Kings and Queens of Sri Lanka

Posted on

A Part of our Heritage

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Photographs by Suresh de Silva





From about 500 B.C. till the advent of the British to Sri Lanka in the early 19th Century there was a long line of kin who ruled over the destiny of this land. When we think of the kin and queens of Sri Lanka we are really focusing our attention on the unique history of an island civilization which has lasted for over 2,500 years. The Mahavamsa, the great Chronicle of the Sri Lankan people, and its later continuation in the Culavamsa. highlights the events and personal who contributed

to the i land history. This remarkable hi ory of the island drawn from earlier existing records, legends and folk memory was mainly the work of scholar monks. Living in times of political uncertainty due to internal strife and foreign invasion, they felt these writings were for the edification of later dynasties.

Vijaya, Pandukabhaya, Devanarnpiyatissa, Dutugemunu, Vattagarnini Abaya, Mahasena, Dhatusena, Kasyapa, Vijayabahu I and Parakrama Bahu I stride across the pages of our history in a never to be forgotten panoroma. If we take our minds back to the origins around 500 B.C it was an extraordinary age in many ways. Gautama Buddha was ushering in a religious renaissance in India too, similar to the thinking of Greek and Chinese philosophers. It was a time of political changes where a great battle was taking place between the older established Persian Empire and the new emerging principalities of Greece. The coming of Vijaya and his band of followers, although a part of legend, led to the beginnings of Sri Lanka’s history as stated in the Mahavamsa. Vijaya and his men would be the personification of such waves of migration taking place along the Indian Ocean and Mediterranean regions.

The Mahavamsa narratives have given prominence to the kings who contributed to the religious, political and social welfare of the people. In this way the idea of kingship was to continue for over 2500 years. Kings were associated with the changes taking place and their names are a part of our heritage. In the 4th Century B.C., when Anuradhapura emerges as the capital city, it is the name of King Pandukabhaya that is associated with the planning and construction of this great city. King Devanarnpiyatissa is remembered as the monarch during whose reign Buddhism was introduced, and who ushered in a period of great religious fervour with his links with the Maurya Empire of Asoka. With Buddhism, cultural and artistic activity as well as the building of _monasteries and stupas grew apace, and agriculture too gained ground as great irrigation schemes were envisaged and constructed by the kings in order to gain merit according to the ideals of Buddhism.



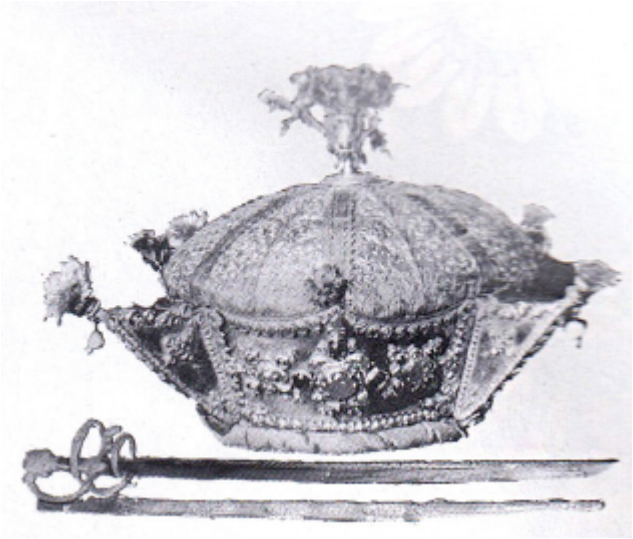
King Vessantara greeting visitors.

During the second century B.C. it is the name of King Dutugemunu that dominates the Mahavamsa chronicle. He is the king who united Sri Lanka and built splendid religious monuments in Anuradhapura; and as Ananda Coomaraswamy says, “King Dutugemunu’s spirit lived on and manifested itself continually in the religious and architectural activity of successive kings to the beginning of the 19th Century.” King Vattagamini Abaya’s reign was associated with the development of many centres of Buddhist learning. Dambulla and Aluvihare were part of an age of rock temples and caves where communities of monks wrote the scriptures and lived in the seclusion

of caves and forest hermitages, away from the unrest and civil disorder caused by South Indian invasions. The building of the enormous Abhayagiri Stupa commenced at this time. King Mahasena in the 3rd Century A.O. is revered as a “god” in the folk history of the island for his contributions towards water conservation through the construction of an intricate system of water-ways and tanks. The Jetavanarama Stupa was also one of the unique edifices constructed during this era. The 5th Century AD. saw a splendid palace complex and water gardens as well as beautiful art forms appearing at Sigiriya, the capital of King Kasyapa. Travellers from many lands visited the lion rock, and this dramatic phase in Sri l.ankan history occurred at a time when in far-off Britain tales of King Arthur were symbols of the post Roman Era.

The Golden Age of Polonnaruwa, which was the next capital city to develop in the island, can be thought of as the era of two of the greatest monarchs in Sri Lankan history -Vijayabahu I and Parakrama Bahu I. Vijayabahu I united the country once again after decades of Chola domination and continued the tradition of the great kings of Anuradhapura. Parakrama Bahu I was a king who ruled in the grand manner constructing enormous irrigation schemes, beautiful palaces and gardens, vanquishing his enemies here, despatching his armies abroad, and making Polonnaruwa a great cultural centre as well. King Nissanka Malla in a later age tried to emulate these kings of the past.

> The Kings and Queens of Sri Lanka focus our attention on the unique history of an island civilization which has lasted for over 2500 years.



The royal crown and sword.

In Medieval times kings such as Parakrama Bahu VI of Kotte distinguished themselves as men of letters. Art and literature flourished once again during this cultural renaissance. In the 16th Century A.O. monarchs such as Bhuvaneka Bahu Dharmapala, Mayadunne and Rajasinghe faced a complex situation of changes arising from the ani,·al of the Portuguese to Sri Lanka.

King Rajasinghe I of Sitawaka and Vimala Dharmasurya I of Kandy were also contemporaries of Elizabeth I of England who granted a charter to the East India Company, which was to affect our later history. King Rajasinghe sought the help of the Dutch to regain the maritime provinces from the Portuguese. The Dutch who were interested in the cinnamon trade succeeded the Portuguese in the coastal areas, while the Sinhalese kings ruled from the last capital city of Kandy. Sri Wickrema Rajasinghe, the last king of Kandy, was em into exile by the British in 1815 and Sri Lanka became part of the British Empire.

Our Queen too contributed to a rich heritage. where Buddhism was the central theme. Many cave temple bear inscriptions where the donor was a queen. The names of Queen Anula Viharamahadevi, Somadevi Lilavati Sugala and Dona Catherina are associated with interesting events in our history. Preceding them all is the name of Kuveni a princess of Sri Lanka, evoking a magical past when the island’s history was to change with the arrival of Vijaya and his new wave of civilization. The story of Kuveni, the enchantress, reminds us of the Greek legends

of Ulysses and Circe. Legend and history continue, and we see glimpses of the women who have held our imagination through the ages:Princess Citta imprisoned in a tower due to her extraordinary beauty and who later became the mother of Pandukabhaya; Queen Anula and her women accepting the precepts of Buddhism in a mass ordination ceremony during the time of King Devanampiya tissa; Viharamahadevi stepping into her golden barge as a sacrifice to the gods of the ocean; Queen Somadevi alighting from her chariot so that her husband King Valagambahu could escape from the invaders; and Queen Sugala riding out at the head of an army to do battle with King Parakrama Bahu I.

Other queens in history we remember are Lilavati, Parakrama Bahu I’s queen, who had coins struck with her likeness when factions in the court decided that she should be a ruler during the disturbed years following the death of Parakrama Bahu 1; and Dona Catherina, the tragic princess who became a pawn in the game of kingship between the Portuguese and the Sri Lankan contenders for the throne. One should also not forget the maidens on the rock face of Sigiriya who were a part of the court of Kasyapa and who have inspired poets through the ages.

Just as the kings who ruled the island were catalysts of social or political change that rook place, their live were often colourful with themes of palace intrigues and dramatic events which the chronicle dwelled upon and which are part of our traditional folk history.

The great kings of Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa left behind them a living culture of religious monuments and water systems, but no personal records of glory, although their place in history is assured for all time.•

