

“Peacebuilding can’t be a Profession; it must be a Passion.”

A Conversation with Visaka Dharmadasa

Mallika Joseph

Abstract

This article is an account of how a peacebuilding initiative in Sri Lanka has unfolded over the course of a few months in 2023. As one of the facilitators of the dialogue process, I had the opportunity to witness first-hand how this key peacebuilding process came about. I could see how several important theoretical constructs came alive in practice — for instance, the idea of local ownership or the importance of omni-partiality. But more importantly, a conversation with Visaka Dharmadasa, the women mediator and peacebuilder behind this process, surfaced the peculiar challenges faced by women mediators ranging from invisibility to marginalization to lack of recognition, and how their singular achievements continue to be silenced behind prejudice, patriarchy, and pettiness.

Author Profile

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On 12 December 2023, a group of monks representing the Sangha for a Better Sri Lanka (SBSL) and members of the Tamil diaspora group Global Tamil Forum (GTF) met with the speaker of the Sri Lanka Parliament to present the Himalaya Declaration, a unique call for a peaceful and prosperous Sri Lanka.¹ The Himalaya Declaration (2023) is significant for various reasons. First, it is the outcome of the *first-ever* meeting between members of the Tamil diaspora and Buddhist monks. Generally considered as those holding extreme views within the conflict parties, thus far, no individual or institution—be it governmental or non-governmental, local, national, or international—has been able to bring these two sets of people together. Second, the Himalaya Declaration resulted from the Nagarkot Dialogue,² a powerful civil society initiative that demonstrates the potential of grassroots movements in peacebuilding. Third, in Sri Lanka, or for that matter in South Asia, no other document resulting from a Track 2 or CSO initiative has received such buy-in at the Track 1 level. But far more significant is the fact that the principal person behind this was a *woman peacebuilder*,³ Visaka Dharmadasa, and her organization, the Association of War Affected Women.

¹ Many consider the 30-year-long deadly conflict in Sri Lanka to be entirely man-made, resulting from colonial and post-colonial policies that first marginalized the minority Tamil population economically and socially (Ganguly 2018). With no satisfactory outcome from discussions with the Sinhala majority government, a faction of the Tamil community resorted to armed resistance, from which the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) emerged as the most ruthless and prominent. Their violence was followed by the retaliatory 1983 mass killing of Tamils resulting in the first wave of Tamil exodus from the country. During the escalating conflict, both sides became increasingly entrenched in their beliefs. The Tamil diaspora was seen as playing a key role in perpetuating the conflict, while Buddhist monks were thought to be influencing Sinhala politicians and preventing any agreement with the Tamils. The conflict ended in 2009 when the Sri Lankan Army defeated the LTTE militarily. Due to the military nature of the conflict’s conclusion without a negotiated settlement, the country has struggled to progress from a post-war to a post-conflict environment conducive to reconciliation. Efforts to resolve the long-standing hostilities and perceptions have not resulted in any substantial progress. The significance of the mediation described in this article should be understood in light of the fact that groups perceived as extreme on each side have never met in person to share their viewpoints or listen to the other side’s views.

² The Nagarkot Dialogue was held in April 2023 in Nagarkot in Nepal. It is the first dialogue between representatives from the Tamil diaspora and senior monks. The dialogue was facilitated by the Association of War Affected Women. The main aim of the dialogue was to initiate a conversation between the members of the Tamil diaspora and the Buddhist monks, and provide an opportunity for each side to listen to and hopefully understand the perspective of the other side.

³ In this article, peacebuilding and mediation have been used interchangeably in some instances. Peacebuilding involves a variety of actions, including mediation, that are geared towards resolving conflicts and assisting parties involved to transition into sustainable peace. Visaka is recognized as a peacebuilder, though the role she has played in some contexts is that of a peace mediator. This article aims to highlight her role as a peace mediator within the context of her peacebuilding activities.

I had the unique opportunity to witness this peacebuilding process first-hand as one of the facilitators for the Nagarkot Dialogue. Recently, while speaking to Visaka about her journey as a peacebuilder and mediator and how she managed to pull off the Himalaya Declaration given the string of several previous failed initiatives, her response was, “Mallika, I cannot take credit for that. Like any natural thing, it came together because the timing was right. The credit goes to the monks and the Tamil diaspora for arriving at the Himalaya Declaration.”

The Himalaya Declaration, with just six articles, has been claimed by some to be even better than the Thimpu Declaration.⁴ However, the reception it has received is quite mixed (Cogan 2024). Some (from all sections of the society, including CSOs, monks, diaspora, politicians, academics, media etc.) have severely criticized it and called into question the representativeness of the delegates. Others have appreciated the boldness with which it aims to bring the communities together. Regardless of its varied reception, it cannot be denied that the Declaration has reignited the conversation on issues such as devolution and accountability that had not been discussed at such length by so many people (Ferdinando 2024). Reflecting on the criticisms, Visaka says, “I think it is, to some extent, healthy because people won’t take part in it unless they feel passionate about it, even to say good or bad things. In that context, the national dialogue that surrounds the Himalaya Declaration is remarkable.”

Working alongside Visaka, I could see how several key theoretical constructs came alive in practice. For instance, the idea of local ownership. Years ago, when I trained EU officials on security sector reform (SSR), we emphasized the importance of local ownership – the first and fundamental pillar of any SSR program. For SSR initiatives (especially those supported by outside) to have even a minimal chance of succeeding, they need to be owned by the people – not just the key politicians or the government. While this is the fundamental principle, in practice, it can be very frustrating to adopt a hands-off approach. To a large extent at the core of mediation is local ownership. And this was very apparent in the way the Nagarkot Dialogue was planned and facilitated.

Neither Visaka nor the facilitators for the Nagarkot Dialogue, including myself, had anticipated the Himalaya Declaration as the final outcome. Since this was the first meeting between the monks and the diaspora, the minimal aim was to provide an environment for them to get to know each

⁴ Also referred to as the Thimphu Principles, they resulted following the first attempt at a dialogue between the Sri Lankan government and Tamil militant organizations including representatives from the Eelam People’s Revolutionary Liberation Front (EPRLF), Eelam Revolutionary Organisation of Students (EROS), Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), People’s Liberation Organisation of Tamil Eelam (PLOTE), Tamil Eelam Liberation Organisation (TELO) and Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF). The dialogue was facilitated by India. The government side tabled a draft favoring devolution, which was turned down by the Tamils, who then submitted four key demands (cardinal principles). This was rejected by the Sri Lankan government because they challenged the country’s sovereignty. Although the discussions in Thimphu collapsed, the four principles put forth by the Tamil side are referred to as the Thimphu Declaration or the Thimphu Principles, encapsulating the essence of the Tamil demands (Frerks and Klem 2006).

other and perhaps gain a little understanding of the other side’s perspectives. In all our preparatory Zoom calls, each side said that they just wanted to meet the other side. There was no agenda set by us. Perhaps this facilitated the delegates to own the process right from the beginning. Towards the end of the dialogue, they decided they would come up with a consensus document. Together, they worked on the articles, the manner in which each was phrased, and the words that went into the Declaration. They chose the title for the Declaration. Today, if the Himalaya Declaration is being discussed (and not dismissed) by the people and the politicians, it is because of local ownership.

Visaka explains this: “The reception we have been getting has been primarily from what until now was the silent majority. I will give you one example. We had a person at the National Peace Council symposium in Kurunegala. He was there in his capacity as a member of the civil society. President Ranil Wickremesinghe had recently publicly spoken about the Himalaya Declaration. So, at this meeting, this person said, ‘The President is speaking about our declaration.’ *Our* Declaration. I really do not want anything more. That’s what we want. It has to be *their* Declaration. We have to give credit to the GTF and SSBSL (the delegates of the Himalaya Declaration) because they have been emphasizing that the Declaration is not written in stone. They have said, ‘It is open for all of you. You can add; you can criticize.’ The biggest criticism, especially from the Tamil side, was that they were not involved. It has not been inclusive because they were not involved in that. So that’s the criticism. But now it’s there for them to add, tell what they want to tell. The document is there for them to own by improving it and infusing it with their own ideas.”

To ensure local ownership, the role of the mediator is crucial. Visaka has been playing that role with finesse for many decades. I asked her what her biggest challenge was in this path. “It’s being a woman. The general impression is that men are the big peacebuilders. They are the ones who speak to the media and are in the limelight. So, that challenge was there from the beginning and throughout my journey. Because I’m a woman peacebuilder, people think differently. Even when I visit embassies of countries that are working on the Women, Peace, and Security agenda and meet the Ambassador, the Ambassador says okay, but please meet with the welfare section, the women section, and the donor or finance section. I tell them, ‘No. I came to talk to you, not someone from the women and children section, not about the money, but to talk with you.’ So that’s something that always happened.” She continued, “At a recent workshop, one of the participants, a Christian nun, had the question, what does the Association of War Affected Women have to do with a peace initiative? She said she came thinking that the workshop was related to women and children. Towards the end of the workshop, I said, ‘Sister, now you have learned that women not only speak about violence against women or domestic violence, but they speak about governance and peacebuilding.’ Therefore, it is a constant struggle to challenge and break this stereotyping that peacebuilding is a man’s domain.”

Visaka’s first steps in peacebuilding, particularly peace mediation, were compelled by a personal tragedy that occurred against the backdrop of the country’s civil war; one of her sons, who was enlisted in the army, went “missing” with 600 other soldiers in 1998 when LTTE attacked the Sri Lankan army base in Killinochi. Not satisfied with the silence and inadequate official response over their disappearance, she led a small team of mothers who also had lost their sons to the war into rebel territory. She ended up brokering the ceasefire between the LTTE and the government. She admits, “I am happy to have played a role in brokering the ceasefire between the LTTE and the Sri Lankan government. Mainly because it was completely unintentional. When we went to Vanni, we never thought that seven women would go and broker a ceasefire. So, that’s one of the most significant achievements in my peacebuilding journey.” But how did a conversation about missing soldiers snowball into a discussion about a ceasefire? “When we met them, we asked what the use of all this is. They started the discussion by saying that these many people are dead, these houses have been bombed, these many have lost houses, etc. So, I said, ‘Look, we also have the same story to tell—these many were hacked to death, and these places were bombed. But what is the use? Why don’t we try to save lives? Why don’t we *talk* to save lives?’ That’s how we brought the message to the government, told them that the time was right for a conversation and that they (the LTTE) were ready. We also gave a 70,000-signature letter to the Norwegians, inviting them to facilitate.”

As Visaka admitted earlier, gender played a huge role in shaping her peacebuilding journey. Although it has been nearly 25 years since UN Resolution 1325⁵ that aimed to foreground the crucial role played by women in preventing and resolving conflicts, negotiating peace, building peace, peacekeeping, responding to humanitarian crises, and reconstructing post-conflict societies, women peacebuilders still remain unrecognized. Even in Visaka’s case, despite her contribution to brokering the ceasefire, she largely remained unknown. The following anecdote is quite significant in surfacing the various prejudices, hurdles, and challenges that women peacebuilders often encounter.

“The LTTE recognized me after that first meeting, which resulted in the call for a ceasefire. When they wanted to release some civilians, they wanted me to come. There were 60 journalists who went from the South, and some were international journalists. The LTTE kept all of them waiting for one and a half days till we reached there. That came as a huge recognition within the country that we are very important in this peacebuilding process. The journalists were surprised when they saw us.

We had been traveling for 10-15 hours. I asked if we could have a shower and come. They gave us time for that. So, we came after a shower and saw that these people (journalists) had been

⁵ UN Resolution 1325 refers to the landmark resolution on women, peace, and security, adopted by the United National Security Council in 2000. While recognizing the impact of conflict and war on women, it also acknowledges the role played by women in conflict resolution, mediation, and peacebuilding (United Nations 2000; United States Institute of Peace n.d.).

waiting for one and a half days. And they were wondering who we were. So that gave us a huge recognition, particularly among the South and other key civil society actors. It signaled to everybody that we were an important group in peacebuilding.

And then, when Tamilselvan, head of the political wing of the LTTE, wanted to take a photograph with us, the men there, who were also parents of missing servicemen, pushed us and wanted to be with him in the photograph. I was pushed to the very corner. When someone said, ‘Why don’t you go to the front?’ I said, ‘Look, I’ll fight if it is for me to stand with my husband. But other than that, I really don’t have to fight to be in a photograph.’ After one hour, Tamilselvan returns. As they see him coming, everybody is running back and forth. They are wondering why he is coming because he has already formally said goodbye and left. He came, and he said, I want to take a photograph with Visaka. That was really something. I guess they had seen the photograph taken earlier and wondered where I was. So, he came and took a photograph with me alone.”

Another common challenge faced by women peace mediators is the hegemonistic masculinity and patriarchal norms that belittle their contribution. They play a crucial role in mediating conflicts, building trust, and promoting community dialogue, and often, their role is overlooked, their impact unrecognized, and worse, their initiative hijacked. Visaka shared one of her gendered experiences, “the Association of War Affected Women initiated the only Track 2-level dialogue in the country parallel to the official negotiations. An international foundation understood that this was very important, and they came onto the scene. One day, the chief mediator of the international foundation calls me and says, ‘Visaka. I’m thinking about the capacity of the Association of War Affected Women for this dialogue.’ It was *our* dialogue; he joined in and took control of it (of course, he still kept us as the main partners), and he was talking to me about *our* capacity. (This is probably because of one of our Sri Lankan male participants, who I had invited for one dialogue. He perhaps thought to himself, ‘Wow, I’m going to seize this.’) So, I said, ‘Look, if you think because I don’t have a PhD, I’m not capable enough to conduct this dialogue, you are wrong. Because it is *I* who muster the trust.’ And I reminded him of it when he was sitting on a culvert to meet Tamilselvan — the LTTE had said that Tamilselvan was not available. I went to the office, and Tamilselvan met me. Therefore, I reminded the mediator of the international foundation, ‘Look, you couldn’t get the meeting through your contacts. However, I managed to arrange the meeting for you. They told you that he had gone far away for five hours, and you were sitting in that culvert waiting for him. But he gave me the meeting. So, I have the capacity. I don’t have anything else, but I have the trust of both sides’.”

The negotiation for recognition is an important and ongoing one. UN Women reviewed 32 peace processes since 1992 and found that out of 280 participants, only 11 were women. Moreover, women held a meager representation of 2.4 percent among chief mediators, 3.7 percent among witnesses, and 9 percent among negotiators. The fact that women are largely absent from peacebuilding efforts does not indicate their lack of involvement. Instead, it belies the reality of

how their significant contributions have been consistently overlooked and marginalized. In an earlier interaction with the current president, even before he became prime minister, Visaka met him with two other women. “It was to tell him something about peacebuilding and to include more women’s political perspectives. I asked him, ‘At least now, will you accept that I am the one who brokered the ceasefire?’ He said, ‘Yes, why not? But you still have a lot to do.’ Soon after the ceasefire, I was completely ignored. Nobody even acknowledged that we were the ones who brokered the ceasefire. So that’s why I asked him whether he would accept now. And the photo he took with me and the other two women did not come out right away, but later, just before the elections.”

It is important to recognize women peacebuilders not just to acknowledge the contribution they have made but to serve as a source of inspiration to other women who are traversing the same path and negotiating their space. Visaka admits, “To tell you, very frankly, networks always give you a huge amount of courage – meeting other people who are working for peace. Meeting women who are working for peace the world over also gives you an enormous amount of courage and strength. That exactly kept me going, and I found a purpose in my work, looking at all the peacebuilding work that others were doing.”

The recognition of women peacebuilders is also key to breaking the victim narrative surrounding women in conflict. It opens up opportunities to learn from each other and to get better at what we do. How can we do that if the singular achievements of women peacebuilders in this field are shrouded behind prejudice, patriarchy, and pettiness?

Speaking to Visaka about her work also reminded me of how men and women perceive peace differently; for men, it is all about ending the conflict, while for women, the ultimate goal is the end of violence. Precisely for this reason, women may still experience a lack of peace, even after peace agreements have been signed. Their differentiated experiences of peace, violence, and conflict influence not just the ultimate goals women peacebuilders seek to achieve but also the approach they adopt in mitigating conflict. Visaka narrated another anecdote that illustrates this better. “The current process [following the Himalaya Declaration] is still in its early stages. The delegates are working hard to expand the ownership of this process, which is not an easy task. It’s crucial at this point to ensure that delegates from both sides are actively engaging with each other. As a woman, I believe I can play a role in facilitating this engagement. For instance, very recently, we had an unfortunate incident in the North in Vavuniya. Privately, I was already speaking to the Minister of Police and other authorities on the very same issue. One of the Tamil signatories of the Himalaya Declaration was very upset and expressed his displeasure via various social media posts that could potentially alienate the delegates from the other side. When I asked the delegate about the posts, he said he was very angry. I told him, ‘Good, if you are angry next time, take the phone and scold me; then your anger will go. That’s still okay because we have to keep our heads cool. There are still spoilers on all sides inciting groups against one another. This is an election year,

and we will have huge challenges. But we have to remain cool and proceed. You are like my younger brother; that’s why I say, take the phone and shout at me. I don’t mind. But remember to bring some chocolate when you come here next time.’ I could tell that that is the difference in being a woman, when it is very necessary to keep them together and still move forward. They are also ready to listen to me because they know very well that I won’t take a side, and I’m still that middle-ground person.” This reminded me of one of the key principles of mediation – impartiality, the need to be in the middle ground.

In addition to all these constraints, women peacebuilders also face challenges in terms of support, particularly sustained funding support. “Even the 68th Commission on the Status of Women speaks a lot about strengthening institutions and financing with a gender perspective. But frankly speaking, where is the money? We really don’t have office running money,” remarks Visaka. Her organization has achieved something where many others have failed. The GTF was a banned organization until six months ago. Today, they were invited along with the senior monks to address the Parliament. The President has endorsed the Himalaya Declaration. Despite these achievements, she is still struggling to secure funding for her office. If this is the struggle a rather successful woman peacebuilder faces, it calls into question the various international frameworks that are supposed to recognize and facilitate the active participation of women in peacebuilding.

According to Visaka, “One of the crucial challenges for women is the lack of support or minimal support that they get when they are engaged in peacebuilding activities. For me personally, in the absence of support, I drew strength from my motivation— the singular motivation not to let any other mother anywhere in the world suffer like me by losing a child because of war. When a mother from far away makes a call at four o’clock in the morning (those days, not now) and asks, ‘Miss, what is happening about my son?’ that was a huge motivation for me to move forward. That is exactly what keeps me going.”

Women peacebuilders foreground human security in their gendered narratives on peace, thus offering greater sensitivity to existing intersectionality in societies. In 2022, women played pivotal roles as conflict-party negotiators or delegates in eighty percent of UN-led or co-led peace processes. In recent years, about 33 percent of peace agreements include references to gender. The Women’s Peace and Humanitarian Fund (set up in 2016) has doubled the number of organizations supported through its Rapid Response Window to enhance women’s participation in peace processes and implementation of peace agreements.

Though these measures boost women peacebuilders’ presence, participation, and influence in formal negotiating spaces, women peacebuilders continue to be excluded and marginalized, minimizing their peacebuilding and denying agenda space for gendered narratives and priorities. Even as women peacebuilders strive to renegotiate these spaces, it must be remembered that for peace to last, including women is paramount. For too long, the gender and conflict discussion has

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centered on what conflict has done to women. It’s time to highlight what women are doing in conflict.

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