



## AIR MOBILITY, TEN HEADS AND UNIVERSAL AUTHORITY: EXPLORATORY STUDY OF KING RAVANA IN THE FOLKTALES OF SABARAGAMUWA

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### INTRODUCTION

King Ravana, the anti-hero in the epic Sanskrit poem *Ramayanya*, a text believed to have been composed in between 500 BCE and 100 BCE by the sage Valmiki, shares one common aspect with Paris, the son of the Trojan King Priam, the anti-hero of Homer's epic poem *Iliad*: both have abducted the legitimate wives of powerful kings and the subsequent events brought forth war and violence upon their subjects and territories. Thus, in *Ramayanya*, King Ravana is the demon king of Lanka capable of unspeakable violence and the plot thus builds a case for his violent ending. Yet, in his mother land, in a region where he has supposedly lived, this anti-hero of *Ramayanya* is remembered differently. In the orally-transmitted folktales of Sabaragamuwa, believed to have been the ancient seat of power of Ravana before he built a large empire, he is recast as a just and an admired king at the head of a fledging empire. This same image of a powerful Lankan king with an empire also triggered a recent nationalist debate involving self-styled Ravana experts, academics and media personnel--the scope and limits of this discussion is beyond the scope of this paper. Instead the focus of this paper is on a collection of folktales titled *Sabaragamuwa Ravana Jana Katha* (Ravana Folktales of the Sabaragamuwa Region), which is a collection of 56 folktales collected from that region by the renowned folktale collector Gunasekera Gunasoma who had published over 20 collections of Lankan folktales from different geographical regions as well as ethnic groups.<sup>1</sup> This study undertakes a close reading of these folktales to understand the modes of construction of Ravana as well as the limits of such endeavors using a folkloric re-reading of the tales. The primary aim is to understand how the narratives of Ravana offer a reflection of what people assume about themselves and their material reality.

Folkloric speech acts are usually considered essential constituents of a nation's heritage as well as a mirror of cultural traditions—in the words of a folklorist, they are “autobiographical ethnography” (Dundes 2007) of a group of people, or a group of people's description about themselves. Folktale, according to Thompson (1977) 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). Kirk (1986) assumes that owing to the high “factual content” (Kirk, 1984) of folktales they tend not to “practical or emotional and intellectual applications” (Kirk, 1984). This study would locate these assumptions at its backdrop as it re-reads Ravana in the tales as figure that offer us a glimpse into the people's deep inner reflection about themselves as well as a figure head they would prefer to preserve for the present and the future. Also if folktales do not offer the

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<sup>1</sup> 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)



applications as listed by Kirk, this study would also attempt to locate the function of the Ravana tales to the region.

### **Folkloric Introduction to Folktales of Ravana**

Gunasoma's Ravana aolktales from the *Sabaragamuwa* Region is a collection of 56 folktales involving King Ravana and was first published in 2016. His initiative was sponsored by the provincial administrative divisions of the *Sabaragamuwa* province who have taken an active interest in preserving the folk heritage of the region. The compiler has recorded the tales in the spoken language of the tellers and at the end of each tale he has included a short biography of the teller. Though seemingly this collection meets the rigorous standards of folktale collection as proposed by folkloristics, a careful analysis suggests many theoretical concerns. For instance, the compiler does not offer comprehensive details about his mode of collection of the tales. As 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—all this needs to be recorded when collecting the tales. Gunasoma has largely neglected these aspects. 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, a thorough details of his informers not their social context. 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 endeavor in the first place.

### **King Ravana, a Short Introduction as he appears in the version popularized in North India<sup>2</sup>**

Ramayanaya is an epic poem of in classical Sankskrit which follows events of the life of King Rama, considered to be a reincarnation of God Vishnu who is one of the most powerful and celebrated gods known as the world preserver in the Hindu pantheon. In the poem, King Ravana is identified as the king of Lanka who has 10 heads and 20 arms. He is known for his extreme asceticism which earned him a boon from Brahma allowing him invincibility from mortal threats posed by gods, demons or spirits. Yet, rather than humbling him this blessing becomes a curse as he violates his jurisdiction and engages in violent expansion of his territory. God Vishnu incarnates as King Rama to defeat him. When Ravana obsessed by the beautiful wife of Rama, known as Sita, and abducts her Rama declares war on him. Assisted by an army of monkeys and bears Rama engages in a prolonged battle of wit and ferocity with his enemy before slaying him.

## **METHODOLOGY**

One of the important characteristics of a folktale is notion of 'folk idea.' Folk idea is an implicit unit of narrative which demonstrates the assumptions and conjectures a story creators/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 tales 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.

<sup>2</sup> This summary extracted from R.K Narayan's rendering of the Ramayanaya. See References for details.



Ravana folktales of Sabaragamuwa have not come under focus academic scrutiny for the present study to observe, study or reflect upon.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A summary of what is represented by the ‘folk ideas’ found in the Ravana folktales are as follows. Ravana originates from a royal lineage of both Lankan and Indian, thus his assumed right to rule India as claimed in the tales. Like any emperor, Ravana began his battle for supremacy over a large swathe of land with a smaller confederate in ancient Lanka: he fought a prolonged and a brutal war to expand his territory to cover all of Sri Lanka and thereby creating a unified kingdom. In this unified Lanka, King Ravana, as the folktales suggest, was a skilled administrator and a compassionate king much popular among his subjects. After the unification of Lanka, Ravana engaged in the next logical move, he conquered the region and went on to become a universal monarch with serious concern for environment and the well-being of his subjects. He was famed for meting out severe punishment for those who destroyed forests anywhere in the world. Ravana possessed multiple intelligences, (represented by his ten heads), namely: knowledge of energies in the universe, language, law, military, astrology, music and medicine. He also possessed knowledge of aircraft engineering and landscaping—he was responsible for the flying machine called *Dandu Monare* and the gardens of Sigiriya. The kidnapping of Sita was an event that was initiated only as a response to an injury and insult caused to Ravana’s sister by Rama and his friends. During her stay as a prisoner of Ravana in Lanka, Ravana and Sita formed a romantic bond. Ravana lost the final battle to Rama owing to people in his own camp betraying him. Even in his death the protective influence of King Ravana still exists in the Sabaragamuwa province.

Thus, the ‘folk ideas’ embedded in the folktales have offered Ravana a much human and endearing profile, and thus offers him an alternative voice against the Indian version. Folk imagination justifies his expansion of power and dominion by suggesting that Ravana was a skilled and a compassionate king who could manage power with responsibility.

## CONCLUSIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS

The Ravana folktales of Sabaragamuwa have offered oral/textual resistance to the original Ramayanaya by subverting the Ravana found therein. They have offered an alternative voice to King Ravana and had neutralized the negative characteristics attributed to him. This act of owning Ravana from an Indian epic, and offering him redemption through a moral coating is a reflection of how foreign influences are negated by people of a specific region in Sri Lanka. Interestingly, the notion of unification of the nation under one rule is a powerful idea that harks to similar efforts by King Dutugemunu—Ravana folktales have valorized that idea and have also extended that notion beyond the shores of the nation into an empire driven by a Lankan personality. Perhaps, in the folkloric imagination of the people of Sabaragamuwa, Ravana is a metaphor for a successful nation which also has the capability to extend its controlling arm to the region. In this metaphoric success, the ruler is compassionate righteous and also a preserver of the environment (which could have been (and could be) under threat by those with power). This same metaphoric ruler possesses intelligence and is able to manipulate technology to achieve his own ends. One could hardly say that this formula of success exists in the sphere of lies of the story tellers. Thus, Ravana of Sabaragamuwa is a people’s projection of a metaphoric solution to an ailment that is affecting their lives—abuse and corruption of power. And the tales might be a cathartic response to a situation that is too obvious in their social setting.

This study is only a preliminary exploration of the Ravana tales and it has its own short comings specifically in its analysis of the social context of the tales. In its second stage intends to fill those gaps expand its focus to locate how Ravana could be a representative of national imagination of the people in response to a national crisis.



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