

## BOOK REVIEW

Siri Gamage and I.B. Watson (eds) *Conflict and Community in Contemporary Sri Lanka: 'Pearl of the East' or the 'Island of Tears,'* Sage, New Delhi, 1999, ISBN 0-7619-9394-0 (RRP Rs. 295).

### Laksiri Jayasuriya

This collection of essays is located within the growing body of scholarly writings on Sri Lanka devoted to an understanding of the ethnic conflict between the dominant Sinhalese and minority Tamil communities, and the political violence, arising from the civil war of the last 17 years. The editors have put together a varied collection of well-documented research papers by social scientists drawn mainly from political science, anthropology/sociology and economics, all with strong credentials of specializing in Sri Lankan studies. The material in this volume covers a broad spectrum of issues and is arranged in four parts. These refer to 'the political economy of the conflict, the story of the conflicts through narratives, the costs of the conflicts, and the conflict in different perspectives.' However, the lack of a thematic introduction and/or a succinct editorial commentary on the complex issues examined is clearly a major shortcoming.

Nevertheless, on a careful reading of the several essays, one can discern an underlying coherence and structure which is built around three key issues, viz., the analysis of contemporary Tamil politics and nationalism; the status and role of the Muslim community—the third largest ethnic group—vis a vis the Sinhalese and Tamil groups; and, the focus on the social dynamics of the ethnic conflict. These characteristic features of the essays in this volume stand in marked contrast to much of the recent work on the Sri Lankan ethnic conflict. This literature has been preoccupied with analyzing Sinhalese nationalism and politics, and in giving causal primacy to religion and ethnicity in explaining the aetiology of political violence and conflict. The language of this discourse has been framed in terms of a historical and culturalist explanation of ethnic politics. Jeremy Spencer, in a critical review of some of these writings ("The Past in the Present in Sri Lanka," *Lanka Guardian* Vol 18 (13), 1995) correctly observes that a major weakness of this predominantly 'nationalist discourse' is its 'relative inattention to the social and political context' of recent expressions of ethnic conflict and political violence. By contrast, several essays in this volume, which deal with politics and nationalism pay more heed to the socio-political dynamics of ethnic violence (e.g., essays by Nihal Perera, Purnaka de Silva and Mark Whitaker).

Meghan O'Sullivan, for instance, in her pathfinding account of contemporary Muslim ethnicity, defends the intriguing hypothesis that Muslim ethnicity is a consequence, rather than, a cause, of the ethnic strife. Whereas O'Sullivan concentrates on the Muslims living in the southwest of the country (mostly Sinhalese-speaking and urban-oriented), other essays, especially those of Patricia Lawrence, Dennis McGilvray, Margaret Trawick, and Michele Gamburd focus on the Muslims in the northeast (who are Tamil-speaking and

engaged in agriculture). Margaret Trawick, using a 'nationalist discourse' based on classical anthropological field work, offers in her ethnographic narrative a graphic account of how the Muslim victims of the conflict in the northeast cope with continued harassment and brutal violence from the LTTE (the 'tigers,' the Tamil militants) and the Sri Lankan army.

Trawick uses her rich ethnographic data to speculate on what motivates the LTTE to engage in military-style warfare, conducted with extreme brutality in pursuing nationalist objectives committed to being "recognized as a 'nation,' an autonomous state." This Tamil nationalism, she argues, is decidedly not religious in the sense in which Sinhalese nationalism has been portrayed by some theorists as "being spurred by religious fanatics." The LTTE secularism, according to Trawick, is driven simply by the devotion to Tamil 'Elam' an independent state or a Tamil nation. Mark Whitaker too adds support to this interpretation by suggesting that what underlies Tamil nationalism is "the appeal to a common Tamil heritage," one which is reconstructed from an awareness of the historic Tamil religious and literary canon, going back to Dravidistan in India. Thus, the 'tiger' symbol for the LTTE is an allusion to the military character of the Chola Empire.

In this context, Rohan Gunaratna provides a detailed and succinct account of the history, structure and organization of the LTTE as a political group and military outfit. This is, perhaps, one of the most informative and revealing essays in this volume. Gunaratna highlights the internationalization of the conflict, and admonishes the Sri Lankan government, academics, and opinion leaders for their failure to understand and respond to the far-reaching implications of the Tamil conflict, domestically and internationally. Interestingly, Gunaratna makes passing reference to economic diplomacy as a potent weapon in seeking a solution to the conflict.

The economic aspects of the ethnic conflict are also taken up by V. Nythianathan, who, while purporting to provide an overview of how the international media has responded to the conflict, proceeds instead to provide a useful analysis of the political economy of the ethnic conflict. Nythianathan endorses the point made by Gunaratna by referring to the important, but much neglected, economic dimension of the conflict. He goes on to argue that the economic policies of the post-independence period, especially the neo-conservative economic policy regime of the post-1977 era, may have "contributed towards bringing out the malevolent nature of communal politics." However, the implication of this for a peaceful resolution of the conflict—a sentiment which underlies all the contributions of the volume—remains unexplored.

Siri Hettige, too, in a lucid and pointed account of recent social transformations shows how the social impact of the economic policies of the post-1977 period has led to greater social inequality and material deprivation of sections of society, and thereby created a greater degree of political instability. Hettige makes the insightful observation that the recent social and cultural changes have been largely responsible for what he calls political threatening "anti-systemic movements." These, he contends, have had an identical impact on the aspirations and mobility strivings of two significant groups, in particular, the Sinhalese and Tamil educated, lower-middle-class youth in the south and north. It is, therefore, of considerable significance that the militant Sinhalese youth movement in the south (the JVP) and the Tamil militant youth in the north who formed the LTTE, though "differently placed within the framework of the nation-state, share similar aspirations vis a vis other social strata" in society.

One of the editors, Siri Gamage, also focuses on this general theme in a critical analytical overview of recent social structural changes in Sri Lanka. He makes pointed reference to the importance of factors such as class, power, language, religion and employment, in understanding the origins of the ethnic conflict. As he puts it, "the major cause of the conflict is the unequal distribution of the country's resources... and [the] class conflicts [that] underline the ethnic dimension." Echoing Hettige's reference to the commonalities between the position of the JVP and LTTE, Gamage also draws attention to the important role played by the class fraction identified as the lower middle class in generating a culture of violence in their struggle for justice and equity. Gamage argues persuasively that "post-independent political conflicts should be viewed as manifestations of class conflicts rather than ethnic conflicts."

In a strongly worded Dedication (somewhat unusual for a scholarly publication of this nature) the editors make a plea to protagonists in the conflict and others, to evolve, through negotiation and discus-

sion, ways to resolve the differences among the various combatants and social groups. These laudable sentiments, signifying the deep personal commitment of the editors as morally committed social scientists, to peace and harmony, however, are not reflected in any of the essays except for, perhaps, Laksiri Fernando in his search for a possible solution to the ethnic conflict. His recipe is contained in some poorly substantiated generalizations about the need to restructure the state and change its character by incorporating human rights. Given that the question of human rights is a highly contested notion, it is regrettable that Fernando offers no informed analysis of these ideas. For example, the contention that the right of self-determination—a critical demand of the Tamil nationalists—should be on the basis of human rights and not on history, remains a bland assertion without any conceptual justification or rationale. Nevertheless, Fernando, while agreeing that the 1995 Draft Constitutional Reforms seek a resolution of the conflict by moving away from the majoritarian hegemony of a unitary state, makes the valid point that the exclusive focus on constitutional reform is a major weakness of these reform proposals. It is a pity the he does not elaborate on this observation.

Despite the misleading impression that one may gain at first sight that this is a loose collection of disparate essays, and also the uneven quality of the several contributions, some verging on the polemical, there is no doubt that this collection as a whole is a valuable addition to the scholarly literature on the Sri Lankan ethnic conflict, especially by its focus on Tamil and Muslim nationalist politics. It also makes a notable contribution by urging the need for a more rigorous socio-political analysis as an alternative to the standard, over-worked 'nationalist discourse,' mostly based on ideational post-modernist type culturalist explanations. This collection of essays should become mandatory reading for Sri Lankan specialists, and also deserves to be included in the intellectual armoury of all those who have an interest in gaining a better understanding of the tragedy of Sri Lanka, its untold human misery and 'unhappiness.'

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**Published by Permanent Black, Delhi.**