
THE MAKING OF THE SRI LANKAN BOURGEOISIE

A Review Essay

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Kumari Jayawardena, 2000, *Nobodies to Somebodies: The Rise of the Colonial Bourgeoisie in Sri Lanka*, Colombo: Social Scientists' Association and Sanjiva Books, 390 pp, Rs. 950.00

This volume is a pathfinding piece of research on the rise of the Sri Lankan capitalist class in the nineteenth century during British colonial times. It is perhaps worth being reminded that the author, Jayawardena — who has previously worked on the rise of the labour movement in Sri Lanka as well as made notable contributions to the study of feminism and nationalism (Jayawardena 1972; 1986) — has in this research turned attention to the growth and consolidation of the domestic bourgeoisie. In itself this is rare. Scholars usually tend to specialize, and what is more are reluctant, to cross the class divide. This is indeed a pity because crossing the divide establishes — as this book lucidly demonstrates — a powerful vantage point from which to oversee the emergence and consolidation of the capitalist economies.

One of the major obstacles confronting the kind of research enterprise undertaken by the author is the difficulty of accessing archival material. In many other countries, this kind of study would have benefited from publicly available company documents and data archives, but this was certainly not the case in Sri Lanka. Hence, the author has had to resort to the time consuming and grinding task of intensive mining of primary personal and family source material, and, for this reason alone the book makes a notable contribution to the study of the Sri Lankan political economy, for which future scholars will remain in debt.

But this book is much more than a historical research document. Importantly it attempts to chart the distinctive mercantile foundations of the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie by analyzing the complex interplay between caste and ethnicity. In addition, by exploring the cultural compass of this class as it consolidated itself politically and economically within the late colonial political economy, it demonstrates the manner in which the emergent Sri Lankan bourgeoisie attempted to navigate the colonial political system.

In addition to the complex and multi-dimensional view of class, the author treats markets as embedded in a wider political and institutional context. Her analysis departs from neo-classical accounts which cognize markets as the mere putty of deep-seated economic forces. Instead, the analysis provided forces us to locate Sri Lankan capitalism in its distinctive institutional context. In this respect, this work is consistent with the recent genre of work which goes under the heading of 'historical institutionalism' (see, for example, Steinmo et al. 1992). Rather than adopting a static and

abstract view of markets and cognizing economic behaviour as independent of historical experience and institutional context, historical institutionalism conceives of markets as a structure that is determined by a complex historical past. Such an approach is one in which economic outcomes are strongly coloured by the texture of the institutional environment. Zysman (1996) neatly encapsulates this institutionalist logic when he notes that each "market economy is defined by the institutions and rules that permit it to function, or to put differently, each national system can be defined by the 'institutional structure' of the economy, that which shapes how buying, selling and the very organization of production takes place" (Zysman 1996: 177). The resort to a dynamic conception of markets demands a recognition that markets cannot be disconnected from the wider ensemble of political and economic power. What this study underlines is that a comprehensive understanding of economic behaviour is possible only within the wider context of political and institutional structures. As much as this is implicit in this volume, it is a pity that these issues are not examined more directly. Nevertheless, its main lines of inquiry stand out as a refreshingly innovative approach to the study of Sri Lankan political economy.

Turning to the major themes of the book, the author, in substantiating the mercantile foundations of the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie, observes that the Sri Lankan economic structure was to a large extent shaped by the dominant plantation economy. As a consequence, the emerging Sri Lankan capitalist class established itself in retailing and distribution, and was heavily dependent on the capturing of rents in various trades. In particular, the author documents the manner in which the emerging plantation economy brought with it a substantial increase in the consumption of liquor and the liquor trade. Arrack rents became the foundation of many of the early business enterprises. Thus, the author observes that the "retail of arrack, from being one among many small enterprises in Dutch and early British times became matters of 'big business' and a source of capital formation for the local bourgeois" (p. 77) and a significant source of capital accumulation.

Furthermore, this account vividly documents how within a space of a generation the 'nobodies' turned themselves from "tavern keeper to gentleman planter" (p. 83); and, one might add, to colonial politician — a transformation well illustrated in the classic photographs of the Senanayake family (a leading 'patrician' family) on the front and back cover pages of the book. It is also a rather sobering thought that having made their fortunes in the liquor trade, a significant part of the Sri Lankan elite got off the booze wagon just in time to hitch a political ride on the growing temperance

train which played a key role in shaping a Sinhalese Buddhist national consciousness.

That this emergent bourgeoisie was dominated by merchant capital had important ramifications for the development of capitalism in Sri Lanka in the pre-independence period. An important proposition advanced by the author is that this class was fundamentally unable to change the basis and source of capital accumulation; it was, therefore, unable to transform itself into a system of industrial capitalism. The author details how the rentier capitalists invested most of their fortunes in plantation or land, which gave them a high status within both the broader society and their narrower more ascriptive caste structures. It was also the case that the prospects of this class for diversification into certain forms of economic activity were limited by constraints on access to credit. While this may be true, the important point to note is that the mercantile character of the new bourgeoisie structurally constrained their ability to transform into industrial capitalists. Indeed, the chosen areas of diversification such as plantation crops like coconut "still remained within the framework of merchant-cum-rentier investments" (p. 156).

But the very attraction of plantations as a status symbol and an economic good reflects the incomplete nature of the capitalist revolution in Sri Lanka. In fact, herein lies the real paradox of capitalism in colonial Sri Lanka: the fact that — contrary to Marx's assumption about the revolutionary impact of capitalism on the colonies — it was unable to bring about fundamental changes in modes of social and economic life. In this respect, this thesis has much in common with the argument advanced by Kay (1975) nearly two decades ago on the dominance of merchant capital. Kay notes that:

In the underdeveloped world independent merchant capital was the form of existence of industrial capital. And that the behaviour of capital here — now revolutionary in establishing commodity production, now reactionary in supporting the existing non-capitalist order — is typical of capital when it exists in this form. (Kay 1975: 104-105)

In fact, it is significant that study on the domestic sector in *Nobodies to Somebodies* complements the earlier work of de Silva (1972) on the dominance of merchant capital in the plantation sector. In this seminal work, de Silva, who established the merchant capital thesis with great empirical detail and theoretical sophistication, concluded that:

In the colonies, the effects of imperialism were to develop and strengthen the role of merchant capital and to stifle its transformation into industrial capital. The factors impeding this transformation may well provide a more fruitful framework of analysis than an attempted classification of capitalism into such varieties as 'deformed' or 'backward' or 'dependent.' (de Silva 1982: 474-5)

In this context, the importance of Jayawardena's work lies in the fact that similar structural aspects of merchant capital pervade both the domestic and foreign owned sectors. Therefore, a suggestive line of inquiry for future researchers may be to link more explicitly the impact of merchant capital in the foreign owned plantation economy on the domestic sector. But the powerful underlying thesis of both de Silva and Jayawardena is that the effect of merchant capital was to usher in an incomplete capitalist revolution, which while profoundly shaping pre-capitalist economic relations, was not able to fundamentally transform these arrangements.

In the second part of the book, the author provides an insightful analysis of the ramification of the dominance of merchant capital on political alliances and social structures. In essence, this portrays simultaneously the corrosive as well as accommodative character of capitalism on traditional or pre-capitalist social forms. The essential point here is that caste as a mode of social stratification was shaped and molded by the rise of the new bourgeoisie of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. To view caste — as a great many sociologists still persist in doing — as an independent and competing mode of stratification is to miss the crucial fact that caste itself was being fundamentally reshaped by the emergence of the new class of merchant capitalists. Seen through this prism of class, many conflicts that were seen to be predominately caste oriented could be properly recognized as intra-class conflicts. For example, the author notes that the rivalry and contestation between two leading caste groups — *goyigama* and *karava* — in the latter decades of the 19th century which "expressed itself in caste polemics was basically the antagonism that existed between old and new rich, between landowner and merchant capitalist, and between the forces of conservatism and moderate reform — similar to the Whig and Tory conflicts in 19th century Britain" (p. 167). In a similar vein, the author points to the intra-class conflict within caste formation, such as for example, the new and the old rich within the *goyigama* group. The upward mobility of some castes within this new colonial economic structure importantly underlines the transformation of caste by class.

This study, however, seems to swing between two versions of this argument: one has caste as the mirror of class dynamics, and the other conceives of class and caste as being inextricably intertwined. The logic of the author's argument seems to suggest the latter perspective: it is not caste or class but caste *and* class. Just as class transforms caste, the new merchant capitalists use caste networks as a means of getting access to credit and other more intangible resources such as trust and reputation needed for market exchange. In this respect, one of the most important consequences of the emergence of the new merchant capitalist was the fact that markets were embedded in pre-capitalist social arrangements. True, they molded and shaped these ascriptive social structures such as caste, ethnicity, but they were unable to fundamentally displace these reactionary structures. As previously noted, it was a capitalism that was simultaneously corrosive as well as accommodative of traditional pre-capitalist modes of stratification and this in turn

shaped the kind of alliances and coalitions that marked the colonial political economy.

There are a great many fruitful avenues of inquiry to be pursued by using this methodology in areas as diverse as political alliances and cultural forms. But what stands out from this research is that the traditional caste interpretation that has been so influential in social analysis (see, for example, the work of Jiggins 1979 and Roberts 1982) has been effectively challenged. The task is to construct models which recognize the fundamental intertwining of caste and class, a distinctive feature demonstrated in the innovative work of Gunasinghe (1990), one of the leading social analysts of contemporary Sri Lanka. In the present volume, Jayawardena makes a substantial contribution to this mode of analysis by showing the extent to which the intertwining of class and caste is a product of the fundamental inability of the merchant capital to revolutionize the basis of capital accumulation – the incomplete capitalist revolution that is an unlucky inheritance of Sri Lankan political economy.

The political and cultural implications of the rise of the colonial domestic bourgeoisie new rich are analyzed in the final section of the book. It details the manner in which the new rich contested the old rich for representation in the Legislative Council in the early years of constitutional reform. This signalled the increasing political voice of merchant and landowners in the Legislative Councils of

the mid-20th century. One of the features of this newly emergent political class was their predominance in single-member seats closely linked to geographical areas where they had economic interests. Indeed, in the 1930s many members were able to become politically entrenched by establishing strong clientelistic political machines which in turn depended on manipulating caste, ethnic, and religious networks. According to the author: “In the 1930s, the candidates with personal fortunes and large dowries were able to spend lavishly on electoral campaigns in the period before the rise of political parties” (p. 342). In short, the colonial legislature became not merely a site of intra-class conflict but also provided the foundations for a highly personal and clientelistic political system whose impact reverberates to this day in contemporary politics.

The role of the colonial legislature as a register of inter-class conflict is a salutary reminder that in its institution the colonial state reflected broader patterns of social and class conflict in the wider society. This would suggest that future research needs to unpack the colonial state in more detail – seeing the state as both seeking to shape civil society and being shaped by developments in domestic civil society. For example the colonial state — through its political institutions, amongst others — had a pivotal role in cementing certain forms of political alliances which continue to influence post-colonial Sri Lanka. ■

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Edited by Rajan Philips

This book is the outcome of the Felicitation Symposium held in December 1999, to felicitate Hector Abhayavardhana and acknowledge his place as the leading left thinker of his time in Sri Lanka. The symposium themes—globalization and Sri Lankan society and politics—reflect Mr. Abhayavardhana's political and intellectual interests, and define the contributions to this volume by Paul Caspersz, Gamani Corea, Kumar David, Rohan Edrisinha, Izeth Hussain, Santasilan Kadirgamar, Saman Kelegama, Amali Philips and Jayadeva Uyangoda. The book also includes a biographical sketch of Hector Abhayavardhana, a tribute by Gopalkrishna Gandhi, India's High Commissioner in Colombo, and the text of Mr. Abhayavardhana's valedictory talk at the Felicitation Symposium.

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