

A tale of two nations – Part VII

The Sinhala nation had begun its existence in the days of King Pandukabhaya, irrespective of the western theories on formation of nations, and has been able to create a culture unique to this country. There may be disputes as to the day the King Vijaya arrived in this country but basically the Mahavamsa story is correct in its essence. It is true that the history that was written in the fourth and fifth centuries in the “Vamsakatha” attempts to identify the date of the arrival of the King Vijaya with the Parinibbana of Buddha and as a result gets into difficulties in respect of the periods of a number of kings who have ruled from Anuradhapura and Magama. There have been some people who tried to make a big issue out of the statement by God Upulvan to the effect that there were no humans living in the island when he was supposed to have met King Vijaya. However, the Sinhala people have been aware that Kuveni was not an evil spirit but a human being who belonged to the “Yaksha” tribe. Intellectuals such as Mr. Kumaratunga Munidasa have gone into this and their interpretations are known to the Sinhala people. The excavations by Dr. Shiran Deraniyagala at Anuradhapura confirm that there had been an Aryan civilization in that part of the country around 9th century BC, who were familiar with the Brahmi script.

Mahavamsa is a unique work that can be found nowhere else in the world and it is the book that has guided the Sinhala people after the fifth century, and irrespective of the Mahvamsaphobia of the westerners and the other pundits it will continue to guide the Sinhala people for at least a further period extending to a couple of millennia from now onwards. During the past five centuries after the arrival of the western Christian colonialists the western and other pundits have relegated it but the criticisms from the anti Sinhala Buddhists in the recent past have made the Sinhala people to rediscover it! It is certainly not a history book in the sense of western Christian modernity but a history book in the sense of Sinhala Buddhist culture. The Sinhala people unlike the westerners after the fifteenth century did not separate subjects into watertight compartments and Mahavamsa is a history book, a Dhamma book, a sociology book (I can hear a pundit saying sociology was created in the west as a subject only in the nineteenth century) etc at the same time. However, it is not a “pitaka” of Sinhala Buddhism as one “scholar” has claimed. If these so called scholars know what is meant by thripitaka they would not have made such childish statements.

Some people are interested in the statement by God Upulvan because it could create some confusion in the minds of the Sinhala people and they may be hoping that the Sinhala people would begin to disbelieve Mahavamsa. Fortunately for the Sinhala Buddhists these people would never understand the way the Sinhalas think in spite of the attempts by these pundits to learn Sinhala literature and Buddhism. It is not something that can be taught though we could list down some essential features of the way the Sinhalas think. However, even the anti Sinhala Buddhist “scholars” who wanted to create a Devanampiya Theesam out of the Sinhala king, have had to depend on Mahavamsa when they wanted to show that there were Tamils in Sri Lanka during the Anuradhapura period. Even today they have to quote Mahavamsa when referring to Thambapanni and the North Western coast in general and the Vijaya story in the Mahavamsa gets

confirmed by these references though the great chronicle may not have reported the years accurately.

From the days of Anagarika Dharmapala the anti Sinhala Buddhist writers of Sri Lanka variety or of the western varieties have been feeling uneasy about the usage of the word Aryan. The word Arya may be irritating to the anti Sinhala Buddhists but it has been used even by Buddha. It cannot be denied that about 3500 years ago some people had migrated to old Dambadiva from the north west and spread their culture. These people called themselves Arya or noble relegating those among the natives who did not belong to the Vedic culture that they had created by absorbing some parts of the native cultures as well. The Buddha having realized that the Vedics used words such as Arya and Brahmin to exploit the others gave different meanings to these words. Aryan in Buddhism was not a Vedic Brahmin but a person who followed the path to attain Nibbana. The word Arya was not something created by Max Muller but has been in existence for thousands of years. The mistake of Max Muller was to identify these Aryans as a tribe or as a group having “blood relationships” among themselves. There would have been many tribes among the original Aryans who migrated to Dambadiva and the Vedic culture appears to be a mixture of cultures of those people as well as of some of the natives. In our opinion the people in the eastern and north eastern areas of Dambadiva during the time of Buddha had not been fully “Vedicised” and we call them Ardha Vedic. The Shramanas would have belonged to Ardha Vedic culture(s) and Prince Siddhartha became a Shramana after the great renunciation. Buddhism is rooted in the tradition of Shramanas such as Asitha, Alara Kalama, Uddakarama Putta and not in the Vedic tradition of Yaga Homa that tried to replace the Thapas Bhavana Dhyana tradition. The people who migrated to Sri Lanka from Kalinga and Vanga symbolized by Vijaya, had come from the eastern Dambadiva and would have been Ardha Vedic.

Having come to Sri Lanka or Lanka these people after fighting with the native tribes that included Yaksha, Naga, Deva, Vedda, began to form the Sinhala nation during the time of King Pandukabhaya. It is clear that the Vedda tribe had not consented to join the Sinhala nation and had continued as an independent group though the Sinhalas if wanted could have forcibly brought them under the (umbrella of) eksesath rajya, using the method adopted by the English Anglicans in “uniting” the Britons. The Yaksha tribe on the other hand appears to have had a dual attitude. While one group (for example Chitraraja and Kaladevala during the time of King Pandukabhaya) had joined the Sinhala nation the others (for example Jayasena of Ritigala) appear to have fought with the Sinhala people. Towards the fourth and the fifth centuries it appears that these fights had reached a climax and strong anti Yaksha feelings had taken root among the Sinhalas. The somewhat anti Buddhist attitudes among some Yakshas would also have contributed to these sentiments among the Sinhalas. The Pali Vamsakatha written during this period have had their origin in the Sinhala texts and the folklore among the Sinhalas which would not have been in sympathetic towards most of the Yakshas. No wonder that the folklore had God Upulvan refer to the Yakshas as evil spirits and it is clear that the Sinhalas had wanted to erase the history of the Yakshas. During this time the Tamil invasions had begun and it appears that whenever the Sinhalas had to refer to the Yakshas the latter were identified with either the evil spirits or the Tamils. Thus Elara most

probably a king from Persia who had connections with the Yakshas has been referred to as a Tamil and the thirty two camps that had been built along Mahaweli on the eastern side of the river have been referred to as Tamil camps. It is very likely that these were camps of the Yakshas who supported Elara and the Prince Gemunu had to overcome their resistance before he crossed the river closer to Polonnaruwa.

The fifth century Mahavamsa and the Mahavihara Bhikkus, together with Andra Pradesh Bhikkus who saw Theravada disappearing in that part of the world were interested in preserving Theravada Buddhism in this country for reasons we would discuss in the next installment, (Any interested reader may refer to the articles in the Vidusara which can be accessed through www.kalaya.org/vidusara.html on “Ape Pravada”.) and thus instilled in the minds of the Sinhala that they had been “chosen” to preserve Buddhism. This is only a passive concept and not an aggressive concept of a chosen people as in the case of the Jews and the post fifteenth century western Christians who have taken upon themselves the “burden” of civilizing the non Christian world and protecting so called human rights of some sections of the people, among other things. The Pascoes who arrive in Sri Lanka to declare that a panel would be appointed by the UN General Secretary to advise the latter on Sri Lankan affairs belong to the western Christian tradition of considering themselves as the custodians of human values defined of course relative to their culture. (To be continued)