



Of books and ocean song

'Beautiful and sumptuously tropical,' said Mark Twain once of this island. For centuries, masters of wordcraft and art-lovers alike have flocked to Sri Lanka, to find inspiration, a resting place and fall in love with this land, its people and its way of life. Pablo Neruda, D.H. Lawrence, Chekhov, they have all stopped by to taste tropical paradise. When the Galle Literary Festival unfolded last week, it opened our doors once more to those contemporary greats of the literary world, many of them hailing from the subcontinent. The festival – a celebration of books and all things artsy, gave these writers an opportunity to sample a tiny piece of paradise and allowed us to acquaint ourselves with their insights, inspirations and personalities a little more intimately.....

By Fiona Wright

Galle is a city of disparities. The ancient fort, built by the invading Dutch, embraces a slow and languid town of figs and frangipanis, sweeping colonial villas, mosques and churches dipping and cresting with the hills and hideaway cafes and galleries. Outside, the bus terminal teems traffic as mashed and confused as kottu, the buildings cram up against each other. Fish and fruit stalls, and shoe repairmen line the streets. Such a city brings to life the deep and tangled issues involved in any literary festival, but especially in one which explores English-language literature in a previously colonised land.

The Galle Literary Festival occupied the city, from January 10 to 14, and saw an influx of writers, both Sri Lankan and foreign, and visitors, publishers and press. An exciting and stimulating event, quite unlike anything held before in this country, the festival was an examination of writing and culture in and about Sri Lanka and South Asia, and a showcase of diverse and dynamic writers.

As a platform to show Sri Lanka to the world, the festival was nothing short of impressive. The venues chosen were incredibly beautiful examples of Galle's architecture, from the refined and airy Sun House, to the Halle de Galle, in the shadow of the old city gate and those built by Geoffrey Bawa, The Lighthouse Hotel and Lunuganga Estate. Participants included such bastions of Sri Lankan writing as Yasmine Gooneratne, Carl Muller and Arthur C. Clarke, as well as a range of newer

and emerging local writers. The big international names, of course, were there; notably William Dalrymple, Suketu Mehta and Booker prize winner Kiran Desai. The festival was undoubtedly high quality, and fascinating for all who attended.

The people who attended, however, were a revealing crowd. Nury Vittachi, a prolific Colombo-born writer, conducted a quick audience survey before his session on Sri Lankan writing. By his quick reckoning, the audience was divided fairly evenly between people living in, and people visiting Sri Lanka. Nonetheless, the pricing of the events acted very much like the Galle Fort wall, allowing only the privileged in. Feature events- including literary lunches and dinners with big-name guests- were ticketed at \$US 50 per person, a price which excludes almost all of the local population, not to mention many tourists. While other events did have a graduated price scheme for local residents, students and international guests, the cost of attending a variety of events, over several days would quickly add up.

And this is the heart of the problem. Literature and cultural festivals should belong to everyone. Art should be a part of every day life. But the very nature of English-language literature in Sri Lanka precludes this. Although some level of English is spoken by many, if not most Sri Lankans, the level of fluency required to access and appreciate the literature can only be acquired by the well educated. Although English is intended as a bridging language between the Sinhalese and Tamil culture, events like this show that it can simply lock both out.

That is not to say that the Galle Literary Festival was, and will continue to be, instrumental in bringing more tourists to Galle, which is all the more important now that visitors to the area have dropped so dramatically in the wake of the tsunami and continuing civil war. Even though the buildings showcased during the festival overwhelmingly belonged to its founder, property developer Geoffrey Dobbs, an increase in tourism in Galle will benefit the greater community and economy. This is art with a heart, and literature as an instrument of development and change.

These issues were always simmering in the moist weather, and tossed around by audience members every evening. They drank gin-and-tonics, with a sense of irony intact, and watched films, poetry readings, debates and a deliciously unexpected drag show. As the festival progressed, audience and participants alike grew more definite in their praise.

Especially delightful were the panels on local writing and local writers. Expatriate authors, such as Vittachi and Yasmine Gooneratne, provided a great introduction and entry point for those unfamiliar with Sri Lankan literature, but the real highlights came from lesser known, local writers such as David Blacker, Pradeep Jeganathan and Lal Medawattagerdara. As well as discussing, and reading from their own work, these writers provided a startling exploration of the issues that affect Sri Lanka literature- and Sri Lanka and her people- today.

The great divides caused by colonialism and what was euphemistically referred to as "the troubles" were an obvious point of discussion; so too the tsunami, as a cause of some kind of national stocktaking, and deep examination of what makes Sri Lankans who they are. Most interesting, however, was the discussion on the English language in Sri Lanka, and whether the development of an idiomatic 'Sri Lankan English' is likely, or even possible. Medawattagerdara in particular used his book, *The Window Cleaners' Soul* to demonstrate how the usage and relationship of English to different kinds of people has a direct, and often damning, influence on their lives and

understanding of the world. The Sri Lankan identity, and purpose of small Sri Lankan literature were also subject to hot debate.

Nonetheless, the other style of panels presented, perhaps catering more to the international crowd, were largely focussed on travel writing, and writing from the diaspora. Although the calibre of writers included here- from Dalrymple and Desai, to Australian authors Christopher Kremmer and Libby Southwell- was exceptional, many of these sessions discussed a kind of exotic and 'outsider' kind of literature. Although interesting, there was little new ground covered by these sessions.

The Galle Literary Festival is the kind of festival that has been growing ever more popular and lucrative in the West over the past decade. The past few years have seen such festivals expand into newer, more unusual locations, such as Indonesia and South Africa, and go a long way towards promoting both the locations, and the commonalities and similarities between readers and writers of English-language literature, as well as the cultures that support them.



And compared to these international events, the Galle Literary Festival performed admirably. It was particularly refreshing to notice the way that audiences and participants mingled and interacted, open and friendly, which is unusual for such events. It is a remarkable achievement that so many interesting and entertaining writers were attracted to the bill, of what was a first time, experimental event. Testament to its success, perhaps, the festival is already confirmed to be taking place again next year, with authors such as Rohinton Mistry and Vikram Seth interested in attending.

All the issues raised about the appropriateness of this event in a country such as Sri Lanka are questions that are a part of Sri Lanka's soul. They are questions that were held up to intense scrutiny and minute debate by the finest minds and writers of this country, while that natural beauty of the area and people cut through with a disarming smile. Literature, and literary events, always walk a delicate line, all the more so in countries struggling with burdens as large as Sri Lanka's, and the Galle Literary Festival did it with nothing short of aplomb.

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