

GENDER & POLITICS

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Mario Gomez and Shyamala Gomez, 2001, *Preferring Women, Gender and Politics in Sri Lanka*: Colombo: Shakthi, 108 pp., Price Rs. 150.00.

As Kumari Jayawardena mentions in the Preface to this book by Mario Gomez and Shyamala Gomez, a great paradox in Sri Lanka's democratic modernity exists. It refers to the extremely low level of women's participation in electoral politics while at the same time some women having been able to reach the highest political positions. At a time when Sri Lanka's President and the Prime Minister were women—incidentally, both came from the same family, one being the daughter and the other her mother—the proportion of women in national parliament demonstrated a declining trend. Kumari Jayawardena's comments bring into focus the efforts made by Gomez and Gomez:

Today Sri Lanka is 97th in the world in terms of parliamentary representation of women – a horrifying figure. Thus while progress in achieving democratic rights has been a feature of Sri Lanka's recent history, a secular decline seems to be taking place in women's participation in legislative bodies. Truly a national scandal, making the question of women and governance one of deserving high priority. (p. x)

In this context, we may also recall that Sri Lanka has a comparatively long history of universal adult franchise, spanning exactly seventy years. In the campaign for universal adult franchise during the late 1920s, women, along with labor unions and minority caste associations, were in the forefront. Interestingly, universal franchise as a public good was first valued and defended by those in the margins of power in the late colonial Sri Lankan society—women, the working class and depressed caste communities.

As a question of democracy, representation and governance, the low electoral participation of women has entered Sri Lanka's public debate only recently. Women activists and researchers have been primarily responsible for bringing it to the agenda of democratic debate. Interestingly, the state began to respond to the women's campaign with some enthusiasm. For example, the National Plan of Action for Women in Sri Lanka, formulated in 1996, recognized

and listed the obstacles which prevented Sri Lankan women from engaging in political activities. It also set the goals and strategies for increasing the number of women at decision-making levels. As Gomez and Gomez note, the Action Plan identified the following as obstacles to women's political participation: Commitment to family responsibilities, politics being viewed as a male domain of activity, criminalization of the electoral politics, male domination in political party structures and prevalence in corrupt practices in politics are the main causes as identified in the Action Plan (pp. 45-46).

Meanwhile, the low participation of women in legislative politics is not specifically a Sri Lankan phenomenon. As the authors point out at the beginning of their analysis, women's low representation in national and local political bodies has emerged as a major concern in the democratic transition in South Asian societies. Consequences of this not only make legislative politics and democratic governance primarily a male domain of public activity; it also stands as an insurmountable barrier to achieving the goals of equality, development and peace. The Platform for Action adopted at the Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995 eloquently encapsulates what it means to ensure equality in men-women representation in legislative politics and governance. As the Platform—which sets out the framework for Sri Lanka's debate on women and politics—argues, equal participation of women and men in decision-making will provide, to begin with, a balance reflecting more accurately the composition of society. It is also needed for strengthening democracy and promoting its proper functioning. It will create conditions for integrating the equality principle in public policy making.

Women's equal participation in decision making is not only a demand for simple justice or democracy, but can also be seen as a necessary condition for women's interests to be taken into account. Without the active participation of women and the incorporation of women's perspectives at all levels of decision making, the goals of equality, development and peace cannot be achieved. (cited in Gomez & Gomez, p. 4)

How should equal women's participation in politics be ensured in a context where there are structural, institutional, ideological and

cultural barriers to such goals? Ivanka Corti, Chairperson of the Committee on the Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), whom the authors cite, provides an important and influential perspective on this question. Corti's argument is that dealing with violence and other structural issues that prevent women from coming to parliamentary politics is important. But that should be the second stage of women's struggle for equality in political representation. As Corti insightfully observes, men in legislative power would not easily leave their seats in parliamentary positions either. What is crucial for women's equality in political participation is finding a method to ensure women's presence in parliament so that violence and other structural obstacles could be dealt with. The strategy then is to ensure women's presence in legislative bodies through a system of quotas. "Who will push the issue of violence if we don't have enough women in parliament? We have to reach something and without quotas we will never reach it" (Corti, cited in Gomez & Gomez, p.6). The authors' own argument for quotas for women appears to favor the past oppression and discrimination thesis. "Proportional inequality is the result of years of past oppression. Years of patent discrimination, and the continuation of this discrimination in subtle forms, calls for an intervention that will go beyond recognizing formal equal rights" (p. 79).

Preferring Women covers a range of issues related to the theme of equality of women's participation in legislative politics. The discussion begins with establishing the essential link between women, political participation and democratic governance. Then it moves to a brief survey of conceptual issues involved in quotas, reservations, preferences, compensatory discrimination and affirmative action. What emerge from this discussion is a host of issues that constitute the debate on the merits and demerits of such policies of affirmative action. At one level it involves concepts such as group rights and positive as well as compensatory discrimination. At another level, it raises questions about individual rights and merit-based regime of social policy. Incidentally, this issue also constitutes one of the most fascinating debates in contemporary, post-Rawlsian, debates in political philosophy and legal theory among liberals and communitarians. It is also one of the recurrent themes in the contemporary feminist theory too. In a way, the debate on quotas for women can be framed from a variety of thematic locations – equality, difference, rights, justice as well as substantive vs. procedural justice and discrimination. The basic philosophical-methodological assumption underpinning the proposal for quotas for women appears to be that a procedural strategy is needed for substantive democracy as well as to correct past and continuing group discriminations arising from social regimes of inequality and difference. The Gomezs too work within this conceptual framework. They assert that "there is a pressing need for a constitutional and legal intervention that would facilitate a greater representation of women in political institutions at all levels of government" (p. 7).

The authors also present a fairly extensive discussion on Sri Lanka's recent policy debates on discrimination, affirmative action and

quota proposals. What comes out from this discussion is the absence of a consensus on these notions and also complexities involved in formulating public policy in order to ensure justice through policies of positive discrimination. Debates on university admissions, ethnic quotas in education as well as public employment, youth quotas demonstrate some of the unresolved contradictions in Sri Lanka's public cultures of rights, equality and justice. Our juridical notion of rights, as enshrined in the Fundamental Rights chapter of the Constitution and enforced by the higher judiciary, is framed in the discourse and within the tradition of liberal individualism. Then we have Directive Principles of the Constitution which have a communitarian spirit. The judiciary's approach to the issue of quotas has been contradictory, primarily because of the unresolved tension that exists between these two perspectives in our constitutionalism. And then, there exists competing group claims to rights, equality, justice and fairness, based on contending constructions of past as well as present discrimination and deprivation. These sentiments of discrimination and deprivation are also narratives of group fears, uncertainties and anxieties in an age of ethnic conflicts. The collapse of Sri Lanka's proposed Equal Opportunities Bill, just two years ago, encapsulated some of these contradictions and tensions that still remain inadequately understood by us. What is nonetheless important is that the campaigns for social and ethnic quotas have been subsided, the argument for quotas for women in representative institutions remains active.

Active but not yet effective: This is the point the Gomezes are clearly making in surveying the outcome of Sri Lanka's recent campaign for equality in women's participation in representative political assemblies. The success of a campaign of this nature is felt at two levels. The first is the public acceptability of the principle, and the second is the translation of the principle into constitutional provisions and public policy. For example, as the authors point out, campaigners for women's equality have not been particularly effective in influencing Sri Lanka's recent constitutional reform debate. The Gomezs are forthright in their critique of women's campaigners too. "For their part women's groups did not campaign strongly for the inclusion of a reservation. There was very little lobbying to make the constitution gender sensitive" (p. 83). There was also what the authors call some ambiguity among Sri Lankan women's groups on the question of quotas (p. 84). While in October 1997 the People's Alliance government incorporated in its constitutional reform proposals the idea of reserving not less than 25 percent of seats for women at local government level, the August 2000 constitutional draft proposed a mere "adequate representation of women, as far as practicable." What it actually means is that, as we said in the 1960s, "the struggle should continue."

In the section before the last, the book provides a very useful survey of the debate on the options for Sri Lanka concerning quotas for women. One argument is for the increase of the quota from the proposed 25 per cent at local government level to 33 or 50 per cent at all levels—local, provincial and national. The Women's Manifesto released during the Parliamentary Election of October 2000 has taken a further step forward in the direction of quotas for

women. It called for a quota of 30 per cent for women at local government, provincial and parliamentary levels and a 50 per cent of the seats on the national list of parliament to be given to women. The other options which the authors propose for discussion include: (i) the reservation for women of 22 per cent of the National List MPs; (ii) A reservation, 33 per cent, in the nominations list of candidates at all elections; (iii) Ensuring by political parties of 33 per cent all elected to be women; and (iv) Multi-member constituencies to guarantee the election of at least one-woman member.

Sri Lanka's constitutional reform debate seems to be one that has a recurring life. Even at present, issues of democratization and electoral reform are at the core of the constitutional reform debate.

It is important that women's groups seize this space to bring the question of women's equal representation to the center of the reform agenda. It requires a range of activities for intervention – public education, lobbying among political parties, public communication through media, networking, campaigning and of course further and continuing research and documentation. *Preferring Women* is an important and useful handbook. It is lucidly written, incorporating what has been generated through recent research and surveys conducted in Sri Lanka. It also synthesizes the legal, judicial and constitutional arguments with the concerns of democratic activist communities. A public educational text like this needs to be made available in vernacular languages, Sinhalese and Tamil. Vernacularization of the democratic struggle is a strategic goal which we should not ignore.

GREAT DAYS, GREAT READ!

Lakmali Gunawardena

Manel Fonseka, 2001, *Great Days. memoirs of a ceylon government medical officer of 1918*, Colombo: Social Scientists' Association
118 pp. Rs. 300.00

There has been a number of memoirs of officers retired from government service recently. It speaks well for the thriving publishing industry and the longevity of retired public servants, whose offspring are aware that all that their aged parents are recounting over and over again is part of our oral history which should be recorded in some way. When Alec Peterson approached Manel Fonseka to put his octogenarian doctor father's stories into some form of writing as a gift to him on his birthday, both son and writer had something much less than a published book in mind.

In a meticulously edited and annotated recording of Dr. Peterson's life in the Ceylon Medical Service at the turn of the century, published by the Social Scientists' Association, Manel Fonseka transports us back to a bygone age when doctors made house calls by foot, on horse back, buggy cart and sometimes on an elephant! It's another world from medical practitioners plying from one hospital to another, tracked by cellphones, to attend to patients waiting in vast numbers to consult them for 5 or 10 minutes.

The editor has carefully preserved the doctor's voice and style of narrative, simple, direct, down-to-earth and lined with humour. She carries us from his student days, when he was part of the temperance movement, when carolling during Christmas was accompanied by an organ tied to a bullock cart, and one could go shoot some rabbit in the wild in Wellawatte, to when he retired from service as Superintendent of the leprosy hospital in Hendala, organizing the patients in building a barbershop for themselves. What comes across the length of the narrative is the personality of an unassuming and practical medical practitioner whose dedication to his service is as rock solid as the man himself. Dedication to the call of duty is foremost to the point that he leaves, for awhile, a son dying of meningitis in the care of his wife, entrusted with nursing instructions, to attend to granting pratique to a ship, while stationed in Galle.

The medical officer takes us all over the country where he was posted, peppering his recollections with many anecdotes. How it took five days to dig a grave in the hard ground of arid Buttala, so that he ordered that the graves be prepared ahead of time. How falling on a recently pruned tea bush in Galaha would rip one's bowels out that would require on-the-spot surgery, and the many-times-told tale, finally caught in writing, of an unforgettable *vambotu* lunch in Badulla. Some of these anecdotes are highlighted by Barbara Mututantri Yearsley's humorous line drawings.

The book shows us another facet of the Burghers as a hard-working people, in contrast to that of the ribald, and rather rumbunctious one painted by Carl Muller in *The Jamfruit Tree*. A grandmother, Sophia Vandergucht who started "the ragged school," a father who became a chief clerk of the loan board and had the lane on which he lived named after him, an uncle, Bonnie Herft, who was an engineer and "was doing well."

Manel Fonseka, is a documentalist and editor. That *Great Days* ended as such a readable and informative book is to her credit and unflinching will and desire to see it in print. Reading it would be giving her more than the gift of chocolate slabs she got from Dr. Peterson!