

An Internally  
Displaced Person

# Returns Home

the Sabiya Manzil Diaries



Fifteen years ago, Sithara Abdul Saroor was compelled to leave her home on Mannar, a small island in the northwest of Sri Lanka, by the armed conflict between the separatist Tamil Tigers and the Sri Lankan government. On a cold October morning, the Tigers evicted all Muslims from northern Sri Lanka, Muslims who had coexisted for many years with the mostly Hindu Tamils. Sithara's family was fortunate enough to relocate from a refugee camp to Colombo, the capital city. To date, around 100,000 war-displaced northern Muslims remain in bleak makeshift camps in Sri Lanka, most of them in the northwestern district of Puttalam. On the anniversary of her displacement, this former Internally Displaced Person (IDP), who now works for the rights of other displaced people and women survivors of the conflict, decided to return home.

—Sarah H. Cross

**August 22, 2005**  
Colombo, Sri Lanka

Today I am worried and mad at my mother. Why is she doing this? Is she crazy or greedy? She says it is foolish to keep something that will soon be taken over by "them."

"Mum," I cry, "it's our house. We have to keep it for your grandkids. Maybe even they won't live there, but it's the only connection we have to our hometown, to Mannar."

"Look, you think it's going to be your home again?" My mother puts her foot down. "People say they've even changed the name of our street. It's now named Murugan Street. What a daydreamer you are. I don't want to even imagine my grandchildren taking one step inside that house. I have decided to do away with the house before the war starts again."

I beg her to give me a few days to think, hoping to furtively lobby my brothers for support.

It appears my brothers have discussed this before. They shout out their questions one after the other: "Why are you so possessive of this ruined house? It was shelled twice and it's haunted. Who would even want to step in there again? Let Mum sell it off." My second brother tries to convince me, cautioning: "Remember, we sold our shop in Mannar for peanuts when we had to rent a house in Colombo. Come on, it's time to sell all we have there and invest the money here. Who knows when they will start fighting again?" My youngest brother, with his usual playfulness, tries to make light of the situation: "You know something, sister? Mum is smart and you should just let her do what she wishes; after all, it is her property."

I'm mystified. How can anyone put a monetary value on this house? It holds so many cheerful memories. It preserves a feeling of belonging, a feeling that was stolen away at gunpoint on the morning of October 24, 1990.

A friend of mine said of us, the Northern Muslims, "Before eviction you were all swimming in a pond. Now you have the ocean." True, my friend. We have an ocean to swim in but in an ocean we can so easily get lost. I didn't dare answer him aloud

— it would bring about the discussion that I most fear: a discussion about our departure.

My brothers were too small to feel how I do about being thrown out. They are simply angry about the IDP stamp on them. For them, the easiest thing is to get rid of everything that reminds them of being displaced, to wipe away the bitter past and accept their new identity as Colombo Muslims. I want to deal with the past because I am hurt and ashamed and disconnected. My wounds can be healed only by returning, by finding answers to my questions and, if possible, renewing relationships. It is difficult to explain to my brothers why I want to stay connected. They think our home is in enemy territory, and who would want to be connected to one's enemies?

Finally, I beg them all: "Look at what is on sale — our dignity. It is a real disgrace to our grandfather and our father." I know they don't understand what I mean but they stand by me because of my tears. This is how I stop (or should I say postpone?) the sale of our ancestral house, Sabiya Manzil.

I wonder why my mother doesn't feel the way I feel. I was told that Mum's birth brought lots of luck to my grandfather's business and that he built this house for her. She and her seven siblings grew up in this house; my mother's dream wedding took place there as well. Our next-door neighbor, Thevi-aunt, used to tell me stories about Mum's wedding: how my grandpa decorated the street that led from the railway station to our home with colored lights so that all his friends who were visiting Mannar for the first time would not get lost. (It didn't make any sense to me because we lived on such a small island — I wondered how anyone could really get lost there.) She told me how it was like Thirukaltheswaram Thiruvilla, with thoranams on both sides of the road, and how my uncles, Sivam and Shakti, covered up a well in our front garden to make a stage for musicians to play nathasvaram. (If only they knew that they were sitting on top of a well 36 feet deep, they would have caught the next train to Jaffna.) She told me about the fuss over Mum when she delivered me, the first grandchild, and how the whole house was made child-friendly. She used to point out the nail marks on the walls on either side of the stairs where my father cre-

ated a barrier to keep me away from the steps by nailing in wooden planks.

There are questions I never ask my mother. Mum, how is it possible for you to say that you don't want to go back there anymore? Why do you hate this house so much? Is it because you, like my brothers, don't want to deal with the bitter past? I never ask her for fear I would dig into her deepest wound — my father's untimely death triggered by our dislocation.

**September 25, 2005**  
Mannar, Sri Lanka

I have been to my hometown many times in the last couple of years but I have never had the bravery to return to Sabiya Manzil. In fact, I have stayed with friends or relatives and avoided passing by the house. Nevertheless, as I return to Mannar this time, after all that commotion I made to stop selling my family's home, I decide to return to it. How nervous I am today, like going to see a long lost dear friend.

I reach for the best dress I have in my suitcase. Fifteen years — that is a very long time, isn't it? As I enter Moor Street, I glimpse my home standing just as strong as it used to. As I get closer to it, I notice something different. Yes — it has lost its friendliness. The porch and compound walls have shed their paint and are stripped naked. Years of negligence and war have dressed it with scars. During war this house brought hope and reassurance. For many of us this was the only safe haven that pulled all of us together — my aunts, uncles, cousins, friends and neighbors. I am reminded of festivals and weddings.

Usually after a fight there would be curfews. I loved curfews because our house used to be full of people — people of different ages, classes, castes, and faiths. Grandma borrowed big pots and pans from our Mosque that were used only for Karthi and cooked in the back garden on stone stoves piled high with wood. Christi-uncle — an amazing story-teller, a political-science teacher, and a superb cook — assisted her. Sivam-anna and Mustala (who worked at the nearby grocery shop, Myilvahanam Kada) tested each other's strength by splitting huge chunks of firewood with one blow. We gathered the chipped pieces of wood when they took breaks and brought them to Christi-uncle

#### TEXT

Sithara Abdul Saroor

#### ILLUSTRATION

Cristy Road - roadcore.org

in anticipation of the usual gifts. Christi-uncle always gave us rewards when we did something good. Most often he rewarded us by telling funny stories of his childhood, growing up together with my father in their village, Vidatthal Thivu. I loved his stories because they portrayed my father as a sturdy yet very mischievous boy. Smoke from the stone stoves engulfed the whole house and we all coughed endlessly with tears, but I loved those days and the tears too. We sat on the floor and ate whatever Grandma served on banana leaves. The food tasted so good that I secretly wished for long curfews. In the evenings Nimmi and my best friend Ranjini joined me in rehearsing the songs Sister Lourdes taught us during our last scout camp. We often forgot that we were in the middle of a bloody civil war.

I am still standing in our front garden trying to gather the nerve to step inside. Suddenly everything becomes threatening and hostile and I feel numb. The sharp memories of war and my last few days living here rise up in me — sorrow, loss, tension, fear, atrocities, and distrust. Memories that keep me awake most nights. God, now I can smell death and pain here. Ranjini became a freedom fighter and later was killed and proclaimed a martyr. Uncle Christi was accused of being a traitor: His body was hung on a lamppost with a bullet through his forehead. I became the "other" in my school, even among some of my closest friends. Myilvahanam Kadai was bombed one night and Mustafa too since he slept there. Thevi-aunt and her only son, Kumar, disappeared at a military checkpoint when they went to see relatives in Adampan. Sivam-anna, a brilliant and devoted mathematics teacher, was taken for questioning to Thaladi army camp, and no one saw him again. After that, math became a bitter subject for me. I remember my uncle Shakti-anna, who was admitted to Jaffna medical college yet opted to join the struggle for his homeland, choosing guns and cyanide capsules as his last resort for survival. If he had stayed with us, perhaps he would have disappeared like his brother. I saw Shakti-anna only once after he became one of "the boys" — the Tamil Tigers — when he came to alert my father the night before they attacked the Mannar police station. I remember our endless attempts to deter my brother from his growing interest in "Al Jihad," and how he ended up being wanted by "the boys." If not for our friends, neighbors, and Shakti-anna, he would have ended up on the lamppost too. The last few days in this house were like living in a hellhole. Calls for prayers, adhan, became a symbol of tension and fear. Every time the mosque's loudspeaker came alive at odd hours our hearts stopped beating. The thought that something dreadful had happened out there killed us minute after minute. At the end, on October 24, as the same loudspeaker announced that we had 24 hours to vacate our homes, I knew that this time neither our friends nor Shakti-anna could come to our rescue.

My numbness turns into humiliation and distress. God, this is making me sick. I run out and walk back quickly to my friend's house. My head feels so heavy I think it will explode. I run to the bathroom and sit beneath the tap. As the cold water pours on me I cry. Fifteen years on, I cry for the first time, tears wiping clean the memories of living in Sabiya Manzil.

Later, I call Mum and tell her: Let's get rid of this ghost house. ☒

Sarah H. Cross is a U.S.-born writer, editor, and researcher who has collaborated with human-rights activists from the United States, Guatemala, Sri Lanka, and Brazil on print and radio projects to communicate their strategies and visions. Sarah and Sithara met in 2004 at the Women PeaceMakers Program at USD. Email: sarahhelen@ipc.org.

#### Footnotes

- i. Murugan is a Hindu god.
- ii. Sabiya is my grandmother's name; "manzil" means "home" in Arabic.
- iii. A famous Kovil festival celebrated in my hometown.
- iv. A kind of decoration with young coconut leaves now only used in Tamil ceremonies.
- v. An instrument associated with Tamil Kovil festivals.
- vi. Jaffna is a main city in the north of Sri Lanka.
- vii. An annual Muslim ritual in which the entire Muslim community gets together at the mosque and prepares a meal for the whole town.
- viii. "Elder brother" in Tamil.
- ix. An infamous military base run by the Sri Lankan government forces.

Sithara Abdul Saroor is currently working in her hometown on economic development and conflict-resolution projects with IDPs, women and children from mixed ethnic and religious backgrounds.

## The Conflict in Sri Lanka

During Sithara's lifetime, Tamils of different faiths (Muslim, Hindu, and Christian) coexisted peacefully as neighbors, a fact she highlights in her peace efforts. But the ethnic tension and conflict in Sri Lanka between the majority Buddhist Sinhalese and minority Tamils has spread to include intra-ethnic, religious-based violence.

The seeds of ethnic tension were present when Sri Lanka (then known as Ceylon) declared independence from the British colonial government in 1948. In part a response to the favored status of Tamils under British rule, the Sinhalese government began institutionalizing discriminatory policies against the Tamils, beginning with the Sinhala Only Act in 1956, which declared Sinhalese the official language and effectively restricted Tamil access to state employment. In 1972, the same new constitution that changed Ceylon to Sri Lanka gave Buddhism special status above other religions and restricted Tamil access to advanced education. Facing discrimination and chronic under-representation in parliament, Tamil nationalism rose, leading to the formation in 1976 of the main rebel group, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (the LTTE, or Tamil Tigers), who embraced the notion of a separate Tamil state in the North.

In 1983, a government-organized pogrom against Tamils, set off by a Tiger attack against the army, ignited the conflict and gave way to decades of civil war. During this time, the Tamil Tigers originated the use of the suicide bomber and conscripted child soldiers, even after a ceasefire was reached. In the late 1980s, Indian peacekeepers, ostensibly sympathetic to the struggle of the Sri Lankan Tamil minority, ended up fighting against the Tigers. Thousands have died on both sides, and many thousands of families have been displaced.

The events of October 1990 were early evidence of the spread of the ethnic conflict to include violence among Tamils, as the LTTE forced Muslims in the North and East of the country from their homes in order to "cleanse" the land. That month, 75,000 Muslims from Jaffna, Kilinochchi, Mullativu, and Mannar were forced to evacuate within a 24-hour period. In Sithara's hometown of Mannar, a large island in Northwest Sri Lanka, the LTTE first destroyed the only bridge to the mainland and then forced approximately 25,000 Muslims onto boats. In these overcrowded boats, evicted families with no personal belongings and virtually no cash arrived in Puttalam. Many of them continue to occupy what were set up as temporary camps.

While Sri Lanka technically remains under a ceasefire since the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding in February 2002, the truce is tenuous. The December 2004 tsunami further destabilized the fragile peace. For current news, try reading local sources, including the pro-federal-government [www.sundaytimes.lk](http://www.sundaytimes.lk) and [www.dailynews.lk](http://www.dailynews.lk), the independent [www.tamilweek.com](http://www.tamilweek.com) and [www.thesundayleader.lk](http://www.thesundayleader.lk), and Tamil perspectives at [www.tamilnet.com](http://www.tamilnet.com) and [www.tamilnelamnews.com](http://www.tamilnelamnews.com).

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