

KUDIL and the HEADMASTER



by Dr Ratnam Niththyananthan

Kudil and the Headmaster

KUDIL
and the
HEADMASTER

Dr Ratnam Niththyananthan

Ratnam Foundation

2021

KUDIL and the HEADMASTER

by Dr Ratnam Niththyananthan ©

Published by the Ratnam Foundation

First paperback edition 2021

Printed by:

Kumaran Press Private Limited

39, 36th Lane, Colombo 06, Tel.: 112364550

E-mail: books@kumarangroup.net

Price £9.95.00 (all proceeds to Ratnam Foundation)

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or used in any manner without written permission of the copyright owner except for the use of quotations in a book review.

ISBN 978-624-98468-0-7

To My Parents

Foreword

*“It is a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done;
it is a far, far better rest I go to than I have ever known.”*

– A Tale of Two Cities, Charles Dickens

Dr Nithy has kindly given me his autobiography *Kudil and the Headmaster* to read. I found it an intense, evocative and inspiring book. As an immigrant myself to the UK since the riots in Sri Lanka in the 1980s, it brought back nostalgic memories of days gone by and my first experiences in London.

I met Dr Nithy in 1989 when my good friend Sanguhan told me that he was involved with a Tamil radio station. I had years of experience in writing for and participating in programmes on Radio Ceylon and subsequently, as it was known, Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation’s (SLBC) Tamil Service. Sanguhan took me to meet Dr Nithy and introduced me to Sunrise Radio, where he and I worked together until the final Tamil broadcast.

Dr Nithy became a mentor to me. He taught me the intricacies of administration and management as I observed the sensitive way he handled difficult and complicated situations. He introduced me to the Academy of Fine Arts (London) as an administrator and subsequently as Director of Administration to the board. This has been and continues to be a learning

process, and when diplomacy and human understanding are required in complex circumstances I owe so much to Dr Nithy's mentoring.

Dr Nithy's book reflects many of the situations I have myself experienced in London, it reveals so many of the principles by which he has lived his life, and it is a true record of all the wonderful qualities I have observed in him.

Dr Nithy reminds me of the 676th *Thirukkural*:

***mutivum idaiyooRum mutriyaangu eydhum
padupayanum paarththuch seyal***

Meaning: An act is to be performed after considering the exertion required, the obstacles to be encountered, and the great profit to be gained (on its completion)

I wish him all the best in life and every success with this book.

R Janardhanan

Acknowledgements

I am not an armchair person, as those who know me well can attest. I have been a scientist, educator, author, broadcaster and proud Tamil patriot. I have joyfully devoted much of my spare time to community work over the last 40 years because helping people gives me great pleasure.

I could not have done this alone, however, and I would like to thank my wife Saro, my children Kannan, Valli and Kaveri, and the numerous friends who have helped me carry out this good work.

August 2021

Dr Ratnam Niththyananthan - "Nithy"
London.

Introduction

My father Subramaniam Ratnam set me a fine example and I am proud to have followed it... for the most part.

And in the one respect (as I shall explain) that I failed to live up to his good guidance, I have paid the price. On many occasions since this deficit has held me back.

Nevertheless, I believe my friends and family would agree that I have worked hard with dedication through most of my life to make the world a better place.

I have been privileged to devote 40 years to the Tamil community in London in a number of voluntary capacities involving the young and young at heart, and I can look back on a pioneering research career in Metabolic Medicine that had real-world impact in the cardiovascular field.

It has been a life filled with joy, opportunity and service. I have been blessed to follow my path with my beautiful wife Saro by my side and I am the unbelievably proud father of three children who are taking on our mantle.

Kannan, Valli and Kaveri, this is my story.

Contents

Foreword	vii
Acknowledgements	ix
Introduction	x
1. My Parents	1
2. Educating Nithy	8
3. Leaving Sri Lanka	16
4. Early Days in London A Different World!	18
5. Life at St Mary's and a Hot Temper	27
6. Kannan, Valli and Kaveri My Golden Trio	31
7. West London Tamil School My Head Start	37
8. London Tamil Centre	47
9. Excellence in South Indian Fine Arts	53
10. London Tamil Elders Centre	60
11. Sunrise Radio	64
12. Tsunami	67
13. Ratnam Foundation	70
14. My Week as a Celebrity!	80
15. Three Surprise Parties	85
16. Conclusion	94
Afterword A Trip to the Unknown	97
Appendix - திருச்செந்தூர்	101



CHAPTER 1

My Parents

First, let me set the scene by telling you a little about my parents.

My father came from a poor background, very much a hand-to-mouth existence. He grew up in Araly South, a village on the beautiful coastline at the northern-most tip of Sri Lanka. Attending middle school at Government Victoria College in Chulipuram, he walked the four miles to school every morning.

His elder brother, my uncle Vythilingam, would walk halfway with him, then run off with his friends to play truant!

My father was a more dedicated student, but he had to get through the day on meagre sustenance. Breakfast was rice from the day before, soaked in water overnight and mixed with what was left of the previous day's curries. His packed lunch was string hopper noodles or pittu (made from rice flour) and sambol. For dinner, the family ate rice and vegetable curry, while meat was considered a luxury.

My father's work ethic paid off, as he went on to become a teacher with a regular salary, whereas his brother had to work on his small farm to scrape a living. My father used to cite this as an example when we were young. He would say:



My father

“If you study hard now you can end up having a comfortable living. If you don’t, then you will end up like my brother.”

It is a lesson I have tried to instil in all the children it has been my honour to teach – that education is the greatest gift we can pass on to others because the rewards are so great.

My father was a very cool, calm person and I think I might have inherited his character. (I hope those who know me best will agree.) An example is how, whenever I broke something in the house, my mother would be ready to beat me but my father would intervene. He would say there was no point punishing me because what was broken was broken... although he was careful to warn me not to do it again.

My father was well educated, qualified in the colonial era Cambridge exam taken by senior-school students in Sri Lanka that required a high standard of excellence – he even learned Latin!

His first appointment was as a station master for Malaysian Railways, then during the Second World war he returned home and retrained at Palaly Training College to be a teacher, his true vocation. On completion of his training he was appointed to Sithankerny Sri Ganesha Vidyasalai, our local primary school, where he was a brilliant teacher and enthused generations of pupils until his retirement. His hobbies included writing poetry, conducting bhajans at the local temple, training children in speech and drama and giving free tuition in Tamil, English (a language he had mastered during his Cambridge exam preparation) and arithmetic.

He was highly respected, encouraged his pupils to enter competitions to test themselves and enjoy a first heady taste

of academic glory, and did all he could for the betterment of the village children. And although he would remind us all to work harder than Uncle Vythilingam, my father remained very close to his elder brother throughout his life.

Uncle Vythilingam lived at Madduvil North, Chavakachcheri, about 15 miles from our family home, and my father made no major decisions affecting the family without consulting him first. Whenever such a situation arose, he would send off a postcard to Madduvil (in a time before telephones this was the perfect means of communication, as they only cost 3 cents) asking his brother to come to our house for a discussion.

Uncle would jump onto his bullock cart and drive over for a lengthy discussion with both my parents (my father was careful to include my mother as well) before they arrived at a joint conclusion.

During school holidays I would happily go off to stay a week or so at the farm. My days were spent helping my uncle water the vegetable plots then playing the rest of the time with my cousins. On Fridays I joined the family in visiting the local temple. Later, during the civil war, the Tamil Tigers LTTE organisation evacuated people from Jaffna to Vanni for safety and around 60 members of my extended family went to seek refuge at my uncle's house in Madduvil.

My mother Sivapackiam was born in Malaysia and had a comfortable upbringing there. I remember my maternal grandparents to this day, how we stayed next to their house in Sithankerny and how really fond of us they were.

Once my mother married and my siblings and I were born, she devoted her life to looking after her family. My



My Mother

mother showered me with love and affection and we were very close. I remember her meticulously doing the housework and cooking with such care and attention. First, she would serve food for us children, then for my father, and only once he had finished would she take his plate with the remains of his meal and add her food on top. Eating from the same plate was my mother's sweet way of showing togetherness.

She was far more than a housewife, however. She won great respect and admiration in the community for her voluntary work as Treasurer of the Sithankerny Women's Society called Maather Sangam. This group ran a tailoring class for girls who had left school early, teaching them intricate skills that helped them earn a small living once they completed the course.

As Treasurer my mother needed to be quick with numbers and she had the required talent. This is one of the reasons why my father never did anything important without consulting her. The other reason, of course, was the deep love they shared. My mother taught me one of the most valuable lessons in my life: that leading a good, happy and healthy life is the true prize. As she would often tell me, there is no point earning a fortune if you are unhappy and it affects your health.

She believed in kindness to others and all that is good. She is always in my heart.

I grew up happily with my brother and sister. I was very close to my brother Sarvananther, all the more so after he came to London to study engineering and worked as an engineer. He led a simple and spiritual life, was very religious and was always to be seen at Archway Murugan Temple during festivals and events.



My brother



My sister

Whenever I was bored, I used to call him and within the hour he would be over at our house with his wife Valliamman, whom he married on 1 July 1974 in Malaysia. We used to have lengthy discussions about ways to help vulnerable members of society and he influenced me greatly in my charitable work. Sadly my brother died in 2009 under tragic circumstances. He left three children, Soruban, Mythili and Sothili. I miss him more than words can say.

My sister Arunthavaeaswary, a BA graduate from Peradeniya University, married Mr P Sivasubramaniam from the Inland Revenue Department on 8 February 1971. They have three children, Janarthanan, Jananthanan and Sanjayan. My brother-in-law retired as a Commissioner in the Inland Revenue Department. I still keep in touch with my sister daily, and she briefs me about all the goings-on in Sri Lanka and news from our relatives.

CHAPTER 2

Educating Nithy

I wonder sometimes if the full life I have enjoyed is partly a matter of luck, for I was born on 17-12-1941.

Why is this significant? Because $1 + 7 = 8$, and $1 + 7 + 1 + 2 + 1 + 9 + 4 + 1 = 26$, which is $2 + 6 = 8$... and 8, as you will probably know, is a very lucky number in Chinese numerology.

To double down on my chances of good fortune, since 1977 I have lived at Kudil, 179 Norval Road... and $1 + 7 + 9 = 17$, which is $1 + 7 = 8$!

Well, numerology may give a person their character but there is a lot more that goes into a life apart from numbers, as I hope my story will show.

I was born in our village house in Sithankerny, just a few miles from where my father had grown up. It was the simplest of structures built from clay, lime and sand with a roof thatched out of palmyra leaves. It had two bedrooms and a kitchen, the cheapest home you can imagine. About a mile square in area, the village is said to have acquired its name because a lot of sithars (yogis) lived there and used the local kerny (public baths): hence Sithankerny. Today it still has only 440 families and a population under 1,300.

Residents include a number of professionals, farmers and civil servants, and many parents are keen on educating their children to improve their prospects. The village has produced some eminent personalities: one went on to become Foreign Minister then Second Deputy Prime Minister of Singapore.

His name was Mr Sinnathamby Rajaratnam and he rose to heights of responsibility that were very unusual for a Sri Lankan Tamil. He was the first minister for foreign affairs in post-independence Singapore from 1965, and served in the Cabinet until 1988. As a leading member of the government he was one of three people who worked with the Prime Minister Lee Kwan Yew to formulate the country's policy. He is also remembered for writing Singapore's National Pledge in 1966.

Others became philanthropists who built schools and from the present generation I am proud of Dr Rasiyah Ganeshamoorthy, a retired consultant anaesthetist, and Professor Arulampalam Atputharajah, Dean of the Faculty of Engineering at Jaffna University's Kilinochchi campus.

Nevertheless, I come from a distinctly modest background.

So who could ever have thought that from here I would go on to put my son through Eton and see him and my two daughters graduate from universities globally rated among the very best?

My beginnings were not auspicious, however. In 1946 I went to the primary school where my father taught the Lower Kindergarten class and was immediately promoted to Upper Kindergarten. Not because I showed dazzling academic promise, but rather because I preferred not to have my father as a teacher! Instead I was taught by the principal Mr Easwarampillai.

At Vaddu Hindu College middle school from 1950 to 1952 I was also no shining star, being placed 25th out of 31 pupils. Yet my father did not express his disappointment, rather choosing to look on the bright side and tell me: “Congratulations, you have beaten six people!”

You may be wondering with this record how I would go on to achieve a PhD at University College London (UCL), one of the world’s most prestigious institutions. It was hard work and determination that took me there, particularly in the light of the story I am now going to relate.

My father, who as I have explained, spoke and wrote excellent English, used to give me and four of my friends extra lessons in the language. He wanted us to learn English spelling so that we would be able to write fluently, but he insisted we memorise 25 words before we were allowed to go out to play. As impatient youngsters desperate to run outside, we thought this too much to ask. So I devised a system whereby the five of us would stand in line and memorise a few spellings each. I would be first in line and learn spellings 1, 6 and 11, while the next child would memorise spellings 2, 7 and 12, and so on ... It was quite a brainwave but it was to have unfortunate consequences. You see, I cheated my guru (in this case my father), I cheated my father and I cheated my education goddess Sarawathy. Throughout my career my difficulties in writing correct English have been a disadvantage. My weak spelling has meant I have had to depend on someone else’s help on many occasions.

If I could go back now, I would willingly give up those extra minutes in the playground to have a better command of the language of Shakespeare!

When the time came for senior school in 1952, I attended one of the oldest American mission schools in South East Asia. Jaffna College in Vaddukoddai was a first-class establishment with origins going back 150 years. From the age of 11 to 16 I survived on a very tight budget. The bus fare to school cost 10 cents and a milk tea in the canteen another 7 cents, so 17 cents in all a day (we were expected to walk the two miles home from school.) So every Monday morning my father would give me 85 cents, enough for the whole week. That was all the money I had and it was a rigorous training programme. You can therefore imagine my joy when I discovered that I excelled at maths, came top in the subject every term in my first year and my delighted teacher was so impressed that he gave me 5 rupees from his own pocket as a prize.

This was a lot of money at that time!

To put it into context, his salary was only 400 rupees a month, and 5 rupees was the equivalent of 50 times my daily bus fare! Mr Kanagaratnam from Naranthanai, I am grateful to you to this day.

By 1954 I was in Form 3 and about to be assigned to either the science stream or the arts stream. Maths was all I felt good at and my father was very keen that I specialise in science. To the extent that, highly unusually, he took me to see my maths teacher Mr Abraham at home, and he directed us on to the principal's house. There Mr Boss Chelliah agreed

with my father's plea, but this is not why I remember this incident so clearly.

I remember it because, keen to impress the principal and seeing that at 6pm it was dark, I greeted him with a confident: "Goodnight, Sir!" How silly I was. As we left, he gently explained to me the correct use of "Good evening."

In 1956 I took my O-levels, but just beforehand I had to sit a mock exam to be streamlined straight into the A-level class. To achieve this I needed to get a mark of 55 in five subjects... and here is where I showed some cunning.

A score of 51 or 52 was rounded down to 50, whereas a score of 53 or 54 was rounded up to 55. I achieved the requisite marks in four subjects but only 52 in my fifth – chemistry. So I went off to see my chemistry teacher Mr Somasundaram. I explained my predicament and asked him to give me one more mark to take me up to 53, which I could then convert into a 55 and secure my place on the A-level course.

Admiring my courage in approaching him, he smiled and agreed!

I like to think this also shows my spirit, my ambition and my determination to succeed. My A-level Applied Maths teacher Mr Rajasingam shared this determination. It was 1957, and he was very impressed with the work our class was completing. He was not so impressed with our Pure Maths teacher, however, whom he felt was not up to the mark. Feeling sorry that poor teaching in this part of the course could jeopardise our results, he invited us for weekend study sessions at his house in Navalar Road, Jaffna. There, under the pretext of studying Applied Maths, he coached us surreptitiously in Pure Maths!

We used to cycle about eight miles to reach his home and after the class we would go to Malayan Café in Jaffna for tea and vadai as a treat. His coaching paid dividends and I finished with a Grade A in Maths. I owe him my gratitude, and whenever I visited Sri Lanka I did not fail to visit him to pay my respects.

By 1959 I was off to the University of Ceylon in Colombo to undertake a science degree. I had failed my Chemistry A-level so could not read Engineering, which along with Medicine was regarded as the most prestigious course.

After my first year, however, I had worked so hard that I was selected as one of only 12 students taken on to do a BSc Honours degree in Chemistry. This was a very popular course as graduates were always offered jobs immediately. I was on my way!

I also had a stroke of luck in my final year... although I would not reap the benefit for another three decades, it was customary in those days to offer the post of Demonstrator in Chemistry to a final-year student.

The role was based on sharing the workload as well as the salary between all 12 students in the class, allowing them to gain part-time training as well as a little bit of money to help with expenses. I was lucky to be called by Professor Eric Fonseka and offered the post of Demonstrator. This gave me some administrative experience, but more valuable (as I was to discover much later in London) was the fact that this one year of service counted towards my pension contributions.

That was far from my mind, however, when I graduated with a 2:1 in 1963, coming second on the list. I was delighted to be appointed as an Assistant Lecturer in Chemistry at the University of Ceylon's Peradeniya Campus. I also served as Sub Warden at Wijewardene Hall in Peradeniya, gaining my first experience as an administrator and learning how to understand and approach the students to help them achieve their best.

While I was working in Peradeniya, I used to join friends at the Hindu Temple in Kandy on Friday evenings then after prayer we would all go for pancakes at a thosai boutique run by a brahmin. One Friday six of us went from Wijewardene Hall and during dinner, one friend came up with the idea that whoever ate the fewest thosais would pay the bill. We all agreed. Usually we would eat four or five thosais each, but that night most of my friends had managed seven or eight while I was behind on six. So I asked the waiter for two more, then an extra one a few minutes later.

All my friends were astonished at the speed I was eating, but I escaped from paying the bill. Then when we arrived back at Wijewardene Hall I opened my trouser pocket... and revealed two missing thosais! Everyone had a good laugh.

Of course, 1963 was also a landmark year in another very important way, as it was when I met my beautiful future wife, Sarojinidevi Subramaniam.

Saro was reading for a B.Sc. (Hons) in Zoology on the same campus in Colombo and living in St Albans Place, Bambalapitya. Impressed with her beauty, her calm and her shy demeanour, I decided to approach her.

But wooing this golden girl would not be as easy as I imagined. First I bought some sweets and cashew nuts and took them over to her place. I chatted to her for some time, then offered her the sweets.

I had been too bold, and she refused them!

I was not to be defeated, however, and several months later devised a clever plan. When I discovered that she was travelling back to her home town on the night mail train, I headed off to catch the same train. I saw her at a distance on the platform, my heart beating in nervous anticipation. I waited for some time until the train reached Ragama station then started to look for her, walking up and down the length of the carriages three times.

No sign of Saro.

At Polgawala station I approached the guard in charge of the sleeping compartments. No berths or seats available, but he offered me a pillow and newspaper so I could bed down in the corridor. The next afternoon I summoned up all my courage and went to see Saro at her residence in Uduvil. To my delight she was pleased to see me... and told me she had been sleeping in a berth in the very compartment where I had spent an uncomfortable night on the floor. It was worth every minute!

We soon agreed to marry, making me the happiest man in Sri Lanka, but we could not do so immediately.

CHAPTER 3

Leaving Sri Lanka

In 1966 I received a scholarship to do a PhD at University College London, following a path well trodden by many Commonwealth students eager to undertake their post-graduate studies in the city.

My new life began on 9 September that year when I set off by ship aboard the Fairstar, heading for the UK. I remember the fare was £105. The journey took 17 days and I chose to sail rather than fly for two reasons. Firstly I would have a chance to experience the different ports where we called in en route – Port Aden, Port Said and Naples. My second reason was economic. My scholarship began the day I left Sri Lanka, so by sailing I accumulated 17 extra days' money which I was careful to save.

There were 35 other Sri Lankans on the Fairstar. Travelling on the ship with me were Mr C Yogachandran, Mr Karunarajah Packiam, Mr LH Dayaratna and a Buddhist priest from Vidyodaya University. I am very close still to Dr. Yogachandran.

Prior to my travels I was pre-warned that England was so cold that I would no longer be able to be a vegetarian but would instead have to tuck into hearty meat dishes, drink

alcohol and smoke to keep myself warm! I decided I would make the transition to becoming a carnivore on the ship, but as it happened we were on an Italian vessel and luckily for our first meal I was served rice and vegetable gravy with plenty of fresh fruit and biscuits. I set about tucking into the same thing every day.

Crisis averted.

We landed at Southampton on 26 September and travelled by train to Waterloo. I was so disappointed! Whereas I had been expecting to find beautiful English homes and gardens like I had seen in picture books, as we trundled along the tracks all I spotted were the ugly backs of houses with pocket-sized yards.

My spirits lifted when a friend from university, Mr Vijayaratna, was there to meet me at Waterloo Station. He took me to No. 1 Pembridge Crescent, where I would be lodging. Now part of posh Notting Hill, in those days my Bayswater street was in a very cheap part of London. For £4 a week I was given a small single room with just one hotplate for cooking and one cupboard to store my belongings.

Solace came from the fact that there were other Sri Lankans in the same house, offering the wonderful comfort of my own language and customs in a strange country. It made for a very homely residence. Sri Lankan fellow lodgers included Mr and Mrs Balasubramanian, Mr and Mrs Velauthapillai, Mr and Mrs Kumaradeva, Mr Jeyasingh, Mr Vijayaratna and Mr Ramachandran.

I still remember how the German caretaker would come along with her dog and bang on the door every Friday to demand the rent!

CHAPTER 4

Early Days in London A Different World!

I will now describe a little of life in 1960s London, a world away from what we know now.

Migration to the UK from Sri Lanka had started early in the decade with an open visa available for skilled and semi-skilled people. Students came to study for engineering and nursing, concentrating around South East London Polytechnic, Kingston Polytechnic and Hatfield Polytechnic. In all, there were around 500 Sri Lankan families in Ealing, East Ham, Wimbledon and south east London.

Houses were not centrally heated, with rooms kept barely warm with either a coal fire or paraffin heaters. A bathtub in our flat would have been considered a luxury fit for the Ritz! Instead people went to the public bathhouse and Porchester Baths was a famous venue for Sunday bathing in Bayswater. Taking a bath cost a shilling – the equivalent of 5p. And of course at that time many houses had outside toilets.

And how strange university life seemed, such a different environment to what I was used to.

That I settled in well was largely thanks to the fact that I already knew Dr Thiruamachandran, who introduced me to an Australian professor, Prof. Nyholm, who in turn took me

to meet my supervisor in Inorganic Reaction Mechanisms, Dr Martin Tobe.

I was also able to maintain my vegetarian diet, having abandoned my plans to become a meat-eater on the boat. On my first afternoon in London Mr Vijayaratna took me to the only Indian shop in Bayswater, Patak, where I could buy all the vegetables and spices I needed. My friends and I also discovered an Indian restaurant owned by a Mr Shah that served a delicious vegetarian lunch, and we took full advantage of the Indian YMCA nearby as well as the Ceylon Students' Centre where lunch was served for three shillings and sixpence.

We would also go to the home of Mr Sabapathipillai, whose family were among the early settlers, for Friday bhajans. (He was also a priest during Hindu prayers, and conducted marriage ceremonies and funerals.) That is how I survived, because back in my room I was a terrible cook, mastering only one dish on my single electric ring – boiled rice mixed with dhal and spinach!

But what about all the famous London pubs? They passed me by.

I had been brought up in a no-alcohol household and I continued not drinking in London. My father found a not-so-subtle way of encouraging me in this before I set off for university studies in Sri Lanka, telling me a story. He began: "When our neighbour's son started university, his friends invited him to a party and wanted him to join them for a drink. He declined. They told him, 'Go on, just have one.'"

“The young man replied: ‘If I have a drink you will be happy, but if I tell my mother that I resisted temptation and did not take a sip of alcohol, she will be delighted. For me my mother’s happiness is more important than anything else because she has sacrificed so much for me.’”

My father concluded: “The moral of this story is – son, don’t touch a drop of alcohol in your life.” I am proud to say that I have remained a vegetarian, non-smoker and teetotaler.

With my fellow students Mr Yogachandran, undertaking a PhD in Maths at UCL, Mr Ganesalingam who had flown from Sri Lanka for his PhD in Zoology and was also at UCL, along with School of Oriental and African Studies postgraduates Mr Pathmanathan and Mr Kanapathipllai, I was happily surrounded by a heartwarming group of friends. I also used to host a Coffee Club in my laboratory for PhD students, each of us putting one old penny into the kitty to buy tea, coffee and milk. There was Ali Hussein from Sudan, Peter the American and Poon and Wang from Singapore. I remember them as if it were yesterday.

Life changed again – in the most wonderful way – when six months into my studies Saro arrived from Sri Lanka to join me.

We married in a civil ceremony on 27 May 1967 at Paddington Register Office. With our two witnesses Mr SM Sri Kantha and Mr K Satkunam we were a grand total of just four! But I didn’t mind, I had just wed the love of my life and we would make up for it three years later. Saro and I moved to 23 Chepstow Road, London W2, and later to Lillian Penson Hall then finally to a University College flat in Farringdon.

Around this time in the late sixties, back in my village in Sri Lanka there lived a mystic. This woman would fall into a trance early in the morning and claim she had the power to predict the future. Somehow my parents heard that Saro and I were living together. Although we were legally wed in the eyes of the law in the UK, in my parents' eyes we would not be married until we had undergone a religious ceremony in Sri Lanka.

My mother, alarmed by what was apparently going on in London, went to consult the mystic with my brother. In a trance, the seer told her that her son was indeed living with a woman... but that his wife was a wonderful person who would look after her in her final days. It is hard to believe, but the prophecy was 100% accurate. Saro is an angel and cared lovingly for my mother, who came to London at the end of her life and spent her last years with us.

In our spare time we went to Speaker's Corner on Sunday afternoons to watch impassioned speakers leap onto a soapbox and debate the issues of the day. Walking along Bayswater Road to view the paintings in a myriad styles set out by local artists was entertaining too. We would go window shopping in Oxford Street then buy our groceries in Sainsbury's, carrying home two full bags each. A week's food for only £2!

And the bus fare was just three old pence... while the average price of a house was £4,000 and there were plentiful jobs in the civil service for those with O and A Levels. Clerical Assistants started on £12 a week.

I also enjoyed poker parties with Sri Lankan friends in Surbiton, though the stakes were never high and it was simply

for fun. The lurking presence of menacing skinheads made walking home alone at night a frightening experience.

My weak spelling came back to haunt me while I was writing my thesis, but again I found a work-around to overcome my failings. I struck a deal with the charming Dr Alan Davey, who was carrying out postdoctoral work in my lab. I would write ten pages a day, he would correct them and in return I would... make him a cup of tea. You might think that I had the best of this arrangement, but Dr Alan loved his tea and he was very pleased with the bargain! To my delight and relief my supervisor later remarked how impressed he was with the quality of my writing ... perhaps proof of my luck in life (or to be more accurate, thank you, Dr Alan).

Another of the tasks for my thesis was to include 35 graphs, which was a time-consuming and tedious challenge. Fortunately I was able to call on the kindness of my friend Mr Nitkunan, an engineer by profession, who did all the tracing for me.

There are some moments that are seared in our memories forever, and my PhD examination is one of them.

To help me relax, my examiner spent the first 15 minutes chatting about Sri Lanka. Then, during the three-hour examination, I found that to each of his questions I was able to provide logical proofs that justified how I had reached my conclusions. At the end he told me solemnly that he was not allowed to tell me whether I had passed or failed, then whispered: "Congratulations!" He later wrote a very nice report about my thesis.

I am not the only pupil who has ever been mischievous at school but matured into a hard worker. In fact, there is another

Mr Balasuramaniam to whom I owe deep thanks. He lived few miles away from us in Bayswater. In fact, I had known him in Sri Lanka. He was a student when I was lecturing in Chemistry and he would regularly infuriate me by making paper planes and throwing them at the girls while I wrote on the blackboard. I had to send him out of the class!

When he came over to the UK, however, he regretted his past behaviour and worked immensely hard in his job at the Medical Research Council while he also completed a Masters then a PhD. He impressed his boss so much with his work ethic that when Saro applied for a job there, and performed very well at interview, the boss thought all Sri Lankans must also be such hard workers and immediately employed her as a Research Assistant. So Mr Balasubramanian turned out to be one of our heroes, and I am delighted to report that he later went on to become a senior executive in the health service in Sydney, Australia.

Saro joined the Medical Research Council, based in Hammersmith Hospital, in 1967 and remained there for 35 years until she retired in 2002. It became like a second home to her and she showed extraordinary commitment to her profession throughout that time. She fondly remembers working under Dr NB Myant and Dr Thompson, serving four Directors in all.

She was always very hardworking and meticulous in her research work. In collaboration with her Director, she published many research papers in the field of lipids. She even discovered a new variety of Apo E protein... and this was such a coup that there was talk of naming it after her, Apo E Saro. Sadly,

however, the name finally chosen was Apo E Hammersmith. Far less evocative! My regret is that in the 1970s she had hoped to undertake a PhD, but I foolishly discouraged her and asked her to devote herself instead to our children.

A life in London is not what we had planned or expected, however. We had never thought of staying on in the UK after our studies were complete and we returned to Sri Lanka in December 1969 where I assumed duties as a lecturer in the Chemistry Department at Peradeniya.

Saro's parents, Mr P C Subramaniam, Principal of Mann's School, and his wife, came to our house in Sithankerny to talk to my parents and formally request consent for our religious marriage. This took place on 8 February 1970 in the Sivan Temple in our village.

What a contrast to Paddington Register Office! We welcomed hundreds of guests in a lavish, colourful ceremony, with glorious food piled up and beautiful music.

However, the political situation in Sri Lanka had changed, and we felt very uneasy at rising discrimination against the Tamil community.

We realised that our future happiness lay back in Britain. I applied for an employment voucher, which was granted straight away, and Saro was immediately given back her job the Medical Research Council.

I began my career as a Visiting Lecturer at Kennington College in south east London, joining on 28 April 1971 on a salary of £41 a week (but no holiday pay). It was not long before I moved to the North London Blood Transfusion Centre as a



Above: Saro's parents Below: Our wedding day



Biochemist. I finally settled at Saint Mary's Hospital Medical School as a postdoctoral Research Fellow in the Metabolic Unit on 20 March 1972 on the grand salary of £1,755 a year.

Since Saro and I were both working, we were able to buy a house in Wembley in 1972, a typical English three-bedroom semidetached home at 58 Nathans Road for £8,500. Our son Kannan had been born on 26 December 1971, followed by our daughters Valli on 21 April 1974 and Kaveri on 1 September 1979. By then we had sold our first house for £15,000 and in 1977 bought our present home at 179 Norval Road, also in Wembley, for £26,000.

CHAPTER 5

Life at St Mary's and a Hot Temper

During my 22 years at Saint Mary's, before I took early retirement as a Senior Research Scientist on New Year's Eve 1993, I am proud to have carried out some pioneering work.

We investigated the side effects of oral contraceptives and wrote papers on their impact on cardiovascular conditions and cholesterol. We carried out more groundbreaking work on the side effects of diabetes, and it was fascinating to be at the forefront of science in my field. I was able to follow a Masters course in Biochemistry on a part-time basis, and I have even been listed in Who's Who in British Science.

Our working conditions were often difficult, on the other hand, because of the character of my professor, an Australian named Wynn. He was extremely hot tempered and 95% of the time very moody.

When he did his rounds of the department, anyone found to have made a mistake or caught chatting was immediately punished with a week's work to be finished by 5pm the same day. He would call round at midday to inspect our work and instruct us to carry on just when we had been hoping to go



A Royal Visit... Princess Margaret, Professor Wynn and Myself

for lunch. Toilet breaks had to be kept to a minimum and at 5pm he would be back to make sure we were still working. As he put his coat on at 7pm he would tell us to “keep going” but the minute he left, we would be out of the lab in a flash.

Professor Wynn was a hard taskmaster but he did have his good points. He applied for multiple grants from America and when the grant-making bodies sent people over to see what we were doing, he would show off our talents and introduce us as “the leading lipidologists in the UK”, which was very welcome praise.

And we made sure to take advantage of the 5% of the time that he was in a good mood. For example, every five years we would prepare letters in advance requesting our merit increments and promotion to a higher grade, then call his secretary when he was happy and ask her to give them to him that instant. He would immediately call us, review our work

and recommend us by dictating a letter to the Dean there and then. It was just a case of choosing our moment!

It was while I was at St Mary's that I learned a valuable life lesson... though too late.

Since childhood I have lived within my means. I have a strict policy of not borrowing any money from or lending any money to my friends, as it can lead to misunderstandings and even ruin a friendship. But in the 1980s one of my friends came to see me at St Mary's and asked for a loan of £4,000, which I refused. He then told me that he had been gambling, had stolen money from the cash till to cover his debts and that if he did not replace it he would lose his job. He was in tears, so I broke my life-long policy in order to save him. I took out the money on my credit card... and that was the last I saw of him. I had to pay back in instalments and after interest was added I had paid an eye-watering total of £7,000.

I made two mistakes.

One, I did not tell my wife about the loan. Two, I did not tell his wife, thinking it could cause heated family arguments. Later, when I asked his wife about repaying all I had lost, she escaped lightly by shooting back a clever riposte: "Had you lent him this money with my permission, I would have settled it." Too late, and a good lesson learned. Whenever friends asks me for a loan, I tell them this story.

You may be wondering at this stage how I was able to take retirement with a full pension at the youthful age of 52. The answer is that I had an unusual contract whereby St Mary's Hospital paid my salary to the university Medical School, which

passed it on to me. Thanks to the Commonwealth Universities Agreement, my eight years' service at the University of Ceylon all counted towards my pension: one year as Demonstrator, three years as Assistant Lecturer, three years on leave from the university for post-graduate studies and one year as a Lecturer.

This became relevant when I had a conversation in June 1993 with Mr Kanagathurai, a former cricketer at St John's College in Jaffna and now Chief Accountant at the hospital. His office was in the same block as mine and we used to meet regularly during our lunch break. Sitting in the canteen that day he told me that in line with St Mary's becoming a Trust as part of an NHS re-organisation, it was offering a very attractive retirement package.

This comprised ten years' service added to an employee's pension, providing an immediate lump sum as well as a pension. As I was indirectly paid by the hospital I could make use of this facility, incorporate my Sri Lankan years of service and retire on full pension. It was an offer far too good to miss and six months later I bade farewell to my colleagues as I left my lab for the last time.

CHAPTER 6

Kannan, Valli and Kaveri

My Golden Trio

While I was hard at work at St Mary's our children were growing up.

I come, as I have explained, from a humble background where a good education is our only goal. I knew that the only way to progress in Britain would be through education. I learned about Eton, its prestige and how 19 Prime Ministers had been pupils. I knew that if Kannan could go there, his future would be safe. So I took him to visit at the age of six, stood in the quadrangle when he was far too young to understand, and told him that one day I wanted him to study there.

It was my dream.

After attending Byron Court Primary School in Wembley and going on to Orley Farm prep school in Harrow, Kannan passed a qualifying test for Eton at the age of 10 ½. This was wonderful news as it gave him a provisional place as long as he passed Common Entrance Exam when he was 13. He did so, and also took a scholarship exam on top of the normal paper. Although he achieved a modest B+ in the basic Maths paper, he excelled with an A+ in the far more challenging Advanced Maths paper... but his combined total came up just a few marks short.



Kannan at Eton

So he did not win a scholarship but he did secure his place at the finest school in the land. Eton is a beautiful place to study and to fund the fees Saro and I re-mortgaged our house. That provided security and our kind local bank manager was then happy for us to write the cheques for £6,000 a year, rising to £10,000 by the time Kannan left.

That is how we put our son through Eton on our modest salaries. The day he started I was so proud and so happy for him, for our family and for our community.

I would like to say a few words here about the delight that all three of our children have brought to our lives.

Kannan did not have an easy childhood. Saro and I were overjoyed when she went into labour on 26 December 1971, was admitted to St Mary's Hospital and we were blessed with a son. It is impossible to describe our feelings at that time, feelings that burst into our hearts once again at the births of Valli and Kaveri.

Shortly after Kannan was born, however, the consultant Mr Paintain examined our son and told us the shocking news that he had a club foot. He consoled us by saying that the baby was in otherwise perfect health and that his condition could be corrected by a minor operation. In fact, our brave boy had to undergo three operations between the ages of three and eight. These were carried out at Northwick Park Hospital under the very able orthopaedic surgeon Mr Klenerman.

To make matters worse, one day my sister-in-law was cooking rice and had a pan of water boiling on the cooker. Kannan was three at the time and as he ran into the kitchen the door swung shut, knocking the handle of the pan, turning

it over and upending scalding water all over him. He suffered third-degree burns to his chest and had to spend three months at Mount Vernon Hospital. It was a truly awful experience.

On top of this, Kannan suffered from infantile asthma. Whenever his wheezing escalated we had to rush him to the Carroll Ward at Northwick Park Hospital and admit him for three to five days.

We were there so often that we had permission to bypass A&E and go straight to the ward. Until he was ten, Saro spent many days and nights at his hospital bedside caring for him as only a mother can. Fortunately, she had an understanding Director at the Medical Research Council who willingly gave her extended leave.

After Eton, Kannan went on to the London School of Economics (LSE) where in his second year another disaster befell him, this time a problem with money not health. He loved disco music and with an Indian classmate jointly organised a disco event with an agreement that they would share the profits.



The family together on Kannan's wedding day

Kannan was surprised but not overly suspicious when the friend made sure that all the contracts for hire of the hall, the artists, the sound, the lighting etc. were in Kannan's name. On the night the venue was full, but it gradually emerged to my son's horror that all the admission tickets were forged. The money had been siphoned off, there was no profit for Kannan and instead he was liable for all the costs of the evening. I had to write a cheque to cover the loss... and £12,000 was a significant sum in 1990.

At least I was happy that I saved him from going down the wrong path, and he did not forget my kindness. Indeed, I was rewarded handsomely later on when he bought me a Mercedes Benz out of his first bonus!

Kannan is now a partner in an American hedge fund. He is very active, sociable and loves sport. He married Louise Byrne, a Director at Google, on 25 June 2011 and they are the proud parents of Orla and Aidan.

His sister Valli followed him to LSE, albeit by way of Byron Court, St Christopher's then Notting Hill and Ealing High School. She was very shy as a child but her personality and confidence were transformed after she achieved wonderful A-level results.

She read for a degree in Economics, graduated with a 2:1 and has had a very successful career. She joined Alliance Capital, completed her Chartered Financial Analyst (CFA) certification and was promoted to Senior Vice President before becoming a part-time investment adviser and stay-at-home mum. Very systematic and methodical in all she does, she never leaves anything to the last minute. Valli married Nirukshan

Srikanthapalan, a risk analyst, on 8 February 2006 and their lovely children are Sarisha and Amaiya.

Kaveri was very bubbly as a child, is still very active and makes friends very easily. After Byron Court and North London Collegiate, she fell in love with Edinburgh and chose the city to study for her Masters in Economics, graduating with a 2:1. She reads widely and can easily fall into conversation with anyone on a variety of subjects. She has held a number of important jobs, loves writing and presently works as a financial journalist.

All three children are my pride and joy!

Yet so much of the credit for raising this golden trio must go to Saro. As I have explained, she gave up her hopes of a PhD to be a wife and mother while juggling a full-time job.

She kept a laser focus on the children's progress through primary school, always charting how far they were ahead of their peers thanks to our family insistence on the importance of education. She knew the syllabus thoroughly, and we encouraged plenty of reading and maths at home. Saro was, and still is, a very keen gardener, talented cook, makes excellent cakes and knits pretty dresses for our grandchildren. We are rather an old-fashioned couple: she has never addressed me by name and at the same time, I have never addressed her by name. But our bond is unbreakable.

CHAPTER 7

West London Tamil School

My Head Start

I will now wind back in time to describe my parallel professional life – for from 1982 onwards I am immensely proud to have served as Headteacher of West London Tamil School in a voluntary capacity. The fact that I was unpaid, and devoted many, many hours to my role was insignificant when weighed against the pleasure I found in teaching new generations of Tamil children.

My love of education to the fore again!

West London Tamil School (WLTS) had been founded by Mr CJT Thamoatham in 1978 as a Saturday morning school teaching Tamil Language and South Indian Fine Arts. It answered a real need in our community for assistance with maintaining our mother tongue and culture among children attending local authority schools for their mainstream education. In fact, it has become a symbol of the love of Tamil families in exile for our language and culture: we have one of the world's oldest languages (and the oldest living language) with a literature that goes back several centuries.



With Mr Thamotharam

Saro and I came to the school in 1979 as parents, because Kannan and Valli were studying there. But three years later the founder and headteacher Mr Thamotharam wished to step down and no one could be found to replace him.

Imagine my surprise when one evening Mr Thamotharam and the rest of the Board namely Dr Soma Arunachalam, Mr K Niththyananthan, Mr S Ganeson and Mr N Wignarajah knocked on our door and asked me to take over.

They felt my past experience as a lecturer and evident passion for learning made me the ideal candidate – particularly as I was the only one willing! Although I was rather young at the age of 40 to be given such responsibility, I took it as a challenge. So I assumed my duties as Head in September 1982, starting with 8 teachers and 50 pupils. By the time I left in



Standing (L-R) Mr. R.Sarvananther, Mr. S.V. Ayer, Mr. S. Ganeson (Governor Secretary)
 Dr. S. Arunachalam (Governor), Mr. N. Sivakumaran (Parent Governor), Mr. K.R. Murugaiyan
 Mr. S. Ramalingam, Mr. S. Anantharajah
 Seated (L-R) Mrs. Y.Sri. W. Rajaah (Administrator), Mrs. G. Sivasubramaniam, Mrs. S. Manikkavasagar
 Mrs. N. Ponnampalam (Teacher Governor), Mrs. J.J. Shakespeare, Dr. R. Niththyanathan (Headmaster)
 Mrs.Y. Pushparatnam (Librarian), Mrs. S. Arunachalam, Mrs. P. Kathiresan, Mrs. K. Sivabalasingam,
 Miss. P. Pasupathipillai Mrs. L. Ramakrishnan,
 Absent Dr. T. Ratnavel (Governor), Mr. K. Nithianathan (Governor-Treasurer)
 Mrs. P. Ganeson (Teacher Governor), Mrs. (Dr.) L. Jayan & Mrs. V. Elampoornar

WLTS Greenford Staff, 1985

1989, we had developed the Greenford Branch to a remarkable 150 students with 18 staff.

As the school needed funds, a Bharatanatyam programme was organised on 19 November 1983 starring Tamil Nadu State Dancer Kumari Swarnamukhi. She was in London at the time and we persuaded her to perform with her troupe of musicians. It was quite a coup for our school to have secured such a celebrity and we enjoyed a very happy fundraising event at Featherstone High School.

We were so popular and successful that our site in Greenford soon became too small, and we opened a second branch in Wembley in 1984.

A contributory factor was the civil upheaval and riots in Sri Lanka in 1983 that led to an influx of refugees from my

homeland, with as many as 100,000 arriving in Britain. In this regard, I remember vividly how I and many members of our settled community in London helped the new arrivals with language and housing problems and liaised with the immigration authorities. I even carried out interviews with the media and appeared on the BBC's Newsnight programme.

The riots also prompted me to become an author for the first time. My inspiration was a book that had been published after the earlier race riots against Tamils in 1958. Written by a famous Sinhalese journalist, Tarzie Vittachi, it drew wide acclaim and became a best seller because he ignored the prejudices of his own community to tell the true story of the atrocities committed at that time against the Tamil population. Titled *Emergency 58 – The Story of The Ceylon Race Riots*, it won the Ramon Magsaysay Prize for Journalism in 1959. Everyone in Sri Lanka was talking about it and it became my dream to write a book myself.

When dark days fell again in 1983 the moment arrived. I was lucky enough to obtain an eye-witness account of the events by a Sinhalese Catholic and this motivated me to follow Vittachi's example and recount a story across the community divide. I worked in collaboration with E M Thornton to write a book on Sri Lanka. The first-edition print run of 3,000 copies sold out within three months, then the second edition of 3,000 more sold in four and a half months. When our labours were over, we knew we had played an important role in exposing the horrors to the outside world.

Let us turn now to the impact of these calamitous events, and the arrival in London of so many Tamil families, on WLTS.

மேற்கு லண்டன் தமிழ் பாடசாலைக் கீதம்

வாழ்க வாழ்க வாழ்க வாழ்க
வாழ்க எங்கள் தமிழ்மொழி.

- (1) மேற்கு லண்டன் தமிழ்க் கழகம்
மேலும் மேலும் வளர்ந்துமே
நாந் றிசையும் தமிழ் பரப்ப
நாமும் தமிழைக் கற்பமே (வாழ்க)
- (2) ஒழுக்க மோடு விழுப்ப மிக்க
உயர் குணங்கள் வளர்ந்திட
தொழுது நாமும் தொன்மையான
தாய தமிழைக் கற்பமே (வாழ்க)
- (3) சேரன் சோழன் பாண்டியன்
சேர்ந்து வளர்த்த தமிழினை
பாரில் பரப்ப பாலர் நாமும்
பயில்வோம் வாரீர் தமிழினை (வாழ்க)
- (4) அன்னை மொழி தமிழினை
ஆர்வமோடு கற்று நாம்
இன்பம் எய்தி என்றும் வாழ்வோம்
எம் கழகம் வாழ்கவே (வாழ்க)

The result of an inflow of new students was to encourage us to get the new branch at Wembley Manor School in East Lane, Wembley, up and running with the help of able administrator Mrs Geetha Vijayadeva. Numbers there grew rapidly, reaching a peak of 100 students in 1989 when I left.

The repercussions of Tamil politics were never far from the door, for our school included teachers and families sympathetic to the variety of different Tamil groups with conflicting political ideologies operating at that time. School policy was not to get sucked into debates and disputes but to maintain a resolutely neutral line. This was tough, as parents had strong views, but I would deploy my best diplomatic skills to insist that our duty was solely to teach language and culture... and leave politics to others.

I had had enough of the incursion of politics into education in 1978 and 1979, when I was shocked to learn that a Sri Lankan Government minister had made speeches in Parliament accusing Tamil lecturers of favouring Tamil candidates in university entrance exams. These speeches were widely diffused among Sinhalese people to sow division. The unfounded allegations dated all the way back to 1964, when I had been an Assistant Lecturer in Chemistry at Peradeniya University. I was heartbroken to see members of faculty unjustly accused in this manner for purely political ends.

A Government inquiry found that there had been no overmarking and the Tamil examiners who had been baselessly accused of dishonesty were exonerated. But the damage had been done. The fact that Tamil students did well because they were industrious and had dedicated teachers was conveniently

forgotten. One Professor, whom I had respected as a mentor when I was a student in Colombo, later told me how much he regretted putting his name to a declaration accusing other academics of cheating. I found it very sad that reputed professors compromised themselves to these low levels for political patronage.

But back to WLTS, and happier times.

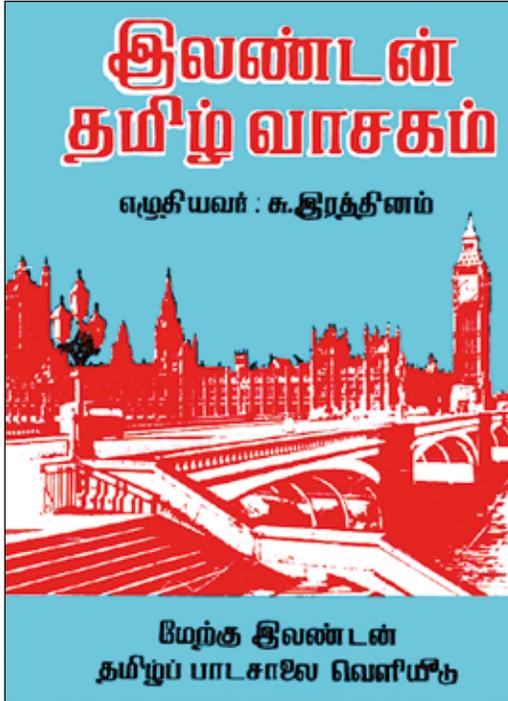
As the WLTS Wembley branch grew and our pupils thrived, all our teachers played a central role in our success: Mrs Navukkarasi Ponnampalam, Mrs Savithri Manicavasagan and Mrs Ragunathan for Tamil Language; Mrs Luxmy Ramakrishnan, Mrs Sudarshini Ramachandran and Ms Priyadarshini for Dance; Mrs Sivatharani Sahathevan for Veena (an ancient Tamil stringed instrument); Mrs Kalaivani Indrakumar for Violin; Mrs Prema Ganeson and Mrs Saraswathy Packiarajah for Vocal Music and Mr Ragu for Miruthangam (a double-sided drum).

Across our two sites, WLTS enjoyed national prestige and counted a bustling total student population of 250 aged five to 18, along with 25 staff of the highest calibre. Many of these staff were distinguished in other walks of life, and sacrificed their leisure time won from exacting occupations.

Fortunately, plentiful public money was available to fund our needs. It may seem incredible now, but in those days it was easy to secure grants. We lobbied tirelessly, combining personal fundraising, talking to local councillors and seeking Government help. The London Borough of Brent actively encouraged us to make applications!

So we received grants from Brent, the Ethnic Minority Unit at Ealing Council and the London Boroughs Grants Scheme. The Department of Environment gave us three times the money we had had from Brent... which was promptly doubled by match-funding from the European Social Fund. When I look back now it seems like a miracle.

As our student roll burgeoned, so our teaching strength increased and our range of activities flourished. They included running the schools in Greenford and Wembley, publishing London Tamil Reader Books 1 to 3, which were distributed to Tamil schools across the city, and holding a conference on Mother Tongue Learning.



Tamil reader for beginners published in the UK

The conference took place on 22 February 1988 at Acton Town Hall and was attended by delegates from ten Tamil schools in Britain, with expert speakers from different parts of the UK. We discussed topics such as methodology and career progression, and it felt truly exciting to be preserving our language for future generations.

Our biggest project was running a Computer Training Centre for unemployed youths in a towering building, Station House, near Stonebridge Park station. For this I was able to obtain exceptional grant funding of £65,000 in 1987 – a very impressive sum at the time.

We leased a whole floor, installed 40 computers and appointed a full-time lecturer, full-time manager and several part-time lecturers. Our shining new centre even had a celebrity opening, as Mr Michael Meacher MP, the Shadow Employment Spokesperson, cut the ribbon in May 1988. This centre provided free lessons in basic computer skills and we can now be proud that we were pioneers in realising the importance of ‘new technology.’

We launched special computer training for 40 women who were new to Britain and needed both technical skills and confidence to find jobs. After completing this programme, funded with the help of City Parochial Trust, many of them secured immediate employment. I still feel enormous pleasure at the way our trainees became computer literate and obtained NVQ qualifications, and the way in which we offered a major advantage to those who had come to the UK with nothing.

The reputation of WLTS soared so high – as more students joined us and our activities expanded – that audited accounts

show our income rising from £3,002 in 1982-83 to £78,667 in 1988-89. Our budget for 1989-90 was in line to be a breathtaking £133,000 but unfortunately a plumbing and electrics course we had planned was scuppered by a shortage of teachers and our projected funding reduced as a result.

This setback did little to slow our momentum, however. Our Wembley branch became independent in 1990, moved to Sudbury Primary School a year later and finally settled in its current location of Wembley High Technology College in 1992.

CHAPTER 8

London Tamil Centre

It was in 1993 that we registered our new institution as a charity and renamed it London Tamil Centre (LTC). The school song remained, with the change of just one word: we swapped “Metku London” (West London) for “Poatrum London” (Praiseworthy London).

And I can now reveal for the first time that the song was composed by my father! One part went:

*Let us all learn our Tamil Language
and spread it in all four directions of the world*

Premises were purchased in 1995 through the merger of LTC (a large organisation with small savings) and London Tamil Academy (a small organisation with money). This clever move allowed us to maximise our resources. With the hard work of many of the active members – Mr R Lambotharan, Mt M T Manicavasagan, Mr S Uthayakumar, Mr T Ganeshwaran, Mr K Sri Raviculan, Dr (Mrs) S Nadarajah and Mr S Yohanathan among plenty of others – the good foundation was laid to take the school to greater heights.

With our sights set on opening a drop-in centre for elders as well, Mr R Lambotharan with the assistance of Dr S Panchaddcharam and Dr N Sriskantharajah organised a local authority grant to modify the building to suit their

needs. Subsequently Harrow and Brent Health Authority provided funds to buy furniture and as LTC's first three years of working capital.

The school's success can be traced to several factors: dedicated, highly qualified staff, generous funding, and the strong structure and governance required by the Charity Commission. Crucially, as Headmaster (officially Director of Studies) I was given a free hand in running the school. If there were problems I could, of course, be questioned in Trustee meetings, but the Board of Governors had no role in day-to-day affairs. Yes, they decided policy, but they left me to implement it.

I am truly grateful to Mr R Lambotharan for defining my position in this way, and to my outstanding Deputy Head, the ever-efficient Mr T Ganeshwaran for his invaluable commitment through many years. He maintained the discipline that I found hard to enforce, for my soft heart never wanted to hurt the feelings of pupils or parents. Together we made an excellent team until my retirement in 2012. I may have been unpaid throughout my more than 20 years at the helm, but it was a privilege to serve.

The fact that LTC now has students who come from as far afield as Hertfordshire, Stansted and Northampton speaks volumes about both the need it serves and its excellent reputation. This Sunday school for 450 pupils from nursery to degree level has grown so big that it hires 30 classrooms at Wembley High Technology College every weekend.

I would now like to take you through the achievements of our crown jewels – our Language and Fine Arts departments.

The image of LTC as the leading voluntary organisation among our diaspora Tamil community was always uppermost in my mind. I was passionate about making it the centre of academic excellence for Tamil Language and Fine Arts education in London.

The Language Department rapidly progressed academically. We organised prize-giving ceremonies and elocution competitions both within the school and as interschool tournaments. I lobbied the University of Cambridge to recognise LTC as a centre for conducting examinations in O Level and A Level in Tamil Language, banking on the university's trust in the school. Repaying that trust, most of our candidates achieved A grades, a stunning accomplishment.

I carried out a similar two-year campaign with the University of Madras, which agreed to recognise LTC as an external study centre of the university – a very big achievement. Degree courses are offered in Tamil Language and Tamil Literature, and in 2012 the first student graduated from LTC with a University of Madras degree in Tamil Literature (B.Lit.): Miss Nitharsana Jeganathan.

Miss Jeganathan was later kind enough to write this letter, which I cherish as evidence of the incomparable role that education can play in young lives: 'Dr Nithy and LTC have transformed our lives and made many of us good citizens, and I am one of the most privileged persons to know him as my mentor. After obtaining a distinction in Tamil language in Advanced Level, he encouraged me to continue further studies and brought the text books from India. With his encouragement, together with the support of my colleagues, I enrolled as an

external student at University of Madras and obtained a BA degree in Tamil Literature.

‘I am very proud to say that I am the first student from the numerous Tamil schools operating in the UK, to obtain this prestigious qualification. This would not have been possible without Dr Nithy’s continuous support and co-ordination with the University of Madras. His guidance did not stop there. He appointed me as a Teaching Assistant at LTC and after a period of initial training, I became a fully qualified teacher in the school.’

A second student, Mr Suthesan Mahendran, completed 14 out of 15 required units, bringing more credit to LTC.

All 22 teachers in the Language Department were talented and dedicated. I would like to mention Miss Selvamani Vadivelu, Mrs Navukkarasi Ponnampalam and Mrs Mathavy Shivaleelan for their leadership which underpinned the department’s glowing success. Also, I would like to mention Mrs Shanthy Yoharajan and Mrs Nalayini Shanthakumar for their hard work and dedication in administrative support for the efficient running of the school and a special mention to Mr S Uthayakumar, who has been a livewire in the success of the London Tamil Centre.

When in 2012 LTC awarded me the title ‘Guardian of Tamil Language and Culture’, I was deeply honoured to accept it not just for myself but for all those others. There was actually a little irony in this award. Being a man of science, I have never had the confidence to write beautiful Tamil with all the artistry and flourishes that the language can command.

As Headmaster of the largest Tamil school in the UK I was often invited to functions as Chief Guest and Guest of Honour. From the start I decided to give my speeches in Tamil because of my love for the language. To hide my deficiencies (my natural style was logical and factual, not soaring rhetoric and clever rhymes), I would write my speech then take it to my dear friend Shankaramoorthy, who worked at the BBC.

Over a coffee he would correct my mistakes and teach me the methodology of good speechwriting. Gradually I mastered his techniques, but unfortunately I lost him on 9 September 2012. Similarly, I have never sent any LTC circulars to parents or any reference letters in English without having them scrutinised first by another dear friend, Mr Ganeshwaran.

Oh goddess Sarawathy, you see how my childhood misdemeanours have made me reliant on others!

London Tamil Academy

I will shine a spotlight on LTC's phenomenal record in South Indian Fine Arts in my next chapter.

In the meantime, let us now take a step back to 1989 again, and the founding of London Tamil Academy. The Academy was established that year to teach Mathematics, English and Science to supplement pupils' learning at state schools. These children had only recently arrived from Sri Lanka and some were struggling with their lessons. Our sessions were an invaluable help in lifting them up to the required level so as to give them every chance to excel. Our help made an enormous difference, facilitating integration with the British community and giving

our young people the confidence and skills to make a success of their lives in England.

I was Chair of the Academy, with Mrs Savithri Manicavasagan as Secretary and Mr N Seevaratnam as Treasurer. Our work was so appreciated by the community that we soon had more than 100 students attending the classes every year. The venue was Sudbury Primary School but I had bigger ideas. My personal ambition was to acquire premises exclusively dedicated to and reserved for the Academy, so I sat down and wrote more than 100 letters.

To my delight the Tudor Trust called me for an interview in 1992 and subsequently offered us a grant of £50,000 to purchase a building. Later the Getty Foundation, which awards grants for “the understanding and preservation of the visual arts”, added another £10,000. As I have already mentioned, in 1994 the Academy merged with LTC and a year later we used our £60,000 as a deposit to buy the property at 253 East Lane, Wembley, for £120,000. A number of members helped with donations and monthly standing orders to help with mortgage repayments.

CHAPTER 9

Excellence in South Indian Fine Arts

I will now turn to LTC's estimable pedigree in Fine Arts, just as laudable as our proficiency in Tamil Language and Literature.

Our Fine Arts Department was run by 25 highly skilled and devoted staff, most of whom qualified from universities in Tamil Nadu. To further strengthen the department, we brought in specialist teachers from South India to provide the best possible tuition in line with our ethos of excellence.

These teachers came to us on work permits, but unlike some other institutions that took advantage of this system, we never treated them as bonded staff. I demanded 100% devotion to the work of our school, but once those duties were finished they were free to offer their services to anyone else, even our competitors. And when after four or five years they qualified for permanent residency in the UK, with the consent of the Board of Governors I always recommended them to the Home Office. I wanted to show my appreciation for their commitment, and I also knew that the country would be culturally richer if they settled here.

Under the above scheme we employed Mrs Saraswathy Packiarasa and Mr K Sarangan for Vocal Music, Mr K T Sivaganesh and Mr A G A Gnanasundaram for Violin, Mrs

Krishnalatha Kathirgamanathan for Dance, Mr Athul Kumar for Flute and Mr R R Prathap for Miruthangam.

The fine arts teachers trained students and staged 17 Dance Dramas and Orchestra performances, comprising Veena, Vocal Music, Flute, Violin and Miruthangam. These spectacular events were usually held at Logan Hall in central London, where we would fill all 1,000 seats!

The productions were:

- 1993 Meenadchi Kalyanam
- 1994 Kunrakkudy Kuravanchi
- 1995 Marisha Vatham and Valli Thirumanam
- 1996 Chiththira Pavai
- 1997 Manimehalai
- 1998 Krishna Leelai
- 1999 Sivahamiyin Sabatham
- 2000 Aandal
- 2001 Mayura Tharisanam
- 2002 Rajah Rajah Cholan
- 2003 Shiva Parvathi Kalyanam
- 2004 Baktha Markandeyar
- 2005 Thiruketheeswara Kuravanchi
- 2006 Mathurai Meenatchi
- 2007 Paanchali Sabatham
- 2008 Nallai Kumaran Kuravanchi
- 2009 Ambihayin Arul Thedy



Dance drama and orchestra performance at Logan Hall

Each was a highlight for our community, a glorious extravaganza telling much-loved historical stories through dance.

These were the golden days born of superb co-operation between students, parents and teachers. The parents were very eager for the school to have a cultural programme every year. They were ever willing to sell tickets to friends and relations in large numbers, allowing us to pack Logan Hall to the rafters. Parents felt that everything should be the very best and I found myself with an unexpected but important role to play: I was to be in charge of buying the sarees!

Let me explain.

Every year I would attend a music festival in India, and the parents of our young dance performers asked me to bring them back new dance costumes from Madras. In preparation, the children's measurements were taken, the colour combinations chosen and my job was to hunt down sarees of the identical colours for each group.

I was then to get them stitched and carry them back to London. This was no easy task. I would walk around 30 shops to locate the exact shade of vermillion with an imperial purple border... or emerald with scarlet piping... or gold ochre with turquoise... Each fabric had to be in the right shade then tailored into the right sizes for our seven or eight dance troupes... so I would fly into Heathrow with 70 dance costumes in my luggage!

It was a painstaking but ultimately very worthwhile responsibility, as up on stage the children would look astounding. Rehearsals began in March for orchestra and dance, and our productions in April were (in my eyes and those of our awe-struck parents) as fabulous as Indira Vizha.

Proof of the incredibly high standards we perfected came in December 1997 when Shanthy Tailors organised an International Dance Festival during the annual Music Festival in Chennai. LTC received an invitation to represent London in the festival. What an honour, and what excitement! Three senior students taught by Mrs Uma Chandratheva and the teacher flew over to India to take part in this very prestigious event. Their performance drew rapturous applause from the audience and was reviewed on the front page of the *Thinathanthy* weekend newspaper, which had a circulation of several millions.

I am very thankful to all our Fine Arts teachers who so often went beyond the call of duty in their devotion to LTC. A special mention goes particularly to Mrs Uma Chandratheva and Mrs Sivatharani Sahathevan for their ceaseless hard work. Eventually the productions were held every two years as more and more Tamil schools put on competing events, but ours were, in my humble opinion, the very best London has seen.

Indeed, I would go further. Although there are other Tamil schools, none have been so successful for such a long period; none have had such a structured syllabus or such a pioneering, dynamic ethos.

Linked to this is a groundbreaking sister institution.

Academy of Fine Arts (London)

Academy of Fine Arts London began in 1989 under the remarkable leadership of Sangeetha Vidwan Mrs Saraswathy Packiarajah, the former chief examiner in Music for North Ceylon Oriental Society of Music in Sri Lanka. My role as Chairman was to assist her, along with the help of Sangeetha

Vidwan Mrs Pathmini Gunaseelan and Sangeetha Vidwan Mrs Kalaivani Indrakumar.

The Academy aims to provide, train and guide Fine Arts teachers who impart the highest quality training to students of South Indian Fine Arts in the UK and overseas. The syllabus for Music and Dance was formulated with the benefit of Mrs Packiarajah's and Mrs Gunaseelan's expertise and teachers trained in the examination process. We entered the first students for our examination in June 1991 and have continued to do so every year since.

I am proud that we were the first examining body in the UK for South Indian Fine Arts and again recognised by the University of Madras, thanks to my canvassing. The university tested the Academy's syllabus and its vice-chancellor travelled to London to witness the teaching of Dance and Music to our students. Achieving the accreditation was a battle, but we have more than proved that our students are worthy of such recognition.

Before the Academy opened there was no route for Tamil children to have their musical talents recognised. Now 1,000 study for different grades every year and even come from across Europe. The Academy's exam papers are sent as far as Australia (Sydney, Perth and Melbourne) and New Zealand for the Tamil communities there. Having accreditation from the University of Madras means that students graduating with a Diploma from the Academy (in Vocal Music or Violin, for example) can go on to do a Masters in that field as long as they couple it with a regular degree such as History or Maths from a mainstream university.

My sincere thanks go to Mr Janardhanan Ratnasabapathy, our Director of Administration, for his tireless contribution to the Academy's success. He is one of so many selfless individuals who have walked with me on my journey with the Tamil community.

CHAPTER 10

London Tamil Elders Centre

I have written so far about my life as an educator, helping our community's children fulfil their potential to reach their dreams and passing on our cultural values to each new generation.

Now I will turn to the other end of the spectrum, our much-loved, much respected elders. The 1983 riots in Sri Lanka sent Tamils fleeing in large numbers to countries across the globe, with many arriving in Britain. Whole families, grandparents included, came as refugees and settled throughout England. As the years went by, more members of the community advanced in age and swelled the ranks of our elders.

The trustees of the London Tamil Centre decided to cater for the needs of those in and around the Wembley area. As I mentioned above, Dr S Panchadcharam initially secured three-year funding from the Brent and Harrow Health Authority to modify our LTC building and meet running costs. This was supplemented by grants from the City Parochial Trust and National Lottery. We drew on our business skills to put together effective business plans, and on our powers of persuasion to convince benefactors that they could help improve the lives of elders, many of them sad and living alone in often cold homes after their children leave for work.



Visit to Nagabooshani Amman Temple, Edmonton

Our Elders Drop-In Centre opened on 26 November 1996 and I was appointed by the trustees to look after its day-to-day affairs.

We have been able to put on a host of stimulating activities and exercise classes at the centre, and anyone who thinks the elderly like nothing better than to doze in a comfortable chair has not met our elders! They are thrilled with our keep-fit classes, yoga classes, Bhajans, lectures on health topics, knitting lessons, flower arranging, playing cards, drama classes, a stack of newspapers and monthly outings to places of interest, visiting a temple in Birmingham or the London Eye, for example, or taking a riverboat trip.

This has made an enormous difference to their lives, and they have often told me they feel less stress and less lonely because they can spend time with friends and neighbours at the centre. Numbers grew from a small gathering to well over



A birthday celebration

a hundred within a few years, bringing together people from all walks of life. Highlights include the drama performances put on every year by the elders themselves, such as Sangiliyan, Ellalan, Pathini Theivam, Thai Nada Thanchama, Veli Naddu Moham, Oorum Uravum and many more.

There is a delicious lunch every day (catered by our elders on a rota), birthday celebrations and huge enjoyment during religious festivals such as Christmas, Tamil New Year, Navarathri and Adi Pirappu. Elders are generally healthy and happy, look forward to their daily visits to the centre and travel there and back on transport provided free of charge through Dial a Ride by the council.

One elder, Mrs J. Ganasegaram, has described the centre as a ‘life changer.’ She wrote: ‘The Elders Centre provides a golden opportunity for Tamil senior citizens to get together on a regular basis and discuss and exchange ideas of common

interest. By participating in the activities of the centre and meeting the people from the peer group of similar interest, the quality of life of several of us has tremendously improved.

'Recognition of the senior citizens by the community in this manner has made us feel part of the wider society, alleviating alienation and boredom... Due to Dr Nithy's positive approach to life, we, the users have realised a number of dreams, which would not have materialised if not for his vision and initiatives and those of all the trustees'.

I must express my great appreciation to all the four administrators for the great success of the Elders Centre, particularly to Mrs Soundaravalli Selvakumar. She is very active, kind, devoted and carefully looks after the interests and concerns of every elder. They like her a lot.

From 2004 to 2010 the centre received Lottery funding and is now a self-sufficient financial success thanks to donations and income from renting out space upstairs. I am often there every day, answering questions, chatting with people, joining them for lunch, giving advice and guidance on social security, pensions and housing, and helping the trustees. Unfortunately, the London Tamil Elders Centre is closed from January 2020 due to the Covid situation and the elders are looking forward for their regular visit to the Centre.

CHAPTER 11

Sunrise Radio

It was thanks to an Irishman and an accidental meeting that I became involved in Sunrise Radio, the first Tamil radio station in Britain. It was also thanks to the lack of fluency in written English that has proved a disadvantage throughout my life – because I “cheated” my father all those years ago.

In filling out grant applications for West London Tamil School I frequently called on the good offices of Dr John Walsh. Dr Walsh, PhD in English, was Head of Community Education for the London Borough of Ealing, an Irishman and a great friend to the Tamil community. On one visit to his office in Southall I met Mr Avtar Lit, an irrepressible radio enthusiast who had been running an illegal local community station. He was there to apply for a full time radio licence.

Mr Lit’s station had been raided repeatedly by the Home Office, only for him to be back on air every time within the hour. Now, however, he was tired of being an outlaw and asked me to join him in community meetings to canvas support for a licence. With the team I addressed about 10 meetings and our wish was finally granted when we obtained a licence for 24-hour broadcasting in the London area. As a thank you, Mr Lit gave us an hour a week airtime.

Sunrise Radio’s first Tamil broadcast went out at 9.00pm on Monday 6 November 1989 on 1413 MW. We focused



The team at Sunrise Radio

Seated : L to R: Mr K Sri Rhangan, Mrs Anantharani Balendra,
Mrs Sivatharini Sahathevan, Mrs Tanuja Constantine, Dr R Niththyananthan

Standing : L to R: Mr Tarrin Constantine, Mr J Ratnasabapathy, Mr Paramesh,
Mr Mohanraj, Mr K Sanguhan, Mr R Gajendra, Mr Nada Mohan

Absent : Mrs Yoga Thillainathan, Ms Thulasi Thillainathan, Mr Raguram,
Mr S Sri Vijayan, Mr Paavai Jeyapalan, Mr Kaliyur Rahman and Mr Amalasuthan

on unbiased news about Sri Lanka, discussions on current affairs, music and interviews with celebrities, building up a loyal following of 100,000 listeners who tune in on the dot to catch every programme. For several years we ran a film music event called Ganakuyil which attracted over 1,000 people. It involved a singing competition with good prizes donated by leading Tamil business organisations.

What started as a weekly one-hour radio slot soon expanded to one hour on three days a week thanks to healthy advertising revenue: Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays from 10pm to 11pm. Over the space of two years we also dramatically extended our reach, first on 1458 MW to cover the whole Greater London area and then across Europe on Astra satellite.

My shift was half a day a week, leading a team of volunteers. We began with five, namely Mrs Yoga Thillainathan, Mr Nada Mohan, Mr Kanapathipillai Sanguhan, Mr Janardhanan Ratnasabapathy and myself, and gradually increased until we counted more than 15 volunteers, none of whom were paid but who set about their work with infectious enthusiasm.

We also maintained strict neutrality in spite of the volunteers belonging to different Tamil political groups. Quite an achievement – and it was a stable, highly popular Tamil programme that after ten years we handed over to Mr Nada Mohan.

It is hard for many of our young people to fathom now, but when we launched, in the days before the internet, there was no access in the UK to any other Sri Lankan news channel. We really were pioneers!

CHAPTER 12

Tsunami

On Sunday 26 December 2004 I was having my breakfast at New Woodlands Hotel in Chennai when the waiter serving my food told me about an extraordinary natural phenomenon: the sea at nearby Marina Beach was rising up and racing towards the land.

I had no idea that what he was describing was perhaps the greatest natural disaster of our age: the Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami that devastated coastal communities from Indonesia to Sri Lanka and India, sent towering waves as far afield as Somalia in east Africa (2,800 miles from its epicentre off Sumatra), and cost an appalling 227,898 lives.

In fact, oblivious to the unfolding tragedy, I finished my breakfast and together with a friend hired a three-wheeler auto to drive down to the beach to see what was happening. We were intrigued to witness for ourselves how far the sea had encroached, thinking of it as no more than an unusual environmental spectacle.

Half way along Dr Radakrishna Road, however, we came up against a police blockade preventing people from going to Marina Beach and chasing them away from the scene. There

was no more news and in the immediate aftermath people in and around Chennai had no concept of the scope of the catastrophe. That particular evening, I even went to see a Jesuthas music concert along with my friends.

Only later did I learn about the devastation and despair the tsunami had caused along the Chennai shoreline, where around 8,000 people mainly from the fishing community lost their lives, the worst being 6,000 in the Nagapattinam district. Overall the Sri Lankan authorities reported upwards of 35,000 dead around the island. One and a half million people were displaced from their homes, and many orphaned or separated from their families.

I returned to London on Thursday 30 December only to realise that I was in the wrong place: damage and destruction had been wreaked on Mullaitivu, Batticaloa and other areas. All the Tamil TV stations were playing funereal music as a result of the large number of Tamil casualties and families made homeless. I was told there was severe shortage of medical supplies and water- purifying tablets.

I moved swiftly to act. I managed to order 50,000 water-purifying tablets and a supply of antibiotics and set off back to Colombo on Monday 3 January.

On arrival the next day I was told there was a big need for thermos flasks as well as slippers. A group of friends and I called at most of the shops in Colombo to buy up all that were available. We left Colombo in two vans fully loaded with all the supplies on the morning of 6 January and arrived in Mullaitevu the same evening.

At five police checkpoints along the way we were halted and asked our business, but allowed to pass when we explained we had emergency items for the Church in Mullaitevu. I stayed for about a week, immersed in all the suffering and devastation. It was a terrible, terrible time, but I felt a sense of relief that I was with my people to share with them the sorrows and the hardships.

CHAPTER 13

Ratnam Foundation

I would now like to describe the remarkable work carried out by Ratnam Foundation, the charitable foundation named after my father that I established in 2005. Funded by my family, friends and wellwishers and through fundraising activities, it is making a significant difference with its health and education projects in Sri Lanka. He would have been immensely proud. The objectives of the trust are twofold:

- To advance the education of socially and economically disadvantaged people in Sri Lanka through the provision of financial assistance for buildings, teaching, books, computers and scholarships.
- To promote and protect good health among the Tamil Community in Sri Lanka through the provision of financial assistance in particular, but not exclusively, for the development of infrastructure, medical centres, care homes, medical supplies and clinical resources.

Funds are distributed in many ways according to need, and we have been able to touch many lives.

Healthcare

I will explain our healthcare work first.

Headline projects include free diabetic screening at village level. In collaboration with Moolai Hospital, a Diabetic Centre has been set up with full funding from Ratnam Foundation. This project was initiated in 2005 and has screened more than 3,000 patients, 35% of whom have been found to be diabetic.

I feel very strongly that I owe a debt to the community where I grew up, an area battered by war and in great need of reconstruction and revival. Before I set up diabetic screening I was heartbroken to see patients wrapping diabetic wounds in herbal leaves that actually fermented and made them worse. Now free advice and free medicine can be provided to the poor in rural areas where people cannot afford to buy their medication. I am so pleased that the expertise and experience from my years of research work at St Mary's is being put to such good use. Wide publicity about the seriousness of diabetes through leaflets and seminars has significantly improved both prevention and control of the disease.

Other projects at Moolai Hospital have been funded to turn this 100-bed hospital into a modern medical centre providing the best possible care to local people. These are projects such as:

- Training 15 nurses because there was a shortage of qualified staff, many having left the hospital after getting married or a change of career. Plans are underway to train more.
- Renovating the 10-room maternity department to improve unsatisfactory conditions.

- Donating computers, computerising hospital records and training staff in IT skills.
- Salaries for visiting doctors, nurses and the purchase of medicines.

Funds have been donated to the *Institut Claudius Regaud* in Toulouse, France, for research into diagnosis, treatment and prevention of cancer.

The Foundation has also provided emergency supplies of food and medicine to children and the elderly in north and east Sri Lanka during Covid-19 lockdown, as well as many smaller projects.

Education

I will now turn to our work in schools, colleges and adult education centres. You will understand, after reading this far, my passion for “education, education, education.” I travel frequently to Sri Lanka to supervise the Foundation’s work to give bright young students opportunities that enable social mobility.

We have established Computer Centres and training for children through the Centre for Child and Youth empowerment programme in Kondavil and Kokuvil, where students learn basic skills. We also work with Kilinochchi Education Development Trust at Puthu Murrippu and Karadipokku and through the Sivan Arul Foundation at Olumadu, where senior students learn IT skills including coding.

Some students are orphans and many are from one-parent families headed by women. Without this type of help and



Our Computer Centre, Akkaripattu

encouragement they would go into the child labour market. With this help, underprivileged children become familiar with computers so they are not disadvantaged when they go to school, and acquire skills that improve their life chances.

Our Computer Centre at Akkaripattu is equally a special project, run by women to train unemployed women in IT skills to open up new job opportunities. Operated through the Sivan Arul Foundation, it is recognised by the Tertiary Education Council of Sri Lanka. The second batch of 20 women are currently being trained in IT and Computer Applications, while the first batch have already found employment.

Many children in the north, east and upcountry have unsatisfactory educational opportunities, tools and facilities.



Pre-school at Nallinakapuram

In particular, O-level and A-level students lack materials, so 500 have been selected and given books and tuition in English Language, Mathematics and Science where teachers are in short supply. They also receive leadership training to get a suitable job when they leave at the age of 18.

Ratnam Foundation with financial assistance from Veenalaya is funding pre-schools in Sirupiddy, Pathamany and Nallinakapuram. These are farming villages in northern Sri Lanka where most small children loiter on the farms without any education. In these forgotten villages the inhabitants are mainly low-income farmers and literacy is very low.

The schools offer the opportunity of a basic early-years education for 3-5 year olds so that they are not handicapped compared to other children when they start their schooling. The schools are land-marks in the villages and are running

very successfully. Grants are also given to struggling pupils for extra help in Maths and English to bring them into line with the mainstream.

To promote high school education at Vaddukooddai Hindu College, we have funded annual scholarships for seven students from low-income groups to continue their Higher Education. We have also made a large donation towards the purchase of books for all winners at the annual prize-giving ceremony, as well as funding laboratory equipment at the college.

For Mahajana College Old Students Association we have funded the training of English Teachers by the British Council. With a serious lack of English teachers in the whole North and Eastern province after 30 years of war, the British Council has trained existing teachers to be more proficient in English. At Vembadi Girls School, Jaffna, our donations have funded student counselling to identify why some of the High School children are unable to perform well in spite of their ability. This is a selective school but some pupils under-perform for socio-economic reasons. Counselling can address problems on an individual basis and bring these students back onto the path of success.

A grant to Jaffna Science Association has allowed it to conduct a schools science competition, helping to foster new ideas in students and became a popular event. Several projects have funded reading schemes, buying books for schools to encourage reading to become a habit. Children in these areas tend not to read as a habit, hence their general knowledge, vocabulary and writing skills are very low. The Foundation has been working to rectify this.

A recent initiative that is building real momentum is smart classes. We have provided laptops, smartboards and overhead projectors to 80 schools in the north, east and upcountry to allow children to absorb their lessons more quickly through visual presentations. For the first time they are able to see images of the brain in 3D or time lapse video of plants growing, for example. Our target is to reach 100 schools by the end of 2021. Ratnam Foundation is grateful to International Medical Health Organisation IMHO, US for partnering in this project.

Our reach extends to university students. We have provided grants to the Rotary Club Of Mullaitevu for financial assistance to 26 students entered for Medicine, Engineering, Science, Mathematics, Accountancy, Dental and Agriculture courses at various universities in Sri Lanka. These young people are from deprived areas in the district and while the



Smart class

government offers bursary to students entering university from low-income families, the award does not meet their entire monthly expenditure. The Foundation offers additional help so students in need can continue their university career. Our support to the International Tamil Students Organisation has paid for computers, study materials and books; more financial assistance goes to ten university students through Kilinochchi Education Development Trust.

Job creation and getting students into employment is also one of my priorities. An example is a donation to Dr Y. Yathunanathan of Lava Hospital, Jaffna, to train 20 students as Certified Medical Assistants with a view to finding immediate employment. Most of these students have since gone into careers as carers and nursing assistants.

Publishing

Ratnam Foundation is proud to have published six books to advance the study of Tamil language and culture:

- Kaal Adi Thal, Sol Varalaru – Etymology Research by Prof G Rajendran, July 1986.
- The growth of Bharatanatyam in London by Dr R Niththyananthan, December 2003.
- Elam Ninaivukal by Nitharsana Jeganathan, B.Sc., April 2004.
- The Thirumurai (Tevaram) contribution to Saivaism and Indian Music by Sangeetha Vidwan Ponnaiah Jeyalaki Arunagirinathan B.A., M.A., March 2004.



Release ceremony for my book on Bharatanatyam, London 2003

- The growth of Tamil Carnatic Music in London by Dr R Niththyananthan, January 2005
- Kaaviach Salangaikal by Pulavar N Sivanathan B. Eng., January 2013.

We held a release ceremony for Professor Rajendran's book in Chennai, and for the first of my two books, my monograph on Bharatanatyam, at Kanagathurgai Amman Temple on 22 February 2004.

The proceeds of my book came to an astounding £1,200, which was allocated for uplifting the education of the Malayagam Tamils living on plantations in the hill country. As we were unable to find a reliable partner, however, it was not until 2020 that this money was actually spent. We used it then to provide smart classes in Maskeliya and I am thrilled that pupils are benefiting now from a book I worked on so long ago.

Humanitarian work

Ratnam Foundation sponsors humanitarian projects such as Vattapalai Amman Humanitarian Fund and the Kalutara Bodhi Disaster Fund, where our donations built small houses for victims of heavy flooding in the south of Sri Lanka in 2017.

We are also running a venture with nine other charities to promote organic Home Gardens in Paranthan and Mannar, training householders to grow their own vegetables so they can be self-sufficient in food as well as lead healthy lifestyles. We hope to extend this project to benefit Tamils in the north, east and upcountry.

CHAPTER 14

My Week as a Celebrity!

It is June 2010, and I am enjoying one of the greatest experiences of my life.

I have been met at Coimbatore Airport by an IAS officer from the Tamil Nadu Government who has received and honoured me. A personal driver has been allocated, who will take me to a four-star hotel and then be at my beck and call for the next week. It is an all-expenses-paid trip, funded by the Government of Tamil Nadu. I will have an audience of millions...

What was this unforgettable event? The International Tamil Conference in Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu.



International Tamil Conference in Coimbatore

I was, in fact, very fortunate to be selected to travel there from London to speak about the influence of the Tamil Language among the Tamils of Great Britain, chosen because of the reputation and popularity of the London Tamil Centre.

In all, we were ten speakers selected from ten different countries. The scale of the conference was spectacular. Organisers had constructed a temporary hall capable of accommodating 60,000 people. The entire five-day programme was broadcast live on radio and television, watched and listened to by several million people throughout Tamil Nadu. An awe-inspiring 908 research papers on the antiquity of the Tamil Language were presented by scholars in the adjoining complex.

It was with a mixture of excitement, honour and a few nerves, therefore, that I stood up on 26 June to give my address to the 60,000 attendees seated row after row in front of me, and all those listening across the state. I felt I was able to share valuable insights from our work in London, and my heart swelled with pride as I thought of all the students and teachers I was representing. When I finished my speech, I received a Special Commendation from Dr Sudha Seshayyan, the Tamil Nadu Government Master of Ceremonies for the conference and currently Vice Chancellor of MGR Medical University.

I was even interviewed by a leading Tamil Nadu newspaper about my time at the conference, the luxury hotel, personal driver (who it turned out had been commandeered from a local taxi company, along with his car) and the sightseeing outings to temples and landmarks around Coimbatore we were also treated to. I told the paper, and it still holds true today: “This is an experience I will never forget in my life.”

கோவையில் நடந்த உலகத்தமிழ் செம்மொழி மாநாடு:

இதுவரையில் இப்படியொரு மாநாடு நடந்தது இல்லை; இனி நடக்கப்போவதும் இல்லை

இங்கிலாந்து தமிழ் அறிஞர் பாராட்டு

சென்னை, ஜூன்-29-
"இதுவரையில் இப்ப
டியொரு மாநாடு நடந்த
தற்கு இல்லை, இனி
நடக்கப்போவதும் இல்லை"
என்று சொல்லும்
அளவுக்கு கோவையிலும்
உலகத்தமிழர் செம்மொழி மாநாடு
அமைந்து இருந்தது
என்று, அந்நேரத்தில்
கொண்ட இங்கிலாந்து
நாட்டை சேர்ந்த தமிழ்
அறிஞர்கள் பாராட்டு
ஒலிக்கிறார்கள்.

5 நாள் பயாடு
கோவையில் கடந்த 23-
5 தேதியில் இருந்து 27-5 தேதி
வரையில் உலகத்தமிழர் செம்
மொழி மாநாடு நடைபெற்றது.
அறிவுசெல்வம் பல்பேறுமாநாடு
என்ற சேர்த்த தமிழ் அறி
ஞர்கள் கூடியதொன்று பய
ணங்கள் பலவேறு ஆய்வுகளை
சமர்ப்பித்து பேசினார்கள்.
"உலக உலகத்தமிழர் தமிழ்
முழுது" என்ற தலைப்பில் இம்
மொழி மாநாட்டின் சேர்த்த
தமிழ் அறிஞர் டாக்டர் ரஜமன்
நித்தியானந்தம் பேசினார்.
லண்டன் இயற்றும் வழிநிதி,
டாக்டர் ரஜமன் நித்தியானந்த
தம் சென்னைவில் நிகழ்த்தி
திருக்குருகு பேட்டி அளித்த
பொது கூற்றுரைவது-

லண்டன் சிவ் தமிழ்ப்பாணி
எனது பூர்வீகம் யாழ்ப்பாணம்
எனது ஆகுதல். கடந்த 1960-ம்
ஆண்டு லண்டன் சென்று
ஆய்வு குடியேறினோம். லண்ட
னில் உள்ள செவ்வியல்
மேற்கு மருத்துவப்பள்ளியில்
மருத்துவ ஆராய்ச்சியில்
பணியாற்றி ஒய்வுபெற்றோம்.
கடந்த 3 ஆண்டுகளாக லண்ட
னில் லண்டன் தமிழ் நிலை
யம் என்ற கல்வி நிறுவனத்தை
நடத்தி வருகிறோம். சென்னை
பல்கலைக்கழகம் அங்கீகரித்து
டன் இந்த நிறுவனம் தலைபெ
றுகிறது. இங்கு தமிழ், கலை,

கலாநாயகம், வாய்ப்பாட்டு, வய
லின், கவிதை என பல்வேறு
தொடர்பான வகுப்புகளும்
நடத்தப்படுகின்றன.
450 மாணவ-மாணவிகள்
இங்கு படிக்கிறார்கள். லண்ட
னில் உள்ள தமிழ் பல்கலைக்
கூடங்களில் எங்குதான் செம்
மொழி மாநாடு நடைபெற்றது
என்று, அந்நேரத்தில்
கொண்ட இங்கிலாந்து
நாட்டை சேர்ந்த தமிழ்
அறிஞர்கள் பாராட்டு
ஒலிக்கிறார்கள்.

கவிதை உலாப்பு
தமிழக முதல்-அமைச்சர்
கருணாநிதி, கோவையில் ஏற்
பாடு செய்து இருந்த உலகத்த
மிழ் செம்மொழி மாநாட்டில்
பங்கேற்றதாக லண்டனில்
இருந்து 22 பேர் வந்திருந்து
பங்கேற்றனர். 5 நாட்கள்
நடந்த செம்மொழி மாநாட்டு
ஏற்பாடுகளை மிகப்பிரமாதமாக
அமைத்து இருந்தது. எங்கும்
தமிழ் ஏற்றும் தமிழ் என்று
சொல்லும் தமிழ் கொடுக்கும்
கொலைநாடு முழுமையும் தமிழ்
மணம் சுவைத்தது.

வேளிர்நாடுகளில் இருந்து
வந்திருந்த எங்களை மிகவும்
கனிவுடன் ஏற்றுக்கொடுத்த
தலைவர் மிகவும் நிலையத்தில்
இருந்து நான்கு நாட்கள் இருந்த
இடம் வேளிர்நாடுகளில் உப
சரிப்பதில் முதல்-அமைச்சர்
கருணாநிதி தனிக் கவனம்
செலுத்தினார் என்று சொன்
னார். அது மிகக்கூடியது.
வேளிர்நாடுகளில் மிக
துணுக்கமாக உலகத்தமிழர்
விமான நிலையத்திலும் சரி,
நான்கு நாட்கள் தங்கியிருந்த இடத்தி
லும் சரி, திரைப்படங்களின்
படி ஒவ்வொருவரையும் இரு
காம் உபயோகம் எங்களை ஏற்
பெற்று அழைத்துச் சென்றது
மிகவும் சிறப்பாக இருந்தது.
எங்களுக்கு அங்கீகரிக்கப்பட்ட
கலாநாயகம், தந்த இடம், மாது
காப்பு ஏற்பாடுகள், மாநாட்
டில் பங்கேற்றதாக அழைத்துச்
சென்றது என ஒவ்வொரு
பேரும் குறிச்சு சொல்லுவது
செல்லுமீட.



டாக்டர் ரஜமன் நித்தியானந்தம்
டது, விருத்தினரை உபசரிப்ப
தில் தமிழர்களுக்கு இளை வேறு
மனம் இல்லை என்பதை நிரூ
பிக்கக்கூடியவர்கள்.

அறிவுநாயக கண்காட்சி
செம்மொழி மாநாட்டில்
பயணிகள் 500 ஆய்வுக்கூட்டு
ஏராளம் சமர்ப்பிக்கப்பட்டன.
மாநாட்டின் போது, ஏற்பாடு
செய்யப்பட்டிருந்த
காட்சிகளின்மேலும், கருத்து
புறம் சுவரும் வகையில் மிகவும்
அந்தரமாக அமைந்து இருந்
து.
வேளிர்நாடுகளில் இருந்து
வந்த எங்களை போன்றவர்க
ளுக்கு இந்த மாநாடு பயிற்சி
கூடும் பயணிகள் தா
களைத் தரும் இடத்தில் இருந்து
வந்திருந்த தமிழ் அறிஞர்
தங்கள் அங்களை தமிழ்நாடு
அருகே இருந்து தரிசித்த
ஆக்கியுள்ளவர்கள் கருத்
துக்களை ஆழமாக புரிந்து
கொள்ளும் வகையில் பய
ணிகள் பல தகவலை
மாநாட்டின் மூலம் பெற
பெற்றனர்.
முதிர்வுக்கு வெள்ளே
மாநாட்டு போட்டிகள்
அனைத்துமேல் புகழ்மலராக

வும், வளை தொழில்நுட்பத்து
டர் குழுத்தலை (சி.டி.) என
கவும் வெளிப்படுத்தும்.
முதல்-அமைச்சர் கருணாநிதி
அத்தனை ஏற்பாடுகளை
செய்யவேண்டும் என்பதுதான்
கனிய அலா. மாநாட்டில்
கருத்து கொண்டுவர்கள் மட்
டுமிகின்ற இடம் பங்கேற்ற முடி
யத்துவர்கள் என்பதும்,
சி.டி.க்கள் மூலம் செம்மொழி
யாம் தமிழ் மொழியின் தனிச்
சிறப்புகளை அறிந்து
கொள்வது என்பதுமேல்
மட்டுமன்றி காலம் காலமாக,
வழி வழியாக வரக்கூடிய
தமிழ்ச் சமுதாயத்துக்கு தாம்
விட்ட சென்னை உலக
மொழி மாநாடு இந்த புகழ்
கரும், குறுக்கிடும் அமைச்சர்
என்று சொன்னால் அது
மிகையானது.

**இதுவரையில் இப்படியொரு
மாநாடு...**
முன்பு தஞ்சாவூரில் நடந்த
உலகத்தமிழ் மாநாட்டிலும்
தான் பங்கேற்ற அனுபவம்
எனக்கு உண்டு. ஆனால், இந்த
மாநாடு அப்படிப்பட்டது
அல்ல. இதுவரையில் நடந்த
உலகத்தமிழ் மாநாடுகளை
காட்டிலும் மிகப்பிரமாதமாக
தரக்கொண்டிருந்த செம்
மொழி மாநாடு அமைந்து
இருந்தது. இந்த மாநாடு தமிழ்
முழுது, தமிழ்நாடு பயணிகள்
தங்கள் அமைச்சர் கரு
ணாநிதிக்கு, அவருடைய
எள்ளத்திற்கு செல்வமாய்
வம் கொடுத்தது மாநாட்டின்
சிறப்பாக நடந்தது தனது
முதல்-அமைச்சர் மு.க.ஸ்டீ
லிங்குமார், கவிஞர் கவிமொ
ழிகுமார் மற்றும் அமைச்சர்
பெரும்குமார், அறிஞர்கள்
அனைவரும் செம்மொழி
களில் இருந்து வந்து பங்கேற்
பெற்ற அறிஞர்கள் சாப்பி
தனர் தெரிவித்துக்கொண்ட
பேரம்.

இதுவரை டாக்டர் ரஜமன்
நித்தியானந்தம் கூறினார்.

அப்படி, இது போன்றதொரு
மாநாட்டை இனி யாராலும்
நடத்திட முடியாது என்று
சொல்லும் அளவுக்கு கோவையி
ல், முதல்-அமைச்சர் கரு
ணாநிதி ஏற்பாடு செய்து
இருந்த உலகத்தமிழர் செம்
மொழி மாநாடு அமைந்து
இருந்தது இனிப்பொரு மாநாடு
இதுவரையில் நடந்ததும்
இல்லை. இனி நடக்கப்போவ
தும் இல்லை என்று சொல்
லும் அளவுக்கு இந்நேரமே
வீழா போன்று, கோவையில்
நடந்த உலகத்தமிழ் செம்
மொழி மாநாடு அமைந்து
இருந்தது.
இதற்குள் சிறப்பு பெற்
றுள்ள உலகத்தமிழர் செம்
மொழி மாநாட்டுக்கு ஏற்பாடு
செய்து நடத்திக்கூடியுள்ள
தமிழக முதல்-அமைச்சர் கரு
ணாநிதிக்கும், அவருடைய
எள்ளத்திற்கு செல்வமாய்
வம் கொடுத்தது மாநாட்டின்
சிறப்பாக நடந்தது தனது
முதல்-அமைச்சர் மு.க.ஸ்டீ
லிங்குமார், கவிஞர் கவிமொ
ழிகுமார் மற்றும் அமைச்சர்
பெரும்குமார், அறிஞர்கள்
அனைவரும் செம்மொழி
களில் இருந்து வந்து பங்கேற்
பெற்ற அறிஞர்கள் சாப்பி
தனர் தெரிவித்துக்கொண்ட
பேரம்.



Muruga Bakhti Conference in Malaysia

In the last two decades I have been honoured to attend five other international events:

- February 1999: Chief Guest at the Dance Festival in Chidambaram Temple, Tamil Nadu.
- December 2012: Presented a paper on Murugum Muruganum at the First International Conference on Muruga Bakhti in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.
- January 2013: Special Guest at the Bharathiya Janatha Party's Pongal Festival in New Delhi. I was received at the conference by Dr Vijay Malhotra MLA and subsequently introduced to Mr La Ganesan, Senior Leader of BJP, Mr Venkaiah Naidu (who as I write is Vice President of India and Chairman of Rajya Sabha) and Mr Rajnath Singh, currently Defence Minister. I was overwhelmed to be amidst such distinguished BJP leaders!
- August 2016: Presented a paper on Thiruchendur at the Third International Conference on Muruga Bakhti in Durban, South Africa.

- August 2018: Presented a paper on Palani at the Fourth International Conference on Muruga Bakhti in Colombo, Sri Lanka.



Top: with Dr Malhotra Bottom: with senior BJP leaders

CHAPTER 15

Three Surprise Parties and My Own Little Bit of Eton

Among my happiest memories of the last decade are three wonderful events thrown in my honour by my family, friends and members of our exceptional Tamil community here in London.

Retirement Party, March 2012

The first is the retirement party given for me when I decided to step down from the affairs of the Tamil school to concentrate on my charity work with the Ratnam Foundation. After 30 years of service as Headmaster (eight at West London Tamil School and 22 at London Tamil Centre), it was a hard decision.

It was heart-wrenching to leave an institution into which I had poured my heart, and to say farewell to my beloved colleagues and our students, but I knew it was time for a change of focus. I also know I had the honour of making a real difference to so many young people.

I was overwhelmed with joy when the Board of Directors together with the teachers organised a farewell function on



Retirement party

3rd March 2012 at Watersmeet Theatre in Rickmansworth. It was attended by more than 400 people, with friends from different walks of life invited. There were doctors and engineers I had known for many years, as well as shopkeepers and factory workers from among the parents: a real cross-section of the community, all sharing my belief in the unique power of education to improve the prospects of our children.

Representatives from the governors, teaching staff and students spoke movingly about my contribution to the school. I would like to include a few of the tributes written in a souvenir book presented to me that day. One family wrote: ‘Thirty golden years’ contribution to the Tamil community – outstanding achievements to so many.’ And a pupil wrote: ‘You make me enjoy my Sundays more.’ Which is praise indeed!

LTC Office Helpers wrote their own message: ‘In the same way you would have with your own child, you sacrificed much of your personal time over the years and worked tirelessly to develop London Tamil Centre from its infancy into a



Memento from the party

பிரியாவிடையா உங்களுக்கு?

Dr. Niththi என்ற நல்லதொரு முத்து ~ இந்த
London தமிழ் நிலையம் கண்டெடுத்த சொத்து
குன்றின் மணிவிளக்காய் நிற்பார்
கோபுரத்துக் கலசமெனத் திகழ்வார்

அஞ்ஞமையின் இருப்பிடமாய்
அன்றோர் தமிழ்க் காவலனாய்
இனிமைதரும் நண்கலைச் சேவகனாய்
இதமாகப் பணி தொடர்ந்தார்

பேசுபொருள் காவியமே!
பிரியாவிடையா உங்களுக்கு?
செம்புலப் பெயல் நீர்ய்யா ~ எம்
நெஞ்சமதில் நீங்கள்

எம் நிலையம் உள்ளவரை ~ உம்
பணியுணர்ந்தோர் வாழும் வரை
கூறு புகழ் கொண்டீர்
காலமெல்லாம் வாழ்க! வாழ்க! வாழியவே!

மாதவி சிவசீலன் 02/03/2012

well-established and smooth-running organisation. In all your years of serving as Headmaster, it was evident that you always went out of your way to ensure the happiness and comfort of the students, teachers and parents. You made it a place that we looked forward to coming to every Sunday.'

I know that our success was an enormous team effort, founded on the dedication of so many, but I was (and still am) very touched to read how much it means to people.

I believe Brent Borough Councillor James Allie summed up well what motivates me when he once wrote: 'Dr Nithy seems inexhaustible in his work for the wellbeing of the children and the elders. Once when I visited the school I saw him taking assembly and advising the children to work hard, get good results and go to good universities so that they would end up getting good jobs and being better citizens of this country... The role model within the Tamil community encourages the young to aim high in life. Dr Nithy has always aimed high himself, and thousands of children and elderly people have benefited greatly.'

75th Birthday, December 2016 and March 2017

We had a small function at home with Saro, our children and grandchildren to mark this landmark birthday on 17 December 2016, with plenty of gifts and gorgeous food. Kannan, however, told me rather mysteriously that he had ordered my present and would give it to me when it was ready.

Three months later he said the moment had come... and asked us to meet him that Saturday at Eton College. I was puzzled about the venue. Kannan was by then 45 and had



left school long ago. So I had no idea what was in store when we assembled at 3.00pm. My son had brought his wife and children and we walked together along the famous red-brick Quadrangle. Slowly we moved to one corner, and Kannan pointed to a certain stone.

I could not believe my eyes: my name was inscribed there! In stone, at Eton.

It had been only a dream when I took Kannan to the Quadrangle at the age of six and held out the idea of this most prestigious of schools as his possible future. Now we were back and I was almost in tears of joy.

Not because it was my name, but because there was a Tamil name inscribed in that hallowed place. Any Tamil student entering Eton or any Tamil visitor will be immensely proud to see a Tamil name to encourage them. What a wonderful present to remember throughout my life.

Community Party, April 2017

My friends in our Tamil community have an excellent principle: that we should celebrate the achievements of our members while they are alive to appreciate the party, not only once they are gone. So on 29 April 2017 I was lured to Alperton Community School in Wembley by a friend, under the impression that I was to be Chief Guest at his daughter's Vocal Concert to thank me for having helped inspire her.

This turned out to be a pretext, for when we arrived the hall was full of 300 friends who had been sworn to secrecy. Even Saro had managed to keep it a surprise from me!



This special function was to honour my 40 or so years of contribution to the community, and began with the blessings of the priest before my wife and I were then both garlanded.

Then, videoclips of my life were shown, interspersed with tributes from friends in the hall and messages from those overseas. There were countless photos from events down the years and a splendid dinner.

I must be modest and say that all my attributes were grossly exaggerated... but this beautiful occasion still lingers happily in my mind. Thank you, friends.

CHAPTER 16

Conclusion

We have had our share of trials and tribulations.

I trust, nevertheless, that I have lived up to my mother's advice, "When you are climbing life's ladder, never forget the person holding it at the bottom or the people who help you rung by rung on the way up." If I am respected in our community it is all due to the numerous friends who have helped me climb, in happy days and when times were hard.

Bill Gates is my hero, not because he has made so much money but because he has the heart to give it away. I am proud of the fact that I was able to give a good education to all my children, and that in particular I could send my son to Eton. My dream is that my grandchildren and the most promising students of each future Tamil generation can aim for places like Eton, MIT and Harvard University, where there are 100% scholarships that can be won by our community's brightest young stars.

It is not impossible if they are determined.

I also hope that they can live as good, selfless and honourable citizens. I owe a great deal to my wife for taking care of me and our children while I was spending most of my

time in public life. I am reminded of four Thirukkural, which I learned during my schooldays and which still resonate today:

*We know no better blessing
Than intelligent children* Kural 61

*Father's responsibility to his son lies
In placing him ahead of scholars* Kural 67

*Mother rejoices indeed at her son's birth
But even more so on hearing his worth* Kural 69

*Son's duty to father is to make others wonder
What merit gained the father such a son?* Kural 70

I will conclude with a few words about the need to dream... and dream big.



My grandchildren

Parents must have a dream for their children, and children must have their own dreams. As Abdul Kalam, a schoolboy from a village in Ramanathapuram district who became a rocket scientist then President of India, once said: “You must have a dream. You must continuously acquire knowledge, hard work and perseverance. One should not be afraid of problems. Then you will be successful.”

In 1963, the Reverend Martin Luther King stood on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial and promised: “I say to you today, my friends, that in spite of the difficulties and frustrations of the moment, I still have a dream.” In the words of Robert F Kennedy: “Some men see things as they are and ask, ‘Why?’ I dream things that never were and ask, ‘Why not?’”

And, most recently, we can be inspired by the words of Kamala Harris in her powerful victory speech as America’s new Vice President-Elect on 8 November 2020: “Dream with ambition, lead with conviction.”

AFTERWORD

A Trip to the Unknown

At the end of March 2021, I had finished my autobiography and was preparing to get it printed... when something unusual happened to me.

On 1 April I was shivering when I went to bed and took paracetamol as a precaution. Throughout the night I felt very uncomfortable. In the early hours of the morning I called an ambulance and was immediately taken to Northwick Park Hospital. I saw another ambulance waiting ahead of us at the entrance and was happy that I would be seen very quickly, as there was only one ambulance in front.

That was my last recollection until recovering in the Intensive care Unit (ICU) two weeks later.

I will now give some details from my discharge notes from Northwick Park: I was admitted on 2 April with sudden onset of right sacroiliac pain and was treated with co-amoxiclav. I became hypotensive and was admitted to the High Dependency Unit on 3 April. Blood cultures grew streptococcus dysgalactiae and I was treated for septic shock. I was transferred to ICU on 4 April and required ventilatory support.

Before I was transferred to the ICU, the hospital asked my wife and children to come and see me as no one was allowed to visit patients in intensive care. I came off the ventilator on 14 April and stayed in ICU for five more days. An MRI scan of my spine on 15 April showed left psoas collection. Neurosurgical opinion was that no surgical intervention was required. Antibiotic treatments included vancomycin, benzylpenicillin, ceftriaxone, clindamycin, co-trimoxazole and meropenem.

It is very difficult to describe in words the suffering, anxiety and pain undergone by my wife and children during the first two weeks I was in hospital.

I am now able to recollect some of the “dreams” I had while I was in this transient state.

1. “I was seated in an auditorium, with no one else there. Suddenly I saw very bright clouds in the sky. There was a big noise as though they were fighting and I felt the clouds were trying to pull me in their direction.”
2. “I was admitted to a hospital close to Chavakachcheri in Sri Lanka. I was not happy there, left the following day and got myself admitted to another hospital nearby. Again I was unhappy, and was admitted the next day to Northwick Park, where I began treatment.”
3. “I was travelling on a semi-circular conveyor belt along with others for some type of scanning in the hospital. As soon as the conveyor stopped, I tried to get off the belt but I heard a clear voice in Tamil: ‘Good morning, Dr Nithy.’

The voice continued in pure Tamil, saying: ‘If you cooperate with me, I will finish the first scan in five minutes and the second scan in 30 minutes. I clearly identified the voice; it belonged to an old student of London Tamil Centre presently working as a doctor in the hospital.’

I was transferred to a normal ward on 19 April, prescribed six weeks of benzylpenicillin and stayed there for ten days. Life was very hard on the ward. There was a shortage of nurses and very rarely I saw the doctors to find out about my progress. I was given liquid food through a tube and my movements were further restricted because of a bladder catheter. I was forced to stay in bed for most of the time.

I was eagerly awaiting the day I could leave and was very lucky to be admitted to Wellington Hospital on 29 April for further observation and convalescence. They had a very good gym and I was allocated a dedicated physiotherapist. I had two to three 45- minute sessions per day with the physiotherapist, learning techniques to improve my strength in both the upper and lower part of my body. Two weeks’ stay at Wellington with a lot of care and attention was very pleasant and enormously helped me to recover my mobility.

I am indebted to the NHS medical, nursing and associated staff for their excellent care during my serious illness.

It was an unforgettable experience.

APPENDIX

My paper on Thiruchendur at the Third International Conference on Muruga Bakhti in Durban, South Africa, in August 2016.



திருச்செந்தூர்

தமிழிசை ஏந்தல் கலாநிதி
இரத்தினம் நித்தியானந்தன்

மலேசியத் திருமுருகன் திருவாக்கு திருபீடத்தின் மூன்றாவது அனைத்துலக முருக பக்தி மாநாடு சமய ஞான வேள்வியாக தென்ஆப்பிரிக்கா - டர்பன் நகரில், தவத்திரு. பாலயோகி சுவாமிகளின் அருட்தலைமையில் 5-8-2016 முதல் 7-8-2016 முடிய நடைபெற்ற கருத்தரங்கில் வாசித்தளிக்கப்பட்ட கட்டுரை.



1. திருச்செந்தூர்

(சீரலைவாய் ★ வீரவாகுப்பட்டினம் ★ ஜெயந்திபுரம்)

“எழுதரிய ஆறுமுகமு மணி நுதலும் வயிரமிடை
யிட்டுச் சமைந்த செஞ்சுட்டிக் கலன்களுந் துங்கநீள்
பன்னிரு கருணை விழிமலருமிலகுபதி னிருகுழையும்
ரத்தக் குதம்பையும் பத்மக் கரங்களுஞ் செம்பொனாலும்
மொழிபுகழுமுடை மணியு மரைவடமு மழயிணையு
முத்துச் சதங்கையுஞ் சித்ரச் சிகண்டியுஞ் செங்கை வேலும்
முழுது மழகியகுமர கிரிகுமரி யுடனுருகு
முக்கட் சிவன்பெறுஞ் சற்புத்ர வும்பர்தந் தம்பிரானே.”

- திருப்புகழ்

கோயில் என்றால் தில்லையம்பதி, பெரிய பெருமாள் என்றால் திருவரங்கத்து நாயகன். அதுபோலே தமிழ்க்கடவுள் என்றால் செந்தமிழ் முருகனையே குறிக்கும்.

தமிழகத்துப் பண்பாடு நாகரிகம், கலாச்சாரம், தொன்மை, பழமை இவைகளை இன்றைக்கும் வெளிப்படுத்துகின்ற தத்துவ நாயகன்தான் முருகன். தென்குமரி தொட்டு வேங்கடத்திற்கு

அப்பாலேயும் அலை கடல் கடந்த நாடுகளிலெல்லாம் உலகம் தழுவி அருட்காட்சி தந்து கொண்டிருக்கிறான் செவ்வேள்.

தூத்துக்குடி மாவட்டத்தில் ஒரு வட்டத் தலைநகராக அமைந்துள்ளது திருச்செந்தூர். அலைவாய் என்றும், செந்தில் என்றும் சங்க இலக்கியங்களில் குறிப்பிடப்படும் திருச்செந்தூர் முருகனது அறுபடை வீடுகளுள் ஒன்றாகும். இக்கோயிலில் பாண்டிய மன்னன் இரண்டாம் வரகுணனின் (கி.பி. 9ஆம் நூற்றாண்டு) வட்டெழுத்துக் கல்வெட்டுக் காணப்படினும், அது தனிக்கற்களில் பொறிக்கப் பட்டிருப்பதால் அக்காலகட்டத்தில் இக்கோயிலின் கட்டுமானம் செங்கற்களால் அமைக்கப்பட்டிருக்கலாம் என நாம் அனுமானிக்க முடிகிறது. தற்போதைய கோயிற் கட்டுமானம் கி.பி. 18-19ஆம் நூற்றாண்டுக் கட்டடங்களுள் குறிப்பிடத்தக்கது மேலைக் கோபுரமாகும். 153 அடி உயரம் கொண்ட இக்கோபுரம், மொத்தம் 11 தளங்களைக் கொண்டுள்ளது. தரைமட்டத்தில் அமைந்துள்ள கீழ்த்தளமும் (வாயில் நிலை) அதன்மேல் அமைந்துள்ள இரண்டாம் தளமும் முற்றிலும் கருங்கற்களால் அமைக்கப்பட்டவை. இவற்றின் மேல் அமைந்துள்ள ஒன்பது தளங்களும் செங்கல், சுதை, மரம் ஆகியவற்றால் அமைக்கப்பட்டவை. கோபுர வாயிற் கதவிலும், மூன்றாம் தளம் முதல் 11ஆம் தளம் வரையிலும் உட்புறத்திலமைந்துள்ள மரத்தூண்களிலும் மரச் செதுக்கு வேலைப்பாடுகள் உள்ளன. செங்கல்லாலான தளம் ஒவ்வொன்றிலும் கிழக்கிலும் மேற்கிலும் கீர்த்திமுகத் திருவாசித் திறப்பு உள்ளது. அரண்மனைகளில் உள்ள ஷர்ஜா வாசல் போன்றும், மாடி வீடுகளில் அமைந்துள்ள பால்கனி போன்றும் இவ்வமைப்பு காணப்படுகிறது.)

கீர்த்தி முகத் திருவாசியுள்ள ஐந்தாவது தளத்தின் மரநிலையில் எழுத்துப் பொறிப்பு உள்ளது. கொல்லம் ஆண்டு 958 (கி.பி. 1783) ஐச் சேர்ந்தது இப்பொறிப்பு ஆகும்.



செப்பேட்டுச் செய்தி

இக்கோபுரம் கட்டப்பட்டது குறித்து திருவாவடுதுறை ஆதினத்தின் வசம் உள்ள ஐந்து செப்பேடுகளில் செய்தி உள்ளது. கி.பி. 1779ஆம் ஆண்டில், திருவாவடுதுறை ஆதின கர்த்தரின் முன் முயற்சியில், பாஞ்சாலங்குறிச்சி ஜெகவீரபாண்டிய கட்டபொம்மன், சாத்தூர் ஏறாப்ப நாயக்கர், ஏழாயிரம் பண்ணை முத்துசாமி ஆண்டு கொண்டார் ஆகிய பாளையக்காரர்களும், சிவகாசி நாடார்களும், தூத்துக்குடிக்கு அருகிலுள்ள ஏழூர் தட்டாப்பாறை வணிதம் சூழ்ந்த கிராமத்து மகாஜனம் பிள்ளைமார் ஆகியோரும் இக்கோபுரம் எழுப்பிடக் கொடை வழங்கியுள்ளனர் என இச்சேப்புகள் மூலமாக அறிய முடிகிறது. (திருவாவடுதுறை ஆதினச் செப்பேடுகள், ச. கிருஷ்ணமூர்த்தி). ஆங்கிலேயக் கிழக்கிந்தியக் கம்பெனி, ஆர்க்காட்டு நவாப் ஆகியோரின் நிலவருவாய் நிர்வாகத் தலையீட்டை எதிர்த்து நின்றவர்களில் பாளையக்காரர்கள் முதன்மையானவர்களாவர். (சிதம்பர வன்னியன் வம்சாவளி, பாளையப்பட்டுகளின் வம்சாவளி, தொகுதி 4, ப. 91, பதிப்பு க. குழந்தைவேலன், தொல்லியல் துறை) திருத்தலப் பயணிகள் நிறைந்த அளவில் கூடுகிற ஒரு வழிபாட்டுத் தலத்தை மேம்படுத்தும் பணியில் ஆதினகர்த்தர்கள் ஈடுபடுவது புதுமையானதல்ல. எனினும் புரட்சியணிப் பாளையக்காரர்கள் இப்பணியில் முதன்மையாக ஈடுபட்டதைப் பார்க்கும் போது பொதுமக்களின் சமய உணர்வுகளைக் கூர்மைப்படுத்தி ஆர்க்காடு நவாபுக்கும் ஆங்கிலேயர்க்கும் எதிராக அணி திரட்டும் நோக்கம் இத்திருப்பணியின் பின்னணியில் இருந்திருக்கக் கூடும் என நம்மால் உணர முடிகிறது.

நமது ஊகத்துக்கு வலிமை சேர்க்கும் வகையில் ஒரு முன்னோடி நிகழ்வு நடந்துள்ளது. கி.பி. 1760 ஆம் ஆண்டில் நெற்கட்டுஞ் செவல் பாளையக்காரர் பூலித்தேவர், காஞ்சாகிபின்முற்றுக்கையிலிருந்து தப்பி இராமநாதபுரம் சீமைக்குச் சென்றார் என்று பாளையப்பட்டுகளின் வம்சாவளி தெரிவிக்கிறது. இக்கால கட்டத்தில் இராமநாதபுரம்

“ரிபெல் சேதுபதி” எனப்படும் முத்துராமலிங்க சேதுபதியுடன் சேர்ந்து, சைவ சமயத் திருத்தலங்களுள் காசிக்கு இணையாகச் சிறப்பித்துக் கூறப்படும் இராமேஸ்வரம் திருக்கோயிலின் திருச்சுற்றினைக் கட்டுவிக்கும் முயற்சியில் அவர் ஈடுபட்டார் என்று, பாலையப்பட்டுகளின் வம்சாவளியினைத் தொகுப்பித்த காலின் மெக்கன்சியின் ஒரு குறிப்பிலிருந்து நாம் ஊகித்தறிய முடிகிறது. (Asiatic Researches - Vol. VI Chapter XI Remarks on some antiquities on the west and south coasts of Ceylon written in the year 1796 by captain Colin Mekenzie P. 427 - Cosmos Publications, Delhi - 1972) எனவே திருச்செந்தூர்க் கோயில் மேலைக் கோபுரத் திருப்பணிக்குப் பின்னணியில் இத்தகைய அரசியல் நோக்கம் இருந்திருக்கலாம். மேலைக்கோபுர வாயிற் கதவில் செதுக்கப் பட்டுள்ள மரச் சிற்பங்களுள் ஒன்று ஒரு குதிரை வீரன் மற்றொரு குதிரை வீரனை வீழ்த்தும் காட்சியாகும். வீழ்த்துகின்ற குதிரை வீரன் கிரீடமும், வீழ்த்தப்படுகின்ற குதிரை வீரன் இஸ்லாமியப் பாணித் தொப்பியும் அணிந்திருப்பதாகச் சித்தரிக்கப்பட்டுள்ளனர்.

கோபுரத்தின் பத்தாவது தளத்தின் உட்புறத்தில் சுவர் ஓவியங்கள் உள்ளன. ஓவியங்கள் குறித்த விளக்கங்களும் வண்ணத்தால் எழுதப் பட்டுள்ளன. 1995ஆம் ஆண்டில் கோயில் திருக்குட நன்னீராட்டு நடைபெற்றபோது இவ்வோவியங்கள் சுண்ணாம்பு அடித்து மறைக்கப்பட்டுவிட்டன. சில இடங்களில் சுண்ணாம்பு உதிர்துள்ளதால் ஓவியத்தின் சில பகுதிகளும் எழுத்துக்களும் வெளியில் தெரிகின்றன. “மேலும் வளந்த படியினாலே ராசா வெகு வெதுந்த தோடே சுவாமி...” என்ற வாசகம் எழுதப்பட்டிருப்பது தெரிய வருகிறது. கந்தபுராணக் காட்சிகளாக இவ்வோவியங்கள் இருக்கக்கூடும். இவ்வோவியங்கள் முற்றிலும் வெளிப்படுத்தப்படும்போது மேலும் பல விவரங்கள் தெரிய வாய்ப்புள்ளது” என கல் வெட்டாய்வாளர் திரு. சி. இராமச்சந்திரன் ‘கல்வெட்டு’ என்ற திங்கள் இதழில் தனது ஆய்வுக் குறிப்பில் பதிவு செய்துள்ளார்.

‘உலகெங்கும் மேவிய தேவாலயந்தொடும் பெருமானே’

என்பார் அருணகிரி.

நக்கீரர் வாழ்த்திப் போற்றி வணங்கிய அறுபடை வீடுகளுள் முதலிடம் பெறுவது திருப்பரங்குன்றம்.

‘ஒரு கோடி முத்தம் தெள்ளிக் கொழிக்கும் கடல் செந்தில்’ என்று கடலைச் சூழும் திருசெந்திலையும் முதற்படை வீடாகக் கொள்வர். சீராக அலைவந்த கரையினைத் தழுவுவதால் சீரலைவாய் என்றும் பெயர் பெற்றது.

தென்னகத்துத் திருமுருகன் திருக்கோயில்களில் மிகப் பெரியது செந்தூர்.

விண்ணுயர்ந்த ஒன்பது கோபுரத் திருவாயில்கள் கொண்டது. செந்தூரின் திருக்கோபுரத்தின் ஒன்பது நிலைகளும் மனிதனது மலங்களின் ஒன்பது வாயில்களைக் குறிக்கும் என்பர் ஆகமத்துறை சார்ந்த ஆய்வாளர்கள்.

கடலைகள் தவழுகின்ற கடல் மணற் பரப்பினைத் தாண்டி உள்ள சந்தன மலைகளில் உருவாக்கப்பட்டது இத்திருக்கோயில். எனவேதான் ‘கந்தமாதன பர்வதம்’ என்றழைப்பர் வடமொழி நூலார்.

விநாயகப் பெருமானை வழிபட்டு மணற்மேட்டில் ஏறிச் சிறிது தூரம் நடந்தால் திருமுருகன் திருக்கோயிலின் நுழைவு வாயில் சேரலாம். நீண்ட அகன்ற மூன்று பிரகாரங்கள்.

வலம் வருகின்ற போது வள்ளியம்மன் குகை, வதனாரம்ப தீர்த்தம். வளாகத்திலுள்ள நாழிக்கிணறு போன்றவற்றை தரிசித்தும் நீராடியும் வரலாம்.

இரண்டாவது பிரகாரத்தில் கந்தவேள் சூரனைப் போரிலே வெற்றி கொண்ட காட்சி, கற்சிலை வடிவில் கண்கொள்ளாக் காட்சி தருவதையும் தரிசிக்க வேண்டும்.



தெற்கு வாசலில் உள்ள கணபதியும், கந்தவேள் திருத்தொண்டர் அருணகிரியின் திருவுருவச் சிலையும் வணங்கப்பட வேண்டியவை. தெற்கு வாசல் நெடுங்கதவு எப்போதும் மூடப்பட்டே இருக்கும்.

அடுத்து, மூலவர் திருச்சிலைக்கு வருவதற்கு முன், முதல் பிரகார வளாகத்தின் தென்திசை நோக்கித் தவமிருக்கும் தட்சிணாமூர்த்தி, வள்ளி, நடராஜர், சனீஸ்வரர், பைரவர் என்று வரிசையாக வழிபட்டும் துதித்தும் வருகின்ற போது - மத்தியில் பொன் தகடு வேய்ந்த நெடிதுயர்ந்த கொடிமரம் - மகாபலி பீடம் ஆகியன காட்சி தரும். அவற்றையும் வணங்கி மூலவர் கருவறை நோக்கிப் போகிறோம்.

ஒரு திருமுகம் - நான்கு திருக்கரங்கள் - வலப்புறம் சக்திவேல் ஏந்திய திருக்கரம், வரமளிக்கும் வரத முத்திரை பிடித்த மறுகரத்தில் ஏந்திய செந்தாமரை, இடது கை ஒன்றில் ருத்திராட்சமாலை மற்றது ஓயிலாக இடப்பில் பொருத்திய திருக்கோலம். இவன்தான் செந்தில்நாதன்.

தகப்பனை நோக்கித் தவமிருக்கும் கோலத்திலே காட்சி கொடுப்பதாலே கரத்திலே வேல் இல்லை.

திருஆபரண அலங்காரத் திருக்கோலத்தில் கரத்திலே வேலும் காலடியில் தங்கச் சீவிலியும் வெள்ளிச் சீவிலியும், குலிசப்படையும் பொருந்திக் காட்சி தருவான் செவ்வேள்.

செந்தில்நாதனது அபிஷேகங்களில் தலைசிறந்தது வீழ்தி அபிஷேகம். அந்தத் திருநீறாலேயே அவனை அலங்கரித்து அன்பர் களுக்குத் தீபாராதனை காட்டுகின்ற திருக்காட்சி நம்மை யெல்லாம் 'நாலாயிரம் கண் படைத்திலனே நான்முகனே இக் காட்சியைக் காண' எனக் கண்ணீர் கசிய வேண்டத் தோன்றும்.

அந்த அபிஷேக விபூதிப் பிரசாதம் தான் 'பத்திர விபூதிப் பிரசாதம்'. திருச்செந்தூர் செல்வோர் பத்திர விபூதிப் பிரசாதம் பெறாது வாரார்.

பன்னிரண்டு நரம்புகள் நெளிந்தோடும் பன்னீர் இலையில் திருநீற்றினை வைத்துக் கட்டித் தருவதுதான் பத்திர விபூதிப் பிரசாதம்.

செந்தில்நாதன் குடிகொண்டிருக்கும் செந்தூரைப் புகழ்ந்து பாடாத சங்க இலக்கியங்களே இல்லை.

சிங்கார வடிவேலனது இத்திருக்கோயில் முதன் முதலில் கல்மலை மீது 30 அடி உயரமுள்ள ஒரு பகுதியைக் குடைந்து செங்கற்களால் அடித்தளம் அமைத்துக் கட்டப்பட்டது.

பின்நாளில் தவத்திரு மௌனசுவாமி என்பவரால் திருப்பணி செய்யப்பட்டு தற்போது உள்ள திருக்கோயில் உருவாக்கப்பட்டது என்பது ஒரு வரலாற்றுக் குறிப்பு.

குறைகளையெல்லாம் தீர்த்தருளும் விநாயகப் பெருமான் கடற்கரைக் கோயிற் பாதையில் உள்ளார். அண்ணனை தரிசித்த பின்னரே வேலனைக் காண வேண்டும் என்பது மரபு. எனவேதான் தூண்டுகை விநாயகர் என்ற பெயரில், இளையவனாகிய கந்தவேளைக் காண வருகின்ற அடியவர்களுக்குத் தூண்டிக் காணிக்கும் திறமுடைய திருக்கோலத்தில் முதன்மையாய் வீற்றிருக்கின்றார். தூண்டுகை விநாயகப் பெருமான்.

வள்ளிநாயகி திருக்கோயில்

செந்திலாண்டவன் திருக்கோயில் வளாகத்திலுள்ள மூன்றாவது பிரகாரம் வெளிப்பிரகாரம். இது கடற்கரையைச் சுற்றி வலம் வருகிறது.

இப்பிரகாரத்தின் வடதிசையில் சிறிது தூரம் சென்றால் கடற்கரையைச் சேர்ந்தாற்போலே அமைந்த குன்று ஒன்றைக் காணலாம். அதைக் குடைந்து தான் வள்ளி நாச்சியாருக்குத் திருக்கோயில் அமைக்கப்பட்டுள்ளது.

உட்சுவரில் அர்த்த சித்திர வடிவில் உள்ள வள்ளியம்மையைக் கண்டு வழிபடலாம். இந்த இடத்திற்கு வள்ளி ஒளிந்த வளநாடு என்னும் பெயர் வழங்கப்படுகின்றது.

பாங்சாலங்குறிச்சி வீரத்தமிழன் வீரபாண்டிய கட்டபொம்மனின் தந்தையாகிய ஜெகவீரகட்டபொம்மன், செந்திலாண்டவனை குலதெய்வமாகக் கொண்டு ஒழுகிய மறவன். எனவேதான் கந்தவேளின் வீரமும் - தமிழ் நெஞ்சும் கட்டபொம்மனுக்கு வாய்த்தனவோ என எண்ணத் தோன்றுகின்றது.

செந்திலாண்டவனுக்கு உச்சிக்கால பூசை நிழ்ந்த பின்னர்தான் மதிய உணவை உட்கொள்ளும் விரதத்தைக் கைக்கொண்டவர் ஜெகவீரகட்டபொம்மனார்.

நடுப்பகல் பூஜை முடிந்தனைக் கண்டறிய - பாஞ்சாலங்குறிச்சியிலேயிருந்து செந்தூர் வரை உள்ள எண்பது கிலோ மீட்டர் இடைவெளி தூரத்தின் இடையிடையே, நகரா மண்டபங்கள் அமைத்து - அம்மண்டபங்களில் முரசுகளை முழங்கித் தெரிவிக்குமாறு ஆணை பிறப்பித்திருந்தார் ஜெகவீர கட்டபொம்மன் என்ற செய்தி ஒரு வரலாற்றுப் பதிவு.

இன்றைக்கும் அன்று முரசு முழங்கப்பட்ட மண்டபங்கள் சிதைந்த நிலையில் காணப்படுகின்றன.

தகப்பனைப்போலவே பாஞ்சாலங்குறிச்சிச்சிங்கம் செந்திலாண்டவன் மீது உயிரையே வைத்தவர்.

இத்திருக்கோயிலின் இரண்டாவது பிரகாரத்தில் உள்ள நிர்வாக அலுவலர் அலுவலகத்தில் கட்ட பொம்மனால் வாழ்நாளெல்லாம் பூசித்து வழிபட்ட சண்முகப் பெருமான் சிலை, இன்றைக்கும் ஒரு கண்ணாடிப் பேழையில் வைத்துப் பாதுகாக்கப்பட்டு வருகின்றது.

திருக்கோயில் முழுமையும் அழகிய ஓவியங்களும் கற்சிற்பங்களும் நிறையவே உள.

மூன்று பிரகாரங்களிலேயும் முறையே சித்தி விநாயகர், சகஸ்ரலிங்கம், சூர சங்காரர், ஆன்மநாதர், மனோன்மணியம்மை, பானுகேசுவரர், சோமசுந்தரர், மீனாட்சியம்மை , திருமூலநாதர், திருக்காளத்தி நாதர், உமா, அருணாசலேசுவரர், உண்ணாமலையம்மை, ஜம்பு கேசுவர, வன்மீக நாதர், அருணகிரி நாதர், வல்லப கணபதி ஆகியோரது திருச்சந்நதிகள் கண்டுகளித்து அருள் பெற அமைந்துள்ளன.

சூரசங்காரர் ஒரே கல்லில் கலைநயத்தோடு செதுக்கப்பட்டுக் காட்சி தருவது அன்றைய நாளின் சிற்பக் கலையின் நெடிதுயர்ந்த



வளர்ச்சிக்குச் சாட்சி சொல்லும் ஒரு முத்திரை. நமது கலையின் மகிமையை அறிவிக்கும் ஒரு பிரகடனம்.

இத்திருத்தலத்தில் வேங்கடத்துப் பெருமானுக்கும், சந்தான கிருஷ்ணனுக்கும் திருச்சபைகள் உள்ளன. வடபாகத்தில் பள்ளி கொண்டுள்ள திருவரங்கத்துப் பெருமாளையும் இங்கே பூசித்து வழிபட திருச்சந்நிதிகள் உண்டு.

வள்ளியம்மைக்கும் - தெய்வயானைக்கும் பளிங்குக் கற்களால் தனித்தனியே அமைந்த திருக்கோயில்கள் உள்ளன.

அருணகிரி - காரைக்கால் அம்மையார் - மாணிக்கவாசகர் முதலியோருக்கும் திருச்சந்நிதிகள் உண்டு.

தல வரலாறு

திருமுருகன் சூரபன்மன் மீது படையெடுத்து வருகின்ற போது, வழியில் எதிர்பட்ட தாரகாசுரனையும் அவனுக்குத் துணையாய் நின்ற கிரௌஞ்ச மலையையும் அழித்து வீழ்த்திவிட்டுத் தமது படைகளுடன் திருச்செந்தூரில் வந்து தங்குகிறார்.

இங்கு விசுவகர்மாவினால் வடிவமைக்கப்பட்ட திருக்கோயிலில் திருமுருகன் எழுந்தருளி - தேவகுருவாகிய வியாழ பகவானால் பூசிக்கப் பெற்று அசுரர்களின் வரலாறுகளைக் கேட்டு அறிந்தார்.

வியாழ பகவானால் பூசிக்கப்பட்ட காரணத்தாலே இத்தலம் புகழ்பெற்ற வியாழத் திருத்தலமாகவும் விளங்குகின்றது.

இத்தலத்திலிருந்து திருமுருகப் பெருமான் தனது படைவீரரான வீரபாகுத் தேவரை சூரபன்மனுக்கு அறிவுரைகள் கூறுமாறு தூது அனுப்பினார்.

ஆனால், ஆணவ மலத்தின் உச்சியிலே இருந்த சூரபன்மன் வீரபாகுத் தேவரின் அறிவுரையைச் செவிமடுத்தானில்லை. தூது பயன்றூப் போனதாலே முருகப் பெருமான் சூரபன்மன்மீது போர்தொடுக்கச் சென்றார்.

கடலில் மாமரமாக நின்ற சூரனைத் தம்முடைய வேலால் பிளந்து - மறக் கருணையாலே அவனையும் ஆட்கொண்டார். வெற்றிசூடித் தேவர்களையும் சிறை மீட்டுத் திரும்பி வந்து - இத்தலத்தில் தேவர்களது பூசையினை ஏற்றுக் கொண்டார்.

ஆகையினால்தான் இத்தலம் 'செயந்திபுரம்' என்று வழங்கப்பெற்று பின்னர் 'சாயந்தி', 'செந்தில்', 'செந்தூர்' என மருவிற்று.

அருள் மணக்கும் திருச்செந்தூர் திருத்தலம் தமிழ்நாட்டின் கிழக்குக் கடற்கரையில் - தூத்துக்குடி மாவட்டத்தில் உள்ளது.

சகலகலாவல்லிமாலை - மீனாட்சியம்மை பிள்ளைத் தமிழ் - முத்துக்குமாரசுவாமி பிள்ளைத் தமிழ் என்று அருள் மணம் கமழும் தித்திக்கும் தேன் தமிழில் பாடிய குமரகுருபரர் அருள் பெற்ற திருத்தலம்.

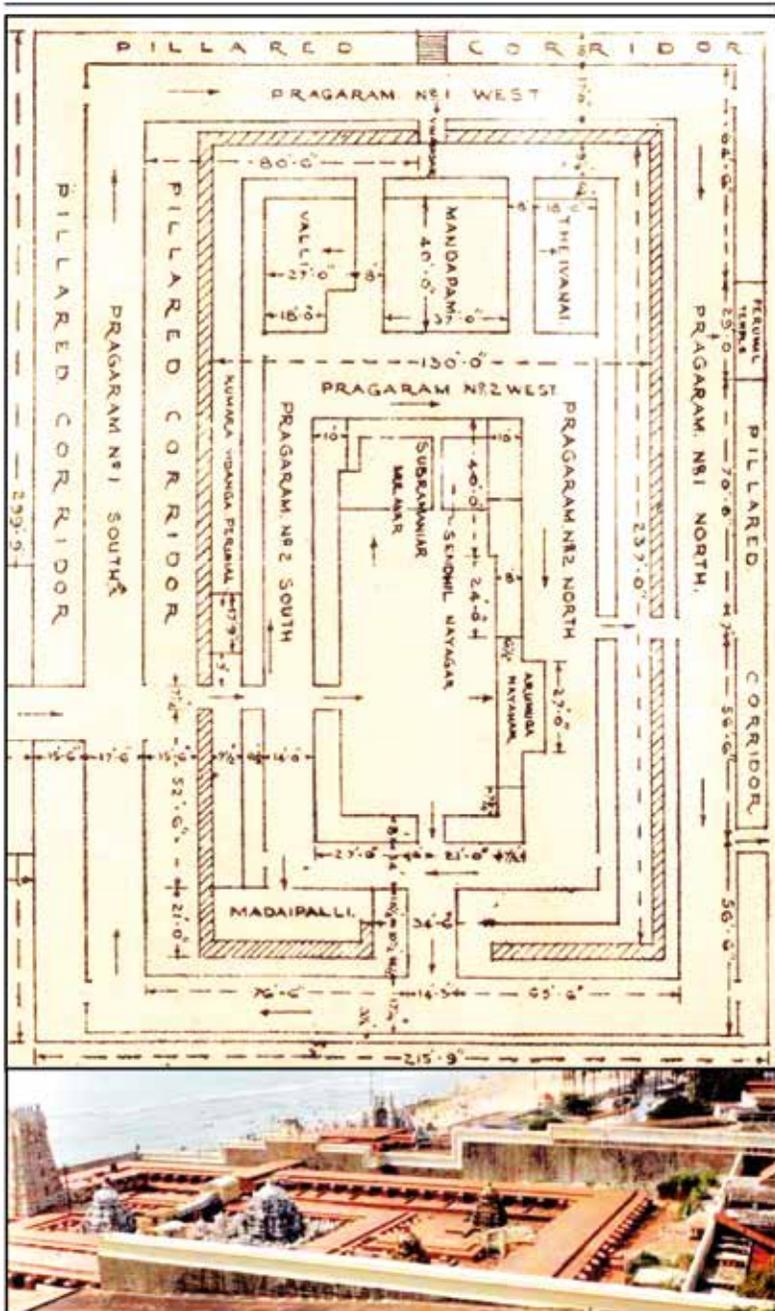
இத்தலத்தில் தான் ஊமையாகவே இருந்த பாலகன், செந்தூர் வந்து விரதம் இருந்து - முருகனைத் தரிசிக்க, செந்திலாண்டவன் குழந்தையை நோக்கி ஒரு 'பூ' வைக் காட்டிப் பேச வைத்தான்.

குழந்தையும் 'பூ' என்று முதல் சொல் பேசிற்று. 'பூமேவு செங்கமல' என்று செந்தமிழ்ச் சொல்லில் ஆரம்பித்து, கந்தர் கலிவெண்பா பாடி முடித்தது. அந்தக் குழந்தைதான் குமரகுருபரர்.

முகவை மாவட்டம் சதுர்வேதி மங்கலத்தைச் சார்ந்த பெரும் புலவர் பகழிக்கூத்தர். சிறந்த முருகபக்தர். வயிற்று நோயால் வாடி வதங்கிப் போனார்.

ஓர் இரவுப் பொழுதில் திருமுருகன் பகழிக் கூத்தரது கனவில் தோன்றி 'பிள்ளைத் தமிழ் பாடுக' எனப் பணித்தார்.

பெரும்புலவர் பகழியார் உடனே, 'திருச்செந்தூர் பிள்ளைத் தமிழ்' பாடி மகிழ்ந்தார்.



பாடி முடித்ததும் புலவரது வயிற்று நோயைத் தீர்த்தார் செந்திலாண்டவர்.

செந்திலாண்டவன்பதியிலே வாழ்ந்த ஒரு தேவதாசி திருமுருகனிடம் பக்தி கொண்டவள். நாள்தோறும் இத்திருக்கோயிலில் இரவில் செந்திலாண்டவன் மீது பாமாலைகளைப் பாடிப்பாடி பரமானந்தத்துடன் இறைவனைப் பள்ளியறைக்கு அனுப்புவித்து வழிபாடு முடித்த பின்னரே அவள் வீடு செல்வது வழக்கம்.

ஒரு நாள், அவள் திரும்பி வீடு செல்லும்போது, அவளது நகைகளைக் கவர்வதற்காகக் கள்வர்கள் இருவர் ஆயுதங்களுடன் பின்தொடர்ந்தனர்.

கள்வர்கள் பின்தொடருவதைக் கண்டறியாத பெருமாட்டி - தன் கையிலிருந்த வெற்றிலைக் காம்பைக் கிள்ளி - 'முருகா' என்று உச்சரித்த வண்ணம் எறிந்துவிட்டுத் தாம்பூலம் போட்டாள்.

கிள்ளி எறியப்பட்ட வெற்றிலைக் காம்பு, வேலாக மாறி, கள்வர்களை மாய்த்ததாக ஒரு வரலாறும் இத்திருக்கோயில் பற்றிப் பேசப்படுவது உண்டு.

இத்திருக்கோயிலின் முன் அமைந்துள்ள சண்முக விவாச மண்டபத்தின் அருகிலுள்ள கடற்கரைத் தீர்த்தம் 'வதனாரம்ப தீர்த்தம்' என்று வழங்கப்படுகின்றது.

கடற்கரைத் தீர்த்தத்தில் நீராடிப் பின்னர் கந்தபுட்கரணியாகிய நாழிக் கிணற்றில் நீராடி - விபூதி பூசி - செந்திலாண்டவனைத் தரிசிப்பது சிறப்பு.

இத்தலத்துத் திருக்கோயிலின் அருகில் கடற்கரையோரமாகவே இருபத்திநான்கு தீர்த்தங்கள் இருப்பதாகவும் - அவை காயத்ரி மந்திரத்தின் இருபத்து நான்கு எழுத்துகளையும் குறிப்பதாகவும் கூறப்படுகிறது.

மகாதேவபாலன் - தேவதேவன் - ஷண்முகன் போன்ற அமரர்களுக்குக் கோவில் கட்டுவித்துத் திருப்பணிகள் செய்த பேறு பெற்ற புண்ணியர்கள்தான் எத்தனை எத்தனை பேர்!

ஆதியில் அரக்கர் வதம் முடித்த கந்தனுக்கு அமரர் உலகச் சிற்பி 'மயன் ஆலயம் அமைத்தான். கடல் ஓரத்தில் கந்தமாதன பர்வதத்தில் செந்நிறமணற் குன்று (Marine Calcarius) குகை ஒன்று குடைந்து கோவில் எடுத்தான். அமரர் உலகே ஆறுமுகனை வந்து வணங்கியது.

செந்தூர் ஆலயத்திற்குக் காலங்காலமாகத் தமிழ் வேந்தர்கள் சேரனும், பாண்டியனும் திருப்பணி பல செய்துள்ளனர்.

வரகுணபாண்டியன், மாறவர்மன் சுந்தரபாண்டியன், உதய மார்த்தாண்ட வர்மன் போன்ற முடிமன்னர்களும் கட்டபொம்மன், திருமலைநாயக்கர் போன்ற சிற்றரசர்கள் பலரும் செய்த திருப்பணியை முற்றும் துறந்த துறவிகள் சிலரும் தொடர்ந்தனர்.

மௌன ஸ்வாமிகள், காசி ஸ்வாமிகள், தேசிக மூர்த்தி ஸ்வாமிகள் இவர்கள் திருச்செந்தூர் ஆண்டவன் திருப்பணியையே உயிர்ப் பணியாகக் கொண்டு வாழ்ந்த பெருமக்கள்.

கோலமயிலேறும் செவ்வேள் அடியார்களுக்குக் காட்டியருளிய திருவிளையாடல்கள், அதிசயங்கள் எத்தனை, எத்தனையோ!

திருவாவடுதுறை மடத்தைச் சேர்ந்த ஒடுக்கத்தம்பிரான் தேசிக மூர்த்தி ஸ்வாமிகளின் கனவில் வந்து கோபுரம் கட்ட கட்டளை இட்டான் கந்தப் பெருமான்.

அதற்கு வேண்டிய செல்வம் இல்லாமையால் வருந்திய தம்பிரான், கோபுர வேலை செய்யும் தொழிலாளர்களுக்கு அன்றாடக் கூலியாகக் கையில் ஒரு சிட்டிகை திருநீறு கொடுத்தார். சிறிது தூரம் சென்ற பணியாளர்கள் வியந்து தங்கள் கையைப் பிரித்துப் பார்க்கையில் வெள்ளிப் பணமாக மாறி இருந்தது.

செந்திலாதிபதியனே திருவுளங் கொண்டு வானளாவிய ஒன்பது நிலைகளுடன் கூடிய கோபுரத்தைக் கட்டுவித்தான் என்பதும் ஒரு வரலாறு .

17ஆம் நூற்றாண்டில் டச்சு நாட்டுக் கடல் கொள்ளையர் திருச் செந்தூர்க் கோவிலைச் சூறையாடி ஆறுமுக நயினார் விக்ரகத்தையும் திருடிக் கப்பலில் ஏற்றிச் சென்றனர்.

சிறிது நேரத்தில் நடுக்கடலில் மழையும், புயலும் இடியுமாக இயற்கை சீற்றம் தொடங்கியது.

இயற்கையின் சீற்றத்தைத் தாங்க முடியாத கப்பலின் மாலுமித் தலைவன், 'இந்தச் சிலையினால் தான் இப்புயல்' எனப் பயந்து விக்ரகத்தைக் கடலில் தள்ளிவிட்டான்.

நாயக்க மன்னரின் திருநெல்வேலி பிரதிநிதியும், சிறந்த முருக பக்தரான வடமலையப்ப பிள்ளை , ஆறுமுக நயினார் சிலை திருடப்பட்டதை அறிந்து வேதனையால் துடித்தார்.

அதைப்போன்றே மற்றொரு சிலையமைக்க முயன்ற பிள்ளை யவர்களின் கனவில் முருகன் தோன்றி, தான் கடலில் கிடப்பதாகவும், தான் கிடக்கும் இடத்தில் அலைமேல் அறுபட்ட கயிறும், எலுமிச்சம் பழமும் மிதந்து கொண்டு இருக்குமென்றும், மேலே ஆகாயத்தில் கருடன் வட்டமிட்டுக் கொண்டிருக்கும் என்றும் அறிவித்தார்.

மனம் மகிழ்ந்த வடமலையப்பர் தோணிகளில் ஆட்களுடன் கடலுள், குறிப்பிட்ட இடத்தை அடைந்தார். கடலில் குதித்தார். கடலின் ஆழம் முட்டளவே இருந்தது. வியந்தார். விதிர்விதிர்ந்துத் தேடிப் பார்த்ததில் முதலில் கிடைத்தது நடராஜர் விக்ரகம். (காரைக்கால் அருகில் திருநள்ளார் எனும் தலத்லிருந்து கொள்ளையர் கொண்டு சென்றது) மறுபடியும் தேடவே ஆறுமுக நயினார் சிலை கிடைத்தது. மறுபடியும் சிலைகள் பிரதிஷ்டை செய்யப்பட்டன. இது நடந்தது 1653ஆம் வருஷம். இதுவும் ஒரு வரலாற்றுக் குறிப்பு.

அலைவாய்த் திருவிழாக்கள்

திருச்செந்தூரில் நடைபெறும் பல திருவிழாக்களில் ஆவணி, புரட்டாசி, ஐப்பசி, மாசி மாதங்களில் மக்களால் மகேஸ்வரனைக் குளிர்விக்கக் கொண்டாடும் திருவிழாக்களும் உண்டு.

ஆவணித் திங்களின் திருவிழாவின் ஏழாம் நாள் விழா ஓர் ஒப்பற்ற பெருவிழா. பிரம்மா, விஷ்ணு , உருத்திரன், மகேசுவரன், சதாசிவன் என்னும் பஞ்சமூர்த்திகளாக இருந்து படைத்தல், காத்தல், அழித்தல், மறைத்தல், அருளுதல் ஆகிய அரும்பெரும் ஐந்தொழில்களையும் நிகழ்த்தி, வையகத்தை வாழ வைப்பதை உணர்த்தும் வகையில் செந்திலாண்டவர் அன்பர்களுக்குக் காட்சி கொடுப்பார்.

இவ்விழாவில் பெருமான் தங்கச்சப்பரத்தில் வீதி உலா வருவது கண்கொள்ளா இன்பப் பெருங்காட்சி.

இதில் சிறப்பு, பெருமான் முன்புறத்தில் ஆறுமுகத் தோற்றத்திலும், பின்புறத்தில் தில்லை நாயகன் திருக்கோலமான நடராஜராகவும் காட்சி கொடுப்பார்.

திருமுருகனது அவதாரப் பெருமைகளை விளக்குகின்ற வகையில் நடைபெறும்.

சூரபன்மனை போர்த் தொடுத்து அழித்து ஆட்கொண்ட திருவிழாதான் கந்தசஷ்டித் திருவிழா சிறப்பான திருவிழா.

கந்தசஷ்டி விழாவில் சூரசம்காரத்திற்காகச் செந்திலாண்டவன் கடற்கரை ஓரமாக உலாச் செய்யும்போது - கடலும் சற்று பின் வாங்கிச் செல்லும் என்று கூறப்படுகிறது.

வடக்குக் கோபுரத்தையடுத்து வெளிச்சுற்று வடமேற்கு மூலையில் தனிமுருகன் கோயில் ஒன்று உள்ளது. இக்கோயிலில் சுப்பிரமணியப் பிள்ளையார் என்ற பெயரோடு திருமுருகன் அழைக்கப்படுகின்றான். திருவுருவம் மிகப் பெரியது.

மயில் மீது ஆறுமுகமும், பன்னிரு கரங்களுடன் இருபெரும் தேவிகளுடனும் கொலுவீற்றிருக்கின்ற திருக்காட்சி அற்புதமாயிருக்கும். இம் முருகனுக்குப் பங்குனி உத்திரத்திருவிழா மிகச் சிறப்புடன் நடைபெறும்.

நாட்பூசைக்கும் - திருவிழாக்கும் வேண்டிய நிவந்தங்கள் திருவாவடுதுறை ஆதினத்தால் செய்யப்பட்டு பரிபாலிக்கப்படுவது ஒரு சிறப்பான செய்தி.

சிற்ப வேலைப்பாடுகளுடன் ஒரு தேர் போலே செய்யப்பட்டு, கல் உருளைகள் கட்டி யானைகளைப் பூட்டி இழுப்பது போல அமைத்திருப்பது ஓர் ஒப்பற்ற திருக்காட்சி.

மாறவர்மன் சுந்தர பாண்டியன் முதன் முதலாக இத்திருக்கோயிலுக்குத் திருப்பணி செய்வித்தான் என்றெல்லாம் பல செய்திகளை - இக்கோயிலில் உள்ள கல்வெட்டால் தெரிந்து கொள்ள முடிகிறது.

‘பன்னிரு கரத்தாய் போற்றி

பசும்பொன்மா மயிலாய் போற்றி

முன்னிய கருணையாறு

முகப்பரம் பொருளே போற்றி

கன்னியர் இருவர் நீங்காக்

கருணைவா ரிதியே போற்றி

என்னிரு கண்ணே கண்ணுள்

இருக்கும்மாமணியே போற்றி’

- திருச்செந்தூர் தல புராணம்



Everyone has a history.

Dr. Ratnam Niththyanathan, known to all as Nithy,
has a tale to tell that is in equal measure colourful,
inspiring and moving.

From a Sri Lankan village to 1960s London,
from life as a pioneering scientist to
head of the best Tamil school in Britain,
from tsunami relief to Eton's famous quadrangle,
he writes with wit and charm.

He recounts his story as accurately
as his memory permits,
and never fails to thank all those
who have helped him climb life's ladder.

The most enjoyable part of his life
remains the charity work he has
carried out for four decades ...
as well, of course, as his beloved grandchildren.

