

After the Slaughter: War Tourism in Modern Sri Lanka

Written by James Stewart

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JAMES STEWART, FEB 28 2014

The Sri Lankan Civil War

After its independence in 1948, Sri Lanka was celebrated as a nation most likely to develop into a socially responsible and economically prosperous country. As Neil DeVotta has said, Sri Lanka, unlike its neighbour India, acquired its independence bloodlessly and was viewed by some as a paragon of peace.[i]

Unfortunately, this optimistic view of Sri Lanka's future was quickly spoiled. Power hungry politicians preyed upon ethnic divisions within Sri Lankan society in order to maintain themselves as a ruling elite. The upshot of such power play was that Sinhalese and Tamils were pitted against each other. Many Tamils felt marginalized by the Sinhalese majority after politicians instituted legislation that made Sinhalese the country's only official language in 1956, and further rules made it difficult for Tamils to participate in higher education.[ii] Violence against the Tamil community started to become more common.

Unhappy with being demeaned in this way, and dissatisfied with peaceful political attempts to remedy the situation, some Tamils turned to more violent solutions in order to achieve parity with their Sinhala counterparts. Most of the Tamil rebel groups that emerged during this period believed that parity could only be achieved through independence and called for a sovereign nation to be established in the Tamil heartlands of the North and East.

The most famous and successful of these rebel groups were the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (hereafter Tamil Tigers). From the Tamil Tigers' inception in 1976 through to its ultimate destruction at the end of the war in 2009, the Tamil Tigers were led and directed by its founder Velupillai Prabhakaran. He developed an organization that was so militarily successful, tactically opportunistic, and downright resourceful, that the Tamil Tigers, at the height of their power, were able to control the entire North and East of Sri Lanka. Tamil devolution was even considered, but after the conservative Sri Lanka Freedom Party was voted into power in 2005 matters took a turn for the worse.

In 2006 hostilities resumed after Tamil Tigers attacked and shut off a water sluice in the Mavil Oya reservoir. This provocation, amongst other aggressive actions, finally led to the resumption of combat operations. This time, however, there was considerable will to finish the war decisively. Massive investment in the Sri Lankan military, sound strategic planning, and dissension within the Tamil Tigers that led to its significant weakening, all contributed to the destruction of the Tamil Tigers in May 2009. The ignoble death of Prabhakaran underscored the defeat of the Tamil Tigers; his remains were found in a swamp in Mullaitivu and his badly disfigured corpse was proudly displayed on national television.

Sri Lankan War Tourism

Very soon after the official end of the civil war, a burgeoning tourist industry began to develop in the North of Sri Lanka. Despite the fact that reconstruction had barely begun, tourist infrastructure was already in place; designed to attract domestic visitors from the southern districts. It should be observed, of course, that these tourist sites were primarily intended for domestic consumption and there seems to have been little idea that foreigners may be interested in visiting. For example, all the information at memorial sites was written exclusively in Sinhala.

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The first notable tourist spot is the wreckage of a train that operated on the Yaldevi line bound for Jaffna in the North. The train was bombed by the Tigers in 1985 leaving 11 civilians dead. After this incident the line was discontinued. Now, however, visitors can observe the wreckage of the train. Its location, hidden from view, is marked by a sign that reads in Sinhala: "This is the place where the Yaldevi train was destroyed by the terrorists."

Further along from the wreckage of the Yaldevi, is the town of Kilinochchi, the former base and defacto capital of the Tamil Tigers. The remains of a large water tower, covered in bullet craters, is a memorial maintained by the Sri Lankan authorities to help remember the military's victory in Kilinochchi. The space around the water tower was well tended and tidy, quite in contrast to the surrounding structures which were dilapidated and badly damaged from the war.

Further up from Kilinochchi, and this time near to the Jaffna peninsula, is Elephant Pass. Elephant Pass is the site of several key battles including an attempted suicide attack on a Sri Lankan army base. The suicide attack was instigated by the Tamil Tigers who had built a makeshift tank from a requisitioned bulldozer and had thick armoured plates welded to it. This tank was piloted by cadres who intended to ram through the base's barricades before blowing the vehicle up deep inside the compound for maximum damage. The memorial at Elephant Pass features the remains of the bulldozer as well as a large plaque and billboard that celebrates the soldier who foiled the attack: Corporal Gamini Kularatne. The sign reads in Sinhala: "For the first time in the world the Vibhushanaya award [a bravery award] was given to Corporal Gamini Kularatne for sacrificing his life at this camp by jumping at the Tiger bulldozer on July 1 1991 at Elephant Pass." Kularatne sacrificed himself in the attack but stopped the bulldozer from reaching its objective. His life is celebrated throughout Sri Lanka and his tiny hometown near Mahiyangane is now widely known because of his actions.

These newly founded heritage sites are just a few of several war tourist spots being developed in post-war Sri Lanka. Even though the war had only just ended the sites were thick with Sinhalese tourists flocking to experience the newly opened North.

War Tourism as Thanotourism

One of the attractions of post-conflict tourism is that the memorial sites are associated with acts of violence and death. People visit Gettysburg in part because of its violent history. Similarly, visitors come to the Somme due to its historical value as a battlefield. This sort of tourism is sometimes called "thanotourism" (thanos being Greek for 'death'), "atrocities heritage" or simply "dark tourism."

War tourism in Sri Lanka can perhaps be explained in part as an example of thanotourism. These heritage sites can foster strong emotions amongst some visitors because soldiers and civilians were killed nearby. The Elephant Pass memorial, for example, may be understood in these terms. The 1991 battle at Elephant Pass resulted in the deaths of between 500 and 1000 Tamil Tiger cadres and over 200 Sri Lankan army personnel. The second battle of Elephant Pass in 2000 resulted in the reported death of 758 Sri Lankan soldiers and the loss of the territory to the Tigers. It was not until after the ceasefire and the renewal of conflict in 2006 that Elephant Pass was recaptured by the military. In light of all this, it is plausible that battlesites such as Elephant Pass may attract some visitors with thanotouristic interests.

Thanotourism, however, can imply a motive that is derived, in large part, from morbid curiosity. David William Lloyd consequently distinguishes between ordinary tourism and acts of pilgrimage.^[iii] For many who visit heritage sites with a dark history, the motive is not grounded in voyeurism but is rather more meaningful and emotionally rooted. Lloyd regards tourists as people who have a "non-feeling" for such sites, while pilgrims associate the site with religious or emotional sentiment. In the case of sites such as Elephant Pass it is likely that this is an important factor in its popularity. At the end of a war, and sometimes even during it, there is a period of so-called "hot tourism" where passions run high and visitors come to remember and pay respect to those who have died. Lloyd questions whether such acts can be reduced to the label 'tourism' and therefore the label 'thanotourism' may not apply in such cases. The erection of the aforementioned memorials so soon after the end of the Sri Lankan Civil War strongly implies an element of post-war pilgrimage. People who were directly involved in the war – ex-servicemen and women, families

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of lost soldiers, people affected by the conflict – may participate in these pilgrimages as a way to remember the losses caused by the war and reflect upon the dead.

War Tourism as Pilgrimage

Pilgrimage may be an important expression of touristic or tourist-like activities in Sri Lanka, but this pilgrimage impulse is complicated by religio-nationalistic factors. In many ways, thanotouristic and conventional pilgrimage explanations do not fully satisfy the motives surrounding tourist activity at these Sri Lankan sites. First of all, unlike conventional so-called atrocity heritage sites, there is an effort in Sri Lanka to cover up or paper over certain aspects of the atrocities conducted in these areas. At the very least, there is a tendency to emphasize the Sinhalese victory. As Causevic and Lynch aptly point out, the meaning and interpretation of heritage sites are often influenced by tourist guides.[iv] At the Elephant Pass pilgrimage site, for example, visitors who had arrived by bus were ushered around the memorial by a soldier who was tasked with explaining the significance of the various battles of Elephant Pass. It is unavoidable that such explanations would emphasize the ultimate Sri Lankan military victory whilst de-emphasizing the personal tragedy associated with the lost Tamil Tiger cadets. This is clear from the memorial to Gamini Kularatne. The site celebrated his sacrifice but did not consider the sacrifice made by the Tamil Tigers who died in the attack.

This way of interpreting the significance of a site to favour the Sinhalese victors is especially clear in the case of the destruction of Tamil Tiger gravesites. During the occupation of the North of Sri Lanka the Tamil Tigers constructed vast gravesites where dead Tamil Tiger cadres were interned. These gravesites were regarded with a certain level of sacredness by Tiger supporters and every year pilgrimages were conducted to honour the dead.[v] This pre-2009 activity may itself be considered a kind of war pilgrimage that was established by the Tamil Tigers. Post 2009, however, this kind of activity was made impossible because the Sri Lankan military systematically bulldozed Tiger cemeteries. Other Tamil Tiger memorials, such as monuments constructed in honour of noted Tiger soldiers, were similarly torn down as the Sri Lankan military advanced.

What this helps illustrate is the way in which the pilgrimage activities conducted in these areas were not necessarily concerned with the uncomplicated act of honouring the dead – not in the way, for example, visitors to Gallipoli or Flanders come to honour the dead – but is rather a way to celebrate the Sri Lankan military victory over the Tamil Tigers. In this regard, these activities are not so much cases of thanotourism, but, rather, are pilgrimage activities with the objective of remembering the victory and not exclusively the dead.

This type of pilgrimage, perhaps more than any other war pilgrimage activity, also takes on a distinct religious-nationalistic light. Sinhalese nationalism routinely affiliates nationalistic sentiment with a religious one.[vi] According to Sinhala nationalist ideologues, the island of Sri Lanka is not just a sovereign nation but is also a protector of the true and original Buddhism preached by the Buddha. This was a large motivator in exciting support for the war against the Tamil Tigers to begin with. The Tamil Tigers were not regarded just as a threat to the unity of the island, they were simultaneously regarded as a threat to the very existence of Buddhism as it was known on the island. When this is acknowledged it quickly becomes clear that pilgrimage to these war sites is not only a pilgrimage to remember the Sri Lankan victory, it is a pilgrimage to acknowledge the victory of Buddhism on the island. This religious aspect is especially important because Sinhala Buddhists favour one other kind of tourism more than anything else: religious pilgrimage. This usually takes the form of pilgrimage to India where Buddhists visit important Buddhist heritage sites such as Lumbini and Kusinaga. Religious pilgrimage is also common within the island itself: good Buddhists make a point of visiting the Temple of the Tooth in Kandy or Adam's Peak, where it is said that the Buddha first arrived on the island, and other places of historical Buddhist significance. Now, a new religious pilgrimage tradition has been established in the form of war tourism.

This celebration of the Buddhist victory over the Tamil Tigers is perhaps a more significant motivating force than any thanotourist motivations or a simple pilgrimage activity. It is also implicitly religio-nationalistic. One of the most problematic aspects of this tourist infrastructure, however, is its tendency to diminish and even cancel out the significance of the Tamil struggle for ethnic parity.

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[i] DeVotta, Neil. (2004) *Blowback: Linguistic Nationalism, Institutional Decay, and Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka*. California: Stanford University Press, p.22.

[ii] DeVotta, op. cit. p.73-91; and, p.137.

[iii] Lloyd, David William. (1998) *Battlefield Tourism: Pilgrimage and the Commemoration of the Great War in Britain, Australia and Canada*. Bloomsbury Academic, pp.140-141.

[iv] Causevic, Senija and Lynch, Paul. (2011) 'Phoenix Tourism: Post-Conflict Tourism Role, *Annals of Tourism Research*, Vol. 38, No. 3, p.783.

[v] Weiss, Gordon. (2012) *The Cage: The Fight for Sri Lanka and the Last Days of the Tamil Tigers*. New York: Bellevue Literary Press, pp.76-77.

[vi] DeVotta, op. cit. pp.27-41; Tambiah, Stanley. (1992) *Buddhism Betrayed? Religion, Politics, and Violence in Sri Lanka*. Chicago: University of Chicago, pp.139-181.

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Dr James Stewart is a Research Associate at the University of Tasmania. His recent work has been concerned with the Sinhalese animal welfare movement and its intersection with anti-Muslim protest organisations in Sri Lanka. You can read some of his other work [here](#).