
Betwixt Isles: The Story of the Kandyan Prisoners in Mauritius

By Raja Bandaranayake. Vijitha Yapa Publications. 2006. ISBN 10 955-1266-41-2.

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Until recently Professor Raja Bandaranayake's fame mainly rested on the formidable international distinction he has achieved as a medical educationist, and a superb teacher of Anatomy. In both domains his services as a peripatetic consultant were eagerly sought by, and willingly given to, organisations such as the WHO and medical and health-science schools world-wide. As an advisor he was learner-friendly, devoid of high-sounding jargon, and above all, sensible. In Sri Lanka he has guided all the state medical schools and the Postgraduate Institute of Medicine, often on several occasions at each place, to develop and implement curriculums and learner assessments along internationally accepted lines.

Now, with the publication of **Betwixt Isles**, Professor Bandaranayake has shown us glimpses of some other facets of his talent and skill. His book is the product of a prodigious exercise in historical research sustained over a 15-year period, entailing many visits to libraries and archives in four continents, and to the island of Mauritius, where Maha Nilame Ehelapola died in exile in April 1829.

The author writes that his first serendipitous encounter with the inscribed tombstone of Ehelapola in Mauritius had "a profound and lasting effect" on him, igniting a flame that has apparently kept burning vigorously through the toilsome and often dreary hours, days and months of labour demanded of any serious researcher into history. The opening sentence of his book, at once unembellished and sincere, tells us why the flame burned so bright for so long: "This book was born out of a deep love for my motherland, primarily inculcated in me by my parents".

Betwixt Isles is an account of the life and death of Kandyan prisoners in exile in Mauritius between the years 1819 and 1834, a mere twinkling in the vast expanse of human history, but nonetheless a matter of consummate importance to us as Sri Lankans, when examined (as the author has done) in the context of the British capture of the Kandyan Kingdom in 1815, terminating one of the longest surviving kingdoms in the world at the time. The book has 25 compact chapters, 6 charts summarising facts

that would have been tedious to describe textually (eg. Ehelapola's pedigree, Pilimatalauve's pedigree, the fate of individual Kandyan State Prisoners and convict rebel prisoners Mauritius), 12 figures (including the signatures of Dr James Barry, Ehelapola and Pilimatalauve, the Powder Mills, 2 prisons in Mauritius etc), 2 maps (19 Century Ceylon and the relevant Districts of Mauritius), and 4 crucially important plans of buildings in Mauritius.

A concise *Introduction* takes novitiate readers through the antecedent events that led to the fall of the Kandyan Kingdom into British hands, emphasising yet again, the internecine jealousies and knavery that pervaded the Kandyan nobility, and the quintessentially British amalgam of fake diplomacy, cunning, perseverance and disciplined military might of the invader. The first 4 chapters give a brief biographical sketch of Ehelapola, his capture in Kandy and incarceration in Colombo for 7 years, until he was banished to Mauritius without any charges being ever framed against him. They also contain, among other intriguing anecdotes, the author's chance encounter with one Jean Francois Guimbeau, a French botanist, who had named his nursery selling plants in Mauritius *Pepiniere Peradenia* after the world-famous botanical garden in Peradeniya that he knew by reputation, but had never visited; three vintage ghost stories set around the Kandy Lake and around two "haunted" houses, one in Vellore and the other in Mauritius, all connected in one way or another with the story of Ehelapola; and the enigma of mysterious hands that pay regular tribute to Ehelapola's tombstone in Mauritius up to the present day. The author writes:

"Although it is established that he (Ehelapola) had no known living progeny either in Mauritius or in Ceylon at the time of his death, a mysterious hand places a lighted candle, a posy of flowers, an incense stick or a clay urn at frequent intervals on the monument. I have seen these tributes..... myself, and was particularly intrigued to note that they often coincided with the anniversary of important events, such as his birth, his death, or the entombment of his mortal remains. In spite of repeated efforts, the identity of the owner of this hand remains a mystery" [page 25].

In the following chapters the author describes in painstaking detail the life and times of the Kandyan exiles in Mauritius – their arrivals, living quarters, provisions, health, medical care, clothing, headgear, dietary fads, and categorisation as either State Prisoners, who had been summarily tried for insurrection and had their death sentences commuted to exile, and ordinary convicts who were banished for serious crimes not connected with rebellion against the British. The first batch of 25 exiles that left Ceylon on 22 February 1819 on the *HMS Liverpool* were all State Prisoners, and included Pilimatalauve and Mattamgoda, and their servants.

Ehelapola left the Port of Colombo on 14 May 1825 on board the *Alexander*, with Captain William Richardson in command. Accompanying Ehelapola were his three servants, an interpreter and his servant, and four ordinary convicts, three of whom had been sentenced to death for murder, but later commuted to banishment for life – unlikely to be the sort of company Ehelapola would have relished for this enforced journey. Ehelapola first set foot on Mauritian soil on 6 June 1825.

Bandaranayake records that Ehelapola had been treated very well by his minders during his exile, and provided with all the comforts that he had requested – a reasonably spacious residence, a butler, his choice of food and wine, an interpreter, household servants, and later, a horse-drawn carriage, that only a few of even the Mauritian elite had the privilege to own. The author's diligent and tenacious search for the exact location of Ehelapola's Mauritius residence is a detective story of its own. I reproduce below the concluding paragraph of his account of this cameo, for its evocative poignancy that would be familiar to all discoverers.

"We were in fact standing on the very ground that the Maha Nilame would have stood upon surveying the spectacular mountain range in the distance, and the solitude of the cemetery nearby. We may, indeed, have been on the very spot where he breathed his last one hundred and seventy five years ago. I stood in silence and pondered over the long and arduous search that had brought me to this spot, and the many individuals who so kindly offered me their time and energy in my search. With mixed feelings of joy and regret I realised that my search was over" [pages 167-168].

The precise location of Ehelapola's residence in Mauritius (incidentally, rectifying several previous incorrect assertions) is but one of the large number of new findings and insights that the author has in store for the reader. Although even a partially representative list of these would be unwieldy in a brief review I must mention a few of them, such as Ehelapola's final illness, death, cremation, and obsequies and wills; the fascinating story of Dr James Barry who attended on Ehelapola during his last illness, and the eventual disclosure of Dr Barry's sexual phenotype by a woman who laid out his body when he died in London much later in 1865; and the confusion of previous historians regarding the two interpreters Don Bastian and Don William.

Ehelapola appears to have had a busy social life in Mauritius, often visiting the local elite by invitation or entertaining them at his residence. He wore the headdress (*toppi*) of the Kandyan Adigar, and insisted on being provided with the finest clothing made in Europe. He was thus immaculately attired in white whenever he ventured outside his residence, and reportedly also had a fondness for wearing his heavy gold jewellery and a ring set with a big blue sapphire on such occasions. In time, Ehelapola

was allowed to use a horse-drawn gig, purchased with his own funds, and he rode it proudly, accompanied by his interpreter Don Bastian, whose attire was apparently no less strange than that of his master. So it is little wonder that the local whites began to refer to Ehelapola as the "Prince".

"The Mauritian bourgeois would surely have been impressed by the sight of this immaculately dressed nobleman with his strange looking companion on the roads of Pamplermousses and its environs" [page 179].

In research methodology, drawing conclusions from his explorations and reporting them, Professor Bandaranayake, true to his twin vocations as medical educationist and scientist, has devoted meticulous attention to accuracy and objectivity. These attributes are, of course, no less important for the historian than they are for the scientist. For both, accuracy and objectivity are duties, not virtues. As the distinguished historian E H Carr has remarked, "It (accuracy) is a necessary condition of his (a historian's) work, but not his essential function". What then is the function of a historian? In the 1830s Ranke stated it shortly as, "....simply to show how it really was," but that aphorism begs many questions. Rather than venturing into a discussion of the philosophical nature of history, I choose here to quote Marx and Carlyle. First, Marx.

"History does nothing; it possesses no immense wealth, fights no battles. It is rather *man*, real living *man* who does everything, who possesses and fights".

As for Carlyle, although he is given the dubious distinction of having asserted that "history is the biography of great men", wrote in his historical masterpiece *History of the French Revolution*,

"Hunger and nakedness and nightmare oppression lying heavily on twenty-five million hearts: this, not the wounded vanities or contradicted philosophies of philosophical advocates, rich shopkeepers, rural noblesse, was the prime mover in the French Revolution: as the like will be in all such revolutions, in all countries".

Professor Bandaranayake's story of the Kandyan prisoners exiled to Mauritius is undoubtedly focused on its "star", the Maha Nilame Ehelapola. But it is set against the backdrop of the sad saga of the last days of the Kandyan Kingdom, with its rebellious denizens and knavish nobility, a narrative that segues into the social life and contemporary times of Mauritius. The author has combined biography with an imaginative understanding for the minds of the Kandyan people and their actions. He has fastidiously avoided his love for the motherland from turning the book into an exercise in antiquarianism. The extensive list of references bears witness to his diligence and relentless pursuit of all sources of evidence, even ones with a remotely possible link to the subject.

Professor Bandaranayake's writing is stylish, interpretations persuasive, and attention to detail thorough without being trivial. The product is an authoritative and compelling read. He ends his book with this characteristically piquant quotation of Oscar Wilde: "The one duty we owe to history is to rewrite it". That duty Professor Bandaranayake has amply done.

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