

# **The Dynamics of People Theatre for Social Change: A Study of Selected Cultural Movements in Sri Lanka**

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## **Abstract**

Two major events took place in the 2008 global peace (and/or war) calendar that coincided with the closing stages of my research project. The first was the Sri Lankan government's withdrawal from the 2002 Cease Fire Agreement that they signed with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The action unleashed spiralling violence from both sides. The other was the nomination of Brazilian theatre guru and activist Augusto Boal, a household name among Sri Lankan theatre makers, for the 2008 Nobel Peace Prize.

Today, it seems that only a few people promote peace, even as most parts of the world persist in wrecking various peace efforts. Indeed, the two milestones do not only correspond with the goal of this study: the interpretation of people's theatre as a cultural movement for social change. They have also helped in shaping my perception throughout my stint in Sri Lanka. Since the focus of qualitative research is the perception and experience of research participants, as well as the manner in which they make sense of the continually shifting realities, this paper spends considerable time in describing my presence in the research setting.

Here, I follow the argument of Locke (2000) that the researcher's role in understanding the social setting, personal experiences, assumptions, and biases can be treated positively, regarded to be more useful than harmful to the circumstances. As Holliday (2002) reminds us, the researcher always brings her own cultural baggage and discourses when she enters the research setting. Thus, it was my interpretation and construction of the social worlds—through my presence in the research setting—that affected the study in unimaginable ways.

## **1. Introduction**

Two major events took place in the global peace (and/or war) calendar of 2008 that coincided with the closing stages of my research project. The first was the Sri Lankan government's withdrawal from the 2002 Cease Fire Agreement signed with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) by January 2008, with which spiralling violence unleashed by both sides has continued to rage. The other peace-related event at the turn of the year was the nomination of the Brazilian theatre guru and activist Augusto Boal, who is also a household name among Sri Lankan theatre makers, for the 2008 Nobel Peace Prize. It would seem that a few people have sought to make peace see the dawn of the day, while most parts of the world have persisted to wreck the peace efforts. Indeed, the two milestones have not only corresponded with the goal of this study, i.e. interpretation of people theatre as cultural movement for social change, but they also helped shape my perception throughout my Ceylon stint.

Given that the focus of a qualitative research like this is the perception and experience of the research participant(s) as well as the manner in which they make sense of the continually shifting

realities, I shall spend at length in the introductory section of this paper describing my presence in the research setting. Here, I follow the argument of Locke and others (2000) on the role of a researcher by believing that my understanding of the social setting, personal experiences, assumptions and biases can be treated as being positive and useful rather than harmful. Besides, as Holliday (2002) reminds us, the researcher had always brought her own cultural baggage and discourse when she entered the research setting. Thus, it was my interpretation and construction of the social worlds through my presence in the research setting that affected the study in a way unimaginable had I otherwise stayed comfortably back home.

As a novice researcher, little did I know that the two-decade long bitter civil war in the country is but multi-faceted. It was not until I embarked on the project and attached myself to my host institution, the International Centre for Ethnic Studies (ICES) in Colombo that I discovered how crude and shallow my intellectual and cultural grasps of Sri Lanka were. Not only was the ICES a fine research institution with excellent collection of books maintained by an admirably dedicated librarian and his staff, it was also an intellectual cauldron to discuss and exchange ideas with different international scholars with different interests and expertise. Added to this academically stimulating atmosphere was my interaction with various people I encountered on daily bases that helped me question and subsequently reconstruct the social worlds.

Coming from a multi-ethnic society myself, I thereby unlearned my ethnicity and reflected on the now tattered nationalism at home through my casual acquaintance as well as close friendship with the Sinhalese and the Tamils alike. I understood their mutual distrust and fear of each other, thanks to the promulgation of the antiquated myths, the state polity, the education system, to say nothing of the media conspiracy that have persistently separated people along ethnic lines. At the same time, being a foreigner, I had the advantage of playing the role of a detached observer who was able to recognize that the two communities have in fact secretly admired each other. This is not to say that I was immune to prejudice and suspicion of the foreign other. My uneasy entrance to and early exit from Sri Lanka,<sup>1</sup> and possibly the recent crisis befallen the ICES<sup>2</sup> also contributed to my understanding of the country's apprehension and caution of foreign infiltration that may erode Sri Lanka sloganised as "a Buddhist country belonging to the Sinhalese." Here, my personal experiences taught me the complexity of the conflict. Thus, having reconstructed the social worlds upon entering the research setting, I confined my topic only to exploration of the world of theatre for social change. It is to the urgency of studying theatre in social conflict that I now turn.

Considering that conflict and its costs are rife in Sri Lanka while the peace process is yet an unfinished project, social change is thus a deep cause of concern as proven by the bulk of scholastic writing on Sri Lanka within 1998-2002 which mainly focus on the causes, dynamics and consequences of the armed conflict.<sup>3</sup> After the "2002 Cease Fire Agreement", attention is largely paid to the repercussion of the ceasefire breakdown, that is, examination on either the mounting increase in human rights violations or, conversely, the humanitarian relief efforts. Not many of the recent scholarships, however, pay attention to the role of such "outside players" as community practices whose indirect involvements may help expedite the peace process in one way or another, and no studies yet appear on such forces in the literary circle, especially that of theatre.

The aim of this research is therefore to explore the extent to which popular theatre as one form of literary works may have shaped people's awareness in reflecting on the ongoing conflict in Sri Lanka. One characteristic advantage of theatre is that, unlike other genres of literature, theatre allows direct interaction and dialogue with the audience; hence it leads to awareness, which in the long run may possibly lead to social change. Next, in view of their constant, durable disposition, the theatre community is considered influential in articulating their own field of cultural production, hence field of power. This present study thus sought to examine in what practical ways encounter with this particular form of cultural movement may have inspired the society to respond positively to the complexity of human situations of the day.

Here, the term "cultural movements" in question as appeared in the title of the study is generally defined as a community consisting of people who are concerned about and engaged with the Sri Lankan world of theatre such as scriptwriters, directors, actors, musicians, make-up artists, organizers, etc. Admittedly, the term "cultural movements" chosen here is yet to gain currency in scholarly conversation,<sup>4</sup> but this term is intentionally preferred to highlight the strength this literati or "men [sic] of letters" has in struggling for legitimacy, to borrow Bourdieu,<sup>5</sup> through their use of cultural capital. Unlike the movement proper, the cultural movements observed in this present study can be individuals or networks taking action in their own accord to help shape public opinions through their literary activities, in this case, theatrical activities. They are not the same with mass hysteria whose collective behaviour challenges the power that be. Neither are they like organized movements with charismatic leaders to articulate their beliefs. Instead, the movement may grow among people having shared concerns and some sense of connections. The concept of movement here is thus close to the social forces that Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri term "multitude" in their book *Empire*:

The multitude is the real productive force of our social world, whereas Empire is a mere apparatus of capture that lives only off the vitality of the multitude—as Marx would say, a vampire regime of accumulated dead labour that survives only by sucking off the blood of the living.<sup>6</sup>

This research, therefore, looked into the so-called "patterns of behaviour" of individuals or organisations whose concerns extend to the promotion of peace, justice and democracy in Sri Lanka through their own specific field of interest and expertise, i.e. theatre. But, considering the complexity of the Sri Lankan conflict, this study confined itself to the period after the "2002 Cease Fire Agreement".

## **2. Methodology and Research Procedures**

*Methodology.* Using a qualitative research paradigm, this six-month case study sought to explore the social praxis of the Sri Lankan theatre workers. The research activities included in-depth interviews, participatory observation on their works, creative process, socio-political awareness and political economy of their artistic pursuits, as well as immersion in their everyday experiences.

The method applied herein was progressive, interactive, and eclectic, using, among others, sociology of literature (particularly Bourdieu's sociology of arts). In times of revolution/war, performing arts are often more powerful as proven by the existence of numerous theatre groups in the country. Yet, considering the relatively short duration of the research, this study narrowed its scope to studying the (major) works that have appeared and performed since 2002 as follows:

Jana Karaliya, TrikonE Arts Centre, Wayside Theatre Troupe, Lanka Children's and Youth Theatre Organisation, Pahura, Third Eye Local Knowledge and Skills Activist Group, Butterfly Peace Garden and Theatre Action Group.

*Research Procedures.* The selection of the research participants above was based on the consistency and depth of their engagement in the world of theatre. Interviews with limited participants were conducted to put together descriptive notes on their formal, demographic encounter with the country's conflict. Data of this kind was necessary to assess the movements' struggle for legitimacy through their respective artistic *fields* when talking about war, reconciliation and ethnicity. Guided by the descriptive notes, the next type of data obtained via in-depth interviews and participatory observation was the lived experience of the movements' members. Such reflective notes may provide thorough information about the background, influences and social outlook –*habitus*– of the literati in question, which were then used to analyse their *social praxis* in dealing with the Sri Lankan continuing conflict.

To sum up, the social acts of the literary-based cultural movements can be read through what Pierre Bourdieu postulates as the process of *distinction*, in order to see in what (symbolic) ways the particular communities under study mark their identity in expressing cultural values as different as others. Here, the triangular design of analyzing concurrently the three types of data may look like a prism with three sides breaking up light into each other. It is through this prism that war, reconciliation and ethnicity in Sri Lanka can be glimpsed at.

### **3. 1. A Well of Tears, Land of Conflict, and Fountain of Creativity**

Although the prolonged ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka is a postcolonial phenomenon and many still believe in the antiquity of the conflict, one of the modern interpretations thereof is the Sinhala – Tamil elite rivalry for (political) position and employment and the Tamil – Muslim business competition as a consequence of the language policy. Given the vast scholarships on the Sri Lankan ethnic conflict to date, what follows therefore are selected accounts on the main milestones of the Sri Lankan conflict to help approach the title of the present study.

On the one hand, there has been long grievance of the Tamil population (comprising roughly of 12% Sri Lankan, 7.5% Hill Country and 7% Muslim)<sup>7</sup> who are economically, culturally and politically discriminated against, to say nothing of the denial of their linguistic rights. On the other hand, the predominantly Buddhist Sinhalese that make up 74% of the population begrudge the demand of the Tamil secessionists who reside mostly in the Northern and Eastern parts of the country for a separate homeland which amounts to one-third of the country's territory.

When Sri Lanka gained its independence from the British in 1948, welfare and political opportunity that used to go to the Tamils in colonial times went largely to the Sinhalese majority to the dismay of the Tamil minority as a result of the various discriminatory laws passed throughout the 1950s by the new government.

In 1956, for example, President S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike in his bid for power played his card of Sinhalese nationalism by making Sinhala the official language, and Buddhism, the state religion. The Sinhala Only Act systematically marginalised the minority as proven by the shrinking quotas of the Tamils in the universities and government sectors. The first anti-Tamil riot broke out in

1958, but militant Tamil movements did not emerge until the 1970s with the formation, in 1975, of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) known popularly as the Tamil Tigers. The LTTE's objective was to create an independent Tamil country for the Tamils minority in Sri Lanka's North and East, ignoring the fact that first, there are other minority groups living in these provinces, and second, Sri Lankan Tamils are now scattered all over the country for which reason separation may pose problems. As such, Sinhalese chauvinists often challenged the LTTE's struggle for liberation by ignoring the injustice done thus far towards the Tamils. Among the state's cultural demolition and humiliation towards the Tamils was displayed, symbolically and literally, by the burning down of the Jaffna Public Library in 1981.

But, the culmination of the conflict was the assassination of 13 Sri Lankan Army soldiers in Jaffna by the Tamil Tigers in 1983. The subsequent retaliation by the Sinhalese angry mobs caused the deaths of thousands of Tamils throughout the country and destruction of their property, forcing their exodus to Australia, Canada, North America, the United Kingdom and other Western countries.<sup>8</sup> The government did nothing about this pogrom for which reason tensions continued to fester.

Numerous peace talks were made to no avail, one of which was the Indo-Lanka Peace Accord signed in 1987 with the Indian government with which the arrival of the Indian Peace Keeping Force turned the political situation from bad to worse. It was not until 1989 that the nearly deposed government of Premadasa crushed the rebels in a draconian manner, and the Sri Lankan government – LTTE relations continue to worsen. Among series of the LTTE's acts of violence were the ethnic cleansing of the Muslims in the East and North in the 1990s, political assassination of the Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in 1991 and murder attempt of President Chandrika Kumaratunga in 1999 and attacks on strategic places like the Kandy's Temple of the Tooth in 1998 and Sri Lanka's airport at Katunayake in July 2001. Under the state's Terrorism Act, the Tamil Tigers has been held responsible for the hundreds of bombings, robberies, and various crimes taken place throughout the 2000s, while the Sinhala youths' Nationalist Freedom Party or the JVP (Jatika Vimukti Peramuna), who has equally committed gross violence to civilians since its insurrection in the 1980s, was never equated as terrorists.

Then, in February 2002, a Cease Fire Agreement negotiated in Norway was signed by the government and the LTTE chief Velupillai Prabhakaran to be broken down in no time. The break up of the ceasefire agreement was as complicated as the government and the LTTE were equally to blame: while the Sri Lankan government never implemented the joint mechanism agreed by both parties, the Tamil Tigers on its part started killing soldiers. While the Sri Lankan government vowed to win the war at the expense of poor governance and crippling economy, the LTTE, supported financially, ideologically and emotionally by Tamil Diasporas worldwide, set out to continue the war at all cost including its use of such infamous methods as child soldiers recruitment, intimidation and self-afflicted martyrdom. By January 2008, peace in Sri Lanka was again back to square one with the breaking down of the CFA.

Albeit the long-standing war, it was indeed the July 1983 riot that became the defining moment in the history of the Sri Lankan ethnic conflict from which the time on retaliatory killings, threats to civilian and other human rights violations committed by both sides show no sign of termination to date. It is within this political context that one needs to understand the Sri Lankan cultural

production, because the year of living dangerously is often the year of writing skilfully and shrewdly.

The next section will discuss the emergence of drama during the creative period of the 1980s onwards.

### **3. 2. Alternative Theatre for Alteration of Sri Lankan Society**

Since the 1970s, Sri Lankan political atmosphere was conducive to the growth of progressive, radical, and alternative theatres –a worldwide trend among the youths of the decade with their street drama– although signs of ethnic bonding seemed slow to emerge as the existing theatres mostly performed for their separate Sinhala or Tamil audiences.

To start with the Sinhalese-led theatre, several important figures with their breakthrough in Street Theatre include Gamini Hattetuwegama, Parakrama Nirielle and H.A. Perera, while Dharmasiri Bandaranayake was then known for his anti-war proscenium theatre. Altogether, these pioneering theatres were effectively used to transmit social problems of the time. The unique contribution of Gamini Hattetuwegama was his modern Street Drama introducing the idea of an activist theatre associated with people's struggles for freedom in Sri Lanka as early as the 1970s. Since then, his model of theatre training workshops and experimental plays with radical and political overtones set the trend of the English/Sinhala theatres followed by such outstanding artistes as the younger Parakrama Nirielle and H. A. Perera. By the 1980s, theatre gathered momentum with the popularity of the protest, political plays both in the form of street dramas and performances in fixed theatre halls. The government surprisingly did not enact any censorship but rather co-opted this activity.<sup>9</sup>

Meanwhile, the Tamil section operated in a rather different way, as proven by the nascent artists hailing from Jaffna who became increasingly more politically alienated and thence located this overload of political anxiety through their works. Unlike their Sinhala counterparts, the Tamil theatre could be seen more as propaganda tool for the Tamil cause. The post-1983 saw escalation of ethnic riots, ceaseless clashes involving the army and the Tamil separatists, atrocity in detention camps, shelling and bomb blasting especially in the North and East. Here, the unaddressed grievance of the Tamils, the growing militancy of the Tamil liberation movements and the government's heavy-handed handling of the rebels had all bred political tension.

Sivathamby has noted that for the Tamil theatre world, the year 1984 was as momentous as 1956 for the rise of Sinhala theatre.<sup>10</sup> In that year, students from the University of Jaffna began to experiment Street Drama with strong political message. The university opened its drama and theatre department staffed by Shanmugalingam, Maunaguru and the then young student Sithamparanathan, introducing as it did the new concept of theatre by using it as a means of political expression. These young talents used playmaking to create a space to involve the populace to voice out matters relating to social and political problems, thanks to Augusta Boal who gave them idea of Forum Theatre. Also in Jaffna, Reverend Dr. N. M. Saveri from the Centre for Performing Arts is worth mentioning for his early efforts to bring together the different communities through the Sinhala Tamil dance and drama performances.<sup>11</sup> This centre uses theatrical activities for social purpose, i.e. bridging the Sinhalese and the Tamils by revitalising the Catholic *kooththu* tradition.<sup>12</sup>

Indeed, reformulation of traditional play like *kooththu* has always had its own appeal and significance for the Tamils in the Eastern province right through these days. Maunaguru who planted the seed in Jaffna is now at the Eastern University, Batticaloa promoting the development of local theatre. His promising protégé S. Jeyasankar, a graduate of the Jaffna University is his colleague at the Eastern University. The younger man used the concept of applied theatre to reformulate the *kooththu* tradition.

Theatre is very popular in Sri Lanka. They are folk-centred, spontaneous, and interactive. Theatre involves people directly, although some conventional dramas have often served the status quo. Meanwhile, there are such anti-institutional theatres like the Sinhala *sokari* and *kolam* or the Tamil *kooththu*, but sometimes they tend to champion their respective ethnicity and this helps to divide the nation. This study looked specifically at theatres of the people, led by Sinhala and Tamil respectively or performed by the mixed communities, which have the power to reach audience at the grass root level to act in response to the emerging socio-political changes in the country.

#### 4. Theatres for Peace in the Theatre of War

To give a sense of the theatre groups under observation, I shall briefly describe each of them to see the degree to which these selected cultural movements have contributed to social change. For convenience, I shall describe the first 5 groups headquartered in Colombo, the next 2 groups in Batticaloa and the last in Jaffna.<sup>13</sup>

1. *The Jana Karaliya*. The architects of the **Jana Karaliya** (henceforth JK) are Parakrama Niriella and H.A. Perera,<sup>14</sup> two veteran artistes in small screen and stage drama, who started to draw a plan in June 2003 and materialized by the next year. The concept of the Jana Karaliya is a travelling theatre with a forum theatre component aiming at integrating audience participation in the live performances. The group perform in a public area inside a huge theatre tent that can be assembled, broken down, and then transported from one area to another. The JK stay in one place for 2 to 3 months conducting pamphlet distribution, recruiting, workshops and rehearsal to be concluded by performances. The JK play both in Sinhala or Tamil mediums depending on the majority of the local communities in the area. Sinhala and Tamil artistes would play roles in each other's dramas. The JK performed for the victims of Tsunami 2004 across the country. JK has played for the paying audience and recently travelled to India while waiting for the tent to be fixed after its frequent wear and tear.

2. *The TrikonE Arts Centre*. The veteran drama and film director Dharmasiri Bandaranayake is the inventor of the **TrikonE Arts Centre** (henceforth TAC), an independent organisation established on 24 October 2005 carrying a mission to use performing arts to promote peace and harmony in Sri Lanka. The activities in the Centre include producing drama and films, conducting artistic educational programmes, holding seminars and workshops as well as publications. Since the increasingly flagging ethnic war in the 1980s, Dharmasiri has steadfastly committed himself to use theatre to convey alternatives to war, hence his passionate engagement with producing a series of documentaries featuring the rich legacy of Sinhala and Tamil folk arts in his attempts to foster understanding and appreciation of each other's cultures. With his TAC

artists Dharmasiri made several cultural troupes to the northern and eastern parts of the country as well as overseas with one single mission to showcase the possible mutual exchange of cultures among Sri Lankan diverse ethnic groups. His goal is to make Sinhala and Tamil communities collaborate for a common goal, i.e. peace through arts.

A renowned figure in the world of theatre and recipient of numerous international awards and esteemed Sri Lankan presidential awards for arts, Kalashoori (1995), and for drama, Kalakeerthi (2005), Dharmasiri consistently believes in using the power of theatrical images to increase awareness of the futility of war. Among his celebrated plays is *Trojan Kanthawo* [Trojan Women] – a brilliant Sinhalisation of Euripides' Greek tragedy. Through this oft-staged drama Dharmasiri displays his refusal to war propaganda while drawing the audience's attention to the high values of classical theatre. It is this vision that exposed him to death threats and a terrorist label "Sinhala Tiger" by some chauvinist Sinhalese.<sup>15</sup>

3. *The Wayside Theatre Troupe*. Gamini K. Hattetuwegama established this group in 1974. A prominent character among today's teachers of drama and theatre, Gamini has been determinedly attached to the **Wayside Theatre Troupe** (henceforth WTT), his brainchild of more than thirty years. Gamini's culturally elite position as a lecturer of English Drama and Theatre at Peradeniya University, Kandy until the early 1980s, coupled with his authority in English Theatre, interestingly enough, did not preclude him from making a break point toward securing populace interests through his artistic pursuit in Street Drama. Beginning their debut performance at Anuradhapura Railway Station on the Poson Poya Day of 1974, Gamini and his WTT artists have since then faithfully played a non-elitist, activist theatre troupe advocating liberation struggles of the Sri Lanka people while commenting on many society's ills of today. At the heart of the WTT is an alternative theatre art-cum-non-formal-education. Such is a liberationist and postcolonial strategy to embrace as wide audience of all social classes from village to town as the troupe can possibly manage.

The WTT radical and political tune was clear when, for example, in 1975, the troupe performed their "Loka Ahara Sammelanaya" at the dinner venue for the delegation of the FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization) international conference in Colombo, criticising as it did the first nations' food policy towards the third world. To date, the troupe always participate on special days like International Women's Day or Labour Day with which many other theatres have followed suit.

Despite the fading enthusiasm at present for Street Drama as their number adds up to more than 60 in the country, Gamini and his troupe remain committed to nurturing this performing arts through producing plays on the modern people's dilemmas and folly. With no financial support from neither individual nor state institution, this non-commercial theatre is indeed a rarity. The government honoured Gamini's contribution to alternative theatre on World Theatre Day 2001. This recipient of the 2005 Kalakirthi was also awarded later at the National Drama Festival 2007 for his contribution to the theatre as teacher, critic, playwright, actor and director in both Sinhala and English. As I write, Gamini is still battling with cancer but this devout Buddhist remains dedicated to teaching groups of young people coming to his workshop – an activity done for years resulting in the nation's best, award winning younger artists many of whom have similarly shown sheer steadfastness as a tribute to their *counsellor* in the theatre world.<sup>16</sup>

4. *The Lanka Children's and Youth Theatre Organisation.* For Somalatha Subasinghe the director and founder of the **Lanka Children's and Youth Theatre Organisation** (henceforth LCYTO) the future of Sri Lanka lies on children. A very good friend of Gamini Hattetuwegama, this veteran in children's theatre and playwright believes that it is important to educate the young ones through the medium of theatre if we are to nurture a benevolent society. Established in 1981 and registered under the Laws of Sri Lanka, LCYTO is a volunteer organisation popularly known as the "Play House-Kotte" with the aim of promoting children's and youth theatre in Sri Lanka.

LCYTO has produced a repertoire of children's and youth theatre and award winning mainstream theatre productions and participated in many international festivals and conferences. It is this group's belief that children's theatre productions with the above-mentioned theatrical orientation will enhance the child's positive perception towards society.

The training programme in LCYTO is offered free of charge to the youth who are committed to study Drama and Theatre especially for children in order that they become professionals, The programme entails all round training such as acting, script writing, directing, movement and vocal training, as well as training with practical application in designing stage sets and props, costume designing, designing stage lighting, training in stage management and sound effects.

As the wife of Mr. Fernando the then Ambassador of Sri Lanka for Malaysia 1997 – 1999, Somalatha, who prefers to keep her maiden name, took time to promote LCYTO abroad. On her leave, her son-in-law Chandana and her elder daughter Kaushalya Fernando were made in charge of the drama troupe fulfilling the duties and responsibilities of Play House-Kotte. Partly for reason of distance – a three hour flight to Malaysia – Somalatha used to return to Sri Lanka once in two months and stayed on for a month. For example, once she came to Sri Lanka for important rehearsals such as the staging of the *Mother Courage* – a production to support the anti-war women organization.

Next, when again she accompanied her husband to the Netherlands in January 2000 and until 2003, this passionate artiste came to Sri Lanka to accompany the drama troupe to participate at the World Theatre Conference in South Korea. I was told that Chandana and Kaushalya did the bulk of work in preparing and rehearsals during the time, and her students in the Play House who had the same vision as herself supported them wholeheartedly. This is to say that LCYTO is indeed on its way to build a concerned society. Somalatha and LYCTO have given their commitment to live up to their vision and mission.<sup>17</sup>

5. *The Pahura.* Prasannajith Abeysurya, a lecturer at the Visual and Performing Arts University, Colombo founded this Street Drama group in 1997. Pahura is at present defunct for lack of financial support. The group however has made attempts to procure funding by taking part in commercial production, for example, Prasannajith and his wife and two children play the high rated TV Series "Olu". This talented young man is one of the brilliant students of Somalatha Subasinghe. His hard work, he said to me when we met in my office at ICES, was a tribute to Somalatha and the 'grand-teacher' Gamini Hattetuwegama. In fact, Somalatha had informed him to see me about his Pahura. But, given that this group is temporarily non-operational, I did not manage to get much from the otherwise resourceful venue for social change.

6. *The Third Eye Local Knowledge and Skills Activist Group*. Called *Moondravathu Kann* [Third Eye] in Tamil, the man behind the group is an academic at the Eastern University of Sri Lanka Sivagnanam Jeyasankar.<sup>18</sup> Himself a skilled *kooththu* performer, Jeyasankar has challenged the conventional, intellectual method –property of the academia– of performing arts by exploring the creative potential of the village performers. He attempts to translate the community’s needs to flock, play and learn together, believing that such is important in today’s world where globalization continues to bulldoze the significance of communal life. In 2002, he established the **Third Eye Local Knowledge and Skills Activist Group** (henceforth Thirdeye) with the aim to reformulate the traditional Tamil *kooththu* by engaging in participatory, applied and street theatre forms with children and youth. It is an art medium to re-invigorate and celebrate the local knowledge, skills and traditions of villages in Batticaloa. The *kooththu* players together with the youth create performance pieces, facilitate children’s drama and games workshops as well as organise children’s performances. Different group members coordinate and specialise in different activities depending upon their skills and training. Ethnic conflict and the 2004 tsunami are among topics discussed and performed by the group. Although at this writing, Jeyasankar is completing his Doctorate in India, Thirdeye remains active in their cultural activities such as publishing poetry, and organising events and workshops pertaining to gender, violence and various awareness training.<sup>19</sup>

7. *The Butterfly Peace Garden*. In 1995, the Batticaloa Health Reach made a partnership with the Canadian artist Paul Hogan to establish the **Butterfly Peace Garden** (henceforth BPG) to provide healing space for children traumatised by the war through arts and play.<sup>20</sup> Sprawled in a land used to be the property of the French Jesuit’s mango garden, the BPC is a centre for creative therapeutic education for the young victims of war. The BPC is funded by the Peace Fund and the Canadian High Commission and, for the first few years, HIVOS (Netherlands). Acting as the local partner is the Jesuit priest Rev. Fr. Paul Satkunayagam, a trained counsellor who has had previous experience in his counselling centre for ex-detainees and widows of war.

At the heart of the BPC is peace-making effort, that is, replacing the war ethos of violence and destruction with gentleness and creativeness with which those children can heal and subsequently become healers within their communities. The BPG has served over 600 schoolchildren with difficulty selected from around 20 villages in Batticaloa representing different ethnic groups (Tamil and Muslim) with their after school and weekend 9-month program at the Garden. Facilitated by staff animators, trained local adults from mixed communities, these children are led to play and do art activities such as clay work, arts and crafts, drama, storytelling and music with the purpose to heal them from the war trauma and ensure their healthy personal growth. The Garden provides an arena conducive for healing that appeals to children’s imagination, hence the BPC motto “earth, arts and hearts”.

8. *The Theatre Action Group*. Based in the northern part of Sri Lanka, the **Theatre Action Group** (henceforth TAG) is a community of Tamil theatre artists founded by Dr. Kandasamy Sithamparanathan, the Director of the School of Fine Arts at the University of Jaffna. A Brandeis International Fellow in 1998 working on a topic of Coexistence and the Quest for Justice, Dr. Sithamparanathan believes in using theatre as a safe venue for people to heal from trauma as well as a catalyst for social change. Characteristic of the TAG is its engagement with members of Tamil communities in transformative theatrical experiences, healing rituals, educational

workshops, political demonstrations and dialogue. As an independent organization, this theatre group has often collaborated with other institution such as the Department of Psychiatry of the University of Jaffna in the "Theatre as Therapy" project. In 2000, the TAG managed to mobilise and organise each village in the Northern part of the country in a theatre forum using not only performances, but also group discussions on common interests and day-to-day problems. Thus, the mission of the TAG is social empowerment, village communication, personal awareness and self-discovery with which individual and societal change may likely occur.

However, TAG's role in creating a platform for societal and individual change at the village level was once challenged when it extended to attempts to involve in Sri Lanka's conflict resolution project. Dr. Sithampanathan's involvement with the innovative Pongu Tamil Movement in the eve of the 2002 Cease-fire Agreement was misread by large segments of Sinhala ultra-nationalists as being the Tamils' war preparation through arts, hence a clear threat to their interests. This misunderstanding was clearly the result of the non-existence of communication between Tamil and Sinhala artists and the absence of information on what Pongu Tamil really was.

The eight theatre groups observed can be linked to one another in terms of vision, mission and means of sustenance. The theatres of Thirdeye, BPG and TAG come from the Tamil culture, while the Sinhala tradition is represented by the theatres of JK, TAC, WTT, LCYTO and the Pahura. Some of them use experimental classical theatre such as Dharmasiri Bandaranayake, while others use ritualistic theatre like the theatre of Dr Sithampanathan and the Butterfly Garden artistes. Others still use traditional-based theatre like Jeyasankar's *koththu*, age-based, i.e. theatres for children and youth like those of Somalatha Subasinghe and Prasannajith Abeyesurya, setting-based as in Parakrama Niriella's on-stage and mobile theatre and the street theatre of Gamini Hattetuwegama. As for the goals, they may vary according to the ethnic identity and political aspirations of the artists, although both Sinhala-led and Tamil-led groups have aspired to social change, i.e. creation of peace. The Tamil groups tend to focus more on social upheaval and the self-determination of the Tamils, while the Sinhala counterparts have prioritised the co-existence between the Sinhala - Tamil groups.

It would seem that given their past achievements, the Sinhala-led groups like those of Parakrama – Perera and Dharmasiri have access to well-placed contacts among all communities including the government echelons, business and professional networks. As such, for groups of this kind, it would seem easier to find their way to mend the tarnished Sinhalese-Tamil relationship when compared to the less 'popular' Tamil groups in terms of influence or what Bourdieu calls cultural and political capital.

Meanwhile, from the observation it was found out that that the road to peace is sometimes hurdled with the presence of such international players as NGOs and donors whose intervention is put effectively through supports for cultural-related activities. On the one hand, partnership with big benefactors is the most viable way for the theater makers to materialize their programs. But, on the other hand, when funding evaporates dependence on sponsorship has proven troublesome. Fortunately, as I observed, the genesis of the theatre groups under study is invariably of self-supporting kind. As it is, despite the impediment they have often met such as

'public distrust of the unknown' or the more tangible problem like lack of stable economic sustenance, there has been no sign of them stopping the promotion of social change in Sri Lanka.

## 5. Conclusions

So, what is peace? "We could talk of peace, we could talk of war," said the Tamil poet Sivasegaram, "Those talking of peace could peacefully sell arms to those who talk of war."<sup>21</sup> I shall conclude my report by saying that peace is yet an unfinished project in Sri Lanka as bemoaned by the just quoted poet. The country's long-drawn-out war is replete with layers of problems: politicization of almost all aspects of public life, deteriorating economy, distrust of public institutions and people's representatives, forceful militarization of society and the increasingly taken-for-granted attitude towards violence, to say nothing of the intervention of international players. As such, the complexity of the ethnic problem has forced each ethnic group in conflict grapple with identity and, in relation to cultural expression, with preservation of each ethnic tradition. This is to say that when the talk turns to cultural approach of peace making, it needs to take into account the possible Hobbesian fear experienced by each ethnic group of the other that precludes restoration of relationships across the divide. A case in point is the TAG. Although to date Dr. Sithamparanathan has made it medium of social and personal empowerment, he has often been misunderstood by some Sinhala sectors.<sup>22</sup>

I have shown, however, that in this war-torn country there are still people who are committed to furthering the cause for peace through their artistic pursuits so that such fear of each other's dominance has slowly diminished. These are people who take proactive work by making use of arts and culture to create equality for all, support co-existence and oppose suppression and denial of any ethnic groups of their rights. Indeed, the magnitude of one culture's artistic productivity has often depended on the ways in which community reflects on and sometimes refracts from their life experiences; and such is shown by outstanding performances of people or group of people I met and subsequently made to participate in my research.

Despite the hurdles, theatre flourishes in Sri Lanka and it provides ground for communication with people on which the seeds for social consciousness, mutual understanding, peace and reconciliation may likely grow. Here we see that the eight theatre makers make up what Hardt and Negri call the "biopolitical power" of the "multitude" that provides sources needed for democracy. These cultural workers are not just part of the nation, but they are its conscience. "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world," said Margaret Mead, "Indeed, it's the only thing that ever has".

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<sup>1</sup> I was denied accommodation at one Buddhist centre off Colombo for the whole duration of my research but one week temporary stay as I set foot in Sri Lanka on 30 August 2007. The proprietor said that the centre was reserved only for students learning meditation, Buddhist students and Buddhist nuns to none of which I qualify. Later, he made it clear to me that the present government was wary of the evangelization attempts by some foreign, notably Korean, NGOs targeting the poor people of the country by means of lavish gifts. His suspicion of me was well founded not only due to my oriental appearance, but also my arrival at the venue accompanied by a Thai Jesuit. As for my early departure, upon some professional advice, I left Sri Lanka one month earlier than the grant period given the deteriorating political situation in the country starting at the beginning of 2008.

<sup>2</sup> In addition to the internal conflict, the denial of visa renewal experienced by the ICES Executive Director, a French nationality, is hot issue in Sinhala polity promoting the idea that the Centre is working for foreign intervention.

<sup>3</sup> The other two main topics are on economic and human development and on identity, ethnicity, nationalism and religion. See *Research on Sri Lanka in the Period 1998-2002: Future Challenges*, A Research Report, April 2003, Wenche Hauge, International Peace Research Institute, Oslo.  
[http://www.prio.no/page/Publication\\_details/9429/40681.html?PHPSESSID=b8a30ac](http://www.prio.no/page/Publication_details/9429/40681.html?PHPSESSID=b8a30ac)

<sup>4</sup> As a comparison, a number of cultural movements in my hometown Yogyakarta have played major roles in the formation of public opinion, yet studies on this community are hard to find. Hopefully a comparative study done in Sri Lanka may contribute to the existing scholarship on cultural movements.

<sup>5</sup> See Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, translated by Richard Nice (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), p. 48.

<sup>6</sup> See Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), p. 80. They further develop this concept in their *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (New York: Hamish Hamilton, 2005).

<sup>7</sup> These three Tamil-speaking nationalities have their respective histories. The Hill Country Tamils (Indian Tamils) who are predominantly Hindus are distinct from their Sri Lankan (Ceylon) Tamil counterparts who are Sivaite, while the Christian Tamils are often politically behind and identify themselves as Sri Lankan Tamils. Though speaking Tamil, the Muslims are assertive about their own distinct identity. Meanwhile, there are other minorities within these 'Tamil' minorities such as the Borah and Memens in Muslim communities and the Colombo Chetties and the Parava among communities with Tamil identity. Outside the Tamil-speaking people, the other minorities in Sri Lanka include the Burghers (descendants of the Portuguese and Dutch), Malays, Attho and Malayalies. See S. Sivasegaram's "The Sri Lankan National Crisis and the Search for Solution" accessible through <http://radicalnotes.com>.

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<sup>8</sup> One critic argues that economic policies in favour of the Sinhalese have driven away the otherwise productive Jaffna Tamils whose work and education ethic would have been useful for the national economy. The middle-class Tamil emigration has caused not only the brain drain in the homeland, but also internal alienation that may explode at any time. See Razeen Sally's paper "Sri Lanka: The Political Economy of Failure", presented at the Conference on Globalization and Economic Success, Cairo, 13-14 November 2006.

<sup>9</sup> See Ranjini Obeyesekere's *Sri Lankan Theatre in a Time of Political Terror* (New Delhi: Sage Publication, 1999).

<sup>10</sup> See K. Sivathamby, *Being a Tamil and Sri Lankan* (Colombo: Aivakam, 2005), esp. pp. 261-271.

<sup>11</sup> Information regarding this peace effort can be seen in J. Abayasekera, *The Role of the Churches*, p. 7.

<sup>12</sup> *Kooththu* is a traditional play of Sri Lankan Tamils of which the setting gives space for the audience to engage in performance, discussion, sharing and relaxing while enjoying the play.

<sup>13</sup> I met Dr. Sithamparanathan of TAG in Colombo nearly at the close of my research and since then we have continued to communicate to date. He left behind his TAG in Jaffna following his death threat. Thus, I never went to Jaffna and information of this group is based on my interview with him and with some TAG members as well as written materials sent to me later. I shall use this opportunity to thank Dr. Sitham and his family for having assisted me and subsequently sustained our friendship.

<sup>14</sup> Special thank to my friend and "guru" Lalith Abeysinghe who set up an appointment for me to meet Parakrama for the first time on 8 October 2007 at the Colombo General Hospital where he was treated for his heart surgery. Since then I have become friends to all Jana Karaliya troupe. H. A. Perera, being a mobile person, preferred to see me at ICES than being visited at home or his Telcom office at the Fort not far away from ICES.

<sup>15</sup> Interview with Dharmasiri, 18 December 2007. He looked amused when recalling this, though, he said, he was shocked by the repeated death threats back then after the performance. I shall thank him for the discussion time and copies of the valuable documentary films given to me, to say nothing of the updated information sent to me regularly to date.

<sup>16</sup> Gamini must have been exhausted after talking for more than 3 hours, yet he did not stop knowing my equal enthusiasm and interest in his story. He is indeed an excellent raconteur to capture his audience. I could only see greatness in his frail body. Fieldwork Notes, 6 November 2007.

<sup>17</sup> Thanks to my dear friend and research assistant Anushaya Collure who is also a niece to Somalatha. I have maintained contact with them and I shall quote at length Somalatha's e-mail (24 March 2008) to me when I asked her about one incident during her overseas trip after the riot of July '83 when her suitcase at the airport was scribbled with notes begging her not to leave Sri Lanka:

"By this time I was married. In fact I married on 6<sup>th</sup> September 1962.

This happened in the 1987/88 period when most of the artistes left the country due to the deteriorating conditions. I did not have the intention to leave though. As I can remember the scribbling on the baggage was not written in fluent English – "Do not go. We like your play. Do other play." made me think that they were written by the Airport workers. I found the scribbling in Leipzig. I was touched to know that people of that social class – not fully competent in English patronised Sinhala Theatre, especially the kind of plays I did. They had not mentioned the film which I had acted was another important factor. It touched my heart and I felt a maternal sense of responsibility. I also felt that for this kind of response and reaction I would not want to rest and relax. Even when I went to the bank or went for a walk I saw the common people acknowledging

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me giving me a nod. I felt that I was being appreciated from the things they told me whenever I came in contact with the common man.”

<sup>18</sup> I sincerely thank Dr. R. Cheran who introduced me to Jeyasankar and made necessary arrangements to meet with the group and other important contacts.

<sup>19</sup> Samples of these art materials are in my possession. Thanks to Thirdeye members Karunenthiraj and Nevinathan who took the trouble of handling them to me at my Colombo residence all the way from Batticaloa during time of crisis.

<sup>20</sup> My trip to Batticaloa and visit to this group is made possible by the kind arrangement of Fr. Guy P. Rajendram, S. J. Travelling ‘with a vicar in a vicar car’ is the best way to avoid the hassle of check points in the Eastern province. I shall acknowledge my huge debt to all Jesuits in Colombo, Batticaloa and Kandy for their supports, constant prayers and comforting reassurance without which my study away from home would have been an unbearable ordeal.

<sup>21</sup> From “Faces of War” in *About Another Matter* (Colombo: Dhesiya Kalai Ilakkiyap Peravai, 2004). I thank the author for access not only to this treasured collection of poems which wittily sum up Sri Lankan political history but also to his exceptional insights for yet “other matters” in the world today.

<sup>22</sup> From Dr. Sitampharanathan’s notes sent to me through e-mail, 14 February 2008.