

[Working paper] A personal journey into the South Asian Satsang style worship



RUWANA GUNAWARDENE

Ruwana Gunawardene is a second year Curate in the Church of England serving my title at St James the Less church in Pimlico, Westminster, but her roots are from the Anglican Cathedral in Colombo and from Ceylon, Sri Lanka. This is an abridged version of a talk she gave at a breakout session for the 2023 Global Consultation on Arts and Music in Missions (GCAMM) in Dallas, Texas.

1. Introduction



I am a second year Curate in the Church of England serving my title at St James the Less church in Pimlico, Westminster. St James is a beautiful Victorian building serving the two local estate communities in one of the poorest parts of the richest Borough in London with the Houses of Parliament and the iconic Big Ben only a few minutes away.

Wherever you are reading this in the world, are you ready to take a trip down to a city on a tropical island in the Indian ocean where my story began?

2. Colombo, Sri Lanka (Ceylon)

My formative years were spent on the island of Sri Lanka – Ceylon, at the time. My family worshipped in the original Anglican Cathedral in Colombo. The cathedral was moved to a more modern building some fifty years ago and my church ceased to be the central gathering place for the diocese. If you notice the architecture of the newer cathedral, it is significantly different, bearing

indigenous characteristics and looking less like a church from England.

My parents belonged to the first young adult generation of the post-colonial era. Church was mainly sung Eucharist accompanied by the English Hymnal and pipe organ, with the occasional chorus sung at Sunday school. Even the musical training I received as a young girl was Western classical. However, my schooling and studying Divinity as a subject was in the Sinhala language. From a very young age we were bilingual, easily dipping in and out of both English and Sinhala and colloquially mixing the two by forming a hybrid we called ‘Singlish’.



Our Christian identity was neatly tucked away into Western practices, hidden from the Sinhala Buddhist culture which made up nearly eighty percent of the population. If one was Sinhalese, one was expected to be a Buddhist. Although there was general respect for each other’s religions, Christians were very much a minority. I can still recall the cultural confusion that I experienced growing up.



Being positioned on the ancient silk route, Sri Lanka was and is a melting pot of mini-culture groups which have lived side by side for millennia. The country has a well-chronicled history of nearly 3,000 years.

The island was under European rule for approximately 350 years, colonized first by the Portuguese, then the Dutch, and finally the British in 1815. Sinhalese culture was suppressed for most of this time.

During post-Independence after 1948, an era dawned when most Sinhala-speaking leaders made Sinhala the official language of the country. This alienated the other communities on the island. Civil tensions that resulted culminated in an island-wide civil war in 1983 which lasted nearly 30 years, making it one of the longest running civil wars in Asia of modern times.

3. London, England

It was during this time that there was an exodus of my generation from the island. I settled in London after an arranged marriage to a Sinhalese Buddhist. Mixed faith marriages were commonplace in Sinhala Christian families. Looking back, I could easily say that joining my local church and experiencing the love and acceptance of the small, local Baptist community helped me integrate into the new culture and grow deeper in my faith.

Our eldest son was born 10 years later, and we moved out of the city to settle in the countryside in England to raise our family. Sadly, we did not feel very welcome in our new surroundings, and we moved back to the safety of multicultural London. Our second son was born a month after the move.

Church in the suburbs of London turned out to be a refuge with a buzzing Sri Lankan Fellowship. The local Anglican church had a significant group of Tamil refugee members who met separately to worship in their language. At first, this was a welcomed retreat from our experience in the countryside. Not long after I realized, with a deep dissatisfaction, that this sort of siloing was unhelpful. I remembered the welcome I received from my first church and the great feeling of being part of the bigger church community. But in this new suburban church, I felt as if my community was missing out on the richness of God's kingdom by being separated in our own culture group.

I can say in hindsight that voicing this concern to church leadership when I was a stay-at-home mum, married to a Buddhist and with no theological training, was rather naïve or even foolish. However, I still believe that cultural segregation feeds the perpetuation of racism. We all lose out when we do not live out the gospel mandate of accepting one another in Christ within the church.

To cut a long story short, my family situation changed, and divorce from my husband meant that I had to return to work to take care of my young children. I was greatly blessed to join the Music and Worship department at London School of Theology.

I grew up with Anglican hymnody and came to enjoy contemporary worship which was hugely popular in Britain in the early 2000's. But there was a growing sense that the sounds of the nations of the attending members



in our worship spaces were not reflected in our gatherings. I realized that even with decades of living in the West, a deep part of me remained Sri Lankan. Something was stirring and not only within me.

How I could reconcile the worship culture in Britain with the sounds that I had heard growing up – the classical Asian sounds of sitar, violin, tabla and even Sri Lankan drumming?

When God is doing something in his Kingdom, he brings people together who you are most unlikely to meet in the normal discourse of life. Through my work at London School of Theology, I came across Chris Hale and Pete Hicks' group Aradhna – two white musicians personifying Desi culture! The musical sounds that Aradhna played were just exquisite and familiar, but not ones I had ever associated with Christianity.

A few years later, a group of us which included Ian Collinge, Jill Ford, and others formed the Imagine Multi-Cultural Worship Forum and started to develop a model for Satsang style worship. We played at the Greenbelt Festival and other church venues around the country and I made a video after one such event.

4. An English-Christian Satsang



The layout of a Satsang style worship set makes it unique and quite different from the way we worship in the West. Any empty space can be used and decorated with colorful fabric, scattered flowers, and incense. Worshippers remove their footwear and sit on the floor. A guru – a spiritual leader – teaches the word and the musicians lead each other in worship.

The music which is led communally is not too tightly scripted. The Raga style of singing can have micro-tones which may be unfamiliar to the Western ear. The call-and-response style of singing is easy for anyone to follow. Timing can be fluid with the sound of the manjira

cymbals gently keeping rhythm along with the tabla drums and their unique resonant bass tones. The musical gathering is a multi-sensory experience that can be part of a eucharistic service.

We have used songs in multiple Asian languages – Hindi, Urdu, Farsi, Sanskrit, Tamil and Sinhala. We intersperse English translations so that a mixed congregation can participate. I love to see my English friends feeling at ease in colorful Asian attire and playing Asian instruments with such authenticity. We have used the ancient Christian tradition of Visio Divina – “sacred seeing” – and meditated on artwork of South Asian Christian artists. Other times we have used storytelling through drama instead of a sermon-meditation, and entered into a time of discussion and prayer. The possibilities for variety are endless.



What began as an attempt to redeem a cultural expression of worship within me has given way to developing Satsang style worship as a collaborative venture with English Christians. Sharing one another's culture in worship breaks down barriers, forges unity, and gives value to the foreigner in our midst. With centuries of Western cultural prominence in Christianity, we as South Asian diaspora believers have an opportunity to redress this imbalance and bring forth cultural reconciliation through worship. When we collaborate with others, we can keep a critical eye on new ventures.

London's largest migrant community is made of South Asians from all major world faiths. Today, in 2023, we have an Indian Hindu Prime Minister in the United Kingdom. I think it would be lovely to bless our political leaders and this nation with a Satsang at a Parliamentary Prayer Breakfast.

Come, Lord Jesus!

