
Daniel Bass makes a welcome contribution to the scholarship on Sri Lanka with a thorough ethnographic study of an oft-neglected community. The narrative of Up-country Tamils—descendents of colonial-time Indian labour migrants working on the estates in Sri Lanka’s central highlands—escapes the mould of the island’s political master cleavage: the antagonism between the majority Sinhala community and the so-called Sri Lankan Tamils, whose elite vied for a separate state. Ironically, the position of the Up-country Tamils as the stepchild of the island’s ethno-political panorama often gets replicated in scholarly writing on Sri Lanka. In analyses of the island’s recent separatist war and unresolved ethno-political crisis, the Up-country Tamils typically receive only token treatment.

It is Bass’ insightful discussion of the everyday production and reproduction of identity in the Up-country, more than its theoretical contribution to scholarly debates, that makes the book worth reading. The ethnographic core of observations and interviews (based on fieldwork in Hatton, in 1999–2000 and 2006) is embedded in a wider review of historical sources, a discussion of unionism and politics, and transnational dimensions. The latter issue is explored on the basis of complimentary ethnographic fieldwork in two hill stations of Tamil Nadu (India), which results in critical and worthwhile reflections on repatriation.

The book starts out with a relatively straightforward history of colonial rule, migration and estates, which pays due attention to intra-Tamil issues of caste, place and socio-economic inequality. Bass does a good job in connecting the grand schemes of history to the details of everyday life, and revealing the way injustice often outlasts times of change. Ironically, Sri Lanka’s independence heralded the loss of citizenship for the Up-country Tamils. “Kankanis” (the Tamil “supervisors” who served as proxies for colonial schemes) were abolished, but subsequent “Talaivars” (Tamil “head men,” associated with unions) reproduced patterns of exploitation and corruption. Bass goes on to describe the community’s persistent bread and butter issues—wages, labour rights, housing, and so on—and takes issue with an historic tendency to write the vital role of women in estate labour out of the story.

He argues that it was the closure of political, civic and social channels for expressing estate labourers’ identity, which pushed the work of identity into the registers of culture and spatial belonging. Chapter 5, on religiosity, presents ample interesting detail on the oracles of (place-based) Amman temples, and the way rituals and processions provide a stage for the enactment and subversion of local pecking orders. Similarly, street drama (chapter 6)
provides a stage for expressing and addressing community issues, but Bass interestingly points out that the expression of ethnic identity and grievances has displaced Tamil drama’s historical preoccupation with caste. Such observations elucidate a vital analytical thread of the book: the evolution of different layers of identity and the associated cleavages—caste, class, gender, place, region, dialect, religion and ethnicity—and how the latter came to trump all of the former.

The detailed ethnographic exploration of these dynamics forms the main strength of Bass’ book. His careful juxtaposition of lived ground realities and perspectives in the Up-country with a balanced review of Sri Lanka’s colonial and post-colonial politics puts Bass in a good position to explore the ethnogenesis of the Up-country Tamils as a “diaspora next door” (to India). He offers a robust and politically engaged demonstration of how “Up-country Tamils have become Sri Lankan, the ways that they have remained Indian, and the meanings of these identifications” (186).

While this ethnogenesis and its contemporary manifestation provide a useful narrative, the book does relatively little to go beyond ethnographic description. The conceptual discussion remains brief and there are some missed opportunities for connecting to broader debates: the discussion of place-making for example (centrally important to the book’s narrative) strangely does not acknowledge any geographical debate on this topic. The book derives some broader resonance from Bass’ consistent references to other Indian-origin estate communities, on Fiji, Malaysia, Mauritius and Trinidad. Scholars interested in the diaspora associated with post-colonial estates will find the book interesting for this reason. However, the author’s claim that these contexts are more relevant for understanding “Sri Lanka’s ethnic problems” than Hindu-Muslim communalism in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh (187) remains unsubstantiated. Bass’ interesting narrative of the Up-country does not really succeed in providing a strong vantage point to engage with Sri Lanka’s ethno-political conundrums; it steers clear of exploring Sri Lanka’s wider questions of ethnic separatism, its ethnicized democratic politics, or the nature of the state in any significant detail. The book’s claim to relevance for academics working on violence and post-conflict nations thus seems to be unfounded.

Bass underlines that identities are relational and for that reason the Up-country Tamil identity needs to be understood in connection (or opposition) to Sinhala and (non-Up-country) Tamil identities. This contention could have been explored further. Sri Lanka’s other Tamil community (whom Bass oddly labels as “Jaffna Tamils”) gets left out of the story almost entirely. In a side note, the author acknowledges that it is a simplification to subsume this entire community (including those living in Batticaloa, Trincomalee, the Vanni and Colombo) under the northern phrase Jaffna (53–54). This sudden terminological pragmatism is at loggerheads with the book’s central plea for a fine-grained understanding of place and identity, and it is strangely
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dissonant in a chapter that spends many pages justifying the name Up-country (Malaiyaka) Tamils, while problematizing the alternatives: Indian Tamils, Plantation Tamils, Estate Tamils or Coolies.

All in all, Bass’ solid ethnography will be of interest to scholars of (South Asian) diaspora, as well as to Sri Lanka specialists who wish to strengthen their knowledge on this under-represented community. Readers desiring a surprising or conceptually stimulating argument, are less likely to find “Everyday Ethnicity in Sri Lanka” a must-read.

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In this important and well-written study of Southeast Asian attitudes to American power since the end of World War II, Natasha Hamilton-Hart examines “foreign policy beliefs” in Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, the Philippines and Vietnam. She bases her study on interviews with foreign policy experts and diplomats as well as a wide-ranging survey of scholarship on the cultures, politics and histories of the region. Although she writes in part for a specialist audience of foreign policy and political science scholars, for whom abstract formulations like “unmotivated’ cognitive processing” (31) and “biased scanning” (35) will be meaningful, the book will be of general interest to historians of Southeast Asia and useful in teaching at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. Two aspects of Hamilton-Hart’s approach stand out and will offer excellent topics for classroom debate: she is critical, but does not engage in a “blame game” about the negative effects of American foreign policy in Southeast Asia; and she bases her analysis on universal cognitive categories rather than culturally specific ones.

Behind what Lord Palmerston called “permanent interests” that explain the choices nations make in their relations with one another lie biases, attitudes and “beliefs” that are held by the people who actually formulate and carry out foreign policy. How these beliefs are formed is what interests Hamilton-Hart. Why do the majority of the diplomats she interviewed support “American primacy” in the region? After setting out the plan of the book in chapter 1, Hamilton-Hart explains her theoretical framework in chapter 2. Her main point here is that, except for Vietnam, Southeast Asian elites in the countries of her study have been pro-American because American policies have helped them hold onto power, and their success in doing so has allowed them to conflate their own interests with those of the nation-states they serve. In chapter 3, Hamilton-Hart traces, country by country, the historical creation of the nexus of personal interests and the belief that what