

SINHALAS AND TAMILS AND THE LESSONS OF HISTORY

By Charles Somasundrum

It has been said that the Sinhala appear to have the wrong attitude about '*their place in history*'. This is thought to be the result of the various Buddhist monks in general. As is well known, the Mahavamsa was maintained by Buddhist myths, spun over the years, by the many authors of the Mahavamsa and incessantly spun by monks, centuries after the events they record. It was started by the monks as a ledger, and maintained by them, to record their day to day activities. It is not a historical treatise nor was it maintained as such, by persons trained in recording events. The prejudice and naivety of its various authors is exposed by even a cursory reading of the Mahavamsa. Deep down in the Sinhala psyche, there has always been the nagging doubt about their real origin, despite all their brave talk about their 'Aryan' origin and their presence in the island, before the Dravidian Tamils.

C Britto in his appendix (xlvi – lxxxi) to the English translation of the '**Yalpana-Vaipava-Malai**' establishes that Tamils had been in the island long before the mythical Vijaya. References to the island and its inhabitants in the **Ramanaya** and the **Mahabaratha** lend credence to this view. It is also well known that the Romans, Greeks, Jews, Nestorian Christians and Arabs traded with the Tamils who, though they had a kingdom further north, maintained a trading capital at **Manthai**, under a chief administrator. The port at Manthai soon came to be widely known by the name of the celebrated and ancient Temple to Siva that stood there and was a continuous centre of pilgrimage for all Hindus, particularly from mainland India. This temple was one of the famous 'five' well known Iswarams in the island and was known as the '**Thiruketheswaran**' Temple. The port of Manthai soon came to be known by the name of its famous Temple. Its long name however, proved quite a mouthful for the foreign traders, who soon abridged it to **Tarshish**. The port of Tarshish is referred to in II Kings of the Christian Bible.

The Sinhala race today, encompasses many races who have merged with the indigenous people. Britto in his appendix holds that the Sinhala 'race' '**rose out of a mixture of Magadhi and Tamil blood in the proportion of one Magadhi to twenty Tamils**'. Regrettably, he does not give his source authority nor does he give any independent scientific basis for his theory of an almost exact proportion of Magadhi to Tamil. It is however established, that apart from the original Magadhi immigrants no other immigrants entered the country from **Magadha** in **Bihar**. However, there is evidence of not only immigrants, but also of invading armies from Tamil country in southern India. The various Sinhala kings too, raised armies from amongst the Saivite Tamils of southern India not only to defend themselves but also to attack other Saivite Tamils in their kingdom. There have also been Tamil Saivite rulers of the Sinhala kingdom.

As for the presence of Buddhism in Sinhala country, despite the Mahavamsa's claim, there is no doubt that even the mythical Vijaya would have arrived in the island long before Buddhism existed in the island, as a philosophy. Even if Vijaya was not a mythical creation of the Mahavamsa authors, and if such a person or an approximation to such a person, ever to have really existed, he would of necessity had to have been a Hindu. Gautama Buddha, who preached his philosophy, was himself a Hindu prince, who lived his life as a Hindu and died a Hindu. It should always be remembered that Buddha preached a philosophy and not a religion.

C Britto, has stated, in the appendix to the 'Vaipava-Malai', that 'the Singhalese language is known also by the name of Elu, Helu, Hela-div-bas, Sihela-bas and Siya-bas'. These are not separate names but are various forms of one and the same word 'Elu.' Incidentally, the modern Sinhala language has a number of words prefixed with the word 'Elu'. Two such words spring to mind, these are the Sinhala word for vegetable, which is 'Elavalu' and the Sinhala word for calf which is 'Eladena'. The common assertion that 'Elu' is derived from the word 'Singhala' is not based on any 'scientific principle' according to Mr C Britto. We are therefore driven to try to ascribe a foreign origin to the word 'Elu'. Britto felt that the origin could be none other than the Tamil language and that the 'Vai-Pava-Malai' is right, when it says that the island would have borne the name '**Ilam**' when and if the mythical Vijaya entered it. He says 'Ilam is a pure Tamil word that has no Aryan origin.' The geographical situation of the island too, would have made it inconceivable that the Tamils of India could have been ignorant of its existence before the entry of Vijaya. Britto says that Sir William Jones was of the opinion that the island was 'beyond time of memory' inhabited by the Hindu race and that languages, letters and monuments support this theory.

Originally, the word 'Singhalese' meant an inhabitant of Ilam irrespective of race. The early Sinhala people comprised, essentially Tamils with scarcely an appreciable admixture of Magadhi blood (Vijaya and the accompanying immigrants were said to be Magadhis from Magadha in Bihar). The dress of the early Singhalese, their habits, customs and religion were those of the Tamils while their language was a hybrid of Tamil and Magadhi.

Dandris de Silva (Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society, Ceylon Branch, 1865 – 1866) quoted by Britto, says that Buddhism is based on Saivism. Every species of superstition, science or literature which exists among the Sinhalas may be traced more or less directly to the Vedas and Shastras of the Saivites. According to the same authority, demonology was the earliest form of worship in Ceylon, and seven eighths of the incantations now employed by the Sinhalas are in the Tamil language. This system appears to have been introduced from the Tamil country into Ceylon, where it is now mixed up with Buddhism.

The Ceylon Historical Journal - Vol. II has an entry by Mr. B. J. Perera on some observations on a study of Sinhala place names. Tamil place names are found, according to this entry, along the coast and in places as varied as **Anuradhapura, Chilaw and Puttalam**. Though there are no Tamils living in the coastal areas south of Colombo, the Tamil origin of most of the present inhabitants living there can be seen from the fairly large number of Sinhala place names with a Tamil background. I might mention that Mr. G C S Corea MP for Chilaw in the first parliament of independent Ceylon and the first Ceylonese Minister for Trade and Commerce was a Tamil speaker as also was his wife, who lived to a ripe old age and died in recent years.

The Tamil word '**malai**' (for mountain) is to be found in the place names in certain central parts of the Island. One comes across these names in literature produced centuries before the opening up of the coffee and tea plantations under the British, and the consequent the influx of a large indentured South Indian Tamil labour force to work them. This shows, according to Mr. B J Perera, that the Tamil element in the composition of Sinhala place names is "**far greater than is usually conceded. Ranimalaye, Kotmale and Gilimale are some of the examples**". Clearly, long time native Tamil residents in these places were responsible for the introduction of these names.

It is worth our while spending some time on the research carried out by Samuel Livingstone and published in his valuable book *'The Sinhalese of Ceylon and the Aryan Theory'*. Mr Livingstone has delved into Sinhala place names and to the novice reader of the subject, his results are quite surprising.

We have seen earlier, the views expressed on this subject by Mr B J Perera. Mr Livingstone carries this further to a new dimension. Examining place names, Mr Livingstone has found that the suffix '*Gama*' in Sinhala place names corresponds to '*Kamam*' (meaning cultivated land) in Tamil. Some Sinhala place names with this suffix are *Ahangama*; *Weligama* and *Magama* to name a few. The word *Aham* in *Ahamgama* means 'inside' in Tamil. The word *Weli* means outside in Tamil. So that *Ahamgama* is a village inside and *Weligama* is a village outside or in the open. *Mahagama* which is a shortened form of *Maharagama* means the large village.

The Sinhala word *Goda or Gode* corresponds with the Tamil word *Kodu* meaning peak or mountain. Examples are *Veyangoda* (possibly *Vyalkudi* – village in the middle of fields), *Wattegoda* (is possibly *Wattakudi* – a circular village), *Ambalangoda* (is possibly *Ambalamkudi* – a village where there is an *Ambalam* or village hall).

The Sinhala suffix *Mulla* corresponds with the Tamil *Moolai* – corner. The Sinhala suffix *Pitiya* corresponds with the Tamil *Pitti* - mound while the Sinhala suffix *Pola* corresponds with the Tamil *Pallai* – meaning fair or market, which is exactly what a *Pola* is.

I can go on ad infinitum but the reader will get the general trend.

I would however like to mention some place names whose meaning in Sinhala has baffled a number of modern day Sinhalas themselves. I will take just two of such names. One is *Galenbidunuwewa*. This word originates from the Tamil *Kaalam-Pinthina-Wavi* (the tank that accumulates its water out of season), and there is *Maradamkadawela* which originates from the Tamil *Marutham-Kaatu-Vali* (a village in an opening of *Marutham* Trees) and *Galwachakuliya* – *Kal- Vaicha-Kuli* (the pit in which the stone was placed).

Mr Livingstone says that long before language was reduced to writing, people went on repeating words from sounds that they heard from the mouths of others and, according to the peculiar ways people spoke in different areas, consonants got interchanged in different ways. It should also be remembered that this was a time when books and reading and writing were quite rare and limited to the learned few. Word of mouth was the common form of communication.

It is interesting to read what Brito has to say of the Sinhalas and the Tamils in the island. ***'The process of coalescence, once happily commenced between the Tamil and Magadhi settlers, continued until it was interrupted by a religious commotion, which took place in B.C. 307, when Buddhism was introduced and established in Ceylon (Tennant I pg. 339); and the Tamils from the continent who had hitherto been encouraged to become settlers and who, when they arrived, easily blended with the old settlers, so long as the old settlers followed Saivism, now changed their character and became invaders. The Buddhist converts (i.e. the old residents) retained their old name, 'Sinhalese', while the new comers and the adherents to the original faith, Saivism, ranked themselves as Tamils.'*** One should however place a caveat here. There was always a Tamil kingdom towards the north of the island with their

own king and they were Saivaites. Saivaite immigrants to the Tamil kingdom were easily absorbed. The problem highlighted by Britto was regarding the immigrants to the Sinhala south who were now in the grip of the Buddhist monks, who had soon begun to change the Buddhist philosophy to a 'religion' of their own their devising.

Duttugemunu was the first Ceylon monarch who openly and mainly, relied on the religious differences between himself and his Tamil enemy, in order to rouse the enthusiasm of his soldiers and perhaps, quiet his own disturbed conscience. His declaration, according to the Mahavamsa, before marching against Elara, the Tamil monarch was, '***I fight not for dominion but for the sake of the religion of the Buddha***'. One can see that the Buddhist monks had succeeded in their efforts to create a religion out of the Buddhist philosophy.

It is said that while Duttugemunu was tormented by the countless deaths resulting from his battles, the Buddhist monks consoled him by assuring him that '***If a person kills a person who is not a Buddhist, he has not killed a human being and therefore should have no remorse***'. According to the Mahavamsa, Tamils who did not belong to the '*Buddhasasana*' were regarded as '*micchaditthi*' 'wrong believers' and '*dussila*' 'evil doers' and '*passuma*' 'like beasts'. These words of the Buddhist monks of Ceylon, one can see, appear to be still guiding today's Sinhala governments and their armies. No doubt, when killing innocent Tamil civilians and raping Tamil women and girls, the Sinhala soldiers bore in mind these words of 'consolation' that the Buddhist monks gave to Duttugemunu. The opinion of the monks, one might repeat, was that the Tamils being 'wrong believers' were like 'beasts' and could be treated like beasts.

The Tamils were however, not destroyed with the defeat of Elara. Succeeding kings were not like Duttugemunu. Elara was slain in battle in B.C. 161 but that was not the end of the Tamils. There were subsequent Sinhala kings who were not ardent supporters of Buddhism and one king Chora Naga, who was the grandson of King Walagambahu (B.C. 88), was a Saivaite and destroyed Buddhist Temples. His Queen, Anula, who succeeded him in B.C. 47, reigned for five years and raised to her bed and throne, numerous lovers. Among them were two Tamils of whom one was a carpenter and the other a purohita Brahman. **Perhaps, today's Rajapakse clan and their coterie, who imagine themselves to be, not only the rulers of all the Sinhala but also of all the Tamils in the island, would need to pay greater attention to the lessons of history!**