

Majoritarian tourism and Sinhala language imposition in Jaffna

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It's been two years since the war came to an end. Soon after, exultant southerners began visiting Jaffna in busloads and van loads to 'see it with their own eyes' and to celebrate the end of the protracted war. To most, Jaffna is like a war memorial, a once exotic place that remained the theatre of war and hence inaccessible. Two years and the travel urge is still strong.

The Jaffna citizens are getting used to hundreds of tourists- some foreign and more local, visiting Jaffna on a weekly basis. The Colombo-Jaffna bus rides are popular.

The roads in Jaffna remain quaint and silent, an eerie silence that hides the violence it had suffered and the bleeding realities of the present day. Visiting Jaffna, one cannot help but observe what the sudden influx of tourists is doing to a culturally conservative place- and how Jaffna's primary language is being relegated to a backseat.

Each little by lane in Jaffna has name boards in all three languages but I quickly learn from the residents that the Sinhala translations are inaccurate. "How do you know what is written in Sinhala?" I ask, with the firm belief that like many of us who do not know Tamil, he also does not know Sinhala. He smiles and answers, "Oh I belong to a different era. We know all three languages to some extent".

Language policy

The city does not fail to remind you that post war, this is unified land and President Mahinda Rajapaksa's image on billboards is visible at different points. There is no escape from the fact that there is a strong attempt to impose the majority language. There are many examples of the language encroachment in a place that is predominately Tamil speaking.

Jaffna has its many fascinating features. It also has its historical monuments such as the Jaffna Fort and the now much visited museum. The average Jaffna citizen is eager to welcome the southern visitors and perhaps to cater to the southern palate, the Jaffna eateries are now offering some southern recipes. Jaffna kitchens are now going well beyond the traditional dosa and sambhar range.

Jaffna Fort draws many visitors along with it, a lot of garbage. There is a mini bunker in the milieu and soldiers are there in the dozens. The Dutch constructed Jaffna Fort, the bullet ridden, broken walls serve as a graphic reminder of Jaffna's violent history.

At the entrance is a garbage bin. Painted across in clear letters is a warning- "Do not litter"- in Sinhala. As I stare at the bin, the soldier standing next to me explains with a smile, "all these visitors and they simply throw things around".

Next to the garbage bin is a small hoarding announcing the availability of Lipton Laojee tea in Jaffna. This advertisement too is in Sinhala. As I stare at it, trying to digest the compelling language reality, the friendly soldier asks me, "Isn't that nice advertisement?"

The southern tourists, according to Jaffna people, sometimes pose a problem. At a small café in Jaffna town, the waiter complained that Colombo men and women wearing culturally insensitive clothes were parading around in Jaffna. In addition, they don't speak Tamil and sometimes, rudely demand service in the Sinhala language.

Samantha Vithanage, a visitor from Colombo was standing outside the Nallur temple gate when I met him. He was not permitted to enter the temple premises in his skinny and shorts. He was accompanied by his young family- the women in strappy short dresses and men in shorts. "I can't believe that there is such cultural policing here.

This is Sri Lanka so why can't we go in", he said in exasperation. Nobody told him that no place of worship would encourage such a dress code.

The inhabitants do admit that they move about the city with ease and with less fear. But they also know that it will take a long time for democracy to become functional. The gory past makes them wary and careful in speaking to strangers specially when expressing their political views. It is as if Jaffna's soul has been silenced by the violence of 30 years, the process of ending the military engagements and the careful elimination of alternate political opinions.

Sangamn Kandaswamy (65) is a retired teacher. He recalls a time when Jaffna bustled with activity and was a hub of vibrant political discourse. He speaks nostalgically of a time when militancy was yet to take root but the political identity of the Jaffna people was expressed strongly by moderate Tamil political groups.

"Gone are the days of moderate thinking. It is all extreme as it had been for decades. Only one political party is active and there is no hope of a broad political discussion taking place in Jaffna or about the country's political question. With the end of the war, we have wiped that discussion under the carpet," says Kandaswamy. His sentiments are shared by many.

"Sometimes meetings are conducted on safety in Sinhala. We just don't understand anything," a resident from Kokuvil said.

The checkpoints are less, but they still remain. The people still have misgivings about the military presence there and the increasing appointments of former military officers to serve in the northeast. "It is as if they need to

ensure the public service is militarized. There are certain public offices where Sinhala is becoming the key language," adds Komathi Ileappa, a retired teacher.

Soon after the war, over 5,000 daily visitors come to the crumbling old building that is the Jaffna museum. A piece of history before the war and a repository of knowledge. The dilapidated building has no electricity and is poorly maintained. "We need Sinhala translators given the increasing southern visitors. That has not happened", museum officials said.

Along the way to Jaffna and strategic places, one finds some restaurants. Some are operated by the military and/or owned by southern business persons with strong political connections. The restaurant operators have no qualms in rattling off names of the actual owners- and that adds a new perspective to the Jaffna reawakening programme.

"Most restaurants are owned or managed by the military. That's our reality," says Ponniah Wanigasundaram, a smalltime shop owner from Iranamadu.

Outwardly, Jaffna remains quiet and serene. But there are too many questions that beg answers. With the war victory, it is as if we have consigned all those questions to our collective past, the irritants that do not deserve answers, be they language, military presence or cultural insensitivity. So we continue to sit on a ticking time bomb perhaps- or a volcano that is slowly simmering.

Full Implementation Of The Language Policy

Minister of National Languages and Social Integration, Vasudeva Nanayakkara said that the official language policy will be fully implemented.

He was unaware of any specific breaches of the policy in northern Sri Lanka but promised to look into that. "Language is a tool of integration while it has much to do with peoples' identities. People should have the right to communicate and be serviced in his or her own language. It is also required for the reconciliation process".

He said officials have been instructed to commence language courses for students pursuing higher education and for the opening of language labs of the Official Languages Department. [courtesy: Sunday Leader]