

K.A.J. Kahandawa, coordinator of COMPAS Sri Lanka

Learning lessons from a traditional healer

K.A.J. Kahandawa works for the Sri Lankan NGO Future in our Hands. He tells us about an encounter with a traditional healer that made a big impression on him. It prompted him to think differently about traditional knowledge and the people who are really preserving it in Sri Lanka.

'I attended a meeting of traditional medical practitioners in Mahiyangana, Badulla district. There I saw an old man performing a ritual and blessing a woman who was ill. I tried to talk to him afterwards but he was not interested. I persisted, and finally he explained that he would not talk about what he did in public. If I was interested I could visit him at home.

'The man lived far away but I managed to go the following weekend. At first he was surprised that I had come, but he treated me as a special guest and I spent the whole day with him discussing his work. The more questions I asked, the more he talked. He described how he treated patients, gave me recipes for snakebite treatments, and

Healing includes more than just giving medicine

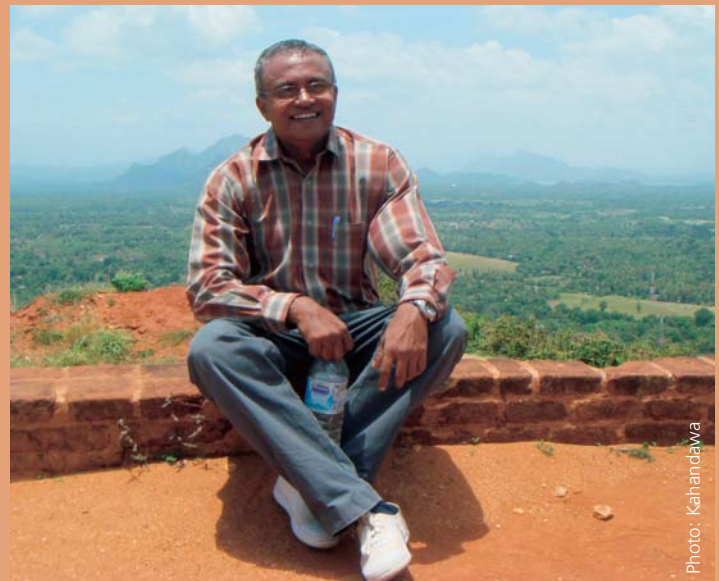
showed me his collection of treatment methods and prescriptions for various ailments, written on ola (palm) leaves. To treat different illnesses he also used rituals, mantras, deities and meditation. For everything he did, he had rational, convincing explanations. He treated snakebite victims by reciting verses that he had committed these to memory, but they had never been written down.

If I was interested I could record them at a later date, he said.

'In the afternoon a young boy came to the house and showed great respect towards the old man. This boy had had a motorcycle accident in which his leg was badly damaged. In hospital the doctors said it would have to be amputated to save his life. His parents objected, to which the doctor responded that he would not be held responsible if the boy were to die. With great difficulty the parents brought their son to this healer. The healer took him in and kept him at his house for more than two months, after which the boy was able to walk again. The healer explained his

success, saying that doctors do not have respect for human life as healers do: healing is not only about giving medicine, but the spiritual aspects are also important in this work.

'I left the healer's house in the evening, and gave a lift to a few youngsters on the road. As we drove along, one of them asked what I had been



doing the whole day in the man's house. I told them about my discussions with the healer and that I had learned a lot. After listening, one of the boys said, 'And we thought that this man was half mad!'

'The way this rich traditional knowledge is regarded made a deep impression on me. I wanted to understand more about this man and the work he does. I developed great respect for him and I still maintain a close relationship with him to this day.'



For more information:
kahandawa@gmail.com