

GRASSROOTS COMMUNITY-BASED PEACEBUILDING

Critical narratives on peacebuilding and collaboration from the locality of Sinhala and Tamil cultural activists in Sri Lanka

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Abstract

This paper is about three local peacebuilding initiatives in Sri Lanka, each focused on the personal or community level, where many Tamil and Sinhalese people share bonds of friendship and family, as well as a common love for good tea, good food, and good drama. Amarathunga uses these case studies to make a deeper point about the nature of knowledge and truth, and about the importance of local peacebuilding initiatives at the community level, rather than political or military settlement.

“The prophets here are those who are founded in what they live, in what they see, hear, apprehend, in what they understand, who are rooted in their epistemological curiosity exercise, alert to the sings they seek to comprehend, supported in their readings of the world new and old, which is the base of how and how much they expose themselves, thus becoming more and more a presence in the world at a par with their time.”- Paulo Freire

Introduction

This paper aims to identify localized peace-building knowledge and the shape of grassroots initiatives with regard to relationship building, friendship building and solidarity building initiatives between Tamils and Sinhalese in Sri Lanka. Grounded in place-based and space-based knowledge of Sri Lankan communities, I use three Sri Lankan case studies to identify uniqueness and illustrate the de-colonization of peace building in local settings.

I was born and raised in Sri Lanka with Sri Lankan culture and traditions. I grew up in a nice village surrounded by coconut trees and a green environment. Drinking tea and chatting in the afternoon with neighbours is a normal day-to-day practice of my culture. Afternoon tea is dedicated to speakers who can tell good stories that make us laugh and happy. I have never seen such a peaceful environment in my life elsewhere.

Sri Lanka has been engaged in a conflict for more than two decades. Armed conflict changed every single Sri Lankan citizen's life. Sinhalese and Tamils were polarised since the starting point of war thirty years ago. When I was young there was a Tamil family in my village. I can still remember that old man's face. A thick beard covered his skinny face and he had bright black eyes. In the period of conflict he disappeared. Some people said he left his family and went to India. Some people said he died. Some people said he went to Jaffna, the northern part of Sri Lanka to support the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam). It was a sad incident for all of us in our village. Young people like us were asking what happened to "uncle Raj"? Conflict escalated. Tension between Tamils and Sinhalese increased. Uncle Raj never came back. But still my father makes tamarind curry remembering "uncle Raj" because my father learnt the recipe from him.

Sinhalese and Tamils suspected each other. Sri Lankan government sent many combat troops to fight against LTTE. Some of my friends never came back to my village or some returned in coffins. Suspicion and polarization between Tamils and Sinhalese escalated. But my father still makes Tamarind curry remembering "Uncle Raj". I am sure that Sinhalese and Tamil communities have many stories like the one about Uncle Raj. I believe that in Sri Lanka, war affected us at the community level just as much as at the political or national level.

Knowledge of the ground

"If democracy is to be deepened, then it must be firmly rooted at the local level" (G. Othero, 2004).

Grassroots movements and place based and space based knowledge develop in different settings and thus represent distinct epistemological and ontological realities. As the experience of 'being' differs from place-to-place and time-to-time, so the understanding or conceptualizing of those experiences is unique to space and place (Escobar, 2008). In this way, the notion of "general truth" can be challenged by localities of truth.

With regard to the decolonizing project, Linda Smith identifies a distinct 'western oriented knowledge' and argues that its claims to universality or superiority have displaced 'native' knowledge(s) with regard to systems of calcification, technologies and understandings of social life. In Smith's words "the globalization of knowledge and Western culture constantly reaffirms the West's view of itself as the centre of legitimate knowledge,

the arbiter of what counts as knowledge and the source of ‘civilized’ knowledge” (Smith, 1999, p67). She continues that this mechanistic and Eurocentric “regime of truth” is established by modernity around the world.

Thus the mere engagement with localized systems of knowledge is a challenge to this “regime of truth”. As Rick Wallace observes in the Canadian context, “Listening to and reading history written by indigenous writers that move beyond a Euro-centric tale of history, allows us to begin to dramatically revise the narratives that many Canadians have come to accept as objective historical truth” (2013, p13).

The same dynamic applies to knowledge of peace and peace processes. Oliver Richmond argues that the local peace process is ‘hijacked and captured’ by state and democratic institutions (Richmond, 2010), and this has been the case in Sri Lanka. Sri Lankan people share a distinct epistemology and ontology, which is unique to them. But in the liberal peace, institutions are privileged above individual and community condition of peace building (Richmond, 2010). Richard Rorty identified peace building without prioritizing the community condition as ‘hegemonic liberal peace’ (Rorty, 2009).

In the following sections, I will challenge this hegemony of liberal peace by using three cases from Sri Lanka to identify the asymmetry of power in Sinhala-Tamil grassroots narratives with regard to dialogs, process and practices of local level initiatives.

Redefining peace building at Sri Lankan Grassroots level

Anuradapura

‘Samadeepa’ is a grassroots peace building organization that works with Sinhalese and Tamils in Anuradapura, situated in the central part of Sri Lanka geographically. The initiative is about peace education and ethnic harmony between Sinhalese and Tamils in Sri Lanka. Samadeepa invite people belonging to Sinhalese and Tamil ethnicities to a community center to spend a couple of days together. All the participants live together, cook together and eat together during these days. When they come to Anuradapura to participate in the event, everyone brings traditional sweets or food as gifts for others. Chandrarathna Bandara, one who founded the organization, talks about the initiative:

It was a wonderful event, ‘the people coming from Hambantota bring Kevum. People coming from Jaffna bring Wade. People coming from Anuradapura bring Bananas. You know, it is not a small amount, food for 500 people. Can you imagine that they came with food as gifts

for each other? That is our culture, Sinhala and Tamil people sit together and eat together. It was beautiful - sharing and eating. For us that is peace and love, what else?

Peace and love for them is about sharing. Food plays a main role in terms of sharing. Many people from both communities want to meet each other. Many Tamil people from Jaffna came to Anuradapura even in the conflict time, irrespective of LTTE or Sri Lankan government Army barriers; they came to see each other. The organisation never pays any money for the participants. Further more Bandara expresses himself:

Peace building is about gathering with people, working together, talking together, eating together. That's how we can make strong bond with our culture and other culture. It means a lot as a community.

Samadeepa believes that the feeling of love can make a difference during violent conflict. Giving gifts is deeply rooted in Sri Lanka culture. Especially if the gift giving is related with food, it symbolizes the elements of brotherhood and sisterhood, friendship and solidarity. Furthermore, says Bandara:

We believe in love and justice, there is no meaning for peace without justice and also there is no meaning for love without justice. We believe that bringing those two concepts together we need to open up our hearts. Then we can meet each other at heart level. Then again we can live together, eat together with Tamils and Sinhalese.

Jaffna

The second initiative, 'Ahavoli', comes from Jaffna, where a majority of Tamil community lives in Sri Lanka. They talk about peace building at the family level, and in partnership with the Catholic Church, seek spiritual healing. Peace building for them is building a "happy family". Inter-Ethnic marriage and blood relationships are the key concepts for them to bring peace to Sri Lanka. The community leader and founder of the community based origination Father Peter talks about the initiative:

Family is the key to achieve peace. In my village, people trust me as a religious person and friend. We work with families to find peace. I encourage interethnic marriage. In general nobody encourages marrying Sinhala girl or boy, but I do. [...] In Sri Lanka marriage is not simply between one man and woman. It is more than that. It is engaging with the entire generation.

The organization believes that ethnic harmony should start with their loved ones. Hence, family is the closest entity for the modern society. Father Peter continues:

Sinhalese and Tamils shouldn't be enemies. We should bring old stories about their corporation and friendship written in our literature. In my village they never see Sinhalese as an enemy. We should understand government and LTTE politics.

Father Peter says that the Ahavoli organization is doing counselling for the people who are affected from conflict. Furthermore, he says that counselling is about healing. It is not to build an enemy image on Sinhalese, but rather to build healthy and trusting relationships.

Janakaraliya

Janakaraliya is a mobile theater group in Sri Lanka. They use a mobile theater and travel from village to village. Parakrama Niriella, a co-founder of the group, says that the drama group spends one to two months in a village and then moves to another village afterwards.

Sinhala and Tamil actors act in Janakaraliya. They practice different drama techniques such as forum theatre, community theatre and street dramas in Sinhala and Tamil languages. They believe that there is a cultural relationship between Sri Lankan community and drama. Niriella says that in Sri Lanka, community theatre is traditionally a common event between Sinhalese and Tamils. Hence, to discuss common problems for Sinhalese and Tamils, drama is an effective method. Niriella says:

Drama should be accessible for all Sri Lankans. Drama is a 'way of expressions'. So, we should cater for all the people in Sri Lanka. We have lots of stories to tell. Sadness, happiness and our frustrations and day-to-day feelings are being expressed via art. We can understand drama. We are familiar with it. So, drama is our tool to dig peace.

The drama group believes that "drama" is the key to embrace the community. They talk about peace and peace building. Furthermore, Mr Niriella expresses that:

Ethnic conflict makes a big gap between Sinhalese and Tamil communities. They suspect each other. Our drama group is a role model for ethnic harmony. We live together as a group with all the dynamics. We travel village-to-village, town-to-town and we show our drama in 'Community Theater'. We are using two languages in our drama and in drama group all the members are friends. We are not only showing drama about ethnic harmony and injustice we are showing ethnic harmony within our drama group.

Grassroots peace building in Sri Lanka

These three initiatives are important to understand the shape of grassroots peace building in Sri Lanka. All the case studies focus on solidarity building between Sinhala and Tamil community. These initiatives are made to bridge the gap between Sri Lankan Tamil and Sinhala communities. All the initiatives work with socio-cultural practices that are shared between the communities, such as eating together, raising families, and watching a drama together. These are the underlying commonalities that can be seen in these initiatives. These initiatives are trying to bridge Sinhala and Tamil communities in terms of solidarity and trust. Rick Wallace argues that trust is the center of grassroots peace building (Wallace, 2013).

Conclusion

Grassroots peace building initiatives in Sri Lanka are about personal motivations related to place and space based knowledge. Grassroots peace building is often a group initiative where the community works for the community. Different case studies show us that peace building for some geographical areas in Sri Lanka is about building solidarity, connection and bridging gaps. Sharing cultural commonalities are common for all three initiatives. Peace building is about how to create your family with joy and happiness in harmony with other cultures and communities. According to the last initiative it is about being a model of solidarity and sharing, practicing solidarity with commonalities.

In the Sri Lankan situation, the notion of commonality takes up a big portion of solidarity-based peace building. Finding commonalities create the safe spaces for Sinhalese and Tamil ethnic groups. These case studies show how Sri Lankan community engaged with day-to-day peace building. Just like my village life, where we drink tea and share stories in the afternoon. It is not much different in larger settings. If we look at Anuradhapura case study, people come with food, then they eat, talk about their future. Sri Lankan community has great memories related to food and solidarity just like my dad making tamarind curry and remembering ‘Uncle Raj’.

In all of these ways, Sri Lankan grassroots initiatives are re-shaping the popular and mainstream peace building discourse. It is about locality. It is about their greater life experience of peace.

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