

## Sri Lanka

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**Daniel Bass, *Everyday Ethnicity in Sri Lanka: Up-country Tamil Identity Politics***

London and New York: Routledge, 2012. xiv + 228 pages. List of illustrations, acknowledgements, list of abbreviation and acronyms, glossary, notes, bibliography, index. Hardback, 85.00. ISBN: 978-0-415-52624-1.

IN 1999, DANIEL BASS arrived to a Sri Lanka engulfed in civil war and traveled to a place mostly off the radar of Sri Lanka's cultural anthropologists. Fourteen years later, the result is *Everyday Ethnicity in Sri Lanka*, an informative ethnography that captures the agency, contradictions, and stakes of expressing an “Up-Country Tamil” minority identity and ethnicity in war-torn Sri Lanka amid realities of diasporic sentimentalities and sociopolitical alienation. This place was, as Bass calls it, the “up-country,” the South-Central areas of the island where tea and rubber plantations are sustained and a place that Tamil plantation laborers and residents—namely Up-Country Tamils—call home.

Bass contends that Up-Country Tamils are a “diaspora next door” having descended from South Indian migrant laborers who came to British Ceylon in the nineteenth century and eventually settled on Ceylon's coffee and later tea plantations as laborers. Bass argues that as a diasporic community Up-Country Tamils “have begun a process of emplacement in Sri Lanka using ethnicity, rather than caste or class, as the basis for communal solidarity” (23). Based on field research

completed between 1999 and 2006, Bass presents the “construction of dominant discourses of Up-Country Tamil ethnicity in Sri Lanka and their negotiation of everyday practices” (3) and in doing so, captures the way in which such dominant discourses inform the lived and material landscape and people of the Up-Country and how both are perceived and recognized in Sri Lanka.

The most controversial aspect of this ethnography is its theoretical usage and application of the word “diaspora” in defining Up-Country Tamils, but Bass presents convincing evidence and a careful selection of nuanced theoretical frameworks to support his claim. First and foremost, the term “diaspora” for Bass does not entail just “displacement and deterritorialization,” but rather a more murky and contested process of simultaneous “emplacement” (26). Following the works of anthropologists Liisa Mallki and David Turton, Bass emphasizes that Up-Country Tamils should be included in diaspora studies because of their emplacement in Sri Lanka, despite social, civil, and political alienation. By calling Up-Country Tamils a “diaspora next door,” Bass not only links their heritage and history as descendants of colonized South Indian migrants to those of other Indian migrants within the British Empire but also gives due recognition to the value and placement of India as a token in narratives of place-making and everyday practice among Up-Country Tamils in Sri Lanka.

The book is divided into seven chapters, with the first two chapters primarily historical in nature, and then builds through each subsequent chapter in contemporary ethnographic detail. In chapters 1 and 2, Bass advocates for anthropologists of South Asia to return to a “modified ‘peoples and cultures’” approach in the face of anthropology’s more localized and segmented approach to writing and representing culture; he argues that for Up-Country Tamils in Sri Lanka, “the interplay of culture, power, and place [are] behind ethnic politics in modern Sri Lanka and in the South Asian diaspora” (49). This approach fits Bass’s agenda in that he claims to not focus on a particular aspect or segment of Up-Country Tamil ethnicity; rather, he is primarily interested in how Up-Country Tamil elites, leaders, and “culture workers” seize culture and place to craft and represent Up-Country Tamil identity and ethnicity within Sri Lanka. This power manifests in his insistence on calling this minority community, “Up-Country” (in Tamil, *malaiyaka*, or “of the hills”)—a term which most Sri Lankan anthropologists, including myself, now use, not because it is politically correct, as Bass rightly contends and demonstrates in his analysis of the census in chapter 2, but because the term forcefully challenges all of the other names given to this discriminated and once stateless minority working community.

This chapter sets up the most commanding sections of the book—namely chapters 3 and 7. Bass turns to the current ways in which “culture workers” wield power and the effects of such moments of agentive capacity on this place in Sri Lanka and on those living in India as repatriates. In chapter 3, “Becoming Sri Lankan,” Bass builds off of anthropologist Valentine Daniel’s theoretical framing of *ur* and Renato Rosaldo’s concept of “cultural citizenship” in order to present how Up-Country Tamils have created alternative geographies of the plantations and on lands that have been, and remain, management controlled, industrial spaces of work. Until now, and apart from the scholarship of Bass and historian Patrick

Peebles, anthropological and historical studies of Sri Lanka have fallen into either structural-functionalist or summary-driven textual genres. Bass's chapter on naming and place-making brings a welcome dimension to plantation studies by foregrounding the power of storytelling and the embodiment and materiality of emplacement in the ground and words of the Up-Country. In chapter 7, "Home and Homeland," Bass leaves Sri Lanka and returns to the site of Up-Country repatriation—the Nilgiris of South India—to which nearly half a million Up-Country Tamils repatriated between 1964 and 1984 (164). Here, he leaves his readers with the emotional debris of repatriation—namely trying to piece together the fractured kinship between Indian repatriate, Selvi, and her mother, Latha, in Sri Lanka. In one of few more ethnographically tense vignettes, Bass presents his readers with what the historical record and dominant discourse often cannot—the persistent longing and affective pain that Up-Country Tamil kin continue to experience long after their displacement and within their continual process of emplacement in Sri Lanka.

Bass's ethnography presents obvious methodological limitations, which he duly mentions in the introduction. Aside from tracing women's narratives between India and Sri Lanka, the ethnography largely avoids a deep analysis of gender, which dominant discourses of Up-Country Tamil ethnicity specifically table due to patriarchal structures of power and its rewards. As a scholar of women and gender, I had hoped to see a more critical analysis of the intentional displacement of gender among "culture workers" and the potentially negative effects of such representations for the community's larger social and political mobility. Furthermore, Bass contends, "Up-Country Tamils have learned that they cannot wait for the government to make improvements for them, but that they must rely on culture workers to make the most of the agentive moments available to them" (189). While perhaps not his intention, this statement forces his readers to question why culture workers are given so much validation and power and if, in fact, all Up-Country Tamils consciously rely on this elite community for social change. Could it be possible that in the everyday, those Up-Country Tamils, who are represented by the elite, embody the will to live independent of such "culture work," create and sustain life at the margins, and defiantly place themselves in an uncertain present for a better, but unknown future? Can a modified "peoples and cultures" approach to ethnography in Sri Lanka accommodate such questions of pragmatic survival and recognition? Nevertheless, *Everyday Ethnicity in Sri Lanka*, is an informative and necessary contribution to Sri Lankan plantation studies and a must-read for those studying migration, labor, and ethnicity in contemporary South Asia. By presenting the dominant discourses of Up-Country Tamil ethnicity, agency, and identity-formation, Bass opens the door for plantation studies to go beyond the borders of the plantation and forces readers to reimagine the concept of diaspora and acknowledge the unevenness of place-making and identity-formation in Sri Lanka.

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