

# PAW SANWARDHANA: VOICES FROM A DEVELOPING SRI LANKAN VILLAGE

Retold by Nigrodha

## Visiting government official, February 1993

In the name of Loveslave Lord-of-the People-*tuma* I hereby declare that you, the people of this village...ahh...(checking his notes) Fertile Fields, are henceforth arisen, awoken, developed! I solemnly inaugurate this assembly hall where the *Udakala Gammanaya* will henceforth take its future into its own hands! I grant this village a new name, honoring its status as *Sinhala purana gama*! I bring you access to the modern world, electric current! And I bring each of you twelve and a half thousand rupees: Let there be brick houses with tile rooves! Let there be latrines! Let there be prosperity! Like the ancient kings, your government is here to help.

## Iskolemahattaya responds:

Let there be water! We have not been able to plant for three years. What need have we for Rupavahini when we struggle to buy rice from the *kade*? We cannot even afford the wire required to bring the current into our homes. We need no latrines when we have the jungle; besides, without rice, *renna mondwat naha*. To what end would the starving assemble here? Our prosperity is the bright green of healthy paddy.

Let there be water! If you really emulate our ancient kings then emulate them: the canals and small jungle tanks they built are still in place; divert the Mahaveli water through them! Our village is full of healthy people anxious to work, anxious to lift themselves up, anxious to take the future into their own hands; give us water, and we will show you prosperity.

## The government official

(Aside:) We **know** you want water. But this is not an irrigation project, it is a village development project. The foreign investors who are sponsoring this program do not want to develop farmers; they want to develop consumers.

(To the entire crowd): Arise, O ancient Sinhala village! Arise and consume!

## Akka, 1984

Eat more rice *malli*, eat more curry. Our gunny sacks full of *wi* have filled the store-room with enough surplus to become these "chairs" on which

we sit. My man has a good job and cultivates a fine *chena* in the evenings. Eat, eat and be happy with us.

## Akka, June, 1993

What else am I to do, *yako*? I spend the day pounding rocks into gravel to put food in your mouths; if you want fresh rice at noon then beg some and cook it yourself! If you'd quit "wild fanta" maybe you could find a new job; drunk, you can't even keep a garden! And now you want five rupees? These are your children too.

## Akka's husband, striking her in response:

Its those cursed goats; no fence is high enough. If I could at least grow something in front of my own house, maybe I wouldn't need to drink. You think its my fault there's no food? Do I bring the rains? Did I introduce the goats? Do I tell you to do the work of displaced estate Tamils rather than staying at home where you belong? You have no shame.

## Amma, 1984

Fertile Fields is the centre of the *wariga*. This is the big village, the first village of our clan; we alone have a temple. Don't worry; the eligible girls in New Canal and Tank by the Road and Fish Pond and Tank with a *Wira* Tree and Village in the Jungle will be happy to marry into this village. Our son is rich with lands from your father's ancestors; he is handsome and clever. Do not worry; why would he ever leave? When you can no longer plough the fields, our son's wife will take us in as I took in your mother and father. Did I not happily come to you from New Canal? Was I not happy to live in Fertile Fields? What could go wrong?

## Someone with an M.A. in social planning, somewhere in Colombo, not very long ago:

Hmmm. Let's see. We can route the water directly along this line here. Right. Add these names to the list of villages to be irrigated: "New Canal"; "Tank by the Road"; "Village in the Jungle".

## His colleague:

Your revision cuts off "Tank with a *Wira* Tree", "Fish Pond" and "Fertile Fields". Do you remember the memo about that old man who had a stroke waiting





in line to ask the district minister for water? I think he was from Fertile Fields. But what difference could it make? All the villages in that God-forsaken region are the same; you can't please all the people all the time. "Fertile Fields" is Tamil — it's probably a bunch of Tigers anyway. The revision will definitely make it possible for us to "put aside" enough concrete for both of our bungalows!

#### **Aiya's wife, June 1993**

Some "fertile Fields". The only time there's water in these fields is when the tank in my village overflows. I don't care about this brick house we're building; my father's house is brick too, and bigger. Our tank is deep and cool; we spit the seeds of mango and jak while the paddy ripens. When we dig a well in "Tank by the Road" it brims with sweet water; here I tire, carrying these heavy water jugs with this child inside me because the morning mud fifteen feet down is unpalatable. *Akka* can look after your parents; we should live in "Tank by the Road."

#### **Loku appa, 1984**

"Fertile Fields" is a Tamil name; it was given to this village in the time of the kings who came here and saw our grandfathers' excellent *kumburu*. All the tanks are called *kulama* that is Tamil for *wawa*. I know all these meanings; I can write and read Tamil too. The *mantras* and *yantras* and medicines in our *sastra*; those too are Tamil. And why not? My own *kiri-amma*, your *muttamma*, spoke only Tamil. Those days we boys in the *Bazaar* did not go to Kandy or Colombo for high times, we went to Jaffna. All the best things are in Jaffna—the best chew of betel, the best music, the best cigar. But I can't even get a good Jaffna cigar because of all these troubles.

What's wrong with the village's new name, "Ancient Buddhist Temple?" Have you not noticed it, towering above *gammadda*? King Mahasena built that *stupa* while he excavated the big tank; the temple has always been the center of this village. "Fertile Fields" is a Tamil name; our father knew Tamil and told me so. Why should our Sinhala villages have a Tamil name? Those devils have been trying to destroy these ancient Buddhist temples for thousands of years, haven't you been paying attention in school? "Ancient Buddhist Temple" is a good Sinhala name, appropriate for our village.

#### **His sister responds:**

I'm sure you're right. But "Fertile Fields" is our name so I'm going to keep using it whatever you and that government official may say. You will see: when the rains come again they will come as never before, filling the tank beneath the temple and overflowing into our fields beneath the tank; then you will agree

again that only its real name is appropriate for our village.

#### **Loku hamuduruwo, 1984**

Fertile Fields Temple is not the only temple for "Fertile Fields"; it is also the temple for the other villages inhabited by our clan. First there was only "Fertile Fields" *gammadda*; our first ancestor founded it. Then as it grew our clan moved out into adjoining areas, founding the new *gammadda* which became "New Canal", and that which became "Tank by the Road", and that which became "Village in the Jungle", and that which became "Tank with a Wira Tree", and likewise that which became "Fish Pond". Now we live even along the roads between each village; This land is all so fertile! But in our prosperity we must think of the temple which holds us together; you hundreds who take *atasil* here on the *poya* days are not all from "Fertile Fields"; you come to this temple from "New Canal", from "Tank by the Road", from "Village in the Jungle", "From Tank with a Wira Tree", from "Fish Pond". Our preaching hall will not hold you all. It is falling apart; the time has come to build. Your kinsmen in "Fertile Fields" cannot bear the wight alone; this is our temple, and we all must join together to construct the new preaching hall.

#### **Upasakamahattaya, June 1993**

"Fertile Fields Temple" feels so lonely today. I'd think that all our "upasakas" and "upasikas" are taking *sil* at Mihintale, but it is not so. Most of our "upasakas" and "upasikas" have gone to the next life, and most of us who remain will join them soon; such is the nature of *samsara*. The young people do not come to the temple as they did in those days. They want to learn about life from *Giraya* rather than *Guttala*. Of course I know it is difficult; they cannot eat the eight precepts for breakfast on the morning after the *poya* (and their goats will not fast in meditation until dawn). Still, it is so lonely. At least there is finally a roof over this part of the preaching hall for those of you who can't walk all the way to "New Canal" or "Tank by the Road". My old legs still work, and I plan to start taking *sil* at "New Canal Temple" or "Tank by the Road Temple"; all the buildings there are new and well-constructed, and there are three monks at each temple who chant *bana* throughout the night. We cannot even provide regular *dana* for this solitary *samanera*. Besides, at "Tank by the Road" or "New Canal" we can have a bath in the *Mahaweli* sluice before donning the white clothes; here we can bathe only in dust.

#### **Vedamahattaya, 1984**

When I was a child, one had to travel far, to the city, to find the joint scourge of western culture: poison





drink/poison medicine. My *sastra* was handed down by monks; we have always known how to make *kasippu* distilled in this village for pleasure; it was about 1945. A cobra fell into the vat; some pleasure! It was an omen, you see; *kasippu* is the deadliest snake. You go to the bar to die, you go to the hospital to die. Our Sinhala medicine is gentle; it works better than their poisons, and the jungle serves it up to us for free. The jungle is alive with medicine; almost every plant is an *ausadhaya*. The jungle and the *Dharma*; they alone keep us healthy.

#### **Vedamahattaya's son, June 1993.**

*Tattha* would walk ten miles to help a patient; even at ninety despite his arthritis pain. He'd still be alive today if not for that stroke; even then he was exerting himself to help others, all of us, by begging the district minister to open our old canals. I am young and healthy, I support my family with the tractor and the cows. I must carry on his work. But it has become so difficult. Jungle lumber is the only valuable commodity these young men have; and so much clearing for the *Gam Udawa* houses and the electricity's path. As the jungle dies, the rains diminish further. Each *ausadhaya* grows harder to find by the minute; with the big trees gone all the oils must be purchased in town for cash. The villagers have learned to pay hundreds of rupees for the pills and knives on offer at the government dispensary, but still pay me in betel leaves and coins. The special diets cannot be maintained without fresh rice and vegetables. Alcohol counteracts every *kalkaya*; only Disprin can be washed down with *kasippu*.

#### **A young farmer, June, 1993**

This assembly hall is our *Gam Udawa*, *machan*, lets not let it go waste; at least its a good place to have a drink. But really, why did they build it? If we assemble, we assemble in the temple, who doesn't know that? But no matter—no one would have wanted this space anyway, at the crossroad and all. You know, Jungleking's *nangi* died of snakebite in the house that used to be here. Yes, let's stop in and drink. Then I'd better go feed the pigs and find my goats.

#### **His friend responds:**

Right, *machan*. I'm ready for a drink. You know, I think that was the last *kohomba* tree for miles; we were lucky to find it. Two, three more days of sawing and we're in arrack for a month!

#### **Another friend, entering:**

Hey *machan*, another elephant cow has been shot! This one died right in the tank! You should go see her, *hari joli*! Good thing the tank is dry; I wouldn't want to bathe there after she's been dead in the sun

for a day or too! Are you going to bathe? It's a couple miles to "New Canal" so we'd better go soon. *Paw*, that elephant cow. They say her calf was there at dawn, looking at her; her eyes are still open. But what to do, *machan*? They can't come live in the village just because the jungle is disappearing.

#### **Young farmer, 1984**

They are our friends, these cows, like members of the family; it is because of them that we can plant paddy, it is because of them that we can thresh paddy. I worry about my cows when they are off in the old *chenas* grazing, I worry that they are not well. Though the *Gopalas* protect lost cows and bring them home to us, I cannot help but worry. Eat them? *Kathe Baha*. Even when they die of old age, we bury them and cry.

#### **Visiting range veterinarian, June 1993**

These village cows are a sickly lot. Relying on Dry Zone vegetation they seldom calve so produce virtually no milk. But the government wants to increase milk production; we import too much milk powder from abroad. After I reach around inside their wombs to make sure they aren't already with calf, I inject them with hormones and drive out here periodically thereafter to continue hormonal treatment. Once the ovaries are functioning again I'll inseminate them artificially. Animal husbandry has been declared the future of this village; the sale and ingestion of the milk and calves will allow the villagers to survive.

#### **Loku aiya, at his daughter's coming-of age feast, June, 1993**

Please, *malli*, don't be obstinate, try the pork. Superstitions won't flavour the rice, and it isn't *kakulu* bat today!

#### **Upasikamma, 1984**

You like my fridge? Ha, ha; yes, this shelf is my fridge, and this *lipa* is my oven and here, through this window, you can watch T.V. But what you say is true, *puta*. we eat well and live well; what need have we for foreign things?

#### **Upasikamma, June 1993**

Raising animals for food, destroying the jungle, getting drunk; did you never learn to recite *pansil*? What next, killing people? This "development". *Chil Paw sangwardhana*.

#### **Her son responds:**

What am I to do *amma*? I owe the government Rs. 12,500 for our house; to repay the loan—who could have anticipated the difficulties?—they give me these pigs and goats to raise, and they start fiddling about



with our cows. If we don't cooperate, then how are we to repay the government? Do they accept pin as currency? And what else are we to do until the animals can be sold? Is the jungle so valuable that you can watch a hungry child cry? If we don't pay we will lose our house; what else do we have? The tank is now jungle scrub; the fields are now jungle scrub. Only the pigs, cows and goats can eat jungle scrub. Do you blame a farmer unable to farm to taking a drink now and then? Do you think I like breeding animals to die? Do you think I like seeing the jungle disappear? But what am I to do?

### Survivor of the camps, June 1993

The movement was betrayed by a few violent men. We simply believed in lifting ourselves up, in working to help the peasantry. Was I JVP? Everyone in this village was JVP; everyone was suffering. Now look around: things are much worse. "Gam Udawa" or "Gam Bassa"? Government policies reduce us to alcoholic despair then government police arrest us for our stills; they extort money to pay for these Potemkin Villages then arrest us for poaching trees from our own jungles; they preach Buddhism then force us to supply their Easter hams; they mar the beauty of this village with concrete poles which carry electric current towards the city then claim they are quenching the dryness in our throats and the fires in our stomachs. Crush the movement while exacerbating its causes; whose brilliant ideas was that? Only a politician could invent a program that in a single blow destroys Buddhist culture, eradicates the jungle AND makes the people starve.

### Visiting government official, February 1993

Loveslave of the people *tuma* himself would have been here to welcome you into the modern world but he is very busy helping other farmers like you. I am here to assure you that you peasants will always be the backbone of our Sinhala culture. Without the village, the city cannot eat. We must repay you with the fruits of the city" rice cookers, strobe lights, Madonna videos. The troubles of the past are over, now we join together in rebuilding the righteous Buddhist society we Sinhalese knew in the time of kings, in whose prosperity all will share equally.

### Glossary

<i>amma</i>	=	mother
<i>aiya</i>	=	elder brother
<i>akka</i>	=	elder sister
<i>atasil</i>	=	the eight precepts
<i>ausadhaya</i>	=	medicine
<i>bajar</i>	=	gang (an adaptation of "bazaar")
<i>bana-dana</i>	=	sermon and alms giving for merit
<i>chi</i>	=	sound of disapproval

<i>Deva bana</i>	=	language of the gods
<i>Gam Udawa</i>	=	Village Re-awakening Project
<i>gammedda</i>	=	village centre
<i>gam bessa</i>	=	deterioration of the village
<i>hari joli</i>	=	its jolly/fun
<i>iskolemahattaya</i>	=	male school teacher
<i>kasippu</i>	=	illicit liquor
<i>kiriamma</i>	=	grand mother
<i>kade</i>	=	small store
<i>kumburu</i>	=	paddy fields
<i>kalkaya</i>	=	medicinal concoction
<i>kohomba</i>	=	margosa tree (considered medicinal)
<i>kathe baha</i>	=	yuk!
<i>kakulu bath</i>	=	new rice
<i>lipa</i>	=	hearth
<i>loku appa</i>	=	uncle (father's elder brother)
<i>loku aiya</i>	=	elder brother
<i>loku hamuduruwo</i>	=	chief priest
<i>malli</i>	=	younger brother
<i>machan</i>	=	chum
<i>muttamma</i>	=	great grand mother
<i>nangi</i>	=	younger sister
<i>nama</i>	=	name
<i>paw</i>	=	sin
<i>paw sanwardhana</i>	=	the accumulation/development of sin
<i>poya</i>	=	full moon
<i>pansil</i>	=	five precepts
<i>putha</i>	=	son
<i>pin</i>	=	merit
<i>renna monawath</i>	=	nothing to defecate
<i>nahe</i>	=	television
<i>rupavahini</i>	=	observing the eight precepts
<i>sil</i>	=	learning
<i>sastra</i>	=	novice
<i>samanera</i>	=	development
<i>sanwardana</i>	=	
<i>Sinhala purana</i>	=	Ancient Sinhala village
<i>gama</i>	=	from <i>etuma</i> , an honorific reference to a superior person
<i>tuma</i>	=	
<i>udakala</i>	=	Reawakened village
<i>gammanaya</i>	=	Buddhist layman
<i>upasaka</i>	=	Buddhist laywoman
<i>upasikamma</i>	=	native physician
<i>Vedamahattaya</i>	=	paddy
<i>wi</i>	=	clan
<i>wariga</i>	=	tank
<i>weva</i>	=	
<i>yako</i>	=	literally, devil