

My Story

Kilali, Sri Lanka

In 1995, I travelled with my four-year-old son back to see my family in Jaffna, from the south to the north of Sri Lanka. My journey through Kilali, a coastal village located in the Jaffna Peninsula of northern Sri Lanka, was both an unforgettable experience yet filled with suppressed memories.

During the civil war, civilians in the northern part of Sri Lanka often relied on the Kilali sea route to flee from conflict-affected areas to safer regions, just as I did on my journey back home from England. However, this journey was perilous, involving navigation through dangerous waters. Civilians often travelled in overcrowded and rudimentary small wooden boats, risking their lives to escape the conflict.

My memory of this journey includes various modes of transport, one of which was the small boats. It was night, and dark as we crossed the sea to avoid navy and army shooting, bombing, and shelling. We slept and walked through the jungle, then waded into the sea to reach the small boats. In the tiny boat, there was only a small lantern for light, and everyone was silent, gripped by the fear of being killed. Someone pushed the boat for a distance, and a small motor - used sparingly to avoid noise - provided intermittent power. I was given a small bowl to bail water out of the boat. It was pitch black, and I don't know how long we were in the boat.

The fear and uncertainty of that night have stayed with me, shaping my understanding of resilience and survival. The shared silence and collective anxiety in the boat underscored the unity and determination of people seeking safety.

Most of these details are suppressed in our minds as we all have to move on with our lives. It has taken me nearly 30 years to create this work; a testament to the enduring impact of those experiences.

1995 was a turbulent and devastating year in the Sri Lankan Civil War, characterised by fierce battles, humanitarian crises, and widespread suffering for the civilian population caught in the midst of the conflict.

This artwork is a reflection of that journey: a narrative of fear, hope, and the relentless pursuit of safety amidst chaos. Through this piece, I aim to honour the memory of those who endured similar experiences and to shed light on the resilience of the human spirit.

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