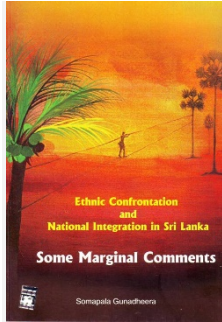


SOME MARGINAL COMMENTS

**Author**

SOMAPALA GUNADHEERA

ISBN

9556582802

Publisher

STAMFORD LAKE PVT LIMITED

Pages

186

Weight

350g.

Price

Rs. 400.00

The Decline And Fall Of Our Once Renowned Public Service

A review by Tissa Jayatilaka

I first came to know of Somapala Gunadheera through reading his perceptive and sensitively written newspaper articles on issues of national significance. I was struck by Mr. Gunadheera's wisdom, duly tempered and refined no doubt by his experience as a civil servant and insights gained thereby. My attraction to Mr. Gunadheera's intelligent and insightful essays that serve to raise the quality of our newspapers by several notches made me want to dig deeper and find out more about the man. It was thus that I discovered his versatility and human depth.

Mr. Gunadheera is a published and award winning writer of fiction and drama. Pekaniweleka Diga and Patabendi Paliya are his novels to-date. Dharmadikaranaya, Umathusangwarusava and Natya Hathak are the better known among his plays with the latter securing national honours. He is also the author of Ethnic Confrontation and National Integration in Sri Lanka: Some Marginal Comments.

Somapala Gunadheera's is a remarkable career during which he has managed to overcome with diligence and fortitude the many obstacles that lay in his path. In 1957, he was the first ever Central School product to enter our civil service which up to that time had been the preserve of those from our public schools. His primary education was at a Sinhala medium school in Narangodapaluva, a village somewhere between Ragama and Batuvatta where he and his family had been relocated from Colombo during World War II. From here, he moved to the Galahitiyawa Central School at which at that time an English-medium education was available for rural youth. This was before Sinhala Only forced upon us 'the equality of degradation'. In order to read for his Higher School Certificate (HSC) after completing his Senior School Certificate (SSC) successfully, the young Gunadheera had to move school once again, this time to the Piliyandala Central School. Due to the limitation of the available curriculum there, he was unable to aspire to a university education at home. He thus opted for a BA (External Degree) from the University of London, paying his way through. Several years later, thanks to political victimization, when he was compelled to seek fresh pastures for survival, he took to the study of the Law in the 1980s at the Sri Lanka Law College.

During a career spanning four decades, Mr. Gunadheera distinguished himself by his devotion to the wellbeing of our citizens. He spent nearly a decade of his four decades in our public service, at the risk of life and limb, serving in the north and east of Sri Lanka in the years when the internecine war between the Liberation Tigers of Thamil Eelam and the state raged in our land. For his selfless and apolitical service, instead of being rewarded, he received the short end of the stick from every government he served loyally. From around 1970 onwards, perverse as it may seem, if one was a loyal and law abiding public servant in

particular, one was and is treated shabbily by the powers that were and are. And this perversity has reached unimaginable proportions today.

It is his varied, four decade- long topsy-turvy civil service career that forms the backdrop of Somapala Gunadheera's semi-autobiographical novel *Patabendi Paliya*. This title reminds one of the 'dahaatapaliya', a low country devil dance ritual performed to cure a patient suffering from mental illness, and it gives us a clue as to what to expect from the novel. Roughly translated *Patabendi Paliya* may be taken to mean the 'dance' or ritual (*paliya*) performed by an individual who holds public office or one who acquires positions and titles – *pata* – by virtue of being in the service. In other words, *Patabendi Paliya* is a fictionalized account of Somapala Gunadheera's civil service experience.

In his preface to the novel, Gunadheera tells us that he first thought of several other possible titles before settling for *Patabendi Paliya*. On a careful reading of the first chapter of the novel alone, I felt that the author ought to have considered *A Latter Day Vessantara* as yet another possible title. This is because Gunasoma, the protagonist of the novel, comes across as an almost-too-good-to-be-true type of character. He gives of himself until he has almost nothing left to give away! With movement up the civil service ladder, Gunasoma discovers he has more relatives and friends than he has been aware of! And when a former classmate, Hemapala, asks Gunasoma for help to secure a piece of land in Colombo 7, he obliges. On learning of this gesture, another long lost classmate, Baladeva (who later turns out to be a bounder) asks for similar help. With no land left to give, Gunasoma gives half of his own block of land to Baladeva! Disappointed and disgusted later on with Baladeva's ingratitude, Gunasoma decides to sell his half built house and piece of land, provoking his wife Sumana to refer to Gunasoma as a *Vessantara* reborn, and to observe curtly that it is a wonder that he has not yet given her away!

Patabendi Paliya is a story that takes us through the ups and downs and highs and lows of Gunasoma's civil service stint. A discerning reader may well identify Gunasoma as an idealized and fictionalized portrayal of Gunadheera. Gunasoma, like his creator-author, is a man of principle and sober habits who performs his public service duties with diligence. He has the strength of character to cope with both triumph and disaster with equanimity. In the course of the unravelling of Gunasoma's story, the reader is introduced to a host of characters drawn from among his colleagues, family and friends, prominent among them being Ananda, Ramanayake, Ramalingam, Maurapada, Arthur Silva, Camillus, Satarasinghe, Baladeva, Madhusika, Peiris, Jayasinghe and Devarajan. There also are a few politicians who figure, the most striking of whom is one that appears to have been modelled on Cyril Mathew, a notable if controversial member of the Cabinet of President J.R. Jayewardene. The majority of Gunasoma's colleagues are unreliable and unscrupulous, especially and ironically enough those who are the beneficiaries of his kindness and generosity. Ananda, Baladeva, Peiris, Arthur Silva, Maurapada stand out notoriously in this regard. It is a testament to the nobility of Gunasoma's character and personality that he bears no ill will towards any of these insincere opportunists.

Gunasoma is deeply disillusioned and hurt but never embittered or vengeful. He comes across as a person at peace with himself and a beneficiary of the philosophy of Buddhism. He takes the many blows he receives in his stride and reconciles himself admirably to adversity. Gunasoma is the one character who remains undiminished to the end. By contrast, Baladeva, Maurapada, Arthur Silva, Peiris Jayasinghe and most of all Ananda come across as pitiable and wholly unworthy creatures.

The overly politicized post-1972 public service as delineated in *Patabendi Paliya* seems to be worse than its earlier much maligned incarnation -The Ceylon Civil Service (CCS) – considered by hostile critics of that service as a colonial relic and identified as a key component of 'bamunukulaya'. In chapter one of the novel titled 'Pata Bendi Vita', we find an outline of the familiar critique of the pre-'56 CCS that was made up mostly of the English-medium public school- educated upper class Ceylonese. It was a service that prided itself on its robust independence from its political masters. These civil servants of old believed that they were impartial officials with the responsibility of implementing to the letter the policies of a given administration in office. All they were careful about was to observe strictly the rules, regulations, systems and procedures of the service in this policy implementation process. The novelist goes on to tell us that seniority and experience within the service and not political patronage were recognized as essential characteristics required for career advancement by the civil service (p.42 of *Patabendi Paliya*).

From 1970 onwards, suggests the novelist, the new breed of public servants that mostly replaced the former CCS types at the senior level were far more personally and politically involved with their political masters. Impartiality and impersonality were no longer the cherished badges of their service as had been hitherto the case. The new lot often were specialists of the subject area covered by a given ministry they were attached to. They were in charge of implementing the policies they themselves had helped formulate and bought into. Most had worked closely with the new ministers while they had served as Shadow Cabinet members when in the political opposition. Hence these officials had a vested interest in policy implementation. There was another crucial difference between the present and the earlier era – that is, between the old CCS and the new SLAS. The politicians of the present, relatively speaking, were less educated, observes Gunadheera, than their predecessors and thus far more reliant on their officials. The kind of mutual respect that existed between politician and civil servant of old was no longer prevalent as exemplified by Secretary Maurapada and his relationship with his less educated Minister as witnessed by Gunasoma when entering the Minister's room to deliver an urgent message(p.36).

As Patabendi Paliya develops, we see more and more evidence of political manipulation, skullduggery and backbiting amongst superiors, equals and subordinates in the public service and how political loyalties are now exploited to undermine generally acceptable standards of public conduct. An example of this deplorable behaviour of our public servants is Secretary Maurapada's appointment of his sneaky, tale carrying and inefficient colleague Arthur Silva to a senior overseas posting in London- not because of any expertise or experience Silva possesses for the job but because he was to act in loco parentis for Maurapada's son about to embark for higher studies in the UK! When the two men eventually fall out, not surprisingly they begin to undermine each other with a vengeance (p.42). The novel is replete with descriptions of many such undignified and ugly episodes.

The impression a reader gets of the revamped and indigenized public service of ours on a close reading of Patabendi Paliya is not a pleasant one. If the CCS was indeed the colonial relic its critics claim it is, it was also a service in which there was a clearly defined and established scheme of recruitment and advancement within it. The SLAS of the post-1970s had no such system or procedure in place. All one needed to get appointed to this service and go places within it was political patronage! This is the depressing portrait of the post-1970s public service we encounter in Patabendi Paliya. With a change of government begins the fun and games with a new set of politicians in office.

An able and principled officer such as Gunasoma is subjected to humiliation and despair given that he is unwilling and unable to barter his self-respect for temporary career gain by sucking up to the new mandarins. Gunasoma finds himself jobless and houseless on account of losing his official quarters. To keep body and soul together and feed his family, Gunasoma is forced to put himself under obligation to his friends and sincere former colleagues. Meantime the likes of Ananda, Peiris, Nagalingam, and Jayasinghe prosper through unscrupulous means while Gunasoma suffers immense hardship (chapter 3 – Pata Nethi Kota). The vilest of Gunasoma's colleagues Ananda is the only character who dies in the novel. Poetic justice prevails and one's faith in life is restored. The paths of glory, it is rightly said, lead but to the grave.

Patabendi Paliya is a novel that portrays the sorry saga of the decline and fall of our once renowned public service. A tragi-sad conclusion we come to at the end of this engaging piece of fiction is that the indigenization of our public service, generally speaking, has resulted mostly in the enthronement of the lowly political stooges and lackeys in places of high official responsibility. The public service of today, as depicted in Patabendi Paliya does not recognize merit, ability or efficiency. Nor does it seem to follow any established procedures or systems. The primary role of a public servant of today is to perform whatever task his political master assigns to him regardless of its usefulness to the public he seeks to serve.

At the end of the novel, one is left with a few nagging questions and they are: Is that which passes for our public service today what Sri Lanka and her citizens deserve? Is this what we have come up with as an alternative for the much maligned CCS? Would not Sri Lanka have been better off if it had retained the best of the CCS and married it with a value-based and merit-driven system more suited to a country trying to rebuild itself after years of suffering under the yoke of colonialism? Would not such a newly fashioned public service have served our post-independent governance and development needs better? Should not the primary loyalty of our public service be to the country and its tax paying citizens rather than to its politicians who are mere birds of passage?