THE CEYLON PRESS HISTORY OF SRI LANKA 5

DANCING ON KNIVES

Sri Lanka & The Lucky Break

DAVID SWARBRICK

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"Every adventure requires a first step."

The Cheshire Cat
Alice's Adventures in Wonderland
Lewis Carroll 1865

ONE

The Careless King

"If I want a crown," remarked Peachey, hero of Kipling's Man Who Would Be King, and unexpected alter ego of Prince Vijiya, Sri Lanka's first monarch, "I must go and hunt it for myself."

If Peachey's motivation was glory and riches, plain and simple, Vijaya's was about raw survival, dodging assassinations and evading parental disapprobation. If, that is, the chronicles are to be believed.

And in this, Sri Lanka is exceedingly fortunate for it has not one but three great chronicles, claiming between them the title of the world's oldest, longest historical narrative.

Although these turbulent chronicles muddle up man, god and magic with morality, history, and myth, they also lay a wraithlike trail of events and people through what would otherwise be a historical vacuum dotted with random and unattributable artefacts.

Prince Vijaya's existence is known about only though the first two chronicles - The Dipavaṃsa Chronicle (complied around the third to fourth centuries CE) and The Mahavaṃsa, The Great Chronicle, an epic poem written by a Buddhist monk in the fifth century CE in the ancient Pali script.

These stupefying works, which put most soap operas and not a few Sci-Fi films to shame, open with Prince Vijaya's arrival from Sinhapura, a lost legendary state in eastern India; and ends in 302 CE.

At this point they hand the task of story-telling onto the third and last book, The Culavamsa or Lesser Chronicle,

which covers events to 1825, an otherwise blameless year the world over with little more of note than it being the date of the first performance of Rossini's Barber of Seville.

But if love and eternal fidelity are rarely the subject of the three chronicles, gold, betrayal, and secrecy often are – though historians naturally debate the factual accuracy of the stories, in which the doings of men and kings take a poor second place to that of monks and Lord Buddha.

Even when the focus shifts from the divine to the secular, it is abundantly clear that, as with the most tenacious tales, history is inevitably written by the winners.

Although verified archaeological, still less documentary evidence for Prince Vijaya, remains tantalizingly absent, he remains from every perspective, the great winner, the shaved head fugitive with a penchant for what The Mahavamsa calls “evil conduct and ... intolerable deeds,” every bit the rebranded hero. Expelled by his appalled father, thrust onto a ship with seven hundred dependant followers and ordered to stay away on pain of death, Prince Vijaya has, though the centuries, still managed to take centre stage as the Sri Lanka’s paterfamilias.

Centuries later, over a shared arak and soda, and, courtesy of reincarnation, it is more than likely that the reformed villain .

would tell you that he finds his righteous reputation puzzling. After all, he never set out to be a hero, still less founder of a nation; and quite possibly not even a king, claiming, in his own lifetime, the much more modest title of Prince. Survival, a bit of fun, respect, of course, obedient followers, amendable wives, good food and the space to be his own boss was probably as much as he aspired to.

Indeed, so careless was he of his greater future that he almost destroyed his own fledging dynasty just as it was starting out, a nasty proclivity that was to reoccur just two generations later when his descendants tried to wipe themselves out.

Twice, in under two hundred years the Vijayans, the dynasty that was to make Sri Lanka the world's only Singhala nation, came perilously close to obliterating it altogether.

It was the sort of carelessness typical of rulers bereft of the value of hindsight, operating like sword dancers twirling on the tops of lofty stupas, and utterly reckless with their unfathomable dynastic destiny.

TWO

The Cursed Crown

It is said that Prince Vijaya snuck into the country through the secretive Puttalam Lagoon.

If so, he enjoyed the value of surprise for the shortest of times. The Mahavamsa, whose respect for divinity of any sort is beyond reproach, has Lord Buddha task an acquiescent Hindu god with protecting the prince and reassuring him that the island he has alighted upon is pretty much empty.

"There are no men here, and here no dangers will arise," claims the god, helpfully disguised as a wandering ascetic.

If one is to found a future nation, this sort of starting point is enormously helpful; and thousands of years later, so little is known about the real social and political structures that existed on the island at this time, that this myth of a largely empty island merely waiting for noble race to occupy it is more than validated by ignorance.

But lines are there to be read through and The Mahavamsa wears the cognitive dissonance of its gilded lines with confident ease.

Almost from the start, they imply, the prince and his followers found themselves fighting for survival, dominance, and land. The many conflicting stories surrounding his fights with man-eating wives, flying horses, skirmishes with indigenous tribes, protection under Buddha and willingness to swap his local wife Kuveni, for a more glamorous and aristocratic Indian princess, are in fact key parts of the country's cherished creation myths.

And curses too. For Kuveni, rejected, outcast and pushed to a shocking suicide, was to place such a curse on the king and his house as to taint "not only Vijaya but the descendants of Hela People (Singhala) as a whole," wrote an observer. It has," remarked another mournful raconteur, "overflowed to each and every nook and corner of Sri Lanka and enwrapped her people over the centuries."

If the nation delights in the stories around Vijaya; those around Kuveni, a native queen of the local Yaksha tribe, cause much head shaking.

For Kuveni was not simply a wife and weaver of cloth, a mother, lover, and queen - but also a demon, a metamorphoser, an outcast, an avenging fury, suicide, traitor, murderess, ghost, and mistress of deception.

A descendant of gods, she is also a goddess to the country's still living aboriginal peoples. We may be forest haunters," said a Vedda leader recently, "but Kuveni our goddess."

Small wonder then that Sri Lanka, in not knowing what to really make of the Mother of the Nation, choses to push her deep into one of its many locked closets.

THREE

The First Colonist

The slimmest of ancient – almost folkloric - marks the Prince's landing on Sri Lanka's shores

Pulling his boats onto a beach of reddish-brown sand – “Tamba” meaning Coppe,; or as it was later known, Tambapanni, was the perfect spot for a settlement, commanding the access to a great natural harbour opening into the Gulf of Mannar and an almost inexhaustible supply of pearl oysters.

“Horse Mountain,” is another alternative name for Kudiramalai and for centuries, amidst the ruins of an ancient temple, the ruins of a massive horse and man statue stood on the cliffs.

Made of brick, stone, and coral, it is estimated to have been at least 35 feet high, its front legs raised, its rider clinging to reins, bearing a lantern to guide ships into the port. Locals still point to some modest ruins, all that remains, they say of the horse and rider. And continually, raked by high waves and surf, broken bricks, pottery, and building materials, wash up on the shore.

Inland are a further set of ruins – mere pillars standing or fallen in the jungle and known locally as Kuveni’s Palace.

Here, where history is forever unprovable, the historian can either move swiftly on to the next footnote, or succumb to the impossible romance of possibility.

Succumbing is naturally the better bet; certainly the most entertaining one.

Although the Mahavaṃsa Chronicle portrays Prince Vijaya as the first and only Indian colonist to arrive in early Sri Lanka, it is more than likely that he was but one (albeit the most successful one) of a number of immigrants.

Colonising the island from the north and west, moving inland along the banks of the Malvata Oya, other settlers undoubtedly arrived on the east coast and followed the Mahaweli River inland.

Still others would have landed in the south, following other rivers inland to make settlements within Ruhana.

The Vijayan progress would have forced the preexisting tribes - the Rakkhaka, Yakkha, Naga and Deva - to retreat inland – and accept a new status imposed on them by these migrants from the subcontinent, who brought with them a steely view on caste.

Most of the main Sinhalese castes derive in some form or another from here.

The Brahman bedecked the very top, below which would have been the Govigama (from govi – literally "housekeeper"); Kavikara (dancers); Batgama (labourers); Radava (dhobis); Berava (drummers and folk priests); Oli (astrologers); Panikki (barbers); Yamannu (iron workers); and the lowest caste of all – the Rodi (untouchable).

Fighting done, Prince Vijiya is said to have then founded the Kingdom of Tambapaṇṇi, situated in the northeast around Mannar and Puttalam.

Nothing is known of how he spent his 38-year reign, except that he appears to have encouraged his lieutenants to set up allied settlements themselves, all of which would have retained some kind of respectful subservience to Tambapanni.

All we have left of these places are their possible names: Upatissagama, Ujjeni, Uruvela, Vijita, floating erratically on maps of the northeast of the island, ephemeral as clouds in a blue tropical sky.

FOUR

Beginner's Luck

Unusually for a king of Sri Lanka, Vijiya was to die naturally, in 505 BCE.

His achievements made up for his earlier criminal delinquency, with the Mahavaṃsa commenting, with immeasurable satisfaction, that he had "forsaken his former evil way of life," and ruled "over all Lanka in peace and righteousness".

In this the Chronicle is being more than kind. It is being disingenuous, for dying as he did, Viyaja inflicted on his family, kingdom, and reputation, the one crime that no king can ever really be forgiven for: he died childless, or at least without any respectable and credible heir lined up to fill his shoes.

That Sri Lanka's future should hang on so avoidable a problem as this seems hardly believable – but then Vijaya had no idea, gasping his last few breaths, that he was about to leave behind a dynasty that ran (ignoring regnal interruptions) for over 600 years, putting it comfortably ahead of Mings and Moguls, Valois, Bourbons, Hohenzollerns, Tudors, Stuarts, or Aztecs.

Or a country that, in the decisions it made and habits it formed around religion, language, writing, water, architecture, or civil administration (to name but a few), was to be like no other the world over, nor last 2,567 years, and still counting.

Had he known this, he might have put a bit more effort into procreation; but instead, with an opportunism

that was, after all, something of a personal hallmark, he left his problems at the feet of others, busying himself instead with the more urgent prerequisites of reincarnation.

Astonishingly, it is better than a one-in-two bet that his tomb still exists. It is said to be located on Medagama Hill in Paduwasnuwara, halfway between Kurunegala and Puttalam.

Certainly, the unmissable shape of a very ancient stupa can be made out.

And astonishingly too, ashes found in its heart during conservation work were tested by the Archaeological Department of Sri Lanka and found to be at least 2,500 – 2,600 years old , placing them well within touching distance of his death in 505 BCE.

That the kingdom did not at this point merely implode is little short of miraculous.

But then the Vijayans were ever the lucky dynasty – perhaps the luckiest of the lot and the prince's long-time follower and chief advisor, Upatissa took over, appearing unexpectedly content with the role of Caretaker King.

Upatissa seems to have had his own little statelet nearby - Upatissa Nuwara; and may well have realised, with a wisdom that later kings would look on as ridiculously old fashioned, that more (land, palaces, titles,

concubines, curries, white horses, silk sarongs) is not always best.

For a year it seems he kept the throne warm whilst word was sent to Panduvasdeva, Vijayan's nephew in India, that the job was now his.

FIVE

Winging It

The new king, Panduvasdeva, was to arrive in his new kingdom in the port of Gokanna, present day Trincomalee.

The port was nearly 200 kilometres away from where Vijaya is said to have had his kingdom, indicating perhaps that the little kingdom had been expert in soaking up other people's territory.

The new king exceeded in his fecund duties by producing ten sons and one daughter, a royal litter that more than made up for his uncle's derisory efforts, prompting The Mahavamsa to note, with understandable smugness, that "the monarch lived happily."

Ruling for 30 years from 504 BCE, Panduvasdeva was just what the nascent dynasty needed to entrench itself.

His greatest achievements - ruling for decades and producing heirs, albeit ones fixated on familicide – was more than enough to secure his golden reputation.

But he was also to move his capital to the fortress of Vijithapura, close to what would later become its great capital, Anuradhapura.

And undoubtedly, like his uncle before him, he would have brought Indian craftsman, technocrats, and experts in a variety of practical fields to help him develop and improve his state, a reverse brain drain of the sort that Sri Lanka, with 13% of its population now living and working abroad, would now welcome.

What shortcomings Panduvasdeva had were largely in the parenting department. Fertile he may have been, but a role model or instiller of blameless family morals, he most certainly was not.

Despite his bountiful prodigy, Panduvasdeva is chiefly remembered for the chaos that later enveloped the country as his sons battled against the morbid predictions of a court soothsayer who predicted that they would all be killed by their nephew, Pandu Kabhaya, son of their only sister, Princess Citta.

That the royal nursery best resembles a pit of serpents was ever to be a hallmark of royal Sri Lanka, but in this case it was quite possibly aggravated by the fact that Panduvasdeva's offspring probably derived from a variety of (competing) wives.

The harem was a key institution of the royal court, and a magnet for intrigue and politics until the last king of the last kingdom breathed his last. Egged on by the Chronicles, at their dread and gossiping best, Panduvasudeva's death was said to have been promoted by a terrible and wholly incurable disease that could be traced back all the way to the curse Kuveni placed on the Vijayan clan.

This king's death in 474 BCE heralded the second and much more serious existential threat to the dynasty's future. But at this great distance

from the events of the time, and with almost nothing to rely on in the historical record, counting leaves in a gale is likely to offer a greater degree of exactitude as to what really went on.

At first affairs seemed to move with reassuring predictably. Abhaya, Panduvasdeva's eldest son, took the throne from his father, reigning for twenty years before abruptly stepping down for his brother Tissa in 454 BCE.

This was no joyful abdication; but a renunciation forced on him by his nine brothers who accused him of plotting to ensure his nephew, Pandu Kabhaya succeeded him.

Spared his life, Abhaya retreated into a wise obscurity, sensibly declining his nephew's later offer to retake the crown, settling instead for the far less pressured job of running Anuradhapura.

Tissa, Abhaya's immediate replacement, was a haunted man. Chief amongst his brothers, he was eager to head off the sinister predictions of the court soothsayer. But it was not to be.

His rule was characterised by an ultimately unsuccessful balancing act: feuding with his brothers (many of whom died in the troubles) whilst keeping at bay his nephew Pandu Kabhaya.

As civil war rocked the new nation for well over ten years, Tissa's repeated attempts to find and slay Pandu Kabhaya, were all foiled and his reign (454 BCE – 437 BCE) came to a predictable end when Pandu Kabhaya killed him in battle.

Like London buses, problems, it is said, always come in threes; but Vijayan Sri Lanka was blessed: they only came in twos. One more and the lights would surely have all gone out. But they didn't.

The tricky years of the country's most formative dynasty were over. It has survived – just.

What was to come next were to be quite possibly the best years of the island's life. Period.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Swarbrick is a publisher, planter, hotelier, hermit, and writer.

He was born in Colombo and raised, with few concessions to modernity, in India, Singapore, and the Middle East. Cornish, he gained his degrees on the Celtic fringe: at the Universities of Wales, and Stirling, prolonging an introduction to accepted working hours for as long as was decently possible.

Having worked at News Corp's HarperCollins UK as board director for various otherwise homeless departments including sales, marketing; and HarperCollins India, he ran Hachette's consumer learning division. Prior to this, he launched Oxford University Press's first commercial online business, Oxford Reference Online.

When the doubtful charms of boardroom bawls, bottom lines, and divas diminished, he returned to Sri Lanka, the land of his birth hundreds of years earlier, to rescue a spice plantation and set of art deco buildings that had gone feral in the jungle.

Today, as the Flame Tree Estate & Hotel, it has become one of the country's top ten boutique hotels, run by the kindest and most professional of hospitality teams; and overseen by several small schnauzers.

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