

# **PHILANTHRONATIONALISM: JUNCTURES AT THE BUSINESS-CHARITY NEXUS IN POST-WAR SRI LANKA**

## **ABSTRACT**

*Over the past few years, the role of private sector organisations as actors and investors in development processes has received increased attention. This paper explores the rise of ‘philanthronationalism’ in Sri Lanka: the co-development of business and philanthropy methods as a response to patronage, nationalization, and militarization in the post-war environment. Drawing from ethnographic research into indigenous forms of corporate social responsibility (CSR), the paper identifies four kinds of philanthronationalist practice – passive, assimilative, reactive, and collaborative – that provide a logic, mechanism, and ethic for private sector development initiatives in the island whilst promoting a vision of the ‘Sinhala Buddhist nation-state.’ Noting the emergence of similar philanthronationalist practices in Myanmar, the paper concludes by arguing the Sri Lankan case is unlikely to be unique and calls for further research into philanthronationalist forms around the world.*

Keywords: philanthrocapitalism, philanthronationalism, CSR, militarization, Sri Lanka

## **INTRODUCTION**

Over the past few years, the role of private sector organisations as actors and investors in development processes has received increased attention (Almaric *et al*, 2004; Blowfield and Frynas, 2005; Frame, 2005; Sayer, 2005). Sometimes subsumed under the label ‘philanthrocapitalism’ (Edwards, 2008a), a range of market-based responses to development challenges including corporate philanthropy, social responsibility (CSR), and social business have come to populate the field. A defining argument of philanthrocapitalism stresses that market-based approaches provide especially effective vehicles for addressing economic, social, and environmental problems. This includes how development agencies should follow venture capitalism’s logics of ‘high risk/high return’ investment, how a focus ought to be placed on ‘empowering’ the world’s poor by making entrepreneurs and consumers out of them, and how corporations can promote development outcomes through more ethical, and ultimately profitable, business practices.

Critiques of philanthrocapitalism have tended to fall into three camps: one in favour, one against, and one exploring the social, ethical, and political terrain of philanthrocapitalism itself. The first two arguments are well rehearsed: philanthrocapitalism can either be read as a

benign movement of socially-aware billionaires and multinational corporations keen to apply their entrepreneurial acumen within the development arena (Bishop and Green, 2010; Hopkins, 2003), or a ‘smokescreen’ put up by companies masking questionable business practices and ethics (Edwards, 2008b). Looking beyond those debates have been a number of anthropologists and others exploring the ‘governmentalities’ of philanthrocapitalism as it manifests in different settings. Here we find a growing body of work that designates philanthrocapitalism a fundamental driver of neoliberalization in society, where the technologies of ‘compassionate capitalism’ mark out new kinds of market practice and subjectivity (useful collections exploring these and other themes have been edited by Browne and Milgram, 2008; De Neve *et al*, 2008; Dolan and Rajak, 2011).

A principle concern in this literature has been how philanthrocapitalist programmes become ‘a crucial mechanism’ (Rajak, 2011b: loc. 307) through which ‘the market supplants politico-judicial and religious domains as society’s ethical arbiter’ (Dolan and Rajak, 2011: 3). Extending market logics, mechanisms, and ethics to development processes, it is argued that philanthrocapitalist interventions marginalize state and civil society by reframing development challenges as falling within the moral and technical purview of private sector actors. Focused mostly on Euro-American philanthrocapitalist efforts around the world, a common underlying assumption is that contemporary global capitalism is defined by what crudely could be described as a ‘roll-back’ of the state and ‘roll-out’ of the market. The implication is that capitalist societies are destined to become philanthrocapitalist societies as capitalism’s ‘technologies of enchantment’ (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2000: 292) displace the state as provider of social protection and development. In much of what has been produced, state actors have been ‘written out’ of the story of philanthrocapitalism, as if national governments and politics have little bearing on how processes of neoliberalization unfold.

Yet as Dardot and Laval (2014: loc. 153) remind us, ‘the modern market does not act on its own, but has always been backed by the state.’ This paper questions the inevitability of philanthrocapitalism as a ‘deregulated developmental form’ and considers the importance of local political configurations in the trajectories of indigenous and ‘south-south’ private sector development interventions. The focus of the paper is post-war Sri Lanka, and the relationships that have arisen between actors glossed as market, state, and military, which are generating what we might describe as a kind of ‘philanthronationalism’: the application of business logics, mechanisms, and ethics for the pursuance of political and nationalistic aims. Here, the rise of philanthronationalism signals not just the emergence of a politically-astute corporate sector that has read the writing on the wall and is merely seeking to ensure its own

survival, but a kind of state-sanctioned economic practice that enables the extension of Sinhala Buddhist nationalist rhetorics into the market in the most fundamental sense. By tracking in close detail how Sri Lanka's oligarchic regime circumscribes philanthrocapitalist practices from a diverse range of sources – local and international companies, NGOs, donor agencies, faith organisations – for its own ends (which often as not are as concerned with economic accumulation as with nation-building), the paper reveals a 'house of cards' that is as pervasive as it is ultimately fragile.

Ethnographic research and in-depth interviews conducted between February 2012 and July 2013 as part of a wider project exploring forms of charity and philanthropy in Sri Lanka and its diaspora form the base of the paper.<sup>1</sup> Fieldwork included open-ended interviews with more than thirty company owners, chairpersons, CEOs, and managers, and individual case studies of specific company engagements. This built on the back of a longer-term interest in philanthrocapitalism in Sri Lanka, with ethnography performed intermittently between October 2004 and June 2006 as part of a separate project.<sup>2</sup> Finally, for the past decade I have also been involved deeply in capitalism's 'cultural circuit' (Thrift, 2005: 6), working as a CSR consultant on behalf of companies, donor agencies, and development agencies. I draw from that experience to understand further Sri Lankan philanthronationalism as a particular kind business strategy.

## **ECONOMY, NATIONALISM, AND WAR IN SRI LANKA**

Insofar as popular economic histories relate, Sri Lanka was set on the path of market 'liberalization' in 1977 – the first South Asian country to do so. On how that history unfolded much has been written, including crucial questions of how economic trajectories have related to nationalism, civil war, and the erosion of democracy in the country (for a selection of writings in this field see: Winslow and Woost, 2004).

In the most basic sense, ethnic and linguistic nationalisms formed between the Sinhala and mostly Buddhist majority and the Tamil and mostly Hindu minority gave rise to the civil war. With the roots of conflict usually cited in terms of northern Tamil grievances at a range of exclusionary educational, economic, and political policies emanating from the Sinhala-

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dominated government in Colombo, a series of hostilities broke into full-scale conflict following ‘state-sponsored’ anti-Tamil riots in Colombo in 1983. Following decades of violence and some serious attempts at a negotiated settlement, the war was ended militarily in May 2009.

Jonathan Spencer (2008: 622-624) identifies three accounts of the relationship between economy and conflict in the extant literature. The first account links the 1983 riots with the neoliberal policies of 1977, which supposedly irked Sinhala businessmen who thought themselves placed at unfair disadvantage vis-à-vis Tamil businessmen, catalysing the riots and eventually all-out war. The second account highlights how ‘1977’ was more rhetoric than reality, as despite claims of ‘state roll-back’ the following decades were defined by increased spending on public health and education, whilst kickbacks associated with large-scale international aid flows led to mounting conflicts as those in power sought to protect their interests. The third contends that in later years the causal bases of the war had changed, becoming increasingly about the preservation of such vested interests than ethnic identities *per se*. Meanwhile, the army, since the 1990s the island’s single largest employer, soaked up a vast population of unemployed youth from the Sinhala Buddhist south (Venugopal, 2011: 69). This not only proved electorally advantageous for the politicians who could promise to keep army recruitment rising. It also helped to quell a security risk, as unemployed Sinhala youth posed a substantial threat to the state, as witnessed in the two Maoist uprisings in 1970s and 1980s/1990s.

Contra popular history, then, the trajectory of Sri Lanka’s economic development in the twentieth century was anything but ‘neoliberal.’ If it is useful to define it at all, then it is one that contained growing traits of what Polanyi (1977: 40-42) called a ‘redistributive economy.’ Elites with extensive political and economic capital accumulated and protected wealth by whatever means, including the propagation of ethnic hostilities and civil war, all performed for the ‘elemental desire to stay in clover’ (Moore, 1990: 371; also see Korf, 2006a). Yet with peace declared in 2009, the nationalistic antagonisms and fears that had previously kept that economy turning risked disappearing. As ever in Sri Lanka, much of what happened next barely escapes the realm of rumour and innuendo and deep politicization. Yet it seems clear that an escalation of well-established practices has defined the first five years of peace, ranging from the redistribution of new revenue sources in return for political acquiescence, to the fostering of ethnic and religious hostilities justifying civil society crackdowns and the consolidation of power bases. These include the continued use of development revenues and other lucrative economies for political gain, the militarization of

the Sri Lankan economy as a means of avoiding mass demobilisation, and the emergence of a muscular Sinhala Buddhist nationalism with tangential links to persons in high office.

Dependent upon foreign and especially Chinese finance, many consider the Sri Lankan government's current economic strategy to be dangerously unsustainable (David, 2013; Kadirgamar, 2013). Notwithstanding the fact that commercial development loans have today replaced aid grants as a source of 'clover,' much remains the same.<sup>3</sup> Public tender processes remain deeply corrupt, with many large infrastructure projects widely seen as vanity or vote-rigging projects of the President Mahinda Rajapaksa, his brothers, and/or money laundering exercises by various other politicians and 'underworld' bosses. At government level, loyalties are bought and rebellions are quashed through the gifting of cabinet posts to existing party members and members of the opposition switching sides; the Sri Lankan cabinet is now possibly the world's largest, containing some ninety-three ministers. Since 2011, thirty-seven major private enterprises, including the national airline and oil company, have been renationalized or earmarked for renationalization, and chairpersonships passed to relatives and friends of the Rajapaksa family. Several of those companies renationalized were allegedly key financiers of the political opposition (Lanka Business Online, 2011).

For many commentators a particular concern is the 'militarization' of the economy. Although processes of militarization in Sri Lankan society and culture have been underway for several decades (De Mel, 2007), militarization has arguably taken on new economic and political significance in the post-war era. Whilst some might have assumed the end of war would see a marked fall in military recruitment, leaked documents suggest plans were set in motion to double the size of the armed forces by 2015.<sup>4</sup> The north and east of Sri Lanka are under what some have called 'military occupation,' with an expansive network of army camps established to deter a regrouping of the LTTE (International Crisis Group, 2013). Since 2009, the Sri Lankan Army, Navy, and Air Force have moved into a range of key industries including tourism, leisure, travel, construction, and agriculture. Having access to 'free' labour and cheap materials, military-owned enterprises are able to undercut private enterprises by a large margin, and regarded by some companies interviewed as a major risk to

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<sup>3</sup> Over the past few years, Sri Lanka has progressed from a low-income to middle-income country, triggering the withdrawal of aid from a large number of bilateral and multilateral donor agencies and NGOs. This fact also of course places increased importance on the actual and potential role of indigenous development funding opportunities from the private sector, and of philanthronationalism as a key determinant of how that money is used.

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/09COLOMBO576\\_a.html](http://www.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/09COLOMBO576_a.html)

‘fair competition.’ They also, of course, provide a means of satisfying ongoing demands for youth employment, which in a country finally at peace represents a significantly greater allure than in previous decades. A joke currently circulating Colombo is that Sri Lanka now has two governments: a civilian government headed by Mahinda Rajapaksa, and a military government headed by his brother Gotabhaya Rajapaksa.

Finally, it would probably not be cynical to suggest that with the total destruction of the LTTE as a threat to Sri Lankan sovereignty, appeals to the majority Sinhala Buddhist vote have been made by stoking fears of new ethnic and religious bogeymen. Thus the emergence of an especially vocal and violent Sinhala Buddhist nationalism, epitomised by the Bodu Bala Sena (BBS; Buddhist Power Force), which in the past few years appears to have set its sights on the Evangelical Christian and Sri Lankan Muslim communities. Ameer Ali (2013: 8) argues that Muslims, who make up around 9 per cent of the Sri Lankan population, have long been accused by Buddhist reactionaries of using ‘Shylockian methods’ to become prosperous whilst ‘native’ Sinhalese suffer in poverty, and this kind of complaint remains a central narrative of the BBS. The BBS itself came to prominence in 2012 following a spate of demonstrations against mosques located on what they claimed to be Buddhist holy land, and later the same year against Muslim-owned businesses including two of the country’s largest clothing chains (see below). As this paper was being revised for publication, a BBS rally in southern Sri Lanka led to several deaths as well as extensive damage to business and property.

## **THE BUSINESS-CHARITY NEXUS IN SRI LANKA**

New configurations of politics, business, and religion in post-war Sri Lanka have ramifications across a number of spheres, of which one is the way businesses have developed a logic, mechanism, and ethics of social intervention. In this section, I stake out the general terrain insofar as Sri Lankan business-charity relationships exist, point to their roots in colonial and post-colonial processes, and set up the analysis for the subsequent discussion of philanthronationalism.<sup>5</sup>

So far, I have referred to private sector development engagements in Sri Lanka as kinds of philanthrocapitalism. Sri Lankan companies themselves, both privately-owned (PVTs) and publically-limited (PLCs), describe what they do using the most up-to-date

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<sup>5</sup> Given the highly contentious nature of the subjects discussed, wherever possible I have tried to disguise organisations and informants. However, because the paper describes highly publicised programmes run by some of Sri Lanka’s largest brands, in most cases this has been impossible.

terms: ‘corporate philanthropy’ is a label rarely found; ‘corporate social responsibility’ (CSR) is a label quickly passing out of fashion; ‘sustainability,’ reflecting the best of post-2015 development thinking, is swiftly moving in. The commitment shown to global ‘best practices’ of philanthrocapitalist engagements by Sri Lankan corporations runs through their glossy promotional materials, annual reports, and corporate infomercials.<sup>6</sup> Upon first glance, the products and trappings of Sri Lankan philanthrocapitalism fit neatly within the global assemblage of CSR and sustainability discourses.

Yet corporate giving cultures differ for foreign and local businesses. During interview, the local officers of MNCs often mentioned that ‘sustainability is in our DNA’; managers at both HSBC and Unilever used identical phrasing. Yet such biological metaphors, integral in Euro-American neoliberalism’s self-descriptions (Thrift, 2005), have not been incorporated into the languages of Sri Lankan companies. By the Keells Foundation, the CSR arm of John Keells Holdings PLC, what is most important is ‘the heart of it’; as some Sri Lankan companies say: ‘We Care’ (a motto used by Sri Lankan airlines and Mobitel, a mobile-telecoms provider). This is not indicative of a ‘touchy-feely’ Asian capitalism compared with a Darwinian ‘red in tooth and claw’ Anglo-Saxon capitalism. Rather, it can be understood in relation to popular moralities of charity expressed by Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, and Christians informants, located in the ‘happiness’ (Sinhala: *santōṣa*) that giving can or should bring, which is valued over and above the rational calculations of giving for merit or blessings (c.f. Samuels, 2008), in this case embodied in the corporate form. Throughout interviews with Sri Lankan PLCs, PVTs, and the wider giving public, the importance of ‘happiness’ as a result of expressing loving-kindness and compassion (*metta*: a Buddhist concept which like *santōṣa* exists as part of popular discourse) for those in need, was shown to be paramount.

We can also understand the pursuit of happiness as an inflection of the redistributive economy. The spoils of corporate success are expected to be shared with those less fortunate, not just because of thought to companies’ ‘triple bottom line’ of ‘People, Planet, Profit,’ but because that is what kind patrons do for their clients. Sri Lankan business leaders share a moral space in society reserved for any individual with power and prestige, from the kings of past to the politicians of present, who are responsible for the fate of those beneath them. Speaking of moneylending practices at village level in Sri Lanka, Michele Gamburd (2000: 78-82) reports on the social relationships between creditors and debtors, which she describes

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<sup>6</sup> For example see: *John Keells Holdings PLC CSR Video 2013*, <http://youtu.be/9N79q4VJ3E4>, accessed 15/10/2013

in terms of ‘trust’; patron-client relationships are defined by exploitation and a cultural expectation to provide clients’ a modicum of protection. The stakes are higher and the game is more complex but at corporate level, the rules remain much the same. Accompanying financial self-gain is an obligation to display altruism in obvious forms. Anything involving money directly, and interest specifically, is especially contentious in this regard. It is no coincidence that one of Sri Lanka’s most famous contemporary philanthrocapitalists, Dr Soma Edirisinghe, owes her fortune to a business career started in a string of pawnshops and today encompasses a range of financial services and products.

The redistributive model of Sri Lankan philanthrocapitalism generates a particular style of giving that in many ways has not changed much in the past two hundred years. In British colonial Ceylon, social mobility was achieved via the amassing of wealth and the use of charity, to ‘win acclaim and power’ from the colonial elite (Jayawardena, 2000: 179). Private development initiatives today still more closely resemble their nineteenth-century forebears than they do the ‘new philanthropy’ of the Gates Foundation and their ilk. The ‘old philanthropy’ was characterised by a ‘charity approach’ exemplified by the existence of dependency relationship between benefactor and beneficiary. Thus in Sri Lanka philanthropy has long centred on the performance itself: the ‘immediacy of the gift’ as a singular event in time and as a relational act in space. Programmes may provide for immediate relief from the consequences of poverty but rarely from the causes of poverty. The vast majority of Sri Lankan philanthrocapitalist actors engage in what I term a ‘schoolbooks and spectacles’ approach. Under the auspices of ‘CSR’ or ‘sustainability,’ companies give gifts of schoolbooks to children, dry rations to needy communities, meals to orphanages or elders’ homes, medical equipment to rural hospitals, leadership programmes for graduates, or eye tests and spectacles for residents of Colombo’s slums and remote villages.

The Sri Lankan government seems nevertheless to have accepted the developmental potential of philanthrocapitalism. In the 2012 budget, tax incentives were offered to companies developing CSR programmes meeting government objectives. At the same time the government has seemingly discouraged external stimulus of the CSR field by overseas ‘development partners.’ In 2012, USAID’s Office of Economic Growth decided to donate US\$ 5 million for a legacy project: ‘CSR Lanka.’ Run by a Sri Lankan board and with the aim of becoming self-financing within five years, the objective of CSR Lanka was to provide information and training for companies wishing to establish philanthrocapitalist programmes. On the eve of launch, with legal status established, a logo and letterhead designed, domain name registered, membership in place, and poised to recruit a CEO (by preference from



overseas, I was told, to ‘avoid the old-boy problem’ and politicization), the government refused to recognise its legitimacy. ‘Too strategically important for foreign involvement’ is how one USAID employee described the Sri Lankan government’s thinking on the matter. Lacking political support, USAID pulled the funding and the initiative was suspended.

On one level, the Sri Lankan government’s response to CSR Lanka, which has since come under the patronage of Basil Rajapakse, the Minister for Economic Development, simply reflects wider animosities between the two countries. The USA is the main sponsor of UNHRC resolutions demanding that Sri Lanka investigate allegations of war crimes. On another level, the move expresses deviations between USAID’s vision for CSR Lanka and local understandings of what CSR means in the post-war context. Integral to this is the way distinctions between economic, social, and political praxis, and market, state, and society relationships, including civil and military distinctions, are generating particular philanthrocapitalist logics, mechanisms, and ethics in Sri Lanka today. USAID’s firmly neoliberalist philanthrocapitalist offering, self-consciously separated from local social and political networks, failed to fit into an environment better described as increasingly ‘philantronationalist,’ where the civil and military branches of government are increasingly laying claim to, and taking control of, market spheres.

## **THE RISE OF PHILANTHRONATIONALISM**

Recent work on development gifts in Sri Lanka has stressed the deeply political and asymmetrical nature of humanitarian and charitable donations and activities (Hollenbach, 2013; Korf *et al.*, 2010; Hollenbach and Ruwanpura, 2011). Building from Stirrat and Henkel’s (1997: 73) contention that development gifts ‘are good for the giver but...bad for the receiver,’ Ruwanpura and Hollenbach (2013) argue that the act of ‘compassion initially motivated by “pure intentions to help” morphs into other facets’ that include the fostering of patronage and political corruption, and ignoring of receivers’ interests (ibid: 244). The ‘schoolbooks and spectacles’ approach of Sri Lankan philanthrocapitalism can be similarly defined in terms of asymmetrical gift relationships. In addition to this, and the subject of the present discussion, is the relationship that exists between Sri Lankan companies and the ruling elite – the ‘oligarchy’ of the Rajapaksa’s and the senior politicians, civil servants, and business leaders who come on their coat tails (Stone, 2014) – that transforms corporate patrons into clients of power.

At the simplest level, ‘philantronationalism’ involves the application of business logics, methods, and ethics to address political concerns and expediencies by promoting a

distinctive Sinhala Buddhist nationalism – a function of corporates’ asymmetrical relationship with the oligarchy. Whilst elements of philanthronationalism have undoubtedly have existed in Sri Lanka for some time, after 2009 it extended beyond a gifting practice to become an integral feature of capitalist practice in the country. This reflected concerns within the private sector about renationalization and militarization, as well as resurgent nationalism and a growing nervousness of minority communities, and go far beyond attempts to ‘win acclaim and power’ addressing the fundamental right of companies to exist and operate at all.

Thus, philanthronationalism has arisen most obviously in minority- and foreign-owned businesses. Yet given the potential risk to all businesses represented by post-war processes of renationalization and militarization, fundamental elements of philanthronationalism exist widespread. To tease out particular features of this complex terrain, I present several case studies by order of a loose typology: ‘passive,’ ‘assimilative,’ ‘reactive,’ and ‘collaborative.’ By structuring the material in this way, my aim is to point out how philanthronationalism can be read as a conjoining of interests at the business-charity nexus rather than suggesting hard and fast distinctions.

### **1. ‘The cost of doing business’: passive philanthronationalism**

The first form of philanthronationalism discussed here, what might be called ‘passive philanthronationalism,’ can be understood as the most widespread. The vast majority of Sri Lankan companies interviewed, both majority- and minority-community owned, expressed vocabularies of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism in and through their work. Commenting on the pastoral aesthetics of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism, Spencer (1990: 286) has described the importance of a triage of symbols – tank, temple, and paddy field – in the nationalists’ rhetoric. In their own use of such nationalist imaginary, companies are merely following the lead of state- and foreign donor-sponsored development projects, and in particular the politicians who have exploited them for electoral advantage (Brow, 1996: 77-87; Spencer, 2008: 623). Thus, the most fundamental form of philanthronationalism is ‘passive’ because it is simply assumed in the elemental design and delivery of projects, with little explicit direction – it ‘goes without saying.’

In November 2012, I attended an arts show organised by youth members of LinkedUp, a small community development organisation run by a couple of Sinhala Christian business owners. LinkedUp operates in a low-income neighbourhood called Waseer Watta, a Muslim quarter of north Colombo with large Sinhala Buddhist and Catholic minorities. Although the charity’s patrons stressed the organisation was for all members of the

community, beneficiaries of their various programmes, from a soup kitchen to financial management training classes, were predominantly Sinhala. For the art competition, LinkedUp invited children from the surrounding communities to submit drawings and paintings on a theme that was meaningful for them. Although I did not conduct a formal examination of the works produced, it did seem that a strikingly large number of submissions appealed to Sinhala Buddhist imaginaries of tank, temple, and paddy field.<sup>7</sup> None, it is noteworthy to add, featured local urban landscapes.

Aside from the gallery, the show featured music and dancing performed by the charity's youth members. Organisers scripted proceedings along the highly regular lines of such public events in Sri Lanka, drawn again from particular Sinhala Buddhist imaginaries. VIPs, including the United Nations' delegate for volunteerism, arrived in the wake of a troupe of Kandyan dancers; as an invocation for an auspicious event, assembled dignitaries lit an oil lamp; all in attendance sang the national anthem in solemnity; select personages, including the local Buddhist prelate, made several long introductory speeches. The monk talked about the importance of preserving Sinhala Buddhist culture, which he explicitly identified with the ancient cities of Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa. Parallels between the cultural significance of those sites as cradles of 'Sri Lankan culture' (*sanskritiya*) and the art on exhibition around the hall were drawn. Towards the end of the show, in what was an impressive display by any measure, dancing children circled the audience with Sri Lankan flags aloft. Meanwhile three teenaged women, a Sinhala Buddhist flanked by a Tamil Hindu and a Muslim, entered centre stage. Marking the crescendo of an event that had already made prodigious use of nationalist vocabularies, the final scene broadcast multiple signs that interwove female innocence (*ahinsaka*) with moral 'goodness' with Sinhala ethnic primacy, which also form central tropes of Sinhala Buddhist moralities (for detailed discussions of this see: Hewamanne, chap. 2; 2008; Lynch, 2007: chaps. 4-5).

LinkedUp's art show illuminates the deep reach of nationalist symbols into popular culture, and their passive manifestation in and through 'philanthrocapitalist' projects. When pushed, however, interviewees often explained how their use of nationalist imagery was a way of appealing to the widest share of employers and customers and of avoiding political interference by displaying patriotic credentials – the 'cost of doing business' in post-war Sri Lanka, as one owner-manager, uncomfortable with the game he was playing, described it. At

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<sup>7</sup> Interestingly, these were also common motifs produced by village children in an art competition conducted by Spencer (1990: 287), some thirty years previously.

the same time, however, the association of nationalist symbols with political ambition means their deployment can also pose significant risks.

The next example concerns Ceylinco Consolidated PLC, once Sri Lanka's oldest and largest private company, whose use of nationalist imagery in its CSR programmes reinforced popular opinions that the company's chairman would be running for political office. At its height, Ceylinco was a group of some 100 companies and more than 30,000 staff owned by Ceylon Insurance Company, from which the group derived its name. In 1996, the company's chairman, Dr Lalith Kotelawala, was injured in the LTTE's suicide bombing of the World Trade Centre in Colombo. During convalescence, Kotelawala read a book about the Grameen Bank, the Bangladeshi microfinance company, which has spawned imitators the world over. Kotelawala was moved to launch Ceylinco Grameen, an act that was to become the first in a long line of social business investments and responses.

Between 2004 and 2006, I spent time with Kotelawala when accompanying the production team of Ceylinco TV (CTV), Ceylinco's media arm. CTV produced documentaries focusing on Kotelawala's philanthropic activities, broadcasting them on one of Sri Lanka's private television channels, ITV. In 2005, CTV filmed a Grameen event supporting local farmers in Mahiyangana in eastern Sri Lanka. As was typical of Ceylinco CSR events, the iconography and choreography was carefully arranged so to place the proceedings firmly within Sinhala Buddhist imaginaries of state and nation. A stage was erected on the banks of a *wewa* (irrigation tank), national flags were hung as a backdrop, Buddhist flags fluttered in the breeze, the Ceylinco brand adorned the stand. The award ceremony itself contained elements already described: Kandyan dancers, VIPs (this time the company leadership including Kotelawala, the local MP, and Buddhist monks), oil lamp, national anthem. The speeches stressed the important role of corporate philanthropy in rural development, and lauded the reputation of Dr Kotelawala as a man generous with his wealth, putting to good works the ethos of capitalist accumulation.

But the utilization of nationalist aesthetics coupled with the space, place, and performance of the ceremony implied that the object of Ceylinco's development efforts was a Sinhala Buddhist nation. Mahiyangana is at the centre of Sri Lanka's Mahaweli irrigation development zone, itself viewed by critics as a product of nationalist policies of Sinhala land grabbing; the site of the ceremony was on the banks of a *wewa*; Buddhist flags and monks formed key props; beneficiaries were simple paddy farmers. Back in my main fieldsite in western Sri Lanka, my informants did not miss the use of such imagery when I discussed it with them. Popular opinion held that Kotelawala was engaged in philanthropy because he

held political ambitions, with speculation rampant that he would run for president against the newly elected Mahinda Rajapaksa. CTV and other Ceylinco staff I interviewed also held this belief. Yet because Kotelawala was Christian, the assumption was that he needed to demonstrate support for the dominant culture in order to become a viable candidate.

Then, in 2009, one of Ceylinco's largest subsidiaries, the Golden Key Credit Card Co., collapsed amidst accusations of corruption and financial mismanagement. In 2007, Golden Key posted profits of LKR 20 million when it had in fact lost LKR 7 billion. In 2008, the company ran out of money and more than 9,000 depositors lost a total over LKR 26 billion. Accused of running a Ponzi scheme, Kotelawala and ten directors were arrested and charged; all were later imprisoned, with Kotelawala also serving time. Ceylinco itself was broken up. Although there is little reason to doubt that Ceylinco's management were guilty of the charges brought against them, what surprised observers the most was the fact that the scandal came to light at all, and that once it had, Kotelawala was not able to avoid criminal charges, or a guilty verdict, or jail time.

When in 2012 I spoke to old Ceylinco staff about Kotelawala's downfall, there was suspicion his philanthropy had proved destructive. Some speculated that the President had failed to intervene in the case, as he might in others, because Kotelawala, by giving away so much, had become 'too big' for his own good. Others suggested the entire case was a fabrication, drawing parallels with Army Commander Sarath Fonseka, a presidential challenger in 2010, jailed on charges of running for public office whilst holding a military post. Interviews with directors of other companies also suggested that the Ceylinco case served as a warning: philanthronationalist expressions are required to consolidate market foothold but must be politically astute. In a country where supporters of the ruling party routinely avoid charges let alone prison, the case highlighted how 'gifts can make the wrong sort of friends' – a dramatic proviso to Marshal Sahlins's (1972: 186) gift that 'makes friends.'

## **2. 'A gift from us to them': assimilative philanthronationalism**

Building on Ceylinco's cautionary tale, what we might call 'assimilative philanthronationalism' seeks to enhance a company's patriotic and nationalist credentials and support for the ruling regime. In this case, philanthronationalism becomes a method of achieving 'competitive advantage': a key strategic goal for businesses operating in fast moving, high-stakes, high-competition marketplaces where the slightest edge can make all the difference. Often described in terms of fostering the conditions for retention and

satisfaction and creativity and innovation in the workforce, competitive advantage enhances brand value and recognition. Both of these outcomes are associated with integrative philanthronationalist projects.

During a succession of interviews conducted between 2012 and 2013, a senior manager at Dialog Axiata PLC explained how public perception of foreign ownership directly influenced their CSR agenda. Foreign ownership has been a source of constant criticism by Dialog's competitors including Sri Lanka Telecom PLC (SLT). Dialog and SLT are the two leading companies in the highly competitive ITC market, which includes landline, mobile, broadband, digital TV services, and mobile cash transfer services, which Dialog currently leads. The majority of Dialog's shares – more than 83 per cent – are owned by a Malaysian company, Axiata (Dialog Axiata PLC, 2012: 42), of which the largest shareholder (at 38 per cent) is a Malaysian sovereign investment fund, Khazanah Nasional Berhad (Axiata Group Berhad, 2012: 317). The Sri Lankan government is SLT's largest shareholder (at 49.5 per cent), although 44.98 per cent are owned by Global Telecommunications Holdings NV, which is Dutch (Sri Lanka Telecom, 2012: 190). Nevertheless, because SLT has a name that implies local ownership and Dialog is widely thought of as a foreign (Muslim) business, Dialog is concerned that its market leadership position is increasingly under threat from rising nationalist sentiments. This problem arose immediately during an interview with a senior manager at Dialog, who was careful to point out that little of Dialog's profit in actuality repatriated from Sri Lanka, and downplayed the extent of Dialog's foreign ownership and overstated the extent of government ownership:

Dialog is a public listed company. There is a certain percentage on the local stock exchange as well as including a large portion owned by the Sri Lankan government. A percentage is owned by a Malaysian sovereign fund. Competitors say things about repatriation of money, but very little money that has come in here [to Dialog] has gone out [to Malaysia]...

Nevertheless, Dialog became convinced it was losing competitive advantage with respect to all of this. The manager admitted that 'the company has been involved in sustainability from day one' since entering the Sri Lankan market, as an attempt to change its public perception: 'But obviously not just as a knee jerk reaction to those accusations,' he hastened to add.

Eventually Dialog's board decided that a big gesture – described as 'a gift from us to them' – to consolidate Dialog's position as a company committed to Sri Lankan development was required. In 2008, Dialog set out to build and gift to the Ministry of Health (MoH) an

eight-storey cancer detection centre in Colombo, and allocated LKR 1bn to the project. Unfortunately for Dialog, the MoH was less enthusiastic about the offer and the project was held up by bureaucratic wrangling. Hinting at deliberate political interference, Dialog's manager told how the project file with the MoH was lost no less than three times, preventing any kind of progression. (Although interviews with the MoH suggested concerns over how to meet high running and maintenance costs of the hospital led to these delays.) Meanwhile another company, the London-based Ahmad Tea, under the direct patronage of the Rajapaksa's, was able to secure a deal to build a very similar kind of facility, thus making Dialog's own offering redundant. Dialog eventually launched a much-reduced project in the form of a rather sorrowful two-room clinic near the proposed location.

In a similar move, Carson Cumberbatch PLC, which has a diverse portfolio spanning plantations, finance, real estate, leisure, management services, and beverage, described its sustainability programmes as politically expedient. A senior manager at Carson described the company's involvement in beer brewery as part of the 'dark economy': a space that although legal goes against the grain of popular morality and the government's official policy of temperance. For Carson this was a concern not only because it damaged the company's overall brand value, but apparently deterred recruitment of the best talent. As the manager explained:

We are in the dark market because of the government's policy on alcohol [which promotes abstinence]. Sometimes there is hostility towards us because liquor is considered a social stigma. In order to cushion that effect it is better to do something for the society. Even though you are selling a product which is not socially acceptable, but your organization is doing something. This gives our employees a bit of pride. In order to attract and retain people that kind of an approach is good for us.

One of Carson's engagement areas is youth training and development. In past years, war-affected communities in eastern Sri Lanka have been the focus, with the aim of developing a grassroots peace process by giving young people opportunities and hope for the future. At the request of Namal Rajapaksa, the president's son and MP for the southern Hambantota District, who also runs his own youth charity, Tharunyata Hetak ('A Better Tomorrow for the Youth,' Carson established a parallel programme in Namal's constituency:

At the moment we do quite a number of other things in order to...say... help the government in power. Very recently the parliamentarian Namal Rajapaksa, who is the president's son, has requested whether we could do something for his electorate...So we are at the moment doing two projects, one in Kilinochchi in the north and one in Hambantota in the South.

When asked whether Carson's decision to support Tharunyata Hetak was a reflection of political expediencies, the manager was quick to deny it. The programme had been conceived and designed based on due diligence, responding to a need:

No, no, no. We don't want to do something for the sake of doing. I went to the employees' federation, read their research papers on what a private sector business is looking for in an entry-level employee. So we got that, and designed the training program...So we took pain to do that model...Tharunyata Hetak may be taking the credit, but the entire process is being driven by us. Only what they do is find people. They bring their youth to this program and we turn them around. So therefore, the political influence in to the program is zero.

Yet immediately after this, he qualifies:

But you find sometimes that when you do these things... supposing if I were to lobby for something for my company one day, which needs the government's support, probably, the work that we do may open doors and windows for us...

For Carson, philanthronationalist projects, if not explicitly conducted with political considerations in mind, do at least offer a way of accumulating political capital for the future. Tharunyata Hetak acts as a centripetal force in this regard, pulling corporate development programmes into its orbit. Several other Sri Lankan companies engaged with youth issues have affiliated with or supported Tharunyata Hetak in some way. The desire to get close to power through the delivery of 'good works' that supported a foundation run by a politician, which also had the benefit of pacifying their own activities, was one of the most obvious ways of achieving this.

### **3. 'We need to protect ourselves': reactive philanthronationalism**

The third form of philanthronationalism encountered is a step beyond the passive and assimilative. What might be called 'reactive philanthronationalism' is better understood as a response to *specific* emerging threats, and thus provides companies with a mechanism for the



management of risks emanating from community or society origins. A particular feature of the Bodu Bala Sena (BBS) strategy has been its attacks on Muslim-owned businesses, including Sri Lanka's largest clothing chains, Fashion Bug and NOLIMIT. Through violent protests outside stores in Maharagama, a Sinhala-dominated suburb of southern Colombo, and Kandy, the last pre-colonial 'Sinhala Buddhist' capital, the BBS has striven to highlight Muslims' 'dominance' of the economy at the 'expense' of the Sinhalese. The selection of Maharagama as a location of protest is thus no coincidence: the area is full of small Buddhist-owned clothing stores in direct competition with a large NOLIMIT outlet in the centre of town.

Like all other Sri Lankan companies, NOLIMIT and Fashion Bug, both PVTs, have been involved in philanthronationalist projects since starting up. Amongst a range of gifting activities, mostly to hospitals, NOLIMIT sponsors several Buddhist festivals including the Buddha Rashmi Vesak Festival at Colombo's Hunupitiya Gangaramaya Temple and the ritually climactic Esala Perahera, the principle event of the Sri Dalada Maligawa, the Temple of the Sacred Tooth Relic in Kandy. These two temples bestow authority to the Sri Lankan Presidency, with the Dalada Maligawa being visited immediately after taking the oath of office, and Gangaramaya being the 'official' temple of the president, the political classes, and business elite in Colombo (Seneviratne, 2000: 227-230; Weiss, 2011: loc. 875). Thus, in a context where increasingly orthodox practices of Islam are bracketed from more syncretic Buddhist, Hindu, and Christian traditions, NOLIMIT's gifts to these temples can be understood as a strong signal on the part of the company to invest in the fabric of Sinhala Buddhist culture, society, and politics.

The aesthetics of NOLIMIT's philanthronationalist engagements, captured in the photographs prominently displayed on the company's CSR webpage, illustrates this. Figure 1, at source captioned 'NOLIMIT supports Esala Perahera 2011,' depicts the company's general manager handing over a donation to the Diyawadana Nilame, the chief lay custodian of the Dalada Maligawa. First, front and centre, are NOLIMIT's various executives, whom, we may assume, are mostly if not all Muslim, and the temple custodians, all of whom, we can be sure, are Sinhala Buddhist. A presentation is passing between them, in this image hung midway, the temple receiving gifts, the company receiving grace. Second, in the presentation itself, we see only the Sinhala script. Sri Lanka is officially trilingual and where in corporate advertising Sinhala, Tamil, and English routinely appear together, or English features exclusively, the deviation is conspicuous. The Esala Perahera, otherwise promoted as a national celebration, is marked out as exclusively Sinhala affair. Third, running along the

background, beneath the silhouetted Esala Perahera forms, are the logos of Sri Lanka's major PLCs, PVTs, and MNCs, all of whom have or will also parade here too. Thus we are reminded that corporate gifts are not simply a presentation but a *prestation* – a payment of money; a toll or a duty; a rendering of a service – an audience has been sought, homage has been paid, honours conferred, and, as for presidents themselves, protection afforded.

[FIGURE 1]

NOLIMIT's annual pilgrimages to Gangaramaya and the Dalada Maligawa are not isolated affairs, but instead form part of a parade of corporations engaged in philanthronationalist expressions. Yet targeted by extremist monks and violent mobs, for NOLIMIT the journey to Kandy is becoming increasingly vital. During interview, a major Muslim business leader commenting on the NOLIMIT case by claiming that 'we [Muslims] need to protect ourselves.' The pursuit of philanthronationalism as a reaction to specific threats posed by increasingly dangerous nationalist movements is shaping corporate commitments to charity as form of business 'risk management.'

#### **4. 'They are getting into the development programme': collaborative philanthronationalism**

The fourth form of philanthronationalism functions to engender governmental and nationalist aims, usually in direct collaboration with the government and/or security forces. When the war ended in 2009, the north and east of Sri Lanka became a target of mass charity and business development. Corporations prepared the ground for entry by establishing CSR programmes in locales where they planned to set up factories and create consumer markets. Yet the north and east are not simply 'open for business,' and interviews with corporate leaders as well as civil society organizations have shown how both expansion and delivery of philanthrocapitalist or development projects in those areas often requires partnership with the Sri Lankan Army (SLA).<sup>8</sup>

Hemas Holdings PLC, a diversified conglomerate recently floated but whose largest shareholder remains the Muslim Borah family that founded it, has been running CSR programmes for a number of years. Delivered via the Hemas Foundation, this engagement reflects the company's core business line, the 'Baby Sheramy' brand, and is thus described as

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<sup>8</sup> This condition was noted by several interviewees representing Sinhala, Tamil, and Muslim businesses, civil society organizations, as well as PLCs.

a 'strategic fit' between the company's profit-driven and charitable aims. Hemas works in close partnership with the Ministry of Social Services (MoSS) on these projects, and the government considers its programme a 'best practice' to emulate. Hemas's flagship project is the construction of 'model preschools' across the country, of which 36 have been built over the past decade. A notable feature of Hemas's relationship with the MoSS is that the company has been one of the few in Sri Lanka to be able to obtain charitable status for its foundation and thus enjoy the tax benefits this brings.

At the close of the war with the internment of hundreds of thousands of civilians in IDP camps, Hemas was also one of the few non-governmental organizations invited in by the government to operate. In partnership with the SLA, Hemas built and ran model preschools in the Menik Farm camp, which in 2009 was home to at least 220,000 and cited by the UN as then the largest IDP camp in the world (IRIN, 2009). According to a senior manager within Hemas, the preschool became a stop on tours given to international observers including the UN head Ban Ki Moon. Nevertheless, Sri Lanka's IDP camps became sites of intense international scrutiny and controversy. The government had been criticised for failing to allow or delaying access to humanitarian agencies, with entry controlled by the military. However, the manager described a picture very different from the one usually associated with the camps, in which the SLA was in actuality fulfilling a humanitarian mission of its own:

We started at Menik Farm when the IDPs were there. I saw something that people don't see. The army used to cook and give them [food], the army used to attend to the sick there. I saw them carrying children and all that...The camps were very well organised, there were pathways, there were toilets. But the media always showed that fencing and the cameras only caught those...they never caught these banks. The first day we were there, the Bank of Ceylon opened a branch. It was well organised. And there were boutiques there, supermarkets in there. But here I come out and see something else in the papers. Nobody showed the supermarkets, nobody showed our pre-school.

In recent years the long-held assumption that humanitarian agencies can enter conflict zones as impartial actors has begun to be questioned both generally (Barnett, 2010; Calhoun, 2008; Ticktin, 2006) and in the specific context of the Sri Lankan civil war (Keen, 2014; Korf, 2006b). For Hemas, its involvement in an IDP camp rested squarely on the humanitarian nature of its mission. Yet for Hemas the SLA did not just provide access but also a more competitive means of delivering its CSR programme. On the suggestion of the SLA Hemas

identified a site for a model preschool in Ambalanagar in the Mullaitivu District in the far north east; the SLA subsequently won the construction contract:

To build Ambalanagar school by private contractor the cost was 2.5 million rupees. Army is doing three schools for that price. No labour, they are putting the best of timber, they make the bricks...

For Hemas, partnership with the SLA has become more than one of necessity but also one of good sense: Hemas can do more with the money it has because the SLA can undercut private contractors. Our informant also identifies the SLA's involvement as part of its own development work: 'They are getting into the development program. They are building up roads, they are building up hospitals, but they love doing the Montessori's...' Thus, the partnership exists as part of a broader process of the militarization of business, charity, and development in post-conflict Sri Lanka, where security forces oversee humanitarian missions, and extend the authority of the state.<sup>9</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The rise of philanthronationalism in Sri Lanka points to new configurations of market, state, and society incompatible with any definition of 'neoliberal' philanthrocapitalism. We find instead that patronage, nationalism, and militarism have radicalised the logics, mechanisms, and ethics of capital accumulation and legitimation. Sri Lankan companies' activities reflect a range of motivations from a passive expression of nationalist symbols through an assimilative or reactive approach aimed at appeasing general or specific forms of patriotic or nationalist opposition to a more collaborative model where governmental aspirations are furthered by public-private partnerships. Multiple interests, interpretations, and inflections are evident, from a humanitarian belief that what counts more is the end (alleviation of suffering) than the means (supplication of reactionary politics), through business rationalities that stress the need to create and sustain markets, enhance brand value and operational efficiencies, and mitigate risks. A linking thread is the desire to at least represent, if not create, a Sinhala Buddhist nation that is coterminous with the post-war Sri Lankan economy and state, marginalizing minority communities.

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<sup>9</sup> For example see: <http://groundviews.org/2012/12/27/racing-tanks-with-bicycles-a-parable-of-reconciliation-in-sri-lanka/>

Philanthronationalism thus forms a fundamental characteristic of what we might understand as a hyper-redistributive capitalism in post-war Sri Lanka. Whilst the extension of trends found during the earlier colonial and post-colonial eras are evident, philanthronationalism is not simply an instrumental method of building political capital with an oligarchic regime, but fundamental business praxis dependent on nationalistic expressions. Philanthronationalism generates nationalist-market conditions found in Sri Lanka as much as it may be a reflection of such conditions. Passive philanthronationalism corresponds with a basic business strategy: reflect your customers and stakeholders concerns, in this case those of the Sinhala Buddhist majority, and the political elite. Assimilative philanthrocapitalism seeks to leverage that market by enhancing competitive advantage through appeals to nationalists' visions. Reactive philanthronationalism is about identifying and mitigating risks associated with being a member of a minority community. Collaborative philanthronationalism is the platform upon which companies consolidate market share by forging more efficient and effective supply and distribution chains by partnering with a state in pursuance of its own homogenizing aims. What this loose framework suggests is a capitalism rooted in presentations and prestations; a deeply politicised developmental machine in which the market falls into line with a nationalistic rationality: one that is, fundamentally, concerned with the creation of a Sinhala Buddhist state.

If a central claim of scholars of philanthrocapitalism is the supplanting of state and civil society as the arbiter of morality and ethics by the market, Sri Lankan philanthronationalism points towards a quite different trajectory. Yet this is not one unique to Sri Lanka. The most obvious other Asian example is Myanmar, where a majority Buddhist culture concerned with the immediacy of the gift produces a similar 'schoolbooks and spectacles' form of CSR, and where a military-led government built upon patronage, nationalism, and anti-Muslim violence also compels business practices we have identified as philanthronationalist (Bowling and Said, 2012; CSR Asia, 2013; CSRwire, 2012). There we find companies similarly pressed to engage with passive, assimilative, reactive, and collaborative practices as a way of doing business with and through an oligarchic regime, similarly concerned with the forging of an ethno-religious national identity and marginalization of minority communities.

Insofar as political conditions in Sri Lanka and Myanmar are both extreme, it could be countered that neither help us to understand philanthrocapitalism in its 'neoliberal' form. The claim of this paper is that, in fact, the conditions described in Sri Lanka help us to identify a more complex set of possibilities at the business-charity nexus than so far has been imagined.

Philanthronationalism is not just a strange local variant of philanthrocapitalism; philanthronationalism is a form of economic practice and market engagement in its own right. Further research is likely to reveal the existence of philanthronationalism in other places where relationships between business and politics converge – whether in Asia, Africa, South America, or indeed Europe and North America. Their investigation will be crucial for our greater understanding of private sector development interventions, as well as trajectories of economic and political globalisation in local places.

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