Tamil Nadu: Indian man's search for father's lost grave ends in Malaysia

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Mr Thirumaran at his father's grave at Kerling in Malaysia

An Indian man whose father died when he was six months old went to great lengths to locate and visit his final resting place miles away in another

country. Prabhurao Anandan, a Tamil Nadu-based journalist, reports.

If you ask Mr Thirumaran (who goes by only one name) about childhood memories he has of his father, he doesn't have much to say. In fact, he doesn't even remember what he looked like.

His father K Ramasundaram - a schoolteacher in Malaysia - died of pneumonia in 1967, just six months after his son's birth.

Mr Thirumaran and his mother returned to the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu that same year.

In 1987, when Mr Thirumaran was 22, she too died.

For years, he held on to some musty old letters, written by his father and passed down by his mother. She'd told him his father was a "great humanitarian" and a "good singer".

Before her death 35 years ago, she had also shared another key detail about her husband - the location of his grave in Malaysia, in the town of Kerling, where he'd lived and died.

Looking to "rekindle his connection" with his father, Mr Thirumaran, now 55 and an activist who runs a school for children rescued from bonded labour in Tamil Nadu's Tirunelveli district, decided to go and look for his grave in November.

"I would often think that I must visit my father, but I hadn't given it a serious thought. Until now," he says.

It all started with a Google search

Mr Thirumaran started his search by trying to locate his father's school, but apart from the name, he knew nothing about the institute.

Ramasundaram taught English at Thotta Thesiya Vakai Tamil Palli, a small school run by the Tamil community in Kerling.

So, Mr Thirumaran asked his students to search for the school on Google. "I don't know how to operate computers. So my students looked it up and showed me a picture of it [the school]. I was amazed," he says.

He also found that the school had been moved to another location, so he emailed its principal for help.

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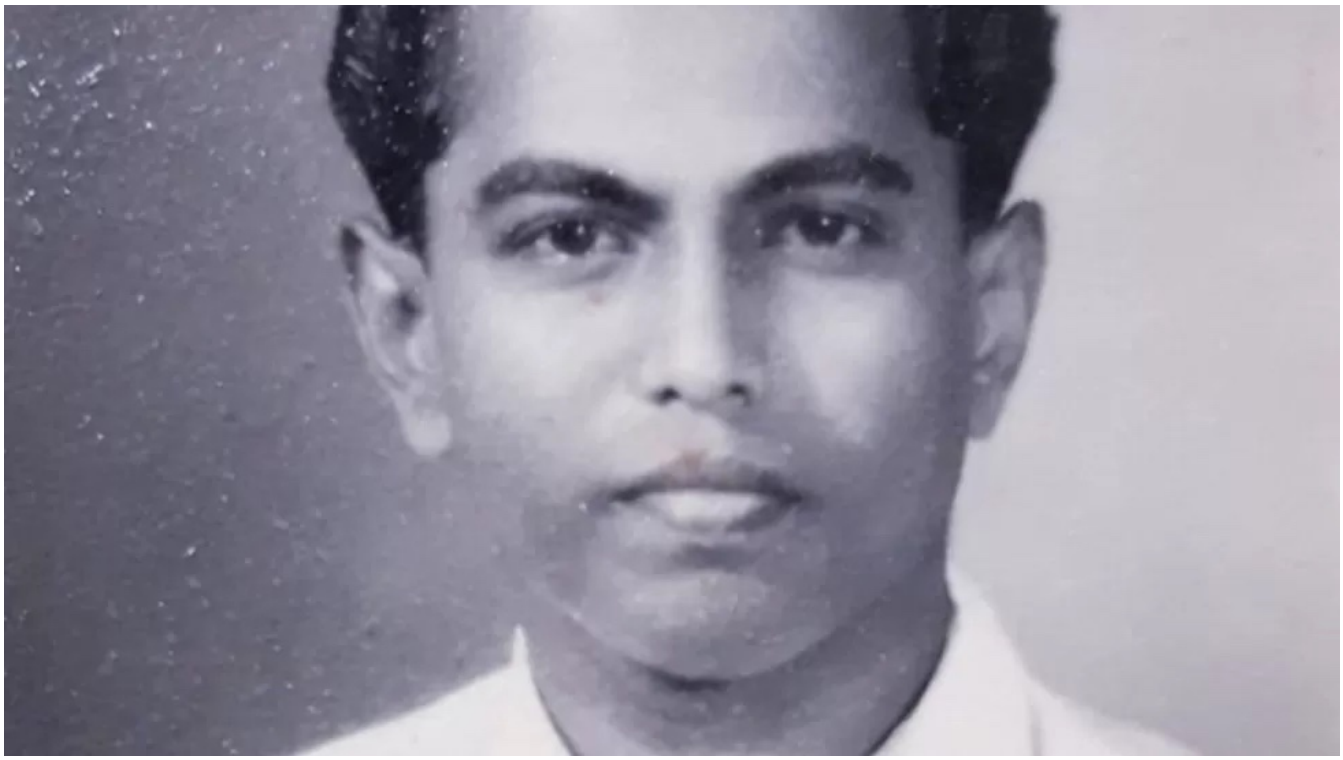
Through the school administration, he got contacts of his father's former students, many of whom still live in Malaysia, and reached out to them.

Over the next few days, several of them responded to his queries and offered to go look for the grave.

Mr Thirumaran said he was surprised to see how fondly the students - who are now in their 80s - spoke of his father.

"One of them told me how my father bought him a bicycle to go to school and college. Another said that when he trailed in studies, my father helped him perform well," he said.

"When I heard all this, I realised what I had lost in my own life."



K Ramasundaram died of pneumonia in 1967

The grave near the bush

After some of his father's former students in Malaysia located the grave, they informed Mr Thirumaran.

On 8 November, an overwhelmed Mr Thirumaran flew to Malaysia to see his father's resting place.

On a muggy morning, he stepped into the old cemetery in Kerling, hidden in a thicket of trees, and walked around the numerous headstones until he reached one near the bushes. It was his father's.

"The grave was a little worn out and overgrown with wild grass, but the

gravestone had a photo of him, as well as his name and birth and death dates," Mr Thirumaran said, adding that until then, he had not seen a photo of his father and had no idea what he looked like.

When Mr Thirumaran's mother had returned to India, she had brought back with her a handful of earth from her husband's grave, which he said, he had sprinkled on his mother's grave.

"This time, I took a handful of earth from my mother's resting place and put it on my father's grave," an emotional Mr Thirumaran said.

"It was as if through me they were sharing their love, even after death."



Mr Thirumaran cleaned the grave with help from his father's former students

Over the next few days, Mr Thirumaran, with help from his father's old students, cleaned the grave, lit candles and prayed several times before returning to India on 16 November.

He said the trip gave him "more than he had imagined" in the form of priceless memories and souvenirs, including old pictures of his father.

"His students told me that I look like him. For a boy who grew up without his father, this was life coming full circle," he said.

His story also caught the attention of Tamil Nadu Chief Minister MK Stalin, who tweeted that Mr Thirumaran's journey - and the way he was helped by other people along the way - was "the unique cultural identity of Tamils".

"Man is a sea of emotions. I feel Thirumaran's search for his father's grave was his life's search," he added.