

Foes to fellows to friends: performing relational peace through theater in Sri Lanka

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The Sri Lanka I grew up in had very few Tamils. The Tamils who were there appeared mostly in the stories of my parents, in books, and in the media. However, my parents, both Sinhala, grew up in a very different country. My mother, who studied in Bandarawela, had Tamil schoolmates, and can understand Tamil. My father, who worked mostly with Tamil colleagues during the first stage of his career, is fluent in Tamil. They both worked in a multiethnic area when I was born. Apparently as a toddler, I had a habit of sneaking off to our Tamil neighbors whenever I could. Yet, despite this story from my early childhood, I did not inherit this multiethnic Sri Lanka that my parents had. Instead, I grew up in a country with clear conflict lines that ran along ethnicity and language. This is partly because my parents relocated to a place that is closer to Colombo before I turned three. But it is primarily because Sri Lanka became increasingly divided by the conflict. Protracted conflict gave way to increasing ethno-nationalistic sentiments. Ethnic stereotyping and polarization became rampant, as the following quotation from a former (Sinhala) dean at the University of Ruhuna illustrates: “I am not in favor of any close association or forming ties with Tamils [...] I think the differences we see among the races are natural. I think that forming kinship ties with people of another culture is something dishonorable [...] I can neither speak nor write the Tamil language, because I never associated with Tamil people” (Kariyakarawana 2004: 99). My first post-toddler interaction with a Tamil person that I remember took place only as a university student. Conflict divides along lines of ethnicity, language, geographical boundaries, and, at times, religion characterized the Sri Lanka where I grew up.

This is the context in which Theatre of the People – called *Jana Karaliya* in Sinhala and *Makkal Kalari* in Tamil¹ – strived to develop interethnic relations. *Jana Karaliya* started in 2002 as a bilingual mobile theater group that brought together Sinhala and Tamil youth from different areas in Sri

Lanka to perform in Sinhala- and Tamil-language plays. The plays brought together elements from Sinhala and Tamil drama traditions, specifically in designing costumes, music, and dance styles. Jana Karaliya's peacebuilding therefore aimed to model interethnic peace and harmony, instead of talking about or directly advocating peace. By the very example of its sustained coexistence, the group challenges ethno-linguistic polarization and binary construction of ethnic narratives in Sri Lanka (see de Mel 2021). Peacebuilding at the ground level requires tackling conflict identities (Cohen 2003). Jana Karaliya puts this approach into practice by bringing together strangers and seeming adversaries, who transform into a group of close friends who continue to work across changing conflict phases. In a country that has been deeply marked by ethnocentric identities, subsequent polarizations, an internationally mediated ceasefire agreement followed by a war, and a victor's peace, Jana Karaliya offers a symbol of ethnic harmony with its multiethnic, bilingual team who live, work, and travel together (Premaratna and Bleiker 2010; Premaratna 2018).

How did interethnic relations between Jana Karaliya's Sinhala and Tamil members evolve over time, and what characterizes this particular manifestation of relational peace? In order to answer this puzzle, I apply the relational peace framework of Söderström, Åkebo, and Jarstad (Söderström et al. 2021; Jarstad et al., this volume, Introduction) to Jana Karaliya's within-group relations. While the arts have gained increasing attention for offering an approach to peacebuilding that can bring together members from conflict groups, we know relatively little about how this approach works when groups come together in practice. The area needs further empirical study and conceptual frameworks that can explain the process through which arts-based peacebuilding works (Beller 2009; Väyrynen 2019). The existing literature shows that personal interactions and relationships that have developed across conflict groups form a key element in peacebuilding through participatory art forms such as theater. Thus, a relational view of peace provides a fitting lens through which to explore how Jana Karaliya has survived as a multiethnic, bilingual theater group amid changing conflict dynamics in Sri Lanka. The framework's focus on the particular attitudes, behaviors, and ideas that characterize relations allows a fine-grained analysis of how relationships between the Sinhala and Tamil members have evolved over time. The chapter contributes to furthering discussions in arts and peacebuilding in three ways. Firstly, it demonstrates a way to map transitions in participatory arts-based peacebuilding. Secondly, it emphasizes the value of doing longitudinal studies by showing how the character of relational peace changes over time. Thirdly, it identifies sustained interaction in work and personal spaces over time as key to the development of relational peace in participatory arts-based peacebuilding.

The chapter is structured as follows. Firstly, I locate my inquiry within a discussion of arts-based peacebuilding. Secondly, I present the methods and materials used in the chapter. Thirdly, I apply the relational peace framework in order to understand how interethnic relationships within Jana Karaliya have evolved over time. The analysis is organized according to the three main components of the relational peace framework: attitudes toward each other, behavioral interaction among the group, and group members' ideas of the relationship. These components are interconnected. Each illustrates how Jana Karaliya members from Sinhala and Tamil ethnicities start from seeing each other as adversaries and move toward closer relationship classifications such as friends and family over time. Finally, I discuss how relations within Jana Karaliya were affected by the overarching conflict tensions in the country.² Applying the relational peace framework demonstrates how relations within Jana Karaliya have transformed over time because its members have sustained interaction and shared a vision of performing peace. The primary analytical contribution of the chapter, then, is to illustrate how the relational peace framework can be used to map relational transitions in participatory arts-based peacebuilding initiatives. The chapter extends the framework's relevance by demonstrating how the specific components within the framework can offer a fine-grained analysis, and therefore a useful means for peacebuilding organizations to chart relational transitions in participatory peacebuilding.

I draw attention to two factors that determine the analytical boundaries of this chapter. Firstly, while there are plural relations to which the framework could be applied – such as relations between Jana Karaliya's members and their families or audiences, or the relations between the cultural elements the group draws from – the chapter specifically focuses on exploring Sinhala–Tamil relations among Jana Karaliya members. I purposely limit myself in this way because Jana Karaliya's peacebuilding potential, relevance for the Sri Lankan conflict, and broader relevance for participatory arts-based peacebuilding largely depend on the manifestation of interethnic relations within the group itself. Secondly, in discussing how within-group relations evolve over time, I am taking something that is essentially heuristic and messy, and somewhat simplifying it to present it in a linear form for analytical clarity.

Peacebuilding, the arts, and relational peace

Peacebuilding through the arts is increasingly becoming relevant in peace and conflict studies. State-centric binary understandings of peace and conflict have been under critique for their inability to satisfactorily consider the

range of actors involved in peace produced at the ground level or its complexity. Building peace through the arts allows us to engage with nuanced understandings of peace where culture, bodies, and webs of relationships that constitute the ground level can come to the fore. Bahun argues that art has an “inherently relational nature” as it “emerges only in relation to and is defined by the relationships it establishes between human beings,” which in turn lead to a space where “new identities and new relationships” can be created and shaped (Bahun 2020: 73). Arts-based peacebuilding often draws attention to these lives and relationships that characterize peace and conflict at the ground level.

There are repeated calls for in-depth empirical studies and theoretical frameworks that can further our understanding of how arts-based initiatives bridge conflict divides. Beller (2009: 5) notes, “theoretical frameworks and evidence-based research on arts-based peacebuilding are in their infancy.” More recently, Väyrynen (2019) and Stephenson and Zanotti (2017) have highlighted the same gap by reiterating the need for empirical studies on how to use the arts for peacebuilding. The *Acting Together* anthologies (see Cohen et al. 2011a, 2011b) and the arts-based theory of change that Bang (2016) proposes respond to this call. The former showcase empirical examples of theater and propose a conceptualization of the relationship between the art product and society. The latter, primarily drawing from existing literature and personal reflection, identifies cooperation as a key element in the process of peacebuilding through music. Both works make important contributions but neither offers a closer analysis of those who take part in arts-based peacebuilding processes. Examining how relations transform over time in arts-based peacebuilding addresses this gap, and contributes to the area’s theoretical and methodological advancement.

Applying the relational peace framework to Jana Karaliya’s peacebuilding practice addresses this call. Participatory arts such as theater, music, or film are often used to facilitate relational engagement between adversaries at an everyday level (see Premaratna and Bleiker 2010; Howell et al. 2019; Opiyo 2020; Mkwanzani and Cin 2022; Dirnstorfer and Saud 2020;). Peacebuilding in such cases requires bringing people together to transform their antagonistic attitudes about and images of each other. Jana Karaliya’s peacebuilding is especially apt for scrutiny because it models this process: instead of talking about or advocating peace, the group performs coexistence as a microcosm of a multiethnic Sri Lanka. Jana Karaliya’s relevance to peacebuilding within the larger conflict context in Sri Lanka therefore relies heavily on its within-group interethnic relations. The relational peace framework has the capacity to shed light on the character of peace that is manifested in these interactions and how these relations evolve over time. This chapter thus offers a way to map transitions in arts-based peacebuilding initiatives, with particular

relevance to participatory arts. In doing so, it contributes to further discussions on peacebuilding through the arts.

Method and materials

Jana Karaliya works in Sri Lanka, a multiethnic context marked by a protracted conflict. While polarizations in the country manifest along diverse social, political, and economic vectors (Kadirgamar 2020), the primary conflict between the Sri Lankan government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) revolves around the two parties' respective Sinhala and Tamil ethno-nationalistic sentiments. Geographical separation of ethnicities due to war and communication challenges due to the use of different languages have helped aggravate conflict polarities by limiting interaction between Sinhala and Tamil communities. Populist majoritarian politics in the post-war period has done little to address these divisions.³

Jana Karaliya's peacebuilding is ingrained in the interethnic relations developed within its multiethnic cast, and is modeled through these sustained within-group relations. This format allows the group to stand out from other theater groups and peacebuilding initiatives in the country. Theater initiatives in Sri Lanka that engage with the conflict tend to speak to their own communities in Tamil, Sinhala, or English,⁴ and often do this through the content of a play. Plays such as *Ravanesan* (Tamil) and *Trojan Women* (Sinhala) are significant for their anti-war message. These are produced only in one language, and are performed as separate, one-off events. Their engagement with the conflict therefore revolves primarily around the message conveyed through the content of the play. The work of multiethnic organizations such as Inter Act Art and Theatre of Friendship follows a similar pattern. Jana Karaliya's relevance for peacebuilding, in contrast, is embedded in its multiethnic, bilingual, residential format, and in the members' relationships to each other on and off stage. Their ability to model interethnic peace therefore depends on successfully developing and performing relational peace among themselves.

A relational view of peace was built into the group from the beginning. Two Sinhala artists, Parakrama Niriella and (the late) H. A. Perera, founded the group in 2002 as a mobile theater group to produce plays in both Sinhala and Tamil languages. The founders publicly advertised the group's formation, and invited applications from interested artists. They recruited Sinhala and Tamil youth from different geographical areas as needed to establish and maintain the group's diverse character.⁵ In its mobile theater format, the group's engagement with the community went beyond performances: Jana Karaliya stayed in one location for a period of several weeks

or months as needed, and interacted with the community within and outside the theater space during that time.

The group has had to adapt to external conditions along the conflict trajectory and has had to reinvent itself accordingly. But its work continues. During the ceasefire period (2002–2008), the group traveled to locations within the LTTE-controlled area in the north as well as to remote areas in the majority-Sinhala south and the plantation sector in the hill country. In interviews, members of the group recount experiences of being equally welcomed by the armed forces of the LTTE and the Sri Lankan army. The group also engaged with the community through activities such as theater workshops at schools and forum theater programs in villages. At present, even though Jana Karaliya works in remote areas periodically, it no longer tours with the mobile theater, because of practical issues and personal situations of its longstanding members. Instead, the group has a center in Anuradhapura in the North Central Province of the country, where it holds workshops, training sessions, and rehearsals for members and regional theater groups. It also has a base in Homagama, a suburb of Colombo.

This chapter primarily draws on qualitative data I collected from Jana Karaliya in Sri Lanka in 2020, but examines relations within the group from its inception. I have researched Jana Karaliya since 2007, and the analysis benefits from data collected over a decade of engagement with the theater group, its members, and previous interviews with the founder. These include ethnographic data, performances, and participant observation at rehearsals and trainings. The study is thus longitudinal. The relationships I developed with the group over the years played a key role in enabling me to broach the topic and conduct insightful, rich interviews with the theater group members. I also draw on secondary sources such as newspaper articles and reports.

The chapter aims to study relations across the dyad of Tamil and Sinhala members of Jana Karaliya over time, with a particular focus on the group's longstanding members.⁶ These members joined the group in its initial stages and played an influential role in developing Jana Karaliya's multiethnic, bilingual image and the character of the interethnic peace within the group. Thus, this specific category of members is the best suited for a longitudinal study on within-group interethnic relations. With them I conducted one focus group interview (two women and three men, of whom two were Sinhala and three were Tamil) and seven semi-structured individual interviews (three women and four men, of whom four were Sinhala and three were Tamil) to explore the character of peace in their interethnic relationships with each other. Candidates for individual interviews were selected according to their availability and information that came up during the focus group discussion. The longest-standing member I interviewed joined the group in 2002, and

the newest in 2007. They had all taken on various roles of responsibility in the group's day-to-day management. The average participant was between thirty-five and forty-five years old. Informed consent was obtained prior to the focus group interview and the individual interviews. The focus group interview examined relationship dynamics and how interethnic relationships within the group evolved over time. Questions also focused on eliciting group processes and practices that facilitated relational peace. Through individual interviews, I explored participants' personal experiences of being a Sinhala or a Tamil in Jana Karaliya, and the members' process of personal transformation if applicable. Exploring relationships within the group is a delicate topic that could have negative consequences unless explored with care and respect; therefore, the interviewees were assured of confidentiality and anonymization for any information they would consider sensitive. Moreover, interviewees were offered the opportunity to withdraw their participation or segments of it by contacting me, whenever possible.

Jana Karaliya: performing relational peace through theater

In this section, I use the relational peace framework to examine interethnic relations within Jana Karaliya and analyze the character of peace within the group. The analysis is structured along the three main components of the relational peace framework: subjective attitudes about each other, behavioral interaction among the group, and participants' understandings of the relationships in the group. I take a chronological approach in order to analyze each component and examine the evolution of interethnic relationships that were initiated at the point of joining Jana Karaliya. The components are interlinked, and this particular ordering of the components is best suited to analyze the peace formation process within the group. The order enables the analysis to start by looking at the predominant ethnocentric attitudes and assumptions the group members had when they joined the group, and then examine how these were recalibrated through sustained behavioral interaction within the group, and finally to look at how individual ideas of the relationship shifted from foes to fellows to friends.

Attitudes toward each other

This section on subjective attitudes toward each other within Jana Karaliya charts the trajectory of relational peace within the group. When they joined Jana Karaliya, members saw each other as strangers at best and adversaries at worst. Their subjective attitudes toward each other at the beginning exemplify how members mirrored conflict narratives and biases seen in the wider society. As discussed below, initial relations within the group were

characterized by antagonistic attitudes and feelings such as mistrust and fear, before these were gradually transformed through sustained interaction.

Jana Karaliya members had no prior experience of peacebuilding when they joined, and carried the differences and conflict divisions of wider society into the group with them. The founding members started the group with the explicit intention of bringing together members from different ethnicities, but this aspiration was not required for someone to join the group as a member. As the focus group discussion and conversations with members revealed, the members joined the group out of a desire to train in and practice theater, and they had little prior interaction with people of another ethnicity. In the early stages, they did not see the multiethnic character of the group as an advantage. Instead, the group's ethnic diversity caused families to worry about the safety of their relatives. Some members' families – both Sinhala and Tamil – even attempted to prevent them from joining.⁷ Most members were monolingual at the point of joining except for some Tamil-speaking members who could understand Sinhala to a limited extent. As several members commented, this led to difficulties in communication.⁸ Members came from different geographical areas, including the Eastern Province, the Southern Province, the Western Province, the tea-plantation-sector Tamil areas in the hill country, and the North Central Province. Several noted how “there were many issues and no understanding at all, and lots of ‘fights’”⁹ even among those from the same ethnicity. The following two statements, respectively from Tamil and Sinhala members, make the differences clear: “There were two groups within the Tamil-speaking members, as Trinco Tamils and Upcountry Tamils”;¹⁰ “I am from Kandy, there were others from Tangalle [indicating that both were Sinhala] and we had different views. There were different views coming from different areas.”¹¹ Thus, the group was diverse in terms of ethnicity, language, geography, and religion. It represented a microcosm of Sri Lanka in terms of its diversity and its tensions.

Because of these differences that ran along and sustained the conflict divisions and biases, the initial relations between members were often characterized by mistrust, hostility, and fear. A Sinhala member observed how “initially some Tamils wouldn't sleep and stay up all night because they were scared.”¹² A Tamil member recalled how shocked and scared she was when asked to share a room with a female Sinhala member immediately after joining the group.¹³ Many others recounted stories of not being quite ready to recognize the others for who they said they were, and of assuming they had secret identities such as being undercover agents for the government or the LTTE: a Tamil member said, “I looked at those around me with great suspicion and mistrust. I was actually quite convinced that one of the guys [Sinhala] was a member of the CID [Criminal Investigation Division].”¹⁴ The Sinhala members were also suspicious of the nightly meetings the Tamils

had in the early days: “they all got together and whispered in Tamil, and we couldn’t understand anything. We also felt suspicious and some even complained to the Sirs [founders].”¹⁵ While talking about their early days at the group during a break in rehearsals, a Sinhala member laughingly pointed at a Tamil member and said, “I was sure he was a Tiger; he wouldn’t talk much, kept to himself, and I was so sure that he was a spy.”¹⁶ The comment made all those around him – both Tamil and Sinhala – laugh.

While some of these conflict biases dissipated after a time, developing trust within the group took longer. The following quotation from a female Tamil member illustrates how at these early stages the members reverted to ethnicity to explain away what was felt as negative:

In the early days of joining the group, we would sing late into the night – [names two other male Tamil members] and I. One practiced the *Serpina*, and the other played the *Dolky*¹⁷ and I sang. Amitha Akka¹⁸ would scold us, asking us not to sing in Tamil after 6 p.m. She did not have a problem with us, she wanted to protect us. But we didn’t feel it that way. We felt that she’s telling us to stop because she’s Sinhala.¹⁹

It was therefore easy to fall back into ethnic binaries in the early days of Jana Karaliya. The members’ subjective attitudes toward each other were influenced by the larger conflict narratives in the society.

The lack of trust at the initial stage became further evident in the members’ conflict resolution strategies at the time: a member reminisced that “even for a minor issue” that emerged in everyday interactions, they “ran to the Sirs.”²⁰ Focus group participants agreed: the founders generally calmed down the agitated members, reassured them that nothing major was going on, and asked them to allow some time and see whether the situation improved.²¹ Members relied heavily on the founders, as they did not trust each other.

These initial attitudes became more inclusive with time and sustained interaction, and the members gradually started recognizing and accepting each other for their better intentions. The interviewee who is quoted above about singing at night explained how she gradually came to trust the very same person who had scolded her:

We realized that the army was waiting outside the lodge at night, and that that’s why she had asked us to stop. She did say that to us [that the Army was outside] but we thought she was lying. We didn’t know. Later on, it was Amitha Akka who was closest to me. Especially when I had all the issues with the Tamil-speaking people [in late-night meetings in Tamil organized by some former members] they [Sinhala members] were supportive and we got closer.²²

Members also commented on how trust developed through sustained interaction. A Sinhala member noted that the person he trusted the most within

the group was a Tamil female: “I tend to trust her more than a Sinhala; I got to do characters with her, so I spent more time with her. How we personally feel about people also plays a big role here.”²³ Thus, once the members get to know each other, trust has more to do with the personality of each individual than with their respective ethnic identities.

The inclusive attitudes that members develop because of being within Jana Karaliya apply to a broader spectrum than ethnicity. A Sinhala member commented on how the experience of Jana Karaliya’s theater expanded his boundaries: “Before I joined Jana Karaliya I used to judge people by looking at them but after I joined, I’ve learned to respect them, their culture, and their ideas.”²⁴ The exposure through the theater group has helped him develop more recognition and trust for people in general, not just for the Tamil members in the group or in the wider society. Thus, while ethnicity was a key factor that shaped their perceptions and feelings about the other at the beginning, sustained interaction in the theater space over time has gradually allowed the members to recognize each other for who they are as unique individuals, and subjective attitudes toward each other has undergone a change from mistrust to trust.

*Behavioral interaction: deliberation, non-domination,
and cooperation*

Behavioral patterns among Jana Karaliya members illustrate how relational peace developed within the group through sustained interaction. Joining the group marked the beginning of a relationship between Jana Karaliya’s Sinhala and Tamil members: they shifted from being “totally independent and unaffected by the other” and therefore having “no relationship,” to a situation where they had “some influence on each other” (Söderström et al. 2021: 488). Producing theater as a residential group required the members to live, work, and travel together. The process required interethnic relations on work and personal levels to continuously evolve. Thus, becoming Jana Karaliya required the individual Sinhalese and Tamils who joined as strangers or adversaries to develop a fellowship with each other.

This expectation that they would integrate while being unable to understand each other’s languages and cultures led to friction within the group. Members were expected to step beyond their comfort zone. A Tamil member who joined in 2006 talked about how being in the group clashed with her sense of safety at the beginning:

We were three Tamil women who joined the group at the same time, and we were told not to stay together [in the same room] and instead share rooms with the Sinhala women. It was a big shock for us. We couldn’t even speak Sinhala, how could we share a room? We talked to an older Tamil sister and

asked for permission to share a room at least for some time until we got to know the group a bit. We were so scared but it helped to stay together at the beginning.²⁵

As the example demonstrates, when faced with challenging situations, individual members discussed and negotiated to find solutions that worked for them. Surviving in the group required learning to adapt: “We have to listen and figure out how to fit in, initially. It takes time.”²⁶ The process was therefore gradual and exploratory.

The way in which the group developed its bilingual capacities was also intuitive, and presented extra challenges to those who were unable to communicate in Sinhala. All the longstanding Sinhala and Tamil members can communicate in both languages today. Some Tamil members like Loganathan have acquired a level of fluency that has enabled them to translate Sinhala plays into Tamil and vice versa. The initial behavioral interactions, however, presented a different story: the mostly monolingual members were expected to learn to communicate in both Sinhala and Tamil, and act together in plays that would be performed in each language. They had to help each other learn the languages and memorize lines with correct pronunciations for performances. The resulting behavioral interaction enhanced interdependence within the group. However, trainings and group meetings were generally held in Sinhala because this was the most comfortable language for the founders. In order to actively participate in these, the Tamil-speaking members had to speak and understand Sinhala. Consequently, until the members could gain the required Sinhala language skills, the few Tamil members who could understand Sinhala summarized the discussions for the others in nightly meetings.

Practicing theater together requires discussion and collaboration, and Jana Karaliya’s particular format further intensified personal interaction. The members’ personal interest in theater brought the team together and played a key role in keeping them together.²⁷ Drawing from other scholars as well as her own experience as a practitioner, Bang observes that actors learn “how to cooperate” or improve “their capacity to do” through taking part in artistic activities, irrespective of whether they were “intrinsically motivated to cooperate” at the point of joining (Bang 2016: 358). Rehearsals, performances, and traveling with the mobile theater are all collaborative activities that required active participation of everyone involved in Jana Karaliya. In the focus group interview, members recognized how engaging in theater brought them together even after a dispute:

How could we do drama if we stay angry at each other and do not talk? How could we look them in the face and say a dialogue?

We cannot do without anyone. So [we] have to talk somehow.²⁸

The residential element of Jana Karaliya also encouraged relational peace practices in the members' behavior. Living together as a group extended interethnic relationships beyond work to ensure interdependence at a personal level. The group members had to look after each other and cooperate in making decisions pertaining to everyday life, including cooking, shopping, cleaning, and sharing spaces. The following conversation between Sinhala and Tamil members captured how living together enabled them to develop a practice of negotiation:

We couldn't even talk with each other then [at the point of joining], but we somehow had to figure out how to get on.

Yes, we couldn't really speak but we had to sort out who gets to use the bathroom at what time and who's to sweep the floor.²⁹

The group had a schedule for each activity, and the members rotated the responsibilities among themselves. Drawing up, negotiating, and abiding by this schedule also called for deliberation and cooperation.

Emergencies and vulnerable situations called for the development and demonstration of deeper levels of relational peace. A Tamil member recalls how he would often "fall sick at the beginning and it was Sumudu [a Sinhala member] who would take me to hospital."³⁰ When two team members – one Tamil and one Sinhala – had dengue fever in 2014, a group of Sinhala members took turns to stay in the hospital with them every night. During the last phase of war, Sinhala members would accompany the Tamil members whenever they had to go out of the group's residence. This was imposed as a group policy at the time in order to ensure the group's safety. A Tamil member commented on the palpable sense of protection he felt from some of the Sinhala members while traveling through checkpoints: "They wouldn't say anything as such, but they would pat me on the head at times, and would make sure to sit at the windows either side [of me] while traveling because the guards would usually approach from the windows [during the war times]. They won't let us [Tamils] sit in a single row alone, and would come and sit between us."³¹ Even though external conditions of war affected the Tamil members by limiting their freedom, behavioral interaction among the Sinhala and Tamil members in Jana Karaliya generally illustrated a caring friendship.

The ability of the group members to disagree with each other without resorting to violence also indicated relational peace. Members noted that they have a lot of work-related disagreements that lead to heated arguments, but "no matter how much we fight we end up reaching some sort of consensus in the end, in relation to a production."³² For post-war societies, deliberation is of particular relevance as it provides a non-violent means to express difference and to have these differences recognized and affirmed in turn.

Scholars also comment on how disagreements at micro-level that do not result in violence are common in pluralist societies (Jarstad and Segall 2019). A Tamil member astutely commented that the ability to have open and direct disagreements and arguments might be a key element that enabled the team to continue to work together.³³ Another member noted how their capacity to engage in debate developed over time: “We’ve gotten accustomed to thinking that whatever we discuss is merely an argument, and that it shouldn’t be personalized. The fact that we come from different places and backgrounds also plays a role.”³⁴ The ability to take a broader perspective toward an issue is a learned skill that results from getting to know each other and each other’s patterns over a long period. With sustained interaction and closer relations, the character of tensions also changed: “After some time we realized that there was nothing to be scared of and that we all have similar thoughts and issues. Then the fights we have had after that turned out to be the kind of fights that anyone would have – not doing your work, falling in love with someone and such like.”³⁵ Considered from an agonistic point of view, such behavioral interaction indicates that the actors have come to recognize each other as legitimate counterparts to engage with (Strömbom 2020). *Jana Karaliya* therefore offered a platform where such contestation among actors can safely take place without members resorting to violence (see Mouffe 2013).

Over time, the members who joined to “do drama” out of personal interest developed shared goals that go beyond acting. An example is *Payanihal*, a Tamil play by *Jana Karaliya* that represented Sri Lanka at an international forum in 2012. Two longstanding female members of *Jana Karaliya*, Ronika Chamalee (Sinhala) and Selvaraj Leelawathi (Tamil), co-directed the play. Rasaiah Loganathan (Tamil), another longstanding member, translated the original Sinhala script into Tamil. The team collaborated, discussed, and negotiated to reach the shared goal of producing the play as an interethnic endeavor. The members recognized that this shared goal of presenting themselves as an interethnic group enabled them to continue working together over a long time: the opportunity to “present ourselves to the society as a team that is engaged in a task, that’s why we’ve been able to be together for this long, because of this work.”³⁶ Thus, the members’ behavioral interaction in the space of theater has led them to develop shared goals.

As the group and the founders also acknowledged, *Jana Karaliya*’s relevance to the larger conflict context is embedded in the way the members relate to each other; in how they model coexistence. The interethnic bonds, collaboration, and cohabitation created within the group set it apart from conflict-prone behavior and attitudes seen in the society: “What we did as *Jana Karaliya* was accepted. The subculture created here can be applied

anywhere.”³⁷ Another member comments on how they are aware of this public image of the group and the need to adhere to it through their behavioral interaction, especially in public: “When I get up on stage or get a mic in my hand, I am well aware of being a part of the group, and I say what I think we *should* say, what I ought to say. It may be different from my personal opinion but at that moment, I am part of the group and this is the side I show. This is what we all do.”³⁸ In saying “[t]his is what we all do” the interviewee also expresses their trust in the other members, noting that they all work together to sustain the image of coexistence that is projected through the group. Thus, behavioral interaction within Jana Karaliya demonstrates how members from different ethno-linguistic backgrounds negotiate their positions, and how peace develops within the group over time through sustained relational interactions performed in work and personal spaces.

Ideas of the relationship: foes to fellows to friends

How members conceptualized their relationship with those from the other ethnicity in Jana Karaliya has also changed over time. The transition illustrates how relational peace has developed within the group. The initial role that ethnicity played in determining members’ ideas of the other changed through sustained interaction in work and personal spaces. Thus, interethnic relational engagements between Jana Karaliya’s longstanding members started from a position as adversaries but gradually came to be framed by ideas of being acquaintances, colleagues, friends, or at times even family.

Jana Karaliya’s particular format, which requires the members to work together and perform peace, played a key role in bringing about this shift. When the members entered Jana Karaliya, they reflected a type of relational peace defined by Söderström et al. (2021: 495) where fellowship is merely “an acceptance of the existence of the other” with “no onus to collaborate or cooperate.” They saw each other through conflict biases and doubted each other’s credibility at first. As discussed in the previous section, they suspected each other to have hidden agendas, such as being spies for armed groups. To stay with Jana Karaliya, however, the members had to coexist in their everyday life and perform peace in the space of theater. To do so, they had to move beyond the lowest threshold of accepting the other’s legitimacy, and actively engage with the other more directly (Jarstad et al., this volume, Introduction) through theater. Thus, despite their reservations and misgivings about the other ethnicity, the members had to perform a fellowship that was cooperative and collaborative as needed, even if it was “largely determined by self-interest” (Söderström et al. 2021: 495). This format, over time, encouraged the idea of the relationship to move beyond

the lowest threshold of relational peace toward a more collaborative fellowship.

After over a decade of working together, the members tend to regard each other as friends and family. Most of the longstanding members agreed that they had become close friends because of sustained interaction and going through ups and downs together as a team. Some recounted stories of asking each other for help when they faced personal issues. The notion of a “family” emerged in the focus group interview and in several individual interviews with both Sinhala and Tamil members. One person saw the others as siblings: “we are like sisters and brothers.”³⁹ For another, the bond was even closer: “closer than a family, they are more a family to me than my own family.”⁴⁰ Participants reiterated the fact in the focus group interview: “even when we go home it’s difficult; we have to at least hear each other’s voices. We have a bond like a family.”⁴¹ Here, they identified the ability to trust and connect with each other with ease and mutual acceptance as indicators of this familial relationship:

We don’t have to hide anything from each other, we feel each other well.

We know everything about each other, money, family, there is nothing hidden. So our bond is stronger.

Even our families wouldn’t listen to our opinions, but here, when we share something the others add to it.

The team discusses things. At home, we don’t get together and talk that much but here it’s different. We talk a lot.

How the members relate to the group and each other affects their lives in general, and can at times raise tensions. Two Tamil members who recently got married to each other laughingly commented that these close relations among Jana Karaliya can become somewhat “challenging as well,” because the couple cannot even leave the others behind and “go for a film” on their own.⁴² The closeness of the relationship posed ethical questions for some longstanding members in relation to working elsewhere or leaving the group:

Even if I would be offered another opportunity, I don’t feel like taking them up. I don’t feel like leaving and disrupting things here.

It is always like a team, we haven’t had thoughts about doing something for ourselves as individuals.

When we do get outside work, we’ll try to somehow get another one of us there too.

Thus, while relating to each other as a family or even more closely holds the group together, it also brings its own tensions and restrictions at the same time, as being a part of any family does.

Variations in how the members perceived their relationships to one another call in to question the feasibility of reading relations through a predetermined dyad. Even though the analysis focused only on one dyad – namely, Sinhala–Tamil relations – as the relational peace framework recommends, the actors involved operated within a web of relations. Ethnicity, in this web, was just one factor that contributed to members’ ideas of the other. For example, a Tamil member saw one Sinhala member as “family” and referred to another as “a friend.”⁴³ Thus, ideas of relationship toward the other can vary depending on factors other than ethnicity. Two members articulated their relationships with the group in more work-related terms, seeing the others as “friends within arts, mostly from a professional, workplace perspective”⁴⁴ and “not exactly friends, friends are different like the ones I had at school.”⁴⁵ All the members acknowledged that they were recognized as legitimate partners when it came to the theater work. Thus, while some members may not see each other as “real friends,” they do simultaneously recognize an underlying willingness to coexist and collaborate. Factors such as gender, personal behavior, or membership of professional networks can impact how the members perceive the other. Relationships among Jana Karaliya’s multiethnic longstanding members traverse a spectrum, and veer toward a character that surpasses the threshold of relational peace toward friendship or beyond. Once relations evolve to a point of friendship where ethnicity ceases to play a predominant role, relations become more nuanced, and the analysis through the chosen dyad can be limiting. Thus, the relational peace framework is more useful when it comes to analyzing relations at their early stages of transformation, where conflict identities play a prominent role.

Implications of the conflict

While I focus on relations between Sinhala and Tamil members within Jana Karaliya as the dyad to which I apply the framework, these interactions cannot be divorced from the larger conflict situation and the webs of relationships within which the members live. Just as Jana Karaliya intends to contribute to the larger society by modeling interethnic peace and harmony through its relations, the larger conflict context had implications for relations within the group. I have discussed how instances such as encounters at check-points while traveling often demonstrated cooperation and care between the Sinhala and Tamil members. However, the broader conflict situation also affected the group in ways that triggered tension and imposed constraints upon its members.

A Tamil member illustrated the conditions under which they had to operate during the last phase of war: “at the peak of war there were lots of issues. The Tamil members were accompanied everywhere by [names of

two Sinhala senior team members]. Whether it is for Jana Karaliya work, for a workshop, to go to the shops, we had to always have a Sinhala-speaking person with us.”⁴⁶ Another Tamil member commented on how these external circumstances invaded their everyday life: “even to get a bar of soap or toothpaste, we had to ask someone.”⁴⁷ While the practice was introduced as a safety measure for the group members, it also imposed limitations on the movement and behavior of the Tamil members within the group, leading to a sense of dependency that reinforced power dynamics and hierarchies. One interviewee described how a female senior member who was accompanying her once asked her to “take off my *pottu*”⁴⁸ upon seeing a police officer at a corner and how uncomfortable that made her feel; but at the same time, the interviewee acknowledged that this tension stemmed from external dynamics that permeated the group’s relations by saying that this was “not a problem between us, but a problem in the country.”⁴⁹ Another Tamil member drew attention to how these external conditions highlighted power hierarchies between the ethnicities and inhibited the Tamil members’ freedom and development in concrete ways:

I felt the Sinhalese have more power than us during the incidents [bomb blasts in and around Colombo during the last phase of the war]. I cannot say that it was used to suppress us, but that power enabled them to do whatever they wanted in this country. We [Tamil members] cannot walk around at night, cannot go freely. Sometimes I felt that it’s a pity that I was born a Tamil. They haven’t used that power to suppress us within the team. They’d get dressed and leave to watch dramas in the evening. We [Tamil members] can’t do that. That makes us feel a bit sad.⁵⁰

The power he refers to derives from conflict hierarchies and widespread militarization during the last phase of the war. While the team member acknowledged that this was not something specifically connected to or directed toward him by his Sinhala colleagues, the felt effects of this social domination were real. The larger conflict context had clear effects upon Jana Karaliya members. Thus, while the group on its own strives to perform ethnic harmony, its boundaries inevitably remain porous to conflict dynamics. The actors, despite being studied as a dyad here, were intricately connected to and in turn affected by external situations.

Conclusion

This chapter has applied the relational peace framework to explore relations between Sinhala and Tamil ethnicities in Sri Lanka, in the context of the multiethnic bilingual Sri Lankan theater group Jana Karaliya. Jana Karaliya

has contributed to building peace in Sri Lanka by modeling how different ethnicities can live and work together in harmony. Their process has allowed relational peace to develop among the Sinhala and Tamil members of the group. As a microcosm of ethnic and linguistic harmony, the group has challenged divisive conflict identities and strived to create alternative narratives of ethnic unity in Sri Lanka. In a protracted conflict where conflict divisions run deep, the value of modeled coexistence is both symbolic and tangible: at a symbolic level, Jana Karaliya has enabled communities to envision and witness a shared future. For Sri Lankans who grew up within conflict narratives and have not had any personal interactions with those from the other ethnicity, Jana Karaliya's bilingual, multiethnic team offers a memorable, transformative encounter. At a tangible level, Jana Karaliya members have undergone personal transformations after joining the group.

Applying the relational peace framework to Jana Karaliya in this chapter has enabled me to illustrate how relational peace developed within the group and the factors that triggered these developments. The chapter also highlights the need for longitudinal research, especially when a relational view of peace is adopted. Relationships take time to evolve, and therefore research that focuses on a relatively short period may not be able to capture shifts in relations. Sinhala and Tamil relations within Jana Karaliya have developed over the course of several years. Shifts in these relations came about largely through sustained interaction in work *and* everyday spaces during this period, and the shared vision of performing peace as a group. Over time, those who were regarded with mistrust became trusted confidantes; those who triggered fear at the beginning became protectors; and those who were adversaries became friends and family. Interaction in work roles required collaboration and helped produce a sense of fellowship at the beginning; and the interaction in everyday personal spaces brought the group closer. The shared vision of performing peace underlined the group's relations in both work and personal spaces. It became a constant reminder to the members of their responsibility to present a united front to the outside society as the multiethnic theater group Jana Karaliya. Constraining behavior entered the group primarily as a result of interactions with the larger conflict context. Thus, even in a unique situation such as Jana Karaliya, where the chosen dyads lived together and strived to model ethnic harmony to inspire others, elements from the outside society affected the relationship.

The primary analytical contribution of the relational peace framework to participatory arts-based peacebuilding, therefore, is in how it can be used to capture apparent relationship dynamics and shifts among participants over time. As the chapter has demonstrated, the framework is particularly useful at the early stages of peacebuilding. The focus on the particular attitudes, ideas, and behaviors that characterize relations is well suited to

capturing a dyad's transition from antagonistic to more agonistic forms of expression, and how the relations become more deliberative and cooperative with time. The separate lines of inquiry along the components have enabled a clear analysis of the shifts that have occurred in this particular arts-based peacebuilding initiative from various perspectives over time, and made visible how sustaining relational transformation required regular personal interaction that extended beyond workspaces. Furthermore, these specific components of attitudes, behavioral interaction, and ideas of each other offer key directions along which we could develop and track participatory arts-based peacebuilding initiatives. For example, peacebuilding activities or programs can be designed with the explicit intention of nurturing relational peace along one or more components of the framework. Corresponding indicators that have developed along each component in the form of questions, exercises, or activities can be used to understand and possibly assess the specific character of relational peace or map how participants undergo shifts over time. Doing so would lead to the implementation of context-specific participatory arts-based peacebuilding initiatives with responsive evaluation strategies. The components of the framework therefore serve as a metric for designing and assessing longitudinal impact of arts-based peacebuilding. The chapter has demonstrated how the relational peace framework offers a possible way to map transitions in participatory arts-based peacebuilding. As a future step, the framework can be extended to map how Jana Karaliya's external relations develop with audience members, and the complexities that come in to play when former members function outside the group.

Notes

- 1 In the present chapter I use the name Jana Karaliya because this is the form most commonly used by the group.
- 2 Overarching conflict tensions in Sri Lanka have primarily come to be defined along ethnic, linguistic, and religious lines, and the conflict underwent a range of phases from a ceasefire-agreement in 2002 followed by an increasingly violent post-accord phase that led to the last phase of war, and a post-war period from 2009 onward. See de Mel et al. (2012) for an overview of conflict tensions, and Spencer et al. (2015) for a close analysis of the associated religious tensions. Höglund (2005) and Åkebo (2016) analyze tensions that characterised the peace process, and Höglund and Orjuela (2012) discuss political tensions that characterise the post-war period.
- 3 The discussion of the Sri Lankan conflict presented in this chapter is in no way comprehensive. It merely highlights the conflict dynamics relevant to the analysis, and is therefore limited in scope. For a more detailed and a nuanced

- discussion of Sri Lankan conflict, its trajectory, and current politics, see Hoole et al. 1990, de Mel et al. 2012; and Kadirgamar 2020.
- 4 For a further discussion on Sinhala and Tamil theaters and their engagement with contemporary politics and conflict, see Obeyesekere 2001; and Dharmasiri 2014.
 - 5 New members were recruited as needed through periodic intakes.
 - 6 The study considered nine longstanding members who Jana Karaliya identified as co-partners and management team at the time of interviewing (January 2020). Four of them engaged on an as-needed basis because of changes in family circumstances and personal reasons. All five members who worked full time with the group at the time took part in the focus group interview. Jana Karaliya underwent restructuring soon after the interviews were held, resulting in changes to these membership types and individuals. This chapter, however, is based on data collected prior to this re-organization.
 - 7 Individual interview 2, January 6, 2020; individual interview 4, January 9, 2020; focus group interview, January 6, 2020.
 - 8 Individual interview 4, January 9, 2020; focus group interview, January 6, 2020.
 - 9 Focus group interview, January 9, 2020; individual interview 3, January 6, 2020.
 - 10 Upcountry Tamils are historically seen as Indian Tamils who were brought to Sri Lanka from India for plantation sector work during the British colonial period. Tamils from Trincomalee are seen as those who have a longer history as Sri Lankan Tamils.
 - 11 Focus group interview, January 6, 2020.
 - 12 Individual interview 8, January 6, 2020.
 - 13 Individual interview 3, January 6, 2020.
 - 14 “FLICT Super Stars,” report prepared for Facilitating Local Initiatives for Conflict Transformation (FLICT) in 2006 by Marissa Fernando.
 - 15 Individual interview 2, January 6, 2020.
 - 16 Field notes, 2012.
 - 17 Musical instruments.
 - 18 Pseudonym used.
 - 19 Individual interview 3, January 6, 2020.
 - 20 Individual interview 2, January 6, 2020.
 - 21 Focus group interview, January 6, 2020.
 - 22 Individual interview 3, January 6, 2020.
 - 23 Individual interview 7, January 9, 2020.
 - 24 Focus group interview, January 6, 2020.
 - 25 Individual interview 3, January 6, 2020.
 - 26 Focus group interview, January 6, 2020.
 - 27 Individual interview 4, January 9, 2020; focus group interview, January 6, 2020.
 - 28 Focus group interview, January 6, 2020.
 - 29 Focus group interview, January 6, 2020.
 - 30 Individual interview 4, January 9, 2020.
 - 31 Individual interview 4, January 9, 2020.

- 32 Focus group interview, January 6, 2020.
 33 Individual interview 4, January 9, 2020.
 34 Focus group interview, January 6, 2020.
 35 Focus group interview, January 6, 2020.
 36 Focus group interview, January 6, 2020.
 37 Focus group interview, January 6, 2020.
 38 Individual interview 7, January 9, 2020.
 39 Individual interview 4, January 9, 2020.
 40 Individual interview 3, January 6, 2020.
 41 Focus group interview, January 6, 2020.
 42 Individual interview 4, January 9, 2020.
 43 Individual interview 4, January 9, 2020.
 44 Individual interview 7, January 9, 2020.
 45 Individual interview 1, January 9, 2020.
 46 Individual interview 3, January 6, 2020.
 47 Individual interview 4, January 9, 2020.
 48 A *pottu* (called *bindi* in Hindi) is a coloured dot associated with a Hindu-Tamil cultural identity that women wear on their forehead, between or slightly above the eyebrows.
 49 Individual interview 3, January 6, 2020.
 50 Individual interview 4, January 9, 2020.

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