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## Popular Music and Social Changes in Sri Lanka

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## Popular Music and Social Changes in Sri Lanka

Shibuya Toshio  
Wako University

Modernization brought a taste of democracy to the non-Western world and created a mass society. Its strong impact is particularly visible in the spread of school education, the rise in the literacy rate, and the development of mass media including both print and electronic media. These gave birth to an entertainment culture of the masses. As a result, movies and the theater became industrialized, which in turn supported the mass society.

Usually movies, theater, and music are regarded as entertainment. However, when a great number of people are enthusiastic about a certain work of art, it can no longer be simply referred to as entertainment; it is more than that. We are aware that certain kinds of work are related to unforeseen violent incidents of great scale such as revolution, rebellion or riot. For example, the Filipino masses whipped up a revolutionary movement, expelled President Marcos, and brought Aquino into power at the end in 1986. What created the solidarity of “people power” were the activities of the theater and popular songs, both with a very strong anti-governmental message. Again in 2001, people power exploded at the corruption scandal of President Estrada, forcing him to resign. It is said that cell phones and popular songs played influential roles in this incident.

A similar phenomenon can be seen in Sri Lanka, the field of my study and research since the late 1970s. It is well known that movies, theater, and literature in the Sinhala language have played major roles in the exaltation and popularization of Sinhala nationalism. At the same time, they have also brought repercussions – conflict between the Sinhala and Tamil communities. I myself witnessed the clashes between them in 1980 when I was working on my research paper on festivals and social changes in Sri Lanka, and studying at the University of Colombo. Clashes started in July, 1983, leading to unprecedented mass killing and arson by the Sinhala against the Tamil. The clashes further escalated, spreading countrywide, and degenerated into the worst ethnic violence in the history of Sri Lanka.

In parallel with Sinhala movies, theatre and literature, popular songs also affected Sri Lanka’s ethnic relations and caused conflicts between the Sinhala majority and the Tamil minority. One such song is *Mē sinhala apage raṭai* (“This Sinhala is our native land”), which reminds me of a related incident told by a Tamil acquaintance of mine some time back. A Sri Lankan Tamil economist, a research fellow, who lived in Japan with his family for some time, told me recollecting his own student days, “Around 1970, I was a committee member of the student council. Once, I joined a bus trip organized by the council. I can still not forget today what I experienced during that trip. Most participants were Sinhala students and during the bus drive, they sang “This Sinhala is our native land” over and over again. Whenever they were singing this song out loud, I was overcome by an unbearable

feeling and I buried myself in my seat, silent and lonely.”

This song praises Sinhala nationalism in the highest terms, claiming that Sri Lanka has been the sacred land of the Sinhala people since the visit of the Buddha. The song, sung by a popular singer, Nanda Malini, was a great hit at that time. Most of these students were either members or supporters of the People’s Liberation Front, better known by its Sinhala title: *Janata Vimukti Peramuna* (JVP).

This recollection of the Tamil economist triggered me to collect the texts of hit songs, and I began to study and research their relation to social changes in modern Sri Lanka. A close examination of the lyrics of these songs, which became great hits and are deeply associated with the turning point of an era, makes it possible for us to penetrate into people’s minds. These kinds of songs far exceed the realm of mere entertainment and without doubt guide people’s thoughts and actions.

This paper aims to examine nationalism, ethnic conflict, and revolutionary movements in present Sri Lanka through popular songs. It attempts to discover the power of such popular songs. The study and discussion in this report are mainly based on Sinhala society. Unlike Europe or India, Sri Lanka never had its own genre of “classical music” developed as court music by kings, feudal lords, and the nobility. It was during festivals, magic rituals, or weddings that the majority of people had the chance to encounter music.

### ***Baila and Saralagee***

No sooner had Sri Lanka achieved independence in 1948 than the government promoted free education from elementary school up to university. This provided a new context for the development of the mass media. As a result, the setting for a mass society emerged in the late 1960s. The literacy rate for people over the age of 10 was 69% in 1953, 77% in 1963, and reached 90% in the 1980s. Mass culture such as movies and literature flourished, but music exceeded them in popularity among the young.

With the spread of radio-cassette recorders in the early 1970s, the latest hit songs became easily available on cassette tapes even in villages far from Colombo. Low-priced song booklets with fashionable lyrics began to circulate. This led to the spread of two genres of popular music sung in the Sinhala language, namely *baila* and *saralagee*. *Baila* became popular among the lower class and *saralagee* was mainly attractive to the middle class and the elite. The kind of music one preferred was not simply a matter of taste but was strongly connected to class, rank and political tendencies.

*Baila* derived from the Portuguese song style called *baile* or *bailo*, which means “dance” in both Portuguese and Spanish. The Portuguese, who were then pursuing trade all over the world, arrived in Sri Lanka in 1505. Soon, they had made Colombo their fortress and taken over the cinnamon trade monopoly from the Arabs. Having gained control of the coastal area, they began to enjoy songs and dance to the accompaniment of musical instruments that they had brought from their home country in order to cheer themselves up when they felt lonely in a land far from home. Over time, this music spread among Catholic converts with lyrics in the Sinhala and Tamil languages.

Another similar kind of music is known as *kaffirinna*. The name originated from the term *kaffir*, referring to mercenary soldiers or slaves who were brought to Sri Lanka from east Africa by the Portuguese. Often both terms are coupled in *baila kaffirinna*.

*Baila* is a mixture of east African and Portuguese music, which later became mixed with Sri Lankan music. A mixture of Portuguese and the Spanish Latin music intermingled with local music had become popular in port towns in Asia and Africa. This gave birth to a cosmopolitan popular music. *Baila* can therefore be called a pioneer of world popular music, alongside the Indonesian *keroncon*.

Sri Lanka was ruled first by the Portuguese, then the Dutch, and finally the British. *Baila*, however, retained its popularity among the masses along the coastline, especially in towns and villages with a large Christian population. It became the custom to drink liquor and sing *baila* during festivals and weddings. It was played in jaunty six-eight time on violins, Spanish guitars (*viaule*), mandolins, and *rabanas* (one-sided drums).

Originally, *baila* was an impromptu duet (*Vāda baila*) on a given subject. It was only in the 1950s that a common form of *baila* emerged through the radio and records in which singers used their skills to produce chorus *baila*. Wally Bastiansz (1913-1985), a distinguished singer of the time, is credited for the formation of the new style of *baila*. With the spread of the cassette recorder in the 1970s, the music industry flooded the market with the production of cassette tapes and popular music shows. Popular singers like M. S. Fernando, Anton Jones and several others became very active, and the chorus *baila* became the mainstream.

The rhythm is still a six-eight time, but today electric guitars, drum sets, electronic keyboards, and trumpets are used as accompanying instruments. The lyrics are in plain language and often made up of slang, contemporary phrases, and puns, with fragments of broken English and Tamil dialects used by the urban lower class. In most cases, however, the fixed form of a four-line stanza is applied and the last words of each line rhyme. In the lines of Latin music, they still maintain the rich lyrical tradition of the Sinhala culture even if they transform it into modern popular music. To the well-educated elite, who speak English fluently, *baila* is nothing but cheap song.

The subjects taken up in *baila* are the dreams and daily lives of the common people in Colombo: incidents, love affairs, and social satire. The audience usually consists of common people from cities and villages, and the singers often come from fishing communities in the western coastal areas. In contrast to *saralagee*, where both singers and the audience are mainly Buddhists, there usually is no connection between *baila* and religion or ethnic consciousness.

Let us take a look here at *Tākusi Kārāya* ("Taxi Driver"), a song by the most popular *baila* singer of the 1970s, M. S. Fernando, which translates:

Taxi driver I am, the fastest driver in town  
Oh my friend, name any I not know in Colombo

Colombo is my hometown, and taxi is what I drive  
The fastest driver in town, and who, I not know in Colombo?

The moment the movie is over, I am on my handles and horn in no time  
 No way I cheat anybody, they all return thankful and friendly smiles  
 Double I charge after ten at night, but I won't do that to my regular guest  
 I can't stop my meter rattling quickly; it only raises my guests' hackles

Taxi driver I am.....

If you wanna take a sick person to a hospital or send for a doc  
 Get a thing like that done, I bet you can count on me

M. S. Fernando, a Buddhist from Mt. Lavinia (*Galkissa*), in the suburbs of Colombo, grew up under the tutelage of his father and uncle, who were engaged in music. In his late teens, he attended *baila* contests and sometimes received awards. He was named as the "King of *Baila*." Later, he gained popularity as a chorus *baila* singer. He died in 1994.

Anton Jones, another well-known singer who was born in Colombo in 1937, was a Catholic. As a teenager he studied *baila* under Wally Bastiansz. Having specialized in singing about incidents, he made his radio debut in 1958. While working at the Bank of Ceylon, he practiced his music mostly on weekends. His songs deal about boat capsizes, plane crashes, assassinations of leading figures like Indira Gandhi, bandits who escaped from prison several times, or terrorist attacks. In a CD released in 2002 he sings about the terrorist attack on New York on September 11, 2001.

The second of the two great genres is called *saralagee* ("modern song"). *Saralagee*'s roots can be traced back to musicians such as Amaradeva, Sunil Shantha, and Ananda Samarakoon who studied in India after its independence and brought back North Indian and Bengali classical music to Sri Lanka. *Saralagee* is, so to speak, a genre with no particular format that is similar to "light classical" in Western terms. As I understand it, the melodies fuse Indian classical music with Western music and the words are in Sinhala. The instruments used are violins, guitars, and flutes together with traditional drums and northern Indian sitars and *tablas*. The lyrics are in most cases in the fixed form of a four-line stanza, making use of literary style along with the use of Sinhala words originating from Sanskrit and Pali. The subjects include religion, love affairs, and ethnic sentiments (patriotism), all deeply rooted in the Buddhist cultural identity.

In the formation of *saralagee*, the singer-songwriter Amaradeva played a decisive role. His songs in the style of North Indian classical music are often called "classical music" (*shastrīya sangeeta*). *Mā dān Mahaluviye* ("Dotage") is one of many noteworthy songs he has written and sung.

It drizzles in through the open window  
 Showing signs of a storm any time soon  
 Hurry I must to the tavern in the junction  
 For a shot to taste a warmth of sweet wine

Torn is my jacket but who cares

None there is to look at nor notice it  
This is my old age; I am old now

Nay, it's not I feel cold when I get out  
Colder I am when in home alone  
A couple walking in a close embrace  
Under one umbrella in this little rain  
Reminds me of none but my own past  
Yeah, never I want to forget that past

Sure I am, wine will make me warm  
Nay, it won't warm my heart up  
I am positive I need no wine anymore  
I'd better go home, yeah back home

In this song, the Buddhist moral of abstinence, praised during the Buddhist Revival Movement, is elaborated. Having established their position in Colombo, members of the elite are nostalgically singing about their native villages, where they identify their own roots but to which they are now only distantly related. In their villages, the devoted Buddhists are leading a frugal life. Amaradeva has played a leading role for many years in the music world, covering music in movies, radio and television. He has also been active internationally, and in 2001, he received the Magsaysay Prize. He has created a number of hit songs about an idealized village society and the good old days of the past. Amaradeva praises the rural society and that of the past, which has made him popular both among the elite and the middle class.

In the latter half of the 1980s, *baila* began to decline. The main reason behind this was probably the rapidly rising popularity of television. Program production is in the hands of members of the elite or the middle class, who prioritized *saralagee* over cheap *baila* songs in radio and the television broadcasts. Moreover, M. S. Fernando died in 1994. In proportion to the decline of *baila*, *saralagee* became corpulent and diversified. Today it has become the main genre of Sri Lankan popular music.

### ***Saralagee* and Sinhala Nationalism**

The subjects sung about in *saralagee* songs are diverse. By looking closely at major hit songs, however, one can find several related to revolutionary movements and ethnic conflicts. In particular, the songs of Amaradeva and Nanda Malini have enjoyed tremendous popularity, and it can be said that these two singers have contributed to shining a fresh light on the history of Sri Lanka. The songs of both singers are refined and deep in meaning, with exalted contents and an emotional, sentimental touch. Nanda Malini's songs often contain ethnically nationalist and radically anti-governmental messages. The best example is *Mē Sinhala apage ratai* ("This Sinhala is our native land"), mentioned at the beginning of this article, which has been popular since the late 1960s.

This Sinhala is our native land  
 We are born here and die in this land  
 Our hearts will always throb for this land  
 The whole world lay beneath this land

Mountain peaks that kiss the tall sky  
 Sea of lakes that soften the soil of earth  
 Rampart built around the seashore  
 Witness the prosperity of this nation

Noble sons of this land in the ancient past  
 Gave themselves up to build this nation  
 Shed their sweat and blood turning it into  
 A land, full of precious gems and pearls

Mt. Samanola, the pride of this nation  
 Marked with the foot prints of the Lord  
 Thanks to His mercy and the sympathy  
 Gifted with this land since we were born

The writer of this song was Mahagama Sekara, a well-known Sri Lankan poet. During the dawn of the mass society era this song became popular nationwide. Today, there are probably hardly any Sinhalese who cannot sing this song. In the world of this song, only the Sinhala people exists. Mt. Samanola refers to the mountain believed to contain the footprint of the Buddha, based on the legend that the Buddha left footprints on the summit. This song indicates the crisis of the impatience of Sinhala nationalism becoming apparent. Chronic economic depression, the threat from India, and the absolute necessity of forced modernization brought about a stalemate in Sri Lankan society. “The whole world lay beneath this country” is the reverse side of the awareness of a small country. This song captured the hearts of the Sinhala masses, especially that of the post-independence generation educated in Sinhala-medium schools.

At the same time, Amaradeva’s song *Ratnadeepa* (“The Land of Jewels”), with lyrics written by Mahagama Sekara, became a great hit. “The jewel island, the native land, Lankadeepa is the land of victory, our noble mother earth” praises patriotism in the highest terms, and deals with a similar subject to that indicated earlier.

In the history of Sri Lanka, three separate waves of Sinhala nationalism seem to have emerged. The first time was during the period from the end of the 19th century until the beginning of the 20th century. While under British rule, the newly emerged elite class launched the Buddhist Revival Movement and whipped up Sinhala ethnic consciousness. New sects of Buddhism were formed, and Buddhist monastic schools and Buddhist temples were set up. Western Theosophists also joined these movements. They founded schools for Buddhists to promote Buddhist education. Soon a celibate leader, Anagarika Dharmapala (1864-1933), emerged to unify the chronicle of *Mahāvamsa* (“Great History”) with the



theory of racism of Western linguists, and formulated a Sinhala nationalism comprising three principles — the “Land of Virtue” (*Dhammadeepa*), the “Land of the Lions” (*Seehadeepa*), and the “Aryan race.” His claim was that Sri Lanka is a country of Buddhists who belong to the Aryan race and descend from lions.

The second wave appeared when Sinhala nationalism was reorganized right after achieving its political goal of independence, and when the festivities commemorating the 2,500th anniversary of the death of the Buddha had reached their peak in 1956. Throughout the country, a range of events related to Buddhism were organized to revive the Buddhist teachings. Repelled by all these, the Tamil elite brought up their demand for autonomy under a federal system. The formation of Tamil nationalism dates from this time.

The third wave appeared in the latter half of the 1980s when the Sinhala Buddhist ideology (*jātika chintanaya*) gained popularity. Its adherents demanded the protection of Sinhala Buddhist culture from the open economic system that was leading to a rapid invasion of the country by foreign consumerism. At the same time, ethnic tension between the Sinhala and Tamil peoples developed into a civil war, leading India to intervene. Anti-establishment sentiments became stronger among Sinhala youth, and the JVP began to fight an armed revolutionary struggle.

“This Sinhala is our native land” by Nanda Malini and “The Land of Jewels” by Amaradeva are thought to be related to the period of the second wave. During that time, intellectuals groping for a new identity after independence launched activities that merged reactionary ideas with modernization. Their works of art (movies, theater, and literature) acquired enormous popularity in 1956, while the festivities commemorating the 2500th anniversary of the Buddha’s death were reaching a climax. Connecting with the political trends of the times – social reforms, social justice, and economic independence – their work found echoes among a wide circle of people.

It was during the 1956 general elections that S.W.R.D. Bandaranayaka broke away from the United National Party (UNP) and launched a new party, the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP). He put forward ethnic policies, such as demanding the return of British military bases, the nationalization of harbor and bus services, and the official use of the Sinhala language. This favored his victory in the election. In particular, the official use of Sinhalese language was received by Sinhala Buddhists with thunderous applause. Bandaranayaka was enthusiastically supported by the so-called village elite, which included schoolteachers, priests, and doctors of Ayurvedic medicine. The literary activities of the intellectuals described above were soon sponsored by the government and thus strongly promoted. Consequently, the Bandaranayaka government succeeded in making Sinhala the official language. But these one-sided policies gave rise to a strong anti-Sinhala sentiment among the Tamils, who criticized the Sinhala-centered government and campaigned for equal recognition for the language and rights of Tamils. They further demanded autonomy for Tamil-inhabited areas.

Thus, from 1956, Sinhala nationalism, which was originally led by the elite of Colombo, changed at one stroke to a nationalism supported by the masses. The three principles advocated by Anagarika Dharmapala – Land of Virtue, Land of Lions and Aryan race – became a daily topic of conversation among villagers. This was the time when



Sinhala nationalism penetrated into the villages in the truest sense. It was during the same period that the confrontation between the major carriers of the Sinhala nationalism – the United National Party (UNP), and the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) – became equally popular. The UNP sometimes joined hands with a Tamil party or a Muslim group and attached importance to relations with capitalist countries like the United Kingdom and the United States. On the other hand, the SLFP often built a united front with Marxist political parties, aiming at relations with socialist countries like the Soviet Union or China. The post-independence parliamentary governments of Sri Lanka have consistently alternated between these two major political parties. Even villagers divided along party lines to support the parties of their choice, leading to fierce rivalry between them. The Sinhala nationalists also consisted of members of Marxist political parties, such as the Lanka Samasamaja Party (LSSP) – the Equal Society Party – and the Communist Party (CP), which were mainly backed by the workers in the cities.

The literary works by the intellectuals were in fact a great success. It must, however, be said that they were the ideas of the educated classes who spoke English and Sinhala. What reached the hearts of the young villagers, who understood no English, was the *saralagee*. The great success of “This Sinhala is our native land” and “The Land of Jewels” succeeded in popularizing Sinhala nationalism. Now, however, the situation took a new turn. In the desire to realize the beautiful world praised in these songs, young people took up arms.

No sooner had Mrs. Bandaranayaka, who led the United Front (UF) consisting of her party together the LSSP and CP, defeated the UNP to win the general elections of 1970, than she faced an unexpected challenge from the JVP, a Marxist organization formed along the lines advocated by Mao Tse-tung or Che Guvera. The JVP strongly demanded that the government fulfill its campaign promises on land reform (e.g. the nationalization of plantations) and free distribution of rice. The government in turn reacted with the arrest and suppression of the JVP leader Rohana Wijeweera and other members. As a result, the JVP launched a nationwide armed insurrection in April 1971 to overthrow the Bandaranaike government. The main forces behind this insurrection were young villagers in their teens or twenties who had received higher education but were unemployed. On the part of the government, it quelled the insurrection within three months with military support from the UK, USA, USSR, India, and other countries.

The adoption of Sinhala as the state language and the policy of free education offered an unprecedented opportunity for higher education to village children, who spoke no English. However, the economy was still under the control of the long-established elite. In practice, the colonial system continued as before and young people were forced to return to lead a gloomy life in their native villages, which were already short of land. The 1971 insurrection aimed at the total overthrow of the colonial system. But it is noteworthy that it received no support for the purpose from non-Sinhala or non-Buddhists. Further, most of its most important members were from the *karāva* (fishermen) caste, regarded as second-class people within Sinhala society. The majority of the members and leaders of the JVP belonged to the generation that grew up under the Sinhala-oriented policies. This insurrection was a battle of the poor Sinhala youth from villages against the old-established

Sinhala elite, including the Marxist parties. It can also be described as a class struggle within Sinhala nationalism itself. A large number of young people joined the battle for liberation, listening to “This Sinhala is our native land” and dying with the “Land of Jewels” on their lips.

### **Nanda Malini and the Revolutionary Movement**

When considering the modern history of Sri Lanka in terms of these three waves of Sinhala nationalism, we can see that Dharmapala created his ideology during the first period, and that the second and third periods followed along the same lines. It was a process whereby his three principles were refined, became more radical, and diversified. In the process, ethnic conflicts and revolution movements started shaking Sri Lankan society. The influence of popular songs on social changes is greater than one can imagine. The most influential figures in this case were the duo of Nanda Malini and Sunil Ariyaratna. Nanda Malini is a social singer and Sunil Ariyaratna a lyricist and a professor at the University of Sri Jayawardhanapura, one of the best-known universities in Sri Lanka.

Nanda Malini Perera, or Nanda as she is popularly known, was born in 1945 in Aluthgama, a small town in the southwestern coastal region. She was the fourth child of a family with nine children – five girls and four boys. Her father was a well-known tailor who made coats. She studied at Gunananda School, a school for Buddhist children. It was a school with few facilities, but extra-curricular activities were held on every second Wednesday. Nanda set herself the challenge of reciting poetry. In 1956, she received first prize in a singing contest sponsored by the Young Men’s Buddhist Association.

It was her music teacher who helped change Nanda’s way of life. The teacher introduced Nanda to the radio station and put her into a training school for artists, where she was very active as singer in training till she was 18. It was here that she met Amaradeva, who chose Nanda to sing his first music in a movie: *Ran Muthu Duva*, the first Sinhalese color movie, in 1963. The movie took first prize in the music section of the Sarasavi Film Festival in the same year. Since then, Nanda has sung in a good number of movies and received the Sarasavi Prize eleven times, the President’s Prize eight times, and maintained the position of the best female singer from 1995 to 1998. During her thirty-year musical career Nanda has released more than twenty-five cassette tapes, with the songs in most cases written by Sunil Ariyaratna.

In order to put down the JVP insurrection, the Bandaranaike government promulgated a new constitution in 1972. The constitution gave the Buddhists the supreme position and specified that the state would protect and promote their status. The principles put forward by Dharmapala had finally been embodied in the constitution. This, however, meant that Tamils, whose nationalism was based on Tamil language, culture and the history of the Yalpanam (Jaffna) kingdom, were classified as “second class citizens.” Originally Tamil nationalism had been asking for autonomy, but Tamils now went further to demand separation from Sri Lanka as the independent state of “Tamil Eelam.” On the one hand, moderate parties joined together to form the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) and tried to gain independence by peaceful means through negotiations in parliament, while on

the other hand Tamil young people launched an armed struggle for a separate state through organizations like the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), led by Velupillai Prabhakaran, and several other minor groups. They called themselves “tigers,” tracing their origin back to the tiger symbol of the *Chola* Kingdom. They killed not only Sinhala soldiers and policemen stationed in the northern and eastern parts of the island, but also those Tamils who sided with the government. The core of the movement consisted of unemployed Tamil teenagers and those in their late twenties with a senior high school education. In spite of these differences in ideology and methods, the drive for separation and an independent homeland became the ultimate goal of the Tamil masses.

The situation led Sinhala nationalism into an unexpected crisis. For Sinhala, division of their sacred land meant the collapse of the three principles. To Sinhala nationalism, the destiny of the Sinhala people and their country was inseparable. Separation and independence were an existential crisis for the nation and had to be prevented by all means. In the general elections of 1977, Bandaranaike’s socialist government had reached a dead end and the UNP, led by J.R. Jayawardane, gained the victory. In contrast to its predecessor, the new government adopted an open economic policy that welcomed assistance from super-capitalistic countries on a wide scale, including the introduction of foreign capital and trade liberalization. The new policy also encouraged Sri Lankan nationals to work in the Middle East. The song *Tun helē kālā tula sinha pāṭav* (“The Lion Cubs”), sung by Nanda Malini since the 1980s, manifests the ambitious and patriotic sentiment of young people in a militant way.

The Lion cubs from three corners of this forest  
Nay, they have not left this land of their birth  
Ashamed they are of the shameless “cubs”  
Locked up inside the iron bars in foreign lands

Fascinated they are with prosperity elsewhere  
The “cubs” of Lion beg for their bread abroad  
But the true cubs of Lion never beg nor depend  
On those mammals that are below the Lions

The cubs of the lion under our great flag  
No way they run away from this native land  
Nor think of begging from door to door  
In foreign lands turning inferior to anyone

“The Lion cubs from three corners of this forest” refers to the three regions of the ancient Sinhala kingdom. The term “lion cub” comes from the Sinhala nationalistic claim that the blood of lions runs through the veins of the Sinhala people, as described in the Mahavamsa chronicle. The open economic policy brought about the liberalization of economic activity, but the unemployment problem among the younger generation remained unsolved. Cars and electric appliances flooding in from foreign countries like Japan further

aggravated their desperate situation. The humiliation of asking for foreign assistance or having to seek work in foreign countries amid a chronic depression became strikingly apparent. However, the emphasis on the Sinhala ethnic group excluded other ethnic groups. This song coincides with the uplifting of chauvinistic Sinhala nationalism during the great anti-Tamil violence in 1983.

What triggered the ethnic clashes between the Sinhala and the Tamils in 1983 was the murder by LTTE cadres of thirteen Sinhala soldiers in Jaffna. Their bodies were transported to the city cemetery in Colombo, and both the President and the Prime Minister were present at the funeral. Soon after this event, a group of militia hired by influential politicians of the ruling party set fire on Tamil shops and houses with gasoline, raided the prison, and massacred Tamil political prisoners. Sparked off by this, a wave of mass plunder, arson, and violence spread all over the country. According to the government sources, the clashes that raged the whole island for a week took the lives of 500 people and rendered 100,000 people homeless.

The third wave of Sinhala nationalism emerged in the late 1980s. In the world of popular music it was *saralagee*, and especially Nanda Malini, who had the greatest influence. In 1987, she released a set of two cassette tapes entitled *Pavana* ("Breeze"). In the same year, the JVP re-launched its armed struggle. Because of the radical contents of *Breeze*, the government banned the broadcast of these songs. The sale of cassettes continued, however, and more than 250 concerts of popular songs under the same title were held during the subsequent 18 months until 1988. This reminds me of my unsuccessful attempt to attend one of her shows in Colombo, in which I failed because tickets were sold out in advance. Let us take a look at the most popular song from Breeze, entitled *Alut lovak gāna sitīma daḍuvan dena varada nam* ("Aspiring for a Better World").

Handcuffed, pulled and kicked they take my son  
 Nailed the fingers and toes and torture my child  
 For simply aspiring a better world for this nation  
 If that is crime, then what the court of law is for?

Blind you are to those youth playing the fool  
 Just because they are from the superior class  
 Tell me what's wrong with my son's desire  
 To put out the fire that is burning this country

The idiots playing the fool aren't worth a damn  
 But my son who died in prison is a Hero of this land  
 May in millions all my heroes be born and reborn  
 Here in this nation, I will give milk to them forever

The open-market economic policy that started in the late 1970s undoubtedly improved the economy, but the rapid increase in imported goods amplified the desire to have something among those who had nothing. The young villagers used to say, "Milk for

Colombo, shriveled cucumbers for us,” an incisive satirical pun in their own language (*kolambaṭa kiri, apaṭa kākiri*). When the Indian government intervened in the northern ethnic problem in 1987, the Sinhala felt repelled and joined the riots against the government. Taking advantage of this situation, the JVP took to arms again. They claimed that several self-governing bodies made too many concessions to the Tamils, and that the occupation by the Indian army was a humiliation to the state. They therefore threatened and even assassinated the politicians and high-ranking government officials who had supported the Indo-Sri Lanka pact. Soon after, the government was said to have organized a corps of assassins, to kill not only the members of the JVP but also anyone suspicious.

Since the mid-1980s, the activities of cultural chauvinists made up of a group of intellectuals calling themselves *Jatika Cintanaya* (“School of Sinhala Buddhist Nationalism”) attracted the public attention. They were made up of Sinhala youth, who had obtained higher education as a result of the Sinhala language and free education policies that opened doors for the village youth to tertiary education. These youth, the university graduates, were able to find employment in their special fields and formed a group that may be called “neo-elite.” Compared with the old-established elite, they still require improvements in their lifestyle and greater power, as real power still lies with the former. Let us take a look at another song from the Breeze album, entitled *Sorunṭa hasuwū lakmawa* (“Captive Mother Lanka”):

Twenty five hundred years old I am now  
Oh, my sons and daughters, listen to me  
Those, whom I fed, suck all my milk  
Till it ended bleeding from my breasts

I gave them birth and fed them well  
Many of them are none but thieves  
Children they were mine but acted like  
The aliens who looted and cursed me

They split my children fight one another  
Lead they life of luxury ignoring all  
You, my poor children and my people  
Never they cared for a penny’s worth

How selfish they were, I am ashamed  
To call them my children I gave birth to  
Nay, they never can think of you little ones  
Busy they are selling all my wealth I had

My poor children of both North and South  
Get slain for none but for these cruel thugs  
They sell my name and kill my children

For their sake and for their power of greed

Oh, my worthy little sons and daughters, listen  
 Time has come for you to wake up and save my life  
 I can still live another fifty hundred years  
 If you act in time and get rid of these thugs

A personified Sri Lanka grieves over the evil spreading in the world. This is a situation completely different from the social reform, social justice, and economic independence celebrated during the festivities commemorating the 2,500th anniversary of the Buddha's death. "The children of the north" refers to armed Tamil youth such as the Liberation Tigers. However, "the children of the north" did not simply die: they died fighting boldly to the end. "The children of the south" refers to the JVP members. According to the song, the only hope left is the youth.

Sinhala Buddhist Nationalism asserted itself as the result of a revolt of intellectuals originally from the villages and educated in the Sinhala stream against the urban elite, who had been educated in English. The former made the point that traditional culture was facing a crisis amid the storm of commercialism. They demanded the protection of Sinhala Buddhist culture through literature and popular songs in the Sinhala language. Nanda Malini contributed to their movement by uncovering social evils through her songs, sending out the militant message that it is inevitable to use force in the fight against injustice. The activities of the School of Sinhala Buddhist Nationalism (*jātika chintanaya*) resulted in strong support for the JVP. There was no solidarity between the two groups, but morally they stood together because of their shared white-collar orientation.

Let us consider what choices these youth had:

- 1) If they had excellent grades, they could have entered university.
- 2) If they failed to enter university, the girls became workers in sewing factories in the Free Trade zone. It was popular to say, "If you succeed you're lucky, if you fail you're Juki" (*lābunot lakī, nolābunot jukī*). "Juki" referred to the Juki sewing machines used in the sewing factories.
- 3) They could leave the country and work in the Middle East, the Maldives, Europe, the United States or Japan. Many of those who go are supported by their families and/or relatives, or borrow money before leaving the country.
- 4) They could become a Buddhist priest. For the poor, this is a chance to receive higher education.
- 5) They could join the JVP and set out on the revolutionary movement.
- 6) Those with only a lower-level education volunteer for the army.

It was not rare for the young ambitious intellectuals belonging to groups 1 through 4 described above, to join the JVP or become their supporters. The JVP had wide support from workers, students and the village youth. With the exception of the University of Jaffna, most student councils nationwide were under its control. It was young people with this background who reacted favorably to Nanda Malini's songs.

The *saralagee* caught the hearts of the post-independence generation and popularized Sinhala nationalism through its lyrics. However, the *saralagee* also embraced a variety of tendencies and discrepancies, widening the gap between the contradictions within Sinhala nationalism.

### The Popularity of Heroic Songs (*Ranagee*)

Heroic songs have become popular among lower-ranking soldiers and those associated with them since the mid-1990s, filling the gap created by the decline of *baila* songs. These songs vary. Some are in the style of the *saralagee*, others are close to *baila* or Hindi popular songs, and they have not established a genre of their own. The lyrics are in almost colloquial style, with plain words and straightforward expressions. They assert the significance of protecting the homeland and encouraging the soldiers. Most of them oppose the LTTE. Soldiers on active service sing these songs at popular musical shows and dance to them. Television and radio do not usually broadcast them. Below are two songs that were highly popular in 1997.

#### *Mā ādaraniya* (“Beloved Mother”)

To you, my beloved mother  
Writing this letter from the base  
We were born to defend our motherland

We are here to defend our country  
Worrying nothing about sunny or rainy days  
Neither for nights nor for days ahead  
Volunteered myself to help my colleagues  
We have no fear at all in our hearts  
Do my duty till I die, for my country

Oh, Mother you gave birth to brave sons  
To defend this country and for its people  
Oh, mother your duty is praiseworthy  
Will one day fill the pages of our history

Oh, Mother, allow me a last request  
Do not forget to send your younger son  
Replacing me in the battlefield

#### *Lankāwa bedāla* (“Dividing Lanka”)

Dividing Lanka into many pieces  
What benefit will you and I have?



To wipe out the crest of the killer Tiger  
 Chop them now, chop them into pieces  
 Let them ask the king of hell for an “Eelam”

Never the Sinhala of the ancient time defeated  
 Turned out to be heroes fighting for our land  
 Carved their names in the history of Lanka  
 Let’s show them how sophisticated our weapons are  
 Now we are the rulers of this land  
 Next is to wipe the tigers out of this land

The whole world knows the truth of this problem  
 Hence they support us and grant the needful aids  
 North will glitter when these tigers die away  
 Soon our country, for sure, will shine bright again  
 Let’s defend our native land from these tigers  
 Let’s die for our motherland when we need to do so

From 1983 the battle between the government forces and the Tamil guerillas intensified, and the state of civil war went on for nearly twenty years. As of 2002, it had taken the lives of 60,000 people. Those who applied to enter the military were mainly poor, uneducated village youth. In the mid-1990s, the government tried to strengthen the war regime by putting up posters saying “Thanks to our brave soldiers,” but the elite and the middle class in Colombo were indifferent to the dying soldiers. For those employed in the city, the problems in the north were far away. Under these circumstances, lower-ranking soldiers who faced death on a daily basis began to praise and embellish their own actions, and to assign meaning to them.

It must be said, however, that the real situation in the front was far from that fabricated by the soldiers in these songs. In contrast to their courageous lyrics, the soldier’s spirits were low and a number of soldiers deserted from the front. In 1996, the government repeatedly appealed to the more than 20,000 (70,000 in 2006) deserters to return to their corps. State-run television frequently broadcast recruitment notices for the army, navy, and air force. The starting salary of 5,500 rupees (about ¥11,000) was a little higher than the average salary but only a very few applied because the government military had been inferior in strength.

## Conclusion

It was in August 2002 that I finally had the chance to visit Jaffna, though I have been a frequent visitor to Sri Lanka for the last 25 years for both academic and field research. The indefinite cease-fire agreement between the government of Sri Lanka and the LTTE in February 2002 finally cleared my way to visit Jaffna. The aim of this visit was to observe the situation in Jaffna with my own eyes.

I drove northbound on national route No. 9 through the land area of Kilinocchi in Wanni (Tamil Eelam) controlled by the LTTE, and reached the government-run city of Jaffna. The citizens seemed to be leading quite a “normal” life. Several buildings were still in a state of collapse, but many showed no scars of the war because the citizens who returned home after the government recaptured the territory from the LTTE in 1995 had restored the buildings in a step-by-step process.

I also watched a festival at the *Nallur kovil* (temple) and walked around the city in the afternoon. The statue of the god Vel, an incarnation of the god Murugan (Skanda), was being carried around the *kovil* amid a crowd of visitors. Along the street, there were small restaurants and shops selling sundry goods, and even show tents. In the market place, there was a photo exhibition of the Liberation Tigers and people were queuing up to enter a thatched hall. Close to the place, a shop operated by the Liberation Tigers was selling cassette tapes, CDs, and videotapes. Heroic songs were being played. They sounded similar to Sinhala popular songs such as those of Nanda Malini or heroic songs. The LTTE has made active use of songs for publicity.

In this paper, I looked mainly at popular songs written in Sinhala language. It is obvious that they exceed the realm of individual tastes and likes. Of course, popular songs are not always connected to negative events. However, one can say that several of these popular songs agitated insurrections and ethnic conflicts. They caused the unprecedented repercussion of the loss of thousands of human lives and large amounts of property on both sides. Both Sinhala and Tamil alike have now become exhausted by the civil war, which has lasted longer than they expected. Both parties have finally begun to strive for peace. I believe that a common theme for both sides is to abandon their chauvinism and create an ideology of inter-ethnic reconciliation, and I am hopeful that songs praising ethnic harmony will become popular in the very near future.

### Postscript

Contrary to my hope, the civil war has rekindled from 2006.

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