

Spice/Tharunyata Hetak in Service Training for English Teachers in Killinochchi and Mullaitivu, March 2013.



We left Colombo early in the morning of St. Patrick's Day, Sunday 17th March. The irony of this lies in the fact that both Sri Lanka and the Republic of Ireland are almost the same size (Sri Lanka is a little smaller) and both countries have fought a long standing wars purportedly on socio-economic grounds. In both cases, a minority, Protestants in Ireland and Tamils in Sri Lanka had created an economic power base that out-performed the aspirations of the majority. In Ireland, this was the Catholic numerical superiority and in Sri Lanka the Sinhala majority.

We were bound for Killinochchi located three hundred kilometres to the north, situated in the "Dry Zone" and well in truly in the "Vanni". We were travelling north in a vehicle of "The Presidential Secretariat" just a couple of months short of the 4 year end to the gruelling civil war that many had branded as "unwinnable". Killinochchi had served as the capital of the Elam state until it was vacated during the second battle of Killinochchi when the Sri Lankan Army's 57th and 58th Divisions defeated the LTTE in January 2009. Capturing the town had not been an easy task; when the LTTE withdrew the damage was considerable. The infrastructure was destroyed due to aerial bombardment as well



as heavy shelling.

Mohan Samarasine founder and Chairman of the "Spice" charity had chosen the area because of the deprivations it had suffered during the war. Schools had been shut down in the area and only reopened in 2010. The goal of the teacher training programme was to introduce the teachers in the area to new and powerful methods of furthering spoken English by developing listening and speaking skills. Curiously, it was English itself that lay as one of the sores that gave rise to tensions between the Tamil and Sinhala community, many, many years before. Many in the "International Community" mark the conflict as an ethnic conflict; I suspect this is a misrepresentation of events.

There had been no apparent polarisation when Ponnambalam Arunachalam, a Tamil had been voted in as the “Sinhala-Tamil” representative to the “All Ceylon State Council” in 1919. Many roots of this war were created by the policies of the British Colonial Administration that ruled the island from 1815 to Independence in 1948. In order to maintain law and order the British had adopted a policy of “*divide et imperia*,” or divide and rule. This happened with the Protestants in Ireland, the Tamils in Ceylon and several other areas where power struggles emanated after independence.

The Sri Lanka Tamils, comprising some 12% of the population migrated to the island a considerable time after the Sinhala migration that arrived in circa 6th century BC from northern India. Because of the rigours of the Hindu caste system, many Tamils converted to Christianity. Many mission schools flourished island wide, and it was there the Tamils received an education that was better than the system available to the Sinhala population. They learned to speak English; not only did they provide the British with a clerical class; some went on to higher education and took leading place in the lucrative professions like law and medicine. Moreover, they were also remarkably successful in business and as late as 1980 we find that 80% of wholesale businesses and 60% of retail were owned and operated by Tamils in the Colombo area. The British “planters” did not favour the majority “Singhalese”. These people were too independently minded and were thought of as unreliable workers. Instead, they imported indentured labour from Tamil Nadu, who were to further increase the political turmoil, as they were not regarded as citizens of the country. With their foreign workers, the planters were able to maintain the policy of divide and rule, which kept the Sinhala population off the estates.

The Tamil bias infuriated the majority Sinhala population. Like the Catholics in Ireland the majority population found itself playing a lesser role in the country they felt was their own. It could have been overcome, but the communal representative system was to provide a massive stumbling block that is only now is hopefully beginning to unravel itself. The rising Sinhala politicians saw this economic disparity. They could see that a major reason for the Tamil success was the English language; they realised if that hurdle were abolished and Sinhala introduced as the official state language the speakers of that language would then be able to take their rightful place as economically dominant majority of the population. In 1936, the "State Council" moved to introduce Sinhala as the official language of the courts and Government in rural areas. Such actions were popular with the elitist politicians, themselves English speakers, who were to provide the Governments of post-colonial Ceylon. Junius Richard Jayewardene took up this cudgel in 1944.

It was SWRD Bandaranaike Administration that introduced the “Sinhala Only Act” of 1956. The idea was to level the political playing field between the Tamil and the Sinhala. Instead of nurturing a “one Ceylon policy” that would have grown and developed the island nation, the politicians continued the polarization policies favoured by their late British Masters. The result has been the economic and political turmoil that we have seen emerge over the last 50 plus years.

The Tamils saw their financial freedoms curbed, and resentment began to grow between the two populations. Bandaranaike was assassinated by a Buddhist Monk at his residence in Rosemead Place on September 25th 1959. After the Dahanayake Government fell, it was his widow Srimavo, who became leader of the SLFP and subsequent Prime-Minister. Her Government introduced a quota to limit the number of University places available to Tamils in the lucrative science based subjects which included Medicine and Engineering. The policy wavered under Tamil protest, but the

seeds of discord had been sown. The autonomous Tamil speaking province in the north was floated in the early 1970s but due to Sinhala clamour, principally on the part of the JVP, was pulled. The creation of the Secessionist State of Bangladesh in 1971 gave Tamil youth aspirations for the possibility of a separate autonomous region in the North. Politicians in the Indian State of Tamil Nadu saw opportunities to apply pressure on New Delhi, whilst professionals resident in the UK began to raise funds to finance this dream of Eelam and, so the seeds of war were sown.

Mrs. Bandaranaike's Buddhist self-sufficiency and non-aligned policies lent themselves remarkably well to a Marxist perspective, which was unpopular with the West and this isolated Sri Lanka. Job opportunities were scarce, and the young Tamils and Sinhala were denied access to employment. Unemployment rose which compounded racial tensions. In the Tamil community, the educated Christians came from the Vellala caste; LTTE leader Prabhakaran was a Christian, not a Hindu. If the educated higher castes had given more room to the lower castes, there would not have been a body of disaffected youth who channelled their anger into violence and made up the cadres of the LTTE and other terrorist groups. There is an example here that the developed countries of the West need to consider in these present times of economic upheaval.

In the elections of 1977 Junius Jayewardene's UNP, won a decisive victory and the controlled economic policies of the past were replaced by capitalistic policies that introduced the World Bank and the IMF onto the scene. Along with this came an open door policy towards imported consumer goods, devaluation of the rupee, privatization of the state sector and all the other policies dictated by the globalization inherent in an American dominated economic policy. Naturally, under such a system the welfare state is the first to suffer. The education budget was cut by a quarter and government spending on food subsidies almost halved in the years 1978-1980. Such cuts made Sri Lanka open to western banking practices and thus a good market for profitable foreign loans. These policies widened the inequalities as a new class of entrepreneurs came to the fore with a focus on external related trade.

Today Tamil enjoys equal status with Sinhala as an official language. It is now a national language in Sri Lanka, a position that it does not hold in India where 60,000,000 Tamil speakers make do with the status of users of a regional language. It was the break-away question that dragged India into the Sri Lanka Conflict. Prime-Minister Indira Gandhi pursued a two faced approach towards Sri Lanka. On one hand, she condemned secessionist moves on the part of the Tamils, but on the other she was secretly financing, training and advising the guerrillas. The Indian Intelligence Service (RAW) played an active part in these developments. Mrs. Gandhi was to pay with her own life at the hands of interests wanting to break away from the Indian State. Her intervention in Sikh nationalist politics cost her dearly! Her Prime Minister son Rajiv dictated policy to the Sri Lankan Government, who came within a hairbreadth of defeating the LTTE under Operation Liberation, which was abruptly curtailed in June 1987. The current Minister of Defence Gotabaya Rajapaksa played a role in this operation; the collapse of "Operation Liberation" gave rise to the introduction of the "India Peace Keeping Force", with horrific results to the country. The Sri Lankan Government found itself fighting an all-out insurrection in the North, and a JVP led rebellion in the South; this was triggered by the presence of the so called Indian Peace Keepers in the north.

English, unlike Tamil is no longer an official language in Sri Lanka, and this has been the case for over 50 years. In some ways, the political treatment of the language has contributed to events that gave

rise to the Civil War that started “Black July” 1983. Ironically, the small smart set elitists, domiciled in Colombo still use English as their language of preference. This group has attended exclusive colleges such as Royal College Colombo or received part if not all of their education overseas. For example Namal Rajapaksa, MP for Hambantota, the President’s son studied law at Cardiff University and later London City University. It’s interesting to note that one of the first questions Sri Lankans ask each other is “*where did you go to school?*”

The A9 Kandy to Jaffna road, improves significantly after Vavuniya, recently resurfaced, it provides a quick link to Jaffna. Beside the road runs the railway line, which too is being rebuilt to provide even better access to the region. As we drove north hordes of white butterflies blew across the road, often smashing into the vehicle’s windscreen¹ Strangely when we returned south less than two weeks later, none were to be seen. The old LTTE capital of Killinochchi is now a bustling site of redevelopment, spread out straddling the road.



Here we see the newly reconstructed

Killinochchi Hospital.

The A9 heads on north to Elephant Pass, the site of yet another bloody battle, and eventually to Jaffna.

The town’s old water tower has been upended by explosives and lies as a stark reminder of the destruction metered out at the hands of the “Tamil Tigers”. Today it boasts two or three hotels, signifying it is opening up to visitors once again. We stayed at the 58 Division Guest bungalow that sits beside a small river which is teeming with wild life. On the bank opposite the bungalow lives a small crocodile. Crocodiles like snakes take a long time to digest food and the neighbour across the water did not seem to be particularly active. Occasionally he would leave his cave and sun himself lazily observing the plentiful bird life surrounding his habitat. Crocodiles can move at astonishing speed when hunting for food so the dogs, cats and occasional mongoose that stalk the river bank could all provide a tasty snack if necessary. Storks strutted past his front door searching for fish; a pair of kingfishers occasionally flashed past in a stunning blaze of turquoise, golden orioles were occasionally to be sighted along with an elegant long tailed species, golden yellow in colour. Sitting on the veranda watching all this activity, was a memorable treat in itself. So, too, was the steady stream of meals including numerous teas and coffees supplied by the custodian “Sisera” and his team from the Officers’ Mess. Sitting in such a lovely yet simple location made it difficult to realize that all of this had once been a war zone.

The Spice/Tharunyata Hetak Teachers Training project started on Monday 18th March at the “Zonal Education Office.” There were 22 participants.” One of the participants Mr. V.Mohnaraj came all the way from Mullivatu, a 200 rupee and hour bus ride away. It was suggested he cease journeying to Killinochchi and instead re-join the Programme when it recommenced the following Monday. He did leave the Killinochchi Training but sadly did not show up in Mullaitivu the following week.

The first day was devoted to discussing problems faced by the English teachers in the classroom situation. By far the biggest challenge was the lack of resources devoted to the schools for English teaching. Most of the primary schools lacked qualified teachers, so the onus fell on the secondary sector for the introduction and subsequent teaching of English. This made it extremely difficult for the participants to follow the syllabus. Overall there seemed to be a lack of serious commitment on the part of many of the students. Until English becomes a compulsory subject in the system, this difficulty will continue. Most families in the area depended on rice production or in some cases fishing for subsistence. This in the parents’ eyes was the focus of life, and they saw little point in encouraging their children to study a language that had little to do with the family’s day to day existence. The only way this attitude will change will be widening of economic opportunities and a political will on the part of the teachers themselves because it they who will have to educate the parents in the benefits derived by the children in learning the language. The political will was somewhat lacking as many teachers feel they have little voice in the birthing of change in their region. If they do not confront the authorities and speak up for better conditions it is unlikely the current situation will change very much.

One of the most pressing issues stressed in the training was that the tendency to revert to L1 in monolingual classes. This was to be discouraged. The purpose of the Spice training Programme was to emphasise the skills of listening and speaking to facilitate the learning of spoken English. To achieve this objective, it was stressed that carrots were much stronger motivating tools than sticks. Carrots motivate the students to speak another language; this makes the learning environment both high energy and fun. A tremendous emphasis was placed on games and other activities that would stimulate participants to speak. For many of the children, the only experience of listening to someone speaking English would come by interaction with their own teachers. Hopefully they would learn from them; unfortunately they would also make the same mistakes, unfortunately, only worse. If the teachers own knowledge of English was limited, the problem would reverberate through the system creating a bastardised form of language which would be increasingly difficult to understand. It is, therefore, paramount the teachers themselves speak an acceptable form of Sri Lankan English conforming to recognized grammatical rules. The purpose of a language is to communicate and most importantly not to be misunderstood. In too many cases, this is not happening. The Teachers own communication skills need to be enhanced. An enthusiastic teacher can do a lot to help him or herself by repeated exposure to the language. It is not enough to do this on an occasional basis; the exposure needs to be daily. The Internet is an invaluable resource that enables people to listen to spoken English and thanks to Skype and other voice based programs to speak it, too. Those unable to use a computer and therefore access the World Wide Web are the 21st centuries’ variant of illiterates. All participants who were computer disabled were urged to attend IT course offered by the Zonal Educational Agencies as soon as possible.

Other suggestions included exposure to the English media via newspapers, radio and TV. Sri Lanka is fortunate as it has extensive coverage in all three areas. Not only do teachers need to make use of these invaluable resources themselves, but they must encourage their students to do so as well.

The Course explored methodologies via micro teaching and demonstration lessons for which their team gained points. At the end of the training, the team with the highest score was awarded a prize. All these techniques were demonstrated experientially so the teachers could include such methodologies into their own classrooms. The importance of listening and speaking skills was truly emphasised as was the importance of producing formal lesson plans. Games also were introduced as a means of starting lessons that put the students in an energized and motivated state from the outset. The actual learning process is enhanced as the class is sharp and alive and thus more open to take in new material. The idea of teams also played a role in this process. Not only are classes divided into manageable sized groups, each with a team leader, who can assist the teacher in classroom preparation and set-up, but also the concept creates an atmosphere of competition which is hugely popular with learners of all ages. All this is a far cry from the time honoured and highly restrictive practice of slavishly following the text book, which by the very nature of the exercise emphasises reading and writing and side-line the communicatively more fundamental skills of listening and speaking. Although such an approach is much easier for the teacher, it is far less useful to the student!

Day three of the training focused on the creation and production of visual aid materials." A picture is" truly "worth a 1000 words" when L1 is discouraged in the classroom. This involved planning and producing lessons built around the use of pictures, word and flash cards. Each group was charged with creating a lesson built around visual aids.

On Day 4 time was also devoted to exploring how spoken English could be encouraged by means of extra curricula activities. How to set-up and use an English Club which met on a regular basis with the intention of generating interest in learning English through drama, music, songs and games. Teachers who already used such a scheme were singled out to tell others on how to set-up such a club. An extension of the English Club is the English Camp, where the aforementioned activities can be incorporated into an intensive one or two day out of school event. Teachers were encouraged to introduce these concepts into their own school settings.

On Day 5, test procedures designed to assess competency in spoken English were also examined. Various ways of testing were explored. It was stressed that competency in spoken English can only be tested by speaking the language. Possible tests ranging from an oral exam comprising several questions to open discussion of a picture or playing a board game that required students to discuss varying topics when they landed on a space determined by the throw of a dice. All tests have to be spontaneous to gauge a true level of ability. The teachers tested themselves by discussing two different pictures which were given to them. In a role play situation, half the group acted as teachers and the other half as students. Teachers asked questions and engaged the students in conversation for up to two minutes. Test criteria were determined, and everybody was marked out of 20 according to the criteria. Scores varied widely, however, due to individual interpretation of the criteria. In future, more time needs to be devoted to answering the question of exactly what is being tested when it comes to spoken English. Clearly listening and speaking are fundamental skills. Listening requires a degree of patience and speaking requires fluency, which can further be broken

down into use of language and proper use of grammatical structure as well as pronunciation; making it a basic communication skill that requires what is being said, by the speaker, to be understood by the listener.

The Training ended on Friday 22nd March. The winning team was awarded the prize of an umbrella each. Hopefully the message stressing that language learning is all about communication got across; if you are not mis-understood you are communicating. A carrot is better than a stick when it comes to motivating the learning process; over correcting mistakes is to be discouraged because it inhibits students from speaking and participating in the lesson. The lesson is a high energy and often times noisy occurrence. An air of excitement is maintained by the teacher insisting all communication be in L2 and his/her methods of generating speech needs to come from unexpected places. If the student is unsure of who is to speak next, he will listen more carefully, because he will always be uncertain when his turn will come.

Many of the teachers attend courses like this one under the auspices of Spice to listen to and interact with native speakers of English. True, they want to learn from the native speaker, but they also need to be able to determine how well they can communicate with them. Bear in mind this will be the first time some of these adults have had any extended conversation with someone who speaks English as a “Mother tongue.” In some senses, the aims of the Spice programme and that of the attending teachers are at odds. In my opinion this can be taken to a higher level by selecting suitable Sri Lankan teachers and mixing them with native speakers to teach workshops similar to this one. The co-operative mix stretches the teachers’ own language skills, so true communication is established.

A significant purpose of these trainings is to identify the future leaders amongst the teachers attending. These are encouraged to set-up and develop courses in spoken English similar to this one. The native or gap year students with basic training in TEFL or TESOL can be assigned to the courses to assist the local teachers. The potential leaders in Killinochchi are:

- Kathy Yasotharan K/N Kanagapuram M.V
- P. Ganeshan Co-ordinator
- C.S. Sivakumar K/N Iranaitivo RCTM School
- T.S. Sivakumar K/N Nachikuda GMM School
- S. Winson M/U Mallavi Central College (He is a native of Mannar and could be useful to Anthony Croos. He also produces very acceptable music!)

A teaching outline of the Course content is available. If you would like a copy, please e-mail me and I can send the document to you as an attachment. Everyone is free to use the material, as long as it is properly attributed.

Saturday 23rd March. Trip to Mannar.

We drove back down the A9 to Vavuniya and enjoyed lunch at the “Nelli” Hotel. This was the second lunch visit to this hotel. We had first eaten there on the first drive north the week before.

After lunch, we took gifts to the girls 'orphanage organized under the patronage of the First Lady, Shiranthi Rajapaksa, who had worked in the field of child psychology herself. These girls ranging in age from 5 to 16 had experienced traumatising events that took their parents from them during the Civil War. In some cases not only are physical wounds visible but also much deeper damage at a psychological level.

The A.30 and then A.14 routes to the Mannar peninsula are in considerably poorer condition than the new highway to Jaffna. There were many potholes and poor surfacing which made the trip uncomfortable. Mannar is the most westerly point in Sri Lanka and used to serve as the link port to India via Dhanuskodi a town on Raeswaram Island, which lies only 30 kilometres away. It has the only land border between Sri Lanka and Indian Tamil Nadu, which is a 30 metre stretch of sand in the Palk straits. The railway services ceased in 1964 after a devastating cyclone destroyed a train from Madras (Chennai), killing all 115 passengers and crew. Services resumed but halted again due to the hostilities that erupted in 1982. India has plans to dredge the area around Adam's Bridge to facilitate shipping in the area. This project has been opposed by many. There are said to be valuable mineral deposits in the area and a chance of oil. Such claims will



increase tensions between India and Sri Lanka.

Mannar is known for its baobab trees, Mannar ponies (really donkeys) and Portuguese Fort.



The tree, a native of Africa, was introduced to the area by Arab sailors who would have come to the region because of its once famous pearl beds. The biggest tree of all in Mannar has a

circumference of 19.51 and is reputed to have been planted in 1477, making it 536 years old. The odd thing about these rare trees is their girth usually exceeds their height.

The Mannar Fort was built by the Portuguese in 1560 and seized by the Dutch 100 years later. The walls are still intact, but the inside of the buildings has fallen into disrepair. The Chapel is still there; it has memorial stones to individuals who died whilst serving in Mannar during the Dutch period of occupancy.



The altar and pulpit of the Dutch Church in the Fort are still relatively intact.

Mannar is a Tamil area that boasts many churches, temples and mosques. The majority of the population is Catholic; the nearby Maddhu Church is a place of pilgrimage for many Christians who travel far and wide to pay homage to our lady of Maddhu. The earth here is considered to have medicinal properties, being particularly beneficial for snake bites. It is eagerly collected by pilgrims as a sacred memento of their visit. The Church served as a refugee centre during the



war

Closer to the peninsula is the Ketheswaram Temple, which is one of the most respected Lord Shiva Temples of worship in all of Sri Lanka. The temple was largely destroyed by the Portuguese



but rebuilt during British rule.

We stayed in an army bungalow whilst in Mannar and met with Anthony Croos on the morning of 24th March. The Tri-lingual initiative is one of the recommendations of President Rajapaksa's "Lessons Learned and Reconciliation Commission," and Anthony Croos is the tri-lingual coordinator for the area. A Press release from the Department of Information dated January 25th stated that India and Sri Lanka are to sign a Memorandum of Understanding to bring this into being.

Sri Lanka to sign MoU with India for trilingual assistance

Sri Lanka is to obtain Technical assistance from the Govt of India for its efforts to make the country trilingual. Presidential initiative for Trilingual Sri Lanka aims to make every Sri Lankan citizen knowledgeable in Sinhala, Tamil and English. The 10 year National Plan for a Trilingual Sri Lanka drawn up for the purpose sets the foundation for a national initiative to encourage the acquisition of trilingual skills and competencies by all citizens of the country.

Sunil Fernando (President's Advisor and Coordinator of the Presidential Task Force on the teaching of English said yesterday. (25/1/2013)

"All sectors in Sri Lanka have to play vital roles to implement these decisions and to convert Sri Lanka into a trilingual country. The education system too has a great responsibility in this effort and as heads of the Sri Lankan education sector, we promise to extend our maximum support to implement these decisions," he added.

Fernando was addressing a workshop on 'Teaching and Learning through the eyes of Japanese Volunteers' jointly organised by the Presidential Initiative for a Trilingual Sri Lanka, Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), Education Ministry, National Institute of Education (NIE) and the Bandaranaike Centre for International Studies (BCIS). It was facilitated by the S W R D Bandaranaike National Memorial Foundation.

The 10 Year National Master Plan for a Trilingual Sri Lanka has provided equal opportunities for all Sri Lankans to obtain skills in Sinhala and Tamil as languages of communication and debate with English as a life skill at levels suitable for individual needs and ambitions.

"There is no need to follow foreign experts, methods and theories to teach the English language to the Sri Lankan students.

Sri Lanka has a number of the cleverest English teachers coming from Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim families. They know the correct way to teach the English language to the students. Measures should be taken to relax the administrative rules and regulations governing teachers and officials attached to the Education sector of Sri Lanka.

Anthony Croos completed a City and Guilds Certification in East Ham, London and as the Tri-lingual coordinator in the Mannar Zone is now enthusiastic about running a "Spoken English" training programme for teachers in the region. As the coordinator he must by Sunil Fernando's definition be "*one the cleverest English teachers....who knows the correct way to teach the English language to the students.*" As such it is important that he is encouraged in every way. Clearly he does not need a "*foreign expert*" to aid in his endeavours, but it would be helpful to provide him with one or two gap year native speakers to help him run his course. As a tri-lingual coordinator, hopefully, he is in a position to influence those with political will, including Mr. Fernando to make English a compulsory subject in the school curriculum and thus ease the professional load of English teachers all over Sri Lanka. Then, truly will English will be a tool for debate thus providing life skills at levels suitable for individual needs and ambitions.

After leaving Mannar we drove back to Killinochchi for lunch and to pick up our Mr. "Fix-it" Nishanta. He provided the photocopies so necessary for classes to continue, but also liberally dispensed refreshments to students in the breaks, miraculously producing cups of tea without sugar for me, but more than that he only had to whisper in the ear of guards manning check points and they would open as if by magic to let us pass. As a member of the Presidential Security brigade he was guardian and gatekeeper, two functions that made the trip a great deal easier. With him on board we drove to Mullaitivu.

Mullaitivu shows more poignant signs of the local conflict, providing a stark contrast to Killinochchi. Many of the roads are being rebuilt and many damaged and destroyed buildings litter the landscape. There is no hotel in the town, so once more we were to be guests of the army, in this the military heartland of the recently defeated LTTE. The army was still constructing their guest house in town. It was not felt to be suitable accommodation although we enjoyed a delicious dinner with the Brigadier. He brought pressure on the SLA to come up with a better alternative. So the night of March 24th was spent at the very comfortable Green House, just around the corner from the GOC's residence in the military containment zone located some distance from the town itself. This luxury was to be ours for only one night, as on the Monday we moved to a nearby SLA bungalow, which was not nearly so elaborate. Still the bedroom had an air conditioner and the yard contained several mature mango trees. Sadly there was no crocodile infested river, here.

The Teachers' Training Course began on Monday 25th at the recently constructed Mullaitivu Mahavidyalay M School. It was built under the auspices of UNICEF, and funded by the Cathal Ryan Trust.

"In Feb 2011 at the UN General Assembly in New York actress Danielle Ryan announced that the Cathal Ryan Trust, set up in memory of her late father, was giving \$14 million to help children in Sri Lanka following the bitter war which ended in May 2009 after 26 years. The donation is being channelled through UNICEF Ireland and is one of the biggest personal donations the UN Body has ever received. It will fund schools and maternity hospitals in Four of the worst effected towns in the main post-conflict area in the North of Sri Lanka." <http://www.unicef.ie/The-Cathal-Ryan-Trust-104.aspx>

Danielle's mother is Tess de Kretzer, who is herself from Sri Lanka but presently lives in Belgium. She met and married Cathal Ryan, son on Irish billionaire and founder of low cost airline Ryanair, Tony Ryan. Cathal spent several years in Sri Lanka flying for Air Lanka, where he became one of the youngest 747 Captains ever. Cathal, returned to Ireland in 1985 when his father set-up Ryanair. He worked both on the executive board and as a pilot until he resigned in 2002. By this time he had become a billionaire himself, due to the incredible success of Ryanair. He went on to involve himself in the launch of Singapore based Tiger Air, a low cost airline based on the Ryanair model. Cathal Ryan died of cancer in 2007, a surprising 10 weeks after his father, Tony Ryan died of pancreatic cancer. Cathal's estate was valued at Euro 250 million on his death; his brother and daughter Danielle worked with family members to set-up a trust to give some of this money back to Sri Lanka.

The Course starting on March 25th began with 16 participants; this number grew to 19 as the week progressed. Tuesday the 26th was Full Moon or 'Poya Day'. In Sri Lanka 'Poya days' are public holidays. Participants, however, universally agreed to come in on their day off, for which Spice rewarded them with a lunch. The material covered was the same as in Killinochchi, except it all had to be condensed in to four days rather than 5. The reason for this was Friday 29th was 'Good Friday'. Good Friday is also a public holiday in stark contrast to the custom in entirely Christian dominated countries like England and the Republic of Ireland. Besides many teachers had homes and families in faraway Jaffna, understandably they wanted to spend the long week-end with them. The course ended on Maundy Thursday, the 28th of March.

On Tuesday 26th March Namal Rajapaksa, MP son and apparent heir of President Rajapaksa, visited the area.



A tea was held in his honour at General Leonard Mark's house before the party departed for Colombo by helicopter. The General's house is located on the inner shore of Nanthikadal lagoon. It was on these very beaches that LTTE leader Velupillai Prabhakaran was shot by the Sri Lankan Army as he attempted to flee the area on 18th May 2009. This brought the long standing war to a thankful end. An unwinnable war had been won and Namal's father has been idolized by many Sri Lankans for at last bringing peace to their troubled land.

Namal Rajapaksa heads the "Tharunyata Hetak", translated "Future for Youth", an organization that is co-chaired by his younger brother Yositha, who is a captain in the Navy. The mission statement on the organisation's website states:

The 'Tharunyata Hetak' youth organization is committed to unite, develop and nurture the youth of Sri Lanka together in the name of peace.

The 'Tharunyata Hetak' youth organization works towards creating bonds between the youth of Sri Lanka with mutual understanding, national patriotism and development highlighting significant qualities of goodwill, friendship and harmony. Carving a peaceful environment among the youth of Sri Lanka regardless of political geographical location, economic differences, religion or race is the motto of this enlightening youth association.

On Wednesday 27th March we visited some of the sites left over from the war. The last days and weeks of the war were fought out in this the area.



The only journalists embedded in the SLA came from India. This report by Muralidhan Reddy appeared in "Frontline Magazine, in their June 6th 2009 edition.

"The accounts of the last hours provided by the civilians by and large tallied with the evidence that has surfaced so far. The detention of Sea Tiger chief Soosai's family by the Navy on May 15/16 and the discovery of Prabakaran's aged parents in a camp by the military on May 27 provided the ultimate proof that the Tigers had decided to spare the lives of the civilians they held.

The May 15 decision of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) – the only outfit present inside the war zone until four days before the war ended – to suspend humanitarian operations inside the Tiger-held territory proved beyond doubt that the overwhelming majority of the civilians were out of the battle zone and that the military and the Tigers were engaged in no-holds-barred fight. The beaming faces of the commanders and troops spoke volumes about the fate that awaited the Tigers.

On May 16, President Rajapaksa declared at the G-11 Summit in Jordan that the LTTE had been defeated, even as troops moved in to flush out the remaining Tiger cadre and leaders holed up in the area. On that day the number of civilians who fled to the government-controlled territory touched 20,000, while over 30,000 waited to cross over...Ending all suspense and speculation, the government announced on May 19 afternoon that its troops had recovered the bodies of Prabakaran and Soosai. The troops found Prabakaran's bullet-ridden body on the bank of the Nanthikadal lagoon, and the announcement was made after it was identified by Vinayagamoorthy Muralitharan ('Col.' Karuna), Minister in the Rajapaksa government and former Tiger commander who broke ranks with the LTTE in 2004, and by Daya Master, LTTE media coordinator who left the war zone along with thousands of fleeing civilians and surrendered to the military on April 21.

Two hours before the announcement, Rajapaksa, in an address to Parliament, said the island nation had been freed from the clutches of separatist terrorism and the need of the hour was to ensure full rights to the Tamils in the country, with a home-grown solution acceptable to all. He made no reference to the LTTE chief.

The appeal made little difference to the jubilant mood across the island. In contrast, reports from Tamil- and Muslim-dominated areas spoke of a sombre and sullen atmosphere.

This correspondent, returning from Anuradhapura in the war zone, witnessed people bursting crackers and distributing sweets as the state-owned television channel, Rupavahini, flashed images of Prabakaran's body."

The LTTE's operations centre is located deep in the jungle, the thick trees providing forest cover from observation from the air. The bunker is a four storey upside down house buried, except for the first floor deep underground. It was an oppressive place that reeked of ammonia and sensed of death. It was fascinating to observe, however, how well Mansion House polished the floor appeared to be. This unusual building was almost redolent of a Tea Estate Manager's bungalow! It was a relief to leave this grim reminder of an era that brought terrible suffering to the people of Sri Lanka. A time has come for the people of the country to unite to form "ONE" Sri Lanka and

move far away from the xenophobic policies that imposed the interests of one group over another. Official figures show 800,000 Tamils moved abroad during the war. Canada was the biggest recipient of the diaspora, accepting some 400,000 people. Remarkably that makes Toronto the city with the biggest Tamil population outside Asia. Another 200,000 people died or disappeared. Thus, the Tamil population decreased by a million. Tamils have now been surpassed by Muslims who have now become the second most populous group. A Sinhala backlash against Muslims, who incidentally are also Tamil speakers, will do nothing to promote unity and the overall development of Sri Lanka.

The teacher training Course ended on Thursday 28th March with a short ceremony where speeches were made, and the winning team received their prizes of an umbrella apiece. This was followed by a short reception where all enjoyed short eats and Coca-Cola. In the Mullaitivu area, potential leaders for future development and subsequent trainings emerged as:

- Ramalingam Elankunaram or Ilango.
- Mary Rejinah Saseethrasingam from Mu/ Vattapalai MV
- Kinothayini Thaninayakam from Mu/ Dayaarkaddu MV
- Shathruban Poonsuarmi Mu/ Maha Vidyalaya.

Several of the participating teachers displayed injuries received during the war. Many had harrowing tales to tell but asking impertinent questions about their traumas seemed somehow indelicate. Ilango had a badly scarred arm, Mary Rejinah told of how she sheltered in a bunker for three days whilst being shelled by the SLA. Kathya Yasotharan's husband was killed, leaving her to bring up her son as a single mother. It would be fascinating to know more but intrusion without invitation is an invasion of privacy.

Our last night in the area was spent as guests of Major General Leonard Mark, the Commander of Mullaitivu Security Forces. He was a perfect host; the local delicacies served at dinner is indicative of this. His residence is impressive with spectacular views across the lagoon. Vines grow by the front door; whilst on the other side of the house was a mini-zoo. First thing in the morning rabbits and guinea pigs hopped about, but the massive grey squirrel was not allowed such freedom, neither were the large fishing eagles. He mentioned that he had once had a Sāmbhur, but it had died.



Dr. Richard Spittel wrote a fascinating book in the 1950's entitled "Where the Wild Sambhur Roams" It is long out of print, but well worth reading if you can get hold of a copy.

The Sri Lankan Army is much to the fore in these relatively recent battle zones. They give the impression of being “an occupying force”, and perhaps they are. The army has an excess of 200,000 members, which as a proportion to size of the population is large. There is no conscription, all are volunteers. Although relatively lowly paid, there are numerous financial advantages in “joining up”. This force is available to assist in the reconstruction process, and can by working on humanitarian projects help win over the hearts and minds of the local Tamil population.

There is, however, after such on-going and bitter violence, a need for law and order to be instilled and preserved. The leaders of the LTTE might be dead, but the structure itself is a many headed monster. The Indian State of Tamil Nadu sees the Sri Lankan Tamil dream of Eelam as part of its own secessionist aspirations. The DMK, with 18 parliamentarians withdrew its support from Manmohan Singh’s Government on March 19th 2013, because it felt India had not pressed for tougher measures to be applied to Sri Lanka over the “Humanitarian” vote taken at the UN in Geneva. The ex-patriate Tamil community raised a lot of money for the cause, and that money is still lying around somewhere. Prabhakaran is no longer there, but someone else could take his place and renew the breakaway war.

On the day our course started (18th March) in Killinochchi, the airport serving Hambantota, Mattala Rajapaksa International opened. This is Sri Lanka’s second Airport after Bandaranaike International in Negombo. Like the port this project has been constructed with Chinese help and Chinese money. The construction lies some 19 nautical miles north of the principal shipping route running from the Straits of Malacca to the Suez Canal. Thirty-six thousand ships per year use this route, almost 5000 of which are oil supertankers. This is the biggest development of its kind in the twenty-first century. The project, which has come, into being during the tenure of the Rajapaksa Government has taken Sri Lanka closer into the Chinese sphere of influence.

India was invited to play the role of developer here. Such a port is extremely crucial for national security; due to the shallow waters of the Palk Strait, Indian ships moving from the West coast to the East have to circumnavigate Sri Lanka itself. Instead, India plumed for the development of its own port and shipping channel at Sathusamudram, close to Mannar. This project involves the construction of an 83 kilometre long deepwater channel giving access to the East coast without the longer routing around its island neighbour. In what Kipling would have called “the Great Game”, we can see this expansion of Chinese influence in the South Indian Ocean be taken as a threat to India and the US led “Anglo-American” Empire. India and China fought a short lived war in 1962 over disputed territory in the Himalayas. They both have rapidly expanding economies and can be considered rivals.

It is, therefore, not surprising that the US and India have a greater game to play in all of this than at first meets the eye. The UN Commission on Human Rights a 47 member Council, which is elected, by the UN General Assembly voted in an American led resolution against Sri Lanka on the human rights issue of the recent war. Could this be a way of political pressure used to isolate Sri Lanka and force the country to take a look at its relationship with China? The Commonwealth Conference is scheduled to take place in Colombo in November 2013. This is a prestigious event the Rajapaksa Government is committed to maintain. Western

interests are likely to put pressure on the Sri Lankan Government to submit to human rights scrutiny or be subject to sanctions if it does not and maybe even forgo the Conference. The human rights issue might be a smokescreen to conceal another agenda entirely. It would be a foolish move as such actions would push the country even deeper in to the Chinese embrace. It will be interesting to note how this issue unwinds.

We drove back to Colombo on Good Friday, the 29th of March. The day being a holiday was deeply mourned. It was fascinating to note the crowds, gathered outside churches, to mark the death of Christ and perhaps one of the most significant dates in the Christian calendar. Such profound devotion would be much envied in the Christian West, where Good Friday passes by barely noticed. It is sad to see the decline of family and spiritual values in the West and encouraging finding a contrast to the social break down witnessed elsewhere. The rich north poor south divide is given undue emphasis in this globalized world. It appears the south has been roped in to provide a pool of cheap labour to produce goods that the north sells at, increased profit, to benefit shareholders in the north. The southern producer is expendable; as soon as a cheaper outlet is discerned the original producer is swiftly forfeited for the cheaper one. This has created enormous harm in many parts of the developing world. As the north tries to intimidate Sri Lanka into complying with its own agenda, often with the aid of Tamil bought support from politicians like congressmen Brad Sherman (D. California) and Rush Holt (D. New Jersey); sadly the only Quaker in Congress, in the US. In the UK long serving Asian MP Keith Vaz has been a lobbyist for the Tamil diaspora. As has previously serving Conservative Andrew Pelling who lost his seat for Croydon Central when he ran as an Independent in the General Election of 2010. It is gratifying to see Sri Lanka standing up for its own values and aspirations. Yes, heinous atrocities were committed by both sides during the Eelam bid to establish a separate state. The LTTE was a proscribed terrorist group that gave the example of the suicide bomber. So successful were these tactics that two heads of state died, and a third lost her right eye. They broke every cease fire they entered into, using the time to rearm and retrain. They reverted to using civilians as a cover for their own forces, and they forcibly enlisted child soldiers. They used explosives to attack the Twin Towers of the Colombo World Trade Centre and then even launched an air attack on the nation's capital, using light aircraft. Many of these attacks are human rights violations. To stop the killing, the SLA had to use ruthless tactics, too. You cannot make an omelette without breaking eggs. I think every military commander in history has been faced with this dilemma. Large overseas Tamil communities have been able to organize themselves to garner sympathy and support from their host communities. The Sinhala population has never had this opportunity. The time, has, come to stop talking about all the groups that make up the population of Sri Lanka and instead start talking about "one nation" and "one people" who can join together to make a strong and prosperous nation,

Alister Bredee

Koh Samui

April 2013