

IN PRINT

Jonathan Spencer (ed.), 1990, *Sri Lanka, History and the Roots of the Conflict*, London and New York: Routledge, pp. 246 and index.

A remarkable feature of academic responses to Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict is evident in a shift in the investigative focus of Sri Lankan anthropology. With the island in the grip of nationalist violence and conflict, land tenure, marriage and kinship, caste and exotic religious rituals have become past foci for anthropological pursuits. In consequence, a considerable body of literature on Sri Lanka's political conflict has emerged in the past decade, produced by those who conventionally would have been called cultural and social anthropologists (though some would reject this disciplinary appellation).

Jonathan Spencer's anthology appeared in 1990, yet has provoked little response in Sri Lanka. Similar work—for example, by Tambiah, Obeyesekere, Kapferer and Valentine—has also failed to generate any serious discussion. Even debates on Sri Lankan anthropological material and their interpretation appearing in Western academic journals rarely receive attention, except perhaps in the course of casual pre-dinner drinks in the company of visiting scholars.

This is a problem worth investigating. When the phenomenology of hour-to-hour existence is constantly being shaken by myriad forms of violence, one is deprived of that precious little peace of mind needed for reflection on events and processes. All, including trained scholarly minds, are acutely subjective; cynicism, despair and mistrust drive them to parochial and sectarian retreats. Relatively free of these sharp and disabling constraints are expatriate academics who carry out their field-work, recording and reflecting on what they see, hear and read. Spencer's anthology is a marvelous illustration of this debacle of Sri Lankan academia. With the exception of one author, R. A. L. H. Gunawardana, all the other contributors—eleven altogether—are expatriate anthropologists. Even Gunawardana's essay is an updated version of one written a few years before the ethnic war began in 1983!

This book, Spencer notes in the Introduction, "is an attempt to shed fresh light on the sources of the political tragedy that has engulfed Sri Lanka in the past decade" (p.3). What is 'fresh' in the light thus shed, according to the editor, is the conclusion that the Sinhalese-Tamil conflict is not the "inevitable outcome of centuries of hostility", nor the "outcome of inherited destiny," but rather "made by the actions of particular men and women" (p.3). Not a great claim, yet a fruitful point of departure for a group of concerned scholars making a collective

effort to grasp and elucidate for themselves and for those of us who are yet entangled in the tragedy, the why and how of Sri Lanka's crisis.

The anthology is organized along three broad themes. Theme I, 'Colonialism, History and Racism,' has five chapters dealing with the 'power of the past' in Sinhala and Tamil nationalist discourses and practices. Elizabeth Nissan and R. L. Stirrat, in their essay on "The generation of communal identities" argue that the Sinhala-Tamil conflict, as ethnic conflict, is a product of modern politics. The delineation of post-colonial specificities of this conflict, differing qualitatively from community conflicts in colonial and pre-colonial Sri Lanka, is perhaps a useful way of moving away from the fatalistic historicist approaches that claim centuries of conflictual relations among the Sri Lankan Sinhalese and Tamils. Similarly, R. A. L. H. Gunawardana's essay on "The Sinhala identity and ideology in history and historiography" is a frontal challenge on the widely-held academic and nationalist view that Sinhalese-Buddhist chronicles provide evidence for a two-millennia long history for Sinhalese nationalism. (Recently, Gunawardana's thesis has been challenged by K. N. O. Dharmadasa, who argues, haphazardly, that the Sinhalese and Tamils have been sworn enemies throughout recorded history!).

Sinhalese-Buddhist chronicles, even apart from their appropriation and interpretation by many users and misusers, are a part of Sri Lanka's problem itself. In the contested terrain of history, the chronicles themselves have been turned into powerful ideological texts. Ideologically constituted pasts—or histories—have thus come into being in a menacingly powerful way in both Sinhala and Tamil nationalist campaigns. Gunawardana's deconstruction of the nationalist historiography of pre-colonial Sri Lanka is followed by two essays, "Historical Images in the British period" by John Rodgers and "The Politics of the Tamil past" by Dagmar Hellman-Rajanayagam. The central point made by Rodgers is that after the official 'discovery' of the *Mahawamsa*—the master-text of Sinhalese nationalist historiography—by British civil servants, it became central to the colonial understanding of the Sri Lankan past and that this colonial understanding itself was appropriated almost totally by the Sri Lankan intellectual elite. Incidentally, even a cursory look at Anagarika Dharmapala's writings would reveal how Dharmapala himself re-produced the colonial/orientalist construction of the Sinhalese past of this island.



Moment of Crisis in Everyday Life

Anthropologists have a disciplinary advantage which historians and political scientists are reluctant to exploit; they observe how people live their lives under concrete circumstances. For example, anti-Tamil violence in 1983: the only available scholarly recording of this horrendous event is an essay written by Gananath Obeyesekere who happened to be in riot-ridden Colombo, when mobs were executing their 'patriotic duty'.

Apart from the recording of, and responding to, concrete events and processes, there is the need to understand how nationalist projects inform and shape ideological and social relations between communities. A multiplicity of nationalist projects and discourses has in recent years introduced to society an array of overlapping identities, agendas, priorities and even courses of action. The state, political parties, anti-state movements, guerilla groups and armed forces, the press, cultural cadres—a host of agents have engaged in enterprises for ideological hegemony. The three chapters under the general theme "History at a moment of crisis" are attempts to examine the multiple ideological constitution of three rural communities.

The bias towards the 'village' or the 'rural community' as a starting point of investigation still illustrates the original sin of social anthropology. When James Brow claims in his chapter to examine "the impact of Sinhala nationalism on a remote and marginal village" (p. 129), one wonders whether there are any 'villages' (or 'islands') in Sri Lanka which can be posited as **ideologically** remote or marginal. If there is any force that has effectively erased the city-country divide in Sri Lanka, and chained the bourgeois and the peasant to a unified world-view, it is that of nationalist ideology. Going to a village in search of roots of the ethnic conflict is a slightly problematic exercise. The President of the Republic, a drop-out of the Lumumba University, a natural sciences Professor in Colombo, an exorcist in Matara, and a school teacher in Sabaragamuwa are intellectual cadres of competing, yet interrelated, nationalist projects.

The chapters compiled by Brow, Whitaker and Woost are nevertheless rich in field material that encapsulate moments in the complex and incessant processes of the re-constitution of nationalist world views and self-understandings by a variety of agents. Whitaker's young Tamil militant in Mandur is motivated by the "desire to redirect nationalist discourse toward a more radically transformative end" (p. 153) and he represents

a community of intensely active thinkers and practitioners of a radical Tamil nationalism. In contrast, Michael Woost's documentation of rural development activities in a Sinhalese village points to the ideological form taken by the ubiquitous presence of the state in rural society and the way in which rural conflicts are subsumed and structured by the dominant official discourse.

The last section, containing three chapters, is on "The politics of the past," dealing with the issue of the re-claiming of the past in present ideological enterprises and political practices. Steven Kemper's chapter on "J. R. Jayewardene, righteousness and *realpolitik*" covers the reign of a man whose manipulation of Sinhala-Buddhist ideological instruments in a project of cunning statecraft has left many disastrous consequences for Sri Lanka to grapple with for many years to come. Kemper's chapter is rather weak in that his documentation and commentary offers nothing excitingly new by way of providing insights into Jayewardene's political project.

A remarkable development in Sinhala nationalist ideology in the eighties was the emergence of some schools that re-articulated old arguments in a militantly new fashion. The late Serena Tennakoon conducted, [before she fell ill], a critical survey of a newspaper debate on Sinhala identity. Spencer's re-production of that essay in this anthology is a tribute to this versatile scholar.

Sri Lanka History and the Roots of Conflict is a valuable addition to the expanding body of scholarship on contemporary Sri Lanka. Its major drawback, which the editor also acknowledges, is the imbalance created by the little space given to Tamil nationalism. In a way, Sinhala nationalism has been privileged by the richness of scholarly attention it has consistently received. The deconstruction of Tamil nationalism is a part of the necessary agenda, too.

Jayadeva Uyangoda

Postscript: Spencer's anthology was later followed by his own book on Sri Lanka's crisis, **A Sinhala Village in Times of Trouble**. A young academic with a genuine commitment to seeing Sri Lanka find peace and democracy, Spencer lost his wife in Colombo last summer. This essay is dedicated to the memory of Julia Swannell.