Tunes from Jaffna

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L-R: Varnan, Stalin and Amalan on the Sangupiddy Bridge from the video Kadhal Mozhi

The tunes of a popular song drifted towards me, I start to tap my fingers in time. But, there was something different, the melody was more refined and smooth, the lyrics were not a jumble of English and Tamil words that made no sense, this song was more enjoyable and pleasant to listen and was entirely in Tamil. I was listening to Kolavari Di.. Jaffna style!

Words Udeshi Amarasinghe and Bhavani Bala

Three young guys all in their twenties sat in front of us; Stalin, Amalan and Varnan. This trio has caused a stir in music circles not only in Sri Lanka but also abroad with their innovative graphics and cinematography as well as attention to maintaining pure Tamil lyics and music that preserve the cultural heritage of the country. Their aim is to show that Jaffna has the same advanced technology, talent and skill although most of the Tamil productions are done in South India.

“With the end of the war, development activities are taking place. Therefore people are learning new things. However, in Jaffna there are still very few opportunities in cinema. As such we thought of doing something in the field of cinema.
We can produce good quality music videos in Jaffna. We have the resources there. We actually produce all our music and videos in Jaffna,” explained Stalin.

“We are not a band, we are a team.” Each person plays a specific role and together what they create is inspiring.

Having known each other for eight years, their common passion for technology and music had brought these three together. “We are not a band, we are a team,” explained Amalan. Each person plays a specific role and together what they create is inspiring. Stalin is the musician and works on the lyrics, composing the music and recording, while Varnan is the cinematographer in charge of the filming and directing of the video and Amalan focuses on multimedia, graphics and editing. “Whatever decisions we make, we do it together,” said Varnan. With the aim of providing quality and value, the main aim of the production team was to promote their talent and work within Jaffna and other parts of the country. Though they had worked on a few projects such as short films, they had not received much publicity.

How did Kolavari Di come about? “The main reason as to why we did a remake of Kolavari Di, is to use the song as a channel to project our talents and skills, because it is such a popular song,” explained Stalin. Though in other versions of the song the lyrics were not changed – only the language – in their version even the lyrics and to a limited extend the music was changed. “We used our traditional instruments such as the harmonium but also used new technology such as the iPhone Apps,” Stalin elaborated further.

Though many have tried to politicise their song, that was not their aim. “We wanted to promote the pure Tamil language that is practiced in Sri Lanka because it has got influenced by the language spoken abroad especially in India,” explained Amalan. Furthermore, “we wanted to show what Jaffna looked like after the war. That is why we showcased many important places in Jaffna to highlight the pride and significance of the city. This is the reason why the Tamil people became attached to the song,” elaborated Stalin.

Using state-of-the-art technology, the graphics of the music video was further enhanced. “We had to limit our expression with Tamil language for this particular song, but we do not want to restrict ourselves into that. We hope to collaborate with Sinhala artistes as well to expand our reach,” they explained. The focus was not only on the lyrics and the music but also the concept, visuals and the most high-end technology was used. “That is the reason this song was such a breakthrough. Many people were surprised that such a quality product came from Jaffna. We received a huge response from South India and the Tamil diaspora living in Canada, UK, Switzerland, Australia and many other countries. There were both negative and

positive comments," explained Amalan. Many South Indian media groups had picked up their song and had even been shown to Dhanush himself. All portrayed the song as the Jaffna counter to the original Kolavari song, which the trio say was not their intention. "The song was purely a platform for us to introduce ourselves to the market," explained Amalan.

Yarl Movies produces commercials, films and tele dramas, while Yarl Music is engaged in music production. "Our first commercial was for Andra Wedding Cards in Jaffna and it was to be played in cinemas. It was the first reel project to be done in Jaffna in 30 years," explained Varnan. All the artistes were from Jaffna except for the female voice as the client wanted a South Indian artiste. She was the winner of the Junior Super Singer, a reality show competition on a South Indian Channel. She had come to Jaffna for a performance and she agreed to sing for the commercial," said Stalin.

"Many thought that Andra was an Indian production. What we want to do is change the mentality because they always do their production in South India and everything they watch and listen to is South Indian. They do not recognise our local talent. We want to bring out the potential of the Sri Lankan people," said Amalan with conviction.

Their second song, which was released on Valentine's day was going beyond the norms, where the lyrics expressed their love for the Tamil language. The video depicted the various places in Jaffna including the Sangupiddy Bridge, Manthri Manai and the Jaffna Fort. It showcased the simplicity of day to day life in Jaffna. The images were further enhanced with digital editing. Each and every song, ad or film is first discussed as a team and the subsequent script and filming is developed and agreed upon.

"Another ambition of ours is to reintroduce the Tamil pop culture in Sri Lanka. Songs such as "Sinna Mamiye" and "Surangani" are very popular not only among Tamils but also Sinhala listeners. Music has no barrier," explained the team.

"Everything we know, we learned by ourselves. We followed tutorials from the internet and we regularly check for updates in the Bollywood and Hollywood film industry. We studied up-to-date modern technologies from 'making of hit movies'. We experiment and try things out. It was all trial and error and we finally had a good outcome," they elaborated.

The reasons for each of them getting into this industry varies, “my father used to be a photographer as a hobby. I too became interested and started taking photographs and this in turn grew into cinematography,” explained Varnan. For Amalan, “with the end of the conflict, roads were opened and we had greater access. I started watching 3D movies and loved 3D cartoons and it was from this that I became inspired to learn multimedia.” And, for Stalin the musician of the three, “I learned to play the keyboard very young and I sing at church as well. Then, I also became interested in computer and sound engineering.” Having grown up in Jaffna, the three of them came together because of their common interest in technology as well as passion to showcase to the world that Sri Lanka has talent as well as advanced technology.

The trio does not accept every offer that comes their way as they give prime place to quality. The major plus is that they use the most advanced technology. “We try to match our production to national and international standards. We do not want to do things in a hurry. We pay greater attention and we are very careful when we undertake projects because we do not want to portray or receive any negative response,” said Stalin cautiously.

They have already received offers from Colombo, where they collect the work and process it in Jaffna.
All work is done in Jaffna. Some of their work includes the Lanka Bell ad for Jaffna. The theme song for the Jaffna Premier league is also being done by Yarl Music where they will be focussing only on the audio part of it. All the artistes are from Jaffna.

“We are happy that people are visiting Jaffna, because there is exposure and people get updated on everything. After many years we have the opportunity to mingle with our brethren. Once we establish ourselves in Jaffna we hope to come to Colombo as well so that we can cater to the future needs of the industry,” the trio explained on a concluding note.

For my friend and I speaking to them had taken us on their journey, one of determination, hard work and passion to take their country to the world. We were finally hearing the tunes from Jaffna…

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