

Servings of Kottu with a taste of Moju

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Bloggers in Sri Lanka can be called many things, but dull bunch they are not.

In a month that saw some of the worst violations of the Ceasefire Agreement, the banning of the *Da Vinci Code* and calls for a concerted effort at internet activism, sites such as Kottu² and Moju³ were abuzz with ideas and salvos of rapid-fire responses as bloggers and commentators alike jostled with each other to get their opinions noticed.

Kottu aggregates just over 100 blogs written by, but not necessarily for, Sri Lankans. Moju is a group blog that belongs to no one in particular, created and maintained by InfoShare⁴, that provides a space for anyone who registers to air their opinions and ideas. Kottu is a window into the world of personal blogs on topics ranging from personal interests to politics, while Moju features writing or links to writing that, on average, deals with more serious topics.

Moju saw plenty of responses to news of the mysterious closure of CBNSat in early June, though less than news of the banning of the *Da Vinci Code* a few weeks earlier. Comments on the posted issue almost inevitably fizzle out into personal diatribes or flame wars. This is a feature of Moju in particular, where hawks and doves are in an eternal struggle to come out victorious.

Interestingly, not a single comment is to be found on a post flagging a Free Media Movement (FMM) statement in response to the re-instatement of the Sri Lanka Press Council. It is almost as if press and media freedom are issues that are worthy of comment or interest when they hit closer to home – denial cable TV or stifling the choice of Hollywood movies – and don't really capture the attention of bloggers when they occur in the “abstract” – at a macro-policy & legal level.

Although a similar report sparked a massive debate on Moju, a report on a fact-finding visit to investigate the Welikanda killings received scant attention. It's interesting on the other hand to note the increasingly vocal calls for internet activism on both individual blogs featured on Kottu and on a number of posts in Moju.

“Enough” by Mala is a case in point⁵.

“I am not calling for something that involves violence in any way. But I am calling for something strong and unwavering.”

¹ The writer is a Senior Researcher at the Centre for Policy Alternatives, Colombo, Sri Lanka and Head of ICT and Peacebuilding at InfoShare also based in Colombo. He has an Advanced Masters in Conflict Resolution and often wonders how it can be used in Sri Lanka.

² www.kottu.org

³ www.moju.lk

⁴ www.info-share.org

⁵ <http://moju.lk/2006/06/16/enough/>

Mala's post generated 65 posts at the time of writing this article. Many were supportive of Mala's frustration while others pointed to the dangers of armchair activism and said:

"Why aren't there a thousand people, no ten thousand people, actually a hundred thousand people outside Temple Trees celebrating this diversity and pressing home the point that bombing the north is definitely not part of the solution."

The blog Deane's Dimension⁶ puts the comments to Mala's post into sharp relief when she contextualizes what it is to "do something"

"The various types of things any activist or a group of activists can 'do' are limited only by their individual and collective imagination. What is important though is to clearly define what any such group seeks to achieve- in clear, specific, unambiguous terms. Broad, generic desires such as say, 'peace' are very hard to not only achieve but to measure success, no matter how sincere that desire may be."

David Blacker, a regular on Moju, in saying:

"The short months here on Moju have been quite amusing. I've never actually been called a government stooge, a Tiger sympathiser, an NGO-backside kissing peacenik, a war criminal, as well as a jaded defeatist in such a short period before. Roll on."

brings out something that is immediately obvious in Moju (but also in comment threads in individual blogs featured on Kottu) – that passions and tempers run high and hidden behind pseudonyms, insults and diatribes almost always take precedence over a more dispassionate analysis of ideas and opinions. In this light, Sittingnut, another regular on Moju, pointed the group's attention to the need for "definite answers" to questions such as "what kind of peace do you desire?" and the need for "a peace that allows maximum political freedom and justice to everyone in Sri Lanka".

Mala's meeting actually happened – though it took someone else to take the lead and suggest a time and place⁷. That it *did* happen is testimony to the power of the web and the SL blogosphere in particular to sow the seeds of what may hopefully become a more powerful activist movement than spans both online and real worlds.

Kottu is a much more eclectic site than Moju, precisely because it aggregates such a vast number of blogs on Sri Lanka. On any given day, there are posts ranging from the serious to the not so serious. Blogs that are updated frequently obviously generate more interest on Kottu - covering issues such as telecommunications regulations through the posts on Lirneasia's blog⁸ through to the welcome news of a book club started by Barefoot Gallery as posted on Nazreen Sansoni's⁹ blog. Indi Samarajiva's¹⁰ blog deserves special mention. Indi's provocative bacchanalia parading as astute

⁶ <http://deaned.blogspot.com/>

⁷ <http://moju.lk/2006/06/27/the-enough-meeting-anyone/>

⁸ <http://www.lirneasia.net/>

⁹ <http://nazreen.wordpress.com/>

¹⁰ <http://indi.ca/>

observations are always a pleasure to read, even if, as is often the case, one disagrees with what he has to say. Judging by comment threads each post of Indi's blog generates, there is no dearth of people who use his blog to air their own take on the issues he highlights. A recent post of his that attracted a lot of attention flagged the idea of a united Sri Lanka:

*If you want a United Sri Lanka then you want to live with Tamil people. It means that you want them as neighbors, co-workers and friends. It means that you want to see their language and hear their music and eat their food and do all the fun and annoying things that come with living together. It means that they deserve the same security, rights and common decency as any fellow citizen. If you believe in a United Sri Lanka you must believe that Tamils and Muslims and Burghers and half Canadian American parayas are your countrymen. You don't have to believe in diversity or multi-culturalism or anything so ethereal. You just have to look around and realize that you're surrounded. Either burn your churches, temples, newspapers and schools to a pure ash or grow up and f***** deal.*

But the conversations on Kottu are not just on politics - far from it.

Kottu also features daily rants on theatre, art, poetry, IT, higher studies, puberty, pre-puberty blues, post-puberty blues, love, lack of love, social revolutions, peace, media, democracy, fascism, liberty, religion, music, ear rings, tattoos, books, reviews and a huge array of photos from Flickr that capture moments both private and public of the varied lives of bloggers.

Blogs like Voices of Reconciliation¹¹ jostle for attention with the Voices in My Head¹². From personal rants on the top 10 Extremists in Sri Lanka¹³ to more thoughtful analyses of Sri Lanka's socio-political dynamics¹⁴, it's really difficult to sift through what good and what's not on Kottu. Inevitably, one ends up visiting some interesting posts in the off-chance that other posts on the same blog are equally or more interesting.

Kottu and Moju aren't representative of anything other than individual voices featured on a single website. There aren't any blogs, posts or comments in Sinhala and Tamil, which is deeply indicative of the limited reach of both websites to inform and influence opinions beyond those comfortable with English as a language of expression and communication.

That said, Kottu and Moju showcase a diversity of opinion that one would be very hard pressed to find in any mainstream media in Sri Lanka. The voices are overwhelmingly young, vibrant and passionate.

As Electra¹⁵, a regular and one of the more eloquent bloggers in Sri Lanka points out:

¹¹ www.voicesofpeace.lk

¹² <http://caffeinaholic.blogspot.com/>

¹³ <http://landlikenoother.blogspot.com/2006/07/top-10-extremist-of-sri-lanka.html>

¹⁴ <http://transcurrents.com/tamiliana/>

¹⁵ <http://electra.blogsome.com/>

“...but for what it’s worth, our opinions need to be out there, reaching out to a community larger than that which has access to and interest in the sri lankan blogosphere. More people need to see this. More people need to hear us.”

I couldn’t have said it better.