

# Accumulation through Nationalism: The Politics of Profit in “Neoliberal” Sri Lanka

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Ask anyone in Sri Lanka of a certain age the significance of the year 1977 and you are likely to get the reply, “that was the year of the open economy!” JR Jayawardene’s famous phrase – “open economy, righteous society” (*nidahas arthikaya, dharmista samajaya*) – coined to describe a new era of economic and social reform, seems as well known today as it was four decades ago. During my time spent doing fieldwork over the past fifteen years in urban and rural Sri Lanka, informants have routinely offered ‘1977’ as a diagnostic for several of the country’s problems, and a way to describe one significant turning point in the island’s history. That said, you are much less likely to hear the full phrase “open economy, righteous society” spoken about the legacy of ‘77 as you are simply “open economy.” What for Jayawardene was supposed to be an economic and social revolution for many people came to be viewed as nothing more than a policy of state rollback and market liberalization, accompanied by rampant patronage and corruption as people at all levels of society tried to grab for themselves something of the growing national wealth (Spencer 2008; Moore 1990).

Yet the process of economic liberalization that took place in Sri Lanka was no simple story of a shrinking state and growing market. In western democracies, the same process did not limit state involvement in society, but rather transformed its role from a command and control state to a regulatory state (Black 2001; Majone 1994; Black 2002). That is, while market principles and providers may indeed have come to shape many aspects of welfare provision and public policy and planning, state functions shifted in turn to regulatory

oversight and intervention. The rapid growth of various economic, social, and environmental authorities and ‘quangos’ (quasi-governmental organizations) over the same period that western states ostensibly ‘drew back’ is witness to this. Despite the widespread view that 1977 initiated a phase of state shrinkage, the Sri Lankan state too has retained to a significant degree its command and control structure, alongside a more slowly emerging set of regulatory functions. Importantly, the Sri Lankan public sector remains the largest employer in the island – buoyed not just by extensive army recruitment but regular graduate recruitment programmes (Venugopal 2011; Venugopal 2010).

In this paper, my aim is to describe the economic implications of the state/market relationship in Sri Lanka, as illuminated through an analysis of corporate social responsibility programmes (CSR) as an expression of Sri Lankan capitalist logic – what might be called a commitment to “accumulation through nationalism”. I argue that the Sri Lankan experience of CSR has been quite unlike that of other countries around the world – in particular, it has been almost nothing like the history of CSR in western democracies and too bears little resemblance to the history of CSR in other countries of the global South. Rather than offering a comparative discussion, however, my intention is to explain what the study of Sri Lankan CSR can tell us about the legacy of ‘1977’ forty years on – that is to say, describe how the practice of CSR in Sri Lanka illuminates a central feature of Sri Lanka’s “open economy” in 2017.

My argument in a nutshell is that far from filling the space in society created by the retreat of the state

through which corporate interventions become society's "ethical arbiter" (Dolan and Rajak 2011), Sri Lankan CSR offers a form of symbolic tithe to the state, the payment of which legitimizes companies' pursuit of capital accumulation. This process not only complicates – yet again – the categories 'state,' 'market,' 'politics' and the ways in which actors loosely defined as belonging to each respond to one another, but produces an economy deeply entwined with the politics of Sinhala ethnic and religious chauvinism. Extending David Harvey's revision of Marx's theory of "primitive accumulation," I argue that accumulation through nationalism involves the pursuit of profit through the everyday accumulation of political and economic capital wherein explicit support for, and expression of, nationalist aims and objectives is a necessary precondition for market participation. While Harvey's revision of Marx explores the conditions of what he calls "accumulation by dispossession" – the ways in which people are alienated from their labour to make them exploitable by capital – I argue that accumulation through nationalism has the potential to both separate and unite people through the mobilization of powerful cultural and historical claims.

Let me begin with some observations of recent history, collected during four years of research performed between 2012 and 2016 in the Sri Lankan corporate sector (Widger 2016a; Widger 2016b; Widger et al. 2012; Osella et al. 2015). The research took place during the final two years of the Rajapaksa government, and first two years of the new Sirisena government. The latter came to power promising *Yahapalana* (Good Governance) following a decade of increasingly corrupt and autocratic rule by Mahinda Rajapaksa and his close retinue of relatives and friends (Stone 2014). During the Rajapaksa period, the political importance of CSR in Sri Lanka became increasingly visible as the government sought to limit what it understood to be 'foreign influence' in the sector – for example, by blocking a new national platform for CSR-related activities, which had been conceived and sponsored by USAID (I describe this in fuller detail in Widger 2016a). After Rajapaksa's surprise defeat in the presidential election of January 2015, the incoming government lifted the injunction against the organization and 'CSR Sri Lanka' began to pursue an active programme of work, culminating in the receipt of a large grant from USAID in early 2017.<sup>1</sup>

I have previously described the Rajapaksa government's decision to undermine CSR Sri Lanka as one stemming from a concern that USAID's vision for the platform failed to accord with their own (Widger 2016a). The normative view of CSR among international and Sri Lankan advocates is that socially responsible

and sustainable corporate governance processes and philanthropic activities offer a 'win/win' for all. Employees, customers, shareholders, and community stakeholders benefit from better working conditions, environmental safeguards, and direct charitable gifts; companies benefit from improved staff commitment and productivity, brand value, and ultimately a peaceful society with growing spending potential. Leaving aside the question of whether the normative view is remotely reflective of what happens in reality, the benefit of CSR for Sri Lankan companies has always too been figured by what could be gained from 'above' in addition to from 'below'. In particular, my research clearly showed how Sri Lankan companies ran CSR projects in direct response to, and as an attempt to appease, growing political interference in the private sector (ibid.).

I renamed Sri Lankan CSR 'philanthronationalism' as a way of capturing this. A play on the popular phrase 'philanthrocapitalism' used to describe development efforts undertaken by companies and private philanthropists (Edwards 2008), my point was that Sri Lankan companies were less interested in the use of business methods to tackle poverty and inequality than they were in using business methods to win friends and influence people within the Rajapaksa autocracy (Widger 2016a). Doing so was in one sense a question of personal survival: some corporate leaders were clear about this point when they reflected on the jailing of one of Sri Lanka's richest men, Lalith Kotelawala, a potential Rajapaksa opponent for the presidency.<sup>2</sup> But philanthronationalism also involved a wider commitment to Sinhala Buddhist nationalism, and this was the case among Buddhist- and minority-owned businesses alike. Philanthronationalist activities of this kind infused CSR programmes with Sinhala Buddhist ideology, carefully portraying 'development' as a cultural as well as economic and social concern, always foregrounding the celebration, protection, and promotion of Sinhala and Buddhist history, language, and signs (for more on the relationship between nationalism, the private sector, and development agendas, see: Kemper 2001; Kemper 1993; Spencer 1990).

Having described the unique character of Sri Lankan CSR, I now move on to consider what this indicates about Sri Lankan capitalism more broadly. Here I argue against the adequacy of the label 'neoliberal' as a descriptive term for the Sri Lankan economy since 1977. I argue that the state has not 'rolled back' in any substantive sense, and too the principle subjective feature of neoliberal economies has not taken hold. In an influential work, Dardot and Laval (2014)

define neoliberalism as a “certain existential norm... that enjoins everyone to live in a world of generalized competition.” This view of neoliberalism places the significant driving factors of the new economic order not in the relationship between state and market, but instead in the processes of subjectivation that it creates through practices of self-responsibilization demanded of individuals cast as earners, consumers, and debtors (Lazzarato 2012). The emergence of financial products and services catering to all wallets, from life insurance and private pension programmes for the wealthy to a plethora of microfinance and pawning options for the poor, does indicate a process of “financialization” is underway in Sri Lanka (Kadirgamar 2013). Drawing from Appadurai (2013), we could argue that from top to bottom of society an “ethics of risk” is emerging which increasingly defines how people relate to themselves and others in both the here and now and in the future. In Sri Lanka, however, I would suggest that an existential norm of generalized competition and a new sensitivity to risk only makes sense when embedded in the wider cultural economy. It is precisely through the political capital to be gained via the active mobilization of Sinhala nationalism that Sri Lankan companies’ right to operate in the ‘open economy’ arrives – indeed, ‘opens’ the economy for market activity – at all.

To understand this process, I introduce Marx’s description of “primitive accumulation.” For Marx, a necessary step in the historical development of capitalism from the 15th century in Britain was the displacement of peasantry from land, via the elimination of common property and, in particular, the enclosure acts of the 17th century (Marx 1995, pp.363–382). This enabled the acquisition of both land for capitalist exploitation and the creation of a landless class to sell its labour. As the demand for both grew, the expansion of empire became a key means through which processes of primitive accumulation unfolded, via conquest, exploitation, and extraction (Perelman 2000). The development of plantations by European powers and America, which defined the world economy between the 16th and 19th centuries, and of which Sri Lanka (then Ceylon) was a key part, is a prime example of Marx’s theory (Bandarage 1983). Goger and Ruwanpura (2014) have argued that Sri Lankan corporate expansion into the North-East of the country following the war’s end involved a similar process, as companies were able to capitalize on displacement that had defined the war years. Their analysis suggests that the ambitions and tactics of Sinhala nationalism and a ‘Sinhala-ization’ of the North-East of the island during the immediate post-war years found a willing executor in the form of Sri Lankan companies (not necessarily Sinhala-owned

or run) desirous to exploit new ‘opportunities’ in that region.

While agreeing with their thesis in general terms, I would counter that the process described by Goger and Ruwanpura was only the most obvious and violent expression of an often quite hidden set of moves undertaken by the Sri Lankan private sector and its local and international backers both during that time and before. After the war, many companies began offering charitable help to conflict-affected people and communities, while organizations such as International Alert and USAID explored ways in which CSR projects could combine their market expansion ambitions with philanthropic interests (Widger 2016a; Widger 2016b). I would also argue that the combination of business and charity that ‘softened’ processes of land and labour acquisition has a long history in the island. During the 19th century, the development of Ceylon’s plantation economy was not a simple one of colonial take-over. The majority of coconut and rubber lands remained in or passed to the hands of local elite and local smallholders, supporting the growth of an indigenous upper and middle class, for whom charitable benevolence was an important means through which their new status in society could be legitimized (Jayawardena 2000). Importantly, the local elite deployed charity to “win acclaim and power” (ibid, p. 179) from both the British colonial elite and indigenous Ceylonese lower down the social ladder. Thus, charity then, and modern forms of CSR and philanthropy today, have for many capitalists been integral to their self-identification and business activity.

To better make sense of this, I turn to David Harvey (2004) and his discussion of Marx’s original theory of primitive accumulation. Harvey argued that under neoliberalism, four processes of privatization, financialization, the management and manipulation of crises, and state redistribution, have come to define what he calls “accumulation by dispossession”. For Harvey, violent means did not pave the way for modern processes of accumulation by dispossession as they did Marx’s primitive accumulation, though still accumulation by dispossession helped the capitalist class to acquire its wealth via a process of extraction from the labour class (Harvey 2004). Instead, Harvey argued, accumulation processes took a subtler, everyday form. The ‘privatization’ of social protection and development through the addition of CSR and philanthrocapitalist programmes to the aid landscape alongside public programmes is arguably one instance of this, as those on the receiving end become rights-less ‘beneficiaries’ or ‘customers’ where once they were ‘service users’ with

at least rights of citizenship (Widger & Osella n.d.). Harvey's argument also implies that we can begin to think about accumulation processes in more diverse forms, including forms that involve the extraction of value from labour through the interplay of communal politics in and of the market.

Extending Marxist analyses, we can define "accumulation through nationalism" most simply as the process through which firms gain market share through the exploitation of nationalist politics. That is to say: the visibility with which companies wear a commitment to an exclusionary nation building favouring one group over another, and how this becomes a key means through which companies open up new business opportunities. As I have previously argued, this is clearest in how Sri Lankan firms pay lip service to the management of the socio-cultural diversity of employees, customers, shareholders, and stakeholders, but in practice often act in ways that clearly favour the majority Sinhalese over minority Tamils and Muslims (Widger 2016b). As Goger and Ruwanpura (2014) point out, this can be as explicit as benefiting from land-grabbing and the promotion of Sinhala culture and history among Tamil and Muslim workers, or as subtle as "passive philanthronationalism" involving the quiet yet ubiquitous integration of Sinhala cultural models into ostensibly national celebrations (Widger 2016a, pp.10–13). Accumulation through nationalism unfolds in a corporate environment that is not only little interested in ensuring equal opportunities for all, but one where the deployment of nationalist signs and symbols is crucial for key areas of corporate affairs, including market growth, brand development, and risk management (Widger 2016a). Visions of what kind of society Sri Lanka should be, explicitly imagined in religious and ethnic terms, inflect the politics and policies of corporate governance. Companies calculate profit making, then, in terms of the value added of exclusionary communal identification.

If nationalism divides the world into those who are 'in' and those who are 'out,' what we find taking place in accumulation through nationalism is a process not just of dispossession but integration too. It is this second process that I want to explore in the remainder of this paper. To that end, I offer a critical reading of an advertisement placed in a Sri Lankan English-language newspaper on 22 April 2013 (see Figure 1). The case is interesting because it highlights how far the logic of accumulation through nationalism runs, and how difficult it can be to escape the politics of exclusion even when the intention may be the promotion of a politics of inclusion.

At the height of Buddhist agitations against Sri Lanka's minority Muslim population that had been escalating since the previous year (Ali 2013; Holt 2016), a local pharmaceutical company urged a more compassionate society drawing from the Buddha's teachings. Under the heading "It's Just a Label," the advert cited an extract from Walpola Rahula Thero's (1974) famous book, *What the Buddha Taught* (bold typeface in original):

The question has often been asked: Is Buddhism a religion or a philosophy? It does not matter what you call it. Buddhism remains what it is whatever label you may put on it. The label is immaterial. Even the label 'Buddhism' which we give to the teaching of the Buddha is of little importance. The name one gives it is inessential.

'What's in a name? That which we call a rose,  
By any other name would smell as sweet.'

In the same way Truth needs no label: it is neither Buddhist, Christian, Hindu nor Moslem. It is not the monopoly of anybody. Sectarian labels are a hindrance to the independent understanding of Truth, and they produce harmful prejudices in men's minds.

This is true not only in intellectual and spiritual matters, but also in human relations. When, for instance, we meet a man, we do not look on him as a human being, but we put a label on him, such as English, French, German, American, or Jew, and regard him with all the prejudices associated with that label in our mind. Yet he may be completely free from those attributes which we have put on him.

People are so fond of discriminative labels that they even go to the length of putting them on human qualities and emotions common to all. So they talk of different 'brands' of charity, as for example, of Buddhist charity or Christian charity, and look down upon other 'brands' of charity. But charity cannot be sectarian; it is neither Christian, Buddhist, Hindu nor Moslem. The love of a mother for her child is neither Buddhist nor Christian: it is mother love. Human qualities and emotions like love, charity, compassion, tolerance, patience, friendship, desire, hatred, ill-will, ignorance, conceit, etc., need no sectarian labels; they belong to no particular religions.

Below the extract rang the invocation "*May all beings be Well and Happy!*" followed by the company's name and contact details.



**Emerchemie NB**  
සමඵලා ආදි ලිපි ෨෦෦෦

**IT'S JUST A LABEL**

A B C D

"The question has often been asked: Is **Buddhism** a religion or a philosophy? It does not matter what you call it. **Buddhism** remains what it is whatever label you may put on it. The label is immaterial. Even the label '**Buddhism**' which we give to the teaching of the **Buddha** is of little importance. The name one gives it is inessential.

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extracted from '*What the Buddha taught*'  
by Dr. Walpola Rahula Thero

May all beings be Well and Happy !

**Emerchemie NB (Ceylon) Limited**  
60, Mallingawatte Road, Colombo 10, Sri Lanka.  
Tel: 2694864/5, 2675005/6 Fax: 2671877  
Web: www.emerchemie.lk

"National in Fibre, International in Flavour"

That an advert expounding the virtues of universal charity and love appeared in the month of April, a week or so after the Sinhala and Tamil New Year and just before the *Vesak Poya* in May, the most auspicious full moon in the Buddhist calendar, was, in itself, not significant. April and May are months of alms-giving and merit-making for Sri Lankan Buddhists, offering a time for family, friendship, and community generosity – practices epitomized by the *dansala*, roadside stalls offering gifts of food or drink to passers-by, which spring up across the island around this time of year (Uyangoda 2007). For Buddhists, April and May are also a good time for reflection upon the meanings and significance of charity, including meditations upon the unitary nature of humankind and the importance of giving without thought for meritorious gain but simply out of love and kindness of one's fellow man or woman. Private companies often post adverts wishing their customers well for the year ahead, and bestowing blessings and merits.

Yet April/May 2013 was different. Over the past year, the Bodu Bala Sena (BBS; Buddhist Power Force), an

extremist group led by Buddhist monks, had come to national attention. While the BBS was only the latest in a line of such groups to have emerged over recent years, its tactic of protesting what it called 'unethical conversions' conducted by Christian Evangelical churches as well as the growth and spread of Muslim businesses and mosques, had led to the group developing a certain notoriety. One element of the BBS's complaint, and which echoes Sinhala nationalist concerns more generally, is the sense that both Christians and Muslims use charity to protect their own and to buy new adherents, contributing towards ordinary Sinhala Buddhist people's poverty (Silva 2016). Thus, the advert appeared at a time when civil society groups in Sri Lanka as well as internationally were becoming increasingly concerned that the agitation, hitherto Buddhist-on-Muslim, was in danger of reaching tipping point and breaking out into more general communal violence. Indeed, local human rights groups shared the advert across social media, discussing it as an example of how the private sector could make positive contributions towards communal harmony in the post-war period, as well as Buddhist-Muslim relations more specifically.

On the surface, the advert does appear to provide a good example of what Venugopal (2010) described as a "cosmopolitan" commitment in Sri Lanka's private sector, whose willingness to confront ethnic and religious discord can offer one route by which Sri Lanka might achieve a lasting peace. I have no wish to challenge the motives of the company who placed the advert, and I am equally happy to read their intentions at face value as a genuine attempt at such. However, beyond a surface reading, the advert offers a valuable window onto practices of accumulation through nationalism that I argue defines post-1977 Sri Lankan capitalism. The selection the company chose to cite from *What the Buddha Taught* is what I interrogate here. Again, I have no quarrel with the sentiment behind the extract, which is surely something upon which we can all agree. Yet in Sri Lanka in 2013, the selection was significant because it was precisely the question of charity upon which much Buddhist-Muslim antagonism was centred, with complaints being made by extremists on both sides that the other was failing to act 'nationally' because they were favouring their own community when giving over the other. Thus, for example, Buddhists were accusing Muslims of exclusionary practices because of the canonical requirement that the *zakat* – an annual alms-tax paid by wealthy Muslims to the poor – could only benefit Muslims. Likewise, some Muslims accused Buddhists of similar tactics around how they distributed charity on the Buddhist holidays *Vesak* and *Poson* (Osella & Widger 2016; Osella et al. 2015).

Thus, an appeal to treat all kinds of charity equally was timely because it came into conflict with kinds of charitable practice that canonically demanded communal performance. The significance of this, I argue, was more than by how it exposed a fundamental distinction between the disinterested world of the market wherein everyone in principle shares an equal right to free contract, and the interested world of charity wherein benefactors are often keen to endorse their own personal worldview through the selection of ‘worthy’ beneficiaries (c.f. Parry 1986). That is to say, the case involved more than a company assuming, perhaps naively, that charity could operate the same way as the market – without any regard for religion or ethnicity. Rather, and reading more deeply between the lines of the advert, the case highlighted how appeals to religious communalism had become integral to both market and charity practice. Clearly, the company behind the advert was aiming at more than a simple public welfare message. As with any such thing, brand reputation was also at stake. But too the advert reflected the religious disposition of the company; the text chosen was a classic in ‘rational’ Sri Lankan Buddhism – a devotion to equanimity through the words of the Buddha. In itself, this was a statement of identification: the company did not turn to Muslim, Hindu, or Christian theology, and one presumes of course that as Buddhists those responsible would have had no cause to do so. Even while, then, the advert broadcast its message of unity plainly, it did so from a specific position.

Steven Kemper’s research on Sri Lankan advertising was similarly concerned with the ways in which nationalist sentiments ran through such work (Kemper 1993; Kemper 2001). Kemper showed how Sri Lankan firms and other kinds of institutions like the national lottery have long grounded their brands on an appeal to Sinhala nationalist history. Even, as with the case described here, those that are avowedly inclusive in message cannot escape the cultural context of the Sri Lankan economy. What I draw attention to, then, is the inevitable political ramifications of any kind of economic activity in Sri Lanka, where national identification seems always to be at stake. Accumulation is never simply a process of dispossession in this context; at least, it is only dispossession for some. For others, accumulation involves the restatement of cultural and historical belonging; a reaffirmation of the taken-for-granted nature of Buddhism as a religion with meaning and relevance for all. What all this amounts to, I suggest, is an articulation of Sri Lanka as a Buddhist country that no matter how unintended by the sponsors of the advert, could not but help play out that way when released for mass consumption.

As a humanitarian call to arms, the advert tried to separate a sense of an inclusive ‘Sri Lankan’ practice from past misdeeds and brought the private and charitable sectors into line with non-discriminating practice. In Europe, humanitarian sensibilities pivot on a construction of the suffering of a generalized other, upon which a ‘liberal empathy’ can be projected (Wilson and Brown 2009). An expression of a long development in European socio-political culture concerned with ‘the rights of man’ embedded in an anonymized marketplace, humanitarian ideology reflects a particular notion of the obligations of benefactors to beneficiaries that presumes the absence of mutuality (Haskell 1985a; Haskell 1985b; Fassin 2012). In South Asia, as Bornstein (2012) shows, humanitarianism has arisen from a very different cultural-historical context that stresses the relationality of the market and the explicit absence of a generalized other, replacing it with a known other against whom ‘relational empathy’ is then projected. In Sri Lanka, as I have argued, communal-political interests infuse the relationality of the market as much as it does the relationality of charity and indeed the state – this is what gives rise to philanthronationalism as I have described it. But philanthronationalism itself only emerges from a cultural economy defined by a logic of accumulation through nationalism. Within such, the company’s appeal to a non-sectarian form of charity could *only* derive meaning because it took a stand against the philanthronationalist demand of interested charity. And in so doing, the advert could not but help the company to accumulate through nationalism.

### Notes

1 For the record, I should note that I helped to support and continue to support CSR Sri Lanka by offering training programmes for member companies. These programmes were provided free of charge, and were supported by two grants from the ESRC-DfID Poverty Alleviation Research fund, aimed at maximising the impact of the original research project conducted. The aim was to help companies develop more inclusive and sustainable philanthropic activities.

2 Although there is little doubt that Kotelawala was indeed guilty of the charges of financial embezzlement brought against him, the fact that the case came to light, went to court, and ended in a prison sentence was taken as proof of a lack of political protection normally afforded to people of such wealth and power. For several years previously, however, Kotelawala had been making moves that many people interpreted as preparing the ground to run for the presidency, which given Kotelawala’s philanthropic largess, could well have been serious (see Widger 2016a for a fuller discussion).

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