

Prospects and Problems in Sri Lankan Studies

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This essay is intended to provide an introduction to recent Sri Lankan studies in the United States. The first section outlines the broad parameters of the field, and the second places American-based scholarship in the context of global scholarship on Sri Lanka, especially that being carried out in Sri Lanka itself. The third section discusses the prospects for American research on Sri Lanka. The essay is not intended to serve as a comprehensive review of current scholarship in the United States, but enough references are provided to give some guidance to scholars or graduate students considering entering the field. It covers only recent scholarship, although some older works remain important (e.g., Ryan 1953, Wriggins 1960, Kearney 1971, G. Obeyesekere 1981).

American Scholarship on Sri Lanka

The number of American-based scholars and advanced graduate students who focus on Sri Lanka is quite small. At any one time close to 100 individuals fall into this category, including those scholars for whom the Sri Lanka aspect of their research is very much secondary to disciplinary or thematic interests. But enough people are active in the field to constitute a lively intellectual community. Most American-based scholars with doctorates received their degrees from American institutions, but a few have overseas graduate degrees, principally from British universities. They are found in all types of American higher education institutions, from large research universities to small colleges that focus on teaching undergraduates. Independent scholars also contribute to the field.

The American Institute for Sri Lankan Studies (AISLS), which was formed in 1995, serves as the professional organization for US-based scholars interested in Sri Lanka. It has 13 institutional members and around 70 individual members, and is a member of the Council of

American Overseas Research Centers and an affiliate of the Association for Asian Studies (AAS). It has a well-established fellowship program (funded by grants from the US State Department) that supports research in Sri Lanka by US citizens. It also coordinates Sri Lanka-related panels at the annual meeting of the AAS and at the Conference on South Asia, which is held annually in October at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. In Sri Lanka the AISLS has a center in Colombo that provides support for US-based scholars, hosts a regular program of conferences and workshops, and promotes US collaboration with Sri Lankan scholars in and outside the academy. Its library is open to both US and Sri Lankan scholars. The center's activities are made possible by grants from the US Department of Education and the Ford Foundation.

Three anthologies provide overviews of aspects of the past interaction between the United States and Sri Lanka. Goonetilleke (1976) presents a selection of accounts by nineteenth and twentieth century American travelers, C. R. de Silva (1989) assesses the more recent American impact on Sri Lanka, while Jayatilleke (2002) collects a wide range of informal observations on American-Sri Lankan scholarly exchange.

American-based scholarship on Sri Lanka is concentrated in two disciplines, anthropology and religious studies (including the history of religions). Other major disciplines, such as political science, economics, history, sociology, psychology, and literary studies, are each represented only by a handful of individuals. This concentration of expertise in two disciplines has both benefits and drawbacks. It means that despite the overall small number of scholars interested in Sri Lanka, there is enough strength in anthropology and religious studies for research on Sri Lanka to have a significant presence in these broader disciplines. In these two areas there is enough good scholarship being produced that it is possible to speak of a Sri Lankan sub-field. If the disciplinary distribution of scholars was more balanced, it is unlikely that work on Sri Lanka would make an impact on any one discipline. On the other hand, the concentration of American expertise

in two disciplines means that the overall field of American-based "Sri Lankan studies" provides a rather unbalanced scholarly picture of Sri Lanka.

When one examines the specific topics treated by American scholarship on Sri Lanka, the strengths and weaknesses of concentration are again evident. A great deal of American scholarship touches on one or both of two topics -- Buddhism and identity/ethnicity.

There is a well-established American interest in Sri Lankan Buddhism, one that extends not only to the discipline of religious studies (Abeysekara 2002; Bartholomeusz 1994, 2002; Berkwitz 2004; Blackburn 2001; Bond 1988; Carter 1993; Hallisey 1988; Holt 1991, 1996, 2005; Salgado 2004; Samuels 2002; Smith 1978; Trainor 1997; Walters 1996) but also to anthropology (Kemper 1991; G. Obeyesekere 1984; Gombrich and G. Obeyesekere 1988; Scott 1994; Tambiah 1992; Seneviratne 1978, 1999) and other disciplines (Duncan 1990, R. Obeyesekere 1991). This research, much of which has been influenced by anthropological and sociological understandings of religion, addresses both historical and contemporary topics. It represents various approaches, but one important theme has been the ways Buddhists and Buddhism react and adapt to modernity. Scholars have examined closely how Sri Lankan Buddhists have sought to use and reshape "traditional Buddhism" to make it meaningful in modern circumstances. They have carried out fieldwork both in urban environments and in rural areas, and relied on textual studies for historical work. "Modern" and "traditional" Buddhism have been conceptualized in diverse ways, but analysis of the relationship between these two "types" of Buddhism lies at the heart of much American work. In recent years some scholars, influenced by critiques of "Orientalism", have challenged more explicitly the view that there exists one authentic (or traditional) "Buddhism" or "Sinhalese Buddhism" (e.g., Hallisey 1995, Abeysekara 2002).

About seventy percent of Sri Lanka's inhabitants are Buddhist. Three other major world religions, Hinduism, Christianity, and Islam, also have significant

followings on the island. In contrast to the extensive work on Buddhism, American scholars have paid relatively little attention to these religions. When they are studied, it is typically from the standpoint of anthropology rather than religious studies (e.g., de Munck 1996, McGilvray 1998a, Whitaker 1999). Scholars assume that Sri Lankan Buddhism is important for understanding Buddhism in general, but this is not the case for the other religions, which are perceived as marginal in relation to the global faiths of which they are a part. Given the extensive scholarship on Buddhism, the relative lack of work on other religions is striking.

The other main focus of contemporary American research on Sri Lanka is studies related to collective identities and ethnicity. Interest in this area developed in the 1980s, a product of the increasing strife that stemmed from political claims made on the basis of ethnic identities. Until recently, cultural and ideological aspects of the conflict received the most attention, in part perhaps because many American-based studies were shaped by the pre-existing academic interests of scholars of Buddhism. There has, for instance, been considerable work on ways Buddhist symbols have been employed as a political tool and to promote ethnic identity.

Much of the most interesting work on ethnicity and identity is found in articles appearing in anthologies. These volumes reflect the international nature of Sri Lanka studies and include contributors from different countries. While American-based scholars have a significant presence in these works, it is not practical to make a sharp distinction between their contributions and those of other scholars.

One of the early works of this genre is the British-based volume edited by Manor (1984). Some of its articles now seem somewhat dated, but others remain important for understanding the events of the early 1980s. The 1980s also saw three volumes produced in Sri Lanka (Social Scientists' Association 1984, Committee for Rational Development 1984, Abeyesekera and

Gunasinghe 1987), all of which had an important influence on American scholars. Like the other volumes discussed here, their contents are uneven, but taken together these three works forcefully demonstrated that ethnic and other social categories must be considered as historically dynamic and changing categories. Thus, the 1980s were a kind of watershed, with many scholars no longer taking these social categories for granted.

Several anthologies appeared in the 1990s. Spencer (1990) is a British-based volume that focuses on the construction of historical images and their use in contemporary politics. Since its appearance American-based scholars have continued investigating this topic (e.g., Woost 1993; Reed, 2002). Later in the decade, three volumes edited by American-based scholars appeared. Pfaffenberger and Manogaran (1994) examine the Tamil side of the ethnic conflict. Ismail and Jeganathan (1995) bring deconstructionist analysis to bear on ethnicity and nationalism, while Bartholomeusz and C.R. de Silva (1998) examine closely the relationship between Buddhist "fundamentalism" and various minority communities. Also important is the two-volume study edited by the Australian-based scholar Michael Roberts (1997-98), which ranges widely over many aspects of nationalism and identity. Four more volumes have appeared in recent years (Gamage and Watson 1999, Rotberg 1999, Silva 2002, Winslow and Woost 2004). Overall, the more recent anthologies reflect a general movement away from the particularities of Sinhala-Tamil conflict and towards a wider consideration of the many complex currents that together form the basis for the many different categories of identity found in contemporary Sri Lanka. The studies explore the importance not only of ethnicity and religion but also gender, caste, class, region and other factors.

American-based scholars have also produced a number of books on themes concerning ethnicity and identity. Kemper (1991) examines a Pali chronicle, the Mahawamsa, with special attention to the different ways that it has been interpreted and extended in the twentieth century. Tambiah explores some of the historical roots

of the island's "ethnic fratricide" (1986), and offers an assessment of Buddhism's ideological role in the conflict (1992). Little (1994) uses the papers and discussions generated by a conference on Sri Lanka held at the United States Institute for Peace to construct a general account of the roots of the conflict, with special reference to the use of religious ideologies by Sinhala and Tamil polemicists and politicians. Manogaran (1987) considers the geography of the proposed "Tamil homeland" and proposes changes in provincial boundaries as part of a blueprint for a settlement. Sabaratnam (2001) examines the conflict from the standpoint of historical sociology, while Devotta (2004) offers a reading of ethnic relations grounded in constitutional history. A recent dissertation (Bass 2004) provides an account of identity formation among up-country Tamils. American-based scholars have also produced many articles on aspects of identity and ethnicity; this literature is too large to review here.

Most of this work on ethnicity and identity does not recommend particular government policies, but it is nonetheless carried out with its political implications very much in mind. Given the ongoing level of political violence, many American-based scholars feel that they have a moral responsibility to produce scholarship that might be used to defuse conflict. In the aftermath of the anti-Tamil riots of 1983, much scholarship focused on Sinhala and Buddhist identity; the assumption was that Sri Lanka had a "majority problem." By the early 1990s, however, many American scholars became more aware of some of the problematic aspects of Tamil nationalism. These include the employment of child soldiers, the human rights violations carried out in its territory, and the use of extortion in the Tamil diaspora.

In recent years studies of identity formation and ethnic conflict have begun to address a broader range of issues, such as human rights and the economic and psychosocial implications of ethnic strife (Daniel 1996, Keenan 2005, Kleinfeld 2004, Lawrence 1997, Marecek 1998, Soysa 2002; Winslow and Woost 2004).

There is an increasing realization that over twenty years of violence has changed the nature of the conflict, and that it is no longer possible to envision a settlement that does not take these changes into account.

Gender studies have also started to attract considerable interest, mostly but not entirely from anthropologists (e.g., Bartholomeusz 1994, Chapin 2003, de Alwis 1998, Gamburd 2000, Hewamanne 2003, Lynch 2002, Miller 2002, V. Samarasinghe 1998, 1999; Winslow 1994). Many of the younger scholars entering Sri Lankan studies have an interest in gender, and their work is likely to attain an increasingly high profile in the future. Much of the current work is concerned with the transformations of gender identities and gender relations in response to economic pressures, the globalization of the labor force, and the displacements and dislocations due to the civil war. Violence against women is also beginning to attract the attention of researchers.

In many other fields, scholars have few American-based colleagues working on closely-related projects. Instead, they generally work with a small number of colleagues in Sri Lanka itself, or they form links with American scholars who work on analogous topics within their disciplines or on other parts of South or Southeast Asia. It is not possible here to give a full account of this scholarship, but a few examples will indicate the range of work being done.

Historical research, apart from the history of religions, has been scarce, but in recent years American-based scholars have published several books (C. de Silva 1997; Peebles 1995, 2001; Webb 2002). Two books on politics have also appeared recently (Devotta 2004, Richardson 2005), while other political scientists have focused primarily on chronicling and interpreting the fast-moving political events (e.g., Oberst 1992, Shastri 1997). There is also a considerable body of interdisciplinary work that has implications for "development" (e.g., Brow 1996, Brow and Weeramunda 1992, Caron 2002, Kearney and Miller

1987, Kemper 2001, Winslow 1996, Woost 1993). Fields such as ethnomusicology (Sheeran 1997), drama (R. Obeyesekere 1999), performance studies (Reed 1991), law (Samaraweera 1997), medicine (McGill and Joseph 1996-97, Natasi et al. 1998-99), psychology (Freeman 1998), urban planning (Perera 1998), linguistics (Gair 1998), literary studies (Ismail 1999), Sinhala literature (Hallisey 2003), geography (Duncan 1990), and economics (Richardson and S. Samarasinghe 1991, V. Samarasinghe 1999) attract occasional interest. Such work, while sometimes quite isolated within American-based academic disciplines, often addresses familiar themes such as ethnicity and nationalism, which are of interest to many in Sri Lankan studies.

The Broader Context of American-based Scholarship on Sri Lanka

American-based scholars who work on Sri Lanka form one part of a global network of researchers. The total number of European scholars interested in Sri Lanka is at least as large as in the United States, but they are scattered in a large number of countries and form a less cohesive group than their North American counterparts. Although European scholars also have a considerable interest in Buddhism, research on development-oriented and policy problems, including those with gender dimensions, has a higher profile in European scholarship than in North America. At one time Britain was clearly the European center for Sri Lankan studies, but its number of active scholars has declined in recent years, although there is still strength in anthropology and development studies. London's extensive library and archival resources remain attractive for many types of investigations of the island. Of the continental countries, at the present time scholars in the Netherlands and Scandinavia are the most active. On the whole, links between American and European scholars are not particularly close.

There is also work on Sri Lanka being done in India, Australia, and Canada. Indian scholarship is mostly concerned with Indo-Sri Lankan relations and with development issues. Australian scholarship is strong in

public policy and development. Both Australian and Canadian scholars also work on diaspora communities of Tamil Sri Lankans.

The largest concentration of active researchers is of course found in Sri Lanka itself. Social science and humanities research is carried on in the universities, in non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and in government departments such as the central bank, census department, and public health bureau.

The island has twelve universities, six of which have been established within the past two decades (K.M. de Silva and Peiris 1995; Gunawardana 1992). The oldest and best known is the University of Peradeniya, near Kandy. The University of Jaffna, which continues to function in a very difficult social context, and the University of Colombo also have some staff members with international connections. But the majority of the academic staff at all universities have few direct contacts with foreign scholars. In the 1990s, because of the need to teach the large numbers of students who were unable to pursue their educations in the late 1980s, when most universities were closed because of civil unrest, Sri Lankan universities faced considerable difficulties. The need to "catch up" extended teaching hours and left university staff with little time for research. In addition, university libraries can afford to subscribe to only a very limited number of foreign periodicals, can buy only a few foreign books, and have only limited access to the burgeoning electronic resources for research and scholarship. As a result, the research findings of foreign scholars working on Sri Lanka are very often unavailable to university staff. Despite these difficult conditions, some university staff continue to carry out and publish important research.

The diminished research role of the universities has been offset to some extent by the increasing role of non-governmental organizations, or NGOs. Some of the best known include the two International Centres for Ethnic Studies (ICES-Colombo and ICES-Kandy), the Centre for Women's Research (CENWOR), the Social Scientists' Association, and the Institute for Policy

Analysis. Most of the research-oriented NGOs are based in Colombo or Kandy. These organizations, which rely on foreign funding, often have more resources and more international links than the universities. They tend to focus on issues that are of interest to their funders - economic policy and development, human rights, globalization, social problems, conflict resolution, and ethnic relations. While the work of the NGOs has greatly enriched Sri Lankan academic life and provided intellectual and material resources for both university-based scholars and those independent of the universities to carry out a broad range of research on urgent and topical issues, it has also highlighted the disparity between the resources available for the topical research favored by the foreign funders of NGOs and more basic social science and humanities research. If this situation continues, in the long-run the quality of policy-based research will suffer from the lack of up-to-date basic research. Basic work in fields such as medical anthropology and family dynamics, for instance, is necessary to address social problems such as AIDS and domestic violence.

In recent years an increasing number of American scholars have affiliated with NGOs rather than universities when they are in Sri Lanka. The NGOs often offer better facilities, English-speaking staffs, and fewer bureaucratic obstacles. This trend is understandable, but it may further isolate the majority of Sri Lankan academics who do not have access to the NGOs' connections and resources. However, the Fulbright program does continue to place American scholars in universities, where they are assigned teaching responsibilities.

What is the relation of American-based scholarship to that produced in Sri Lanka? Some of the American-based work in religious studies and anthropology has been fairly widely disseminated. In other disciplines, the American contribution to research provides only occasional input.

The American focus on anthropology and religious studies means that the American field of "Sri Lanka

studies" is in many ways quite distinct from the concerns of many academics in Sri Lanka itself. Some of the more dynamic fields of Sri Lankan scholarship are virtually unknown in the United States. A good example is Sinhala literature, which is taught in many Sri Lankan universities. Most of the scholarship it generates is published in the Sinhala language. Sri Lankan scholars in this field have no counterparts in the United States, although some of them maintain links with a very small number of interested American-based individuals. This disjuncture between American and Sri Lankan scholarship even extends to Buddhist studies, where many Sri Lankan scholars write within intellectual traditions that take little account of the sociological concerns that shape American scholarship. The language of scholarship poses problems across all disciplines, since many Sri Lankan scholars write in Sinhala or Tamil, and few American-based scholars read secondary works in these languages. Moreover, while most Sri Lankan university staff have at some point in their careers studied English, in recent years many younger lecturers have had little opportunity to develop their English-language skills. And very little American scholarship has been translated into Sinhala or Tamil. For an interesting discussion of Sri Lankan intellectual life and attitudes towards foreign scholarship, see Uyangoda (1997).

Another obstacle to closer links between US and Sri Lanka-based scholarship is that most Sri Lankan academics do not have easy physical access to American scholarship. Since few international journals are available in libraries, Sri Lankans often have to rely on the random circulation of photocopies. Most books published by American-based scholars are never reviewed in any Sri Lankan publication. And few American scholars publish in Sri Lankan journals, partly for career considerations but also because most university-sponsored periodicals suffer funding difficulties and are often published only after long delays.

The library at the AISLS center in Colombo seeks to make international scholarship available to Sri Lankan scholars through its subscription to JSTOR, which

provides full-text access to many international journals. In addition, it acquires recent books on Sri Lanka published in the US, Europe, and India, and keeps files of conference papers and reprints of articles.

Prospects

American-based scholarship on Sri Lanka faces important challenges. Ideally, it will be able to balance several different needs, addressing both American and Sri Lankan concerns. At one level, the scholarship should be responsive to Sri Lankan needs and concerns. Given that foreign funding for NGOs ensures the viability of some policy-oriented and applied research, work in less fashionable and seemingly less "relevant" fields might prove the most useful in the long run, especially when carried out in collaboration with Sri Lankan university staff. In particular, historical research of all types (not just that identified with the discipline of history) and studies of contemporary social and economic processes not directly related to the "ethnic issue" or "social problems" might have the greatest impact.

At the same time, given both the low profile of Sri Lanka and the "rethinking of area studies" in the American academy, it is not likely, even if it were desirable, that American scholars will seek to produce work that is intended only as a contribution to knowledge about Sri Lanka. Most scholars already formulate their work in ways that they hope will draw an audience beyond Sri Lanka specialists, and this is likely to become an even stronger requirement for American researchers in the future. This need is recognized by the AISLS, which sponsored four panels on "Sri Lanka in South Asia" at the 1998 Madison Conference on South Asia. These panels sought not only to place Sri Lanka in the broader context of South Asia, but also show how a consideration of Sri Lanka can reshape interpretations of South Asia as a whole. A number of recent publications also follow this strategy (e.g., Hallisey 2003, McGilvray 1998a, 1998b; Rogers 2004a, 2004b; Tambiah 1996, Winslow 1994), which has intellectual antecedents in some earlier social science

work that also had explicitly comparative concerns (e.g., Herring 1983, Leach 1961, Yalman 1967). Work that seeks to link Sri Lanka with contexts beyond mainland South Asia is also likely to enrich further our understanding of Sri Lanka and alert a wider scholarly audience to the island's historical and contemporary importance. The AISLS is encouraging this approach through the criteria it has set for its fellowship program. Applicants who already work on Sri Lanka are asked to show how their work will contribute to the understanding of historical or contemporary connections between Sri Lanka and other parts of the world. The competition also seeks to bring new perspectives to Sri Lankan studies by encouraging applications from scholars with no previous experience of Sri Lanka. About one-half of recent fellows have fallen into this category. As a result, experienced scholars with backgrounds in areas such as the history of the Dutch East India Company, Pali and Tamil literature, development studies, nineteenth-century cartography, and women's studies have carried out research in Sri Lanka.

Finding the desirable balance between American and Sri Lankan needs will not always be an easy task. In an ideal world, there would be more funds to bring Sri Lankan scholars to the United States to interact with their American colleagues. Although some such opportunities exist, particularly through the Fulbright program, they do not begin to meet the potential demand. They also tend to favor scholars who already have international connections of one sort or another.

Despite all these difficulties, there are many opportunities for American-based scholars to form meaningful links with Sri Lankan colleagues and do important research that can reach audiences in both the United States and Sri Lanka. Sri Lankan academics generally welcome the opportunity to work with American-based colleagues. There are also considerably fewer bureaucratic obstacles to carrying on research than in other countries of the region, such as India. Sri Lanka, with its rich social and geographical diversity, is also well situated for scholars

interested in doing comparative work. In the past, American scholarship on Sri Lanka has been more prominent than one would expect given Sri Lanka's relatively small size. Sri Lanka scholarship, for instance, has been well represented in the pages of the *Journal of Asian Studies*. There are presently several younger scholars who are only beginning to publish the results of their research. Despite the limited number of scholars active in the field, the outlook continues to be bright.

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