

Vijaya: Sri Lanka's First Recorded King

Maureen Seneviratne



Veddahs - descendants of King Vijaya and Kuveni.

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Scene from a play 'Sinhabahu' (Suresh de Silva)

From 500 BC (at least) to 1815 A.D. Sri Lanka was a monarchy. In 1815 A.D it abjured its own native rulers or the ruler of the fast growing British Empire. King Sri Wickrama Rajasinghe of Sri Lanka, lawfully crowned head of the Kandyan State - the last bastion of freedom and sovereignty to fall into the hands of the British colonial invaders - was taken into captivity betrayed by his own Council of chieftains and replaced by George III.

We might then claim that Sri Lanka was a .. monarchy' right down to the attainment of political independence by this British Crown Colony in 1948. It is, however, only since 1972 that Sri Lanka has taken the status of a Republic.

Kings there were, according to the myths and legends, before Vijaya. There was Ravana, who will always have a place in our island story, albeit he is never regarded with pride by Lanka's people who prefer to adulate his rival, Rama (incarnation of the Hindu god Vishnu), hero of the "Ramayana" epic. Ravana, that mysterious, tenheaded (or rather ten-times-crowned) demon king who held sway over a vast empire in this part of the globe, met his death in a hand-to-hand encounter with his foes. There was Vibishana, his brother, a divine architect, who took over the country after the defeat and destruction of Ravana -but they are of the substance of gossamer-legend and nothing has been recorded about their reigns.

We have only their fair descendent, Princess Kuveneri, who seduced Vijaya and bewitched him, gave him her invaluable assistance in conquering her own people and leaves posterity with the memory of a traitress who in turn was discarded by her lover and her leige. After he had made use of her wiles and spells and incantations on his behalf, of course! Vijaya was no weakling. Indeed the story told about him in the Mahavamsa Chronicle is of a wayward son who was punished with banishment by his own father for his misdeeds. "Vijaya was of evil conduct and his followers were evil (like himself), and many intolerable deeds of violence were done by them. Angered by this the people told the matter to the king; the king, speaking persuasively to them, severely blamed his son. But all fell out again as before, the second and yet the third time; and the angered people said to the king: 'Kill thy son'. Then did the king cause Vijaya and his followers seven hundred men, to be shaven over half the head, and put them on a ship and sent them forth upon the sea, and their wives and children also. The men, women and children sent forth separately landed separately, each company upon an island and they dwelt even there. The island where the prince named Vijaya the valiant, landed (was) Lanka in the region called Thambapanni, on the day the Tathagata lay down between two twin sal trees to pass into nibbana.

Vijaya's character must have undergone a sea change for now he is the "valiant", the leader, the founder of a nation. But first he came under the spell of Kuveneri, "sitting at the foot of a tree, spinning". A "woman hermit" he took her for at first, but she had already laid a spell

on his men, making them disappear into a dark cavern. According to the ancient chronicler she was a witch, pure and simple, a yakkini or she-demon; as all the conquered in the island were to be henceforth known as Yakkhas' (devils) to the conquerors. He came under the yakkini's spell but the story has it that she also fell, with rather more detrimental effects upon her own future. Not too long after the island had been subdued and the alien prince and his entourage firmly established as its rulers, his Ministers-of-State recommended he should take a wife worthy of him to be his royal consort. And Vijaya, ambitious in his new role, deciding his kingdom needed to be advanced, agreed. Kuveni, the witch, the demon-princess, was banished. And with her the two children the prince had once acknowledged as his own. Money was offered, of course, to meet her needs and theirs, "a thousand Kah-apanas" - a lot of money as the book has it, but Kuveni, even in her anguish spumed the gift. Her own end was a case of poetic justice one might say; for her betrayal of her own people she died at the hand of a one-time lover.

And Vijaya? You could say our first king prospered. He married a Pandyan princess from South India who brought with her many of the artefacts of civilisation, along with craftsmen of skill from "the eighteen guilds" of Madurai, to further build up the new society. She also brought with her maidens decked in gold and jewels, wearing priceless silks and bearing dowries as brides for Vijaya's ministers. "According to custom the ministers in full assembly consecrated King Vijaya and appointed a great festival. Then King Vijaya consecrated the daughter of the Pandyan king with solemn ceremony as his queen; he bestowed wealth on his ministers and every year he sent to his wife's father a shell-pearl worth twice a hundred thousand pieces of money (as a gift).

The rebel prince who had caused his father such concern and grief was now an established ruler of the island-kingdom. His paths had fallen in pleasant places! He, Vijaya, whose grandfather was a lion! For according to the old legend, recounted in most of the ancient chronicles, including the Mahavamsa, Vijaya's royal grandmother had been the mistress of a lion! If we do not take the old texts literally, then we are left with a totemistic lion which seems to be very likely - for Vijaya hailed from the Lion Race and the word Si-hala (Sinhala) itself means: the Lion People. Literal or totemistic, the symbol is a powerful one. Other meanings have been found - such as 'people of the cinnamon lands' - but none has attracted the imagination or been so often portrayed in the arts of Sri Lanka than the Lion Symbol, since the time of the island's first king.

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Anuradhapura - believed to be King Vijaya's capital. (Ranjith Senaweera)

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Veddhas of Dambana attired in leaves and branches of trees-getting ready for one of their ceremonial dances.

Vijaya and Vijayi as we might well call her, for all the pomp of their “abhiseka” (coronation ceremony) did not bear a child. His children by his union with the yakkhini Kuveni, wandered away and were lost in the jungles in the hills of the island to beget there a race of veddhas or wild men, according to that legend - but he was not blessed with legal heirs. The throne he had established went to his nephew, his brother's son, Panduwasadeva, who came in response to his uncle's dying message and took over royal Lanka to reign long and gloriously in it, and leave behind his heirs.

No traces have yet been found of King Vijaya's capital city, but it is believed to be in the north western part of the country. Close by perhaps to the spot where his men knelt down

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