

creativeresistance

from Design & People

[Home](#) | [Design & People](#)

.....

Sethu Das / March 07, 2010

The Land Minds of Sri Lanka

Soon after the killing of Lasantha Wikramatunge, Editor of 'The Sunday Leader', by the Sri Lankan government forces, Design & People Co-Founder Sethu Das travelled to Sri Lanka to meet with **Ravindra Ranasinha**, one of Lasantha's close associates in journalism and a known Sinhalese theatre activist.



BY the time this story was completed, the European Union announced the withdrawal of its GSP+ tariff benefits to Sri Lanka — the only country in South Asia to have this status. Benefits to the tune of US\$116 million were lost on the grounds that there were serious shortcomings in implementation as per the UN Human Rights Convention. This latest move by the EU is going to affect more than one lakh textile and apparel workers in the country.

The island nation has had to deal with several issues — a troubled economy, civil war, ethnic conflict, poverty, unemployment, and child prostitution being some among them. The long fight between the Sri Lankan army and the Tamil rebels has already displaced millions of ordinary people; it has also resulted in the death of more than 70,000 people. Sri Lanka is also probably the only conflict zone in the world which continues to debate on the nation's standard time. The Sri Lankan Standard Time was moved back by 30 minutes in April 2006 to match with the Indian Standard Time (IST) and to make use of the daylight. This new standard time was adapted against the wishes of the country's scientists and astrologers, and is yet to be accepted by the reluctant Tamil community.

At the same time, the island nation is slowly opening up to multinationals, to replace its army bunkers with Automatic Teller Machines, and check-posts with Kentucky Fried Chicken stores. The time is not far when a resource-rich country like Sri Lanka becomes one of the best economies in South Asia.

As a country that shares a cordial relationship with Chairman Mao's People's Republic of China, Sri Lanka too believes in the power that flows from the barrel of a gun. A good number of the country's journalists have either been eliminated or tortured by government forces. Like Lasantha

Wikramatunge, Editor of The Sunday Leader, shot dead by the Sri Lankan army on January 08, 2009.

I decided to meet one of his close associates — Ravindra Ranasinha, a veteran journalist and a well known Sinhalese theatre activist. His inspiring writings are usually published in 'Irudina' of 'The Sunday Leader', a newspaper known for its unbiased journalism on the island. Ravindra's theatre productions focus mainly on diverse social issues of Sri Lanka. He is among those rare few who truly understand the real political scenario and the dubious role played by non-governmental organisations in the ethnic conflict of Sri Lanka. These qualities have made Ravindra a controversial figure in the orthodox Sinhalese community and also a target of extremist Buddhist groups. I believe it is necessary to understand and recognise the humble contributions of Ravindra Ranasinha, a Sinhalese who has struggled for decades to bring about peace and harmony between the two divided communities in Sri Lanka.

Excerpts from a conversation:

Sethu Das:

Before we discuss the conflict in Sri Lanka, let me ask you a question about your theatre background. You've been in the Sinhalese theatre for the last two decades and are responsible for directing some of the most controversial plays. But how active is the modern Sinhalese theatre in Sri Lanka?

Ravindra Ranasinha:

The modern Sinhala theatre has had its own history since the 1950s. The problem we face presently is that theatre has become zero, or has gone down drastically due to the conflict situation in the country. The 50s saw a revival of literature in Sri Lanka, with a lot of focus on poetry, novels, plays and experimental theatre. During this period Prof Sarachchandra from the Peradeniya University explored options regarding the kind of theatre to be established in Sri Lanka. Prof Sarachchandra travelled to India, USA, Japan and Russia to explore possibilities. In Japan and India he found something similar to the culture of Sri Lanka — Kathakali in Kerala, and Kabuki in Japan — two theatre forms that use mythology, music and local dance forms to tell a story. He saw this as a possibility in the Sri Lankan context. Because Sri Lankan theatre is more about song and dance, not just verbal. A theatre of presentation and expressionism. While Kathakali was very expressive and intellectual, Kabuki theatre was very beautiful because of its gorgeous and 'mega' costuming and stage designing. He also travelled to the USA, but observed that the theatre there was very open when it came to dealing with issues such as sexuality and human relationships — something he felt would not appeal to the people back in Sri Lanka. So he overlooked that aspect completely. Equipped with the oriental experience of India and Japan, he put up his first play called 'Maname' — a folk tale of a prince and princess from the city of Varanasi in India.

Prof Sarachchandra brought a scientific approach as he conducted the first ever experiments in Sri Lankan theatre. His plays were of a psychological nature, something which Sri Lanka did not have earlier. Our theatre, though expressionistic, was without a proper structure, and very focused on the folk traditions. We used masks and jokes, but lacked the drama created by a taut story line. It was more a collection of folk songs, folk poetry and folk dance. But Prof Sarachchandra brought all of these together and raised it from the level of folk art to pure art.

After 1956 a lot of experimentation was done in theatre by Sugathapala De Silva, Dr Henry Jayasena and Gunaena Galapatty — by studying foreign plays and adapting them for local communities, thereby leading to a total theatrical revival. And all these took place against the political backdrop of the emergence of Solomon West Ridgeway Dias Bandaranaike — Chandrika Kumaratunge's father, the man responsible for introducing Sinhala as the only official language of the island. Bandaranaike was in the United National Party (UNP) at the time and wanted the Premiership. While Sir John Kotelawala went to Jaffna and promised people that both Tamil and Sinhala would be made official languages, Solomon WRD Bandaranaike promised Sinhala as the official language of the country and the people gave all their votes to him who then became the Prime Minister. And, Sinhala became the official language — thus leading to a lot of enthusiasm among people and the development of Sinhalese literature and dramas.

Prof Sarachchandra's initial plays were propagandist in nature and content. Art and politics have always been bed-fellows in the history of Sri Lanka, and this trend continues till date. Dramatists cashed in on people's enthusiasm and hope in those heady days in Sri Lankan history, leading to a revival. Dr Henry Jayasena, inspired by foreign plays, adapted them and made realistic plays mixed with the traditional dance theatre of Sri Lanka. Sugathapala De Silva was very critical of the political conditions and wanted to break away from Sarachchandra's traditional drama concept, so he focused completely on realistic theatre. He did some fantastic plays like "Dunna Dunu Gamuwe", which depicted the worker's struggles and inspired workers at that time to come out fighting for their rights. Sugathapala De Silva was himself a part of the 1980s worker's struggle. He was with the Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation then, but was thrown out later.



"We call this country a Buddhist country. Unfortunately it is the very same Buddhist monks responsible for developing the spirituality of the people who are now warring. How can you expect our people to develop maitri as preached by Lord Buddha? Maitri is not just love, but immense and passionate love towards the other. Healthy relationships are dreams in this country," says Ravindra Ranasinghe. (Photo: Sethu Das)

Nearly a hundred thousand people lost their jobs during JR Jayewardene's regime, due to his policies. The 70s saw Bandaranaike focusing on touching political issues at the surface level, not going very deep. Authoritarian dictatorship was developing in the country at this time and during the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) insurrection SWRD Bandaranaike was murdered by a monk. After his assassination, his wife Sirimao Bhandarayanake came to power and the country witnessed a wave of capitalism. In this climate of economic deprivation, people were finding it very difficult to live their lives. At this time, Rohana Wijeweera came down from Lumumba in Russia to organise JVP and led the young people against Sirimao Bhandanayake's regime. More than 50,000 youth were killed by the state machine. The theatre of the 70's mainly dwelt on these issues of authoritarianism and how the people were crushed economically and politically. In 1977 JR Jayewardene introduced free economic policies which led to opportunities for local business people to venture into different markets. Even Jaffna was a good market for the Sinhalese.

In 1983, the Tamil people were suppressed, businesses collapsed and an organised military-state action against the Tamils resulted in riots. Prabhakaran emerged at this time. 13 Sinhalese soldiers were killed by his group — LTTE and the state began a long standing retaliation with the Tamils. A sad fallout of this was we lost some of our most valuable books kept in the Jaffna Library, where many Sinhalese scholars were educated.

In the 80s, the country was completely in the grip of totalitarianism. Nobody could really come out as Jayewardene was a very strict president. He had no choice actually. Chauvinism was aggravating and disseminating into every corner of the country, and he was in no position to stop it. The extremist Sinhalese counterpoint of Sirimao Bhandranayake revealed the many discrepancies of the Jayewardene period. Businesses flourished, the rich got richer with more money in banks — especially foreign banks, while the working class suffered. Large scale unemployment, worker's strikes, all these were increasingly leading the nation into a state of chaos. The suppressive policies of the 80's sounded a death knell, for the literary revival of the

1950s.

Our theatre group emerged under the guidance of Dr Solomon Fonseka from Czechoslovakia, who had pursued a PhD in method acting, and inter-mingled it with western and oriental concepts. Our initial step was to try our plays against the totalitarian regime. Our group decided not to go for original scripts in the beginning but work with foreign scripts as they were already popular, they would get us more recognition and would not threaten our lives. We wanted to revive the theatre which had witnessed a downfall during the mid 1980s. So we selected 'One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest'.

[Continued...](#)

[Share](#)

.....

Sethu Das is the Co-founder of Design & People. He can be reached at: sethu.das@designandpeople.org

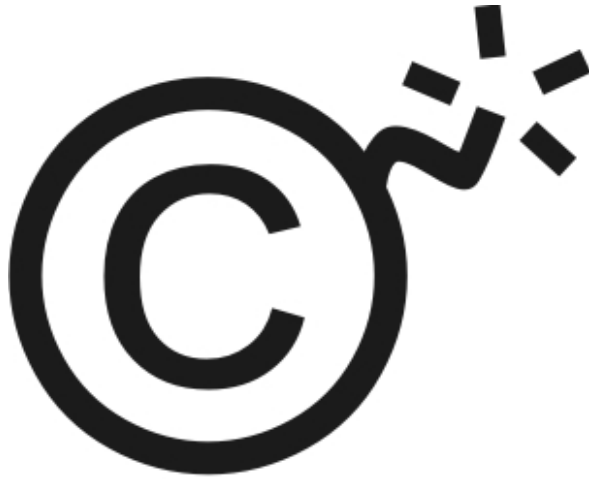
The 'Open Design Policy' of Design & People grants users the freedom to copy, share, study, distribute, display, transform or even make derivative works based on Design & People artworks — both visual and written — for any non-commercial or academic purpose by giving appropriate credit to the author of the work. We advise the user who creates a subsequent work based on the original artwork make no attempt to remove it from the Public Domain. By choosing to contribute to the evolution of this work of art, the user agrees to give to others the very same rights.

.....



Design & People **E:** support@designandpeople.org **W:** www.designandpeople.org





creativeresistance

from Design & People

[Home](#) | [Design & People](#)

.....

IN CONVERSATION WITH RAVINDRA RANASINHA — II



The decorated entrance of the University of Moratuwa in Sri Lanka praising the Sri Lankan Army in a nation-wide campaign initiated by the Sri Lankan Government to boost the morale of the army. (Photo: Sethu Das)

Sethu Das:

Most of your plays are either translations of classics or theatre adaptations — like 'One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest', 'The Physicists', 'The Fragments' or 'The Trail' by Franz Kafka. How effective are these adaptations and influential are these among a people who live in a war-torn island?

Ravindra Ranasinha:

I must say that with our first attempt — 'One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest', we showed that it is the system that makes people saunter, because of the totalitarian regime. In the play we showed that individuals cannot fight back, there has to be a collective effort. Individuals — like with the JVP or worker's struggle — tend to get isolated, with no unity among unions. We conveyed that individual struggles very often result in failures and end up causing more damage to society. The play 'One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest' was a hit and made people think once again. We recieved

many positive reviews and feedback regarding how a similar Marxist revolution should take place in Sri Lanka. People had given up on the idea of revolution. Our play provided just the right jolt to awaken people from their stupor. I must mention here that the situation in Sri Lanka is very different from Russia or India. We are primarily a Buddhist country and our backbones are being broken by the Buddhist concepts.

We would have loved this discussion and dialogue to continue. But unfortunately this play came out in 1987 and two years later Sri Lanka witnessed a youth insurrection. All over again. JVP came to power through an armed struggle. This was much more serious than the earlier one and this time the JVP struggle was directed against the Tamils or the LTTE. They said that India should not be allowed to become a regional power and Sri Lanka should not support the Tamil cause. Not only did JVP go against the innocent Tamil people, but also against the state machine, resulting in the killing of soldiers and cops. There was utter chaos in Sri Lanka. In fact people stopped going to work — it made more sense to just sit at home. Just a notification by the JVP would lead to a total curfew in the southern region of the country. The country very nearly came to a stand still.

The theatre we wanted to revive so desperately collapsed entirely. No young person could go out after 6 pm. I was at the university at that time and I remember hiding the university identity card inside a radio cassette when they raided my house during the riots. I was planning to dramatise "Lower Depths" by Maxim Gorki. It dealt with utter depression of the people, which I wanted to show on stage. The army raided my house and took my father away. They came with guns and were suspicious of all my activities. They feared that "Lower Depths" was sponsored by the Soviet Cultural Institute. Just being in possession of Lenin's picture created horror for the state machinery and they branded us all as Marxists. But somehow we managed to stage the play and it was a huge success. Once again our play became a talking point. We were pleasantly surprised as we never thought that Sri Lankan people would be able to appreciate such a play. It showed social and economic degradation and the collapse of relationships. We made people realise that they were living in a den where one person was ruling and exploiting them. They were mere soul-less creatures on the earth hoping for salvation. So this play once again touched a raw nerve among people and became a hit on the stage.

Unfortunately, the situation was worsening in Sri Lanka. The country was going down economically and conflict was escalating. JVP was crushed by President Ranasinghe Premadasa, and the theatre scene had to face immense difficulties. After Ranasinghe Premadasa, came Chandrika Kumaratunga, and the war continued. But this time we had a better understanding about what was happening to the lives of the Tamil people. This was one area our artists were unable to ponder on. We felt that the Tamil people were deprived of their soul. When I say soul, it means everything — their economical, social, political and educational life and their right to politics etc. We are all familiar with a similar holocaust in Germany where a particular section of people were made to feel guilty for something they had not done, and had to accept the charges leveled against him by the system or the state.

All the plays that came out after 'Lower Depths' discussed the totalitarian state machine and how it suppressed individuals and society; and how the collectiveness and the unity of the people had collapsed. Finally in 1997 I thought of bringing everything to a climax by doing 'The Trial' by Franz Kafka. This play was an adaptation which discussed how an organised state machine could destroy the complete culture or the complete soul of a society be it the Tamil community, or the Sinhalese or the Tibetan community or Jews, or Palestinians. This play roused people into thinking in a different way — because people had to think for themselves. They had to delve deep and ask difficult questions of themselves. Were they their own persons? Were they being blackmailed by someone or 'handled' by someone else? In Sri Lanka we always saw that the 'other' was handling or intervening with our lives.

There was a gradual decline of theatre from the 1980s and a serious drop in attendance soon after. At one point of time I even thought of doing street theatre. Going to the people with just one drum; I actually did it and found it effective. But the problem in Sri Lanka is that we cannot sustain such type of theatre. After ten or fifteen performances, we had to disperse. But we made an attempt. We did a Chinese opera which discussed how the powerful people with money and political power utilise others as slaves; this applied to the rural areas as well. We visited those regions and were able to discuss these issues. But we had to stop because towards the end we did not even have the money to travel in a bus.

For sometime I did some theatrical work with the Tamil people. In 1998 I was invited by a Catholic Priest from the Centre for Performing Arts, Jaffna, to conduct theatre workshops. Not only did we conduct workshops, we were also given the opportunity to go and perform in villages. The story we chose was about the psychological impact on a mother when her son suffers in the war. This was to make the people understand that war never gives you anything positive, but only takes away from you whatever good you have. Our attempt was satisfactory, but did not serve much purpose. I feel that by this time in 1998, the society was so steeped in the concept of war. It had become a way of life. They either wanted to fight the LTTE or the Tamil cause. Our attempts did not bring much positive results.

I left Colombo for about two-three years as the situation was worsening and there was no activity whatsoever in theatre. I had a long standing desire to do some research work — not only on theatre, but on social conditions as well. I worked as a teacher in a rural area and witnessed the

difficulties of the people. I realised the fact that other than economic issues, war was the only other issue that affected most ordinary lives. In December 2005, the Principal of Holy Family Convent in Kaluthara wanted to do a play called 'Mission Everlasting'. I accepted the offer of directing the play. This was one of my boldest productions. It generated a serious dialogue about Sri Lanka in Sri Lanka. Only one performance took place and an extremist group sent a death threat to the Principal, to the Director and all those who were associated with staging the play. The threat came from a group attached to Jathika Hela Urumaya, which comprised of Buddhist monks propagating chauvinism in a very dangerous manner. This play with nearly 70 school children raised the question of the possibility of transforming the conflict situation. It put forth our belief that negotiation is the most important aspect in conflict transformation. The children were on stage enacting their own experiences, and similar experiences from around the world — like the Beslan incident where Chechen guerrillas blew up a Russian Girls School, Martin Luther King's experience, to Rachel Corrie's experience at the Gaza border. All these were put up on stage and discussed in great detail. Was it possible to negotiate and have a much broader understanding of the conflict? We believe that conflict is not just the result of what transpires between two parties, it happens due to many other aspects like social, ethnic, political or religious influences. Conflict is multifaceted.

Negotiation is something that is extremely important at this moment. Unless you listen to the grievances of the other party, you'll never be able to resolve an issue. We believe that we must have thousand and one lenses to look at these issues. That's why we took issues from Martin Luther King to Rachael Corrie and even some local incidents that inspired us. We were just amateurs crying out for peace, and whatever we showed had already been documented. Even then the elder statesmen in Sri Lanka — especially the politicians and the intellectuals, were unable to safeguard our play, to turn it into a valuable asset to bring about a change in the political scenario of the country. More than a hundred thousand young lives could have been saved if this play was performed in front of the people, so they could understand and know the real situation. It had the potential to change the cultural situation too. But this experiment was not accepted by our society.

However, we were not disheartened. We went for a serious production with real video footages of the war and combined it with Anne Frank's experiences. It was a play that discussed — rather demanded freedom. Because life is a given and the rights of children must be safeguarded — these two basic things one should not have to fight for. I remember a statement from one of the reviews of Sandra Fernando where she said "Colombo, why were you not present when 'The Shadows' was preformed?" Another opportunity missed as only 70 people came to see the play. But journalists and artists from Jaffna came all the way to see the play and shared their experiences with us. This is the plight of theatre and other cultural activities in Sri Lanka.

So I must say that from the very beginning of my work (since 1987) up to now, almost 22 years, I have seen theatre play a role and be influenced by the political game on the ground. Everything was dependent on how the political machine functioned. Unfortunately our politicians do not want to listen as they are in politics only for their personal gain and power. Our interpretation of the current scenario is that there will soon come a time when there will be no arts, no journalists and no young blood left... only old men and women remaining in this land. That will be the truth for Sri Lanka. In the near future you will only count the number of aged people left without any support as the young are being killed continuously in war. The new generation of Sri Lanka is growing up with war in their blood.

Sethu Das:

Like the new generation Beslan children growing up with toy guns in their hands and revenge in their minds?

Ravindra Ranasinha:

Exactly. Who created this situation? We need a political figure, someone who understands the situation and has the potential to change it. But we see no sign of such a president or a prime minister coming forward to save the country.

Sethu Das:

You've been a critic of totalitarian state and fascism. You are also a victim of censorship and the rule of the state. How do you think the Sri Lankan government looks at the themes of your plays advocating people to give up discrimination against culture and language — because these are the two factors which led to the present conflict in the country?

Ravindra Ranasinha:

Here I must say that politicians were completely unaware of our activities. They were not so concerned. If they had really paid attention, they would have learnt something. I remember when 'The Shadows' was performed, a priest who was part of the audience stood up and said: "This play must be performed in front of the Sri Lankan Parliament"— because the parliamentarians should know the plight of the children in the country.

Our question is not whether the war has actually ended or not. This conflict emerged in the first place because one party was not ready to accept the identity of the other. We all get hurt if someone interferes with our identity; all of us have our own social, religious and educational backgrounds. We have our own ways of thinking, social interactions, and we would like to

safeguard our identity just as we would like to be humble and cooperative with others. But when one group is not humble enough to accept the identity of the other, conflict arises. This is what happened in Germany, in Chechnya and it is happening in India, in Tibet under Chinese occupation, and at the Gaza border. It is happening everywhere — all due to the inability of human kind to accept the identity of the other. I don't understand why one cannot understand the other. When we come to this world, we develop a kind of organised system around us where we are the sole people who should live, others should not be permitted. Hitler wanted to wipe out the Jews, someone in the Middle East is trying to wipe out someone else, America is trying to wipe out someone else. Someone is constantly trying to take control of the other. But why worry too much about this? One day there is bound to be retribution for such deeds...

We the Sinhalese people accelerated a war killing thousands of people on the other side. We may feel happy that we have won the war. But if we turn around and look at ourselves, we will see the price we have paid for this victory. We will see how many Sinhalese people have lost their young children — those who joined the Sri Lankan forces. How many of our children have lost their parents, how many of our mothers have lost their sons and how many women have lost their husbands. This is the retribution we get. Nobody thinks about them. This is the plight of war. In Sri Lankan society, there will always be people who are lonely and physiologically broken as they have lost their loved ones. Who has caused this situation? Did they ask for this retribution? No! They were compelled to send their children to the war fields by the Sinhalese forces and the LTTE.

We know that the Tamil people are now caught in the crossfire and are in the middle of a war. They are left without shelter, water, food, clothes or any other facilities. Who is going to talk about this and help them out? Why have they been made victims of this situation?

There were many opportunities in the past to change the situation. Though it was a disaster, during the Tsunami there was an opportunity for the government to come to a settlement with the LTTE. But unfortunately the extremist groups were against talks. They wanted to go for a war as they wanted blood. Even the LTTE has made political blunders. They were having secret dialogues with the Sinhalese politicians. If they were candid enough they would not have fallen into a dangerous situation. Their actions were disastrous. They took money even from Mahinda Rajapakses' Office. Even the Sinhalese side, in the past, could have settled this issue in an amicable manner. Now it is very clear that it is the chauvinism which gradually grew and led to the present situation.

[Continued...](#)

[Share](#)

.....

Sethu Das is the Co-founder of Design & People. He can be reached at: sethu.das@designandpeople.org

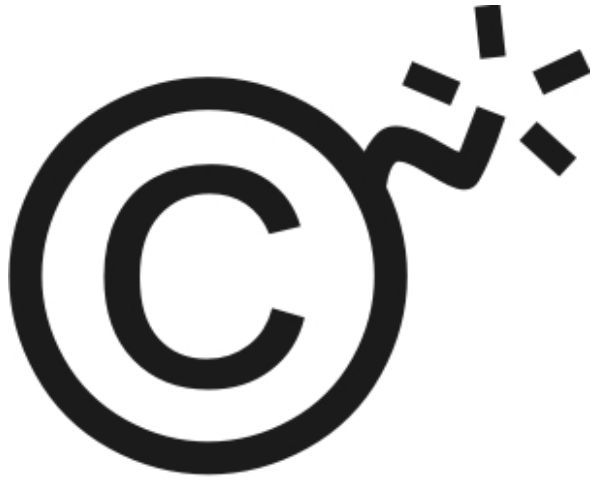
The 'Open Design Policy' of Design & People grants users the freedom to copy, share, study, distribute, display, transform or even make derivative works based on Design & People artworks — both visual and written — for any non-commercial or academic purpose by giving appropriate credit to the author of the work. We advise the user who creates a subsequent work based on the original artwork make no attempt to remove it from the Public Domain. By choosing to contribute to the evolution of this work of art, the user agrees to give to others the very same rights.

.....



Design & People **E:** support@designandpeople.org **W:** www.designandpeople.org





creativeresistance
from Design & People

[Home](#) | [Design & People](#)

.....

IN CONVERSATION WITH RAVINDRA RANASINHA — III



Fr Mervin Fernandes of 'Subodhi', Fr Ranjith, Ravindra Ranasinha and Sethu Das at Anuradhapura, Central Sri Lanka.

Sethu Das:

Your latest play 'Sevanali' or 'The Shadows' is all about the plight of the war victims. As a Sinhalese how do you analyse the current situation in Sri Lanka which has displaced more than 1.6 million people and resulted in the death of more than 70,000 people.

Ravindra Ranasinha:

The current situation in Sri Lanka is really bad. It is inhuman to expect people to live without food or shelter. And yet the Tamil people are being deprived of these very basic needs. My question to the Sinhalese people is: How can we live here in the south comfortably, with all the luxuries, when our brothers and sisters are suffering? Our senses are now numbed due to political campaigns. We do not have any love for those who are being victimised. We cannot see this happening because even in schools the students hoist the national flag whenever the army captures a piece of land. This is a tragic situation. Why should we inculcate this hatred in our children? What we need to inculcate is love for others. This is a frustrating situation in Sri Lanka. Are we putting enough

pressure on our government to stop this war and look at the needs of the people? I don't think so. We Sinhalese are not doing that and may never do so — our senses have been numbed.

We call this a Buddhist country, but unfortunately it is these very Buddhist monks who are responsible for developing the spirituality of the warring people. How can you expect people in our temples to develop maitri as preached by Lord Buddha? Maitri is not just love, but immense and passionate love towards the other. How can you be in love with the other when you're so numbed by chauvinistic and mundane principles? The soul of the spirituality of the southern Sri Lankan people is being crushed. I will leave this question unanswered. There is no hope unless the Sinhalese people develop their spirituality and accept their brothers and sisters on the other side who are being victimised. If a Tamil person comes and resides in a Sinhala area, he or she is looked upon with suspicion. This suspicion does not let you build a cordial relationship. Healthy relationships are impossible dreams in this country.

Sethu Das:

I always compare your theatrical experiments with the experiments we had in south India, where plays were successfully used to fire social and political changes. How optimistic are you about a change in the mindset of a people who are already divided and have already taken a stand on the issue?

Ravindra Ranasinha:

Well, theatre is a powerful tool. And it has all the potential to bring about a change in mindset of the people. In India, you have such forums, unfortunately in Sri Lanka the theatre has now been taken over by non-governmental organisations.

Sethu Das:

Is that a good or a bad situation?

Ravindra Ranasinha:

It's a worse situation. Because now it is the agenda of the NGOs that the theatre people are following. I see no difference between the NGOs and the theatre people. This agenda is most probably framed by the American State Department and the policy makers for South Asia. Now the minds and souls of the people are partly controlled by the NGOs, just like the extremists who also prove to be a contributory factor. I know for a fact that NGOs have supported forum theatre for the purpose of discussing conflict resolution. The question is how do they do it? They have all the potential to change the situation. Instead they talk to you about human rights situations and avoid talking about the spiritual connection, and the interconnectedness between two ethnicities. They demand rights, which are demanded by most NGOs. Then the fight starts; here human rights have not been supported to resolve issues but have created a conflict situation. When you bring up the topic of good governance, they bring people for dialogue, make people talk, they invite people for workshops, conferences — all of this instead of discussing the real issues. They want you to speak. What do you learn? You learn to collect money through such conferences. Democracy, rule of law and transparency — everything boils down to just one thing — the transparency which is lacking among NGOs. Here theatre people enjoy facilities like travelling and staying in luxury hotels with the money they receive from these NGOs.

These NGOs teach people how to beg for funds. Instead of having real dialogue, people now prefer going for such theatre activities — a trend which is crushing the worker's power to voice against suppressions. So with money, artists crush the common people who have been suppressed in a very bad way. As you said, mindsets cannot be changed at the moment through theater unless there is a political change or a spiritual change, because a bad culture has been created — primarily because people have not taken the responsibility on to themselves. In Sri Lanka we cannot imagine that a people's movement could emerge. There's a people's movement which is funded by Norway and EU, which is a complete failure, because they are the ones who with other NGOs spend money on the people — crippling their minds, abilities and skills. With this NGO culture and atmosphere, we will never be able to achieve any positive results in the country.

All we can pray for is to have a good leader who is responsible and spiritually developed to play a major role. Theatre personalities, artists, novelists and others who have abandoned their responsibilities for the lure of NGO money should remember that they have a greater responsibility towards the society. If creative professionals and the clergy understand their real role as spiritual people, then only the nation will change. All these components are important.

Sethu Das:

Coming back to the present situation in the country, do you agree with the Sri Lankan military claim that 95% of the war with LTTE is over?

Ravindra Ranasinha:

They claim that they've won this war and there is only a small area nearly 5 sq kms where the LTTE is being restricted according to the Major General. The question is — have they really destroyed the LTTE and found answers to the ethnic conflict? They can capture land, as we all know the LTTE has created a human-shield of a hundred and fifty thousand people. In case a deep penetration takes place in that area (where the human shield is created) you can imagine how many lives will be lost. I don't think the real victory is by waging a war against the LTTE, because

LTTE is just a fraction of the Tamil Diaspora in the world who would continue to claim these political rights in Sri Lanka. This is an acid test for the government. Winning of land is one thing but winning the minds of the Tamils will take a century, unless they realise the truth of why this conflict erupted. They know the roots, but they deliberately want to avoid talking about it. If you really go to the root of the crisis, you will see that the Sinhala people refused to acknowledge Tamilians as their brothers and sisters. We know that the Tamils want to share their culture with us. Mixed marriages have taken place between Tamils and Sinhalese. We have lived together for many years. But now I do not think so... We might crush the LTTE in a week or two but I still feel that the situation will continue. The real solution will not be achieved unless they identify the root cause of this conflict.

Sethu Das:

"Media should be either with Sri Lankan government or the LTTE". This is what Mahinda Rajapakse said when he came to power in 2005. Don't you think the assassination of the outspoken editor of The Sunday Leader, Lasantha Wikramatunge on January 08, 2009 is a war on those who love freedom of speech/media?

Ravindra Ranasinha:

Every individual has an identity. Freedom is for media people as well. Their view is sharper when it comes to seeing what's happening in the social and political spheres. By Mahinda Rajapakse saying "Media should be either with Sri Lankan government or the LTTE," he is making a statement similar to George Bush. By giving the 'terrorism' label to the LTTE or by labeling Tamils as terrorists, we will be unable to find a solution to the Tamil issue. Because if we do not consider them a part of our country, and treat them like terrorists, then any Tamilian coming into a Sinhala area will be viewed with suspicion — which will only aggravate the situation. The media is being very critical about the dubious government arms deals, The Sunday Leader was very critical about the government policies, especially Lasantha. I must tell you that nearly 20 odd journalists have been killed in the last three years since Mahinda Rajapakse came to power. More than a dozen journalists were either abducted or tortured because they were not with Rajapakse. The political parties in power have always used the government media and the private media institutions for their own propaganda. This is bad because Sri Lankan people are completely influenced by the media.

Noam Chomsky has very clearly explained in his book 'Manufacturing Consent' about how media plays a huge role in influencing people's minds. All media institutions in Sri Lanka are under government control, except for The Sunday Leader which is still very critical of the situation. By killing Lasantha, they cannot destroy The Sunday Leader. The government can seal the office and yet The Sunday Leader will find a way to function — by using a different name or taking the form of a website... so that the government will be kept guessing. There is a threat to a journalist's life if he/she tries to expose the dirty activities of the government. But any journalist who is conscious of his/her social responsibilities will continue to write regardless of the consequences.

We are at an important juncture where the international community should play a stronger role to resolve the situation. The government refuses to listen to any international calls for media freedom. There are many journalists who are unable to talk or write about people's plights. If you consider all English newspapers in Sri Lanka, with the exception of The Sunday Leader, all of them say what the government tells them to say. Freedom is suppressed. We cannot even talk about the freedom of the press. I know for sure that The Sunday Leader will have problems in future given that the situation is worsening. They may not be as critical as they used to be, or they may even stop criticising the government policies all together. If this is going to be the fate of The Sunday Leader, I hope there will be an alternative...

Sethu Das:

Finally can you explain to us the activities of Deepa, Centre for Community development and peace-building? What exactly are you trying to achieve collectively for the people in general?

Ravindra Ranasinha:

Deepa is for the well-being of the people, especially those who have been victimised by war, those cast off from the social fabric due to situations not in their control, those not considered as people of any value. We have children in the war zone who've lost their parents; young girls raped by the armed forces; children without education, health facilities etc. Unless we support and make these people messengers of peace, we will be unable to achieve anything. These people are broken and have lost their souls. We intend to develop them spiritually through activities like leadership training, agriculture development, vocational training programmes, computer literacy and education to develop inter-personal skills with others.

So many of these people still live in trauma. They fear that someone will harm them. We want to create a small space for these victimised children of the North and the East. Here we will educate them, give them access to vocational activities, sports, spirituality, drama, dance etc. This will be in collaboration with Subodhi — an institution run by Father Mervin Fernandes and some other organisations. We need to collaborate with such organisations so that in return other organisations will come forward and support us too — may not be monetarily, but through advise, or by designing programmes for us. We look forward to such support and guidance to help us help these people — not just children, but also the many aged people left behind with no one to look after them because of the war situation in the country. In Sri Lanka we have a situation where

children leave their parents in old age homes. We should teach our children that there is a strong spiritual bond between parents and children. Finally this comes down to spiritual teaching. I use the word 'spiritual' time and again because, unless people understand the souls, emotions and thinking patterns of the other person and one identifies with the other, we will not be able to work together and in a cordial relation.

Theatre can do a lot. If 'Deepa' comes in theatre, there could be a change in the society. We are anticipating a change or a transformation. It is completely for the well-being of the people and to bring them together. It is not to make people beg or to make them weak, but to enliven their spirits. This is our vision and our ultimate intention.

Sethu Das:

Let us hope for the best. We wish you all the best with your ventures.

(End)

[Share](#)

.....

Sethu Das is the Co-founder of Design & People. He can be reached at: sethu.das@designandpeople.org

The 'Open Design Policy' of Design & People grants users the freedom to copy, share, study, distribute, display, transform or even make derivative works based on Design & People artworks — both visual and written — for any non-commercial or academic purpose — by giving appropriate credit to the author of the work. We advise the user who creates a subsequent work based on the original artwork make no attempt to remove it from the Public Domain. By choosing to contribute to the evolution of this work of art, the user agrees to give to others the very same rights.

.....

design by
people

Design & People **E:** support@designandpeople.org **W:** www.designandpeople.org

