

CONTESTED IDENTITIES

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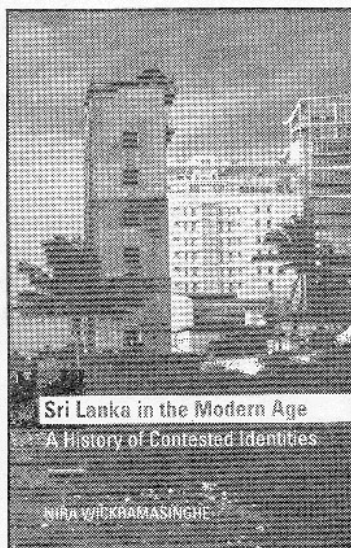
Sri Lanka in the Modern Age: A History of Contested Identities by Nira Wickramasinghe (London: C. Hurst and Co., 2006, 352 pages).

This volume is a neatly crafted, well documented historical narrative written for an audience which includes the general reader. In providing a valuable social history of the British colonial state in the 19th and 20th centuries as well as the post independence period (1948-), a distinctive feature of this work is that it offers a 'history from the bottom', characteristic of subaltern politics and postcolonial accounts of 'fragments'. More specifically, it aims to democratize historical writing with a people-centred history – a history of people and communities – as against the conventional social and political history or accounts of 'state building'. Furthermore, this study is cast in a distinctly antipositivist discourse which draws heavily on the postmodernist theorizing of some Sri Lankan 'anthropologist/historians', but minus the penchant for the obfuscation of language.

The author as a historian is driven by two dominant motifs: one is to articulate the voice of the 'different' as manifest under 'postcolonialism' which also includes the late colonial state (1931-48); the other – a broader historical agenda – is the quest for a historiography that challenges some of the assumptions of the dominant narratives of nationalism. The latter is one that envisages a 'nation state', but which does not reject modernity or discard the achievements of the modern state. This foray into 'culture and politics' is indeed an ambitious project and invariably confronts the juxtaposition of modernity alongside questions of political memory, claims of authenticity derived from the past.

In Part I (Chapters 1-4) – by far the most valuable and interesting part of this work – the author proceeds to deconstruct the sense of the authentic by probing identity

politics as a product of the British colonial experience, Identity, as manifest in the lived experience of people is understood as the sense of self, circumscribed by one's group memberships defined by categories such as caste, class, gender, and race/ethnicity. Social categorization as a way of representing 'colonial difference' was a distinctive feature of colonial statecraft and governance, and also central to identity politics.



The colonial state's 'techniques of rule' such as census, enumeration and mapping of territory, individuals and communities acquired political significance through demands of representation. Importantly this also created an identity politics which the author argues led to the unfolding of a racialised ethnic identity which continues to engulf all aspects of present day Sri Lankan society. By focusing on identity, particularly its social construction, the author endeavours to portray that recent social and political history has been driven by an identity/politics rather than by a *politics* of difference. This, of course charts a different course, distinct

from the processes of state building in the context of a changing political economy exemplified in the standard historical writings of this period, especially from the late colonial state onwards.

A distinctive feature of this volume is the novel and insightful way of depicting recent political history as 'identity politics' by drawing pointed attention to the otherwise ignored 'fragments' of society. To demonstrate the various manifestations of identity politics, the author draws heavily on her previous study: *Dressing the Colonized Body: Politics, Clothing, and Identity in Sri Lanka* (Orient Longman 2003). In this work the author presents a compelling historical account of how identity is revealed through dress – especially women's clothing – taken as the source of what it means to be a colonized body in colonial Sri Lanka. Relying heavily on this earlier study, the author takes a single series of events

about clothing and shows how identity is manifest in everyday life. By weaving this fascinating tapestry, the author incorporates a feminist perspective into the Sri Lankan historical discourse by treating gender as a historiographic category. Clearly, unlike other histories, the author conceptualizes 'history' as a vehicle for locating people and communities with political agency and giving them a presence.

Part II (Chapters 5-8) looks at over five decades of post independence as a legacy of the late colonial state, the socio political context which laid the groundwork for later bitter ethnic conflicts. These are seen as being enmeshed in the collective identities of cultural nationalism, mainly between Sinhala and Tamil nationalism, while not wanting to eschew the politics of state formation surrounding notions of democracy, equality, and rights, the historical narrative of this period captured in terms of the social movements, the clash of groups and communities in the civil society, reiterates the dilemma of nation building. In brief, the civil society, comprised of a complex social dynamic of voluntary associations and social groups, is depicted as confronting, if not challenging, state policies and an institutional framework surrounded by powerful bureaucracies and political elites.

The author rightly alludes to 'a sense of divide between civil society ... and the political society' (p. 328), but fails to raise questions bearing on the interplay between the civil society and the state sector which includes the economy and structural forces in society. Nor does the author acknowledge that these two sectors can be mutually constitutive of each other. The neglect of state formations also reveals a notable shortcoming and a failure to recognize the influence of the political economy and intersection of class, ethnicity, and gender in the transformation of Sri Lankan society. In this regard we need to remind ourselves that 'only the state presents us with a content that is appropriate for the prose of history but also contributes to it' (Hegel quoted in Ankersmit 2001). Nevertheless, by departing from the conventional historiography of the Sri Lankan historical discourse, this study makes a significant contribution to the discipline of history in Sri Lankan society. ■

Reference

F.R. Ankersmit (2001), *Historical Representation*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

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