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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

I was at a conference in Colombo, Sri Lanka, 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: I jumped out of the seat ready to either run or dive under the nearest available cover. The official end of war in Sri Lanka a decade ago in 2009 plus several years of living in places without a war, had apparently failed to make an impact in this immediate reactionary space. A backfiring car in Zurich 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, where loud noises were associated with the possibility of an explosion. Irrespective of the political changes, the embodied experience of war continues to live within us.

Peacebuilding in places like Sri Lanka where generations grow up during war call for an equally embodied process. As feminist peace scholars consistently point out, a rational understanding alone cannot transform the corporeal experience of war. How do we arrive at an embodied peace? What processes would be involved and how would such a peace look? In contexts where dominant understandings of peacebuilding continue to revolve around negotiated settlements peppered with infrastructure development, governance models, and abstract rights discourses, seeking

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answers to these questions requires an exploration of everyday spaces that creatively envision peace. Recent scholarly initiatives such as the Peace Continuum, or the Varieties of Peace program, indicate the increasing interest in developing lenses to understand peace as a nuanced concept. As these initiatives also argue, empirical studies that explore practices on the ground can contribute much here. The Sri Lankan theater group, Theater of the People—*Jana Karaliya* in Sinhalese or *Makkal Kalari* in Tamil—offers a relevant empirical example with their approach to and understanding of peace and the relational processes through which that understanding is developed.

J*ana Karaliya* advocates neither a political solution to nor an intellectual analysis of the Sri Lankan conflict. Their relevance for peace emerges through the group's form and structure than content. As a bilingual, multi-ethnic mobile theater group initiated in 2002 amidst an internationally negotiated cease-fire agreement and discussions of a federal solution, *Jana Karaliya* envisions and performs an embodied everyday peace at a people's level. Living and working together as a multiethnic group, their notion of peace is largely based on coexistence and collaboration. The group's peacebuilding process has two overarching levels: first, *Jana Karaliya* develops an embodied notion of peace through a process of largely self-regulated within-group negotiations. Second, that idea of peace is made visible through their engagement with the audience and wider public. The process is open-ended and constantly evolving, and leads the group to inspire through lived practice and demonstration instead of direct pedagogy.

The first level of *Jana Karaliya's* peacebuilding is found in facilitating the emergence of a notion of peace through interactions among its members. How the members relate to each other and the visible and subtle negotiation of differences and practices within their work and personal spaces are key here. The group aspires to be diverse and professional. Team members come from different regions, socio-economic and education levels, ethnic and linguistic backgrounds. At the same time, the group aims to produce high-quality theater. Unlike most political theater in which the emphasis is on the content or the pedagogical value of a play, *Jana Karaliya* assigns equal value to both. Ethno-linguistic diversity of the group allows conflict-related dynamics to surface while the shared interest in theater holds the members together. These two factors in the group composition together created a space where an embodied understanding of peace can emerge from negotiating and re-negotiating the differences.

The group had to negotiate tensions that emerged out of diversity in order to produce a play. Most team members lacked previous training in

peacebuilding or close personal relationships with the other ethnicity when they joined. Several Sinhalese members recall that despite the hassle of daily encounters at checkpoints and persistent fear of suicide bomb blasts, they had not given much thought to the conflict 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. 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 team 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, thus, was expected to negotiate among and come up with strategies to deal with the diversity on its own.

Engaging in regular theater practice contributed to hold the group together. The members received regulated training on producing a play. Scholars and practitioners often agree that engaging in artistic activity enhances collaboration. April Bang takes this idea forward and argues that people who share art-based somatic experiences learn cooperation whether that is an intended result or not. The individuals who joined *Jana Karaliya* had to become a collective that engaged in theater despite their differences. The group received extensive training and careful monitoring on various aspects of producing a play.

Each member became competent in general production and often chose a specialization such as lighting, make up, costume design, script development, translation, 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 performances and provide feedback. They had to rely on each other for the technical aspects of putting together a play. 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 new ways of collaborating through work.

The group's embodiment of peace as coexistence and collaboration is evident in how their work 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 Loganathan, a Tamil permanent member of the group, successfully translates plays from classical Sinhalese to Tamil. Team members collaborate with each other and develop scripts and direct plays on their own: Ronika Chamalee and Selvaraj Leelawathie's co-directed play *Payanihal*, Rasaiyah Loganathan'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 multiethnic team that works in harmony with each other. Peace manifests within the group as a gradual self-regulated process, held together by their shared interest in theater.

Personal interactions or relationships, too, are key in the process through which the group articulates and embodies a notion of peace as coexistence and collaboration. As Johanna Söderström, Malin Åkebo and Anna Jarstad argue in proposing a relational peace framework, cooperation, deliberation, and non-domination among and between the parties characterize a peaceful relationship. Presence of mutual trust and friendship among and between parties are key here.

Jana Karaliya's notion of peace is developed through their interactions with each other. 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 travelled 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 takes relationships beyond the regular 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 on a wide range of issues. Away from their families, the group automatically becomes the substitute "family" for one another, 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. Both living and working together at the early stages of the group helped develop their reliance on each other. Discussion, cooperation, and non-domination among each other, thus, are practices that determine *Jana Karaliya's* survival.

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 often initially saw the other ethnicity through mainstream narratives and stereotypes. Their differences coupled with the inability to communicate intensified the discomfort and mistrust. Consider the examples of 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. These are common stereotypes of the other ethnicity and indicate the positions from which members joined the group. The situation gradually transformed to one where group members would see each other as "family," thus negotiating sensitive or hostile political environments for each other. For example, those with Tamil ethnicity were especially scrutinized at military checkpoints at certain periods.

During such instances, the group would come together to vouch for the affected members, and would minimize the risks for them by either running their errands or accompany 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. Coexistence and collaboration as the group's understanding of peace developed and fine-tuned through both work and life practices, gradually becoming visible as an embodied approach towards peace.

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. As a result of this process, an understanding of peace as co-existence emerged through daily personal and professional negotiations within the group. The act of letting the group find its own balance and co-existence was based on the founders' belief that the roots of the Sri Lankan conflict arise out of political and structural conditions that were manipulated for political gain, and not necessarily from tensions among the people. The conflict, according to Parakrama Niriella, a founder of the group, "is something that does not exist among the people. It is something external that is constructed and imposed upon 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 an own notion of peace based on co-existence and collaboration.

The second level of *Jana Karaliya*'s peacebuilding arises from their performative engagement with the outside. This is where the group's

embodiment of peace as coexistence and collaboration developed through a relational process is communicated and made visible. The group unsettles mainstream narratives on conflict through their engagement with those who are external to the group, in personal as well as professional spaces. Working and living together in the long term creates opportunities for the 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 towards the Tamil members when the group visited her home for a few days. She recalls how, towards the end of the visit, her father ended up embracing 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, and at times, reports the group to the police for suspicious behavior. With time, the same community bonds with the group, invites the team into their homes and asks for an extended stay or repeat visits. 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 renegotiate their personal beliefs and ideologies.

Performative engagement with an audience in a professional capacity draws further attention to the group's articulation of peace. The audience is gradually led to a point where they gain an understanding of *Jana Karaliya's* embodied practice of peace as coexistence and collaboration. The group's primary task when they arrive at a location is to perform. As a result, though the plays are often cast with Tamil leads in Sinhala language plays and vice versa, the team does not formally introduce themselves through their ethnic or linguistic identities to the audience prior to the performance. Instead, the audience is allowed to gradually deduce the ethnic composition of the cast. The accents and the post-performance introductions act as clues here. With the mixed ethnic cast, there are always actors for whom Sinhalese or Tamil would be the second language. In such cases, the accent would be noticeable. Thus, the ethnic identity of an actor is hinted at through their line delivery.

The post-performance introductions by 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. 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 aesthetic 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, temporarily leaving aside their pre-existing notions of a specific ethnicity.

Instead of being preached peace, the audience is encouraged to witness the play as an example of peace as coexistence and collaboration. When the group stays in a given location for a longer period, the community has the opportunity for repeated interactions outside the theatre space. Community members often attend rehearsals, hang out with the group at their base, and invite group members to visit their houses. These casual encounters play a major role in the idea of peace embodied and promoted by the group, as it emphasizes the relational aspects and reveals the coexistence and collaboration 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 an everyday, 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 at first, and then expanded to the members' families and 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 for peace is primarily articulated through the group's form and structure 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. The peacebuilding politics of the group, thus, come out through the group's practices and the form of the plays. *Jana Karaliya* challenges the audience by 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 in facilitating engagement at the ground level. Within that space, *Jana Karaliya* undergoes a self-regulated process of negotiating relationships that arise 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 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 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, instead, is the palpable solidarity among the permanent members of the group, and the ease with which they express and negotiate dissent, and in the sharing of an everyday life where personal and work responsibilities constantly overlap and intertwine.

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