

Ceylon's 'Great Hartal' of 1953: The Masses Enter History

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70 years ago, on 12 August 1953, “a demonstration of the tremendous power of the masses in action”^[ii] influenced by Left parties and trade unions, shook the recently independent island of Ceylon. It was not to be repeated until last year’s people’s uprising^[iii], to which it is sometimes compared.

Direct mass intervention, “the basic factor in the revolutionary process”, emerged as the new political dynamic. The uprising or ‘Great *Hartal*’ as it has entered Left folklore, was hailed by Lanka Sama Samaja Party leader Colvin R. de Silva as the former British colony’s first revolt against capitalist rule; and first manifestation of the crucial but hitherto absent alliance between workers and peasants.

In a largely agrarian society fractured by racism and casteism, religious and regional origin; where the working class, and its consciousness of being ‘a class in itself’, was weak, the Left exulted in the coming together of the exploited and the oppressed, and against an enemy that was not one another.

On the day of action, every province experienced some form of protest at the pro-capitalist and pro-imperialist United National Party (UNP) government, that was elected with a thumping majority only the year before. The UNP had been in power since 1947, and its leadership at the centre of government since universal franchise in 1931. Its critics and opponents on the Left wanted more than anything, to “[shatter] the myth of the invincibility of the UNP...”^[iv].

There were workplace strikes but also public demonstrations and meetings of the working people. Black flags were hoisted outside homes, and in public places including the town halls of Colombo and Moratuwa (where the Left was in control). Public transport on road was paralysed as the largest bus line stopped running in deference to the sentiment of its workers; while self-employed rickshaw-pullers and bullock-carters stayed at home.

People were most defiant of State authority in the Western littoral of the island where the population density even at the time was highest, and where most industry was to be found. Shops and offices were forced to close, while buses, trains, and private vehicles were stopped from moving. Postal services were suspended.

In Colombo, the hub of country-wide transport services, railway workers struck duty at midnight of 11 August. The city trams stopped running. The harbour came to a standstill. Workers at the largest private textile mill, and other enterprises such as engineering and carpentry, also struck work.

In semi-urban and rural areas, particularly in the Southwest, locals expressed their sympathy for the day of action through removing railway sleepers to prevent the passage of trains and dynamiting small bridges used for conveyance of people and movables. Trees and boulders were laid to block roads. Signal wires were cut and telegraph poles were toppled, to disrupt communication between the government in the capital and its agents in the districts.

In the village of Egoda Uyana in Moratuwa, a train was captured to prevent it from operating, and armed police were made to retreat to the police station by unarmed people. Further South at Panadura railway station, two wagons were set on fire in a message to the authorities.

The main entry and exit points to and from the capital were occupied by demonstrations and barricades. The police attempted to remove protesters from the street. In the trading centre of Pettah in North Colombo, demonstrators were baton-charged. A weapon-less pavement hawker and LSSP youth activist by the name of Edwin refused to move, and taunted the police to open fire if they dared. He was shot dead. In all, nine people are known to have been killed by the State on that day and the next.

The government panicked. Fearing for their safety, the cabinet of ministers met that day on the British warship HMS Newfoundland, moored in Colombo's harbour. Emergency rule was declared that afternoon. The military was deployed to restore law and order. A police curfew was imposed for 12 hours from 6pm onwards. Government politicians assembled a militia of their supporters, 'to assist the police'. The printing presses of the Left parties were sealed; and their newspapers ceased publication.

Under cover of the state of emergency, the military and the police brutally assaulted peaceful protesters. UNP supporters provided lists with names of those alleged to have participated in the *hartal* – including leftists, political adversaries, and personal enemies, in their localities. Thousands were arrested and thousands were injured.

On the following day, despite the curfew and the presence of the military, there continued to be outbursts of outrage. In one area, a private bus company was blockaded for defying the *hartal* the previous day. In another village, the residents held a large demonstration for the release of those arrested the day before. Nearer Colombo there were clashes with the police and military, and a petrol bowser was set alight.

Prime Minister Dudley Senanayake was so shaken that he took ill; and became unwilling to lead his party, and therefore the government. He partially reversed the policies that sparked the uprising, before resigning in October 1953. Finance Minister J. R. Jayewardene, rightly blamed for the welfare budget cuts, lost his portfolio in the new cabinet formed by Sir John Kotelawala.

The people chose the ballot box to complete what was left unfinished on the streets: the UNP was trounced in the 1956 general election by a Sinhala nationalist coalition led by the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP). This bloc, and not the Left, was the principal beneficiary of the political fallout of the uprising.

It would take decades more for Jayewardene to realise his political ambitions. As Prime Minister and later President of Sri Lanka, he settled the score with those who had humiliated him, by unleashing violence against labour militants, before crushing the trade unions in the July 1980 general strike. He also abolished the rice ration scheme, substituting it with food stamps for some households, and incrementally ended subsidies on food. Any electoral blowback was neutered through public investment, including subsidies, in rice-farming.

Trigger and Roots

The trigger to the uprising was the almost three-fold increase in the price of rice from 25 cents to 70 cents a measure (following abolition of the rice subsidy), the increase in rail fares and postal rates, and the withdrawal of the free mid-day meal (a bun) for schoolchildren, announced in the Budget Speech of 1953.

However, this violence to the standard of living of the poor, was only the latest in a series that had begun after the general election of 1952. Within months of the UNP's triumph, it began cutting back spending on State subsidies and public welfare, to shrink the yawning budget deficit.

The ration of rice for each household was abruptly reduced by a quarter measure. The price of a pound of sugar was increased by 15 cents. Milk-feeding centres where a free glass of milk was provided to under-nourished children were closed. Tariffs were raised on textiles and tobacco.

The system of rationing and price controls on essential foods such as rice, flour, and sugar – all imported and therefore financed from foreign exchange – was progressively dismantled, as advocated by *laissez-faire* enthusiasts within the Central Bank of Ceylon and the World Bank.

While imperfect, this system introduced during the Second World War to manage limited supply from abroad with growing demand at home, succeeded in expanding access to basic goods while keeping price increases in check, thereby limiting an inflationary spiral in a low-wage economy.

The roots of Ceylon's fiscal ills were in the underdevelopment of its economy by colonialism.

As of independence in 1948, three agricultural commodities – tea, rubber, and coconut – accounted for almost all foreign earnings. Britain, the former occupier, was the main market for exports. The Korean war stimulated a boom in demand and market price for natural rubber from the US military-industrial complex. This benefited the island's balance of payments, but petered out soon.

Meanwhile, almost everything had to be imported including rice, flour, sugar, clothing, and kerosene oil. The country's fledgling Central Bank established and led by US national John Exter who had been seconded from the Federal Reserve, pronounced in its annual reports that Ceylon was living beyond its means. In its view, the government was sacrificing investment

in development projects for subsidies on food, and creating distortions and inefficiencies in food prices and wage behaviour consequently.

“It is regrettable from the economic point of view that such a large share [Rs. 133 million out of Rs. 153.6 shortfall] of the budget deficit is the result of increasing food subsidies”^[vi], said the Central Bank. Over 20% of government revenue^[vii] was utilised to subsidise the world market price for rice (purchased mostly from the US and partly from Burma) and distributed through the ration system to domestic consumers.

The World Bank’s report on its first Mission to Ceylon in late 1951 took up this refrain: “Food subsidies impose an unending drain on the country’s financial resources”^[viii]. Its recommendations to reverse the budget deficit included, “... increasing income tax rates and reducing the exemption limit; adjusting electricity rates and railway transport charges ... [and] cutting food subsidies”^[ix].

As one critic has observed, “... the [World Bank] Mission’s recommendations were intended to promote private capitalism within the broad economic and social structure which then existed – the same type of dependent capitalism previously cultivated by British colonialism”^[x]. It should be underlined that the UNP government, the Central Bank of Ceylon, and indeed the merchant capitalist class, were of the same thinking.

The World Bank proposed that “food subsidies should be eliminated gradually over the next few years, the necessary adjustments being made in wage rates, including government salaries, and in the tax burden of the export industries ... a gradual removal of the system [of food subsidies], if carefully planned and spread over a period of two or three years, can be carried out without any major disturbances”^[xi].

Had the government heeded their counsel, conditions may not have been as favourable for the success of the *Hartal*.

The soaring cost of rice, a staple food item, was particularly infuriating to people, as the UNP election campaign had promised that its price would be unchanged so long as it was in government.

Spontaneity and Organisation

The day after the abolition of the rice subsidy, there was a spontaneous protest on 21 July in Randombe, along the Southwestern coast. The people of the village blockaded the main road, by lying across it, preventing the traffic of people and goods between Colombo and the Southern seaport of Galle.

Women are said to have been angrier and more rebellious than men. The responsibility of food preparation and managing the household budget was mostly theirs. This sudden and sharp increase in food prices hit them hard.

As word of their action spread, villages elsewhere along the same stretch of sea and to their interior, were inspired to protest similarly over the next three days. On 24 July in Ahungalla, the police used batons and tear gas to remove protestors who had blocked the road. In the combat that ensued, some policemen were knifed.

On 20 July, the Communist Party-affiliated Ceylon Trade Union Federation (CTUF) held a conference with the LSSP-affiliated Ceylon Federation of Labour (CFL), the Ceylon Workers’ Congress (CWC—formerly Ceylon Indian Congress Labour Union), and the LSSP-aligned Ceylon Mercantile Union (CMU) among others, that ended with a joint declaration calling upon all trade unions and unorganised workers to “prepare for a one-day general strike and to form united action committees in all places of work for carrying this into effect”^[xii].

The VLSSP-affiliated Harbour and Dock Workers’ Union (HDWU) and the Ceylon Labour Union (CLU) led by A.E. Goonesinha, later also endorsed a joint appeal for “all sections of the people to participate in this protest [on 12 August] by closing their establishments, keeping away from schools and workplaces, holding protest meetings and hoisting black flags”^[xiii].

The militancy of the working class compelled the Left unions that were bitter rivals, and the anti-communist CLU and CWC, to cooperate. It also drove strikes in advance of the day of action: on 21 July the 12,000 strong work-force at Colombo Port struck work for three hours; and on 23 July, there was a half-day strike at the Wellawatte Spinning and Weaving Mills. The momentum for large-scale action was accelerating among the urban working class.

The government, of course, was not sitting back as preparations unfolded for the day of action. It threatened workers in the public sector and in local government with dismissal from employment if they went on strike. Shop and cooperative store-keepers were threatened with removal of their business license if they did not open on the day. There was greater public presence of the police and the military on the streets and in public places in the weeks leading to 12 August.

On 11 August, the eve of the announced day of action, university students led by the LSSP protested on the streets of the hill country capital of Kandy.^[xiiii]

While peaceably marching back to their campus in Peradeniya, they were baton charged by the police, loaded onto police buses, and assaulted in their hostels. In anger, all university students boycotted classes; and in solidarity, shopkeepers in Kandy shuttered their stores the following day.

Even as the masses were in advance of the Left in the timing and tactic of their protests, its organisation in trade unions, party branches, and youth leagues enabled it to quickly provide support to those in action and to politically influence their direction.

The LSSP's newspapers in Sinhala, Tamil, and English were printed twice a week, as the public sought alternatives to the bias of the pro-capitalist media. The party printed handbills daily to pass information from one workplace to another of the militancy among workers, encouraging strikes.

Galle Face Rally

Well before these events, the parties of the parliamentary opposition, principally those of the Left, began organising a public protest on Galle Face Green, almost opposite the Parliament which had recently passed the cuts in public assistance programmes, and where the Budget Speech was being debated.

In addition to the Left parties, the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) representing the Sinhalese Buddhist petty-bourgeoisie and rural classes, the CWC which commanded the support of the Tamil proletariat in the plantations along the central massif, and the Federal Party (FP) that championed autonomy and rights for the Tamil-speaking people of the Northern and Eastern regions, also participated. None of these three parties were friends of the Left. Each had reason of its own to be hostile to the UNP and agreeable to its embarrassment.

The opposition leaders who addressed the rally on 23 July were surprised by the turnout, and caught off-guard by the strength of feeling of the crowd. There was apprehension among the police that some in the assembly were prepared to storm the Parliament building and disrupt the debate. The police began assaulting the crowd with batons and tear gas. Instead of dispersing, those under attack fought back with stones and anything else that came to hand.

Left Unity

The Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) saw the soaring anger of the working people and popular classes as an opportunity to unify the divided parliamentary Left opposition against the government.

At the time there were three self-defined Marxist parties in Parliament: the LSSP that was affiliated to the Fourth International; the Ceylon Communist Party (CCP) that orbited around Moscow; and the *Viplavakari* or Revolutionary LSSP (VLSSP) that had broken from the reunified party in 1950, and subsequently formed a 'United Front' with the CCP.

Relations, both political and personal, were fraught between the three parties. The LSSP was faulted by the other two for not suspending its criticism of the Communist Parties of the Soviet Union and China – which it did along with defence of the revolutions in both countries and opposition to their destabilisation by the West.

The LSSP having been rebuffed in its attempts in the run-up to the 1952 general election for a no-contest pact among the Left parties (as well as with the SLFP), grasped the opportunity of mounting public discontent with the UNP government, to find the glue to bind it with the 'Communist-Samasamajist United Front'.

"[The] task is to make the capitalist class pay for its Government's mistakes instead of allowing the capitalist class and its Government to shift on to the masses the burden of a crisis of the capitalists own making"^[xiv] declared the LSSP's English-language weekly paper.

Unity within the Left was achieved in 1953 based on a two-point agreement proposed by the LSSP: "(a) to support the masses in just struggle against the capitalist UNP Government and (b) to assist the masses to achieve their objective of replacing the capitalist UNP Government with an Anti-Capitalist Government"^[xv].

The importance placed by the LSSP on unity among the Left on immediate tasks amidst deep differences in several areas, was significant in securing the breadth and spread of the anti-government movement.

It was a step forward in forging a front of all anti-UNP and anti-imperialist forces that could overthrow the UNP, and form a government in which the working class would be central and provide leadership to other classes. This differed from the position of the CCP-VLSSP front that raised the slogan of a 'democratic' government – that is, an alliance of the Left with the anti-UNP and Sinhala-nationalist SLFP.

Hartal not Strike

It was the LSSP's creativity that prepared the day of action as a *hartal*, rather than the more traditional working-class strike. This word of origin from the Western Indian language of Gujarati, meaning

shutdown (of commerce and community for political ends), was then not known in Ceylon. It was imported by the LSSP into the national languages of Sinhalese and Tamil, where it is now embedded, from their direct experience in the anti-colonial struggle in India.

During the Second World War, the underground LSSP sent its central leadership to the Indian subcontinent, for refuge from imprisonment by the British for opposing the war; and to make connections with other Marxists for the purpose of socialist organisation and social revolution on a sub-continental scale. While there, they participated in the 'Quit India' campaign of August 1942, where independence leader M.K. Gandhi (himself of Gujarati origin) used the *hartal* as a means of mobilising people across social classes and the urban-rural divide, and beyond traditionally organised sectors, for non-violent political struggle for India's independence.

Colvin R. de Silva explained the novelty and the value of the *hartal* over the strike:

"... the hartal idea was new to Ceylon... it provided a framework for the worker-peasant alliance in action. It provided a channel of struggle for the rural masses whose entry into the arena could give to the movement as a whole a sweep and power which a strike could never have by itself even if it was quite general to the working class. It could also bring in the city poor who were so badly hit by the rice price raise and who normally were not drawn into political action. What was more, it was a mass weapon capable of revolutionary development, as the August 1942 struggle in India had shown."^[xvii]

According to de Silva: "[the government] had prepared to fight a strike, but were met with a hartal. They did not understand it and they did not know how to tackle it."^[xviii]

A Brake on the Masses?

Since the 'Great *Hartal*' (to distinguish it from the many *hartals* that have followed but of lesser order), there has been controversy as to whether it was an insurrectionary flame, which the Left ought to have fanned into revolution, instead of snuffing after 24 hours.

LSSP theoretician Hector Abhayavardhana argued that,

[the *hartal*] is a mode of bringing mass pressure on a government to make it change an unpopular or unacceptable decision. Involving as it does all classes of people, it cannot be prolonged easily...A *hartal* can provide an important

auxiliary means of heightening tension and strengthening political and trade union organisation for future action. But it cannot be the kind of action that will develop into the capture of state power. A *hartal* is by no means the same thing as a revolution."^[xviii]

The available evidence, and the remarkable consensus between the revolutionary and reformist wings of the LSSP and CCP on this matter^[xix], suggest that the prospect of sustaining the action beyond 12 August, and of it growing further, was poor.

Not coincidentally, the districts where the action was of highest intensity were also where the Left drew its electoral support, and the LSSP Youth Leagues were present. This was at best across a third of the island, albeit its most populous and closely integrated into the capitalist economy. Elsewhere, actions were more moderate, and without clashes with State authority.

There was not sufficient support across all trade unions, particularly in the public sector where government intimidation of workers and threat of victimisation weighed heavy. The Left-controlled and usually militant Government Clerical Services Union (GCSU) membership voted against strike action. A similar ballot in the Ceylon Mercantile Union (CMU) that organised white-collar staff in the private sector, was also lost.

The Ceylon Workers' Congress (CWC) refused to join the day of action, offering token protests after working hours on the economically strategic tea and rubber estates. The Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) did not call out its followers including its significant rural base. While the Federal Party did participate, it lacked the organisational coherence and working-class base of the Left parties; even in its Northern heartland, the most militant actions during the *Hartal* were in villages where the CCP and LSSP drew support.

Nonetheless, the parliamentarism of the Left, including of the LSSP well before it embraced coalition politics ('popular frontism') with the SLFP in the early 1960s^[xx], no doubt coloured its attitude towards working-class and mass action as a lever principally to strengthen its electoral fortunes; and through accretion of seats and influence within a governmental alliance with the SLFP, to legislate for socialism.

2022 Uprising

The *Hartal* of 1953 was the highpoint of mass action in Sri Lanka – the Sinhala insurrections of 1971 and 1987-1989, and Tamil secessionism between 1983

and 2009, were supported by substantial sections of their co-ethnics, but participation was the domain of those wielding arms – until last year’s people’s uprising, dubbed the *Aragalaya* (‘struggle’ in Sinhalese).

2022’s social and political upheaval was provoked by a balance of payments crisis, where import expenditure was outpacing export revenue two to one. In the 21st century, the island relies on low-value exports of apparel, tea, receipts from migrant workers’ remittances, and tourism, for its foreign exchange. It also continues to depend on the world market for the import of essential foods, medicines, intermediate, and consumer goods. Its integration into the world market deepened after 1977; and its import-substituting industries and State interventions in domestic production were dismantled by neoliberalism. It has become more vulnerable to external shocks and crises, including the pandemic and war in Europe, rising commodity prices, and fluctuating consumer demand; and more hooked on debt to finance its spending plans.^[xxi]

In some respects, the *Aragalaya* could be said to have surpassed the ‘Great *Hartal*’. It sustained its momentum and even grew in number between March and July 2022. It forced the incumbent president – elected 20 months before with more than 52% of the popular vote (and the support of the LSSP and the CP) – to twice flee from his home, and later the country, before resigning.

The former ruling family was made to hide from the wrath of the people. The *Aragalaya* was contemptuous not only of the executive but also a Parliament constituted two years before with a crushing majority for the president’s party. It made politicians fear the masses, instead of the other way about. Its radical wing posed the demand of ‘system change’.

There are parallels and discontinuities with the ‘Great *Hartal*’. Though the *Aragalaya* enjoyed support across the country, it was most militant in the urbanised Western province. Although people of all ethnicities and faiths participated in it, Tamil-speaking minorities in the North and East, and in the hill-country, were lukewarm. Middle-class discourse could be said to have dominated 2022’s multi-class uprising, unlike the plebeian persona of July-August 1953.

While there was trade union contribution, including a general strike on 28 April and *hartal* on 6 May 2022, the working class was largely passive in workplaces; and missing as ‘a class for itself’ in the people’s movement. The *Aragalaya* was a glorious rebellion of the discontented, but balked at rejecting *in toto* the existing edifice of the economy and the State.^[xxii]

In an acute aside, the dramatist and scholar E. F. C. Ludowyk observed, “The *hartal* was political transformation of mass feeling which, but for the leadership and organization provided by the Left, might have wasted itself.”^[xxiii]

Had the Lankan Left not wasted itself in the decades after 1953^[xxiv], perhaps the ‘mass feeling’ unleashed in 2022 might have been politically channelled in a transformative way.

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Notes

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[xv] De Silva, Colvin. R. (1953). *Hartal!* Colombo: Lanka Sama Samaja Party, p. 6-7.

[xvi] *Ibid.*, p. 7.

[xvii] *Ibid.*, p. 12.

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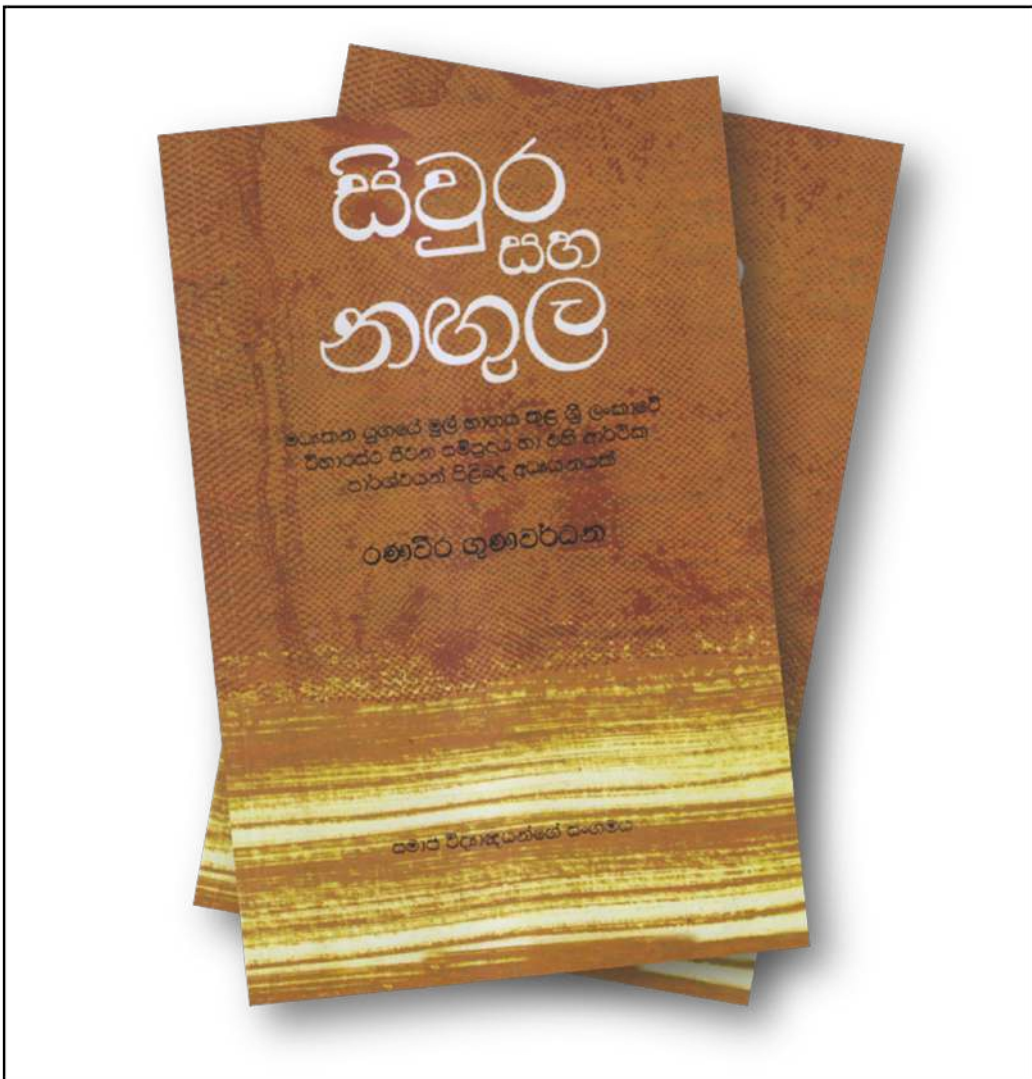
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R. A. L. H. Gunawardana's *Robe and Plough: Monasticism and Economic Interest in Early Medieval Sri Lanka* (in Sinhala) is on sale from SSA, No. 380/86, Sarana Road, Colombo 07.