DAKUNEN SADI KOTIYO, UTUREN GOLU MUHUDAI

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I

When the Tamil Tigers overran the massive military complex at Elephant Pass in April 2000 and swept into their heartland, the Jaffna Peninsula beloved by so many northern Tamils, it looked as if the armed forces of the Sri Lankan state, some 40,000 troops, would be trapped in the northern reaches of the island. It was a crisis of the greatest proportions. The fears in the south took frenetic shape. Chauvinists who had castigated India for years as the enemy hand behind the Tamil movement for Eelam turned 180 degrees and wanted help from India to save the armed forces and prevent a military and political catastrophe. Such a step would necessarily involve the Indian navy.

From this perspective, then, the situation was one that had the vile-cum-fierce Tigers (Tamils) in the south and the dumb(?) sea to the north, *dakunen sädi demalui, uturen golu muhudai.*

To come face to face with this inversion of that striking phrase in the mythologised story of the Sinhalese people may be rather a shock to some readers. It is so intended. It is certainly an ironic twist. But let me clarify the story first for the benefit of the uninitiated. It is said that in the second century BC when the young prince and culture-hero to be, Dutthagâmini, was discovered sleeping curled up on his mat—implicitly like a foetus—and his mother made tender inquiries, she was told that there was no other position he could adopt because his father, the weak-kneed king, did nothing to rectify the prevailing political situation wherein one found the vile Tamils to the north and the !!! sea to the south, *uturen sädi demalui,dakunen golu muhudai.*

II

A highly evocative phrase that, *uturen sädi demalui, dakunen golu muhudai.* Virtually every Sinhalese person today will be familiar with the phrase and its import. It is the stuff of lullabies as well as folk tales. It can enter political rhetoric. This familiarity is NOT the outcome of modern technology and contemporary politics. The expression *sädi demala*, after all, entered some war poems, such as the *Râjasîha Hatana*, as well as the correspondence of the Kandyan court —in its capacity as the font of *Sihalê*,—with the British in the 1810s. From this evidence it would seem that the *Mahâvamsa* story had been implanted within the rich oral corpus of knowledge among the Sinhalese as well as the ola-leaf manuscripts known as the *râjâvaliyas*, *kadaim pot* and *bandâravaliyas*.

Given the importance of this epigram in the folk culture of the Sinhalese people, I was puzzled by the use of the term *golu* to describe the sea. Since *golu* normally refers to that which is "dumb" and since the Sinhala individuals in Adelaide translated this Dutthagâmini saying in the same manner, I was unhappy with the rendering. It did not make sense because the imagery of *golu* did not balance the imagery of *sädi.*

Nor did it match the conventional attitude to the sea in Sinhala culture. Whereas water 'sports' around river and tank have been celebrated for centuries, the sea was regarded as the *ho gâna pokuna*, "the pond that makes [terrible and turbulent] sounds." Living 100 yards from the sea, moreover, as a teenager I had witnessed numerous bodies of inland villagers turning up to gaze in wonder at this *muhuda.*

Seeking to resolve this dissatisfaction with the everyday translation provided by Sinhalese in Adelaide, I sought out Kitsiri Malalgoda and Punchibanda Meegaskumbura. On this occasion, in contrast to the light they invariably shed on my queries, their answers were no help. As I grappled with the issue, an inspiration came to me one day when I was in Sri Lanka. The best translation for *golu* would be "unfathomable." Ananda Wakkumbura, who brings a combination of aesthetic sensibility as well as grass-roots political experience to this sort of issue, responded cautiously as well as positively when I spoke to him. In a subsequent communication by email he provided a further confirmation derived from writings by J.B. Dissanayake in the *Divaina* newspaper: "*golumuhuda* is also equivalent to *vadabhamuka*, the sea, which sucks everything."

III

One would logically expect that the answer to this puzzle would come from scholars familiar with the literature of the first millennium AD. Unhappy with my translation as "fathomable," Srinath Ganewatte has kindly pursued this path. He informs me that the Pali rendering for *golu muhuda* is *ghôtha samudda.* In Pali *ghôtha* does not mean "dumb," but rather refers to that which is "shallow."

This does not make metaphoric sense either. But Ganewatte resolved the question by consulting Vimala Wijesooriya's *Ruhunê, Aprakata Purâvrutta* (Hidden Legends from Ruhuna, 1987, Tharanji Prints, p. 19) and indicating that *golu* could derive from the Pali word *ghuttha*, meaning "noisy" or "brawling." Aha! This does make metaphoric sense and neatly fits in with the picture presented by the saying, *ho gâna pokuna.* So, what Dutthagâmini was reputed to have said is that the Sinhalese were hemmed in like a sandwich between the turbulent sea to the south and the vile-cum-fierce Tamils to the north.

IV

While the issue appears resolved, I'm still rather attached to the idea of *golu* as "unfathomable" as a meaningful reading of the average Sinhala person's attitude to the sea. In my view it is not an either/or issue. The *muhuda* can be BOTH unfathomable and turbulent. The

force of metaphoric imagery lies in its multiple implications ("polysemy" is the technical term).

The word *sädi* (also *hädi*) provides a perfect example of polysemy. Most persons whom I consulted referred to it "fierce," "wicked" or "unruly" in the sense associated with the synonym *chanda*. A *sädayä* is a "ruffian," according to Carter's dictionary (1996: 675), thus in effect a *chandiyâ* or *chandayâ*. In fact, *sädi* has been translated as "wicked" and "fierce" by such scholars as K.N.O. Dharmadasa and Paul E. Pieris. However, in translating one of Anagarika Dharmapala's references to *sädi demalu*, Obeyesekere renders it as "dirty" (1993: 152) and elsewhere uses the term "filthy." This is in keeping with the meaning *kunu kasala sahita* attributed to *sädi* in several dictionaries (e. g. Dharmabandu 1962: 1207 and Sorata 1926: 1035).

In other words, *sädi* is a powerful invective that carries multiple thrusts. As an epithet, it is, metaphorically, a double-headed hammer. In so far as "filthiness" (*kunu kasala sahita*) and "savagery" are both regarded as vile in Sinhala culture, that is the reason why I have rendered it as "vile-cum-fierce" in the translations provided earlier on. On similar grounds one could think of the *golu muhuda* as both turbulent and unfathomable to the Sinhalese of the *Mahâvamsa* era in the sixth century AD as well as subsequent centuries.

V

During modern times in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries few Sinhalese have held significant economic interests in the Jaffna Peninsula. Other than bakeries, a few traders and the isolated case here and there, to the vast majority of Sinhalese people there was limited pragmatic value within that piece of territory. To the soldiers who are fighting and dying in the Peninsula today in 2000, therefore, the land does not carry the sense of belonging that is attached to their home localities, or even places such as Kandy, Colombo, Monaragala and Mahiyangana. It is *only*—albeit a powerful "only"—the *Sîhaladvîpa* concept, a concept of state sovereignty, that makes their struggle meaningful.

Protecting a *mavbima* (motherland) that is not quite the *mavbima* of their home locality, and facing the fierce and successful Tamil Tiger 'hordes' in the Vanni territory to their south, they must surely feel that they are caught in a sandwich between the devil and the deep blue sea. *Dakunen sädi demalui, uturen golu muhudai.* But for a soldier to say this from a location within a strange piece of land that carries few meaningful memories is surely NOT the same as a similar statement from a location in Ruhuna today. ■