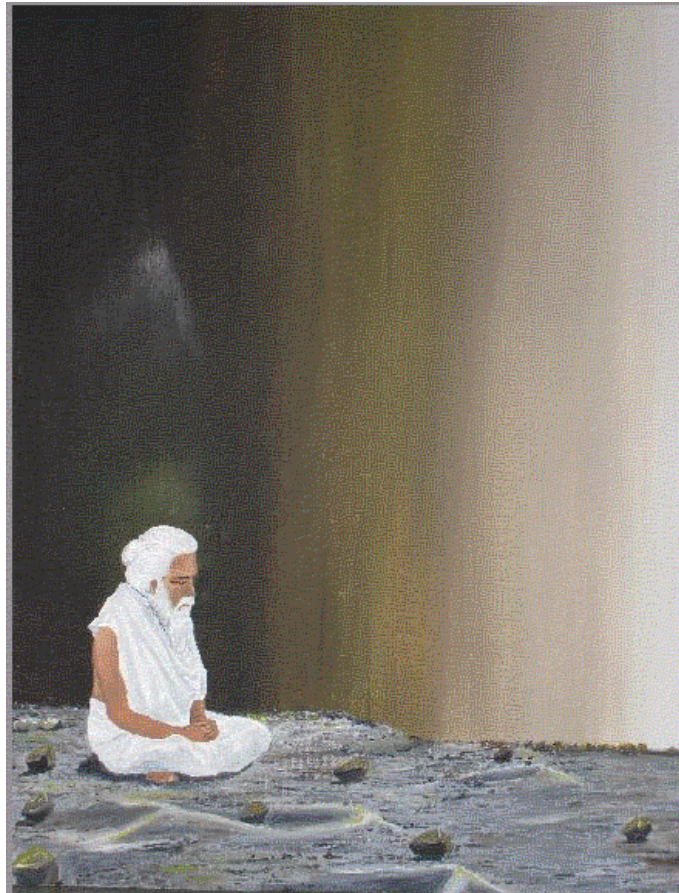




OHM SWEET OHM

Monday, 06 October 2008. I decided to call off my intended trip to Batticaloa, in Eastern Sri Lanka. I was tired and was wondering whether to go or not to go. I was tired due to the long journey to Jaffna and back. It takes a whole day and a whole lot of checks which seem to keep reminding us that we are all terror suspects. After sometime, one gets used to it and often it becomes part of the routine. In other words, we successfully submit to second class status by merely undertaking that journey to the North. Travelers do grumble amongst themselves but I am yet to witness anyone challenging the decision by a checking officer. During emergency, I become part of the 'majority' and hence prevent the administrator in me from surfacing at the process level. I do however, openly respect all those who follow Due Process and/or work with 'faith' in higher values. This was possible because there is no room for political affiliation when I am an administrator.

I rang Thilagavathi at Maangkerni in Batticaloa, to inform her of the change. The trains decided to strike and that sort of gave me the 'excuse'. Thilagavathi very naturally said '*Anty (Tamil aunty) you must come..... You have to come and sort it all out*'. Thilagavathi is an outstanding homemaker. Mother of three – with the eldest daughter preparing for the University Entrance exam., Thilagavathi still looks like a high school student herself.

I met and got to know Thilagavathi during my Tsunami service in the eastern village of Maangkerni with Sri Sithi Vinayagar Temple as its nucleus:



Sri Sithi Vinayagar Temple - Maangkerni

Immediate Past President of Sri Lanka Chandrika Bandaranayake Kumaratunge,



approved the proposal to repair the Tsunami damages to the temple. The village folks continue to express appreciation for my work in achieving this. That genuine service continues to be the basis on which the local folks relate to me and hence Thilagavathi's feelings that my presence was **needed** there. It was an expression of love and faith and one I could not resist through intellectual calculations or majority rule.



I promptly said to my relatives Bala & Arunthathi (pictured below) who have warmly kept their doors open to all their relatives needing accommodation, that I was going to Batticaloa by bus.



I had to quickly rearrange my mind. Prior to the call to Thilagavathi, I was planning on going to the bank to cash a cheque for five thousand rupees. I successfully established Australian Tamil Management Services Pvt

Ltd., despite the warning from Tamils that this was not possible. I did it from zero base – thanks to my experiences as a migrant in Australia. Hence the bank account and the cheque. I asked Arunthathi, the treasurer of that home, whether she could keep that cheque and give me cash. Arunthathi as usual said ‘certainly’ and went inside. When Arunthathi came out she had in hand six thousand rupees. Arunthathi said to take six thousand. I said ok. Arunthathi looked a bit concerned because of the travel blocks due to which their neighbor who works in Batticaloa and was in Colombo for the weekend, postponed his return to Batticaloa.

I packed the gifts that fellow Australians gave me to be given to Batticaloa folks, and also packed a few clothes and essential toiletries for myself. As I stepped out on to the streets, I quickly asked myself whether I wanted to catch the bus from Galle Road or its parallel - Havelock Road. The response from within me was ‘Havelock road’ - the reason being Mayura Amman temple on the way. I prayed first at the St. Anthony’s church close to the temple and then at the temple, seeking Mother Kali’s blessings for my trip. I knew there were risks due to the political situations and I knew that when something adverse happened that looked like a terrorist attack – checks were strengthened and increased in North and East more than in other parts of Sri Lanka. It’s a kind of punishment that we now endure. After my return from Jaffna, I witnessed Tamils in Colombo having arrived into Colombo within the past five years being asked to report and register at the local Police stations. There were some public protests against this on the basis that it was racial discrimination. Later, all those who were from Batticaloa were also asked to report and register. This happened on the day before I called Thilagavathi. I was on my way to Nugegoda to see my Air Lanka friend Yasmin who recently lost her beloved mother, when I witnessed this event. All this did affect me psychologically – as I felt that it was an attempt to separate us from majority race whilst at word level we were being told to consider people of all races as our ‘sahotharaiyas’ (brothers).

After seeking Mother Kali’s Blessings, I felt more in balance. Praying helps me use the Truth within above the rights and wrong by others. I caught the bus to Pettah – from where most of the outstation buses commenced their journey. At the last minute I decided to ask about the buses from ‘Technical College’ – reputed to be used popularly by Muslims traveling to Kathankudi in Batticaloa district. People just pointed in the general direction and I kept walking. After about 10 minutes I decided to ask one of the uniformed security officers. He not only did not know, but decided to question me about my whereabouts. I later thought it might have been due to the suicide bombing of Mr. Janaka Perera (former Sri Lankan High Commissioner to Australia) and his wife, in the historic city of Anuradhapura. Back then ofcourse, I did not know about the bombing and felt a bit irritated with the armed officer who sought to question the person who approached him for help.

I often wondered about the effectiveness of these searches and checks. It’s a bit difficult to ‘judge’ because I certainly am not in the group directly targeted by the authorities. It’s a bit like the Australian mothers being cautioned against harming their babies when the babies are sick. (Some mothers were reported to have shaken the babies too strongly - thereby causing damage). When I protested, I was informed that it did not apply to

mothers like myself. Likewise these 'security' searches and inquiries. I do appreciate the psychological effect of such actions. Our psyche is something we carry with ourselves. That is the real protection we have at the mind level. Hence I usually show respect for the officers who do their duty – irrespective of which side they seem to be from. To my mind, one who has seriously invested in safety / security would intuitively pick up when s/he is focused on that issue. May be that is a reason why I have not been seriously hurt by these checks.

Finally an ordinary Sinhalese bus conductor who observed me asking others directed me from his moving bus !!!! He sure is my sahotharaiya.

I was informed that the private bus would leave only at 7 p.m. to arrive at Batticaloa in the morning. I walked back to Pettah to catch the CTB (Ceylon Transport Board) bus and after the searches at the entrance of the bus stand, I went looking for the Batticaloa bus stand. Some pointed in the wrong direction and some others said there were no busses to Batticaloa from that area. One ill tempered Sinhalese officer of the Transport Board directed me to the right place. He was not a sahotharaiya but a duty conscious officer. While waiting for the bus to arrive at the stand, I was singled out (probably because I was foreign looking Tamil) by army officers. They could not find anything to find fault with me.

The bus arrived at the stand around 10 a.m. I got into the bus and raced to get a window seat . I was pleased with myself until a man who did not feel very nice (seemed Tamil) sat next to me. He had a pink copy of what looked like a booking ticket. I did NOT want to do the trip sitting next to him. I looked quickly to the other side and found the isle seat next to an old Sinhalese lady. The old lady and I were comfortable with each other and the lady even called me her 'Dhuva' (daughter).

We left Colombo around 10.30. I asked the conductor as to what the scheduled time of arrival in Batticaloa was and he said 8, 8.30 p.m. I was getting a bit concerned after that information because there were no buses or other public transport into Maankerni after 6 o'clock. I had not informed Sivathondan Nilayam at Chenkaladdi about my arrival and hence they would not have expected me and it would not be appropriate for me to arrive unannounced after dark. I had not stayed overnight at Yoga Swami Girls Home at Chiththandi and hence did not think of staying there. Staying at a hotel in Batticaloa town was the last resort. After realizing that we would be passing Sivathondan Nilayam. I decided that Sivathondan Nilayam was the safest for me to stay that night before proceeding to Maankerni the following morning. Passing Pollanurwa, as we approached Batticaloa, the checks increased and their strength intensified. Later I connected it to the bombing of Mr. Janaka Perera. Some did not get off the bus for checks – saying they were sick, old etc. I did. Before the final check point – the old lady got off and a young man sat next to me. He got talking to me and I informed him quite naturally that I was from Australia etc. He asked me a few questions about my husband and family. When it was time to get off the bus for the search – and I got up, he asked me to sit down – saying there was no need to get off the bus. When the armed officers came into the bus and asked for the identity documents – they did not ask this person and when they asked me

he signaled that it was ok. I later asked him 'how come?'. He said he was an army officer returning after his leave. He did casually ask me as to why I would not stay at 'Kiraan' (on the way) and I said because I did not know anyone there. Later I felt that he was testing me in a nice way. He got off at Oddumaavaddi – and I said to the conductor to stop at Sivathondan Nilayam **Chiththandi**. I do not know why I said Chiththandi instead of Chenkaladdi. I said it many times to the conductor as well as the passenger next to me. The bus stopped and the conductor said 'there you go sister'.

I got off the bus and could see no one. A road light was flickering and gradually I saw a young man resting on a bicycle – as if he was waiting for someone. I asked him – pointing to the gate behind the flickering light – whether that was Sivathondan Nilayam and he promptly said 'Sivathondan Nilayam is at is Chiththandi'. I got upset a little but did not want to show him that. I crossed the road towards the gates of Yoga Swami Girls flickering light went off and I was in pitch darkness. I put my hands out and encountered the blind wall and gradually moved like the gate. I knocked hard on the gate which was locked out, recognized me from the inside. The girls came out, recognized me and opened their doors to me. That night I learnt that they needed a printer and when I asked them how much that would cost – they said Rs.6,000. I then knew that I was meant to go there and hence Arunthathi gave me 6,000 instead of 5,000 I had asked for. I promptly gave the Rs.6,000. That was out of the funds collected from the photographs on page one – of the painting by Pradeepkumar Paramasivam for Sunthu who is a quiet Yoga Swami devotee. Sunthu photographed the painting and Sydney devotees contributed \$210 – out of which came the Rs.6,000. That night when I slept with the kids on the floor – I felt that I was in Mother's lap. It felt so peaceful. Yes, Swami mothered me and I needed it badly.



ST. YOGA SWAMI



I had the good fortune of celebrating Saraswathee Poojah with these kids:



The girls praying together. We are now in the process of arranging formal training for them in music and dance.



The girls study in the common hall. They are six years upwards. They dress appropriately the simple clothes that they have.



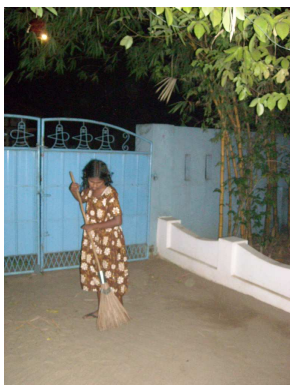
Carers making Dinner



After dinner, studies continue and then the young ones, the carers and I slept in this great hall of Spiritual Calm.



As I watched the little ones sleep, I thought of the cuddles and hugs that our granddaughters receive when they go to sleep. The youngest one is one year younger than our 7 year old granddaughter.



Up from 5 a.m., they allocated teams of time most kids would



about 4.30 to all do their jobs – in five – at a Australian be still in bed.





Then they pray, get dressed and off they go to regular school – in western uniforms their foreheads proudly glowing with Hindu Holy Ash and their feet in smart shoes.



OHM SHANTHI

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