

ECONOMY, CULTURE, AND CIVIL WAR

Laksiri Jayasuriya

Deborah Winslow and Michael Woost (eds) (2004) *Economy, Culture, and Civil War in Sri Lanka*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, ISBN 0-253-21691-5

This volume, though originating from a Workshop held in 2000 at the University New Hampshire, USA, is more than the normal run of a collection of essays. It is located within the growing body of scholarly writings devoted to an understanding of the ongoing ethnic conflict, especially the political violence, over the last two decades in Sri Lanka. The structure of the volume consists of an introductory essay by the Editors, which is followed by several essays arranged in three Parts to demonstrate the articulation of national economy, class, and ethnicity in ethnic conflict and political violence.

The contributors, drawn mainly from related but distinct strands of discourse in sociology and anthropology, focus on different facets of the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka bearing on the dominant theme of the volume, viz., the complex linkages between the economy and the ethnic conflict. Part One ('Articulation of National Economic Policy and Ethnic Conflict') focuses on the national economy—its policies, practices, and outcomes in the period 1977-2000—and serves as an informed preamble to Part Two ('Articulation of Class, Ethnicity, and Violence') which draws pointed attention to the critical role of economic forces in unraveling the manifestations of the ethnic conflicts between the Tamils and Sinhalese in the 1980s. The essays in Part Three ('Articulations of Civil War in Everyday Life') seek to translate national economic policies into the lived reality of the 'local' by documenting how political violence impacts on the social life of different groups, and importantly, how these persons, often the innocent victims 'of abstract policies and practices view the changing world'. The volume concludes with a post script by the editors on the 'peace process' which emerged in 2000-2003 and still continues.

What makes this study noteworthy is that it is specifically focused on examining the 'economic terrain of Sri Lanka life' (p.8) which has been severely affected by the 'war' and in particular, the 'war economy', tied up with the politics of ethnicity as well as the politics of profit. The editors of this volume—two leading anthropologists, one from economic

anthropology and the other from development studies—set the tone of the volume and demarcate the scholarly boundaries within which the several essays are located with an introductory essay entitled 'Articulation of Economy and Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka'.

The theoretical framework presented in the Introduction revolves round the key notion of 'articulation', and is influenced by the work of the marxist social theorist, Stuart Hall. According to this formulation, the construction of social order at any given point of time is contingent on the arrangement of complex social linkages and articulations. The notion of articulation serves as 'a valuable starting point of social analysis of political violence and is seen as an evolving process devoid of 'fixed identities'. Hence, the need they argue 'to think of articulation as multiple layered, engaging, transforming and never final'. This is particularly so in the Sri Lankan context which is a society divided by location, gender, class and ethnicity. It is therefore a work very much in the tradition of British radical critical social theory not only of Stuart Hall but also of Raymond Williams, E.P. Thomson and others. Clearly the editors see this tradition as providing an alternative to some recent theories of post colonialism though a more direct engagement with these competing traditions would have been useful.

The introductory essay stands on its own and presents a theoretical point of view utilizing many different strands of contemporary social theory, and is clearly intended to structure and underpin the crux of the argument developed through the several articles in this volume. As the editors express it individually and collectively, these essays hopefully mirror the theoretical framework provided in the introductory essay. In any event, the expectation of the editors is that this will help to provide a new 'understanding of how Sri Lanka's tragic civil war has become embedded in the social formation of wartime Sri Lanka' (p. 23). This theme is developed mainly through the theoretical exposition provided by one of the key essays (Chapter 4) of this volume. This is from the leading marxist Sri Lankan social theorist—the late Newton Gunasinghe, who in a pathfinding essay entitled, 'The Open Economy and its Impact on Ethnic Relations in Sri Lanka', went against the orthodoxy of Sri Lankan anthropological discourse, one steeped in historical and/or essentialist modes

of cultural anthropological theorizing. This lead essay of Newton Gunasinghe, hitherto available only in Sri Lanka, is made accessible to a wider audience by its inclusion here.

This volume, in many ways rates as a long overdue scholarly tribute to Newton Gunasinghe whose untimely death in 1988 was a loss not only for Sri Lankan social sciences, but also for the wider scholarly community. In their generous tribute to Gunasinghe, the editors observe that he eschewed ‘a simple “straightline” approach ... [and looked at] how in a multiethnic society, changes in the structure of the national economy produced effects that built on historically specific social formation but always in ways that were differentiated by class, ethnicity, and other factors’ (p.19). Using this conceptual framework Gunasinghe was able to show the linkages that existed between different strands of the new economy – all generated by the neo liberalism of the post 1977 era. These articulations drastically altered the economic structure and political architecture of Sri Lankan society. In many ways Gunasinghe’s work remains a sharp rejoinder to other Sri Lankan scholars preoccupied with a language of discourse framed in terms of a historicity and distorted logic of post modernist cultural explanation of ethnic politics and violence, which gives causal primacy to religion and ‘culture’.

No doubt, influenced by Gunasinghe’s work, the editors have, with some degree of success, sought to frame the several essays to highlight the dialectical relationship between social forces and ideology. Another Sri Lankan scholar included in this volume, who extending this line of scholarship is a leading Sri Lankan sociologist, Siri Hettige of the ‘Colombo School of Sociology’. In an informative and well documented, more empirical piece than that of Gunasinghe, Hettige in Chapter 5 (‘Economic Policy, Changing Opportunities for Youth and Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka’) highlights the complex way in which identity articulates through factors of class and interest. These linkages serve to fashion ‘the opportunity structure’ of Tamil and Sinhala youth in the post 1977 era of neo liberal politics and economic theorizing. What this work neatly demonstrates is the way in which people in significant groupings such as class fractions (e.g., lower class youth, Tamil youths, etc.) are affected by shifts in economic policies.

An overview of the economic policy context referred to by Gunasinghe and Hettige is provided in Part One by Richardson (Chapter 2) and Shastri (Chapter 3). These two essays which concentrate on the interconnection between national economic policy and politics provide a useful descriptive account, along with a succinct critique of the

social and economic policies of the open economy policy regime of the post 1977 era. Richardson (Chapter 3 entitled ‘Violent Conflict and the First Half Decade of Open Economy Policies in Sri Lanka: A Revisionist View’) with his ‘revisionist’ account of neo liberal economic policies draws pointed attention to the social and human consequences of the policies pursued between 1977 ad 1982 — the early years of the open economy. It was more than a matter of coincidence that these most significant economic changes in Sri Lankan post colonial history set the scene for intense and violent ethnic conflicts amongst the Sinhalese and also between the Sinhalese and Tamils.

Shastri’s contribution (Chapter 3 entitled ‘An Open Economy in a Time of Intense Civil War: Sri Lanka, 1994-2000’), on the other hand, concentrates on the period 1994-2000 and demonstrates how the protracted civil war, generated a war economy, creating the illusion of ‘war with growth’. To use the language of the editors, it would have added greatly to these two essays if they were accompanied by articulating the underlying political and institutional fabric of the post colonial discourse of the post 1977 period characteristic of the neo liberal economic policy regime. The crucial point here is the shift from the politics of welfarism which defined the post-independence period to the new politics of warfare. If there is one major shortcoming, it is the failure to address the complex political dimensions of the ethnic conflict, especially the role of the state and constitutionalism. This volume could well have benefited by the inclusion of the work of a political anthropologist.

The concluding essays in Part Three consist of three empirical studies by a sociologist and two anthropologists (Bremner, and Gamburd, and Lynch respectively). These essays describe how 3 local groups—a lower class community in Colombo, rural lower class villagers and the *juki* girls working in garment factories—have engaged with the new social formation created by the war and the economy. These contributions underline a more distinctly human dimension by considering the transformative effects on people involved in the war by documenting what motivates action, construct interests, articulate the local with the national and move people in and out of the war.

By focusing on the ‘lived dimensions’, the editors seek to avoid an economism – a sort of materialist/economic reductionism which extols a national aggregate macro-economic perspective revealed clearly in the ‘greed or grievance’ debates about the cause of ethnic conflicts or civil wars. Or, in the development dogma built around the notion

of social capital, widely promoted by the World Bank and other international development agencies. According to this development philosophy, 'social capital constitutes an essential ingredient for organized efficiency and successful development' (p.13). This critique of economism, and implicitly of an instrumental view of social forces presented in terms of national aggregate and/or structural features alerts the reader to the need to insert the factor of human agency for a deeper understanding of social and political conflict.

Having concentrated on understanding the genesis of the ethnic conflict and violence as well as its persistence, the editors in the Post Script, feel obliged to reflect on how the foregoing analysis relates to the 'peace process', first initiated in 1994, but formalized between 1999 and 2003. One of their main contentions in this regard is the 'peace is not simply a cessation of hostilities' but a new scenario which relates to 'new articulations of cultural economic and political hegemony on global, national, and local levels' (p.197). They introduce a word of caution about the hidden assumption implicit in the internationalization of peace efforts that 'peace and development' go hand in hand.

What stands out as the single most important contribution of these essays to the extensive literature in this area is the logic of the argument being advanced in these essays, viz., that there are 'many complex linkages and articulations to consider in war and peace' extends to a wider social critique and analysis of contemporary Sri Lankan society. By their use of the notion of 'social formations', the editors argue pointedly that Sri Lankan society is 'not a fixed entity'. Rather it needs to seen as characterized by a complex array of practices which evolved through different periods of its history but may or may not resonate with each other. It is the dynamic of this social and political transformation which is illuminated by these essays.

This volume rates as compulsory reading for any student of not just of ethnic conflict of Sri Lanka, but more generally for those engaged in the study of social change in post colonial societies. ■

From *The Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 36 (1) 2006

Emeritus Professor Lakshmi Jayasinghe is Honorary Senior Research Fellow in the University of Western Australia.

New from the SSA



Price Rs. 350/-

Available from Suriya Bookshop & Leading Bookshops