

# Life Returns to No Man's Land`



Kandiah Sakthivel and his young son

**“I’m coming home I’m coming home. Tell the World I’m coming home. Let the rain wash away all the pain of yesterday... I’m coming home” It was not that long ago that once you passed the entry point to Omanthai, the land would be deserted, no sound of life except the hum of the wild. Today, that is not so, the seeds of life are growing. The soil is fertile and the harvest generous. You do not need to go far to see... those who left are coming home...**

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New beginnings... I guess for me that is what this area truly represents. Years of conflict had left this land void of human life, I would not have been able to venture off the main road without the fear of a land mine going off. But today, as I stepped on the sun blessed land I could not help but feel relieved. Vehicles were going on the road and people could be seen working. Instead of silence there were the sounds of life.

We stopped at the first little wayside shop, curious to know how life was. The

shop was full of colourful items that are required for daily life. Kandiah Sakthivel was with his little son and was quick to come out of the shop as we approached. Kandiah was originally from Oddusudan in Mullaitivu. His wife was from Omanthai and as such following the end of the conflict the young family had returned to Mahilankulam, Omanthai to cultivate their land and rebuild their lives. Having returned about a year and a half ago he had started the shop very recently. While his father spoke, the little one sat on a bench and observed us. He looked from face to face listening intently, and then his face broke into a smile, while he shyly tried to hide behind his father. Usually, we do not even notice the simple joys of life. Here, every moment was precious.

We were told that the by-roads led to villages, therefore we decided to explore further. We were in an area called Vilakuvaithakulam, Mahilankulam in Omanthai. As we walked along, we came across a grinding mill in the centre of a land where all the shrubs had been cleared. We were pleased to note that the grinding mill was started only three days prior to our visit. Nithiyar Ponniah, was helping his uncle in the mill. The sound of machines drowned our voices as Nithiyar was in the middle of grinding some rice. The mill was within a simple structure with all four sides open. With the machines they had, they could grind rice and spices - mainly chilli. As the mill had been opened very recently, holy ash with sandalwood paste and kumkum had been applied on all the machines as a blessing. The family had hailed from Jaffna and were now living in this area.

With the hum of the machines behind us we walked along the gravel road, deeper into the village. It was very calm and quiet, almost peaceful in this pleasant afternoon. Dotted with dwellings it was apparent that life had truly returned to this area.

A line strung with kottakilangu (dried root of the palmyrah tree) caught our attention. The little homestead was picture perfect. Swaminathan Kirubaharan and his wife lived here. He was from Mahilankulam while his wife was from Jaffna. They were first displaced in 1996, after moving from place to place, they finally resided in Vavuniya before returning home in November, 2011. The lady of the house was very chatty. She was happy and relaxed. Even though they had not started home gardening as yet, Kirubaharan makes a living through paddy and small grain cultivation including corn, black gram and cowpea. Furthermore, he is a carpenter by profession.

We were humbled by the simple life of the area, there may be shortcomings but it was encouraging to see that the people were happy to live their lives in peace, without any fear for their life and family.

Corn cultivation was also done by many, which was apparent by the many corn fields that we saw. We met Kobalapillai Manisekaram while he was tending to the corn that he had laid out to dry. He had some chickens as well. Having settled with his son in Omanthai just six months ago it was apparent that he, just like others, were finding ways to live their lives.

The large tree shaded our path and as the sun started to go down, the evening became cooler. Arokiyanathar Christurasa, a cheerful chap is a toddy tapper and does not actually live in Omanthai. His home is in Mullaitivu. However, as a licensed toddy tapper he travels from area to area and works in one location for 20 days. He expertly climbed the palmyrah trees, checked whether the containers were full. In one instance since the sap collected was not of the required quality, he recut the flower and fastened the container to the flower stump. Upon coming down Bhavani started to barrage him with questions. Suddenly he ran towards the temporary abode he was staying in, to return with his toddy tapping license! All smiles. While teasing my friend for asking too many questions, we bid adieu to Christurasa to resume our journey.

Sivalingam Tharusan was busily harvesting the corn in his field that glowed a golden brown in the evening light. Tharusan and his family had been displaced in 1995 and they had returned to their land only six months ago. With his younger brother and sister still studying in Vavuniya, Tharusan helps his mother to take care of the land and corn cultivation.

Where-ever we went, what-ever we saw it was of hope and happiness for finally being able to come home. No one was just idling, everyone was engaged in some productive activity or the other.

We were walking in search of a tank, when our attention was drawn to a hive of activity, where sacks of paddy were being prepared to be collected for processing. K Kanthiah is a paddy cultivator and having collected his harvest he was working with his brother-in-law, A K Gnanamoorthy, to prepare the paddy for the buyers to come and collect. Kanthiah had cultivated a land of about four acres, however as there had been heavy rains previously, the harvest had been less than expected.

He had returned to his land after 25 years and was extremely happy that they were back home, cultivating their own land. They cultivate during both the Yala and Maha seasons. However, this is the first time that they had cultivated the land after returning. Only the old mango tree remains of their previous home, though now they are starting to rebuild their lives.

In the relaxing evening light a family was leisurely chatting with each other while another was separating peanuts from their outer covering using a winnow. With almost rhythmic like movements Selvarasa Velayutham's wife, continued with the fanning of the peanuts while speaking to us. They also grow cowpea, black gram and corn.

As we went in search of the tank, we soon came to a Kovil, so peaceful and sacred. The statues of the nine Gods that represent our solar system and statue of Nanthi stood strikingly against the simple landscape. The main sanctum was closed, but for a moment we stood in silence in respect of the spirituality of the site.

We were almost at a dead-end and we were wondering where the tank was. A young boy came out of the gate and we convinced him to show us the way. We were surprised that he asked us to follow him into his garden. His mother Thambapillai Devaki upon hearing our request proceeded to show us the way to the tank. Their home garden was lush and neat, with long beans just mature enough to be plucked. The land was well prepared and various crops had been planted.

**As the rain washes away the pain of the previous years, the sun shines on our present, where the future will reap what we sow today...**

We walked through overgrown paths, with mud splattering on us while we tried to avoid prickly plants. We slowly climbed the incline in single file and soon the great Mahilankulam was right in front of us. What a beautiful view! It was the best way to end our journey.

We cannot change the past, it is the present that matters and it is the future that we mold. As the rain washes away the pain of the previous years, the sun shines on our present, where the future will reap what we sow today...

They are home...

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