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Peasant Revolts in Dutch and British Periods

Kumari Jayawardena, PERPETUAL FERMENT Popular Revolts in Sri Lanka in the 18th and 19th Centuries. Social Scientists' Association, Colombo 2010. Price Rs. 850

N. Sanderatne *

Peasant revolts have been a fascinating area of study by political scientists and sociologists who have taken a holistic view of why peasant revolts occur. They have attempted to explain why peasants revolt where and when. The seminal work in this area was Eric Wolf's, *Peasant Wars of the Twentieth Century* which is a comparative analysis of the peasant revolutions of Mexico, Russia, China, Vietnam, Algeria, and Cuba, not from the perspective of governments or parties or leaders, but from the perspective of the peasant peoples whose lives and ways of living were disrupted by imperial powers.

Kumari Jayawardena explores these issues as to why peasants revolted during the Dutch and British colonial periods. It is a study of peasant behavior that explores the hidden facts of history. *Perpetual Ferment* is an excellent social history of the Dutch and British periods. It belongs to that genre of books that crosses disciplines. It is a work on social and political history as well as sociological and political analysis of people's discontent, popular protests, and peasant rebellions. Its analysis reveals several dimensions of peasant political behavior in the context of Sinhala feudal social organization and the ideological hegemony of feudal chiefs, bhikkhus and nobility. Interesting facets of the study are the importance of monarchism in the revolts and the role of pretenders to the throne, chieftains, bhikkhus and Veddhas in the frequent rebellions. The book also highlights the lesser-known uprisings of the cinnamon peelers against the East India Company during the Dutch rule, as well as the famous 'Great Rebellion' of 1818 against British rule, and the rebellion of 1848.

The book is in three parts. Part One of the book is a thoughtful political and sociological analysis that puts the more descriptive parts of the book in perspective. It provides a conceptual framework that makes a contribution to analytical writings on political history, peasant behavior and the sociology of peasant protests. She posits Eric Hobsbawm against Ranajit Guha and leans more to Guha on the issue of "primitive rebels". In this she is

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again breaking new ground with this kind of approach to Sri Lankan historical studies. She supports Newton Gunasinghe's notion of a 'multi-class bloc' as the rationale for the absence of peasant rebellions against landlords and chiefs. Her Introduction gives you an idea of her analysis of social change. Her perspective is a political economy one oriented to a critical social analysis.

Part one also deals with the political, economic and social changes brought about by foreign rule. The Portuguese and Dutch that created mercantilist economic relations and then the spread of this mercantilism to the hinterland with British rule in 1815 brought about hardships especially to the peasantry. With the introduction of the plantations, first with coffee and then tea, there was a fundamental transformation of the economy and society that changed the traditional role of the dominant classes as well as the condition of the poor peasantry. The introduction of the plantation system brought about severe difficulties to the peasantry and at the same time colonial rule denied the feudal elite their social and political status and power.

Part two of the book consisting of five chapters gives a detailed account of the revolts and rebellions that took place in the Maritime Provinces and the Kandyan Kingdom from up to 1848 that have been "hidden from history". The 1848 rebellion that has been the focus of historians is dealt with in much detail in chapter 8. This was the last rebellion despite the "perpetual ferment" of the peasantry. It is analyzed afresh in the light of several interpretations of peasant revolts. The 1848 rebellion Jayawardena contends "was the most important of the continuous protests against foreign rulers." It was multifaceted in its causes and different in character and participation. Unlike the previous protests discussed by the author, it was not an aristocratic revolt, but included an attempt to enthrone a pretender as king. It had diverse causes of discontent, widespread participation, the alignment of different classes and was not confined to the Kandyan Kingdom but also extended to Colombo. It was rooted in mass discontent arising from the deprivation of rights and privileges previously enjoyed by the peasantry, oppressive taxation and difficult economic conditions. It was fueled by perhaps the first external economic shock that common people experienced when the plummeting of coffee prices led to lower incomes of the peasantry that had by now taken to the cultivation of coffee in home gardens.

The hostility was not confined to the peasantry, the chiefs, the aristocracy and the bhikkhus. It extended to town dwellers in the Maritime Provinces, traders and workers. The varied discontents led to a broader alignment of classes and agitation in Colombo. Jayawardena contends that although it had a few trappings of the earlier rebellions and revolts, it was vastly different in character and was fuelled by growing hardships and

oppressive taxation. The influence of foreign historical movements, such as the 1848 revolts in Europe, challenge to British rule in India and the role of enlightened foreigners in Colombo like Dr. Christopher Elliot are brought out in this analysis.

In the third part of the book, three chapters she analyses the character, causes and motives of the peasant uprisings and rebellions, the role and nature of leadership of the uprisings and foreign influences. Fascinating accounts of the two rebels, Gongalegoda Banda and the better known Puran Appu, who had a controversial background, are enthralling. A brief account of Saradiel the bandit of Utuvankanda too is made in chapter 12. The perception of British rulers of these leaders was that they were vagabonds, desperate robbers and thieves. Never did the rulers realize that there were fundamental causes of discontent fomenting disaffection.

In portraying the perpetual oppressive colonial rule and discontent the peasantry and workers that led to popular protests, revolts, and rebellions during Dutch and British rule, Kumari Jayawardena dispels the popular notion that colonial rule ushered in peace and calm. On the contrary, her book demonstrates the undercurrents of mass discontent that found expression in a series of rebellions that culminated in the best-known last rebellion of 1848.

She makes a profound contribution to understanding the nature of peasant revolts. Interestingly the revolts were not against the oppression of landlords but peasant alignments with the oppressors, the nobility, chiefs and higher echelons of monks to restore the monarchy and the pre-colonial political and social structures. The notion of class solidarity and class actions were still to arise till the wage labor in enterprises and early trade unions and strikes in 1890s arose with the development of capitalist modes of production.

It is of much interest that these revolts ceased after the 1848 rebellion. A facile explanation for this is that the ruthless crushing of the 1848 rebellion and a realization of the futility of such rebellions silenced further protests and revolts. Kumari's explanation is deeper. She attributes it to the social and economic transformations that took place with a more prosperous plantation system, trades associated with the thriving plantations, development of an urban proletariat and bourgeoisie and the decay of monarchism.

This is a most delightful book that could be read and enjoyed at different intensities of interest and understanding. It is a scholarly work that is readable as a narrative of events and of personalities who figured in peasant revolts during the Dutch and British period up to the mid-nineteenth century. It is woven around the theme that the incursion of capitalist modes of production on peasant societies has cataclysmic effects on that society. The

social discontent, people's protests, popular revolts and rebellions are portrayed in a fascinating manner.

Based on archival research and secondary sources the book is attractively presented with maps, documents and illustrations of colonial rulers and leaders of rebellions. These miniatures are themselves a fascinating collection. Readers who savor the analysis and the narrative of events hidden in history would no doubt relish it. It is a book that a reviewer cannot do justice to; repeated readings would make you "ask for more".