

LUÍS VAZ DE CAMÕES, OS LUSÍADAS AND THE ISLAND OF SRI LANKA (CEILAO)

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INTERESTING it is to note the extent to which Sri Lanka (Ceilão) figures prominently in the sixteenth century Portuguese documents, historical, literary and biographical. Although one notices that some of these early records have been tapped through translations by early historians such as Fr. S. G. Perera and Dr. P. E. Peiris, the literary sources and biographies have not received the same attention. This is a very fertile field for indepth research; such a study will unravel a colourful and undoubtedly fascinating panorama of Sri Lankan cultural history. It should, nevertheless, be noted that, in a sense this situation is the result not so much of a lack of awareness and motivation but generally reflects a lack of financial back-up at the level of the academe.

A few scholars like Prof. C. R. de Silva and Prof. Tikiri Abeyasinghe from the University circle, Rev. Fr. Dr. W. L. A. Don Peter, Rt. Rev. Bishop Emeritus, Dr. Edmund Pieris and Mr. A. C. Dep have followed the earlier Sri Lankan academic exercise, but not to the extent that its importance demands. A study of Portuguese records in original Portuguese is a sine-qua-non for any study of Portuguese history and culture.

Be that as it may.

Although Sri Lanka's external factor in relation to European conquest and colonization is said to commence with the arrival of Alexander in India and the relay of news pertaining to Sri Lanka by Onesicritus in 330 B.C.; the island civilization, that is Sri Lanka, encountered powerful European forces with advanced social systems, only after the arrival in the island of the Portuguese either in 1504 or in 1505. The period which emerges subsequently is indeed a big historical threshold. In point of fact the Portuguese could not control the island in its entirety, and as Abeyasinghe rightly states¹ there were only 4,640 villages under the Portuguese rule. Although their span of life in Sri Lanka was short (1505-1658 A.D.) and was confined to the littoral, the missionary work of the Portuguese and later of the Goans activated a steady process of acculturation which has left a lasting impression on Sri Lankan society. Their influence on Sri Lankan cultural mores, literature, theatre and official documentation cannot be easily dismissed.

Even so, it is regrettable that some of the more prominent Portuguese historians today conveniently by-pass Sri Lanka when they discuss Portuguese influence in South Asia and in South East Asia. In an interview with the Lisbon daily newspaper *Diário da Notícias* (8 May, 1988), Professor Oliveira Marques, Professor Catedrático da Faculdade de Ciências e Humanas of the newly established University of Nova de Lisboa states inter alia:

“Admitando que há um numero excessivamente grande de países interessando aos descobrimentos Portugueses e que seria necessário reduzir o conjunto alguns mais importantes, penso que teríamos de atender aos grandes pontos de expansão portuguesa desde meados do século XV: chegada ao Cabo da Boa Esperança, portanto Africa do Sul; chegada á India, logo União Indiana; chegada á Malaca, logo o Governo de Singapura, e o Governo dos Estados malaicos; e, finalmente, chegada á china e ao Japão..”

(Tr. “Admitting that in a study of Portuguese discoveries there are an exceedingly numerous number of countries connected, it becomes necessary to reduce the number of the more important ones in studying the important points in the Portuguese expansion from the middle of the XVth century; arrived in the Cape of Good Hope and therefore South Africa; arrived in India which later became the Indian Union; arrived in Malacca, later the Government of Singapore; the Government of the United Malay Government and finally, arrived in China and Japan..”

For this historian Sri Lanka (Ceilão) is not of that importance! Countless number of travel histories of the Idade Média or the Middle ages and historical documents of the 16th, 17th centuries stored in the Lisbon and Goa archives as well as in the libraries of the Sociedade de Geographia, Lisbon, the Biblioteca at the University of Coimbra nail this lie to the desk.

I wonder whether Japan, China or Singapore could display more Portuguese influence than the island of Lanka; the Portuguese exerted such pervasive influence here that it has left behind nearly two to three thousand Portuguese-speaking descendants² concentrated in one pocket in and near Batticaloa. Their morpho-syntactic traits when examined in the light of modern philological research reveal a wealth of information on the extensive use of a kind of Portuguese pidgin spoken in South Asia.

James Emerson Tennent writing in 1859 refers to Sri Lanka in the following terms: “There is no island in the world that has attracted the attention of authors in so many distant ages and so many different countries as Ceylon. There is no nation in ancient or modern times possessed of a language and a literature, the writers of which have not at some time made it their theme. Its aspect, its religion, its antiquities, and productions, have been described as well by the Classic Greeks, as by those of the Lower Empire; by Romans, by the writers of China, Burmah, India, and Kashmir; by the geographers of

Arabia and Persia; by the mediaeval voyagers of Italy and France; *by the analysts of Portugal and Spain*³ by the merchant adventurers of Holland, and by the travellers and topographers of Great Britain."⁴

Early Portuguese historians, unlike some of those of today, wagged eloquence of Ceilão since the time of Gil Eanes who passed Cape Bojador in 1434. For instance in a very rare document which records the bequeathing of the rights of the island to the Portuguese king by D. João of Kandy we note almost a eulogy on the island.

It is in this context that we turn our attention to the immortal Portuguese epic, *Os Lusíadas* composed by Luís Vaz de Camões (Camões) in the early sixteenth century. This is a travel classic and the poet is regarded today as one of Portugal's hero-poets; June 10th, the date of his death is a public holiday in Portugal.

The poem comprises 10 Cantos (a Canto is equal to a *sargaya*) containing almost 1102 verses, highly lyrical in character. Since the work is a record in verse, of the valorous feats and arms which the Portuguese performed in the East, it verily commences with a reference to Lanka:

"As armas e os barões assinalados
Que, da Ocidental praia Lusitana,
Por mares nunca navegados
Passaram ainda além da Taprobana,
....."5

(Literal translation:

"The warlike barons valiant,
From the Western Lusitanian (Portuguese) coast
Rowing on to seas never before navigated,
And pass through Taprobana.")

Taprobana, as we know, is one of the many terms to describe Sri Lanka used by foreign travellers of the past. Although the Portuguese historian Fernão Lopes de Castanheda was not certain of the location of Taprobana⁶ Camões, the war-poet quite rightly describes its location in the following verse:

"Vês, corre a costa celebre Indiana,
Pera o Sul, ate o Cabo Comori,
Ja chamado Cori, que Taprobana
(Que ora é Ceilão) defronte tem de ai"⁷

(Tr.

"Observe the celebrated coast of India,
To the South, till Cape Comorin,
Known as Cori, the Taprobana,
(That is Ceilão) that lies ahead of you")

The descriptions are colourful and undoubtedly fascinating. It is also a rich source of information to the student as well as the geographer. It is recalled how Camões was once very close to the royal court in Portugal, but a street brawl put him behind Lisbon prison bars. Although Portuguese historians do not appear to ignore the fact that his journey to the East was a result of this action, it is quite certain that he was sent overseas immediately thereafter. In 1553 he was sent to Goa. In this journey he had to follow the path laid by the famous Portuguese Captain Vasco da Gama; it is interesting to note that the poem is a narrative of the *vida gama* (the life of Gama), almost a eulogy. Camões was born in 1524, the year Gama died. We see their remains placed side by side in the national pantheon in the famous Portuguese Mosteiro S. Jerónimos in Lisboa. Both are connected with the East. Both fought wars. But Camões became a chronicler. Gama fought wars. Camões wrote verses on the sea voyages, the islands and the coastal towns. Camões's love for his poems is illustrated from an incident related by traditional Portuguese folklorists. When he was hastily despatched back to Goa from Macau in 1556 the ship in which he sailed was wrecked in the high seas off the river Meekong in China. He had swam ashore, but assuring that the unfinished manuscript of *Os Lusíadas* would not get wet; he had been raising it high over his head!

The allusions to Lanka are numerous.

"A nova ilha Maluco, co(com) a canela,
Com que Ceilão é rica, ilustre e bela"⁸

(Tr. "Recently discovered island, Maluco, with cinnamon,
With which Ceylon is rich, illustrious and lovely)

Captain João Ribeiro in his book "Fatalidade de Historia" refers to ships from the Red sea, South Seas and such countries as Bengala and Persia assembling in Ceilão to collect cinnamon. Among the tribute collected by Lopo Soares de Albergaria in the early 16th century were 300 bahars (1200 quintals-hundred-weights) of cinnamon. The competition between the maritime powers to gain command of the cinnamon trade of Ceylon appears to have resulted in internacine warfare; two such powers were the Portuguese and the Moors. Camões relates these wars in detail in Canto IX.

An interesting reference made by Camões is to the mountain Sri Pada:

"Olha, em Ceilão, que o monte se alevanta
Tanto, que as nuvens passa ou a vista engana;
Os naturais o tem por cousa santa,
Pola pedra onde está a pegada humana."⁹

(Tr. "Look! in Ceilão the mount that lifts up,
So (high), that it passes the clouds, or the vision misleads,
The natives through sacred motive,
By the stone where the foot-print of a humane")

Camões was a poet, and an immortal lyricist !

I have a different view point on this description. Camões was in Coimbra in Portugal; either he studied there or was born there. Coimbra University stands on a lofty hill, and when one climbs it and enters the class rooms one does not wish to climb down for his lunch or evening tea because it is so strenuous and tiresome. But the view from the top, perhaps from the College of Arts is fantastic. Aubry F. Bell makes the following comment:

“The fervent humanism of the beautiful old city on the hill above the transparent waters of Mondego and the exquisite surrounding scenery had sunk deep into his spirit, and we may surmise that it was love rather than ambition that drove the poet from University, when his learning and talent could not fail to be appreciated”.¹⁰

It is therefore not strange that Camões was enticed by the idealized atmosphere and the glorious celestial view which Sri Pada affords to the pilgrim.

At the time of Camões's departure from Lisbon to the East, the kings of Lanka were in constant communication with the kings of Portugal. Twelve years prior to this event a diplomatic mission headed by Salappu Aracchi was in Lisbon: they had an audience with King D. João IIIrd. In 1557, that is four years after the arrival of Camões in the island, Dharmapala was baptized as D. João Periya Pandar. Events such as these would have prompted Camões's sojourn in Ceilão; his vivid descriptions are a living testimony.

NOTES

1. Abeyasingha, Tikiri, *Portuguese Rule in Ceylon*, Colombo, 1966.
2. Vide, Goonatilleka, 'O padre Jacome Goncalves e a sua contribuição para a literatura cingalês' *Panorama*, Lisboa, 1970 (30/31); 'Relações culturais entre Ceilão e Portugal', *Studia*, Lisboa, 1970; 'Off the beaten track: Portuguese connection in Sinhala literature'. *The Sri Lanka Archives*, Colombo, 1983 (1/1); 'Portuguese-Burghers of Sri Lanka', *Cultural and Educational Issues in multi-cultural societies*. Second International Conference on Indian Ocean Studies, Perth, W. Australia, 1984; 'A Portuguese creole in Sri Lanka: a brief socio-linguistic survey', *Indo-Portuguese History, old issues, new questions*, Xavier Centre for Historical Research, Goa, India, 1983; Smith, Ian R., *Sri Lanka Creole Portuguese Phonology*, Monash University, Australia, 1977; Dalgado, Pe. Sebastiao Rodolpho, *Dialecto Indo-Portuguese de Ceilão*, Lisboa, 1900; Hettiaratchi, D. E., 'Influence of the Portuguese on the Sinhala language', *JRASC*, 1965; Lopes, David, 'A Expanao da lingua portugeses no oriente', durante os séculos XVI, XVII, XVIII', Lisboa)
3. Italics lettering is mine.
4. *Ceylon, an Account of the Island*, London, 1859.
5. *Oos Lusiadas de Luis de Camoes*, (ed) Emmanuel Paulo Ramos, Lisboa, Cap. 1 Canto 1.
6. Castanheda, Fernao Lopes de, *Historia da India*, Livro II, Cap. XXII.
7. *Os Lusiadas*, Canto X, v. 107.
8. Canto IX:14.
9. Canto X; 136.
10. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 4.





**OS
LUSIADAS
DE LVIS**
de Camões.

*¶ Polo original antigo
agora nouamente
impressos.*

EM LISBOA,
Com licença do Sancto
Offisio & Priuile-
gio Real

Por Manoel de Lyrá. 1597.
A custa de Esteuão Lopez mer-
cador de liuros.