

SADF Podcast S3E7 Edited Transcript

SADF Podcast

Decolonising Peacebuilding in South Asia: Feminist Perspectives from Sri Lanka and Beyond

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This transcript has been lightly edited for clarity, grammar and readability while preserving the substance and character of the original conversation. Views expressed by the speakers are their own.

Tapas Kanti Baul

Hello and welcome to the SADF Podcast. I'm your host, Tapas Kanti Baul.

Today, we are pleased to present a deeply engaging episode entitled **"Decolonising Peacebuilding in South Asia: Feminist Perspectives from Sri Lanka and Beyond."**

Joining us is **Dr Chamindra Weerawardhana**, a distinguished Sri Lankan scholar, political analyst, educator and feminist political organiser with more than 18 years of experience in research, activism and international advocacy.

Dr Weerawardhana is a leading voice in decolonial feminist international relations. Her work spans conflict transformation, trans-feminist politics, intersectional justice and human-rights diplomacy, with a strong focus on the Global South. She is the author of the monograph *Decolonising Peacebuilding*, which critiques Western-centric peacebuilding models and considers feminist and locally grounded alternatives, drawing on cases including Sri Lanka and Northern Ireland.

We are also joined by my co-host, **Natasha Fernando**, an advocate for inclusive peace processes and an Associate at the South Asia Democratic Forum.

Together, we will explore how feminist and trans-feminist politics can reshape peacebuilding in South Asia, and what a truly decolonised peace process might look like in our region.

Dr Weerawardhana, thank you for being with us.

Let me begin with the first question: could you briefly explain what you mean by **decolonising peacebuilding in the South Asian context?**

Dr Chamindra Weerawardhana

Thank you, Natasha and Tapas. It is a great pleasure to be here.

By decolonising peacebuilding in the South Asian context, I mean a couple of things.

First, it means revisiting our understanding and knowledge of peacebuilding and asking critical questions about where that knowledge comes from.

Many of us entered the fields of conflict resolution, conflict transformation or peacebuilding through particular channels. Some of us studied at Western institutions, while others studied at institutions in our own countries where the knowledge base on these subjects still comes primarily from Western sources.

Certain parts of the world, such as the Nordic countries, are particularly well known for peacebuilding. Even today, if a young person in Delhi, Colombo or Chennai says, “I want to do a Master’s degree in peacebuilding,” a more senior person might respond, “Uppsala University in Sweden is a great place,” or “Lund University is a great place.”

That is not necessarily untrue. But we should ask: **why is this so?**

Why does knowledge about peacebuilding and conflict transformation so often have to trickle down to us from the Global North—from Europe, the Euro-North American region or white-settler societies such as Australia?

That is one critical question.

South Asia is a region that was subjected to enormous colonial violence over centuries. Some people in our region like to believe that colonialism belongs entirely to the past, but unfortunately its repercussions are still very much alive.

We can see this in gender norms that were imposed upon us, in forms of social conservatism and in systems of governance.

When you think about the government of India in Delhi or the government of Sri Lanka in Colombo, for example, you have to ask: who originally created these structures, and for whose benefit?

So, for me, decolonising peacebuilding begins with asking those critical questions.

The second issue concerns who works within the peacebuilding sector.

If you look at peacebuilding in Colombo, for example, it tends to be a particular kind of person who enters that sector: people with access to the English language, people who attended certain schools and universities, and people from particular social backgrounds.

What does that tell us about peacebuilding in complex societies like ours, where there are profound fault lines related to class, social status, caste and other forms of inequality?

Many of the people most directly affected by conflict, insecurity and instability come from backgrounds considerably less privileged than those of the people professionally employed in peacebuilding.

There is therefore a politics of power at work here, and we need to be conscious of it.

We also need to examine how the language of peacebuilding can itself be weaponised.

Take Sri Lanka. Certain narratives have been presented to the Tamil people of the country, while different narratives have been presented to the Sinhalese community.

We need to ask: why? Who benefits from these narratives? What kinds of divisions and structures are being protected by them? And where are the roots of those narratives?

If you ask me, I would say that many of those roots lie in the politics of **divide and rule—divide and conquer**. And who brought divide-and-rule politics to our part of the world? The British did.

These are serious questions.

And when I speak about peacebuilding, I do not only mean internal conflict within societies such as Sri Lanka.

I am also thinking about the long-standing antagonism between the Republic of India and the Islamic Republic of Pakistan. I am thinking about the politics of Manipur. I am thinking about the daily conflicts and challenges experienced by Adivasi peoples across the length and breadth of the subcontinent.

These are all part of what I think about when I speak of decolonising peacebuilding.

Decolonisation, in this sense, means **restructuring the power politics of peacebuilding**.

It means critically examining who is allowed to participate in peacebuilding, who possesses decision-making power within these processes and who is excluded.

So my answer has three parts.

First, examine the power structures.

Second, ask critical questions.

Third, explore ways of doing things more equitably.

Why not look at our own knowledge systems? Why not study our own histories and ask what lessons they contain for building a better society, a better region and better cooperation across South Asia?

We should not assume that all meaningful knowledge must trickle down to us from the Global North.

Those are the ideas that come to mind when I think about decolonising peacebuilding in our home region.

Natasha Fernando

That was an excellent introduction to the overarching question.

I would like to ask about postcolonial South Asia.

What, in your view, can be considered some of the major feminist movements in the region?

I am thinking particularly about distinct and notable examples of women mobilising themselves around social causes—whether peace, women’s rights, democracy, human rights or fundamental freedoms.

How have women mobilised themselves historically in South Asia?

Dr Chamindra Weerawardhana

There are quite a few examples.

If you look at Sri Lanka, for instance, it was one of the first places outside Western Europe where women received universal suffrage—the right to vote—in 1931.

During the suffrage campaigns in Colombo, there was a Sri Lankan Tamil aristocrat named **Sir Ponnambalam Ramanathan**, who was very closely connected to the British colonial establishment.

He publicly opposed extending the vote to women and reportedly compared giving women the vote to “flashing pearls at cows”—the implication being that women would not understand the value of the right they were being given.

When you look back at that statement, however, it actually became useful to the Sri Lankan suffrage movement.

Until then, only a relatively small group of women had been strongly engaged in campaigning for the vote. But when Ramanathan made those comments, many more women mobilised. They were understandably outraged.

Some may not initially have had an in-depth understanding of suffrage, but they came out, campaigned and fought for the right.

Sometimes, when we think about Sri Lankan history in the 1930s and 1940s, we make the mistake of assuming that independence and women’s suffrage were simply handed to us.

We did not have exactly the same anti-colonial trajectory as India, with figures such as Subhas Chandra Bose or Pritilata, but that does not mean there was no struggle. These gains were also the result of mobilisation and resistance.

I give that example because women’s mobilisation for their rights has a very long history in our subcontinent.

If you look at India, for example, consider the work of **Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit**. She came from an extremely privileged political family and was closely connected to the

establishment through her brother, but her diplomatic career nevertheless helped create important space for women.

There have been many movements across South Asia in which women have challenged patriarchal norms.

At the same time, we need to recognise the limitations of some of these movements.

We should ask: **who was leading them?**

Very often, they were led by women from privileged backgrounds—women with considerable caste and class privilege.

That is why we also need to think about the struggles of Adivasi women and women from other marginalised communities.

When I think about women's resistance, I think about **Phoolan Devi**. I think about **Velu Nachiyar**, the eighteenth-century queen who fought against the British. I think about the **Rani of Jhansi**.

The decolonial struggle against oppressive violence is a different kind of struggle.

There have always been women in our subcontinent who clearly identified oppression and fought against it with enormous courage. They were deeply engaged in anti-colonial resistance.

That is where I personally find a great deal of inspiration for feminist struggle.

In South Asia, however, I also think we need to redefine the word **feminist**.

For a very long time, feminist circles in our major cities tended to be led by women who had attended certain schools, who had access to English and who belonged to particular social classes—the same pattern we see in peacebuilding.

And what feminist knowledge did they consume?

Very often, it was knowledge produced in white Britain or white North America.

That helps explain why, until relatively recently—and especially before the emergence of younger Gen Z feminist activists—serious conversations about Black feminism, Black abolitionist feminism or decolonial feminist thinking were relatively limited in our region.

They were not entirely absent, but they were less prominent than they should have been.

Yet perspectives such as Black abolitionist feminism and decolonial feminist traditions emerging from Latin America—or **Abya Yala**, to use an Indigenous term—can be enormously useful when we think about feminist politics in our own societies.

So when I consider postcolonial South Asia, I see two things.

First, there have been very important movements led by individual women and groups of women working to secure rights. They have worked within the NGO sector, social-justice movements and politics to strengthen women's rights.

I would never dismiss that body of work. It is extremely important, and we have a great deal to learn from it.

At the same time, some of the politics pursued under the banner of feminism in South Asia have been exclusionary towards Adivasi women, Dalit women and women from other marginalised communities.

That is one reason why some Dalit women, for example, do not necessarily wish to describe themselves as feminists, even though the work they do is deeply feminist in substance.

We need to acknowledge that some feminist politics in our region have themselves been exclusionary.

But I think we are living through a very exciting period.

Across South Asia—from Pakistan to Bangladesh, Nepal to Sri Lanka, east to west and north to south—we increasingly see feminist movements engaging seriously with decolonial thought.

There is greater recognition of the work done by Adivasi women, Dalit women and women from socioeconomically marginalised backgrounds.

We are expanding and redefining what it means to be feminist in South Asia.

That is very inspiring.

Tapas Kanti Baul

Listening to your conversation, another issue comes to mind.

Sri Lanka produced the world's first woman Prime Minister, **Sirimavo Bandaranaike**, and later had the Bandaranaike mother-and-daughter political dynasty.

Pakistan had **Benazir Bhutto**. Bangladesh had **Sheikh Hasina** and **Khaleda Zia**. India had **Indira Gandhi**, often described as one of the most powerful women in South Asian politics, and Sonia Gandhi has also played a major leadership role within the Congress Party. Nepal currently has former Chief Justice **Sushila Karki** as interim Prime Minister.

How do you assess the contribution of these women political leaders?

How should we evaluate their performance—and perhaps compare their role with prominent Western women politicians such as Margaret Thatcher or Hillary Clinton?

Dr Chamindra Weerawardhana

That is a very interesting question.

Let us begin with **Sirimavo Bandaranaike** and start with the positive side of her legacy.

She did not come into office with extensive academic qualifications from prestigious institutions. In many respects, she learned on the job.

But she made sure that she surrounded herself with people who had expertise and experience.

In foreign affairs, she managed Sri Lanka's international relations very diligently during an extremely challenging period, both for Sri Lanka and for South Asia, in the middle of the Cold War.

She built alliances and strengthened Sri Lanka's role within the **Non-Aligned Movement**.

There is a real legacy there.

I remember that when I was an undergraduate student in France in the mid-2000s and travelled to places such as Croatia, older people who learned I was from Sri Lanka would sometimes ask about “the lady who wore the sari and tied her hair in a bun”—Mrs Bandaranaike.

Likewise, in China there remains considerable appreciation for her diplomatic role during tensions between India and China.

So there is a legacy from which our region can learn.

However, there is an important qualification.

What brought Mrs Bandaranaike into politics?

Her husband.

Had Prime Minister **S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike** remained alive, it is entirely possible that Mrs Bandaranaike would never have entered politics in the way she did, and the world's first woman Prime Minister might have emerged somewhere else.

Something similar can be said about Benazir Bhutto, Indira Gandhi, Sheikh Hasina and several other prominent women in South Asian politics.

Their family backgrounds mattered enormously. Their relationships to male political figures were often decisive in opening the door to political power.

That does not mean their presence was unimportant. Their presence mattered.

But this is where a decolonial critique becomes necessary.

Sri Lanka produced the world's first woman Prime Minister, yet until the most recent general election women made up only around six per cent of the legislature. Today that

figure is higher, at roughly ten per cent, while women constitute more than half the population.

Even now, a young woman who is talented, articulate, committed to social and economic justice and eager to enter public life faces enormous barriers.

It can be extremely difficult for her to enter politics, even at the local level, unless she is connected to a particular man, family or social network.

Those are serious systemic barriers.

You see similar problems in neighbouring regions of India. In Kerala, for example, women's representation in the Legislative Assembly remains low. The same broader problem exists in Tamil Nadu and in many other parts of the subcontinent.

So what does that tell us?

Sometimes elite women enter positions of power as women, but they simultaneously represent a particular patriarchal and capitalist elite.

Mrs Bandaranaike, for example, advocated socialist economic policies, particularly during the United Front government from 1970 to 1977, when she worked in coalition with some of Sri Lanka's most significant socialist leaders from the **Lanka Sama Samaja Party**.

There were important figures such as **Dr Colvin R. de Silva**, an outstanding constitutionalist and one of the leading intellectuals of the Sri Lankan Left.

Those alliances mattered.

At the same time, we need to examine the social class and family structures from which political elites emerge.

The Bandaranaike family occupied a highly privileged position within Sri Lankan society and benefited from structures that developed under colonial rule.

Mrs Bandaranaike herself also came from Kandyan aristocracy. That is a different historical source of social power, connected to the Kandyan elite that predated direct British rule.

These different forms of socialisation and elite formation matter.

The broader point is that highly aristocratic women can reach powerful positions while still belonging to upper-class systems that reproduce existing social interests.

That matters greatly in South Asia because our societies contain such deep socioeconomic inequality.

If the presence of elite women at the top automatically generated feminist political transformation, Sri Lanka would not still have such low female representation in Parliament.

Nor would women's representation remain so low in places such as Kerala, despite a long history of leftist and progressive politics.

So placing aristocratic women in powerful positions through family connections can take us only so far.

It is not a sufficient strategy.

We need more **feminist politics**, more **gender justice**, more **social justice**, and politics centred on equality and equity.

That is how I would evaluate these political legacies.

Natasha Fernando

I would like to bring the conversation more directly towards peacebuilding in Sri Lanka's post-conflict setting.

Sri Lanka has experienced periods of extreme violence, including civil war and ethnic and religious unrest, in which women have been victims and survivors.

In that context, what role have women played?

How do you assess women's agency in peacebuilding in Sri Lanka? Where has that agency been limited, and what explains those limitations?

Dr Chamindra Weerawardhana

One obvious limitation comes from the patriarchal systems within our societies.

These systems prescribe particular roles for women, and sexist prejudices remain widespread.

Naturally, these realities affect women's roles in situations of violent conflict and insecurity.

But there is another problem.

When we think about conflict, peacebuilding, peace negotiations or post-conflict reconstruction, the dominant narrative is usually a very male one.

When people think about armed groups such as the **Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam—the LTTE—or Tamil Tigers**, they often imagine groups of armed men.

Yet women were a central part of LTTE structures.

Women played active roles, including within some of the organisation's most important units.

For listeners interested in this subject, the late **Adele Balasingham**, spouse of LTTE theoretician Anton Balasingham, wrote about the role of women within the organisation.

As a foreign woman who became deeply embedded within the movement, she had a particular perspective on how those structures functioned.

Women were active participants and fighters in armed resistance.

More broadly, one problem in peacebuilding is the tendency to assign women an exclusively passive role.

The same pattern appears in our interpretation of history.

In India, for example, we do not speak enough about the **Rani of Jhansi**.

If you go into schools in Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka or Kerala and ask children about **Velu Nachiyar**, many may not know her name, even though she was a warrior queen who fought against British colonial power at a very early stage.

Similarly, in West Bengal we speak extensively about Tagore, but far less about figures such as **Pritilata**, who participated directly in anti-colonial resistance.

Women who engage in armed resistance tend to be diminished or marginalised in historical narratives.

A similar phenomenon occurs in peacebuilding, where women are frequently portrayed only as passive victims of armed violence.

We need a gendered critique of that assumption.

The second major issue is **gender-based violence**.

In many conflicts, gender-based violence is used as a weapon of war.

We have seen this in Manipur, and we have seen it extensively in Sri Lanka.

Patriarchal establishments can use gender-based violence during conflict and then subsequently deny that such violence occurred.

In Sri Lanka, this remains particularly sensitive because political and military establishments have often presented the war primarily through the language of a “humanitarian offensive” and have rejected allegations of gender-based violence.

From a feminist peacebuilding perspective, these narratives need to be critically examined.

So there are several things we need to do.

First, stop treating women only as passive victims of armed conflict.

Second, recognise women’s agency—including forms of agency that do not fit conventional peacebuilding narratives.

Third, take a strong and critical position on gender-based violence during conflict.

If we fail to address such violence, its consequences continue into the post-conflict period.

Look at the dynamics of gender-based violence in northern Sri Lanka today, eastern Sri Lanka and indeed elsewhere in the country.

We can still see the repercussions of our collective failure to deal adequately with violence experienced during the war years.

That is one reason why I would argue that Sri Lanka is still not a reconciled nation.

It is like living with a wound that continues to worsen.

We may occasionally put a plaster over it, but we do not sufficiently examine the wound itself and ask how we can contain it, heal it and recover collectively.

How we engage with gender-based violence in conflict is therefore fundamental to genuine peacebuilding.

Natasha Fernando

I have one final question connected to that.

Sri Lanka has several women peacebuilders and activists who have also gained international recognition.

How do you view the work of women such as **Sandya Eknaligoda**, **Visaka Dharmadasa** and others who have worked in this field?

Dr Chamindra Weerawardhana

Women such as Sandya Eknaligoda and Visaka Dharmadasa are pioneers.

They have made important contributions, and those contributions absolutely deserve to be acknowledged.

They have genuinely tried to make a difference, often under difficult circumstances.

At the same time, there is a broader question.

Under what conditions have women been able to participate in peacebuilding and conflict-transformation processes?

Over roughly the last 25 years, much of that participation has developed within frameworks such as the **Beijing agenda** and **UN Security Council Resolution 1325**, which gave rise to what we now call the **Women, Peace and Security agenda—or WPS**.

That framework helped create formal space and funding for women's engagement in peacebuilding.

Non-profit organisations and what critics sometimes call the **NGO industrial complex** have also created professional opportunities for women within this sector.

The women you mention have worked within that broader system.

And I would certainly say that many have tried to do the best they could from within it.

My broader work, however, includes a **decolonial feminist critique of the Women, Peace and Security agenda**.

I have recently completed work on this subject that has been accepted for publication, and I am continuing to develop this research.

My critique is that the Women, Peace and Security framework, as it currently exists, operates within a particular international system.

So we need to distinguish between individuals doing important work and the structure within which they are required to operate.

From my perspective, that structure itself deserves serious criticism because it can reproduce patriarchal, racialised and imperial power relations.

One place where I believe these contradictions become particularly visible is Palestine.

If the Women, Peace and Security agenda were as influential as its advocates sometimes suggest, particularly as we mark the 25th anniversary of Resolution 1325, we have to ask why gender-based violence can still occur on such a scale in places such as Palestine while the international system proves unable or unwilling to prevent it.

We can ask similar questions about Yemen, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Sudan.

Sudanese women have extraordinarily strong historical traditions of resistance, yet look at the conditions women face there today and the limited capacity of the international peacebuilding system to protect them.

So my criticism is not principally about individual women peacebuilders.

Individuals may be doing everything they possibly can.

The problem lies in the system within which they have to operate.

That system involves funding priorities, political allegiances, knowledge systems imported from particular Western countries and the soft-power strategies of donor states.

Take Norway's role in Sri Lanka, for example.

Norway's engagement in peacebuilding was also part of its international soft-power strategy. Peacebuilding contributes to a country's diplomatic identity and international reputation.

Yet some international peacebuilding figures who became household names in Sri Lanka did not speak Sinhala or Tamil.

That creates an obvious question: how can outsiders possess such influence over peacebuilding in a society whose languages, cultures and local realities they may understand only partially?

Again, the women who have worked hard within this sector deserve our full recognition.

But we also need to be critical of the institutions and structures within which they have been operating.

If we truly want to strengthen women peacebuilders, perhaps we need to rethink the WPS framework itself.

Perhaps we need to rethink peacebuilding and create new structures that have not yet been fully explored.

Decolonial work is partly about imagining a different world beyond what we already know.

It means refusing to be satisfied simply with what is given to us.

Our people deserve better.

Tapas Kanti Baul

Thank you very much, Chamindra, for raising these issues.

This is precisely why we need to question systems.

People who already operate inside a system may succeed within it and may acquire influence, but influence does not necessarily mean empowerment.

So let me ask my final question.

If you were to imagine a **truly decolonised peace process in South Asia**, what would it look like?

Dr Chamindra Weerawardhana

A genuinely decolonised peace process in South Asia would require us to return to some of the political philosophies represented by figures such as the **Rani of Jhansi**.

She was someone who brought different communities together.

Her struggle against the British involved building alliances among people from different religious, social and political backgrounds and bringing them together against what she identified as a common oppressive power.

We do not speak enough about that political legacy.

If we want to think about decolonised peace in our region, we need to recover that kind of political philosophy.

Let me give an example from some of the work I am currently involved in.

I co-curate a podcast called **Nari Politics** with two colleagues.

We recently discussed reconciliation and received an avalanche of abusive comments on TikTok from fellow Sri Lankan citizens, particularly Sinhalese people.

Part of the reaction came because three Sinhalese women were openly critical of aspects of the conduct of the armed forces.

Some people consequently perceived us as the enemy.

Likewise, Tamil Tigers are frequently constructed simply as “the enemy.”

But we also have to ask: who were the Tamil Tigers?

They did not arrive from another planet.

They were our own people—Sri Lankan citizens who became deeply alienated and aggrieved by the way their communities believed they had been treated.

You can absolutely develop a very serious critique of the LTTE and the way in which it functioned.

But the fundamental point remains that we are talking about our own people.

If you want a decolonised peace process, therefore, you have to rethink the idea of the enemy.

Take India and Pakistan.

I do not believe ordinary Pakistanis should be regarded as India’s enemy.

Instead, we should examine wider geopolitical systems and external powers that have shaped antagonisms within our region.

We should also think critically about unequal economic relationships.

Countries in South Asia send enormous numbers of talented young people abroad into the higher-education systems of wealthier countries.

We import their products. Our economies contribute to their prosperity. Our societies lose some of their strongest human resources through migration.

Yet the relationship is not always reciprocal or equal.

So when we speak about decolonisation, we have to think about these relationships too.

We need to ask who benefits, who extracts value and how South Asian countries can develop relationships with the wider world on more equal terms.

Tapas Kanti Baul

I agree that the concept of the “enemy” needs to be reconsidered.

Personally, I would almost prefer to remove the word from the dictionary because of the problems it creates.

The circumstances of a hundred years ago are not the circumstances in which we live today.

We cannot endlessly reproduce the same categories of enemies and conflicts.

The deeper question is: who or what is really producing the harm?

Countries and political actors can very easily become instruments of other interests, including commercial interests.

This is part of what we might call a new form of colonial extraction—finding new ways to extract wealth and resources from South Asian and African societies.

You no longer necessarily need to send an army into another country.

Influence can be exercised through political actors, economic structures and other forms of power.

And we also need to consider our own responsibility.

We are adults. We possess knowledge and agency. If we recognise that certain things are wrong and nevertheless allow ourselves to be used by systems we know to be harmful, that too raises serious moral and political questions.

We will have to wrap up here today, although somewhat abruptly.

But we will definitely continue this discussion in another episode—and hopefully in several more episodes—because these are questions that deserve to be discussed repeatedly.

Otherwise, mainstream audiences and political actors may never confront the structural problems within the system.

We have to keep asking questions. We have to keep raising these issues.

Chamindra, thank you very much for being with us.

Dr Chamindra Weerawardhana

It was a pleasure.

Tapas Kanti Baul

And thank you, Natasha, for your important questions and for the research behind them.

We will meet again.

To our audience, thank you for watching and listening.

Please continue asking questions and sharing your thoughts on these issues, because dialogue is essential.

Thank you, everyone.