

Kumari Jayawardena

Interviewed by Amrita Chhachhi

Kumari Jayawardena is currently Senior Fellow of the Institute of Graduate Studies, University of Colombo and Secretary of the Social Scientists Association, Sri Lanka. She taught Political Science at the University of Colombo, Sri Lanka from 1969 to 1985, from where she retired as Associate Professor. She also taught in the Women and Development Masters Course at the Institute of Social Studies in The Hague, The Netherlands (1980–82), and was an Affiliated Fellow of the Bunting Institute at Radcliffe College, USA (1987–88). Her publications include *The Rise of the Labour Movement in Ceylon* (Durham, NC, 1972); *Ethnic and Class Conflicts in Sri Lanka* (Colombo, 1985); *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World* (London, 1986); *The white Woman's other Burden* (New York, 1995); and *Nobodies to Somebodies: The Rise of the Bourgeoisie in Sri Lanka* (Colombo, 2000/London, 2002). Her forthcoming book *The Erasure of the Euro-Asian* (Colombo) is on the radical Euro-Asians and their proto-nationalism and feminism. Kumari Jayawardena continues to be actively involved in the women's movement and peace movement in Sri Lanka and South Asia.

AC: Looking back, the dominant themes defining your life, academic work and politics have been a concern with labour, gender, ethnicity and the development of capitalism in Sri Lanka. How did you personally get interested in these issues?

KJ: My interest in the labour movement and leftist politics has stayed with me since I was in school in the late 1940s and early 1950s — a period of unprecedented militant struggles and political excitement with the elections under the Soulbury constitution in 1947 and independence in 1948. I grew up in a house which was always full of political activists, supporters of women's rights and left wing cadre.

My family was close to Dr S. A. Wickremasinghe and his British wife Doreen Wickremasinghe (founders of the left movement in Sri Lanka); we spent holidays together and these links bought me into contact with trade unionists and left-wing politicians of that period. My parents' concern for labour conditions influenced me as well. My father, Dr A. P. de Zoysa, was in the State Council (legislature) from

1936 to 1946, elected from Colombo South. I often watched the proceedings of the Council where my father took up a large number of controversial issues, ranging from worker's rights, anti-dowry legislation and decriminalization of prostitution.

My mother (Eleanor Hutton) and her family had been activists in the Labour Party in Durham, England. My grandfather George Hutton held strong socialist, secular, pacifist and anti-colonial views and my grandmother Sarah Bewick was a suffragette. My mother was involved in the All Ceylon Women's Conference, which investigated women workers conditions of work. I was recruited along with Ranjani Jayasuriya (de Mel) to help in a survey of women workers in a coconut husking and processing factory. I did not have to go against my family since both my parents were feminists: if I had revolted it would have been in the opposite direction!

The influence of the left continued through my university years as I attended Marxist 'study classes'; then in the 1950s as a student of political science in London, I not only absorbed theory but also was active in left student politics. My choice to write the history of the trade union movement for my PhD in the 1960s came from these influences. Since then I have continued to write and research on the theme of labour, women and politics.

My life and work could be seen as a reflection of the three categories I belong to: Marxist, feminist and secular. What does this mean in the context of Sri Lanka? I often say that I have no caste, no ethnicity, no religion and no false patriotic feelings and don't care who wins in cricket!

AC: Your book *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World* (chosen for the Feminist Fortnight award in Britain in 1986) is a major contribution and is considered one of the twenty most important books of the feminist decades (1970–90) by MS magazine. What made you write this book? Did you ever think it would prove to be so significant in 're-claiming' feminism for the non-western world and challenging Eurocentric and Orientalist theories of the state and political movements? How would you see the relationship between feminism and nationalism today?

KJ: I never thought it would have such an effect! I was teaching at the ISS in the newly started Women and Development courses and found that there was very little on the history of women in the Third World. I knew about women who had been active and so I began to search for material. I found a mention here, a reference there — usually in a footnote saying women had protested in Egypt, Persia, China, etc. for equal political rights. Luckily for me I found the International Archives of Women's History in Amsterdam which turned out to be a treasure house. I was living in Brussels at that time so the manuscript was shakily written on

the train travelling between The Hague and Brussels. Someone typed it out; it was sent downstairs in the ISS for printing and a small book was ready the next day. I had wanted to insert pictures but there it was! It was sold and used first by students at the ISS and then subsequently was expanded and published by Zed Books.

My objective in documenting the rise of early feminism and movements for women's participation in political struggles in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in countries of the South was to challenge the view of traditionalists, political conservatives and even certain leftists, that feminism was a product of 'decadent' Western capitalism, based on a foreign culture of no relevance to women in the Third World. It is amazing that this charge is still made against feminism today. Many young women today also do not know about the debates and struggles on women's rights and that, in a sense, their great-grandmothers were already in a women's movement in the 1920s. Maria Mies, of the ISS, and I also wrote *Feminism in Europe* during the same period, based on our lectures on liberalism, socialism and feminism in the women's movement.

While *Feminism and Nationalism* showed the affinities and tensions between national liberation movements and feminism, highlighting the ways in which the two had common objectives in the struggle against colonial governance and underdevelopment, in the post-colonial context this relationship is more complex. The meaning and deployment of nationalisms have changed dramatically and one has to distinguish between national liberation and ultra-nationalism. As Malathi de Alwis and I have pointed out (Jayawardena and de Alwis, eds, 1996: xiii), women become the carriers of 'authenticity'; ultra-nationalisms and religious fundamentalisms use women's bodies as sites in their struggle to appropriate institutional power. The book also documents how such 'embodied' violence, be it overt or subtle, consensual or coercive, has nevertheless been continuously and spiritedly contested both by individual women and by the women's movement in South Asia.

- AC: A major part of your historical work has also been on the development of capitalism in Sri Lanka. Your recent book, *From Nobodies to Somebodies: The Rise of the Bourgeoisie in Sri Lanka*, delineates the class formation of the nascent Sri Lanka bourgeoisie and emergence of a rentier capitalism in the colonial period. How does your characterization of capitalism in Sri Lanka depart from other accounts?
- KJ: This book resulted from discussions and debates I have had with academics and political activists, locally and abroad, over many years. Dr Michael Roberts (1982) had postulated that the rise of capitalism in Sri Lanka was the rise of the *karava* caste. I knew instinctively that this was not the explanation — that it was rather the rise of a class

of which one section was a dominant caste group. I started to write a short reply to Roberts and it became a book.

The class/caste controversy, cognate issues concerning ethnicity and gender and the question why Sri Lanka had such a weak capitalist class framed my enquiry. While the peasantry, working class and leftist movement were subjects of research, the development of capitalism and the rise of the bourgeoisie have suffered a relative neglect.

In the ongoing debates on caste and class, valuable studies have been done on the 'colonial elite' and Jayadeva Uyangoda has added a new dimension to the caste debate in his recent analysis of 'the colonial caste system'. However none of these studies explored fully the inter-linkages between class, caste, ethnicity and gender, in the constitution of the bourgeoisie as a class and its assumption of state power.

My book traces the evolution of the bourgeoisie from a 'feudal' society and mercantilist economy, to the age of plantations. Local merchants accumulated capital through liquor retailing and toll renting, diversifying into plantation cultivation and graphite mining, thereby making dents in the old caste-based division of labour. I show how class is more significant than caste in the rise of the new-rich 'No-bodies' of many castes, ethnicities and religions into the ranks of the 'Somebodies'. I discuss the links between capital accumulation, religious revivalism, ethnic identity and political movements, as well as the emergence of the bourgeois woman, and the marriage 'cartels' which led to further concentration of wealth.

Unlike the Indian capitalist class, in Sri Lanka the bourgeoisie was a rentier class, which adopted Western culture and lifestyles, and were basically collaborative with the colonial rulers. The obsession of this class with land acquisition and social status, and its backward consciousness, resulted in a constraint on further capitalist development.

It took me twenty years to finish this book! I started it in the 1970s with the caste/class controversy, took the manuscript to The Hague where I recall discussions with Maria Mies and Ken Post, and then after being 'interrupted' by *Feminism and Nationalism*, I returned to complete it. By now I had to add more — I could not just focus on the Sinhalese alone, so Tamils, Muslims and Burghers were included and the book expanded.

- AC: One of the key debates in South Asia today is the garnering of history writing/rewriting for communal political projects and sectarian conflicts. In countering colonial and communal representations of the past, progressive historians have been central figures in the controversies surrounding ethnic/communal violence in the region. How did you get involved in this debate?
- KJ: In 1983, I returned from the ISS, all hell broke loose in Sri Lanka with the attacks on Tamils. I started writing on nationalism, ethnicity, chauvinism and published fifteen articles in the *Lanka Guardian*, which

were then put together as a book (Jayawardena, 1985). My aim was to set the conflicts between the majority Sinhala group and other ethnic groups in the context of 100 years (1883–1983), which included colonial and post-colonial rule. Despite long periods of ethnic harmony there was the consolidation of a Sinhala–Buddhist consciousness that was anti-colonial but also contained the seeds of chauvinism and, at different conjunctures, different minority groups were targeted for attack. I trace the evolution of this to a point where class distinctions become almost irrelevant and Sinhala and Tamil people of all classes get constituted into mutually antagonistic ethnic blocs.

What was disturbing was the shift from anti-racist policies and joint class actions of working class and leftist movements in the early period, and their subsequent descent into majoritarian and chauvinist positions. Theoretically this enquiry questioned the assumption that pre-capitalist ideologies based on caste, religion, ethnicity would disappear with capitalist development. The fundamental question of why ethnic consciousness grew, despite it being against the objective interests of both capital and labour still requires deeper studies. We have to look at the complex ways in which ethnic and national consciousness originate and at the interaction and interplay of economic and political factors with consciousness and ideology.

Politically this study challenged the intertwining of mythology and history, which were being used to justify racist politics. Earlier I had been seen only as an academic but now I became a national hate figure. Chauvinism permeates traditional scholarship whether Sinhala or Tamil. We have seen it in India, too, where historians have challenged the communal interpretation of history in textbooks and also where scholars have demystified the views of ‘the golden age’ and have been vilified and denounced as traitors. Careful historiographical analysis continues to be done to unravel the constituent elements of chauvinist ideologies, to expose the myths, falsehoods and misinterpretations they propagate.

It is interesting to see the historical continuity in the five arguments made against individuals and national liberation movements, working class movements and women’s movements that challenge dominant hegemonies and class/racist/sexist prejudices. The standard attack is that they are foreign-funded, corrupt, immoral, treacherous and enjoy the ‘high life’. The colonial police used the same kind of arguments against nationalists and socialists. In every epoch these five tropes reappear.

AC: Would you agree that your approach has remained essentially Marxist, focusing on political economy and class extending also to your analysis of gender? Do you think the current focus on ‘intersectionality’ is a new conceptual development in feminist theorizing? How would

you assess other contemporary trends in feminist theorizing, such as postmodernism?

- KJ: As I said, I am a Marxist but I use what someone called a 'wide spectrum lens' to deepen and extend economic analysis to social and political domains. In this approach 'intersectionality' is certainly not new: our work on ethnicity/class/caste/gender precisely explores those mutually constituting linkages.

I find postmodernism interesting — Radhika Coomaraswamy has written that I deconstructed Sinhala Buddhism! My focus on political economy and class is very much a generational question: when we were young, class was all we talked about. We would not only refer to 'working class women' and 'upper class women' but we would also ask, irrespective of their social origins, which class they claimed to represent? So context is very necessary — the background to a country, class structure, power relations. Recently in a discussion on Islamicism I was trying to figure out which country, which class, the speaker was referring to, but when I asked her she said, 'It is not relevant which class these people belong to, because I am talking about Islamicism'. You can't just say a bunch of women are Islamicists without saying whether they were peasants in the fields or upper-class women. So I don't particularly reject or support postmodernism but do feel that political economy is important to ground culturalist studies.

- AC: You have always linked your teaching and academic scholarship with political engagement. Would you agree that this linkage is more characteristic of an earlier era and contemporary academics and feminist scholarship is not linked with activism?

- KJ: In a Third World context you cannot avoid activism because there is always something going on which calls for intervention and protest in one's own country or in another. One cannot isolate oneself from these actions. Alongside my historical research and teaching at the university I have spoken at numerous meetings, taught at workers' education classes, replied to attacks on the women's movement — as in my article, 'So Comrade, what happened to the democratic struggle?' (Jayawardena, 1988) — and plunged headlong into the political debates on ethnic conflict.

If you are part of a movement then there is no big dichotomy between action and research. Perhaps the dichotomy is a false one. What is the definition of 'academic'? Is an academic only a person teaching in a university? Does doing research place one in the 'academic' category? Research clearly spans the academic-activist divide. Are well-researched publications put out by activists organizations considered 'academic' in nature? I am not sure either about the word 'activist'. Maybe we should have another word for activist- cum-researcher. Of course academics have more time to think and read, but they can also

be in direct contact with various movements. When academics go to a village or a plantation, organize meetings, give speeches — what are they then? They are political speakers with commitment, so no one asks, ‘Which caste are you, activist caste or research caste?’.

Often academics and activists feel awkward in the presence of the other. The academic feels that she/he is not activist enough, and the activist is always apologizing, ‘I am not an academic, but. . .’. So there is uneasiness but I think this is a false division and in Sri Lanka we have seen, particularly through the peace movement, how people have come together whatever their ‘location’.

AC: As we speak the peace process has been reversed and Sri Lanka has returned to a state of war. What have been the specific consequences of ethnic conflict for women? How effective was your attempt to involve women in the peace process as head of the Sub-Committee on Gender Issues in the 3rd Peace Talks?

KJ: Much has been written on how women in the North and East have been among the most badly affected by the on-going conflict — and about how women are coping with trauma, loss of family members, and widowhood as well as loss of livelihood and displacement. One of the most interesting interventions by the parties to the peace process was the creation of a Sub-Committee on Gender Issues (SGI) at the 3rd Peace Talks held in Oslo in December 2002. The decision was that the SGI was not only to ‘explore the effective inclusion of gender issues in the peace process’ but also, ‘on a regular basis, submit proposals relating to women’s interests to the sessions of negotiations and to the sub-committees of the peace process’. At the 4th Peace Talks in Thailand in January 2003, the SGI was set up with five representatives each appointed by the government and the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) with a Norwegian facilitator, Dr Astrid Heiberg. This was a historic breakthrough without parallel in other conflict situations and received some publicity and editorial comment in the national press.

The Sub-Committee on Gender was launched in Kilinochchi in March 2003 and the second meeting took place in April that year. My involvement in this process was very useful and also raised a lot of questions about representation. At the meeting there were five of us from the women’s movement and there were five women from the LTTE. Just before the meeting started I saw a board with GOSL on it. I asked what that meant and was told that it meant us — we were representing the Government of Sri Lanka. I said no we did not: I could not understand how a mixed bag of ‘subversive’ feminists from the South were seen as GOSL! We had to convince them that we were not representing the government or any party (despite being flown in on a government helicopter!) but were critical of both — and belonged

to the peace movement. The issues identified for attention from a gender perspective were: sustaining the peace process; resettlement; personal security and safety; infrastructure and services; livelihood and employment; political representation and decision making and reconciliation.

After the peace talks broke down in June 2003, the gender sub-committee ceased to function. The move to 'engender' the peace process through the SGI marks a significant shift in the policies of the parties to the conflict. The linking of the SGI to the Peace Talks was its strength and also its weakness. The 'official' status of the SGI gave it both authority and visibility — such as acceptance by all mechanisms of the government, among others the Peace Secretariat, and the offices of the Ministers involved in peace, women's issues and reconstruction.

When the talks broke down, the SGI members had to function 'unofficially' through personal contacts and visits with women's groups and individuals in the North and East and South. This involved continued networking with organizations which had been established in the 1980s when the war began. A group called Women For Peace had continuously lobbied for the involvement of women at all levels of the peace process citing the UN Security Council resolution 1325; they publicized the problems women have faced as victims of war and their active role in safeguarding their families and communities during the conflict and campaigned for a just and peaceful solution to the conflict. Thus, the advantages obtained by state intervention to promote women's issues across the conflict divide have continued at a civil society level (without official patronage) in the last few years.

Despite the limited mandate of the SGI, state attention and intervention on gender and peace issues was a good precedent, enabling women of all communities to raise their demands and agitate for legal and political change. For example, the meetings and interchanges between Southern and Northern women have served to bring to the attention of Southern women, the serious problems faced by women of the North and East. In turn, the latter have been made aware about the changes in the law and about women's demands in the South and their role over many years in the agitation for peace. This process enables women not only to be made aware of other experiences, but also to devise policies to change patriarchal attitudes on both sides. There was already agreement on issues such as female subordination, male violence, political representation, the need for legal reform and better livelihood. This is particularly important since it is in the post-conflict situation that we have to be most alert. During wars and conflict, gender roles break down but afterwards patriarchy says, 'Thank you very much, now you can go back home'. It is in the post-conflict situation that we have to be really vigilant and be prepared for the 'comeback' of patriarchy.

This whole process however is now stalled with a breakdown of the peace agreements.

AC: What is the way forward to address the failure of Sri Lanka's project in post-colonial state building? How do you assess the present situation and the role of the international community?

KJ: Globalization is not new, and as Amartya Sen has said, the problem is inequality and growing exploitation that may arise. It is the pressure from the World Bank and IMF and the multinationals that we oppose. We cannot be dogmatic — there is no going back to the centralized command economy nor to the distant past. We have to take up issues of the mixed economy and explore other alternatives such as getting the private sector to take on some of the burden of providing for basic entitlements like health and education. As feminists we have to question and understand the nature of the state and political economy in our region in particular and strategize for change. On the present conflict, as feminists we will continue to struggle for a peaceful rather than military solution and hope that the international community continues to support the peace process.

AC: The rise of politicized religion and identity politics is one that poses many dilemmas for secular and progressive scholars and activists, raising problematic political and ethical questions about how to deal with 'difference' — for example, universal values versus cultural specificity. How has your thinking changed on ways of approaching this over the past decade?

KJ: There is no dilemma. There has been no change in my thinking on these issues. I take a political stand against fundamentalism, chauvinism and fascism and work to strengthen the left and secular approach. We should treat religion as a personal affair and focus on the politicization/mobilization of religious/ethnic identities, which is a political phenomenon. Alliances can be built on common political understanding. The question of difference is also one raised in discussions on western feminism versus Third World feminism. In South Asia many feminists come from a socialist and anti-colonial tradition. Maybe the issue of 'difference' has another significance for Third World women living abroad in racist contexts.

I also believe we have to get away from the idea that there is a serious Third World–First World division between feminists. Westerners did not impose feminism on the Third World. Each country has had its own history of feminism. You also have to take into account the fact that Europe and the USA have a history of dissent, into which we have tapped. Indians and Sri Lankans have been in contact with these dissidents over the decades and drawn on this support in various movements. Knowing some western dissidents, such as Doreen

Wickremasinghe (née Young), led me to write *The White Woman's Other Burden* (Jayawardena, 1995) where I explore how foreign women in South Asia were not just 'Women of the Raj' or 'mem-sahibs', but were also women with their own agendas which often went against colonial policies of their own countries.

Many of us are against cultural relativism that states, 'Our culture is the best; we don't need to change; local women who oppose cultural practices are westernized and alienated from their own cultures'. We fall into a trap here trying to defend our culture and ourselves.

I strongly believe in modernism and would not uphold customary law and tradition if they are oppressive to women. This does not mean denying diversity — we can all agree on women's rights and human rights and follow the guideline of what Nira Yuval-Davis has called 'universality in diversity'.

- AC: Unlike the 1970s, the incorporation of gender into contemporary development discourse, policies and programmes is almost axiomatic today — some say that this is donor-driven 'conditionality'. What are your views on this? What types of tensions arise in engaging with international donor agencies?
- KJ: Indeed today gender is fashionable and it is OK to be a feminist. There is a change in language with even the Ministry of Women's Affairs using the term 'patriarchy' in their documents. There is a women's caucus in Parliament in Sri Lanka and feminist lawyers in particular have been very active on CEDAW and the Prevention of Domestic Violence Act. I don't think all this is donor driven. There are occasionally tensions with international donors who do not recognize or support research programmes, but push for advocacy and counselling or only income-generating projects. Donors are being short-sighted since research is crucial for advocacy and for developing clear political stands. It is also important to develop comparative research programmes on, say, issues of gender and conflict and gender and globalization to develop deeper understanding. For instance, in post-conflict situations what does 'rehabilitation' mean from a feminist perspective? Does it signal a return to a mythic 'home sweet home', doing what your grandmothers did and reconstructing patriarchal society? What does 'transformation' mean? We have to think about what kind of transformation we would like. Usually the groups that have been in conflict have been too busy fighting to think about an economic plan or to think through politics.
- AC: You have been involved in initiatives to build South Asian links and develop a South Asian feminist perspective. What have been the strengths and weaknesses of this transnational alliance?
- KJ: In recent decades, we have been closely linked with South Asian feminists on issues of peace, democracy, human rights and women's rights.

Feminists from South Asia have come to Sri Lanka to investigate human rights abuses and also joined us in solidarity meetings held in the North and East of Sri Lanka. One expression of this network is the South Asian Feminist Declaration brought out in 1989 (which you were also involved in drafting). That document is historically important since it marks a shared common vision and analysis of the political, economic and social dynamics in the region despite differences. In the recent South Asian Women's meeting held in Sri Lanka (July 2006) to rework the Declaration, we have had intense debates on globalization, religion and identity politics, and human rights — highlighting some continuity as well as the emergence of new issues in the present era. But we have also ended with agreement on the many commonalities that link our feminist and democratic movements in the region — an example of transversal dialogues. In Sri Lanka we are under attack all the time and this transnational network has been very important for us.

AC: What do you think are the main challenges facing democratic and women's movements today, particularly in South Asia?

KJ: We have to move from the margins into the centre. By that I do not mean getting political representation or gender mainstreaming. Our work — feminist scholarship and knowledge production in history, political analysis, economics — and our politics should get known. We have ghetto-ized ourselves. We should be able to 'convert', influence and transform mainstream agendas (not be incorporated into them); a woman economist is still never asked what she thinks about macro-economic or national economic policies and plans. Feminists today still suffer from *lajja bhaya* (shyness and fear) — we need to be more assertive. We also need to continuously draw strength from the struggles by men and women who were modernizers. I recently turned to exploring my own roots and discovered a lost history of those with European and Asian origin. *The Erasure of the Euro-Asian* (forthcoming) focuses on the creation of the Euro-Asian communities (Burghers, Anglo-Indians and Eurasians) in the colonial period in South Asia and their vanguard role in the struggle for democratic rights. While some were certainly collaborators, it is not widely known that many Euro-Asians were pioneers of workers' and peasant rights, proto-nationalism, secularism and gender equality, many decades before the rise of those celebrated as 'national heroes'. Many Euro-Asians had utopian visions of a future democratic society, but the obsession with 'purity' of race has relegated them to a footnote. My book brings out the centrality of their role and places them in the main text.

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