Youth and Identity Discourses in Post War Sri Lanka

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Youth and Identity Discourses in Post War Sri Lanka

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1. Introduction

In post-war Sri Lanka, an often overlooked, sometimes instrumentalised, nevertheless pivotal socio-political group for meaningful reconciliation and co-existence in Sri Lanka, is the youth. With their intersecting identities, leading to intra-group and inter-group differences marked by socio-economic and political exclusions, youth have found themselves in situations where their agency is compromised, or they are sometimes 'mobilised' towards certain political gains by powerful forces. At the same time, youth of different ethnicities, religions, classes, castes, and genders, from different locations have historically struggled to 'belong' in this country's social, economic, and political fabric. At times, youth have been forced to take extreme measures due to marginalisation and lack of involvement in the political decision-making process. As a result, they have experienced state-centric suppression, concurrently limiting the space for constructive dialogue and voice(s), at the intersection of differentiated identities such as gender, ethnicity, religion, class, caste, and location.

With the ending of the civil war in 2009, there has been a strong socio-political discourse towards the creation of 'one common identity' for the people of this country, as a symbol of cohesion or unity, burying identity differences especially ethnic and gendered identities. This had taken the form of a 'Sri Lankan-ness' shared across all identity groups (Al Jazeera, 2020; Presidential Secretariat, 2021). However, discourses that highlight the hegemonic position of Sinhala Buddhism while framing 'the other' to be one of a minority ethnic group – Tamils and Muslims alternatively – or those who challenge the hegemonic Sinhala Buddhist narrative, have taken a prominent place in the public domains, especially through social media (Ivarsson, 2017).

This study explores who creates these discourses, how they shape youth perceptions, 'activism' or action. Likewise, the study, analyses the kind of discourses that are being used, embraced, and espoused to create identity groupings. Here, youth are treated as a heterogenous group, and given this heterogeneity, it is assumed that they would experience and react to these discourses in different ways. Thus, this study attempts to understand the 'silencing' and 'amplification' processes that have been used by the 'creating and enforcing a shared identity' discourse, focusing on one social group: youth, and how youth in turn, have responded to, used, embodied, and transformed these processes to make their own voice(s) heard. To study these processes, the study focused its analysis on the discourse surrounding murals that were a resurgent trend in 2019–20201 in physical and virtual spaces, and which were subsequently endorsed by President Gotabaya Rajapaksa (Wickramasinghe, 2019).

The research analysed the offline and online discourse pertaining to the 2019 mural wave as part of the process of identity creation in post-war Sri Lanka: thus, contributing to the body of knowledge on the process of identity creation, the degree of youth agency in the process, and the resultant impact on reconciliation. In doing so, this paper attempts to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the majority and minority narratives portrayed through the 2019 mural wave in relation to the nationalist discourse in post-war Sri Lanka?
    a. How does it contribute to the dominant post-war narrative of Sri Lanka?

2.. How do these discourses, portrayed through murals, shape youth ethno-religious identities?
    a. How are these discourses embraced, espoused, and recreated by youth in the digital space?

3. How is youth agency reflected in the process of reverse-agenda-setting in the virtual public sphere, in relation to the 2019 mural wave?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Context

Historically, the youth in Sri Lanka have always been at the forefront of socio-political discourses and revolutionary movements for change. Over the last five decades, youth from the south and north have been involved in two insurrections (1971 and 1987–1989) and an armed struggle (1980s to 2009) which are considered critical junctures in Sri Lankan political history. The three decades of war resulted in the destruction of many lives, mostly of youth. Rapid socio-economic changes following the economic liberalisation of the 70s, and the sense of deprivation which was felt mainly by the disadvantaged youth persuaded them to align with radical political movements (Punchihewa, 2014). This led to episodes of youth unrest leading to the pro-communist movements of 1971, 1987–1989 and ethno-militant movements from the 1970s to 2009 (Hettige, 2004; Hettige, 2010; Punchihewa, 2014). During this era, the two main political youth movements were the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) who pursued two mutual "anti-ethical political projects" (Hettige, 2004). The JVP advocated for a Sinhala-Buddhist dominated unitary state, while the LTTE advocated for a separate state for the Tamils in the North and East of the island (Hettige, 2004). Both groups had common ideological orientations and lived experiences influenced by similar grievances against the "dominant strata or elite segments of society" (Hettige, 2010). Thus, economic inequalities and ethnic and religious identity issues were considered as the main reasons for the youth uprisings in Sri Lanka during the war (Ibargüen, 2004; Punchihewa, 2014). The weakening of the JVP as a radical movement from 2005 and the military defeat of the LTTE in 2009 drastically changed the political landscape in the country – thereby shaping youth activism in the post-war era (Hettige 2010).

According to Mushtaq (2012) no other country faced such a bloody and long identity conflict as religiously and ethnically divided as Sri Lanka. Even though Sri Lanka is considered a "nation state, it is evident that religious and ethnic identities have become more prominent than the inclusive national identity". However, academic literature on conflict in Sri Lanka has emphasised ethnicity (Frerks and Klem, 2004), sometimes at the expense of masking social inequalities emerging at the intersection of gender, caste, and class (Silva, Sivapragasam and Thanges, 2009). Fredrik Barth (1969), in his seminal essay, states that, more than the shared cultural characteristics of a group, what defines ethnicity is the difference that distinguishes them from others. As such, divisions within Sri Lanka developed often in opposition to 'the other'. More specifically, the consciousness of ethnicity became a more salient issue among Sri Lankans as a consequence of British Colonialism (Eller, 1999). Contemporary Sinhalese ethnic identity, along with the religious identity (Buddhist) developed in part, as a reaction to the Christian missionaries and the West. According to Somasundaram (1998) Tamil identity emerged, in part, as a reaction to the Sinhala-Buddhist identity. Youth involvement has been quite significant in both majority and minority nationalist discourses that were developed through ethnic and religious identities.

2.2. Art and Murals

Since the war ended, the youth of Sri Lanka have expressed themselves through various mediums. One such medium, art, is used to disseminate poignant political messaging, including but not limited to post-war narratives. The use of art in the conversation on peace in Sri Lanka predates the end of the war with multiple organisations and youth groups employing art to promote reconciliation at various stages of the conflict. For instance, the Centre for Performing Arts of Sri Lanka founded in Jaffna in 1965, is a long-standing organisation that uses performing arts as a conflict resolution method, promoting healing and inter-community co-existence and cooperation (Dharmawardhane, 2012). In a post war context, the use of art has been even more pivotal due to its innate ability to restore victims' capacities to participate in reconciliation processes, access their emotions and begin their individual healing processes;

> "for societies emerging from conflict, the art provides a new form of communication and a creative tool to address the silences and pain that are rendered unspeakable" (Naidu-Silverman, 2015, p. 11).

A review of some of the literature on street art reveals the contrasting nature between how street art is perceived elsewhere, as opposed to how it is perceived in Sri Lanka, especially during the wave of mural painting in late 2019. In academic literature, street art is considered to be a form of radical media as it cannot be categorised under mainstream media within the larger society (Downing, 2001). This radical medium is further divided into two alternative ways of how it is perceived and utilised. One, views street art as a form of social activism (Tsangaris, 2018). Here, street art creates the space for dialogue which may not be available elsewhere, and it also functions as a form of protest in its refusal to reproduce hegemonic structures within a given society (Tsangaris, 2018). Street art goes beyond mere protest and actively engages in initiating radical change; this creative form of resistance provides passage for democratisation and reclamation of public spaces and places from authoritative regimes (Awad, et al., 2017). The other views street art as vandalism; this is mainly seen in relation to youth and youth subcultures, while also being viewed as a radical use of an art form. The wave of mural paintings created in Sri Lanka seems to be different from how street art is viewed within this global literature; instead of being affiliated with radicalism, this unstructured youth movement was acknowledged, condoned, and adopted by the current government as a sign of progress of their own regime. The identification of this mural wave as a process of beautification may have led to its departure from radicalism (Azeez, n.d.).

2.3. Youth Identity in the Context of Evolving Digital Nationalism

The murals have not been limited to physical spaces, but have also stimulated conversations in digital spaces, with the attention given to the murals being invigorated by the hype created on social media platforms. This trend exemplifies how social media has democratised the post-war discourse by providing youth with a platform for wider engagement (Vromen, 2017). While the recent resurgence of nationalism cannot be attributed solely to the advent of digital platforms, they have been instrumental in proliferating the discourse. It is worth noting that nationalism in its banal form as a foundational understanding of the world in relation to distinguishing characteristics or identity existed prior to its proliferated resurgence in the current context. This has precipitated a movement coined as "digital nationalism". Nationalism, for the purpose of this research is identified in relation to Benedict Anderson's definition of nations and imagined communities. In his seminal work Imagined Communities (1983) Anderson defines nation as an imagined political community that is inherently limited in scope and sovereign in nature (Anderson, 1983, p. 6). With this understanding as the foundation, nationalism is defined in this research as "about the actual 'content' of the nation—about the distinguishing characteristics or identity of a nation, about who belongs to it and who does not, about what the national interests are and so forth—and about the uses the national 'form' and 'content' are put to" (Jiménez-Martínez & Mihelj, 2021, p. 335). However, this form of nationalism takes the forefront at times of collective celebration, conflict, and war, or during major shifts and disruptions in governance and is not ever-present (Jiménez-Martínez & Mihelj, 2021).

Digital nationalism refers to the transition of this conversation to virtual spaces. It is observed that participatory affordance of digital technologies has enabled a wider range of actors to contribute to public communication, thus making national imagination and nationalism potentially more diverse but also more unpredictable (Jiménez-Martínez & Mihelj, 2021, p. 333). It is argued that digital media – social networking platforms in particular – have furthered the fragmentation of public debate by means of creating algorithm-driven "filter bubbles" and "echo chambers" (Jiménez-Martínez & Mihelj, 2021, p. 333). Furthermore, this diversity has also resulted in greater fragmentation and polarisation of national imagination, with prominence given to niche versions of national identity as well as solidifying more extreme forms of nationalism (Jiménez-Martínez & Mihelj, 2021, p. 333).

In line with this trend, the term Netizen was introduced to recognise people who actively contribute online towards developing discourse. Netizens are classified into various groups according to the purpose for which they peruse the internet, with some using the space to seek specific information and others playing a more active part in virtual spaces to build a community and act in their best interest. The nature of the engagement is largely unrestricted with freedom of expression in cyberspace (Lee, et al., 2005, p. 58). For the purpose of this research, the focus will be on the youth populous of Netizens actively partaking in building and utilising the virtual space for the perceived benefit of their community. The benefits to the community take many forms such as partaking in identity formation, debate on policy as well as contributing to processes such as reconciliation and memorialisation in post war contexts such as in Sri Lanka. Lee et al (2005) recognises the growing relevancy of Netizens' online political activity, which was only thought of as an extension of public opinion in the past, but is now being recognised by traditional media as newsworthy, and according to the Second Annual Media in Cyberspace study, this is reflected in how print journalists rely on online services for information on breaking news and for research purposes (Lee, et al., 2005, p. 68).

2.4. Youth Identity and Gender

In studying identity, a theoretical concept that is important to this study is that of gender. It is established within gender studies that gender as an identity is performative and not biologically innate to one's person; gender constitutes the stylised repetition of acts whereby the notion of gender itself is reified and naturalised within society (Butler, 1988). The performativity of gender renders it as an identity which is a culture specific social practice. In Sri Lanka, the culture specific performativity of gender mainly depends on Victorian values imposed by the former colonial masters; in order to enhance economic productivity, the performativity of gender was disseminated as gendered bodies, wherein the man was to be productive and the woman to be domestic (De Alwis, 1997; Kahandagama, 2015). Although Sri Lankan society has come forward in many aspects of performativity of gender, and perception and acceptance of gender and sexual identities, the heteronormative binary between (cis) man and woman is ingrained within society, and the masculinities are shaped in relation and opposition to femininities (De Mel et al., 2013). Masculinities, according to Connell (2005), can be categorised into four ways of performativity and reception; hegemonic masculinities, subordinated masculinities, marginalised masculinities, and complicit masculinities. Further ways of categorising masculinities include resistance (Kimmel & Mosmiller, 1992; Messner, 2000) or protest masculinities (Walker, 2006). Hegemonic masculinities are pertinent to this study, for a form of hegemonic performativity of masculinity within Sri Lanka, identified as militarised masculinity is tied intrinsically to the studied event. Militarised masculinity in Sri Lanka is both externally and internally (Demetriou, 2001; Hinojosa, 2010) hegemonic, in how it is both performed and received within society and popular culture (De Mel, 2007; Kahandagama, 2015). Militarised masculinity is performed and perceived on two extremes: the benevolent, humanitarian soldier (Kahandagama, 2015), and the violent, aggressive, unruly fighter (Hinojosa, 2010), and it is often thought that war and battlefields are necessary to the survival of militarised masculinity. The celebration of such performativity of gender by the public will be studied in this paper. Furthermore, Sri Lanka's National Youth Policy (Ministry of Youth Affairs and Skills Development, 2014) defines youth as those between 15 to 29, and the close approximation of the sample population to this age category enables within this paper an investigation of which iterations of gender are celebrated by youth within public discourse.

2.5. Agenda Setting Theory and Reverse Agenda Setting

In this context, this study is designed to analyse the degree to which discourse on social media vis-à-vis art as an instrument of fostering a national identity in post-war Sri Lanka has enabled youth participation in the conversation. The dynamics of this relationship will be expounded on with the agenda setting theory as the theoretical underpinning, with a focus on more recent iterations of the theory such as the agenda building perspective. Agenda setting theory and the role of media in framing public opinion was derived from Walter Lipmann's seminal work Public Opinion in 1922. He notes "news media" as the primary source that influences the public's impression of the larger world of public affairs (Lippmann, 1922). To this effect, in 1971, Cobb and Elder posited the agenda building perspective broadening the scope by way of making allowances for a wider-range of influences in the public policy-making process;

"The agenda-building perspective, however, suggests that the importance of popular participation may go well beyond simply voting or participating in the selection of political leaders. It emphasises the crucial role that various publics may play in shaping the very substance of governmental decisions" (Cobb & Elder, 1971, pp. 911–912).

In essence, as the theory was developed further, scholars recognised the public as playing a more active role in the process of building an agenda (Erbring, et al., 1980). A prominent scholar on theorising agenda setting, Maxwell McCombs recognised a degree of reciprocity between the public and the media in "building" the agenda (McCombs, 2004). McCombs identifies this tendency as "reverse agenda-setting" where public agenda could influence and "build" the media agenda in return (McCombs, 2004, p. 198). The advent of social media further emphasised this process of reciprocity by providing a platform for public engagement. Weimann and Brosius (2016) in their work on agenda-setting research, note that the emergence of new online platforms has changed the media environment positing a challenge to the traditional understanding of agenda setting theory quoting Chaffee and Metzger (2016);

"New technologies may give more power to people whose agendas would not normally be reported in the major mass media," and "[t]he key problem for agenda-setting theory will change from 'what issues the media tell people to think about' to 'what issues people tell the media they want to think about.'" (Weimann & Brosius, 2016, p. 29).

Further citing existing research, they note strong evidence alluding to the interactive two-way effect – "reverse agenda setting" - in the transfer of salience between the media and Netizen agenda (Weimann & Brosius, 2016, p. 31).

Reviewing existing literature for this study, further revealed the absence of academic contributions investigating the socio-political implications and impacts of the 2019 mural wave, although very comprehensive articles written on the visual impressions and masculinities can be found on the internet (Azeez, n.d.; Kahandagama, 2020). The absence of any scholarly investigation of the topic at hand further justifies the need for this paper.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This research paper brings together Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), Agenda Setting, and Identity together in its analysis of data. Critical Discourse Analysis is a form of discourse analysis incorporated in qualitative research approaches. Discourse analysis is the observation of language as having meaning in particular historical, social, and political conditions. Taking this analysis a step further, CDA focuses on the ways through which discourse structures enact, confirm, legitimise, reproduce, or challenge relations of power, and uses and abuses of them (Van Dijk, 2015). CDA takes the textual analysis of discourse analysis further and situates it within social theory, whereby one could study the consequences of a produced text (Fairclough, 2003). Words one produces are never produced within a vacuum, and the words one chooses are always a political choice. By studying the socio-political contexts within which discourses are situated, and produced texts, i.e., words and phrases uttered by the studied entity, one is able to investigate the ways in which power relations are created, maintained, and reified within society (Locke, 2004; McGregor, 2004; Meyer, 2001; Van Dijk, 2015). Making hidden power relations and meanings explicit and calling for change is one of the main tasks of CDA (McGregor, 2004; Meyer, 2001). While CDA functions as the methodology through which the collected data is analysed, Agenda Setting and Identity became the main concepts through which the shaping of the discourse was studied. This qualitative study utilised CDA in order to investigate the discursive practices of youth when referring to the mural wave of late 2019. This study, in some aspects, resorted to a selective process of analysis; the studying of linguistic elements through a text analysis was limited in some ways, and was not situated within English or Language Studies. The identified discursive practices were studied in relation to the processes of agenda setting and creation of identities and agency within the mural wave. The collection of data was uniform for the most part, except when two different methods were used to collect necessary data, which will be further explained in the next section.

3.2. Data Collection

Initially, as the study was in its inception stage, the research team decided to do a social media scoping of the studied event, to understand the ways in which the conversation on the mural wave was shaped online. The social media scoping was also conducted due to the fact that the research team could not do a field visit to identify and take pictures of murals in person, as was planned initially. As the study commenced at the height of the third wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, in May 2021, the research team decided to opt for remote data collection. In the social media scoping, the researchers conducted key word searches on the Internet and found relevant social media posts and news articles on the mural wave. Within platforms such as Twitter and Facebook, hashtag searches were also carried out in order to obtain further data; keywords and hashtags such as murals sri lanka 2019, murals sri lanka, #srilankamurals, #muralsLKA, were used. The data collected through the social media scoping were all available in public domains; Facebook pages and posts dedicated to the mural wave and tweets discussing the mural wave. Social media posts were gathered in all three major languages (Tamil, Sinhala, and English). Apart from the primary data collected through the scoping of social media, the research team gathered further primary data by conducting interviews. The interviews were initially categorised into two (02) groups; Key Person Interviews (KPIs) and Focus Group Discussions. The KPIs were to include academics who had expert knowledge on the studied area, whereas the FGDs were to include mural artists, youth activists, netizens, journalists, and political figures. It was decided from the outset that the KPIs and FGDs would be conducted in all three major languages, for the research team thought it was pertinent to study the discourse in the three languages as it would provide a more cohesive look into the ways in which it was shaped. It was also a way to capture the multiple ethnic, religious, and linguistic identities of the country. Eventually, the categories changed from two to three (03), adding Expert Interviews to the methods of data collection and changing the FGDs; the FGDs were changed into

KPIs and In-Depth Interviews, for it was difficult to get people to join the virtual discussions at the same time, and it was decided that these two formats would provide more space for the interviewees to express themselves. The KPIs included a close approximation of the youth category mentioned at the beginning of the paper; whereas the Expert Interviews included individuals who were studying concepts such as identity, reconciliation, art, etc., within the academia, and whose input was taken in framing the KPI's responses.

The Expert Interviews were conducted with the aim of framing the studied discourse and validating the findings derived from the KPIs and the In-Depth Interviews. Several Expert Interviews were conducted as a first wave of interviews in order to understand the event studied. The rest were conducted simultaneously with KPIs and In-Depth interviews. Respondents were reached out to via email and phone. All interviews were conducted virtually on MS Teams, Zoom, and phone calls. Two FGDs were to be conducted with mural artists; however, for one of the FGDs, only one person showed up, prompting the research team to treat it – and the other FGD – as In-Depth Interviews. An FGD organised with Muslim youth from the Eastern Province who were involved in mural paintings was scheduled; however, it fell through as the respondents became unresponsive towards the day of the FGD. Efforts to reconnect were unsuccessful and were attributed to disruption caused by the 3rd wave of COVID-19 and the lockdown that ensued. Although the research team did interview individuals from the Muslim community as KPIs and Expert Interviews, they were not representative of the youth who engaged in mural paintings. Therefore, the research team refrained from drawing generalisations on the lived reality of Muslim youth through the interviews conducted. An elicited element (questions regarding murals while sharing pictures of certain murals on screen) was to be included in the two In-Depth Interviews (FGDs). However, due to the nature of the two In-Depth Interviews, they could not be conducted properly; one of the interviews was conducted via phone as the interviewees refused consent for the conversation to be recorded, and only one person participated in the other elicited element. Therefore, the elicited element was removed from the analysis. All interviews were recorded with the participants' consent for transcribing and note-taking purposes; the only exception was the In-Depth interview conducted via phone with mural artists. Only the KPIs and In-Depth interviews were transcribed word-to-word, for the purpose of applying CDA. The recordings were transcribed by a trilingual Research Assistant, and the recordings were transcribed in the languages in which they were conducted. The In-Depth interview conducted via phone was transcribed while it happened by three researchers. The three transcripts were collated and no major discrepancies were noticed between them. Notes were taken for Expert Interviews and CDA was not applied to the notes taken. Refer Appendix A for a comprehensive list of the figures and format of the interviews conducted, Appendix B illustrates the way in which cited interviews were labelled.

3.3. Data Analysis

CDA was applied to the social media posts selected through the social media scoping, and transcribed KPIs and In-Depth interviews. In analysing the social media posts through CDA (social media critical discourse studies [SM-CDS]) the focus… "[was] maintained on the form, processes, and projected meanings of the content itself and their calculated impacts in society" (KhosraviNik, 2018, p.587). Due to the nature of SM-CDS and social media posts, multimodality was pertinent in analysing the content of the said posts; the audiovisual texts which the social media posts contained were treated as part of the overall text of the post. The meaning bearing forms, i.e., communicative resources which indicate the engagement with and reach of a social media post such as tagging, likes, and shares were not taken into consideration, for the reach of the social media posts was not taken into consideration within the study – the research focused on the production of the text rather than the consumption of it.

The application of CDA to the transcripts was done in relation to Fairclough's (2003) three-dimensional approach to CDA. Although using this approach is largely reserved for texts and speeches, there have been attempts by many researchers in extending this approach to analysing interviews (Davies & Rea, 2019); this study would then be contributing to this evolution of the methodology as well. This analysis was done by four researchers; two researchers applied CDA to all the transcripts, except the Tamil transcripts. A third researcher applied CDA to all the transcripts including the Tamil transcripts, and the last researcher applied CDA to the Tamil transcripts. This application of the methodology was done individually by the researchers. This was carried out by collating the findings on an excel sheet, thematically. The themes were decided on by three researchers to correspond with the discourses and genres from which the interviewees drew on during the interviews. The collated data was validated by two additional researchers, who engaged in the task independently. This was done in order to ensure and account for triangulation, validation, and reflexivity, within the analysis process.

The first step of Fairclough's (2003) approach included a text analysis, which was not detailed, as a heavy linguistic element would not contribute to the findings of this research. . The second step included an analysis of the discursive practices of the interviewees, i.e., discourses and genres from which they drew on when answering the questions – this allowed the research team to investigate the ways in which the interviewees perceived the mural wave, and the perceived roles of youth and the state therein. The second step or dimension involves studying of both the production and consumption processes of the texts. However, as the produced texts were not available to the public, the consumption process of the produced texts was not studied. The consumption process in this instance is replaced by analysis Using the third dimension, the derived findings were then looked at in relation to the agenda setting function and identity creation and performance within post-war Sri Lanka, in order to study whether the discursive practices of the interviewees reproduced or restructured the order of discourse, and the consequences it had for the broader social practice of the mural wave.

A thematic analysis was conducted for the Expert Interviews, wherein the findings were coded and divided into themes and sub-themes. The findings of the thematic analysis of the Expert Interviews were used in both framing and validating the findings derived through the other interviews.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1. Socio-Political Context Leading to the Mural Wave

The socio-political context against which the mural wave takes place, mirrors sustained post-war narratives in Sri Lanka which predate the murals under consideration. The discursive practices of the interviewees contend that the immediate post-war narratives of Sri Lanka constitute a range of complimenting and contradicting narratives. These narratives range from jingoistic, monoethnic and mono-religious narrative perpetuated by the State to sustained extremist discourse in the aftermath of the armed struggle (EI–2,2021; KPI–10, 2021;KPI–9, 2021). While successive governments have varied in policy and agenda, the inherently majoritarian political narrative perpetuated by state institutions by way of policy and practice remain central to the state's identity. That is, the historical narrative of Sinhala identity based on a militarised past is venerated and reinforced by the state (KPI–7, 2021).

"90% of the people have grown up worshiping Buddhist monks and thinking that the soldiers are heroes and they save the country. Those are very day-to-day reflections of our thoughts. That is a thing we all celebrate and it does not mean we are against something" (KPI–6, 2021)

This narrative perpetuated by the state is reinforced by other stakeholders in the post-war discourse such as media organisations, while pressure groups and activists retort with alternative narratives (KPI-10, 2021). Sri Lanka's political history is no stranger to populist majoritarian rhetoric, and this renascent wave of majoritarianism has been sustained since 2005 (EI–4, 2021).

The studied discourse reveals that, those netizens interviewed do not perceive Sri Lanka's civil war as being recognised as a conflict in the popular discourse among the people of the country. This results in the reinforcing of the triumphalist narrative that avoids meaningful conversation and reflection on the root causes of the civil war (KPI-7, 2021). It is against this backdrop that netizens identifying with the minority narrative/s regard that the state's post war focus was on infrastructure development while the psychosocial, economic, and developmental requirements that necessitate policy solutions were not addressed (In-depth–2, 2021). Continued reinforcement of the triumphalist narrative and formative experiences of their lived reality have resulted in a perceptive association of the Sri Lankan military as defenders of the majority ethnicity among the minority communities (KPI-7, 2021). Conversely, it is argued that the state's immediate response in the post-war period focused on development to ensure that underlying socio-economic factors that contribute to violence and division are eradicated, thereby ensuring a more sustainable resolution (KPI–6, 2021).

It was stated by the interviewees that the narrative of the common enemy is still sustained as the dominant discourse among the majority for political gain, mirrored by sustained extremism in minority polity in response (KPI–8, 2021). The 2013 attacks by the Bodu Bala Sena against Muslim minorities, that created a ripple effect altering the majority-minority dynamic within the country yet again, is attributed to the continued sustenance of the common enemy narrative (EI–10, 2021). Social psychology studies identify the "common enemy effect" as a phenomenon where members of a community or group work together in the face of an opponent, despite having little else in common otherwise (De Jaegher, 2021). Respondents identify that the vacuum created following the defeat of LTTE as the common enemy of the state is now occupied by the Muslim community at large, with the intention of galvanising the majoritarian base for political purposes; "The minute you have the government in an unpopular place, you see something against the Muslims being done like banning the Burqas and Madrasas or scrutinising Islamic texts coming into the country and forcing barriers. They do anything that would placate the majority at points where they're very unpopular" (KPI–9, 2021). The imperceptible pace of reconciliation processes has compounded on this impression as allegations of war crimes, justice and other aspects of healing remain largely unaddressed (KPI–102021). The duplicitous application of law regarding matters such as memorialisation, and more recently burial of COVID–19 victims, remain contentious while reinforcing the systemic imbalance of power between majority and minority ethnicities (KPI–9, 2021). These impressions have paved the way for an understanding among netizens that the state continues to maintain, if not reinforce a triumphalist narrative that centres around gratitude for the end of the war from all ethnicities (KPI–9, 2021).

The immediate socio-political context leading up to the mural wave under observation, is centred around the Presidential Election of 2019. The incumbent Executive President's campaign into power is documented as drawing heavily from populist adaptations of nationalism and majoritarianism with a focus on Sinhala Buddhist identity and triumphalist, militarised narratives. It is in this same context that some netizens identify the "one country, one law" narrative perpetuated in the majoritarian political discourse as reductive, as the singular identity is considered tantamount to an erasure of minority identities (KPI–8, 2021). Netizens observed that the ethno-religious nature of youth identity, even in the current context, necessitated the political discourse of the campaign to be of ethno-religious nature, focused on a majority centric, triumphalist narrative (KPI–9, 2021). This observation is supplemented by the state response to the COVID–19 pandemic, which re-emphasised the pivotal place of the military outfit within the state's institutional structure. While the COVID–19 response by the military reinforced the triumphalist narratives with parties, including media, posturing it as a military victory, factions of netizens argue that the triumphalist narrative maybe losing currency, as they recognise the militarised response of the government to have failed (KPI–9, 2021). However, there is consensus amongst interviewees that the socio-political climate against which the mural wave unfolded was distinguished by militarisation of memorialisation, militarisation of civil spaces and militarisation of governance.

In contextualising the mural wave, this research broadly classifies the dominant narratives as majority narrative/s and minority narrative/s. However, it is worth noting that when reflecting on the process of identity creation, netizens drew from power systems based on economic, social class, and caste elements, which will be analysed later in the paper (KPI–6, 2021). These factors are understood to have an impact on identity creation beyond the ethnic and religious aspects. It was also noted that overall understanding of gender and sexual identity varies more along the lines of urban – rural, generational and class classifications than ethno-religious lines.

4.2. The Mural Wave of 2019

This section of the paper looks at the dominant narratives in the majority, minority, and alternative discourses, as it pertains to this study. In venturing into the study of the 2019 mural wave, it is imperative that visual impressions of the murals are mapped prior to analysing its discursive context as well as overall impact on youth identity. As reflected above, the visual impressions of the mural wave mirror the dominant discourses prevalent in post-war Sri Lanka; the majority narrative/s and minority narrative/s. A broad study of the visual impressions suggest that the murals were heavy in its representation of nationalist, militaristic and religious symbolism (KPI-9, 2021; KPI–5, 2021). Supporting the argument that Sri Lankan identity has a subjective interpretation rooted in ethno-religious classifications prevalent in the country, the murals portrayed distinct Sinhala and Tamil ethno-religious art and symbolism (KPI–8, 2021). A preliminary observation indicates that the content of the art corresponded to the predominant ethnic demographic of the geographic area. That is, murals located in areas with a strong presence of the Sinhala community were reflective of the dominant majority narrative/s, whereas the areas with a significantly larger Tamil community reflected the dominant minority narrative/s (KPI–9, 2021; KPI–5, 2021). For example, mural artists in the Northern Province of the country reflect on using symbols from Tamil culture referencing the Tamil ethno-religious identity and aspirations for the community, whereas those involved in the process in predominantly Sinhala localities focus on Sinhala Buddhist ethno-religious symbolism. It was also noted that imagery of soldiers and the war victory depict how triumphalism is celebrated (EI–5, 2021) mainly by the Sinhala Buddhist communities.

According to the discursive practices to which the interviewees resorted, reference to the dominant majority narrative akin to Sinhala nationalist sentiments were heavily visible in murals in predominantly Sinhala Buddhist geographic locations. Murals in these localities portrayed symbols that celebrate militarism such as victory of war, soldiers, lions etc. (EI–2, 2021), focusing heavily on imagery that glorify the role of soldiers in armed conflict. Other similar imagery included well known military figures such as Lieutenant General Denzil Lakshman Kobbekaduwa and Brigadier Priyanka Fernando; the latter was considered contentious following an instance of displaying "throat-cutting gestures" towards a group of Tamil protesters in front of the Sri Lankan Embassy in London (Ram, 2019). As one youth netizen stated the murals "fused the idea of soldiers to everything" (KPI–4, 2021). Moreover, art related to historical figures was tied to militarism (EI–7, 2021), for example imagery of historical figures such as King Dutugemunu and King Elara, recanting and reiterating the pre-civil war context of the ethnic tension between the Sinhala majority and Tamil minority.

Buddhist religious symbols from Dambulla, Medawachchi, and Anuradhapura were also depicted in the murals. Similarly, a 30ft long mural in Kalmunai depicted Hindu religious symbols such as the kovil and a festival. This same mural portrayed social harmony that the community experienced before the war (In-depth –2, 2021). Visual representations reflecting Muslim identity and religion were not observed on social media aside from general images relating to tokenistic reconciliation. However, in Medawachchi a particular reference to the Muslim community was made with a mural painting of the Mecca (Azeez, n.d.).

4.3. Dominant Post-war Narratives

The initial visual impressions, identified by the interviewees, portrayed through the murals signal the prevalence of two dominant narratives pertaining to youth identity; a majority narrative that reflects a Sinhala ethno-religious youth identity, and a minority narrative that reflects youth identity of the Tamil community. In doing so, as recounted above, the youth involved draw heavily from socio-cultural references to their community and locale. It is worth noting that the majority narrative drew heavily from concepts of militarism and triumphalism, while participants aligning themselves with minority narrative recognised that they were compelled to focus more on reconciliation in the aftermath than the conflict in order to avoid recurrence (In-Depth–2, 2021).

Aside from the dominant narratives that mirror ethno-religious identity markers, the research identified 'alternative' narratives that were exposed through the mural wave. For instance, murals heavy with cosmopolitan imagery drawing from pop-culture such as "Star Wars" (KPI–3, 2021) and other common unifying values such as environmental projects, anti-bribery and corruption, which reflected more moderate aspirations devoid of ethno-religious subtexts and identity markers. While some attribute the alternative narratives to the perceived apolitical origins of the murals (In-depth–1, 2021) others understand it as demonstrative of youth aspirations for a reconciled identity beyond ethno-religious identity markers (In-depth–2, 2021).

An interesting element of the mural wave which the interviewees brought up was its representation of gender. Although it was stated that the murals contained an element of gender, it was not cohesive and was restricted mainly to highlighting one performativity of gender; the discourses from which the interviewees drew on, reveal that the performativity of gender which was present in the murals was mainly militarised masculinity; "the identity was combined with a triumphalist militarised narrative" (KPI–9, 2021). According to the interviewees, militarised masculinity was not only portrayed on walls, it was glorified too. The consequences of such portrayal of masculinities will be further discussed in the section on murals as a tool of agenda setting.

Another alternative narrative observed in the murals and aligned with both the majority and minority narrative/s on nationalism is the recurrent imagery of King Ravana. A prehistoric figure, King Ravana has a significance in both cultural histories and is seen as a common factor that has emerged through the murals. While the mythology of Ravana and its study has been documented by scholars extensively, the trope pertaining to Ravana has been excluded for the purpose of this research, as it warrants further independent study (KPI–5, 2021; KPI–7, 2021; In-depth–2, 2021) (EI–7, 2021).

5. Murals as a Tool of Agenda Setting

Murals, and other art forms that belong to the broad genre, have a rich history of being used as a tool of agenda setting in domestic and global politics, particularly as a radical, non-conformist expression (EI-6, 2021). Globally, the propaganda function of art peaked during the Second World War with various forms being used by the German State apparatus in the manufacturing of Third Reich (KPI–1, 2021). Conversely, graffiti – akin in its form to murals – boasts a history of being instrumentalised to represent marginals in society, as a subversive art form (KPI–3, 2021). Its transition from a radical, non-conformist tool to an instrument of agenda setting incorporated by the state is recognised as a subversion of the art form by artists. In Sri Lanka, the first recorded mural is from the cave of the Balangoda cave man, after which the art form was patronised by the state and religion throughout history by way of temple paintings for centuries to come (EI–7, 2021). By virtue of being a mural, the form takes a public nature rendering it unavoidable, empowering it with a unique communicative function (EI–1, 2021; EI–2, 2021). It is this nature of the art form that has been instrumentalised both as a tool of consolidating and subverting power (KPI–3, 2021). As in the case of the mural wave under consideration, the art form has been used to set the agenda by the state, and as a means of free expression or reclaiming the space against posters and vandalism by the public (KPI–3, 2021: EI–4, 2021).

In studying the silencing and amplification process that has been used in identity creation as it pertains to the 2019 murals, the following section shows that both state and youth incorporate the medium in its agenda setting function.

5.1. Role of Youth in Murals as a Tool of Agenda Setting

Observers of this communicative event identified two interpretations pertaining to the origins of the mural wave. Each iteration is centred around motivations behind youth engagement in the event. Firstly, the mural wave was identified as a response to the "oppression" of nationalist and patriotic rhetoric under the out-going regime (KPI–6, 2021). This iteration of the genesis of the murals argues that under the previous regime nationalist and patriotic discourse was considered anti-democratic, which had an oppressive effect on public sentiment, with a particularly frustrating effect on the youth (KPI–6, 2021). This effect compounds on the veneration of the military and clergy that exists due to decades of socialisation skewed in favour of the dominant majority discourse. In response, the nationalist sentiment evolved into the populist movement that ushered in the current regime. The mural wave that emerged subsequently is seen by this school as a celebration of the liberation that ensued (KPI–5 2021).

The second iteration of the genesis of the mural wave attributes its origins to apolitical motivations. While beautification remains the conceptual underpinning of this iteration, the motivation behind the process in this instance is to subvert power in a public space. Proponents of this view suggest that the mural wave started as a solution to the menace of posters, thus being subversive in its functional purpose (In-depth–1, 2021). While the first iteration recognises the phenomena as a response to a political process, this identifies politicisation of the mural wave as a response to its potency in popular discourse. While the nationalist discourse was the catalyst in motivating youth, the functional purpose of the mural wave complementing the beautification agenda of the new regime is considered central to its pertinence as a political tool (KPI–3, 2021: KPI–9, 2021). Contenders of this argument define beautification as the process of consolidating and subverting power in public spaces; "it's used as a way to beautify cities. When we say beautified, essentially the idea is not to speak against the values of power in a city and it's not to take back power from the powerful to the powerless. It's actually to increase the real estate value of the city, increase the attractiveness of the city, increase the prices of property, and gentrify the city" (KPI–5,2021). Further, it is the understanding of this school that the politicisation of the mural wave resulted in an "engineered authenticity" in some murals while discouraging further engagement in others (EI–2, 2021).

5.2. Role of the State in Murals as a Tool of Agenda Setting

Findings of the research suggest that the regime change in 2019 under a nationalist mandate ushered in a paradigm shift in the national discourse, skewing it in favour of a more populist nationalist discourse (KPI–6,2021). Resultantly, the discourse surrounding murals mirrored the socio-political climate at a time when it was potent with majoritarian, triumphalist, and militarised bias.

The perceived politicisation of the mural wave reflects the state's role in incorporating the mural wave in its agenda setting role. The state's influence of the agenda could be mapped under four areas based on the role played by state or political institutions in the process of producing a mural. The first means by which representatives of state or political institutions engaged with the mural wave was through financial and resource assistance (KPI–6, 2021;KPI- 3, 2021; KPI–7, 2021). In many areas local politicians aligned with both the current regime and the opposition, assisted mural paintings in their locality by way of financial assistance or provision of resources such as paint and the requisite tools (KPI–6, 2021; KPI–6, 2021; KPI –7, 2021). The second point of contact between the state and the process of producing the mural was in its role as facilitator. Murals, by virtue of its nature, are drawn in public spaces that require permission. Following the President's endorsement of the mural wave, the state undertook the role of facilitating the expression by way of providing permits and easing red tape which further incentivised engagement. It was noted that in many instances participants of the process preferred public spaces in prominent locations that would otherwise prohibit displays such as posters and would even be penalised as vandalism. However, in the spirit of empowering youth, exceptions were made (KPI –6, 2021). Social media platforms document the process of painting a mural over a hazard sign supporting this observation (Welikumbura, 2019). The nature of engagement and power structures pertaining to the process suggest that it may influence the message conveyed through the medium. However, findings support a third means of engagement where state institutions directly mediated the content of the murals. Data supports that minority narratives were mediated or "censored" by the police in some areas whereas majority narratives were perceived to have allowed more freedom of expression, if not proactively encouraged (In-depth–2, 2021). The limitations imposed on the minority narrative by way of censoring its imagery and messages dilutes its authenticity as a means of expression (EI–1, 2021). Juxtaposing this against the continued memorialisation of the triumphalist narrative by the state mirrored in the mural wave at large, it is implicit that the dominant narrative of the state is skewed towards the majoritarian narrative.

The militarisation of the post war agenda is portrayed further via the mural wave through militarisation of gender performativity, especially that of masculinities. The findings from the interviews suggest that both forms of performativity of militarised masculinity – the benevolent, humanitarian soldier and the violent, aggressive fighter – were portrayed through the murals; "but now if you look at all the men in these murals, they're super ultra-masculine, it is crazy musculature and they have beards and they're carrying swords. It's a really violent masculine image" (KPI–3, 2021). This was a comment made in relation to the kind of violent and aggressive militarised masculinity portrayed in the murals. The kind of murals which highlighted the good-natured soldier was the most frequently painted kind, and such murals often portrayed the Sri Lankan army aiding civilians and emerging victorious from the civil war; "I think it is a glorified version. In some places, I have seen images of rescue missions like how they are carrying a Tamil woman in their hands and how they are actively engaged in the operation of rescuing people" (KPI–4, 2021). These portrayals of masculinities are not limited to a gendered element. The example provided for the good-natured soldier is placed against an ethnic other and a gendered other who is in need of the soldier's help. Furthermore, the violent (hyper) masculine imagery mentioned earlier is often portrayed in relation to ancient battles, specifically the battle between King Dutugemunu and King Elara, placing militarised masculinity within the historical narrative of Sri Lanka, as well as militarising history itself. These two portrayals further add to the triumphalist narrative espoused by state institutions in post-war Sri Lanka; a nation that has always been victorious and where military figures are needed for the survival of the other. The militarised masculinity sustains itself within the battlefield, for that space allows the existence of the soldier figure and legitimises violence (Kahandagama, 2015). Interestingly, the mural wave is not a battlefield; however, this may point to the increased militarisation of civil spaces and its sustenance by and through the public. The militarisation of civil spaces creates the façade for the continuation of the soldier and the need for him. This shows that militarisation – of spaces and performativity of gender – is a process both accepted and celebrated by the public who were engaged in the mural wave; thus the agenda set by the state during the civil war, in glorifying and romanticising a certain performativity of masculinity – with the hope of capitalising on the appeal of the soldier and recruiting more of them – continues to be reinforced by the public, and youth in this specific instance.

5.3. Impact on Youth Identity

The process of producing the murals and its incorporation as a tool in agenda setting by way of politicisation has both immediate and long-term implications on the aspects of identity creation. As an immediate response, the politicisation was perceived as a pulverisation of apolitical motivations behind the mural (In-depth-1, 2021). Research identified instances where this resulted in discouragement and subsequent discontinuation of further engagement by parties spearheading efforts within their communities (In-depth-2, 2021). As such, the incorporation of murals as a tool in setting the agenda by the state elicited mixed responses from the public with some youth factions revitalising their expressions and others discouraged.

The long-term implications of the mural wave pertaining to its role in youth identity take an ideological nature. The youth demographic under consideration in this research have spent the last decade out of their childhood in a post war context. Coming into their youth years in the context of rapid socio-political changes in a post war context increased their expectations for a peaceful country. However, the imperceptible pace of reconciliation and accompanying psychosocial development in post war Sri Lanka has rendered youth largely disillusioned. The visual impressions of the murals when juxtaposed against the state's role in the process of its production affirm that the state reinforces the dominant post war nationalist discourse through the memorialisation of majoritarian and triumphalist narratives. As such the research infers that the state's role in the process of identity creation largely encompass two functions: reinforcement of the dominant narrative and simultaneous erasure of counter narratives and subordinate histories. Further, consensus from discussants affirms that contemporary socio-political events continue to be a distinct influence in shaping youth identity. The overwhelming presence of ethno-religious themes and references to contemporary political discourse in the murals reflect this assertion. To this end, it was noted that youth participants identifying with the minority narrative attribute the ethno-religious themes and references as a response to the discriminative presence of the dominant majority narrative. It is in this context that the mediation of content and agenda by the state undermines the authenticity of the reflections of youth identity through the mural wave (KPI-10, 2021). While the murals reflect the sentiment of violence caused by structural issues faced by youth, it does not conclusively or coherently indicate youth sentiment independent of the political process of identity creation (EI-7, 2021; EI-2, 2021). As such, while the state reinforces the agenda in favour of the dominant discourse, the mural wave brought into focus the prevalence of counter narratives that resonate with youth, be it moderate or extremist (KPI-3, 2021; KPI-7, 2021; KPI-2, 2021; In-depth-2, 2021). In its current conception, the discourse on post war youth identity positions the end of the war in a triumphalist light with heavy emphasis on militarisation against pro-reconciliation sentiment (KPI-2, 2021). The continued portrayal of war "victory" through a hegemonic lens that pins reconciliation as its conceptual antithesis will continue to be an obstacle in the process of realising an inclusive identity for Sri Lankan youth (KPI-7, 2021).

6. Social Media as a Tool of Agenda Setting

The emergence of social media paved the way for a new form of public sphere that is more interactive and converged compared to the Habermasian (1962) notion of the public sphere. Social media has become an important element in contemporary democratic societies where people have diverse spaces to express their opinions than ever before. However, social media is not an organic representation of public opinion as it is used by the authorities and dominant groups as a propaganda tool to promote their ideologies.

The use of social media by Sri Lankans has been increasing due to the significant growth of internet penetration. According to the World Bank (n.d.), internet penetration in Sri Lanka was at 35 % in 2020, whereas it was around 10.5% in 2014. As of 2018, there were a recorded 6 million active social media users in Sri Lanka with the number of Facebook users estimated to be just under 6 million (Hewage and Weerasekera, 2020). As such, Facebook is the platform that is widely popular in both urban and rural areas while Twitter is still mainly used by users based in the urban centres. Facebook has been used as an influential tool in the social and political discourses in Sri Lanka. The decisive socio-political role of Facebook was evident in both the 2015 and 2019 presidential elections, as well as during the 2018 anti-Muslim violence (Al Jazeera, 2020).1

6.1. Role of the State in Social Media as a Tool of Agenda Setting

Even though, Facebook is not under state ownership, there have been incidents in Sri Lanka where different governments intervened regarding the content and functioning of the social networking site. The major involvement came in 2019 when the government decided to temporarily ban Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp for several weeks claiming that these social networking sites were used by extremist groups to disseminate fake news and to propagate hate speech. The government's decision could be identified as a reaction to the influential agenda setting function of social media in Sri Lanka. Several social media activists have been arrested in the recent past alleging that they disseminated harmful information through social media (UCA News, 2020). However, activists claim that these were clear examples of the violation of the right of freedom of speech guaranteed in the constitution.

Social media enabled the proliferation of the conversation pertaining to murals as the pandemic impeded the physical movement of the wave. As such, the study examined the agenda setting function of social media with regards to the mural wave. Both the state involvement and the influential role played by the netizens in agenda setting were critically looked at in the study.

Findings of the study suggest that even though the state was not directly involved in the creation and dissemination of information related to murals, the dominant Sinhala Buddhist narrative that was facilitated by the state transcended to the social media discourse. Social media platforms that were owned by mainstream media institutions that are favourable to the government, framed the murals as an organic social movement of the youth.

The state and other parties with vested interests played a decisive role in promoting digital nationalism in Sri Lanka (KPI-10, 2021). Netizen's engaging in discursive practices recognise that digital nationalism mirror and further emphasise the divisions among individuals and communities along ethnic and religious lines.

According to an expert, "what you have now is a concentration of semantic authority and narrative power through the insturmentalisation of social media in the president, the government, or a proxy of the government; unprecedented – completely opposite of what social media promised" (EI-2, 2021). This clearly indicates that the state and the

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1. Riots broke out against the Muslim community in March 2018, subsequently investigation revealed the role played by Facebook in precipitating the violence, which resulted in an apology by the platform.

political elite have the ability not only to control social media, but also to promote their ideology using visible and invisible measures.

The dominant role of the state also resulted in silencing dissent which led to self-censorship during the mural wave. It was also noted that existing controversial legislature such as the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) resulted in a self-censoring effect, even in relation to the expression of identity in the murals. This was evident particularly among youth identifying with the dominant minority narrative whose engagement in both mainstream and social media is under surveillance even in the post war context.

Netizens' Role in Agenda Setting and Reversing

Social networking sites are predominantly popular among the youth in Sri Lanka and the data indicates that 41% of Sri Lankan Facebook users are between the ages of 18 and 24 years (Ishara, 2015). The study found that the youth were the driving force behind /the mural wave and they also played a key role in the online and offline discourse surrounding the murals. The agenda setting role of netizens needs to be looked at from a broader perspective, not purely limiting it to the discourse on the mural wave. The social media dynamics on murals should be read as a communicative event that took place in the wider social and political discourse in the online public sphere.

The agenda setting function of netizens during the mural wave has been complex as there were clear differences in youth engagement with the discourse depending on the dominant discourse they identify with, as well as the dominant ethno-religious composition of the locality. Social media was used as a tool to galvanize participants from different social backgrounds and geographical locations (In-depth–1, 2021). However, the convergence of youth from different backgrounds through social media did produce murals that portrayed the diversity of the country. The study found that most of the murals that were drawn in the South represented the dominant Sinhala Buddhist narrative. However, the social media engagements created further divisions among youth even if they were from the same ethnic or religious backgrounds. This was evident in the Northern and Eastern Provinces where there was competition among youth in Facebook pages that were created based on geographical locations (ex-Jaffna boys, Trinco boys). The fragmentation of the social media sphere indicates the micro level functioning of agenda setting as well.

The findings of the study indicate that social media has become the echo chambers of likeminded groups that promote the rhetoric of the majority. Even though, there is space for different opinions, that space is drowned by the dominant content, this was evident in the elections as well (EI–2, 2021). The echo chamber effect is not solely a Sri Lankan phenomenon as Facebook algorithms contribute to the polarisation of discourse by restricting critical engagement. However, users can overcome it by actively seeking information with an open mind and by using fact checking tools. However, there was hardly any constructive debate taking place on the murals as the discourse was polarised clearly between the netizens with nationalistic sentiments and those who advocated for a more inclusive nation. There seem to be no counter narratives on social media challenging the nationalistic portrayals in the murals (EI–4, 2021). Given the penetration of Facebook in Sri Lanka, the limited availability for counter narratives on Facebook is reflective of there being no opportunity for reverse agenda setting in the Sri Lankan social media sphere.

The social media posts surrounding the mural wave in the South was dominated by imagery representative predominantly of Sinhala culture, military figures and reference to war, and derogatory portrayal of politicians representing the minority communities. Interviewees perceived that there was no space for the conversations promoting reconciliation as it was dominated by content that was against reconciliation (KPI-10, 2021). Several respondents claimed that the democratic nature of social media has been diminishing due to the overwhelming domination of the majority discourse which limits the space for critical engagement and debate.

The study also found that there is a significant difference in the social media sphere based on language. The agenda of the discourse in the virtual sphere is predominantly set in the Sinhala language as the limited presence of minority (Tamil) language netizens tip the scale in favour of the majority on the platform, with limited scope for pushback or agenda reversal. The linguistic divisions in social media have fuelled the existing mistrust among communities and ironically, as a form of art, murals have not been able to bring the communities together, in fact, social media discourse indicates that it has further widened the divisions. However, a positive impact of the Sri Lankan social media sphere as noted by an interviewee is that it has provided an alternative platform for women to express themselves (KPI–6, 2021). But it needs to be noted that silencing of women's voices does occur in the social media sphere which is proportionately dominated by men.

The population dynamics based on the ethnic, religious and languages are mirrored in the virtual public sphere as well, with the discourse dominated by the Sinhala language. . This has been evident in the last few years and the discourse on the mural wave is no exception. The agenda setting and reversal function of netizens in Sri Lanka is overwhelmed by the majority narrative and it escalates during significant social and political events.

7. Education as a Tool of Agenda Setting

While the research did not aim to study education as a tool of agenda setting, the application of CDA to the transcripts and a review of the discursive practices of the interviewees, yielded a set of data on the discourse of education which was thought necessary in setting and reversing the agenda, pertaining to identity.

7.1. The State's Role in Setting the Agenda

The interviewees recognised education as a tool used by the state in setting the agenda, as well as a tool which has the potential to subvert that set agenda. The former, according to many interviewees, is achieved by the state through its gatekeeping role within the education system. As the producer of syllabi and disseminators of knowledge, the state promotes the Sinhala Buddhist triumphalist narrative which it espouses in governance as the dominant post-war narrative of Sri Lanka, through the education system. For instance, one of the interviewees claimed that youth born after 1990 have no knowledge of the events which led up to and resulted in the 1983 pogroms (KPI–4, 2021), and this sentiment was validated through the expert interviews conducted (EI–1, 2021). This is seen as a result of the state re-narrativizing history – via the history curricula – and suppressing the emergence of alternative histories and/or narratives within the education system and public discourse at large. The erasure of the root causes of the ethnic conflict of Sri Lanka, within the history curricula, has resulted in a regime of truth sustained by a selective history and memory in relation to the recent history of Sri Lanka; the Sinhala community prevailed against the Tamil separatists and emerged victorious at the end of the war. The absence of lived experiences of the war, while not applicable to those in their late 20s and early 30s living in the Northern and Eastern Province, has provided a blank slate for the state to impose its values on the youth and create a bias towards the dominant post-war narrative within the country. In terms of reconciliation, this proves to be an obstacle in addressing past grievances and accepting accountability, in order to move forward. The continuous promotion of the triumphalist narrative is sustained through the education system as it disseminates the said narrative across generations, thereby leading to further divisions amongst communities. The school system of Sri Lanka reinforces these divisions, for schools are divided along ethnic, religious, and language lines, which results in upbringing within ideological silos; "So, from a very young age you're divided, and the state resources are going to the patronage of schools that are predominantly Sinhala Buddhist... Until you come to the age where you work with people from other ethnic and religious backgrounds, your upbringing is very sheltered and it's limited" (KPI-9, 2021). In addition to the references made to the discourse on education and the resultant identity creation, one of the interviewees also drew from the discourse on militarisation in relation to education; "I think that the future will be worse since they are trying to militarize the educational system" (KPI–4, 2021). This evidences the seeping of militarisation at the level of governance into institutionalised education.

7.2. Education in Reversing the Agenda

The reversal of this agenda set by the state– divisions between communities the oppression of alternative historical narratives – can only be achieved through the very system used in furthering it. The narratives forcibly imposed on children curb their agency in forging opinions which may counter what is taught to them as universal truths. In order to prevent further framing of the minds of the youth, one of the respondents emphasised the need to foster critical thinking within the education system. Critical thinking counters state agenda setting on multiple levels; critical thinking would allow students to question hierarchies of power and regimes of truth, for critical engagement requires the questioning of what is presented as factual and true. This would then also allow students to be agentive within the education system. Tied to the notion of questioning, was the need to decolonise the education system. The interviewees referred to the discourse on decolonisation of education in relation to questioning of hierarchy and the performativity of one's gender and sexual identities. Apart from the forging of identities along divisive ethno-religious and linguistic factors, the education system has also affected the creation and performativity of youth gender and sexual identities. Colonial and conventional values regarding gender and sexuality are still prevalent within modern day Sri Lanka. Interestingly, one interviewee's explanation on the trajectory of the perception and performativity of gender identities in Sri Lanka, referred to such identities as Western gender identities, suggesting that attraction and performativity of gender which lies beyond patriarchal heteronormativity is perceived as alien and Eurocentric. The need to decolonise education was seen as pertinent in absolving gender and sexual identities from such normative beliefs. According to the interviewees, one of the main ways in which one could reverse the agenda set by the education system is by reforming the history curricula; "I think the fundamental history curricula needs to be changed and be more inclusive because... even from the time you are at the age of eight onwards, we could be talking more about co-existence and diversity rather than giving a particular version or narrative of our histories" (KPI–1, 2021). Other suggestions for the prevention of the formation of a divisive national identity include, exposure to other cultures and access to the English language. The latter is of interest as it was mentioned multiple times and was validated through expert interviews. Access to the English language is seen as performing a dual role; social mobility within the country which still looks back at its former colonial masters with affection, and access to global discourses. The latter could perhaps be due to the absence of a heavy presence of English in the state apparatus, for the state has the power to appropriate and dismantle narratives and discourses within the Sinhala language, for it is the language of the majority. Re-narritivisation of history which is institutionalised and disseminated through the education system leads to the fabrication of memories and histories, and the ignorance of important historical events, and their alternative narratives creates the space for youth to form their (national) identity along the ultra-nationalist sentiments pushed by the state. This data pool refers to the dual role of education within the process of education. Although the state, and subsequently various governments, have successfully utilised the education system in setting its agenda by re-narrativising history, suppressing alternative histories and memories, and forming regimes of truth, with the aim of shaping youth identities, it can be subverted by the very same tool of education if the necessary steps are taken; a holistic retelling of history, the agency to question power, and access to other cultures and ideologies, thus ridding state institutions of their power over discourse(s).

While the critical analysis of the discourse revealed that Sri Lanka does not have a common identity along ethno-religious and cultural lines – with the education system contributing to this – many interviewees and experts, reminding one of imagined communities, claimed that there is the possibility for a common Sri Lankan identity simply by virtue of being born within its territory and existing under the same administration (EI–1, 2021). Another interesting aspect of a common Sri Lankan identity, and the only other reference to it which emerged from the youth, was the display of a common identity during cricket matches, where everyone would come together despite their differences to support the national team (KPI–1, 2021; KPI–7, 2021; KPI–9, 2021; In-Depth–2, 2021).

8. Conclusion

This thematic paper was an attempt at studying youth identity discourses in post-war Sri Lanka in relation to the mural wave which took place in late 2019. In studying this specific occurrence, the paper looked at youth agency and their processes of identity creation and formation. According to the interviewees, the murals themselves were representative of ethnic and localised identities of the communities which painted them. The composition of the symbols, motifs, and elements were location specific, and changed according to the ethnography of the communities which drew them. The narratives espoused by the mural wave were also representative of the dominant post-war narratives within Sri Lanka; the Sinhala Buddhist triumphalist narrative which is majoritarian and the dominant minority narrative portrayed by the Tamil community, which focussed cultural and religious representations of the Tamil community. Apart from these dominant majority and minority narratives, the mural wave also contained alternative narratives which highlighted cosmopolitanism, environmental concerns, and Ravana or Ravanan. The glorification of historical figures and military figures, and resultant militarisation of the mural wave was extended to shaping performativity of gender, thereby rendering the murals a glorification of militarised masculinity.

The mural wave as a tool of agenda setting, functioned on two levels; the state and the community. The former politicised the mural wave, in order to push the dominant post-war narrative of Sri Lanka, which is majoritarian and triumphalist. Support provided through finances, resources, and provision of space, allowed the state to appropriate the mural wave in memorialising the aforementioned narrative through the kind of symbols, motifs, and messages the murals entailed. The presence of the murals is also representative of the increasing militarisation of civil spaces within Sri Lanka, for the majority of the murals were heavily influenced by the military and the victorious narrative of the civil war (KPI–2, 2021; KPI–3, 2021; KPI–9, 2021). The engineered authenticity created through the state involvement enabled the space for youth involvement in the agenda setting process. The youth involvement was motivated by two main factors; youth who treated the mural wave as a civic duty and youth who used the murals as an extension of their own identity. The latter can be further divided into two groups; youth who were "oppressed" by the previous regime in exercising their freedom of expression and youth who did not gain or benefit from state patronage. One faction of the youth aided the populist sentiment ushered in by the mural wave, another faction lost interest in their community level initiative due to politicisation, and the other faction could not fully express themselves due to censorship. Due to the physical nature of social media and its function in communication, the discourse on the mural wave on social media was polarised and took place in echo chambers. This polarisation limited the emergence and engagement with alternative narratives in relation to the mural wave; this inhibits the avenues for effective reverse agenda setting. This also denotes that the mural wave contained the space to express and reinforce the ethno-religious identities of one community, the Sinhala Buddhist, while providing limited space for minority ethnic communities to portray an identity which did not align with the dominant post-war narrative.

Education was perceived as both a tool for the state's setting of its agenda, and a tool which contained the power to subvert the state's agenda setting function. The discourse and related narratives on education in relation to ethno-religious, gender, and sexual identities, was an interesting discursive practice which the interviewees shared. The regime of truth created via selective memories and histories and erasure of alternative narratives, accorded the state and its governing institutions the power to disseminate the majoritarian, triumphalist narrative through institutionalised education, thereby shaping the national identity of the youth in accordance with state's agenda. In order to limit the power the state has over manipulating discourses and narratives within them, encouraging students to critically question hierarchies of power, a holistic retelling of history, and decolonising the education system, were suggested by the interviewees. The ability to subvert the power the state has over the education system would then allow the youth to be agentive in shaping their own identities and to rid themselves of colonial and Eurocentric views regarding gender and sexual identities.

One of the most pertinent aspects of post-war Sri Lanka which this thematic paper was attempting to investigate was the existence of a cohesive Sri Lankan identity. It was made evident throughout the studied discourse that an existence of a cohesive Sri Lankan identity along ethno-religious lines is an impossibility within the country, for differences between each other are deeply engrained within society, with the local political environment continuously exploiting such differences for their own benefit. The only instances of a cohesive Sri Lankan identity, as elicited through the discursive practices of the interviewees were the kind of identity one would see in an imagined community and during cricket matches. One of the experts interviewed also claimed that the creation of a common Sri Lankan identity would be different, for youth are increasingly becoming globalised, leading to the creation of a hybrid identity which is not completely nationalist in its essence. This further highlights the importance Sri Lanka places on ethno-religious identities in creating a sense of belonging to the country.

The findings also revealed that the efforts at post-war reconciliation, even 12 years after the war has ended, had not achieved much. The interviewees claimed that the state appropriated the space left for reconciliation in reinforcing their agenda of prioritising a triumphalist narrative within the public discourse. Once the three-decade long civil war which was set around the presence of a 'common enemy' ended, the void left behind by the 'common enemy' was instrumentalsied by the state, in order to narrativize the Muslim community and portray them as a threat to national security (EI–2, 2021; KPI–1, 2021; KPI–2, 2021; KPI–3, 2021; KPI–9, 2021). The interviewees claimed that the void left behind by the state within the reconciliation process is filled by civil society organisations. The continued negligence of the need to make a conducive space for reconciliation, according to the interviewees, was evidenced in the presence of the mural wave and the increasing presence of the state on multiple media of expression. The mural wave was an instance of merging of media (murals, arts, and social media) which further helped the dissemination of the state's agenda setting by several actors. The mainstream media giving publicity to the mural wave, both through their conventional means and on social media, extended the state's presence and its processes of agenda setting. Such processes were further reinforced by the public (youth) as they merged the medium of art with social media and initiated a conversation around murals online. The majoritarian, triumphalist narrative embodied by the state and espoused through the mural wave was reinforced by the media and public through the merging of media.

Conversations with the youth and experts further revealed that youth priorities do not align with larger processes such as reconciliation, for they are occupied with concerns such as economic development, employment, and nation building. Some youth experts commented on the mural wave saying that it may not be the best measure by which to study the creation and expression of youth identities in overall Sri Lanka. The heavy politicisation of the mural wave, censorship imposed by local authorities, and self-censorship imposed by the artists themselves may have clouded the expression of the youth and their identities through the mural wave. What could have been a retaliation against the majoritarian, triumphalist narrative endorsed by the state and its governing institutions, was watered down by censorship. As mentioned in the analysis, this brings to light the unequal spread of state patronage within the mural wave, and the effects of politicisation of public movements. It also highlights that increasing politicisation of public spaces and platforms limit the space available for critical discourse and freedom of expression.

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9. Appendices

Appendix A

Table consisting figures and status of interviews conducted

Type of Interview	Language	No. of Interviewees	Total No. of Interviewees	Transcribed/Notes
Key Person Interview (KPI)	Tamil	02	10	Transcribed
	Sinhala	01		
	English	07		
In-Depth Interview	Tamil	01	04	Transcribed
	Sinhala	03		
	English	–		
Expert Interview	Tamil	02	09	Notes
	Sinhala	02		
	English	05		
			24	

in total 24 individuals were interviewed

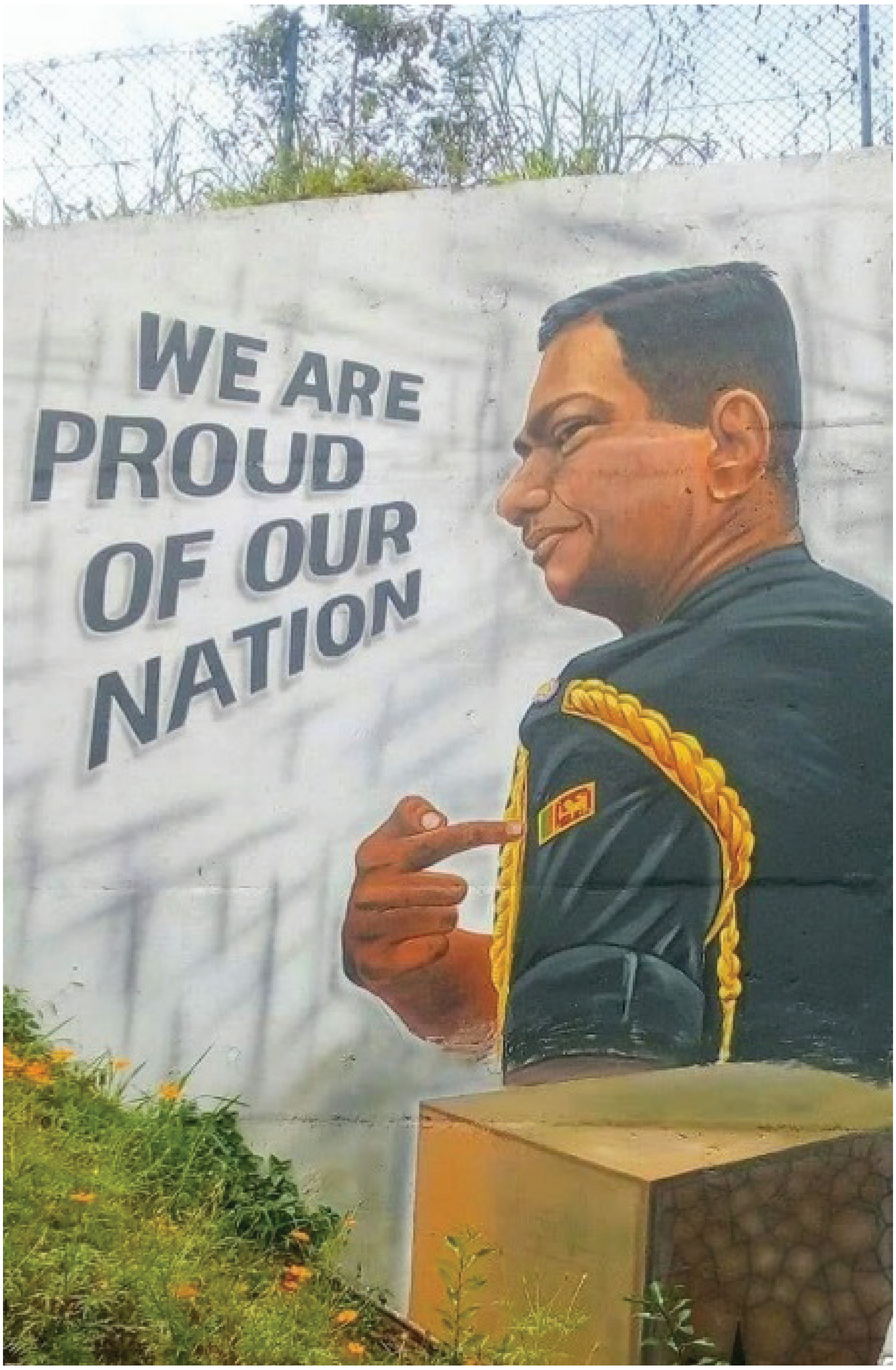
Appendix B

A breakdown of the interviews cited

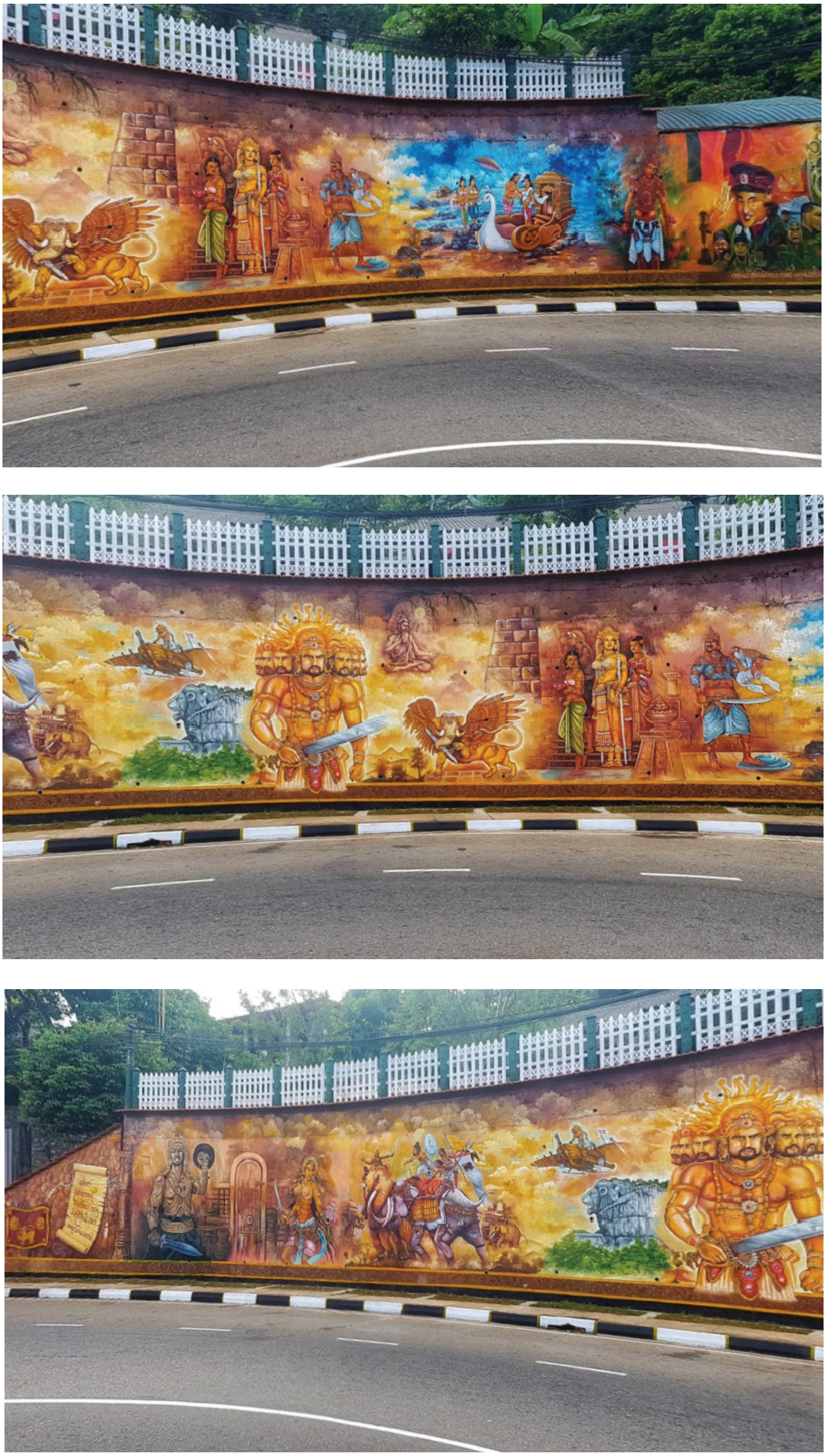
Type of Interview	Date of Interview	In-Text Citation of Interview
EI	06.08.2021	(EI–1, 2021)
KPI	09.08.2021	(KPI–1, 2021)
EI	10.08.2021	(EI–2, 2021)
EI	13.08.2021	(EI–3, 2021)
KPI	18.08.2021	(KPI–2, 2021)
KPI	19.08.2021	(KPI–3, 2021)
In-depth	19.08.2021	(In-depth–1, 2021)
KPI	23.08.2021	(KPI–4, 2021)
EI	23.08.2021	(EI–4, 2021)
KPI	24.08.2021	(KPI–5, 2021)
In-depth	25.08.2021	(In-depth –2,2021)
EI	25.08.2021	(EI–5, 2021)
EI	26.08.2021	(EI–6, 2021)
KPI	28.08.2021	(KPI–6, 2021)
KPI	28.08.2021	(KPI–7, 2021)
EI	30.08.2021	(EI–7, 2021)
KPI	30.08.2021	(KPI–8, 2021)
EI	01.09.2021	(EI–8, 2021)
KPI	01.09.2021	(KPI–9, 2021)
KPI	03.09.2021	(KPI–10,2021)
EI	15.09.021	(EI–9,2021)

EI – Expert Interview / KPI – Key Person Interview / In-depth - In-depth Interview)

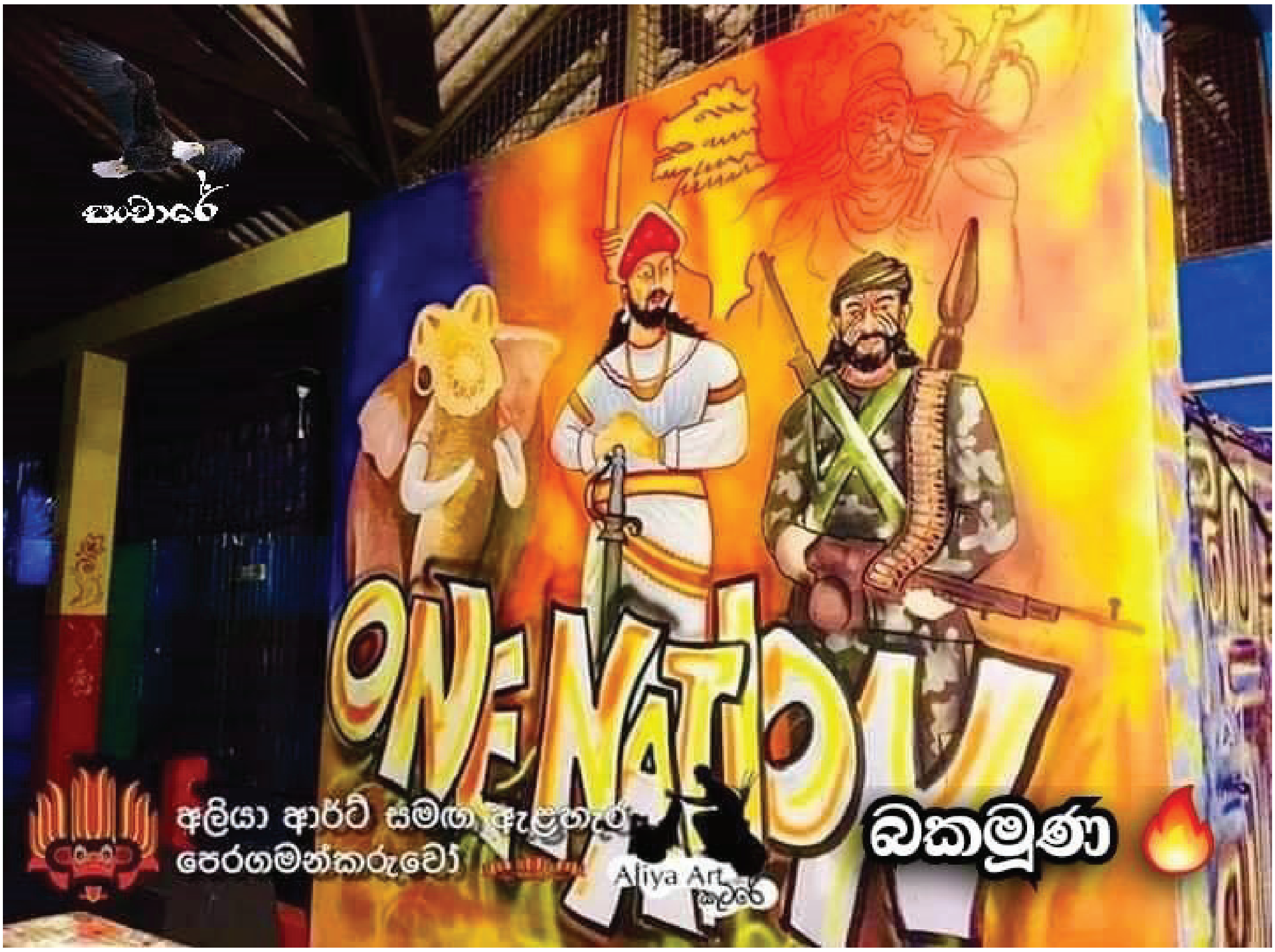
Appendix C


WE ARE
PROUD
OF OUR
NATION

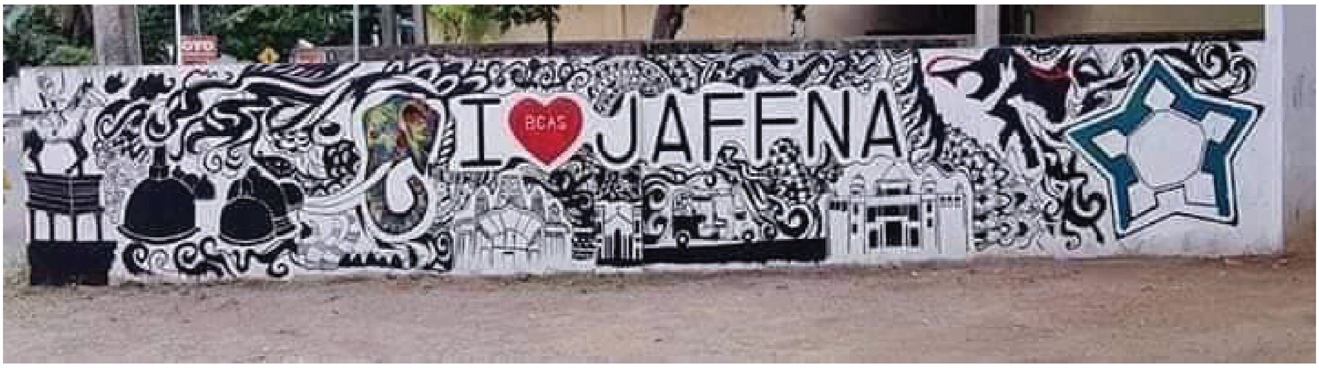
1.Taprobane World (28 January 2020) – Malapalla



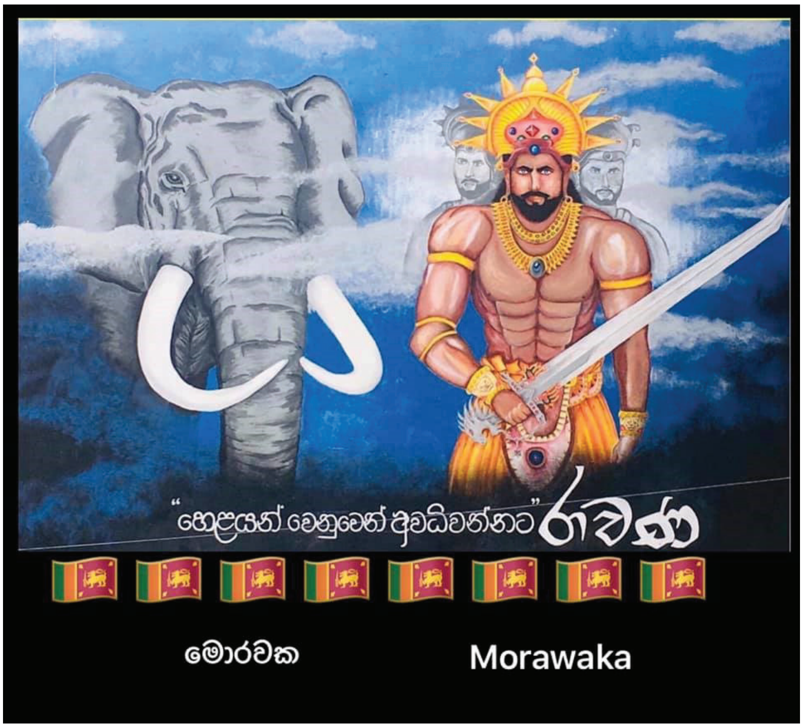
2. Dumith Danushka (12 January 2020) - Dehiowita


සංචාරේ
ONE NATION
අලියා ආර්ට් සමඟ ඇළුහැල්
පෙරගමන්කරුවෝ
Aliya Art
බකමූණා

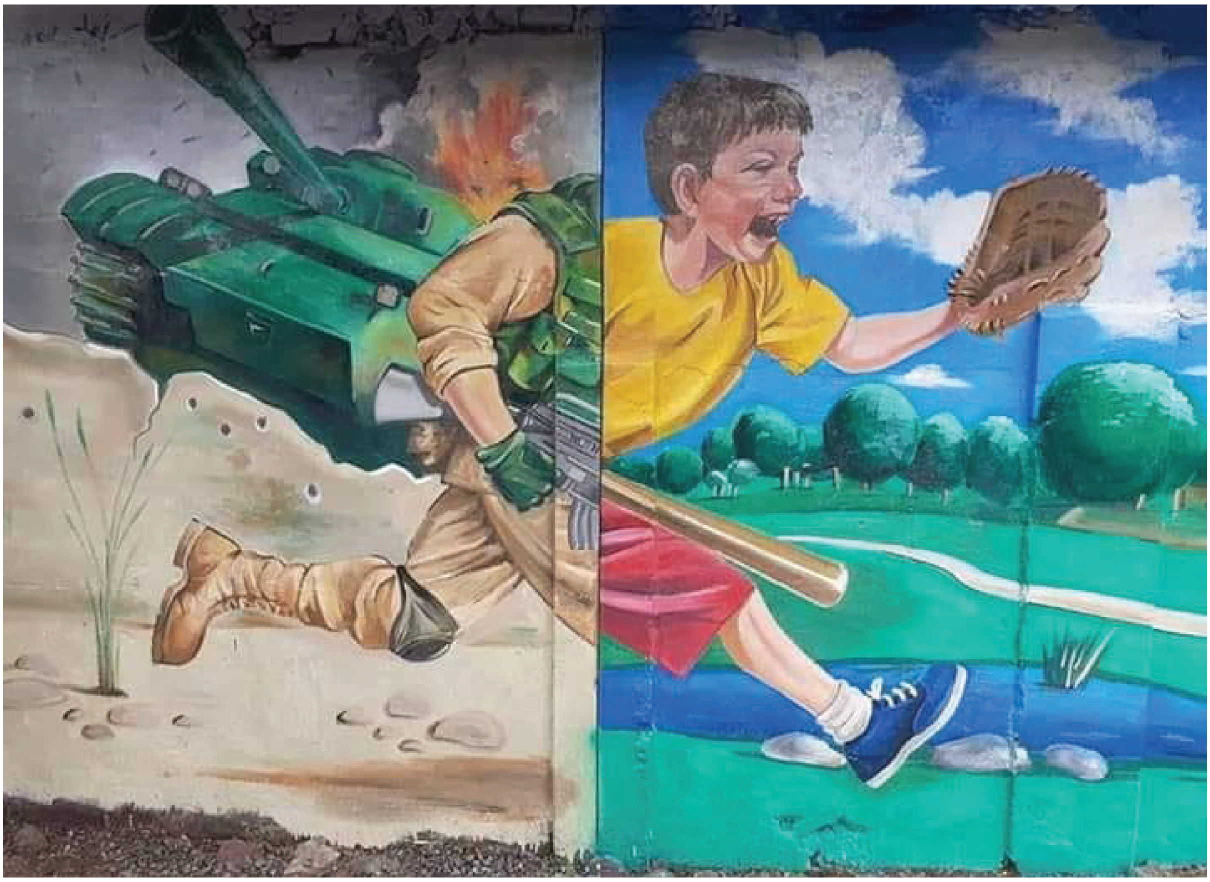
3. Sanchare (11 December 2019)


I ♥ JAFFNA
BCAS

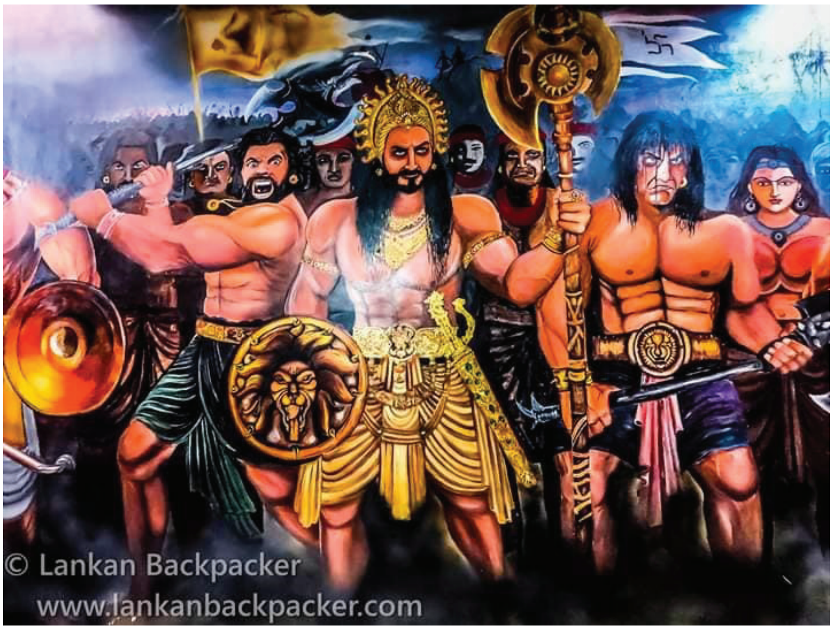
4.Wall Art Sri Lanka (15 December 2019) - Jaffna


“හෙළයන් වෙනුවෙන් අවධිවන්නට” රාවණා
මොරවක
Morawaka

5.Riggae Lions (13 December 2019) - Morawaka



6.Wall Art Sri Lanka (10 December 2019) - Kantale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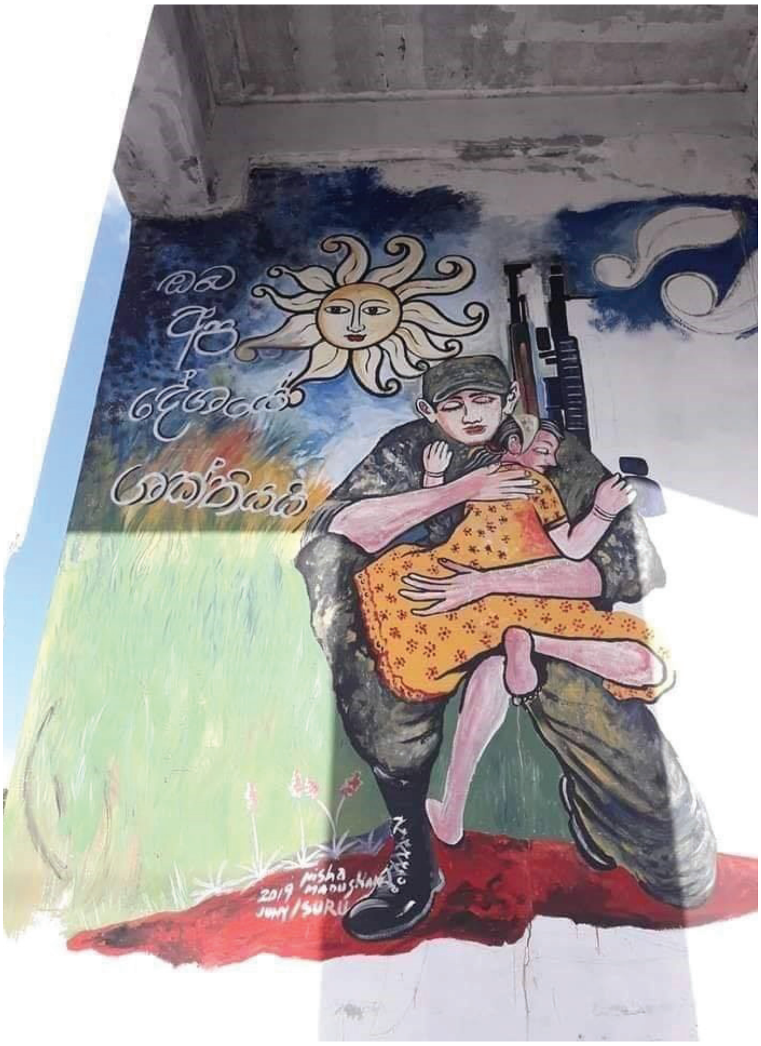
7.Wall Art Sri Lanka (9 December 2019) - Badulla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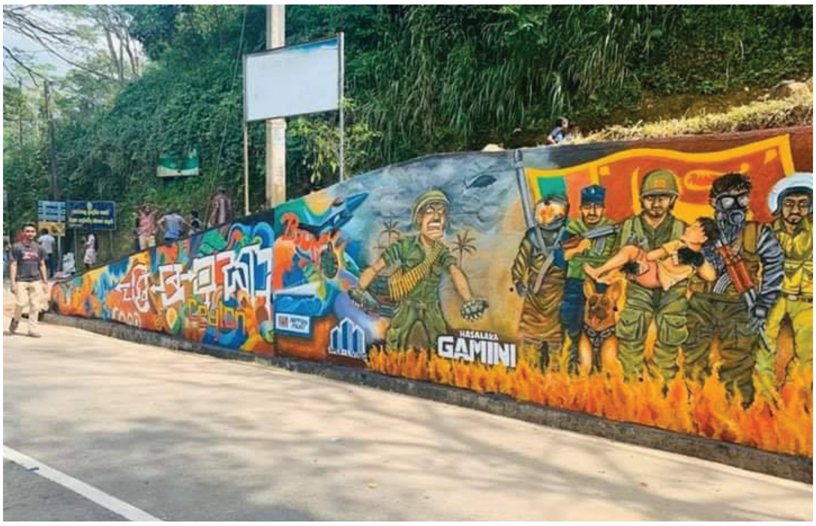
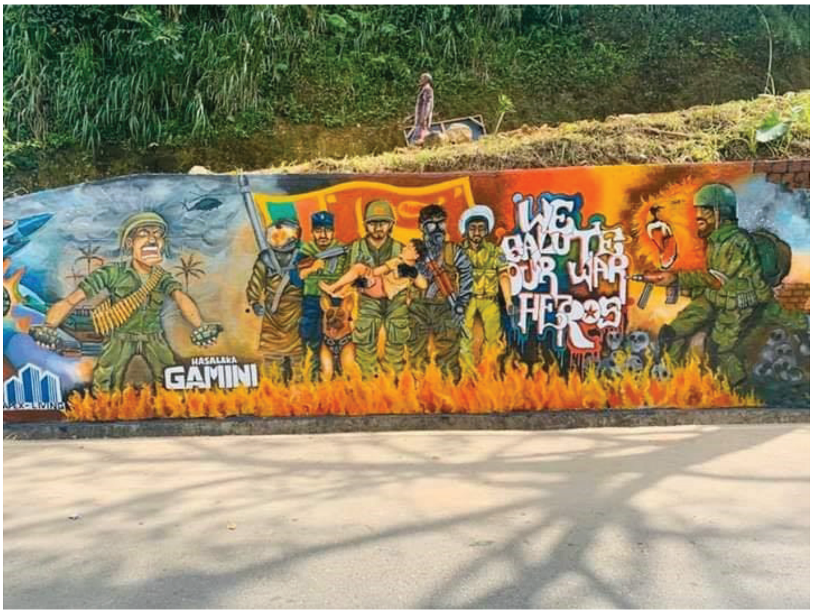
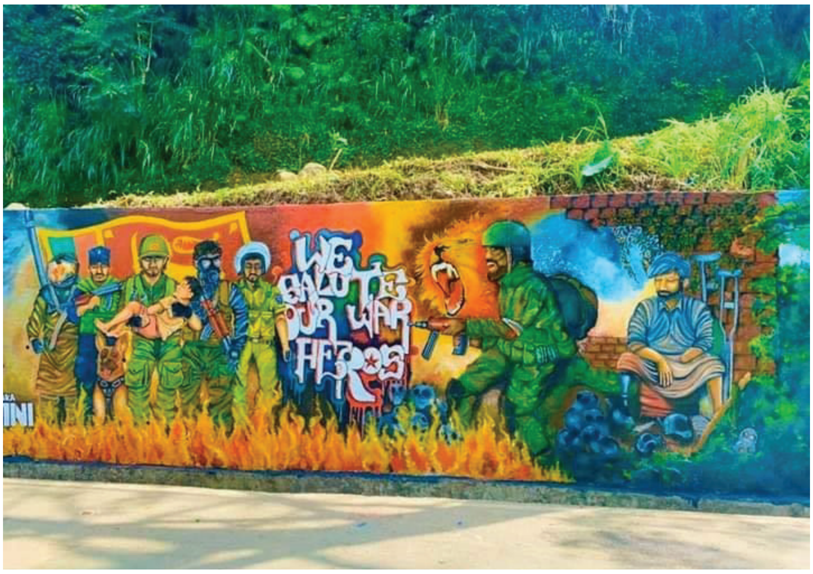
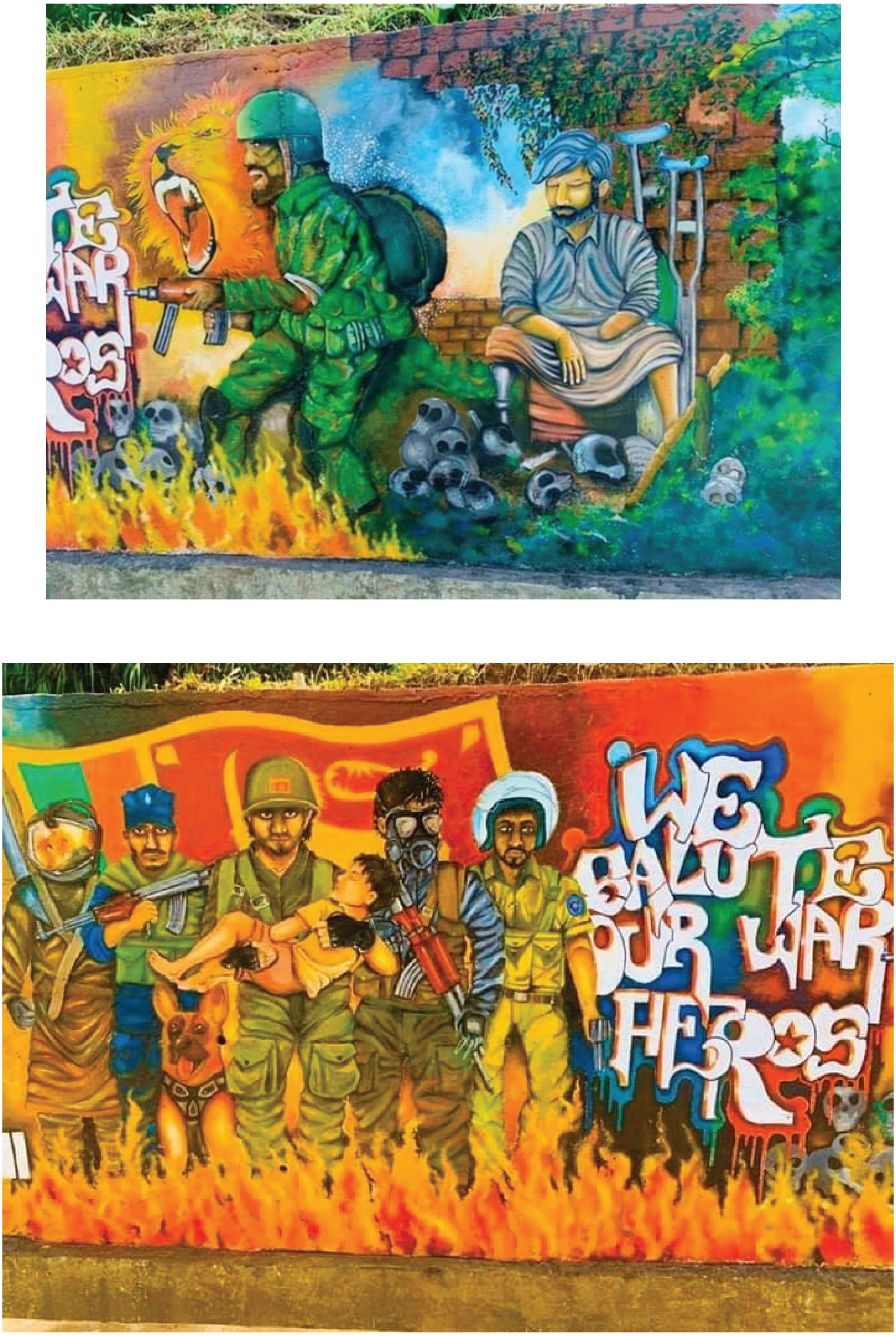
ශක්තියයි
2019 Nisha Madushan
Jony/Suru

8.Apey Gama Matara (28 November 2019) - Kalu Palama, Galle


HASALAKA
GAMINI


HASALAKA
GAMINI
WE SALUTE OUR WAR HEROS


WE SALUTE OUR WAR HEROS

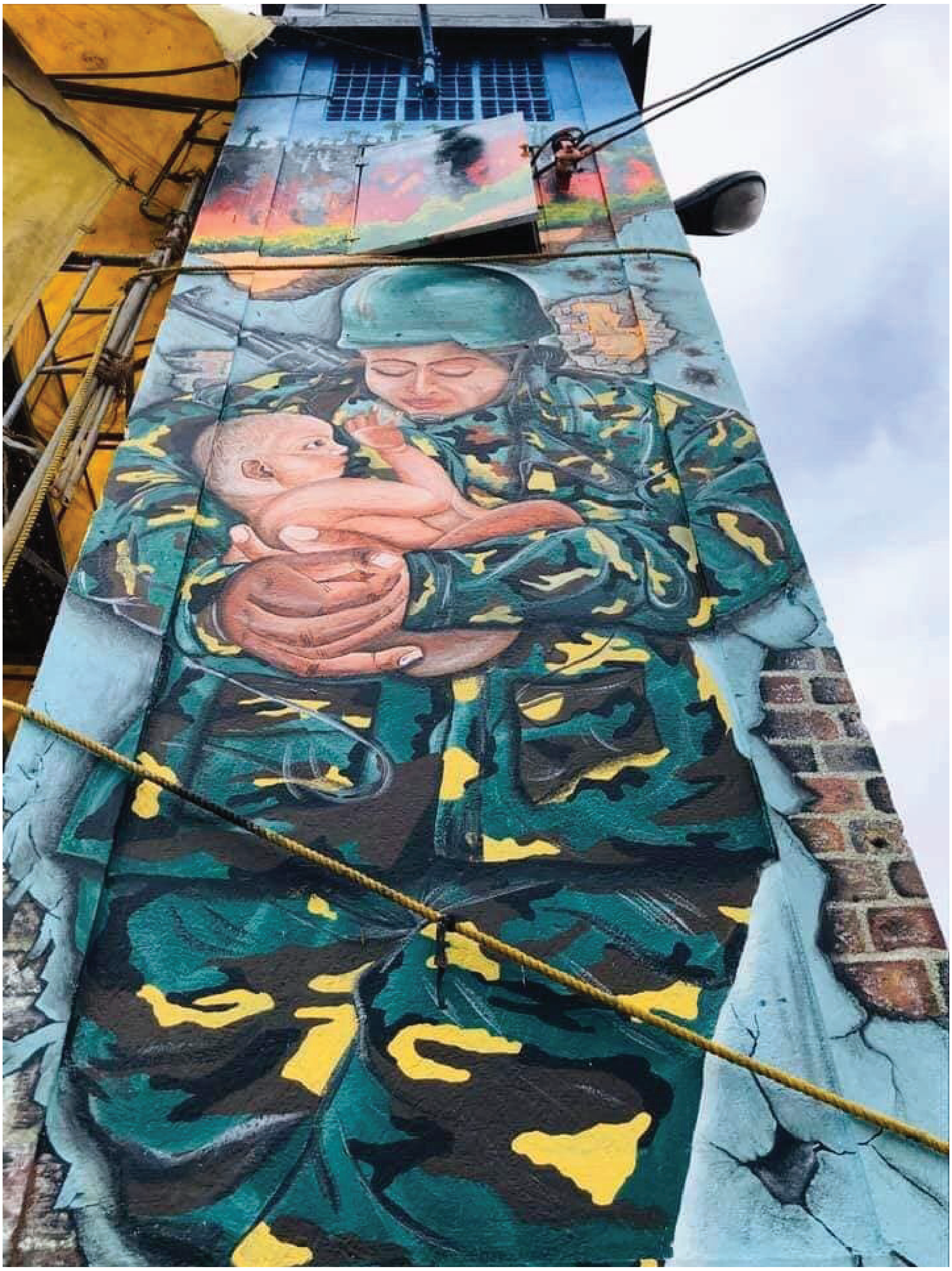

WE SALUTE OUR WAR HEROS

9.Apey Gama Matara (8 December 2019) – Deniyaya

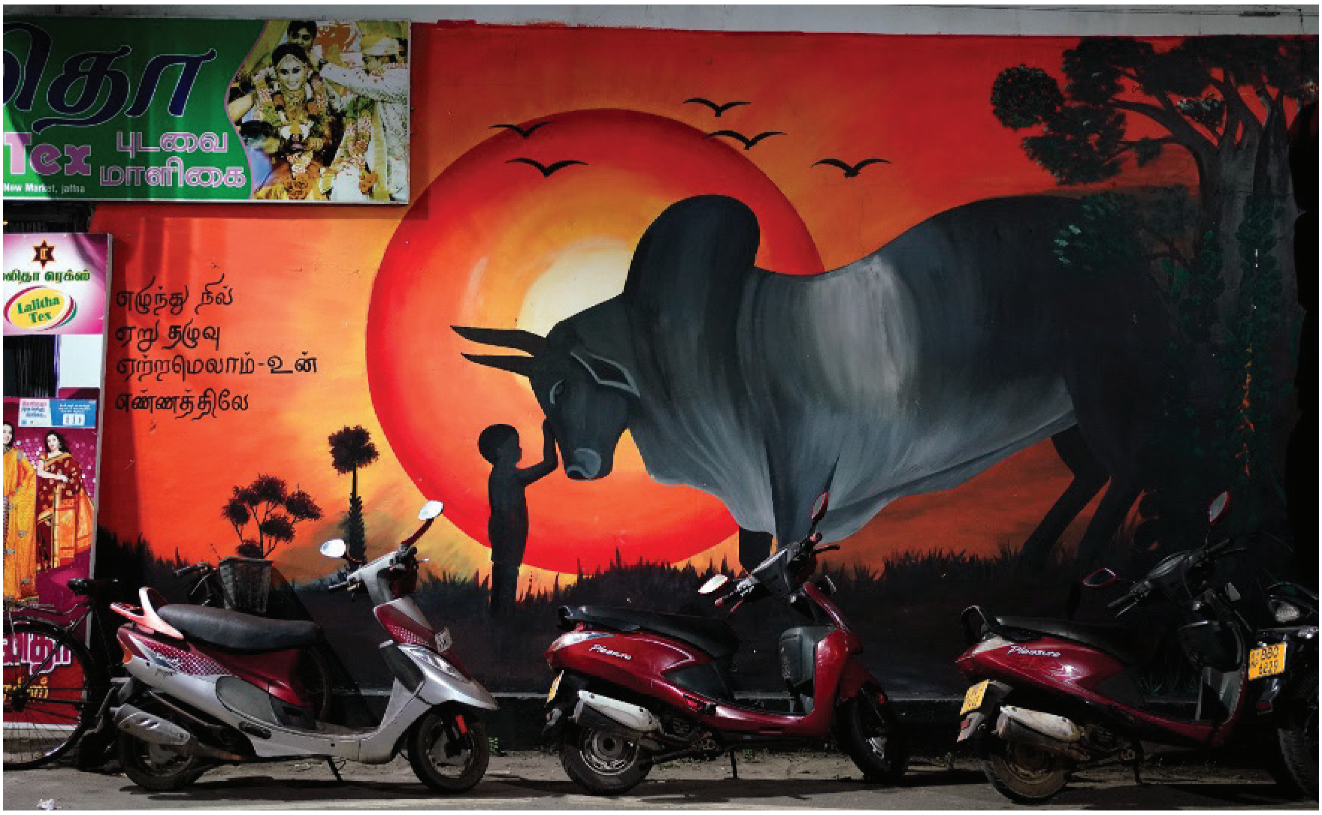
Boom
HASALAKA
GAMINI
NIPPON PAINT
APEX-LIVING

Boom
Ceylon
NIPPON PAINT
APEX-LIVING

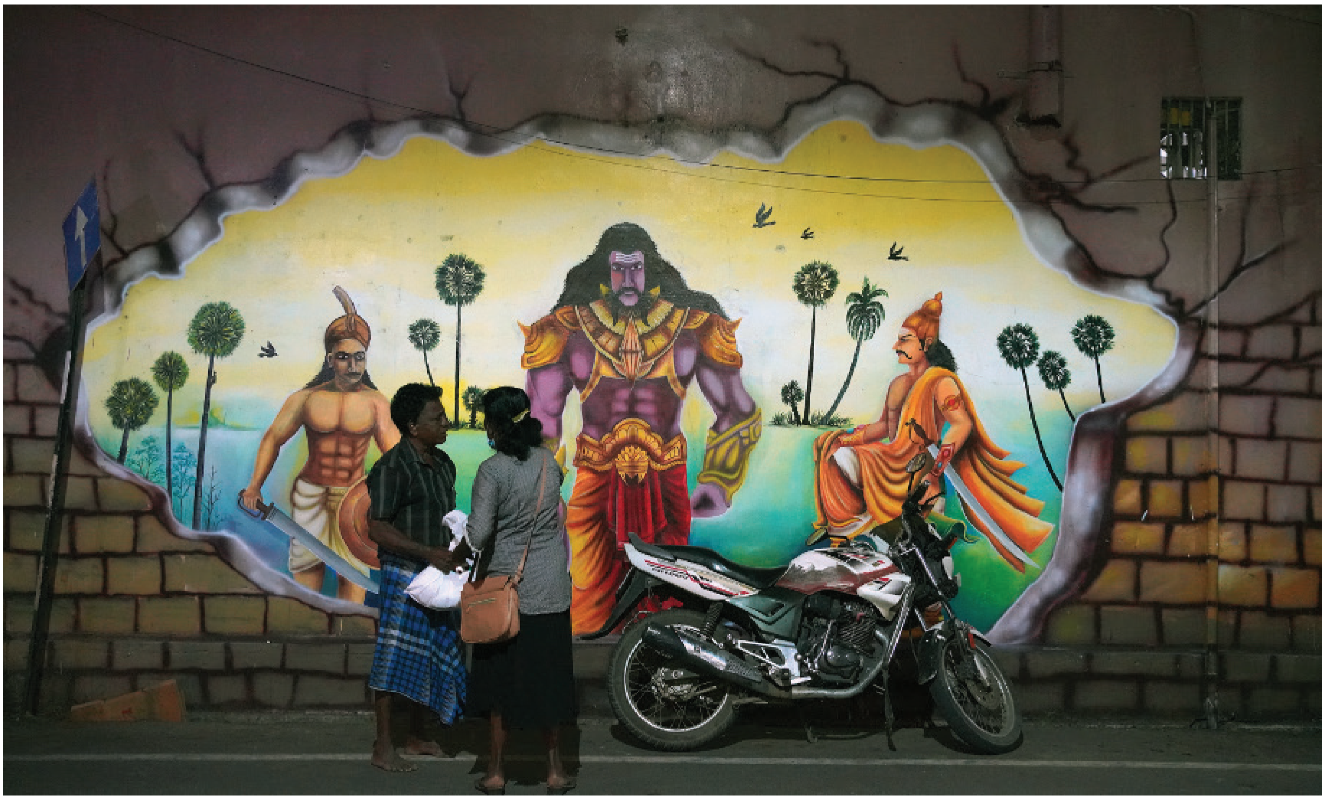
WE SALUTE OUR WAR HEROES



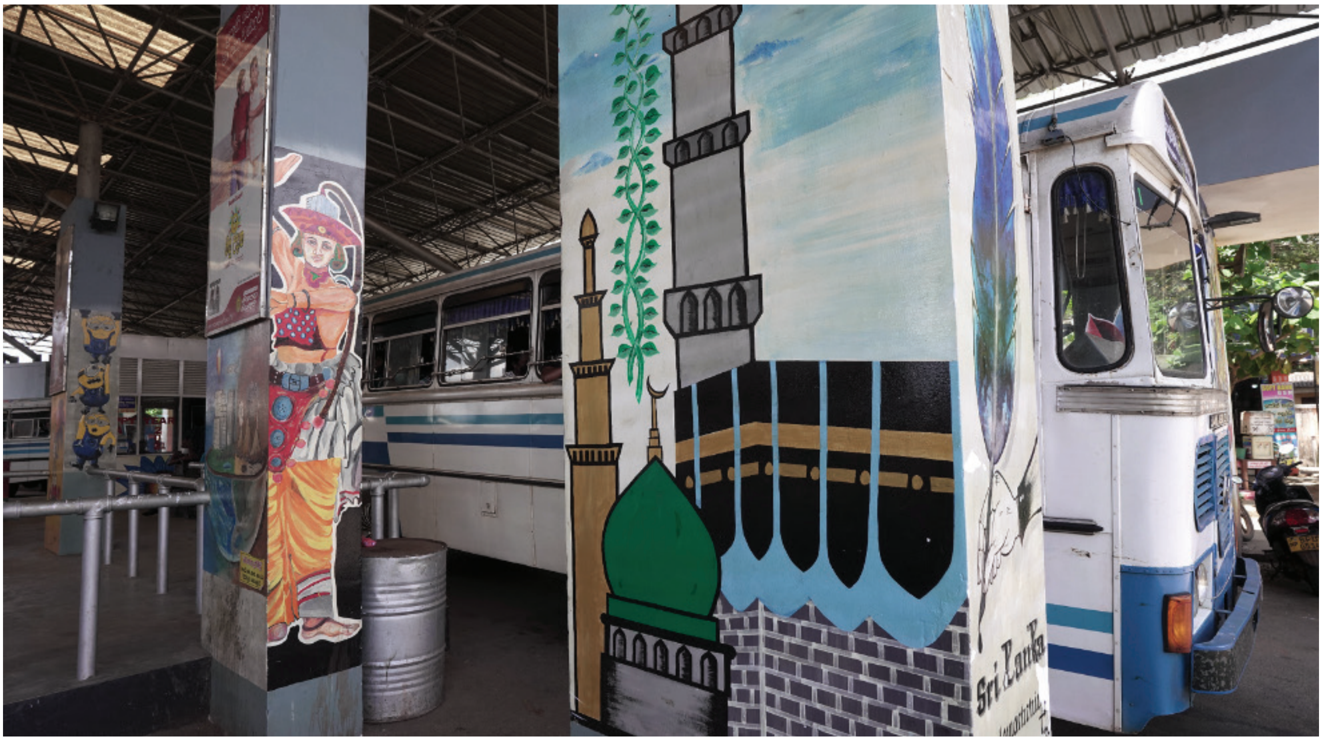
10. Senali De Silva (1 December 2019) - Veeraketiya


Tex புடவை மாளிகை
New Market, jaffna
Lalitha Tex
எழுந்து நில்
ஏறு தழுவு
ஏற்றமெலாம்-உன்
எண்ணத்திலே

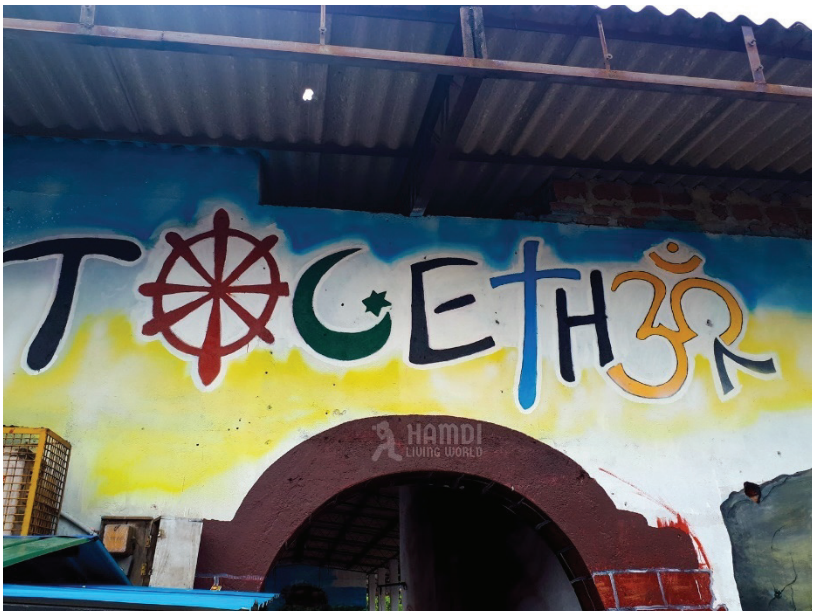
11. Jaffna town



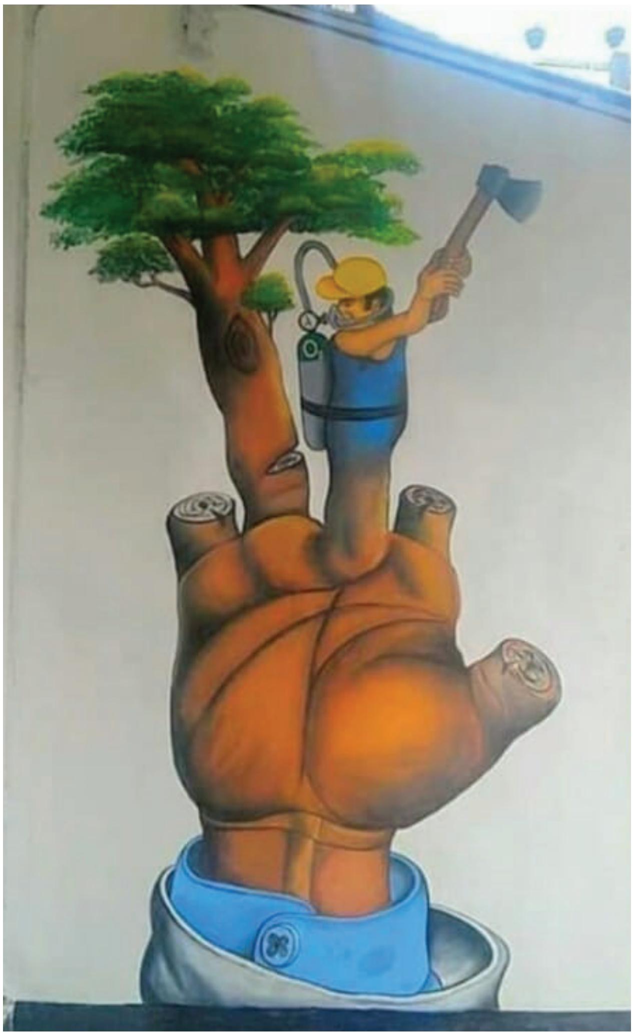
12. Jaffna – King Ravanan



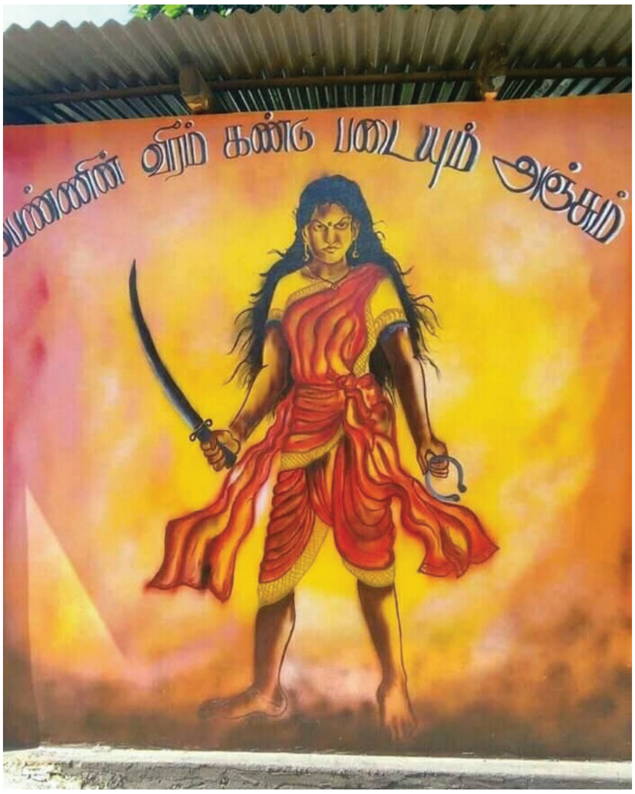
Madawachchi Bus Stand



(Kekirawa Bus Station)



(Kalmunai - Shared by Kalmunai Youth Club)


ண்ணின் வீரம் கண்டு படையும் அஞ்சும்

Mural from:-Konddavil (Jaffna)

நேரத்தை வீணாக்கும் போது
கடிகாரத்தைப் பார்! ஓடுவது
முள் அல்ல, உன் வாழ்க்கை.
பொய் சொல்லித் தப்பிக்க
நினைக்காதே. உண்மையைச்
சொல்லி மாட்டிக்கொள்.
ஏனென்றால் பொய் வாழவிடாது
உண்மை சாகவிடாது
- சுவாமி-விவேகானந்தர் -
அனுசரணை:
திரு.புண்ணியமூர்த்தி
-ரவி

The Sri Lanka Barometer "Our Voices, Our Choices" comes at a critical time in the country's journey to national reconciliation and aims to fill an important gap in understanding people's experiences in the post-war period, their perceptions about progress made to date, and their expectations about the work that remains. It comprises four key components: (1) an annual, island-wide public opinion survey, (2) thematic studies using largely qualitative methodologies, (3) discussion papers and concept notes, and (4) an outreach component.

The Barometer is an initiative of the Strengthening Reconciliation Processes (SRP) programme funded by the European Union and the German Federal Foreign Office; and implemented by the German Technical Cooperation (GIZ) and the British Council in Sri Lanka, in partnership with the Ministry of Justice.

It is implemented through a Consortium that seeks to generate evidence on citizens' understanding and expectations about reconciliation and social cohesion to inform public discourse. Together with SRP, the Consortium currently includes the Centre for Poverty Analysis (CEPA) in Sri Lanka and the South African Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR). Discussions are underway to include the Open University of Sri Lanka (OUSL) in the next phase of the Barometer in 2022.

For more information please see www.thebarometer.lk

THEMATIC STUDY
2 – 2021

SRI LANKA BAROMETER
OUR VOICES . OUR CHOICES
අපේ හඬ . අපේ තීරණ
எங்கள் குரல்கள் . எங்கள் தேர்வுகள்

SRP
STRENGTHENING RECONCILIATION PROCESSES IN SRI LANKA

Co-funded by the European Union

german cooperation
DEUTSCHE ZUSAMMENARBEIT

Implemented by
giz Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH

BRITISH COUNCIL

cepa
centre for poverty analysis

IJR
THE INSTITUTE FOR JUSTICE AND RECONCILIATION