# POSTCARDS AND STAMPS AS PEACEBUILDING TOOLS IN SRI LANKA: A CASE REVIEW

**Project title:** Kiyawanna Muddara: Send a Card and Bring a Smile
**Implementing organization:** Malwaththage Samantha Niroshana Peiris
**Central focus:** Mental health and social cohesion during the COVID-19 pandemic.
**Country/region:** Sri Lanka, southern and western districts of Rathnapura, Kegalle, and Puttalam
**Grant amount:** 5,000 EUR
**Date of approval:** January 2021
**Closing date:** November 2021
**Main activities:** Send a postcard with a message of encouragement.
**Three lessons:**

1. Creative approaches can be a powerful and practical peacebuilding tool.
2. The postcard writing campaign illustrates vital links between mental health and social cohesion.
3. Art-based communication approaches can encourage solidarity and empathy in a fractured society.

## INTRODUCING THE CHALLENGE

Sri Lanka faces unraveling social cohesion and the possibility of new and different forms of conflict. Even with the end of lengthy and bitter conflict in 2009, grievances between the Sinhala and Tamil communities are largely unresolved. Islamophobia (a different matter) is rising. Ethnic and religious strife in the island nation is thus far from over, with a fragile peace marred by simmering tensions and periodic violence. The COVID-19 crisis which has brought isolation for many, and an uneven public health response, has further damaged intercommunal relations and added new mental health challenges.

While state-led efforts to address Sri Lanka's fraught history have fallen short, civil society actors have found innovative ways to promote peace at the grassroots. Kiyawana Muddara, one such grass roots organization, uses the study of postage stamps as a vehicle for dialogue and reconciliation. The group's "Send a Card and Bring a Smile" campaign, conducted with AHA! Project grant encouraged participants to write postcards and explore a rarely considered art form—the postage stamp—as a reflection of shared values and national identity. By sending affirming messages and gaining a greater appreciation of Sri Lanka's history and diversity through stamps, these leaders sought to counter the pandemic-related trends of poor mental health and social fragmentation. This case review highlights Kiyawana Muddara's unique approach to peacebuilding, and explores applicable lessons for other practitioners across South Asia.

AHA! small grant recipients work to mitigate specific impacts of COVID-19 in South Asia, focusing on threats to social cohesion, the spread of hate speech and misinformation, and the pandemic's unique religious and gender dimensions. Kiyawana Muddara's campaign, and similar initiatives offer significant potential to contribute to a more peaceful and inclusive Sri Lankan society.

## CONTEXT FOR THE CASE REVIEW

Fallout from COVID-19 emergencies in Sri Lanka include increased isolation, widened divides between and within communities, and a large increase in mental health problems. While this is true in many societies, it is particularly concerning in Sri Lanka, as the nation's history of ethnic and religious violence—some of it very recent—point to a significant potential for increased alienation and conflict.

For decades, the brutal struggle between government forces—dominated by the Sinhalese ethnic majority—and ethnic-minority Tamil separatists overshadowed all other conflicts in Sri Lanka. A long, disastrous civil war ended in 2009, but relations between the two communities remain tense and unlikely to improve in the current political climate and remaining security concerns. In these circumstances, language, identity, and history are deeply contentious issues.[1]

In recent years, growing ethnic and religious tensions have revolved around Sri Lanka's Muslim population. Bombings by Islamist extremists on Easter Sunday 2019, killed hundreds of people at hotels and churches around the island. Intense backlash against Muslims ensued, including anti-Muslim rhetoric from political figures and mob violence. In the past year, the government rolled out restrictive legislation targeting Muslims under the pretext of combating terrorism.[2]

The arrival of COVID-19 amplified discrimination against Muslims and other minorities. During the first wave of infections, rumors in the press and online falsely attributed the outbreak in Sri Lanka to the Muslim community. Social media users accused Muslims of intentionally spreading the disease and called for boycotts of Muslim-owned businesses. Contrary to World Health Organization guidelines, the Sri Lankan government banned burials and ordered that the bodies of COVID-19 victims be cremated—widely perceived as an attack on Muslim and Christian traditions. Hate speech in Sri Lankan digital spaces around this time revolved around burial customs. In 2021, minority voices accused the government of applying policies in a discriminatory fashion, for example by restricting the Islamic Eid-ul-Fitr festival—allegedly on health grounds—despite allowing Sinhala and Tamil New Year festivities the month before.[3]

Like other South Asian countries, Sri Lanka has seen a rise in domestic violence and online misogyny during the pandemic. Sexism on social media has coalesced, with rumors and misinformation—about women harming their husbands during lockdown, or about women's rights rallies endangering public health—drawing pejorative and misogynistic commentary. Workers in the apparel industry, overwhelmingly female, have been stereotyped and stigmatized following news of COVID-19 infections at factories.[4]

The pandemic has also taken on a heavy toll on individuals' mental health. Lockdowns, health-related worries, economic fallout, and circulating misinformation are thought to have caused high levels of depression and anxiety around the globe.[5] Poor mental health and unraveling social cohesion are linked, as isolated individuals look to social and news media—rife with anger, scapegoating, and incendiary misinformation—to find connection and make sense of stressful events beyond their control.[6] In this climate, the differences between ethnic, religious, and socioeconomic groups can be accentuated and exploited, fueling conflict. History and demography make Sri Lanka especially vulnerable to this process.

Amid rampant division and deteriorating mental health, interventions to build peace and promote mental wellness are urgently needed. Two underutilized resources for this purpose are writing and the arts—activities that have proven benefits for mental health and social connection. In light of the coronavirus, experts recommend letter writing as a tool to combat isolation, depression, and suicidal tendencies.[7] Beyond improving individual wellbeing, artistic pursuits that encourage reflection and self-expression can also play a role in healing traumatized communities and fostering reconciliation.[8] Kiyawana Muddara has leveraged the power of art and writing in creative and meaningful ways to address Sri Lanka's social challenges during the pandemic.

**1** https://thediplomat.com/2020/05/post-war-sri-lanka-fractured-and-unjust-for-tamils/

**2** https://www.usip.org/publications/2021/04/two-years-after-easter-attacks-sri-lankas-muslims-face-backlash

**3** https://thediplomat.com/2021/05/sri-lanka-teaches-the-world-how-not-to-respond-to-covid-19/

**4** https://www.ft.lk/opinion/The-COVID-19-second-wave-and-the-apparel-industry/14-708902

**5** See, for instance, https://www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/nejmp2008017

**6** https://www.cdc.gov/mentalhealth/stress-coping/cope-with-stress/index.html

**7** https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/wellness/letters-pandemic-depression-anxiety-help/2020/09/14/47b3bb3a-f3b1-11ea-b796-2dd09962649c_story.html , https://www.today.com/health/mental-health-coronavirus-writing-letters-can-boost-your-mood-t180727

**8** https://theartsjournal.org/index.php/site/article/view/2123/973

## THE "SEND A CARD AND BRING A SMILE" CAMPAIGN

In 2007 M. Samantha Niroshana Peiris founded Kiyawana Muddara. In an age where digital communication has largely replaced letter writing and "snail mail", the organization aims to revive philately—the collection and study of postage stamps—in Sri Lanka.[9] Kiyawana Muddara means "Reading Stamps," and aims to educate the public about this subject. Peiris, however, considers stamp reading to be much more than a hobby: it can also aid mental health and national reconciliation. During the ongoing COVID-19 crisis, Kiyawana Muddara's "Send a Card and Bring a Smile" campaign, supported by funding under the AHA! Project encourages Sri Lankans to fight isolation and division by sharing unifying and uplifting messages via postcard.

Stamps have significance far beyond their immediate function. Peiris quotes David Scott, a scholar who has written about how stamps shape and reflect national identities in five European countries, "[postage stamp] has a more concentrated ideological density per square centimeter than any other cultural form."[10] As a tiny, inexpensive, and widely circulated piece of art, a stamp offers an ideal way to spread powerful narratives of national unity and identity. Those same traits require efficiency and precision—stamps must clearly represent a country's most important symbols and values in a very limited space. Similar to currency, they are designed to catch the eye and be readily understood and functional, while also carrying deeper meanings.

Peiris believes that stamp reading can support national peace and reconciliation by forging a shared appreciation of Sri Lanka's cultural diversity and achievements. Out of that awareness can grow understanding and solidarity across ethnoreligious lines. Stamp reading can facilitate cooperation, exchange of viewpoints, tolerance and respect for difference, and improved conflict mediation skills as participants explore the historical and identity-based themes in the text and artwork. Through dialogue and study, stamp readers can broaden their understanding of what it means to be Sri Lankan.

Kiyawana Muddara's "Send a Card and Bring a Smile" campaign has used postcards and stamp reading to address the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic in Sri Lanka. Peiris aimed to break through isolation and tension by inspiring project participants to write appreciative messages to frontline workers and loved ones. Five thousand Sri Lankans from various ethnic, linguistic, and religious communities benefited through the Kiyawana Muddara's initiative.

Peiris' team designed nine pandemic-themed postcards with slogans such as "Compassion will carry us through," "Community will carry us through," "Science will carry us through," and "Words will carry us through." The concept was inspired by COVID-19 related postage stamps produced in other countries. Iran, the United Kingdom, and Switzerland, for instance, issued special stamps to raise awareness about hygiene and vaccination and to celebrate scientists, nurses, and others who were working to end the health crisis.

Kiyawana Muddara printed and distributed 5,000 postcards through three local libraries in the southern and western districts of Rathnapura, Kegalle, and Puttalam. These locations were chosen to reach a diverse cross-section of Sri Lankan society—both Sinhala and Tamil speakers, Buddhists, Hindus, and Muslims alike. Peiris conducted two live workshops on creative writing and social cohesion through stamp reading in each of these libraries, as well as one at the Colombo Public Library, to support the campaign. Participants were shown how to analyze stamps' symbolism and language and to explore their role in shaping collective memory, national identity, and awareness of shared heritage and values; they were also encouraged to develop greater self-awareness and empathy, using techniques from psychology and art therapy. In total, 210 participants—library staff and "active readers" from the local community—representing all ages, ethnicities, and genders attended these workshops. Of those, 184 of these were women.

To enlarge public awareness of the project, Kiyawana Muddara launched a trilingual media campaign in Sinhala, Tamil, and English. Besides outreach through the organization's Facebook page, "Send a Card and Bring a Smile" was also covered in local and national newspapers and on digital platforms throughout 2021.[11]

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**9** See https://kiyawanamuddara.lk/

**10** European Stamp Design: A Semiotic Approach to Designing Messages (Academy Editions, 1995), https://books.google.com/books/about/European_Stamp_Design.html?id=HkAfAQAAIAAJ

**11** See, for instance, http://www.dailymirror.lk/.../Stamping-out-the.../131-207707

The only substantial challenge the project faced was the pandemic itself: events had to be downsized due to health and safety concerns, with workshops and other gatherings capped at 50 attendees per event. However, the campaign's wide media coverage and positive reception by attendees attest to Sri Lankans' interest in the activities. The campaign met a clearly felt need for interventions that promote social cohesion, greater connection with others, and improved mental health.

## LESSONS AND TAKEAWAYS

**Three project elements offer promise that this positive momentum will be sustained:**

- Kiyawana Muddara collaborated with the three local libraries to establish Stamp Information Resource Centers, stations where readers can learn about philately and the deeper significance of postage stamps through art displays and stamp literature.

- The organization has launched a website, www.kiyawanamuddara.lk, with updates and articles touching on stamp history, peacebuilding, and mental health awareness.

- Niroshana's team continues to promote postcard writing on special dates such as World Health Day, World Elders' Day, and National Children's Day, encouraging Sri Lankans to share caring notes with vulnerable and overlooked populations.

More broadly, the effort highlights the need and potential for novel and creative approaches, and highlights that art can be a powerful tool for change and a practical peacebuilding tool. Kiyawana Muddara's campaign demonstrates how the strategic exploration of these mediums can encourage solidarity and empathy in a fractured society. Arts initiatives can be effective for facilitating reflection, dialogue, and healing in other post-conflict settings. Peiris's use of a nonpolitical, nonthreatening subject like postage stamps to discuss national history and identity holds promise for similar projects elsewhere.

The postcard writing campaign illustrates vital links between mental health and social cohesion. COVID-19 related isolation, anxiety, and depression have increased intercommunal conflict, which in turn produces more isolation. Kiyawana Muddara's postcard initiative recognized this dynamic and addressed both challenges, encouraging an activity that benefited individual wellbeing and the community. Effective peacebuilding interventions should incorporate both dimensions.

As Sri Lanka emerges from the grip of COVID-19, social cohesion and mental health alike are challenged, as isolation and misinformation strain relations between communities. Divisive political rhetoric, discriminatory legislation, and widespread suspicion—especially against the island's Muslims—have the potential to lead to conflict. Peacebuilders need to work on multiple fronts to reduce tensions and establish trust. Against this backdrop, the "Send a Card and Bring a Smile" campaign has found novel ways of bridging divides. Peiris's recent experience with Kiyawana Muddara highlights two lessons that can be applied in other contexts.