

Some Folk Poems from Ceylon

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C EYLON has a literary tradition that goes back to pre-Christian times. But of the extant examples of poetry in the Sinhalese language the graffiti poems discovered on the mirror-wall of the fortress at Sigiriya are perhaps the earliest. These poems, many of them spontaneous compositions, some even casual scribblings, were written over a period of time between the sixth and tenth centuries. Although they can in no way be considered representative of the major literary compositions of this period referred to in the chronicles, they are some of the few extant examples of Sinhalese poetry prior to the twelfth century.

Sinhalese literature, after the twelfth century, was the product of a scholarly classical tradition influenced strongly by Sanskrit literature. Sinhalese folk poetry on the other hand was part of a non-literary, essentially oral tradition and we have evidence that it existed side by side with the classical tradition from as far back as the fourteenth century. As the influence of the Sanskrit tradition decreased with the centuries, especially under western domination, the influence of folk poetry on the literary tradition seems to have increased. However it remained and still remains a poetry of the unlearned as opposed to the major literary tradition which was the preserve of the scholar and the monk.

The structure of the Sinhalese folk poem was a basic unit or stanza of four lines. The rhythms were simple but subtle variations could be introduced in the actual singing of the lines. The language was often rich, evocative and highly charged, but it was the colloquial language of the people not the written language of the scholar. This distinction is important because in Sinhalese the spoken and written forms of the language differ quite distinctly in grammar, structure and even vocabulary.

Folk Songs or *Sivpada* as they are sung even today are basically four-lined end-rhymed stanzas. The four-lined units are usually

self-contained so that however lightly charged or complex the emotional experience it must necessarily be expressed within the confines of the four line form. Slightly more sophisticated versions of the folk poem in recent times tend to group together these four-lined stanzas in order to develop a single theme or narrate an incident. The more traditional four-lined unit is however still immensely popular in the villages of Ceylon. The meanings of these poems seem to extend in concentric eddies around a single poetic statement. The emotional content is expressed through suggestion, implication, nuance and understatement giving to these poems a quality of restraint as well as intensity. Not all poems of course have all these qualities. The Sinhalese language lends itself easily to rhymes and four-lined stanzas are easy to write. In spite of this however a large number of the popular folk songs handed down from generation to generation do have a high degree of poetic richness and artistic control.

Perhaps the Buddhist tradition with its emphasis on control of the emotions its concept of karma interpreted at the village level as an unprotesting acceptance of one's fate, and its specific rejection of violent or exaggerated displays of emotion, influenced the choice of theme and conditioned the particular structure and mode of poetic utterance characteristic of these poems.

Like much folk poetry all over the world it is also a poetry of the outdoors; rich in images or sharp pictorial sketches of the familiar world of birds and beasts, trees and sky. Since these poems were always sung, and meant to be sung full-throatedly, they come alive in the outdoors. Very often they have a quality of haunting melancholy heightened perhaps by the singer's own experience of the poverty and hardships of peasant life. There is often a note of protest in these poems but it is not the protest of the revolutionary eager for change and believing in the very real possibility of change; instead the protest voiced in the Sinhalese folk poems is conditioned by a fundamental acceptance of the existent reality and an awareness that there is little possibility for change at least in this birth.

A translation can hardly do justice to this kind of poetry which in a sense grows out of a particular ethos, takes colour and meaning from a world of known referents and which depends for its total effect on the allusion, the implied suggestion, and the

nuance. I have attempted a translation, however, perhaps because the very nature of the poetry — its compression and its extended range of meaning — has a particular fascination for the translator. The fact that one can never capture the full impact of the original becomes a continuous challenge to the translator who keeps returning to the poem, making constant changes. On a rare occasion one may savour the satisfaction of having caught precisely the flavour of a certain word or phrase if not of the entire poem. To illustrate something of the quality of these poems I shall discuss a few of them. Unfamiliarity with the background and cultural ethos may otherwise limit a full reading of the poem.

PAL KAVI

(or songs sung in watch-huts in jungle clearings)

I

In lovely lonely fields the big grain ripens
Grief-giving-beasts, these elephants, I chase and drive away,
By your protection gods; this rice gives sustenance,
But because I'm poor in this hut I drag my days.

II

Only the axe knows I cut fence sticks from the jungles,
Only the dyke knows how I dammed my paddy plot,
Only my mat knows of the nights that I spent watching,
But the gods know how my watch-hut I did haunt.

III

The she-frog's clamour beats upon my ear,
A wild pig rooting yams, I see quite near,
I dare not now climb down for my mind is full of fear
And my body is all weary with this watching.

IV

The plants that once I planted here are withered,
The fence that I built then, by cattle torn,
We have kept watch over our plots all through this long night,
Let us now drowsily compose new songs.

V

A pair of bulls stood in the green field grazing
One of the pair without a tail kept swaying,

The bull which had the tail used it the flies to flail,
But poverty alas is like the bull without a tail!

VI

In this back-scorching sun I cannot stand,
These hand-entangling ferns I cannot tear,
These firm-grown bamboo roots I cannot pull,
Growing 'al' rice and this grim life, I cannot bear.

VII

With beads and coloured baubles round my neck
I came to this dead village — more fool I;
On the coconut trees grow lush and green in my own home,
I may yet use you, coconut-scraper, do not cry.

The first set of poems I have grouped under the heading *Pal Kavi*. They are each self-contained poems having no relation to each other except that they refer basically to the experience of the village farmer. They are songs sung while keeping watch at night in a little hut or trechouse built on stilts at the edge of the jungle cleared for the cultivation of crops. The songs are often sung in succession by the farmer as much to keep himself awake as to pass the time away between dusk and dawn.

In the first poem a farmer is looking out over his field of ripening grain with a certain sense of satisfaction. In spite of the beauty of the fields however, their vast expanse devoid of human life seems to evoke also sense of loneliness conveyed in the plaintive rhythms of the line. The second line focusses on the animals who do impinge on his world, not to ameliorate the loneliness but as a source of perpetual harassment and possible danger. The elephants are described as *duk dena ali* literally 'grief-giving elephants' which reinforces the impression of the loneliness and struggle which is a part of the hard life of a peasant farmer. The third line is a momentary expression of relief almost a mumbled thanks to the gods whose protection does enable him to sustain life by means of his rice harvest. The line can also be interpreted as an invocation, a kind of ritual safeguard in case some unforeseen disaster affects his harvest. The final line has again an element of ambiguity characteristic of these poems. The Sinhalese word *nisai* means 'because' or 'since'. The line can thus be interpreted either as an implied protest 'It is

because I'm poor that I'm forced to lead this hard life keeping watch in this lonely hut' or as an expression of resignation. This is my life and since I am poor there can be no other for me. There is a certain tension in the structure of the verse that maintains the ambiguity. Line one and line three prevent one from interpreting the last line as one of total protest. Life is hard and poverty has forced him to this lonely existence but the sight of the fields of ripening grain is something to be grateful to the gods for. The poem when sung is suffused with a sense of 'pleasing' melancholy tempered by a lurking hint of protest.

A similar mood of resignation tinged with a strong sense of humour comes through in poem v. It is a simple humorous statement of the predicament of the poor peasant. There is neither self pity nor melancholy but a humorous awareness and acceptance of the hard realities and deprivations of peasant life.

By contrast Poem vii has a highly charged emotional content. The speaker, obviously a woman, is a newcomer to the hard world of the dry-zone farmer. She comes from a different part of the country where rain is plentiful, life comparatively easy and where a young girl could even afford the little indulgences of beads and coloured baubles. The first line evokes a vision of the pretty young girl decked in her little trinkets, eager, inexperienced and in love, following her husband (or lover) to his village. The second and third lines juxtapose brilliantly the two worlds. The lush green world where coconuts grow plentifully and the dry barren world of the dry-zone where existence is a struggle. The pithy irony of the last line gives to the whole verse a certain equilibrium. The emotional intensity and personal involvement of the first three lines is now balanced by the poet's projection of the emotion on to the inanimate object of the coconut-scraper. This piece of basic household equipment indispensable even in the poorest Ceylonese home becomes now the focus of the poem's emotion. It is the coconut-scraper that is crying, remembering better days when it was put to good use. The woman's comment, 'I may yet use you, do not cry', is a whispered consolation; a vague possibility she holds out to herself and to the coconut-scraper that she may one day go back perhaps to the green world she knew, or the even more distant possibility that things might improve here.

LULLABIES

A

Way up there you can see the sky,
 Outside in the yard is the sun,
 At night my son you can see a bear
 Stop crying and sleep little one.

B

She's gone to fetch you milk, your mother,
 She's gone to milk the cow.
 The pot of milk flows on the river:
 It has burst its banks, the flooding river,
 And a flock of storks that were flying over
 Have drunk the milk out of the pitcher.

C

In her hands ripe fallen olives,
 At her waist some gathered greens,
 On her head a load of firewood;
 In a second mother will walk in.

D

There baby roams the she elephant;
 That rocky grove is her home.
 Deftly she steps from stone to stone
 And blows through her trunk as she goes.

The lullabies have a completely different emotional quality to that of the *Pal Kavi*. Here the verses have a tenderness and lyricism contrasted with the pervasive melancholy of the watch-hut verses. The images and referents again are to the world of nature; the animals, birds, fruits and flowers that are part of the known environment. The connection between the lines of each stanza are often even more tenuous. One no longer needs to maintain tight emotional and logical connections between the four lines of a verse. In the *Pal Kavi*, though the external verbal connections may have seemed slight, the implications or suggested sense is quite carefully and subtly worked out. By contrast the context in which the lullabies are sung permit the imagination to flit from one image to another, where logical consistency is not important and only the mood need be maintained. Poem A is one such example. Poem B does seem to have a carefully worked out logical connection. However it is a kind of dream logic that

seems to operate here, where one image follows on the heels of another. It is not the logic of argument. The meaning of the poem does not lie in the fact that the mother has gone to fetch the milk or that after a series of accidents the milk is lost. Instead although each idea is in fact connected to the next one the emphasis is on each image in isolation. It is almost as if the poet's intention was to trap the child's imagination and distract it with one image after the other. The attention thus shifts from the mother to the milk, to the cow, to the pot, to the river, and finally to the storks flying over the river, who with that clear logic of dreams then drink the milk out of the pitcher and so tie the poem together. The popularity of this poem lies perhaps in the fact that each image opens up a new world for the child's imagination to linger in.

Sometimes, as in Poem C, the situation described is totally realistic, or, as in Poem D, it deals with the creatures of the jungle that have always fascinated the folk imagination. The elephant is one such creature that often figures in folk poetry. Here, in spite of the vague threat that a wild elephant would always signify to the peasant, the vision of the huge ambling beast stepping deftly from stone to stone as it roams in its jungle groves and its strange habit of blowing through its trunk when excited or alarmed seems to fascinate the poet. The sharp realistic details indicate first-hand knowledge of the beast and its ways.

Love poems in the folk repertoire seem to work even more strongly on the basis of allusion and understatement. Declarations of love are seldom formally made between lovers in the Sinhalese social context. Love poems thus have often necessarily to depend on ambiguity for their effects.

LOVE POEMS

I

The wild hen coming over this hill is freckled
 The sweat upon her forehead rounds like pearls
 The rings upon her hands and feet, gem-speckled;
 Will you walk past without one glance my girl?

II

Oh city of Taksala — you lie beyond the moon,
 Deep in my mind, a whirlpool of sadness churns

The bees they come for honey when its blossom time
 Why comes not sleep to me. I toss and turn.

III

Milk the cow 'Moon face'
 Congeal the milk like the disc of the moon
 Then cousin sweet do not answer 'no'
 But give me a taste of curd soon.

The first poem is typical of how the poet expresses his feelings while yet operating within a given mode. The first line could be simply descriptive of a bird (in this case a hen) seen walking over a hill. The word 'gomariye' meaning freckled, however, gives the first hint of a possible alternative referent. Freckles were considered a special mark of beauty in a woman and the word 'gomariye' was often used by Sinhalese poets. It was used in a similar sense, however, with regard to elephants too where the whitish freckles often found on the head and ears of the animal were looked on with particular favour. The word also has the more ordinary meaning of 'speckled' and as such could be applied to birds or animals. Thus the first line merely hints at a possible ambiguity. The next two lines however give effective descriptive touches which fill out the figure of the young woman described. The sweat forms pearl-like beads upon her forehead, and the rings upon her fingers and toes indicate quite clearly that it is not the markings on a bird that are being described. The final line conveys more than a hint of the possible relationship between the man and the girl.

The second poem attempts to probe much deeper emotions. The poet apostrophizes the distant city of Taksala, the ancient seat of scholarship, and perhaps in this context the scene of the poet's student days and loves. It is now however remote, unattainable, more distant than the moon. The poet's attention then shifts from the memories of the distant city to the turmoil within his own mind, vividly captured in the image of the whirlpool of despair churning beneath his conscious mind. With that quality of seeming irrelevance characteristic of these poems the attention is distracted again to the bees sipping honey from the blossoms around him. Of course here they are a poignant reminder that for the rest of the world unlike for the poet it is

the springtime of love. He, cannot however, even hope for the soothing visitation of sleep, much less of love.

The third poem is simple, humorous and light-hearted. It is more than a request for some curd but as the Sinhalese reader or listener would be quick to notice, an attempt to win from the girl an acceptance of love. 'Nāna' is the kinship term for marriageable girl-cousin and the poet's request, prefaced by a series of alliterative negatives typical of the understatement characteristically encountered in folk poetry, is that she make a gesture of acceptance of him as a lover, by giving him some of the much relished dessert.

The tradition of understatement, concentration, brevity, and ambiguity, characteristic of folk poetry goes back not just to the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries when the four-line end-rhymed verse form or *sivpada* became popular, but can be traced to literary traditions that go back even as far as the Sigiri graffiti poets (seventh to tenth centuries). Many of the graffiti poems too confine themselves to single stanzas and use similar techniques of ambiguity, implication and suggestion, to achieve concentration and intensity of thought and emotion. I shall quote one of the graffiti poems translated by Dr Parnavitarne for purposes of comparison.

No. 582

The wind blew. Thousands and hundreds of trees which had put forth buds fell down. The curlew uttered shrieks. Torrents came forth on the Malay mountain. The night was made of the glow of tender copper (coloured) leaves by fireflies beyond count. O long eyed one, the message given by you — what sustenance does it bring?

The literary sophistication revealed here is much greater than that generally encountered in folk poetry but here too the effects are achieved through suggestion rather than statement. The external situation is rendered by a realistic sketch of the wind-swept rock with its spectacular view of the storm breaking over the distant mountains. This is contrasted with the beauty and stillness and the sensuous quality of the warm tropical night filled with fireflies. 'Copper leaves' describe the fireflies in their myriads on the trees creating a visual effect as of burnished metal gleaming in the sun. The final lament of the poet is that the message of the woman since she is unfortunately only a painted form, can give no sustenance to one living in the world of men.

YASODARA'S LAMENT

(on the departure of Siddartha in his quest of Enlightenment)

My eyes are full my garments wet, tears fall,
 As my husband, nectar-like, I do recall;
 I think of how he went, leaving our one son,
 Does this world hold another such as I?

When once in a former birth we were born as squirrels
 And our young one into swirling waters fell,
 I know how hard you strove to save him then,
 My husband, Lord, why do you leave him now?

Did I do wrong to bear you a handsome son?
 Did I fall short in beauty, goodness, strength?
 By my unwitting hands was some slight done?
 Or did you dream of Buddahood, conquering death?

My moon-like lord who partook of fragrant food
 Which I prepared and flavoured just for you;
 May fragrant herbs now fill the forest for you
 And scented flowers bloom for my lord of gold.

Your goal was Buddahood — I sensed the signs
 Yet chose you for my refuge — none the less;
 May meditation never leave my mind;
 The palace is dark today, oh husband mine!

My Lord, are you on a bed of flowers now sleeping
 Your tender lovely feet are they now hurting
 Are there gods enough around you, guarding, watching
 Dear husband, Elephant Lord, where are you roaming?

May all the forest fruits for you, turn sweeter,
 May men surround you like the bees a flower
 May the sun his scorching rays for you make dimmer
 And mile on mile may heavenly halls appear.

This last poem is an example of a later development in folk poetry. The four-lined end-rhymed verse was used as part of a larger unit to express a single theme, or narrative. We still find the characteristic use of understatement, compression, suggestion, etc., only it maintains an overall unity in spite of the seeming looseness of the structure.

Yasodara begins with a statement of her grief and expresses the pathos of her immediate situation, abandoned by a husband she loves and for no fault of hers. For a woman in an oriental culture to be abandoned by a man is perhaps not unusual but that he should also have abandoned their son, and an only son at that, is a fact hard to understand, much less accept. She then recalls their former lives and remembers his expressions of filial love on other occasions. The Sinhalese buddhist peasant, whose religious education centred around the *Jataka Tales* relating stories of the past births of the Buddha would have no difficulty in catching the precise reference. The link between the first and second verses is the accepted idea of a father's affections and responsibilities towards a son.

In the next few verses the mood varies and the imagination shifts from self-accusation and questioning to memories of little domestic intimacies — ‘. . . partook of fragrant foods / which I prepared and flavoured just for you.’ — to clear insights into the true nature of the departure, and a desperate effort to accept the rightness of the decision. As the wife of a would-be Buddha, Yasodara struggles to follow her husband's example of religious ascetism ‘May meditation never leave my mind’ but the fallible woman in her intrudes with the poignant human cry: ‘The palace is dark today, oh husband mine!’

In the next verses she projects her imagination into her husband's possible present situation — a wandering ascetic in the forest. The intimately personal terms in which the scene is evoked conveys a sense of her grief, her concern for his safety and comfort, and her awareness of the reality and hardships of the ascetic life especially for one who had so long enjoyed the comforts of a princely living.

The final invocation of blessings on him is a last desperate, generous expression of love, tenderness, and grief, arising from her awareness that she can no longer shield him from physical hardship with her protective love. It is at the same time an admission of her knowledge of the irrevocability of his decision.

In a seemingly simple and loosely structured poem the folk poet has thus achieved an effective communication of deep and complex human emotions to which both the singer and the listener in the given cultural context could immediately respond.