

TRADE: GENDER-BLIND DOHA CRITICISED

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A key characteristic of the Doha meeting of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) was the effort to close a series of gaps in world trade between the industrialised and developing countries.

Arguably, one of the widest gaps—gender—was not breached, in fact not even mentioned. There was a complete absence of any gender dimension in this week's fourth ministerial conference of the WTO—not only in the substance of negotiations, but also in the glaringly unrepresentative number of women. The WTO has 145 members, yet only eight delegations were led by women. Of course, gender equity is more than just a numbers game, but representation is held to be a symbol of commitment.

The eight women-led delegations were Botswana, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Belgium, Britain, Iceland, Indonesia, Malaysia and Mali. The number of women delegates differed across the delegations, but not one country managed equity. The Arab countries had no women on their delegations, while the industrial countries had few. Africa led in the number of trade negotiators on its delegations (which were small due to financial constraints) while Asian countries fared better.

Britain, led by its secretary of state for trade and industry, Patricia Hewitt, displayed an important trend. Where there is female leadership, there is usually (though not always) a more fair representation of women—Britain brought almost as many male as female negotiators.

Compared with other international gatherings, Doha has been a remarkable and unrelenting gathering of male suits. From the opening plenary to the closing ceremony, men have dominated proceedings. Until the least developing countries complained, WTO chairman Stuart Harbinson had elected six male friends of the chair—the negotiators appointed to break the logjam between industrialised and developing countries during the five-day meeting.

Botswana's head of delegation, Tebelelo Seretse, became the seventh and only female friend of the chair. Seretse is also Botswana's Minister of Trade, Industry, Wildlife and Tourism and spoke eloquently about the levels of prejudice she has to overcome to operate and lead in the multilateral trading system.

"When you are new like myself in this set-up they're going to first think, 'well, she's black'. And secondly that she's a woman and thirdly, that she's African," she said in an interview. "I think that in (some) cultures, especially that of Africa, the custom is to be seen, and not to be heard. But we're changing faster than Europe."

Perhaps because there are so few women like Seretse taking up leading roles in the WTO system, its negotiations and agreements reflect no gender concerns. While the Doha meeting has affirmed the links between trade and development, it is still silent on gender and on how global trade exerts particular pressures on poor women. "The most disturbing feature is that nothing in the text makes mention of gender," said Zo Randriamaro, the programme manager of Geralinks in Senegal, which studies the impact of globalisation on women. "Work needs to be done at every level from the negotiations to the national level to bring women's concerns onto the agenda."

Trade, says Mariama Williams of the Gender and Trade Network in the Caribbean, is not a technical and neutral exercise. "Policies do not impact on people in the same way," she said. She pointed out that female farmers and businesswomen were often prejudiced by patriarchal institutions that prevented them from owning land or entering into contracts. It was women who took up the slack as economies were restructured and liberalised, said Williams. When men lost formal jobs through the relocation of investment and tariff reduction, women entered the workforce or managed subsistence economies.

WTO statistics show that the past decade, a decade in which globalisation was institutionalised, labour patterns have changed—with negative impacts on female workers. "The incidence of part-time work was higher for women, they still earned lower wages and women tend to have higher unemployment rates," said the organisation. Williams puts it more frankly. "In Asia, Africa and the Caribbean, women are employed as cheap labour." She also said that studies in Kenya, Uganda and the Philippines had found women farmers were being displaced as land and services were privatised.

"All the trade agreements have gender dimensions. All we're asking is that WTO members work through the Beijing Platform for Action—to which they've pledged themselves." Williams said that the Beijing Platform was not a document that should be considered in isolation, but that it needed to work in tandem with trade negotiations.

"In trade policy," she said, "we need a different way of looking at the world."

BOOK REVIEWS

THEATRE AND THE STATE

Neloufer de Mel

Ranjini Obeyesekere, *Sri Lankan theatre in a time of terror: political satire in a permitted space*, Colombo, Charles Subasinghe & Sons, 1999. pp.208.

An interesting contradiction inaugurates the central inquiry in Ranjini Obeyesekere's study of the Sinhala theatre of the late 1980s. At a time of intense political turmoil, civil unrest and ethnic war, a climate of draconian censorship prevailed which muzzled the newsprint, radio and television media. The government newspapers, radio and TV channels spouted its propaganda while the oppositional press took on a reactive stance. The press, depending on its ideological positioning, was under attack from the United National Party government of the day or the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) which was in militant insurrection against the government in the late 1980s. In this climate, it was quite remarkable that the Sinhala theatre of the period, largely satirical of the UNP government, witnessed a flurry of activity. It was allowed to survive and able to attract sponsorship and audiences who braved various odds, including the sudden imposition of evening curfews, to see the plays and be entertained.

How, and why, did this happen? Why was the Sinhala theatre allowed to function as a permitted space of anti-government protest? Ranjini Obeyesekere sets out to find answers for these questions in a book which not only brings alive to the reader the enormous vitality of the Sinhala theatre scene of the 1980s but is also a guide to seeing the modern Sinhala theatre as a continuum with traditional religious ritual and Buddhist culture. The book offers a useful survey of the 'development' of the Sinhala theatre, from its origins in folk theatre and religious ritual to a modern, urban site of performance. It acknowledges the influence of the touring Parsi musicals from Bombay in the early decades of the 20th century and the nationalist theatre of John de Silva; the theatre of E.R. Sarachandra who, in 1956, fused folk forms of dance and theatre with western paradigms to forge a new mode of poetic Sinhala theatre with *Maname*, and the vogue of realism in the theatre that took hold from the 1960s onwards. It marks the debates that took place in the late 1960s and 1970s on the issue of language. Two registers of the Sinhala language, one literary and stylized, the other colloquial and informal were available to dramatists. Which register was most suitable for the drama of the time? This question paralleled a similar contemporaneous search in the Sri Lankan theatre in English when playwrights like Ernest MacIntyre experimented with the use of Sri Lankan English—hitherto used only for comedy and caricature—for serious dialogue and character portrayal.

Much of the theatre history in Obeyesekere's book resonates with E.R. Sarachandra's earlier book *Folk Drama of Ceylon* (1958). The reasons for the unavailability of a strong tradition of Sinhala theatre because of Theravada Buddhism's monastic emphasis on solitary creation and meditation which devalued the performing arts, the comic satire in the folk play, the advent of the Parsi theatre etc., rehearse the scholarship that went before as a useful introduction to the contemporary Sinhala theatre. Where Obeyesekere extends this scholarship is by documenting and analyzing the varied and dynamic youth theatre activity in Sri Lanka. She assesses the importance of government initiatives like youth drama festivals and theatre workshops, credits these initiatives with having lured audiences back to the theatre from the medium of film by the mid-1960s, and profiles the entry of five young playwrights who, in the 1980s and 1990s, arrived on the contemporary Sinhala theatre scene through these initiatives. Obeyesekere also examines the texture, allure and atmosphere of various Sinhala theatre venues within universities and urban centers. Her analysis is attentive to class and region, and shows how theatre venues play a central role in the Sinhala theatre, at times significantly shaping particular productions and audience reception of them. Obeyesekere's book is a valuable sourcebook therefore to understanding Sinhala theatre as an entire social text.

For Obeyesekere, the satirical tradition in modern Sinhala drama traces its roots to the permitted spaces for satire within Buddhist culture. Folk drama as well as literary texts accommodated social satire and criticism leveled at the ruling elites. This tradition, according to Obeyesekere, percolated into the Sinhala psyche largely because of high levels of literacy amongst the Sinhala people. Through print media and temple education, the Sinhalese imbibed these satirical forms. During the rise of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism in the 19th century, the tradition of debates was famously invoked in what has come to be known as the 'Panadura debates.' They critiqued the ruling British, westernization and Christianization. The continuing space for critical satire within the Sri Lankan theatre of the 1980s is to be understood in terms of the legacy of this Buddhist heritage.

This argument is, perhaps, too culturally deterministic. The scholarship of those like Bruce Kapferer, Gananath Obeyesekere, M.H. Gunatilleke which the author cites, undoubtedly mark a significant comic and satiric tradition in Buddhist folk rituals. But in insisting that there are deep continuities of this culture in the psyche of the ruling elites that are anchored to Buddhist practice