

A 'NATION' AND AN ANCIENT FLYING MACHINE: LOCATING THE FOLKLORIC SIGNIFICANCE OF KING RAVANA'S DANDUMONORAYA IN THE FOLKTALES OF SABARAGAMUWA

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INTRODUCTION

In the epic Sanskrit poem *Ramayana*, possibly composed between 500 BCE and 100 BCE by a sage identified as Valmiki, the perceived anti-hero King Ravana, is depicted as the demon king of the landmass known as Lanka. Among his many attributes— he was a man of ten (10) heads, had a penchant for conquering other countries and the notion of air power: Ravana could pilot a wooden flying machine built in the image of a peacock called *Dandumonoraya*.¹

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¹ Ravana's flying machine has many types of descriptions in the many versions of the Rama-Ravana tale. The South Indian version states that Ravana could fly using his mind power. The version that is told in Lanka has depicted Ravana's flying machine as a wooden aircraft resembling a peacock.

This idea of airpower possessed by a Lankan who also harboured empire-building tendencies became a powerful symbol of nationalism in recent times granting a renewed existence to Ravana and also creating a discourse that pitted academic disciplines of history and archaeology against folk beliefs, media-governed discourses and even religious notions. The present paper wishes to avoid such controversies and focus on an area which had not been explored by those involved in folkloric studies, namely a close reading of the idea of King Ravana's flying machine called *Dandumonoraya*.

To analyse this textual construction, its limits and boundaries, this study resorts to a Lankan-grown collection of folktales attributed to King Ravana. In this sample, this study will locate the textual occurrences of *Dandumonoraya* and attempt to undertake a parallel study of such textual occasions to locate a comprehensive account of the

flying machine before attempting to interpret its significance to the story creator/teller/listener. The study would also attempt to interpret a potential link between folk imagination and the material reality of their creation.

In Valmiki's *Ramayanya*, King Ravana is depicted as the 'demon king' of Lanka who is destructive, impulsive and violent. This depiction offers the author the creative license to plot a case for Ravana's abject and volatile ending. Such endings would restore moral balance in the universe and re-establish the notion of morality as the most powerful designing force in the world.

Yet, in ancient Lanka, in the folktales circulated among octogenarians of Sabaragamuwa; supposedly Ravana's seat of political power, he is remembered much more affectionately. In the orally-transmitted folktales of *Sabaragamuwa*, a province located in the South-central region of Sri Lanka, Ravana is recast as a compassionate, just, creative and a highly admired king. The phrase 'demon king' is entirely absent from these tales and his empire-building endeavours come under great admiration². These 56

² Modern Lankan nationalists have used these ideas to propagate their

folktales were published under a collection titled *Sabaragamuwa Ravana Jana Katha* (Ravana Folktales of Sabaragamuwa) by the renowned folktale collector Gunasekera Gunasoma who has published over 20 collections of Sri Lankan folktales from different geographical regions as well as ethnic groups.³ These folktales offer several accounts of the *Dandumonoraya*, thus offering this researcher the opportunity to construct a home-grown account of the folkloric flying machine that has been preserved in oral literature for unknown periods of time⁴.

own version of a nation state that had access to military and administrative power even before the advent of known history. A lengthy discussion is beyond the scope of the present paper.

³ His collection of folktales from the Muslim ethnic group of the eastern province of Sri Lanka has been previously studied by this writer under the title *Folk Ideas' and 'Worldview' Inscribed in a Selection of Folktales Attributed to the Muslim Community of the East Coast of Sri Lanka*. See OUSL Journal, 2017, Vol. 12, No. 2, (pp. 5-17)

⁴ As folkloristic research has shown it is difficult to pin a specific time to a folktales, which are cultural units transmitted orally from person to person.

This specific folktale collection was selected for this study owing to two reasons. Firstly, this is the only collection of home-grown Ravana folktales, collected and annotated in the print media, thus offering this researcher (and other potential researchers) to locate and analyse the modes of narrative of the tales to understand the psyche of the tale creators/tellers/listeners. Secondly, Sabaragamuwa is the region that is traditionally believed to be the seat of power seat of Ravana, and it would be interesting to locate how the people of this region; who have been exposed to folkore, perceives the modes of political power and their execution in the imaginative sphere.

Since a powerful nationalist movement has been created in Lanka with the content of these tales (which have not been studied previously), this study would attempt to fill an existing research gap by opening up an initial discourse on the tales with the notion of airpower as its focus.

Folkloric speech acts are considered essential constituents of a nation's heritage as well as a mirror of its cultural traditions. Like any 'cultural tradition' folkloric speech traditions will not be able to evade the essential power dynamics that would be inscribed into the psyche of the

people who create, tell and hear such stories. This makes folktales a fascinating field of study for nation-making. This is well articulated by Dundes (2007) who argues that folkloric speech acts (folktale is one mode of folklore) are "autobiographical ethnography" of a group of people, or a group of people's description about themselves. At the same time, time and space play essential roles in the meaning of a folktale. As Thompson (1977) suggests, a folktale is a "story which had been handed down from generation to generation either in writing or by word of mouth" (Thompson 1977, pg 04). He goes on to argue that a story teller would hold his/her ability to preserve a tale as an act of immense pride, "He usually desires to impress his readers or hearers with the fact that he is bringing them something that has the stamp of good authority..." (Thompson 1977, pg 04).

Another researcher posits folktales as narratives with a close connection to their material reality- Kirk (1986) assumes that owing to the high "factual content" (Kirk, 1984) of folktales they tend not to have "practical or emotional and intellectual applications" (Kirk, 1984). The thinking offered by these three folklorists about the close bonding between a folktale and its

creators/tellers/listeners and the material reality of its creation/telling/hearing would form the backdrop for this study as it attempts to analyse the notion of the *Dandumonaraya* in the Sabaragamuwa folktales.

How is *Dandumonaraya* conceived in the folktales? What did air mobility mean to the ancient Lankan folk imagination? What do such imaginative ideas of air mobility tell us about the material reality of the story creators/tellers/listeners? By focusing on the modes of construction of the *Dandumonaraya* in the selected tales, and interpreting its significance through a folkloric and literary reading this study would attempt to answer these questions.

FOLKLORIC INTRODUCTION TO THE FOLKTALES OF RAVANA

Folktale collector Gunasekera Gunasoma's Ravana folktales from the *Sabaragamuwa* region brings together 56 folktales and was first published in 2016. The book has gone for a second edition in 2019, suggesting its popularity among the Sinhala reading public.

Gunasoma's initiative has been sponsored by the provincial administrative divisions of *Sabaragamuwa* with the objective

of preserving the folk heritage of the region- a suggestion that folk heritage is considered to be connected to the nation and its identity. The tales have been narrated to their compiler by story tellers, and these speech acts have been recorded. They have been transcribed in the spoken language of the tellers and the compiler has taken the initiative to offer an extremely short biography of the teller as a footnote to each tale.

While this researcher appreciates Gunasoma's efforts to collect his tales scientifically (only because such attempts are not so common among folktale collectors in Sri Lanka), there are gaps in his methodology. For a folkloric endeavour that received regional patronage, Gunasoma does not offer the reader a contextual sketch to gather an in-depth understanding of the tales in their socio-cultural context.

For instance, he does not offer details about his mode of collection of the tales. How did he locate the narrators? Why are his story-tellers mostly male octogenarians and members of the clergy? What about the others beyond these categories who might have offered him Ravana tales? From whom did the present narrators originally hear the story? Were the stories he heard narrated from one location or many?

Gunasoma has not attempted to answer such concerns even though he has written an introduction to the stories.

Folkloristics encourages tale collectors to improve the authenticity of their tales by offering extensive background information as well as biographies of the tellers and listeners. As the folklorist Weerasinghe (1986) asserts, the entire context of the tale being told needs to be documented- the setting, biographical details of the tellers/listeners, the facial gestures/voice intonations of the teller, the response of the audience. Gunasoma has largely neglected these aspects. The biographies he offers of his narrators are sketchy. At the same time, he does not place his collected tales, as Hultkranz (1984) articulates, within the cultural structure of the region nor does he attempt to locate its function in that social setting.

Yet, in spite of these shortcomings, the collector has collected and compiled interesting folk tales about King Ravana from a specific region, an event a reader would have missed had Gunasoma not undertaken the endeavour in the first place.

METHODOLOGY

One of the important characteristics of a folktale is the notion of 'folk idea.' Folk idea is an implicit unit of narrative which demonstrates the assumptions and conjectures a story creator/narrator/listener commonly agree upon. According to the folklorist Dundes, 'Folk Ideas' are "traditional notions that a group of people have about the nature of humanity, of the world, and of life in the world" (Dundes, 2007). However, Dundes also argues that 'folk ideas' need not be openly apparent in folkloric material and they could be "unstated premises" (Dundes, 2007) which could underlie thought and action of individuals- the present study takes this argument into consideration when re-reading the Ravana folktales for embedded 'folk ideas.'

Dundes' idea about 'unstated premises' is also a notion that is somewhat reflected in the work of the literary critic Pierre Macherey specifically in his recommended mode of reading literary texts. All speech, according to Macherey "envelopes in the unspoken in order to reach utterance" (Macherey 93), and this "silence" (Macherey 93), informs us of the "precise conditions for the appearance of an utterance...its limits...real significance" (Macherey 93). The entrenched 'silences' in the folktale sample

under consideration here would be read for what they state about King Ravana's flying machine *Dandumonaraya*.

LITERATURE REVIEW

As far as this researcher is concerned, *Dandumonaraya* of King Ravana as depicted in the folktales of Sabaragamuwa by Gunasaoma have not come under academic scrutiny. Medawattegedara (2021) has undertaken a study of the folkloric construction of King Ravana in the Sabaragamuwa tales. The present study is a continuation of that study as it focuses on a similar exploration of the flying machine of the legendary king. This study would add to the academic literature on Lanka's folktales, especially those involving King Ravana.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

“On either side of the Dandumonare are large wings, just like those of a bird. These wings move up and down like the wing movement of a bird—like this. When the wings move downwards, the air is pressed and that pressure creates a force. When the wings move up again, the force enables the machine to fly upwards. The wings are flapped down

again, creating a force of wind. When the wings move up again Dandumonare moves up. Just like a bird flying as it flaps its wings up and down. It is with the power of the wind that the Dandumonare flies.”

(Tale No 6:
Dandumonaraya in Ravana Janakatha)

A story teller from Sabaragamuwa, who was in his late seventies at the time when Gunasaoma collected this tale, prefers to see the techniques of flying of *Dandumonaraya* primarily as a means by which nature is imitated. And he is careful to give specific details of the flying mechanism and even resorts to identifying concepts such as air pressure and how pressure is used to thrust the machine upwards. He also brings in a simile (“Just like a bird...”) to add what seems like a scientific justification to the flying mechanism of *Dandumonaraya*.

The unstated premise here is that the narrator is anxious and edgy to prove the authenticity of the ancient flying machine, and he takes care to align the *Dandumonara* with the modern flying discourse as he had understood them. The narrator is seemingly threatened by time and space: modernity has articulated

the mechanics of flying with scientific accuracy, and this narrator is attempting to align the ancient flying machine to modern flying discourse.

In another tale from Sabaragamuwa (Tale No 6: *Dandumonaraya*) the creator of this flying machine is identified as a skilled craftsman named Mithra, who was a close friend of King Ravana. He created the body of the machine using wood- the narrator insists that Mithra did not use steel, brass or mechanical devices (specifics of these devices are not mentioned). The final product looked like a peacock, but with two large wings on either side. The wings had the ability to move up and down and imitate the flight of a bird.

Yet, Mithra did not possess a consistent flying mechanism for his bird-mimicking machine. He consulted his close friend, King Ravana, who invented the means by which this machine could fly. The king used magic (no details provided) as well as Mercury to make the machine fly. There were ropes which held some of the sections of the *Dandumonaraya* in place and a passenger could hold on to these ropes for stability when flying (as Sita was asked to do when she was kidnapped by Ravana and brought to Lanka in *Dandumonaraya*). This machine

required a landing site which used to be large grassy lands. Ravana's timely intervention ensured that the *Dandumonaraya* could flap its large wings and be airborne. The narrator insists that this machine did not depend on oil or petrol for its functioning. Once again, the narrator of this tale is keen to explain the specifics of the flying mechanism of *Dandumonaraya* and interestingly he combines magic and science (represented by Mercury) to articulate his point.

Once again, it is apparent that this narrator is anxious about time and space: he is engaging in a defence of the *Dandumonaraya* and is keen to combine science and ancient magic to do so. At the same time, he is committed to keep *Dandumonaraya* as a machine built from natural substance; wood, rope, and that it avoided the modern aeronautic manufacturing components including oil. This motivation to keep Ravana's innovations as close as possible to nature is better explained in the analysis of the next tale.

In Tale No. 4, titled *Ravana Sakvithi Rajek* (Ravana is a universal king) offers the notion that Ravana had an intense attachment to nature and would not hesitate to put to death anyone who was involved in deforestation anywhere in the world. He would frequently travel the world in

Dandumonaraya and shoot the offenders with arrows while being airborne. Ravana had a special place in his heart for the Sinharajah Forest. "Today, all these people are hell bent on destruction and clearing forests," says the Buddhist monk who narrated this story. Connecting Ravana to the natural world of Sabaragamuwa; through the natural production and the flying mechanism of *Dandumonaraya* and his love of any forest, is clearly a response to the dwindling forest cover of the region. This new situation that afflicts Sabaragamuwa has prompted the story tellers to add new perspectives to their treasured tales of King Ravana.

In summary, the people of Sabaragamuwa held in their imagination the presence of a king called Ravana who was an innovative, responsive ruler with respect, love and concern for protecting nature. *Dandumonaraya* was his mode of transport to observe his jurisdictions and this machine is a natural product which mimicked nature. The story tellers of Sabaragamuwa are seemingly attempting to preserve this notion of *Dandumonaraya* against time and space which threaten to devour it.

The advent of air travel has brought into question folkloric

devices that conduct air travel like carpets, horses, and of course *Dandumonara*. Yet, the story tellers of Sabaragamuwa seemed motivated to sustain the time and space which created this flying machine- a mythical space where nature held sway over human affairs and also exerted a sense of religiosity upon the people.

CONCLUSIONS

The textual projection of the *Dandumonara* into the folk imagination needs to be understood from several different perspectives.

Firstly, folktales that promote magical motifs, like a flying machine, need not offer the listener/reader extensive realistic portrayals. These are tales for entertainment as well as moral edification and not necessarily a platform to test or learn notions of science. Thus, the obvious gaps in the narrative about the flying machine should be considered as essential gaps needed for imaginative fiction in the sphere of folktales.

Secondly, in the original Sanskrit poem by Valmiki, the air power granted to Ravana with secretive mechanisation serves the purpose of increasing Ravana's potential as an enemy: such attributes make Ravana a formidable opponent for

King Rama who faces him in a battle to avenge the kidnapping of his wife. Thus, air power should be considered as a motif that makes King Rama's battle an arduous campaign against an opponent who is stronger than him- a David and Goliath story for the want of a parallel. That makes Rama's victory (combination of good motives and brutal strength of the monkey king, Hanumantha) more admirable in the eyes of the listener/reader. Yet, in the hands of the Lankan folk story teller, Ravana becomes the subject of a counter narrative.

As argued by Medawattegedara (2021) the story tellers of Sabaragamuwa "have offered an alternative voice to King Ravana and neutralized the negative characteristics attributed to him. This act of owning Ravana from an Indian epic, and offering him redemption through counter narratives is a reflection of how foreign influences are negated by people of a specific region in Sri Lanka." Thus, the story creators/tellers of Sabaragamuwa have taken the motif of air mobility offered to Ravana and have legitimised it into a narrative that offers the *Dandumonaraya* a complete life of its own. They have offered it a creation strategy, mode of travel, a shape and runway. Thus, they have made this flying

machine into something 'realistic'.

In doing so, they have preserved the mythical space that many folktales tend to recreate in their plots: a land where modernity and its pressures and pollution and other issues do not exist and where, to quote the British poet, Philip Larkin: "*Here is unfenced existence: Facing the sun, untalkative, out of reach.*"

The story tellers of Sabaragamuwa through their orally transmitted Ravana tales have offered the nation of Lanka an industrialised image that it had not attained in its present 'reality.' *Dandumonaraya* is built from local raw materials and follows a natural mechanism whose inspiration is nature. Thus, the industrial image is one that follows an idealistic image of an industry that keeps nature clean.

At the same time, the story tellers/creators/listeners seemed affected by the rampant destruction of the forests in Sabaragamuwa (possibly by the gem industry) and they have devised a solution in their imagination by creating a hero who deals with them with instant death. Severely punishing those who engage in deforestation which cannot be achieved in real life, is achieved in imaginative fiction.

Thus, Ravana's *Dandumonaraya* is a folkloric motif that has significance beyond an unbelievable notion that only common folk would dream of or encourage in their story telling. Rather it is a magical device that transports the story creators/tellers/listeners of Sabaragamuwa to a mythical space which is 'out of reach' for the present Lankan state- a space where the Lankan nation engages in innovations of global significance while protecting its natural resources.

Whether that 'nation' is a practical possibility or not does not count for folkloric imagination because they live in hope that this ideal nation could be achieved.

In the words of a story teller: "Not like today, in Ravana's time no one can cut the jungle, burn it and take the wood away. No one dared to. Even if someone did, it was not allowed. Who did not allow? Ravana! But look at the situation today. All these people frequently destroy the jungle. Ravana should have been alive today."

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