

Final Report

Impact Assessment of the ‘Thriloka’ Drama in five Selected Districts

Contracted by Search for Common Ground



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Introduction

‘Thriloka’ is a 14-episode tele-drama that was telecast on Independent Television Network (ITN) from December 15 2018 to March 16 2019. The drama depicts the story of a multi ethnic coastal village, at where at the beginning all ethnicities live peacefully. The youth in the village prepare for a football match and has a team with players from different ethnicities. A Sinhalese youth gets injured while learning to drive with a Muslim friend. A group of people frame the

accident as something deliberately planned by the Muslim youth. Some of the youth who used to live peacefully with each other start to share false information about this incident targeting Muslims. A couple of politicians use this incident to create issues within the village for their political gains. Eventually, people in the village begin to suspect people from other ethnicities and their relationships become hostile. However, they later realize that it is only a few individuals that create issues among each other, and that there is, in fact, no real problem between the Muslim and Sinhalese communities. In the end, they work together and win the football match. At the conclusion of the series, everyone in the village comes together leaving their ethnic and religious differences behind.

The impact assessment of the ‘Thriloka’ drama was conducted focusing on following key areas;

- To understand the knowledge change among viewer circle members through watching Thriloka drama;
- To identify the changes occurred in viewer circle members’ attitude/perception by watching Thriloka Drama series and,
- To explore the behavioural changes or responses the viewer circle members are expressing as a result of watching Thriloka drama series.

The impact assessment was conducted based on resonance and response which comes under the 3R framework of the Search for Common Ground (SFCG). The participants understanding on key messages and their views on the characters and narrative of the drama in relation to everyday realities were also examined. The overall reaction of the participants regarding the tele- drama was assessed along with any barriers they would have faced while watching the ‘Thriloka’ series.

In order assess the impact of the tele-drama, a team of researchers from the Centre for Poverty Analysis (CEPA) conducted two viewers’ circles at the start and conclusion of the ‘Thriloka’ series in the selected five districts. The viewers’ circles were held in Galle, Ratnapura, Kalutara, Badulla and Kurunegala districts. In each district, 2 viewers’ circles were conducted with a group of youth and a group of adults which included a few community leaders. The selection of participants was done by a field coordinator from the respective area and that person was instructed to get 25 people to each of the circles and there should be no

discrimination based on their gender, ethnicity and social status. The field coordinator informed the potential participants about the date and the venue of the viewers' circle a week before.

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Table 1: Composition of the viewers' circle by location and age group

First Round of Viewers' Circles

Objectives, Questions and Responses

The main objective of the first viewers' circle was to understand how participants think about society in a broader perspective and to also capture their initial responses to the tele-drama. The information collected during the first viewers' circle was used as the baseline for the

District	Location	Number of participants			
		1 st Viewers' Circle		2 nd Viewers' Circle	
		Adult	Youth	Adult	Youth
Galle	Richwarn Hotel, Elpitiya	24	19	19	16
Kurunegala	Koralampoththa Temple, Pannala, Kuliypitiya	41	21	16	14
Badulla	Rideemaliyadda Cultural Centre, Badulla	28	22	17	14
Ratnapura	Vidhyaloka Higher Education Center, Kalawana	22	26	16	18
Kalutara	Maha Ingiriya Community Centre, Ingiriya	21	22	17	16

assessment of knowledge change, attitude/ perception change and behavioural change among viewers. Another objective of the first viewers' circle was to establish a strong bond with the participants and convince them to watch the drama and be an integral part of the viewers' circles.

Participants were randomly paired-off and were asked to share something personal about themselves which include questions such as telling their respective partner about their favorite tele-dramas and their reasons for liking it. Afterward each group member had to share what was discussed with their partner with the rest of the audience.

Following the above exercise, two questions were asked prior to screening the pilot and first episodes of the 'Thriloka' tele-drama for the first viewers' circle. This was done so as to have an overall understanding of the participants' views on issues the country is facing, through which we were able to understand how the viewers' circle framed their perceptions of the tele-drama.

What are the three key issues that the country is facing at the moment?

Everyone in the viewers' circle was given three separate cards on which to write three key issues they feel that the country is facing at the moment along with their proposed solutions to these issues. This particular question was asked in order to identify whether the viewers' circle identified ethnic and religious conflicts as major issues that the country is facing presently.

While both the adult and youth groups identified political and economic issues as the main issues in the country, ethnic tension was identified as a reason by the youth group alone. The adult group on the other hand identified the third most rated issue was the drug problem in the country, for which they proposed village level drug prevention committees and the education of youth on harmful health and social effects of drug usage as viable solutions. The adult group in Badulla however, highlighted the fact that ethnic tension and conflict is a major issue in the country.

The youth group unanimously agreed that ethnic tension and conflict was a pressing issue that needed to be discussed. However, this was the third most pressing issue faced by Sri Lanka after political and economic issues. Interestingly, there were a difference in the way how the Galle youth framed ethnic issue/ tensions. A participant from the discussions said "Our Sinhala majority has been outnumbered by the Muslims and it has become a national issue now". There were no opposing views expressed from other participants to his views and when the participants were asked to suggest solutions to the ethnic issue, the same group suggested that we need to give the due respect to the majority's religion and culture while minorities can follow their respective religions and cultures.

The final ranking provided by these groups on issues that were most relevant to Sri Lanka were as follows;

1. Political
2. Economic
3. Ethnic/Conflict

Given below are the issues identified by the youth groups and proposed the solutions in their group presentations:

Table 2: Key issues identified by youth groups.

Issue	Proposed solutions
<p>1. Political</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Political instability • Lack of educated people in the parliament and other political bodies • Corruption • Lack of political vision among the leaders 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enhance political literacy of the youth and the public which would help them to make informed political decisions • Establish a mechanism which would allow only those qualified to enter and hold political positions
<p>2. Economic</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unemployment • Poverty and inequality • High cost of living • No proper economic policy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developing an economic policy which will continue irrespective of the political changes in the country • Job market oriented educations system

<p>3. Ethnic tension</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tensions among different ethnic groups • Threat to the Sinhala majority from the minority groups • Racism 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Grass roots level committees need to be established representing all ethnic and religious community to address the ethnic tensions. • Cultural exchange programmes among school children from different ethnicities
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What are the most popular tele dramas that are currently televised on national television?

The above question was asked to obtain an understanding about television consumption patterns among the participants. There was a clear difference in consumption patterns of the youth and adult groups. The youth group (inclusive of male and female participants) watch tele dramas frequently while there was lack of interest by the adult males compared to adult females who showed a high interest in watching tele dramas. The tele dramas that both groups preferred were relatively the same. The most popular tele dramas were identified as *Deveni Inima*, *Maharaja Kansa*, *Sakuge Kathawa* and *Wes*. When the distribution of tele dramas across television channels were calculated, it was identified that 90 % of the tele dramas viewed by youth and adults are telecast on private TV channels such as *Derana*, *Swarnawahini* and *Hiru TV*.

Prior to conducting the first viewers' circle, two episodes of the 'Thriloka' tele-drama had been telecast. When the CEPA team inquired if they knew of the 'Thriloka' tele-drama, only three participants had heard of the tele-drama and while two participants had watched the first two episodes before we screened it at the discussion.

Initial Reaction to the Tele-drama

Each participant was given a card to write the first thing that came to their mind after watching the drama.

Youth Viewers' Circle

The youth were mainly attracted to the entertainment aspects of the tele-drama. They mentioned that they enjoyed the tele-drama mainly due to its interesting narrative style. Youth participants highlighted the fact that this tele-drama seems to be somewhat different and creative compared to current tele-dramas on television. A majority of the youth mentioned that the drama talks about the unity and harmony among Sinhalese, Tamil and Muslim communities in the country.

Adult Viewers' Circle

A majority of adults' (80 % to 85 % of the adult group) initial reaction to the tele-drama was of the unity and harmony narrative, which was identified as an integral factor for a better Sri Lankan future. Unlike the youth groups, there were criticisms by this group about certain scenes in the first episode. One respondent from Kalutara viewers' circle stated "in our culture, you need to follow the customs and rituals at your wedding and there is a special place for the *poruwa* ceremonies. But it is a disrespect to our culture when Samantha went to find his friend while leaving his bride alone at the Poruwa". Same sentiments were shared by the respondents from Kurunegala and Badulla discussions.

Information Sources on News and Current Affairs

As the drama highlights the fact that serious social issues can take place as a result of depending on non-verified news sources and 'fake news', participants were requested to rank their favourite information sources. Adults rated television as their leading news source but majority of the youth said they are mainly dependent on Facebook to get their news. However, private television channels are the leading and popular stations among both groups as a news source.

Memories of Persons from different Ethnicities and Religions

The discussion with the first viewers' circle in all five districts ended with a question which asked members of both the adult and youth groups about an unforgettable memory they had with a person outside their own ethnicity and religion.

Participants were grouped and asked to discuss among their group members an unforgettable memory they had with a person outside their ethnicity and religion, and to then, share it with the other groups. The adult participant groups in Kurunegala and Ratnapura had more interactions with other ethnic and religious communities compared to Galle, Kurunegala and Badulla. A participant from Kurunegala adult discussion said

“I faced a similar situation to what happened in the first episode in the drama. In 1995, I was working at a shop and I had an argument with a Muslim guy. He suddenly started to beat me and I couldn’t fight with him as he was a *big-made* guy. I screamed and another Muslim guy from the next shop came and saved me. Then he told the other Muslim guy, even though we both go to the same mosque, what you have done here is wrong. That day, I felt that humanity is above all our ethnic and religious differences.”

In comparison, the youth participants had very little interactions with Muslim and Tamil communities

At the end of the first viewers circle, participants were requested to watch the next episodes of the tele-drama which were shown weekly on ITN. This was so that the research team will be able to hold a second round of viewers’ circle incorporating their ideas and perceptions of the tele-drama. Adult participants were given note books to record their responses and feedback of the tele-drama while the youth were asked to share their views on ‘Thriloka’ Facebook group.

Second Round of Viewers’ Circles

A few weeks after the conclusion of the first viewers’ circle, a researcher from CEPA contacted all the participants and reminded them to watch the tele-drama weekly, as there will be a second discussion on the tele-drama within the next few months. As such, the second round of the viewers’ circles were conducted in the first week of March, by which time twelve episodes were telecast. The last two episodes (13,14) of the tele-drama were screened at the second viewers’ circle after being granted permission from the SFCG. The same participants from the first viewers’ circle were invited for the second round and the discussions were held at the same locations of the first round.

Credibility of Information Sources on News and Current Affairs

At the first viewers' circle, a question regarding information sources was asked. A follow-up question to this was asked at the second viewers' circle, which asked the participants to comment on the reliability of their news sources.

For a majority of the participants, television was considered the most trusted news source among adults and think that 70-75% of information reported on television is accurate. They mentioned that they rely heavily on private television channels as the government stations have become significantly politicized.

The youth respondents who identified Facebook as their leading news source stated that despite it being common to see 'fake news' shared, they can always check the accuracy by comparing what they see on Facebook with other news sources. A youth respondent from Mahiyanganaya speaking on social media and false information stated, "I am not saying social media is the main reason for racism and ethnic conflicts in the country, but if youth had used social media wisely, we would have been able to minimize the damage of *Digana* riots. I am glad that the 'Thriloka' drama showed us something similar and how youth are being misled by false information.

Questions and Responses

After the final two episodes were screened, the CEPA research team asked those in the second viewers' circle questions with regard to the series and their perceptions of the tele-drama.

What comes to the mind after watching all the episodes?

According to the cards collected from the participants, 82 % of youth participants and 84% of adult participants stated that the first thing that registered in their minds after watching the tele-drama was the importance of living in harmony with people from different ethnicities and religious.

State one thing that you liked and did not like about the drama?

This probing question was asked gather more insights on participants' views about the tele-drama and its impact. There is a strong similarity in the things that the youth and adult groups enjoyed about the tele-drama. Both groups stated they liked that a strong message was given in the drama through a creative format. They also liked that the drama had a very simple narrative which was very easy for them to follow. It should be noted, that some adults participants did not like the use of a Football match as they think that a Cricket match or Volleyball game would have suited the local context better.

What changes would you make to tele-drama?

Both groups were asked to have a group discussion about changes they would take to improve the tele-drama. The adult group stressed that the tele-drama needed to include child characters to make the tele-drama more appealing to them. This was because, as they stated, despite parents playing a vital role in family decisions, young children and teenagers have control over the remote control and are mainly attracted to tele-dramas which have leading child roles.

In the adult viewers' circles, certain female participators mentioned that they couldn't watch the drama regularly mainly due to the fact that they have to work in the kitchen from 8.00 pm to 8.30 pm. All the female participants agreed that it would have been better if the drama is telecast after 8.30 pm. Another key change that the adults wished to see was to make the tele-drama more culturally relevant and in par with the Sri Lankan context.

The youth participants highlighted that more people would have been attracted to the tele-drama if it had been telecast on a private TV channel. In comparison, adults believed that ITN is the ideal channel to telecast a drama like 'Thriloka'.

In the discussions held in Badulla and Galle, the youth participants stated that it was evident from the first couple of episodes that how the drama would end. They believe that the drama would have been more successful, if they had more curiosity as to how the tele-drama would play out from the beginning to the end. They compared the 'Thriloka' tele-drama to 'Koombiyo', a recently concluded tele-drama.

Synthesis of Findings

Knowledge Change among Viewers

It was evident from both youth and adult discussions that there was a positive change of knowledge among them regarding the reasons for ethnic and religious conflicts in the country. One such positive knowledge change was that they identified certain individuals and groups as those who create problems while most of the public do not have issues with people from other ethnicities. A female participant from Kurunegala viewers' circle elaborating on this said "this drama provided us knowledge on what are the main reasons for ethnic issues in the country and through the drama, I learnt how these things are happening in the country".

A significant number of adults also mentioned that the drama reiterated important aspects related to reconciliation and social cohesion. The drama portrays how politicians intentionally create issues among different ethnic groups for their own survival. Participants mentioned that the opportunistic role of the politicians were properly portrayed in the drama. Even though was not new knowledge to the participants, the drama further reinforced their existing knowledge about these issues, and that these issues were valid.

Changes in attitudes and perceptions

Though there were notable changes of knowledge among the viewers, the findings show that the change of knowledge did not indicate at a positive change in attitudes and perceptions. A youth participant from Badulla said "Thriloka doesn't show the negative things that are being done by Muslims against the majority Sinhalese". After watching the 11th episode, a female participant from Badulla said "certain Muslim groups are trying to control our Sinhala youth and we should not allow it to happen".

Majority of the youth and adults mentioned that the tele-drama highlighted the importance of living in harmony with all ethnic and religious groups. However, the dominant perspective of the majority Sinhalese needing to have control over ethnic minorities, did not change as a result of the drama.

In comparison to the first round of the viewers' circle, there was a decline of participation in most of the discussions despite the repeated reminders sent by the CEPA team and the field research coordinator. The research team was informed within the Kurunegala discussions, a

participant had spread a rumour that the drama is biased towards Muslims and asked some participants not to attend the second viewers' circle. This is also indicative that certain participants viewed the drama as a threat to their dominant views on minority ethnic groups.

Limitations

The active participation of the viewers' circles were critical for the success of this study. As the participants were invited on a random basis from the selected areas, there were participants who could not watch the drama due to a few logistical and geographical issues. For example, there were participants who did not have access to Televisions. In Ingirya (Kalutara) and Rideemaliyadda (Badulla), people had technical difficulties with connectivity to ITN.

Even though participants were reminded to watch the tele-drama throughout up until the second round of viewers' circles, some participants had only watched a few episodes. The reasons behind their inability watch the drama was mainly due to their workload and the preference of their family members to watch the more popular mega tele-dramas.

The most difficult to track is behavioural change, mainly because each individuals' interactions with the other varies and also due to the short duration of the assessment.

Recommendations

- Include child characters in future tele- dramas to attract young children
- Change airtime from 7.30 pm to 8.30 pm or 9.30 pm.
- Youth believe that a future drama of this nature should be telecast on a private channel while the adults believe ITN is the better channel.
- Attract the youth by incorporating more creative elements such as embedding the ideas of reconciliation and social cohesion in popular narratives and plot lines.
- As noted in the study, technical difficulties were experienced in accessing ITN channel. Therefore, in future it is recommended that connectivity issues are taken in to consideration outreach activities.

Conclusion

It is evident that the majority of participants of the viewers' circles had a positive feedback and reaction to the drama. However, it does not necessarily lead to immediate attitudinal or behavioural changes. One of the reasons is that the evaluation was done a couple of weeks before the public telecast was concluded. The notions such as reconciliation and social cohesion require much larger incubation period for people to absorb, contemplate and thereafter, practice in their everyday interactions. While people were very satisfied with the narrative style and the way in which the story unfolded, the ability to 'read' between the lines was not so prevalent. This may not necessarily be a fault of the tele-drama itself but due to the overcrowding of the popular dramas which adopt a very linear narrative style and simple plot line. While 'Thriloka' may present an outlier among the popular mainstream tele-dramas, the positive reactions of the viewers' point to the potential of such a tele-drama to address rather challenging socio-political issues.

Annex

Agenda and Questionnaire for first viewers' circle

Agenda

The main objective of the first round of viewers' circle is to get an understanding on how do the participants think about the society in general and also to capture their initial responses to the drama. The information that is collected in the first circle would serve as the baseline for the assessment of knowledge change, attitude/ perception change and behavioral change among viewers. Another objective of the first viewers' circle is to establish a strong bond with the participants and convince them to watch the drama and be an integral part of the viewers' circles. Following agenda will be used for both Youth and Adult viewers' circles.

5.00 pm - 5.30 pm - Introduction of the participants.

Participants will be paired randomly and asked to share their basic information and the favorite drama and the reason for liking it with their respective partners. Then each one has to share their partner's information in front of the audience. This would not only help us to identify the participants, but also to get some basic understanding of their television viewing habits. For example, if the majority are watching a tele drama that is aired in a different channel at the same time as Thriloka, we need to think of some alternative ways to convince them.

5.30 pm – 6 pm

Two questions will be asked in this section.

Question 1 – What are the 3 key issues that the country is facing at the moment?

Everyone is given a piece of paper to write the 3 issues and they will have to make a paper rocket with that paper. Then they will be asked to throw it and everyone has to collect a rocket that is thrown by someone else. Each person has to say they 3 issues that are written in the paper (rocket).

Question 2 – How do you come to a conclusion about something that is happening in your neighborhood?

This question is would help us to get some insights on how do people access to information and on what basis to they believe the information in order to make their decisions. According to the drama, the main reason for the misunderstanding among different communities is the reliance on no-verified information/ fake news. We will be able to connect this question with the last viewers' circle.

6 pm- 7pm Screening of the first two episodes and discussion

It would be important to screen at least the first two episodes as at least 3-4 episodes will be aired by the time we have the first viewers' circle. After screening of the episodes, a brief questionnaire will be shared with the audience to capture their initial responses about the drama. These are basic question to understand participants' demographic information. This will be followed by a discussion focused on 2 key questions.

Question 1- What is the first thing that comes to your mind after watching the drama?

We will give a card to each person to write the answer. They will have to write it by using no more than two words. Then we will ask everyone to share what's in their cards.

Question 2- How do you relate the story with your daily interactions?

We will facilitate the discussion to make people share their views on whether they see any relevance in the drama with their day to day interactions. Probing questions like what is your favorite scene, will be asked to get more insights from the participants.

7 pm- 7.35 pm Group Activity

We are proposing two option. We can choose one out of the two.

Option 1

The participants will be divided into groups of 5 each. Then they will be asked to draw an unforgettable memory they had with a person or a group outside their ethnicity or religion. Instead of using the words like reconciliation or co-existence, this would be an ideal way for us to get an idea about the nature of inter-ethnic relationships among them.

Option 2

We will list the 5 key issues that the country is facing now based on their responses to question 1. Then participants will be divided into a group of 5 and each group is given 1 key issue. Each team is required to creatively portray their proposed solution to the issue that is assigned to them. They can draw a picture with their possible solution.

Each group will be given 10 minutes to prepare and 5 minutes to do their play.

7.35 pm -7.45 pm – Closing Remarks

CEPA facilitator will summarize the day's proceedings and emphasize what is expected from the participants in the coming weeks. Participants will be requested to write their responses after each episode in the diaries given to them. Members of the youth circles will be asked to register in the 'Thriloka' Facebook group. They will be given a tablet computer at the session to register and interested participants from the adults' group is also invited to join the group.

[Agenda of second viewers' circle](#)

Draft Agenda

2.00 pm – 2. 15 pm – What do you think about the credibility of your main news sources?

In the first round, we asked the question, 'How do you come to a conclusion about something that is happening in your neighborhood?' and with this question we collect their views on the credibility of the media that they mentioned in the first round.

2.15 pm - 3.00 pm – Screening of the last two episodes of the documentary film

3.00 pm – 3.15 pm- What’s the first thing that came to your mind after watching all the episodes?

In the first round, we asked the same question after screening the first two episodes. The same question will be asked after watching all the episodes in order to examine whether there have been any changes in their views, perceptions about the drama over last couple of months.

3.15 pm – 3.30 pm – What is the thing that you liked most and one thing that you did not like about the drama?

This question will examine both positive and negative (if any) outcomes of the drama. There will be follow up questions based on their response.

3.30 pm- 4.00 pm- How do you relate the story with the recent similar incidents that occurred in the country?

Do you think that the drama has any impact on the way you understand and react to similar incidents in the future?

We will ask them to reflect on recent incidents ethnic and religious conflicts/ tensions happened in the country and whether the reasons for those issues are similar or different to what is portrayed in the drama.

4.00 pm- 4.20 pm - If you are given a chance give a different ending to the story, how would you do it?

The participants will be divided in to groups of 5 each and they will be given 20 minutes prepare to discuss and come up with an ending that they think is more powerful.