

Sri Lanka: Jaffna Sangam. Decentralising queer spaces

Thursday 13 May 2021, by [WIJESINGHE Dimithri](#) (Date first published: 18 April 2021).

Jaffna Sangam is a Tamil-speaking LGBTQIA+ community founded by Thenmoli Margret, Kasro Turai, and Thiyagaraja Waradas. The Co-Founders shared with *Brunch* the incredible work they have been doing as part of their movement, which originally started in the North but has since expanded to other corners of the island.

Jaffna Sangam originally initiated with the intention of decentralising the ownership of the LGBTIQ movement, which, despite how far it's come, has been centralised largely within Colombo amongst a primarily English and Sinhala language-speaking audience.

A safe space

Speaking about the origins of the movement, Waradas shared that since 1995, the only offices that existed outside of Colombo were those of the LGBT support group Companions on a Journey (CoJ) in Kandy and Anuradhapura. However, since they closed down, there have only been co-ordinators for those areas outside of Colombo. He said that a co-ordinator is an extension of what's happening in Colombo and it does not result in what is necessary; i.e. to empower people to create their own movements in their local areas.

"How feasible is it to expect those community members in somewhere like Badulla to come all the way to Colombo to be connected to the movement and its services? It is far more effective to have a small group working in Badulla to whom they can reach out."

Especially because of this disconnect, the trio shared that Jaffna Sangam has been a long-term dream of theirs. Waradas shared that often community members from around the island would travel to Colombo for workshops conducted primarily in English and go home after collecting a per diem. They want to instead allow a space to empower local communities to carry on their own movements - "independent but connected".

A veterinary surgeon and one of the Co-Founders of Jaffna Sangam Kasro Turai shared that born from this need to "decentralise queer spaces" they created Jaffna Sangam, starting out by simply having workshops for the community, with their first having been held on 17 July 2017. Turai said that they went on to organise several such workshops in succession, and received overwhelmingly positive feedback.

Turai said that they hoped to create a safe space for LGBT persons in the North of Sri Lanka, especially from Jaffna, to come and talk freely and openly share their thoughts.

He said that they held three events in 2017 and since February of 2018, they have been hosting a gathering once every month where they would have film screenings, discussions, literature readings, and a variety of other activities. "It is mostly to get to know one another; to create an idea of activism and encourage all forms of art, etc.," Turai explained.

Jaffna Queer Reads

He also shared that the effects of Covid-19 have resulted in their monthly meetings taking place virtually, and they have taken the opportunity to expand their membership to include those from the Tamil diaspora and people from India representing various fields, including writers, artists, etc., which has given way to an event called “Jaffna Queer Reads” – literature readings for the Tamil-speaking LGBTIQ+ community, bringing together the global queer community to engage in a literary dialogue.

To address issues faced in the North

Thenmoli Margret also shared her thoughts on their ever-expanding movement, commenting that often they have faced difficulty in finding solutions for the challenges faced by community members in the North, to address their gender-based violence, arbitrary arrests, etc.

This is why they have initiated Jaffna Sangam and the forums they have created, which includes Jaffna Sangam, Eastern Queer Collective, Community Welfare and Development Forum, Aniyam Foundation from Chennai, Vithai Kulumam, Pasumai Suvadugal, Priyam Collective, Wallamai Organisation, and Chennai Queer Chronicles from India. Margret commented that they have expanded beyond the constraints of Jaffna and have made efforts to acquire a wider scope in order to reach more community members needing access.

She said that whenever a community member identifying as LGBT is facing issues at work, or in their family, they are able to support them. She said that their main objective is advocacy as often, they are unable to receive assistance urgently from Colombo.

“We have a powerful voice in Tamil-speaking people in Sri Lanka. We carry out a lot of online events, creating a good understanding about our community amongst the Tamil-speaking community,” she said, adding that other than speaking Tamil, there are absolutely no barriers to who wishes to join and support their movement.

Sharing with us the latest initiative they have launched, Margret shared the programme in the works for trans women and men – providing access to medical clinics. She shared that there are many consultants in the Jaffna Teaching Hospital who will provide services at the grassroots level. Therefore, they have put together an initiative to provide better access to healthcare services like HIV testing and management services.

Not limited to LGBT

Jaffna Sangam works in association with the Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka (HRCSL), and with the support of a number of other government authorities. Margret shared that they worked in association with the Election Commission during the election and in their effort to expand their network and reach out beyond the community, they carried out relief efforts during the height of the pandemic and lockdown, called “Lend a Hand to the Affected”, where they supplied basic needs for those adversely affected working through the grama niladhari’s office to give supplies.

She said that they make efforts to take part in other social issues and provide their support as they then represent queer organisations to another public space, which in turn, gives them positive visibility. “We participate in protests, vigils, and other events, and they in turn support our movement,” she said.

As for the outcomes they’ve had so far, the trio shared that the response has been incredibly positive and they have faced very little opposition. Other than for a very few conservative organisations and

some religious parties, they said that they were expecting far more resistance.

They said that the welcome nature has been primarily because Jaffna Sangam has not limited itself to the LGBT space when it comes to offering up support, and it has evoked a surprising trend in civil society.

Jaffna Sangam is the first Tamil-speaking LGBTQIA+ community to be made in the North, and has been the first to cater to a group that has largely been ignored or marginalised within an already heavily marginalised group – they have been welcomed by the community.

Margret stated that because they are a homegrown organisation, they are able to conduct proceedings in a manner that is familiar to the culture in their localised areas. Speaking of cultures and practices that belong to their area, she pointed out that something of note here is that in the North, unlike in the South, the police do not systematically target trans individuals, primarily because the subculture of “nachchi” in the North is not yet eroded. However, discussing dealings with the police, she did mention that it is not entirely devoid of challenges; certainly, they do experience a prevalence of sexual bribery, and typically trans individuals are not economically stable and are therefore more vulnerable.

Challenges they face

She shared that because they identify as a Tamil-speaking organisation, there is suspicion and question raised surrounding it, with many asking: “Why is there a need for this segregation and division?” To this she said that the purpose of their organisation is to reach people and for this, language is their main tool.

There is a need for language in the medium that those in rural areas can access and understand. They cannot absorb what is being said in unfamiliar languages, especially in English. She said because they place so much importance on the use of language, they often encourage art forms where community members are encouraged to tell their stories through art, which has resulted in them being able to collect an archive of material coming from those who experience the struggle.

As for future growth, the trio shared that at present, they are in need of an office space to operate from, as currently they are utilising space offered to them by the Adayaalam Centre for Policy Research (ACPR), and it would be greatly appreciated if a space can be allocated for them. Sharing that Sri Lanka’s first transgender film director Jonisha (Ealanila) is an active participant of Jaffna Sangam, they stated that their membership is bursting with fresh talent and passionate individuals and that they are always welcoming of anyone who can assist them to grow and build capacity.

Dimithri Wijesinghe

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P.S.

The Morning

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