

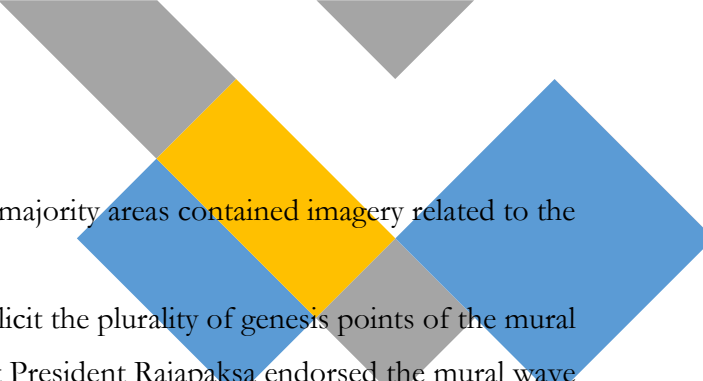
# YOUTH AND IDENTITY DISCOURSE IN POSTWAR SRI LANKA

## Executive Summary

This study was designed and conducted in complimenting the work of the Sri Lanka Barometer, which includes evidence generation and outreach activities to inform public debate on reconciliation in Sri Lanka. The Sri Lanka Barometer is led by a consortium comprising the Strengthening Reconciliation Programme (SRP); Institute of Justice and Reconciliation (IJR), South Africa; and Centre for Poverty Analysis (CEPA), Sri Lanka. The Consortium aims to engage multiple stakeholders in Sri Lanka to support research on deepening the understanding and expectations towards reconciliation and progress towards it. This research paper, titled *Youth Identity and Discourses in Postwar Sri Lanka*, was an attempt at studying the intersect between identity, art, social media, conflict, and reconciliation. The study explores the processes of creation of identity amongst the youth and their agency in relation to discourse/s on nationalism and dominant majority narrative/s within the said discourse and alternative and minority narrative/s which exist alongside them. In studying such processes, this study looked at the mural wave which lasted between late 2019 and early 2020, and managed to transcend beyond physical spaces and places and be present in virtual spaces.

This research paper utilised Critical Discourse Analysis as the methodology of data analysis. The analysed data was looked at in relation to their Agenda Setting function and identity creation and performativity as understood by Benedict Anderson. In order to conduct this study, alongside a social media scoping of posts related to the mural wave (on Twitter and Facebook),<sup>10</sup> Key Person Interviews (KPIs), four In-Depth Interviews, and nine Expert Interviews were carried out

The findings of the study revealed that there is a clear narrative within the mural wave which dominated other narratives. This dominant narrative was characterised by ethnonationalism, triumphalism, and militarisation. The motifs and objects present on the murals and the respondents' discursive practices indicated these discourses are linked to Sinhala Buddhist sentiments. Minority and alternative narratives within the mural wave include peace, cohesion, reconciliation, and references to popular culture, environmentalism, and Ravana/Ravanaan, the last three areas which the essay did not have the space to explore. The analysis of the discourse further revealed that the contents of the murals changed from the location and the community which resides in that location. While the murals which were drawn in Sinhala majority areas contained the dominant narrative which was

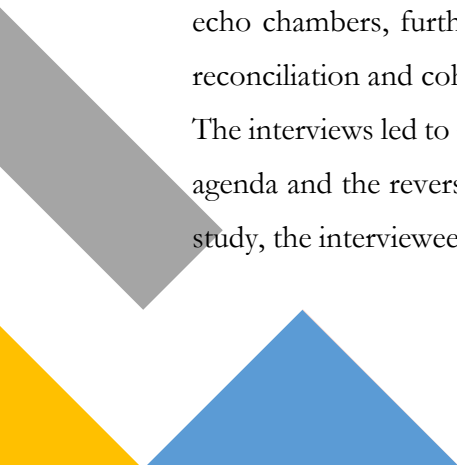


mentioned earlier, murals which were drawn in Tamil majority areas contained imagery related to the local culture and the importance of co-existence.

The interviews with youth groups and artists elicit the plurality of genesis points of the mural wave. Although the social media scoping revealed that President Rajapaksa endorsed the mural wave after the 2019 presidential election, the artists revealed that the origins of the mural wave was devoid of any political motivations and was completely aimed at beautifying towns littered with unwanted posters and bills. The politicised movement provided state patronage to patriotic youth who felt oppressed during the previous regime with respect to freedom of expression. With such state patronage, these patriotic youth decorated public spaces and places with Sinhala Buddhist, triumphalist imagery, rendering the agenda set by the state a perpetuation of a Sinhala Buddhist, triumphalist narrative through the “beautification” of public spaces. The state’s agenda is also extended in suppressing minority narratives and this is evident in the respondent’s revelation of the authorities denying Tamil youth to paint what they wanted on walls; the content was censored and chosen by the authorities. The mural wave also sheds light on the ways in which youth perceive and perform gender. The social media scoping and the discursive practices of the interviewees revealed that, through the mural wave, the public celebrated the performativity of militarised masculinity, ultimately allowing public spaces to be further militarised through the portrayal of soldiers on walls.

The discourse on the mural wave was also present on social media. As the pandemic closed in on the mural wave, the continuation of the movement was transferred on to social media as physical mobility was limited. The studied data reveals that a cohesive representation of the physical mural wave was absent on social media, for the majority of murals circulated on social media and the discourse around them was that of the dominant narrative present within the physical mural wave; Sinhala Buddhist, ethnonationalist, and triumphalist. The increasing instrumentalisation of social media by the state and its attempt at suppressing alternative and minority narratives may explain this skewed representation of the mural wave on social media. The analysis of the discourse as it was shaped on social media further reveal that social media users are constantly moving within their own echo chambers, further reducing the space to engage with different ideologies and make space for reconciliation and cohesion within the country.

The interviews led to another set of data which expounds on the role of education in setting the state’s agenda and the reversal of it. Although education was not an intended premeditated outcome of the study, the interviewees’ constant references to education and its role in identity creation further added



to this study. According to the interviewees, the education system puts in place divisions between children from a very young age in terms of ethnic and religious divisions. The centralised production of education materials by the state has continued a singular narrative of history in terms of the root causes of the ethnic conflict, racial violence, and gender and sexual identities and their performativity. As explained by the interviewees education itself has the power to reverse this agenda set by the state; all it would take is a reformation of the education system into a cohesive retelling of histories and the teaching of alternative histories and narratives, in order to dismantle the fabricate memories and narratives upheld by the state.

In conclusion, the study was able to determine through academic inquiry that the mural wave of 2019-2020 was served the agenda setting function of the state in furthering its dominant postwar narrative which is built on ethnonationalism and the oppression of the minority communities' freedom of expression. The favouring of one community and narrative over another has reduced the space within this mural wave for the state to promote the importance of and the need for social cohesion, reconciliation, peace, accountability, and co-existence



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