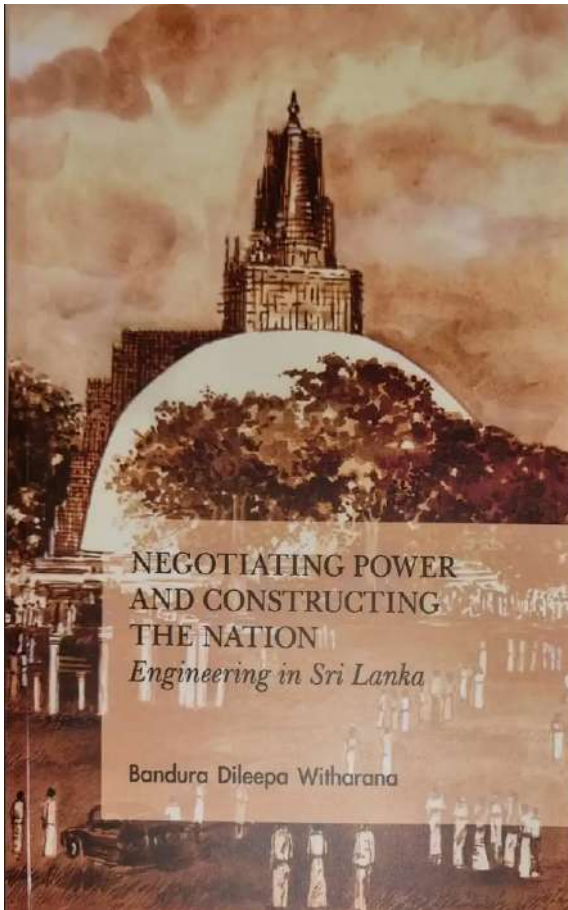


Negotiating Power and Constructing the Nation: Engineering in Sri Lanka. Bandura Dileepa Witharana

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Since the mid-1980s, the subjects of nationalism and Sinhalese identity have dominated scholarly output on Sri Lanka. *Negotiating Power and Constructing the Nation: Engineering in Sri*

Lanka offers a range of fresh perspectives on these subjects by considering the close relationship between engineering – a site that has received little academic attention in Sri Lanka thus far – and the development of Sinhalese nationalism over the past century.

This work is situated at the intersection of theoretical engagements with nationalism and technology. Noting that many foundational accounts of nationalism have focused primarily on the imagined past, it seeks to shift our attention to the importance of imagined futures in shaping national identity. For Witharana, developmental nationalism is a prime example of such forward-facing sentiment, and he invites us to consider the role played by engineering technologies, institutions, and professionals in its mobilisation.

The chapters are centred around three engineering case studies: the colonial-era Aberdeen-Laxapana Hydroelectric Scheme (1900-1936), the post-Independence Accelerated Mahaweli Development Project (1978-1985), and the surge in popularity of the mythical figure of Ravana, the demon king and engineer, in the Sinhalese community in contemporary Sri Lanka. Through his exploration of these, Witharana makes several critical interventions into existing debates on Sinhalese nationalism.

Firstly, he challenges the prevailing view that Sinhalese identity has always been backward-looking and rooted in an imagined past (Daniel 1989). By studying the discourses that emerged around engineering technologies in the opening decades of the 20th century, he shows that there was a clearly articulated vision of a technically advanced, industrialised future for the Sinhalese nation in circulation, which has been largely overlooked by historians.

Secondly, through his examination of the rejection of the Vijaya myth in contemporary Sri Lanka and the growing popularity of Ravana the engineer as an alternative founder of the nation, Witharana makes the claim that Sinhalese nationalists are currently experimenting with a new vision of their past, to meet the needs of the post-LTTE era.

This work is underpinned by Witharana's assertion that engineering is a central component of Sinhalese identity and that there exists a corresponding narrative that "engineering is in our blood". The first chapter provides evidence of this through an examination of three key sources: *The History of Technology* course at the Open University of Sri Lanka; the documentary film *A Hundred Year Renaissance*, which was produced for the centenary commemoration of the Institution of Engineers of Sri Lanka; and the 2015 ceremony that relaunched the book *Wewa* (The Tank) by Udula Bandara Avusadahami, which was dedicated to the island's community of Buddhist monks.

Within this narrative, ancient engineering technologies whose physical remains still dot the landscape, such as the tank irrigation systems and wind-powered iron smelting kilns, are the earliest examples of a continuous tradition of engineering excellence that has persisted in Sinhalese communities to the present day.

However, through a granular analysis of the three sources, Witharana shows that such a 'smooth' narrative is only made possible by a range of silences and omissions. Of particular note is their collective silence on the early engineers themselves and to which segment of society they belonged – a matter on which the island's chronicles are also strangely silent.

After presenting evidence that early engineering expertise in Sri Lanka might have been held by the low-status Navandanna caste or Tamil artisans who arrived from India, Witharana speculates that the latter would have been especially incompatible with a narrative in which engineering is the domain of the ethnic Sinhalese, resulting in their exclusion from the story.

Next, Witharana interrogates the commonly accepted claim that a developmental form of nationalism never emerged in Sri Lanka (Spencer 2008) and that Sinhalese nationalism has been tied primarily to an imagined past (Daniel 1989).

Through an exploration of the Aberdeen-Laxapana Hydroelectric Scheme, in which the Aberdeen Falls of the Kehelgamu Oya tributary and the Laxapana Falls of the Maskeli Oya tributary of the Kelani River were to be harnessed to provide cheap electricity, Witharana argues

that the energy-generating capacity of this scheme made possible a vision of a developmental State that has been largely overlooked by historians.

This story is told through the biography of D.J. Wimalasurendra, a District Engineer of the Public Works Department and politician of the first State Council, who inspired and tirelessly campaigned for the scheme. It is in Wimalasurendra's engineering publications and speeches to the State Council that the vision of a technologically developed future for the Sinhalese nation is most clearly articulated.

This forward-facing vision of national development, Witharana argues, was ultimately marginalised by the colonial government, whose economic interests would have been threatened by the domestic production of inexpensive power, and the merchants and rentiers of the Ceylonese bourgeoisie, who were dependent on opportunities provided by the colonial economy. Here, Witharana invites to consider engineering technology as providing a solid foundation from which nationalist futures can be imagined.

While the Accelerated Mahaweli Development Project (AMDP) has already received much scholarly attention as a site of nationalist imaginings (Tennekoon 1988), the next chapter re-directs our attention to the ways in which it facilitated the development of an exclusionary strain of nationalism through its material marginalisation of the Tamil community.

The AMDP, which was the largest engineering project in the island's history, diverted water from the Mahaweli River to the major tanks of the dry zone. Unlike the Aberdeen-Laxapana Hydroelectric Scheme of the previous chapter, this project was enthusiastically supported by the State and represented as the resurrection of the hydraulic civilisation of the ancient Sinhalese kingdoms.

Firstly, Witharana shows how the *Mahaweli Vansaya* – the authorised chronicle of the Mahaweli River civilisation produced as part of the project in the early 1980s – erased the presence of Tamil and Muslim communities in the Mahaweli Valley by portraying the region as a site of purely Sinhalese authenticity. Whilst this erasure of the Tamil and Muslim Other was achieved discursively, two episodes in the early-stage design of the Mahaweli project aimed to marginalise Tamil communities in the North and East in material terms too.

These were a failed attempt in 1983 by a group of engineers to redraw the technical map of the AMDP, which would have fragmented the belt of land considered by Tamils as their traditional homeland, and

the scaling back of plans to build a canal through the North Central Province that would have provided water to Tamil regions in the North. With such nationalist agendas present at the design stages, Witharana argues, the AMDP was not just of rhetorical and symbolic importance to the Sinhalese nationalist project but should be thought of as an inherently nationalistic tool, mediated by the techniques and members of the engineering profession.

In the final section, Witharana turns our attention away from large-scale engineering projects and towards the emergence of a new engineering narrative in contemporary Sri Lanka. Ethnographically, he documents the spread of a new origin myth that has been circulating in the Sinhalese community since the final stages of the armed conflict and the defeat of the LTTE. By tracking conversations on trains and trends in digital and print media, we learn that there has been a surge in the popularity of the mythical demon king Ravana, who is renowned as a skilled engineer, as an alternative to Vijaya as the founder of the Sinhalese nation.

With confidence running high following the defeat of the LTTE, Witharana argues, the Sinhalese have been in search of a new identity. Here, the engineering accomplishments of the Ravana dynasty are considered more befitting of this emboldened forward-looking nation than the Vijaya narrative, which ties Sinhalese achievement to the simple agricultural past of tank-based rice cultivation and to Sri Lanka's dominant neighbour, India.

Sri Lanka, Witharana argues, provide us with a rare example of a nation (the Sinhalese) in a state of such supreme confidence, in the wake of the 2009 military victory, that it can take the risk of experimenting with and replacing its past. In so doing, this work challenges the view that questioning myths of origin always destabilises national identity.

Negotiating Power and Constructing the Nation brings discussions of Sinhalese nationalism firmly into the 21st century and generates original perspectives on a well-worn subject. It convincingly demonstrates the centrality of engineering to the development of nationalism. Witharana's re-framing of Sri Lanka as a socio-technical space is refreshing.

Given this framing, the discussion of the 'technical' dimensions of these projects could, at times, have been pushed further. Which aspects of their design and operation, we could ask, allowed them to mediate the development of nationalism so effectively? At the outset, Witharana suggests that this study opens "the possibility of a theory that braids engineering and nationalism" (10), and it will be interesting to see whether a clearer formulation of such a theory emerges in subsequent works.

The light this research sheds on overlooked episodes in Sri Lanka's developmental history and on underappreciated aspects of nationalist imagination and action mean that it will be of interest to many scholars of Sri Lankan history, politics, and sociology, not just those with an interest in the island's engineering past.

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