




Book review

## Ravana's Kingdom: The Ramayana and Sri Lankan History from Below

By Justin W. Henry. New York: Princeton University Press, 2022, xv + 277 pages, ISBN 9780197636305 (hardback), £82.

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**I**N *Ravana's Kingdom*, originally a quest to discover whether a Sinhalese version of the *Ramayana* existed, Justin Henry delves far deeper and highlights various adaptations and revisions of the epic in Sri Lanka from the fourteenth century to the present day. Tracing impressions of the *Ramayana* through media spanning literary works, stage drama, film, online forums, blog sites, and even YouTube, he emphasises the “uniquely sympathetic view” (2) of Ravana’s character on the island amongst both Sri Lankan Tamil Hindus and Sinhalese Buddhists. As a “populist vision of history” (3), subversive local narratives regarding the characters and events of the *Ramayana* represent for Henry a “significant triumph” for “history from below” (16) and a rebuke to established accounts of the island’s recorded history. This “Sri Lankan case” for Ravana’s kingdom, he argues, further allows for comparisons with contemporary popular movements, sovereignty discourses, and the rise of alternative media in societies across the globe.

Divided into six chapters exploring the transmission of the *Ramayana* in Sri Lanka, the book opens with the various ways in which Ravana has emerged as a “cultural hero” amongst the island’s Sinhalese Buddhist populace through both “popular” and “official” (1) channels. For Henry, the historical continuity in these manifestations of Ravana and the references to his ruined kingdom, act as both symbols of Ravana’s Sri Lankan indigeneity and metaphors for “colonial loss” and what Henry terms “neo-colonial exploitation” (2). Given the recent history of Sinhalese-Tamil relations, Henry references the irony that Ravana, long an emblem of southern India’s Dravidian independence and Tamil separatist movements, has today become closely associated with autochthonous visions of the origins of the Sinhalese people. Introducing both current and historical iterations of the *Ramayana* story in the first chapter, Henry emphasises the epic’s difference from the island’s long Pali chronicle tradition and the peculiarity of its anti-hero becoming the esteemed symbol of the “post-war palingenesis” (9) of the Sinhalese people.

Chapter two examines how, while Ravana continues to live on as a “quiet hero” (27) for some communities across the subcontinent, South Indian inscriptional discourses from the eighth century onwards began to directly identify the island of Sri Lanka with Ravana’s abode. Henry maintains that the “inversion” of Ravana’s character from “treacherous villain to sympathetic hero” (36) can be traced back to the oral traditions and temple histories present amongst Tamils across southern India and northern and eastern Sri Lanka, which then found their way into the Sinhalese storytelling tradition.



In chapter three, Henry traces the incorporation of these Tamil impressions of Ravana's kingdom into the Sinhalese cultural and literary sphere during the Kandyan period (1597-1815). Citing Sinhalese poems, folk tradition, and ritual texts, he illustrates how *Ramayana* lore abounds across the island and relates the "unremittingly positivist interpretations of the literary record" (67) which seek to reposition Ravana as a historical persona. Through these "informal channels," lay Sinhalese Buddhists thus appeared able to relate the contours of Ravana's kingdom to the island through bypassing the "conservative censorship" (75) of the monastic elite who remained fixated on the Pali chronicle tradition with its strict historical chronology.

Chapter four tracks Ravana's evolution as a literary and historical character in the Sinhalese world from the late nineteenth century to the present day. From *fin de siècle* prose works and stage adaptations to recent television serials and science-fiction works, Henry demonstrates how *Ramayana* narratives today represent an epistemological break from Pali chronicle accounts of Sri Lanka's genealogy and early history. Whereas, in the twentieth century, memories of Ravana helped islanders to imagine a future without the yoke of colonialism, post-civil war "consumer demand" (98) from the victorious Sinhalese Buddhist populace dictates his place as a guardian of a golden age of tradition now finally within reach. Contemporary discussions of Ravana's kingdom become perfect exemplars of "cultural essentialism" where "grandiose, hyperdiffusionist theories" emerge which critique the influences on a nation's "cultural genius" (107). Referencing Arjun Appadurai's anxiety of incompleteness concept, Henry shows how this cultural essentialism thus connects the island's experience to the nationalist imaginaries driving "dark Baltic states, raving African demagogues" and "fringe Nazis in England and northern Europe" (107).

Chapter five examines further the presence of Ravana and his kingdom in the wider Sri Lankan public imagination in the twenty-first century. Citing Banu Subramaniam's theory of archaic modernity, Henry highlights how the shared desire to discover "procedural knowledge" (127) from deep antiquity to use in the present connects both the Sinhalese Ravana movement and India's *Hindutva* discourse. His analysis of the rise of the "Ramayana Trail" and "Ram diplomacy" (135) between India and Sri Lanka also foreground the economic and diplomatic benefits to be gained from evoking the epic and demonstrate the nexus linking archaeology, diplomacy, history, religion, and tourism. Henry further documents the activities of "digital bricoleurs" (152) who, often without formal academic training, offer their own interpretations of Ravana's connections to Sri Lankan history on the "global alternative media" (151) of YouTube, Facebook, blogs, and self-publications. He uses the phenomenon to critique Sheldon Pollock's assertion that "no civilization wants its origins searched" (157) and implies that the Ravana movement is unique in its existence as a popular enterprise seeking to rewrite the history of an ethno-racial community from the bottom up.

The necessity of "choosing sides" (176) when discussing Ravana in Sri Lanka today becomes the focus of the book's final chapter. With Henry describing his having to overcome "residual suspicion" (177) and to explain the intentions behind his research to local audiences from *baristas* in coffee shops to patrons at the National Library, the dynamic but divisive legacy of the *Ramayana* across the island today becomes readily apparent. Yet, as he explains, a variety of Sinhalese and Tamil artistic, academic, and literary figures have in recent years attempted to use Ravana as a kind of cultural interface and conduit for post-war reconciliation between Sinhalese Buddhists and Tamil Hindus. This unlikely possibility—considering the rhetoric of those pushing a more exclusivist Sinhalese Ravana revival—connects to Henry's summation that there remains no "Ravana consensus," with the recent phenomenon being "in essence user-generated" (182) and developed by Sri Lankans from all walks of life. Indeed, what Ravana and his kingdom represent for Sri Lanka today are a legacy of triumph and visions of limitless possibility for a nation which has found itself reeling from political and economic crises in recent times. Furthermore, as Henry emphasises, the reception of the *Ramayana* across

the island serves as a warning to the rest of the world that “dominant historical narratives have always been vulnerable to insurrection from the voice of the common people” (198).

As Henry concludes in the appendix, there seems to exist no authentic Sinhalese *Ramayana* in the manner of the various vernacular versions of Valmiki's epic found throughout South and Southeast Asia. All that appears to exist is the *Rāvaṇa Katāva*, an abridged poem discussing Ravana and his character, dating back no earlier than the seventeenth or eighteenth century. Nevertheless, with his attention to the informal avenues of transmission from southern India to Sri Lanka from the late medieval period onwards, Henry successfully communicates the manifold ways in which the *Ramayana* has percolated into the lives of the Sinhalese people. Charting its historical literary reception across the island, he crafts a convincing account of the contemporary rehabilitation of Ravana in Sri Lanka today and of the alternative narratives connecting an epic anti-hero to Sinhalese and Tamil civilisational antiquities and to both Sri Lankan Buddhism and Sri Lankan Hinduism.

Still, Henry's focus in his discussion of the *Ramayana* as a manifestation of a wider Sri Lankan history from below remains on the epic's connections to the majority Sinhalese community. For instance, while he traces Tamil influences on and reactions to its “Sinhala appropriation” (190), he concedes that there are *Ramayana* traditions “preserved in Tamil speaking regions of the island, concerning which further ethnographic research remains a desideratum” (74). The reader is left wondering whether a difference of opinion regarding Ravana's kingdom exists between the Sri Lankan Tamil population and Indian Tamils both on the mainland and within Sri Lanka itself. While a footnote in chapter three mentions Ronit Ricci's analysis of the epic's importance for Sri Lankan Malays, the place of the *Ramayana* in the histories of Sri Lanka's other minority ethnic and religious communities remains uncertain and another avenue for possible future academic activity. Henry also explains at the outset that his goal is “not to rehearse Sri Lankan instances of phenomena already documented elsewhere in South Asia nor to reduce Sri Lanka to a mere token of a general type” (2-3). However, systematic comparisons of how Ravana and his kingdom were received by other ethnic and religious communities within polities across the wider Indic world are surely necessary to bolster any argument about the bespoke legacy of the *Ramayana* in Sri Lanka today.

In his examination of how Ravana became a cultural icon for the Sinhalese, Henry firmly but correctly connects conversations concerning the monarch and his kingdom to the various popular attempts to rework and to reconstruct Sinhalese royal genealogies. However, he could perhaps further develop his stance on whether the Sinhalese Ravana movement is merely the means to achieving or, indeed, the end goal in finding the hitherto “hidden” origins of the Sinhalese people. Indeed, a parallel phenomenon sharing many similarities and a great deal of overlap with this Ravana revival is the emergence in recent years of a Sri Lankan claim to Buddhism's geographical origins which regards the current consensus of an Indian or Nepalese origin as heavily flawed. While Henry makes passing mention of this concurrent campaign in chapter five through his description of Meevanapalane Siri Dhammalankara Thero, that Buddhist monk is just one of several actors in a movement which has currently gripped popular Sinhalese discourse. Overlapping questions therefore emerge concerning not just the possible connection of the *Ramayana* to Sri Lanka and its people, but also the link between quests to find the origins of the Sinhalese people and those seeking to uncover the beginnings of their primarily Buddhist faith.

Another subtle tension appearing throughout Henry's work which warrants a deeper examination relates to the difference in credibility attributed to amateur or independent Ravana enthusiasts without the relevant research expertise in comparison to credentialed or professional archaeologists and historians. In chapter one, Henry asserts that bricoleur Ravana mavens do not see themselves in opposition to the academic establishment and do not consider their research findings to lie beyond the realm of scholarly consensus, noting that several academics have themselves joined the Sinhalese Ravana cause. Yet, in a footnote in the

concluding chapter, Henry curiously references the rapid decline in the popular relevance of and national appreciation for professional history in Sri Lanka today. Why did these amateur researchers come to fill the gaps in the production of local historical and archaeological output and how did they gain widespread acceptance? While Henry posits that these bricoleurs emerged because “Ravana is *fun*” (6) and fulfilling for those with the “sufficient time and interest” (182), perhaps their proliferation instead reflects the more *serious* view that mainstream academia has not done enough to convincingly answer the questions many islanders continue to have regarding their origins and their past.

Aside from these opportunities for further inquiry, Henry’s deep dive into the reception of the *Ramayana* in Sri Lanka achieves his aim of showcasing how the island’s tales regarding Ravana and his kingdom represent a subversive historical account propelled from the bottom upwards. Readily admitting that his own Sinhalese is “exasperated and inadequate” (176), Henry, in the acknowledgments, reveals how strong interdisciplinary collaboration enabled him to make full use of multilingual sources and archives that have until now received little to no attention in Western scholarship. Indeed, through his work ranging from analysing ancient palm-leaf manuscripts and chronicle texts to surveying Facebook posts and claims from internet forums, Henry offers vivid insight into how a centuries-old epic tradition, long neglected in studies of Sri Lankan Buddhism, continues to find an expression in the digital age.

A religious historian, he adds to the work of John Holt, Michael Jerryson, Mark Juergensmeyer, and others writing on contemporary South and Southeast Asia by exploring the links between ethno-nationalism and religious chauvinism in Buddhist polities across the Theravada world. With its voluminous footnotes and bibliography and its expansive survey of existing media on the topic, Henry’s book is geared towards an academic audience familiar with developments in contemporary Sri Lankan society. Yet advanced knowledge of the island and its history, though certainly helpful, is not necessary for those wishing to engage with the book’s thesis and to evaluate its merits. Indeed, Henry’s work becomes a must-read case study for anyone seeking to understand how alternative narratives from non-traditional sources can come to challenge hegemonic histories.