Introduction

Nation-Building and Imagined Becomings at Mayadevi

> We are Sri Lankan, and we have a very important heritage to maintain. We shouldn't just remember to speak English, but also keep speaking Sinhala which is our language. We are in the last kingdom of Sri Lanka, and we should keep our heritage.
>
> —Mr Wijetunga, January 2018

The Monday morning school announcement had been altered to mark the Independence Day celebrations held over the weekend on 4 February 2018. Delivered by Mr Wijetunga, in charge of teaching A-Level Greek and Roman Civilisation (GRC), the announcement, which lasted a little under twenty minutes, retraced the steps leading up to and following independence from Britain. It ended with a reminder to the female students of the importance of maintaining a national heritage. For the students of Mayadevi Balika Vidyalaya,[1] a secondary school for girls located in Kandy, the words of wisdom granted by their GRC teacher had little effect. As we sat in a hot and muggy classroom, I noticed the students in 13B slouched over their small wooden desks, playing with each other's plaits and fanning themselves using their notebooks, patiently waiting for the announcement to end so that they could commence their English Literature lesson.

As it turned out, for the students in class 13B, whom I followed through the course of my fieldwork, and many of whom became what I will refer to as my 'core group',[2] Independence Day held little significance symbolically. In contrast to the news depicting country-wide celebrations, the girls slept in, spent time with family, or travelled into Kandy to visit Sri Dalada Maligawa and wander around Kandy Lake. For girls like Chaturi, an eighteen-year-old A-Level student in her final year of schooling, the day

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was one of families getting together. As she explained, 'We (family) didn't celebrate. It's not a big celebration for us. We put the [Sri Lankan] flag in our garden, and we have to put flags on our cars. That's all.'

Chaturi and her peers' experiences of Independence Day celebrations (or lack thereof) were a stark contrast to what I had seen take place in Colombo over the weekend. I had visited the capital as schools across the country were closed to mark the occasion, and on a walk down Galle Face, I came across a procession. It was a practice run for the official event, and road closures had already begun, with traffic diverted to make the area pedestrianised. The procession included the infamous Special Task Forces, dressed in full regalia with weapons attached to their side. Alongside them was a group of young Kandyan dancers, creating a stark contrast in what Sri Lanka has come to represent for me – that is, tradition and politics that have become intertwined and inseparable. It seemed though that for the students in 13B, the weekend leading up to the day had been what they called 'normal'. The significance of attaining independence from the British did not appear to be a point of celebration, despite Kandy being one of the last kingdoms to resist British colonial rule.

Listening to Mr. Wijetunga's call to cultivate pride in their heritage and replicate this fell on deaf ears. This was not at the forefront of their minds. Instead, the girls' focus was directed towards studying and passing their final exams to be able to secure a place at a government university. They hoped that after their A-Levels, they would be free to do what they pleased, away from the routines and stresses of school life.

Over the course of my fieldwork at Mayadevi, I was regularly reminded of the stark differences between what the school viewed as important and how female youth perceived and responded to this. Amongst my interlocutors, conversations centred around their struggles, whether it was the amount of studying they had to do, or the lack of freedoms afforded to them by their parents, who restricted the time students spent away from studying. The girls I spent time with would willingly share their worries about their present and future, against the backdrop of pressure from their families and the school to do well. Getting good grades, completing university, securing a government job, and getting married were things that the girls were expected to achieve. These achievements, as they articulated, would allow them to 'become' a future self they deemed aspirational. It is this notion of becoming, and what this signifies to the girls I spent time with, that became an area of interest. Ideas of who they would become were tied to questions of gender, class and ethnic identity, and were interlinked to processes of figuring out the future: one which isn't quite set and in flux, and dependent on the here and now. Through the course of my time at Mayadevi, I became aware of the tension that female students are required

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to navigate to maintain equilibrium between gendered expectations (self-formed as well as external) and aspirations for a cosmopolitan lifestyle.

The anecdote presented at the beginning of this introduction serves to highlight a running theme across this book: these are the everyday tensions that a group of female students at the cusp of their schooling journey navigate in pursuit of figuring out who they want to become, whether it's negotiating how they embody and replicate nation-building processes within the school or the types of lifestyles they come to imagine for themselves. This book is about the different ways in which a group of adolescent girls imagine their futures while grappling with maintaining a connection to their heritage and tradition, against the backdrop of an increasingly volatile socio-political and economic landscape.

Drawing on the experiences of a group of seventeen- and eighteen-year-old female students at a key stage in their lives, this book explores how they form aspirations and imaginations of the future: a future underpinned by ethno-religious values, which at times is disrupted by their wishes for who they want to become. Through a collection of everyday observations, conversations, and rituals, this book seeks to reframe the process of 'imagining' as an exciting concept that can provide us with insight into how ideas of the future are formed. Salazar (2020), alongside Cangià and Zittoun present innovative ways of understanding imaginations and imaginings as dynamic concepts. As Cangià and Zittoun note, these are 'ever-changing embodied and creative activit(ies) both embedded in and shaping the social and cultural world around' (2020: 643). Extending our 'gaze' into the socio-cultural process of imagining can present us with deeper insight into the act of doing so as a way of manifesting the wants and needs of adolescents. In some cases, as I will illustrate, imagining certain futures can be the girls' attempt at feeling less 'oppressed', whilst in other scenarios it becomes a process in which to 'craft' selfhood through forming strategies for upward mobility. Exploring the types of futures that are imagined, and unpacking these with young people, can provide us with anthropological insight into how lived experience and the social world influence the types of imaginings. As I discovered, these imaginings become ways for this group of girls to project their desires but also navigate complexity and uncertainty by visualising different versions of 'futures' they see for themselves.

What was initially a way for students to express what they wanted to be in the future, the concept of becoming (or *wenawa*, which means 'to become' in Sinhala) developed into an important ethnographic theme. The concept of becoming allowed me to examine the intersectionalities of identity and how futures are imagined in light of educational discourses surrounding social mobility. The latter became particularly important given the continued assumptions that holding high aspirations can lead

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individuals to achieve better educational and employment outcomes (Fruttero et al. 2021). There is also recognition that a lack of opportunities to facilitate aspirations can be a barrier. This echoes the experiences of my core group, who despite having 'high' aspirations were, in some instances, unable to achieve these owing to long-standing systemic barriers, both nationally and internationally.

Instead of placing focus solely on how youth aspirations are formed within a social, cultural, and political framework, I wanted my research to expand on the theorisation of aspirations, education, and social mobility. In doing so, it presents opportunities to acknowledge and value more banal dreams, hopes, and wishes that are formed out of everyday experiences, and challenges discourses surrounding education and pathways to social mobility to bring to light the importance that positionality, capital, and context play in the types of aspirations or indeed 'becomings' imagined by the students at Mayadevi. Through this lens, this book will touch on key themes that provide a glimpse into the complexities of growing up in a post-war landscape.

Chapter 1 introduces Mayadevi Balika Vidyalaya and the everyday schooling occurrences that students experience. With a specific focus on my core group, it illustrates the ways in which the girls internalise and replicate nation-building practices that influence their pursuit of figuring out who they want to become. I demonstrate through the examples of students how some of these nation-building practices have origins in national educational policies, reflected in the school curriculum, whilst others reflect and speak to regional practices. By drawing on students' engagement in nation-building practices in the school, I demonstrate how these come to shape their notions of becoming.

Continuing the exploration of how ethnic, gender and religious identities are promoted within the school, Chapter 2 extends the focus to how the girls come to think about their becoming within the schooling space. Through the stories of Nadika and her peers, I present how the core group articulate their plans for the future and how the concept of becoming is linked to this. In doing so, I introduce the role that cultural and social capital play in facilitating these aspirations.

Chapter 3 marks a shift towards examining private tuition and students' experiences of this parallel education system. It examines how national education and the privatised tuition system function in parallel to one another and, in doing so, present youth with opportunities to realise and form their aspirations. It also brings to light two important observations: the first is the question of the purpose of schooling, and the second is how students respond to the tensions caused by engaging with these two parallel education systems. I consider the latter question by illustrating students'

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engagement with private tuition and bringing to light how they come to perceive it as 'worthy'. By drawing on differences in how teaching takes place between the two sites, I highlight the tensions that arise as a result.

Continuing the exploration of students' engagement with tuition, Chapter 4 delves into the 'symbolic' importance of the tuition space. I introduce tuition as a youth-centred space that allows young people to reclaim small freedoms. I examine the semi-formal nature of tuition and how this enables youth to transgress rules and boundaries imposed by the school. The tuition space subsequently becomes an important site for place-making, which grants youth the freedom to play out different versions of themselves.

With educational sites such as school and tuition encompassing a young person's life, what happens when they leave school? How do a group of female students form ideas about who they want to be and what they want to do once they've left school? The final chapters (5 and 6) move beyond the school and tuition and deal with the themes of aspirations, futures, and identity. Here, I explore how futures are imagined in light of the possibilities for social mobility and post-schooling options considered by my core group. In linking these to social stratification in Sri Lanka I argue that social positioning shapes the types of aspirations and futures imagined. In the final chapter, I map out the pathways that some of the students have chosen as a means of facilitating their aspirations for social mobility. This draws on a sample of trajectories of my core group and situates the girls' attempt to figure out the future in a post-pandemic landscape, which is paradoxically filled with uncertainty and hope.

As will be discussed in the course of this book, notions of becoming are very much set in the future. The group of girls I befriended in Kandy must grapple with forming ideas for their futures whilst attempting to hold on to the national identity and heritage taught to them from a very young age. 'Becoming' for these youth is not envisioned through their education or career alone, but rather through the lens of the type of people they want to embody, the lifestyles they hope for, and the dreams they form and discard on a day-to-day basis. It is important to add the caveat that the group of people I spent time with are among the comparatively more privileged middle classes.[3] Their social context forms the foundation of how they realise their becoming. What I want to bring to light is considerations on how young people might form and negotiate these ideas in spaces where continuous nation-building processes take place in the background but are nonetheless intrinsically carved into the very essence of 'Sri Lankan' society.[4]

This book is, therefore, a starting point for some of the themes discussed, and calls on academics and practitioners from the 'field'

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working in the field of education to utilise their insights in reshaping discourses surrounding aspirations, futures, and the role of education. Importantly, it invites those with often important but overlooked, or undermined expertise (often from the Global South) to contribute to existing debates through insights that reflect the lived experiences of adolescents.

Before delving into the schooling experiences, I want to present some background on the context of Sri Lanka, and its educational system. This is by no means a comprehensive overview of the island's history or of the educational system (the former has been written extensively). Instead, it offers useful context in relation to my empirical findings.

A Brief History of Sri Lanka

With a population of approximately 20 million, Sri Lanka is often referred to as the 'pearl' of the Indian Ocean (Department of Census & Statistics 2012a). Before 2021, the island held a reputation for pristine beaches, warm hospitality, and an abundance of nature. More recently, the country has been in political upheaval, resulting in food shortages, electricity blackouts, and numerous nationwide curfews, that have viscerally impacted the most vulnerable communities across the island. New Poverty Line (NPL) data reveals a stark increase from 2019, which rose from 2.3 per cent to 14.3 per cent. The disparity between urban and rural sectors, in addition to the Estate sector, further reveals the gap (Deyshappriya 2023). The once celebrated war hero, Gotabaya Rajapaksa, and his kin were ousted (albeit temporarily), and the country, which was recovering from the COVID-19 pandemic, once again found itself at a crossroads. The state's approach to silencing the Aragalaya protestors and critics of the regime has caused concerns about the state's involvement in the civil war to resurface. For now, people are making ends meet where possible, and there is a sense of bated breath and anticipation to see how things unfold.

Despite how the island was once portrayed to outsiders, Sri Lanka's history has been marked by violence. Three hundred years of colonisation by the Portuguese (1505–1658), Dutch (1658–1796), and British (1796–1948) have heightened the importance of maintaining an ethno-religious identity (Wickramasinghe 2006). The civil war between the Government of Sri Lanka and the Tamil liberation group Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), from 1983 to 2009, amplified the state's response in presenting a unified Sri Lanka. Although the civil war ended over ten years ago, tensions among ethnic groups are still present and have been

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marked by a shift in nationalist rhetoric, with more recent spates of attacks targeting the Muslim community, some of which I witnessed during my fieldwork. The bomb attacks in April 2019 further emboldened nationalist discourses, resulting in violence perpetrated on largely Muslim communities by a sect of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalists (Gunasekara 2020).

Society in Sri Lanka is made up of three main ethnic groups: Sinhalese, who constitute the majority ethnic group and largely practise Buddhism; Sri Lankan Tamils, or Eelam Tamils;[5] and Muslim Moors (Department of Census & Statistics 2012a). Sri Lanka is also home to Indian Tamils, who were brought by the British to work on tea plantations, Burghers (descendants of the Dutch), and Malay communities. The indigenous Veddahs – though few – can be found in Mahiyangana, a town in the Uva province.

Forms of identification in Sri Lanka are developed along linguistic, ethnic, and religious lines and languages, where these come to operate through a social order, much like class in Britain (Sivanandan 1987; Sutcliffe-Braithwaite 2017). While conducting my fieldwork, I became acutely aware of just how entrenched this social order is and how it functions on a day-to-day basis. Ethnicity is the primary social order, where people identify themselves first according to their ethnic group and then by class and religion. This has been observed by Spencer et al. (1990) as a form of cultural consciousness – a sort of binding – which brings a collective imagining into play. Social hierarchy in Sri Lanka is therefore shaped by one's ethnic background, religion, and class – all of which act as forms of cultural capital.

To understand how Sri Lankan society functions, it is important to provide an overview of the context in which identities are formed. Through everyday schooling experiences, I have seen how majoritarian discourses calling for the preservation of Sinhala-Buddhist values have been taught, and, in turn, how students come to reproduce these narratives. A recent example of this can be found in the number of murals that have cropped up across cities on the island (see Figures 0.1 and 0.2). Often, these are created by students at local schools and form part of visual storytelling, where important religious figures feature heavily. On repeat visits to Kandy and the South of the country since 2018, I have been in awe at the number of murals that have erupted from what once were concrete blocks, be it on school walls, bus stops, or highways, as illustrated in the picture below. These illustrations are one very recent example of how the beautification of public spaces comes with a political message – *we are Sinhalese Buddhists; we are Sri Lankans.*

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Figure 0.1. Mural outside of a school in Kandy, 2019. © L. Batatota

The Politicisation of Education in Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka's educational history is firmly rooted in its colonial past. The arrival of the Portuguese and Dutch resulted in Christian missionary schools being established across some parts of the island, where scriptures were taught in the 'native' language. Following this, the arrival of the British brought about the consolidation of a mass education system during the nineteenth century, seeking to address the need to 'educate the natives' (Ministry of Education 2013: 13). The Enactment of Education Ordinance, or the Free Education Act, was introduced in 1939, leading to the state assuming responsibility for government schools and consequently implementing free education across the island (Wickramasinghe 2006; Ministry of Education 2013). Post-independence, the Government of Sri Lanka (GOSL) continues to provide free universal education across the island, from primary to tertiary levels. The educational reforms of 1997 supported the ongoing provision of free textbooks, uniforms, and school transport, making Sri Lanka's educational structure one of the most accessible in South Asia (Little 2011). The state continues to provide bursaries at secondary and tertiary levels, which have enabled

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Figure 0.2. Mural outside of Kathugastota Junction, 2020. © L. Batatota

even the poorest households to send their children to school (ibid.). Educational policies have historically focused on encouraging successful development by attempting to identify and respond to barriers that families may face.

Colonial history is subsequently embedded within the educational system and schooling structure more broadly. The medium of instruction is offered in both local languages, Sinhala and Tamil; however, the English medium holds more weight compared to both of those. Key educational milestones continue to mirror the British educational system, such as O-Levels and A-Levels. Teaching is also conducted through rote learning, and rote memorisation through dictation forms a large part of the learning process across many schools in Sri Lanka. This form of instruction is also found in neighbouring India, where teaching methods involve multiple choice exercises, rewriting text sections, and dictation. This speaks of a culture in which teaching reflects 'pedagogical authoritarianism' as described by Jayadeva (2019: 162). Colonial undertones continued to be present throughout schooling – from the buildings to extracurricular activities

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such as cadeting and scouting, or morning 'exercise' classes that students were required to take part in. Discipline is a core component of schooling experiences in Sri Lanka, and Mayadevi was a prime example of this.

High literacy rates and educational enrolment often mask the politicised nature of education and the role that colonial powers played in shaping the current educational system. Independence from the British brought legislative changes to education with affirmative action policies, such as the Standardisation Act introduced in 1971, that sought to redistribute university places based on ethnic group identity. Since Tamil youth had at one point been the majority at universities, the act re-established new quotas dependent on region and province, disadvantaging Tamil students across the country (Tambiah 1992; Wickramasinghe 2006). As a result, the enrolment rates for Sinhalese students grew since the policy redressed the 'imbalance' created by the colonial and missionary education systems. Despite these inequalities, legislation such as the Free Education Act has been recognised for providing education to children and adolescents across the island, though such acts often mask the youth unrest that has come about due to a lack of educational opportunities and unmet aspirations.

From 1987 to 1989, Sri Lanka experienced some of the most turbulent periods of political unrest of its time, involving Sinhalese and Tamil youths. These insurrections served two very different purposes: for the Tamils in the North, legislation such as the Standardisation Act, as stated, served to restrict access to educational opportunities. For rural Sinhalese youth, the riots represented a demand for greater employment opportunities, as historically Tamils had received better educational opportunities as a result of the Christian missionary schools established in the northern parts of the island (De Silva and De Silva 1990; Tambiah 1992; Wickramasinghe 2006).

Youth unemployment in Sri Lanka is a structural issue resulting from what Bowden and Binns argue are 'historic and contemporary social, political, and economic issues' (2016: 197). Their research suggests that youth engagement is central to the country's economic development, and yet, with a third of the country's unemployed made up of people who have completed schooling, questions surrounding the quality of education and employment opportunities for graduates are lacking. With this high unemployment, and a low number of universities across the island (only eighteen in total), tertiary education becomes an option for only a limited number of young people. Subsequently, university entrance is extremely competitive, and school graduates typically must wait two years, as was the case with my participants, before securing a university place (Hettige et al. 2004; Bowden and Binns 2016).

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This book first and foremost centres on the experiences of a cohort of students at Mayadevi, in their final year of schooling. It aims to provide a glimpse into the experiences of schooling, to demonstrate the often-overlooked complexities of what it means to grow up. By drawing on the concept of 'becoming' I want to bring light to the nuanced ways in which the girls in class 13B form ideas of self and come to imagine specific futures for themselves.

A secondary aim is to raise the significance of understanding the role of schooling in instilling and reproducing ethnic identity and belonging. In an increasingly polarised and volatile world, processes of nation-building, in my view, are undermined. These practices aren't limited to Sri Lanka alone, but echo 'citizenship' processes happening across the world. There is much learning and piecing together that can be done to understand the problematic nature of such state apparatuses in heightening divides and processes of Othering. This book therefore draws on the context of Sri Lanka as an example but offers its readers an opportunity to take a moment and reflect on how some of the insights span across contexts and geographies. With education continuing to be perceived as a key vehicle to reduce inequalities through opportunities for social mobility, we also have a responsibility to acknowledge the pitfalls of education and schooling in reproducing state agendas.

Notes

1. All names, including that of the school, have been anonymised and are herein pseudonyms.
2. For reference, the group was made up of Thilini, Chaturi, Nadika, Gayatri, Dilki and Yani in 13B.
3. This book will make reference to class differentiations throughout; however, my primary analytical focus is on the middle-class students who attend Mayadevi.
4. It is important to note that identifying as Sri Lankan is indeed a nation-building project, which has gained particular traction since the end of the civil war. The sense of Sri Lankanness speaks to a very specific ethno-religious identity of the majority, and in doing so displaces and negates the identities of minoritised communities on the island.
5. I have made a conscious effort to move away from grouping Eelam Tamils as Sri Lankans. This is in part due to the politicisation of the national identity of being Sri Lankan, as will be discussed in the course of this book. My reason for this has also been due to conversations with the Tamil Diaspora, who do not identify with the state identity following the violence perpetrated on the Tamil population by the state during and after the civil war.

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