

THE FIRST WAR OF UNIFICATION IN SRI LANKA: A READ BETWEEN THE LINES

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Abstract

The war fought between prince Duttagamini and Elara in the 1st Century BC was commonly known as the first war of unification in Sri Lanka. Until then the country was not referred to by the historians as a single sovereign administrative unit. There were many power pockets operating from various parts of Sri Lanka. However, Mahavamsa the chronicle which was written a few centuries after the war of unification, allocates a favourable prominence to the victory of Duttagamini against Elara. This historical event has been interpreted by many historians for many objectives in the passage of Sri Lankan history. This paper critically analyses the historical validity of the facts about the war taken place.

Keywords— Duttagamini, Elara, Unification

INTRODUCTION

Sri Lanka became a much more civilized nation after the advent of Buddhism along with the reign of King Dewanampiyathissa. And the beginning of many new cultural aspects setting along the path to a more developed state. Starting up with a ruling system with much more positive backgrounds together with social and cultural areas from side to side. Sinhala Kings started up with ruling focused mainly on the interior of the country. Till invasions from different nations started up. Specially invasions from South India.

According to the Mahavamsa the early Anuradhapura period was not ruled by one King or under one main district. However, it was ruled under many sub-regional areas where there were chieftains and rulers to each minor to major human settlement within Sri Lanka. The central power that a state should have was divided and subjected to highs and lows in different levels with the impact of different reasons. Beginning from King Pandukabaya to King Elara Sri Lanka was not unified till King Duttugemunu took up the responsibility along with the war against King Elara an invader. Before the unification, we see the just and powerful rule of the South Indian Invader. King Duttagamini and his efforts to unify Sri Lanka are the earliest wars of territorialism seen in the Mahavamsa. He was the first king to unite the whole of Sri

Lanka under one unified state and recapture from tribes of Indian migrants. His Campaign to unify went through a series of wars in which he killed 32 kings (literally confirmed by both the Mahavamsa and Depavamsa, although only the Mahavamsa states they were Tamil kings) to arrive at Vijithapura to face his greatest foe King Elara.

Starting up with two “Damilas” or Tamils, Sena and Guttika, sons of a freighter who brought horses hither conquered the Sinhala king Sooratissa, at the head of a great army and reigned Sri Lanka together for twenty-two years. But when Asela had overpowered them, the son of Mutasiva, the ninth among his brothers, born of the same mother, he ruled for ten years onward from that time in Anuradhapura. This is the closest history for the start-up of King Elara’s just rule despite him being an invader and a Tamil.

At this period there were branches of the royal family established at Kelaniya and Magama in the present Hambantota District. The queen of Devanampiya Tissa tried to poison her brother-in-law, the sub-king Mahanaga, who thereupon fled towards Ruhuna. On the way his wife gave birth to a son, Tissa, at the Yattala Vihara, whence, proceeding to Ruhuna, he established himself at Magama. The site of Tissa's birthplace usually is identified with a temple near Galle, but it is clear from the narrative that it was not in Ruhuna: possibly it the vihara of the same name in Kegalla District.

During the reign of King Asela 185 BC, a Damila (Tamil) named Elara from the Chola country landed at Malwathu Oya with a large army of nearly 100,000 men at the mouth of the river Mahaweli on the east coast of Lanka. From there, the army marched to Anuradhapura. King Asela was killed and the Kingdom was seized. Having overcome opposition Elara established 32 military camps and appointed 20 great paladins. An account of these camps is found in the Nikaya Sangrahaya.

He ruled the country forty-four years, his justice commanded the respect of his Sinhala subjects. Though a Hindu, concerning this the Mahavamsa relates that the king had a bell with a rope attached at the head of his bed, so that all who sought redress might ring it. Among other instances of the royal justice the chronicle tells how a calf was killed unintentionally by the chariot wheel of the king's son, and how, on the mother cow ringing the bell, the father had the prince's head struck off by the same wheel. The story is also told in Tamil literature of the Chola king Manu. Elara is a peculiar figure in the history of Sri Lanka and one with particular resonance given the ongoing strife in the country. Although he was an invader, he is often regarded as one of Sri Lanka's

wisest and most just monarchs, as highlighted in the ancient Sinhalese chronicle Mahavamsa.

Elara's reign has been ascertained to be from 205 BC to 161 BC – a cumulative period of 44 years. Assuming that he had to be at least 20 years to capture the Anuradhapura kingdom, and one can fix his birth year to around 225 BC. Thus, Elara's life span can be tentatively fixed for 61 years. He died in a duel (fought while riding an elephant) against the young prince Dutugemunu in 161 BC.

KING ELARA THE NOBLE RULER

King Elara is described in the Mahavamsa as "A Tamil of noble descent . . . from the Chola-country". Little is known of his early life. Around 205 BCE, King Elara mounted an invasion of the Rajarata based in Anuradhapura in northern Sri Lanka and defeated the forces of king Asela of Anuradhapura, establishing himself as sole ruler of Rajarata. His name is mentioned in Silappatikaram and Periya Puranam and since then it has been used as a metaphor for fairness and justice in Tamil literature.

According to Professor W.I. Siriweera in his book "History of Sri Lanka" Elara couldn't have remained in power for such a long period as 43 years if he lacked the support of the locales. Professor Siriweera has further stated that "most foreigners who succeeded in resting the throne and ruling the country for any considerable length of time have had some indigenous support or had been backed by foreign power."

It is evident that King Elara was a just king to an extent that he executed his own son as a punishment for killing a calf. The Mahavamsa itself states that King Elara was a pious and just king that even though he was not a Buddhist himself, he patronized Buddhism.

Throwing light into the most reliable source of Sri Lankan history, which is the Mahavamsa, it is evident that King Elara and King Dutugemunu was in more of a feudal power game and not in the racial conflict between the Tamils and Sinhalese given the fact that King Elara had deep reverence to Buddhism. For instance, it is stated that when Elara was on his way to the Cetiya Mountain in a chariot to invite Bhikkhus the nub of the yoke of his chariot struck a dagoba and caused damage to the monument. During this scenario Elara's ministers are said to have exclaimed that "Oh King! Our thupa has been damaged by you" This portrays the fact that Elara had Sinhalese ministers as they claimed the thupa to be theirs. It is clear that King Elara has given

prominence to the locales during his regime. Moreover, king Elara is said to have invited Buddhist Bhikkhus of the Cetiya Mountain for a religious function or to seek to advice.

KING KAVAN TISSA

Kavan Tissa, also known as Kakavantissa, was the king of the Kingdom of Ruhuna in the southern part of Sri Lanka. He ruled Ruhuna, in the same time as Kelani Tissa of Maya rata and the usurping Tamil king of Anuradhapura, Elara of South India, expanding and beautifying the city, and projecting the power of his native Rajarata region across the island of Sri Lanka. Kavan Tissa was a great-grandson of King Devanampiyatissa's youngest brother Mahanaga, and also, the father of King Dutugemunu.

It is clear that the Mahavamsa author was in great kilfu of King Duttagamini hence he not only tried to glorify the achievements of King Dutugemunu by elaborating on his religious nationalist mannerisms, he also portrays King Kaavantissa (his father) and his brother King Saddhatissa as cowardly leaders who wasn't in favour of conflict. In the saga of King Duttagamini, the Mahavamsa author portrays the young prince Gamini as an upcoming, powerful religious-nationalist leader. Lore has it that when Prince Gamini was just 12 years old, King Kaavantissa made three mouthfuls of rice which he made Prince Gamini and Prince Tissa eat while making three promises. One was to never go into war with the Tamils, which Prince Gamini refused at once. It also states that the enraged and frustrated prince was lying crouched on the bed and when his mother questioned him of the reason, he has compared his bed to the island and stated that, " Over there beyond the river are the Tamils; here on this side is the sea; how can I lie with outstretched limbs" The Mahavamsa chronicler Mahanama Thera further elaborates that Prince Gemunu's attempt to wage war against the Tamils was prevented by King Kaavantissa three times. As a result, the enraged Prince has sent a set of women's' ornaments to his father and he self - exiled himself to the central mountains (believed to be Malaya) and earned the name "Duttagamini". Professor W.I.Siriweera has stated that, it is significant that the relationship between King Kaavantissa and Prince Gamini was strained during the latter part of the prince's youth.

However, it is clear that King Dutugemunu must have surely lost the battle against Elara and the Tamils if not for his father's foresight and skilful planning. It is evident that King Kaavantissa lay the founding stone for King Dutugemunu to go into combat with Elara without facing many difficulties. Therefore, it is wrong to portray King Kakavantissa as a weak, cowardly leader for refusing to go into unplanned combat with a powerful ruler who managed to rule the country for 43 years.

It is evident that King Dutugemunu had to bring 38 kingdoms and kinglets under one royal umbrella before going to the final unification war with King Elara. The initiative was taken by King Kavantissa and he was the ruler who welded the various kinglets of Rohana into one unit. He brought the Kelani Kingdom under his rule by giving his sister Somadevi in marriage to Prince Abhaya of Kelaniya. Furthermore, he managed to bring the kinglets Seru and Soma under his influence of Rohana by using tactful means.

Professor Senarath Paranavithana has pointed out that King Kaaavatissa managed to build and train an army in a very successful manner. He established workshops to manufacture the required weaponry needed for combat. The hiring of 10 warriors with supernatural powers is one of the most salient features of King Kaavatissa's skilful panning. By name they were known as, Nandimitra, Theruputtabhaya, Suranimala, Mahasona, Gotaimbara, Bharana, Velusumana, Kanchadeva, Phussadeva and Labhiyavasabha. The king gave the responsibility of expanding and training the army to these 10 warriors. Hence, they managed to raise an army of 11,100 soldiers. Prince Dutugemunu too contributed to train the army in combat before the grand finale. King Kaavantissa had garrisons posted at strategic points along the Mahaweli river and also managed to station spies in the kingdom of Anuradhapura. Moreover, he sent his son Dighabhaya (from another princess of his concubine other than Viharamahadevi) to guard the frontier against possible in roads from the Rajarata ruler. King Kaavatissa's foresight can be described as beyond great given the fact that he predicted of a possible war between his sons Prince Gamini and Prince Tissa. Therefore, he made the warriors and monks take an oath to stay away from such a battle between the brothers. In addition to King Kaavatissa's foresight in building war strategies, he realized the fact that a war can't be fought successfully if the economy of the citizens was not satisfactory. Therefore, he sent his younger son Prince Tissa to Dighavapi to develop and oversee the agricultural and irrigation sectors.

As discussed above, it is evident that the unification war wouldn't have been an easy one for King Duttagamini if not for King Kaavantissa's tactful planning. Unfortunately, he isn't given the credit that he deserves as he's portrayed as a cowardly leader who refused to wage war against the Tamils who were ruling the capital city of the island, Anuradhapura.

Due to this great feat and the support offered. The Mahavamsa constitutes the major source on Dutugemunu's reign and dedicates eleven chapters out of 37 to his tale. Hence, the Mahawamsa itself is known as the epic of Dhuttagamini by certain historians. In chapter 22 he is described as being descended from the ancient royal family of Rajarata through Devanampiyatissa's brother Mahanaga. At the time of his birth Dutugemunu's father was Kavantissa, king of Ruhuna, a small kingdom in south-east Sri Lanka outside of the influence of Rajarata in the north; the border between the two kingdoms was the Mahaganga, or 'Great River', possibly the modern Menik Ganga. The Dipavamsa which is the earliest extent historical record of Sri Lanka referred to Sena and Guttika, the earliest invaders of Sri Lanka as the Damilas but not Elara. It merely states that the Kshatriya prince Elara, having killed Asela, ruled righteously for forty-four years.

W I Siriweera states in his book history of Sri Lanka that "neither at the time of writing of the Dipawamsa" nor during the two centuries prior to its writing, did Sri Lanka experience south Indian invasions while the Sinhala and the Tamil communities living in the island had existed as best as they could without conflict.

Dutugemunu's mother was Vihara Mahadevi, daughter of Tissa, king of Kalyani. Legend has it that as punishment for Tissa slaying a Buddhist monk, Kalyani had been subject to a series of deluges from the sea. To placate it Tissa placed his daughter Devi in a golden boat with the words 'A King's Daughter' written on the side, and set her out to sea. Miraculously the princess washed ashore, alive and well, in Ruhuna, and married Kavantissa. During her pregnancy with Dutugemunu, Viharamahadevi had a series of peculiar cravings, including the urge to sleep on a pillow made of honeycombs. In particular her urge to drink the water used to wash a sword that had cleaved the head of a warrior of Elara, whilst standing on that same head, raised the interest of the soothsayers at court, who predicted that 'The queen's son, when he has vanquished the Damilas and built up a United Kingdom, will make the doctrine to shine forth brightly'. Viharamahadevi gave birth to a son named Gamani Abhaya sometime later, and after that to another child, a boy named Tissa. Around the time of

Gamani's birth, 'an elephant of the six-tusked race brought his young one thither and left him here and went his way'. Named Kandula, he went on to become Gamani's mount and accompanied him through much of the prince's adventures. By the age of sixteen Gamani was 'vigorous, renowned, intelligent and a hero in majesty and might'. If a little wayward. Determined to expel the invading king of Rajarata, Gamani levied an army from around Rohana and declared his intention to regain the north to his father. The king forbade this stating that 'the land on this side of the river is enough' the resulting exchange between father and son saw Gamani being dubbed 'Duttha Gamani', his friends fleeing to Malaya, and he himself being incarcerated in a royal prison.

Kavantissa is known as a good strategist who recognized early that he needed to make his kingdom powerful before waging war against the invaders. He assembled armies and made his kingdom prosperous – this meant that the people had a lot of agricultural surpluses. The legendary ten "great paladins" – men who had great strength – were brought into the army at this time. Kavantissa repeatedly makes Dutugemunu and Tissa swear that they would never fight one another and that they would always respect and listen to the advice of the priests. He also makes the ten paladins swear never to pick sides in a war between the brothers.

CONCLUSION

Upon Kavantissa's death, Dutugemunu found himself having to defend his crown against his younger brother Tissa, who had seized possession of not only the elephant Kandula, but the dowager queen Viharamahadevi as well. The war between the two began with a defeat for Dutugemunu at Culanganiyapitthi, where 'many thousands of the king's (Dutugemunu's) men' perished. Dutugemunu was forced to flee back to Mahagama where he levied another army and engaged Tissa in yet another battle in the vicinity of the city. Legend has it that as Tissa, fought his brother riding the royal elephant "Kandula" against Dutugemunu who rode a mare. Dutugemunu at one point made the mare jump over the elephant causing the elephant to recognize its master and attempt to kill Tissa who hastily dismounts via a tree. Dutugemunu was victorious and Tissa was smuggled off the battlefield disguised as the corpse of a monk. It is said that Dutugemunu recognized the ploy and called out to his brother "Are you not ashamed to be carried on the back of these priests?" Sometime afterwards, however,

Dutugemunu and Tissa were reconciled through the efforts of Vihara Mahadevi and the monks, and Tissa became one of the king's foremost generals.

Having secured his place, he then planned his operations to regain the north, which included not only Rajarata but numerous smaller semi-independent polities. The king's army consisted of 'chariots, troops and beasts for riders', soldiers and a number of war elephants, as well as a number of monks (to advise the King) and a relic placed in his spear for luck and blessings. In addition he was accompanied by the famed Ten Giant Warriors who had been recruited from all over the island by his father Kavantissa.

Historians believe that the two generals Gamini and Dighabaya of Elara's army to be Sinhala Buddhist names. Elara's sister's son, Nandimitta was one of Duttagamini's ten commanders.

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