

Stories from a Jaffna Auto Stand

daniel dillon

“Tell me” the anthropologist asked, notebook in hand, “how did you come to this work?” Stories can start from any point. This one, he hoped, would allow his friend to tell a story without centering the war. He had questions about that too, but some questions are best unasked. “What can I do?” Prittan retorted. “I only completed to 8th standard. Then the army came, schools closed. I worked for five years in the Gulf, but I am too old now. I did construction work. The pay was good, but now my back is no good. What else can I do?” Prittan said all this dispassionately, a mere reporting of the facts. Thirty-two and he was at the end of the line.

“What would you do if you could?” the anthropologist tried. “If you could be the hero of your own story, what would that look like?” An odd question he admitted, but just humor him. “What can I do?” the answer came again. “I am no one. I am a loser even in my own life. I have no power, no respect. How can someone like me be a hero?” But this time there was a note of sadness in Prittan’s voice. Some bygone aspiration that it was now too late to speak perhaps. So much for the anthropologist’s theories about mobility and Jaffna’s development economy. This would not be that story. Months of ethnographic labor, and still he knew nothing.

"Can I take your photo, at least?"



*"I am a loser in my own life," Prittan admitted.
"Can I take your picture?"
the anthropologist asked.
Photo: daniel dillon, 2018.*

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Most of the drivers called Pahir *māmā*, "uncle." He was not much older, but he carried himself with the air of a nurturing old soul. Pahir washed his auto almost every day, and he was similarly well groomed. The anthropologist often sat and spoke with Pahir as he cleaned, drawn to his quiet demeanor and keen eyes. They spoke of their mutual respect. The anthropologist impressed with the driver's calm confidence; the driver touched by the anthropologist's unexpected interest in men like him.

"What do you mean?" the anthropologist asked, falsely thinking himself inscrutable.

"My life is nothing special," Pahir deadpanned.

"That's not true," the anthropologist countered. "No one here is as stylish or cool as you." It sounded too flirtatious to his own ear, but Pahir was gentlemanly enough to pretend he did not notice, or the way the anthropologist's eyes sometimes followed the curves of his body.

Pahir was a master of self-abnegation. He used to have desires, before the wars, but no more. He wanted to be a painter of murals, a respected artist. His own self-denial made it easy to silently ignore the desires others imposed. He felt them, of course, but remained so impassive they were unable to penetrate him, like oil on water. The anthropologist silently admired Pahir's refusal of futile longing; he could benefit from such unfeeling himself, the queer fool.

"I have no desires. I only want my family to fulfill theirs. My son will soon take his O levels. I want only for him to do well in his studies so that he can become what he desires. He is my life, my future. I want nothing else."



"I have no desires. My son is my life, my future. I want nothing else."

Photo: daniel dillon, 2018.

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Thusi takes a hire from the 6:10 intercity train, earning 150 rupees (about a dollar) for transporting his customer to the bus stand, from where they will travel farther and cheaper than he can offer.

Ten minutes later, he repeats the trip. He's made enough for a tea and a few rolls, a small luxury. It costs him 170 of his 300 rupees.

The morning calm is short-lived as the 8:30 train spews forth a crowd of locals returning home for the upcoming temple festival. 250 rupees.

About an hour later he manages another bus-stand hire from the flagship train as she heads south.

For two hours there is no work to be had. Thusi goes home for lunch and to get out of the sun.

He returns around noon, hoping to get lucky with passersby headed to lunch. He is, and he returns with 200 rupees.

Several hours pass. The stand fills up. Conversation, laughter, and the sounds of carrom board fill the air. Gossip is exchanged, games are played, some men smoke

while others chew betel, their crimson spittle arcing out around them. Life is lived in these empty hours.

As the afternoon matures, the flagship returns to station, now northbound. The station is all flurry and movement. The drivers line the exit gate and down the street, trying to solicit the biggest hires of the day. Thusi gets a pair of tourists headed to the luxury hotel in town, but they haggle him down to 100 rupees. It is better than nothing, he admits.

As everyone returns, they share stories. Despite being underpaid, Thusi buys tea for several friends. The crowd slowly thins as work tapers off. Thusi catches a couple of tourists looking to have an early dinner at a famous local haunt. At the drop off, they do not take his number; they will get another driver back.

The evening passes slowly, with much conversation. Thusi secures another bus-stand ferry. After so many hours, the conversation also dwindles. Drivers disappear into the backs of their autos. Phones emerge. The sounds of message notifications, mobile games, and video-chatting replace the collective discourse.

In	Out
06.10 AM	
① 150 /=-	08.20 AM
06.20 AM	① 170
② 150 /=-	
08.25 AM	04.45 PM
③ 280 /=-	② 60
09.45 AM	08.30
④ 150 /=-	③ 500 PM
12.05 PM	
⑤ 200 /=-	
12.50 PM	
⑥ 100 /=-	
03.30 PM	
⑦ 300 /=-	
⑧ 05.10 PM	
⑧ 150 /=-	
07.30 PM	
⑨ 500 /=-	

A page from Thusi's log, provided by the author, tracking all his income and expenses on 2 August 2018.
Photo: daniel dillon, 2018.

When the final train arrives around 7:30, an older driver is too aggressive with his solicitations. Thusi secures one last hire for the unusually high fare of 500 rupees. He immediately uses it to buy petrol. Prices are about to be raised again at midnight. He ends the day with 1220 rupees in his pocket, about eight dollars. Not bad, it is been a good day.

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Suyana parks her unassuming rickshaw at the designated 'ladies auto stand' only to be surrounded by idling buses pushing their way through traffic. "This is our place, we must defend ourselves," she says to the anthropologist, exhaust visibly swirling around her head. But she is forced to move when she receives a call from a regular client, the only kind she has most days. She cannot afford to refuse the work.

Luckily, Kamaleswary arrives before she can depart, and quickly moves to occupy their place, a wry smile her only answer to the angry bus drivers. "Hey, sister," one gets down and shouts, "move out of the way!"

"I am not your sister!" she snaps. "And we will stay here," she adds, drawing the anthropologist into her defiance. Kamaleswary does not stop until the driver storms off, shamed. She apologizes for involving him. "I told him you are media." They snicker.



"This is our place, we must defend ourselves," Suyana says defiantly, glaring at the bus drivers encroaching from both sides.

Photo: daniel dillon, 2018.

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They chat for some time, until low blood sugar demands the anthropologist has lunch. "Let me be your first hire today," he offers. Kamaleswary is an attentive driver,

so much more careful than most of the men he knows.

“Why are your mirrors like that?” the anthropologist asks. “You can only see the passenger that way, no?”

“I can see behind too,” she starts. “But I must see inside, for safety.”

The anthropologist suddenly recalls reports about rampant sexual harassment in Sri Lankan public transport, his smile fading. Of course she needs to see who is sitting behind her.

“Don’t worry,” she adds, sensing his concern. “As a driver, I am in charge of my life. This is only to take caution.” Better safe than sorry.



“As a driver, I am in charge of my life,” Ka-maleswary says, wearing the drab ‘lady drivers’ uniform with pride.

Photo: daniel dillon, 2018.

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Sajeep was arguing with his wife. She had asked him to come home after the last train. He did not. He was wary of going anywhere with so many police out preparing for a visit by a cabinet minister, an empty political gesture. The police were always watching auto drivers, suspicious when they moved around, equally suspicious when they did not. Drivers were always almost terrorists. Rumors held that Tamil Tiger cadres had used autos for cover to move covertly within government-controlled areas. The anthropologist could find no proof, but it was made real, if not true, through repetition.

He heard so many rumors about drivers, about drugs, weapons, smuggling. If there was a social ill, he had heard it said about drivers, even by other drivers. It made

the work more precarious, for him and them. SajEEP needed to make more money before his son was born but driving anywhere with so many police about was risky. Instead, he sat with the anthropologist and chatted about which routes were likely blocked by checkpoints. The police in Jaffna do not know Tamil and he does not speak Sinhala, he reminded the anthropologist. What good would an auto drivers' union registration do him then?

If he was stopped, there was no way of knowing what might happen. He could lose his license and his livelihood, he could be detained on flimsy pretenses, he could be disappeared. It still happened sometimes. The war was over, but tension and conflict remained. "What to do?" SajEEP asked half-rhetorically. But the anthropologist could not say either, pondering how one could tell a story with what might be left behind. "Hmmm," he replied, "what to do?"



Three of the many required forms of identification for all drivers in Jaffna.

Photo: daniel dillon, 2018.

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