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Seeds of Reconciliation: Peacebuilding and Transitional Justice in Post-War Sri Lanka

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Introduction

Seeds of Reconciliation begins from a simple but urgent premise: ending a war does not by itself create durable peace. Sri Lanka's 2009 end to three decades of armed conflict opened space for rebuilding, but also left a complex legacy of disappearances, contested land, institutional mistrust, and inter-communal wounds. This book examines how truth-telling, accountability, reparations, psychosocial healing, and everyday community work have played out across that terrain — what has borne fruit, what has withered, and why. By drawing together state-level policy analysis, detailed case studies from the Northern and Eastern Provinces, and frontline experiences from civil society, the book offers both critical assessment and practical guidance for those engaged in post-conflict repair.

The approach is deliberately plural. Transitional justice is not a single instrument but a constellation of processes that must be calibrated to local realities. Chapters 1–8 set the context and analyze formal mechanisms: truth commissions, the Office of Missing Persons, judicial options, reparations, land restitution, and security-sector reform. These chapters interrogate not only legal design and political feasibility but also the symbolic effects such mechanisms have on memory, trust, and civic belonging. They pay close attention to patterns that have undermined past efforts — lack of victim-centered design, weak outreach, politicization of institutions, and the tensions between international norms and local perceptions of sovereignty.

Chapters 9–16 shift focus to the social and cultural instruments of reconciliation: the central role of women and youth, interfaith initiatives, community-based organizations, arts and memory projects, psychosocial healing, livelihoods, and the media. These chapters are grounded in field-level examples — from women-led advocacy networks to the Butterfly Peace Garden and community museums — illustrating how small, sustained practices can transform relationships and create conditions for larger political reform. They also acknowledge the limits of grassroots work when structural obstacles such as land militarization or exclusionary laws remain unaddressed.

Chapters 17–25 translate analysis into practice. They examine governance reforms, monitoring and evaluation approaches for peacebuilding, the role of international actors including the UN and donor community, and necessary legal reforms to safeguard rights while addressing security concerns. The final chapters synthesize lessons from provincial case studies, propose pathways for scaling successful local initiatives into state policy, and present practical toolkits and ethical guidelines for practitioners. These sections are designed to be usable: checklists, sequencing considerations, conflict-sensitive planning points, and guiding questions for teams

working in volatile settings.

Throughout the book, victims' voices, civil-society practitioners, judicial actors, and community leaders are foregrounded. Where possible, the analysis prioritizes how initiatives were perceived by affected populations and what steps built—or eroded—trust. This emphasis reflects a guiding principle of the volume: reconciliation is measured not only by institutional outputs but by changes in everyday relationships, perceptions of justice, and the ability of citizens to coexist with dignity and security.

This book is aimed at policymakers, practitioners, civil society leaders, donors, scholars, and students who seek tested, culturally informed strategies for post-conflict healing. It does not offer simplistic templates; rather, it provides frameworks and concrete practices that can be adapted to shifting political realities. If reconciliation in Sri Lanka is to take root, it will require patient, multifaceted work — planting seeds of trust in communities, tending institutional reforms at the center, and creating the conditions for those seeds to grow. This volume is an invitation to that long, necessary labor.

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CHAPTER ONE: Mapping the Post-War Landscape: History, Trauma, and the Stakes of Reconciliation

The final shots of Sri Lanka's long civil war echoed in May 2009, bringing an end to nearly three decades of brutal conflict. For many, it was a moment of profound relief; for others, the beginning of a new, complex struggle. The conflict, predominantly between the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the Sri Lankan state, had ravaged the island nation, leaving deep and multifaceted scars that would define the subsequent journey toward peace and reconciliation. The landscape that emerged from the ashes of war was one of physical destruction, certainly, but also one profoundly shaped by trauma, distrust, and unresolved historical grievances.

Understanding the stakes of reconciliation in post-war Sri Lanka requires a journey back to the roots of the conflict itself. It wasn't a sudden eruption but a slow-burning fire, fueled by decades of discriminatory practices against ethnic minorities. Sri Lankan Tamils, Tamils of Indian origin, and Muslims often found themselves on the periphery, facing systemic marginalization in areas as crucial as land distribution, access to public jobs, and university admissions. These were not minor slights but deeply felt injustices that chipped away at their sense of belonging and equality within the nation. Instances of organized violence, recurring pogroms, and targeted attacks against Tamil communities further exacerbated these tensions, pushing a segment of the population towards increasingly radicalized solutions.

The narrative of "us versus them" became deeply entrenched, shaping identities and hardening divisions. The war itself became a crucible for collective trauma, a shared experience of loss, displacement, and violence that permeated every layer of society. While the physical fighting ceased in 2009, the psychological and emotional battles continued in countless homes and minds. Families grappled with the agonizing uncertainty of missing loved ones, communities struggled with the weight of mass graves, and individuals bore the invisible wounds of torture, sexual violence, and witnessing unspeakable acts. This pervasive trauma, often unacknowledged and untreated, became a silent antagonist in the pursuit of genuine reconciliation.

The immediate aftermath of the war saw a flurry of activity aimed at physical reconstruction and the resettlement of internally displaced persons (IDPs). By 2015, over 90% of IDPs had returned to their areas of origin, a testament to significant logistical efforts. Demining operations also progressed commendably, clearing vast tracts of land that had once been deadly no-go zones. New roads were paved, bridges rebuilt, and infrastructure projects initiated, particularly in the war-torn Northern and Eastern Provinces. These visible signs of recovery, however, sometimes created a

deceptive veneer, obscuring the deeper, more intractable issues simmering beneath the surface. It was akin to meticulously repairing a fractured bone without addressing the underlying disease that caused the break in the first place.

Beneath the new asphalt and gleaming buildings, the specter of ethnic marginalization, land dispossession, and economic exclusion continued to haunt the affected communities. Many found that their return to their "homes" was not a return to normalcy. Land, a deeply symbolic and practical resource, remained a contentious issue, with widespread allegations of ongoing military occupation of civilian lands. Economic opportunities were scarce, leaving many families, particularly those headed by women and those who had lost their primary breadwinners, in dire circumstances. The feeling of being second-class citizens, of being perpetually "othered," persisted, hindering any sincere attempts at fostering a unified national identity.

Adding another layer of complexity to this post-war landscape was what some termed the "war-winning mentality" prevalent in certain segments of the majority Sinhala society. The decisive military victory in 2009 was, for many, a source of immense national pride and validation. While understandable, this narrative, when unchecked, often overshadowed the need for accountability for alleged war crimes and human rights abuses committed by all sides during the conflict. It inadvertently fostered an environment where acknowledging the suffering of minority communities or critically examining the state's role in the conflict's origins could be perceived as disloyal or unpatriotic. This triumphalist stance proved to be a significant psychological barrier to empathetic engagement and genuine reconciliation.

The question of identity and belonging remained, and indeed still remains, a central, unresolved dilemma. For decades, the conflict had sharpened ethnic identities, pushing people into rigid categories. Post-war, the challenge was to move beyond these narrow confines, to foster a shared Sri Lankan identity that respected and celebrated its diverse cultural tapestry. This was not a call for assimilation but for a pluralistic vision where different ethnic and religious groups could coexist with dignity and mutual respect. However, the legacy of conflict meant that distrust remained high, often stoked by political opportunism and the resurgence of ethno-religious nationalism.

The political environment itself was a shifting and often unpredictable terrain. Successive governments made various commitments to transitional justice and reconciliation, often under the watchful eye and sometimes gentle nudge of the international community. Resolutions passed by the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) became a recurring feature, outlining a roadmap for addressing truth, justice, reparations, and guarantees of non-recurrence. These commitments, however, often faced an uphill battle against domestic political realities, fluctuating political will, and deeply entrenched narratives of sovereignty and national security. The implementation of these pledges often proved to be a far more arduous task than

their initial pronouncement.

One of the most profound and emotionally charged issues to emerge from the war's end was the question of the missing and disappeared. Estimates ranged from 60,000 to 100,000 individuals, a staggering number that spoke to the widespread nature of abductions, forced disappearances, and extrajudicial killings that occurred during the conflict and in its immediate aftermath. For families, particularly mothers and wives, the agonizing uncertainty of not knowing the fate of their loved ones was a daily torment. This unresolved issue became a powerful symbol of the state's failure to provide answers and a constant reminder of unaddressed injustices. It fueled protests, petitions, and a desperate search for truth, which often met with bureaucratic stonewalling or outright denial.

The economic disparities between regions, exacerbated by the war, also presented a formidable challenge to reconciliation. While some areas benefited from post-war investment, many war-affected regions continued to grapple with high poverty rates, limited market access, and widespread underemployment. Youth in these areas often lacked vocational training and viable livelihood opportunities, leading to feelings of marginalization and vulnerability. Families burdened by debt, particularly microfinance loans, struggled to rebuild their lives, further deepening existing socio-economic fault lines. Economic recovery, when not equitable and inclusive, risked entrenching existing grievances rather than alleviating them.

Furthermore, the very concept of "reconciliation" itself lacked a shared understanding across Sri Lankan society. For some, it meant forgetting the past and moving on; for others, it demanded a full accounting of historical wrongs, justice for victims, and systemic reforms to prevent future atrocities. This divergence in understanding made it challenging to forge a common national vision for reconciliation. Without a widely accepted framework or a unified narrative, efforts often felt disjointed, lacking the popular legitimacy and broad-based support necessary for sustainable impact. The perception of reconciliation initiatives as externally imposed or as favoring one community over another further complicated their acceptance.

In essence, the post-war landscape of Sri Lanka was a complex tapestry woven with threads of hope and despair, progress and stagnation, resilience and lingering vulnerability. It was a nation grappling with its past, navigating a fractured present, and yearning for a more peaceful future, yet often uncertain of the path forward. The stakes of reconciliation were, and remain, incredibly high: nothing less than the long-term stability, prosperity, and indeed, the very soul of the nation. It is against this intricate backdrop of historical grievances, deep-seated trauma, uneven recovery, and contested narratives that the efforts towards peacebuilding and transitional justice unfolded, forming the core subject of this book. Each step taken, or not taken, in this complex dance carried profound implications for the journey from the absence of war to the presence of a just and lasting peace.

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