

*A quest for identity, a search for roots and...*

# A STORY OF INSPIRATION



**Niomie Anton, French citizen of Sri Lankan origin**

**Q:**  
How and when did you and your family leave Sri Lanka?

My family is from Kayts, Jaffna. During the war, they all moved to Negombo and Colombo. After they got married, my parents left Negombo for Germany in 1985. They came to Germany as political refugees. Because they could not work there, they decided to go to France. In 1987, they obtained their visas not without difficulty and they started working and learning French.

Today, all the members of my family are living abroad (in France, the USA, England, Australia) and have sold their houses in Sri Lanka. Only my grand uncle (from my mum's side) and my aunt (from my dad's side) are still living in Sri Lanka.

**Q:**  
What made you return to Sri Lanka now?

I completed my BA in Applied Foreign Languages (French, English and Spanish) at the University of La Sorbonne (Paris) in 2009. In November 2011, I earned my MA in International Business at the University of Paris Dauphine, specializing in Project Management and New Technologies. Before I moved to London in January 2012 where I was blogging about cultural and social events during five months, I have worked as a project manager for IBM France for 1 year.

It was by chance that I learnt about the Sustainability (income generation) Volunteer position advertised online by the Foundation of Goodness (FOG). I applied in April 2012 and came to Sri Lanka in June 2012, to volunteer at FOG. My family did not understand my decision to come to Sri Lanka but I was determined to follow my instinct to seek out my roots. Travelling alone to my home country that I have never seen was challenging but at the end I can say that this whole experience has been a real lesson for life.

Q:

What are your impressions of the country and your emotional responses?

What strikes me are the poverty and the huge gap between the rich and the poor people. I realized that I had the chance to be born abroad and to be able to create a change in my life. I received a good education, I managed to save money so I can travel and see the world, I have access to the Internet, I can go to coffee shops and have a social life, ... It is really frustrating to see that most Sri Lankan people don't have the same opportunities, seem apathetic and have no ambition in life. I understand why religion is predominant in this country because I believe religion is a way to alleviate social and cultural ills. "Religion is the opium of the people", said Karl Marx. But the focus has to be on education to enjoy equal chances in life. Education is the key to enable people to have confidence and ambition in life and to be successful. It does not matter if you were born poor or rich. The key is to be enthusiastic and to feel positive energy.

Q:

You mention that Sri Lanka is now one of the safest countries in the world to travel to. How did you come to that conclusion prior to your arrival in the country?

I read a lot of things about reconciliation in post war Sri Lanka. We can indeed talk about a post-war Sri Lanka but I feel like there is a tacit conflict, not between the different ethnicities but between the different social classes. For me, the ethnic conflict is now a myth. As a Tamil, I don't feel in minority. Locals don't ask us if we are Tamil or Sinhalese. They simply ask where we are from. It's rather us, from the Diaspora, who ask if they are Tamil or Sinhalese; this maybe because our parents have transmitted to us their apprehension of the other.

There is no reason to have fear. I have been working with Sinhalese, Muslim and Tamil people. I met many interesting people from various backgrounds. In Sri Lanka, I feel Sri Lankan among Sri Lankan people.

Q:

What is the message you carry back to France?

Knowing the tough times that our parents have experienced during the war, I feel lucky to be born and to have studied and worked in France. As Tamil diasporans, we should be grateful to have those opportunities to succeed in life but we also should not neglect our fellow Sri Lankans who stayed back and suffered; they need help but they also need to feel that we don't forget them. I don't have any take-home message for them other than that coming to Sri Lanka with all the empathy for our fellow Sri Lankans has maybe a more significant impact than fighting for Sri Lanka from abroad.

Since the end of the war, Sri Lanka has been changing at an exponential rate. It is safe and truly enjoyable. The island offers many opportunities. Just come (back) and experience Sri Lanka for yourself. You will be positively surprised!

Q:

What have you been doing in your time in Sri Lanka and how long have you been here?

I first came to Sri Lanka to work as a Sustainability (income generation) volunteer for FOGUC in June 2012. During seven months, my role was to work on the projects developed to generate income and make the organization sustainable. It was interesting to see how a local NGO really worked. I was impressed by the amazing work FOGUC were doing to empower the less privileged rural communities with better opportunities in the South and the North. Then, I was progressively getting involved in their North-related projects. It was one of the most rewarding experiences for me working with inspiring and passionate people.

During my spare time, I travelled a lot across the country. I also try to visit my family here as often as possible.

Q:

Do you have plans to return to the country?

During the past eight months living and volunteering in Sri Lanka, it was hard for me to feel connected to Sri Lankan society. I was often critical of the social, cultural and economic situation of SL but progressively I have learned to be more tolerant.

I am still in Sri Lanka and I am not ready to leave the country yet. I feel I have still a lot of things to learn. Working for FOG was a great adventure that enabled me to gain exposure to Sri Lankan culture and its paradoxes and peculiarities. Since February 2013, I have received my resident visa. I have one year to find out how to get involved in the society in an innovative and altruistic way.

Post-war Sri Lanka is like a virgin land that offers many interesting opportunities in terms of business even though there are obstacles which need to be addressed.

Q:

What did your parents tell you of the reasons for their leaving the country in all these years you grew up?

My parents told me that they left Sri Lanka because of the war.

Q:

How specifically do you think that young members of the Diaspora help and contribute to the advancement of the country in its post-war era? Why do you think the Diaspora is important in Sri Lanka's efforts in its post-war era?

While working on the ground during the Neethipuram sanitation and water project with FOG in the Mullaitivu District, we got friendly with the villagers. I don't speak a word of Tamil and it was quite difficult to communicate with them. We had the opportunity to meet these people living in remote areas and who experienced the war and I simply wanted to ask about their feelings, their fears, their dreams, their vision of life... At home, my parents never talk to me in Tamil. We only speak in French. Was it because they did not want to transmit their fear of being Tamil during the war to us? Was it because they wanted us to be fully integrated and become successful in the host society? Anyway, I think it is very sad because in addition to being a beautiful language, the Tamil language tends to disappear among the young members of the Tamil Diaspora.

We, the members of the Diaspora, should put our efforts into building a better connection with our country of origin.

The creation of a better bridge between those in and out of Sri Lanka is not done only through remittances, money that immigrants send home to their families. What these poor people want is to live with dignity such as have access to clean water and sanitation facilities and also to feel important and understood as human beings. It is not a matter of ethnicity or religion.

I think it is important for the young members of the Diaspora to come to Sri Lanka. Our parents who had fled the war had to build a new life in the host country and I can imagine how hard it was for them. They might have saved us from the war. But I feel like that period is a taboo subject and the Tamil cultural transmission is almost denied between generations. There is a gap between our parents who do not want to dwell on the past and us who want to understand our origins in order to go forward. For me, the only solution that came to me was to travel to Sri Lanka 'on an educational trip' to see with my own eyes, try to form my own opinion about the country, reconnect with my Sri Lankan roots and show I truly care about my fellow Sri Lankans.

**Sivashankar Krishnakumar, US citizen of Sri Lankan origin**



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Q:

How and when did you and your family leave Sri Lanka?

My parents left Sri Lanka in December 1991. I was seven years old when we left, my sister was three. We left using a variety of transportation and eventually landed in America, filed for asylum and were granted permanent residence status in the US.

Q:

What made you return to Sri Lanka now?

My background is in Electrical Engineering and I worked as a consultant in the energy industry. I left my job as I wanted to discover the country I was born in and the country I knew little about.

Q:

What are your impressions of the country and your emotional responses?

Throughout the island, the people of Sri Lanka are trying to live a normal, prosperous, and peaceful life. From the trishaw drivers to the fishermen to the IT professionals, everyone is happy the civil war is over. Normal everyday complaints of traffic, rising food and fuel prices and politics dominate the street conversations. Colombo seems to be developing at an alarming pace compared to the rest of the country. While five-star hotels are popping up in the capital, people in the South, the North and the East are in need of toilets, clean water, electricity and jobs. Hopefully, this growing gap is addressed very soon otherwise civil unrest is surely likely and the last 30 years would have been in vain.

Q:

You mention that Sri Lanka is now one of the safest countries in the world to travel to. How did you come to that conclusion prior to your arrival in the country?

Before I went to Sri Lanka a lot of people seemed to worry about the safety of travelling in Sri Lanka. However, having travelled using the public transportation system I felt very safe. That being said I was always viewed as a foreigner in a foreign land. Therefore, my perspective is that of an American. I've been to other countries in Asia, Africa and South America and Sri Lanka is definitely one of the safest places I've been to as far as crime is concerned.

Q:

What is the message you carry back to (a) your parents? (b) your foreign friends?, (c) members of the Sri Lankan Diaspora?

If we, the members of the Diaspora want to engage with Sri Lanka, it's important for us to understand the history of the conflict. There was a war for a separate Tamil state which forced many of our parents to flee and now that war is over; we have to live together in peace. Two generations were lost due to the war and we need to be brave enough to accept this. We need to begin to forgive and forget. Holding on to the past is never a good thing.

Q:

What have you been doing in your time in Sri Lanka and how long have you been here?

I've been working for the Foundation of Goodness for six months. Words can't describe all the happiness the staff of FOG spreads everyday through their projects. One of the projects I was lucky to work on was the Murali Harmony Cup 2012 - The Murali cup was an awesome project, I'm incredibly lucky, I got the chance to meet and work with some of the most famous cricketers in Sri Lanka and got to watch the faces of young Tamil kids who dream of watching a live cricket match to get to actually meet their childhood heroes. It was truly a magical event, something of this magnitude and coordination hasn't been done in Northern Sri Lanka since probably before I was born.

I worked with the army and our other partners to build five new cricket grounds, in Vavuniya, Kilinochchi, Mankulam, Odddosudan, and Jaffna. Players from the Sri Lankan national team came to each venue where they spent time coaching the kids, signed a few autographs and most importantly brought positive attention and energy to the North. The Murali Cup gave the northern boys the opportunity to showcase their talents, meet their childhood heroes and most importantly, made them feel important and not forgotten. The best part? One of my Jaffna boys was spotted by a selector and asked to move to Colombo and now has a sponsor and plays for Tamil Union. Maybe he will become the next great Tamil cricket star and will help continue this tournament for years to come.

Q:

What did your parents tell you for the reasons of leaving the country in all these years you grew up? My father never said much but my mother told me that we moved to America because it's the land of opportunity. She always told me there was a civil war and because she wanted a normal life for her children we came to America. After having been to Sri Lanka I'm happy we left as opportunities are hard to come by regardless of your ethnicity, sex or religion.