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Jaffna: Touch And Go



Travelling to the North last week, I noticed many changes. Roads are being developed at a rate. And the stretch of tar from Vavuniya to Killinochchi is steadily becoming more motor-able. The increase in traffic and tourists has also been beneficial to the local economy, and small towns have popped up where previously there was only empty stretches of road.

These towns are not new, however, and most of them claim to have been reborn after disappearing during the war. Central to these towns are the hotels and small kades that cater to travellers. We stopped at one town called Periyakulam that ostensibly did a disappearing act

during the war. It is still only a town by a large stretch of the word.

But the hotel that we stopped at seems to be doing pretty well. It employs 38 staff and has built its own mosque so that they can pray in it. Its owner Dawud (if the hotel's name is anything to go by) tells me that most of his business comes from people who ply the A9. His priority now is to build toilets. Toilets, he says, are 'the main thing'. He has budgeted over Rs. 1 million, and is quietly confident of growing business.

The road networks in Jaffna have shown fast improvement, though they are still a far cry from what you may find in other developed towns. Development in Jaffna is just starting in earnest. And even though the town was still under government rule during the war, it seems to be only now that it is being given anything more than step-motherly treatment.

I've always heard stories about the prosperous land of Jaffna, but have only seen little more than sparse greenery in its arid landscape on my visit. Now, however, the results of some care and cultivation of the soil are showing. Farmers are out since dawn, digging around their crop. The fields are surprisingly green, a sight for sore eyes. Still, getting good prices for stock has proven a problem for most small scale farmers, who lack the money to transport their goods to markets like Anuradhapura and Colombo where returns are better.

Tourism is just beginning to open up. Most visitors have thus far been locals. And have been attracted to beaches like Casuarina. There is a lot of room for cultural tourism. Jaffna has a rich history of kings and ancient civilisations. I am aware of it only passing, having been educated in a system that only taught me the history of the Sinhala kings. A visit to Kirimale, an ancient bathing pool constructed by a past ruler, and a conversation with a local, however, made me realise the deep history the peninsula lays claim to.

Hotels are popping up in Jaffna. The first time I visited soon after the war's end the town had only one guest house and we stayed at the home of a kind gentleman in Point Pedro. There was a little black kid (meaning goat spawn) running around and a friend woke up screaming in the middle of the night because he felt a rat. Now, however, hotels with AC rooms and cable TV are easy to find.

But there is still simmering discontent in the city's intellectual classes. Several people I spoke to including the Judicial Medical Officer, a professor and a newspaper editor all lamented the lack of a proper civil administration and justice system in Jaffna. Murders are on the rise, and paramilitary forces are ruling the roost, doing whatever they like, they say. Freedom of expression is restricted and military presence is required at every gathering of more than three people.

Elections are about to happen in Jaffna but next to no election activity is apparent. The only posters are of Northern powerhouse Douglas Devananda. Jaffna's institutions could use more work. Its social infrastructure needs looking at, and there is a lot to be said about freedoms of movement. The crux is that the people there still seem somewhat subjugated, they don't feel trusted, and by extension still don't feel like they truly belong in this country.

In conclusion, I think there is a lot of hope for Jaffna. Most of the issues are touch and go, and people do love to complain. But some problems, like paramilitaries and the abuse of freedoms and law and order are real. The peace dividend is definitely starting to turn the economic wheels in the North, but a lot of other factors are providing plenty of friction. This friction needs to be gradually removed.

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