

MAKING SOMEBODIES OF THEMSELVES

Robert Cruz

NOBODIES TO SOMEBODIES—*The Rise of the Colonial Bourgeoisie in Sri Lanka* by **Kumari Jayawardena** (Colombo, Social Scientists' Association & Sanjiva Books, 2000).

Kumari Jayawardena's latest book takes a socio-historic look at the steady accumulation of wealth through various enterprises which included arrack renting, land acquisition and coffee and tea plantations. This wealth was accumulated by a group of families of different caste, ethnic and religious origins who challenged existing caste and other traditional hierarchies in late British colonial Sri Lanka, to emerge as wealthy, influential bourgeois families. They played a crucial and central role in the social and political future of the country.

The importance of family connections in Sri Lanka's social and political life can never be underestimated. The story, in any national or cultural context, of the genesis of the importance of some families over that of others, specially the story of the evolution of families who were once not so influential, into families of major influence and importance, makes absorbing 'reading' in any form, be it television soap opera, a novel, or a serious academic work.

The election in December 1999 to a second term in office of President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga, the death of her mother, Mrs Sirimavo Bandaranaike, on 10 October 2000, the Parliamentary elections of that same day, and the election soon after of her brother Anura to the position of Speaker of the eleventh Parliament of Sri Lanka prompted a government controlled newspaper to declare recently on its front page that the Bandaranaike family had created a unique record in world history. Never before had one family held the posts of President, Prime Minister, Speaker and Leader of the Opposition during fifty years of a parliamentary democracy. It went on to proudly insist that even the Mother of Parliaments in Great Britain had not achieved such a record, and that the other South Asian political families, the Nehrus, the Bhuttos and the Rahmans, have not been able to 'capture' (sic) so many public positions.

This same newspaper, a few days after the announcement of the results of the October 10 elections, published another front-page piece about the 'family ties' among the new faces in Parliament. After reminding us of the uncle-nephew, father-son, mother-son, and husband-wife combinations among the members of past Sri Lankan parliaments, it listed the new combinations of father and daughter, father-in-law and son-in-law, brothers, cousins etc., who had been elected as MPs to the 2000 parliament.

While we must question the propriety of such a public display of pride and praise for what is really the shameful practice of South Asian political nepotism, these two short pieces based on recent political events in Sri Lanka provides a timely contemporary backdrop to Kumari Jayawardena's latest work on the transformation of a group of Sri Lankan 'nobodies' into social and political 'somebodies' during the late British colonial period—a transformation which had repercussions across the whole spectrum of Sri Lankan life after independence and which continues to this day.

Jayawardena gets the very appropriate title for her socio-political analysis of the origins and rise of these rich 'nobodies' of many castes and ethnicities who evolved into the collectivity called the Sri Lankan colonial bourgeoisie, from a remark made by one of the original -somebodies of that time, Sir Christoffel Obeyesekere (the great-grandfather of President Chandrika). This was made during the debates in the Legislative Council on the Muslim-Sinhala riots of 1915. Sir Christoffel claimed the disturbances would never have occurred had it not been for the encouragement of the peasant villagers by "half a dozen misguided, designing villains" who were trying "to pose as leaders of Buddhists." He claimed that these villagers had been "deluded into this trap for the personal aggrandisement of a few who are nobodies, but who hope to make somebodies of themselves by such disgraceful tactics."

These "designing villains," these "nobodies" that Sir Christoffel was referring to, were some of the Sinhalese leaders of the Temperance Movement, among them the *goyigama* D.S. Senanayake, the future first Prime Minister of independent Sri Lanka, and his two brothers F.R and D.C, who were jailed for allegedly instigating the anti-Muslim rioting of that year. The brothers were released on bail and the bail conditions later cancelled when no case could be made against them.

Their father, Don Spater Senanayake, had made his fortune initially in graphite mining and later branched out into coconut plantations, arrack renting, toll renting, and urban property. He formed a profitable partnership with N.D.P. Silva in the arrack rents of the Negombo area in the 1890s. He was involved in a cartel of arrack renters called the Colombo Arrack Farm Syndicate and continued to have an interest in the arrack business up to about 1907.

H.A.J. Hulugalle's well known 1975 biography of Don Stephen Senanayake makes no mention of Don Spater's involvements in arrack renting. Some space is given, however, to the involvement of D.S and his brothers in the Temperance Movement, which earned

the anger of the authorities when it opposed the Toddy Act of 1912 "an act which resulted in a "proliferation of toddy taverns in every part of the country." Hulugalle's analysis of the Senanayake brothers' involvement in the Temperance Movement is couched in terms of their wanting to protect the values of decency and proper behaviour in a society based on Buddhist and other religious teachings. He claims their role of Sinhala leadership was cast on them—"politics came to D.S Senanayke; he did not go in search of politics." But it is possible to speculate (and Kumari Jayawardena does not indulge in this) about their real motives in opposing the spread of toddy taverns, given their close connection to arrack renting cartels, even though Don Spater appears to have ended his direct involvement in this business about 1907. Jayawardena mentions the fact that in 1949, when Prime Minister D.S. Senanayake visited Moratuwa, he was reminded in public of his arrack renting links when a Sinhala pamphlet was published setting out the relationship between "the Senanayake family of Botale and the sons of Moratuwa." It claimed that John Clovis Silva, a leading *karava* arrack renter, and graphite mine owner, shared his knowledge and experience of the arrack industry with Don Spater. It also states that the joint secretaries of the arrack syndicate at one period were "L. Jacob de Silva *rainda mahataya* and Don Spater Senanayake *rainda mahataya*" (*rainda mahataya* meaning arrack renter).

Sir Christoffel's allegations of "disgraceful tactics" being used by some "nobodies" to gain the position of "somebodies" in Sri Lankan society makes us ponder the situation of the problem of political violence in the country today. Roots can be dug out and parallels drawn, but to continue would be a distraction from the main theses of this book. Kumari Jayawardena's focus here is thankfully more urbane.

Social Transformation

Jayawardena is interested in the bourgeoisie as a class in its classical Western or European sense. Her broad concern here is to show its genesis, its character and its role in the transformation of a social and political system based on feudal relationships, and sustained by an imperialist colonialist agenda, into one based on capitalist enterprise and democracy. Whether this transformation was true and complete is one of the interesting aspects examined in this book.

Jayawardena argues that it was a particular type of capitalism that developed in Sri Lanka during the colonial period and a particular kind of bourgeoisie that emerged along with it. She supports this with a detailed examination of the question whether class became more important than caste in this process, and her interpretation of the political dimension of Sri Lanka's transformation is linked to this caste/class question. She examines how bourgeois families came to dominate Sri Lankan politics up to and after independence, and while doing so, she provides answers to the important questions still being asked about their relationship to imperialism, specially in the political sense—were they national heroes, collaborative 'villains' or merely an unconcerned and contented "lumpenbourgeoisie"? or perhaps a mixture, in varying proportions, of all three?

Jayawardena considers the rise of a new class of capitalists composed of different caste, ethnic and religious groups as one of the most significant developments in 19th-century Sri Lanka. It was a period when radical changes took place simultaneously in both caste and class systems. She asserts that this simultaneity is important to understand "both the complex nature of the economic and social processes that gave rise to a bourgeoisie, and the link between the political attitudes of the new class and its economic origins." In four very detailed and comprehensive chapters in the core of the book, one devoted to each of Sri Lanka's ethnic groups—Jayawardena considers this simultaneity and examines the complexities in the rise of the Sinhala, Tamil, Muslim and Burgher/Eurasian bourgeoisie. She identifies and names particular personalities and family groups in each section, and teases out the different socio-economic relationships and historic paths within each ethnic group which enabled them to accumulate wealth and thus increase their social status and influence.

The Sinhala Bourgeoisie

It is the sections of the book on the rise of the Sinhala bourgeoisie which makes good reading. Her chapter on the Sinhala bourgeoisie of 'nobodies' and 'somebodies' gives details of nearly twenty families. They consisted of a mix of various castes such as the *goyigama*, *karava*, *salagama* etc. and in class terms included both the old rich 'somebodies,' like the *goyigama* Obeyesekere Bandaranaiques, and the new-rich 'nobodies' like the *goyigama* Senanayakes and the Attygalles, the *karava* Warusahennedige Soysas and the Hannedige Pieris.'

The new-rich 'nobodies' also included families from the *salagama*, *durava*, *vahumpura* and other castes who "broke through the traditional caste stratification to emerge as successful planters and businessmen, or by virtue of a high level of education, to join the professions and later enter politics."

The original old-rich *goyigama* 'somebodies' were the feudal Mudaliyars and their extended families, whose wealth was based mainly in land and the growth of plantation produce for the market. However, the new-rich *goyigama* 'nobodies' were the more resourceful. They derived their wealth from plantations and graphite mining and also branched out into other enterprises like arrack renting. It was the challenge posed by these 'nobodies' for power and influence based on their new wealth which caused tensions within the hierarchical *goyigama* caste system and led to Sir Christoffel Obeyesekere's famous outburst.

Jayawardena notices the irony in this outburst because "the Mudaliyars themselves were of recent vintage—products of the colonial system that transformed the interpreters and intermediaries, so vital to British rule, into a landed 'aristocracy'. In other words, these 'somebodies' were once relative 'nobodies' themselves "subordinate members' of the colonial bureaucracy who had been given small grants of land called *accomodessans*... in lieu of salaries" They were not 'feudal' in the traditional sense of being a privileged class linked to the institution of Sri Lankan royalty. This class was dismantled along with the Kandyan Kingdom in 1815. In

its place, the British rulers set about creating, through gifts of land, titles and positions of authority, an "artificial aristocracy of loyal servitors to the new sovereign" i.e. the British monarch.

These loyal servitors, the Mudaliyars, were mainly leading "Low-country" *goyigama* families "who first rose to real prominence during colonial rule, with a record of loyal service to the Portuguese, Dutch and...British rulers. The land, as well as the privileges and titles they thereby acquired had enabled them to assume a 'feudal' lifestyle and establish their position in the Low-country as the 'leading' Sinhalese families. Thus their status could only be defined in terms of the foreign rulers who had created an 'aristocracy' for their own purposes."

Among them were the de Saram family of Mudaliyars who had married into Dutch families, and later, through marriage alliances, created a network embracing the families Obeyesekere, Dias, Bandaranaike, Ilangakoon, de Alwis, de Livera, Pieris and Siriwardena. It was this family network which figured with great significance in the society and politics of colonial and postcolonial Sri Lanka and which continues to make its presence felt today as 'somebodies,' in the figure of President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga.

Booze and the Bourgeoisie

Despite the restrictive monopolistic and high tariff-led policies of the colonial state from Dutch times to around the third decade of British rule, which favoured the relevant East India Company and its subsidiaries, small opportunities began to emerge for local enterprise in the form of internal and coastal trade, the supply of goods and services, and especially the renting system. During Dutch and British rule, certain forms of revenue were not collected directly by the colonial administration. They were farmed out to local tax gatherers or 'renters' on an annual basis, for an annual pre-paid fee. This gave the 'renter' the right to collect in money or in kind, the fish tax, paddy tax, tolls for roads, bridges and ferries, monies from gambling and cock-fighting, and the tax monies from the sale of arrack. Early Sinhala renters were mainly selected from among the *goyigama* caste who constituted the local government officials like village headmen (*vidanes*), police *vidanes*, school masters etc. The *karava* and other castes also shared the various rents along with Muslim traders and businessmen. But the caste divisions changed in 1832 when the government prohibited village headmen from becoming renters. Increased opportunities for the *karava* and renters of other castes and ethnicities were thus opened up. The *goyigama* involvement in arrack renting in particular declined but did not disappear. One of the families which continued was the Wewage Dep family, whose fortunes were laid by an early arrack renter, Abraham Dep. His grandson Wewage Arnolis Dep was one of the leading arrack renters around 1900. Arnolis daughter Helena married Tudugalle Don Philip Wijewardene, a timber merchant. Their grandson, J.R. Jayawardene, became the first President of Sri Lanka.

Kumari Jayawardena considers the farming of arrack rents as the critical factor in the accumulation of capital and class formation in

Sri Lanka—it became "the most important source of local capital accumulation in the first half of the 19th century"—i.e up to around 1830, after which the plantation system began to expand rapidly. The early 1830s also saw significant changes in British colonial policies. Certain monopolies and export controls were ended, the feudal practice of extracting unpaid labour (*rajakariya*) was abolished and arrack renting was changed from a tavern basis to a district basis. This enabled influential renters with large resources to outbid small renters, resulting in monopolistic practices which favoured a few families. Wealth creation was also helped by the caste ties which thus protected and kept the business interests within the family networks.

After the introduction of the first coffee plantations in the 1830s and later tea, with its impact on the economy through large movements and concentrations of labour (the main alcohol consumers) to the plantation areas and the towns, mainly the capital city Colombo, the capital accumulation through arrack renting then really took off among the new-rich Sinhala 'nobodies' of all castes. Their huge wealth enabled them to branch out into other ventures, including land ownership, large scale planting of coconut, rubber and spices, graphite mining, transport and labour contracting, commercial activities, and providing services for the colonial bureaucracy. Their increasing wealth made it possible for their children to be sent to Europe for studies and to enter the learned professions as doctors, lawyers etc. They purchased town properties, mainly in Colombo, built new homes, and ran their businesses and professions from there. They engaged in lavish spending, entered high society and chose to live and act like their colonial masters. The 'nobodies' had now emerged as bourgeois 'somebodies' and were already contesting for the leadership of Sri Lankan politics and society.

Caste and Class

The colonial period of Sri Lankan history saw a gradual decline in the practice and influence of the caste system. Links between caste and occupation slowly deteriorated in Sinhala and Tamil areas. There were many reasons for this. Dutch mercantilism created new avenues for trade, commerce and contractual servicing, which were not the particular concerns of any one caste. Many non-caste occupations emerged, thus opening up employment for Sinhalese and Tamils from all castes. Up to the 1830s the emergent Sinhala merchant capitalists were mainly from the *goyigama* and *vellala* castes, who served as minor government officials. After the 1832 prohibition of government servants from involvement in arrack renting, the route to wealth accumulation was opened up for the *karava* caste, who were already experienced in trading. Christian conversion, the mixed education system, boarding schools, the universal application of Roman-Dutch criminal and civil law irrespective of caste were some of the other developments which led to the decline in the hierarchical influence of caste. The abolition of caste categories from the census in 1824 further weakened the system.

The opportunity to maximize capital accumulation through the liquor trade was initially made use of by all castes. It came under the domination of the *karava* caste only after the 1830s which led to

their subsequent 'spectacular rise' in social and political standing. Other castes, like the *salagama* and *durava* also made use of the opportunities. This aroused the hostility of the *goyigama* sections of the national elites. Some historians have drawn attention to the 'caste struggles' of the latter decades of the 19th century, specially the so-called 'great controversy' between the *goyigama* and the *karava*. Jayawardena, however, carefully re-examines the data and argues that this was more an inter-class controversy expressed in caste terms and not a caste controversy per se. It was a rivalry between old and new rich, between landowner and merchant capitalism and between the forces of conservatism and those of moderate reform.

A Particular Type

Jayawardena contends that the mode of the emergence of the bourgeoisie and their involvement in social and political change was of a particular nature. While changes did take place in traditional structures and values, including ethnic and class loyalties, the colonial rulers found it useful to continue in some areas with the traditional systems of exploitation and governance. Therefore, feudal structures and attitudes were not totally swept away. The bourgeoisie while acting together as a class in economic and political matters, acted within their caste alliances when it came to private family matters, such as marriage and the running of their businesses etc. What emerged, then, was a Sri Lankan bourgeoisie which was an appendage of imperialism, a dependant class. Their creation and continued existence was based on the protection and opportunities provided by the colonial state. This was different from the more mature bourgeoisie that emerged in India which displayed more independence and confidence in their nationalist and anti-imperialist struggles. The Sri Lankan bourgeoisie on the other hand did not display all-out opposition to colonial rule as did their Indian counterparts. It was satisfied with political concessions and limited constitutional reforms.

The other side of this was the particular kind of economic system which developed. On their journey towards becoming 'somebodies,' the 'nobodies' made huge accumulations of wealth almost over-

night, but much of it remained within the island and in the familiar locality. There were no true capitalist instincts in the sense of re-investing and putting back into the process, that which would have improved and increased their capital-earning prospects. Theirs was hardly entrepreneurial economic activity, since their main interests were mercantile and typically *rentier* in attitude. With their lavish consumption habits and the tying up of much of their wealth in land, the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie acted like feudal lords and landed gentry. The system was neither wholly capitalist nor feudal—there were elements of both—the archaic and the modern were yoked together. For Jayawardena then, the development of capitalism in Sri Lanka is unfinished business to this day.

This extremely detailed and carefully crafted book certainly fills the considerable gap in the research into the development of capitalism and the rise of the bourgeoisie in Sri Lanka. Since some of its contents are controversial Jayawardena has made every effort to check the details and corroborate oral histories with the archival documentation. As is to be expected from any academic work of quality, the chapter end notes, the appendices, the bibliography and the indexes are detailed and extensive, and the approach is non-polemical and non-judgemental. At the same time, the easy writing style makes the work accessible to the general reader and does not take anything away from its serious nature. The quality and the concerns of the scholarship displayed in this book are such that the analysis is not restricted to the socio-economic and the political arena. Jayawardena's range also includes detailed chapter length examinations of the rise of the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie with respect to cultural shifts, religious revivals and the changing role of women in late colonial society. The two witty cover photographs and the inclusion of some eighteen pages of additional archive photographs adds not only to the importance of the book, but to the 'reading' pleasure as well. Perhaps the inclusion of a few charts or 'family trees' would have helped the reader to clearly see the actual roots of some of our contemporary bourgeois social and political elites. It would help if such charts and family trees are also made public. Sri Lankans need to be told where our leaders really come from. Some of their mythic versions of their own roots need to be exposed and challenged. ■

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