
Living with Multi-ethnic Neighbours: A Story of Everyday Strategies of Negotiating Politicised Ethnoreligious Identities in Colombo, Sri Lanka

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Abstract

Anthropologist S.J. Tambiah considers Colombo as being as one of the three most sensitive zones in Sri Lanka, a zone where Sinhala-Tamil tensions have occurred periodically, since slum communities play a key role in ethnic polarization. For instance, slum dwellers in Colombo actively participated in the July 1983 ethnic riots and their behaviour reflected a similar pattern to the behaviour exhibited by slum dwellers in the riots that took place in other megacities of Asia i.e., Delhi, Calcutta and Jakarta. Asian cities in general and the city of Colombo in particular, have witnessed how their dwellers negotiate and live with long-standing and deep-seated politicised ethnoreligious identities and displayed anxieties along ethnonational divisions of society. Based on an ethnographic study conducted between 2010 and 2012 in two locations in Colombo, Sri Lanka, namely, Crow Island and De Mel Watta; this paper examines the manner in which people from middle- and lower- class backgrounds, negotiate politicised ethnoreligious identities and construct a liveable social space related to their day-to-day lives. Mobilising Pierre Bourdieu's notion of embodied dispositions which inform everyday practices and Michael Jackson's idea of the existential and inter-subjective lives of human beings, the concept of "commongrounds" was crafted to denote inhabitants' continuous and creative efforts to live and relate to each other in fields of common endeavour. This attempt has been informed by an embodied (conscious or unconscious) understanding of the social and material world. The present study suggests that the politicised ethnoreligious identities of people have existential capacities to negotiate such stigmatised identities and develop a liveable social lifeworld as neighbours. The criteria adopted for negotiating these politicised ethnoreligious identities vary significantly, according to locational, situational and personal characteristics.

Keywords: multi-ethnic neighbourhood, commongrounds, everyday urban lives, politicised ethnoreligious identities, Sri Lanka, Colombo

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Introduction:

The city of Colombo, identified as කොළඹ (Kolamba) in Sinhala (hereafter S.), and கொழும்பு (Kolumbu) in Tamil (hereinafter T.), which has a lengthy colonial heritage, has been the home of a population of almost one million people comprising numerous ethnic, religious, cultural and social groups. Ethnically, Colombo comprises a population of approximately 37% Sinhalas, approximately 30% Sri Lankan Tamils, followed by Indian Tamils and Sri Lankan Moors comprising approximately 29% of the population. Meanwhile, there are pockets of other communities as well, comprising of the Chinese, Portuguese Burghers, Dutch Burghers, Malays, Chetties and Barathas. Moreover, Colombo has earned a bad reputation for being the scene of harassment, attacks and disturbances on the everyday lives of ethnic “others,” something which has been particularly evident during numerous periods in history. Asian cities in general, and the city of Colombo, in particular, have witnessed how their dwellers negotiate and live with politicised ethno-religious identities and regularly instigate unnecessary divisions and tensions amongst societies that are ethnically divided. This paper explains how people of middle and lower class backgrounds negotiate politicised ethno-religious identities in a context of ethno-religious nationalisms and yet, construct livable social space on a daily basis. This study was undertaken in the two year period, 2010-2012, employing the ethnography of the said communities in Colombo, the capital of Sri Lanka. The fieldwork was conducted in two communities identified as Crow Island (middle-class community) and De Mel Watta (low-income community). The findings of the study suggest that members of the above-mentioned areas live in communities where politicised ethnicities and religions are a significant feature and communities have the existential capacities to negotiate such identities and construct livable social spaces.

This paper discusses the numerous ways in which city dwellers address the issue of multi-ethno-religious backgrounds, whilst negotiating stigmatised ethno-religious identities in order to construct a livable social space, called a “neighbourhood”. There is limited acknowledgement of the fact that ethnic tensions are the result of the politicisation of ethnicities and religious divisions (see Tambiah, 1989, p. 339; 1996, pp. 334-342), despite the fact that this is a common phenomenon evident in post-colonial South Asia (Phadnis & Ganguly, 2001; Visweswaran, 2011). The politicisation of ethnic and religious divisions have also contributed towards creating conflicts amongst communities, irrespective of their being classified as urban, rural or estate locations (Tambiah, 1996). The paper pays special attention to two communities representing middle- and lower-class (or locally known as “Watta” community) backgrounds in order to discuss daily living experiences in Colombo in the post-war context.

The theoretical perspective of the study reflects the observations of Pierre Bourdieu and Michael Jackson. Pierre Bourdieu refers to embodied dispositions that inform everyday practices, while Michael Jackson considers the existential and intersubjective lives of human beings (1998, p. 6). Bourdieu suggests that people’s attitudes, values, and ideas are unconsciously gathered over a period of time via socialisation and participation in social activities. These activities are performed automatically, via individual postures, gestures and ventures explained through the concept of embodied disposition. At the same time, one’s

(subjective) life is essentially connected with and shaped by others (it is inter-subjective) and as well as concerns related to existence. In his discussion of the interactions between individuals in a society, Michael Jackson values the “*interplay* of subject and object, ego and alter-ego” as a subject for ethnographic analysis (original emphasis Jackson, 1998, p. 6). For Bourdieu, people’s habitus is comprised of systems of perception and common values and assumptions, “which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without pre-supposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary to attain them” (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 53). In this paper, both these preceding ideas are used to discuss inter- and intra- ethnic connections.

Using the concepts of Bourdieu and Jackson, I introduce a concept called “commongrounds” which explains inhabitants’ continuous and creative efforts to live and relate to one another in fields of common endeavor informed by embodied (conscious or unconscious) understandings of the world. Commongrounds also possess the capacity to exclude, and /or hegemonise others to a mutually-consensual extent. To put it slightly differently, commongrounds involve shared dispositions and abilities to use cultural resources in distinctive, pragmatic and creative ways that best match the prevalent situation and contingencies, while remaining sensitive to the various external forces/limits endangering the living of a local social life that meets existential needs. Commongrounds are not something necessarily passed on generationally. They are a field of growth, enhancement, addition, imagination, learning and adaptation, creativity, and imitation, including the involvement of the desires of individuals or groups. It is a field of continuously invented/forgotten traditions. It connects with the socialisation process of a person. My discussion of commongrounds showcases actors’ efforts either to negotiate ethnic boundaries, or to deliberately ignore and downplay them.

For this purpose, an ethnographic study was conducted pertaining to relationships prevalent amongst members of these two societies via their social networks of informants available during the period 2010-2012. The study was done using a phenomenological approach in two selected locations in Colombo. The attention paid to details of the collective experience of community, structure and culture is characteristic more of an ethnographic approach, while grasping individuals’ experiences and understandings of the world through their lived experience lays claim to a phenomenological approach. To analyse what I observed in the everyday interactions of the people who were part of the study, it was essential for me to draw theoretical support from both Bourdieu and Jackson, since I wanted to discuss the manner in which people’s biological bodies include socially ingrained habits, skills and dispositions, and works, all of which shape the existential strategies of people in various situations. Stated differently, commongrounds is the inbuilt capacity of a person to negotiate stigmatised ethnoreligious identities in his/her own, unique way, according to the situations and contexts in which he/she has been placed, order to have a better social life every day. My aim in this paper is to avoid drawing conclusions from situations which have not been witnessed to date, but to draw analytical attention to what everyone sees. For anthropologists, “it is the social reality of the lifeworld and forms of social consciousness which are of critical interest” (original emphasis Jackson, 1996, p 19). To this end, I draw upon the anthropology of everyday life to help me discuss everyday phenomena, which have gone, by and large, unnoticed.

Commongrounds are both embodied and ‘enminded’, and may vary from person to person in the same family, ethnic or cultural group. Ultimately, the commongrounds construction means that people’s capacity to live a social life in a complex and ethno-religious identity politics divided world. The focus on commongrounds recognizes individuals not merely as passive inheritors of given identities but as active, creative, imaginative beings who struggle incessantly to create the collaboratable social spaces across politicised ethno-religious boundaries in their social lives. Commongrounds are not always peaceful but tense, lived out in ups and downs, and shifting constantly. This is one of the fundamental living realities experienced during the two years of network analysis conducted by myself, in the two selected field locations in Colombo. Commongrounds take various shapes in the four locations where I did my original fieldwork, according to their unique situational, contextual, and social spaces. Hence, following Jackson, the current paper focuses on “the paradox of plurality and the ambiguity of intersubjective life” (Jackson, 2013, p. 9), which will be described in the next sections of this paper.

Elapsed mixed identities and collaborations:

The colonial literature has often projected Sri Lanka as a place that had accommodated diverse identities, and as a place which had witnessed the complexity of British Administration. In the same way, contemporary scholars also face complexity in their endeavours to understand the socio-cultural dimensions of inter-ethnic relations in the island’s society. The following note from Robert Percival regarding the then Ceylon’s capital *Columbo* (today’s Colombo) is one such description,

There is no part of the world where so many languages are spoken or which contains such a mixture of nations, manners and religions. Besides Europeans and Cingalese, the proper natives of the island, you meet scattered all over the town almost every race of Asiatic: Moors of every class, Malabars, Travencorins, Malays, Hindoos, Gentoos, Chinese, Persians, Arabians, Turks, Maldivians, Javians and natives of all the Asiatic isles and Parsees or worshipers of fire, who would rather have their houses burnt and themselves perish in the flames than employ any means to extinguish it. There are also a number of Africans, Cafrees, Buganese, a mixed race of Africans and Asiatics, besides the half-castes, people of colour and other races which proceed from a mixture of the original ones. Each of these different classes of people has its own manners, customs and languages (Percival, 1805, p.136).

This description regarding people of mixed identities, which existed in Colombo in the early 1900’s, establishes a basis with which to discuss the changes occurred between then and now (Rajasingham-Senanayake, 2002, p. 54). Moreover, Tambiah (1986) identifies three types of ancient social differences: caste, geographical, and communal aggregates. He claims that the migrant communities from India were absorbed smoothly into local communities during the pre-colonial period. There were no ethnic tensions during this time. Some historical analyses of Sri Lanka highlighted the fact that prior to the 19th century, the ideal combination of distinct races, languages, religions and political territory, so prominent in

contemporary nationalist discourse, did not exist (see Nissan & Stirrat, 1990; Obeyesekere, 2004b; Rajasingham-Senanayake 2004; Tambiah, 1986). It was, according to Spencer (1990b; 2008) the significant contribution of local politics and politicians that promoted ethno-religious nationalism in post-independence Sri Lanka. Therefore, the evolving multi-cultural populations of local or regional socio-political complexes in the kingdoms of Kotte, Kandy, and Jaffna were not considered as rivals of the “Sinhals” or the “Tamils.” These observations were confirmed by early 19th century colonial writers such as Robert Percival who notes a “mixture of nations, manners and religions”, “caste” and “class,” and that all of these groups have unique “manners, customs and languages” (1805, p. 136).

During my fieldwork I often heard people in Colombo state that, “those people are incompatible with us, so we cannot live with them”. This claim was asserted primarily when people referred to ethnic ‘others’ who made them anxious at the prospect of sharing space with them. I note that this notion of an ethnic ‘other’, in today’s mass ethno-political consciousness, is a colonial invention and has been maintained at an enhanced level of vigour by post-colonial political elites who always engaged in communal politics. In both cases, it involves attempts initiated by power holders, to deny existing resemblances and similarities between groups of people (Harrison, 2003, p. 2006) generated through their pragmatic and skilful engagement with sometimes similar, sometimes contrasting environments. These evolving identities have been maintained as “incompatible partners” up until today by political entrepreneurs via various discriminatory efforts, including disfranchising the citizenship rights of Tamils of Indian origin in 1948 and instigating politically-backed systematic ethnic riots since the 1950s (see Kapferer, 2012).

My research into the history of ethnic relations elaborates the fact that the early roots of contemporary ethnic rivalry is largely connected with the construction of ethnic categories which were of colonial invention and established during colonial interventions (also see Kapferer, 2012, p. 91; Spencer, 2008). Colonial administrators used “scientific” categorisations for the purpose of census-taking and codifications in the legislation drawn up for the colonies. However, these colonial administrators, especially the British, demonstrated that Sri Lanka was a “plural” society by importing different communities, such as the Indian Tamils (or Indian Plantation Tamils who are an intra-Tamil group), Burghers, Malays, Javanese, Kaffirs and various other groups, to work in the harbour in the city of Colombo and on tea and rubber estates. Migrants were not allowed to integrate with local communities and, as a result, the Indian Plantation Tamil community, one of the island’s largest ethnic minorities, was subject to an ethnic violence erupting between the Sri Lankan Tamils and the Sinhals (see Bass, 2013; Daniel ,1996; Kanapathipillai, 2009), especially in post independent Sri Lankan politics. These categories were critical to the establishment of political representations of minorities in 1833, which categories thereafter gave rise to ethnic consciousness (Nesiah, 2001b: 9). Meanwhile, the inherited Westminster system with its majoritarian ethno-political model offered more advantages to the majority ethnic group than to the minorities. The thrust of my argument throughout this paper is that the history of the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka is not primordial but essentially a political history, in which particular cultural resources have been deployed to suit the interests of the key political actors of the time. According to the Orientalist theoretician Homi Bhabha, colonial efforts were geared towards stereotyping or creating a fixation, by arresting some elements and discarding

the social fluidity which has always existed among people (Huddart, 2006, pp. 35-56). On the whole, the colonisers muted or cornered existed fluid identities such as caste, religion or cosmological identities as well as regional identities, while mobilising and concretising ethno-racial identities. Likewise, the post-colonial elites further strengthened ethno-racial identities into strong ethno-nationalisms via modern liberal democracy. With this introduction to the construction and maintenance of divided ethnoreligious groups, namely, Sinhala, Tamils and Muslims, I will proceed to an elaboration of the observations made on the ethnographic account of the daily social life which I experienced whilst researching two locations in Colombo.

Daily strategies of negotiating politicised differences in Colombo:

Tambiah (1986) considers Colombo to be one of Sri Lanka's three most sensitive zones, a place where Sinhala-Tamil tensions occurred and where slum communities are likely to play a key role in ethnic polarization. Slum dwellers in Colombo actively participated in the July 1983 ethnic riots, whilst people who belong to such backward and marginalised communities were involved in similar incidences in Delhi, Calcutta and Jakarta (Kapferer, 2012, p. 102; Nissan & Stirrat, 1987, p. 23; Tambiah, 1996, p. 216). However, these phenomena should be understood within a broader socio-economic and politically manipulative context (Bandarage, 2009, p. 79). By contrast, *collaboration* across ethnic, cultural and other borders tend to be marginalised in scholarly discussions surrounding city dwellers. In this paper, I discuss the accommodation of cultural heterogeneity and ethnic diversity among slum dwellers (see Silva, 1994), and the middleclass community's subculture in Colombo, an elaboration of another facet of ethnoreligious relations in Colombo.

Crow Island:

Crow Island is identified in Sinhala as *kāka dūwa* or *Kākadupatha* and *kākatheewu* in Tamil, and is a small island village surrounded by approximately the two-kilometre Vystwyke canal, named thus to honour a onetime Dutch Governor. Crow Island is separated from the mainland but linked by the *Kelani Ganga* (River *Kelani*) on one end and the Indian Ocean on the other, thereby making it a semi curve shaped island. The Dutch Governor Vystwyke had resided in a house facing the sea, next to the Crow Island beach, and thus, this former house has earned its present name *Pradeepa Hall*, and has now been converted to a hall for weddings. There are approximately seven hundred housing units on the island, which accommodate nearly 1000 multi-ethnic and multi-religious families of the island (Rajarithnam, 2011; Wijeyeweere, 2011). There is a *pansala* (S.² Buddhist temple), *kōvil* or *kōil* (T.³ & S. Hindu temple), a mosque and a church dedicated to Mother Mary (controlled by lay persons). Likewise, certain Christian missionary groups operate in the vicinity as well. Crow Island was considered a shanty area housing low-income dwellers prior to the 1980s. Subsequently they were re-located by Ranasinghe Premadasa, the then Minister of Housing and Construction, to create middle-class housing schemes. This was a joint venture

² Sinhala terminology

³ Tamil terminology

undertaken together with certain foreign construction firms, following the liberal economic policies which commenced in 1977, and which linked the local economy to the global economy, whilst minimizing state monopoly. However, it should be noted here that only the affluent could afford to buy houses in this housing complex.

The entire fieldwork process was a way of improving inter-ethnic relations and would not have been possible if I could not develop a “commonground” with members of the multi-ethnic community. My profession as a university academic and as a citizen who lives in a middle-class area in Colombo was an added qualification, for me, to relate to this community. While I was searching for a field site in Colombo city, one of my friends, Rajalingam, whom I fondly refer to as *Raja*, a *Batticaloa Tamil* married to a *Colombo Tamil* lady and serving as the Principal of a Tamil School in Colombo, accompanied me to this exciting research site where he is a resident. He did this because of our close friendship, which began at the university, encouraging us to labour as co-workers for more than ten years. He had arranged a meeting for me with the one-time treasurer of the Beach Park Management Society (BPMS), Sankaran. Sankaran⁴ was a *Jaffna Tamil* who had settled down in Colombo to start work at a government ministry in 1976. Raja and his wife became friends with Sankaran when they met often at the beach during morning jogging sessions. Sankaran took me to meet Gilbert, a 58-year-old Burgher gentleman married to a Muslim lady, operating a customs clearance firm whilst also serving as the chairman of the BPMS. They often conversed in English, a symbol of the educated middle-class. They offered me membership at the BPMS and subsequently, I obtained access to their programmes, meetings, and casual discussions and became a nob in their social network. Consequently, collection of data became an inter- and intra-ethnic endeavour based on relationships established with this middle-class community.

De Mel Watta

De Mel Watta is also referred to by its shortened name Mel Watta; Mel Watta is an “imagined community” in the sense of Anderson (2006). For its residents, everyone is a dweller of Mel Watta in terms of their affinity to each other, as “Watta (or “thotta” in Tamil) dwellers” even if they may not know each other very much on a personal level. They have clear physical boundaries within the community but possess a sense of belonging to “a community operating over and above their respective households” (Silva, 1994:6). The limits of the commune are demarcated, for the most part, by the high walls of factories or shops, and one boundary marker that includes a nearby canal comprising stinking wastewater. The residents of this “Watta” often use the term “Watta” in Sinhala and “thōttam” in Tamil to denote their place of residence. They differentiate one “Watta” from the other using terminologies such as “apē Watta” (S.), “engalōda thōttam” (T.), “intha thōttam” (our Watta) (T.), “ehā Watta” (S.), “antha thōttam” (*the other Watta*) (T.), and “ēgollange Watta” (S.), “awangalōda thōttam” (*their Watta*) (T.). Meanwhile, outsiders to this community are hesitant to start a quarrel or fight with the “Mel Watta Minissu” (S.), “Mel Watta Ākkal” (*Mel Watta People*) (T.) since the setting is supposedly notorious for underworld - “pāthāle” (S.) or “pāthāla lōkaya” (S.) activities. In general, the Watta is known for its forcible encroachment on government owned lands, commercial sex, drug peddling, robberies and

⁴ All persons fictitious.

various other criminal activities, and a significant number of people living in the community have a common interest in protecting themselves from law-enforcement authorities, as Silva (1994) indicates. However, the respondents mentioned that the government military operations aimed at curbing criminal activities in Colombo on the cessation of the civil war has contributed to a reduction in criminal activities in this Watta. I frequently met individuals addicted to drugs, drug users and sellers in murky areas in between lanes. I also often encountered quarrels amongst the community, which, however, did not lead to the creation of eternal enemies. Fighting and later making up with neighbours was a more short-term phenomenon in Mel Watta, as these dwellers were interdependent socially, culturally, and economically in their day-to-day lives.

This Watta community largely comprises Muslims, together with a minority of Sinhalas and Tamils who originally belonged to the more numerous temporarily re-settled families, due to various property development schemes undertaken in Colombo by different regimes, as described by Orjuela (2010) in connection with Colombo 15. Most of the current houses were constructed in the 1980's under the patronage of the late President Premadasa's UNP (United National Party) regime. These were temporary houses built with minimum facilities, with access to common lavatories and water taps, until the high storied low-income dwellers' housing complex was constructed. However, once the Mel Watta housing complex was built, the apartments were given to party supporters of the political system, which was largely dependent on a patron-client relationship. President Ranasinghe Premadasa was a political leader well-loved by the slum dwellers. They called him *Duppathāgē Hithawathā* (friend of the poor) (S.) as he was known to be a person who had feelings for "the poor people" of the country. With the assassination of President Ranasinghe Premadasa at a May Day rally by an LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) suicide cadre, many people lost the dream of owning a permanent house and they gradually converted these temporarily built plank-houses into permanent structures with certain modifications, such as adding private lavatories, bathrooms, building upper stories to create more space, illegally expanding the houses, and renovating the walls as well as the floors with bricks or cement blocks. Subsequently, a considerable influx of Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim communities flocked to the area, in search of affordable housing solutions in the city.

Mel Watta is divided into three sections; "people living beyond the water tank", "people living before the water tank" and "people living in the flat" (flat people). However, even within each of the first two sections, there were sub-sections. Gayani (34), a Buddhist-Sinhala lady commented about the people who lived beyond the water tank, who were predominantly Muslim and were residing round about the mosque,

I do not undertake to help the politicians or the Grama Sewaka (village level government officer) beyond the water tank. I cover only 48 legal government houses and 78 illegal houses existing before the tank. People who live beyond the water tank are pāthāle people. They have very bad qualities. They have no decency at all. When there was a musical show here, organised by Shakthi TV (a Tamil medium TV channel) recently, boys came from that area and hammered boys in our section. We had to go to the police station and get it sorted out.

Muslim boys in our section have united with some other boys and they are now coming forward, ready for anything.

Re-categorization of groups in such a manner has de-constructed the rigid ethnoreligious identity (or any other stigmatised identities) to shape social relationships in a multi-cultural Watta life, as explained by Neofotistos (2004). This Watta, where most members are Muslims, has been divided into three sections by the people for their daily reference. The first section of the Watta consists largely of the Muslim community who is known to have connections with underworld activities. There is a mosque at the centre of that area. The second section in the Watta comprises an ethnically mixed community, whilst the third section is where “loku minissu” (S.) or “periya ākkal” (T.) or else “panakkāraṅga” (T.) reside, and this area is classified as a section where a group of lower-middle-class people live. This group consists mainly of people living in government built public housing schemes, often referred to as “flat people”. Originally, many politicians had promised accommodation facilities to temporarily re-settled people currently living in the other two sections as well. Meanwhile, the “flat people” preferred to maintain a distance from the slum dwellers living in the other two sections. The flat community has an organization called the “Sahadipathya Committee”, a welfare and flat maintenance society officially linked with the then Ministry of Construction, Engineering Services, Housing and Common Amenities, in order to attend to various issues related to the well-being of flat dwellers, as well as building maintenance. The heterogeneous families living in the flats pay a monthly subscription to the committee and meet regularly on a monthly basis, while office bearers change at an annually conducted general meeting. My participatory research is confined mainly to the first and second sections of the community.

The shape of commongrounds: The possibility of connection across ethnoreligious boundaries

My intention in this section is to engage in a comparative discussion regarding the structure of the commongrounds, the space in which members of multi ethnoreligious communities can collaborate (which also includes the resolution of day-to-day disputes and quarrels as well) and the manner in which they collaborate.

Crow Island, which was established by replacing the slum community that existed, is a middle-class setting including ethnic ‘others’ grouped according to class resemblances. These class resemblances happen not only because of the wealth community members have but also because of the nature of the lifestyle they lead. The case of Crow Island brings to the fore the influence of middle-class consciousness in relation to taste, aspiration, dispositions, and a lifestyle forged on commongrounds similar to Bordiues explanation in *Distinction* (1984). These people naturally wish to live a peaceful life without becoming involved in fights and are more concerned with sports, health, and community work, and possess an understanding of the importance of relaxation, stress release, and spiritual development. In other words, they have chosen an experience close to total enjoyment of life. The islanders give prominence to private space, peace, social status and prestige. They increasingly wish to develop relations with the people who are of the same emotional and spiritual calibre, regardless of ethnic background. The parents wish to provide a peaceful as well as a

progressive lifestyle to their children. Their developed notions of “compatible” and “incompatible” people is linked more closely with class dynamics than with ethnic differences. By contrast, the Mel Watta people forge commongrounds on the basis of a socially, culturally and economically marginalised *Watta* (‘slum’) community. Meanwhile, Crow Island is inhabited by an urban entrepreneurial class characterized by economic and cultural globalisation (Hettige, 1999). Therefore, in Crow Island, the community comprises mainly of business owners or professionals such as accountants, doctors, managers and directors, while the others are senior level officers in public and private sector institutions. In contrast, the Mel Watta people are engaged as blue or pink collar workers such as drivers, factory workers, daily wage labourers, watchers, security guards, clerical staff members, self-employed tailors, carpenters, mechanics, and other similar workers. Crow Islanders are concerned with social dignity, prestige and status. They highlight the appropriateness of certain ways of speaking, and engage in particular subjects of conversation. They are equally aware of the status indicated (most often) by and attached to certain clothing styles, in particular, when attending social gatherings such as dinners and picnics. In contrast, the De Mel Watta people’s discourse foregrounds regular expressions of the everyday conflict and struggle to survive, which is intimately connected to the hassle of earning their bread and butter.

People in Mel Watta are acutely aware of their stigmatised identity as a group of people from a marginalised community known as the *Watta* dwellers. Considerable bond building could be observed amongst these people who live in close proximity. This community comprises individuals who have been re-settled at this site from time to time, as they had migrated from various places to Colombo, resulting in a diverse development of interventions. Predominantly, then, this is a settlement which constitutes a “cheated community” or a “forgotten community,” viewed, of course, from the perspective of the residents. The then President Premadasa’s government had already made arrangements to settle these people in a temporary housing scheme, until they were given houses in the Mel Watta housing complex. Ironically, these people and the pledges given to them were forgotten by the subsequent government established by the SLFP-led coalition formed by President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga who came into power after the assassination (by a suicide bomber) of President Premadasa at Armour Street, which, incidentally is in close proximity to this settlement. Therefore, the Mel Watta people, in Paul Farmer’s terms, were *structural victims*, who subsequently converted their temporary housing into permanent structures. The Watta people, are from multi-ethnoreligious backgrounds, and they understand the political culture which labels them as a group of people having connections with the “underworld”, “unlawful settlers”, and “criminals”. However, when it comes to politics, they suffer a sea change into the “bulk of voters” who can easily be manipulated, quite unlike the Crow Islanders. Subsequently, many people in Mel Watta constructed their permanent houses on this strip of marshy land.

The research on Crow Island explored commongrounds in the middle-class social space in Colombo, with special reference to shaping community dwellers’ social lives through formal community organisations and modern social value systems. These people often live in houses covered by high walls, gates with bells and notices such as; “no parking”, “private road”, and “beware of dogs” and have security guards, which is, of course, middle-

class living. Krishnan Sundaralingam described in detail this middle-class community. “All the people who live here have had humble beginnings, though they are presently at a certain elevated socio-economic status. Therefore, they understand each other well. They have all come from remote areas and now live as citizens of Colombo.” Thus, it is not ethnicity or religion that unites these people but their commonality as middle-class residents. They mix English with their mother tongue, or “swabasha” (Tamil or Sinhala), at home. They are people who own businesses, serve in government departments or are retired persons possessing foreign connections. Most of the households have vehicles. Community members go to the beach to jog and to relax in the mornings, evenings and on weekends.

Most residents lead busy lives and have no time for interaction, even with their neighbours. Unlike the manner in which people interact in rural communities in Sri Lanka, these individuals have only very formal contacts with their neighbours. Therefore, this community prefers to gather through formal organisations where they then develop significant friendly relations that are continued by participating in the happy (for example, weddings and other celebrations) and sorrowful (for example, deaths and memorials) events of ethnic “others” who then take on the appearance of friends and neighbours. Bourdieu’s discussion of class consciousness (1984; 1991) and cultural and social capital is useful in exploring these individuals’ world of day-to-day social life. Meanwhile, class capital facilitates the ‘transgression’ of ethnic borders via the construction of commongrounds among a specific segment of ethnically-diverse people, uniting them to create a new segment called the middle-class. Crow Islanders have created a unique lifestyle, a pattern of social exchange distinct from those of other vulnerable communities. Education and modernity connects them with certain ‘cultural’ features of life such as “means of income”, “common houses”, “usage of English”, “modern equipment”, and “non-dependence” in a bid to make ethnic borders unimportant, amidst the serious macro-polarization that prevails in Sri Lanka today. This context, in which a (re)creation of ethnicity takes place, as Wallman (1988) indicates, ensures comfortable relationships for communities on all sides of ethnic boundaries (see Jenkins 1986). Members of ethnically varied groups, united through common preferences, have formed the Beach Park Management Society (BPMS). Apart from the BPMS there are several other societies existing in the community: The Crow Island Housing Scheme Welfare Society (CHSWS), the Hindu Society, the LKN Housing Scheme Society, Sea Breeze Garden Housing Scheme Society (SBGHSS), Catholic Society, Buddhist Dayaka Sabha, and Mothers’ Union. However, certain associations have ceased to function or they only operate at half strength. The BPMS was initially formed to improve the health and relaxation facilities of the members of this community. However, the BPMS has now been elevated to a position of a social and cultural capital support system. In short, Crow Islanders showcase a tale of commongrounds generated within a middle-class habitus that explicitly disregards the exploitation of the ethnic field by political entrepreneurs.

From the onset, the BPMS conducted various activities which benefitted broader society. Some of these initiatives which supported these activities were the Tsunami commemoration programme, a monthly “shramadana” (gift of labour) campaign to clean the beach, Sinhala and Hindu New Year Festivals, conducting a dansala during the Buddhist festival of “Poson”, developing infrastructure for elders and children of the beach community, social services such as medical clinics and dengue prevention programmes,

annual get-togethers, and supporting community members when they are in need. Furthermore, the BPMS has contributed to the religious programmes of the Hindus and Christians as well as to other leisure events organized in the area of the beach. At the time this research was conducted, there were considerable development initiatives in place, which displayed BPMS's steady improvement. For instance, hiring a labourer to clean the beach daily, establishing a police post to provide security to the visitors, renovating toilets, renovating the main office of the BPMS, planting trees, establishing a cemetery for dogs, renovating the children's park, taking initiatives to construct a parking area, planning to build a community hall, raising funds through the collection of parking fees, charging hawkers and hiring the space of the beach for various functions with an intention to invest those funds for the development of the beach. The discussions community members had with various government bodies to intervene in order to develop the infrastructure of the beach have been fruitful, and the beach area has been developed to reach the standard of a formal beach park.

Despite the fact that I did not observe such formal organisations at Mel Watta, the people of the multi-ethnic Watta community often come together to engage in developing the needs of the community and the families living in it. Whenever there is a funeral, sickness, quarrel or any other difficult situation existing in neighbouring families, community members gather to identify the need and assist in developing a solution. Sometimes, they attended functions in the Buddhsit temple or Hindu Kovil where they gathered and conducted rituals respective to each religion to the best of their abilities and means. This thinking seems to be emanating from the "sameness" in relation to livelihood, social stigma, and everyday struggles to survive.

Unlike the middle-class dwellings observed in Crow Island, which comprise formidable enclosures of walls and gates, the dwellers in Mel Watta displayed a more open and intimate relationship with their neighbours. They were known to communicate with their neighbours from their living rooms, merely by raising their voices. This is similar to their routine communications with their respective family members; the only difference being that the volume of the voice had to be raised in order for the conversation to be carried across to the neighbouring living room. However, I noticed that Mel Watta community members were making an unsuccessful effort to follow the lifestyle of the Crow Islanders. For example, attempting to converse in English, which is considered to be a symbol of the upper class in the Sri Lankan context, reading English newspapers, watching English TV channels and listening to English radio channels, mixing English words with the local dialect, imitating modern fashion ideas, hanging around large shopping malls, enrolling in study courses at recognized educational institutions, and enrolling their children in so-called English medium international schools were found to be trending amongst several of these middle class families. Some Mel Watta inhabitants find opportunities to associate with upper-middle-class residents such as Crow Islanders, by working as employees of certain private sector establishments, and these wealthy employers become a reference group for Mel Watta employees. This trend was observed across the ethnic divide. It was my experience that often, Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim families had been watching the identical Tamil or Hindi movies, which are telecast during weekends. Sinhala and Tamil songs are popular among the people as well.

Bourdieu's (1984) discussion of "taste" suggests that people become acculturated in accordance with their social positions. This notion is aptly explained in the discussion of common grounds at Crow Island. Here, community dwellers develop special likings or dispositions that distinguish them as middle-class people, a premise that I will employ throughout the chapter. Bourdieu's notion of "habitus" summarises the manner in which taste, and dispositions are communicated and embodied (Lupton, 1996, p. 95). Bourdieu helps us study class identities not based on economic assets as such, but on other forms of capital, i.e., cultural and social capital, that are essential in daily practices and sub-cultures. One day, while I was jogging in the morning at the beach, a retired government servant asked me whether I would like to join a proposed family outing (organised to commemorate family day) to Madu Ganga located down south. I immediately said "count me in" as that would give me a fine opportunity to observe the relationships and ties among neighbours. During my walk on that day, many Sinhala and Tamil friends invited me as well. The inhabitants of Crow Island are well-known for organising regular gatherings and leisure activities where they have lots of fun. Examples of these celebratory events include 31st night parties, annual Christmas parties and annual trips. Meanwhile, they also maintain a strip of beach on Crow Island where individuals, irrespective of ethnic, religious, class and caste divides, could come and relax, indicating middle-class Crow Islanders' commitment towards the common good and their awareness of their civic responsibilities. Crow Islanders engaged in jogging and exercise sessions in the morning and evening. They also arrived at the beach to relax and enjoy the sunset and the horizon. The beach was a strip of land approximately 10 acres in extent, with the Modara Kovil at one end, and the Kelani Ganga (river) on the other, where the Sri Lanka Navy Post was stationed. This is a common physical and social space where people representing different political affinities and ethnic backgrounds can gather, interact and build relationships. The BPMS, comprising members from heterogeneous ethno-religious backgrounds, has developed certain facilities, such as two children's parks covered with barbed wire, in which access is granted only to children, along with certain additional facilities that will attract more families to the beach. There are other facilities too, such as benches provided for people to sit on and converse, an open stage that can be used for various functions, lamp posts, rarely used garbage bins and a lavatory. Mobile ice-cream vendors and other fast-food sellers of heterogeneous backgrounds come here to do business. Some young people bring horses and horse carts to take people on amusement rides around the beach. Meanwhile, this beach is used by Hindus to release the ashes of their dead family members to the sea, as well as to commemorate rituals such as "ādi amā wāsa" (T.), healing rituals, and some other kovil-related rituals. Muslims also utilize the sand from the sea for various rituals. Most community members I met at the beach claimed that they had engaged in a program of exercise for more than ten years, while some residents have been using the beach for more than 20 years. Here, people greet each other with "Good morning!" and "How are you today?" and associate with heterogeneous neighbours. The BPMS monitors and takes action to improve the facilities of the beach on a voluntary basis.

Crow Island is a multi-religious society where Buddhist-Sinhalas, Christians of Sinhala and Tamil origin, Hindus of Tamil origin, members of evangelical groups and Islamists live in co-existence. There is one Buddhist temple, two Hindu temples normally identified as kovils, a church and a mosque. Meanwhile, on a regular monthly basis, religious

festivals are conducted in the area. Among the Buddhist religious festivals are Wesak, Poson and the Katina Pinkama; these main celebrations are held at the Sri Bodhirajaramaya temple. Meanwhile, Sri Raja Rajeshwari Ambal Kovil conducted its annual *Ther* festival in Crow Island, as well. The main ritual of this festival takes place when the Hindus carry the Goddess Pattini's statue around Crow Island, on a chariot. Additionally, St. Mary's church at Crow Island conducts certain annual functions as well, and one such festival is a procession organised to carry Mother Mary's statue across town, a statue that was brought to Sri Lanka from a catholic country. I had the privilege of witnessing this ceremony during one of my regular visits for the purpose of fieldwork.

Meanwhile, at Mel Watta, one can elaborate on another dimension of commongrounds construction by the Watta dwellers, who live in a specific, low-class, marginalised community amidst ethnoreligious political tensions. They create and maintain "give and take", "going and coming", "sisterhood", and "brotherhood" types of relationships that facilitate the existential and economic needs of this multi-ethnic community. By a *give and take relationship* I mean the exchange of goods and services. During a crisis, people borrow essential food stuffs and money, share jewellery and furniture all of which are essential to the people who live in marginalized communities. Whenever neighbours have funerals, weddings, are sick or face other crises, they are supported by their neighbours, with whom they have always maintained close relationships. Fictitious kinship terminologies such as "Akka" (elder sister), "Nangi" (S.) and "thangachchi" (T.) for younger sister and "Aiya" (S.) "Anna" (T.) for elder brother, "Malli" (S.) and "Thambi" for young brother or "Mama" (S. & T.) for uncle, "Nenda" (S.) and "Atte" (T.) for Aunt are used for such relationships. This usage of terminology cements the bond and close association between community members, shared and maintained across ethnoreligious boundaries. Meanwhile, the apparent religious and ethnic differences between neighbours are actually a way of forging alliances. They divide this heterogeneous community into "good" and "bad" categories, transforming conflicting ethnicities into a user-friendly concept, a categorisation based on unique individual and family-based criteria. The Watta residents maintain informal relationships, vastly different to the formalities and polite exchanges linking the Crow Islander community. The socio-economic and political pressures, which the Mel Watta residents have to face, propel them into "sharing" a way of life. These socio-economic and political pressures, also serve to trigger a form of resistance to such pressures, which acts as a coping strategy. It is also considered ethical to demonstrate a giving and generous attitude. On the face of it, this heterogeneous community struggles to survive on a daily basis. Therefore, they do not have the *luxury* of engaging in or becoming motivated by conflicting ethno-politics, a phenomenon that does not have any bearing on lifting their standard of living.

Mel Watta is a home for the Sinhala, Muslims, Malays, Burghers, and Tamils (also reflected in certain sub identities such as Colombo, Jaffna, upcountry, estate and so on). Most of these families have been living in this setting for nearly three generations, since the 1980s. For example, Gopalan Anna came to the Watta in the 1980s as a tenant occupying his current house, which was originally given to a Buddhist-Sinhala lady named Dayawathi akka. Houses that were initially given to close associates of politicians through "patron-client" provisions (given to Dayawathie Akka) were sold to third parties (Gopala Anna) in this way. As noted by Sunil Bastian, the Sri Lankan electoral and political system was largely

patrimonial (cited in Frerks & Klem 2011: 174). Thus, Gopalan Anna initially came to live here as a tenant; later he bought the house, after the landlady agreed to receive the money in instalments. He considers this gesture as being of immense help. Generally, people feel jealous of the progress of other individuals. However, in this case, the original deed continues to remain in Dayawathi akka's name, whilst Gopalan Anna has Dayawathie Akka's power of attorney. This is testimony to a situation that exists among many such dwellings, wherein trust extends across ethnic borders. Meanwhile, Gopalan became a father of two children during this period, his mother passed away and his wife's sister too passed away in the same house. During this period, many landmark events such as puberty, marriage, divorce, fights, death, and ill-health had occurred, which had bonded the Watta community together in feelings of mutual trust and regard. The current scenario in these settlements accentuates the need to study and understand the "Sri Lankan culture and personality," in a similar manner to that followed in the study, *Patterns of Culture*, authored by Ruth Benedict (Benedict, 1934). My association with the families of the Watta indicated to me that they wished to create and maintain additional neighbourhood ties (*sutti irukkindra makkal, pakaththu veettu ākkal, ingana ulla ākkal* in Tamil and *ahala pahala aya, allapu gedara aya* in Sinhala) which are identified as existing social capital networks available in deprived urban communities, and include the supply of material and emotional support to needy members (Nyamongo and Ezeh 2005). Likewise, the people of Mel Watta also help one another in crisis situations. The Watta dwellers identified their neighbours (families living very close by) as a group that came forward to help in a crisis, even before their relatives (who live in distant places) could arrive on the scene. This inter-dependability is significantly high in a crisis situation in the Watta, unlike in Crow Island, due to the financial, housing, and other social conditions of the Watta families.

In Mel Watta, the neighbours sometimes served as babysitters, while this was not observed at all in Crow Island. During my fieldwork, I came across a situation where a two-year old toddler of a Sinhala lady was taken care of by her neighbour, who was a Hindu-Tamil lady, despite the fact that their personal relationship was facing a temporary setback, due to a misunderstanding which had occurred between the elders of both families. The Tamil lady asked herself, "Can the children be blamed for the mistakes made by their parents?" This child comes running to my home as she knows that I love her a lot. The Mel Watta people engage in "kuduttal-wāngal" (T. "give and take"), "ganu-denu" (S. give and take) and "pōradu-wāradu" or "yanawā-enawā" (T. going and coming) types of relationships with their multi-ethnic neighbours. Sharing food such as curries, rice, and some special dishes is also one of the ways that neighbourly ties are developed. Fathima's children come to Gopalan Anna's house to obtain curries or other food when they do not have enough to eat in their own homes. During festivals, the friends and neighbours of the Watta share food.

The Mel Watta people also engage in "sisterhood", "brotherhood" types of relationships. "Akka" in Tamil and Sinhala means elder sister while "Anna" in Tamil and "Aiya" in Sinhala refer to older brother, while "Thangachchi" in Tamil and "Nangi" in Sinhala signifies a younger sister. This is another explanation of the types of relationships discussed above, but with significant emphasis on the existence of a strong bond. When Gopalan Anna came to the Watta in the 1980's, the Watta community members faced problems in obtaining access to public toilets and also common taps, as the people already

resident demanded priority in accessing these resources, referring to Gopalan Anna and his family as “newcomers” (T. Puthusa wandawarkhal). In this context, his immediate neighbours were a Muslim family, an extended family with many members (the number of family members is a determining factor of hegemony in this Watta community). Eventually the children of this family were looked after by Gopalan Anna’s wife, and all three children who originated in a Muslim home continued to call Gopalan Anna “appa” (T. daddy) and his wife Selvi “amma” (T. mama). Both Gopalan and Selvi are Hindu-Tamil.

Meanwhile, members of this multi-ethnic Watta community, have developed a friendship (“yāluvō” in Sinhala, “kūttāli” in Tamil) network penetrating ethnic borders. They engage in various micro-financial activities with compatible members, cutting across ethnic boundaries. The Mel Watta people largely work for employers who belong to other ethnic groups. The Watta people are very conscious of their comparatively low status in society and the various pressures exerted on them by different governments. The then president, Mahinda Rajapaksa, was ruling Sri Lanka at the time, in a regime where his brother, Gotabaya Rajapaksa, was the Secretary to the Ministry of Defence and Urban Development. Gotabaya Rajapakse had placed these Watta dwellers under a strict 24-hour surveillance system, operated by a state security division. The then regime initiated the eviction of communities from this area to beautify the city, and acquired lands for various developmental activities in the city. Meanwhile, this community was also subject to some very unfortunate circumstances such as flooding, lack of garbage disposal systems and various other health issues such as dengue fever. However, all these seemingly unfortunate events only served to strengthen the bonds between Mel Watta dwellers create unity among them.

In conclusion, the researcher wishes to point out that the community of Crow Island was significantly cautious in their negotiations with broader ethno-national and communal politics and did not allow these forces to dictate terms in their day-to-day activities. Nor did they allow political interference in their middle-class lives and the disturbance of the existing equilibrium in the neighbourhood. Therefore, these residents were very selective when it came to the politicians they voted for, and the parties they supported at elections. However, their political allegiance was forced to be secretive, since they were a marginalized community. In contrast, as far as the Watta community was concerned, they engaged freely in and openly supported the various politicians who came canvassing and welcomed almost all the candidates. It appears that in most of these instances, the key organisers were financially and materially benefitted. This type of bribery was considered the normal approach by all concerned and did not lead to heated arguments and quarrels. The Watta dwellers are of the mind that they should cash in on these offers and maximize the benefits offered by the various political parties in order to improve the welfare conditions of the Watta dwellers.

Conclusion

This paper elaborates on how the men and women of Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim communities live out their social lives in the city of Colombo, in the midst of negotiating their politicised, ethnoreligious and nationalist identities to construct livable social spaces or neighbourhoods. The case study of Crow Island explores the strategies that a middle-class community uses to build cross-ethnoreligious collaborations through middleclass lifestyles. Members of Crow Island, in Colombo, tend to work through voluntary organisations

including systematic and formal channels. The ethnography of Crow Island shows how ethnically and religiously heterogeneous members of the Island accommodate diversity and construct a livable social space. It illustrates how the community of Crow Island constructs reality and inter-subjectivity in the evaluation of their activities, whilst being conscious of certain aspects which are likely to be of threat to them (from politicians), such as maintaining interactions across ethno-religious boundaries. Such a threat will arise only if the ruling regime is heavily invested in building a chauvinistic and ethnocentric society. Meanwhile, the case study of the Mel Watta community describes the everyday experiences of the Watta community, their activities, how the members of this low-income settlement construct common grounds while, simultaneously, being well aware of the discrimination they face in the socio-economic, political, and cultural spheres. This is an existential and also embodied capacity, introduced as “common grounds,” that operates as a field of growth, enhancement, addition, imagination, learning, adaptation, creativity and imitation. The access to this space is not necessarily a peaceful transaction, but it gives members the space to engage in arguments, disputes and quarrels and, hopefully, come up with viable solutions. . In a way, these qualities could be considered as being part and parcel of a culturally pluralistic society, which is generally “taken for granted” by most interlocutors. However, this society serves a very vital function, that is the fulfillment of the everyday existential needs of members of multi-ethnic communities, who are trapped in the never-ending political game of power and greed, where opportunistic elites twist and manipulate ethnicities, religious differences, cultural differences and nationalisms for the sole benefits of themselves, rather than seeking the common good. Consequently, this capacity to construct common grounds, seems to be an inherent and well-understood strategy of the people of Sri Lanka, and should be used by the citizens of this country for a prolonged time period in the future as well, at least as far as the existing divisive communal political culture continues to plague this country.

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