

Sri Lanka: Collective Identities Revisited, Volume II. Ed., Michael Roberts, Colombo: Marga Institute, 1998. pp. 452 (and preface).

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Sri Lanka: Collective Identities Revisited (Vol. II) edited by Michael Roberts consists of 15 essays in varying degrees of quality, mostly written by academics with an interest in Sri Lanka working or studying abroad. It also contains an editor's preface which the editor correctly calls "Meanderings Amidst Heightened Moments." In a way, the present volume is the second of a two part reincarnation of a collection of influential essays originally published in 1979 as *Collective Identities, Nationalisms and Protest in Modern Sri Lanka* also edited by Michael Roberts. Of the 15 essays in the present volume, those by C. R. de Silva, Michael Roberts and S. Arasaratnam are reprints from the 1979 version. Some of the remaining essays have either been published before elsewhere or have been presented in various conferences. In other words, some of the ideas presented in these essays have been circulating among Sri Lankan or Sri Lanka oriented academic circles for some time. In general, my comments would be mostly focused on some of the essays appearing in this volume for the first time, in which I would attempt to introduce the readers to the main arguments of the essays rather than making a detailed critical review, in the conventional academic sense.

At the outset I should also note that given the significance of the issues dealt with in the three essays reproduced from the 1979 edition, it could have made much more sense for the authors to add pertinent contemporary or recent material and reformulate their work, rather than publishing them merely as essays of historical significance or artifacts from academic production from a previous period. Thus Michael Roberts' "Nationalism in Economic and Social Thought, 1915-1945", C. R. de Silva's "The Impact of Nationalism on Education: The Schools Takeover (1961) and "The University Admissions Crisis, 1970-75" and S. Arasaratnam's "Nationalism in Sri Lanka and Tamils" seem like essays that are encapsulated in a time capsule where socio-political developments of the last two to five decades have not been dealt with despite the fact that such information is readily available, and in need of analysis not merely for academic consumption but for purposes of intervention as well. If such an effort was made, their work would have been of much more relevant to the contemporary concerns.

In chapter 5, in an essay titled "Pushing Poson" Jonathan Walters writes about the politics of religion in the context of Poson celebrations Sri Lankan Buddhists, an event that marks the introduction of Buddhism to Sri Lanka through arahat Mahinda. He describes the transformation of arahat Mahinda into what he calls "Mahinda the Nationalist" in the post 1950 period (1998: 135). Prior to that, in

the 19th century Walters suggests that there were two versions of Mahinda's co-existing among Sinhala Buddhists — Mahinda the Temple Preacher and Mahinda the Missionary (1998: 136-139). This transformation, he suggests, should be understood in the context of the political changes of the time since it reflects the way in which the post-colonial elite perceived and reacted to these changes (1998: 135). Walters also shows how the commemoration of Mahinda in Poson celebrations expanded rapidly since the early 20th century, gaining political momentum, particularly after independence in 1948. With reference to specific incidents up to the mid 1990s, he suggests that this process continues to date through many transformations (1998: 140 - 156). It is interesting to note the manner in which Poson has been turned into one of the most important national Buddhist celebrations by the press, particularly through the Lake House Group using its sponsorship of the *aloka puja* (honoring with light) during the main Poson celebrations in Mihintale (1998: 144). He also describes the role played by politicians and archaeologists in the making of Mahinda the Nationalist to represent the modern Sinhala Buddhist nation (1998: 151).

In Chapter 6 titled "Praxis, Language and Silences: The July 1987 Uprising of the JVP in Sri Lanka." Jani de Silva presents an essay on the second uprising of the JVP. Her analysis of the politics of the JVP is based on four elements which she believes are central to understanding the politics of the JVP. She has identified these key areas as the JVP's notion of social justice, its notions of patriotism and related dynamics, the role of violence in social struggle and issues of leadership (1998: 168 - 190). One of the key features of de Silva's essay is her attempt to base her work on scattered JVP material such as leaflets and tapes etc. which are no longer easily accessible.

Much of the conventional academic wisdom suggests that the JVP ideology based on concerns over class and socialist aspirations in the late 1960s, was transformed into an ideology based on "patriotism" in the late 1980s (1998: 164, 190). Contrary to this view, de Silva argues that despite the shift to a platform of patriotism, a preoccupation with social class remained a primary category of the JVP identity and politics.

Neloufer de Mel in her essay "Agent or Victim: The Sri Lankan Woman Militant in the Interregnum" (Chapter 7) attempts to place in context the positionality of women militants in JVP and LTTE movements. She focuses on the manner in which their roles as militants have allowed them to transcend the limitations of conventional female identity and gender roles as that very process also imposes other forms of restrictions on them (1998: 200). Much of her ethnographic material come from a conversation with a woman member of the JVP who was active in 1971 as well as poetry from Tamil women poets and LTTE literature. She points out that most of LTTE literature on women cadre, such as Adele Ann's book *Women Fighters of Liberation Tigers* (1993), stresses the idea that

the armed struggle is a departure from traditional restrictive gender roles imposed upon them by patriarchal society (1998: 202). Yet in other instances such alleged freedoms are clearly curbed by the LTTE itself (1998: 209). Such examples of "empowerment" and simultaneous containment, de Mel points out, can be seen in the dynamics of both the JVP and the LTTE (1998: 199-217).

Referring to the experience of a JVP militant active in the JVP's first uprising in 1971, de Mel points out that her womanhood had been desexualized and her personal needs are placed secondary to the cause of "her" struggle. The gender control that takes place in militant groups became most clear, as she points out, in the manner in which such organizations relegate emotional and sexual needs as merely personal and thus not a priority. It is also in this context that the "female combatant's needs as a woman are never considered political needs" (1998: 213).

Clearly de Mel's essay is one of the first in Sri Lanka to seriously question the notion of empowerment of female combatants within militant groups while also focusing on the containment strategies which the membership in such organizations entail. Such problematic and uncritical notions of empowerment emanate not only from the LTTE propaganda, but also from tracts that pass as academic discourse. On the other hand, given the importance of the issues de Mel is dealing with, her arguments could have been made much

more stronger and convincing had she talked to women combatants of the JVP's second and much more brutal uprising in the late 1980s as well as LTTE female combatants. However, in the context of the secrecy of the LTTE and the restricted access to its members the possibility of conducting research with the latter is much easier said than done.

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In chapter 8 Pradeep Jeganathan presents an interesting and readable essay titled "All the Lord's Men? Ethnicity and Inequality in the Space of a Riot." Based on his fieldwork in an area south of Colombo, Jeganathan attempts to find certain similarities or comparisons between the anti Tamil violence of July 1983 and the 1992 floods of Colombo. As Jeganathan points out, these comparisons emerge out of the experiential qualities of the two events. Much of that experience is based on the "suddenness" and the "extraordinariness" of the two events (1998: 227-228). The other aspect of this comparison relates to the issue of property. In both events property in the words of Jeganathan "stood seriously challenged" (1998: 228). In both moments the boundaries between these spaces disintegrated. To Jeganathan the flood "is a tracing of the riot" (1998: 229).

Through a number of conversations with some of his neighbors Jeganathan brings out a series of recollections about the riot, particularly focused on the fate that befell a Tamil family living in the neighborhood. Through these recollections it becomes clear that the violence directed against this family had much more to do with other issues than their mere Tamilness. For instance, the partial

destruction of the house that the family had rented from a Sinhala had nothing to do with their Tamilness but with the sense of inequality some of the "rioters" felt in their relationships with the owner of the house. In these recollections one could also find how a family which was once popular in the neighborhood despite their Tamilness became demonised over their reaction to one particular incident prior to the July violence, and how the violence directed against them was justified in recollections after the event in which they were considered aloof, distant, different and so on (1998: 221-242). Jeganathan, in his analysis of the floods of 1992 as a tracing of the violence of July 1983 has successfully brought into sharp focus many issues such as concerns over inequality, and differential recollections of memory, often hidden in the discourse on ethnicity and violence in Sri Lanka.

In chapter 9, Mark Whittaker presents a paper which he has called "Learning Politics from Taraki: A Biographical Fragment". Whittaker presents an interesting but a somewhat larger than life picture of a former Tamil militant from the People's Liberation Organization of Tamil Elam (PLOTE), whom he has identified as Taraki. He introduces Taraki in an amazing array of manifestations: Tamil separatist guerrilla, sailor, jungle guide, party theorist, export businessman, published historian, philosopher, and journalist.

The essay is based on a series of conversations Whittaker has had with Taraki in the eastern Sri Lankan town of Batticaloa in 1984 (1998: 249-265). In his essay Whittaker presents numerous views Taraki has on society and the politics he is familiar with, based on what Taraki has learnt from experience as well as his own readings and interpretations of selected ideas from Chomsky, Foucault, Gramsci and so on. But one particular

theme that clearly emerges from the conversations that Whittaker has reproduced and in some cases presented in summarized form is Taraki's critique of formal anthropology and university based knowledge production (1998: 247-265). As Whittaker recounts, Taraki takes issue with Whittaker's "assertions of professional neutrality" because the prevailing political conditions demanded "engaged action" (1998: 248). Of course, issues of anthropological neutrality as well as the possibility of objectivity in the practice of anthropology have been debated for quite some time in international academic discourse, even though that debate has not touched the Sri Lankan academic or popular discourse in any real sense. It appears that to Taraki, conventional anthropological practice, if "uninvolved", was merely a discourse that has no real purpose. The following words from Taraki places this sentiment in perspective:

"Why am I going off tomorrow to get my hands dirty, when a normal anthropologist, equally a repository of knowledge —, would simply go back to his desk and write articles for university press publications". (1998: 258)

Clearly, Taraki has a point. And, he is also simplistic in this particular critique. He has a point in the sense that the Sri Lankan

academics in general — not simply anthropologists — are notoriously noninterventionist when it comes to taking a stand with regard to tenuous political issues. That is one reason why Sri Lankan social sciences in the formal sense and social intervention in general are marked by an extreme sense of mediocrity.

He is simplistic in the sense that one cannot expect every individual to be a larger than life hero in situations of political and social instability as is the case in Sri Lanka, particularly in the context of prevailing practical difficulties, which are far from the ideal. For example, taking a clear stand in support of Tamil separatism (however legitimate it may seem to be) could ensure that state restrictions may be imposed on local anthropologists while foreign ones may find it difficult to get a visa to do their field work next time around. Similarly, a critique of LTTE politics could mean that an anthropologist could get her hands so dirtied that she may not get an LTTE “visa” to enter areas under the movement’s control. Besides, different individuals “get their hands dirty” in different ways, while all such efforts may not be as spectacular as becoming a guerrilla,

a philosopher, published historian or whatever. Despite its limitations however, the aspects of Taraki’s critique as outlined above are important since such a critique is necessary, but has not yet come from seats of academic production within the country where a critical self-evaluation of the relevance of contemporary academic production is urgently needed.

Patricia Lawrence in chapter 10 writes about the work of oracles in eastern Sri Lanka in a situation where extensive political violence marked by fear and lack of trust has, according to her, silenced conventional means of mourning (1998: 271-275). Moreover, individuals were not able to take their problems to government authorities since some agents of that government in the form of military and police forces were responsible for much of the violence they experienced. Even though the almost complete silencing of conventional mourning implied by Lawrence is not present in the routine realities of eastern Sri Lanka, it is quite clear that modes of mourning, expression of emotion in the context of political violence and methods of coping with trauma have certainly undergone significant transformations as a result of the war as well as in response to it. It is then in this context that her descriptions of the role of oracles in *amman* cults become important. According to Lawrence, people’s emotional outpouring in local *amman* temples overcomes political silencing which has occurred under conditions of war (1998: 274). In these temples, *amman* oracles “embody, interpret and acknowledge” the injuries of war (1998: 274).

The role of the oracles become more relevant and legitimized given the fact that many of them are also touched by the same violence that had been experienced by their clients. Their advise to the clients varies from asserting that the violence they had experienced would happen again, suggesting to mothers that they should not give up

hope for the sake of their children irrespective of the violence they

may have personally experienced (1998: 279). It is significant that in the southern part of Sri Lanka also a similar process of oracular intervention as well as expectations of demonic and divine intervention in delivering justice and revenge became popular in a situation when mechanisms of secular justice and law and order failed with the expansion of political violence in the south in the late 1980s. While the issues that Lawrence address — the problems of mourning and coping with trauma — are important issues in sites of violence including eastern Sri Lanka, her essay would have benefited much had she introduced additional ethnographic material from her fieldwork.

In chapter 12 Sankaran Krishna presents an interesting essay on “Divergent Narratives: Dravidian and Elamist Tamil Nationalisms.” Krishna argues that contrary to popular perception in both India and Sri Lanka, Tamil Elamist nationalism in Sri Lanka and what he calls Dravidian nationalism of Tamil Nadu were not in dialogue and had completely different contexts of origin, and the reasons for their emergence were different from each other (1998:

318-319). But this perception has had serious consequences in both Sri Lankan and Indian politics irrespective of historical realities (1998: 319).

But Krishna suggests that the manner in which Tamil leadership in Sri Lanka looked towards India for help in the context of worsening ethnic politics in Sri Lanka has quite a bit to do with the Indian intervention in

Bangladesh in 1971. According to him the emergence of Bangladesh pushed Sri Lankan Tamils further along the road to Elam, believing in its achievability while it also exaggerated their expectations of the Indian central government on behalf of their cause (1998: 339, 341). The Bangladesh situation also marked a more aggressive Indian external policy towards its troublesome neighbors, a model India used later on in Sri Lanka to bring around the Jayewardene regime more in tune with Indian policy. As he points out, in India the Bangladesh situation was interpreted as indicating the tremendous foreign policy implications “that could accrue from intervention in neighbouring countries by utilizing beleaguered minorities to further regional hegemony” (1998: 341). After the 1980s, with the worsening of the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka, Tamil Nadu politics also adopted the cause of Sri Lankan Tamils as one of its agendas, which only changed after the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi by the LTTE. In the end, according to Krishna, it was because of the perception of the intimacy of these two nationalisms that the Indian army fought its longest war — in Sri Lanka (1998: 340-341).

In general, I would have very little to say about the remainder of the book. A. Jeyaratnam Wilson’s brief essay titled, “Politics of Ethnicity and Ethno-nationalisms in Asia” as the title itself suggests attempts to paint a broad picture of ethnicity and ethnic based nationalisms in Asia. But such an enterprise clearly was not possible in the 9 pages that Wilson had devoted to it, and in the end what purpose this essay plays in this volume is not clear to me. It would

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have been better off in a magazine. Charles Sarvan, in chapter 14 presents a short story titled "An Appointment with Rajiv Gandhi" which is a fictional account of the thoughts and activities of the woman suicide bomber of the LTTE who assassinated Gandhi. In the story the unnamed woman assassin perceives of her action as a marriage in which she embraces death as she garlands her bridegroom (1998:357-361). Chapter 15 consists of a very long essay by Godfrey Gunatilleke titled, "The Ideologies and Realities of the Ethnic Conflict - A Postface." In the 57 pages Gunatilleke has devoted to his rather unilinear description of the emergence of ethnic conflict, its development, and its present position (in his view) offers a generalized description of a very complex process, and much of its complexities tend to disappear beyond the margins of Gunatillake's essay. But it still serves the purpose of a general

outline for those who are pressed for time, but are nevertheless interested in "understanding" the Sri Lankan ethnic conflict.

Finally, despite the kind of short-comings I have briefly outlined above, the present volume marks yet another significant contribution to the realm of knowledge production in the Sri Lankan academia. But unfortunately that knowledge — as typified by this book — continues to be published in a language most Sri Lankans would not be able to read even though they deal with issues which at least some of them should know about and think about. One hopes that Marga as the publisher would consider bringing out at least some of the more useful essays in this volume in Sinhala and Tamil in not so distant a future.

Postponement of Elections

"We as a group of concerned citizens, are deeply perturbed at the imposition of all-island Emergency to postpone provincial council elections, and the grave consequences for democratic governance resulting from this action. We note that elections in Sri Lanka have been postponed before with disastrous consequences for democracy, peace and stability. We also note that in the past, elections have been held in Sri Lanka when the security situation was worse and the threat to democracy graver. The logic of the Government's decision is, therefore, that the exercise of the fundamental right to the franchise is to be conditioned by the uncertain fortunes of a military offensive.

We are of the firm belief that the imposition of all-island emergency to postpone elections on the grounds of security is, in this instance, unwarranted, and has clearly been taken for partisan political reasons.

This decision has blatantly negated the Government's commitment to democratic governance boldly stated in its 1994 election manifesto with regard to the use of the emergency to postpone elections. The 1994 People's Alliance Manifesto reiterates, "The State's powers to change laws governing any aspect of the conduct of elections, by having recourse to Emergency Regulations promulgated under the Public Security Ordinance, will be removed."

We note that the deterioration in the security situation and the critical nature of the Jayasikuru offensive identified by the Government is not of recent vintage.

In any event, it precedes the holding of the SAARC summit and perahas in Kandy and Kataragama with the substantial additional security presence these events necessitated. We also note that the personnel requirement for security during the elections relates to the police and not the armed forces.

Furthermore, the Government was insistent on holding local government elections in the Jaffna peninsula (29 January) in spite of LTTE threats to candidates and voters alike. In fact, there was an LTTE attack on the Gurunagar jetty on the day of the polls and during campaign the LTTE attacked the Punguduthivu camp, killing two Pradeshiya Sabha candidates amongst others. Moreover, we are concerned that the logic of the Government's argument indicates that its strategy for conflict resolution has a direct and debilitating impact on its commitment and capability for democratic governance. We are extremely concerned that as much as the opening of the supply route is cited as the reason for postponing elections, the defence of it too could be used for the same purpose in the future. Is it to be the case that elections in this country can only be held once the war has been concluded?

Most importantly, we wish to emphasize that it is a recorded fact that the major responsibility for violence during elections lies with the main political parties themselves. The security problem during elections stems in the main from the propensity for thuggery and intimidation embedded in the political culture practiced by the political parties. The security problem could be considerably mitigated if the leaders of these parties take decisive action to demonstrate their commitment to free and fair elections.

We demand that the Government and all political parties restore public confidence in the institutions and practices of democratic governance. As the first and crucial step in this direction we demand that the Government revoke the all-island Emergency with immediate effect and proceed with the provincial council elections.

We call upon all citizens to write the President saying "No! to the all-island Emergency and No! to the postponement of elections", and to demand that democratic rights and freedoms be upheld and that accordingly the elections be held without delay."

The statement was signed by :

Prof. Vijay Kumar, Prof. P. V. J. Jayasekera, Dr. Moira Tampoe, Dr. Lilamani de Silva, Dr. Nawarathna Banda, Dr. Michael Fernando, Attanayaka M. Herath, Dr. Sisira Pinnawela, Jayaratna Maliyagoda, S. Balakrishnan, Sumanasiri Liyanage, Dr. Sunil Wijesiriwardene, Jayatilleke Kammallaweera, Gunadasa Kapuge, Kapila Kumara Kalinga, Suranjith Hewamanna, Kelly Senanayake, Jiffry Yoonoos, Uvindu Kurukulasuriya, Victor Ivan, Nayananda Wijekulatilleka, Air Vice Marshal Harry Gunatilleke, Dr. Arujuna Parakrama, Tissa Abeysekera, Waruna Karunatilleke, Rohan Edirisinha, Dr. Paikiasothy Saravanamuttu, Sunila Abeysekera, Kumudhini Samuel, Dr. Jayadeva Uyangoda, Dr. Qadri Ismail, Aritha Wikremanayake, Austin Fernando, Prof. A. J. Gunawardena, Janaka Biyanwila, Dr. Kumari Jayawardena, Samantha Hiththatiyage.