

Introduction to the Symposium on Caste in Sri Lanka and the Sri Lankan Diaspora, Part II

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For this second part of the Symposium on Caste in Sri Lanka and the Sri Lankan Diaspora, we have selected a set of four essays that continue our interest in thinking about caste on and of the island, not as something predominately relegated to history and declining in significance, but as an ongoing part of everyday life that remains understudied and in need of social and political attention. Each of these four essays challenge normative conceptions of caste on the island, from whether caste itself is determined by ethnicity, to questioning its role as a component in the careers of actors and organizations of the island's story in the twentieth century. In this collection, we have not always chosen articles containing arguments with which we agree. We have selected essays that advance our conversation in new, exciting, and sometimes surprising ways.

The first essay, by Dominic Esler, is titled "An Integrated Approach to Caste in Sri Lanka." Esler's provocative work rethinks and challenges what he describes as a fundamental presumption of most public and scholarly understandings of caste on the island: that at least two parallel and incommensurate ethnoreligious caste systems exist, one Sinhala Buddhist, the other Tamil Hindu. In the process, Esler provides an extensive appraisal of caste research on the island. As he writes: "If caste in India has, as Mosse has argued, been discursively 'enclosed' within the categories of religion and politics, in Sri Lanka it has been enclosed within ethnicity..." The consequences of this, he explains, are multiple, ranging from the partition of the research field into two camps to the development of ethnographic literature that is "theoretically disengaged" from the extensive caste literature in the region.

Our second essay, written by Bahirathy Räsānan, is titled "Perspectives on Caste and Militant Nationalism in Sri Lanka: The LTTE and Resistance Against Vellalah Hegemony." Drawing on interviews and surveys conducted during the last phases of the war and informed by years living in a world shaped by the Liberation Tigers of

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Tamil Eelam (The LTTE, or Tigers), Räsänen crafts an argument through territory replete with fierce agendas and unhealed wounds. She writes:

The LTTE's association with caste was deeply ambivalent and remains a subject of debate. On the one hand, its leader proclaimed an ambition to abolish caste differences and spoke of creating an egalitarian Tamil society free from entrenched hierarchies. On the other, their interventions often appeared to my interlocutors as less focused upon dismantling caste as a social system and more concerned with toppling the ingrained hegemony of the Vellalah elite, who had long monopolized political, social, economic, and religious power in Jaffna. This ambiguity raises the question of whether the LTTE sought to build a genuinely caste-free society or merely to reorder caste relations in ways that eroded Vellalah hegemony while consolidating its own legitimacy as the bearer of Tamil nationalism.

Räsänen's data and the claim that the Tigers were motivated by an anti-Vellala agenda is controversial and will certainly spur debate. Among other things, the evidence she offers demonstrates the central role caste has played in the lives of people wrapped up in the Tamil nationalist cause, despite the longstanding tendency to obscure and silence caste as a threat to a unified Tamil nation.

The third essay of this collection, by Bhadragee Hewage, is titled "The Caste Negotiations of Anagarika Dharmapala (1864–1933) in Colonial Ceylon." Hewage takes as his subject arguably the most famous Sri Lankan social reformer ever to have lived, the controversial Buddhist activist and anti-colonial-cum-national leader, Anagarika Dharmapala. Sifting through his voluminous writings in Sinhala and English, Hewage seeks to read Dharmapala's nuanced relationship with caste, from his mixed parentage and critiques of the operation of caste on the island, to his admiration of caste in India. Subtle differences between Dharmapala's Sinhala writings, which Hewage describes as "more intimate and forceful than his English-language work," offer clues. "Indeed," he writes, "it is from these [Sinhala] writings that we gain our clearest understanding of Dharmapala's positionality regarding caste and his attitudes towards its practice and existence."

Mark E. Balmforth's "The Arrogation of Being Tamil and Other Campaigns Against Caste Discrimination in Jaffna, 1927-1957" is the fourth and final essay of Part II. Through this work, Balmforth draws our attention to what he describes as an oppressed caste-led, anti-untouchability and civil rights movement centered upon four claims: a common Tamil identity, the right to free education, access to public cremation space, and separate electoral representation. By framing these campaigns as part of a larger project well predating the so-called Temple Entry Movement of the late 1960s, Balmforth makes the case that caste struggle has been as significant to the

story of Sri Lankan Tamils in the twentieth century as the question of nationalism and sovereignty.

We hope that this Symposium on Caste in Sri Lanka and the Sri Lankan Diaspora will stimulate further research on this relatively neglected terrain of social life in Sri Lanka, as well as promote development and social justice on the island. We encourage our community to interrogate the arguments made herein and to consider them while shaping future investigations, policy initiatives, and social action seeking to promote social justice, equity, equality, and democratic social values. We remain open to suggestions for future research, policy, and action, and welcome communication from our readers.