

HISTORY AS DYNAMITE

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There was once a *kade* at Hindagala that served a *pol sambol* that was called "dynamite". This was a relish for many. Not so history as dynamite. The history that has gained value in Sri Lanka is an explosive force that we need to fence-off and restrain.

I

I say this while yet being a historian. I am passionately involved in history writing. Yet, today, I say, I shout, I yell: "Damn our history talk". Or if we do not condemn it, let's box it in, hold it at arm's length and move into the 21st century pragmatically without the sort of history-talk that is now a millstone around our necks.

II

We Sri Lankans have too much history. Such history-talk has been a powerful powder serving to ignite or exacerbate the ethnic conflict. Among the history-talk, or historical representations I allude to here are tales as (i) the Vijaya legend associated with the *Mahavamsa* and its offshoots; (ii) recent Tamil claims to have provided immigrants to the island in the Sangam age (2nd century BC to 3rd century AD) and (iii) the idea of "traditional homelands". Such emphases have their origin, in part, in nineteenth century intellectual processes. These included the literary and political strands of romanticism, the discipline of history as it was taught then and the work of Indologists such as Max Muller. These forces promoted a retrospective romanticism which dwelt on the greatness of the Rajarata civilisation and inspired a "Ceylonese nationalism" (i.e. Lankan nationalism) from the mid-19th century onwards. But since this civilisation was largely dominated by Sinhala-speakers, it also inserted additional fertiliser to pre-existing cultural traditions based upon oral and ola-leaf transmissions which had made many a Sinhala person alive to the (alleged) achievements of such figures as Dutugamunu and Rajasinha II.

Such traditions also had rendered Vijaya into a primordial symbol that marked the founding point of Lanka's line of kings - so much so that several Kandyan letters to the British in the period 1796 to 1815 began with a reference to Vijaya, a truly remarkable practice in my view.

In more recent times these lines of emphasis have been further nourished by the cultural nationalism associated with the political forces that engineered a "revolution" in 1956.

And over the last half century or so Sinhala-media books have inscribed a version of history that tends to equate the history of Lanka with the history of the Sinhala (that is, those who became Sinhala). That there is some empirical grounding for this weightage does not lessen the dangers arising from this view when it is extended to the changed circumstances of Lanka in the 20th century

- a Lanka that has a multi-ethnic composition that calls for provisos to be attached to such stories. The point is that the word "Lanka" becomes subsumed by the term "Sinhala" in such versions. This danger is compounded by a tendency to read the past situation into the present.

As the Tamils have been increasingly alienated from the political order, they have begun to rewrite their history in ways that seek to combat Sinhala claims. In the process, they commit the same fallacies as some Sinhala history-makers. Fable and parable are presented as empirical fact. Ravana becomes a historical figure in support of their assertion that the Tamils provided the original settlers. In these very counter-claims Vijaya is treated as a living person.

Such claims and such reasoning are both futile. Let me clarify this point of view.

Ancient History as Interpretive Speculation

History writing is interpretative. As such it usually involves an element of speculation. The degree of speculation varies. Some statements involve bold conjecture.

Such conjecture is usually indicated by their authors through explicit references or by introductory statements such as "it would seem that". But the interpretations with a foundation of illustrative empirical "Proof" do not carry such cautions. They are presented in a definitive voice that does not disclose the measure of speculation that is attached to their claims.

The degree of speculation increases as one enters those realms of human interrelations where few records exist. Ancient Sri Lankan history is one such realm. I am not a specialist in this field, but it can hardly be denied that the archaeological, epigraphic and written records of this period are meagre and fragmentary.

This means that historians are making broad statements about two or three centuries on the basis of a few pieces of evidence. There are large areas, in the thematic sense of the word, about which we know little or nothing. There are large areas, in the geographical sense of "regions" or "localities", we know little or nothing about - so that there are regional biases in the data available. The best records are those concerned with the most powerful institutions of the day, namely, the Sangha and the dynastic kingdoms; or those associated with literary traditions such as the *sandesa* (message) poems and *prasasti* (eulogies) of the medieval period of Lankan history.

Two Tendentious Claims

Set against the cautionary note above, and writing as a non-specialist layman, let me sustain my suggestion that ancient history, and for that matter, medieval history, is of little use to us today by venturing to make two bold statements. In effect I am deliberately belling the lion.

1. Vijaya did not exist. Vijaya is a symbolic idea.
2. If Elara existed as a chieftain in the 2nd century BC, he was not a Tamil; and, indeed, the Sinhala-Tamil opposition carried no meaning in that century.

ONE: The figure of Vijaya is the medium of a symbolic claim presented by Mahanama, the author of the *Mahavamsa* around the year 500 AD. Vijaya, meaning "conquest" represents the argument that the Buddha Dhamma had claimed, that is, conquered, the island for itself. This understanding was probably in accordance with the state of the religious field at the time of the *Mahavamsa*, in that the various sectarian strands of Buddhism together dominated religious practices in the centres of settlement at the time. This situation may have prevailed for a few centuries prior to the *Mahavamsa*. I say this because the *Mahavamsa* is based on a missing set of texts, the *Sinhala-atthakata-mahavamsa*, itself a repository of oral traditions.

Thus, in these stories Vijaya is the eponymous ancestor. Here, then, is a genesis story. Vijaya is as much an empirical fact as Adam. Neither existed. Nor did Eve. They represent didactic and parabolic statements about original points of genesis.

TWO, Elara: in the 4th century *Dipavamsa*, which predates the *Mahavamsa* by 150 years or so, there is a relatively brief reference to the struggle between two chieftains named Gamini and Elara (Elala). But there is no suggestion that Elara is a Damila (Tamil). It was Mahanama, writing at about the time when Dhatusena had displaced invading Tamil chieftains, who rendered this battle between two ancient chieftains into an epic Sinhala-Tamil conflict. He did so while constructing a broader saga that rendered Dutugamunu into a warrior-hero and defender of the Dhammic way. In brief, Mahanama read his present into the past in order to underline his principal claim, namely that Lanka or Heladiv was a place selected to preserve Buddhism in its pristine form, with the Sinhala cast as the chosen people.

The argument thus far is that the Vijaya and Elara stories are inventions of a particular sort. It is an argument seeking to hurt Sinhala devotees. Thus, in making these claims I am aiming at Sinhala myth-believers of the 1990s. I am throwing down the gauntlet. Prove otherwise, I say.

But the Tamilian devotees should not read into all this my support for their claims. Indeed, let me proceed to hurt Tamil devotees. In my view, any empirically-rooted history of the island would favour the claims of the Sinhala-speakers (that is those who became Sinhala speakers). If there were Tamil-speakers migrating to Lanka in the last centuries BC and early centuries of the first millennium AD, they appear to have soon become Sinhala-speakers over time.

The weight of epigraphic evidence indicates that Elu or proto-Sinhala was by far the most dominant and widespread language in the first millennium AD. This dominance arose in part from its association with kingly power and the monastic order of the time. Where evidence indicates the presence of Tamils, this was in pockets as merchants or as *velaikkara* soldiers. And the latter, I suggest in bold speculation, appear to have become Sinhala over time if they did remain within the island. The same process occurred in the period 1236-1815. Most of the bodies of immigrant peoples who settled in the Vanni areas of the present North Central and North Western Provinces, or along the south western coast, became Sinhala. In ethnic identity at any point of time it is not what you were, but what you subjectively are, or are in the process of becoming, that counts.

Thus, in long historical overview one can say that Sri Lanka was dominated by a Sinhala and Buddhist state civilisation from at least the 4th century AD and probably from a few centuries prior to that. Subsequently, this hegemony was qualified after the drift of the principal centres of Sinhala power to the south western regions because of the emergence of the kingdom of Yalpanam (Jaffnapatnam) in the 13th and 14th centuries. This kingdom, nevertheless, appears to have been regarded as a tributary state under the overlordship of the *Trisinhaladishvara* or ruler of the Three Sinhalas, who ruled at the principal centre of Sinhala power (Dambadeniya-Yapahuva-Gampola-Kotte-Sitavaka-Kandy). That at least was the viewpoint of the Sinhala king and the ruling elements of *Trisinhalas*. Whether this was realised through annual rites of *dakum* is a question that has to be adequately researched.

But that is where the dispute will begin. Such issues encourage partisan, and sometimes downright dishonest, scholarship with the cheating veiled by a veneer of selective empirical detail that does its work through omission. In effect, a historical bone of contention is inspired by contemporary interests and then empowers the latter. History becomes dynamite.

The history of Sri Lanka, in my view, is poor ground for Tamils to choose as a legitimising battlefield. The homelands of the Tamils, however defined, were also homelands to bodies of Sinhala-speakers in ancient times. Likewise, the Eastern Province was a part of the Kingdom of Kandy in the 17th and 18th centuries. When Chelvanayakam and others coined the concept of "traditional homelands" in the 1940s and chose to include the Eastern Province within its ambit, this was a blatant ambit claim that chose that point of history most favourable to its maximum interests. The western border of the Eastern Province was an arbitrary line on a map drawn by colonial officials sitting in Colombo in 1832 (in may have been modified a mite when the NCP and Uva were carved out in 1872 and 1889).

This is not to say that any merger of the Northern and Eastern Provinces is not valid. But the grounds for this have to be established in terms of contemporary conditions and recent history, not distant history. The merger of these lands must be presented on the basis of Tamil experiences and sufferings at the hands of Colombo's various regimes over the last 40 odd years. This is the line of argument through which the Tamil spokespersons must express their desire

for a devolution of power that will provide them with a sense of security and an opportunity to reveal their capacity to manage their affairs within a confederated consociation of nationalities.

For such justifications to gain a hearing, their presentation and negotiation cannot be dogmatic. There must be a measure of pragmatism and a spirit of compromise. Clearly, a similar spirit must inform the attitudes of those representing the Colombo-centred state if any *modus vivendi* is to be secured.

A dogmatic adherence to colonial lines-on-a-map on the one side is as unhelpful as fabulous Sinhala fears or medieval Sinhala political notions. Contemporary demographic distributions and localised grass-root conditions must assume primacy as the bargaining ground in any programme of reconciliation.

III

History, then, cuts both ways. Reworking ancient history to claim original occupation is soft sand for one's legitimising justifications. Blatant manipulations of historical facts are self-defeating. And to insist on the primacy of historical claims is to neglect the massive

changes in the island's situation after the imperial unification secured by the British, the growth of capitalism and the subsequent transformations in the post-1948 era.

These changed circumstances include a world drawn closer together by rapid communication techniques. Globalisation will not homogenise the world as thoroughly as some scholars believe. But it has set up a keen media-eye that does not let outrageous killings and ethnic cleansing to pass unobserved.

Lanka has been transformed. One cannot easily pursue the sort of policies that the Portuguese pursued in their imperial domains. One cannot implement the policies of a Magha or even a Rajasingha II. We are moving into the 21st century. Medieval attitudes have to be jettisoned. Multi-cultural tolerance must be nourished. And in order to secure the Sri Lankan nation we must construct a new form of confederative alliance that gives scope to the majoritarian force of the Sinhala nation without subsuming the Tamil nation or the Muslim community. Out, out thou medieval beasts. The 21st century beckons.

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WOMEN'S GROUPS CONDEMN ATTACK ON ANOJA WEERASINGHE

We condemn the recent politically motivated attack on award-winning film and stage actress Ms. Anoja Weerasinghe. Such assaults on cultural producers have been witnessed in the past under all governments and fit into a history of attempts to control culture and the free expression of artists. The recent burning of the contents of the house of Anoja Weerasinghe, is one example of a criminal act of vandalism and arson. The attack on Ms. Weerasinghe's house was a follow up to an assault on various women artists at a political rally in Veyangoda on December 16th in which actress Chandi Rasika was also injured. A protest demonstration was held subsequently at Lipton Circus on the 17th.

Anoja Weerasinghe, who has won several international awards for her performances was recently playing the role of Hecube, in the Sinhala anti-war play *The Trojan Women*. In this context, the destruction of Ms. Weerasinghe's house and 22 year cultural archive at her home in Moneragala is disturbing. Moreover, the archive was in the process of being turned into a museum. Its destruction is a great public loss since we do not have a national film archive in this country. In fact, some of the films burnt were the only copies in existence.

There were other artists, both women and men, who pledged their support openly and freely to different candidates and addressed the meetings and sang on the political platform during the presidential election in December 1999. We believe that Ms. Weerasinghe was targeted both for her politics and because she is a woman artist. As such this attack constitutes a blatant violation of women's human rights and impinges on their right to free participation in democratic electoral politics.

Given the implications for democratic rights, all concerned parties should unite to protest against such violence. We demand a full, fair and impartial inquiry into this attack.

Signed by:

Organisation	Name	Organisation	Name
Women's Education and Research Centre	Selvi Thiruchandran	Centre for Development Alternatives- Gender Unit, Kandy	S. Rajeswary
Women's Coalition for Peace	Darini Rajasingham	Women's Development Centre, Kurunegala	Sumika Perera
Women's NGO Forum	Ksharma Rahavana	Sooriya Women's Development Centre, Batticaloa	Vasuki Jeyashankar
International Centre for Ethnic Studies - Gender Unit	Radhika Coomaraswamy	Women and Media Collective	Kumudini Samuel
INFORM	Sunila Abeysekera	Feminist Forum	Kumari Jayawardena
Kantha Shakthi	Rohini Weerasinghe	Social Scientists' Association - Gender Unit	Mangalika de Silva
Women's wing of People's Coalition for Peace & Democracy, Kandy	Chandrika Kumarasiri	Muslim Women's Research and Action Front	Faizun Zachariya
Sama Liya Collective, Kandy	Samanthi Ganegoda	Centre for Women's Research	Swarna Jayaweera