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History of Sri Lanka 8

MERRY-GO-ROUND

Sri Lanka & The Spinning Sovereigns

DAVID SWARBRICK

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DAVID SWARBRICK
& The Editors of The Ceylon Press

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"Well that was the silliest tea party I ever went to! I am never going back there again!"

Alice's Adventures in Wonderland
Lewis Carroll
1865.

ONE

The Great King

If ever there was a king who was entitled to get very cross indeed, it was Dutugemunu, one of the island's standout sovereigns.

Known, not unjustifiably as “The Great,” Dutugemunu was to rescue his car crash of a dynasty, only to watch it (albeit from the life thereafter) speed off the proverbial royal road yet again, and with such casual ingratitude as to make common cause with Mark Twain - “if you pick up a starving dog and make him prosperous he will not bite you. This is the principal difference between a dog and man”.

In the hundred years that preceded Dutugemunu taking the throne, the dynasty had managed to get itself dethroned twice. In the following hundred years they were to do it once more, this time with much greater injury to the state.

Stability is rarely the embodiment of absolute monarchies; and Sri Lanka suffered more than most from almost institutionalized political volatility as if, just below the surface of the realm, with the constant rumbling and tremor of a gathering earthquake, yet another government eruption made itself ready. Instability haunted most of the dozen or so kings that succeeded Dutugemunu.

Five were rogue invaders from Tamil India; at least two were fated to be murdered by their scheming successors; and most of the rest reigned as if having signed up for a farce.

Only Dutugemunu and his later nephew, Valagamba, the Comeback King, were to move the kingdom progressively

onwards. For the rest, it was as if a life-changing ennui had floated into the palace throne room, a debilitating cloud that left every monarch much like Phil and Ralph in “Groundhog Day:

Phil: "What would you do if you were stuck in one place and every day was exactly the same and nothing that you did mattered?"

Ralph: "That about sums it up for me."

Had he had any presentiment of what was to come, it is probable that even Dutugemunu, so famously proactive as to make a Long-life Battery appear idle, would have chucked in his chips and moved on. But thankfully no plot-spoiling deity, soothsayer, or psychic was to interrupt his indomitable spirit; and for a glorious moment it seemed as if the Vijayan good times had returned. The lucky dynasty was back in business.

Although history has drawn back from letting us know Dutugemunu's height, it is probable that he was short, for if ever a leader existed with the Napoleon Syndrome it was this man, whose nature, evident from the many myths and tales of his childhood, was naturally geared to dominate, and control. “Growing duly, Gamani came to sixteen years, vigorous, renowned, intelligent and a hero in majesty and might,” reported The Mahavamsa, with an almost palpable sense of relief and thanksgiving.

TWO

The Prodigal Returns

Dutugemunu's path to ruler of Lanka was far from straightforward, coming as he did from a lesser twig of the Vijayan family tree.

Despite these disadvantages, Dutugemunu famously found his way through an obstacle course of family hurdles intended to arrest his monarchical ambitions. He even made a point of conquering the many mini-Tamil fiefdoms that had sprung up around and possibly within the Rajarata during Ellara reign – a far from straightforward task as the four-month siege of Vijitanagara illustrated. Here, having to calm his panicking elephants against incessant Tamil attacks using "red-hot iron and molten pitch," it was evident how the campaign was no walkover, but one that needed planning and determination to ensure victory. But the triumph was ultimately his. Power was consolidated; and his final victory over Ellara in 161 BCE left him ruling nearly the whole of the island – more territory by far than even that of the great king, Pandu Kabhaya.

And as if to confirm the return of Vijayan order, the construction of more buildings commenced. Anuradhapura expanded exponentially, its infrastructure, utilities, water resources so upgraded as to ensure that it would flourish for centuries to come, the longest surviving capital city of the Indian sub-continent.

Still more spectacular was the building of many more of what would become its most venerated celebrity structures. A large monastery, the Maricavatti, was erected, together with a nine-story chapter house for monks, with a bright copper-tiled roof; and most famous of all, what

is today called the Ruwanweliseya, the Great Stupa, which housed Buddha's begging bowl. The building programme was not restricted to the capital alone – eighty-nine other temples are said to have been constructed, along with hospitals and smaller tanks, in other parts of the kingdom.

The kingdom was return to order – exactly the kind of order that Megasthenes, the Greek historian based in India had noted just a hundred years earlier, relishing, with a commercial leer, the kingdom's "palm-groves, where the trees are planted with wonderful regularity all in a row, in the way we see the keepers of pleasure parks plant out shady trees in the choicest spots;" and how the island was "more productive of gold and large pearls than the Indias."

After decades of enemy occupation and incipient civil war, the Anuradhapuran state found itself a welcome prodigal returning to the honeypot table that was the Indian Ocean economy. Dutugemunu would have found little difficulty in rebooting trade, drawing back to its ports merchants from Arabia, Persia, India, East Asia and possibly even Rome; and, in so doing, wrenching back control of trade and custom dues from the merchants themselves for whom the laissez faire regime of the earlier years had several commercial silver linings.

Accompanying this structural reform and state

promoted capital investment was a new sense of nationalism.

Dutugemunu's recapture of the Anuradhapuran state, the second in just a few decades, was not just a return to power for the Vijayans but for the budding Singhala country too, whose growing cultural differences to the kingdoms across the Palk Straits was accelerating as never before.

"We own the country we grow up in," the Sri Lankan writer Michael Ondaatje was to write thousands of years later: "or we are aliens and invaders".

THREE

Events, dear boy, events

And own it they did, with Dutugemunu applying to the succession the most stringent of moral codes, most strikingly seen in how he disinherited his son Saliya, for having fallen for a girl from one of the lowest castes.

The ailing king, dying before his eye-catching Ruwanweliseya Stupa was finished, ensured the throne passed instead to his own brother, Saddha Tissa in 137 BCE; enjoying, as he did so, an experience rare for most Sri Lankan monarchs - a natural death. And what an end it was.

"Lying on a palanquin," records The Mahavamsa's compelling heart-on-sleeve account, "the king went thither, and when on his palanquin he had passed round the cetiya, going toward the left, he paid homage to it at the south entrance, and as he then, lying on his right side on his couch spread upon the ground, beheld the splendid Great Thupa, and lying on his left side the splendid Lohapasada, he became glad at heart, surrounded by the brotherhood of bhikkhus."

For the next thirty-three years it seemed as if life had gotten back to normal, or to whatever passed for normal amidst the seemingly indestructible building and gardens of Anuradhapura.

King Saddha Tissa busied himself building the obligatory new monastery and, more usefully, a tremendous water tank, the Duratissa Reservoir which held three hundred and thirty-six million cubic feet of water. But as the late British prime minister Harold Macmillan remarked on the unpredictability of politics, the sudden appearance of "events, dear boy, events," was to unseat everything.

Saddha Tissa's death, 18 years later in 119 BCE, set off a power struggle, with his son, Thulatthana, taking the throne – though not for long.

It also fired the gun to start the dynasty's race towards its next great disaster, just 15 years later fuelled by the bewitching pull of palace coups.

Thulatthana's coronation was a crowing too soon. He was not the next legitimate heir, that honour going to his older brother, Lanja Tissa.

But Lanja Tissa was busy far south of Anuradhapura, in Ruhuna, and so not on site to determine the right order of succession. Thulatthana, with the blessing of a Buddhist clergy unable to resist the opportunity to play kingmaker, took control.

Inevitably, war broke out – albeit briefly. Thulatthana was defeated and killed and from 119 BCE to 109 BCE, Lanja Tissa ruled the kingdom, with, no doubt, much justified satisfaction, causing no small trouble to the those monks from Anuradhapura's leading Theravada Buddhist university monastery, the Maha Viharaya, who had earlier plotted to deny him his crown.

But even the pleasures of revenge must end, and Lanja Tissa's death, ten years later, brought his brother, another son of King Saddha Tissa to the throne, Khallata Naga.

FOUR

All the Hounds of Hell

It was a damned succession. Within just six years, the kingdom disintegrated yet again, just as surely as it had when Sena and Guttika, or Ellara had so effortlessly seized the throne in 237 and 205 BCE.

For over twenty years Dutugemunu's successors had failed to nurture their inheritance. Treason, regicide, dynastic self-harm and rebellion had been normalised. Impoverished, neglected, unmanaged - the state was unstable. And ungovernable. "There is a great deal of ruin in a nation," said Adam Smith; and so there was in Khallata Naga's ragged inheritance.

Almost at once he found himself busy with a civil war against three renegade relatives: Tissa, Abha and Uttara, though The Mahavamsa is blithely happier recording the "works of merit" that this careless ruler somewhat astonishingly found time to carry out – including well over thirty religious structures. Much good it did him. Killed by Kamma Harattaka, his chief general in 103 BCE, another messy power struggle broke out for the succession, this time between the general and Valagamba, Khallata Naga's brother.

Valagamba, who later events would show, had so unquenchable a sense of his own royal inheritance as bounce back from the darkest of setbacks, took the throne in 103 BCE by killing the general and – in an act of reckless trust - adopted Kamma Harattaka's son and married his wife.

But it was too good to be true. Barely was the celebratory kiribath digested when all the hounds of hell slipped their leads. A rebellion broke out in Rohana. A devastating drought

began – a less than positive development in a land where the king was considered to have the power to cause rain. And, most ominously, the kingdom's preeminent port, Mahatittha (now Mantota, opposite Mannar) fell to invaders.

The third Tamil invasion of Sri Lanka was underway – this time led by seven opportunistic members of Madurai's Pandyan rulers who had seen in Sena and Gupta; and again in Ellara, just how easy it was to occupy Sri Lanka. It was a lesson that, once learnt, could never be unlearnt.

Valagamba, plucky to the last, met them in battle at a place called Kolambalaka, said to be near Anuradhapura, but ended up fleeing from the battlefield in a chariot lightened by the (accidental?) fall of his wife, Queen Somadevi.

In a 14-year tableau reminiscent of Agatha Christie's novel "Five Little Pigs" the once grand Anuradhapura Kingdom was then manhandled to atrophy.

Two of the Dravidians returned to India, leaving one of the remaining five, Pulahatta, to rule from 104-101 BCE. At this point, history struggles to keep up.

Pulahatta was killed by Bahiya, another of the five remaining Dravidians and head of the army, who was in turn murdered in 99 BCE by Panayamara, the third Dravidian who had been unwisely promoted to run the army.

Proving those who do not read history are doomed to repeat it, Panayamara was assassinated in 92 BCE by his general, the fourth Dravidian, Pilayamara.

And at this point Valagamba, the comeback king, begins his return. Having evaded capture back in 103 BCE, his subsequent escapes and hiding places illuminated the map of Sri Lanka like a Catch-Me-If-You-Can treasure hunt. His most famous hideaway was probably the Gunadaha Rajamaha Viharaya in Galagedera, just where the flat plains of the Anuradhapura Kingdom rise into the mountains that enfold the centre of the island, and with them, protection and cover.

Month by month, Valagamba's guerrilla tactics won ascendancy and the greatest of all compliments in the copycat campaign Ho Chi Minh would carry out centuries later in Vietnam. A milestone was reached when he managed to kill Pilayamara who had lasted all of seven months on the throne. With his death the throne passed to the last of the Pandyan chiefs, Dathika.

Given the murderous incompetence of the Pandyans, Valagamba's incremental skirmishes had the effect of pushing at an open door. His long, determined campaign marks him out as one of the country's pluckiest rulers. His defeat and killing of the Dathika in 89 BCE, gave him 12 years of real rule, and put the dynasty back at the centre of the state.

FIVE

The Written Word

Valagamba set to work building a monastery, stupa and more memorably converting the Dambulla caves in which he hid during his wilderness years, into the famous Rock Temple that exists today.

Less adroitly, Valagamba managed to drive a wedge between the monks, his favouritism of one sect for another, setting in motion the island's first Buddhist schism.

Despite this, it was under Valagamba's patronage that thirty miles north of Kandy five hundred monks gathered at the Aluvihare Rock Temple to write down the precepts of Buddhism. It was a momentous moment. Until then Buddha's teachings had been passed on orally - but repeated invasions from India left the monks fearful that his teachings would be lost.

The challenge they had set themselves was immense. Firstly, they had to recite the doctrines. That would have taken several years. Then they had to agree on an acceptable version of the teachings before transcription. That must have taken even longer. Finally came the lengthy work of transcribing them, using ola leaves from talipot palms.

The Pali Canon became the standard scripture of Theravada Buddhism's, written in the now extinct Pali language, an ancient Indian language, thought to be the language spoken by Buddha and used in Sri Lanka until the fifth century CE. Scholars argue (as they do) about how much of the work can be attributed to one person or to Buddha himself – but believers are largely free of such elaborate debates. The Cannon lays out in unambiguous terms the doctrines, and rules of conduct Buddhists should

follow. Running to some 80,000 pages, the Canon is roughly the size of a dozen Bibles. The cave temple in which it was created still exists, with numerous caverns and old inscriptions to view, despite parts of it having been destroyed in the 19 CE Matale Rebellion.

The monks were probably still hard at work on The Pali Canon when Valagamba died in 77 BCE, bringing his adopted son, Mahakuli Mahatissa to power. History hints that the Valagamba's succession may not have been entirely orderly; if so, then Valagamba's earlier trust in adopting Mahakuli Mahatissa, the son of his slain and traitorous enemy, can be read as a suicidal move.

But however he came to the throne, Mahakuli Mahatissa stayed the course for an surprisingly long fifteen years, though whether he did anything constructive remains a niggling historical curiosity.

What is known however, is that what came next proved right Calvin and Hobbes' astute observation: "It's never so bad that it can't get any worse."

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.

It also helps fund The Ceylon Press, set up to make Sri Lanka's rich and complicated story, a mystery to many, and a secret to most, more accessible. The Press' books, companions, podcasts, blogs, and guides are freely available at theceylonpress.com. The Press also publishes Poetry from the Jungle, a podcast that recasts the orthodox view of the world's best poets and poems.

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