Constituency Justification

Sri Lanka is full of wonderful ironies. We call our beloved local fried snacks “short eats,” although when you start eating them, you can never stop. We have demarcated traffic lanes but the point is to avoid staying in between the lines, and we have the lion on our national flag, our beer cans, and apparently in our blood, but not a single one has lived on the island for over thousands of years BC.

I consider myself one of the island’s many ironies.

In the bustling city of Colombo, where I was born and raised, I was hidden from the 26-year long civil war, but she wasn’t hidden from me. I saw her in the eyes of my Tamil friends who always had their passports handy, in the nod of the army uncles every 100 meters, and in the huddles around a candle during curfew. I was both sheltered from and exposed to what made my home, home – conflict, resilience, survival.

In my house, I was nangi – younger sister – very different from my aiyya – older brother. I was reminded that I was a woman in the nation that gave the world their first female prime minister, but I was still a woman. One who wasn’t allowed to attend university, have her own ambition or voice. I was what has been, what could be, and what may never be again, all at the same time.

At Colombo International School (2003-2018), I experienced a colonial hangover. I spoke my colonizer's tongue better than my mother’s and knew extensively about the Reich, Reagan, and Rasputin, but not a thing about my own rajas. I craved the teardrop island but only received buckets of water from oceans away.

In 2018 as I arrived in Washington, D.C., on an F1 visa, I remained a walking irony. The first Sri Lankan native undergraduate at Georgetown University, greeted by many peers with some variation of “what is a Sri Lanka?”

I went back whenever I could: first-year winter break (December - January 2018), summer break (May-August 2019), and then during the pandemic (March - December 2020). When I couldn’t, I made a home on the Hilltop – through food, music, dance, and friendship, reconciling the Indian and the Atlantic, as well as the Pacific when I lived in Oregon for a remote semester (January - June 2021).

I have spent the past two months (June - August 2021) researching in Sri Lanka. Amidst a terrible third wave on the island, while the US has returned to some sense of normalcy, I am constantly questioned – why did you come back?

It is the same reason I always return and will continue to; the same reason the only two other Sri Lankan Rhodes Scholars came back – the short eats, chaotic roads, and the lion within.

I hunger to serve my country, even under the Trust whose namesake perpetuated empire in my nation – I want to serve, wonderful ironies and all.

Personal Statement

Female Asian elephants travel in herds. I encountered one on Sithulpawwa Road in Sri Lanka. An adolescent female was crossing as we approached; she ran, calmly but sternly gesturing to her herd – don't cross, hide. I call her Kali, after my mother's patron goddess. The others cowered behind Rosewood trees as Kali was now signaling at us. She was angry and bluff-charging.

Asian elephants are highly adept at communicating and building consensus. They do so chemically and acoustically so they can reach others across distances beyond visual perception – a skill our networks lack.

My interaction with Kali was reminiscent of two serious problems faced by my country. One, conflict among stakeholders resulted from resource mismanagement; two, public policy crises due to mistrust.

On an island with 20 million inhabitants, 19% of the total area is restricted for conservation, obstructing land use for agriculture, housing, irrigation, and other development activities of rural residents. During my research in Yala National Park, I learned about what it meant to live in proximity to one of the island's biggest cash cows. Strangely, it meant barely surviving.

Although parks are considered a tool for poverty alleviation, neighboring residents suffer from an inequitable distribution of national parks' costs and benefits. Costs include inflation from tourism, crop and livestock depredation by wild animals and competition for water with both wildlife and tourism accommodations. In Yala, villagers live on one meal a day, without electricity most of the week, and turn to illegal mining out of desperation.

The pain of the human-elephant conflict is palpable. The elephants were their friends. They were both partners in stewarding the forest. Yet, religious landgrabs and tourist overcrowding encroaching on forest and farmland meant once allies were now enemies.

I was angry at the authorities, but the Nimalawa Rangers Office receives a meager $30/month in petty cash and only has five employees. Officers sleep on broken beds and beg for uniforms. In 2020, despite the pandemic, Yala made three billion rupees. Yet Ranger Asita spends out of pocket for the office's needs.

The exclusion of local communities from park supply chains means that the central government and hotel chains reap 70% of the economic benefits. However, due to diminished opportunities for human capital development in the villages, the remainder is not sustainable.

Emerging in the 1970s, the call for people-centered national park management isn't recent. However, the role of colonial legacies in nature that perpetuate poverty is understudied. As evidenced by patterns of revenue distribution, parks are embedded in hierarchical, market-based systems. My senior thesis proposes that the inequity is due to the colonial gaze – one that is sewn into the modern-day fabric of former colonies and is embodied in the class-based, albeit ethnically influenced, voyeurism of nature in national parks. Like many others in the British Commonwealth, Sri Lanka's colonial hangover is embroiled in a forgetful collective memory of land without people.

In my country, everything is about the earth. An island plundered by 500 years of colonialism and partitioned by 26 years of civil war. A land devastated by a tsunami where the ground gave in, and the ocean gave up. Holy land was bombed on Easter Sunday, and lives were lost to garbage landslides; because, for some, landfill is a literal term. My interest in an MSc in Nature, Society, and Environmental Governance attempts to master this interaction between people and space.

In addition to squandering public resources, communities have been pit against one another: safari jeep drivers against Department of Wildlife Officials, villagers against hoteliers, farmers against elephants, and tourists against environmentalists. Yet Yala is only symptomatic of a more significant public policy crisis – a lack of communication and trust between stakeholders.

Unlike African elephants, Asian herds don't have a matriarch. Their relationships are fluid and complex, much like bonds in my community. However, unlike elephants, we live in an era of self-preservation and political pandering. Countering this inspired my zeal for the Master of Public Policy.

There is a global crisis of misinformation, political polarization, climate change denial, and anti-vaccination efforts. These positions are not due to a lack of technical know-how, information, or research but defiance against listening, trusting, and building together.

In 2017, I listened to my closet. I founded the Garage Sale Project, one of Sri Lanka's first non-profit thrift stores, to address Colombo's waste management crisis and aid underfunded charities. Buy second-hand, lend a helping hand.

My sophomore year, I listened to the grass. Through the hybrid performance piece and eco-art installation, 'On the Lawn,' my collaborators and I conveyed the complex relationship between the cultural institution of the American lawn and climate change. Through poetry and movement, the seeds of climate activism grew on our stage.

During the pandemic, I listened to the beach and unearthed Southeast Asia's mismatched coastal sustainable tourism standards. Sustainability benchmarks were a western import, ignoring the pressing needs of local ecosystems and cultures.

I then listened to the mountains. Coal built America's industry and won its wars, but in Appalachia, the region's coal history and mountain identity have resulted in the demonization of the 'pre-modern, Appalachian savage.' Kentuckians mourn their homes which have turned into an Environmental Sacrifice Zone.

Appalachian women are referred to as ironweed, the purple flower gracing the mountains in the summer with roots that won't budge. Fighting to stay put, they reminded me of Kali – immovable, and myself – adamant. Although Asian elephant herds don't have a matriarch, young females often emerge as leaders.

Sri Lanka's public policy crisis is severe. From climate change to resurfacing ethnic tensions, natural resources and territory are critical. The environment is rising to the political forefront, and innocent people are becoming sacrificial scapegoats of greenwashing corporations and politicians. Listening is pertinent.

The news tells me we've hit rock bottom, but perhaps that's how growth happens best – like an elephant in crisis, like ironweed, when you're held to the ground and have nowhere to go but up.

Academic Statement of Study

In Buddhism, we believe that an educator has seven ideal traits. My high school geography teacher, Mr. Dave Davies, didn't embody the Buddha's virtues, but he had his own. I look for his lessons everywhere. From classes at Georgetown, interviewees for my thesis, and even at Oxford. The MSc in Nature, Society, and Environmental Governance and the Master of Public Policy are the proxies where Mr. D and I meet again.

1. Center empathy in methodology

Science is often solely communicated by the written word – a western form of knowledge dissemination rarely accessible to the masses. However, emotional reverberation is how Mr. D taught me, how I learn best and nudge the needle of social change forward. From the 5-minute video projects by the students in this year's Governance, Politics, and Policy module to exam questions on poetry and ethnography, NSEG pushes the boundaries of conventional teaching. For instance, as a decolonial political geographer, Dr. Amber Murrey emphasizes experiential learning. Through testimonies of violence along the Chad-Cameroon Oil Pipeline and the multisensory blindfolded food theatre, she insists on *listening* and *feeling*. From filmmaking to eating, I am hungry to study under her.

2. Seek excellent theoretical proficiency

Mr. D pushed me to have a thorough grasp of the theory before critiquing it. To do that, I'm excited to learn from professors doing cutting-edge research. For example, during my study of Sri Lankan national parks, I was exposed to the infatuation with the leopard. The power of their charisma is astounding. Yet, despite evolutionary biologist and feminist perspectives on charismatic megafauna, there is a gap in the literature on a potentially inherited colonial gaze. Professor Jamie Lorimer's work on nonhuman charisma and its implications on conservation would complement my curiosity.

3. Historicize the self

Mr. Davies inspired me to situate myself in my learning, a function of education foreign women of color like myself are rarely welcomed to do. Like the snail, the crab, and the fisherman, I am eager to find my voice through my learning in NSEG. I am confident educators like Professor Gillian Rose and her work in feminist geography, visuality, and the politics of sentiment will fuel that ambition.

One year in NSEG, undergoing comprehensive training as a geographer will provide me with niche tools in the Master of Public Policy. Our Mother Lanka is a ubiquitous presence in every aspect of life. From the upcoming Port City to the economy's transition to the secondary industry, our oceans and soils are critical in any policy issue. The MPP's horizontal and interdisciplinary nature will challenge me to harmonize space and politics.

4. Debunk binaries

Mr. Davies taught us to cherish the grey. Professor Anandi Mani's work on the behavioral economics of poverty was astounding. Her exploration of meritocracy, decision-making, and linguistics challenges the myth of a proportional work-reward ratio. Inspired by Sri Lanka's plastic and fertilizer ban, I am curious to test her theory against green-purchasing and natural resource management.

5. Practice what you love

My favorite memory with Mr. D was our field trip to Batticaloa. As much as academia excites me, nothing is more invigorating than doing *in* community and loving what you're doing. Mirza Saaib Beg will soon be an MPP alum. After six years as a practicing lawyer, a customary internship made little sense, so he wrote a book. However, his fellow MPP peer is currently reporting directly to the Afghan president as a part of the Fragile State Group. I am looking forward to the program and its mentors who support students in developing their diverse practices.

6. Nurture opposition

Some of Mirza's peers had viewpoints diametrically opposed to his. Although this diversity has explosive potential, I realized it is preparatory for future leaders. Mr. D never shied away

from a debate and encouraged us not to either. The MPP will position me to interact with potential allies and opponents, honing my ability to negotiate and answer policy challenges beyond the theoretical optimal.

7. Be inspired

Mr. Davies always highlighted student work, amplifying the voices of even the quietest students in class. Mirza fondly recalled his unmoderated chat with MP Theresa May. The mere opportunity to ask an unfiltered question from a global leader is astounding. On the Indian subcontinent, politicians are inaccessible, so the MPP's genuinely international and intentionally curated network will connect me with trailblazers.

As a Buddhist, I have an affinity for cycles. I began one with Mr. Davies, and the NSEG-MPP, embodying his seven virtues, will help me complete orbit.