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LATITUDE

30 years, many stories



By **Anukshi Jayasinha**

Interview pix by **Ashan Gamage**

Photographer and journalist, Natalie Soysa, was just three during the riots that took place during Black July, but she vaguely remembers the sounds and smoke that emanated from outside her house. Lawyer, photographer and activist, Sachini Perera, was not born yet. Both were lucky, at the time, to be untouched by the horrific events of that week, personally being neither victim nor one of the many non-Tamils who guarded their friends and neighbours from the mobs. But the 30 years that followed have undoubtedly left a deep impact on them, shaping their growing years around a civil war that is widely seen as the aftermath of the unforgivable events of Black July.

Today, in 2013, as the country finds itself in a position to finally look back, learn and build peace and reconciliation, Natalie and Sachini work to give a voice to women who, like themselves, have lived through those dark times. Their latest collaboration, 'I Was, I Am', provides a space for women across Sri Lanka, regardless of their racial, religious and sexual identities, economical statuses, occupations or levels of education, to talk about their personal experiences in the last 30 years and how they have impacted where they stand at present.

Hands that tell stories

"We met a total of 43 women, who were a cross-section of all demographics, including activists, artists and persons of alternative gender, and looked at how the 30 years since Black July have impacted their lives, directly or indirectly," they explain. Natalie and Sachini had already been working to obtain funds to work on photographic collaborations when they were invited by Groundviews to partake in a compelling exhibition of content, 30 Years Ago, to be launched next month. 'I Was, I Am' was the result, taking them to all parts of the county over five weeks, to meet women with diverse yet powerful stories to tell.

As photographers, their main aim was to capture each of these women and their unique experiences in a single photograph, and they do this with the use of hands as their subject. "The idea just sort of 'happened in the moment'," says Natalie. "We were photographing women we met and realized their hands could tell their story in an interesting way. So we set out to capture their gestures and body language. The different ways in which they each used their hands brought out their interesting characteristics."

For the exhibition, however, their work will be showcased as "almost-video-capsules", combining still photographs and audio, so viewers will learn the unique story behind each photograph they see. "We had to read thoroughly on Black July and the gender aspects of the last 30 years before we started working on the projects, and while these women shared some jarring similarities, they brought us insights we had not thought of earlier," they add.

Open to 'having chats' with various women, the one thing they steered away from was talking to women who have already been highlighted in the media. This led them to speaking to women whose stories have gone unheard. "We came across these women through the work we have been previously engaged in and our personal journeys," explains Sachini. "All of them were open to speaking and being named, but most of them didn't even think they had anything interesting to tell us, but they ended up being more powerful and more impactful than anything we have heard before." Natalie: "These are women who are so beautiful and humble, they don't even know the impact they can make."

Focus on women

Relating these stories was important to both Natalie and Sachini, for both similar and very different reasons. For Sachini, who has been working with Women and Media Collective (WMC), her work has often taken a political and feminist standpoint, and so she was driven by the urge to give a voice to women. "In the last 30 years, the media has been distracted by other politics; earlier the focus was on the war and now it is development. I spent an entire day at the National Archives and realized, in the last 30 years, articles on women have only peaked around the time of Women's Day, every year," says Sachini. "Women's issues are still not coming into focus." For Natalie, her inspiration largely stems from having recently given birth to a son. "My motivations have changed as a mum. I find myself thinking, 'What can I do for him?' In short, I look back, and don't want my son to experience the next 30 years in the way I experienced the last 30 years," says Natalie. "I want him to have better opportunities."

But their work with the women of Sri Lanka does not end with this project, they say, now that they've only begun to unravel the thousands of stories left to tell. The next 30 years, for them, apart from their own, personal goals, is about finding ways to work further with the people they have met. "We have both had opportunities to live and work abroad, but we choose to stay here," says Sachini. "Our purpose is rooted here and we realize now that we can contribute here."

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