



**"If Sri Lankan Tamils Truly Want  
to Shape Their Destiny, They  
Must First Become Financially and  
Institutionally Self-Reliant"**

**Prof. Thavam Thambipillai in Exclusive  
Interview with Jaffna Monitor**



## Our Special Correspondent

In many ways, Prof. Thavam Thambi Pillai stands as an inspiring role model for Sri Lankan Tamils-and a guiding light for a community long in search of grounded, visionary leadership. A distinguished transplant surgeon, educator, and institutional leader, he became the first Sri Lankan Tamil-and possibly the first Tamil globally-to be elected World President of the International College of Surgeons (ICS). His journey is a masterclass in transforming tragedy into triumph and pain into profound purpose.

Born in Colombo, Prof. Thavam was just 13 when the 1983 anti-Tamil pogroms tore through the capital. He watched helplessly as his family home was burned to the ground by mobs blinded by hate. Though he left Sri Lanka shortly before the arrival of the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF), he would later learn that two of his close friends-including the brilliant Ahilan Thiruchelvam-had been brutally gunned down. These are the kinds of

events that could sow a lifetime of bitterness in any teenager's heart. But Thavam chose a different path. He channeled his grief into quiet service and academic brilliance.

After earning his medical degree with honours in Ireland, Prof. Thavam trained in world-class institutions in Philadelphia and Cincinnati, eventually becoming a transplant surgeon of global repute. He now serves as Professor and Vice Chair of Surgery at the University of South Dakota Sanford School of Medicine and is Surgical Director of the Sanford Transplant Center in Sioux Falls.

Yet what sets him apart is not just professional success, but his enduring commitment to Sri Lanka's war-ravaged regions. While some diaspora voices call for sanctions and economic disengagement from Sri Lanka-seemingly indifferent to the fact that we, Sri Lankan Tamils, must still live and build our lives here-Prof. Thavam offers a more practical and intellectually grounded alternative.

Whenever he finds time, Prof. Thavam returns to his karma bhoomi-Jaffna. Over the



*Prof. Thavam Thambi Pillai conducting operations in Honduras (left) and in Jaffna (right).*

past decade, he has led numerous medical missions, conducted training programs, and helped build institutional capacity. In 2023, he personally mentored a group of surgeons and physicians at the Jaffna Teaching Hospital in performing renal transplant surgeries. Today, those same teams are carrying out complex procedures independently.

He is also a co-founder of the International Medical Health Organization (IMHO), a charity that has implemented over USD 15 million worth of health projects in 15 countries.

So if you still wonder whether one person can make a difference, look no further. Prof. Thavam ThambiPillai is living proof that one life-when fuelled by integrity, compassion, and vision-can indeed change the course of a community.

### **Could you please share your journey-from being born into a Sri Lankan Tamil family to becoming an internationally accomplished transplant surgeon?**

I was born in Colombo in 1970 and lived there until the anti-Tamil riots of 1983. But even during those years, we regularly visited Jaffna-typically during two out of the three school terms-so I have many fond memories of going to my parents' native village, Kaithady. That's where my grandparents lived, and those visits were always filled with joy.

My father worked at the Treasury as one of the deputy directors. We had a government-provided house, a vehicle, and a driver-he was well looked after. We were among the many victims of the anti-Tamil violence in July 1983. Our house was burned to the ground. I later learned that mobs used voter registration

lists to identify Tamil households. That's how our home-despite being a government bungalow-was identified as a Tamil residence and attacked.

We were in the servant quarters when our house caught fire. I distinctly remember how we escaped the fire by jumping over our wall. Our next door was the Department of Weights and Measures, and we stayed there overnight.

Fortunately, my father knew the Attorney General, who arranged an armed escort to take us to Bambalapitiya Hindu College-my own school. Ironically, I became a refugee for the first time, and that too in my own school. That very day, we were supposed to sit for our second-term exams.

That violence left a deep mark on me. It's something no child should ever have to endure. But looking back, I realize that moment changed the course of my life. It shattered something in me-but it also sparked something in me.

We hadn't eaten for two, maybe three days. The curfew made it impossible to get food. That was the first time I felt hunger pain. It was exactly 42 years ago today that our house was burned to the ground. (This interview took place on July 25.)

Our school was built to accommodate 1,500 students, but more than 10,000 refugees were crammed into it. For days, there was no proper food. Fortunately, Savumiammoorthy Thondaman, who was the Minister of Dairy Development at the time, arranged for milk and bread to be delivered.

As a child, I had never tasted cold milk before-we always boiled it at home. Drinking it cold gave me a stomach upset. I still remember needing to go to the toilet, but when I saw its condition-overused by thousands I





*Prof. Thavam Thambi Pillai with doctors in Jaffna.*



*Prof. Thavam Thambi Pillai with his team, including Jaffna surgeons, after guiding the first successful live renal transplant at the Teaching Hospital, Jaffna.*



*Prof. Thavam Thambi Pillai with fellow doctors in Jaffna.*





*Prof. Thavam Thambi Pillai with the staff of Jaffna Hospital.*

told myself, 'I don't need to go anymore.

My father had many good Sinhala friends who wanted to take us out of the camp and shelter us in their homes. But my father refused. They insisted-at least let the children go-but he said no. He wanted us to experience this. He said, "I don't want my children to forget this."

At that time, I was furious. I couldn't eat. I couldn't go to the toilet. I was angry and confused. But now, with time and clarity, I feel he made the right decision. We stayed in that camp for about 10 days before traveling to Jaffna by ship.

I still remember seeing him wearing a sarong in public for the first time. Until then, he had always worn Western clothes outside. At the KKS harbor, as we disembarked, he stood there in his sarong, holding my hand, and said, 'I came to Colombo as a 16-year-old boy. And now, I'm returning to Jaffna with three teenage sons-and nothing in my hands.'

While in Jaffna, something beautiful happened-I was admitted to St. John's College. I often say that it was there the true

foundation of my academic life was laid.

Over the years, I've had the privilege of studying across four continents-Asia, Africa, Europe, and North America-but it was in that humble classroom at St. John's that everything truly began. It was there I realized that a 98% average wasn't just some mythical number in textbooks. I had grown up thinking of marks like that as phantom numbers-until I sat beside boys who were quietly scoring 98, even 98.5.

They held exams every two weeks-fortnightly-on top of term tests and year-end finals. The entire rhythm of the school pulsed around academics. Traditionally, Tamils haven't placed much emphasis on sports or extracurricular activities. Our community has always seen education as the great equalizer, and I was no exception. As Nelson Mandela famously said, 'Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.' That was my father's core belief.

Meanwhile, my father did something he had always resisted-he left Sri Lanka and joined the World Bank in Tanzania and subsequently moved to Botswana. Though he had received



opportunities to go abroad much earlier, he had never wanted to leave.

He had come up from poverty, growing up in a hut with no electricity or running water. He became a chartered accountant through a government scholarship, and because of that, he remained deeply loyal to the state that gave him that opportunity. His dream was to serve the country until the very end of his career. But after 1983, something in him broke. And he walked away from the country he loved.

I had completed my O-Level exams and was waiting for the results. Even though my father had left the country, I still wanted to stay.

But the turning point came in March 1987, when a massive blast occurred in Kaithady North while the LTTE was assembling a bomb. The explosion killed several key LTTE leaders, including Lt. Col. Ponnammam and Major Cadles. In the aftermath, the military launched heavy shelling, and we were displaced to Mattuvil. We ended up crammed into a house with many others. That trauma reopened the wounds of 1983. I was overwhelmed. That's when I decided to go to Botswana for a few months to recover before preparing for my A-Levels.

But once I got there, things in Sri Lanka kept deteriorating. The Indian Army arrived. My brother, who had just finished his A-Levels, told me, 'Things are not going to improve. You'd better learn English.' Because in Botswana, education was in English. That transition was brutal. But I managed to do just well enough to get into medical school in Ireland in 1989.

My academic foundation had been laid at St. John's, but it was in Ireland that I truly discovered the power of mentorship and independent learning. This is something I recently spoke about during my talk at the

Jaffna Medical Faculty-the critical role that mentors and sponsors play in shaping a student's journey.

It all began with my Professor of Anatomy, Prof. MJT Fitzgerald, and Prof. Given, the Professor of Surgery at University College Galway, National University of Ireland.

Prof Fitzgerald was the first person who made me believe I could aim for the stars. When someone you deeply respect believes in you, you start believing in yourself. That's the power of mentorship. I had some incredible role models who took me under their wings and lifted me up.

I spent about nine years in Ireland, including my basic surgical training.

Many of the Irish faculty were trained in the United States, largely due to Ireland's complicated and often tense history with neighboring Britain. In fact, Ireland was the only European country that was colonized by Britain.

Instead of looking to the UK, many Irish professionals chose to pursue opportunities in the U.S.-and they encouraged me to do the same.

That's how I ended up in the U.S. in December 1998. I completed my advanced surgical training on the East Coast-and the rest, as they say, is history.

**Witnessing the 1983 violence firsthand would have been deeply traumatic for any child. For many, such an experience led to lifelong resentment-some joined militant movements like the LTTE, while others who experienced it firsthand and now live**





*Prof. Thavam Thambi Pillai — a leading figure in robotic surgery.*

**in the diaspora continue to struggle to make peace with Sri Lanka, even decades later. Given that you personally experienced this injustice as a child, how did you navigate that pain without being consumed by anger or hatred? And how did you transform that trauma into a driving force for excellence in your life?**

I'd say all of us are shaped by a combination of genetics and environment. I don't know if it's 50/50 or 70/30, but it's definitely a mix.

Interestingly, many of my friends in the U.S. don't even know my full life story. When I occasionally share it—usually while traveling or over dinner—they're shocked. They say, “You lost friends as a teenager, witnessed such violence firsthand, and you don't have PTSD!?” That's always their first question.

And the truth is—I don't know. Maybe I'm genetically wired with a certain kind of resilience. Or maybe it was the environment I grew up in. Either way, I consider myself fortunate.

But that doesn't mean I forget. Just today, while driving past Chemmani and hearing again about the 77 bodies found there, it opened up old wounds. I thought of Krishanthi Kumaraswamy. Her mother, Rasamma, and my father were schoolmates. So no—I will not forget. We're human, after all. But I believe there's a big difference between forgiving and forgetting. I believe we should forgive—not for others, but for ourselves. If we hold on to that pain and anger, it will eat us from the inside.

If I had stayed in Sri Lanka, I honestly wouldn't have been surprised if I had ended up on the other side—as a militant. When you're oppressed or pushed to the edge, especially as a young person, the response can be extreme. But I was lucky—I escaped the war.

At times, I've felt that I betrayed my people by leaving. So maybe this is my way of giving back—my payback, in a sense. Not everyone is fortunate enough to be in a position where they can help others or pay it forward.

And I know, not everyone processes trauma in the same way. Some people retreat inward. Others become consumed by anger. It depends on both nature





*Prof. Thavam Thambi Pillai teaching in Kilinochchi, 2004.*

and nurture-the emotional wiring you're born with, and the values your parents instill in you.

I always tell my residents-what you call medical officers in Sri Lanka-"I can teach you how to do a complex surgery. But I can't teach you how to speak with a patient's family. That part-I hope your parents have taught you." For me, my greatest mentor is my father. Even in his darkest moments, he was always looking for ways to help others. That's something I carry with me.

Maybe that's one of the most important reasons I do what I do today. Maybe that's the source of my strength-the quiet power that keeps me going.

**I've interviewed many surviving LTTE veterans who were part of the movement in 1983. Almost all of them told me they never imagined the LTTE-or the other Tamil militant groups-would grow to such an**

**unimaginable extent. Before the 1983 violence, they said there were barely 30 active members. But after the riots, thousands came forward, driven by rage, grief, and a sense of helplessness. So, my question to you is: As someone who has lived through that dark period and now sees the country trying to move toward healing, what should the current government-claiming to be in a reconciliatory mode-actually do to ensure lasting peace?**

Let me begin with a quote from the renowned anthropologist and writer Margaret Mead: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has."

Over time, I've developed a deep appreciation for history-something I admittedly never



enjoyed as a student, but have grown to value immensely as an adult. There's so much wisdom in it, so many lessons hiding in plain sight.

America, for all its present-day progress, has grappled with a deeply painful past-slavery, segregation, and systemic injustice. I've also lived in Botswana, just 40 minutes from the South African border, during the height of apartheid. I was even accepted into medical school at the University of Cape Town. It was affordable and nearby. But my father said no. "We've already escaped one problem in Sri Lanka," he told me. "Why walk straight into another?"

He was right. South Africa was still under apartheid rule.

Looking back, I see now how the histories of the United States and South Africa-two countries that confronted their own dark legacies-offer valuable lessons for Sri Lanka. If we are willing to listen and learn, there is much we can take from their stories.

Let me start with the South African story. I strongly recommend everyone watch the film *Invictus*, in which Morgan Freeman brilliantly portrays President Nelson Mandela.

When Mandela became the first democratically elected president of South Africa, the country was, within a year, preparing to host the Rugby World Cup. Rugby was-and still is-a deeply symbolic sport in South Africa. The national team, the Springboks, represented white supremacy and apartheid-era dominance. For many Black South Africans, the team was a painful symbol of oppression. Supporting them was, for decades, simply unthinkable.

And yet, Mandela urged all South Africans-Black and white-to support the Springboks.



*Prof. Thavam Thambi Pillai with his father in Pannai, Jaffna.*

Why? Because they were the national team. He knew that if the country was to heal, it had to unite. Even Mandela's own party, the African National Congress (ANC), initially opposed his stance. But Mandela persisted and narrowly won the support he needed within the ANC.

As fate would have it, South Africa reached the finals, facing the legendary New Zealand All Blacks-an undefeated, dominant force, and overwhelming favorites to win.

Mandela personally met with Springbok captain François Pienaar and shared his own story-27 years of imprisonment on Robben Island. He didn't demand victory. He simply said, "I trust you will." He also recited to Pienaar *Invictus*, the poem by William Ernest Henley that had sustained his spirit during his years in captivity.

South Africa played their hearts out-and won.

In that moment, for the first time, Black South African children-who had once viewed the Springboks as a symbol of oppression-were

cheering for their national team. Mandela had used sport as a bridge. He turned a divisive symbol into a unifying force.

That is the kind of visionary leadership Sri Lanka needs. Leaders who dare to swim against the tide. Leaders who see beyond language, ethnicity, or religion.

The South African story happened in our era. But if we look further back, 19th-century America offers another timeless lesson for Sri Lanka.

During the American Civil War (1861–1865), the country was brutally divided between the North-the Union-and the South-the Confederacy. At the heart of this conflict was the institution of slavery. The Southern states had built their economies and social hierarchies on the backs of enslaved Black people, while the Northern states increasingly opposed slavery on both moral and economic grounds.

The war claimed approximately 698,000 American lives, representing about 2–3% of the nation's population at the time. To put this in perspective, if a similar percentage died in warfare today, it would mean over 7 million Americans lost. It was white Americans fighting white Americans for the freedom of Black people, who were largely excluded from participation in the war. They were enslaved-considered property, not citizens.

Had the Confederacy won, there would have been two Americas. But the Union prevailed. That victory preserved the United States as one nation.

At the war's end, General Ulysses S. Grant, who led the Union forces and would later become President, met with his old peer and former senior at West Point, General Robert E. Lee, commander of the Confederate Army.

When Grant asked Lee, “What do you want from me?” Lee made a humble request: “Allow my men to return home with their horses and their guns-so they can farm and protect their families.”

Grant agreed without hesitation. Grant ordered 25,000 rations distributed to Lee's hungry troops. When Union soldiers began celebrating with artillery salutes, Grant immediately ordered them to stop.

But what happened next speaks volumes about leadership. President Abraham Lincoln contacted Grant and told him, “You may have won the war, but you have not yet won the hearts of the South.”

He instructed that no Union troops were to enter the defeated South for at least a week. “Let them grieve,” he said.

That is reconciliation. That is leadership rooted in grace, not revenge.

The original U.S. Constitution, created in 1787, was preceded by the Declaration of Independence in 1776, which famously proclaimed that “all men are created equal.” Yet, at that very time, many of the men who wrote those words enslaved millions of others. The contradiction was stark and undeniable. It took a brutal civil war nearly a century later to begin turning those words into reality. The 13th Amendment, ratified in December 1865, abolished slavery throughout the United States. The 14th Amendment (1868) granted citizenship to formerly enslaved people, and the 15th Amendment (1870) prohibited denying voting rights based on race.

This is the kind of journey Sri Lanka must consider. We, too, need leaders of that moral caliber-leaders who do not govern by popularity, but by principle.



For instance, why not develop the Kankesanthurai (KKS) Harbour with the same commitment and investment we show in Colombo? Why not prioritize Palaly Airport the same way we do Katunayake? Development doesn't have to be a zero-sum game. Investing in the North and East will yield returns many times over-economically and socially-for the entire country.

Singapore is a perfect example. Its founding Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew, once looked to Sri Lanka as a model. Now look where Singapore is-and where Sri Lanka stands. As the saying goes, "A rising tide lifts all boats." And ultimately, it all comes down to leadership-leadership with character, vision, and courage.

### **In your view, what steps should Tamil political leaders take to genuinely advance the best interests of the Sri Lankan Tamil people?**

I can speak from my experience in leadership within the field of surgery and global health. I believe in empowering people to do the right thing. At our core, we are all human-and most of us, I believe, are inherently good.

When it comes to leadership-whether in medicine, politics, or community life-certain principles remain universal. One of those principles, as I mentioned earlier, is the distinction between forgiving and forgetting. Forgiveness is essential-not just for others, but for our own peace of mind. But we must never forget the past.

Instead, we must learn from it. The path to a better future begins with honest reflection. That's why I believe collaboration is key. And let me be clear-collaboration is not a sign of weakness. It is, in fact, the ultimate display

of strength. Just like humility, it's one of the highest forms of leadership.

Tamil and Sinhalese leaders must work together with sincerity and courage. Healing begins when both sides acknowledge past mistakes. We don't need to reinvent the wheel. Models like South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission show us how to move forward, if done meaningfully.

Beyond reconciliation, we must focus on economic empowerment.

Sri Lanka has all the right ingredients: a high literacy rate, a relatively small population of 22 million, and a strategic location.

So, to truly advance the interests of Sri Lankan Tamils-or of any community-our leaders must think beyond narrow identities. They must act with humility, embrace collaboration, pursue justice without bitterness, and invest in shared growth. The sky is the limit for this country-if only its leaders can rise to the moment.

### **What inspires you to leave the comfort of your life abroad and dedicate your limited time to serving the people of Jaffna whenever possible?**

For me, it comes down to Ikigai-the Japanese concept that refers to one's reason for being. When you love what you do, it doesn't feel like work. And I genuinely love being here in Jaffna.

That feeling goes back to my childhood. Even before my teenage years, I always enjoyed our visits to Jaffna. I have warm memories of spending time with my grandparents and relatives and this region has always held a special place in my heart.



That emotional connection has stayed with me. Every time I return, I feel a deep sense of contentment. It brings me joy-a joy that aligns perfectly with the Ikigai dogma.

People sometimes ask if coming back here is a sacrifice. But let's be honest: I'm not walking into a warzone. This isn't Gaza, nor is it the no-fire zone of 2009. Jaffna in 2025 offers a peaceful, decent life. So, I don't see this as a compromise at all. In fact,



*January 18, 2023 – First living donor kidney transplant at JTH.*

I feel deeply privileged to work alongside the talented surgeons and physicians here.

To tell you the truth, I look forward to these visits. They recharge me. And while some say you shouldn't call it charity if you enjoy doing it, I believe that joy is exactly what makes it meaningful. I love what I do-and that love is what brings me back.





**You've worked across five continents and seen a range of healthcare systems. From that global perspective, how would you assess Sri Lanka's medical infrastructure-especially in the North? What are the most urgent areas for improvement?**

**There also seems to be growing public distrust-and at times hostility-toward medical professionals, even those who choose to stay and serve in places like Jaffna despite having opportunities abroad. Viral videos and sensationalism around isolated incidents appear to be worsening this. Do you think this climate is affecting doctors' morale and mental well-being? And what role should society play in supporting and protecting its healthcare workers?**

To begin with, Sri Lanka is no exception when it comes to the long-term effects of conflict. We are living in a post-conflict era, but not everyone is equipped to handle the psychological aftermath. In such environments, it's unreasonable to expect consistently 'normal' behavior. PTSD and emotional trauma manifest in different ways. And so, there's a fragile societal dynamic at play.

When we train our residents in the U.S., we emphasize six core competencies. The first two are fairly straightforward:

1. **Medical Knowledge** – knowing what needs to be done.

2. **Patient Care** – applying that knowledge to real clinical situations.

The next two competencies take a broader systems-based view:

3. **Practice-Based Learning and Improvement (PBLI)** – the ability to learn from mistakes and complications. Every week, we conduct Morbidity and Mortality (M&M) conferences to reflect on difficult cases, ask what went wrong, and consider what could have been done differently.

4. **Systems-Based Practice** – understanding healthcare delivery in context. For example, choosing a CT scan over an MRI because of cost-effectiveness, or collaborating efficiently across departments-surgery, oncology, radiology, and so on.

The final two competencies are trickier, but arguably the most vital in today's context:

5. **Interpersonal and Communication Skills** – the foundation of trust and leadership.

6. **Professionalism** – which includes respect, integrity, accountability, and emotional intelligence.

When I recruit surgical residents, I make one thing clear from day one: if I ever have to terminate someone from the program, it will most likely be due to a lack of professionalism, not clinical incompetence. Skills can be taught. But if I receive consistent reports from nurses and colleagues about someone's behavior-rudeness, arrogance, disrespect-I have very low tolerance for that. I believe that the foundation of professionalism is often laid much earlier-in how we were raised, what values our parents instilled in us, and how we were taught to treat others.

Now, coming to your point about public

perception and media sensationalism-yes, it's deeply concerning. Physicians go through incredibly rigorous training. They work under immense pressure, often in life-or-death situations. Meanwhile, patients and the general public are also under enormous strain-decades of civil war, political unrest, and now an economic crisis. So, the environment is ripe for misunderstanding and conflict.

As medical leaders, we must rise above, try to understand our patients' struggles, and still uphold standards. But society, too, must play a part. For instance, in many hospitals around the world-including in the U.S.-there are clear restrictions on video recording within hospital premises.

Patients can take pictures with their loved ones in private rooms, yes. But filming healthcare workers without consent, especially in emergency or public areas, is not permitted. That kind of behavior erodes trust and creates an unsafe environment for staff.

Sadly, we are losing talented, committed professionals over these avoidable issues. When people are constantly pushed to their emotional and physical limits, something will eventually break.

Yet, on the positive side, Sri Lanka's public healthcare system is still one of the strongest I've seen among developing nations. I've visited and worked in many countries, and few can match the dedication and competence of Sri Lankan doctors, nurses, and allied health professionals.

In the U.S., I work in a not-for-profit hospital system. That means while we operate privately, profits earned are reinvested into patient care-not distributed to shareholders. It's not like a commercial corporation. But Sri Lanka goes one step further: it provides

healthcare and university education for free. That's virtually unheard of. When I mention this at international conferences or during dinner meetings, people are astonished. In the U.S., medical students often graduate with \$300,000 in student debt. That's a mortgage without a house!

So no, we should not take this system for granted. We must protect it. We must nurture it.

Ultimately, it all comes down to collaboration-patients, professionals, administrators, and policymakers working together in the same sandbox. Yes, it's easier said than done. But I've always believed in leading by example. That's how we create change.

**You have been a long-time advocate for day/out-patient surgery. For the benefit of our general readers, could you explain what day surgery involves-and why you consider it a significant advancement in modern healthcare?**

In simple terms, day surgery means that the patient comes to the hospital in the morning, undergoes a planned procedure, and returns home later that same day. There's no overnight hospital stay required.

This model has been proven, time and again, across both developed and developing countries, to offer numerous benefits. One of the most important advantages is a lower risk of infection. Hospitals-regardless of where in the world they are-can be breeding grounds for infection. I often describe hospitals, quite frankly, as petri dishes. The longer a patient stays, the greater the risk of hospital-acquired infections. So, minimizing that exposure-when clinically appropriate-is in the best interest of



the patient.

Beyond infection control, patient satisfaction is significantly higher with day surgery. People prefer recovering in the comfort of their own homes. And importantly, recovery tends to be faster.

Now, applying this concept to a place like Jaffna, the benefits become even clearer. The teaching hospital in Jaffna currently has a limited number of operating theatres. If we can shift minor procedures out of these main theatres and into a dedicated day surgery unit, it immediately frees up those theatres for more complex and urgent surgeries. That in turn helps reduce waiting times and optimizes resource utilization.

**You currently serve as the President-Elect of the International College of Surgeons- World Body-and notably, the first Tamil to hold this prestigious position. Could you explain the significance of this global organization? More importantly, how do you envision the College contributing meaningfully to strengthening Sri Lanka's healthcare system?**

The International College of Surgeons (ICS) was established in 1935 and is headquartered in Chicago, USA. It is a truly global organization, with active sections in over 30 countries and members in more than 70. My tenure as President starts in January 2026 for two years.

At its core, the mission and vision of ICS are centered around fostering fellowship through

the exchange of surgical knowledge. This is not a one-way transfer of information. For example, I have just as much to learn from my Sri Lankan colleagues-especially in managing conditions that are more prevalent in this part of the world, such as amoebic abscesses and endemic diseases-as they might have to learn from my experience in robotic surgery or other techniques practiced in the United States.

This mutual exchange of knowledge builds professional capacity, fosters collaboration, and ultimately enhances well-being. At its highest level, well-being is found in the act of giving. I truly believe in the idea that "in giving, you receive."

A powerful example of this is the organ transplant program in Jaffna. Thanks to sustained collaboration and knowledge-sharing, surgeons here, are now independently performing kidney transplants. It's a small but profound example of what's possible when knowledge is shared and capacity is built locally. And with the right support, this can absolutely be scaled up in other areas and across the country.

**You have been a pioneer in the field of transplant surgery and were present at the Jaffna Teaching Hospital during its first-ever living donor kidney transplant procedure. Looking ahead, how do you envision the development of this program? Can we expect transplant surgeries to become a more regular and sustainable part of Jaffna's healthcare services?**

The first living donor kidney transplant surgery at the Jaffna Teaching Hospital was

successfully performed in January 2023, and since then, the progress has been remarkable. Even in my absence, the local surgical team has gone on to complete a total of 11 living donor transplants and 9 cadaveric transplants.

Like any complex medical program, there is a learning curve, and naturally, there will be some initial challenges and hiccups. But that's expected-and it's part of building any high-performing system.

My vision is that Jaffna Teaching Hospital has the potential to perform at least one kidney transplant per week, which would amount to around 50 transplants annually. That's a realistic and achievable goal. With that kind of volume, I am confident that we'll be able to do other organ transplants at the Jaffna Teaching Hospital.

I have no doubt that transplant surgery will become a regular, sustainable, and successful component of Jaffna's healthcare services. I hope that transplantation should be available across all teaching hospitals in Sri Lanka.

**There appear to be two broad segments within the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora: one that genuinely wants both Sri Lanka and its Tamil communities to flourish, and another that, in its pursuit of dismantling the Sri Lankan state, seems willing to jeopardize even the well-being of Sri Lankan Tamils. You clearly represent the former-those committed to healing, progress, and sustainable development. In your view, what should a responsible and forward-**

**looking diaspora be doing to support Sri Lankan Tamils in a meaningful and constructive way?**

I believe that no matter where you live, you should strive to be a good citizen of your country. And being a good citizen means promoting peace, justice, and harmony, not perpetuating bitterness or division.

Take the United States, for example. It's a young country-just over 250 years old-and yet it rose from being a British colony to becoming a global superpower. One major reason for that success is its ability to attract talent and create an environment where people can thrive, regardless of their background. I don't speak with an American accent, nor do I look like what some would call a "mainstream American," but I've been able to succeed there. That speaks to the strength of the system, which recognizes merit and contribution over appearance or origin.

Just look at the Fortune 500 companies-several of the top ones are led by immigrants: Google, Intel, Microsoft, and others. That tells you something.

Now, coming back to Sri Lanka, I don't believe the responsibility lies solely with the diaspora. Sri Lankan leadership also has a vital role to play. The government must create an inclusive environment-one in which everyone feels safe and encouraged to participate in the rebuilding of the nation. Without that, expecting the diaspora to fully engage is unrealistic.

Many Diaspora humanitarian organizations are contributing positively towards rebuilding and reconstruction. As an example, I was privileged to be one of many confounders of one such organization called the International



Medical Health Organization (IMHO), a registered charity in the USA, Canada, and the UK. Since its inception in 2003, IMHO has worked on many health care, educational, and community-based projects, amounting to more than US\$15 million. Most importantly, IMHO has positively impacted the lives of over 2.5 million people across Sri Lanka.

The diaspora can and should contribute meaningfully to economic empowerment because when communities are economically stable, they gain independence, better health outcomes, and a greater sense of hope and dignity. Having hope is to imagine a future with goals and ambitions. Hope in crises helps us define our level of dignity. Only with dignity can we survive disasters. Having dignity means feeling respected and being an independent person. But this must be done without erasing or forgetting the past. True reconciliation requires acknowledging what happened, accepting past mistakes, and committing to building a better future.

**Are you suggesting, then, that Sri Lankan Tamils should focus on cultivating their own internal leadership-one that is not overly reliant on the diaspora-and take greater ownership of decision-making within the country?**

Someone once told me: "If you want to know who really runs a country, don't look at the president-look at who controls its finances." And that applies globally. Even in the United States, it's not just the government; it's institutions like Wall Street and the entertainment-industrial complex in Hollywood that wield immense influence.

By the time someone reaches a high position of leadership, they often become beholden to those who helped place them there. In many cases, they are constrained-if not outright controlled-by the forces funding or backing them. So, when we talk about self-determination and local leadership, it's essential to understand that true autonomy requires strength, both financial and structural.

If local communities-like the Sri Lankan Tamils-truly want to shape their destiny, they must first focus on becoming financially and institutionally self-reliant. That's the foundation for independent leadership.

**In your view, what is the path forward for Sri Lanka and Sri Lankan Tamils? What practical steps must we take-individually and collectively-to build a more stable, inclusive, and prosperous future for Sri Lankan Tamils?**

First and foremost, we must become a society that is physically, financially, and institutionally independent. We need to move away from dependency.

So, my message to people at home would be: use the next 10 to 15 years wisely. We still have a window of time where there is interest and willingness from segments of the diaspora to collaborate. Leverage that period to build a thriving, self-reliant community.

At the ground level, everyone can help in small but meaningful ways. Sponsor one student. Help one family stand on their own feet. Almost every Tamil diaspora community has a village Sangam in their respective countries-so adopt your native village. Support its school. Fund its educational programs.

It's okay to build temple towers (maha gopurams) if that's your spiritual passion.

But if you're spending ten crores on a temple, spend a hundred crores on education and livelihood/economic empowerment projects. I'm not saying don't support your religious institutions-do it. But let your investment in education and economic empowerment be ten times greater.

**Many would agree that the current generation of Sri Lankan Tamils-particularly in Jaffna-possesses strong intellectual capabilities. However, there appears to be a noticeable gap when it comes to emotional intelligence (EQ). In your view, how can we systematically cultivate emotional intelligence in our children, just as we have nurtured intellectual intelligence (IQ)? Should this be incorporated into our school curriculum?**

Some individuals are naturally gifted with high emotional intelligence, while others need to consciously learn and develop it-just as in sports. Some people are born with natural athletic talent; others need coaching, discipline, and effort to reach the same level.

So yes, I completely agree with your point: emotional intelligence and leadership training should be systematically introduced into our education system, and we shouldn't wait until university or professional life to do so. It should begin much earlier-at the school level.

In fact, one of the key messages I always share with my students is this: "If you want to lead others, you must first learn to lead yourself." Emotional intelligence is central to

that.

Ideally, we should incorporate leadership and emotional intelligence modules into the O-Level and A-Level curriculum. These could be introduced as elective subjects, workshops, or even co-curricular leadership programs-either through local initiatives or in collaboration with international educators and institutions.

But even beyond formal education, today's students have unprecedented access to learning tools. The smartphone in their hand has more computing power than NASA had in 1973. This generation has the means to learn almost anything at their fingertips.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, many top universities around the world-including Stanford, MIT, and others-have made high-quality online courses accessible, either for free or at highly subsidized rates. These include courses on leadership, emotional intelligence, communication, and personal development. Sri Lankan students should take full advantage of these opportunities.

**The North and East remain significantly underdeveloped-some say 30 to 40 years behind the rest of Sri Lanka in infrastructure and public services.**

**In your view, what are the main reasons for this persistent gap? And what should national leaders do to ensure the region is meaningfully integrated into Sri Lanka's broader development agenda?**

We are now in an environment where there is



only one country on this island. So, whether a ship docks at Kankesanthurai (KKS) or in Galle, the goods it brings are still entering Sri Lanka. The taxes are paid to the central government, and the benefits ultimately go to the same national coffers. It shouldn't matter whether that economic activity happens in the North, South, East, or West-the country as a whole gains.

The same logic applies to airports. We must stop viewing development through a narrow, regional lens.

I believe bringing economic development to war-ravaged areas is one of the best ways to heal the wounds of the past, while responsibly acknowledging and addressing those old wounds.

**Given Sri Lanka's economic crisis, the government's capacity to invest in war-affected regions is limited-but the diaspora has both the means and willingness to help. Still, trust remains an issue: the diaspora worries about misuse, while locals question transparency and commitment. What advice would you give to both policymakers and the diaspora to bridge this trust gap and collaborate sustainably? Do you see a dedicated North-East Development Fund-managed through provincial structures with strong oversight-as a viable solution for ensuring accountability and targeted investment?**

Currently, there are no functioning provincial councils in the North or East, so all governance responsibilities fall to the central government, making its role in ensuring transparent and responsible development even more critical.

As for the diaspora, we must be realistic: they're not a government and don't have access to institutional tools like IMF, World Bank, or ADB support. We shouldn't overestimate what they can achieve alone.

That's why collaboration is key. The government, public, and diaspora each have distinct roles, but they must work in synergy — one cannot replace the other. Sri Lanka spends about 3.5% of its GDP on health care, compared to around 8–9% in much of Europe and 18% in the United States. Yet, despite these numbers, even the richest nation in the world still has gaps in healthcare that are addressed by not-for-profit agencies and NGOs.

A country like Sri Lanka, which has endured decades of war and economic hardship, most certainly needs external assistance for rebuilding. Public-private partnerships are crucial to achieving universal access to quality healthcare — both within a nation and globally. The ultimate goal is to become self-reliant, not to build a dependent society.-

Public-private partnerships (PPPs), when structured with transparency and shared vision, can be powerful in post-conflict regions. A North-East Development Fund could be promising, but its success depends entirely on how it's designed, governed, and trusted. Ultimately, it's the government's responsibility to build a framework that enables such partnerships to succeed.