

Janakaraliya – Makkal Kalari

Theatre of the People

Evaluation of Best Practices by Tilak Jayaratne

JANAKARALIYA-MAKKAL KALARI [THEATRE OF THE PEOPLE]

Janakaraliya, started in 2003, is a mobile theatre group, the first in Sri Lanka, spreading awareness through theatre and drama to rural parts of the country. This fulltime group includes Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim artistes. In addition to holding drama and film festivals and workshops, and drama appreciation programmes scheduled for teachers and school children, theatre training for youth in the area are also included in its activities. It provides the area with a cultural hub during its stay, using drama and theatre, with other art forms, to promote and encourage social harmony.

Its mission is to develop a culturally and spiritually awakened society able to live in peace and harmony, to make society sensitive, creative, wise, active and just.

Instead of staging theatre productions in the towns, as is normally done, Janakaraliya takes the theatre to the audience instead of waiting for the audience to come to the theatre. This concept has been a lifelong dream of Parakrama Niriella, an award winning filmmaker and pioneering tale-drama director, the man behind Janakaraliya, which was established with the intention of building bridges between divided communities and is dedicated to spreading the message of peaceful coexistence.

Janakaraliya believes that the people's empowerment can be promoted through performance and applied theatre. Their mobile theatre is a large tent that can travel to the remotest areas and can seat 800 people at a time. The core performance group is a multi-ethnic troupe of about 35 young actors who have already performed ten Sinhala and Tamil plays to at least 500,000 people. Discussions on the themes covered in the plays often occur after the performances. The applied theatre programme uses theatre for educational and personal development by conducting workshops for marginalised people and also trains teachers to develop their knowledge, skills and attitude. It works closely with local cultural groups, educational institutions and other civil society organisations.

Janakaraliya's multi-ethnic youth, from all parts of the country, have received an excellent residential training from veteran dramatists Parakrama Niriella and H. A. Perera (now deceased), the founder directors. The group has become an icon of multi ethnic cohabitation and co-existence. It provides a space to enjoy theatre without language barriers, creating a precedent in cultural cohabitation. HIVOS extended their support to establish Janakaraliya. USAID provided the fully equipped mobile theatre, with complete theatre lighting, sound equipment and a modern power generator and including sleeping and kitchen facilities needed to accommodate the theatre group. Janakaraliya Conflict

Resolution project was funded by FLICT, from 2004 to April 2010. The establishment of drama groups in Anuradhapura, Nuwara-Eliya and Hambanthota was co-sponsored by Freedom to Create (formally Art Action), who are also co-sponsoring the 'Cloning Janakaraliya in North' up to December 2011. HIVOS is to fund production of two dramas until the end of year 2011.

BEST PRACTICE TITLE:

1. Taking theatre to the people

BACKGROUND

Theatre in Sri Lanka is largely concentrated in the cities and the idea of taking theatre to the people seemed idealistic. Theatre-goers too are a special breed and not, generally, the common people. Parakrama Niriella shares that notion of the performance space evolved, over a period of 30 years, as a result of working with the late Gamini Haththotuwegama and his Wayside and Open Theatre. Niriella and H.A. Perera were part of this first street theatre group in Sri Lanka, whose express purpose was to take theatre beyond the proscenium stage to villages and other areas unfrequented by mainstream theatre.

Janakaraliya was started in 2004 with 27 amateurs who were ready to dedicate the rest of their lives to theatre. Since then, under the guidance of Niriella, these youngsters have groomed themselves to a point that they can even conduct a theatre workshop. 'My aim was to create a multi-ethnic group to take theatre to rural, underprivileged areas of this country. Even though it was originally a two year project now we have now successfully completed six years,' says Niriella.

Janakaraliya is able to perform in the traditional proscenium theatres, any open space, even under a tree or on a threshing floor (kamatha). It has no racial, religious or caste barriers and believes that theatre should be capable of making their audience, the common folk, enjoy themselves while demonstrating the importance of peaceful coexistence in pluralistic societies.

In its long journey from premise to practice, Janakaraliya had to face many challenges and tests. Although 'street theatre' inspired Janakaraliya, it ironically presented them with problems too:

- Sustenance of a resident, permanent performance group was not as easy as that of a street theatre group
- Foremost among the issues was the interrelations amongst the multi ethnic group. Language was a barrier. Suspicions, fears of discrimination and disharmony born out of the ethnic conflict made it almost impossible.
- Street theatre, apart from providing an expression of discontent against the traditional theatre did not have focus or direction
- The expense of maintaining a professional theatre group as against a loosely knit street theatre group

To train multi-ethnic groups of performing artistes and produce dramas in both Sinhala and Tamil was by no means easy. Employing professional performers could have been a solution but their style of acting and performance, their attitudes and approach were different from what was needed for a true people's theatre.

Another aspect was the content. Instead of the fare offered in the traditional theatre, Niriella wanted productions in keeping with the mission of Janakaraliya, while being aesthetically appealing to the masses at the same time.

The audience Janakaraliya had in mind was completely different from the average city-based theatre-goers, who were versed with the traditional performances and stage practices. The founders' experience with street theatre may have provided some clues but finding a complete solution was their responsibility.

RESULT OF PRACTICE

Janakaraliya saw it as their responsibility to take theatre to the people and to keep Sri Lankan theatre alive in the face of an uncertain future. It resuscitated theatre by taking its mobile theatres to remote places that did not have theatres or even ordinary halls to perform in, and it taught people there to appreciate good theatre craft. It also built up a base of young, trained, talent for Sri Lanka's Sinhala and Tamil theatre.

Niriella says "I have realised is that saying the public have lost interest in the theatre is a plain lie. For example, in Badulla, instead of the 22 scheduled performances we had to do 47. This was demanded by the audience." Many of the group members affirmed that they often get very large and enthusiastic audiences and that once, in Badulla, they had to perform the same show six times in a single day because there was a never ending stream of people arriving to see the play. In Monaragala too there was a large and eager audience that responded actively to the play. In Puttalam, request to perform in Sunday schools, both Christian and Buddhist. In Hambantota, the interaction of the groups with the local community showed growing ethnic harmony. Their extremely successful Jaffna tour has contributed to creating a change in the social and cultural life of the community, getting them to participate in evening shows, hitherto unfamiliar to this community living under curfew. There were requests for subsequent tours. In Ampara, racially mixed audiences sat together and watched performances. This is Janakaraliya great achievement.

The following table shows how successful Janakaraliya was in their mission of taking theatre to the people:

PERIOD	PROGRAMMES	PARTICIPATION	TERTIARY RECIPIENTS
August 1 st , 2005 to July 31 st , 2006	294	142,056	710,280
August 1 st , 2006 to July 31 st , 2007	183	119,526	931,860
August 1 st , 2007 to July 31 st , 2008	298	144,833	1,295,225
August 1 st , 2008 to July 31 st , 2009	272	192,144	2,319,880
August 1 st , 2009 to July 31 st , 2010	245	203,389	972,945

BEST PRACTICE TITLE:

2. Different communities work together to achieve common objectives

BACKGROUND

The usual practice was for organizations to take the message to target groups in order to achieve objectives, be it conflict transformation or creating harmony and peace. The objectives were sometimes not put in to practice within the organization itself, setting a bad example. Janakaraliya by forming its multicultural, full-time theatre group, acted contrary to the normal practice. As Kanchuka Dharmasiri puts it: *“Many people who decide to work on ethnic solidarity resort to the idea of making work about war or peace. I would not discard that sort of art, but there is much to be said about the merits of a project such as this one where members of the Sinhala and Tamil communities actually live together and create powerful art in both languages. The praxis, the act of the creation itself, is the moment of establishing that understanding or solidarity. Often when the cast and crew members go around introducing themselves to the audience after their performances, there is a moment of surprise and curious whispers about the identity of a specific performer. Janakaraliya is an empowering and creative space for the group and it is an extremely inspiring space for rural audiences”.*

As Niriella recounts, *“In the beginning we wanted to take Sinhala plays to Tamil areas. As we discussed this idea we were encouraged to form a multi-ethnic cast and perform plays in both languages. We believed in the power of theatre for social transformation but we had absolutely no idea how one went about establishing such a group. As Sinhala directors we were unsure and even afraid of tackling such a task. We had to use many different strategies (advertisements, personal contacts etc) to recruit people. Even then many very talented young persons were reluctant to join such a venture. This has been an incredible process which even I find difficult to always comprehend.”*

Initially it was a huge challenge to convince Tamil members to be a part of the team. The words of Krishanthan, a young man from Trincomalee aptly describe the situation: *“Two years ago I was seated on a chair in that corner and I looked at those around me with great suspicion and mistrust. I was actually quite convinced that one of the guys in the room was a member of the CID. I didn’t know what was happening here. We had come to be part of a theatre group but all these people from all parts of the country were over whelming. For the first three months we fought and struggled to get along and live together.”*

What really prompted the change? The group living, sharing of workloads and delegation of responsibilities may have contributed towards group cohesion. But there’s more to it. Founder director H.A. Perera was convinced that media products and processes can play a powerful role in transforming individuals. The process is often far more important than the final product. The exercises built into the drama workshops that help the group to first understand themselves, their attitudes and how they relate to those around them as well played a significant role in moulding and shaping the group.

Niriella sees it as *“a positive tendency of building trust and co-operation between the ethnic groups.”*

RESULT OF PRACTICE

Building up this multi-ethnic group to achieve Janakaraliya's objectives had far reaching effects. It taught lessons in transforming conflict and building harmony. More importantly, it taught ways and means to achieve them.

- Overcoming the language barrier: Initially, this proved to be the greatest hurdle. Not knowing each other's language drastically hampered communication, which, in turn, breeds mistrust and misunderstanding? The first task was to break this barrier. Some 'theatre tools' may unintentionally have been invented to learn the language of the other. These, coupled with the efforts of the facilitators, helped to promote bilingualism and to accept the other language.
- Changing attitudes: Transcending firmly established ethnic/religious identities, reinforced by decades of ethnic conflict, was no mean task. Here, the decision to provide residential training paid off. Living and working together made the task much easier. The messages contained in the plays also contributed to the change. The group members have transformed their attitudes about 'the other' by living and working together. Jayantha Mudaranthri from Embilipitiya says: *"We always had a different impression in our minds about Tamil people and when I came to Janakaraliya" I came with those impressions, but after working with them I've come to realize that we Sinhalese and our brothers and sisters who speak the Tamil language can live together in harmony. It is theatre that made me realize this, and for this I'm thankful to our teachers. As another member commented "When I first joined the group I was really suspicious of the others from different ethnic groups. At first it was very hard to get along and there were many misunderstandings but now we are a committed team, with a common vision"*. This building of trust, understanding and harmony, indeed, is a great achievement in itself.
- Spill-over effect: Janakaraliya strongly believe that this multi-ethnic group working together for the common good sent a strong message of peace, harmony and reconciliation to the communities they had contacts with. Wherever they went they observed that there were *'positive responses from audience as they witness firsthand the ability of the mixed cast working together to bring out high quality drama'*. Niriella explains that *'audiences who view our dramas realize that it is as a collective work by both Sinhala and Tamil theatre loving groups. The presentation of our theatre production sends some kind of a signal to the inner thoughts of the viewers in an exemplary manner.'* In the final report submitted in 2010, Janakaraliya states : *'after seeing the effort of the youth belonging to both Sinhala and Tamil ethnic groups working together, the question that comes naturally to the mind of the audiences is "why can't we too work together in harmony like this" '*.

Answering the question 'What do you think about Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim youth working as a single group in harmony?' in the questionnaire distributed to viewers at drama performances, all 5,673 (out of 6,000) returned responded very positively. The following are few of their comments:

- It is good to have more groups like this all over the country.
- If these kind of activities were started after the year 1983 the communal war would not have happened

Marisa Fernando, Programme Officer, FLICT, sums it up thus: *“There was really no planned process and the strategies were developed and adapted as the work progressed. As a role model and a pilot initiative it has paved the way for similar innovative work to take place in this field. The proof of the pudding is in the eating of it...and this in a sense has proved that drama, and theatre when properly used and harnessed can contribute towards peace building and conflict transformation.”*

LESSONS LEARNED

Janakaraliya 's successful attempt to build a multi-ethnic theatre troupe taught them many lessons in conflict transformation and peace building. These added up to a one important lesson: by learning to work together diverse groups can achieve common goals. This process will enable similar groups to overcome the challenges they might encounter and to engage more effectively in the process of internal transformation.

BEST PRACTICE TITLE:

3. Long-term sustenance of a full-time theatre company

BACKGROUND

Individuals, as well as groups and communities, need access to financial and other assets in order to achieve their visions. Janakaraliya was no exception. Initially, it was a struggle to find funds for the 'take off'.

In order to create a sustainable initiative, Janakaraliya believed that a comprehensive approach was needed with a focus on media and marketing, volunteer/leadership development, collaboration, fundraising and resource development. When used together, these areas of focus create a powerful synergy exceeding the value of any one component.

As Janakaraliya explains, *'HIVOS of the Netherlands extended their support in establishing the first ever multi ethnic theatre troupe in Sri Lanka.'* Hivos support was destined for the recruitment and costs of the core group of 25 artists, as well as transport costs. Hivos also supported the organizing of a series of important exchange visits between Tamil and Sinhala dramatists. Other funders covered the costs of educational and personal development programmes, with a focus on conflict transformation, through the usage of applied theatre. USAID came forward to help them in their hour of need by providing the fully equipped mobile theatre. With Janakaraliya continuing successfully on their chosen path, USAID 'extended their support by providing two mini mobile theatres in 2007.

The 'Conflict Resolution' project of Janakaraliya for schools, communities and different social groups was funded by FLICT from 2004 to April 2010.

RESULT OF PRACTICE

Janakaraliya continues to fulfil its mandate through its ability to procure funds for its programs ; drama and theatre education workshops for children, training workshops for teachers and other professionals. This was achieved by providing quality outcomes that convinced funders of their sincerity and positive impact.

The project started off as a partnership between local dramatists and the Ministry of Cultural Affairs and National Heritage; FLICT and HIVOS, which are covering operating costs for two or more years; and the US Agency for International Development (USAID), which provided support for the tent, stage, bleachers and other start-up costs. Speaking before the inaugural ceremony, Dr. Carol Becker, USAID Mission Director said that the *“enthusiasm and camaraderie among these multi-ethnic dramatists is infectious and shows us how strong the bonds of common purpose and trust can be. The wide-ranging pathway of Janakaraliya over the next two years - and its interaction with communities - will give these young Sri Lankans a unique opportunity to model what participation, collaboration and inclusiveness is all about. I think it's exciting, and USAID is privileged to be part of the partnership that helped make the initiative possible.”*

Hivos confirms that it supports Janakaraliya *“because it takes risks in breaking out of the existing fixed system of theatre concepts, dares to create spaces for multi-ethnic artistic interaction and creation, and reaches a huge rural audience providing enjoyment and a chance for critical reflection (amongst other issues on the ethnic conflict) to tens of thousands of onlookers who normally would not have the chance to witness high-quality theatre productions”*.

As Janakaraliya has earned a reputation for producing top quality plays, it now has the potential to generate income by organizing shows on commercial basis.

Although the physical destruction caused by the war can be rebuilt, it is not that easy to heal minds affected by the war. Janakaraliya is geared to implement well planned cultural activities in the North Central, Northern and Eastern provinces for this purpose. Janakaraliya intends to construct a permanent theatre studio in Anuradhapura to facilitate this project. Janakaraliya has already received a plot of land from the Anuradhapura Urban Council for this purpose.

It will be a centre of friendship, affection and love for all artists and art lovers without communal, cast or religious bias. It will be ‘home’ for all artists and art lovers, whether from the North, the South, the West or the East. It will be built with the support and contribution of all who yearn for such love, kindness and affection without petty differences.

The establishment of zonal (provincial) drama groups in Anuradhapura, Nuwara-Eliya and Hambanthota was co-sponsored by Freedom to Create (formerly known as Art Action).

35% of the total expenditure of Janakaraliya is funded by these two institutions, HIVOS and Freedom to Create, while 40% of the expenditure is born by two local companies, namely DSI group and Link Natural Products. The balance 25% is met by the earnings of Janakaraliya, who plan to increase this to 55% of the total.

Asked what made him return to the capital, Colombo, with Janakaraliya’s new productions, Parakrama said *‘to show what we have done over the years, to step into another level and to launch a sustainable development project where those experienced Janakaraliya artistes can stand independently while expanding the fields of Janakaraliya to publications, communication centres, electronic media systems and sound systems’*.

The elements that helped Janakaraliya to sustain themselves as a group was their ability to create a sense of community within the group. They were able to prove that through collective action, groups of

people can come together to bring about the social change they desire. Rather than have mere influence or input, Janakaraliya as a group has succeeded in shaping their own destiny, with a vision shared by all those involved.

LAESSONS LEARNED

Many community-based projects have relatively short lives. Once the initial funding comes to an end, many projects do as well. Janakaraliya has developed and implemented a three-pronged sustainability framework of collaboration, quality output and establishing a community base. Collaborators share a common vision with clearly defined outcomes, roles and responsibilities. Janakaraliya has succeeded in achieving the stakeholders' consensus regarding courses of action on project activities and achieving social sustainability.