



Exploring Human Geographies in Postcolonial Sri Lanka

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ABSTRACT This paper explores an array of human geographies that are made and unmade within postcolonial Sri Lanka. Realizing that the task is incredibly overwhelming, it focuses on two main domains that have been the defining processes of transformation in the post-colonial period - the process of development and the evolution of nationalisms. In terms of nationalisms, it explicates how the new national space created after colonialism is imaginatively owned by the majority ethnic group Sinhalese with reference to their precolonial glory. Yet, the Sri Lankan Tamils unable to fit within this new national space challenged the integrity of it while imagining and materializing two provinces that the British created for administrative purposes as their homeland. In terms of development, it explores how the colonial spatial order of core-periphery continues, but constantly rearticulated to give an indigenous veneer. In conclusion, it argues that thinking geographically about postcoloniality allows us to ask new questions that we may otherwise not ask.

Key Words: postcoloniality, geographies, nationalism, core-periphery, development

Introduction

It was Edward Said's now classic book "*Orientalism*" (1979) which signaled to us in a powerful manner and made us conscious of the fact that, 'as we make histories, we also make our geographies.' In Sri Lanka, the Social Scientists have been overly conscious and concerned about how we make and remake histories, yet not so much about geographies. In a way, geography is taken as a given while social, economic and political processes and forces are taken to be more significant and powerfully present. This paper, by exploring an array of human geographies made and unmade in the post-independence Sri Lanka, aims at demonstrating the significance of

geography in understanding postcolonial Sri Lanka.

Obviously, such a task is overwhelming yet challenging. It is overwhelming because capturing all human geographies is a dauntingly difficult project. It is difficult to find a comprehensive approach that best captures all human geographies. Surveying individual academic work that reflects a geographical understanding might provide an inventory of the geographies, leaving out many geographies that are not yet studied. Categorizing by sub-disciplines in Geography may also compartmentalize our understanding which should be fundamentally integrative and may undermine the necessary interlinkages between them. Exploring along broader

social categories such as gender, class, ethnicity, etc., also has its own limitations as it may "box" geographical imaginations within specific sociological worlds.

Realizing the above limits, yet being ambitious to engage in a reasonably justifiable exploration of postcolonial human geographies, I choose a different path by asking a simple question. What are the social domains that have been decisively transformative in nature which would adequately reflect and capture in its entirety the multitude of geographies that are made and unmade in the post-independence Sri Lanka? The two such domains that can be cognitively recognized are: process of development and evolution of nationalism(s). I find that both these domains have had an enormous bearing on the nature, constitution and the imaginations of the fundamental spatial unit - that is the Sri Lankan state and the postcolonial project. As a result of both Sinhalese nationalism and Tamil nationalism/separatism, the territorial integrity of the fundamental spatial unit, the national space created by the state, is challenged; provinces constructed for colonial functions have derived new meanings and purposes; new spaces are created such as border villages. On the development side, the integration of Sri Lanka into the world capitalist system and therefore its location within the global periphery remain intact. This integration into the world capitalist system through the European colonial economy with the introduction of the plantation sector and the development of Colombo as the political and economic centre primarily produced an internal core-periphery spatial structure in postcolonial Sri Lanka. While this spatial structure has continued, attempts to indigenize development have introduced new meanings to modern spaces.

I will elaborate more later on the significance of each domain within the respective section where it is discussed. These two domains, in other words, would provide me with the necessary analytical framework to place the postcolonial trajectory of human geographies. However, it should be mentioned early on that these two domains are by no means mutually exclusive. It should be emphasized here that my attempt is to understand the changing human geography of Sri Lanka *in relation* to the processes of development and nationalism as they unfold in the post-independence period.

The paper is organized into four major sections. In the first section, I will clarify the two central conceptual categories that define the scope of this paper - postcolonialism and human geographies. As the notion of postcoloniality has been extremely contested and challenged within the Humanities and the Social Sciences, I will outline the specific meanings with which I adopt this term in this paper. What is geography (and now geographies!) is similarly a question that makes us wonder and inquisitive. Some of the key themes that have been discussed within the discipline of Human Geography will be briefly explained as they will provide the necessary conceptual cum theoretical background for this paper. In the second section, I will explore how various geographies are constructed by the competing nationalisms of the Sinhalese and the Tamils and highlight how the fundamental spatial unit - the Sri Lankan state - is contested. In the third section, I will trace the geographical changes in relation to the process of development focusing on how the colonial geography of development is continued and discontinued in the post-independence period. By way of summing up in the last section, I will highlight two aspects. First, I will identify the major

geographical imaginations that have *defined* the postcolonial Sri Lanka. Second, I will discuss how these tendencies in Sri Lanka reflect upon or correspond to the recent theoretical debates in Geography.

Thinking postcolonially about Geography

As a discipline, Human Geography¹ has evolved into a significant place within the Humanities and Social Sciences, as spatiality is increasingly understood as a fundamental principle of human life and society. Research work within Geography of Edward Soja, Derek Gregory, Doreen Massey, John Agnew, David Harvey etc. and those outside (i.e. Anthony Giddens and Henri Lefebvre) have played a critical role in this move. Henri Lefebvre's *Production of Space* has ascertained both the ontologically and epistemologically critical status of spatiality in relation to human life and society while geographers such as Soja (1999), Gregory (1995), and Massey (1985) have powerfully and vehemently argued for the need of a "spatial turn" in the Humanities and Social Sciences.²

Human Geography very simply offers a spatial perspective to the understanding of the world. However, this spatial *perspective* does not yield to a coherent spatial *approach* (a standardized universal format) through which we can understand the world; rather it engages with and attempts to fathom the ever changing world in a multitude of different ways through varying and changing themes. Succinctly, thinking geographically – or the geographical imagination – itself has been a contested terrain (Watts 1999). The geographical imagination has over the years been articulated and rearticulated in different ways.

Among such articulations, one of the prominent themes emerging from the 1980s that is of relevance to this paper is

the thesis that the "social is spatial" and the "spatial is social".³ This is premised upon the basic fact that spatial formation is integral to social formation and vice versa. This thesis provides me with the broader conceptual framework to identify the major changes in the postcolonial human geographies in Sri Lanka in relation to social processes – nationalism and development. This thesis further allows us to move beyond the conventional thinking of space as a "container" in which the social is *packed* or to unravel the fixity imposed on space and comprehend space as a dynamic process as much as the social is.

Soja's (1996) idea of trialectics of being is also useful here for us to strengthen the argument for "society and space" as it brings the element of history into our focus. Soja's basic argument is that spatiality along with historicity and sociality is a basic principle of human life (Soja, Edward, 1996). To simplify it, history and society moves together with geography. Soja writes that "...there is a growing awareness of the simultaneity and interwoven complexity of the social, the historical and *the spatial*, their inseparability and often problematic interdependence" (1999:261). However, within the particular way in which the Humanities and the Social Sciences evolved, historicity and sociality have accrued more critical insight and interpretive power. Soja elaborates that the making of histories and the constitution of societies have dominated the social sciences while the constitution of spatiality is undermined. This is very representative of the Sri Lankan Social Sciences and Humanities too. Sri Lanka is all too often written about, studied and researched from the viewpoint of historicity and sociality except for a few recent attempts.⁴ The trajectories of nationalism and development are always compiled either ignoring or taking their

spatiality for granted.⁵ This paper, though not in an all inclusive manner, attempts to fill this lacuna in two ways; first it intends to show the significance of spatiality in understanding Sri Lankan postcolonial history and society and second to expose (or more cautiously to take stock of) a number of areas (potential research areas) where it can be further studied and articulated.

Now that we have an understanding of geography, let us turn to the other important concept that defines the scope of this paper – postcolonial. The term, *postcolonial*, has been discussed and debated within the last three decades deriving multiple meanings and interpretations. What most of the writers on postcolonialism argues is that we must not use the term *postcolonial* as an umbrella term or as a blanket theory that explains a single condition.⁶ It is clear that the postcolonial condition is extremely diverse varying across time and space. Some tend to generalize this as a process that is subsequent to colonialism, but the exact nature of the process is not very clear.

Given this multiplicity and complexity of meanings, the best strategy would be to adopt a provisional definition within one's scope of research. It seems to me that postcolonialism somehow renders an engagement with the colonial or as Mishra and Hodge point out, 'any kind of postcolonial discourse is necessarily implicated upon both the colonizer and the colonized though explicating the exact nature of this engagement belongs to empirical inquiry. In this light, I see postcoloniality as a social condition and an experience that is *unique* to societies such as Sri Lanka which were under colonial rule for centuries. When we see it as a unique social condition and an experience, it is not bound by space or time. It could have occurred or been experienced during colonialism or after

colonialism. It could be experienced within the core or the periphery itself: within Sri Lanka or without.

Within the Sri Lankan context, postcolonialism is an attempt/project to reclaim and renegotiate its social and cultural identity that was suppressed through coercion and hegemony especially under the British. However, this process ironically takes place within the given modern nation state. Most interestingly, the state itself becomes an integral part of this project.⁷ But it must be emphasized that such attempts have taken place both during colonialism as well as after colonialism. The main difference between these two periods is that during colonialism it took the form of anti-colonial resistance (from civil protests and diplomatic efforts to organized rebellions) while after colonialism it takes a more complicit form. Given that, the condition of postcoloniality is not necessarily post-colonial.⁸ However, this paper delimits itself to examining postcoloniality in the post-colonial period as it is during this period that it falls into a more coherent format and brings about major transformations in the nexus of society and space.

Development, theoretically accepted as emulation of the west towards modernization, yet ideologically resorting to *national* development, can be recognized as a decisive postcolonial project. Similarly, the two variants of nationalism – that of Tamil and the Sinhalese which emerged to fulfill different objectives – are also pertinent postcolonial projects. Thus, development and nationalism can be identified as defining domains of postcoloniality in Sri Lanka. Thinking postcolonially about human geographies thus involve an attempt to examine the complex relations between these two domains of postcoloniality and the spatial entity known as Sri Lanka.

Nationalism and Geography

The modern nation state was *given* at independence to Sri Lanka. Thus as Perera (1998) points out, the territorially integrated national space is, by all means, a colonial construction. Perera states that, "it was the external colonial forces which over a span of three centuries transformed a variety of kingdoms, principalities, and port settlements in the island into a single, integrated social and spatial entity" (1998:184). The modern nation state was created with the European model in mind and with the expectation that it will perform a similar function of homogenizing its citizenry. From a European perspective, this involves a move forward towards integrating the once crown colony of Ceylon into the inter-state system or to the world system.

Thus, the *national space* created by the modern nation state emerged as the fundamental spatial reality that defined postcolonial social formation. How the different ethnic groups, especially the Sinhalese and Sri Lankan Tamils, understood or made sense of this fundamental spatiality in fulfilling the postcolonial objective of reclaiming their due place after colonialism is the primary question in this section. How each group understood, imagined, evaluated and articulated this fundamental spatiality in relation to their ethnic identity and nationalism is an important and defining matter of postcolonial social formation. Most of the existing analysis has looked at it more as a politico-social problem to the detriment of the spatial issue.

Sinhalese and national space

In the case of the majority ethnic group, the Sinhalese, two of the essential components that make the nation state, political power and space were given when the crown colony was transformed

into an independent modern state in 1948. They were circumstantially present as they became heir to political power and able to assert predominance within the modern state as the statistical majority. Within this particular context of ensured political power, their postcolonial project was one of cultural nationalism (Hennayake 2006).⁹ It was a project intending to reclaim the *lost glory* and stature under colonial rule, and to gain control through institutional and policy changes. This was clearly characterized as a clear move towards indigenization and nationalization.¹⁰

This project of cultural nationalism was dormant in the immediate post-independence period (until the mid 1950s) during the UNP (United National Party) regime which was more liberal in ideology.¹¹ The project reached a head with the Bandaranaike politics in 1956 with the introduction of language policy, land reforms and cultural and religious revivalism with the mobilization of Buddhist monks and the segments of traditional elite who were previously restrained to their villages. They practiced an ethnic cultural nationalism in completing the postcolonial project and it seems that the homogenizing ideal of the modern state was never an issue that they took seriously.

What is most interesting is that the new space - modern state resonated with the imaginative geography of the Sinhalese. This imaginative geography is expressed through spatial vocabularies such as *Lankadweepa*, *Dharmadipa*, *Sihaladipa*, *Helaya*, *Hela derana*, etc. and referred back to pre-colonial historiography as evident in the Great Chronicles – the Mahawamsa. This imaginative geography has been constantly invoked, together with the notion of the glorious past to fight against colonial coercion and control during and after colonial rule (for i.e. the early 20th century revivalist movement).

An intricate and affinitive relationship was established between the Sinhalese and the territory of Sri Lanka thus legitimizing their ownership to the new national space. The Bandaranaike politics of 1956 accentuated the Sinhalese-Buddhist consciousness further nurturing its intimate relation to the land. Colonialism thus transformed the imaginative geography of the Sinhalese into a modern material space by establishing political power onto it.

From a geographical perspective, it is important to note that certain regional identities and affinities of the Sinhalese (i.e. the low country-upcountry division, sentimental attachments towards certain pre-colonial spatial entities such as Raja Rata and Ruhunu Rata, the Kandyan Kingdom etc., seemed to have gradually diluted within the new national space. What Sinhalese nationalism in 1956 did was to amalgamate the different groups of Sinhalese (divided in terms of caste, class and region) or rather to encapsulate them around the interests of the modern national space, recasting it through their imaginative geography subsuming the differences. For example, the peasantry (the rural proletariat in the Sri Lankan context) who lived in the rural areas (primarily in villages) depending on rural space for their occupation was successfully consolidated or rather co-opted within the national space.¹² In a way, it appears that early spatial divisions were subsumed within the new national space. Given the fundamental spatiality – modern national space was not a problem for the Sinhalese; what they tried to do was to relegitimize their power through their imaginative geography, yet unthoughtful about its consequences on other groups.

Sri Lankan Tamils and national space

The spatial scenario faced by Sri Lankan Tamils at independence was obviously

different. The fundamental spatiality (i.e. the modern state) created by the colonial rulers in itself was an obstacle to realize the postcolonial project of reclaiming their cultural identity and ascertaining political power. This was an issue that was contemplated by Tamil nationalist leaders even prior to the independence. The emergence of the Federal Party in 1949 and an early claim towards a federal state clearly indicates how they related to the postcolonial challenge. The Tamil leaders have well understood that space or more correctly a form of spatial autonomy is a fundamental requirement firstly, for the construction of a Tamil nation and secondly in ensuring their political power and cultural identity. Tamil nationalism emerged with this early understanding of the centrality of space.

The theory of interactive nationalism explains that Tamil nationalism has emerged as a result of the modern nation state dominated by Sinhalese political leaders practicing nationalism instead of hegemony in the process of nation building (Hennayake 1992). The expedient politics of S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike in 1956 and the endurance of Sinhalese Buddhist ideology led by the imaginative geography of *Sihaladipa* and *Dharmadipa* are considered as integral to the practice of nationalism. Thus, the new national space became a challenge to the Sri Lankan Tamils both politically and culturally. As the modern state apparatus became home for the practice of Sinhalese nationalism, the new political space became distant to the Sri Lankan Tamils. Further, the specific ways in which this space was symbolically represented further alienated the Sri Lankan Tamils preventing them from seeing it as an inclusive cultural space either.¹³

However, one must be cautious in attributing the full responsibility for the emergence of Tamil nationalism to

Sinhalese Nationalism.¹⁴ Michael Roberts (1994) has pointed out, that the idealistic agenda of the Sri Lankan Tamil nationalist leaders and their power politics which reflected a minority with a majority complex gradually resulted in Tamil nationalism.¹⁵ The fact that the Tamil leaders were articulating their interests in spatial terms, not only after independence, but even before hints at their long term political agenda.

The cumulative result of these contentious and ambiguous relations between the Sri Lankan Tamils as an ethnic group and the national space is the construction of a *traditional homeland* by merging the northern and eastern provinces as part of the Tamil nationalist agenda. To relate this to the main theme of the paper, this clearly reflects a discordant relationship between a social group and political space. A traditional homeland has been constructed to give much needed spatial meaning and imaginative power to Sri Lankan Tamil nationalism as they were unable to articulate it within the borders of the modern state. If I am to state it in the language of Edward Said, 'just like the Orient, the traditional homeland was not merely there, it was constructed with thoughts, imagery and vocabulary by the Tamil nationalists.'¹⁶ Further, the LTTE materialized it as *eelam* – the space for and of Tamil liberation – through coercion and a variety of other mechanisms of control.¹⁷ What is important here is that the construction of a Tamil homeland should not be analyzed as the mere outcome of Tamil nationalism and later separatism. Such an interpretation undermines the dialectic of the social and the spatial seeing space (homeland) as an outcome of the social (Tamil nationalism). Rather, the construction of a homeland out of northern and eastern provinces was simply spatializing Tamil nationalism.

Generally, the construction of the *traditional homeland* is explained as a threat to the modern state in a political sense because it is a failure of modern nation-building. Considered from a geographical perspective, it simply signals that the colonial construction of a national space has fundamentally failed.¹⁸ It clearly shows the naivety of this colonial project which assumed that the new space will be able to subsume diverse communities (in terms of ethnicity, religion and language) and be a successful nation state. There is a fundamental spatial question at the heart of the postcolonial project – how do diverse communities fit into this space while retaining their respective socio-cultural identities. A colonial spatial construction is being thus challenged. Yet, ironically, another colonial construction – the provinces, is used by the Tamil nationalists conveniently and unquestionably. They superimposed the imaginative homeland onto the colonially defined northern and eastern provinces, disregarding the multi-ethnic composition of the eastern province and reinterpreting it as a predominantly Tamil spoken region. All these reflect the perplexity of postcolonial project.

At this particular historical juncture in Sri Lankan political history, what is important is not whether the *traditional homeland* is justifiable or not, but to understand that it has produced a new set of issues that were not there at independence or until about the 1980s. One of the fundamental facts is that the civil war has, to a certain extent, given it a material existence by secluding this region from the rest of the country for a duration within which a new generation is born. If we are to recall, Soja's trialectics of being, spatiality (the *traditional homeland*) has been integral to the Tamils and others living there. I will return to this at the end of this section in the summing up by drawing

the broader implications of nationalism and geography.

Consequential geographies of nationalism

As discussed above, nationalism has posed the greatest challenge to the colonially constructed national space. Over the years, on one hand, Tamil nationalism has evolved into a separatist movement led by the LTTE and resorting to terrorism since 1980s. On the other hand, Sinhalese nationalism has continued to be reactionary and the Sri Lankan state has strenuously attempted to defend its territory. These two processes combined together have produced a variety of new human geographies with far reaching consequences to which I pay attention below.

The changing status of provinces

Similar to the national space, provinces were new regional categories constructed by the British colonial rulers for administrative convenience. They continued with their colonial functions as civil administrative units until the Thirteenth Amendment was introduced in 1987. For the first time, recognizing the ethnic diversity in the country and the need to look into the grievances of especially the minority groups, a provincial council system was established. The provinces were thus transformed from their civil administrative spaces into political spaces to devolve power. This is elaborated as an effort "to provide an institutional framework for the sharing of power between all communities of Sri Lanka." Wickramasinghe (2006:190). The nine provinces system became an eight – province system as the northern and eastern provinces were merged. This should be recognized as a remarkable politico-spatial move with far reaching

consequences. This was seen by political forces such as JVP as an act of Indian intervention bringing a geopolitical dimension to it.

The merging and de-merging of the eastern and northern provinces has been one of the most controversial moves. Its spatial identity has changed from civil administration units into a Tamil speaking area, a war zone, a Tamil homeland, and eelam. After recent de-merging, it has now become part of the eastern reawakening. Interestingly, the de-merging of the two provinces has come from two different fronts. On the one hand, the breakaway of the Karuna faction from the LTTE triggered the demerging of the two provinces by rupturing the ideological unity ascribed to this through the notion of the Tamil speaking area, the Tamil homeland and also eelam. On the other, the recent "rescue" of the east from the LTTE, the reinstatement of peace and order, rhetorically expressed as "eastern renaissance" by the government in 2007-2008, has reinforced the de-merging by the Karuna faction. What this clearly suggests is that space, society and history evolve together.

Provinces are also being debated as a possible spatial unit for devolution under a federal system. The question to merge or demerge the two provinces still remains as a contentious issue. In a possible scenario of a federal system devolving power to provinces, even the other provinces will acquire more political power thus changing their current roles and functions. Whether such a system will lead to new regional identities as sporadically surfaced with provinces such as Wayamba and Southern is yet to be seen. Potential human geographies relating to provinces are incredibly dynamic, ambiguous and unpredictable given their ethnic compositions and peculiar histories.

The province as a colonial construct has been contested to the

extent that there has been a proposal to come up with new provinces even totally eliminating the nine province systems. Madduma Bandara (1991) has proposed an alternative provincial system based on river basins as a more viable and sustainable spatial system concordant with the physical geography of the island. However, this is critiqued by Liyanage (1991) who takes Lefebvre's argument of space as socially constructed, further arguing that the criterion of physical geography is no longer neutral.

New spaces: border villages

It is a new space that is created as a result of the protracted war between the LTTE and the government forces. There are many villages at the border of war and non-war zone. The war zone was generally considered as LTTE controlled until the government captured certain areas in the recent past. What is interesting is that these villages are on the border, but they do not have borders/boundaries for their villages. Their occupations, children's education and all other social functions and relations have changed. During the night, they retreat to safer places to sleep. These villages in Sri Lanka provide a classic example of places without boundaries and it reflects the need for geographers to move beyond static notions of space and think of them as fluid as Soja has argued. These villages are in a constant state of flux, making and unmaking in their efforts to find livelihoods and to ensure security.

New spatial vocabularies

As a result of the nationalisms in Sri Lanka, a new set of spatial vocabularies have been unknowingly constructed. In recent years, Sri Lanka is talked about in terms of a north – south. These are both imaginative and material. They are

imaginative to the extent that they exist in people's imaginary with no boundary. They are material to the extent people act as if such spaces exist. For example, we relate north to terrorism and south to political extremism and interpret them as dependent socio-spatial categories. The border villages have recently been relabeled as 'threatened villages' making the social process behind such villages politically more explicit.

Overall geographical imagination of Sri Lanka has also dramatically changed as a result of the continuing war. For example, Sri Lanka has been traditionally identified with terms such as serendipity and the resplendent isle due to its natural beauty rhetorically recognized as a paradise. Because of the contemporary war situation and other reasons, Sri Lanka is known as a "paradise poisoned and a "failed state." While one can argue that these do not represent the realities and there is actually a problem of representation. For example, the criterion used to define a "failed state" can be challenged for its western bias. It is a fact that most war situations in various countries around the world have led to famines. Sri Lanka engaged in a war for almost three decades has never had that experience largely because of state policies and actions to ensure that essentials are sent to these war areas.

Development and Geography

Similar to the nationalisms discussed above, the process of development has had an enormous bearing on the postcolonial national space. While the question with nationalism was the majority Sinhalese and the minority Tamils trying to fit into the national space politically and culturally, in the domain of development it was one of indigenizing as well as modernizing the national space. In this section, I discuss how the development space that Sri

Lanka inherited in 1948 permitted both these tendencies.

The two main features of the inherited development space are:

- 1) automatic integration of national space into the global capitalist space and its location in the global peripheral space, and
- 2) the construction of a core-periphery spatial structure within the national space. It is these two features that defined the postcolonial development geography in Sri Lanka.

Perera (1998) has argued that the most significant feature of postcolonial development geography is its incorporation into the global capitalist space. The British, as Perera (2000) has pointed out, 'constructed an economy that is compatible with the then contemporary European world-economy.' In a socio-historical sense, this meant that Sri Lanka has entered into a unilinear path of development signifying a transformation from the traditional to a modern form of society. What is most significant is that this integration concurrently laid the foundation for an internal core-periphery order, by establishing Colombo as the centre and rest of the country as the periphery. Integration of Sri Lanka into the global capitalist space and its particular socio-spatial history is adequately dealt by Perera (1998) and therefore, I pay attention to the manifestations of internal core-periphery structure.

Core-periphery spatial order and national space

Two important features of the colonial economy were; a) the development of Colombo as the economic hub that connects to the world economy and b) the creation of the plantation sector in the central hill country. The rest of the country where people engage in paddy cultivation and other forms of traditional

agriculture, by default, became the hinterland of Colombo. Thus, the three geographical realities at independence from a development perspective were;

1. Centrality of Colombo as the economic and political center
2. Plantation economy in the central highlands
3. Agricultural hinterland periphery

Centrality of Colombo

The centrality and significance of Colombo is succinctly captured when Perera (1998) states 'that it was Colombo that created Ceylon not vice versa'. Perera (1998) explains how Colombo was constructed as a geopolitically strategic port within the larger Indian Ocean space and how its significance was more in relation to the exterior. So, Perera elaborates that:

The strategy of European colonizers was to establish a "colonial port city" in Colombo and then spread outward, incorporating the island into its sphere of domination. Colombo was therefore the node from which imperial power and European capitalist culture diffused over the territory, and channeled economic gains from, and domination over, the colony back to the metropole

(1998b:3)

Thus, the spatial function of Colombo was twofold. On the one hand, it became the connecting point to the metropole thus servicing the global capitalist economy as an export center of primary products such as tea, rubber and coconuts transforming that into a peripheral center within the metropolitan sphere of influence according to Gunder Frank's dependency logic. On the other hand, as the politico-administrative and economic centre within Sri Lanka, it not only diffuses the capitalist culture as Perera (1998) argues, but also exploits and extracts from the rural hinterland,

thus entering into a new relationship with the rural Sri Lanka in the post-colonial period.

Its centrality within the interior of the island was ascertained in the post-colonial period. Its function changed from a mere peripheral colonial port city to the capital city of the new state, rendering the core status, both politically and economically, within the country. As a result of the core status of Colombo, post-independence development work has completely concentrated in and around Colombo. The region around Colombo has been developing (and recording less poverty) while the rural hinterland still lags behind (World Bank Poverty Report 2007).¹⁹ Even the infrastructural network (i.e. the railroad system) that was built to facilitate the interaction between Colombo (core) and the rural hinterland and the plantations have remained without any expansion.

Development became more and more concentrated in the Colombo region with the introduction of the open economic policy in 1977. The best example is how a free trade zone was established in Colombo as a result of the global peripheral industrialization drawing its cheap labor force from the rural hinterland. It is this core status of Colombo that attracts global capital and has now become a frontier of capitalist development. Thus, the modernizing project of Colombo and the surroundings continues into the postcolonial era.

Central Highlands/Plantations

The emergence of the plantation economy indicates a simultaneous process of social and a spatial transformation. In the early period of the colonial rule, the Portuguese and the Dutch utilized Ceylon to be an important export node in the trading network between Asia and Europe. British, after the Dutch, continued the same style of mercantilism, especially engaging in

extracting and exporting cinnamon. However, in the early nineteenth century, mercantilism was gradually challenged in Europe itself and the colonial rule opted for reforms and changes favoring capital investment in the colonial lands. Gradually, the colonial rulers introduced plantations, beginning with coffee. This was marked by a number of significant socio-spatial transformations. Introduction of the plantations became a point at which the Sri Lankan economy was truly incorporated into the global economy. At the local level, it replaced the agricultural economy of the Kandyan Kingdom with far reaching spatial impacts on the Sinhalese peasantry, specifically under the Crown Land Encroachment Ordinance. It created an extremely unique space - a laboratory space for colonialism's culture (see Duncan 2007 for details) with British as the managers and the controllers and the migrant Indian Tamils from South India who were brought to work as laborers in the plantations as the controlled. In a sense, it is a spatial enclave of its own mode of production, culture and politics.

The identity and the citizenry of this migrant population became a contested issue as to whether they should be incorporated into the new space or sent back to India. It is a classic socio-spatial question: how to fit this migrant population into the *new national space*. This continued as a contentious issue and they were left with an ambivalent identity until citizenship was granted under the Citizenships Acts of 1988 and 2003.

However, the plantations remained unchanged in its mode of production, in particular, the *colonial* culture and style. Most of the Indian Tamil workers do not own land and they continue to live in the estate dwellings. If they are to stay in line rooms, they must register to work as laborers within the particular estate. Given this

situation, the social mobility of Indian Tamils is spatially restrained. Plantations operate as spatial enclaves within the Sri Lankan national space-colonially constructed and postcolonially continued.²⁰ Nevertheless, two kinds of transformations can be identified in the recent years. On the one hand, there is a conscious effort on the part of the Indian Tamil population to "Tamilize" or to indigenize the hill country landscape by building shrine rooms, Hindu Kovils and pandals across roads, etc. On the other hand, it has become a radical political space. At times in the political history, plantation political parties have become the king-makers in Sri Lanka. Thus, a colonial economic space has been transformed into a postcolonial political space.

The rural hinterland

In a way, it is debatable whether the rural hinterland is a colonial construction or not. On the one hand, it is colonial as it is defined as a hinterland by the centrality of Colombo. Colombo is integrated into the global capitalist space as a provider of primary goods while the rural hinterland is integrated as a receiver of *manufactured goods* via Colombo. On the other hand, unlike the city of Colombo and the plantations, the rural hinterland, the dry zone of Sri Lanka, has a pre-colonial political and economic history. It is here that the ancient kingdoms were fostered and *Sinhalese* civilization flourished as evident from ancient ruins and the existing irrigation system. Therefore, it is identified as the Sinhalese heartland. This Sinhalese heartland was transformed into a peripheral status as a result of colonialism and capitalist integration. Within the developmental state and its postcolonial project, it becomes an area to be developed and metaphorically a *land to be rediscovered*.

In postcolonial vocabulary, the rural hinterland can actually be described as a liminal space in the sense that different conditions and ideologies cross over and blend together – it is a space which engages with precoloniality, coloniality and postcoloniality at the same time. How do we engage with this liminal space in the post-colonial period? On one hand, the rural periphery was backward and in need of material development as irrigations systems and paddy cultivation were generally neglected during the colonial period and due to the Malaria epidemic in the 1930s. On the other, this is the heartland of the Sinhalese emblematic of a *glorious past*. Thus, "the need to develop the dry zone (rural periphery) was justified not only by the practical necessities but also because of the historical role it had played within Sinhalese history (Hennayake 2006:55). An analysis of rural development projects very clearly demonstrates the fact that development of the periphery is constantly driven with the above dual intentions of modernizing and indigenizing (see for details, Hennayake, 2006 c 1 and 3)

Indigenous discourse and the rural periphery

Ironically, it is the co-existence of the rural periphery and the Sinhalese heartland which facilitated the construction of an indigenous discourse. (see for details of the constitution of the indigenous discourse, Hennayake 2006). In other words, the distinctive identity of the rural periphery within the Sinhalese ancient history is what allows indigenization of development possible within postcolonial Sri Lanka. The periphery of the colonial spatial order (thus within the western discourse of development) transforms itself into the core or the heartland within the indigenous discourse of development.

Thus, the rural hinterland, though contradictorily, holds the dual identities of core and periphery in competing discourses of development.

The most central space that dominates the indigenous discourse and the discussions of rural development in post-independence Sri Lanka is the *village*. The western discourse views Sri Lanka (thus the whole national space) as the unit of development pending transition from the traditional to the modern form. Yet, within the indigenous discourse, the village emerges as an ideologically powerful and representative spatial unit of development. Sri Lanka is thus conceptualized to be a union of self-sufficient villages supposedly as was the case during the ancient periods.

The village as the spatial icon of the glorious past is accrued a strategic and critical place within the indigenous discourse. The internal spatial structure of the village is featured by the triadic icons of the dry zone landscape – *wewa*, *ketha* and *dageba* (respectively tank, paddy field and temple) which naturally invokes the ancient hydraulic civilization of the Sinhalese (Ulluwishewa 1992). These triadic icons amount to an ideal image of the village. Leach writes in 1961, that “the ideal order tends to be a constant which is reinterpreted to fit the changing circumstances of economic and political facts.”

Socially, the development of the village signifies the revival of the peasantry. Most of the rural development projects, such as the river basin developments initiated by D.S. Senanayake, the Mahaweli Development Scheme, the one million housing projects in the 1980s, the poverty alleviation programmes enacted by late President R. Premadasa etc., carried this ideology that villages and thus the peasantry must be revived. Not only the state sector, but voluntary organizations such as

Sarvodaya resorted to a village-based development model and an ideology.

Here, some clarification is needed to avoid misinterpretations. The project of reclaiming the periphery by identifying the village as the unit of development, acknowledging the significance of the peasantry and re-developing the dry zone through various projects and plans, has had its own politics. These projects were not only driven by material necessities (as they were the most backward areas of the country) but also by reasons of political legitimacy. The anglicized political leadership needed ways and means of legitimizing their pro-western macro development policy. Turning to the periphery, and articulating it within an indigenous discourse that ideologically challenges the hegemony of the western, was politically strategic for them. Thus, centrality of village reigns as a powerful strategy of political legitimacy.

However, one must also ask the question how it becomes such a powerful strategy. Scholars such as Brow (1988, 1990), Tennakoon (1988), and Spencer (1990) tends to think of the *village* as an ideological construct that serves Sinhalese nationalism in a narrow sense. For example, Brow writes that, “sixty years of rural development in Sri Lanka have been shaped by the images of village community generated within the complex discourse of Sinhalese nationalism.” To reduce it to a mere ideological construct of Sinhalese nationalism downplays the empirical centrality of the village within Sri Lankan society and culture. It is not simply an ideological construct of the nationalists and political leaders at different times. The village featured by the triadic icons is an empirical reality in the dry zone even today.²¹ On one hand, as most of the Sri Lankans still live in villages it is their material experience. On the other hand, the ancient village, featured by the triadic icons is alive in

the imaginative world of the Sinhalese community. They can intimately relate to it – to that extent it is a material space, not merely ideological. In essence, rural periphery is simultaneously modernized and indigenized.

Thinking geographically about postcoloniality

What I have attempted to do in this paper is only to take stock of human geographies that emerged with the postcolonial experience of nationalism and development. There are many more postcolonial human geographies that can be teased out at different scales and in domains.²² I conclude this paper by summarizing the identifiable postcolonial human geographies on the one hand and on the other by elaborating how the empirical realities in Sri Lanka reflect recent theoretical developments in the geographical imagination.

My basic argument here is whether in relation to nationalism or development, postcolonial Sri Lanka is spatially contested. In the case of nationalism, how different ethnic groups identify with the colonially constructed national space has been the fundamental spatial issue. The new national space strengthened the imaginative geography of the Sinhalese. Yet, for the Sri Lankan Tamils, the new national space paved the way towards inventing their own imaginative geography-- the traditional homeland out of two administrative provinces created by the colonial rule. The contestation of national space has resulted in the rethinking of existing spatial structure (i.e. provinces) and to the production of new spaces (i.e. border villages) and spatial vocabularies (i.e. north and south) and reimagining Sri Lanka (as paradise poisoned).

These geographies open up new questions of identity. First, we have to accept that the imaginative geography of

the Sinhalese is spatially challenged by the Tamil homeland concept. Can we continue with equating "Sihaladeepa," with the modern nation state? What about the contending imaginative geographies of Sri Lankan Tamils? Some may identify with Ceylon more than Sri Lanka. A new generation of Sri Lankan Tamils was born within the invented homeland and without much ideological attachment to the rest of the island. How would they enter into the national space – to identify with the Sri Lankan state regardless of the form (unitary or federal) it may take? How would they negotiate between the national space of which they are legal citizens and the regional space which they feel to be home? How to overcome the social exclusion that is spatially enforced for the Indian Tamils? What would happen to the border villages? Opening up new borders, diluting the imaginative borders, removal of barricades – the geographical imaginations will have to be reworked for both the Sinhalese and the Sri Lankan Tamils.

Furthermore, the postcolonial developmental state is constituted by a core-periphery spatial structure. Colombo continues to function as a satellite to the metropolitan economy yet it reasserts itself as the core within Sri Lanka. As a result, development concentrates in and around Colombo, producing a spatially uneven pattern of development. Economically, the plantation space remains unchanged, yet it has gradually transformed itself into a political space expressing the needs of the Indian Tamils. Most importantly, the periphery or the rural hinterland is renegotiated within the indigenous discourse of development. It becomes a classical liminal space within which pre-colonial, colonial and postcolonial identities are renegotiated. The development of the periphery is thus ideologically redefined as an attempt to

reinstate the glorious past. In essence, the periphery of the colonial spatial structure becomes a metaphor to recast the glorious past and to indigenize development.

This paper attempted to highlight how space is an integral part of the constitution of postcolonial society and history. The postcolonial human geographies in Sri Lanka clearly show the need to move beyond the "container" view of space to a more nuanced understanding of space. It casts doubts about the fixity of boundaries and borders; spaces emerge on the boundary itself (i.e. border villages, the north-south with no boundaries). It fundamentally challenges binary conceptualizations of difference. For example, imaginative and material,

traditional and modern are not necessarily oppositionally constituted. Containing postcolonial space into an "either/or" format seems to be a meaningless exercise as they are so fluid. These are all concerns raised by geographers in recent years. In this context, exploring postcolonial human geographies has not only allowed us to raise some questions that we may otherwise not ask in the postcolonial context, but also to refresh the theoretical debates in Geography that have occurred in recent years.

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Notes

1. The term "Human Geography" refers to the academic discipline while "human geographies" is used to identify the human geographical phenomena in the world.
2. See Soja, E (1999) *Thirdspace: Expanding the scope of the geographical imagination*, In D. Massey, John Allen and Philip Sarre (eds.) and Gregory, D and Urry, J (eds.) (1985) and Massey, D (1985).
3. Ibid.
4. See Duncan, J (2007), Hennayake, S.K. (1992), Jazeel, T (2003), Wickramasinghe, N (2007) and Perera, N (1998).
5. Most of the published work in these two domains seemed to be couched in a narrow teleological framework. The post-1983 social sciences have been very reductionist as it explains all economic, political and social issues through the lens of *ethnic* conflict.
6. See for details, Mishra, V. and Hodge, B. (1991), McClintock, A (1992), Loomba, A (1998) and Shohat, E (1992).
7. Elsewhere, I have argued this as the "postcolonial paradox of Sri Lanka in having to simultaneously cater to a developmentalism entrusted upon it as modern secular state on one hand, and on the other to the "desire" of the locals who were subjugated not only materially but also culturally during colonial rule." (Hennayake, N. 2006: 1).
8. The term post-colonial is used in this paper whenever I refer to the period after 1948. When referred to the condition of postcoloniality, I use the term un-hyphenated as postcolonial.
9. See for details on cultural nationalism Hutchinson, J. (1987).
10. I have explained elsewhere how these two tendencies of indigenization and nationalization were simultaneous reactions to on one hand to colonial subjugation and on the other to the growing imperialism at the global scale. These tendencies were articulated by the combined forces of nationalist and socialist groups. See Hennayake, N. 2006 for details.
11. Efforts such as Home Grown Food Policy and the colonization schemes etc. are identified as reflecting more of personal ambitions of D.S. Senanayake who is characterized by Jupp (1978) as a liberal nationalist who aspired to make Sri Lanka self-sufficient in her staple food, rice. However, the immediate post-independence regimes controlled by the anglicized political elite who continued to nurture a colonial culture set the stage for nationalist politics in 1956. See Hennayake, N (2006) and See Jupp, J (1978).

12. Moore explains how the peasantry which had the potential of a counter-hegemonic force was co-opted into *national interests* disabling them to articulate along their own occupational interests. See Moore, M (1985).
13. See for details, Hennayake, S. K. (1993).
14. Many have written about the emergence of Tamil nationalism. An analysis of them is beyond the scope of this paper.
15. See for details about the fifty-fifty deal proposal made by the Tamils even before independence.
16. Said states that, "it (the Orient) is not merely there... that the orient is an idea that has a history and a tradition of thought, imagery, and vocabulary that have given it reality..." (1979:4-5).
17. This was enacted by creating a de facto state through a system of taxation, law and order system, regulations for border crossings etc. At a socio-cultural level, this also included a variety of mechanisms such as redrawing the map of Sri Lanka with eelam in it and publicizing it in the cyber space, and use of such maps in the school curriculum, propagandist functions and festivals (i.e. Maha Veer Day).
18. For a detail discussion on the modern state as a colonial construct, see Perera (1998).
19. Also see O'Hare, Gregory P. and Barrett Hazel R. (1996).
20. This is not to suggest that there are no interactions between the people in plantations and rest of the country. But the occupational structure rather restrains their socio-spatial mobility.
21. Hennayake (2006) has done a map exercise to determine the spatial prominence of village with triadic icons in Anuradapura district, Sri Lanka.
22. Some work is already done in this direction. For example, see Perera, Nihal (2002).

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