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978-0-521-77177-1 - Anthropology, Politics, and the State: Democracy and Violence  
in South Asia

Jonathan Spencer

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### ANTHROPOLOGY, POLITICS, AND THE STATE

In recent years anthropology has rediscovered its interest in politics. Building on the findings of this research, this book offers a new way of analysing the relationship between culture and politics, with special attention to democracy, nationalism, the state, and political violence. Beginning with scenes from an unruly early 1980s election campaign in Sri Lanka, it covers issues from rural policing in North India to slum housing in Delhi, presenting arguments about secularism and pluralism, and the ambiguous energies released by electoral democracy across the subcontinent. It ends by discussing feminist peace activists in Sri Lanka, struggling to sustain a window of shared humanity after two decades of war. Bringing together and linking the themes of democracy, identity and conflict, this important new study shows how anthropology can take a central role in understanding other people's politics, especially the issues that seem to have divided the world since 9/11.

JONATHAN SPENCER is Professor of the Anthropology of South Asia at the University of Edinburgh. His previous books include *A Sinhala Village in a Time of Trouble: Politics and Change in Rural Sri Lanka* (1990); *Sri Lanka: History and the Roots of Conflict* (1990), *Encyclopedia of Social and Cultural Anthropology* (co-edited with Alan Barnard, 1996), and *The Conditions of Listening: Essays on Religion, History and Politics in South Asia* (co-edited with C. J. Fuller, 1996),

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# Anthropology, Politics, and the State

## *Democracy and Violence in South Asia*



JONATHAN SPENCER

*University of Edinburgh*



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*For Janet and Jessica for everything*

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## Acknowledgements

This book is the product of many conversations over the years. Parts of it have been presented in seminars and workshops in Cambridge, Colombo, Edinburgh, Gothenberg, Harvard, Heidelberg, London, New Orleans, Oxford, Paris, and Peradeniya. I am grateful to the late Raj Chandavarkar, the late Neelan Tiruchelvam, Radhika Coomaraswamy, Goran Aijmer, Arthur Kleinman, the late Richard Burghart, Robert Gibb, Mattison and Gill Mines and Mayfair Yang, Tudor Silva, Sudipta Kaviraj, and David Washbrook for their hospitality on these occasions. The annual meetings of the South Asian Anthropologists' Group have not only provided an audience for parts of this work in progress on more occasions than I care to remember; they have also kept me in touch with some of the most exciting and fresh research from emerging scholars, research which has in some cases found its way into the chapters that follow. I am especially grateful to three of its most active members, Mukulika Banerjee, Lucia Michelutti, and Arild Ruud for kindly allowing me to use photographs from their own path-breaking research on South Asian politics. The arguments in this book grew (in rather unpredictable and unruly ways) out of the Malinowski Memorial Lecture which I gave at the London School of Economics in 1995: my thanks to the Department of Anthropology, and especially Chris Fuller and Jonathan Parry, for the invitation to deliver that lecture, and much else besides over the years. My friends in the Centre for South Asian Studies at Edinburgh, especially



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In conversations over the years, a number of academic friends have – sometimes, I suspect, unwittingly – convinced me that the idea of a book on this theme was not entirely barmy: notably, at different times, Mukulika Banerjee, Richard Burghart, Veena Das, Thomas Hansen, Sudipta Kaviraj, Sunil Khilnani, and David Washbrook. Thomas found time in his breath-takingly full life to read a complete draft and provide helpful suggestions at an especially psychologically vulnerable moment.

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Parts of chapter two first appeared in *Journal des Anthropologues* 92–3: 31–49 (2003), and parts of chapter four were published in *Political Ritual*, edited by A. Boholm (Gothenburg, IASA, 1996), and a longer version was translated into Spanish as ‘La democracia como sistema cultural’ (Democracy as a Cultural System) and published in *Antropologica* 7: 5–28. An early version of chapter seven was presented to an international meeting in Colombo to celebrate the life of the Tamil politician and

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human rights activist Neelan Tiruchelvam who was assassinated by a suicide bomber in 1999. A copy of that presentation was subsequently published without permission in a daily newspaper in Sri Lanka, provoking a lengthy rebuttal from a leading nationalist ideologue, published under the heart-warming headline: Spencer Sponsors Tamil Racism. ‘Cheerful laughter is our response’, as Brecht’s Galileo put it on another, not entirely dissimilar, occasion.

Charles Hallisey and Jayadeva Uyangoda have been with me through thick and thin, and it is fair to say that both this book, and its author, would not be in the shape they are in today without their remarkable capacity for friendship. Janet Carsten and Jessica Spencer have been there throughout the writing, and have endured the consequent moments of abstraction as best they could. When I realized parts of the argument were as old as Jessica herself I was reminded of a story about my old teacher Barney Cohn. When a veteran Chicago graduate student bumped into Barney one day and excitedly told him that he thought he was almost ‘finished’ on his dissertation, Barney replied ‘Sometimes you shouldn’t try to “finish”. Sometimes you just have to stop.’

In the West, we are used to the idea of government within the framework of the state and through the medium of specialised political and legal institutions (eg parliament, police and law courts). Such forms are now found world-wide, but this has not always been so, and even today many peoples living within modern states rely to a great extent on other mechanisms for the maintenance of law and order. In societies where people live in closely-knit communities, and rely heavily on each other for economic assistance, the local maintenance of good social relations can be a matter of life or death. Asian studies and political anthropology more generally. Spencer's writing style and the clarity and persuasiveness of his analysis make this broadly conceived work a valuable contribution to the field.' Source: Nations and Nationalism. "Blurred Boundaries: The Discourse of Corruption, the Culture of Politics, and the Imagined State"™, *American Ethnologist* 22: 375-402. Hacking, I. 1999. *The Social Construction of What?* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.