



THE CEYLON PRESS HISTORY OF SRI LANKA 1

THE GREAT CONUNDRUM

SRI LANKA & THE MAGIC SPELL

DAVID SWARBRICK

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

THE CHESHIRE CAT.
ALICE IN WONDERLAND,
LEWIS CARROL, 1865.



ONE

Small is
Beautiful

It took a refugee from Nazi Germany, with an interest in economics and Buddhism, to note the singular connection between two of the most apparent 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.

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 into Peru nearly 20 times.

Its nearest neighbour, Tamil Nadu, could accommodate it twice over, with land to spare. Head a little further north, and 10 times as many 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 of how humans live in the world – but it could easily have lent its title

to a mandatory guidebook to be issued 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 encountering Rubik's Cube for the first time, that infamous multi-coloured rotating brick toy whose coloured ends seem 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, or just plain thwarting befuddlement, lies the 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 so complex that the Election Commission had to issue a 200-word note on how to mark the ballot paper correctly.

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 16 years. Now regulated by this, its second constitution since independence, Sri Lanka possesses a governing document of such elastic resilience that it has undergone an average of one significant amendment every second year and has still survived.

Such political robustness is nothing less than what should be expected of an island whose circuitous history meanders through over 2,500 recorded 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 sudden appearance of polar partisan opposites have riotously followed almost every step of that wild journey. The kings eventually made way for 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, to be followed later by an avowed Marxist-Leninist beloved of the IMF, World Bank, and other wicked bastions of world capitalism.

Given that barely 10% of the country's supreme law-making body, its parliament, is filled with female MPs, this institutional sexism is understandable – but to fully explain it, one needs to look little further than the fact that a striking number of MPs have yet to attain an A-level, still less a degree. But there's much more to the rule of law than exams. Should parliament depress you, look to the country's Supreme Court, a focused and resilient 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 who have profoundly reshaped how people live across the tropical world, its best universities barely scrape into the top 1,000 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 given time, eggs, onions, rice, milk powder, or even turmeric have entered an Alice-in-Wonderland world, swinging in and out of affordability like circus merry-go-rounds.

Yet still the kiribath is made. This dish, of coconut-flavoured milk rice, is unique to the island, the muse behind Anuradhapura's Kiribath Stupa, a

monument of almost unimaginable antiquity that was once said to house the sacred tooth relic itself: the left Canine tooth of Gautama Buddha. The snack itself never fails to delight, a comfort food that pushes Butter Chicken, Shepherd's Pie, spaghetti or chocolate brownies 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.

Given the island's history, it is no surprise that so many national resources should be devoted to the health care of its people. The remains of at least five ancient hospitals are found among Anuradhapura's oldest ruins, and with them the tantalising Brahmi inscriptions of two physicians from the second century BCE.

King after king built and enlarged the hospitals across the land and endowed 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-diagnose before electing to see the correct doctor, praying all the time, as they hobble towards the hospital, that they are heading towards the proper cure – 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.

Even so, the country's Western medical health care system competes head-to-head with traditional medicine. In village after village, town after town, the ancient medical practices of the land are easily accessible, endorsed by the government, and supported by their own doctors, ministries, training, teaching, and hospitals, curing and alleviating the suffering of thousands of people daily.



THREE

Not What It
Seems

Nothing is really what it seems. The island's geography makes it look as if the country itself is easy to grasp. Huge flat coastal plains ring each golden kilometre of the entire island. Dotted with orderly coconut groves and orchards of cashew and mangosteen, it seems as if nothing could ever hide on such neat land.

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 sea. With 1,200 notable peaks, the country may have fewer mountains than Lebanon (1,652). 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," but the island's cultural differences have led to civil war, terrorism, and racism. Yet so too have they created a multicultural homeland, whose deep and stunningly rich traditions delight in the very differences between Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Singhalese, Tamil, Burghers, Moors,

Malayalis, Ambalavasis, Mapillas, Telugus, Vaddars, Waggais, or Veddas.

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 faiths, the consequences of their hate crimes, sometimes 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 Cardinal Malcolm Ranjith, himself interwoven into a complex matrix of political alliances, demanded a UN probe into the event, claiming that the "massacre was part of a grand political plot". Unlike most other democracies, politics and religion dominate the Sri Lankan national agenda and are demanding and often argumentative bedfellows.

The Democratic Socialist Republic may be the nation's formal title. The old castes (and there were scores) may have faded to the point of being almost forgotten. Yet still class remains paramount, albeit now accessible through talent and wealth rather than just family. Love marriages

may be increasingly common, but the newspapers are nevertheless inundated with mothers advertising for future sons-in-law with good prospects or daughters-in-law with modest and proper attitudes.

Live openly with your gay lover in India: in Sri Lanka, gay life is all about explaining why you can't yet get married. Even so, the appearance in Time magazine of the country's most famous no-nonsense lesbian brought patriotic cheering from most sections of society.

Even Sri Lanka's weather celebrates the illusion of certainty, with confident wet-and-dry forecasts upended by climate change and defying its forecasters 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 is undeniably deep and absorbing – from lowland and montane rainforests to the dry zone and thorn scrub that harbour cheetahs 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, virtually any forecast, and the forces of Microsoft Excel. Yet still it spins its potent and inexplicable magic.

So how exactly did it get to be like this? What makes Sri Lanka unique, and what is the source of its fecund magnetism?

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

For Sri Lanka's history is no worn antique costume left to hang in some dreary museum showcase. Instead, it is something commonly worn – like a sarong or sari - every day, in plain sight, inciting you to deconstruct it. Like pleats of cloth, the distinctive themes of the nation's story lie entwined in its extraordinary, and often bizarre rulers; from the moment it became an island independent of India to the Nirvana 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 an authority shattered from time to time by belligerent northern invaders and regicidal courtiers.

When their kingdom, which had endured for almost 1500 years, was finally destroyed in 993 CE, its citizens recreated the old times in new kingdoms that stretched from Polonnaruwa to Kandy, undeterred by reversals – much as Winston Churchill once was: "Keep buggering on!"

And for hundreds of years, good was almost good enough. At 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, an enfolding geology and cinnamon that drew invaders like a dog on heat - all were part of the unparalleled allure of one of the most minor and most elaborate 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 a 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, while Danish colonists held out for an improbable 2 months.

As Buddhism retreated across Asia, it blossomed in Sri Lanka, even surviving the ravages of European rule. And with it came the flowering of Sinhala culture and, in its wake, the beguiling threads of alternative cultures from the Malay Moors to the Tamils. And in this interweaving of traditions, some of the nation's rarest and most beautiful things were created, from food to laws and novels, from 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, could really outshine thousands of years of accumulated independent culture, geography, climate, or 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 patrician politicians inherited the promised land, with Independence in 1948, it seemed as if the good times would never end. Yet within 10 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. Together, they have driven the country to the brink of bankruptcy several times since Independence. Still worse, they also 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 the brink of anarchy.

And now, two and a half thousand

years later, the country your plane arrives at, wafting across warm blue skies, above winking water tanks, vertiginous mountains every bit as glorious as Tolkien's Mount Mindolluin; above golden seas dotted with basking whales and fishing boats, clay-red rooftops and languid palms – Sri Lanka awaits like a puzzle you never imagined existed; one that confounds, 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, with few concessions to modernity, raised in India, Singapore, and the Middle East. Cornish 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 possible.

Having worked at News Corp's HarperCollins UK as a board director across departments including sales, art, and marketing, and at 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 and bottom lines diminished, he returned to Sri Lanka, the land of his birth hundreds of years earlier, to rescue a spice plantation and a 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 more accessible. The Press' books, companions, podcasts, blogs, and guides are freely available at theceylonpress.com.

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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, and its healthy menus fuse 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.flametreestate.com.

It also houses and funds The Ceylon Press, whose books, companions, podcasts, blogs, and guides are freely available at theceylonpress.com.

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