



Between Hope and Struggle: Dialogue in Sri Lanka and Israel

Ahimsa is dedicated to educating for peace and conflict resolution. The organization promotes coexistence through raising awareness of non-violent values within Sri Lankan society, while strengthening groups and individuals in their efforts to live by these values. Some of its activities include working with students in high schools and incorporating peace education into school curriculum; working with shanty area's children through holistic education, carrying out conflict resolution programs across Sri Lanka, and incorporating creative methods of bringing in communities to a coexistence process within their conflict resolution frame. As part of this effort, Ahimsa has been integrating applied theater techniques into their programs which have become a promising coexistence tool in bringing communities together to discuss the conflict.

Project Goals

- Learn about the different program Ahimsa is currently engaged in and the methods it uses in promoting organizational goals
- Introduce dialogue to Ahimsa staff
- Explore the possibility of incorporating the dialogue techniques into the various ongoing activities and programs of Ahimsa and Sri Lankan society as a whole
- Understand the successes and struggles of Sri Lankan non-governmental organizations working in the coexistence field

Personal Goals

- Develop personal relationships with Ahimsa staff
- Learn about the different aspects of Sri Lankan culture in terms of its uniqueness, gender dynamics, role of religion, different local traditions, and the place and roles of each of the different ethnic groups within the society and the conflict at large
- Understand the meanings of the ongoing conflict and the peace process on the grassroots level and the way it is perceived by individuals in the society
- Explore the possibility of establishing a relationship between Ahimsa and Reut-Sadaka—an Arab-Jewish youth movement for coexistence in Israel.
- Feel that I made a contribution to the organization

Activities

- Led a series of dialogue trainings for Ahimsa staff
- Facilitated a three day dialogue workshop for Tamil, Sinhalese, and Muslim social workers, teachers, and policemen from the Eastern district
- Led activities on promoting non-violent education with Sinhalese children from shanty areas in Colombo
- Helped to develop project proposals that incorporated dialogue exchange for Ahimsa's ongoing "Peace Education in High School" program
- Begun developing a dialogue manual as a link between Israeli organization "Reut-Sadaka" and Ahimsa
- Met and interviewed female peace activists across Sri Lanka
- Participated in applied theater training with Ahimsa staff

Key Dilemmas

- How can the existing dialogue framework developed in other parts of the world be applied as an effective coexistence tool in Sri Lanka?
- Can the obstacle of the lack of common language be dealt with in the dialogue setting effectively?
- In what ways can the work that I started continue into the future?
- What impact will the unfolding political realities have on the grassroots coexistence work such as that of Ahimsa?

Marina Pevzner

Important Learnings

- English is a language of the more privileged part of Sri Lankan society. Thus to be able to implement long-term coexistence work knowledge of local languages is essential.
- Understanding the cultural and social norms and being able to integrate into them while being flexible about your own goals is the basis for the ability to implement programs productively and for establishing personal relationships.
- Theater has an important place in the local culture and can serve as a great coexistence tool for dialogue, especially given the language barriers.

- The ongoing diplomatic process does not translate fully into the daily lives of people—it becomes a major obstacle when planning and implementing programs aimed toward conflict transformation.
- There are many similarities between the Sri Lankan and Israeli political realities. People in Sri Lanka are very intrigued by the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and are interested to learn about it and the various coexistence efforts taking place in Israel.



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1. I facilitated activities in the Botanic Gardens on the way to Kandy on the day of the Full Moon celebrations. 2. The people I worked with had never met Jews before. So after two weeks we cooked shabbat dinner and lit candles together. 3. I am leading a dialogue training for Ahimsa staff. 4. Here I am working in the office. 5. After leading workshop on non-violence, I spent time with children from Colombo.



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I am in Colombo two days earlier than planned. My trip to Batticoloa was cancelled because of violent incidents, which are still taking place. The LTTE called for a general strike (Hartal) in Batticoloa on the day before we had planned to arrive. During the strike, vehicles cannot enter or leave either Batticoloa or the surrounding area. The strike is in response to an army arresting a vehicle that allegedly carried eight armed LTTE women. The army surrounded the area but is unable to respond. Interestingly, the Sri Lankan media has provided almost no coverage on the incident. I've been told that during a crisis the government doesn't allow information to be reported.

I am very concerned that this incident will put additional negative pressure on the ongoing peace process, which is already not in great condition. I am also disappointed because I was supposed to conduct several interviews in Batticoloa and will not have time to do so before I leave Sri Lanka.

Aside from my early return, the trip to Trincomalee was both exciting and fruitful. On the way to Trincomalee we passed several checkpoints, some of the war-affected villages, and two refugee camps run by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. Since I have not been directly exposed to the devastating impact of the conflict during my stay in Sri Lanka, seeing these sights was both interesting and educational. Passing through the checkpoints brought back memories of my own country, Israel. I was reminded of the stories of the long waiting lines and living with the fear of attacks; stories shared by my Sri Lankan friends.

We had an amusing incident at a Sri Lankan army checkpoint. To the guard's surprise, he discovered a white girl driving a van with three Sri Lankans. Me, the white girl, had driven for few hours since the ride was very long and the driver was tired. I was not carrying an international license and with my American license our driver had to answer few questions. However, in the end it was fine and he let us pass through. Driving in Sri Lanka is an experience that I will never forget.