

# A Sri Lankan cricket star rises from the Tamil heartland

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## **Braving poverty, poor infrastructure and gender stereotyping, Sadasivam Kalaiyarasi scores a big win**

Growing up in her village in Sri Lanka's northern Kilinochchi district, Sadasivam Kalaiyarasi had one dream — to play cricket for Sri Lanka. It came true this week, when she made it to the country's under-19 squad, becoming the first Tamil girl to enter the national cricket arena.

"It's my father who got me interested in cricket and supported me. I'm here because of him," says the lanky teenager, attired in her dark blue and red training gear. Her recent selection not only highlighted sporting aspirations in the former war zone, but also brought some much-needed cheer to locals who, like many other Sri Lankans, are braving crippling shortages and power cuts due to the national economic crisis.

A keen follower of cricket, Ms. Kalaiyarasi's father got his daughter to watch matches with him as a child. Seeing her pick up the game well, local coach Jeevarathinam Priyadharshan focused on honing her skills. "She is a formidable pace bowler, very consistent and confident. More recently, her batting has also improved a lot. I see her attempting leg side shots that I play, and they are getting better by the day," says the proud mentor. "In a zonal match held earlier this week, she hit what, six sixes?" he asks her student. "Seven, sir," she gently corrects him.

News of her selection came just a month ahead of Ms. Kalaiyarasi's 16<sup>th</sup> birthday. If she makes it to the final under-19 national team from the provisional squad, she will have a good three years to train professionally and play competitive international cricket. "She is leading in points right now and will certainly get there," says the coach. Sri Lanka's T-20 captain Chamari Athapaththu is her idol. "I want to play like her," Ms. Kalaiyarasi says.

On Saturday morning, Ms. Kalaiyarasi was meeting her coach at a ground in Vaddakkachchi, about 10 km and two military check points away from Kilinochchi town that was once the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam's (LTTE) administrative capital. Thirteen years after the war ended, armed military men can be spotted along several roads in Sri Lanka's Tamil majority north and east.

It was not a scheduled practice session, as her coach was training a boys' volleyball team at the time. "In our society, it is rare to see parents supporting a girl child to pursue a sporting career. But Kalaiyarasi's parents are an exception," Mr. Priyadharshan notes. Behind her steady rise in cricket and now intense coaching routine is their hard labour. Her father, a daily wage worker in agricultural farms, runs the household, caring for her and her two younger siblings, while her mother left for Kuwait seven months ago, taking up a job as a domestic worker mainly to support her daughter's training. Until recently, Kalaiyarasi didn't own a good pair of shoes and even now, rarely eats three meals. "I leave for coaching early in the morning and it is hard for my father to finish cooking by then. So I get back and eat at around 4 in the evening," the young cricketer says. "No

matter what, he fully supports me. At times, neighbours in my village would comment on my wearing shorts and trousers all the time. But my father never told me what girls should dress like or do. Whenever he has the money, he buys me a pair of trousers.” Her father’s support is especially valuable when schools and the wider community see girls taking to sports as unnecessary.

In Sri Lanka’s post war years, national sports are beginning to see some diversity, according to Mr. Priyadharshan, citing Jaffna-born cricketer Vijayakanth Viyaskanth, now a familiar name in the Lanka Premier League, as an example. Despite good talent and committed coaches, sports infrastructure remains grossly inadequate in Sri Lanka’s north, sportspeople from the area have often noted. “Even in Kalaiyarasi’s school, we had to make the cricket pitch ourselves, laying the gravel and levelling it. If sports infrastructure is generally inadequate in the north, facilities for girls are even poorer,” Mr. Priyadharshan observes, however hoping that Ms. Kalaiyarasi’s feat would prompt more schools to take sports seriously.

As for Ms. Kalaiyarasi, since cricket is serious business, she turns to Tamil cinema for entertainment. A die-hard fan of actor Vijay, she says she has watched his movie *Bigil*, in which he plays a women’s football coach, 52 times. “My friends dare not criticise him in front of me, they know I’ll give them a whack,” she laughs.

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## **Meera Srinivasan**

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