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# Biased and Prejudiced Collection on Sri Lanka

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This massive, ambitious project by a distinguished historian of religion contains a series of essays that span a long time period from Sri Lanka's mythic origins to the terrifying 25-year insurrection of the Tamil Tigers – the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) – and its final eradication by the Sri Lankan army. It is difficult to review a comprehensive collection of this magnitude without bringing to bear the reviewer's own prejudices.

My criticism of this work is that it plans to do too much and therefore achieves too little. It is "all you wanted to know about Sri Lanka" within the frame of a single volume which to me is an impossible task. The work is sprawling and lacks an organising principle and "history, culture, politics" is too broad to be manageable. The editor brings together disparate essays by social scientists, colonial historians, poets and novelists along with journalistic articles in newspapers, but they lack an overall analytical or interpretative framework that will benefit students and scholars alike.

## Glimpses of History

The book's cover with its romantic setting of fisherfolk near a lagoon against the backdrop of a beautiful house or hotel seems to me at odds with much of what the editor wants to say about the Island's recent troubled history. One might have been able to make sense of this work if the editor had a long essay that tied together into a meaningful whole the five "parts" that constitute this volume; or for that matter if there was a long introduction to each part. Unfortunately, the editor's own introductory notes are too brief to serve this function.

Part I dealing with Sri Lanka's pre-modern period is, I think, the best because it is comprehensive and the essays contained there are both interesting and give us valuable glimpses of the nation's past. This is followed by Part II with shorter essays on

## BOOK REVIEW

**The Sri Lanka Reader: History, Culture, Politics**  
edited by John Clifford Holt (*Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011; pp 772 + index, illustrations, \$34.95.*)

the "colonial encounter", i.e., the Portuguese, Dutch and British periods (from 1,505 onwards). In Part III we move into the politics and culture of the last kingdom of Kandy and on to our own times where the excerpts deal with Buddhist, Muslim, Burgher and Tamil identities. Part IV is on another vast topic entitled "Independence, Insurrections and Social Change" and then on to Part V, a "Political Epilogue" on the post-war situation after the defeat of the Tamil Tigers.

The book is generously dedicated to those Sri Lankans who have died as a result of political violence and those who work for peace but it tells us very little on the violence and anomie that the long war and its aftermath have produced. Violence in recent times is not simply confined to the long war and its suppression, but also relates to the brutal Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna insurrection of Sri Lankan youth in the late 1980s and the equally brutal suppression by the then government of President Premadasa in which it is estimated that about 60,000 people were killed. Even if we reduce this official estimate to 20,000 dead, we are confronted with a searing commentary on violence by Sinhals against Sinhals, an issue that Holt does not discuss.

Alongside these brutalities Sri Lanka is proud to be the first or the near first in other areas: it has maybe the highest rate of suicides in the world, followed by equally horrendous homicide rates. And if one can rely on official statistics the nation's Sinhala and Tamil males are among the largest consumers of alcohol in the world, assuming, of course, that most Muslims and women in general abstain from alcohol

or are only moderate consumers. Violence against women, sexual abuse of children and multiplying cases of incest (owing to absent women working in west Asia) that have been highlighted in recent times do not merit mention anywhere in this collection.

Instead, the editor has chosen an essay "Sarvodaya in a Buddhist Society" by Ariyaratne, the Sarvodaya chief, who attempts to produce a Buddhist version of socio-economic and political development. Ariyaratne, in his numerous publications, seriously believes that, prior to western contact, Sri Lankan villages expressed Buddhist ideals and lived harmonious lives where inequalities did not prevail. Such an idealised model of village life simply did not and could not exist in Sri Lanka or elsewhere in the world. I doubt that Sarvodaya has made the slightest impact on the issues that I have highlighted, including matters relating to peace and human rights violations following the end of the long war.

## Precolonial Sri Lanka

I mentioned that the largest and best section of this collection is on precolonial Sri Lanka with one serious exception. The editor believes that the Vādda hunters or "people like them" had lived here for perhaps "millennia" without offering a scrap of evidence to substantiate this vision of history and without examining whether such groups or so-called tribals, like many other south Indian peoples, continued to migrate into Sri Lanka from the neighbouring subcontinent. All of us after all have been "aborigines" at some point in our unknown pasts!

Holt applauds the account of the Vāddas by the famous Scottish prisoner Robert Knox in the mid-17th century (who was free to travel in a large area demarcated by the king) and who in his work *The Historical Relation of the Island of Ceylon* spoke of two sorts of Vāddas, wild and tame, based on the perennial western preoccupation with nature and culture, the wild living like the beasts of the jungle. Knox probably did not even see a single so-called wild man of the woods, except for fleeting glimpses of them when he was fleeing the Kandyan kingdom. Surely, an excerpt from the classic work *The Veddās* (1911) by CG and Brenda

Z Seligmann (especially their excellent account of Vādda religion) would have been more apt, not to mention the recent important collection of historical essays on Vāddas with a scholarly commentary by Peter Schalk, *Vādi into Vanniyaḷātto* (2004).

### Colonial Sri Lanka

I have serious qualifications on Holt's selections from the colonial period and I will admit this might be due to my own anti-colonial prejudices. The excerpts from the Portuguese period are entirely by Europeans. Sri Lankan scholars and the many texts written by local historians during the period of the wars with the Portuguese do not enter the picture.

The Dutch period articles fortunately include two Sri Lankan historians, but the excerpts from the British period are most unsatisfactory because the voice of Sri Lankans has been stilled. Even John Davy, who in general emerges as a sympathetic colonial officer, has in this volume an appalling, gratuitous and unverified discourse on the brutality of the last king of Kandy, Sri Vikrama Rajasinha. It is as if the editor has accepted uncritically Davy's account, including the king ordering the wife of his enemy Ähälepola to pound her infant child on a mortar, a myth that the Sri Lanka historian P E Pieris has effectively deconstructed, pointing out its colonial origins in "The Tragedy of Ehelepola's Family" (pp 175-85 in *Tri Sinhala: The Last Phase*). There is no doubt that this was a time when a great deal of brutality prevailed on both sides of the warring divide, but one must remember that the last king built the beautiful "palace of the tooth relic" and the adjacent lake in Kandy and that he was popular with many sections of the Sinhala population.

The key event of the resistance against the British was the 1817-18 rebellion that was put down with terrifying violence by the British. While the account by the colonial historian Jonathan Forbes might, as Holt rightly recognises, provide an insight into the British representation of these events, it unfortunately has the effect of sanitising the devastation and brutality unleashed by the colonial regime. As late as 1896, the British judge Archibald Lawrie could say in his *Gazetteer of the Central Province of Ceylon* (Vol 1, p 203): "The story of the English rule

in the Kandyan country during 1817 and 1818 cannot be related without shame. In 1819, hardly a member of the leading families, the heads of the people, remained alive; those whom the sword and the gun had spared, cholera and smallpox and privations had slain by hundreds."

The Pax Britannica that followed the rebellion was initially erected on a terrifying base in Sri Lanka as it was in other lands that the empire subjugated. The excerpt from the much less significant rebellion in 1848 is again by Governor Torrington, the very person responsible for its brutal suppression. Holt does recognise that Torrington's account is a kind of self-vindication and also as with Davy and Forbes, a justification and rationalisation of colonial power, but he does not mention that Torrington was, in fact, recalled by the government in Britain for the excesses committed by him and his advisers.

The essays on colonial rule are followed by a brief series of excerpts on "Kandyan culture in the colonial era", that unfortunately tells us very little of this important period. The Kandy period also saw considerable literary activity but Holt's examples are poems on two local gods Pitiye and Dadimunda. He seems to be unaware that these poems or "ballads" are really texts sung in collective rituals or in shrines for local deities. Such local deities are found everywhere in Sri Lanka from very ancient times and cannot simply be seen as a "result of Tamil migrations" or as "resistance to Portuguese rule" during the Kandy period (p 308).

### Emergence of Identities

For me it is a relief to move to Part III on "Emerging Identities". Here Holt is familiar with his material, and moreover, he deals with "identities" that have been little known previously, namely, that of Muslims and Burghers, the mixed descendants of Europeans. The excerpts on "Buddhist identities" are extremely useful as also to a lesser degree the discussions on "Tamil identities". I suppose someone teaching a course on Sri Lanka might be able to complement the excerpts on identity with a discussion on what is meant by term "identity", so sadly misused nowadays.

Part IV on "Independence, Insurrection and Social Change" is also, unfortunately,

a vast topic embracing a long historical trajectory and so can only end up by telling us very little of independence" or of "insurrection" or "social change". But a teacher using this text might be able to fill in the blanks. The last section on "Political Dialogue" is a brave attempt to deal with the aftermath of the long war and the spectre of human rights violations, but based entirely on newspaper articles or popular accounts.

I find the concluding essay "Kingship in the Making" by Doug Saunders particularly offensive. On the basis of propaganda from the president's office that many did not take seriously, the author implies that President Rajapaksa himself has aspirations to wear a crown. I doubt this. But I will confess that, as I write this essay, many do see him as someone who "saved" the nation from the brutal LTTE. Surely such a view is not without its truth. But that truth cannot excuse human rights violations that currently afflict the nation as a whole; or for that matter obscure the looming threat of the cultural and political colonisation of the north by the Sinhala Buddhist majority.

### Conclusions

I would have liked to see these issues discussed in much greater detail and with moral sensitivity, rather than rely on newspaper articles familiar to most of us. As far as Saunders' paper is concerned, I would add that self-glorification and ego-inflation of political leaders via posters is endemic here as in the neighbouring sub-continent, especially south India, and also in much of the non-western world. But such continuing propaganda will surely begin to wear thin in the public which will lose interest in them just as it is also beginning to lose interest in the vulgar "hoardings" and crass advertisements that deface our beautiful country-side. Nevertheless, the omnipresent images of the president often enough accompanied (metaphorically speaking) by all the king's men do not mean that the public at large is naïve enough to believe, as in the Kipling short story, that Rajapaksa is "a man who would be king".

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