

SADF Podcast S4E1 Edited Transcript

SADF Podcast

Haunted Histories: Violence, Memory, and Justice in Sri Lanka

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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

Welcome to today's episode of the SADF Podcast.

Our theme is “**Haunted Histories: Violence, Memory, and Justice in Sri Lanka.**”

We will be exploring how historical narratives, collective memory and the pursuit of justice intersect in the Sri Lankan context, and what these dynamics mean for peacebuilding and reconciliation.

Joining us today is Andi Schubert, a PhD researcher at the University of Cambridge. His work focuses on the politics of memory and the ways in which histories of violence shape contemporary debates on justice and accountability. His research offers critical insights into how societies remember—and sometimes forget—their most difficult pasts.

Co-hosting this conversation with me is Natasha Fernando, SADF Junior Fellow, who brings her expertise on South Asian peacebuilding and transitional justice to the discussion.

Together, we will unpack the complexities of Sri Lanka's haunted histories and ask: How do narratives of violence influence the present? What role does memory play in shaping justice? And what lessons can be drawn for the future?

Welcome, Andi.

Andi Schubert

Thanks, Tapas. Thank you for having me, and thank you so much for the invitation from both you and Natasha. It is really great to be here.

Tapas Kanti Baul

Let me begin with a very basic question. How do you define the “haunted history” of Sri Lanka? When we use that term, what comes to mind first?

Andi Schubert

That is a great question.

I have come to see Sri Lanka as a place haunted by many different kinds of what, in English, we might call ghosts. In Sinhala, we might use words such as *yakku*, *pretha* or *holmang*—terms that do not translate exactly into “ghosts”, and that have different meanings of their own.

But I have come to think of Sri Lanka as a space dealing with restless spirits: spirits that have not been laid to rest.

That applies across a range of histories. It includes colonial encounters over different periods, but also our postcolonial histories, particularly the war and the violence that the country has experienced.

For me, Sri Lanka is very much a space haunted by that violence, but also by the fact that so much of it has never really been addressed. Calls for accountability and justice continue throughout our politics and society. They return in different forms because we have not been able simply to move past them.

So when I think about haunted histories, I think about a space that is in dire need of justice. That is one way of understanding what haunting does.

Natasha Fernando

Thank you, Andi.

I first contacted you after coming across an article while working on my bibliography: **“Restless Somnambulist: Reflections on Violence, Accountability, and Historical Practice from Sri Lanka,”** published through the History Workshop Journal.

It fascinated me because it is about Sri Lanka, which is a country I am studying as a Sri Lankan, and because it is written by someone working as a historian while also experimenting with forms of narrative that are relatively unusual in historical writing.

I could also see your literary background reflected in the piece, including references that many Sri Lankans can immediately recognise and relate to.

Could you tell us a little more about your PhD work at the University of Cambridge and how this article relates to it?

Andi Schubert

I was really surprised when I got your email. I thought, “Oh wow, someone is reading this piece.”

When I was writing it, somebody asked me what my measure of success would be. I said, “If it gets published.” The History Workshop Journal was kind enough to publish it.

The piece has an indirect relationship to my PhD, although I think the connection is also quite important.

My doctoral work is about questions of time and decolonisation in Sri Lanka, particularly between 1948 and 1956. For those familiar with Sri Lankan history, those years mark two major moments.

The first is independence from British rule. But I am also specifically interested in the citizenship acts through which the community now widely referred to as Malaiyaha Tamils—and at the time described as Indian Tamils—was disenfranchised and rendered stateless. Those were among the earliest acts of the postcolonial Sri Lankan state, in 1948 and 1949.

Then, in 1956, we had the Sinhala Only Act, which made Sinhala the sole official language. In many accounts of Sri Lanka's civil war, that is treated as a major turning point.

So it is a short period, in one sense, but an enormous amount is happening.

One of the ways I think about the project is that **1948 and 1956 haunt each other**.

When you start thinking about questions of time—and history is, in some ways, a way of thinking about time—the figure of the ghost becomes very interesting.

A ghost is, in one sense, outside ordinary time. That is part of what defines it. If we start thinking historically with ghosts, it changes the way we think about distinctions between past, present and future, because the ghost breaks those boundaries down.

So although the article and the PhD are indirectly connected, they are also closely related through these questions about temporality.

There is another dimension as well. I was coming from English studies into history, and this was one of the first pieces I wrote during my PhD. It was partly a way of working through what that disciplinary transition meant.

You have very kindly described me as a historian, and I am still not entirely sure about that identification. It is something I am still becoming comfortable with. It sits a little uneasily because many of the questions I am asking are also questions about what happens to history itself if we begin thinking with ghosts.

What does that do to conventional historical practice? What then matters to us?

Natasha Fernando

I understand that disciplinary transition.

I studied international relations and law, and then for my PhD moved into religion, which was also a major change of field.

One of the first questions raised in my doctoral seminars was the question of **researcher positionality**: how do you position yourself in relation to the object of your study, and how do you understand your own privilege?

I struggled a great deal with that. It took a lot of time, energy and reflection, particularly because it came at the beginning of a PhD and in the context of changing disciplines.

When I read your article, I saw a lot of that reflexivity, but also the influence of your literature background and the way you write through familiar Sri Lankan references and images.

So I would like to ask: as a historian—or perhaps as someone becoming a historian—how do you define your positionality and your privilege in relation to what you study?

Andi Schubert

Those are very big questions, and there are no easy answers.

If you ask me again in a year, I may give you a different answer. I would like to allow myself the privilege of changing my mind and reframing these things as I continue working.

But there are a couple of things I would say.

First, I have increasingly begun to think of **privilege as not having to think about certain things.**

I will give you an example.

Many years ago, when I was still an undergraduate, I took part in someone else's PhD research. They asked me: "How do you identify yourself as a man?"

I simply could not answer the question, because it was something I had never really had to think about.

That, in itself, is part of the privilege of being a man. You are often not required to ask yourself, "How do I know that I am a man?" Whereas for many women, society constantly places the question of what it means to be a woman in front of them—through expectations around marriage, children and many other things.

That is a very heteropatriarchal example, of course, but it illustrates the broader point.

So one way I think about privilege is as the ability not to think about something unless somebody forces you to confront it.

The second part concerns reflexivity.

I am increasingly inspired by conversations in anthropology, which is a discipline that has thought a great deal about privilege and positionality, perhaps more explicitly than history has.

One question that interests me is: **How does reflecting on your positionality actually change you?**

There are many ways in which I am privileged. But I have also had to come to terms with ways in which privilege or identity is assumed of me by other people.

That is slightly different from positionality as something you define for yourself. There is also positionality in terms of what other people assume you are.

I have felt that particularly as someone working as a minority in Sri Lanka.

People make assumptions about my ethnic identity. I have a name like Schubert, for example, and my spoken Sinhala is passable, so people do not always recognise me as belonging to a minority.

During the war, that allowed me certain privileges in navigating spaces that people with Tamil backgrounds, for example, might not have been able to navigate as easily.

But in other contexts, people may not recognise that I am approaching a question from the experience of being a minority in Sri Lanka.

Sri Lanka is very identity-conscious. Ethnicity matters. People are constantly trying to work out where you fit and which box you belong in.

I try to avoid affirming any particular box, and that makes things complicated. I often feel that I am navigating other people's attempts to categorise me.

That is part of the work as well.

More generally, when it comes to research, I think research is a tremendously extractive process.

Personally, I do not think there is any way for me to conduct research that is entirely non-extractive. There is a great deal of privilege inherent in being a researcher, and we cannot simply make that disappear.

It matters. It colours the work that we do.

For me, there is no genuinely subaltern positionality in being a researcher. The act of researching already places you in a position of privilege within that relationship.

The most responsible thing we can do is be honest about it rather than pretend that we somehow stand outside it.

Natasha Fernando

Those are excellent reflections.

Tapas, I think you may have some questions.

Tapas Kanti Baul

I wanted to return to this idea of learning from the past, of being haunted by the past, and also to something you mentioned in your opening remarks: **justice**.

You suggested that justice becomes important if we are to deal with these haunting experiences.

But what kind of justice?

I come from Bangladesh. Bangladesh attempted to provide justice for victims of 1971, but that process itself became the subject of enormous political controversy. We are still dealing with those consequences.

I was a prosecutor at that tribunal, and the process remains at the centre of political debate, accusations of revenge and wider questions about democracy.

So I am very curious to hear from you: **what kind of justice should we actually be seeking?**

Andi Schubert

Thank you, Tapas. That is a really important question.

One of the inspirations—or perhaps provocations—for the article was Shehan Karunatilaka's *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*, which many people encountered after it won the Booker Prize.

An earlier version of the novel was published in South Asia as *Chats with the Dead*, and its ending is quite different.

What I find very interesting about that earlier version is that it poses precisely the question you are asking.

The main character has to make a choice about what kind of justice to pursue.

One option is simply to move on: forget about it and continue.

Another is something closer to revenge.

The character seems to be moving along one path, but then these apparently opposite possibilities come into conflict. The pursuit of revenge may end up hurting people you love. At that point, can you still make the same choice? Can you simply say: whatever happens, happens?

When we think about justice, I believe we have to make space for the fact that different people and communities imagine justice differently.

Not all forms of justice are the same.

That is one of the strange things about working with ghosts. Some ghosts are not going to be laid to rest. Some are not going to give up their claims for justice. We may ask or plead to be released from those demands, but they may continue to haunt us.

So if you ask me directly, “What does justice look like?”, I do not think there is a straightforward answer.

Different communities will answer that question in very different ways.

Part of what the state often tries to do—usually through legal processes—is to **close the debate**.

The state says: we have gone through this process, therefore justice has been served and the conversation is over.

But the figure of the ghost puts that into question.

It suggests that closure is not necessarily up to the state. It may not even be entirely up to those who are still alive.

If we are having a conversation about the past, haunting and justice, then we need to make room for different ways in which justice is pursued.

That does not mean endorsing unlimited retribution. But it does mean recognising that justice cannot always be reduced to a single legal outcome.

Tapas Kanti Baul

In my own research, I have looked at South Africa and at what Nelson Mandela attempted to do.

We can now see that old conflicts and competing claims have not simply disappeared.

The same is true in Bangladesh. Jamaat-e-Islami was prosecuted over its role in 1971; now the political tables have turned and allegations are being directed against the Awami League for its conduct during its years in power.

Again and again, we see the tables turning.

It seems there is no single prescription for defining justice.

I have also encountered this problem in literature dealing with the future and historical responsibility. The question of what justice means in light of past experience can be deeply frustrating.

So I understand where you are coming from. These questions are also politically difficult to answer because we inevitably think about how an answer will be received.

Let me move to another question.

You were discussing positionality and memory. What role do **both positionality and memory play in shaping justice?**

Andi Schubert

One issue that comes to mind is something I worked on a long time ago.

In many transitional justice frameworks, there is a presumption that it is clear who the victim is and who the perpetrator is.

When those roles are not clear, things become much messier.

One of the questions I asked when examining post-war reconciliation discourse under the Mahinda Rajapaksa government was: **What does it mean to claim to be both victim and victor?**

I titled that paper *Victorious Victims*.

You mentioned South Africa, and I think these questions arise in many places that have attempted to deal with atrocities, past crimes and memory.

Framing becomes crucial.

In South Africa, for example, the community that had been oppressed became central to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission process.

There are parallels in Rwanda, where post-genocide justice mechanisms were developed in a context where the Tutsi community had been the principal victims of genocide.

But then consider places such as Sri Lanka, Chile, Argentina or Guatemala, where perpetrators—or people credibly accused of human-rights violations—may remain very close to political power.

You are then trying to pursue transitional justice within a very different political dynamic.

That produces very different claims about what justice means.

In Sri Lanka, for instance, the Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission, the LLRC, was presented as a mechanism for dealing with the aftermath of the conflict and allegations of human-rights violations.

But communities particularly affected by violence, especially Tamil communities, often rejected the idea that this mechanism could provide sufficient justice.

In the north, there has been a persistent demand for international involvement in accountability processes.

Part of the reasoning is that communities ask: **How can we expect justice from a state structure dominated by the same forces that we believe made us victims or survivors?**

In that context, memory becomes very important because it offers a way to challenge, resist and negotiate how the state frames justice.

That is my understanding of it.

There are also ways in which memory persists even when people might prefer it not to.

Take Elephant Pass.

There is a tank there associated with the war. During the LTTE period, the tank became a symbol connected to an LTTE victory. Later, after the Sri Lankan military took control, the same tank was reinterpreted as a symbol of the bravery and victory of a Sinhala soldier and the Sri Lankan army.

It is the **same object being used to commemorate opposite narratives**.

That tells us something about how memory works, particularly when it becomes attached to physical objects.

Memory is a very tricky and slippery thing.

Perhaps the way I prefer to think about it in my own work is this: **what happens if we begin from the assumption that memory and justice may never be fully settled?**

Rather than assuming that there will eventually be a point at which justice is achieved and memory stabilises, what if we start by accepting that these things may remain unresolved?

That changes the questions we ask.

I can no longer simply prescribe a sequence of actions and say: if you do these things, justice will be achieved.

Perhaps that is not the point.

Perhaps the point is learning how to live with the fact that some questions cannot finally be settled.

Again, that brings me back to what haunting does.

Tapas Kanti Baul

These are very difficult questions to answer.

We can continue discussing them, but there may never be an answer that completely satisfies the question.

That is something I have also come to understand over the years.

Natasha?

Natasha Fernando

When I read your article, *Restless Somnambulist: Reflections on Violence and Historical Practice*, I noticed several references to the JVP insurrections—the Marxist uprisings in Sri Lanka during the 1970s and 1980s, led largely by Sinhalese youth.

Those periods involved state-sponsored violence, disappearances, sexual violence, torture and killings.

There are several people whose deaths became particularly prominent in public memory.

One is Premawathie Manamperi, a young beauty queen from Kataragama who was assaulted and killed by members of the security forces in 1971 following accusations of involvement in the uprising.

Another is Richard de Zoysa, the journalist, actor and poet whom many Sri Lankan students encounter through postcolonial English literature.

You refer to both of them in the article.

I would like to know why you brought these figures into the piece and how you now think about their deaths from your evolving perspective as a historian.

Andi Schubert

There is also a third site in the article that I think is important.

I discuss an incident involving students who were killed and whose heads were reportedly arranged around a pond. Accounts vary regarding the number of victims. It is not an incident that we talk about very much.

I like to think that these were figures who **found me**, rather than figures I went out and found.

They became a way of approaching certain questions.

Richard de Zoysa is someone I remain very interested in. He was not only a poet. Of course, many people now remember him that way, but during his lifetime he was many things.

He was a journalist—which may have been connected to why he was killed. He was also an actor and participated in a range of cultural work.

But I do not think I was necessarily interested in Richard de Zoysa simply as a historical figure, or Premawathie Manamperi simply as a historical figure.

It is difficult for me to talk about the article because, when I reread it in preparation for this podcast, I almost thought: “Who wrote this? I do not know this person.”

It sounded like an interesting article and I would quite like to meet whoever wrote it.

I wrote it incredibly quickly. I had the idea, sat down and wrote almost continuously for two and a half days. Then it was finished.

So these were figures that came to me, figures I felt haunted by.

I am not joking when I say that writing the piece felt almost like a strange ritual or séance.

They were not simply convenient devices for telling a story. They became figures through whom I could reflect on what violence means.

It helps, of course, that their lives and deaths are accessible to people.

Many Sri Lankans know the story of Richard de Zoysa. Many know the story of Premawathie Manamperi.

The story of the students is much less widely known.

I was not at Peradeniya at the time, obviously, but I can only imagine the experience of walking onto a university campus and seeing the severed heads of people arranged around a central location.

Even saying it now sounds almost unbelievable.

These stories allow us to ask what violence does and whether there can ever be justice.

Part of the article came from another contradiction.

Sri Lanka is a country that understands itself as having **so much history**.

We have ruins. We have written texts. We have great temples and monuments. History is very much part of our national imagination.

And at the same time, we have experienced extraordinary violence.

So what does it mean to live in a country where, on the one hand, we have almost too much history, and on the other, never enough accountability?

Of course, these are figures whose stories we may know better than others.

But there are many more who are never named and who never receive that kind of recognition.

They also lost their lives. They also experienced violence. Their families still live with that history.

Those people are also restless.

Their absence has not disappeared. For their families, they remain very present in everyday life.

So figures such as Richard de Zoysa and Premawathie Manamperi can become ways of entering a much broader conversation.

The point is not that only their lives matter.

They can stand in for many others whose stories never received the same public recognition.

Natasha Fernando

I would like to offer a reflection rather than another question.

What Andi has described throughout this conversation about unresolved justice and haunted histories strongly resonates with experiences I have encountered in Sri Lanka.

I was involved in a “Missing Valentine’s Day” event organised in Colombo by the Office for Reparations. Families from different sides of Sri Lanka’s conflicts were present—Sinhalese, Muslim and Tamil families.

They came to make the point that they had still not received reparations or justice for relatives who disappeared during the civil war, the insurrections and earlier episodes of mass violence.

When researchers approach these questions of memory and justice and place them inside the broader framework of transitional justice, we encounter a seemingly endless set of questions.

There is rarely a clear answer.

And the positions we ourselves take as researchers evolve as we continue studying and encountering new experiences.

With that, Tapas, I will hand the conversation back to you for any final reflections.

Tapas Kanti Baul

My reflections are very much aligned with both of you.

When memory continues to haunt us, we face difficult choices. We may seek accountability, or we may try to make peace with aspects of the past.

At the same time, reopening an old wound can sometimes cause it to bleed again.

But that does not mean we should abandon the search for justice. It does not mean we should stop trying.

Andi, once again, thank you very much.

That brings us to the end of today's discussion on **haunted histories, violence, memory and justice in Sri Lanka**.

We have explored how the weight of a haunted past and the politics of memory shape our understanding of justice—not merely as a legal concept, but as a deeply contested moral and historical question.

Our conversation also highlighted an uncomfortable reality: the state itself can sometimes become a perpetrator of human-rights violations.

Sri Lanka's experience reminds us how difficult it can be to reconcile accountability with power, and how memories of violence continue to resist simple narratives of closure.

A big thank you to our guest, Andi Schubert, for sharing his insights and helping us navigate these complex questions.

And thank you to my co-host, Natasha Fernando, for guiding this dialogue with such depth and clarity.

Natasha Fernando

Thank you, Andi. And thank you again for participating.

Andi Schubert

Thank you so much for having me. It has been really fantastic.

Tapas Kanti Baul

To our viewers and listeners: if you enjoyed this episode, subscribe to the SADF Podcast and share it with anyone interested in peacebuilding, justice and South Asian affairs.

Until next time, let us keep asking the difficult questions and keep the conversation going.

Thank you very much.