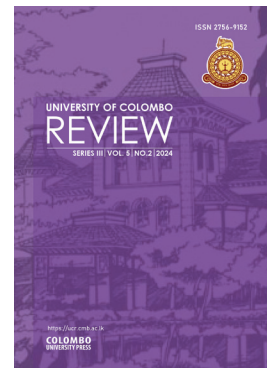


DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4038/ucr.v5i2.219>

University of Colombo Review (Series III),
Vol.5, No.2, 2024



Redrawing the Lines: A Review of the *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Sri Lanka* (2024)

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Ruwanpura, K. N., & Mohamed-Saleem, A. (Eds.) (2024). *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Sri Lanka*. Taylor & Francis.

The *Routledge Handbook of Sri Lanka* describes itself as “a comprehensive survey of issues facing [Sri Lanka].” While it certainly does that, evidenced by the multitude of topics discussed by highly qualified authors, to simply call it a “handbook” is an understatement. The book is not merely “here is Sri Lanka and its issues.” It is an indictment of the mistakes, spanning decades in some cases, that have led Sri Lanka to where it is today. Sarah Kabir’s poem at the beginning of the book not only sets the stage for the critical assessment of Sri Lankan society, culture, and politics that follows, but also the lens through which the criticisms will be made.

The book, spanning many topics, is best suited for readers familiar with the basics of the Sri Lankan context, especially those with a social science, humanities, or political science background. It is strongly critical of colonial influences and the Sinhala-Buddhist, patriarchal status quo in Sri Lanka. Furthermore, it is a summary of academic literature on its various topics, evident in the tendency to cite secondary literature throughout the chapters. This book, as a handbook, prioritizes breadth over depth in its topic coverage. Even individual chapters tend to focus on wide strokes of their subject matter rather than deep ones; a single chapter can span decades or centuries of events.

While there are many topics discussed, my impression of the book, concerning both topics in which I do and do not have specific knowledge, is that it tends to use fixed groupings of relevant items (be they events, ethnic groups, ideologies, etc.) that render distinct, neat collections for comparison and contrast. To demonstrate this, I will take chapters pertaining to the history of communal conflict that exemplify this tendency and offer alternative framings that may provide more fluidity in our understandings of how these issues manifested.

The chapter “Centering Conflict” by Shamara Wettimuny examines the escalation of conflict in Sri Lanka between different ethnic communities, beginning with commercial, social, or political grievances, and resulting in violence. The chapter tends to sort events into distinct phases that follow a general, causal

sequence: largely non-violent rivalries between Sinhalese and a minority group, major violence by Sinhalese against the minority, and then minority violence. Given that these phases can span years, if not decades, they can be understood as broad phases. However, is there room for more granular phases – phases within singular events themselves – in narrations of these histories? Several major communal riots involving Sinhalese saw minority violence interspersed with Sinhalese violence. Particularly in the 1950s’ riots between Sinhalese and Tamils, it was understood by contemporary observers that there was mutual escalation of the violence, and both sides used each other’s excesses as an excuse to commit their own (Vittachi, 1958). Chronologically, the riots followed cycles of violence consisting of smaller phases of oft-overlapping Sinhalese violence and Tamil violence (Manor, 1989; Tambiah, 1996). More detailed studies of these episodes capture their progression by phasing the violence on a granular, day-by-day basis.

The broad-phased approach to historiography is the most common, especially among ethnoreligious or political communities that see reasons for grievance in their history. The alternative, granularly phased approach can offer more complete retellings, even at the expense of narrative formation, but is hardly suitable for historiographies that span decades or centuries. One potential way to balance it all is to have several, parallel versions of events based on the narrating community, though assuming that entire ethnic or political communities adopt particular narrations has its own drawbacks.

“Defining Sri Lanka’s Identity” by Bhavani Fonseka and Luwie Niranjan Ganeshathasan discusses the history of the Sri Lankan identity from a constitutional and legal perspective, focusing strongly on contestations between Sinhalese and Tamils. While these disputes are indeed central to the evolution of the Sinhalese-Tamil conflict, and resultant impacts on the Sri Lankan identity, some of the landmarks can be discussed in broader terms. Admittedly, the authors concede early on that it would be a misconstruction to interpret their framing of the identity question as a binary one between Sinhalese and minorities. However, the erroneousess of a binary framing could be eliminated by shifting the issue’s essence from various Sinhalese-minority disputes to a relatively amorphous political in-group, ‘Sri Lankans,’ legally defining the parameters of how the political out-group, the collective ‘other,’ can coexist with the in-group in Sri Lanka, if at all.

For example, the chapter mentions the Ceylon Citizenship Act as an example of a legal definition of the Sri Lankan identity. This act defined who was and was not a citizen of Sri Lanka, and indirectly, who could and could not participate in its democratic processes. While the authors acknowledge that they have not explored this issue’s complexities, there is another, broader angle to it. Though the affected were indeed the Malaiyaha (Upcountry) Tamils, as the authors imply, support and opposition to the act were not strictly on ethnic lines. Some politicians from

minority communities had voted for the act, including the early proponent of Eelam, C. Suntharalingam. On the other hand, many Sinhalese leftist politicians voted against it (Hoole, Somasundaram, Sritharan, & Thiranagama, 1990). Those Sinhalese politicians in favor of the act referred to the Malaiyaha Tamils as “Indians” (Kanapathipillai, 2009). Such an appellation would render them a geographic out-group, contrasted with the in-group of Sri Lankan (Ceylonese) Sinhalese, Tamils, and Muslims, whose ancestors had come to the island long before 1823. Even a Sinhala nationalist organization in the pre-1956 period, the Tri Sinhala (Jatika) Peramuna, had considered Sri Lankan Tamils, Muslims, and Burghers to be part of Sri Lanka’s native people living in the Tri Sinhala (Ruhunu, Maya, and Pihiti), and urged them to ally with Sinhalese against the “Indians” (Non-Violence is Keynote of Tri Sinhale Movement, 1955). Though the *peramuna* was not formally in politics, its utterances demonstrate an in-group identity that defies the usual homogeneously Sinhala-Buddhist one, using geography and history, rather than ethnicity or religion, as the dividing lines. Squaring the conception of the Sri Lankan identity issue as that of a nonspecific in-group and out-group conflict with subsequent political realities of Sri Lanka necessitates an ever-changing composition of the Sri Lankan in-group and out-group, though the former always retains a Sinhala-Buddhist core.

All communal conflicts are based on differences of identity. One area in which the book does well to challenge perceived fixities is the formation of ethnic identities. “Eastern Muslims of Sri Lanka”, “Nationalism, Conflict, and Power-Sharing”, and “Imagining the Nation” all challenge rigid descriptions of ethnic communities in Sri Lanka, explaining their trajectories that both shape and are shaped by political forces. They demonstrate how modern ethnic identities and divisions, taken for granted today, were products of colonial and post-colonial developments. Western notions of race and community were transplanted to an island that, while perhaps not fully deviating from them, had not indigenously embraced them. More damningly, the book explains how Sinhala-Buddhist dominance in Sri Lanka’s independence has perpetuated these understandings, exacerbating conflict between the modern communities, and fostering new concepts of community altogether.

Beyond communal conflict, the tendency to neatly categorize exists elsewhere in the book, like in “A Political Ecology of Sri Lanka’s Urban and Regional Wetlands”, where indigenous coexistence with wetlands is juxtaposed with colonial and post-colonial rejection of the latter, or in “Politicizing ‘The Virtual’”, where masculinized hatred results in misogynistic language, even in non-gendered contexts like racism. In both cases, more fluid conceptions of the actors could be considered to grasp multiple dimensions of their respective issues. However, because of the summarizing nature of the chapters, space and convenience may dictate the use of these clean groupings to explain relevant developments. Fluid groupings, while offering more porous reinterpretations of the subject matter, lack the concision needed

for summaries. None of this is to say that summaries, simplified as they may be, are unwarranted. Tracing patterns throughout history, geographies, or demographics, is an integral part of understanding why Sri Lanka is where it is today. While the subject-matter specialists may have their objections, being able to cohesively unite such a wide gathering of discussion points within a single chapter is commendable.

I reiterate: the book is best suited for those familiar with Sri Lanka and who want to learn more about its issues, and their reading experience would be enriched by familiarity in the disciplines relevant to the chapters. It is a one-stop shop that provides readers with a clear picture of current academic thinking on a diverse set of topics. From there, they can delve further into the subjects with the rich lists of sources in the references. Considering the dire situation in which Sri Lanka finds itself, it needs its citizens to have greater literacy in its affairs, both past and current. The *Routledge Handbook* is a fine step in that direction.

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Conflict of Interest

The author has no conflict of interest to declare.