



St John's and Jaffna Revisited

By

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*Breathes there a man with soul so dead,
Who never to himself hath said,
This is my own, my native land!
Whose heart hath ne'er within him burn'd,
As home his footsteps he hath turn'd,
From wandering on a foreign strand!
If there such breathe, go, mark him well;
For him no minstrel raptures swell;
High though his titles, proud his name,
Boundless his wealth as wish can claim;
Despite these titles, power, and pelf,
The wretch, living, shall forfeit fair renown,
And, doubly dying, shall go down
To the vile dust, from whence he sprung,
Unwept, unhonour'd, and unsung.*

Return of an exile:

These immortal and patriotic words by Sir Walter Scott from *The Lay of the Last Minstrel*, studied well over half century ago at JSC level, struck me with gale force as our plane circled over Palaly airport and I saw beneath us the familiar palmyra trees, just before landing. An unusual number of mangy stray dogs hovering around reminded me that we were in a place which not so long ago had food shortages. The impression that we were in a neglected region were reinforced when we were at the waiting room before we could collect our baggage and get into the bus taking us to Jaffna town. For there was only one toilet common for both men and women and even there, the flush was not working. The officers working for the airline companies ExpoAir/LionAir were very courteous and cordial and the waiting room quite adequate, but with so many passengers travelling daily to and from Jaffna, surely the airport authorities can surely have two separate toilets especially in so conservative a region.



Jiving away the blues - OBA Dinner Dance August 20

The bus journey from Palaly up to about Vasavilan (high security zone) was depressing. Mile upon mile of damaged and destroyed buildings, shops and houses, with the weeds and trees grown wildly into almost impenetrable jungle in some places. Not so long ago, these derelict and abandoned buildings once housed people who lived and loved and laughed and tended their homes with pride and care. Now only snakes and denizens of the bush roamed these very areas.

Once we came to Urumpirai, the scene changed gradually. My wife and I saw the banana plantations and some vineyards which were almost trademarks of the red soil areas. How thrilled I was to see glyricidia and tulip(poovarasu) trees marking off the fences. It had been such a long time since I last saw them or heard the strange haunting sound of palmyra leaves as they rustled in the wind. Can you imagine anyone being overjoyed to see such ordinary trees which are so common in Jaffna? As we drew closer, the familiar raucous cawing of crows and the blaring of Tamil film songs from boutiques, signalled our arrival in town. These were sights and sounds which I had loved long since and lost awhile.

From the clock tower where our bus trip ended, we had the privilege of being the guests of Mr and Mrs Thanapalan. As the college car took us towards the familiar surroundings of Kandy Road and St John's College, I felt like an exile who had returned home! For the man born and bred in Jaffna, the love of his homeland is something unique; and for a Johnian, a visit to his alma mater is something special. It is almost like the yearning of the Jewish diaspora for Jerusalem and to worship in their temple!

St John's:

I'll never forget my first look at the college after the recent building improvements. I had read and seen photographs of them but there is nothing like seeing them in person. The majestic new iron gates with the name and logo of the college boldly displayed; the gatekeeper who saluted the Principal as the car passed the gate; - we were to bask in the reflected glory of a right royal salute from him every time the Principal's car carrying us passed the gate! And then, most memorable of all, the lovely tree lined drive from the gates up to Peto Hall and the new administration block designed to match the architecture of the church and the old buildings which had been demolished. The architecture with white limestone walls and gothic archways and windows will never grow out of place. In fact, I think their attraction will grow with time. They will remain a thing of beauty forever. The administration block (named after C E Anandarajan) houses the Principal's and V Principal's offices as well as spacious room for the office staff on the ground floor. On the first floor among space provided for stores, archives etc, there is a computer room as well as an auditorium which can accommodate about 100-125 people in individual seats. On the Saturday of my visit (July 16), the OBA had a meeting of their committee in this auditorium. The Jaffna OBA had presented medals to all their past Presidents and Secretaries on the occasion of their centenary in 2004. I was not present then, so they gave me my medal at this meeting. I was indeed honoured to receive it and it will be a cherished memento of my visit.

The drive up to Peto Hall and along the edge of the administration building has been planted with exotic palm trees on one side and tall graceful Asoka trees on the other with crotons and flowering plants in between. From the new Arulanantham block up to the Principal's bun-

galow, the drive is fringed with teak trees. By the way, the drive from the main gate to the Principal's bungalow was named Lady Chalmer's Drive after a visit by Governor and Lady Chalmers to the college about 100 years ago.

The view of the grounds from any point within it is lovely. With the three storeyed Arulanantham block (containing all the science laboratories and lecture rooms for the AL students) in the foreground and the Old Park in the background and the Principal's bungalow at one end and the mahogany trees in front of William's Hall at the opposite end, and teak trees lining the roadway, the St John's College grounds is one of the most picturesque in Jaffna. But there is amidst this beauty an ugly spot or two. It may be sacrilegious of me to say this, but William's Hall, the Dining Hall, Fleming House and the Sick Room, all beloved by earlier generations, are an eyesore when seen beside the new improvements like the Anandarajan administration block, the Arulanantham science block and the newly built lower school named the S V Eliathamby block; these old buildings have to go.

Mr Thanapalan told me that there are plans to demolish William's Hall and rebuild it (retaining the name) at the site of the dining room, as a two storeyed block with a dining room on the ground floor and a hall on the first floor which could be used to hold examinations and as a study hall. Fleming house and sick room are to be demolished and in their place a sports pavilion to be built for the participating teams, staff and visiting dignitaries. He has not decided what should be done where William's Hall stands now, but it will be a good location for another pavilion with multipurpose facilities like art room, music room, training room, scout room etc. When the 400 metre track is laid out, the grounds will not be that remote from this site. As a matter of interest, the expansion of the grounds will leave the famous tamarind tree close to Williams Hall and the Villard mango tree near the Principal's bungalow untouched, along with the mahogany trees near Williams Hall. Another improvement envisaged is to extend the E M Ponnudurai pavilion tiers up to the Principal's bungalow on one side and extend it as a sloping ground (like the famous Sydney Hill at the SCG of yesteryear!) on the other side towards where the Chaplain's quarters once stood. Once these plans are laid out on the ground, I dare say that the SJC grounds will be one of the most picturesque in Sri Lanka.

The college compound was a hive of building activity. The new Handy Memorial Library building is under construction between the administration block and Peto Hall. The architectural features will blend with the church and administration block. It should be completed by mid next year. Another building under construction, for which old boys had contributed, is the Centenary block which is a two storeyed building meant as living quarters for two staff members, and is coming up where Thompson house boarding stood. This is the third boarding house to be dispensed with. Evarts House has already been demolished to give space for the 400m track and Fleming House is to be replaced with a pavilion. There are only about 20 boarders at SJC now (out of a student population of 1780) and the Memorial Block of dormitories should suffice for the foreseeable future. A new staff room is being built by the side of the existing one which is to be demolished. In its location another two storeyed block of classrooms are to be constructed and will be named after K Subramaniam, one of our past revered teachers and well known for his erudition in Tamil.

A visit to SJC is not complete without going to Chundikuli Girls' College and we had a look around it with their Principal's permission. CGC is also looking grand with the luscious greenery along its main drive (similar to SJC). All their buildings are of recent vintage and the compound looked spick and span. These two schools have never looked better and the Principals and staff should be congratulated. A special word of praise is due to the SJC agricultural master who has been responsible for the layout of the gardens and tree lined drives and their maintenance. It will do credit to a botanical gardens entrance! I must also mention that the church compound and the graveyard are clean and well maintained with teak trees planted around.

Jaffna town:

SJC and CGC look like oases in a desert. What about the rest of Jaffna town? All the large schools, churches and cathedrals have been repaired and are looking good. Probably these have had contributions from well wishers living abroad. In the town area, the Public Library, Veerasingam Hall, the Post Office, the Telecommunication Complex, St Peter's Methodist Church and the Clock Tower have been completely reconstructed or renovated. Subramaniam Park is being done up at the moment, even though the large trees have all gone. Periya Kadai has been rebuilt to a certain extent and there were a lot of people, cars, trishaws and cycles bustling around which was good to see. Sinna Kadai area consists of a swathe of damaged buildings even though business is going on in them. But the sad part is that a large number of private houses in Jaffna remain partly or completely damaged. I think this is because individuals are still uncertain of the future and do not want to invest in rebuilding their houses. We had been told that Jaffna is normal, but this is not so. Compared to what it was before the ceasefire, it may be better. But the yardstick should be what prevailed before the war and in that sense Jaffna has a long way to go. Gone are the happy faces of people who vied with each other to build bigger and better houses and educate their children to the best of their ability. I could sense a feeling of fear and doubt in the minds of people with whom I talked, as to what their future held for them. Gone is the confidence with which they used to look towards their future in the years before the civil war.

Two or three reliable sources told me that the standard of education in Jaffna is falling. This is mainly due to a number of good students and teachers having left Jaffna and also due to a dearth of good English teachers. Jaffna university students are losing out to students from other regional universities like Badulla, Anuradhapura, Trincomalee etc when it comes to securing positions which require English knowledge. Colombo and Kandy are teeming with international schools whereas Jaffna doesn't have even one. While this may be good for our schools, it shows a shortage of teachers who can teach in English. St John's is taking some action in this regard because I found that expatriate English teachers were conducting classes for our college teachers to teach in English. This lowering of educational standards is a worrying factor. One major reason is of course the civil war. Our youth were forced to take up arms to defend their lives, their properties and their way of life. (How can man die better than facing fearful odds, for the ashes of his fathers and the temples of his gods?) But this should be only a temporary phase and should not change our values altogether. The example of Athens and Sparta is a pointer to us in the correct direction. Athens and Sparta were two ancient city states in Greece who were constantly warring against each other for supremacy more than 2000 years ago. Athens was known for its love of learning and its philosophers while Sparta was known for its love of martial valour and its fighting men. Today Sparta is a forgotten name except in History, whereas Athens is still the capital of Greece, a modern city and still known as the cradle of democracy and western civilization. The choice for future generations of Jaffna students should be clear. Whether they will select wisely is another matter. The plight of the people left me dejected. The only consolation was the negative emotional satisfaction that the rest of the country was not in much better shape due to the extreme divisive politics and the absolute disregard for law and order. The spiralling cost of living is having a race with the rate of corruption. I thought my Sri Lankan pension was a reasonable amount until I read an advertisement which showed that even two months of my pension will not buy me a stainless steel kitchen sink! Quite a number of people with whom I spoke, seemed to think that the veneer of prosperity is only skin deep and the bubble of epicurean "karpalla, beepalla, jolly korapalla" style of life being led by the consumerist society will burst soon and leave the country in danger of anarchy, unless peace, law and order are restored. Let us hope that peace will prevail and bring prosperity to the whole of our motherland.

Conclusion:

Every good Muslim is expected to go on a Hadj pilgrimage to Mecca. Likewise, I'll urge every Jaffna born and bred expatriate to visit his homeland at least once and if he is a Johnian to go and see his alma mater. In addition to meeting old friends, he or she can delve into their roots and revisit their heritage. Once there, to give of his or her time and talents to improve the skills of the struggling masses. I met some people like that, working at hospitals, schools and the university. The trip by plane is not tiring. There are delays at both ends, but it is a one-off thing. The only real drawback is that the airlines often cancel or delay their flights. Actually this happened to us, but the delay enabled us to attend the Sunday morning service at St John's Church, Chundikuli. This was where I started going to church 60 years ago with parents, sisters, brothers, friends and relations and later on with my own family. Nostalgic memories came abounding and it was in a sombre mood that I prayed, perhaps involuntarily knowing this was probably the last time I'll worship there.

So, I'd advise every Johnian living abroad to go to his old college, and if he happens to be a Christian to go pray in the church; if he is a non-Christian to go to the temple where he used to worship when he was a boy; and pray for the emancipation of the people so that each and everyone will be able to go back to their homes and live in the way they have always lived without let or hindrance. It is only then Jaffna will be able to rise like a phoenix out of the ashes of destruction.

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