POLITY

ISSN 1391-822X

December 2023 Volume 11, Issue 2

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Cost
Sri Lanka: Rs. 500
International: $10
(postage not included)

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Cover Photo
Sakuna Miyasinadha Gamage

Contents

Palestine and Us 3

A Voice from Palestine 6
M. A. Nuhman

Gaza: Into the Abyss 9
Devaka Gunawardena

Sri Lanka Must Act in Solidarity with Palestine! 11

If I Must Die 14
Refaat Alareer

In 2024's Elections, Lessons from 2015 15
Devaka Gunawardena

Why 2024 Will Not Be 2015 Redux 19
Ramindu Perera

2024 and Beyond: Electoral Politics and the Left 23
Devaka Gunawardena

"Austerity Driven Economic Reforms Affect Women More than Men" 27
Juan Pablo Bohoslavsky

Budget 2024: 'Deep Marketisation' in Sri Lanka 31
B. Skanthakumar

"One Day, Nobody will Even Ask about Us": The Obsolete Silversmiths of Kandy 37
Hasini Lecamwasam

Reflections on Critical Agrarian Studies in Sri Lanka 40
Urs Geiser

When crises converge: How Uneven Agrarian Development Influences the Effects of Climate Change in Sri Lanka's North-Central Dry Zone 49
Harry M. Quealy and Cherisma Rajaratnam

Fault Lines in Indian Agriculture: Solidarities and Contradictions in Southern Haryana 54
Srishti Yadav

Repatriation and Reparation: Objects and the Colonial Museum 60
Lara Wijesuriya

The Cannon and the Cranium: Towards a Wider Agenda for Reparatory Justice in Sri Lanka 63
Andi Schubert

Ceylon's 'Great Hartal' of 1953: The Masses Enter History 66
B. Skanthakumar

A Hundred Years of Pauline and C. R. (Dick) Hensman 73
Rohini Hensman

Abolish Marriage? Kanchuka Dharmasiri's Play 'Surpanakha' 80
Liyanage Amarakeerthi

Negotiating Power and Constructing the Nation: Engineering in Sri Lanka. Bandura Dileepa Witharana 82
Cherry Briggs

Brotherless Night. V. V. Ganeshananthan 85
Vasugi Kailasam

Claiming Identity, Dignity, and Justice: Malaiyaha Tamils of Sri Lanka 87
B. Skanthakumar

Best Reads in 2023 92
Vajra Chandrasekera, Adilah Ismail, V. V. Ganeshananthan, Vivimarie VanderPoorten

Palestine and Us

Three months of atrocity upon atrocity and abomination upon abomination have passed since the dogs of war were unleashed over Palestine. As of the dawn of 2024, over 22,000 Palestinian men, women and children have been killed, and around 57,000 injured, in Israel's annihilation of the people of Gaza, accompanied by multiple and ongoing acts of state terrorism in the West Bank, Lebanon, and Syria.

For the avoidance of doubt, we are horrified and condemn without equivocation the murder by Hamas, of 1139 men, women, and children (695 Israeli civilians, 373 Israeli military, 71 foreigners) in 'Operation Al-Aqsa Flood' on 7 October 2023. It is possible, even necessary, to resolutely support the right of Palestinians to resistance and self-defence, while having no truck with either the Islamic fundamentalist Hamas[i] nor the authoritarian and corrupt Fatah[ii], vassal of Israel in the West Bank. The courageous people of Palestine who have been struggling for the right to exist since the first *Nakba* of 1948, deserve a leadership committed to the values of equality and justice, secularism and democracy.

Yet, let there be no ambiguity either, that our solidarity is unconditionally with those being pulverised into oblivion by the actions without parallel of the Israeli State. To speak of 'both sides' being culpable, as if there was and is symmetry between them, defies the record. As the former UN senior staffer Craig Mokhiber, who resigned disgusted by the ineffectiveness of his organisation to stop a genocide "unfolding before our eyes" succinctly framed it: "the two sides are colonizer & colonized, occupier & occupied, oppressor & oppressed, persecutor and persecuted, ethnic cleanser & ethnically cleansed".[iii]

The timeline of this conflict did not begin on 7 October. That date is but a point over seven decades of colonial-settler violence unleashed by the Zionist State of Israel against Palestinians[iv], underpinned by limitless material, financial, and diplomatic support from the countries that spawned and practised antisemitism for centuries, slouching all the way to the *Shoah*. To indulge in 'whataboutism' in this moment amounts to the blandest moral abstractionism; where in an astoundingly ahistorical sweep, 'violence' becomes a catch-all to be abhorred and rejected *en tout*, without regard to cause, construction, and context, of this tragedy.

Almost 85% of Gaza's residents or 1.9 million people (most already refugees) are now displaced, without adequate water, food, and sanitation. Whole neighbourhoods have been bombarded to the ground.[v] Hospitals, schools, refugee camps, universities, libraries, installations of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA), and places of religious worship have been shelled and those sheltering within them murdered and maimed. Israel is targeting and systematically eliminating those who communicate its crimes to the outside world and those who have sustained Palestinian communities through its blockade of Gaza: at least 28 artists, intellectuals and writers; at least 70 journalists and media workers; 142 UNRWA staff; and 300 healthcare workers.

This barbarism continues only because it has the consent and collusion of the West. The refusal of these guardians of the post-1945 international order to even call for a ceasefire, leave alone restrain Israel's genocidal campaign in the Gaza strip, affords a moment of rare clarity on our unequal world, the moral compass of those policing it, and the hollowness of cherished concepts of the 'rule of law', 'human rights', 'international community', and 'international law'.

If not now, when will the scales fall from the eyes of our local liberal and left stalwarts of civil society, in their idealisation of Western liberal democracies and foreign policy as paragons of the norms of civilised peoples?

It is now many years since justice for war crimes in Sri Lanka and other gross abuses of human rights has been internationalised. Will we continue to make appeals to Western powers to intervene for civil and political rights protection in Sri Lanka: tagging them on social media, sending letters and petitions, and through back-door and public lobbying of their missions in Colombo, in their capitals, and in Geneva and New York? Will we shamelessly pose for photographs with their political emissaries, and partake in their cocktail receptions? Can we continue to seek and take funds for good governance, anti-corruption, and human rights projects, from the countries that are financing, arming,

and providing diplomatic and political cover for Israel's crimes against humanity? For how much longer, to avert the mirror and see staring back, "Imperialism's face/And the international wrong"?

Ever the opportunist, Ranil Wickremesinghe has called out Western double standards asking, "Then why is it one rule applies to us, and another rule applies to them", in reference to Israel's conduct vis-à-vis Palestine.[vi] Neither the United States nor the United Kingdom nor Canada, active in keeping Sri Lanka on the agenda of the UN Human Rights Council, will likely have an answer to this question. There is no doubt that our malevolent political leadership aims to invoke this blatant hypocrisy to sweep human rights accountability into the dust-pan.

While we cannot let them do so, to move forward in Sri Lanka, let us begin by ridding ourselves of delusions in an international 'rule-based' order, that somehow offers hope and solace to those sorely in need of it. Even if we side-step the ethics of appealing to those complicit in state terrorism in Palestine, for relief and redress of violations in Sri Lanka, can we now expect these countries to practically wield influence in the prosecution of gross abuses of humanitarian and human rights law? Hereafter at least, the West occupies no moral high ground. Of course, with its record of colonialism and post-colonial wars for dominance, natural resources, and markets, it was never deserving.

Shall we start by taking heed of what the State of Palestine's Ambassador to Sri Lanka said when he addressed trade union, civil society, and left activists on International Human Rights Day last month: "We know that the people of Sri Lanka have their own problems, which they struggle with for a long time. My advice to you is to find a way to fight for your own solutions. Do not expect any other party to come and solve your issues".[vii] We need to root our struggle for human rights, justice, and accountability, in our own soil and among our own people.

And how are we to respond to the double-dealing of our political leadership? Should we laugh or cry when Mahinda Rajapaksa – who strengthened diplomatic, economic, and political relations with Israel during his presidency and even undertook a state visit in 2014 (while being founder president of the Sri Lanka-Palestine Solidarity Committee) – says poker-faced to the Palestinian representative in Colombo, that "War is not the solution. We are against it. This has to be solved through dialogue"[viii], after bathing Mullivaikkal in blood?

It is puzzling that the Left's only prospective candidate for the Presidency in 2024 thought it appropriate and of comfort to the same Ambassador, to assure him of the *Jathika Jana Balawegaya's* support for a 'two-state' solution[ix] – even as Netanyahu and the Israeli Right have changed facts on the ground: through aggressive establishment of militarised illegal settlements that diced and sliced the West Bank; and now their evisceration of human life in Gaza. When in demonstrations we chant that "Palestine shall be free/from the river to the sea", it is because now this is the only option remaining that recognises the right of existence of both the original people of that land, and those who claim it through the dispossession of the former.

There is absolute silence from the political opposition, trade unions, and migrant workers' advocates on the government's drive to send 10,000 workers to Israel to work in farming and construction,[x] replacing some of the Thais who have returned to their country in recent months. They will join more than 9,000 Sri Lankans already working there as elderly caregivers and agricultural labour. What does it mean when all affirm the legitimacy of Palestinian statehood but are accomplices to desperate Sri Lankans working on land stolen from Palestinians, reinforcing Israel's settler-colonialism and apartheid policies, and vulnerable to being taken hostage or killed in raids and bombings?

Why is there no action from any quarter in Sri Lanka on the international Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) campaign? There should be a comprehensive ban on political, economic, cultural, and sporting exchanges with Israel. The trade in gems, seafood, and tea with Israel should stop. State universities and academics should be making connections with Palestinian universities and scholars. If the Wickremesinghe-Rajapaksa government is sincere in its stance for an immediate ceasefire, why has it not recalled its Ambassador in Tel Aviv as a mark of disapproval?

It is long past time for the 'Global South' to unite in international fora and exert what agency and power it does have, to force Israel to stop its annihilation of Palestinians beginning with those in Gaza. South Africa's case against Israel in the International Court of Justice has the backing of Jordan, Malaysia, Turkey, and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation. Will Sri Lanka follow suit?

Oil producing countries must cease sales to countries condoning Israel's war. Instead of hand-wringing and statements of concern from the despotic Arab and other regimes that shore up the US economy including through equity investments and weapons purchases,

there should be divestment of US dollars, Euros, Sterling, and other Western reserve currencies. Malaysia has banned the docking of Israeli flag vessels in its ports. Yemen has gone further and blocked all maritime traffic to and from Israel.

We stand in solidarity with all who feel the hurt and pain of Palestinians by gathering in protest on streets and in public places; taking direct action against corporates supportive of Israel; and combatting the disinformation and propaganda spread by the backers of this wicked war. The global movement for Palestine must strive to shield its people from Israel's iron swords and remain mobilised until there is a permanent ceasefire, the return of refugees, and a durable political solution.

07.01.2024

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A Voice from Palestine

M. A. Nuhman

Israeli defence minister says: "We are fighting with human animals" and Prime Minister Netanyahu says in his address to the nation: "Israel is fighting with the enemies of civilization … This war is between the forces of civilization and the forces of barbarism". This poem is in response to their utterances.

You say,
You are fighting with human animals and
That's how they should be dealt with.
Yes, you can only speak like that.
Your brain is benumbed.
Your heart is parched.

Do not insult animals.
Animals are friends of people.
You and I cannot live in this world
without animals.
Do not insult animals.

Animals do not encroach and occupy others' lands.
Animals do not bomb and kill people.
Animals do not rob a country.
Animals do not chase people out of their homes.
They do not destroy villages.
They do not make people refugees.
Do not insult animals.

Think who you are
and how you came here,
how you chased us out,
how you killed us,
how you destroyed our villages,
how you made refugees of us,
how you imprisoned us.
Think of these, if you can.

You have lost your memory.
Your conscience is dead.
Your heart is parched.
Your brain is benumbed.
You say we are terrorists.
You say we are human animals.
Do not insult animals.

நீ சொல்கிறாய்
நாங்கள் மனித விலங்குகளுடன் போரிடுகிறோம்
என்று
அவர்களை அப்படித்தான் நடத்தவேண்டும்
என்று சொல்கிறாய்
நீ அப்படித்தான் சொல்வாய்
உன் மூளை மரத்துவிட்டது
உன் இதயம் காய்ந்துவிட்டது

விலங்குகளை அவமதியாதே
விலங்குகள் மனிதரின் தோழர்கள்
விலங்குகள் இல்லாத உலகில்
நீயும் நானும் வாழமுடியாது
விலங்குகளை அவமதியாதே

விலங்குகள் ஆக்கிரமிப்பதில்லை
விலங்குகள் குண்டுவீசி மனிதரைக் கொல்வதில்லை
விலங்குகள் ஒரு தேசத்தை அபகரிப்பதில்லை
விலங்குகள் மனிதரைத்
தங்கள் வீடுகளை விட்டுத் துரத்துவதில்லை
கிராமங்களை நிர்மூலமாக்குவதில்லை
விலங்குகள் மனிதரை அகதிகளாக்குவதில்லை
விலங்குகளை அவமதியாதே

நீ யார் என்று யோசித்துப்பார்
நீ எங்கிருந்து வந்தாய்
எப்படி இங்குவந்தாய்
என்பதை எண்ணிப்பார்
எப்படி எங்கள் மண்ணில் காலூன்றினாய்
எப்படி எங்களைத் துரத்தினாய்
எப்படி எங்கள் கிராமங்களை அழித்தாய்
எப்படி எங்களைக் கொன்றுகுவித்தாய்
எப்படி எங்களை அகதிகளாக்கினாய்
எப்படி எங்களைச் சிறையில் அடைத்தாய்
என்பதை எண்ணிப்பார்

உனக்கு எல்லாம் மறந்துவிட்டது
உன்மனச்சாட்சி மடிந்துவிட்டது
உன் இதயம் காய்ந்துவிட்டது

Is it not you that shattered our peace?
Is it not you that destroyed our beehive?
Is it not you that felled our olive trees?
Is it not you that forced us to take up arms?
Is it not you that made our children pick up stones?
Now, you say we are terrorists.
We are human animals.
Do not insult animals.

You say
'We are fighting the enemies of civilization'
and you say
'This war is between forces of civilization
and forces of barbarism'.
Is it not the joke of the century?
Are you saying what I should be saying?
Is not Satan reciting the scriptures?
Is it not you
that is the worst enemy of human civilisation
that travels along the same path as Hitler
following him?

The big terrorists of the world
support you, but
open your eyes to see
people with a sense of justice
rise against you around the world.
Your own people with a sense of justice
rise against you in your own country.
Your end is near.

Tyrants cannot survive forever.
History will spit on them.
You follow their line.
Your end is near.

Your conscience is dead.
Your heart is parched.
Your brain is benumbed.
Your mind is confused.
You have lost your memory.

You say that we are human animals,
barbarians and enemies of civilisation.
You seek to destroy us completely and
dream of a peaceful sleep.
That will not happen
as long as a drop of justice
survives in this world.
It cannot happen.
There is no peace for the one who destroys the peace of others.
There is no freedom for the one who robs others of

உன் மூளை மரத்துவிட்டது
நீ எங்களைப் பயங்கரவாதி என்கிறாய்
மனித விலங்குகள் என்கிறாய்
விலங்குகளை அவமதியாதே

எங்கள் அமைதியைக் குலைத்தவன்
நீ இல்லையா
எங்கள் தேன்கூட்டைக் கலைத்தவன்
நீ இல்லையா
எங்கள் ஒலிவ மரங்களை அழித்தவன்
நீ இல்லையா
எங்களைத் துப்பாக்கி தூக்கவைத்தவன்
நீ இல்லையா
எங்கள் குழந்தைகளைக் கல்பொறுக்கவைத்தவன்
நீ இல்லையா
இப்போது நீ எங்களைப் பயங்கரவாதி என்கிறாய்
மனித விலங்குகள் என்கிறாய்
விலங்குகளை அவமதியாதே

நீ சொல்கிறாய்
நாங்கள் நாகரீகத்தின் எதிரிகளுடன்
போரிடுகிறோம் என்று
இது நாகரீக சக்திகளுக்கும்
காட்டுமிராண்டிகளுக்கும்
இடையிலான போர் என்று சொல்கிறாய்
இந்த நூற்றாண்டின் பெரிய நகைச்சுவை
இல்லையா இது
நான் சொல்லவேண்டியதை நீ சொல்கிறாயா
சாத்தான் வேதம் ஓதுகிறதா
ஹிட்லருக்குப் பிறகு
அவன்பாதையில் செல்லும்
மனித நாகரீகத்தின் மோசமான எதிரி
நீ இல்லையா

உலகின் பெரிய பயங்கரவாதிகள்
உன்னை ஆதரிக்கிறார்கள்
ஆனால் உன் கண்களைத் திறந்துபார்
நீதி உணர்ச்சி கொண்ட மக்கள்
உலகெங்கும் உனக்கெதிராகக்
கிளர்ந்தெழுகிறார்கள்
நீதி உணர்ச்சி மிக்க உன் சொந்த மக்களே
உனக்கெதிராகக் கிளர்ந்தெழுகிறார்கள்
உங்கள் முடிவு நெருங்கிவிட்டது

அநியாயக் காரர்கள் நிலைத்திருப்பதில்லை
வரலாறு அவர்களைக் காறி உமிழ்கிறது
அந்த வரிசையில் நீ வந்துநிற்கிறாய்
உன் முடிவு நெருங்கிவிட்டது

உன் மனச்சாட்சி மடிந்துவிட்டது
உன் இதயம் காய்ந்துவிட்டது
உன் மூளை மரத்துவிட்டது
உன் சித்தம் கலங்கிவிட்டது
உனக்கு எல்லாம் மறந்துவிட்டது

நீ எங்களை மனித விலங்குகள் என்கிறாய்
காட்டுமிராண்டிகள் என்கிறாய்
நாகரீகத்தின் எதிரி என்கிறாய்

their freedom.
You may kill more and more of us
by dropping
thousands and thousands of bombs.
But we will rise again and again
from the rubble
from the ashes
to shatter your dream.

Cast away your arms into the Red Sea
and approach me with an
olive branch, and
I will forgive your sins of
seventy-five years and embrace you.
I will offer you a place to live in my land
so that
we may sleep and wake up peacefully in our homes.
Are you ready for that?

Let your heart moisten.
Let feeling sprout in you.
Let clarity fill your mind.
Are you ready for that?
Are you ready
to throw your arms into the sea and
come to me with an olive branch?
Until then the dispersed bees
Will continue to chase you and
continue to disturb you.

Do not dream of destroying us completely.
That will not happen
as long as a drop of justice
survives in this world.
It cannot happen.

01. 11. 2023

Translated from Tamil by ***M. A. Nuhman*** *and*
S. Sivasegaram

M. A. Nuhman *is a poet, literary critic, and translator who has published more than 30 books. He retired as Professor of Tamil at the University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka. His poem 'Murder' ('Buddharin Padukolai' in the Tamil-language original) is a highly acclaimed protest of the 1981 burning of the Jaffna Public Library.*

எங்களை முற்றாக அழித்துவிட
ஆசைப்படுகிறாய்
எங்களை அழித்துவிட்டு
நிம்மதியாய்த் தூங்கலாம்
எனக் கனவுகாண்கிறாய்

அது நடக்காது
உலகில் ஒரு துளி நீதி இருக்கும்வரை
அது நடக்காது
பிறரின் அமைதியைக் குலைத்தவனுக்கு
ஏது அமைதி
பிறரின் சுதந்திரத்தைப் பறித்தவனுக்கு
ஏது சுதந்திரம்

இன்னும் இன்னும்
ஆயிரம் ஆயிரம்
குண்டுகளை வீசி
நீ எங்களை அழிக்கலாம்
அந்த இடிபாடுகளில் இருந்து
அந்தச் சாம்பலில் இருந்து
மீண்டும் மீண்டும்
நாங்கள் உயிர்த்தெழுவோம்
உன் கனவுகளைக் கலைப்போம்

உன் ஆயுதங்களை செங்கடலில் வீசிவிட்டு
ஒரு ஒலிவம் கிளையைக் கையில் எடுத்துக்கொண்டு
என்னை நோக்கிவா
எழுபத்தைந்து வருடகால
உன் பாவங்களை நான் மன்னித்துவிடுகிறேன்
உன்னை அரவணைத்துக்கொள்கிறேன்
என் மண்ணில் வாழ உனக்கும் இடம் தருகிறேன்
நாம் நம் வீடுகளில் நிம்மதியாகத் தூங்கி எழலாம்
அதற்கு நீ தயாரா

உன் இதயத்தில் ஈரம் கசியட்டும்
உன் உணர்வு துளிர்க்கட்டும்
உன் சித்தம் தெளியட்டும்
அதற்கு நீ தயாரா

உன் ஆயுதங்களைக் கடலில் வீசிவிட்டு
ஒரு ஒலிவம் கிளையுடன் வர நீ தயாரா

அதுவரை கலைக்கப்பட்ட தேனீக்கள்
உன்னைத் துரத்திக்கொண்டே இருக்கும்
உன் காதில் இரைந்துகொண்டே இருக்கும்
எங்களை முற்றாக அழித்துவிடலாம்
என்று மட்டும் கனவுகாணாதே
அது நடக்காது
உலகில் ஒரு துளி நீதி இருக்கும்வரை
அது நடக்காது

Gaza: Into the Abyss

Devaka Gunawardena

Gaza and the wider world are heading into an abyss. With the announcement and preparation of Israel's invasion of Gaza in response to a massacre by Hamas, longstanding fears appear to be on the verge of realisation. The collective West remains eager to absolve itself of its historical guilt for the Holocaust, which shades into its enduring dehumanisation of (ex-) colonial subjects, Palestinians. It affirms that it will stand by Israel.

There is little clue or indication that policymakers grasp the enormity of what is happening. The old bromide that "Israel has the right to defend itself" has obscured the reality that what is occurring is nothing short of a slow-moving annexation, if not potential ethnic cleansing[i] and even genocide[ii]. Whether that occurs through 'surgical' amputation or wholesale destruction of the Palestinian people, the moral consequences for humanity will be no less dramatic. The primary analogy for recent events is less the worst surprise attack on Israel since the Yom Kippur War, than the possibility of a second, and potentially conclusive, *Nakba*[iii].

Of course, there are many layers to the conflict. Anyone who seeks to wade into it with a position must apparently justify themselves by the reams of literature they have read, no less than their own physical experience on the frontlines. Yet in our case, the appeal to moral authority through proximity to the ground cannot deflect the world historical consequences of Israel's impending invasion of Gaza for practically everyone on the planet.

Those who prioritise solidarity with Palestine have often been accused of antisemitism for 'singling out' Israel, insofar as other States may commit even worse abuses. But the reality is that the question of Palestine produces a critical reading on our political barometer. It crystallises many issues on account of both its strategic primacy, and its weight within the story the West tells about itself.

If the whole of modern European history has been defined precisely by the Jewish question – then it is nothing less than a complete abdication of responsibility to isolate Palestine, compartmentalise it, and see it as only one among a range of issues on which progressives must campaign, to be viewed as 'even-handed'.

In fact, the reality is that throughout the whole evolution of the struggle of oppressed peoples, what we are witnessing now anticipates a much darker period in world history. It is on no less than the scale of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. At the very least, the latter shook the Left to its core and produced a tremendous amount of soul-searching on the growing dangers of non-Western imperialisms. But the impending attack on Gaza does not appear to provoke anything close to a similar level of self-reflection within the Western establishment. It continues to target and harass[iv] progressive movements of solidarity with Palestine.

The reality, however, is that authoritarian regimes have no trouble coordinating with each other, regardless of their geopolitical stripe. While the West sees in Israel its eternal ally, the truth is that the years-long sharpening of racism within the body politic along with the Netanyahu government's most recent actions now threaten to upend the world order to an unprecedented degree.

What other aspiring regional powers are waiting to see what the consequences will be, if any, for Israel? Is it not likely that the Modi regime, for example, will be emboldened by Israel's solution to the Palestinian question when considering its own plan of action against, for example, the Kashmiri Muslim community? The potential global scenarios are frightening to contemplate.

Already, revanchism has erupted to the surface in recent years in otherwise disconnected places, from Kashmir to Nagorno-Karabakh, as Noa Landau noted in a prophetic article, 'How Israel Shaped the Era of Annexation'[v]. It was published only weeks before the current upheaval. The world, like a clenched fist squeezing a razor, appears to be releasing new gushes of blood with every pump.

At the same time, the Left often romanticises struggle. No doubt, there have been many thoughtful responses[vi] that have disrupted our assumptions by asking us to carefully consider how we frame the Palestinian question, ensuring that we do not undermine the struggle with

coarse rhetoric. Reverend William Barber II[vii], for example, powerfully invoked the legacy of Black Americans' freedom struggle to condemn Hamas' butchery of Israeli Jews, while resisting dehumanising attempts to conflate Palestinians with Hamas.

But there is an unavoidable fear that what we are watching right now has no exact parallel in history. It cannot be reduced to a heroic struggle for civil rights or even decolonisation. The whole population of Gaza, and by extension the rest of Palestine, is under immediate existential threat. The haunting words of Gandhi, who even after World War II, argued that "Jews should have offered themselves to the butcher's knife"[viii], acquires renewed menace in this context.

For those around the world who cannot accept the wilful destruction of a people but who can only watch helplessly on the sidelines, the demand remains simple: freedom for Palestine *now*.

Of course, the path forward is incredibly complex. Nevertheless, the point remains that acknowledgment of the trauma caused by Hamas' massacre should not become a tool to rationalise the underlying aggression of Israel's occupation. The latter is becoming a full-blown threat to the collective existence of Palestine.

While the Biden administration and the wider Western establishment fall back on the assumption that Israel has a right to defend itself, the clear need instead is to avert further tragedy. *That cause can only be strengthened by withholding any form of military, political, economic, or ideological support to Israel until it ends its occupation, including through the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions movement*[xi]. More than a nuclear-armed power, it is the Palestinian people who face an actual existential danger today.

Moreover, the Left's temper must be carefully calibrated in response. What is happening is not a global moment likely to lead to a great outburst of 'freedom struggles' in sympathy with Palestine. We are far from the world of the Battle of Algiers. Instead, the world is already approaching a point of no return[x]. Interlocking 'defensive' alliances between hegemonic powers are likely to produce only a greater degree of conflict. The trajectory has its nearest parallel with World War I in terms of the potential for sheer, meaningless destruction. The tripwires are being set. If there is any moral clarity to be obtained in this stomach-churning situation, it must come from painful yet clear acknowledgment that the Palestinian struggle has entered a new phase. The very existence of an entire group of people is once again at stake. In this context, insight comes from mourning, not chest-thumping.

The Armenian genocide and the Holocaust represented the scourge for which the West promised "never again". It is in this moment that the free peoples of the world—especially in the Southern periphery, where the West claims to want to rehabilitate its image—must hold it to the same collective pledge. Emerging popular movements of resistance are compelled to demand that the West truly recognises the Palestinian people by withholding support for Israel. They have been written off its ledger for far too long. If not, the West itself will come to rue its decision to back Israel's war with dramatic regional consequences.

The need to avert this outcome becomes even more urgent in today's context. Far-Right forces elsewhere around the world—unabashed in their antisemitism—are primed to find twisted inspiration in the glowing embers of bombed-out apartment complexes and mangled bodies in Gaza.

Devaka Gunawardena *(PhD, UCLA) is a political economist and independent researcher.*

Notes

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Sri Lanka Must Act in Solidarity with Palestine!

The diabolical horrors unfolding in Gaza compel people of conscience across the world to take a principled stand in solidarity with the Palestinian people.

The current violence unleashed indiscriminately on Gaza in particular, is supposedly aimed at eradicating Hamas whose surprise attack on 7 October, and abhorrent killings of civilians as well as subsequent taking of over 200 Israeli hostages, is presented by mainstream media as the immediate trigger behind Israel's gross and egregious violations of international humanitarian law and human rights. Blanket bombings of the Gaza strip, coupled with assassinations and other acts of Israeli state terror in the West Bank and Lebanon, are supposed to achieve this aim.

However, Hamas's actions in early October cannot, and should not, be understood in isolation from decades of Zionist settler-colonial violence that has sought the physical and political erasure of Palestine. The grievously regular killings of Palestinians, including children, at the hands of Israeli forces and settlers in the West Bank are well known and documented. The Gaza strip, known as the world's largest open-air prison, has been in a state of siege for close to two decades now.

What has been a semi-acknowledged state-of-affairs has become official reality since the 7th of October, with a full blockade being imposed on Gaza. From a daily average of 500 trucks with water, food, and medical supplies that used to be permitted into Gaza, only a few dozen are allowed in now. Apartheid Israel's

political leadership, notably its Prime Minister, Minister of Defence, and Minister of Energy and Infrastructure, are openly throwing around dehumanising rhetoric about Palestinians to justify their actions amounting to genocide.

Israel is throwing a tantrum over a statement of fact by the UN Secretary-General condemning the "collective punishment" of Palestinians, labelling it as antisemitic and calling for his removal. Naming any, and all, criticism of Israel as antisemitic is a tactic used time and time again to silence and cow down those who oppose and challenge Zionism. But Israel's advantage in global public opinion is steadily dissipating through its ongoing actions, including within the Jewish diaspora.

Hundreds upon hundreds of thousands of honourable people of all faiths and none, and across the political spectrum, have taken to the streets of Europe and North America, the Middle East and North Africa, Australia and in Asia including Sri Lanka, to demand a #CeasefireNOW; international action against genocide in Gaza; and for a secular, democratic Palestine.

We salute the enormous courage of Jews within Israel, North America, and Europe, who stand against Israel's barbarism and with the people of Palestine, amidst Zionist threats of violence and intimidation, and ostracism from their families and co-religionists. We reiterate that the Israeli State does not represent all Jewish people, and that any kind of violence against anti-Zionist Jews is indeed antisemitism, even when unleashed by Israel and its backers.

As an institution against all forms of injustice, the Social Scientists' Association of Sri Lanka, and its magazine *Polity*, stand in solidarity with the people of Palestine in their struggle for the right to freedom from Israeli State terror and violence, to peace and dignity with security, for their right of return from where they are refugees and exiles, and their right to self-determination.

We appeal to the people of Sri Lanka and their political representatives, to oppose Israel's total war on Palestine, and strive for lasting peace through a political solution that acknowledges the grave wrongs to which the Palestinian people have been subjected since the *Nakba* of 1948.

To borrow from Rabbi Brant Rosen: "Let us find the courage to speak the words that must be spoken. Let our words kindle sparks of possibility, and may they inspire us all to create the world we know is possible."

- Aamina Nizar
- Adilah Ismail
- Amali Wedagedara
- Amana Zahid
- Ameena Hussein
- Ammaarah Nilafdeen
- Amra Ismail
- Anberiya Haniffa
- Aneesa Firthous
- Anithra Varia
- Ann Jabbar
- Anne M. Blackburn
- Anupama Ranawana
- Apsara Karunaratne
- Aruni Samarakoon
- Asha L. Abeyasekera
- Ayesha Perera
- Balasingham Skanthakumar
- Camena Guneratne
- Chathurika Sewwandi
- Chulani Kodikara
- Deepika Udagama
- Devaka Gunawardena
- Devana Senanayake
- Dhanusha Gihan Pathirana
- Dinali Fernando
- Erandika de Silva
- Ermiza Tegal
- Faizun Zackariya
- Farah Mihlar
- Farzana Haniffa
- Fazana Ibrahim
- Geethika Dharmasinghe
- Harshani Fernando
- Hasini Lecamwasam
- Herath Gunatilake
- Hyshyama Hamin
- Ishan Weerapura
- Jayadeva Uyangoda
- Jayanthi Kuru-Utumpala
- Jeana De Zoysa
- Jeanne Samuel
- KD Darshana
- Kumudini Samuel
- Lakmali Hemachandra
- Leila Udayar
- Maduranga Kalugampitiya
- Malin Kumaranayake
- Malinga Prasad Jayarathna
- Marisa de Silva
- Melani Gunathilaka

- Nabeela Iqbal
- Natasha Van Hoff
- Nelun Gunasekera
- Nicola Perera
- Nisreen Rehmanjee
- Nuwan Walasmullage
- Prabath Hemantha
- Pradeep Peiris
- Ramyani Ratnayake
- Rohini Dep Weerasinghe
- Rohini Hensman
- Ruki Fernando
- Ruvani Ranasinha
- S. Janaka Biyanwila
- Sabra Zahid
- Safana Gul Begum
- Sakina Moinudeen
- Sakuna M Gamage
- Sakunthala Kadirgamar
- Sandun Thudugala
- Sarah Kellepatha
- Sarala Emmanuel
- Sepali Kottegoda
- Shafinaz Hassendeen
- Shafiya Rafaithu
- Shamala Kumar
- Shashik Silva
- Shreen Saroor
- Shyamala Sivagurunathan
- Sulochana Peiris
- Sumaiya Pallak
- Sumathy Sivamohan
- Sunela Jayewardene
- Suresh Amuhena
- Taniya Silvapulle
- Tehani Ariyaratne
- Thahira Cader
- Upul Wickramasinghe
- Vasanthi Thevanesam
- Vijaya Kumar
- Vijayakanth Madasami
- Waruni Chandrasena
- Yasantha Chamara Jayasooriya
- Yathursha Ulakentheran
- Zahrah Rizwan
- Zainab Ibrahim
- Zulfika Ismail

31.10.2023

If I Must Die

Refaat Alareer

If I must die,
you must live
to tell my story
to sell my things
to buy a piece of cloth
and some strings,
(make it white with a long tail)
so that a child, somewhere in Gaza
while looking heaven in the eye
awaiting his dad who left in a blaze —
and bid no one farewell
not even to his flesh
not even to himself —
sees the kite, my kite you made, flying up above,
and thinks for a moment an angel is there
bringing back love.
If I must die
let it bring hope,
let it be a story.

Refaat Alareer *was professor of English Literature at the Islamic University of Gaza and co-founder of 'We Are Not Numbers'. Born in Gaza, he was killed by an Israeli air strike on December 7, 2023.*

ට මැරෙන්න වෙනවා නම්,
ඔබ ජීවත් විය යුතුයි
මගේ කතාව කියන්න
මගේ දේවල් විකුණන්න
කඩදාසි කෑල්ලක්
සහ නූල් කිහිපයක් මිලදී ගන්න
(දිගු වලිගයක් එක්ක සුදට හදන්න)
එතකොට ගාසාවේ කොහේ හරි දරුවෙක්
අහස දිහා බලාගෙන
ගින්නෙන් ගිය පියා-
කිසිවෙකුගෙන්
ඔහුගේම මාංසයෙන් පවා
තමාගෙන්ද
සමු නොගත්-
එනතුරු බලා සිටින විට
ඔබ හදපු මගේ සරුංගලය දැක
මොහොතකට හිතයි
ආදරය නැවත ගෙන එන
දේවදූතයෙක් කියා
මට මැරෙන්න වෙනවා නම්
එයින් බලාපොරොත්තුව ඇති වේවා
එය කතාවක් වේවා

Translated from English into Sinhala by ***Vajra Chandrasekera***

In 2024's Elections, Lessons from 2015

Devaka Gunawardena

Ahead of the 2015 Presidential Elections that were held on 8 January, Mahinda Rajapaksa seemed unlikely to be defeated. Although Maithripala Sirisena had split from the Sri Lanka Freedom Party, the Rajapaksas had tremendous control over the State and media. Any struggle to prevent a third term and the likely consolidation of a quasi-dictatorship appeared to be an uphill battle at best. Yet in retrospect, the path was not as shut off as it had initially appeared.

Unlike the previous presidential and parliamentary elections of 2010, enough popular antipathy had built over the preceding years. The trends included protest over major issues: from pension reform to fuel price hikes, measly budget allocations for education, to attacks on natural resources. In addition, there was implicit, if not explicit, resistance against militarisation in the North and East. In general, as much as the Rajapaksas crowed about the gains of infrastructure-led development, the reality was that most people were already experiencing the creeping effects of austerity under the post-war regime.

The lessons from 2015 are relevant to understanding the possible trajectories next year, when a momentous electoral juncture in Sri Lanka's history will once again occur. It is unclear what exactly the Wickremesinghe-Rajapaksa government plans to do. But much will depend on its own confidence in its ability to break parties apart and construct a coalition of notables within Parliament; one capable of ensuring that Ranil Wickremesinghe himself earns a plurality of votes in any potential presidential election.

In the absence of this condition, there is a strong possibility that the government could try and delay presidential and/or parliamentary elections using procedural loopholes, masquerading as a state of exception. In this context, it is clear why a growing chorus of voices across society, such as the Civil Society Collective for Democracy[i], is raising the alarm about any potential delay. This is especially true considering the local government elections that have already been indefinitely postponed.

Elite Tactics

The challenge in avoiding this outcome, however, will be in getting the framing right. While the defeat of the Rajapaksa government in 2015 depended on splits within the elite, it also included the crucial dimension of working people's protest, especially overwhelming Muslim and Tamil mobilisation (Gunawardena and Kadirgamar 2023). In this regard, 2024 is unlikely to be different. In fact, more than in 2015, the stakes are even higher in the current period of severe economic and political crisis. This crucial factor alters the political coordinates of what is required for a coherent response to the regime. It makes a soft version of neoliberalism untenable as a broad framework for the opposition.

For example, in 2015, the mainstream opposition could coalesce on the vague platform of 'good governance', because it appeared to be the opposite of corruption, itself a proxy term for the Rajapaksa regime's tendency towards absolutist dictatorship. In contrast, in today's context, relying on the language of eliminating corruption plays directly into the hands of the Wickremesinghe-Rajapaksa government. It is far more adept at using such discourse to demand regressive reforms. For example, by guaranteeing the 'independence' of the Central Bank[ii] to impose unprecedented interest rate hikes. Moreover, the Wickremesinghe-Rajapaksa government is already exposing contradictions within the ideologically diverse opposition by playing both ends of the national question.

Accordingly, if disgruntled sections of the elite and middle class rely on soft neoliberalism to try and counter the current regime, it will be far more counterproductive than in 2015. The ideological confusion it engenders will disrupt political polarisation along class lines

necessary to confront the regime. Namely, the need to point out the *effects* of austerity on working people and the lower middle class especially, regardless of how these challenges are refracted through existing ideological prisms to justify the government's reform programme.

Of course, different quarters, including a marginal faction within the elite, have found fault with the Wickremesinghe-Rajapaksa government for their own reasons. Their focus tends towards ideologically salient issues such as formal liberties, which are often distinct from the everyday concerns of people struggling to survive. But it could be fatal to democracy itself if a selective framing overdetermines the question of elections by turning it into a battle to implement neoliberal ideas in a kinder, more palatable way.

In other words, the language of attracting direct foreign investment, providing stability for investors, eliminating corruption through 'independent' institutions, implementing allegedly overdue neoliberal reforms, and so on, is extremely unlikely to drum up the public support necessary to overcome the Wickremesinghe-Rajapaksa regime. In fact, the regime could very well be an even stronger adversary than Mahinda Rajapaksa's government.

The Wickremesinghe-Rajapaksa government knows its advantages, and it is expert at leveraging neoliberal discourse to impose anti-democratic solutions. How else can we explain the fact that the Wickremesinghe-Rajapaksa government stole the thunder from the people's movement last year to implement an IMF solution?

In that crucial moment, we saw how crafty the regime was at turning the vague tendency towards a progressive constitutionalism within the people's movement on its head. It managed to reorient the debate toward the need to ensure 'stability'[iii], especially for IMF-driven reforms. This solution has since provided the cover for a series of repressive actions that have undermined, if not dismantled, the remaining resistance.

Accordingly, from the shock policies last year to the coming wave of Public Private Partnerships or outright fire sale of public assets, we can now see that the current regime understands the political context extremely well. That includes its sources of foreign and domestic backing. Any attempt to try and reframe neoliberal discourse in terms of a defence of democracy will be met with tepid approval from the movers and shakers behind the scenes. Worse, it could even undermine attempts to galvanise growing public anger with austerity.

Instead, those elites who wish to triangulate between the regime and the working people must come up with an alternative capitalist project if they truly want to defend democratic space. Franklin Delano Roosevelt, for example, used the 'New Deal' to shore up support for a system that began tanking because of its own contradictions during the Great Depression of the 1930s.

The lesson is that only the force of popular protest that compels the elite to produce its own '(counter-) visionaries', as the late Mike Davis (2022) put it, will be sufficient. In contrast, relying on well-worn tropes about transparency, eliminating corruption, and attracting direct foreign investment are losing arguments in a game that is rigged to benefit the Wickremesinghe-Rajapaksa government.

Already, for example, cabinet officials have cited attracting investment as a justification for cracking down on protestors to avoid disruptions to economic activity[iv]. At the same time, there are opportunities for the mainstream liberal representatives of civil society especially to return to 2015 and draw a different conclusion: one that prioritises taking seriously the working people who are protesting the government's austerity policies. In this regard, democracy is not merely a set of formal rules and procedures. Instead, we must understand how it emerges and is consolidated through struggles to defend the basic entitlements people need to survive.

Democratic Space and Pluralism

This approach hinges on redefining the relationship between democratic space and pluralism. During the global crisis of the 1970s, innovative theorists from the democratic socialist tradition such as Nicos Poulantzas and Göran Therborn tried to grapple with the implications of new social movements, from the feminist and environmental to the anti-racist. As Therborn put it, the Left required an alternative approach to democracy to try and defend it against looming attacks from the Right. The latter became visible in what Stuart Hall (1980) called the "authoritarian populism" of figures such as Margaret Thatcher. As Therborn (1978) noted in his major work, *What Does the Ruling Class Do When It Rules?*:

> In part, these problems will be solved by the unfolding of mass struggles for social transformation, in which normally atomised people, who feel they are 'no good', will be drawn into the life of society and regain their human

> value and dignity. But a solution also presupposes that the democratic-socialist coalition will consciously go beyond existing bourgeois conceptions and practices of 'pluralism' to organise social collectivities and in all parts of society. (280)

The flip side of Therborn's argument was Poulantzas' (1978) point that the rise of authoritarian statism/ populism also involved a direct attack on formal liberties. He argued that socialists would be compelled to defend representative institutions against a new kind of exceptional capitalist State. Not necessarily fascist, but incorporating tendencies and trends that could facilitate such a turn under the wrong circumstances (Poulantzas 1978: 210).

In the context of a resurgent wave of global authoritarianism triggered by the multiplying crises of neoliberalism, these arguments remain relevant today. In the aftermath of Sri Lanka's own popular uprising last year, the Wickremesinghe-Rajapaksa government aims to dismantle liberties such as the right to dissent. But it also claims to entertain the concerns of marginalised groups such as women and the Tamil and Muslim communities. The government's ideological conceit involves parrying concerns about the narrowing of democratic space by rendering the broader grievances of marginalised groups instrumental to the regime's own goal of consolidating power.

To confront this strategy head on requires folding conventional concerns with civil and political liberties into a new definition of political community. That means reformulating collective experiments to cope with the burden of the economic crisis, along with older traditions of working people's protest[v], as a direct challenge to the regime's attempts to reaffirm hyper-competitive individualism. This was evident in Wickremesinghe's own preamble to his budget speech[vi] last year, in which he criticised the tendency of Sri Lankans to get "lazy day by day".

In this context, to ensure that at the very least elections are held next year, and that there is a genuine chance for the people to eject an increasingly authoritarian government once again, it is crucial to frame these issues in terms of the resurgence of a broad social opposition. That means articulating working people's economic demands for survival with the diverse social contexts in which they appear.

Meanwhile, ahead of crucial, upcoming battles, it is possible that an alternative project could still be born from within the elite, which is represented by different fractions of the political class. But that requires implicit, if not explicit, acknowledgment of the traditions of protest that would facilitate this reconfiguration. We must draw the appropriate lessons from 2015, which demands an emphasis on the role of working people's protest. In view of Therborn's argument, the point could be extended further to encompass the new cooperative ethos, including the self-provisioning that households are undertaking to sustain themselves under extreme economic conditions.

The autonomy of the working people's movement must be clearly acknowledged and supported. If other sections of society—including disgruntled members of the elite and middle class—are serious about pushing back against a parliamentary quasi-dictatorship, then doing so will require engaging these social and class impulses. It is imperative to adopt this attitude regardless of whether such sections themselves remain committed to capitalist policies. In contrast, engaging in self-mystification about the need for a clean, efficient State while ignoring the substantive implications of concrete struggles—or divorcing policy from protest—will be disastrous.

In the spirit of Ellen Meiksins Wood (1981), to avoid such a turn requires bringing into view the enduring battle to overcome the separation of the economic and the political. Now more than ever in these times of crisis, civil society, especially in its hegemonic liberal form, cannot afford to retain uncritical neoliberal assumptions. The latter have included the pervasive assumption of the need to insulate economic decision-making from popular demands for relief and stimulus.

Instead, adopting a more critical posture requires producing an alternative agenda that attempts to overcome the depression through measures far more favourable to working people. Meanwhile, and in the most immediate sense, it means engaging protests by trade unions and other representative actors of the working people that are on the frontlines in defending democratic space.

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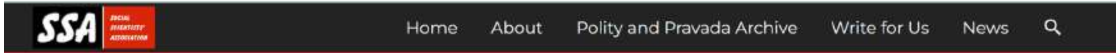

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Why 2024 Will Not Be 2015 Redux

Ramindu Perera

Amidst the woes of a deepening economic crisis and the disastrous effect of International Monetary Fund-dictated austerity measures, Sri Lanka is passing through a tremendous political crisis. On the one hand, the government — an unstable coalition between the *Sri Lanka Podujana Pakshaya* (SLPP—People's Party) and Ranil Wickremesinghe has become increasingly desperate due to lack of popular support. The authoritarian turn Ranil Wickremesinghe took once he became President is becoming more intense by the day, as reflected in the recent attempts to introduce a new anti-terrorism law to crush dissent and to control social media activities.

On the other hand, there is also a crisis in the opposition — the two-party system that dominated the country during most of its post-independence history seems to be in crisis with two actors in the opposition now competing to fill the vacuum created by the decline of the SLPP. Throughout history, what we have seen is while one major party is in crisis, the other leads the opposition aiming for a comfortable takeover. But 2023 seems to be different — and any analyst without prejudice would acknowledge that this difference flows from the rise of the *Jathika Jana Balawegaya* (National People's Power – NPP) that has altered the equilibrium Sri Lankan politics has experienced so far.

This is why making parallels between the 2015 elections and the 2024 elections is misleading. Devaka Gunawardena makes this mistake by attempting to draw lessons from the 2015 presidential elections for the 2024 election year.[i]

Gunawardena's argument can be summed up in the following terms: (a) the Wickremesinghe-Rajapaksa bloc will attempt to fracture opposition parties and form a coalition that can ensure its victory at a presidential election; or failing that, try to delay elections; (b) but, there is an opportunity for an "alternative project", and as in 2015, the challenge to the regime would likely come from splits within the elite, combined with popular mobilisation. However, (c) the "soft neoliberal framework" associated with slogans of political democracy that the main opposition and liberal civil society currently rely on, do not sufficiently capture the frustration prevailing among the working poor and lower-middle-class masses.

Warning against the irrationality of only defending civil and political liberties, Gunawardena wants the oppositional movement and liberal civil society to do what they did not do in 2015 — to break away from soft neo-liberalism; and to prioritise concerns of the working masses.

Changed Political Landscape

Gunawardena writes his piece at a moment when we see a movement led by some oppositional figures and liberal civil society representatives to form a 2015-type common opposition coalition with the main opposition *Samagi Jana Balawegaya* (SJB—United People's Power) as the leading force. These figures want the JJB-NPP too, to join this movement to defeat the 'common enemy'.

Gunawardena does not name this or that party in his piece, nor is he explicit about whom he treats as the main agent in the opposition movement he envisages (there is always a key force in any coalition. To talk about coalitions without any reference to composition is mere abstraction). Nevertheless, Gunawardena's appeal to abandon soft neo-liberalism and to take workers' concerns seriously makes it clear that his target audience is the SJB faction of the opposition, and liberal representatives of civil society that tend to back the SJB. Thus, in this context, Gunawardena's formula for a repetition of 2015 minus neo-liberalism appears as a left-wing argument for an SJB-led united opposition.

The main problem in Gunawardena's perspective lies in the refusal to acknowledge changes that have taken place in the balance of forces in the aftermath of the 2022 mass protests. One of the significant outcomes of the 2022 March-July protest movement was the dismantling of the Rajapaksa-led hegemonic bloc that dominated politics in Sinhala constituencies. Thus, we can say that 2022 signifies a rupture in Sri Lankan politics.

In 2015, Rajapaksa's political project was still dominant in the South. Even during the election that defeated former president Mahinda Rajapaksa, the vast majority of the Sinhala people voted for him against the common opposition candidate. This explains the short life span of the 2015-2019 *Yahapalana* ('good governance') government. Though the Wickremesinghe-Sirisena coalition was formally in power at the time, they had to govern without the active support of Southern constituencies whose sympathies lay with the Rajapaksa bloc.

This hegemony does not exist anymore. The fall of the Rajapaksas during the 2022 protests has seriously damaged the SLPP mass base and it is unlikely they will recover in the foreseeable future. The current government is deeply unpopular among the masses, and what we see can be confidently called a scenario of dominance without hegemony.

The crucial question is: who would be capable of capturing the vacuum created by the decline of the SLPP? It appears that more than the SJB, it is the *Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna*-led NPP that has captured the moment, and is expanding its reach on a substantial scale.

Many commentators, including the NPP's opponents, agree that the local government elections which were due to be held in March 2023 were postponed because the government feared a strong performance by the NPP. Opinion polls continue to give the NPP leader Anura Dissanayaka a lead over the SJB leader,[ii] and most of the cooperative society elections that are taking place in the South see NPP-nominated candidates securing significant victories. Apart from the large crowds the NPP leader draws to his rallies, these are indicators of the growing popularity of the movement.

Beyond 'Anti-Corruption'

One common mistake many commentators make is to depict the NPP project as a mere anti-corruption movement. This misconception flows either from the lack of knowledge of the NPP platform; or the deliberate refusal to acknowledge any progressive content of the NPP for reasons that require further analysis. It is a surprise that despite the NPP's recent growth, no left-wing analyst in Sri Lanka has so far attempted to do a serious analysis of the political nature and the class composition of this emerging movement.

The NPP appears to be a clear outsider to the political establishment. It does not have intimate ties with the big bourgeoisie that the two major parties enjoy. The NPP's main constituent party, the *Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna* (JVP—People's Liberation Front), draws its support mainly from the rural poor and the urban and rural lower middle classes. The movement claims that it aims to dismantle the elite political establishment and win power over the masses.

Corruption is raised as a slogan, not in an NGO 'good governance' style, but as a condemnation of the political establishment. In comparative terms, the present writer would characterise the NPP as something akin to the Latin American pink tide — a left-reformist movement with a largely plebian mass base.

The populist message of the NPP (elite vs people) is articulated along with socio-economic demands framed in left-leaning terms. Of all the parties in Parliament, it is only the NPP that attempted to build a campaign around issues arising from the IMF austerity deal such as the privatisation of State enterprises; the adverse impact of domestic debt restructuring; the deterioration of the public health system; and so forth.

These campaigns might have their strengths and weaknesses, but the point to be noted is the willingness of the movement to critique the IMF deal and give expression to the concerns of the downtrodden masses, unlike the main opposition party. In 2015, JVP was a small opposition party with a limited mass base, but what we now see is a formidable force that cannot be relegated to the second rank as a fringe left-wing party.

Surprisingly, Gunawardena's piece fails to take note of this important development. There is not even a single reference to the NPP factor. Envisaging an elite-led oppositional movement in 2015 is one thing when Rajapaksa was formidable, and no left-leaning party had any succeeding prospects. But to imagine the repetition of the same in 2024 under totally different circumstances is quite another.

Thus, it is an utter misrepresentation to talk about an 'opposition' in singular terms. There is no single opposition in today's Sri Lankan political scene. What we see is a right-wing opposition (SJB) endorsing the neo-liberal restructuring programme undertaken by the present government, but critical of the attacks on democratic liberties on the one hand; and a left-wing opposition critical of the IMF-dictated austerity measures and attempting to link the demands to defend political liberties with questions of economic policy on the other. Both these forces are competing for influence. Disregarding all these circumstances, Gunawardena chooses to ignore the resurgent left-wing opposition, but sees the right-wing SJB and its civil society sympathisers as the agent of change; and advises them about the need for departing from neo-liberalism and taking working-class concerns seriously!

An SJB Break from Neo-Liberalism?

This brings us to the other problem with Gunawardena's analysis. It seems that he is optimistic about the possibility of the SJB and liberals in civil society moving away from neo-liberalism. Similar thinking can be seen in SJB sympathisers such as Dayan Jayatilleka who argue that to capture the current political moment, the SJB has to denounce its neo-liberal wing represented by figures like Harsha De Silva and embrace a different economic direction.[iii] From this perspective flows the plea that the SJB should take a more critical stance on the IMF-dictated economic reform programme.

But events so far have proved that this is mere wishful thinking. The official economic programme of the SJB which was revised and published earlier this year (*Blueprint 2.0*) confirms unambiguously that the SJB is thoroughly committed to the neo-liberal ideological framework that Wickremesinghe pursues. They may have technical questions about this or that policy, but they endorse the ideological premise without any reluctance. Reasons for this endorsement should not be sought in the ideological preferences of individuals, but rather the material base of the SJB as a political formation. Party positions do not flow from nowhere that can be changed through 'advice', but are conditioned by material circumstances within which a particular political formation functions.

Thus, we should approach the question by inquiring about the class base of political formations. The immediate class base of the SJB which is the political heir of the United National Party (UNP) is the big bourgeoisie. The bourgeoisie in Sri Lanka comprising merchant and financial capitalist factions is a product of neo-liberal economic policies introduced in 1977. They have benefited from neo-liberal capitalism, and their interests are inseparably intertwined with the neo-liberal economic regime. At the moment, it seems that this class wholeheartedly backs the economic reform process initiated by Wickremesinghe, which *inter alia* has allowed them to make profits by privatising public assets.

Therefore, we see statements from institutions like the Ceylon Chamber of Commerce urging people to refrain from protesting as these might jeopardise ongoing economic reforms.[iv] This class wants the SJB to pursue the same policy as the UNP leader; and might even prefer to see an alliance between Wickremesinghe and the SJB in upcoming elections.

Sajith Premadasa cannot defy the intimate link between his party and the economic elite. The maximum one can expect from Premadasa's 'social democracy' is pseudo-populist gestures like paying the electricity bill of this or that *viharaya*, and doing some charity for a rural school, while not deviating from the neo-liberal framework the economic elite embraces. The SJB has not shown active opposition to any of the processes that attack the rights of the working poor.

The other material restraint is the link with external forces. Western countries encourage the IMF programme as well as Wickremesinghe's presidency, since the country has moved out from China's sphere of influence in the aftermath of his election. Where does the SJB stand in this scenario? The SJB – like its parent, the UNP – explicitly demonstrates its pro-Western leanings. The SJB MPs boast about their ability to secure Western backing if they come into power and mock the NPP for not having such leverage. Above all, the SJB proudly proclaims that it was they who wanted the IMF to come in, when then Central Bank Governor Ajith Nivard Cabraal was resisting declaring that Sri Lanka was bankrupt. Having hopes for such a movement to initiate an "alternative" project is not only illusory but also reveals lack of understanding of the concrete dynamics of Sri Lankan politics.

Defunct Analysis

Sri Lankan politics after the 2022 mass protests is not the same. There is mass resentment towards established political parties. Though it is the SLPP that has suffered most from this resentment, it has not benefited the SJB either, as indicated by its failure to emerge as a dominant force. The anti-establishment discourse the JVP/NPP has been focusing on for a long time – condemning both mainstream parties as belonging to the same establishment ("*unuth ekai—munuth ekai*") – has never appealed to popular sentiment as much as it does today. If political analysis is about analysing concrete conditions, no analyst could miss this profound shift that has occurred in popular sentiment.

What is quite apparent is the fact that Sri Lankan politics is at a conjuncture that is unprecedented in its post-colonial history. Traditional allegiances are falling apart, and new configurations are emerging. Where we are in 2023 is not the state-of-play that prevailed in 2014; and 2024 is not going to be like 2015. In a context where there is a substantial resurgent Left-leaning force with a considerable mass following, envisioning an elite-led alternative similar to 2015 is a misleading perspective that disregards what has happened in Sri Lanka since the 2022 mass uprising.

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2024 and Beyond: Electoral Politics and the Left

Devaka Gunawardena

Amid a suffocating consensus on austerity, any opportunity to expand on the current stakes of Left strategy in Sri Lanka must be seen as a small victory. The debate provoked by my original piece, including Ramindu Perera's response in *Polity*, ought to continue to widen to include a diverse set of voices. But I must briefly clarify several misconceptions in Perera's piece specifically. I wrote my initial article with the intention of pushing progressives to think about the *blind spot of an easy analogy between the upcoming 2024 elections and the presidential election of 2015*, in which Mahinda Rajapaksa was ejected from power.

My point was that unlike in 2015, even the very holding of elections in 2024 cannot be taken for granted. To generate the resistance to force the hand of the current government led by Ranil Wickremesinghe and backed by the disgraced Rajapaksa party, the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP), requires a far more explicit framing of growing popular opposition to austerity. That includes pointing out the harmful effects of the laws and measures being passed by an illegitimate Parliament, including approval of Domestic Debt Restructuring.

My argument, as Perera himself notes, was to demonstrate that given the much higher stakes of today's crisis, any real opportunity for progressive forces must come not only from elite divisions from above, *but also from popular pressure from below*. While not a particularly novel lesson, my goal was to apply it in a concrete way to Sri Lanka. Such a takeaway has been obscured in much of the mainstream narrative of 2015. It has too often neglected the critical role of the breadth and diversity of working people's protest in the run up to the election.

Building on this point, I wanted to push back against a common-sense belief that the current Wickremesinghe-Rajapaksa government can be defeated with the same soft neoliberal arguments about governance and corruption that were woven into the mainstream opposition to Mahinda Rajapaksa.

In general, I use the term opposition in a discursive sense, covering not only political parties but civil society as well. The all-embracing character of such an opposition was apparent even in 2015. The *Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna* (JVP) was not part of the "good governance" coalition. Yet it took up a common refrain against the potential consolidation of a Rajapaksa dictatorship if Mahinda were to win a third term. In this regard, highlighting bigger issues at stake, such as the dangers of authoritarian consolidation, should not be reduced to a question of favouring one party over another.

The Stakes for the Left

Accordingly, whatever 'advice' I offer today as well is not for a specific electoral formation—whether the National People's Power (NPP) front led by the JVP or, as Perera claims, the *Samagi Jana Balawegaya* (SJB)—so much as a way of providing a mental map for the Left to highlight contradictions in the predominant way of thinking about politics. In this context, rather than engage Perera on his imaginative claims about the alleged subtext of my piece—supposedly to persuade the SJB to move away from neoliberalism no less—I prefer to move deeper into the substantive argument involving Left strategy.

The way Perera sees it, the NPP is the future. Anyone who does not acknowledge this apparent certainty is playing with abstractions. But since Perera invokes the "dominance without hegemony" of the current Wickremesinghe-Rajapaksa government, it is critical to take the other part of Antonio Gramsci's formula: the enduring possibility of what he called a *reactionary Caesarist* solution to crisis. Despite growing expectations of an NPP victory at the polls in 2024, the path forward remains far less certain, even with the tremendous changes that have occurred since 2022, such as the people's movement (*aragalaya*).

What Gramsci (1971) defined as an organic crisis indeed represents the passing of masses from a "state of political passivity to a certain activity," visible in

the detachment of people from the traditional parties (210). This factor is especially apparent in the voting intentions of Sri Lankans today, and which is cited as the justification for a potentially unprecedented shift towards the NPP. But as Gramsci demonstrated using multiple levels of analysis—not only one focused on political parties—crisis also contains many potential tendencies. It reveals the fact that the balance of forces cannot be reduced to the vote alone. Scenarios include those in which, over an uncertain period, progressive forces do not necessarily triumph for various reasons, not only because of electoral defeat.

In Sri Lanka's case, we must consider the broad possibility of a blocked path to social transformation regardless of whether the NPP wins elections scheduled for 2024. Given that so much emphasis is being placed on the supposed rupture that the NPP represents—whether framed in elitist terms as a new "red menace"; or the more hopeful aspirations of the NPP's own supporters—it is imperative that the wider Left take far more seriously the potential pitfalls and dangers. Those include potential deceptive manoeuvres by the current government to delay elections or otherwise hold onto power. But, *pace* debate about elite attempts to blunt the momentum of the NPP as well, they also imply the very real limitations that would be encountered even by an NPP-led government.

When Progress is Blocked

What is a key reason for the potential failure of progressive forces, whether inside or outside the NPP? A major detour, in which a Caesarist actor assumes power, derives from a "conflict with catastrophic prospects" between reactionary and progressive elements in society (Gramsci 1971: 221). Following Gramsci, such a disastrous stalemate reflects both the immaturity of progressive forces and the subordination of a country such as Sri Lanka within the international system. Perera is right to attack the legitimacy of the current Wickremesinghe-Rajapaksa government. But given the scale of the current crisis, including the vast pressure facing Sri Lanka through institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), I am much more sceptical about the NPP as a be-all, end-all solution. This is where Gramsci, writing from a fascist prison cell and recognising that the path to revolution is not straightforward, remains incredibly relevant.

The first part of Gramsci's equation covers the difficulty of balancing contradictions within a multi-class bloc and the urgent need for serious thinking regarding an economic alternative. What does the immaturity of progressive forces mean in the Sri Lankan context? And how can it be overcome? In today's case, an alternative solution includes the fundamental need to parry the constant refrain that government spending is out of control, requiring deep and painful cuts for most people. In other words, austerity. What is the nature of the break with the dominant economic paradigm[i] that is required to facilitate a real recovery for working people amid the current depression in Sri Lanka?

Rather than reading into ambiguous statements put out by leaders such as Anura Kumara Dissanayake, for example, real analysis would require pushing the limits of thinking by engaging the immediate challenges facing working people. That includes developing an anti-austerity programme with which any future government would be pressured to comply. Much as neoliberalism has remained the hegemonic ideology despite changes in government, a true alternative cannot be reduced to thin pronouncements geared towards elections, regardless of whether they are in Sinhala, Tamil, or English.

Meanwhile, the second part of Gramsci's equation reveals the role of countries such as the US, China, and India, in the context of Sri Lanka. Any domestic progressive force capable of leveraging sufficient popular support to push back against renewed attempts at international subordination would need to be committed to an anti-austerity programme. That includes resisting the fire sale of public assets, irrespective of the geopolitical actor involved. Moreover, resistance further demands the political will to implement a redistributive agenda, including a comprehensive wealth tax. It is unclear if any party currently has not only the vision but the strength to carry through this programme. In the meantime, it is incumbent on progressives to keep pushing the boundaries of the debate. Whichever party or coalition does in fact come to power must feel growing popular pressure to pursue a real break with austerity.

The Dangers of an Unprepared Left

In contrast, putting on rose-coloured glasses when viewing an electoral force or coalition, even the NPP, is an especially dangerous proposition. While the NPP may very well win the next elections, the point of serious Left thinking should be to clarify the bigger stakes, and thus to avoid reducing its objectives to elections alone. Meanwhile, Sri Lanka's Left has been eviscerated over a period of decades, since the late 1970s. It lacks the extra-parliamentary strength through a social movement, such as organised labour, capable of holding political parties accountable. In this context especially, an excessive emphasis on electoral politics is more likely to lead to a

scenario like that of Syriza in Greece. Despite holding a referendum in 2015—in which a popular majority overwhelmingly rejected austerity through a proposed bailout package—the government led by Alexis Tsipras promptly went back to the European troika on its hands and knees.

The real danger, then, is not a Left that fails to seize the advantage through a full-throated endorsement of an electoral alternative to the legacy bourgeois opposition. Rather, it is a situation in which the Left has not considered the very likely dangers if such an electoral force wins and forms a government but nevertheless fails to deliver the goods. And it is in such a situation of dejection and growing resentment—when a social democratic or otherwise quasi-progressive government lacks the strength to break with economic orthodoxy—that far-right forces and other right-wing populist contenders seize the advantage. We have witnessed this trend with the recent victory of Javier Milei in Argentina. Again, like Greece, Argentina had a far more vibrant anti-austerity movement than Sri Lanka. And yet there too the Left found it extraordinarily difficult to push through an alternative agenda. The task must not be taken lightly.

Finally, even if the NPP were to embrace a real programme of social transformation, there is still the looming danger of outright intervention to try and block it. I do not have a proprietary sense over an agenda of economic redistribution that is both democratic and pluralistic in character. If whichever party or coalition is sincere in implementing it, then so much the better. But in this context as well, the most serious Left thinkers of the 1970s such as Ralph Miliband (1977: 188) and Nicos Poulantzas raised the need for extra-parliamentary movements capable of not only holding accountable but also defending governments with a transformative agenda from attack by imperialist forces abroad and reactionary forces at home.[ii] They saw, for example, what happened to the government led by Salvador Allende in Chile in 1973.

Contradictions within the Class Bloc

The need to push through a transformative agenda precisely undermines, however, those other elements within the class bloc that would initially be required to win an electoral majority (see, for example, Therborn 2008: 278-279). This paradox reveals the contradiction involved in not only capturing State power but trying to transform it. What would the NPP do, for example, if in opposition to a shift towards self-sufficiency, much of the middle class vote that it is now courting resists a break with the aspirational horizon of consumption through luxury imports? Furthermore, from where would it derive the strength to pressure the business class that it now engages to accept a wealth tax?

No amount of theorising about the people/elite cleavage by putting a different spin on the rhetoric of corruption can deflect such thorny questions, as even the most successful Latin American left-wing populist movements have recently discovered. How else do we explain the fact that an 'anti-corruption' movement in Brazil[iii], for example, ostensibly had its origins in mass protests opposing bus fare hikes in 2013 but ended with the election of Jair Bolsonaro in 2018? These are real problems that cannot be hand-waved away by pointing to a potential electoral majority alone.

And in the case of Sri Lanka, especially given both the cunning nature of the current government and the depth of the crisis, it is a matter of existential importance to the Left to avoid reducing its identity to a given electoral formation without defining its red lines. This is true even despite the tremendous force of the people's movement in 2022, which has nevertheless found itself on the defensive. In fact, the signal failure of much of Left thinking in Sri Lanka up to this point has been its stubborn refusal to deal with the question of movement-building outside the ever-present question of electoral coalitions.

While it is true that my injunction may appear 'abstract' on the surface, it is only because we have yet to move deeper into an analysis of the concrete demands required to strengthen popular opposition to austerity. That task cannot be delegated to an electoral formation alone. The sooner we acknowledge this, the faster we can move onto the real work of analysis that justifies an "initiative of will" (Gramsci 1971: 185).[iv] In other words, the question goes beyond parties. It entails asking what is required to generate a coherent bloc that can implement a broad redistributive agenda. Regardless of whether the NPP wins the next elections, that perspective must continue to be singled out and strengthened within the Left movement in Sri Lanka.

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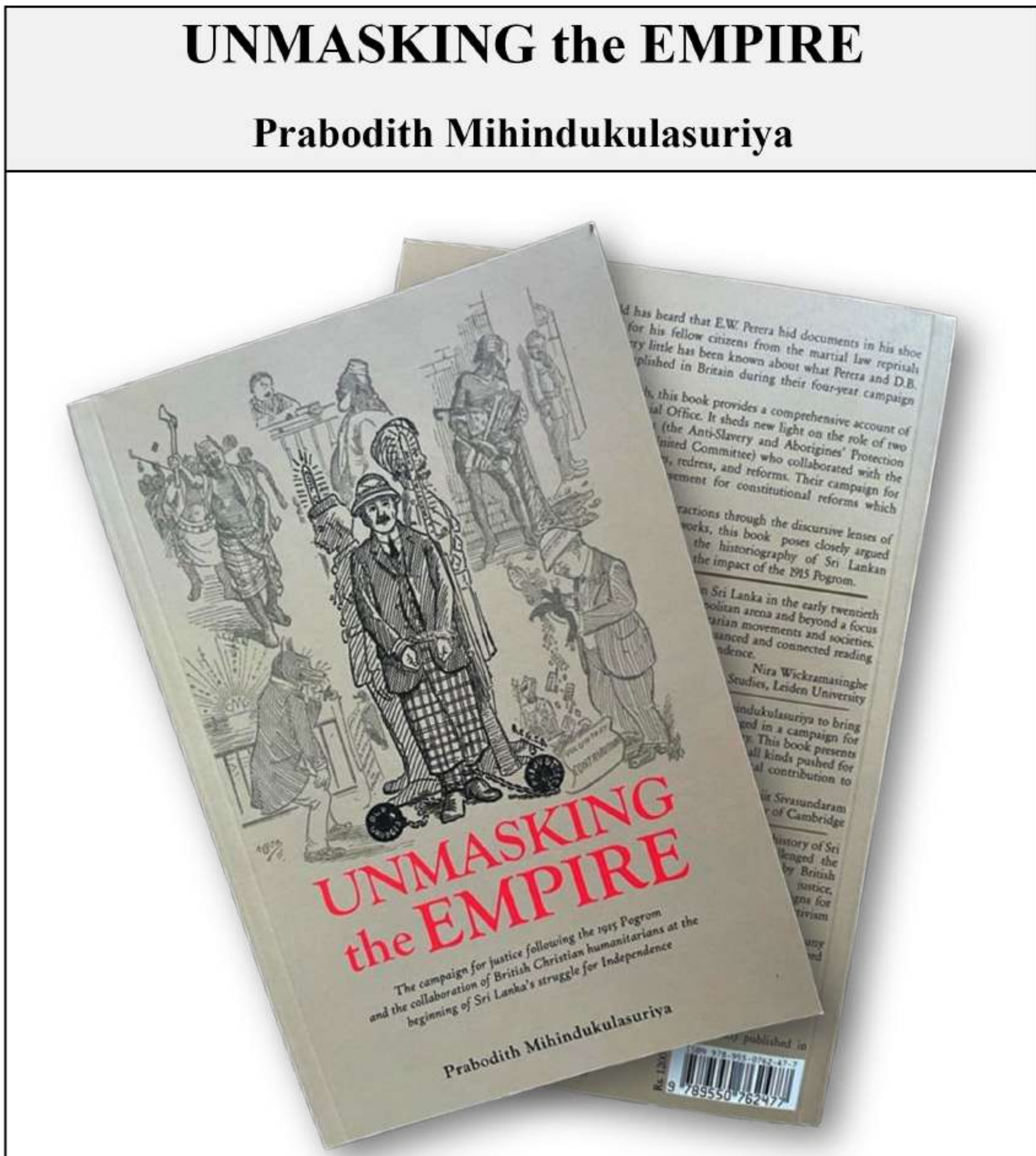
Notes

[i] See, for a detailed description, my previous intervention in this forum at https://ssalanka.org/left-strategy-in-the-time-of-the-imf-counter-revolution-devaka-gunawardena/ssalanka/

[ii] As Poulantzas (2014) put it: "It is possible to confront this danger through active reliance on a broad, popular movement. Let us be quite frank. As the decisive means to the realisation of its goals and to the articulation of the two preventives against statism and the social-democratic impasse, the democratic road to socialism, unlike the 'vanguardist' dual-power strategy, presupposes the continuous support of a mass movement founded on broad popular alliances. If such a movement (what Gramsci called the active, as opposed to the passive, revolution) is not deployed and active, if the Left does not succeed in arousing one, then nothing will prevent social-democratisation of the experience: however radical they may be, the various programmes will change little of relevance. A broad popular movement constitutes a guarantee against the reaction of the enemy, even though it is not sufficient and must always be linked to sweeping transformations of the State. That is the dual lesson we can draw from Chile…" (263).

[iii] Fogel, Benjamin. (2018). "Against "Anti-Corruption"". *Jacobin* (10 May). Available at https://jacobin.com/2018/10/corruption-bolsonaro-pt-populism-democracy-development

[iv] Or as Gramsci (1971) elaborated, effective analyses: "… reveal the points of least resistance, at which the force of will can be most fruitfully applied; they suggest immediate tactical operations; they indicate how a campaign of political agitation may best be launched, what language will best be understood by the masses, etc." (185)



"Austerity Driven Economic Reforms Affect Women More than Men"

Juan Pablo Bohoslavsky

Dr. Juan Pablo Bohoslavsky (JPB) *was the United Nations Human Rights Council's (UNHRC) Independent Expert on foreign debt and human rights between June 2014 and April 2020. He was previously a sovereign debt expert of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD). He is currently based at the National Council for Scientific and Technical Research of Argentina at the National University of Rio Negro. Among his many publications are* Making Sovereign Financing and Human Rights Work *(2014),* Sovereign Debt Crisis, What Can We Learn? *(2017), and* Human Rights and Economic Policy Reform *(2021).*

Lakmali Hemachandra (LH) *and* ***B. Skanthakumar (BS)*** *met with him in Colombo on 10 August 2023 at the Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development's national consultation on the debt crisis, jointly organised with the Colombo Urban Lab, the Law & Society Trust, the National Fisheries Solidarity Movement, and the Women and Media Collective. The interview was facilitated by Sandun Thudugala, and transcribed by Akshie Wickremesinghe.*

LH: As the previous Special Procedures mandate-holder of the Human Rights Council of the United Nations on foreign debt and human rights, would you please begin by explaining how debt and finance impinge on human rights; and why human rights matter, or ought to matter, when it comes to issues of debt and finance?

JPB: Thank you for inviting me for this interview. First, we should clarify what human rights mean in this conversation on finance. Human rights encompass both civil and political rights, as well as economic, social, and cultural rights. Rights require fiscal resources for their full realisation: hospitals, schools, the social protection system, the functioning of the judicial system all require resources, and we know they are limited. If you take the State budget as a whole, as one single cake, if funds are spent to repay debts, and not used to invest in the social sector or in climate change adaptation or mitigation, for example, rights will invariably be undermined. This is why debt has to be sustainable, not only financially, but also from a human rights and environmental perspective.

LH: In a 2018 report to the UN General Assembly[i], you argued that economic reforms, in particular the austerity and fiscal consolidation measures promoted by international financial institutions including the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, impact on women's human rights. In what ways do they do so; and in response what are your key recommendations?

JPB: The bottom line here is that austerity hits women more than men. Most women are already grappling with a range of structural inequalities including pay gaps, occupational segregation, informality, precarious jobs, unemployment, lack of access to and control of land, credit, and other productive resources, and the heavy burden of unpaid care work. In addition, many women also face discriminatory norms, gender stereotypes, and various forms of violence. We have to also keep in mind that women are often under-represented in politics and decision making and may have fewer opportunities to participate in the decisions that affect their lives, families, and communities.

Owing to these economic disadvantages many women tend to use employment, health, and education services provided by the public sector. Therefore, often women depend on social transfers, social housing, utility subsidies, as well as disability benefits and child benefits or in the case of women living in poverty, cash transfers and in-kind transfers.

That is why austerity-driven fiscal consolidation measures and economic reforms, such as those encouraged by labour market flexibilisation that result in thinning the coverage of social protection benefits and services, cuts to public sector jobs, and the privatisation of services tend to negatively affect women more than men. Austerity and fiscal consolidation policies hit the most vulnerable groups within a given population, among whom women are over-represented and the most exposed, giving rise to intersecting forms of discrimination.

Among the women who are most exposed are single mothers, young women, women with disabilities, women refugees, migrant women, lesbian and intersex women, and women who have been victims of sexual assault. Those women who belong to ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities, women living in rural areas, and women who live in poverty or even extreme poverty are also in this category.

LH: Has the IMF recognised how women are specifically and differentially affected by austerity policies?

JPB: The IMF has developed and implemented its own so-called 'gender approach'. But it is still an instrumentalist approach in the sense that it only takes the woman's position as valid as long as it contributes to economic growth. That means the IMF is okay with incorporating more women into the labour market irrespective of the conditions in which these labour relations are established. So, I am not sure the IMF approach considers gender equality as an intrinsic value. Gender equality only seems important if it contributes to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP).

LH: In 2015, the UN General Assembly passed a resolution (supported by Sri Lanka) on sovereign debt restructuring, which included nine basic principles[ii] to be adhered to when you restructure debt. Among them is good faith, transparency, equitable treatment, and sustainability. The current domestic debt restructuring process in Sri Lanka will definitely disproportionately affect the lowest income earners, especially with the social security funds getting a cut. As we see now, international foreign bond holders are getting the more lenient end of the deal, whereas workers particularly women workers are getting a really tough deal at the moment. How do you think the UN principles can be used to support more equitable debt relief?

JPB: This is a very important question, given what Sri Lanka is going through. Equal treatment, the principle of non-discrimination is not only based on the UN resolution that you mentioned, it is a principle of international law. So, I don't see any good legal reason to discriminate against domestic creditors and benefit those holding external debt. I mean, why is the government asking only domestic creditors to make a sacrifice and accept a haircut, while external creditors are fully repaid? This is a legitimate question that needs to be answered.

It is legally unfair. It has happened in other countries too, whereby domestic creditors have had to suffer a haircut that is usually taken out of social security investments. And that means, for example, that those people who retire and are getting monthly pensions will experience a reduction of their income. So, the question here is why those pensioners in Sri Lanka suffer a cut in their pension; while hyper-rich owners of hedge funds living in another country remain untouched, and the profit keeps on flowing [to them].

BS: Following your country visit to Sri Lanka in September 2018[iii], your findings and recommendations paid particular attention to the impact of public debt, structural adjustment, fiscal consolidation, and other economic reform policies on the realisation of human rights; illicit financial flows; international development assistance, project finance, and lending to Sri Lanka from a human rights perspective; and the integration of human rights standards into the financial sector, with special emphasis on microfinance. In brief, what were your summary conclusions?

JPB: I think those conclusions are still valid in the current context. First, debt sustainability analysis in the country has to be carried out on a more comprehensive understanding, incorporating human rights, social, and environmental dimensions of sustainability. A human rights impact assessment should be conducted systematically prior to the adoption of economic reforms in order to evaluate potential human rights risks and to avoid retrogression of economic, social, and cultural

rights. I also highlighted and suggested considering boosting domestic demand, opening discussion on whether the military budget reflects the fundamental changes in the country [the war having ended in 2009], and also renegotiating debt not only with domestic creditors but also with external debt holders. Boosting the fiscal space of the government is necessary to ensure the full realisation of all human rights.

BS: After your mission to Sri Lanka, where the issue of household debt incurred through microfinance schemes mostly by women borrowers was a major theme, you investigated and presented a thematic report on the issue of private debt and human rights to the UN Human Rights Council, issued in early 2020[iv]. What were your findings on the drivers of private debt globally? What were your principal recommendations?

JPB: As you mentioned, it was a thematic report; that means that it dealt with global trends. I think it applies very well to the situation in Sri Lanka. So let me begin by saying that the main finding of the report is that there are two drivers of rising private debt in the world: first, the flourishing supply side of finance, with deregulation and increasing financialisation being its facilitating instruments; second, the reconfiguration of many human needs for social reproduction that become unmet financial needs, paralleled by a colossal failure of the State to ensure economic, social, and cultural rights for all.

While the past century has witnessed the establishment and expansion of social safety nets, the gaps that remain provide ground for private debt to flourish, accounting for a significant portion of private debt in most countries. High individual household debt has been associated with inequality, macroeconomic instability, sovereign debt and financial crisis, low wages, poverty and inequality, which are all exacerbated by State policies. Privatisation, austerity measures, and labour market flexibilisation have pushed millions of people into debt, poverty, and informality, making them even more vulnerable to all kinds of abuse.

So, it is obvious that increasing financial inclusion does not necessarily result in real life improvement, more enjoyment of human rights, more sustainable development or less inequality. It is also obvious that a number of States and international financial institutions of course support debt servicing at the expense of the provision of public goods and services. So, the main recommendations presented in the report are to reduce wealth and income inequality, eradicate poverty through progressive taxation, and introduce transfers to extend social protection flows.

Secondly, and this in particular is important in the context of Sri Lanka—regulate and monitor all lending activities formal and informal, ensuring that contractual terms in particular interest rates and other non-interest charges, supporting or enabling technology for banking and financial services, and the means of collecting money do not violate borrowers' human rights. The third recommendation is also relevant in the context of Sri Lanka, which is to ensure that bankruptcy laws that are in line with human rights standards are in place to protect debtors.

BS: Drawing on the experience of your own country Argentina, "that has endured [the] International Monetary Fund's (IMF) orthodox conditionalities for years"; where women are more exposed than men to the effects of the pandemic and the economic recession; where women are disproportionately affected by the invisibilisation of unpaid domestic and care work, and also by austerity policies that cutback on social and health budgets and deregulate the labour market[v], you have argued that a human rights impact assessment that includes a comprehensive gender analysis should be undertaken to review economic reforms and to analyse their impacts before adoption of those economic measures. In March 2019 the UN Human Rights Council adopted the 'Guiding Principles on Human Rights Impact Assessment of Economic Reform'[vi]. What is its significance for Sri Lanka?

JPB: Human rights impact assessments tell us how economic reforms have to be calibrated in order to ensure that women's human rights are fully realised. This is the paramount importance of conducting an impact assessment. Are there enough resources left after repaying creditors for the health sector, for the social safety net? All fields that are very crucial in terms of realisation of women's rights. Will tax regressive reforms promoted by the IMF and other creditors reduce gender inequality and poverty in the country? On the contrary, it seems that the current reforms in Sri Lanka will indeed increase gender inequality.

The same can be said regarding reducing salaries in public service agencies and eliminating subsidies without ensuring that the most vulnerable households can at least keep up, leave alone seeing their social protection strengthened. In terms of anti-corruption

measures and policies being discussed, the participation of civil society organisations is key in order to ensure that robust and transparent arrangements are in place, and to prevent unsanctioned corruption, including illicit asset recovery measures to bring stolen funds back to the country. Here, international cooperation is key.

Also, in Sri Lanka's case it is necessary to question whether it is fair that the IMF has imposed a so-called IMF surcharge. This extra interest rate adds to the existing costs already charged to sovereign borrowers.

BS: In response to Sri Lanka's ongoing and combined crises, along with over 180 academics around the world, you co-signed an Open Letter on dealing with Sri Lanka's debt in January 2023, which called inter alia on all Sri Lanka's creditors to "ensure debt cancellation sufficient to provide a way out of the current crisis"[vii]. In your assessment, have Sri Lanka's creditors – multilateral, bilateral, and private – taken heed?

JPB: As to whether creditors have taken heed on this call for debt cancellation, the answer is no. What debt sustainability means is that creditors collect their full dues, no matter whether it pushes a country into further poverty and inequality. This is why it is so important to keep in mind that creditors are also bound by international human rights law. Given certain circumstances they must agree on considerable haircuts. And not only creditors holding domestic debt, but also those holding external debt should be given haircuts. They are all bound by international human rights law. There is no legal reason to treat the two categories, domestic and external creditors, in a discriminatory manner.

BS: The implications and impacts of IMF conditionalities, particularly on the poor and the powerless, are clear. What do you think can be done in countries like Sri Lanka?

JPB: We have to keep in mind that Sri Lanka is not in a unique position in terms of being forced to implement austerity measures. Actually, the IMF is pushing most of its member State clients into similar economic policies. So, this is a global challenge. And it is here that coordination with other countries, countries dealing with the IMF and its conditionalities, becomes key. I am referring here to the possibility of organising a debt write-off, so they are collectively excused. Creditors are very well organised. So here, there is an issue of collective action, problems, or challenges. That is why I suggest that countries dealing with similar problems with common creditors organise themselves.

I also want to refer to the point of public opinion here. It is important that people fully understand the implications of the IMF conditionalities for their specific, concrete, material living conditions. So, people should demand from the government very strong positions towards the IMF. Here, of course, civil society organisations play a crucial role.

BS and LH: Thank you for taking the time to respond to our questions.

Notes

[i] *United Nations General Assembly*. (2018). "Report of the Independent Expert on the effects of foreign debt and other related international financial obligations of States on the full enjoyment of all human rights, particularly economic, social and cultural rights: Impact of economic reforms and austerity measures on women's human rights" (18 July), A/73/179. Available at https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N18/229/04/PDF/N1822904.pdf?OpenElement

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[iii] *United Nations Human Rights Council*. (2019). "Report of the Independent Expert on the effects of foreign debt and other related international financial obligations of States on the full enjoyment of all human rights, particularly economic, social and cultural rights, on his visit to Sri Lanka" (17 January 2019), A/HRC/40/57/Add.2. Available at https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G19/009/95/PDF/G1900995.pdf?OpenElement

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Budget 2024: 'Deep Marketisation' in Sri Lanka

B. Skanthakumar

Ranil Wickremesinghe's Budget for 2024 had safe passage on third reading on 13 December as expected, with a majority of 41 votes in the 225-member legislature. The Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP—People's Front) with its rotten majority in Parliament, having selected Wickremesinghe as president last year, made sure of that. There were 122 votes in favour and 81 votes against, with one abstention and the remainder not voting.

The ailing SLPP leader and former president Mahinda Rajapaksa voted in favour. On second reading, he described the budget proposals as "future-oriented".[i] Rajapaksa *fils,* who has been posturing as Wickremesinghe's critic and 'friend of the suffering masses' while seated on the government benches, absented himself. The regime that has provided immunity to his family from their political and economic crimes must not fall; but neither must he fall with Wickremesinghe at the ballot box.

The Budget Speech estimates government expenditure in 2024 to be 6.5 trillion LKR.[ii] This is an increase of 24% in comparison to 2023, which appears surprising when Sri Lanka is in an International Monetary Fund (IMF) programme oriented to reducing public spending. However, this is more than offset by the depreciation of the LKR by 44.8% of its value against the USD, over the course of 2022.[iii] With next-to-no domestic production for home market consumption, and a highly import-dependent economy fostered by the 'open economy' reforms since 1977, many more rupees are required to finance a whole lot less.

The government's revenue target in 2024 is 4.1 trillion LKR, as against an anticipated 2.76 trillion LKR by year's end.[iv] In view of its expenditure estimate, this means that for every Rs.100 in government revenue in 2024, it will spend over Rs.150. This chronic deficit between revenue and expenditure – marked by persistent over-estimation of income and under-estimation of spending in government budgets – has for decades been plugged by borrowing: through domestic and foreign debt. The unsustainability of this strategy was what triggered post-colonial Sri Lanka's worst and ongoing economic crisis.

Shrinking Economy

However, how to increase revenue when Sri Lanka's economy has continued to shrink over the course of 2023? Last year, the economy contracted by an unprecedented 7.8%.[v] The blithe pronouncements by regime-loyalists on how 'normalcy' has been restored in Wickremesinghe's regnancy are belied by the further slump in the economy by 7.9% in the first half of 2023. More than 500,000 jobs were lost in 2022 alone. One in five small and medium enterprises, where most employment is generated, did not survive the double-whammy of the pandemic followed by the economic crisis.

There is an exponential increase in the number of the poor: around 25% of the population are now below the official poverty line; the minimum monthly expenditure per person to meet basic needs is calculated as an absurd 16,112 LKR as of October 2023.[vi] More than half-a-million households have been thrown off-the-grid in the first ten months of this year, as the Ceylon Electricity Board disconnected 544,488 connections (approximately 50,000 each month) for non-payment of bills.[vii]

The Central Bank has commended itself on the dramatic decline in headline inflation, now down to single digits – the Colombo Consumer Price Index was 3.4% in November – following the statistical sleight-of-hand effected through changing the base year for its calculation to 2021 when prices began their staggering climb.[viii] While happily the rate of increase in prices has significantly slowed this year – remember that headline and food inflation peaked at 69.8% and 94.9% respectively in September 2022[ix] – the general price level has increased, according to the Department

of Census and Statistics, by an average of 93.4% in comparison to two years ago.[x] When it comes to many staple foods ranging from dhal, eggs, fish, meat, rice, wheat flour, and so on, prices are now several-fold higher than pre-crisis.

There is bad news on the balance of trade front too, as the deficit between import expenditure and export revenue steadily grew, totalling four billion USD in the first 10 months of 2023.[xi] This is unsurprising given the government relaxed controls on almost all imports since June, while the export value for industrial and agricultural products has fallen sharply. The crisis of production (and therefore also employment) in the apparel or ready-made-garments sector shows no sign of abating, recording a 20% year-on-year decline.[xii] Between January and October 2023, earnings from tea increased by almost 4%; but decreased in rubber and rubber-finished products by almost 12%, and in coconut and coconut-based products by almost 17%. Meanwhile imports have surged in fuel, sugar, and milk powder.

Fortunately, and with no credit to the government nor the IMF, migrant worker remittances mostly contributed by women in domestic work and men in construction work in West Asia (particularly Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar), have bounced back in 2023 to a little under 500 million USD monthly or 4.35 billion USD in the first nine months of 2023.[xiii] There has also been an uptick in tourist arrivals to 1,276,951 – mostly from India, Russia, Britain, Germany, and China – in the first 11 months of this year; with receipts of 1.79 billion USD so far.[xiv]

These inflows should be compared with that of foreign capital. This regime claims that it's economic and political policies are those that are most conducive to investors from overseas; and that their investments are the antidote to Sri Lanka's economic malady. However, between January and October of 2023, net foreign direct investment has been a pathetic 305 million USD.[xv] It is the labour income of migrant workers, and earnings from foreign tourism, that keeps this maldeveloped economy from stalling as it did last year.

Thanks to these inflows, usable foreign reserves (that is, excluding the Chinese currency swap equivalent to 1.4 billion USD) have climbed to 2.184 billion USD as of the end of November 2023, which would cover a little over five weeks of imports.[xvii] This is only of relief in comparison to May of 2022 when Sri Lanka had only 50 million USD in its coffers.[17] The rupee has also stabilised at around 326 LKR = 1 USD. It seems a lifetime ago, but at the end of 2021 it was trading at 200 LKR to the US dollar.[xviii]

In a condition of such abject socio-economic deterioration, what explains the government's projected increase in revenue in 2024 by a whopping near-45%? In keeping with the strictures of the IMF programme, the government must progressively decrease the budget deficit as a percentage of GDP (gross domestic product or the size of the economy) following pre-determined targets. To reduce the budget deficit to 7.6% of GDP in 2024, without wielding the axe too wildly on recurrent government expenditure (mostly public sector salaries and pensions), there must be a dramatic jump in government revenue. A new Revenue Management Authority was announced in the Budget Speech, to intensify collection from the departments of Inland Revenue (direct and indirect taxes on personal and corporate income and consumption and internal trade); Customs (duties and levies on external trade); and Excise (taxes on alcohol and tobacco).

However, the government is mostly banking on increased taxes largely from the administration of Value-Added-Taxation (VAT), by raising the rate to 18% (from the current 15%) and by lowering the threshold for registration of companies to a turnover of 60 million LKR per annum and above (from 300 million LKR), to realise its revenue target. As the rise in VAT takes effect from January 2024 – and more suppliers, of 97 more goods and services, are subject to it – costs will rise across the board, disproportionately hurting the quality of life and standard-of-living of the poor.

What a progressive government would do instead is to relieve the burden of indirect taxation off the backs of the poor so that their incomes can be channelled into basic needs, while shifting it onto the corporates that continue to benefit from tax holidays; the banks and financial services industry reaping super-profits through the pandemic and beyond; and the conspicuous consumption and obscene wealth of the ultra-rich.

As Sharmini Coorey, former IMF official and current advisor to the President had cause to observe in relation to existing tax exemptions for the Colombo Port City, export processing zones, and so-called strategic development projects: "… in Sri Lanka we have welfare for the rich and super-rich that far outweighs the small amounts the Government transfers to the poor…"[xix]

Tightrope Walking?

"A tightrope walk" is how one post-budget discussion described *Budget Speech 2024*; referring to Wickremesinghe, who is also Minister of Finance, negotiating socio-economic respite for politicians and voters (with parliamentary and presidential elections due next year) with political-economic reassurance of

‘fiscal consolidation’ (that is, reduction of the budget deficit and government debt through austerity measures) to the International Monetary Fund.[xx]

In the lead-up to the Budget debate, there were ritual, mostly lunch-break protests by public sector unions agitating for a 20,000 LKR monthly increase in their salaries. There has been no wage increase in the public sector since 2015, apart from modest revisions for teachers and principals in 2021 following months of all-island industrial action.

In 2019, mean monthly household expenditure was calculated by the Department of Census and Statistics (DCS) as 63,130 LKR and average household monthly income at 76,414 LKR.[xxi] Of course, these all-island statistics that assume the size of the household to be only four persons, mask the substantial differences between the urban, rural, and estate sectors; and between and across provinces and districts. This most recent DCS survey was also pre-pandemic and pre-crisis, before the Rupee sank, the cost-of-living soared, and income inequalities sharpened. It is not fanciful to reckon from lived experience that household expenditure has since doubled, while income has stagnated at best.

There are 1.3 million public sector workers in the 8.2 million labour force; and 730,000 State pensioners. These are sizeable vote banks, along with their family members, to be courted in an election. What this Budget does though is to freeze salaries and pensions, while enhancing the cost-of-living-allowance (COLA) by 10,000 LKR and 2,500 LKR respectively. Additionally, the statutory deduction for the widows’ and widowers’ and orphans’ pension scheme is raised to 8% (from 6%), reducing the take-home salary of public sector workers. To address their “economic hardships”, the Budget proposes resuming the distress loan scheme for public servants, heightening their vulnerability to indebtedness.

Social welfare spending will be boosted in comparison to this year, according to the Budget Speech. The government’s new cash transfer scheme *Aswesuma* has been expanded to cover two million households, and its allocation is promised to treble to 183 billion LKR. There is a 50% rise in the monthly allowances for persons with disabilities and those afflicted by chronic kidney disease to 7,500 LKR, and for elders to 5,000 LKR, for which 138 billion LKR is set aside. Unfortunately for these groups as with other citizens, the real value of the increment is more than wiped out by the massive price increase in healthcare, transport, electricity, fuel, and essential foods, since 2022.

In contrast, military spending continues its year-on-year increase to almost 424 billion LKR, in what will be 15 years since the end of the war. Almost half of this allocation are salaries for the 200,873 personnel, most of whom are an occupying power in the Tamil-speaking majority Northern and Eastern regions.

In adherence to the IMF programme, the Budget has earmarked 3 trillion LKR, that is 65% of forecast government revenue, for sovereign debt restructuring with domestic and external creditors including holders of government bonds. This allocation for debt-servicing is many times more than the combined expenditure on education, health, and social protection. The regime’s aim is to begin repaying the creditors of its suspended debts, thereby rehabilitating the risk rating on its sovereign bonds, in order to resume more borrowing in the future.[xxii]

To protect the State banks from collapse, following politically-influenced bad lending to crony capitalists and loss-making State-owned-enterprises like Sri Lankan Airlines, the Ceylon Electricity Board, and the Ceylon Petroleum Corporation, the public will have to fork out 450 billion LKR next year for re-capitalisation of the Bank of Ceylon and the People’s Bank. For additional capital, 20% of the share value of the two banks will be floated – in other words, this is the first step towards their privatisation. To finance both debt-restructuring and recapitalisation, the Budget Speech proposes almost doubling the limit for government debt from 3.9 trillion LKR to 7.35 trillion LKR.

While the IMF, World Bank, and the government brag about the “social safety net” that they are weaving through the *Aswesuma* programme, its holes are so large that people in need are falling straight through.[xxiii] This unholy trinity are stealthily dismantling Sri Lanka’s social security system. The universal provision of free education and health is *de facto* denied through under-funding. The disintegration of State provision of public goods is precipitated by stretching infrastructure, staff, and users, to breaking point. The aim is to prepare the objective and subjective conditions for direct or indirect or partial privatisation: the corporate capture of the considerable assets of State institutions, and the monetisation of public services.[xxiv]

Since legislative adoption of the regime’s revenue proposals, the IMF has approved the second tranche of about 337 million USD from its Extended Fund Facility loan to Sri Lanka.[xxv] It is reassured that the president maintains parliamentary support; has steamrollered opposition to domestic debt restructuring that penalises workers’ retirement funds[xxvi] – demonstrating political

will to meet the agreed conditionalities ("revenue-based fiscal adjustment"); and that most bilateral creditors are agreeable to restructuring 5.9 billion USD[xxvii] from Sri Lanka's external (commercial, bilateral, and multilateral) debt as of end-September 2023 totalling 36,384.50 billion USD.[xxviii] In IMF-speak: "The draft 2024 budget is consistent with program parameters".

In Wickremesinghe's circus, it is never the ringmaster who walks the tightrope.

Public-Private Partnerships

What else stands out in this Budget Speech? Certainly, the focus on higher education reform and expansion is striking.[xxix]

At least eight new public universities, even as the present number grapple with academic staff shortages through out-migration and declining ratios of investment to each student owing to the government freeze on capital expenditure. There is also State support for expansion in the number and intake of private universities, including through loans for school-leavers, that intensifies financialisation within the economy. There is encouragement for Provincial Councils to register universities. It is inconceivable that this government will make public funds available for this purpose, when it is already devolving income-generation for capital expenditure onto universities. Hence, 'public-private partnerships' with domestic and foreign business for infrastructure and operational costs, and their return-on-investment through fee-levying, will be normalised.

The other take-away is the aggressive drive to commodify and privatise housing, land, and property: a new frontier for private capital in Sri Lanka.

Two million farmers who have been living and working on State lands (on inter-generational permits) are to receive legal title to their plots. Estate residents are promised land ownership and new housing. Nearly 50,000 urban poor households currently renting State-owned housing will be granted ownership. Through titling of land and housing, a new market will be created, where through the relentless logic of the market, those in possession will for reason of speculation or survival, surrender their only asset through sale or lease or rent.[xxx]

Through lease or concession 300,000 acres of State land currently managed by the State plantation corporations, the Mahaweli Authority, and the Land Reform Commission, are to be assigned for "large scale agricultural activities". This will be export-oriented production with pauperised farmers or the rural landless working the land. Likewise, the National Livestock Development Board farms will be leased to commercial interests for dairy production. Small tank rehabilitation in villages will be in partnership with agribusiness concerns, indicating that these corporates will gain direct control over water resources, while gaining the power through command of water rights to determine which crops/s are cultivated, and to monopolise their purchase. Likewise, fisheries harbours are to be operated in partnership with private capital, which suggests that industrial fishing and capitalists within the sector will have precedence in access and control.

Local government authorities are expected to gradually become self-financing (central government transfers will begin tapering off from 2024). Those bodies, unable to match their revenue from rates, revenue licenses, stamp duty, and court fines with their expenditure, will be compelled to lease their properties to businesses for income, or outsource their functions to commercial providers to reduce on salaries and capital costs.

State-owned prime real estate in city centres will be traded to companies for high-end commercial and residential development. The urban poor who live on State lands will be evicted. Railway stations and land in Anuradhapura, Colombo Fort, Galle, Jaffna, and Matara, will be leased for mixed purpose projects including logistics, storage, and retail trade. State ministries and agencies that require additional infrastructure on land allocated to them, will enter build-own-operate-transfer arrangements with equity investors, paying 'rent' until the cost of construction is settled.

Deep Marketisation

The paradigm in evidence in the Budget 2024 proposals above, could be described as "deep marketisation attempts to fuse the public and the private into a liberal market reality like never before, working *on*, *through* and *around* the state […] a project that privileges – contradictorily – private interest as being in the interest of the broader public".[xxxi]

Indeed, the thrust of the Wickremesinghe regime's socio-economic framework is to expand the scope of market relations, particularly into areas that were partially insulated from commodification in the past such as education, land, and government services.

His ambition is to expand and deepen the transformation that was initiated by his uncle, J.R. Jayewardene after 1977, with a 21st century twist of digitalisation, artificial intelligence, and green growth, enmeshing larger numbers and greater human activities

in the net of capital accumulation. The ideology that accompanies this reordering of State-Society-Capital relations seeks to secure the de-legitimation of public provisioning and delivery, and the commons; and embed the private sector, market values, and financialisation in its place.

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Agrarian Regimes in Sri Lanka's Economic Crisis – Call for Articles

Sri Lanka is facing its worst economic crisis since independence which has in turn given rise to food insecurity, food poverty, and increasing malnourishment and stunting. Central to these issues is the agrarian question, including the ways in which food is produced and consumed as well as dependency on global markets. By agrarian we mean something much broader than just agriculture. It is people's relationship to farming, land, and their food.

Yet there has been relatively little critical debate since the 1980s on the role of social and class relations and economic reforms in shaping the rural sector. Powerful international actors such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank, along with other aid agencies, have intervened in ways that have increased Sri Lanka's dependency on the global market. Furthermore, the recent IMF agreement and the ongoing debt restructuring process are also affecting the agrarian space.

Historical and recent interventions—from austerity measures that have undermined access to key agrarian inputs such as fuel and fertiliser, to a general emphasis on strengthening Sri Lanka's incorporation into 'global value chains' and an extractive plantation regime—have all contributed to key vulnerabilities. These are however not unique to Sri Lanka and reflect changes that are affecting the South Asian region as a whole. To analyse the impact of the agrarian regimes, *Polity* invites submissions on a range of topics related to the broad themes outlined above. Short papers of 1500-3500 words could engage specific topics including but not limited to:

- The relationship between class dynamics and the intervention of international agencies in the agrarian sphere, including tensions between rich, middle, and poor cultivators, in addition to the demands of the landless.
- A critical look at the construction of women in agricultural discourses including by donors and development agencies, and their (in)visibilisation as producers and consumers.
- Regional, ethnic, and caste disparities that may intensify through internationalised efforts to reshape the agrarian question.
- The role of private businesses and corporations in determining who benefits from interventions in the rural sector.
- Alternative ways of framing socio-technical innovations and technologies, and whether they reinforce or reduce market dependency.
- The impact of IMF agreements, debt distress, and debt restructuring processes on land tenure, agricultural production, and the food system.
- The analysis of Sri Lanka's agrarian relations and food regime in the context of problems faced by other countries in South Asia.

The Editors (**polity@ssalanka.org**) will be pleased to consider submissions in the form of articles, commentaries,and interviews.

“One Day, Nobody will Even Ask about Us”: The Obsolete Silversmiths of Kandy

Hasini Lecamwasam

Hand-powered machine for silver rolling

In the course of research into why the traditional craft economy, despite being a key medium through which Sinhala nationalism is expressed, was not lifted with the rising tide of nationalism and its related economy, I have been interviewing brassware producers and silversmiths as two case studies. My visit to Thalathuoya (about 10 km away from Kandy) first in March 2023 and subsequently a few more times, was an extension of this. My initial point of contact was a government official attached to a Divisional Secretariat (DS) of the area, who kindly introduced me to several of his colleagues, facilitated a group discussion on the premises of the DS office, and then accompanied me – along with one of his colleagues – to a village in their jurisdiction, to speak to a traditional silversmith.

The village I visited was a further 10 km away from Thalathuoya, lying along the Kandy-Nuwara Eliya border. Nestled in lush mountains peppered by plots of land used for seasonal cultivation, the riveting beauty of the area is in stark contrast to the poverty plaguing many lives there. Nearer the main road, as is usually the case, we found the houses of families that were clearly well-off, while the poorer households were further interior. We reached a stream (artificially created, I later learnt, through the Murapola Ela irrigation scheme of 1945) that sloshed down the steep landscape to the paddy fields below, irrigating them. From there, we descended the stone steps running parallel to the stream, to reach the house of our host that lay at the end of the descent, surrounded by paddy fields.

He is in his late sixties, and greeted us with much warmth, indicating the close relationship he shared with the two men travelling with me. The three later revisited memories of how they first met each other, when the young officials were newly appointed to the area, and the subsequent strengthening of their ties over months of regular interaction. My informant is a traditional artisan and the president of the village artisans’ collective, as well as the farmers’ association.

He started the conversation off with a description of the feudal past of the village, which had apparently been established during the time of King Sri Wickrama Rajasinghe. Folklore has it that the ruler in disguise had spent the night at an artisan’s home in this area. The

silversmith, upon learning the true identity of his guest (having taken a close look at his belongings and spotting the royal emblem on the sword), had secretly placed a ring with a blue stone on the latter's toe while he slept, as a token of recognition and respect. In return, the King had granted him all the surrounding landholdings, thus giving rise to the village. In the past, shared our host, the artisan village was surrounded by cultivators who would provide for that village. Even today, this village continues to be the only one in the area where members of the artisan caste community reside, while all the surrounding villages are populated by those of the *Goigama* caste, who continue to predominantly engage in agriculture, with a few exceptions of state sector employees, according to a respondent from a neighbouring village.

In recent times, the Murapola Ela irrigation scheme has facilitated greater diversification of income generating activities for the village, with more and more people of the traditional silversmith caste – known as Navandanna, referring to artisans in general – taking up agriculture for subsistence. With the opening of the economy, our host opined, further avenues emerged for income generation, leading to many youths taking them up, gradually resulting in an ongoing process of disintegration of the craft-based village.

Discussions with other artisans who have flourished in the business of traditional silver jewellery making shed light on exogenous factors that also contribute to this state of affairs, such as political patronage and consequently the rise of middlemen who suck in much of the profit generated.

Within this context, my informant lamented the fast decline of his craft, framing it in a narrative of cultural erosion.

The entry point to this discussion was the transformation that the 'open economy' policy has wrought in his industry: "They [non-traditional vendors selling similar items] started importing cheap substitutes for the raw material that we use for our products, and so were able to sell similar looking jewellery for much less. Then they started wholesale importing the jewellery themselves, imitation ones, from India and China, which were much cheaper. So, people started going for those. They are much shinier, their shine is much longer lasting. The chemical mixes they use to obtain those qualities are poisonous to the body. People will one day realise the actual cost of our industry being pushed out of existence. In another two to three years there would be no point in coming to these villages. Nobody will even ask about us."

He then recalled an instance in which he had stepped in to negotiate on behalf of the village with a domestic tourism operator. Their representatives had visited the village, expressing interest in working with the crafts people there to "tap into the tourism potential of the area". This company had proposed conversion of the village households into homestays where the guests could experience for themselves the traditional production process of silver jewellery. Guests were to be transported into the village by bullock carts driven by their respective hosts -- our subject was thoroughly amused by this, laughingly saying "As if the natural incline of the land wasn't hard enough to climb by ourselves!" In exchange (and in addition to whatever tips the guests would make to the host family), the company had promised to construct a new house for each participating household, which it could choose from among four or five such models.

The catch – unsurprisingly there was one – was that all home owners had to transfer ownership of their property to the company! The promise of new income had clouded the good reason of the villagers, he shared, which had to be hammered back into them. Using his authority as the village patriarch, he had refused to have any further negotiations with the company, much to the dismay of many cash-strapped villagers, particularly the young ones.

This also led us to the question as to why the youth are not keen on continuing in artisanal work anymore. The associated caste connotations are an obvious deterrent. The issue is compounded by the additional challenges faced by artisans such as the lack of institutional continuity of government promotional initiatives, in-fighting between the State institutions governing the crafts[i], profiteering by middlemen to the detriment of direct producers, the benefits of political patronage mostly having eluded this community etc., which together render it economically untenable to make a livelihood out of cottage industries. One has to also keep in mind exogenous factors such as the opening up of other, in some cases more 'prestigious', avenues of income such as State sector employment. More recently, quick cash options in the informal sector like driving three wheelers, construction work, and work in garment factories (mostly for women) have also encouraged many young people to venture away from artisanal work. Subsequent visits yielded that commercial agriculture is now the chief livelihood of many youth in the village, who mostly supply for the Colombo market and, in a limited number of cases, those abroad. A desperate attempt at income generation was also observed in

the form of a shoe making business that has now been abandoned, due to the sheer impossibility of connecting with a market.

This narrative of decline, however, needs to be complicated by another conversation I had with my initial contact, the DS official. Also a resident of a nearby village, he was somewhat critical of the insistence of traditional artisans on "doing things the traditional way", particularly in terms of the scale and speed of production, which he believed could immensely benefit from mechanisation: "You can retain the content and update the method. But they refuse even to do that. For them, how you produce it is also part of 'the tradition' and therefore what the end outcome actually means. I am also from this area, and I want the best for them. If they hold on to these notions, you can't avoid their industries getting completely wiped out."

What inhibits the adaptation of pre-capitalist craft industry to the logic and rationality of 21st century capitalism? Is there a future for those in the crafts sector outside of producing artefacts for foreign tourists? If, in fact, they do 'upgrade' to newer methods of production, can they claim to be 'traditional' anymore?[ii] And what implications will this have for the niche market they have carved out for themselves, inadequate as it may be? Without demand from society for the products of their skill and labour, will the silversmiths abandon their trade and sell their tools to be exhibited in galleries or the homes of wealthy collectors?

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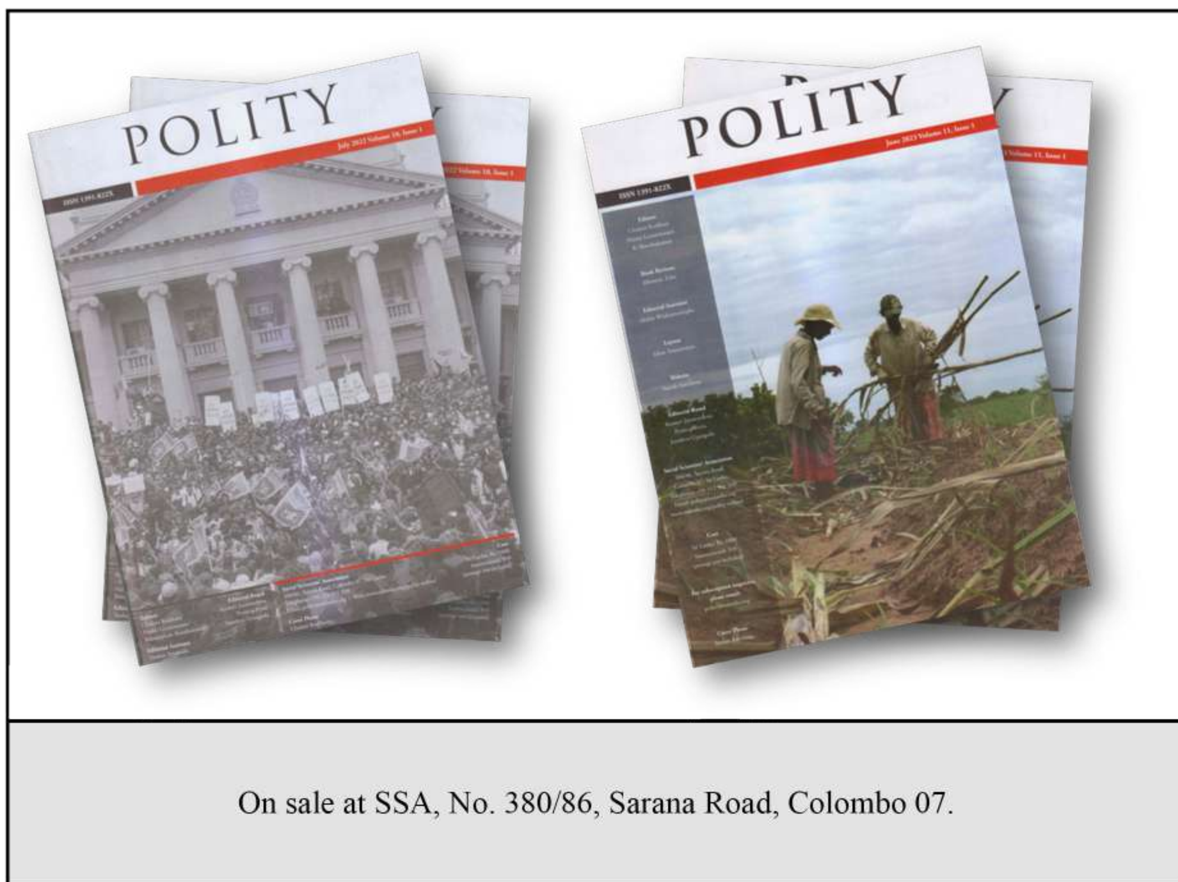
Notes

[i] Laksala, Design Centre, and National Crafts Council.

[ii] For a comparative perspective, see Balaswaminathan, Sowparnika. (2018). "The Real Thing: Craft, Caste, and Commerce amidst a Nationalism of Tradition in India". *The Journal of Modern Craft,* 11(2): 127-141.



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Reflections on Critical Agrarian Studies in Sri Lanka

Urs Geiser

In this essay, my aim is to reflect on the situation in Sri Lanka's agrarian sphere, through the gaze of 'critical agrarian studies'.[i] I begin with a glance at related discourses during the 1970s and early 1980s with their emphasis on the 'peasantry'. I then turn to the present, arguing that the contemporary moment poses new challenges to the field of agrarian studies – challenges that require more nuanced theoretical approaches.

I will illustrate this around just two points: the understanding of the 'peasantry' itself; and how to understand the role of the 'State' in agrarian change. I conclude by thinking about what insights gained through contemporary critical agrarian studies could contribute normatively to the search for progressive policies.

In principle, agrarian studies, then and now, engage with the "continuous struggle over access to resources and the allocation of agricultural products" (Brow and Weeramunda 1992: 9), a struggle that is structured through social relations, which in turn are characterised by the involved actors (from the household to the village to the State and beyond) having different interests, influence, and power. This engagement, though, has changed over the last decades.

Therefore, while comparing earlier studies on the peasantry with the present context, I focus on three interlinked dimensions, i.e. (a) the changes in *theoretical* underpinnings through which the agrarian was/is studied; (b) the implications of these changes on *methodological* approaches; and (c) the (changing) *normative* thoughts that emerge from such critical inquiries.

Regarding the theoretical underpinnings, I will show that earlier studies in Sri Lanka – exemplified by Newton Gunasinghe – drew heavily on Marxist political economy to understand the challenges faced by the peasantry. However, diverse theoretical approaches within social sciences began to critically engage with social relations and their transformations over time, and thus addressing unequal power relations and their consequences on agrarian households as well. Gradually, these approaches – some based in Marxism, some not – began to influence the field of 'peasant studies'.

This increasing range of theoretical entry points is also visible in the flagship journals around agrarian studies. From 2001, when Tom Brass took over the *Journal of Peasant Studies*, the journal focused on strict Marxist political economy, disqualifying all other research on the peasantry as "a-historical, cultural essentialism of postmodern theory" (*Journal of Peasant Studies* 2000: 1). The *Journal of Agrarian Change* (started in 2001 by Bernstein and Byres) followed political economy as well, but argued for the need to go beyond its orthodox reading, searching for "alternative approaches to understand agrarian structure and change" (Bernstein and Byres 2001a: 8), based on a "broad interdisciplinary framework, inspired by theory" (Bernstein and Byres 2001b: ii). They argued that such approaches would allow a more refined analysis of the complex social relations within and beyond the peasantry. And in 2009, Borras, the new editor (since departed as of end 2022) of the *Journal of Peasant Studies* reiterated the need for critical theories beyond the de-politicising mainstream, but with much more attention to the "interplay between structures, institutions, and actors that is a key element in agrarian change" (Borras 2009: 20f). Finally, a few years ago, the notion of critical agrarian studies emerged to encompass this broader field of nuanced studies. The broadening of theoretical perspectives also led to more differentiated methodological procedures, and as I will argue, also complicated the normative thinking on how to address unequal power relations.

Looking back – Marxist Agrarian Studies in the 1970s and Early 1980s

Before late 1977, the Sri Lankan State's policies and interventions into the life of agriculture-based households and the rural space were different, and so

was the subject with which agrarian studies had to engage. As Peiris (1996: 151) writes, the 1950s to 1970s saw "periodic policy shifts" between what he labelled a "conservative paternalistic approach" and a more "radical reformist approach".

The first did not include radical changes in production relations, but focused more on extending the frontier of agriculture into the Dry Zone, based on a family farm model (also influenced by a specific, nationalist reading of history); and extensive support to farmers and settlers through input and marketing support, and technical advice. The "radical reformist approach" included institutional reforms as well, such as land reforms, measures against exploitative production relations (especially tenancy), and experimenting with cooperative farming. Though in reality, the actual practice of these policies showed many overlaps, depending on who was in power, and on political needs to maintain the dynamics of party coalitions (Peiris 1996: 147f).

Against this backdrop, Marxist agrarian studies (or peasant studies) began to flourish, and is best represented in Sri Lanka by Newton Gunasinghe. In his study on the Kandyan village he called Delumgoda, he found an increasing stratification into different classes of rural households, i.e., semi feudal landlords, petty bourgeoisie, middle peasants, poor peasants, urban workers, and rural labour. For this typology, "nuclear families were taken as units of analysis and the production relations maintained by the head of the household were given emphasis" (Gunasinghe 1975: 138).

These diverse classes emerged through the differentiation of production and exchange relations and the capacities to extract surplus and thus to accumulate. In conclusion, he found these processes working in one direction only: "an inevitable expansion of the proportion of rural workers who would increasingly depend on selling their labour for sustenance" (1975: 139).

His conclusion was in line with larger theoretical debates beyond Sri Lanka, in which the central question was: whether capitalism-induced social differentiation of the peasantry would lead to a dominant class of larger peasants, with small peasants having to give up farming and earning their living through selling their labour; or whether small peasants would continue to survive as a class of their own, for example through the exploitation of unpaid family labour?

This dispute was part of an even larger and contested debate on the need of 'freeing' rural labour as a precondition for industrialisation and national growth. This debate is often labelled as the 'agrarian question', which engages with changes in the agrarian sphere from a long-term, historical, and normative position (i.e., the desirability of certain ways of transformation) – a debate that goes back to the writings of Lenin and Chayanov (see Bernstein 2010). This theorising on larger structural changes over time and space is an important component of agrarian studies, but I will, in the following, focus more on their relevance to understand challenges faced by rural people.

Returning to Gunasinghe, the analytical categories used, and the conclusions drawn, reflect his Marxist theoretical position. He, for example, considers class as an "objective reality" (1975: 117). His research interest was to understand how the larger processes of capitalism (understood as originating from the West and expanding into the pre-capitalist periphery) impacted on, and transformed, rural households. Gunasinghe perceived rural households as still located in pre-capitalist modes of production, or having "pre-capitalist elements within capitalist formations" (1975: 117). One core transformation he found is that "class is acquiring the position of the dominant mode of stratification" (1975: 116), thus replacing the importance of the pre-capitalist system of caste.

The above hints at Gunasinghe's theoretical and methodological approach. What about his normative thinking, on how to improve the lot of marginalised rural people? After all, the government coalition of the early to mid-1970s included the leftist Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) and the Communist Party. Could one expect him to agree with, and share their development paradigm regarding the agrarian sphere?

In his study on Delumgoda, Gunasinghe speaks of the "current period of monopoly and state capitalism" (1975: 139). In his study on land reform, he basically rubbishes the United Front regime's approach as "state-led land to the tiller"; a "bureaucratic procedure" which simply "remoulds existing agrarian relations", without overcoming them (Gunasinghe 1979: 50). In contrast to that, an "agrarian revolution relies on the forcible seizure of large landholders' land by the peasantry", and only such a revolution would end structures of dominance. These few quotes suggest that Gunasinghe's normative position was a radical (in the sense of revolutionary) one.

Beyond Marxist Agrarian Studies

Gunasinghe is a key representative of what we can call Marxist agrarian, or peasant studies. But as mentioned in the introduction, from the early 1980s, concerned researchers with other theoretical positions (partly inspired by Marxism) began as well to critically engage with the "continuous struggle over access to resources and the allocation of agricultural products" (Brow and Weeramunda 1992: 9). While most of the contributions in the Social Scientists' Association (SSA) published volume on *Capital and Peasant Production: Studies in the Continuity and Discontinuity of Agrarian Structures in Sri Lanka* (Abeysekera 1985) follow Marxist political economy, those in the book on *Agrarian Change in Sri Lanka* (Brow and Weeramunda 1992) display a broader range of theoretical approaches, spanning from Marxist to (what I call) critical social science approaches.

There were other important publications that went beyond Marxist approaches. I shall recall only two of them. In his study on the Gal Oya settlement scheme, Harriss (1984) focused on the "social organisation of production", but he studied the relation between peasants and low-level bureaucrats. He found that the emergence of inequality (or differentiation) was also supported by the nexus between wealthier farmers and these low-level bureaucrats. On the one hand, this ensured privileged access to State services, but on the other hand, the bureaucrats also feared being assaulted, as farmers dissatisfied with water supply would mobilise their political representatives, prompting "interventions by politicians who have to respond to appeals from groups of their supporters in order to maintain their own position" (1984: 322). I consider this study important, because it gives more nuanced attention to the range of actors involved, beyond generalised notions such as the 'State' and the 'Peasants'. Harriss also illustrates what others have called "everyday forms of resistance" (Scott 1985).

With the change of government in late 1977, the Sri Lankan State's policies and interventions into the life of agriculture-based households changed. One indicator is the enormous growth of donor-supported projects that not only focused on the construction of new infrastructure, but also on fostering the link between peasants' production and markets. All this came together especially in the emerging Accelerated Mahaweli Development Project – and this triggered a whole array of critical studies. Many were published in the People's Bank's journal, the *Economic Review*, and in the *Lanka Guardian*.

S. S. A. L. Siriwardena wrote on "emerging income inequalities and forms of hidden tenancy in the Mahaweli H area" (1981a; b). He asked, "why (when ostensibly all settlers begin their settlement life on an equal footing, with an equitable distribution of resources) within a period of few years income disparities and concomitant social stratification occurs" (1981a: 26).

His case study consisted of villagers that had to give up their traditional (*purana*) structure, and were re-settled in System H. He finds that soon after having received 2.5 acres of irrigated and 0.5 acres rain fed land, most of the settlers began to give their land to others through share-cropping tenancy arrangements (*andē*). The settlers often received only 25% of the product; thus, the "majority of the settlers could hardly survive" (1981a: 29; a finding against the grain, as many researchers elsewhere found the sharecroppers to be disadvantaged). For a livelihood, they worked as agricultural wage labourers (often for the lease cultivator and on their own land).

Siriwardena highlights especially two causes for this dynamic. One is that many settlers lack the capital required for cultivation. The second is that many of the poorer settlers (being used to the social relations of the *purana* village) find it extremely difficult to handle the increasingly monetised (or commodified) agricultural economy of the Mahaweli scheme – hiring tractors, buying all the inputs from seed to fertiliser to chemicals, hiring labour for harvesting and threshing, buying livelihood needs from the market, etc.

In sum, he finds increasing income disparities, as many peasant settlers are going for casual wage labour, leasing out their land at unfavourable terms, and the presence of others (often with good connections to local officials of the Mahaweli project) "with sufficient production assets, capital and improved production techniques … willing to cultivate their land on a hidden tenancy basis" (1981b: 25).

Normatively, that is to counter these processes of social differentiation, Siriwardena does not invoke the need for revolution, but demands more progressive variants of existing strategies: "It is apparent that future policies would have to be more precisely aimed to reach the disadvantaged groups, who are in the process of being marginalised" (1981b: 26).

As does Harriss, Siriwardena focuses on grassroots-level power relations among diverse actors and their relative role in social differentiation. Beyond that, his study points at a prominent research strand during that

period. Briefly: agrarian studies critical of the mainstream modernisation approach were concerned with processes of social differentiation and the production of inequality. These processes are conceptualised as 'agrarian change', that is the transformation of earlier forms of social relations and production towards more capitalist forms of organisation. The 'agrarian question' would then debate the desirability of one or the other form of agrarian change.

Earlier forms of social relations and production are often described as pre-colonial, traditional, embedded in local culture, or village-based smallholder production geared towards subsistence. The social relations structuring this peasant economy included communal or cooperative forms of land ownership and labour sharing, free labour provision to authorities, and caste relations. However, these structures underwent sweeping transformation through the spread of capitalist forms of organisation, "as defined by the expanded use of wage labour and the re-orientation of peasant production from subsistence to the market", and their "incorporation into wider circuits of economic, political and cultural relations" (Brow and Weeramunda 1992: 9f).

Many studies in Sri Lanka were informed by this take, arguing that colonialism led to capitalist penetration, and then destruction, of traditional (pre-colonial) village structures perceived as having been more egalitarian and communal; thus, the notion of the 'disintegrating village'. I read Siriwardena's study along such lines, as he describes the settlers' familiarity with their earlier *purana* social relations, and contrasting them with the new market-dominated realities in System H.

I posit that a contemporary re-engaging with agrarian studies also requires a critical reflection on such concepts and notions that informed the 1970s and early 1980s debates (especially the notion of the 'peasantry'), and I will come to that further below.

The Absence of Critical Studies on Agrarian Contexts after the Mid-1980s

Indeed, studies that questioned the dominant development practices, and that focused on the production of inequality flourished in the 1970s to the early 1980s in Sri Lanka. They were based on a range of theoretical positions within and (increasingly) beyond Marxism.

This changed, though, with the escalation of the violent conflict after the 'Black July' pogrom in 1983. The war began to dominate everyday lives of all people in the North and East, and in the rest of the country as well, creating suffering for so many. The violent conflict called for attention by researchers, many of whom struggled to understand and explain the causes of the turmoil.

A few tried to search for answers through Marxist political economy (including Gunasinghe 1984a; b; c). This, though, has been critically assessed (e.g. Moore 1990); and most researchers applied more cultural theories to engage with nationalism, identity politics, processes of othering, and later reconciliation. This stream of inquiries began to dominate academic engagement with Sri Lanka for many years. As a result, attention to political-economic dimensions of contested rural life disappeared.

Institutions such as the Agrarian Research and Training Institute (now HARTI), though, continued their studies on agriculture and related fields, producing valuable information. Some claim that the quality of the work has declined, but I rather think that with the shift of research agendas, the interest for ARTI's political economy studies simply reduced. Still, I have the impression that for almost 30 years, critical political-economic studies on agrarian contexts are rather few (with exceptions such as Bastian 2010 and Kadirgamar 2014).

What flourished, though, were mainstream economic studies associated with the now dominant post-1977 discourse of development through liberating market forces. As a matter of fact, what was considered in the 1970s and early 1980s (by radical researchers) as creating inequality and under-development (that is the penetration of rural life by capitalist market forces), was now perceived (by mainstream researchers) as the solution.

This discourse was operationalised, among others, through a flood of donor-dominated interventions in the rural space. Piles of consultancy reports emerged that studied rural conditions, and evaluated the progress of development. But they studied these conditions through their very specific theoretical gazes. One of them continues to perceive rural society as communities of farmers facing similar challenges – challenges that were to be tackled through community-based development. The other, more dominant one, centred around farmers as rural entrepreneurs, whose capacity to expand their entrepreneurial production activities required market-led modernisation (see the description by Siriwardena on Mahaweli System H).

These were not critical studies, because they rarely addressed power relations within 'farmer communities', and they rarely addressed the risk of intensified market

relations becoming exploitative. After all, these were research on contract, meant to serve the intentions of the modernisation project.

Let me cite just one example from among many. Around 2003, the World Bank financed a huge 'North East Irrigated Agriculture Project' (NEIAP), and among others, studied the feasibility for modernisation of the Vammiyadi Kulam in the Thirukkovil Divisional Secretariat Division of the Ampara District. In our study on land conflicts in the East, Shahul Hasbullah and I had a close look at contestations (at times violent) between paddy cultivators and livestock herders around access to land and this tank's water (Hasbullah and Geiser 2019: 153). A careful reading of the World Bank's report (2004) revealed not a single mention of this conflict. It instead speaks, in typical discourse, of "small farmers" and the "local community", and their needs for "development".

Thus, analytically, these studies lack a critical perspective that would address power relations and (potential) processes of differentiation and marginalisation. And normatively, they continue to be embedded in the modernisation project, with their recommendations limited to suggestions for minor adjustments in this endeavour.

It required the present economic and political crisis to demonstrate the urgent need for renewed and critical attention to the agrarian sphere. This crisis is nested in larger political-economic processes within and beyond Sri Lanka up to the global level.

Challenges for Contemporary Critical Agrarian Studies

In what follows, I continue to concentrate on Sri Lanka's agrarian space and its grassroots, where the present crisis was triggered by the post-war spread of micro-finance loans in the North (itself nested in the massive post-2009 inflow of capital; see the debate on financialisation in Kadirgamar 2013); the sudden decision to ban chemical fertilisers and to immediately switch to organic only (with the related problems of producing food in the first place); and the enormous challenges of access to food and other items associated with the drastic increase in prices.

This crisis – coupled with the problems created by the war and the State's (rather, ruling regime's) post-war economic strategy with its obsession to invest in huge infrastructure – has created realities that differ from those the researchers were studying in the 1970s and early 1980s. Just think of the last decades' waves of development interventions on a scale never seen before, the enormous inflow of foreign capital, and the important role of donors (including their paradigms on how to develop the rural). And last but not least, Sri Lanka's population in the early 1980s was 14-15 million people, whereas today it is around 22 million.

The need for 'Critical Agrarian Studies'

All this suggests that one needs to recall and learn from the older debates (e.g. from 'peasant studies'), but that these debates need to be critically reflected upon, and made more nuanced – regarding underlying theories (e.g. the understanding of pre-colonial social relations and the notion of class); methodologies (e.g. the focus of data collection on the head-of-household); and the normative (e.g. the meaning of radical or progressive politics).

This is the case not only in Sri Lanka. To further underline the potential of this turn to a "broad interdisciplinary framework, inspired by theory" (Bernstein and Byres 2001a: ii), the notion of critical agrarian studies has only recently emerged (Edelman and Wolford 2017). Recalling what Bernstein, Byres, and Borras had advocated earlier, Akram-Lodhi *et al.* (2021: 1) write: "Critical agrarian studies represents a field of research that unites critical scholars from various disciplines concerned with understanding agrarian life, livelihoods, formations and their processes of change. It is 'critical' in the sense that it seeks to challenge dominant frameworks and ideas in order to reveal and challenge power structures and thus open up the possibilities for change".

As discussed above, such contemporary critical agrarian studies are still rare in Sri Lanka, and the present crisis seems like a warning call that this field of research urgently requires deeper attention. For now, I can just touch upon two of the many dimensions that call for this attention. One circles around the notion of the peasantry. The second is concerned with the increasing number of State, as well non-State, organisations to which rural households are exposed.

The Peasantry and the Complexity of Livelihoods

The notions of the peasant or peasantry were important entry points for studies in the 1970s and early 1980s. Many perceived the peasantry as a homogenous group, sharing a common history, and being exposed in a similar way to agrarian change through penetration by capitalism. Bernstein (2003) labelled this approach as "peasant essentialism".

Others made efforts to understand the effects of agrarian change on differently endowed groups of peasants, which led to stratification. Gunasinghe for example (as mentioned above) found in his case study in the Kandy region, a differentiation into several classes:

- Petty bourgeoisie – i.e., people who earn a regular salary (e.g. teachers), but still own some land, which they rent out for sharecropping.
- Middle peasants – who "spend their labour or the labour of their nuclear families without exploiting others". They are "not compelled to sell their labour to supplement their income" (Gunasinghe 1975: 136).
- Poor peasants – they own land, but the "land they own or possess is absolutely insufficient for them to keep their body and soul together. Hence, they are compelled to sell their labour" (1975: 137).
- Rural workers – who are "totally alienated from all the means of production", and therefore completely depend on wage labour; and who spend most of their time "looking for work" (1975: 138).

To reflect on this classification and the normative conclusions drawn from it, it is important to reflect on the methodology on which it is based. As stated above, Gunasinghe took the nuclear family as unit of analysis, and noted the "production relations maintained by the head of the household" (Gunasinghe 1975: 138). With this, the production relations of the head of household became those of the family – thus a class of rural workers, i.e., families/households that depend entirely on wage labour; or a class of middle peasants, i.e., families/households that can make their living from working their land. He then suggests that some of these classes have a certain degree of class consciousness, in the sense of sharing common interests; the middle peasants, for example, "are conscious of their distinct position which separates them from the poor peasants and rural labourers" (1975: 137).

How far can this theoretical and methodological approach help to understand today's realities? Just recall Jazeel's (2014: 95) remark that: "Whatever else theory is, it is a key optic through which the world is made present and imaginatively constituted at one and the same time".

In our study in the East, Hasbullah and I found a highly heterogeneous peasantry – paddy farmers, cattle breeders, sugarcane cultivators, etc. – all of them having their very specific interests in land; interests that often lead to conflicts among them. All these types of farmers included middle peasants, but they had conflicting production interests, and lacked a class consciousness (Hasbullah and Geiser 2019). On top of that, many peasant households (across the board) were pushed to diversify their income sources, some because they could afford it, but the majority because they lived under conditions of severe distress.

Therefore, I posit that a methodological focus on the head-of-household does not suffice. Instead, an understanding of family or household-internal dynamics becomes crucial. Recently, I came across peasant households in which different members were engaged either in cultivating the little land they had (often permit land), some of them leasing in additional land, others leasing their land out, other household members going for casual labour within agriculture, or searching off-farm labour opportunities (close-by, or in urban areas), some having to mortgage land for micro-finance organisations, or (some members) even having to migrate abroad.

All of this raises questions on how we understand, and generalise, rural life. After all, the way we do this influences the conclusions we draw, and the recommendations we come forward with. Gunasinghe for example differentiates a class of rural workers (living entirely from casual labour) from a class of urban workers, having regular employment, and thus are easier to mobilise (Gunasinghe 1975: 138). My point is that members of rural households also go to urban areas for work, and that this urban work can be casual as well. Gunasinghe also observes that middle peasants "spend their labour or the labour of their nuclear families without exploiting others", but overlooks the exploitation of family labour (an important strategy for small farmers to survive). Attention to intra-household dynamics would also force attention to issues of gender (a marker of identity I miss in Gunasinghe's writing). Class can be an important category, but what does class mean today? Statistically, we might be able to draw differences between "classes of themselves", but how can they be "classes for themselves" (to invoke another important conceptualisation) when considering todays complexities (see Herring and Agarwala 2006)?

Two points to conclude this section: (a) I argue that the struggle to earn a living has led, over the last decades, to much more complicated interrelations between production on land, and earning income from non-land-based income sources – wherever they are found. And (b): as is well known, the notion of the peasantry is also used in Sri Lanka for ideological purposes

by sections of the political elite, who justify their interventions into the rural space by invoking the image of a 'traditional peasant culture' that needs support and protection. Contemporary agrarian studies need critical introspection to clarify their own ideological position in this debate.

The Enormous Local Presence of State and Non-State Actors

The above thoughts on the peasantry engaged with our understanding of rural households and their complex livelihoods. These households are exposed to the dynamics of capitalist penetration, deepening inequality, and this process is at the core of critical agrarian studies. But who are the actors that drive this process, that operationalise capitalism and market forces? And how do these actors engage with each other to produce the forces that are capable of impinging on rural households?

To put it simply: capitalism and market forces are not actors by themselves, but processes. There is no space here to deconstruct this nexus, but I argue that contemporary critical agrarian studies must engage with this theme. As indicated above, I am sympathetic to Borras (2009: 20f) in his call for a more differentiated analysis of "how key actors engage each other, leading to political change within the state, in society and within state-society channels of interactions". After all, the "interplay between structures, institutions, and actors … is a key element in agrarian change".

A few initial thoughts. Of course, it is the State that creates the conditions for market forces to operate. Critical research, though, shows that the State is a highly complex thing, and that outcomes of State action are not uniform, but can be contradictory; and so too policies towards the agrarian space.

When Hasbullah and I (2019) tried to understand how the State's land policies reach the grassroots, we realised its highly fragmented nature at the local level. In Eastern Sri Lanka, we found that this State is split into a whole array of different departments, each following its own policy. People must contact the *Grama Niladhari* (village officer), the Land Officer, the Forest Guard, the Irrigation Engineer, the Agricultural Instructor, or the staff at the *Pradeshiya Sabha* (Divisional Council) or the Divisional Secretariat. Although all these officials are linked to the same State, they represent its different branches. Our study shows that these branches often have independent lives, and more often than not, operate in splendid isolation from each other, without any coordination. This affects policy implementation as well, and thus the manner in which (differently positioned) rural people experience the plethora of State agencies.

Similarly, civil society, or the non-State sector, has become complex, and contradictory at times as well. Involved actors have increased since the late 1970s; just think of the networks of regional, national, and international non-governmental organisations (NGOs). If you check for their foundation year, many emerged in the 1980s and 1990s. And many more came with, and after, the 2004 *tsunami*. I have yet to come across agrarian studies from the 1970s and early 1980s that thematised the role of non-State actors in Sri Lanka (Gunasinghe 1975 critically engages with co-operatives). But the growth of the non-State sector, and its enormous presence in the rural space, now requires detailed attention. As a colleague studying credit co-operatives in the North recently mentioned, such co-operatives had, earlier, only to compete with the village moneylender; today, so many NGOs (besides the private sector) too are involved in credit, setting most diverse conditions for lending.

Rural households are exposed to this enormous density of State and non-State actors at the local level – despite all the talk on the 'neo-liberal downsizing of the State'. It seems to me that Sri Lanka is strikingly different from other countries in South Asia. I have also worked in Pakistan and parts of India, but never seen this huge a number of actors in rural areas.

Progressive Policies

This brings me to the final part of my reflections. The SSA seminar invitation notes that critical agrarian studies not only want to analyse agrarian realities, but also to transform them, searching "for alternatives to the dominant paradigm". This is a crucial qualification for critical agrarian studies, one though that poses its own challenges.

Here, the agrarian question comes in: to progress, create employment, income, profit, and food for all, can Sri Lanka follow a strategy of commercialised agriculture, globally interlinked and export-oriented, with heavy involvement of national and international business, based on large-scale capitalist farming which replaces smallholder agriculture (with the industrial and service sectors absorbing all the labour thus 'freed' from agriculture)? Or should the strategy aim at 'food sovereignty', based on autonomous small-scale family farming, linked through co-operative arrangements to keep profits with the producers (see Jansen 2015)?

A quick glance at the experiences of the last decades suffices to disqualify the first approach: just look at the present fundamental crisis. The second option, therefore, invites attention. But then, today's rural reality is still characterised by the massive lack of meaningful employment opportunities outside the cultivation of land. This mainly affects rural youth, who get stuck between the lack of access to land and lack of access to off-farm jobs (again an issue that needs critical analysis). I simply doubt that a food sovereignty strategy can absorb the masses of rural youth. Add to this the many rural youths do not necessarily aspire (I assume) to work in muddy paddy fields.

Thus, to reflect on strategies for the agrarian within Sri Lanka's national policy (i.e., the agrarian question) requires careful and innovative thinking. And as in the case of analysing the ground realities and challenges of differentiation that rural people face, the search for progressive policies (to address these challenges) needs to be based on analysis as well. It can learn, for example, from the experiences of already existing policy processes at the grassroots.

Looking at recent debates in Sri Lanka I sometimes get the feeling that debates around progressive policies focus more on what could be, or *should be* (such as 'workers-peasants solidarity'). Such debates are not really based on empirically grounded insights into *what is there.* For instance, analyses of current problems in Sri Lanka's rural sphere may conclude that class-based interventions are required to solve problems in agricultural production and marketing, in addition to land reform. But how relevant or useful would it be if there is no reflection on what 'class' might mean today; or on lessons to be learnt from earlier land reform experiences? Likewise, occasionally there are suggestions to foster collective farming, but without hint of what to learn from such attempts in the 1970s (see Peiris 1972).

So, what do I mean by 'searching for progressive policies'? I assume that within the enormous range of State and non-State actors' interventions in the rural sphere, not all will be geared towards the "incorporation [of peasant production] into wider [capitalist] circuits of economic, political and cultural relations" (see Brow and Weeramunda above). Just think of the various efforts over the last decades to foster co-operatives, or other policies that might resonate with at least aspects of the food sovereignty discourse, or even resistance against policies that hinder food sovereignty. What policy-lessons can be learned from such experiences?

So far, I have not come across a critical study that, for example, carefully addresses the role of non-State actors in the recent crisis around chemical versus organic fertiliser. Did non-State actors intervene? Were they involved (or not) in mobilising the farmers' protests that emerged? How, then, did these farmers' protests get organised? Can such insights give hints at possible progressive policies?

Nor have I seen an analysis that (critically) studies (not just blames) the array of local-level State agencies; one that analyses their mandates, the practices they use to implement the policy prescriptions they are tasked with, the challenges they face in having to work in a field where many other organisations are active; and then contrasting these insights with how differently positioned rural households experience, and interact with these grassroots-level bureaucrats: how they collaborate, or resist them, etc. (an exception being Uyangoda's 2012 study on *Pradeshiya Sabhas* and Divisional Secretariats).

Finally, unemployment is a crucial challenge for rural households (even for those who have land, though very little). Thus, it is an issue to be addressed by critical agrarian studies as well. What were earlier, or present, strategies by State and non-State actors to address this issue (traveling through the countryside one sees many centres for vocational training); what can be learned from their experiences; and can such experiences inform the thinking about progressive strategies?

In Lieu of a Conclusion

As I said at the outset, these are reflections – some more evidence-based, others more thinking aloud. Recalling Brow and Weeramunda (1992), it is as valid now as it was in the 1970s and 1980s, for scholars and activists to engage critically with the continuous struggle in rural society over access to resources and the allocation of agricultural products, a struggle that is structured through social relations, which in turn are characterised by the involved actors having different interests, influence, and power.

The theoretical underpinnings informing the analytical categories for such studies, the methodologies used, and the normative reflections emerging from them have evolved over the past decades through better and better insights into '*what is out there?*'. These insights also complicate the normative debate, and make easy recommendations difficult. But the challenge to engage with struggles over rural livelihoods is more urgent than ever before.

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Notes

[i] This paper is a revised and expanded version of the inaugural seminar presentation on February 9, 2023 of the 'Critical Agrarian Studies' series of the Social Scientists' Association of Sri Lanka. I am very thankful for the critical and engaged feedback received from the editors of *Polity*. Responsibility for the ideas expressed herein remain, of course, mine alone.

When crises converge: How Uneven Agrarian Development Influences the Effects of Climate Change in Sri Lanka's North-Central Dry Zone

Harry M. Quealy and Cherisma Rajaratnam

In 2016-2017, Sri Lanka's North-Central dry zone suffered what had been described as the worst drought in decades (Fernandez 2017). The severe drought conditions, followed by heavy rainfalls, led to widespread crop failures, particularly affecting the 2016/17 *Maha* and 2017 *Yala* cultivation seasons. The drought had a significant impact on paddy cultivation. Overall, paddy production across 2016/2017 fell by close to 40% from the previous year, yielding the lowest harvest in close to 35 years (WFP 2017; FAO 2017). While it is difficult to attribute climate change as the primary cause of the 2016-2017 drought, research in Sri Lanka has demonstrated how climate change is contributing towards more extreme weather events throughout the country (Jayawardena *et al*. 2018; Darshika *et al*. 2018).

The effects of the drought were widespread; however, they were also unevenly experienced. For Asoka,[i] a smallholder farmer from the village of Kalawelpothana in the Anuradhapura district, the drought has had a lasting effect. Asoka cultivates a small plot (around

three acres) of paddy. Like most in the village, Asoka is also reliant on informal and uncertain agricultural daily wage labour work in neighbouring villages. The drought not only affected Asoka's paddy harvest, but also reduced the availability of daily wage labour work that is so essential for his household's finances. With only little paddy and income during this time, Asoka and his family, like many other households in Kalawelpothana, experienced periods of serious financial precarity and food shortages. During the worst periods of the drought, meals were often reduced to just manioc (cassava), *pol sambol*, and black tea, which they consumed only once or twice a day.

Debt and Agrarian Life

As is common among smallholder farmers throughout the North-Central dry zone, Asoka regularly depends on loans for covering the costs of cultivation, harvest, and other household expenses. Debt has long been a feature of agrarian life in rural Sri Lanka. For example, the Royal Banking Commission of 1934 calculated that close to 80% of households in the dry zone were indebted to the tune of Rs.200 (Farmer 1957). The Commission found that large portions of this debt was undertaken to purchase household goods rather than for cultivation purposes and were settled by payments in kind instead of cash (Leach 1961).

However, with the introduction of hybrid seeds and synthetic fertilisers and pesticides at the start of the Green Revolution in the 1960s (Dhanapala 2020) and the neoliberal agricultural modernisation pathway embarked upon post-1977 (Shanmugaratnam 1984), credit has become an essential livelihood resource for many smallholder farmers in the North-Central dry zone as they attempt to navigate rising agricultural costs (Quealy and Yates 2021).

Before the drought – as he does before most cultivation seasons – Asoka took out a small loan to cover the initial costs of cultivating paddy on his small plot. Asoka was already indebted to a commercial bank, so like many others in Kalawelpothana, he often turns to a local *mudalali* (businessman, actually moneylender) for informal lines of credit. Gaining loans from the *mudalalis* is easier, he explains, as they are usually more willing and often travel to the village making them more accessible. Despite the ease of access, the *mudalalis* charge high rates of interest. An interest rate of 10% per month is applied to Asoka's loan – a figure that was regularly quoted by others during our time in Kalawelpothana. The interest rate is compounded by a time lag that exists from the date on which the loan is taken and the income generating commodity sales that occur after the harvesting period several months later. As the interest begins to accrue from the initial date the loan is taken, by the time Asoka has harvested and sold his paddy, he will often face 3-to-4 months' (depending on the paddy variety) worth of interest on top of the loan principal.

An Indebtedness Treadmill

Taking on debt, however necessary, provides a temporal displacement of risk into the future (Taylor 2013). For Asoka, the poor harvests during 2016-2017 significantly impacted his ability to make debt repayments, while the lack of income created the need to take on additional debt. The self-reinforcing cycle of rural indebtedness in Kalawelpothana can be seen as an indebtedness treadmill (cf. Karamchedu 2023), in which smallholder farmers fall into further debt each time they experience a crop failure, which in turn creates a demand for, and dependency on, additional debt.

Despite being unable to repay the full loan amount, Asoka was able to negotiate both a repayment extension and an additional loan. Faced with little other choice, taking on additional debt allows Asoka some financial breathing space in the short-term. However, the additional debt compounds the risks of default and asset dispossession into the future as interest rapidly accrues, while at the same time deepening the unequal relations of dependency and exploitation between Asoka and the credit-providing *mudalali*.

Dynamics of debt and land are central to the socio-politics of agrarian society in Kalawelpothana and the surrounding area. By controlling lines of credit, the *mudalalis* are able to expand their control over land, either directly or indirectly. For Asoka and many other smallholder farmers in Kalawelpothana, access to credit through *mudalalis* is contingent on providing a portion of land as a guarantee. This practice appears as a mode of informal mortgaging (*ukas*), in which the land in question falls under the control of the *mudalali* until the loan is repaid. If the loan cannot be repaid, the *mudalali* may eventually assume ownership of the land.

Andē and *Mudalalis*

For smallholder farmers who are rendered either landless, without full access to their lands, or reliant upon reduced landholdings, *andē* (sharecropping) is commonly practiced throughout Kalawelpothana. *Andē* has a long history in Sri Lanka and usually involves an agreement in which the smallholder rents a portion of land from another landowner in exchange for a percentage of the harvest. In some cases, the costs of cultivation and

harvest will also be shared – although not always equally – between the sharecropper and the landholder. Earlier accounts of *andē*, such as Leach's study of Pul Eliya (a village which directly neighbours Kalawelpothana), depict a largely reciprocal arrangement, usually taking place among kinship groups (Leach 1961). More recent experiences from Kalawelpothana, however, reveal far more lopsided and exploitative arrangements.

In Kalawelpothana, smallholders such as Asoka almost always enter into *andē* arrangements with the same *mudalali* to whom they are both indebted and who has acquired control of their land. In this sense, smallholders such as Asoka, become tenants on their own lands. While numerous efforts have been made to regulate the practice of *andē* to provide rights and security for the sharecropper (see Moore 1985), these regulations appear scarcely enforced in Kalawelpothana. As a result, smallholder farmers who are indebted, without control over all or part of their land, and/or unable to afford the costs of production, are poorly positioned to negotiate the terms of *andē* agreements, meaning it is the *mudalali* who mostly commands a large majority of the harvested paddy (regularly reported as two-thirds of the yield).

Socio-Political Consequences

In some cases, *andē* proves the possibility of cultivating a small volume of paddy that would be otherwise unaffordable and/or unattainable without access to sufficient land. However, experiences from Kalawelpothana illustrate two important socio-political consequences of *andē* that underpin the social power hierarchies in the village and between those in neighbouring villages. First, the small share of harvest received by many smallholder farmers, like Asoka, makes it difficult to profit from cultivating paddy, while at the same time the paddy received is regularly insufficient to meet household consumption requirements. Second, under the weight of insufficient profits, many smallholder farmers in Kalawelpothana expressed feeling trapped within a cycle of *andē* and debt to cover household and cultivation expenses. Over time, the dependency on *andē* and informal lines of credit provided by local *mudalalis* have embedded deep socio-political power hierarchies within Kalawelpothana and neighbouring villages.

Although Asoka was able to navigate the worst of the drought, the future appears precarious under the weight of increasing indebtedness and concerns over land control. While not representative of all smallholder farmers in the North-Central dry zone, Asoka's struggles appeared relatively common throughout the village of Kalawelpothana. The context of Kalawelpothana is reflective of broader patterns of uneven agrarian development that have emerged in particular since the introduction of colonial capitalism under British rule, and more recently accelerated under the neoliberal turn post-1977, in which economic growth has coincided with the pauperisation of large numbers of smallholder farmers (Shanmugaratnam 1984; Shanmugaratnam 1985). For Asoka, the processes of uneven agrarian development have clearly impacted his ability to navigate the "climates of uncertainty" that emerge through the entwining of climatic variabilities and agrarian capitalism (Matthan 2022). However, for politically and economically powerful *mudalalis*, crises such as the 2016-2017 drought provide the opportunity to consolidate their power by controlling lines of credit and accumulation through the dispossession of indebted farmers' lands.

2021 Chemical Fertiliser Ban

The unequal socio-political power relations in Kalawelpothana, especially those related to land and debt, are particularly salient as multiple crises converge across rural Sri Lanka. For example, the crises that emerged through former President Gotabaya Rajapaksa's overnight chemical fertiliser ban in 2021 amplified existing inequalities, while also creating new inequalities in the process. Like elsewhere, the overnight fertiliser ban caught farmers in Kalawelpothana by surprise. Indebted, ill prepared, and unable to afford the prohibitive prices of the remaining chemical fertilisers available in the market, farmers in Kalawelpothana experienced sharp agricultural yield declines. For those still recovering from the 2016-2017 drought, the fertiliser ban, among other things, resulted in heightened indebtedness, inflamed concerns related to land access and control, and deepened the hierarchical relations of dependency and exploitation between smallholders and *mudalalis*.

For Asiri, a farmer from the neighbouring village of Bellankadawala, the fertiliser ban was one crisis too many. Having only just overcome the enduring effects of the 2016-2017 drought and faced with the uncertainties of an ongoing political and economic crisis, the fertiliser ban led him to stop commercial farming all together. While Asiri still cultivates a small plot of land for his household consumption, he has loaned out the rest of his paddy lands to his brother in return for a marginal percentage of the harvested paddy. Asiri now relies on income derived from driving his tuk-tuk and on finding daily wage labour work. By shifting away from agriculture, Asiri can potentially begin

untangling himself from the exploitative debt relations with local *mudalalis*. However, for many indebted small-scale farmers in Sri Lanka and elsewhere, waged labour is frequently precarious, informal, low paid, with poor conditions, and unsafe (Withers and Piper 2018; Akram-Lodhi 2021).

Vulnerability is Produced

For Asoka, Asiri, and other smallholder farmers in the villages of Kalawelpothana and Bellankadawala, "vulnerability does not just fall from the sky" (Ribot 2013: 164). Rather, it is produced through histories of uneven agrarian development and contemporary relations of power. Climate change deepens existing inequalities, while also co-producing new forms of injustice as it becomes entangled with multiple overlapping crises (Sultana 2021).

Understanding climate change as part of an entanglement of multiple crises in rural Sri Lanka therefore demands challenging the prominence of approaches that seek to understand the effects of climate change by focusing primarily on biophysical events, while silencing the uneven agrarian histories and political economic dynamics that shape climate change and the converging of crises across the dry zone (Ribot 2022; Matthan 2022; Paprocki 2021).

For example, a recent report by the Hector Kobbekaduwa Agrarian Research and Training Institute (HARTI) assesses the vulnerability of farming communities in the dry zone to climate change by focusing on a range of biophysical and socio-economic indicators (i.e., frequency of exposure to droughts and floods, reliance on natural resource-based incomes, access to crop insurance, etc.) to measure levels of climatic exposure, sensitivity, and adaptive capacities (Samarasinha *et al.* 2020). For policy makers and practitioners, the report provides functional and straightforward insights into the generalised vulnerabilities of farming communities to climate change in the dry zone. However, the approach appears both ahistorical and apolitical in that it is limited to identifying *who* is vulnerable, rather than uncovering the more-than-climatic processes through which the vulnerabilities of smallholder farmers, such as Asoka and Asiri, are first produced (i.e., revealing *why* they are vulnerable) (Kashwan and Ribot 2021; Quealy and Yates 2021).

In the villages of Kalawelpothana and Bellankadawala, climate change converges with histories of uneven agrarian development, a long-standing neoliberal modernisation drive, the enduring effects of former President Gotabaya Rajapaksa's fertiliser ban in 2021, political uncertainties, and the ongoing economic crisis (among other things). Climate change must therefore be understood, and addressed, together with the historically produced political economic dynamics that shape its influence across the dry zone (Shattuck *et al.* 2023; Borras *et al.* 2021).

In this regard, and through a focus on power relations, political economic dynamics, and socio-ecological concerns in rural settings, insights from the interrelated fields of political ecology and critical agrarian studies are crucial within ongoing climate change debates in Sri Lanka. Through an engagement with these analytical fields, we argue that working towards more just agrarian futures under climate change in Sri Lanka's dry zone demands critical attention towards understanding the ways in which climate change is shaped by, and in turn shapes, the politics, and trajectories of agrarian change across the region.

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Notes

[i] All names used here are pseudonyms.

Fault Lines in Indian Agriculture: Solidarities and Contradictions in Southern Haryana

Srishti Yadav

November 2023 marks three years of the historic farmers' protests in India that captured the imagination of people in India and around the world; and two years since the Narendra Modi-led Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government capitulated and repealed the farm laws at the bedrock of the protests.[i] The government's retreat in the face of opposition is significant, since it has not buckled under citizens' protest on any of the other major changes it has introduced or enabled, such as the *Goods and Services Tax Bill* or the *Citizenship Amendment Act*. State Assembly elections in Punjab may have been a factor in the government's decision, but it is also evident that India's farmers continue to be a class to contend with. But the protests also revealed the broader internal fault lines of Indian agriculture, and manifest economic anxieties that transcend the rural and the agrarian.

Farm Laws

In September 2020, as the world was reeling under COVID19, the Narendra Modi government introduced three contested farm bills in the Indian Parliament. The government unilaterally passed the bills into law despite opposition from other parties. Together, the three laws would have weakened government procurement from farmers, and eased the entry of big capital into contract farming and marketing. The *Farmers' Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation)*

Act allowed farmers to sell their produce to private traders outside State grain markets and eliminated market fees for traders. The *Farmers' (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement of Price Assurance and Farm Services Act* allowed farmers to enter production contracts with private firms or traders; and the *Essential Commodities (Amendment) Act* removed restrictions on private entities to stockpile cereals, pulses, oilseeds, onions, and potatoes.[ii]

As with other moves, the Farm Laws reflect the Modi government's ambition to take advantage of its Hindutva-backed political mandate to initiate big transformations in India's economy and polity. The Farm Laws can be seen as the Modi government's attempt to resolve the impasse at the heart of Indian agriculture, rooted in the uneven adoption of Green Revolution techniques, low productivity of Indian agriculture, and its implications for public spending.

Green Revolution in India[iii]

In the late 1960s, India adopted Green Revolution techniques in agriculture to reduce dependence on food aid from the US in the form of PL480 wheat imports. Green Revolution techniques, more precisely the high-yielding varieties of wheat and rice, along with the use of chemical fertilisers, pesticides, and intensive irrigation, are more resource-intensive, increase dependence on paid inputs, and demand greater cash outlays. The techniques were initially adopted in only a few regions—fertile, well irrigated parts of the North-West and South that had seen historical development of large-scale irrigation and other types of public investment in colonial and independent India.

Indian policymakers, as well as the forces behind the Green Revolution project such as Norman Borlaug, understood that small farmers would not be able to implement these techniques without access to credit and other types of support. Therefore, since the late 1960s, the Indian State has supported agricultural petty commodity producers with various input subsidies, easy availability of credit, and has provided support prices for major crops. The State procures food grains at support prices, which are sold at subsidised rates through the Public Distribution System. The combination of these efforts enabled India to achieve food security and prevent large-scale food shortages since the 1970s.

The liberalisation of the economy in the early 1990s changed this picture. Even as Green Revolution techniques have been adopted in more regions, insufficient adaptation of Green Revolution techniques to varying ecologies and limited State support in credit, irrigation, and research and development, have contributed to depressed productivity and incomes. The decline in availability of formal credit has contributed to farmers' dependence on private credit, often at explosive interest rates.

Moreover, the opening of the economy has left Indian agriculture susceptible to fluctuations in global agricultural commodity prices, rendering agriculture vulnerable and uncertain. Rising input prices, rising debt and greater volatility, led to several years of acute agrarian crisis, which manifested in alarming numbers of farmer suicides across the country, particularly in Maharashtra. Farmers in previously beneficiary states such as Punjab and Kerala have also faced agrarian distress.

Farmers' movements throughout this period have demanded the implementation of support prices and procurement uniformly across the country—procurement varies drastically across states, and in many parts of the country farmers have very little access to marketing channels of any type, public or private.

At the same time, there has been considerable discourse about the 'subsidy burden' of agriculture on the State exchequer, and the market distortions introduced by support prices and incomplete land and labour markets. Proponents of this view advocate the opening of markets to private capital, to reduce inefficiencies. This perspective pervades sections of the media, academia, as well as the government's 'expert' policy advisors on agriculture.[iv]

The government's neoliberal orientation and commitment to improving the 'ease of doing business' in India is perhaps also the reason why it is the darling of corporates, Indian and foreign, and attracts massive funding.[v]

The Farm Laws can be seen as the Modi government's attempt to find a way out of this impasse in the State's approach to agriculture. It was an implicit admission of the government's inability to tackle the challenges facing Indian agriculture and the over 40% of the country's population that is dependent on it.

The laws made way for large private capital to subsume petty commodity producers under new relations of exploitation. Recent reportage[vi] indicates that large capital such as the Adani group lobbied the government in 2018 to lift the *Essential Commodities Act*. Farmers' unions caught on to this nexus early on, and launched an attack on the government for its close relations with specific large business houses such as the Adanis and the Ambanis.

Contradictions in Indian Agriculture

While the farmers' protests were vibrant political spaces that resonated with the larger pro-secular democracy sentiment in India, they did not necessarily reflect participation from all segments of Indian agriculture or farmers from all parts of the country.

From their inception, Green Revolution techniques and associated policies of State support and procurement were only effectively implemented in a few regions in the North-West and South. In these regions, access to subsidised fertilisers and subsidised electricity, which enabled the use of tubewells to pump groundwater, as well as support prices and well-functioning procurement for key crops like wheat, rice, mustard, etc. allowed yields, farmer incomes, and surpluses to rise. In these states, a new dominant class of medium and large farmers emerged as a political force in the 1970s and 1980s, demanding greater resources from the State.

Moreover, the long-term trajectory of Indian agriculture and of those engaged in it is tied to the wider processes of structural transformation in the economy. The distress in agriculture is reflected in the macroeconomic fact that while the contribution of agriculture to GDP has declined from nearly 60% in the early 1980s to under 20% in 2021-22, it continues to provide employment to over 40% of the workforce.[vii]

India's service sector-led growth since the 1980s has failed to generate commensurate employment, and instead has led to a burgeoning of informal employment that has failed to draw people out of their dependence on land. Instead, the prevailing reality of the Indian countryside is a diversification of livelihoods across sectors, spaces, and times, with agriculture continuing to provide one among a plethora of livelihoods.

Indeed, more and more rural households today are diversified into multiple sectors, livelihoods, and spaces—spanning agriculture and non-agriculture, rural and urban, formal and informal. These connections are fundamentally shaped by the success (or lack) of accumulation within agriculture, which in turn is differentiated by region, class, and caste. In core Green Revolution areas where medium and large cultivators were able to gain from increased productivity and surpluses, these provincial propertied classes were able to transform their agrarian footholds into non-agrarian sources of income, rents, and profits.

At the lower end of the spectrum, the growing numbers of marginal and small farmers, particularly in less-productive regions, engage in distress-driven diversification into non-agricultural activities such as casual wage work, particularly in construction, and other seasonal work often entailing seasonal migrations to more developed agricultural regions or big cities. The livelihoods of this latter group, though tied to land, are not primarily dependent on it. Nor do they benefit from State procurement, marketing channels, and credit. This group was not part of the farmers protesting the farm laws. It is the former group—medium and large farmers from core Green Revolution states and states with well-functioning procurement—who were the major participants in the 2020-21 farmers' protests.[viii] This is because they still have the most to lose from receding State support to agriculture.

Indeed, while agriculture as a sector has lost out relative to the non-agriculture sectors during the last four decades, distress has been unevenly experienced within agriculture. Even through the peak of agrarian distress, some groups and regions continued to accumulate. The fate of those in agriculture does not depend only on agriculture, but rather on the pathways they can make in non-agricultural sectors.

To understand the fault lines that differentiate those in agriculture, I did intensive fieldwork in Sangli,[ix] a village in Rewari district in Southern Haryana. Green Revolution techniques were adopted early on in Haryana, which was carved out of post-partition Indian Punjab. Haryana also happens to adjoin the industrial belt that extends from Delhi to its surrounding districts, where foreign capital has concentrated in the neoliberal era. This makes it an interesting place to study processes of generation and re-investment of agricultural surpluses, and to scrutinise the relationship between 'modernised' agriculture and neoliberal industrial and urban growth that has dwarfed the rural economy. I present some findings below.

Methodology for Agrarian Class Analysis[x]

In attempting to unpack the differentiations and contradictions between agrarian households, I drew from the considerable literature on agrarian class analysis. The ownership of means of production, particularly land, and relatedly the tenurial relations in which agricultural households are engaged, are critical to locate their class position.

In agrarian economies that are dominated by commodity production, the distinction between simple or petty commodity production and capitalist commodity production is strongly linked to the systematic production of surplus. This criterion, termed the 'surplus criterion', has been developed for the Indian agrarian context by Athreya, Böklin, Djurfeldt,

and Lindberg.[xi] In my analysis, I qualify the surplus criterion to consider re-investment of surplus in agriculture and non-agriculture, the purchase and use of machinery to displace labour, and the expansion of the scale of production.

The relative use of hired versus unpaid family labour in agrarian economies has also been identified by scholars such as Utsa Patnaik to be among the critical identifiers of agrarian class.[xii] Scholars of agrarian change typically use a combination of these three criteria.

In my analysis, I consider ownership of land, scale of production or land leasing, ownership of agricultural machinery such as tractors, re-investment of surplus towards cultivation or non-agricultural avenues, extent of hiring of agricultural labour, and type of non-agricultural diversification (property incomes, diversification via education into formal employment, diversification into commercial activity, and diversification into informal employment).

Additionally, the institution of caste, which manifests in regional *jati* hierarchies, has historically shaped the rural economy, and must be integrated into a holistic understanding of agrarian class relations. Caste is critical to the conception of power in the rural economy, as it fundamentally shapes the ability to command productive resources.

In Sangli, *ahirs* (officially categorised as Other Backward Classes), *brahmins*, *rajputs*, and *banias* (all three officially categorised as Other or General castes i.e., upper castes) are the predominant landowning dominant castes that have historically commanded the labour of *prajapats, khatis* (both non-dominant Other Backward Classes that perform traditional caste occupations such as pottery-making in the former case and woodwork in the latter case), and several Dalit jatis (Dalit is a political identity of the formerly untouchable castes; in Sangli the Dalit jatis present who engaged in agricultural labour were *chamar, dhanak, nai*, and others).

Productive Forces

Agriculture in Sangli has been transformed by the Green Revolution over the last five decades, though this transformation has lagged that of the more fertile Northern parts of Haryana and Punjab. Sangli is drier and more arid than core Green Revolution regions. Respondents noted that access to electricity in the 1970s was critical to the use of pump sets, which allowed for groundwater-based irrigation. With irrigation, high-yielding varieties of wheat, mustard, and pearl millet could be adopted. Chemical fertilisers and pesticides replaced manure, and by the 1990s tractors and threshers wholly mechanised parts of the agricultural production process.

Labour Process in Sangli

The transformation of the production process through the adoption of Green Revolution techniques changed the labour process as well. For centuries, caste-based servitude (the *jajmani* system) tied individual landless Dalit households with dominant caste landowners or *zamindars* into relations of forced dependence. From the 1970s, *jajmani* ties have weakened considerably, to be replaced by hired wage labour, though agricultural labour hiring out continues to be the domain of Dalit landless households. Over time, long-term farm servants have been replaced by daily-wage and piece-rated labour, the former predominantly by Dalit men and the latter by Dalit women.

Apart from local Dalit labour, dominant caste landowning households also hire (and certainly prefer) migrant labour groups for harvesting and threshing operations on piece-rated contracts. Migrants come from nearby states of Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Bihar, and often comprise whole families (including children) who work together in large groups, are paid by the acre, and therefore finish operations more quickly—precisely why landlords prefer them to local Dalit labourers.[xiii] Regional disparities in development contribute to large-scale migratory flows of labour, and allow booming regions to benefit from cheap labour from depressed regions.

Despite the adoption of 'modernised' techniques and the 'super-exploitation' of migrant labour, high input costs and small farm sizes put pressure on surplus margins in agriculture in Sangli. Most cultivators combine unpaid household labour with hired labour on the farm to mitigate this pressure and boost cash surpluses. Using Utsa Patnaik's Exploitation-Ratio or E-Ratio[xiv], I find that half of the landowners in my sample rely *primarily* on unpaid family labour. Reliance on family labour further inhibits scale, especially if some household members are diversified in other lines of work.

Agrarian Class Analysis and Pathways out of Agriculture

Virtually all landowners I spoke with were dissatisfied with returns from agriculture, especially given the dependence of surplus margins on intensive physical labour, and instead sought pathways into 'service' (i.e., formal, often office-based) employment. This is

noteworthy because Haryana is frequently presented as a Green Revolution success story with widespread adoption of 'modernised' techniques and relatively well-functioning public procurement systems for several key crops.

Instead of sustained accumulation and re-investment within agriculture, agricultural surpluses paved the way for diversification into non-agricultural activities for dominant caste landowning households. Many dominant caste landowners, 70% of my sample, earned most of their household incomes from non-agricultural sources—from wage employment, small businesses, or pensions from public-sector employment. Indeed, the average per capita income for diversified landowning households was twice that of primarily agricultural households.

Some better-off dominant caste landowners, particularly *banias* (or merchant castes), can deploy surpluses towards setting up local small businesses or merchant capital ventures like grain trading, fertiliser and seed shops, *kirana* (or grocery) stores, etc. These households are likely to withdraw from the use of family labour on the farm, and are among the most well-off in the village. Others, predominantly *ahirs* and *brahmins*, can secure coveted jobs in the public sector, whether in the army, the electricity department, the police, etc., while continuing to cultivate the family farm through a combination of family and hired labour. Once diversified, landowners cease consistent investments in agriculture.

Using agricultural surpluses to 'invest' in education, from local private schools to postgraduate programmes in nearby cities, as well as knowledge and social connections cemented over generations of access to public sector employment, dominant caste landowners dominate the pathways into secure, non-agricultural livelihoods, though not all make the shift successfully. Many are not able to secure formal wage employment in the public sector or in offices and factories of the nearby industrial belt. Some tried their hand at the work in factories but returned to cultivation because it offered a better livelihood. Landownership serves as a failsafe against the most precarious and low-paid wage work.

Dominant caste landowners who continue to invest in agriculture and produce on an expanded scale are those who have not yet established pathways into formal employment or petty businesses. Their incomes are lower than those of the first two groups, and their surpluses in agriculture depend at least in part on the intensive use of unpaid family labour. These households may be agents of capitalist development, but their continued reliance on unpaid family labour and relatively worse economic position indicate that agrarian surpluses will eventually be diverted to non-agrarian ends, and so the tendencies for capitalist accumulation within agriculture are limited.

Landless Dalit households on the other hand, who have neither the investible surpluses from cultivation nor the social networks of upper castes, are precluded from access to formal employment. Engaged primarily in precarious daily wage work in agriculture and construction, the few instances of self-employment are confined to petty commodity production with very small asset bases (as street hawkers, seamstresses, etc.). The limits of formal job creation are more tangible for Dalit households. Access to basic foodstuffs through the Public Distribution System (PDS) is critical for several Dalit households.

However, even this limited access to non-agricultural employment and PDS is resented by dominant caste landowners. Shorn of centuries-long assured access to the labour of Dalits, dominant castes lament that Dalits "don't want to work anymore because they get rations from the government". When they do work, "they ask for too much". When asked why cultivators prefer to hire migrant workers, one *ahir* landowner said that daily wage workers come in at 930 a.m., take an hour-long lunch break and a tea break, and leave promptly at 530 p.m. Migrant workers, on the other hand, work till late in the night.

Contradictions

Indian agriculture is riven by several contradictions. At the macro policy level, it is the inability of the State to successfully support petty commodity producers in the adoption of regionally-differentiated Green Revolution techniques, while maintaining existing political support and subsidy structures that are limited to a few regions. At the village level, it is hierarchies in the ownership of land, access to credit and marketing, and ability to transform agrarian surpluses into pathways in non-agricultural employment that create gradations among the agrarian population. These latter gradations are as much a result of the incomplete structural transformation of the Indian economy which has failed to generate sufficient formal employment; as they are of historical, regionally differentiated caste hierarchies. All these divisions were visible in the 2020-21 farmers' protests as well.

While it is true that the period of reforms has generated a further divide between rural and urban, and agriculture and non-agriculture, the graded hierarchies

within agriculture shape unequal access to urban and non-agricultural opportunities. In consequence, agrarian economic but also political interests are diversified into multiple sectors and spaces. This results in complicated political expressions that are not easy to classify.

For instance, Sangli lies close to National Highway 8, where one of the three big protest sites of the 2020-21 farmers' protests was established. However, barely any farmers from Sangli or the entire Southern Haryana region participated in the farmers' protests, which were instead composed of farmers' groups from Punjab, Northern Haryana, Madhya Pradesh, and other parts of the country.

Instead, when in 2022 the Modi government announced a new policy called the Agnipath scheme which jeopardised long-term hiring into the Indian army (one of the primary sources of formal, secure employment for dominant caste households in Sangli and in Southern Haryana), there was swift, organised, and persistent political action by the dominant caste agrarian households of Sangli and its surrounding regions.[xv]

This reflects that while the connection to land remains strong, cultivation, and the politics of cultivation, may not be the mainstay for large sections of the agrarian population. These changes demand new prisms to understand the contradictions within and beyond Indian agriculture.

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Notes

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[ii] For an overview of the three Farm Laws see: Javaid, Arfa. (2021). "Farm Laws 2020 Explained: Everything you need to know about the new agriculture reforms in India". *Jagran Josh* (19 November). Available at https://www.jagranjosh.com/general-knowledge/farm-bills-indian-farm-reforms-2020-1606901455-1

[iii] This section draws from my paper "From Bargain Sector to By-passed Sector: Phases of the Classic Agrarian Question in India" which is part of my dissertation [Yadav, S. (2021). *The Agrarian Question in India: Past, Present, Future* (Doctoral dissertation). New York: The New School for Social Research].

[iv] See my review [Yadav, Srishti. (2023). "Technological Optimism, Fiscal Conservatism". *Economic and Political Weekly*, 58(17): 44-46] of *Indian Agriculture Towards 2030: Pathways for Enhancing Farmers' Income, Nutritional Security and Sustainable Food and Farm Systems*, produced by the Niti Aayog (the government's policy advisory body), the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), as well as the Indian Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers' Welfare. This volume is presented as the roadmap for the future of Indian agriculture, and largely takes as given fiscal conservatism and the necessity of bringing private capital on board in agriculture.

[v] *NDTV*. (2022). "BJP received 94% of corporate donations by 4 parties in 5 years: Report" (20 November). Available at: https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/bjp-received-94-of-corporate-donations-by-4-parties-in-5-years-report-3560898

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[ix] Name changed to protect the anonymity of respondents.

[x] This and the next two sections borrow heavily from Yadav, Srishti. (2022). "Caste, diversification, and the contemporary agrarian question in India: A field perspective". *Journal of Agrarian Change*, 22(4): 651-672.

[xi] Athreya, Venkatesh, Gustav Böklin, Göran Djurfeldt, and Staffan Lindberg. (1987). "Identification of agrarian classes: a methodological essay with empirical material from South India". *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 14(2): 147-190.

[xii] Patnaik, Utsa. (1987). *Peasant class differentiation: A study in method with reference to Haryana*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

[xiii] Men from *avarna* ('outside caste categories') landless households who primarily work as agricultural labour prefer daily wage contracts, though often *avarna* families or groups of *avarna* women also undertake labour operations on piece-rated contracts, often in kind—the aim is to work in return for food grains (wheat, pearl millet, and crop by-product for milch animals), a practice reminiscent of *jajmani* arrangements except that *avarna* workers can choose their employer—something that irked several *savarna* ('within caste categories') respondents during field interviews.

[xiv] Originally a measure of the extent of labour hiring relative to family labour employed, measured in labour days, I employ a monetary variant of Patnaik's E-Ratio:

$$E = \frac{LC - ALI}{FL \times 400}$$

where LC is total hired labour costs, ALI is total income from agricultural labour, and FL is family labour days employed on own farm. FL is multiplied by 400 because INR400 was the going daily wage rate in Sangli at the time, and so serves as the opportunity cost of family labour.

[xv] Behl, Abishek. (2022). "Agnipath: Protests erupt in Gurugram, Rewari, Palwal against government". *Hindustan Times* (17 June). Available at https://www.hindustantimes.com/cities/gurugram-news/agnipath-protests-erupt-in-gurugram-rewari-palwal-against-government-101655405300374.html

Repatriation and Reparation: Objects and the Colonial Museum

Lara Wijesuriya

In 1934, the Duke of Gloucester paid a State visit to Ceylon, bringing with him the throne and regalia of Sri Wickrama Rajasinghe, the last king of Kandy. The return of the throne, which had been taken to Britain when Kandy was conquered in 1815, was a major attraction – instead of the planned three days, it was kept in Kandy for a full month to allow crowds to view it. Almost 50,000 people visited the National Museum over three days when the throne was brought to Colombo, necessitating the closing of roads to vehicles.

During the preparations for the handover, the ceremonial Kandyan chiefs decided they should be the ones to receive the throne, since it was from them that it had been removed a century before. This was backed by the chief prelates of the Malwatte and Asgiriya chapters, who also insisted on their former place of honour being restored to them. The throne was referred to as "national property".

The arguments produced by the Mahanayaka *theros* draw very much on the perceived national significance of these objects. They also emphasised the fact that the throne should be returned to the chiefs from whom it was taken; whereas the British themselves had the idea of handing it to 'the people', represented by the (British) Governor of Ceylon.

The throne today occupies pride of place in the Kandy Gallery of the Colombo National Museum, where thousands of school children are told that it symbolises a national cultural heritage.

This elevation of an object to a place of national significance should be more complicated; the throne was, after all, a diplomatic gift from the Dutch Governor Thomas van Rhee to King Vimaladharmasuriya II[i], and contains many non-traditional motifs. The fact that the British considered it important enough to carry away, however, made its subsequent return of symbolic significance[ii].

Unfortunately, this symbolism is all too often restricted to a sense of nationalist pride in opposition to colonial decisions.

The museum, the map, and the census were important tools of colonialism. These three institutions, taken together, allowed colonial administrators to imagine the colony as a limited entity with clear categories, boundaries, and components.

The idea of collecting objects, housing them, and exhibiting them together was not a new concept, but prior to the 19th century this practice was largely confined to objects of religious importance – and most importantly, the objects, although respected and protected, were part of human ritual. The 19th century practice of museumising the colony brought a new element; in that museum objects were meant to be exhibited only, removed from human contact.

With the advent of nationalism, the museum was co-opted into the project of creating a national imaginary. Museum objects were recast as symbols of glorious (and independent) pasts, forcing a selective and falsely coherent imagined past on visitors and viewers.

In 2022, after years of research, the government of the Netherlands announced that it would be returning several objects[iii] in museum collections to their lands of origin. Among these are six objects looted from Sri Lanka[iv] during the Dutch colonial occupation. Their proposed return added fuel to the argument that already existed about the repatriation of museum objects.

A glance at the newspapers shows two major arguments about the return of such objects: that the colonial powers who occupied this country can make reparations by sending some objects back; and against the return, that our museum sector is not developed and funded enough to ensure the safety of the objects.

Since the objects have already been signed over, the second argument is a little beside the point – whether or not they will be safe here, the objects are coming back. I will therefore consider only the first argument: that the repatriation of objects is a form of reparation for colonial harm.

Sri Lanka was colonised by the Portuguese, Dutch, and British in that sequence, gaining independence in 1948. In part due to the structures of colonialism and the demands of nationalism which arose counter to these, post-independence history has not been peaceful.

The internal war which raged along political, linguistic, and ethnic divides, the armed uprisings of the 1970s and 1980s, and the many religious and ethnic riots and pogroms from the 1950s up to most recently in 2019, found parallels in conflicts in other newly-independent States.

The communal divisions cemented in the museum's portrayal of the past have grown deeper and deeper. The singular focus on colonialism, however, has allowed many people to conveniently ignore any and all other contributors to Sri Lanka's current problems and divisions.

The anti-colonial sentiment that has stirred again, since the announcement of the objects' return, is premised on the fact that a wrong has been done to us and the wrongdoers need to make amends for it. European museums have stolen other countries' artefacts, the received wisdom goes. Those museums are symbols of everything bad about colonialism.

But this year, while looking for objects for a proposed exhibition on the Malaiyaha Tamil community[v], I found that the Colombo National Museum had nothing apart from a few copies of the Ceylon Workers' Congress (CWC) newsletter. This speaks of a hierarchy in museum representation where certain groups are given more space and exposure than others. What does that tell us about the colonial power structures within the museum itself?

If the museum represents an imagined national past, by excluding some communities it is sending a very clear message to them: you do not have a place in this nation. We inherited the museum from our former colonisers; but that does not mean that we are under obligation to run it along the same lines they did. The national imagination can expand and grow to encompass everyone who is here today, regardless of when, and from where, they arrived.

Contemporary discussion of the repatriation of museum objects to Sri Lanka today make reference to objects taken to Europe: Lewke Disave's cannon (pictured above), the statue of Goddess Tara[vi], the throne, and more. One will hear about the University of Edinburgh's return of Veddha skulls in 2019[vii], after a protracted debate about the ethics of having human remains on display.

Yet the Colombo National Museum, having remained sheltered from such debates, still displays Veddha skulls obtained in the 1920s. Objects which can be used to tell a different story are displayed in the context of a constructed ethno-nationalist heritage.

The discussion about colonialism in the museum needs to be turned inwards, to our own museums, before it is turned to foreign museums.

The dominant conversation around the repatriation of objects takes agency away from the former colonised. Shifting the blame to the colonising countries allows us to criticise European colonialist attitudes comfortably, without having to think about our own practices of injustice and oppression. At the same time, it turns the spotlight of the conversation back on the same practices and actors that we are supposedly opposed to, giving them undeserved power over us.

The physical return of the six objects, then, should not mark an end to their discussion in the reparations debate. Instead, the artefacts should spark more discussion, more research, and more complicated understanding of colonialism, within and without the museum.

Lara Wijesuriya *is a historian and researcher, interested in maritime history and museum objects. This article was written out of her experiences during an internship at the Colombo National Museum.*

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The Cannon and the Cranium: Towards a Wider Agenda for Reparatory Justice in Sri Lanka

Andi Schubert

Lara Wijesuriya's excellent recent essay is a wonderful invitation for further conversation about the politics of repatriation and the role of museums, archives, and the labour that underpins them in the national imaginaries.

Wijesuriya cites in passing Nira Wickramasinghe's essay on the return of Keppetipola's cranium.[i] In that essay, Wickramasinghe makes an important argument for how the framing of "Kandyan things as authentic" by British colonial authorities was embedded in the grammar of the postcolonial nation-state. In the nearly 30 years since Wickramasinghe's essay, the argument about the relationship between Kandy and imaginations of authentic pasts and cultural practice has only grown.[ii]

Wijesuriya's essay invites us to consider the complicated status of objects within the national imaginary. It made me wonder whether Keppetipola's cranium and Lewke's cannon now share the same status as holders of a nationalist imaginary. Both are after all 'relics' from the Kandyan Kingdom, and like the cranium, the cannon is also tied to lost struggles against European colonisers.[iii] Located then in the grammar of loss and defeat, why, we might ask, do all 'Kandyan things' not get positioned as equally crucial to a postcolonial nationalist imaginary? Or, to put it pithily, what makes some 'things' more canonical than others?

Perhaps one answer could be to consider the bodily status of the 'things' themselves. Crania, as Wickramasinghe points out, are centrally positioned in the now widely disproved ethnological 'sciences' that sought to use physical measurements to make claims about the status of communities, and in particular their relation to European bodies. In contrast to the 'embodiedness' of the cranium, does the cannon's status as an object of either war or patronage make it more difficult to position it within the practices of colonial and/or postcolonial knowledge production? Or is it, perhaps, the conjunctural moments that shape attitudes towards 'things', animating their epistemological status and shaping their reception and use? I find myself drawn to the latter provocation; and one I want to discuss briefly here as a means of furthering the conversation Wijesuriya has initiated.

The repatriation from the Rijksmuseum of the cannon, and other objects looted during colonial times, can and should be recognised as part of a larger conversation[iv] that is currently gaining ground in Europe and elsewhere about the status of objects held by museums and galleries and the accountability of the institutions that hold them. In the United Kingdom (UK) for instance, the recent discovery that at least 1500 items in the British Museum's Collections had been quietly stolen and sold by staff[v] has renewed calls for the repatriation of items in the collection.[vi] More recently, this may also have caused a diplomatic spat between the UK and Greece.[vii] In a related vein, a powerful exhibition[viii] at the University of Cambridge's Fitzwilliam Museum focuses on how the University's collection of colonial objects contributed to furthering the enslavement of people in the Caribbean and Americas in particular, and the creative ways people then and today have sought to challenge these legacies of enslavement.

At the heart of these kinds of conversations in Europe, is an awareness that these 'things' highlight the interconnected webs of capital, colonialism, power, and knowledge that have deepened conversations about institutional and personal (particularly familial) responsibility for profiting off the enslavement and indenture of people around the world. This is one way to contextualise the repatriation of the items from the Rijksmuseum within the conjunctural moment that is shaping the priorities and actions of many European cultural institutions today.

But simply because this conversation is happening on these lines in Europe does not mean that the conversations in spaces like Sri Lanka need to follow the same pattern. Indeed, the conversations in Sri Lanka[ix] around these objects have certainly begun. But there is always space for more. And maybe one of these threads is to contrast the reception of Keppetipola's cranium and Lewke's cannon; and ask if there is space for us to have a broader conversation about the continuing legacies of colonial rule in Sri Lanka, without falling prey to the suffocating grasp of nationalist imaginations.

One way to pursue this is to engage with a broader world of formerly colonised spaces that are raising new and important questions about how to contend with these legacies. One example of this might be the interesting work taking place around reparations in the Caribbean where CARICOM, the inter-governmental association of former British, Dutch, French, and Spanish colonies, has developed a comprehensive 10-point plan for reparative justice[x] that recognises reparatory justice not simply as monetary reparation or debt cancellation but as a broader network of practices that address the layered legacies of colonial rule in the Caribbean. And given that Sri Lanka continues to look to South Africa as a model for transitional justice, it may be good to engage with the concept of *ubuntu* in a more holistic sense; not simply to include amnesty for perpetrators, but to engage in a more meaningful process of recognising, upholding, and promoting the personhood of those who have been wronged.

Drawing on these developments, we might pursue Wijesuriya's point further and ask what reparatory justice for the *Malaiyaha* communities in Sri Lanka may look like over and beyond the mere presence or absence of their representation in the National Museum. For example, if we follow CARICOM's cue and keeping in mind the submissions made by members of the *Malaiyaha* community on transitional justice to the Consultation Task Force on Reconciliation Mechanisms,[xii] would there be scope for demands that the United Kingdom and the Sri Lankan State both of whom profited and continue to profit from the labour of the community invest significantly in transforming their educational and health infrastructure?

And if so, how might this affect other communities in the island, particular in a context of an economic crisis and deep cuts to (and one could even suggest, deliberate sabotage of) meaningful State funding for education and health? These questions are raised as examples of why a concern for reparatory justice can and should have implications far beyond the glass cases of the National Museum. The point being that while repatriation is not the same as reparation, thinking of these practices in conversation enables us to recognise and engage with the repatriation of objects as part of a wider reparatory agenda, one that has implications for all communities in Sri Lanka.

This is just one potential opening but one that foregrounds the possibilities of broader networks of solidarity, learning, engagement, and movement building for justice and accountability that is not only directed towards former European colonial powers but also at ourselves as the willing conscripts of coloniality and its ordering of communal relationships in our countries.

This approach would, I believe, open a range of options for thinking about the legacies of Sri Lanka's colonial encounters without being trapped into an endless loop of nationalistic nostalgia and anxiety. If Keppetipola's cranium represents the latter tendency, there may perhaps now be space to engage with this and other objects like Lewke's cannon on different terms, one that not only appreciates the value of its repatriation but also sheds light on the problematics of caste, exploitation, kinship, exclusion, and power, that like European colonialism, continue to be part and parcel of our realities today. The cannon and the cranium should then invite us to a broader conversation, one that Wijesuriya's essay has helpfully nudged us towards.

Acknowledgements

I want to thank Nigel Nugawela for his insightful comments on an early draft of this essay. All shortcomings, however, remain my own.

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

B. Skanthakumar

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"[v], said the Central Bank. Over 20% of government revenue[vi] 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"[vii]. 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"[viii].

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"[ix]. 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"[x].

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"[xi].

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"[xii].

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.[xiii]

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."[xvi]

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."[xvii]

A Brake on the Masses?

Since the 'Great *Hartal*' (to distinguish it from the many *hartal*s 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 baulked 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.

***B. Skanthakumar** is co-editor of* Pathways of the Left in Sri Lanka *(2014, Colombo: Ecumenical Institute for Study and Dialogue).*

Notes

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[iii] Skanthakumar, Balasingham. (2022a). "Sri Lanka's Crisis is Endgame for Rajapaksas". *International Viewpoint* (Paris) (13 July). Available at https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article7739

[iv] Goonewardene, Leslie. (1960). *A Short History of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party*. Colombo: Lanka Sama Samaja Party, p. 46. Available at https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/writers/goonewardene/1960/lssp.htm

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[vi] Wriggins, W. Howard. (1960). *Ceylon: Dilemmas of a New Nation*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, p. 289.

[vii] International Bank for Reconstruction and Development. (1953). *The Economic Development of Ceylon*. Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, p. 185.

[viii] *Ibid.*, p. 89.

[ix] Lakshman, W. D. (1985). "The IMF-World Bank Intervention in Sri Lankan Economic Policy: Historical Trends and Patterns", *Social Scientist* (New Delhi), 13(2): 3-29, p. 7. Also, in David Dunham and Charles Abeysekera (eds.) (1987). *Essays on the Sri Lankan Economy, 1977-83* (54-95). Colombo: Social Scientists' Association.

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[xi] Keuneman, Pieter. (1968). *25 Years of the Ceylon Communist Party*. Colombo: People's Publishing House, p. 54-55.

[xii] *Ibid.*, p. 55.

[xiii] Wanasinghe, Sydney. (1980). "The Hartal of August 1953", *Young Socialist* (Colombo), New Series, No. 2 (June), p. 23-24.

[xiv] Editorial. (1953). "With the Masses – Into Action", *Samasamajist* (Colombo), date unknown, July. Reprinted in Wesley S. Muthiah and Sydney Wanasinghe (eds.) (2002). *We Were Making History: Saga of the Hartal of August 1953*. Colombo: Young Socialist Publication, p. 8.

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

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

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

[xviii] Abhayavardhana, Hector. (1977). "The Hartal and Our Critics", *Socialist Nation* (Colombo), August 1977; also, in Hector Abhayavardhana. (2001). *Selected Writings*, Colombo: Social Scientists' Association, p. 259.

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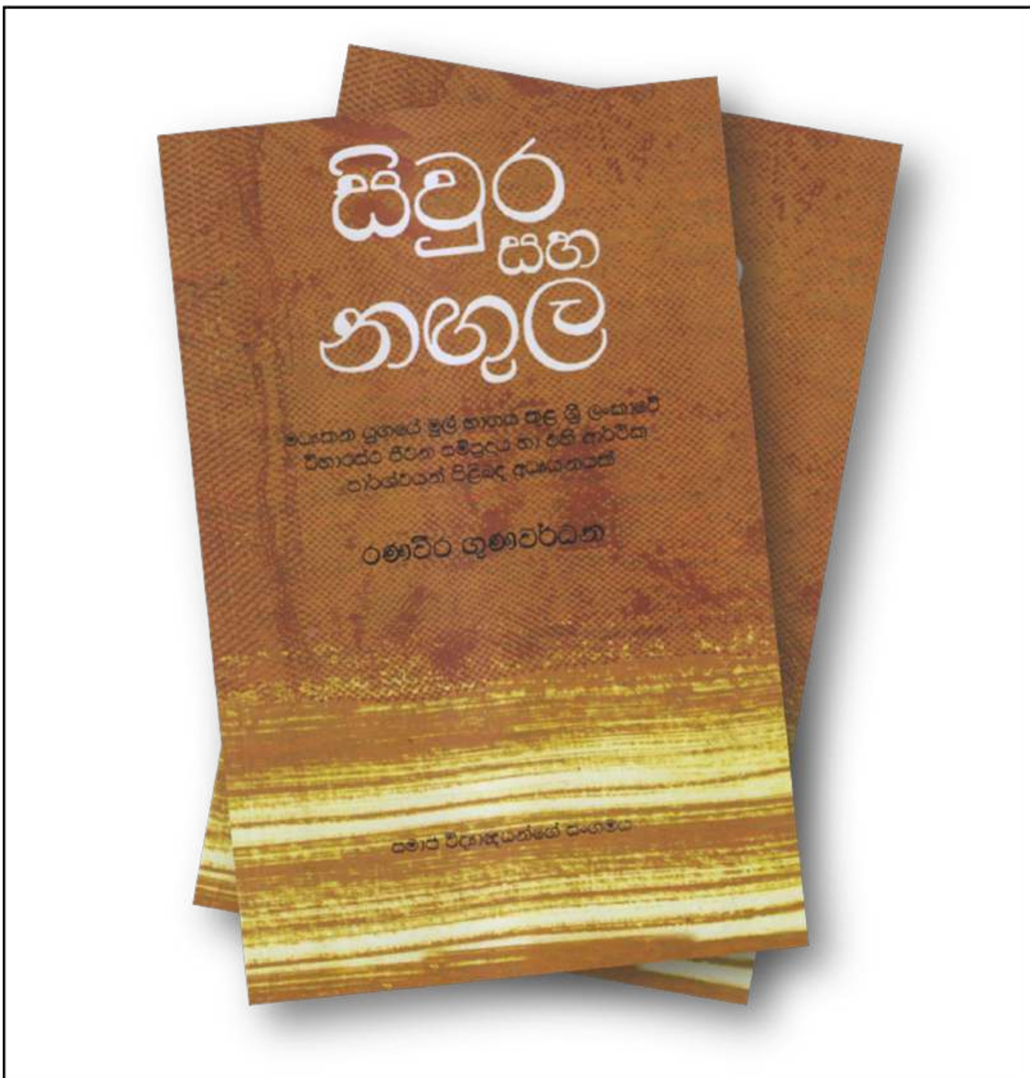
[xxiv] Uyangoda, Jayadeva. (2023). 'The Lanka Sama Samaja Party', In Marcel Van Der Linden (ed.). *The Cambridge History of Socialism Volume II*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 435-454.



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.

A Hundred Years of Pauline and C. R. (Dick) Hensman

Rohini Hensman

The birth anniversaries of Pauline Hensman (née Swan) and Dick Hensman occurred over the course of the past year. This attempt to provide an overview of their life and times will inevitably suffer from gaps, since neither they nor most of their contemporaries are alive. It will, therefore, have to draw on the imperfect memories of their children and younger friends, who would have to rely on hearsay for the parts of their lives from which they were absent. Nevertheless, the main events and themes of their lives emerge quite clearly.

Early Years

Pauline Beatrice Swan was born on 1 December 1922 in Colombo. Her father James Swan had worked his way up from the lowest grade to become a foreman in the railway workshop at Maradana, and the family lived in quarters allocated to the workers. Despite being from the Burgher community, which had European ancestry and was considered to be close to the British, he – like other 'natives' – was barred from being promoted to a higher post than foreman. From him, she seems to have

inherited a sympathy for workers' struggles and hostility to British rule, because among her most vivid childhood memories was the tramway strike of 1929, which was supported by the railway workers.

Her mother Erin looked after the household and cared for Pauline, her elder sister Rosine, and younger brother Edward. Their income covered only basic necessities, and Pauline had memories of creeping through the fence with Rosine and Edward to get to the office of the workshop in order to dance and sing to the amused clerical staff in return for paper and pencils. Erin always helped neighbours in whatever way she could; her support for a neighbour suffering domestic violence from her husband almost had a fatal outcome when the man broke into their home and attacked Erin with a knife. Pauline had the courage and presence of mind to bite the man so hard that he was forced to back off, thus saving her mother's life. She inherited from Erin a strong belief in gender justice as well as a love of children.

Tragedy struck while the children were still in school, when their father developed throat cancer and died after a period of dreadful suffering which traumatised the entire family. Erin had to move out of the railway quarters and began living in Bambalapitiya with her children and sister Gladys. Her meagre pension had to be supplemented by the work both women did as seamstresses. Pauline completed her schooling and went on to get a degree at the Colombo campus of the University of Ceylon.

Charles Richard Jeevaratnam Hensman was born on 17 March 1923 in Nallur, Jaffna, to Noah Thirunesan Hensman and his wife Louise. When he was a small boy, his father was recruited as a supervisor in a plantation in Malaya and the family moved there. Noah was good at his job and was promoted to become the *de facto* manager although the top manager had to be British. But he was also a male chauvinist who wanted a stay-at-home wife. Louise, an extraordinarily courageous woman, had trained as a nurse and wanted to work as one. So, she left him and went to stay with her sister Mercy and brother-in-law Navam, who were already living in Malaya. She unofficially adopted an older boy, Peter Raymond, and paid for his education in return for his help in caring for Dick when she was at work, for example on night shifts. As he grew up, Dick had other companions too – his girl cousins, who were more like sisters.

Louise was opposed to British rule, but the Japanese occupation seemed worse. In the middle of the war, Dick made the journey to Colombo to pursue his higher education. Joining the university somewhat later than Pauline, he got involved with the Student Christian Movement (SCM), which was affiliated to the World Student Christian Federation (WSCF) and dedicated to motivating students to work for social justice and sustainable development. In order to do so, they needed a good understanding of economic and political systems and processes, and the SCM ran seminars and other activities to provide this. The connection remained a strong one even after Dick got his degree. In the meantime, he had to support himself, and did so by providing tuition to schoolchildren. One of them was Edward Swan, whose family attended the same church in Bambalapitiya that he went to. And that was how he met Pauline.

Drawn together by their shared love of literature and belief in what would come to be called Christian socialism or liberation theology – faith in a God who wants followers to struggle against class, caste, gender, ethnic, religious, national, and all other forms of oppression, and to work for a world ruled by justice, freedom, equality, and love – they fell in love with each other and decided to get married. However, relatives on both sides had objections to this inter-racial marriage. Dick's family in Malaya disapproved so strongly that they sent Navam to talk to Erin and persuade her not to allow Pauline to go ahead with it. Paradoxically, that had the opposite effect on Erin, who told him that Pauline made her own decisions and she had no control over them. When Dick got to know what happened, he was furious with his family, as they no doubt knew he would be! Fortunately, both sides reconciled themselves to the match, and the wedding took place on 10 April 1947.

From Marriage to Flight

Dick and Pauline were teaching at Dharmarajah College, Kandy, for some time after getting married, but moved to Colombo before the birth of their first child, Rohini, in August 1948. Erin had converted her garage into a bedroom for them, and they stayed there until after the birth of their second child – Lakshman James, better known as Jimmy or Jim – in March 1950. By then this temporary shelter was becoming rather cramped, so they rented a small house in Mount Lavinia, at that time little more than a fishing village with no running water or sewage connections and frequent power cuts. After retirement, Louise came to stay with them. Pauline found herself providing advice and treatment for minor medical problems and tuition for children in the neighbourhood, all *gratis*. Menike was employed to help look after the children, especially Jim, when their parents were at work, and quickly became part of their extended non-biological family, as did her son Nimal.

After a few short-term teaching jobs, Pauline settled down at Bishop's College and Dick at St. Thomas's College (Mount Lavinia), both teaching English to older children, especially Advanced Level students. Their teaching methods are best described by their former students. Here is an extract from a tribute by Rukmini Attygalle, née Samarakkody:

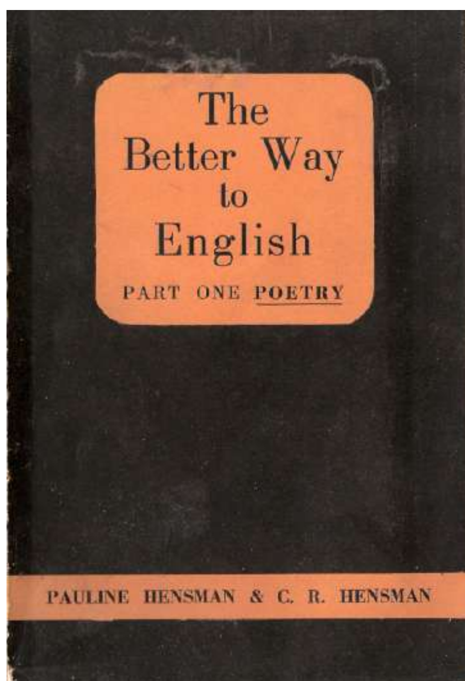
> I first came to know Pauline at age 15, at Bishop's College, when she was my English teacher. Before I came to her class, I was perhaps the worst student in English because my spelling was atrocious. The previous teacher took pleasure in ridiculing my spelling. She would read my essay, stopping at each misspelt word, and ask those who knew the correct spelling to put their hands up. All the hands would go up and I would sit there at the back of the class feeling ever so foolish. As the teacher deducted marks for wrong spelling, I never got more than four marks out of ten! I used to dread the English classes, and I absolutely hated the subject.
>
> I remember very well my first English lesson with Pauline. She gave us each a sheet of paper with a short extract from Christopher Marlowe's Dr Faustus, and gave us a short synopsis of the poem. She asked us to read the extract carefully – several times if necessary – and write down what we thought of it. This was our first attempt at critical evaluation. I found this extract strangely fascinating. I wrote my essay – of course with my habitual wrong spelling.
>
> The next day Pauline came into the classroom carrying our exercise books. She kept three books on her desk and handed out the rest. Since I did not get my book back, I knew what I was in for. I was glad that there were two others besides me to face the music.
>
> Then she said that although a few of us had not quite understood the poem, she was generally pleased with our submissions. She was particularly impressed with three essays, and she was going to read them to the class. The one she happened to pick up first was mine. It was a strange experience – from being at the bottom of the class, and the subject of ridicule, to be told that your essay was one of the best was really incredible!
>
> When I got my book back, of course I saw all the spelling mistakes underlined in red, and the correct spellings written down at the bottom of the page. But I also saw interspersed here and there several ticks with "good" written beside them. She hadn't deducted marks for bad spelling and had given me eight out of ten! That was a real boost to my confidence.
>
> Pauline never ridiculed a child in front of the class. She was always tactful and encouraging. If she found that a student had a problem, she would discuss it privately. She was rather strict of course. She would simply give marching orders to anyone who tried to disrupt her class. She was a person who showed respect to others, and this included her students. And of course, in return, we all respected her immensely. What was very valuable to me personally was that she taught me to respect myself.
>
> Pauline used English literature as a vehicle through which to teach us about life itself. By discussing and analysing characters and situations that appeared in fiction, she taught us what is important in life and what is not. She did not believe in spoon feeding. She asked us questions continually, and by doing so she made us think for ourselves.
>
> As adolescents we were at an impressionable age. We soon learned that wealth, power, physical beauty, outward appearances, etc. were in themselves not important. What really mattered in life were honesty, justice, consideration for others, love, and compassion. She awakened in us a social consciousness. She made us think about the less advantaged, the under-dog. She inculcated in us a sound sense of values which has helped us in life. As a student I looked up to her as a mentor.
>
> No female member in my family had been to university, and in keeping with this tradition, I was not expected to go either. Pauline was most unhappy when she learned this. Together with a couple of other teachers, she persuaded my mother to let me go on to higher education. I am very grateful that she enabled me to go to university.

Here is an extract from a tribute to Dick by Thiru Kandiah:

> I first met Mr. Hensman when he taught me English Literature in the university entrance classes at St. Thomas' College, Mt. Lavinia (1954). No doubt all of us human beings, as we move into life from the uncertainties of our beginnings, are fortunate to encounter people who, by the positive influence they exert on our lives, set us on the way to whom we might eventually become at our best. But, in the case of those of us who are the most fortunate, among the people we meet thus is someone who is so special, so very rare, that as he or she grows into our lives, the encounter takes on far deeper and more fulfilling layers of meaning. To me, Mr. Hensman was one such person.
>
> My parents had told me that according to my horoscope I was going to be a lawyer; and, as far as I was concerned, that was all there was to it – lawyer I was going to be. I am now 70, and law is yet as remote from me as it was when my horoscope was cast around the time of my birth.
>
> And that is because Mr. Hensman changed all that, irrevocably. For some reason, he felt that I had potential to be something other than the nondescript and unpromising person I appeared destined to be, and took me in hand, encouraging me with my English studies. He never tried to dissuade me from doing law; he had too much respect for the individual and his/her mind and commitments ever to interfere gratuitously in such matters. But when one day he found out what I had been planning to study in university, he asked me, in a kindly, completely non-coercive way, to consider whether it might not be useful to think of doing something more general in the way of studies *before* I went into a narrower specialty.

> So much did I, like my fellow students, respect and admire him as a teacher that all he had to do was to ask the question, and my mind was immediately made up – I was going to do English. During the rest of the period he taught me in school, he greatly encouraged my interest in this subject to which he knew by then I had committed myself. And so, English Studies became what the rest of my studies and my professional work have been all about. My entire academic and professional career has, then, been something that I owe to him.

Several points stand out. By contrast with dominant South Asian traditions, which demand that pupils respect their teachers but not *vice versa*, Pauline and Dick respected their pupils and indeed taught them self-respect and self-confidence. Their teaching method was the opposite of rote-learning, constantly asking their students to think critically. Their lessons went beyond the classroom into the wider world, introducing pupils to universal moral values. And they gently encouraged their students to discover a self-fulfilling pathway for themselves rather than having their lives determined by gender or horoscopes. It is no surprise that many of these former pupils – among the best-known being Yasmine Gooneratne and Senake Bandaranayake – became lifelong friends of Pauline and Dick, who also tried to popularise their teaching methods by working on and publishing a two-part book entitled *The Better Way to English*.



Teaching was Pauline's calling, her preferred way of making the world a more just and humane place, but Dick needed a wider canvas. Both fervently supported anti-colonial and anti-imperialist struggles worldwide, but finding a pathway to democracy and social justice was an additional task.

This is what led Dick to inaugurate the Community Institute. It was defined as "an independent, non-profit, non-partisan organisation" with its "membership open to persons normally resident in Ceylon who are committed to its objectives, irrespective of nationality, community, religion, language or political affiliations". Its objectives were "To initiate and stimulate discussion and research with a view to understanding and discovering solutions for basic political, economic, social and cultural problems, with particular reference to Ceylon … To provide an opportunity for the mutual confrontation of political and social ideologies, policies and attitudes, so that sectarian approaches may be replaced by a fuller understanding of the needs and the interests of the whole community. To organise a library and publish a journal; to arrange seminars and lectures, … to publish educational works in Sinhalese, Tamil and English."

It is worth looking closely at this description, because it suggests a reason why Dick and Pauline, despite expressing strong anti-capitalist sentiments and having volumes by Marx, Engels, Lenin, Trotsky, and Isaac Deutscher on their bookshelves, were not in the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), at that time affiliated to the Fourth International: scepticism that any party had enough contact with the diverse working people of the country or sufficient knowledge of their economic, political, social, and cultural problems to be able to tackle them effectively. Carrying out research and bringing together different views, Dick thought, would allow a fuller understanding to emerge.

The first issue of the journal *Community*, with Dick as editor, came out in April 1954. Two subsequent issues were: *The Role of the Western-educated Elite* and *National Planning: Schools for the Nation*. Wishing to concentrate on the Institute, Dick resigned from his teaching post, spending some time on a fellowship at Yale and lecturing part-time after returning. Pauline and a circle of friends and comrades contributed to the work, and subscribers helped to fund the magazine.

When the Official Language Act (1956) made Sinhala the only official language and peaceful Tamil protesters were attacked by mobs with the complicity of the police,

Dick and Pauline decided to stay on and fight. But the anti-Tamil pogroms of 1958 changed all that. As the violence spread, their friends knew how vulnerable they were as an isolated Tamil family in an almost exclusively Sinhalese neighbourhood. On the morning of 27 May, they received an offer of shelter at the home of Yasmine's parents, but Pauline and Dick refused to go. Instead, as Menike insisted that they leave because mobs were heading that way, they packed off Louise, Rohini, and Jimmy with a Sinhalese neighbour in a taxi to Erin's place and started making Molotov cocktails to defend themselves. Frantic, Menike threatened to take her own life unless they abandoned their mad plan, and finally convinced them to accept Yasmine's parents' offer and a lift from another Sinhalese neighbour to get there.

Pauline and Dick were shaken by the thought that their children's lives had been in danger. When they were reunited with the children, it was in an apartment in Kollupitiya, and when they next went to Mount Lavinia, it was to pack up their belongings. Soon they were heading by ship to London. Louise had joined the exodus of Tamils from the South to Jaffna.

Back and Forth

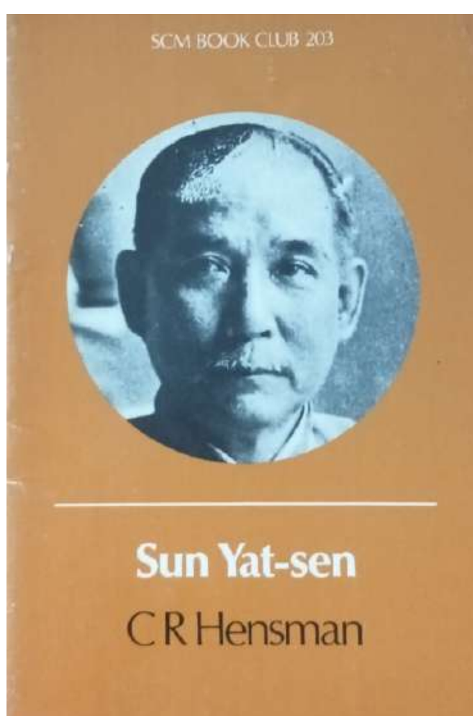
Once they had found a landlord willing to rent out a flat to them, Pauline and Dick started looking for employment. Pauline, after working as a supply teacher, found a permanent post at a girls' grammar school in East London, at that time attended mainly by white working-class children. Dick got a job at Church House, the headquarters of the Church of England, researching and advising the church about what was happening in the Third World.

But they still craved to return to Ceylon; and when they found that the country was not in immediate danger of descending into civil strife, Dick tried to raise funding for his pet project … and succeeded! In 1961, after a journey in the opposite direction, they used the two-year grant to rent a much bigger house in 1st Chapel Lane, Wellawatte, and restart activities of the 'Community Institute', including the publication of *Community*.

The space was large enough for proper meetings, and heated debates over economic, political, and social policies often extended late into the night. Some of these issues found their way into the journal, which also placed a great deal of emphasis on culture. Thus, the first issue of *Community* to come out after their return to Ceylon was titled *The Public Services and the People*, while the next two issues were devoted to *Ceylonese Writing* in Sinhala, Tamil, and English. Nor were the issues taken up purely domestic; international speakers addressed some of the meetings, and the discussion of bureaucracy drew on the experiences of other countries. It was a period of vibrant activity.

On 5 April 1962 their third child, Savitri, was born. It was not essential for Pauline to return to work, but she continued to teach on a part-time basis out of choice, with Menike, Dick, and Rohini helping to care for the new baby. When the two-year period of the grant expired, Dick had saved enough money to continue working from a smaller place for another year. In 1964, when that ran out and there was no prospect of another grant, he decided to go back to Britain on his own because he needed a bank loan to pay for the rest of the family to follow.

This time perhaps Pauline would have preferred to stay, but gamely fitted in with his plans. After some temporary work, eventually she got a new job teaching primary schoolchildren with special educational needs: a completely new field for her, yet she did so well that she had the children coming to her during lunch breaks begging for extra classes! Dick got employed as a producer in the BBC World Service. It was a prestigious job that satisfied his interest in world affairs, yet he resigned from it in the wake of the 1967 war in which Israel expelled 300,000 Palestinians from their homes and occupied the whole of Palestine, the Sinai Peninsula, and Golan Heights, feeling unable to abide by the BBC's notion of impartiality in reporting on these events.



From that time onwards, Pauline was the primary breadwinner, while Dick focused on writing. *China: Yellow Peril? Red Hope?* (1968) was inspired by the fear of an impending military attack on China by the US, where racist smears combined with anti-communist rhetoric was being used aggressively in the context of China's support for Vietnam in the war. Dick argued that the Chinese revolution was a purely national one, aimed at obtaining freedom from both foreign domination and regressive domestic forces; but then and later there was a failure (shared by Pauline) to acknowledge the lack of democracy under the new regime, its departure from the goal he described as being articulated by Sun Yat-sen in his book of that title (1971). *From Gandhi to Guevara: The Polemics of Revolt* (1969) was an edited collection of writings giving voice to a wide variety of anti-colonial and anti-imperialist activists; *Rich Against Poor: The Reality of Aid* (1971) was an exposure of how developed countries used "aid" to exploit and gain control over Third World countries in a process he characterised as "anti-development".

Return to Sri Lanka

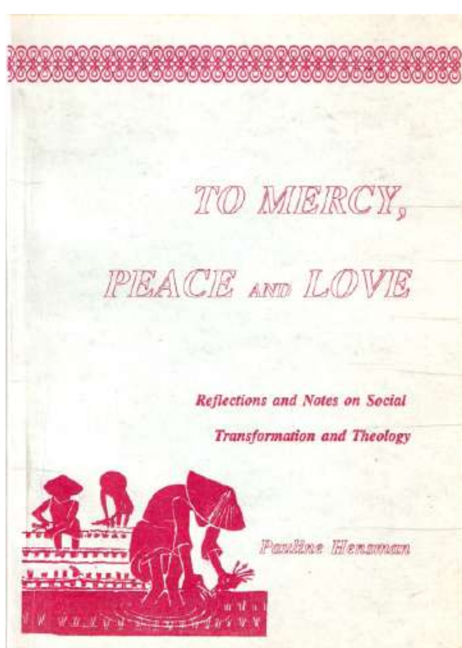
Dick and Pauline never gave up their Sri Lankan citizenship and always intended to return when it was practical to do so. In 1979 they made an exploratory visit, and in 1981, Pauline took early retirement and used the *ex-gratia* payment she received to build a house in their old neighbourhood in Mount Lavinia: the first time they ever owned a home. They stayed with friends while it was being constructed, and in December 1982 hosted a get-together of their children and grandchildren even while Sri Lanka was descending into State terror and civil war. Other close friends and their extended non-biological family were happy to have them back.

On 25 July 1983, a discussion of what to do about the situation had been organised at the Kollupitiya residence of Sanmugathasan of the Ceylon Communist Party (pro-Peking), but when Dick and Pauline turned up in the morning, the three of them were the only ones there. Some instinct made them walk back home along the beach, so they escaped the gruesome bloodshed taking place on Galle Road. Their home was saved by a bureaucratic delay in registration of the property in their name, but Pauline insisted that Dick go to stay with Savitri at their London home for his safety.

While there, he completed *Sri Lanka: The Holocaust and After* (1984) under the pseudonym L. Piyadasa, one of the first publications to document the evidence that the deadly pogroms were State-sponsored. The analysis was continued in a sequel, *Sri Lanka: The Unfinished Quest for Peace* (1987), published following the Indo-Lanka Accord of 1987, and both rejected Tamil Eelam as a solution to the ongoing war.

Dick soon returned, and their home became a venue for resistance to an increasingly totalitarian State. But they also supported the extraordinary work of University Teachers for Human Rights (Jaffna), which combined analysis with documenting human rights violations by all parties, including the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. Meanwhile Pauline resumed her neighbourhood healthcare and teaching role, using innovative materials and methods for teaching English as a Second Language to children and adults.

Dick worked on his historical, theological, and philosophical writings: *Agenda for the Poor: Claiming Their Inheritance* (1990), and *New Beginnings: The Ordering and Designing of the Realm of Freedom, Volume 1: Captivity* (1992), in which he tackled not only issues of national liberation and social justice – but also lesbian and gay rights, to which he and Pauline had been introduced when Savitri came out to them as a lesbian – and protection of the environment. Dick mastered computers and the internet as he continued his research, including extensive work on Volume 2 of *New Beginnings*, which was never completed. He also collected previously unpublished writings in *The Remaking of Humanity* (2000). Pauline, by contrast, did not even type, writing out her articles and talks in her beautiful handwriting, so Dick collected, typed, and got them published as a collection entitled *To Mercy, Peace and Love: Reflections and Notes on Social Transformation and Theology* (1993).



Three themes emerge from these writings. One is the belief that God inspires people of all faiths and none, provided they are struggling for truth, justice, peace, and love. The second is the inextricable connection between spirituality and action in the pursuit of these goals. And the third is the belief that the role of revolutionaries is to equip the poor and oppressed to rule, rather than take power on their behalf.

The Last Years

Rohini, who had settled in India, often stayed with them for extended periods of time and they sometimes visited her and her family there. They also travelled to Britain, spending time with Savi and her partner Vijayatara, Jim's family, and later their grandchildren's families. On one of these visits in 2006, Pauline contracted a hospital infection which almost killed her. After she recovered, although physiotherapy and her own determination enabled her to walk with a frame, she needed day-and-night care, and Dick was her primary carer. The stress and loss of sleep took a toll on his health; he developed atrial fibrillation, resulting in several mini-strokes and then a massive stroke for which he was hospitalised. Unable to speak, he nonetheless conveyed his anxiety that Pauline should be cared for in his absence before slipping into unconsciousness. He died peacefully on 9 July 2008.

Pauline was inconsolable, bemoaning the fact that she did not have any condition which would take her off rapidly. When she was hospitalised with pneumonia in May 2010 and efforts to treat her failed, she insisted on being taken home to the room she had shared with Dick for so long, and died peacefully on the 21st. They had arguments like any couple, but their love for each other never ended. As Anne Abayasekara wrote in a moving tribute, "Pauline and Dick. Dick and Pauline. You couldn't think of one without the other. They were held in high esteem and affection by Sri Lankans of every community, creed and class." Their legacy lives on in the many people they have influenced around the world.

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Abolish Marriage? Kanchuka Dharmasiri's Play 'Surpanakha'

Liyanage Amarakeerthi

The *Ramayana* has many retellings, and there will be more to come. Kanchuka Dharmasiri's new play, *Surpanakha* (2022), is a brilliant retelling of an episode in the South Asian mythical narrative of which Lanka is part of the setting. It has been pointed out that the 'Lanka' of the myth is not the country known as 'Sri Lanka'. But the patriarchal universe that Dharmasiri's play beautifully critiques and deconstructs, certainly includes our contemporary society too.

Surpanakha, the sister of Ravana, wants to ride her brother's coveted flying machine, *Dandumonara,* (literally, 'wooden peacock'). But he does not allow her. At one point, he asks himself and us, "Who am I without that flying machine?" That single line indicates that the mythical aircraft is a symbol of male power more than a machine that flies. His own prowess rests on the machine, and he would not let her even touch it. After all, she is a woman.

All men, arguably, have such an 'object' as their source of power, and they fear it would be stolen by someone, especially by women. This 'object' of power, though it is a flying machine in this story, need not be an 'object' *per se*; it could be something non-material such as an ideology or a piece of knowledge. For Ravana in this play, this flying machine is the source of his special power that makes him unique. So, he cannot part with it even temporarily.

Surpanakha eventually steals the flying machine, which turns itself into a time machine, and time travels into the 21st century. The ease with which she bridges the time gap is remarkable, and it shows Dharmasiri's skills in theatrical storytelling.

Before coming to our times, Surpanakha gets herself entangled in a series of events in the main narrative, known to us as the *Ramayana*. First, she meets the banished Rama in the Dandaka forest. As soon as she sees him, she is sexually attracted to him and communicates her desire to Rama. But Rama, being a virtuous prince and husband, tells her that she should approach Lakshmana, his brother, who is not married. Yet it is Rama whom Surpanakha wants. This exceptional desire on her part indicates that she wants to test the real strength of 'ideal marriage' symbolised by Rama and Sita. By focusing on this dimension of the *Ramayana* narrative, Dharmasiri teases out a thematic aspect in the original myth that has not been explored by any modern artist in Sri Lanka. Yet, she does not deal with it within that mythic narrative. Instead, she makes Surpanakha time-travel to the present day.

This is in many ways a poignant image because, here in the 21st century, there are many who believe that Ravana's legacy can be recovered. He led a civilisation that many believe was much superior to ours. Now, Surpanakha arrives not only in our century but in our country, where she runs into an artist who paints nude portraits of women and has a fetishist attachment to breasts. Surpanakha becomes his model, but the painter only sees her breasts. Surpanakha comes to realise that whatever breasts the male painter uses as his model, he ends up only painting an 'ideal breast' that is his own fantasy. For those male patrons or connoisseurs of such paintings, the breasts are just objects that are the same as other material possessions and play-objects such as cars. And those women, who carry those 'ideal breasts' on their bodies are also 'objects' as indicated by the Sinhalese expression *badu* (thing/object) used to designate and denigrate women.

This is quite clear in relation to this painter, whose portraits often do not have faces but only breasts and the rest. As Surpanakha herself remarks, in this country Lanka, the female body has been so objectified that men do not even see the full female body but only parts of it. Within the male gaze, women have been reduced to breasts or butts. At these moments in the play the writer/director's feminist critique is pronounced, one might say. Dharmasiri does not shy away from making her feminism obvious. Why should she in a theatre culture where women playwrights and directors are so rare? After Somalatha Subasinghe, Dharmasiri seems to be the only woman theatre director to continuously engage in productions, this being her fourth within the last ten years.

In the Dandaka Forest, to return to the original myth, Lakshmana chops off the top of Surpanakha's nose. Here in contemporary Sri Lanka, this painter robs her of her face by painting the breasts of a faceless woman. In this postmodern culture industry, women have lost their collective and individual identities.

This painter has a wife whose name is Janaki – another name for Sita (in fact, the Sri Lankan Sanskrit poem on the original myth is called *Janakiharna*, which means the 'abduction of Janaki/Sita'). Janaki is also a painter. When she married him years ago, the promise was that once he has reached some sort of stability and mastery in his painting career, she will be given opportunities and helped to grow as a painter. But that promise, as many such promises within marital life, has been broken, and she has been restricted to domestic work within their home. For about ten years, she has been attending to all the household chores such as cooking, cleaning, and laundry. The playwright suggests that this is a form of *janakiharna* (abduction of Sita), by robbing her of her skills and talents.

The play in its final scenes signifies something else that deserves our attention. The painter eventually gets beaten by Surpanakha when he tries to sexually assault her. The way he attempts to invade her body, and the way she forcefully fights back, indicate that a final battle between the sexes might be needed before we could invent another form of being together. Subsequently, along with Surpanakha, the painter-wife/painter's wife Janaki is getting ready to time-travel, perhaps into a future where a new concept of marriage can be found. It could be a same sex marriage, or it could be a form of marriage between more than two people, but certainly not like that from which she escapes.

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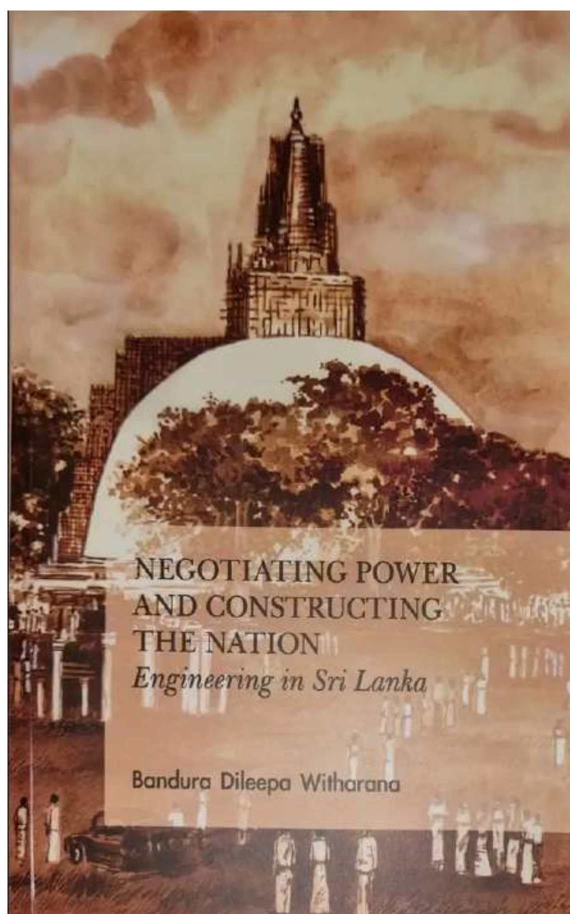
Negotiating Power and Constructing the Nation: Engineering in Sri Lanka. Bandura Dileepa Witharana

Cherry Briggs



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 bourgeoise, 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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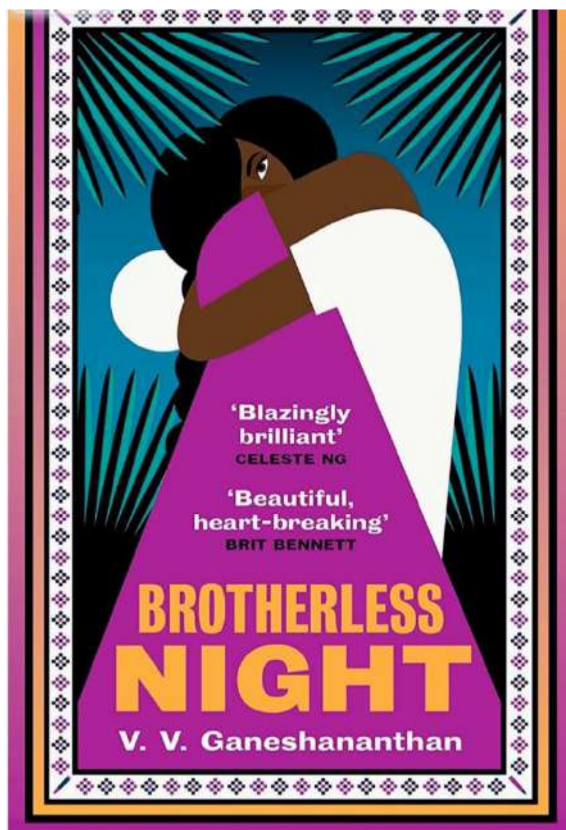
Brotherless Night. V. V. Ganeshananthan

Vasugi Kailasam



Brotherless Night is V. V. Ganeshananthan's second novel. I read this novel in late July 2023, with a fevered reminder of the commemoration of the 40th anniversary of Black July in Sri Lanka. The reading was a moving exercise that prompted me to pause and reflect on the fractured nature of modern Tamil identities, and the enduring legacy of violence and dislocation following independence from the British. In contrast to Ganeshananthan's first novel, *Love Marriage*, which is set within the North American diaspora, this book firmly places itself in the heartland of the Tamil experience in 1980s Jaffna.

Beginning in 1982, the years before the ethnic conflict became militarised, Ganeshananthan chooses to narrate the tale in a realist mode that allows the text's space to be experienced as a realm of overlapping and repeating memories, with both first- and third-person narration, thus creating unstable realities for the reader.

Narrated by 16-year-old Sashikala Kulenthiren, an aspiring medical student, *Brotherless Night* commences in the aftermath of the burning of the Jaffna public library. This library serves as a gathering place for Sashi and her four brothers—Niranjan, Dayalan, Seelan, and Aran—to study and connect with peers. The destruction of the library leads to the politicisation of Tamil identities and irreversibly alters Sashi's idyllic household. Her brothers Dayalan and Seelan join the cause of Tamil militancy. Niranjan, her eldest brother and a medical doctor, is killed in the July riots of 1983.

The central plot revolves around Sashi's relationship with 'K' (modelled after Thileepan, a popular LTTE leader), a connection that begins as a teenage crush and evolves into a relationship that falls somewhere between platonic and romantic, prompting her to reflect on her evolving feelings about Tamil separatism and politics. K's portrayal as a rebellious young Tamil man who reluctantly embraces violence and its consequences while conforming to the militant cause is rendered with empathy.

Against this backdrop, Ganeshananthan depicts the fragmented nature of Tamil militancy and its ideals, with the Tamil Tigers overtaking other Tamil militant movements and positioning themselves as the sole representatives. Framing her narrative in this manner, Ganeshananthan's novel explores two aspects: the challenges and ambiguities of intimate friendships and solidarities during times of militant and State violence, where labels like 'terrorist,' 'traitor,' and 'martyr' become commonplace; and on the other hand, the experience of terror and atrocities that are deeply traumatic, but nevertheless remain unaddressed to this day through legal or political means.

Ganeshananthan is acutely aware of the responsibilities and challenges inherent in her narrative project and navigates these issues skilfully and with the adeptness of masterful storytelling, employing sensitive characterisation.

Brotherless Night stands as an exemplary text in its attempt to shed light on the lesser-explored aspects of the war and how it is remembered, uncovering stories of women and their experiences of displacement and violence during this tumultuous era.

Whether through the depiction of Sashi's soft-spoken mother who loses her sons one by one to the conflict, or through the outspoken critic Anjali Premachandran (modelled after another historical figure, Rajini Thiranagama), Ganeshananthan reminds us that the impact of militarisation and a political structure enforced by arbitrary and clandestine violence, subject women to everyday suffering that is inherently gendered.

One of the remarkable strengths of this novel is its portrayal of Tamil life during the politically charged decades of the civil war. In contrast to other recent English novels set in Sri Lanka, *Brotherless Night* adeptly maintains its Tamilness while being written in English. The characters' dialogues, often crafted in the cadence of Jaffna Tamil, contribute to this sense of authenticity. This achievement is evident across various dimensions, including the insightful references to the characters' reading materials, such as the shift from popular Tamil romance novels like *Ponniyin Selvan*, imported from Tamil Nadu, to more politically charged titles of Russian literature, which served as inspiration for a vibrant social realist canon within the Sri Lankan Tamil literary tradition, such as Maxim Gorky's *Mother*, translated as 'Amma' in Tamil. Through these literary nuances, Ganeshananthan deftly infuses the text with skilful Tamil cultural specificity.

Brotherless Night emerges as a novel of profound importance, chronicling the social ramifications of the Sri Lankan civil war's mass displacement through the lens of civilian experiences. As Ganeshananthan deftly guides readers through the tumultuous three-decade-long conflict, her focus on individual subjectivities provides a poignant and lasting contribution to modern Sri Lankan literature.

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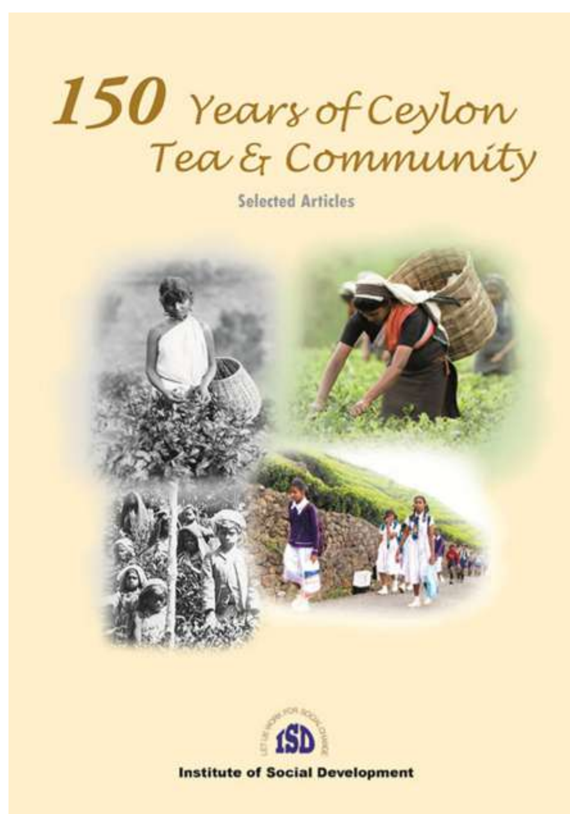
Claiming Identity, Dignity, and Justice: Malaiyaha Tamils of Sri Lanka

B. Skanthakumar



The 150th anniversary of the beginning of the tea industry in British Ceylon was marked in 2017 by a range of government and corporate events, mostly to promote Sri Lanka's premier agricultural export. In counterpoint, the Gampola-based Tea Plantation Workers' Museum and Archive hosted a symposium in Hatton that year, with the purpose of redirecting attention from crop and product, to cultivator and producer.

Five papers: on historical dispossession; variations in production models; social and political exclusion in the North and East; women's participation in unions and parties; and plantation political patterns, were subsequently published as '150 Years of Ceylon Tea and Community' by the Kandy-based Institute of Social Development.

Historical Context

Emeritus professor at the University of Madras, V. Suryanarayan's keynote conference paper, from which the title of this review is borrowed, opens the volume. He begins with the conditions in which those trapped in chronic indebtedness to landowners and rural moneylenders in Southernmost India were forced through hunger and destitution to migrate across the Palk Straits for food and waged work.

Those who survived poor health, disease, and danger to reach the forested interior, cleared land for coffee and later tea and rubber cultivation; planted and plucked or tapped; and constructed road and track for conveyance of commodities from source to Colombo and beyond.

In a "bird's eye view of the problems and prospects of the Hill Country Tamils from an Indian perspective", the poor educational level of the community and the lingering legacy of decitizenisation and disenfranchisement post-independence, are highlighted as particular concerns.

Suryanarayan decries the longstanding disinterest of Northern and Eastern origin Tamil leaders, related by language and culture but estranged by caste and class, in taking up the cause of another group of Tamils. The politicians of Tamil Nadu are no better in his opinion for having failed to integrate stateless persons repatriated, whether by choice or coercion, under the terms of official agreements between India and Ceylon/

Sri Lanka: the Sirima-Shastri Pact of 1964 and Sirima-Gandhi Pact of 1974; and those displaced by violence and conflict after the July 1983 pogrom and since resident in South India.

To lift the educational standard of the community and better the future of its youth, a free mid-day meal and bus pass for children in plantation districts, and hostel facilities in major towns, is proposed. As a disadvantaged community, the government could assist Hill Country Tamils through reserved admission to schools and higher education institutions, as well as access to scholarships and employment, he recommends.

Changing Plantations and People

Professor A. S. Chandrabose of the Open University of Sri Lanka situates the evolution of the plantation community within Sri Lankan society, in the changes in the tea plantations from nationalisation in the early 1970s to privatisation in the early 1990s. Through this transformation, he explains how a community once bonded to the estate and relatively immovable, has been rendered mobile in the reserve army of labour.

He notes how while nationalisation was deemed a failure owing to low productivity and high production costs compounded by political interference and mismanagement; post-privatisation, the Regional Plantation Companies have performed poorly in the harvesting of tea leaf, acreage under cultivation, and replanting of aged bushes, particularly in comparison with smallholdings which now account for over 70% of production.

According to Chandrabose, companies have pushed down the cost of production through reducing the number of registered workers, reneging on the 300 days of work guaranteed by collective agreements and re-employing retired workers as temporary or casual labour without social security entitlements.

He proceeds to outline the latest production model for the plantations, which is the 'out-growing' or 'revenue-sharing' system promoted by the Planters' Association of Ceylon. In a hybrid system, workers are to be offered a fixed number of days of waged work each month based on the current plucking norm; and remunerated on other days on a per kilo rate.

In this labour regime, the cost and risks of cultivation are exclusively borne by the out-grower, who is obliged to purchase inputs from, and sell the green leaf exclusively to the Regional Plantation Company (rather than on the open market). The land remains under leasehold to the company and the bushes under its control.

What incentive then for today's waged worker to become tomorrow's contract farmer? Based on the smallholder sector, where the number of kilos harvested is considerably higher than the current norm in the plantations, an increase in the yield and consequently daily income is assumed to follow.

The self-exploitation of the plantation household (as family labour is inevitably applied to increase the yield from the allotted bushes) – in the absence of any transfer of land or even security of tenure – is apparently their pathway out of poverty and coolie status.

Chandrabose is aware of several problems with the current out-grower system in Sri Lanka. The assigned tea bushes are invariably aged and therefore low yielding. The number of bushes allocated is too few, and the length of the informal agreement too brief, for durable gains for the producer. Housing on the estate is tied to at least one member of the household remaining in waged work for the company. In times of illness, injury, and infirmity, the responsibility of social protection shifts from the company to the household and the State.

Caste and Culture

The second part of his paper argues that the 'repatriation' of dominant castes in the 1960s and 1970s created a vacuum in leadership on the estates, and the decline if not demise of unique cultural traditions of the plantation community in Sri Lanka, of which they were the main practitioners.

Not here but elsewhere[i], Chandrabose has identified some of these castes as *Mottai Vellalar*, *Reddiyar*, *Agamudaiyar*, *Ambalakarar*, *Kallar, Naidu, Mudaliyar, Padayachi, Udaiyar, Gounder*, and more. He contends that they contributed to the travel of agrarian festivals and folk drama, dance, and music from the hot plains of the Madras Presidency – for example *Kaman Koothu, Ponnar Sangar*, *Archunan Thapasu*, and *Margali Bhajan* – and their translation in the cool hills of the former Kandyan Kingdom.

It took until the mid-1990s for a generation of educated youth to provide renewed community-based leadership. By this time 'Sinhalese culture', by which he means the language, dress, and forms of worship of the majority community, had permeated the plantation community. Unsurprisingly where Hill Country Tamils are a dispersed minority (for instance Galle, Matara, and Monaragala), this extended to the assimilation into Sinhala society of some, amidst racist attacks, compounded by decades of an ethnicised internal war.

Absent in this narrative though are the shifting fortunes of *kanganies* (labour recruiters and field supervisors) and branch union leaders (*thailavars*) as elites among estate Tamils; and how the cinema, film music, and television of Madras/Chennai shape and reshape culture and identity, past and present, on the plantations.

North and East

Hill Country Tamil migration to urbanised Sinhala majority areas in the West and South-West of the island is a perceptible trend. What is less known is that decades before, some Hill Country Tamils moved to rural Tamil majority areas in the North and East seeking physical security, land to farm, and the promise of a better life.

The internal migration of Hill Country Tamils, and their experience of social and political exclusion by their co-ethnics, resulted in their formation in the North and East as a distinct sub-category within Sri Lanka's Tamil community, contends P. Muthulingam, Executive Director of the Institute of Social Development.

Beginning with discriminatory legislation in the late 1940s and the rise of majoritarianism including the 'Sinhala Only' Language Act in 1956, and anti-Tamil riots of 1958, Hill Country Tamils in Galle, Kalutara, Monaragala and even Badulla and Nuwara Eliya were pushed to move to the Vanni and to Pullumalai in Batticaloa district within the Tamil-speaking North and East.

Even along the Vavuniya-Killinochchi (A9) and Badulla-Chenkalady (A5) roads respectively, these were sparsely populated, forested areas, with poor infrastructure and facilities, and undesirable to locals. Their numbers were swelled by successive anti-Tamil violence: in 1963 (in Bandarawela); forced eviction following land reform and starvation deaths between 1972 and 1975; and riots in 1977, 1981, and 1983.

Meanwhile through the 1970s there was a pull from North-Eastern Tamil activists to populate the border zones of the North and East, as a counterweight to the State-sponsored settlement of landless Sinhala villagers in what the former considered to be their 'traditional homeland'.

The non-governmental Gandhiyam organisation developed large model farms in the Vanni where thousands of displaced Hill Country Tamils resettled. Left wing armed militant youth organisations – the People's Liberation Organisation of Tamil Eelam, the Eelam People's Revolutionary Liberation Front, and the Eelam Revolutionary Organisation of Students – adopted the cause of Hill Country Tamils, established villages for, and enlisted, them. By the late 1980s, these organisations were decimated by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam which voluntarily and through conscription in the areas under its control, would recruit up to 12,000 Hill Country Tamil origin youth as cannon fodder, peaking in the war's endgame in 2008-2009.

The early settlements were largely a failure. Subsistence farming was unfamiliar, and income was poor. Their only asset was the land adjacent to the main roads, which once cleared for cultivation and with rising value was soon attractive to locals, pushing the migrants into the poorly irrigated interior, and for work as agricultural labourers or *chena* cultivators.

Through 80 oral interviews, 10 community discussions, and ethnographic observation, Muthulingam has recorded the origins and evolution of surviving Hill Country Tamil new villages (styled by landowners as *purams* or *nagars*) spanning Mannar, Killinochchi, and Mullaithivu across the North through to Trincomalee and Batticaloa in the East. These names are also markers of origin, caste, and identity of their inhabitants and for "exclusions in social development, access to governance structures, land ownership, and other welfare rights".

The spur for the post-war political mobilisation of Hill Country Tamils appears to be the discrimination in provision of rural roads, water to drink and for agriculture, and income generation projects against the new villages, and in favour of the older ones inhabited by locals, by government officers and political representatives of Northern and Eastern Tamil origin. An important memorandum on their grievances on livelihood, housing, education, political representation, employment, and infrastructure development, prepared by the '*Malaiyaha Makkal* Forum of the Northern Province' in 2017 is annexed in this volume.

In the remainder of this chapter, Muthulingam describes struggles for political representation of this community within a community in the Vanni. The 2011 local government election was a breakthrough as Hill Country Tamils were elected in Killinochchi and Vavuniya through the Tamil National Alliance, Eelam People's Democratic Party, United National Party, and United People's Freedom Alliance. Nevertheless, the community remains under-represented in local bodies and unrepresented in provincial institutions. Drawing a parallel with the condition of the 'repatriates' in South India, he cautions that their integration as equals into the Tamil community of the North and East is not only unrealised but also uncertain.

Hill Country Tamil Women

Development practitioner T. Kalaimagal seeks to evaluate the place of, and emerging new avenues for, Hill Country Tamil women in trade unions and politics. In a sector where women predominate in the labour force, their under or token representation in leadership bodies of trade unions, their absence from collective bargaining and other decision-making discussions, and the gender blindness if not male bias of trade union programmes, seriously undermine the representativeness, legitimacy, and relevance of traditional workers' organisations.

This is not to say that women have never benefited from trade union membership or action. Equal pay for women plantation workers was a demand and victory of combined plantation trade union strike action in 1984. Meanwhile Collective Agreement No. 13 of 2003, negotiated by trade unions, has provisions of concern to women workers: on transport to hospital, maternity leave, funeral expenses, and crèche facilities.

Kalaimagal notes that the women's committees (*mathar sangam*) in trade unions have not empowered women members nor advanced women's agendas within trade unions. On political parties, she cites researcher Chulani Kodikara who found that women's wings of political parties in Sri Lanka exist to mobilise women during elections – for the purpose of voting men to power – and for social service activities in between.

In her only primary data, she interviews Saraswathi Sivaguru who leads the Women's Wing of the National Union of Workers, and was the first Hill Country Tamil woman elected to the Central Provincial Council (2013-2018). Sivaguru makes reference to the pressure on women leaders to "conform to the male leadership model". Structural, organisational, and procedural changes within trade unions are required for women's inclusion and leadership, says Sivaguru. The introduction of a quota for women's participation and representation in the 2018 local government elections is hopeful, according to her.

Political Patterns

Ramasamy Ramesh of the Department of Political Science in the University of Peradeniya "endeavours to discuss the emerging political patterns, changing political aspirations, the status of the traditional political leadership and the role of upcountry political parties in the State reforms process in Sri Lanka" in the concluding chapter.

He observes that whereas in general in Sri Lanka, trade unions were floated by political parties, the reverse is true of the plantations. The Ceylon Workers' Congress, the Democratic Workers' Congress, the Up-Country People's Front, and the National Union of Workers, have had a dual role in the plantations beginning as trade unions and developing into political parties.

Over time and accelerated by the restoration of citizenship rights to stateless Hill Country Tamils and therefore their enrolment as voters, party politics has taken precedence over union politics. These parties are personality driven and least interested in "political ideologies, policies, party organisation, democratic values in party organisation, and decision-making". The traditional leadership practised issue-based politics based on coalition-making with the governing party at the centre.

"With the resolution of [the] citizenship issue" argues Ramesh, "institutional discrimination, inequality in governance structures, developmental rights and public service delivery became a matter of serious concern among upcountry political leaders, especially among [the] emerging new leadership".

The popularisation of the concepts of *Malaiyaham* (hill country) as home, and *Malaiyaha Thamilar* as identity (in place of 'Indian-Origin Tamils') by the Up-Country People's Front during the 1990s, is crucial to this new consciousness.

This new leadership also aligned with Sinhala majority political parties, has engaged in State reform of the political and governance institutions to address the "incomplete citizenship" of Hill Country Tamils. Their composition includes educated youth, civil society activists, progressive academics, and intellectuals, churned out by class differentiation within their community, and critical of the Ceylon Workers' Congress, which has long dominated the trade union and political landscape of the plantations.

In the past, the political parties of the plantations have been muted on national issues such as corruption, development policy, and State reform, focusing only on an ethnic minority issue-based agenda. Significantly, the Hill Country Tamil community demonstrates a more progressive understanding of politics than their traditional leadership, believes Ramesh. They favour political pluralism by supporting diverse political parties. They wish to weigh in on national controversies and debates. They want to be in the social and political mainstream.

Drawing on political scientist Jayadeva Uyangoda and sociologist Laksiri Jayasuriya, Ramesh points to the difficulties of achieving social rights in this period "when fully fledged welfare policies and programmes started withering away and neo liberal economic and social policies came into force…". This dilemma is side-stepped by the plantation leadership who look to the regime in power, donor agencies, and non-governmental organisations to meet the needs of the people.

As legal citizenship (symbolised by the 2003 Citizenship Act) has not over-turned the inequalities and discrimination experienced by Hill Country Tamils, he invokes Canadian philosopher Will Kymlicka to press for differentiated citizenship rights: unique policies and programmes that recognise the claims of ethnic and other minorities and overcome their marginalisation.

Overall, this publication will be of interest to anyone interested in the continuing journey of the tea worker from chattel to citizen. It advances contemporary claims for identity, dignity, and justice, acknowledging the challenges and contradictions along the way. The book has its limitations and unevenness, particularly in the treatment of gender relations and women's subordination. The view from Kegalle and Ratnapura, not to mention Matara and Monaragala, may differ from the high-grown districts.

The *Malaiyaha Thamilars* have come far. But their long trek within Sri Lanka is far from over.

B. Skanthakumar** is co-editor (with Daniel Bass) of* Upcountry Tamils: Charting A New Future in Sri Lanka *(International Centre for Ethnic Studies, Colombo 2019).**

Notes

[i] Chandrabose, A. S. (2014). "Cultural Identity of Indian Tamils in Sri Lanka: A Measurement of Multi-dimensional Status of the Indian Tamil Society in Sri Lanka". In Sanjay Garg (ed.). *Circulation of Cultures and Culture of Circulation: Diasporic Cultures of South Asia During 18th to 20th Centuries* (145-163). Colombo: SAARC Cultural Centre. Available at http://saarcculture.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/diasporic_cultures_A_S_Chandrabose.pdf

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Best Reads in 2023

Vajra Chandrasekera

I have meant to read Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) my whole adult life but only picked it up while glued to the current horrific news about Israel's genocide in Palestine. On reading the book for the first time, I found perhaps unsurprisingly that I already knew it. Not Said's close readings of specific historical Orientalists, which were fascinating and mostly new to me, but in the book's broader arguments, which have long ago become such a core part of our shared intellectual heritage that if one reads at all, one has already grappled with *Orientalism* and orientalism alike. Said's book therefore remains not only a vital text, but in understanding culture at all—such as reading the international news, in 2023—as urgent as it was when first published.

Anna Kavan's *Ice* (1967) is the oldest of my selections and by far the strangest, and like the others a book I had meant to get to for some years before I actually did. The titular ice could refer to heroin, echoing Kavan's own struggles with addiction, but also to the apocalypse of ice the story describes. The book has been called science fiction but also slipstream, surreal, dreamlike—all the words that come up when a text confounds expectations. It is a story about war, mental illness, and the end of the world, and as such is as much, if not more so, a book of our moment as it was hers.

Siva Ahrooran's *The Innocent Victims* (2019) is a social novel in contemporary realist style, about a widow in post-war Jaffna navigating the complexities of remarriage and single parenthood while dealing with escalating workplace harassment. Like all of his books to date, this was written during his 17 years of imprisonment under the Prevention of Terrorism Act. He was released in May this year, acquitted of all charges after having already endured punishment, when a judge finally decided that a coerced false confession was inadmissible. The book can therefore also be read, as I read it, as entangled inextricably with the indelible image of Ahrooran being escorted by a policeman on stage to accept a State literary award before being sent back to prison. This is not allegory but a reminder, in speaking of victimhood and innocence, that the art is not separable from the artist.

Vajra Chandrasekera is from Colombo, Sri Lanka and is online at vajra.me. His debut novel The Saint of Bright Doors *was a New York Times Notable Book of 2023, and his short fiction, anthologized in* The Apex Book of World SF, The Gollancz Book of South Asian Science Fiction, *and* The Best Science Fiction of the Year *among others, has been nominated for the Theodore Sturgeon Memorial Award.*

V. V. Ganeshananthan

Early in the year, I tore through *Letters to a Writer of Color*, edited by Deepa Anappara and Taymour Soomro. It's a fantastic volume, full of authors like Amitava Kumar, Tahmima Anam, Tiphanie Yanique, Kiese Laymon, Jamil Jan Kochai, and Ingrid Rojas Contreras writing about topics like humour, trauma, violence, showing and telling, and art and activism. The pieces are complex, surprising, humane, frank, and introspective; they made me feel part of a conversation I'd been longing for. Soomro's opening piece on origin stories and Anappara's conclusion, about the ideal conditions for writing, were two of my favourite contributions. I wish this book had been around when I was younger, but I'm so glad it's on my shelf now.

This fall, I returned to one of my favourite novels of all time, *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*, by Michael Chabon. *Kavalier & Clay*, which won the Pulitzer in 2001, is a baggy, delicious monster of a novel, clocking in at almost 700 pages. In the story of writer Sam and artist Joe, two Jewish cousins and friends who work together to create a classic comic book character, Chabon offers a canonical American tale, one that enfolds us in its long, artful, witty sentences while sparing us nothing about the political ugliness it depicts. The story starts in 1939, when American-born Sam and émigré Joe meet, and includes the brutality of World War II. It goes all the way to 1954, with a portrayal of the homophobia of the Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency of the Senate Judiciary Committee, an actual factual committee that at that juncture in history devoted its considerable energies to determining whether comic books were corrupting children.

Finally, I want to mention *River Spirit* by Leila Aboulela. I've been a fan of Aboulela's for decades; this year I met her for the first time. I interviewed her for the Literary Hub podcast I co-host with Whitney Terrell, Fiction/Non/Fiction, which is about the intersection of literature and the news. It was fascinating to hear her talk about her first historical novel, a stunning and deeply imagined piece of work covering the period leading up to the British occupation of Sudan. Its broad sweep includes multiple perspectives. Later, I met her in person in Toronto, where we were on a panel together at a literary festival. To meet and read a writer I have long admired at the moment that her work is taking a new turn was a special pleasure.

***V. V. Ganeshananthan** is a novelist and journalist whose novel* Brotherless Night *is out now.*

Adilah Ismail

Over the past few years, my reading has gravitated more towards nonfiction and a nonfiction book that stayed with me in 2023 was Toni Morrison's The *Source of Self-Regard.* I came to it at the end of the year when I was preparing to lead a workshop on social justice and writing. The book spans essays, speeches, and meditations over the course of her career and many of the pieces feel apt for today. A short piece, 'Racism and fascism' for instance, feels like it could be transplanted to multiple global contexts today. Morrison's essays and speeches thrum with sharp, incisive insights written in the way only Morrison can.

Another book that marked the year for me, especially with the rise of AI and the subsequent conversations it sparked, was Ellen Ulman's *Life in Code.* Ellen Ullman was a computer programmer in San Francisco in the late 1970s and was part of an almost exclusively male group that shaped the internet's ascent. *Life in Code* would draw anyone interested in technology, ethics, and capitalism but is repelled by Silicon Valley techspeak slathered in buoyant marketing and corporate jargon. Ulman's essays are lyrical and philosophical, and she throws in personal stories and tech-criticism into the mix, giving us insights into the tech worlds that have sculpted and continue to sculpt our lives in unimaginable ways. Some essays are stronger than others, but overall, an enjoyable read.

With fiction, I fell down a very enjoyable Claire Keegan-shaped reading hole this year after her Booker nomination. Keegan's books are short, contain succinct prose, and she wields language deftly, without a single stray, superfluous word. You are reminded that sometimes less is definitely more. I enjoyed *Small things like this, Antarctica,* and *So late in the day,* but I kept thinking about *Foster*. A taut novella, I devoured *Foster* within an hour and it stayed with me long after I read it. Keegan has a brilliant eye for setting scenes and dialogue, leaving the reader with a strong sense of the Irish landscape. *Foster* is a bittersweet, simple, sparse story with a poignant, feel-good ending, and perhaps we could all do with a few feel-good endings this year.

***Adilah Ismail** is a writer and communications practitioner based in Colombo, Sri Lanka. She writes a newsletter at: https://alifeofsaturdays.substack.com/*

Vivimarie VanderPoorten

The poetry I most enjoyed in 2023 was Kusal Dhananjaya Kuruvita's *Asparshaneeyan wetha* (*To Untouchables*) (Santhava, 2021). Over the last three years, I had read some of the extraordinary poems he had posted on social media. I was so moved by their depth, insights, and feeling for language, that I translated some into English in an effort to both share and increase my appreciation of his work. So, imagine my delight when I discovered a whole book of his poems – 79 of them in fact!

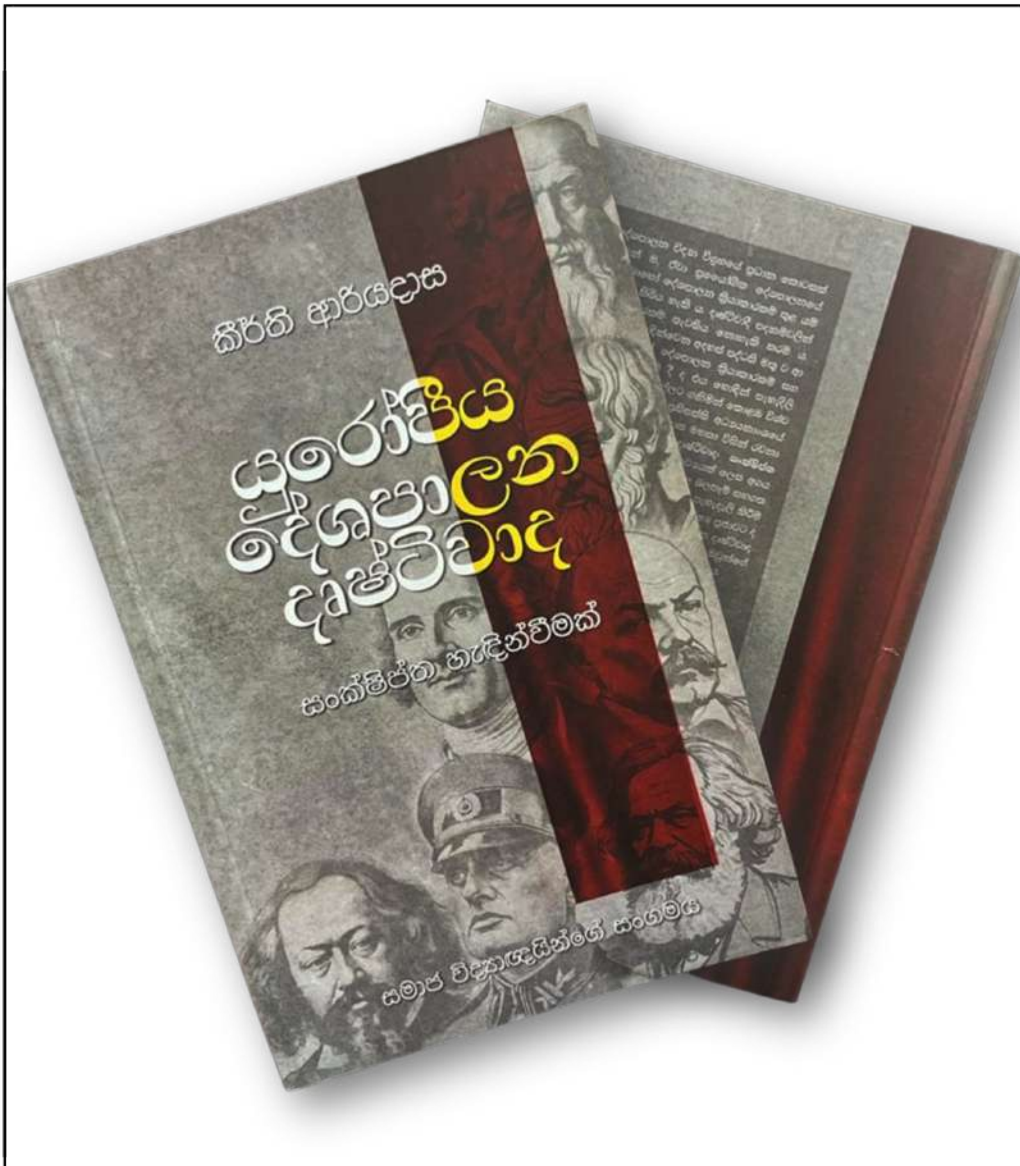
Kuruvita's poems, potent and political, are peopled largely by the non-elite and the powerless. Save for a few love poems, witty and heartbreaking, most of his collection presents powerful images and explore the many facets of exploitation. This is reflected at every level: from the last hen in the poultry truck who gets a city tour, to the park that can only be beautified if the blades of grass are decapitated; from the necktie that turns into a dog's collar literally tightening around the neck of an employee while his boss is not around, to the dumpster that believes its owner is its benefactor and the municipal worker who empties it, its plunderer.

This sensitive collection, faithful to its title, is truly a tribute to its subaltern characters and deserves to reach beyond a Sinhala-knowing readership. The poems serve as a means of affirming one's humanity within a societal framework where personal attributes, choices, economic status, and overall identity are constantly diminished or confiscated by those in positions of power.

It is not just art: it is an act of creative resistance. The short poems are especially vivid and written with quicksilver wit, conjuring up images like those in Banksy's street art. I would love to see some of these subversive poems in *To Untouchables* morph into city graffiti. A kind of poetic street art to constantly remind

us of the seemingly casual violence of exploitation; to generate ideas and questions about power, courage, integrity, compassion, altruism, but also the darkness that is all around us which we often refuse to see.

Vivimarie VanderPoorten *is Senior Lecturer in English in the Department of Language Studies at the Open University of Sri Lanka. Her first collection of poetry* Nothing Prepares You *(Zeus, 2007) won the 2007 Gratiaen Prize for creative writing and the 2009 SAARC Poetry Award.*



Keerthi Ariyadasa's concise introduction to *European Political Ideologies* (in Sinhala) is available at SSA, No. 380/86, Sarana Road, Colombo 07.

Call for Articles

From People's Councils to Participatory and Deliberative Democracy in Sri Lanka

'*Balayata diyawannawen eliyata!*' or 'taking power out of Diyawannawa' was one of the rallying cries of the *aragalaya*, *porattam*, struggle that we witnessed from April to August 2022 in Sri Lanka. This idea subsequently found expression in the demand for People's Councils that can include citizens in political decision making processes as a way to hold elected and non-elected officials to account, and as a means of reforming our political system and deepening democracy. There have been many debates and discussions on the idea since then, with a spectrum of opinions expressed on the concept, the structure of such councils, as well as their viability. Today this call assumes more salience and urgency in the context of the violent repression of the *aragalaya* and the continuing repression of peaceful protests related to the *aragalaya* as well as other protests around the country including in the North and East. These protests are themselves evidence of the absence of a forum/s in which concerns of citizens can be articulated, heard, debated, discussed, and addressed in a peaceful manner. In this context, *Polity* invites submissions that can make a contribution to this conversation, while contextualising the idea of People's Councils within the much longer tradition and older scholarship, debates, discussions, and experiments around participatory and deliberative forms of democracy in Sri Lanka and elsewhere.

The idea of citizen participation in democratic governance is one that can be traced to the Greek *polis*. The more recent debates around participatory democracy can be traced to the 1960s, where the imperative emerged in the context of a crisis of faith and legitimacy between citizens and the State, deep disillusionments with institutions of governance because of corruption, lack of transparency, and lack of responsiveness to the needs and demands of people. These debates have since manifested in a dizzying array of institutional mechanisms such as *gram panchayats* in India and participatory budgeting in Brazil. Sri Lanka is not without experiments in participatory decision making processes, particularly in development related projects. Consider farmer organisations relating to the Gal Oya Irrigation and Resettlement Project and the Mahaweli Development Project; the Local Authorities Participatory Development Plans drawn up by *pradeshiya sabhas*; and owner-driven housing reconstruction projects in the North and East. We believe there is much we can learn from a robust engagement with the scholarship as well as the institutional experiments on the issue.

Suggested sub themes include, but are not limited to, exploring the following questions:

- What are the institutional forms through which democratic politics can be deepened and made more participatory?
- What sorts of issues are best dealt with through such institutional mechanisms? What has worked and what has not?
- Are there preconditions that are necessary for such experiments to work? If so, what are they?
- How do advocates in Sri Lanka conceptualise People's Council?
- How does one ensure that hierarchies of power and domination based on class, caste, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, etc., that characterise our institutions are not reproduced in People's Councils? What kind of mechanism can privilege the participation of the most marginalised and vulnerable in our communities?
- What comparative experiences of participatory democracy can we draw on?

Send your pitches and drafts to the Editors at **polity@ssalanka.org**

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