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**MEMORIALIZE THE IMPACTS OF WAR:  
A DOCUMENTATION OF ORAL STORIES  
OF SRI LANKAN TAMILS**

***Abstract***

*Oral history is a field of study and a method of gathering, preserving and interpreting the voices and memories of people, communities, and participants in past events. Thus, it has become an awareness campaign and education in an alternative path for those who would search for truths throughout history. Further, the oral history puts forward the life, beliefs, objectives, thoughts, traditions and even the politics and emotions of the people belonging to the land in their voices; the oral history should not be sidelined when considering the number of vibrations. In Sri Lanka, the long-standing war affects the lives of hundreds of thousands of people from the Tamil community. Thousands of them were killed and forcefully disappeared; many of them were chased away from their habitats; they became internally displaced; a considerable number of them still live in refugee camps and houses of relatives and friends. The recorded stories of their plights do not reveal the facts. Instead, their stories are often or always falsely recorded, interpreted and distorted as a struggle of terrorism and violence in government documents and used to coerce the world to erase the memory of the suffering, asserting and maintaining its narrative of victory. The Sri Lankan government perceives the memories of the Tamils as a sign of possible revival or regrouping of terrorism. In this context, the study revealed the importance and the efficiency of the transmission of oral narratives in the present scenario in Sri Lanka by observing the two notable efforts made by an organization named 'Noolaham', a virtual library and Mr. T. Jeyaraj, well-known as Jera, a freelance journalist and social activist from the North of Sri Lanka in their efforts on the register the oral stories of the common people with different dimensions as case studies in order to inquire the memorialize the impacts of war through the documenting oral narratives.*

***Keywords:*** *Sri Lankan Tamils, Oral Stories, War Impacts, Memorialization*

### **Introduction**

The oral literature is considered a treasure of wisdom and a way of holding history from the perspectives of the grass root people. Though the domination of the authorities from the domains of knowledge, social structure, myths and richness determined history, the oral literature reserved the space for the history of a layman who is suppressed and oppressed.

Oral history is a field of study and a method of gathering, preserving and interpreting the voices and memories of people, communities, and participants in past events.<sup>1</sup> Thus, it has become an awareness campaign and education in an alternative path for those who would search for truths throughout history.

From another perspective, in the history constructed from the oral stories of the people, people look at the events horizontally instead of vertically. The analysis is used to capture the history hierarchically or trickle-down by the so-called elites and 'historians'.

The oral history tried to put forward the life, beliefs, objectives, thoughts, traditions and even the politics and emotions of the people belonging to the land in their voices and it should not be sidelined by considering the number of vibrations and the quantity.

In Sri Lanka, the long-standing war affects the lives of hundreds of thousands of people from the Tamil community. Thousands of them were killed and forcefully disappeared; many were chased away from their habitats; they were displaced locally; a considerable number of displaced are still living in refugee camps and houses of relatives and friends. Most of these persons were deprived of their rights and still not permitted to return to their native places. Their lives were filled with tears and struggle.

The memories of their own life are not permitted to reveal the truths and are largely interpreted and manipulated as a struggle of terrorism and violence in government documents. Even the Tamil people who are one of the national ethnic communities of the island and holding their motherland traditionally in the North and East of the country cornered and not admitted to remembering their close relatives and friend who were killed during the war while the government has built countless memorials celebrating the war victory rather than post-war amity.

Further, the government is forcing upon the world an erasure of memory while asserting and maintaining its own narrative of victory. The existence of memory for the Tamils poses, in the view of the government, the possibility of a revival or regrouping of terrorism.

Observations by the Special Rapporteur on the promotion of truth, justice, reparation and guarantees of non-recurrence, Mr. Pablo de Greiff, on

the conclusion of his visit to Sri Lanka in 2017 explained the ground reality in his statement that “Memorialization can have a reparative effect provided that it is even-handed and not used by anybody as part of a zero-sum game in which the basic task is to reaffirm a single-sided narrative. Spaces are needed for communities to mourn and remember those they have lost, especially those sites across all regions where civilians died.”<sup>2</sup>

In this context, the study revealed the importance and the efficiency of the transmission of oral narratives in the present scenario in Sri Lanka by observing the two notable efforts made by an organization named ‘Noolaham’, a virtual library<sup>3</sup> and Mr. Thurairasa Jeyarajwell known as Jera, a freelance journalist and social activist from the North of Sri Lanka in their efforts on the register the oral stories of the common people with different dimensions as case studies in order to inquire the memorialize the impacts of war through the oral documentation.

The study explored the trends and determinations of using construction of the history of common people in a war zone area by analyzing the contexts of the reflections, opportunities and challenges in the collection and system of archiving the stories.

### **‘Avanaham’ – The Platform of the Collection of Oral Stories**

‘Avanaham’, a Multimedia Archives Platform,<sup>4</sup>a project launched by the ‘Noolaham’ Foundation to record oral histories by disseminating oral histories as a research methodology and training researchers in the field of oral histories from the year 2017.

So far, there are more than 34,000 documents relevant to the 93 aspects that have been collected and archived in digital format in a virtual space named avanaham.org, a part of ‘Noolaham’, a digital archive and a digital Library undertaken the critical work of documenting and preserving. It provides free and open access to the knowledge bases and cultural heritage of Sri Lankan Tamil speaking communities.

The oral history is the main component of the collection; it has recorded nearly 480 oral stories such as life history, oral history, history of temples, history of peoples’ movements, political parties and social organizations.

They are about liberation movements, folk worships, different professions, stories regard to arts, castes, indigenous medicinal practices and nostalgic memories about villages, schools and friends and so on.

The main objective of recording oral histories of ‘Avanaham’ was the documentation as claimed by Mr. Thillainathan Gobinath<sup>5</sup>, a pioneer of the project. Since losing the aged people who know the life and history of the past and the need arises to document the subaltern voices which are not reached by the mainstream media are the basic reasons to commence this vigorous

assignment, he shared, further.

'Avanaham' also tries to preserve the sources which can facilitate the construction of the alternative history which is largely buried by the forces that dominated the society for years and years. It's very interesting that the larger numbers of the oral histories recorded by 'Avanaham' are from the 'Malaiyaham', the central hilly part of Sri Lanka (upcountry) where the Indian origin estate workers were settled mostly from Tamil Nadu, two centuries before. The people of upcountry do not enjoy the opportunity like the people from North and East of the island who have the custom and tradition to record their professional and personal lives in the form of printed publications.

The efforts of 'Avanaham' strongly believe that the archives of the oral histories of common grass root people can lead to constructing an alternative history in future by providing evidence of the past from the peoples' perspective. It's has realized that the value of archive which is predominantly in the hands of the government in the local context such as the National Library and the Department of National Archives in the South and the Sri Lankan Tamils, the community does not have serious concern on documentation of its own history.

While setting the criteria for the selection of the informants who are interested to share their stories, it's observed that the 'Avanaham' mainly moved towards the side of recording personal histories rather than professional experiences. The diversity and the different backgrounds are also considered in priority such as labourers, teachers and village priests in order to minimize the monopoly of the voices from the same strata.

The freedom to express the opinions and justifications over holding ideologies and other relevant personal traits have been admitted as their own to ensure the engagement without any limitations during the recordings. It's requested to the informants always share their own experiences and minimize the expression of third party information which used collected from others. But, it's occasionally permitted when the need is understood to have a look at rare incidents and consideration over the importance of the time period.

The choices of the recording medium as audio or audio-visual also consulted with informants and acted according to their wishes. Anyhow, 'Avanaham' maintains the arrangements to get the proper backup by more than a channel for recordings as its accepted system.

While the anonymous appearance and identification were requested from the informants for various reasons, the 'Avanaham' is keen on the credibility of the information and has not shown interest in the admission where there is a possibility of manipulation exists.

It's further noted that while the informants who have the capacity to tell the stories interestingly as storytellers occupied comparatively larger

duration, even some time for more than ten hours taken to share their insights. They have extended the sphere by telling branch stories from the main stem and are encouraged by the data collectors who are ready to spend time and show their interest in listening.

When having an observation the recording of the experiences on or about the war in Sri Lanka, 'Avanaham' mostly compiled the oral stories from the common agenda and did not aim particularly to attend the stories in regard to the war and its consequences. But, 'Avanaham' has been able to find that the stories of war are interwoven with personal profiles and other avenues of storytelling.

It's noteworthy that the number of people shared their personal experiences, particularly about the war of Indian Peace Keeping Forces (IPKF) in the North and East of the island nation and the mass displacement that occurred in the Jaffna Peninsula in 1995. It is observed that the participants of the project were not like to share their experiences about the final phase of the war held from 2007 to 2009.

Even though some of the informants have shared painful memories of the ethnic riots which occurred in the year 1983 at the starting point of the armed struggle, they wished to bypass the period of the final phase of the war and shared only a short description of it.

The researcher felt that there are strong reasons or intentions should be for bypassing the period; the uncertainty of the protection of the personal life, fear of revealing the truths and hard to recall and accept the reality of the loss of thousands, some of them are very close relatives and friends. Further, there are chances for the assumptions among the informants that it's not an appropriate time to talk about the events that happened in the very recent past where the oral history is mostly mounted on long years back.

The 'Avanaham'(the platform for documentation) expects the opportunities to convert the oral stories into text format which is more feasible for searching and finding the exact location by using keywords and 'Avanaham' hopes that the platform will be the space for the extensive research who wants to inquire about the fields of folklore, anthropology, ethnography, culture and so on about the Sri Lanka Tamils.

### **The Oral Stories of the People Who Lost their Lands**

The efforts on recording the oral stories of the people specifically who are directly affected by the war and lost their family members and were forcefully displaced from their lands have been registered by Mr. Thurairatnam Jeyaraj well known as Jera<sup>6</sup>, a freelance journalist and social activist from the North of Sri Lanka.

Compare with 'Avanaham', Jera's attempt is different and he would

act not only for the documentation but takes up the initiation to formalize a peoples' movement to fight for rights.

As one of the outcomes of this, the stories of the Tamils who have been chased away from their motherland in Northern Sri Lanka have been compiled and published as a book with the assistance of the 'Adaiyalam', a center for policy research in Jaffna.

The outsized existence of the government armed forces in North and East even after the war and thus leading to forceful occupation of the lands belonging to the people are the main field of the studies under the title of 'Nilamizhantha Kathaikal' (The stories of lost the lands) which released as a book publication in 2015.<sup>7</sup>

The stories are grounded on the common people who want to resettle in their own lands again from where they were forcefully chased out several years ago, the lands are presently occupied by the armed forces for various reasons including constructing military barrages, government-assisted planned settlements for people from the majority Sinhala community in order to change the population composition in traditional Tamil areas and so on.

The methodology used by Mr. Thurairasa Jeyaraj was narrative journalism as mentioned by the Director, 'Adaiyalam' in his forward and it helped Jeyaraj to get involved very closely to collect the sensitive stories from the affected people. In 2010, the year after the end of the final phase of the war, Mr. Thurairasa Jeyaraj started to collect the stories of the people in order to publish in a Tamil daily from Jaffna and he recognized that oral stories were the better platform to make the people talk about the unspoken and unrevealed pains suffered from the long-standing war.

The situation did not favourable for him to work in the war-affected villages initially and the people were not ready to share anything because of the fear of abductions and forceful disappearances even after the war. Further, the people were not come out from the psychological impacts as the direct witnesses of the war which kills thousands in bombing and shelling over several days.

The main threshold area for his research was the border villages in the Vanni region such as Kokkilai, Karunaatankerni and Mankindimalai which are severely affected by the intrusion of the planned colonization of the Sri Lankan government for a long time and not sheltered by any authorities including local politicians.

Since the heavy surveillance, the people were having fear on the persons from outside even the journalists and Mr. Thurairasa Jeyaraj used the way to identify and introduce him with the association of familiar persons to the people and his nativity helped to do so.

The people interviewed were not restricted to the issues at the meeting

and were allowed to talk about what they wished to share. The required portions were documented, only, after scrutinizing and listening to the complete story made the data collector have a better understanding of the people and their backgrounds interviewed.

The inducements and assistances to explore the memories and track down them to talk about the issues where they deviate from the stem were also applied in order to preserve the energy and concentration of the people. Depending on the sensitive levels of the topics shared, the additional tools used as meeting personally and with family members where the need arises. Most of the stories started with the perspective of individuals and later expanded to more people or groups. While meeting groups, Mr. Thurairasa Jeyaraj felt that the stories gathered with different dimensions and even deeper than individual recording, particularly about the grave incidents they faced during the wartime including massacres and massive immediate displacements. The continuity is kept in line with the storytelling, while the group sharing is conducted if someone forgets to share anything important and missing parts. It's further noted that the people as witnesses felt safe when they gathered in groups along with their close associates and shared sensitive issues.

While the oral stories were made into the transcript, the credibility and the holistic view of the oral stories were always cross-checked with the comparative study on the secondary sources and sometimes even from the people from the neighbouring villages. It's realized that the monotone or depending on the single or available source is a challenge and danger where the scope of finding alternative history from the oral stories.

When finding informants to share the information on a particular incident or event which occurred more than twenty or thirty years ago, there is a mathematical approach employed to find suitable storytellers by calculating the age at the time of the incident or event happened. It justifies that the people from the different age groups could have shared different views on the particular incident or event and were able to get a more or less complete picture by merging the stories, sometimes different versions together.

It's noteworthy that the recording of the non-verbal cues along with the verbal stories also should be considered paramount when the stories come out from very personal and sensitive issues. While a person who is only alive from the family where others were brutally burnt in a house at Thennamaravadi, the border village between the districts in Eastern Sri Lanka; Trincomalee and Manaluru, shared his oral story, his body language and expressions were helped to gather unimagined pains of him, Mr. Jeyaraj told.

At the time of recording of the oral stories of the close relatives of the persons who were forcefully disappeared during and after the war and the status and whereabouts are not known yet, also made similar remarks of the above.

Anyhow, the challenges prevail in visual recording, in particular on the recordings of the war experiences and impacts that they could help personally expose the witnesses to the world which may lead to harm to their existence and survival.

It's another obstacle noted that the people believe in sharing their sorrows that may provide remedies for their unresolved issues such as the cases of forceful disappearances. Hence, it's strongly expected that the objective of the collection of oral stories should reveal clearly to the people before they invite to engage in sharing.

Even though the hardships faced in the efforts of the documentation of the oral stories in the context of the memorializing the impacts of war, it's understood that this is the only available avenue to register the true history from the peoples' perspective and the way to construct the alternative history which expected to put forward to the world.

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