

The Nāgas of Ceylon: An Attempt at Identification

by

V. VITHARANA

Dept. of Sinhala, Vidyodaya University of Ceylon

IT is generally known that the *Yakkhas* and the *Nāgas* are supposed to have been the earliest inhabitants of *Lankā* (Ceylon). They are referred to in the Pali chronicles, the *Dv.** and the *Mv.*,¹ but because, unfortunately, they appear to have left no tangible evidence of their existence (such as architectural remains, inscriptions, etc.) nothing conclusive may be arrived at regarding them. It is, therefore, understandable that the views expressed by scholars regarding their identity have been conjectural. Accordingly, the *Yakkhas* are regarded as a powerful, wild people,² or as worshippers of demons (*yakkhas*)³ or as representative of an Austroloid element in the local population,⁴ and the *Nāgas* as worshippers of serpents (*nāgas*),⁵ or as representative of a Mediterranean element.⁴ Both people are, at times, not regarded even as human.⁶

The *Dv.* and the *Mv.*, though composed about 700 years and 1000 years, respectively, after the supposed episodes associated with the *Yakkhas* and the *Nāgas*, supply certain descriptions of these peoples, and from what is said of the former⁷ they cannot be regarded as civilised, even though they would have been human.

As regards the *Nāgas* the situation is different. The Pali chronicles make reference to them and relate episodes connected with them at greater length. But it is significant that more details about them are supplied in yet later

*See Abbreviations.

1. *Dv.* Chs. I & II, *Mv.* Ch. 1.
2. *JCBRAS*, April 1914, notes & queries.
3. *SS.*, p. 1
4. *HC.*, p. 30.
5. *SS.*, p. 1; this idea may have been inspired by the presence of a tribe (*gotra*) called *Nāga* in certain localities of N. E. Deccan, so called because they worship the snake: *CTSI.*, p.134.
6. *EHC.*, p. 8, fn.
7. They are described as *mahāghorā*, *luddā*, *lohītabhakkasā*, *caṇḍā*, . . . *paravānarosā*, *parapiṭṭhimaṅsikā*, *akārunika*, *paraheṭhane ratā*, *ruddā*, *rabhasā*, *niddayā* (i.e., terrible, cruel, feeding on blood, furious, those having desire and anger, back-biters, uncompassionate, engaged in harassing others, cruel, violent, merciless): *Dv. I.* 46-7, 71. The Buddha is said to have frightened the *Yakkhas* with fire, scattered them and, later, deported them from the island (—all this, not in keeping with His all-compassionate virtue!). It is also significant that he did *not* preach to the *Yakkhas*: *Dv. I.* 57-78, *Mv. I.* 21-30.

literary works composed in the Sinhalese language. It looks as though there was, in this island, a deep-rooted tradition associated with the *Nāgas* of which the Pali chroniclers mentioned only a fraction.

The present study is based primarily on this evidence which no student can afford to ignore totally. However, it has to be admitted at the very outset that no researcher is quite firm on that evidence alone, by its very nature, (it is, firstly, tradition, and secondly, it is a record of what is supposed to have taken place over one and a half millenniums past). But it is possible to make interpretations from this evidence and piece them together with certain other historical and anthropological subject-matter in such a way as to make these ancient inhabitants of this island appear more human and cultured than they are generally supposed to be. It is only hoped that this study would help in placing one more step forward from the stage reached now regarding their identity.

According to these Sinhalese literary works, the *Nāgas* seem to have had three kingdoms located in different parts of *Laṅkā*: *Vaḍunāgala*, *Kālaṇīya* and *Maṇināga*, and at the time of the supposed visit of the Buddha, had three chieftains: *Cūlodara*, the 'Small-bellied', *Mahodara*, the 'Big-bellied' and *Maṇi-akkhika*, the 'Gem-eyed'.⁸ The first and the second belonged to the *Maṇināga* kingdom⁹ and the third was the over-lord of the kingdom of *Kālaṇīya*. The mansion where dwelt the royalty of *Maṇināga* was called *Sāmu-drika*.¹⁰

The *Nāgas* were of two clans, viz., of the water (i.e., of the sea) and of the land—*jalaja* and *thalaja*,¹¹ respectively, or in other words, *gala vasana nāgayō*, i.e., the *Nāgas* of the mountains as those of *Vaḍunāgala*, and *diyehi vasana nāgayō*, i.e., the *Nāgas* of the water as those of *Maṇināga*.¹² The Buddha is said to have visited the *Maṇināga* and the *Kālaṇīya* kingdoms on two occasions and lived with the people—He is even said to have had a bath at the latter¹³—and preached the Doctrine to them.¹⁴

These few details about the *Nāgas* are an indication, however indirect and insufficient they may be, of a fairly high degree of culture and, of course, of general intelligence that they would have possessed.¹⁵

-
8. *Sdhrk.*, p. 325; the last is also referred to as *Mini-ak* (*SLS.* 64, *HS.* 95), *Miniāsī* (*Fjv.* p. 706) & *Maṇinayana* (*Sdhrk.*, p. 329)—all meaning 'the gem-eyed'.
 9. *VMS.*, p. 498.
 10. *Sdhrk.*, p. 328.
 11. *Ibid.*, p. 425.
 12. *Sdhrk.*, p. 438.
 13. *MS.*, p. 43.
 14. *SBV.*, p. 181-2, *SLS.*, p. 64; it is said that they, having understood the Doctrine, adopted it as their faith.
 15. It has to be admitted that some of our classical writers confused between the mythical serpent *nāgas* & the *Nāga* clan of humans: *cūlodara mahodarādī atī daruṇi satvayan* ('very ferocious beings such as *Cūlodara* and *Mahodara*'): *Sdhrk.*, p. 159.

The terms *jalaja* and *thalaja*, though their literal meanings are 'born (*ja*) of the water (*jala*)' and 'born of the land' respectively, may, for practical purposes be better interpreted as 'addicted to or associated with the water' and 'addicted to or associated with the land'. Thus are evident the two clans of *Nāgas*, one distinct from the other not only territorially, but also occupationally:

1. 'The *Nāgas* of the Water' occupying the northern coastal region. They would have been maritime in outlook, and sea-faring and fishing, in addition to pearl-diving, may have been their occupations. Pearls (which gave them the name of their kingdom—*Maṇi*, and with which they are supposed to have studded their throne which was the bone of contention between two warring factions on the occasion of the Buddha's visit)¹⁶ would have been their chief commodity. Being an arid and a normally infertile area, agriculture would have held a very secondary position in this region.
2. 'The *Nāgas* of the Land' occupying the rainy and fertile interior areas of the island. Agriculture,¹⁷ hunting and in-shore fishing would have been the main pursuits.

It is possible that these people were not acquainted with the art of erecting permanent buildings with lasting material which can withstand the ravages of time, which factor might explain the absence of any evidence to their existence, as referred to at the beginning of this article. (It may be remarked that conditions were not dissimilar during the earliest centuries of the *Anurādhapura* kingdom of the Sinhalese. But the civilisation of this pre-Buddhist era is not held in serious doubt). Nevertheless, they can be brought into a relationship with their namesakes of the Northern part of India, the neighbouring sub-continent.

The North Indian *Nāgas*¹⁸ were an ancient race of people whose original home was Scythia which territory spread over the Mongol regions of Tartary and Mongolia. They were mythically believed to have descended from an ancestor who was half human and half snake; hence, *Nāga* (=serpent, more appropriately, the cobra). They appear to have migrated to the plain of the

16. *Mv.* I. p. 45.

17. These *Nāgas* are said to have boasted that they had greater *dhana dhānya sampatti* ('the resources of wealth and grain') than the *diyeḥi vasana nāgayō*: *Sdhk.*, p. 438.

18. See *CpI.*, s.v.; also *Tak*, *Takka*, *Takshaka*—the other Scythian 'snake' races that immigrated to N. India: *CpI.*, s.v.

THE NAGAS OF CEYLON: AN ATTEMPT AT IDENTIFICATION

Gaṅgā, i.e., the Ganges, probably from the N.E. passes of the *Himālaya* mountains, before the arrival of the Aryans to India.¹⁹ They occupied, at first, the *Magadha* region (mod. Bihar) and spread South-West-wards over a portion of the Deccan, and westward over the plain. Some of them took to sea-faring,²⁰ and as late as the time of *Asoka* (3rd c. B.C.) *Nāga* sailors were known in the Bay of Bengal as pirates.²¹ A few centuries later, with the dawn of the Christian era, some of these mongoloid people established themselves over the region south of the river *Yamunā* (mod. *Jumna*) and were finally reduced to subjection by the Guptas during the fourth century A.D.²⁰

These sea-faring *Nāgas*, during the course of their movement in the Bay of Bengal, would have discovered and colonised *Laṅkā* and the pearl islands on its N.W. shore during these pre-Christian centuries; and, by the time of the supposed visit of the Buddha, some of them would have established themselves so much in the island's interior, too, that they would have severed all their connections with the sea to live on the land as *thalaja* or *gala vasana nāgayō*.

It is of significance here to note the availability in the pre-Aryan (i.e. before the 5th c. B.C.) *Tabbōva-Maradammaḍuwa* culture of N.W. Ceylon, of terra cotta human heads in some of the larger of which Deraniyagala sees a 'flat face and coiffeur akin to that of the Malays'²² (therefore, a striking similarity with the mongoloid statuary of the Indus Valley civilisation)²³. And it is not difficult, therefore, to imagine that these ancient artistes depicted in their statuary the human features which they came across in their very neighbourhood: one may suppose that the mongoloid *Nāgas* were the models, although the artistes may not have been *Nāgas*, themselves.

It may be that with the subsequent onset of overwhelming Aryan infiltration to this island the *Nāgas*, whose numbers would have been comparatively few, fused with them. Nevertheless, that they existed as a recognisable community at least in certain localities of the island during the first century B.C. may be upheld from how an Ethiopian captive called Jumbulus, who

19. This immigration is, sometimes, thought to have taken place by about 4,000 B.C.: *AJ.* 4-5.

Significant also are the skulls and figurines from the Indus Valley that possess striking mongolian characteristics such as the high cheek-bone and slanting eyes, which indicate the presence of these peoples in NW. India, too, during such far-off times; see *MIVC.*, p. 345, 643, Pls. CLX. 5-8, XCIV. 5 & *FEM.*, p. 267, 270, 275, 280, 281, Pls. LXXIV. 21-2, 25, LXXVI. 1-4, 8, 9, LXXXII. 7.

The *Nāga* tribes of the Assam Hills of the present day may be a relic of these immigrations.

20. *AHI.*, p. 123.

21. *HIS.*, p. 114.

22. *SZ.*, 29. II. p. 252, fig. 2.

23. See fn. 19.

reached the island during these times, describes the native people: they, according to him, 'had no hair other than those on their heads, eyebrows and chins'²⁴—a typical mongoloid characteristic, and one which differentiates them from the 'hairy' Aryans. It is very likely that Jumbulus set foot in a port inhabited by the *Nāgas*.

Bell recognises a 'tinge of Mongolian blood' in some of the *Sigiriya* paintings²⁵ and Wijesekera supplies two such examples from these frescoes.²⁶ Hocart also sees an 'undoubted Mongoloid strain' among the Sinhalese people;²⁷ this is noted by Wijesekera too, who further points out the presence of an alveolar prognathism and other mongoloid characteristics among the Sinhalese.²⁸ In addition, Phear recognises in these people 'a pronounced calf to the leg' which, he points out, is a mongoloid characteristic.²⁹ Wijesekera, attempting to explain these physical affinities, sees a possible infiltration to the island's S.E. sector of Indonesians, who, he believes, implanted these characteristics among the local population.³⁰ But, the arrival of these islanders in such considerable numbers as would have been required to impose peculiar ethnic features on the local inhabitants is not authenticated by the history of either region.

It is, now, not unreasonable to attribute these features which the Sinhalese possess to a strain of mongoloid blood which they have inherited from the ancient *Nāgas* whose existence in the island at an early stage of its history has been established.

It is also interesting, at this juncture, to note the manner in which the story of the visit of the Buddha to *Laṅkā* receives treatment at the hands of the Pali chroniclers. The Buddha, according to them, was compassionate to the *Nāgas* of *Laṅkā*³¹ (quite in contrast to His supposed attitude towards the *Yakkhas*)³², who served Him with food and drink³³ and gathered around Him in vast numbers to listen to His sermon.³⁴ He also received a special invitation by *Maniakkhika* to pay a visit to his *Nāga* kingdom of *Kālaniya*,³⁵ and the Buddha is said to have obliged, accompanied by 500 *bhikkus* on none but the full-moon day of Vesak, to be welcomed and entertained in the noblest manner.³⁶

24. *HPSACD.*, Apnd. p. 777-8.

25. *ASCAR.*, 1905 p. 17.

26. *ESP.*, p. 52.

27. *CJS.*, I.2. p. 82.

28. *HC.*, I. p. 30, 33.

29. *AV.*, p. 177.

30. *ESP.*, p. 25, 52.

31. *Dv.* II. 13, 28.

32. See fn. 7.

33. *Dv.* II. 40, *Mv.* I. 61.

34. *Dv.* II. 41. The *Sdhk.* (p. 437) gives the population of *Vaḍḍunāgala*, *Kālaniya* and *Maṇināga* as 30, 20 and 30 *koṭis*, respectively. These figures are, no doubt, exaggerations.

35. *Dv.* II. 52, *Mv.* I. 65-6.

36. *Mv.* I. 72-6.

Now the Buddha was a personage of the *Sākya* clan which was composed of mongoloid people³⁷ who occupied the foot-hills of the *Himālaya* in the *Nepāla* region (where mongoloid people live yet); and it may be that the chroniclers were prompted by a desire to show how the people of His own blood in distant *Lankā* took a special interest to invite Him—their illustrious clansman—to their midst and to entertain Him with the dignity befitting His greatness. The chroniclers in pursuing this desire also would have, for a moment forgotten His sense of equanimity in depicting in Him a particular compassion towards the *Nāgas*, whilst representing Him as a source of fear to the *Yakkhas*.

The arrival of the *Sākya* princess *Bhaddakaccānā* (daughter of *Paṇḍu*, a cousin of the Buddha) with 32 of her female host,³⁸ and of her brothers *Rāma*, *Uruvela*, *Anurādha*, *Vijita*, *Dīghāyu* and *Rohaṇa*³⁹ (circa 5th c. B.C.) may be taken as representative of several mongoloid immigrations to the shores of pre-Christian *Lankā*. Some of them did add to the quota of their racial blood already infused into the Aryans by the earlier *Nāgas*.⁴⁰

37. *IA.*, p. 82.

38. *Mv.* VIII. 18-25.

39. *Ibid.* IX. 6-10.

40. Mention is made of the 10 sons and 1 daughter of *Bhaddakaccānā* and of the one son of *Dīghāyu* (*Mv.* IX. 1, 13). The marriage of *Paṇḍuvāsudeva* of Aryan ancestry with *Bhaddakaccānā* of Mongol ancestry is significant (*Mv.* VIII. 28); it marks the fusion between two of the world's important blood-streams in *Lankā's* royal genealogy. The same is sure to have taken place in the lower rungs of society, too.

Abbreviations

<i>AHI.</i>	: Advanced History of India—Majumdar, Raychaudhuri & Dutt.
<i>AJ.</i>	: Ancient Jaffna—Rasanayagam.
<i>ASCAR.</i>	: Archaeological Survey of Ceylon Annual Report.
<i>AV.</i>	: Aryan Village—Phear.
<i>CJS.</i>	: Ceylon Journal of Science.
<i>CpI.</i>	: Cyclopaedia of India—Balfour.
<i>CTSI.</i>	: Castes and Tribes in South India—Thurstan.
<i>Dv.</i>	: <i>Dīpavamsa</i> —tr. Law.
<i>EHC.</i>	: Early History of Ceylon—G. C. Mendis.
<i>ESP.</i>	: Early Sinhalese Painting—Wijesekera.
<i>FEM.</i>	: Further Excavations in Mohenjodaro—Mackay.
<i>HC.</i>	: History of Ceylon—University of Ceylon.
<i>HIS.</i>	: History of Indian Shipping—Mookerji.
<i>HPSACD.</i>	: An Historical, Political and Statistical Account of Ceylon and its Dependencies—Pridham.
<i>HS.</i>	: <i>Haṅsa Sandeśaya</i> —ed. Tennakon.
<i>IA.</i>	: Inscriptions of Asoka—Sircar.
<i>JCBRAS.</i>	: Journal of the Ceylon Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society.
<i>Mv.</i>	: <i>Mahāvamsa</i> —tr. Geiger.
<i>MIVC.</i>	: Mohenjodaro and the Indus Valley Civilisation—Marshall.
<i>MS.</i>	: <i>Mayūra Sandeśa Varnanāva</i> —ed. Kumaratunga.
<i>Pjv.</i>	: <i>Pūjāvalīya</i> —ed. Sraddhatisya.
<i>SBV.</i>	: <i>Sinhala Bodhi Vaṅśaya</i> —ed. Amaramoli.
<i>Sdhk.</i>	: <i>Saddharmālanīkāraya</i> —ed. Nanavimala.
<i>Sdhrk.</i>	: <i>Saddharmaratnākaraya</i> —ed. Devananda.
<i>SIS.</i>	: <i>Sālaḥihini Sandeśaya</i> —ed. Kumaratunga.
<i>SS.</i>	: The Story of the Sinhalese—Senaveratna.
<i>SZ.</i>	: <i>Spolia Zeylanica</i> .
<i>VMS.</i>	: <i>Visuddhi Mārga Sannaya</i> —ed. Sraddhatisya.