

Sri Lanka: The art and literature of protest and liberation

Tuesday 24 May 2022, by [WARAVITA Pamodi](#) (Date first published: 23 May 2022).

Poets, academics, novelists, performance artists, painters, and activists expound on SL's burgeoning art and literary scene anchored in expressing dissent

Resistance literature has taken a new foothold in Sri Lanka as the “Go Home Gota” struggle continues, centred around the demand for the resignation of President Gotabaya Rajapaksa. Poems, artwork, plays, and songs have been continuously popping up this entire year, as people take the pen, the paintbrush, and the musical instrument to express their frustration at the Rajapaksa-led State, the military involvement in the suppression of protests, and the corruption of politicians.

Sri Lanka has a long history of resistance, and hence, of resistance or protest literature. Some of the key works were done by the Tamil community, as they fought for their rights through the decades. Another notable example is the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)-led insurrections that gave space to unique examples such as “vimukthi gee” or liberation songs. *The Morning* looked at the history of resistance literature in the island and how these movements have eventually impacted the struggles of today.

Poet and academic Prof. R. Cheran spoke to *The Morning* about resistance literature among the Tamils in Sri Lanka, introducing its history through the decades from the 1950s to the 1990s. In doing so, he was able to show that resistance literature changes as history does and that literary movements are often shaped by the experiences of people, who are influenced by the politics at the time.

“I am going to be speaking about the Tamils because I am not that familiar with the Sinhala literary context. There is a long history of what we call resistance literature among the Tamils in Sri Lanka. Resistance literature is a form of literature identified by some literary critics and others as one that challenges oppression, and that resistance is expressed through words of art. There is a very strong anti-establishment and anti-dominant theme in this type of literature. There can be various forms of oppression that people face, and based on their experiences, they create resistance to nationalist, gender, and caste oppression. In another way, we can also promote this type of literature as the literature of liberation because the idea of resistance is closely tied to liberation – free, to liberate,” said Prof. Cheran.

He explained that the term “resistance literature” was first used by the scholar Barbara Harlow who was studying Palestinian poetry, noting that there was a time in the 1980s when a lot of Palestinian poetry was translated into Tamil.

“The origin of the Tamil resistance literature movement can be traced to 1956, when the then-Sri Lankan Government decided to implement the Sinhala Only Act.”

‘Tamil is our weapon’

“There were huge protests by the Tamils then, and in that context, there were all kinds of poetry and writing that came up as being against the implementation of the Sinhala Only Act. Some of the most well-known and great poets in Sri Lanka came out with work at that time. There was a collection of powerful poetry that came out in the early 1960s called *Tamil is our Weapon*, which is a collection of poetry that simply consists of poems from all the major Tamil poets at the time and against the Sinhala Only Act.”

Prof. Cheran said that from 1956 onwards there were several plays, poetry collections, short stories, and novels dealing with the majoritarian State, explaining that “from 1956 onwards, Sri Lanka became a Sinhala Buddhist State”.

“Before that, most of those major poets and writers were writing about Ceylon and they were writing and praising Ceylon in both Sinhala and Tamil - the whole notion of ‘we are all Ceylonese’ was very powerful before 1956,” he added.

However, he noted that one of the problems he identified among the poetry and other forms of literature that emerged at the time was that they were not really aesthetically powerful. “There was a lot of emotion there, but most of it was not really aesthetically powerful. Of course, there were some exceptions to the norm, like some short stories and novels, but I was not impressed by the poetry of that period.”

From 1972 onwards, this changed, as a new Constitution was introduced in the country.

“We became really political during that period. I was 11 years old then and on 22 May 1972, we started burning the national flag and that was the beginning of the new youth movement. We were against the new Constitution, as it gave us no rights. From 1972 onwards, we became even more powerful and then the 1977 pogrom against the Tamils happened. In 1988, the Jaffna Public Library was burnt. From the late 1970s, we witnessed a new resistance culture and new forms of poetry and literature that were completely different from the 1956 period. These new forms were aesthetically powerful and became very solid in the 1980s. There were street plays and performance poetry as well. That particular resistance movement has entirely transformed Tamil writing, not only in Sri Lanka but in India as well,” he said.

He pointed out that the impact of this resistance movement on Tamil literature was felt in India too, and from it, there emerged very powerful Dalit poetry and literature in the feminist movement as well. “All of this was largely influenced by the resistance movement that emerged among the Tamils in Sri Lanka. You can also see very powerful Tamil females there as well. That was very powerful, and that trend still continues even today, in different forms.”

In the late 1980s, the course of history in the island changed again, and with this, the path that Tamil resistance literature took, changed too.

“I think that in the early phases of resistance literature, it was mainly against the oppression of the Tamil people by the Sinhala Buddhist State and the military. But after 1986, literature became very critical of Tamil militant groups, including the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). There are at least 21 books of Tamil poetry from Sri Lanka that have been translated into English and published in various parts of the world.

“Initially, Tamil militant groups were considered as a liberation group and were well-respected. But, by late 1985 and 1986, when the LTTE recklessly assassinated all other militants and when this ideal liberation movement deteriorated into simple and pure nationalism, this sentiment changed. No military movement, no State would ever like to allow its people the full freedom of expression.”

Prof. Cheran spoke on censorship, threats to his life, and other challenges he faced as he continued to use his writing to resist.

“I was arrested and tortured by the Army. I wrote about this for a chapter in a book called *To Arrive Where You Are*. My work has also been banned by Tamil militant groups after 1986. I was a supporter of the idea of Tamil national liberation and I was one of the first writers to talk about national liberation in the context of the Tamils. But I never became part of any militant group because I wanted to maintain my freedom of expression and my freedom to write. No militant group, in any country, would ever accept or support freedom of expression and the right to criticise.”

From 1984 to 1987, he worked at the only regional English language weekly newspaper published from Jaffna called *The Saturday Review*. Although the paper had begun its publications in 1982, in 1983, then-President J.R. Jayewardene had banned it as it reported violations committed by the Sri Lanka Army.

“The editor at that time, S. Sivanayagam, had to go underground. He went to India and never returned. In 1984, when the ban was lifted, there was no one to run the newspaper. The famous Sinhala journalist and my mentor - Gamini Navaratne - came to Jaffna and restarted the newspaper. But still within a few months, the Jayewardene regime introduced a special censorship on the newspaper, as they did not want any news reaching the South.

“There were supporters of the newspaper from the South, like Prof. Ediriweera Sarachchandra, but there was also economic blocking; we had no petrol, no electricity, and no paper to print on. It was an extremely difficult time, but we somehow managed to publish. In 1986, our newspaper offices were bombed by the Sri Lanka Air Force. I still do not know whether it was an accident or whether it was intentional.”

He said that when the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) arrived in Sri Lanka in 1987, he left Jaffna, as he was “not certain of his life there”. He returned to Sri Lanka two years later, when the IPKF was still there, and completed a poetry collection, based on his difficult experiences at the time, called the *Procession of Skeletons*.

“No one was willing to print it in Jaffna, anywhere else in Sri Lanka, or in Tamil Nadu in India. Finally, the book was published in Toronto, Canada, when I was not even there at the time.”

Across territories

“There is still a very powerful literary movement from Tamils in Sri Lanka and also in the diaspora, which is diaspora Tamil literature. It has become a very powerful and inseparable movement in contemporary Tamil literature. This is a different kind of resistance because it is not based in a territory in Sri Lanka and is outside. They are living as the diaspora but there is a strong emotional link to the place where they were born and where they are still connected to,” said Prof. Cheran.

The recycling of songs and the JVP movement

The Morning also spoke to author and scholar Dr. Visakesa Chandrasekaram who said that artistic expression cannot be separated from protests, and that some forms of expression which originated in the 1970s are still reused today.

“As I understand, there has always been some sort of artistic expression at protests. There has always been literature at protests. You may hear some kinds of folk political expressions coming into mass protests now. These might have been originally crafted and produced in 1971 and then developed and reused in 1989. Some of those pieces have been reused even today, particularly the

rhymes and slogans we hear. I think that they are part of literature. The rhyming and the way of chanting come close to the genre of folk singing.”

According to him, the “vimukthi gee”, started by the JVP, lasted for many decades, but is not so popular these days. The songs and scores, developed and presented by the members of the JVP, were mainly sung by groups rather than individuals and were recited in public. Dr. Chandrasekaram said that this was part and parcel of the strong music and singing culture in protests around that time. This had continued until the 1980s, when the JVP tried to come back to parliamentary politics.

“However, a lot of this went underground with the suppression of the JVP by the Jayewardene Government. When they came back in the third round, they were not that strong, and today they are not a strong part of the protest literature. Now, a lot of pop singers have taken over that space. They were welcomed by the JVP as well, because the JVP went through a huge transformation. That is a brief analysis of the music-related literature or music in protest literature. Now that space is taken by those who are not necessarily members of the party, but supporters or sympathisers who get invited to their events or party conferences.”

He said that music was the strongest part of our protest literature, with poetry coming in second, and visual art being third. “Then I would say stage performances and theatre, and finally, I would say film. With regard to the latter, there is not enough protest literature, although they have captured many topics.”

Furthermore, Dr. Chandrasekara noted the inevitability of propaganda being present in protest literature.

“This was somewhat seen in the early stages of the Sri Lankan left wing as well, including the JVP. There is a certain roughness and propaganda-like nature to its presentation. That is inevitable, as protest literature will have aspects of propaganda.”

The Rajapaksa dynasty

Dr. Chandrasekaram is well-known for his book, *The King and the Assassin*, which he said was published originally because he was concerned by the taking over of the Government by the Rajapaksas during the administration of Mahinda Rajapaksa.

“I saw the potential of a dynasty taking over the power of the entire country and the country being stuck in a situation where we cannot detach the dynasty from the Government. My fear was that if they do a bad job, they cannot stay there, but if they do a relatively ‘okay’ job, they could stay there forever, because they have built this majoritarian ideology, basically removing all the minorities from the participation of government processes. So, that was my fear.

“The main reason this dynasty could be created was the Constitution which created a very powerful presidency. I was obsessed with the powers of the President, as a legal practitioner. Those days, people really didn’t see the dangers of the Executive Presidency, particularly the way it was implemented in Sri Lanka, and I really wanted to raise awareness about that. Also, in case we ever end up with a despotic leader, we need to discuss how we can get rid of that leader, and that is why I wrote the book.”

Prof. Chandrasekaram described *The King and the Assassin* as a futuristic story set from 2019 to 2058. In the book, there are three attempts to overthrow that regime with the first attempt being from around 2021 to 2022.

“That dissent was brutally suppressed, the protestors were massacred, and the rest went

underground. It took another 20 years for them to organise and come back. They very cleverly used social media and different techniques to create slogans in public spaces. I think that forming this collective consciousness around the ideologies of democracy and freedom is important. It is not one person believing and preaching about them, but people collectively realising that and then coming into an agreement about their beliefs. That happens in *The King and the Assassin*. I am overjoyed that it is emerging now rather than later in Sri Lanka," he said.

Resistance on the Green

This year, protests began in neighbourhoods as the rising cost of living, the increasing number of hours of power cuts, and the decreasing amount of fuel took a toll on everyday life. Neighbourhood protests soon reached the President's neighbourhood in Mirihana, where protestors were met with state-sponsored violence.

Notwithstanding these attempts to intimidate, thousands of protestors marched to Galle Face Green on 9 April again, following which they set up camp. What started off with a handful of tents has now grown into a village, supported and encouraged by people from around the island. A people's university, a people's library, a kitchen with its own head chef, and a stage for plays and musical performances are now part of the view outside the Presidential Secretariat.

Groups, organisations, and individuals from all over the island visit this village, seeking justice for various forms of state-sponsored violence, answers for economic difficulties, and accountability for corruption, beginning with the Rajapaksa dynasty. For over a month now, protestors have made the Galle Face Green their home, at "GotaGoGama", emphasising that "until he goes, we won't go either".

This space has now become a pivotal space for resistance or protest literature.

On 20 April, the site became a significant space for those seeking justice for the victims of the Easter Sunday terror attacks. Notably, "The New Wings" organisation organised *Resurrection of the Victims*, a piece of performance art that aimed to raise awareness about the need for justice for those who were terrorised by the Easter Sunday bombings in 2019.

"We had planned for a couple of months with Hasindu Jayasinghe, who is an integrated design student from Moratuwa University. He spoke to us about fashion collections being showcased in a very particular way. We have been talking, in The New Wings, about justice for the Easter attacks. He has been following our work and he came for a few of our protests beforehand also. The creative licence, silhouettes, and looks were his. We discussed the message of this performance a lot.

"We did not initially think about 'GotaGoGama' as the location. His theme was on resurrection. He had various elements in accessories, crosses, veils - all in terms of art. Messages appeared on the clothes of the 'models' or performance artists as they walked around," a member of The New Wings and activist Vraie Cally Balthazaar told The Morning.

Balthazaar said that The New Wings organisation has been finding various creative ways to talk about problems, thus incorporating art and creativity into what they do.

"Design and art and performance is sometimes more impactful than other methods of protest."

Digital resistance

Social media has become an important space for resistance, as various artists publish their work through their personal blogs or pages to convey specific messages. One such artist is "Line Demon"

on Instagram. His artwork titled *The Right Hand of Doom* was published on his Instagram page on 13 April, the day after former Premier Mahinda Rajapaksa addressed the nation.

The work captures Rajapaksa's right hand, which usually holds a number of superstitious devices – each with their own myths and stories behind them. Line Demon adds a twist to this famous hand, by replacing the superstitious devices with accessories made of skulls. This piece of art was widely shared across social media apps as the public interpreted and discussed the meaning behind his work.

“This particular piece is a little darker in tone. I am trying to depict the ideals of superiority or invulnerability and outdated notions of manifest destiny that guide this particular political clan and often other such powerful political figures. The gesture and pose depict the certainty and assurance in their privilege. They accessorise with gaudy jewellery that is almost primitive in style. I have been a little on the nose with the skulls and the clawed hand, but I feel that is justified given the common knowledge of their notoriety,” he said, explaining the thinking behind his work.

“Art that tries to describe or reflect its social setting can make people feel empowered. They might feel encouraged to speak up or be able to better articulate their feelings. It could become something unifying and symbolic. It would be great to know that someone who experienced an artwork made by me or us (the Agnirebel group exhibiting activist art during these protests) felt that their fellow citizens were aware of the injustices that they and others around them faced and were ready and willing to speak up against it by their side.

“I'm certain that the importance of the media in resistance has been long discussed, debated, and reasonably concluded, but the digital age has given rise to much greater outreach and engagement with such media. A simple sentence or photograph could reach thousands within seconds. An excellent tool to combat propaganda and misinformation but unfortunately it can be used the other way as well. Education and awareness in discerning reliable sources for oneself would be equally important moving forward.”

The way forward

Should protest or resistance literature be limited to such moments like the one Sri Lanka is experiencing today? Does resistance literature play an important role in maintaining momentum when resisting against an oppressor – be it the State, a militant group, or a community?

“No matter how democratic the space we are going to build, there is always something to criticise or protest against, because there are always forms of injustice. That is the nature of the universe. We can't really create something that is all-positive, good, and kind and so forth. We have to maintain our momentum,” said Dr. Chandrasekaram.

Stressing that resistance literature is not something that should come up at a turning point and then die down, he added that artists must maintain resistance.

“We are going to at least partially win this struggle. At least partially get rid of sexism, homophobia, religious extremism, and then think about the next step and keep it moving forward.”

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