

Sri Lanka: The Batti Walk for Justice: A resistance for fundamental system change

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“If you don’t let us dream, I will not let you sleep”

- Placard written by a young person in Batticaloa

On 9 May 2022, the peaceful citizens’ protest in GotaGoGama in Galle Face was brutally attacked by mobs who came in buses, which was followed by the resignation of then Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa.

A few of us met that day to share experiences of visiting GotaGoGama (GGG) and how incredible it had been. GGG inspired us to create a similar space of resistance in Batticaloa. Curfew was declared. We discussed if we could also create a ‘gama’. However, due to the violence and curfew, we decided to do what we have done over the many years during the war - we decided to walk, in single file, in silence...

Creating spaces of protest through troubled times is not new for us in Batticaloa. As early as 1995, women and men walked as a form of silent protest against the brutality of war.

Over the years the families of the disappeared have walked. There has been a ‘paadayathra’ of hundreds of women from kovil to Buddhist temple to church to mosque. When the tensions between the Muslim and Tamil communities were rising in the aftermath of the Aluthgama attacks in 2014, we walked as Muslim and Tamil women through the town - a town embroiled in ethnic tensions between Tamils and Muslims - in silence, asking for nonviolence and peace.

The beginning

On 12 May, with the declaration of curfew, we started our first day of the walk for justice. We had many discussions on what to call our resistance. We were clear that we didn’t want it to be a GGG.

We have had long-standing protests and resistance movements over many fundamental causes - the right to truth and accountability for the families of the disappeared, against the PTA (Prevention of Terrorism Act), against militarisation, condemning communal attacks against Muslim communities, against forced cremations during the Covid pandemic, opposing violence against women and girls, and land dispossession.

For us, this resistance was bigger than the call for Gotabaya to go. We wanted fundamental system change. And so we called our walk the ‘Batti Walk for Justice’.

We started at St. Sebastian’s Church, continued through town, and ended at Gandhi Park. It meant something to us to connect with Gandhi who had also walked for justice so many decades ago.

The practice of walking every day for an hour is new to us. It is hard and requires discipline - mental, physical, and emotional. We had hoped many would join us, but we are now a small number of regulars, with people, mostly women, from communities in and around Batticaloa whom we work with.

They join when they can - transport availability, bus fares, queues, clinic dates, and various other pressures in their own lives permitting. The desire to attract and even demand that others join us faded as we walked day after day.

We saw that people were on the streets anyway, in mile-long queues. Sometimes some of us were also in the fuel lines. There really was no separation between us. We were all occupying public space together.

Slowly we developed a connection as we walked alongside those standing in the queue. It didn't matter that some didn't walk with us, we were in this struggle together. Sometimes we have passed others who were also walking intentionally for other reasons such as the pilgrims going to Kataragama, the mothers who walked to remember the end of the war, or your average person rushing to catch a bus in the midst of this fuel crisis.

81 days of walking

The Batti Walk for Justice has now reached 81 days. Sometimes we are only four people, and other times, with those who join from villages and even from other districts, we have been 30-40. The bus fares are too high for ordinary people to come every day. But there is a steady stream of people joining. Many children have walked, being as young as two.

Everyone writes their own placards, even the children. There has been poetry, anger, GO HOMEs, raising issues of environmental exploitation, remembering the terrible end of the war, the burning of the Jaffna Library, massacres in Batticaloa, the working class having to repay the debt accrued by the wealthy and the State, and calling for accountability of the MPs from Batticaloa District.

A 10-year-old had written a placard, which asked, "Am I a fascist?" - following Ranil Wickremesinghe's dismissal of young people who had been protesting for months asking for systemic change.

Those walking have overwhelmingly been women. We do not have answers to why this may be so. Some of our male friends walk regularly but they are outnumbered. The presence, primarily of women, has inadvertently made the walk a heavily-gendered space of resistance in the public sphere in Batticaloa.

This is important as spaces of protest that aren't about 'women's issues' are often 'macho,' even if a good number of women are present. This is not such a space.

We have a cloth which asks who we are and why we are walking. The answer to the question on the same cloth says that we are walking for justice. Women living with disabilities, children, the elderly, religious persons, rural women across ethnic communities, and the small queer community in Batticaloa have walked.

There have been struggles within struggles, such as when a trans woman walked for the very first time in the gender that was truly hers in public. Over the weeks, hundreds of people, mostly women, have walked in the Batti Walk for Justice.

In the course of the walk, songs have been written, including by children. Often someone will bring

some food or a drink to be shared when we have tiredly reached Gandhi Park. A young boy celebrated his birthday with us because he wanted to do something meaningful for his birthday.

Justice Village

At the Gandhi Park, we have slowly started creating a space where all the daily placards are kept around a beautiful tree. Placards are often written on old newspapers, paper bags, old cloth, and old saris. These have been hung on the tree and tied around the bark. This place we have started calling the 'Niyayakiramam' - Justice Village.

The Justice Village meets every Saturday evening and songs are sung, street plays and traditional dances are performed, teach-outs happen, and collective art is created. Many of those who come to the park in the evening curiously join.

The teach-outs have been about the causes of the economic crisis, the history and importance of paadayathras as a form of nonviolent resistance, the Sri Lankan Constitution, local food practices, and indigenous knowledge.

Often several musicians join for jam sessions, such as performers from the Burgher community, traditional drummers, female drummers, and a teenager who plays the keyboards. In the 'Niyayakiramam' we sit and talk about what is taking place politically and economically and what our political stand should be.

Our placards and clothes have been cleared out from near the Gandhi statue and even the tree. We do not know for sure by whom. But we have recovered them from the dustbins in the park, straightened them out, and displayed them again and made new ones and hung them up again! The Tamil poet Bharathiyar's words feature on one of our placards: "Veezhvom endru ninaithaayaa?" (Did you think we would fall?).

This week we have walked with parts of the Sri Lankan Constitution that hold the spirit of the Constitution even though again and again it has shown its terrible flaws. The Constitution says that sovereignty is in the people and is inalienable.

It also says in its preamble: "We the freely elected representatives of the people of Sri Lanka, humbly acknowledging our obligations to our People and gratefully remembering their heroic and unremitting struggle to regain and preserve their rights and privileges so that the Dignity and Freedom of the Individual may be assured, Just, Social, Economic and Cultural Order attained."

We too, like other protesters around the country, have been intimidated. We have been photographed and threatened by intelligence officers who have asked prying questions. Sometimes angry people on the street laugh cynically as we pass. We have been accused of being funded by foreign money!

Public space is also gendered and women walking every day sends uncomfortable ripples through the streets and the fuel lines. Sometimes there are comments of ridicule and jokes, such as, "Don't you have anything better to do at home?"

Sometimes, we walk through heavy traffic where everyone around has been filled with tension and anger due to fuel lines. We have walked through aggressive and violent Police and military. Yet, space has always been made for us to pass through. There is recognition and respect that this walk is on behalf of all of us. Once, an Army soldier came running eagerly and asked for a leaflet that we were handing out.

A monk's message

Tibetan Buddhist monk Tashi Choedup who joined us on the walk one Sunday, spoke to us at the Gandhi Park. These were his words:

"We frequently walk with an idea of getting somewhere - from one place to another. But where are we in between? With every step, we can arrive at the present moment. The walk that you all do every day here is not about getting from church to Gandhi Park, but being fully present with the restlessness you are experiencing in your country, breathing through it as a community, thinking about it, reflecting... Or simply being present.

"In chaos, it is often common for us to be pulled into multiple directions, by many things that are out of our control making us restless. We are pushed into the past, pulled into the future. In such a situation, finding a ground to stand upon and to hold on to things is difficult. Often, the only thing we possibly hold onto is restlessness because that is the only thing that makes sense and helps us connect with what is happening!

"It is challenging and difficult not to do that. Through this walk you continuously, consciously, intentionally, and actively keep bringing yourself to the present moment, where you are, and where your community and life are. Political, economic, and other crises - the first thing they do is deprive us of our hold on the present, they force us out of our present moment, out of that which is more real than our past and future.

"Through this walk, you are reclaiming your present - that in itself is a resistance of a different kind. By reclaiming your present you are asserting that you still have a say in what is happening. You are choosing to stay awake and engage in the crisis, instead of giving into restlessness alone.

"Joy - this walk is also an attempt to come together, reminding each other of the joy of having each other. We all know a crisis can never be resolved with another crisis, but only with harmony. This walk is an attempt at building that harmony. This walk is not just for you. You are walking for so many people in this country. That way this walk is also about reconnecting with the shared existence and what Thich Nhat Hanh calls inter-beingness!

"Again, this walk is for you - for all those who have come before you, and for all of those who come after you."

The walk continues...

As our hearts hurt due to the terrible betrayal of our politicians and as spaces of peaceful resistance are being attacked and forcefully shut down, we continue to walk. We walk to hold everyone's hopes, especially the thousands of young people who believe in change and have fought for change in nonviolent ways.

It is not easy to hold onto hope for systemic change at times like this. But at the same time, we cannot underestimate the unshakeable change in a whole generation of young people in Sri Lanka, who now have higher expectations from our leaders. This cannot ever be undone or taken away from us.

To alleviate the hard weight

Of our days

This loneliness that we all carry with us

Lost islands

To rule out this feeling

Of losing everything

To analyse where to go on

And to choose the way of doing it

All I need is you to be here

With your bright eyes

- 'Razón De Vivir' by Mercedes Sosa (1985)

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