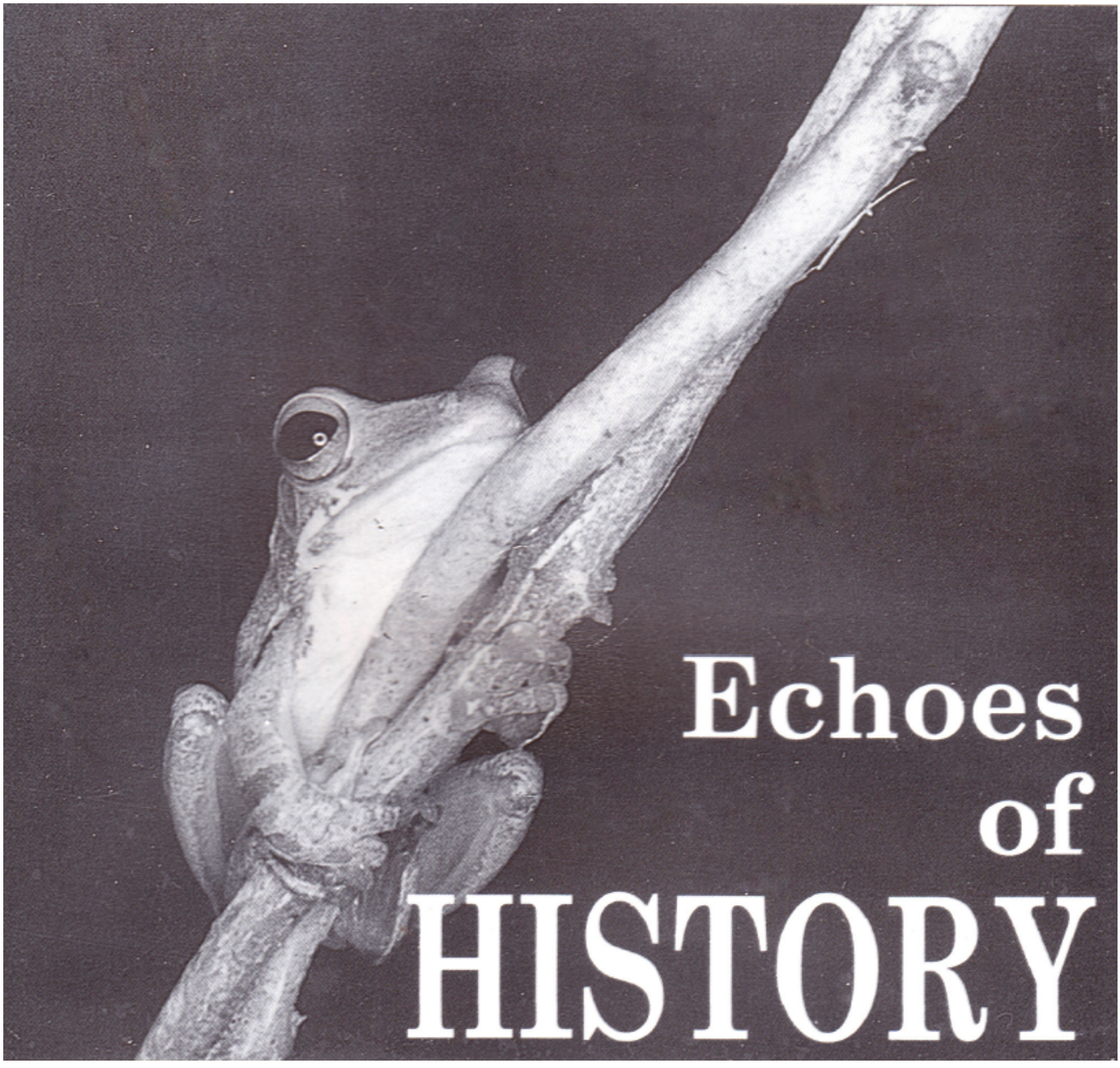
Echoes of History

Posted on

A legend retold by Iris Manampery



Anuradhapura is an ancient capital situated 240km north of Colombo. It is a historian’s paradise and also a place of veneration to the Buddhists. 12km from Anuradhapura, along the road to Trincomalee, is the village of Mihintale. It was on the rock of Mihintale that King Devanampiya Tissa met the missionary Mahinda, who introduced Buddhism to our land.

In Mihintale are the architectural remains of an ancient, well-planned hospital. Here have been found deep, stone receptacles for steam and oil baths and various forms of herbal treatment. The Mahavamsa which is an ancient record of our country’s history, speaks of animal hospitals too and it is said that the system of acupuncture, brought from China, was used on elephants even at that time.

In our history, the science of medicine is closely associated with King Buddhadasa (meaning the Slave of the Buddha), a physician and surgeon who gave much of his time to the sick and suffering of his kingdom. He also inaugurated community projects for the blind and incurables, very much like those of modern times.

Many legends have been woven around his medical skills and although some of them are unbelievable, many are delightful insights into the ancient way of life.

A king’s cure

Dusk was falling and shadows lengthening. The farmer left his plough, straightened the length of cloth wound around his head and looked afar at the vast expanse of rich, red soil, neatly unearthed in even furrows. Feeling proud at a day’s work well done, he stopped at the village tank to wash away the mud which lay encrusted on his hands and feet.

The coolness of the clear, cool water soon dispelled his fatigue when splashed it over his weary body. Unable to resist the comfort of the cooling water, he cupped his hands and took deep draughts to slake his thirst. The water so refreshed him that he drank on and on to his heart’s content, before making his way home.

After a month this man was taken ill. His symptoms were so strange, the village physician was baffled and the physician’s concoctions of herbs and barks brought no relief.

The farmer said I feel a movement in my head. Inside my brain I can hear a croak.

After a few days even those who sat near the farmer could also hear croak…croak

from within the man’s head. It was the monsoon season and when heavy showers fell, the sound of croaking was even louder.

Since others could hear the croak, no one thought the man was insane. But it was obvious that no physician in the village could cure him of this odd malady. It was so frightening and strange that the assistance advice of Buddhhadasa the surgeon king was sought by the hapless farmer,

The king noted the strange symptoms of the ailing man, and also head the croaking from within the farmer’s head. He though deeply for a w hile.

I think I know where all your troubles and discomforture lie, he said. Have you drunk of the impure water of your village tank?

The farmer shook his head, which only made the cracking worse.

I know you have the, the king said calmly. Floating in the water of the tank must have been the spawn of frogs. It slipped down your throat to your nose, from nose to head and there hatched from spawn to tadpole, then grew from tadpole to frog. The frog is croaking inside your head because it wants to get out.

It is said that the skillful surgeon king cut open the man’s head, plucked out the frog, closed the incision and thus saved the man from their unhappy existence.