

Sri Lankan child-artists react to the tsunami

Scenic Panadura in Kalutara district, Sri Lanka, is a 90-minute drive out of Colombo. The tsunami has left its tell-tale marks all along the drive. But the people of this town have left the trauma of 12/26 behind them.

Many of the tsunami's survivors – adults and senior citizens – have since spoken about the tsunami, but children have not. The BOBP-IGO therefore decided to let some talented schoolchildren express their viewpoint creatively, artistically, broadening awareness among the young on the value of our coastal and marine environment.

An on-the-spot art contest for schoolchildren of Sri Lanka was held at Shri Sumangala Girls School, Panadura, some 40 miles from Colombo, on December 8, 2005. The theme: "Life after the tsunami". Forty eight students from 15 schools took part. Twenty eight juniors (ages 11 to 13) used crayons, 20 seniors (ages 14 to 17) displayed their water-colour skills.

The event began with a traditional lamp-lighting ceremony. Ms Sampathini Nepala, Headmistress, said her school felt honoured to host the event. Dr Y S Yadava, BOBP-IGO Director, thanked Ms Nepala and her school. He said similar contests conducted earlier in Tamil Nadu, India and in the Maldives, were a sparkling success.

The setting for the Panadura contest was most appropriate: native paintings adorned the walls. Six judges — Mr W Gunasinghe and Ms Susila Abeyasinghe (both art instructors at the Zonal Education Office, Kalutara); Mr Shanta Bhandara, Director, Planning and Monitoring of the Ministry of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (MFAR); Mr M A Wijepala and Ms W W M C Geetharani (art teachers both) and BOBP-IGO artist S Jayaraj – were to pick first, second



The young artists' work drew praise from the judges as well as from professional artists.

and third prizes and five consolation prizes for each of two categories – 16 prizes in all.

The Contest & the Paintings

The 48 child-artists were a picture of concentration throughout the 150-minute contest. BOBP-IGO artist S Jayaraj was all praise not merely for their focused interest and commitment but also for the work they turned out. He remarked "Almost all the paintings filled the canvas. This reflected the rich imagination of these kids and their maturity. The figures they drew were full figures, anatomically accurate – no symbols or half-figures. Consciously or unconsciously, they used techniques such as surrealism, palette-knife, or paintings layer-by-layer."

The first prize winner in the senior category (by Ms Amanda Gunawardena, Panadura) was in the surrealist style. It showed a wall under construction and five figures of men and women – three busy, two others in pensive contemplation. The second prize-winner among seniors (Ms Shashikala Chathurani Peiris) showed a woman vegetable vendor under a tent bargaining with a male customer. On the background: two fishermen about to go out on their craft. The third prize among seniors (by Ms Nimmi Shiranthi Fernando, Panadura) did an engaging painting of two neat little huts, two women





Facing page: The young artists busy at the contest. Students receiving certificates from Dr Y S Yadava (top) and Mr A Hettiarachchi (middle). A dance presentation by Sri Sumangala Girls School at the Art Contest (bottom).

engaged in cleaning, two children busy with pottery, a man busy brick-laying. “Look at the full figures,” Jayaraj comments.

The first prize winner in the junior category (Chamari Madushika Samaraweera) drew a smart little housing colony. Jayaraj praised “the tight organisation, the symmetric pattern of the houses, the very even colours.”

One colourful painting showed multiple activities — beach seining, house building and watering of plants. A physically challenged youngster who came to the contest

in a wheel chair drew an aerial view of reconstructed houses. He won a consolation prize.

Dr Yadava remarked on the “positive attitude and viewpoint” of almost all the paintings. He also noted that girls outnumbered boys in all the art contests – whether in India, Sri Lanka or the Maldives. Does it reflect the fact that painting as an art form today attracts girls, while boys are drawn more to cinema and television? Perhaps.

The art contest captivated parents and teachers alike. They praised the theme of the art contest, the organisation, the opportunity it gave the students. Said the mother of one student, who was physically challenged: “This is the first art contest my son is taking part in. It is a proud moment for us. It’s wonderful to see my son’s excitement.”

An art teacher commented “This contest was very different from all others. The awards were cash prizes. The materials needed for the contest, such as crayon boxes and water-colour paint boxes, were made available by the organisers themselves – a great help since some of the children would not have been able to afford them.”

All artists were given certificates of participation immediately after the contest, much to their excitement. The parents were very pleased at the quality of the certificates – bright, laminated and therefore durable. “This will last long,” said one of them.

A surprise item followed the painting contest – a dance show by a group of girls from the host school, the Shri Sumangala Girls School, Panadura. Clad in eye-catching traditional maroon-and-yellow costumes, the girls did a graceful folk dance on stage that captured their pride, their vivacity, their *joie de vivre*. It was as if the youngsters said: “It will take much more than a tsunami to get our spirit down.”

The art contest prize-winners were honoured at a special ceremony on December 10 at the office of NARA (the National Aquatic Resources Research and Development Agency), where the National Workshop on Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries was being held. Workshop participants cheered as Dr A Hettiarachchi, Director-General, MFAR, and Mr G Piyasena, Director-General, Department of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources, gave away the prizes.

The contest was made possible through the energetic co-operation of the Ministry of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources, particularly Mr H S G Fernando, Director, MFAR.

Does catharsis stimulate art? Most certainly, yes! The Panadura art contest provided stunning proof.

— Text by Tabrez Nasar
Photographs by S Jayaraj