

## THE FIRST FIVE LIVES OF N.U. JAYAWARDENA

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*N.U. Jayawardena: The First Five Decades* by Kumari Jayawardena and Jennifer Moragoda  
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Deshamanya N.U. Jayawardena (NUJ for short) was a renowned and respected business leader in Sri Lanka who also had a strong scholarly streak. During his long life of ninety four years, he held a number of leadership positions in the public sector, before joining the ranks of Sri Lanka's fraternity of financial sector entrepreneurs. In the minds of persons of my generation, who have had some familiarity with the development of the system of banking and finance in Sri Lanka, NUJ occupied a position of great esteem as the first Sri Lankan Governor of the Central Bank of Sri Lanka, among his many other firsts over a period of twenty odd years of public sector career. During much of this time, Sri Lanka was under colonial rule. NUJ, as a self-made man, deserves admiration for being able to rise up so quickly to so many important positions of economic management. His innovative activities within the Sri Lankan financial sector during the later years of his life as architect and creator, as well as manager of a number of financial and banking institutions, are well known.

It was with keen anticipation that I started reading NUJ's biography. The interesting episodes in the first half of his eventful life are presented in this volume in the backdrop of contemporary socio-political and economic changes. It is sometimes said that biography is the only true history. The clever combination of personal biography with contemporaneous social history, presented in the excellent prose of Kumari Jayawardena and Jennifer Moragoda, makes this biography exceedingly readable. It has been particularly interesting to me as I too belong to what the biographers call the "Ruhuna diaspora" both in broad regional and narrow community senses in which this term has been used in this biography. NUJ formed part of the "Southern Province exodus" (p. 50) of the 1920s. This exodus became larger in size, generation after generation. What would have been a trickle at NUJ's time had already become a significant outflow of human capital by the 1960s when I became part of that process.

I knew about NUJ many years before I came to know him personally. I had heard of him during my secondary school days in Galle, Mihiripenna, the small village of my birth and upbringing, was part of NUJ's life as well after he moved from St. Servatus' in Matara to Galle for his secondary education at St. Aloysius'. NU lived with his elder sister in Talpe and like many of us from Mihiripenna (the adjoining village), NUJ commuted by train to school having walked to the small rail station in Talpe. By the time I commenced my secondary education at Vidyaloka Vidyalaya in Galle, NUJ was already almost at the pinnacle of achievement in his public sector incarnation. The 5-6 years of my secondary education coincided with his rather turbulent association with the nascent Central Bank of Sri Lanka covering all major aspects of that association - work with John Ester in the relevant commission of inquiry which led to the establishment of the Bank, holding the position of Deputy Governor in its first few years under Ester's governorship, service as the first Sri Lankan Governor of Central Bank, dismissal from this position on charges of wrong doing (1955) and eventual exoneration from those charges (1957).

In spite of the years between the times of NUJ's secondary education and mine, there were elderly people who knew him well and therefore occasionally talked about him with us during our childhood in Mihiripenna. Most such discussion would have referred to NUJ as a person whom children should emulate. I should mention Rev. Tangalle Dheeralankara of the Mihiripenna village temple telder brother of Professor Jelliya Dheerasekera, later Bhikku Dhammayehari, referred to in the NUJ biography: p. 35) among these elders. I can also vaguely remember Rev. Dheeralankara talking of NUJ visiting the village temple to meet the chief incumbent, perhaps during the period when he was looking for "solace in religion and community" during the turbulent days of his transition from dismissal from Central Bank service to setting himself up in private sector (p. 155).

It was in the early 1980s that I met NUJ for the first time. My meeting with him was to discuss matters of mutual interest surrounding two institutions I was closely associated with at the time – the Department of Economics at University of Colombo and the Sri Lanka Association of Economists (SLAE) which was established only a few years ago. This first meeting, in the Mercantile Credit head office in the Fort, had left behind in me vivid memories of his life and style of work as a private sector leader of finance. I had the opportunity to meet him on a number of occasions since then, privately as well as in formal gatherings. The NU biography, portraying NUJ's personal traits so interestingly, takes my mind back to these encounters with NUJ. We discussed a variety of things in these meetings – about the promotion of the teaching of economics in Sri Lanka, development of the newly established SLAE and contemporary economic and financial issues. What remains from these early encounters with NUJ however, is the text of an interesting address he made in 1984, edited and published in the SLEA journal *Upanathi* Vol. 3:2 (July 1988) under the title "Current Approaches to Banking in Sri Lanka: A Critique and Some Suggestions for Reform".

NUJ's statement that he "came from a humble family and did not have any privileges of class or caste" has been cited at several points in the biography. This statement strikes a familiar chord with many of us who have come up through education - together with determination, commitment and hard work - to rise to leadership levels in the society in their respective chosen fields of specialisation without the support of family, class or caste privilege. Those in later generations would perhaps cite the push they had received from the educational reforms of the mid-1940s, the so-called Kannangara reforms, as a major factor in their upward social mobility, particularly the free education component of these reforms. NUJ however, grew up in a system without these state-sponsored subsidy schemes. In the absence also of adequate family support, NUJ was compelled to depend heavily on his individual qualities of, using his own words - determination, tenacity, purposefulness and cultural values - for upward social mobility. NUJ was indeed famous for his strongly held ideology, being averse to state intervention in private lives, including state-funded subsidies.

The biography under review would undoubtedly have been exceedingly difficult and time consuming to compile. This would have been particularly so in the case of the early

chapters covering NUJ's childhood, adolescence and early youth, given the paucity of written records. Although some of these early chapters have, as a result, little directly about NUJ's life story, the biographers have made good use of publications on contemporary social conditions letting the reader make his or her own judgements about NUJ's early life. In writing this biography, well-known publications describing and analysing Sri Lankan society and polity during the latter half of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (scholarly work of local and foreign authors, as well as of colonial administrators, together with numerous official documents) have been extensively and cleverly used without losing sight of the objective of biography writing. The carefully selected photographs and illustrations are excellent historical material sometimes worth more than hundreds of words. The long list of acknowledgements indicates another facet of the time-consuming and laborious nature of the compilation of this particular biography - identification of persons to meet, arranging interviews, and choice of material to be included. In drafting the second half of the volume the authors appear to have benefited from greater availability of material from NUJ's personal files as well as from more abundant publications. The research and writing skills of the authors may have been intensively taxed in drafting these chapters as the interesting components of the more abundant material had to be selected to be presented in a balanced and interesting manner as part of a bibliography.

As already noted, an interesting aspect of this biography is its skilful combination of the life history of NUJ with the relevant social history of the times. On the basis of my personal interest, let me select a few chapters and the social history component that is covered in those chapters. Chapters 3 to 5 examine some aspects of social conditions during the first half of the twentieth century under the British raj - conditions that exercised a sizeable influence on individual lives of many contemporaries. The commentaries about the educational facilities of the time, largely developed by the Christian missionaries, though brief, are interesting, particularly as conditions have undergone revolutionary change following the significant educational reforms of the mid-1940s and after. The biographers record NUJ's own judgement that it was his alma mater St. Aloysius College, Galle which inculcated in him some of the excellent qualities which helped him become what he eventually turned out to be - namely determination, tenacity, purposefulness and cultural values. I personally have had no exposure to

education in Christian missionary schools, I had the opportunity, however, of knowing, through relatives and friends, that some of the good comments about missionary school education and the teachers involved (highlighted in this biography) were applicable to such schools even in the 1950s, three decades after NUJ's education at St. Aloysius'. The difference perhaps was that by the late 1950s and early 1960s, the missionary schools lost the monopoly of 'good' education in the country. Competitive schools came up in the private sector under organisations like the Buddhist Theosophical Society and also in the state sector.

The analytical material presented by the biographers on contemporary social conditions is particularly interesting when it comes to the period of NUJ's life after his school education. For many years, comment has been made by scholars, policy makers as well as managers of private businesses about the predilection of educated youth for government sector jobs. Conditions have changed to some extent, but still this characteristic prevails among the bulk of the educated youth in our society. Widely heard was the comment about the educational system developed in Sri Lanka under British rule to train the locals for government service in administrative, accounting, clerical and other tasks. The lure of government service rested on security of employment it offered, social dignity attached to it and the opportunity it provided for upward social mobility. The numbers who rose from humble backgrounds to high social positions over the last hundred years did so through education, government sector employment and of course, conscientious hard work plus some luck, may be counted in tens of thousands if not in millions. Truly rare though are such meteoric rises from government sector clerical service to Central Bank governorship. Such talents and commitment to work as were found in NUJ also are extremely unusual, and rare in any society.

NUJ's expertise, both as scholar and practitioner, was in the area of banking and finance. His work as Assistant Secretary to the well-known Ceylon Banking Commission (also called Pochkanawala Commission) of 1934 was instrumental in strengthening his knowledge in banking and finance. The NUJ biography provides a succinct, clear account of economic history of colonial Ceylon to provide the backdrop for the appointment of this Commission of Inquiry. The

biographers have used some of the classic works on this subject to write the relevant sections of the volume. Examples are H.A. de S. Gunasekera's *From Dependent Country to Central Banking*, Wickrama Weerasooria's *Natukottala Chetivara* and of course, the Report of the Commission itself

one of the most highly valued sessional papers produced by a Commission of Inquiry. The pinnacle of achievement for NUJ in his public sector service was his appointment as the Governor of the newly established Central Bank after the resignation of the first Governor, John Ester. He thus became the first Sri Lankan to hold this key position in economic management. The last three chapters of the biography cover details of NUJ's turbulent association with the Central Bank and the political backdrop of this association.

The detailed account of political developments in the first decade or so after independence is likely to be exceedingly edifying to younger generations. In order to explain the political backdrop to the events of how NUJ was "made a scapegoat to shield the activities of bigger fish" (cited from the *Tribune* of 30 August 1957, p. 72 of biography), the authors explain the role played by family and caste links in Sri Lankan politics (even as they do even now), in addition of course, to ownership of wealth. The three final chapters of the volume are instructive of the process of evolution of electoral politics in Sri Lanka after independence. Details provided in this volume about the lives of some of the key persons in Sri Lankan political life of this period, are useful to understand the political processes. The story concerning NUJ is about political discrimination against an official who refused to bend rules to favour the political masters. Certain autonomy on the part of senior public servants was perhaps routine nature at that time. Conditions have changed so much, however, that today, similar instances of refusal to carry out wrongful instructions from political masters are believed to be exceedingly out of the ordinary. Today, therefore, cases of victimisation for non-compliance are perhaps also rare, clearly rarer than cases of political favouritism in appointments and promotions.

This biography of NUJ which covers the range of his life in the first five decades – 1908 to 1958, is a work of great interest to students of economics and politics as well as the general reader. ■

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