

A SHORT HISTORICAL SKETCH OF CEYLON AND THE SINHALESE.

Different names by which Ceylon was known in former times.—Perhaps there is not a single Indian to whom the name of Lanka or Ceylon is not familiar. Every Hindu knows it to be the famous battle-field of the story in the Ramayana. The Rajput knows it to be the land that nourished the brave heroine Padmini, the “Lotus-Flower of Chittor,” one of the brightest examples of Indian womanhood unparalleled in history. The exquisite natural beauty that this island exhibits and the immense mineral wealth that it possesses, have had attracted merchants and adventurers from far distant lands such as Greece, Rome, and Carthage even at the time when Britain was not well-known to the Romans and the Greeks, and at an age when means of communication were far more difficult than what they are now. We find the earlier Greek and Roman writers calling this island *Taprobane*; a corruption of Tamrapanni, the name which Vijaya and his Bengalee colonists gave it on account of its copper-coloured soil. To later Hellenic and Latin writers the island was known as Salice or Palaesimundus, and they described it as “the land of the hyacinth and the ruby.” Some of the Arabian geographers such as Soleyman and Edrisi called the island Serendib, a transformation of Silaha-dipa, one of the Sinhalese names for Ceylon meaning “the island of the lion-hearted race.” The English name Ceylon which came into use not more than seven centuries ago, is also most probably an extraction from the Sinhalese word Sihala or Sinhala. In this way, we find still a dozen or more other names applied to this island in different tongues; but the name Lanka, which is the earliest of all that are known to have been given to it, still predominates the rest, and is in more common use in many countries throughout the East, perhaps because of the music in that word, and the great facility of its pronunciation.

The mention of Ceylon in mythology.—The earliest mention of Ceylon has been made in the Skandha Purāna, where it is said that Skandha Kumara or Kartikeya, the god of war, was born to fight against the fierce Asuras. The scene of that great battle is said to have been a forested area in the south of Ceylon, where the village of Kataraganfa or Karthakeya Grama is now situated. The next tradition after this, concerning the island is to be found in the Ramayana. It appears from the story in the Ramayana that Ceylon was at that time a far more extensive island, very many times bigger than what it is at the present day. This may be believed without hesitation from the information that we can gather from the Mahabamsa, the great chronicle of Ceylon, which gives the history of the island from the landing of Prince Vijaya in 543 B. C. up to the British occupation of the island in 1815, A. D. This great history was written, little by little, by various hands in the reigns of the respective kings from the early days of the Sinhalese colonization of the island—a thing which was very uncommon in the East. In addition to what we read in the Mahavamsa, we have for the corroboration of our belief, two Sinhalese topographical works, namely Kadayim Potha and Lanka Vistraya which are historically old. According to the statements made in these books we come to learn that Kelaniya, a village which is now only six miles inland, was 28 miles away from the sea at the time when those two books were written.

Encroachment of sea on land.—Now the question arises—how is it that the area of Ceylon became smaller? The answer that will naturally catch the mind of the questioner is that it might have been due to inundation by the sea. And this is what had really happened. We read in the Ramayana that Lankapura, the imperial seat of Ravana, with its people and all its mighty brazen palaces and a large portion of the kingdom were swallowed up by the sea. But the Ramayana is a story, the truth of which is doubted by many. So we cannot rely much on its information, although by sifting the mythical

superstitions with which the story is embellished, and by careful scrutiny, we can try to prove the historical truth of the fierce seize of Lankapura. Happily, we have got some treatises on history and geography which had been written in the very very early days when those said encroachments of the sea took place. With the help of these books, we are in a position to know much of the condition of ancient Ceylon. According to what we can gather from these valuable books, we find that several submergences of land took place in Ceylon, very many centuries after the war of Rama-Ravana. The first of these, that we come to know of with certainty, happened in the reign of Pándavasa about the year 500 B.C., and later on yet another in the time of Devánam Piyatissa. The third encroachment of the sea was a much more extensive and terrific one, which took place in the days of Kalyáni Tissa in about 300 B.C. At this time, it is said, the sea encroached upon 100,000 seaport towns, 970 fishing villages and 479 villages of pearl fishers, thus sinking for ever beneath the waves nearly eleven-twelfths of Ceylon. With the accumulation of years too, the ocean has gradually stolen away the precious soil from the coasts of Lanka; but worse than this, only in the latter half of the last century, the unavoidable fate that fell upon the once fertile island of Krakatqa in the Sunda Strait, grievously affected Ceylon also. For, when that beautiful island was sunk beneath the sea, the mighty waves which were created as a result of that, travelling for a distance of nearly 2000 miles, burst upon the southern and western coasts of Ceylon, thereby washing away several acres of rich cocoanut growing land.

The early inhabitants of the island. The Sinhalese, who have lived in Ceylon for the last twenty-five centuries, are not the real aboriginal natives of the island, but are the descendants of some 701 Bengalees who settled there in 543 B.C. forming a new nation by themselves. History tells us that, prior to the advent of the Sinhalese, there were three different tribes of people in the island. These were the Dévās, the Nágās, and the Yakkhās—so called by the Sinhalese because

the tribes worshipped gods, snakes, and demons respectively. The Dévās and the Nágās were people of some primitive civilisation, while the Yakkhās were mostly wild cannibals. At the time when the Sinhalese visited the island, these Yakkhās were far more numerous than both the other tribes and were also much more powerful. The Dévās and the Nágās were soon becoming extinct, probably by being destroyed by the cruel Yakkhās. When the Sinhalese conquered the island, they began to clear the forests and construct towns and villages. The Yakkhās who were unaccustomed to leading a civilized type of life, and also to escape from the swords of the Sinhalese, then betook themselves to strongholds either on inaccessible mountains or in large forests. The members of this wretched people can still be found in the wilds of Bintenna in the eastern part of Ceylon. These people live in a very primitive style like the Santals of Bengal, or still worse. They are known by the name of Veddahs meaning "hunters," because they live by hunting the wild animal of their forests.

Ethnological relations of the Veddahs. Some ethnologists are of opinion that the Veddahs belong to the great Dravidian stock of people who inhabit Southern India. But more reliable evidence goes to prove that they rather belong to the same race of people as the "blacks" of Australia, to which stock also belong the native Andamanese. How the members of one such race are placed in two countries which are so far away from each other, is a question that still puzzles the ethnologists. But modern discoveries help to solve this puzzle a little. For it is the opinion of some geologists that from Australia up to continental Asia, there was, in ages past, a vast continent embracing Ceylon, the Andamans, and the whole of Malay Archipelago. This great continent was in existence long before the proud Himalayas rose up from the depths of the sea and when India was yet at the bottom of a mighty ocean. Some millions of years passed. Man was then fighting for supremacy over the other animals, when once, for ever, a large portion of that mighty continent sank under the

sea, and India emerged out of the depths of the ocean. When that great continent was submerged, some of the very high mountains and plateaus remained above the surface of the sea in the form of islands, and the few people that survived the calamity were forced to be confined to these. This argument explains why the Veddahs of Ceylon and the Blacks of Australia are so widely separated from each other.

The coming of the Sinhalese. Now we must turn our attention to the Sinhalese, the people of Ceylon. As we have already said, they are not the aborigines of Ceylon, but some Aryān conquerors from Northern India. During the closing years of the great Sakya Muni, there was in ancient Bengal a king of the Ikshavāku-Vaṃsa named Sinhabahu. He had several sons, the eldest of whom was named Vijaya or Bijoy Singh as the present day Bengalees prefer to call him. This prince was by nature a rash and obstinate youth, somewhat like Henry V of England when he was the Prince of Wales and who was nicknamed "Madcap Hal." As his father was too old to rule the kingdom, Vijaya was appointed Prince-Regent. Vijaya ruled in a most obnoxious way, and like "Madcap Hal," he allowed his favourites to behave in ways that were much detested by the people. Dissatisfied with the Prince-Regent and his bad government, the people complained to the king several times and even demanded that he should be executed for his misdeeds. The king warned his son three times, but Vijaya did not listen to him. He went on governing the land in his own autocratic way, till at last the people rose in rebellion against him. To evade further trouble and to pacify the people, this time the king was compelled to exile his son and 700 of the prince's favourites from Bengal. Vijaya and his 700 followers had now to go and find a new settlement for themselves. History does not clearly tell us which route they followed. But any way, it mentions to us three of the places which Vijaya visited after he was exiled and before his landing in Ceylon. From these three places we can safely guess the route that he and his followers must have taken, and can

imagine what might have befallen them. Vijaya and his party probably went along the Gangetic valley and tried to settle down in one or two countries that came on their way. But because of their rough behaviour and the fact of their being exiles, rulers of those countries did not welcome them. They then reached Mathura in ancient Rajasthan. King Pandu, the ruler of Mathura received the prince at his place and kept him there for a few days as his guest. Here Vijaya fell in love with the daughter of King Pandu. But when Vijaya asked the king whether his followers could settle down in Mathura, he most probably refused because of their rough ways and also being reluctant to displease Sinhabahu. His request being thrown away, the prince went with his men to Broach (ancient Barukachcha) at the mouth of the Narbada. Here they bought a ship from the Gujarati merchants, and setting sail from there, they reached the town of Supparaka north of Bombay. The men of Vijaya soon brought about on themselves the hostility of the people of Supparaka, and so he had again to embark. Out at sea, they were caught in a storm, but fortunately their vessel was carried by the winds to the Gulf of Mannar in Ceylon. Here they landed near the place where the town of Puttalam is now situated, and founded their first city Tamrapanni. "

Vijaya in Ceylon: The story that is told of Vijaya and his followers when they landed in Lanka is almost similar to that of Ulysses and Circe as related in the Homeric epic, the Odyssey. For, here they met with an enchantress named Kuvéni, who was a Yakkha princess. She lived in much the same way as Circe. Like Ulysses, Vijaya managed to get the enchantress under his control ; and afterwards with her help Vijaya was able to conquer the island of Lanka from the Yakkha rulers. In order to do this, Vijaya first married Kuvéni ; and she thought that he really loved her, and did all she could to help him to win the island. He had two children by her—a son and a daughter. But after he had won the kingdom, he left them all—the wife and the children ; and sent

messengers to the court of King Pandu in Mathura asking him for his daughter in marriage. It was very unkind of Vijaya to have done this, but we cannot of course blame him too much for it, however wicked the act might appear before our eyes. Vijaya wanted to make a pure Aryan dynasty to rule over his kingdom. So in the hope of getting Aryan blooded issues he deserted Kuvēni and her children and married the Rajpoot princess. In his time such a deed was not looked upon as cruel. More than this, he wanted to make Lanka an Aryan colony altogether, and so we read, that when he sent messengers to King Pandu, he requested him to send Rajpoot maidens as wives for his followers also. King Pandu complied with all the requests of Vijaya with the greatest pleasure, and it was from the time of that great union that the Sinhalese nation came into existence. Vijaya reigned in Ceylon as king for 38 years ; but he had no children by his Rajpoot queen. So when he was advancing in years, he sent ambassadors to his brother Sumitra asking him to come over to Ceylon and wear the crown after him. But Sumitra by this time had become the King of Bengal after the death of his father, and so he sent his own youngest son Pánduvása to Ceylon. When Panduvasa arrived in the island, King Vijaya had already died, and the Sinhalese people who were anxiously waiting all this time for a prince from Bengal, crowned him with great rejoicings.

Geographical conditions of Ceylon. We have devoted so much space to the ancient history of the island. Now it is proper that we should know something about its geographical conditions. Anyone who has visited the island will find it to be a marvel of natural beauty. The south central part of Ceylon is a high mountainous region. On the north and the east is one vast plain, and all-round the sea-coast is a wide lowland tract. This lowland region generally goes by the name of Low-country and the mountainous part as the Kandyan or Up-country. In the lowlands, along the southern and western coasts, the coconut palm thrives luxuriantly. The passenger in a steamer, as he nears the island, sees the place as a forest of wavy palms floating amidst the sea. Coconut trees are said

to grow best in Ceylon, better than in any other country. It is also a common saying that the poor native of Ceylon can get all his requirements from the coconut tree alone. In the hilly regions, all kinds of tropical, sometime as well as 'warm-temperate vegetation can be found. In spite of the country being small, different and various types of vegetation are met with at the change of every forty or fifty miles. Such a variety of changes in the natural scenery is perhaps never to be come across in any other country. There are also in Ceylon as many as 800 different species of plants which do not grow elsewhere in the world. The climate, too, is 'surprising. The fact that the island is situated between 6 and 10 degrees north of the equator, does in no way make the climate unpleasant. No spot in Ceylon is more than 70 miles away from the 'sea, and so the cool breezes, that unceasingly blow from all sides of the ocean, keep the climate of the island very mild. In addition to this, the island is fully exposed to both the Monsoons, which also modify the tropical heat to a great degree. In the hill-country, these two facts together with the elevation of the land make some parts have a climate similar to that of an English summer. There are in Ceylon climates suited perhaps for any man in the world. Those who come from cold countries such as Europe will find themselves quite at home in places like Nuwara Eliya and Pattipola. Those who come from hot countries like Egypt will find a suitable climate for them in the Jaffna Peninsula. The Indian, in general, will find an excellent place for him to live anywhere in the low-country.

Mineral wealth of Ceylon—Ceylon has always been famous for its precious stones throughout the whole world. The reason why merchants were attracted to this island from far off countries, even in the days before Christ, was mainly because of these treasures. We have already said that the ancient Greeks and Romans described this island as "the land of the hyacinth and the ruby." The Chinese called it "the Island of Jewels." Many are of opinion that Ceylon was a

part of the region which was known to the ancient Hebrew writers as Gphir or Tarshish, from where gold, silver, ivory, apes, and peacocks were supplied for King Solomon. There is also a story that the great Kubla Khan once offered to give a whole province of his to the King of Ceylon in exchange for a ruby which the latter possessed. Ships from Arabia, Persia and China were in those days very busily engaged in the trade of gems and pearls with Ceylon. The Arabian geographer Edrisi writing about Ceylon in 1154 A. D. says:—

“In the mountains around Adam’s Park they collect precious stones of every description, and in the valleys they find those diamonds, by which they engrave the setting of stones on rings. The same mountains produce aromatic drugs, perfumes and aloe-wood, and there too, they find the animal, the civet, which yields musk. The islander cultivates rice, coconuts, and sugar cane; in the rivers is found rock crystal remarkable both for brilliancy and size; and the seas have a fishery of magnificent and priceless pearls. Throughout India there is no prince whose wealth can be compared with that of the King of Serendib (Ceylon); his immense riches, his pearls and his jewels being the produce of his own dominions and seas, and thither ships of China and of every neighbouring country resort, and bring the wine of Irak.....The exports from Serendib consist of silk, precious stones, crystals, diamonds and perfumes.”

The Sinhalese people—The total population of Ceylon is only four and a half millions, and this comprises of several races—the Sinhalese, the Tamils, the Burghers, and the Muslims. Of all these the most numerous are the Sinhalese, who are generally taken as the natives numbering over two and a half millions. They are a people of pure Aryan stock, being descended mainly from the Bengalees and the Rajpoots of India. Their language is a form of Sanskrit and Pali mixed together. They have a long history with a glorious past, and have remained as an independent nation for 2358 years—from 548 B. C. to 1815 A. D. They had held their country against three great European nations for more than three-hundred years in spite of the latter’s continuous attempts to take it. The Portuguese, for a century and a half from 1505 to 1658 A.D., carried on an incessant struggle in the hope of conquering Ceylon but in most of their wars they were defeated by the Sinhalese. The Portuguese historian De Couto says: “Ceylon was to Portugal what Carthage was to Rome, a source of unceasing and anxious expenditure.” Then the Dutch till 1796, for an equally long period, tried their utmost to capture

the island. But their attempts were all unsuccessful. Next came the English; and they were carrying on their operations for about a quarter of a century, when a sudden change took place. The last King of Ceylon had become a great tyrant; his reign was a period of cruel bloodshed and horror. The Sinhalese people then rose against their King and deposed him; and of their own accord they handed over the government to the British in February 1815, under a treaty signed by both nations.

The Government. Since the occupation of the island by the British, it has been turned into a Crown Colony with the Roman-Dutch Law in force. According to the reforms granted two years back, at present the administration of the island is carried on by a governor appointed by the Crown and assisted by two Councils. These are the Executive Council, consisting of six members and the Governor as president, and the Legislative Council consisting of 35 unofficial and 12 official members together with the Governor as president. One of the unofficial members is also appointed as the Vice-President of the Legislative Council; and as matters stand out at present, it is usually this Vice-President that presides over the council proceedings. For the facility of governing, the whole country is divided into nine provinces. Each province is placed under a high official called the Government Agent. In every province there are several native chiefs, and these keep law and order in their respective districts according to the advice and the direction of the Government Agent. In the villages there is a type of minor law courts called Grama Sabhas or Village Tribunals for the settlement of petty disputes. Above the Village Tribunal Courts there are the Police Courts and next in superiority are the Courts of Requests and District Courts. Higher in power than all these is the Supreme Court of the Chief Justice. There are no separate laws for different sects of people in Ceylon such as Mohammedan Law for the Muslims and Hindu Law for the Hindus. There is only one law for all—the Roman-Dutch Law; and all the people whether Europeans or natives are judged according to this without any distinction of caste and creed.

Industries of Ceylon. With regard to industries, Ceylon may be said to be a poor country in manufactures. Agriculture is the chief occupation of the people. Paddy cultivation was carried on in excess in the time of the Sinhalese kings, and Ceylon was then described by writers as the "granary of the East." The Sinhalese emonarchs of old devoted much of their time to improve the agricultural welfare of the island. They

constructed great tanks even fourteen miles square, which are in existence up to this day. But having fallen into decay in later times they are now no longer in use. The Government is trying its best to restore tanks; but the modern engineers have not still found out a way as to how to reconstruct these great reservoirs of water. They only remain as one of the wonders of the world in the sight of engineers. In ancient times rice used to be exported to other countries from Ceylon, but now-a-days rice has to be imported to Ceylon from India and Burma. The great drawback in the cultivation of paddy was mainly due to the troublous years that destroyed the prosperity of Ceylon in later times. For over three hundred years, the Sinhalese had continuously to fight against three of the greatest European nations; and in the face of such odds, the people found no time which could be devoted to agriculture. They neglected their fields and their tanks, and thus huge forests sprang up in places, whence rich harvests were gathered in days gone by. The cultivation of paddy is now chiefly confined to the places where rainfall is abundant and where irrigation can be carried on without much trouble. In the cultivation of tea, Ceylon holds the third place in the world, but this industry is mainly in the hands of the Europeans. The other important industries in which the Ceylonese have a hand are the cultivation of coconut, rubber, and cinnamon; and it is chiefly from these sources that Ceylon gets any money from countries outside.

The religion of the Sinhalese. The Sinhalese of Ceylon follow Buddhism, the religion preached by the great Sakya Muni of India. In ages past the Sinhalese were probably Hindus. But during the time of the great Buddhist Emperor Asoka of India, missionaries were sent by him to Ceylon to convert the people to Buddhism. The king of Ceylon and all the Sinhalese people gladly accepted the precepts of the Buddha and from that time their civilization and their destiny had been modelled according to the principles of Buddhism. The history of Ceylon from that time is really the history of the Buddhist Church in Ceylon. Mighty edifices and huge monasteries were built in Ceylon by various kings. Large and beautiful cities grew up in places where once there were huge forests; but unfortunately most of those mighty cities have now fallen into decay. Forests in their turn have again grown up in those places, and nothing remains of those mighty cities today, except their buried ruins. As Mahatma Ganhhi observed on one occasion, there is no great difference between Buddhism and Hinduism. The essential difference lies only in

the different ways of conception of Nirvana and Rebirth by the two religions, and in the fact that the Buddhists do not believe in a personal Creator. Buddhists believe in a form of rebirth without the existence and the transmigration of the soul. To the ordinary Hindu mind, which has always been trained to believe in the existence of a soul this would of course seem as absurd. But if we reason well both scientifically and logically we shall find that this is not impossible. Otherwise, how could a fluid of the whole human race be brought about to believe in mere abstractions? The Hindu idea of Nirvana is in other words to "attain God"—the reunion of our souls with that of the Almighty. But the Buddhist conception of Nirvana is quite otherwise. Of course it is not easy to explain this; yet we can try to give some idea of it. Buddhist Nirvana is a state of "emancipation" which can be attained even in this life. When we have destroyed all our desires and possessions and have banished selfishness altogether, our hearts being filled with compassion for the whole world, we arrive at such a state known as Nirvana, after which there will be no rebirth. To attain the Buddhist Nirvana, we should not go in the way as shown in the Upanishads by being completely actionless in order to kill Karma, but we must rather struggle and be active in virtue and actionless only in the case of all that is evil. By struggling for myriads of years like this life after life at last we can arrive at the holy path that leads to Nirvana. Such is the type of salvation preached by the Lord Buddha who was, in the words of Mahatma Gandhi, "the greatest teacher of mankind."

S. B. K. Ranasingha.

2nd Year 1. Sc. Class,

SECTION "A".

5/2/24