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Envision and Embody a People’s Peace through Theater

NILANJANA PREMARATNA

“Our world is relentlessly reshaping itself and we need to continue to co-create our world in response. In that sense, peace is more lived than it is achieved.”

Toran Hansen

At a conference in Colombo, Sri Lanka, I was listening to a talk on the country’s development prospects when there was a sudden, loud noise. My body immediately fell into well-rehearsed patterns; panicked and pumped full of adrenaline; I literally jumped out of my seat ready to either run for or dove under the nearest available cover. The war in Sri Lanka officially ended in 2009. Yet, neither over a decade of time passed, nor having lived for several years in places without war have made much of a difference in my automatic reactions. My body continues to associate loud noises with bomb blasts. A backfiring car in Switzerland and a malfunctioning loudspeaker at a conference in Colombo all blend into the conditioned response that arise from growing up during the war in Sri Lanka. The war and fear continue to live in my body, irrespective of the contextual changes.

As feminist peace scholars consistently point out, a rational understanding alone cannot transform the corporal experience of war. How, then, can peace be embodied? What process could that entail? And how would such a peace look? In a context where the dominant understanding of building peace continues to revolve around negotiated settlements peppered with infrastructure development, governance models, and...
abstract rights discourses, seeking answers to these questions requires an exploration of ideas that creatively envision peace. The Sri Lankan theater group, Theater of the People, Jana Karaliya in Sinhalese or Makkal Kalari in Tamil, offers just such an interesting case.

Initiated in 2002 amidst an internationally negotiated cease-fire agreement and discussions of a federal solution, Jana Karaliya advocates neither a political solution to, nor an intellectual analysis of the conflict. Instead, as a bilingual, multiethnic mobile theater group that lives and works together, the group embodies a people’s peace based on coexistence and collaboration through a process of largely self-regulated negotiations within the group and engagement with their audiences and the wider public. The process is open-ended and constantly evolving, and the group inspires through practice and subtle demonstration instead of through direct pedagogy.

Jana Karaliya’s notion of peace developed through negotiation of differences and practices within their work and personal spaces. Team members were recruited from different regions, socio-economic and education levels, and ethnic and linguistic backgrounds. At the same time, the group was envisioned to produce high-quality theater—the aspiration being to combine diversity and professionalism. Unlike most political and participatory theater in which the emphasis is on either the content or the pedagogical value of a play, Jana Karaliya assigns equal value to both. Therefore, ethno-linguistic diversity of the group allowed the conflict-related dynamics to surface, while theater acted as the connecting element. These two combined factors in the group composition created a space where an embodied understanding of peace can emerge from negotiating and re-negotiating the differences.

The team had to mitigate tensions that emerged out of diversity in order to produce a play. Team members did not have previous training in peacebuilding or sufficient interaction with the other ethnicity when they joined the theater. Several Sinhalese members recall that while the daily encounters with checkpoints were cumbersome and fear of suicide bombs were unpleasant, they had not given much thought to the conflict or its impact on the other ethnicity until they joined the group. For many, the first instance of a meaningful interaction with someone from another ethnicity took place within the group itself. The few who were from multiethnic areas also had limited or merely surface level interactions with each other. Communication was difficult as the members were mostly monolingual except for a smattering of words here and there. Language skills of the group in the early days were therefore insufficient for satisfactory communication. The team had to rely on each other. Those who could understand a little of each other’s languages started
translating as best as they could, and the group started teaching each other
their own languages with the available modes of communication. Words,
phrases, alphabets and script lines in both the languages were put up on
the walls. The spare time of the group went into self-regulated teaching
and learning of the languages. The team members, thus, were expected to
negotiate among themselves and come up with strategies to deal with
diversity on their own.

Reinforcing theater’s role as the alliance factor, the group received
strictly regulated training on producing a play. Scholars and practitioners
often agree that engaging in artistic activity enhances collaboration. April
Bang argues that people who share art-based somatic experiences learn
cooperation whether that is an intended result or not. The individuals that
joined Jana Karaliya, too, had to become a collective that engaged in the-
ater despite their differences. The group received extensive training and
careful monitoring on various aspects of producing a play. Each member
became competent in an overall sense and often chose a specialization
such as lighting, make up, costume design, script development, transla-
tion, or directing according to personal interest and capacity. The training
also included learning how to share responsibility as a team.

The team had to come together to help improve each other’s per-
formances, provide feedback, and rely on each other for the technical
aspects of putting together a play such as make-up, costume design, and
lighting. Work related expectations expanded into taking care of everyday
management, administration and logistical tasks. This included setting up
and dismantling the mobile theater tent at each location. Thus, from the
start, the team was expected to discover processes to collaborate for work.

The group’s embodiment of coexistence and collaboration is evident in
how their work has evolved; far from their point of departure in
which they could not even communicate with each other, today the team
seamlessly writes, directs, and performs plays in both Tamil and
Sinhalese. Rasaiyah Logananthan, a permanent member of the group suc-
cessfully translates plays from classical Sinhalese to Tamil. Team mem-
ers collaborate with each other and develop scripts and direct plays on
their own; Ronika Chamalee and Selvaraj Leelawathe’s co-directed play
Payanihal, Rasaiyah Logananthan’s Irumbiya Poruththiya Idayam and
Thiyagaraja Shivanesan’s Maya Kalvi are such examples. Therefore, the
team, many of whom joined with just a passion for acting, gained new
skills and shared responsibility, with the end result of becoming a united
team that can produce refined plays on their own. The strictly regulated
artistic aspect of the group gradually led to a tightly knit, self-regulated,
multiethic team that works together in harmony. Peace manifests within
the group as a gradual self-regulated process held together by their shared interest in theater.

Personal interactions, too, are a key in the process through which the group has articulated and embodied a notion of peace as coexistence and collaboration. Each individual has had to adjust to the practical realities of sharing an everyday life and space with the others. The mobile theater element of the group required the team to work and live together for several months at a time. From the beginning until recently, the group traveled and camped at different locations in the country for most of the year, performing and organizing theater festivals in their mobile theater tent.

The act of living together involves personal dimensions that go beyond a regular professional work environment. Constant interaction throughout the day encompasses sharing household chores, caring for each other in sicknesses, and negotiating disagreements and disputes that arise from varying patterns of behavior. As the public and private lives of the group largely overlap, the members have to rely on each other for a wide range of issues. Away from their families, the group automatically becomes the substitute “family” for each other as evidenced by the terminology used by many to describe the team. The tensions that arise in sharing a space and everyday life present a different level of negotiations than those at a professional level. Living and working together at the early stages of the group’s formation helped develop their reliance on each other.

The transformation that took place within the team’s personal spaces is evident in how trust developed over time. The fact that members were chosen for their interest in theater and joined with little exposure to peacebuilding meant that they initially saw the other ethnicity through mainstream narratives and stereotypes. Their differences coupled with the inability to communicate intensified the discomfort and mistrust. Take a Tamil member of the group who initially thought a Sinhalese member was an intelligence officer in disguise, and a Sinhalese member who thought a Tamil member was a terrorist; both these are common stereotypes of the other ethnicity, and indicate the initial position of members. The situation gradually transformed to one in which group members would see each other as “family,” thus negotiating sensitive or hostile political environments for each other. For example, those of Tamil ethnicity would be especially scrutinized at military checkpoints. During such instances, the group would come together to vouch for the affected members during these stops or minimize the risks for them by either running their errands or accompanying them during travel. Given where they
started from, the close bonds developed with each other today makes a strong case for the transformative capacity *Jana Karaliya* has had on its members.

Though the initial phase of the group required engaging with ethnic stereotypes, language barriers, and the resulting mistrust and misunderstandings, the founders allowed the group to find its own balance. Consequently, peace as co-existence was allowed to emerge and be discovered through daily personal and professional negotiations within the group, instead of being imparted through formal peacebuilding workshops. The act of letting the group find its own way was based on the Founders’ belief that the roots of the Sri Lankan conflict arises out of political and structural conditions that were manipulated for political gain, and not from among the people. The conflict, basically, as the founder Parakrama Niriella comments, “is something that does not exist among the people. It is something external that is constructed and imposed on us. We don’t need anyone to teach us how to live together. We’ve known that for quite a long time in this country.” Thus, the team had the space and time to negotiate their differences and discover their own notion of peace based on co-existence and collaboration.

The second level of *Jana Karaliya*’s peacebuilding is seen in their performative engagement with the outside. This is where the group’s embodiment of peace as coexistence and collaboration is communicated and made visible. Working and living together in the long term creates opportunities for team members to get to know and visit each other’s families. A Sinhalese member from the Southern part of the country recalls her father’s initial negative reaction and animosity toward the Tamil members when the group visited her home for a few days. She recalls how, toward the end of the three-day visit, her father embraced one of the Tamil members with tears in his eyes and apologized for the initial mistrust. A similar process takes place in professional encounters; when the group visits a new location, the community is often wary. They tend to report the group to the police for suspicious behavior. Thus, *Jana Karaliya*’s presence itself as a mixed ethnic group that lives and works together unsettles mainstream narratives and invites the community to self-reflect and re-negotiate their personal beliefs and ideologies.

Performative engagement with an audience in a professional capacity draws attention to the group’s embodiment of a people’s peace even further. Though a play is performed in either Sinhalese or Tamil by the mixed ethnic cast—plays are often cast with Tamil leads in Sinhala language plays and vice versa—the actors for whom it is a second language often speak with a slight accent. Thus, the ethnic identity of an actor is
hinted at through their line delivery. The post-performance introductions of the cast where they say their names and where they come from is another indicator. While not conclusive, both language and name can be markers of ethnic identity in Sri Lanka. Thus, refraining from drawing attention to the ethnic identity of the cast until the end of the play allows the audience to make an initial connection with the performance and absorb the esthetic experience without the added layer of “othering.” As a result, the audience is more open-minded and likely to judge the actors for their skills and not for preexisting notions of ethnicity. The play itself is an example of peaceful coexistence and collaboration.

In addition, when the group stays in a given location for a longer period facilitating repeat encounters, self-reflection is triggered within the community, and as a result the experience deepens. It is common for community members to express interest in the group’s rehearsals and spend time with them outside of the performances. These casual encounters play a major role in the idea of peace embodied and promoted by the group as it reveals the comity woven into the team’s everyday activities. In contrast to the practice of using theater to perform at a given location at a given time and a date to impart a political message before departing, Jana Karaliya’s embodied approach resonates with living a people’s peace. The initial phase of ideological negotiations required to live together as a multiethnic team therefore had to take place within the group first and then expand out to the members’ families and finally, the group’s audiences.

In the conventional understanding of political theater, the content of a play promotes a specific political ideology. With Jana Karaliya, political relevance is primarily reflected through the group’s form and structure rather than content. Peace as an embodied practice of coexistence and collaboration becomes evident in living and working together as a multiethnic bilingual team. The group challenges mainstream ethnic and linguistic stereotypes that are often perceived as major obstacles to peace. Jana Karaliya challenges the audience by its example to coexist and collaborate. Thus, the group’s approach differs from the regular format of political theater, and instead opts for a deeper form of politics that is embedded in the lived practice of the group itself.

Theater plays a major role in bringing and holding Jana Karaliya together as a group, and also in facilitating engagement at the ground level. Within that space, Jana Karaliya undergoes a self-regulated process of negotiation resulting from living and working together as a diverse group. The coexistence and collaboration required becomes embodied as a lived practice of peace for the group and is communicated through the
group’s engagement with the outside. The sense of hope the group offers stands out as a symbolic milestone in envisioning a people’s peace in the country. Instead of striving to rationally analyze the conflict or advocate a specific notion of peace based on a solution, the group strives to embody and demonstrate ethnic unity by living and performing a people’s peace at an everyday level. In my interactions with the group, I did not ask whether a malfunctioning loudspeaker would make them jump out of their skin. What I have witnessed, rather, is the unspoken solidarity among the permanent members and the comfortability with which they express and negotiate dissent among each other.

RECOMMENDED READINGS

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