

Tales of the Pandemic:

*Stories of Resilience
from Sri Lanka*



“Ultimately, the greatest lesson that COVID-19 can teach
humanity is that we are all in this together”



Sarvodaya



Shanthi Sena
Sansadaya



This project is co-funded by
the European Union



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Abbreviations

PHI – Public Health Inspector

MOH – Ministry of Health

IDH – Infectious Disease Hospital

Introduction

“We are not makers of history. We are made by history”

Martin Luther King, Jr.

In 2020, the world was devastated by an outbreak of COVID-19. People were confined to their homes and workplaces and their freedom was restricted. In Sri Lanka, the imposition of a curfew across the country left many communities vulnerable. The general public had to face the negative implications of COVID-19 unexpectedly. The pandemic instilled fear and mental distress among people. Misinformation and false information also had multiple effects. As this was an airborne, communicable disease spread through proximity to people, a suspicion of others created fear in people's hearts as the disease spread through Sri Lanka.

This resulted in growing fear and suspicion of COVID-19 patients and their loved ones and they were shunned by the public. At one point in time, when several patients were found from a certain religious background, society completely neglected the entire religious group and treated them differently. When the virus spread among a cross-section of professionals, they were ignored and discriminated against for no reason.

It was evident that it was a time we had forgotten the true values of humanity and our religious teachings. The economic strength of common people were challenged as they were compelled to stay indoors isolating themselves from society. Faced with the growing pressures of economic burdens and mental distress all at once, a disgruntled public paved way for communal disharmony. Minor disagreements between different religious and ethnic groups escalated into callous social discriminations.

In light of this, Sarvodaya Shanthi Sena Sansadaya along with the United Nations Development Programme started a series of online dialogues with 10 district level Civil Society Leaders' Committees consisting of religious, community, women and youth leaders (25 per district) representing 10 selected administrative districts in Sri Lanka, which were severely affected by the coronavirus outbreak.

Through these online dialogues, the participants were able to share their opinions, experience and feelings about the current situation and gain knowledge about sociology, media, oral history and medical guidelines to prevent COVID-19 with the support of experts in diverse fields. Equipped with this knowledge and a deeper understanding of social issues, a new norm was created to minimize discriminations and to strengthen communal harmony. Several steps were taken to build trust among diverse religious groups and the participants were prepared to face unexpected challenges while following the health guidelines given by the health authorities.

During this time, young entrepreneurs faced a very difficult situation. Through this project, an important step was taken to financially assist several young entrepreneurs to rebuild their businesses and lives. Applications were called, the best candidates were selected by a panel and the chosen candidates were trained on business planning, management and development. 102 selected young entrepreneurs were given financial grants. Among these selected young entrepreneurs were women, differently-abled people and widows. These young entrepreneurs were involved in small-scale sewing businesses, handicraft, cement production, farming, making gold jewellery, food production, metal, aluminium and ironwork, selling fish, leather bag production, making technical tools and small-scale grocery businesses.

Another key objective was to archive people's memories and experiences of the lockdown into a book – stories of real-life people, collected at ground level by our participants. This book is published as a result of this very project.

All the stories in this publication are based on real events shared by fellow Sri Lankans. These stories are published with due permission, with names and places changed to protect the identity of the contributors.

The Editorial Board

Message from **Sarvodaya Shanthi Sena**

The COVID-19 pandemic changed our way of life instantly. This unknown enemy created drastic systematic changes and citizens had to face this with a sense of fear and urgency. By March 2020, Sri Lanka was in lockdown. People were restricted to their homes and day-to-day life came to a halt. As the virus spread to different areas of the country, many faced isolation. While the wealthy had little difficulty in moving on, the underprivileged and marginalized groups faced diverse socio-economic issues. Irrespective of race, caste or class, almost every citizen in the country experienced a series of events they could never have imagined. Many faced the situation with resilience and courage, while some remained dejected. This collection of stories of the real-life experiences of fellow Sri Lankans were made available to us by a group of religious, community and youth leaders elected from 10 districts in the country. These are stories of hardships, communities coming together, resilience, hope and grief.

I wish to acknowledge Mr. Vishnu Vasu for the editing of the stories, Mrs Nilukshi Cooray and Miss Vinsika De Saram for the English Translation, Mr Thariq Ali for the Tamil Translation, Mr Rasika Geethanga for the page layouts in Tamil and our Sarvodaya District Coordinators for engaging in this project at district level. This book would not have been possible without your commitment and care. My heartfelt gratitude to Dr Vinya Ariyaratne, President of Sarvodaya Movement, who highlighted the need to implement a program of this nature and Dr Priyan Senevirathne and the team from the United Nations Development Programme in Sri Lanka, for their support and being a source of strength to successfully implement this project.

The foremost objective of Sarvodaya Shanthi Sena Sansadaya is to overcome disaster rather than lamenting it. This collection of stories is a result of a series of programs we launched during the lockdown and beyond. Parallel to this program, the contribution made by religious leaders, who launched various programs to maintain religious and ethnic harmony during COVID-19, is highly commendable. Moreover, with the hope of rebuilding businesses affected during this catastrophic situation, 100 young entrepreneurs selected from 10 districts were provided with financial assistance along with the required technical know-how. Our heartfelt gratitude goes out to all those who contributed.

I believe that this collection of stories will become a vital memoir for generations to come.

Message from **Sarvodaya**

It is not new for Sarvodaya to reach out to affected communities in the event of any natural or man-made disaster and make necessary physical and psychological interventions to uplift them. There are plenty of examples of such instances. Even in the face of COVID-19, situation support services were extended to affected communities although it was not an easy feat. It was an extremely challenging task considering the gravity of a contagious disease like this. However, it is not ethical for a social organization like ours to turn a blind eye to the suffering of people affected by such circumstances. In this regard, we did our level best to offer a range of services cutting across diverse fields while working within the purview of guidelines issued by the health authorities. When standing up for the people who were affected, the benefits of exceptional services offered by Sarvodaya Shanthi Sena, are not indeed minor. It was very unique that Shanthi Sena gathered together religious leaders, community leaders and youth leaders by facilitating a virtual discussion platform and used their leadership to heal affected communities at a time when no social activist could do anything face-to-face. It is indeed very important that initiatives were taken to minimize the incidents of discrimination which usually arise in a situation like this and to provide financial support and technical support necessary for rebuilding the wrecked businesses of young entrepreneurs. The publication of this book of stories carrying the memoirs and life experiences of communities in facing this unprecedented situation will be a vital source of learning for the future.

I express my sincere thanks to Sarvodaya Shanthi Sena Sansadaya who accepted this challenge and completed it successfully and effectively even though it was not a very easy task. I also thank United Nations Development Programme for trusting us and offering necessary financial support. I believe that this collection of COVID-19 stories will be a strength to future communities in facing challenges of this nature in the future.

Message from **the EU**

The pandemic affects us all, but it does not affect us equally.

The coronavirus and its socio-economic consequences have a disproportionate impact on the rights of women, children, and elderly persons, and on all persons in vulnerable situations. Those facing structural inequality and exclusion in society often carry other markers of difference based on ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation.

The European Union-funded project ‘Preventing Violent Extremism through Promoting Tolerance and Respect for Diversity’ is a result of a partnership between the EU and the UNDP to prevent violent extremism in the Asian region by addressing its root causes and promoting tolerance and respect for diversity. In Sri Lanka, as elsewhere, these efforts aim to build and strengthen the resilience of at-risk communities while playing a key role in supporting local responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. This prioritization reflects the EU’s call for pandemic response measures which take into account the needs of those most at risk of marginalization and stigmatization and other forms of discrimination.

The project is also one of ongoing EU-funded interventions in Sri Lanka to promote pluralism. Now, more than ever, we support efforts to build inclusive societies that effect institutional responses and behavioural change.

I congratulate UNDP and Sarvodaya on the impressive work done to narrate experiences of the COVID-19 lockdown as a means of understanding societal fault lines to address underlying inequalities.

UNDP Foreword

The coronavirus has clearly demonstrated that a society is only as strong as its weakest link. This is true both for the health of its people and of its economy. The social, political and economic fallout confronting countries now will influence our societies for years to come. Disruption in livelihoods, financial hardship, domestic violence and abuse, increased social isolation, aggravation of conflicts and violence, and extreme poverty traps are some of the unimaginable trials being faced by people around the world. On the one hand, the coronavirus is preying on all these factors to create a great global challenge. On the other hand, the pandemic is pushing us to rethink, innovate, transform and thrive by converting challenges into opportunities.

We're human, so we live for stories. Real stories of real people facing different challenges allow us to understand some of the most pressing issues of our time with greater depth and empathy. Believing in the power of dialogue and reflection, we at UNDP are drawn towards highlighting challenges exacerbated by COVID-19, particularly deep-rooted patterns of exclusion and discrimination which unravel as people and communities are challenged. As COVID-19 continues to surge in communities across Sri Lanka, the power of dialogue and reflection, which emerge from storytelling, can address drivers of communal tensions, build social cohesion and trust, and reinforce ties between communities.

I am excited about storytelling and the possibilities it brings when done strategically and in collaboration with value-driven networks such as Sarvodaya Shanthi Sena Sansadaya, with whom UNDP initiated a series of 60 virtual community dialogues and over 20 face-to-face dialogues to gauge the pulse of the people. Key actors from religious and ethnic communities, women and young people from across 10 districts were engaged under the 'Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE) through Promoting Tolerance and Respect for Diversity' project - supported by UNDP with funding from the European Union. This project empowers civil society organizations to strengthen communities for social cohesion and communal harmony.

The community dialogues brought out stories of vulnerabilities and resilience due to COVID-19 and yet, were overtaken by empowering stories of inter-communal harmony and entrepreneurial journeys of joy and success. With a strong message of togetherness at its heart, this compilation of life stories and experiences serve as a powerful resource, to help reflect, empathize and empower communities to navigate challenging times with solidarity.



ERANGA

Behind the Scenes at a Quarantine Centre

I am Eranga. I am 38 years old. I work as a DJ at parties and I also work in a hotel. I was holidaying in Nuwara Eliya when the news of COVID-19 broke out. I cut short my holiday and returned to the hotel on 13 March. Upon my return, I felt that the foreign guests staying at the hotel were not taking the pandemic seriously. They took things too easy and even laughed at us for taking necessary precautions, such as wearing a face mask. But they woke up to a new reality when the government disclosed information of the first coronavirus patient in Sri Lanka.

PHIs and the police visited the hotel to educate us on the pandemic and with new guidelines to adhere to, to control the spread of the virus. The government and the health authorities monitored the situation closely and updated us on a regular basis. In response to the situation, the hotel management decided to close down the two swimming pools with immediate effect. Some guests were unhappy over this decision. They argued with us. Some questioned us saying, “We have paid lakhs of Rupees to enjoy a holiday, why have you closed the pools?” Ignorance of the deadliness of the virus made them question this decision, blaming us.

By 20 or 21 March, they were receiving messages about the rising death toll in Italy, mass graves in the Middle East, lockdowns in Paris and so on and so on.. Suddenly, they started panicking. The tourists who were arguing with us were so scared of the direction the world was heading that they even stopped talking to us.

By 21 March, the government decided to send all the foreigners back to their respective countries. Some guests told me that they were reluctant to return to their countries. Many opted to stay back in Sri Lanka for safety reasons. With the dawn of the Sinhala-Hindu New Year 2020, we expected things would go in favour for us. Bookings for holidays flowed fast. Our hotel had about 4000 room bookings up to May. We were jubilant dreaming of the service charges. Alas! This was not so. The pandemic affected the hospitality industry the most. At the beginning of the pandemic, there were staff of about 300. Nearly 100 of them were on a contract basis. They had no official documents of contract. When the pandemic happened, they were the first to lose their jobs.

On the first of April the hotel was handed over as a quarantine facility. The government arranged security and medical facilities. On 1 May, I was asked to report to work for 14 days to look after those who were in quarantine. It was a great risk and a responsibility at a time we were not fully aware of the virus and its rapidly changing phases. All of us were nervous as we had to serve the people who were returning from other countries which are severely affected. I have worked at this hotel for 12 years. I couldn't abandon my employers at a critical time like this and I decided to join the team. But some of the permanent staff refused to work. We can't blame them. Who would like to get marginalised when you go back to your village after working at a quarantine facility? Yet the hotel paid their wages.

We were given a two-hour training. A stick with a rubber ball fixed to one end was used to tap on a guest's room door. We had to collect the garbage bags by 7 a.m. in the morning. We tap on the door and ten seconds after tapping, the occupant leaves the garbage bag outside the door. We load the trolley and take them away. Food was also provided in the same way. A small table was placed outside every room. We leave the food trays on that table and tap on the door to inform them.

We wore a track bottom, a t-shirt, socks and gloves. In fear of contracting the virus, I wore three pairs of gloves and a face mask at all times. When collecting garbage, an overall had to be worn. It covered us from head to foot was similar to the safety gear worn when handling dangerous chemicals.

In addition, we were instructed to wear a pair of goggles and a thick pair of gloves. This entire gear was so heavy and we struggled a lot until we got used to the kit. We could feel the sweat pouring underneath the garments. It was a very uncomfortable feeling. When we take off the gloves, we easily perspire about 200 to 300 millilitres of sweat. There was a fixed menu for all three meals and the hotel staff were also offered the same food.

On the 12th day, the PCR tests were done for those in quarantine at 10 in the morning. The doctors informed us in advance of their exact time of arrival. We got ready early waiting for them. Four doctors from the forces and the general hospital conducted the tests. They instructed us from which section the occupants should be brought. We tapped on the doors and asked them to come out of the room and line up. When the last person was out, we asked them to follow us. One meter distance was maintained throughout. After testing, we took them back to their rooms. I had two elderly people in my section. The lady had to be taken in a wheelchair and at the end of the operation, I had to disinfect the wheelchair. The first PCR test was done in the country they boarded the aircraft. To be on the safe side, they are tested again at our airport upon arrival. They were brought to our hotel with a military escort. No one helped them carry their baggage. They were requested to carry their own bags themselves for safety reasons. Everything had to be done systematically and responsibly. A hint of negligence could bring deadly results.

The final PCR test was done after 12 days as their quarantine was two weeks long. On the 13th day, they were tested for Malaria. At the end of 14 days of work, we had to go to the PHI for a certificate saying that we had worked at the quarantine facility and were cleared of all ailments. That was the pass we used to travel with. Even though we had a pass in our hand, we faced a severe problem in returning home after work as there were no transport facilities. Further, travelling between districts was strictly prohibited.

People in our villages also frowned upon us. Some of us faced a lot of harassment because we had worked with returnees from foreign countries, some did not want us to come back to the village. People thought the virus came from other countries. Ignorance about a new disease caused fear and confusion and people didn't understand. Although we had a letter of clearance, our neighbours informed the police when we returned to our villages. When police officers frequented our homes, the rest of the village wanted to find out the reasons for their visits. Some of us had to stay isolated for another 14 days.

We will never learn to find solutions to obstacles if we do not face these challenges and embrace them. Now look at me – since I decided to face this challenge, I now know the realities woven around this COVID-19 risk as well as the effort that the government puts in to curb the situation. Since I experienced this saga first hand, I have the confidence and courage to take on any challenge.

Story compiled by Mr Thayaga Chandana, Gampaha District

PRIYADARSHINI



A Tale of Calamity

My name is Harshika Priyadarshani. My husband works at a construction site in Colombo. He comes home once every two months when he gets his salary. We lived in a tiny 10x10 foot house, built on land that belonged to my husband's elder aunt, loku amma. Suddenly, the coronavirus started spreading like a wildfire. Police curfew was imposed.

My husband had not been home for two months. He said he couldn't come as he had not received his wages. He was trapped in Colombo. But sadly, our two kids and I faced a Himalayan crisis back in the village. There wasn't a grain of sugar in the house. Not even a drop of kerosene to light a kuppilampuwa (night lamp). We fell into darkness and were desperate as never before. Since we didn't have a toilet of our own, we started using my husband's loku amma's toilet. With the rapid spread of the pandemic, they put a padlock and locked the door to prevent us from using the toilet. I packed a few things and left for my mother's home with my two children. Having stayed there for two weeks, I dropped by at our home to grab a few clothes for my children. We did not have a proper door to our home. A piece of spare wood barely made up a door. It was open when I reached home but I thought it was due to the wind. Unsuspectingly, I closed the door and returned to my mother's place. After a week or so, the police came looking for me. They accused me of lending my house for producing illicit liquor. I was shocked when the police officer informed me that our house had been used for producing illegal liquor at nights during my absence. The police officer issued a stern warning saying that I'll have to go to jail if such illegal operations are carried out inside my house again.

Almost a week later, I heard that the police had searched my house and four people who were engaged in illegal liquor production were taken into custody. Around midnight on the same day, the daughters of my husband's loku amma stormed into my mother's home, where I was staying.

They scolded me in raw filth accusing me of tipping off the police. They threatened me in front of my children stating that they would not allow me to set foot on their land ever again. They thought I tipped the police regarding the liquor production but honestly, I was clueless and had nothing to do with this incident.

The very next day, in spite of all that drama, I gathered courage and returned to our home along with my two children. Oh God! Our little house was flattened to the ground. Empathy towards each other, especially at a time like this, is so important. How on earth can people do such harm to fellow human beings at a time of such crisis? What crime have I committed to face such karma? How barbaric are people to punish a family with two innocent children already suffering their ill fate? I gathered together whatever was left and returned to my mother's place.

Four months later, my husband came home. But then, the ill-treatment that we received from my mother and my family increased day by day. My children got scolded. They started spanking them and became increasingly rude to them.

When it became impossible to bear the ill-treatment by my own kith and kin anymore, my husband and I built a small polythene shaded hut with clay walls on a land that belonged to the government. Exactly five days later, the officers from the Mahaweli Project visited the location, informed us that it was illegal to erect an unauthorized construction and demolished the hut. We became destitute once again with no roof above us. We spent day time under a Bo tree in the vicinity. At night, we slept under the shade of a polythene tied to one of the poles left from the demolished hut. It is disheartening that we received no support from anyone. During this disastrous period, for two days both of us and our children starved and survived only on water. On the third day, we received a packet of lunch from a nearby grocery shop. We let our children fill their stomachs and we starved. No one – simply no one – offered us help. Finally, we met the Divisional Project Officer and told him of our plight. He was the only one who was sympathetic towards us as he allowed us to stay at the community hall veranda until the election duties were over. Now, we are occupying that space. God only knows how long we'll be allowed to stay there.

Story compiled by Ven. Sandunpura Revathalankara, Gampaha District

Akurana Comes Together

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the role played by local religious leaders is invaluable. The prelates of the four main religious sects of Sri Lanka volunteered to care for the people in need. The interventions they made leaving aside caste, creed, religious and communal differences not only brought people together but also saved lives. Being affiliated to the Sarvodaya Shanthi Sena Movement and followers of the Sarvodaya philosophy, they have served communities diligently during various emergency situations.

The village of Akurana in the Kandy district drew the attention of the country in 2018 due to an ethnic riot. A curfew was imposed and the tensions mounted to a boiling point. Sadly, Akurana was in focus for unfortunate reasons for many weeks. During that critical and tense period, both young and old clergy played a decisive role in bringing fractured communities together. Clergy belonging to all religions in the area, worked tirelessly to bring about social harmony among heartbroken and divided circles. Fortunately, their determined efforts gave birth to a new wave of solidarity in the area.

Akurana faced a total lockdown when a few COVID-19 positive cases were detected earlier on. Curfew was imposed and soon all the roads leading to Akurana were blocked by the military. The villagers were confined inside their houses unable to even come out to fetch essentials. Here are anecdotes from two religious leaders from two villages in the area.

Ven. Konakalagala Uditha, the chief priest of Saddhananda Pirivena in Konakalagala, Alawathugoda described the situation thus:

“The government imposed curfew abruptly with no prior warning whatsoever. But they also had no alternative either. There were 90 novice monks studying at the Pirivena. People who offered alms to us regularly visited the temple through byroads to share their stories. They were so destitute they came looking for food, medicine or even some sort of financial assistance. I offered assistance to the best of my ability to fulfil their needs. Government servants, bankers and people holding important positions in the private sector were also among the band of powerless who visited the temple. Most of them were well-to-do individuals with savings in their bank accounts. But the question was: how could they go to the bank to withdraw money during a curfew?

A group of STF officers on duty arrived at the village. They had to be accommodated at the temple since there was no other facility in the area. Water scarcity was one of the greatest challenges we faced. In the first week or so, we did not have access to essential goods such as food, gas, medicines etc. Vendors were reluctant to come into the village as they had to pass through many checkpoints to reach the village.

Even when someone fell ill and needed to go to a hospital, the villagers came to the temple for assistance. Though we managed to organize transport for the sick, they were not allowed to step outside the village as strict guidelines were issued by the military and police. I think people in Akurana suffered the lockdown the most. We organised all precautionary measures to prevent people staying at the temple from getting infected with the virus. Every time we felt that stocks of essential food items were running low, we informed the authorities to obtain them.”

Mr. U. S. M. M. Hussain of Vilanagame, Akurana is a close confidante of the priest. He is also an active member of the inter-religious harmony programme launched within the village.

“As a first step, we requested our children living away from us to return to the village without delay. We felt that the family members should be together at a time of crisis to feel at ease. All of us stocked dry rations sufficient for one week. But soon we realised that this was not something that would be over in a week or two. We gathered a few young people and discussed how we could walk through this storm collectively. Finding a solution to the lack of water became our priority. There is a waterway by the edge of the village, where people used to bathe in the past. We volunteered to clear the surroundings and make it easily accessible to all. This community effort brightened our lives and we felt the value of flocking together at a time of fear and pain. Next, we discussed with the temple and the church to draw up a plan to assist the families affected the most. We were so motivated that we introduced new ways to minimise waste by securing fruits and vegetables grown within the village. We also worked towards the future by initiating a program to utilise abandoned paddy fields to grow vegetables. The Buddhist priests as well as the Muslim Maulavis educated villagers about the value of leading a spiritual and simple lifestyle at all times.

Ven. Konakalagala Uditha Thero:

“We have a twenty-year-old inter-religious organization called Akurana Suhadata Foundation. Almost on a daily basis, we inquired about each other’s wellbeing. We made sure that every family had enough to fill their stomachs. Irrespective of who is who, we shared dry rations among all. When a death occurred in a Muslim family, they contacted the temple regarding procedures. We worked as one family.”

Mr. Hussain:

“Hunger knows no boundaries. It does not discriminate on religious or ethnic lines. All of us feel hunger in the same way. The chief priest of Konakalagala put forward a wonderful plan. There are plenty of wealthy traders in Akurana. We requested them to donate essential food items. No one refused, all of them contributed readily. Our youth were so energetic and ready to offer help. They came together, worked round the clock and distributed the food items to the needy. One of the women in the village gave birth to a baby. Unfortunately, the baby died two days later. We informed the authorities immediately and the Buddhist priest made arrangements for the funeral. We adhered to the guidelines set by the government and organized the funeral. Even the bathing of the infant’s body was done with careful precautions. We can write a book on how we worked together at that time. We have a story to tell the whole country on harmonious living.”

Ven. Konakalagala Uditha Thero:

“Stories that spread all over the country about Akurana earlier were not true. Some of them were fiction and lies. While we were working harmoniously together, gossip and idle talk spread like wildfire through the media and social networks. That was a very destructive trend. Here, we were working together like one family while the media was spreading false, humiliating stories. However, we are blessed that we managed to overcome the negative publicity and maintain our unity as a family. If we had not worked together intelligently and sensibly, the story could be different. The love and compassion we shared is boundless and will continue long after the pandemic is over!”

Story compiled by G. S. T. Dilshani and Yasintha Abeysinghe, Kandy District



R O S H I N I

A Journey from Italy to Sri Lanka

I am Roshini Perera and I am 49 years old. My eldest son is 16 and the second one is 10. My husband's name is Nirosh. We were in Italy together. Italy was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic in an extremely brutal way. As the virus broke out at an alarming speed, the entire country was locked down by the second week of February. Schools were closed down. We were trapped inside our homes. A vast majority lost their jobs. We became absolutely helpless as the crisis was aggravated day by day. Our elder son has a breathing difficulty since childhood. Despite medical care, we couldn't cure his wheezing condition. We worried about his medical condition when the pandemic started spreading so fast.

In the meantime, flights from Sri Lanka to Milan ceased functioning. We received information that a Middle Eastern airline was scheduling their last flight on 12 March. My husband forced me to go back to Sri Lanka as soon as possible together with our children. He had to stay back since he was employed in Italy and had to provide for us. I hurriedly left Milan on the 12th night with both our sons. After 10 hours of waiting in transit, the flight to Sri Lanka finally took off. The majority in our flight were returning to Sri Lanka with children. As soon as the plane landed, it was announced that those returning from Italy should remain seated while the rest could disembark.

Army officers helped us out. Our luggage was disinfected and piled up in a separate area. We were asked to board buses and were taken to the Punani Quarantine Centre. After being in quarantine for 14 days, we were issued a clearance certificate. When we reached the Yakkala Police Station, our relatives accompanied us home. Ten minutes after we reached home, the Grama Sewaka (village headman) appeared at our door and we were then asked to stay indoors for another 14 days.

Since my elder son has a wheezing condition, Public Health Officers frequented our residence to examine him. Our neighbours suspected that these officials were in and out of our house because one of us had got infected with the coronavirus. Some remarks were humiliating and hurtful.

There is a parapet wall around our house. We stayed indoors without inconveniencing anyone. Yet, whenever both my sons played in the garden, the neighbours called the police. The police visited our home five times.

No one reached out to offer help. Not even to comfort us with kind words. I still can't believe how our neighbours, with whom we shared happiness and grief over the years, could become so rude and unkind at a time we were experiencing a storm. Some of our neighbours even tried to pick fights with us. We decided to move to another area leaving behind this home – a home we built dreaming of a beautiful future. We have had enough of this. Not even in our wildest dreams did we think that the people we shared a close bond with, would marginalize us for no reason. We thought all of us were a family. We thought that when we were in need, we will be protected by our neighbours. Had we known that those we trusted the most would turn against us like this, we would have remained in Italy and suffered the consequences with a smile.

Story compiled by M. D. A. H. Wijesuriya, Gampaha District

A Long Walk Home

Life has not been rosy for us and we faced so many difficulties throughout our married life. But we experienced a darker side of life like never before during the pandemic.

My name is Niluka Sandamali. My husband is a carpenter and we have two children. The eldest is schooling and the younger one is still in pre-school. My husband earned about Rs. 2500 a day as a carpenter. That too was only if he found work. He would give me Rs. 500 to cover household expenses. The rest he wasted on alcohol and cigarettes. He used to yell at me and beat me up even before the COVID-19 pandemic. Under the influence of alcohol, he also screamed at the children for no reason. The children were scared of him and rarely show up when he is around. He lost his job during the pandemic.

On 18 April my elder son showed symptoms of fever. I gave him Panadol but it did not subside. I was terrified thinking it could be something fatal. The neighbours blamed me, as though it was my fault my child had fallen sick. I did not even have a cent at hand to spend. Samantha, my husband, did not help at all as usual. He went fishing to a nearby stream avoiding the turbulent situation at home.

I went around the village begging for assistance to take my son to the hospital, but not a single person came forward to lend me a few Rupees. However, after much pleading and weeping one compassionate individual offered me Rs.1000. I rushed my child to the Gampaha Hospital in a three-wheeler. They kept the child under observation till late evening. The head of the ward finally informed me that my son was negative for the virus and discharged him. I did not know how to get back home as the entire country was under curfew. Roads were empty with no form of transport available. Our village, Chandana Gama, was around 7 km from the hospital. I carried my son in my arms and walked that entire distance alone. There was an eerie silence. It had been a tough time and I couldn't bear the pain anymore. I wept all through the journey home.

I feel disgusted towards mankind. My husband had the audacity to turn a blind eye when we were going through so much. Just as I entered the house, Samantha started yelling at us. He screamed, questioning me as to why we took this long to come. The neighbours scolded me for bringing the child back home. I explained to them that the doctor discharged him since the child is not infected with COVID-19 but just had a slight fever. They did not believe my story. They threatened us and wanted us to stay indoors for two weeks. We had little choice but to bow down to their command. Fortunately, a teacher from my son's school sent us a bag of essentials every two weeks. The Grama Sewaka too sent us dry rations. Since we are recipients of the Samurdhi grant, a monthly grant offered to low income families, we could also manage. Still, however, I'm disgusted by mankind – by my husband's lack of care during a crisis and our neighbours' reaction during a time of need.

Story compiled by Shyamal Kuruppu, Gampaha District



Love in the Age of a Pandemic

This is a story of romance. A story that may even remind you of a film you have seen.

Our heroine is from Rajanganaya and was following a course at the Anuradhapura Technical College. She met a boy who hailed from Kekirawa and was also studying at the same college. They fell in love instantly. Inseparable and devoted, the couple soon became the talk of the town. Their love story spread across Anuradhapura and beyond. They were well-matched and their parents gave their consent with no hesitation and the wedding was fixed. But they were advised not to rush things until their final exams were over. Meanwhile, they started building a house on a land gifted by the boy's father. The prized teak trees around the heroine's house were cut, loaded and dispatched to Kekirawa to make doors and windows for the couple's new house. Both passed their exams with flying colours, delighting their families. The heroine decided to remain in the sacred city, Anuradhapura, and follow another course while the boy migrated to Colombo for a job.

A few months passed by. Our heroine received some shattering news which made her weep in despair – her beloved fiancé had gotten married to someone else. But time heals all wounds. Our heroine secured a job at a government office and moved to Colombo. One day, she met a handsome man working at the same office. They shared their stories sitting on a park bench, got to know each other and fell in love.

With blessings from their families, they fixed the dates for the wedding. All arrangements were made to hold the wedding ceremony on 23 July 2020. But calamity struck! A COVID-19 positive patient was found in Rajanganaya and the area was placed under lockdown. Our heroine from Anuradhapura and hero from Kurunegala were unable to cross districts due to strict quarantine laws. The heroine's family pleaded to postpone the ceremony until the lockdown was over. But the hero's parents were firm followers of auspicious dates and times and vehemently opposed the idea.

Meanwhile, our heroine was also determined. The Rajangana canal flows through the two districts. If she crossed the district by foot or vehicle, the border guards would not allow her. Instead, our courageous heroine decided to cross the Rajangana canal with a suitcase of wedding attire balanced on her head. She completed the crossing. Rings were exchanged at the auspicious time and the marriage vows were read aloud amidst tears of joy.

This was a story of romance and resilience amidst a pandemic – perhaps it might even be better than the love stories you have watched on film.

Story compiled by Shalini Nishadi Kodagoda, Anuradhapura District

An Eye-opening Experience

Our eldest son is at service in the Navy. He is one of three sons in our family and was attached to the Welisara Navy Camp when the pandemic broke out. Due to the heavy workload, my son could not get any leave during the curfew period. However, after the Sinhala and Hindu New Year he came home on 19 April. My son is a very community-minded person and is loved by our neighbours for his friendly and caring nature. Just like any other occasion, he enjoyed his vacation with neighbours while attending to minor repairs in our house.

The discovery of the Welisara Navy Camp cluster attracted a lot of publicity. TV news channels were flooded with updates. This number started rising daily and the Navy soon ordered every soldier on vacation to provide details about their whereabouts. We called the PHI and the police to provide information about our son and the PHI advised all of us to self-quarantine at our home. He also posted a notice in front of our house. Although we were asked to self-quarantine, we did not receive any relief items from authorities and we experienced stress and anguish during this time. Meanwhile, a vehicle from the Navy picked our son to house him in a quarantine facility.

Every day since our son was taken away, many people, including strangers, called frequently to inquire about our whereabouts. My son called the day after and informed us that all of us will be taken to Trincomalee to a quarantine centre. He asked us to be prepared and said there's absolutely nothing to worry about. But to be honest, we panicked – this was a new situation for us. We packed the essentials for our stay. Sadly, none of our neighbours troubled to check on us. Only one family visited and wished us a safe journey back.

The people with whom we had associated for years completely abandoned us. For the very first time in our lives, we realized that we were by ourselves. The Navy took us to Matale. A few other families who were to join us were also there. Our son requested his fellow officers to take us in a separate vehicle since no one in our family had tested positive for the virus and they agreed to his request. A house by the ocean with two rooms was allocated for us to quarantine in. It was one of the best holidays we spent.

Before we returned home after completing the quarantine procedures, we were given a bag full of rations. Almost every essential item was there. It was such a rich bag of rations. All of us and our son received COVID-19 free certificates. I wonder how our neighbours would have treated us if we had tested positive.

This lesson we learnt was bitter but it opened our eyes to a new reality.

Story compiled by Ven. K. Dhammaratana Thero, Matale District



The Life of a Dragnet Fisherman: Sanjeewa's Story

My name is Suresh Sanjeewa and I was born in Kalpitiya. Since my youth, I have lived in Negombo. I earn my living through dragnet fishing. Before COVID-19, dragnet fishing was done by inviting people on the promise of a half-share. Later, things changed rapidly. We had to find new ways to continue. It became increasingly difficult to find people in the area to drag nets.

I brought a group of people from outside and provided them with accommodation. I also used a tractor to pull the nets as the number of people still weren't enough. Usually, we need at least 25 people to drag a net, but I had only 15 working for me. When the virus started spreading, the police advised us to abandon our work immediately since dragnet fishing involves a group of people. I had no choice but to request my workers to return to their homes and paid their wages out of my pocket.

Dragnet fisher folk were hit hard by the coronavirus. Trawler and dinghy boat owners were given permission to fish, but we were asked to refrain. In the fishing industry, the dragnet fisher folk are a special group. Very rarely, they sail to the sea in small boats. Unfortunately, most of the current generation is addicted to heroin, hashish, cocaine, or other intoxicating pills and they are scared of the sea and don't dare to join a trawler or dinghy boat group. This drug menace is such a tragedy and we will lose future generations to this menace if the authorities fail to implement proper laws.

The ocean never offers us what we wish for. Sometimes, we are blessed in abundance; other times, we sail back to the shore empty-handed and dejected. But that is the nature of this job and we must be prepared to accept with a smile whatever the ocean offers to us. Companies and foreign countries stopped purchasing fish due to the coronavirus scare. The price of fish is usually high – it's ironic how we have to pay a high price for fish which breed in our own sea. Generally, we sell a kilo of fish for around Rs. 4000. But today, we are unable to sell a kilo for even Rs.1500. Sometimes due to the high-tide, there is also a shortage of fish.

Since COVID-19 is a worldwide phenomenon, we can't blame the government for the hardships we are forced to face. It's unfair to demand additional relief and benefits at a critical time like this. We have to be mindful of our expenditure in these dire circumstances. Fisher folk live carefree lives and eat, drink and spend lavishly. But today, we have to curtail our spending habits. It is wiser to spend less until this adversity ceases. We had a list of issues to solve before the coronavirus struck and we were working towards them. But who thought we would encounter an unexpected situation like this?

I hope this unpredictable turn of events will provide us with an opportunity to think afresh and learn. We should be happy that we are able to survive this way in comparison to other countries. I'm not going to give up my fishing job because of this unexpected event. What we started should be continued no matter what difficulties are thrown our way. If we analyse these events mindfully, we can find an answer to all obstacles and dilemmas. I often wonder whether this was a blessing in disguise. These once-in-a-lifetime situations should not weigh us down – the brave fisher folk, who challenge the mighty ocean all throughout our lives. I have already spoken to my work force. As soon as the situation returns to normal, I will reinstate them. In a way, I am blessed since I have a wadiya of my own. Nearly fifteen families are dependent on my decision and I will not abandon them. Some of them have already inquired when we will be able to sail again. I told them that if everything falls in line with God's grace, we would be able to restart soon.

There is nothing that we cannot do if our intentions are clear.

Story compiled by Thayaga Chandana, Gampaha District

Misinformation and Misused Authority

I served in the army. I am now retired and have rented out the annexe of my house to a young couple. The boy works at Lanka Camp which adjoins the Welisara Navy Camp. The Welisara Navy Camp came into focus as a COVID-19 cluster was found there. Navy officers who were on leave were looked on with suspicion instantly. People began frowning upon them. Being a retired army officer and having served the nation for 22 years, I felt so awful about this ill-treatment. The couple have a 9-month-old baby boy. Both of them were born in this very village. They belong to this place while I am from Galle. We have moved to this village nearly 18 years ago. We lived in harmony with the villagers. I allowed the couple to stay in the annexe as a gesture of gratitude for the work he rendered to our motherland and certainly not to earn a living by renting the place.

During those initial critical days, the mainstream news channels and social media were flooded with nothing but coronavirus-related stories. But not all stories were real. There were rumours, gossip and even malicious allegations circulated. The government could have taken stern action against those gossipmongers but then, how much can the government do in a critical time like that? Soon after the disclosure of the Welisara cluster, the government requested all those attached to the camp and who were on leave to report to the authorities immediately. We asked the boy to surrender without delay but he informed us that he did not belong to the same camp and I trusted him.

For whatever reason, I wanted to double-check to make sure the call was only for Welisara Navy officers. I called Mr. Indunil Hiththatiya, Sarvodaya District Coordinator of Colombo, and made an inquiry. Having called a higher-ranking Navy official, he too confirmed that this call was only for Welisara staff. My wife also felt so sad about the ongoing blame game. These are the very heroes who helped save the country from terrorists and who protect us. This is certainly not the way to treat those who sacrificed their lives for the country. The mainstream media should have acted in a more responsible manner.

With all the clarifications in hand, I voluntarily informed our Grama Sewaka, the local police station, the PHI and Indunil Malli of Sarvodaya. But the villagers spread rumours, accusing me of hiding a COVID-19 patient. Whenever anyone from our household visited the nearby grocery shop, people looked at us with suspicion. Such nasty looks and speculation made me think about the way people looked at victims of AIDS in the bygone era. Villagers kept ignoring us and they even refused to talk to us or come close to us. I was a soldier with a brave heart and even though I am retired, I remain competent and strong. I told my wife that come what may, we should not abandon the couple or listen to the gossip and speculation.

The PHI informed us that he would visit us because of the rumours that were flying around. Prior to his arrival, a police officer from the Meegoda Police Station visited our home. He spoke to us, maintaining a distance of about 2 metres. He left a notice and requested me to stick it at the entrance to our home and warned us not to step out of the house. I told him that it is not my duty to display notices and requested him to do so. I also told him that I would inform the PHI about this. However, on his way back to the police station, he informed a few families that the Navy couple staying in our annexe was COVID-19 positive. The news flew around the village within seconds and we became victims of malicious misinformation. The police officer had given his phone number to villagers and requested them to notify the police if they saw us stepping out of our house.

Since this was a challenging situation, I cannot point fingers at anyone. I do understand the importance of quarantine procedures. However, I have a question – whose duty is it to designate people for quarantine. The PHI or the police?

The police officers could have visited us while notifying the PHI of the area prior to their visit, as the Public Health Inspectors are in charge of quarantine procedures. I informed the PHI that the police officer issued us a notice. But the PHI refused to put up the notice given by the police. He was clear in his decision: “I only want the couple in the annexe to follow the self-quarantine procedures due to suspicion. I don’t want the two of you, the elders, to follow through.”

However, finally, I myself relented and pasted the notice in front of the annexe. The news, once again, spread across the village rapidly. We locked ourselves indoors, voluntarily for 14 days. We survived for four days with dry rations stocks in store. For the next few days, we ate rice and coconut sambol. When I realized that the young Navy family did not have enough food, I informed the Development Officer of the area and she brought dry rations. Indunil Malli of Sarvodaya too visited us thrice and provided us with relief. He is the only one who constantly inquired about us and walked to our home fearlessly. People in quarantine need to be looked after and different people within households – women and children etc – have differing needs. No one else contacted us to inquire if we were alright. I am not blaming the government, but the officers at the ground level should look into these concerns.

The boy next door returned home after completing the quarantine regulations. We followed the advice of the PHI and remained indoors for 14 days. As per the PHI's request, I pasted the notice outside our home. Because only then, he is authorised to issue us with quarantine certificates. The police did not come to our home after the disastrous initial intervention. Once we completed the two weeks of self-quarantine, the PHI removed the notice. But the police ordered us to remain indoors for a few more days. I am still unable to figure out whose orders we should adhere to? The PHIs? Or the police?

Story compiled by Supun Sandanuwan, Colombo District



NADEESHANI

A Pregnant Mother's Ordeal

The delivery of my second baby was fixed for 31 March and I was asked to get myself admitted two days before. My name is Nadeeshani Kanchana and I am 34 years old. On 28 March, a COVID-19 positive patient was found in Akurana. The authorities locked down the area with immediate effect. My husband and I left home at around 10.30 a.m. to go to the hospital. The military at the checkpoint did not allow us to get out of Konakalagala village, as we had to go through Akurana which was a sort of a danger zone. Somehow, we reached the hospital travelling through Pangollamada and Jambugahapitiya. Honestly, I don't want to remind myself of what I faced at the hospital. Yet, we should archive these stories for future reference. I am totally disgusted, disappointed and displeased with the treatment I received. I will never, ever sight that hospital.

My husband was asked to leave soon after my admission. I was admitted at 1.30 p.m. Till 3.30 p.m., I sat on a bench waiting to be taken to a ward. There were about 15 other pregnant mothers in the ward I was admitted to. There was a separate area for the mothers from Akurana. Even though I am from Alawathugoda, I was asked to occupy a bed in the same ward and I was scared to be close to them for fear of infection. Nurses screamed from the top of their voices and ordered us to use the toilets allocated only to the ward. I was worried that I would catch COVID-19 while staying in the same ward with pregnant mothers from Akurana. I moved to an isolated bed which was a little away from them. I cried so much and wondered why we were treated like this. I agonized, wondering if those who were from Akurana might be COVID-19 positive and if so, if my baby's life would be at risk. The nurses were scared to come close to us and refused to make any physical contact with us. Even though I was supposed to be relaxed and calm before my delivery, I suffered a great deal of psychological trauma witnessing how the nurses treated us – the pregnant mothers in that particular ward.

They finished all the testing and I was asked to be ready by 7 a.m. the next day. I was taken to the operating theatre and during this time, a mother who had just delivered her baby was taken back to the ward. The baby's mother was a Muslim from Akurana. Assuming that this mother was COVID-19 positive, the nurses did not touch the mother or the baby. From the day I was admitted, the nurses did not touch the new-born babies.

I was taken to the operating theatre – there were separate facilities for mothers from Akurana. I was the first in the operating theatre that morning. I immediately realized that I was treated differently as I was thought to be from the area under lockdown. My delivery was not easy due to multiple complications. I encountered a serious breathing problem while in the theatre. After giving birth to my baby, my condition worsened. I bled so much during my caesarean surgery, the doctors had to transfuse blood while I was still in the operating theatre. Even in this serious state, medical staff were reluctant to touch my body as though I was plagued with the coronavirus. My physical condition deteriorated and I suffered a great deal of psychological trauma due to the ill-treatment by the hospital staff.

Soon after the delivery, while I was still in pain and grief, I overheard a nurse advising the support staff to disinfect the theatre, the entire area and the medical equipment used as I was from Akurana. The pain I felt deep inside of me after hearing these words were infinite. I was lost for words to explain how much it hurt me. My husband could not visit me due to lockdown. I went through immense humiliation all by myself with no one around to even offer a word of consolation. All new and expectant mothers had no choice but to consume food provided by the hospital. There were times where there was no food was available to us as they had distributed all they had to other patients. The attendants spoke to us harshly. We were treated like dirt since we are from Akurana and the remarks were insulting. They treated us – pregnant and new mothers – as though we were COVID-19 infected. Childbirth is supposed to be a blissful journey every mother treasures. This was my second child. The manner in which I was treated took away all the joy of childbirth.

The day after the delivery, the nurses did not come close to me. I begged for their attention and they simply ignored me. On the second day, I screamed and called out for help as I was suffering through a barrage of complications and was in pain. When I couldn't tolerate the hunger pangs any more, I begged a nurse to make me a cup of Nestomalt, which I had with me. They ignored my cries and kept their distance. After my last meal on the night of 29 March, I had not even taken a drop of water till 1 April.

I had my first meal after three days only when my husband visited me. When I was at the hospital, I always chanted gatha (prayers) and reminded myself of all the good deeds performed. As followers of the Buddha, we attempt not to hurt anyone intentionally. I always thought that the Gods and Goddesses will help me deliver my baby safely. In our ward, the majority of pregnant mothers were Muslim. During this time, what matters is not one's ethnicity or religion. All of us were pregnant mothers hoping to give birth to healthy children. I constantly prayed to invoke blessings from the Gods seeking protection for all.

I was admitted on 29 March and discharged on 2 April. The senior doctor who discharged me asked why I was kept in that ward as I was not from Akurana but from Alawathugoda. The junior doctor said that he did not know and would need to inquire from the nurses. However, the nurses never gave me a chance to even explain where I came from. All these unforeseen incidents took place due to ignorance and misunderstanding.

The doctor said that he could not discharge me as I was too weak after my delivery. "Please discharge me, I want to go home. We have been treated cruelly. I am mentally down because they did not even allow my husband to visit me and there was no milk to be given to my baby. Please allow me to go home, doctor," I cried. "I will sign stating that I demanded to be discharged. Please let me go home." With tears in my eyes, I begged the doctor. To be honest, I came home forcibly discharging myself from the hospital. I was discharged at around 5 p.m. in the evening. It was around 8 in the night when we reached home. A few days after coming home, my body began turning yellowish and I became seriously sick. I was admitted to the Matale hospital due to a lack of blood in my system and for further treatment.

Today, my baby completed three months. We visited the Temple of the Sacred Tooth Relic, and made offerings, seeking blessings for my baby. Every time I remember this sequence of events, I feel bitter. All my life, I have never faced an episode of this nature. Never have I been so upset and heartbroken. My only wish is that no mother goes through such agony ever in her life.

The Muslim mothers who were with me in the hospital were in a far miserable condition compared to mine. Nurses scolded them aloud for the entire ward to hear if they even touched a finger accidentally and they were neglected so much. I wondered what the effects of this will be. It is certain these mothers would share their stories with their family members. Being a member of the majority community, they treated me as if I was an outsider. If I still feel this awful about what I had to go through, I can't imagine how those mothers must feel. Even after months have passed, this series of incidents and the mistreatment keep haunting me. There are days I cry out aloud. It's not easy to forget but time is a great healer, I guess. My only wish is that no mother on earth should go through such pain and agony.

Story compiled by Ven. Wahigala Sarada Thero, Kandy District



“When Will the People of this Country Understand Us?”

I am neither a female nor a male. I do not belong to both genders. This does not matter to me at all. I know who I am, and that is more than enough.

I am the only child of my family and I am 29 years old. My father has many issues about my ways. I just stay quiet when he is angry and I don't counter his arguments or anger. There are hundreds of us in Colombo who have stepped out of our houses due to this kind of family harassment. During the pandemic, they have undergone endless suffering.

I played the role of a mediator and found solutions for some of their problems. Due to my involvement, I can tell hundreds of stories of our community who faced so much hardships during the lockdown. In any case, it is hard to find boarding houses for us. People think that we have fallen from another planet or something. When we are on the streets, people give us strange looks. They laugh and pass nasty hints at us. If at all, when they talk to us, they use abusive language. After going through all this harassment, we are now immune to this kind of treatment by the ignorant. Well, there are times where some of us have retorted and given them a taste of their own medicine. However, I do not get involved in fights with anyone. This harassment is not an isolated issue pertaining only to Sri Lanka

Those who are trapped in boarding houses in Colombo either work at salons, beauty parlours or readymade clothing stores. Some even work as sex workers. None of these are permanent jobs. Almost 80% of our community members are migrants from outstation with poverty-stricken family backgrounds. Some were unable to pay their rent and were thrown out of their boarding houses. The majority of them had nowhere to go and ended up in places like bus stands, the beachside, Vihara Maha Devi Park and so on. Whenever possible, I protected them and I even kept a few of them at our house without the knowledge of my parents. We too must be able to exercise every right guaranteed to all citizens of this country. When we applied for the Rs. 5,000 grant offered by the government, Grama Sewakas chased us away yelling at us in abusive language. On one hand, it's silly to think that they would give us the Rs. 5000 grant when they even refuse to issue us a character certificate.

Those who stayed at bus shelters were caught and taken to local police stations. Some of them were kept in a remand cell by the police and were even sexually and verbally harassed while in the remand itself. Some were kept inside and intimidated for days.

The law of this country does not apply to us. Knowing that there is absolutely no one to stand up for us, people at all levels ill-treat us. This takes a toll on us.

This is how we were born. This is not a mental illness. This is a problem with our hormones. When will the people of this country understand us? When will we be free?

Story compiled by Anuhas Sandaru, Colombo District

Stronger Together

I am Thushanthi Fernando. I work at the Divisional Secretariat Office in Homagama and I am the officer-in-charge of small enterprise development and related issues. We were summoned just two days after the curfew was announced – not for day to day office work, but to bring, pack and distribute different items to fulfil the needs of common people. In addition, as the Small Enterprise Development Officer, I also assisted the entrepreneurs in my area. I was instrumental in supporting around 50 to 60 entrepreneurs to obtain their license to carry on their businesses during the lockdown.

Those days, our phones would ring endlessly. One day, I got a call from a pregnant mother who was due in two weeks. She said she didn't have a chance to get the dresses for her baby on time and was unable to consume any food but oranges. We left all our work aside and began looking for oranges for this pregnant mother. It was not the moment to spend a lot of time to fulfil an individual request but how can we ignore a plea by a pregnant mother? We called everyone known to us in our quest to locate some oranges. At last, with the help of the police, we finally found oranges from a place in Piliyandala. It felt like a large-scale humanitarian mission for us all, a moment of triumph.

Through some of our entrepreneurs, we provided clothing for children. These are only a few among many of the efforts we carried out. Under the leadership of our Divisional Secretariat, we delivered dry rations packs to the doorstep of every household. We directly contacted the entrepreneurs we work with and purchased spices, rice and other items from them. The biggest problem was to distribute the Rs. 5000 grant. At first, we distributed Rs. 5000 for those who did not receive Samurdhi and those with disabilities. This crisis affected not only the underprivileged segment but also the daily wage labourers, small and medium scale entrepreneurs / businessmen, goods and service providers and many more. In my area, there were hundreds who were worried about paying their vehicle lease.

When distributing the Rs. 5000 grant, we found several families for whom we should give at least Rs. 1000 rupees if we couldn't afford to give them Rs. 5000. Some elders were not given Rs. 5000 as this sum was distributed to their children. In situations like these, I intervened and provided required aid for 10 to 15 persons in the Jalthara area. Even today, people are grateful for all the commendable services we rendered during an unprecedented time.

I can confidently say that nobody from Homagama area suffered due to the lockdown. We engaged in our duties diligently. We brought in vegetables and fruits and unloaded, cut, measured and delivered these to households. There were no divisions or hierarchies when we were at work. Everyone worked as one team – from the Grama Niladari, the Development Officer and the Samurdhi Officer. Even the officers from other areas worked with us to fulfil one goal – helping the needy. There were days when we reached home around midnight.

After the lockdown, I went to meet our entrepreneurs. I could not believe how much their businesses were severely affected. It will take ages for them to recover their losses. Those who do vegetable and fertilizer businesses were not too affected. But those who sell readymade garments had purchased stocks worth around 5 - 6 lakhs in the expectation these would be sold during the New Year season. Sadly, they are still stored at homes, unsold. Those who sell plants will not be able to stand on their feet for at least 6 to 7 months. Now, under the new Swashakthi scheme, we provide loans. Last week, we visited 20 entrepreneurs and promised to support them to our fullest capacity. We held an exhibition last month to boost their sales and open new markets to them by connecting sellers with a larger consumer base. There is also no business for fancy goods and 80% of beauticians are affected. Several communication centres and book shops too have closed down. Although financial assistance has been provided, business recovery will take a while. While production can continue, there is no guarantee of sales as people have no money to purchase products.

Day care centres haven't opened as yet. It is a big task even for government officers to find a safe place to house their small kids during office hours. I leave my children with a close friend living nearby. In the days ahead, we will be called for election duties and this problem will worsen. It looks like a second wave of the coronavirus is around the corner. If so, it will deal another blow to entrepreneurs. At this point in time, even calling to inquire about them gives them a boost. Some have closed down their businesses while some have restructured their businesses to suit new realities. Those who sew clothes are now making face masks, those who sold food items are now baking cakes.

During the lockdown, we also observed that many government servants lacked the protective gear required to carry out their duties efficiently. At the beginning, even face masks were scarce. A few enterprising young government employees came together, sewed face masks and distributed these to each and every government office in the Homagama area free of charge. We pooled money, sewed and distributed nearly 3000 face masks.

Many of us have families and children. The stories we heard and the incidents we witnessed, made us scared for our children and we took a lot of precautions. When we returned from work, we entered the house through the kitchen, showered and kept our wet clothes outside and only then approached our children and looked into their needs. For their safety, I tried my best to exercise minimal physical contact with my children as much as possible.

During the pandemic, many civil society organizations at village level supported us voluntarily. At one occasion, we did not have a vehicle to distribute certain items. A businessman offered his vehicle. On that day, from 9 in the morning till late evening, we delivered dry rations packs to around 25 families in Homagama area. The houses were not situated close to each other yet the person who volunteered did not make any fuss in helping us. At the office, everyone from the security officer to the Divisional Secretary worked in complete harmony. In one way, we also built camaraderie while working together. We took on all tasks humbly and worked to serve our community.

The Small Enterprise Development Unit also created an online marketing system. We initiated a program to encourage the products of entrepreneurs and some have updated their businesses to the online marketing system. We try our best to encourage them to remain in businesses. At present, there is a good demand for locally grown potatoes which is sold for around Rs. 300 per kg. We have chosen around 25 entrepreneurs who possess land to cultivate potatoes. Next week, we are going to Monaragala to buy seeds. We will undertake the sale of potatoes when the harvest is reaped. We also plan to embark on a mushroom cultivation project later on. Our plan is to reach the supermarket chains. Our final target is the Colombo online market as there is a growing demand there.

Story compiled by Supun Sandanuwan, Colombo District

KANCHANA



Operation Bread

I am Kanchana Lakmal from Sedawaththa and I worked at a bakery. During the coronavirus outbreak, a lot of three-wheeler vendors lined up in front of the bakery to buy bread. My friend and I were inspired by this and embarked on a venture to sell bread.

The bakery owner agreed to our proposal and offered us a discount. So, when other vendors sold a loaf of bread for Rs. 70, we sold ours for only Rs. 65. Both of us sold between 200 to 300 loaves almost every day. Within a few days, we saved roughly Rs. 200,000. We obtained a small loan and bought a small bakery. Now, we make bread, buns, cakes and all kinds of other food products in our very own bakery. We deliver to households and have a very good demand for our products.

Be it Kittampahuwa, Sedawatta, Welewaththa, Wadugodawaththa or Orugodawaththa, our products are sold like hotcakes and we are a household name in the area today. We are hoping to purchase a small van in the near future and then, we'll be able to expand to Colombo, selling our bakery products.

COVID-19, you have been a blessing in disguise!

Story compiled by U. A. L. Yohan, Colombo District

When Gossip and Fake News Collide

What happens when misinformation spreads during a pandemic? This is one story of a family caught in a net of gossip, suspicion and fake news. It is not the only one in Sri Lanka.

Mr Vijitha Ariyadasa and Mrs Namalie Ariyadasa's father fell ill during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic in Sri Lanka. He was 86 years old and had a wound on his leg and was admitted to Ruhunu Hospital. The family obtained a hospital pass to attend to his needs and get around during curfew. Later, he was transferred to the Karapitiya Hospital where he passed away. The death certificate stated that the cause of death of septicemia due to the wound and respiratory failure caused by a lung infection. A relative who came to the hospital and met the doctor misunderstood the cause of death. The person carried the news of the death to the village and then chaos unfolded. There was no need to panic as the death was not linked to the coronavirus. But false news spread from one person to another, soon taking a life of its own. News of the death and the cause of the death was distorted and the papers and social media also highlighted the news incorrectly.

It was a troubling time. Information about the coronavirus was still trickling in – there were rumours about the deadly virus being airborne. Given the curfew conditions and uncertainty about the virus, health and police authorities took steps to curtail the people attending the funeral.

“Immediately after I received a complaint about this death, I sent the officials to inspect the place and informed the police and the health authorities. Everyone was advised not to attend the funeral and to stay within their homes. We knew that he was not suffering from the coronavirus but unnecessary risks should not be taken. I informed the Divisional Secretary, Dodangoda not to issue any curfew permits to attend the funeral and I stopped all those who were coming from outside the area. The health authorities were also instructed to take the necessary steps,” explained Mrs. Himali Ratnaweera, Divisional Secretary of Kadawath Sathara, Galle.

However, the distorted information had upsetting effects. Villagers discouraged clergy from attending to funeral rites, accused the family of covering up information and the police were repeatedly contacted. A moment of grief for the family became part of a public social media storm.

Namalie Ariyadasa recollects her experience with sadness: “This village is known to be a village with educated, intelligent people but the prestige of the village and the people has vanished after this incident. We were not allowed to leave the coffin even at the funeral parlour. We have a society in this village and the President had discussed organizing a picketing to protect the village. This was planned in the middle of the night. They also had dialled 119 multiple times to contact the police. The calls kept coming even when the police were inside our house. This felt like some kind of revenge plot but we do not hate anyone.”

“We were never infected with the coronavirus but we had to go through so much. But it helped us learn about the nature of people. I hope that by telling our story, people will be more mindful about listening to gossip and fake news in the future,” laments Mr. Vijitha Ariyadasa.

Story compiled by Anula Deegala, Galle District

Bread, Glorious Bread

During the COVID-19 lockdown, we started baking bread at home just for fun. Our first loaf of bread was in the shape of a breadfruit. On the second day, it looked like a jackfruit. But the aroma was heavenly. The fragrance of the bread was so good that people from our village wandered over to our home in curiosity. We kept improving. We sought assistance from those who were well versed in the techniques of making bread and also went through many YouTube clips to master the art of baking. Soon, orders started flowing and buyers flocked to purchase our products. Now, we not only bake bread but also fish buns, butter buns, roast paan etc – our range covers almost every bakery product. Let the good times roll!

Story compiled by Bandula Jenendrasinghe, Kalutara District

From Milano to Lunawa

The following are extracts from a conversation with a family in Lunawa. Kithsiri, who returned to Sri Lanka from Italy, describes what it was like to contract COVID-19 while his wife, Senehelatha, talks about her experience with her neighbours and the authorities.

Senehelatha: The coronavirus spread to Italy soon after it began in Wuhan. When I heard the news, I called my husband every day and urged him to come home. My four daughters and I haven't seen Kithsiri in a long time now. Finally, understanding the gravity of the situation, Kithsiri's brother persuaded him to come home.

Kithsiri: We reached Sri Lanka on the night of 11 March via Dubai. We were then taken to the Katunayake Air Force camp – even the immigration procedures were completed at the camp. We were not sent inside the airport for any reason and were taken to the Katunayake camp through a different route.

We were taken to Kandakadu in a bus, we were 23 altogether. There was a person who had been working in Italy and he wasn't even wearing a mask when he was in the bus. A day after we arrived, he developed a fever. There were some who picked fights but the rest of us didn't get into any clashes. We were given good food at the camp free of charge. They gave us tea 4 - 5 times a day and also gave us refreshing drinks like koththamalli and soup.

From 7 in the morning till the evening, we were on our beds covered with the mosquito nets. Our temperature was checked twice a day by two doctors. A person from Rome developed fever but he mentioned that he gets fever on and off when he comes to Sri Lanka because of the change of climate. Two days afterwards, at about 3.00 a.m., I felt body aches and pains and wondered if it was because of exhaustion. On that day, I slept for about five more hours. Even though I was sleeping, I knew I felt unwell. I thought oversleeping might make me feel worse and came out for a while. When I was out, I realised that it was hard to look at the sunlight – my eyes became smaller and tears rolled down my face. When the two doctors came to check our temperature that night, I had a fever of 100.2 and there were four others who had developed fever. More doctors came to examine us and we were asked to collect our belongings as we were being taken to the Polonnaruwa Hospital.

There, they performed aPCR test on us. It took 24 hours to get the results. We were informed that we had tested positive and the five of us to be taken to the Colombo IDH. Five days after arriving at the IDH, another PCR test was done and that too returned positive. We were tested periodically during the course of our stay. They announced the results of the reports every evening around 7 p.m. At the hospital, we were given good, nutritious food. We were asked to eat well and stay strong. We didn't eat well for about one and half days because of the fear of the coronavirus. They also brought some kenda made with 85 plant varieties from an Ayurveda establishment.

We were at IDH for around 23 days and treated as normal patients as there were no other complications. I was in self-isolation for another 14 days after coming home. We have a room upstairs. They kept food and water on the chair placed near the door. I washed my clothes by myself.

Senehelatha: As soon as he came home, I informed the PHI thinking it might be an issue if we didn't. When I called the PHI and MOH, a lady doctor and another gentleman came along the following day itself. They were polite, helpful and asked me not to go outside for 14 days.

I need to share another thing that happened. When my husband arrived, I went to the airport gate to see him as I had not seen him in a long time. I did not have a chance to talk to him or touch him at the airport as they were transported in sealed busses. I only waved at him from a distance. As soon as he was taken to the hospital, about seven police officers came home. I realised that there were also high-ranking officers among them. They didn't come inside and instead, questioned me standing outside at a distance. We told them we went to the airport but didn't have a chance of talking to my husband and only saw him going in the bus. They asked for more details. By this time, the neighbours also started peeping curiously as if we were criminals.

This was a very trying time. It was difficult to answer the police when they were standing from a distance. My profession, details of kids' schooling etc were recorded from across the road. And then, they left. The next day, MOH officers came home. They came inside the house and spoke in a friendly manner. Two hours after they left, two policemen came by – one in uniform and the other in civilian clothes. Again, they didn't even come inside the gate but started questioning us from the outside like the previous night. I had to repeat the same story again. By this time, I had also told this story to the MOH officers in addition to the group of police officers who came the previous night.

They were from the Moratuwa Police Station. One was a senior official. I think there was another from military intelligence. This was what made me feel disappointed. They should know the details, laws and procedures and would need to be aware of this than us. I felt very upset. On one hand, my husband was sick with a deadly illness. On the other, I was being questioned so unkindly while bearing this mental load.

Then, they said that we need to quarantine ourselves just because we went to the airport. They even asked me whether I brought my husband's bags. I argued with them, asking the officer if he was aware of the airport procedures and that people who returned from overseas were not taken out of the airport but were sent straight to the quarantine centre in buses with no contact with anyone else. Officials need to be informed by the procedures exercised by their own authorities without causing inconvenience to people.

Then, they pasted the notice that we were in quarantine. I asked them to remove the notice as the MOH officers informed us that there was no reason for us to be in quarantine. They said they can't help it and that they are following the instructions given to them. I phoned the Moratuwa Police, who said they couldn't remove the notice, and then I explained the issue to the MOH. They were very sympathetic towards me and said that it is the MOH office's responsibility to issue quarantine notices when needed. They said issues like these arise when people without knowledge perform tasks like these.

I broke down in tears. It was a lot of psychological pressure. I explained how this had become a big issue in our neighbourhood. They treated us as if we were COVID-19 patients. The police came to our area at around 10 or 11 o'clock at night, inquiring about our whereabouts from others in the area. When a police jeep comes in search of us in the middle of the night, what will people think about us?

Everyone who lives around here knows us but a handful of people don't. When the police came at night and looked for us, there were rumours the next day that I had brought my husband home and was hiding him under my bed and that the police took him away. They said it meant he was COVID-19 positive. Another person spread a rumour that my father was taken into custody. It was a very challenging time.

It was also difficult to keep my youngest daughter calm. She was only two years when Kithsiri left and she is very fond of him. He used to take care of her during the day when she was small. Even after leaving, he used to talk to us through video calls regularly. When he returned after quarantine, I was worried that she might go and cling on to him and it was very difficult to control her and explain the situation to her. Whenever she heard him opening the door, she would run to him.

On the 14th day, when Kithsiri came out of his room, she jumped into his arms. He was worried, but then I asked him to take her into his hands. No matter how bitter the situation is and what we went through, seeing the faces of our children makes all the sorrow and grief go away and gives us hope to start everything anew.

Compiled by Indunil Hiththetiya, Sarvodaya Colombo District Coordinator



Online or Offline?

“Both of my children are very talented in their studies. During the COVID-19 pandemic, school continued via the internet. But since we do not have facilities like phones, computers or tabs, none of my children could participate in a single lesson.

It is the underprivileged like us who are most affected by this pandemic. Unlike other days, there was no chance of even going to a friend’s place to copy or borrow their books and attend to homework as everyone was afraid and kept a distance. Both my children are suffering mentally as they are worried that they will be reprimanded for not attending to their homework once the schools start . Oh! We wish we could also go online!”

– Kamala

“Our father died in a dynamite explosion. My mother goes through enormous hardships every day to raise me, my younger brother and younger sister on her own. I even passed the scholarship examination and I have a thirst to learn and study. I am facing the Ordinary Level Examination this year but because of this pandemic, I have missed all my lessons.

How could we afford smartphones when we are struggling to fill our stomachs?”

– Nimali

Stories compiled by Sathisha Kameshi, Galle District



NEINA MOHOMED NAJEEBA

Finding Community in a Quarantine Centre

My name is Neina Mohomed Najeeba and I was in Kuwait when the pandemic swept the world. I went there in 2016 for the second time. When the pandemic escalated, we requested the embassy to send us back. We were kept in isolation for 21 days from 21 April. 481 of us returned back to Sri Lankan soil on 19 May. The PCR test was done at the airport itself and we were sent straight to the China Bay quarantine centre. Having arrived in Sri Lanka, it was sad that we had to leave for quarantine without even seeing the faces of our loved ones. We were minutes away from our family but so far apart. I wondered if we might die without even getting the chance of seeing our family.

Ramazan fasting also coincided with this. The first few days in quarantine were spent in sorrow. Sinhala, Tamil, Muslim – everyone was together in this camp. Gradually, a bond developed between us. If not for those connections, we would have become walking corpses. I will never forget those faces. On the day we parted to leave for our homes every one of us cried just like children.

Neina Mohomed Najeeba, Trincomalee District



U W A N E S H W A R I

The Politics of COVID-19

My name is Rajawelu Uwaneshwari. We are residents of Hunugala Estate - Upper Division in Harankanda village of Rattota area located in Matale district. We live in a line room in the estate. My house is a 10x10 feet small room. All six of us live inside this tiny room. My husband used to do manual labour work. I am unable to go to work as I have four children to take care of. The shop that my husband worked for closed down because of the COVID-19 pandemic. He received Rs. 5000 when he returned. Soon afterwards, he fell ill. The hospital asked us to get many tests done and for this those alone Rs. 3500 was spent. We came back home with 5 kg of rice bought with the balance money. We also got 5 kg of rice distributed by our Grama Sevaka Mahaththaya. That was all that we received.

Many others in the estate received dry rations from time to time. But we were never even considered because this was distributed according to political favours. In this area, there is a lot that is done based on political motivations. There was a big conflict the day we went to get the Rs. 5000 grant that was offered by the government as money was distributed selectively and only to certain people. Fortunately, the officers intervened and distributed the money in an unbiased and methodical manner. I also received this money for two months.

But then again, that money was not enough to feed six people. The days that we remained starving are countless. It's around this time that the clove harvest is reaped. We went to those estates hoping to find work but were not paid our wages and were told there was no proper market because of the lockdown. Now, we have slipped from bad to worse. There was no one to offer a helping hand although we went asking for petty loans. We can't blame anyone for this too. Anyone would be reluctant to trust those of us who earn a living through daily odd jobs as things are so uncertain. Anyway, after pleading with many, we were able to borrow some money. And now, they frequent our house wanting their money back. It's such an embarrassment. It is true that we are poor but we too have a sense of dignity. My husband is stuck at home with no way of returning to his workplace. Sadly, I can't leave my four children home and look for work. We have suddenly fallen into darkness.

Story compiled by G. H. N. N. De Silva, Matale District



Unequal Citizens: The Plight of Sri Lanka's Gypsies

The history of the Telugu gypsy community living in Sri Lanka dates back to hundreds of years. They migrated from Andhra Pradesh in India and speak a local language derived from the Telugu language. At present, almost all of them speak Sinhala language fluently. For generations, they earned a living by doing non-traditional jobs. Most of the men go house to house with snakes, monkeys and pythons and making them do tricks or dance. The women read palms and sharpen scissors and coconut scrapers. Some sell joss sticks while others work as labourers.

Many do not have a permanent residence. Often, they live in open-air camps and move from place to place. Members of this community were living in Balaluwewa village, near Kala Wewa in the Anuradhapura district during the COVID-19 pandemic. Here are some of the stories from the area.

Welamanikkam Suresh

“During the COVID-19 lockdown, there were 15 members in our group. There were days that we couldn't feed ourselves at least one meal a day, let alone three meals. There was absolutely no one to see how we were managing. Even though we are gypsies, we too are citizens of this country. Villagers avoided us like the plague. We couldn't find jobs anywhere and some people shut their doors whenever they saw us. They treated us as though we were infected with COVID-19.

We caught fish from the lake but selling these was a struggle. The police gave permission to visit households and sell fish only for those who had a bicycle. How could we get bicycles? We sold the fish we caught to those who passed by our area. The vendors who came on bicycles bought our fish at a very low rate.”

Rizkana

“We were trapped inside our temporary houses the entire period of time. I have a new-born and 3-year-old old son. I can survive by drinking some water, but I have to breastfeed my child. We managed several meals by eating the boiled fish caught from the lake.”

S. M. Hanifa

“I am a small shop owner living in this area. Since the day they arrived in this village, they bought rations from my shop. During the COVID-19 lockdown, they came and asked for help. But how long could I lend them goods for? They are here today and somewhere else tomorrow. If they had a permanent residence, I could have lent goods without fear. However, how could we let children go hungry? Looking at the pale faces of the children, how could I say no to them? I asked them to leave their national identity card and borrow the goods. I asked them not to misunderstand. At a glance, you might feel that it's inhuman. But, what else could I do? During that time, I lent goods worth Rs. 45,000. I'm not sure when I will recover my money.

Harishchandran

“The government gave Rs. 5000 to everyone in this country. But to this day, we didn't receive a cent. Now, we have stayed here for three months. The government officers came and ordered us to leave this place. But where could we go amidst this pandemic? We too are citizens of this country. We are also people of this country”

Story presented by Sulochana Weerasinghe, Anuradhapura District

Healing Old Wounds

The Easter Sunday attacks of 2019 killed 45 foreigners and 267 civilians, including three police officers. It left over 500 injured. One of the churches that was attacked was located close to the Negombo city. After the attack, the harmony that existed among Sinhala and Muslim communities was disturbed. Even though petty incidents were reported from a few places, thanks to the commitment of government and the peace activists, these incidents were attended to at early stages.

I am Mowlavi Mohamed Salman. I'm the head priest of the mosque located right in the middle of Negombo town. I am also a member of the committee at the Negombo main mosque. We are of the view that we should be actively engaged in improving community harmony in the area. When the COVID-19 pandemic spread, almost everyone in our area suffered. Both rich and poor faced many issues. We, the Muslim community, got together and decided that we need to work with every religious group and help those suffering. This was a moment where the whole country was going through a period of utmost challenge. There's no time for us to find answers to these problems while being segregated into Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim camps. That's why we decided to find solutions together. There is a rich business community in our area we know of. There are people with knowledge and experience to organize social welfare activities. We asked everyone to come together and assist.

We hoped this would be an opportunity to heal the wounds of the Easter bomb attacks last year. The responses we received amazed us. Even friends in foreign countries supported us financially. We maintained accounts in a very orderly manner to reflect how every Rupee we received was spent and publicized our financial records via WhatsApp for transparency. We decided that the Catholic, Christian and Buddhist communities in Negombo should be helped through their respective religious institutions. We visited the churches in Mahaveediya and Dalupotha and handed over dry ration packs to Angurukaramulla temple and another small temple. We requested the bhikkhus to undertake the selection of needy families and organize the dry rations distribution to them. We also went to the Negombo Police Station. The Senior Inspector came to all the places we visited and supported us wholeheartedly. We provided each of the police officers with a dry ration pack too. We also helped the Hindu community in the area. We hope that this deed would help rebuilding the unity that was shattered due to Easter attacks. We hope we can be one family once again.

Story compiled by Thayaga Chandana, Gampaha District



A Farmer's Story

A strange thing happened to me.

In late April, a group of navy officers attached to the Welisara Navy Camp tested positive for COVID-19. Sadly, by the time authorities found the cluster, some had already gone to their respective villages on vacation and had travelled around the country. One of them had come to Tangalle and had used the Bank of Ceylon ATM to withdraw money.

I knew nothing about this. I had also used the same machine to withdraw money. A list of people who had used the ATM was published and to my horror, my name and address were also there! This list was swiftly publicised across all social media networks, WhatsApp and Facebook. The friends who recognized my name on the list started calling me and I got an earful of advice and instructions. The older people in the village treated me like I was plagued with COVID-19 and isolated me. No one came anywhere near our house. We couldn't step out of the house even to buy some food.

The Public Health Inspectors visited my house almost every day. The police officers called. Mentally I was very upset. Once I completed the 14-day quarantine period, I got a certificate of clearance. I'm a farmer.

When I went back to my field, I found that all my plants had withered. I was so distraught. But the worst was seeing how the rest of the village spurned me. My friends, relatives and the villagers, all abandoned me. They treated me as if I was a criminal. The threat of COVID-19 will pass but I am still reflecting on the lessons learned from this experience.

Now, I am waiting for my new young saplings to grow.

Story compiled by RHK Dheerasinghe De Soysa, Hambantota District



When Coronavirus Anxiety Takes Over

Aruni worked in a private firm. About a week before the curfew was imposed, she participated in a workshop. The following day her nose was runny. As she had sinus problems, this should have been quite normal for her family. But this time, because of the pandemic, all of them were terrified. Every time the media spoke of COVID-19, Aruni trembled in fear.

Then, one of Aruni's friends developed a sore throat. Next, her boss began complaining of aches and pains he had been having for two days. With everything happening around her and with all the news, Aruni became anxious. She went home and carefully studied all the news items on the coronavirus posted on social media. With the implementation of a lockdown, Aruni's anxiety increased daily. She started washing water taps, door locks and everything that caught her eye. She drank large amounts of kotthamalli (coriander water). She became distrustful of everyone and was even suspicious of the vendors who visited the house.

She felt scared that the villagers would stone their house and was sure she would test positive for the coronavirus and that she would be the first COVID-19 patient in the village. She spoke about her worries without a break and though her siblings tried to ease her anxiety, she was not ready to accept any explanations. When there was no other alternative, Aruni's father took her to a doctor. Though the doctor said there was nothing to worry about, Aruni did not believe him either. Later, she complained that she could not swallow food and had no desire to take her medicine. She complained of difficulty in breathing and many other ailments.

The following morning, Aruni admitted herself to a government hospital to get a PCR test done. She was compelled to be hospitalised for two days while awaiting the report. Meanwhile, two cases of COVID-19 positive patients were detected in Bandaragama and they were admitted to the same hospital. After two days, Aruni's reports confirm that she tested negative for the coronavirus. But then, she had to suffer for her impulsive actions arising from her anxiety. The PHI of the area visited her and questioned her as to why she wanted a PCR test done. The whole family was asked to self-isolate for 14 days. Aruni's anxiety deepens now. She worried further if she had contracted COVID-19 from the patients from Bandaragama and regretted her impulsive actions. Now different symptoms emerge. The 14 days become 21 days and this goes on for a month. Aruni did not seem to recover from her worries and she suffered from anxiety every time she heard any news.

Gradually, the country moved forward while adjusting to the changes of COVID-19. More information about the virus and how to protect people from it also emerged and Aruni's anxieties lessened and she began feeling better.

Aruni is now more at ease and sometimes goes to Elders' homes to distribute rations for those in need. She is more informed and takes measures to protect herself but is now calmer about the situation and realizes that her anxieties were unwarranted.

Story compiled by Sachitha Nandajith, Kalutara District

A Medical Emergency in a Pandemic

My cousin had a bypass surgery in 2019. In April this year, she became unwell and showed signs of a complication. We were under a curfew, she had to be taken to a hospital. But we could not even come out of our homes without a curfew pass. We went to our Grama Sevaka Mahatthaya and managed to get a certificate declaring her medical condition. Then, we went to the Public Health Inspector and from there to the Medical Officer of Health and at last to the Police station. Though the Grama Sevaka officer was readily available, every other officer was very busy because of the prevailing pandemic situation. Our patient's condition was bad and it was very late when we reached the hospital. Although she showed symptoms at the start of the day, by the time we got the necessary approvals it was too late.

When the patient's condition worsened, she was transferred from the Chilaw Hospital to Colombo for an emergency surgical intervention. Her condition worsened every minute. We thought that she will be taken to the theatre immediately after being admitted to the hospital in Colombo but a PCR test had to be done first and they refused to take the patient for the surgery until the results were out. By the time the test results came, she was dead.

She passed away at 1.30 a.m. By 6.00 a.m. the curfew pass was issued to us to take the body home and finish the funeral proceedings as quickly as possible.

Our hearts fill with pain to think that our aunt might be still alive if the permits needed to take her to the hospital were issued as promptly as the curfew pass for her funeral.

Story compiled by W. S. Quvintas Tisera, Puttalam District

A Close Encounter with the Coronavirus

I am Mohamed Lafeer and I live in Orugodawatte. I do not have much money, but I always make it a point to help others whenever possible. During the COVID-19 period, I accompanied a patient to the Cancer Hospital in Maharagama. He was very poor and had leukaemia. His son-in-law and I took him to the hospital. Right in front of the Cancer Hospital, the clutch cable of my three-wheeler broke down. I did not have any money to repair my vehicle but I persevered and we got the patient admitted.

Since he had fever, he had been tested for COVID-19 and was transferred to the Infectious Diseases Hospital (IDH) in Angoda. Three days later, I got a call from the Angoda IDH: “The patient you brought has tested positive for COVID-19. Get ready to go to the quarantine centre immediately, along with your entire family.”

Shortly, Public Health Inspectors (PHI), journalists and police officers surrounded my house. There were 12 family members from the patient’s household and 9 from my home. They were going to take everyone, including the little children. We had a grandmother with a physical disability at my house. I pleaded with the PHI officers to let our grandmother quarantine at our house and take the rest of us with them but they refused.

Then, they brought a bus and made us walk up to the main road. The people in our area were staring at us in a strange way, as though we were criminals.. Everyone from the houses we walked past criticized us until we reached the bus. We had to stay under the Orugodawatte bridge for nearly 3 hours before we left. We didn’t even have water to drink. Then, we were taken to Dambulla. At the Dambulla Army Camp, we were given a short eat and a water bottle. It was around 10 p.m. when we entered Punani Camp. There we were given a packet of rice and a water bottle. We were treated so well once we reached Punani – no complaints there. The Army took good care of us and 9 days later, PCR tests were done. Nobody tested positive. It was only then when we felt physically fit and relieved – we had no knowledge about what the coronavirus was and what it felt like. We asked God for help because we had nobody else.

Those days, we lived as if we were nearing death. We were that terrified. I felt as though I had imprisoned myself and my family inside all because I had helped that patient. For 14 days none of us could sleep at all. After two weeks, the army officers brought us back and handed us over to the police station. The police officers were callous and did not care about us at all. As soon as they heard that we were from Orugodawaththa, they yelled at us asking us to stay away from them and wait on the other side of the road. I told them that there was a grandmother with a disability in our group and that she couldn't walk about. They asked us to call someone and get a vehicle to go home, refusing us transport in a police vehicle. Finally, in the middle of curfew, we managed to get down two three-wheelers. All nine of us got into two three-wheelers and went back home.

After reaching home, two police officers came to our place and asked us to remain indoors for another 14 days. By that time, I had already bought coconuts, onions, potatoes, eggs, ginger, tomatoes, green chillies and some other items to sell. Food items worth Rs. 80,000 rotted just like that. I'm in a desperate situation right now!

Story compiled by Muhammed Siraj Maulavi, Colombo District



How the Coronavirus Cured a Bad Habit

My name is A. Karunasena. I live in the Kumbugollewa village in Anuradhapura district and I am a father of three. I have been a fan of alcohol for a while now. I used to take a shot almost every day. Friends were plentiful during those happy days.

I am a dairy farmer. Yet I spent a substantial amount of my income on booze. I have tried many times to break away from this habit but failed. It was not an easy task to get rid of my craving for alcohol. I sing superbly after a few shots and I thought a shot of arrack was a must to fall asleep. And when I take a drink, all my aches and pains also vanish. At least that's how I thought. Earlier, the moment I returned home, my wife would begin scolding me. Oh, it was like a running commentary with no end. My children ran away as soon as I walked home.

When the coronavirus started spreading, I became a prisoner at home and couldn't step out of the boundary lines. Friends were rare to find. My closest confidantes who promised to be around at all times were missing in action. Worse, I could not find a drop of arrack.

As the days and weeks passed by, I realized that I was misled about alcohol. It was not mandatory to imitate Jothipala or to sleep like a baby. In fact, I now slept better than before. I relished the food cooked by my beloved wife – the same way I would savour her feasts in those early days of our life together. This decisive change charmed my life. The best outcome was that my wife became closer to me – it felt like we were on a renewed honeymoon. My children rallied around me for the fatherly love and warmth they did not receive in all those years. I also resumed my neglected cultivation.

It finally took a pandemic to make me realize that alcohol was detrimental to me and my life.

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An initiative of Sarvodaya Shanthi Sena as a part of the
'Preventing Violent Extremism through Promoting Tolerance and Respect for Diversity'
project supported by UNDP with funding from the European Union to prevent violent
extremism in the Asian region.