

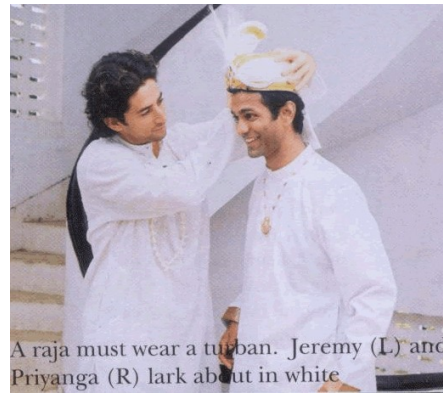
Cooling off at sunset. Chris (L) and Priyanga (RR) enjoying a poolside chat

*The jasmine foundation is a non profit* charity set up in Australia to raise funds to help children in "necessitous circumstances". It will focus on helping the disabled, poor, and orphaned in disaster areas including in developing countries. The foundation is in incipient stages. Adoh's roving interviewer catches up with Priyanga Hettiarachi by the pool to discuss the Jasmine Foundation and other things.

Whether you are entranced by his renaissance man musings or bemused by his other worldly earnestness for the Lord of the Rings, one thing's for sure; he's on mission. The mission is children's charity. He is of course, Priyanga He. When Priyanga ambles on to a deckchair after a swim he is unrecognisably

and predictably, wet. Rather than the cavalier demeanour you might expect of a handsome socialite, he is affable and so mellow you worry he could drift off into a stupor at any moment. He orders beers for both of us. His sips are measured. He is cheeky and captivating. He is visibly excited

about doing his bit in the arena of charity. The news get better. Sri Lanka will be a recipient. Priyanga's own upbringing may provide a clue to understanding his message; "even the smallest person matters and smallest act of kindness can make a difference." One message to rule them all, then?



A raja must wear a turban. Jeremy (L) and Priyanga (R) lark about in white

Like the characters in the Lord of the Rings, he has trodden an unconventional path that reads like a magical adventure. He is multi-lingual and has travelled extensively. B h u t a n ? N o r t h e r n Cyprus? He's been there. He has spent years living in Sri Lanka, India, England and Australia. He has experienced good. Palpably embarrassed when I explore his academic and

professional achievements, he adds politely. "I am proud of these things, but that's in the past and not really relevant to what we are trying to do now" His has not been a sheltered life. He is able to relate to difference and embraces it; privilege has not blinkered him

While his tales and manner are contemporary, around their borders you glimpse layers of utopian times and places.

like others, and particularly those who lived in our country during the civil war and the Marxist's guerilla insurrection, he has witnessed terrible things, The upheavals in our country touched him directly. His family home was burnt to the ground during the riots of 1983. He was in Colombo on 26 December 2004. His girl friend was in Chennai. "We are the lucky ones", he maintains.



Enjoying a dashing figure. Chris looking very lovely

Along with friends, Priyanga got involved with relief work in Colombo immediately afterwards. "Loading and unloading a truck is hard work... it was like a sauna in the back of those trucks..."

He marvels at the way so many people - tourists, professionals, business people and others came together to help. "It was encouraging that everyone pitched in... it was one way of trying to make sense of this tragedy".

"Ok, I've been dealt a pretty good hand so far. That's all the more reason to try, whenever you're in a position to do so, and help those who may be less fortunate. Clearly, I can't help every one. So the Jasmine Foundation is about doing little bit to help those who have been dealt rough hand. I'd like to play a part, even if it is small part, in doing what I can."

"So at one level, this has nothing to do with guilt, grief, ego, making connections with the less fortunate or being Mahatma Gandhi. Actually, if anything, it is more about what I call being Mahatma Gucci."

Mahatma Gucci? "That is about being philanthropic without being puritan, providing service with style..."

Why the name Jasmine? "The flower has several uses... therapeutic, remedial and perfume... It is white, a colour often associated with purity and

innocence... It is also small... all qualities apt for children's charity". He insists that we climb Sigiriya Rock to view the 5th century frescoes. He explains that the logo of the Jasmine Foundation was in part inspired by those frescoes. Priyanga does not view the world through jasmine tinted glasses. He is realistic about the challenges that lie ahead ranging from the bureaucratic and fund raising to choices about distributing funds. "We have much to do and learn. Charity is a complex subject." "And one of the challenges is to deal with media and the socialising side of promotional work and fundraising. That's something I've generally been keen to distance myself from."

Those remarks are illuminating. It is what makes Priyanga an enigma. He is obsessive about his privacy and jealously guards his personal life. For one so at ease with himself and worldly, he is unusually reticent and suspicious about engaging in the superficial aspects of promotional work. He concedes: "I guess there's a balance to be struck. The goal of charity is a good one so may be I'll have to be more flexible. We'll see." So apart from trips he makes to visit family and friends are we likely to see more of this charming man?

"I can't say at this stage. Initially, the Jasmine

Foundation will operate on a small scale. And we have selected the areas in Sri Lanka that we want to help. We have checked out some orphanages in Batticaloa. Some of them were destroyed by the Tsunami. Others were severely affected. These areas are also affected by the civil war and poverty. For the moment, there won't be a need to make special visits to Sri Lanka. That way our costs can be kept to a minimum. Of course, volunteers on the ground here in Sri Lanka will assist by undertaking checks and ensuring that the whole process is regular."

Priyanga is impressed and grateful that Australians have put their hands up to become trustees of the Jasmine Foundation. The trustees include Chris Carrodus who is a lawyer at Deacons (a Major law firm in Asia and Australia) and Nick Perkins, another lawyer, who works with Visy, one of biggest packaging companies. Both Chris and Nick are fond of Sri Lanka. Both of them have undertaken voluntary work in the past. Chris downs a martini after every dive. So far, that is four spectacular dives. He originally planned to spend a week surfing in Arugam bay on the east coast. Instead, he revised his plans and chose to spend some of that time assisting with local relief efforts putting both his legal and non-legal skills to use. Chris, take a bow.

And what of Priyanga's current job and new projects? About leaving the cut and thrust of commercial law and quitting his job to focus on the Jasmine Foundation, he says: "I'll always be romantic about the ideals of law, But I'm not sure the corporate world is the best place to realise them." As if repeating a mantra was a way of reinforcing his conviction, he says, "it's time to try something new". Later he says "... if I can be part of a team which recommends that a bill of rights be adopted in victoria, then that would be very cool. We'll see." Bill of Rights? Clearly, not your average stuff for Priyanga. This man sets his sights high.

And just when you thought that charity couldn't get any better, my next interviewee arrives. He evokes images of white linen shirts, safaris and Indiana Jones. Priyanga shakes his head, seemingly apologetically, and mumbles something about riding elephants.

Jeremy Meltzer simply looks like the next best thing. From a CD of his performances that I had listened to previously and what he has to say, he sounds as good. Beautiful things about women are the most normal for him to ponder. He looks hurt if you respond with disbelief when he steers conversation towards a discussion about women.



"There is so much to celebrate and get to know, particularly in Latin women", continues Jeremy, as if in the middle of a dream, mid sentence and mid song. Is that the source of his inspiration for his music? His life? I ask. He smiles. He then claps his hands and says "but we are here to discuss the Jasmine Foundation, no?"

There is something old fashioned about this Melbourne man. He has features that belong to a more civilised era. He invites intimacy. He is a question asker and a listener. He is intense and energetic. He travelled

extensively in Sri Lanka and is overwhelmed by the island's beauty. As if on cue, Jeremy insists that we walk over to look at view of the hills, the river and the lush jungle where he had been riding earlier in the day. Riding an elephant, Impressive.

Being in Madras and Sri Lanka during and after the Tsunami struck, left a deep impression. It was only a matter of time before these two friends devised a way of helping our country. Amongst the many talents this man has, he is a latin jazz singer. He has performed sell out shows, including in New York City and Miami. His signature songs are performed in Spanish, which he speaks fluently. He works very hard at his craft and many other projects.

"To me it was obvious. When Priyanga told me about starting a charity, I told him that my next show

would help promote that charity to raise funds... you have to be firm with Priyanga sometimes."

It is obvious that Jeremy and Priyanga have an excellent rapport. They are more like brothers. "Our focus is to help children who remain affected by the unkind hand of fate". Either one of them could have said that.

Jeremy's next show in Melbourne will be held in June 2005. Any chance of some salsa in Colombo? "Why not? I would love to do a show at the Galle Face... at sunset."

Our interview is almost at an end. The guys have an appointment to try out locally design outfits for a wedding. There are summoned by an impatient designer. I stay and observe. Clothes are white. Fitting. And fetching.

They are gentlemen of charity. I am struck by a

commitment to philanthropy in ones so young and to help communities distant to their own. I am impressed that they have found time always from fulltime jobs and leisure to make this a part of their lives. Isn't such commitment a distraction from the things that most people do at their stage in their life?

Then again, for them it is about balance. The easy beauty of charity is etched in their faces and underlies so much of their thoughts and actions. If these guys lived in your home, there is no doubt at all that charity would begin there. If their dedication and enthusiasm are any indication, the feel of charity is about to have a wonderful entrant. They make charity so cool and fun. And blessed in deed are the children.