With drones being deployed for surveillance last week, to ensure quarantine laws are not being violated, the conversation around privacy, technology, big data and government has reached a new crescendo. What, if any, implications does the use of this technology have on us? Rohan Samarajiva Chairperson of LIRNEasia, an ICT policy and regulation think-tank, spoke to us on the issue.

The past week has been rife with news that Sri Lanka’s Muslim community will be granted their request to bury #COVID19 dead, instead of have their bodies cremated — although there has been no official confirmation of the fact by authorities. Ali Zahir Moulana, a former state minister, who has been vocal on this issue throughout the pandemic, joins Roar Media to discuss the latest developments.

It has been a month to the date that the first case of COVID-19 was detected once more in the community, some two months after the ‘Navy cluster’ — also the largest at the time — was successfully managed.

This new cluster, dubbed ‘Minuwangoda cluster’ by the media, was first detected in an apparel worker in Minuwangoda in the Gampaha district, but was soon found to have spread all over the country.

Now, inexplicably, there have emerged two clusters: the Minuwangoda cluster has been renamed ‘Divulapitiya cluster’ by health authorities, (Divulapitiya is the apparel worker’s area of residence) and the second, ‘Peliyagoda Fish Market cluster’, which is where the virus was next found to be the most virulent.

As things stand, the Divulapitiya cluster seems to have stabilised, the last few news updates indicating almost no cases from that cluster. However, cases related to the Peliyagoda Fish Market cluster have continued to emerge from various parts of the country.

The latest numbers indicate that the two combined clusters have impacted upward of 8,000 people and has almost doubled the death toll; before the Divulapitiya and Peliyagoda Fish Market clusters, the death toll from eight months of COVID-19 was 13. In the sparse length of a month, ten people have passed away, increasing the tally of lives lost to 23.

While the government opted this time not to declare islandwide curfew like it did for three months earlier this year, the Western province has been under curfew since October 28 — a decision many charge is late and negligent.

Imposed initially for just the long weekend — from October 28 till November 2 — authorities having ‘assessed the situation and in light of the high number of cases detected’ decided to extend the curfew. It is now due to be lifted the upcoming Monday, November 9.

However, indications are that the curfew will remain in place for as long as it takes to bring the situation under control, even if the government may choose to be cautious about sounding the alarm.

Other areas in which a high number of cases have been detected — Eheliyagoda in the Ratnapura district, the Kurunegala Urban Council and the Kuliyapitiya police — area have also been placed under curfew. Meanwhile Hemmathagama, Mawanella and Bulathkohupitiya police areas in the Kegalle district and the Galgamuwa pradeshiya sabha and Giriulla police area in the Kurunegala district have been declared isolated until the situation there is brought under control.

The high virality of the virus and the proportionately high number of cases has led to overcrowding at quarantine camps and hospitals. This forced the government, on October 26, to announce the decision that all ‘first contacts’ would self-quarantine moving forward, and not be moved to quarantine camps as had been the practice.

Multiple reports from early October — some from authorities themselves — indicated that Sri Lanka was not able to handle the influx of cases and was fast running out of space for patients.

The issue was raised by the Opposition in Parliament, with Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB) Leader Sajith Premadasa asking why the government had not used the intervening months — and collected funds — to invest in the country’s health infrastructure.

While during the ‘first wave’ — the period between March and May 2020 — conditions at quarantine camps were praised, current conditions have reported as dismal, images of filthy washrooms, unappealing food and reports of poor service and care surfacing online.

Issues were further compounded when a primary machine used to conduct polymerase chain reaction (PCR) tests reportedly broke down (later speculated to be the result of a ‘shaky’ table), causing a delay and backlog of samples to be tested, and exacerbated when authorities were accused of malpractice while testing overseas returnees.

On October 12, scientists at the Department of Immunology and Molecular Medicine and Allergy, Immunology and Cell Biology Unit of the University of Sri Jayewardenepura concluded that the COVID-19 strain currently circulating is different to the strains that circulated in Sri Lanka previously and is highly transmissible.

Doctors at the Medical Research Institute (MRI) also pointed out a ‘heavy viral load’ in the current strain, with Consultant Virologist Dr Jude Jayamaha telling the media, “The rate of patients becoming positive is also low and many seem to be asymptomatic.”

Perhaps it is this that allowed the virus to escape detection at the Minuwangoda apparel factory for so long — authorities speculated the virus had been present from mid-September — although only detected at the end of that month.

Complications around the government’s decision to cremate Muslims who have died with or from COVID-19, in contravention of their religious and cultural beliefs, have continued to be a cause for pain within the community.

Opposition Leader Sajith Premadasa once more, accused the government of targeting Muslims during the coronavirus pandemic, and following the intervention of Justice Minister Ali Sabry, a team of experts has now been appointed to review the decision to cremate all COVID19-related deaths.

Economic issues have continued to plague the already debt-strapped government, and the President was clear at the outset of this ‘second wave’ the country could ‘not afford’ a second lockdown.

Even though the Western Province, in which the commercial hub Colombo is situated, has been under curfew now for close to two weeks, the government has listed a number of government institutions that have been permitted to send a skeleton staff to work, while others have been asked to ‘Work From Home’ to ensure economic wheels keep turning.

It is clear the government is struggling to get on top of issues that have spiralled fast out of control. It is also likely that for as long as COVID-19 exists and a vaccine does not, countries will be forced into frequent partial or full lockdown, every time the virus emerges within the community again.

This makes it also clear that there is merit to the criticism that the intervening months since the last community virus could have been used to bolster existing health infrastructure and prepare for any new outbreak of the virus that is potent and deadly and without solution.

But it can be hoped that the government that is new, has learned from its mistakes and will regain and maintain control of the situation so that it is able to yield the results it did the last time, when it effectively contained the virus in the country.

Russia today registered a vaccine for the novel coronavirus COVID-19, making it the world’s first approved vaccination against the virus.

“This morning, for the first time in the world, a vaccine against the new coronavirus was registered” Russian President Vladmir Putin said during a televised call with government ministers.

The registration is conditional, meaning the Institute will have to conduct trials on a further 1,600 people before it receives full approval.

But Russia has shown remarkable faith in its medical research capabilities, with Putin’s daughter reportedly among those who have received the vaccine.

Developed by Moscow’s Gamaleya Institute, the Russian Defence Ministry and the Russian Direct Investment Fund (RDIF), Director Alexander Gintsburg explains the vaccine uses inanimate particles created by adenoviruses to prevent the virus.

Adenoviruses are a group of common viruses that infect the lining of your eyes, airways and lungs, intestines, nervous system and more and are a common cause of fever, coughs, sore throats.

But Gintsburg claims the vaccine cannot harm the body.

“The particles and objects that can reproduce their own kind are the ones that are considered alive. The particles in question cannot multiply,” he was quoted as saying.

Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte has extended unconditional support to Gamaleya Vaccine, offering himself for the trials.

“When the vaccine arrives, I will have myself injected in public. Experiment on me first, that’s fine with me,” he said at a press briefing on Monday (10).

He also said the Philippines was ready to assist Russia in clinical trials and local production.

The Philippines currently has the highest number of confirmed cases in Southeast Asia.

But Russia’s announcement has come with a fair share of detractors.

The Association of Clinical Trials Organizations (ACTO) said using the vaccine was akin to opening “Pandora’s Box”.

“This is a Pandora’s Box and we don’t know what will happen to people injected with an unproven vaccine,” ACTO Executive Director Svetlana Zavidova said, while in a letter sent to Russian Health Minister Mikhail Murashko on Monday (10), the body asked, “Why are all corporations following the rules, but Russian ones aren’t? The rules for conducting clinical trials are written in blood. They can’t be violated,”

Russian virologist Alexander Chepurnov has also warned it could be dangerous for those with antibodies to the SARS-CoV-2, pointing out that the absence of information and data about the vaccine’s clinical trials were a red flag.

“The danger is there … in terms of the possibility of increasing the disease[‘s severity] with the wrong vaccine,” he said.

The United State’s leading infectious disease expert Dr Anthony Fauci has said he hoped that Russia - and China - were “actually testing the vaccine” before administering it.

Even more disturbingly, The Jakarta Post, quoting the Agence France-Presse reported on August 5, that the World Health Organization (WHO) spokesman Christian Lindmeier had said WHO had NOT been officially notified of any Russian vaccine on the verge of being deployed.

“There are established practices and there are guidelines out,” he had said, adding, “These should be definitely followed in order to make sure that we know what the vaccine is working against, who it can help and, of course, also if it has any negative side effects.”

Criticism notwithstanding, Russian plans to begin production next month (September), followed by a nationwide mass vaccination campaign in October.

Russian President Vladmir Putin announced today his country had registered the first vaccine against COVID-19. Video credits: RT

Meanwhile, doubts have also been raised over Russia’s claim to have reached a medical breakthrough, with the U.S., Canada and the U.K. accusing Russian state hackers in July, of attempting to steal vaccine research.

U.K., U. S., and Canada security services said a hacking group called APT29 (also known as ‘Cozy Bear’, had targeted a number of organisations involved in COVID-19 vaccine development with the ‘likely intention of stealing information’.

The U.K.'s National Cyber Security Centre (NCSC) said it was more than 95% certain that the group, also known as The Dukes or Cozy Bear, was part of Russian intelligence services.

Russia’s Ambassador to the UK Andrei Kelin rejected the allegation, telling BBC, “I don't believe in this story at all, there is no sense in it,” while Finance Minister Anton Siluanov told CNBC, “there are no hackers” working for the government.

Concerns were raised as far back as in June, when Gintsburg disclosed that the researchers there had tested the vaccine on themselves prior to human trials, causing the Russian Association of Clinical Research Associations (RACRA) to condemn the action, calling it a “crude violation of the very foundations of clinical research, Russian law and universally accepted international regulations.”

“I’m worried that Russia is cutting corners so that the vaccine that will come out may be not just ineffective, but also unsafe,”Lawrence Gostin, a global public health law expert at Georgetown University had said. “It doesn’t work that way. ... Trials come first. That’s really important.”

But at a televised meeting in July, Russian President Vladimir Putin had placed great emphasis on accuracy, indicating Russia’s commitment to getting in right.

“The key requirements for a vaccine are its proven effectiveness and safety so everything needs to be done very carefully and accurately,” he said. “Our confidence in the vaccine must be absolute.”

In the consensual hallucination we also call cyberspace, there exists what science fiction writer Yudhanjaya Wijeratne (27) describes as a ‘digital panopticon’—none other than one of the most frequented websites in the world, Wikipedia.

“Think about it,” he tells me, at a crowded restaurant in Colombo, attempting to shape with his hands a panopticon. “Everyone is watching”. And it’s true. The inherent nature of Wikipedia ensures that all content is reviewed.

Wijeratne thinks this is a good thing. “This way everything is kept in check,” he said, explaining how Wikipedia’s content policies and guidelines that ensure more senior ‘editors’—as all contributors are known—are responsible for vetting and approving.

“As you keep making more and higher-quality edits and additions, you start unlocking more privileges within the system,” he said.

Launched on January 15, 2001, by Jimmy Donal ‘Jimbo’ Wales, a British-American Internet entrepreneur and Larry Sanger, an American internet project developer, who coined the name from the Hawaiian word for for ‘quick’ (wiki) and ‘encyclopedia’, the platform is today a multilingual, open-collaboration encyclopedic project owned and supported by the non-profit Wikimedia Foundation.

Featuring free content, running no commercial ads, and funded primarily through donations, the site is accessed by over 1 billion unique devices and has over 200, 000 volunteer editors contributing to Wikimedia projects every month. All three languages spoken in Sri Lanka are represented on Wikipedia, although English, is by far the most populated.

Wikipedia is a large entity, with millions of pages in about 297 active languages. But, “Sinhala Language Wikipedia is tiny. Minuscule,” according to Wijeratne. Tamil Language Wikipedia is larger because of its geographical reach—Tamil is used in India as well, but in terms of purely Sri Lankan content, Tamil still falls short.

Pradeeban Kathiravelu (32), a postdoctoral researcher in distributed systems at Emory University, Atlanta, who has been an editor on Wikipedia since 2008, feels this could, inversely, be because of Wikipedia’s stringent editorial policies. “There are some over-enthusiastic maintainers out there, [ready] to delete anything,” he told Roar Media.

“The process of writing itself is easy,” he said, explaining that the challenge lay instead, in getting Wikipedia to understand and accept the relevance of certain topics. “A Sri Lankan temple may be notable to us and deserve an article. But on the global scale, it may be hard to prove that notability to a foreign maintainer who is sanity-checking the new articles,” he said.

Nisansa de Silva (32), a doctoral candidate at the Department of Computer and Information Science at the University of Oregon in the U.S.A, who has been an editor on Wikipedia for many years, agreed that one of the primary difficulties encountered by local contributors is having admins from outside the country, with little local context, attempt to delete the page on the grounds that it does not meet ‘Notability Requirements’, citing as example an attempt to delete the page of a notable Sri Lankan software developer and businessman. “If Sanjiva Weerawarana's notability is questioned, how will we ever be able to add a page about a dean of a faculty or a Sri Lankan businessman?” he asked.

Referring to the scale and scope of the Sinhala Wikipedia pages, de Silva noted that Google’s search optimisation may not always be useful to growing interaction with these pages. “Most people get to Wikipedia through a Google search,” he told Roar Media. “[And] unless you search for a Sinhala word or phrase in Sinhala Unicode, Google will give you the English version.”

Despite these challenges, Kathiravelu, notes that Sri Lanka has committed contributors. “Any latest local event is quickly recorded,” he said. “That shows enthusiastic participation from Sri Lankans. Similarly, several important pages get translated to Sinhala and Tamil quickly too.” And although a dedicated ‘Wikipedians in Sri Lanka’ page indicates that over 100 editors are in operation, Kathiravelu feels the numbers are possibly far higher.

Click here to view a video advertisement run in 2014 encouraging people to contribute to the platform.

Most local editors on Wikipedia don’t know each other ‘offline’, or in ‘irl’ (in real life), many preferring to be anonymous—although anonymity is not required to be an editor. Referring to the local events that are quickly recorded locally, Kathiravelu said most edits came from unregistered users. “If you see the edit history, you will notice only their IP address and not the user name,” he said. “Even those with a user name may not sign in when they make an edit.”

He also pointed to the existence of editors who come online with the intent to disrupt. “I have seen those who make only controversial edits or vandalize existing articles. Such behaviour makes a negative impact,” he said. Wijeratne also gave as examples some of the ‘edit wars’ that have broken out in Sri Lanka—incidents he has documented on his own Facebook page, in which Sri Lankan editors on Wikipedia with diametrically opposite points of views and agendas disagree with each other on the content of a specific page.

In these cases, it is often an editor based out of the country who must get involved to ensure a resolution to the conflict. However, when asked, Wijeratne felt it was not necessary for Wikipedia to establish a physical local presence, as perhaps, some of the other companies have begun to do. He is firm in his belief that the ‘open’ nature of Wikipedia is what keeps the platform so authentic.

While agreeing that there is a huge deficit in local content, Wijeratne also disagrees that paying writers, or editors, to create content would solve the problem, explaining that the minute money was involved, the impartiality of the editor and the integrity of the Wikipedia page was compromised. Referring to the ‘edit war’ documented previously, he said he would not have been able to persist in his mission to have the objective truth recorded if money had been involved.

Both Kathiravelu and de Silva agree. “The volunteer-based system works,” Kathiravelu said. “Wikipedia is growing and is quite stable—that shows that it works. “[Bringing money in] would inevitably introduce an author-vetting process, which in turn will be a barrier to the entry of a hobbyist or a newcomer,” de Silva said.

Pointing to the fact that Wikipedia offered countless sources and backlinks, all of which would be used as research material, Wijeratne said that he also felt that the reluctance to accept Wikipedia as a dependable source of information, is one of the biggest mistakes people make. De Silva agreed. “That idea [that Wikipedia is not a dependable source of information] has not been true for a decade,” he said “But the old teachers that “learnt” that idea, continues to regurgitate it oblivious of the changes that have happened [since].”

Kathiravelu disagreed to some extent. “Never cite Wikipedia articles,” he said. “Anyone can make a Wikipedia page, and it is filled with self-promotion, vandalisms, and biased views. But Wikipedia is an excellent source to get a basic understanding of any topic, and most list multiple sources you may be able to go through and cite instead if you find them relevant.”

Cover image—Roar Media/Jamie Alphonsus

Former Sri Lanka cricket captain Kumar Sangakkara, who is already an honorary life member of the Marylebone Cricket Club (MCC), has accepted an invitation to be its first non-British President, beginning October 2019.

High security prevails over the country as Sri Lanka enters the fifth day after deadly terror attacks struck the island on Easter Sunday. Police and security forces have been searching buildings and patrolling streets to prevent further attacks and explosions, with Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe saying the government is on the lookout for ‘sleeper’ cells of terrorists that may unleash second and third rounds of attacks. Declining to provide a number, the Prime Minister said Police were looking for suspects that were on the run, possibly with explosives.

An internal security memo that was leaked to the public indicated that two Muslim sects were possible targets for attacks. Muslim theological organisation, the All Ceylon Jamiyyathul Ulama, advised Muslims to pray at home instead of at mosques on Friday, April 26, if there was a need to protect family and properties. They also appealed to Muslim women to refrain from wearing the niqab to help authorities with identification. Additionally, a rumour on Thursday, April 25 that there would be an attack in Colombo between 10 AM and 2 PM caused widespread panic, with many employers advising employees to stay indoors and return home early.

Police Spokesman SP Ruwan Gunasekara said yesterday that over 70 suspects had been rounded up in connection to the Easter bombing; 33 were in the custody of the Criminal Investigations Department (CID), while four were being held by the Terrorist Investigation Department (TID). Meanwhile, the images of seven other suspects were released to the media, seeking public assistance in tracking them down. The Police got the image of at least one of the suspects wrong, causing an uproar on social media. At least seven international police agencies are aiding Sri Lanka in its investigations, including the FBI and Scotland Yard.

Meanwhile, 200 detonators were found in Hawaeliya, Nuwara Eliya and 21 hand-grenade type low-explosives in Mutwal. An explosive in Pugoda caused panic, as did a suspicious vehicle parked in the Bandaranaike International Airport premises, causing authorities to cordon off the area for investigations. In Balangoda, a man was arrested with a map of the Parliament and a number of Parliament passes. Meanwhile, a lorry that the Police were looking for, registered in the name of Zaharan Hashim, leader of the National Thawheed Jamath, was also found. But the explosives it was feared to be carrying were not aboard.

Health Services Director-General Dr Anil Jasinghe said the death toll from the Easter Sunday attacks was not as high as previously estimated. The revised figure now stands at 253, not 359. In a statement, the Health Services Director-General said the miscalculation had occurred as a result of the difficulty in numbering body parts. “In bombing such as this, bodies are subject to great harm and in some cases destroyed. Since bodies are in parts it is difficult to identify them as a whole. For this reason, it is very difficult to give an accurate number of those dead and we can only give an estimation,” he said.

Meanwhile, on the ground, there is mounting frustration at the government, not just for not acting on previously received information of possible attacks, but for the political blame game that is being played out, with the President and Prime Minister trying to insinuate that the other should be held responsible for the security lapses that led to the attacks. It is also clear, in the absence of communication to the public, that the government is still unable to work together to allay fears and ensure the safety of people.

Cover Photo credits: Kris Thomas / Roar Media

On Tuesday, April 23, sorrow turned to anger in Sri Lanka, when the Salafi jihadist militant group Islamic State (IS), claimed responsibility for the attacks that rocked the country on Easter Sunday. The group’s AMAQ news agency posted pictures and videoes of the suicide bombers, together with a short statement on the ‘blessed invasion’ that killed the celebrants of an ‘infidel holiday’ and the ‘citizens of Crusader coalition states.’

On Twitter, one of the few sites unaffected by the temporary ban on social media imposed by the government, users posted comments distancing Islam from the radical ideology of the IS. “This is making me angry. They are using my religion to create hatred. Allah will never accept such a thing,” one user wrote. Another labelled the attackers an “uncivilized group of cowards” that had performed an “unacceptable act in the name of Islam.”

The country seems largely cognizant of the fact that the attacks on Sunday were perpetrated by extremists, who do not represent the majority. In a special address to the nation, President Maithripala Sirisena reiterated the same: “Bear in mind, not every Muslim is a terrorist,” he said.

The president also called for unity to combat global terrorism, and promised that there would not be a recurrence of violence. But faith in the President is at an all-time low. The failure of law enforcement authorities to inform both the President and the Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe of intelligence reports that warned of possible attacks to Christian places of worship is being viewed as proof of the ineptitude of the administration.

The intelligence report in question contained detailed information that the leader of the National Thawheed Jamaath, a local Muslim extremist group, was planning suicide attacks, even pointing to Catholic churches and the Indian High Commission as possible targets. In Parliament yesterday, State Minister for Defense, Ruwan Wijewardene, confirmed that initial investigations had revealed the National Thawheed Jamaath was responsible for the attacks.

The State Minister also said the government was investigating “possible foreign links.” In a special address yesterday, Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe said it was evident the group had undergone training and that the attack was planned with great secrecy. “Some have travelled abroad and returned,” he said. “It’s why we have asked for international assistance.” The comments came hours before the IS claimed responsibility, and the government is yet to officially acknowledge IS involvement in the attacks.

The implications of IS involvement in the Easter Sunday attacks are serious. In 2016, then Justice Minister Wijeyadasa Rajapakshe reported that 32 Sri Lankans had left the country to join the IS, but his concerns were trivialised. That same year, Indian intelligence reported that Sri Lanka had become a favoured destination for the study of fundamentalist Islamist Wahabism, but no action was taken to contain this growth.

The National Thawheed Jamaath too, is not unknown. Its leader Zahran Hashim was known for inciteful, hate-filled preaching that called for the total annihilation of other religions. The group was also responsible for damaging Buddhist statutes in Mawanella last year. Many in the Muslim community disagreed with the ideology of the National Thawheed Jamaath, with some Muslims even protesting against the organisation in Kattankudy in the Eastern province in 2017.

It is clear that going forward, the country will have to rethink its approach to extremist ideology, in any form or fashion.

The country remains tense and on edge, as it becomes increasingly clear that security forces are still on the lookout for explosives planted at other locations. Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe confirmed the fact, telling reporters yesterday, “There are still people on the run with explosives.” Police also said yesterday that they were on the lookout for a lorry and a minivan believed to be laden with explosives.

A State of Emergency still prevails, and a curfew was reimposed last night. Government schools and universities remained closed, but many in the private and public sector opted to continue with day-to-day activities. However, multiple reports of suspicious packages and persons have caused panic.

Security is beefed up across the country, with police and security forces conducting raids and patrolling the streets. To reduce suspicion, the Police requested vehicles owners and drivers to leave a telephone number taped to the windscreen of their vehicles before they leave them parked on the roadside. Meanwhile, in the interest of security, the Postmaster General has said he would no longer accept pre-sealed packages.

In Colombo, Negombo and Batticaloa, the families of the 359 killed have begun to bury their dead. At last count, the Foreign Ministry said 34 of those killed have been identified as foreign nationals, but 14 are still unaccounted for.

Cover Image Credit: Reuters

A State of Emergency, under Section II of the Public Security Ordinance, came into effect in Sri Lanka at midnight on April 23. Under these Emergency Regulations, law enforcement authorities are given increased powers that will allow them to, among other things, enter and search premises and take possession or control of property in the interests of public security and the preservation of public order.

The Gazette announcing the State of Emergency will be presented to Parliament when it convenes on Tuesday, April 23 to discuss the situation in the country. Tuesday has also been declared a national day of mourning, to grieve the lives of the 310 killed and close to 500 injured in the eight explosions that rocked the country on Easter Sunday — the worst the nation has witnessed since the end of the civil war ten years ago.

Sri Lankan authorities are overwhelmed; hospitals are overflowing, and all available experts and law enforcement officers are on the scene, but the Police has not yet been able to release a list of the names of those killed. The Justice Ministry has called on coroners to expedite postmortems so that remains can be released to families.

Authorities have also appealed to INTERPOL for help with investigating the attacks and identifying victims. An Incident Response Team (IRT) with experts in crime scene examination, explosives, counter-terrorism, disaster victim identification and analysis is expected in the country soon.

INTERPOL has also said it is willing to offer expertise in digital forensics, biometrics and photo and video analysis to aid the investigation. “As the Sri Lankan authorities investigate these horrific attacks, INTERPOL will continue to provide whatever support is necessary,” INTERPOL Secretary General Jürgen Stock said in a statement.

The Government Analyst confirmed that four of the six attacks on churches and hotels were committed by suicide bombers. While no organisation has claimed responsibility for the attacks, fingers are being pointed at a radical Muslim organisation, the National Thowheed Jamath, whose name featured in intelligence reports reportedly received by authorities as many as ten days before the incident.

While the Police is yet to conclude investigations and make an official statement, at a press conference on April 22, Health Minister Rajitha Seneratne held the National Thowheed Jamath responsible, while also acknowledging and apologising for security lapses that led to an unprecedented number of deaths and injuries, despite prior warning from local and foreign agencies.

“Nearly 300 people have died. Over 500 people have been injured, severely injured. Some are disabled. So we are very, very, very sorry, as a government, we have to say. And we have to apologise to the families and the other institutions about this incident,” the Minister said.

Zahran Hashim, an imam associated with the organisation, is suspected to have masterminded the terror attacks, although authorities are looking for foreign collusion. Hashim, who is known for inciteful, hate-filled speech—even calling for the total annihilation of other religions—is believed to be the suicide bomber at the St. Sebastian’s Church in Negombo, although there is still no official confirmation.

The curfew that was imposed on April 21 night was reimposed on April 22, as Police continued their hunt for suspects. Forty persons are now in custody, 26 of whom are being questioned by the Criminal Investigations Department while three are detained by the Terrorist Investigation Division.

There are also fears there may be more explosives planted at locations across the island. Police are on high alert for suspicious parcels, baggage and vehicles that may carry incendiary devices.

On Sunday, April 21, an improvised explosive device was discovered on a road close to the Bandaranaike International Airport in Katunayake, and defused in a controlled explosion. Explosives found in a van parked in the vicinity of the St. Anthony’s Shrine in Kotahena yesterday—scene of the first attack on Easter Sunday—was also defused by security officers.

The temporary ban on social media, particularly Facebook and WhatsApp, that was imposed on Sunday still prevails. The suspension of these services was aimed at reducing the flow of unverified and unsubstantiated news that could cause panic and lead to violence. Ordinary telecommunications services remain intact, and micro-blogging websites like Twitter are accessible. On social media, Twitter in particular, the calls for answers are increasing; people want to know how the government plans on ensuring incidents of this nature are never repeated.

Cover Image Credit: Twitter.com/INTERPOL\_HQ

With dry conditions and power cuts imposed on the island, the National Water Supply and Drainage Board has warned people to use water sparingly.

A government initiative to induce artificial rainfall was unsuccessful, causing Power and Energy Minister Ravi Karunanayake to call off the project.

It all began with an email, written in November 2010.

Dear General Hospital Ratnapura,

I have a question about my adoption.  
I decided I would like to search for my mother.  
Your hospital is listed as the birthplace on my adoption papers.  
Is it possible to look for more information about my adoption?  
I can send my adoption papers if needed.

All the best,

Kind regards,

Sanne van Rossen.

“I wasn’t really expecting an answer,” 34-year-old van Rossen told Roar Media. Yet, days later, she received an email from the hospital: an administrator was willing to help. van Rossen was elated. The questions relating to her birth were haunting her, and she wanted to know more.

A month passed with no news, and then, a message from Sri Lanka: “We found your mother.” She had been living at the same address as before, and had been easy to trace. And even better news — she wanted to meet her daughter.

Five months later, in April 2011, van Rossen and her father boarded a flight to Sri Lanka to meet the woman who, 26 years earlier, had brought them together.

van Rossen remembers the first meeting as a sea of tumultuous emotions. She described her mother as small, old, wrinkled and huddled, and with a ‘lived’ face.“It seems as if everything she has experienced can be read from her face,” she said of that meeting.

And while she had many questions—who her father was, and what circumstances led to her adoption— she found her mother unresponsive, even apathetic. The meeting was unproductive, and a disappointed van Rossen flew back home to the Netherlands.

But the questions lay hidden beneath the surface. After the birth of her son, Sem, in 2013, she was overwhelmed with conflicting emotions. To help her cope, she sought the company of other Sri Lankan adoptees in the Netherlands, to learn how they dealt with the flood of emotions.

But in conversation with them, van Rossen began to learn some uncomfortable truths.

“I found out that many other adoptees couldn’t find their biological families because of falsified papers,” van Rossen said, sitting with us in our Colombo office on a hot day. This reminded her of how her biological mother had mentioned that she had been born in the Karanwella Hospital, not the Ratnapura Hospital. Were her own birth papers in order, she wondered.

She also learned that FLASH (Foundation, Life, Adoption Services and Happiness), the organisation through which her parents adopted her, had ceased operations, due to ‘increasingly complex rules and increasing quality requirement imposed on adoption organisations’. She also learned that the lawyer who processed the papers—a woman whom she only identifies as ‘T.’— was no longer alive, but had at one point been detained and questioned for child trafficking.

Consumed with a need to know more, van Rossen dug deeper and learned that things were worse than she had first thought. Adoptees told her how they had ‘traced’ their biological families and met women claiming to be their mothers, only to have DNA tests prove otherwise. Worse still, she found out that infants who were said to be fraternal twins, were adopted by families who only learned much later that they were not.

The discovery hit close to home for van Rossen, whose twin siblings Miriam and Eric, were adopted from Sri Lanka in 1986, a year after she was. The two were very dissimilar, and on confronting her parents, van Rossen learned that they too had always had their doubts. The more she researched, the more it became evident to van Rossen that there had been a thriving adoption ‘business’, not just in Sri Lanka, but also in other developing countries like India, Nepal, Thailand and the South and Middle Americas in the 1970s and 80s.

In Sri Lanka, she learned, women were made to give their children away under duress. Some were unwed mothers unable to return home with a new infant, while others were abandoned by husbands and partners, and unable to fend for themselves or provide for a child. Grieving mothers were even told at hospitals that their children had been ‘stolen’ or had died after birth.

She also learned of the chilling existence of ‘baby farms’ in Sri Lanka: homes in which women were kept for the sole purpose of giving birth to babies that would be given away for adoption. Why had these women—mothers like herself—participated in this scheme, she wondered.

The questions have kept van Rosen looking for answers.

She has worked to find solutions. Her unique perspective, as an adoptee and a mother, allows her to empathise with both sides. She feels very strongly that families ought to be able to find their loved ones. She was lucky: a DNA test conducted on the woman claiming to be her mother later proved maternity, but there are many other young men and women out there, her siblings included, who have been unable to find their families.

The Sorrows Of Sri Lanka And ‘Zembla’

In 2017, van Rossen, with the help of journalist Maurice Ambaum, published ‘Het Verdriet Van Sri Lanka’ (The Sorrows Of Sri Lanka), translated into English as ‘The Adoption Cover-Up Of Sri Lanka,’ a book about her journey and discoveries. Her personal investigation caught the attention of the Dutch public broadcasting system BNNVARA, whose television documentary channel Zembla, produced a two-part series entitled ‘Adoption Fraud’ (watch it here and here) based on her findings.

The book and the television series produced unexpected, but welcome results. At The Hague, legislators questioned the actions of the Dutch adoption agencies in the ‘80s, and promised to approach Sri Lankan authorities. And when Zembla questioned the Sri Lankan government, spokesman Minister Rajitha Senaratne, admitted to the existence of baby farms in the 80s for the first time, and promised that he would set up a DNA database to help children find their birth mothers.

There has, however, been no visible progress on the matter. Roar Media’s attempts to have Minister Rajitha Senaratne comment on what concrete action he has taken to establish a DNA database proved unsuccessful.

But van Rossen has refused to give up her fight. Currently working on a sequel, her second book will deal specifically with the baby farms of the ‘80s. She also plans to lobby the United Nations to set up a DNA databank to help families from the various countries that fell victim to this scam, reconnect with each other. “Now I want to focus now on what we can do for all adoptees and birthmothers,” she said. “They have already gone through so much.”

If anyone has any information on the existence of baby farms in Sri Lanka—the locations, people involved and any survivors, van Rossen and Ambaum would like to be put in touch with them. You can contact van Rossen on: sssssanne@hotmail.com and Ambaum on: info@ambaum.nl

Cover image credit: Claudia van der Starre

Sri Lanka has been plunged into an energy crisis when early warnings that shortages were imminent were ignored due to a rift between the Ceylon Electricity Board (CEB) and the Public Utilities Commission (PUSL). Now, President Maithripala Sirisena has appointed a committee to look into the matter.

A declaration of assets offers financial transparency that inspires confidence and trust in public officials—but has never been enforced in Sri Lanka. Now, for the first time, seven Members of Parliament make public their assets.

Ashan Ranatunga\* never really wanted his children to attend an international school. “There is this sort of superiority that international school kids have,” he said with a laugh. “I didn’t want to encourage that.”

But when he discovered that his young son was struggling with a learning disability compounded by a partial loss of hearing, he thought that it was only at an international school that his son would be offered the kind of support he needed. And so, Ranatunga moved his son to a leading international school in the heart of Colombo.

The school promised smaller classes, greater attention to students and overall better support for children. His son did well in school, and Ranatunga was happy with what was being offered.

The first time Ranatunga noticed that something was amiss was when he ran into trouble while attempting to transfer his son’s school fees while he was travelling abroad, to the bank account provided by the school. “The money was not being credited, ” Ranatunga said, “and I was getting calls from the school asking why I had not paid the fees.”

An annoyed Ranatunga contacted his bank, which clarified that the transfer had been flagged as suspicious because a large amount was being transferred to an individual, and not an establishment.

“Of course I thought it was weird,” Ranatunga said. But given the good reputation of the school, and particularly the headmistress at the helm, Ranatunga held his peace.

However, other issues began to crop up later. A sudden influx of students led to larger classes and fewer teachers. “It began to be clear to me that many of the teachers were not even aware of my son’s condition,” he said.

An increased focus on prize-winning led the school to prevent students thought to be unable to score well from taking exams, for fear that the school’s overall performance average would be affected. Ranatunga’s son was one of the students held back.

“I began to be increasingly dissatisfied with the direction the school was taking,” Ranatunga said. And he was not alone. Several other parents had banded together and were planning action against the school. Not one for snap reactions, Ranatunga decided to move his son out to his sit his exams as a private student.

However, despite his disinclination to battle the school, he remains resolute in his assessment. “The first thing is, these schools should be recognised as schools,” he said. “It’s crazy that they are permitted to operate this way.”

“Of all the international schools in the country, Overseas [The Overseas School of Colombo] is the only one that is registered as a private school,” said Dr. Tush Wickramanayaka, a family physician licensed in both Sri Lanka and the United Kingdom.

Dr. Wickramanayaka made headlines in January, when she publicised an incident relating to her 11-year-old daughter, a student of Gateway [international] College in Negombo. She wrote about how her daughter and eight other students were made to kneel and had their ears pulled for forgetting to take their weekly English reading book to school.

Despite her complaints to the school, and renewed calls—this was not the first time she had objected to the way the school disciplined students—for a child protection policy, a transparent complaint procedure and compulsory child psychology training for teachers, her suggestions were ignored. Instead, she and her two children were ostracized and picked on, she said.

Even as she continued her battle with the school, taking her complaint to the National Child Protection Authority (NCPA), the Ministry of Education, the Human Rights Commission, the Solicitor General, the Inspector General of Police and even the Prime Minister, the school responded by asking her to first transfer her children to another branch of the school, and later urging her to enroll the children elsewhere.

“For me, it is a matter of principle,” Dr. Wickramanayaka told Roar Media. Despite heavy opposition, she has decided to keep her two children at Gateway and continue her demand for justice.

While now on a mission to end corporal punishment through her newly-established organisation ‘Stop Child Cruelty’, Dr. Wickramanayaka also wants the government to take cognisance of the fact that international schools need to come under the purview of the Ministry of Education. “It was only when I took my matter to the Minister of Education that I learned that international schools are registered as businesses with BOI,” she said. “They are schools,” she said. “Educational establishments. They need to be regulated by the Ministry of Education.”

Dinesh Rajawasan disagrees with Wickramanayaka’s approach. Rajawasan’s daughter Saakya was thrust into the limelight in October 2018 when she was disciplined by the Colombo International School (CIS) for ‘unacceptable and irresponsible behaviour’ and a ‘disappointing attitude’. Sakya was taken to task for wearing trousers to school when it was ‘not the school uniform applicable to girls’ and for wanting to use the rainbow flag—synonymous with LGBT Pride—as part of her ensemble for the school’s 2018 Fashion Show.

“Saakya is very independent,” Rajawasan said. “So I let her handle it — and she did.” Saakya’s response to the school, in which she expressed her disappointment at the ‘cognitive dissonance’ of having teachers who have ‘always told us that they will support us in our choices’ being unable to support her when she most needed it, has been lauded.

Despite the setbacks Sakya faced after the incident—she was given demerit marks, detention, excluded from school extracurricular activities for some time and threatened with suspension should she not comply—Rajawasan refused to remove Saakya from the school. He also sees no reason to take legal action against the school.

“Those are archaic methods,” he told Roar Media. “There is absolutely no necessity for it. It only serves to satisfy the ego.” Instead, Rajawasan swears by people power and its ability to correct wrongs. “Especially in this day and age, with the democracy of social media at our fingertips,” he said.

Rajawasan doesn’t believe international schools need government regulation. He believes that it is bound to happen naturally. “Never underestimate the power of market forces,” he said with a laugh. “When this sort of thing receives widespread attention, it dissuades parents from putting their children in schools like this in the first place. All it takes is for one person to stand up for themselves.”

For Shalini Wickramasuriya, an educational consultant with over 20 years of experience in the field, the solution is clear: international schools must be regulated by the Ministry of Education. “Just like the Ministry of Education has a separate unit for private schools, they must set up a unit to look into matters relating to international schools,” she said.

Although successive governments have intimated that they would regulate international schools [Bandula Gunawardena in 2013, Akila Viraj Kariyawasam in 2016 and the Cabinet of Ministers on the proposal of Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe in 2018], there has been little progress. Instead, there have been more reports of excesses.

The absence of a body to look into matters pertaining to international schools means parents of international school children have nowhere to go when issues that need redressal crop up.

“The parents of local school children can go to the zonal education office, or the provincial education office, and if both fail them, they can take their case to the Ministry of Education. But the parents of international school children don’t have that option,” Wickramasuriya said.

It is not only on issues relating to corporal punishment or discipline that Wickramasuriya feels the government needs to be involved.

“There need to be guidelines, followed by an Education Act, set out for international schools,” she said. “For instance, there are no prescribed criteria for hiring teachers. This function depends entirely on the school’s budget. There have been instances when the school has hired teachers just because they speak English well — that’s not enough,” she said.

Wickramasuriya believes that there need to be set parameters for discipline, recruitment and qualification of teachers; requirements for spaces [such as whether a school can comfortably hold the number of children accepted, or it is adequately ventilated etc.] and other criteria. “None of this happens here,” she said. “In Sri Lanka, international school exist in a ‘no man’s land’— they are held accountable to no one.”

Perhaps the need of the hour is a middle ground. “We’re not asking for the government to be involved to the degree that they are meddling,” Ranatunga said. “International schools are better for the fact that there is less interference and less corruption. But there are evidently gaps in the system, and as a first step, I propose they are recognised as schools.”

In September 2017, a group of fashion designers from the Parsons School of Design in New York and the California College of the Arts, arrived in Sri Lanka to meet women from the apparel industry. “This will be my first time meeting women working in a garment factory,” Ioli Tzouka, a student of the Parsons School of Design said. What the students didn’t expect was to be moved so strongly by what they saw.

“Everything was so immense. There were so many people, so many things going on, so much noise — it definitely left me speechless,” Tzouka said of the teeming factory floor. Taking stock of the speed at which the women worked, and the conditions they worked in, Mallory McDaniel, a student at the California College of the Arts, said thoughtfully, “I think when people design clothes, they’re thinking about the glamorous part of it.” She added: “The issue right now, is that most people don’t know. Our industry would look a lot different, if people actually had a connection. Now that I have seen the human element, I think I am going to have a totally different approach to how I create.”

Exploitation Of Women

This was the purpose of the visit, organised by Remake, a U.S. non-profit committed to changing current fashion cycles that move cheap and trendy clothing fast from the catwalk to high-street stores like H&M, Zara and Topshop. The burden of producing pieces fast is placed on the 60-75 million—predominantly female—global workforce.“While 80% of the people on the factory floor are women, most managers and union leaders are men,” Remake founder Ayesha Barenblat told Roar Media. “Female garment workers represent the most vulnerable part of the fashion supply chain, and often toil hidden and unseen by the fashion world.” It is this impact on—and exploitation of—women worldwide that influenced Barenblat, a Pakistani-American who grew up in Karachi in a family that ran clothing factories, to become committed to her cause. She aspires to change consumer patterns, which contribute to what has been described as modern-day slavery in which thousands of impoverished workers are trapped.

Garment workers in developing countries work in harsh and hazardous conditions with little thought for their dignity and safety. In recent times, the most galling example of this was the Rana Plaza building collapse in Bangladesh in 2013. Over 1,000 people died and 2,500 were injured after owners ignored warnings that the building containing several garment factories—making clothes for European and American fast-fashion brands such as Mango, GAP and Primark—was unsafe, and ordered workers to report to work. The collapse is considered the deadliest structural failure accident in modern human history.

Effect On The Environment

Despite producing large quantities of clothes and accessories, high fashion stores are sometimes unable to sell their products. As a result, they resort to destroying or dumping their inventory. The most recent examples of this were when Burberry destroyed unsold clothes, accessories and perfume worth £28.6 million in 2017, and when H&M was left with unsold clothes worth $4.3 billion in 2018.

This cycle of creating and discarding clothes and accessories places a heavy burden on the environment.

“The impact [of fast fashion] on the planet is alarming,” Barenblat told Roar Media. “To make just one t-shirt takes the same amount of water that a person would drink in three years,” she said, explaining that fashion’s impact on climate change is “more than the aviation and shipping industry combined”. “Only 20% of clothes donated worldwide make it to second-hand markets or are recycled — the rest crowds landfills, where it can take up to 200 years to degrade,” she said.

Barenblat’s goal is to make consumers more conscious about the impact of their decisions and the power they have to change the negative aspects of the industry. By staying away from mass-produced, cheap clothing and investing instead in quality, durable clothing and accessories, Barenblat feels the ‘fast fashion’ cycle can be reversed, minimising the impact on women and the environment.

Implicit Dangers And New Connections

Drawing attention to the plight of the women working in the garment industry is not without consequences. Barenblat’s work often pits her against corporations with money—and legal—muscle. “The work is often dangerous,” she said. “We get kicked out of factory settings and our garment organiser partners face threats. But we continue regardless, to shine a light on what life is like for the people who make our clothes.” she said. The organisation makes documentary shorts, pitches stories to the media, and works with fashion press and influencers to “make the women who make our clothes visible. We [..] ensure that the industry hears directly from the women on the front lines,” Barenblat said.

It was while shooting in Sri Lanka for her immersive series on worker conditions in garment-producing countries that Barenblat met Ashila Dandeniya-Gamage, a former garment worker who has dedicated her life to advocating for other women in the industry, through her organisation ‘Stand Up Sri Lanka’. At the Colombo screening for the documentary short, ‘Made in Sri Lanka’, in which Dandeniya-Gamage is featured, she spoke of the difficult working conditions and problems faced by the women in Sri Lanka’s garment industry, which has even led to the degradation of their social image.

“We are derisively referred to as ‘Juki kalli’ or ‘garment kalli’,” she said. [Juki refers to the industrial sewing machine the women use, while ‘kalli’ is a sexist way of referring to a woman as a ‘piece’ or an ‘object’]. She also spoke of the extremely high production targets imposed on the women, and the often “unpleasant consequences” of not meeting them.

A garment worker is typically paid a basic wage of Rs. 10,000 (USD 56) a month. A budgetary relief allocation is expected to give them an additional allowance of Rs. 3,000 (USD 16) — but many companies forego the allowance, Dandeniya-Gamage said. The workers can work towards two ‘incentives’ — one a ‘monthly attendance incentive’ and the other an incentive on meeting production targets. “The monthly attendance incentive varies from factory to factory but ranges from Rs. 3,000 to Rs. 8,000,” Dandeniya-Gamage said. But even a day’s absence can strip a worker of her incentive, forcing many to show up even when sick. Additionally, while production target incentives also vary from factory to factory, targets are placed so high that workers resort to extreme measures by forfeiting their meals and tea times. “Sometimes they save time by not even consuming water to avoid going to the toilet,” she said.

What the garment workers, spearheaded by activists like Dandeniya-Gamage are asking for, is a living wage of Rs. 25,000 (USD 140). But companies often counter these requests by pointing out the many ‘other ways’ workers are empowered to earn more, including with ‘manpower’ agencies that find extra work for garment workers at other factories. But according to Dandeniya-Gamage, this sort of working is inhumane and strips the worker of her dignity.

She also said that the J. R. Jayawardene government, while conceptualising Free Trade Zones (FTZ) to attract foreign investment with the promise of low or non-existent taxes, had failed to take into account the living conditions of the thousands of workers they would employ. Consequently, according to Dandeniya-Gamage, literal pigsties and chicken coops belonging to houses in the vicinity were transferred to worker hostels and boarding spaces with less than minimum basic amenities. “To this day, most boarding houses have poorly ventilated rooms, inadequate and unhygienic sanitation facilities and an absolute absence of personal safety and security,” she said.

Her organisation Stand Up Sri Lanka operates at the grassroots. “I was forced to take up a job in the garment industry to support my family after my father was killed due to political violence,” she said. “I soon found I had a habit of questioning things and standing up to authority, especially in the face of injustice. This got me in trouble.” Due to her activism, Dandeniya-Gamage would go on to lose her job. But while still living in the worker’s hostel, she one day encountered a group of civil society activists who made her understand what her basic rights were and how they were being exploited. “Something snapped inside me,” she said. The incident served as a catalyst for her movement. “We knew it was important to build connections with each other. So we began watching a movie once a week. After the movie, we would discuss what we saw and what it meant to us,” she said, recalling with some humour, that the first movie they watched together was the South African comedy ‘The Gods Must Be Crazy.’

Later, Stand Up Sri Lanka initiated a ‘talk-shop’ or a juice bar, where anyone could come and talk about their problems. In addition, it began a mutual-assistance programme, the ‘Social Security Network’ (SSN), to help women face unexpected emergencies — from funding for new lodgings in case of the loss of a previous one, to giving out loans to cover the funeral costs for the death of a family member. Since 2008, when Dandeniya-Gamage began the movement, she has been working to uplift the lives of workers in the 14 FTZs in the country, which together employ nearly 450, 000 workers.

Her work advocating for better wages, conditions and the safety of workers earned her an Ashok Fellowship in 2012. The fellowship has helped her build strong connections with global change-makers like Barenblat, who makes it her mission to look for ways to raise funds — not just for Dandeniya-Gamage’s organisation, but also for other organisations and communities of women across the world, banding together to create better working conditions for themselves.

But while Dandeniya-Gamage and Barenblat work to build networks, create awareness and foster change in customers at a local and global level respectively, some questions remain. The foremost of these is: What are governments and businesses doing to reduce the impact of fast fashion?

While there are some global efforts such as the Circular Fashion Commitment and the Sustainable Apparel Coalition, many of these leave out the voice of the worker. In Sri Lanka, a campaign titled ‘Garments without Guilt’ led by the Joint Apparel Association Forum (JAAF) began in August 2006. The movement, independently audited by leading inspection and certification company SGS (formerly Société Générale de Surveillance), had as many as 139 factories (of an estimated 259) registered with them. But a representative told Roar Media that many had failed to renew their registration.

For as long as the consequences of fast fashion remain out of sight, humanity will have failed the hands that create the clothes we wear.

Cover Image Credit: remake.world / Jamie Alphonsus

Budget proposals for the fiscal year 2019 were unveiled in Parliament on Tuesday, March 5 by Finance Minister Mangala Samaraweera. The theme this year is ‘Empowering The People And Nurturing The Poor’. It is a continuation of the ‘Enterprise Sri Lanka’ concept launched by the Minister last year, with the accompanying theme: a ‘Blue, Green Budget.’

Budget proposals for 2019 were due during the last quarter of 2018, but were delayed due to the political crisis that erupted in Sri Lanka between October and December. However, Minister Samaraweera noted that the economy has stabilised since, with a visible upswing in growth. Therefore, he said, the pursuit of a liberal, outward-oriented economy was “more steadfast than ever.”

Here are some of the key highlights of the 2019 budget proposals.

Women contribute to only about 30% of the labour force, often making them financially dependent and disempowered. To counter this, commercial establishments with more than 250 employees will be encouraged to provide child-care facilities.

Selected schools will receive support to establish After School and Vacation Centres (ACVC) to serve as child care facilities, with guidelines and regulations issued by the Ministry of Women and Child Affairs.

The private sector will be encouraged to establish child-care facilities with support from ‘Rekawarana’ Concessionary Loan Schemes introduced through Enterprise Sri Lanka.

The private sector will be encouraged to support working mothers, by allowing 50% of the salary cost of the mandatory three months maternity leave as an additional deduction in calculating their corporate taxation (subject to a maximum of Rs.20,000/= per employee per month). The additional deduction can be extended to 100% for the fourth month of maternity leave, if so granted. The concession would apply for a five year period.

Sequenced approach to enable greater participation of women in boards of listed companies with the support of the Securities and Exchange Commission.

Proposal to amend labour laws to allow part-time, flexible hours,home-working and other options for women.

Proposal to allocate Rs. 500 million to establish a training and development centre in Dompe for women convicted of minor crimes.

Proposed debt relief of Rs. 500 million for approximately 45,000 drought-affected women in Trincomalee, Ampara, Batticaloa, Jaffna, Mullaitivu, Kilinochchi, Vavuniya, Mannar, Kurunegala, Puttalam, Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa, who have taken out loans of up to a maximum of Rs.100,000 (initial capital) with an outstanding of at least three consecutive months since June 2018.

Proposal to have the National Elders Secretariat (NSE) create a proper regulatory framework to improve the quality and increase the supply of elder-care facilities in the country.

‘Rekawarana’ Concessionary Loans through Enterprise Sri Lanka to encourage the private sector to invest in elder-care facilities.

Proposal to introduce a National Pension Plan with a sustainable financing structure to address growing challenges with the ageing population.

Rs. 12,000 million to revise pension to rectify an anomaly — this is expected to benefit around 585,000 affected pensioners.

Rs. 4,320 million to increase the allowance given to the disabled from Rs. 3,000 to Rs.5,000 a month.

Rs. 200 million for private entities that recruit at least five persons with disabilities. Salary subsidy of 50% per person, to an upper limit of Rs.15,000/- per person per month for a period of 24 months.

Government and private commercial buildings to be made accessible or ‘disability friendly’ by 2023. It is envisaged that this will be a mandatory requirement for new building approvals from January 1, 2020.

Rs. 100 million towards a free glass of milk for rural, primary school children

Rs. 500 million towards the Scholarship for Educational Excellence (SEE) Fund that will enable the country’s top A/L performers at Physical Science, Biological Science, Technology, Commerce and Arts to pursue an undergraduate education at top foreign universities, such as Harvard, MIT, Oxford and Cambridge. Those selected will be required to return and serve at least 15 years in Sri Lanka.

Rs. 100 million to encourage the private sector to offer internationally accredited training courses for nurses in order to develop the healthcare sector. The government will provide a stipend of Rs. 10,000 a month per trainee, for a period of two years.

Rs. 50,000 million to depoliticise and streamline ‘Samurdhi’ welfare system and absorb approximately 600,000 more deserving households.

‘Home Sweet Home’ loan for middle-income, first-time home buyers through ‘Enterprise Sri Lanka’ of up to Rs. 10 million at a 6% interest rate with a repayment period of 25 years.

‘Sihina Maga’ dream home loan through ‘Enterprise Sri Lanka’ for migrant workers registered at the Foreign Employment Bureau (FEB), of up to Rs.10 million. The government will bear 75% of the interest cost and tenure of the loan will be a maximum of 15 years, with a two year grace period.

International Telecommunication Levy will be removed on calls made by migrant workers.

Rs. 250 million to establish Kibbutz-style farms under the Prison Authorities in Ambepussa and Weerawila to rehabilitate convicted drug users.

Rs. 100 million to strengthen the Commission to Investigate the Allegations of Bribery or Corruption.

Rs. 1, 000 million to strengthen the natural disaster insurance scheme introduced in 2016 in response to Sri Lanka being earmarked as a high-risk country prone to natural disasters on the NFORM Global Risk Index.

Proposal to make mandatory for any entity manufacturing or importing single-use plastics as defined by the Central Environment Authority (CEA) to register with the Ministry of Industry and Commerce before September 1, 2019, as the first step in introducing appropriate regulation.

A concessionary loan under ‘Enterprise Sri Lanka’ to encourage three-wheel drivers to upgrade to electric three-wheelers and small cars that are more environmentally friendly. The government will bear 75% of the interest rate.

Rs. 400 million to create modern, climate-controlled warehousing facilities in Dambulla, Katunayake, Embilipitiya, Jaffna, and Keppetipola in order to minimise post-harvest losses. Private enterprises will be invited to invest, manage and operate facilities.

Rs. 2,410 million to complete the canals and headworks of seven major projects that will directly benefit almost 21,000 agricultural families.

Rs. 1, 000 million to improve sanitary facilities at bus and railway station terminals. Improvements to include separate facilities for men, women and those with special needs. The private sector will be invited to maintain these.

Rs. 4, 000 million to provide sanitation facilities to houses without, within two years, benefitting almost 1 million citizens.

Rs. 1, 000 million for ‘Sahasara’ programme to modernise bus services. Employees will be given EPF and ETF and become eligible for loan facilities as an incentive for better service towards passengers. A Revenue Support Fund will be established to enable bus owners to be paid on a monthly basis for the kilometres operated to reduce existing competition that often results in accidents. Also, pre-paid fare cards, electronic tracking of buses using GPS and information on bus schedules to be delivered to mobile devices.

Rs 200 million for awareness programmes to communicate reconciliation efforts by the Secretariat for Coordinating Reconciliation Mechanisms (SCRM) more effectively.

Rs. 700 million to set up and staff Office for Reparations.

Rs. 500 million to support families of all missing persons with Certificates of Absence. Families will be provided Rs. 6,000 a month until the Office of Reparation is established and their cases are resolved. These families will also be given preferential access to relevant ‘Enterprise Sri Lanka’ loan schemes and will be required to join the livelihood programmes coordinated by the Office for National Unity and Reconciliation (ONUR).

Rs. 2,500 million to establish a ‘Palmyrah Fund’ over two years to fast track development activities in war-affected areas. The fund will also be channelled towards addressing alcoholism, drug abuse, youth unemployment, civil society-initiated counselling and other support programmes.

Nation Building Tax (NBT) on foreign currency receipts by tourist hotels registered with the Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority (SLTDA) to be removed to encourage growth in the tourism sector.

Economic Service Charge (ESC) applicable for export sectors subject to a Corporate Income Tax of 14%, will be reduced to 0.25% from 0.5% to boost exports, IT and tourism sectors.

No foreign construction company will be allowed to tender for government projects unless the project is fully foreign financed, and without forming a joint venture with a local construction or consultancy company.

A series of measures were also proposed to enhance fiscal revenue and address anomalies in the taxations system:

Excise duty on cigarettes that are more than 60 mm will be increased by 12%, resulting in an increase of Rs. 5 per stick, effective March 6, 2019. NBT will be imposed on cigarette manufacturers effective June 1, 2019.

Excise duty will be revised and a luxury tax will be implemented on motor vehicles effective from March 6, 2019. The 200% cash margin requirements on motor vehicle imports is to be removed in the near future.

3.5% NBT in place of stamp duty on all foreign payments using credit cards and debit cards, effective from June 1, 2019.

Fee on alteration and issuance of passports revised. The fee for alteration has been increased from Rs. 500 to Rs. 1, 000. Issuance fee (One Day Service) from Rs. 10,000 to Rs. 15,000, Normal Service from Rs. 3,000 to Rs. 3,500.

Excise duty on locally manufactured hard liquor will increase by 08% (excise duty on Special Arrack remains without change) and malt liquor by 12%, based on indexation effective from March 6, 2019, where the minimum annual duty is increased according to an index capturing annual inflation and income growth.

Piece-based VAT rate on disposal of garments by BOI-approved enterprises will be revised from Rs. 75 to Rs. 100 on the basis of inflation indexation, effective from June 1, 2019.

The toll on Expressways will be increased by Rs. 100 during peak hours, effective April 1, 2019.

Casino licence fees increased from Rs. 200 million to Rs. 400 million per annum. Casino turnover levy will be 15%. These new charges will be effective from April 1, 2019. Casino entrance will be USD 50 per person, effective June 1, 2019.

Cover Image Credit: Jamie Alphonsus / Roar Media

The evening turned dark as rain clouds gathered ominously in the sky overhead. Despite the weather, \*Dharshan smiled brightly as he welcomed us into his garden. Having no chairs, Dharshan hastily unrolled a mat over the dark, wiry grass and gestured for us to sit on it. A desultory puppy sniffed at our toes as a few angry raindrops hit the ground, causing Dharshan to cast a laughing look at the sky and wonder aloud if we should move indoors.

Dharshan’s home is in rural Ritzcader in the Rasentharankulam division, a hinterland several kilometres from Vavuniya town. It is a single room, built on a property that the 30-year-old said the government was planning to take away from him. Forty seven other families were also asked to move to make room for government-sanctioned settlers, despite the fact that Dharshan, and many of the villagers around him, have lived there for over a decade now. But they had fallen into disfavour with a local politician, he said, for being unable to pay a Rs. 5,000 fee to be put on a ‘list’.

His home is a tiny hovel built from brick, with a corrugated metal roof to protect it from the elements. Only the front of the house is whitewashed, to give the abode a semblance of respectability. The space inside is lit by a just a single bulb. The cement floors were clean and only the barest of necessities lined the wall: a single mattress, a pedestal fan, a coconut scraper, a gas cooker and cylinder. A few pieces of clothing were hung to dry on a line strung across the room. As Spartan as it is, it is home to Dharshan, and he doesn’t want to leave.

But more pressing problems weigh on him now.

Everyone Dharshan knows has taken a loan from one of the many formal lending institutions operating in the area. “My brother lives on three loans a week,” he said, inexplicably upbeat despite the dire circumstance he is in. Perhaps it is the absurdity of the situation that makes him laugh. “Loan is life,” he said, palms upturned in surrender. Dharshan himself has taken a large loan to buy a small truck he can give out on hire. He is now saddled with paying back about Rs. 16,000 a month, although he admits that he only earns about Rs. 20, 000 — if he is lucky.

When asked how he managed, he shrugged. “If you take, you must pay,” he said, adding that the villagers were accustomed to going without food to pay back loans.

We had been in Dharshan’s home for no more than 20 minutes when the room began to fill up with people from his village. News had travelled fast that we were there to find out more about their situation, and seated on the mat next to us, crowding in at the doorway and gathered in knots of three and four, they waited, eager to share their stories.

Thamilini\* is 67, sickly and stays at home. Her husband works at a bakery, earning about Rs. 22,000 a month. Thamilini has taken loans for over eight years now — she estimates her total debt is approximately Rs. 600, 000. Paying the money back is never easy, but Thamilini doesn’t know what else to do. Her house needed repairs, and they needed to dig a well. All of that costs money.

Then there are the living expenses and her medical expenses — all of which she ‘manages’ with frequent loans.

It is not uncommon for these villagers to take out loans simply to live. Bhodan\* is 34 and is constantly transacting with lenders to buy what he needs to keep the home fires burning. When stuck for cash, he takes a quick loan with the intention of paying the money back on a staggered basis. He agreed this was no way to live, but in his words, “What choice do we have?”

Many of those living in Ritzcader are without permanent employment, eking out the barest existence on odd jobs found in the Vavuniya town. But their lack of permanent employment has not detracted lenders. We were told of ‘field officers’ who visit the village with the specific purpose of offering—as a solution to burning financial problems—the ‘quick’ and ‘easy’ option of taking a loan.

These lenders are often from trusted establishments, Ravindra De Silva, a humanitarian working in the North told Roar Media. “Lanka Orix Leasing Company (LOLC), Commercial Bank and Bhumiputhra, these are some of the names that come up in our research,” he said, and this was confirmed by the villagers in Rasentharankulam who told us they were offered loans by field officers from these institutions.

“We had to take a copy of the ID,” Thamilini said, after a moment’s consideration, when we asked her what documentation she was asked to produce before taking out her loans. But nothing more was required to assess if those receiving loans were able to pay back what they took. But where the ‘field officers’ were lax with assessment, they were sharp with repayments, harassing the villagers if they defaulted or delayed.

“The field officers scold us in filth and try to hit and intimidate us,” Dharshan complained. The loanees are given a two-month grace period, but are dogged by field officers who turn up at their homes and refuse to leave until they are satisfied that they have terrified the villagers sufficiently.

These unsolicited visits are unchecked and often lead to trouble, De Silva said. In a number of cases, loan sharks preyed on vulnerable families, coercing young women into relationships with them. Based on complaints by organisations such as his, the police have finally stepped in and ordered that field officers can no longer visit loanees after 6 PM.

Micro-finance related problems are not limited to the North, said W. A. Wijewardena, former Deputy Governor of the Central Bank, who directed the Landless Credit Project, the country’s first-ever microfinance project, from 1992 to 2000.

“It is prevalent across the whole country, because there is a high demand for micro-loans from this sector of customers that are not serviced by formal banking institutions,” he said.

Inability to pay off their debts led to as many as 195 people ending their own lives last year, Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) leader Anura Kumara Dissanayake said in Parliament. Finance and Mass Media Minister Mangala Samaraweera also pointed out that the situation especially impacted women, from whom sexual bribes were solicited when they were unable to pay off their debts.

In response to the situation, the government decided last year to write off non-consumption loans of up to Rs. 100,000 granted to women by registered finance companies, as well as implement an interest rate cap of 30% per annum on all future loans given by microfinance companies.

However, the scheme only benefited women who obtained loans for non-consumption purposes in the drought-affected districts of Trincomalee, Ampara, Batticaloa, Jaffna, Mullaitivu, Kilinochchi, Vavuniya, Mannar, Kurunegala, Puttalam, Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa, where cultivation was affected consecutively for five seasons.

There are many more that continue to fall prey to microfinance institutions that quote high-interest rates starting from 40% and going up to as much as 220%, forcing already impoverished families into a desperate situation.

In the North, where approximately 58,000 households are headed by women (according to the 2012 Census), this issue is particularly insidious. Reeling from a 30-year civil war, the province falls far behind others on key social indicators.

But particularly galling is the unemployment and accompanying poverty rampant in both the North and the East.

A lack of financial literacy compounds the problem. Speaking about those in Ritzcader, De Silva said, “These people don’t even know the basics of money management. How [would] they know how to juggle living expenses with debt repayment?”

It is clear that the poor in Rasentharankulam are at the mercy of a system in which the loaner is both saviour and master.

As we mark 71 years of independence from the British Empire, we reflect on what independence means to some citizens of our nation.

“February 3 midnight. As the clock’s hands veered to a minute past, the burst of crackers heralding the ‘appointed day’ for Lanka’s independence crashed into the silence of the night.” - Ceylon Observer, February 4, 1948.

Thus began celebrations to mark Ceylon’s long-awaited independence from the British. At 7:30 the next morning, in a ceremony held at the Queen’s House, Sir Henry Monck-Mason Moore was appointed Ceylon’s first Governor-General to the ringing sounds of a gun salute. Later that day, the lion flag was hoisted at a ceremony at the Assembly Hall at Torrington Place, signalling Ceylon’s new status as a free country.

“I very vividly remember the Union Jack coming down, and the Lion Flag being hoisted,” said 96-year-old veteran journalist, editor and author, Kala Keerthi Dr. Edwin Ariyadasa. Although only an undergraduate at the time—too young to be an active participant in the independence movement— he said “[we] knew that we were participating in an important historical event.”

The newspapers the next day were filled with reports of the celebrations that took place on February 4. Under the headline, ‘DAWN OF FREEDOM BREAKS OVER LANKA’, the Ceylon Observer evocatively described the ‘silver peals of church and temple bells’, that were ‘re-echoed by the ships and sirens in the harbour,’ as Ceylon took its ‘rightful place in the Assembly of Free Nations of The World.’

Reflecting on his memories from that day 71 years ago, Dr. Ariyadasa said he had shared the sentiments of most people in the country at the time. “We wanted independence, our own rulers,” he said. Recalling the jubilant crowds that thronged to the city to watch the ceremony, he said, “The people were crowded as far as I could see. There was a certain amount of rejoicing at that moment.”

Several events were organised for that day: a morning mass at the Cathedral Church in Mutwal, maha pirith at the Raja Maha Viharaya in Kelaniya, and the highlight of the evening — a ‘Water Festival’ organised for the public by the Colombo Port Commission.

“Long after midnight, thousands flocked to Fort for illuminations and the water pageant. Colombo was robed in splendour, with gaily decorated streets, pandals, flood-lit buildings and a riot of vari-coloured illuminations,” said the Ceylon Observer, describing the occasion.

In his address to the nation, Prime Minister D. S. Senanayake called upon his countrymen to “transform this newly-won freedom into an instrument of happiness for the people, prosperity for the country and advancement of peace in the world,” describing the attainment of political freedom as “second in importance only to the message of spiritual freedom delivered by the Lord Buddha.”

However, Dr. Ariyadasa said the focus of the people were elsewhere: “We had only one particular thing in mind — taking it over from the British. That we were repossessing our heritage, getting our kingdom back for ourselves. Other details did not quite matter at that point,” he said.

Perhaps it is this conspicuous lack of vision that has led to the current vacuum in the body politic. Trade unionist Peter D'Almeida, (61), questioned the very meaning and impact of independence from the British.

“Freedom from what?” he asked. “Because we just passed on the rule from British capitalists interests to Sri Lankan capitalist interests.”

Although he acknowledged that there was certainly a movement across all of Britain’s colonies to overthrow British imperialism, quoting Colvin R. de Silva, a founder of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party, the first Sri Lankan Marxist political party, he described the events of February 4, 1948 as a “bland moment” for all but those involved in the struggle.

“And it was not a big struggle in Sri Lanka. We got it because of the struggle in India,” he said.

D’ Almeida said that despite 70 years of independence, Sri Lanka had continued to retain “the worst of British institutions”— a parliamentary system “that has failed us”, an education system geared to “churn out people for the industrial age” and other forms of governance that were not the “best for us.”

Highlighting the fact that the recently inaugurated Matara-Beliatta was the first built since the British ceded power to Sri Lanka—and that too, with funds provided by the China Exim Bank—he said, “Seventy years later...we are completely dependent on foreign nations...and we have replaced British colonialism with Chinese imperialism.”

“So, I don’t know if throwing out the British made a change to the aspirations people had of a different type of society,” he said.

Pesala Karunaratne (34), President of the Colombo Chapter of the Young Professionals Organisation (YPO) of the United National Party (UNP), was also critical of Sri Lanka’s dependence on foreign nations.

“The way I see it, independence is to be able to act as a sovereign nation, to operate without interference,” he said. “But instead, we have become economically dependent. And as a result, we are still ruled by the conditions imposed on us by other nations.”

Pointing out that Sri Lanka had no competitive advantage as a country, and hence, no bargaining power in the world, Karunaratne said leaders needed to look for long-term solutions to the issue.

“Today we are reliant on the Chinese; sometime ago, we were reliant on the West,” Karunaratne said. “We need to train our labour for tomorrow’s industries. Policymakers must be able to assess what industries will be in demand in the next five or so decades, and adjust our education system to produce that market-ready labour,” he said, warning that unless this happens, Sri Lanka would continue to be dependent on other countries.

“In terms of our generation, independence wasn’t hard-fought; it wasn’t hard-won by us. It was more of a legacy, an endowment, part of my inheritance,” said Manisha Dissanayake, a 25-year-old lawyer and the founder of The Arka Initiative, an organisation that works to support to men and women on issues surrounding sexual and reproductive health.

While some of her earliest memories are of colouring in a black-and-white picture of the flag, which was later tacked to a waving ekel stick, it was only later, as she became more socially and politically conscious, that Dissanayake began to understand the true meaning of independence.

“I really started to understand that independence was not this abstract concept, but rather, something that thrusts upon us a certain obligation and accountability, to make something of what we have gotten,” she said.

In determining what contribution her generation could make to taking Sri Lanka forward, Dissanayake feels the youth is positioned to play a specific role — “to bring something fresh to the table...to breathe new life into stagnated conversation, into certain prejudices that haven’t gone away.”

Although declining to assess how well Sri Lanka had done since independence was granted, considering it a “difficult question that can’t be arrived at through a quantitative assessment or a balancing exercise,” Dissanayake advocated for a “culture of service” and more youth engagement to overcome any deficits.

“We need to foster a culture of service,” she said, “to individuals, the community and our country. The moment that young people feel a sense of responsibility, I think that’s when we can really start to move.”

The Long Walk To Independence: Is Sri Lanka There Yet?

Sri Lankan-born doctor Gertrude Seneviratne will be recognised as an ‘Officer of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire’ by Queen Elizabeth II, for her services as a Perinatal Psychiatrist.

Suranga Lakmal, 36, remembers when the rains came to his village in Kekirawa, in the Anuradhapura district of the Central Province in May 2018. “It rained for days,” he said. “Although we had been waiting for the rain, it felt like this was a punishment. Our crops were entirely destroyed — all the labour of the season, just gone.”

The previous year, his village was one of many in 16 districts that were affected by a prolonged drought, the worst in four decades. After the heavy rains of May 2018, Kekirawa was once again hit by drought, this time in September 2018. By December 2018, the rains had come again to play havoc in the Northern, Central, Sabaragamuwa and Western provinces.

Lakmal said the calamitous weather patterns—something he’s noticed as more pronounced since “about three years ago”—was making it harder and harder for farmers like him to make a living. “Life is hard for us anyway,” he said. “We have so many problems, but harsh weather patterns make it so much harder.”

It is why so many young people are abandoning traditional farmlands in search of more ‘secure’ jobs in the cities. “At least we know we have a salary at the end of the month,” Lakmal said. It is not glamorous work they find — many work as labourers on construction sites and the steady influx of workers amounts to low wages. But for many from the farming community, the trade-off is worthwhile.

“This change in perspective is most apparent in the third generation farmer,” Namal Karunaratne, National Organiser of the All Ceylon Farmers' Federation told Roar Media. Once a farmer himself, Karunaratne said first and second generation farmers like his grandparents and parents, had no option but to farm. “With the younger generation it is different — they can go to the cities for work,” he said.

While the agriculture sector contributes to only 6.9% of the GDP, it employs 26.1% of the country’s workforce. Despite this, it is estimated that as many as four million Sri Lankans are now internal migrants. According to the Department of Census and Statistics, many are from the Central, Southern, North Western and North Central provinces, and move to urban districts such as Colombo, Gampaha and Kalutara in search of jobs.

But many of them don’t last there. “The bond with the land is too strong,” Karunaratne said. “After some time they come back and try their hand at farming again.” But the same problems persist and the dissatisfied farmers leave for the cities once more. “This cycle will continue for as long as the issues farmers face are left unresolved,” he said.

But what can Sri Lanka do to mitigate climate change, the defining global issue of our times? The number of casualties recorded due to natural disasters last year resulted in the country being ranked second in the Global Climate Index of countries most susceptible to climate change. And while conservation, sustainability and an end to pollution are now global topics, countries remain divided on how much they are willing to do to reduce the emission of greenhouse gases to reduce the effects of climate change.

Even the Paris Agreement, an initiative of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), which was drafted in December 2015 to encourage member countries to keep global average temperature rise to below 2 °C, will only come into effect in 2020. This means that any eventual changes brought about by the effort of these countries, will only be apparent much later.

But according to the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS), Sri Lanka needs to do more to develop the rural economy in the short term. In a piece entitled ‘Weathering the Storm: Improving Disaster Resilience of Rural Workers in Sri Lanka’, written for the report ‘Sri Lanka: State of the Economy 2018’, Research Director Dr. Nisha Arunatillake argues that the rural population must receive support to withstand the adverse effects of climate change.

“With more than 82 percent of Sri Lanka’s population, including 92 percent of the poor, living in rural areas, developing the rural economy is necessary to help them withstand the vagaries of weather and improve living standards,” she writes. In her opinion, “better education, better institutions, better infrastructure, better coverage of social protection” as well as better jobs are necessary to uplift the rural worker.

“There will be more internal migration as a result of climate change if the government does not develop the rural economy,” Dr. Arunatillake told Roar Media. She added that while the government has a strategic interest in keeping a minimum number of lands in agriculture because it did not want to rely totally on imports, “people will move when they are unable to make a living where they are.”

Although a temporary solution, migration to urban areas is not the answer to the growing problems of rural workers. Many are forced to live in cramped spaces, paying for rent, utilities and bearing the cost of higher living expenses. More migrants also place a bigger burden on urban infrastructure, adding to already congested public transport and sanitation. Furthermore, urban dwellers are not exempt from climate-related disasters. In the May 2018 floods, up to 2,270 homes were partially damaged in Colombo —the highest number in the country.

“Urban dwellers must also be made disaster-resilient,” Dr. Arunatillake said. “Some of their livelihoods are also affected by climatic changes.” She said the best way to manage the entire situation was to build awareness on mitigation. “It is important to develop technologies that can withstand climate change, and the responsibility for this should come from the highest level, as this is a cross-cutting issue,” she said.

Karunaratne was also emphatic that the government must do more to cushion the hardships that farmers face as a result of climate change. “There are many issues farmers undergo,” he said. “But if I were to categorise them into four key areas, it would be production, storage, innovation and fair price.”

“Production cost is high,” Karunaratne said. “It is only when the government reduces the price of seeds, fertilisers and agro-chemicals that we can make a profit. Because no matter what the production cost is, we can’t sell our product for too high a price because the consumer can’t afford it. So we have to keep our prices moderate and take the hit ourselves.”

“In addition, no attention is paid to storage,” he said. “Tonnes of produce goes to waste. Produce is loaded into sacks, thrown into lorries, labourers climb into those very lorries and step on the produce. Up to 40 per cent of produce is eventually thrown away. Of a 100 sacks, only 60 make it to the market. This is a national shame.”

Besides storage, preservation and packaging have not kept pace with the times. “No support is given to innovation,” said Karunaratne. “We just produce the raw material. In other countries, techniques like sun-drying have been adopted to preserve and add value to certain types of food. None of that is being done by the farming community in Sri Lanka. These manufacturing networks have to be established to support the farmer. Ultimately, this is a vulnerable community that needs the support of the government for mere existence.”

Cover image credit: canva.com

Some 30 kilometres from Kilinochchi town, the slick, tarred A9 road veers sharply off onto a dusty track to the left, taking us on a bumpy ride towards Iyakkachi. The road is mostly desolate, except for a few people riding slowly on bicycles under the hot northern peninsula sun. Vast tracts of land lie undisturbed on either side, until quite suddenly, you come upon a large construction; a new Hindu kovil glistening in the morning sun. Around the kovil is the usual humdrum of human religious activity, but the dusty road ploughs straight past onto more uninhabited land. But within moments, we spot, on the right, a small compact house in pink - and another one, metres away, and yet another one in equidistance. This is the ‘village’ for war widows we’ve come looking for, the ‘Param Puja Papa Ashram’.

“The Param Puja Papa Ashram was established in 2013 by a 73-year-old philanthropist, Ponnambalam Paramalingam”, said Navitheesan (41), who oversaw the ashram. Paramalingam, by birth a Sri Lankan, now domiciled in India, was motivated by his guru Swamy Raamadhasar to commit his life to help others, and had funded the ‘village’ himself, with the specific purpose of providing war widows with homes. “Widows, and children, are left most vulnerable by the war,” Navitheesan, who goes by the name Neethan, said as he explained why Paramalingam had decided to support them. There are about 60 homes on 60 acres, of which 50 homes are inhabited by war widows. Other families, affected by the war in other ways —the death of a father or the disability of a primary breadwinner — have also been included in the village.

Kovi Regan Kovila Santhi is a 26-year-old, whose husband is missing since the end of the war. She now shares her home with her grandparents and ten-year-old son, on whom their hopes are pinned. A slim young woman with vacant eyes and an expressionless face, Kovila Santhi contributes very little to the conversation, preferring to let her grandparents take the lead. Rajalakshmi, 67, is a tiny, emaciated-looking woman, dressed in a bright green kaftan, with wisps of white hair tied tightly in a knot at the back on her head; a livewire, berating her 78-year-old husband Lechamanan Ganapatty in Tamil, whenever he spoke out of turn, deftly taking control of the narrative, relating the events of the past and situation of the present.

The hallway in the two-bedroom house is dark and unfurnished, except for a small, blue, wooden 3 x 1 table in one corner on which is a heap of paper cuttings and a bottle of coagulated glue. A number of plastic chairs have been dragged out from one of the rooms for us to sit on. The absence of furniture and decor is offset by the bright walls, on which are glued the colourful, smiling faces of Tamil and Hindi teledrama stars, chubby babies, fluffy puppies and Hindu deities. Lechamanan Ganapatty is the sole breadwinner, Rajalakshmi said, earning Rs. 9, 000 a month as a security guard in Kilinochchi. The family barely manages to get by. “We cook and eat one day, and we don’t eat the next day,” Rajalakshmi said gesturing in hopelessness. “That is how we manage.”

Despite having a fairly comfortable and new home, with the promise they will never be turned out and can live there for generations to come, Kovila Santhi and her family live in isolation and dire poverty. “No one looks out for us,” Rajalakshmi said bitterly. “Not the government, not NGOs, not anyone. And we don’t go to ask the neighbours for anything,” she said, with a touch of pride. Kovila Santhi would like to work someday, in agriculture, but there are no jobs nearby and she is still unwell, dealing with trauma from the end of the war, and the loss of her husband. Kovila Santhi had no closure, Rajalakshmi explained, as it was not even possible for her to find her husband’s body. His presumed death, just one in many casualties at the end of the brutal war that waged on for over 30 years.

Further down in the village, we come to a wild garden, brimming with life and bright colourful flowers. At the entrance, we are met by 48-year-old Mohandas Padimani, a tall and graceful woman clad in a blue silk saree, who greets us with a welcoming smile and hands folded in greeting - ‘vanakkam’, she said. Padimani, who lost her husband Sinnathurai Mohandas in March 2009, arrived at the ashram in 2014, and lives there with her 17-year-old-daughter and 15-year-old son. Padimani performs menial labour at the ashram and earns Rs. 13, 000 a month, which, she admits with some difficulty, is barely enough. To make things easier on her purse strings, Padimani and her teenage daughter tend to their garden where they grow a variety of fruit and vegetables they can use to supplement their diet.

Padimani’s house too, is dark and crowded. There is a mattress on the floor of the hallway, and a bale of barbed wire lies wound tight in a corner. Miscellaneous household items, shopping bags, garlic, and a slipper lie around, while from the kitchen comes the sound of Padimani’s daughter scraping coconut in preparation for lunch. Her two teenage children are not all she had, Padimani tells us, she had five. Two are with her, two are married, and one is missing. Padimani suddenly breaks down in tears, telling us of the 18-year-old son she lost in February 2009, a month before her husband died. “They were shelling,” she said, in broken sobs, tears coursing down her face, as she fiddled with the knotted end of her saree, “and we packed up to leave. He went ahead with some things strapped on his bicycle, and we never saw him again.”

Padimani has been looking for her son since. “If he is still there, he will come to us,” she said to us, brokenly, “but at the same time, I can’t believe he is dead.” She recounted how she had been to the Boosa, Trinco and Batticaloa camps to see if her son was held there, but was not able to find him. “He was so loving and caring,” she said. “He would wake me up in the morning and give me my milk, he was the good one.” The families of the disappeared protesting in the North and East have often asked her to join them to pressure the government to reveal the whereabouts of their loved ones, but Padimani could only attend once. “Who will look after the rest of the family if I go?” she asked. But when asked if she blames anyone for her losses, she is quick to emphatically shake her head, “No,” she said in quiet resignation. “It is our fate.”

Outside, on the porch of a compact pink house within the ‘village’ premises, a squalling baby of not more than two months lay in a plastic bassinet, naked and slathered in oil. The uncomfortable cries of the tiny infant in the afternoon heat soon drew the attention of his youthful parents, who came outside to pick him up, greeting us as they did. Sajipa is 22 and lives with her 25-year-old husband Rasaiah Santharas, a labourer. The home was given to her mother, Vijayamani (49), after her father Selvarasam took his own life at the end of the war in 2009. Originally from Chavakacheri, Sajipa and her family moved into the ashram in 2015, after they were recommended as suitable for aid by the area Grama Sevaka (village officer), and have been living there since.

Sajipa, who has been married for three years now, tells us she worked briefly in Saudi Arabia, but left because she was unhappy. Now, here in Kilinochchi, she has no prospects. “We would like to open a ‘fancy items’ shop,” she said, but they need a vehicle and lack the funds. With Sajipa’s mother, who works at the Holy Cross Hospital in Jaffna and lives with her sister elsewhere in Jaffna, Sajipa and her baby rely on the money her husband Santharas makes as a mason. But work is not steady, Sajipa told us, and with the rainy season coming, it will become harder to manage. Still, the young couple appears buoyant with youthful optimism, their world centred around the tiny life in front of them. As the baby cries, Santharas soothes him, swaddling the infant lovingly in a soft cloth.

The Param Puja Papa Ashram is arranged in neatly allocated lots, with large sandy roads running through them. The houses are separated from each other by fences made from saplings bound tightly together, covered over with plaited coconut palm fronds. The ashram is administered from a small yellow office within the village, manned by a staff of about five people and employs about 15 residents for upkeep and labour, paying them about Rs. 600 a day. The results show; the ashram is cleaned, watered and well-maintained. Pointing to a lake in the distance, Neethan explained that one of the first things Paramalingam did was to build a lake, because “everything centres around water”. The water is used for the village and also for agriculture, that Paramalingam encourages villagers to be involved in.

Reminding us to remove our footwear, Neethan led us into an airy hall, in which large framed pictures of Paramalingam’s guru Swamy Raamadhasar were hung. This was the ‘prayer’ hall, where the villagers met morning and evening, although Neethan was quick to point out prayers are not mandatory. “Anyone can come if they want to,” he said. The ashram’s philosophy is simple; “We have no class, caste, or race distinctions here,” Neethan added. “Everyone is equal.” He explained that vulnerable families were chosen in conjunction with the area grama sevaka and gifted a home and an alternate lifestyle and encouraged to live freely in the village for as long as they wanted to, and their children after them. But although they are allowed to live for free and not asked to pay rent, the land is is not written to them, to prevent the villagers from selling the property.

Neethan himself lives in the village with his wife Kamalini (40) and 4-year-old son Biranad. He was working with Paramalingam in Dubai when the philanthropist asked him to take over management of the ashram, and Neethan complied. Paramalingam visits the village about once a year, to inquire into the wellbeing of the villagers, and is often accompanied by other spiritual gurus, teachers and students, who live in separate quarters in the ashram and hold special sessions for the residents while they are there. The village, or ashram, is largely isolated from the rest of the district, and while it subscribes to the spiritual ideals of its founder, it cannot offer solutions to the economic hardships faced by its inhabitants. Indeed, as Neethan explains, the ‘village’ does as much as it can. The rest is up to the government, which must expand on its plan to develop the northern province, providing income opportunities for all.

Transport and Civil Aviation Minister Arjuna Ranatunga has created a new Facebook page to encourage the public to report on corruption and other irregularities within the transport sector.

It is a rainy morning in Jaffna when we set off in a rickety three-wheeler to find 32-year-old Amarasingham Narthanan, a carpenter and woodcarver devoted to creating colourful chariots used in religious processions by Hindu kovils. The road to Araly winds along the coast of Jaffna. Strong gusts of salt-sprayed air whip through the open sides of the taxi as it teeters on its three wheels trying to plough ahead in the face of an impending storm.

Araly is a small fishing village eight kilometres north of Jaffna town, where many of the ‘asari’ caste of master carpenters also live. The asari have traditionally engaged in carving figurines and chariots for Hindu kovils. Narthanan is a sixth generation carpenter. A slight, fair young man with a betel-stained mouth, Narthanan at first refused to maintain eye contact. But before long, he grew excited and dug through drawers to find dusty cardboard sheets on which he had sketched fantastic figures of birds and beasts, dancing male and female figures and intricate architectural designs for the chariots that he makes with the help of a team of about eight workmen.

For such a quiet man, he is also remarkably resolute in his belief that he is one of the best in the business. “There are many other carpenters in the village,” he said. “But people come to me for my skill and my talent.” Narthanan has only completed three chariots so far. His father, he told us, made as many as 25 before he died in 2015 at the age of 72 – the same year that Narthanan entered the business full-time as a 22-year-old. But three chariots is nothing to scoff at. Chariot-making is a painstakingly intricate task that takes as long as 12 months to complete, and Narthanan is still a fledgeling—albeit very talented— ‘master carpenter’.

Narthanan’s home, where he lives with his ageing mother and young wife, is fairly large, yet sparsely furnished and painted a shade of mint green. High up on one wall is a large picture of his father, Sinnathambi Amarasingham, heavily garlanded in jasmine flowers, with the scent of a joss stick permeating the air.

Next door to his home is a sizeable plot of land, in the middle of which is a wooden shed. This is where Narthanan and his team create the chariots used in Hindu kovil processions. The sound of hammering reaches us as we approach the shed. An elderly man seated on the ground is chiselling a figure out of a wooden block. Not too far from him is a mounted lion – a menacing beast painted orange and red, mouth open to display white incisors. At the back of the shed, an unfinished, headless torso stands dressed in what looks like bygone military regalia, while little blocks of other carved figures lie scattered on the workbenches.

Although time-consuming, chariot-making is a lucrative business. “The total cost for building a chariot is about six million rupees, and I get 2.5 million,” Narthanan said. He said the commissioning kovil raises money for building the chariot from villagers and devotees, especially those from the diaspora. Apart from chariot building, Narthanan also makes the ‘thavil’ and ‘natheswaram’, two musical instruments used by Tamils in the north on festive occasions. He is also retained by a number of kovils to perform periodic maintenance work throughout the year. Narthanan enjoys his work, considering it a fulfilment of his destiny.

But for now, Narthanan is only just establishing himself. He trained and worked briefly as a banker, before his father’s death pushed him into his current line of work. But he has no regrets. He smiles sheepishly, finally making eye contact with us, happy that he been able to share his love for his craft. Pointing to the picture of his father up on the wall, he says, with a shake of his head, almost as if he is unable to believe it — that his father would be very happy too.

Cover image courtesy: londonhindutemples.com

An eventful year is coming to a close, and as we enter a new one, we think it is fortuitous to remember the old adage by which Confucius swore—“Study the past if you would define the future.” Political infighting resulted in a mega-crisis that shook the stability of the country; racial riots erupted in the Eastern and Central provinces, and several other matters of little consequence took up national headlines. On the bright side, Sri Lanka made some progress in a number of areas, won awards and became sporting champions. Here is a summary of the highs and lows of this year:

The events that contributed to the ‘Constitutional crisis’ are probably the freshest on our collective minds. Tensions that had been simmering all year between the leaders of the two biggest parties representing the national unity government—President Maithripala Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe—caused the President to try on more than one occasion to remove the Prime Minister from the post. He covertly sponsored a no-confidence motion against the Prime Minister in April, which was successfully defeated. But in a surprise move in October, he engineered the defection of the UPFA from the coalition and used that as grounds to appoint a new Prime Minister — none other than his erstwhile nemesis, former President Mahinda Rajapaksa. The move sharply divided the country on the question of the constitutionality of the President’s actions, which was finally put to rest by the Supreme Court earlier this month. The apex court ruled that the President’s actions were, in fact, unconstitutional. Rajapaksa subsequently resigned from the post, ending a seven-week long siege on democracy. Ranil Wickremesinghe took oaths as Prime Minister two days later.

While tensions were simmering beneath the surface of the national unity government, racial riots broke out on an unprecedented scale in the eastern and central provinces in February-March this year. The riots were precipitated by solitary events. In Ampara, a group of Sinhalese men accused a Muslim ‘hotel’ owner of attempting to cause infertility by adding ‘sterilisation pills’ to their food, and in Teldeniya, four Muslim men assaulted a Sinhalese lorry driver for causing minor damage to their vehicle, resulting in his death. Angry mobs reacted in both situations, burning mosques and Muslim-owned shops and homes.

Fanned by flames on social media, the violence spilled over to other districts in the central province, prompting the President to declare a state of emergency. The police, Army and STF were sent in to regain control, and social media was banned to stop the proliferation of racially-instigated, inciteful content. Over 200 people were arrested, and the riots were finally quelled on March 10. A three-judge panel was subsequently set up to investigate the incident. Meanwhile, Bodu Bala Sena General Secretary Galagodaaththe Gnanasara Thera, who played a role in inciting communal violence against Muslims in 2014, was convicted in a separate case of four charges of contempt of court and sentenced to 19 years of rigorous imprisonment, to be completed within six years.

The investigation into the Central Bank bond scam, which has its roots in 2015, saw some progress this year, with the former owner of Perpetual Treasuries Arjun Aloysius and CEO Kasun Palisena being arrested. The two are currently in remand custody. Former Central Bank chief Arjuna Mahendran is still on the run, despite repeated attempts to have him arrested. Mahendran was at the helm of the country’s monetary authority when Perpetual Treasuries, the company founded by his son-in-law Aloysius, made unprecedented profits, which led to suspicion that the two had engaged in insider trading. The case is still in court. Meanwhile, UNP MP Ravi Karunanayake, who resigned as Finance Minister after he was implicated in the bond scam by a key witness, was asked to stand down as Assistant Leader of the UNP by an investigative committee looking into the role of UNP MPs implicated in the bond scandal (there were others too). But he refused to do so.

Sri Lanka made some progress on the rights front this year, specifically in women’s rights. But these small victories were marred by regressive policies. Finance Minister Mangala Samaraweera started the year by lifting a 60-year-old ban on selling alcohol to women. He also revoked regulations on employing females in places selling alcohol. Unfortunately, the decision was reversed by President Sirisena five days later, despite then Economic Affairs Minister Harsha de Silva describing the law as encouraging gender-based discrimination and Verité Research, a prominent independent think tank, pointing out that the President’s actions were unconstitutional and an infringement on fundamental rights.

In preparation for the local government elections in February, the Human Rights Commission set up a dedicated Elections Desk to handle complaints, but also to ‘pay particular attention to the rights violations of women candidates’— a laudable move. But although 25% female representation in Parliament was made mandatory in 2016, party leaders in Parliament decided to disregard 25% mandatory female representation in local government bodies due to ‘practical difficulties’, a move UNP MP Rosy Senanayake challenged in the run-up to the election. Senanayake was later elected the first female mayor of Colombo.

Marking small victories, in May, erstwhile Education Minister Akila Viraj Kariyawasam ruled that school teachers were no longer required to wear sarees during advanced stages of pregnancy, and a law allowing women with two or more children only 42 days of maternity leave was amended to allow all new mothers 82 days maternity leave. Later in the year, the Supreme Court changed a law in effect from 1978 by allowing female attorneys-at-law to wear dresses and trousers.

Sri Lankan-born scientist Hasini Jayatilaka was thrust into the public eye when she found a mention on the 2019 edition of the Forbes ‘30 Under 30-Science’ list. Jayatilaka was nominated for her discovery of a signalling pathway that controls how cancer cells metastasize through the body, now dubbed the ‘Hasini Effect’, and a concoction of drugs she had created to slow—and in some cases stop—certain cancers from spreading.

Marine biologist Asha de Vos won a Professional Achievement award at the British Council Global Alumni Awards and also made it to the BBC 100 Women 2018 , a list of ‘women leaders, trailblazers and everyday heroes from more than 60 countries’, for her work on ocean conservation.

In sports, Sri Lanka continued to perform dismally in cricket, with the administration coming under fire for mismanagement. Accusations of pitch fixing followed, and former cricketing stalwarts Kumar Sangakkara, Mahela Jayawardene, Roshan Mahanama and Muttiah Muralitharan refused Sports Minister Faiszer Mustapha’s invitation to be involved, even as consultants.

Despite these lows, Johann Peiris completed his trek up Mt. Everest to become the second Sri Lankan, and first Sri Lanka male, to summit the world’s highest mountain. Sri Lanka also won the 2018 Carrom World Cup. The national women’s netball team won the 2018 Asia Netball Championships for the fifth consecutive time; Hasini Ambalangodage won gold at badminton (mixed), and Parami Maristella won bronze at the 2,000-metre steeplechase at the first ever Youth Olympics. The year ended with ‘Sri Lankan Hulk’ Lucion Pushparaj winning in his category at the WBPF World Bodybuilding and Physique Sports Championships, despite being locked in a feud with the national governing body.

In all, it’s been a mixed year, with lots of lows tempered by some highs. We look forward to what is to come in 2019.

At an intersection on a busy street in bustling Kotahena is a shrine for St. Anthony, patron saint of lost things. Milling in through the three glass doors of the imposing Neoclassical façade are ordinary people wanting extraordinary miracles. The St. Anthony’s Shrine in Kochchikade has a reputation for granting the wishes of those who fervently pray at its altars, but is equally well-known for is its ability to draw a multi-religious audience.

Outside the church, beggars sit, reliant on the charity and goodwill of passersby. Across the street, numerous small shops have sprung up, catering specifically to the Catholics that congregate morning and evening at the church. Rows of plaster statues of Mary and Jesus line the store walls, strings of coloured rosaries are laid out on countertops and cases of containers filled with crosses and pendants fill the empty spaces.

But when Christmas approaches, the row of shops on the street opposite the ‘Kochchikade Church’, as it is known in common parlance, take on a more festive appearance. There is a sudden proliferation of nativity cribs — rough, wooden skeletal structures, with a thatched, straw ‘roof’, stacked atop each other in varying sizes. Some of the cribs are empty, some contain plaster figurines of the nativity scene: Mary and Joseph, the baby Jesus in a manger, the three wise men, and an assortment of attending animals.

Tuan Saeed is 36 and has been in the crib-making business for 12 years now. He got into it quite by accident — he was hired to help someone make cribs one year, and decided to get into the business himself the next year. Business has been good, Tuan said. When he began, he was selling cribs at Rs. 60-70, now he retails them at over Rs. 1,000. The cribs require the most basic elements to make—wood, straw and nails—and Tuan makes a decent profit from what he sells during the season.

“I start preparing from around September,” he said, explaining that it was because he didn’t want to be rushed during the season. “The first set of cribs go into the shops around December 10 — maybe 10 to 20 of them. But by the end of the season, I would have sold about 600,” he estimated, adding with a laugh that people even bought cribs on their way home after mass early on Christmas morning. “Maybe they didn’t have time before,” he hypothesised, with a shrug of his shoulders.

Tuan, who is from nearby Modera, spends the rest of the year driving a three-wheeler, but said that selling cribs during Christmas is more profitable than his other occupation. In fact, Tuan is thinking of entering the Vesak kudu (Vesak lantern) market as well, when that holiday comes around mid-next year. A Muslim by faith, Tuan knows very little about Christmas. “It’s the day Jesu-baba (Baby Jesus) was born,” he said, but added frankly that he didn’t know much more.

Elsewhere in Dehiwala, Sanjeewa Pubudu Nanayakkara (33) has set up a stall alongside the pavement outside the St. Mary’s Church, where he sells nativity cribs in assorted sizes. Unlike Tuan’s collection, Sanjeewa’s cribs are arranged on shelves, in neat rows, and according to size — each complete with a little nativity family. Sanjeewa is a large man with a mop of oily, curly hair, and a belly that hangs over his trousers. He has been selling cribs since he was 18—for 15 years now—but grumbles that business now is “not good”.

“Before this, it was just me doing this business,” he complained. “Now there is competition, others are also selling cribs.” Like Tuan, Sanjeewa is a three-wheel driver when he isn’t making and selling cribs, but laments that his vehicle was recently seized for non-payment, and that he is left with few other options. As we speak, families stop to inquire how much a crib costs, and Sanjeewa breaks away to attend to them, before resuming the conversation.

Sanjeewa is married and is the father of a three-year-old girl. He is a practising Buddhist and lives in Kalutara from where he ferries cribs to Colombo in his truck every morning. Sanjeewa said he had an arrangement with the church that allowed him to set up his stall by around the second week of December. “I used to sell close to 1, 000 cribs during the season, but now it’s much less,” he said.

Sanjeewa is not sure why people buy less from him, and his glowering face was an indication of his disinclination to discuss the topic any further. But it is clear the market for cribs is robust and thriving.

It is unclear when the practice of making cribs came to Sri Lanka. But legend has it that the tradition of making cribs, or crèches as they are also known, began in Italy in 1223.

While living in the town of Greccio, St. Francis of Assisi, patron saint of animals and the natural environment, asked a man by the name of Giovanni Velitta to enact the scene of Christ’s birth at Bethlehem, which Velitta did to St. Francis’s delight. The concept of bringing Bethlehem home spread quickly, and soon there were Christmas cribs in churches and homes all over the world.

Police have launched a new website to report stolen or misplaced mobile phones.

A picture of two Sri Lanka land monitors locked in embrace has made it to the finals of the 2018 Comedy Wildlife Photography Awards.

It has now been six weeks since the country was thrown into disarray after President Maithripala Sirisena replaced his Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe with former nemesis Mahinda Rajapaksa.

In the weeks that followed, legislators engaged in bitter political warfare, trying to outmanoeuvre each other in support of their candidate for the coveted position of power.

But former President Mahinda Rajapaksa faced the toughest obstacle to his political comeback this week, when the Court of Appeal issued an interim order preventing him and his government from functioning.

The order, the first of its kind, rendered the country once more effectively government-less, and reinstated the President’s chosen Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa as mere parliamentarian.

The interim relief was the result of a Writ of Quo Warranto filed by 122 MPs challenging Rajapaksa’s continuation in office even after successive no-confidence motions (NCM) were passed in Parliament.

In its decree, the Court of Appeal said that the magnitude of damage caused by allowing a set of persons not entitled in law to function (as the Prime Minister of the Cabinet of Ministers or any other minister of the government) would be “very high”, “irreparable or irremediable” and have “far-reaching consequences to the whole country.”

In stripping away the legitimacy of the purported government, the Court of Appeal was also sending a strong message to those that continue to refer to the former President as Prime Minister, and his purported government as Cabinet or state ministers, that they could be held in Contempt of Court.

The interim injunction order by the Court of Appeal has pushed President Maithripala Sirisena on the backfoot (though not yet against the wall), forcing him to call a meeting with ministry secretaries to instruct them on how to run government affairs until the matter of government is decided.

However, UNP parliamentarian J. C. Alawatuwala told the press, that as per Article 52 (2) of the Constitution, the President’s meeting with ministry secretaries is unconstitutional.

“According to Article 52 (2), it is only the line minister that can direct the secretary to his ministry and other officials. The Constitution also states that there should be a Cabinet of ministers to administer the republic. According to the no-Confidence motions passed in Parliament and the interim order issued by the Court of Appeal, there is no Cabinet. Therefore, Sri Lanka no longer has any authority that can instruct ministry secretaries," Alawathuwala reasoned.

The UNP’s official Twitter account also said Sri Lanka was effectively under a dictatorship, as the President, who remains the only centre of political power in the country, was refusing to appoint a government that commands a majority in Parliament.

However, former President Mahinda Rajapaksa has publicly expressed his disagreement with the Court of Appeal order. In an official statement Rajapaksa argued that only the Supreme Court had the authority to interpret matters related to the Constitution, and has had his lawyers appeal against the Court of Appeal interim order in the Supreme Court.

While Rajapaksa continues his battle for premiership, President Maithripala Sirisena is anticipating a ruling from the Supreme Court on his controversial Gazette dissolving Parliament prematurely on November 9. Hearing began before a seven-member bench, presided by Chief Justice Nalin Perera.

At the hearing, lawyers for petitioners and intervening petitioners filed their submissions for and against the Gazette notification, while Attorney General Jayantha Jayasuriya, the Chief Legal Officer of the government had also presented submissions justifying President Sirisena’s action.

On Friday (December 7), at the end of a four-day marathon session of hearing, the Supreme Court extended the interim injunction against the dissolution of Parliament until the seven-member bench gives its ruling. Proceedings will begin again on Monday (December 11).

Meanwhile, an SLFP party convention at the Sugathadasa Indoor Stadium on Tuesday ( December 4) was a strong indication that the power struggle between President Maithripala Sirisena and ousted Prime Minister Wickremesinghe is far from resolved.

In a lengthy speech, the President criticized Wickremesinghe, accusing him of ruining the country and destroying him. The President described his former Prime Minister as a “political curse” and pledged to fight him.

“He does not suit the country. His politics do not suit the interests of the public. He is divorced from masses,” the President said, with no sign of letting up or reconciling with the former political partner.

The President, however, in concluding his speech, assured the listening public he would end the current crisis within a week, although he didn't say how.

At the meeting with the party leaders of the United National Front (UNF) the previous night ( December 3), President Sirisena had also reiterated his position that he would not reappoint Wickremesinghe as Prime Minister, even if all 225 MPs in Parliament wanted it, bringing the discussion between the two parties to an abrupt end.

Tamil Progressive Alliance (TPA) Leader Mano Ganesan, who attended the meeting with President Sirisena also reported that the President had threatened to step down from office and return to a life of farming if he was pushed against the wall on the matter of reinstating Wickremesinghe.

As the week ends, we find ourselves in much of the same quandary as before, until a political compromise can be reached between the leaders of the country. What is and must be of paramount importance, however, is that all decisions made must be in line with the Constitution.

Ending days of speculation, President Maithripala Sirisena dissolved Parliament on the night of November 9th, calling for snap elections on January 5th, no more than two days after newly-appointed Government Information Director, Nalaka Kaluwewa, issued an official statement denying what he claimed was a “rumour”, spread by an “organized group”.

It was expected, however, that President Sirisena would either dissolve Parliament or call for a referendum, when it became increasingly clear that he was unable to muster the numbers to prove a majority in the House, despite proroguing Parliament on October 27 for three weeks (until November 16), to allow his new alliance time to negotiate support.

Days of horse-trading had followed, with MPs being offered as much as Rs. 500 million to switch allegiances, but despite the pressure—and indeed, several deflections—the scales began to tip in United National Party (UNP) leader Ranil Wickremesinghe’s favour, particularly when minority parties such as the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), the Tamil Progressive Alliance (TPA) and the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) pledged their support to “democracy” in the House.

This larger coalition of minority parties, which includes the Sri Lankan Muslim Congress (SLMC), the All Ceylon Makkal Congress (ACMC) and the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU), together with the United National Front (UNF), agreed that former President Mahinda Rajapaksa’s appointment as Prime Minister is extra-constitutional, and joined the international community in calling for the matter to be resolved in Parliament.

Until now, the Sirisena-Rajapaksa alliance had remained resolute in their decision to delay reconvening Parliament until November 16, relenting only at the eleventh hour by issuing a Gazette notification announcing that Parliament would reconvene just two days earlier, on November 14, in partial response to mounting local and international pressure on the new government.

But as the days went by, it became apparent even to MPs and supporters of the United People’s Freedom Alliance (UPFA), that they would soon face a humiliating defeat in Parliament.

In a bid to deflect this unwelcome defeat, a hasty meeting of the UPFA chaired by President Sirisena and former President Mahinda Rajapaksa was called on the morning of November 9, where the future course of action for the party was discussed. Following the meeting, Co-Cabinet Spokesman of the newly-appointed government, Keheliya Rambukwella, admitted to an international newswire service that the new government lacked the numbers.

As domestic and international pressure mounted, President Sirisena and former President Mahinda Rajapaksa met alone for a highly confidential meeting, during which it is assumed they discussed the options of dissolving Parliament or calling for a referendum, although no final decision was arrived at the time. The worrying problem of a clear lack of support within the House forced the two leaders to meet again that evening, where they finally decided they would dissolve Parliament.

Meanwhile, as rumours of a dissolution swilled in the public sphere, citizens gathered for protests day-after-day in the rain at the Liberty roundabout and the international community watched from afar, armed with threats of economic sanctions, senior members of the UNP attempted to facilitate a one-on-one meeting between Wickremesinghe and Rajapaksa last afternoon, in a last-ditch effort to resolve the crisis within Parliament. The desired outcome of the meeting was to ensure smooth proceedings in the House when Parliament convened on November 14.

But while Rajapaksa’s group is said to have initially responded positively to the overture, the conversation stalled after it was understood that a final decision had been made by the President to dissolve Parliament.

The President’s decision was followed by a hurried spate of late-night ministerial appointments. Udaya Gammanpila was appointed Minister of Buddha Sasana and Religious Affairs, C. B. Rathnayake as Minister of Posts and Telecommunications, Johnston Fernando as Minister of Commerce, Consumer Affairs and Christian Affairs, M.L.A.M Hizbullah as Minister of Urban Planning and Water Supply, S.M. Chandrasena as Minister of Plantation Industries, Gamini Lokuge as Minister of Labour, Foreign Employment and Petroleum Resources and Mahinda Yapa Abeywardhana as Minister of Industries and Commerce. This was a strong indication to the watching public that the Sirisena-Rajapaksa alliance were putting in place the mechanics that would enable them to run the government, even after the dissolution of Parliament.

But even before it was decided to dissolve Parliament, the President issued a Gazette notification last morning bringing the Police Department under the Ministry of Defence, headed by him. He followed this with bringing the Government Printers—which issues Gazette notifications—also under the Ministry of Defence.

Fearing trouble, the President also assigned Special Task Force (STF) officers to guard the Government Printers. Also setting stage for the dissolution elsewhere, in an exclusive interview with India Today, former Defence Secretary and Mahinda Rajapaksa’s brother Gotabhaya Rajapaksa, opined that President Sirisena should dissolve Parliament and announce fresh elections to “let the people decide” an end to the political crisis.

At 9. 48 PM, state media confirmed that the President had decreed Parliament dissolved, as at midnight October 9, 2018. Citing Articles 70 (5), 33 (2) (c) and 62 (2) of the Constitution, and provisions of Section 10 of the Parliamentary Elections Act No. 1 of 1981, the President called for General Elections to be held on January 5, 2019, nominations for which would be accepted between November 19-26, 2018. The new Parliament would meet for the first time on January 17, he said.

The UNP, the JVP, the TNA and the international community have reacted strongly to the unconstitutional dissolution of Parliament. Although the Articles cited by the Gazette do indeed give the President the powers to dissolve Parliament, they are overruled by the 19th Amendment to the Constitution, which states very clearly that ‘the President may by Proclamation, summon, prorogue and dissolve Parliament provided that the President shall not dissolve Parliament until the expiration of a period of not less than four years and six months from the date appointed for its first meeting, unless Parliament requests the President to do so by a resolution passed by not less than two-thirds of the whole number of Members (including those not present), voting in its favour.’ The current composition is not due to change til early 2020.

It is clear that in both cases—the sacking of Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe and the dissolution of Parliament—President Maithrpala Sirisena and his one-time nemesis Mahinda Rajapaksa have acted in a manner contrary to the letter and spirit of the Constitution, and were made increasingly aware of the consequences of their actions. This is why, in a last ditch effort, they are appealing to the people, seeking mass approval for their government.

At the Local Government elections in February this year, the Sri Lanka Podu Jana Peramuna (SLPP), whose de facto leader is Mahinda Rajapaksa, won with a resounding majority, sending shockwaves through the national government, which had thought it enjoyed the support of the people. It is this support the Sirisena-Rajapaksa alliance will be banking on as they take to the polls in January 2019, barring any barriers that may come up if the legality of the President’s decisions is questioned by the Supreme Court. The UNP, JVP and ACMC have indicated they will appeal to the Supreme Court seeking redress in this regard. Be that as it may, the country enters its third week of instability and uncertainty, as the battle for power between three key stakeholders heats up in the political arena.

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Every spring for several years, Christina, 41, would go through her belongings and carefully separate in neat piles the things she wanted to get rid of. “Then I would sell the items that were in good condition for a nominal fee and buy new items I really needed with the money I made,” she said. Living in Australia, ‘decluttering’ in this manner was the norm. But when she moved back to Sri Lanka in 2012, Christina realised she had far fewer options.

In Sri Lanka, used goods of high quality are usually sold at auctions such as those at Schokman and Samarawickrema, or through ‘going away sales’ when the owner is migrating overseas and selling all his / her belongings in a hurry at a reasonable price. But seasonal sales of unwanted, used household items were not common until recently. Christina could have advertised in the newspapers, but the thought did not appeal to her as she was not comfortable with sharing her personal information publicly. Since the goal was to earn a small return from what she was selling, donating the items to a charity or using a Facebook group, which required a fee for posting or a commission from the sale, also made little sense.

This was when, on a whim, she decided to create the Facebook group ‘Pre Loved Items For Sale’, with the help of her partner Ramesh, in August 2017. “Within a matter of three hours, we had 150 members,” she said. The group, which now has just under 11,000 members, was initially made up of mums like herself, selling items their kids had outgrown. But now, the group facilitates the sale of not just used items, but also new and antique items, as well as motor vehicles and electronics.

At first, the group only made a limited number of transactions, not exceeding 20-30 sales a day, and Christina observed that the slow pace had something to do with the stigma attached to buying and selling used items. “We had people who initially didn't want to sell using their own profiles, as their sister or cousin was on the group,” she said. But over time, Christina has noticed a slow but definite change in this trend. “Those same people are now happily doing their own posting and sales, having realised they are actually helping someone who can benefit from it,” she said. The group now sells hundreds of items weekly.

“There is no shame in selling used items,” she reiterated. “ Certain things, like baby items—cots, prams, furniture and even toys—are so expensive. Kids clothes also go through a short life cycle, so many parents are grateful [that] they have the option of selling carefully used items. There are also lots of expatriates on the group willing to sell their belongings for very low prices when leaving the country, and this is also a definite bonus for buyers,” she said.

Reselling furniture left behind by expats was the motivation for Michael Moonesinghe, 58, to create the Facebook group ‘ExPats Furniture Service Sri Lanka’, in 2014. An expat colleague leaving the country needed his furniture sold, and Moonesinghe obliged. “Suddenly, several other people were asking me to also help sell their unwanted items,” he said, recounting how the page’s membership grew from 20 to a thousand within a matter of weeks. “We now have 63,500+ members and still receive 50+ applications daily,” he said.

The group grew quickly from selling quality used furniture to selling “pretty much anything and everything”. The most unusual of these sales? “We have even sold not one, but two grave plots!” said Moonesinghe, adding that the group has also helped fledgeling home-based businesses such as ‘Curries’,, which provides homemade rice and curry, and ZOTO Online, an online shopping service, get off the ground. “At our last Community Fair, two ladies came up to me to say thank you – one for being able to pay her children’s school fees herself and the other for helping her regain her self-pride! It makes all the hard work worthwhile,” he said.

The group has today evolved into a community of people not just buying and selling a variety of items, but also posting inquiries, providing advice, and helping others find products and services at reasonable prices. “Many people consider the group as useful as Google or Craigslist, as their queries get answered in real time by other people,” said Moonesinghe. That is partially why he renamed the group ‘The EPFS Community’, to reflect its current, wider use.

The power and reach of this burgeoning community became apparent at a critical time for the country. “The UN asked us last year and the year before to use the platform for getting emergency messages out quickly, as we can reach about 20 times more people on social media in an instant than even the Disaster Management Centre can!” said Moonesinghe. The group has also initiated programmes like ‘FreeCycle’, where items are given away to each other for free. “This sort of recycling reduces waste in landfills and helps others out in the process,” Moonesinghe said.

The group also makes an impact through its commitment to charity. Members are expected to donate 10% of the price of an item sold to a wide range of local charities and worthy causes. Companies marketing products or services are also asked to make a small (between Rs 2, 000-Rs 5,000 per month) contribution to the group’s charity fund. “To date, we have donated over Rs 21 million to over 35 different groups,” said Moonesinghe.

For 26-year-old Ranaka Alwis, ‘Colombo Market Hub’ was an online space to help people find household furniture, appliances and many other items for a reasonable price. “But that is not all,” he told Roar Media, “ I believe it's important to encourage the community to preserve our natural resources by encouraging recycling through reuse.” The group, established in June 2018, first started as a buying and selling service, but soon evolved to its current status as a hub for new business ideas, a forum where economics can be discussed and success stories shared for inspiration.

“As we know, buying and selling used items is a common occurrence in many parts of the world. But in countries like Sri Lanka, there are sometimes cultural repercussions to this that discourage people from engaging, even if they want to. This is where we came in, and I’m so excited that this platform has become more popular and successful than I expected,” said Alwis. “We grew rapidly from three members to 1.5k members within three months.”

While each of these groups has evolved to allow the sale of new, antique and other miscellaneous items, Nalika Unantenne, 39, has stayed focused on managing a platform solely for used items. She created, her Facebook group ‘Preloved Baby Goods Sri Lanka’ in 2017. “I first explored the idea of selling my preloved clothes and shoes on eBay while I was in Melbourne,” she said, “and was surprised at how quickly they went, while I earned handy pocket money in the process.”

Unantenne experimented further after she became a mum, based in Singapore in the years 2011 to 2016. “It was a great way to get rid of baby items and clothes—both mine and those my child had outgrown—knowing that someone else was benefiting from them, and also getting some money back in return,” she said. “Maternity and baby items are NOT cheap! It is also a good thing from an environmental point of view, because it promotes recycling and therefore prevents items from ending up in a landfill.”

Unantenne has been surprised by the popularity of the group. “ Mums really seem to love the idea of passing on their gently used baby items to another parent,” she said.

“There is definitely a new ‘thrift culture’ emerging in Sri Lanka,” she said, “and it’s great! Not only is it a good way of earning some extra income while seeing your items put to good use, but you also avoid throwing them or away – or worse, just hoarding them like a typical Sri Lankan aunty,” she said with a laugh.

When 45-year-old Chathurya\* gave her 13-year-old son a smartphone, she didn’t see any potential drawbacks. “All his friends are hyperconnected, and considering myself a rather progressive mum, I didn’t buy the argument that people were less connected in the ‘real world’ because of friendships pursued online,” she told Roar Media. “Furthermore, given the evidence that the skills acquired during gaming helped develop strategic thinking and motor skills and also knowing the benefits of having knowledge at my fingertips, I thought Mahesh\* would benefit from it,” she said.

The last thing Chathurya expected was for Mahesh to become more and more dependent on the palm-sized device. “He was doing well at school and playing sport for his team and I thought he was well-balanced, but the incessant tap-tapping on the phone increased, especially during the holidays when he had ‘nothing else to do,’” she said. “He also became more and more closed-off and uncommunicative, and although we put this down as ‘normal teenage behaviour’, we were worried.” The tipping point came when Chathurya noticed scores of neat horizontal scars across Mahesh’s forearms.

“I was shaking,” Chathurya told us. “I grabbed his arm and demanded to know what had happened.” But the answer was convoluted: “Mahesh said it wasn’t serious, and that other boys in school were doing it too.” Both alarmed and dissatisfied with his answer, Chathurya pressed further, threatening to take the matter to the school principal. Mahesh’s rambling answers were inconclusive and it was difficult for Chathurya to understand why her son was cutting himself – or indeed, why other kids were harming themselves, as Mahesh had reported.

Chathurya decided to take her son to a counsellor, who referred her to Dr. Lalith Mendis, the former Head of Pharmacology at the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Kelaniya. Dr Mendis, who currently functions as the Director of the Empathic Learning Centre in Colombo and as the Founding Director of the Centre for Digital Science, Right Learning, Career and Choices, campaigns tirelessly against digital addiction. He explained clearly the way digital devices affect the brains of children and teenagers, impacting their behaviours.

“Reducing screen time from a young age is very important,” Dr. Mendis said, explaining that children should be allowed no more than 25 minutes in front of a television, iPad or another screen. “Cartoons with a high pixel per inch (PPI) and rate of pixel change, coupled with the intensity and variability of sound and colours causes ‘pixel-driven neurotoxicity’, a condition that causes attention span deficits, boredom and chronic fatigue from dopamine depletion due to digital overuse. Learning becomes uninteresting, the regular becomes boring and the fantastic becomes the craving,” he said.

For children younger than two-and-a-half, digital overuse is believed to contribute to delays in speech development. “Parents come to me and say, ‘My son (or my daughter) is so smart, he knows this and that, and they attribute this knowledge to the digital device(s) the child is using. But later they come to me in tears—their child is finding it difficult to adapt to a new language in school, he is unable to cope—and why? This the reason why,” said Dr Mendis.

The more the digital stimulation, the more dopamine is secreted to the brain. Although dopamine is commonly known as the ‘happy chemical’, what it does is to signal the value of a reward to the brain, which in turn provides motivation. Dopamine does this through what is known as a ‘Dopamine U-Curve’, which refers to when dopamine regulates itself by taking a U-turn, making way for another brain chemical: serotonin. Serotonin conducts a ‘self-check’, evaluating satiety and satisfaction, before taking a U-turn itself, making way once more for dopamine.

Dopamine is usually active in the brain for no more than 45 minutes, before the naturally-occurring U-turn takes place, giving way to serotonin, which is active for about 15 minutes. This is why Dr. Mendis advises that no brain activity is conducted for more than 45 mins without a short break. When children—or adults—spend long hours on a digital device, the brain has no time to evaluate or reflect on the work it has just done to ask the important questions: Have I understood this correctly? Was this done right? What more can be done to make this better?

Once a child, or teenager, becomes accustomed to the ‘high’ derived from the excessive dopamine produced in the brain, she begins to want to replace the high when she becomes dopamine-depleted, which can lead to addiction. As Jomo Uduman, Honorary Director of Mel Medura, an organisation affiliated to Sumithrayo that helps people struggling with behavioural addictions, explained: “The failure to resist an impulse, drive, or temptation to engage in a behaviour that is harmful to the person or to others is the essential feature of an addiction. Digital addiction falls into the category of ‘behavioural addictions’ like pornography, computer gaming and gambling.

“When a person is ‘digitally addicted’, there is an increase in tension, restlessness or irritability that becomes apparent when it is impossible to use the device, and increasing amounts of the activity is needed to reach satisfaction. More alarmingly, social, occupational, academic or recreational activities are often given up or reduced to make room for the behaviour: Digital addiction becomes the most important or central activity, dominating thoughts, feelings and behaviour. In this way, behavioural addicts, such as those digitally addicted, are no different to those who abuse and misuse harmful substances like alcohol and other drugs,” he said.

It isn’t that only young people are susceptible to digital addiction. Jomo explained that the risk of addiction to devices is high for all users. “When excessive time is spent on digital devices, it takes you away from connecting with the real world and importantly, from acquiring life skills that will help you cope with real life situations and the challenges and crises in your life,” he said. “It reduces the opportunity to develop and practice ‘emotional intelligence’—the key elements of which are self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy and social skills—and social scientists have already indicated the importance of emotional intelligence (EQ) over IQ.”

This became apparent to Chathurya, who through counselling and support, discovered that Mahesh was cutting himself in frustration at his inability to deal with the pressures of school and his peers. While at first she couldn’t comprehend why he would choose to hurt himself, Dr. Mendis explained that the behaviour could have physiological reasons. “Although children themselves may not know the psychology behind their actions, references to violence and pain online prompts them to experiment and thereby experience the ‘sweet release’ that occurs when endorphins, a naturally produced morphine, is released in the body,” he said.

Dr. Mendis warned that digital addiction could also affect sleep and eating patterns. “Digital overuse suppresses the secretion of melatonin, the hormone that regulates sleep and wakefulness,” he said, adding that the effect was worse when children use devices after 6 pm, when the brain begins to prepare for sleep. This became evident to Nilu\*, whose 17-year-old son, Thilina\*, began to stay up all night gaming with friends from across the world. “He would still wake up and go to school on time,” she told Roar Media, “and his grades were fine, so I didn’t know if I should make a fuss.”

But a few months on, Thilina’s grades dropped and he found himself floundering, unable to manage his life. It took several months to get him back on track. Nilu wishes parents had more guidance in this area. “ We didn’t know what he was doing was unhealthy, so we didn’t actually prevent him at the beginning,” she said. This is one of the reasons why Dr. Mendis is so committed to educating schools, parents and religious organisations on how important it is to guard children and adolescents against digital addiction. “ It’s best to delay giving a child or teenager a phone until after his Advanced Levels; if possible, even later,” he said.

Jomo also pointed out the responsibility lies with parents to influence the behaviour of children. “Adults must be conscious of their own habits, if they want to moderate their children engaging with technology and media,” he said. “When a child observes a parent frequently distracted by his phone, she may wish to imitate that behaviour. We need to set boundaries for work-time, social networking and family time.” And even while Jomo agreed that less time on social media may be the best solution, “learning how to use social media in a way that will boost well-being rather than hinder it will also play an important part,” he concluded.

[Cover: Director of the Empathic Learning Centre, Dr. Lalith Mendis, who has campaigned tirelessly against digital addiction, sees increased dependency on digital devices as retrogressive rather than progressive. Image courtesy: ft.com]

It is a hot, humid day in Colombo as I make my way to ‘Sumithrayo’, a volunteer-based charity, to speak to Jomo about what the organisation does to prevent suicide in Sri Lanka. Jomo, a tall man with wide shoulders and a blunt, no-nonsense manner, is clear from the outset that he would like to keep much of his personal information—including his last name—to himself, explaining that anonymity is key in the work they do. “Callers must not feel they know who they are talking to,” he said. “If they know who they are talking to, they may be deterred from divulging information about themselves because they are afraid of social consequences. It is absolutely imperative that we remain anonymous.”

Sumithrayo was founded by Joan De Mel (née Hamilton), the British wife of (then) Bishop of Kurunegala, Lakdasa De Mel, in 1974. It functioned as the local chapter of Befrienders International, linked to the Samaritans, and offered support to people experiencing feelings of distress and despair, leading to thoughts of suicide. Volunteers are taken through a training programme educating them on the principles and practices of the organisation, equipping them with how to deal with vulnerable callers. Jomo, who has volunteered for many years now, is very clear that the screening and training process for ‘befrienders’, as they are called, is rigorous and inflexible.

“It is very important that volunteers fit in with the ethos of Sumithrayo”, he explained. This includes having good listening skills, being empathetic, disciplined, accepting and non-judgemental. “We have a very stringent screening process followed by a four-day, non-negotiable training programme,” he said. The training, however, doesn’t guarantee a place within the organisation. Jomo explains that there is a further vetting process to handpick the volunteers finally taken onboard. “We explain to them beforehand so that they are not disappointed if they are not chosen. They may be caring, warm-hearted people, but it is vital that they fit in with the criteria set out by the organisation,” he explained.

He explained that volunteers must be able to sensitively handle the deeply private nature of the information shared with them. “We can’t be shocked or surprised by the stories we hear,” he said. “We have to be able to understand where they are coming from and guide them to a more rational state of mind by empowering them to make better decisions for themselves.” Although he is reluctant to share specifics, considering it a betrayal of trust, Jomo explained, “What you need to understand about people who are suicidal is that they don’t really want to die”. Tracing a finger on the long, blue-shrouded table between us in an empty hall at the headquarters of the Sumithrayo in Colombo, he said quietly, “They just want to end the pain”.

People consider ending their lives for a variety of reasons. In the experience of Ranil Thilakaratne, who manages the team at CCCline, this could be due to abject loneliness, feelings of isolation or that people don’t understand or care, the inability to cope with emotional, physical or sexual abuse, relationship stresses, gender issues, and a variety of other causes. As with Sumithrayo, one of the first things CCCline does is to assess the risk to the person calling. This includes asking the questions, “When did you last feel like ending your life?” or “How do you plan to end your life?” Through a series of similar questions, CCCline and the other suicide helplines that fall within an international framework, ascertain how close the caller is to harming themselves.

If the risk is relatively low, callers are encouraged to maintain a relationship with the helpline to help navigate difficult situations. Just like Sumithrayo, CCCline, established in partnership with Lifeline Australia in 2009, considers building relationships with callers paramount. Although callers are not likely to connect with the same volunteer each time, they are encouraged to speak freely and without shame about their problems — itself a way to remove the restraints placed on them by the situation. Volunteers may gently suggest practical solutions to the problems, but offering outright advice is discouraged, as imposing one's own convictions on a caller is frowned upon.

If the risk is high, volunteers will stay on the phone with callers until they are in a less emotional state of mind, often spending hours talking them out of harm. “We will resort to the simplest things to distract them,” Ranil said. “We’ll ask them what their hobbies are, and what they enjoy most in life. We will also encourage them to tell someone they trust—a sibling, a relative or a friend—about how they are feeling, to ensure they are safe.” Although Sumithrayo and CCCline are unable to follow up with callers, they encourage callers to stay in contact with the helplines and update them on their situation. “We have many people who later thank us for helping them out of a tight spot,” he said.

On a bustling, narrow street in Borella is ‘Shanthi Maargam’, a non-profit organisation founded by public health professional Kamani Jinadasa. That Jinadasa is passionate about what she does is clear from our first meeting, as she animatedly explains why she created what she refers to as a ‘safe space’ for youth, in an otherwise impoverished area. “We want to enhance the emotional wellbeing of young people and create opportunity for learning and growth,” she said, pointing out that this fundamental is driven through their community outreach programmes and free one-on-one counselling sessions by qualified professionals.

Shanthi Maargam operates a helpline, but its services don’t stop there. The staff and volunteers try to provide as many solutions as possible to those seeking help. “We maintain links with a wide network of professionals so that we can connect [clients] to whatever service they need, whether legal or medical,” Jinadasa said. Just like with Sumithrayo and CCCline, when callers indicate a desire to end their lives, counsellors at Shanthi Maargam will assess the risk before deciding on a course of action. But unlike those helplines, Shanthi Maargam is even prepared to take someone at a high risk of suicide to hospital—even without their consent—in order to save their lives.

Jinadasa, who herself underwent a tumultuous, traumatic childhood, was adamant that she wanted to create a place that could engage young people, to help them escape the negativity, strife and neglect they often faced at home. Although her work has been primarily with gender and preventing gender-based violence, Jinadasa has found her calling in enabling and empowering youth to overcome the difficulties in their lives. She has plans to expand the model, although she admits that progress is bound to be slow. Still, she tells me that she is incredibly grateful that Shanthi Maargam is up and running. “It is something I wished I had when I was younger,” she said.

Ranil’s motivation is also personal. “I went through a lot as a child,” he said. “There was a lot of abuse, and it was a very hard and dark period for me. But I came through it, and I knew I had to use that bad experience to make a positive change.” A chance coincidence—witnessing two of his closest friends struggle with severe depression, and being asked to manage the CCCline—firmed up his conviction; he has been involved with the hotline ever since. “It has changed me as a human being,” he said. “I find now that I am kinder, more empathetic. Even the way I talk to people, how I respond to situations—even to difficult people—has changed as a result of my work.” he said.

For Jomo, a man of few words, the reasons are simpler. “I always knew I wanted to do something for people,” he said. “The qualities required for this sort of work resonate with me. I am non-judgemental, I listen, and I care. This is the work cut out for me, so I do it.”

September 10 is World Suicide Prevention Day. You can support Sumithrayo here, CCCline here, and Shanthi Maargam here.

Cover: By talking to people, offering support and a helping hand, volunteers give people the courage to continue with their lives, no matter the circumstances. Image courtesy: buzzfeed.com

In 1997, Ravi Corea had only just returned to Sri Lanka after completing his degree in conservation biology in the United States. Looking to conduct his field internship, Corea was intrigued by the human-elephant conflict – which, in his words, “was one of the big issues at that time in Sri Lanka”. Upon assessing the situation, Corea found that on average, 150 elephants were being killed every year. (Contrast that to last year, and the numbers have climbed to 280).

“Obviously, something is not clicking somewhere,” the 57-year-old wildlife professional told Roar Media. “Either the solutions are not right, or they [the government] are not addressing the real issues driving the conflict”. Corea’s immediate solution to the problem was a concept called ‘fencing elephants out’. Previously, elephants were fenced into parks and Corea felt this was not practical because the elephant, as a highly mobile animal, is difficult to contain.

At the time, it made more sense to protect the village boundaries from elephants – thus fencing them out. The first fence was put up in 1998. “More fences were put up later and then we realised, we can’t be doing fencing all the time – it’s not suitable for all situations and it's also very costly and labour intensive. At the same time, we were always open to looking at other holistic ways of mitigating conflict,” he explained. This is how the idea of Project Orange Elephant was born.

Project Orange Elephant is an initiative conceptualised by the Sri Lanka Wildlife Conservation Society (SLWCS), which Corea founded in 1995. The initiative hinges on using elephants’ natural aversion for citrus plants to protect the crops and homes of farmers from being ravaged. The project is entirely unique to Sri Lanka and came about as the result of field work conducted by the SLWCS in the Wasgamuwa area of the Central Province.

“Anytime we heard a village had been raided by elephants, we would go and do a survey. We [would] speak to the villager whose house or crop was damaged, and ask him, ‘What happened? What did the elephant break? What did the elephant eat? What are the crops he damaged?’ And at the same time, we [would] ask him, ‘What didn’t he eat? What are the crops the elephant didn’t damage?’” From these questions, it emerged that elephants generally avoided citrus plants. “Then we realised, maybe we are on to something here,” Corea said.

The SLWCS approached the Dehiwala Zoo to test their theory that elephants avoid citrus-based fruits. “The zoo was very receptive and very helpful,” Corea said, describing how the SLWCS set up controlled feeding trials that offered elephants nine varieties of food that included favourites such as pumpkin, carrots, cucumbers and bananas. They also included less popular foods, such as mandarin, orange and bitter gourd to test the elephants preferences.

The trials were held three times over a period of six weeks, and analysis of the data accrued from the controlled research indicated that despite having being made to skip a meal so that they were “hungry enough to eat anything”, the hungry elephants would bypass the citrus based fruits. They even avoided a branch of an orange tree that was included “to make sure they won’t even eat the leaves” and instead chose the more popular food varieties such as pumpkin, carrots and bananas each time.

Armed with this data, Corea launched a pilot project in 2006. It was initially met with resistance. “It was not all plain sailing,” he recalls. “It was a pretty big challenge to convince seasonal farmers to grow oranges.” But the idea, he explained, was to give farmers an alternate income, so that they were not entirely ruined when elephants lay waste to their crops. “Project Orange Elephant is basically a holistic approach to create a more non-violent environment in a landscape where people and elephants share space,” he said.

What began as an experiment in one village in Wasgamuwa has now spread to 12 villages in the same area. Although progress has been painstaking and slow, the SLWCS is not done yet. Project Orange Elephant, which won an international award for innovation in 2015, continues to encourage farmers to plant citrus-based fruit trees around their homes to act as a natural deterrent to marauding elephants, and also avail them an additional income should their traditional crops be destroyed.

Last year, the SLWCS and Project Orange Elephant received a shot in the arm: Cargills, the largest chain of convenience stores across the island, was willing to retail oranges the farmers produced at all of its branches, and has done so—within the limit of 200 kg of produce—the last three seasons.

Project Orange Elephant is just one of a number of methods employed by the SLWCS to mitigate the conflict between humans and elephants. Corea tells us of the 24-seater ‘EleFriendlyBus’ initiated at the Weheragala Elephant Corridor in Wasgamuwa for the safety of villagers who risked their lives walking in the Wasgamuwa National Park region. Farmers, pedestrians, and school children often found themselves face-to-face with a potentially aggressive giant, and sometimes shot at it to scare, hurt or kill it.

But ever since the EleFriendlyBus was launched in 2016, “the conflict is definitely non-existent in that area,” Corea said. “You can now see more than 80-90 elephants moving across the corridor now, with no incident.” The EleFriendlyBus, which was privately funded, linked two villages in the forest reserve by providing transport to schoolchildren and adults, keeping them away from the path of elephants.

Corea strongly believes that in addition to loss of habitat, poor land management on the part of the authorities is a primary factor in driving the human-elephant conflict. “There is a complete disregard for environmental issues and ecological factors when land is being utilised or demarcated for development,” he said. Citing the ‘world’s emptiest’ Mattala Airport and the Suriyawewa cricket stadium as examples, Corea said, with frustration evident in his tone, “Even if they know there are elephants, they will still go and initiate mega development projects there.”

Corea is passionate about adopting a more evolved and considered approach to treating elephants. “The elephant is a very intelligent animal. It is a very sentient, social, and gregarious animal. In many ways, it reflects a lot of qualities humans have. So when it comes to treating elephants, we should look at those attributes in the animal, and our attitude to it should be based on that,” he said.

Cover Image Courtesy: pixabay.com

Benislos Thushan, 25, still remembers the first time he heard the word 'period' used freely in conversation in Colombo. Although it was only a few years ago, the openness of the discussion made a mark on him. "It was a culture shock," he said, contrasting it to his conservative upbringing in the North. He noted that there was a lack of dialogue on female reproductive health among schoolchildren in general, and said that teachers must be sensitized to deliver comprehensive sexual education effectively.

This glaring lack of dialogue about sexuality and sexual health, especially among the youth, was the focus of the Generation-to-Generation dialogue on Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) hosted by the UNFPA last month. The taboo and culture of silence that surrounds the subject of sexuality education has potentially damaging effects. Misinformation abounds, and given the lack of access to credible sources of knowledge, schoolchildren and teenagers often look for alternate means of education.

Roar journalist Aisha Nazim, who was also a panelist at the discussion, remembered how boys in her school van would purchase porn for as little as Rs. 20 a CD. “This would be freely passed around, and that’s how many of them learned about sex,” she said. She faulted teachers for skipping lessons on sexual reproduction, revealing that there was ‘lajja’ or a culture of shame associated with asking questions on the topic of Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) when she was growing up.

Although it is unclear if remedial measures have been put in place to give schoolchildren and young adults better access to sexuality education, Director of the Ministry of Education, Renuka Peiris, said that the Ministry wanted to continue to introduce “age-appropriate” sexuality education to schoolchildren. She did acknowledge, however, that since the SRHR was only mandatory at grade eight, students often chose to educate themselves in other ways.

“Only 42% of students in Sri Lanka select health and physical education as a subject and have access to even basic knowledge of SRHR,” she said. “ The rest rely on media and Internet.”

While some panelists expressed the fear that premature exposure to CSE could be seen as endorsing sexual activity, leading to early experimentation, the UNFPA emphasised that studies had in fact proven that CSE did more to delay the onset of sexual activity among adolescents than promote it. In fact, research shared during the discussion showed that in countries where age-appropriate CSE was effectively delivered, the incidence of teenage pregnancy is low.

The role of desire and pleasure in inciting sexual activity among adolescents is rarely, if ever, discussed. Although no solutions were presented to this, Sharanya Sekaram, editor, bakamoono.lk told Roar Media that it was imperative to have an open and honest conversation on the topic. “What we need to do is remove the shame and stigma. After all, sex is fuelled by desire and pleasure, which can vary from person to person,” she said.

She said it was important to create awareness about the importance of respect, consent and bodily autonomy when it comes to sexual relationships. “It's about how you understand your own and other's desires through communication – and respect those boundaries,” she said. Consent is also a crucial element to understanding subjects like masturbation, for instance. “Masturabation is already a part of the current curricula,’ she said. “however it needs to be taught why masturbating in public to someone who hasn't expressed their consent is wrong vs doing it in private.”

Another lack in the current curricula is the fact that it doesn’t include or address sexual activity that is inclusive of the LGBTQI community. Sekaram pointed out that while the law prohibits “sex against the order of nature”, it is important to widen our language and discussions. “It's about scientific facts. Homosexuality is no longer classified as a mental illness, even by the Sri Lanka College of Psychiatrists. We need to understand that heterosexuality is not the only reality and young LGBTQI people now know where to access the information they need.”

Parliamentarian Sudarshani Fernandopulle, Deputy Chair of the Parliamentary Sectoral Oversight Committee on Women and Gender, noted that in the modern world, traditional values designed to protect young people have restricted them from receiving comprehensive sexuality education. In conclusion, Madusha Dissanayake, Assistant Representative, UNFPA in Sri Lanka pointed out that Sri Lankan society should sufficiently evolve to where we are unafraid to say the words ‘orgasm’ and ‘masturbation’ in public. “Sex should be treated as a positive subject for discussion so that we can ensure every young person's potential is realized,” she said.

Sri Lanka has a youth population of over 4.4 million, but according to the National Youth Health Survey (2013) 50% of young people have limited knowledge about sexual and reproductive health. Although teenage pregnancy in Sri Lanka is relatively low at 5.2%, sub-national disparities exist with a rate of 8-9% in some localities. Further, incidents such as that which took place in Ampara, where inaccurate information relating to reproductive health caused mass hysteria and violence (after a Muslim shop owner was accused of adding ‘sterilisation pills’ into food being served to Sinhala patrons), highlight the need for sexuality education to become more widely available from a young age in Sri Lanka.

Given Sri Lanka’s 1,340-km-long coastline, seafood is a readily available source of nutrition for a majority of the population. The benefits of seafood fish are numerous and well known. They are a rich source of omega-3 fats, vitamin D and selenium, and are high in protein, and low in saturated fat. In a country like Sri Lanka, where many communities eschew the consumption of meat, fish provides a widely accepted— and healthier—alternative.

Given that Sri Lankans have traditionally been farmers and fisherfolk, it is not uncommon for meals to contain fish in either fresh, dried or canned form. “The market for fish in Sri Lanka is tremendous,” said British fish biologist, Dr. Steve Creech, while talking to Roar Media. So much so that suppliers are unable to meet demand. “Fish is expensive because the country can’t meet demand, but the market still exists. In fact, Sri Lanka has to import dry and canned varieties to meet demand,” he said.

This is despite the fact that only a small portion of the fish caught off Sri Lankan shores make it to the international market. These include the yellowfin and bigeye varieties of tuna, swordfish and seafood such as prawns, cuttlefish, mud crab and lobster. “Over 160 other species of fish are caught and make their way into the local market,” he explained, adding that this demand makes it difficult for exporters to find sufficient fish stocks to sell to the international market.

Global fisheries are affected by several issues including illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing (which leads to overfishing of exploited species); bycatch or when untargeted fish or marine species (such as albatrosses or sea turtles) are caught unintentionally; and plastics pollution and heavy metal pollution, among others. The Sri Lankan government has already proscribed bottom-trawling, a harmful method of fishing, and taken a tough stance against IUU.

But certain issues persist. A paper published early this year indicates that small-scale fisheries in Sri Lanka are throwing away more marine species than they keep. Of the 62 species recorded in the survey, more than 80% were routinely discarded as bycatch, the paper found.

The paper recommended that sustainable management practices be combined with community schemes to reduce unnecessary seafood waste. “Communities with successful and inclusive cooperatives are better off than those without. Cooperatives have the potential to empower small-scale fishers against environmental and socioeconomic shocks”, the paper pointed out, noting that the millions of small-scale fisheries all over the world could maximise long-term benefits by dealing with the threats of fisheries mismanagement, livelihood insecurity and poverty.

On the topic of plastics pollution and and heavy metal contamination, Dr. Creech says Sri Lankan fisheries are minimally impacted. In 2017, a study raised concerns that heavy metal contamination in coastal sediments in Sri Lanka’s highly urbanized coastal belt is a major environmental concern. But Professor H. M .T. G. A. Pitawala, a geochemist and key contributor to the study, told Roar Media that although “there is some heavy metal contamination in urban areas, it did not affect rural areas, or areas that affect fisheries.”

Dr. Creech is of the opinion that fish caught within Sri Lanka’s maritime borders “are of excellent health.” “They have a short supply chain, as a result of which the fish delivered to the market is fresh,” he pointed out. In fact, the Ministry of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources Development noted last year that per capita fish consumption had increased across the country by 2.7 percent to 46.7 kilos, except in the estate sector of the Central Province, where it remained low at approximately 450 grams. The total fish production for 2017 was 389,500 MT.

Around the world, in some countries like Thailand, the seafood industry has been plagued with rampant human rights abuse issues. According to Dr Creech, this is one more area in which Sri Lankan fisheries have excelled.

“Take a look at the Thai industry and all the human rights concerns linked to it,” he said. “Sri Lanka has no drastic labour concerns.” He pointed to the fact that Sri Lanka employs 273, 350 marine and inland fisherfolk, 11, 250 in processing plants and 2,115,400 informal sector workers, employed in local markets etc. “This is a total of 2.4 million persons, or a 28.16% workforce employed by the industry, proving that fisheries continues to be a strong sector in the economy,” he said.

Globally, the fisheries industry is grappling with a number of well-publicised issues. Governments and organisations around the world are working hard to change the trajectory of the industry that was said to be in danger of collapsing by 2048, if ocean species were not better managed. (But the latest report on The State of Fisheries and Aquaculture (SOFIA) published by the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations, projects that by 2030, global fish production is actually set to grow to 201 million tonnes, an almost 18 per cent increase from the current 171 million tonnes.) This growth is contingent on fixing the problems that currently plague the industry.

It is clear that Sri Lanka remains relatively unaffected by many of these issues, but it is still important to remember the benefits of consuming seafood that has been sustainably sourced. It is not only good for the ocean, but also good for you.

Cover: Fish is high in protein, low in fat, and a rich source of vitamins and nutrients, but is it being sourced sustainably? Photo courtesy: pixabay.com

On the beach, sheltered from the sun under an awning, 22-year-old Ashan and his French girlfriend Sarah sat facing the camera. The couple were affectionate with each other, and continued a conversation in undertones, punctuated with laughter, until they were posed questions, which they answered seriously.

Sarah met Ashan in Unawatuna on her first visit to Sri Lanka, in 2016. She returned a year later to kindle a relationship with him. “We were just friends, and we talked. Later feelings started, and then this happened. Now he is my boyfriend,” the 28-year-old told us, snuggling up to him.

Sarah, who was employed in the hospitality sector in France, left her job to move to Sri Lanka. What will she do for work here? She said she plans to help Ashan with the diving centre he runs and perhaps help expand his business – maybe a restaurant, maybe more water sports, who knows?

On the surface, Ashan represents the stereotype of Sri Lankan men on the beach: he is a ‘beach boy’, with seemingly limited prospects and a foreign girlfriend, whom he plans to benefit or live off.

But watching Ashan share a simple meal of paan and curry with Sarah for breakfast, and the easy manner with which she mingles with his friends, who are also beach boys, indicates that there is certainly more to the story than meets the eye.

Ashan doesn’t view himself as a beach boy. He is just a boy who grew up on the beach where he runs a diving centre owned by his father, he said. He is referred to as a beach boy, not by the foreign men and women frequenting the beaches, but by the affluent crowd from Colombo, he explains.

Ranga, 22, agrees with Ashan. He too doesn’t perceive himself as a beach boy. “What is a beach boy?”, he asks? Walley kollo. Yes, we are boys that grew up on the beach. But this term beach boys is just a tag made up for us,” he said. “It’s just a name. It means nothing.”

I ask Ranga why he feels beach boys have such a bad rap. “It may be because we are counter-culture,” he said. “If a Sri Lankan woman spent all her time dressed in bikinis and on the beach, she would be called a prostitute. It’s the same with us. We are called names because we live a life that goes against our culture.”

But Ranga enjoys the freedom of his profession. “This is a free and easy life,” he said. As a diving instructor, he spends his days on the beach. He usually operates in Unawatuna, but when the southwest monsoon hits, he moves to Arugam Bay on the southeast coast.

Ranga is happy with what he earns, and says he would not trade his job for a ‘better-paying, normal one’. “We can’t be free in those jobs, like this,” he said. He acknowledged, however, that he was met with resistance when he first began to explore the beach as his primary means of living.

“My parents weren’t too happy at first. They wanted me to get a job inland, away from the beach,” he said. “But I wanted this life. I am passionate about the beach. I taught myself to surf and dive and took the exam to become a certified instructor. Now this is what I do for money.”

Ranga has never involved himself with a foreign woman. He said he had a local girlfriend, who was both understanding and supportive of his lifestyle. “She understands that just because we are surrounded by half-naked women on the beach, does not mean we are romantically involved with them,” he explains.

Indeed, not every beach boy is romantically involved with foreign women they meet on the beach. “It is connection-based,” explains Kumara, who has worked as waiter at restaurants in Unawatuna since 1989. “It is always consensensual, and in many cases, the women pursue these men that they find attractive and exotic.”

Kumara also addresses concerns that frequent, drug-fuelled ‘rave’ parties are a hotbed for lawlessness. “Yes, there are parties every weekend,” he said. “And we have heard that the young people who come there take drugs. But from what I know, the drugs are brought from Colombo,” he said.

“Where would beach boys procure drugs that are smuggled into the country?” he asks, perplexed. “I have not seen anyone I know partake of this drug culture. It is mostly an elitist, Colombo posh-people practice,” he said, before adding brightly, “But we drink!”

Referring to reports of fisticuffs between locals and foreigners, Kumara replies that in his experience, such incidents occur when a foreigner hassles a woman involved with a local man. “If the woman is being harrassed, very often her local boyfriend will step in and even beat the foreign man,”Kumar said.

“Actually, it doesn’t matter if it is a local man or a foreign man. If a beach boy feels that his woman needs defending, he will defend her no matter the consequences,” he said. “There have been so many fights on the beach,” he reminisces, with a shake of his head.

Commenting on the well-publicised incident in Mirissa in April, when a group of Dutch tourists were assaulted for resisting sexual advances, Kumara said he had no insight. “We really don’t know what happened there,” he said. “But it is sad that things came to that level.”

Despite their defensiveness, though, there have been some reported instances of beach boys having run-ins with the law.

In May this year, in Trinco, two American women also reported being sexually harassed by a hotel employee.

Krishmal is 26. His family runs a popular restaurant on the beach, and a nearby shop specializing in jewellery and other trinkets. Educated at one of the finest schools in Galle, Krishmal isn’t considered a beach boy, but he counts many of them as his friends.

“I consider the beach boys an asset to themselves, and an asset to the industry,” he said. “I don’t think they are doing anything wrong. They provide a service to tourists, at a nominal rate, and who cares if they end up in a relationship with some of them?” he asks. “That is up to them.”

I ask him if the waiters employed at his family restaurant are considered beach boys. “No”, he said. “These men have been employed based on experience and skill. They weren’t just hired – interviews were conducted, and the men most suitable for the job were hired.” .

“Also, there are rules here. But that is not the way everyone on the beach conducts their business. Some establishments are freer in their operations, and allow staff to fraternize with tourists. That’s their prerogative,” he said. In his view, the beach allows tourists a better chance to mix with locals.

“The beach is generally the last stop on a tourist’s itinerary,” he said. “This is where they come to rest, relax, and spend a few days. It allows them a greater chance to mix with the locals, than in the interior of Sri Lanka, where they only make a quick stop.”

Beach boys provide tourists with a variety of services, he told us. This could include a visit to the local bath kade or a guided tour of the town on the back on scooter. “The tourists establish friendships with these boys and often return as a result of that honest friendship,” he said.

“It is the same with locals,” he added. So many people from Colombo frequent this place, because they know people by name. They have visited their homes, shared meals with them. Locals, foreigners, it is is the same hospitality offered by the beach boys,” he said.

So why do these beach boys have such a bad reputation? Krishmal shrugs. “A few bad eggs,” he offers. Pointing to lanky man on the beach offering foreigners a massage, he says, “That is another example of a beach boy,” he said, “but that is not what I would call a beach boy!”

A portly man passes us, colourful wood and cloth puppets strung on his arm. “Is he considered a beach boy?” I ask Krishmal. “ Technically, I guess, yes,” he grins. “But beach boys as I know it are typically young, sporty and attractive, and have interpersonal relationships with foreigners and locals.”

It is clear, despite the less-than-appealing reputation they have garnered that beach boys are not perceived as dangerous and threatening among those closest to them. This doesn’t mean there have not been incidents of concern.

In June last year, a British woman was left stranded in Sri Lanka after her husband was killed. Diane De Zoysa, 59, sold her house in Scotland and moved to Sri Lanka to live with Priyantha, a hotel worker she had met seven months earlier, but said she had had come to believe the marriage was 'all about the money', and that Priyantha had another wife.

Krishmal is of the opinion beach boys will benefit from some sort of government recognition and training. “If they are trained on basic etiquette, dos and don’ts and other matters relating to the hospitality trade and industry, they will be able to work in a more professional manner,” he said.

He added that he didn’t mean the beach boys ought to be put in a uniform and made to wear a name tag. “That will take away their freedom,” he said. “But they definitely should be given some of kind of official recognition.”

According to Rasika Jayakody, Consultant, Communications at the Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority, the SLTDA is in the process of addressing these concerns.

“The SLTDA is in the process of formulating an island wide initiative, with the support of some volunteer organizations, to give beach boys training and recognition,” he said. Proper training and education will give them more opportunities to earn a better income and allow them to render a greater service to the tourism sector in more ways than one.”

The role of art in documenting culture is well known. For centuries now, artists have reproduced what they saw around them, from renditions of lush landscapes to portraits of human figures. Through their art, we are able to learn about the past, see representations of the present and even explore visions of the future.

Art also plays an important role in recording history. The work of artists allows us to reimagine scenes of the past, and how things may have been before rapid development and technological advancement took place. It acts as a visual accompaniment to literary portrayals of history, and helps make it more vivid.

This is one reason why 56- year-old Aruna Saparamadu has embarked on a project to collect the work of artists—both local and foreign—who have captured the people and places of Sri Lanka, or Ceylon as it was known in colonial times..

“I began collecting vintage posters of Ceylon many years ago and I have more than 250 posters now,” said Saparamadu. “Then I slowly expanded to collecting art, especially [that of] foreign artists who visited Sri Lanka. I now have more than 100 different artists' works in my collection now.”

Saparamadu, who has already published a book on vintage posters, is currently working on a two- volume book that will feature the work of many of these artists. He has also developed an online quiz to tests users’ knowledge of indigenous and foreign artwork inspired by Sri Lanka.

“Art is part of Sri Lanka's cultural heritage, so we should do everything to preserve it. These artists painted scenes of the country that have changed completely today. The only memories we have of this are these images,” he explained.

The images that Saparamadu has collected span the period 1600-2000, and range from depictions of everyday Sri Lanka (Portrait of a Tamil Lady, Saraswathi Rockwood, 2001) and still life (The King Coconuts, Sara Radcliffe, 1981) to landscapes (Flowers of Mahagastotte Tea Estate, Eliza Baker, 1890).

Here is the work of six of the artists, both local and foreign. You can find the work of the other artists here.

G. S. Fernando (1904–1990) was a Sri Lankan artist born in the seaside village of Suddhagoda, Bentara. He studied under Ceylon’s foremost mural painter, M. Sarlis. He later trained under A. C. G. S. Amarasekara and became known for his exquisite watercolours of rural country life. In 1934, he joined the Times of Ceylon as a commercial artist, and later became the head of the art department.

Luigi ‘Louis’ Toffoli (1907–1999) was a French artist who worked primarily in a figurative style. One of the major themes of his work was the ‘world at work’, where he depicted people engaged in various forms of labour. In 1960, Louis Toffoli devoted himself entirely to painting and travel, during which time he visited Sri Lanka.

Ernst Heinrich Philipp August Haeckel (1834–1919) was a German artist who was referred to as the ‘Darwin of Germany’ for his interest in biology. He spent about six months in Sri Lanka in 1881-82. More than 70 of his Ceylon paintings and sketches are currently housed at the Haeckel Museum at the Friedrich Schiller Universität Jena, Germany.

Walimuni Solias Mendis (1897-1975) was born in Mahawewa, Madampe, Chilaw. Mendis was primarily involved with painting murals in Buddhist temples and his work combined Indian Buddhist art techniques with traditional Sinhalese classical art. At the age of 30, Mendis undertook a 20-year project to complete the Kelani Vihara murals, which still stand today as his masterwork.

Franz Kienmayer (1886-1963) was an Austrian painter, born in Vienna in 1886. He travelled extensively after studying art in Vienna, visiting China, Japan, Singapore, Malaya (present-day Malaysia), and many of the islands of the Indonesian archipelago, where he became known for his portrayal of scenes of daily life in Asia. He visited Sri Lanka around 1930.

Sameera Kalupahana was born in Galle in 1970. He studied at the Vibhavi Academy of Fine Art and specialises in rural scenes, landscapes and human figure studies, using watercolours, oils, graphite and charcoal as his mediums.. A skilled watercolourist, his works are found in private collections worldwide. He currently teaches art at the Vibhavi Academy of Fine Art.

Cover image: ‘Danseuse Cinghalaise à Wattala’ (Sinhalese Dancer in Wattala) by Belgian artist Paul Daxhelet, 1960’s

“What glory, what majesty is Ravana’s, the Lord of Demons! Ravana is beaming like the sun with his rays difficult to be gazed, neither can the eye rest on him such is the binding strength of his magnificence!” —

K. M. K.Murthy, Valmiki Ramayana.

Ravana is the chief antagonist in the Indian epic Ramayana, written by the sage Valmiki, some time around 500 BC (although this is contested). This Sanskrit poem, containing nearly 24,000 verses, weaves the tale of Indian hero Rama, and his victory over the marauding King of Lanka, Ravana, who made off with his wife Sita.

But although Rama is positioned as the righteous victor in this epic, Ravana is viewed through different lenses on either side of the Palk Strait.

In India, the Ramayana is held in reverence. Rama is believed to be the avatar of the god Vishnu, reincarnated to remedy evil in the world. He is depicted as the embodiment of all things good; the dutiful son who obeys his father, the faithful husband who fights for his wife, and the righteous king who accedes to the wishes of his subjects.

Sita is seen as the embodiments of all desired female qualities. She follows her husband into exile, remains faithful to him under duress, and uncomplainingly raises twin sons alone after she is expelled from the kingdom by Rama who questions her ‘purity’ after being abducted by Ravana. Hindus also believe she is an avatar of the goddess Lakshmi, the esteemed paragon of feminine virtues.

Temples such as the controversial Rama Janmabhoomi in Ayodhya, the Ram Mandir in Odisha, the Ramchaura Mandir in Bihar and the Sri Rama Temple in Kerala, are among many dedicated to Rama in India, while in the northern, southern and western states of India, the yearly festival of Dussehra celebrates the victory of Rama over Ravana.

Ravana, being king of the Rakshasa, is viewed as a demon. The Rakshasa are described as ‘man-eaters’, enormous and fierce with two fangs protruding from the top of the mouth. They have sharp, claw-like fingernails and are able to both fly and vanish. They are said to possess ‘maya’, the magical powers of illusion, which allowed them to change size and assume forms.

Despite being a Rakshasa, Ravana is seen as different, and distinct, in that he is described as having ten heads, each attributed to varied aspects of physical and mental prowess. He is said to have been a great scholar, with an intimate knowledge of the Vedas (ancient Indian texts), and a master of aerodynamics, frequently using his flying chariot, the Pushpaka Vimana, in which he also spirited Sita away.

In Sri Lanka, Ravana is viewed as a powerful ancient king - claimed as a Sinhala icon by a group of nationalists - forced to avenge his sister. His character is held in high esteem, with writers drawing attention to the fact that Ravana did not force himself on Sita (i.e. rape her or forcibly marry her) while she was held captive, but only repeatedly asked her to marry him (N.B., Sita refuses).

This has been contrasted to Rama’s treatment of Sita, where despite the results of an agni pariksha (test of fire) to prove her purity, he is swayed by public opinion, and banishes a pregnant Sita to the forest. Sita gives birth to twin sons and lives with the sage Valmiki (who wrote the Ramayana) until he reunites her with Rama, but too late, as Sita calls on her mother, the goddess Bhoomi, to swallow her into the earth.

Educator Goolbai Gunasekara, who describes Ravana as a “gentleman”, and a “man of intellectual and scientific brilliance”, argues that “the real hero of the Ramayana is King Ravana of Sri Lanka”. This love for Ravana has also spawned a Sinhala-Buddhist supremacist movement—the Ravana Balaya, that has aggressively pursued its ideology at the expense of other ethnic and religious minorities in the country.

While Ravana is viewed alternately as hero and demon on either side of the Rama Setu, the narrow shoal of sand and rock that forms a bridge between Rameshwaram island in India and Mannar island in Sri Lanka (which, incidentally, is believed to have been built by the army of vanara, to rescue Sita), there are a number of inaccuracies linked to what people believe about this popular myth.

The most contentious among these is the idea that Ravana was Sri Lankan. As per the Ramayana, Ravana is described as being the son of the Hindu sage Vishrava. His paternal grandfather was the sage Pulastya, one of the ten ‘mind-born’ sons of the creator-God Brahma and one of the Seven Great Sages Rishi in the first Manvantara (a period of time measurement)—which would make Ravana distinctly Indian, not Sinhalese.

Even the historicity of ‘Lanka’ is disputed. The late Indian politician and writer, D. P. Mishra, pointed out that Sri Lanka was referred to as ‘Simhala’ in ancient Indian chronicles, not Lanka, and that the Lanka referenced to in the Ramayana was located in India (according to him, evidence pointed out that a stretch of islands on the Godavari River in Andhra Pradesh was the Lanka referred to in the epic).

Historian Romila Thapar has said that the matter has been disputed by Indian scholars for centuries and Lanka remains unidentified. Several other locations—Sumatra, the Maldives, Australia (via the Sunda Islands) and the Lingga Island, which is on the equator, have been suggested as alternatives to the theory that ‘Lanka’ refers to Sri Lanka.

In fact, Sri Lankan researcher and writer Hasitha Abeywardena drew attention to an observation by the late archaeologist Professor Senarath Paranavitana, who pointed out that there was no archeological evidence to corroborate the Ramayana. Even the Archeological Survey of India (ASI) has said there is no evidence to conclusively prove that Rama actually existed.

Professor Nira Wickremesinghe, a leading academic on South Asian studies, has pointed out in her book Sri Lanka in the Modern Age: A History of Contested Identities, that the ‘Hela’ theory promoted by scholars like Munidasa Kumaratunga, rejected the Vijayan ancestry of the Sinhalese, in favour of the theory corroborated by the Ramayana—that a great civilisations existed on the island before.

“It is a slur on the Helese nation to say that the arch robber Vijaya and his fiendish followers were its progenitors. Many thousand years before their arrival we had empires greater and mightier than the greatest and mightiest that any other nation could have claimed to have,” Wickremesinghe quoted Kumaratunga as having said, on the theory that Vijaya was the progenitor of the Sinhala race.

Wickremesinghe said proponents of Hela believed that the Hela kingdom was ruled by powerful monarchs such as Taraka and Ravana, who even challenged the military might of Indian empires, but said that the myth was embraced more as a need to “sharpen the boundaries, particularly with regard to India”—in particular, as a refusal to accept the Indian origin of the people of Sri Lanka.

She added, however, that the Hela theory of the origins of the Sinhalese and the earlier incarnations of the Ravana myth did not succeed in capturing the imagination of a large group of people, noting that “the Rama-Sita-Ravana myth which saw the king of Lanka ultimately defeated by Rama did not give Ravana a persona Sinhala people could easily identify with”.

While scholars, writers, researchers and lovers of literature and history continue to immerse themselves in the story of the Ramayana, and as the people of two countries across the ‘Rama setu’ continue to disagree in their opinions of the protagonists Rama and Ravana, it may be wise to discard the political underpinning of the tale and look only to the moral one.

What must be remembered is that the Ramayana, while cautioning against unchecked rage, desire, ego and evil intent that can cause the downfall of even a most powerful being, is at its heart, a simple celebration of the victory of dharma (righteousness, or things in keeping with the underlying cosmic order of things) over addharma (that which is not dharma, or right).

Cover: The Ramayana is a Hindu epic written around 500 BC. Image courtesy icytales.com

Editor's Note: A previous version of this article referred to Ravana as a Sinhala king. This has now been corrected to reflect the fact that this is a claim made by some groups.

At a busy intersection in Colombo Fort stands a slim, tall tower, often perceived as an impediment to traffic rushing past in various directions. This is the Old Colombo Lighthouse Clock Tower, referred to as the Chatham Street Clocktower, seeing as it is located between Chatham Street and Janadhipathi Mawatha (formerly Queen’s Road). Getting to the clocktower requires a combination of agility and bravery as vehicles rarely stop to allow you to cross. Once under the arches of the clocktower, besides a faded bronze plaque inscribed with a brief history of the tower, there is little else to see—until you notice a narrow, iron stairway leading up to the ceiling in one corner of the space.

Ishan de Lanerolle, one half of the well-known singing duo, The De Lanerolle Brothers, has with his older brother and singing partner Rohan, recently taken over maintenance of the Old Colombo Lighthouse Clock Tower. The tower was previously cared for by the Central Bank for many years. Ishan, spying the potential for this landmark, has big plans for its conservation and ideas to bring it to public attention. The clocktower, at 29 metres tall, was at one time the tallest building in Colombo, and—as per the inscription on the plaque—the only lighthouse clocktower in the world. It was officially opened on 25 March, 1857, but was decommissioned on 12 July, 1952, after it became obscured by tall buildings that had sprung up nearby.

Climbing up the narrow stairway through the hatchway door on top, we found ourselves in a compact room, with beautiful, dusky golden yellow walls. Natural light filtered dimly in through rectangular window panels on all four sides of the wall, but the wooden shutters forming a protective barrier against the elements hampered attempts to dispel the dark. All at once, the room is lit up by small warm yellow lights that Ishan has strategically placed in corners of the room. He explained that he wanted to preserve the 161-year-old walls in their original form by lighting up the old building within and without, without imposing any large structural changes.

The beautiful interior is in stark contrast with the dull, two-toned exterior of the building designed by Lady Steinberg Ward, wife of Governor Sir Henry George Ward, and constructed by the Public Works Department under the supervision of Assistant Engineer J. F. Churchill. As we find our bearings, Ishan casually shares with us an interesting nugget of information—as per the plaque on the ground floor, the Old Colombo Lighthouse Clock Tower is also the point from which all the road networks throughout Sri Lanka are mapped, this is to say, the distance of 115.6 km, for instance, between Colombo and Kandy is measured from the Old Colombo Lighthouse Clock Tower on Chatham Street.

We digest this piece of information as we take narrow iron stairs that continue up a second, third and fourth landing, although actual ‘floors’ are missing on each of these. Instead, peering down concrete pillars at a dizzying height we can catch sight of the first floor, now far beneath us. Ishan indicates that he would like to transform these empty ‘floors’ into a gallery—complete with pictures and a history of the evolution of the clocktower. This would take some work—not only would he have to lay down floors, but also procure and present a history of the lighthouse clocktower—but Ishan seems not just equal, but passionate about the task. He truly believes this building is worth restoring and conserving for future generations.

As we emerge onto the fifth floor of tower, Ishan has us duck through a door to enter a room with a low ceiling and timber floors. This is where the bells belonging to the clocktower once hung. The bells are no longer there, having been moved to the Economic History Museum of the Central Bank of Sri Lanka, housed across the street, at some time in the past. In its absence, the large cast iron beam on which the three bells once hung, stands alone in an empty room. The three bells—a large main bell weighing approximately 250 kg which strikes on the hour, and two smaller bells, of approximately 150 kg each, which strike every half and quarter-hour.

On the floor above are two large, oblong industrial-sized cylinders which once powered the lighthouse. According to reports, the lighthouse originally used kerosene, but was replaced with gas in 1907. In 1933, the lighthouse began to use electricity until it was decommissioned in 1952. Today, the two cylinders are all that remain of inner workings of the lighthouse, that according to some reports, was constructed by the ‘Chance Brothers’, a major British lighthouse engineering company in the 19th and 20th centuries. The light from the tower was said to have been visible upto a distance of 27 km in clear weather, and shone in triple flash in intervals of 30 seconds, each flash of 1 second duration.

Finally, we emerge onto the inner sanctum; a square room, flanked on all sides by the six-foot tall glass face of the clock. The clock was built by Dent, a leading English manufacturer of clocks and watches, two years before they built the mechanism for the ‘Big Ben’—the world-renowned clocktower located at the Westminster Palace in London. The cloak at Chatham Street originally used gravity (!) to run, but was replaced in 1913, and re-inaugurated on 4 April, 1914. In the ensuing years, key parts of the original mechanism have gone missing, and Ishan is determined to replace them—even if it means writing to Dent and asking if they would be interested in helping restore a century old clock in a former British colony.

Right on top of the tower is a golden dome from which the light once shone. Clambering onto the floor that houses the dome, we skirt past the edges of the large, round, rotating cast iron structure that operated the light, and creep through a narrow opening onto a strip of balcony outside from which unparalleled views of that quarter of Colombo can be seen. On one side, the Port City project sprawls, on the other side is the President’s official quarters, one another end, the Central Bank and its accompanying snipers, and in front, the changing landscape of Colombo Fort. The golden dome is sadly rusting, allowing water from the beating Southwestern monsoon to seep into the building; more work that Ishan must take care of.

But setbacks aside, Ishan is determined to ensure the edifice will be open to the public in due course. He is currently wrangling with local service providers to have the clock’s mechanism temporarily restored until he can explore the option of having the clock’s original manufacturers involved in its restoration. This means temporarily relying on a digital mechanism for the clock’s operation, but Ishan only sees it as a step in the right direction. He is eagerly looking forward to the day he can open the tower for public viewing, and divulges a secret; he plans to unleash his singing prowess from the top of the tower the day it is opened to the public.

The going may be slow, and Ishan has only just embarked on the task, taking over management of the tower in January this year. But the ambitious, creative plans he has for an otherwise ignored building will ensure public attention is turned once again to the Old Colombo Lighthouse Clock Tower that once lit up the sky.

Cover Image Courtesy: Roar Media/Daran Kandasamy

The market today is saturated with products, each competing with the other to attract potential customers. Branding, advertising and marketing work alongside businesses to grow their visibility in order to garner a larger share of the market. With a population of over 21 million, Sri Lanka has a thriving market evolving frantically to match supply with demand. But things were not always this fast-paced and competitive. Thirty, forty, fifty years ago, commerce was slower, brands fewer and life simpler. Sri Lankan were not bombarded with an influx of brands, but instead enjoyed and made do with the few they had at the time. While these brands listed below were popular at the time, they are today no more, having made room for bigger and more aggressive brands that have taken over the market. But there are many people who remember them with nostalgia, and the part they played in the landscape of their lives.

Perhaps the brand most indelibly printed on the mind is Alerics ice cream, and its ‘Piccadilly Cafe’, the first ice cream parlour in Sri Lanka. Alerics ice cream, which was a venture by Alerics De Silva Wimalaratne in 1949, sold a very popular ‘ice chock’ as well as a ‘family block’, which contained three flavours of ice cream, housed in a cardboard box. This was way before plastics and polythene spread its vicious tentacles over mass produced products, and treats such as the Alerics ice cream were packaged in cardboard. Ice cream was something that was still made in many homes, so going to the Piccadilly Cafe for an Alerics ice cream was considered a treat. Alerics also sold ice creams off a van that would visit carnivals, fairs and other gatherings.

With its iconic yellow and blue marking, Blue Band margarine was the Astra of yesteryear. The margarine, that was also known by the name ‘Rama’, ‘Country Crock’ and ‘Doriana’ in other countries, was distributed under the brand name ‘Blue Band’ by Unilever in Sri Lanka. During the Sirimavo Bandaranaike era, butter was a luxury, so people made do with margarine, which to all accounts tasted like lard. The Blue Band margarine was made from vegetable oils, and professed to contain essential fats and vital vitamins A, D, and E, to “enhance children’s ability to concentrate at school”. Blue Band, Rama, Country Crock and Doriana products were consumed in over 65 countries at the time it was popular.

Elasto was Sri Lanka’s pioneer footwear brand, established in 1947. Although international brands also flooded the market at the time (Bata was incorporated just two years later in 1950), Elasto, which was initially named ‘Foamtreads’, was the first local manufacturer of footwear on the island. The company was established by engineer Donald Gunasekera and his brother Wilson in Bentota, to create shoes and slipper of a high quality that would be available at a low price. Elasto footwear—slippers in particular—were very popular and worn by people across the island. The Elasto branding was also striking; black lettering across a metallic grey backdrop, and was seen in prominent places across the island.

Before the advent of toothpaste in plastic tubes, tooth powder was used to keep teeth clean. For the uninitiated, tooth powder is the crushed particles of a variety of substances (ingredients depend on the manufacturer) used to clean and whiten teeth. In ancient Rome, bones, hoofs and the horns of animals were used to prepare tooth powder, but in Sri Lanka, the very popular ‘Gopal tooth powder’, imported from India, was made from a combination of dried herbs and included clove, calcium carbonate, myrobalan powder, cinnamon, saccharine and amaranth. Anecdotal evidence indicates that as many as 50% of the population of Sri Lanka used ‘Gopal tooth powder’, that came in an familiar red and white pack.

Shelltox was a brand of insect repellant, manufactured and distributed by the Shell Gas Oil Company. This aerosol insecticide looked nothing like the sleek, long-nozzled sprays we use today, but came in the form a can, that contained the chemical, a tube, and a pump (not unlike a bicycle pump!). Shelltox was very popular in Sri Lanka and used in households to get rid of pests. It was also used as a pesticide to get rid of crop-destroying insects like the locust and grasshopper in other parts of the world. It was taken off the market after the chemical content—aldrin, dieldrin and endrin, known together as the ‘drin family of pesticides’—were discovered to form potentially harmful toxic residue.

Lyle’s Golden Syrup was a thick, amber-coloured sugar syrup formulated at the Abram Lyle & Sons refinery in London, in the 1800’s. It was recognised by the Guinness World Records in 2006 for having the world's oldest branding and packaging, and was first canned and sold in 1885. Its green and gold tin with an image of a lion carcass surrounded by a swarm of bees and the words, ‘Out of the strong came forth sweetness’, is said to be a Biblical reference, as Abram Lyle was a deeply religious man. Lyle’s Golden Syrup was a luxury item, available more in Colombo that other parts of the island, but was nevertheless a brand that was much-loved by consumers in the past. It is no longer available in Colombo.

Quink fountain pen ink was very popular in Sri Lanka before ballpoint pens took over the market. It was a product of famed fountain pen manufacturer the Parker Pen Company, and was developed in 1928 as an improved general-purpose ink, safe for use in all fountain pens. Quink was introduced to the US market in 1931 and began worldwide distribution to Europe, Australia, India and the Orient soon after. Quink was distributed in Sri Lanka by MR Distributors (now known as International Cosmetics (Private) Ltd.), a company owned by the Capital Maharaja Organisation. Quink was available in two colours in Sri Lanka—blue and red, and was used widely until the use of fountain pens went into decline.

The Sun (1964) and The Weekend (1965) were two popular English newspapers published by the Independent Newspapers Limited (INL), owned by M. D. Gunasena & Company and founded by journalist D. B. Dhanapala. The INL also had numerous Sinhala and Tamil language ‘sister’ newspapers. In 1974, INL locked horns with the Sirimavo Bandaranaike government, resulting in all the newspaper being shut down and the Independent Newspapers Limited presses being sealed under Emergency Regulations. The papers remained closed for 3 years, and resumed publication in 1977. However, it struggled to re-capture the market after its shutdown, leading to final closure in 1990.

Venus Pencils’ iconic green ‘broken’ pattern were seen in classrooms in Sri Lanka throughout the 70’s and 80’s, before a variety of other pencils took over. Venus Pencils were manufactured by the American Lead Pencil Company in 1905, under the categories very soft, soft, medium, hard, and very hard. It had a glossy, hard exterior and were made with no eraser at the ferrule. Although, by the time, The Ceylon Pencil Company had already been established (1959), it took awhile for the pencils made by the Ceylonese brand to take over the market, allowing the Venus Pencils to dominate. In 1973, the American Lead Pencil Company was acquired by Faber-Castell, and products from the company are still sold in Sri Lanka.

The Two Elephant brand of safety matches, featuring two elephants facing each other on a red background, were a very popular brand of matches in Sri Lanka in the 1970s. The brand was manufactured locally by the Ceylon Match Company Limited, a company that, despite the fight put up to survive in a tough market, no longer exists. Import controls were removed in 1977, and matches of a superior quality were brought in from India and China, forcing many small manufacturers to close. The Ceylon Match Company Limited, however, rose to the challenge and turned out products (including the Two Elephants brand) that successfully competed with the foreign imports for a period before the company finally shut down.

Cover: The locally manufactured Two Elephant brand of safety matches were widely used across the island. Image courtesy ulyssesblack.com

Sri Lanka is considered one of 35 biodiversity hotspots in the world due to the wealth of flora and fauna found on the island. According to the National Red List on the Conservation Status of the Fauna and Flora in Sri Lanka, there are about 3,150 species of flowering plants on the island, a large number of them endemic. Despite this, there are several invasive alien species of plants spreading rapidly across the island. Invasive alien species of plants refer to plants that were either intentionally or accidentally introduced to Sri Lanka, which have since taken root and spread rapidly, adversely impacting natural ecosystems either by competing with natural resources, or through predation.

Here are seven invasive alien plants found in Sri Lanka:

The Velvet Tree’s bicolour oblong leaves can grow upto a metre in length. Image courtesy calphotos.berkeley.edu

Velvet Tree, or Miconia calvescens is a plant native to Central and South America. It was introduced to Sri Lanka as an ornamental tree in 1894 but has since become an invasive species in the montane regions of the island – especially in the areas of Ginigathhena, Nawalapitiya and Watawala. The Velvet Tree is so called because of the dark purple underside on its leaves – the top of the leaf however is dark green. The plant can grow to about 15 metres in height and its oblong leaves can grow up to a metre in length. The tree flowers several times a year and bears fruit simultaneously. The tiny purple fruit is sweet when ripe and packed with about 120–230 minuscule seeds that are attractive to birds and other animals which disperse them. The Velvet Tree grows quickly in forest gaps and open areas and forms dense thickets that absorb nutrients from the soil and block sunlight from reaching the forest floor, so that few plants under its canopy can survive. It has a shallow roots system that is believed to contribute to landslides. The Velvet Tree is listed in the IUCN World’s 100 Most Invasive Species and is known as the “green cancer” of Tahiti and the “purple plague” of Hawaii.

The Sikkim Knotweed grows aggressively in the high montane areas of Sri Lanka. Image courtesy en.hortipedia.com

Sikkim Knotweed, or Sikkim potherb – Aconogonon molle, also known as Polygonum molle, is a plant native to the central and eastern Himalayas, India – especially in Garhwal and Assam, Nepal and eastward to China. It was discovered and described by the botanist David Don in the 19th century and later classified into a valid botanic system in the family of Polygonaceae (Buckwheat) by Hiroshi Hara in 1966. It is unclear when the plant was introduced to Sri Lanka, but it is presumed to have been brought in as an ornamental plant. This invasive alien species can be found only in the high mountain zone of Sri Lanka, in areas in and around the Nuwara Eliya town. The Sikkim Knotweed is a shrub that grows in thick groves to a height of about 1 – 1.5 metres. Its leaves grow alternately, are elliptical, long and wide and are about 7-18 cm long. Its stem is hairy. The plant flowers during the July-September period, and has a large number of small white, or yellowish-white flowers arranged in a loose branching cluster. Plants that live for over two years also produce nuts. The shrub grows aggressively and in thick clumps preventing other native species from taking root.

The Porcupine Flower has fragrant, pineapple-scented leaves. Image courtesy nybg.org

The Porcupine Flower, Centratherum punctatum, is alternatively known as the Pineapple Flower, the Brazilian Daisy, the Bachelor’s Button and the Lark Daisy. The plant is a native to Central and South America – especially Brazil, but is also found in the Philippines, Australia, Africa, Madeira, the West Indies, and islands in the Pacific Ocean. It was introduced to Sri Lanka as an ornamental flower, although it is unclear when. It is a herb (a seed-bearing plant without a woody stem, that dies after flowering), and grows to about 10 – 50 cm tall. Leaves are of a narrow oval shape, tapering to a point at each end and are pineapple scented, for which reason it is considered an ideal candidate for wreaths or potpourri. Flowers bloom within the June – September period and are purple, foliaceous and solitary – attached at the base, without a stem. The plant has been observed to spread rapidly across all parts of Sri Lanka, using up land resources and preventing other plants from taking root. In many countries the Porcupine Flower is considered a weed. It is classified as an invasive alien species in Hawaii, the Galápagos Islands, New Caledonia, Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands, and was only recently classified as an invasive alien species in Sri Lanka.

Blue Stars are produced in succession over an extensive period, but last only a day. Image courtesy wikipedia.org

Blue Stars, Aristea ecklonii , is also known as Blue Flies, the Blue-eyed iris and the Blue corn-lily. Its name arises from the Latin word arista, meaning ‘spike’ or ‘point’, referring to the leaves of the plant, and ecklonii after Christian Ecklon, a Danish botanist, apothecary and plant collector. The plant is a native of central and southern Africa and was introduced to Sri Lanka as an ornamental plant, although it is unclear when. It has since spread rapidly, especially in the higher elevations – in the Nuwara Eliya district, at the Galway’s National Park and at the Horton Plains National Park. It is a herb that grows upto 60cm tall with leaves that are upright, long, sword-shaped and basal. Flowers are numerous, and grow in clusters of about 2-4. They are a deep blue and last only a day, but are produced in succession over an extensive period, specifically between September – December. Flowers develop into capsules containing many dark red-brown seeds that are dispersed by wind and water and germinate fast. The plant grows in shrubland, open and disturbed forest as well as on streambanks and on rocky, bare land in a dense clump that is impenetrable and displaces other plants.

The Common water hyacinth cloggs waterways and irrigation networks. Image courtesy swbiodiversity.org

The Common water hyacinth, or eichhornia crassipes (known as japan jabara colloquially) is a floating freshwater plant that is considered pernicious and highly-invasive. This fast-growing plant is native to South America, specifically the Amazon basin, but has since spread to North America, Europe, Australia, Africa, New Zealand and many other countries. It was introduced to Sri Lanka as an ornamental plant from Hong Kong in in 1905 and spread so rapidly, that a Water Hyacinth Ordinance was introduced in 1909. The plants clogs waterways and irrigation networks and prevents native aquatic plants from thriving. It creates septic and odorous conditions and is known to deplete oxygen in the water, killing fish and other aquatic life. It is also a prime habitat for mosquitos. The plant is listed as one of the IUCN World’s 100 Most Invasive Species and is known in India as the ‘Terror of Bengal’. Countries, including Sri Lanka work hard to control the plant, before it covers lakes and ponds entirely. The plant is free-floating, its leaves are thick, glossy and ovate, and rise to about three feet above the water. It grows multiple lavender-blue flowers in a single spike about 12 in. long and can grow faster than any other tested plant, doubling in as little as 6 days.

The Giant salvinia forms dense, impenetrable mats on the water, affecting aquatic life. Image courtesy keyserver.lucidcentral.org

The giant salvinia, Kariba weed, African payal or Salvinia molesta is a floating aquatic fern that thrives in freshwater. It is native to South America, specifically south-eastern Brazil, and northern Argentina. It was introduced to Sri Lanka as educational material in 1939, but has since spread rapidly, affecting waterways and irrigation systems. It is widely seen in the low country wet and dry zones and was declared a noxious weed under the Plant Protection Act in 1952. The plant has two types of leaves – emergent and submerged; the emergent leaves are green and obovate in shape, and the submerged leaves are brown, feather-like, and often mistaken for roots. The emergent leaves measure around 2.2 cm in length and 1.3 cm in width and have surface ‘hairs’ that split and then rejoin at the tips, forming a cage like structure that resemble ‘egg beaters’. The giant salvinia is a fast-grower and can double its population in a week to ten days. It forms dense, impenetrable mats that block sunlight and reduce oxygen in the water, affecting aquatic life. It also makes fishing, boating, swimming and other recreational activities impossible. The giant salvinia was, in 2013, elected one of the IUCN World’s 100 Most Invasive Species.

The Lantana flowers form in clusters of numerous tubular flowers that vary in colour. Image courtesy wikipedia.org

Lantana, or Lantana camara (big-sage, wild-sage, red-sage, white-sage and tickberry) is locally known as ‘gandhapana’. It is a plant native to Central and South America but has since naturalised in as many as 60 countries in 5 continents. Lantana is believed to have been introduced to Sri Lanka as an ornamental plant through the Royal Botanic Gardens, sometime around 1826 – this is however unconfirmed due to the absence of proper documentation records. The plant is a shrub which can grow to a height of about 2 m, and forms dense thickets that crowd out other native species and reduce biodiversity. The leaves are oval, have a scalloped, serrated edge and are quite rough to touch, although the underside is soft and hairy. The flowers form in clusters of numerous tubular flowers that vary in colour (from white, cream, yellow, orange, red, pink, purple) in over 100 different combinations. The fruit is purplish-black or bluish-black and fleshy and glossy and contains 1-2 seeds, which are dispersed by birds and other animals. The Lantana is one of the earliest classified invasive alien plants in Sri Lanka and has spread widely across the island, invading the Udawalawe National Park, significantly reducing the grazing lands for elephants.

Containing invasive alien species of plants is an ongoing effort and methods include a combination of physical, chemical and biocontrol processes. In some case, plants are physically uprooted and burnt, while in other cases herbicides are used to stem the proliferation of these plants. In Sri Lanka, in the case of the giant salvinia, or the Salvinia molesta, the coleopteran weevil, Cyrtobagous salviniae was introduced as a biocontrol agent in the mid 1980’s, but it failed to produce expected results. The mottled water hyacinth weevil – Neochetina eichhorniae and the chevroned water hyacinth weevil, N. bruchi were introduced as agents to control the Common water hyacinth, or eichhornia crassipes, but have also failed to produce results. In a bid to strengthen the battle with these invasive alien species, a National Policy on Invasive Alien Species in Sri Lanka, Strategies and Action Plan was implemented by the Ministry of Mahaweli Development and Environment in 2016, with a focus on prevention, early detection, rapid response, containment, control, eradication and restoration of ecosystems.

Cover: Blue Stars, or Aristea ecklonii was introduced to Sri Lanka as an ornamental plant. Image courtesy asergeev.com

Sri Lanka has diverse landscapes; beautiful beaches, rolling teas estates, verdant rainforests and archeological ruins considered world heritage sites. We are also known for our wildlife—in fact, Sri Lanka is ranked among the 34 biodiversity hotspots of the world, and has rich species of flora and fauna. The more popular national parks—Yala, in the Southern/Uva province, Wilpattu, in the North Central/North Western province, and Udawalawe, in the Sabaragamuwa/Uva province, are known to local and foreign tourist alike, but Sri Lanka has a total 14 national parks; in fact, 13% of Sri lanka’s land surface is designated Wildlife Protected Areas (WPA), exceeding a total area of 8500 km2. Here are some of the lesser known national parks in Sri Lanka:

Researchers discovered that the migratory ‘brown noddy’ is a resident breeder at the Adam’s Bridge National Park. Image courtesy Pinterest

The Adam’s Bridge National Park is located on the chain of limestone shoals between Pamban Island off Tamil Nadu and Mannar Island, off the north-western coast of Sri Lanka. While the Sri Lankan end of the bridge forms the Adam’s Bridge National Park, the Indian end forms the Gulf of Mannar Marine National Park. The area of 18,990 ha (46,925 acres) on Adam’s Bridge was declared a national park on June 22, 2015, after an Integrated Strategic Environmental Assessment of Northern Province in October 2014 revealed Adam’s Bridge was an important bird migratory path and a marine conservation area. According to biologists, the area is used by thousands of seabirds for breeding, including seven species of terns (six endangered) and the brown noddy, which was thought to be a migratory bird. Other varieties of fish and sea grasses thrive in the shallow waters, including creatures like the dolphin, dugong and turtle.

The park is named after a British officer who bequeathed the land as a sanctuary. Image courtesy timeout.com

The Galway’s Land National Park is situated within the city limits of Nuwara Eliya, in the Central province, and overlooks the landmark Gregory’s Lake. It is named after a British officer Colonel Galway, who was gifted the land for cultivation. Colonel Galway, having been entranced by the natural forest area and its teeming wildlife, preserved it, and gifted it back in 1938 “for the sake of the unknown generations of the Ceylonese”. The park, which covers an area of 27 hectares (0.10 sq mi), was declared a wildlife sanctuary on May 27, 1938, and elevated to the status of national park on May 18, 2006. It is home to a variety of flora and habitat to numerous fauna, and is also an important birding site. Access to the park is from Nuwara Eliya, on the Udupussellawa road, and there are a number of eco-lodges and other places to stay at in the vicinity.

Pigeon Island is so known for the number of rock pigeons that have settled there. Image courtesy wikipedia

The Pigeon Island National Park is located on two islands (Large Pigeon Island and Small Pigeon Island), 1 kilometer off the Nilaveli coast, in the Eastern province. The islands are known as the ‘Pigeon Islands’ because of the concentration of rock pigeons found there. Rumour has it the two island were once a colonial shooting range. The islands are connected by a sand bank and fringed by a coral reef in which many species of coral and coral reef fish are found. The islands were designated a sanctuary in 1963 and elevated to status of national park in 2003. Blacktip reef shark have been spotted in the shallow areas around the island, and a variety of other sea creatures—ornamental fish, Hawksbill turtle, green turtle and olive ridley, count among those that can be found there. Pigeon Island was cut off from the public during the war, but has seen increased tourism since the war ended in 2009.

Wild ponies Image courtesy uplist.lk

The Delft National Park is unique in that it is the only place in Sri Lanka where wild ponies breed. These wild ponies are believed to have been brought to the island by the Portuguese in the 16th century. The Delft National Park is on the island known in Tamil as Neduntivu, although the Dutch name, Delft, is more popular. The island is approximately 35 km south west of Jaffna, in the Northern province, and was declared a national park on June 22, 2015, after an Integrated Strategic Environmental Assessment of the Northern province recommended that an area of 1,846 ha (4,562 acres) on the island be set aside for preservation. The island is inhabited by a small community of people and is surrounded by white beaches and corals and shallow waters. Over 60 species of birds and a multitude of butterfly species can be spotted in the Delft National Park, in addition to several other sights, including the ruins of ancient stupas.

The Flood Plains National Park is an important feeding ground for elephants. Image courtesy elephant.siyaset.us

Flood Plains National Park is situated along the Mahaweli flood plain, 222 kilometres north-east of Colombo, in the North Central province. It is made up of rivers, marshes, villus, seasonally flooded grasslands and swamp forests, and is an important habitat for elephants. In fact, the area, that was declared a national park on August 7, 1984, is also considered an elephant corridor, which elephants use to migrate between other national parks. The park is also home to a number of large mammals such as the fishing, jungle and rusty-spotted cats, jackals, wild boar, sambar, spotted deer, buffalo and even the leopard. There is also a wide variety of resident and migratory waterfowls, as well as exotic and endemic freshwater fish. There is also a high diversity of both small and large plant species—over 231 have been recorded from the Handapan and Bendiya villus and marsh forests contained within the park.

Mugger and saltwater crocodiles have been spotted at the Chundikkulam National Park . Image courtesy antasticaanimal.blogspot.com

The Chundikkulam National Park is located 12 km north east of Kilinochchi, in the Northern province. The area includes the Chundikkulam Lagoon (sometimes called the Elephant Pass Lagoon), to which a variety of birds flock. The area was designated a bird sanctuary on February 25, 1938 and was only elevated to the status of national park on June 22, 2015, after an Integrated Strategic Environmental Assessment of Northern province recommended an area of 19,565 ha (48,347 acres) is preserved, an increase of 8,416 ha from the sanctuary’s previous 11,149 ha. Water and wader birds—including the bar-tailed godwit, brown-headed gull, curlew sandpiper, eurasian spoonbill, greater flamingo and painted stork are found at the Chundikkulam National Park, as well as mugger and saltwater crocodiles.

Information on how to access these parks, entrance tickets and places to stay nearby can be obtained by contacting the Visitor Services Management Division of the Department of Wildlife Conservation on the number listed on their website.

Cover: Wild ponies, brought to Sri Lanka by the Portuguese in the 16th century, breed exclusively at the Delft National Park. Image courtesy wikipedia

Sri Lankans are known for playing one game in particular—cricket, but that doesn’t mean we don’t engage in other games as well. From rugby to soccer to netball and volleyball (which is incidentally our national sport), swimming, tennis, squash and badminton, there are Sri Lankans enthusiastically engaging in their sport across the island. But outdoor sport is not all we engage in—there are plenty of indoor games we play, which include the more Lankanised Booruwa, Hatha Vasi, Juse and 304, as well as the plethora of Western games like Monopoly, Risk, Boggle, Scrabble and Uno we love playing in our free time. In recent years, however, a number of Sri Lankans have created whole new uniquely Sri Lankan games that are making their rounds on social media. Here are six new games that have debuted in Sri Lanka in the recent past, and what we know about them:

Does Hora Deal takes a lesson from Trump’s ‘Art of the Deal’?! Image courtesy Facebook/HoraDeal

This black and white card game is politically inspired and created for the ‘aspiring politician’. The goal of the game is to collect three sets of ‘power cards’ to become President (the first set makes you a Provincial Councillor, the second a Cabinet Minister, and the third a President). Each power card comes with a number of Sri Lankan political essentials—your own set of thugs, relations in power, offshore accounts, and stolen ballot boxes! There are a number of ‘action cards’ that allow you to steal power cards from opponents, collect bribes, engineer crossovers, and perform all manner of other tricks to stop your opponent from becoming president and making sure you get there first, all the while avoiding missing a turn courtesy the FCID. ‘Hora Deal’ is the brainchild of three young Sri Lankans, who would rather not have their names publicized, and the idea came to them sometime last year, but was acted on much later, with the first edition going on sale in February 2018. The response, in the words of the three-member team, has been “awesome” and the game has garnered positive feedback on social media where marketing was done via their Facebook, Twitter and Instagram accounts.

‘Just Go Men’ is a Sri Lankanised version of the classic Monopoly. Image courtesy Facebook/JustGoMen

‘Just Go Men’ is board game that takes its inspiration from the ubiquitous Monopoly, but is customised to the Sri Lankan palette. Peppered with colloquialisms like ‘aiyo’ and ‘machan’, cards fall under the categories ‘rice’ and ‘curry’ (replacing ‘chance’ and ‘community chest’) and instruct players to “pay Rs. 150 million for the tuk tuk fare to Uncle Saman’s sister’s husband’s niece’s wedding”, or asks them “Did you hear about that one ‘carrying on’ with this one? Advance to Colombo to hear the gossip”. The game also features an achchi who will send you to a family function, the equivalent of ‘go to jail’! Even property names have been changed to reflect the names of the larger cities in Sri Lanka—Colombo, Negombo and Kandy, to name a few. The board game was the fruit of a “wild idea” six friends—Revan Fernando, Shahen Rodrigo, Nipuna Gunaratne, Sharya Wickremasuriya, Shenali De Fonseka and Shanya De Fonseka—had while playing the board game sometime last year, and culminated in a fully fledged Sri Lankanised version of Monopoly in December 2017. The response to the game has been strong, with the friends selling out the 100 games they had prepared for the launch. Shanya de Fonseka told Roar Media they plan to continue producing the game, and that it can be bought online and is being marketed only on social media sites Facebook and Twitter.

Tuk Tuk Quest takes you into the dangerous lives of Sri Lanka’s tuk tuk drivers! Image courtesy Facebook/TukTukQuest

‘Tuk Tuk Quest’ is a card game conceptualized by author Navin Weeraratne, and created in collaboration with friends Nigel De Zilwa and Rommel Arumugam. The game is fast paced and erratic—not unlike your typical tuk tuk ride, and is unstable enough to ensure that the best player does not necessarily win! Players masquerade as tuk tuk drivers, who must, among other things, struggle against the cost of living, or ascend into politics (not unprecedented irl…). The game is a ‘screw your neighbour’ type, easy to learn and with room for skill and strategy. It pokes fun at Sri Lankan society, biases and prejudices and is also cynical about the government and politics, Weeraratne said, adding that future iterations of the game would continue to highlight social problems like ethnic intolerance, and violence against women. Response to the game was very strong, especially with the geek community, and the three friends sold out all games produced in the first stock. While traditional sales were slow to catch on, social media and online platforms worked in their favour, with online store takas.lk featuring the game on their site. Tuk Tuk Quest is currently out of stock, but queries can be directed to their Facebook page.

Card Kudu is a game for “horrible” Sri Lankans. Image courtesy Facebook/CardKudu

‘Card Kudu’ is a wild, tongue-in-cheek game for “horrible” Sri Lankans. No, that’s not what we’re calling it, it’s what those that created the game call it themselves! Inspired by the game ‘Cards Against Humanity’, Card Kudu follows the same format, in which there are two piles of cards – one, the black ‘question’ cards, and two, the white ‘answer’ cards. Each player is dealt a hand of seven ‘answer’ cards, and a revolving Kudu Karaya (a play on the Sinhalese term for drug addict, no less) picks up a black ‘question’ card, on which an often outrageous question is posed. Take for instance, the question, “William’s Grinding Mill is a cover for…..’, leaving the blank to be answered by a variety of equally outrageous answers on the ‘answer’ cards. The ‘answer’ cards include the now famous ‘Disce Ammata Disce Discade’ and make digs at yahapalanaya, the bBond scam, the Cleopatra night club and even the nuns at Holy Family Convent. While the creators of Card Kudu would – for obvious reasons – prefer to remain anonymous, the wide acceptance for the game is evident in the fact that the game sold out its batch and is now currently out of stock. You can satisfy your curiosity about Card Kudu via their Facebook page.

Ranjan Ramanayake’s physical attributes may crop up during a game of Machans Against Humanity! Image courtesy Facebook

‘Machans Against Humanity’ is a game also modeled on the popular Cards Against Humanity, in which players complete fill-in-the-blank statements with words or phrases typically considered “offensive, risqué or politically incorrect”. This Sri Lankanised version is the work of Lanka Comic Con trustee Thilani Samarasinha, together with the Geek Club of Sri Lanka, which helped crowdsource the questions and answers contained in the black and white ‘question’ and ‘answer’ pack. The goal, Samarasinha explained was to come up with the most offensive answer to seemingly innocuous questions. The simple (is it really, though?) question “What is the meaning to my life?” could bring about an answer as absurd as “Ranja’s boob tattoos”, referring to that unfortunate member of parliament’s physical attributes! The game is still in the making, Samarasinha said, for which reason there is no Facebook or Twitter page set up as yet, but the game will be pushed out via social media, once complete – so watch out for it.

Cover: A vintage postcard of women from Ceylon playing a card game. Image courtesy: ebay.ie

Not a single drop of water received from rain should be allowed to escape into the sea without being utilised for human benefit—Parākramabāhu the Great.

Sri Lanka’s ancient Cascaded Tank-Village water management system, known locally by the name Ellanga Gammana, has been accepted as a Globally Important Agricultural Heritage System by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations.

In a ceremony in Rome on April 19, the FAO also recognised 12 other agricultural heritage sites from China, Egypt, Japan, Korea, Mexico, Portugal and Spain, bringing to 50 the number of globally recognised agricultural heritage systems in 20 countries.

The system earmarked by the FAO is in Palugaswewa, Anuradhapura, and consists of 12 cascade systems within the Malwattu and Yan Oya river basins. But what is a Cascaded Tank-Village, or Ellanga Gammana system, and what does it do?

King Parākramabāhu I constructed extensive irrigation systems in the country. Image courtesy youtube.com

The accepted definition for Ellanga Gammana, is “a connected series of village irrigation tanks organized within a micro- (or meso-) catchment of the dry zone landscape, storing, conveying and utilizing water from an ephemeral rivulet”.

This is to say, the Ellanga Gammana system is a unique method through which water is reused and recycled through a network of small to large tanks (wewa) to efficiently manage water resources for agricultural and domestic use in the dry zone.

The dry zone, which covers 1/3 of the Sri Lanka’s land area, receives a mean annual rainfall less than 1,750 mm, with a distinct dry season from May to September, in contrast to the ‘wet zone’ that receives relatively high mean annual rainfall of over 2,500 mm.

The Ellanga Gammana system, developed by farming communities over two millennia, controls seasonal flooding and droughts to ensure the continuous cultivation of paddy during both the rainy and dry seasons in the dry zone.

The Ellanga Gammana or Cascaded Tank-Village recycles and reuses water through a network of small to large tanks. Image ucnsrilanka.org

The Ellanga Gammana system is made up of four distinct zones which each contain several elements. The four zones are (i) tank bund and tank bed (ii) associated irrigation channels and paddy fields (iii) protected forest in the catchment and rainfed uplands and (iv) hamlet (gangoda) or high elevation household area.

Elements contained in the first zone are:

In the second zone are included:

In the third zone is the godawala (waterhole), while in the fourth zone is the gangoda (hamlet) and thibambe (hamlet buffer).

Each of these zones and elements play an important role in the function of an Ellanga Gammana system.

The Ellanga Gammana or Cascaded Tank-Village system manage water resources for agricultural and domestic use. Image courtesy youtube.com

The earliest known medium-scale irrigation tank, the Basavakkulama, was built in Anuradhapura around 300 BC, and there are today about 30,000 tanks built in a land area of 40,000 km2 in the dry zone.

While tank construction peaked from around the middle of the 12th century, especially under the rule of King Parākramabāhu I (credited with making the policy statement “Not a single drop of water received from rain should be allowed to escape into the sea without being utilised for human benefit” during his rule), a “dark age of tank civilization” began around the middle of the 13th century and continued up to the arrival of the British in the 18th century.

The reasons for this “dark age of tank civilization” remains unknown, with scholars like C. M. Madduma Bandara, offering in ‘Village Tank Cascade Systems of Sri Lanka’, that “Some attribute it to foreign invasions, butothers to malaria, climate change, depletion of soil fertility, and even to a combination of factors and a “pulland push” mechanism that eventually attracted the people to the wet zone and the hill country”.

It is also pointed out that Cascaded Tank-Village systems, in the pre-colonial era, were managed through the custom of compulsory labor, or rajakariya. But with this system losing favour with the British in 1832 AD, an alternative maintenance scheme for the compulsory labor was not introduced resulting in the gradual abandonment of Ellanga Gammana.

Ellanga Gammana sustains a variety of ecosystems in the dry zone of the North Central province. Image courtesy youtube.com

In recent times, however, the government of Sri Lanka, together with international and farmer organisations, have undertaken projects to develop the tanks and manage water in the dry zone—in fact, the government is currently in the process of preparing a “master plan” for the conservation and development of the Ellanga Gammana system.

In having the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations recognise the Ellanga Gammana system as a Globally Important Agricultural Heritage System (Sri Lanka submitted the proposal last year), Sri Lanka has taken an important step in furthering the conservation and preservation of this ancient water management system that, to date, sustains a variety of ecosystems in the dry zone in the North Central province of the country.

Cover: There are over 3,000 tanks in the dry zone of Sri Lanka. Image courtesy youtube.come

“What’s in a name,” asked the bard, and we know now that “that which we call a rose, by another name would smell as sweet”. But for a number of Sri Lankans, their names given at birth proved a thorny issue. These Sri Lankan, who came to dominate the spheres of music, sports, cinema and others, chose to change their names for a variety of reasons we’ll attempt to discover in this article. So successful were they that many contemporary Sri Lankans are still unaware that these men and women, so cherished and admired, existed in a previous iteration. Here are a list of ten famous Sri Lankans who changed their names along the way.

Amaradeva is attributed with creating an unique Sri Lankan music style. Image courtesy dailynews.lk

Sri Lankabhimanya Pandit Amaradeva is one of the most revered artistes in the Sri Lankan history. A vocalist, violinist and composer, Amaradeva is known as the Helaye Maha Gandharva, or the ‘Maestro of Sri Lanka Music’. His father, a carpenter at the Moratumulla Wadu Karmika Vidyalaya, or the Moratuwa Carpentry School, gifted Amaradeva his first violin when he was seven years old, and the young Amaradeva went on to create a unique new Sri Lanka sound just when Ceylon was just emerging as an independent nation, and the question of what constitutes as Sri Lankan music was being debated by academics and intellectuals alike. Amaradeva combined indigenous Sri Lanka folk music with North Indian ragas he had studied at the Bhatkhande Music Institute in Lucknow, and also experimented with Western, South Indian and Tamil musical harmonies and forms. He even created the ‘mando-harp’, a musical instrument combining the mandolin and the harp, and was conferred numerous awards for his contribution to creating a Sri Lankan musical identity. But Amaradeva, whose name means ‘immortal god’, was born Albert Perera —Wannakuwatta Waduge Don Albert Perera, to be precise. The name Amaradeva was given to him by prominent playwright Professor Ediriweera Sarachchandra after Amaradeva returned from studying music in India, in 1955—perhaps as a means of establishing in him a Sinhalese identity, his birth name Albert Perera associating him with the colonial past.

Rukmani Devi was the first Sinhala film actress. Image courtesy fragmenteyes.blogspot.com

Rukmani Devi was a singer and actress, known as the ‘Nightingale of Sri Lanka’. She was born in Nuwara Eliya to a father who worked on a plantation and a mother who was a teacher, but grew up in Colombo and was educated at the St. Matthew’s School, Dematagoda, and at St. Clare’s School in Wellawatte. At just the age of seven, Rukmani Devi caught the attention of her school teachers for her ability to dance and sing, and was cast in the lead role of the school’s rendition of Sapaththu Mahannage Birinda, or ‘The Shoemaker’s Wife’. So much did she impress that drama producer Walter Abeysinghe—who was in the audience—sought the permission of her parents to have her portray the role of ‘Sita’ in his play ‘Ramayana’ at just the age of 12. Her role in the Ramayana sealed Rukmani’s fate as an actress, and she went on to act in several well received plays. In 1947, Rukmani Devi was cast in the lead role as ‘Ranjani’, in the first Sinhalese film in Sri Lanka, Kadawunu Poronduwa, or ‘Broken Promise’, making her the first local film actress in the country. She recorded her first audio recording (for gramophone) in 1938 and went on to record many others songs through the length of her career, and acted in close to 100 films before her death in 1978. Rukmani Devi, however, was born Daisy Rasammah Daniels. Her name change occurred sometime after 1938, and it is speculated that either prolific musician H. W. Rupasinghe or industry professionals Jayantha Weerasekara and Michael Sannas Liyanage effected the change.

Sunil Santha strove to create a Sinhalese musical identity divorced from North India influences. Image courtesy sundayobserver.lk

Sunil Santha was a renowned lyricist, vocalist and composer, known as Gurudevi to his students. He was born in Ja Ela, in 1915. His parents passed away while he was young and he was raised by his maternal grandmother. He was educated at Dehiyagatha School, St. Benedict’s College, Kotahena, St. Aloysius College, Galle and Tudella School, and was reportedly a gifted student who placed first in the island at the School Leaving Examination in 1931. Sunil Santha took to teaching in 1933 and led the Mt. Calvary Christian School in Galle to three consecutive victories at the Southern Schools Music Competition. He gave up teaching in 1940 to study music at Santiniketan and Bhatkhande, two prestigious music universities in India, and returned in 1944 after he had earned his Visharada degree. In 1946, Sunil Santha was asked to join Radio Ceylon where he began to compose and record a great many songs including the classics Olu Pipila, Handapane and Kokilayange Kokilanade. He also created the soundtracks for Lester James Peries’ films Rekava and Sandeshaya, and published several books, while writing to the newspapers regularly. Sunil Santha composed over 300 songs during his lifetime, and strove to create a Sinhalese identity with his music, divorcing it from North Indian influences prevalent at the time. His one-note song Gum Gum Gum (Wasp Song) is considered his masterpiece. Sunil Santha was however born Baddeliyanage Don Joseph John, and only changed his name to Sunil Santha after his return to Ceylon in 1944.

Ananda Samarakoon was distraught when his composition Namo Namo Maatha was changed to Sri Lanka Maatha. Image courtesy flickr.com

Ananda Samarakoon was a composer and musician known for creating Sri Lanka’s national anthem, Namo Namo Maatha. He was born Egodahage George Wilfred Alwis Samarakoon, to a Christian family in Padukka in 1911, and was educated at Christian College, Kotte (now Sri Jayawardenapura Maha Vidyalaya). Having completed his education, Samarakoon taught music and art at alma mater for some years, before leaving to Santiniketan in India in 1936. He returned in 1938 and taught music at Mahinda College, Galle until 1942. It is upon his arrival that he changed his name to Ananda Samarakoon and embraced Buddhism. Samarakoon is credited—together with Sunil Santha and Amaradeva—as being founders of a new Sinhala music tradition, a conscious breakaway from North Indian influences. In 1948, while living in India where he had fled to grieve the untimely death of his five year old son Ranjith Arunadeepa, his wife Caroline Samarakoon submitted his song Namo Namo Maatha—written some years before—to a contest organised by the Sri Lanka Ghandharwa Sabhawa to choose a new national anthem. P.B. Illangasinghe won the contest, but the validity of the choice was contested as Illangasinghe was a judge on the selection committee. Samarakoon’s more popular Namo Namo Maatha was chosen instead and sung for the first time at the Independence Day ceremony in 1949. Namo Namo Maatha faced controversy, however, when critics in the Sirimavo Bandaranaike government alleged the ‘n’ at the beginning of the anthem was inauspicious and brought ill luck. The anthem was changed to Sri Lanka Maatha without the consent of the composer. A distraught Samarakoon died of an overdose in 1962, a month after writing to Dudley Senanayake, noting that death was more merciful that life under a merciless regime.

Professor Ediriweera Sarachchandra played a crucial role in the resurgence of Sinhala drama. Image courtesy news.lk

Professor Ediriweera Sarachchandra was an acclaimed novelist, poet, literary critic, essayist and social commentator, considered Sri Lanka’s premier playwright. He was born in Galle in 1914, and had his education at Richmond College (Galle), St. John’s College, Panadura, S. Thomas’ College, Mount Lavinia, and St. Aloysius’ College, also in Galle. Sarachchandra gained entrance to the Ceylon University College (University of Ceylon) in 1933 to study Pali, Sanskrit and Sinhala and passed with first class honours. He next sat for the Ceylon Civil Service Examination and was placed first in the island. He then decided then to go to Santiniketan to study Indian Philosophy and Music, and only returned to Ceylon in 1940. He worked on his master’s degree in Indian Philosophy from 1942 to 1944 and in 1949 began work on a postgraduate degree in Western Philosophy. In 1956 he produced Maname, considered the first modern drama in Sri Lanka. Maname was well received and commended for drawing on local ritual theatre traditions such as Nadagam and Kolam. He followed this with Sinhabahu, Bava Kadathurawa, Pematho Jayathi Soko, Loma Hansa, Vessantara and numerous other stage dramas, mostly adaptations from Buddhist Jatakas or Sinhala folklore. Professor Sarachchandra, who also wrote novels, short stories, theory and criticism, played a crucial role in the resurgence of Sinhala drama during Ceylon’s struggle to form a new identity after years of colonial rule. Ediriweera Sarachchandra was, however, named Eustace Reginold de Silva at birth, and reportedly renamed himself after after the legendary Bengali novelist Sarat Chandra Chatterjee.

Chitrasena was an internationally recognised dancer who pioneered the Sri Lankan modern dance form. Image courtesy Chitrasena Kalayathanaya Facebook

Deshamanya Chitrasena was an internationally renowned dancer, credited with popularizing Sri Lankan dance forms abroad. He was born to Seebert Dias, an actor and producer, who encouraged him to embrace theatre and the arts. He made his debut at 15 in the role of Siri Sangabo in a Sinhala ballet produced and directed by his father. He studied Kandyan dance under Algama Kiriganithaya Gurunnanse, Muddanawe Appuwa Gurunnanse and Bevilgamuwe Lnpaya Gurunnanse, and Kathakali dance in Travancore at the Sri Chitrodaya Natyakalalayam under Sri Gopinath and at the Kerala Kalamandalam. Chitrasena founded the Chitrasena Dance Company in 1943 and the Chitrasena Kalayathanaya in 1944, where he introduced new creative dance forms based on indigenous dances to young artistes who lived and worked in the studio. In 1945 he left to India to study and perform at the Santiniketan, and on his arrival worked hard to revive Sinhalese Kandyan, Low-Country and Sabaragamu dance forms. He pioneered Sri Lankan modern dance, forging a link between the traditional and contemporary, and created numerous Sinhala ballets like Ravana, Vidura, Chandali, Nala Damayanthi to name a few. Ananda Samarakoon, Sunil Santha and Amaradeva are closely linked with Chitrasena, having lived, worked or taught at his studio during the early stages of their careers. Chitrasena was born Amaratunga Arachige Maurice Dias, but shed his Portuguese-influenced name sometime after he returned from India, choosing to be influenced instead by the rich roots of his Sinhalese heritage.

Ravindra Randeniya changed his name to suit the Sinhala cinema screen. Image courtesy dbsjeyaraj.com

Ravindra Randeniya is a popular film and television actor, who later became a politician. He was born in Kelaniya in 1946 and attended St. Francis School, Dalugama and later St Benedict’s College, Kotahena, where he displayed interest in reading, writing and the arts. Having completed his schooling, Randeniya began courses in theatre decor and screenwriting at the Lionel Wendt Theatre Workshop, frequented by leading Sinhala dramatists of the day, Dr. Sarachandra Ediriweera, Dhamma Jagoda, Gunasena Galappatty, Ernest MacIntyre, Percy Colinthus, and Irangani Serasinghe. He became fascinated with acting while taking a required general acting class under Dhamma Jagoda, and had his first role in Gunasena Galappatty’s production Muhudu Puththu (Sons of the Seas) in 1962. His next role was with Manik Sandarasagara’s Kalu Diya Dahara’ (Column of Black Water) in 1971. In 1972, acclaimed film director Lester James Peries, who had been impressed by his performance in Galapatty’s Muhudu Puththu, cast him, together with Joe Abeywickrama and Shriyani Amarasena, in Desa Nisa (A Certain Look). This was a breakthrough role for Randeniya, who went on to establish his name as a popular Sinhala film and television actor in the following decades, winning the Sarasaviya Best Actor Award four times; in 1984 for Dadayama, in 1985 for Maya, in 1989 for Sandakada Pahana, and 1990 for Sri Medura. Ravindra Randeniya was named Boniface Perera at birth and his name was changed by veterans in the industry to suit the Sinhala cinema screen.

Vasanthi Chathurani’s family were initially hesitant to let her become an actress. Image courtesy howold.co

Vasanthi Chathurani is a Sinhala film and television actress who made her debut in Gehenu Lamai (1978), while she was just fifteen. Chathurani was born in Gampaha and attended the Holy Cross Convent, where she developed a flair for dancing, poetry recitation and theatre, even winning the ‘Best Actress’ award for a play staged at her school on one occasion. Chathurani was spotted by film director Sumitra Peiris who was on the hunt for a young girl to play the lead in her upcoming film. Despite being handpicked by Peiris, Chathurani initially faced opposition from her family as it was not considered ‘decorous’ for a convent-educated girl to be acting in ‘bi-scopes’ (as films were called then!). She was finally allowed to travel to Colombo to act in the film, and the naive sense of innocence she portrayed opened more doors for her. Although Gehenu Lamai did not do as well as expected, her next role as Nirmala in the film Ganga Addara (1980), opposite the late Vijaya Kumaratunga won her the ‘Best Actress’ award at the Sarasaviya Film Festival, at the tender age of nineteen. Chathurani went on to act in numerous films and teledramas, including Iti Pahan, Giraya, Kadulla and Gajaman Puwatha, working with top directors Lester James Peries, Dharmasena Pathiraja, Dharmasiri Bandaranayake, H. D. Premaratne, Sunil Ariyaratne, and Chandran Rutnam. Chathurani was awarded the Sumathi Most Popular Actress Award in 1997 and received the Sumathi Best Teledrama Actress Award in 1998, 2002 and 2009. But Chathurani was born Wasantha Doreen Peterson; her first name was changed to Vasanthi by Sumitra Peiris, while Professor Ediriweera Sarachchandra gave her the name Chathurani. It is speculated that this was done to facilitate her entry to Sinhala cinema and tele-acting.

Latha Walpola made her debut on Radio Ceylon at the age of 12. Image courtesy fmderana.lk

Deshamanya Latha Walpola is a prominent vocalist, also know to her audiences as the ‘Nightingale of Sri Lanka’. She was born in Mount Lavinia in 1934 and was educated at St. Anthony’s College, where she was a member of the school choir. When she was just 12 years old, she performed together with C. D. Fonseka on the programme Sarala Gee, on Radio Ceylon. The next year, in 1947, she performed her first solo song, Kandulu Denethe Vehena, also on Radio Ceylon. Over the next few years, she trained under Mohammed Gauss, P. L. A. Somapala and B. S. Perera, and was, by 1950, a recognised female singer in the country. Her Namo Mariyanee (1948), Seethala Duruthu Mahe, Mihiri Suwanda Vihiduwa, Nunwa Jaya Handa Pem, Soka Nege Den, Oba Prema Raja Mage and many others made her a household favourite. Walpola also lent her voice to cinema as a playback singer, starting with the film Eda Rae in 1953, and followed by the duets Hari Hari, Hebeta Mage Luck Kale and Prithi Prithi Darling. In her career spanning over 70 years, it is estimated that Walpola has recorded over 6, 750 songs and performed as a playback singer in over 600 films. It is said that Walpola has performed as a playback singer for every actress in Sinhala cinema, save Rukmani Devi, who performed for herself. She has also performed for actresses Rohini Jayakody and Girley Gunawardana in 50s and 60s and for their actress daughters Veena Jayakody and Sabitha Perera much later. Walpola has also collaborated with a number of South Indian artistes such as Dakshinamoorthy, Krishnamurthi, R. S. Diwakar, Rajan Nagendra, T. R. Pappa, K. Jamuna Rani and K. Rani, and is veritable doyen of Sinhala music. But Latha Walpola was born Rita Jenevi Fernando and changed her name to Latha Walpola after marrying top male playback singer Dharmadasa Walpola in 1959.

Tillakaratne Mudiyanselage Dilshan was born to a Malay father and a Sinhala mother. Image courtesy deccanchronicle

Tillakaratne Mudiyanselage Dilshan, or T. M. Dilshan, is a former national cricketer who captained the Sri Lankan team in 2011-2012. He was born in Kalutara in 1976 and was educated, first at the Jaffna Sinhala Madya Maha Vidyalaya, and then at the Kalutara Vidyalaya. Dilshan initially played football, but was discovered by coach Sunil Saluwadana when he was about 10-11 years old. Saluwadana said he had spotted Dilshan playing cricket during the break with his school friends, and noting his top form, invited him to join the cricket team. Dilshan went on to captain the school’s Under 15 team, and replace the regular wicketkeeper of the First XI team, a position he held onto for many years. Having completed his schooling, Dilshan joined the Kalutara Town Club and later the Singha Sports Club and Sebastianites Cricket Club. He made his national debut against Zimbabwe in 1999, where in the second test at Harare, he scored an unbeaten 163 and was awarded ‘Player of the Match’. Dilshan is a seasoned batsman, fielder, wicket-keeper and bowler, and inventor of the ‘Dilscoop’, or ‘ramp shot’, where the ball is ‘scooped’ over the head of the wicket-keeper towards the boundary. Dilshan was born to a Malay father—a police sergeant—and Sinhalese mother, and was named Tuwan Mohammad Dilshan at birth. While rumours are rife that Dilshan changed his name to increase his chances at the national level, still others speculate his name change came about with his marriage to a Sinhalese girl—his first wife Nilanka Vithanage—in 2002. Be that as it may, childhood coach Ranjan Paranavitana said Dilshan and his siblings had followed their mother’s religion from childhood, and had changed his name to Tillakaratne Mudiyanselage Dilshan after his parents separated.

Cover: Rukmani Devi, Sri Lanka’s first Sinhala actress, was a Tamil. Image courtesy youtube.com

The Southwest monsoon, that typically falls between May and September, is approaching, and we are reminded of the devastation caused by excessive rains in May 2016 and 2017 that led to the loss of lives and displaced thousands of people, as floods and landslides wreaked havoc in parts of the country.

In 2016, a low pressure area over the Bay of Bengal—a precursor to cyclonic storm Roanu—resulted in heavy rainfall exceeding 100 mm in several areas. The rains lasted for four days (May 15, 16, 17, 18) and caused over 100 deaths and displaced close to half a million people.

In Aranayake and Bulathkohupitiya, villages were buried in mud as the area experienced the worst ever landslide in history. In fact, as bodies were pulled out from the rubble, Disaster Management Minister Anura Priyadarshana Yapa pronounced it the “worst disaster situation experienced in the past 24 years”.

Yet, exactly a year later, in just two days (18, 19) of rain in May 2017, a precursor to Cyclone Mora brought floods and landslides that affected 15 districts, claimed the lives of over 200 people and rendered close to 700, 000 people temporarily homeless.

Despite having undergone a disaster of an epic scale just the year before, the Disaster Management Ministry as good as admitted it was unprepared for such a calamity. Copies of a document titled ‘National Disaster Relief Services Centre Requests for Relief’, prepared to be circulated among international donor agencies, indicated the ministry was not in possession of the most basic humanitarian needs such as blankets, life jackets, mobile toilets, umbrellas, torches and matches.

It was the general public that sprang to action, donating their own lunch and organising the collection and distribution of relief items to armed forces personnel on the ground. Disaster Management Ministry Secretary S. S Miyanwala conceded the ministry did not have an adequate stock at its disposal at the time of the flood, citing inability to store some items past their expiry date, and explaining that certain items not available in the market had to be outsourced.

Entire villages were buried in landslides that occured in Aranayake and Bulathkohupitiya. Image courtesy army.lk

In the aftermath of the calamity, fingers were pointed at the government, with pundits proposing the need to improve humanitarian response to disasters through empowering local communities. They also pointed out the need for the use of GPS and drones for locating victims, a request to telecom operators to man a specialised cross network channel for ease of communication, and stockpiling food and essential items.

During the Budget 2018, over Rs. 5.8 billion was allocated to the Ministry of Disaster Management to mitigate damage caused by natural disasters, and with just weeks to go before the onset of the Southwest monsoon, Roar Media thought it fit to find out how much the Ministry, and the institutions affiliated with it, were preparing for the impending rains and the possibility of floods of the scale and nature experienced the two preceding years.

While repeated efforts to solicit an answer from S. Amalanathan, Disaster Management Ministry Additional Secretary (Planning), proved unfruitful, with the Secretary evading response to the questions posed to him, several of the other government institutions were forthcoming with information on the work done in preparation for the expected Southwest monsoon.

Athula Karunanayake, Assistant Director at the Meteorological Department, said the department was preparing its ‘Monsoon Forum’, where stakeholders, that is to say, representatives from the Disaster Management Ministry (including the Disaster Management Minister Ranjith Siyambalapitiya), the Disaster Management Centre (DMC), the National Building Research Organization (NBRO) the National Disaster Relief Services Centre (NDRSC), and the Irrigation Department would be briefed on what weather to expect during the Southwest monsoon.

At the conclusion of the Forum, information relating to the expected weather conditions would be updated on their website and on their Facebook page, Karunanayake said, assuring Roar Media that despite reports that disaster authorities had failed to issue early storm warnings last year, an effective communications system was currently in place.

The Meteorological Department is also currently in the process of creating a mobile app to disseminate weather forecast, Director Sarath Premalal told Roar Media. While he admitted the department did not have an SMS alert system (possibly the best way to disseminate information to users across the island, as mobile penetration grew from 96% in 2012 to 126% in 2017), he said the proposed app would “inform users of expected weather conditions over the next ten days”.

A cursory look at the Meteorological Department’s Twitter page also revealed the tool is heavily underutilized, its last post of consequence on April 17, 2017, right in the thick of the storm. The fact that the Met. Department has made no moves to initiate an SMS alert system—despite the suggestion being made in the aftermath of the 2017 floods, also does not bode well.

Army soldiers were extensively involved in rescue operations during the floods of May 2016 and 2017. Image courtesy cnn.com

The National Building Research Organisation, which, among other things, is tasked with landslide research and risk reduction, said in the year since the floods of 2017, much action had been taken to minimise the damage caused by excessive rains.

Director, Dr. Gamini Jayatissa told Roar Media that foremost among these was a community-based system for early warning and evacuation. “We have identified 13 landslide prone districts, including parts of Colombo, parts of Gampaha, parts of Hambantota and major districts like Badulla, Kandy, Nuwara Eliya, Matale, Kegalle, Ratnapura, Kalutara, Galle and Matara,” he said.

“Over 150 Automated Rain Gauges have been installed in these areas, through which we gather real time rainfall data. We have a 24 hour monitoring centre at the NBRO, with scientists working overnight to monitor rainfall in particular areas,” he said, adding that once a threshold limit is reached, or passed, warnings would be issued to the Disaster Management Centre (DMC), through which the message is disseminated to the community.

“The evacuation mechanism lies with the DMC. We monitor the situation and give out early warnings and other technical information, ” he said, adding that the NBRO planned to increase the number of automated rain gauges to 250 this coming year to gather more accurate information of possible landslides.

“In addition to this, we have initiated a community-based evacuation system, where we educate a group of individuals from vulnerable communities on how to measure rainfall using manual rain gauges and how to issue warnings through a siren we have given them, once the water levels reach a designated level,” he said.

“This way the communities themselves are empowered to act in the event of unprecedented rains that increase the risk of landslides in these areas,” he said, adding that 100 community groups had been established in the Badulla, Nuwara Eliya and Kegalle district, with the NBRO planning to roll out more programmes this year.

The Army distributed food and relief items to those affected by the floods. Image courtesy colombopage.com

The NBRO has a fairly active Facebook page, which was used to issue warnings last year but no Twitter handle which could also be used to inform the public of disaster situations. Dr. Jayatissa also admitted that while the NBRO “had plans” to initiate a SMS alert system, it had not been implemented as yet.

“We don’t yet have an SMS alert system to inform the public, but we are trying our best to establish such a system. It’s in the process, we are in the midst of discussions—we know this is important, and we want to do, but it will take time,” he said.

It is the Irrigation Department that is tasked with warning the DMC of impending floods. Mala Alawatugoda, Hydrology Director (Engineer), told Roar Media the department maintained Automatic Weather Stations across the country which monitor rains and rising river water levels 24 hours.

“We have pre-designated alert levels; the first on this scale is not for the public, but an internal alert for our officers to be vigilant,” she said. “Then there are ‘Minor Flood Levels’ and ‘Major Flood Levels’,” she said, adding that the DMC would be informed the minute water levels reached Minor Flood Level.

The Irrigation Department has a fairly active Facebook page, but no Twitter handle which could be used to warn the public of impending floods. Alawatugoda told Roar Media the department had no plans to launch an SMS alert system or app, stating simply that they would only alert the DMC, which would coordinate alerting the public.

J. A. D. C. Savithri, Assistant Director of the National Disaster Relief Service Centre (NDRSC), said that while evacuation and rescue lay with the DMC, which acted together with the tri-forces, the NDRSC was in the process of preparing a contingency plan for the upcoming Southwest monsoon rains.

The plan promises to support relief management efforts with better coordination among stakeholders, in much the same manner it prepared for the Northeast monsoon late last year. The NDRSC, with the analysis of historical data, calculates the potential impact to pre-identified vulnerable districts, and plans evacuation centres, provides financial allocations to each district, and maintains a warehouse stocked with items for emergency response and relief, she said.

“In addition to this, we have an insurance scheme that covers all individuals in vulnerable areas, so that we can offer compensation for damaged properties,” Savithri said.

However, it was the NDRSC that was found wanting when the disaster of 2017 hit. The document circulated among donor agencies indicated the warehouse maintained by the NDRSC was lacking the most basic humanitarian needs.

Responding to queries relating to this, Savithri said the NDRSC was unprepared for the scale of the disaster faced in 2017. “We have relief items stocked at the warehouse, but over half a million people affected in two days of rain was unprecedented, and we had to reach out to donor agencies to fill the gap,” she said.

However, it is unclear if the NDRSC has taken necessary action to prepare for possible floods this year, by stockpiling more relief items in anticipation of the expected Southwest monsoon. When questioned, the various officials Roar Media spoke to declined to provide a quantitative answer, choosing to avoid responding to the question altogether.

While each of these agencies has very specific tasks to perform, overall coordination lies with the Disaster Management Centre (DMC) that is expected to disseminate warnings to the media and the public, and manage rescue and relief efforts.

Deputy Director, Pradeep Kodippili said starting next week, the DMC would begin emergency response committee meetings at the district level, with the support of the disaster management units that have been set up at each district.

The affected clamour for relief and supplies. Image courtesy xinhuanet.com

“We will also begin discussion with emergency response teams—that is the police, armed forces, electricity board employees etc. to discuss how we will respond to the information received from the Met. Department, the Irrigation Department and the NBRO,” he said.

He said the DMC had already provided emergency response items to the military and the police. “This time we have provided more than 125 boats to district levels and more than 150 water bowsers and other response items as well—rope, generators, wire cutters etc.”, he said.

He said the emergency operations centre at the national headquarters of the DMC, manned by 25-30 people from the tri-forces and police, was used to disseminate warnings. “The tri-forces and police have their own communications network, and we also use these networks to broadcast warnings to all parts of the country,” he said.

Kodippili also said that the DMC had conducted drills with vulnerable communities, educating them on where to go, and what routes to take. “People living in vulnerable areas have faced the possibility of floods and landslides their entire lives,” he said. “This is not something new to them, so when the time comes, they need to move.”

Kodippili was especially critical of the people’s desire to remain in their homes, despite warning to leave. “Last year we provided the warnings in time. People got the message asking them to evacuate, but were more concerned about the safety of their goods, and would not leave their homes until it was too late,” he said.

“People have to change, they have to leave when we warn them to, without staying behind and then having to be rescued by the tri-forces and police,” he said.

Be that as it may, in the aftermath of the floods last year, Kodippili said the DMC had not received timely information from the Irrigation Department and the National Building Research Organisation.

The Southwest monsoon, which battered Sri Lanka the past two years, is expected in May. Image courtesy Azzam Ameen/Twitter

G. L. S. Senadeera, DMC Director General, had meanwhile said that the reports from the Meteorological Department had not predicted the intensity of the approaching deluge. “The low pressure system just changed so suddenly, there was no time for anyone to communicate, issue warnings or effect evacuations. It was so sudden and quick,” he was quoted as saying.

The media also highlighted the fact that the Doppler radar system belonging to the Met. Department was inoperative. Although an agreement was signed with the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) in June 2017 to establish another Doppler Weather Radar Network, the project will take almost two years to come into effect.

The DMC had also—in 2009—launched an app known by the acronym ‘DEWN’, (which stands for Disaster Early Warning Network), capable of alerting the public of potential disaster. Despite this, the DMC was accused of failing to alert the public in time when the floods hit in 2016 and 2017.

It is clear that in the aftermath of the devastation last year, several of the institutions that come under the purview of the Disaster Management Ministry have adopted new methods to prepare for disasters. Particularly commendable is the community-based evacuation system initiated by the NBRO that works to empower vulnerable communities.

But it is equally clear that many areas remain unaddressed. Particular among them—and prevalent across the board—is a peculiar reluctance to use SMS warning systems to alert the public of impending disaster. Coupled with the fact that the Met. Department still lacks the technology needed to accurately predict weather, and the underutilization of social media tools, we are unsure—despite the appearance of confidence—if the government is truly ready for a disaster, should it strike this May.

Cover: Close to 700, 000 people were affected in the May 2017 floods. Image courtesy leads.lk

Hot on the heels of the ‘no-confidence’, or ‘no-faith’ motion against Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe last month, the ‘Joint Opposition’ (JO), the largest opposition group in Parliament, is in talks to bring a no-confidence motion against Opposition leader and Tamil National Alliance (TNA) chief Rajavarothiam Sampanthan, on charges he sided with the government during the no-confidence motion brought against the Prime Minister. The JO is of the opinion that as the leader of the Opposition in the government, Sampanthan is duty bound to vote against the government. A final decision on if it would bring a no-confidence motion would be made after Parliament reconvenes on May 8, having been prorogued by the President on April 13. Meanwhile, Sampanthan made it clear in Trincomalee this week, he was prepared to face any no-confidence motion.

The JO has effectively wielded the no-confidence motion tool, having just weeks ago – on March 2 – brought a much publicized no-confidence motion against the Prime Minister, in which it laid a number of charges against the Premier, particularly that of economic mismanagement in the the three years since the coalition government took over administration, involvement in the Central Bank Treasury Bond scam and failing to curb anti-Muslim riots that broke out in Kandy last month, while functioning as Law and Order Minister. The ministry was later given to Ranjith Madduma Bandara.

That no-confidence motion was taken up for debate on April 4, and successfully defeated after a majority of the minority coalition parties—particularly the TNA and the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC)—stood by the Prime Minister, isolating the JO and part of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) that said it would support the motion against the Prime Minister. The Marxist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) also supported the JO in its motion against the Prime Minister. Despite this apparent show of support, 122 Members of Parliament voted against the no-confidence motion, 76 voted in favour of, while 26 (mostly SLFP-ers who had initially pledged support) abstained from voting.

S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike faced a no-confidence motion in 1957. Image courtesy wikipedia

Crackers were lit late that night in Colombo and the suburbs as United National Party (UNP) supporters celebrated the triumph of its leader Ranil Wickremesinghe, over discontented members of the national unity government. As the unity government heads towards its fourth year in administration, it was made clear the interminable leader of the UNP enjoys a clear majority in the house. But this comes in the wake of President Maithripala Sirisena attempting to oust Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, when the results of the local government elections held on February 10 indicated the JO’s Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) had gained traction with the masses.

It was President Maithripala Sirisena’s attempt to oust the Prime Minister that acted as catalyst for the JO to bring a no-confidence motion against the Prime Minister, in the hopes of defeating him at a vote in Parliament and forcing his resignation. Such a scenario would have allowed the JO to partner with the SLFP, displacing the UNP in the national unity government. Since the JO—an ‘unofficial’ political party—is made up primarily of SLFP supporters (siding with former President Mahinda Rajapaksa in his disapproval of the alliance with the UNP), this would have made for an ideal situation for many of those against the policies and values of the liberal UNP.

This is not the first time the JO, which coalesced in the aftermath of the 2015 General Election, has brought a no-confidence motion against a member of the coalition government. But it is the first time it has considered bringing a no-confidence motion against a member of the opposition. This is not, however, unprecedented. In 1981, members of the UNP government brought a no-confidence motion against the (then) opposition leader and Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) chief Appapillai Amirthalingam, which was passed in parliament. It was the first time a no-confidence motion had been brought against the leader of the opposition by the sitting government. The no-confidence motion against R. Sampanthan is equally farcical, and only indicates the JO’s desire to be considered leaders of the opposition in Parliament.

Earlier on, in 2016, and once again in 2017, the JO submitted no-confidence motions against Ravi Karunanayake. While Karunanayake defeated the first motion (145 against, 51 for, 28 absent), he publicly resigned over the second no-confidence motion that accused him of involvement in Central Bank bond scams of February 2015 and March 2016. His resignation was seen as a major victory for the JO.

There have been several other instances during which no-confidence motions have been brought against various members of parliament. This latest against the Prime Minister, is, in fact, the 47th instance of a no-confidence motion. There have been 23 no-confidence motions against governments, 13 against ministers, six against Speakers and Deputy Speakers, one against an opposition leader and another one against a chief justice (Shirani Bandaranayake). The no-confidence motion against Ranil Wickremesinghe is, however, the third no-confidence motion brought against a Prime Minister—the previous two being S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike in 1957 and Sirimavo Bandaranaike in 1975. Both were defeated, with S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike receiving 45 against and only 1 for, while Sirimavo received 100 votes against and 43 for.

Prime Minister Sirimavo Bandaranaike also faced a no-confidence motion in 1975. Image courtesy biography.com

A no-confidence motion is a statement by a number of members of parliament that demonstrate the elected parliament no longer has confidence in a member of the government—or a head-of state—to hold that position.

Cited as reasons for losing faith are if the elected government feels the person concerned is no longer fit to hold that position because they are inadequate in some respect, or they have failed to carry out obligations, or have made decisions that are detrimental to the functioning of the parliamentary body.

In the case of Ranil Wickremesinghe, the 14 reasons were submitted by the JO to demonstrate their lack of faith in his leadership, while in the case of the proposed no-confidence motion against Sampanthan, the allegation is that he acted in the interest of the government, rather than in the interest of the opposition, which role he is expected to play as the leader of the opposition in Parliament.

Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe successfully defeated the no-confidence brought against him. Image courtesy vasalaviththi.com

Before April 2015, had the no-confidence motion brought by the JO been successful, it could have forced the Prime Minister to resign or be dismissed, allowing the JO a greater hand in the machinations of the government. With the passage of the 19th Amendment to the Constitution in April 2015, however, the Prime Minister’s position in office is constitutionally guaranteed. As per the 19th Amendment, 46 (2), the Prime Minister can continue to hold office unless he (a) resigns his office by a writing under his hand addressed to the President or (b) ceases to be a Member of Parliament. The 19th Amendment obliterates the clause (47) included in the 1978 Constitution that allows the President to remove the Prime Minister, effectively assuring the position of the Prime Minister in Parliament. Had the no-confidence motion against the Prime Minister been successful, rather than force him to resign or be removed, it would have been effective in discrediting him and the UNP-component of the coalition and done damage to an already fragile coalition government. Be that as it may, the no-confidence motion against Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe was successfully defeated by a majority of 46 votes, just as the previous no-confidence motions against Prime Ministers S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike and Sirimavo Bandaranaike were defeated in Parliament.

The no-confidence motion against R. Sampanthan too – if it is brought to fruition – is likely to have no impact on the status of the TNA as the opposition in government. Given that the TNA supported Premier Ranil Wickremesinghe during the no-confidence motion brought against him, it can be expected that members of the UNP in Parliament will vote against the no-confidence motion brought against TNA leader R. Sampanthan. The move – members of the ruling party voting for a member of the opposition – will be just as unprecedented as members of the opposition voting for the Prime Minister, as they did during the no-confidence motion against Ranil Wickremesinghe. The JO is likely they will face defeat should they choose to bring a no-confidence motion against Sampanthan, but, as Sampanthan himself pointed out, any party has the right to bring a no-confidence motion against any member of Parliament, and what remains to be seen is how this latest complication will play out.

Cover: The Joint Opposition is considering a no-confidence motion against Opposition Leader R. Sampanthan. Image courtesy srilankamirror

Dutch-Ceylon relations began when Dutch Admiral Joris van Spilbergen arrived in Ceylon with three ships in 1602. He struck up a friendship with King Vimaladharmasuriya I and discussed future relations, including possible assistance to expel the Portuguese who had ruled over the Kingdom of Kotte and the maritime regions since 1580. A second fleet commanded by Sebald de Weert arrived in Ceylon shortly after, to build on the cordial relations established by van Spilbergen, but ended with disaster after he was mistakenly killed when King Vimaladharmasuriya I ordered him imprisoned—“bandapan me balla” (bind this dog), during a heated fracas that broke out during a feast, when an inebriated de Weert made a comment perceived by King Vimaladharmasuriya I to be an insult to the Queen (“Oh, as for the Queen, she will never be at a loss for men”). King Vimaladharmasuriya I was already enraged with de Weert for failing to kill a shipload of Portuguese taken prisoner in accordance with a promise made to him. . Dutch-Ceylon relations cooled for a period after the death of de Weert, until Senerat took over as King in 1604. In 1612, King Senerat entered into a treat with the Dutch in the hopes of expelling the Portuguese from the country, but little came of that agreement, prompting King Senerat to look to Denmark, with who he penned a treaty in 1618. Nothing came of this alliance either, and it was left to his successor King Rajasinha II to attempt to engage the Dutch in a mission to expel the tenacious Portuguese.

Dutch-Ceylon relations began when Admiral Joris van Spilbergen struck up cordial relations with King Vimaladharmasuriya I in 1602. Image courtesy thuppahi.wordpress.com

Rajasinha II reached out to the Dutch in 1638 and the Dutch complied with his request, sending several ships to engage in skirmishes with the Portuguese over the years, finally expelling the Portuguese from Ceylon in 1658. Over the next decades, the Dutch established control over parts of Ceylon, and only left when the British acquired Dutch possessions through direct conquest in 1796. In the century or more that the Dutch held sway over the provinces of Ceylon, it impacted local culture and customs in ways that still linger today. Take for instance the Roman-Dutch law, a combination of early modern Dutch law and Roman law, that is the general law in Sri Lanka today. Place names such as Hulftsdorp (Hulft’s Village), Wolvendaal (Dale of Wolves) and Bloemendaal (Vale of Flowers) are also of Dutch origin, as are loan words assimilated into the Sinhala language such as istoppuwa (verandah), kamaraya (room), kanturowa (office), iskuruppuwa (screw) and ketalaya (kettle). In addition to these, families of the Sinhalese elite took on Dutch first names such as Cornelis, Hendrick, Jacobus and Philipsz, Cornelia, Henrietta and Johanna. Dutch influence also spread in terms of religion (Calvinism) and architecture—many of which stand today. Perhaps the most lasting testament of Dutch occupancy in Ceylon are the people it left behind. Referred to today as Dutch-Burghers, these are the descendants of Dutch men and native Ceylonese women. The Dutch-Burghers in Sri Lanka today sport first names such as Adrian, Willham, Graham, Simone and Elissa, while many of their surnames take on the tussenvoegsel, or prefix ‘van’ or ‘de’ meaning ‘from or ‘the’. Today, in Sri Lanka, many of British, French, Swiss, Belgian and other European descent have come to be known as “Dutch Burghers”. This article however, lists a number of names of those directly descended from the Netherlands, and explains what they mean.

The name Arentz is a variant of the name Arends and means “eagle”. Arentz or Arends also derives from the name Arnould/Arnout, which stems from the Germanic word aran, also meaning “eagle”.

Claessen is a patronym, meaning son of Klaas. Klaas is a short form of the name “Nicholas”, which is a Greek name meaning “the victory of the people”. It is a common name in the Netherlands.

De Jong means “the younger”, and is used when two of the same family hold the same first name. Its English equivalent would be “junior”. It is a very common surname, used more often than “De Oude”, which means “the elder”.

Jansz and its variant Jansen are patronymic names, meaning “son of Jan”. The name Jan is the Dutch version of the name “John” and Jansz or Jansen are the Dutch equivalent of the name “Johnson”. The name is common in the Netherlands. Variations include Jans, Janse and Janssen.

Van de Berg means “from the mountain”. Because there are no “mountains” as such in the Netherlands, the name “berg” (mountain) refers to “higher ground”. It indicates that the holder came from an area on higher ground.

Van Buren means “from Buren”. Buren is a small town on the island of Ameland in the north of the Netherlands, as well as a small city in the Dutch province Gelderland. Its name is derived from the word “bur” meaning “house” or “dwelling”.

De Bruin is a common surname in the Netherlands and means “the brown”. It is a patronymic name inherited from a male ancestor, and probably refers to the colour of one’s hair. Its English equivalent is, of course, the surname “Brown”. Variants are Bruin, Bruijn, Bruyn and Bruins

Loos is a name of Dutch and low German origin. It can be a toponymic (place name), patronymic or descriptive name. In certain areas, the name Loos is a short form of the name “Lodewijk”, which is the Dutch name for “Louis”. In other areas (North Germany) it may be derived from the name “Nikolaus”, meaning “conqueror of the people”.

Van Dort, or “from Dort” is a toponymic name meaning from the city and municipality of Dordrecht (colloquially “Dordrecht”, and in English “Dort”) in Western Netherlands in the province of South Holland.

Cover: Dutch Colombo, based on an engraving circa 1680, Philippus Baldaeus. Image courtesy wikipedia

The weather has been getting increasingly warmer as we head towards the Sri Lankan equivalent of summer (roughly the months between April, May, and June, when the sun is at its zenith). As the heat increases, and with it our restless desire to get out of the city and head towards cooler climes, the first option that pops into your mind is a holiday staple, Nuwara Eliya.

Meaning ‘city of lights’, referring no doubt to the way the homes light up the dark mountains in the dead of the night, Nuwara Eliya—also known as ‘Little England’—comes alive during the holiday month of April, when families upon families travel up the mountains to engage in the fun and activities that Nuwara Eliya is known for during that very warm month.

Nuwara Eliya, also known as ‘Little England’, can get very crowded during the month of April. Image courtesy nuwaraeliyainfo.com

Just as crowds descend upon Colombo during the Vesak month of May to take in the sight of lanterns and pandols and partake in dansals, crowds traverse to Nuwara Eliya during the month of April to escape the heat, visit strawberry gardens, go horseback riding, visit the colorful carnivals and just relax and cool off in that beautiful little town, the coldest in Sri Lanka.

But Nuwara Eliya can get very crowded during the holiday season, with increased vehicular traffic blaring horns and emitting exhaust smoke, and pedestrians taking over the streets, leaving no room to breathe. And so, if you’re looking for a quiet holiday away from the hustle and bustle this April season, Nuwara Eliya, for all its scenic beauty, may not be the best holiday destination.

There are, however, other cool(er) places you can take off alone, or with your family, to escape the heat in the city and spend some time with nature, in mild to chilly, breathtakingly beautiful climes.

1. Haputale

Scottish tea baron Sir Thomas Lipton’s favourite spot in Haputale offers a panoramic view. Image courtesy amazingsrilanka.com

Haputale is a small town in the Badulla district of the Uva Province, situated at an elevation of 1,431 meters above sea level. The town holds no more than approximately 5,000 people and is located on top of a mountain range with scenic views on either side. There are plenty of places to stay, and the town is accessible by road and train. The Dambatenne Tea Factory, Lipton’s Seat and Adisham Monastery are all in vicinity and worth a visit with family or friends. The town is uncongested and misty and cool, and will make for a wonderful alternate holiday destination.

2. Ella

The Demodara Nine Arches Bridge near Ella is considered one of the best examples of British engineering in Sri Lanka. Image courtesy shalanka.com

Ella is a small town in the Badulla district of the Uva Province that has seen increasing popularity over the last few years—especially with tourists. Situated at an elevation of 1,041 metres above sea level, the Ella town has flourished and has a relatively well established tourist economy, with plenty of guest houses and places to stay, as well as wi-fi and general amenities and services. Ella is accessible by road and train. The climate is cold and misty and the area is surrounded by valleys, tea plantations and forests. In the vicinity are the Ravana Falls, the Nine Arches Bridge and Demodara Loop Tunnel—where the train passes under itself in a spiral loop—that are worth visiting.

3. Pattipola

Pattipola is the highest point to which the train travels in Sri Lanka. Image courtesy theuniquetravelcompany.co.uk

Pattipola is a small town on the border of the Nuwara Eliya district of the Central Province and is a good alternate holiday option this April season. Pattipola is accessible by road and train and is, in fact, the highest point to which trains operated by Sri Lanka Railways travel, at 1,897.5 metres above sea level. There are several inexpensive places to stay in Pattipola, and the surroundings are cold and beautiful. Pattipola is also one of the entrances to the Horton Plains, which gives visitors to this sleepy town the adventurous options of hiking the Kirigalpoththa and Thotupola mountains. Nearby is also the Ambewela Farm where you can find out how your daily dairy is made.

4. Badulla

The Bogoda Wooden Bridge in Badulla was built in the 16th century. Image courtesy picture.lk

Badulla is the capital city of the Uva Province and is situated at an elevation of about 680 metres above sea level. The weather is cool and the area is surrounded by tea plantations. The city is almost completely encircled by the Badulu Oya River and overshadowed by the Namunukula range of mountains. There are plenty of places to stay while in Badulla, and a number of nearby attractions to visit. These include visiting the Dunhinda Falls, the Bogoda Wooden Bridge, built in the 16th century, the Dhowa Rock Temple, the Anglican St. Mark’s Church and the Wewessa Ella.

5. Deniyaya

A variety of flora and fauna can be found at the Sinharaja Forest Reserve, which lies adjacent to Deniyaya in the Matara district. Image courtesy themasstours.com

Deniyaya is a small town in Matara district of the Southern Province, close by the Sinharaja Forest Reserve. This lowland wetland area is cool, especially during the night, and abounds with nature. Deniyaya is accessible by road and train and there are a number of lodges and places to stay. It is easy to relax in Deniyaya, enjoying the misty cold views. Nature walks through the Sinharaja Forest are a must, and many species of flora and fauna can be spotted there. There is also the Sathmahal Ella for bathing and the Dalu Tea Centre to visit.

6. Kotmale

Ruins of the Kadadora Viharaya, submerged to make room for the Kotmale reservoir, can be seen when water recedes during dry weather. Image courtesy amazinglanka.com

Kotmale is a little village in the Central Province that lies alongside the Kotmale reservoir and dam. It is accessible by road and train and has plenty of small hotels and places to stay. There are a number of attractions in the vicinity, which include the Kotmale Mahaweli Maha Seya, built to commemorate the over 50 temples submerged when building the reservoir in the 1980s, the Dehadu Kadulla, or the Kotmale Kadadora, one of four main entrances (Kadadora, Watadora, Niyangandora and Galdora) used to enter Kotmale in ancient times, and the nearby Devon Falls in Talawakele. Depending on the weather, you can also a catch glimpse of the Kadadora Viharaya, partially submerged in the waters of the Kotmale reservoir.

7. Rakwana

Rakwana, in the lowland wetland of the Sabaragamuwa Province, is cool and misty. Image courtesy srilankaexpeditions.com

Rakwana is a small town in the Ratnapura district of the Southern Province that serves as an entrance to the Sinharaja Forest Reserve. It is surrounded by looming mountains and tea estates and also the Rakwana River. There are a number of waterfalls—Galdola Ella, Handapan Ella, Dalveen Ella and Arambe Ella—for visiting and bathing, in addition to the Sinharaja Forest Reserve which is a ‘must-visit’, with its variety of flora and fauna. There are places to stay in Rakwana, and it is accessible by road and train. The lowland wetland area is cool and misty in the morning and will make a great alternative holiday destination.

While Nuwara Eliya is definitely the coldest of all these spots, each of these listed above can be cooler alternatives to the busy hill country towns of Nuwara Eliya and Kandy. With a little pre-planning and pre-booking, you can arrange an informative excursion with your family in parts hitherto unexplored on the island of Sri Lanka!

[Cover: Haputale, in the Uva Province, is picturesque and cold. Image courtesy bookings.com]

Sinhala and Tamil New Year is almost upon us, and as preparations begin for the festivities that mark the end of the harvest season, we thought we’d take a look at some of the traditions and customs that have come to characterize the holiday.

In Sinhalese, the new year is known as Aluth Avurudda, while in Tamil the new year is known as Puthandu or Puthuvarusham. For the Tamils, the holiday marks the first day of the Tamil month Chithirai, while for the Sinhalese it marks the movement of the sun from Meena Rashiya (the house of Pisces) to Mesha Rashiya (the house of Aries).

Kavum, deep fried oil cakes made with treacle, is a traditional sweetmeet made by Sinhalese families during the Aluth Avurudda. Image courtesy srilankanfoodforever.blogspot.com

Both Sinhalese and Tamil families begin preparations for the new year by cleaning their houses. Unused items are discarded, broken items repaired. In many homes, a fresh coat of paint is applied in the runup to the holiday that typically falls on April 13 and 14 on the Gregorian calendar.

In Tamil homes, entrances are decorated with colored rice powder in elaborate designs called kolam. Kolams are believed to bring prosperity and ward off evil spirits from the home. Kolams are typically drawn by the females of the house, the day before new year dawns.

Both the Sinhalese and the Tamils prepare a variety of food items for sharing and consumption during the new year. The Sinhalese call these kevili, while the Tamil refer to them as palaharam. Sinhalese kevili include the following:

Tamil palaharam include:

In addition to these, Sinhalese make milk rice, or kiri bath, to be eaten with the hath maluwa – a dish made up of seven vegetables and fish ambul thiyal (sour fish). Tamil families make rice (sometimes milk rice) and curries, while also serving a number of savoury items such as murukku, vadai and ‘mixture’. Tamils also make a special dish called pachadi for the new year. Pachadi is a heady mix of sweet and sour, made from mangoes, spices, sugar and bitter neem leaves. It symbolises the mix of experiences that can be expected in the new year, and serves as a reminder to partake of life with equanimity. Fresh fruit, especially bananas, are an integral part of both the Sinhalese Avurudda and Tamil Puthandu table.

Payatham Paniyaram, a spicy green gram snack made by Tamil families during Puthandu. Image courtesy srilankancuisine.wordpress.com

Sinhalese mark the period between the end of the old year and the beginning of the new year with a period of nonagatha—also known as punya kalaya, where time is spent in religious observances and no work is done, not even cooking.

It is also customary for the Sinhalese, especially in the village areas, to partake of a herbal bath before the new year arrives. This is done after receiving a nanu—the anointing of the head with mustard or gingelly oil. The anointing is generally carried out by a male elder in the family, or by a priest at the temple. The herbal bath is made up of a variety of leaves like imbul, divul, kolong, kohomba, bo, karanda or nuga, depending on the day, with imbul on Sundays, divul on Mondays, kolong on Tuesdays, kohomba on Wednesdays, bo on Thursdays, karanda on Fridays and nuga on Saturdays.

Aluwa is a diamond-shaped sweet made by Sinhalese families from rice flour and treacle. It is also coated with rice flour giving it a distinct white, floury look. Image courtesy foodwithlove.com

Tamils also partake of an anointing, when a concoction known as maruthu neer is applied on their head before taking a bath on the morning of the new year. The maruthu neer is made up of herbs, selected flowers and leaves, milk and saffron and is prepared by Hindu priests. After applying maruthu neer, Tamils partake of a herbal bath before leaving for the kovil to make their offerings and thanks to the gods.

Sinhalese and Tamils also traditionally seek the blessings of elders in their families. This is done in Sinhalese families with the offering of betel leaves to elders, while in Tamil families, an exchange known as kai vishesham takes place, where betel leaves, flowers and money is gifted by the elders of the family to the younger members.

Ellu Urundai or Ellu Pagu is a Tamil sweet made from black sesame seeds and jaggery syrup. Image courtesy lakshana-recipes.blogspot.com

After the morning rituals, both communities open up their homes to receive friends and families. Crackers are lit to signify the beginning of the new year and food is partaken of and various traditional indoor and outdoor games played. The games played by the Sinhalese and Tamils are very similar, and include kabbadi, kana mutti bindeema – or mutti udaithal in Tamil, kamba adeema – known as kayiru illuthal in Tamil and a variety of other board games including chess and draughts.

It is clear that despite differences in customs, these two communities in Sri Lanka are bound by several similarities, as exemplified in these shared customs and traditions revolving around the new year festivities.

Cover: Women folk of the Tamil families hand draw kolam outside the entrance of their homes in anticipation of Puthandu. Image courtesy designhouse.blogspot.com

The Sinhala and Tamil new year is approaching, and with it, the hustle and bustle to prepare for the festivities are increasing. Colombo and other city centres are inundated, as shoppers throng to buy new clothes, gifts, food ingredients and household items to ring in the new year—an important date in the Sri Lankan calendar.

Although the holiday falls on just two days—typically the 13th and 14th of April on the Gregorian calendar —industry in Colombo and other cities and towns are crippled for far longer, as people leave the city centres to return to the villages they were born in, or from whence their ancestors came, to celebrate the new year with family and friends.

For this reason, the Sinhala and Tamil new year results in a long holiday for all the communities of the country, and as hospitality and sharing are an integral part of the Sri Lankan identity, Burghers, Muslims, Malays and other minority communities share in the celebrations and bask in the goodwill of the two majority communities during this holiday.

Kiri ithirima, or boiling a pot of milk or coconut water is a ritual that is still practiced in the new year. Image courtesy lanka.com

The Avurudu holiday is deeply intertwined with agrarian culture and traditionally marks the end of the harvest season. There are a great many customs linked with the Avurudu holiday, that have been passed down from generation to generation, distinct in ritual and obeisance. But not many of these customs and rituals are practiced today.

This has largely to do with rapid urbanization and the gradual transformation of Sri Lanka from an agrarian economy to a service and industrial economy. As more people leave the villages and settle in towns and cities, there is little room to practice the rituals, traditions, and customs perpetuated by generations of rural communities.

While some traditions persist—observing the nonagatha, or punya kalaya between the old and the new year; kiri ithirima, boiling milk on a new hearth to symbolize prosperity; hisa thel gama, anointing the head with oil; and ganu denu kireema, exchanging betel leaves and money with elders of the family—many other traditions associated with the new year have been discarded.

Here are five traditions practiced by village communities during the new year that have now gone out of practice:

Viewing the new moon is one of the first rituals prescribed by the panchanga litha for the new year. Image courtesy nydailynews.com

Nawa Sandha baleema, or viewing the new moon, was a tradition practiced by villagers to mark the end of one year and the beginning of the new year. Nawa sandha baleema traditionally takes places after the ritualistic herbal bath at the end of the old year. The herbal bath and the nawa sandha baleema are the first rituals in the panchanga litha (almanac) prescribed by astrologers for the new year. It is believed that there are two auspicious times for viewing the moon—one during the old year, and one during the new solar year. It is said that once the moon is viewed for the old year, it is best to refrain from looking at it again until the new year.

Men and boys in the village would go in search of cashew trees to gather cadju for the new year. Image courtesy youtube

Cadju, or cashew, grows in abundance in the village during the April month, which is when the new year falls. It was a customary practice for the men and boys in the village to go in search of cadju trees from which to pick cadju plums and the nut. The nut is dried and roasted and used to make a variety of food items for the new year, including the hathmaluwa, a dish made up of seven types of vegetables, and in the batter for the kavum. Cadju was also used for traditional games—wala kaju gaseema is a game in which a small hollow is made in the sand and a player has to put his cashews in it or hit others afterward.

Each home in the village had a mortar and pestle used to pound ‘new rice’ from the aluth sahal mangalya for the new year. Image courtesy deemaspice.blogspot.com

The aluth sahal mangalya refers to the first batch of new rice that is plucked, threshed, winnowed and presented to the Sri Dalada Maligawa in Kandy and the Sri Maha Bodhi Vihara at Anuradhapura. Sri Lanka has two harvest seasons—the Maha and Yala. Rice from the Maha season is offered to deities during Duruthu poya day in January, while rice from the Yala season is offered in April, prior to the Avurudu celebrations. Some of this ‘new’ rice is set aside for use during the Avurudu celebrations and sound of rice being pounded by mortar and pestle in the days leading to the new year was familiar in villages homes.

A coin was cast into the well as part of the ganu-denu (give and take) with water. Image courtesy windowtonature.wordpress.com

Jalaya samaga ganu-denu refers to a transaction with the well located on the land, from which the family met their daily water needs. The use of pipe-borne water, the contamination of groundwater and other factors have led to wells being rarely used in households today, but in earlier times, the male of the household would throw a coin into the well, along with a few jasmine flowers. Water would then be drawn from the well, and a bottle filled and placed in the care of the primary female caregiver in the house, until the next year, when the tradition was repeated.

The branch of a jackfruit tree or a breadfruit tree was cut until the sap oozed out, signifying an overflow of prosperity. Image courtesy youtube

Kiri gahak kapeema is part of the ritual associated with weda alleema, or beginning day-to-day activities at the auspicious time after the period of nonagathaya. Kiri gahak kapeema refers to when the primary female of the house would cut the branch of a ‘milk’ (sap) bearing tree, to symbolise an overflow of prosperity in the new year. Typically jackfruit (kos) and breadfruit (del) trees growing in the home garden would be cut during this ritual.

While these traditions have fallen by the wayside as Sri Lanka progresses to a service-oriented middle-income country, it is heartening to see certain traditions still kept alive and passed onto new generations. Come Sinhala and Tamil new year this weekend, many Sinhalese families will consult the almanac for auspicious colours to wear, times to boil milk on the new hearth, and begin work for the new year. Even as we progress to an era in which the internet and smartphones have taken precedence, taking the time to practice rituals of the past maintains the bonds we shared with our ancestors and reminds us of simpler, humbler times. Suba aluth awuruddak wewa!

Cover: Raban or drums were beaten in the villages to mark aluth avurudda udawa or the dawning of the new year, a practice now obsolete. Image courtesy timeout.com

Education in Sri Lanka is said to have begun in the 3rd century BC, when the Sanskrit language came to the island with the establishment of Buddhism at the hands of Arhanthà Mahinda Thera, during the reign of King Devanampiyatissa. By the 6th century BC, monasteries and temples became the educational centres in Sri Lanka, but this changed when the Portuguese conquered the maritime regions with the purpose of commandeering trade routes and spreading Roman Catholicism. The Portuguese established many missionary schools, gaining a foothold in the fishing communities—both Sinhalese and Tamil. When the Portuguese were expelled in 1640, the Dutch took over, banning Roman Catholicism and establishing a Christian—specifically Calvinist—primary school system in the island. But it was only after the British took over in 1802 that formal primary and secondary education was actualized with the establishment of a number of schools by British missionaries.

The first school established by the British in Sri Lanka was ‘The Galle School’, now known as Richmond College, in Galle. The school was established by the Wesleyan Methodist Mission in 1814 and is today a national school, funded by the government. ‘The Galle School’ was also the first Methodist school in Asia. This was followed by the Methodist Central College in Batticaloa, also in 1814. Numerous schools began to burgeon across the island in the following years, but a large number of them were based in Jaffna, in the Northern Province, where British and American missionaries set up base with the intention of converting the local population to Christianity. In fact, the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Mission, at its Annual General Meeting in Boston in 1834, said the Jaffna schools excelled over all others set up abroad.

Here is a list of some of the oldest missionary-established schools in Jaffna:

Union College in Tellippalai is one of the oldest schools established by missionaries in the Jaffna district. It was initially known as the Common Free School, and was founded by Reverend Daniel Poor in 1816 with the intention of spreading the Christian message in the community. In 1818, the school was converted to a family boarding school, and in 1825, the boarding school was converted into a preparatory school. In 1869, a new school called the Chellappah English School was founded on the same premises, but the school was taken over by the American Ceylon Mission (ACM) in 1901 and renamed the American Mission English School. In 1939 the two schools amalgamated as the Tellippalai Union High School. In 1940 the name was changed to Union College.

Jaffna Central College, established in 1817. Image courtesy mapio.net

The Jaffna Central College was originally named the Jaffna Wesleyan English School and was established in October 1817 by the Wesleyan Methodist Mission, North Ceylon—an entity specifically established to cater to the Tamil speaking Ceylonese in Jaffna, Trincomalee and Batticaloa. Reverend James Lynch was its first principal. The school was originally situated opposite the Jaffna esplanade but moved to its current location in Vembadi in 1825. The school was renamed Jaffna Central School in 1834 by then principal Reverend Dr. Peter Percival and is today a non-fee levying national school.

St. John’s College was originally named the Nallur English Seminary and was established in 1823 by the Church Mission Society (CMS) of the Anglican Church. Reverend Joseph Knight was the first Principal of the school, that had only seven students at its inception. In 1845 the school was moved to Chundikuli and renamed the Chundikuli Seminary, but was later renamed St. John’s College in 1891. St. John’s College is today a private, non-fee levying school.

Jaffna College was initially the Batticotta Seminary and was established in Vaddukoddai in 1823 by the American Ceylon Mission (ACM). The seminary’s mission was to convert the community to Christianity, but failed as most families retained their Hindu faith. The seminary subsequently closed in 1855. In 1871, alumni of the Batticotta Seminary and other local Christians led a campaign to re-open the seminary and in 1871 Jaffna College was opened on the former seminary site.

Uduvil Girls’ College was initially named the Missionary Seminary and Female Central School. It was established in 1824 by the American Ceylon Mission (ACM). It was situated in an abandoned Franciscan mission built by the Portuguese and was turned it into an all-girls boarding school by a missionary named Harriet Winslow. The Missionary Seminary and Female Central School was Asia’s first all-girls boarding school.

Vembadi Girls’ High School, established in 1834. Image courtesy mapio.net

The Vembadi Girls’ High School was founded in 1834 by the Wesleyan Methodist Mission, North Ceylon. It was originally part of the Jaffna Wesleyan English School—which later became the Jaffna Central College—but was renamed the Vembadi Girls’ High School in 1897. It was founded by Reverend James Lynch who also established the Jaffna Central College in 1817. The Vembadi Girls’ High School is today national, non-fee levying school.

Hartley College, originally named the Wesleyan Mission Central School, is named after Wesleyan priest and missionary Reverend Hartley. It was established in Point Pedro in 1838 by the Wesleyan Methodist Mission, North Ceylon. The school was renamed Christ Church School in 1912 and became Hartley College in 1916. Hartley College was taken over by the government in 1960 and is today a national school.

Holy Family Convent, Jaffna, established 1845. Image courtesy info.shalanka.com

The Holy Family Convent was established in 1845 in Vembadi by Bishop Bettaccini with the aim of providing English education to the girls of Jaffna. The school was initially managed by a Mrs Mary Anne O’Flanagan, wife of an Irish military officer, but was taken over by the sisters of the Holy Family in 1962 and became the first convent school in the island. Holy Family Convent, Jaffna is today a national school, with a student body of about 2, 000.

St. Patrick’s College was established by Bishop Bettaccini, an Italian Roman Catholic missionary in Gurunagar in 1850. It was originally named the Jaffna Catholic English School, but was later named the Jaffna Boys’ Seminary. The school was renamed St. Patrick’s College in 1881. St. Patrick’s College is today a private, non-fee levying school.

The Chundikuli Girls’ College was established in Chundikuli by the Church Mission Society (CMS) of the Anglican Church in 1896. It was initially managed by Mrs. Mary Carter, followed by Miss Annie Hopfengarten, who was succeeded by Miss Amy Goodchild. In 1936, the school moved to its present location, also in Chundikuli. In 1945, when the free education system was introduced by C. W. W. Kannangara, Chundikuli Girls’ College chose to remain outside the system, and as such is today a private, fee-levying school.

The last school on this list, is \*not\* a school established by British or American missionaries, but is instead a school established in reaction to the missionaries’ work in the Northern Province. We thought it would be interesting to add a note about the Jaffna Hindu College, whose origins are different to all the others listed here!

Jaffna Hindu College was founded by a Hindu, who wanted an English-language school alternative to the Christian schools in Jaffna. It was established as The Native Town High School by Williams Nevins Muthukumaru Sithamparapillai in 1886. By 1889, however, the school was unable to sustain itself and was taken over by S. Nagalingam and was relocated to Vananarponnai, where it was renamed the Nagalingam Town High School. In 1890, the school moved once more to a location nearby in Vananarponnai, and was renamed the Hindu High School. It was formally recognized by the government as the Jaffna Hindu College in 1980.

Cover: An ancient map of Jaffna. Image courtesy antiquemaps-fair.com

Pettah is a chaotic, crowded smorgasbord of sights and sounds. But it is also the go-to place for a variety of items, from plastics to mechanical parts. While it is difficult for the uninitiated to navigate the bustling streets of Pettah, each of the streets is known for specific items, and with a little help it is easy to find your way around.

But first, a little history.

‘Pettah’, in local parlance, refers to the Pettah Market, an expanse of shops extending from Olcott Mawatha, to Main Street and beyond. The name ‘Pettah’ is derived from the Tamil word ‘pettai’, used to indicate a suburb outside a fort. The Sinhalese word for the area, ‘pita-kotuwa’, meaning ‘outside the fort’, correlates with this.

As indicated by its name, Pettah, or Pita-Kotuwa is the area outside the fort the Portuguese built in the 16th century. The fort was besieged by the Dutch in 1656, who demolished part of the fort and rebuilt it to take advantage of the natural strength of the location. After the British took over in 1815, they set about establishing control in Colombo, and in 1870 demolished the walls of the fort. Despite the absence of ramparts, the area continues to be known as Colombo Fort.

On Main Street you’ll find assorted clothing. Image courtesy Roar Media/Thiva Arunagirinathan

‘Pettah’, and more specifically the Pettah Market, lies just outside what remains of Colombo Fort and is a bustling bazaar of hawkers, shops, vendors and buyers. Architecture from the colonial period stand as backdrop to the daily hustle and bustle; the Wolvendaal Church, the strikingly red and white Jami Ul-Alfar Mosque, the Khan Clock Tower and the Dutch Period Museum watch as life in the 21st

century passes by. Trade in Pettah is dominated by Muslim and Tamil businessmen, but tradesmen from Sinhalese and minority ethnic groups also operate. It is usually very crowded, and it is better to undertake the task of shopping there on foot, although there is a car park near the Khan Clock Tower, where buyers arriving in vehicles can park until their shopping is done.

The streets of Pettah are in a constant state of flux; nattamis dart to and fro, unloading heavy gunny sacks of fruit and vegetables from trucks and carrying them to wholesale stores, while buyers in their dozens sidestep them on narrow lanes. Carts laden with apples, grapes, oranges and other ‘imported’ fruit stand at every street corner, while tiny kiosks serve colourful ‘cool’ in glasses.

It’s easy to get lost in the endless maze of streets that make up the Pettah Market—but with a little reading before hand (look right here), and some orientation, you’ll know just where to go for what. Here is a breakdown of what you can find at each of the street of Pettah:

Main Street — On Main Street, Pettah, you can find assorted clothing stores. Some of these are the high-end ‘Ranjanas’ and ‘Visakamals’, but there are other stores with a variety of clothing that line the street. There is a wide range of colourful sarees—from the more average silk and cotton for daily wear, to the more expensive ones laden with beadwork and embroidery.

Prince Street is where you will find electric items, leather products and mirrors. Image credit: Roar Media/Thiva Arunagirinathan

On the First Cross Street you’ll find hardy bags of every kind, from school bags to hiking bags, also shiny watches—mostly knock-offs of expensive brands like Rolex, Piguet, Mont Blanc and Omega—at very reasonable prices, and mens shoes. Also available on First Cross Street are electric item ‘parts’ and electronic item ‘parts’—but beware, only a seasoned professional will know how to bargain for the right parts! You will also find all manner of stationery and printing items on First Cross Street.

Second Cross Street is where you will find rolls upon rolls of cloth, from poplin, to muslin, to cotton and silk and even cheetha redi—all at very reasonable prices. Also on Second Cross Street you will find electric items galore: hair straighteners, irons, blenders, toasters, sewing items like spools of thread, needles and thimbles, sewing machines and even cosmetics like creams, powders, eyeliners and pencils, lipsticks, and perfumes.

Third Cross Street is the shortest of the ‘Cross Streets’ that criss-cross the Pettah Market. On Third Cross Street you will also find cloth or various types and hues, as well as items such as scales (to weigh groceries, not the body!), and tools such as hammers, spanners, screwdrivers and the like.

On Fourth Cross Street and Fifth Cross Street you will find wholesale food items. The entire street is filled with fresh vegetables, fruit and dried goods. You will find potatoes and onions by the sackful, stacks of leeks, beans and leaves, mounds of carrots, tomatoes and a host of other local produce at very reasonable prices.

Dam Street has bicycles, bicycles parts, cakes items and ingredients. Image credit: Roar Media/Thiva Arunagirinathan

Cutting across these ‘cross streets’ are a number of other streets that are filled with various wares. Maliban Street is where you can find wedding invitations, on Prince Street are more electric items, leather products and mirrors. On Keyzer Street you will find a further selection of cloth, while Malwatta Road has more bags, watches and mens shoes.

On Bankshall Street is found chemicals—borate, boric acid and chemicals used to treat water, as well as artificial flowers and other paraphernalia. Old John’s Street has building material—sacks of cement, bricks, sand, asbestos sheets and the like, while China Street is filled with ornaments and home decor, glassware and polythene.

On Gabo Lane you will find pharmaceutical items, ayurveda drugs and cake items like baking trays, cake ingredients and more, while Perera Road has a selection of dried fish. On Olcott Mawatha you will find more vegetables and fruit, while Dam Street has bicycles, bicycles parts and more cakes items and ingredients.

Meanwhile, Sea Street in Pettah is particularly known for gold. The entire street, and several large buildings on the street, are filled with gold traders and dealers of semi-precious stones; a trade that has continued for decades. It derives its Sinhala name—Hetti Veediya— from Chettiar, a South Indian business community which set up shop and thrived in Sri Lanka.

While tackling the streets of Pettah is no easy task and requires braving the elements, sidestepping people and being trod on (!), it is the best place to buy goods for the most reasonable prices. The riotous colours, sounds and general atmosphere makes for a unique, flavoursome experience.

Cover: Pettah is a smorgasbord of sights and sounds. Image credit: Roar Media/Thiva Arunagirinathan

Given the stigma surrounding mental illness, you would think mental healthcare in Sri Lanka is still at early stages; but it was in 1839 that British Governor James Alexander Stewart-Mackenzie first introduced an ordinance to establish mental asylums in Sri Lanka.

The piece of legislation called the ‘Lunacy Ordinance’ was enacted for the better care of mental health patients, who had until then languished in jails. But rather than house them in separate facilities, the mentally ill were first removed to a wing of the ‘Lepers Asylum’, then in Hendela.

It was in 1847, thanks to the efforts of Dr. Christopher Elliott, the Principal Medical Officer in Ceylon, and Governor Stewart-Mackenzie, that a hospital for the mentally ill was built close to Campbell Park in Borella, Founder, Director and Consultant Psychiatrist at the National Institute of Mental Health, Dr. Jayan Mendis told Roar Media..

The Borella facility was used for confinement, said Dr. Mendis, who explained that there was no ‘treatment’ for the mentally ill at the time. “They were simply housed there, and given meals.”

With time, however, conditions at the Borella mental hospital deteriorated due to overcrowding, leading to the death of many of the inmates. A decision was then made by Dr. W. R. Kynsey, Principal Civil Medical Officer at the time, and Governor Sir William Gregory to build a new asylum for the mentally.

Female patients at the Angoda mental hospital converse with nurses outside their ward. Image credit: Minaali Haputantri/Roar Media

There were, however, many delays before the new facility was complete; it took seven years of discussions between the relevant parties for the project to take off the ground, and construction took a further fifteen years, according to Emeritus Professor of Psychiatry at the University of Colombo, Nalaka Mendis.

The new asylum was finally built in 1889 on a 14-acre site in an area known as ‘Kumbikele’, near the Cinnamon Gardens in Jawatte—the location known today as the ‘Independence Arcade’. The Jawatte Lunatic Asylum was built to house two-hundred and fifty inmates and contained private rooms, dormitories and seclusion rooms for the very disturbed patients, Dr. Jayan Mendis said.

Medical research had not yet made a breakthrough in the treatment of mental patients, and patients were still mostly confined and given meals. With time, and a lack of understanding about mental illnesses, the numbers of those afflicted steadily increased. Predictably, conditions at Jawatte Asylum too deteriorated, leading to an outcry by families of patients to British authorities, saying there were no facilities for the sick.

This forced the closure of the Jawatte Mental Asylum, after which the construction of a new mental hospital on a 125-acre piece of land in Angoda began in 1917. “This is a huge hospital complex, with a large administrative block and six three- storey buildings—each able to contain about hundred patients,” Dr. Mendis said.

A patient mends a cane chair at the Angoda mental hospital, as part of his occupational therapy. Image credit: Minaali Haputantri/ Roar Media

“Together, the complex is able to house about one thousand five hundred patients, in addition to quarters for those who work, quarters for doctors, a paddy field, garden facilities, etc.,” Dr. Mendis said.

Dr. Mendis explained that to be mentally ill was to be “emotionally or behaviourally disturbed” —and have no knowledge of the emotional or behavioral disturbance or deviance. He explained that not all mentally ill persons were dangerous—“In fact, only about 1% can become dangerous, and it’s up to psychiatrists to determine which ones are dangerous and treat them accordingly.”

Things have changed greatly since 1950s, when the drug ‘chlorpromazine’ was synthesized in France, Dr. Mendis told Roar Media. The drug was found able to reverse the symptoms of mental illnesses and patients who exhibited positive results were reintegrated into society. Today, more than fifty drugs with which mental patients can be treated exist.

All patients at the Angoda mental asylum, officially known as the National Institute of Mental Health, are being treated, Dr. Jayan Mendis said. Conditions are also much better, with inmates offered recreational activities and a glimpse into the outside world.

Things can get better though, Dr. Mendis add. The stigma surrounding the mentally ill is still very strong, with the perception that patients are unpredictable and could be dangerous. To the contrary, Dr. Mendis explain, the mentally ill are silent suffers and need all the help and support they can get.

“It’s important to detect early, treat early, treat adequately, treat quickly, continue treatment and follow up treatment,” the doctor said. “Treat them like equals. Try and engage them in work,” he further encouraged.

The Angoda mental hospital has undergone further changes in recent years. Since 2008, it has moved from centralized to community-based treatment so that patients can receive treatment at base hospitals and clinics, and can continue to live within their communities.

Renovations were made to give the wards a facelift. Image credit: Minaali Haputantri/ Roar

According to reports, this practice has been especially implemented with great success in the post-war North and East, where progressive treatment models ahead of Colombo have been embraced.

From being confined among ‘untouchables’ in the Leper’s Asylum at Hendala, to receiving state-sponsored care and treatment at Angoda, the welfare of those mentally ill has progressed over the years, but Dr. Mendis believes more must be done to remove stigma. “Even the media continues to portray the mentally ill through ‘dark’ images,” he said. “This perpetuates the stigma surrounding mental illnesses. We must all play our part to removing the stigma surrounding these people.”

Cover: The current ‘Independence Arcade’ was once the Jawatte Mental Asylum. Image credit: Minaali Haputantri/ Roar Media

Politics is not without intrigue, as is evident in political thrillers like ‘House of Cards’, and, closer to home, ‘Koombiyo’, the political crime series that is making waves in Colombo. In one of the latest episodes, leader of the opposition Dudley Maldeniya (played by the brilliant Peter de Almeida) enlists the help of chief protagonist and mastermind Jehan Fernando (Thumindu Dodantenne) to fashion a union with a Leftist political organization to further increase his ‘numbers’, in what is manifestly a numbers game. Fernando promises results in four years, an indication of the tenacious patience needed in political gaming, reminding us of other compelling real-world tales of political intrigue. We’ve listed here five occasions in which political gaming was used for personal or party gain in Sri Lanka’s post-colonial political history.

Dudley Senanayake, at 41, was the youngest member of the Cabinet when he was appointed Prime Minister by Governor Sir Oliver Goonetilleke. Image courtesy dailynews.lk

Dudley Senanayake’s father D. S. Senanayake—the “Father of the Nation”—led the Independence movement to became the first Prime Minister of Ceylon in 1947, but suffered a stroke and passed away in 1952. At his death, the Premiership was expected to be passed onto senior United National Party (UNP) Cabinet member Sir John Kotelawala, who had been bumped up to second-place in the party with the withdrawal of S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike in 1951, who went on to form the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP). However, Governor Sir Oliver Goonetilleke chose to pass on the reins to Senanayake’s son Dudley, who was at the time Minister of Agriculture, and the youngest member of the Cabinet at age 41. The move caused consternation in the circles close to Kotelawala, but Governor Goonetilleke pressed on with the change. Around the time, a kele pattare (anonymous paper, circulated widely) called ‘Premier Stakes’, containing derogatory and defamatory comments about top leaders including Dudley Senanayake, was leaked to the public. Although there was no evidence to link Sir John Kotelawala with the kele pattare, it was widely believed that he orchestrated the publication of it. Premier Dudley Senanayake was forced to remove Sir John Kotelawala from his Cabinet position, but later relented when the former made a show of contrition. Senanayake called a general election soon after, which the UNP won. Under the leadership of Senanayake, however, the government made a number of ill-advised moves, including increasing the price of rice, which led to the first hartal, or first mass act of civil disobedience by independent Ceylon in 1953. Sir John Kotelawala was at the forefront of the state machinery that quelled the riots. However, responsibility for the death of nine civilians during the protest fell on Dudley Senanayake, who resigned shortly after, citing bad health. His resignation paved the way for Sir John Kotelawala to take over as Prime Minister, nearly a year-and-a-half after his initial bid for Premiership.

The 1962 coup d’état was an attempt by a group of top-ranking military officers to topple the government of Sirimavo Bandaranaike. Image courtesy rattviseformedlingen.se

The military coup of 1962 was an attempted by a group of disenchanted high-ranking military officers to topple the government of Prime Minister Sirimavo Bandaranaike. The group, composed primarily of Christian officers, felt they were being systematically sidelined by the government ever since S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike—himself a Christian turned Buddhist—began a campaign of ‘Sinhalisation’, which included appointing more Sinhala-Buddhist officers to the military and elevating them to ranks above the Christian officers. The attempted coup, code-named ‘Operation Holdfast’, intended to arrest the Prime Minister and several other top members of the government—including Army Commander H. Winston G. Wijeyekoon, who was not in on the plan—and hold them in a bunker at the Army Headquarters, after which a curfew would be announced in Colombo, followed by a take-over of the Central Telegraph Office, the newspapers and other key establishments. The group planned to take direct control of the state after having Governor General Sir Oliver Goonetilleke dissolve parliament. The attempted coup failed and the conspirators were arrested after S. P Stanley Senanayake, head of Police in Colombo, who was taken into confidence of the conspirators, divulged the information to his father-in-law SLFP M.P Patrick de Silva Kularatne, who notified the CID. Thirty-one conspirators were arrested, and twenty-six charged with attempting to overthrow an elected government. A Trial-at-Bar sat for 324 days and convicted eleven of the twenty-six charged. These included Colonel F. C. de Saram, OBE, Commanding Officer, Ceylon Artillery; Colonel Maurice Ann Oerard De Mel,Commandant, Volunteer Force, former Chief of Staff of the Army; Rear Admiral (Rtd) Gerard Royce Maxwell de Mel, OBE, ADC, relieved captain of the Navy; and Lieutenant Colonel Wilmot (Willie) Selvanayagam Abrahams. The accused were sentenced to ten years imprisonment and confiscation of property, but they took their case to the Privy Council, which acquitted all eleven.

The crossover of Land, Irrigation and Power Minister C.P. de Silva from the ruling ranks to the Opposition precipitated the fall of the Sirimavo-led government

Rarely does a sitting MP crossover to the Opposition, but that is just what 13 MPs led by Land, Irrigation and Power Minister C. P. de Silva did in 1964. This was during the government of Sirimavo Bandaranaike, and was cause for her defeat in the subsequent election. C. P. de Silva was the senior-most member of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) after the death of its founder S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike, but was sidelined by his successor, widow Sirimavo Bandaranaike, who favoured her nephew Felix R. Dias Bandaranaike. Around 1964, Mrs Bandaranaike began negotiations with the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) for a coalition government to prop SLFP, that had won the 1960 elections by a slim majority. The union with the leftist LSSP irked several members of the SLFP, and laid the foundation for the opposition UNP to begin wooing members of the government. These events were further conflagrated when the government initiated plans to nationalise the Associated Newspapers of Ceylon Limited (ANCL), which was widely seen as a move to curtail press freedom. Esmond Wickremesinghe—Ranil Wickremesinghe’s father—and J. R. Jayawardene—who was a Colombo South MP for the opposition UNP at the time—were both shareholders of ANCL (Lake House) at the time, and began in earnest efforts to prevent the nationalisation of the entity by weakening the government. The move by the SLFP government to place ANCL under state regularization also resulted in unifying opposition to the government. It is against this backdrop that the UNP-orchestrated deflection on C. P. de Silva, together with 13 other MPs, met with success. In his speech on 3 December, the day he informed Prime Minister Bandaranaike of his intention to crossover, C. P. de Silva said he was compelled to leave the government, because “our nation is now being inexorably pushed towards unadulterated totalitarianism”. He said he was foregoing his office in the SLFP, in order to “live [as] a free man in a free society”. C. P. de Silva was followed by Mahanama Samaraweera (Mangala Samaraweera’s father), P. P. Wickramasooriya, Wijebahu Wijesinghe, Edmund Wijesuriya, A. H. de Silva, Indrasena de Zoysa, Chandrasena Munaweera, W. G. M. Albert Silva, S. B. Lenawa, Lakshman de Silva, Dr. Edwin Tillekeratne, Sir Razik Fareed, and R. Singleton-Salmon. His deflection prevented the SLFP government from pushing ahead moves to nationalise ANCL, and also weakened the SLFP-LSSP government, that subsequently lost to a seven-party coalition in 1965.

Mass deflection to the opposition and a no-confidence motion by the UNP weakened Chandrika’s People’s Alliance government. Image courtesy DailyFT

It is always calamitous when sitting MPs move out of the government and into the opposition, and calamity is what occurred when a number of MPs of the People’s Alliance (PA) government deflected in 2001. This was during the presidency of Chandrika Bandaranaike-Kumaratunga and precipitated the fall of the government, following a no-confidence motion brought in by the opposition United National Party (UNP). President Chandrika Bandaranaike-Kumaratunga had in October 2000 dissolved Parliament and called for fresh elections. The Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP)-led People’s Alliance won the election thanks to the support of two minority parties—the Eelam People’s Democratic Party (EPDP), and the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC). In June 2001, President Kumaratunga made the unwise call of sacking SLMC leader Rauff Hakeem (it is said, in a bid to hand over reins of the party to SLMC founder M. H. M. Ashraff’s widow Ferial Ashraff), prompting five members of the SLMC to deflect with their leader to the opposition. Close on the heels of this shake-up, the UNP relayed its intention to bring forward a no-confidence motion against the PA government. The no-confidence motion was supported by 88 UNP members, five Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) members, three Tamil Eelam Liberation Organization (TELO) members, and one All Ceylon Tamil Congress (ACTC) member—97 MPs in all. President Bandaranaike-Kumaratunga suddenly found herself beset by problems from both within and without her party. In a desperate effort to save her now minority government, the President used her executive powers to suspend Parliament for 60 days, to enable “concerned political parties to find a solution to their differences” and to “consult the public” on the need to change the constitution. The referendum was initially fixed for August 21 (2001) and then put off to October 18, during which time she attempted to broker peace with the UNP, to no avail. The final blows came when 8 members of her own PA, including her closest allies Ministers S. B. Dissanayake, Bandula Gunawardena and Professor G. L. Pieris, crossed over to the opposition UNP, followed by four members of the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC), reducing the strength of the PA in Parliament, and leaving the incumbent President in the lurch.

Maithripala Sirisena shared a meal of ‘hoppers’ with his leader Mahinda Rajapaksa before deflecting and coming up against his erstwhile leader as common opposition candidate. Image courtesy colombotelegraph

The 2015 Presidential Elections saw the unexpected appearance of Maithripala Sirisena as common opposition contender. President Mahinda Rajapaksa, who had taken over the mantle in 2005, had remained as President for two 5-year terms and was seeking a third term in office at the 2015 elections. Sirisena was previously the General Secretary of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), the party led by President Mahinda Rajapaksa, who had called the elections two-years before its time. The irony was that Sirisena, hours before deflecting and coming up against his erstwhile leader Mahinda Rajapaksa, had enjoyed a meal of ‘hoppers’ with the latter, while discussing matters of political interest. It is reported that former President Mahinda Rajapaksa told his party General Secretary Maithripala Sirisena that he was confident he would win the upcoming Presidential election, never knowing his subordinate was plotting against him and would ultimately present himself as the common opposition candidate, winning the election and going on to be the 7th elected President of Sri Lanka.

Peter de Almeida, who acts as opposition leader Dudley Maldeniya in the political crime TV series ‘Koombiyo’. Image courtesy youtube

History teaches us of the accomplishments of past politicians, but rarely do we catch a glimpse into the private lives and hobbies of these men and women—not unless we pick up a bulky biography and spend time patiently perusing the pages! While many of our past politicians are known for laying the foundation for the nation state that came to be known as Sri Lanka, we know little of what they did to rest and relax in their spare time. Here we take a look at some of the non-political hobbies enjoyed by some of the leaders of the past decades.

‘Father of the Nation’, D. Senanayake. Image courtesy thefamouspeople.com

‘Father of the nation’ Don Stephen Senanayake, who led the country to Independence, formed the United National Party (UNP) and was appointed the first Prime Minister of Ceylon. He was said to be never studious in school, preferring instead to play sports.

Educated at S. Thomas’ College, Mutwal, Senanayake wrestled and also played cricket. He played cricket for the prestigious Royal-Thomian and later for the Sinhalese Sports Club (SSC) and Nondescripts Cricket Club (NCC).

He also enjoyed horse riding. In fact, it was while riding the police mare ‘Chitra’, together with Inspector General of Police Richard Aluwihare and Cabinet minister G. G. Ponnambalam, on March 21, 1952, that he suffered a stroke that led to his death at the Colombo National Hospital several hours later.

Aluwihare, who had been riding some way behind the Prime Minister later said that he has seen the Premier lilt in an uncharacteristic fashion, and then fall off the horse. Uncharacteristic—because D. S. Senanayake was known to be a fine horseman.

Second Prime Minister of Sri Lanka Dudley Senanayake. Image courtesy dailynews

Second Prime Minister of Sri Lanka Dudley Senanayake. Image courtesy dailynews

D.S. Senanayake’s son Dudley, who was appointed Prime Minister of Ceylon after his father’s untimely death in 1952, excelled in sports and studies while at school. He engaged in hockey, boxing, athletics and cricket—going on to captain the college team at the prestigious Royal-Thomian cricket encounter. He was also awarded colours for hockey, boxing, and athletics at S. Thomas’ College, where he had his education.

In later years , he took up golf and photography. An oft told anecdote exemplifying Dudley’s humble nature is of how he apologized for his misdeed when stopped by a policeman while speeding in his modest Triumph Herald, on his way for a round of golf. During his stint as Agriculture and Land Minister, he was often seen in rural areas, his camera slung over his shoulder. Dudley, who enjoyed music and reading, also enjoyed eating and had a voracious appetite.

S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike during his marriage to Sirima Ratwatte in 1940. Image courtesy sirimavobandaranaike.org

UNP break-away member and founder of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike was said to be fond of cricket and tennis, as well as photography, music and reading and writing. He played cricket and tennis for his alma mater S. Thomas’ College, and enjoyed photography, music and reading as a private pursuit. His writing was another story—in 1925, after spending six years away at college in Oxford, London, S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike returned to co-edit the ‘Island Review’ together with J. Vijayatunga. In 1926, he published The Kandy Perahera. He later wrote The Mystery of the Missing Candidate, a story about the life of a political candidate, Sunil Rajapakse, in the run up to an election, and styled his protagonist John Ratsinghe as a Sherlock Holmes-type sleuth in The Horror of Mahahena and The Adventures of a Soulless Man.

Third Prime Minister of Sri Lanka, Sir John Kotelawala. Image courtesy chirpstory.com

Third Prime Minister of Sri Lanka, Sir John Kotelawala was known for his prowess in the military, moving up the ranks from Second Lieutenant in 1922 to Major in 1933. But Sir John was also known for his love of social gatherings and often hosted parties in his home in Kandawala.

In fact, in 1955, a barbecue hosted at his home came under censure, after news that a calf was roasted at the party caused furore in our Buddhist majority country. It was unfortunate that 1955 was the year that marked the 2500th commemoration of the passing of the Buddha, and religious fervour was at an all time high.

Sir John Kotelawala and the other UNP elites were contemptuously referred to as ‘brown sahibs’ by S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike who broke-away from the UNP to form the SLFP—primarily because they lived a ‘Western’ styled life,with whisky, ballroom dancing and race-going far removed from the Sinhala-speaking masses.

Sir John Kotelawala openly flaunted ‘jodhpur pants’ and commissioned ‘exotic dancers’ from the Middle East to his parties and it was these stark differences that precipitated the UNP’s fall in the general elections of 1956.

A popular political cartoon from the time, the Mara Yuddhaya depicted the UNP characterized by an elephant and followed by drinking, ballroom dancing UNPers attempting to disturb the Buddha sitting in Samadhi under a bo tree. The calf roasted at Sir John Kotelawala’s party is also depicted in the cartoon.

The first executive President of Sri Lanka, J. R. Jayawardene. Image courtesy pameladesilva.org

Junius Richard Jayewardene, the second President of Sri Lanka, serving from 1978 to 1989, is known for introducing the executive Presidency under an amended Constitution to the country. J. R. Jayawardene was educated at Royal College in Colombo and excelled in both his studies and sports. In 1925 he made his cricketing debut at the Royal-Thomian cricket fixture and later captained the Royal rugby team at the annual Royal-Trinity (Bradby) encounter. Even while reading for a degree in English, Latin, Logic, and Economics at the University College, Colombo in 1926, Jayawardene showed a keen interest in sports.

J.R. Jayawardena was also an avid reader. His son Ravi Jayawardene reminisces in an interview with the Daily News that his father spent long hours reading on varied topics, and taught him that reading was a good habit—“You will never be lonely when you are old, if you are a reader,” his father had said to him. In fact, at his death in 1996, he was reading the biography of General Patton.

R. Premadasa, the second executive President of Sri Lanka. Image courtesy colombotelegraph.com

Ranasinghe Premadasa, the second executive President of Sri Lanka, who was accorded the highest award to a civilian—the Sri Lankabhimanya—in 1986, spent a great deal of his time engaged in social work. As a young man, he founded the Sri Sucharitha Movement, a volunteer organization that sought to uplift the economic, social and spiritual development of low-income families living in ‘shanty’ areas in Colombo. He also organized community development projects in these areas and encouraged youth who joined his development movement to desist from partaking in alcohol or smoking or gambling. In his later political life, too, Premadasa worked towards the upliftment of the ‘downtrodden masses’. But he was also a poet and gifted lyricist. Premadasa lent patronage to ‘ATHAKASA’—the Aganuwara Tharuna Kavi Samajaya (Colombo Young Poets’ Association), springing out of his seat on one occasion during the 50th anniversary celebrations of ATHAKASA in Embilipitiya in 1985 to recite impromptu, “No one can claim that he or she is a poet just because he or she had composed four lines of words. A poet should necessarily have a fertile imagination, which could come only by having good habits and human qualities, only such a person could be a good poet”. The lyrics Premadasa wrote were also incorporated into well-known Sinhalese songs like Samanala Mudune and Dagab Maha Waw.

Cover: Leader of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party S. W. R. D Bandaranaike. Image courtesy: dbsjeyaraj.com

Editor’s note: An earlier version of this article had a typographical error that stated that J. R. Jayawardene was in university in 1962 rather than 1926.

We’ve all had our encounters with the Police, be it for traffic violations or incidents of public security. But what do we really know about the officers charged with upholding law and order? We see khaki-uniformed patrolmen at every traffic stop, but do we know what institutions and legalese put them there in the first place? While Sri Lanka has always had a traditional systems of governance, it was the Dutch who first introduced the concept of ‘policing’ to the city.

K. Pippet, in his book A History of the Ceylon Police writes, “On the 10th June 1659, a resolution was passed by the Colombo Council for regulating the Burghery and Trade Guilds which ordered Captain Peter Wasch to select four of the slowest and most heavily built married soldiers to perform the duties of night or rattle watchmen…”

The Dutch were also responsible for setting up the first Police stations in the country; one at the northern entrance to the Fort, another at the causeway connecting Fort and Pettah and a third at Kayman’s Gate in the Pettah. In addition to these, the office of ‘Disawa’ of Colombo—a Dutch official at Hulftsdorp— also served as a Police Station for the suburbs.

After the Dutch acceded power to the British in 1796, the policing of the city was taken over by the military, and in 1797 the Office of Fiscal was created, and entrusted with the responsibility of policing the city of Colombo. With time however, Governor Fredrick North, finding the Fiscal ‘overburdened’ with the task of policing, soon entrusted magistrates and judges with the task of supervising the police.

Police stand guard outside a police station in Galle. Image courtesy rossocjennings.com

In 1805, police functions expanded from the maintenance of law and order to include the detection and prevention of crime. The rank of Police Constable was created, and came to be associated with all types of police work. In 1806, the city of Colombo was divided into 15 divisions and police constables were appointed to supervise each of the divisions.

In 1832, Governor Edward Barnes appointed a committee to form a ‘police force’. The committee decided that the newly constituted police force would consist of one Superintendent, one Chief Constable, five Constables, ten Sergeants and 150 peons. It was also decided that the new police force would be funded by a tax paid for by the people.

The Police Ordinance was established in 1865 and Governor Henry George Ward appointed G. W. R. Campbell, an Indian officer in charge of the ‘Rathnagiri Rangers’ of the Bombay Police, to take on the task of organizing the police force in Ceylon on the 3 September, 1866. The third of September, 1866, is therefore considered the beginning of the country’s present police service.

In 1867, the post of chief of police—held by G. W. R. Campbell—was changed to Inspector General of Police (IGP), and that post to date remains the highest ranking police post in the country. The position of Inspector General of Police, currently held by Pujith Jayasundara, is followed by the position Deputy Inspector General of Police (DIG).

According to Sirisena Herath, retired Senior DIG of Sri Lanka Police, while an IGP enjoys overall command, the Senior DIG is tasked with overseeing each province. Below the Senior DIG is the Deputy Inspector General of Police, charged with a ‘district’. This is followed by the Senior Superintendent of Police (SSP), who is in charge of ‘divisions’.

Women were admitted to the police force for the first time in 1952. Image courtesy pergelator.blogspot.com

After the SSP comes the ASP, or the Assistant Superintendent of Police. The ASP is a supervisory officer who investigates public complaints. According to Herath, public complaints are always investigated by an ASP or officer senior to an ASP. The ASP is followed by Chief Inspectors (CI) who man ‘A’ grade stations—Borella, Pettah, Bambalapitiya etc.—followed by Inspectors who are in charge of other stations of lesser grade. This is thanks to a 1954 decision to grade police stations according to five classifications—Grades ‘E’ to ‘A’, depending on the workload, population, locality, crimes etc., in the area.

Further down the police ranks are the Sub Inspectors, Sergeant Majors, Sergeants and Police Constables (PC). According to Herath, Sub Inspectors are in charge of ‘C’ grade stations and lead teams of sergeants and PCs in raids. Sergeant Majors, on the other hand, only participate in parades and drills, Herath said. Sergeants, while not ‘in charge’ of anything, are typically transferred to court duty, depending on the length of their service and available vacancies. PCs belong to the lowest rung of the police service, and are tasked with myriad duties.

Women were admitted to the police force for the first time, in 1952, but the rank of Woman Sub Inspector was only introduced in 1976. It took until 1988 for a Woman Police Inspector to be promoted to the rank of Assistant Superintendent of Police. According to Herath, women police officers today are eligible to be appointed to all positions within the police force – including that of IGP, if they meet the necessary criteria and requirements. Women Police officers have however only made it to the rank of Senior Superintendent of Police, he said. Meanwhile, the police force continued to make strides by establishing a Tourist Police and the Illicit Immigration sector in 1969, Crime Detective Bureau in 1972, and the Police Narcotics Bureau and the Colombo Fraud Investigation Bureau in 1973.

Today, the police force has many specialised units and divisions. These are the Protective Units—charged with tasks such as the President, Prime Minister, Ministerial and Diplomatic security; the Counter Terrorism Unit, under which the Special Task Force (STF) and the Terrorism Investigation Division (TID) exist; the Crime Investigation Unit, under which fall the Criminal Investigation Department (CID), the Colombo Crime Division (CCD), Police Narcotic Bureau (PNB) and several other sub-units.

Police engaged in investigating a crime scene. Image courtesy yahoo.com

Traffic Police, Tourist Police, Anti-Riot Squad, Police Kennels (K9 units), the Ombudsman Division and the Strategic Development Division (community policing) all fall under the Law enforcement unit of the police, while the Mounted Division and the Marine Division come under the Support Unit of the Police. In addition to these are the Police Information Technology Division, the Police 119 Call Centre and other units that fall under the technology arm of the Sri Lanka Police.

Entrance to the police service is at three levels—Police Constable, Sub Inspector and Assistant Superintendent of Police. To enlist as a Police Constable, it is necessary to have passed the O/L examination, including the subject of Mathematics. To enlist as a Sub Inspector, it is necessary to have four credits for the O/L examination, including Mathematics, while to enlist as an Assistant Superintendent of Police it is necessary to be a graduate. Police men and women typically stay on in service until the age of retirement, which is 60, but are sometimes given the chance to opt out through voluntary retirement service (VRS).

The police force, in its current iteration, promises ‘dhamemā havay rakakhati dhamamachāri’, which is Sanskrit for promising to ‘righteously protect those who abide by the law.’ However, especially during the rule of repressive governance, the police force has been known to transgress and act with impunity. It is for this reason, and due to the lobbying of many civil rights activists, that the National Police Commission came into being in 2001. Although the NCP was twice discontinued—between 2005 and 2006, and once again between 2009 and 2012—it promises to ‘provide support to transform the Sri Lanka Police Force into a disciplined, credible and community responsive service’, by ‘entertaining and investigating public complaints against the Police Force or Police Officers’. It is this National Police Commission that ‘polices’ the police, and ensures it is a ‘people-friendly, professional, prestigious’ police service.

Cover: A policeman keeps watch during a demonstration in Colombo. Image courtesy hrw.org

On a quiet by-road in the heart of Colombo, is a faded old house in which hang paintings by the famed ‘43 Group of artists. The house, once owned by Harry Pieris, is now the ‘Sapumal Foundation’—a gallery of art and other memorabilia. A series of interconnected rooms reveal myriad works of art—the private collection of Pieris, who was the secretary of the ’43 Group, from the time of its formation, till the very end. Several other pieces by notable artists have also taken their place on the walls of the house in Barnes Place.

“They called themselves the ’43 Group because it was formed in 1943,” Rohan de Soysa, current Chairman of the Sapumal Foundation explains. The group was made up of ten core members: Lionel Wendt, Harry Pieris, Geoffrey Beling, Richard Gabriel, Ivan Peiris, George Keyt, George Claessen, Aubrey Collette, Justin Deraniyagala and Manju Sri Thera. “Lionel Wendt was the pivot around which the group was formed, but the idea to form the group actually came from Ivan Peiris,” de Soysa said.

The ’43 Group was a breakaway from the established Ceylon Society of Arts which adhered to traditional forms of painting and frowned on experimental art forms, which the ’43 Group were interested in. Members of the ’43 Group were inspired by European modernism of the early 20th century as well as traditional art forms of India and Ceylon, and focused on interpreting art in their own respective style.

A year after the ’43 Group was formed, Lionel Wendt passed away leaving all of his artwork to his brother Harry. A year later, in 1945, Harry passed away and their home, named ‘Alborada’, was turned into the Lionel Wendt theater and art centre, which stands even today. Having successfully exhibited here and abroad—in Venice, France, England, and Brazil, the ’43 Group held its last formal exhibition in 1967. Many years later, in 1974, Harry Pieris decided to form the ‘Sapumal Foundation’.

The entrance to the house that once belonged to Harry Pieris. Image credit: Thiva Arunagirinathan/Roar Media

“He called it the Sapumal Foundation because ‘Sapumal’ was his nickname,” de Soysa said. Pieris, the eighth of ten children—six boys and four girls, was unlike the others who were fond of sports, dancing and other activities. In contrast, Harry, who had a wide range of interests in the arts, philosophy, theosophy and various other subjects, was often teased by his siblings and called ‘Sapumal’ after the flower which doesn’t ‘fully bloom’.

An alternate theory was that Harry was called ‘Sapumal’ after the historical Prince Sapumal, who reportedly didn’t smile very much. Harry, too, was not given to smiling, de Soysa explains, lending credence to the nickname. “But he got his own back by calling the Foundation the ‘Sapumal Foundation’”, de Soysa said. Incidentally, the unsmiling Prince Sapumal went on to becomes King Buvanaka Bahu VI.

The Sapumal Foundation now stands where three workers cottages, attached to Harry Pieris’s lavish house at the top of Barnes Place, were once situated. “After Harry’s father died, Harry’s mother Lydia Pieris didn’t want to continue living in the grand mansion—ballroom and all—she had lived in before her husband’s death. She suggested they move to the workers cottages situated on the premises, which would provide for a more basic life and simpler home for Harry and herself,” he said.

Harry lived in the rear end of the three interconnected cottages that made up their home, and which today make up the Sapumal Foundation. The house at the top of Barnes Place, and the extensive land surrounding it, was divided and given to Harry’s other siblings. After his mother’s death, when Harry decided to form the Sapumal Foundation, his collection of paintings, accumulated over 40-50 years were hung up on all the walls for all to see.

Pictures of Harry Pieris’s family members still stand in one of the rooms of the Sapumal Foundation. Image credit: Thiva Arunagirinathan/Roar Media

Harry’s intention, in setting up the Sapumal Foundation, was to allow more accessibility to art lovers. He reasoned that everyone should be able to appreciate art, and set up the Foundation deciding that an admission fee would not be charged, but instead, the foundation would be open to small (or large!) donations used for upkeep and to pay menial staff.

While the house has seen some changes, much of the original layout still stands; over the entrance to the Foundation is a notice that reads ‘Sapumal Foundation’ in all three languages, the chairs in the sitting room are shrouded with white cloth, a roundtable takes centre stage in the dining room. The rooms have been cleared and on all available walls pictures of various artists hang.

De Soysa said some of the furniture was auctioned off, while many of the books Pieris collected were given to his family. What remain—mostly on the subject of art—now functions as a reference library for art lovers to peruse. The house is also used by students of the University of Visual Arts, who visit yearly to make measured drawings of the whole place, including the paintings, as part of a university project.

The ‘Valerie Hunt’ Gallery, located in the garden of the Sapumal Foundation. Image credit: Thiva Arunagirinathan/Roar Media

In addition to serving as a relic from the past, the Sapumal Foundation is open to contemporary artists as a gallery. De Soysa explained how ‘fake walls’ were made by the administration to facilitate the work of new artists so that the paintings by the ’43 Group and others— including photographs by Lionel Wendt and caricatures by Bevis Bawa, Geoffrey Bawa’s brother—are preserved intact.

The Sapumal Foundation also features the work of artists Seevali Illangasinghe, Ranjit Fernando—who was a nephew of Harry Pieris—and Chandra Thenuwara, the principal of the Cora Abrahams Arts School. At the back of the house, in a small garden, is another gallery housing the paintings of Valerie Hunt—a painter relative of Harry Pieris, who specialised in stained-glass paintings.

The Foundation has been called a ‘hidden gem’ by local and foreign tourists who find portraits, murals, caricatures, photographs and other works of art, the work of the acclaimed ’43 Group, hidden in a rambling old house over 80 years old, a relic of an illustrious past.

Cover: Some of the art on display at the Sapumal Foundation. Image credit: Thiva Arunagirinathan/Roar Media

On 6 March 2018, Sri Lanka imposed a state of emergency to help quell racial riots that had broken out in the hill capital of Kandy. The state of emergency allows the President to use extraordinary powers under the Public Security Ordinance, ‘in the interest of public security and the preservation of public order’. This is not the first time Sri Lanka promulgated emergency laws to quell racial riots since it was granted dominion status within the British Commonwealth. In 1958, a state of emergency was declared by the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) government after violent clashes erupted between the majority Sinhalese and the minority Tamils. A state of emergency was declared during the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)-led riots in 1971, and once more following the horrific violence in what has come to be known as ‘Black July’ in 1983. The state of emergency was also in place for much of the three-decade long civil war, making the 2018 declaration of emergency the first in nine-years since the war ended in 2009. As United Nations Under-Secretary-General, Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict Radhika Coomaraswamy notes in ‘Rule by emergency: Sri Lanka’s postcolonial constitutional experience’ (2004), ‘Dating from when the government of Sri Lanka first declared a state of emergency in 1958 until the most recent lapse of emergency powers in 2001, Sri Lanka has experienced more years of authoritarian power, under the guise of emergency powers, than of democratic governance’. But what ‘authoritarian’ powers does the President wield during times of crisis, such as these?

Marauding mobs set fire to tyres on the streets of Kandy. Image courtesy sundaily

Article 155 of the Constitution of Sri Lanka— Chapter XVIII entitled ‘Public Security’ provides for the Public Security Ordinance, that was enacted in 1947 (prior to Independence), to be ‘deemed law, enacted by Parliament’. The Public Security Ordinance provides for the ‘enactment of emergency regulations, or the adoption of other measures in the interests of public security and the preservation of public order and for the maintenance of supplies and services essential to the life of the community’. Under Section II and III of the Public Security Ordinance, the President, ‘in view of the existence or imminence of a state of publicemergency’, is empowered to:

‘Where circumstance endangering the public security in any area have arisen or are imminent and the President is of the opinion that the police are inadequate to deal with such situation in that area, he may, by Order published in the Gazette, call out all or any of the members of all or any of the armed forces for the maintenance of public order in that area’. [12.1]

‘Where the President considers it necessary to do so for the maintenance of public order in any area, he may, by Order published in the Gazette, direct that, subject to such exemption as may be made by that Order or by any subsequent Order made under this section, no person in such area shall, between such hours as may be specified in the Order, be on any public road, railway, public park, public recreation ground or other public ground or the seashore except under the authority of a written permit granted by such person as may be specified in the Order.’ [16.1]

A member of the armed forces stops a civilian from entering an area troubled by violence. Image courtesy srilankacybernews

‘authorize and provide for the detention of persons; (b) authorize(i) the taking of possession or control, on behalf of the State, of any property or undertaking; (ii) the acquisition on behalf of the State of anyproperty other than land; (c) authorize the entering and search of any premises’ [5.2 (a), (b), (c)]

‘Any police officer, or any member of the armed forces who is called out by Order made under section 12, may, if a written authorization to do so is issued to him by the President or any person appointed by the President to act on behalf of the President under this section, seize and remove any gun or explosive in the possession of any person in the area to which such Order applies and keep it in such custody as may be determined by the person issuing such authorization, and may, for the purpose of seizing and removing any gun or explosive, enter, with such assistants as may be necessary, any premises or place in such area andsearch such premises or place and any person present therein.’ [13]

‘Where the President considers it necessary in the public interest to do so for the maintenance of any service which, in his opinion, is essential to the life of the community, he may, by Order published in the Gazette,declare that service to be an essential service’. [17.1]

Members of the elite Special Task Force were sent to Kandy to quell the racial riots. Image courtesy theworldnews.net

‘Any police officer may arrest without warrant any person who is committing or has committed or whom he has reasonable ground for suspecting to be committing or to have committed any offence under section 16 or section 17’. [18]

Section 7 and Section 8 of the Public Security Ordinance also stipulates that emergency regulations ‘prevail over all other law’ and that no emergency regulation ‘shall be called in question in any court’, giving the President wide-ranging powers to curtail and quell any incident contravening habitual law and order. While the specifics of the emergency regulations promulgated under the Public Security Ordinance vary (see here for emergency regulations promulgated by former President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga in 2005 and President Maithripala Sirisena in March 2018), emergency regulations require parliamentary approval within 14 day and lapse after a period of 30 days. The current state of emergency was called for ten days, during which period the government also imposed a curfew on Kandy for several days and ordered a ban on social media to stem the proliferation of hate speech inciting violence against Muslims.

These moves have been criticized by some who claim the government is violating a fundamental right of expression. They also argue that the general populace is deprived of methods with which to communicate with friends and family during these troublesome times. Parallels have been drawn to repressive regimes that have banned the use of social media in order to curb the freedom of its people. But these measures have also been hailed by countries who point out that the Sri Lankan government has done what even the US government hasn’t been able to; pull the plug on hate speech and ‘fake news’ on social media—platforms increasingly seen as powerful tools used to unleash violence on ethnic minorities, destabilize governments and affect the outcomes of elections.

Cover: Sri Lankan Police and Armed Forces hold back an enraged Buddhist monk. Image courtesy afternoonvoice

The long overdue Local Government elections were held on February 10, 2018, during which the newly-formed Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) won, defeating the more established United National Party (UNP) and Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP).

In the city of Colombo, however, the right-leaning UNP received the most amount of votes, making candidate Rosy Senanayake the first female Mayor of Colombo. Roar Media caught up with Rosy Senanayake to talk to her about female representation, and her plans for Colombo.

Eradicating corruption and making the Colombo Municipal Council (CMC) administration efficient are central to my platform. There are various short-term and long-term measures that I hope to implement to achieve these goals. A key part of this is transparency and accountability. We will make use of technology wherever possible to help us achieve our goals. We have already identified several tangible initiatives and measures to start this endeavor. We hope to use various technologies to monitor and collate data which to help us identify and better deliver services and facilities in the city. In terms of smart city, we have formulated a plan to digitize several existing services and also introduce new facilities and services. These will range from digitizing property ownership details, online filing of applications for various approvals, apps for communications and dissemination of information, monitoring of garbage collection etc. and many, many more initiatives.

The former Women and Children’s Affairs Minister in conversation with Minister Eran Wickramaratne. Image Source: Rosy Senanayake Twitter

This is a term used to describe a city that uses information and communication technologies to both improve and redefine the way various city-related services are delivered. This not only results in overall better service delivery, but improves efficiency through reductions in consumption of resources and reductions in costs and waste. According to a study conducted by Deloitte Consulting, there are now over 1,000 smart city projects ready or under construction globally, and about 500 of these are in small and big cities around China.

So our vision is to bring Colombo up to speed with this growing global trend and be a pioneer in the South Asian region. I believe the initiative to make Colombo a smart city will immensely help us in achieving our other campaign objective of making Colombo an efficient city. Projects already operational in cities around the world have shown that the efficiencies accumulated through smart technologies have resulted in quantum improvements in services, especially at ground level.

I think this is a very important issue which requires the cooperation of the public to tackle effectively. We are planning on an integrated communication strategy for the CMC and we will use these communication channels to educate the public on smarter, environmentally-friendly and more responsible garbage management and disposal. Whilst educating the public on smarter disposal, it is also important to educate and get the cooperation of the general public to reduce the quantity of garbage disposed. At the moment we have approximately 650MT of garbage collected daily within the city limits, of which approximately 300MT is mixed waste. This mixed waste cannot be disposed in an environmentally-friendly manner, and is causing a huge problem at the disposal end. This mixed waste is the result of residents of Colombo, and even those from outside, dumping garbage in public spaces. We have to educate the public to separate the waste, and the public and law enforcement authorities to be more vigilant, to put an end to the illegal dumping of waste.

We are presently formulating certain measures and initiatives and these will be put it into practice no sooner we take charge of the CMC administration. We also hope to formulate long-term plans to complement the existing plans for garbage disposal through waste to energy projects, separation techniques etc.

The flooding in Colombo is the result of the massive increase in buildings in the city, the dilapidated and inadequate storm water drainage infrastructure and the clogging of the canals and waterways. Some improvements have been made in the infrastructure in the last couple of years but this needs more investment and long-term solutions. We plan to work very closely with the central government to improve this infrastructure. We will also work closely with and coordinate with the other central agencies in taking care of the waterways and canals.

Ms. Senanayake attends as Chief Guest at the University of Colombo’s Faculty of Graduate Studies’ Women’s Day, Image Source: Rosy Senanayake Twitter

Our target is zero dengue fatalities within the city. We have several plans to complement the existing work done by the CMC. We have studied the patterns and will be aggressively targeting potential dengue hotspots, raising awareness among the public, monitoring dengue control and incidents very closely, and overall keeping the city clean and free of potential dengue mosquito breeding spots. We hope to be proactive in our fight against dengue and I am confident that we can deliver the results.

In the first three months, we will be looking at making improvements in service delivery to our residents, addressing some pressing needs, setting up a mechanism for citizen participation in decision-making and monitoring CMC activities, tackling the ongoing garbage issues, and getting on top of the fight against dengue.

I have always had a passion for public service, and I feel politics is a means by which I can engage in this.

I always felt that if we are genuine in our desire to serve the country and its people, we can make a huge difference in the lives of people. I still believe that and will showcase public service through our work in the CMC.

Rosy Senanayake at the Graduation Ceremony of the Oxford College of Business. Image Source: Rosy Senanayake Twitter

Colombo is our beloved city. While there is a lot we love about Colombo, there is a lot we can also do to improve Colombo. I have set out our vision in our manifesto and am determined to make it a reality. That is to make Colombo smart and efficient. I believe through these two pillars will flow many good things and everyone will see a transformed Colombo in the near future.

Well, it has ensured 25% representation for women, except in a few councils where they are facing some practical difficulties. However, this does not mean that it has been a failure. We should all be happy that a significant change has been made and most councils will end up having close to 25% women members. I am happy that I was able to play my part in making this a reality.

Definitely. As politicians, we are servants of the public. This demands us to work hard, be transparent in our actions, and as servants of the public have an ongoing and continuous relationship with the public.

Cover: Former Deputy Chief-of-Staff at the Prime Minister’s office Rosy Senanayake addresses the press. Image Source: kajalmag.com

Tourism has seen an increase in Sri Lanka, with the Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority (SLTDA) recording 2.1 million arrivals in 2016, up 14.0 percent from the previous year’s 1,798,380. While the upward trend can be seen as an indicator that tourists are satisfied with their experience, there is some evidence, especially on user-generated websites like TripAdvisor, or on personal blogs, that some tourists are disenchanted with the price of some of the tourist sites.

‘Backpacker Lee’ in his blog post titled ‘India and Sri Lanka: Ripping off Johnny Foreigner’ writes, “Ever wondered why we, as foreigners, get charged up to 10 times more for admission to major tourist attractions in India and Sri Lanka? This has been a bugbear of mine for a long time, and the discrimination doesn’t show any sign of abating anytime soon.”

He accedes, “The belief is that the average “Johnny Foreigner” has more money to spend compared to the locals, therefore the price must vary accordingly. However, this is not a reasonable pricing structure and it, as you can imagine, draws a lot of criticism.” He adds “Some backpackers even blindly refuse to travel in Sri Lanka and India on principle.”

Sri Lanka has eight UNESCO World Heritage sites; Polonnaruwa, Sigiriya, Dambulla, Galle, Anuradhapura, Kandy, the Sinharaja Forest Reserve and the Central Highlands, and entrance to these vary from between USD 15-30 for a tourist, while locals are typically charged Rs. 60. Tourists from SAARC countries are also given a rather large discount.

Tourists at the rock fortress ‘Sigiriya’. Image courtesy mylankandream.com

It is this ‘unreasonable’ pricing scheme that is being criticized by certain tourists travelling Sri Lanka, with some resorting to underhand methods to gain access to certain sites. Michael Turtle in his blog Time Travel Turtle writes, “Constantly looking over my shoulder; lying to the police; surreptitious drive-bys. This isn’t how I imagined I would be seeing this World Heritage Site. My driver slows the car to a halt and I wind down the window and stick my camera out. Click. Then on we go. It doesn’t have to be like this.”

He explains in his blog post ‘Why is Sri Lanka so expensive?’, that he didn’t buy a ticket to see Anuradhapura the ‘right’ way, because he didn’t feel the entrance fee added value for money “The reason I didn’t buy a ticket to see the ancient city of Anuradhapura is not because I couldn’t afford it. It was more about value. I was passing through for just an hour or two and was limited with my time. Buying a day pass to see all the parts of the city was going to be a waste. If it had been cheaper, I probably wouldn’t have minded, but it seemed hard to justify at that price.”

The Central Cultural Fund (CCF) which manages the ‘Cultural Triangle’ – Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa, Sigiriya, Dambulla, and Kandy, justifies the levy imposed on tourists, saying it was on par with tourist attractions in other countries. CCF Working Director Karunaratne Herath speaking to Roar Media said, “Compared to other countries in the world, this is not a big amount. Look at other ancient monuments in the world, they charge just as much—if not more.”

A tourist at the ‘vatadage’ (circular relic house) in Polonnaruwa. Image courtesy matthewwilliamsellis.photoshelter.com

Herath also explained that the monies earned by the CCF were put to good use: “Twenty-five percent of our income is shared with the Archeological Department,” he said, adding that the rest was used to maintain existing sites as well as identify other sites of national importance for preservation. “We launched a national project last year to identify 1, 000 temples in rural areas, with intention of developing infrastructure and facilities around them,” he said.

“Furthermore, we also use funds for several ‘intangible heritage’ projects – such as supporting artists; we are mandated by the Central Cultural Fund Act to look after artists. We launched a insurance programme for artists last year,” he explained, adding also that the monies were used for projects such as the production of the drama ‘Ramayanaya’ as well as the publication of the ‘Mahavamsa’, in order to preserve and perpetuate the culture of Sri Lanka among its inhabitants.

CCF Director General Professor Prishantha Gunawardena also defended the decision to charge foreign tourists more than local tourists, saying that cultural tourism was an important income generator for the tourism industry. He said levies were imposed on tourists and locals according to a pre-formulated pricing scheme—not willy-nilly—and that the same pricing scheme was visible in other forms of tourism such as wildlife and adventure.

But is overpricing negatively affecting tourism? It is clear that while a certain strata of society is willing to spend to travel and sightsee, there is a burgeoning number of low-budget travellers, backpackers and the likes, who also want to see the world, albeit at a more reasonable price. By targeting those with disposable incomes, is Sri Lanka losing a sizeable portion of a potential tourist market?

The SLTDA, in its document Sri Lanka Tourism Strategic Plan 2017-2020 writes that a ‘reliable and secure online payment scheme’ must be implemented. “Because Sri Lanka has myriad cultural, nature-based, and religious sites, each with its own ticketing system and pricing structure, the potential for travellers to become confused and disenchanted is great.”

“Many social media reviews complain about the total costs involved in multiple visits and the expectation of drivers and guides to receive substantial tips. A common ticketing approach, advance purchase, seasonal passes, low-season passes, student deals and other packages could be developed to streamline the system and offer savings to visitors,” it writes.

A tourist outside the Temple of the Tooth Relic in Kandy. Image courtesy, intrepidtravel.com

“This system would result in a one-time payment so that visitors do not have to complete multiple forms and pay multiple times. The ticket ‘bundles’ can combine different choices and feature lesser-known attractions to promote alternative sites and disperse tourism throughout the island,” it writes in its strategic plan.

But while the SLTDA speaks of rehauling the ticketing system and offering concessionary packages and passes, it does not specifically address the issue of pricing, which is what has earned the ire of many travellers, who label the two-tier approach as discrimination.

Roar Media spoke to Rasika Jayakody, Consultant, Media and Communications at the SLTDA who said, “These prices are not within the control of the SLTDA. But we are working with various state authorities to fix some of these issues. Having said that, you can’t expect progress overnight.”

“We, as the state tourism body, have adopted many measures to ensure value for money for tourists visiting these sites. One aspect of this is developing infrastructure and giving them better services. Our Domestic Tourism and Community Relations Department has been entrusted with the task of developing infrastructure and they have already made progress within a short period of time.”

“Another part, is giving value additions and complementary services that will benefit tourists. For instance, developing apps and the utilization of virtual reality for key tourists destination are tasks that we have already embarked upon. Such initiatives will justify the money they spend to visit these places,” he said.

Tourists at the ancient city of Anuradhapura. Image courtesy pledgeholidays.com

Plans are also afoot to increase the ticket prices for locals, CCF Director General Professor Prishantha Gunawardena said. “Everything has been discussed, the proposal has been put forward to the Board of Governors; within a week, we expect an answer on that,” he told Roar Media.

Fair prices are essential to the development of the tourism industry and if Sri Lanka is to achieve its ambitious plans of earning 7 billion US dollars through its tourism sector by 2020, it is important that it adopts measures that ensure it is not perceived as a country that offers a third-world service at first-world prices.

Cover: Tourists visit the Dambulla caves. Image courtesy matthewwilliamsellis.photoshelter.com

The Portuguese arrived in Ceylon, or Ceilão, as they called it, by chance. In 1505, a fleet commanded by Lourenço de Almeida—the son of Francisco de Almeida, the first viceroy of Portuguese India—was blown into Galle by adverse winds. It was thirteen years later, in 1518, that the Portuguese established formal contact with the Kingdom of Kotte, ruled by Vira Parakrama Bahu, and were permitted to build a fort in Colombo.

Although the Portuguese were primarily interested in exploring trade and commercial opportunities in Sri Lanka, an opening for greater exploitation presented itself in the form of seven warring kingdoms within the island. With time, the kingdom of Kotte began to depend heavily on the Portuguese for defense against the other kingdoms, leading to an enhanced role for the Portuguese in Sri Lankan affairs.

An agreement in 1543 between King Buvenaka Bahu of the kingdom of Kotte and the Portuguese resulted in his grandson Prince Dharmapala being educated in the Franciscan order of the Roman Catholic Church. The conversion of Dharmapala heralded sweeping changes in Sri Lanka’s social landscape, as the Portuguese embarked on a mission to convert the local populace.

Sri Lankans in the western coastal areas were particularly susceptible to the changes, with conversions occurring en masse, but conversions occurred interior and in the northernmost parts of the island as well. As Portuguese culture permeated the island, Sri Lankan Tamils and Sinhalese took on many Portuguese names as their own, suffixed to their personal names.

A traditional Portuguese-Sri Lankan wedding in the Batticaloa area. Image courtesy natgeotourism.com

Here are a list of some of the more popular Portuguese-Sri Lankan surnames and what they mean:

The surname ‘Silva’, and its derivative ‘de Silva’, meaning ‘from Silva’ or ‘of Silva’ is a popular Portuguese surname and means ‘forest’ or ‘woodland’. It is a wide-spread surname in Portuguese-speaking countries as well as regions formerly under the control of the Portuguese empire (like Sri Lanka, India, America, and Africa.) ‘Silva’ and ‘de Silva’ are very common surnames in Sri Lanka, but doesn’t necessarily mean the holder is of Portuguese descent—just that the holders ancestors subscribed to the cultural hegemony perpetuated by the Portuguese.

The surname ‘Fernando’, although perpetuated in Sri Lanka by the Portuguese, is the old Spanish form of a Germanic name meaning ‘adventurous’ or ‘bold journey’. It is made up of the elements ‘fardi’, meaning ‘journey’, and ‘nand’ meaning ‘daring and brave’. In addition to being a popular name in Portugal, the name is common in Western India which was colonised by the Portuguese, and of course in Sri Lanka, where it is one of three most popular (the others being ‘de Silva’ and ‘Perera’) surnames taken on by Sinhalese.

The surname ‘Perera’, and its variant ‘Pereira’ is derived from the Portuguese surname ‘Pereira’, meaning ‘pear tree’. Perera is a very common surname in Sri Lanka, taken on by Sinhalese converts to Roman Catholicism with the advancement of Portuguese rule in Sri Lanka. ‘Perera’ is also a Spanish name with a number of variants (Perer, Perero, Pereros, Pereyra, Pereyras, Das Pereiras, Paraira) in the Iberian peninsula.

‘Almeida’ and its variant ‘de Almeida’, meaning ‘of’ or ‘from’ Almeida is a Portuguese surname derived from the town of Almeida (in the Beira Alta province) in Portugal. Portuguese explorer Lourenço de Almeida who ‘discovered’ Sri Lanka, was the first of his kind to arrive in the island. In the subsequent decades, with the expansion of Portuguese powers in Sri Lanka, the surname ‘Almeida’ took on prominence with many Sinhalese and Tamil families taking on the name.

‘Costa’ and its variant ‘de Costa’ meaning ‘from’ or ‘of’ Costa is a Portuguese surname derived from the Latin word ‘Costa’ which means ‘rib’. With time, the surname came to mean ‘side’, ‘slope’, or ‘coast’ denoting the holder was from the coastal area. The surname ‘Costa’ and ‘de Costa’ are also Italian and Spanish surnames. In Sri Lanka, the surname was adopted by many Sinhalese and Tamil families, with the adoption of Portuguese mores in Sri Lanka.

The surname ‘Fonseka’ is derived from the Portuguese surname ‘Fonseca’, which comes from the Latin ‘fōns siccus’, meaning ‘dry well’. It refers to a spring that has dried up during the hot summer months and is today a well-known Sinhalese surname in Sri Lanka.

The surname ‘Correa’ or ‘Corea’ is a derivative of the Portuguese word ‘correia’ meaning ‘leather strap’. The surname is of occupational origin, meaning the holder was originally a maker or seller of leather straps (or belts). The surname is popular in Portugal and in Spain and is adopted by Sri Lankan Tamil and Sinhalese families for further advancement under Portuguese rule.

The surname ‘Tissera’ is derived from the Portuguese surname ‘Teixeira’ which refers to a ‘texio’ or ‘yew tree’. Variants ‘Texeira’ and ‘Técher’ are also common in Portugal. Although less common than the ‘Perera’, ‘de Silva’, and ‘Fernando’, ‘Tissera’ is today a well-known surname in Sri Lanka.

The surname ‘Cabral’ and its variant ‘Cabraal’ are Portuguese and Galician surnames that are derived from the Latin word ‘capra’ meaning ‘goat’ or ‘capralis’ which means ‘place of goats’. The surname is an occupational one, meaning the holder was engaged in work relating to the care of goats, possibly a goatherd. In Sri Lanka, the surname is has been adopted mainly by Sinhalese families.

The surname ‘Thabrew’ and its variant ‘de Abrew’ meaning ‘from Abrew’ or ‘of Abrew’ is a derivative of the Portuguese name ‘Abreu’. The origins of the name is debated; some argue that it is a reference to the phrase ‘Abraham the Hebrew’, while others claims it refers to a ancient branch of the House of Normandy.

There are countless other Sri Lankan names of Portuguese origin, like Peiris, Nonis, Gomes, Suwaris, Mendis, Sigera, Pigera, and others. In addition to these surnames, Sri Lanka assimilated many of the Portuguese names for everyday items such as ‘kalisama’ (trousers), ‘kamisaya’ (shirt), ‘almariya’ (wardrobe), ‘bonikka’ (doll), ‘bottama’ (button) and so many more. In parts of the island, especially the north, a Portuguese creole is spoken by a small population of those of Portuguese descent. It is clear that the 153 years the Portuguese spent in Sri Lanka affected the cultural composition of the country, even to this date.

Cover: The Portuguese manner of dressing was adopted by the Ceylonese. Image courtesy sundaytimes.lk

The morning of February 10 dawned like any other, but for a group of men and their acolytes, the day heralded the busiest 24 hours of their lives. Elections Commissioner Mahinda Deshapriya and his team of officers at the Election Secretariat readied themselves for a day of intense pressure, as Sri Lanka took to the polls to vote in the Local Government elections.

For Deshapriya, preparations for the Local Government elections began much earlier, when, as per Section 25 of the Local Authorities Elections Ordinance, ‘nominations notices’ were published by Returning Officers. A ‘nominations notice’ contains all information relating to the period of nomination, number of candidates to be nominated, the number and/or symbols for each group, etc.

This is followed by the ‘acceptance of nominations’, which commences on the fourteenth day after the nomination notice is published and ends at noon on the twenty-first day after the nomination notice is published. The Returning Officers, in this instance, begin accepting nominations from various parties, as well as accepting objections to these nominations from various other parties.

In addition to these matters, the Returning Officers—who are Assistant Commissioners of Elections, Senior Assistant Commissioners of Elections, and Deputy Commissioners of Elections, each appointed to a local authority—‘check nominations’ to ensure they are in accordance to Section 28 of the Local Authorities Elections Ordinance.

Elections Commissioner Mahinda Deshapriya addresses the press after the February 10 elections. Image courtesy Thiva Arunagirinathan/Roar Media

In the meanwhile, Elections Commissioner Mahinda Deshapriya said that the Elections Secretariat begins working closely with the Government Printers to print ballot papers, household notices (which inform voters about contesting candidates) and the ‘Elections Notice’—to be published in the Gazette—that contains information relating to each local authority.

Deshapriya and his team next begin the task of executing postal votes, in accordance with Local Authorities Election Act No. 24 of 1987. Postal voting facilities are provided for officers and employees of the public sector and security forces who are unable to cast their vote at polling station due to work they are entrusted with during that period.

There are several other matters that Deshapriya and his team must coordinate, which include the appointment of polling agents; two agents can be appointed by each recognized political party to be allowed to stay inside the polling station on the day of the election for observation, as well as coordinating with Police for security.

In terms of Article 104C of the 17th Amendment to the Constitution, the Police Department is duty bound to follow the instructions of the Commissioner of Elections to conduct a free and fair election. To this end, Deshapriya said, he works closely with DIG of Elections, the Senior DIG of Elections, the DG Elections, and the Civil Defense Department and their team of police officers.

Elections Commissioner Mahinda Deshapriya: good-natured banter and an easy manner hide a sharp mind. Image courtesy Thiva Arunagirinathan/Roar Media

There are other logistical matters Deshapriya must oversee; these include selecting polling centres, staffing polling centres, organising food and transport for polling staff and counting staff, as well providing them with transport and lodgings. The government of Sri Lanka typically uses public servants at polling and counting centres.

Two days before the election, ballot boxes are sent to the issue point, Deshapriya said. In Colombo, these are the D.S Senanayake College and Royal College, while in other districts, premises of equal significance are used. It is from this ‘issue point’ that ballot boxes and papers are issued to polling stations that are typically housed in public schools or temple premises.

On the day of the election, Deshapriya and his team arrive at the Elections Secretariat early. Polling begins at 7 am and ends at 4 pm, and much of Deshapriya’s time is spent putting out flames. ‘I’ll get a call from one place, not enough ballot papers, I’ll get a call from the next place, someone hasn’t been allowed to vote and is appealing to me, the calls are endless but we deal with all of them,” he explained.

Deshapriya has, in fact, set up a Complaints Centre at the Elections Secretariat to handle these issues in particular. An overwhelming amount of complaints are made that employees are not being allowed to leave work to vote, Deshapriya said. In these cases, the team working with Deshapriya sets to work, calling the HR management, urging them to grant their employees leave to vote.

“We try to push the point that it is everyone’s right to vote,’, Deshapriya said, explaining that although an employee was liable, under Section 84A of the Local Authorities Elections Ordinance to grant leave for votes, written complaint was needed to take action against the difficult employer—a matter not easily rectified given time constraints and the employees’ fear of losing jobs. “If these people press the point they will be asked to go home, so we appeal to the HR management to give them the freedom to exercise their rights.”

At 4 pm, once the polling stations close, the ballot boxes are transported to the District Headquarters, where counting staff await their task. The ballot boxes are closely guarded by police officers, and polling agents (or party representatives) are often allowed to place a sticker across the ballot box before the box is transported to ensure the seal is not broken until the boxes reach the District Headquarters.

Once the ballot papers are counted, Senior Presiding Officers at the District Headquarters tabulate the results that are then faxed to the Elections Secretariat. The same data must be entered into software used by the Elections Secretariat; the two sets of figures are tallied with each other for any errors, after which, if necessary, the Elections Commissioner will call for a recount.

Addressing the press, Deshapriya makes a point. Image courtesy Thiva Arunagirinathan/Roar Media

Election results are typically announced ward-wise, between 8 pm and 12 midnight by the Returning Officers. However, there can be delays, Deshapriya said, explaining that in some cases there is a failure with software, in other cases results have to be recounted in certain wards.

The results are finally announced to the media, by which means the general public learns which candidates won in their local authority. But work doesn’t end there for Deshapriya and his team at the Elections Secretariat. In the aftermath of the election, parties dissatisfied with the results of an electorate often demand a recount.

Post-election elation and violence are also not to be ruled out. Deshapriya said police presence remains at the Elections Secretariat till well after the election is concluded. Furthermore, petitions can be filed at the Court of Appeal and the Provincial High Court by parties not satisfied with the results of the election, leading to protracted issues.

However, Deshapriya, a veteran, takes it all in his stride. A jovial man, his easy manner, and good-natured banter hide a sharp mind and the ability to withstand enormous pressures. Able to take control of any trying situation, Deshapriya steers the most important exercise of franchise with seeming ease. “We are very happy this election was free, fair, credible, and transparent,” Deshapriya said of the February 10 LG polls.

Cover: Elections Commissioner Mahinda Deshapriya. Image courtesy Thiva Arunagirinathan/Roar Media

The tropical waters of Sri Lanka are home to 29 species of marine mammals, five of which are large whale species. According to marine biologist Dr. Asha de Vos, who runs Oceanswell, a marine conservation research, and education organisation, the rest are large dolphins, small dolphins, and the dugong. Technically, Dr. Asha said, the larger dolphins are also called whales, as evidenced in the list below, of the five ‘beaked’ whale species inhabiting Sri Lankan waters. Beaked whales are toothed whales of the family Ziphiidae, notable for their elongated ‘beaks’. They are one of the least known groups of mammals because of their deep-sea habitat and small numbers. What information is gathered on these species is through strandings on beaches and through painstaking fieldwork, with de Vos commenting that beaked whales are in general considered elusive and difficult to see. Here is a list of the five beaked whales spotted in Sri Lankan waters.

The Cuvier’s beaked whale is the most widely distributed of the elusive beaked whales. Image courtesy whaleopedia.

Cuvier’s beaked whale, Ziphius cavirostris, also known as the ‘goose-beaked whale’, is the most widely distributed and, therefore, the most frequently seen of all the beaked whales. It was named after French anatomist Georges Cuvier, who first described the species in 1823.

This beaked whale is a deep diver; diving to record depths of over 2,000 metres and being able to stay underwater for more than two hours. It feeds on species of squids and deep-sea fish, and with an approximate figure of 100,000, is listed on the IUCN Red List of Threatened species as being of ‘Least Concern’.

The Ginkgo-toothed beaked whale is so called for his unusual ‘ginkgo’ leaf-shaped teeth. Image courtesy whaleopedia.

Little is known of the Ginkgo-toothed beaked whale, Mesoplodon ginkgodens, so named for its unusual dual teeth shaped in the form of a ‘ginkgo’ leaf. The Ginkgo-toothed beaked whale has been spotted in the seas off Japan, in the Pacific and Indian oceans, but little information is available on its behaviours and habits.

The Ginkgo-toothed beaked whale is typically midnight black in colour, with a lighter underside. Females do not display the ‘Ginkgo’ shaped tooth. The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species lists this species as ‘Data Deficient’ due to a dearth of information.

Blainville’s beaked whale is also known as the ‘dense-beaked’ whale. Image courtesy phys.org

Blainville’s beaked whale, Mesoplodon densirostris, is also known as the dense-beaked whale on account of its rather large jaw bone. The species is named after French zoologist Henri de Blainville, who first described it in 1817.

The Blainville’s beaked whales can be spotted in tropical and warm waters across all oceans and are typically seen in groups of three to seven. They feed on squid and have been known to dive for over 20 minutes before resurfacing for air.

Deraniyagala’s beaked whale was identified by Dr. P.E.P Deraniyagala in 1963. Image courtesy scinews.com

Deraniyagala’s beaked whale, also known as Mesoplodon hotaula, was first identified in 1963 by Dr. P.E.P Deraniyagala of the National Museum of Ceylon. This beaked whale was initially confused with the Ginkgo-toothed beaked whale, but marine biologist later distinguished between the two species.

Little is known of the Deraniyagala’s beaked whale, which was previously only positively identified via seven strandings that have occurred in Seychelles, Maldives, Sri Lanka, Gilbert Islands, Kiribati, and Line Islands. It is thought to feed on squid and deep-sea fish.

The Longman’s beaked whale is also known as the ‘tropical bottlenose whale’. Image courtesy us.whales.org

Longman’s beaked whale, Indopacetus pacificus, also known as the ‘tropical bottlenose whale’ and the ‘Indo-Pacific beaked whale’, was initially described by H. A. Longman in 1926. This whale species, which typically travel in large groups or ‘pods’, has a distinct beak, with a large lower jaw which sticks out beyond the upper jaw.

Until recently, this species was identified via two skulls found in Africa (in 1955) and Australia (in 1882) and were thought to be one of the rarest cetaceans. The species has two small oval-shaped teeth at the tip of the jaw, thought to be present in males only. It is listed on the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species as ‘Data Deficient’.

As pointed out in our previous article on the five large whale species spotted in Sri Lankan waters, marine mammals have been spotted by de Vos and her team in waters all around the island, although tourists tend to converge in Mirissa, Kalpitiya, and Trinco because deep waters closer to the shore offer greater accessibility to these creatures. For as long as the waters around Sri Lanka meet these mammals requirements, the whales, dolphins and the dugong will continue to inhabit Sri Lankan waters. While there are complications—carcasses of blue whales have washed ashore in several parts of the island, the result of collision with ships; a study by a team of researchers in 2014 and 2015 recommended that if shipping traffic crossing the Indian Ocean was moved five nautical miles further south than present, the risk to blue whales could be reduced by 95%—de Vos and her team, who have been working to mitigate the impact of ship strikes on whales since 2012, are also in the process of putting together an actionable document with which to engage the government on this matter, making Sri Lankan waters a safer home for these gentle giants.

Cover: Mesoplodon densirostris, or Blainville’s beaked whale. Image courtesy robertharding.com

The 1950s are considered the ‘golden age’ of Sri Lankan journalism, producing many giants such as Denzil Peiris, Mervyn de Silva, Tarzie Vittachi, Ira Amarasekera, and Piyasena Nissanka. At the time, there were only two main news publishers in the country—the Times group and the Associated Newspapers of Ceylon Limited, better known as the ‘Lake House’.

Both these companies were privately owned and had large audiences because newspapers and radios were the only methods of communications during that era. The Times group published two main newspapers—the Times of Ceylon and the Lankadeepa, while the Lake House published the Daily News, Dinamina, Thinakaran, and the Sunday Observer.

The journalists produced in Sri Lanka at that time were considered to be on par with their contemporaries abroad, despite working under conditions very different to our own: news publishers of the 1950s were not exposed to the advent of mobile phones, the internet, and smartphones, and news was gathered and produced in ways very different from now.

A busy newsroom at the Denver Post, with journalists working fiercely on their ‘beats’. Image courtesy newspaperalum.com

Even the way a journalist dressed in the 1950s was very different to the way they dressed now, veteran editor Edmund Ranasinghe told Roar Media. Today, journalists mostly dress in casual clothing—an untucked shirt with pants or jeans, for instance—but the journalist of the 1950s was expected to wear a shirt and a tie. Coats were also mandatory if setting out for an assignment, as was a hat—a dictum probably influenced by the British.

One thing in particular that stood out then, from the way things are done now, is the manner in which relationships with ‘sources’ are cultivated, Edmund Ranasinghe told Roar Media. Back in the day, journalists actively cultivated relationships with politicians, ministers, departments heads, and other officers of import, and maintained close links with them to preserve their sources of news.

As there were no messaging or emailing platforms, it was important that the journalist kept in touch with decision makers and other people directly affecting his ‘beat’. It was common for journalists to make appointments with politicians, ministers, departments heads, and other people in the morning hours, during which meeting, information was gathered.

The ‘Times of Ceylon’, one of two main media publishers in the 1950s. Image courtesy thesundaytimes.lk

Deadlines for article submissions were at 1.pm, Dr. Edwin Ariyadasa, Sri Lanka’s oldest active journalist told Roar Media. Journalists who went out into the ‘field’ were expected to type out their articles and submit them to their respective News Editors before 1.pm.

Whatever research was necessary for the article must also be accrued by these journalists through means far more difficult than the click away we are accustomed to; there was no internet, with its wealth of information, nor yet browsers like Google to make search easier. Instead, journalists had to pore through books and clippings at public and private libraries to find what they were looking for, and laboriously take down that information by pen before painstakingly crafting their ‘story’ for news publications.

The newspaper publishers (that is to say, the Times group and the ‘Lake House’) both had extensive libraries which were liberally used by the journalists in the 1950s and thereafter. Library staff maintained dossiers on notable figures of authority both in Sri Lanka and abroad, for easy access.

The ‘Daily News’, one of two English publications, published by the then privately-owned “Lake House”. Image courtesy sundaytimes.lk

The dossiers contained paper cutting with important information regarding people of national and international importance, and journalists were wont to sift through them to find a particular article in which a statement or action taken by a leader was documented.

It was also necessary for the newsman of yore to be well-read and possess a deep knowledge of current local and international affairs. While in modern times information is only a few clicks away, the journalist from the 1950s was expected to be on his/her toes, able to engage in deep conversation on matters of national and international importance at any given time.

D.F. Kariyakarawana, a former Editor at Lake House for the Janatha and Silumina papers, who worked at the Times Group and Lake House as a journalist in the 1950s wrote in his memoirs Memories of Seven Decades, “Editors back in the day thought a good English knowledge was essential even for a Sinhala language journalist going out on coverage. The same applied to photographers working with Sinhala newspapers. For instance, I remember three Burgher photographers who worked for Dinamina (a Sinhala daily newspaper) namely Don Pascal, Harvey Campbell, and Neil Moses. Even the cartoonist of the Dinamina newspaper in the 1950s was a Burgher by the name of Mark Gerrain. He could hardly write in Sinhala, although he was attached to a Sinhala paper.”

International news was gathered by means of a teleprinter, which was connected to the Reuters newswire service, Edmund Ranasinghe told Roar Media. The machine would unceasingly print out news of international importance which was gathered by the International News Editor who earmarked the more important ones for the next day’s newspaper print. This was not an easy task and an International News Editor often had a team of journalists below him to help.

Two journalists attached to the Denver Post working through news that arrived via ‘teleprinter’

The newsrooms were male-dominated, Edmund Ranasinghe admits. He did say, however, that there were a few women who worked in newsrooms, mainly in the function of Sub-Editors or Features editors—a feature present even today. Because newsrooms jobs or jobs as reporters were not considered female-friendly, it deterred many women from taking up jobs in the newsrooms. However, two notable female journalists emerged from that era—Roshan Peiris and Ranji Handy.

The kickback on smoking indoors had not taken place yet, Dr. Edwin Ariyadasa said, guiltily admitting he had been a chain smoker when he was younger, to the extent he had a lit cigarette in his hand, even while having lunch.

“Till I developed a cough,” he said. “After which the doctor told me, ‘Young man, you will be dead before you turn 30 if you continue this way’, and I quit the habit from that point on.” That didn’t stop the other writers and editors from smoking both pipes and cigarettes, however, as smoking continued unabated in the newsrooms.

Often, by the time lunch was over, a sizable proportion of the newsroom was already ‘in the cups’. It appears that this did not affect their work because some of the finest journalists Sri Lanka produced were from that era.

Because the two main newspaper publishers were based in the Fort area, journalists from the rival papers often fraternized with each other at the cafes and restaurants on Chatham Street, Hospital Lane, at the Nippon Hotel, at the Lord Nelson, and the National Bar. It was customary for reporters to hang out at these restaurants and bars after work or during the day. It was here that many interesting stories were exchanged over a drink and ideas—part of a journalistic lifestyle.

D.F. Kariyakarawana writes in his memoirs, “During my days at the Times group, it was almost a daily ritual to go to Ratnagiri, after work (Ratnagiri is a hotel and bar located opposite to the WTC building at Echelons Square, Colombo Fort). Neville Dillamort, Chief Sub Editor of Times of Ceylon, and Ervin Moonamalai, the Chief Reporter of the paper, also joined us. Almost a half of my monthly salary was spent on Ratnagiri. Aside from drinks, our lunch was also bought from Ratnagiri.”

This tradition appears to be perpetuated even by modern journalists, who often visit the Ratnagiri and other smaller bars in the Fort area to fraternize with each other over stories. Although the way stories are gathered, crafted and published has changed so much with the advent of the internet and web publishing, there are many aspects of the newsroom that remain unchanged.

The passion a journalist has for pursuing a story, the idea that newspapers can create change, can chronicle events for posterity, continues to live strong in the mind of aspirants. Journalism is not easy, nor yet a popular career for many, but for those who choose it, it is a literary life.

Cover: The landmark ‘Lake House’ building, that still stands today. Image courtesy lakehouse.lk

Sanjay Leela Bhansali’s ‘Padmaavat’ (changed from the previously named ‘Padmavati’ following protests in India), is in cinemas in Colombo and is a tale of love, honour, valour, dignity, and sacrifice. A Rajput king falls in love with a ‘Singhal’ (presumably Sinhalese, but definitely Sri Lankan) princess, and takes her back with him to Chittor, where their love withstands the greed of a Khilji sultan.

While the movie is based on a 1540 CE poem written by Sufi poet Malik Muhammad Jayasi, it deviates from the original text in many areas: in the poem, a talking parrot ‘Hiraman’ tells Rajput king Ratan Sen of the Singhal princess Padmavati’s beauty, prompting him to seek her hand in marriage. In the movie, Ratan Sen chances upon Princess Padmavati while hunting in the Singhal jungles.

In the movie, Brahmin courtier Raghav Chetan (who tells Khilji sultan Alāʾ ud-Dīn Khaljī about Padmavati’s beauty, inciting the siege of Chittor), is banished from the kingdom for spying on King Ratan Sen as he kisses Rani (Queen) Padmavati, but Malik Muhammad Jayasi’s poem speaks of the Brahmin being removed for fraudulently winning a contest.

Rani Padmavati circa 1765. Image courtesy bnf.fr

On many other occasions the movie deviates from the original text, as is to be expected in an adaptation, but in one area both the poem and the movie stand tested: the historical accuracy of the character Padmavati, or Rani Padmini as she was also known. Was she real, or was she the fictionalised product of the poet Malik Muhammad Jayasi’s imagination?

By most accounts, Padmavati was a fictionalised character, although Ratan Sen, Alāʾ ud-Dīn Khaljī and the siege of Chittor in 1303 are rooted in fact. Ratan Sen was ‘Ratnasimha’, a ruler of the ‘Medapata’ or Mewar kingdom in 1302 –1303, and Alāʾ ud-Dīn Khaljī the second and most powerful ruler of the Khalji dynasty that ruled the Delhi Sultanate.

Khaljī, whose ambition was to be the next Alexander the Great, laid siege on Chittor in 1302-1303, and took the city after eight long months. While historians attribute Khaljī desire to extend the borders of his sultanate as reason for laying siege on Chittor, legend has it that it was the Queen Padmavati that Khaljī wanted.

The legend extends south of the Indian subcontinent, where here in Sri Lanka, Rani Padmavati is by one account thought to be a Sinhalese princess, and by another account the daughter of a Rajput prince living in Sri Lanka.

Writer and history researcher Hasitha Abeywardena told Roar Media that the renown Professor Senarath Paranavithana had, at a speech made at the Sri Vijayasundararama in Dambadeniya in 1958, talked of a close association between the Rajputs and the Sri Lankan monarch during the Dambadeniya era (1220 -1345)—during which time, Ratan Sen, Alāʾ ud-Dīn Khaljī, and Padmavati were thought to have lived.

Rani Padmavati with Rajput king Ratan Sen. Image courtesy youtube.

“In those days, in addition to a battalion of Sinhalese soldiers, the King’s army (of the Sri Lankan kingdom of Dambadeniya) had a battalion of Aryan soldiers,” Abeywardana quotes Paranavithana in his blog. “The commander of the Aryan battalion was called a ‘takur’ ( meaning ‘leader’ in Hindi).”

“The Rajput battalion was instrumental in diffusing an internal coup and ensuring the continuation of the monarch. It was during this time that a Rajput king married Padmavati, a Sri Lankan princess,” he writes.

In another article titled ‘The Rajput people of Sri Lanka’ (published in the book, ‘Collected articles of Paranavithana’), Professor Paranavithana suggests that Padmavati may have been the daughter of a Rajput prince living in Sri Lanka, Abeywardana told Roar Media.

Although the movie depicts Padmavati’s father Gandharva Sena as the ruler of Singhal at the time, there is no account of a Sinhalese king by that name. That, nevertheless, does not rule out the idea that Gandharva Sena may have been a provincial ruler, a chieftain or a Rajput prince who lived in Sri Lanka, as suggested by Professor Paranavithana.There have also been local adaptations of the tale of Padmavati, with, according to Abeywardana, Sri Lankan dramatist John de Silva (1857 – 1922) writing a stage play by the name of ‘Padmini’ in 1910.

Actress Deepika Padukone portraying Rani Padmavati in the 2018 movie ‘Padmaavat’. Image courtesy NDTV.com

“According to L.D.A. Ratnayake who authored the biography of John de Silva, the play was written in 1910 and had 22 scenes and 34 songs. The play was aimed at arousing patriotic feelings among the Ceylonese community, as Padmavati was considered a woman of great valour and beauty,” he explained.

Abeywardana also spoke of the famous Sinhalese song ‘Dakkoth Padmavati’, which speaks of the beauty of Rani Padmavati (‘Dakkoth Padmavathi – Aaley nokara baree’. If one sees Padmavati – one cannot but love her) and said the song was first included in the play ‘Padmavati’, produced by Charles Dias (1878-1944) another doyen of Sri Lankan theatre at the turn of the last century.Abeywardana said the song was also reproduced by Professor Siri Gunasinghe in the movie ‘Sath Samudura‘ in 1967. The story of Padmavati has gone beyond the shores of Sri Lanka and India than first imagined: in addition to there being Persian, Tamil and Bengali adaptations of the story, in 1923 French composer Albert Roussel set the story of Padmavati in a two-act opera.

While pundits on either side are unable to historically verify the existence of the Sinhalese princess Padmavati, what is clear is that she has captured the imagination of popular culture, both here and abroad, literature having immortalized her throughout the centuries.

Cover: A rendition of Rani Padmavati, or Rani Padmini, as she is also known. Image courtesy scroll.in

It was only 39-years ago that television was introduced to the tiny isle of Sri Lanka. Businessmen Anil Wijewardene and Shan Wickremasinghe established the country’s first television station—the Independent Television Network (ITN), which started broadcasting on April 15 , 1979. ITN remained independent for two monthly only, before the government of Sri Lanka, under the aegis of President J.R. Jayawardene, took over the station on 5 June 1979. Sri Lanka’s second state-owned television station—the Sri Lanka Rupavahini Corporation (SLRC)—was established on 15, February 1982. Since then, Sri Lanka has added many private television stations to her portfolio, on which a number of teledramas, films, and other programmes have been broadcast to mass public appeal. But some teledrama series are little better known than others. Here is a list of seven of the most iconic teledramas in Sri Lanka’s television history.

A scene from the first Sri Lankan teledrama ‘Dimuthu Muthu’. Image courtesy youtube.com

‘Dimuthu Muthu’ receives the honour of being Sri Lanka’s first teledrama and South Asia’s first ‘colour’ teledrama. Directed by the legendary D. B. Nihalsinghe, a pioneer in professional television production, the series aired on Rupavahini in 1982. With a cast that included Devika Mihirani, Amarasiri Kalansuriya, Navanandana Wijeysinghe and Chitra Wakista, the story revolves around a girl named ‘Nanda’ (played by Mihirani), and portrays the strength of love, compassion, and traditional village values.

The first teledrama produced by the Teledrama Division of the Sri Lanka Rupavahini Corporation. Image courtesy dailymotion.com

‘Palingu Menike’ was the first teledrama produced by a newly formed ‘Teledrama Division’ of the Sri Lanka Rupavahini Corporation. Directed by Dhamma Jagoda, with Somaweera Senanayake as scriptwriter, the series was written in 1984 and telecast in 1985.

With a cast that included Rohana Beddage, Sriyantha Mendis, Jackson Anthony, Menike Attanayake and Anura Bandara Rajaguru, the story revolves around a traditional village dancer in the Southern province (played by Rohana Beddage) and a man called Surasena (Sriyantha Mendis) who comes to the village after making money in the city. According to Somaweera Senanayake, the subtext of the teledrama series was on how the open economy affected the traditional values of rural society. The series, which ran into 18 episodes, was wildly popular and has been re-telecast ten times in the past 33 years, a testament to its enduring appeal.

‘Kopi Kade’ is the longest running teledrama series in Sri Lanka. Image courtesy ITN

‘Kopi Kade’ is currently the longest-running teledrama series in Sri Lanka. Originally telecast on 1 April 1987, the series is still aired on the ITN on Wednesdays. Conceptualized by Thevis Guruge and Andrew Jayamanne, and initially directed by Janaka Mahalpath, the series has to date seen more than six directors.

‘Kopi Kade’, which loosely translates to ‘Coffee Kiosk’, is a series of single-episode dramas based on a village shop that sells coffee, groceries and other food items. The shop is frequented by men and women alike—men to play draughts and women to buy their daily supplies. The shop is where village gossip is exchanged and the creators of the show used the platform to discuss social issues. With a cast that initially included veterans Denawaka Hamine, Chandrasiri Kodithuwakku, Susila Kuragama and Damitha Saluwadana, it now counts Rathna Sumanapala, K. A. Piyakaru, Rodney Fraser, K. D. Siripala, Geetha Bulathsinghala, Srilal Abeykoon and Chithra Wakishta among its cast.

Veteran actress Iranganie Serasinghe as ‘Sudhu Achchi’ in ‘Doo Daruwo’. Image courtesy nalanmendis.com

‘Doo Daruwo’, meaning ‘offspring’, is a family-oriented teledrama series that was aired on Rupavahini. It was the first ‘mega’ teledrama series in the history of the country, spanning five years (199 0 to 1995). Directed by Nalan Mendis, with Sandhya Mendis as producer and Somaweera Senanayake as scriptwriter, the series starred Iranganie Serasinghe, Henry Jayasena, and Yashoda Wimaladharma. The story revolved around Iranganie Serasinghe, who played the role of the ‘Sudhu Achhchi’, and the lives of her various offspring and their children. Producer Sandhya Mendis told Business Today that it was important to her that the television series was one the whole family could watch together. For this reason, she said, she made sure to steer clear of topics such as murder and adultery and instead promoted family values.

At the time ‘Doo Daruwo’ was telecast, it was the longest running teledrama series in Sri Lanka, which, according to Sandhya, even had viewership in India.

‘Dandubasnamanaya’ was the first action-thriller teledrama series aired in Sri Lanka. Image courtesy dailymotion.com

‘Dandubasnamanaya’, or ‘an arrow’s range’ was the first action-thriller television series released in Sri Lanka. Directed by Jayantha Chandrasiri, with music by Premasiri Khemadasa, the teledrama series is a gripping tale: action, romance, and history packed into one punch. The story is based on ‘angampora’, an ancient form of martial arts, and its cast included actors Kamal Addaraarachchi, Sriyantha Mendis, Buddhadasa Withanarachchi, Damitha Abeyratne, W. Jayasiri, Wasantha Vittachchi, Deepani Silva and Edward Gunawardane. A chieftain of a village (played by Sriyantha Mendis) teaches his nephew the ancient form of angampora, but his nephew betrays him by teaching a villager (Kamal Addaraarachchi) the art form in exchange for help gaining the hand of a woman. The chieftain kills his nephew for betraying the family tradition and is challenged to a duel by the villager. It also became the first award-winning teledrama in Sri Lanka. At the Sumathi Tele awards in 1995—Sri Lanka’s first awards ceremony for teledramas—Dandubasnamanaya won 11 awards, including the award for the best teledrama.

‘Akala Sandhya’ was the first Sri Lankan teledrama series to include time travel. Image courtesy lankahq.net

‘Akala Sandhya’ is Sri Lanka’s very first television series to devote itself to the topic of time travel—a popular theme for science fiction across the world. The story is based on a 17th century legend and revolves around a long-standing fight between two Kandyan clans—the Sudaliya and Maruwalliya.Directed by Jayantha Chandrasiri, the teledrama series tells the tale of the Sudaliya leader who fatally injures the Maruwalliya leader after gaining powers through Kundalini yoga, that allows him to travel through time and visit his past and future. The teledrama series told a tale of history, using the tool of time travel to appeal to audiences. Its cast included actors Jackson Anthony, Sriyantha Mendis, W. Jayasiri, Edward Gunawardena and Sabeetha Perera.

is the first series to become the highest rated crime television series on IMDb. Image courtesy youtube

‘Koombiyo’ is a 2017 teledrama series that is making its mark even as we speak. Starring Thumindu Dodantenna, Kalana Gunasekara, Senaka Titus Anthony, Andrew Pulle, and Yureni Noshika, the series focuses on the lives of Jehan and Priyantha, who exploit loopholes in the law to make a living. The series was initially rejected for portraying the lives of conmen but was later agreed to by the Independent Television Network which began airing it on August 26, 2017. Koombiyo was written by Lakmal Dharmarathna and Damitha Chandrasiri, and directed by Lakmal Dharmarathna. Within a month of its release, Koombiyo became the highest rated crime television series on the IMDb (Internet Movie Database) receiving a score of 9.9/10 , displacing US crime series ‘Breaking Bad’ and ‘The Wire’.

Cover: ‘Doo Daruwo’ was the first ‘mega teledrama’ series to air in Sri Lanka, running for five long years. Image courtesy youtube.com

Sri Lanka is blessed with a tropical climate. The weather is warm during much of the year—except when it isn’t, and even then it’s not unbearably cold but just wet and damp. The balmy weather is just one reason why Sri Lanka is such a popular tourist destination—her warm, dry, and sunny beaches are the perfect haven for tourists escaping the cold during bitter winter months.

But there are other reasons why a traveller puts Sri Lanka on her bucket list; from walking the ramparts of the Galle Fort, to watching the Esala Perahera in Kandy or spotting leopards in Yala, Sri Lanka offers a wide repertoire of activities for the experience seeker. But just like every other country, Sri Lanka has her own ‘seasons’ for each of these activities—and you wouldn’t want to be caught in the wrong one!

Sri Lanka experiences four climate seasons. The first inter-monsoonal season begins in March and ends in April. It is followed by the Southwest monsoon season between May and September, followed by the second inter-monsoonal season between October and November and the Northeast monsoon season between December and February.

Horse riding is a favourite activity in Nuwara Eliya during the April ‘season’. Image courtesy tripadvisor.com

The monsoons between May and September and December and February bring strong winds and rains, often influenced by depressions in Bay of Bengal. The heavy rains have been known to cause flooding and displace thousands in low-lying areas, but rarely last longer than a few days at a time.

Sri Lanka enjoys sunny weather, aside from these squalls, and with a little planning there are seasonal places of interest to visit every month. Besides these, being multicultural, the island has a host of cultural festivals that can be of interest to the local and foreign traveller alike.

The months of January, February, and March are generally considered the best time to travel in Sri Lanka. The weather is dry, warm, and sunny with a nip to the air, carried over from the cooler December month. The beaches in South and East of the island are popular as tourists flock to warm themselves in the pleasant sunshine.

The cultural triangle in the North central province, Ella in the Uva province, the historical city of Galle, and the beaches of Mirissa and Tangalle are populated by tourists during these months. January, February, and March are also the months during which many locals make their way to Adam’s Peak for the pilgrimage that begins on Unduvap Poya day in December and ends on Vesak Poya day in May.

The month of April is by far the hottest month in Sri Lanka and coincides with the local school holidays. This results in a host of migrations to the cooler climes in the central hill country, specifically to Nuwara Eliya, or ‘Little England’ as it is known, where a number activities, including horse racing, are organised for the general public.

Adam’s Peak pilgrimage season begins in December and lasts until May. Image courtesy news.lk

Southwest monsoon winds and rains sweep in this month and bring relief to the heat waves experienced the month before. The rains occur in the south and west coastal areas and also in parts of the central hill country. This opens the north and east of the island to those looking for sunshine and warmth.

May is also the month that Vesak—the birth, enlightenment, and death of the Buddha is commemorated—and while lanterns are lit in places all over the country, the city of Colombo, especially the heart of Colombo, is transformed into a colourful festival of lights.

Southwest monsoon rains continue during the month of June and July across the south, west, and areas of the central parts of the island. In Anuradhapura, in the North Central province of the island, Poson poya—which celebrates the arrival of Buddhism in Sri Lanka—is celebrated with pirith (chanting), dhansal (free food as almsgiving) and sermons in June.

July is when the 15-day Kataragama Maha Devalaya perahera (procession) is held attracting devotees from across the country. Both the months June and July are favourable for surfing in Arugam Bay, and locals and tourists escaping the Southwest monsoon head in that direction.

The monsoon rains affecting the Southwest of the island continue during the month of August, interspersed with extremely hot days. The Esala perahera in Kandy is a highlight during this month, while dry conditions in the North Central province cause elephants to converge at water bodies at the Minneriya National Park, making it a perfect setting for elephant watching. In Jaffna, the famed Nallur festival, which spans 25 days, begins, beckoning to Hindu devotees near and far.

Leopard spotting is a favoured activity at the Yala national park. Image courtesy monara.lk

Surfs up in Arugam Bay, even as monsoon rains dwindle in the Southwest of the island. Whale watching, off the coasts of Mirissa, Tangalle and Kalpitiya are also favoured activities during these months.

October and November, the ‘second inter-monsoonal season’ bring thunderstorm type rains across the island, leading sometimes to floods and landslides. Almost the entire island receives in excess of 400 mm of rain during this season, hampering day-to-day living and travel. As a result, many people refrain from travelling during this period.

December heralds the onset of the Northeast monsoon, which affect the coastal areas of the north and the east, as well as parts of the central hills of Sri Lanka. The rest of the island enjoys cool, dry weather, making December—together with January, February, and March—a favourable month for tourists to visit Sri Lanka.

The wild beauty of Yala and Wilpattu, a favourite with both nature enthusiasts local and foreign alike, reaches its peak during the month of December. The pilgrimage to Adam’s Peak begins on Unduvap Poya day in December, and goes on until Vesak Poya day in May.

While it is clear that Sri Lanka is a year-round destination with many places of cultural, religious, and aesthetic significance, for a traveller to capture the essence of Sri Lanka, it is important to be in the right place, at the right time. A clear understanding of seasonal places of interest in will ensure plans remain unspoiled.

Cover image courtesy tuktukdude.com

From the nature parks of Wilpattu and Yala to the forest reserves of Bundala and Sinharaja, Sri Lanka is teeming with plants, animals, and microbes of every hue and colour. But her biodiversity is not restricted to the landmass alone. In recent years, Sri Lanka shores have become known for her marine mammals—whales and dolphins. The discovery has triggered a flurry of tourism as resort owners rush to cash in on the value of spotting one of these majestic creatures. This boom in ‘whale watching’ gives rise to fears that the mammals are being disturbed in their own habitat. Another cause for concern are the shipping lines that cut across the Southern coast of Sri Lanka—whale carcasses have been spotted washed ashore, the result of a fatal collision.

Environmentalists and activists have been working to mitigate the damage caused to these creatures, but solutions, while forthcoming, are yet to be adopted. Work on whales and dolphins in Sri Lanka is fairly new, but marine biologist Asha de Vos, who runs Oceanswell, a marine conservation research and education organisation, maintains there are 29 documented species of mammals in our waters, of which five are large whale species. Here’s a quick round-up of the five large whale species.

The magnificent Blue Whale, the world’s largest mammal. Image courtesy axiomlive.com

The Balaenoptera musculus indica, is a subspecies of the Blue Whale (Balaenoptera musculus), the largest animal known to have existed. The blue whale is listed on the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species, but the threat status of the blue whales spotted in Sri Lankan waters is yet unknown, de Vos said. The blue whale can grow up to 98 ft long and weigh up to 173 tonnes. It is a blueish-grey colour with an underside of ‘sulphur’ giving rise to the nickname ‘sulphur bottom’.

Bryde’s Whale, with its intricately pleated throat. Image courtesy, natgeokids.com

Bryde’s whale, Balaenoptera edeni, is named after Johan Bryde who established the first whaling station in South Africa in 1909. Although it is unclear how many subspecies of Bryde’s whale exists, the species Balaenoptera edeni is believed to inhabit the warmer waters of the Indo-Pacific ocean. The Bryde’s whale has three parallel ridges on the top of its head and between 40 and 70 throat pleats which allow its mouth to expand when feeding.

The Sperm Whale is known for its massive head and prominent forehead. Image courtesy smithsonianmag.com

The Sperm Whale, Physeter macrocephalus, is easily recognized by its massive head and prominent rounded forehead—it also has the largest brain of any living creature known. Its head holds a substance called ‘spermaceti’ which early scientists believed were sperms, but the actual function of the semi-liquid substance is yet unknown. It is the largest of the toothed whales and the largest toothed predator— and has between 18 to 26 teeth on each side of its lower jaw, which fit into sockets in the upper jaw.

The rarely seen Humpback Whale. Image courtesy: thesardinerun.info

Spotting the Megaptera novaeangliae, or the Humpback Whale, in Sri Lankan waters is extremely rare, Asha de Vos told Roar Media. The Humpback whale is dark grey, with some areas of white and has long pectoral fins and a knobbly head. It can reach 60 ft in length, and adult females are typically larger than adult males. The Humpback whale typically lives for about 50 years and feeds on crustaceans such as krill, plankton, and small fish.

The recently spotted Omura’s whale. Image courtesy wikipedia.com

Omura’s Whale, Balaenoptera omurai, also known as the ‘dwarf fin whale’, was recently spotted in Sri Lankan waters by Asha de Vos. Little is known of the behavior of the Omura’s whale, the species having only being classified in the early 2000s. The Omura’s whale was previously thought to be a pygmy version of the Bryde’s whale. Omura’s whales typically move in pairs or as solitary individuals and feed on krill and schooling fish.

These five large whale species, a number of large dolphins, small dolphins, and the dugong make up the 29 species of marine mammals that have been observed feeding with small calves, and engaging in courtship, in Sri Lankan waters, indicating they undertake all their most important life functions here, Asha de Vos said.

According to de Vos, who has sailed 95% of the coastline in search of the mammals through different seasons, there are whales around the entire coastline of Sri Lanka, although people tend to flock to Mirissa, Kalpitiya, and Trinco because deep water is closer to the shore, and therefore accessibility a little higher.

Technically, the larger dolphins are also known as whales, de Vos said, explaining that the creatures would continue to live in Sri Lankan waters for as long as their requirements are met. For some of the whales, the warmer waters of the tropics appeal, while the natural marine ecosystem offers school fish, krill, and other varieties of small crustaceans.

Conserving our marine resources is important to ensure these ‘gentle giants of the ocean’ continue to live in our waters. A study conducted by the University of Ruhuna in Sri Lanka, local whale watch operator Raja and the Whales, International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW), Biosphere Foundation, and Wildlife Trust of India (WTI) in 2014 and 2015, recommended that if shipping traffic crossing the Indian Ocean was moved 5 nautical miles further south than present, the risk to blue whales could be reduced by 95%. But although findings from the study were published in 2015, relevant authorities are yet to do anything to reduce the risk to whales. de Vos said she had been working to mitigate the impact of ship strikes on whales since 2012 and was currently working on an actionable document, with which to engage the government. It is to be hoped that the government will take this issue into consideration.

Cover: The elusive humpback whale, rarely spotted in Sri Lankan waters. Image courtesy nationalgeographic.com

Years, as they go, are tumultuous, but Sri Lanka wound her way magnificently through the last one. Braving incidents as horrific as the Meethotamulla tragedy, the protracted drought that engulfed a swathe of the nation, and cyclone Ochki that raged through parts of the island, Sri Lanka, nevertheless, made meticulous progress on several fronts. Here are a few things that Sri Lanka did right in 2017.

When the Yahapalanaya government took over reins in 2015, it made a number of pledges spanning 100 days. Among these was the promise to enact the Right to Information Act within three weeks of February 20, 2015. Despite these ambitions, Cabinet approval for the draft Bill was only granted on December 2, 2015, after which it was sent to the provinces for discussion.

While the Western, North Western, Central, Southern, Eastern, and Uva Provinces agreed with the contents of the draft Bill, the Sabaragamuwa, North Central, and Northern Province wanted amendments made to it. The draft Bill was finally presented to Parliament for first reading by Parliamentary Reforms and Mass Media Minister Gayantha Karunathilaka on March 24, 2016.

After several rounds of discussion, the draft Bill was passed with amendments on June 24, 2016, receiving the support of all 225 members of Parliament. Under the Act, citizens are ensured the right to request for information in the possession of any public authority. The Act, however, only came into effect on Independence Day—February 4, 2017, two years after the current government took over.

Local university students and members of the Government Medical Officers’ Association protest against SAITM. Image courtesy nation.lk

The issues surrounding the medical faculty attached to the South Asian Institute of Technology and Medicine (SAITM) had reached a fever-pitch before the government intervened to finally abolish SAITM on October 29, 2017.

It had previously offered to take over the Neville Fernando Teaching Hospital and a host of other compromises in a bid seek ‘middle ground’, but the offers were rejected by the Government Medical Officers’ Association (GMOA) and the protesting local university students.

The GMOA and the local university students had launched an indefatigable attack on the government in the form of strikes and protest that affected the public. University students also stormed the Health Ministry, resulting in over 80 students being injured in the ensuing clash with law enforcement officers.

The protests severely crippled medical services as people were left stranded in government hospitals, and inconvenienced the general public who had to bear the brunt of the street protests. While the move by the government resolves the SAITM issue, the conflict between state and private education still persists.

Sri Lanka lost access to the lucrative European Union Generalised Scheme of Preferences (GSP) Plus trade concession on February 15, 2010, for “significant shortcomings” in the implementation of “three UN human rights conventions relevant for benefits under the scheme”.

This was largely due to the previous government’s disregard for human rights and its dismal track record with the international community. The new government, however, that was formed in 2015, made regaining GSP+ trade concessions a priority.

Accordingly, an application seeking to regain access to the GSP+ trade concessions was made on June 28, 2016. In October 2016, Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe travelled to Brussels, Belgium to recommence talks with the EU.

After a protracted period during which the EU reviewed Sri Lanka’s application concurrent to her human rights record, Sri Lanka was once more granted access to the GSP+ trade preference on May 16, 2017. Under the scheme, Sri Lanka will benefit from GSP+ until 2021, when it becomes a middle income country.

The GSP+ trade preference grants a full removal of tariffs under the standard scheme. This allows Sri Lanka to export upto 60,000 products to European Union countries duty-free, boosting the country’s export sector.

Climbing to 141 place in the World Press Freedom Index. Image courtesy rsf.org

The year 2017 marked continued success for Sri Lanka when, after plummeting to as low as 165 from 180 countries on the World Press Freedom Index in 2014 and 2015, she maintained the position of 141 gained in 2016 for a second year running.

The World Press Freedom Index, compiled by Reporters Without Borders, is an annual ranking of countries to assess the freedom given to journalists, news organisations, and netizens, and the efforts made by authorities to respect this freedom.

Ranking 141 for a second year is an indication that improved relations between the fourth estate and the incumbent government are stabilising, and the culture of impunity propagated by the previous government is truly a thing of the past.

Intimidation and attacks against journalists, the murder of Sunday Leader Editor Lasantha Wickrematunge and the disappearance of cartoonist Prageeth Eknaligoda, number among the incidents that caused Sri Lanka to slip down the ranking in the previous years.

The national unity government that was formed in 2015 promised to reverse the damage caused to Sri Lanka in the eyes of the world and opened investigations into a number of attacks against the media and journalists that had seen no progress for years. Investigations into these high profile murders and disappearances are ongoing.

Sri Lanka agreed, by consensus resolution at the United Nations Human Rights Council in 2015, to work towards promoting reconciliation, accountability and human rights in Sri Lanka. To this end, the government pledged to establish 1) an Office on Missing Persons, 2) an Office for Reparations, 3) a Judicial Mechanism with a Special Counsel, and 4) a Truth, Justice, Reconciliation and Non-Recurrence Commission.

The first of these, an Office on Missing Persons Act, was signed into law by President Maithripala Sirisena on June 20, 2017. The Act seeks to “ensure necessary measures to provide appropriate mechanisms to search and trace missing persons, as well as to clarify the circumstances in which such persons went missing, and their fate,” and is not restricted to those affected by the civil war with the LTTE but also those missing during the JVP insurrections.

Sri Lanka Permanent Representative to the UN Dr. Rohan Perera deposited the Instrument of Accession to the Ottawa Treaty on December 13, 2017. Image courtesy ft.lk

On December 13, 2017 Sri Lanka became signatory to the ‘Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of Anti-Personnel Mines and on their Destruction’, also known as the Ottawa Treaty.

Sri Lanka became the 163rd country to sign the Treaty, following in the footsteps of countries like Canada, Ireland, and Mauritius—which were the first to get on board in 1997. Thirty-three countries, including the United States, China, India, Pakistan and Russia, are non-signatories to the Treaty.

The move by Sri Lanka comes on the heels of intense post-war recovery, which included demining efforts in the areas of the North and the East. It was estimated that there were over half a million mines hidden in Sri Lanka.

Under the terms of the Ottawa Treaty, a state must destroy all anti-personnel mines under its jurisdiction or control within four years of the Treaty, while ensuring the anti-personnel mines do not pose a threat to civilian populations.

Cover: President Maithripala Sirisena is greeted by SAITM founder Dr. Neville Fernando when he arrived to sign the agreement transferring ownership of the Neville Fernando Teaching Hospital to the government. Image courtesy dailynews.lk

If you’ve lived on the island a fair amount of time, chances are you’ve sunk your teeth into some luscious tropical goodness. Whether it is the juicy yellow mango served with ice cream in your dessert or the rotund rambutan eaten by the bagfuls during ‘season’, Sri Lanka has her share of the region’s fruit basket.

But have you ever wondered where your fruit came from? While some fruits are endemic to Sri Lanka, others originated from countries as far out as Mexico (cashew), and of course, from our regional neighbours India, Burma, and Malaysia.

Research indicates that Sri Lanka is home to about 3,368 plant species belonging 1,294 genera, with 132 families identified. Of these, about 800 are endemic to Sri Lanka. Here are a few of the fruits endemic to Sri Lanka, that you’d be hard-pressed to find elsewhere.

Also known as Mangifera zeylanica, the Sri Lanka Wild Mango belongs to the Anacardiaceae family and is known locally as aetamba in Sinhalese and kaddu-ma in Tamil.

The tree, which grows in the lowlands in moist and dry regions, is large and has a rough bark. Its leaves are ovate or oblong and its flowers smooth.

The Sri Lanka Wild Mango tree is not cultivated but is scattered among native plants. The fruit is eaten by villagers and the soft wood used for making tea cases and other similar knick-knacks.

Flowering buds of the Hal fruit tree. Image courtesy dilmahconservation.org

Vateria copallifera, known in Sinhalese as hal, is a tree belonging to the Dipterocarpaceae family. Currently on the 2008 IUCN Red List of Threatened Species\*, the tree can grow up to about 40 metres tall with a 4-metre girth under forest conditions. It grows mainly in the wet zone, between Colombo, Kandy, and Matara, and its fruit—an oblong nut—is ground and added to rice flour.

The fruit must be washed to remove a bitter taste—in the villages, traditionally, the fruit was put in a gunny bag and steamed for up to a day to get rid of the taste. The ground, dried fruit that is added to rice flour can be used for a variety of foods including pittu.

The wood from the hal tree is also used for a variety of purposes—most notably for the making of tea cases. The resin from the tree is added to pots which collect sap from coconut and kithul tapping to prevent fermentation of the sap.

Nil veralu. Image courtesy lakdasun.org

The Ceylon olive, more commonly known as veralu in Sinhalese, or veralikkai in Tamil, is endemic to Sri Lanka. Scientifically known as Elaeocarpus serratus, the Ceylon olive belongs to the Elaeaocarpaceae family of flowering plants. It is a moderate-sized tree, with a smooth bark of gray or grayish-brown that grows in the west and centre of the island. The fruit is oval, smooth, astringent when unripe, and moderately acidic when ripe. The Ceylon olive is eaten both boiled and fresh or as an achcharu (pickle).

Several other varieties of the Ceylon olive prevail; gal veralu, nil veralu, thiththa veralu (Elaeocarpus amoenus), and pol veralu being some of these.

The Weera fruit and leaves. Image courtesy serendib.btoptions.lk

Drypetes sepiaria, known as Weera in Sinhalese and‘Virai or Weerapalam in Tamil is a moderately large tree belonging to the Putranjivaceae family. Its bark is pale gray or dull white and leaves are glossy green. Its bright red fruit is popular with both humans and bears. The Weera fruit is best eaten fresh and is sweet to taste. It is not cultivated, but grows wild in forests and scrublands.

Artocarpus nobilis, or Ceylon breadfruit, is a tree belonging to the Moraceae family of flowering plants. The fruit is known in Sinhala as del, wal-del, baedi-del, or hingala-del and in Tamil as aresini-pilaka or asiri-pillakai.

The tree is large, stout and can grow up to about 25 metres in height, and its leaves are large and bright green. It is the fruit and seeds of the Ceylon breadfruit that is eaten—the fruit is boiled and the seeds roasted. The fruit is popular among locals.

Phoenix zeylanica, known in Sinhalese as indi or wal-indi, and in Tamil as iichchampalam is a tree belonging to the family Palme. The plant is very common in the moist low-country and especially along the Southern coast of the island. The fruit and the cabbage are eaten and the rest of the plant discarded.

The plant can grow to up to 5 metres and the trunk is covered with irregularly arranged long leaflets forming a ‘wicker’ pattern. Its fruit is ovoid, purplish-black, and sweet to taste.

Luscious Ceylon gooseberries. Image courtesy healthbenefitstimes.com

Dovyalis hebecarpa, or ketambilla is a shrub of the family Dovyalis, native to Sri Lanka. Known as the Ceylon gooseberry, Dovyalis hebecarpa is a small tree that grows to about 6 metres tall. The fruit that is also referred to as a ‘tropical apricot’ is most often used in jellies and jams.

The fruit is medium sized, orange when unripe, and purple when mature. The fruit has a thin, velvety skin and is bitter at first taste, giving way to a mildly acidic flesh. The fruit is rich in vitamins and minerals and high in antioxidants.

Cover: Drypetes sepiaria. Image courtesy: serendib.btoptions.lk

The central city of Colombo is undergoing many changes as we speak. Not only is it to be transformed into a megapolis, but several high-rise buildings that have sprung up in the past five years have changed the skyline of Colombo immutably. In addition, the planned Port City Project will ensure Colombo will continue to be an important commercial district in Sri Lanka.

It is perhaps with this in mind that the Megapolis and Western Development Minister Patali Champika Ranawaka announced on December 19, 2017, that begging would be prohibited within the Colombo city limits, from January 1, 2018.

But this is not the first time the government has touted the idea of ridding Colombo of beggars. In April 2017, the government said it would eliminate ‘beggars, stray cattle, and stray dogs’ from within the Colombo city limits, and a similar message has resounded for years.

Successive governments have attempted to eliminate the city of beggars through various means—there were mass arrests under the Vagrants Ordinance, and, more chillingly, a spate of killings in 2010 which, though no evidence emerged to support the fact, were blamed on the government.

The current government has communicated the decision to move the mendicants from their begging locale to a rehabilitation centre in Rideegama, Ambalantota. But details of the rehabilitation centre remain hazy and very little is known of what happens to the beggars once they are taken off the street.

Homeless on a street corner. Image courtesy: Kah Zen Kam, Flickr

As the first step in clearing the city of beggars, arrests would be made under the Police Ordinance and the Vagrants Ordinance, Police Media Spokesman SP Ruwan Gunasekara said.

He told Roar Media that it is estimated that as many as 600 beggars operate in Colombo, who would all be arrested and produced before a court.

“This is the law, and we are upholding it,” he said of the two enactments that hold policemen duty-bound to ‘prevent all crimes, offences, and public nuisances’ and to ‘apprehend disorderly and suspicious characters’, defining as vagrants ‘every person being able to maintain himself by work or other means, but who shall willfully refuse or neglect so to do, and shall wander abroad or place himself in any public place, street, highway, court or passage to beg or gather alms.’

Having being produced at court, the mendicants will be moved to a facility in Rideegama, Ambalantota.

Project Manager, Megapolis and Western Development Ministry Ranjit Meegaswatte told Roar Media that the facility was constructed during the Sirimavo Bandaranaike government.

“It currently houses 480 beggars. But we (the Megapolis and Western Development Ministry) built ten new buildings which can accommodate 600 more beggars,” he said.

Elaborating on the facility at Rideegama, Additional Secretary, Megapolis and Western Development Ministry, Anjali Devarajan said it extended to 107 acres.

“Of this only about 55 acres have been utilized,” she said, adding that there was also farmland on the premises.

Commuters pass an old man on the streets. Image courtesy: newsradio.lk

She said that although the facility was managed by the Social Welfare Ministry, the Megapolis and Western Development Ministry extended its help wherever possible.

Southern Province Social Services Commissioner Mahesh Karunanayake told Roar Media that the facility conducted several rehabilitation programmes for the beggars.

“Beggars and prostitutes are booked under the Vagrants Ordinance and brought in through a court ruling and can only leave through a court ruling,” he said.

He said a majority of those brought in were disabled or mentally handicapped, and hence unable to work, but the able-bodied were employed for agriculture.

“All the vegetables the facility uses are sourced on site,” he said.

The commissioner also explained that the women picked up as prostitutes were engaged in creating handicrafts and handloom products.

Beggars can leave the facility once they have served the time imposed on them by the court, but many stay on, the Social Services Commissioner explained.

He said the Social Welfare Ministry supported those beggars that had no means of supporting themselves but noted that families looking for ‘missing’ loved ones ought to check in with the Southern Province Social Services Department to see if their loved ones were there.

“Some of the older folk are senile or near senile,” he explained, ‘and they have no recollection of their families or where they live. They end up on the streets and are brought here and stay here until someone can come and get them—if that ever happens.”

He explained that it was necessary to seek court intervention to release a ‘beggar’ or vagrant housed at the Rideegama facility, but admitted that not many were in a position to hire legal aid to enable them to submit a motion for their release before court.

“We do what we can with the resources we have,” the Social Services Commissioner said, “ and we try to give these beggars better care than they had on the street.”

Professor Tennyson Perera, of the Sociological Department of the University of Sri Jayawardenepura, was of the opinion that the move by the government was a positive one.

“This may, however, be viewed by the beggars as a negative one,” he cautioned.

Beggars who were familiar with the city would be loath to leave a relatively free and easy lifestyle, for one in which they would be relocated to a rural location and expected to work, he said.

“There are some beggars who will be happy to be taken care of,” he said, “but most of them are in ‘group formations’, working in close association with relatives and other beggars.”

Entire families begged, the Professor said, father, mother, and children at various locations, living in close proximity to the city in areas like Kolonnawa, Angoda, Dehiwala, and Ratmalana.

These would be resistant to moving to Rideegama, he explained.

An old man on the streets. Image courtesy: taringa.net

There were also mudalalis (dealers) who ‘controlled’ certain beggars, who would be unhappy with the government’s decision to clear the streets, the Professor opined.

The professor also pointed out that as Sri Lanka was a Buddhist country, there were those that gave to beggars as a means of collecting merit, thereby unconsciously encouraging the trade.

“There is a close relationship between beggars and those people, from a religious point of view,” he said.

Be that as it may, the announcement by the government indicates a renewed resolution to rid the streets of vagrants and beggars. Infrastructure has been put in place to take beggars, i.e. those unable to fend for themselves and forced onto the street for the lack of means, off the streets. While it may be imagined that those in dire need will be grateful for the care, what remains to be seen is how those involved in beggar cartels will respond to the government’s latest decision to clear the city of Colombo from organised begging.

Cover image courtesy: Wikipedia

The idyllic beauty of Dedduwa is no secret. Located to the east of Bentota, it comprises water bodies, marshy lands and paddy fields. Weaving through the wetlands is the Dedduwa Lake, rich in biodiversity.

It was alongside the Dedduwa Lake that Sri Lanka’s legendary architect Geoffrey Bawa built his iconic country home, the Lunuganga Estate. Administered by a trust after his death in 2003, the Estate is still venerated by local and foreign tourists alike.

It is this scenic location that is to be the site of what has been touted as Sri Lanka’s ‘biggest tourism project’; an ambitious plan to transform a large swathe of the wetlands into one of Asia’s top three high-end tourism zones.

The project, by the Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority (SLTDA) and the Southern Development Board, seeks to create a zone in the style of Mexico’s ‘Mayakoba’—a series of interconnected resort islands, making ample use of the location’s natural ecology.

Roar Media spoke to several of the people involved in the project to get a clearer idea of what the project entails.

Law, Order and Southern Development Minister Sagala Ratnayaka told Roar Media the Dedduwa tourism zone would be a high-end tourism zone, over three times as large as the Colombo Port city.

“The project, which will span across 1, 800 acres, will be a high-end tourist destination which includes unique resorts, restaurants, unique cuisine, water sports facilities, ferries and other entertainment and commercial activities,” the Minister said.

“About 60% of the total area will be water and 40% will be land. An unprecedented level of caution will be exercised throughout the construction, to protect the environment and the natural ecosystem,” he said.

Geoffrey Bawa’s country residence ‘Lunuganga Gardens’. Image courtesy geoffreybawa.com

The Minister said new laws and regulations would be formulated to protect the natural ecosystem as it was important the project was entirely sustainable. “This project, the first of its kind for Sri Lanka, will dramatically transform the tourism sector. We have been relying on our history, culture, heritage, natural resources, beautiful coastal line and other similar things all this while, but this is something we will build from scratch and offer to tourists from across the world. In that sense, this is a major investment for the country’s future,” he said.

Shehan Ramanayake, Consultant at the Southern Development Board told Roar Media the plan was to build a resort destination that is “not a mass of concrete and human construction, but something a lot more natural, aesthetic, ecologically-sensitive and balanced.”

He said the concept—drawn by Channa Dasawatte’s architectural firm—planned to achieve three purposes: one, boost the destination profile of the country, making it one of the top three tourism zones in Asia; two, bring the economic value of the resort to the local area—that is, in terms of employment, to employ one or two levels above typical skills requirement; and three, for an experiential diversification of Sri Lanka’s tourism portfolio.

Fairmont Mayakoba, Riviera Maya. Image courtesy visasignaturehotels.com

“Everything we’ve been saying for the last thirty years about Sri Lanka, we’re still saying—beaches, Anuradhapura, the Dalada Maligawa, tea—we haven’t added any depth to our experiential portfolio as a policy,” he explained, adding that although the private sector has capitalised on the market, the public sector was yet to add depth to its portfolio.

“This is an opportunity for us to say we are looking for a different value proposition which is not beach-based, but an inland, water-based wetland, transformed into a high-end tourism resort,” he said.

Director, Planning at the SLTDA Upali Ratnayake told Roar Media the communities around the Dedduwa area would be positively impacted by the project.

“Our first priority is the people in the area,” he said, explaining that the Vocational Training Authority and Sri Lanka Institute of Tourism and Hotel Management (SLITHM) in Galle would provide training opportunities for aspirants.

“There are initiatives for local people to gain employment opportunities at the resorts. There will also be opportunities for small and medium producers of crafts such as masks and beeralu lace,” he said, adding that these would provide an additional income to the locals.

Ratnayake said the SLTDA envisioned an integrated approach with the communities, “suppliers will have an opportunity—vegetable sellers, fishermen, animal husbandry, carpentry, masonry—all of these people will have opportunities to share the benefits,” he said.

Part of the area earmarked for development in Dedduwa. Image courtesy Tourism Development Authority

Ratnayake denied that anyone would be negatively impacted by the project. He said the entire purpose of the project was to build it in a way that would not cause damage to the natural ecosystem and environment.

He said he had been personally involved with negotiations from the start and knew for certain there was no one negatively impacted by it.

“The area we seek to develop is mostly marshland and abandoned paddy fields,” he said. “I personally spoke to the people, together with the district secretary and grama seveka, and they were happy to give up their lands for compensation,” he said.

“In fact, they are waiting to see the project take off,” he added.

Ramanayake told Roar Media that the acquisition was done voluntarily. “The lands are not inhabited. The acquisition was done voluntarily with compensation based on valuation. No land has been forcibly acquired or grabbed,” he said.

“A lot of the land was abandoned marsh and paddy—an unused part of someone’s estate that was given up for financial compensation, or lands that were no longer arable, so they could sell it to the government for compensation,” he said.

“The financial feasibility assessment and the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) will be done before March next year,” Minister Ratnayaka said.

Interconnected islands will form a large part of what has been imagined for the Dedduwa project. Image courtesy Tourism Development Authority

“The initial work with regard to construction will start in March, 2018. The land acquisition has already been completed.”

Ramanayake told Roar Media that the project was still in its initial stages, “We have embarked on a series of studies—testing the soil, the hydrology of the area because it is adjoining the lake, as well as a feasibility study to evaluate the business viability of the concept we are proposing, because if the investors and the developers are unable to monetize and deliver value, the whole thing will be a flop.”

He added that, “We want to ensure that the concept we are proposing can make money for the developers and the private sector players who will be a part of this, to make sure that the project has long life and can deliver the kind of socioeconomic value that the project is intended to have to the community and the region.”

“We also want to be equipped to select the right investors,” he said. “We’re in the studies phase, so once the studies are complete and we have our information, research and analysis, we will refine the concept and our requirement of our investor to have a high degree of success.”

The project, one of many lined up by the government in its drive for development, will irrevocably impact the areas of tourism, service industries and employment generation in the country. The Dedduwa wetlands—home to a variety of freshwater fish, reptiles, aquatic birds, dragonflies, and a host of the other fauna and flora, including mangroves and mollusks—will also be irreversibly affected, unless the government sticks to its projected plan to make development as eco-friendly as possible. It is evident that it is with this in mind that the government has embarked on this project, but it will be up to the media, environmentalists and concerned citizens to ensure that the government keeps its promises.

Cover: Mexico’s Mayakoba, a series of interconnected islands. Image courtesy visasignaturehotels.com

History records social transformation. It is through the lens of historical narrative that we see the ages and eras of the past and learn of the people, places, and events that made an impact. Documented history throws a light on the customs and rituals of people as they wend their way through time, leaving their mark on a particular epoch.

In the 1950’s, Ceylon has just gained independence from the British Raj, the fruits of which were yet to be seen. Many of the cultural influences of the British were still apparent, including speaking the English language, clothing styles, and partaking in English customs and holidays.

The major Christian holidays—Good Friday, Easter Sunday, and Christmas were all celebrated on the island, and going by documented history, Christmas in Ceylon in the 1950’s was a riotous time with all the main hotels hosting gala events. These began as early as the 22nd of December and lasted till Boxing Day, before picking up again for the New Year.

Records advertised by Cargills, on the Ceylon Daily News.

The three main hotels in Colombo at the time were the Mount Lavinia Hotel, the Grand Oriental Hotel, and the Galle Face Hotel. The Grand Oriental Hotel held a special dinner dance on Christmas Eve in 1950 for Rs. 10.00. This was followed by a gala dinner dance on Christmas Day for Rs. 12.00. The Christmas festivities were rounded up with a dinner dance on Boxing Day for Rs. 7.50.

All the events organised by the Grand Oriental Hotel in 1951 offered the option of attending the dance without the dinner, for roughly half the price, indicating that dancing formed an important part of the festivities, which an advert in the Ceylon Daily News said would include the “gayest of decorations and illuminations, crackers, caps, toys and balloons”.

The Grand Oriental Hotel also held a special Christmas Concert by ‘Felice and his Blue Star Orchestra’ on December 19, 1950, in aid of the ‘Deaf and Blind School’—although it is not indicated if this is the same one in Ratmalana today.

Special trains for the Southern Cup, or ‘Boosa Races’. Image courtesy Ceylon Daily News

The Mount Lavinia Hotel in the same year (1950) began Christmas festivities with a dinner dance on December 22, advertising that it would feature ‘Ken Mac from Bombay’. On December 24 the Mount Lavinia Hotel hosted a Children’s Christmas Eve Tea Party, as well as a ‘Special Dinner Dance’ with dancing to the ‘Mount Melody Makers’ till 2 am.

The iconic Galle Face Hotel held a dinner dance on December 23, followed by a ‘Promenade Concert’ by ‘Sacha and his Melodists’. The Christmas Day dinner dance was priced at Rs. 12.50 —just 50 cent more than what the dinner dance at the Mount Lavinia Hotel cost.

Colombo was not the only locale to celebrate Christmas in style: the Bandarawela Hotel organised a ‘Grand Christmas Dance’ with music by ‘Mario Manricks Band’ for Rs. 10.00, in keeping with Colombo prices, and also indicating that the planters community in the central highlands would celebrate the holiday, while the Savoy Ballroom advertised a Christmas Eve and Boxing night dinner dance with “hats crackers and effects” for Rs. 7.50.

Liquor was advertised freely in the newspapers. Image courtesy: Ceylon Daily News.

Down in the south, the Southern Cup, or the ‘Boosa Races’ were also an important part of the Christmas festivities in Ceylon. Trains were delegated to take crowds to Boosa, with special fares on return tickets and other deals offered by the Ceylon Government Railway.

The middle class shopped at ‘Millers’ where hampers were priced between Rs. 35 and Rs. 143. Interesting to note was the fact that Cargills—that exists now in the form of supermarkets—sold records during the 1950’s. The local papers advertised records by the London Chamber Orchestra, the Philharmonic Orchestra, the Benny Goodman Quartet, and Muggsy Spanier to name a few.

Similarly, Pilawoos as we know it today on the Galle Road in Colombo did not exist; instead, Pilawoos was located on the Second Cross Street in Colombo 11, where ‘venison biriyani’ was a seasonal offer. Perera and Sons and Elephant House were going strong in the 1950’s, as was the ‘Bake House’, advertising Christmas cakes, yule logs, and breudhers as part of its Christmas fare.

Venison biriyani at Pilawoos, located on Second Cross Street in Colombo 11. Image courtesy Ceylon Daily News.

‘The Rupee’ on Galle Road, Bambalapitiya was another store that offered imported goodies for low prices; Pascall’s Sunshine Marshmallows, Russell’s Fruit Lollies, Cayley’s Crawford Chocolates, and Rowntree’s Fruit Pastilles were some of the items for sale for as little as Rs.3 a pound.

Bata and Don Carolis were two other brands that had a presence in the 1950’s, offering shoes, sandals, and furniture on seasonal ‘mammoth’ sales.

Bata was a strong brand even in the 1950’s. Image courtesy Ceylon Daily News.

Another important point to note was the fact that alcoholic beverages were advertised without government restrictions in the 1950’s. Although Sri Lanka’s Temperance movement began in the 1890’s together with anti-colonial sentiment, it seemed that people still freely consumed spirits.

Socially, Christmas was celebrated widely, with Chandra Arulpragasam writing in his memoir ‘Fallen Leaves’, “As a Christian living in a mainly Buddhist country, I am now amazed at the fuss that was made over Christmas in those days. It was a fuss in which all middle-class communities, Christian, Buddhist, Hindu, and Muslim participated, evincing a heart-warming give-and-take between the different communities and cultures.”

‘Thinking back, I am most struck by how the Buddhist and Hindu homes also celebrated Christmas in those times. I have been to Buddhist homes that had Christmas trees, Christmas presents, etc. in the 1950s. This was because the colonial legacy persisted even after decolonization. As noted above, this was partly due to the privileged position of Christianity under British rule but also due to the cultural overhang of English/Christian dominance.”

Prime Minister D. S. Senanayake at the Galle Face Hotel dinner dance in 1950. Image Courtesy Ceylon Daily News.

Christmas, as it is celebrated today has changed in some ways; the days of swing bands and gala dinners are gone, replaced by buffet lunches and dinners and other activities at the many new hotels that have sprung up in the last 67 years. Some of the business entities of yore are thriving today, while some no longer exist. But the celebrations and traditions that remain at the heart of Christmas continue to live on today.

Cover: Galle Face Hotel. Image courtesy luxuryhotelsassociation

Silvana Mathews begins making thambili wine for Christmas in the warm month of April. She brings her glass bottles out from storage and begins the process of crushing spices to add to the king coconut water and caramelized sugar before setting the bottles aside to ferment.

“The fermentation process is the most important,” she said, explaining that thambili wine, like all wine, matures and becomes stronger when it is kept for a longer period.

Silvana learned how to make thambili wine from her mother, who learned it from her mother, who learned it from her mother before that. “My understanding is that it is mostly made by the Burghers and is passed on from generation to generation,” she said.

Thambili wine is traditionally mostly enjoyed on three occasions, Silvana told Roar Media. “At Christian weddings, in the good old days, homemade thambili wine was used to propose the toast at homes before the bride or groom left to church; at Christmas, when the family returns home after midnight mass and also on Christmas during family get-togethers; and on Easter Sunday,” she said.

The exact origin of thambili wine is, however, uncertain. Silvana refers to childhood stories that state that the wine was made by the servants of the Portuguese and British. But other sources point to the Dutch as the originators of this alcoholic delicacy. Whatever the origin, it has been a part of burgher tradition for as long as anyone can remember.

Thambili wine is an integral part of the Christmas holiday. Image Courtesy: www. currymad.net

Silvana, whose family has been making thambili wine for over 30 years, usually makes about 80 or 90 bottles a year, at 30 bottles a batch—but the numbers vary depending on demand. “Some of my customers order wine the previous December itself, so it’s easy for me to plan,” she said. “But we have customers who order later as well, so we always have extra wine.”

Anita Papalie, whose family has also been making thambili wine for generations, said that she doesn’t remember a time there wasn’t a bottle of thambili wine stashed somewhere in the house.

“Making thambili wine is a tradition in our family, along with milk wine, and of course, Christmas cake,” she said.

The earlier made, the better the wine tastes, said Anita, adding that to her understanding thambili wine was a unique, Sri Lankan Burgher tradition—possibly due to the abundance of thambili in the country.

“I’m sure other countries have their various takes on wines too, but let’s keep thambili our little Ceylonese secret,” she said, adding that the thambili wine was a “contender at any truly burgher Christmas party.”

The thambili wine making process is not unlike the winemaking process of any other fruit; sterilized equipment is used, and the fruit is mixed with sugar and yeast, Tamara Bulner explained to Roar Media.

Cinnamon, cardamom, cloves, and nutmeg are used to spice the thambili wine. Image Courtesy: www.mychocolate.co.uk

Tamara’s family has been making thambili wine, along with milk wine and Christmas cake for over 25 years. “We begin early because the longer the wine and cake are kept, the better,” she explained, adding that a rich flavour could only be acquired with age.

“The process is very important,” she said, noting that the wine must be strained properly several times over and left to ‘rest’. The bottle caps must also not be screwed on too tightly, because they may explode,” she warned.

But while it may seem, at first glance, that thambili winemaking is a uniquely Burgher tradition, Aloma Abeykoon begs to differ.

“We’ve been making thambili wine for many generations now,” she said suggesting it may be a Christian tradition, rather than a Burgher one.

Aloma’s family, a Sinhalese one, living in Jaela on the traditional Catholic belt, also makes thambili wine and cake early on in the year for consumption during Christmas.

She also said that to her knowledge, thambili wine was enjoyed at many Sinhalese weddings too, indicating a wider appreciation for the amber liquid.

While the origins of the thambili wine may be debated, what is certain is that the king of coconuts produces a wine that is undeniably appreciated in local culture; whether it be for wedding celebrations, or to add that extra bit of cheer to the Christmas season. Thambili wine has been here a long time, and it looks like it is here to stay.

Cover image courtesy: Silvana Mathews

The annual Colombo Shopping Festival is on at the Bandaranaike Memorial International Conference Hall (BMICH) between the 16th and the 23rd of December. The Festival will run from 10 am to 10 pm with entrance tickets priced at Rs. 100.

In its 26th iteration, the Colombo Shopping Festival is the initiative of Aitken Spence Conventions & Exhibitions. Over 240 vendors will showcase their wares this year, with festival organisers expecting upto 80, 000 patrons.

Colourful lanterns at the feng shui stall

The Festival is a biannual event that is held both during the Sinhala and Tamil New Year holiday in April, and once again at the year-end, just before the Christmas holiday.

The entrance to the BMICH is lined with vehicles as crowds throng to reach the interior of the cavernous building that houses the grand sale.

Inside, people follow each other in long queues through the myriad stalls laden with goods and crafts of every kind.

A fair percentage of the stalls at the BMICH are laden with clothes ranging from as little as Rs. 150 to over Rs. 1,500. Cotton ‘Rolling Stone’ and the ‘Beatles’ t-shirts, crop tops, flowing skirts, shirts, and more are to be seen hanging from the stalls.

A jolly ceramic Santa waves a cheery hello

Other stalls are replete with jewellery from Rs. 65 apiece to upward of Rs. 650 for the fancier ones. Tiny studs, long feathered earrings, woven arm bracelets, and polished rings are spread across the front of a stall.

Intricately embellished colourful sarees, leather bags, purses, shoes, wallets, walking sticks, dream-catchers and other curios fill the stalls. Mattresses, gardening tools, and home appliances such as TVs, rice cookers, irons, and water heaters are all available at the Festival for discounted prices.

Outside the hall, vendors sell outdoor furniture that include brightly-hued poly-cotton hammocks for just Rs, 2,000 and above. The place is dotted with food vendors selling hot dogs, popcorn, candy floss and cool refreshment to weary shoppers.

Printed sarees for discounted prices

Mostly seen at the Colombo Shopping Festival were families with young children in tow, but also present were the lone buyers and office workers popping in for a spot of shopping during a lunch break.

The Festival caters not only to the city crowd, but also to those from as far off as Maharagama and Homagama.

For the pre-Christmas shopper, the Colombo Shopping Festival is a great place to visit, offering a wide range of potential gift items in one location. The Festival also draws shoppers seeking to cash in on a year-end deal of discounted items.

With the uncharacteristic rainy December weather, the Colombo Shopping Festival offers customers a place to shop indoors rather than braving the weather and the haggling of vendors outside.

For those who want to avoid the alternately dusty and wet streets of Pettah, the Colombo Shopping Festival seems to be a worthwhile option.

Cover: Gleaming, discounted eyewear

Nestled in a corner of the JDA Gallery in Colombo is a pile of crumpled newspaper. Standing over it is the evocative image of an eye, tears streaming down the length of the artwork. The piece, by Minal Naomi, titled ‘Do Not Take This For Granted’, investigates the role of print media in disseminating the death of her uncle, former Sunday Leader Editor, Lasantha Wickrematunge.

As Naomi notes, “the idea is to highlight how the machine he used to disseminate information to the broader public became the very same machine that broadcasted his murder in a sensational manner.” This ‘double-edged sword’ is portrayed with the image of a double-nibbed fountain pen, highlighting the importance of using the right to freedom of expression responsibly.

Naomi’s piece is one of dozens on exhibit at the first ever Human Rights Arts Festival 2017 in Colombo, organised by the Arts Council of Sri Lanka in collaboration with the Human Rights Council of Sri Lanka, with support from The Workshop Players and the Saskia Fernando Gallery, among others.

‘Killing Book’ by Kingsley Gunatillake

Curated by Chandragupta Thenuwara, the exhibition showcases many names known to Colombo, such as Anoma Wijewardene, Gayan Prageeth, and Muvindu Binoy, among others. The work of lesser known artists such as Jasmine Nilani Joseph, Somasundaram Hanusha, and Pakkiyarajah Pushpakanthan from the North and East are also on display, as is the work of artists from Scotland and England.

Taking centre stage on the ground floor is an installation by Anoma Wijewardene created in 2009, at the end of the war. Part of the collection ‘Phoenix’, ‘I Hear Those Voices That Will Not Be Drowned’ takes the form of seven panels, each alluding to displaced persons—the collateral damage of over 26 years of civil war.

“In 2017, we are yet again at a critical juncture—at the precipice of squandering away another chance to achieve progressive change and lasting peace. Entrenching progressive change requires brave and difficult decisions; it requires leaders to be courageous and principled, and citizens to be socially conscious and responsible,” she notes.

‘The Story of an ‘Assignment’’ by Menika Van Der Poorten

Menika Van Der Poorten recounts a failed assignment, one commissioned by the UNHCR in 2002. “In 1990, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (the LTTE) embarked on a campaign to evict the Muslim population out of the then LTTE-controlled areas of Mullaitivu, Mannar, and Jaffna,” she writes.

“In 2002, the UNHCR commissioned me to photograph and record the stories of the displacement of Muslim women…the communities were very enthused about the project in the expectation that, finally, their experiences and their narrative of the events of 1990 would be made public…”

“We collected hours of recordings and photographs which we handed over the UNHCR…in the expectation that there would be a life for the documentation beyond the exhibition…sadly only a few of the tapes were translated and/ or transcribed and what transcriptions there were are now no more, supposedly ‘lost’ by the UNHCR.”

The series of black and white photographs, the few copies that Menika managed to save before handing over the project material to the UNHCR, capture with poignancy moments from the lives of the displaced Muslim women. In one, a woman tends to her children in a cadjan hut, in the other, two young women share a moment of fraternity in a bleak landscape.

Menika’s photographs suggest themes of grim resilience in the face of darkness. Particularly striking is the image of a lone woman standing against the light, on her face the unwritten story of loss.

Blind Eye by Flick Ferdinando

The silhouette of children in a tenement building, the face of a woman hidden from view, the knotty leg of a crippled street vendor. Abdul Halik Azeez’s ‘Invisible People’ shines the light on those left behind in the global drive for development.

A central motif in Azeez’s work is the absence of a recognizable face, signalling the ‘invisibility’ of the subjects captured. Azeez argues that the current economic system is geared to favour the privileged and fittest, leaving a stratum overlooked and forgotten.

He faults the international discourse on human rights for focusing more on the obvious aspects of deprivation rather than the lesser obvious, but as important, issue of an economic system that sustains income inequality. He questions if traditional human rights discourse is partner to an oppressive economic system.

‘Thatti’, or Bamboo Blinds by Firi Rahman

Other artists contemplate variant aspects of the social fabric we live in, within the framework on human rights. Somasundaram Hanusha’s piece ‘Labour’ was made of used tea bags through which the shadow of a tea-plucker emerged, while Nirosha Wanigasuriya’s ‘Domestic Violence’ was depicted through a series of broken dishes.

Speaking to Roar, Human Rights Festival 2017 curator Chandragupta Thenuwara said he was keen on tying art to socially conscious themes. “I am a very politically and socially conscious artist, and as the President of the Arts Council, I wanted to make sure we did something that raises awareness among the public,” he said.

He referred to when the issue of human rights was taken up by the European Union before Sri Lanka regained GSP+ tariff concessions in May, and said, “People were suspicious about human rights. They think it is a European or Western thing, but it is not. It is something enshrined with the people.”

He said human rights must not be constrained to the discourse of politicians or the government. “People must know these are our rights—and must fight for them,” he emphasised, promising to hold an exhibition on a larger scale the next time to facilitate deeper engagement.

The exhibition is thought provoking, opening up avenues for conversation on social issues ranging from the pervasive nature of plastics to age-old customs restricting women from the crucial capacity for independence. It also explores and examines the role of art in stimulating social consciousness.

The Port City Project has been at the front and centre of public scrutiny in the past, but no new details on the progress of the project have reached the media in recent days. While the issue of the Port City Project hung in the balance during the transition of the new government in 2015, very little is being said of it now, which begs the question, what is happening to the Port City Project and where do things stand now?

Part of China’s ambitious ‘One Belt, One Road’ plan, the Port City Project seeks to reclaim 269 hectares of land adjacent to the Galle Face Green and develop it into five different precincts; at a total initial cost of USD 1.4 billion. The deal—struck between the government of Sri Lanka and the Chinese government-owned China Communications Construction Company (CCCC)—uses the China Harbour Engineering Company (CHEC) to handle master-planning, land reclamation, and infrastructure.

Development is set to be implemented—at an expected overall investment of USD 15 billion—in three phases over 25-years, of which only the first stage has yet begun.

The Port City project envisions five different precincts on the reclaimed 269 hectares of land. These are the Financial District, Central Park Living, Island Living, The Marina, and the International Island. As at 30th November 2017, 60.7% of land has been reclaimed by the Port City project.

The five different precincts on the reclaimed 269 hectares of land.

When completed, it is estimated to have some 5.65 million square meters of built-up space, with Grade A offices, medical facilities, educational facilities, resorts, retail destinations, hotels, and various lifestyle developments.

Of the 296 hectares of total reclaimed land, 178 hectares of the 269 hectares will be marketable land, CHEC Port City Colombo (Pvt) Ltd told Roar.

Public land—that is, roads, public spaces, and utility areas etc.—are allocated 91 hectares of the reclaimed area, while approximately 45 hectares will be set aside for a public park.

A length of 1.5km will be set aside for a public beach area, while total protected water areas for public use i.e. for recreation and watersports is 125 hectares.

It is expected that the marina will hold a total of around 150-200 boats, based on size.

Resident population, as envisaged over 25-30 years is 75,000, while resident and transient population over 25-30 years is expected to reach 250,000.

Approximately 60-65% of the reclaimed land will be used as an open space—i.e will not be occupied by buildings.

Permissible developments within Port City will include the following, CHEC Port City Colombo (Pvt) Ltd said:

Commercial: Banks, Offices and retail, hotels, and restaurants

Residential: Dwelling houses/units, apartment building, serviced apartments

Institutions: Healthcare, educational and R&D institutions, diplomatic embassies

Small businesses, services, and allied activities: associated with the mixed development activities

Entertainment: Indoor amusement and entertainment establishments, outdoor recreational spaces

Community: Art galleries, socio-cultural establishments/community centres

Other: Marina and related facilities, tourism business, convention and event facilities, cultural events and festivals

The Marina. Image: portcitycolombo.lk

The government announced that legislation will be introduced to transform Colombo into an International Financial Centre. It has been proposed that in the short term, the Colombo International Financial City (CIFC) will be set up in an existing building within the Central Business District (CBD) of Colombo, and upon the required infrastructure being made available, the CIFC would shift to Port City Colombo.

The Tripartite Agreement—signed between the Ministry of Megapolis & Western Development, the UDA, and the CHEC Port City Colombo (Pvt) Ltd. in August 2016—allows for CHEC Port City Colombo (Pvt) Ltd. to extend all reasonable assistance to the Government of Sri Lanka (GOSL) in the planning of the proposed CIFC on reclaimed land, subject to the successful outcome of a technical and financial viability assessment to be undertaken by CHEC Port City Colombo (Pvt) Ltd.

Where Is the Construction Material Sourced From?CHEC Port City Colombo (Pvt) Ltd. said that according to the Supplementary Environmental Impact Assessment (SEIA) of December 2015, rock materials will be extracted from Geological Survey and Mines Bureau (GSMB) approved quarry sites in identified districts of Sri Lanka.

It is stated in the SEIA report that Port City would use 3.5 million cubic metres of quarry material for the reclamation stage of the project and this would account for only 7% of the available reserves in 11 identified quarries in the Colombo and Gampaha Districts.

Based on the quarry rock requirement for building construction, the cumulative requirement over a 23 year period is 1.7 million cubic metres, working out to an average requirement of 0.08 million cubic metres per annum.

This quantity is easily sourced in Sri Lanka from approved quarry sites and would be a negligible quantum of rock material compared to available resources in districts such as Gampaha, Colombo, and Kalutara, CHEC Port City Colombo (Pvt) Ltd. said.

The cumulative requirement of sand for the envisaged buildings at Port City over a 23 year period is around one million cubic metres or around 53,000 cubic metres per annum. Annual demand for construction sand in Sri Lanka is estimated at 12 million cubic metres. Hence the demand for sand for construction of buildings within Port City will be just 0.4% of the annual demand for sand in Sri Lanka.

Assuming a significant portion of sand demand for Port City will be met with sea sand obtained by Sri Lanka Land Reclamation & Development Corporation (SLLRDC), the demand for river sand for Port City would be as low as 0.1% of the annual demand for sand in Sri Lanka.

The required sand quantity for the purpose of reclamation is about 65 million cubic metres. The GSMB has estimated the total potential sand deposit at site 2 to be 68 million cubic metres, CHEC Port City Colombo (Pvt) Ltd. said.

The Central Park. Image: portcitycolombo.lk

An Environmental Monitoring Plan (EMP) involving 26 government agencies (ministries, departments, authorities, etc.) has been implemented by CHEC Port City Colombo (Pvt) Ltd. The Port City project is probably the only private-public partnership that has 24/7 monitoring by 26 government agencies. The EMP covers the mitigation and prevention of any monitored adverse effects to the environment.

Speaking to Roar Media, environmentalist Jagath Gunawardena confirmed that there was very little environmental impact on the project site itself – “but some issues may arise from dredging for sand,” he said, also pointing out that issues may arise when quarrying for gravel.

“These issues will have to be resolved on a project by project basis,” he said.

Fishing communities and civil organizations have protested the move to dredge for sand from areas along the Western coast, citing soil erosion, and disruption to traditional livelihoods. However, the Supplementary Environmental Impact Assessment (SEIA) has held that the impact would be negligible.

The reclamation, dredging, and construction of the protective structures of the Colombo Port City project commenced in 2016 and is scheduled to be completed in the year 2019.

Phase 1 infrastructures and utilities began in the second half of 2017 and is expected to reach completion in the first half of 2020. First development (building construction) is scheduled to start in the second half of 2018.

Stage 1 Marketing and Development will take place between the years 5 to 13 and will cover 42% of the land area adjacent to the Central Business District—the entire Financial District, Marina and Central Park Living will be completed in this stage. The implementation of infrastructure including services, roads, landscaping and the construction of the majority of medium rise to low rise buildings will also take place during this phase.Following that, Stage 2 Marketing and Development will be carried out between the years 10 to 23 and will cover 58% of land area towards the offshore breakwater. Completion of the International Island and Island Living will be targeted during this phase, while main construction activities will be the implementation of infrastructure including services, roads and landscaping and the construction of low rise, medium-rise, and high-rise buildings.

Despite the suspension of the Port City Project for over a year, development has been continuing apace and the project is well set to meet its targets, CHEC Port City Colombo (Pvt) Ltd. Public Relations Head Kassapa Senarath told Roar Media.

There were fears that Sri Lanka would be made to bear the brunt of a USD 143 million lawsuit for breach of contract after the project was suspended in March 2015, but the CCCC dropped the case against Sri Lanka as a gesture of goodwill, and work began once more after the tripartite agreement was signed in August 2016.

The project, initially envisioned by former President Mahinda Rajapaksa, later drew the criticism of the former President and his informal ‘Joint Opposition’ on the charge the newly-appointed Sri Lankan government was ‘selling’ assets to China.

Upon completion, the Port City Project will become the country’s central business district, creating 80,000 jobs for Sri Lankans, CCCC Vice President Sun Ziyu told the South China Morning Post, making this the biggest project undertaken by the Asian superpower in the country.

Editor’s note: In a previous version of this article, hectares was mistakenly labeled acres in a few instances. This has been corrected.

Three-wheelers are the preferred mode of travel in the cities of South Asia, but as many a traveler will tell you, there are instances they’ve been scammed. In Sri Lanka too, we hear the gamut of excuses from “meter broken” to “give me any amount,”—only to be harangued at the end of the ride for more than what the ride would actually cost.

This sort of behaviour is not particular to the locals—foreigners too have complained that they’ve been at the receiving end of some ill-hatched scheme or the other, to the degree that the United States Embassy in Colombo issued a warning in July, advising female travelers in particular, to be more cautious.

The US Embassy’s warning alarmed Sri Lanka’s tourism authorities to the extent that they quickly moved to hold discussions with relevant parties and government bodies to come up with a long-term solution to the problem.

It is in this light that the Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority (SLTDA) announced the introduction of a ‘Tourist-Friendly’ tuk-tuk service in Colombo, with plans to streamline the tuk industry in Sri Lanka through a licensing system.

It also resonates with the 2018 Budget proposal to set up a ‘Three-Wheeler Regulatory Authority’, under which all three-wheel drivers would be regulated and disciplined.

The Budget 2018 also promised that meters would be made mandatory and that they would run a programme to train tuk-tuk drivers. But what do all these changes really mean, who will be handling them, and how will it benefit us, locals?

Roar Media spoke to a senior spokesperson at the Sri Lanka Tourist Development Authority, the body tasked with initiating the new tuk-tuk regulations, to find out more about what measures the government plans to roll out and by when we should see a change.

A large part of the new programme involving tuk-tuk drivers will be licensing, SLTDA Community Relations Director Mihira Liyanaarachchi told Roar Media. He said that under the new regulations all tuk-tuks transporting tourists will be compelled to register with the SLTDA.

Image courtesy dontstopliving.net

“Licensing is only one part of our two-pronged approach,” he said. “With the licensing, the SLTDA intends to streamline their service.”

“The Tourism Act No. 38 of 2005 holds that all tourism service providers should be registered with the SLTDA. This means that anyone that performs any service for tourists should be registered with the SLTDA,” he said.

When asked if this meant that no random, unregistered tuk could take a tourist on for a ride, Liyanaarachchi replied to the affirmative. “Ultimately, the plan is to get all three-wheel drivers transporting tourists to register with the SLTDA,” he said. “This would ensure that an important segment of the industry is covered and streamlined.”

The operation will be mainly based in Colombo, where approximately 10,000 tuks transport tourists on a daily basis. It is likely to systematically expand to other major cities, too. The whole process, according to the SLTDA, may take a few years.

What differentiates the SLTDA’s initiative from a mere licensing process is the fact that upon licensing, standards would be issued on the drivers.

For instance, meters will be made mandatory, and as an additional feature, drivers would be required to display their information prominently on the tuk-tuk.

The information includes the name of the driver, his address and contact number, as well as the details pertaining to the police division under which he functions, so that a complaint could be made to the right quarters, if necessary.

In addition, all licensed tuk-tuk drivers would be given lessons on etiquette, customer care, code of conduct, duties and responsibilities of a tuk driver, essential first aid, basic language skills, and road discipline.

Three-wheelers are the most fun way to get around the island. Image courtesy packtolife.com

The move by the SLTDA has been well received by the tuk-tuk community. At a recent meeting held with tuk-tuk driver representatives, tuk-tuk drivers had expressed approval for the SLTDA project.

Tourist Three-wheel Drivers’ Association secretary Udara Samarasekara told Roar Media that the move was a very good one: “Many tourists are scammed by unscrupulous three-wheel drivers and this will put an end to that,” he explained.

He stated that while he operated in the Colombo area—honourably—for some time now, many new tuk-tuk drivers from rural areas were flocking to Colombo with the intention of earning at the expense of unsuspecting tourists.

“I operate outside the Hilton Hotel during the day,” he said, “but when we leave at night a new set of drivers operate from there. They attempt to fleece the tourists. In the morning we are the ones hauled up before the police and questioned,” he said indignantly.

He said the measures to license tuk-tuk drivers and provide them with basic training on how to act as tourist guides, and even on etiquette, would positively impact the industry as a whole.

Officer-in-Charge of the Tourist Police, Chief Inspector Prabath Vidanagama told Roar Media that the Tourist Police Division had already conducted a very successful awareness programme for tuk-tuk drivers attached to three main tuk-tuk parks servicing the Colombo city hotels.

“We have identified training and awareness as key to streamlining the industry,” he said, explaining that enforcing regulations would only be done after the relevant Gazette notification is published. “At this stage we want to educate the tuk-tuk drivers on the upcoming changes,” he said.

After the relevant Gazette notification is published, the Tourist Police would assist the SLTDA in cracking down on errant three-wheel drivers, he said, in the same way it was currently cracking down on unregistered tourist hotels in Colombo.

“First we will educate the three-wheel drivers on the upcoming changes together with the SLTDA,” he said. “After this we will let the SLTDA take over and proceed with the licensing. Finally, after the Gazette notification is published, we will set up a task force to enforce it,” he explained.

Although the measures seem primarily aimed at the tourism industry, as more and more tuk-tuks come under the licensing system, locals too will benefit from the regulations imposed on three-wheel drivers. “There has to be a starting point for everything,” SLTDA’s Liyanaarachchi said. “This is where we will begin and we will soon see the changes across the country. These changes will affect not just the tourism industry but the local market as well,” he said. The tuk-tuk industry is a large and unregulated one. It is estimated that 1.2 million tuk-tuks operate in Sri Lanka—that is, one for every 20 persons. By moving to regulate the tuk-tuks, the Sri Lankan government is embarking on a process of which the trickle-down effect will be monumental.

Cover: packtolife.com