

Nirmani Liyanage (2.2.1988 - 12.11.2022)

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“**T**o understand the community I am researching, i.e., the injustice and inequality its members are facing on a daily basis, I have to live among them, gain their trust and, through that trust, find ways to address the complex systematic forces and barriers that hold them down.”

Nirmani Liyanage was an immensely talented and intellectually sharp community development specialist, researcher, and social activist committed to supporting ordinary people’s efforts of self-empowerment. Building

on her empathy towards ordinary, oppressed, and marginalised people, she learned to work *with* them, instead of *for* them. She took her quest to a national level during the *aragalaya* where she led the creation of *Purawesi Sabhawa* (People’s Forum) with the idea that empowered communities could displace the top-down power structure, often monopolised and manipulated by formal politicians, leading to restructured communities of social power.

Nirmani’s approach to work and research was not oppositional. She was aware that, as Terry Eagleton (Eagleton 1990: 26) demonstrates, oppositional politics moves under the sign of irony, following “a terrain already mapped out by [the] antagonists.” Instead of walking the power holders’ path, even if it is in the opposite direction, she looked for ways to displace power centres. Her objective was to find ways to make society more just, by enabling people’s life journeys and empowerment initiatives. ‘Enabling’ people includes removing the obstacles that prevent them from achieving their life goals and helping people to stand on their own feet and create a just society. In this journey, Nirmani found ways to get politicians and corporate executives to cooperate with her.

I first met Nirmani in 2011, at a lecture that I delivered at the University of Moratuwa, Sri Lanka. I demonstrated that urban and regional (development) planning documents in Sri Lanka are rich with data such as coordinates and rainfall patterns that are never used to understand the needs and predicaments of the particular community nor plan its future. The data says almost nothing about the production and use of space by its members. Nirmani not only understood the argument, which most professionals miss, but wanted to change the status quo. She sensed an urgency. Instead of waiting for her anticipated graduate studies at Ball State University where I teach, she eagerly wanted to get on with research immediately.

Handiya, Pola, and Local Spaces

Nirmani was a highly creative and exceptional student and academic. She completed her Bachelor's degree as the Salutatorian; she had the highest grade point in her Master's class; and was the recipient of the best Master's thesis award at Ball State University (2016). Among other accolades, she was a Salzburg Global Fellow (Austria). Most importantly, she 'created' (or found) her own job and identity. She made use of the knowledge she acquired from her two degrees in urban planning and her life experiences gained by helping communities to empower themselves. She also coordinated with scholars, practitioners, and donors from a variety of countries from all continents and kept learning and growing in the field of 'post-development' that she was crafting at the same time.

For her undergraduate research project Nirmani studied the basic node, *handiya* (junction), around which Sri Lankan communities are organised. Her research was original, grounded, and relevant to the lives and livelihoods of Sri Lankan communities. In a book chapter that was subsequently co-authored with me, we argued that the national space of Sri Lanka is organised as a network of *handiyas* which is denser in urban areas; and while street intersections and the branching off of roads provide potential locations, the actual emergence and success of these locally developed, activity concentrations *cum* community centres depends on the demand for services and the availability of land (Perera *et al.* 2016). Every Sri Lankan grows up in the context of *handiyas* but professional planning and policy work hardly acknowledges these social centres.

She continued her quest at Ball State University (USA) where she examined the *pola* – the periodic market in Sri Lanka (Liyanage 2016). Her Master's thesis refuted the prevalent understanding of the *pola* as a place where rural farmers sell vegetables to urbanites. It demonstrated that the *pola* is a modern institution, but one with a long history. She documented how the *pola* has modernised through the emergence of a new type of (urban) vendor who rotates between five or six weekly markets, new merchandise including imported items, and how it continues to reproduce itself as the key local market and people-friendly space that supermarkets are unable to replace. The study was timely as the government (2005-2015) was steadily replacing organic *polas* with large, blue roofed, airplane-hangar type structures, destroying the institution and space. Nirmani's observations were sharp. She noticed the damage in detail. For instance, vendors did not like

the organisation of modernised *polas* that made them sell on the floor especially as women did not want to bend down to check the produce.

For the most part, politicians, policymakers, and planners only see the physical form of institutions, their economic activities, and how land can be better utilised, especially to make profit. As Nirmani demonstrates, the *handiya, pola*, and possibly many other local spaces and institutions are not outdated but modern. They are internally reproduced and renewed responding to external influences and demands, in their own ways. It is the illiteracy and ignorance of professionals and politicians that marginalises and/or destroys them for their own profit.

Ball State and CapAsia

Nirmani was never content with her own knowledge. She read extensively, made good literary and field observations, and got deeply involved with people from all walks of life. Rather than sticking to a particular ideological line, or blindly following a hero, she drew from a range of disciplinary and political perspectives, exploring their potential to help people to empower themselves. Nirmani questioned imported and imposed frameworks and was most interested in learning from ordinary people, in the field. At Ball State, to further enhance her interdisciplinary and ethnographic skills, she took classes from professors Jeff Bracket (philosophy), Jennifer Erickson (anthropology), and Molly Ferguson (literary criticism). Committed to developing a more empathic, insider-view of the *handiya*, she spent months at Moratumulla Handiya and, later, spent the summer selling snacks at Kottawa Pola, as part of her research.

Nirmani treasured immersive learning, especially the prospect of learning from people by doing collaborative studies and projects. She admired the immersive-learning CapAsia programme that I founded and directed (1998-2022). She first joined CapAsia 7 (2013), conducted in Bhubaneswar (India) and Kathmandu (Nepal), as a resource person, just after her bachelor's degree. After joining Ball State, she became the Programme Assistant of CapAsia 8 (2015), conducted in Penang (Malaysia) and Changsha (China). She was also a resource person of CapAsias 9 and 10 (2017, 2019), in Thailand.

She had a natural ability to connect with people, especially from low-income and marginalised backgrounds, and was extremely comfortable with diversity. Her style was respectful of individual

differences be they occasioned by differences of the intellect, lifestyle, culture, and other forms of human diversity. Nirmani who was in her early twenties connected extremely well with the self-built neighbourhood of Satyakali in Bhubaneswar. There she met Soyam Prava, the woman-leader of the community, who was somewhat overshadowed by men. Exposing Soyam Prava to the world beyond the community and the local authorities, Nirmani helped her further empower herself and her community. Soyam Prava is now a well-established and recognised community leader.

Wanathamulla

After returning to Sri Lanka in 2016, Nirmani lived in Wanathamulla for 14 months, considered the main 'slum' and most dangerous place in Sri Lanka. With the support of The Asia Foundation and in particular Gopa Thampi, but taking no remuneration for herself, Nirmani conducted a deep and extensive immersive study of Wanathamulla. Her compassion, commitment, and bravery were impressive. She carried out this lived experience in addition to her day job. She also published a co-authored book chapter on this experience (Perera *et al.* 2022).

Nirmani was a reflective practitioner of great intellectual depth. She thought deeply about and reflected on her practice. She shared her knowledge with the community that she worked in and with, without patronising them. While she brought sophisticated concepts and analytical approaches into her work, she learned a great deal from the people she worked with and employed her experience to reflect on and question her prior knowledge and privilege. She was able to combine large- and small-scale projects and short- and long-term processes together to make small interventions with great impact. She helped the leaders of the Metropolitan Planning Organisation (MPO) of Indianapolis (USA) amend the positioning of bus stops that did not match with the neighborhoods of low-income people who used the system the most. The agency wanted to keep her.

Her passion for working with poor communities was complemented with compassion and empathy. After her Master's degree, Nirmani was employed by the Centre for Poverty Analysis (CEPA) to lead its new research theme on infrastructure development. She infused the concept of 'people as infrastructure', bringing the organisation's research orientation closer to its roots: poverty analysis but with empathy towards the poor. She developed a great partnership with then Director, Udan Fernando.

Nirmani then joined 'We Build Colombo Together' (WBCT), a project affiliated with Search for Common Ground (SFCG), which is dedicated to promoting youth, peace, and security. This is especially relevant in Sri Lanka where leading politicians have exploited nationalism to divide people. She infused the conversation on social justice directly into her work, making it a reality. In a non-partisan way, she brought all stakeholders including the State, capital, and the affected people to the same table, making them acknowledge and understand each other. She did not simply view the exploited and the discriminated as passive victims, but acknowledged ordinary people's life journeys, their agency, and their transformative capacities, and supported their struggle to build the life that each individual valued. She was always prepared to adjust the goals of a project if that better served ordinary people and the research objectives.

In Colombo, she strengthened low-income communities by restoring a network of community leaders established in the 1980s. She persuaded the Mayor of Colombo to issue identity cards for them, bringing official recognition for over 110 low income communities in the city. In 2010, she played a key role in creating the current national housing policy of Sri Lanka, energising the bureaucrats on its drafting committee and working closely with professionals such as Susil Sirivardana.

COVID19

She was an activist who used her networks to help and support the powerless. The network of community leaders she created became helpful during the COVID19 pandemic. When the government declared curfew for two months, in March 2020, Nirmani used this network to distribute food, masks, and sanitiser. Community leaders helped her identify those who, despite their acute poverty, were not on the government's poverty lists and she distributed the necessities to them. With the voluntary efforts of a few of her friends and colleagues, she raised over 3.4 million LKR and, with her four-women group, implemented a very effective food-distribution programme. They reached over 5000 families much faster than the central government and city authorities.

She was relentless. Prior to the *Vesak Poya* day (the full moon day in May on which the Buddha was born, awakened, and passed away), she used the same network to sell lanterns of small-scale producers in those neighbourhoods who were confined to homes due to curfew. Leveraging the strength and legitimacy that her efforts brought to community leaders, Nirmani

transformed the network into a long-term resource by creating a social media platform which she hoped will operate for a long time. The social impact of her work was well articulated in the eulogies of community leaders such as Pushpa Galhena at her funeral.

She worked across faith and ethnic groups in a country where citizens have been increasingly divided by political and religious leaders. After the bomb attacks on Catholic churches by an Islamic extremist group on the Easter Sunday of 2019, Nirmani brought together the people of Kompannaveediya (Slave Island), a low-income neighbourhood in the middle of Colombo. She organised an Iftar (end-of-fasting day meal during Ramadan) on *Vesak Poya* at the Buddhist temple. Catholic and Hindu clergy also participated, sharing their views on peace. Despite disruption by some politicians, this event brought the community together at a time when there was violence in some parts of the country. A key supporter was Saji Prelis, Director of SFCG.

She paid great attention to individuals and to details, with empathy. Nirmani helped the efforts of the dedicated principal Saumya to revive the somewhat rundown and neglected Holy Rosary School in Kompannaveediya. Nirmani saw the community beyond the institution, structure, and land, and knew the fact that the school cannot be understood without the students, their families, and the community. Nirmani recognised that the students rely on the school for food, safety, and many other needs. Beyond economics and poverty, she learned that some little girls did not want to go home after school because of the abuse that awaited them: some feared sexual abuse including the possibility of rape from their own fathers; some feared being pushed into prostitution. Nirmani helped the principal create programmes to feed and keep the children in school until their mothers returned home. She found some help to renovate the building and introduced field trips, making it enjoyable for children to socialise and experience what they learn.

As she worked with the poor, she also helped the authorities make more inclusive and (socially) just policies and plans. True to the idea of building Colombo together, she worked well with State and private companies. “You have power, right?” Nirmani asked the Municipal Commissioner of Colombo. “Then why can’t you do something as simple (apolitical) and cost-free as giving identity cards to community leaders?” During curfew, she got the help of the police to distribute food. She also encouraged private companies to practice corporate social responsibility (CSR), channelling some of the support to help improve the Holy Rosary School

and institutions at Wanthamulla. The effort was well supported by corporate executives, especially Nayana Mawilmada of John Keells Holdings.

She refused to accept gentrification as the only way to (re)develop neighbourhoods. Rather than criticising ‘neoliberalism’, she approached the issue from the people’s end. With the help of a few champions of the support-systems-based housing programme of the 1980s, she developed a viable development alternative for Wekanda, a neighbourhood in Kompannaveediya. The white paper she co-authored entitled ‘Nawam City’, with Lalith Lankatilleke formerly of UN Habitat and other experts, proposed a way the neighbourhood could be modernised without causing forced evictions of poor people and small and informal businesses. It was discussed in the Parliament of Sri Lanka.

Purawesi Sabhawa

Leading the creation of *Purawesi Sabhawa* (People’s Council) before her untimely death in November 2022, Nirmani brought her efforts to help people empower themselves to a national level. The April (2022) uprising in Sri Lanka, known as the *aragalaya*, resulted in the occupation by the protestors of a small area near the main public square in Colombo: Galle Face. It was occupied by a variety of organisations and people, including older political organisations, new types of groups, as well as nondescripts. Most of them practiced conventional politics, directly confronting the State. Recognising the limits of extant understandings of politics and resistance, especially in the context of contemporary global transformation, Nirmani thought of helping communities to shift the locus of power to the community level, displacing the top-down use of power and manipulation.

Instead of changing the rulers or the political party in power, she thought, people must displace the whole governance system of top-down rule by strengthening their own communities. Instead of joining a political movement that attempts to provide direction to people, from outside, she opted to enable people to discuss their own issues and aspirations, in the context of Sri Lanka’s crisis, and respond in ways that would strengthen people’s own standing. This alludes to transforming (voiceless) subalterns into citizens (with voice). She began by collecting people’s ideas and creating a platform for everyone to share news and ideas (about the *aragalaya* and beyond) directly, on the internet. A group of *aragalaya* participants who respected Nirmani’s idea worked together to create the *Purawesi Sabhawa*. Nirmani very thoughtfully and courageously led it through various political and personal challenges.

She was a leader with empathy. When she was talking about spaces of resistance at the first forum held at the occupied space at Galle Face, a man began to talk about the importance of (physical) exercise. With extreme kindness, Nirmani incorporated that person into the conversation without denigrating him or his ideas.

She was also a compassionate teacher. She taught at several institutions including the University of Colombo and the City School of Architecture. Social production of space, diversity, social justice, and freedom were subject matters central to her interests. Nirmani helped many budding students achieve their potential abroad. Ball State University too benefitted from her recruiting efforts.

As much as I taught and guided Nirmani, I also learned a lot from her. As her life goals changed at our first meeting, from competition to collaboration and locally relevant research, my personal and academic lives also transformed. As she studied the *handiya*, *pola*, and Wanathamulla, my work on people’s spaces also took a new turn: I was able to see how the leading scholars of social space such as Henri Lefebvre and David Harvey have missed the lived spaces of ordinary people. Her community development practice provided me with unending questions to think about. While I guided her at the beginning, soon she was providing me with deep insights and vast connections. I would not have been able to complete much of my work on

people’s spaces, especially how people create spaces for their daily activities and cultural practices, without our partnership.

As her colleague, Pradeep Sangapala said: “We miss her, but no one said that they cannot live without her.” Instead, they said “we should continue what she started. That is empowerment.” Nirmani will be missed but her inspiration will survive. So many—especially women—follow her footsteps, but in their own ways, becoming more empowered as she wished.

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Image Credit: Salzburg Global Seminar/Katrin Kerschbaumer.

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