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Historical Consciousness and Transitional Justice in Post-War Sri Lanka

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Abstract: Historical consciousness is a decisive factor in Sri Lanka with regards to the relationships between Sinhala and Tamil ethnic communities. It functioned as a great divide between these two communities. It was also used as a “charter of right” in order to impose one community’s claim on the other. This has become increasingly problematic in the post-war context after the violent hostilities between the Sri Lankan state and Tamil insurgents ended in 2009. Sinhala-Buddhists, who were politically dominant and identify themselves as the legitimate possessor of the island, desire to consolidate their dominance in the Tamil North and reckon historical knowledge as an effective tool for that end. The historical narrative that Sinhala Buddhists endorsed beginning in the early 20th century proved to be insufficient in countering the rising power of a Tamil counter narrative. Attempts have been made since the mid-1980s to produce a new historical narrative that is capable of challenging Tamil political claims. Although this effort was not fully successful, partial success was achieved during and after the war between the Sinhala dominated state and Tamil insurgents. The new historical consciousness that emerged out of this process proved to be extremely problematic in the context of the growing need for transitional justice for the war-affected Tamils in the North.

Keywords: ethno-nationalism, historical consciousness, Sinhala-Buddhists, Sri Lanka, Tamils

Historical consciousness is a vital aspect of the social, political, and cultural life of the Sri Lankan people. Following the end of a brutal military conflict between the state and Tamil militants in 2009, historical consciousness has become even more important, particularly in addressing issues related to transitional justice. This article seeks to answer three questions: “why and how has historical consciousness become so significant in the post war period in Sri Lanka?” and “how has it become problematic in addressing sensitive issues related to transitional justice

in particular?” Although the military confrontation between government forces and Tamil militants came to an end with the comprehensive defeat of the latter amid heavy human casualties, the conflict between the Sinhala and Tamil ethno-nationalisms has not ended. The two communities responded to the end of the military confrontation in a completely contrasting manner. While some Sinhalese celebrated the military victory with massive celebrations, for some Tamils it was a major shock. Although some Tamil people seemed to be not unhappy about the end of the military conflict, the humanitarian disaster they experienced was traumatic. Hence the serious need for effective measures towards transitional justice. It was closely connected to the long-standing political demands of Tamils as well, which Tamils generally felt as legitimate. The triumphant mentality of the Sinhalese, however, did not permit the government to give in to the Tamil’s political demands. Furthermore they were generally hostile towards any effective measures to address issues related to transitional justice.

Many Sinhalese also felt that the opportunity that was opened up with the military victory should be used to strengthen the grip of the Sinhala hegemony in the North. “History” functioned in the proposed endeavor as a “Charter of Right” in mediating affairs in the post-war North from the Sinhala point of view.¹

1 History as a “Charter of Right”

History functions as a “charter of right” for Sinhala-Buddhist ethno-religious nationalism in Sri Lanka, which legitimized its social, political, and ideological role through the construction of a particular narrative that came to be known as “the history of Sri Lanka.”

It may be important to contemplate briefly the nature of nationalism in Sri Lanka for a proper understanding of the aforementioned nomenclature “ethno-religious nationalism.” As in other countries in the European colonial world,

¹ I have discussed this post-war mentality of the Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism elsewhere. See Nirmal Ranjith Dewasiri, *‘History’ After the War: Historical Consciousness in the Collective Sinhala-Buddhist Psyche in Post-war Sri Lanka* (Colombo: ICES, 2013).

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modern nationalism in Sri Lanka emerged as a response to European colonial domination. In line with this, ethnic divisions that came to prominence under colonial hegemony in Sri Lanka played an important role in shaping the country's nationalistic impulses. However, the assertion of ethnic divisions in Sri Lanka is a highly contested subject. There is an unfinished debate on the evolution of ethnic identities in Sri Lanka, particularly Sinhala and Tamil ethnic identity groups.² The importance of both Sinhala and Tamil ethnic identities in public life underwent decisive changes in the 19th century, in the context of profound social, economic, and cultural changes that Sri Lanka experienced in that century. Irrespective of the emergence of a unified polity under the British colonial hegemony in the 19th century, ethnic cleavages continued to be deeply entrenched in the nation's cultural and political life.

There were several important identity markers that were central to the formation of ethnic identities in 19th century Sri Lanka, viz. ethnicity, which were perceived as primordial human groupings, religion, language, and the association with a particular territory that is imagined to be historically significant.

Language was fundamental to the distinctiveness of the two ethnic communities. While there were some bilingual communities – particularly in metropolitan areas with highly cosmopolitan culture, and peripheral regions where Sinhala and Tamil linguistic communities live side-by-side, the two ethnic communities generally lack the ability to communicate with each other. This distinctiveness was vigorously emphasized when cultural revival movements were set in motion by the elites of both communities in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Each of two ethno-nationalisms asserted themselves against each other. This notwithstanding, both groups in their nascent stages evolved as movements that were independent from each other, and each of them soon began a tendency of “othering” their ethno-cultural counterpart.

As already mentioned, Sinhala and Tamil ethno-nationalism originated as an intellectual effort to reaffirm an indigenous cultural ethos in the context of the sweeping impact of colonial domination. In the Tamil North there was an initiative pioneered by the well-known cultural intellectual Arumuga Navalar to rejuvenate traditional Hindu education in response to the influence of the Christian missionary schools.³

Meanwhile in the Sinhala South, a similar cultural movement was slowly evolving to revive Buddhist activities and literary work. In the second half of the 19th century this movement evolved into a strong anti-Christian Buddhist movement to which the Sinhala-Buddhist population felt a strong popular attraction. By the early 20th century, the Buddhist revival movement had already transformed itself into a nationalist politico-cultural project, with a strong inward-looking orientation that excluded non-Sinhala-Buddhist communities.

In a well-articulated essay, published in Los Angeles in 1902 as a pamphlet, Anagarika Dharmapala, the foremost promoter of modern Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist discourse, presented the reader with a historical narrative that arguably laid the foundation for popular historical consciousness in the ensuing periods. He argued that the Sinhalese, who belong to the pure line of Aryans, were racially and culturally superior to their colonial masters, the British.⁴ This new discourse of the “history of Sri Lanka” was formed in the context of the emergence of a new socio-political space that represented the interests of a new affluent social class. This class wanted to assert its political and social interests by challenging the colonial order.⁵ Thus the emerging historical narrative of Sri Lanka, as endorsed by emerging Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism, was defined in terms of its desire to inaugurate a national identity vis-à-vis the colonial project. This was done by attributing a superior position to the Sinhala “race” vis-à-vis the British, as cleverly articulated by Anagarika Dharmapala in his aforementioned pamphlet.

² For this debate see, K.N.O. Darmadasa, “The Roots of Sinhala Ethnic Identity in Sri Lanka: The Debate on the ‘People of the Lion’ Continued,” *Ethnic Studies Report* 14, no. 2 (Colombo: ICES, 1996): 137–170; R.A.L.H. Gunawardana, *Historiography in a Time of Ethnic Conflict: Construction of the Past in Contemporary Sri Lanka* (Colombo: SSA, 1995); Gananath Obeyesekere, “The Vicissitudes of the Sinhala-Buddhist Identity through Time and Change,” in *Collective Identities, Nationalisms and Protest in Modern Sri Lanka*, ed. Michael Roberts (Colombo: Marga, 1979), 357–361; Michael Roberts, *Sinhala Consciousness in the Kandyan Period, 1590s to 1815* (Colombo: Vijitha Yapa Publications, 2005).

³ Rohan Bastin, “Authentic Inner Life: Complicity and Resistance in the Tamil Hindu Revival,” in *Sri Lanka: Collective Identities Revisited*, vol. 1, ed. Michael Roberts (Colombo: Marga Institute, 1997), 385–438.

⁴ Anagarika Dharmapala, “History of an Ancient Civilization,” in *Return to Righteousness*, ed. Ananda Guruge, (Colombo: Ministry of Cultural Affairs, 1991), 479–496. For more about Anagarika Dharmapala and his career, see Sarath Amunugama, *Lion's Roar: Anagarika Dharmapala and the Making of Modern Buddhism* (Colombo, Vijitha Yapa, 2016).

⁵ For further understanding of this class see Kumari Jayawardena, *Nobodies to Somebodies: The Rise of the Colonial Bourgeoisies in Sri Lanka* (Colombo: Social Scientists' Association, 2007).

The construction of this historical narrative was greatly enhanced by the endeavors of the colonial administration to produce knowledge on indigenous people, particularly after the kingdom of Kandy was annexed to the British possessions on the island in 1815.⁶

The ideological purpose of “historical knowledge” underwent an important change with the emergence of the political conflict between Sinhala and Tamil ethnic identities in the early 20th century. Competing historical narratives became vital rallying points around which distinctive collective identity claims of both communities were justified.⁷

As Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism was heavily supported by a strongly-built historical narrative with a solid empirical base, the Tamil side was in need of a counter narrative, not only to assert their existence as a distinct ethno-cultural collective entity, but also to legitimize their political demands, which were particularly crucial in the post-colonial period.

This counter narrative attempted to meet two main objectives. In the first place the counter narrative attempted to establish a continuity between the erstwhile Jaffna kingdom that existed till the early 17th century, and the present political demands of the Tamils. The underlying argument was that the Tamil kingdom that was overrun by the Portuguese in the 17th century was subsequently annexed to the unified Sri Lanka that British colonialists created. As such, when the British left the island in 1948 the entire country, including the Tamil provinces, was subjected to Sinhala political domination.

The second objective was to deprive the Sinhala-Buddhists of the monopoly that they enjoyed in claiming the right to the pre-13th century civilization. It is generally understood that the civilization that existed in the Northern and Eastern plains of the island was built by ancient Sinhalese. This was not only an ideologically charged

perception among the Sinhala masses, but many scholars, both local and international, also subscribed to this view.⁸

There was a desire in the Tamil political and cultural mind to challenge this view. Thus, they attempted to show the presence of Dravidians, including Tamils, even before the “arrival” of the Sinhalese to the island.⁹ These counter narratives of Tamil nationalism became immensely significant in the 1980s when Sinhala-Tamil relations became extremely volatile after decades of slow-burning communal conflict (including incidents of ethnic violence in the 1950s, 1970s, and finally in 1983).¹⁰

1.1 War on History in the 1980s

The well-known newspaper debate that unfolded in a Sinhala newspaper in 1984 highlights the significance of “history” in the ethnic conflict.¹¹ The debate took place soon after 1983 communal riots, and the participants, representing a Sinhala-Buddhist version of the “history of Sri Lanka” defended it against their opponents who showed some sympathy towards Tamil political demands. It highlighted the need to reassert the historical narrative by addressing the challenge that came from the Tamil nationalist readings of history. This had become necessary because the existing dominant narrative proved to be inconsistent with the new ideological needs that arose in

⁸ University of Ceylon, *History of Ceylon, Volume I (Part 1&2)*, (Colombo, 1959) clearly represented this view. That is especially true for the chapter entitled “Aryan Settlements: The Sinhalese” in the Part 1 of volume 1 authored by Senerat Paranavitana, the editor of the volume and one of the foremost modern scholarly interpreters of early history of Sri Lanka.

⁹ Dagmar Hellmann-Rajanayagam has provided a detailed account of the evolution of modern Tamil historical consciousness. Rajanayagam shows how the Tamil narrative was constructed parallel to the political circumstances that shaped the Tamil political demands, particularly in the 1920s, See Dagmar Hellmann-Rajanayagam, “The Politics of the Tamil Past,” in *Sri Lanka: History and the Roots of Conflict*, 107–122. For Tamil nationalist historical representations that emerged in the 1980s when Tamil political resistance reached its peak, see Radhika Coomaraswamy, “Myths without Conscience: Tamil and Sinhalese Nationalist Writings of the 1980s,” in *Facets of Ethnicity in Sri Lanka*, eds. Charles Abeysekera and Newton Gunasinghe, (Colombo: Social Scientists’ Association, 1987), 72–99.

¹⁰ See the following books for the Sinhala-Tamil conflict in Sri Lanka: K.M. de Silva, *Managing Ethnic Tensions in Multi-Ethnic Societies: Sri Lanka 1880–1985* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1986); *Sri Lanka, the Ethnic Conflict: Myths, Realities & Perspectives* (New Delhi: Committee for Rational Development/Navrang, 1984).

¹¹ For a critical account on this debate, see Serena Tennekoon, “Symbolic Refractions of the Ethnic Crisis: The *Divaina* Debate on Sinhala Identity – 1984–1985,” in *Facets of Ethnicity in Sri Lanka*, eds. Charles Abeysekera and Newton Gunasinghe (Michigan: Social Scientists Association, 1987), 1–59.

⁶ The territory of the kingdom of Kandy was largely a *terra incognita* to the British when they captured it. Hence the urgency to accumulate information to ease the administration of the territory. Historical knowledge formed a major part of this knowledge production exercise, and they were immensely helpful for the Sri Lankan intellectuals who constructed the narrative of the “History of Sri Lanka.” For further information, see John Rogers, “Historical images in the British Period,” in *Sri Lanka: History and the Roots of Conflict*, ed. Jonathan Spencer (London: Routledge, 1990), 87–106; Frank Perera, *The Early Buddhist Historiography of Ceylon*, (PhD diss., Georg-August-Universität Göttingen, 1979); Sujit Sivasundaram, *Islanded: Britain, Sri Lanka and the Bounds of an Indian Ocean Colony*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

⁷ For detail see, Jonathan Spencer, ed., *Sri Lanka: History and the Roots of Conflict* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990).

the 1980s. The Tamil counter narrative had immensely benefited from some features of the dominant Sinhala-centered narrative. According to this narrative, which was based on origin myths found in Pali chronicles, the Sinhalese were descendants of North Indian migrants who arrived after the 6th century BCE. This narrative unequivocally excluded the pre-migrant inhabitants of the island by attributing to them a non-human identity. This North Indian origin theory fit very well to the late 19th and early 20th century Sinhala nationalists' desire to connect Sinhalese to the Aryan race. This gave free license to Tamil nationalists to attribute Dravidian identity to the Pre-North-Indian migrant people on the island. In the initial stages, Sinhala nationalists did not perceive this as a major problem, so much so that some advocates of the Sinhala historical narrative explicitly shared the same view.¹²

Some vital features in classical texts which were widely used as authenticating sources for the Sinhala-centered narrative, proved to be in contradiction to the new ideological needs. The "Dutugemunu" episode was one of them.¹³ The Manawamsa-based story of Dutugemunu, the paradigmatic hero of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism, proved to be inconsistent with the ideological needs of the post-1980s period. Particularly the characterization of Dutugemunu and Elara in the Mahavamsa raised serious concerns. While Elara is depicted as a righteous king, Dutugemunu has been attributed with some blatantly villainous characteristics. This was not consistent with the Sinhala-Buddhist ideological mindset of the post-1980s period, which yearned for a morally superior person as their paradigmatic hero.

The "Indian intervention" in Sri Lanka in the 1980s, which culminated in the Indo-Lanka Accord in July 1987 and subsequent Indian military intervention, had a serious impact on the historical consciousness too. This controversial move by the powerful neighbor of Sri Lanka intensified already haunting anti-Indian sentiments in the Sinhala-Buddhist mind. The ravaging anti-Indian sentiments among the Sinhala-Buddhists posed a serious dilemma to the exponents of the established narrative, as it had an explicit North Indian bias. Consequently, there was a desire towards getting rid of this North Indian bias in the traditional narrative.

¹² See Anagarika Dharmapala, *Return to Righteousness*, (Sri Lanka: Ministry of Cultural Affairs, 1991), 485, and Paravahera Pannananda, "Preface," in *Uthuru Karaye Arya Rajjaya*, ed. Senerat Arnavitana, (Nugegoda: Janakantha Prakashana Bharaya, no date).

¹³ See W.I. Siriweera, "The Dutthagamani – Elara Episode: A Reassessment," in *Ethnicity and Social Change in Sri Lanka* (Colombo: Social Scientists' Association, 1984), 64–92; Gananath Obeyesekere, *Meditation on Conscience* (Colombo: Social Scientists' Association, 1988).

Addressing these issues to be inconsistent with the *zeitgeist* of the Sinhala-Buddhist popular mindset formed the prime ideological motive in the new wave of the production of popular historical knowledge as far back as the mid-1980s. It remains still an unaccomplished task because "rewriting history"¹⁴ became quite controversial even within the Sinhala-Buddhist ideological camp. The erstwhile narrative was well-established, and the influence of Mahavamsa and other Pali chronicles, which were major sources of the narratives' empirical basis, was too entrenched to be completely gotten rid of. Therefore, the issues were to be carefully handled, and the new needs were to be incorporated into the existing narrative without harming it.

2 Working Towards New Historical Synthesis

The pressing need of the mid-1980s was to challenge the historical basis of Tamil political claims. There were efforts to meet this challenge without causing major changes to the existing narrative. Thus, the well-known thesis of "Traditional Historical Homelands Tamils in the North and the East" was challenged well within the traditional paradigm on two grounds. Foremost historians such as K.M. de Silva argued that the historiographical ground upon which this thesis is based is erroneous.¹⁵ Moreover, an alternative discourse of "Sinhala-Buddhist Heritage in the North and the East" (උතුරු හා නැගෙනහිර පළාත්වල සිංහල-බෞද්ධ උරුමය) was constructed to challenge this thesis.¹⁶ Archaeological and literary evidence was assembled to show that the people who lived in those parts of the island were primarily Buddhists and therefore Sinhalese. Although these counter theses were possible within the existing paradigm, it was not easy to sustain the same paradigm in the long run, especially when other aspects of the challenge, listed above, were addressed.

¹⁴ ඉතිහාසය නැවත ලිවිය යුතුය (History must be rewritten) became a popular slogan in the mid-1980. The newspaper *Divaina* became a popular platform for many advocates of this slogan to disseminate their views. See Tennekoon, "Symbolic Refractions of the Ethnic Crisis."

¹⁵ K.M. de Silva, *Separatist Ideology in Sri Lanka: A Historical Appraisal of the Claim for the "Traditional Homelands" of the Tamils of Sri Lanka*, (Kandy: ICES, 1987).

¹⁶ For detailed account on this, see Nirmal Ranjith Dewasiri, *'History' After the War: Historical Consciousness in the Collective Sinhala-Buddhist Psyche in Post-war Sri Lanka*, (Colombo: ICES, 2013).

The problem became visible when attempting to deal with the historical issues that came to the fore with the Indian interventions. When the People's Liberation Front (popularly known as JVP) organized an armed insurgency in 1987, ostensibly to oust Indian aggression, one of its popular propaganda slogans was ඉන්දියානු වඳුරු හමුදාව පරාජය කිරීමට සටන් කරනු (“Expel the Indian monkey army – fight to safeguard the motherland”). The term “Monkey Army” was a reminiscence of the legendary monkey army of the Ramayana epic. This line of thinking was practiced not only by insurgents but also by some sections of the governing elite. The well-known cultural intellectual Arisen Ahubudu¹⁷ wrote and produced a stage play with an intriguing name, *Sakviti Ravana* (Emperor Ravana). This had the strong backing of the then-Prime Minister Ranasinghe Premadasa, a well-known opponent of the Indo-Lanka Accord.

The espousal of the Ravana story, alongside the discrediting of the Mahavamsa-based version of the North Indian origin, enjoyed strong popular backing but was never attractive to mainstream academic historians. Although not supportive of the Indian intervention, most mainstream historians were ideologically molded within the confines of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism and were strongly influenced by the tradition of the Mahavamsa. Moreover, they were not convinced of the historical authenticity of the Ravana legend as a credible alternative to the Mahavamsa-based narrative. There was significant re-articulation of the original Mahavamsa-based narrative, particularly with the availability of indisputable archaeological findings as well as through careful textual analyses of the Mahavamsa.¹⁸ These attempts, however, made no significant contribution to changing popular historical consciousness. There were also

attempts to replace the “Vijaya myth,” the core of the North Indian-centered narrative, with the Ravana story – without completely ignoring the Mahavamsa. This is because even hardcore advocates of the Ravana story would not dare discard the Mahavamsa completely. Attempts were made to retain the Vijaya story with some re-articulation – by giving less prominence to the Vijaya myth as the origin story of the Sinhalese and by making “North Indian migrants” subordinate to the “pre-Vijayan” indigenous people.¹⁹

We can witness a more comprehensive effort towards maintaining such a line of thinking across the last two decades, particularly in the context of the intensification of the military conflict and the increasing political and ideological significance of Sinhala-Buddhist ethno-nationalism. Popular historical representations found new modes of manifestation such as popular films, teledramas, novels, television discussion series, and coffee table publications.

These popular modes of historical representation became important discursive sites of addressing the historical issues that have been discussed above. It is useful to discuss several influential efforts to address these issues. Two such efforts were made by two prominent cultural figures in Sinhala society: namely, Jackson Anthony and Jayantha Chandrasiri. There was another influential effort to challenge the historical claims of Tamils by a number of intellectuals, among whom Nalin de Silva and his followers occupy a central place.²⁰ Jackson Anthony (a prominent Sinhalese actor and director) hosted a popular television discussion series on a prominent TV channel, with the intriguing title *Maha Sinhale Wansa Kathawa* (The chronicle of the great Sinhala nation), part of which was later published as a coffee table book. Parallel to this, he also directed a film based on the Mahavamsa story of the legendary Sinhalese king Pandukabhaya, a theme which was extensively covered in the TV discussion series as well as in the coffee table book. Anthony also directed a movie titled *Aba* (2008) during the same period; it was based on the early years of Pandukabhaya. This entire effort was aimed at constructing a new synthesis between the Mahavamsa-based narrative and the dissenting sentiments emerging out of the discontent that the former had caused.

¹⁷ Arisen Ahubudu (අරිසරහුසුරු – 1920–2011) was, at that time, the most famous figure of the Hela Haula group. The organization had been founded by the famous grammarian Kumaratunga Munidasa (1887–1944) in the 1940s. One important feature of the Hela Haula movement was that it vehemently opposed the Mahavamsa-based historical narrative of the early settlement formation of Sri Lanka. They strongly upheld the Ravana legend.

¹⁸ Some major works by prominent historians and archaeologists, including G.C. Mendis, R.A.L.H. Gunawardana, and S.U. Deraniyagala have already proved the limitations of the Mahavamsa-based narrative, and these works raised the need for critical re-evaluation of the narrative. See S.U. Deraniyagala, *The Prehistory of Sri Lanka: An Ecological Perspective* (Colombo: Department of Archaeology, 1992); G.C. Mendis, “The Pali Chronicles of Ceylon,” *The University of Ceylon Review* 4 (October 1946), <http://dlib.pdn.ac.lk/handle/123456789/907>; R.A.L.H. Gunawardana, *Periodization in Sri Lankan History: Some Reflections with Special Emphasis on the Development of the State* (Colombo: Social Scientists' Association, 2008).

¹⁹ Kumaratunga Munidasa in the 1930s and 1940 attempted to challenge the prominence of the “Vijaya myth” while acknowledging it as a historical fact, but arguing that indigenous people who were initially subdued by the “foreign invaders,” managed to subjugate them. See Kumaratunga Munidasa, *Prabandha Sangrahaya*, (Boralesgamuwa: Visidunu Publishers, 2015).

²⁰ See Nirmal Dewasiri, “Jathika Chinthanaya: History and Political Significance” in *ColomboArts Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities* 2, no. 3 (2018), <https://colomboarts.cmb.ac.lk/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/4-Nirmal-Dewasiri.pdf>.

Although the film was a box office success, there were negative responses too. Nalin de Silva was highly critical of the film, citing an alleged “biblical touch.”²¹ Moreover, the Royal Asiatic Society of Sri Lanka, in a rare gesture, organized a public gathering to critically evaluate the film, with heavy participation by leading historians. Speakers were highly critical of the film and generally conveyed the message that the film had distorted history, damaging the credibility of established “historical facts.”²²

A more comprehensive effort for such a synthesis was found in the *Maha Sinhale Wansa Kathawa*, both in the television discussion series and the coffee table publication. Anthony hosted various advocates from different historiographical orientations of the “early history of Sri Lanka.” For example the early episodes were based on the work of S.U. Daraniyagala, the foremost pre-historic archaeologist in Sri Lanka, Arisen Ahubudu, the dominant figure of the Hela Haula tradition, and Mendis Rohanadheera, a well-known scholar of the history of Sri Lanka and an advocate of the conventional Mahavamsa-based narrative.²³

Jayantha Chandrasiri’s *Maharaja Gemunu* (මහරජ ගැමුණු) – both the novel and film – aimed at rescuing the Sinhala-Buddhist paradigmatic hero Dutugemunu from the disgrace to which he was subjected owing to the way in which Gamunu and his foe Elara were depicted in the Mahavamsa. Chandrasiri has made a meticulous effort to elevate Gamunu to a morally superior position.²⁴ This is of course the reversal of the order as found in the chronicle, where Elara is positioned as a morally superior character to Gamunu. Chandrasiri’s Elara is, however, not morally inferior. Rather, he suffers from a profound guilty consciousness owing to his unjust seizure of power by killing the legitimate king. He knows very well that Gamunu is morally superior and is trying to wage a just war. This new narrative would certainly satisfy the Sinhala-Buddhist mind, particularly at a time when the military victory over Tamil militants were being discredited as a humanitarian catastrophe by various forces that were perceived to be inimical to the Sinhala-Buddhist cause.

²¹ Nalin de Silva suggests that Anthony has potentially anti-Sinhala-Buddhist intentions behind the production of the movie. He further claimed that Anthony’s Catholic background might have forced him to make use of some Christian influenced images in the film. See Nalin de Silva, *Ape Pravada 3* (Boralesgamuwa: Visidunu Prakashakayo, 2010).

²² <http://www.asiantribune.com/node/13739>, accessed October 20, 2020.

²³ Jackson Anthony, ed., *Maha Sinhale Wansa Kathawa* (Colombo: Gunasena Publishers, 2006).

²⁴ Jayantha Chandrasiri, *Maharaja Gemunu* (Boralesgamuwa: Visidunu Prakashakayo, 2011).

Arguably, Chadrasiri’s literary representation was based to a great degree on Rev. Ellawala Medhananda’s work *Sinhalaye Wimukthidayakaya, Dutugamunu Mahara-jathuma* (Liberator of the Sinhalese, Great King Dutugamunu) and a polemical work by Nalin de Silva. Both of them were major figures in the “re-writing of history” in the post-1980s period. The latter made a more serious effort at questioning the very basis of Tamil historical claims when he took it upon himself to dismantle its foundation from the early 1990s onward. According to the narrative he constructed, the majority of the Tamil population in the North, particularly those who belonged to the superior Vellala caste, descends from the plantation workers that the Dutch colonial administration brought to the island from South India to work in tobacco plantations in Jaffna in the 18th century. Although he did not produce substantial evidence to support his claim, the narrative seems to be quite attractive to the Sinhala-Buddhist collective mind.²⁵ A large contingent of young followers of de Silva were active in Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist activities and passionately propagate this view. “The Concise History of Tamil People” by Channa Sudath Jayasumana, former professor of medicine and a minister of the present government, is an example.²⁶

3 Historical Consciousness and Transitional Justice: By Way of a Conclusion

These interventions systematically denied a positive historical identity for Tamils. It is in fact irrelevant whether or not these interventions were substantive and stood on firm empirical ground and were treated to a fair interpretation. What is significant is the fact that these interventions constructed a corpus of historical “knowledge” that the Sinhala-Buddhist mind desired. As I argued elsewhere, to the hegemonic Sinhala-Buddhist collective conscience, the post war Tamil North was perceived as a territory to be re-conquered. Creating a historical narrative conducive to such a goal plays a central role in this quest.²⁷

From the transitional justice perspective, the post-war context required a concerted effort to ease the tensions between the two communities. As Sinhala-Buddhist

²⁵ For this view on Tamil history see, Nalin de Silva, *Ape Pravada 3*.

²⁶ *Demala Janathavage Sankshiptha Ithihasaya* (The Concise History of Tamil People), (Boralesgamuwa: Visidunu Publishers, 2006).

²⁷ Nirmal Ranjith Dewasiri, *History After the War*.

nationalism was of the firm conviction that the military triumph is only one step towards defeating the Tamil secessionist orientation altogether, the situation has become more obfuscated and volatile. Therefore, constant vigilance is necessary to prevent the repetition of the pre-war scenario.

One of the major premises of the Sinhala-Buddhist discourse on Tamil political orientation in the post-1980 context is that the superimposition of a “false” historical narrative on ordinary Tamil people by an interested elite is one of the major root causes for plunging the Tamil community into the “secessionist trap.” Nalin de Silva has articulated this view constantly and consistently for the last two and half decades, and has gone even further with his argument that Tamils ought to be taught the “authentic” history so that they will be persuaded to acknowledge the fact that the “true” history of Sri Lanka is the one that is prevalent in Sinhala-Buddhist society.²⁸

Although Nalin de Silva’s views do not have mass readership, they trickle down to the Sinhala-Buddhist masses via various intermediaries. The pilgrims that flocked to the Jaffna peninsula after the war ended,

certainly carried this desire with them.²⁹ For these pilgrims, the Jaffna peninsula is a sacred land for Buddhists, even sanctified by Buddha’s visit – and it is a region that had been denied them for decades. Tamil domination is perceived, therefore, as a potential threat to the perpetuation of their sacred Buddhist heritage. Therefore, in their minds, this “sacred land of Sinhala-Buddhists” ought to be rescued, defended, and protected as did happen in May 2009 with the end of the protracted civil war.

This mode of historical consciousness was not only ideologically appealing to ordinary Sinhala-Buddhists, but also politically powerful as many advocates of this thinking occupied important government positions in the post-war period. The conclusion therefore is that the particular mode of historical consciousness, which is ideologically and politically influential and populist, posed a significant challenge to the execution of transitional justice in the post-war context. Moreover, this hegemonic mode of historical consciousness which is immensely attractive to the Sinhala-Buddhist masses has become a factor that has reproduced the structures of hostile relationships between Sinhala and Tamil ethnic communities yet again.

²⁸ He argued that the Sinhala-Buddhist version is the one which is more consistent with the available historical evidence. See Nalin de Silva, *Ape Pravada* 3 for more detail.

²⁹ See Nirmal Ranjith Dewasiri *History after the War*.