

## No Peace in Rest

### [thuyilum illams northern province]

The Sri Lankan State's erasure of the complex history and experiences of the war manifest in varying ways across the country; [military monuments that showcase a single victory narrative](#), the [construction of Buddhist statues in Tamil-majority areas](#) and the [blatantly incorrect signboards at several of these locations](#). Then, there is the desecration of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam's (LTTE) '*maaveerar thuyilum illam*', which loosely translates to 'great heroes' resting places'.

Here lie bodies of LTTE cadres killed in combat. In the several cases where bodies could not be recovered, memorial headstones are erected. The people who remember them in their original state are quick to say that they were graveyards as much as they were gardens, or even temples, meticulously designed and maintained by the LTTE and their families. Now, some of them are cement fragments piled in the centre of a vast field, while others now form the foundation of a few of the many army camps that cover the peninsula.

On November 27, the *thuyilum illams* across the Northern and Eastern provinces would become the sites of community mourning and celebration of '*Maaveerar Naal*', the LTTE's 'Great Heroes Day' celebration. Held on the anniversary of the death of Shankar, considered to be the first '*maaveerar*', a symbolic lamp is lit and the LTTE flag raised at 6.05pm, allegedly his precise time of death. It was the day Velupillai Prabhakaran, leader of the LTTE, would make his annual speech. These observances are said to provide the community with the feeling that by sacrificing their lives, the dead cadres would [grasp eternity](#).

Commemorations are no longer carried out at the scale they were during the conflict, however they remain problematic due to the explicit promotion of the flag and symbols of a proscribed organisation. There are also questions around the heroic remembrance of those who, by giving their lives to their cause, orchestrated the death of civilians. This is so in the case of the Black Tigers, who dedicated themselves to specialised suicide missions at specific targets, many of which were civilian spaces. Survivors and families of victims of the LTTE's atrocities, including Tamils, question why the cadres should be remembered and celebrated as heroes in public collectively, in events that often have a political dimension. However, those interviewed in this piece say the former cadres' families only want the right to remember and grieve.

### Conflating Remembrance Day With Maaveerar Naal

[Efforts in 2017 to remember those who perished in Mullivaikkal in May 2009 were restricted](#), because the police thought that those being mourned were LTTE cadres. The two are distinctly separate; Mullivaikkal commemorations in May are regarded as remembrance of all those who perished in the war, but a larger focus is on civilians. Similarly, journalists have written that it is '[a grave blunder to assume that the '\*Maaveerar Naal\*' of the LTTE is a day of national mourning for the Tamils of Sri Lanka.](#)'

Though many in the North and East had family members who joined the LTTE and many Tamils are sympathetic towards the LTTE even today, not all Tamils have connections to the

LTTE. There are those who have suffered under the LTTE; surviving assassination attempts, forcibly recruited, recruited as children, shot at when attempting to flee LTTE-controlled areas in May 2009, and more. These survivors, as well as families of Tamils who fell victim to LTTE's violence, do not regard the LTTE as their representatives or as heroes.

There is also controversy as to why the JVP, who also took up arms against the state, and engaged in abuses against civilians, are [allowed to mourn their dead publicly in heroes remembrances](#) (*viru samaruma*) when the *thuyilum illams* have been destroyed by successive governments. It is interesting too to note that the JVP and the LTTE were described differently during the JVP insurgencies – [the English and Sinhala media often referring](#) to the former as 'subversives' and the latter as terrorists.

## The destruction

The army would destroy the *thuyilum illams* in its path as it gained ground during the war, reducing the headstones and graves to rubble and in a few instances, we were told had even dug bodies out of the ground.

The State's efforts to clamp down on post-war memorialisation meant that families of the fallen cadres had no opportunity to mark *Maaveerar Naal*. But there were also restorations and reconstructions as the LTTE gained access to and varying degrees of control of areas the Army had earlier captured. For example, in Kopay, in the Jaffna district the *thuyilum illam* was destroyed once the Army gained control of the area in 1995. But after the ceasefire of 2002, the LTTE regained access, rebuilt and memorials began again. They even had placed a plaque at the entrance, with remnants of the destruction. As the ceasefire collapsed, the Army again destroyed it and built a camp over it, which still stands. Around 2012, some Tamils in the North and East defied government's crackdowns and organized remembrance events, but these were not held in *thuyilum illam* sites. In 2012, when *Maaveerar Naal* fell on the same day as *Karthiaai Vilakeeduu*, the Hindu festival of lights, residents lighting lamps at the University of Jaffna [came under attack from the security forces](#).

From 2016, families and communities, supported by some Tamil politicians, clergy and diaspora, started to [publicly but mutedly mark Maaveerar Naal](#). Some did this by arranging remaining fragments of headstones, clearing the overgrown fields, and restoring some order to what had been destroyed. Surveillance and the presence of intelligence personnel was recorded in many locations, and some thereby resorted to a single lamp lit near where the resting place used to be.

## The Right to Remember and Mourn

The right of all communities, and families, to remember their dead who were lost in combat is laid out in [international humanitarian law](#). Government-appointed bodies such as the LLRC and the Office on Missing Persons have also made recommendations on remembrance and memorialisation in general while the [Consultation Task Force on Reconciliation mechanisms \(CTF\)](#) has explicit reference to remembrance of dead LTTE cadres. One submission, quoted in the report, said '20 LTTE graveyards from across the North and East of Sri Lanka, comprising thousands of graves and commemorative plaques for LTTE fighters were bulldozed after the war' and acknowledged that "the destruction of LTTE cemeteries, the grief it had caused and the need to preserve the sanctity of the dead' was raised frequently

during its hearings. The CTF then [recommended](#) the restoration of burial plots to family members and the removal of all buildings subsequently erected on them. The CTF also made a general recommendation noting that the ‘sanctity of all sites, where those who perished or disappeared in armed conflicts are buried, interred or symbolically remembered is respected.’

A [possible reason](#) for the destruction of the *thuyilum illams* could be that the military who carried out these acts were motivated by a wish to [‘deny the defeated LTTE any focal points for resurgence’](#). These actions, however, only serve to deepen divide between the ‘conquering’ and the ‘conquered’, hindering possibilities of understanding and reconciliation between groups.

As Sri Lanka nears ten years since the end of the conflict, many of the initiatives intended to address wartime abuses and post-war issues are yet to come to fruition. The families of the disappeared [still wait for answers](#), and some have been engaged in protests for around 600 days at the time of writing. Land release is slow, and militarisation in the North and East remains an ever-present issue. These issues are compounded by the denial of their right to mourn their loved ones. The desecration of the *thuyilum illam*, in this light, acts not as a deterrent but as a [‘focal point for enhanced embitterment towards the government’](#).

## The sites

The contents of this article are based on visits to 14 sites of *thuyilum illams* in the Northern Province in May 2018. This is by no means an exhaustive list, as there are many more such sites in the Northern and Eastern provinces.

## Vavuniya District

### Echchankulam

‘The Army themselves used to protect the small cemetery we had here, from the time we started it in 1988.’ The man at the small grocery store explains how the soldiers would call all the villagers to participate in the *shramadhana* (voluntary labour), and keep cows away from the graves. This part of Vavuniya, he says, had been under Army control for as long as he could remember. After it came more decisively in their possession in 1999, the *thuyilum illam* was closed off from the people.

During the ceasefire, the LTTE renovated the *thuyilum illam* and commemorations started again.

The land itself had belonged to several villagers, before it came to be used as the *thuyilum illam*. The Army says that if the people were once able to give their land to the LTTE, it would only be released to them when the army left the area.

He says that the *thuyilum illam* was for the bodies of all the fighters who died in Vavuniya district.

‘My brother too.’

‘Every family living down this road has given at least one child to the movement, some gave two. But we don’t have their photos, or even photos of ourselves – we burned everything, for fear of what the Army might do if they found them.’

Senior officers now running the camp may not know it was a cemetery. One Army officer had told a villager that they will leave if the President orders them to.

This was said to be the only *thuyilum illam* for the Vavuniya district. Burials started at this location between 1988 and 1992, when the LTTE took the land from a private owner. An estimated 2000 bodies may be buried there.

## **Mannar District**

### **Periyapandivirichchan**

During her time serving on the parish in Madhu, the elderly nun remembers visiting the *thuyilum illam* every year in November, along with thousands displaced. Fighters who died from as far away as Jaffna were buried here, as their relatives had been displaced to the IDP camps.

There were two kinds of burials, explains a man who stopped over on a bicycle. One, a headstone with a marble plaque for those whose bodies could not make it back. Another with a heavy stone coffin for the body, and the headstone.

An estimated 450 bodies were buried here, dating back to 1990, residents estimate, along with 280 more headstones.

The army had, at that time the villagers returned, blocked off the area for use as a cricket ground.

‘We know this place well, we know where people are buried, even though the headstones are no more. They might have levelled the structures, but remnants still lie below the surface. How do we feel then, to see soldiers playing games over the body of a deceased loved one?’

### **Andankulam**

The cavity of what must have been a large pond is now overgrown with reeds.

The priest explains that the people in the village were displaced in 2006, and made their way to Mullivaikkal. On their return in late 2009, the cemetery was destroyed. ‘Even if we have any records of who we lost, it is destroyed, as we were too afraid of carrying it with us.’

‘Every family has lost someone to the cause, and especially our boys who were taken by force,’ says a white-haired gentleman. He recalls the *Maaverar Naal* celebrations, how the whole community would gather to celebrate their lost loved ones, and how families who had not lost someone would also join in solidarity.

Where possible, fighters were buried in a *thuyilum illam* close to their hometowns, but those from as far as Jaffna were buried in Andankulam. ‘Their families still make the journey here yearly, to celebrate them’, the priest says.

In 2016, commemorations were held on a small scale. But in 2017, a large crowd was present, and some were worried that this might invite trouble. ‘We still want to celebrate this day together’, says a father who simply wants to mourn his dead child. Another local person also said they prefer to hold commemorations as a community, not through a political event.

The men estimate that about 2000 LTTE cadres are buried here.

## **Jaffna District**

### **Chatty**

‘Parents of the dead came in large numbers; it’s pathetic that they don’t have the remnants of their children to mourn over’.

On their final return after the end of the war, the *thuyilum illam* had been destroyed. The sandy field is marked only with the broken remnants of the cemetery’s central pavilion. Opposite this, the visiting crowds enjoy the blue waters of the Chatty Beach.

It is estimated to have been started in 1990 and destroyed after the Army captured Jaffna in late 1995, renovated during the ceasefire, only to be destroyed again after the end of the war in 2009.

### **Kodikamam**

‘That’s the *thuyilum illam*’, says the man sweeping his garden with an ekel broom. He points at the army camp a few feet up the road.

The land is owned by several individuals, one who returned from overseas and demanded his land back. He was offered money from the Army as compensation, but they refused to leave the land.

He adds later that his own brother was buried at the *thuyilum illam* in Mulliyawalai. ‘We were living in Muhamalai at the time, but there was no way for them to bring the body across’. When he died in 1996, restricted movement meant his brother could not be buried close to their home.

This cemetery had been started around 1995 and 1,500 are estimated to be buried there.

### **Ellankulam**

‘My relatives are buried here too’, says the man sitting under a shady mango tree, ‘I remember visiting every year to remember’. Located a stone’s throw away from the house of Prabhakaran, which was [destroyed in 2010](#), is the *thuyilum illam* in Valvettithurai. The man says it was started in 1990, and in the five years that it was in operation, he estimates around

1,000 bodies were buried there. The bulldozers came in 1995, and the cemetery was destroyed for the first time.

In 2017, the army allowed one lamp to be lit in front of the camp by way of commemoration. This too, was only for politicians, and the people stayed away from the ceremony, fearing ominous implications from the security forces.

The land the new camp stands on belongs to about 7 people, and some of it is being cultivated as a garden. These owners, however, are afraid to come forward and claim their ownership, despite living in the village close by. A paddy field that used to feed and gain income for some families in the village was dug up for sand to build the new camp. It is now a lake, and only for the Army's purposes.

He notes that he has taken several suggestions for rebuilding to the community leaders, but they are yet to take any steps. The community remains willing to maintain the place, but those in power do not seem to have any interest. 'They are our people and we of course we want to visit them, mourn them on that day' he says.

## **Kopay**

'My mother never gave me permission to attend *Maaveerar Naal* ceremonies', says the young activist. He went anyway, with his other teenage friends, eagerly peddling their bikes to the Kopay *thuyilum illam*.

Begun in 1987, the Kopay *thuyilum illam* is widely regarded as the first of all the LTTE's cemeteries. After the ceasefire of 2002, the LTTE regained access, rebuilt and memorials started again. They even had placed a plaque at the entrance, with remnants of the destruction. The army camp that now stands on it was constructed in 1995, when the peninsula fell to army control.

'It was destroyed, definitely, but people are too scared to go and see what it looks like now', he says. In 2017, the people were allowed to light a lamp on the main road, still a fair distance from the camp.

There is an access road, along the camp's very boundary to the interior village of Kondavil. Farmers tend to their crops, abundant in the rich red earth, while army sentinel watch from through the barbed wire fence that runs the camp's perimeter.

## **Kilinochchi District**

### **Kanagapuram**

The wide field has 5 large trees at its centre.

'This land belonged to us' says the elderly gentleman. 'The LTTE leaders had been asking for land for a *thuyilum illam* as far as Visuvamadu, but we were the ones who offered this place.'

He says that the cement embargo in place in the Northern Province during the war meant that graves had to be made using alternate materials. Limestone and coral would be a common replacement, and cadres would obtain pieces of these materials from Dutch Forts that were accessible at the time, be they in the Jaffna peninsula or in the Eastern Province.

The LTTE claimed this whole area, but only used about 2 acres for the burials. The rest has fallen into complete disuse, the man laments as he motions toward the overgrown shrub.

It was only in 2017, that the people were first able to have a small commemoration ceremony in November; they did so by lighting a lamp and rearranging some of the rubble.

‘The *Maaveerar* died for their community and the vision of the homeland they believed in. Now, people are just using their deaths to take money from others’, he says. He is referring to various individuals and groups who reach out to the diaspora and international community to obtain money claiming to maintain these sites – only the community living there know that nothing of this nature has been done.

The man also critiqued the LTTE’s treatment of the bodies of the Sri Lankan military; ‘Our cadres used to leave the dead bodies of the Army at the side of the road, or burn them at Depot Junction as a ‘lesson’, while they devoted so much energy to burying their own. The Army men deserve a respectful burial as well, don’t they?’

This *thuyillam illam* was started in 1991 and about 2000 are estimated to be buried here.

### **Mulankavil**

The lady on the bike tells us how they were displaced from their homes in 2008, and returned in October 2009, upon which they realised the *thuyilum illam* was destroyed. ‘We began to clear the jungles behind here for resettlement, that’s when we found the rubble from the graves.’

‘Over the loudspeaker, they would announce the bodies that had been buried that day,’ he says, a list which included many cadres from the nearby area, ‘including my sister’.

His family and his community left their homes in 2007, displaced by a shelling that was coming from the direction of the sea. They returned once again in 2010, and only the foundation of the *thuyilum illam* remained. An army camp was built over the site, but that had been removed around 2014.

The man says that there is some private land that has been used for the creation of the cemetery, but the owner is too afraid to ask that it be returned. They are aware of government plans to convert all previous *thuyilum illams* into ‘botanical gardens’, and the Pradeshiya Sabha has no power to object.

‘Nearly 1,500 burials here, so many across the North, and they want to plant trees all over them? They just want to pretend that they don’t exist, but history must be written!’ he claims, livid.

In the South, he knows that people commemorate ‘at a grand scale’, but people are afraid to do it here because they know the repercussions. ‘They are rewriting the accounts, and there is

no history to say who the army fought against. The truth needs to be preserved, and future generations must know what happened.’

He stresses that the people do not want monetary support from the State for this, just approval, and the assurance that security officials won’t obstruct these efforts. ‘The parents and families themselves will build the place up for their loved ones in a matter of days.’

## **Mullaitivu District**

### **Visuvamadu**

The man in a white sarong confirms the location of the *thuyilum illam*, where now an army camp sits on the side of the Paranthan-Mullaitivu road.

The next time the ceremony was held would be in 2017, and the villagers cleaned a small patch of land near the camp, along the side of the main road, to light the commemorative lamp. Despite the full area being a vast 10 acres, only a small section had been used for the burials.

‘It was beautiful inside’ says the man serving tea at a small store, ‘more like a garden than a cemetery.’ He leads a walk to the back of his house, through the thorny, dry shrub that overruns the area. At the base of a giant tree sit the remains of several cadre’s headstones, now crumbling and in pieces, and he says many more such fragments litter the surrounding jungle.

The clear boundary of the army camp is a few feet away. ‘They would have just bulldozed over it, and pushed it out of their area when they started building the camp.’

### **Iranapalai**

‘The army was closing in and the LTTE had nowhere else to go; this was the last proper *thuyilum illam* they maintained before the final days’ says the old gentleman, shaded from the heat under a large margosa tree. He notes that the death toll was steadily rising in those months, so bodies were brought in batches and usually buried in the sheet packing in which they were delivered. By this time, the LTTE couldn’t transport bodies to other *thuyilum illams* due to intensity of the war and capture of areas by the army.

His wife tells of the army roundup that moved them into the coastal areas, from their home to Mathalan, Valaiyanmadam, Nanthikadal and finally, to Mullivaikkal. When they returned in 2011, half of the cemetery was occupied by the army. The other was completely overgrown. ‘There are still some bodies buried on the side that the Army is now using’, she notes.

To this date, the old couple have been clearing the cemetery by themselves, as no one else is willing to take on the task. ‘People are afraid of coming forward, with reason’, says the man, ‘the youth who took the lead on the 2017 commemoration were called in by the Army soon after, and their names recorded.’ Local politicians and female clergy had stood around to offer protection as locals had cleared the grounds.



He adds that he wants to plant things, to make the *thuyilum illam* look like the ones of old, gardens of rest. The lack of water in the dry area makes this difficult.

The old couple had two daughters who joined the LTTE, and both died in combat. Their photo hangs on the wall next to a Palm Sunday cross, now dry. ‘We are ready to build new tombs, and till we die we will keep tending to this place with care.’ He is 81 years old.

Their grandson, the child of their youngest daughter, has a reel of photos from the last *Maaveerar Naal* commemoration on his smartphone. The old gentleman had been invited on the stage to give a small speech and light the lamp. His photos show the old lady in a red saree, as she prepared a small shrine for her daughters.

### **Alampil**

The owner of the small eatery says that since 1986, the LTTE would burn the bodies of dead cadres on the land that is now occupied by the Army camp. He notes that sometimes, a single bonfire would be set on around 500 bodies.

One of his customers says that the last commemoration was held in November 2008. When they returned from displacement in 2010, the place had been destroyed. The commemorations were restarted in 2017, with a lamp lit outside the *thuyilum illam*, on the side of the road.

The 7 acres that made the cemetery have not been used in the construction of the camp, however the headstones and graves have been broken. The men know that the army is carrying out papaya cultivation in this area now.

‘They fought for their people, and deserve respect. Now, not even the rubble from their tombs remain.’

### **Mulliyawalai**

The lady sits in the verandah, overlooking her lush green garden. ‘For one year in 1986, the land was used to burn dead cadres’ bodies, but they stopped doing that because the smoke was unbearable for us living nearby’.

The lady says she mourned for her son, forcefully taken when he was preparing for his Advanced Levels, at the last *Maaveerar Naal* commemoration here in 2008. The small patch of land was full of people paying their respects to the cadres. The community was displaced to Menik Farm in 2009, and returned in 2010 to find the *thuyilum illam* destroyed, the rubble of all the graves and headstones pushed to the border of what would become the army camp.

‘The army released just a sliver of the total land back to the public in 2017, and people were able to commemorate their dead that November,’ says a local social worker. He adds that while people were quick to ask for their own land back, no one was interested in reviving the *thuyilum illam*.

This release too, was problematic. The army gave back the extended portion that included the old footpath, which has long since been out of use. The lady gestures at the path the LTTE cut for the civilians, which is now on private land that has been fenced off by an owner. ‘The new road is blocked, so people have started using the old footpath again, not knowing that

there are bodies buried under the soil there.’ Those who know, avoid it, and people like her whose loved ones’ graves fall directly under this path are pained to see their resting places a route for daily foot traffic.

‘We lament at the fence of the camp every year, asking if we can leave some food offerings, but the army refuse, asking us not to give trouble. They play *pirith* (Buddhist religious chanting) over the loudspeaker in the morning, and play cricket on the grounds where our children lie buried’ she says.

### **Vannivilankulam**

The vast Vannivilankulam *thuyilum illam* is situated off the Mankulam – Vellankulam road. During the Jayasikuru offensive ordered by President Kumaratunge, many bodies were buried in the green acres. The people of the area were forced to leave in 2008, returning home after the end of the war to find the *thuyilum illam* reduced to rubble, and the grounds excavated.

‘I was travelling on this road in the days immediately after the war’, says the priest. ‘The army was using sand dug from the *thuyilum illam* to repair the road’, he says, and the gaping cavities in the field are still visible today.

Digging up the sand meant bringing up the bodies, and the priest goes onto say that bones, set in piles, were being burned along the main road by the forces as they worked. Any other remains from the dug areas were dumped into a well that sits in the centre of the field, and burned as well.

The fact that the LTTE chose to bury their dead is an interesting thing in itself, the priest observes - Prabhakaran was Hindu. He believed that on the word of a trusted advisor, perhaps even a member of the clergy, what started as mass burnings of bodies eventually shifted to the construction of cemeteries. ‘There is history to show when you bury, after all’ he says.