Anoma Pieris. Architecture and Nationalism in Sri Lanka: The Trouser Under the Cloth. Routledge, 2012.

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Recollecting some of the faint and fragmented memories of the early years of my life in a small remote hamlet of peasant farmers, cattle-breeders, bullock-cart drivers, agri-laborers, cooli-workers, and loiterers in the north-western province, I remember overhearing the conversations of the elders talking about a country called *Engalanthe* (England), a king named George, a great queen named Elizabeth, a Senanayake duo -father and son, a Kotelawala, a Bandaranaike, a parliament, independence etc. I also remember the two large-framed photographs, one of Queen Elizabeth with Prince Philip, the Duke of Edinburgh in a standing posture in full regalia, and the other a bust portrait of the young beautiful Queen Elizabeth hanging on the wall of the front verandah of my grandparents' house along with framed prints or paintings of the life of the Buddha—all of this hung at the same level. I have no recollection whatsoever of hearing the Sinhala equivalents of the words that meant nationalism, colonialism, independence, nationhood, citizenship, etc. etc.

Even though I found no time in the subsequent years of my life to learn more about what I heard from my village elders about the British monarch or the native political leaders, a few remarks that they used to make often about the British keep reverberating in my mind to this day. One was that, whenever they found fault with the government, they would say that "*Sudda hitiyanam mehema venne ne*", which may be translated as "it would not have happened this way if the British continued to rule". Two similar remarks were, "*suddage kale badata athivenna keva*" (roughly translated as 'we ate well during the time of the British') and "*aye parak sudda enavanam ratata hariyayi*" (roughly translated as 'it would be better for the country if the British would return to rule'). When someone engaged in disorderly or sloppy conduct, people used to caution him saying "*Sudda wage veda karanna igenaganna*" (translated as 'you must learn to do things right in the manner of the Englishmen').

While reading Anoma Pieris' *Architecture and Nationalism in Sri Lanka*, aptly sub-titled '*trouser under the cloth*', a familiar idiomatic expression in Sinhala, my childhood memories of the conversations of ordinary village folks about the British and their rule began to reverberate in my mind, giving rise to many questions that I have been trying to find answers to in the past couple of years. Was colonialism as bad as it has been painted by those who led the struggle of independence or the official versions of history? Did 'ordinary people' of colonial Ceylon really want independence from the British? Did the granting of independence truly contribute to the betterment of the quality of life of ordinary people in a tangible manner in the first thirty-years of post-independence Sri Lanka, despite several regime changes? Were the lines of thinking of the educated elites who led the struggle for independence and that of the ordinary folks of the country who formed the majority regarding the colonizer and being colonized remain the same or were they diametrically opposed? Above all, what if the British did not grant independence in 1948 and continued to rule Ceylon for another couple of decades, and how would the ordinary people have responded to it? Pieris' magnificent work, the result of nearly twenty-years of research using both formal and informal sources, inspires and invites us to re-assess the popular beliefs about colonialism, nationalism, patriotism, independence, nationhood, national elites, etc., although her main purpose is to discuss Sri Lankan architecture of the mid-nineteenth century to the present day as reflecting national-consciousness building and the fragmentation of Sri Lankan society along countless ideological lines creating innumerable social classes, economic bases, and power centres.

With foundational training at the Faculty of Architecture of the University of Moratuwa, Sri Lanka, subsequently honed through rigorous academic training in two of the most prestigious seats of higher learning in the USA, MIT and Berkley, Pieris has ventured to research this most challenging topic of architectural discourses dealing with "ideas of national belonging through the history of colonial, bourgeois self-fashioning and post-colonial identity construction in Sri Lanka". Published in 2013 by Routledge under its contemporary South Asia Series, the book contains seven chapters, an appendix, endnotes, a glossary of Sinhala terms, a lengthy bibliography, and an index that encompasses all 259 pages. The text, written in eloquent language, is illustrated by fifty diagrams, drawings, and photographs. The book is available in

hardback (ISBN 978-0-415-63002-3) and in e-book (ISBN 978-0-203-07483-1) versions only.

Drawing from the work of a number of outstanding sociologists, anthropologists, social historians, and architectural theorists, Pieris, in the first chapter titled 'Domesticity and Decolonization', introduces her assumptions that underpin the succeeding chapters of her book. Here, she illustrates how the house serves as a form of self-expression and, thereby, how elites of colonial and post-independence Ceylon used domestic architecture to express their acquired westernized social status on the one hand and the nationalistic identity on the other. Pieris' comparison of the predicament of the social elites whose duality or choice of identities between the colonial and nationalist positions resembled that of the proverbial duo Ariel and Caliban in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* is not only interesting but also helps the reader visualize other dimensions of the psychosomatic conflicts the social elites (who wore the trouser under the cloth) underwent during the 'difficult but welcomed' social metamorphism which is reflected in the location, planning, and designing of their domestic abodes.

Pieris briefly draws our attention to the dimension of displacement and homelessness of all ethnic groups due to homeland politics and ethnic conflict. This invites us to look at the other side of the issue, which is outside of the scope of this book: architecture of the ordinary people, their ideologies related to place and nationhood, to ownerships of land and sense of belongingness, choices, materials, aesthetics etc. However, her main focus in this book is on the domestic house in the Colombo District that witnessed the social mobilization involving a small but extremely wealthy and influential class of natives irrespective of their original caste status. She ends the first chapter with a brief account of the scope and the structure of the book as it unfolds in the six succeeding chapters.

The next two chapters are devoted to investigate the socio-cultural metamorphism of the native elites and the ways in which such changes were reflected in their domestic architecture. I found her second chapter, in which she tries to establish her assumptions on the formation of city architecture and country architecture, too much driven by theories based on African, Indian, Australian and other situations that seem too far-fetched. Though she concedes that "[T]he case of Colombo was ... more complex", her fundamental argument on the shift of power between the city and

the country and its consequent reflection of the social-fashioning of the elite classes in their domestic architecture as regards city-living and country-living follow the lines of thinking of previous scholars. I do not see the same "racial/racist inscriptions of colonial urbanism" that she quotes from Fanon on page 25 (which, to me, sounds too subjective) in the city architecture -country architecture dichotomy of Ceylon.

Her attribution of the tendency of the national elites to build detached houses in the country to "[t]heir desire to maintain an uncontaminated rural indigenous culture at a distance from colonial metropolitan centres ..." (page 26), without supporting evidence, one could argue is an over simplification. In addition to the support of the colonial rulers, the native elites needed also the support of the ordinary people for sustainability as has been shown in Kithsiri Malalgoda's *Buddhism in Ceylon* (1972), an essential history of the state of Buddhism of Sri Lanka during the colonial period that is strangely omitted in Pieris' study. Therefore, living in the country in mansion-type houses not only reinforced their social rank in the eyes of the people but also ensured their visibility to the masses that was an indispensable part of their survival.

Her analyses of the *walavva* traditions and the colonial bungalows are thorough and exceptionally rich. They invite the reader to gain more insight into the interrelationships between the chosen domestic house forms and the occupants' perceptions of their positions in the society as well as their values, and the ways in which the occupants related to the community at large. Discussion on the manner in which the *walavva* form was modified through hybridization with the British bungalow form and the resultant moving of the courtyard to the rear part of the house is not only interesting but also invites further research into the rarely discussed subject of the gendering of domestic space in Sri Lankan houses.

In chapter 3, titled 'trouser under the cloth', Pieris explores "the pathways by which local elite identities acquired a metropolitan and consequently national significance". It is interesting to note the most unconventional reservoir of sources that included among many other things; "... caste narratives, funeral notices, wills, letters, testamentary cases, memoirs, and family histories ...". She describes in detail the upward mobility of the *karave* caste elites and their philanthropy, especially that of the members of the large

family of de Soysa. The magnificent mansions they built are only a some of the examples the Pieris has used to illustrate the power and position enjoyed by this class in the landscape of shifting power distributions in the metropolis and its suburbs during the latter part of the British colonial period.

Towards the end of the third chapter, she orients us towards a little-discussed area when 'seeds of nationalism' come to be germinated in pre-independence Ceylon. Indeed, the emergence of anti-colonial sentiments first among a small group of the Burgher community rather than among the Sinhalese and Tamils is ironic. Giving Indian names such as Lakshmigiri, Sandagiri, Swarnagiri, Mumtaz Mahal, etc., to the neo-classical or Victorian style mansions that the elites built in the metropolis and suburbs is symptomatic of the incipient sentiments of nationalism that became more tangible in subsequent years. Pieris describes how women of the Soysa family later changed their outfits from the European gown to Indian-style dress on account of the new-found tendency towards oriental cultural forms and norms.

In the next two chapters, Pieris describes how the nationalistic sensibilities that were being fermented in the latter part of the colonial period came to acquire a hue of full-blooming indigenized sentiments in the post-independence era together with the indigenization of religious and secular institutions, and the formation of cultural organizations that were clearly reflected in the architectural record, both private and public. She shows how the intellectuals, artists, and architects inspired by the attainment of independence tried to express identity through indigenous lines. She offers a detailed analysis of how novelists, poets, playwrights, cinematographers, musicians, dancers, academics, and architects worked persistently to create works that displayed a purely Lankan character in their creations. Even though there were conflicts in the definition of 'a Lankan-ness' as in the case of the role of the Ceylon Society of Arts and that of the '43 Group, the general tendency was to preserve the 'indigenous ethos' in the creative works of this period.

In this chapter, Pieris moves from domestic architecture into the sphere of public architecture, in order to examine the 'big picture' with regard to the development of nationalism and its expression in architectural forms. She illustrates how those developments are reflected in public and monumental architecture such as in the

YMBA Building in the Fort, the Trinity College Chapel in Kandy, the Independence Hall, the Cathedral of Christ the Living Savior, and the University of Peradeniya. What is most noteworthy in this chapter is Pieris' excellent analysis of the indigenization of national institutions and demythologization of the whole notion of 'the nation'.

Chapter five directly addresses the central theme of the book: the emphasis on private architecture, the adaptation of Western and American models for new local needs, and the re-invention of the vernacular forms by Andrew Boyd and Minnette de Silva, and its later revival by Geoffrey Bawa and others. Pieris describes a new trend, aptly coined as tropical modernism, which means the designing of buildings for the tropics by foreign experts. Urban apartment buildings in Colombo are the Sri Lankan response to the new trend. Minnette de Silva, Geoffrey Bawa, Justine Samarasekera, and Valentine Gunasekara, who were the pioneering architects of the 1960s followed the modernist style initially. This style was perhaps the best solution to address the demand for urban housing from the ever-increasing migrant population to the city from the country. By this time, one can see an important change of course in architectural practice from serving the elite classes or bourgeois on the one hand to attending the needs and aspirations of the middle class on the other. Pieris shows how the trend lost its momentum after the reinvention of the vernacular styles of architecture by Andrew Boyd, followed by the other architects mentioned above. This follows a lengthy account of the contribution of those architects who made an invigorative contribution to the development of the vernacular architectural ethos and practice serving many different needs and clients across the country.

The focus of Chapter 6 is on the aspect of social change and political climate, which therefore seems to be somewhat outside of the main theme of the book. It starts with a lengthy account of the changing political ideologies of the country in response to the global conditions created by Cold War politics and the demand for 'social modernity'. The new modernity was accurately reflected in the buildings constructed for the Ceylon 65 exhibition site in Colombo held in 1965. Pieris describes the new trend and the social response quite aptly as follows:

"This modernity manifested itself in the denial of the Orientalized self-image inherited from both the feudal and colonial pasts and provided new avenues for technological experimentation. Visitors

to the exhibition were dressed in the local fashions of the 1960s: high-heeled shoes, sleeveless sari blouses, and bouffant hairstyles (Figure 6.3). They embodied the spirit of the age, and demonstrated an Asian middle-class modernity that had been ignored three decades earlier. This homegrown interpretation of modernity was easily married to a functionalist aesthetic of concrete architectural forms." (Page 165).

Pieris discusses at length the new social order created by economic liberalization, developments on the agricultural front such as the Accelerated Mahaveli Development Project, expansion of the hospitality industry, and the political propagandist construction agendas such as *Gamudava* Village Reawakening Movement and their effects on the architectural idiom. Although it is obvious that the diverse socio-economic needs of the country would require varied architectural approaches, Pieris has ventured into examining in detail the effects of the *Gamudava* project as an idealization of the village conceptually only. The chapter ends on a sad note on 'the forces of anti-urbanity' as the apex of the process of decolonization, as marked by the full frontal assault on the established status-quo by forces such as the JVP.

In the last chapter of the book, Pieris returns to the theme of the Sri Lankan Parliament building and Bawa's contribution to the vernacular mode in a philosophical and an aesthetic sense that she discusses in great detail and in depth. She details the hotels designed by Bawa and the extent to which he has integrated not only the tangible architectural forms but also the Buddhist and Hindu philosophical ideas into his design concepts. Thus, I wish to wind-up this review with a quotation from the last chapter as follows:

"If we are to revisit the analogies introduced at the beginning of this book, in order to understand bourgeois class formation in terms of a cosmopolitan vernacular subjectivity, then the metaphor of the trouser under the cloth seems apt. Ariel emerges as a shape-shifter equally comfortable in Caliban's garb. Yet, when applied to post-colonial architects we see that de Silva was too close to the vernacular to adopt the distance of a cosmopolitan approach, and Gunasekara's abstraction of form was too cosmopolitan for an era of resurgent nationalism. Their methods and imaginaries were not suited to the neo-liberal frame."

Truly, *Architecture and Nationalism in Sri Lanka* by Anoma Pieris offers new vistas regarding the architectural history, theory, and practice of Sri Lanka of the twentieth century. The information she has gathered and presented is not found in any other recent publication on the subject. The superbly articulated analysis of the material and coherently synthesized arguments make the book an extremely valuable addition to any serious reader's collection.

Postscript

I am however curious whether the same author or any other architectural historian/theorist has any desire to write a book about the architecture of ordinary people and its praxis and how or whether it relates to any broad perspectives such as nationalism, independence, etc. By ordinary people, I mean the type of people who inhabited the village where I was raised and who used to express their honest opinions and feelings about colonialism and independence as mentioned above in this review. As far as I understand, to an ordinary citizen, 'house' or 'home' means an object of pride as it makes you independent. People believe that one needs to have one's own home as no one can chase you out into the street. This may have emanated from the times when the land was owned by the king or a feudal lord and the majority of the ordinary people remained landless, so that you can be chased out into the street at any time if the landlord so desired. Once the *corvee* system or the compulsory labour system was abolished by the British, people were able to own land so that one could build one's own home and live independently. Another belief connected with the need to have one's own home is embodied in the expression that 'one needs to have one's own place to lie down and die' ("*vetila marena thamangeme kiyala tenak tiyenna oone*"). It is well known in Sri Lankan society that terminally ill patients who are being treated at hospitals and know that they have only a few more days to live would often ask their family members to take them home. Why is it so? Let me wind-up this postscript on a positive note recollecting what Dorothy Gale wrote in the 1939 American movie classic *The Wizard of Oz*: "there's no place like home".