

The First War of Unification in Sri Lanka: A Critical Analysis

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Abstract- The war fought between King Duttagamini and King Elara in the 1st Century BC was commonly known as the first war of unification in Sri Lanka. Until then, the country has not been referred to by the historians as a single sovereign administrative unit. There were many power pockets operating from various parts of Sri Lanka. However, Mahavamsa -the chronical which was written a few centuries after the war of unification- attaches favorable prominence to the victory of Duttagamini against Elara. This historical episode has been interpreted by several historians for diverse objectives in the passage of Sri Lankan history. Moreover, this war of unification has been misconstrued by many as an ethnic conflict which escalated between the Sinhala and Tamil races. After a thorough perusal of facts and figures relating to this research, it is evident that this military offensive was solely prosecuted with the motive of unifying this island. The aim of this compilation is to justify the fact that this venture was to be treated as war of unification and not as an ethnic conflict while critically analyzing each stage of the Elara-Duttagamini war. This paper is compiled with employing secondary data. Books, research papers, journal articles and e-articles are used as secondary data.

Keywords— *Duttagamini, Elara, Unification*

Introduction

Sri Lanka became a much more civilized nation after the advent of Buddhism during the reign of King Dewanampiyathissa. This signal event saw the introduction of many novel cultural aspects paving the path towards a developed state. Starting up with a ruling system with much more

positive backgrounds together with social and cultural areas from side to side. Sinhala Kings started ruling, focusing mainly on the interior of the country until invasions from different nations -especially invasions from the South India- usurped the peace.

According to the ancient Sinhalese chronicle Mahavamsa, Sri Lanka was not ruled by a single King or governed under one main district. Yet it was ruled under several sub regions where there were chieftains and rulers to each minor or major human settlement within Sri Lanka. The central power that a state should have wielded was devolved and subjected to vicissitudes due to the impact of several decisive factors.

Beginning from King Pandukabaya to down King Elara, Sri Lanka was not rated a unified land until King Duttagamini shouldered the initiative for unification. This was against King Elara who was branded an invader. Before the unification we are encouraged to note the fair and firm rule of the South Indian Invader. King Duttagamini and his efforts to unify Sri Lanka are the earliest campaigns of territorialism portrayed in the Mahavamsa. He was the first king to unite the entire land and to hold sway over as a single ruler and to recapture from hordes of Indian migrants. His campaign of unification went through a series of engagements during which he killed 32 generals (confirmed by both Mahavamsa and Depavamsa, although only the Mahavamsa states that they were Tamil kings) before arriving at Vijithapura to face his archrival - King Elara.

Starting up with two “Damilas” or Tamils, Sena and Guttika -sons of a freighter who brought

horses hither- spearheading a great army overthrew the Sinhala king Sooratissa and ruled Sri Lanka together for twenty-two years. But when Asela - the son of Mutasiva, being the ninth among his brothers and born of the same mother- had vanquished them, he ruled for ten years at Anuradhapura. This is the closest history for the start-up of King Elara's just rule despite him being rated a Tamil invader.

At this period there were branches of the royal family established at Kelaniya as well as at Magama in the present Hambantota District. The queen of Devanampiyathissa tried to poison her brother-in-law, the sub-king Mahanaga, who thereupon fled towards Ruhuna. On the way his wife gave birth to a son, Tissa, at the Yattala Vihara and while proceeding to Ruhuna, he established himself at Magama. The site of Tissa's birthplace usually is identified with a temple near Thissamaharama.

During the reign of King Asela 185 BC, a Damila (Tamil) named Elara from the Chola country landed at Malwathu Oya with a contingent of nearly 100,000 men at the mouth of the river Mahaweli on the east coast of Lanka. From there the army marched to Anuradhapura. King Asela was killed and the Kingdom was seized. Having overcome all opposition Elara established 32 military camps and appointed 20 great giants. An account of these camps is found in the NikayaSangrahaya.

He ruled Mother Lanka forty-four years and his administration of justice and enforcement of fair rule commanded the respect of his Sinhala subjects. Though he was a Hindu, he tolerated all religions and persecuted none. Mahavamsa relates that the king had fixed a bell with a rope attached at the head of his bed, so that all who sought redress might ring it. Among other instances of the royal justice the chronicle relates how a calf was killed accidentally by the chariot wheel of the king's son, and how, when the mother cow was ringing the bell, the father had the prince's head struck off by the same wheel. The story is also repeated in Tamil literature of

the Chola king Manu. Elara is a favoured figure in the history of Sri Lanka and one with a particular resonance, given the ongoing strife in the country. Although he was an invader, he is often regarded as one of Sri Lanka's wisest and just kings, as highlighted in Mahavamsa.

Elara's reign has been ascertained to be from 205 BC to 161 BC – a cumulative period of 44 years. Assuming that he had to be at least 20 years of age at the time of capturing Anuradhapura kingdom, then one can fix his year of birth to be around 225 BC. Thus, Elara's life span can be tentatively fixed at 61 years. He died in a duel (fought while riding his elephant) against the young prince Duttagamini in 161 BC.

King Elara- The Noble Ruler

King Elara is depicted in the Mahavamsa as "A Tamil of noble descent . . . from the Chola-country". Little is known of his early life. Around 205 BC, King Elara led an invasion to capture the Rajarata which is based around Anuradhapura in northern Sri Lanka. He routed the forces of king Asela of Anuradhapura, thus establishing himself as sole ruler of Rajarata. His name is recorded in Silappatikaram and Periya Puranam and since then it has been used as a metaphor for fairness and justice in Tamil literature.

According to Professor W.I. Siriweera in his "History of Sri Lanka" Elara could never have remained in power for a long period such as 44 years had he lacked the support of the locals. Professor Siriweera adds that "*most foreigners who succeeded in wresting the throne and ruling the country for any considerable length of time have had some indigenous support or had been backed by foreign power.*"

It is evident that King Elara was a just king to such an extent that he executed his own son as a punishment for killing a calf. The Mahavamsa itself repeats that King Elara was a pious and a just ruler. Another outstanding feature was that even though he wasn't a Buddhist himself, he liberally patronized Buddhism.

Throwing light into the most reliable source of Sri Lankan history, which is the Mahavamsa, it is evident that King Elara and King Dutugemunu were engaged in a more of a feudal power game and not in a racial conflict between the Tamils and Sinhalese given the fact that King Elara had formed a deep reverence to Buddhism. For instance, it is stated that when Elara was on his way to the Cetiya mountain in a chariot to invite Bhikkhus, the nub of the yoke of his chariot struck a dagoba and caused damage to the monument. During this mishap Elara's ministers are said to have exclaimed "Oh King! Our thupa has been damaged by you" This proves the fact that Elara had employed Sinhalese ministers too as they claimed the thupa to be theirs. It is evident that King Elara has given prominence to the locals and entrusted them with administration during his regime. Moreover, King Elara is said to have invited Buddhist Bhikkhus of the Cetiya mountain for religious rites or to seek advice.

King Kavan Tissa

KavanTissa, also known as Kakavantissa, was the ruler of the Kingdom of Ruhuna in the southern part of Sri Lanka. He ruled Ruhuna, at the same time as Kelani Tissa of Maya rata and the usurping Tamil king of Anuradhapura, who happened to be Elara, expanding the city. Also, he was consolidating the clout of his Rajarata region across the length and breadth of Sri Lanka. KavanTissa was a great-grandson of King Devanampiyatissa's youngest brother Mahanaga, and also the father of King Dutugemunu.

It is clear that the Mahavamsa author has attached great importance to King Duttagamini. He not only tried to glorify the achievements of King Dutugemunu by elaborating on his religious-nationalist character, he also downgrades King Kaavantissa (his father) and his brother King Saddhatissa as cowardly leaders who weren't in favour of conflict. In the saga of King Duttagamini, the Mahavamsa author extols the young prince Gamini as an upcoming, powerful religious-nationalist leader. Folk lore has it that when Prince Gamini was just 12 years old, King Kaavantissa made three lumps of rice which he made Prince Gamini and Prince Tissa to eat while making three promises. One was to never go into

war with the Tamils, which Prince Gamini refused at once. It also states that the enraged and frustrated prince was lying crouched on the bed and when his mother questioned him of the reason, he has compared his bed to the island and retorted that, " Over there beyond the river are the Tamils; here on this side is the sea; how can I lie with outstretched limbs" The Mahavamsa chronicler Mahanama Thera further elaborates that Prince Gemunu's attempt to wage war against the Tamils was thwarted by King Kaavantissa three times. As a result, the enraged Prince has sent a set of women's' ornaments to his father and he self-exiled himself to the central hills (believed to be Malaya Rata) and earned the sobriquet "Duttagamini". Professor W.I. Siriweera has remarked that, it is evident that the relationship between King Kaavantissa and Prince Gamini was strained during the latter part of the prince's youth.

However, it is clear that King Dutugemunu may have surely lost the battle against Elara and the Tamils if not for his father's foresight and meticulous planning. It is evident that King Kaavantissa laid the solid foundation to enable King Dutugemunu to galvanise the populace into action with Elara without jeopardising the economy, agriculture and other routine affairs. Therefore, it is a misconception to portray King Kakavantissa as a vacillating leader just for refusing to embark on an unplanned and hastily drawn up combat with a powerful enemy who successfully managed to rule the country for more than 4 decades.

It is evident that King Dutugemunu had to bring 32 kingdoms and kinglets under a single royal standard before launching the final unification war with King Elara. The initiative was taken by King Kavantissa during his regime. He amalgamated the various kinglets of Rohana to form one formidable unit. He brought the Kelani Kingdom too under his suzerainty by giving his sister Somadevi in marriage to Prince Abhaya of Kelaniya. Furthermore, he managed to bring the kinglets Seru and Soma under his influence of Rohana by using tactful measures.

Professor Senarath Paranavithana has pointed out that King Kaavantissa managed to build and train an army in a very successful manner. He established a number of workshops to manufacture the required weaponry for combat. The recruiting of 10 warriors with superhuman powers is one of the most salient features of King Kaavantissa's strategic planning. By names they were known as Nandimitra, Theruputtabhaya, Suranimala, Mahasona, Gotaimbara, Bharana, Velusumana, Kanchadeva, Phussadeva and Labhiyavasabha. The king assigned the responsibility of expanding and training the army to these 10 warriors. Hence, they managed to raise an army of 11,100 soldiers. Prince Dutugemunu too contributed in training the army in combat before the grand finale. King Kaavantissa had garrisons posted at strategic points along the Mahaweli river and also managed to station spies in the kingdom of Anuradhapura. Moreover, he sent his son Dighabhaya (from a secondary wife, other than Vihara Mahadevi) to guard the frontier against possible inroads from the Rajarata ruler. King Kaavantissa's foresight can be rated as prodigious considering the fact that he predicted of a possible conflict between his sons Prince Gamini and Prince Tissa. Therefore, he made the warriors and monks take oath to keep away from such a clash between the siblings. In addition to King Kaavantissa's foresight in developing war strategies, he realized the fact that a war can't be prosecuted successfully if the economy of the land was in ruin. Therefore, he detailed his younger son Prince Tissa to proceed to Dighavapi to accelerate the development and to personally oversee the progress in agricultural and irrigation sectors.

As discussed above, it is evident that the unification war wouldn't have been an easy for King Duttagamini if not for King Kaavantissa's farsighted planning. Ironically, he hasn't been bestowed on the due credit that he deserves. Unfortunately, he is portrayed as a cowardly leader who refused to wage war against the

Tamils who were ruling the capital city of the island, Anuradhapura.

Due to this feat and the support offered, the Mahavamsa constitutes the major source on Dutugemunu's reign and dedicates eleven chapters out of 37 to his narrative. Hence, the Mahavamsa itself is called the epic of Duttagamini by certain historians. In chapter 22 he is depicted being descended from the ancient royal family of Rajarata through Devanampiyatissa's brother Mahanaga. At the time of his birth, Dutugemunu's father was Kavantissa, the king of Ruhuna. This was a small kingdom in south-east Sri Lanka beyond the influence of Rajarata in the north : the border between the two kingdoms was the Mahaganga, or 'Great River', possibly the modern Menik Ganga. The Dipavamsa, which is the earliest historical record of Sri Lanka, referred to Sena and Guttika, the earliest invaders of Sri Lanka as the Damilas but not Elara. It merely states that the Kshatriya prince Elara, having routed Asela, ruled righteously for forty-four years.

W I Siriweera records in his book, "History of Sri Lanka" that "neither at the time of writing of the Dipawamsa" nor during the two centuries prior to its writing, did Sri Lanka experience South Indian invasions while the Sinhala and the Tamil communities inhabiting the island had co-existed as best as they could, sans any conflict.

Dutugemunu's mother was Vihara Mahadevi, daughter of Tissa, King of Kalyani. Legend has it that as retribution for Tissa slaying a Buddhist monk, Kalyani had been subject to a series of deluges from the sea. To placate the deities, Tissa placed his daughter Devi in a golden boat with the words 'A King's Daughter' inscribed on the hull and set her out to sea. Miraculously the princess was washed ashore, safe and sound, in Ruhuna, and married Kavantissa. During her pregnancy while expecting Dutugemunu, Vihara Mahadevi made it known that she harboured a series of peculiar cravings, including the urge to sleep on a pillow made of honeycombs. In particular, she longed to drink the water used to

wash a sword that had slashed the head of a warrior of Elara, whilst standing on that same head. These fired the interest of the soothsayers at the court, who predicted that 'The queen's son, after he had vanquished the Damilas and built up a United Kingdom, will make the doctrine to shine forth brightly'. Vihara Mahadevi gave birth to a son named GamaniAbhaya and after that to another child, a boy named Tissa. Around the time of Gamani's birth, 'an elephant of the six-tusked race brought his young one thither and left him here and went his way'. This pachyderm named Kandula, grew up to become Gamani's mount and accompanied him through much of the prince's adventures. By the age of sixteen Gamani was 'vigorous, renowned, intelligent and a hero in majesty and might' and somewhat wayward. Determined to expel the invading King of Rajarata, Gamani raised an army from around Rohana and declared his intention to regain the north for his father. The King forbade this venture remarking that 'the land on this side of the river is enough'. The resulting verbal exchange between father and son saw Gamani being dubbed 'Duttha Gamani', his friends fleeing to Malaya, and he himself being incarcerated in a royal prison.

Kavantissa is known as a brilliant strategist who realized well in advance that he needed to make his kingdom powerful as well as prosperous before waging a war against the invaders. He galvanized armies of farmers and herdsmen to make his kingdom overflowing with "milk and honey". This meant that the populace reaped an abundant yield which would come handy during a period of strife. The legendary ten giants- who were endowed with Herculean strength - were absorbed into the army by this time. Kavantissa repeatedly makes Dutugemunu and Tissa vow that they would never fight one another and that they would always respect and heed the advice of the priests. He also makes the ten giants pledge never to pick sides in a clash between the two brothers.

Upon Kavantissa's death, Dutugemunu found himself having to defend his crown against his

younger brother Tissa, who had seized possession of not only the elephant Kandula, but the dowager queen Vihara Mahadevi as well. The battle between the two began with a defeat for Dutugemunu at Culanganiyapitthi, where 'many thousands of the king's (Dutugemunu's) men' perished. Dutugemunu was forced to flee back to Mahagama where he levied another army and engaged Tissa in yet another battle in the vicinity of the city. Legend has it that Tissa, engaged his brother riding the royal elephant "Kandula" while Dutugemunu was seated on a mare. Dutugemunu at one point made the mare jump over the elephant causing the elephant to recognize its master and in turn it attempted to kill Tissa who hastily dismounts by hanging on to a tree. Dutugemunu emerged victorious and Tissa was smuggled off the battlefield disguised as the corpse of a monk. It is said that Dutugemunu got wise to the ruse and called out to his brother "Are you not ashamed to be carried on the back of these priests?" However, sometime later, Dutugemunu and Tissa were reconciled through the efforts of Vihara Mahadevi and the monks with Tissa becoming one of the king's foremost generals.

Having secured his position, Dutugemunu then planned his operations to regain the north, which included not only Rajarata but numerous small semi-independent polities. The king's army consisted of 'chariots, troops and beasts for riders', soldiers and a number of war elephants, as well as a group of monks (to advise the King) and a relic placed in his spear for luck and blessings. Other than these, he was accompanied by the fabled Ten Giant Warriors who had been recruited from all over the island by his father Kavantissa.

Historians believe that the two generals Gamini and Dighabaya of Elara's army have to be Sinhala Buddhist names. Elara's sister's son, Nandimitta was appointed one of Duttagamini's ten commanders.

King Dutugemunu's Campaign Against Elara

The campaign saw Dutugemunu subduing a number of usurping rulers in the north (as many as 32, according to the Mahavamsa). Of particular interest is the four-month siege of Vijitanagara, where the defending Tamil troops are said to have used 'red-hot iron and molten pitch to cause panic and mayhem among Dutugemunu's elephants. During this time, he also married Ran Etana, the daughter of a chieftain who continued to pay homage to Elara of Anuradhapura. On at least two occasions victory is attributed to the king's 'cunning' and the bravery of Kandhula. The campaign reached a climax at the eastern gate of Anuradhapura, where Dutugemunu, riding Kandhula, finally confronted the aged Elara, mounted on his own elephant Mahāpabbata, and slew him with a spear; the encounter is one of the most glorified accounts in Sri Lankan history.

Dutugemunu's victory at Anuradhapura placed him in the unprecedented stature of ruling nearly the entire island of Sri Lanka. Despite this exalted rank however his troubles were far from over. There may have been a few pockets of resistance that needed to be stamped out. Elara, despite being an invader from the Chola empire of south India, was hailed having been a just and righteous ruler. Dutugemunu went out of his way to ensure that the memory of the old king was revered and perpetuated as he cremated Elara befitting the departed warrior's stature. Dutugemunu also built a tomb to deposit the ashes and further decreed that all travellers should get off from whatever vehicle in order to pay their respects at tomb of the vanquished warrior. Furthermore, reflecting on his glorious victory, notable though it was, he knew no joy, being remorseful that thereby he annihilated thousands of enemies and also caused the deaths of his own soldiers. This is attested to by a number of religious sites attributed to him by the chronicles (between 68 and 99), which include magnificent stupas, monasteries, and shrines.

Conclusion

Considering all these facts it is evident that King Elara wouldn't have had even a remote chance to rule for such a long period if he was an unpopular and autocratic ruler. By considering the facts as mentioned in the Mahavamsa, it is clear that the social and political structure during the Elara regime was favourable to the citizens and he has afforded prominence to the Sinhalese and Buddhism. This setting can make us conclude that the conflict between Elara and Dutugemunu was nothing but a war of unification and never a racial conflict between the Sinhalese and the Tamils.

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