

Anxious integration: Development in Sri Lanka's post-war frontier

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A classical way of dealing with post-war frontier areas is to integrate them into the national economy and polity. When handled well, development and stability go hand in hand, much of the policy wisdom seems to suggest. We contend that such an approach is riven by contradictions. Economic and political logics collide, pacification strategies backfire, and increased connectivity produces unforeseen anxieties. This paper studies development efforts and associated forms of state territorialisation in northeastern Sri Lanka. Following its military victory over the Tamil insurgency in 2009, the government has launched comprehensive development plans for the region. These plans are in synch with a long history of state intervention in the northeastern Dry Zone. Nostalgic registers of the paddy village rub shoulders with a modernist developmental state; material welfare is engulfed in processes of state territorialisation. Although the government's approach seems to accomplish some of its objectives, there are clearly issues of exclusion and erasure. Typically, government officials seek to render these interventions technical, while critical ethnic minority leaders render them political. Zooming in on three salient post-war interventions – special zones, settlement schemes and increased connectivity – we argue that the integration of Sri Lanka's northeast produces contradictory results. Political moves wrapped in economic rationales no longer make sense, increased welfare goes hand in hand with disgruntlement, new forms of circulation produce contingent results, and established repertoires of antagonism are unsettled. Future outcomes are unpredictable, but it is clear that short-term pacification efforts risk sowing the seeds for longer-term structural instability. The Sri Lankan case thus sheds light on the challenges of integrating a frontier region, even for a strong state in a middle-income country.