



Department of Sociology

Faculty of Arts, University of Colombo

MONTHLY SEMINAR SERIES

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3.00 p.m.

Via



<https://learn.zoom.us/j/67832916431?pwd=S2E2eXZwTXJPUElnUk1dFpZZTJPUT09>

Meeting ID : 678 3291 6431

Passcode : @vX1Rtsz

“Towards an anthropology of caste in Sri Lanka”

In this presentation I offer a reappraisal of the social scientific research on caste in Sri Lanka, making the argument that certain theoretical orthodoxies have thwarted the development of a comparative field with much to offer. I begin with an examination of two characteristics of Sri Lankan caste research: its relatively marginal position within wider Sri Lankan scholarship and the predominant ethnoreligious framework that assumes Sri Lankan caste takes the shape of parallel (Buddhist) Sinhalese and (Hindu) Tamil caste systems that are perceived to differ according to ‘strength’. Arguing that it is necessary to contextualise both of these characteristics within Sri Lankan history since the abolition of compulsory labour in 1832, I question the premises of the ethnoreligious framework, proposing that it has foreclosed a number of crucial research questions while detaching Sri Lankan caste studies from discussions elsewhere in South Asia. By reading across the existing caste research, I propose several key themes that could stand as the foundations of a comparative anthropology of caste that considers the similarities and connections as well as the differences between caste contexts in Sri Lanka and elsewhere. Such an approach also raises questions about the broader ethnic divisions in Sri Lankan research, of which the ethnoreligious caste framework is only an unusually elaborate example.

Dominic Esler

Dominic Esler completed his PhD in social anthropology at University College London in 2020. His doctoral fieldwork focused on caste, Catholicism and the village in Mannar District, during which time he was a visiting student at Colombo University. Most recently he has been a tutor and casual lecturer in the anthropology department at St Andrews University in Scotland, and he is also an editor at The South Asianist journal based at the University of Edinburgh. He is currently developing a historical anthropological project on caste in the north that uses Catholic missionary archival sources.

