



THE CEYLON PRESS HISTORY OF SRI LANKA 1

THE GREAT CONUNDRUM

Sri Lanka & The Magic Spell

DAVID SWARBRICK

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DAVID SWARBRICK
& The Editors of The Ceylon Press



Published By The Ceylon Press 2024

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THIS BOOK IS PUBLISHED BY

The Ceylon Press
The Flame Tree Estate & Hotel
Mudunhena Walawwa,
Galagedera 20100,
Kandy,
Sri Lanka.

www.theceylonpress.com

“The proper
order of things
is often a
mystery to me.”

The Cheshire Cat.
Alice in Wonderland,
Lewis Carroll, 1865.

ONE

Small is Beautiful

It took a refugee from Nazi Germany, with an interests in economics and Buddhism to note the singular connection between two of the most obvious characteristics that distinguish Sri Lanka.

“Small,” remarked E. F. Schumacher in his eponymous book in 1973, “is beautiful.”

It was economics, rather than Sri Lanka that Schumacher had in mind, but, as with all seismic observations, his simple statement lent a formative new way to understand previously inexpressible truths.

For Sri Lanka is both small and beautiful. So small in fact that it could fit into India 50 times; into Britain almost 4 times or even Peru almost 20 times. Its nearest neighbour, Tamil Nadu, could accommodate it twice over, with land to spare. Head a little further north and ten times more people crowd into nearby Pakistan, or six more into Bangladesh.

Schumacher’s only other book, published on his deathbed in 1977, “A Guide for the Perplexed”, is a study on how humans live in the world – but it could easily lent its title to a mandatory guidebook for issue to every person who passes through Bandaranaike Airport, citizen or guest, VIP or economic migrant.

For little about the island is straightforward, despite or because of its size and beauty. Confronting it for the first time is like first encountering Rubik’s Cube, that infamous multi coloured rotating brick toy whose coloured ends appear so easy to organise into blocks. The outcome, though satisfying, and apparently almost effortless, remains virtually impossible to achieve.

Just below the surface of almost everything on the island, and simmering with delight, richness, chaos, reward, or just plain thwarting befuddlement, lies the innate complexity of what is quite possibly the most byzantine and bewitching country in the world.

The more you see, the more you wonder – why?

Why, for example, make a simple presidential election quote so convoluted and full of enough own-goal traps to risk making the spoiled votes equal to the good ones? The 2024 presidential election brought almost 40 candidates forward for a preferential style vote of such complexity that the Election Commission had to issue a 200 word note on how to correctly mark the ballot paper.

But perhaps this is to worry unnecessarily for the country's political system has, as horse riders might note, plenty of form. By 1978 when the current constitution was adopted, it had already enjoyed three earlier ones, roughly one every sixteen years. Now regulated by this, its second Constitution since Independence, it is blessed to possess a governing document of such elastic resilience that it has undergone an average of one major amendment every second year, and still survived.

Such political robustness is nothing less than what should be expected of an island whose circuitous history meanders

through over 2,500 recoded years to take in at least 12 former capital cities, as many, if not more kingdoms, and 300 recorded kings, some half of whom were estimated to have murdered the other half. Conundrums, reversals and the appearance of sudden polar partisan opposites have riotously followed almost every step of that wild journey. The kings eventually made way the world's first elected female head of a modern state when in July 1960 Sirimavo Bandaranaike was elected Prime Minister; yet in 2018 a new President reimposed a four-decade-long ban on women buying alcohol.

Given that barely 6% of the country's supreme law-making body, its parliament, is filled with female MPs, makes this institutional sexism immediately understandable – but to explain it one needs to look little further than the fact that just under a fifth of all MPs have just one A level to their credit. But there's much more to the rule of law than mere exams. Should parliament depress you, look to the country's Supreme Court, a body that has thwarted attempted coups and power grabs through the decades.



TWO

Contradictions

"Do I contradict myself," asked the American poet, Walt Whitman? "Very well then I contradict myself, (I am large, I contain multitudes.)."

And so too does Sri Lanka.

Despite Nobel prize winning scientists, Booker-prize winning writers, and architects that have profoundly reshaped how people live right across the tropical world, its best universities barely scrape into the top one thousand worldwide with a pedagogy that deliberately fails almost half its students.

Honest domestic consumers eager to pay their electricity bill must first correctly guess which of 8 categories they fit into before they can pay up, proof, if ever it was needed, that here at least there is little pleasure to be had in being a consumer.

Used car prices have more than doubled in the past few years and at any one time, eggs, onions, rice, milk powder or even turmeric have entered An Alice in Wonderland World, priced well out of the reach of ordinary people.

Yet still the kiribath is made. This dish, of coconut flavoured milk rice, is unique to the island, the muse behind Anuradhapura's Kiribath Vehera, a stupa of almost unimaginable antiquity that once was said to house the sacred tooth relic itself.

The snack itself never fails to delight, a comfort food that pushes Butter Chicken, Shepherd's Pie, Spaghetti or chocolate biscuits to the back of any gourmet's fridge - yet seems but a demure option in a national cuisine enriched by visitors that stayed too long -

Portuguese love cakes, Dutch Lamprais, Lisbon pumpkin preserve, deliciously crispy yellow deep-fried Amsterdam koekjes , Tamil dosas, idlis and vada, roast paan, Keralan hoppers, English fish cutlets, Christmas Cake, brown Windsor Soup or tea itself.

In village after village, town after town, traditional medicine, endorsed by the government, with its own doctors, ministry, training, teaching and hospitals, cures and alleviate the suffering of thousands of people, daily.

Given the island's history, it is no surprise that so many national resources should be placed for the health care of its people. The layouts of at least 5 ancient hospitals are found among Anuradhapura oldest ruins, and with them the tantalising Brahmi inscriptions of two physicians for the second century BCE . King after king improved and enlarged the nation's health facilities building hospitals across the land and endowing them with revenue. One even built a hall for several hundred patients, each to be attended to by a slave. The third century CE king, Buddhadasa, was so committed to health that he even took to doctoring himself, curing snakes and monks alike. Today the nation's free universal Western health care system is among the best in South Asia. Even so, patients, feeling some degree of illness, need first to self-diagnosis before electing to see the correct doctor, praying all the time,

as they hobble towards the hospital, that they are heading towards the right cure – a fate that eluded a recent government minister who fell ill after spectacularly drinking a ‘miracle’ COVID potion, concocted by a man who claimed to have received its recipe from Hindu goddess of destruction, Kali.

THREE €

Not What It Seems

Nothing is really what
it seems.

The island's very geography makes it look as if the country itself is commendably easy to grasp. Huge flat coastal plains ring each golden kilometre of the entire island. Dotted with coconut groves and orchards of cashew and mangosteen, it seems as if nothing is ever really out of sight.

Yet step inland and the plains become hills, the hills, mountains and plateaus, their slopes entangled by dense jungles sliding down into shudderingly steep valleys that carry over 100 rivers to the seas. With 1200 notable peaks, the country may have fewer mountains than distant Lebanon (1,652 peaks), but like Lebanon, its highlands have encouraged villages to look on one another as France might gaze upon Germany or China upon Hong Kong.

"Strength lies in differences, not in similarities," noted Stephen Covey author of *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, yet the island's cultural differences have led to civil war, terrorism, and racism. But so too have they created a besottedly multi-cultural homeland, whose deep, and stunningly rich cultural traditions delight in the very differences between Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Singhalese, Tamil, Burger, Moor -still less its Malayalam, Ambalavasi, Mapilla, Telugu, Vaddars, Waggai or Vedda.

Its paramount religion, Buddhism, the one religion in the world that most definitely cherishes peace, is routinely hijacked by extreme nationalist monks

calling for the elimination of other religions, the personal consequences of their hate crimes, rendered inconsequential by the protection they enjoy from key establishment figures. One recent President, found guilty of failing to prevent the 2019 Easter Bombings, is facing jail, whilst Sri Lanka's irrepressible Cardinal, Malcolm Ranjith, demanded a UN probe into the event, claiming that "massacre was part of a grand political plot".

Democratic Socialist Republic may be the nation's formal title and the old castes (and there were scores) may be faded to the point of forgotten but class remains paramount, albeit now accessible by talent and wealth – not just family. Love marriages may be increasingly common, but the papers are nevertheless inundated with mothers seeking future sons-in-law with good prospects or possible daughters-in-law with modest and proper attitudes. Live openly with your gay lover in India; but in Sri Lanka, gay life is all about explaining why you can't yet get married.

Even so, the appearance in Time Magazine of country's most famous no-nonsense Lesbian brought patriotic cheering from most sections of society.

Even its weather celebrates the illusion of certainty with diehard wet and dry forecasts upended by recent climate change, and able to defy pundits in the blink of an eye.

Sudden cyclones torment one side of the country whilst the other basks in placid sunshine. Despite a countryside dominated by massive monocrops, from tea to rice, almost a third of Sri Lanka's mammals and plants are endemic. Nearly five hundred kinds of birds fill its skies. Its real and flourishing wilderness are undeniably deep and absorbing – from lowland and montane rain forests to those of the dry zone and thorn scrub that harbour cheetah and swarms of ever rarer Sri Lankan albatross butterflies.

FOUR

Defying Logic

In almost every aspect of its existence the country defies logic, gravity, ratio analysis, forecasts of almost any kind, the forces of Microsoft Excel; and yet still it spins its potent and inexplicable magic.

So how exactly did it get to be like this? What made Sri Lanka unique; and what keeps it going with such fecund magnetism?

The answer – or, more correctly answers - lies in its history; a history many do their best to avoid, a task made ridiculously easy by its boundless complexity.

For Sri Lanka's history is no worn antique costume left to hang in some dreary museum showcase. But rather, it is something commonly worn – like a sarong or sari -every day, in plain sight, tormentingly, provocably inciting you to deconstruct it. Like pleats of cloth, the distinctive themes of nation's true story lies entwined in its extraordinary, and often bizarre rulers; from the moment it became an island independent of India to the Nirvana Raj of its first and greatest royal dynasty, the Vijayans.

Harnessing the power of water technology and the centralising forces of religion and administration, to an aristocratic attitude that would have made the Court of the Holy Roman Emperor appear commonplace, its later Lankbranaka kings made good a kingdom like no other in Asia, despite a rule shattered from time to time by belligerent northern invaders, and regicidal courtiers.

When their kingdom of almost 1500 years was finally destroyed, its citizens recreated the old times in new kingdoms that

stretched from Polonnaruwa to Kandy, as undeterred by reversals as Winston Churchill once was: ““Keep bugging on!”

And for hundreds of years good was almost good enough. As the slightest hint of danger or invasion, the kingdom, complete with as much of its power base as it could muster, would move on like a gypsy encampment.

Elephants, precious stones, abundant agriculture, art, and architecture so sure and pure as to make its contemporaries seem trite and predictable; trade routes, a profoundly enfolding geology and cinnamon that drew invaders like a dog on heat - all were to mark out the unparalleled allure of one of the smallest and most elaborate gypsy kingdoms in the world, one that would remake itself each time it was knocked down or, more typically, self-immolate.

That such a royal travelling circus lasted as long as it did was itself impressive. But it was little match for boatloads of rapacious and well-armed foreigners. The arriving European forces feasted on all they found, more stirred, and inspired than by most other parts of their far flung empires. Portuguese, Dutch, and British rule each lasted an average of 150 years a piece, with wannabe Danish colonists raking up an unexpected and improbable 2 months.

As Buddhism retreated right across Asia, in Sir Lanka it blossomed,

surviving even the ravages of the Europeans. And with it came the flowering of Singhala culture and in its wake, the beguiling threads of alternative cultures from the Malay Moors to the Tamils. And, in this, the interweaving of traditions, was created some of the nation's most rare and beautiful things from food to laws and novels, songs to surrealist photography.

Nothing, not even the massive introduction of cash crops like coffee or tea; or trains and roads that penetrated the once closed hinterland; nothing could really outshine thousands of years of accumulated independent culture, geography, climate, still less attitude.



FIVE

Attitude

For attitude, that hardest to pinpoint, but most critical of all human accomplishments, is the granite in the country's heart, which has carried it through good times and bad. Most especially, the very bad.

When the patricians inherited the promised land in 1947, it seemed as if the good times would never end. Yet within ten years the many "isms" and "ologies" that were to torment the nation took centre stage, with wars, attempted coups, assassinations, and social and economic experiments that often left the country much worse off than ever before.

Desperate quick-fix initiatives for economic, racial and social equality collided with the collapsing macroeconomics of the wider world, to drive the country to the edge of bankruptcy several times since Independence, and fed not just the civil war between the Tamil north and the Sinhala government in Colombo, but also the still more extreme Marxist Leninist civil war that erupted with incalculable violence within the Sinhala community and twice pushed the country to near anarchy.

And now, two and a half thousand years later, the country your plane arrives at, wafting across warm blue skies with such delight, above winking water tanks, vertiginous mountains every bit as glorious as Tolkien's Mount Mindolluin; golden seas dotted with basking whales and fishing boats, clay red rooftops and languid palms - all awaits like a puzzle you never imaged existed; one that confounds with each revelation, enfolding you in secrets and insights that stretch like ghost stories deep into the tropical night.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Swarbrick is a publisher, planter, hotelier, hermit, and writer.

He was born in Colombo and raised, with few concessions to modernity, in India, Singapore, and the Middle East. Cornish, he gained his degrees on the Celtic fringe: at the Universities of Wales, and Stirling, prolonging an introduction to accepted working hours for as long as was decently possible.

Having worked at News Corp's HarperCollins UK as board director for various otherwise homeless departments including sales, marketing; and HarperCollins India, he ran Hachette's consumer learning division. Prior to this, he launched Oxford University Press's first commercial online business, Oxford Reference Online.

When the doubtful charms of boardroom bawls, bottom lines, and divas diminished, he returned to Sri Lanka, the land of his birth hundreds of years earlier, to rescue a spice plantation and set of art deco buildings that had gone feral in the jungle.

Today, as the Flame Tree Estate & Hotel, it has become one of the country's top ten boutique hotels, run by the kindest and most professional of hospitality teams; and overseen by several small schnauzers.

It also helps fund The Ceylon Press, set up to make Sri Lanka's rich and complicated story, a mystery to many, and a secret to most, more accessible. The Press' books, companions, podcasts, blogs, and guides are freely available at theceylonpress.com. The Press also publishes Poetry from the Jungle, a podcast that recasts the orthodox view of the world's best poets and poems.

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ABOUT THE FLAME TREE ESTATE & HOTEL

"It's absolute paradise," wrote one guest recently; "I would fly back to Sri Lanka simply to stay in this place for a couple more days."

Centered on a 25-acre organic spice and timber plantation, The Flame Tree Estate & Hotel has been renovated and furnished with art & antiques; its healthy menus fusing street food with fine dining.

Its 1,000 high rocky hills stalled the Dutch army in 1765; and until the civil war the estate stretched over 100 acres with 3 working elephants.

Today its restored plantations grow cardamom, turmeric, ginger, cloves, pepper, cocoa; rubber, coffee, vanilla; cinnamon, coconuts - and scores of trees from ebony to sapu – best enjoyed from the vantage point of the hotel's infinity pool. Visit www.flametreeestate.com.

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