I spent close to two years reading and re-reading Shehan Karunatilaka’s Chinaman for the purposes of my thesis, and so it took me a while to muster the strength to tackle his latest novel Chats With The Dead. It was not because I had a particular quarrel with the author or his debut novel. It was simply a case of too-bloody-much. Upon recovering from the sheer trauma of my academic venture, however, and months and months after his latest release, I decided to brave it and found myself glad for several reasons; the first being that I had the pleasure of witnessing the evolution of a writer in my own lifetime, and the second, for reasons I did not expect: a strange catharsis. But more on that later.

While I will not say that this is the most stupendous literary feat in the history of literature or pass other such hyperbolic statements, I will say that it is far better and more mature than its predecessor and as far as Sri Lankan Anglophone literature is concerned, it is as good as it gets.

“Where Chinaman was a tad verbose, indulgent and even saggy, Chats With The Dead is sharp and snappy. It gets to the point without too many digressions, is well-paced and structurally concise, and, most importantly, showcases Karunatilaka’s evolution as a writer who is not merely satirical but also sensitive.”

The book also, in my humble opinion, responds well to the pressures of an orientalist literary market.

To tick the boxes (Karunatilaka style):

Would I recommend this book to someone? Yes.

Would I recommend its predecessor? Yes.

Would I recommend this book as a fine example of Sri Lankan Anglophone literature? Yes.

Would I put Karunatilaka at the forefront of the Sri Lankan Anglophone pantheon? Yes.

Is it about Sri Lanka? Yes (and perhaps even too much so).

Is the world building any good? Yes, yes, and yes.

Let us stay clear of spoilers and start with the world building. Chats With The Dead shares much with Chinaman, so if you have read the latter, you will find yourself immersed in a similar world with similar rules — nothing, for instance, is as straightforward as it seems, not the truth, nor even lies.

Sri Lanka, as Karunatilaka presents it, is a shadow-world that operates on its own quixotic set of rules. There is the usual gripe that we have heard every uncle under the sun utter, and which is often passed as universal wisdom: that all politicians are corrupt, all cops are bastards, everything politics touches is soiled etc. And then there is a set of familiar characters: I. E. Kugarajah makes a (prominent) reappearance, as does Jonny Gilhooley. Even Ari and Wije pop in a few times (although they are merely referenced, but never explicitly named). It is a familiar world, except inversed. If there was any doubt that Mother Lanka was home to a noxious underworld — in this case a truly local Tartarus — there is none now. Karunatilaka takes the familiar and frustrating world of the living and dexterously charts it onto the world of the dead: the underworld is as hierarchical and demonic as the above-world, and worst of all, it is also so damn bureaucratic. But even the bureaucracy is ambiguous, giving you the sense of a world with no rules. There is no escape from meaningless structure (meant to give life meaning and structure), and death is as senseless and as violent as life. The only way to navigate the Thanatos of Sri Lanka is with a heady dose of black humour.

“It is a familiar Karunatilaka-verse, except expanded, and this is where I feel the book ought to be commended.”

The mythology is familiarly Sri Lankan but it does not feel contrived, touristy or orientalist: rather, Karunatilaka thoroughly workshops this world to the point where it feels lived in, even real. I have no trouble believing that Mahakalis or pretas exist. In fact, I do not think I would mind so long as the yakas do not come with tourist-board-endorsed accents and ye olde frangipani cliches, which, thankfully, they do not.

The book, to elaborate, is decidedly hyperlocal, just as Chinaman is. Neither Chinaman nor Chats With The Dead set out to explain in excruciating and minute detail what Sri Lanka is; you will not find italics or definitions, there is no attempt to mark out “local” words and make them more palatable for a global audience, nor does the book attempt to tame and cage the strange beast that is Sri Lankan English.

Its hyperlocality works two ways; on one hand, there is a tendency to lean on stock Sri Lankanisms, which can get exceedingly annoying after a while. There are only so many references to Sri Lankanisms such as elephants and King Buvenekabahu III before the similes and analogies get tiresome and feel a tad overwrought. On the other hand, the book reads like a map that requires a certain intimacy with all things Sri Lankan to be fully appreciated and understood. Anyone standing outside may get lost in the hair-raising tuk tuk ride (and this is my attempt at a ‘Sri Lankan’ analogy) that the book is. There is little to no reductive attempt at explaining life in Mother Lanka, nor an attempt at boiling this life down into a concentrated syrup of orientalist clichés. There certainly are garrulous characters (with the exception of Jaki, who says it best with an eloquent ‘OK’), who pontificate endlessly, regurgitating uncle-isms and received, hacked wisdom. Yet, there is also a sense that Karunatilaka is poking fun at it, using the chaos of his universe to laugh at the absurdity of small talk, pained justifications, human speech and human lives in general. That said, while the world may appear hyperlocal, its tight structure and pacing lends the book considerable cohesion, preventing the reader from losing the narrative thread.

“If there is a tendency in Sri Lankan Anglophone literature to focus on the country’s collective trauma, such as riots, bombings, the war, the tsunami etc, there is a similar instinct here and yet, it is my contention that the book does not narrowly focus on a single subject but straddles multiple foci to weave a living picture of what it means to live (and die) in Sri Lanka.”

You could read it as an indictment of politics and the ugliness of war, or of Victorian sexual mores that the country has adopted with an unyielding zest (the protagonist, for instance, identifies as gay, and there is no such thing as being openly gay in Sri Lanka), or, as I prefer it, as an unexpected and heart-rending story of love in all its iterations and complexity. There is much you can say about sexuality, politics, and war but I would like to argue that neither are the crutch for at the core are personal relationships, which is where Karunatilaka’s strength and evolution as a writer show. There is no doubt that Chinaman has all these elements too, but Chinaman did not make me shed a tear. I did not find myself attached to Ari and Wije as I was to Jaki and DD, and I did not miss the former duo as much as I missed and even related to the latter. All this Karunatilaka manages without recourse to cloying sentiment or emotionally-charged language; the absence of emotion, in fact, is what makes you pause and look back at all the relationships you took for granted, at all the people you never got to say goodbye to and at how we are all fundamentally flawed. And while the book’s prose itself can be described as prosaic and has not seen much of an evolution, from this simple and yet poignant feat of writing, I felt something I have not felt a long time in my readings: catharsis. The book stayed with me, it made me think of all the Jakis and DDs of my life. Although the dead eventually let go, I found it hard to let go of Jaki and DD and the tinge of sadness that settles in at the end of the book. There is, of course, no real answer to life after death and other existential questions that the book poses (nor should one expect it of any book or person), but there is a painful reminder of mortality, human fallibility and human stupidity that lingers. And that, in my opinion, is the mark of a good book.

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Snowden's Guardian Angels At Risk

The Sri Lankans and Filipino who sheltered whistleblower Edward Snowden in 2013 are in fear of being locked up in immigration detention centres and separated from their children. Read more on Roar Reports.

Posted by Roar Reports on 19 मे 2017

In the wake of the Hong Kong government’s rejection of their asylum claims late last week, the Sri Lankans and Filipino who sheltered whistleblower Edward Snowden in 2013 are in fear of being locked up in immigration detention centres and separated from their children.

The Sri Lankans—Supun Kellapatha and Nadeeka Nonis, along with their two children and Ajith Pushpakumara—and Filipina Vanessa Rodel and her daughter had sheltered former NSA contractor Edward Snowden in their homes when he was on the run from the American government for leaking information about their illegal civilian surveillance programmes. Following the exposure last year of the crucial role they played in sheltering him, they have faced a series of trials and tribulations at the hands of the Hong Kong government, culminating in the rejection of their asylum claims. With the Canadian government yet to respond to their appeal for asylum in Canada, time is running out for the families.

Speaking to Roar, Robert Tibbo, the lawyer representing both Snowden and the asylum seekers, claimed that the Hong Kong government’s decisions were “prejudicial”, “completely unreasonable”, and “weren’t made in good faith.”

He explained that the screenings were rushed, incomplete, and grossly unfair, and took place when Tibbo was out of the country and therefore unable to represent his clients. Both Kellapatha and Nonis did not receive a proper screening, while Pushpakumara was asked a few superficial questions. He added that Rodel’s screening took place not in person, but entirely in writing. “Not one question was asked about the welfare of the children, or about the children’s own refugee cases . The children’s cases were never screened,” he said. Kellapatha and Nonis’s two children and Rodel’s daughter are all stateless.

When asked if any of his other clients had also been screened and denied asylum, Tibbo said, “Of all my clients, more than 50 of them, only those who assisted Mr. Snowden have been targeted and screened—no one else.”

Currently, Tibbo is in the process of appealing against the decision. But he is concerned that the time frame he has been allowed—of two weeks, ending May 25—is too restrictive. “I need more than 13 days to file the seven appeals. I am going to need another month or a month and a half, and will be asking for an extension to put together a comprehensive appeal,” he told Roar.

Tibbo and his clients, however, are concerned that if the haphazard screening process is anything to go by, the appeal may not be in their favour. “Looking at how [the] Immigration [Department] has behaved in this highly prejudicial manner, we’re concerned that the appeal board may do the same,” Tibbo said. “We’re worried that the government may just reject their appeals without allowing them to be heard, and will detain and try to remove them from the country,” he added.

The families fear that they will be forced to be separated from their children if the immigration department decides to detain them. The children will be sent to either government facilities or foster homes, while the adults will be sent to immigration detention centres, which Tibbo explains are essentially prisons, where they will possibly be held indefinitely or removed from the country. “They will only be able to see, and be reunited with their children, on the airplane back home,” he said.

Returning home, however, is not an option. Tibbo highlights how all four adults had fled varying levels of persecution and torture in their respective countries—and that returning home would only endanger their lives once again.

“Pushpakumara was caught by the military for desertion in 2012. There were no legal proceedings, he was never given a lawyer or brought before a military tribunal. The military took him to a special facility and tortured him for 10 days, to the point where he almost lost his life,” said Tibbo. He added that he was certain that once Pushpakumara returns to Sri Lanka, he will be detained, questioned, and handed over to the military. Tibbo fears that Pushpakumara, too, will join the ranks of Sri Lanka’s disappeared.

The picture is just as bleak for Kellapatha, who escaped political persecution, and for Nonis and Rodel, who escaped gender persecution. In Nonis’s case, Tibbo explains, she was “being exploited by some powerful people in Sri Lanka” and that the authorities were unable to provide her with the protection she needed. Rodel, too, escaped from her captors in the Philippines where she was “trafficked, and in a position of servitude.”

Despite being hard up themselves, it was the open-heartedness of the asylum seekers that ensured Snowden’s safety once the leaks went public. Ever since their role in sheltering him was exposed in Oliver Stone’s movie Snowden, Snowden himself has been campaigning for a more humane treatment of the families. In a video uploaded recently on the website, For The Refugees, Snowden explains the importance of understanding who the asylum seekers are—as people. “These are good people driven from their homes by torture, rape, abuse, blackmail and more, and in circumstances that are really difficult for us to imagine. These are documented, these aren’t allegations, these are facts,” he states.

Addressing their rejected claims for asylum, he goes on to say that although it isn’t clear who is behind it, it would appear that someone within the Hong Kong government wants to repatriate these families, despite the consequences. “…if the Minister of Security in Hong Kong, Lai Tung-kwok, allows it to happen, it should be seen as the defining moment of his career. Maybe we’re wrong, and he will… work to get these families immediately resettled and protected, whether in Hong Kong, Canada or somewhere else. But hope is not enough, and with stakes so high we can’t take chances.”

Meanwhile, a spokesman for Hong Kong’s security bureau, speaking to the South China Morning Post, denied that the Immigration Department targets any claimants, and added that the Department would continue to expedite the almost 9,000 pending asylum claims. He further stated that they would only accept claims that have “substantial grounds for believing that the claimant would be in danger of being subjected to torture or such other risks as cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment” in their country of origin.

Hong Kong has a near negligible rate of acceptance for refugees in general—the figure stands dismally at 0.7% and below, a fact that Tibbo and his clients are only too aware of. Their only hope lies in an appeal or in the high court, says Tibbo. “The Hong Kong government has signed legal agreements and has a constitution, but it pays superficial notice to both constitutional and international legal obligations when it comes to asylum seekers and refugees,” he said.

As Lakshan Dias, leading refugee lawyer and chairperson of Transparency International’s Sri Lankan Chapter explains, legally speaking, the asylum seekers are well within their rights to have left their countries. “There is nothing called leaving your country illegally if your government fails to look after you. If it fails to guarantee your security, or treat you as a first class citizen, and if you are under persecution and have well-founded fears of persecution, you are internationally and legally entitled to go and seek asylum in any other country in the world,” he said.

Where Sri Lanka is concerned, however, Dias cautions that although it may not have been illegal for them to leave the country due to persecution, the powers that be at home may not share that sentiment. “The Sri Lankan hegemony considers them to be traitors. Although the current government may not feel that way, there are still the security forces and various state departments that are part of this mindset. So once they return, the security forces like the CID, TID, and the police may harass them, treat them like traitors and arrest, detain, investigate or interrogate them,” he said.

Despite the geographical distance, the threat posed by the Sri Lankan police is still real to the Sri Lankan asylum seekers. As reported earlier, Tibbo and the Sri Lankan asylum-seeking community in Hong Kong believe that the Sri Lankan police were investigating Kellapatha, Nonis, Pushpakumara, and the two children, towards the end of last year. Although the Sri Lankan police has denied this, this incident has sparked fresh fears in the 250+ strong Sri Lankan asylum seeker community in Hong Kong.

Responding to Roar, the Sri Lankan government asserted that no requests had been made to any party seeking the return of these asylum seekers. “[They] obviously went to a certain country to seek asylum. It is that particular country that decides whether the asylum claims should be granted or not,” said Mahishini Colonne, spokesperson for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

For the asylum seekers, Hong Kong’s decision is crushing. In an interview with the South China Morning Post, Kellapatha said: “We are now in fear. We can’t sleep at night. We don’t know what might happen to us tomorrow.”

Until Hong Kong accepts their appeal, or the Canadian government comes to their rescue and grants them asylum, their fates hang in the balance.

To find out more about how you can help, visit www.fortherefugees.com. To find out more about the lives of the asylum seekers who sheltered Snowden, check out Roar’s previous coverage of the issue.

Stay tuned to Roar Reports for more updates.

Featured image courtesy South China Morning Post

When Oliver Stone’s movie Snowden premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival in September 2016, it offered viewers a humanised glimpse into the man behind one of the world’s most significant data leaks – while also, inadvertently perhaps, exposing the people who gave him refuge in Hong Kong after the story broke.

It is no longer a secret that those who sheltered Snowden were themselves asylum seekers living in the poorest sections of affluent Hong Kong. Snowden’s lawyer, Robert Tibbo, was confident that the crowded and poverty-stricken slums would be the last place anyone would look – and until the movie forced these asylum seekers into the public eye, not a soul, apart from Snowden, his lawyers, and the asylum seekers themselves, had the faintest idea that the crumbling facades of the towering lower-income housing complexes held such a secret.

Since then, the asylum seekers – a Sri Lankan couple (Supun Kellapatha and Nadeeka Nonis) with two children, a Sri Lankan man (Ajith Pushpakumara), and a Filipino woman (Vanessa Rodel) and her child – have attracted much media attention and global curiosity. International media channels buzzed with videos, photos, and articles on the brave asylum seekers, while local Sri Lankan media remained largely silent, mostly content with republishing stories written by international media.

Their open-heartedness, however, seems to have come at a price – the Hong Kong government, according to the legal representatives of the three families, has expedited the deportation process, which Snowden called “irregular, immediate deportation hearings.”

HK Migration says the refugees who aided me must face irregular, immediate deportation hearings this week. Details: https://t.co/3WalvUEb3X

— Edward Snowden (@Snowden) March 22, 2017

At a press conference held in Montreal on March 22, Marc-André Séguin, President of For the Refugees, pointed out that while their clients entered Hong Kong “separately and years apart from one another,” the letters from the Hong Kong authorities about the deportation hearings “all came within a few hours of the March 9 press conference” (where it was announced that the asylum seekers have applied for asylum to Canada).

Séguin further states that it is evident that his clients are “specifically targeted by Hong Kong’s immigration authorities, who are actively trying to get our clients out of its territory and back to their home countries, where they will be apprehended, tortured or killed.”

Robert Tibbo, who represents both Snowden and the asylum seekers who sheltered him, explains that until recently, the Hong Kong government has, for the most part, ignored his clients’ cases, and that the rushed asylum screenings were “on short notice,” and were “extremely brief and incomplete”, and took place while Tibbo was in Europe, unable to represent his clients.

“All the three families’ cases are uncertain and are in limbo,” explains Tibbo, adding that “there is a real risk their cases could be rejected in the next few weeks.”

For the asylum seekers, it would seem that Oliver Stone’s movie complicated an already complicated life. Fleeing their countries of origin for various reasons including political persecution and torture, their lives have seen much turmoil since coming into the limelight.

Speaking to Roar, Robert Tibbo explained that a third party had disclosed the information to Oliver Stone. “We realised that when the film comes out, the media and the governments of the world will start focusing on me and my clients,” he said.

To mitigate the eventuality that all his clients would be targeted, and to ensure that the world saw them for who they were – as human beings who opened their “doors and hearts” to Snowden, despite having so little – they decided that they had no choice but to go public. “We wanted to ensure that there was a high level of transparency. If there was a lack of transparency, someone could possibly do something bad to my clients,” Tibbo explained.

Since coming into public focus, however, the asylum seekers have had to deal with several difficulties, including having to move houses several times – for both safety reasons, and because of the media knocking on their doors day and night. According to Tibbo, however, the process of moving his clients to safety was far from smooth. When Filipino asylum seeker Vanessa Rodel, with whom Snowden stayed briefly, approached the International Social Services (ISS) and explained her predicament to them, the ISS began questioning her about Snowden – and when she refused to comply, they informed her that they would not be paying her electricity bill.

Given that asylum seekers in Hong Kong cannot seek employment and face 22 months imprisonment if caught violating this rule, and given that the monetary assistance afforded to these asylum seekers is meagre to begin with, such threats are significant in making already abject conditions worse.

Vanessa returned to the ISS a week later to insist that she had to move out for the safety of her five-year-old daughter (who is stateless) and herself. She explained that the flat adjacent to hers was occupied by five mainland Chinese prostitutes, and that apart from the media banging on her door, she also had to contend with customers of the prostitutes outside her house. The ISS, however, informed her that if she moved, she would lose her deposit and would not receive one for her next home. They also said that they would be cutting off all assistance. Since November 2016, Vanessa and her daughter have been surviving exclusively on the funds provided by various crowdfunding campaigns – the Hong Kong government has not been providing her any assistance, Tibbo claims.

The plight of the Sri Lankan couple, Supun and Nadeeka, with their two children (one aged five, the other barely a year old, both stateless) is no different from Vanessa’s. After their role in sheltering Snowden was exposed, the Sri Lankan couple, too, were reportedly questioned by the ISS about Snowden, and, because they didn’t comply, their appeals for an increase in state assistance went ignored. Their request to move houses, too, was unheeded.

Since November last year, Supun and Nadeeka’s five-year-old daughter has also been unable to attend to school. The local Chinese school she had been attending kept her out, and was hounding the family for money. Tibbo explains that although the Education Bureau in Hong Kong had agreed to pay the school fees, they had failed to do so.

Tibbo is certain that his clients are being targetted and persecuted by the Hong Kong government – the living conditions they are subject to amounts to a long-term violation of human rights, violating Article 7 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), and the unexpected fast track screening of his clients, he asserts, is clearly designed to deport them, amounting to a lack of state protection, and a loss of liberty.

According to an article published by Al Jazeera, “ISS declined to comment on Rodel and Kellapatha’s allegations or their individual cases. Connie Hui, a press relations manager with ISS, told Al Jazeera that, ‘humanitarian assistance will be given in accordance with the current eligibility criteria’, in reference to asylum seekers who come to them.”

If living in penury and limbo, and being the target of the host country’s government wasn’t enough, there are fears among the Sri Lankan asylum-seeking community in Hong Kong that the Sri Lankan Criminal Investigations Department (CID) had been on the ground around November-December 2016, investigating and targeting a number of Sri Lankan refugees, including the Sri Lankan asylum seekers who sheltered Snowden.

“Once we became aware of the activities of the CID in Hong Kong, we had the three families immediately moved from their homes into new safe locations,” Tibbo said, adding that his clients have “a well-founded fear of persecution in Hong Kong by both the Hong Kong and Sri Lankan governments,” and that “there is a lack of state protection by the Hong Kong government.”

Additionally, in October 2016, the relatives of the asylum seekers, back in Sri Lanka, were reportedly “questioned, harassed, and threatened” by the Sri Lankan government, the CID, and the Sri Lankan military. “The Sri Lankan families in Sri Lanka are distressed by these incidents,” Tibbo states. “They were asked about or threatened to disclose the asylum seekers in Hong Kong, their whereabouts, their contact details, as well as the contacts and details of their friends.”

The Sri Lanka Police has, however, denied all such allegations. Police Spokesperson, DIG Priyantha Jayakody, told Roar that “we categorically deny all such allegations. We have repeatedly emphasised that their lawyer [Tibbo] is spreading baseless allegations against the Sri Lanka Police to get undue support from the Hong Kong government. We deny the involvement of the CID in Hong Kong, and repeat that only one ASP attended an Interpol conference in Hong Kong. He is the only officer who visited Hong Kong on behalf of the Sri Lankan Police on official duty. They are asylum seekers, why should we harass them?”

Jayakody further denied that the Sri Lanka Police has had contact with the asylum seekers’ families in Sri Lanka. “This is completely purposeless, we absolutely deny this. They were not questioned, threatened, or harassed in any way whatsoever,” he said.

Returning to Sri Lanka, however, is not an option for most of the Sri Lankan asylum seekers who sought refuge in Hong Kong. Tibbo reveals that there is a significant community of Sri Lankan asylum seekers in Hong Kong – over 250, in fact – who fled due to persecution back home.

According to Hong Kong government statistics, of the 9,981 non-refoulement claims, as at 31 December 2016, 281 Sri Lankans have pending cases. From a total of 11,138 torture/non-refoulement claims from late 2009 to December 2016, only 72 were substantiated – this included 14 Sri Lankans; incidentally the highest number of substantiated claimants on the list.

Some of them are military deserters, who have witnessed and been subject to torture, a practice which, Tibbo claims, is endemic and systemic in the Sri Lankan military. “My clients know what went on behind closed doors from the 1980s up until 2003,” he said, pointing out that there are also female soldiers who were subjected to various abuses within the military.

Another segment of Sri Lankan asylum seekers fled due to political persecution, particularly during the Rajapaksa regime. “They were all targetted, their lives threatened and subjected to cruel, inhuman, degrading treatment, and they were punished and tortured,” Tibbo notes. Most of these asylum seekers have faced persecution for their political opinions or activities.

There are also several cases of gender-related persecution – both male and female. Some of Tibbo’s Sri Lankan clients, he explains, have been subjected to sexual harassment, sexual abuse and, in extreme cases, rape. In some instances, sexual harassment and abuse occurred within the military itself, Tibbo states, and in others, was used as a political tool. “Most of my clients didn’t dare go to the hospital for fear of being stigmatised, and they were too afraid to approach the police.” This includes a few of Tibbo’s male clients who, too, had been raped, but feared that if they reported the rape, it may be considered a homosexual act – which is illegal in Sri Lanka – and be punished for it.

Where Hong Kong is concerned, however, the reality is that until most refugees land there, they don’t realise that Hong Kong has a practically negligible acceptance rate of refugees – around 0.7%, according to some reports. According to Tibbo, the agents handling illegal migration often deceive them. “No one knows there’s practically no support, that they cannot work and that they will be discriminated against until they get there. They really thought that they would have safety and security. They didn’t know they would be treated as criminals. The laws and practices in Hong Kong are such that asylum seekers are destitute and left in desperate circumstances,” he explains.

There are no rose-tinted glasses in existence that will make the plight of asylum seekers and refugees – not only in Hong Kong, but the world over – seem less marked by struggle and loss. A lot of the coverage on refugees highlights their struggles with poverty and deprivation, but an unaddressed problem which many refugees face is depression and PTSD. Although some Western countries provide asylum seekers with counselling services, this does not take place across the board.

Refugees in Hong Kong are likened to untouchables, their lives confined to shadows and slum cities. Most have little to eat, live in unhygienic houses, and wear old, worn out clothes; they cannot work, they have limited money for transport, and are given food coupons restricting them to one or two supermarkets. Over time, Tibbo explains, many become depressed and give up hope. Their psychological integrity is compromised when they realise that they don’t have enough money for diapers or milk powder for their children. Some resort to selling their food coupons to be able to make enough money to cover rent and electricity. “They would rather work for a pittance than steal something. They feel that working illegally is not dishonest. They haven’t cheated anybody, they haven’t hurt anybody, and so some of them embark on risk behaviour out of desperation, knowing that they stand a chance of being caught and jailed.”

Discrimination is common – and in some cases, as Vanessa’s, and Supun and Nadeeka’s children have discovered, it is based on skin colour, and has dogged their steps in school. Tibbo explained that, among their teachers and other children, the girls have been treated as inferior based on their skin colour, with their peers refusing to play with them.

“Quite often, the only support structure asylum seekers have are their solicitors, barristers, and the asylum seeking community itself,” Tibbo said, adding that public hospitals are more treatment-based and do not often provide counselling services. Where there have been psychological examinations, they are often short, said Tibbo, with the doctor merely confirming that the patient is fit to be interviewed for the refugee screening process, as opposed to being given counselling and support.

Currently, the families who sheltered Snowden are awaiting a verdict from Canada, where they applied to for asylum. Their fate hangs in the balance. The Hong Kong government is yet to pronounce their verdict following the screening process which took place towards the end of March, and there is a very real chance that these families may be deported to the their countries of origin.

For Supun, Nadeeka, and Ajith, this means returning to the country they fled from under desperate circumstances – a country which may or may not welcome them back. In February, Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe proclaimed “come back, all is forgiven,” urging Sri Lankan refugees (who had fled illegally to Australia) back to the country during an official visit to Canberra. However, Lakshan Dias, a well-known human rights lawyer and activist, believes that Sri Lanka is not “conducive for refugees to return,” and will not be until reconciliation and transitional justice mechanisms are put in place.

He explains that there is no guarantee that the returning refugees may not be harassed and detained by the law enforcement. “It depends entirely on your case. If you come back to Sri Lanka with links to the LTTE, then you definitely will be screened by the State Intelligence Service, then the Criminal Investigations Department and the Terrorism Investigation Division, and they can detain you if necessary. In this case, they sheltered Snowden, and, therefore, due to pressure from foreign governments, harassment is entirely possible. We don’t know for certain how much protection the Government will give them,” Dias told Roar.

Receiving little or no assistance from the Hong Kong government, these families are now being sustained through various crowdfunding campaigns. A gofundme page has been set up, while Joseph Gordon-Levitt recently released a video talking about the plight of Edward Snowden’s ‘guardian angels’.

At the time of publication of this article, the Government of Sri Lanka had yet to provide an official statement.

Cover image courtesy: VOA news

Editor’s note: A previous version of this article was published on Roar.lk on February 23, 2016, but is being re-published following a series of updates. The article also includes images taken by our staff photographer Christian Hutter, who travelled around the island to capture the effects of the ongoing drought.

A previously underwater Hindu Kovil in the old Maskeliya town resurfaces after the water levels in the Maskeliya reservoir fall as a result of this long-lasting drought.

While on the other side of the world, scientists in America battle with the highest office in country to come to terms with anthropogenic climate change, for a little island in the Indian Ocean, the reality of climate change is becoming all too real a little too soon. The proof of it is written, metaphorically of course, in the warming of the Indian Ocean, which has resulted in a drastic reduction of the phytoplankton population in the Ocean, and the weakening of the monsoon. This means trouble ‒ not just for Sri Lanka, but the entire South Asian region.

Over the last century, the Indian Ocean has been warming at a faster rate than other oceans of the world, with “a rapid and continuous basin-wide warming (taking place) since 1950,” climate scientist Dr. Roxy Mathew Koll of the Indian Institute of Tropical Meteorology told Roar. For that matter, according to Dr. Koll’s research, the change measured is between 0.7 to 1.2°C, while the global mean change is 0.8°C.

Dr. Koll explains that the Indian Ocean has warmed two to three times faster in comparison to the central tropical Pacific. The warming can be partly attributed to increased levels of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere, in addition to the Indian Ocean being relatively landlocked in the north, unlike the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans.

Dr. Koll added that, as a result, “the ocean circulation is restricted from flushing out the heat to the poles,” and therefore the heat pile-up persists for a longer time. In addition, heat in the Indian Ocean accumulates through “a modified atmospheric circulation” due to El Nino-like conditions in the Pacific. He observed that “the magnitude and frequency of El Ninos have gone up in the recent decades, and so has the ocean temperatures in the Indian Ocean.”

Pottuvil Lagoon, as seen from above on January 31. Even lagoons on the east coast of the country are reeling from the drought.

Dr. Koll has identified two main problems: a temperamental monsoon, and an affected food web.

Where the monsoon is concerned, he explained that while there is an increase of moisture in the atmosphere, the monsoon winds transporting moisture is weakened, spelling trouble for the South Asian subcontinent in many ways. On one hand, this will result in a decrease in rains over central South Asia, but on the other hand, equatorial regions will see an increase in rainfall. He added that “though we have not specifically focused on the rainfall changes over Sri Lanka, we see a slight increase in rainfall due to its proximity to the region where the warming has occurred.”

What this means is that we’re all in for bipolar weather: the warmer climate has ensured that the atmosphere can hold moisture for a longer period, which will result in long dry spells interspersed with extreme rainfall.

Unfortunately for Sri Lanka, Dr. Koll’s predictions hit very close to home in 2016. The floods which arrived unannounced in May 2016 were soon followed by drastically dry conditions, leading to the worst drought in four decades, one that hadn’t seen an end even during the first two months of 2017. According to reports, the World Food Program (WFP) has pointed out that based on data, Sri Lanka has only felt 50% of the brunt of the current prevailing drought and needs to get its “resources in place” if it is to face the challenges of food security.

The Samanala Dam is part of the second largest hydroelectric scheme in the country, producing 405 GWh annually. As a result of the worst drought in 40 years, some places in the reservoir have almost dried out completely. The brown patches of land seen in this picture are normally supposed to be under water.

If that wasn’t worrying enough, both Sri Lanka and India are facing issues related to groundwater. In a paper published on January 9, 2017, for the journal Nature GeoScience\*, a group of scientists point out that “analyses of satellite and local well data spanning the past decade [show] that long-term changes in monsoon precipitation are driving groundwater storage variability in most parts of India either directly by changing recharge or indirectly by changing abstraction.” Their findings show that “Declining precipitation in northern India is linked to Indian Ocean warming, suggesting a previously unrecognised teleconnection between ocean temperatures and groundwater storage.”

Where Sri Lanka is concerned, speaking to the International Water Management Institute (IWMI), it was understood that groundwater levels have ‒ even without factoring in climate change ‒ been under considerable duress over the past few years. The country’s aquifers in Kalpitiya, Jaffna, Colombo, and Gampaha, as well as the regolith aquifers, have been affected by pollution, over-extraction, and sealing of land covers. With climate change conditions entering the fray, recharge of our groundwater supplies also take a hit.

Herath Manthrithilake, Head of the Sri Lanka Development Initiative of the IWMI, explains that although the intensity of rainfall has increased, it also only rains for a short period of time. This means that there is hardly any time for rainwater to penetrate the soil and recharge our groundwater supplies. Therefore, recharge is either slow, or will not take place at all. When it does rain, the rainwater rushes downslope as runoff and joins the river channels, which cannot accommodate such large volumes of water, resulting in floods. Alongside retardation of groundwater recharge is increased abstraction of groundwater for drinking and agricultural use.

Manthrithilake stresses that recharge programmes, like those in Gujarat in India, aimed at soil and water conservation must be embarked on with earnest, and at the earliest, to mitigate the impact of climate change. He explains that there are known and simple technologies which can be adopted, and cautions that if Sri Lanka does not act fast, the effects of climate change will soon be felt ‒ and with vengeance.

The warming of the Indian Ocean has also affected the marine food-web, on which many countries in the region are heavily dependent. According to a study published in January 2016\*\*, there has been a 20% decline in phytoplankton, microscopic plants which are the basic building blocks for the food web. The study points out that there has been an “alarming decrease of up to 20% in phytoplankton in this [Indian Ocean] region over the past six decades. We find that these trends in chlorophyll are driven by enhanced ocean stratification due to rapid warming in the Indian Ocean, which suppresses nutrient mixing from subsurface layers. Future climate projections suggest that the Indian Ocean will continue to warm, driving this productive region into an ecological desert.”

With an integral part of the food chain affected, there could be a chain reaction involving other marine life, adding further stress to the marine ecosystem. To a great extent, this also threatens food security.

Victoria Dam: dramatic changes to the landscape can already be seen, as a result of the drought. What appears like a river in this image is normally a part of the reservoir.

The effects will be seen on both land and sea. Rainfall changes will have an immense impact on agriculture. Central South Asia will see a reduction in rainfall, while Sri Lanka will experience a predicted increase in rainfall. Either way, the reductions and increase will result in a severe blow to the agricultural industry, which is heavily dependent on rainfall.

Similarly, the fishing industry will take a hit. Dr. Koll explained that a decline in marine phytoplankton was observed in the western Indian Ocean, ranging from the Kenya-Somalia coast to the Gulf coast, to the south of the Indian peninsula around Sri Lanka, potentially affecting the fish and other marine species in the region. “Most fish species have a very narrow range of optimum temperatures related to their metabolism… even a change of 1°C may affect their distribution and life cycle,” Dr. Koll explained, adding that it could result in fish migrating to cooler waters, dying out entirely, or getting affected by invasive species.

We can’t stop climate change this late in the day, but we can prepare for the worst. Dr. Koll suggests, where agriculture is concerned, cultivating crops which can withstand drought and flood conditions would help, in addition to a judicious use of water, as well as the right methods of irrigation and water storage. Where fishing is concerned, he pointed out that the lack of regulation of commercial fisheries in the Indian Ocean is adding to the problem. “Regulating the total allowable catches through a proper allocation system maximises sustainable yields, helps the fish and marine ecosystem to adapt to climate impacts, and also reduces greenhouse gas emissions by fishing boats,” Dr. Koll said.

Janakapura Tank, Mullaitivu, as photographed from above on February 2. The North is usually drier than the rest of the island, conditions which have been intensified due to the drought. Thousands of people have been affected by the lack of rain in the last few months.

Going by reports, as it stands, Sri Lanka has seen a 7% reduction in rainfall over the past five decades, prompted by the very warming which will potentially increase rainfall. The temperatures in Colombo were also 1.2°C higher in 2015, in comparison to the other years, while globally NASA has noted that 2016 was the warmest year ever recorded. With carbon dioxide levels in the atmosphere surpassing 400 ppm for the first time in recorded history, it doesn’t look like the climate is about to catch a break anytime soon.

\*Asoka Akarsh, Gleeson Tom, Wada Yoshihide, Mishra Vimal. (2017). Relative contribution of monsoon precipitation and pumping to changes in groundwater storage, Nature Geoscience, doi: 10.1038/NGEO2869

\*\*Roxy, M. K., A. Modi, R. Murtugudde, V. Valsala, S. Panickal, S. Prasanna Kumar, M. Ravichandran, M. Vichi, and M. Lévy (2016), A reduction in marine primary productivity driven by rapid warming over the tropical Indian Ocean, Geophys. Res. Lett., 43, 826–833, doi:10.1002/2015GL066979.

Featured image credit: Roar/Christian Hutter

The Corruption Perceptions Index for 2016, surveyed by Transparency International, is out – and it doesn’t look like Sri Lanka has fared too well. The real question, however, is: has Sri Lanka truly regressed and become more corrupt? The answer is, of course, more nuanced than clickbait headlines would have you believe.

The fact is, Sri Lanka has a poor score, and has had a poor score for the past few years. The Index measures corruption on a scale of zero (highly corrupt) to 100 (very clean), and the global average score this year is 43. it would seem as if Sri Lanka has merely been oscillating from one bad score to another: from 40 in 2012, to 37 in 2013, to 38 in 2014, back to 37 in 2015 and down to 36 in 2016, making us the 95th least corrupt country in the world. In the words of Asoka Obeysekere, Executive Director of Transparency International Sri Lanka (TISL), “it is clear that we (Sri Lanka) are stagnant.”

The overall trend across the world, findings show, has been towards an increase, rather than decrease, in corruption. Over two-thirds of the 176 countries and territories included in the Index fall below the midpoint on the scale.

Going by the Index, it appears that corruption is an issue the entire Asia-Pacific region is grappling with. According to Transparency International, “Poor (regional) performance can be attributed to unaccountable governments, lack of oversight, insecurity and shrinking space for civil society, pushing anti-corruption action to the margins in those countries. High-profile corruption scandals, in addition to everyday corruption issues, continue to undermine public trust in government, the benefits of democracy and the rule of law.”

Of the 30 countries in the Asia-Pacific region, 19 scored 40 or less on the Index, with India and China both scoring 40, both countries seeing marginal improvement from the previous year. The only two Asia-Pacific countries that appeared closer to the 100 (and, therefore, less corrupt) mark were Australia (who scored 79) and Singapore (who scored 84). Countries like ours, which have been ranked low in the index, have been “plagued by untrustworthy and badly functioning public institutions like the police and judiciary” according to Transparency International. Just as important to note is the fact that while these countries may have anti-corruption laws in place, there is disregard for these laws, resulting in corruption taking place unhindered. Situations where bribery and extortion take place are frequent, and citizens are met with “official indifference” when it comes to redressal.

The Corruption Perceptions Index typically uses 13 different data sources; Sri Lanka’s data came from seven sources – including academics, political analysts, and businessmen – whose perceptions on the country’s progress helped form our current dismal ranking.

Going by the country’s ratings, it would appear that Sri Lanka’s Yahapalana government, sweeping into power with promises of “good governance”, has yet to see actual progress. The current government merely seems to have inherited stagnancy when it comes to ending, or even reducing, corruption.

According to TISL’s Asoka Obeysekere, there have been discussions on legislative reforms in Sri Lanka, but he points out that discussions alone are insufficient – action is essential.

Where action is concerned, the issues that really stood against the Unity Government are the Central Bank Bond scam, allegations of corruption brought against an Australian mining company with alleged connections to the President, and in corruption-related prosecutions. Obeysekere explained that the “lack of progress seen is illustrative of the fact that the rhetoric (of anti-corruption) has not been translated into action.”

But, as Obeysekere pointed out, it isn’t merely enough to hold the government alone responsible. It is equally important to bring to account the Commission to Investigate Allegations of Bribery and Corruption (CIABOC), which, under the 19th Amendment, has been given the power to investigate and prosecute on their own motion.

For a more comprehensive breakdown of the CPI, check out this article we published last year.

Featured image credit: Roar.lk/Nishan Casseem

You’ve all heard of child-lock and were probably subject to technology training wheels at some point in your life, especially if you still had considerable growing up to do in the late 1990’s and early 2000’s. You probably grew up with phrases like “always on the internet/phone,” “chatting chatting chatting,” “doesn’t listen to a word I say when he/she is texting” and other parent-isms, but did you ever imagine the day would come when the democratisation of the internet and smartphones would lead to a turn in tables?

“Children these days, alwaaays on the phone!” – Every Aunty/Uncle at some point. Image credit: AP/Altaf Qadri

Statistics claim that as the years go by, computer literacy among our parents’ generation is gradually but surely increasing. According to the Department of Statistics, for 2015, computer literacy among 40 – 49 year olds is 17.2% (15.3% in 2014), while 10.5% of 50 -59 year olds (9.6% in 2014) and 6.1 % of 60 – 69 year olds (5.2 % in 2014) are computer literate. Mobile subscriptions, meanwhile, according to Sri Lanka’s Telecom Regulatory Commission (TRC), have increased from 91,359 in 2009 to 3,461,044 in June 2016, while fixed broadband and narrowband connection subscriptions, too, have seen an increase in growth, albeit at a slower pace. Within 20 years, from 1996 – 2016, the number of fixed internet connections has increased from 2,504 to 771,247.

While these figures look promising, the truth is that internet penetration in Sri Lanka is quite low, with only 20% of the population having access to the Internet.

Things aren’t as bleak if you focus solely on the urban population, with 27.6% of Colombo’s household population accessing the internet during the first 6 months of 2015. While the rest of the country has yet to catch up, a small portion of this 27.6% (possibly more now) include our parents, who were once custodians of all things technology.

Now it’s difficult to think of a time when your mother didn’t share life hacks videos on social media and your father didn’t send the modern day equivalent of chain-mail or forwards via Whatsapp. It’s probably been a strange few years for those who have watched their parents zealously embrace the technology they were initially sceptical of, and subscribe to the same habits we were constantly accused of (and even punished for) when we were younger. And while we desperately try to talk to our parents over the blare of music coming from their phones/tabs, as they spend considerable hours watching every single video on their timelines, we’ve probably wished someone would develop a ‘parent-lock’ software.

Try approaching your parents with the word “moderation” and you’ll probably get a lecture reminiscent of the ones you were regaled with as a teen. The irony and role reversal is hard to miss. Suddenly we’re doing the educating as we explain to them the concept of data charges and the difference between Facebook and Twitter. We’ve probably also tried to explain the difference between a public and a private post, that giving out personal details like addresses and telephone numbers is a bad idea, that a little discrimination when it comes to adding people on Facebook would be wise. Introducing your parents to the concept of a troll and the world of internet memes is comparatively easy, however, to the Herculean task of explaining to those born in the generation of the immutable written word that not everything they read on the internet, not every forward they receive on Whatsapp, not every video that they watch, not every fact shared on Facebook is true. Telling them that the internet is a largely editable, extremely democratic, non-discriminating void would be like expecting a textbook to update itself just by staring at it. It’s exciting that we can now share our lives shaped by the internet with our parents, but we also need to make sure that we act as the Minotaur by guiding them through the maze of the www. The internet is a post-modern dystopia our parents have no idea they are trapped in because they possibly lack the critical tools to deal with the idea of an extremely subjective reality where everyone has an opinion but not everyone has heard of a fact checker.

There are days where your parents will start resembling, well, you, when you first discovered a forum and the existence of an opinion (which wasn’t always well-informed). But the difference is that you most likely are acquainted with a few rules of the internet: that there is little or no censorship or need for citations or validation and that the concept of publishing and authorship is a lot more fluid than in the world of print.

Having to parent your parents on the Internet is a novel experience most 80’s and 90’s kids seem to deal with daily, without even realising it. You are the mentor when your father unwittingly allows a Facebook app to make changes to his profile, which posts videos and articles that conflict with his often more conservative worldview, convincing him that his account has been hacked. You explain to them that downloading every video sent on Whatsapp eats up space, leading to storage issues, and while you thumb through their phones, selecting various videos that need deleting, you may come across videos of a questionable nature in which the thumbnails almost always feature nudes, making you suddenly aware of the other side of the internet which your parents may have stumbled upon, or gone in search of. Your thoughts are probably similar to what they would have entertained when usage of the www first exploded into the mainstream and into your then teenage life: how do you protect them from the boundless internet, do they need protecting, do they realise what they are doing or are they unwitting spectators? You start to see them in a different light, perhaps.

Maybe you’ve also had to explain the concept of private property and public property in a world where property isn’t a physical manifestation. They seem insistent that you read a condemnation someone has written and forwarded, which in turn was forwarded ad infinitum, until the original author loses all control of the dissemination. It is based on a video someone shot during a wedding ceremony. The source of the video is unknown and untraceable. The condemnation is about the ceremony and how the video shows the flouting of traditional values and embracing customs from other cultures. The condemnation isn’t a well-thought out, balanced piece of writing. It’s vitriol condemning the modern world and multiculturalism, blaming the West and technology for altering traditional values: all of this disseminated through technology pioneered by other cultures. The irony is lost on all the participants. The concept of lifting someone else’s video and sharing it without permission doesn’t make any of them uncomfortable. Because an opinion has been typed out and shared, because the name of God has been invoked in the message, it has been swallowed whole and endorsed in the modern day sense of “sharing”.

You may have muted all extended family WhatsApp groups, which ping incessantly with long posts punctuated by emoticons; dubious announcements about Government initiatives; WhatsApp shutting your account unless you pass this message on to ten others; inspiring stories typed in epileptic grammar; a good morning picture, good afternoon picture, good evening picture, and good night picture, a different picture for a different day. Health tips with no verifiable source; tips on how to maintain your spirituality; rules of religion which someone may well have invented for all you know: but because it has been passed on it must be true. The written word worldview, that everything printed is sacred, true and absolutely real, is applied to the world of our screens unblinkingly: that there have been post-structuralist theorists out there refuting the idea of language as a stable receptacle representing the real, that there is a real, that our history books are biased, that the Sepoy Mutiny was actually a rebellion for those who rewrote history from the margins has little credence. The internet is the singular truth, not the post-modern Hydra of many truths, half-truths, opinion, bias and untruths.

You ask yourself over morning coffee, trying to hear yourself think over the sound coming from your mother’s phone, whether there is anything you can do to effectively explain the Internet to them. Short of sending them to a specialised educational course, you realise there is no systematic way of dealing with it. You may also feel guilty for indulging in the same habits, clicking “share” just because something sounds plausible and touts itself as a “fact” when it is most probably anything but; rolling your eyes at BuzzFeed quizzes and then playing another; realising certain issues exist only because they are trending; stalking Kylie Jenner on the Internet out of pure scorn and strengthening her search histories and therefore popularity; borrowing your feminism from Facebook and unpunctuated Tumblr rants; replacing orthodox religion with good vibes, the universe, David Avocado Wolfe and Deepak Chopra (random word generated) quotes, yoga which you never practiced, a Western-trying-to-be-Eastern-and-failing awe for life, karma, yin and yang, contorted versions of pagan goddess worship, kale and other trending superfoods, filling the void left by a lack of religion with yet another arbitrary system of belief. Your relationship with the internet is no less abusive. On the surface, you may seem more savvy and literate, but how many times have you googled something and clicked and believed the first post ever that verifies and validates your worldview? If Snapchat or Instagram was God, you’re already a devotee without even knowing it.

We check in on Facebook proclaiming to the world that we’re here, we have money to burn even if we don’t, here’s my generic food picture #foodporn #aesthetic #insertanotherpointlesshashtag. We flood our walls with endless selfies, flower filter, balloon face filter, pout filter, and so on, shouting out to the world that we exist, we are important, we’re witty and funny and unique and beautiful and smart while we Google inspirational quotes to accompany our oversaturated self-portraits. Our profiles, quite possibly, resemble the worst stream-of-consciousness experiment written by a hack writer with a vocabulary of 300 words (the word “grammar” or its usage not included). If anyone wanted to track you down, steal your identity, stalk you or harass you, you’ve already given them ammunition. And here we are, an internet abusive generation, trying to explain the uses of the internet to the older generation.

Can you then imagine trying to explain its abuses to them? Imagine trying to explain the concept of identity theft, of fake profiles, of hate speech on social media. Imagine trying to explain photoshop. Imagine telling them that no, this is not you, someone has stolen your pictures and edited them, that body is not yours, those are not your nudes. Imagine trying to explain the concept of revenge porn, telling them that your seemingly nice ex-boyfriend has decided to share your nudes with the rest of the world. Imagine trying to explain to them what your picture is doing on some random Facebook page with an abusive caption proclaiming that you’re a no good, big mouthed \*insert your favourite four letter word\*. If they understand that it’s not you, it’s an impersonator, a fake profile, then they may urge you to go the police, to report the abuse to the authorities, little knowing that even the authorities have yet to grasp the idea of borderless crimes, that even the President’s website can get and has been hacked. And since you’re not the President, it would seem that the authorities can do little. Based on anecdotal information from people who have faced various forms of abuse on the Internet, including continual identity theft despite contacting the authorities, it’s clear that the Internet, its ecosystem and its strange ways stump even those on top. The www should actually stand for the Wild Wild West, not World Wide Web; it is especially so in countries like Sri Lanka where the laws and authorities, just like the rest of the population, has yet to catch up with the internet phenomena. It is undoubtedly a dystopia, where people make their own laws, are governed by their own sense of justice, where there is no policing or monitoring body, where we are all at the mercy of others. Imagine telling your mother, who is 65 and has only known a society of structure, that the arm of the law in the www is indeed short, that you’re on your own and you have to fend for yourself with the little skills you have acquired informally through continued usage of the internet.

At the heart of it, we don’t understand the internet either. We don’t understand the urges people have to spew hate and verbal bile. We cannot comprehend just how forbidding the internet really is, and yet here we are, trying to teach them how to navigate the darkness of the Internet when we ourselves are lost.

Featured image courtesy askideas.com

For the days following November 10, you can expect all your local media outlets to concentrate their energies on a single subject: the national budget. Expect experts to wax eloquent on whether the budget is good for the country’s growth, whether the amount allocated for certain ministries is justified, whether the taxes proposed are the last nail in the middle-class taxpayers’ coffers (or coffins), and whether such a thing as a hydrogen car exists commercially.

Expect to be assaulted with so much budget-related information that the very word “budget” will soon lose all its meaning. Without a bit of guidance, however, average citizens like us, whose only reference point to a budget would be a household budget at the most, coming to terms with the creature that is the national budget on our own is tough. It’s easy to get lost in the many words experts like to throw around, and the media only amplifies the confusing din. If you’ve always been curious about how budgets are compiled and how you ended up paying that ridiculous tax figure, read on.

Finance Minister Ravi Karunanayake will deliver the 2017 Budget Speech in Parliament tomorrow (November 10). Image courtesy: lankabusinessonline.com

The budget, shortly put, underlines the Government’s fiscal policy, which would help sustain the country’s economic growth.

The responsibility of putting together the country’s budget rests, quite obviously, with the Ministry of Finance, under which specific departments like the Department of Fiscal Policy, the Department of National Budget and the Department of Public Finance work towards bringing it all together.

Something as vast as the national budget, however, requires coordination with practically every public institution, starting with the Central Bank. The Central Bank’s role is to provide the economic rationale, and this is presented in a report (submitted annually by September 15) which evaluates the budgetary performance and the economic conditions of the current year, the prospects for the next year, the overall rationale behind expenditure, the taxes that need revision, and taxes that need to be introduced or abolished.

According to ex-Central Banker W. A. Wijewardena, the government had in the past heavily relied on this report, and based much of the budget on it. However, of late, with the development of the technical capacity in the Ministry of Finance, the effective use of this report in the preparation of the budget has waned.

Although the budget is presented in Parliament in November every year, the work that goes into it starts in May, well before the presentation. The Department of National Budget, for instance, requests all ministries and statutory boards to submit their expenditure estimates by the end of July. The Department of Fiscal policy, meanwhile, contacts the country’s chief revenue generating agencies (namely the Department of Inland Revenue, the Customs Department and the Excise Department) who come up with their own estimates for expected revenue.

After the revenue and expenditure are consolidated, giving the Ministry of Finance a clearer idea of the total income and expenditure expected, the negotiations to cut down expenses begin. According to Wijewardena, most Ministries have adopted the neat trick of overestimating their expenses, and during the process of cutting down expenses, they essentially reach the amount they actually require. The results of this long drawn out negotiating process between the ministries and the Treasury finally culminates in the Appropriation Bill, which is presented by the Minister of Finance to Parliament a month before the final presentation.

The Appropriation Bill, together with government estimates, is essentially a detailed micro-level description of the budgetary outlook of the government, which is based on the operational inputs by the ministries, before a budgetary policy is arrived at. Independent to this, another report is prepared based on the economic and technical inputs as outlined in the Central Bank report (mentioned above). Essentially, therefore, the input for the budget comes from two different sources. Following discussions with the private sector, and factoring in their inputs, the final budget proposals are prepared.

Currently, according to Wijewardena, due to the Prime Minister’s keen interest in economic affairs, the budget has to be approved by the PM, too. The final budget is then presented to the Cabinet a day before the final presentation in Parliament, where amendments may be suggested. The impact of these suggestions is then evaluated by the Ministry of Finance and their feasibility is reported to the Minister, who re-consults with the Cabinet. Once the Cabinet approves of it, it is finally presented in Parliament and made public.

After its presentation in Parliament, the Cabinet can suggest amendments to the National Budget. Image courtesy: srilankanewslive.com

There are, however, possibilities of errors passing through, as we witnessed last year, with the likes of healthcare and education. Wijewardena explained that while on the surface it looked as though the government was pumping in more money into education and healthcare (the allocation for education last year, for instance, was Rs. 189.97 billion, up from Rs. 47.6 billion for 2015), it was actually the result of erroneous calculations.

As frightening as that sounds, however, once the Appropriation Act is passed by Parliament, the Central Bank converts all the data to relevant functional classifications of government expenses as per the government financial statistics (which is an IMF manual allowing for a uniformity of classifications across the world).

What this essentially means is that what the Central Bank publishes in the Annual Report differs from what the Minister has presented in Parliament – and the figures presented in the Annual Report are the actual reflection of the expenses incurred by the government which directly affect, say, the students, as is the case with above mentioned example. The raw data presented in the budget, therefore, are\*not\* the actual expenditure in both functional and economic classifications as per the global practices relating to the government’s finance statistics.

To put this into context, when it comes to healthcare expenses, the Central Bank calculations are based on expenses that directly benefit the patients and help improve health standards. This includes the salaries of the doctors, nurses, public health inspectors, the cost of drugs and expenses involved in eradicating epidemics like dengue. The Central Bank pulls these expenses out from the detailed expenditure headings in the Appropriation Bill, recalculates and then presents this in their annual report in a table called the “functional classification of government expenditure.” This table essentially acts as the guide to the actual amount the government has spent on, say, healthcare. The only drawback, however, is that those seized by curiosity will have to hold their breath until the annual report is published by the Central Bank the following April.

A major “don’t”, which the public should keep a keen eye out for, is the government retracting or backtracking after the budget has been approved by the Cabinet – any grievances should ideally be addressed at the Cabinet briefing and not after. If such an incident occurs, it is considered a violation of the collective responsibility of the cabinet, and results in a negative impression of the country in the eyes of the international community.

Such incidents have occurred in the past. For instance, in 1982, after for Finance Minister Ronnie De Mel presented the budget, a senior minister who criticised it in Parliament was asked to resign by the then president J. R. Jayewardene for violating the collective responsibility of the cabinet. If it has been approved by the cabinet, the decision cannot be reversed.

This does not apply to instances where an introduction has been made to the budget that was not approved by the cabinet. As Wijewardena put it, if such an instance occurs, it is up to the cabinet ministers to “be tough on the Finance Minister.” This hasn’t always been easy to put into practice, however, given the fact that since 1993 the Finance Minister of the country has also been President, as with President Wijethunga, President Kumaratunge, and President Rajapaksa.

If you have any concerns, there is unfortunately no actual mechanism for citizens to participate and pinpoint their grievances. On the other hand, trade unions, and other organised bodies, have been known to force the government on certain instances, and while it may benefit some, what it results in is an imbalance in the accounts. This may, in turn, harm another sector, highlighting how the political economy and the economic in general are at constant variance.

What you can do, however, as an informed observer of the circus, is to keep your ears tuned to the news – there may be things which the media, in their haste to report, or in keeping with political ties, may fail to report or highlight. Afterall, knowledge is power and knowledgeable citizens contribute to a better democracy.

Next time you exclaim “aiyo!” and someone shoots you a puzzled look, you can actually ask them to refer to the Oxford English Dictionary for some quick troubleshooting. You may have heard by now that the September 2016 list of new dictionary entries includes the ever versatile Sri Lankan/South Indian expression “aiyo(h)”, much to the amusement of the denizens of the South Asian subcontinent.

Defined as an exclamation expressing distress, regret, or grief, “aiyo” is our go-to word for when the comparatively quaint exclamations “oh no!” and “oh dear!” fail us – which, as it turns out, is very often if you’ve been brought up either in Sri Lanka or South India.

The English language has a history of borrowing words and phrases from the subcontinent.

Welcome to World Englishes, a post-colonial response to the hegemony the English language enjoyed in many English colonies. As a result of colonial occupation, English invariably ended up entering the linguistic fabric of the colonies. Many colonies, in turn, however, took the language and indigenised it with a local touch that has now to come be recognised as “Englishes”. Words such as “prepone” and “anyways” for example, belong to Indian English, one of the many forms and manifestations of English.

What should be kept in mind, however, is that the English language itself is a result of a confluence of many cultures. English is a West Germanic language that developed over the years through the many invasions of the British Isles. From Old Norse to Old Norman, to loanwords from Latin, Ancient Greek, French, German, and Dutch, the English language has borrowed heavily from different languages. The borrowing and subsequent expansion of the English lexicon never stopped at the European region. Many words that we use so casually, like bungalow, cash, and shampoo, for instance, originate from subcontinental languages. Bungalow comes from the Gujarati word “bangalo” or the Hindi word “bangla”, meaning house built in the Bengal style. Cash meanwhile comes from the Tamil word “kasu”, Sanskrit word “karsha”, and the Sinhalese word “kasi”, while shampoo comes from the Hindi word “champo”.

With English reaching the status of a global language and the world’s lingua franca, and with the number of its users growing exponentially, it isn’t unusual at all for words like “aiyo” to land up in the dictionary. All they have to do is meet the criteria.

JehanR: bringing iYo to the mainstream before the Oxford dictionary did.

Turns out there is. It is pretty much the same criteria that govern the entry of words like “selfie” being included in the dictionary. While many have, over the years, expressed their dismay at the entry of modern lingo into the dictionary, essentially the Oxford English Dictionary serves as an ever-growing source documenting the growth and usage of the language. It doesn’t act like a language police, and while it helps standardise spellings, usage, and meaning, it doesn’t discriminate between words that some may deem to be mere fads or unworthy of a dictionary entry (although this writer still contends that the inclusion of the laughing emoji as the word of the year for 2015 was pushing the limits, an argument for another day, perhaps). What the Oxford Dictionary editorial team mostly looks out for is frequency of usage – if the word has been used by various types of literature (in a broad sense of the word) over a space of time, it qualifies.

Where foreign words specifically are concerned, volunteers worldwide can send in their material, through the online OED Appeals campaign. That’s probably how the word “aiyo” landed in the dictionary in the first place. According to the official dictionary entry, the term dates back to the late 19th century, originating from the Sinhala word “ayiyo”, with the earliest use found in the Chamber’s Journal of Popular Literature.

Some words, which are mostly everyday currency, can be traced back to Robert Knox’s An Historical Relation Of The Island Of Ceylon, and have even gained international usage. Some of these words are betel-leaf, bo-tree, Buddha, poojah, and rattan. Similarly, you won’t be hard-pressed to find definitions for words like kithul, dissava, ambalama, vihara and our cutesy kabaragoyas and thalagoyas on the internet, although not all these words have specific dictionary entries. There are several other words which Knox highlights in his book, which have more regional, and therefore area-specific, uses.

Knox’s book, in particular, was instrumental in allowing Sri Lanka a tiny place in the giant linguistic canvas of the English language, into which “aiyo” has now been ushered in. It may seem silly, or even laughable, that aiyo rubs shoulders with words like poojah and bo-tree, but you cannot deny that in every Sri Lankan’s (and South Indian’s) vocabulary is a special place carved out just for aiyo, which no other word can or will ever adequately replace.

For the Indian media, it’s probably routine to report on Tamil Nadu’s Chief Minister Jayalalithaa (fondly referred to as ‘Amma’) writing to the Indian premier about the arrest of Tamil Nadu “fishermen” by the Sri Lanka Navy. Her claims often include that the arrest of the “fishermen,” fishing in “historic waters” is a “humanitarian issue” and is “inhumane”, despite the fact that there is a clear trespass by these said fishworkers into Sri Lankan waters. The topic also keeps surfacing at bilateral talks between the two countries, but for all the attention and coverage it receives, a closer examination of the actual issue reveals that there’s a lot more to it than Amma presents.

Bottom trawling – a highly destructive fishing method – is not what most would have in mind when talking about “fishermen.” The truth is, the arrests made by the Navy are those of the trawler skippers and the labourers working on board – not of “Tamil Nadu fishermen” in a traditional sense, a distinction which needs to be made. Tamil Nadu “fishermen” using “traditional” fishing equipment, to begin with, would never be able to cross the maritime border into Sri Lankan waters. The “fishermen” working on board the trawlers are not all fishermen by profession; many are migrant labourers from various parts of India, according to activists Roar spoke to. It has also been found that children have been employed on board Tamil Nadu trawlers: underage, child labourers are not “fishermen”, an urgent issue the Indian and Tamil Nadu governments should be looking into.

Tamil Nadu trawlers are also to employ child labour while fishing illegally in Sri Lanka. Four children from Tamil Nadu were arrested by the Sri Lanka Navy in March this year while employed as fishworkers onboard a Tamil Nadu trawler. N. M. Alam, President of the Mannar District Federation of Fishermen’s Cooperative Societies, is pictured handing over clothes and food to the children who were lodged by the Sri Lankan authorities at Annai Children’s Home in Mannar Town by the Sri Lankan authorities.

Trawlers dredge the seabed and harvest fish indiscriminately (of the catch, only 10% may be the target species, which is mostly prawn). Trawling damages the broader marine environment, including the seabed and the marine ecosystem. In the process of trawling, the trawl nets also damage and destroy fishing equipment, and thereby the livelihoods of small-scale and traditional fishermen. And this happens on both sides of the international maritime boundary line: unregulated trawling by Tamil Nadu trawlers in Tamil Nadu waters and illegal trawling in Sri Lankan waters destroys the livelihoods of not just Sri Lankan fishermen but also Tamil Nadu small-scale, traditional fishermen. The voice of traditional small-scale fishermen in Tamil Nadu is yet to be heard at all in this debate.

How bottom trawling works, and the damage it causes.

The marginalisation and ultimate destruction of traditional, small-scale fishing in the North is something the Sri Lankan Government must take keep in mind when addressing India’s request to legally allow a number of Tamil Nadu trawlers into Sri Lankan waters. Legalising Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) fishing by Tamil Nadu trawlers in Sri Lankan waters will not change the fact that trawling is a destructive fishing method which affects the marine ecology and the livelihoods of traditional, small-scale fishermen.

Contrary to the oft touted slogan that the arrests of Tamil Nadu fishworkers are a “humanitarian issue,” Dr. Steve Creech, an independent fisheries researcher and Director of Pelagikos Pvt. Ltd., points out that from a Sri Lankan perspective, this is primarily a livelihoods issue for northern Sri Lankan fishermen, and not just a humanitarian issue for Tamil Nadu fishworkers alone. Tamil Nadu trawlers enter Sri Lankan waters thrice a week, often coming within 500 m of the Sri Lankan shoreline. To avoid damage of nets and equipment, the small scale, traditional Sri Lankan fishermen avoid fishing on Monday, Wednesday and Saturday evenings, which means that they lose three days’ income every week. According to a report published by Dr. Muttukrishna Sarvananthan, Director of the Point Pedro Institute for Development Studies in Jaffna, the average annual losses incurred by small scale fishermen in the north amounts to US$ 41 million or Rs. 6 billion every year. This, it should be noted, is a modest estimate – it does not include the damage to the ocean, the damage to fishermen’s gear and nets, the opportunity cost of the bycatch harvested indiscriminately by Tamil Nadu trawlers, and Sri Lanka’s lost revenues from seafood exports as a result of Sri Lanka’s marine resources being landed at and exported from Tamil Nadu.

Tamil Nadu trawling comes at a steep cost to Sri Lanka.

Where fishing and fishing rights are concerned, it should be noted that trawling is in no way a “traditional” fishing method. The first Indian trawlers were funded by a Government of Norway aid programme back in the 1960s and introduced to Kerala as part of the Indo-Norwegian Project (INP). Trawling is a modern, not a traditional, method of fishing.

This is not what traditional fishing boats look like. Image courtesy: newindianexpress.com

Traditional fishermen could never have sailed right into sea and crossed the maritime boundary to begin with; their movement would have been restricted to a 5 – 10 km radius from the shore, while the maritime boundary is located as far as 40 km from the coast of Tamil Nadu.

This is what traditional fishing boats look like. Image courtesy: wikimedia.org

‘Historic waters’, as defined by the French historian Bourquin, are based on “a combination of geographical, political, economic, historical and other circumstances.”\* However, after maritime boundaries were drawn up and demarcated according to the UN Law of the Sea in 1972, the idea of ‘historic waters’ needed updating. In the Palk Bay, the Indo-Sri Lankan fishery dispute unfolds against what are now legally known as “internal waters,” rather than “historic waters”, negating the question of Tamil Nadu fishermen’s right to fish in historic waters. Sri Lanka’s internal waters in the Palk Bay fall under the sovereignty of the state, and are therefore governed by the laws of the Sri Lankan Government.

Pictorial representation of South Indian trawler movements across the International Maritime Boundary Line (IMBL), based on RADAR images gathered and analysed by the Sri Lanka Navy in 2012.

It is crucial to understand that according to Sri Lankan laws, fishermen and trawlers who are not Sri Lankan are not allowed to fish in Sri Lanka’s internal waters. Amma’s claims about historic waters and traditional fishing rights are both outdated and irrelevant in the modern day legal context of the Laws of the Seas.

A single exception has been provided for in the maritime agreements signed between Sri Lanka and India in 1974 and 1976, and that relates to the feast of St. Anthony on the island of Kachchativu. In February every year, thousands of Indian devotees are allowed to cross over to Kachchativu. In addition, Tamil Nadu fishermen are legally allowed to dry their nets on the island of Kachchativu, but no longer have the need to do so, as cotton nets have been replaced with quick drying nylon nets.

The Sri Lankan Navy is under constant fire by the Tamil Nadu government for arresting Tamil Nadu trawlers for fishing illegally in Sri Lankan waters, despite the fact that the Navy is simply protecting Sri Lanka’s maritime borders and upholding Sri Lanka’s sovereignty by doing so. Some of the allegations levelled against the Navy include arrests of “innocent fishermen” and claims that they beat, shoot and kill these “fishermen”.

Having earlier established that these are not in the strictest sense “fishermen” working on Tamil Nadu trawlers, but daily wage labourers, the question of innocence is also debatable. Thiyagaraja Waradas of the Department of International Relations at the University of Colombo, points out that Tamil Nadu trawlers have been alleged to actually offer monetary incentives to “fishermen” working on their trawlers, to fish illegally in Sri Lankan waters. Tamil Nadu trawler owners actively encourage their vessels to cross the international maritime border. This trespass is a conscious decision and not in any way “innocent”.

With regard to the deaths of innocent Tamil fishermen that is constantly pinned on the Navy, Waradas notes that this took place during the Sri Lankan conflict. There have been no reported deaths since the end of the conflict, he said. Furthermore, it has never been established that the Navy alone was responsible for these deaths. It remains unclear to this day if the deaths of Tamil Nadu fishermen that occurred during the civil conflict were caused by the Sri Lanka Navy or the LTTE. Before 2009, the waters into which Tamil Nadu trawlers were crossing was clearly demarcated as a conflict zone. On the Sri Lankan side, there was a ban on operating fishing boats in these areas between 6 p.m. and 6 a.m. every day. The fact that Tamil Nadu trawlers chose to cross the maritime boundary was in contravention of the prohibition on fishing imposed by the Sri Lankan security forces and the LTTE. As a result, Tamil Nadu trawlers could have been shot at by either party, given how fragile and volatile the situation was at the time. Thus no one is really certain who is to blame for the deaths of Tamil Nadu fishermen leading up to 2009. Dr. Creech also pointed out that it remains unclear if they were fishing or smuggling ammunition, supplies and cadres for the LTTE.

There have also been incidents, although isolated, where Tamil Nadu fishworkers have reacted aggressively against the Navy. According to Navy spokesperson Captain Akram Alavi, there were a few remote incidents last year where the Tamil Nadu trawlers were “aggressively maneuvered” towards Navy boats ‒ hardly an act of innocence, it should be said.

Roughly 436,000 km²\* of maritime space is under Sri Lanka’s national jurisdiction ‒ this includes the island of Kachchativu, settled under the agreements signed between Sri Lanka and India in 1974 and 1976. The legal status of Kachchativu is another device used often by Tamil Nadu’s Chief Minister in her political discourse on the Indo-Sri Lankan fishery issue. Amma’s disinformation serves simply as a distraction from the real issue, that of illegal fishing by Tamil Nadu trawlers in Sri Lankan waters, and is intended to further confuse an already confounding debate. Kachchativu, which is located off the southern tip of the Jaffna peninsula, was administered by British Ceylon prior to Indian Independence in 1947 and Sri Lankan independence in 1948. At Independence, and then again after the maritime boundaries between the two countries were drawn in 1974 and 1976, Kachchativu was included on the Sri Lankan side of the International Maritime Boundary Line (IMBL) demarcated between the two countries. W. T. Jayasinghe\* notes in his comprehensive account of the two negotiations ‒ The Maritime Boundary of Sri Lanka ‒ that even as early as 1923, “the (British) Government of India accepted Sri Lanka’s (then British Ceylon) claims to Kachchativu” and “…in a letter dated 8 March 1923 made this situation clear to the British Government of Madras.”

Jayalalitha’s persistent denunciation of the Union Government in New Delhi and the Central Government in Colombo over the ownership of Kachchativu is as futile as it is legally flawed. Amma’s cry for Kachchativu does nothing to further a solution to the issue – nor is it intended to do so. Even if the Government of Sri Lanka was to give up Kachchativu and gift it to India, Tamil Nadu trawlers fishing off the coast of Kalpitiya, Pesalai, Delft Island, Kayts, Kankasenthurai, Point Pedro, Mullaitivu and Pulmoodai would still be fishing on the wrong side of the IMBL ‒ the crossing of which is, indisputably, an act of IUU fishing.

It was recently noted in The Sunday Times that Amma frequently pulls out the Kachchativu card at the peril of other, unaddressed issues in Tamil Nadu, including the dismal state of the storm drainage in Chennai and other parts, which amplified the effect of the catastrophic floods last December. Kachchativu isn’t the only card Amma uses, however ‒ misinformation on a number of key issues, including the illegal nature of trawling and the crossing of the IMBL, are offal she throws at the general public, which do nothing but add confusion to the debate. The Sri Lankan Government would be wise to take more than a cursory look at the issue and take a stronger stance ‒ Tamil Nadu trawlers stealing the livelihoods of thousands of Sri Lankans and destroying our maritime resources isn’t something that should ever be dismissed, or taken lightly.

\*Jayasinghe. W. T. Kachchativu: and the Maritime Boundary of Sri Lanka. Stamford Lake Publication, 2003.

Featured image courtesy: ibtimes.com

For those who’ve been keeping a tab on the news, particularly with regard to climate change, you would know that carbon dioxide levels have surpassed the critical threshold of 400 parts per million (ppm). Sadly for us bungling humans, this has been described as the point of no return, and, going by the latest research, they weren’t joking when they said so. The carbon dioxide in the earth’s atmosphere isn’t likely to reduce ‒ even if we find a way to keep our carbon emissions in check. This possibly means that we’re saying goodbye to the earth as we knew it and ushering in a new era where we may never again know an earth with carbon dioxide levels below 400 ppm.

Apart from human activity, the 2015 El Niño also contributed to this final push. According to reports, thanks to this El Niño, the month of May was the eighth in a row to smash records for being the hottest month. Additionally, with a La Niña brewing, there’s no saying what the rest of the year will look like.

Closer to home, things aren’t looking good either. A few months ago we reported about the effect the rapidly warming Indian Ocean is likely to have on us (video can be found here) and sure enough, we saw the result of stronger cyclonic conditions. The fact is, a month down the line, we’re still recovering from the disasters, and what should have been our front line of aid in a time of distress ‒ namely the Government ‒ failed on many fronts. The sorry attempts of the Government to bring the situation under control is inexcusable, which begs the question: does our Government have a plan, a strategy in place which would help mitigate (as far as possible) the backlash we’ll be facing as a result of rapidly warming atmospheric conditions?

In April this year, 171 countries, including Sri Lanka, signed the Paris Agreement on Climate Change. Image credit http://www.iisd.ca/

In February 2016, scientists issued a “climate emergency” warning after receiving NASA data that showed February smashing a century of global temperature records by a “stunning” margin.

Then came March, which shattered the record heat previously set in February, according to data released by the Japan Meteorological Agency (JMA). Then came April, which was the hottest April on record globally – and the seventh month in a row to have broken global temperature records. May soon followed on its heels, becoming the eighth month in a row to break global heat records.

These record-breaking temperatures triggered the third recorded global coral bleaching, and in Australia, 93% of the reefs have now been affected by bleaching along the 2,300 km Great Barrier Reef. In the northern parts of the reef, it’s expected that the majority of coral is dead, and on some reefs, over 90% of the coral is dying.

On Earth Day (April 22), 171 countries convened at the United Nations Headquarters in New York to sign the Paris Agreement on Climate Change at a High-Level Signature Ceremony. Our local media reported that the Minister of Science, Technology and Research, Susil Premajayantha, signed this agreement in New York on Sri Lanka’s behalf.

The aim of the Paris Agreement is to “strengthen the global response to the threat of climate change, in the context of sustainable development and efforts to eradicate poverty,” by:

(a) Holding the increase in the global average temperature to well below 2 °C above pre-industrial levels and to pursue efforts to limit the temperature increase to 1.5 °C above pre-industrial levels, recognising that this would significantly reduce the risks and impacts of climate change;

(b) Increasing the ability to adapt to the adverse impacts of climate change and foster climate resilience and low greenhouse gas emissions development, in a manner that does not threaten food production;

(c) Making finance flows consistent with a pathway towards low greenhouse gas emissions and climate resilient development.

All countries across the globe that are committed to these goals are expected to submit Intended Nationally Determined Contributions (INDCs) for tackling climate change. To quote Sri Lanka’s INDCs report, Sri Lanka “intends to reduce the GHG emissions against Business-As-Usual scenario unconditionally by 7% (Energy sector 4%, and 3% from other sectors) and conditionally 23% (Energy sector 16% and 7% from other sectors) by 2030.”

Additionally, according to Hemantha Withanage, Executive Director at the Centre for Environmental Justice/Friends of the Earth Sri Lanka, the country has already received “cabinet approval to create a Climate Change Commission” and there are already several committees in place at the ministerial level. Speaking to Roar, he also said that the idea behind this is to get Sri Lanka ready by 2020, for when the implementation of the Paris Agreement will come into force.

Sri Lanka’s ability to implement these proposed changes, however, hinges on three pre-conditions: finances, technology, and capacity building. Basically, we need both technical and financial assistance. As we are a developing country, we can expect assistance from Green Climate Fund (GCF) and other similar funding institutes and organisations, but finances aside, this also means that we, as a nation, have a lot of learning to do and changes to make.

It is also interesting to note that since this is an agreement under a convention (UNFCCC), and not a signed protocol, the question of sanctions will not arise, should we fail to hold up our end of the bargain. This effectively means that adhering to these guidelines is completely voluntary, despite the risk posed by not doing so. Which, in any universe, is bad news.

So far, Sri Lanka is aiming not just for economic development, but sustainable development, and has agreed on 17 sustainable development goals. The country claims to be taking steps to increase the renewable energy sector and aims at becoming 100% reliable on renewable energy by 2050, at least.

There are also plans to adopt energy-efficient and environment-friendly alternatives in the transport sector (electric, hybrid vehicles and electrification of railway system among other promises).

The disasters that struck the island in May should have been a wake-up call for anyone who hasn’t taken climate change seriously. Image credit: Thiva Arunagirinathan

The Paris Agreement’s 1.5C target has been called “wishful thinking,” by Andy Pitman, Director of the ARC Centre of Excellence for Climate System Science at the University of New South Wales in Australia.

Pitman isn’t the only sceptic. Despite the Agreement’s target, according to this study, “The INDCs collectively lower greenhouse gas emissions compared to where current policies stand, but still imply a median warming of 2.6–3.1 degrees Celsius by 2100.”

As The Washington Post points out, “Both before and after the Paris climate agreement, analyses by authorities including the International Energy Agency and the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change found that countries’ promises to cut their emissions just weren’t ambitious enough to keep the world within the “safe” climate range that lies at the core of the Paris agreement. Such analyses suggested, again and again, that without more ambitious action on the part of individual countries, global greenhouse gas emissions would still rise in the future, and warming might peak at temperatures well above 2 degrees Celsius.”

Where Sri Lanka is concerned, as Hemantha Withanage simply put it, “our national priorities are not yet in line with solving the climate crisis.”

Echoing that statement is the fact that our country’s INDCs were submitted last year. According to the INDCs report by the Ministry of Mahaweli Development and Environment:

“Sri Lanka is largely affected with climate induced extreme weather events and slow onset disasters. During these situations Sri Lankan government bears the responsibility of taking care of disaster victims, providing food and other necessary relief services and other supporting to recover early. Losses and damages (L&D) due to these disaster events are heavy creating a huge pressure on the economy and public spending. According to the National Disaster Relief Centre the total relief expenditure for the period of 2007-2011 was [LKR] 1,786 million (US$129.4million) and that money [was] borne by the government funds. Nevertheless, this calculation has been done without considering of infrastructure and other physical damages. According to the An Integrated post flood Assessment-May 2010 [report by the] Disaster Management Centre, Ministry of Disaster Management Sri Lanka… after the floods in the Western and Southern provinces, the total flood damages and losses amounted [to] over US$ 38.46 million .This means the Government of Sri Lanka is currently handling the losses and damages unconditionally.”

This report is dated October 2015, so it goes without saying that the estimated losses are much higher this year. Proof of the country’s extremely sluggish progress is last month’s disaster, a clear result of our true commitment to implementing the changes we promised.

Speaking to Pradeep Kodipilli, the Deputy Director of the DMC, it was understood that the DMC follows a set plan on how to manage disasters, which is renewed every five years. This plan includes the coordinated efforts of institutions like the Army, Navy and the Air Force. The plan will see a renewal once again in 2017, at the end of its five-year term. It would appear that it is this plan the DMC consulted when trying to handle the situation with the floods and landslides in May, which speaks for the effectiveness of the plan, as well as the fact that our Government is still dragging its feet when it comes to implementing its INDCs. If you choose to ignore their fumbling attempts, then take into consideration The Sunday Times report about equipment worth millions, which could potentially have helped mitigate the disaster, being left fallow.

Kodipilli also added that in the aftermath of the floods and landslides, a Comprehensive Disaster Management Plan has been written and is still waiting for parliamentary approval. That our leaders are still mulling over a belated attempt at planning for disaster is telling ‒ climate change and disasters aren’t going to wait until bureaucracy finally catches up with the times and learns to be faster, and more flexible. The fact that the need for such a plan has finally dawned on the DMC is encouraging. The time taken to approve it (especially considering the late hour) and the usual complacency, laziness, ineptitude, and inaction in implementation, which we as a nation have perfected over the years, aren’t positive indicators to go by.

Another problem we’re faced with is education and awareness ‒ how do you deal with an issue such as climate change if people don’t even know such a problem exists? Withanage points out that “not even 10% of the Sri Lankan population understands climate change. The same goes for SDGs.” He added that politicians themselves don’t discuss such important matters in public, while the media that collected funds and relief for victims of natural disasters don’t give the issue airtime or print space. The pathetic state of awareness in the country isn’t surprising, given the lack of public discourse and initiative on the part of the media and the country’s leaders.

Sri Lanka has a number of development plans in the pipeline – but have we considered, and sufficiently addressed, environmental concerns? Image courtesy infosrilankanews.com

Let us also not forget that these grand plans are supposed to be implemented by 2020. Added to that our highly ambitious development drive, which will be taking place simultaneously. Sri Lanka has big plans for the future ‒ the Megapolis project, the Port City, the countless high-rise buildings around the city… the list is endless. We want to turn the island into the next Singapore, conveniently forgetting that Singapore has been ranked one of the worst environmental offenders. Their development has come at a steep cost, one which we cannot afford to pay. Throwing climate change into the equation changes the development debate considerably ‒ the big question is, has our Government taken these concerns into account when planning these development drives? We have plans, we have agreements, we have proposals, we have treaties, we have press conferences and token tree-planting ceremonies ‒ what we don’t have is the strong political will, or leaders who recognise the dangers of the situation. It isn’t enough to plant a few hundred trees and wipe our hands clean of the matter. The tennis match over the fate of Sampur isn’t a good example of our leaders’ commitment towards reducing carbon emissions. Words like Paris Agreement and Sustainable Development Goals are freely thrown about. They look great on paper, but we need more than token agreements and promises.

The weak attempts of all the governments in the past and the Government in the present over environmental issues which are no-brainers (like illegal logging in forests and forest reserves) are yet another example of paper vs. action. The list is longer than we care to repeat ‒ but one thing is clear: now, more than ever, we need to do more than twiddle thumbs and hope that our policy makers will see the light. We may not be one of the biggest carbon dioxide contributors in the world (in fact, as of 2011, we contribute 0.7 metric tonnes per capita) but that doesn’t mean the effects of climate change will be reined in. As much as Sri Lanka needs to be concerned about climate change, we should be equally worried about our political climate and the lack of will to make changes while we still have the chance.

With contributions from Cassendra Doole

Featured image courtesy AP

The image of neatly dressed postmen on bicycles seems to belong to the past, what with increasing dependence on modern conveniences like email, text messages and VOIP. Receiving a letter these days often means receiving a bill and that hardly counts as exciting. The Post, however, doesn’t consider itself an anachronism – particularly not in a country where internet penetration is mostly an urban phenomenon. Joining – or perhaps even leading – the fight to stay relevant is, oddly enough, Sri Lanka Post.

Out on delivery; will they soon become obsolete? Image credit: exploresrilanka.lk

If you live in the city, chances are your only interaction with the Post Office would be to refer to it as a landmark, or a place specially earmarked for traffic violation fines. Post office workers going on strike and other such incidents would strike you as amusing – what do you need the post office for, anyway? It’s not as if people actually send each other letters anymore, right?

The truth is a lot more complicated than that. While for most, epistolary greetings belong in a Jane Austen novel, the fact is that the volume of letters sent for individual purposes has remained roughly the same over the years. What has changed is the volume of business mail, which has seen a dramatic increase due to changing economic conditions. From between 2002 – 2003, 60 – 70% of all mail in Sri Lanka was for individual purposes, while 30 – 40% was for business purposes. As of 2016, there has been a reversal, with commercial mail amounting to as much as 80% and the balance 20% being sent for individual purposes. The number of individual letters has stayed roughly the same over the years, but the volume of business mail has increased exponentially in comparison.

For the urban population that seems to increasingly prefer going paperless, all this might not mean much. But that’s because we’re part of the 20% that seems to have replaced the need for postal services with alternative, technologically-driven services. The Post may not be of service for those of us used to paying their bills online or transferring money electronically, but the rest of the country has yet to catch up and that’s exactly where the Post Office comes in.

While the urban population may have limited interaction with Sri Lanka Post, 80% of the country’s population still continues to depend on it. Image credit Raiyyu Radzi

Sri Lanka Post has done its homework. According to Shervyn Senadheera, Additional Secretary to the Ministry of Posts, Postal Services & Muslim Religious Affairs, a survey conducted between 2013 and 2014 with a sample size of 1,122 participants found that only 15 – 18% of the population has the capability of getting their services online, through the internet, mobile phones and apps. The rest of the population faces immense hurdles in terms of language, computer literacy, access to hardware, and confidence with technology. Senadheera is of the opinion that whatever the technology introduced, basic problems like those mentioned above need to be addressed first. And there is truth to the statement: even a giant technological development drive will need to tackle computer literacy before the people can enjoy its benefits.

The Post has recognised this – they’ve recognised that 80% of the population has yet to reap the benefits of technology. They’ve also recognised that they have the best access to that 80%. The challenge they’ve risen up to, therefore, is bridging the gap between a swiftly changing world and those who are yet to change with it, for various socio-economic reasons. Their solution is rather simple, perhaps even elegant. As these changes aren’t likely to trickle down to them yet, they’ve started offering these services, acting very much like the bridge mentioned above. A classic example is the electronic money order service, which cuts down the hassle of documentation. While Senadheera himself agrees that this service is not perfect as yet – the ideal solution would be for the customers to never leave their houses at all – it allows for money to be transferred electronically, relatively seamlessly in comparison to the nothing-but-a-hassle manual money order service used before.

Electronic money orders are just the tip of the iceberg. Turns out, the Post Office offers insurance services, e-channelling and e-money, and has tied up with various financial institutions including HSBC to provide a variety of financial services. They even have a toll-free hotline, 1950, for some free troubleshooting, just in case. It doesn’t end there, however.

It’s hard to imagine a quaint building like this facilitating e-commerce delivery, but Sri Lanka Post is more than doing its part when it comes to keeping up with the times. Image credit: commons.wikimedia.org

Perhaps the biggest problems most e-commerce websites have are customer reach and delivery, especially outside Colombo. The Post seems to have realised this, too. Using their vast network, they’ve tied up with e-commerce websites like wow.lk to deliver catalogues of goods to households. The postman doubles up as a door-to-door waiter of sorts, taking down orders and entering them into a handheld device. The orders are then beamed up to the mothership and dispatched, making full use of the giant network of 652 Post Offices and 3,410 sub-post offices.

Essentially then, what the Post has become is a giant spider web. Rather than cowering under the pressure of technology and accepting defeat and redundancy, they’ve evolved by identifying some unique weaknesses in the system and by providing solutions to tackle them. They may not seem ideal to those of us used to more seamless services – the Post, after all, has to navigate through red tape and government bureaucracy, unlike most private companies. They are, however, offering people services they may otherwise not have had access to at all, while putting up a fierce fight to ensure that the lack of technological penetration doesn’t cripple a sizeable chunk of the country’s population.

Featured image credit: flickr/pontfire

We really have the highest praise for our local politicians, and so, we thought to ourselves, that if US Presidential candidate Donald Trump knew of the existence of Sri Lanka and its gem-like democratically elected representatives, he would definitely take some time off from scaring Mexicans to come to Sri Lanka and learn how to be a proper leader.

We’re certain that if the gentleman in question really wanted to know how to run a country effectively, he would find invaluable pearls of wisdom and dog-years of experience in good governance right here in this tear-drop of an island in the middle of a steadily warming Indian Ocean. Here’s how we think our Lankan politicians can help Donald Trump become better at what he already does so well:

Yes, behaviour is definitely something our politicians have mastered. Watch and learn, Mr. Trump.

We don’t have fancy Senates and Houses in Sri Lanka, but we do have a Parliament and every now and then our politicians really let their hair loose and show the world what it means to be well behaved. For instance, just last week, fists rained while our politicians tried to make informed decisions about how to run the country, resulting in the hospitalisation of an MP. And this is just the tip of the iceberg. Titanic sized tantrums have been known to take place rather often in parliament, and it is behaviour like this that Trump can take back so much from. Although it doesn’t seem likely that he will go in very often, he could, perhaps, make it a point to be more regular and maybe learn how to run away with the mace, throw bottles and even a few well-placed punches, all in the name of getting the point across more effectively and providing great entertainment at the measly cost of integrity.

Just give ‘em all some major portfolios already, Mr. Trump. (Yeah, even the kids.) Image courtesy: hollywoodreporter.com

Who better to give Trump tips on nepotism than our dearest MR? Suddenly Trump will wish he had a bigger network of relations on whom he can entrust the coffers of the country and key public positions to. This is why, Mr. Trump, family relations and lack of birth control are instrumental. Watch and learn. Maybe you could still dig up a few relatives, who may unfortunately still be calling themselves Drumpf, from your native land. Oh wait.

Got minorities in your country? No problem, we can teach you how to show them some love. Image courtesy: realtimepolitics.com

Our history is fraught with examples of how well our leaders have managed to promote religious and ethnic harmony. The war never happened, after all, neither did all those riots and the Sinhala Only Act. Oh, and did we forget to mention the BBS? We’ve always been great (to use a greatly over-used Trump adjective) at being nice to people of other ethnicities and religious backgrounds, and this is something Trump badly needs to consult our politicians about.

Learn from the Master. Image courtesy Getty Images

Mervyn Silva’s Masterclass on “How to Tie People to Trees” deals with the effective management of public servants, most often the hapless types. In Trump’s case, he could apply these invaluable lessons on those Mexicans he keeps harping about. Walls are, after all, rather cumbersome, expensive, and old fashioned. Ask the Chinese, they should know. Speaking of…

Fear not, Mr. Trump ‒ diplomacy with China is something our politicos are pretty darned good at. Image courtesy conservativefocus.com

It’s not that difficult, we hear, but America always had trouble getting along with China and we really cannot understand why. That book on How To Be Friends with China will really come in handy, just about now, dear politicians. Think about it: despite a change in government (which incidentally gave us the impression that we would lessen our dependence on our Far-Eastern neighbours), we’re still on such fantastic terms with China. Projects that came to a screeching halt, like the Colombo Port City, are back on the cards once again, and it truly must be thanks to extremely intelligent diplomatic manoeuvring that we’re still superglued to our old buddies. America, meanwhile, is a bit insufferable when it comes to diplomatic relations with China and could do with a few badly thought out Chinese funded airports, ports, port cities and towers, to come to terms with their rivals. As for towers…

Bonus:

Beautiful. Image courtesy archkidecture.com

6. We know all about making extremely phallic looking towers, don’t we? Dear Mr. Trump, if you thought your Trump Towers were the phallocentric epicentres of the world, you got another thing coming.

7. The phallus isn’t far from sexist comments, but then again, this is something you’ve been doing really well on your own, come to think of it, Mr. Trump. If there’s something you can teach our politicians, please let it not be this.

Of course, the list doesn’t end here… we could go on for rather unreasonable lengths, but we’d rather hear from you. What do you think Donald Trump could learn from our wonderful politicians?

Featured Image credit: Chip Somodevilla/Getty Images

The World Happiness Report 2016 Update was released shortly before the UN International Day of Happiness on March 20, and provided a breakdown of the world’s happiest and not-so-happy countries. Of 157 countries, our own little island ranked at 117, falling behind Palestinian Territories (108), Bangladesh (110) and South Africa (at 116), while faring slightly better than India (118) and Myanmar (119). Our ranking is a drastic setback from the usual image presented of our island, and which tourist guides promote: a happy island, despite its troubles. The data samples collected, however, tell a different story.

Good question. A ranking of 117 out of 157 doesn’t look too good on us. Before we go into the methodologies and the conclusions reached, however, we need to understand the purpose of this report. Quite simply, it seeks to measure subjective happiness, something that goes beyond factors like the GDP. So while GDP is factored in, other aspects like social support, healthy life expectancy, freedom to make life choices, generosity, and freedom from corruption, are also taken into account.

The math behind it is far from easy, but let’s attempt a simplification. Data is captured using a polling system called the Cantril Scale, which was developed for sociological research. It is one of the foremost empirical methods used to measure “happiness” or subjective well being. The index hopes to answer a subjective question, which, in this case, is the happiness of an individual from a particular nation.

The Cantril Self-Anchoring Scale, developed by pioneering social researcher Dr. Hadley Cantril, consists of the following process which allows recipients of the questionnaire to come up with a score to determine their level of happiness:

a) Please imagine a ladder with steps numbered from zero at the bottom to 10 at the top

b) The top of the ladder represents the best possible life for you and the bottom of the ladder represents the worst possible life for you

c) On which step of the ladder would you say you personally feel you stand at this time (i.e. in the present)?

d) On which step do you think you will stand about five years from now (i.e. the future)?

Data is collected from roughly 1,000 individuals from each country per year. This time’s data set is an aggregate from 2012 – 2015. Obviously, individual answers to the questions differ. The data is normalised and averaged. Since the polling data is averaged, it presumably is a way to define a “typical person from the country” and how happy they are.

According to the report, the average Sri Lankan’s mean is 4.415 and on a scale of zero to 10, things don’t look too great.

If you look closely at the graph, you’ll notice that the horizontal coloured lines each tell a story. What you need to keep in mind is that each of these colours play a different role in each country and the length of these lines depicts how impactful the factors are in that particular country. For example, the longer the yellow line, the more importance the population gives to GDP. In Sri Lanka, for instance, the yellow line is longer than the other lines, meaning that income is more important for Sri Lankans than factors like social support, healthy life expectancy, freedom to make life choices, generosity and even perceptions of corruption (which is, incidentally, the shortest line in the graph).

The report also compares past data to the present data and tries to figure out if the country has improved in terms of happiness or not. The good news here is that we have improved, but sadly only marginally. The changes in happiness from 2005 – 2007 and 2013 – 2015 is 0.037.

The report also takes into consideration the inequality of happiness, and takes into account that the score varies from person to person in a country. Standard deviation was used to measure the inequality of happiness, and the larger the deviation, the larger the inequality of happiness. We stand at 1.941 out of a scale of 3.5, which means that the inequality of happiness is more than 50%. This means that Sri Lankans disagree quite a bit on their level of happiness and that not everyone is equally happy. It is important to keep this figure low as it demonstrates whether everyone is happy as opposed to a select few, who often tend to be of a higher income.

The report argues that subjective well-being is a broader and more inclusive measure of the quality of life than income. Measuring the subjective inequality of well being also helps us better understand the distribution of well-being among the individuals in a society.

The report also notes that the shift from non-material sources of well-being to a broader measure of well-being, encourages possibilities for increasing happiness, while simultaneously reducing stress on scarce material resources. It’s interesting, however, to note that for a struggling country like ours, material well-being, as understood by the greater importance given to GDP, is still a greater priority, than, say, a healthy life expectancy or social support. This is actually quite distressing – while it is important that people are able to have better lives, we need to understand this isn’t necessarily determined by income. Other less tangible factors also come into play and valuing them equally may help improve the overall wellbeing of our society.

Cover image courtesy: intrepidtravel.com

It’s not often that you find a writer who pays equal attention to the craft of writing and the story itself. Nor is it easy to find a well written book that also has a unique mixed-genre approach. Where Sri Lankan English Literature is concerned, the chances of stumbling into the above are pretty low – so it was a pleasant surprise to read in Theena Kumaragurunathan’s debut novel, First Utterance, the words of someone who is not just meticulous with his writing, but also literary and experimental at the same time.

It wouldn’t be an understatement to say that the majority of the books written for the niche English reading audience in Sri Lanka deal with conflict. We’re constantly framing ourselves in terms of some external conflict or the other, in terms of the war, the tsunami, colonisation, or colonial trappings; and while it is important to explore such topics, it is equally important to go beyond them. In such a context, First Utterance is an absolutely refreshing read – for that matter, we will even go as far as to call it Sri Lanka’s first attempt in English at a genre that goes beyond fiction and even fantasy. To use the words of the author, let’s call it ‘speculative fiction’ that doesn’t allow for tidy classification. So while it deals with an alternative universe, known as Mirage, if you’re expecting a run-of-the-mill fantasy paperback, you’re in for a surprise. It could even appeal to many sub-genre sensibilities, and readers may find correspondences with fantasy, magic realism, fiction and even sci-fi. The fact that there aren’t many – or any – Sri Lankan English books touching such adventurous and daunting themes might just make this book the father of a new genre, a great start to doing away with some of the needless stigma associated with speculative fiction.

There are a few things that stand out where Kumaragurunathan’s book is concerned, but before we get to that, here’s a short introduction to acquaint the reader with the book in question.

First Utterance is the first instalment of three books which make up the Miragian Cycles and is, just as interestingly, a self-published novel. It is easily on par with any novel a major publishing house out there might put out – or perhaps even goes beyond it, for, as the author pointed out to us, publishing houses tend to be rigid where genre is concerned, particularly in Sri Lanka. Hence the difficulty in finding a book that takes on a mixed-genre approach, where traditional novelistic prose is juxtaposed alongside tight, economical poetry and, interestingly enough, a play.

Where subject matter is concerned, out of fear of that dreadful word “spoilers,” we’ll leave it at: a book about creation and destruction, the cyclicality of beginnings and endings (artfully conveyed by the cover where three Urobori devour themselves), the marginalisation of what’s “different”, the dangers of dogma, an All-Mother, fathers and sons, writers and madness, music, and time itself.

The book will launch this Sunday, March 27, at the Sri Lanka Foundation Institute, and is a slim, but well-designed volume that won’t disgrace your bookshelf. You can pick up a copy on the day of the launch itself, or go to firstutterancebook.com to register for a free e-book version.

Perhaps Kumaragurunathan takes his cue from poetry – his writing, like his poetry, is economical and precise. It doesn’t leave room for a loose word or details that the book could do without. In fact (and this could go both ways), it is a very demanding book where attention is concerned. It might put off lazy readers, or readers who only want easy prose, but the book is by no means difficult either. Rather, the book, to repeat, is ‘precise’ and extremely carefully constructed. This means that skimming through it is not an option – every word is purposeful and every sentence integral to the flow of the plot. If at any point the reader might feel confused, particularly with the three “mad” men and their corresponding narratives, it’s only because the writer encourages the reader’s understanding to gradually develop. In that sense, it wouldn’t be difficult to call the book a bit of a mystery, which would require the sequels to help develop the universe further.

Kumaragurunathan also has an interesting way of dealing with convention, particularly fantasy convention. Perhaps he draws from writers he endorses, like Marquez; for although the primary plot device is, quite simply put, a prophecy of sorts, there’s nothing cheesy, trite or even apologetic about his presentation. In that sense, his experimentation with this particular classical fantasy trope has paid off. It’s almost as if he reinvents the idea, breathing much needed life into a concept as hacked as a prophecy.

The fact that a self-published debut novel could be so well crafted is commendable – it begs to answer many questions that budding writers out there may have. We thought we’d get the details from the man himself, so watch this space for an exclusive interview with Theena Kumaragurunathan about self-publishing and the writing process.

As for the book itself, if you’re wondering whether you should pick up a copy, either electronically or physically, we have this much to say: this book is a definite yes, a book that could possibly even help redirect, redefine, and refine Sri Lankan Literature written in English.

For those of you unacquainted with the issue or the concept, bottom trawling is an industrial fishing method whereby fishing nets, with large weights attached to them, are dragged across the seafloor, indiscriminately catching everything in their path. Unfortunately, this method catches more than just the targeted fish, and results in nearly 90% of the “catch” (which includes corals and other marine life) being thrown back to the sea, after the irremediable damage has been done.

The issue is also central to the longstanding India-Sri Lanka fishermen conflict, but banning Indian fishermen from our waters alone will not solve it.

Images of a seabed before and after it was subjected to bottom trawling fishing. Image courtesy occupy.com

Turns out, while most point fingers at the Indian fishermen, who are notorious for using this method of fishing, Sri Lankan fishermen have also been adopting this destructive practice, as seen off Jaffna. This means that it isn’t enough to ban Indian fishermen from Sri Lankan waters – banning Indian boats could simply result in local boats taking over. The practice, essentially, will continue while the main culprits will change. The only solution is to ban the practice altogether, to prevent any further damage to our delicate marine ecosystem.

Sri Lanka hasn’t yet banned bottom trawling in coastal waters, although the practice is banned in inland waters. According to Research Director and Head of Law at Verité Research, Gehan Gunatilleke, although fishing licenses are rarely granted for the practice, the practice itself is permitted under the Fisheries and Aquatic Resources Act.

Additionally, while the Fishing (Import and Export) Regulations of 2010 prohibit the import or export of fish caught through the trawling method, no such regulations extend to the fish sold in the domestic market, which in itself provides local fishermen incentive to continue.

On April 21, 2015, MP M. A. Sumanthiran proposed a legislative amendment calling for a total ban of the practice, but this was not considered due to the dissolution of Parliament in August 2015. The Bill was filed again in February 2016. In his speech to Parliament on October 9, 2015, MP Sumanthiran noted that “it has been said that due to this particular method of fishing (bottom trawling), the marine resources on the Indian side have been totally destroyed – there is nothing more – and that is the reason why these fishermen are now coming into the territorial waters of Sri Lanka,” but also that “the Government of Sri Lanka must take decisive action with regard to bottom trawling. Presently there is a Regulation under the Fisheries and Aquatic Resources Act where this method of fishing is regulated. But, that will not do. It must be totally banned, because now it is clear to everyone that this method of fishing only destroys the marine resources and long-term sustainability is not possible.”

How bottom trawling works, and the damage it causes

To understand just how destructive this fishing practice is, let’s take a look at what the WWF has to say about it. According to the WWF, the introduction of the rockhopper trawls in the 1980s meant that nets could easily pass over any rough surface, without any damage caused to the nets. For that matter, “the largest, with heavy rollers over 75 cm in diameter, are very powerful, capable of moving boulders weighing 25 tonnes.” This has meant that most of the ocean floor can now be trawled, even to a depth of 2,000m.

The WWF also noted that “in an experiment off Alaska, 55% of cold-water coral damaged by one pass of a trawl had not recovered a year later,” while “scars up to 4km long have been found in the reefs of the north-east Atlantic Ocean.” Additionally, “in heavily fished areas around coral seamounts off southern Australia, 90% of the surfaces where coral used to grow are now bare rock.”

While we don’t have studies in Sri Lanka to estimate just how bad the damage is, it doesn’t take much imagination to understand just how badly our marine ecosystem has been damaged. It’s high time Sri Lanka takes this historic step and bans bottom trawling – while we’re at it, we could even set a good example for the rest of the region.

Cover image credit: Kambou Sia AFP/GETTY

No, this isn’t about the recent power outages we’ve all been experiencing – apart from dealing with the ensuing fracas related to that, Ceylon Electricity Board (CEB) may also be in hot water over the potential extinction of an endemic, critically endangered species of fish.

Until recently, the Green Labeo (Labeo Fisheri), also known as gadaya, was thought to be extinct – it was rediscovered in 2011, in a rather ironic fashion. Dynamite blasts for a mini hydro project had resulted in an accidental discovery: dead, decomposing fish had been found and identified as the gadaya, which was, up until then, considered extinct. Since then, the gadaya has been categorised as critically endangered. Its ideal habitat can be found in certain parts of the Mahaweli River. However, one such habitat is currently under threat because of the Moragolla Hydropower Project.

The Moragolla Hydropower Project received the required environmental clearance from the Central Environmental Authority (CEA), and therefore the green light to proceed with the project. Subsequently, however, environmentalists found that the gadaya breed in the very waters that are the proposed site of the Hydropower Project, creating a thorny issue for the CEB.

The existence of the gadaya at the site of the project was, however, not accounted for when the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) report was made by the CEB – hence the green light to proceed.

Speaking to Roar, DDG of the Environmental Management Assessment Division of the CEA, U. K. D. G. Jayasinghe, explicitly stated that, “this fish species was not recorded according to the report” made by the CEB to receive the environmental clearance.

Whether the CEB knew of the existence of the fish in the waters at the time of the report is unclear – what is certain, however, is that the CEB called for contractors for the “Surveying, Translocating, Monitoring and Relocating of Labeo Fisheri in Mahawelli (sic) River – Moragolla Hydropower Project.” The tender notice issued at the time can still be found on their website.

The CEB, in this attempt to relocate the critically endangered fish, has not, however, done so in consultation with the concerned environmental bodies, both the Department of Wildlife Conservation (DWC) and the CEA confirm. Furthermore, as environmental lawyer Jagath Gunewardena points out, any attempts to capture or remove protected species is considered an illegal activity under Section 31 A of the Flora and Fauna Protection Ordinance (FFPO). Gunewardena also added that under section 55 of the FFPO, the DWC can only give approval for a relocation in view of an ex-situ conservation method, to help the population growth of the fish.

That the CEB now knows of the existence of the fish at the proposed site of the project was understood when a CEB representative, W. J. L. S. Fernando, Additional General Manager (Projects) told Roar that they had “…come across many species and tried to control the damage. This is only one species and steps have been take to protect that species.” Mr. Fernando added that he would “not like to comment on this” any further.

Speaking to the DWC, it was learnt that the the Department had only recently received information of the CEB’s attempt to relocate the fish. “Steps have been taken to communicate with the CEB and the CEA. We only know the news so far and don’t know the exact situation,” M. G. C. Sooriyabandara, Deputy Director (Law Enforcement), DWC, told Roar.

Additionally, the Mr. Jayasinghe of the CEA said that, as the approving agency, they had given the CEB clearance to proceed but that the “fish species was not recorded according to the (EIA) report. This was not informed by the CEB. We have to inquire into the matter.”

While the respective authorities have begun investigations into the matter, environmentalists, however, are pretty clear that the CEB has overstepped a line. “Any initiative to relocate the fish, and that too only for breeding purposes, should come only from the DWC,” explained Jagath Gunewardena. “If they had performed a real assessment, the fish would have been found. CEB’s move to relocate the fish is not part of the approval condition either. Anything beyond the mandate is a violation under the National Environmental Act,” he said.

Vibushana Bandara, Vice President (Action Committee) of the Young Zoologists’ Association of Sri Lanka, also added that “the CEB has no right to relocate or to even request permission for a relocation.” According to Bandara, “relocating an endangered species using the limited technology we have will be no easy task. It is extremely difficult and even after relocating the fish, it could die off, or something equally drastic could happen, which would adversely affect its population.”

The issue poses a dilemma which many countries today face ‒ the demand for power and energy is increasing, adding stress to the already overburdened environment. The recent spate of power outages, combined with the now compounded effects of climate change, is adding to the issue. Yes, we need clean electricity now more than ever: but we shouldn’t discount the drastic effects its procurement could have on the environment. Over to you, CEB.

Cover Image courtesy: adaderana.lk

For Sri Lankan born British documentary filmmaker Kannan Arunasalam, filming Jaffna has posed some unique challenges. On one hand, he finds that he has better access to Jaffna than most: Kannan was born in Jaffna and has family there. On the other, there’s the constant fear for both him and his film subjects when it comes to covering sensitive issues ‒ like media freedom ‒ in post-war Jaffna.

Perhaps the best way to understand Kannan’s post-war Jaffna would be to look at it in stages: the first stage is of self-imposed censorship. For instance, in his 2010 documentaries, of which Paper, Kerosene and Koothu are representative, the viewer would note that the stories are placed almost entirely in the past, of the struggles during the war rather than contemporary life. “You wouldn’t even consider talking about a contemporary issue. It was essentially a form of self-censorship. It was easier and safer to talk about a distant past,” said Kannan.

His 2010 documentaries Paper and Kerosene talk of life in Jaffna during the war-time embargoes. In Paper, for instance, a scarcity of newsprint puts the profession of journalism, and thereby news itself, in danger. Faced with such daunting obstacles, the newspapermen have to make do, even if it means using sheets of paper found in school exercise books.

Kerosene, a documentary which speaks of life during government embargoes on fuel, medicines and food in the 1990s. Image Credit: vimeo.com/kannanarunasalam

“They talked about it with strange nostalgia,” Kannan reflects. “They would smile and remember those days,” but he added that out of fear – fear which instilled a sense of censorship – he stuck to documenting life in the distant past. “What I wish is that I could have filmed life as it was happening. For mine and their own safety, I avoided telling the story of what is affecting them the most,” he said.

In contrast, the second stage of Kannan’s Jaffna films is a bold change. His 2014 film for Al Jazeera, News from Jaffna, pushes boundaries and touches on very sensitive themes, particularly for Jaffna. His protagonist, a young journalist working for the Udayan newspaper, attempts to write a news feature about a missing journalist, also from Udayan, who disappeared without a trace during the height of war. The story traces the young female journalist’s attempts to write her story despite fear and red tape in a heavily army controlled environment, while touching on issues like press freedom and the double jeopardy of being a female journalist in such a volatile environment.

As a testament to the instability of the environment at the time, Kannan shot most of his film guerrilla style so as not to attract too much attention to himself. “I was terrified, yes, and was getting steadily paranoid towards the end.” He talks of how he was anxious to leave Jaffna after shooting – but he still had to get one last shot, the most dangerous of all: a panoramic shot of Jaffna town. “We looked everywhere for a building not ‘connected’ to ‘anyone’,” he said. “In the end, with my father’s help, we found a newly completed mall from which we got the shot. I had almost given up,” he confessed.

Kannan Arunasalam’s documentaries touch on various issues from not just Jaffna, but also around the world. Image Credit: Kannan Arunasalam

Talking about the paranoia he felt while shooting, he explained that he was most worried about having his footage confiscated. “I backed everything up, but I was taking a military plane back. I acted as if I wasn’t doing anything out of the ordinary and realised that it’s fear that stops me. That’s what stopped me back in 2010,” he said.

We met up with Kannan shortly before he left for Jaffna for what promises to be the third stage of his Jaffna documentaries, and the difference, according to him, promises to be huge. “For the next few films – I’m thinking we can do anything. There’s so many possibilities now. It’s a different phase. I would love to do a feature film, something we weren’t able to do before because we couldn’t risk spending a long time with somebody. You have to ensure that the subjects are secure to warrant for a feature length film,” he said.

Watch out for the release of his latest documentary film “Sampur” based on the return of displaced communities from Sampur, Trincomalee. You can also follow Kannan on his many adventures on the Stateless Media Facebook page and the Iam project website.

The concept itself – sexism – is far from new and can probably be dated to the agricultural age (our ancestors from hunter-gatherer tribes are said to have been more egalitarian – imagine that!). Because of its prevalence in many societies and in many forms, it’s obviously no surprise to find the prejudice transferred to the internet. Although there is no evidence that sexism has increased after the advent of the world wide web, the internet has, however, allowed for it to be viewed more publicly. From comments on Facebook pictures, to comments on articles and issues, to blog posts and memes, sexism on the internet has taken many shapes and faces, possibly encouraged by relative anonymity, lack of accountability, and the online disinhibition effect.

Misogyny has existed in cultures across the world, and for a long time ‒ the internet now gives it a new spin. Image Credit: REUTERS/Tim Wimborne

Sri Lanka is, quite obviously, no different – it is interesting (and appalling), for instance, to see how internalised sexism, which up to this point rarely had an audience wider than your immediate circle, has become, embedded within the emerging Sri Lankan viral culture, if you can call it that. Let’s take a look at a few “viral” events involving women that occurred over the space of a few years – from the “Wariyapola girl” to “BMW akka” to the “Danno Budunge” controversy – to understand the issue (of cyber sexism) a little better.

Based on comments made online (of which we have compiled a series of screenshots) on various platforms including Youtube and “gossip” websites, a very disturbing picture emerges of Sri Lanka’s citizens’ treatment and opinions of women. You can access all the screenshots here (although caution is advised; the content of the screenshots is extremely disturbing). Please note that the examples provided are in no way exhaustive; they are merely a sample and not representative of the entire internet. Conversely, there may be plenty more examples that haven’t yet been documented – for the purpose of clarity, we will only refer to a narrow segment of samples. We have also blurred out the last names of the people who made the comments – but because these comments are freely available on public domain and haven’t been taken from any personal pages or accounts, we have, for the most part, left them as it is.

Additionally, in the three case studies highlighted, we will not be analysing the issue itself to determine whether what took place at the scene was right or wrong. Rather, we will be studying some of the reactions to the issue as found on public online forums. Please note that the writer personally feels that gender roles and gender constructs are to a great extent outdated and need to be redefined (this applies to both men and women), and when terms such as “feminine” and “masculine” are used, they are used to indicate perceived societal norms and constructed behavioural frames.

In most cases involving women, a lot of criticism is directed at the person’s gender. Image Credit: sidedooryk.com

What these three issues have in common is that they deal with women. The comments made are, therefore, gender-centric: there has been direct allusion to the person’s gender, which may at times, take precedence over the issue itself. Such gendered comments, however, aren’t new to Sri Lanka alone. What we can understand from all these cases is that most often, if there is a woman in question, comments will be directed at her based on her gender alone.

In all three cases, the women have also been perceived by the commenters as having crossed a line.

Right or wrong, the internet’s reaction to this video was far from pleasant. Image Credit: adaderana.lk

Looking beyond what is “right or wrong” in this case, we come to comments where the commenters were strongly angered by the incident. The general understanding gleaned from the 12 screenshots we used to study this case includes the following:

From all the comments, what we gathered was that the commenters were all male. We also understood that what a woman should be and do, how a woman should dress and behave, are governed by traditional notions. A woman who goes beyond this is perceived as being “non-traditional,” “Westernised,” even “anti-national,” and “anti-Sri Lankan.” Somehow a sense of nationhood is thrown into the noxious mix, giving the impression of a society that is highly patriarchal, rigid and traditional. This sense of nationhood can only be maintained and protected from influences (such as Westernisation) through extreme violence.

This time around the accusations even stemmed from ideas over religion and nationhood. Image Credit: Facebook/Kishani Jayasinghe (Soprano)

In the previous case we noted how a sense of “nationhood” was often traditional and patriarchal. In this case, religion is also perceived as phallocentric. There was also a degrading statement made towards the singer on national television. The effect of such a statement when it comes to influencing public opinion isn’t quantifiable; but it can be supposed that it may have contributed in some way towards the negative sentiment. In comparison to the “Wariyapola girl” case, however, the Danno Budunge incident didn’t draw as many sexually explicit comments, but the comments are still derogatory. Here’s what we noted:

The Danno Budunge case brought up a lot of anger, particularly because many perceived it to be disrespectful towards religion. There were negative comments made by women, but the comments that were profane and derogatory were made entirely by male commenters. The Danno Budunge case also brought in a political dimension. Commenters implied that the singer was able to perform an act which is disrespectful towards religion because of the new regime; the new regime, therefore, endorses the weakening of traditional institutions such as religion. Added to this is the fear of Westernisation and the implication that traditional values are deteriorating (hence a woman is able to openly and publicly “disrespect” religion), leading to a morally loose society. With the perceived weakening of traditional mores comes the vehemence of the male commenters, for the shift in values undermines and threatens the males’ traditional place in society (i.e. right on top).

When the subject of a video this infamous is a woman, she is often subjected to derogatory remarks based entirely on her gender. Image Credit: Youtube/THILANGR8

Because BMWs are synonymous with wealth, this case has the added degree of classism to it, in addition to a political slant. In addition, we have a first: a female commenter (or so we assume, going by the comment) who engaged in making a derogatory remark on the incident. Here’s what we observed:

What sets this case apart from the others is the presence of a female commenter. Her comment is a generalised statement which implies that the lady in the video has, in some way, brought shame to other women through her actions. The takeaway from this is that there are certain “values” so deeply ingrained that it goes beyond gender: the woman commenter seems to be endorsing the same kind of disrespect the male commenters have shown. It also shows that she, too, believes that there is a particular way a woman ought to behave and has internalised the patriarchal mould; if any woman crosses this, then she has brought shame to all of womankind.

Apart from outright insults and vulgarity, online comments subject women to a barrage of opinions stemming from patriarchal ideology. Image Credit: shamelessmag.com/Kelsey Borch

All three cases are unique, and at the same time similar. The heart of the similarity lies in the fact that some commenters feel very strongly about how a woman should behave: if she doesn’t conform to their standards, they feel that they have the right to degrade her. The degradation is often of a sexual kind; reinforcing the dichotomy between genders and using sexual prowess to assert dominance over the other. In tandem with sexual degradation comes the strong idea of punishment – justice can only be asserted if these women are punished, and punished in a painful, degrading, and inhuman manner. Punished by defiling the very biological receptacles that make them women. This reduces the worth of a woman to that of a sexual object who can be brought in line through violent sex acts and rape, making her almost slavish.

What’s disturbing is the degree of violence with which this is asserted – violent acts such as rape aren’t perceived to be crimes but are considered agents of justice, a dominance of the masculine over the feminine. This degree of masculinity seems to be prevalent in many social strata: politics, patriotism, religion and tradition.

Furthermore, the commenters thought it important to mention the mothers: mothers (and mothers alone, in these cases) are responsible for the upbringing of the children, which is part of their domestic responsibility (the fathers aren’t anywhere in the equation). These type of comments reinstate a very traditional notion of a woman’s role in society and confine her to a domestic realm – overstepping this, by driving a BMW and arguing with the police, by slapping a man who was harassing her in public, by publicly using a supposedly exclusive Western form of music to sing a song many consider to be religious, is sacrilegious. All these acts, and the viral culture that helped bring them to popular limelight, have brought notice to these women who have gone beyond their “rightful domestic spheres,” beyond the private into the public domain. One can ask the rhetorical question as to why these videos have garnered such a widespread response: is it the nature of incident or is it because there are women in the video, or is it both?

Online sexism in comments may very well be symptomatic of the online disinhibitive effect, which, to quote a New Yorker article is a theory that claims that “the moment you shed your identity the usual constraints on your behavior go, too.” Such comments are in no way acceptable socially – and yet you find them, given impetus by the anonymity granted by the internet, empowering people to make statements that would, if said in a public sphere where they can be held accountable, bring censure, if only because of the derogatory language used.

We’d also like to add, to wrap up, that this isn’t a generalisation of all males – this is just a small sample from three disparate incidents and is, we hope, in no way reflective of the overall state of the country.

As is evident, when in a South Asian context, the issue of sexism is rather complex; it is multidimensional and needs more than a surface reading for better understanding. What can be gathered from this is that the internet culture isn’t very woman friendly, and may well reflect on the mindset of the users and their views and opinions of women, making the internet a darker place than usual for women.

Cover Image credit: prezi.com

Quality of Living Rankings by Mercer for 2016 are out: Colombo (the only Sri Lankan city ranked in the survey) is at 132 out of 230 cities. This ranks Colombo higher than other South Asian cities, including Hyderabad (ranking at 139; the best performing Indian city), Bangalore (145), Chennai (150), Mumbai (152), New Delhi (161), Islamabad (193), Lahore (199), Karachi (202) and Dhaka (214).

Going by data released in 2015, Colombo has managed to hold onto its position – or rather, remain stagnant – while Hyderabad has dropped a notch and Pune improved by a single rank (from 145 in 2015 to 144).

The Quality of Living Index is calculated based on 39 factors, grouped into 10 categories, that help assess living conditions. This includes the “political and social environment (political stability, crime, law enforcement etc), economic environment (currency exchange regulations, banking services), socio-cultural environment (media availability and censorship, limitations on personal freedom), medical and health considerations (medical supplies and services, infectious diseases, sewage, waste disposal, air pollution, etc.), schools and education (standards and availability of international schools), public services and transportation (electricity, water, public transportation, traffic congestion, etc.), recreation (restaurants, theatres, cinemas, sports and leisure, etc.), consumer goods (availability of food/daily consumption items, cars, etc.), housing (rental housing, household appliances, furniture, maintenance services) and natural environment (climate, record of natural disasters).”

The primary purpose of these rankings is to help determine living conditions for multinational companies, and thereby help employers give their employees fair compensation when placed on international assignments.

Although lists of this sort should be taken with a grain of salt, it is, however, a useful tool when it comes to understanding just where we stand globally in terms of the quality of living.

We seem to be the undisputed boss of South Asia, but we don’t even figure in the list of top 5 Asian countries. That privilege belongs to Singapore (26), Tokyo (44), Kobe (46), Yokohama (49) and Osaka (58). For that matter, Singapore has a higher ranking than New York City (44), London (39), Oslo (30) and Paris (37), strangely enough, despite the one-party system. As Sri Lankans are very fond of aspiring towards becoming the next Singapore of the region, this just might help us understand where we stand globally and how far we have yet to go.

Another reality check: Hyderabad isn’t too far off. At 139, Hyderabad has a far larger population and far more problems than Colombo could even dream of. Additionally, the list hasn’t accounted for cities in Nepal, Bhutan and Afghanistan, which narrows the list of cities we can be compared to. As Bhutan ranks quite well on the corruption index, but doesn’t figure in this list at all, we just might be a little toothless when it comes to claiming the crown for South Asia.

Finally, we aren’t even at the halfway mark on the list: as a city, as a nation, we clearly have our work cut out for us. To begin with, it would do well to take a closer look at the criteria for judging and work on improving various factors like our socio-cultural environment, schools, education and public services, and transportation.

Cover image credit: lamudi.lk

Brace yourselves: we’re in for a rough ride. Despite what climate change nay-sayers may claim, the truth is that the climate is, without any doubt, changing… for the worse – and we don’t have to look beyond the Indian Ocean for proof. According to latest research, the warming of the Indian Ocean has been taking place at a faster pace in comparison to other oceans of the world. This has resulted in a drastic reduction of phytoplankton in the Indian Ocean, and the weakening of the monsoon. This means trouble, not just for Sri Lanka, but the entire South Asian region.

A warming Indian Ocean can spell drastic weather fluctuations for Sri Lanka. Image credit newsinfo.inquirer.net

Over the last century, the Indian Ocean has been warming at a faster rate than other oceans of the world, with “a rapid and continuous basin-wide warming (taking place) since 1950,” climate scientist Dr. Roxy Mathew Koll told Roar. For that matter, the change measured is between 0.7 to 1.2°C, while the global mean change is 0.8°C. Dr. Koll explains that the Indian Ocean has warmed two to three times faster in comparison to the central tropical Pacific: the warming can be partly attributed to increased levels of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere, in addition to the Indian Ocean being relatively landlocked in the north, unlike the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans.

Dr. Koll added that as a result, “the ocean circulation is restricted from flushing out the heat to the poles,” and therefore the heat pile-up persists for a longer time. In addition, heat in the Indian Ocean accumulates through “a modified atmospheric circulation” due to El Nino-like conditions in the Pacific. He observed that “the magnitude and frequency of El Ninos have gone up in the recent decades, and so has the ocean temperatures in the Indian ocean.”

Dr. Koll has identified two main problems: a temperamental monsoon, and an affected food web.

Where the monsoon is concerned, he explained that while there is an increase of moisture in the atmosphere, the monsoon winds transporting moisture is weakened, spelling trouble for the South Asian subcontinent in many ways. On one hand, this will result in a decrease in rains over central South Asia, but on the other hand, equatorial regions will see an increase in rainfall. He added that “though we have not specifically focused on the rainfall changes over Sri Lanka, we see a slight increase in rainfall due to its proximity to the region where the warming has occurred.”

What this means is that we’re all in for bipolar weather: the warmer climate has ensured that the atmosphere can hold moisture for a longer period, which will result in long dry spells interspersed with extreme rainfall.

There has already been a 20% fall in phytoplankton, which form the base of the marine food chain. Image Credit: Wikipedia

The warming of the Indian Ocean has also affected the marine food-web, on which many countries in the region are heavily dependent. There has been a 20% decline in phytoplankton, microscopic plants where are the basic building blocks for the food web. With an integral part of the food chain affected, there could be a chain reaction on other marine life, adding further stress to the marine ecosystem. To a great extent, this also threatens food security.

The effects will be seen on both land and sea. Rainfall changes will have an immense impact on agriculture. Central South Asia will see a reduction in rainfall, while Sri Lanka will experience a predicted increase in rainfall. Either way, the reductions and increase will result in a severe blow to the agricultural industry, which is heavily dependent on rainfall.

Indian ocean warming has had, and will continue to have, an adverse impact on marine life. Image Credit: cosmosmagazine.com

Similarly, the fishing industry will take a hit. Dr. Koll explained that a decline in marine phytoplankton was observed in the western Indian Ocean, ranging from the Kenya-Somalia coast to the Gulf coast, to the south of the Indian peninsula around Sri Lanka, potentially affecting the fish and other marine species in the region. “Most fish species have a very narrow range of optimum temperatures related to their metabolism… even a change of 1°C may affect their distribution and life cycle,” Dr. Koll explained, adding that it could result in fish migrating to cooler waters, dying out entirely, or getting affected by invasive species.

We can’t stop climate change this late in the day, but we can prepare for the worst. Dr. Koll suggests, where agriculture is concerned, cultivating crops which can withstand drought and flood conditions would help, in addition to a judicious usage of water, as well as the right methods of irrigation and water storage. Where fishing is concerned, he pointed out that commercial fisheries in the Indian Ocean isn’t regulated. “Regulating the total allowable catches through a proper allocation system maximises sustainable yields, helps the fish and marine ecosystem to adapt to climate impacts, and also reduces greenhouse gas emissions by fishing boats,” Dr. Koll said.

Global average temperature anomalies for January 2016. Image Credit: NASA GISS

Going by reports, as it stands, Sri Lanka has seen a 7% reduction in rainfall over the past five decades, prompted by the very warming which will potentially increase rainfall. The temperatures in Colombo, Sri Lanka was also 1.2°C higher in 2015, in comparison to the other years, while globally NASA has noted that January 2016 was the warmest January ever recorded. With the current prevailing El-Niño conditions coming to a gradual close, there are also predictions of it being replaced by an equally strong La-Niña. It doesn’t look like the climate is about to catch a break anytime soon so we had best be prepared.

When Maithripala Sirisena was campaigning for President, his election promises included a ‘New Sri Lanka for Women.’ It has been over a year since President Sirisena came to power, and, to a great extent, his promises to the women of Sri Lanka await fruition. As a recent report by Verité Research outlines, out of his nine pledges to women, four have yet to be addressed, and the other five are yet to be fulfilled. While the report does point out that these promises are ambitious, they are also crucial to creating an environment where women are ensured safety – physically and economically – and are granted equal representation and recognition, something which should have been guaranteed well before the year 2016.

Almost everyone must be aware by now that in the year 1931, Sri Lankan women were entitled to vote, well ahead of women in the rest of the region. Only a few decades later, Sri Lanka also witnessed the election of the world’s first woman Prime Minister, and then the country’s first woman president. Apart from these token slogans, in reality Sri Lanka has done little to boast of when it comes to empowering women.

Oh, and Happy (admittedly belated) Valentine’s Day! We women could do with more love and here’s where the President and Government should start: by fulfilling the promises made.

Full Promise: An effective system of law enforcement which addresses mounting sexual offences against both women and children.

Status: No progress

Current Situation: A study published by the UN in 2013 stated that 1 in 7 men in Sri Lanka admitted to raping a woman or a girl, and that 40% of them reported raping a non-partner. Of these, 97% faced no legal consequences. For that matter, out of 2,008 ‘true cases’ of rape in 2014, there was only 1 conviction. Similarly, there are 376 ‘true cases’ of cruelty and sexual exploitation of children, with only 4 convictions. This means that over 94% of the cases are ‘pending.’ To add to the blight, marital rape is still not a crime, while ‘sexual entitlement’ was claimed as motivation by 66% of the men who admit to rape. Convicted rapists are faced with a sentence between 7 and 20 years only, while cases of sexual violence are liable to suspended sentences.

Suggestions Made by the Report: Improving legislation in two ways – first by enabling legal action against marital rape, to counter the abusive sense of entitlement; and second, by ensuring proper sentencing, as well as ensuring that cases of sexual violence are subjected to mandatory sentencing. Other suggestions include broadening definitions in current legislation to ensure proper sentencing, and ensuring the victims of rape and abuse are met with less prejudice and trauma while seeking justice.

Full Promise: Provide state support for better lodging facilities for women in the apparel sector.

Status: No progress

Current Situation: The apparel industry is one of the three main sources of revenue in Sri Lanka, totalling USD 4.9 billion in 2014. Over 80% of workers in the apparel sector are young women, while the three major Export Processing Zones in Sri Lanka employ over 100,000 women, who are mostly from rural areas. These women are faced with difficulty when it comes to finding suitable and safe accommodation, with adequate sanitation. Often, the conditions are cramped and the salaries bare minimum, with many women only able to afford rooms shared with around 4 – 8 other women, and a single toilet. Many of these women also travel alone to their lodging after a night shift, adding to their vulnerability.

Suggestions Made by the Report: Follow in the footsteps of Bangladesh, which faces problems similar to Sri Lanka. The Bangladesh Bank and the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association signed an agreement whereby the Bangladeshi Exporters are awarded a grant to build hostels at a low interest rate and subsidised costs.

These women contribute greatly to one of Sri Lanka’s prime industries and their demands for better habitation should be met.

Full Promise: Legal recognition and protection for domestic workers and women employed in the informal sector.

Status: No progress

Current Situation: In Sri Lanka, 69.1% of the domestic work sector is made up of women. Domestic workers generally receive low wages, have little or no social security, and are faced with high levels of abuse. Domestic workers are also excluded from the labour law framework of the country, including:

a) the two key wage-fixing mechanisms (the Shop and Office Employees Act No. 19 of 1954 and the Wages Board Ordinance No. 27 of 1941) and

b) the legislation guaranteeing social security for the labour force (the Employees’ Provident Fund Act No. 15 of 1958, Employees Trust Fund Act No. 46 of 1980, and the Payment of Gratuity Act No. 12 of 1983).

As these laws do not cover domestic workers, this leaves them vulnerable and dependent on their employers.

Suggestions Made by the Report: The report highlights three critical points of intervention:

Full Promise: A special protection scheme for war widows of all communities and their dependents.

Status: In Progress

Current Situation: There are approximately 89,000 war widows in Sri Lanka, who face numerous problems including economic instability, exploitation, violence, and sexual abuse. While there are a few programmes launched to help the war widows, the report points out that these initiatives are one dimensional and fail to provide widows with transferable skills needed to find employment.

What the Government Has Done So Far: In May 2015, the Government declared that it would establish a National Center in Kilinochchi to ensure the needs of families of female-headed households are met. This programme would also offer low-interest loans (up to Rs. 36,700 approximately) and customised vocational training. It is important to note, however, that no comprehensive policy has been announced as of yet.

Suggestions Made by the Report: The war widows have myriad problems apart from socio-economic well-being, which also need to be addressed. As it is, there are very few women police personnel in the Northern Province, and due to social stigma and shaming by communities, many women don’t talk about the sexual violence and abuse they’ve experienced. Setting up Gender Based Violence desks (GBV) in hospitals and police stations would greatly help the situation. The skills and livelihood development programmes also need to provide transferrable and employable skills. In addition, the pledge needs to be broadened to include not just socio-economic well being but also personal safety and security for the war widows.

Full Promise: Give every mother an allowance of Rs. 20,000 at childbirth to obtain nutritious meals.

Status: In progress

Current Situation: Malnutrition is a problem Sri Lanka is still faced with. Approximately 14.7% of Sri Lankans experience stunting, 21.4% experience wasting, and 17% of children are born with a Low Birth Weight (LBW). Meanwhile, 58% of children between 6 – 11 months also suffer from anaemia. This can be combatted by improving maternal health (LBW is, for instance, linked to maternal undernourishment). Households in poverty have limited access to nutritional foods; for that matter, according to a World Food Programme report, in every province a large percentage of the population is unable to afford a nutritious diet.

What the Government Has Done So Far: A programme has been implemented that provides a Rs. 20,000 allowance to expectant mothers; once registered with government maternal clinics, mothers are eligible to receive Rs. 2,000 worth of nutritional foods every month over the course of ten months (the last six months of pregnancy and the first four after childbirth). However, as the report points out, a long-term plan to continue with this initiative has not been mentioned in the new budget.

Suggestions Made by the Report: Apart from the importance of providing the necessary education and support to tackle the issues related to malnutrition, the report also points out that the monetary value of the package seems insufficient to provide the nutritional and caloric value actually required. Based on calculations, it would cost between Rs. 3,076 and Rs. 3,589 per month to provide a nutritional diet to a single individual in a household; far more than what the Government provides.

Full Promise: Provide all women in the estate sector with fair wages, safe housing, land rights and adequate sanitation services.

Status: In progress

Current Situation: The problems faced by estate workers are well known. A majority of estate workers are women and they occupy the lowest tier in the work hierarchy. They are given low wages, have limited access to health facilities, and also face cultural and political isolation. The traditional housing, line-rooms, are small and crowded, while the estate workers have no entitlement to land rights. Their access to safe drinking water and sanitation is also lower when compared to urban sectors.

What the Government Has Done So Far: Estate workers have been guaranteed an increase in the daily wage from Rs. 680 to Rs. 770. A project has also been initiated to replace 162,000 line-rooms with individual houses. Additionally, 200,000 estate worker families have been given 1,900 sq. ft. of land with ownership documents, with title deeds in the name of both the husband and the wife. Initiatives to build latrines for estate workers are also underway.

Suggestions Made by the Report: Women are primarily engaged in low-paying jobs in the estate sector; the report suggests allowing for mobility for female estate workers to pursue other jobs in the same sector. Education and awareness of sanitation would also help ensure that the use of the infrastructure is maximised.

Full Promise: Take protective action at state level against abuse, maltreatment and injustices suffered by workers abroad

Status: In progress

Current Situation: In 2014, migrant worker contribution to the Sri Lankan economy was over US $7 billion. Between January 2014 and May 2015, 37% of departing migrant workers were women, and 80% of them were employed as domestic workers. Female migrant workers are one of the most exploited groups of workers and face abuse at workplaces, work in isolated and unregulated environments, and have no access to information or support networks. Domestic workers who approach the Sri Lankan consular officials to report cases of severe physical and sexual abuse, unpaid wages and exploitative working conditions are given little or no assistance. Women who have run away from abusive situations are given no insurance cover.

What the Government Has Done So Far: MOU’s have been signed with the Governments of Saudi Arabia and Qatar to protect migrant workers’ voting rights. A limited insurance scheme has also been established under the Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment (SLBFE).

Suggestions Made by the Report: The SLBFE has several shortcomings which need to be addressed, including the fact that the board is overly represented by recruitment agencies. Additionally, comprehensive legislation is required to protect the rights of migrants; a good place to start would be the ILO’s Domestic Workers Convention. Like in Indonesia, a contract with defined terms and conditions with the destination states would help the situation greatly. Indonesia also has a task force to examine situations where the death penalty came into account, which Sri Lanka should also emulate.

Full Promise: Make provisions for migrant workers to have a provident fund, similar to the local Employees’ Provident Fund (EPF), an unemployment trust fund, and gratuity payment entitlements.

Status: No progress

Current Situation: Approximately 1.8 million Sri Lankan citizens are currently living and working abroad, with at least 200,000 migrating each year, making up 20% of the country’s economically active population. Of these, 90% reside in the Middle East, and the majority of them are women. Among the many problems these women face, they also often leave behind their children with economically dependent parents, and lack awareness of legal procedures and the ability to communicate in the host country’s local language. The Government has promised a pension scheme for migrant workers, but currently the proposal awaits approval of cabinet ministers.

Suggestions Made by the Report: In addition to granting this form of social security to migrant workers, the report suggests a crackdown on illegal foreign employment agencies, as well as bilateral and multilateral ties with foreign labour organisations, employment agencies, and direct employers.

Image Credit: Kuni Takahashi/New York Times

Full promise: Increase representation of women in local authorities and provincial councils to 25%.

Status: In progress

Current Situation: Among South and Southeast Asian countries, Sri Lanka has the lowest representation of women in Local Government, standing at 2%, in comparison to 33% in India and Bangladesh.

What the Government Has Done So Far: The Prime Minister has submitted a proposal to amend the Local Authorities (Special Provisions) Act No. 21 of 2012. The amendment, which aims to increase female representation in local authorities, was approved by the Cabinet in November 2015.

Suggestions Made by the Report: Apart from ensuring mandatory quotas are met, training on the drafting of legislation should also be provided. A larger plan should also be devised to ensure that women are given decision-making power.

As has been pointed out, even the five promises in progress have a long way to go before a noticeable and positive change is made in society. Additionally, having more women in positions of power may ensure that some of these concerns are addressed and met. That the Government is neglecting the safety and well being of one half of the country’s population is perhaps a strong statement to make: and yet, if greater importance is not given to women’s issues, the inequality in our society and the social evils will only be exacerbated.

The Indian Swiftlet (collocalia unicolor) is only about 12 cm long, and can be found in Sri Lanka and South West India. The nests these birds make are highly priced and prized, and are a delicacy in Far East Asia, to be used in soups, desserts and medicine. This has led to a sinister trade in edible bird nests, where the nests are processed and sold on the market – disturbingly, the trend has now entered the West, with over 60% of sales now concentrated in the United States and Europe.

The Indian Swiftlet builds these nests, which are barely longer than its body, on a vertical surface over a period of 2 – 3 months. It is constructed primarily using its own saliva, which fortifies the nest: it is this hardened saliva that is sought after. The nests are processed of all vegetable and foreign matter, and the white husk of hardened saliva is smuggled out of the country and sold.

A nesting swiftlet. The birds are cruelly evicted from their nests when the nests are removed to be sold. Image Credit: speakupforthevoiceless.org

There are only five species in the world that build such nests, and only two of these species build white nests, which are of the highest quality. The Indian Swiftlets of Sri Lanka are one of these two species. These birds also have two breeding seasons, January to May being the primary season, and the second from August to October.

According to environmentalist and lawyer, Jagath Gunewardena, once the nests are moved, the birds will not build the nests for a second time during the season. It would seem that they have exhausted their resources to do so.

These birds are also invaluable to farmers as they are insectivorous and feed on insects considered to be pests and harmful to crops, like planthoppers. They also hunt late in the evening and feed on insects that emerge at dusk, including mosquitoes, and thereby maintain the delicate balance of the ecosystem.

In order to facilitate the edible bird nest trade, the nests are often scraped off cave walls using blunt instruments, while the eggs are dashed or chicks thrown to the ground and left to be consumed by ants.

A simple Google search will highlight just how popular this trade is. The first results will include edible birds’ nests “with chow mein” “recipes” “shredded wheat” and “rice krispies.” There are also plenty of websites dedicated to the sale and consumption of the nests. That said, it is also referred to as “the caviar of the East” and is supposed to have medicinal and aphrodisiac qualities – claims which no research, to date, is able to substantiate.

Edible birds’ nests are one of the most expensive tonics or delicacies on the Chinese market. The fact remains, however, that while the saliva of the bird contains proteins, it is of a class of micro-proteins, as Jagath Gunewardena explained, which have very little amino acids and therefore, no nutrients. He also noted that as the white husk is insoluble in water, it has to be boiled at high temperatures; and as a result, it loses its supposed nutritional properties. The husks are also crushed and incorporated into various food items, including, bizarrely enough, candy.

Processed swiftlet nests, ready for cooking. Image Credit: therakyatpost.com

The trade is also popular in countries like Malaysia, where it has taken on a different dimension entirely, with several people attempting a domesticated trade of sorts.

Gunewardena has been keeping a keen eye on the trade for the past 23 years, ever since the issue cropped up way back in 1993. It was then realised that the trade has an international dimension, when the Sri Lanka Customs caught a consignment in 1993. Since then, the trade has raised its ugly head from time to time, quietening when consignments are found and when law enforcement authorities are vigilant. The trade itself is rather haphazard, and looms when the law enforcers have relaxed their vigilance.

Over the past few years, in 2012, 2013 and 2014, the trade was regular, but died down in 2015. This year, however, has seen the exposure of a massive racket in the trade, where nests built in the tunnel of the Hatton-Singimale railway line were broken. It was reported by both railway employees and residents living in the vicinity.

The trade was, primarily, concentrated in the Far-East, but as Gunewardena pointed out, the trade has now caught up in the United States and Europe, which account for 60% of the trade. Far Eastern countries like China and Taiwan, at this point, only account for 7 – 8% of the trade, while the remaining are smuggled to various other locations in the world.

Perhaps one can point the finger at globalisation – there are Chinese restaurants all over the world now, which would account for how this trade has expanded to countries beyond the Far East.

Edible birds’ nests are, furthermore, not consumed locally. It is mainly used for the export trade, although there may be a small local market.

The birds are protected under Section 31 of the Fauna and Flora Protection Ordinance; therefore, anyone who collects, transports, keeps in custody, or tries to sell the nests is committing an offense and can be arrested without a warrant. If found guilty, they can be punished by a fine or imprisoned, or both fined and imprisoned. The Department of Wildlife Conservation, the Police, and the Forest Department can facilitate the arrests. The nests are not a legal item to export, therefore all products and nests are illegal. The Customs is empowered under Section 40 of the Fauna and Flora Protection Ordinance to take legal action, in addition to the punishments meted out by the Customs for false declarations, among other offenses.

It can be observed that this trade is insidious on many levels – not only does it topple the delicate balance of the ecosystem and expose crops to harmful insects, but it is also fundamentally cruel: helpless, unable to find a vertical perch of any sort, the chicks are left to suffer a slow, painful death, at the mercy of ants who consume them even while alive.

Sri Lanka, out of 168 countries, is currently the 83rd least corrupt country in the world and has seen a marginal improvement, going by Transparency International’s latest Corruption Perception Index (CPI). As of 2015, we’ve dropped from 85 to 83 – but before we pat ourselves on the back, we need to put things into perspective.

We’re currently on par with countries like China, and surprisingly, Columbia – both these countries have seen an immense improvement in the space of a year. Columbia, for instance, ranked at 94 in 2014 and improved by 11 paces. China’s progress has been even better: they’ve dropped from 100 to 83. Even more surprising is the fact that our neighbour India, generally perceived as being more corrupt and with whom we shared the 85th rank in 2014, has surpassed us and now ranks at 76.

Where scores are concerned, on a scale from 0 – 100, with 0 being highly corrupt and 100 being very clean, we’re at a whooping 37, while India is at 38. This definitely puts things in perspective and brings us that much closer to ‘highly corrupt.’

Regionally, we have much to learn from both India and Bhutan. Bhutan stands at 27 worldwide and ranks first regionally. Not too long ago we were the second best in the region, but India currently holds that title. We come in right after India – realistically however, neither India nor Sri Lanka can boast for taking the silver and bronze considering the fact that we’re over 50 paces behind Bhutan. Clearly we have a lot of catching up to do.

Transparency International owns that the CPI is by no means an absolute verdict on overall corruption in a country, but is, rather, limited to corruption in the public sector alone. Because corruption is deliberately an under the table affair, it is difficult to find empirical data on corruption. Transparency International also contends that the exposure of scandals and corruption isn’t the best way to judge either, for that is only an indicator of how effective the prosecutors, the courts, or the media are in exposing and investigating these matters. Hence, they rely on the perceptions offered by “those in a position to offer assessments of public sector corruption,” as the most reliable method of calculating and comparing levels of corruption between countries. The data is drawn from “independent institutions in governance and business climate analysis” (if you require exact details, scroll down to the Data and Methodology section on their CPI 2015 page).

While the scope of the CPI is admittedly limited, it is nevertheless a useful tool: it is the public sector that ensures (that should ensure, would be more accurate) the smooth operation of a country and its resources. The presence of corruption in the public sector is itself a worrying assertion (which we are, most unfortunately, acquainted with a little too well) – the fact that we have moved up only by a snail’s pace, despite the change in regime, should be even more worrying.

Saying Sri Lanka has corruption is like saying the country is an island – rather indisputable, in that sense. We’ve seen some fluctuation, going by the CPIs of previous years (would you, for instance, believe that in 2012 we ranked 79 and, overjoyed by our success, took a tumble to 91 in 2013?). That we have improved, albeit marginally, cannot be denied – but it should be noted that we regressed substantially before improving, which isn’t exactly a compliment.

It all comes down to the mechanisms we have in place to mitigate corruption, explains Shan Wijetunge, Senior Manager Advocacy, Transparency International Sri Lanka. Unfortunately for Sri Lanka, these mechanisms have not improved due to several reasons. Primary to this is the lack of human resources required to look into complaints against corruption. Organisations such as the Commission to Investigate Allegations of Corruption and Bribery face challenges in the HR department, for instance. For the number of complaints they receive, they require at least 500 – 600 police officers to conduct investigations, Wijetunge explains. Instead, they have only around 150 officers sifting through over 3,000 complaints.

“Our mechanisms to curb corruption require considerable strengthening,” Wijetunge asserts, adding that there is room for improvement.

When asked why Sri Lanka has only seen negligible improvement despite the change in Government, he explained that the promises made by the current regime are, for the most part, yet to be fulfilled for a significant change to register. “The Government has done a bit of work in this regard, but they need to do more. For instance, we need the Right To Information Act, as well as other policies, including open Government partnerships,” he said.

Wijetunge also added that a likely reason for the Government not meeting their promises could be due to the various other challenges they faced in 2015. “There are far too many issues they have had to deal with, so the progress in the anti-corruption area is slow,” he said.

Although many Commissions were appointed to look into corruption, including the Presidential Commission of Inquiry to Investigate and Inquire into Serious Acts of Fraud, Corruption and Abuse of Power, State Resources and Privileges (PRECIFAC), Wijetunge explained that these Commissions are yet to make a marked impact towards investigation and minimising corruption – hence the inching forward on the CPI.

If you’re curious about corruption indices like the CPI, take a look at the 2013 Global Corruption Barometer, also by Transparency International, which takes into account citizens’ views on corruption in the country. You’d be interested to know that the people’s faith in public institutions, such as the police, are yet to be restored.

Although there have been less than a handful of baby elephants born into captivity in Sri Lanka since the 1980s – not counting those born at the Pinnawala Elephant Orphanage – there has been, strangely enough, an increase in the number of registrations of baby elephants at the Department of Wildlife Conservation (DWC). Giving sanction and passage to this sinister trade are highly placed public officials and individuals with considerable clout and political power. The issue has been given sporadic coverage over the years (this writer also reported on the issue in 2011, for The Sunday Leader) but until recently, little was done to clamp down on this trade.

According to Sri Lankan law, it is illegal to capture elephants from the wild. Image Credit: hikenow.net

Owning an elephant – and in Sri Lanka, unfortunately, this is not a novel concept – isn’t as straightforward as it seems. There are many private owners of elephants, and considerable documentation is required for the registration of an elephant. There is one catch, however: it is illegal to capture elephants from the wild, as per the Fauna and Flora Protection Ordinance. Yet, while there are no baby elephants born into captivity, these private owners nevertheless have access to baby elephants.

Having worked on this story some years prior to this, it was learnt that the elephants weren’t from the Pinnawala elephant orphanage – which is the only legal way to obtain an elephant, via donation. The DWC wasn’t too wild on providing any information at the time either, for reasons that remain unclear. The only explanation, elephant experts contend, is: these elephants are taken from the wild, illegally.

A baby elephant separated from its herd has a 40% mortality rate, possibly higher if captured via illegal means. Image Credit: hikenow.net

Speaking to Dr. Prithiviraj Fernando, elephant expert and Chairman, Trustee and Scientist at Centre for Conservation and Research (CCR), it was understood that even in transit homes, which have all the facilities for elephants, the mortality of a baby elephant separated from its herd is 40%. “In illegal cases, it has to be a lot more,” he said, adding that in the case of illegally captured elephants, proper care is often not administered.

For years, elephant experts had been suspicious about the sudden crop of baby elephants found at various temples and with private owners. Interestingly, these elephants weren’t donated by Pinnawala. It wasn’t until recently, due to political pressure and requests from several environmentalists, that the Attorney General’s department formed a special unit to look into wildlife-related crime. Only then did investigations into the issue begin – what they found can only be called a combination of foolhardy bravado and arrogance.

The DWC has a book registering domestic elephants. There was also a law passed in 2009 stating that if a domestic elephant is pregnant, the department has to be informed within a few days. Because this law complicates forgery, all entries where baby elephants were registered predated 2008, and thereby predated the law as well. In certain instances, the guilty party had merely written over older entries (predating 2008), using correction fluid and replacing the older pictures of the elephants with newer ones. The AG’s department caught on to the series of forgeries that, fortunately and rather ridiculously, were easy to see right through: not only was the paper trail required to register an elephant incomplete and patchy, but the guilty parties also – perhaps in belief that they would never be caught – utilised rather moronic tools like correction fluid and strike throughs.

According to the Director at Species Conservation Centre (SCC) and elephant expert, Pubudu Weerarathna, the Attorney General’s department and the CID detected around 50 cases of forgery. After further investigations, the CID started conducting raids. The elephants found have been taken into custody and sent to Pinnawala. Currently there is a special holding pen being built at the Udawalawe National Park to help accommodate these elephants. Those implicated are yet to be arrested; evidence against the guilty parties is still being collected. Weerarathna, however, noted that there are a few well-known temples that are implicated in this matter. There are also notoriously shadowy figures, who, thanks to political cover, have managed to conduct these operations in relative safety.

The process via which a calf is captured from the wild is both cruel and depressing. Image Credit: mysrilankatravel.com

The herd is always protective of the calf, so the methods used by the smugglers involve separating the baby from the herd, and especially the mother. Weerarathna claims that, in the past, snares had been used to catch babies. “The babies would have wounds and cut marks,” he explained.

In this day and age, it would seem that technology has caught up even with the smuggling trade. Tranquiliser guns are used on the babies, while shotguns are used to inflict injury on the mother. The baby elephants often have a dark patch on their hide, a testament to the tranquiliser dart.

Only the baby elephants in prime condition are selected – from then on, it gets worse. Weerarathna explains that the training of the animal is brutal. Cables and ropes are used to tie the elephant, and the smugglers work towards breaking the elephant’s spirit completely. They belittle and humiliate the animal to break its resistance and make it succumb.

To transport the elephant from the place of capture to its intended destination, which is often Colombo, defenders or jeeps are used in some cases. Another method is loading the tranquilised elephant onto a truck and placing a plastic water tank on top to hide it, Weerarathna explained.

Tourism and personal prestige are two very problematic motives behind the elephant trade ‒ and a calf like this one could fetch up to Rs. 10 million. Image Credit: puretravel.com

The elephant trade is big money – an elephant calf could involve up to Rs. 8 – 10 million. The demand for this trade comes from people who want to own elephants for prestige, including temples, as well as the tourism industry. These days, it isn’t all that difficult to find an elephant or two at any given religious festival, a trend of sorts, one could say. Weerarathna explained that the owners of the elephant earn around 40,000 – 60,000 rupees per night when they hire their elephants out to various parties. Tuskers fetch an even higher price. The sale or purchase of a tusker could fetch up to Rs. 11.5 million. Weerarathna added that none of this, in any way, corresponds to any known religious or spiritual belief because fundamental to the illegal elephant trade is cruelty.

The other culprit is the tourism industry – Sri Lanka and elephants are practically synonymous. “Hoteliers will pay a lot to have baby elephants on premises,” Weerarathna said.

Looking at this issue historically, elephants have been a part of the fabric of our history – from great legendary battles to working elephants to elephants at peraheras. While it goes without saying that harming these animals doesn’t form the basis of any known religion in the world, we don’t need to look that far to understand the sheer cruelty of this trade.

After a brief hiatus since 2012, the Galle Literary Festival (GLF) was back this year, with the participation of writers, scholars, artists, musicians, performers and chefs from across the world.

Despite the rather (sometimes uncomfortably) sunny conditions, many literary enthusiasts gathered in Galle for the series of programmes that spanned a five day agenda, from January 13 –17.

Participants included award-winning writers Sebastian Faulks, Sir Mark Tully, Amitav Ghosh, Anita Nair and Anuradha Roy, performers Fiona Shaw (Aunt Petunia, to you Potterheads) and Nandana Sen, among many others. Also present were our very own contributors to literature, including Captain Elmo Jayawardena, Shehan Karunatilaka, and Nayomi Munaweera.

The festival also witnessed the awarding of prestigious prizes for literature. The 2016 DSC prize for South Asian literature was awarded to Indian writer Anuradha Roy, for her novel Sleeping on Jupiter. Meanwhile, the first Fairway National Literary Awards went to Sepali Mayadunne for Maha Sami in the Sinhala category, while Rizwana Morseth de Alwis (It’s Not in Our Stars) and Ayathurai Santhan (Rails Run Parallel) were jointly awarded the prize in the English category.

Roar decided to check out some of the other highlights of the festival over the weekend, which included a panel on how literary juries work, a late-morning conversation with renowned Indian writer Amitav Ghosh on his Ibis trilogy, and a discussion on Sri Lankan writing in English.

Although the Festival succeeded in luring out a colourful medley of Colombo’s denizens and relocating them to Galle, and while we did enjoy some of the talks we attended, there were a few concerns which we hope the festival organisers will take in good faith.

We understand that hosting a festival of this sort, especially in a country as removed from the rest of the world as ours, is expensive. Bringing down writers and artistes from around the globe would naturally cost quite a lot – but what we’re concerned with, is how the opulence of some of the events sometimes detracts from the point of hosting this festival: literature.

The biggest criticism the GLF has faced, time and time again, is the degree of elitism it imparts to literature, especially English Literature, making the GLF inaccessible to your everyday Sri Lankan living outside Colombo. In that respect, this year was no different, and while we understand that having so many sponsors and keeping them satisfied isn’t an easy task, we wish the focus was more on literature itself than on the brands sponsoring the fest.

This could even have been counterbalanced, say, had there been a better collection of books on sale at the GLF. The collection we saw was, especially for book lovers such as ourselves, unappetising. And for a festival about literature… it seemed at times that the Land Rovers cruising around were more a part of the festival than the books themselves (we’re aware that Land Rover was a main sponsor, but really, the narrow streets of the Galle Fort are best explored on foot or on bicycles – else it defeats the purpose of having the festival at the old Dutch Fort to begin with). This all brings to question the heavy commercialisation that’s often associated with festivals of this sort, and whether or not it is counterintuitive and counterproductive.

Another point we would like to make is that, especially for lovers of literature, there was little to actually take back from the festival itself. Sure, it was great meeting the writers, there were good laughs to be gained at some of the sessions, and even some very valid points and questions raised at discussions. Yet, there were moments during some events – discussions, specifically – where it seemed justice was not done to the topics; the panelists even dodged answering perfectly valid questions raised by audience members. And for people who attended the festival with more than just a social hangout in mind, this was rather disappointing. There ought to be something for the attendees who genuinely seek to engage with literary studies to take back, even if it is just a statement that would help further the study of literature and culture.

We were excited by some of the panels, and topics presented, and looked forward to a learning experience, but were sometimes disappointed. The potential for literature to inform and broaden a person’s perspective of the world was sadly not catered to as well as it could have been. To summarise, we would like more substance and less of a show.

Apart from that, it really was refreshing to walk along the cobbled streets of the Galle Fort, knowing we were surrounded by lovers of books, both writers and readers.

For those of you who missed out, here are some scenes from the GLF, captured by photographer Aamina Nizar.

The final installment of the GLF 2016 is to take place in Jaffna from January 23 – 24, and more information can be found here.

The world of bombai muttai is a strange and intensely exciting one, and not just because of the (quite literally) sweet childhood memories we associate with it. In the backwaters of Pettah, home of small industries, a group of brothers has translated their father’s legacy into a booming family business.

A gloomy Colombo day. The air outside is nippy, greatly contrasting with the steady heat inside the two rooms that serve as a small-scale manufacturing facility. The smiles are contagious but the work looks tedious and backbreaking – except, as the youngest brother of the group informs us, the seemingly complex process has actually been simplified and mechanised over the past few months. Despite streamlining the process, however, it should be noted that behind every strand of bombai muttai is a method that needs to be followed to the last syllable.

It all begins in the backroom where the second brother, Naufer, on several induction cookers, makes a concoction of sugar, lime, and water, which is then transferred to large cooling vats. To this, he adds a pink strawberry dye which gives the Bombai Muttai its characteristic, violently pink colour. There’s something hypnotic about the way the vats are rotated to optimise the cooling process while Naufer mixes the swiftly cooling chunk of caramelised sugar into a block. He then transfers this block to a flat surface in the front room, where he twists and beats the caramelised sugar into an oblong shape.

While this is happening, the youngest brother, Azwer, adds a carefully measured mixture made of coconut oil and flour, onto a disc-like contraption that looks like something borrowed out of a Doctor Who episode. A short distance away, Naufer continues kneading the caramelised sugar until he gets it right.

Alien technology? Nope, this is just how your bombai muttai gets made

The caramelised sugar is transferred to the disc, and then begins the delicate process of giving Bombai Muttai its famous form and consistency. The brown mixture of coconut oil and flour will serve to split the fine fibres that come together to make a delicacy that brings out the child in even the most hardened adult. While the coconut oil and flour mixture is slathered onto a ring of caramelised sugar, Azwer jumps into action. The movement is reminiscent of a guitarist pressing down on a pedal or a motorist accelerating, but what Azwer is really doing is controlling the movement of the various spatulas that help in what can only be called the splitting-hairs process.

It looks easy enough – especially with the machines helping out – but Azwer is essentially prodding into shape a snake-like ring of 10 kilograms of caramelised, semi-hardened sugar slathered on with flour and oil over a swiftly spinning UFO-like heated disc made of stainless steel. It is an exact process, a science even, which has an equally romantic backstory as the dilapidated industrial setting.

This process has been passed down from father to sons as a familial legacy. Naufer turned fifty-one on the day we visited him, and he proudly informed us that it had been exactly fifty-one years since this particular method of making bombai muttai had been perfected.

“This method is as old as I am,” he informed us happily. His father, Mohamed Farook, worked as an apprentice to Malayali sweet makers from Kerala who jealously guarded their sweet secret. “This particular type of bombai muttai, however, is entirely my father’s invention,” he said, adding that he “innovated the sweet into the form we see today, making it easier to eat.” This secret was then passed on to his three sons Jabbar, Naufer, and Azwer, who made a successful business – H. F. Candy Mart – out of their father’s passion.

Back in Mohamed Farook’s time, the going was slow: a day’s work would only yield 2 kilograms of sweet. Very recently, just a few months ago in fact, the brothers innovated on the method to the point where their maximum capacity is now between 150 – 200 kilograms a day. “We sell it all on the same day. There’s a huge demand for bombai muttai, more demand than we can supply at the moment,” Naufer added, grinning.

Do they have plans to expand their production? “We’re happy with the way things are going right now,” Naufer said, “we currently have no space to expand but we do have plans for the future.”

Two kilograms to 200 seems like a large jump – what contributed to this was the youngest son, Azwer’s genius and love for electronics. The UFO-like disc we mentioned earlier is entirely his creation, after which production speeds increased threefold.

“He figured it out on his own,” Naufer proudly said, adding “when we figured out that importing a machine to help with the process would cost 70 lakhs, he made this machine by sourcing materials from different parts of the country. We managed to make it for 8 lakhs.”

The bombai muttai workshop is a flurry of activity and sound from between 9 a.m. to 12 p.m. The work stops promptly after the demand has been met – but sometimes, on particularly demanding days, the work resumes after 3:30 p.m. Apart from the three brothers working ceaselessly, two youthful helpers can be seen bustling around. Although spotting bombai muttai sellers seems to be a rarity these days, this tiny manufacturing plant is overflowing with a number of sellers who come here to collect their day’s means to a livelihood.

Packed, collected, and then taken into town by the bombai muttai uncles, whose tinkling bells call out to anyone with a sweet-tooth

Picking up the famous bombai muttai containers, along with 2 – 3 kilograms of bombai muttai each, and then rummaging through a large barrel for neatly packed wafers (‘nice’) that are famous accompaniments to the sweet, a long line of men filter out, tinkling their bells to attract the attention of potential sweet-toothed customers. It’s a difficult life, and caught up as we are in the cacophony of the modern world, many of us would miss the characteristic tinkling of the bell that we all eagerly looked forward to as children. Behind every lone bombai muttai seller is a long journey: travelling from the base and then by bus to whatever destination, anywhere from Ja Ela to Wattala to the Colombo suburbs, to Panadura and Moratuwa. Most of the sellers are old, their skin leathery and weather worn, the soles of their slippers thinning, walking from one street to another.

It’s a unique eco-system where the manufacturer and seller work seamlessly to supply an ever increasing demand, a demand which, if it has to be met, will require yet more innovation and technological infiltration. Perhaps the days of on-foot bombai muttai sellers are slowly coming to a close – but the demand most certainly isn’t. The family legacy which the three brothers have inherited and improved has yet to reach its peak. How far they take this will definitely make an interesting story.

Liked the article? Check out our video to see for yourself how bombai muttai is made.

Images courtesy Praveen Jayasuriya

During the early hours of 31 December 2015, while the world was preparing to usher in a new year, the Muthurajawela lagoon was struck by disaster. Oil, approximately 52,000 litres of it, leaked into the lagoon from a corroded pipeline, choking the area with kerosene.

Muthurajawela is known as Sri Lanka’s biggest saline wetland, “home to purple herons, cormorants and kingfishers.” Incidentally, the recent oil leak comes only months after Sri Lanka became the first country in the world to protect all its mangrove forests. It goes without saying that the natural environment took a devastating hit.

MEPA claims there is nothing left to clean up while others may beg to differ.

According to environmentalist Thilak Kariyawasam, the cost to the flora and fauna in the area is high. “There is no way you can compensate for damage to the environment,” he said. The flora especially, including several water plants important to the biodiversity of the area, have been badly affected.

Although the Marine Environmental Protection Authority (MEPA) claims that there is nothing more to be removed, Kariyawasam explained that it is difficult to assess the damage to the environment this early on. “We will be able to tell only over the next three months the toll this oil spill has had on the vegetation. These things take time to show,” he explained, adding that “we need to conduct a damage assessment, and we will only be able to report on it in a few months’ time.”

That’s oil, floating around in the water.

According to Kariyawasam, how fast the area gets cleansed depends on how much rainfall we get. “We are expecting rain. If it rains, the recovery process will be faster. If the rain is delayed, even the plants will not recover,” he said, adding that “while the oil has been partly cleaned and the damage stopped, I feel the cleaning process is not at a satisfactory level.”

According to the Chairman of MEPA, Rear Admiral Rohana Perera, the leak was reported by locals. He explained that the culprit was a corroded joint of a pipeline carrying oil from ships to the storage facility at Kerawalapitiya. He added that the Ceylon Petroleum Storage Terminals Limited (CPSTL) has temporarily repaired the pipeline. “A permanent repair is yet to be done,” he said. “The CPSTL has to inform us when they make the repairs so that we can monitor them. We can expect more spillage during the repair,” Perera said.

Everyone came together in cleaning up.

Apart from stakeholders such as the MEPA itself, the Department of Coast Guard, Sri Lanka Navy, Ceylon Petroleum Corporation (CPC) and the CPSTL, the locals, too, helped remove some of oil.

Perera added that as of now, “there is nothing on the surface anymore, the oil slick has been removed. What has collected at the edges of the lagoon will naturally decay.”

According to this report in The Sunday Times, however, microbiologist and eco-toxicologist at the University of Jayawardenapura, Professor M. M. Padmalal, is quoted saying that it would take around three to four years for the oil to disintegrate naturally. He has also said that “by that time birds, fish and reptiles would have consumed contaminated food and would become prone to chronic diseases and genetic disorders.”

According to MEPA, what can be cleaned has already been cleaned.

While the MEPA stated that there is nothing more that can be removed, there are some residual remains in the areas with a heavy growth of mangroves. “It isn’t possible to go in,” Rear Admiral Perera said. “The people will get affected because manual handling is dangerous.”

It would seem that the most we can hope for, at this point, is rain to help wash away the oil that has remained.

The MEPA has lodged a complaint with the Bopitiya police and will be suing the CPSTL for compensation, to cover the expenses incurred by the various departments who aided the clean-up. When asked if the local fishermen were badly affected, Rear Admiral Perera explained that very few fishermen actually fish in the lagoon itself but there are around 40 houses by the side of the lagoon, whose residents have been affected. “The toxic gas and smell has created problems for the locals and the CPSTL will have to pay compensation.”

Thilak Kariyawasam added that before oil pipes are laid through wetlands, there should be an environmental assessment – which was not done, in this case. He explained that although the pipes predate the 1980 environmental policy and standards, there are certain guidelines that need to be fulfilled, particularly with regard to replacement of the pipelines. “In this case, they haven’t conducted the required environmental assessment,” he said.

Pipes were laid without following any regulations or assessments pre-1980.

Kariyawasam added that there are more pipelines around the country, which were also laid before the 1980s. Additionally, according to this report, prior to the Muthurajawela oil leak, the Attorney General’s Department had warned of the possibility of a disaster due to the poor conditions of pipelines carrying fuel from ships to storage tanks.

“This is a lesson we need to heed for the future. Environmental studies need to be conducted to minimise impact to the environment,” Kariyawasam said.

In this age of rapid climate change and increased pollution, we cannot afford disasters of this magnitude. The worst possible way to learn a lesson is after a disaster – and especially where the environment is concerned, there should be no room allowed for mistakes, right from the outset.

\*All images courtesy of Marine Environmental Protection Authority (MEPA)

On a clear day, it’s difficult to miss the yet to be completed Lotus Tower dominating Colombo’s skyline. Although the project has been mired in controversy (and not the Freudian sort), and perhaps because of it, most people seem unsure as to what purpose the Tower will serve. We all know the basics of how the Lotus Tower will be the tallest tower in South Asia – but here’s a list of things about the Lotus Tower which you probably didn’t know, but should know (because let’s face it, whether you like it or not, it’s definitely here to stay).

1. Currently, 292.2 metres (958 feet) of the Lotus Tower, up to the concrete mast, has been completed. The metal mast and the petals are yet to be finished.

2. The entire project is to be completed by October 2017 and the tower will be declared open towards the end of 2017.

3. Once completed, and with the lightning tower in place, the tower will stand at a total of 350 metres.

4. The Lotus Tower, on completion, will act as a transmission tower for TV and radio. The Telecom Regulatory Commission (TRC) informed Roar that the rationale behind the Lotus Tower acting as a single transmission hub is to equalise the quality of transmission and ensure that all consumers have equal access to quality broadcast. This will also ensure that the operations cost of digital transmissions by the current service providers will reduce.

5. Sri Lanka Telecom (SLT) will act as the independent operator, taking over the responsibility to transmit.

6. The first and second floors of the Tower House, at approximately 215 metres and 219.8 metres (705 and 721 feet), are for TV and radio transmissions respectively.

7. The Lotus Tower, however, isn’t solely for transmissions. It will be a multifunctional building. Its three storied tower base will house various shopping centres (mostly high end), food courts, and possibly even a walk-through museum. The tower itself will house banquet halls and an observation deck.

8. According to the TRC, the cost of the tower is covered by a loan from the Export-Import Bank of China. This loan will be paid back with the revenue earned from renting out space.

9. There will be two banquet halls which will accommodate 450 people each. They will be on the third and fourth floors of the Tower House at a height of 224.6 metres and 224.6 metres (721 and 737 feet).

10. At 234.2 metres (768 feet), there will be a restaurant with a revolving floor for fine dining.

11. There will also be suites for state guests on the seventh floor, at 244 metres (784 feet).

12. The TRC estimates that by August this year, the ‘petals’ of the tower will be in place.

13. The framework of the petals will be in steel, while the petals will be made of glass. The petals will be illuminated with LED lights of changeable colours.

14. During festivities (like Christmas, Avurudu and Eid), the tower will have appropriate decoration displays.

15. The TRC also has plans of building an interactive app to improve visitor experience to the tower. This app will enable users to, for instance, check the availability of seats for a movie and make immediate bookings, or remotely reserve seats at a restaurant. The app will keep the visitor updated about events and attractions taking place at the tower.

16. An entrance ticket will be required to enter the Lotus Tower. Concessions may be granted to school children and families.

17. The outdoor viewing deck, or the observation deck, will be on the eighth floor of the Tower House at a height of 248.2 metres (814 feet). There will also be viewing telescopes.

18. There will be eight elevators in the Tower. Three elevators in the tower will be high speed elevators, two will travel at a medium pace, while the three slower elevators will be mostly for service usage. With the high speed elevators, it will be possible to reach the observation deck from the tower base in less than a minute.

19. While the petals will be illuminated with LED lights, the trunk will be illuminated using flood lights. This will mean that the tower will be seen even at night, from a considerable distance.

20. There are plans for a Phase II, which will be built in the same locality as the Lotus Tower. It will house underground parking for 2,000 vehicles (and will also include parking for daily commuters), a shopping arcade (to cater to all income groups), gyms, swimming facilities, and theatres.

With all these plans in the pipeline, the Lotus Tower certainly appears to promise a change in Colombo’s skyline – here’s hoping it will be a change for the better.

On average, Sri Lanka imports 1,800 vehicles on a daily basis. During the first nine months of 2015, a total of 489,000 vehicles were imported. To add to this, approximately 100,000 vehicles enter Colombo city daily, and while traffic has been the most pressing concern for many, the real question is, how badly has this impacted air quality in the city?

A large number of imports, a larger number of cars entering Colombo daily. Image Credit: english.readsrilanka.com/

For those accustomed to taking tuk-tuks to get around, next to harrowing near-death experiences, the most memorable impression of the ride would involve a blast of exhaust fumes greeting your lungs. In areas of the city where there aren’t as many trees as there should be (hint: Havelock Town), travelling can be excruciating. What with the rise in the number of vehicles on the roads and the deterioration of the quality of public transport, the real victim here is the environment (and, of course, your poor lungs).

While we aren’t even half as bad as China (no red alerts or bottles of Rocky Mountain air required here!) or even New Delhi, it should be a cause for concern, especially considering the narrow concentration of these vehicles.

Turns out, despite doomsday predictions, Sri Lanka is holding up reasonably well. According to the Central Environmental Authority (CEA), Sri Lanka is at Target No.2, going by the guidelines stipulated by the WHO. This means that we’re not as bad as we think we are – but we could definitely do with some improvement (the improvement being reaching Target No.3).

Using the Nugegoda area as a representative (and everyone would agree that Nugegoda is a microcosm of what we imagine hell looks like), the CEA estimates we are well within the pollution parameters. For instance, the particulate matter (PM) 2.5 is between 21 – 29, while the national standard is set at 50. Likewise, the PM 10 is between 23 – 35, while the national standard is at 100. This means that the pollution level in the city of Colombo is, strangely enough, manageable, and the respirable dust particles are more or less within limits.

Additionally, (and this is surprising considering the yearly increase in the number of vehicles on the roads as well as industrial activities) since 1998, the pollution levels in Colombo have seen a drop. In 1998, it was 80 mg per meter cube, but as of 2014, the CEA estimates that the levels have fallen down to 60 mg per meter cube.

Turns out, Colombo has the advantage over Kandy all thanks to the location. According to the CEA, the pollution levels in Kandy are worse than anywhere else in Sri Lanka (Kandy: PM 2.5 is 10 – 20 and PM 10 is 37 – 54). The reason Colombo manages is because of its proximity to the sea, resulting in a constant supply of fresh air. “Therefore, if there is an impact on the Colombo environment, it is minimised by the sea,” Chairman of CEA, Professor Lal Mervin Dharmasiri elaborated. Kandy lucks out in this respect, being so far away from the coast.

Well, obviously. It is at this point that the vehicle emission testing comes into play – and some would even say, foul play. There are currently two main bodies issuing certificates for vehicles, which is a mandatory requirement if you are to renew your license.

There are, however, exceptions. According to the CEA, the testing is mandatory for all vehicles except armed forces vehicles – and, rather counterintuitively – CTB buses. “We are currently discussing the possibility of providing the buses these tests free of charge,” the chairman of CEA added.

Speaking to the Department of Motor Traffic (DMT), it was understood that where privately run buses are concerned, the emission tests are mandatory. According to an official at the DMT, “the issue is, although we do the test, the vehicle needs to be maintained and the filters need to be changed. Sometimes, this doesn’t happen.”

CTB buses aren’t the only vehicles exempt from emission testing. According to the DMT, tractors, vehicles manufactured before 1975, and hybrid vehicles are also exempt.

Apart from this, there’s also the question of whether or not these emission centres are operating as they ought to. While the DMT claims that they inspect the centres and will take action when complaints are received, this is yet another aspect that needs strict supervision.

Our public transport system needs improvement – there’s no question about it. Image Credit Flickr/calflier001

The increase in vehicles, and therefore, increase in air pollution, is a symptom of a bigger problem – our dismal public transport system. The issue is multifarious considering the fact that CTB buses continue to be inefficient, and are also major pollutants which run unchecked. As a result, last year saw a greater increase in vehicle imports – at this point, there are 4.2 million vehicles actively in use, while the total number of registered vehicles is 6 million.

The CEA’s overall strategy where air pollution is concerned is to regulate it in the major cities – cities like Colombo and Kandy are used as a benchmark. Regulating the pollution in these cities, the CEA claims, is a good way to ensure that pollution in other parts of the island is kept under check.

Where actually reducing the level of pollution is concerned, Sri Lanka does have plans – but when you take into account the confusion the recent budget created (concessions for vehicle categories that don’t exist, like Helium and Hydrogen, and an increase in duty for hybrid vehicles), and then tried to amend, it is definitely a cause for concern. In addition, there are other sources of pollution (like industrial pollution) that are equally pressing.

Apart from taking personal initiatives (like ensuring your vehicles are low pollutants or carpooling whenever possible), it is time we collectively push for stringent regulations and stricter enforcement and monitoring.

New Delhi – where vehicles with odd and even license plate numbers are now allowed to run on alternate days, in an attempt to curb pollution. Image Credit: Harish Tyagi/European Pressphoto Agency

Perhaps if we have a more reliable public transport system, we could push for measures like in New Delhi, where just last week the government implemented a system to curb use of private vehicles.

Our air quality may not be causing half the problems that cities in China and India are subjected to, but it doesn’t mean we can afford to take a backseat either.

We wrote a driving etiquette for dummies and an article about things that stress us out the most. If we were to graphically represent this article, it would be in the form of a venn diagram with the above two articles intersecting here. We would also add a horror component to it, because, quite frankly, these videos are enough to inspire the yellow-bellies in us all. Here’s reasons why horror movies are like a walk through Disneyland in comparison to the traffic, roads and motorists in Sri Lanka:

Even if you aren’t a lawless creature who thinks the road is his, at some point, you’ll undoubtedly get stuck behind someone who thinks the road is his pulpit.

Busses have the menacing look (and of course, the mentality) of a playground bully. If this was a gangster movie, the bus would be the hulking giant that compensates for brains with brawn. If we were to call for a show of hands of the number of people who were almost knocked down by a bus or ten, we’d have more votes than Maithree at the January 8 elections.

More from Sri Lanka’s favourite and more preferred homicide machine. Move or die.

We revise the previous statement. Lorries are no better. What happens when you put the two together?

The traffic police are purely for ornamental purposes. An old Sri Lankan legend has it that they exist only to make traffic worse.

This is the best of the worst. This video is a revised edition of Dante’s Inferno. At first we thought it was all about motorcyclists… and then we realised that we’re all doomed. The lesson we take back from this: Busses are evil and must be put down. We repeat, busses are evil.

Feel free to share your horror stories/videos in the comments section below. We always welcome a healthy dose of fear.

A big shout out to Sri Lanka Traffic Violations, the home of angry motorists. You can find more harrowing videos on their Facebook page, just in case your fear needs revamping.

Last Tuesday (24 November), the arrivals lounge of the Bandaranaike Airport was, for a number of Sri Lankan Tamils, the first sight of home in many years. Forty two people, who had fled to Tamil Nadu in boats as asylum seekers during the civil war, were finally able to return to Sri Lanka.

These 42 are among the approximately 5,600 Sri Lankans who have returned to the country from Tamil Nadu since 2011, with the assistance of the UNHCR and the Government of Sri Lanka. There are, however, over 100,000 more Sri Lankan refugees currently in various parts of Tamil Nadu, according to the Ministry of Resettlement. Of these, 65,000 refugees live in 109 welfare centers or camps, while others live with family and friends.

Speaking to the returnees, we understood that for the most part, they all seemed happy to be back. Some had relatives in Sri Lanka they were returning to, others had left family behind in Tamil Nadu. But they all looked forward to a fresh start in what they still considered their ‘home country.’

Anbukkarasi looked tired but seemed happy to speak to us. She was returning after nine years. “I left in 2006, with two of my sons. They were twelve and nineteen years old. We left on boats from Pesali. We had to pay Rs. 10,000 per person. It was very difficult,” she said.

After reaching Tamil Nadu, Anbukkarasi and her sons settled down in Tirunelveli. “The government (there) would give us Rs. 1000 a month. That was not enough. Apart from that, we had to find jobs,” she said, adding that she had managed to find work in a kadala (gram) company and a cotton mill. “I couldn’t just sit around doing nothing, right?”

Her two sons are now married and settled in India. “I came back because my father is not in good health,” she said.

“The life we have here is good for us. It was difficult there,” she said. “This is the third time I’ve gone and come back. I first went to India in 1985, then in 1990, and finally in 2006.”

Anbukkarasi may return to visit her sons in India at some point. At this point in time, however, she looks forward to settling down with her family in Trincomalee.

Our eyes were drawn to a mischievous little girl in a red and white dress, playing with her mother’s green shawl. Her mother, Manavadhani, said that she was happy to return.

When asked why they had left in the first place, she said, “We felt a threat to our lives, so when we had an opportunity, we left. We only wanted to live and sleep peacefully. Apart from that, we had no other desire to leave our country.”

She left the country in 2007. “My daughter was born there. But now that the troubles have ended, I want to show my children our country,” she said.

Speaking of her time spent as an asylum seeker, she said, “We don’t criticise India, they did welcome us as refugees and take care of our needs, afterall. We are thankful to the Tamil Nadu government for this. But we don’t want to live in a foreign country. So we came back. Whatever happens, this is our own country.”

Saandini, who stood with her 14 year old daughter, Threha, explained that they had first left in 1990, returned in 2004 and left again by boat in 2006 to Rameswaram. Explaining why they had chosen to leave Sri Lanka, she said, “I was scared for my children. We were scared for our lives.”

Saandini, a mother of five, said that her husband, who now has a job as a driver, had returned last year. “The country is good now, and we have family here. So we thought we should also return,” she said, adding that they will have to figure out the rest after they return to their home in Vavuniya. “We do agriculture, and I can also sew. As long as it’s peaceful here, we don’t need anything else.”

Her daughter Threha was only able to complete her primary schooling in India. When asked if she remembers anything about Sri Lanka, she smiled shyly and shook her head. “I was too small,” she said, but then quickly added “but I do remember the sea.”

Did Saandini ever think she would return to Sri Lanka? “Yes,” she said. “I had faith that we could. How could we not? It’s our country.”

Naharaj is now 74 years old. He left 25 years ago, in 1990 and is returning to the island for the first time since. “My family is all here in Mannar. They returned before I did, in 1995,” he said.

When asked how he felt about returning, he smiled, and said that he was very happy and that he hoped to engage in paddy cultivation after settling down. “I worked as a coolie in India. I have three children here, one son and two daughters, and they are all in their twenties. I have a house here which my children built after returning.”

“Life here has to be good,” he added, confidently.

Mahalakshmi and her two daughters lived in Neervely, Jaffna but left for Tamil Nadu in 2006. Her oldest daughter Dharaniya was only two and a half years old when they left, while Pavitha was one and a half. Her husband had returned to Sri Lanka a few years ago. This was the first time in years the two girls were seeing their father.

“I want to enrol my daughters in school and educate them very well,” Mahalakshmi said happily. Dharaniya didn’t seem to share her mother’s enthusiasm, however. When asked whether she was happy to return to Sri Lanka she simply said “I got used to living there (in Tamil Nadu).”

Mahalakshmi was still waiting for her husband while we talked. They had no way of contacting him so we offered the use of a phone. Pavitha, who seemed more carefree than her older sister, dialled the number and spoke to her father briefly. “Appa, we’ve arrived!” she said. Taken out of context, those words would seem almost commonplace. From her tone, no one would have guessed that it had been years since she had seen her father.

S. Valliamma saw her daughter, N. Mangalaswari, for the first time in 22 years. Her daughter’s reaction was explosive. She immediately burst into tears when Valliamma put her arm around her granddaughter.

Valliamma had left with her children in 1990, but Mangalaswari returned to Sri Lanka shortly after, while her two siblings stayed back in India.

“We’ve only spoken to her on the phone. She gets to see her granddaughters for the first time now,” an emotional Mangalaswari explained, adding that “I am happy Amma is back. She’s going to stay with me now.”

Of Valliamma’s six children, two are still in India. Mangalaswari’s elder daughter is incidentally 22 years old now. “Both my daughters are at campus. One in Jaffna and the other in Batticaloa,” she began but was interrupted by Valliamma who indignantly asked her “why did you send her to Batticaloa?”

“Because that’s where she was able to get (a seat for) her course,” Mangalaswari replied.

Valliamma explained that “it’s been a long time since I saw my children. I’m not going back,” at which point daughter added: “They (her siblings in India) had her all these years, now we get to have her!”

Mangalaswari also expressed that she would like her brother to return to Sri Lanka. Valliamma, however, looked worried. She said that she wanted her children to all return but she was concerned about her son getting a good job. “I don’t want him to return and just take up a coolie job,” she said.

In comparison to everyone we spoke to, Uruthira Moorthy (58) was more of a cynic. About his time in India, he explained that “they welcomed us as refugees, but after a while they didn’t even treat us like people. They only saw us as ‘Sri Lankans.’”

Moorthy’s home is in Jaffna. He travelled to Rameswaram from Mannar with his wife and son by boat. “It cost around Rs. 25,000 for three people,” he said.

For the first three months, Moorthy and his family stayed in Rameswaram. “the only livelihood available to us was fishing, and since we couldn’t fish, we later moved to the Bhavani Sagar refugee camp. When we went there, there were around 1500 families. Now there are about 1025 families there.”

Perhaps Moorthy’s cynicism had its roots in the difficulties he had to face to return. He explained that, in order to leave they needed to get police clearance but they had to bribe people to receive it. “I have complained about this to the UNHCR,” he said.

Moorthy’s family managed to sell jewellery and get help from relatives to raise the money. “But so many others don’t have this opportunity,” he said.

He spoke to us in a mixture of Tamil and (rather fluent) Sinhalese. When asked how come his Sinhalese was so good, he said that he’d picked up the language as a young boy working in Panadura. While in Tamil Nadu he’d continued to speak the language with other Sri Lankan Tamils who could also speak Sinhalese.

“I look forward to living in peace with the Sinhalese people, the Tamil people, the Muslim people… We have been Sri Lankans for generations,” he said.

For those of you who had no idea, Lanka Comic-Con took place last weekend (November 28 – 30), as part of the Cyber Games Festival at the BMICH. Although the event itself was quite small, and because it was the first of its kind, it goes without saying that it could have – and hopefully will – be better in the years to come. We’d like to see more merchandise and events and, of course, more cosplay. Yes, you read that right. Cosplay. To be sure, it was strange to see the BMICH filled with people dressed up for more than just an awards ceremony.

We decided to feature some of the best costumes we saw at this year’s Comic-Con as inspiration for those of you who missed out. We may not have access to some of the cool outfits you would find abroad with ease, but that certainly didn’t stop the cosplayers from getting creative. Here’s our pick:

[foogallery id=”5018″]

Images courtesy of Ruwen Gy Sil, Anjana Nishal Dharmasiri and Ranmith Welikala

The internet was up in arms recently when an International band, brought down by a radio station, erred drastically by way of lip syncing. There were those who cried “I told you so!” given the band’s bad reputation, others who mourned the loss of a childhood favourite and some others were incensed at the quality of bands brought down to the island. This article isn’t about the above mentioned concert – a lot has been said about it, more than we care to repeat. Rather, we’re more interested in why we don’t have good bands or acts touring Sri Lanka.

Let’s face it: Sri Lanka isn’t exactly a concert hub. It can also be argued that until recently, say, the past 10 years, India wasn’t either. It was bands like Iron Maiden that really opened the floodgates for concerts in India. Where non-rock/metal acts are concerned, India has seen big names like Beyonce, Shakira, Akon, Ricky Martin touring the country. Where rock/metal acts are concerned, India has seen the likes of bands as big as Metallica, Iron Maiden, Megadeth, along with other bands like Opeth, Porcupine Tree, Iced Earth, Ihsahn, Leprous, Animals as Leaders, Rotting Christ, Anathema, Ne Obliviscaris, Belphegor, Napalm Death, Karnivool… just to name a few. Of course, India has the advantage of sheer size over an island as minute as ours but it isn’t always about size – Singapore is but a fraction of the size India and Sri Lanka but it is definitely known more as a concert hub than either country.

So what’s the deal? Why can’t we catch a break? It all begins with money…

Speaking to Romesh\*, who works for an event management company that has brought down acts like Olivia Newton John, it was understood that the biggest problem organisers face is sponsorship.

“Sponsorship in the last few years has dramatically dropped in every field,” he said, adding that “no one is willing to pay a large amount of money for a single event.”

Romesh isn’t alone in this belief. Speaking to Dilshard, concert organiser in collaboration with Fun Times, it was understood that “no corporate is interested in sponsoring unless they have proper visibility.”

Milinda, organiser for Skzin Colombo Open Air, explained that one of the biggest expenses when it comes to bringing down a band to Sri Lanka is airfare. “Getting airline sponsors is next to impossible now. Without sponsors, flying a band in is just too expensive,” he said.

Surely it’s not all about sponsors – what about money from ticket sales to cover the cost? Well, let’s take a look at the ticket pricing and attendance to get a better idea.

“We don’t have the money or the audience to get the money back,” Imran from Fun Times explained, adding that “we don’t have the audience to support big range acts.”

Imran broke it down further: Depending on the act, an average of 7,000 to 8,000 people may attend. The average ticket price would be around Rs. 7,000, which is roughly around USD 60. Even with tickets priced at Rs. 7,000, which is expensive in Sri Lankan terms, it is still less than the average price of a ticket for most concerts abroad.

Romesh added that, on average, tickets abroad are sold at USD 85 – 100 while, in Sri Lanka, that’s usually the amount a VIP ticket is sold at.

“We cannot sell tickets for Rs. 1000 or 2000 and still expect to cover the cost. How do you cover 50 million, based on ticket sales alone?” he asked. “Even when international promoters come to Sri Lanka to make money, they cannot.”

Dilshard added that only one in hundred concerts held in Sri Lanka make a profit – often, breaking even is difficult.

Now that’s a crowd – Image Source, RedKalinka

Ravindu, one of the concert organisers of the recent metal gig Maelstrom, which brought down five International bands, pointed out that, as with everything in Sri Lanka, there’s the issue of getting permission – from the censor board to the police and if it is an open air concert, the Municipal council.

“We have to chase behind them if we want to get anything done. It gets easier over the years as you organise more concerts, but this is quite daunting in itself.”

Dilshard noted that taxes are based on the ticket prints – and not on the number of tickets sold.

“It is impossible to recover if you pay the taxes based on the ticket prints but don’t sell the number of tickets printed,” he explained.

Say we do manage to get sponsors and the numbers. Where do we host them?

Romesh pointed out that Sri Lanka can host concerts that meet International standards – we have the equipment, which is, of course, expensive, and the expertise. “The problem is, do we have a venue to host large concerts? We have difficulty accommodating even 5,000 people, let alone 50,000,” he said.

And it just isn’t about the airfare, venue, sounds and lights. There’s also the matter of paying the bands or artistes, providing accommodation, catering to their technical riders and the often dreaded tour riders. Legend has it that some of the tour riders are pretty crazy (like no brown M&Ms for Van Halen and lots of bacon for Metallica) – the bigger the artiste/band, the crazier their demands. And let’s face it, if we can’t even pay for the venue…

One person’s dressing room, someone else’s definition of heaven – Image Source, Christopher Catania

Turns out, even India doesn’t have it easy. Speaking to Salman, organiser of Bangalore Open Air, it was understood that India faces similar pressures – except, perhaps, where the crowds are concerned.

“It all depends on what’s in demand. Artistes like David Guetta are more in demand and getting down DJs costs less than getting down a band. Often the costs involved are not proportionate to the investment,” he said.

On some accounts, India has it even worse. “There’s so much red tape and corruption here. The system is messed up. Even with influence, you have to pay whatever they ask you. Permission for gigs here is not that difficult but the bureaucracy is killing,” Salman explained.

Perhaps, or perhaps not. Enrique’s “Love and Sex” tour might be good news for us, but it will certainly take a long time before the industry picks up – or as Dilshard put it, Sri Lanka is still in its infancy.

“We need to get a world class band to perform here first – it will help our tourism and hospitality industry immensely if we take that first step. But first, we need the money, the sponsors and a bit of backing from the government to jumpstart things.”

And until then? Until then, it’s about supporting the little endeavours our concert organisers make and maybe taking that trip to India or Singapore if the waiting gets tough.

\*name changed upon request

This highlights of this week in local news include new traffic lane laws and a dead body in a canal in Dematagoda. Where world news is concerned, tragedy strikes in Brazil while dark clouds loom after Turkey shot down a Russian warplane.

In a bid to control traffic in Colombo, traffic lane laws have (finally) been implemented as of yesterday (November 26), with the police booking 725 violators within the first 10 hours following the implementation. Extra police officers have been deployed to crackdown lane law violators.

Former Defence Secretary Gotabaya Rajapaksha was summoned before the PRECIFAC yesterday (November 26) to give a statement with regard to the floating armoury belonging to Rakna Arakshaka Lanka Ltd.

Two ex-Navy commanders were also summoned for the recording of statements over allegations of corruption and fraud at Rakna Arakshaka Lanka Ltd.

The body of a dead man was found floating in a canal near the Mihindusenpura housing complex in Dematagoda yesterday. The body is yet to be identified.

Finance Minister Ravi Karunanayake stated that the price of essential utilities, including water, electricity and telecommunications will not see a rise under the new VAT amendment by the new budget.

Meanwhile, the prices of a few essential goods will be reduced as proposed in the latest budget. The prices of dhal, dried fish and 400g of local milk powder will see a reduction.

After Turkey shot down a Russian warplane, with Turkey claiming the Russians had violated their airspace and had given the pilots advanced warnings, the surviving pilot has stated that Turkey gave no warning and that they did not violate Turkish airspace. Both the countries, have, however, made it clear that despite the bad blood, they do not intend to go to war with each other, although Turkey has hinted strongly that Russia is not being honest about its targets in Syria, while Russia called it a “planned provocation” and a “stab in the back.” Russia is also planning sanctions against Turkey following the attack.

Following the collapse of a mine in Brazil that left the area flooded with toxic substances, experts have said that it will have negative and irreversible effects on human health and the environment. Apart from killing 11 people and disrupting water supplies to over 250,000 people, the toxic waste has now reached the coast threatening the Comboios nature reserve, which is one of the only regular nesting sites for endangered leatherback turtles. AJ+ has a video of the effect this has had on the environment and the local fishing community.

French President Francois Hollande stated that the US and France will scale up their attacks on Syria and Iraq to take back key locations by IS in the two countries.

The Eagles of Death Metal said they will return to perform at the Bataclan once it reopens (watch video where they talk about it here). During their performance two weeks ago, a hostage situation credited to ISIL ensued, resulting in the death of over 89 people, including the band’s merchandise manager Nick Alexander.

After years of court proceedings, an Indian court sentenced two medical workers for ‘embezzling’ 11 INR (17 cents USD) over 25 years ago.

We have to admit, we didn’t quite know what to expect when we went to watch Pyramus and Thisbe , on November 19 at the Lionel Wendt. We were definitely excited at the prospect of a Sri Lankanised A Mid-summer Night’s Dream that would make Shakespeare comprehensible for local audiences – however the question is, did they succeed?

Rehearsal for Pyramus & Thisbe – Image Source, Dilanjan Seneviratne

Good old Shakespeare has seen a decline in popularity over the years. No one, it would seem, has time for his “thou”s and “thee”s and “wherefore”s and some university syllabi have even neatly trimmed their offerings of Shakespeare, because, it would appear, he is no longer relevant. It would seem that the modern audience cannot grapple with the complexity and length of Shakespeare’s dialogues and his wit may even be outdated (before Shakespeare fans burn this writer at the stake, please note that these are not her views). We want action and comedy but, most of all, we want something relatable. How is Polonius relevant to your average Sri Lankan? (He’s a nosy uncle, that’s how) Why would anyone in Sri Lanka be amused by Richard III’s manipulation? (Not too far off from our own politicians)

These are valid questions but it does not mean that Shakespeare is any less important. The response, instead, has been to transform Shakespeare’s plays into something our modern audiences can digest. Anyone who has watched BBC’s Hamlet (2009), featuring David Tennant and Patrick Stewart would agree. Shakespeare has been twisted, tweaked and transformed time and again, and this is exactly what Jehan Aloysius attempts with his Sri Lankanised rendition of A Mid-Summer Night’s Dream. The play was not, however, a full-length Mid-Summer and featured only the fairies and acting troupe but left out the Athenian lovers entirely.

Rehearsal for Pyramus & Thisbe – Image Source, Dilanjan Seneviratne

The play opens with Peter Quince acting the part of a typical Sri Lankan auntie/uncle (we feel the ambiguity was deliberate as Peter Quince later develops as homosexual). We like how he breaks the fourth wall by directly talking to the audience and even earning smatterings of laughter. On the whole, it should be noted that the naatya-style was very well done and received. Here is a Peter Quince we can all understand because he is so undeniably Sri Lankan, almost like a gay andare.

The play then loses its coherence when the real action begins. The fairies come onstage and what happens next is unclear. Interpretive fight-dance sequences, some impressive but slightly wooden acrobatics – had this been someone’s first dose of A Mid-Summer Night’s Dream, they would definitely have been lost in the tangled webs of fairy politics. The fact that the play is adapted from A Mid-Summer Night’s Dream, and therefore doesn’t follow the same logical flow might be the reason as to why there was confusion to begin with (for instance, the wedding celebration of Theseus and Hippolyta, at which Peter Quince’s play will be performed, was left out). The premise for Peter Quince staging the play was lost. Additionally, according to the original play, Oberon and Titania are estranged over an Indian changeling. This particular version made it look a bit like infidelity, although the dialogue did say that Titania had promised the Prince’s mother that she would take care of him. There was a hint of infidelity and confused sexuality because Titania clearly sat on the Prince’s lap in a rather sexually charged move. This creates a certain amount of confusion, questioning the premise of Titania’s “punishment”. Even if the director did not intend to allude to adultery, there was no background, no exposition whatsoever, that would familiarise the audience to fairy politics.

We commend the effort to Sri Lankanise the fairies – they were attired as traditional Sri Lankan dancers – but there was no willing suspension of disbelief on the part of this writer. They simply weren’t digestible, and there was no attempt to familiarise the audience with the concept of Sri Lankan fairies at all.

The thing with A Mid-Summer Night’s Dream is that it presents two realms: the mortal and the fantastical. Going by the costumes and the grandeur of the fairies, we obviously picked up on the idea of disparate realms, but apart from costume, attempts to make these fairies appear Sri Lankan didn’t sit too well. Perhaps because the audience is required to accept these two disparate realms, the localisation of the fairies becomes too much to digest. Apart from the costumes, it would seem, there was nothing else about these fairies that would make them “Sri Lankan.”

This, we feel, ultimately undermined the entire fairy narrative. In addition, we weren’t very happy with the presentation of fairies. We didn’t feel there was much thought or attention given to the fairies. They didn’t really stand out as individuals – not even Puck. Titania was almost forgettable, for that matter, and this particular reading of Oberon did little justice. The power, majesty and even intelligence of Oberon was merely substituted by brawn while Titania was two dimensional. Puck, who ought to have been the life and soul of the play, had absolutely nothing about him that would make him stand out from the rest of the fairies, apart from extra stage time.

Additionally, the fight-dance sequences were far too long and all the fairies seemed to do was dance at the drop of the hat. It came to a point where it resembled a Bollywood movie, which was honestly annoying at certain moments. In addition, we weren’t quite sure that the contrast in diction between the mortals and the fairies did anything to add to the play.

Then there was the troupe of actors, led by Peter Quince and featuring the infamous Nick Bottom. They were funny, but crudely so. They wasted no time familiarising themselves with the audience by often throwing in a Sri Lankanism like “yako”, much to the amusement of the audience. We liked the fact that it was bilingual in certain parts and the characters were very kopi kadey-esque, and thus, instantly relatable. The characters drew from typical Sri Lankan archetypes but the thing is, apart from Pyramus and Peter Quince, none of the other actors really stood out in the group as individuals.

Rehearsal for Pyramus & Thisbe – Image Source, Dilanjan Seneviratne

Definitely enjoyable if your brand of humour is slapstick. The jokes and references were often crude – not a family drama for sure – and there were plenty of Sri Lankan imprecations peppering the dialogues. It did, however, make the audience laugh. There were certain parts of the play that were really enjoyable (for instance, when the play-within-a-play was finally acted out), even if your cuppa is subtle humour and this was anything but. It was ribald but it did have its moments.

What we weren’t so sure of was the homo-eroticism. We have no issue whatsoever with the homoerotic undertones of the play – hardly undertones, more like overtones. We just weren’t sure what the purpose of it was. Were they trying to make a point or were they making fun of homosexuality or were they trying to say that homosexual characters are funny? The point of it did not come through, if, indeed, they were trying to make a point.

Rehearsal for Pyramus & Thisbe – Image Source, Dilanjan Seneviratne

The play featured no scene changes, but the backdrop was well done. We thought it managed to recreate a forest scene minimally and effectively (just one large tree with vines) and the lighting, more or less, helped enhance the feeling of forest-like enchantment. Except for one light, to the left of the tree, that blinded the audience at certain points (audience’s left. We noticed several people trying to block out the light with their hands), we have no complaints with the backdrop and the lights. As the stage at Lionel Wendt has more depth than width, however, when Titania’s bower was transported to the stage, it looked a little overcrowded on the right hand side of the stage (the audience’s right).

The effort taken to give the music a local touch must be commended, although the soundtrack of the fairies was overplayed and ceased to provide any additional effect to the scene after a certain point. We didn’t notice any major problems with the sound, except that the fairies could have projected better (it still wasn’t clear, towards the end of the play, despite all the action, why Oberon and Titania fought in the first place).

We also loved the “pite scene” and the hilarious slow motion action but not so much the interpretive fight-dance scene of the fairies.

Rehearsal for Pyramus & Thisbe – Image Source, Dilanjan Seneviratne

While the play may not have succeeded in following a coherent narrative (this is, after all, Shakespeare, not Beckett or Pinter), it fused several local elements in really well. We saw a bit of kolam, thovil and traditional drumming… and even drunk Sri Lankan uncles. The fusion, where the troupe of actors is concerned, was seamless and enjoyable.

The real gem of the play was its ability to constantly break the fourth wall. For that matter, half-way through the play, the actors descended from the stage and pulled several male audience members up on stage, demanding that they audition as Pyramus. This ensured that the play was continually engaging on many levels and made the audience feel even more a part of the action.

We weren’t sure what the play was trying to say, if it was trying to say anything at all. The hilarity and ridiculous action on stage kept escalating, forcing the audience to sit tight and laugh until it hurt – but it didn’t say anything and, we suppose, it didn’t have a point beyond entertainment and comedy. Not a play you would want to bring children to, but definitely something worth watching if all you want is a laugh.

Jehan Aloysius and co. will also be representing Sri Lanka at the Bharat Rang Mahotsav International Theater Festival in India in 2016, so we’d also like to wish the troupe good luck on their Indian stage adventures.

Ganesha Vidane has an unusual story to tell – one that began well before she was born, all the way back to the 1920s. She is the daughter of Banda and Dagmar Vidane, who were both circus performers. In fact, her father Banda was born and raised on a circus and went on to become one of the most famous circus performers in the world.

“He was raised on a circus” are words that deserve a black and white movie with gay, classical music playing in the background. For Banda Vidane, however, those words are painted in reality. This is the story of Banda, now in his 80s, who became a world famous elephant trainer and performer in Germany in the late 1900s – but not just any trainer. Banda was known for his special bond with his elephants and even received an award from the Dutch Animal Rights Society in 1988 for his humane treatment of his close friends, the elephants he trained.

It all began one distant day in the 1920s…

For Banda’s father, Epi, it was the chance of a lifetime. At an event hosted for King George V in Ceylon in 1925, Epi performed a trick with an elephant that caught the attention of Mr. Hagenbeck, the owner of one of the greatest Animal Parks (zoos) at the time. Epi’s trick, where the elephant lifted and carried Epi around while his head was in the elephant’s mouth, was an instant success. It marked the beginning of Epi’s career where Epi embarked on a journey that would change his life forever.

Epi’s trick that caught everyones attention

Impressed, Mr. Hagenbeck paid Epi to perform his trick in Hamburg at a show called Wonders of South India. Soon, Epi was on his way to Germany by boat, with his elephant as his companion.

…in 1937, Premadasa Puncha Vidane, also known as Banda, was born in Frankfurt and raised on a circus. His life was far from ordinary but to Banda this was the only life he knew. He grew up sneaking out on the quiet to visit the elephants in the stables, and this left a lasting impression on him. Epi disapproved of his son’s over-fondness for the animals but Banda was unstoppable. His showmanship showed even at the age of 3 when Epi asked Banda to lie on the floor at the show as part of the trick. Banda was fearless but the elephant, not so. Scared that she might hurt the little boy, the elephant showered him with a jet of urine instead of carrying out the command, much to the amusement of the audience.

Epi featured on a magazine cover

Banda was soon part of Epi’s act, making his first appearance in the ring at the age of 5. At 14, he was fully integrated into the act but Banda was a different breed.

While Epi was used to the Sri Lankan mahout technique of training, where the elephants are often punished, Banda was a rebel. To him, each elephant had individual abilities and it was these abilities that he nurtured. While Epi mainly taught his elephants to carry, push and pull things, Banda integrated movements that came naturally to the elephants. Looking back, Banda explains that he trained the elephants according to “their own needs.” Depending on the talents and attention span of each elephant, he trained them and nurtured their strengths and natural abilities like standing on their back legs (they do this to reach for food) and making a headstand (to get roots out of the ground). Banda felt as if he belonged to them – they had their own personalities, fears and talents.

“His method was love and patience,” his daughter, Ganesha, explained. “Whatever the trick, it was something both my father and the elephant were comfortable with. Elephants do, in their own way, communicate when they are not up to doing something,” she said.

In Banda’s shows, the elephants took on a new life, moving away from the traditional idea of an elephant, that of a slow and ungainly animal. Banda’s elephants were trained to move fast in a small area, but were graceful as they danced with a chorus in harmony to sounds and lights. This became one of his best performances: elephants with a cabaret of dancers and elephants performing tricks in the mist, without either vocal or visible guidance from Banda.

Books and movies have created an idealised notion of what living in the circus was like. “Everything gets glorified in movies thanks to Hollywood. It was definitely not as romantic as people make it out to be. The old westerns and movies based on circuses are mostly fiction,” Banda laughs.

Epi, Elisabeth and Banda

“Back in the day, there was no running water in the caravans. There were washing busses and we made use of public taps for water,” elaborated Banda. “Electricity was cut off by night and the front seating area had to be turned into a bed by night,” he said.

A typical day for Banda began at 6 in the morning. Feeding the elephants, playing with them and even cuddling them and tending to their needs if they were sick or ill. The rehearsals took place daily, regardless of the fact that the conditions were never stable and the environment and surroundings ever changing. There were at least two shows in a day, one at 3pm and the other at 8 – at times even three shows during the weekends, with a morning show at 10. This meant getting ready for the show in full gear, and not just for the performers but also for the animals!

“It takes endurance and patience and most of all, team work with strangers. Most of the shows and acts change annually but you need to depend on and trust your partners,” Banda said.

Was it difficult living in a circus? Banda chucked in amusement. “I didn’t know any better. It wasn’t hard for me, it was quite normal and even mundane because it was ‘normal’ to me,” he said.

“I think, as my parents grew older, they came to realise that comfort was missing,” Ganesha added. “Things like a stable surrounding and friends they could spend time with for more than just a season. But in general, my family never felt as if we missed out on something or had a hard life. On the contrary, we were always busy meeting new challenges and unexpected difficulties and it was a life full of joy and amazement. We were all quite content.”

Banda at his best

Both Banda and his father Epi lived exceptional lives. When asked if WWII had an effect on the circus, Banda responded with an amazing story of Epi’s bravery. “My father was quite popular at the time. All the ladies loved him. He was exotic, brave and untouchable,” Banda explained. “Despite the war, the circus went on as usual, except during air raids when everyone ran for cover. This was Nazi Germany and my father knew quite a few heads of the regime, but he helped many Jews cross the border. He knew what it was like to be at the bottom, so he used his influence and dropped a few names where necessary. He hid Jews in his elephant trailer behind balls of straw and helped them across the border whenever he went abroad. My mother told me that she never feared getting caught as Epi’s confidence convinced everybody. He did this for five years,” he said.

Banda’s own life is quite colourful. He met his wife Dagmar at Zirkus Busch where Banda trained elephants. It was instant love. She grew up in East Berlin and joined the National Circus School and trained as a horse rider. Her act was toe dancing on horse-back in a tutu. In 1956, her group Truppe Case was contracted to the same circus Banda worked in. In 1958, Bodidasa Suwaneris, Ganesha’s brother was born. Dagmar’s family was not too happy – the couple just had a child out of wedlock and what’s more, they disapproved of the dark skinned Banda. “It all changed when my father helped her flee East Germany and helped support her family stranded behind the wall,” Ganesha explained, adding that their wedding was delayed because Epi was still touring and was unable to take time off. They finally married in 1959.

Banda recalls a time when both he and his wife were practising with the elephants at the winter quarters, where all the animals were housed, when the lions suddenly made an entrance. The caretaker of the lions had not shut their cages properly and the lions had broken out. “Arriving in the ring where we were rehearsing, they must have thought it was time for breakfast and tried to attack me,” Banda said. But before they could do so, one of the elephants rammed the flank of the lion and hurled it so far that it landed with a thump. “It fled, panicking, along with the other lions, right back into the cage. The lions looked like they never wanted another excursion ever again,” he laughed.

The dangers and excitement of circus life was also peppered by a few tragedies. Epi sold the elephant he brought from Sri Lanka, which he had taken with him to Hamburg and America, to buy his way out of his contract and finance his travels back to Europe. Unfortunately, his elephant did not perform the head trick with the new owner. The result was that the new owner’s head was crushed and the elephant was shot.

When Banda retired in 1997, one of his most valuable elephants, an African cow named Layla, became untameable. When Banda first worked with Layla, she was always in chains surrounded by at least four men. In next to no time, Banda won her over and she became his pet elephant. “She would even defend him from me,” Ganesha added. “She made sure all the elephants did what my father wanted them to do. They had an amazing bond.” When Banda retired, however, she was given over to a zoo, as she could not be tamed. “He transported her there and did what he always did. He left after he had introduced to her the new space and the new caretaker. I couldn’t believe it when he came back from the Naples Zoo without shedding a tear. I don’t think he could believe it either.” Layla, however, did not take to her new surroundings. Within weeks she became apathetic and stood only in one corner. She barely ate anymore. The zookeeper called Banda when Layla no longer got up in the morning, although she wasn’t an old elephant. Banda flew to Naples and what he saw broke his heart: he spent hours sitting beside her, touching her and talking to her softly. Layla had held on until she got a chance to say goodbye to Banda and for the first time in Banda’s life, parting with an elephant resulted in a death.

Epi and Banda worked at a number of circuses during their careers. According to Banda, Epi claimed to have made himself 10 years older than the date of birth (1890) registered in his passport and said that he came from a wealthy Kandyan family, although Ganesha doubts this assertion. While working with Mr. Hagenbeck, he was offered to train elephants for Circus Busch. From 1928 – 1930, Epi was in America working with Ringling Bros and Barn & Bailey Circus but disliked America. “That was a time of racial segregation in America. He felt very uncomfortable there. In Europe he was a star, the exotic elephant man, and was treated with respect. In America, he was just a non-white-male worker,” Ganesha explained. Epi returned to Circus Busch in 1928 and stayed on until he retired in 1969.

Circus tents were packed to catch a glimpse of Banda’s amazing tricks

By 1956, Circus Busch had 8 elephants and an ever growing demand for their act in many countries outside Germany. The father and son duo split in two, with 4 elephants remaining at Busch with Banda while Epi went abroad with the other elephants to countries like Poland, Romania, Bulgaria and Hungary. “During winter, when the travel season was over, they were hired by circus houses (buildings providing theatre and sporting events) and the group united and stayed at Budapest, Prague and Warsaw.

By 1962, Banda had decided to move on. He no longer wanted to be apprenticed to his father. He wanted to move out of his father’s shadow, especially now that he had started his own family. He got his chance to train a baby elephant at the Swedish circus Trolle Rhodin but the tide was against him. “He had quite a difficult time,” Ganesha explains. “There weren’t that many circuses with elephants to begin with for there to be a shortage of trainers.”

Banda worked in many circuses after that. He trained 30 horses at Franz Althoff’s circus in West Germany in 1965, then worked with the Italian circus Royal Americano in 1967 and in 1971 he was hired by the Italian circus owner’s cousin and began training 25 elephants at Circo Americano with Banda’s son, Bodidasa, as his apprentice. There, father and son worked in two groups with Bodidasa staying with a group of 12 elephants in Italy while Banda worked away from home, mostly at Circus Scott in Sweden or Bouglione in Belgium/France. “It was during this time that my father started trying out more humane ways of handling elephants. Sweden was very liberal. He was allowed to take them for walks and they could graze freely and swim in rivers,” Ganesha said.

Dagmar and Banda were a hit

Due to economic problems in Italy, the Vidanes then moved to Switzerland where Banda worked as a consultant to Louis Knie from Circus Knie. They trained and taught animals, but did not perform as they did before. Although the money was good, Banda was not happy – he wanted more. He missed the spotlight.

Banda’s big break came in 1982. Circus Krone was having trouble with their trainer – this was just the chance Banda had been dreaming of. It was also where he met the tall, lean, African beauty Layla, who helped him with the herd. Soon, the largest group of elephants performing in the same ring in Europe was born. Banda’s performance included 15 elephants. Banda soon introduced training sessions that were open to the public, to make the process of training animals more transparent.

Every show was important for Banda – he had different shows for the season, travelling during summer and putting up shows in circus houses in winter. “All the shows had to differ and they all had to be perfect. He created things people have not seen before: tricks, costumes, lighting and music. It was a perfect melange,” Ganesha added.

On Banda’s 60th birthday, in 1997, he retired, saying goodbye to his fairy tale life in grand style: in a circus ring with his wife of over 40 years, presenting his last show. They took their last bow to Andrea Bocelli’s “Time to Say Goodbye” and in a frenzy of camera flashes, their fans ran into the ring with flowers and gifts. He ended his career having trained 75 elephants in total and fighting for more humane treatment of elephants.

When asked if he missed the circus, Banda chuckled in amusement. “You might as well ask a fish if he misses water!” he said.

“I think they find it a bit boring at home,” Ganesha added. “They miss their friends but maybe not the travelling. I think they miss all the great conversations and the crazy world they lived in,” she said. “It’s different for my mother. She’s a people person. She has her children and her grandchildren but my father doesn’t have anyone he can talk to with a deep hum or a squeak, like he did with the elephants.”

Banda’s travelling days are, however, far from over. Recently (2014), he visited his country of origin, Sri Lanka, for the first time in his life. He was pleasantly surprised. “Epi did not a paint a nice picture of Ceylon, pointing out why he left. Sri Lanka also has been negatively portrayed in the media as a primitive, backwards but beautiful country,” Ganesha said. “He loved the food and the sights and how friendly the people are. To him, his roots are in Sri Lanka.”

Dagmar wasn’t just a pretty face

Both Banda and his wife Dagmar now live in retirement in Hannover, Germany, with their son Bodidasa, and often visit their daughter Ganesha in Berlin. “He never learned anything else and he never had a problem with animal rights. He respected his herd and was a part of it. Because he never let them suffer under any circumstances, he never understood why people fussed so much.” The elephants Banda trained were not born free, they were mainly elephants from zoos. “All they did in the zoo was graze all day. No mental input or entertainment, never mind physical exercise,” she said.  
Working with elephants was Banda’s life, his natural inclination. A little question for the reader: can you guess why her parents named her “Ganesha?” His love for elephants is so strong that Ganesha said she often felt that “we knew he had something with them, a kind of bond, he would never have with us or anybody else.”

The video starts post 7 minutes in:

Images sourced from Ganesha Vidane

It has been a rather serious week for local news, following the demise of Ven. Sobitha Thero, and the resignation of Minister of Prison Reforms and Law and Order, Thilak Marapana.

For those of you who missed out (or have forgotten), today is #SpaceDebrisDay and the Government has declared a No Fly Zone with effect from 11am to 1pm today, in anticipation of the bit of space debris that will enter the atmosphere above the Indian Ocean off the Southern Coast of Sri Lanka.

Thursday, November 12, was declared a national day of mourning following the demise of Ven. Sobitha Thero, who played a key role in the anti-corruption campaign leading up to the January 8 elections. His cremation ceremony took place with full state honours yesterday at Parliament Grounds, Battaramulla.

Following the Avant Garde fiasco, Thilak Marapana stepped down from his ministerial position as Minister of Prisons Reforms and Law and Order on Monday (November 9). Later in the week, D.M. Swaminathan and Sagala Ratnayaka were sworn in as ministers of Prison Reforms and Law and Order respectively, on November 11.

Meanwhile, the Government has cancelled all agreements with Avant Garde Maritime Services, reverting relevant operations to the Navy.

On Wednesday (November 11), the Colombo Chief Magistrate granted bail to 31 suspects held under the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA). The order came after hunger strikes were carried out by the prisoners over the last few weeks, demanding their release.

In lighter news, 140 parking meters are to be installed in and around the Colombo Municipality, including both Duplication and Galle Road, with effect from January 1 2016.

Despite tensions running high, Myanmar’s first free election saw a landslide victory for Nobel Peace Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi’s opposition party, the National League for Democracy (NLD). The country’s military later acknowledged the victory, creating hope for a peaceful transition of power.

Due to the large influx of refugees, Sweden has introduced border checks with effect from November 11 to control the flow of migrants into the country.

Kurdish troops launched an attack yesterday, November 12, on the northern Iraqi town of Sinjar in an attempt to free it from ISIS hands.

A while back we did a story on things only Sri Lankans living abroad would understand – the response was immense! As an aftermath, one reader, Navin, came forward with a most peculiar story which we felt was absolutely worth publishing: while it isn’t exactly about things only Sri Lankans abroad would understand, it has the words “Sri Lankans” and “abroad” and all the makings of a strange but amusing tale. It starts like this…

Midtown Manhattan, late 2013. A jetlagged Navin found that he couldn’t sleep and instead of wasting time counting sheep, he jumped out of bed and started walking towards Herald Square when he came across a giant adult store by the oh-so-subtle name Empire Erotica, just two blocks west of the famous (phallic) Empire State Building. This is prime location, smack bang in the middle of Manhattan. Empire Erotica also has a sister store across the street called Empire Exotics.

Empire Erotic during the day – Image Courtesy, Google Street View

Now, you may be wondering what the big deal is. Sure, such sights in Sri Lanka are as rare as a nice politician, BUT remember that bit above about “Sri Lankans” and “abroad”? Well, turns out, the store manager is a true blue Sri Lankan uncle (beer and rice belly included), somewhere in his 50’s, who got immensely excited upon spotting the brown-skinned Navin.

“Are you Sri Lankan?” he asked, excitedly and then promptly said “no photos, please!” spotting a Nikon around Navin’s neck.

One Sri Lankan uncle, check. Beer and rice belly, check. Dubious environ, check. But the story still needs a bit more spice. At this point, it should be mentioned that the staff was entirely Sri Lankan, against a backdrop of seedy sex toys and adult DVDs, peep shows included.

His inner journalist bristling, Navin decided to ask uncle-sir all about it. Turned out, uncle had been in the business for 25 years and lives in Staten Island, which has a large Sri Lankan population. Although run exclusively by Sri Lankans, Navin wasn’t able to verify if uncle was the store owner or just the manager. The whole episode did, however, get Navin wondering why Sri Lankans are so attracted to the concept of an island. Thinking that, perhaps, this was just one of those strange one-off occurrences, he walked back out to embrace the sights and sounds of the chaotic concrete jungle that is New York…

…but it doesn’t end there…

Sri Lankans tend to open up restaurants such as Kottu House. Others chose to spice up another aspect of life. Image Courtesy, New York Times

It was yet another late night. Navin was walking back, after happily browsing through comics at Midtown Comics (Manhattan’s most mainstream comic store), located close to Times Square. Walking towards 34th Street on 8th Avenue, he came across a sign that took him right back home. Something extremely Sri Lankan by the name of “Vihan’s Video.”

With home at heart, he decided to brave this dodgy DVD store and found… yet another adult store, this time selling cheaper, more mainstream “stuff”. And once more: manned by another 50-something Sri Lankan uncle and staffed entirely by Sri Lankans.

You may leave Sri Lanka, but Sri Lanka never leaves you. Uncle was streaming Neth FM on full blast, using the speakers of the store. The programme happened to be the popular Sinhalese social commentary programme “Balumgala.” Picture this. Whether you’ve seen the interior of an adult store or not, draw in all the knowledge and images imparted by Hollywood and picture a Sri Lankan uncle in an adult store listening to “Balumgala.” Imagine uncle attentively listening to the radio show host lamenting about how the younger generation was contributing to the deterioration of culture in Sri Lanka. Imagine now said uncle turning to yet another Sri Lankan uncle who had just entered the store and saying:

“Balannako Lankawata wela thiyena dey.” Basically, look at what’s happening in Sri Lanka.

Uncle number 2 nods gravely.

Sweet irony sneaking in a goal whilst surrounded by prosthetic penises and cheap pornographic DVDs. Navin found the philosopher in him wondering whether the uncles were unacquainted with the concept of irony and even hypocrisy, talking of deterioration of culture back home, whilst working at an adult store abroad. He decided that working in a sex shop is probably just viewed as “business” and is, therefore, divorced from your typically Sri Lankan brand of morality.

We did a bit of research and found out that Vihan’s Store is now one of the few surviving adult stores in Midtown. Adult stores, like the one mentioned, seem to have come under fire for various reasons, some obvious (with community members taking the issue to courts and claiming that the presence of an adult store in the area allegedly produces “litter, crime and prostitution, as well as an adverse effect on property values”) and some purely economic, like rising property and rent prices which are driving them out of their nests.

You would note, however, that this is a sum total of TWO adult stores manned by Sri Lankans, within just a couple of blocks from each other and all right in the middle of Manhattan. Curious, wouldn’t you say? Our protagonist, mulling over all of this, kept walking and came across…

Jayasara Video Inc. a repeat of both Vihan and Empire. Run exclusively by Sri Lankans with the addition of cheap lingerie displayed in the façade.

Sadly, Navin has a day job so he couldn’t dedicate more time to this mystery but apparently, there are many MORE such shops in Manhattan, Brooklyn and Staten Island which are run entirely by Sri Lankans. Case in point, this tragic story where a Sri Lankan working in an adult shop was killed in an alleged botched robbery (note the number of Sri Lankan names quoted in the article, some of adult shop workers).

Speaking to a few people living in Staten Island, Navin was able to confirm that Sri Lankans were leaders in the adult entertainment industry in New York, the undefeated champs of importing and distributing toys and videos. The same was heard of Los Angeles, although we have no eyewitness accounts.

We had grave doubts while publishing this story, worried about the possible backlash it might create in conservative Sri Lankan society. At the same time, we’re not here to point fingers and call people immoral. We think it’s important to look at these matters as objectively as possible, although most would disagree whilst standing on a moral high ground: but let’s face it, employment is employment, despite some forms of employment appearing more dubious than others. Furthermore, it should be pointed out that while most of us would squirm at the very idea…it’s not exactly illegal in the West. Plus, one must do what it takes to get by because even in Western countries, life is a lot harder than what we see in movies. So we understand the rationale, but the very thought of Sri Lankan uncles paving the way with their beer bellies does give way for a fit of giggles. There is also the mystery: why are these places manned solely by Sri Lankans? What’s more, we’re quite certain that this story is one among the many queer, interesting tales revolving around the lives of Sri Lankans living abroad… and we’d definitely like to hear more! Drop a comment below if you have anything to add to the above story or if you, too, have encountered a phenomenon as fascinating as the one above.

It’s been a relatively lazy week for news, possibly due to the poya on Tuesday – the highlights include protesting students, space debris heading towards Sri Lanka’s Southern tip and talks over a railway line from Maradana to Battaramulla. Here’s a brief recap of what happened this week in case you missed out:

WT1190F, an artificial/ man-made object, currently doing the rounds in space, is headed back to earth – towards Sri Lanka’s Southern end to be more precise. Several news outlets reported this, while Roar followed up with a comprehensive analysis and an exclusive interview with astronomer Nicholas Moskovitz, who was part of the team that made the discovery earlier this month. The date for impact of the space debris is 13 November, 11.50 a.m. Sri Lankan time, and scientists believe there is little cause for worry as most of the material will burn up in the atmosphere.

After previously reducing the vehicle loan margin from 100% to 70%, the government has brought it up to 90%, with effect from Thursday 29 October.

The Government is seeking a loan from China for the first phase of the Colombo – Kandy highway project, also known as the Central Expressway.

Given the increase in the number of vehicles on Colombo roads and increased traffic congestion, Sri Lanka Railways is looking into the feasibility of a 10 km railway line from Maradana to Battaramulla.

Higher Diploma in Accountancy students protested outside the UGC on Thursday 29 October, creating a major traffic jam in Town Hall. The police set off tear gas and water cannons at the demonstrators.

The Presidential Commission of Inquiry to Investigate and Inquire into Serious Acts of Fraud, Corruption and Abuse of Power, State Resources and Privileges, or the PRECIFAC, has had a busy week.

The PRECIFAC were unable to hand over a notice to summon former Sri Lankan Airlines chairman, and brother of former First Lady Shiranthi Rajapaksa, Nishantha Wickramasinghe, on 28 October as they could not locate him. His wife is reported to have said that Wickramasinghe has not been home for three years, and that she is unaware of his whereabouts. The next day, however, Wickremasinghe informed the Commission that he was abroad and hence unable to receive the summons. The PRECIFAC is looking into a complaint regarding the irregularities at the Sri Lankan Airlines Catering Services.

This includes President Sirisena’s advisor on maritime affairs, Admiral Jayantha Perera. They have been summoned for questioning about the fraud and corruption allegations levelled against Rakna Lanka Security Company.

The PRECIFAC has also re-summoned MR to be questioned over the non-payment of money to ITN for political advertisements aired during the 2015 Presidential Election campaign.

Watch this space next week for our next news round-up.

Featured Image Credit – Lalith C Gamage

Often, the first image the word ‘shipwreck’ conjures up is the Titanic or something inspired by The Little Mermaid. Picture a looming hulk on the seabed, rife with little treasures from a time long forgotten. Such images are deemed fantastical, belonging to the realm of cartoons, movies, books, and perhaps even dreams. Yet, for a select few, this world is as real as the one on land and they don’t have to go too far to see it: Sri Lanka’s coast is dotted with numerous shipwrecks, some even dating back to 2 – 1 BC.

Sounds unreal? Take a look at some of these pictures if you don’t believe us…

Off the shores of Batticaloa is the world’s first purpose-designed Aircraft Carrier HMS Hermes, sunk during the Japanese attack of Ceylon during World War II on April 9, 1942.

This is HMS Hollyhock, a flower class corvette sunk during the Japanese raid of Ceylon in 1942 off Kalmunai.

Diver at the HMS Hollyhock bow

Turns out, going by historical records, there are over 200 estimated shipwrecks around the coast of Sri Lanka. Many have been located but there are still a few wrecks that remain unexplored and unlocated. According to shipwreck explorer Dharshana Jayawardena, the best place for shipwrecks and wreck diving happens to be Colombo.

“There are over 15 wrecks off Colombo,” he explained, adding that as Colombo has a harbour, a lot of wrecks can be found in its vicinity. Some of them can be found off places like Panadura, Dehiwala, and Mount Lavinia.

One of the most beautiful wrecks, as pictured below, is titled the Taprobane North Wreck which may even be the 1917 Perseus, sunk off Mount Lavinia. In an account written by Dharshana, he poetically describes his encounter with this wreck thus: “…the remnants of this massive ship seems to loom above our heads. For a moment the mind was confused. The two ends looked like the raised wings of a leviathan aircraft brought to life from the pages of a morbid tale of dark fantasy. But the moment of doubt was brief. Rationality prevailed over what was perhaps a slight bout of narcosis. This was nothing but a ship. A really big ship.”

A diver swimming over the bow of the ship, which lies on its port side

The alleged 1917 Perseus’s giant propeller

This massive steering quadrant was used to steer the rudder of the ship

Massive shoals of blue striped snappers inhabit the Perseus

Like the Taprobane North Wreck, rated as “world class” among wreck divers, the H. M. S. Hermes in Batticaloa, pictured below, is said to be an experience of a lifetime.

“This is a world famous dive. One of the top 100 dives in the world, in fact,” Jayawardena elaborated, adding that divers from around the world come to Sri Lanka specifically to see this wreck.

Such encounters aren’t the first of their kind in Sri Lanka. Roar caught up with marine archaeologist Rasika Muthucumarana who recounted to us the time when the remains of a ship from 2 – 1 BC was unearthed.

“It was identified by accident by two conch divers from Godawaya, a small fishing village between Abalantota and Hambantota, in 2003, and we got information of this in 2008. They had discovered a bench-like stone object in an unusual place, with some pottery,” he explained. “We found the shipwreck but we can’t see the ship. All that remains is a mound and wooden parts covered with corals and plants and some pottery. This is the oldest wreck both in Sri Lanka and the Asia-Pacific region.”

He went on to add that due to the tropical waters of the island, only wrecks made of iron can survive, while wood perishes quickly.

“We can see the structures of the ships are relatively intact, despite the collapse, but these are mostly iron ships from the last 200 years as wood perishes easily given the sea conditions in the area. The water here is relatively warm and the sunlight and oxygen are not good for wooden shipwrecks,” he said.

The wooden ships, which are covered by sand and marine growth get flattened over time, making it difficult to detect even with equipment.

A diver exploring the hull by the lower decks of the HMS Hermes.

“Our equipment is based on sonar, and for that to work, there needs to be something standing on the seabed,” he explained, adding that there are a lot of wooden shipwrecks dating back to the Dutch invasion of Sri Lanka. Locating these wrecks, however, has proven difficult. Most of the wrecks known today, are, therefore, from a relatively recent period where iron was used for construction in place of wood – nevertheless, this does not make them any less beautiful or romantic, for behind every wreck is a story of loss and tragedy, which marine archaeologists like Muthucumarana try to piece together like a puzzle.

Apart from the general difficulty in finding the wrecks and preserving them, there are a few other obstacles along the way. Muthucumarana notes in a published journal paper that although Sri Lanka “does not have well-organised treasure hunters with modern technology,” there is the issue of “small scale looting and distractions,” adding that there is a new trend developing in Sri Lanka where shipwrecks are broken in an attempt to collect iron.

“This occurs because salvage permits are issued without any awareness of the value of shipwrecks and without referring to the proper authorities,” he stated.

“Looters destroy wrecks by using explosives and heavy machinery. Large pieces of iron are blasted and salvaged, using lifting barrels. This destroys all the archaeological evidence as well as the surrounding environment,” he pointed out, noting that “explosives used underwater cause shock waves which travel four times faster in water than in air. The impact of these shock waves kills fish instantly.”

Despite being illegal, Muthucumarana adds that the use of explosives to catch fish is widely practiced in Sri Lanka.

“Explosives are also often used in Sri Lanka during legal and illegal salvage operations,” he said.

This poses an immediate problem for divers, where the “use of explosives underwater can also cause the disorientation and death of divers who are within range of the explosion,” making it a major threat to both tourism and marine archaeology.

However, though this may come as a shock, Muthucumarana added that, for the most part, wreck diving is quite safe because most wrecks are stable.

“It may be dangerous if the dive is too deep, but that’s rare,” he said.

Jayawardena also added that with good training and equipment, wreck diving is not dangerous at all.

While shipwrecks are generally associated with abandonment and disaster, this eerie underwater world is peopled with different lifeforms.

“Shipwrecks are a breeding ground for fish and coral,” Muthucumarana explains, which adds to the importance of preserving these derelict hulks. The pictures say it all: under water, it’s a strange new world with beautiful lifeforms transforming what was once a tragedy into beauty.

Pictures courtesy Dharshana Jayawardena.

This may sound strange, but Sri Lanka is the only country in the region with a rising fertility rate. According to the Census on Population and Housing report released in 2012, the “Government in its population policy statement issued in 1991, set… a TFR (Total Fertility Rate) of 2.1, to be achieved by the year 2000.” As of 1998, Sri Lanka’s TFR was 1.9, making it the only country in the South Asian region to “achieve the level of replacement fertility before the end of last century, and ahead of the targeted time frame.” Oddly enough, ever since 1998, Sri Lanka’s fertility rate has been on the rise, reaching 2.3 in 2005 and 2.4 in 2011. Before we can ask why, however, let’s take a look at what the fertility rate really means.

According to Dr. Sanjeewa Godakandage, Consultant Community Physician of the Family Health Bureau, the TFR is, quite simply, a measure of the “average number of children per woman.”

The Census report defines it as the “measures (of the) average number of children born to a woman during her entire reproductive period,” while the UN has a more elaborate definition: “the average number of live births a woman would have by age 50 if she were subject, throughout her life, to the age-specific fertility rates observed in a given year. Its calculation assumes that there is no mortality.”

Here’s what the report outlined:

Professor Indralal De Silva of the Department of Demography, University of Colombo explained that many factors have come together to contribute to the rise in the TFR. Some of these include:

Speaking to the Family Health Bureau, it was understood that while there is no real consensus as to why the TFR has increased, there are several contributing issues. Where family planning is concerned, it was pointed out that after the tsunami and the civil conflict, there has been a change in attitudes towards family planning and that their needs are greatly under-addressed. Additionally, adolescent pregnancies are now higher, which the Family Health Bureau attributes to a change in societal values. They also pointed out that although abortion is illegal in Sri Lanka, the crackdown on these facilities has also contributed. There is also increased pressure by social and religious groups against family planning as well as a reduction in the age of marriage. On the whole, the Family Health Bureau added that this increase in fertility has been observed in all ethnic groups in Sri Lanka.

Speaking to Professor De Silva, it was understood that a rising TFR has several serious implications, including:

Greater burden on tax payers – with more children in society, added to the elderly population, there are more dependents. More dependents increases the burden on the tax payer.

Although they should be, they aren’t really. Professor De Silva noted that there has been no serious discussion of what this implies on the part the Government. “The policy makers have not paid much attention to these particular areas,” he added.

Featured Image from CRC.ORG

Sri Lankan boys are a funny lot – even after most of them insist on being called “men,” they’re all still boys at heart and sometimes that’s not even a good thing. We don’t intend to start a war of the sexes here. We thought, for purely academic reasons, it would be fun to see how many Sri Lankan boy types we could name. Of course, this is not without its limitations, for in no way do we assert that Sri Lankan males conform to only \*one\* of the categories listed below. Nor are we saying that this type of behaviour is exclusive to the male Sri Lankan – rather, certain cultural nuances seemed to have seeped in, setting apart this male from the rest of the breed.

We’ve also listed out some types of Sri Lankan boys who are actual causes for concern. As much as we all enjoy our light reading, a few realities just cannot be ignored.

Every mother’s dream!

His hair is parted in the middle, his teeth are slightly crooked, his glasses are too big for the rest of his face and he only wears carefully buttoned down shirts. This type is the Sri Lankan mother’s “golden boy” who brings back trophies for all kinds of academic achievements. Socially, they are often awkward and introverted, and with little or no exposure to the female kind. We don’t mean all of this in a bad way, however. After the descriptions below, this kind is preferred to some of the other horrors, even if they could do with a bit of shaking up.

You find them everywhere. At the bus stop, at the mall, at the beach, at local events, even down your road. They seem to have X-ray vision which can penetrate even padded bras, going by the lecherous but otherwise vacant looks on their faces. This type, synonymous to the annoying local mosquito, is a lurker – you won’t realise until too late that you’ve been ‘ah nangi-ed’ and stung by the indignity of being commented on even if you are only getting something from the corner kadey. Defined by pseudo-bravado, lechery and ample amounts of sexual frustration, you could either ignore, take a swat at them or scare them off with by a sharp remark. Their bravado doesn’t extend beyond a chorus of “you are very beauty” and “can I have be your friendship” so, for the most part, they are left baffled by the fact that the object of their perverted desire is an actual human being who can talk back. But sometimes, you might get unlucky if the ‘ah nangi’ type is actually not an ‘ah nangi’ type but is a…

This type makes the ‘ah nangi’ types look positively sweet in comparison. Fed on a diet of what we guess is male chauvinism and bad upbringing, this is the type who has no qualms following you even up to your doorstep. If not on foot, at the worst, you’ll find this type on various transportation devices like a bicycle, moped, motorbike and even a BMW – what this means is that their psychotic inclinations have Marxist tendencies. They are classless, in every sense of the word. This type not only inspires nausea in the opposite sex, but also the need to carry anything at all that might serve as a weapon: an umbrella, a can of deo spray or even pepper spray. They have no boundaries whatsoever and are budding psychopaths, in our humble opinion.

Sometime the boy isn’t as good looking and his boi’s aren’t as talented – Image Source, Jehan R Facebook

Apey mey kolla is actually a sweet boi but poddak difficult to bring out in the open. Alone. He’s constantly shadowed by his muscle men, (even if they are technically just skinny boys), and he’s only seen in their company. Ever. You’ll never see him without that gang of bois – try arranging for a one-on-one and you’ll find that what you hoped was a date was yet another group outing. He’s all about his machangs to the point where he might even call you machang by habit. There’s nothing wrong with this type, but not being able to survive outside his machang circle might be a bit of a problem…

This type believes the only way he can prove he’s a man is if he boasts, a little too loudly, about how he got smashed the other night and how he got smashed on another night and how he got smashed on yet another night. The type of conversation you have with this type often includes gory details about the number of times he threw up, all in a single night. He even has a beer-and-rice-belly to support his claim. Their life goals include liver complications, an early grave and extremely bad breath. Baila is the soundtrack of their lives and their bodies are ever ready, despite the degree of inebriation, to put a jig or two. They initially come off as social (but not social drinking), talkative and seemingly fun-loving despite their repeated boasts and puke-talk. As soon as they approach a glass of alcohol or even the subject of parties and alcohol, immediate evacuation is advised.

This type makes Flash look like he’s working at snail pace, when it comes to the number of things and projects he’s involved in. From philanthropic drives to theatre productions to save-our-heritage programs, they must have been a centipede in a previous life: one foot for one of the hundred things they are working on. If you’re lucky and you happen to be a priority, you’ll get roped into their highly fascinating lives and land up with a case of acute vertigo. You’ll need to hire a secretary, though, to keep track of the things they are working on. Conversations with them often tend to go like this:  
Him: You know that project I’m working on…  
You \*furiously consulting a notebook used to keep track of his projects\*: Uh, um, you mean the Save the Stupa project, right?  
Him: No, no, not that one…The other one…  
You \*still consulting\*: The End Corruption one?  
Him: No, no, that’s not the one…it’s the other one…

Ad infinitum. Sanity finis.

They are stubborn, incurable and believe that they are the most handsome, charming men around. How could any woman say no, right? Surely she must be teasing! Of course she doesn’t mean no! He’s the type who believes that he loves her and that she loves him even if he has only seen her once in his entire life and even if she is completely oblivious to his presence, until it is too late, of course. He then makes a nuisance of himself, harasses her until she gets tired of him and his antics. Even if he stood a chance, his overenthusiasm killed it several decades ago.

There is such a thing, turns out. They are well read and well informed but not to the point of being boring. They spin out cool facts and political jokes at the drop of the hat and are often the creative type who will either build a rose out of scrap metal or try to save the world with a doctoral thesis, among other things. The only thing with this type is that they are rare, taken, gay or fictional.

Social media gives more of a voice to this type, unfortunately. This type is somehow convinced that they are immeasurably superior and that anything a woman does or says is naturally incorrect, especially if she is resisting his advances. Their contradictory dislike and need for women often take on an ugly face, particularly if she has an opinion of her own and doesn’t conform to his often twisted idea of what a woman should be – the Wariyapola incident and ensuing ugliness is proof. This type, however, has several variations within the sub-category. You also get the unconscious misogynists who have your best interests at heart but sometimes pass a tasteless but worrying remark, as well as the I’m-just-joking types you can never be sure of and even the I’m-really-broadminded types who find ankle-length skirts on women too “short.” Yes, they actually exist.

Seriously, who the hell is he? No one seems to know where he comes from or what he does. He’s always in the periphery, the kind of type you don’t really notice because he’s quiet, reserved and blends into the shadows so well that he might as well be a brand ambassador for Dulux. He could be anything – the nicest guy you will meet or the creepiest. There is no scientific way to verify “kowda boley meya” even if you see him at every event or party you attend. He’ll always remain mysterious and elusive, even after you’ve stalked his Facebook page 253 times. You might come to a few basic conclusions, things like the books he reads (Foucault’s Madness and Civilisation), the music he listens to (Philip Glass) and the people he quotes (Slavoy Zizek) but despite the wealth of such meaningless information, you’ll never find out things like his favourite childhood writer, his first love, what his first day at school was like etc. In all likelihood, he is probably a cyborg created by the GoSL to keep the womenfolk of Sri Lanka distracted. There is no other plausible explanation to their existence. Seriously.

Love them, hate them – we can’t escape them. We’ll always run into at least a few of these types on a daily basis. Some of them make our skin crawl, and some of them are a peculiar achcharu of a few of the above listed types, not always in a bad way, too. Everyone has their quirks and eccentricities but that doesn’t mean there aren’t any nice Sri Lankan boys who will restore your faith in the male species, right? Right?

The new, ostentatious Customs office on Main Street is hard to miss. Walking in, you will immediately be arrested by the sight of not-so-ordinary looking sculptures. Yes, there is a man in a toga with a laurel of leaves but no, he is not Caesar and he is most definitely in Sri Lanka, interacting with a Sri Lankan customs official of yore. Welcome to the Sri Lanka Customs Museum.

It is questionably open to the public (from 10 am – 12 pm only on Wednesdays) and is home to various artefacts the Sri Lanka Customs has managed to seize from smugglers over the years. From ridiculously beautiful wooden cupboards with ebony carvings (ridiculous because you have to be really thick to try to get that past the customs) to priceless statues of great archaeological value to preserved butterfly frames to even an arecanut made of ivory.

The Customs have a special branch – the Biodiversity, Cultural and National Heritage Protection Branch (BCNP) – dedicated to weeding out things people try to smuggle in and out of the country. Incidentally, it is also known as the world’s first specialised cell formed within a customs administration for the purpose of safeguarding the environmental and cultural heritage of a country, and by extension, the world (which means that they also act as watchdogs for illegal goods coming into the country and also during transit).

Speaking to the BCNP, it was understood that it worked on a system of tip-offs and vigilance, particularly for suspicious behaviour. For instance, in 2014, based on a tip off the customs detected the largest ever shipment of contraband rosewood, valued at over Rs.1 billion. After two months of vigilance, keeping an eye on suspected ships from African countries stopping by Sri Lanka en route, they located four containers out of six, in addition to 24 other containers, also of rosewood.

Clearly they would stop at nothing. In 2012, Customs seized a consignment of no less than 359 African elephant tusks that were declared as “polythene waste.” That’s 1.5 metric tonnes of “polythene waste” which also approximates to the lives of around 180 African elephants, according to a news report. Apart from that, there have also been attempts to, for instance, smuggle out sandalwood wrapped in beetle leaves, leopard skin through parcel post, rhino horns concealed in personal baggage, elephant tusks, ivory ornaments and bangles concealed in containers or in the ship’s upholstery.

According to the BCNP, they keep an eye out for items that are prohibited, like antiques and items that are restricted, and certain flora and fauna which require permits from relevant authorities. The Archaeological Department added that the sale of items of archaeological value cannot be prevented within Sri Lanka but taking such items out of the country is prohibited.

According to the Archaeological Department, most of the items seized by the Customs were originally bought from antique shops, sold by independent parties or in some cases, particularly when it comes to rare Buddha statues, sold by monks themselves.

“There are some old items like jewellery that walawwa owners have, which are personal items, and these are sometimes sold to antique shops. The sale is permissible but even such personal items cannot be taken out of the country,” an official from the Archaeological Department stated.

The Customs has managed to seize priceless items like statues of Hindu gods dating back to the 19th century, Buddha statues cast in ivory, ebony and bronze, old furniture like a writing bureau with ebony carvings dating back to the 17th century and Kasthana swords.

The Department of Wildlife pointed out that Walla patta (agarwood) used in perfumes is currently what people attempt to export illegally the most. Apart from that, wild karapincha, sandalwood (red sanders and white) and kothala himbitu are also in great demand.

BCNP added that where fauna is concerned, due to heavy commercialisation, different types of fish are exported for ornamental use, along with turtles, lobsters, Indian pangolin, sea cucumber and edible bird nests.

Quite obviously, the museum isn’t home to any of the above captured fauna but there’s more to it than the list above. Attempts have been made to smuggle leopard skin, python skin, snake skin handbags and briefcases, monitor lizard tambourines, various preserved insects, stuffed birds, rhino horns, preserved green turtles, snake wine (used for medicinal purposes), elephant tusks, turtle shell ornaments, elephant hair jewellery, carved/polished turtle shells, peacock feather fans, an extensive collection of preserved butterflies and even samples of plant DNA. Phew.

You can also find many items made of ivory, including (the irony!) ivory elephants and Buddha statues, storage jars dating back to 1 – 2 century, jewellery and coins among many other things.

Where items like elephant tusks are concerned, the BCNP added that they are destroyed and disposed of according to law.

The answer is undoubtedly a yes (particularly when you think of those 180 elephants that had to die to satiate a few greedy collectors), but the Archaeological Department also pointed out that tourists unwittingly buy mementos of value. Yet they pointed out that a lot of business people, under the pretence of not knowing the law, also attempt smuggling.

“The value of these items is, to be honest with you, beyond valuation. These items don’t have a price, we cannot possibly value history,” the Department said.

The same goes for our biodiversity or biodiversity in general, it should be added, despite the obvious attempts of countless smugglers. So if you have the time and energy, drop into the Customs museum (keep in mind their restrictive opening times) and you will find yourself, at the same time, awed at the collection and incensed by the lengths and result of human greed.

News reports of late have been dominated by the presence of salt water crocodiles spotted in several places offshore, including Dehiwala/Mt Lavinia/Colpetty and more recently Galle Face. Turns out, despite the hype, these “unusual” sightings are not as unusual as most people would think.

The issue is more complicated than it seems at first glance. For instance, while wildlife experts have pointed out that this behaviour is perfectly normal, why is it that there is suddenly a spate of reports on this?

The answer is exactly that: there’s simply more reportage on such issues than before. According to Dinal Samarasinghe, Project and Research Officer at EFL, there have been reports of crocodiles at sea throughout history. “Although this is new to most people, it has been recorded in old literature and records by the Navy,” he said, adding that despite the reactions of fishermen to such occurrences, the older generation of fishermen are sure to have seen it. “Reporting on this has become the new attraction,” he noted.

Additionally, apart from increased reportage, what could have also happened, according to Samarasighe, is that after the war and the rise in development, there are more recreational activities for people, which could have facilitated the increase in visibility of this occurrence due to better access to the sea and surrounding areas.

Saltwater crocodiles in the sea are perfectly normal – for that matter, while they don’t necessarily swim in the sea, crocs use sea currents to get from one place to another. Additionally, according to Samarasinghe, saltwater crocodiles have organs that help excrete excess salt, therefore facilitating long distance sea travel. He added that this ability to survive in the sea for long periods has helped the population disperse to a large area including places like Orissa in India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Papua New Guinea and Queensland, Australia. Saltwater crocodiles are, however, listed as endangered, according to the Red List.

Samarasinghe pointed out that a recent study, which listed the famous crocodile hunter Steve Irwin as a posthumous contributor, had tracked crocodiles using technology. It was found that crocodiles are conscious about getting to the ocean, and they select the dry season to do this. “When the weather and currents help, the crocodiles get into the ocean and rely on ocean currents to take them to their destination,” Samarasinghe said.

Samarasinghe noted that the Sri Lankan crocodiles probably mastered the good currents going upwards but due to the early monsoon, the weather patterns might have been disturbed. Due to this disturbance, it may be that they came closer to the shore or stayed in shallow waters floating until the weather calms down, and the currents are favourable. Additionally, they do so without expending any energy.

While the prospect of sharing sea-space with a saltie, as they are fondly known in Australia, isn’t something many of us look forward to, Samarasinghe was quick to note that the worry and hype is “unnecessary.”

“There have been instances where the off-shore crocodiles have attacked people in Australia, but that was most likely in self-defence. Crocodiles hardly eat while in the ocean. They travel long distances while on empty stomachs but may hunt reef sharks, if necessary,” he said.

True to this, it was found that the crocodile that died offshore in Dehiwala had nothing inside its stomach. Environmentalist Pubudu Weeraratne explained that when the Department of Wildlife had performed a post-mortem on the dead crocodile, they had found the stomach empty.

“Crocodiles can live without food for several weeks,” he noted. “They have been observed migrating through the sea. The crocodile in Dehiwala had barnacles on its skin – it was probably in the sea for around 2 – 3 months,” he said.

He also added that it was possibly due to some disturbance that the crocs were spotted so close to the shore. “They were probably trying to enter the Kelani River, but couldn’t due to some disturbance. We also have to take into account human activities in the river. The canals and their natural habitats are being cleared, and the removal of invasive species is taking place,” he said.

Weeraratne also noted that due to the presence of new water bodies, the young supermales could be trying to take over new habitats. Loss of habitat could also drive these crocs to find a new place.

While crocs definitely won’t win beauty or popularity contests, it has to be admitted that they are quite fascinating – for instance, according to this, it is possible that crocodiles go “island hopping” (via the sea) which could explain why, despite seeming ‘isolation’, different crocodile groups haven’t evolved into distinct species. It could be that through this process of “island hopping” they keep the gene pool well mixed.

As fascinating as all this is, however, we’re still not sure people would be thrilled to find out that their swimming partner is, well, a crocodile.

Anyone even remotely interested in theatre would have gotten their theatre pants on just for The Workshop Player’s rendition of Les Misérables now at Lionel Wendt. We caught the opening night show (October 1st) and were equal parts amazed and disappointed.

Les Misérables or Les Mis for short is, for those not aware, a musical. Which means that the story very much depends on being able to follow through with the songs. This is not always great – it honestly requires more attention than following just dialogue because your brain is processing both the music and the lyrics. Some people can, however, digest this better than others so it’s not exactly an ideal cup of tea. Musicals also mean that the acting \*may\* fall on the wayside because the focus may be more on the singing – but you know you’ve found a rare gem when someone can both effectively act and sing simultaneously. Musicals are also far more melodramatic and may be off putting as a result. What all this means is not that musicals are difficult, or somehow inferior or just plain bad – it just means is that it takes real effort and talent to pull it off.

On some levels, yes. We’ve analysed it and broken it down for better comprehension.

Les Mis did a few things really well: the backdrop, the lights, use of stage space and the use of props and costumes.

For a period piece, they beautifully managed to capture the era, effectively using the lights and backdrop to take you to Paris during the French Revolution. The use of the fog machine was very well done, whether it was to recreate grimy, dingy alleys, the interior of a tavern, a battlefield, an idyllic garden, moonlight or a red light district. We particularly liked the use of lights during the battles – the flashing of lights to simulate the muzzle flashes of the guns was cleverly done. Likewise, the use of no lights in scenes where the cast used candles was visually stunning. We’d also like to note the symmetry in which the candles were placed. Apart from that, there was great attention to detail. Simple, seemingly mundane aspects like motes of light and being able to mark the differences between day and night were appreciated. In addition, using the depth of the stage to their advantage, they even managed to recreate the illusion of a long hall punctuated with quaint windows. Our only contention was the projected image of sewers. Overall, we like the use of technology in stage productions but this scene was jarring and detracting, possibly because the effect of the optical illusion tunnel.

The backdrop, especially the terraces moved in from the wings and the garden wall, the timing of the sets and props and seamlessness of the scenes only points to technical brilliance and endless practicing. The transition between scenes was seamless – some of the props were rolled in or brought down using mechanical pulleys while the scenes were going on. The stage at Lionel Wendt is known more for its depth than width. Despite the restrictions in width, however, especially in scenes which featured the entire cast, we think they managed to use the stairs at the side of the apron reasonably well. Even the exits and the use of the trapdoor were well orchestrated – nothing that would divert or detract attention from the play.

Where the costumes were concerned, once more, the era was nicely captured. The costume designs were pretty good and we loved the attention to detail, including the underskirts and the pantaloons. The only thing we could point out was that sometimes the costumes felt too…clean and perhaps even too tailored, but that’s a minor gripe.

For the most part, we really liked the singing. Some of the voices really stood out – like Fantine’s husky dusky voice, Javert’s bass, Eponine’s sass and Madame Thénardier’s snarl. Cosette’s voice was more of a soprano persuasion, which is an acquired taste and can be a bit jarring. The synchronised singing, especially in the opening scene set the right mood for the entire play. There’s something powerful about large groups of people coming together to sing – and that power was well transmitted to the audience. There were moments, however, due to technical difficulties, where the voice of minor characters didn’t carry. Some of the singing was also unclear due to issues with enunciation – this, especially for musicals, is a big problem and created a few gaps in the storyline, especially that of Jean Valjean. There was also a bit of audio interference with the music, but these things are to be expected.

While there are many things to compliment – we also believe in honesty. In all honesty – we thought some of the scenes were long drawn out. Javert’s scenes in particular had a tendency to drag, despite the power of his voice. This might not be the actor’s fault, however.

The biggest problem we recognised with the play was length – sure, Les Mis is known for its length but the question is, are Sri Lankan audiences up to it, particularly for a play as heavy as Les Mis? The answer is perhaps a no – a three hour long play is too much to sit through, particularly at a sparsely furnished theatre like the Wendt. While this has little to do with the play, the place seriously needs an upgrade, especially considering the length of such plays. The quality of the seating actually detracted from the play – towards the end, it was literally a pain in the a\*\*.

Where long drawn out scenes are concerned, like the one mentioned above, the director should ideally have cut down the length of these scenes – it makes no sense, whatsoever, to have someone solo for 2 – 3 minutes or longer at a stretch. Musicals are demanding and scenes of this length felt tedious and up to a point, even boring. What could have been a brilliant play is therefore compromised by the length – personally, we felt our attention waver, especially during the second half of the play.

While the first half set the exposition and the rising action, the second half lagged greatly – which is disappointing because this is where the climax, falling action and denouement come in. The battles should have been exciting on more than just a technical level, but they weren’t the highlights of the play although little Gavroche did stand out. In comparison to the battles, however, the performance of the Thénardier’s and their antics was more memorable. In addition, perhaps due to the length, we also felt that while the singing was really well done, it just wasn’t engaging enough. The exception to this was Eponine, who was really easy to connect to, and was engaging. In contrast, Javert’s and Cosette’s solos left us cold. Fantine and Jean Valjean had their moments of brilliance – beautiful voices but they didn’t always leave a mark. We weren’t too taken by that night’s pairing of Cosette and Marius, either. There was little or no chemistry between them and the coupling felt forced.

The play was, on the whole, good and okay – good in terms of technical elements and to some extent the performance itself, give or take a few things. We had issues with the length and a few other aspects, which in turn dulls the effectiveness of the play.

If you’re a regular theater goer – yes, go watch it. Like we said, the play is technically brilliant and there are a few gems for the observant viewer. If this is your first play – yes, go watch it but don’t send us hate mail if you feel like walking out or yawning during the second half. The cast also gets shuffled, which means that your experience might not correspond with ours.

Crawling out of bed to watch Monkey Kingdom, airing at Savoy at 9am, was absolutely worth the sleep deprivation. This docu-drama was special for more than one reason: it wasn’t just the right mix between entertainment and education about the social structures and hierarchies of our fellow primates – the cherry on the cake is that it was filmed in Sri Lanka, with sweeping scenes of the landscape and ruins at Polonnaruwa.

While it brought home important lessons, we couldn’t help but wonder about a few things related to the filming and the scripting – let’s face it, how on earth did they manage to film some of those scenes? Does nature truly engineer Disney-esque happy endings? Was it all scripted or sheer luck? Because we at Roar couldn’t rest until we found out – and we’re sure everyone who watched it had similar questions – we did a bit of digging and found the man behind the monkeys. Meet Dr. Wolfgang Dittus who has been studying macaques in Sri Lanka for over four decades. Incidentally, his study is also the longest-running monkey study of all time, with the findings of his study featuring in several documentaries and now, more recently, in Monkey Kingdom.

Dr. Jane Goodall, Disney Nature Ambassador and founder, The Jane Goodall Institute with Dr. Wolfgang Dittus, Scientific Consultant, in the Monkey Kingdom – Photo courtesy: DisneyNature

Although we could endlessly wax eloquent about the movie, we’ll just stick to treating our readership with an exclusive interview with Dr. Dittus about Monkey Kingdom and his research in Sri Lanka.

Where did the idea come from? How did Disney suddenly hit upon monkeys in Sri Lanka? Did you pitch the idea to them or was it the other way around?

It was a meeting of the minds: we had the science and knew how to film monkey behavior while Disney had the resources for a major production. Over the last 35 years our studies on the primates at Polonnaruwa have been the subject of over 20 TV documentaries that had been broadcast internationally on the BBC, Discovery Channel, Animal Planet and others (including Rupahavini). But, I had always dreamed of showing our monkey studies on a big screen in a movie theater, preferably IMAX. The opportunity presented itself through Mark Linfield who, with our help, had 12 years earlier produced the award winning TV documentary “Temple Troop” at Polonnaruwa. Mark had since then directed other films for Disney Nature. We pitched the idea to Disney – and now we have our film.

Wolfgang Dittus, Scientific Consultant with Chameera Pathirathne, and Sunil Rathnayake, Scientific Assistants, observe some monkeys in the ruins – Photo courtesy: DisneyNature

The film is in keeping with our philosophy for conservation: namely, that people will only conserve what they love, will love only what they know and understand, and will understand only what we teach them. It is our duty as scientists, then, to raise peoples’ consciousness and enthusiasm for the rich tapestry of our primate heritage. TV and films offer the best medium for communication. That is what Monkey Kingdom does for us.

How long did it take to film the movie? When did the shooting start?

The actual camera shooting time lasted nearly 3 years from mid-June 2012 to mid-March 2015. It involved over 1000 cameraman-days, and about twice as many monkey-naturalist-days in support of the camera crew. The monkey naturalists team included Sunil Gunathilake, Chameera Pathiranne, Sunil Rathnayaka, Dinesh Chandrasiri and Nimal Perera.

Was there a ready script or did the story evolve based on the footage?

The overall story arc was based on tried and tested themes that had been used by us in earlier TV productions with the Polonnaruwa monkeys, such as “Temple Troop” (BBC Natural World) or “Dark Days in Monkey City” (Animal Planet), but the details of the narration were adjusted to fit the best filmed images and the evolving story. Story arcs had been developed over the years by myself in collaboration with various film producers.

What were the logistics of filming like? Any amusing stories of mishaps in the wilderness you would care to share?

The logistics of filming were a mix of daunting, frustrating and rewarding happenings. For example, the filming of the feeding bonanza on the elate termites required delicate timing to coincide with three not-easily-predicted events: the onset of the rains, the decision by the termites to actually respond to the rain and, finally, good light for filming. In 6 years of trying to capture this unique behavior on film (including for “Temple Troop”) we succeeded only once in 2014. When the rains began our primate research staff scouted the forests daily for this elusive event that last only 1-3 hours. When alerted by them that “it’s starting” you can imagine three cameramen racing in a frenzy from one location to another where termites were swarming – the equipment is heavy – it’s like weightlifters having to jog shouldering their burden with swarms or termites landing on their faces and camera lenses.

Two monkeys catch some termites during the monsoon – Photo courtesy: DisneyNature

The frustration came in being stymied from filming some beautiful scenes owed to the absence of cooperation of a few local authorities. But we were compensated by the monkeys with their sometimes surprising antics – like the male macaque arrogantly striding between Maya and her grooming partner as though they did not even exist. The images that we are able share with an audience are the result of hard work, persistence, know-how and luck.

We’re curious to know – how were the shots in the town and the underwater shots taken? Was it preplanned or did the crew just follow the monkeys?

We were aware of the daily habits of the monkeys, their travel routes and preferred foraging and raiding sites. The camera crew simply followed the monkeys and recorded the images. The underwater shots required some preparation in the sense of knowing where this occurs and waterproofing the camera equipment. To our surprise the monkeys were not shy of the camera underwater. That was another unexpected reward from the monkeys.

Oliver Goetzl, Field Producer, setting a remote camera in a sloth bear cave – Photo courtesy: DisneyNature

Were there liberties taken with the narrative or did the story fall into place by pure luck?

Some poetic license must be expected, even in a nature docu-drama. The Disney brand rests on a reputation of suitability for family audiences: therefore, explicit images of too much violence, blood and of sex were reduced and communicated only subtly.

Where exactly was Monkey Kingdom shot – was it in Polonnaruwa or Sigiriya?

The spectacular landscape images of the dry zone forests and hills included areas outside of Polonnaruwa, such as Sigiriya.

What has the response been after the movie? Have you received a lot of interest in your research since the movie from the general public and tourists?

Sadly, our contribution to the film as naturalists, with close to 50 years of study of these monkeys at Polonnaruwa, was not prominent in the film credits and was downplayed in the publicity given to the film production. That is an unfair trade-off that scientists often are subject to when collaborating with film producers. The filming industry is very self-serving. Even in Sri Lanka the Tourist Board uses the film to self-promote with no mention at all of who actually was at the core, inviting and supporting the production. At our research station at Polonnaruwa we do offer tourists educational tours of primates and other wildlife as advertised on our website www.primates.lk

How are the monkeys doing now? How old would Kip be now?

Female hierarchies in macaque society tend to be stable over long periods; Maya is still there as a subordinate and the Evil Sister are in control. The males, in contrast, rise and fall in rank depending on their physical condition and ability to form alliances with other males. Kumar is no longer the alpha male and nor is Raja. A new male immigrant has taken over the male hierarchy. Kip is keeping out of trouble as he matures and grows.

Kip – Photo courtesy: DisneyNature

Have you heard of any upcoming documentaries/films about Sri Lankan wildlife?

Yes, following our film with Disney Nature we have made another film with BBC Earth that will be shown in 2016.

Your bio says you have been researching about primates in Sri Lanka for several decades now. What made you come to Sri Lanka specifically?

I came to Sri Lanka serendipitously! As a graduate student out of McGill University in Canada I was seeking a natural location anywhere in the tropics to study primate communication. The Smithsonian Institution (USA) had a program in Sri Lanka from 1966-1970, and I was fortunate to have been invited to join to study the toque macaques. My mentor, the late Professor John Eisenberg, along the late Professor Hilary Crusz (U. Peradeniya) lead a program of study and research of Sri Lankan wildlife that launched the careers of many Sri Lankan and foreign nationals.

As amazing as Monkey Kingdom is at first glance, we do have a bone to pick with Disney, however. We thought the song What a Man was spot on but apart from that, it would seem as if Disney’s standards where music is concerned has slipped. What happened to those great tunes Disney familiarized us with while we were growing up? Disney’s 1959 Sleeping Beauty for instance featured musical scores by Tchaikovsky. That said, here are a few great links and videos you might want to check out if you want to know more about Dr. Dittus’ research. Or if you simply can’t get enough of Monkey Kingdom check this and this and this and this.

Often, the tropical heat forces us to the freezer where we grab the first soft drink we see to quench a thirst that even water refuses to quench. Whether it’s international brands like Coca Cola or Pepsi, or quirkier local names like Necto or Orange Barley, some of us drink with little thought of what we are ingesting.

It should be noted, however, that this stuff is detrimental to people with diabetes. For that matter, a few states in the US and certain other countries are considering banning soft drinks for their high sugar content. Additionally, some artificial sweeteners like aspartame have been linked to cancer. Soft drinks also jam-pack a good few calories in. That’s perfectly fine for those who are not calorie conscious, but for those of you who are, here’s a breakdown of how many calories per 100ml you’re introducing to your body when it comes to both local and international soft drinks.

The figures are dreadful – and that’s just for 100mls. What’s more, a closer look reveals that, for the most part, our local soft drinks have a higher calorie count. Does this mean we’ll have to forego Necto? – cue horror movie music– Before you announce the apocalypse, however, a few things need to be kept in mind, apart from those conspiracy(?!) theories about what Coca Cola does to our insides/rivers. Let’s keep it real – it’s honestly just a few calories. (Just a few calories? Some might ask, voicing scandal.) You might, instead, want to focus on burning those 50ish calories, regardless of whether the preferred poison is Pepsi or Bitter Lemon.

Turns out, you can burn 50 calories easily. Sometimes, a little bit of housework (what most of us in an uninformed state of prejudice don’t really consider ‘work’ or a ‘workout’) can go a long way. To burn 50 calories you could:

This sounds crazy, it’s just 50 calories! Who knew it would take actual effort to burn it off? We’re not saying it’s time for something drastic either – like a total ban on soft drinks or anything equally morbid. It would, instead, help to make a few changes in your lifestyle here and there. But one thing is for sure: we’ll never look at 50 calories, or a bottle of soft drink, the same way again.

Tucked away neatly in the heart of Sri Lanka’s official capital city, Kotte, is a structure made of kabok or laterite stones. This structure predates all other buildings and houses in the area and is better known as the Ramparts of the Ancient Kingdom of Kotte. As if to exemplify the neglect and decay of the long lost kingdom, a pair of underwear, presumably left by one of the residents in the area, is casually laid out to dry on one of the stones of the rampart. To find out more about what happened to the remnants of the ancient kingdom of Kotte, it is necessary to use the above mentioned spectacle as a metaphor for the gross insensitivity and indifference towards monuments of the past.

Ancient Sri Lanka had four long-term capitals, one of which was Kotte. Professor Senerat Paranavitana\* who was Archeological Commissioner in 1940 noted that Kotte was rebuilt and fortified during the reign of Vikramabahu III (A.D. 1357 – 1374) by the minister Alakesvara and was made the seat of government during Parakramabahu VI’s reign (A.D. 1412 – 1467). After Parakramabahu VI’s death, with the decline of the empire and the Portuguese takeover that followed, the Portuguese relocated the seat of power to Colombo and abandoned the city of Kotte for strategic reasons. What had not been destroyed during warfare had been taken over by jungle or transported for construction of buildings in Colombo by the Portuguese and subsequently, the Dutch. During the Dutch period, Kotte was reoccupied and Professor Paranavitana speculates that the new house owners, too, would have “utilised the material lying abundantly at hand in putting up their homesteads.”

The Kotte of today, apart from a few scattered relics, neglected ramparts and road names, doesn’t proudly boast of such a past because the past has not been preserved. As Professor Paranavitana notes, “the consciousness of the people was not sufficiently alive to the importance of preserving a heritage… and the destruction of such antiquities as were till then to be seen on private lands of Kotte, went on unchecked, so that today, the visitor who sees its suburban drabness is not reminded, by any conspicuous relic of the past, that he is at a spot which was the centre of the political and cultural life of the island during a period of its history not lacking in achievement.”

As the official capital city of Sri Lanka, Kotte is now home to the Sri Lanka Parliament, the Diyawanna Oya, high property prices and a Kotte museum. However, as Nihal Perera PhD, notes, almost all other museums in Sri Lanka are better maintained than the Kotte museum.

At this museum, we posed the question of what happened to Kotte to the gentleman in charge. He explained that apart from being built from kabok, which is not durable, the shifting of the capital city back to Kotte in 1982, during J.R.Jayawardena’s presidency, ensured the final destruction of all that remained of the ancient kingdom of Kotte.

“Despite evoking the glory of Kotte, the physical and archaeological remains of the Kotte Kingdom largely lie in a state of neglect and disrepair,” Dr. Perera notes.

“[Even] two decades after the move [of the capital to Kotte], there is no restoration activity and the physical remains from the Kotte period, including stupas, the wall, and the tunnels, are allowed to be naturally destroyed.”

Dr. Perera contends that Kotte, although the capital, doesn’t in any way stand out from the rest of Colombo. “For most users, the area is a continuation of Colombo made up of highly congested roads,” he said.

Visitors in search of hints of a more glorious past may find road names such as Maligawa Road, Ferry Road (now Mahindarama Road), Mission Road and Rampart Road deceptive relics of the past. There is no Maligawa down Maligawa Road, or a Temple of the Tooth Relic. The ramparts are scattered around and built over. Nothing remains of the ferry that the name Ferry Road seems to suggest, but there are hints of what was once the inner moat, which now resembles a drain more than anything. Hilary Wirasinha, resident of Kotte and amateur historian, notes that right in front of the moat is the construction of a condominium, permission for which was obtained from the Archaeological Department, despite the need to preserve the inner moat. In the school down Mission Road there was even an entrance to a tunnel that was said to have connected Etul Kotte to Pita Kotte. The tunnel is supposed to have led to Ananda Sastrala. There were two ambalamas, one of which still stands and was reconstructed on the same spot and transformed into a bus stand and two stupas at Veherakanda, which are also referred to as kotaveheras. Apart from a few hints here and there, however, there is little evidence that Kotte was once a Kingdom and the centre of political life in Sri Lanka.

To make matters worse, the museum curator also noted that excavation is nigh impossible due to the houses and structures built in the area. What we have instead of a heritage site of the Kingdom of Kotte, is a suburban sprawl known for its narrow roads and traffic jams made worse by its proximity to the parliament.

Speaking to the Director General of Archaeology, Dr. Senerath Dissanayake, it was understood that the department itself is underfunded, making conservation difficult. “We have a limited amount of money to carry out projects. In addition, most of the monuments are on privately owned lands,” he said. When asked about the building permit given for the construction of the condominium in front of the inner moat, he said that as per regulations, there is a 10ft buffer zone between the construction site and the moat. “We are working with limited resources and funds. We don’t have enough watchers, either,” he said.

There are, of course, boards in numerous places put up by the Archaeological Department that hint at a richer, more glorious history. Yet, it should be noted that if even the Archaeological Department lacks the funding for the required conservation, there is little hope for the preservation of what was once Sri Lanka’s ancient capital.

\*From his essay “Baddegana at Kotte”

Scanned maps courtesy Kotte: The Fortress by Prasad Fonseka

Sri Lanka is known for its elephants and elephant safaris – and for good reason. Sri Lanka has the highest density of Asian elephants in the world. Yet, the sad truth is, apart from being endangered and under constant threat, Sri Lankan elephants are also facing starvation.

A starving young elephant seen in Yala

Dr. Prithiviraj Fernando from the Centre for Conservation and Research (CCR) explained that the issue is compounded mainly due to elephants being confined to certain delegated areas.

“People think that the best place for elephants are forests. But going by the ecology of elephants, the biggest issue an elephant faces is food,” he said.

An elephant requires 100 – 300 kgs of food daily and eats for about 17 – 19 hours a day. Most mature forests, however, cannot provide the volume of food a large number of elephants require to survive. Although generalist feeders, elephants, for the most part, prefer grass as other plants have evolved survival mechanisms such as poisons or thorns. But the grass which elephants prefer, Dr. Fernando explains, is found only in particular seasons and in particular areas.

“There is very little food for elephants in undisturbed forests. When we drive and restrict elephants to parks, often the elephants are confined to areas where they cannot get the food they need,” he said.

A mother and calf seen at Yala National Park

The reason that elephants are confined to wildlife parks, Dr. Fernando explains, is an attempt to mitigate the human-elephant conflict and protect the elephants. Yet, he notes, parks with mature forests are not ideal habitats for elephants.

“Most parks are poor elephant habitats,” he said, adding that there is also the problem of the park’s carrying capacity, which makes it difficult even for the elephants already inside the park when elephants from outside the park’s boundaries are forcibly added to the population.

“Even elephants that were protected within the parks are now suffering because of the additional population we are pushing in. This is a major issue from a conservation perspective and has still not been realised,” he said.

Citing Lunugamvehera, Tabbowa and even Yala as good examples, Dr. Fernando asserted that human activity has driven and fenced the elephants in, and elephants in those parks are now starving.

The elephants in Udawalawe, meanwhile, are starving for different reasons entirely.

“These elephants, too, were pushed into the park but it was a good area because of its grasslands,” he said.

Udawalawe now, however, is in the process of natural succession – the grasslands of Udawalawe are currently in the natural process of growing back into forests.

“As a result, elephants are finding it harder to get food, and the fences on the park boundary prevent them from accessing forest areas outside where there is food,” he explained.

A similar phenomenon of succession will take place in Maduru Oya and will result in the same dilemma, said Dr. Fernando.

This is a picture most of us miss because the process isn’t swift enough to be immediately noticed.

Dr. Fernando noted that the elephants starve, “but they starve very slowly; therefore, it isn’t immediately obvious, and with time, their health, body condition and reproduction decline, leading to a population decrease,” he said.

“In Yala, for example, this problem has been occurring since 2004. The juvenile elephants are hardest hit. We see older elephants and infants but very few intervening age groups of elephants now. Elephant populations are slowly taking a crash.”

Most elephants live outside the wildlife park

The simplest solution is letting elephants continue to inhabit areas outside the parks, in Forest Department areas, where they can find plenty of food.

“What we need to do is maintain the number of elephants we have, rather than try to increase the number,” Dr. Fernando said.

It is critical that elephants outside the parks continue to live in these areas, he said, adding that 70% of Sri Lanka’s elephants live outside the Wildlife Department’s Parks and should continue to do so.

“We are only creating more problems by trying to limit elephants to the parks,” he explained.

Yet, what about the human-elephant conflict which created the drive for elephants to be ‘protected’ within the boundaries of the parks? According to Dr. Fernando, all comes down to perspective

“The conventional approach to conservation doesn’t work, especially in a situation like ours,” he said.

“Most of the elephants live in the dry zone of Sri Lanka and most of the landscape features in these areas are anthropogenic. The numerous water tanks and seasonal cultivation are classic examples. Animals have adapted to these systems over millennia and now, suddenly, we put a fence around them and decide to ‘let nature take its own course’. Naturally, things take a different trajectory. We need to make informed choices and incorporate ecology into elephant management. Over the years, with more and more areas being opened up for development, things have changed a lot, but our approach hasn’t.”

There needs to be a shift in perspective – rather than viewing the human-elephant conflict as a conservation problem, Dr. Fernando said, it needs to be looked at as a development problem.

“If we continue to look at it as a conservation problem, then we cannot solve it. The human-elephant conflict is a result of development, not conservation, and the development sector has the funds and the network to address this issue; the conservation sector doesn’t,” he said.

The elephants of Udawalawe

According to the 2011 census conducted by the Department of Wildlife Conservation, there are around 5,879 elephants in Sri Lanka, almost one-fifth of the global Asian elephant population. However, while there are numerous efforts to conserve our elephants, we also need to take a step back and question the effectiveness of these conservation efforts particularly if we inadvertently starve them in an effort to protect them.

Images courtesy Dr. Prithiviraj Fernando

History is a painful playground – although practically minute in the eyes of the world, Sri Lanka, too, has seen and suffered more than its fair share of conquests and colonisations. The resulting hangover has, however, left the island with a curious admixture of cultures; a sort of crosspatch heritage where we borrowed the best of certain cultures and made it indelibly our own. The best example of this is seen in our cuisine where we have localised certain foods to such a degree that many would find it surprising to learn that they originated on distant shores. Here’s a list of food irrevocably Sri Lankan that find its origins elsewhere, proving that while we like to borrow a little from here and there, we also like to add, deduct, embellish and make it our own.

Avurudu would be incomplete without an assortment of kokis, but did you know that kokis is originally Dutch? The word kokis comes from the Dutch word for cookies “coekje,” which we gradually adopted to our wide range of sweetmeats. Google search ‘Swedish Rosette’ and jaws will drop at just how identical the Swedish Rosette is to the kokis.

However horrific colonisation might have been, we did inherit a few good things along the way: like lamprais, for instance. Cooked in meat stock, with some meat curry, vambatu moju, seeni sambol, and meatballs to accompany the banana leaf wrapping, this local favourite found its way to the island through the Dutch. Although not Dutch per se, due to its rich South Asian flavours, it is possible that they brought it along with their conquests of other South Asian countries like Java and Indonesia, introducing their own twist to it by adding local flavour and spices and passing it on to the Dutch Burghers of Sri Lanka. Hallelujah!

The Portuguese called it Bolo D’Amor but it’s widely known by its Anglicised name of Love Cake. But of course, we don’t just borrow – we embellish and improve, and so to European ingredients we threw in a bit of local flavour with cashews, rosewater and cardamom. But why “love cake”? Turns out, it’s local legend that if you feed love cake to the boy you want your daughter to marry, their stomachs just might make the decision for them. So next time some generous aunty ladles you with some Love Cake, you might want to question her intentions a bit.

This time, we borrow from a little closer to home, from Kerala, South India, to be more precise. Our Indian counterparts call it “appam” and “puttu” and while you might find some strange combinations like mutton appam in Kerala, we Sri Lankans have improved the race of appa, too, with the likes of bittara aappa, kiri aappa and peni aappa. Our aappas and string hoppers, however, are much smaller than the Indian ones, with, of course, a heady dose of katta or seeni sambol. As a result, three string hoppers or two aappas are considered to be a filling meal, while over here we’d do an Oliver and simply ask for more.

No Muslim festivity is complete without a chorus of people calling out for Watalappan, and this love for Watalappan is rampant not only among the local Muslim community but all islanders in general. This death-inducing sweet, however, comes from the Malay community, brought in by the Dutch rulers who did away with all the dissident parties that threatened the interests of the Dutch East India Company, by bringing them to Sri Lanka from 1708 onwards. History is a bitch, but in this instance, we have a lot to thank for.

Even though technically not a type of food, despite its popular consumption, we thought we’d just throw in that baila, too, has interesting foreign roots. Uncles with beer bellies dancing to baila is quite a common sight. It would be blasphemy to call it our national music, but let’s just say it is; unofficially, of course. Baila, however, comes from quite diverse origins and has been around in our island for centuries. It came with the Portuguese, who brought in ‘African Kaffirs’ as slaves and soldiers to fight against the Sinhalese Kings, but that didn’t stop the Sri Lankan uncles from yonder ages doing the jig to their upbeat music. Now no drunken uncle party is complete without a round of baila and awkward dance moves where the belly takes more prominence than dexterity. We’ll just leave you there with that picture to complete your contemplations on our accharu culture and the accidental blessings of history.

Images: serandib.co.nz

Zest Lounge

mychef.lk

serendib.btoptions.lk

taste.com.au

The concept of organic farming is becoming quite popular – it seems too good to be true that there is an alternative to using chemicals to help grow produce. While many people seem to be taken by the idea of organic farming, which promises healthier produce and healthier lives, it is important to take a step back and understand how organic farming really works – let’s look at the facts before the marketing.

Nelson De Silva, District Director of Agriculture in the Gampaha District, explained that organic farming is farming without agrochemicals like chemical fertilisers and chemical pesticides such as weedicide, fungicide, insecticide and additional hormones.

Organic farming can be done by adding organic fertilisers like compost or cow dung and natural pesticides which either kill or repel the insects (like clove oil), or controls fungus (like water boiled with cinnamon leaves). It would, therefore, be incorrect to say that organic farming does not allow for the use of fertilisers or pesticides but merely that they use different, “natural” fertilisers and pesticides, as opposed to agrochemicals.

When it comes to agrochemicals like fertilisers, De Silva notes that a plant doesn’t absorb the fertiliser as it is. Rather, the plant only absorbs the nutrients found in fertilisers, irrespective of whether the fertilisers are organic or inorganic.

Where pesticides are concerned, De Silva explained that all chemicals added to the plant or soil will gradually degrade. Chemical pesticide producers often warn against harvesting and consuming the plant within a certain period before the degradation occurs. The issue however, is not only the chemicals used but the lack of adherence to the recommendations and restrictions made by the chemical producers. This, according to De Silva, is dangerous and in Sri Lanka this issue is applicable especially to leafy vegetables.

“The best thing to do in this case is to check if your leaves have come from a reliable source,” he said.

Additionally, where chemical pesticides are concerned, it is possible that plants may have some chemical residue even after a particular expiry period. However, while it is generally agreed that chemical pesticides are harmful, not many people are aware that organic pesticides are just as harmful. For that matter, half the natural chemicals found in organic pesticides are, according to studies, carcinogenic, too.

The general consensus is that natural is better than chemical – particularly when it comes to produce. Yet, it should be kept in mind that while there are obvious negative effects of agrochemicals, the seemingly innocuous natural chemicals are just as dangerous. The problem lies with data; because the effects of natural pesticides have not been measured, it doesn’t mean it is safer or less harmful. It merely means that there isn’t enough data to compare the two.

In an article by University of Berkeley, it is noted that

“…we don’t know for certain which system is more harmful. This is because we do not look at organic pesticides the same way that we look at conventional pesticides. We don’t know how long these organic pesticides persist in the environment, or the full extent of their effects,” adding that “when you look at lists of pesticides allowed in organic agriculture, you find warnings such as, ‘use with caution. The toxicological effects of [organic pesticide X] are largely unknown,’ or ‘Its persistence in the soil is unknown.’”

It is taken for granted that organic is better, so there are very few studies measuring just how harmful natural pesticides, too, can be.

District Director De Silva also noted that the reaction of using organic pesticides has not been studied.

“The kind of problems you will have as a result has not been researched,” he said. “To what extent is there proof to say that if it is organic it is completely harmless? The same applies for the GMO argument. It’s just an idea or opinion if there is no proof, so it needs to be questioned if it is worth spending more on.”

He added that while Sri Lanka is a relatively small country, even here, organic farming is not a solution that can cater to the food demand.

“We need to produce the required amount of food for the country, but it is not possible through methods such as organic farming,” he said.

While, as De Silva notes, in Sri Lanka the market for organics is very small, there are a number of initiatives taken to produce organically for both a local and international market.

The biggest problem, however, is not merely the higher premiums for organic products but also ascertaining whether the product is actually organic and whether the claims made by the producers are authentic.

One way to do this is to check for certification. Where exporting is concerned, certification which adheres to the standards set by the buyer is required. Sri Lanka, however, does not as yet have a local accreditation system for organic products, but there are several international bodies that provide the certification. This process is, however, quite costly and most small-scale farmers cannot afford the cost of hiring an independent body to monitor and provide certification. The Sri Lanka Export Development Board (EDB) is, however, setting up a monitoring body called the National Organic Control Unit (NOCU), while the accreditation will be done by the Sri Lanka Accreditation Board (SLAB).

The NOCU will register all certification bodies/ laboratories accredited by the SLAB, Gayani Wijayathilake, Assistant Director of the Export Agriculture Division, EDB, said.

“Any organic product exporter that needs to get an organic certification has to contact the registered organic certification body,” she added.

Until the EDB takes over, however, there are two options organic producers have: third party accreditation or a Participatory Guarantee System (PGS), such as the one Good Market has set up. According to Amanda Kiessel, one of the Good Market organisers, PGS is where consumers and producers set standards and a system and build a mutually beneficial relationship.

“The producers form a group and sign a producers’ promise and all producers check each other’s farms. The consumers can visit the farms and ask questions any time,”she said.

Kiessel explained that the PGS system is different from the third party certification in that it is applicable to small-scale farmers more than exporters. It is a system based on mutual trust, where the consumers know and can investigate exactly where the produce comes from.

We’re not saying don’t buy organic or that organic is evil or that mass, non-organic production is better than organic production. No choice is that simple or black-and-white. All we’re saying is that a little research and a little caution might be wiser. We all want to save the world from the mess that it is in – and there is nothing wrong in trying, yet good intentions coupled with bad research (and in this case, excellent marketing) are just as damaging as, say, chemical pesticides are to the environment.

Featured Image Credit: Amantha Perera/IPS

Hoppers (appa) aren’t what you’d expect to find at a street market in London and yet, strangely enough, there is a little pop-up store smack bang in London, selling the most delectable looking hoppers you will ever see – scroll down and see for yourself if you don’t believe us.

Big love and thanks team @eatdrinktoast @decaturlondon @rosiefoodie @fattiesbakery @butterculture @blackboxcoffeebar @blutopicecream ! See yeh @hatchhomerton tomorrow and Monday Kings X @kerbfood #appam #egghoppers #hoppers 🍳🍳🍳🍳🍳🍳

A post shared by EMILY DOBBS (@weligama\_ldn) on Aug 8, 2015 at 9:46am PDT

The face behind these scrumptious beauties is Emily Dobbs who has been enchanted by Sri Lankan food from ever since her childhood visits to Taprobane Island, Weligama. “I used to go to Sri Lanka a lot as a child and always loved the cuisine. I never understood why it wasn’t available in London, especially with the current ‘health’ trend. Sri Lankan food is very colourful, vibrant and healthy and should be applauded. I just love it!” she explains.

See yeh next week Kings X Mon and @druidstmarket Sat 🍳🍳🍳🍳🍳 no tambourine emoji 😌

A post shared by EMILY DOBBS (@weligama\_ldn) on Aug 17, 2015 at 11:30am PDT

Years down the line, Emily transformed her love into what we can only call edible art, adding a modern twist to the traditional appa. “It has taken me many months to create the perfect hopper batter. I like to keep my recipes as traditional as possible. I use red rice flour as I prefer the flavour and texture to white rice flour and make all my own homemade pickles and chutneys. So far everyone has loved the hoppers but I’m not sure the Sri Lankan purists like pomegranates on their appa!”

Bring on the weekend ! NEW crab curry egg hopper with coconut sambal! Tomorrow @druidstmarket and Sunday @hatchhomerton pics by @issycroker #alwayssunnyatweligama

A post shared by EMILY DOBBS (@weligama\_ldn) on Jul 24, 2015 at 12:45am PDT

SUMMER's BACK Lewis Cubitt sq 12-2pm

A post shared by EMILY DOBBS (@weligama\_ldn) on Aug 17, 2015 at 3:01am PDT

Emily, who has trained in some of UK’s top restaurants, explains that she aims to change the way the British think about Sri Lankan cuisine. “Indian food has a stigma in London for being greasy and heavy. This is simply not true with Sri Lankan food and I want to revolutionise the way British people understand the cuisine,” she explains, adding that her “modern Sri Lankan pop-up” is just the start. She hopes to open a restaurant soon, write a cookbook and go global. So if any of you happen to be in London and want to bite into something quintessentially Sri Lankan, but with a modern, funky twist check out Emily’s little pop-up at Druid Street Market or her website, Instagram and Facebook for pictures that will get you craving.

Pork belly, duck egg hopper, curd & lime #popup #egghopper #weligama

A post shared by EMILY DOBBS (@weligama\_ldn) on Jul 11, 2015 at 2:53am PDT

We have an advantage over the West in many ways. For instance, our parents may be overbearing most of the time, but at least we know they won’t kick us out once we’re 18 and old enough to get a job and fend for ourselves. They – bless them – put up with us, for unfathomable reasons, even if we are 40 and balding. The thing is, this makes the prospect of moving out more daunting than it should be. Whether it’s for a three-year undergrad course, the big migration or even a two-week transfer program, moving out of home and into a different country brings out the yellow-bellies in all of us Sri Lankans. We’re so used to being mollycoddled and pampered that the realisation that laundry doesn’t do itself boggles our mind.

Even years down the line, despite being seasoned veterans of living abroad, despite surviving the life our parents tried to shelter us from, there are a few things that set off bouts of nostalgia and maybe even a few tears. No matter where you go, there are a few things those of us living away from home find ourselves doing – like swapping notes and pro tips, writing elaborate Facebook status updates about missing home, and capslocking our grievances to our astonished parents who got onto WhatsApp or Viber for the first time, just to keep in touch. Doubtless, if you’ve lived or are living abroad, the following might sound familiar to you:

We even miss the endless fussing. Image Credit, Jehan R

We’ve grown up eating our mother’s food all our lives to the point where we just stopped appreciating it as much as we should. When we were younger, we used to look forward to canteen days so we wouldn’t have to suffer through marmite and butter sandwiches or eat that compulsory slightly-black-by-lunchtime banana. Eating out was always more exciting: it meant birthday celebrations, special functions and much later, a sign that we were independent enough to control what our stomachs digested. And then we went abroad and suddenly realised that nothing tastes as good as mother’s food. Nothing. Which brings us to Point 2…

We did it, rather bravely and stoically, the first month or so, and then everything started tasting the same: too much salt, too little love. There’s a story that home cooked food always tastes the best because unlike at restaurants and eateries, our mothers know who they’re cooking for; they know what we like and dislike and, exactly how we like it. Whereas restaurant food is impersonal, colder and always more salty. Pretty soon, your tongue starts feeling like the sea, and that’s when we feel like Tennyson writing In Memoriam, except, of course, dedicated to our lost taste buds.

Seeni Sambol. The food of the gods. Image Credit, www.karenskitchen.us

It’s soon seeni sambol for breakfast, lunch, dinner and all the other Hobbit-like snacking we do in between. Seeni sambol on bread, seeni sambol on pizza, seeni sambol on crackers, seeni sambol with rice, seeni sambol on garlic bread, seeni sambol for all seasons, shapes and foods. Basically lots and lots of seeni sambol. And when your stock runs low and you cannot seem to find any in your local Indian store, that’s when you realise that seeni sambol is the elixir of life and exemplifies everything Sri Lankan. Without it, we feel lost, rootless and hungry. But mostly hungry.

Saving Starving Sri Lankans. Image Credit, Maliban

Containing seeni sambol, of course. But apart from that, an entire carton of Munchee/Maliban biscuits, Kist jam and MD Mango Chutney. The joy of opening a parcel of goodies from home is unparalleled. For the first hour, you’re ecstatic, jumping up and down and informing everyone that you have a little piece of home. Then the battle starts: how do you stretch this little sample of heaven? Everyone who receives a bottle of homemade seeni sambol will suddenly realise just how vulnerable the stuff is to fungus. If you don’t or can’t refrigerate, you’ll soon start noticing white stuff in the bottle. This writer decided to brave an upset stomach and, every day, meticulously chucked out the bits that caught fungus and ate the rest, a routine that was repeated until the jar was empty. But then there’s the guilt: every bit wasted feels like a sin. You mourn every biscuit you accidentally drop as if you were mourning a friend. Like a dragon guarding its gold, you guard your stash of milk toffees and Marie biscuits from the hungry eyes of your roomies. You ration it all out and seethe on the inside when someone asks to share. Mine, my own, my precious!

How beautiful is this? Image Credit Nazly Ahmed

As lazy islanders with too many holidays, we don’t fully appreciate it until we go abroad, spot a full moon and realise that while we’re slaving away, people at home are chilling, enjoying the holiday, listening to bana/sermons whether they want to or not or getting inebriated shamelessly, whether the government allows it or not. Suddenly, we feel like howling at the moon, not because the full moon lunar-tic bug caught us, but because we missed a day of sleeping in, lounging about and doing absolutely nothing. Why can’t the rest of the world be sensible like us and, in appreciation of the beauty of the full moon, just declare a holiday? There’s no such things as too many holidays, after all.

Thanks to the weakling rupee, we always feel poorer wherever we land up, even if it is just India, so we always find ourselves doing the math in our heads. Shampoo here costs USD 12? Apo, expensive, no? Or, grapes costs only AUD 2 a kilogram? Cheap, no? I’ll never get such a deal back at home… Or, bloody toilet paper costs INR 60? I’ll stock up and bring it from home next time. The struggle is real, people, have some sympathy.

Sometimes it feels like we peaked awesome-friend capacity and life won’t give us any more. Which sucks. We’d all like to have friends we can hang out with, without feeling awkward, talk to when things get rough and rely on when shit hits the fan. Instead, when they’re all back home, posting pictures of them hanging out together, you feel left out and all the more lonely.  
Thanks to time zone differences and the fact that people have lives that don’t revolve around us, we can’t always drop them a line and whine about what terrible lives we live. Spontaneous meetups and midnight surprise parties are all consigned to a now mythological past, leaving a dull aching throb that has nothing to do with what you ate for dinner.

Where we come from, it’s either raining or it’s sunny, or sometimes both. We don’t hold stock with all these fussy seasons. It’s always tropical summer here in Sri Lanka and shorts are appropriate all year round. That’s why when we move abroad, we think we can handle summer – puh! Summer, like that’s something to worry about – until you land in Australia in December and have to battle out 40 plus degrees, or summer in California where it’s 16 degrees in July or in India where you can make an omelette on your face or summer in Norway where…let’s not go there. Basically, we don’t do seasons really well unless it’s monsoon season. Don’t even get us started about winter. It sounds really romantic and nice. Cold weather, no sun as opposed to forever sun and other such islander delusions. Pretty soon we’re cursing and begging for the sun, running towards every patch of sun we find and acting like something out of Shawshank Redemption. We think the snow and the ice is just there for ornamental purposes, and earnestly believing we are all Ranjan Ramanayakes at heart, we try a few stunts and…you know the rest.

You feel the crunch when you can’t just pick up the phone and call your best friend. International calls are too expensive, so we resort to Skype, WhatsApp, Viber, Facebook, etc., etc. Soon there are designated Skype hours, particular days you keep free just to call home, whereas before you groaned at the idea of sitting at the dining table and reminding yourself of the existence of your family members. When the internet is bad and you can’t seem to connect, when you’re running out of money and broadband, that’s when you go to a little dark corner in your heart and weep for mother Lanka.

All this might seem trivial for those still living in the comfort of home – get over it, right? But it’s always the little things, like the longing for monsoon, the comforting scent of home, the kades and the reload shops and the general, inviting chaos of our island that makes staying away difficult and the prospect of home even more inviting. When we return, we return like sails emptied of wind and stomachs seeking fulfilment, not just for food but also for the love, happiness and other cheesy, clichéd “feels” we only get on this mad island of ours.

Featured Image Credit: www.investsrilanka.com

We don’t have to go all the way to the Great Barrier Reef in Australia to marvel at the wonders of coral reefs. Some of Sri Lanka’s major reefs can be found off the Jaffna Peninsula, the Gulf of Mannar, Hikkaduwa, Galle, Yala, Pasikudah and Trincomalee.

Important recorded coral reef areas in Sri Lanka. Source: NARA; Rajasuriya and White 1995, www.fao.org

It is estimated that in Sri Lanka, there are about 35 soft coral species and 208 hard coral species, and while they aid the tourism sector and provide a livelihood for many people living off the coast, our corals are also in danger due to a variety of direct and indirect human activities, such as:

Image Credit – littleadventuressrilanka.com

Image Credit – littleadventuressrilanka.com

Despite the obvious importance of these corals and coral reefs to Sri Lanka, they receive little protection in the natural environment. Legally, they are given protection under the Fauna and Flora Protection Act by the Department of Wildlife Conservation. Corals and reef habitats are also protected under the Coast Conservation Act. The protection this Act provides is, however, limited to a two-kilometre-wide strip of coastal water around the country.

Image Credit – www.absolutesrilanka.asia

The Department of Wildlife Conservation has also established four marine protected areas: the Hikkaduwa Marine National Park, Pigeon Island Marine Park, Bar Reef Marine Sanctuary and Rumassala Marine Sanctuary. A report, however, notes that due to inadequate implementation of regulations, little protection is given to reef habitats, even if within the marine protected areas. Despite the creation of special management areas under the Coastal Zone Management Plan for the Hikkaduwa Marine National Park and the Bar Reef Marine Sanctuary, most recommendations for the protection of coral reefs in these areas have yet to be implemented, leaving our coral reefs vulnerable to further degradation.

Anyone who has done geography or environmental studies, even at a school level, would know about how delicate and interconnected our ecosystem is. We’ve all heard of animals and plants that have become extinct or are endangered due to factors such as habitat loss and environmental changes, and the subsequent damaging effects on the overall environment. While growing up, we’ve recited lists of exotic animals like the Dodo, Tasmanian Tiger, Caspian Tiger and the Great Auk – but it always seemed so distant because it was all happening so far away and so long ago.

The truth is not as comforting. Sri Lanka is known as a biodiversity hotspot. To a certain degree, it may seem that we’ve managed to preserve our forest cover (which, in reality, is not the case, as our forest cover has more than halved since Independence). Everyone is talking about our wildlife safaris, whale and dolphin watches, and elephant rides etc., yet the truth is bleak. Going by the latest National Red List (2012), published by the National Botanical Gardens, Peradeniya, there is a large number of fauna species either critically endangered, endangered or vulnerable, and it’s all happening on a little tear-drop island in the Indian Ocean.

According to available data, out of the 34 species of amphibians “confirmed as extinct worldwide in the past 500 years, 21 are from Sri Lanka.” The number was finally brought down to 19, with the rediscovery of two species. While amphibians are not exploited for commercial use, significant habitat loss is the main threat. “The vast majority of the amphibians are restricted to the south-western wet zone quarter of the island (Dutta & Manamendra-Arachchi, 1996), where more than 95% of the original forest cover has now vanished,” the report read. Pesticide use, which is as yet unregulated and the threats to environmental health and impact on non-target organisms unassessed to date, is another concerning factor, along with air pollution. Of the total 111 species of amphibians in Sri Lanka, 73 are threatened.

The Pseudophilautus adspersus, also known as the Thwaithe’s Shrub Frog has been listed as extinct.

Yet another highly threatened group are the fresh water crabs. According to the report, “nearly 90% of the freshwater crabs in Sri Lanka are globally threatened with 66% being listed under the critically endangered category.” That means 46 out of 51 species are threatened. Sri Lankan crabs also show 98.04% endemicity, not observed in any other faunal group in Sri Lanka. Threats include invasive alien species, fertilizers and pesticides, local climate change, rainwater acidification and increased erosion leading to sedimentation of water bodies.

Faced by the decline and fragmentation of their natural habitats, as well as invasive grass species, 106 out of 130 species of bees are currently threatened.

53 out of 95 mammals, excluding 30 marine mammals (excluded due to lack of data) are under threat. This includes shrews, bats, the Sri Lankan purple faced langur, the red slender loris, the leopards and elephants we are so proud of, the rusty-spotted cat, the fishing cat, sloth bears, civets, wild buffalo, hog deer, pygmy mouse deer, giant and small flying squirrels. Aquatic mammals like the sea whale, blue whale, fin whale and the sperm whale also face threats.

The Golden Dry-zone Palm Civet. Status: critically endangered.

107 out of 211 species of reptiles, including marine reptiles, are under threat. This includes crocodiles, sea turtles, horn lizards, geckos and snakes.

Fauna species like dragonflies (61 of 118 species), land snails (179 of 253), freshwater fish (45 of 91), birds (67 of 240), butterflies (99 of 245), ants (59 of 194) and spiders (62 of 501) also face threats.

The Giant Flying Squirrel. Status: endangered.

The numbers are bleak – all the more when looked at under a microscope. Some are critically endangered to the point of being possibly extinct. This includes two fresh water fish species, one amphibian species and one reptile species. Others are critically endangered, like 41 species of spiders, 34 freshwater crab species, 26 species of dragonflies, 25 ant species, 48 species of bees, 21 species of butterflies, 80 species of land snails, 19 freshwater fish species, 34 amphibians species, 38 reptiles species, 18 bird species and 13 species of mammals. The list is further divided into endangered and vulnerable species as well as species not threatened. The report also identified areas where data is deficient, as well as species that are the least threatened in comparison.

In the report, Professor Devaka Weerakoon summarises it further.

“Of the surviving inland vertebrates, 122 species are Critically Endangered: i.e., one in every 6 species of inland indigenous vertebrates of Sri Lanka is currently facing a high risk of extinction in the wild.”

Among the total endemic vertebrate species, 92 (29%) are Critically Endangered, 98 (31%) are Endangered and 39 (12%) are Vulnerable. Among the vertebrate fauna, the highest number of threatened species was recorded among reptiles (107 or 31%), followed by amphibians, birds, mammals and freshwater fish. One in every two species of freshwater fish, amphibians, reptiles and mammals and one in every five species of birds in the island are currently facing the risk of becoming extinct in the wild.”

The Hog Deer. Status: critically endangered.

He further said that among the selected groups of inland invertebrate fauna evaluated, the highest number of threatened species was recorded among the land snails (179), followed by bees, butterflies, spiders, dragonflies, ants and freshwater crabs.

“However, within a single group of invertebrates evaluated, the highest proportion of threatened species was recorded among the freshwater crabs (90% of the total crab species recorded to date), where one in every two species in Sri Lanka is currently facing an immediate and extremely high risk of extinction (CR) in the wild,” he added.

…surely something would have been done by now, right?

Not really. Speaking to Professor Devaka Weerakoon, from the Department of Zoology, University of Colombo, also part of the supervisory team of the Red List, it was understood that the Red List only acts as the initial diagnosis – beyond that, however, not much has been done.

“We need programs for every Critically Endangered species, but much of that has not happened,” he explained. “Without that, the Red List will become a mere academic exercise,” he said, adding that the list should be accompanied by swift action, mostly on the part of the government.

Professor Weerakoon identified another problem: the lack of data. In the report, he pointed out that “among the inland vertebrate species evaluated, nine freshwater fish, one amphibian, 27 reptiles and six mammals were included in the Data Deficient category. Among the invertebrate species assessed, 394 spiders, 11 dragonflies, 109 ants, 06 butterflies and 36 land snails had to be included in the Data Deficient category, because they lacked sufficient distribution data within Sri Lanka. The number of species listed in the data deficient category is extremely high among the spiders and ants as very little information exists about members of these two groups.”

None of this sounds particularly encouraging – the numbers are against Sri Lanka. It would help greatly if we had strict regulations that were enforced, for instance, on whale watching, which is a huge money spinner. Likewise, strict laws on emissions, industrial waste and logging could help the situation immensely. Despite all the promotion Sri Lanka gets as a biodiversity hotspot, as the home of many endemic plants and animals, as an exotic location for safaris and eco-tourism, we need to have something to show – apart from a harrowing Red List, that is.

Traditionally, crowdfunding has been associated with raising money for startups and new businesses, often acting as an alternative to investor funding. In Sri Lanka, however, we have a unique departure from this type of crowdfunding in Charity Apple, which uses the model of crowdfunding to support charitable causes.

In a developing country like Sri Lanka, issues such as poverty and deprivation are still rampant. Added to that, we have our own share of man-made and natural disasters which leave a lot of people in abject penury and dependent on the charity and goodwill of others. There are many people who would wish to contribute in any way to alleviate those in difficulty but it’s not always that easy. Sometimes it’s a matter of the availability of time on hand and accessibility that hinders people from giving to those in need.

How Charity Apple works

Charity Apple is a platform that bridges this problem. The Rotary Club of Colombo, along with partners Saberion and HNB, have started this crowdfunding initiative with the aim of providing people with a medium to help fund those in need. To date, Charity Apple has successfully worked on as many as 48 completed projects, ranging from providing relief to victims of the Koslanda landslide to installing electricity in a remote primary school, to helping out families suffering from personal tragedies, such as the loss of breadwinners. The stories, which can be found on their website, are plain heartbreaking: school-going children who face a different kind of a war for survival even after the end of the war, mothers without any means to an income trying to feed and educate their families, disenfranchised individuals attempting to start up businesses to support their families.

Project Manager, Steffan Johnson explained that initially they worked on causes identified by the Rotary Club but now they even receive proposals from outside parties who have identified the needs of others. “We research about the proposals we receive to prove if they are legitimate and take it from there,” he said. “The idea is to provide people who want to give charity an easy medium to do so. It doesn’t have to be a large amount. There is no minimum limit or a maximum limit of what people can give. Even rupees 10 towards a cause is immensely helpful.”

Some campaigns benefit individuals like Dinusha who is undergoing a kidney transplant surgery and needs all the help she can get.

In Sri Lanka, the concept of crowdfunding is gaining slow momentum, slow because many still view the concept with a certain degree of scepticism and mistrust. In their project reports, however, Charity Apple has made it a point to provide the necessary invoices to ensure complete transparency. “The idea is catching up now,” Steffan elaborated. “Helping people out has become easier – it’s now only a matter of going through the causes on our website and funding the causes you would like to help out with.”

It doesn’t matter which part of the country you are in – 60 school children from Yahalegama Vidyalaya in Anuradhapura, for instance, received Rs.25,000 worth of stationery and books at the beginning of this year

Currently, Charity Apple has around 15 ongoing causes, ranging from helping people with disabilities to helping people rebuild homes damaged by disasters, to providing fully equipped first aid boxes and stationery items for schools, to raising funds for people in need of kidney transplants. To find out more visit their website and lend a helping hand to those in need.

It’s that season where our favourite tropical addiction is out in full force. A drive down Havelock Road is reason enough to return home with an empty wallet, all in the name of our furry, fiery red friends, the rambutan. From the time we remember, however, our favourite fruit has come under constant parental onslaught. “Here, child, you’ll get a bad throat if you keep eating that stuff” are words we’ve probably all grown up with and come to detest.

Yet, is our best friend the rambutan all that evil? We take our research at Roar very seriously and in the process of our rambutan emancipation campaign, we found that we’re not the only ones obsessed with the fruit. A whole bunch of enthusiastic researchers have been conducting various studies on our hairy friends – as it turns out, we may even be sitting on a health goldmine. Practically every part of the rambutan tree and fruit can be used for various health fixes. Here’s a bunch of things you probably didn’t know about rambutan:

You know those seeds we just throw away by the dozen? Apart from using it to plant a rambutan tree, researchers have found a good use for it: rambutan seeds may “find application in tumour therapy.” After various chemical studies, it turns out that rambutan seeds have a 22.5-kDa trypsin inhibitor (aka. NLTI). What this means is that trypsin, currently being studied as a potential cancer therapy, is a natural enzyme which, if controlled properly, can lead to curing cancer. Trypsin inhibitors like NLTI are needed to control the amount of trypsin during a treatment. NLTI is also, incidentally, one of the few trypsin inhibitors with “nitric oxide-inducing activity” – long story short, we may have a lot to owe rambutan.

More than just a pretty fruit – the rambutan is abundant in health benefits. Image credit: vegetafruit.com

According to research conducted on fruit peel extracts of rambutan, mangosteen, and coconut to “evaluate antioxidant activity and cytotoxicity against human cell lines,” the rambutan’s peel crude extract has the highest antioxidant activity. So what’s the big deal? Well, antioxidants help prevent or slow cell damage. That’s what fights those free radicals from eating up all your electrons, which makes you more vulnerable to heart disease, cancer, and all those wrinkles. So basically, it’s good for your body and skin. Also, the fruit has antioxidants, too, just in case you were wondering if the fruit was of any use apart from delighting us gastronomically.

Turns out, the fruit’s rind is effective in inhibiting certain enzymes that prevent regeneration of pancreatic beta cells at a much higher level than the drug acarbose. It’s also a potential source of anti-hyperglycemic agents.

The rambutan also has a considerable amount of polysaccharides which have prebiotic properties. That’s the stuff that can handle acidic and enzymatic digestion in the small intestines and go on to be utilised by probiotics and gut bacteria in the large intestines. This helps boost immunity and mineral absorption, helps prevent colon cancer and other gastrointestinal diseases and lowers cholesterol. It basically makes sure your tummy is happy and your health tip-top.

Apart from being an antioxidant and cytotoxic, rambutan is also antiviral, antibacterial, and antifungal.

Which it has a lot of.

Oranges aren’t the only fruit rich in Vitamin C. Image credit: http://khao-lak-magazine.com/

The ancients liked their rambutan, too. Traditionally, the roots are used for their medicinal properties in the treatment of fever. Likewise, the bark of the tree is used for treating diseases of the tongue, while the leaves are used as poultices for the treatment of headaches. Although the skin contains a toxic saponin, in Java it is dried and used as a medicine, while the young leaves and fruit skins are used in Malaysia as dyes.

We could go on and on, to be honest. The internet is full of claims about the magical properties of rambutan, but we’re going to restrict ourselves to academic data and books about the stuff to help you better understand this addictive, yet sometimes maligned fruit. There may even be no valid scientific base for the ancient “bad for your throat” claim, so due to a lack of available data on the subject, just show the parental forces this article.

Sri Lanka is known for many things: tea, gems, exotic beaches, wildlife, cricket and politicians. But did you know that Sri Lanka is also a good film location? Turns out, there are over 40 International movies filmed on location in Sri Lanka – some receiving high praise and industry recognition, and some exemplifying everything sketchy. Here’s a list of top 3 movies you might have known were shot in Sri Lanka and another list of 3 movies that had us wondering if people didn’t have better uses for their money.

Bridge on the River Kwai – we’ve all grown up hearing legendary tales about this movie shot in Sri Lanka but did you know it rates 94% on Rotten Tomatoes and an 8.3 on IMDb? Those pictures we’ve all seen at the Kithulgala Rest House are quite the bomb, not just literally.

The iconic explosion of the Bridge – Image Courtesy, Columbia Pictures

Shot along the Maskeliya Oya and Peradeniya Botanical Gardens, the blowing up of the bridge is also known as one of cinema’s most iconic moments. Directed by David Lean and starring Alec Guinness and a constructed wooden bridge (425 feet long, 90 feet above water and costing an estimated quarter of a million dollars…and later blown up), this WWII drama tops our list of movies shot on our beautiful island. Needless to say the actual bridge in Thailand is a concrete and girder structure, nothing like the wooden bridge we see in the movie.

It has become quite the tourist attraction – Image Courtesy, Getty Images

2) Water – Deepa Mehta’s 2005 movie starring Lisa Ray, John Abraham and Seema Biswas comes in at number two on our list, scoring a 7.8 on IMDb and and a 91% on Rotten Tomatoes. As it often happens, when directors have trouble filming movies somewhere in Asia (twice for Deepa Mehta; Midnight’s Children, too, ran into a roadblock), they all land in Sri Lanka.

Beautiful locations

Filmed under a fake title called “Full Moon,” the movie is set in Varanasi but due to threats and demonstrations by Hindi fundamentalist groups, it was relocated to our paradise isle. Some of the footage filmed at the original set in Varanasi featured Shabana Azmi and Nandita Das, the initial choices for the female roles, but could not be used due to the shift in location. For that matter, around 2000 protesters had stormed the location, destroyed and burnt the main film set and thrown the remnants into the Ganges, based on false accusations about the subject matter of the movie. Despite mankind’s best efforts to stop the filming of this movie, the movie has won 18 awards and 14 nominations (including an Oscar nomination) and is part of a trilogy of movies.

3) Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom – In some corner of our island, the land is probably thinking “Steven Spielberg and George Lucas were here.” Probably one of the most exciting movies shot in Sri Lanka, because, well, Indiana Jones, duh, the movie stars some big names like Harrison Ford and our very own Asian king-of-villains Amrish Puri aka mogambo (khush hua).

Lucas and Spielberg on Sri Lankan soil.

The stories one could tell about this movie are endless – like dresses eaten by elephants, Barbra Streisand appearing in a dominatrix outfit and whipping Harrison Ford as part of a crew prank, Amrish Puri acquiring his ultimate villain look, Steven Spielberg meeting his future wife Kate Capshaw during production, smuggled pythons, etc etc. Another film that was supposed to have scenes shot in India but landed on our Lankan shores due to permission issues. The village featured in the movie was built on Hantana Tea Plantations, the elephant ride took place at the Pinnawala Elephant Orphanage and the rope-bridge was built across a 300 foot-deep gorge not far from Victoria Dam, with the aid of engineers already at work on the dam site. You’ll find chants in Hindi and villagers speaking Sinhalese (when they’re actually supposed to be Indians) and while it scores lower than other two movies in terms of ratings (7.6 on IMDb and 85% on Rotten Tomatoes) this is probably the movie we’re most pleased about.

What stands out the most when it comes to movies shot in Sri Lanka is that they are mostly set in other Asian countries like Sumatra (Paradise Road), Borneo (Farewell to the King, The Sleeping Dictionary), Burma (Beyond Rangoon, Never So Few), Papau New Guinea (The Mountain of the Cannibal God, Eaten Alive!), Thailand (Bridge on the River Kwai), Africa (Tarzan, the Ape Man, The Great Alligator) and India (Water, Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom, The Second Jungle Book: Mowgli & Baloo, Midnight’s Children) – but they were shot here, which leads us to the obvious question: why? Nihara Jayatilleka from Asian Film Location Services (Pvt) Ltd. explained that due to Sri Lanka’s political background, accessibility, level of education, ease of gaining permission for filming and the fact that practically everyone can speak English, we’ve invariably become a bit of a hot spot. Not bad, Sri Lanka, not bad.

Speaking of bad, however…we came across some pretty shady movies that were also filmed here, which we shall simply call “dodge” for the lack of a better word. Here are some movies you probably don’t want to watch unless you have too much time and Internet bandwith in your life. Oh, and maybe if you are in need of a severe belly ache post-laughing.

1) This spot is reserved for what some would call a research documentary but is actually a badly researched documentary going by the name of The Mating Urge. The name says it all, but contrary to expectations it doesn’t fall into the same category as the Kama Sutra. Basically this is a documentary about mating rituals in exotic locales like Africa, Bali, India and Sri Lanka, among others. Why does it deserve to be on Dodge list? Well, YouTube it and skip to the part where they talk about Mating Rituals in Sri Lanka. Did you know, for instance, that we Sri Lankans don’t kiss but rub noses and engage in some “plain sniffing” instead, and that, too, behind bushes? Did you also know that women in Sri Lanka, prior to their wedding, walk into rivers and bathe fully clothed, put on a “changing bag” (an underskirt, basically), wear their blouses in the “changing bag”, pull down the skirt and wear their sarees in full view of the public? We must also add that the documentary featured some stellar lines like “for the less one sees, the more one imagines” and “don’t be surprised if your boyfriend calls for you on an elephant.” Some anthropologist is probably laughing in his afterlife right now, or burning in the hell reserved for researches who, in their attempt to sell their work, make exotic (bullshit) and Orientalise the poor locals.

Not something you catch in the cinema

2) Ghosts Can’t Do It – Frankly, we don’t want to know what exactly ghosts can’t do (“it” is as open ended as it gets) but this movie is about Kate whose husband Scott dies but manages some post-mortem communication gimmicks. As it turns out, Scott is sick of the afterlife and wants to return to being alive, so Kate hatches a plan to drown a young man so that Scott can take over his body. As incredulous as it all sounds, did you know that this movie happened to have won a bunch of awards? For being the Worst Picture (tied with Adventures of Ford Fairlane), for having the Worst Actress (Bo Derek), for the Worst Director (John Derek) and the Worst Supporting Actor (Donald – wait for it – Trump). It was also nominated for Worst Supporting Actor, Worst Supporting Actress, Worst Screenplay, Worst New Star (twice, once for…wait for it…Donald Trump). All this at the Razzie Awards, 1991. They were also nominated for the Stinkers Bad Movie Awards in 1990 for the Worst Picture. My, they must be so proud of themselves.

“It” is a lot of things…

3) This is a tough one, because, gee, there are so many dodgy movies shot in beautiful Sri Lanka vying for the limelight. Let’s, however, settle for The Great Alligator. It sounds harmless enough, but then a simple google search will bring you to a rather questionable poster of a woman who should look terrified but is too busy looking seductive in the mouth of a giant alligator…completely naked. Turns out this movie, too, is full of accolades and features in a DVD reserved for “The 50 Worst Movies Ever Made.” -slow clap- This movie is also a cautionary tale for all you tourists out there. This is what happens when you go to exotic locations, do something stupid and anger the natives and the island god. You will then be stalked by the god disguised as a giant alligator and have all your nubile women eaten alive and, well, naked. And a river boat escapade with the alligator in the water and the angry natives waiting to kill you on land. Sounds terrifying.

Everyone’s been talking about it – the masked crusader surfing the Sri Lankan internet, sprinkling readers with a generous amount of laughter, satire and even some curry. This strange creature has brought in that Onion-esque bite to all things Sri Lankan that often border on ridiculous and puerile.

No one really knows who he/she is, but often, at the end of a dreary day subject to the bipolar tendencies of our little island’s on-goings, we tend to thank this phantom figure for laughter he/she provides through the satire news portal, newscurry.co. While satire as a medium of expression isn’t necessarily new – our newspapers have been doing this for decades – it’s still nice to see new faces on the internet ready to highlight the amusement found in, let’s say, the upcoming general elections.

The brains behind NewsCurry may be a complete mystery, but Roar did manage to sneak in an interview to satisfy that itch to know more.

We like to imagine this interview taking place in a room with a single white light and a table separating the interviewer and interviewee, 1984 style, to better explain the tonal variations in the article but the truth is always more disappointing (i.e. email interview).

A: My parents went through quite a few baby name books before coming up with NewsCurry. The actual story is far less interesting. Okay, it went something like this – NewsPoppadom? NewsOnion? NewsCurry? NewsCurry! Currynews? NewsCurry! URL Available – check.

A: Calling it an operation is overstating the setup, unless that’s what you call a slightly dysfunctional person with laptop minus two keys, stealing Wi-Fi from the neighbours, reading the news and a bit of hurried writing with the support of a couple of other friends/contributors. The setup is like that of any Sri Lankan Politician’s – the policies are flexible, rules can be bent and we don’t work hours, only minutes. But I don’t travel in a motorcade or have an office. I am open to discussing financial favours, though.

A: Laughs would be great – it means that I’m not always just laughing on my own at ideas swirling in my head. People lightening up and not taking themselves and events that don’t affect them seriously is also a good side effect. If the impact is that it makes people reach into their wallets and send us a drink, we would be much obliged!

A: I guess being targeted is part of it, as I think that some people take the stories seriously so may want to make a point. But I hope they realise much like the real news, people stop talking about it within a few days unless someone wants to make a bigger deal out of it than it really is. Additionally, who writes this does not matter and could change in the future so it’s better to focus on the content.

A: I couldn’t handle requests for a TV show, book deal, movie rights, the groupies – what a terrible life that would be.

A: Not really – even now it’s still quite a niche, though. So far my family accounts for most of the traffic. My mum doesn’t know how to close a tab on Chrome so it has been stuck on the site for the past 3 weeks. Time spent on the site is probably the best for a Sri Lankan website. But it is comforting to know that there are people who really do get satire / spoof news and share the content and it is growing.

A: Surprisingly, mainly positive. I haven’t yet received an invite for an appearance on the Daily Show, though. I am grateful for all the people who do take the time to read and interact with the site.

A: No, I haven’t been directly threatened nor have I seen any white vans hovering around my neighbourhood – although I have noticed someone following me on Twitter. There is an occasional comment which people don’t get, but on the whole it’s been positive. Appealing to a larger mainstream audience may be harder though, as I don’t think satire is yet fully appreciated. But also the line between truth and spoof is small in Sri Lanka so a number of people actually believe the stories and then get all defensive about them. We are, however, on Twitter if would like to follow us in a non-threatening manner: @NewsCurrySL or try searching for #NewsCurry.

A: Read the news, stare into space, stare into the screen, have a drink, stare into the bottom of the empty glass, check email and repeat until something seems like an idea. I consider it a small, part-time endeavour and need to be careful about how much I time I spend on it and it’s difficult to cover it all when you’ve got a few other real world jobs. But like most people’s hobbies, I do enjoy the process.

A: A bit of both. Satire has been around for a very long time and sites like the Onion have taken the art form to a new level in the digital era. In addition, there is a lot of great comedy content being produced in Sri Lanka – from the theatre to cartoons; there are talented people who have also played a part in seeding ideas. I also have friends who share a sense of humour. It’s just funny to read the news, primarily relating to Sri Lanka politics, and think that these things happen.

A: I have had a few inquiries from parties interested in advertising, but I don’t want to take on board any just yet as I feel it’s a small site. However, I am open to creative suggestions (e.g. product/brand placement within content/ spoof ads) although I don’t think brands are interested in that. They just seem to want to push their logo out there. We are currently looking into opening a Finance Division and launching a Savings Account like most companies do and also possibly floating on the stock exchange and getting involved in insider trading which is extremely lucrative according to our sources.

They do advertise some interesting services

A: We are considering contesting in the upcoming elections. We pledge to be the most transparent government – we will conduct backroom dealings in the front room, publish details of all bribes taken and only interview family members to lucrative government positions.

The usual response

Well, there you have it. That’s the scoop on NewsCurry and a bit about the earthling behind it. As much as we’d like to go Sherlock and figure out the identity of our mystery person, anonymity suits him/her.

It must be said that satirical news is an interesting medium on several levels. Apart from highlighting the laughable state of affairs or the affairs of our state, it also subverts the concepts of “news” and “credibility.” What we read and absorb as “news”, which should essentially be true and unbiased, is depicted as being unreliable and trivial, questioning the concept of “true news.” It also questions the news angles we unquestioningly read in mainstream news stories, a careful examination of which highlights just how skewered and tilted the news is in support of one party or the other.

While all this may seem a bit too heavy – isn’t it just about making fun of things as they are? Well, nothing is ever that simple – it’s a great move for Sri Lanka because it shows bold new initiatives to question what we take for granted and gets us thinking a bit. The best part is that a lot of people are taking satire as a medium seriously – websites like Colombo Chronicle and Broken News too, add to the stream of laughs life and news have become.

At times it feels like Colombo needs to be more happening. It’s not like we don’t have events, but there needs to be more variety, something beyond the usual concerts, plays, sporting events and beach parties. Thankfully, there’s the Colombo Design Market (CDM) to look forward to this Sunday (19th) – and this time, it’s bigger and better.

The general setting at the CDM – Image Courtesy, Aamina Nizar

What started off as a venture to provide a platform for upcoming designers, artists and creative entrepreneurs is now mushrooming into something bigger – and not just in terms of space. This time around, you’ll find the CDM at the Viharamahadevi Amphitheatre, stocked with a few neat surprises, including a vibrant night market, interactive art installations and a workshop.

In what can only be described as festive, this installment of the CDM will begin at 2pm and go on until 10pm, with lights, music, food and the creative arts setting the mood for a perfect day out with friends and family. Adding to the list of things to look out for are the interactive art and digital installations like Oculus Rifts and interactive sandboxes, among others. Pecha Kucha will also be a prominent feature this time around.

PechaKucha is coming back! – Image Courtesy, Colombo Design Market

It’s not just about looking, buying and playing around, however. There will also be a workshop conducted by Lee from the Colombo Design Studio on the design thinking behind everyday products, giving participants the opportunity to go from the generation of an idea through to the process of designing, creating and taking their completed product home. The idea is to educate participants on where products come from, the creation process and the work that is required to create the product.

In the process of evolving from a hub for the art and design, a direct market where unique products can be bought and sold, the CDM has gradually grown to embrace other forms of art, such as music. As founder Alifiya explained, some people just come for the good music and the festival-like atmosphere. “Many bands started off with covers, but now it’s moving into the domain of original music. There are even collaborations between artists off the books and in that sense it’s great because it gives musicians the chance to network and broaden their musical horizons.”

Founder Alifiya & Art Coordinator Munira. Image Courtesy, Aamina Nizar

According to Alifiya, the only catch is that you have to create or design something of your own, something innovative and original – resulting in a wide range of things that you previously couldn’t and wouldn’t have found in your everyday store. Everything from paintings, crafts, tote bags, jewellery, clothing or shoes are all customized and custom-made. “This is a space for people who are making their own things. Before the Design Market, there was no platform or easy access for people to sell and buy,” Alifiya explained.

The stories tell themselves – the Design Market has given many artists and small businesses the pickup they need. Bernard from Dodo Footwear, for instance, explains that the CDM allowed for direct interaction and feedback with customers, which ultimately helped them become more customer-needs oriented and helped improve the product design. “We were creating in a bubble before. This gave us the right exposure because we met and interacted with our customers and even retail people.”

Stalls at the CDM – Image Source, Aamina Nizar

For Shifani, it was an opportunity that allowed her to turn her art into a business. “The first one that I went to put me on the map: people knew I existed, and orders came pouring in for weeks after. So the event is great not just for marketing but for networking – people will know your name as an artist. I’ve grown as an artist who paints canvases in her room for the fun of it to moving into music album art, book covers, and now custom painted wallets. It helped me expand into new mediums of art and share what I do with thousands of others online and at the CDMs, and become self-employed in the process, in only a matter of months. So it’s definitely an enabler, and a huge opportunity for any artist with a desire to also be an entrepreneur.”

Local artists jamming – Image Courtesy, Aamina Nizar

To find out more, visit the Colombo Design Market on their Facebook page or better yet, come along this Sunday to the Viharamahadevi Amphitheatre and see for yourself!