



The devotees receive offerings from the priest

Kilinochchi town was gingerly rousing in the cool morning light. Lone vehicles trundled along a dusty gravel lane that ran alongside a freshly laid tarmac. New buildings stood smartly amidst the heave and sigh of the old. A feeling of quiet anticipation hung in the air as a slow and steady wave of change had taken root across its uneven facade. As I stood in the benevolent shade of what appeared to be the only large tree in the area, I felt like an unwitting witness of Kilinochchi in limbo.

Words Prasadini Nanayakkara Photographs Prabath Chathuranga

A few years from now, I wonder, how much of today's Kilinochchi would be familiar tomorrow. However, the town's Kandaswamy Kovil, would most certainly remain unchanged. Through its open doorway, I caught glimpses of the Kovil's priest swathed in a white *vetti* or sarong as he wandered about its quiet passages in the early hours. It was not yet time for the morning *pooja* to commence. The Kovil stands as the only one situated within the town centre as the other prominent Kovil in the region, the Murukandi Pillayar, sits at the outskirts. It's beginnings date back to the late 1940s, and it was officially inaugurated in 1950. Since then, the Kovil has on many instances, stood still with its bells silenced. It was as recent as January 2010 that the Kandaswamy Kovil, yet again, held what is known as a *Kumba Abhishekam* or the religious inauguration ceremony that sanctifies the precincts to mark its reopening. Even today the administration acknowledges Muhandiram Vetrivelu - a community leader of the colonial times - for establishing the Kovil, which was one among many of his contributions to Kilinochchi.

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The Kovil priest, Brahmasiri Rathineswara Kurukkal, makes a customary round of the temple as the time approaches for the first of the five *poojas* held throughout the day. Opening each of the shrines surrounding the main sanctum, he murmurs a prayer under his breath, as he lingers at the threshold of each with the flaming oil lamp. As time closes in on seven, devotees trickle in to pay obeisance to God Skanda - symbolised at the sanctum by a spear. They cleanse their hands and feet at the well before entering and purchase items for offerings from a tiny shop nearby that sells powders, oils, honey, fruits, incense and sweets.

In silence the few at the temple sift forward in a line to receive the priest's blessings and prayers. Observing this sequence of events within the restful surroundings itself had a quietening influence.

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Immediately outside, the town carried on in a slow rumble. The Kovil with its bright new bearings stood out amidst the transient chain of nondescript buildings - a town that emerged back in the day as an in-between for trading regions. Kilinochchi was a stop enroute a railway system that ran up to Kankesanthurai at the northern peninsula all the way from Anuradhapura, and as a result it has transformed into a trading settlement. The community soon established and with it burgeoned an agricultural region. The famous Iranamadu tank was built to irrigate the lands for cultivation. Interestingly it was this development that led to the christening of the town. As the story goes, *kili* or parrots, were in abundance at the time and were a hindrance to the farmers. To fend off the pesky birds, *nochchi* trees that emanated a pungent odour were planted in the surroundings. Thus Kilinochchi came into being. A contradictory story is that there were an abundance of parrots or *kili* who were simply inclined to perch in flocks on *nochchi* trees. Either way today there are no signs of the parrots nor the *nochchi* trees, at least not in abundance.

Towards the town centre, a thin crowd had gathered at a temple. Hardly enclosed by a short wall it appeared right by the main road pronounced by a large Bo Tree. Groups sat in prayer and another had just arrived on a pilgrimage led by a guide, who narrated the history and significance of this temple - the Lumbini Viharaya. Much of what he relayed could be found summarised upon a signboard. It revealed a little known link between the temple or rather the Bo tree with a legendary event in the annals of history. It is believed that in the 3rd Century BC, Theri Sangamitta on her voyage to Sri Lanka from India bearing the sacred Bo sapling spent her first night of rest at this site along with her entourage. And it is here that a segment of the sapling was planted before being bestowed in Anuradhapura where it stands famously today. The Lumbini Viharaya in effect bears the significance as the first site in the Island, where the sacred tree has taken root and it remarkably prevails to this day, unharmed. While its immediate surroundings have often been subjected to destruction, the proof of the tree's sole existence is regarded a blessing. Set back from view, in the habitable sections of the temple, the morning's almsgiving had just concluded and a scurry of activity ensued with devotees clearing up their emptied vessels and mats.

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Heading back to the outskirts of the town, a detour lay in wait. Just before the renowned Murukandi Kovil, lay a path that pointed to the Akkarayan Kulam or lake. A distance of 10km off the A9, it was oriented in the opposite direction of the Iranamadu Tank. Egged on by a rugged gravel road, I watched as a distinctly sparse landscape sped by. The first impressions of Akkarayan Kulam was of vast isolated beauty amidst deserted and arid land. A lone fishing boat rested at its banks that expanded to include 5000 acres all around. Those who frequent the lake have encountered deer and wild boar and the communities in the vicinity set out in their boats early morning for a catch of fish. At another end of the bank, rows of unbaked bricks lay in the sun, which will later be used to build houses. These bricks have been made using the sand drawn from the lake's sandy bed.

Setting forth once again, a group of small school children waved us off, their bright wide smiles as bright as the day a hopeful premonition for the future of Kilinochchi.

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