

Sri Lanka: Shared Sanctities

Thursday 18 August 2022, by [ROZAIS Naveed](#) (Date first published: 13 April 2022).

A study on the paradox of religious art and Sri Lanka's diverse ethnic history

That Sri Lanka was an ancient trading hub based on our strategic positioning on the global map is a well-known facet of our history and that positioning as a trading hub is one that we're still very much trying to capitalise on to this day. As much as we would prefer to forget it in favour of nationalist narratives that exclude minorities and foreign culture, being a trading hub since time immemorial has made us a melting pot of diversity.

Art, architecture, and the combination of these two practices is often where, if we look closely, we can see just how welcoming of diversity Sri Lankan history really is, and this is the focus of Shared Sanctities, a series of essays and video documentaries by sociologist, researcher, and author Hasini Haputhanthri and photographer and documentary film director Sujeewa de Silva.

Shared Sanctities is presented by the International Centre for Ethnic Studies (ICES) with funding support from the Ford Foundation in its research and the Strengthening Reconciliation Process Project of GIZ supported by the German Foreign Office and European Union for the development of its films and publication.

Brunch chatted with Hasini on the story behind Shared Sanctities and how it came to be.

Going behind Shared Sanctities

Explaining the overall concept of Shared Sanctities quite simply, Hasini shared that Shared Sanctities is a publication written in the form of a collection of travelogues alongside a series of documentary films that explore certain Sri Lankan heritage sites and reads them architecturally and historically through new eyes and a critical perspective to show the multiple narratives of Sri Lankan history that are often overlooked and shed light on a more inclusive view of our history.

"I was fascinated by the paradox of religious art," Hasini said, "on one hand, religions tend to be eclipsed by dogmatism and art always sought freedom of the human spirit, so what happens when these two things co-exist? I wanted to study the religious art and architecture of this island and explore the different roots and traditions that enrich them."

Hasini also shared that in the context of post-war reconciliation and rising tensions between religious groups in the aftermath of the Easter Sunday attacks, it is important to facilitate a dialogue on how cultures and religions co-exist and add value to each other. Ethnic and religious factionalisms are rooted in a parochial understanding of history and culture. Art and architecture are two frontiers in which people transcend narrow divides. Shared Sanctities hopes to address this urgent need to educate people on the syncretic aspects of our heritage so that they draw inspiration from the achievements of the past, to build a peaceful future.

"As you know, we do struggle and have been struggling as a country for a long time with issues of identity. We have such a divided past, from the war and even after the war, we're still struggling

even now,” Hasini said, “I’m glad to see people coming to the streets right now and finally uniting over this regime, but until now, we have been a divided people and this issue of social inclusion is something I’ve worked on a lot. The division we see presently in society – Sinhala, Buddhist, Tamil, Hindu, etc. – is based on historical narratives and things we learnt from childhood, absorbed from our textbooks, and from media. This historical narrative is why we are so deeply divided and it is time to really explore these narratives historically and challenge them and show different ways of looking at this.”

An example Hasini cited of non-inclusive historical narratives pervading the present day is the city of Kandy, a city that is always envisioned as completely Buddhist, but visiting Kandy, you will see a much more multicultural aspect to the city, with lots of kovils around it as well as hybridity in the people, with many visiting both Hindu and Buddhist places of worship over the course of their day. You also see depictions of Jesus as a Sri Lankan person with brown skin in a Sri Lankan setting at the Trinity Chapel which was painted by the renowned Sri Lankan artist David Paynter. “This multicultural narrative should be the main narrative but it isn’t, and I’m pushing for this narrative to gain popularity and find reasons to coexist and not be divided in the present context.”

Putting Shared Sanctities together

To Hasini, it was important that her travelogues be framed casually for the general reader, as a lot of publications that deal with the themes she was trying to address were academically written and focus heavily on art and architectural and archaeological jargon, which can alienate the general reader. “I’ve written these travelogues as my personal journey of exploring these sites, I wanted to translate the knowledge available to an audience that is general and from a subjective point of view about how I came to discover these things.”

In fact, Hasini’s first travelogue begins with the moment that sparked the whole of Shared Sanctities – her finding a small cross in an Anuradhapura museum. “It grabbed me because Anuradhapura is considered this great Buddhist kingdom, but finding a Christian cross in this little museum in Anuradhapura was a revelation for me because it made me realise that Christianity was present in Anuradhapura and not just from colonial rule. These are the different stories from our history that we don’t find in textbooks.”

In keeping with her goal of democratising knowledge and sharing it with a wider audience, Shared Sanctities is a trilingual publication, having been translated into Sinhala and Tamil.

Shared Sanctities also interviews 14 experts across the fields of art, archaeology, and architecture, weaving their knowledge into both the travelogues and the video documentaries that make up Shared Sanctities.

Speaking on the documentaries with Sujeewa de Silva that make up Shared Sanctities, Hasini shared that the documentary aspect of Shared Sanctities was initially meant to be four films, but once she and Sujeewa embarked on the project, they learned that four films simply wouldn’t cut it, especially when taking into account the wealth of knowledge of the 14 experts they were interviewing. This led to nine documentaries accompanying Hasini’s five travelogues. “It should have been 10 films actually,” Hasini explained, but the 10th film couldn’t come to pass because, despite their best efforts, Hasini and Sujeewa were unable to obtain permission from the Colombo Museum to film and photograph the artefacts they wanted to discuss, a collection of bronze statues from the Polonnaruwa period.

Shooting nine to 10 films after having only planned for four was no small feat, both in terms of the amount of work Hasini and Sujeewa had to put in as well as in terms of funding. “The partnership

with ICES was really helpful, not just financially, but also in supporting the work we were doing,” Hasini shared. “ICES Executive Director Dr. Mario Gomez and ICES Programme Officer Nadine Vanniasinkam were very supportive from the start. Even when I explained to Dr. Gomez that I didn’t want to do research articles or publish a research book but instead wanted to publish a set of travelogues from a subjective and creative point of view, he was very supportive in helping with the research and supporting us in finding resources.”

The highs and lows of Shared Sanctities

Any research project that deals with the themes in Shared Sanctities is bound to be an exciting journey (to say the least), and we asked Hasini to share her biggest challenges and her biggest highs with us.

If Hasini were to pick the singular biggest challenge to complete Shared Sanctities, it would have been the pandemic, she said. “We’d done the research and all of that, but then the pandemic hit and it was really not possible to do anything. The challenge was the amount of patience we had to have not to just give up. We were also dealing with Sri Lankan bureaucracy. We were not doing Shared Sanctities to earn money, but for educational purposes – we wanted these documentaries to be shown in museums and schools, to be used for historical research and art history education – but with the way Sri Lankan bureaucracies work, they don’t recognise that and it was really challenging in terms of getting permission, especially during the pandemic. To do one film shoot we have to get permission from several departments like the Central Cultural Fund, the Department of Archaeology, and also the Ministry of Defence – three different places with three different processes, all of which were challenging to start with, combined with the unprecedented challenges of the pandemic.”

What was rewarding for Hasini though was actually being able to situate herself in and properly take in the beauty of the heritage sites she was exploring. “I spent three days at the Tivanka Image House, while most people visit just for a few minutes,” Hasini said, giving us an example, “I began to see and connect with the place very differently. Speaking to those 14 experts and advisors was also very rewarding.”

A repository for the future

With Shared Sanctities now published, Hasini shared that she hopes it will become an educational resource, especially since it has been made to engage with audiences who don’t have backgrounds in art, art history, architecture, and religious art.

“I hope the films will be shown in schools and that students and teachers will be able to see the value in the book and the series of films and use it in their education. I also hope young people read it and understand our diverse and inclusive heritage and take inspiration for our future from the past, because once you see the past differently and see that co-existence and being united is possible, you will also see that all these differences that have divided us are actually our strength and not reasons for conflict.”

The book Shared Sanctities can be purchased from Sarasavi Bookshop, One Galle Face, and from the International Centre for Ethnic Studies (ICES). The documentary films of Shared Sanctities can be viewed on the ICES YouTube Channel.

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P.S.

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