Ending a civil war is a gigantic challenge by any standards. But building a lasting peace after the guns have ceased to resound can be even more difficult. When Sri Lankan government troops crushed the last pockets of Tamil Tiger resistance in 2009, they won a victory that few had considered possible even a year before. The conflict, raging since 1983, had already cost around 70,000 lives. As the Sri Lankan army finally pushed forward and defeated the Tigers, the news was received with a mix of euphoria and surprise. And yet it came at a price: another 20,000 or more lives lost in the final stages of the war, widespread shelling of civilian populations and tens of thousands of ethnic Tamils forced into camps. Peace may have been achieved militarily, but healing the wounds of a war-torn society will prove more challenging.

In post-war Sri Lanka, free speech is increasingly challenged by Government agencies and minorities are under pressure. Journalists have been murdered, union leaders receive death threats, and even such venerable institutions as the Royal Asiatic Society of Sri Lanka (now in the hands of radical nationalists) or the University of Colombo (still resisting the siege) have come under attack. The battle for Sri Lanka’s future is being fought not only by politicians, but also by anthropologists, sociologists, linguists – and of course, historians.

History has become a prime subject of debate in Sri Lankan newspapers, blogs and other public outlets. Under such conditions, a seemingly obscure research subject has suddenly become one of the hottest topics around. Books on the impact of Portuguese imperialism – the first instance of European power building in Asia – are selling by the thousands.

The problem is that the past is misused and heavily distorted to make statements about the present. When history is mobilised to put pressure on minorities – Tamils, Catholics, Anglicans, Muslims – and tell them they are ‘less Sri Lankan’ then the country’s Sinhalese, predominantly Buddhist majority, then scholars need to raise their voice. Sri Lanka has a multi-ethnic past that it needs to embrace, not reject.

In 2012 I travelled to Colombo to present papers at a history workshop organised by the American Institute of Sri Lankan Studies and at a public event organised by the International Centre for Ethnic Studies, an independent think-tank. Talking to wider audiences and feeling that my work really matters has been one of the most rewarding experiences of my life. I had people in the audience who travelled all the way from Kandy in the central highlands and even Batticaloa on the east coast just to hear an independent opinion about the introduction of Catholicism to Sri Lanka. In Batticaloa, there are still people speaking a Portuguese Creole dialect. They are a threatened minority, and for them the past is a lifeline, something they can cling to in order to survive as a community.

The next decade will decide, I believe, which way Sri Lanka will go as a society: towards an open, democratic and assumedly multi-religious future or towards an oppressive, majority-culture-oriented regime. In this battle, the re-writing of history will play a crucial role.

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