Slave in a Palanquin: Colonial Servitude and Resistance in Sri Lanka. Nira Wickramasinghe. New York: Columbia University Press, 2020

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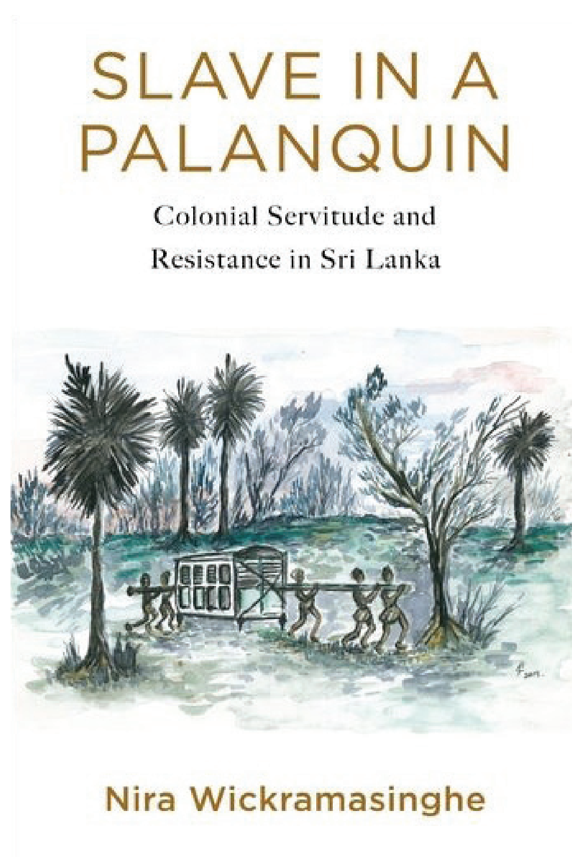

"I understood I was to be carried to the country [to] which the ship was going, which was inhabited by giants and cannibals," Louis Badgamege explained in 1813 (86). The nine-year-old boy did not speak his abductors' language, but he knew that the "particular dress" they made him wear indicated he had been enslaved, along with a number of other Sinhalese children. Louis seemed to appreciate that in the supposed age of abolition, it remained easy to fall into slavery. Only a neighbour's chance finding of the boy aboard a vessel anchored at Galle prevented his being taken away, across the Western Indian Ocean, to a new life of enslavement.

We do not often get to hear the voices of the enslaved, let alone the voice of a child at the moment he was rescued from bondage. By listening to such voices whispering to us from unexpected places, Nira Wickramasinghe has written the most important book we have on the lives and longings of the enslaved in Sri Lanka in the 18th and 19th centuries. As the polyglot crew convicted for seizing Louis reminds us—they were from Mocha, Malacca, and the Malabar coast as well as from around Galle—slavery in Ceylon operated within practices that stretched across the seas in which Sri Lanka sits. But this is more than an account of Sri Lankan or Indian Ocean slavery, valuable as that may be. By situating the stories of Louis and so many others

in the contexts in which they lived, Wickramasinghe has made a significant contribution to the global history of enslavement in the generations when it was fitfully coming to an end. By doing so, she reminds those who do not typically think about Sri Lanka's history that it has much to teach them about global processes.

Wickramasinghe's most important accomplishment is to recover the subjectivity of the enslaved: "My strategy is to capture the slave at the moment he or she acts" (11). The many often surprising actions of the enslaved left "traces and hauntings" (1) all over the archive of empire. These traces may only be found through the most creative work with recalcitrant records. Of the many sources that Wickramasinghe deploys, three in particular help us see the kinds of explanations she undertakes across the book.

Enslaved people appear throughout criminal proceedings: as witnesses, as victims, as the accused. We would not know about Louis's frightening escape without the report made by the unusual Vice Admiralty Commission that convicted his kidnappers. Similarly, without a trial record, we would not know the story of Valentine and Clara, a married pair who attempted to flee their separate masters during a period of incipient slave rebellion in 1797. Their story survives only because Valentine was murdered, perhaps by the same men he had counted on to assist their escape. The island's revenue collectors and sitting magistrates handled routine misdemeanours and gathered evidence, took witness statements, and conducted pre-trial procedures in instances of major crimes. Without their letters and papers, it would be impossible to think about the fate of the enslaved Selestina's infant, who was found dead in a latrine. None of these or the other stories in chapter two, concerned with "enslaved bodies in an archive of violence," could be told without the records of criminal proceedings, where violence of all kinds often ended up. Without the papers of sitting magistrates, Wickramasinghe would not have many of the details that illuminate chapter three's remarkable story of the slave who presumed to ride in a palanquin. By doing so, Cander Wayraven, like others, opened "small spaces of resistance" (90). After all, riding in a palanquin was not just a luxury. It was also an assertion: of status by those who were allowed to enjoy such comforts, and of rebellion by those who were not.

Wickramasinghe also draws from the hundreds of petitions submitted by people of all stripes, including the enslaved, to the Commissioners of Eastern Inquiry who inspected administrative and judicial practices in Sri Lanka in 1829 and 1830 (the National Archives UK, CO416/29-32). Such petitions were often filled with pitiful tales meant to support the requests for justice they contained. This large cache of documents plays a crucial part in chapter four's exploration of the previously unknown "experiment" in offering emancipation to Coviyar, Nalavar, and Pallar slaves who agreed to work cleaning canals around Chilaw in the 1820s. Taken together, episodes drawn from criminal records and petitions indicate how the enslaved "could display a unique form of agency motivated not by a dream of freedom but by a perception of being unjustly or unfairly treated." (88) Even the enslaved, Wickramasinghe reminds us, might act to shape the world around them according to their desires.

Such stories would just be anecdotes without all the evidence Wickramasinghe uses to indicate broader conditions these people faced. One important body of evidence that helps her do this may be found in registers of the enslaved (the National Archives UK, T71/663-71 and 681-82). As in the Caribbean, Mauritius, and the Cape, registration was used in Sri Lanka as part of a slow-moving project intended to end slavery by listing information about individuals and then totting them up to establish the scale of the practice. Wickramasinghe can thus locate some of her subjects in space and time when she can find them in these registers. More often, by aggregating data about thousands of registered people, she is able to reconstruct larger patterns against which the meanings of individual lives become clearer. For instance, by studying long lists of names, Wickramasinghe can speculate about slaves' places of origin—from India to southeast Asia and beyond—and thereby clarify the importance of long-distance mobility in an island's experience of slavery.

One of the pleasures of this book arises from Wickramasinghe's well sign-posted speculations. Court records and petitions can be rich in the mundane details of everyday life because the mundane was so often the backdrop against which moments of violence or other wrongs played out. But such details are only tiny, one-dimensional dots in what were once three-dimensional lives. Wickramasinghe rightly leaves many such stories as she finds them, "sketchy and… unfinished" (3), and trusts the reader to make what she will of the little glimpses of life they provide. In other stories, Wickramasinghe fills out sparse details by posing sharp if unanswerable questions: for instance, questions about the sexual violence that might explain how Selestina came to be carrying a child, and thus how and why it died. Had the babe miscarried? Was it murdered? We can't know. But we can ask what it meant that it was found at all. Did Selestina know she was pregnant? If she did, why might she have hidden the outcome? What

might it mean that no one thought to ask Selestina who fathered that child? Might those who quizzed her, and other witnesses have worried that questions about paternity might lead to her master? Even if we cannot answer such questions, we need to ask them, and think through the possibilities. Wickramasinghe understands that if the historian's work does not sometimes trespass on the province of the novelist—if we do not press on our speculations, while taking care to mark them—we might never fill in "where the archive falters" (75).

By working with archives of these kinds and in these ways, *Slave in a Palanquin* recovers realities of slavery in Sri Lanka and beyond. In doing so, Wickramasinghe adds to the scholarship that we have on the varieties of enslavement and servile labour found across the Indian Ocean, for instance, in works by Megan Vaughan (2005) and Sue Peabody (2017) on Mauritius and by Clare Anderson (2000) on convict labour in southeast Asia and beyond. But perhaps the key contribution of Sri Lanka's stories is how they illuminate global processes of enslavement, amelioration, and abolition that took decades to unfold. Like these and other historians, Wickramasinghe is suspicious of progressive narratives that trace neat lines from slavery to emancipation, lines punctuated by the end of the overseas trade in humans declared by British and American legislation in 1807-08, and by the abolition of slave labour itself in Britain's empire in 1833-34. By Wickramasinghe's account, ending slavery in Ceylon was at best a halting process, slowed by dynamics within the island and beyond, just as it was everywhere else. Sri Lanka thus provides further evidence of the substantial space where freedom and slavery overlapped, before and after abolition, as Rebecca Scott (2008), Malick Ghachem (2012), and Alejandro de la Fuente and Ariela Gross (2020) and other scholars have shown in the Caribbean and Atlantic. In these places, as in Sri Lanka, slavery shuffled unheroically to its demise, and left behind legacies that haunt us to this day.

Many of these legacies were born not during the height of slavery, but during that demise. This makes chapter four particularly important for thinking globally about how slavery came to be replaced by other kinds of exploitation. The 'experiment' at Chilaw in what imperial lawmakers called "amelioration" presented the enslaved with a devil's bargain: to trade enslavement for new kinds of labour nominally declared 'free' but now commandeered to serve the State rather than private masters. That convicts were often put to work maintaining State infrastructure, especially roads and bridges, indicates how similar kinds of work cleaning canals around Chilaw was nothing but 'free' labour stolen by new means. In this way, Ceylon was quite like the Caribbean, where so-called "apprenticeship" replaced slavery with little change in the realities of daily life. Here and throughout, Wickramasinghe reminds readers how "freedom is clearly a misleading antithesis to slavery" (7). The 'free labour' of the liberal imagination, supposedly unleashed by emancipation in the Indian Ocean and the Atlantic, was never free for those who performed it. Thanks to Wickramasinghe, we can now place an understanding of Sri Lanka alongside those that we have for the Caribbean and the Atlantic to see how, across the globe, that slavery worked, how it died, and how it lingers.

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From People's Councils to Participatory and Deliberative Democracy in Sri Lanka

Call for Articles

'*Balaya diyawannawen eliyata*!' or 'Power to the People!' was one of the rallying cries of the aragalaya, porattam, struggle that we witnessed from April to August 2022. This idea subsequently found expression in the demand for People's Councils that can include citizens in political decision making processes as a way to hold elected and non-elected officials to account, and as a means of reforming our political system and deepening democracy. There have been many debates and discussions on the idea since then, with a spectrum of opinions expressed on the concept, the structure of such councils, as well as their viability. Today this call assumes more salience and urgency in the context of the violent repression of the aragalaya and the continuing repression of peaceful protests related to the aragalaya as well as other protests around the country including in the North and East. These protests are themselves evidence of the absence of a forum/forums in which concerns of citizens can be articulated, heard, debated, discussed, and addressed in a peaceful manner. In this context, *Polity* invites submissions that can make a contribution to this conversation, while contextualising the idea of People's Councils within the much longer tradition and older scholarship, debates, discussions, and experiments around participatory and deliberative forms of democracy in Sri Lanka and elsewhere.

The idea of citizen participation in democratic governance is one that can be traced to the Greek polis. The more recent debates around participatory democracy can be traced to the 1960s, where the imperative emerged in the context of a crisis of faith and legitimacy between citizens and the State, deep disillusionments with institutions of governance because of corruption, lack of transparency, and lack of responsiveness to the needs and demands of people. These debates have since manifested in a dizzying array of institutional mechanisms such as *gram panchayat*s in India and participatory budgeting in Brazil. Sri Lanka is not without experiments in participatory decision making processes, particularly in development related projects. Consider Farmer Organisations relating to the Gal Oya Irrigation and Resettlement Project and the Mahaweli Development Project; the Local Authorities Participatory Development Plans drawn up by Local Councils; and owner-driven housing reconstruction projects in the North and East. We believe there is much we can learn from a robust engagement with the scholarship as well as the institutional experiments on the issue.

Suggested sub themes include, but are not limited to, exploring the following questions:

- What are the institutional forms through which democratic politics can be deepened and made more participatory?
- What sorts of issues are best dealt with through such institutional mechanisms? What has worked and what has not?
- Are there preconditions that are necessary for such experiments to work? If so, what are they?
- How do advocates in Sri Lanka conceptualise People's Council?
- How does one ensure that hierarchies of power and domination based on class, caste, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, etc., that characterise our institutions are not reproduced in People's Councils? What kind of People's Councils can privilege the participation of the most marginalised and vulnerable in our communities?
- What comparative experiences of participatory democracy can we draw on?

Send your pitches and drafts to the Editors at polity@ssalanka.org by 30 November 2023.