



Negotiating access to land in eastern Sri Lanka: social mobilization of livelihood concerns and everyday encounters with an ambiguous state

Mansoor Mohamed Fazil

To cite this article: Mansoor Mohamed Fazil (2019): Negotiating access to land in eastern Sri Lanka: social mobilization of livelihood concerns and everyday encounters with an ambiguous state, *Asian Ethnicity*, DOI: [10.1080/14631369.2019.1680271](https://doi.org/10.1080/14631369.2019.1680271)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14631369.2019.1680271>



Published online: 18 Oct 2019.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 89



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

BOOK REVIEW

Negotiating access to land in eastern Sri Lanka: social mobilization of livelihood concerns and everyday encounters with an ambiguous state, edited by Shahul H. Hasbullahand and Urs Geiser, Colombo, International Centre for Ethnic Studies, 2019, 211 pp., (paperback), ISBN: 978-955-580-233-8

Land-centered conflict in Eastern Sri Lanka has resulted from the state's discriminatory policies in the multi-ethnic society. The Sri Lankan census of 2012 divided the population ethnically into Sinhalese (74.9), Sri Lankan Tamils (11.2), Indian Tamils (4.1), Sri Lankan Moors (9.3), and others (0.5). With regards to religion, Buddhists compose 70.1% of the population, while Hindus, Muslims, and Christians are 12.6%, 9.7%, and 7.6%, respectively (Department of Census and Statistics, 2012, 20–21).¹ The state is controlled by the majority population in Sri Lanka, the ethnic Sinhalese. The Sinhalese are an integral part of the state which has expanded across the nation through ethnicised colonization.²

This is most effectively exemplified by the Gal Oya scheme in Eastern Sri Lanka. In this part of the state, a piece of land roughly 4,000 acres in size³ lies at the centre of an intense and decade-long quarrel among several 'social groups' (8). According to this book, each of these groups has organised and mobilised supporters to struggle for their respective claims – claims that are closely related to livelihood concerns. One of the groups claim that they are entitled to use the land as pasture for their cattle, and hold official documentation issued by the appropriate government department as proof. Another 'social group,' however, contests this claim: they argue that they are entitled to use this piece of land not as pasture, but to cultivate paddy. Similarly, this second group holds official documentation from a state department. Both these claims, though, are challenged by a third 'social group': for this third group, the land is part of larger track of forest and, though no longer entirely covered by trees, should be protected as a forest reserve. Once again, the respective government documents are in hand. Last but not least, a fourth 'social group' vilifies all others groups on environmental grounds; the cultivation of paddy is in particular denounced as an illegal activity, and other state documents are invoked to support this position.

This book is an attempt to re-empiricalise state-people relations in eastern Sri Lanka and to document the diversity and complexity of land conflict in the nation. The authors believe that, while that detailed analyses may not solve the conflict, they do provide the starting point in the search for possible solutions.

This book is fundamentally a description of the insights authors have been able to gather through a micro-perspective lens, and is structured as follows: in Chapter 1, the authors describe the context understanding the conflict. In Chapter 2, they introduce their wider study region in Eastern Sri Lanka, namely the Right Bank area of the Gal Oya scheme, including the densely populated region of Akkaraipattu along the east coast (28). It is a region where three distinct ethnic groups (Tamil, Muslims, and Sinhalese) share borders. It is also a region that has been strongly influenced by a number of economic and political processes over the last few decades, including a rapid change in land use as a consequence of the state-led Gal Oya irrigation scheme; the war that afflicted the region and its people in different phases between 1983 and 2007; the Tsunami of 2004; and the continued role of development projects implemented by international aid agencies and the state.

Chapter Three concerns the study region proper: the two Divisional Secretariats (D. S.), the Divisions of Akkaraipattu and Alayadivembu. It briefly describes some of the social and economic characteristics of this locality, including the presence of ethnic groups, but also other markers of identity such as wealth and class. This Chapter also looks at the local, state structure. Being specifically interested in forms of local mobilisation and organisation, the authors undertook a general survey of such entities in Akkaraipattu and Alayadivembu, finding hundreds of local organizations.

Chapter Four to Eight provide the empirical details for each of the five cases that were explored in the book. These five Chapters describe and analyse five cases of land disputes, providing deeper details of the issues with considerable empirical insights into the workings of land conflict (67–162).

The first study (in Chapter Four) engages with the seemingly routine and technical process of defining local units for the administration of state services and functions. In this Chapter, the authors discuss how this process unfolded, and examine the role that local organizations and their (patronage) networks can play in this process. They start with a brief overview of provincial and district levels, which is followed by a detailed description of local administration and governance. This Chapter ends with the first discussion of administrative boundary-setting between groups striving for local self-determination (which can be linked to debates on decentralisation) and ‘political engineering’ along ethnic lines. With the Fifth Chapter (the second case study), the authors focus on one locality where such divisions were recently created and are still ongoing. The focus of this fifth Chapter is on a small geographical area: this helps the authors to dig deeper into the perceptions of why land (and the use of specific plots of land) is contested, how those affected grapple with and negotiate the consequences, and how these groups interact with the state and interact with the ‘others’. Chapters Six and Seven elaborate on the topic of land use by the people of Akkaraipattu and Alayadivembu for agriculture. These Chapters highlight the challenges faced by farmers who gained access to land through the Gal Oya land development project. Chapter Eight addresses the dispute in Wattamadu in the south of the Akkaraipattu region. As previously outlined, a range of groups claim the right to use this piece of land, and each group is able to legitimise its claims through legal documents issued by the state. This Chapter is indeed an arena of social contestations, and thus provides an excellent opportunity to further deepen the understanding of group formation, encounters between these organized groups, and encounters between the groups and the ‘state’.

Finally, the book concludes (with Chapter Nine) is an attempt to analyze, in a comparative manner, this corpus of empirical insights. This Chapter also aims to discuss whether each of the five case studies is unique, or whether there exist certain patterns that may be applied across this region of study.

In a nutshell, this book is an outstanding account of rural populations’ concerns with the land. This analysis is outlined the connection between land ownership and livelihood needs, as well as people’s economic capabilities to meet these needs, across ethnic markers of identity. This highly differentiated and, at times, divided rural populace encounters a state at the local level that is fragmented, compartmentalized, and ambiguous. This book makes a valuable addition to the field of social mobilization of land access and livelihood concerns in Eastern Sri Lanka. This present study, however, has not accounted for the recent regional state policies which have declared reserve lands for archaeology, forest reservation, and cultural heritage. This book also has not considered issues relevant to the second generation of the present disputers of land. This second-generation fills a different livelihood context, as many of them pursue education are moving toward careers in government and private institutions. These research gaps can be fulfilled through further studies.

Note

1. Department of Census and Statistics, *Census of Population and Housing 2012 – Final Report*.
2. Fazil, *State-Minority Contestations in Post-Colonial Sri Lanka*.
3. Department of Land Administration Eastern Province, “Administrative Report 2012.”

Notes on contributor

Mansoor Mohamed Fazil is a Senior Lecturer in Political Science at the South Eastern University of Sri Lanka. His research interests include state and society relations, ethnic conflict, conflict resolution, and post-conflict peace building.

Bibliography

- Department of Census and Statistics. *Census of Population and Housing 2012 – Final Report*. Sri Lanka: Ministry of Policy Planning and Economic Affairs, 2012.
- Department of Land Administration Eastern Province. *Administrative Report 2012*. Trincomalee, Sri Lanka, 2012.
- Fazil, M. M. “State-Minority Contestations in Post-Colonial Sri Lanka.” PhD thesis, University of Malaya, Malaysia, 2018.

Mansoor Mohamed Fazil

Department of Political Science, South Eastern University of Sri Lanka, Oluvil, Sri Lanka,

 fazrasm@seu.ac.lk  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3253-2795>

© 2019 Mansoor Mohamed Fazil

<https://doi.org/10.1080/14631369.2019.1680271>

