

Video Abstract - Lankapura: The Legacy of the *Ramayana* in Sri Lanka (video abstract transcript)

Editors: Sree Padma and Justin Henry

[Sree Padma]: The *Ramayana*, one of the two major epics in India, has been popular in its many versions in south and southeast Asia for many centuries. Although Sri Lanka, one of the close neighbors to India, joins to some extent in this shared culture, the island's relationship with the *Ramayana* involves its own idiosyncracies, political turmoil, and ethnic conflict. On the one hand Rama, the protagonist of the *Ramayana*, is acknowledged as an incarnation of Vishnu. And on the other hand, Ravana, the anti-hero, is projected as the proud ancestor of the Sinhala race. Vibhishana, the younger brother of Ravana, is venerated as a deity by Sinhala Buddhists. Our special volume, entitled 'Lankapura: The Legacy of the *Ramayana* in Sri Lanka', points to this problematic but unique relationship with the epic through its introduction followed by five articles. Together these explain various facets of Sri Lanka's engagement with the *Ramayana*.

[Justin Henry]: My contribution to this volume, an article entitled 'Explorations in the Transmission of the *Ramayana* in Sri Lanka', traces the identification of the island of Sri Lanka with the 'Lankapura' of the *Ramayana* epic. While Ravana's city of 'Lankapura' remained a mythical locale within the realm of literary imagination for Valmiki and other first millennium Sanskrit authors, the Cholas of the ninth century were the first to make an equivalence between Ravana's kingdom and the island of Lanka as a domain of military conquest. I go on to explore the impact of various South Indian literary conventions on northern Sri Lankan literature, including the uniquely sympathetic rendering of Ravana in the temple histories (*tala-puranams*) of Koneswaram, and the self-identification of the Arya Cakravarti rulers of Jaffna as 'guardians of Rama's bridge' (or *cetu kavalan*). Finally I explore likely points of contact between Sri Lankan Tamil and Buddhist representations of Ravana, pointing out knowledge of aspects Ravana's biography unique to Sri Lankan *tala-puranams* on the part of the author of the *Ravana Kathava*, a Kandyan period Sinhala poetic rendering of the epic.

[Sree Padma]: I have authored the paper entitled, 'Borders Crossed: Vibhishana in the *Ramayana* and Beyond'. In the *Ramayana*, Vibhishana is the younger brother of Ravana, succeeding him to the throne of Lanka, after Ravana was killed by Rama. In this paper, I interrogate the reasons for the rise and sustenance of Vibhishana's cult, focusing on his main shrine located in the Buddhist vihara in Kelaniya. In this paper I interrogate the reasons for the rise and sustenance of Vibhishana cult since medieval times. By examining Vibhishana in artistic representations, poetic descriptions, and devotional prayers, I trace his multiple identities as *yaksa/raksasa*, guardian deity of Sri Lanka, and bodhisattva to argue how these various attributes supplant his original role in the *Ramayana*, as well as how these attributes make Vibhishana a Buddhist deity, at least from the 13th century. These various characteristics, as I conclude, steal Vibhishana away from the story of the *Ramayana* to situate him in the Sinhala Buddhist shrine, as a bodhisattva protecting the Buddha's *Dharma*, and protecting the needs of the Buddha's devotees.

[Justin Henry]: Jonathan Young and Philip Friedrich have contributed a joint paper to this issue

exploring the character of Ravana as represented in a fascinating genre of late medieval/early modern Sinhala topographical reference works, known as *kadayim pot* or “boundary books.” In ‘Mapping Lanka’s Moral Boundaries: Representations of Socio-political Difference in the *Ravana Rajavaliya*’, Young and Friedrich analyze ways in which a little-known Sinhala text called the *Ravana Rajavaliya* articulates a moral topography of late-medieval Sri Lanka. Rather than expressing a kind of all-consuming xenophobia in response to social and cultural difference, the text indexes a set of local political responses to the surge in social mobility occasioned by changing patterns of trans-regional circulation in Sri Lanka’s southwest. They argue that ‘others’ are represented in terms of proximity to a generalized moral order, one which highlights desirable forms of selfhood as instruments for assimilation within an emerging state society.

[Sree Padma]: The next paper in the volume is ‘Ravana’s Sri Lanka: Redefining the Sinhala Nation’ by Dileepa Witharana. Witharana begins his article by noting the ways in which Sinhala Buddhist heritage has been traced for a long time back to the progenitor, Prince Vijaya, in the sixth century before the common era, as mentioned in the the *Mahavamsa*, the Buddhist polemical text. He discusses how over the last decade and a half there have been attempts to replace this standard narrative with a newly configured myth. This new myth instead traces Sinhala heritage to Ravana, who ruled Lanka 5000 years ago. Tracing the motivations of creating and promoting this myth to political, ethnic nationalistic and profit making factors, Witharana demonstrates the active involvement of publishers, bookshops and social media, as well as the Sri Lankan Tourist Department, in this enterprise.

[Justi Henry]: In the final contribution to this special issue, ‘Reclaiming Ravana in Sri Lanka: Ravana’s Sinhala Buddhist Apotheosis and Tamil Responses’, Pathmanesan Sanmugeswaram, Krishantha Fedricks and Justin Henry consider the appropriation of Ravana as a Sinhala Buddhist cultural hero in the context of twenty-first century post-war Sri Lanka. They highlight the irony of the recent Buddhist appropriation of Ravana as a signifier of indigeneity and sovereignty, given that he has already been employed in this capacity in the Tamil Hindu context for nearly a century. Sanmugeswaram, Fedricks and Henry note several convergences between the ‘Sinhala Ravana’ phenomenon and its Tamil counter-narrative, including a shared archive of textual material invoked as evidence, the introduction of alleged physical evidence as proof of Ravana’s historicity, and a sympathetic outlook on Ravana’s character, emphasizing his qualities as a learned and righteous king.

[Sree Padma]: Thus, the story of the *Ramayana* struck different chords at different periods of Sri Lankan history generating radical departures from its earlier versions. The engagement with the *Ramayana* started with the Sinhala Buddhists and Saivite Tamils venerating Rama as an incarnation of Visnu in the same way as their Hindu counterparts in India. Identifying Sri Lanka as Lankapura, clubbed with the Buddhist cosmological understandings, gradually resulted in the deification of Vibhishana not so much for his role in the *Ramayana* but as the guardian ruler of Sri Lanka and Buddhist bodhisattva. In the case of Ravana, however, the recent phenomenon shows that both the Tamil Saivas and Sinhala Buddhists contribute to reclaiming and repositioning him as their proud valorous ancestor and an exemplar of many arts and sciences. Hence, this special volume chronicles the ways the perception of Sri Lanka as Lankapura leads

to invention and proliferation of myths elevating Vibhishana as a deity and Ravana as a hero par excellence.