

THE EXTERNAL FACTOR IN SRI LANKA'S HISTORICAL FORMATION*

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Sri Lanka is an island located at the centre of the Indian Ocean and at the southern extremity of the South Asian subcontinent. As an island its relationship with the external world around it, both by land (i.e. with Peninsular India) and by sea (i.e. with the countries of the Indian Ocean region and beyond), has been of particular importance in the evolution of Sri Lanka's history and culture. The way in which historians have looked at what we may call this "external factor" raises important issues of *approach*, *orientation* and *perspective* in historical studies. The principal objective of this article is to raise some of these questions of orientation and to outline some basic approaches to the role played by external factors in Sri Lanka's historical formation in the period before the 16th century.

Any confrontation with historical data—or even the simplest kind of "search for historical facts"—involves either explicitly or implicitly a certain theoretical framework or theoretical viewpoint on the part of the historical researcher. We may describe this "network of theory" as the sum total of mental or philosophical attitudes and the set of received beliefs and assumptions, of historical notions, methodologies and scholarly traditions which the student of history brings to bear on his or her field of survey. This complex of mental equipment is what basically determines which facts the observer chooses to see, which facts he or she chooses to link together and how he or she evaluates and

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interprets such facts. This theoretical framework is inherited or implanted in the historian by virtue of his or her training and by the prevailing scholarly environment. It is rarely questioned and often, because it is never explicitly presented as a coherent framework, it is not questionable. Instead, each generation of scholars improves on the work of the previous generation by a variety of additive or critical methods. The net result is an increase in the quality and the quantity of data within the parameters of the established and inherited framework. At a certain stage in this process anomalies and contradictions appear between some of the available data and related parts of the inherited theoretical framework. At this point two paths of action are possible: the researcher who is inhibited by his or her training ignores, accommodates or explains away these anomalies; the bolder student, on the other hand, begins to search out that (often hidden) framework, to question it and finally begins to look for alternative theoretical models or to ask for the construction of new ones.

This somewhat simplified description of an important aspect of historical studies is offered here because the present article derives from the viewpoint that Sri Lankan historical studies have arrived at precisely such a critical juncture. Modern Sri Lankan historical science has made tremendous progress since it began in the late 19th or early 20th century, and particularly since the 1940's. The accumulation and critical verification of data is today highly advanced while the rate of research output has increased exponentially. Yet no single work of scholarship has yet questioned the basic assumptions and theoretical framework laid down many decades ago, while the subject as a whole has developed beyond recognition but basically within the parameters of that early framework.

The present article does not presume to offer a new theoretical framework in any total or coherent form. What it does attempt is to provide the outlines of a fresh orientation to the problems posed by its particular subject; an orientation which calls for a new way of looking at the available facts and which opens up new perspectives in the continuing search for further data. As such, for the most part it only makes explicit what is already implicit in the work of other scholars and its focus is not with the facts themselves but with the relationships between facts.¹ In effect, our concern here is to point out in a preliminary way

1. As the article contains facts drawn from a large number of sources—most of which are familiar to scholars working in the field of Sri Lankan historical studies—footnotes are dispensed with altogether except for two instances where specific references are made.