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Book Review of, Mark Whitaker. *Learning Politics from Sivaram: The Life and Death of a Revolutionary Tamil Journalist in Sri Lanka*

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formation of the Khalsa resources that are restorative and renewing for Sikhs living today. “I want us to remember the vital ingredients of selfhood and autonomy supplied by Guru Nanak and Guru Gobind Singh,” she says, “so that we can retrieve the full force of Sikh identity sipped in the *amrit*—for both men and women” (p. 74).

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Learning Politics from Sivaram: The Life and Death of a Revolutionary Tamil Journalist in Sri Lanka. By MARK P. WHITAKER. Ann Arbor, Mich.: Pluto Press, 2006. xiv, 251 pp. \$90.00 (cloth); \$28.95 (paper).
doi: 10.1017/S0021911807001830

The book is a must-read for scholars interested rebellions, revolutions, and power struggles. Mark P. Whitaker’s evocative prose captures the urgent and unsettled nature of life in eastern Sri Lanka over the course of the nation’s ethnic conflict.

Sivaram Dharmaratnam was a militant, a journalist, and a strategic analyst. Unlike many Tamil commentators on Sri Lanka’s ethnic conflict, Sivaram lived and worked in Sri Lanka. Knowing the danger, he repeatedly refused to leave the country. “How can you scream from the outside?” (p. 94) Sivaram asked rhetorically, spurning the life of the detached academic. Whitaker asserts that Sivaram strove to create and disseminate knowledge about the nature of political oppression and resistance, working to better the lot of the disenfranchised and disempowered. As his fame grew, Sivaram traveled widely, consulting with foreign governments, military strategists, think tanks, nongovernmental organizations, and activist groups. Though never elected to office, Sivaram was committed to political action. He worked to build alliances between Sinhala and Tamil leftists and to mend relations between factions of the Tamil insurgency. Sivaram pursued his political project until he was assassinated in April 2005.

Foremost, the book is an intellectual biography. Sivaram was a complex man with a deep range of scholarly interests. Whitaker and Sivaram started talking about philosophy in 1982 and continued the discussion for the next two decades. This biography records their rich debates and their deep friendship, both cut short by the conflict that encompasses the book. Whitaker argues that anthropologists usually write life histories, wherein scholarly projects prevail over the subjects’ interests, which the writers translate and interpret for the readers. Biographers, in contrast, often take a back seat to their subjects. Stretching the boundaries of life history and autobiography, this subject-led biography was written in consultation, and two strong voices emerge from the narrative: the self-assured Sivaram and the humble but incisive author.

This review focuses on three themes in the book, one being journalism. A world-renowned journalist, Sivaram wrote as the columnist Taraki (influential

in the English-speaking Sinhala south) and in the last eight years of his life served as a senior editor for the online independent news agency TamilNet (which presents accurate, timely, subversive, firsthand English reporting from the north and east of Sri Lanka). His opinions were widely respected by the Tamil diaspora and by international news agencies covering the conflict in Sri Lanka. Sivaram saw the level of risk involved in writing articles and editing TamilNet as indicative of the influence and importance of his work.

Counterinsurgency tactics and methods for resisting them form a second theme in the book. Speaking about Sri Lanka specifically and state practices more generally, Sivaram analyzed how states suppress dissent and pacify and contain rebellions. He identified overlapping political and military strategies, including propaganda, divide-and-rule tactics, checkpoints, disappearances, torture, and massacres. Having created an atmosphere of terror and caused the collapse of the social fabric, counterinsurgency governments can then take moderate positions and engage in confidence-building measures without making any fundamental changes to the structure of the state. A war-weary population might willingly accept any measure that stops the conflict. Sivaram formulated “a cookbook” (p. 118) for resisting and challenging counterinsurgency tactics, for example, suggesting that counter-counterinsurgents can create autonomous zones of control and engage in countermedia (such as TamilNet). Sivaram did not wholeheartedly approve of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam but viewed them as the “only game in town” (pp. 129–132) for waging a rebellion and achieving military parity with the Sri Lankan state.

Nationalism forms a third theme of the book. Sivaram argued that many scholars fundamentally misunderstand the importance of violence in the analysis of nationalism. Sivaram viewed ethnicity and nationalism as the basis for nation building, not as “epiphenomenal byproducts of modern nation-states” (p. 172). Ruling elites are not multicultural but support their ethnic group. Premodern states used to have multitiered forms of governing, with local elites governing members of regional cultures. Modern states have replaced this inefficient intermediate tier, using ethnonationalism to govern instead (p. 168). But centralization and homogenization inevitably draw attention to cultural and linguistic differences between national elites and those they govern, and local elites rebel. International dynamics normalize some elite-led states and brand others as illegitimate.

Whitaker’s finely crafted book relates the evolution of Sri Lanka’s civil conflict through the story of one of its main commentators. It will interest anyone who is engaged in studying, perpetrating, or resisting counterinsurgency strategies. It is also of critical use to students of nationalism and to anthropologists who are interested in cutting-edge experimental ethnography. Finally, it offers a touching tribute to Sivaram, a dynamic intellectual respected and mourned the world over.

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