

The wall that travels within me

*“A team of researchers has discovered, with the help of residents of the area, a new large species of the genus *Bangarusa* making its home in a rock cave at an ancient archeological site near Medawachchiya, Sri Lanka. This highly venomous snake ‘whose staple diet is human flesh appears to be an unusual kind’, Dr Pahan Jayakody, a herpetologist told ACR News. Scientific research has confirmed that *Bungarus ceylonicus* or Sri Lanka krait and *Panthera leo* or Lion were the evolutionary relatives of this unique species. The newfound species, named *Bangarusa panthera* is the newest addition to the list of endemic fauna of Sri Lanka, a globally important centre of endemism. Deputy Director of the Institute of Archeology and Ancient Civilisations, Professor Ravindra Palangasinge, a world renowned zooarchaeologist said; ‘this two headed reptile had been documented by Edward Charles Gordon, a colonial era archaeologist on a plastered wall of the rock cave. He described it as a mythical creature in Buddhist-Sinhala art and dated it to 3rd century A.D. i.e. Anuradhapura period. It was only in the last century, that this colourful ancient work of art was given life and slowly gathered strength to prey on humans’. People, particularly young men and women have been disappearing for sometime in the area. Aggrieved family members of nearby Sinhala and Tamil villages, wandering in search of their loved ones who had fallen victim to this two headed snake, paved way to its discovery”. - Elaine Balmond, ACR News, Anuradhapura, Sri Lanka, 18 May 2009.*

Little effort is needed to understand that the story of the two headed snake is fictitious. However, the violence of the Sri Lankan state towards its people - both Sinhalese and Tamil - is no fiction. It was and is factual.

Large scale violence by the State, frequently involving torture and death in custody, has become a norm in dealing with dissent, in post-independent Sri Lanka. In 1971, a relatively new leftist party, the People’s Liberation Front (JVP), mainly driven by the younger generation, staged an uprising, entirely homegrown and with the ambition of ushering a socialist state. The then Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) led coalition government crushed it within a few weeks with a grossly violent military response. The government of Sri Lanka received military and economic aid from a number of countries including the United States, Britain and Australia to suppress the insurrection. I was a young child at the time and have some distant memories of the occasional sounds of gunfire and curfews that ran for days on end. My family’s life wasn’t directly affected by the events.

The second uprising of the JVP, which spanned from 1987 to 1990 captured the public imagination and gained wider popular support in the majority Sinhalese south of the country, in challenging the existing socio political oppression. The United National Party (UNP) government in power at the time countered it with a response that eclipsed the violence of 1971, both in its scale as well as brutality. My life during this period as a student activist was marked by detention and torture which was then followed by an underground life to avoid recapture and death. Led by military as well as paramilitary groups affiliated to the government, extrajudicial killings with public display of victims and disappearances became the order of the day.

The European Parliament’s mission to Sri Lanka in 1990, which three members of Students for Human Rights, including myself, met with in clandestine, reported that “..various estimates we have received suggest that at least 60,000 people disappeared in the south of Sri Lanka since 1987. This represents about one in every 250 of the [southern] population.”¹

¹ Subcommittee on Human Rights of the European Parliament 1990, *Report of Investigative Mission into Alleged Violation of Human Rights in Sri Lanka 27 October - 4 November 1990.*

In October 1991, by which time I was in exile, the United Nations Working Group on Enforced and Involuntary Disappearances visited Sri Lanka. The Working Group report stated that the disappearances which had occurred in Sri Lanka between 1983 and 1991, involving all parts of the country from Tamil majority North to Sinhalese majority South was "by far the highest number ever recorded by the Working Group for any single country."²

Four Presidential Commissions were appointed *between* 1994 and 1998 to investigate the "disappearances" that occurred across the island from 1988 to 1994. As has been noted by the United States Institute of Peace, "[o]f the several thousand suspected perpetrators that the commissions identified, less than 500 were indicted and even fewer were convicted."³

By 1991, with the virtual decimation of the JVP's second uprising, the Sri Lankan government fully focused on defeating the Tamil liberation struggle in the north and east of Sri Lanka, led by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The Sri Lankan state successfully weaponised Sinhala-Buddhist mythology and narratives of ancient chronicles and those of colonial time. The mainstream Buddhist institution fuelled the war effort and took the frontline in mobilising the support of the country's Sinhala majority. Where the Sinhalese are concerned, the irony here is cruel; as a community that was already in the grip of the iron fist of Sri Lankan state, the Sinhalese aided the very same State to take another, an even more oppressed community, into its grips. This dynamic has not only bolstered state repression of Tamil people in Sri Lanka but also helped the State enormously to erase the collective memories within both communities of being subjected to state violence.

I returned to Sri Lanka from my life in exile after the UNP regime fell in the mid 1990s. I carried 15 of 5 1/4" floppy disks with me on my journey back home. They each contained information about political violence and human rights violations that occurred in the south of Sri Lanka from 1987 to 1990. After immigrating to Australia I managed to recover some of the data on these disks. I continued gathering records and reports related to the 1987-90 period in the South. From time to time, I would take those disks out of the box in which they were kept, look at them and then safely return them back to it. One day I arranged them on my desk and it looked like a wall; a wall that holds memories of people who were taken from us, some who were known to me and many others not known to me.

In 2009, the Sri Lankan government declared its victory against the LTTE's struggle for an independent Tamil homeland. The conflict, and particularly the behaviour of the Sri Lankan military, has left deep scars on the soul of Tamil society. The Report of the United Nations Secretary-General's Panel of Experts on Accountability in Sri Lanka observed the Sri Lankan government's extensive use of heavy weapons and intentional disregard of human casualties.² In reference to the number of civilian deaths during the final days of the war, another probe by the UN concluded that other sources "have referred to credible information indicating that over 70,000 people are unaccounted for." Yasmin L Sooka, who was a member of the United Nations Report of the Secretary-General's Panel of Experts on Accountability in Sri Lanka which investigated war crimes that occurred during the final stages of the Sri Lankan Civil War has identified that "[y]ou

² The Asia Watch Committee of Human Rights Watch 1992, *Human Rights Accountability in Sri Lanka*.

³ United States Institute of Peace 1995, *Commissions of Inquiry: Sri Lanka*, viewed 21.01.21, <https://www.usip.org/publications/1995/01/commissions-inquiry-sri-lanka>.

can draw a direct line from 1989 to 2009 in terms of the violations and many of the characters involved ... Military officers who were involved in crushing the second JVP uprising, went on to commit war crimes and crimes against humanity against Tamils with total impunity.” She goes on, “[t]here is no doubt that torture in Sri Lanka is State sponsored and is an important instrument of State policy in which the full authority and structures of the State are drawn in and fully utilised to implement the policy at all levels by the security forces.”⁴

So far, no meaningful transitional justice or reconciliation process has been attempted. As geopolitics of the Indian ocean region takes precedence, regional and global powers continue to show a laissez-faire attitude towards Sri Lanka’s record on human rights. Meanwhile, facts, memories, reflections on the past and future within the nation inch slowly towards oblivion.

~ Jagath Dheerasekara, 12.04.21

⁴ Journalists for Democracy in Sri Lanka 2020, *First Ever Map of Sri Lanka Identifies Over 200 Torture Sites*, viewed 21.01.21, <http://www.jdslanka.org/index.php/news-features/human-rights/956-first-ever-torture-map-of-sri-lanka-identifies-over-200-torture-sites>.