the needs of all the citizens of a country. Countries like the USA and India conform to this principle. In the case of Sri Lanka, on the other hand, the needs of the Tamils are always disregarded.”

“What is your suggestion to end the conflict? “Is separation the only solution?”

“I wouldn’t say that.”

“Most Tamil politicians say that as in the past they need a country of their own.”

“Just because we were a separate entity at one time, it is not fair to ask for separation now.”

“We must face reality. Sixty per cent of the Tamil people live comfortably in the south. We can’t afford to forget the Indian Tamils and the Muslims who live among us. By rights the Muslims have a say as a matter of fact. Their rights must be safeguarded.”

“That is a notable point. Most Tamils are used to lead a comfortable life. They are well-known for their intellectual capacity. Many who live in the southern and other regions outside north and east are well off. In my opinion, they will be badly affected by separation.” said Mrs Wimalisiri.

“It has been proved several times that using force is the better option than dialogues for Tamils to win their rights.”

“Surely, that will lead to destruction,” said Mrs Wimalisiri.

“I agree with you, but avoiding devastation is in the hands of the Sinhalese.”

“What do you mean by resolution sans destruction?”

“I mean a solution under socialism.”

“Which means..?”

“Forcibly bringing the majority ethnic community and the minority community under the umbrella of a single authority is authoritarianism. Under socialism, every ethnic group has the opportunity to prosper.”

“Please explain,” said Mrs Wimalisiri.

“Now both the communities are amalgamated without the consent of the minorities. A favourable political climate is essential for the Tamils to join hands with the Sinhalese voluntarily.”

“How can it be made possible?”

“The government should be prepared to give autonomy to Tamil speaking people.”

“Could you please elucidate what you mean by autonomy,” Said Wimalisiri.

“The right of the Tamils either to co-exist with the majority community or to secede from them must be constitutionally guaranteed.”

“What a funny businesses! You want to make things easier for the Tamils to go their own way instead of their taking arms to liberate themselves,” said Wimalisiri.

“I’m afraid you are confusing autonomy with separation. You sound just like the southern politicians.”

“Separation is the next step to the right to autonomy. Can there be any doubt about it?”

“You have the right to get a divorce from your wife. That doesn’t mean that you are at liberty to use the right irresponsibly.”

“In my opinion, if autonomy is made legal, the two ethnic communities will be able to live amicably, What we need is regional autonomy?”

“What do you mean by regional autonomy?”

“Under a unitary government the Tamils and the Sinhalese can administer their own areas freely.”

“Won’t there be several demands for autonomy from Indian Tamils, Muslims and so on?”

“No, autonomy is given based on certain criteria.”

“What do you mean?”

“To qualify for autonomy, a region must have a common language, a common territory, a unique culture and a viable economy.”

“Don’t you think that the Tamil region becoming legally autonomous will eventually lead to separation? Is there any guarantee that the bickering couple wouldn’t be divorced in the course of time?”

“Autonomy is basically equal status. When the Tamils feel they are on equal terms with the Sinhalese, there will be no room for separation.”

“Are you sure that autonomy will never lead to separation?”

“We will have a ready market for our agricultural products in the south. Power supply from the south will be cheaper. Can the Tamils afford to lose all these benefits?”

“As long as you are dependent on the south for you to be economically viable, what chances are there for separation?”

When a race keeps on suppressing another race politically and economically, then only will the need for separation arise.”

“Won’t the progress of the Sinhalese be impeded then?”

“How can the Tamils winning back their rights impede the progress of the Sinhalese?”

“Autonomy means the right to separation. Am I right?”

“Yes, you are, but it is not something that can be abused. Separation comes into force under unavoidable circumstances.”

“The masses are not aware of the technicalities involved. As for them, autonomy means separation.”

“That is because the politicians have misled them. It is their responsibility to undo the damage done.”

“Who is supposed to handle foreign affairs if a region is autonomous?”

“It is entirely handled by the central government. When the president is Sinhalese the vice-president could be Tamil. Central government is responsible for national security, finance, rule of law, aviation and so on.”

“Are the present conditions favourable for the separation of power?”

“The present president has won the confidence of the majority community. He is the leader of the U.N.P. It has had overwhelming majority in three successive parliamentary elections. So, this is the best time for the president to solve the ethnic problem. If he misses this opportunity, the problem can never be solved.

“There is some truth in what you say.”

“Why are the Sinhalese against separation?” queried the doctor.

“The Sinhalese people with a clear cut majority have a minority mindset as they fear that the Tamils of India who outnumber them will push them into the sea.”

"It is nothing but paranoia as I see it," Guffawed Dr Mahesan.

"Hasn't Israel set a bad example? Haven't they brought under their control some territories of their neighbouring countries? What is your answer to that?" said Mrs Wimalsiri.

"That's why I said that autonomy is much better than separation," said Dr Mahesan, laughing.

"When India achieved Independence, Mahatma Gandhi was killed by a radical. Are you sure such problems won't crop up in your autonomous region?"

"The best person to answer that question is none other than Master," said the doctor.

All of them laughed.

Chapter 17

The car was moving at a slow pace.

“What do you want to buy, Anula?”

“I have nothing to buy.”

“But you said you wanted to buy something.”

“It was a pretext for coming with you”

“You are a thief.”

“What did I steal?”

“My heart.”

“You are good at saying sweet nothings. I know you will leave me in the lurch in the long run.”

“You are absolutely right! You are very wise, aren't you?”

“.....”

“Chandran noticed that Anula had turned pale.

Hey, I was just pulling your leg. Why do you look so sad?”

“No, you meant what you said as if you were teasing me.”

“Why do you say that, Anu?”

“After coming to Jaffna something is nagging at my subconscious mind.”

“Oh.... you are disturbed by the political discourse”

“It looks like the Sinhalese and the Tamils can never get along.”

“Don’t talk rubbish.”

“You haven’t told anyone about our affair yet. You haven’t allowed me to speak to anyone about it, either.”

“This is not the appropriate time to make it public. Don’t you think so?”

“It has to come out some day or other, hasn’t it?”

“The time is not ripe yet, anyway”

“When are you going to let the cat out of the bag, then?”

“When you carry my baby.”

“It is out of the question,” Anula went crimson.

“What is out of the question?”

“What you said just now”

“Just you wait.”

“You are asking for the Moon. Do you think I will give in?”

“Will you take a bet?”

“For how much?”

“Here you are,” Chandran handed over his briefcase to her.

“What is it?”

“See for yourself.”

Anula opened the briefcase to see bundles of crisp one hundred rupee notes.

"Oh, my God. What is this money for?"

"To bet."

"You are going to lose the money for nothing."

"No, you are going to succumb to my charms."

"Are you planning to use force?"

"Nonsense. Do you take me for such a vulgar person?"

"Then you will be the loser."

"....."

"Why so much money? Tell me, won't you?"

"To buy the bridal sari and jewellery for my future wife."

"Oh, I see," Anula was overwhelmed with emotion.

"What colour do you prefer?"

"Bridal saris are usually white in colour, aren't they?"

"White bridal sari is forbidden in our culture. I hope you wouldn't insist on wearing white."

"I leave it to your choice."

"When we met for the first time you were wearing a pink sari. Pink suits you."

She was reminded of their first meeting.

A few days after she came to Colombo to live with her sister, she asked her sister for storybooks and she told her to try Chandran who was interested in reading fiction.

Anula went to his room, hesitantly, and said, "Excuse me I wonder whether I could borrow a story book from you?"

Chandran looked startled. He stared at her.

Anula burst out laughing.

“What sort of books do you like? Detective stories or romances?”

“I don’t like detective stories.”

“I see. So romances, then?”

Her enchanting smile and her beautiful face attracted him. The dimple that appeared when she smiled made her more attractive.

He pointed to the books on the table. Anula picked one of them.

To hide his discomfort, Chandran pretended to comb his hair in front of the mirror and stole a glance at Anula in the mirror.

“Thank you,” said Anula, looking at his piercing eyes in the mirror.

Chandran turned to face her and smiled.

She ran out of the room.

Anula was jolted out of her reverie when the car stopped at the entrance of the shop.

“We are looking for bridal saris,” said Chandran to the salesman. Anula was by his side.

“We have nice Indian saris, sir.”

“Let us take a look at them.”

“You can make the selection, Anu.”

There were many kinds of saris of different hues. Anula was confused. She didn’t know what to choose.

“All of them look nice.”

“My goodness! I can’t afford to buy the whole lot for you.”

The salesmen who understood English laughed.

At long last Anula picked a sari.

“That suits you,” said Chandran.

“Shall I ask for the bill?”

“No, I have to buy a matching blouse piece, underskirt, bra, and so on.”

Anula finished shopping in forty-five minutes.

Chandran gave her the briefcase and told her to settle the bill.

Haven’t you got small change?” Anula was asked at the counter.

Anula paid him and they left the shop.

“They must be from Colombo. Madam is under the impression that it is below her dignity to speak in Tamil. However badly they are assaulted, our people don’t seem to change,” gossiped the salesmen.

Chandran and Anula entered a jeweller’s.

“What are you going to buy, Anu?”

“Why don’t you suggest?”

“A necklace?”

“It’s something I already have.”

“The design we use will look nice on you.”

“I think you are planning to transform me into a Tamil woman.”

“You are going to be known as Mrs Chandran in no time, mind you.”

Anula beamed.

Chandran chose the necklace for Anula.

She held it around her neck and asked, “Does it suit me?”

“Your neck looks more beautiful than the necklace.”

Anula opened the briefcase and paid for the necklace.

“Are we going home now?”

“Let’s go to a hotel and have something to eat.”

They went to a plush hotel. A waiter showed them a cubicle.

“He knows that a young couple needs privacy,” said Chandran.

“Bring some sweets, please.”

“Anything to drink, Sir?”

Chandran turned to Anula.

“Can we have iced coffee?”

“Yes, madam.”

“If my sister sees the sari and the necklace, she’ll become suspicious.”

“I can have them with me until I come to Colombo.”

“What are your plans for our future?”

“You are coming to the registry office on Friday, wearing this sari and the necklace. I will be there with two of my friends. We are getting married at the registry office.”

"I am scared, Chandran."

"It is too late. You should have thought about the backlash from your relatives when you fell for me."

"I never expected you to make such a sudden decision."

"I have to marry you or leave you in the lurch. I can't part from you, Anu."

Neither can I part from you, but I can't help being nervous, Chandran."

"Nobody can interfere when we register our marriage."

The waiter brought the bill. Chandran gave him a hundred rupee note. When the waiter brought the change there were some one rupee coins on the tray. He placed the tray in front of them and left.

"How much shall we leave as tip?" Chandran asked and started dropping the coins one by one on the tray.

"Enough, enough," said Anula in Sinhala.

Chandran laughed and dropped two more.

"You have become a spendthrift," said Anula.

"I am thrilled, you know,"

"Who has won the bet, Anu, you or me?"

"You have"

"When will you be ready, then?"

"Any time..."

"What?"

"I'm ready."

"What? Why such haste?"

Anula covered her face with her hands.

"No..., no. You will have to wait until our marriage is registered," Chandran said.

"As if I didn't know....."

"But I thought you said you were ready just now."

She kept looking at him for a short while.

He could see her lips trembling. Her eyes were shining. Her face lit up with emotion.

"What's wrong, dear? There was anxiety in his voice.

"I know you are a gentleman," said Anu. Her eyes brimmed with tears. "I said so because I didn't want you to lose the bet."

"Why the tears, then?" He gave his handkerchief to her.

"Nothing but pure joy," said Anula, wiping her eyes and pressing her lips to her handkerchief.

"Shall we leave?"

She opened her handbag, took out some more one rupee coins and put them on the tray.

Both of them laughed.

While leaving Chandran heard someone saying, "He is Tamil but the girl looks like a Sinhalese."

Chandran glared at them and said, "She is neither Sinhalese nor Tamil, but a human being like all of us."

The cashier was stunned.

When the car left the waiter asked the cashier, "What did he say?"

“He called us fools, you mind your job,” the cashier jumped on the waiter.

“When we get married, I want to take you to some place. I hope you would agree, said Anula.

“O.K. Where are you going to take me?”

“To the Buddhist Vihara in Kelaniya.”

“What are you going to pray for?”

“I’d like to express my gratitude to Buddha for giving me a good husband.”

“Done,” said Chandran

He stroked Anula’s fingers gently.

Chapter 18

Dr Mahesan and Dr Mala went to the railway station that morning to give a send-off to the guests.

When they reached the station the train was about to leave.

As she boarded the train Mrs Wimalasiri said, "We spent useful time in Jaffna, doctor. We were able to learn the problems of the people of Jaffna. Your suggestions to resolve the ethnic problem are praiseworthy. Your views must reach a wider audience among the Sinhalese."

The guard whistled and waved the green flag and the train started moving. They were somewhat relieved when the guests left.

On the way to the nursing home, Mala said, "When are we going to discharge Bala?"

"In a day or two. He is recovering very fast."

"His friends promised to come in two days, but they have failed to keep their promise."

"Maybe they are not in a position to come. One of them must have been caught."

"I wonder whether our hospital was searched on the information he gave."

"I don't think so. Anyway, there must be some valid reason for their checking."

As they were getting off their car at the hospital they heard the army trucks screeching to a halt in front of the hospital.

Dr Mahesan could feel his heart pounding in his chest. Why are they here again?

"You'd better distract their attention for a little while, I will get Bala to escape through the back door," said Mala in a low voice.

"Dr Mahesan!" An army officer was hurrying towards them.

Mala was walking towards the ward.

"Stop, please. Nobody should move," ordered the officer.

Armed soldiers surrounded the hospital.

Dr Mala felt giddy. She sat down in one of the chairs.

"Can I help you in any way?" said Dr Mahesan.

"Yes, we have to check your hospital."

"You searched the hospital a couple of days back. Why trouble us again?"

"I am in charge of the camp now. My predecessor has gone on transfer."

"Every time the camp changed hands you would come and trouble our patients, would you?"

"You are under constant surveillance."

"Your predecessor promised that he wouldn't trouble us again."

"I have my own way of doing things."

"You are giving our hospital a bad name by coming here over and over again."

“If you stand in our way, I will have to be harsh with you.”

“I can’t permit your troubling our patients.”

“If you persist in your refusal to allow us in, I may have to arrest you under the prevention of terrorism act.”

The doctor was speechless.

They always twist the law to suit their needs.

The term terrorism is not well-defined. So, the people are arrested under the prevention of terrorism act at their whims and fancies. Nobody seems to care about human rights violation.

“I am a doctor. You shouldn’t humiliate me like this.”

“All are equal before the law. As far as I know, many doctors, lecturers and priests and the like are behind bars.”

“.....”

“We can’t wait any longer, you alone can come with us. Others stay where you are. You are not supposed to move about.”

Dr Mahesan could do nothing but accompany them.

There was no one in the first room.

“Isn’t there anyone here?”

“The patient was discharged yesterday.”

The patient in the next room, an old woman, got out of the bed nervously.

“Let’s go to the next room.”

The doctor thought that he must somehow or other desist from taking the officer to Bala’s room.

The officer paid careful attention to every patient in each room.

When they went to Sivakumar's room his sister got to her feet in terror.

"How long has this patient been here?"

"For about three weeks."

What is he suffering from?"

"Pneumonia."

"I had pneumonia when I was young, but I recovered in a week."

"There are several types of pneumonia. Not everyone recovers in a week."

When they finished checking all the adjoining rooms the officer asked whether there were any other patients?

"No."

The officer went to the back of the hospital on suspicion. "There are two more rooms there."

"Yes, yes there are," said the doctor. His throat felt dry and constricted and his heart missed a beat.

The officer opened the door of the first room in suspicion. The doctor was at his heels.

The diarrhoea patient was fast asleep. The old woman was nowhere to be seen. The bathroom was locked and the sound of running water was heard.

The officer came out.

The doctor's heart pounded uncontrollably. He thought he was about to faint.

The officer entered Bala's room.

Dr Mahesan stroked his chest. His heart was beating against his hand.

'What is fated cannot be avoided,' thought the doctor as he followed the officer.

The doctor tugged at the blanket of the patient roughly.

To the amazement of the doctor, the old woman was lying in the bed.

Snoring heavily, the old woman turned in the bed.

The doctor gathered his wits and said, "She is a heart patient. I didn't want to bring you here to avoid putting her at risk. Thank God, she is sleeping."

"I see, let us leave before she gets up," said the officer and left the room in a hurry.

Dr Mahesan heaved a sigh of relief.

As they were walking away, the officer said, "Is there nobody to take care of the boy suffering from diarrhoea?"

"His mother must have gone out somewhere."

They came to the front of the hospital.

On finding that Dr Mala's face had gone pale with fear, Dr Mahesan turned to the officer and said, "I hope you will leave us in peace in the future. This is the second time you have run amok."

"I am sorry, it is our duty to be vigilant. We can't help inconveniencing people at times, though."

Those who finished checking the outpatient clinic joined them then.

“Thank you for cooperating with us, doctor. We are leaving.”

When the officer boarded the vehicle his soldiers hopped into the trucks and drove away.

Mala came running to Dr Mahesan “Where is Bala? Didn’t they catch sight of him?” she asked breathlessly.

Dr Mahesan shook his head and took her to Bala’s room.

The old woman was still in bed, snoring.

They went to the bedside and Dr Mahesan said, “Ammah” softly.

“Have they gone, doctor?” asked the old woman and sat up on the bed.

On hearing their voices, Bala came out of his hiding place. He had been hiding behind a cupboard.

“Ammah has saved me, doctor.” He was so emotional he could hardly talk.

“There is nothing to it, you stupid. Have I done anything extraordinary?”

“What happened, ammah?” Mala held her hands warmly.

“When the army fellows came, I smelt trouble. I understood that they were after this boy. So I made him hide behind the cupboard. Then I lay in his bed.”

“Ammah, you have saved all of us,” said Dr Mahesan. He was deeply moved.

“What of it, doctor? You were courageous enough to admit him to your hospital. You are trying your best to cure him. I am an old woman on the verge of death. Can’t I save this boy?” said the old woman.

"You are a very brave woman, ammah. We badly need brave mothers like you for our freedom struggle to go forward. The time has come for thousands of women like you to be sent to the front to fight along with the militants." Bala fell at the feet of the old woman.

Mala expressed her happiness at her husband escaping unscathed by pressing her 'wedding necklace' known as 'tali' to her tearful eyes.

The old woman looked at them through her thick glasses and grinned showing her betel-stained teeth.

In Mala's eyes the appearance of the old woman zoomed in, filling the room.





V. Thillainathan is a retired school / university teacher of English and a Tamil fiction writer.

He has also written a few short stories in English two of which were carried by "Channels". One of them won the second prize in an island wide short story contest.

A Tamil novel of his was a co-winner of the State

Literary Award in 1978.

Erimalai, the winner of the Godage award for the best Tamil novel published in 2018, is considered extra-ordinary creative writing because of its subject matter. The work is the outcome of an attempt to encapsulate the whole history of the Sri Lankan ethnic crisis within a novel, revealing the agony and ambitions of a section of the people of this country. Though there have been works that dealt with different periods and handled particular aspects of the development of the problem, no other work has ventured so far in dealing with the full history of the tragedy.

Gnanasekaran's outlook is broad. As a writer, he never confines himself to any restrictions. His exposures, experience, and empathy help him to make his works humanitarian. The sincerity and success of his earlier novels Kuruthi Malai, Kavvaaththu, and Layathuch Siraikal, depicting the life of the hill-country Tamils, are good examples of this since he hails from Jaffna. Even The Volcano portrays him as a righteous human and a sincere Sri Lankan.

The reader can see that the challenge to prove himself as a good novelist and an equally good historian is met successfully by the author. His technique of using friendly dialogues and serious exchanges of ideas between characters helps to bring about political history, without hindering the tempo of the main story in any way.

-Ayathurai Santhan

Rs. 650/= US\$ 15

Novel

ISBN 978-624-00-0531-9

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