

Nira Wickramasinghe (2006) *Sri Lanka in the Modern Age, A History of Contested Identities*, Hurst & Co, London, 2006, ISBN-13: 978-1850657590, hardback, 360pp.

This book offers a vast amount of detailed information on the history of the people and communities of Sri Lanka and the evolution of their identities as opposed to a history of the process of state-building. This is not the first volume that has been published on this subject as the author herself acknowledges. The select bibliography includes several well known authors such as K. M. De Silva and James Manor. The author claims, however, that her study is an attempt to articulate an original perspective on Sri Lanka's history that draws on a critical understanding of and research into the country's colonial past and its post independence and contemporary politics and society. The book is roughly divided into an analysis of the impact of colonial rule on the Sri Lankan people and the impact of the creation of an independent Sri Lankan state in 1948. The chapters are subdivided into a range of interesting sections that deal with important social, economic and political processes all of which, although not suggesting a linear progression, do provide an insight into the different communities that constitute Sri Lanka's plural society, the creation of social hierarchies and the complexities of power relations.

The two main communities today are the Sinhalas (although there are caste divisions within Sinhalese society also) and the Tamils. However, the island is located in the Indian Ocean and since ancient times has attracted traders. The permanent settlement of some of these trading communities and commercial classes has contributed to ethnic diversity. The author makes a distinction between cultural and political identities and also illustrates interconnections between the two. In brief, different groups began to jockey for power with the advent of representative political institutions. For example, the commission on constitutional reform headed by Lord Donoughmore (1927-28) was confronted with 'a self-conscious assertion of communal belonging'. There were even dress codes, so for instance Malays distinguished themselves from Moors by not wearing the red felt fez (a significant community symbol for the Moors) and instead tying a cloth around their heads. More importantly identities were being shaped by notions of an authentic past. The Sinhala nationalists drew on the *Mahavamsa* and the legendary prince Vijaya who is believed to have come from north India, and stressed their Aryan origins. Many Jaffna Tamils felt an affinity with South India and had an attachment to a cultural heritage that was very different from that of the Sinhalas. Religious revivalism (both Hindu and Buddhist) also shaped identities and challenged the social values of foreign Christian rulers and British rule as a whole. Today Buddhism is practised by seventy per cent of the population and the state is committed to giving Buddhism 'the foremost place'. Nevertheless, the theoretical point made by the author is that identities are not stable and unchangeable but fluid and constructed by a variety of processes. Chapter three on 'National framings: Authentic bodies and things' has an interesting section on 'Spreading notions of authenticity: schools, reading, newspapers, theatre and new religious practices'.

The first chapter, entitled 'Colonial Encounters', informs us that for about four hundred years the island of Sri Lanka was the prey of successive naval powers, the Portuguese, the Dutch and the British, that controlled parts of or the totality of its land and changed social and economic structures. A market society developed and was dominated by the needs and

demands of plantation capitalism. The cash crops grown were coffee, followed by tea, coconuts and rubber. The needs of the plantation economy led to inward migration of labourers of South Indian origin who became known as the estate Tamils and occupied the lowest rungs of society. However, the inward migration of labour was resented by the indigenous Sinhala people. Chapter four on 'Before independence: Communities and conflicts' has a section on 'The vote and anti-migrant moves' that examines the issue. In keeping with her argument about the fluidity of identities the book notes that earlier migrants from South India had been assimilated. Therefore, the Tamils are by no means a monolithic community, moreover the estate Tamils have been betrayed by the Sri Lankan Tamils who did not express solidarity with them. Chapter five on 'Citizens, Communities, Rights, Constitutions, 1947-2000' sheds light on why so many Tamils became stateless. Although the agreements between the governments of India and Sri Lanka to grant Indian/Sri Lankan citizenship to these Tamils was an attempt to solve the problem there was not much sympathy for these Tamils within Sri Lanka.

However, while all non-Aryans were considered to be aliens by proponents of Sri Lankan nationalism the British introduced other criteria such as period of residence or proof of intention to settle. The Tamils, therefore, became the victims of a 'rational' and legal order that was implanted in colonial Ceylon. Another point made by the author is that today the most visible communities are the Sinhalas and the Tamils, many other communities exist but are almost invisible. The attempt to fix identities started with the colonial practice of taking censuses. An entire chapter is devoted to the discussion of how European rulers constructed identities by classifying people according to social categories such as caste, religion, race, nationality and so on. In chapter two, 'Colonialism and constructed identities' the author argues that 'when the British officials chose to delineate groups within the native population and refer to them as castes, nationalities, races or communal groups, the term used was never innocent or fortuitous; it reflected an understanding of the differences prevalent amongst the people of Ceylon'. The categories kept changing and in 1921 the principal races recognised by the census included the Low Country and Kandyan Sinhalese, the Ceylon and Indian Tamils, and the Ceylon and Indian Moors. Four other races were acknowledged, the Burghers and Eurasians and the Malays and Veddas. The Muslims of the island were also given recognition by the census. The divisions within the Muslim community were based mainly on origins. During British rule various associations were formed to represent all these communities, for example, the All Ceylon Tamil Congress and the Ceylon Indian Congress. The former claimed to represent all 1.5 million Tamils of the island while the latter championed the rights of the Indians.

The book devotes an entire chapter to a discussion of the left in Sri Lanka and the search for equality before moving on to an examination of the search for sovereignty: Tamil separatism and nationalism. Both chapters note divisions within these movements. The author asserts that the first progressive left organisations originated in the needs of the urban and plantation working classes for representation. The first half of the chapter gives a history of the left movement while the second half focuses on the politics of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) whose aim is to secure social justice for the Sinhalese by taking up arms against an oppressive state that has fostered a neocolonial economy 'completely subservient to the imperialists'. The chapter on Tamil separatism - while acknowledging

that the Tamil community 'is not one but many' - accepts that institutions such as the bureaucracy, the police, the defence forces, the public education system and the judicial system were biased against the Tamils. The author describes the different kinds of Tamils who live in Sri Lanka in great detail and also their links with the Tamil diaspora. She then goes on to discuss their grievances. An important landmark in the growth of the Tamil movement is the Sinhala Only Act (1956) that enraged the Tamil speaking community. In 1958 riots broke out and in 1960-1 the Federal Party led a civil disobedience campaign for Tamil language rights and Tamil consciousness. However, by the early 1970s, the demands for a separate state for the Tamils had gathered momentum. In 1975 the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) was created, an organisation that 'did not hesitate to resort to murder and terrorism in the pursuit of their goal'. The chapter has a good section on the 'War of Attrition: from the 1983 riots to 2001' and a final comment on 'The spirit of Tamilness'. However, it is clear that the author has no sympathy for the LTTE and its supporters. She also castigates the organisation and its ideology for being male dominated and using women to further the aims of Tamil militancy. Elsewhere in the book she notes that women as a social category in Sri Lanka are even more disempowered than the Tamil community.

The final chapter examines welfare measures in Sri Lanka. They were first introduced by the British and included the enactment of minimum wage legislation for Indian estate labour and social legislation on child and family welfare, poverty alleviation, education, health and social security. After achieving independence the Sri Lankan state made a commitment to welfarism. However, the welfare state was dismantled after 1977 with the initiation of economic liberalisation and an export led economy. Welfare expenditure fell from 10 per cent of the GNP in the 1970s to 4 per cent in the 1980s. The chapter goes on to discuss the impact of welfare policies on various sections of the Sri Lankan society, the economic and social costs of the civil war and neo-welfarism: humanitarianism. UN agencies and INGOs and relief organisations have stepped in where the state has abandoned its responsibilities because of conflict, unfortunately creating dependencies.

Identities have torn the island apart, destroyed its chances of economic success and blighted the lives of its poorest citizens. The protracted civil war in Sri Lanka is not the first of its kind in the world and will not be the last. It underscores the potency of ethnic identities notwithstanding the controversies surrounding the LTTE. This volume reflects on Sri Lanka's history and although it does not offer any solutions encourages the adoption of a critical approach to Sri Lankan identities.

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