Boxing Coach Srilal Gomes never gave up on the sport—even though he would never fight competitively again.

Tomorrow (August 5), Sri Lankans will be voting in its ninth parliament. The 225 members voted in will possess legislative supremacy over all other political institutions in the island, with the power to make, repeal, and amend laws, including the Constitution.

But how does this parliamentary process work and how are the 225 members chosen?

The legal basis for the parliamentary, or general election is set out in the 1978 Constitution, as well as the Parliament Elections Act No. 01 of 1981—among other legal provisions, circulars, and guidelines.

It is the 1978 Constitution, or the Second Republican Constitution, that sets out that 225 members must be ‘returned’ to parliament as elected members from the electoral districts in Sri Lanka.

While Sri Lanka has 25 administrative districts, it has only 22 electoral districts; this is the result of the electoral district of Jaffna covering the administrative districts of Jaffna and Kilinochchi and the electoral district of Vanni consisting of the administrative districts of Mannar, Mullaitivu and Vavuniya.

According to the 1978 Constitution, four seats of the 225 seats reserved for the 225 parliament members are apportioned to each of the nine provinces of Sri Lanka right at the start of the process.

“This is so that no province is under-represented,” Aaseem Mohamed, an analyst at Verité Research explained to Roar Media.

“For example, take the Trincomalee district,” he said. “It is slightly underpopulated but has a relatively large land area. A district should be properly represented, and sometimes, if you only consider the population, that district may just get a few seats.”

To avoid this, the Delimitation Commission decides how best to divide the four seats given to each province, among its existing districts.

For example, the Western Province has three electoral districts; Colombo, Gampaha and Kalutara. The Delimitation Commission will allocate the four seats assigned to the Western Province to each of these three districts by taking into account several factors.

The four seats per province, that is apportioned to each district on the recommendation of the Delimitation Committee removes 36 seats from the 225 to be ‘returned’ to parliament, leaving 189 to be accounted for.

Of the 189, 29 seats are allocated to what is known as the ‘National List’. This ultimately leaves only 160 seats to be ‘returned’ to parliament through universal adult franchise from across the island (more on this, further down).

These remaining 160 ‘members to be returned’ as Members of Parliament (MPs) are decided in a rather complex way.

First, the Election Commission (EC) must decide how many seats or candidates are to be returned from each district. This depends largely on the voter population of that district.

“Before they call for nominations, the EC will publish the number of ‘members to be returned’ from each electoral district,” Mohamed said.

“The EC will, according to Article 98 of the Constitution, decide the number of seats, [some of which are] based on the number of voters [in that district] and sometimes vary from the previous one. If you take Badulla, last time it was eight, this time it is nine. Likewise for Galle, last time it was 10, this time it is nine.”

Once the EC publishes the number of seats to be ‘returned’ per electoral district, it will call for nominations.

Each political party or group must nominate the number of members that correspond to the number of seats allocated to the district, plus an additional three members.

For example, this year, the Colombo district is entitled to 19 seats in Parliament. Therefore, each party will nominate 19 candidates for the Colombo district plus three additional candidates to make up 22. “This additional three is in case someone passes away, falls severely ill or the seat has to be revoked for any other reason—then the other person on the list can replace them,” Mohamed said.

In addition to recognised political parties, the election usually sees a number of independent groups contesting. This year alone, Colombo has 26 independent groups contesting with more than 20 nominees per group, amounting to over 500 independent candidates.

Mohamed explained that since registering a political party is a process and takes up time, many choose to run independently within their own districts.

“You may be popular within the district but may not have the luxury to run [for an election] in multiple districts. Then, you can contest as an independent group and run within a district,” Mohamed said, explaining that registered parties contested in more than one district.

On election day, when voters make their way to respective polling divisions, they will be presented with a ballot paper. They must first vote for a party or group of choice and then, additionally, mark preferential votes for upto three candidates from within the party of their choice.

For a clearer idea on how to vote, as well other matters you should bear in mind, like what identification documentation is accepted, or what new measures have been introduced as a result of concerns surrounding COVID-19, view this video we’ve created below.

This year’s voting process includes several more procedures in order to maintain health and safety standards as a precaution against COVID-19. Video Credits: Roar Media

After the polls close tomorrow (August 5) the ballot boxes will be kept under safe conditions overnight this year, as a result of COVID-19 concerns, before counting begins at 8 AM the next day (August 6). Usually, counting takes place on the night of the election.

On August 6, the EC will first begin to release the party results from the 160 polling divisions which make up the 22 electoral districts. This will tell us how each of the parties and independent groups are faring in each of the polling divisions.

Later, as counting progresses, the EC will begin to release party results from the districts, which will tell us which of the parties are taking the lead and how the others are faring. Following the formula highlighted below, the EC will also calculate how many of the available seats in each of the districts are won by each party.

Article 99(6)(a) of the Constitution mandates that only parties or groups that receive more than 1/20th of the total votes polled—in other words, over five percent of total votes—in any district will qualify to even be considered for a parliament seat. Therefore, every party or group that does not pass this five percent threshold is automatically disqualified, leaving only the parties or groups that have qualified in the fray.

Another thing to remember, is that Article 99(5) of the Constitution also mandates that whichever party receives the most votes for any particular district automatically secures one seat, commonly referred to as a ‘bonus seat’.

Here’s how the seats are apportioned.

Once the EC has announced how many seats had been won by each party based on the calculation above, it will announce which of the candidates received the most preferential votes in each of the districts. The candidate with the highest preferential vote will automatically receive the ‘bonus seat’, while the remainder of the seats will go to the candidates that amassed the most number of votes.

After the island-wide results—both party and candidates—are announced, each party will announce who will enter parliament through the 29 seats available on the National List.

The National List was first introduced as a method to enable professionals, academics, and experts in various fields to enter parliament without being disadvantaged by their lack of constituencies or networks.

For example, in 1994, then lawyer, the late Lakshman Kadirgamar entered politics for the first time through the National List and subsequently was appointed Foreign Minister. Similarly, in 2010 former MP Eran Wickramaratne too, left his banking career of nearly 30 years to enter politics through the National List.

“The National List doesn’t fall under a district but goes straight to Parliament,” Mohamed explained. While a party or independent group can nominate up to 29 members to the National List—although in many cases it is far less—how many National List nominees each political party or independent group is allowed to send to parliament is decided on the overall number of votes their party or independent group receives at the election.

Since those on the National List are not contesting, voters cannot indicate preference for who should enter parliament through the list—this is at the discretion of the party. But, while there has been praise for the National List in theory, in practice most parties simply elect the candidates that were rejected after contesting at district-level. Since in Sri Lanka, nominations for the National List are put forward in what is called an ‘open list’, which allows for parties or groups to change the names put forward even after the election, it facilitates the ‘backdoor entrance’ of those who fail to be elected to Parliament. This has called for reform of a method that was meant to draw those with professional and academic experience into parliament.

This parliamentary electoral process we have explained falls under an electoral system known as ‘Proportional Representation’ (PR). Sri Lanka previously used the First-Past-The-Post electoral system (FPP) which was less representative than the current PR system.

“But there is also criticism for the [current] PR system,” Mohamed said. “Earlier, if a candidate was contesting from, let’s say Moratuwa, under the FPP system the candidate only had to campaign within Moratuwa. Under PR, the candidate needs to campaign for the whole of Colombo. So now, the candidate has to pump in a lot more funds in an effort to secure more votes.”

There is also criticism that the PR system is more favourable to the larger political parties, as the five percent threshold to qualify for seats in parliament means that it is the parties with existing large networks that have a higher chance of qualifying.

The absence of sound campaign finance laws, in addition to these, means that changing the current electoral system alone is not going to solve the problem, Mohamed explained, adding, “but, we shouldn’t go back from the PR to a FPP system. We should always aim to keep moving to a more representative system. Several countries have also adopted their own ‘mixed’ electoral systems.”

General elections are just as important as Presidential elections. They determine which party will have the majority in the House, and has a bearing on some key decisions the legislature—that is the 225 members of parliament—may choose to make.

For this reason, voter awareness and citizen participation in politics and civic life are integral to a functioning democracy. As such, pondering the inner machinations of the general election is important as we move into the voting, counting, and soon, the appointing of a brand new parliament that will sit until its term expires in 2025. (Article 70(1) of the Constitution explains the occasions this does not apply).

We hope this article helped you understand the importance of voting at the election tomorrow, so you are truly able to make your vote count.

Cover: AFP.

Design and Editing: Jamie Alphonsus

Sri Lanka’s general election is just around the corner. However, the #COVID19 pandemic has made health and safety concerns foremost on people’s minds. Here’s how to vote under the new health guidelines.

As Sri Lanka continues to grapple with the COVID-19 pandemic that has overshadowed 2020, the recurring threat of dengue is still very prevalent. This mosquito-borne disease, which was first detected in Sri Lanka in the 1960s, continues to be a major public health issue—with high morbidity, high mortality and no approved vaccination in the country, it has and continues to be difficult to eradicate.

In May this year, health officials warned of a possible surge in cases with the onset of the south-west monsoon. With resources, energy, and attention focused on COVID-19, negligence about a virus that can breed in your backyard was highly likely. And as experts confirm, dengue numbers continue to be reported against the backdrop of COVID-19.

The novel coronavirus, COVID-19 caused consternation as it began to spread across the world: here was an airborne, unseen, untested and unfamiliar virus, to which there was no known solution. A vaccination for COVID-19 is yet to be developed, and cases and deaths continue, now more than six months after the virus was first detected in China.

Sri Lanka, which has been lauded for successfully managing the virus, responded quickly by appointing a national action committee and screening inbound passengers at airports and ports after the first patient was detected in January. It was only in March that the second case was discovered, giving way to over 2, 000 cases as of the end of June 2020.

But while the nation’s attention was focused on the ‘unseen’ enemy, a more familiar threat continued alongside. By the end of June, there were 22, 469 dengue cases recorded—over ten times more than the number of COVID-19 cases— and 26 deaths compared to the 11 attributed to the novel coronavirus.

More than half these—11,595 cases—were recorded in January, Dr Onali Rajapakshe, Acting Consultant and Community Physician of the National Dengue Control Unit, told Roar Media.

“There are certain factors that affect the spread of dengue, such as rainfall, temperature, and humidity,” Dr Rajapakshe said, explaining that the surge of cases in January was due to heavy rain in the latter part of last year, and the early part of this year. Dengue cases usually peak between June-August and at the end of the year, corresponding with the heavy rainfall brought in by the south-west and north-east monsoons.

There were some marked differences noted this year, however, Dr Rajapakshe said, explaining, “so far the total number of cases is just over 22,000. If you look at the other years for the same duration of time, this year is better.”

Dengue cases over each year between 2016-2020. Although the year began with a large number of dengue cases in January, the cases for the rest of the year were relatively low.

She said it was possible the curfew imposed as a result of COVID-19 may have helped mitigate the spread of the dengue: “People were restricted to their homes, and had time to clean up. Also, restricted travelling played a big part,” she said.

Urbanisation is also, typically, a major contributor to dengue: “Usually, when we see an increased number of patients in Colombo, we see an increase in other areas also. This is because temporary workers who come from other areas then travel back home,” Dr Rajapakshe pointed out. But the months-long COVID-19 curfew acted as a deterrent to that.

While dengue cases are distributed across the island, Colombo has reported the most with 3,105 confirmed cases (at the time of writing). This is a trend that has been observed over the past ten years, Dr Rajapakshe said.

“The risk [of dengue] is based on several factors such as population density, mosquito distribution, presence of potential breeding sites etc., and there is a higher risk in urban areas,” Dr Rajapakshe said.

The viral infection is transmitted through the bite of an infected Aedes aegypti or Aedes albopictus mosquito which usually bites two hours after sunrise and before sunset. While there is no human-to-human transmission, there is instead a human-to-mosquito-to-human transmission cycle, where an infected patient can infect an uninfected mosquito.

With mosquito life-cycles related to clearwater, she further emphasised the need to remove water collecting items and eradicate breeding grounds found in construction sites—an industry that is largely contributing to rising cases.

Dr Rajapakshe said that having acknowledged the difficulty with removing water from such large sites, the Registrar of Pesticides had granted approval to use licensed pesticides. She confirmed that the National Dengue Control Unit has and continues to work with this industry, on awareness and communication of appropriate control measures.

Most recently, the Unit, during their recent eradication programmes detected 22 percent of construction sites across the country as dengue breeding grounds and subsequently took legal action against these sites.

Over the years, the country has experienced a consistent trend of dengue cases, withDr Rajapakshe adding that usually, 30% of the cases were school and pre-school children.

Although a dengue vaccine ‘Dengvaxia’ has been put forward globally, with mixed results, it has not been approved by Sri Lankan authorities. As a result, the main focus is on prevention, by limiting opportunities for mosquitoes to breed and taking measures to avoid being bitten.

“The main challenge is getting the public to act on this,” Dr Rajapakshe said. “We have to clean and keep our environment free of breeding grounds. This does not mean only in our houses, but also institutions, construction sites, religious places, public places.”

The Unit has continued to undertake its prevention and control efforts and currently monitors the ‘DengueFreeChildApp’, developed in collaboration with several stakeholders. Through this app teachers and parents can report a confirmed or suspected case of dengue, so that necessary action can be taken and infection-prone areas identified.

The Unit is also working with the World Mosquito Program on the ‘Wolbachia Project’ which uses the ‘Wolbachia bacteria’ to inhibit the spread of dengue among mosquitos, and is being trialled in certain areas in Sri Lanka. This method, first implemented in Australia—where no transmissions have been recorded in eight years—has been set up in 12 other countries.

“But we need help from the public as we cannot solve this issue by ourselves,” Dr Rajapakshe said. She highlighted the need to remove breeding places and maintain efficient waste disposal. With regards to children she said that precautions must be taken when allowing children to play outside, applying repellents or covering their bodies to minimise mosquito bites.

“Also, during the lockdown people were at home and regular clean-ups at institutions and other places would not have been taking place. It is important when going back, especially schools, to undertake clean-up programmes before the students return,” she said.

While there is no significant spike in dengue cases this year, it bears reminding this deadly virus exists and must be battled alongside COVID-19.

Efficient and accurate diagnosis of dengue is of primary importance, and early detection is key. But Dr Rajapakshe said that as fever is a symptom common to both dengue and COVID-19, it was possible that some may have been reluctant to seek healthcare during the curfew. There was also the fear that one may contract COVID-19 during a visit to the hospital—however, she said, appropriate precautionary measures have been adopted in hospitals so there was no need for the public to be afraid of seeking treatment.

With the current monsoon and the usual trend of dengue numbers rising during July and August, it is possible that the cases will rise during the upcoming months. But, Chief Epidemiologist Dr Sudath Samaraweera told Roar Media, “just because there is one disease, does not mean we will not focus on the others. We will work parallelly to address all of the problems.”

Note -

A clinical-dengue like illness has been recorded in Sri Lanka from the early 20th century, but was serologically confirmed in 1962.

All data was collected and updated as at 14 June 2020.

Cover: Roar Media/Jamie Alphonsus

Roar Media prides itself on producing original, refreshing, and thought provoking content which aims to capture the vibrancy of the South Asian region.

The Light Rail Transit (LRT) project was expected to revolutionise Sri Lanka’s transportation system, but what is its current status?

Sri Lanka has reported over 20 deaths and 22,942 cases due to dengue in the period between January and June 2020, Chief Epidemiologist Dr Sudath Samaraweera confirmed to Roar Media.

“As of last week, dengue fatalities stand at 26,” he said.

This comes even as Sri Lanka battles to contain and prevent the deadly pandemic COVID-19, which has claimed 11 lives and affected 2,511 people thus far this year.

Dr Samaraweera assured however, that the country was able to focus its efforts on both the diseases.

“Just because there is one disease, doesn't mean we will not focus on the others,” he said. “We will work parallelly to address all of the problems.”

Despite recording more than 22,000 cases in the first six months of this year, the numbers are less than in the corresponding period in the previous years, Onali Rajapakshe, Acting Consultant and Community Physician of the National Dengue Control Unit told Roar Media.

She said this could be due to a number of reasons, including the fact that the lockdown of the country due to COVID-19 helped prevent the spread of the disease.

Dengue, described by the World Health Organisation (WHO) as a ‘fast emerging pandemic-prone viral disease’, has been prevalent in Sri Lanka since the 1960s.

Nation-wide prevention and education programmes coupled with legal ramifications for negligence have been able to contain and control to some extent the extreme consequences of the disease.

But the National Dengue Control Unit has emphasised the need for continued public support and action to prevent any further negative impact of the mosquito-borne disease.

With COVID-19 curfew finally lifted, the once deserted streets of Colombo are brimming with life again. The cacophony of the crowds in public spaces is only rivalled by the blare of bus horns and the tooting of tuks. It is clear, people are glad to be out and about, despite lingering health concerns.

Roar decided that the awakening of a city from its months-long slumber and the shedding of its mantle of silence was a good time to take a camera out to the streets for some candid captures.

In Pettah, we met Idris\*, who stood on the street to sell mothballs. Idris used to sell spectacles, but the combination of a loan to pay and mounting living expenses has forced him to take up anything, just to make ends meet. He is yet to resume his usual work.

A sarong seller sat on the sidewalk, waiting for customers. The day began early for him, but has been slow so far, he told us. There is not a lot of business these days.

Here, in one of Colombo’s typically busy neighbourhoods, public taps have been placed at strategic points—a reminder to all to be hygienic and safe.

Crowds walked past us, some rushing to their destination, others ambling slowly by - all now sporting face masks, some ordinary, others with a creative twist of their own.

In Colombo Fort, we spotted a rare sight: Sri Lanka’s Mounted Police trotting past on thoroughbreds.

Even traffic has picked up on the Colombo roads—although nowhere near the bumper to bumper levels accustomed to before the city was shut down.

A little further up at the Galle Face Green, joggers and brisk walkers have come out for their evening exercise.

Kite-sellers, toy vendors and food trucks have returned to their familiar haunt, and families with raucous children in tow have reemerged to unfurl bright kites in tangible excitement and enjoy the sea breeze at this ocean-side park.

As the sun began to dip, it seemed the crowds were reluctant to leave. They lingered on, savouring the outdoors that had been inaccessible for so long.

Back in Pettah, vendors rushed to make a few more sales before being enveloped in darkness.

A street food vendor dropped ulundhu vadai and bajji into sizzling oil, one after the other. The vadai, a popular crispy dough-like snack, and bajji—mouth-watering ash plantains and chillies tossed in gram flour and deep-fried.

He told us that while a few regulars have returned, they did not make up for the stream of customers he was accustomed to before the lockdown.

Achcharu sellers now cover their pickled wares with large polythene sheets and those selling drinks now use plastic caps on their drinks in this COVID-19 era.

But, even as people out and about indulged in street food, some of the clothing stores languish empty—bereft of customers and adequate sales.

Now that people are allowed out, most have gone back to familiar routines—sometimes even eschewing social distance for comfort, company, and earning.

But COVID-19 has left its imprint: the streets emptied out much faster, as many chose to call it an early night in the safe confines of their homes.

\*Names have been changed

Across the largest Gulf State, more than hundreds of Sri Lankan workers wait in hope to return home. It has been over three months since the World Health Organization (WHO) declared a COVID-19 pandemic, but none of the stranded workers in Saudi Arabia have yet been repatriated.

Malini\* (45) has worked in a number of countries in the Middle East for around 20 years. Now in Saudi, she is employed as a housemaid and undertakes the cooking, cleaning and general upkeep of a large family.

She was recently diagnosed with a cyst in her womb, for which she must soon undergo surgery. “It’s been difficult as I bleed occasionally, and some days are worse than others,” she told Roar Media.

Widowed for 13 years now, her three children want her back during the crisis. She, too, longs to be home with them, preferring also to have her surgery in Sri Lanka, with her family around her.

But she has not been able to return home. “My employer got me the number to the Sri Lankan Embassy in Saudi and I called to explain my situation,” she said. “But when I spoke to a representative I was told that if I had been able to bear the pain the last few months, why can’t I just bear it for longer?”

Sri Lanka first began repatriating citizens in March, with a particular focus on students, facilitating flights from countries like India, the United Kingdom, and Australia.

Secretary to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Ravinatha Aryasinha said in April over 27,000 Sri Lankans overseas—including 17,000 migrant workers—had expressed a desire to return home, but focus would be on repatriating students and those on government training, considering the ‘particular vulnerability they faced from a medical perspective’.

However, with increasing pleas from migrant workers stuck in the Middle East, repatriation also began for those in Qatar and Kuwait. A public outcry over pregnant mothers stuck in Dubai led to a special flight on June 18 which repatriated 290 Sri Lankans, including 120 pregnant mothers.

But as each repatriation flight brought in more and more infected cases—flights in May led to a fifth and ongoing patient cluster—fear that healthcare resources could be overburdened has led to authorities delaying some repatriation flights, leaving many migrant workers stranded.

Shehan\* (29) is an engineer who has been working in Saudi Arabia for five years now. Planning to join a new organisation, he informed his employers that he would leave in early March. However, the pandemic hit, borders closed and all hope of travel gradually ceased, not a few days after he handed in his resignation.

Earlier, in December, his wife had travelled back to Sri Lanka to spend the initial months of her pregnancy with family to support her. He had intended to join her in March, until they could both leave again for Dubai, where the new job awaited him. But he could no longer do so.

“I never thought I would be stranded in Saudi with no income for months on end,” Shehan told Roar Media. “This is a special time for us, it is also a complicated pregnancy, and I wanted to be there for my wife.”

When Shehan contacted the Sri Lankan Embassy in Saudi he was advised to immediately ask the organisation he was still attached to, not to process his final exit visa, because if they did and he had not left the country within 60 days he would be compelled to make a penalty fee.

“This could [have] even affected future attempts to come back to the country,” he said. “In my case, I was precautioned by the Embassy and my company agreed to hold back. But this was not so for everyone, and many who are stuck here are running out of their buffer time.”

“There are roughly 135,000 Sri Lankans in Saudi right now, with around 128,000 making up the working population,” Madhuka Wickramarachchi, Charge d'Affaires at the Sri Lankan Embassy in Saudi Arabia told Roar Media.

Wickramarachchi said six Sri Lankans had fallen victim to COVID-19 in Saudi, “But, they were all above 60 years of age, and had other underlying health issues,” he added. According to him, 30 Sri Lankans in Saudi had been infected by the virus, of which 20 had already recovered, and 10 are still in hospital.

In June, the Sri Lanka Bureau for Foreign Employment (SLBFE) reported that 23 Sri Lankan expatriates had died of COVID-19 in the Middle East, from mid-March to date, including in Saudi.

Sri Lankan workers have had a long-standing relationship with the Middle East having travelled for work from the 1970s. Since then, the Government has continued to encourage migration, especially of domestic workers, this considered at the time a strategy towards solving severe unemployment and alleviating poverty. Their remittances are still the largest contributor to foreign earnings in Sri Lanka today.

In 2019, foreign worker earnings brought in 6.7 billion USD, and according to think tank Verité Research more than 75 percent of migrant workers are in the Middle East.

“In Saudi, the majority of workers are domestic workers, which includes housemaids, drivers, gardeners, and helpers,” Wickramarachchi said.

Saudi Arabia recorded its first case on March 2 and set in place curfew hours and subsequent lockdowns in certain areas by March 23. Two months later, in late-May, the country began to ease its lockdown. It is, however, currently battling a second-wave of COVID-19 infections, as coronavirus cases hover between 3,000-4,000 daily. Considered one of the hardest-hit Arab countries, Saudi had surpassed 180,000 confirmed cases and 1,551 deaths, at the time of writing.

The country’s large landmass had made it more difficult to reach out to Sri Lankans residing there, Wickramarachchi explained. However, he added that the Embassy had worked hard to get in contact with, and aid as many Sri Lankans as they could by setting up a hotline, distributing rations and sending tokens to workers in more remote areas through WhatsApp, which would enable them to obtain basic necessities.

The Sri Lankan Government announced that it has sent Rs. 42.6 million to Sri Lankan Missions in the Middle East and elsewhere, for basic rations, medicines and safety equipment. While, Wickramarachchi confirmed that the Embassy in Saudi received around Rs. 1.075 million from government sources.

One other major challenge the Embassy is dealing with is facilitating Polymerase Chain Reaction (PCR) tests for workers before they leave, which would incur quite a cost. According to Wickramarachchi the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has set up free testing for nationals and residents. But, it is still prioritised for those with symptoms, leaving many without recourse. He added, however, that Sri Lanka authorities are in negotiations with the Saudi government to conduct at least 1,000 tests for workers.

“We keep hearing about flights from other countries and people going back, while we have heard nothing definitive over the past months,” Shehan said.

In desperation, a group of stranded Sri Lankans had earlier emailed the Sri Lankan Ambassador in Saudi Arabia, giving details of those already on exit visa status and confirming the fact that these workers are willing to pay for their tickets and for quarantine centre facilities. But, they are yet to receive any response.

For both Shehan and Malini, the hardest part has been months of waiting and not knowing. Shehan in his apartment alone, Malini at her employer’s house, one of the many foreign domestic help.

“This has been the most difficult time in my life,” Shehan said. “In addition to money, I have struggled mentally during this time, and I’m feeling so depressed. But I know people who have it worse, who cannot even afford to have three meals,” he said.

A video posted to Facebook on June 6 showed five Sri Lankan workers stranded in what was described as a 10 x 10 room in Saudi Arabia. These workers were not in possession of masks or gloves, had no work, were struggling to find food and were begging to be repatriated.

In the video, the workers talked about the harsh conditions they were dealing with, having to bathe using a bidet in the one bathroom. They also claimed they had not received any rations and could not contact the Embassy—“they just cut our calls,” one of them said.

Video posted on Facebook on June 6 shows Sri Lankan workers stuck in Saudi Arabia telling their story.

Workers in the Middle East fall under the kafala system of sponsorship-based employment, recognised as highly exploitative. There is a long, documented history of discrimination, abuse and even death at the hands of the Saudi government or employers.

Wickramarachchi explained that while it was the United Arab Emirates (UAE) that had the most number of migrant workers from Sri Lanka, followed by Qatar and Kuwait, and then Saudi, “the decision to repatriate citizens lies with the Sri Lankan government”.

He further added that while there are plans for a repatriation flight that could accommodate 290 people in July, there has been no official confirmation of this. At this juncture, the Embassy is only gathering information on the people who may want to leave.

Shehan has received a call asking for personal information and telling him what the flight will cost, but Malini has not been communicated with, at all.

“I am not here because I like it,” Malini said. “We have suffered and struggled and come here, and I have nine people depending on my salary. I am still in a foreign country, and isn’t the Embassy supposed to be our representative? Why isn’t anyone doing anything?”

\*—Names changed to protect identity

Cover: Migrant workers in Dubai stand in line to travel to work during the COVID-19 pandemic (April, 2020). Photo Credits: AFP

On January 27, 2020, the first case of COVID-19 was reported in Sri Lanka. By that time, the virus, which is believed to have had its origins at a wet market in Wuhan, China at the end of 2019, had already begun to spread to other countries—but there seemed very little to be overly concerned about: Just days before, the government had installed thermal scanners at the main international airport and the Epidemiology Unit of the Ministry of Health had warned vulnerable populations and the public of general precautions. A 22-member National Action Committee to combat COVID-19 had also been formed and the patient, who was moved to the National Institute of Infectious Diseases Hospital (IDH), made a full recovery and was discharged with much fanfare after close to a month of treatment and monitoring. Sri Lanka had successfully managed its first encounter with a deadly viral infection.

It was over a month later that the first local COVID-19 case was detected, followed closely by four more cases. Sri Lanka is now in its sixth month of COVID-19, and despite having emerged from almost two months of curfew during which all public activity was completely curtailed, new cases are still being reported.

For the purpose of visualisation, Roar Media has mapped out the last five months (January-May 2020) of the COVID-19 pandemic in Sri Lanka. The illustrations and graphs draw a clear picture of how Sri Lanka reacted to a global crisis. From the origins of the outbreak and first local transmission to the lockdown and ongoing cluster identification—this is a visual depiction of the data.

The cluster of pneumonia of unknown etiology was first reported from Wuhan, in the Hubei province of China on December 31, 2019. Within the span of four days, over 40 people were infected—an early sign of the virality of the infection.

The first case of COVID-19 outside of China was reported in Thailand on January 13, 2020, when a tourist from Wuhan tested positive there. Cases were subsequently reported in Japan, South Korea, the United States, Taiwan and Nepal until it reached Sri Lanka—the 12th country to report a COVID-19 case globally.

January And February

Sri Lanka’s first patient, identified on January 27, was a 44-year-old Chinese tourist from the Hubei province, who had arrived with a group of other travellers.

By early February, Sri Lanka was in negotiations with Chinese authorities to repatriate local students stranded there as a result of a lockdown imposed on Wuhan and other cities in the Hubei province. The students were moved to the Diyatalawa Army Camp, where they underwent two weeks' quarantine before being allowed back home. On February 19, the Chinese patient made a full recovery and was discharged from hospital.

The first local case was reported on March 11. This patient, a 52-year-old tour guide, is believed to have contracted the virus from a group of tourists from Italy, to where the viral infection had by then spread to all regions.

Authorities immediately began contact tracing, rounding up close to 50 people and instructing them to self-quarantine. Within days the second, third, fourth, fifth, and sixth cases were recorded—all of them contacts of the tour guide—marking the first cluster of patients in Sri Lanka.

By this time, the government significantly changed its strategy in combating COVID-19, ordering all locals returning from abroad quarantined and partially closing down the main airport on March 18. Until then, it had only been foreign returnees from the three countries identified as high-risk countries at the time, Italy, Iran, and South Korea that were quarantined.

Schools that were due to be closed for April holidays were closed early on March 13, and what began as a ‘holiday’ for non-essential businesses from March 17 -19 eventually led to a strict island-wide curfew on March 20, in which all travel was strictly prohibited and those violating arrested.

On March 23, the first local patient—the tour guide, made a full recovery and was discharged from hospital. The first casualties from the virus were also reported this month, on March 28 and 30. On March 31, 21 new cases marked a peak in numbers for that month.

Sri Lanka started this month with the third COVID-19 death: on April 1, a 72-year-old from Maradana died while receiving treatment at the IDH hospital. Four more deaths were reported that month, making April the month with most fatalities in the country.

The second major patient cluster emerged in Suduwella, Ja-Ela where a group of six who had been in contact with a COVID-19 patient, disregarded instructions to self-quarantine and acted as vectors for the viral infection. The group was arrested and moved to a quarantine facility, but by then the damage had already been done: the cluster expanded that month, and the area had to be isolated.

As a result of the Suduwella cluster, a third major cluster emerged, when a sailor who was deployed to round up those evading quarantine in Suduwella, Jaela, contracted the virus. The Welisara Navy Camp was isolated on April 23, as a result, and cases from the Navy continue to be reported. The Navy cluster is currently the largest patient cluster in Sri Lanka with over 200 personnel and 50 others who were in close contact with those infected counting among those affected.

It was also during April, that the fourth major COVID-19 cluster was detected among the residents of Bandaranayake Mawatha, Colombo 12. An asymptomatic patient who had returned from India had violated curfew regulations, and moved freely about the neighbourhood, as a result of which over 300 residents were moved into quarantine centres that month (this eventually increased to over a 1,000 the following month).

On May 11, after close to two months of complete curfew, the government gradually eased up on restrictions in order to restart the economy. The public allowed to return to work, under specific guidelines and restrictions, but despite the caution, cases continued to be reported. On May 4, 5 and 25 three more people died as a result of COVID-19, bringing total deaths from the viral infection to 10. However, by this time, Sri Lanka had also successfully negated community transmission and all-new cases—with the exception of one at the latter end of May—were being reported from within quarantine camps.

The country also saw the emergence of another major cluster in May. Many of the Sri Lankans returning on repatriation flights from other countries began to test positive while in quarantine at the 44 temporary quarantine camps set up at various facilities across the island. This month has recorded the highest numbers of cases thus far—137 on May 26, and 150 on May 27. (At present, 412 of the 467 returnees from Kuwait alone have tested positive for the virus).

On May 28, over 200 Navy personnel were also quarantined after a group of sailors occupying the Gafoor building in Colombo tested positive. These were absorbed into the larger Navy cluster that began in April. It is these two clusters—the foreign returnees and the Navy cluster that are still active in the country.

The graph above depicts daily cases, recoveries and deaths; numbers that fluctuated in the first five months of the pandemic. The significant spikes in daily cases (in red) represent five major ‘patient clusters’—while authorities reported 31 clusters between January and May, Dr Samitha Ginige of the Epidemiology Unit told Roar Media, “although Police have identified 31 clusters, the health authorities have recognised only five major clusters.”

The steady rise in cases that peak on March 17 represents patients from the first cluster—the ‘Italian cluster’. The minor spike on April 14 is the cluster from Suduwella, Ja-Ela, which is linked to the Navy cluster which emerged on April 27. The Bandaranayake Mawatha cluster is represented on April 20. May has two major spikes on May 26 and 27, when the repatriated returnee cluster was identified.

The graph also represents Sri Lanka’s total death count, which as of May 31 stood at 10.

Here, the red line indicates active cases from January to May 2020, which continues to grow. However, recoveries—which follows a little slower, is also rising. By the end of May, active cases and recoveries ‘meet’, which indicates a levelling of the COVID-19 cases in the country—the numbers of those recovering is gradually increasing and will potentially, as the number of active cases decreases, overtake the number of active cases.

When compared to many countries in the world, and despite some delayed decisions, pushback and controversy, Sri Lanka has fared remarkably well in managing COVID-19. However, the success of the first five months of the year should not be a reason for complacency. Any negligence on the hands of the authorities or the public could lead to a second wave. The threat from COVID-19 is still very real and will be present for as long as it takes to develop a vaccine for it. This should not be forgotten.

All data was primarily sourced from the Epidemiology Unit of the Ministry of Health. Auxiliary data was obtained from and the Health Promotion Bureau.

The cumulative number of COVID-19 cases include all cases reported from January to June. Each graph is an independent depiction of COVID-19 cases during the relevant month. The graphs cannot be compared side by side. Instead, a summary of daily cases (from January to May) has been included.

Sri Lanka’s confirmed cases are recorded as confirmed following a Polymerase Chain Reaction (PCR) test. The daily cases include both symptomatic and asymptomatic cases.

The cases, recoveries, and deaths are recorded as reported on the relevant date by the Ministry of Health.

Cover: Roar Media/ Jamie Alphonsus

Roar Media prides itself on producing original, refreshing, and thought provoking content which aims to capture the vibrancy of the South Asian region.

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Donation Nation is a community service initiative that is seeking your kind contributions to provide relief packs of dry rations to low-income families of Sammanthranapura, Colombo 15. Click on the link for more information: https://webxpay.com/index.php?route=checkout/quick&id=VTB0N1hvZ21aNnp6VHNhNHE2N3FESVAydzU4UjFYYS8=

During most crises, the effects felt are uneven. The repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic have been twofold; a direct result of the crisis as well as the state's response to it. While the lockdown has been a measure implemented to mitigate the threat of COVID-19, it has produced unintended consequences and circumstances that are yet to be addressed.

In Sri Lanka, the efforts to control the spread of the viral disease, implemented since March, have challenged the livelihoods and lives of several vulnerable groups. It has already created casualties of an extended curfew period for whom ‘staying at home’ can mean unbearable pangs of hunger or abuse behind a closed door. The casualties are not just economical but also physical, social, and emotional.

At Roar Media, these stories have been—and continue to be—shared and recounted on our social media. Here we compile and curate, providing a brief snapshot into the lives of many.

Gamini Indralal (55) drives a garbage truck for the Kotte Municipal Council. “We are essential workers, so we have to work during curfew too,” he said, washing his hands with a bar of soap which he now carries around, after the COVID-19 outbreak.

Equipped with the mandatory face mask and gloves, Indralal and his fellow workers are on duty, working their respective garbage collecting routes. “Our salaries are paid. The cleaners are also showing up for work,” he said.

“When the lockdown was announced, I could have gone home to Kurunegala where my family lives,” Indralal said. “But I chose not to. It’s better to stay in Colombo. We get food and a bed to sleep in. And I send money to my family. It’s not so bad.”

“Most families who employ domestic workers do so to help them with their own workload. Now, with everyone home, and finances uncertain, be it middle-class or lower-middle-class, the need for a domestic worker is less,” Menaha Kandasamy, founder of the Domestic Workers’ Union (DWU) told Roar Media.

After curfew was imposed, domestic workers could not travel to work, and many who reside at their employers’ houses were asked to return to their hometowns.

“No money means no food,” explained part-time domestic worker and President of the DWU, Sarasgopal Satyavani. “Even if they [food lorries] bring food to our area, everyone struggles to purchase something,” she said.

Domestic work in Sri Lanka is severely unrecognised and excluded from several labour laws. Although the union has been lobbying for laws that benefit the workers, Kandasamy fears that in the light of this crisis, the process will be delayed further. “The workers face not only short-term but also long-term consequences,” she added.

“In a situation where our employers themselves are struggling to keep their jobs, I do not know what kind of work will be there for domestic workers in the future,” Satyavani said.

The National Child Protection Authority (NCPA) has observed a rise in reports of child cruelty, following the COVID-19 lockdown.

“During this time that curfew has been in place, the NCPA’s 1929 hotline has recorded 352 complaints,” Professor Muditha Vidanapathirana, Chairman of the NCPA told Roar Media. Out of this, 152 complaints are of cruelty, where children are victims of physical and psychological trauma at their own homes.

While previously, complaints of abuse were not always restricted to domestic environments, reports during lockdown are different.

“Before the curfew, the NCPA received roughly 40 complaints a day, out of which four of them were cases of cruelty against children. What happened during the curfew month (17 March - 17 April) was a significant increase in that. We noticed that cruelty cases went up to six cases, out of the 10 complaints we received every day,” he noted.

Just during this period, the percentage of child cruelty cases reported to the NCPA have increased from 10 to 60 percent. It is likely that many more go unheard.

Shihan Fareed (47) is known to many as ‘Thilas’ in his village. Usually, he wakes up early in the morning to take his children to school, before starting his work driving his three-wheeler.

“Sometimes I get hires soon after, but at other times I have to wait for a while. Depending on the day, I can earn between Rs. 2,000-2,500 on average,” he said. “Sometimes more, sometimes less.”

These days, Thilas has no income due to the lockdown in place. He lives with his wife, four children, and mother. His oldest daughter’s husband (currently a trainee at the post-office, earning a small stipend) and child also make up the entire household. As the sole breadwinner, he has had to depend on donations and help from neighbours, friends, and relatives.

“We all live in the same village, and consider ourselves one and the same,” he said.

Sarath\* (62) is a labourer attached to the Kotte Municipal Council. He was paid his last salary by his employer, but other benefits and overtime payments had been cut off. “The first week of curfew was really difficult. We were supposed to receive aid from the naghara sabha (municipal council) but we didn’t,” he said.

As an essential worker attached to the Municipal Council, nowadays he occasionally gets called into work, without any remuneration. He also used to clean houses regularly in order to earn some extra money. After the lockdown, however, this too has come to a halt.

Sarath and his wife live in Bandaranaikepura, Rajagiriya. Their son, Malith\*, told Roar Media that it was impossible for his parents to buy anything even when the food lorries started coming in. “Whenever the lorries came it would only go to some houses. By the time it reached us, everything was over,” he said.

However, things changed over the next few weeks, and goods were made available to everyone.

“Right now it’s manageable,” Malith said.“But what happens when we run out of money? How are we going to buy anything from the lorries? There are so many families in Bandaranaikepura who are already facing this situation. If the lockdown continues, what is going to happen when my family has no money to buy anything?”

Nimali Jayawardana (83) receives two pensions, both of which belonged to her late husband. One is for his service as an officer in the Sri Lanka Army. The second, for his work at the United Nations office in Sri Lanka.

“On a normal day, amma would receive her first payment to the post office and the other one would be deposited to her bank straight away,” Jayawardana’s daughter, Crishanthi told Roar Media. “This time, it was different.”

Due to the lockdown in place, the Sri Lankan government implemented a strategy to hand-deliver the payments to retirees and their families via postal officers on 2 and 3 April. “Amma received that payment, from which we purchased her medicine. But it was not enough and she has a doctor’s appointment coming up soon. We were hoping to receive the other pension allowance as well, but we don’t think it will arrive anytime soon,” she said.

“The first few days of curfew were really difficult,” Mala\* (27), a factory worker at the Katunayake Export Processing Zone, told Roar Media. “I kept wondering if the food we have in our room was enough, but I was grateful that we had water to drink,” she said.

When curfew was first imposed, among the many stranded away from their hometowns were workers employed at garment factories, living in boarding houses within EPZs.

A week after, transport was provided for these workers who wished to travel back home. Some chose to stay behind and since then, have returned to work amidst the lockdown.

Currently, a few factories have reopened, after adopting new safety measures against the COVID-19 crisis. Mala is waiting to hear back from her company so that she can go back to work. “I was paid for March and April, but was told that May depends on my willingness to come into work,” she said.

However, not all workers have continued to receive a salary. They wonder about the months to come, as they form an integral part of the country’s apparel sector—estimated to be one of the hardest hit in the current economy. Tap the link in our bio to learn more about the uncertain wage of factory workers, in Sri Lanka.

Ever since the COVID-19 curfew was imposed, non-profit organisation Women In Need (WIN) has observed an increase in domestic violence reports. With over 450 calls and an increase in new callers, 75 percent of calls received are from victims of domestic abuse.

“Domestic violence is not a new issue. But, where there is a curfew, with financial and social pressures, children at home, and no travel—it is worse when you are locked in with an abuser,” Project and Legal Manager of WIN, Mariam Wadood told Roar Media.

In addition to counselling services, WIN works with the Police to intervene and when possible, transport victims to three shelters in Matara, Batticaloa, and Colombo. However, the organisation faces challenges of its own; with travel restrictions, limited number of shelters, and a law enforcement directed at tackling the COVID-19 crisis. In addition to reports of domestic abuse, the organisation receives calls asking for rations, general assistance, legal advice, custody-related queries and reports of cyber harassment.

Wadood pointed to how stereotyped roles of men and women play a large role in the rising trend of domestic feuds and violence. “There are expectations of each gender, for example, the women must cook and clean, and these roles are not flexible,” she said.

She also noted that at a time where violence against women is exacerbated, the availability of only an ad-hoc system to support victims of abuse becomes more pronounced.

Ramanathan (50) is from Kandy, but owns and manages his own cut-piece textile shop located on Negombo Road. It is his main source of income to support his family who lives back in Kandy.

He used to visit them occasionally whenever he could catch a break. But ever since the COVID-19 curfew began, he has not been able to travel home and has been confined to his shop. It was during this time that he decided to start stitching masks and gloves using the material he had stored at the shop. His son too has been assisting him, and with the shop closed for sale, he thought this could generate an income for the both of them to survive on.

Ramanathan also felt that by selling these items at a reasonable price where there is a demand for it, he would be providing a service to the community. With permission obtained from the Police, he managed to set up his three-wheeler to sell his products to the public.

People travelling along the Negombo Road stop by to buy these masks and gloves from him. He also sells braided ropes which are used to hold down goods when transporting. According to Ramanathan even the little money he makes out of this, he is unable to send to his family due to his banking limitations. He has registered with the Police with the hopes that they will soon allow him to travel to see his family.

Report by Nazly Ahmed

For some citizens in Beruwala, water comes in short supply for half a year. “During the sunny season we don’t receive water,” resident Sharmila\* (19) told Roar Media. Even though Sharmila is currently in Colombo, she communicates regularly with her family who has been struggling to receive water.

During the drought season, some houses in the neighbourhood open their private wells for others to use. However, after the COVID-19 pandemic, most neighbours have stopped allowing others to come into their homes. “They tell us that we might bring in the virus,” she said.

Usually, the community works together to arrange a water tank at a specific location for everyone to use. “When this happens, we can get around 10 litres of water to our houses by paying a three-wheeler to bring it for around Rs. 200-250. Alternatively, we can walk and go, though this takes around two hours or more,” she told Roar Media.

“After the curfew was imposed, some members of the community began working together to distribute four litres to each house. But we are expected to make this last for four days,” she said.

The majority of Sharmila’s neighbours are daily wage earners. “Initially they did not receive essential food items and most ate half a jackfruit for each meal in order to survive,” she said. “Now things have improved with some receiving rations, though not all. The main issue is securing a steady flow of water, which remains unresolved.”

On 17 April, nearly 300 homeless individuals in Gunasinghepura, Pettah were taken to quarantine centres outside Colombo, after fears of COVID-19 spread through the area. The programme led by the Police and public health officials saw the group of homeless being disinfected and washed before being transported to the centres. New clothes and food were also distributed among the 300 men and women, who usually engage in begging.

Many of them later tested positive for COVID-19. Those who had contracted the disease were immediately sent in for treatment. The others, after completing the quarantine period, faced the conundrum of having no home to return to.

“I received a call from the Department of Social Services of the Western Province asking if we would be willing to take in a group of homeless elders who were quarantined in Mullaitivu,” Sanath Munasinghe, founder of Shelter4Homeless—a privately funded shelter for homeless senior citizen—told Roar Media.

“They were begging on the streets when they were taken to quarantine. And now they have no home to return to. Our institution agreed to take 10 of them, provided the state fulfilled some requests,” he said.

According to Munasinghe, since the COVID-19 lockdown, private run homeless shelters have faced complications due to diminishing stocks and the inability to transport or properly care for their residents. “We have 17 homeless elders under our care at the moment (without the group from Gunasinghepura) and we mostly work with private donations,” he said. “If one of the residents had fallen ill, we would not have been able to take them to the hospital because of the curfew. Apart from that, there has been little to no help from the Social Service Department until now.”

Munasinghe noted that the Department has agreed to support the shelter whenever residents require medical attention. Similarly, the Department would also be responsible for arranging funeral arrangements at the cost of the state, in the case of a death.

“During the COVID-19 crisis, restrictions were placed prohibiting visitors, and inmates were not allowed to receive additional necessities such as soap, clothing, sanitary napkins, etc.,” President of the Committee to Protect the Rights of Prisoners, Senaka Perera told Roar Media.

On 21 March, a riot at the Anuradhapura prison resulted in the death of two inmates while six were injured. Reports have been mixed; some claiming the prisoners were protesting visitor restrictions and others stating that tensions were due to suspicion an inmate had tested positive for COVID-19.

Overcrowding in Sri Lankan prisons is not a new issue. 2018 Prison Department Statistics reportedly\* estimated overpopulation at a whopping 73.3 percent — a large number of these pre-trial detainees.

In March, activists called for eligible prisoners — arrested for minor crimes or those awaiting trial — to be released on bail. They also asked for particularly vulnerable prisoners, like women with children, the elderly and the sick to be released on bail.

Assessing the situation, the government released over 2,900 prisoners on 5 April on bail.

“The prisoners receive their basic needs,” Perera said. He said, however, that the current crisis had prevented them from receiving small but important benefits and exacerbated existing structural issues within prisons and the criminal justice process.

There are 374 child care institutions in Sri Lanka, managed by the provincial commissioners of the Department of Probation and Child Care Services (DPCCS).

“Approximately 12,000 children live in these institutions,” DPCCS National Commissioner Chandima Sigera told Roar Media.

“Among the many problems the department had to deal with was the lack of food and essential goods after the lockdown,” she said, explaining that some department officers were unable to procure curfew passes to travel between districts for their work.

“But whenever these matters came up, we worked together and resolved them,” she said.

The Department also received reports of various charity frauds committed by unscrupulous individuals wanting to make money off this situation. The fraudsters would collect public monies under the pretext of helping the child care institutions—without the knowledge or sanction of the DPCCS.

“We ask the public that while donating to children is a valued effort it would be best to verify beforehand,” she said. “There are so many scams like this out there, where people ask for money to be donated to orphanages, but the child care homes never receive them.”

These frauds are under Police investigation.

Farmers, bee-keepers, kithul planters — these are just some of the people affected greatly by the curfew that was imposed as a result of COVID-19.

A group of young greenhouse farmers from Welimada, Uva Paranagama, Bandarawela, and Hali-Ela said the curfew had prevented them from selling their produce.

The farmers are part of a Department of Agriculture-led programme that provides concessionary loans to build greenhouses and cultivate tomato, cucumber, and bell peppers.

“Before the COVID-19 crisis, a kilo of tomato was sold at Rs. 130-140, a kilo of cucumber at Rs. 200 and a kilo of bell pepper at Rs. 850,” Gunadasa, a field officer overseeing a number of the farming projects in the Uva Province told Roar Media.

“But during the lockdown, we couldn’t even sell a kilo of bell pepper for Rs. 30. No one bought the harvest.”

He explained that 100 farmers are participants of the programme, of which 59 had received loans and 35 had used it to cultivate their first season when the curfew came into effect.

Although agriculture was not prohibited during curfew, the farmers found it difficult to sell their crop to the local market.

“Our farmers faced a desperate situation,” Gunadasa said, explaining that these crops were typically sold to a different clientele at supermarkets.

With wholesale marketplaces in central areas and other economic centres scattered across the country temporarily shut down, farmers began selling their produce on the roadsides.

In April, the government intervened and purchased over 700 metric tonnes of vegetables sold by roadside vendors.

L. K. Priyantha (49), is the Managing Director of Lanka Eco-Products, and oversees 500 kithul treacle producers, 350 mushroom farmers, and 300 beekeepers — all of whom, he said, were unable to sell their produce during the curfew.

“Our main clientele were cake-makers, wedding receptions, and hotels. But now with everything being cancelled our sales have dropped immensely,” Priyantha told Roar.

“We had to resort to new ways to deal with the situation such as implementing a mobile unit that would go around selling the produce.”

“Even after the curfew, we still face trouble selling our products because people only buy what is necessary,” he explained further.

Mohamed Faris is a building contractor who lives in Panadura. He usually undertakes contracts from his hometown as well in areas nearby such as Dehiwela and Mount Lavina. However, during the COVID-19 curfew all of his construction projects were halted.

Out of options to support his family, he began selling essential food items. Having obtained permission to transport goods in his three-wheeler, he began making visits to the Pettah and Manning Market almost three times a week to purchase everything that he needed.

He would then sell them at a reasonable price to the people in his neighbourhood.

"I can't sell with a big profit margin,” he said. “I should be reasonable at a time like this. And after all the costs are counted, I am left with a very small amount. But it keeps me going.”

Report by Nazly Ahmed

With medical resources exhausted as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, access to general healthcare has been a struggle—in particular for many with chronic illnesses.

Asoka Liyanage (68), a kidney patient, was left stranded with no access to regular dialysis when his usual private hospital was shut down after a false COVID-19 scare in April.

“All the other private hospitals refused to take us in. Government hospitals said that they could only accommodate some of us for a short period of time,” his son, Suneth told Roar Media.

“My father had trouble breathing. He was supposed to have his treatment on 21 April, but couldn’t,” he said. It took six days for authorities to reopen the hospital and offer services to the patients: that too, only after a massive public outcry.

With primary attention diverted towards containing and treating the novel coronavirus, patients suffering from diabetes, cancer, and other chronic illnesses have had to adapt to the current situation.

Ponnambalam Udhayakumar (45) started fishing at 15 years old, with his father. Thirty years later, he still goes out to sea to earn a living. Only a small percentage of the income is kept for himself, and the rest is spent on the boat he hires.

Although no restrictions were placed on fishing during the COVID-19 pandemic, the livelihoods of many fisherfolk were nevertheless severely affected.

Udhayakumar told Roar Media he was not able to sell his catch to his usual customers or wholesale purchasers because no one came to buy them. “I had to sell everything I caught at a very low price by the side of the road. It was not even close to the income I received before,” he said.

According to Udhayakumar, a kilogramme of any type of fish could be sold at Rs. 400. But during the curfew, this dropped to almost half, making it very difficult for him to make ends meet.

While Udhayakumar is away at sea, pushing off from the Trincomalee Bay almost every day, his wife tends to the household and their children’s needs. But with insufficient income from fishing, he has had to seek additional work elsewhere.

“[Because] the situation was so dire, I started undertaking small labour work. One person wanted help with the house they were building, so I became a mason’s assistant. The other time, I managed to clear some land for money,” he said.

Udhayakumar and many others like him were recipients of the Rs. 5000 allowance distributed by the government as relief during the lockdown, and he says the money was a respite from having to work menial jobs for a pittance.

“But we don’t know if we’ll get the money in the future. So I’m looking forward to going back to work,” he said.

“My work involves sitting on a chair for long hours in the night. I sleep in a small room the company has given me. That’s during the day, of course,” chuckled Mani\* (52), a night guard at a restaurant in Colombo.

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit Sri Lanka and businesses closed down indefinitely, security guards and night watchmen like Mani were among the few still working.

Even though many of those who continued to be employed opted to find a hostel or temporary boarding facilities in the city, Mani said he could not afford it. “I would have to spend half of my salary on the hostel,” he said. “I wouldn’t be able to send any money home. Here [in the security post], even if the room is small, I can manage. I get my food and sleep. I send money to my family.”

Mani had also initially planned to go home for the Sinhala and Tamil New Year in April. But with curfew imposed, he could not. “I haven’t been home in three months now,” he said.

Meanwhile, Siva\* (58) who is one of three guards at a shopping centre in Colpetty lives at a hostel. “There are 18 others who stay here,” he said.

When the lockdown was initiated, the private security company that employs Siva cancelled all holidays for its employees. Siva said the company provided face masks and gloves to all staffers, as well as thermal scanners. At the hostel, they maintain distance from each other and have been instructed to use our own cutlery and to keep them clean and sanitised at all times.

“We were paid our salaries and were given rations to cook our food. If we were at home, we would not have an income. We would not have been paid. So we managed to live through the lockdown,” he said.

\*—Name has been changed.

While the unexpected disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic has caused grief to many, vulnerable populations and communities remain the hardest hit. Sumithra\*, an amputee told Roar Media how hard she found it to go about her daily routine, even after the lockdown was lifted.

“I wear a prosthetic leg,” Sumithra said. “At supermarkets and other places, I’m expected to wash my hands using a station that is operated by foot. How am I supposed to do that?”

Marginalised even before the pandemic, the disabled community was significantly challenged during the lockdown.

“Visually-disabled persons who sell items by the side of the road, such as handicrafts and lotteries, to earn a living—they all lost their livelihood during the lockdown,” Rasanjali Pathirage, head of the Disability Organisations Joint Front (DOJF) told Roar Media. She added that the absence of a proper government database has made it impossible to ensure everyone received aid during this time.

Many of those disabled—most already dependent— had to lean further on volunteers, community supporters and rights advocates to survive.

Nalinda Nagolla, the Managing Director of the DOJF told Roar Media that over 2,000 persons from the community had problems buying food and dry rations and that approximately, 1,500 persons—mostly hearing-impaired—did not even receive the Rs. 5,000 allowance given by the government.

“Around 60 people suffering from physical disabilities—mostly, wheelchair-bound—couldn't obtain their medicine and equipment,” Nagalla added. “Many didn't even receive the aid and donations that were distributed because it was hard for them to stay in a queue to collect them.”

The DOJF, communicating through social media or online messaging platforms such as WhatsApp or IMO, managed to compile a database of complaints that were brought to the attention of the Presidential Task Force for Economic Revival and Poverty Eradication, which intervened to provide aid.

But although many of the complaints have been addressed after DOJF intervention, the disabled community continues to face challenges. “Even though the lockdown has been lifted, many are yet to receive their compensation. Funds approximately worth Rs. 290,000 have been allocated to provide aid, but they are yet to receive it,” Nagalla said.

“We had no hires after the COVID-19 curfew was imposed,” Sisira\* said.

Sisira, who works for an online food delivery platform is usually on the road for up to 16 hours a day, including on the weekends. But the COVID-19 lockdown completely dried up his source of income.

“It was quite difficult because we earn by the day and have little savings,” he said.

A father-of-three, Sisira and his family managed with what little savings they had. The company he works for also deposited a small percentage of his usual monthly earnings in his bank account, making things a little easier.

But managing those months under lockdown was still a challenge. “Food was the main problem,” he told Roar Media. “We had to think a lot about what we purchased.”

Food delivery apps have become quite popular in Sri Lanka. Delivery persons whizzing past in brightly-coloured jackets in all types of weather is now a common sight.

“We are quite used to the rain,” Sisira laughed. “Our main focus is on protecting our phones!”

Sisira returned to work when curfew was eased but has noted a low turnout of delivery persons, or ‘riders’ as they are known, as many have returned to their hometowns as a result of the lockdown.

Very few orders were also being placed, he said. This meant a smaller income than usual each month.

At work, Sisira’s temperature is checked regularly. He is given hand-sanitiser, a reusable face mask and educated on health guidelines he should follow.

‘Contactless delivery’, a new feature that allows the delivery person the option of leaving the food at the doorstep and moving away before calling to inform the customer, has also been gaining popularity, he told us. “But in some cases, there is no place to keep the food, even though contactless delivery has been requested, I can’t keep it near the drain!” he said.

Drivers are also now often held up at restaurants which are running on minimal staff, he added. Curfew that is still in place (between midnight and 4 AM every day) means that riders who previously had the option of working until 2-3 AM to earn extra have not been able to do so.

With limited opportunity, Sisira also wonders how he will fare the next few months, even as more riders return to work.

\*Name has been changed

Cover photo credits: Akila Jayawardana/ NurPhotos

There are new taps installed in the guard room, with bars of soap on the side. A nurse monitors your temperature and you wipe your feet against a special mat, before you enter the premises. At the doorway is a separate chamber, where you are sprayed with disinfectant from head-to-toe. Promptly after, you punch-in on the fingerprint machine—like everyone else reporting for work—you are asked to sanitise your hands again.

This is the process Sarath\* (38) undergoes now while working at the glove manufacturing department of a factory, at the Katunayake Export Processing Zone (EPZ); which has since re-opened amidst the lockdown.

Initially, when the COVID-19 curfew was first imposed, employees at EPZs were confined to their boarding houses. A week later, the Board Of Investment (BOI) temporarily closed down all zones upon government instruction and ensured that the employees returned to their hometowns.

Not all chose to leave, however. Many employees like Sarath stayed behind.

EPZs (also known as free trade zones) established by the BOI, are designated areas across the island rooted in export promotion and economic growth. Housing a combination of factories and dwellings, it is a second-home to a workforce that forms the backbone of more than 42 percent of the country’s export economy.

The first week of curfew was extremely difficult for most workers at the Katunayake EPZ.

Sarath lives with his wife and children in a boarding house. On 24 March, when a brief interlude for the curfew was announced, he chose to queue at the grocery store over the bank, with the little cash left in his hand. He couldn’t bear the thought of not taking any food back home before the curfew was reimposed.

“I would get calls from several other workers crying at night,” Sarath told Roar Media. “One used to break down over the phone, feeling like a prisoner in his cramped rented room. Another missed her family, and counted her rations carefully; the rice, the dhal, the soya, and the kawpi.”

Boarding houses within these zones can vary from rentable rooms to hostels for around 50-60 people. These buildings emanate signs of shared space; a common clothing line snakes its way, marking the outer edges of makeshift homes.

Communal washrooms host a row of showers and toilets. “In some [washrooms], there is no partitioning between shower cubicles or even of gender,” Ashila Dandeniya, a former factory employee and current founder of organisation Stand Up Movement Lanka, said.

On 27 March, employees who wished to return to their homes outside the zones gathered in large crowds, as early as 5.00 am. Most of them had been notified of the plan, only the day before.

“We announced to everyone to be at the gate by 7.00 am. I do not know why many arrived two hours earlier,” BOI Director for Katunayake, Sisil Fernando said. “We had to make preparations: set up a system with medical professionals, wait for the buses, and army personnel to arrive,” he added, further confirming that a due medical check-up process was followed.

The BOI is responsible for workers in 12 EPZs across the country, and according to Fernando, just the Katunayake zone holds around 36,500 workers on an average day. Individuals travel from all parts of the country to live and work in these job generating regions.

Sarath chose to stay back as he felt it was too risky to travel with his two young children. Meanwhile, Mala\* (27), also a factory worker, has no one back in her hometown Hatton—with her family members stationed in different parts of the country for work.

She lives with her husband, and during the initial weeks, had barely any food left in their room. “At least we had water,” she said. “And soon after, we were grateful for the rations donated to us by a local NGO.”

According to Dandeniya, salary payments have differed across factories. “Some have not even received their salary for March. While those who did in March, only received half of their salary in April, with notice that May too will be a half-salary,” she said.

She confirmed that certain factories were able to pay the workers for both months. “Of course, this is the basic salary. There is no overtime, attendance bonus, or other incentives that the workers usually look forward to, to keep them afloat.”

Sarath and Mala received salaries both months, “and I got half my bonus for April,” Mala said. Earlier, she had purchased rations on credit from a nearby store until she was refused the option due to her inability to meet her debt. She also has to pay rent and send money to her mother. “I don’t really have savings, we pay with each salary we get,” she said.

The apparel sector is forecasted to be one of Sri Lanka’s hardest-hit industries by the COVID-19 crisis. Sri Lanka’s key buyers of textiles are the US and Europe—two of the most vulnerable markets, in the face of an imminent economic recession.

As international economies struggle, payments have been delayed, local orders suspended or cancelled. The lockdown has brought a large proportion of revenue-generating work to a grinding halt.

At a public online panel, CEO of Brandix Lanka Ltd, Ashroff Omar highlighted an expected contraction in demand for the rest of 2020, followed by a price war among export countries, and unpredictable consumer behaviour—unless a vaccine for COVID-19 is introduced. This, with the potential to close-down factories, and create large-scale unemployment.

Although, factory employees are not the only victims, as job insecurity in this field is spread across staff levels.

“Now we have to use our feet to open doors and operate taps,” Sarath said. He further explained that even the factory’s canteen layout had been changed with every middle tap removed to create a metre-gap.

“We take our tea cups from hot water containers, and eat our food alone, maintaining distance,” he added. “The factory is sprayed with disinfectant daily, and we sit away from each other. Where I work, there’s only around quarter of the usual workforce right now.”

The latter part of March saw a handful of factories operating under the lockdown with, according to BOI Director Sisil Fernando, around 130 employees. More recently, he told Roar Media that, roughly 62 enterprises are back in operation with a workforce of 4,945. Many of these enterprises have returned to work, after taking every precaution available.

“In the zone, we have a Ministry of Health office and a Public Health Inspector who frequently visits these enterprises where the employees are working,” Fernando said, confirming that measures are being taken to provide hygiene protection to all.

However, the threat of infection is ever present. On 1 May, 21 factories at the Horana BOI zone were shut down after one employee tested positive for COVID-19, reported to be related to a confirmed patient. PCR tests are set to be conducted on the 350 employees who were present.

This industry, like many others, faces the difficulty in needing to resume work—to sustain livelihoods, the economy, and produce the scarce and much needed protective equipment—while considering the very real threat of the virus. “Not all factories are following similar standards of hygiene,” Dandeniya further pointed out.

Sarath does not mind having to go to work, because it means an incoming salary. Since the lockdown, he has been assigned in processing urgent orders and most recently, in the production of medical masks and Personal Protective Equipment (PPEs) for healthcare workers.

Mala [who has not yet been called into work] and several others—either in their hometowns or confined to their boarding room—wonder about their income during the next few months.

“I worry about how to buy food to survive. I hope this situation will resolve soon so that I can go back to my job,” Mala said. “I just wish things would go back to the way it was before.”

\* — names changed to protect identity.

Cover: remake.world

Online messaging platforms like WhatsApp, Viber, Signal, and Telegram have become pivotal sources of information in the digital age. While these platforms facilitate positive communication and create a sense of community, it is also a breeding ground for misinformation and disinformation that can cause confusion, at best, and physical harm or death, at worst.

This is particularly evident during national or global crises when there is a desperate need for information. At times like these, information is sometimes created and disseminated with the deliberate intention of misleading. These soon take on a life of its own as it spreads rapidly through communication networks.

Not all of it is with malicious intent however; some are simply created or shared with the best of intentions but have the potential to cause serious harm. We have seen this before, in Sri Lanka, and we’re seeing it again, globally, during the current COVID-19 pandemic.

Take a look at some of the WhatsApp forwards we’ve included below–you may have seen, received or even shared these with your own peers.

COVID-19 currently has no cure. While many nations and companies are working on a treatment and a vaccine, the trials are yet to succeed.

The compounds mentioned in the message are very real and Dr Li Wenliang did attempt to call to attention the initial spread of the coronavirus and later died from it.

However, there is no verifiable information to prove that doctors in China are serving tea to COVID-19 patients, or more importantly—that tea is a cure for or will help reduce possible infection.

Just leave tea-drinking for your customary evening break.

Pro tip — Note the mix between fact and fiction: this makes it difficult for people to use a common-sense approach. Most resort to ‘forwarding as received’—an attempt at absolving responsibility for the veracity of the content, but that’s not enough. Take the time to research the information before you share it. Note the ‘Breaking News from CNN’ tag—get onto the CNN site, type in the keywords, and see for yourself if it is true.

Don’t believe us? Check AFP Fact-Check here.

While the link to the CNBC article is accurate, the content in the message is not.

The link explains that the World Health Organisation (WHO) is considering ‘airborne precautions’ for medical staff after a new study showed the coronavirus can survive longer than usual in the air in some settings.

The setting referred to were at medical care facilities where aerosol-generating procedures (procedures that stimulate coughing) are conducted on people with respiratory illnesses. In these settings, it would be necessary for healthcare workers to take extra precautions.

At no point in the article is there any indication that COVID-19 can remain in the air for eight hours. At no point has the WHO said everyone is required to wear masks everywhere—in fact, the WHO is very clear on who and how masks should be worn and has also advised the rational use of medical masks to avoid unnecessary wastage of the resource.

What has been established is that COVID-19 spreads from person to person when an active COVID-19 patient coughs or exhales and produces droplets that come into contact with another person.

Since the droplets are too heavy to be airborne, they land on people in close proximity or objects and surfaces that are then contaminated. Other people can become infected by touching these contaminated areas and then touching their eyes, nose or mouth.

This is why maintaining at least a metre distance from other people, and washing hands regularly for at least 20 seconds with soap and water or an alcohol-based sanitizer is encouraged.

Pro tip: Click on the link and read it carefully before sharing. Does it corroborate with what is being said in the ‘forward’? If it doesn’t, discard. If it does to some extent, you still may want to do some additional research and reading before sharing unverified information.

Don’t believe us? Read what WHO has to say about it here.

You do not have to wash your hands every 20 minutes. Instead, wash your hands with soap for at least 20 seconds, especially if you have; stepped out of the house, just coughed or sneezed, or have come into contact with another person—and most definitely if that person is already sick.

Secondly, hot water does not kill the virus, gargling with warm salt water or vinegar does not prevent infection, and clothes must be washed and dried—it is not a choice of one or the other.

Since most of these tips appeal to common sense it may be easy to assume all of it is factual and to share with as many people as possible—all with the intention of being helpful. But the wrong information can have dangerous unintended consequences.

There are documented cases of severe illnesses or even death as a result of drinking bleach, methanol, or eating copious amounts of garlic to prevent COVID-19. People may also believe these simple methods are enough to prevent them from contracting the virus and not take enough precautions.

Fact-check tip: Take time to study these claims. It may require more work than simply sharing it, but you would be doing your part at being a responsible citizen—remember you can help break the misinformation/disinformation chain.

Don’t believe us? All of this has been very effectively addressed in the WHO ‘Mythbusters’ section here.

This forward claims that the virus that killed over 3,000 people in China was engineered as a bioweapon and released to destabilise and allow China establish a firm foothold in the world.

The claim is seen as part of a disinformation campaign against China or as a conspiracy theory that has been debunked by many accepted publications.

If you’re still not convinced, here’s what Tom Inglesby, Director of the John Hopkins Center for Health Security had to say “... there isn’t any evidence that this virus has been engineered or is different from something that has been found in nature.”

Fact-check tip: Notice the claim that China had become the owner of global companies in China as a result of economic destabilisation? Do a little research and see if that is true.

Want further proof? Read what WHO has to say about the natural—and not constructed—origin of the virus, here.

Hydroxychloroquine sulfate is currently used for the prevention and treatment of malaria. Reports of the drug’s efficacy in the battle against COVID-19 began in South Korea, which recommended the drug after an experimental treatment.

Later in the United States, President Donald Trump claimed it showed “tremendous promise” in treating COVID-19 patients, despite the director of the country’s National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, Dr Anthony Fauci saying the drug is yet to be considered for trials.

The drug made headlines in Sri Lanka as well, when Opposition Leader Sajith Premadasa recommended its usage. He later retracted his statement and issued an apology after a public outcry. Health authorities here also strictly instructed people not to buy or use the drug without medical advice and pharmacies were prohibited from selling the drug without a prescription.

Pro tip: It’s easy to get excited about a rumoured treatment for COVID-19—it’s even understandable that you may want to stock up on the drug, so that you are not left without when you need it. But as a rule of thumb, you should never take any medicine that isn't prescribed by a doctor, especially in evolving public health situations like these, when no clear medical solution has been discovered.

Want to know for sure? See what WHO has to say about it.

Steam inhalation is a common and effective way to clear your nasal passages if you’re sick with a cold or flu—but COVID-19 is not a common cold and steaming will not help a patient recover in ‘double-quick time’.

This sort of common-sense advice has appeal because it is uncomplicated and people feel it would do them no harm to steam, anyway. However, the damage is that it trivialises the potentially deadly nature of COVID-19.

Steaming will not prevent you from contracting COVID-19, either. At this stage, we know that social distancing and hand hygiene are probably the best way to do this. By sharing this sort of information you are endorsing an ill-informed view that could potentially cause harm to someone.

There is also no evidence that the doctors at the National Infectious Diseases Hospital (IDH) are inhaling steam.

Fact-check tip: Read and understand the severity of COVID-19. Does it seem possible that a virus that has spread so fast all over the world and claimed so many lives can be prevented by something so simple as steam inhalation—and if yes, why is it not being propagated as a solution more by health authorities? Nothing short of a conspiracy theory can prevent you from coming to the logical conclusion that a steam inhalation can’t be the solution to the virus. Why not use that as a stepping stone to find out what the experts are actually saying?

Don’t believe us? See what AFP FactCheck has to say about it.

As per the WHO, an ‘incubation period’ is the time between contracting the virus and showing first observable symptoms. An incubation period will vary from person to person—most estimates of this incubation period range from 1-14 days, with an average of five days.

This is why the government moved swiftly to put people who arrived in Sri Lanka into two weeks quarantine from early March onwards, where they are kept under observation for any developing symptoms.

Similarly, the government moved fast to round up those that may have come into contact with confirmed cases (contact tracing) and impose a 14-day quarantine period on them as well, during which they are watched over for symptoms.

While it is likely that a number of people will display symptoms at the same time—if they have come into contact with an active case within a similar time frame—it is not possible for everyone who has contracted the virus to develop symptoms at the same time.

For these reasons, it is clear that there was absolutely no truth to the claim that 23 March - 3 April is when the virus will ‘peak’. However, ‘forwards’ like this have the real ability to cause panic and fear and even instigate panic buying increasing the chances of people coming together and the risk of the virus spreading.

It can also lead to the mistaken belief that after ‘3 April’ the worst will be over.

Fact-check tip: It is safe to take these ‘forwards’ with a pinch of salt. Rest assured, if there was something to be worried about, the relevant authorities would have introduced measures and published informed statements. Follow authentic sources, instead of your WhatsApp forwards.

Want to know more? Click here.

These WhatsApp forwards are only a small sample of the fake news out there. Some are far more serious than others, and even purport to be from established and authenticated sources—so remember that even if you receive some information that professes to be from WHO, the United Nations (UN), the Sri Lankan government, or an established news website—it might not be necessarily true.

It only takes a few clicks to find out if the ‘forward’ you received is credible information. Go to the actual website. Does the WHO/UN/Sri Lanka government/News website say the same thing?

It is also good practice to have more than one established source corroborating the information — so even if one news source is propagating a certain bit of information, it is good to wait till several others say the same thing to establish that there is some truth to the claims.

Stick to established sources. It is not a good practice to get your news and information from gossip sites or less than reputable news sites. Always make sure you visit established websites for information.

In a world where citizens now have the power to create, hold, and distribute information—the public has an even larger role to play as consumers of the media.

If you cannot verify a piece of information with a reliable source, do not share it. You, more than anyone else, can break the fake news chain.

<Cover: The Financial Times>

For Osanda Samarasinghe (45), the highlight of April has been celebrating the Sinhala and Tamil New Year. He and his family would observe traditional nekath at the appropriate auspicious times, and before the New Year dawned, would shop for clothes and prepare and plan their finances for the upcoming year.

“We would renovate and repaint the house, make kavum, kokis, and aluwa. And on the day of the New Year, we would distribute it amongst our neighbours,” he told Roar Media.

This year’s Sinhala and Tamil New Year will kick off at the auspicious time of 8:23 p.m. on Monday (today, April 13). The auspicious time—or nekatha—for the first ritual of the New Year, which is to prepare the first meal, is at 10:05 p.m. also today. But this time, the New Year will not be celebrated with extended family and friends. It will take place within the confines of homes surrounded by only immediate family members.

On Thursday (April 8) the Ministry of Buddhasasana, Cultural and Religious Affairs urged the public to observe Sinhala and Tamil New Year rituals within their own homes, and in a subdued manner. The measures were aimed at preventing gatherings by continuing the social distancing policy the government had adopted as a strategy to contain COVID-19.

As a result, New Year uthsawa (festivities) and religious gatherings will not be permitted.

“We cannot celebrate, therefore we must adhere to nature’s orders. [This New Year] we are going to stay home and try to do some of these festivities as safely as possible,” Samarasinghe said.

“Normally, this would be the April holidays, meaning 10 days to spend time with family. This season, we have already spent a lot of days with the family, which is good,” he added with a laugh.

“But we will be missing a lot of things this year,” he said. “We can’t organise the games within the community, or exchange food with neighbours. This is rather sad.”

New Year for Kanthi\* (60) and her family ordinarily meant throwing a massive dinner party for her entire neighbourhood within a gated community in Ja-Ela. But not this year.

“Every year, our community comes together and we throw this avurudu party,” she told Roar Media. “Early in the morning, we exchange sweets. Later on, everyone meets at this plot of land within the housing scheme. We set up games and put out chairs and usually take part in a whole lot of events.”

The merriment would typically carry on late into the evening, Kanthi said. “We would then meet at one of the houses afterwards for the dinner party.”

It is not just the inability to prepare for the New Year as they ordinarily would by shopping for new clothes, making traditional sweets or putting up decorations that have affected many. A lack of supplies has led to frugality and many are aware they will not be able to prepare a feast as they ordinarily would for the holiday.

This year, Varushini Balasingam (31) and her mother have decided to forego celebrating the New Year this time. “We are in Colombo, so we receive some supplies but there are families who do not get the same, who have only one meal a day, and are struggling,” Balasingham said.

“We can’t buy new clothes or step out. So, instead of celebrating, we thought of seeing how we can help those in need. We are in the same country and in the same situation. We should also think about the COVID-19 patients during this time,” she said.

Sisira (63) owns a small store on a byroad in Udahamulla. One of the few shops allowed to open for a maximum of 12 hours a day, Sisira only allows those wearing a face mask to enter.

Aside from the dry good and other daily essentials, Sisira also allows his neighbours to provide a selection of items—typically food, whether fresh or prepared—to sell at his store.

“There is a woman in the neighbourhood who used to make sweets for avurudu and sell it to my store. She can’t do that this year,” he said. “How can we ask her to make kavili these days? We don’t have the ingredients to sell to them, let alone people who would want to buy kavili from us now.”

“People cannot celebrate avurudu properly until this wasangathaya [plague] passes over. No one will go paying calls to their family, or to the temple because it’s not allowed. Not even cakes are available”

Chandrika\* too has had to cancel all her New Year plans this time around. Living in Dematagoda with her family, she has had trouble finding essential items needed to make kavili.

“Putha told me to do something small even, but what are we to do?” she told Roar Media. “To make any [of our sweets]we need coconut oil. I can’t find coconut oil anywhere. We are using what we have very sparingly.”

A few weeks ago, things were far worse. “I couldn’t find flour anywhere. I called the nangi at the shop at the top of the road but she also told me they didn’t have any. I couldn’t find milk powder. And the turmeric–they had mixed haal piti (flour) into the turmeric powder so that they could sell it. When you put it into a little water, you’d see how it clots,” she said.

But despite the odds, people are looking for ways to celebrate in the simplest ways possible. This was apparent when earlier this week Chandrika one neighbour organised flour for her and another sent by a carton of eggs.

“Maybe I will make a small cake at least,” she mused.

\* Some names have been changed at the request of those we spoke to.

Cover image—steemit.com

For Kendrick Fernando (19) and his fellow passengers, the process took more than 14 hours. They landed at the Bandaranaike International Airport (BIA) on March 15, but only arrived at the Vavuniya quarantine centre the next day.

Although they were some of the first there, the camp was at capacity by the end of the next day, holding as many as 200 people, as the government moved swiftly to round up all those returning from countries identified as ‘high-risk’ for the novel coronavirus COVID-19.

The first case of COVID-19 was detected in Sri Lanka on January 27, when a Chinese tourist leaving the country developed symptoms and later tested positive. She was admitted to the National Infectious Diseases Hospital (IDH) and discharged nearly a month later, on February 19.

Proactive action only began early March, after the first local case was detected when a tour guide tested positive. Within 24 hours, schools were closed as a precautionary measure and online visa facilities suspended for a number of countries.

Fernando, who is studying Robotics, Mechatronics and Control Engineering in the United Kingdom (UK) decided to come home as he was not sure how things would pan out in the UK over the next few months.

He also preferred to be with family than alone at this time. Speaking to Roar Media, Fernando said that as soon as the passengers on flight QR 654 disembarked, they were met with airport officials and defence staff, who separated them based on the country they were arriving from.

They were then taken to a small building on the outer edges of the airport complex, where their clothes, hands, shoes, and luggage were sprayed with disinfectant, before they were instructed to wash their hands and screened for COVID-19 symptoms.

“We didn’t know [for sure] if we would be quarantined until we landed,” said Mehak Sangani (22), a student also returning from the UK and currently quarantined in Diyatalawa. “The anxiousness and uncertainty of not knowing was worse than actually going through the process...”

For Sangani, like many of the other students returning, the decision to come back home was precipitated by a general dissatisfaction and unhappiness at the response of the country they were studying in, to the global pandemic.

Universities deciding to close down and a longing for home at a time of great uncertainty were also deciding factors.

“I got slightly emotional when I knew my family was at the airport, and I couldn’t actually go to them,” Seraiah Fernando (19), a first year law student told Roar. “It was an unusual feeling, to be in the same country and not be with them.”

Strict regulations were imposed on all those arriving, irrespective of nationality. They were made to sign a health declaration form specific to COVID-19 — which included questions about their travel history over the last 14 days, details of any symptoms or illnesses they may have, and details on where they planned to stay in Sri Lanka.

The returnees then spent some hours at the airport — ranging from six to 12 — waiting for more arrivals so that they could be sent together to the assigned quarantine centres, which were often, quite a distance away.

“I found some friends and other students I know, so it wasn’t as bad for me. But also travelling on my flight were some elderly passengers and a single mother with two children,” said Tharaka\* (20) a student returning from the UK, currently at the Diyatalawa quarantine centre.

All passengers were taken by bus to the quarantine centres with a police escort. At the centres, they were subject once more to a process of disinfection before entering, and then segregated based on gender.

Food, clean rooms and bathrooms, a variety of amenities in addition to wifi are provided across the board. Towels, a mug, tea bags, milk powder and toiletries were also some of the things made available to them.

They were also given medical masks and a list of important telephone numbers to call in case of an emergency. These included the telephone numbers of brigadiers overseeing the camp, administrative officers and medical professionals.

“We were also given an extensive list with [items and their corresponding prices], which we could request and pay for if we needed anything extra,” Fernando said of his experience at the Vavuniya quarantine centre.

The returnees were briefed on the virus and on guidelines and measures that had been implemented by the government, to prevent community transmission.

“Even as a medical student, I didn’t know [that much] in detail,” Dinul Hettiarachchi (20), a returning student who has been providing updates on his quarantine experience on social media, told Roar Media.

Those in quarantine are not allowed to leave their assigned block or bungalow. During meals, packages of food are deposited by the staff at a preselected place, so that those in quarantine can distribute among themselves, reducing interaction between themselves and those manning the centres.

Those in quarantine have also been advised to reduce interaction, to maintain some distance between each other and to wear masks when stepping to outside areas within the allowed confines.

To pass the time, they complete work, assignments, play games, read, watch movies and catch up on sleep.

“This [inability to communicate] can be frustrating, but we understand the situation,” Tharaka said. “I think Sri Lanka is quite ahead, compared to the rest of the world. We are doing everything we can to flatten the curve.”

Medical officers also keep a close eye on the returnees. In some centres, doctors and nurses — dressed in protective gear — visit those in quarantine, while at other centres, daily check-ins are conducted over the phone.

A key element to the success of the programme is the manner in which the returnees were treated by the tri-forces. “We have everything we need and nothing to complain about,” Fernando told Roar. “We are not too worried. We have placed our trust in the officials at the camp.”

“I had a lot of friends who had to leave the UK to come back to their home country, but no one I knew had to be placed in quarantine,” Sangani said. “I was particularly proud to be a Sri Lankan at this point, where proactive measures are being taken.”

All interviews were carried out over the phone or on video-call. Special thanks to the interviewees.

\* — name has been changed to protect identity.

Cover: Officials in personal protective equipment and military in medical masks at disembarkation, just before the disinfection process. Photo Credits: Dinul Hettiarachchi and Roar Media/Jamie Alphonsus

The COVID-19 pandemic is an evolving situation and as such information relating to it is rapidly changing. We encourage you to always check our latest articles, the updates on our live blog or the reportage on our Twitter feed.

We’re all very cued in on the news now: there have thus far been eleven cases of COVID-19 in Sri Lanka, the very first of which was successfully managed, the patient—a 40-year-old female Chinese tourist—returning to her country on February 19. The other ten are currently being monitored at the National Institute of Infectious Diseases (IDH).

These numbers are bound to change—and Roar promises to keep you updated. Right here, with this guide, and through our LIVE blog, that has been gathering and compiling COVID-related information since December 31.

The sheer volume of information and misinformation spreading through mainstream and social media channels has caused people to panic, many queuing at supermarkets to stock up on supplies for a foreseeable future in which they will either be in self-imposed quarantine on lockdown.

We created this guide with the specific purpose of ensuring everyone is informed of the most basic things you need to do to stay safe.

The state, the military and health authorities are working together to contain COVID-19 at the entry point and isolate clusters.

The first patient in Sri Lanka was a Chinese tourist. She was isolated and treated at the IDH and left the country having successfully recovered on Feb 19.

‘Patient Zero’ was an Italian tourist who has now left the country.

The second patient (first Sri Lankan patient) was a 51-year old tour guide, who had later come into contact with 60 people. All sixty are currently being observed at home. Five of the 60 who displayed symptoms of the flu were admitted to the IDH for further investigation.

The second tour guide came into contact with 25 people. Eight of these (all family members) displaying symptoms of the flu were admitted to the IDH and are under investigations.

On Saturday (March 14), in quick succession, the government confirmed the next five cases (bringing the total to 10) — most were returnees from Italy who were already in quarantine centres. One of the patients is the 17-year-old female relative of an existing patient.

It is clear the government is working hard to isolate and contain the spread of the virus.

the government has decided to close many establishments.

All private and public gatherings have also been prohibited for two weeks, starting on Sunday (March 15).

Because COVID-19 originated in Wuhan, China and spread from there, the points of entry into the country are of utmost importance.

the government has:

Stopped incoming flights from Bahrain, France, Spain, Germany, Switzerland, Denmark, the Netherlands, Sweden and Austria from March 15 at 2359hrs local time and until March 29 at 2400hrs local time

Visa-on-arrival has been suspended for all countries

All passengers from Iran, Italy, South Korea will be sent to mandatory quarantine for 14 days and only released thereafter.

Everyone else has been asked to adhere to a self-imposed quarantine by practising social isolation for two weeks at least.

All incoming travellers—whether local or foreign—will be subjected to the following precautionary treatment:

IF, at the point of entry, you show the following symptoms.

You will be:

Isolated at the port of entry and examined by officials on 24-hour duty.

Sent to the nearest designated hospital in an ambulance.

IF YOU have just returned from abroad or IF you have come into close physical contact with someone who has just returned from abroad or IF you have been to a public gathering and are thereafter displaying COVID 19 symptoms - you can go to your own general practitioner who will refer you to the nearest designated hospital, or go to the nearest designated hospital and have yourself checked.

Please note, private hospitals have not been permitted to conduct testing for COVID19 - so rather than waste big bucks trying, it is best to go to the nearest state hospital.

Quarantine is implemented through the Quarantine and Prevention of Diseases Ordinance of 1897 and International Health Regulations (IHR-2005).

“These locations were chosen mainly due to its space to accommodate a large number of people,” explained Dr. Paba Palihawadana, Chief Epidemiologist of the Ministry of Health, Some reports indicate that these centres were also selected for their location in slightly remote and less populated areas.

The camps can typically hold about 2000-2500 persons, are medically equipped and manned by 5-6 medical teams with Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), have bunk beds, daily meals, and refreshments, Wi-Fi facilities, laundry and entertainment facilities —all provided for by the state.

Foreign travellers have been told they do not have the ‘social or legitimate right’ to refuse the quarantine process.

Any local non-compliance will result in imprisonment up to six months and could be fined between Rs. 2, 000 to 10, 000 if found guilty.

A 22-member National Action Committee including Health Minister Pavithra Wanniarachchi, Western Province Governor Dr. Seetha Arambepola, Additional Secretary to the President Admiral (Rtd.) Jayanath Colombage, Health Secretary Bhadrani Jayawardane, Director-General of Health Services Dr. Anil Jasinghe, Specialist Dr. Anuruddha Padeniya, Additional Secretaries Dr. Sunil De Alwis and Lakshmi Somatunge, Dr. Nihal Jayatilake, SPC Chairman Dr. Prasanna Gunasena, Physician Dr.Ananda Wijewickrama, Brigadier Dr. Krishantha Fernando, Epidemiology Unit Director Dr. Sudath Samaraweera, Dr. Paba Palihawadana, Medical Research Institute Director Dr. Jayaruwan Bandara, Civil Aviation Authority Chairman Major General (Rtd.) G.A.Chandrasiri and the Immigration a Emigration Controller and six other members was set up on January 27 to direct efforts at containing COVID19.

Additionally, a new central office will be established on Monday (March 16) in Rajagiriya to handle all COVID related issues.

All inbound travellers are required to self-quarantine for two weeks.

Public Health Officers will visit throughout, and at the end of the 14-day period, conduct a final assessment to clear the person of COVID-19

D.r Samitha Ginige, Epidemiology Unit, Ministry of Health told Roar Media, "The public health staff of the Health Ministry carries out daily health check-ups on those who are in self -quarantine in order to ensure that they are strictly following the correct procedures. Their health is monitored to see if they have developed symptoms of the infection and if they have, they will be immediately taken to the quarantine centres.”

There is no doubt, the virality and reach of COVID19 is cause for concern. But panicking will not help anyone. There is a national task-force and a national plan to contain the virus. What you need to do is to:

Not fall victim to fake news by ensuring you consume your news from trusted sources

Work to educated and reassure those around you with the correct information

Practice hand hygiene, respiratory protection, social isolation

For good measure, here are the ways in which you can contact the government for more information:

Health Promotion Bureau Facebook page

Department of Government Information Facebook page

Department of Government Information YouTube channel

Govt. Info Dept. website

Also, don’t forget to protect yourself from the virus in the three most basic ways:

Sri Lanka’s first waxworks museum will be launched soon featuring figures of popular local politicians and celebrities.

Late this January, the United Kingdom (UK) finally, and officially, ended its membership in the European Union (EU). Although the process began four years ago, this break in 2020 is less than a clean one. The UK is now in a transition period, during which much of the previous rules apply, for the next 10 months at least.

But as the EU and the UK hammer out the details of new trade relations, it’s worth asking, how will all this affect Sri Lanka?

‘Brexit’ refers to Britain's exit from the EU, an economic and political union among 27 countries which trade quite extensively with each other.

What started out as an initiative to advance economic cooperation between countries after World War II has since grown to cover areas such as health, environment, security, and migration. Most countries in the EU have now adopted a single currency (the euro) and a ‘single market’, which allows for free movement of goods and services. The borders within the EU are also open, allowing students and workers of member countries to study or work in any EU country they wish.

Moving out of this zone — to which the UK has belonged to since 1973 — means negotiating new trade deals and borders. For example, the border between Northern Ireland (which is part of the UK) and the Republic of Ireland (a separate EU country) has been a key point of contention in the Brexit discussions, even contributing to its delay.

According to Kithmina Hewage, Research Economist at the Institute for Policy Studies (IPS), there won’t be an immediate impact on Sri Lanka due to the transition period. “But the UK — and the EU overall — is one of our biggest export destinations,” he pointed out. Therefore, Brexit’s effect depends largely on the agreement that the EU and the UK come to by the end of this year.

“If they don’t [finalise an agreement] the UK will be outside the EU and will have to trade with the EU like someone from a different continent,” he said.

In 2017, the EU was Sri Lanka’s second largest export destination, and the UK its second largest exporter, accounting for more than eight percent of exports. Sri Lanka is also part of the EU’s Generalised Scheme of Preferences Plus (GSP+) which gives tariff concessions to developing countries exporting to any EU member. With the UK’s breakaway, the terms that the two parties finally agree to is therefore, of utmost importance to Sri Lanka.

“If the UK leaves without a trade deal, or the trade deal does not include a commitment to continue with GSP+ that means whatever we send to the UK will be taxed,” Hewage explained.

The EU has guaranteed that Sri Lanka will continue with GSP+ until 2023. However, this type of trade benefit is conditional on the country’s compliance with labour and environment standards, human rights, good governance, as well as its economic position. With Sri Lanka’s recent graduation to upper middle-income country status, it is likely the country will lose GSP+ concessions after 2023.

“At that point in time, whether the UK is in the EU or not is immaterial to us because then we have to compete [with all the other countries],” he added.

Sri Lanka’s top exports are apparel, tea, and rubber products and our competition is mainly countries like Vietnam and Bangladesh which also produce exports such as women undergarments and knitwear. Losing out on preferential access will mean competing with countries that still receive either GSP or trade benefits from the World Trade Organisation (WTO).

“We have an issue with our export basket as well, because we continue to produce lower value export products,” Hewage explained.

“So in reality our economic position is the same as the likes of Thailand and Malaysia (upper middle-income) but the items that we produce and export are that of the Bangladesh’s and Vietnam’s [standard],” he further explained.

Another potential issue is that the economic impact of Brexit may have a ripple effect on the global economy. “If [Brexit] leads to some sort of recession, demand for Sri Lankan exports will reduce, and that will have an impact as well,” Hewage said.

“We saw this during the 2008 financial crisis, when both the US and EU markets crashed; there was a knock-on effect on our markets,” he added.

The 2008 financial crisis intensified the ‘euroscepticism’ of a faction of the public critical about further integration with the rest of Europe. They also opposed the rise in migration to the UK from other parts of the EU.

This emotionally charged issue, along with EU’s tough economic regulations that member countries have to follow, saw a ‘leave’ campaign gain momentum, resulting in 51.9% of Britain’s public voting to ‘leave’ the EU.

This is also likely to make access to the UK for employment even more difficult for citizens living outside the EU circle, such as South Asia.

Hewage feels it is too soon to tell how Brexit will affect tourism in Sri Lanka. “The impact on tourism is entirely dependent on the economic growth in the UK,” he said, explaining that the main effect Brexit is expected to have on Sri Lanka is on trade.

In preparation, Hewage explained that it is vital the country focuses its efforts in diversifying its export market as well as its export destinations — although, admittedly, the transition is not an easy task.

Recently, at a Brexit forum held in Colombo, immediate past Chairman of the Sri Lanka Apparel Exporters Association Felix Fernando emphasised the need for the government to establish Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) with the UK and the EU, and to look at China and India as export markets.

But as Hewage pointed out, “the export sector performance is important for the economy as a whole. But, this is not [necessarily] a Brexit issue. It is an economic structural issue.”

Cover: Anti-brexit demonstrators march in London in October 2019. Photo Credit: Getty Images/newstatesman.com

A Sri Lankan scientist is recognised for her research on ecosystem conservation.

Growing up amid war and ethnic divisions, filmmaker Prasanna Vithanage’s newest venture is a critique of social constructs — particularly that of the Kandyan kingdom in 1814.

His new film, Gaadi (Children of the Sun) tells the story of an oppressed group, a conflicted society, and one fearless woman.

The Rodiya caste was considered one of the lowest in Sri Lanka’s social hierarchy at the time, “and the term is derived from the Sinhala word Rodda, which means dust,” Prasanna Vithanage told Roar Media.

Treated as ‘untouchables’ and equated to ‘human dust’ this community was severely discriminated against, banished to a lifetime of begging. The film revolves around a forced relationship between one noblewoman, ‘Tikiri’, and and one Rodi man, ‘Vijaya.’

Unhappy about being ruled by King Sri Wickrama Rajasinghe due to his South Indian links, the nobles of 1814 Kandy attempt to oust their ruler. A failed attempt leads to the wrath of the King and retribution falling on the shoulders of the aristocratic women. All noblemen’s wives must be handed to the Rodi men, exiled to the margins of society.

However, the idea of belonging to such men is so repugnant, that the women have a choice: agree to a marriage with an outcast or keep one’s dignity by choosing to drown. All except Tikiri choose their dignity.

Stripped of her nobility, Tikiri is now property of the Rodiya caste. She belongs to Vijaya.

“The caste system made people irrelevant,” Vithanage explained. “Let’s say when a child is born, depending on if he is a Rodiya or Govigama (an upper caste involved in agriculture), his entire life was predestined.”

One of the world’s longest surviving social systems, a person born into a caste could not consider changing status and remained a member for life. The Rodiyas were not allowed to work, cultivate, or own property, and both men and women were prohibited from clothing their upper body.

Vithanage uses history to connect to the present. Here, caste is just one example of the kind of divisions which plague society. “Even today, society and its ruling class have made certain people irrelevant, for example on ethnic lines,” Vithanage said.

While Rodiya is the derogatory term used, the members of the caste refer to themselves as ‘Gaadi’ (Children of the Sun). “Worshippers of the Sun, they believe that they are descendents from something above,” Vithanage said. “They are the Children of the Sun.”

The screenplay, which Vithanage first began writing in 1991, takes the form of a road film, where the narrative follows a journey. “They are moving from one place to another, and this story is about what happens between them on this journey,” Vithanage said.

One of the most challenging tasks was developing a character arc in Tikiri, who chooses to marry Vijaya, but continues to find ways to hold on to her prescribed dignity as a noble.

“We see how the events that happen around Tikiri affects her thought process and the way she looks at life,” Vithanage said. “Even for Vijaya, he doesn’t want this girl, but he is forced. And this journey becomes a space of understanding,” he added.

Vithanage questions the concept of ‘identity’ as each of his characters have an ingrained notion of themselves, delivered to them by their community. “In this film you will see everything attributed to caste divisions,” he said.

He also highlights the role of women in society — treated as secondary characters with little agency in their own lives, regardless of class. Just as Rodiyas were discriminated against and ostracised simply for their birth, even noblewomen are punished for the deeds of their husbands.

“And one woman refuses to do so. In a society, where at the time, women were not expected to be independent, one woman chooses to be independent through her choices,” Vithanage emphasises.

For the team, this was one of the more difficult scenes to portray. To express the feelings of not just Tikiri, but all the women making their way to imposed suicide, as well as the Rodiyas awaiting with bated breath on the other side of the river bank, for signs of a new member who has no choice but to learn the ways of their life.

Another challenge was depicting Rodi women in the film. To remove the sexuality commonly associated with partial nudity, and instead, highlight the shame and oppression in denying the women their right to clothe as wished.

While set in Kandy, the film travels across locations such as Dambulla, Ratnapura, Balangoda, Riverston and Trincomalee, in order to recreate Kandy as it was in 1814.

With a team of nearly 500 persons, Gaadi worked with renowned Indian cinematographer Rajeev Ravi, editor Sreeker Prasad, and sound designer Tapas Nayak. Musician ‘K’ helped create an authentic feel and the Macedonian Symphonic Orchestra provides the key soundtrack.

Debut actress Dinara Punchihewa takes on the role of Tikiri, while actor Sajitha Anuththara (Abha) plays her new partner, Vijaya. Some other notable cast members are Iranganie Serasinghe, Damayanthi Fonseka, Shyam Fernando, Ravindra Randeniya, Kalana Gunasekara, Ananda Kumara Unnahe, and Nethali Nanayakkara.

“History is often told by the victors, but this film is about the commoners. The Rodiyas may not be the heroes of history, but the film portrays how they struggle to keep their own dignity,” Vithanage said.

The film is also a powerful reminder of Sri Lanka’s misfortune to come, as a kingdom embroiled in its own conflict, succumbs to the British only a year later. The price society pays for differing ideas of nationality and demarcations in society is delivered by Vithanage, popular for his films on the underprivileged and marginalised.

“I always believe that in cinema, every moment, a character is built by beats. Every moment we exchange, there is a beat. To bring out this beat, without missing out on one, and make the audience’s heart beat the same as their characters — that is the hardest thing,” Vithanage said.

(Gaadi first premiered at the Busan International Film Festival in 2019. It was selected as one of the 100 not to be missed films from Asia in 2019 and is set to premiere in Sri Lanka this year.)

Cover: The ‘Rodiya Caste’ refer to themselves as ‘Gaadi’ (Children of the Sun). Photo Credits: Sanjaya Mendis.

Sri Lanka’s dance queen Vajira Chitrasena was one of two women singled out for a prestigious award.

How well is the new ‘Agitation Site’ for protests and demonstrations faring?

The COVID-19 pandemic is an evolving situation and as such information relating to it is rapidly changing. We encourage you to always check our latest articles, the updates on our live blog or the reportage on our Twitter feed.

Sri Lankan students unable to leave quarantined Wuhan tell Roar Media they long to come home. The government of Sri Lanka is working hard to repatriate them.

The European Union (EU) recently assured Sri Lanka it will continue GSP+ concessions until 2023, while monitoring the country’s compliance with certain conditions.

Early last November, Colombo woke up to an unusual smog lingering over the city. At first, many thought it was a mist brought about by the impending cold weather. But by late morning, news had begun to filter through that Sri Lanka’s air quality had turned ‘unhealthy’.

Almost as widespread as the smog was the rumour it came from Delhi, India. But although almost half the 50 most polluted cities in the world are in India, there was no proof for this.

“The analysis required to examine transboundary air pollution and its effects are quite complex,” Environment Researcher at Verité Research Ashani Basnayake told Roar Media.

As a result, it is difficult to say how much of Sri Lanka’s smog is a direct consequence of this.

Air pollution kills an estimated seven million people every year. Particle pollution or Particulate Matter (PM), a mixture of liquid droplets and extremely small particles are found in varying sizes in the air, and can include dust, soil, metals, and acids. Larger PM can be visible to the eye, while smaller PM—2.5 micrometres or less in diameter (and 40 times smaller than the width of an average human hair)—can only be detected through a microscope.

“Smaller particles are worse because it can travel more than 5,000 km with wind due to its size,” Senior Scientist at the National Building Research Organization (NBRO) Air Quality Unit, Sarath Premasiri explained. “These are the particles that easily enter the respiratory system.”

Particle pollution contributes to respiratory illnesses such as asthma and bronchitis, and some studies have even linked it to cancer. These tiny particles also enter the bloodstream and can reach vital organs such as the brain, kidney and liver.

The primary state institutions responsible for measuring air quality in Sri Lanka are the Central Environmental Authority (CEA) and the NBRO. Sri Lanka has five state-owned air quality monitors capable of providing real-time data. The NBRO has one stationed at the Meteorological Department and one in Battaramulla. In 2018, the CEA introduced special automated monitors in Battaramulla and Kandy, and one mobile monitor that is stationed in various parts of the city.

According to the NBRO, last month, monitors were also placed in a few places out of Colombo, such as Jaffna, Galle, Anuradhapura, Puttalam, Kurunegala, and Vavuniya. But, in general, an air quality monitor covers a radius of not more than 100 metres.

There are also three other privately-owned monitors stationed in Colombo and its suburbs, and these include the one at the U. S. Embassy, which took the lead in disseminating information about the quality of air in Colombo when the smog took over—in turn raising valid questions about the utility of state-operated systems.

Air quality is measured against an Air Quality Index (AQI), where, like with a thermometer, the degree of air pollution is marked on a scale. It can range from 0-50, which is ‘good’ or go up to beyond 300, the dark, ‘hazardous’ zone.

The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that more than 80% of people living in urban areas—where air pollution is mostly monitored—are exposed to levels that exceed WHO guideline limits. And in Sri Lanka, the national standard of what is hazardous air is lower than international.

“For example, the US standard is 35 micrograms [of PM 2.5] per cubic metre air for 24 hours. In Sri Lanka it is 50 micrograms per cubic metre,” Premasiri told Roar Media.

These standards refer to minimum levels of air pollutants during a specified time in a defined area. And globally, the levels of 2.5 PM allowed are even stricter, with WHO guidelines standing at 25 micrograms per cubic metre air of fine particulate matter.

“AQI values are categorised depending on the health conditions of the country,” Premasiri explained. “It is a kind of prediction based on our [health] standards.”

“Since this is a health concern, it is better for us to go with the US standard. We are also working on some research, but we have not exactly calculated air quality index levels for Sri Lanka. We have to do a lot of health studies to develop a good air quality index,” he said.

During the smog, the NBRO’s analysis depended mostly on judging wind patterns. “We can’t identify where it is coming from, but depending on the wind direction, we [can]have to assume,” Premasiri said.

“The highest levels of wind came from the North of the country and at that time India too had high pollution levels.”

Premasiri explained that looking at more rural areas that generally maintain a ‘good’ level of air quality was also an indicator. “If those areas get highly polluted along with the other areas, then we can assume that it has come from an external source,” he said. On November 6th, the effects of Sri Lanka’s smog were also reported in the Northern and North-Western provinces.

However, Premasiri emphasised that in Sri Lanka’s instance, blame cannot simply be attributed to India, and could be a mix in the atmosphere. The Northeast monsoon (December-February), he said, also contributed, with dry weather and low pressure circulating pollution at ground level, for long periods of time.

“The most common pollutants in Sri Lanka are vehicular emissions, domestic and commercial activities such as open burning, generators, and industrial boilers, and coal and thermal power plants,” he said.“More than 60 percent [of average pollution] is due to vehicles and domestic emissions. The other 30-40 percent are other sources.”

The NBRO has assured the public that the situation will improve with the inter-monsoon season of March. But this highlights the fact that this is simply a temporary solution. In order to identify polluted air and keep track of areas that violate standards, air quality must be systematically monitored. This information helps identify the causes of pollution and push for policies and regulations to curb bad air. Most importantly, it helps keep the public informed of when air contamination can have adverse effects on human health.

But according to Basnayake, Sri Lanka does not have an effective platform overseeing all monitors, and neither is the data accessible to the public.

Premasiri pointed out that bad air quality had prevailed even last year. But a lack of funding to maintain continuous management and obtain a quick analysis of information consistently gets in the way.

“We just didn’t have facilities to measure continuous data,” he said. “But, we must think about air pollution as a critical problem in Sri Lanka.”

Cover: The smog on 6 November 2019 placed a haze of grey over Colombo’s growing skyline. Photo Credits: Roar Media/Nazly Ahmed

Sri Lanka may have to face power cuts in the month of March due to low levels of rainfall and limited power-generation capacity.

A young male tourist sits cross-legged outside the Fort Railway Station in Colombo. Arranged neatly in front of him are rows of colourful wristbands. To his left, a cardboard sign on which is penned the words, ‘I’m travelling the world, could you support me please?’—replicated in Sinhalese on his right.

The image caused some outrage, locally on social media, one user writing, ‘This is an awful trend where privileged, white people misuse and take advantage of people more vulnerable than them and skirt immigration law simply because they have passports from powerful countries,’ with another chiming in, ‘If I decided to sell bracelets near Amsterdam Central, I’d be in jail before I could lay my stuff out. This is so wrong.’

This controversial trend of ‘begpacking’ has spread through South-East Asia and South Asia over the last few years. Also known as ‘millennial begpackers’, the phrase is a play on the term ‘backpackers’ and the act of ‘begging’ by these tourists, who either outright ask, perform on the street, or sell trinkets to fund their travels.

Although still quite rare for Sri Lanka, in 2014, a 24-year-old British tourist was taken into custody in Ella, for playing the violin on the roadside near the famed ‘Ravana Ella’ (Ravana Falls)—she claimed she had run short of funds for her daily expenses.

While budget travel is now a common and accepted practice, begpackers espouse an entirely different set of ideals: begpackers appear to outright reject consumerism and are perfectly comfortable with travelling with no money, and asking or ‘earning’ it, when necessary.

This new opportunism has received angry backlash from host countries whose hospitality is being exploited. It has been branded as ‘self-indulgent’ and a product of ‘white privilege’, and an ‘utmost form of irresponsibility to ask/beg people to help you fund your leisure’.

Images and videos cropping up online show the trend is extremely prevalent in countries like Indonesia, Thailand and Hong Kong. In one video, a furious local in South Korea is expressing his anger at a foreigner earning money by performing on his guitar.

Another post went viral with anger directed towards two tourists begging opposite a soup kitchen for the homeless and elderly in Seoul, while in Malaysia, a video of a Russian couple swinging their baby in an unusual musical performance on the street sparked outrage and led to their subsequent arrest.

The main thrust in the arguments against begpackers is that in many cases the locals who donate money to begpackers may be poorer than the tourists themselves. This is something clearly understood by many other backpackers who distance themselves from begpackers. “I personally think this is quite ignorant,” said Lisa Berghman (29) a backpacker from Belgium, travelling across Sri Lanka with her husband. “You have to think of the locals, the vendors and also what kind of country you are going to.”

While begpackers may try to legitimise their appeal for funds in the form of some enterprise, another increasingly popular form racketeering is scamming with stories of distress, lost wallets, and passports.

“I was walking near Park Street on the way to Odel, when this foreigner came and spoke to me. He was Australian—I could tell from the accent—and he asked me for directions to Pettah. He looked quite troubled,” Mihindu\* (25) told Roar Media about his experience with a begpacker in the heart of Colombo, about a year ago.

“Then he started telling me about how he had not been able to get back to his hostel last night, how he had to sleep on a bench, and how he was having a really tough time. He asked me if I could lend him Rs. 4,000, and said that he would pay me back. I didn’t expect he would, and so I gave him Rs. 200, enough to take a trishaw to Pettah.”

Sharmila\* (27) was approached by a tourist a few months ago, who told her his pregnant wife had fallen down the stairs and that he was having trouble with his hospital bills. “I thought, this is probably a scam, but what if his wife is really injured? On the off-chance that that is true, I thought I’ll give him money,” she said.

Even as most people react with outrage and anger to these incidents of begpacking or scamming of locals, there are those that suggest we be not so quick to judge, pointing out that these tourists may indeed be in trouble and be seeking help.

However, the illegality of their enterprise, as well as the fact that any traveller in true distress or in dire need of help can always reach out to the embassies of their own countries rather than appeal to the kindness of possibly less-affluent locals has been repeatedly pointed out.

Many countries are now reacting strongly to these new tactics: Hong Kong has implemented new laws against street performers, Thailand now requires tourists to show proof of travel and Indonesia sends begpackers straight to their respective embassies.

But Sri Lanka is yet to effectively counter this malaise. “In Sri Lanka, begging or working while on a tourist visa is illegal, but policing this can be quite difficult,” Udana Wickramasinghe, Director Research & International Relations at the Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority (SLTDA) told Roar Media.

The countries and their locals are frustrated with the blatant exploitation and financial drain on the country. “When a tourist goes to another country there is a cost that has to be borne by the host country, and this trend [begpacking] can impact the country negatively,” Wickramasinghe said.

In 2018, tourism was the third-largest foreign exchange earner for Sri Lanka. Tourist receipts—revenue earned by a country from inbound tourism—grew by 19 percent from 2017 to Rs. 711, 961 million. And, of the total revenue collected by public institutions in 2018, the top contributors were fees at Sri Lanka’s cultural triangle, embarkation taxes, and wildlife parks.

But according to Wikcramasinghe, the trend of begpacking can attract the wrong kind of traveller. The country’s focus, in terms of tourism, is on persons who will have a high yield and begpackers do not fall into this category. “Any country will consider this,” he said, in perhaps an indication of more stringent policies to follow.

(\*names have been changed to protect identity)

Cover—the tourist selling wristbands outside the Fort Railway Station on 31 December 2019. Photo Credits: Twitter/Mahinda Karunaratne.

‘...in early December 1977, my twelve-year-old self realized I would not be back for some time. So I scribbled something on a piece of paper—something to the effect of ‘I will be back’—and buried it next to the lemon tree by which I had morning class[...]

That was the end of my Sri Lankan childhood.’

Although he grew up in Sri Lanka, Razeen Sally (54) and his family left the country having experienced increasing tensions, against the setting of a rising civil war.

Decades later, a renowned academic and professor, Sally returned to Sri Lanka as a political and economic advisor. In 2009, he began his journey as a traveller, rediscovering a country with which he shared deep personal connections: a country that was, at the time, undergoing its own post-war changes.

“This country is really blessed with an almost endless variety of stunning places, which is a combination of landscape and people,” Sally told Roar Media. “And of course taken for granted by most Sri Lankans!”

Living and working in Singapore, often only travelling to Sri Lanka for work, his recently published travelogue ‘Return to Sri Lanka: Travels in a Paradoxical Island’, spans ten years of travel in the island.

Born to a Welsh mother and Sri Lankan Muslim father, Sally’s identity is mixed. He identifies as “half-half, half-British, half-Sri Lankan.”

“From an early stage I always felt like a half-outsider while growing up in Sri Lanka, just as I did while growing up in the UK,” he said.

There are layers to Sally’s travels—his exploration of the terrain is coloured by his early days in the country, his later involvement on a policy level, as well as the years spent away. He is—as considered in the book—‘a native, a tourist, both and neither’.

“When I’ve gone on these journeys, there’s my childhood and childhood impressions of Sri Lanka. And that is very much during the political conditions of the 1970s, which was also when my father was arrested,” Sally explained.

Sally’s father and uncle were subject to draconian exchange control laws passed during this time, against the backdrop of JVP rebellion. Enacted within the country’s controlled economy and criminalising most foreign exchange transactions, this time period saw several businessmen arrested for violating these exchange control laws. And at the time, they were the Managing Director and owner of Mount Lavinia Hotel, respectively.

“I acquired political consciousness at the age of six, because that’s when our house was raided, ransacked, and my father taken away,” Sally said. “He served a year in remand, a year in prison, and we could not leave the country for almost seven years.”

He writes of his parents’ shipboard meeting; while his mother was headed to Australia and his father, back to Colombo. Their romance spilt over into courtship by post, a brief meeting, and a proposal in the form of a love letter.

Sally also recounts his life in Sri Lanka, as well as the absent years, and the emotions he encountered after he returned after his father’s death. He writes as a child having loved Sri Lanka almost unknowingly. The wonder in rediscovering his country is sometimes weaved into the historical narrative of his experiences.

Sally intentionally seeks places and travels further than the ‘outstation trips’ he remembers from his childhood. “Over the decade I have probably done at least 50,000 km on the road, maybe more,” he said.

He also writes about the detachment between Colombo and the rest of the country, even in the method of travel. “Through this book, I want the reader to have a deepening love for Sri Lanka and incite one to go out and explore,” he said.

With a focus on places and people, he weaves in numerous encounters with notable Sri Lankans, and both new and old friends.

There is Charmaine, known for her Burgher cooking, specifically ‘lamprais’. She yearns for the good old days of Ceylon and believes that ‘Sri Lankan men are hopeless’.

While, Uncle Ranjith and Aunty Jameela live on an estate bordered by the Ella Rock on one side. Aunty Jameela defied her family by entering into an interfaith marriage with Uncle Ranjith, who can talk for hours on end about his job as a planter.

“The people are [themselves] interesting,” Sally enthuses. “And sometimes, they are windows into a broader story about the country or that particular place at a particular time.”

To Sally, Sri Lanka is riddled with paradoxes. One such contradiction is the contrast of its beauty and tourist charm alongside its history of violence. “This is not just what happened in recent decades, but goes way back,” he pointed out.

One of his treasured moments is visiting the ancient monastic site of Kudumbigala in Arugam Bay, a functioning aranya (monastery) for over 2, 000 years. “What one sees amidst this spectacular jungle with rocky outcrops are these drip-ledge caves, a few hundred of them. There are elephant droppings and leopard paw prints, and ten monks live there,” he said.

Past the aranya is the closest village, Panama. “I was curious about it because it is a mixed Sinhala and Tamil village. Has been for about two centuries,” he said.

The journey ended on a Friday afternoon in Panama, when the villagers were conducting their weekly pooja. Sally describes seeing Tamils and Sinhalese from the village worshipping the same temples and sharing the same food. “That moment, I thought, was a good way to end the book,” he said.

“Amidst all the gloom and pessimism that crops up—certainly in places of the book—I thought that was a good metaphor for what Sri Lanka should be like.”

Cover: Razeen Sally with his guide Joseph, on the road in the Eastern Province in March 2015. Photo Credits: Return To Sri Lanka: Travels in a Paradoxical Island, 2019 Juggernaut Books.  
Roar Media / Jamie Alphonsus

As pollution in the Kelani River increases it threatens the supply of clean water to a portion of the country.

Serving South Indian food since 1946, Shri Vani Vilas takes pride in being Colombo's 'Dosa King' and has satisfied many a hungry patron over the decades. Today, its popularity remains as high as ever. On this, the third episode of #RoarShortEats, we visit the restaurant to learn more about its story.

Popular politics has a lot to do with perception: candidates vying for votes will do all they can do to position themselves as capable and strong leaders. And during an election—such as the one we are heading towards—this is most easily achieved through imagery: it is not uncommon for candidates to use every possible avenue to be seen and to communicate their messages and promises to as many people as possible.

In this melee, perhaps one of the more important ways of assessing candidates’ capabilities is often overlooked—a candidate’s manifesto, which is his or her contract with the people. It is through a manifesto that a candidate enlarges his or her vision for the future and makes commitments to the people he or she hopes to win over. But in the headlong, often tumultuous rush towards an election, it is often easy to neglect to read what is actually contained in the pages of manifestos.

To make things easier for our readers, we selected five of the candidates with the most comprehensive manifestos for a quick comparison. Do note, this is not an endorsement of any of the candidates, but a selection of the front runners and an effort to compare their manifestos: what do each of them have to say about key issues like national security, economy, corruption, constitutional and legal reforms, women and lgbtqia+ rights?

It is impossible to represent in full, the contents of each manifesto, so we have summarised the key issues as concisely as possible. We apologise if any summary misses out on what supporters of that candidate feels are important issues—it was not done intentionally. We also do encourage you to read the manifestos in-depth, before the election, for a deeper understanding, and to make a deeper, educated choice.

Please click on image to enlarge.

Artwork—Jamie Alphonsus

The election to appoint Sri Lanka’s eighth President is a little less than 10 days away, and as it draws nearer, preparations to accommodate voters are gaining frantic pace.

Approximately 16 million voters are set to vote this time, a number that has almost doubled from when Sri Lanka first went to the polls to appoint a President in 1982.

But despite this fact, there are many in Sri Lanka who remain ‘disenfranchised’—and will not participate in this political process for a variety of reasons.

Here are a number of those who are still excluded, forgotten and marginalised.

Sri Lankan citizens are constitutionally eligible to vote once turned 18 (unless disqualified). However, the electoral register is only revised and updated every October, with voters who turn 18 before June 1 that year. This means that only those who have turned 18 before June 1 and those who currently above the age of 19 are actually eligible to vote, making it impossible for many first time voters with the ‘right to vote’ to exercise their franchise.

The issue is further compounded this year with the Presidential Election due this month (November). Because of time constraints, the electoral register of 2018 will be utilised, instead of a newly-revised one. It means that only those above the age of 19 and first-time voters registered before October 2018 will be eligible to vote in this election.

There is a segment of the population, who although technically eligible to vote, may not be able to exercise their franchise for a variety of practical reasons. These include those whose movements are restricted making it difficult for them to travel to the nearest polling station and those residing in elders’ homes.

Hospital in-patients, for instance, are not able to cast their votes and those in elders’ homes are often neglected and forgotten—especially if placed in a care home away from their original area of residence and registration.

There are a number of those who are unable to vote on election day because they will be engaged in essential services or other employment that renders it impossible for them to visit the polling station nearest to their area of residence to vote.

This includes doctors and nurses, fishermen whose livelihood depends on an everyday catch, plantation workers, security personnel working on roster, customs officers and other employees at airports, ports, railways, and buses.

Prison staff, members of the police force and Civil Defense Force (CDF), officers engaged in election duties and observations, as well as media personnel covering elections, may find it difficult to vote, among others.

Only state officers in election duties, officers in essential services and members of the security forces are able to engage in the process of ‘postal’—or ‘early’ voting. This year, postal voting took place on October 31, November 1. The second phase voting will continue until November 7.

However, being eligible for postal voting does not ensure inclusion—many are still unable to exercise their franchise. This may be due to practical issues, like how much time the voter will need to take off work and the resulting wage loss, and although employers are expected to provide leave to employees to travel and cast their vote at their registered district, in several instances this does not take place.

Citizens working and studying out of the country or deployed overseas as members of the defence or peacekeeping forces are also excluded from the process of voting in any Sri Lankan election.

While other countries have negotiated around the physical barriers to polling, like offering the option of voting at an embassy (or other designated place), internet voting, by fax, proxy voting or even postal voting—Sri Lanka has not adopted these measures to include such voters as of yet.

The Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment has estimated that 55 per cent of total departures in 2017 were within the unskilled and housemaid categories, with roughly over 200,000 persons travelling to the Middle East, Japan and other countries as migrant workers, every year.

Not having a residential address is a disqualification, as per the Registration of Electors Act, No. 44 of 1980. This means that any citizen without a home before 1 June in an election year is excluded from the electoral register.

In addition to those between homes during that period, this includes the homeless, and in some cases, the internally displaced, who are mostly concentrated in the North and East, and undergo logistical issues in terms of loss of land (addresses), national identity card, transport to voting etc.

The Election Commission has taken steps to better include IDPs in the voting process by introducing special legal provisions to allow for easier registration, arranging transport facilities to vote, and reflecting new residential addresses by registering persons within the new district. However, voting is still quite a demanding process for displaced persons.

Meanwhile, no attempts have been taken to include homeless persons in the electoral register.

This process is beyond the responsibility of the Election Commission, requiring a change in the law and the collaboration of Grama Niladhari Officers.

Citizens may also complain to the relevant district officer or election secretariat if not included in the election process. But with slim chances of additional action been taken by a community already living unrecognised lives, it is unlikely that they will ever vote.

In Sri Lanka, there is no clear legal path to changing gender, and transgender persons are rarely able to obtain a national identity card or other official documents reflecting their preferred name and gender.

This means that at an election, transgender persons must vote with their original national identity cards, and are often subject to arbitrary, invasive questioning by polls officers—as a result of which many refrain from participating in the political process and exercising their franchise.

A ‘gender recognition certificate’ proposed by the Human Rights Commission in Sri Lanka (HRCSL) to the Ministry of Health is yet to receive the approval of the Registrar General’s Department.

While Bangladesh has created a ‘third gender’ category in its voter list and Delhi, India, has made efforts to include transgender persons in the political process, Sri Lanka is yet to come up with comprehensive reforms to tackle these long-standing discriminations.

The clergy in Sri Lanka must provide a separate certificate to the Department for Registration of Persons in order to obtain a national identity card. For a Buddhist priest, this a Samanera certificate or a Upasampada certificate.

However, since the monastic order for female monks in Sri Lanka is not recognised and considered nonexistent to all intents and purposes, bhikkhunis are unable to even obtain a national identity card.

This greatly marginalises this community, who are unable to complete their education for not being able to produce relevant identification at examination centres, obtain a passport, or even participate in the political process by voting.

Refugees who have fled the country seeking protection, but have no hope of being granted asylum and are currently in limbo, cannot be allowed to vote in the election of their country of origin.

At the height of the civil war in Sri Lanka, a number of Tamil refugees fled the country, seeking shelter in countries like the U.K. Canada and India. But while some absorbed these refugees, others, like India, have instead housed them in temporary camps and shelters.

Some of these Sri Lankan Tamil refugees—currently numbering an estimated 90-100,000 who live primarily in Tamil Nadu (but also in Kerala)—have been living as refugees for over 30 years, but are still not able to participate in their political process of their own country.

And although these refugees have been gradually repatriated those who have returned still struggle to register due to the lack of a permanent residence, inability to obtain misplaced documents like birth certificates necessary to obtaining a national identity card and other issues.

Accessibility for persons with disabilities in Sri Lanka is already low—facilities for voting are even worse. Voting is typically conducted at national schools and these lack ramps and other infrastructure for the disabled.

The disabled depending on public transport find it hard to travel to the polling station nearest to their area of registration, and since private vehicles are not allowed within half a kilometre of the polling stations—those able to use them are still greatly inconvenienced.

Persons with disabilities can apply for a special vehicle permit a week before the polls, but this requires additional paperwork and the option is often neglected, resulting in the further exclusion of an already marginalised group.

It is also difficult for those who are physically disabled to access information on the electoral process so that they can decide on how to engage with it. Special assistive devices, using braille, other visual and hearing aids, communication boards or screen readers are rarely—if at all—used.

Persons with disabilities can receive assistance from another person of choice when marking the ballot paper, though this negates the very idea of a ‘secret’ ballot. And this doesn’t take into consideration the paperwork required to obtain an ‘eligibility certificate’ confirming disability and nominate a companion.

Article 89 of the Constitution specifies those prisoners who aren’t allowed at an election—such as those on whom the death penalty is imposed. However, the absence of a centralised system makes it impossible for those who can, especially if they are from several different districts as returning to their area of residence to vote is not an option.

More recently, there have been complaints that names have been crossed off electoral lists and that people have not received polling card, despite following the appropriate registration procedure.

These complaints—posted on social media—allege that the names were crossed off at Grama Sevaka level, and have led to concerns there may be many more disenfranchised in this manner, who are, however, not heard.

The Elections Commission has said it is looking into these incidents, but it is unclear what solution has been offered these voters.

The disenfranchisement of these voters is not a new phenomenon in Sri Lanka, and activists have been working for many years to safeguard the fundamental right to vote. Greater inclusion will require strategic planning, strong legal reform and substantial effort from the state and local authorities, but the dividends would be great: a democracy truly flourishes when all groups are represented.

Cover Image: brandinginasia.com

A whopping 35 candidates have decided to run for the Presidency in Sri Lanka this year. This is a record number—the highest previously in 2010—when 22 entered the fray. Although a multi-party system, Sri Lankan politics has been historically dominated by two parties and it is typically the contenders from the two strongest parties or alliances that have commanded the race. This year, however, a number of fresh contenders have entered—making a third party alternative a viable option, and leading also to speculation that no one party, alliance or candidate will secure the majority, thereby necessitating a recount of second and third preferences. An election is always an important event—the very few times a citizen exercises his or her franchise, and this election is no different. But while some candidates effortlessly dominate the headlines, others fall into obscurity—so here is a quick update of the most basic information you need to know, plus some, about each of the candidates.

Remember, this election, your first, second AND third preferences will count. So educate yourself, and vote wisely!

This October, to mark Pregnancy and Infant Loss Awareness Month, we promised we would start the painful conversation around the unexpected death of an infant—whether through miscarriage, stillbirth, medical complications, and even abortion.

On Pregnancy and Infant Loss Awareness Day, we published an article about the ‘Rosebud Service’ at the De Soysa Maternity Hospital, that attempts—in some small manner—to offer women who have lost infants, emotional and medical support.

In our many conversations with those affected, we heard how misunderstood and alone some felt, even when surrounded by family and loved ones. Others told us about the desperate desolation of pregnancy outside of the institution of marriage.

This is why we opened our platform to the public, inviting those who have been through that loss to share their stories with us. We promised we would respect your privacy, and we have. In this short piece, we share a few of the most impactful stories around Pregnancy and Infant Loss in Sri Lanka.

This is just the beginning..

Click on the icons to read and listen to the testimonies below.

Roar Media prides itself on producing original, refreshing, and thought provoking content which aims to capture the vibrancy of the South Asian region.

Winding roads and lush green paddy fields lead to the small coastal town of Rathgama in the Galle district of the Southern province, where somewhere a little past the town’s junction is the area known as ‘Monroviawatte’.

Rathgama is beautiful—deep waters and greenery giving way to sandy shores and tossing waves. But the closer to Monroviawatte you get, the more pungent the smell of rotting garbage.

It is the strangest juxtaposition: flourishing paddy fields set against the backdrop of a mountain of garbage. But, Monroviawatte is where authorities have chosen to set up what is officially known as a compost plant complex and sanitary landfill—although residents simply refer to it as the ‘garbage dump’.

For over six months now Indrapala\* (66) has been struggling to walk. There are painful boils and bumps on his feet on which are a few plasters granting temporary relief.

Having been a farmer his entire life, he believes that the wounds are the result of contamination in the water flowing into the paddy fields. “The paddy fields are not in a proper state,” he said. “And I cannot get into the fields [to work].”

Indrapala also recently lost his wife due to an unexpected infection in her kidney and believes her sudden death was a result of contamination in the water.

As we walk around, we notice that the water bodies surrounding the Compost Plant Complex have indeed turned green. Trees closer to the complex have stopped bearing fruit and flowers, and the villagers tell us that just a few months ago, the fish at a nearby water body had died.

The Monroviawatte Compost Plant Complex opened in 2012 on 20 acres leased from the government and collects waste from seven local authorities; Rathgama, Hikkaduwa, Balapitiya, Galle, Ambalangoda (both its Pradeshiya Sabha and Urban Council) and Bope-Poddala.

It was part of the ‘Pilisaru National Solid Waste Management Project’ that was launched in 2009, to implement a sustainable and environment-friendly waste management system. Building compost facilities and sanitary landfills were part of the programme.

Central Environmental Authority (CEA) Planning and Implementation Manager at the time, Malaka Dassanayake explained that with sanitary landfills land is dug up to form a vast pit, over which a protective covering is placed to prevent contact between the garbage and the ground.

As per the due process, waste that is brought in is separated—and degradable material sent to the Compost Plant Complex, while non-degradable waste is deposited into the landfill, which is packed over with earth to keep it compact.

This creates alternate layers of earth and waste. The final layer is a plastic lining on top of which is dense soil, re-creating the original land area. “This can be used for recreational activities or parks and this method has been adopted in several other countries,” Dassanayake explained.

Sandamalie\* (35), who lives close to the Monroviawatte Compost Plant Complex told Roar Media the stench from the garbage is strongest in the early hours of the morning and when it rains. “[Then] the smell is so unbearable, it makes me want to cry just trying to endure it,” she said.

The exposed garbage has also brought an influx of flies, forcing those living nearby to even eat under nets. “What are mosquitos, when we have flies even at midnight,” Sandamalie complained. Her family was even forced to close up one of their wells due to contamination of the water.

Neither Sandamalie, nor any of the other families living nearby are opposed in principle to a sanitary landfill near their homes. They do object however, to the careless manner in which the Compost Plant Complex and landfill are being operated, affecting the lives of all those around it.

Dassanayake, who was a part of the project at the inception, but is no longer with the CEA, working as a freelance environmental consultant instead, explained that a vital part of project was treatment—every time waste is brought to the landfill, liquid and gaseous emissions must be collected and treated before being sent back.

But the lack of adequate liquid and gas treatment is clear at the site, with contaminated liquid evident on the ground and in waterways. The sanitary landfill is also above ground level, and the garbage now being dumped in the open, is mounting.

It is also clear the landfill has exceeded capacity, and instead of being disposed in the intended manner through sorting and layering, waste is piling up like any other dump.

Garbage transportation is an additional issue, residents tell us. Some garbage lorries are not sealed, others are only covered with large tarp, and a fair amount of garbage is dropped along the way, the foul smell adds to the existing stench in the otherwise sanguine and secluded area.

But, protests and appeals to authorities, even as far back as in 2015, have not led to any intervention or sustainable solution. And even though an article was published earlier this year claiming the issues relating to the plant had been resolved—there is no proof of any change.

The garbage dump grows in height and unbearable conditions for those living nearby continue.

\*Names have been changed to protect identity.

Cover: Indrapala\* suffers wounds on his feet, that he believes are the result of water contamination in the paddy fields. Photo Credits: Roar Media/Sakeena Razick

Sprint Queen Susanthika Jayasinghe is to team up with her American coach Tonie Campbell find Sri Lanka's next Olympic star.

It was twenty-eight-year-old Ayesha’s\* first pregnancy. Recently married and excited about the arrival of her baby, she hadn’t expected any complications. In fact, when she was sent to the hospital by her village clinic, it was only because of a spike in her blood pressure—she never expected that when she gave birth two days later, her baby would be stillborn.

She sits with me, a week after her loss, in a room in Ward 03 of the state-owned De Soysa Maternity Hospital (DMH). Although she is composed, and speaks in a slightly matter-of-fact manner, her forlorn eyes, and the occasional wringing of hands are indications of the depths of her grief.

“I became extremely depressed. I felt an unbearable loneliness after what happened,” she said. “You get to the point where you can’t even share your words.” Because her blood pressure was still high, Ayesha was advised to stay on at the hospital until she was better. “It was my mindset, you know—it was not good,” she explained.

But with support and care from the hospital, she soon improved, and was able to go back home, where she is currently recovering, only returning to the hospital for ongoing health screening.

The care Ayesha received came under a programme known as the ‘Rosebud Service’ that was informally launched by the DMH in 2016, to support mothers who have recently lost an infant.

Consultant Obstetrician and Gynaecologist Dr. Prabodhana Ranaweera who set up the service, said he had observed the need for special psychosocial support during his internship in Colombo, as far back as 2007.

“We were often told that the mother is sad, but we didn’t have any streamlined counselling services to offer,” he told Roar Media. “It was always on my mind, that this is not the way it should happen.”

During his specialised training in the United Kingdom in 2013, Dr. Ranaweera identified the need for dedicated facilities and individual care to help mothers cope with their grief. And so, upon returning to Sri Lanka, he began to explore the possibility of setting up a similar service here, even with the limited resources available.

“We cannot allocate separate rooms within our capacity, but I first thought I’d see to the need for counselling,” Dr. Ranaweera said. “Somebody to take care of them [the mothers] individually.”

Drawing inspiration from his experiences in the U.K., ‘Rosebud Mothers’, as they are affectionately known in Sri Lanka, are identified by the sticker of a rosebud on the ‘Bed Head Ticket’ issued to every patient.

“It helps us with how we talk to the mother,” Nurse Rukshani Salwathura who works at Ward 03 of the ‘Special Baby Care Unit’ of the Hospital said. “We know we have to treat Rosebud Mothers with extra care, because their problems are different from the other mothers.”

The service was initially meant for mothers like Ayesha, who had delivered stillborn babies, as well as mothers who had experienced early neonatal death, which is the loss of a baby within the first week after delivery.

But it has since then it has expanded to cover early miscarriages—that is, the loss of a foetus during the first trimester.

“First trimester miscarriages are quite common and therefore, we focus on recurrent first trimester miscarriages—occurring for the third time, or beyond,” Dr. Ranaweera explained, adding that the Hospital did also consider any second trimester miscarriage. “The loss of a baby in the 12-24 week span is less common, and usually more serious,” he said.

The Rosebud Service also pays attention to mothers who are medically required to terminate their pregnancies—which is legally allowed in Sri Lanka, if the mother’s life is at risk.

Taking Things Forward

The Rosebud Service is still at nascent stages. Dr. Ranaweera was only able to organise training for a few volunteer nurses in 2015 with psychologist, Dr. Anula Rathnayake, who conducted the training for free.

Even now, at the DMH, the Rosebud Service has only two dedicated nurses who are known as ‘Bereavement Nursing Officers’, who are trained to offer emotional and practical support to those undergoing recent loss.

Though not extensive or officially recognised, the training has helped nurses with additional awareness and the skills with which to conduct their responsibilities with increased sensitivity.

The two Bereavement Nursing Officers associated with the Rosebud Service are now able to quickly identify when Rosebud Mothers require additional support and counselling, and even refer those in need of more serious counselling to the National Hospital of Sri Lanka (NHSL).

“Women are often blamed for the loss of a baby, or the mothers themselves feel guilty for what happened,” Dr. Ranaweera told Roar Media. “Through our service, we have managed to identify several instances of potential suicide, and have swiftly addressed the causes and helped the mothers.”

Nurse Salwathura also explained that while the service, which officially launched this year, had not previously taken the father’s feelings into account, “We now take the time to separately explain and talk to him,” explaining that the nurses were open to meeting other members of the family, too, if necessary, to offer support and help them understand the reasons for the loss—particularly that it is not the fault of the mothers.

With around 1, 000 deliveries a month, the Rosebud Service supports some 3-5 grieving mothers every month. It also investigates the cause of foetal death and even helps mothers plan out their next pregnancies.

“The introduction of this service has led to several mothers considering [another] pregnancy and even returning to the same hospital,” Dr. Ranaweera said, which was often not the case before, due to the perceived stigma with being known as a Rosebud Mother.

Very often, the traumatic experience of losing a child can make mothers fear their next pregnancy. “If they [have lost] their baby at around 30 weeks, during their next pregnancy they are scared again, especially around this time period,” Nurse Salwathura said. “We try our best to reduce any fears the mother may have during this trimester.”

In Ayesha’s case, she lost her baby during her very first pregnancy. But she has decided that if she conceives again, she will return to the DMH.

“I think all mothers should have something like this,” she said. “It was after this, this treatment and these facilities that I understood a way I could come to terms with what happened to me. I can be helped and fixed. I have support here,” she said.

\*—Name has been changed to protect identity.

Cover Image—Bastien Jaillot on Unsplash

Famously known as the 'Robin Hood of Sri Lanka', Saradiel gained notoriety for stealing from the rich and distributing to the poor. In the process, he gained the love of many, and earned the wrath of a few.

Today, Saradiel's tale is preserved for generations to come at the Saradiel Village in Mawanella.

Sri Lanka Railways is one of the last remaining railways in the world to continue to use the Tyer's Tablet system. Meant for use on single-line railway tracks, the ingenious system has been credited with helping prevent accidents on single-line railways around the world. A relic of a bygone era, other countries have gone on to adopt more advanced radio and electronic signalling methods. But in Sri Lanka, Tyer's Tablets still continue to do their job, day in, day out.

In an industry where body image is just as, if not more important as the music, three female musicians in Sri Lanka are making it about body positivity.

This is why they chose the most unusual—perhaps even the most unflattering name they could think of—‘The Singing Potatoes’, for their band. Their goal, to take a stand against body shaming by expressing unapologetic comfort in their own skin.

The acoustic trio was an accidental formation that came together for the first time at their school talent show in 2010. Years later, in 2016 they banded together again to record covers of the songs they love—a wide repertoire of English, Sinhala, and even Tamil and Hindi music.

In their truly independent fashion, they made their first public appearance on YouTube, choosing to record in offbeat locations, like inside cars.

Since then, they’ve moved on to playing at local events, concerts and most recently hosted their first unplugged concert ‘ප-අල-වෙනි එක’ (The First One) on August 19 to commemorate National Potato Day.

The Potatoes—Harini Dias, Chinthani Senevirathne, and Shenali Kirindagamage—all 23, play acoustic music but their genre is yet to be defined.

They each have different musical backgrounds and their own individual musical taste. Dias was part of her school choir and cites a range of influences, from pop, soul and R&B, with a particular love for singer-songwriter, Adele.

Senevirathne was a member of the school Sinhala drama circle, composing music for the performances they staged. Together with Kirindagamage, she was also a member of the school orchestra. Senevirathne’s favourite music artist is Indian musician A. R. Rahman, while Kirindagamage told Roar Media she had always had a love for rock music, particularly guitarists, like her favourite, Slash from Guns N’ Roses. All three unanimously agree that Sri Lankan music producer and artiste Charitha Attalage, is a favourite.

As a result of these diverse tastes, the band’s music is a fusion of sounds, with the trio actively seeking out new combinations.

Vocalist Dias quit her job as a trainee chef to become a full-time musician in 2016. “I learnt from my grandfather, and I think that is what influenced me to do music,” she said, explaining, however, that she had never expected to end up a musician.

She even had some opposition. Music was perceived as unsuitable a career for a young woman, and her family was also concerned about the unsavoury stereotypes associated with women in the industry in Sri Lanka. This meant that Dias only half-heartedly participated in her music lessons while growing up, on the assumption that she would not follow through.

But with time, her love for music ignited, and now, in addition to being the lead musician, she is instrumental in creating and fine-tuning melodies for the band. Dias also aspires to qualify as a choir trainer.

Senevirathne is the quieter of the three and plays lead guitar. But she is the lead vocalist when the band performs numbers in Sinhala. She attributes her talents to a “lucky genetic combination,” and training by her parents—her mother, a music lecturer at a leading university, and her father, an avid guitarist.

A student of Indian classical music, Senevirathne is also pursuing a degree in software engineering, whilst teaching guitar on the side.

Unlike her other bandmates, Kirindagamage did not consider music until recently. “I didn’t want to do music. I didn’t think I could even play the guitar!” she said. But after a few successful attempts on her brother’s guitar, her family encouraged her to consider lessons.

She now plays bass, and sometimes the lead guitar for the band, all the while balancing a full-time job and pursuing a degree in Business Management. She also takes on most of the band management and runs its social media platforms.

Globally, the unnecessary priority placed on ‘image’ over content has faced backlash —especially in the music industry. The fact that an artiste’s appearance is considered important to sell in a ‘popstar package’, and the exceptionally high pressure on females to maintain a publicly accepted profile has been repeatedly called out.

“It’s way easier to make yourself accomplished when you have the right skin colour, or the [conventionally] pretty face and the body,” Dias said matter-of-factly. “But it is hard to sustain this.”

The Singing Potatoes, instead, place great emphasis on being themselves, dressing in comfortable clothes and focusing, quite simply, on their music. One of the videos recorded in their early days as a band, in a car with poor lighting, dressed in their standard T-shirt and jeans, received quite a bit of traction. “We realised [then]that it is the content, the output that matters,” Kirindagamage said.

Even the name they chose for themselves was an attempt to dissociate from the negative connotation associated with being called a potato. The band uses this point to drive home the message of truly loving who you are.

And as Kirindagamage pointed out with a laugh, with a band named ‘The Singing Potatoes’, “you can’t make fun of us, as we’ve already done that [ourselves]!”

Play Video  
  
The Singing Potatoes performing a cover of ‘Kuweni’ by local musicians Ridma Weerawardene ft. Dinupa Kodagoda, at their first unplugged concert on August 19, 2019.

The girls also feel the offbeat band name has helped them truly connect with their fans—lovingly referred to as ‘french fries’.

Most social media posts to their fans begin with a ‘Dear Fries’, a play on their unusual name. But aside from the popularity brought about by their quirky name, the band is quick to point out the support of local artistes, like Viresh Cooray from the band ‘Daddy’, Ridma Weerawardena, Umara Sinhawansa and Monique Pallegama from ‘Gypsies’.

The band initially received some local exposure through an online music competition, Music Star, in 2018, where they placed third. But participating opened doors to a network of musicians and artistes in Sri Lanka’s industry who have been nothing but supportive.

It was these established artistes that also persuaded the trio to consider working on their own originals, resulting in their first concert last month, which gathered a crowd of over 200 people.

The event, which included performances from Viresh Cooray and Ridma Weerawardena, ended with the band receiving an offer from Viresh Cooray to produce and record their new original—which they immediately accepted.

But ‘The Singing Potatoes’ know that their biggest supporters are their family and friends. Three friends in particular form an integral part of their support team and take on administrative work, event management and promotional activities, while the families chip in, in every possible way.

While the band has not been vilely personally attacked on their appearance, there has been some pressure to “dress up”, they say. Despite this, the trio remains committed to their identity, choosing to be accepted for who they are.

People have also voiced concerns about the name of the band, questioning its sustainability in the long-term. “People have tried to convince us [to change our name], asking us how it would look calling ourselves ‘The Singing Potatoes’ when we are 40 years old,” Dias said.

“But we also have the music band, ‘Queen’ and even ‘Daddy’ in Sri Lanka!” said Kirindagamage, supremely confident about the use of unconventional names, and what it represents.

Fresh off the high from the success of their first concert, the band now plans to focus on themselves. “We have some originals lined up,” Kirindagamage said. “And we want to focus on us for a little while.”

Cover Image: (L-R) Harini Dias - Theewra/Kasun Chamara,   
Shenali Kirindigamage - Theewra/Banura Sooriyapperuma   
Chinthani Senevirathne - NowYouSeeMe/Yasansha Edirisinghe

Former National Badminton Champion, Chandrika de Silva recently represented Sri Lanka at the World Senior Badminton Championship. She won a silver and bronze in the over 40 age group, helping Sri Lanka finish at an overall 23rd place.

Japanese high school students repaired 46 wheelchairs for the victims of Sri Lanka's Easter Sunday Attacks. These students participated in the volunteer programme ‘The Flying Wheelchair Project’, which teams up with volunteer high school and university students, repairs wheelchairs and gifts them to various countries in need.

Push back against plans to expand the palm oil industry may lead to a loss of Rs. 400 million worth of plants. Environmentalists have opposed plans to expand cultivation, primarily due to concerns about the impact on the environment. Globally, oil palms are believed to be one of the key reasons for deforestation. But, is there more to it than meets the eye (in the local context)?

A young Sri Lankan girl, Chandeena and her family received a YouTube 'Gold Play Button' for their YouTube channel 'Village Life'. The channel features Chandeena's grandmother cooking outdoors to the sounds of nature, and has over 1 million subscribers.

Palmyra arrack will be exported from Northern Sri Lanka, for the first time in four decades. With more than 11 million trees growing in the country, the Palmyra palm is used to produce both edible and non-edible products. With further production and marketing Palmyra products can better be incorporated in Sri Lanka's export market.

Sri Lanka has its very own locally produced electric car and electric golf cart. Developed to provide Sri Lankans with a cost-effective and environmental friendly solution, the creator hopes that electric vehicles will be utilised more in the future.

In a school in Pallebowala, Kandy, a group of fighters are gearing up for the fight of their lives. Training dawn to dusk everyday, these young athletes have dedicated themselves to the art of Muay Thai. However, their chance to represent Sri Lanka remains uncertain.

Although Sri Lanka’s healthcare is hailed as being both universal and free, the system is burdened with long waiting hours, limited resources and limited access to doctors.

This is why it is not uncommon to see patients crowded outside national hospitals, that are often unable to provide them with anything but the most rudimentary facilities as they wait.

Since access to doctors is also limited, patients are forced to take time off work, and must often arrive at the hospital before dawn to secure a place for themselves.

Access to resources can also vary based on location, creating an uneven distribution of medicines and medical supplies, forcing patients to visit specific hospitals miles away from their homes.

Highly politicised trade unions also frequently launch ‘strike’ actions, leaving patients in the lurch. These factors undermine whatever success was envisioned with making healthcare ‘universal and free’ and creates a demand for private, often costly, healthcare.

Data compiled by the Department of Census and Statistics’s Household Income and Expenditure

Survey 2016 indicates that on average, a Sri Lankan household spends Rs. 2, 529 a month on personal care and health expenses.

These expenses include fees for private medical practitioners, to private hospitals and consultation fees for specialists. In a country that offers ‘free’ healthcare, this is quite an expense for a household to bear.

A report by the ILO indicated that even in 2009/2010 the desire for private healthcare was not limited to urban areas—payments to private health service providers are almost three times higher in rural Sri Lanka than in urban areas.

Private healthcare is also riddled with problems of its own. Long waiting hours are not uncommon even at private hospitals, although the facilities are much better. Furthermore, convenience comes at a significant cost.

Perhaps as a bid to remedy some of these issues, the healthcare industry has embraced technological disruptions that can address existing vacuums in the healthcare industry. Here are a few listed below:

Doc 990 is a venture by Dialog Axiata PLC and Asiri Hospital, with Durdans and Nawaloka hospitals coming on board later. The venture, Digital Health Private Limited, has since partnered with around 80 other hospitals, connecting customers to over 1, 500 doctors.

The service facilitates appointments with a doctor tied up to the service. By dialling 990, via its mobile app or through its website, users are also able to access a ‘tele-doctor’ service, which is not an alternative to visiting the doctor, but rather a general medical consultation call.

These ‘tele-bookings’ are a cheaper option, generally including only a booking charge and a subsidised doctor’s fee to account for the over the phone advice, as well as call charges which may vary depending on the user.

Payments through Doc 990 differ based on your choice of medium. Over-the-phone bookings require mobile payments, while the website and app allow you a broader range of options—you can choose to use your card, add it to your mobile phone bill or even pay through mobile wallet and cashless systems, such as FriMi and Genie.

Other services fall under the ‘healthcare brought to your doorstep’ initiative, which brings transport, home nursing, medication and health checkups to your home.

Overall, this particular platform increases convenience and accessibility, though with very little difference in the price of private healthcare.

Doc Call is a service Sri Lanka Telecom (SLT) has rolled out for its own users. Accessed by dialling 1247 (for SLT users), and 247 (for Mobitel—its subsidiary mobile service provider—users), it provides initial medical advice through government-registered doctors.

Doc Call is considerably cheap, at Rs. 1-2 per minute, plus Rs. 150 for doctor consultation fee, but is limited to being simply an over-the-phone medical consultancy option.

The service does not provide diagnosis or prescriptions, acting simply as a sort of help desk, advising users on what specialist doctor to contact and other general information.

Available 24/7, each caller is also only allowed a maximum of 10 minutes to speak with the government-registered doctor on call. Adding to its limitations, the service does not allow you a choice of doctor—callers are directed based on availability. And so, while it doesn’t offer in-depth solutions, it seems to be a useful gateway for quick medical advice.

A start-up by four Sri Lankans, oDoc is available as a mobile app that eliminates travel and waiting time through video or audio consultations, promising appointments with a general practitioner (GP) within three minutes and a specialist within 24 hours.

Working also as a B2B telemedicine app, oDoc capitalises on the unequal distribution of health insurance provided across Sri Lankan companies. It offers a corporate subscription package to which several companies have signed up. Overall, more than 15,000 Sri Lankans have used this service and currently, all publicly available reviews remain positive. Most recently, oDoc set up operations in India.

The app syncs your card to ensure payment for the appointment, and the overall cost is lower when compared to visits to the hospital. The service also considers a situation in which the video or telephone consultation is insufficient to provide an effective diagnosis and is better converted to a hospital visit—in the event this happens, the patient is notified, does not get charged for the appointment, and oDoc pays the doctor for the time taken.

First established as a web service in 2012, MyDoctor.lk launched a corresponding mobile app in 2017. The service facilitates medical advice, channels doctors and provides pharmaceutical and laboratory-related services.

Signing up with MyDoctor.lk for an annual package provides users with discounts on certain services, ranging from diabetic clinics and laboratory investigations to hospital room rates, at select hospitals.

Dialog users can dial 2407 while other service providers can connect by calling +94 117 24 7000, where, acting as an ‘initial guide’, medical advice, prescriptions and laboratory test assessments are dispensed through doctors whose profiles are available on the website.

A doctor’s appointment can be booked through the website with a choice of doctor and hospital, while the app provides a broader range of services. Through the app, you can chat with a doctor, have your medicines delivered to your doorstep and schedule lab tests at the nearest lab or at your own home.

The service can sometimes be confusing, with certain services accessible over the phone, some others through its website, although all of its services are available on its mobile app.

Available for Android and IOS users, the app sets up your very own health profile, which stores and maintains health records with a panel of experts to guide you in health and wellness. For the data lovers, this profile will also present health data in a graphical and numerical format in order to evaluate trends over a period of time.

Another trend taking over Sri Lanka, in the area of healthcare, is fitness and wellness. GOYO is an app that helps users accumulate 'active' minutes based on the recommendation of the World Health Organisation (WHO), the American Healthcare Council (AHC) and local institutes like the Diabetes Association of Sri Lanka.

The app sets up a fitness profile, tracks your activity statistics and sets challenges with rewards to the successful—for example, in November 2018, 100 lucky GOYO winners were awarded a voucher for fresh produce at Keells Super.

You can choose to use the app unaided or along with ‘GOYO Wearable’ – a band with additional tracking features and the ability to gather data on heart rate and sleeping patterns. The app is free, but the GOYO Wearable band is priced at Rs. 4, 990.

GOYO has amassed over 30,000 subscribers, each competing to score active minutes and stay fit.

Ayubo.life is a wellness app created by Hemas Holdings PLC that helps you stay on course with your exercise, nutrition and relaxation goals. The app can be connected to any wearable and offers rewards for health-related progress.

It maintains a wellness dashboard, offers structured workouts and nutrition programmes. For instance, a three month online high-intensity training programme to build muscle can be purchased for Rs. 300. This programme, run by fitness influencers Lee and Gaia can be paid for through your Dialog bill or via card payment.

The app also provides diets and healthy recipes to explore, and online yoga and audio booklets to stimulate the mind. In addition, it provides access to medicine and healthcare—users can channel or video call a doctor and order medicinal products through an available prescription.

This app seems to touch on a broader idea of wellness, advocating for a balance in all aspects of life. In a country still struggling to place equal importance to both physical and mental aspects of wellbeing, this seems like a step in the right direction.

It would be interesting to see the app amped up with additional features on mental wellbeing, like meditation and mental exercises as well as activities based on psychology and cognitive behavioural therapy, to name a few.

Released in February 2019, Fitzky is a website and location-based app connecting users with multiple options of gyms and fitness classes in Sri Lanka. You can choose a gym or classes such as yoga, CrossFit, Zumba or swimming.

The app provides information on class times, prices and also provides you with the option of making a booking. Interestingly, users can also choose to pay for time at the gym by the minute, instead of obtaining an overall membership.

The app itself is free and payments only need to be made based on the choice of workout. Launched early this year, reviews on the app’s performance is limited. However, it is one of the few apps that acts as a marketplace for a variety of fitness options in Colombo and its suburbs.

Sri Lanka is clearly taking a place in an already developing world of digital healthcare, with telemedicine and video consultations allowing for increased access to healthcare. Although yet to make waves in Sri Lanka, artificial intelligence is improving medical tests in other countries —leading to better medical solutions, and inventions such as Bluetooth-enabled smart inhalers, 3D implants and virtual caregivers—changing the industry as we know it.

In early 2019, the World Health Organization (WHO) released its draft Global Strategy on Digital Health, which places digital healthcare in a leading role to affordable and universal access to care, worldwide.

While the strategy is aimed at the public sector, universal healthcare can only be achieved with the combined work of all parties involved. Sri Lanka still lags in this regard. Digital solutions in public healthcare are limited to equipment and service provision, and the industry’s public and private sector remains fragmented.

This recent growth of digital ventures points to a growing demand for convenience, cost-effectiveness and better accessibility. Collaboration between the public and private sectors and increased state investment in digital health may be the next steps needed to improve access to efficient healthcare equally, across the island.

Cover image—India Health Link

Sri Lankans will now be able to view public transportation routes on Google Maps. The Google Transit tool integrated into the app provides information on routes, schedules and stops of buses and trains in the country. While only still available in the Western Province, it will soon be accessible across the Island.