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Peace building through Environmental Protection

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Abstract

Religion and language differences have often lead to misunderstanding and if not resolved at an early stage to conflict. A conflict is a state in which two parties do not agree on a particular subject, situation or process. Ethnic war of Sri Lanka was one such conflict, while the Governments and armed forces were seeking to find solutions to the ethnic war; the author sought an alternative dispute resolution. This was through the vehicle of environmental protection. Whether in conflict or not, no human being in this world can survive without adequate and clean air to breathe, water to drink and food to eat. Therefore, environmental protection was used as the best strategy to bring peace. The author a Sinhalese speaking Christian worked in Vauniya, Jaffna and Ampara among the Tamil speaking Hindu, Islamic and Christian community. Construction of a compost plant, empowerment of school children for environmental protection, recycling of Tsunami debris, minimization of polythene usage among the armed forces were used as strategies to bring about a dialog, understanding, and healing between the two communities. This lead to the co-author being recognized as the most courageous woman of Sri Lanka, elected by the US embassy in 2011.

Keywords: *Peace, Conflict, Environmental Protection, Ethnic war, Sri Lanka*

Introduction:

Religion is a spiritual status to which one is born. A woman who conceives her child pre determines the religion to which the child will initially be born. The child grows in the mother's womb conditioned to the thoughts of the mother. She may be a God fearing or void of thoughts on God. Once born the baby is introduced to the rituals of the family, and from then on gradually conditioned to the beliefs of the family. No human being is born wanting to be a Christian, Muslim, a Hindu or a Buddhist, or any other form of religion or spiritual belief. The mother, the immediate family and the environment determines it. According to Wikipedia, religion is any cultural system of designated behaviors and practices, world views, texts, sanctified places, ethics, or organizations, which relate humanity to the supernatural or transcendental. John and Tamara (2013) discuss myths about religious belief in general, as well as specific ideas that surround Judaism, Christianity, Islam, atheism, and agnosticism. Even though many articles have been written on religion, religions and their impact, there is no scholarly consensus over what precisely constitutes a religion. According to the

Association for African Studies of the University of Michigan (2009) there are an estimated 10,000 distinct religions in existence worldwide.

Peace is a status of mind. Peace is our desire to be happy or be content with our surroundings, thus no great conflict exists. According to Wikipedia peace is a lack of conflict and freedom from fear of violence between heterogeneous social groups. Great scholars define peace in different ways. According to English Oxford Dictionaries Peace is a status free from anxiety or distress, a state of friendliness, which refrains or prevents others from disturbing civil order, thus re-establish friendly relations.

The Environment is our surroundings: it comprises of all things which are around us. For the ease of scientific analysis, it is divided into physical, biological and human environment. The United Nations definition is based on the environmental degradation and it says, Environmental degradation is the deterioration in environmental quality from ambient concentrations of pollutants and other activities and processes, such as improper land use and natural disasters (UN, 1997).

Of the three things defined thus far, the religion, the peace and the environment, the environment is one thing that all human beings require and cannot live without. One can live without a religion, void of peace but no one can live without the environment. Therefore, the authors sought to prioritize environment in their search for peace among the two ethnic communities, namely the Sinhalese and the Tamils.

Factors which facilitated the drift between the Sinhalese and the Tamils of Sri Lanka:

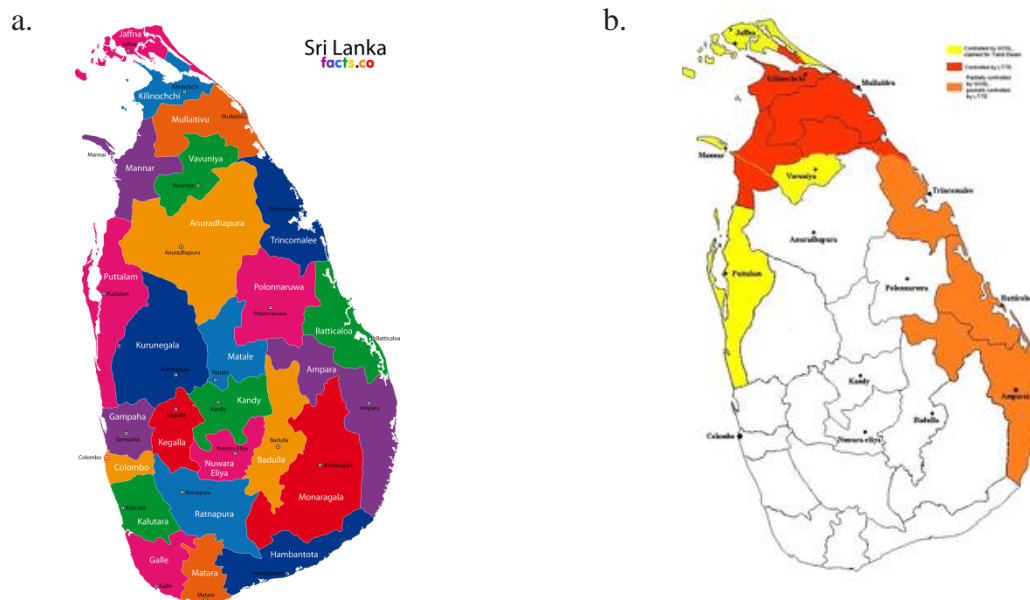
One of the major reasons for the ethnic war was the lack of communication between the Sinhalese and the Tamils due to the language difference. Sinhalese originating from the Indo-Aryan branch of Indo-European languages and Tamil, a Dravidian language (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sinhalese_language). Very few Sinhalese spoke Tamil, however many Tamils had some understanding of Sinhalese. This diversity led to misunderstanding between the two communities, which provided ample space for outsiders to bring in ideas for division. The geographical location of the two groups also did not allow them to meet. The Tamil speaking, Sri Lankan community resided primarily in the north, and the Tamil speaking Indian migrants, who worked in the tea plantations, lived in the hilly central regions, again far away from the Sinhala speaking community. Even though the Buddhists worshipped the gods from Hinduism in their temples, the Tamil Hindus had their own Kovil. The only place where the Sinhalese and the Tamils worshipped together was in the Church.

Ethnic war:

The publication of May 18, 2009, by the Council on Foreign Relations titled, “the Sri Lankan Conflict” says, Sri Lanka has been mired in ethnic conflict since the country, formerly known as Ceylon, became independent from British rule in 1948. A 2001

government census says Sri Lanka's main ethnic populations are the Sinhalese (82 percent), Tamil (9.4 percent), and Sri Lanka Moor (7.9 percent). In the years following independence, the Sinhalese, who resented British favoritism toward Tamils during the colonial period, disenfranchised Tamil migrant plantation workers from India and made Sinhala the official language. In 1972, the Sinhalese changed the country's name from Ceylon and made Buddhism the nation's primary religion. As ethnic tension grew, in 1976, the LTTE was formed and it began to campaign for a Tamil homeland in northern and eastern Sri Lanka, where most of the island's Tamils reside (<https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/sri-lankan-conflict>).

Sri Lanka suffered economically from 1983 to 2009 due to the ethnic war between the majority Sinhalese (the Buddhist) and minority the Tamil (mostly Hindus). The fighting between the Sri Lankan Government military forces and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam kept the 23 million population, young and old under tension for over 30 years. The children and youth of both the communities suffered as no one was sure of the future of Sri Lanka. Peace was so vital for all people that the author had the desire to intervene in some way to bring about a positive solution even at a small scale. Directly speaking on peace or love would have no impact as both the Sinhalese and Tamils were killing each other. There had to be a way, and the pathway which is most familiar to the author, due to her expertise, the path of environment was the strategy used to bring about healing at least among a few hundreds of people.



a. Sri Lanka with its 9 provinces and b. the area declared as the war zone where the majority was the Tamil people.

Methodology utilized:

A. Establishment of a compost plant in Veppumkulum, Vavuniya at the peak of war:

On assessment of the status of waste management in the Northern District, GTZ or the German Organization for Technical Cooperation (GTZ) requested the author to assist in constructing a compost plant in Vavuniya in order to manage the garbage which was daily disposed in the District of Vavuniya. Piles and piles of garbage were accumulating on the roadside as the infrastructure for collection, transport and disposal was not available. The Author conducted several awareness programs together with the community workers at household level. This included house to house visits as well as large scale meetings in collaboration with the Urban Council Members at the Auditorium of the Vavuniya Urban Council. The Government Agent of Vavuniya, Chairman of the Urban Council, Council staff and all local political members of all parties supported the work by being present at all events. They carried the message to the areas, which were not accessible to the author and the team.

The author in addition also conducted awareness programs on the importance of keeping the refugee camps clean and commenced a program for beautification of the refugee camp surroundings. Even though it was a painful experience to see many persons from all walks of life crowded within a small camp, being able to work with them to bring about changes to their surrounding gave comfort for them to know that they were cared for. In most travels to Vavuniya there were incidences of bombing close to the place of residence. In fact on some occasions bombs fell close to Veppumkulum, where the compost plant was situated. People of Vavuniya were grateful that a Sinhalese woman travelled often from Colombo to Vavuniya to create awareness and bring a lasting solution to the growing garbage problem. Without a word being said on peace or reconciliation better understanding was establishing between this one Sinhalese woman and those who came in touch with her in the district of Vavuniya.



The Author teaching a group of community workers in Vavuniya

The compost plant built in Vavuniya was well looked after by the Vavuniya Local authority, all local political groups as well as by the Government Agents. This is one of the earliest compost plants to be established in Sri Lanka even in the midst of the ethnic war. Both the organic waste from the market as well as, waste from the slaughter houses were composted at the Veppumkulum compost site, and were continuously monitored by GTZ. The temperature of the compost piles was monitored on a daily basis to ensure effective composting. For this purpose, the technical officers of the Urban Council were trained. In addition, a competition was conducted among the households to select the best Green Houses which separated the non bio-degradable waste and also composted organic waste at household level.

Most households dumped the cut branches of the trees on the roadside. In order to discourage them from dumping waste on the roadside, a new legislation was brought in and the council charged a fee for collection of branches of trees and logs from the roadside. House to house awareness programs, school programs, meeting with the shop owners, radio and newspapers were used to create awareness on the importance of proper waste management within the district of Vavuniya as well as its surrounding areas.

B. Awareness creation among the armed forces:

The author initiates the banning of polythene use in Vanni

The author did not ignore any persons or groups active in the war zone in her attempt to bring about peace through environmental protection. Even the armed forces both of the Government and the LTTE were involved in the environmental protection work. According to the publication in Tamil Net[TamilNet, Monday, 15 September 2003, 16:07 GMT]the decision by the LTTE to ban polythene in Vanni earns plaudits was initiated and implemented by the author.

[“The ban on Polythene use in the Vanni by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam has heartened the Environmental movement in Sri Lanka, said Dr. (Ms.) Ajantha Perera, the head of the project for solid waste recycling in Sri Lanka, in a press statement, the Jaffna-based Tamil language daily, Uthayan, reported Monday. Ms. Perera said that her repeated attempts to limit the use of polythene products in the country have failed in the past. Her statement said:“When people buy products at shops and common markets, the products are sold in polythene bags. The consumers later either use these bags to deposit their daily waste or just throw them away, which then get buried in the soil.“Because polythene bags are not destroyed by chemical and biological reactions, the bags prevent normal chemical reactions of the soil, thus depriving its fertility.“As these bags clog the sewage canals, waste water stagnates and leads to the growth of mosquito menace. Burning polythene bags results in unhealthy gases that could cause illnesses to people.“As these polythene bags are imported from abroad, the local

industry that produces bags locally by traditional means is greatly affected. "The environmentally conscious people of the country have been waiting for a long time for action to limit the use of polythene bags. They are heartened by the LTTE's ban on polythene use in the Vanni. "Other local leaders should come forward to limit polythene use in their respective areas and encourage the use of traditional bags that do not cause environmental hazards."]

C. Recycling of Tsunami debris in 2004 in Samanthurai, Ampara:

Ampara district was severely hit by Tsunami of 2004. The author was requested to propose a way to manage the debris. On visiting the affected sites, and in consultation with World Vision, a non Governmental Organization working in the area, the author decided to carry out her pilot work of recycling of Tsunami debris in Samanthurai area. Samanthurai is a predominantly a Tamil speaking area. Her approach was to utilize the project to bring about peace between the communities.

Her work is well cited in many publications.

(<http://www.maidstoneallsaints.co.uk/community/0805/28.htm>,
<http://www.christianpost.com/news/world-vision-assists-in-construction-of-new-recycled-homes-15717/print.html>)

According to [Reuters](#): of 03/06/2005" the article titled,

Recycled rubble from tsunami-hit coast to be used to build new homes and roads
the following account is given:

Tsunami survivors in Ampara may soon be living in homes built from the rubble of their previous houses under a radical new recycling scheme run by Lanka Environmental Recyclers Institute and World Vision. The environmentally friendly concept, in which rubble is crushed to make dust for bricks and shingle for foundations and road construction, is the brainchild of the Institute's chairman; Dr Ajantha Perera. The plan also includes chipping and composting organic debris littering tsunami-struck beaches and lagoons. Dr Perera had the idea after seeing the Ampara coastline littered with rubble, wood and broken plants and trees. She said that recycling this material will mean so much more to Sri Lanka than just saving money. "We need to reduce the costs of rebuilding materials in Sri Lanka because the country just can't afford it," she said. "Sand is especially expensive. "But it's more than that. People want something positive in their lives to make up for what they have lost. Instead of saying to them that we'll build a brand new home for them, we can give them something that has sentimental value attached to it. "We shouldn't be telling them that they need to start over again. It's just not as easy as all that. By rebuilding their homes with some of the original material, we are keeping back some of what they have lost. That's part of the healing process." While these concepts will not trial for another two weeks, Dr Perera said she truly believes it will be a success. In fact, she thinks it will be so effective that the Institute and World Vision will, before long, be extending the project further along the coast. She added that, in her experience, this

kind of project also encourages different communities to work together for a common cause.

In Ampara, both Muslims and Tamils live side by side. Another practical reason why this project has a good chance of succeeding is that many of the houses destroyed in Ampara were middle-class homes of a good quality, so the rubble left is good enough quality for recycling. Vision's Operations Director Andrew Lanyon said that this revolutionary project would link all areas of the organization's work. "Local people collecting the rubble, those working the crushers, they will all be paid by World Vision for the work they'll do. So will those rebuild the houses and roads. That's economic recovery and shelter. "Those people clearing the lagoons of debris will be allowing people to fish again. That's livelihood recovery. And the organic material taken from the lagoons and chipped down will be turned into compost for paddy or coconut farming. That's agricultural recovery. This really is a holistic, environmentally sound project."

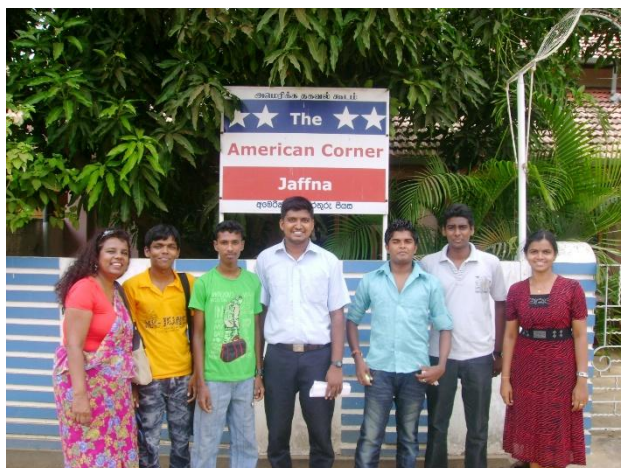
The author displaying the cement blocks made from recycling the debris. When tested these blocks have a higher strength than the normal cement blocks. The strength of the blocks were tested in the laboratory of the civil engineering department, Ampara



The Author displaying the concrete blocks made from Tsunami debris

D. Awareness on environmental protection in Jaffna among the youth and the children

The author worked in the Jaffna district among the youth and school children to create awareness on the value of environmental protection. The main awareness programs were held in the Jaffna Library auditorium, Vembadi Methodist College and Jaffna American centre.



Youth Leaders of Jaffna after a training program



School children planting trees following an awareness program

Community projects for planting trees in Jaffna



Women leaders of the communities were given coconut seedlings for planting in their chosen areas. Women while being extremely careful to accept new ventures are however the change makers of the society.

Conclusion:

With lack of communication between the Sinhalese and the Tamils, the ethnic war flared as ammunition was dumped onto the growing fire of hatred by those who benefitted economically from the war. Thus a way had to be found in order to regain the dialog between the two communities. The best pathway under the circumstances was the pathway towards protection of human life through protection of the environment: clean air, clean water and clean, nutritious food for all. Environment is a

concern for all. The targeted area was the war zone, and the person who carried out the tasks is the author, a Sinhalese Christian woman. The actions were carried out through community participation, involving Government officers, local Political Leaders, community Leaders, students, Refugees, Non – Governmental Organizations. A transparent doable program was developed with those in authority and the community within the war zone which allowed for better and clearer understanding and trust. Through the agreement that the attempt was to protect the environment for the good of all, trust developed. Long term communication with trust; led to friendship, which became strong and long lasting beyond the environmental issues. Such binding led to peace among those who worked together.

The benefits of the work carried out among the community within the war zone are many fold: A number of practical solutions to the garbage problem was established and sustained;

A compost plant was established in Veppumkulum, Vauniya despite the war, which can utilize both market waste, household organic waste and slaughter house waste. The staff of the Urban Council was trained on the techniques of composting, quality testing, packaging and selling of the compost, recycling and waste management, regulation and policy formulation as well as project writing. The compost made at the Veppumkulum plant was dispatched at regular intervals to different parts of Sri Lanka for commercial purpose and was readily accepted and used by the people. Similar projects were popularized in other parts of Sri Lanka using the compost plant of Vavuniya as an example. Usage of compost was enhanced among the farming community in the north, thus leading to organic vegetables and fruits.

A new legislation was established in the north to handle the tree cuttings, banana stems used during the festival seasons. A fee was charged by the Urban Council for removal of branches, logs and other heavy waste. Households of selected areas were requested to separate their waste at home, prior to giving it to the garbage truck. Those households which implemented such work were recognized as Green homes.

Knowledge on the value of the environment and awareness on environmental Protection was intensively carried out among the school children and the youth of the war zone as it is a long term investment. The purpose was to build a strong and committed new generation who will take decisions for the benefit of protecting the natural resources, thereby act as wise decision makers. The school children participated enthusiastically and the youth were given the opportunity to travel to different parts of the country to observe ongoing environmental projects. This increased their overall enthusiasm for environmental studies and had the opportunity to meet and discuss on important topics with the other ethnic communities, which automatically led to better understanding between the communities.

The appreciation of the banning of polythene by the LTTE encouraged them to initiate many other environmental protection works among the communities, which

are only accessible to them. This ensured that the environment was protected despite the fierce war. Planting of trees to replace those destroyed by the war was one such activity.

The purpose of the projects carried out by the author was to bring about a lasting peace between two communities torn apart by the war and begin the process of healing of the deep scars. Tsunami, which took away the lives of thousands of persons, affected both the Sinhalese speaking and the Tamil speaking communities and it gave everyone the opportunity to rethink about life. After the Tsunami doors were open to commence recycling of Tsunami debris in the eastern region. During the months spent with the affected community opened up conversations which led to understanding of the need to forget differences, but work towards the common good and to become one nation.

In recognizing the work carried out in the North and East during the peak of war and thereafter the United States Embassy in Sri Lanka nominated the author as the most courageous woman of Sri Lanka for 2011. The opportunity to work in the North and the East during the war gave the author a life experience which cannot be priced. The paper hereby concludes by stating that during conflicts between communities one need to utilize vital commonalities, which bring the distanced communities together because of its relevance to their life, one such vehicle which can be utilized at many occasions is environmental protection.

Acknowledgements:

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