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Negotiating power and constructing the nation : engineering in Sri Lanka

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Chapter 4

Giving up a past for a technologically better past? Ravana the engineer and his technological dynasty (2000-2016)

The story of "Ravana the engineer and his technological dynasty" provides a case of how engineering - mythical engineering to be exact, acts as a ground on which an attempt is made to redefine a nation. If the case of the Accelerated Mahaweli Development Project is about the role that a massive technological system performs through multiple nationalistic functions, by mobilising the imagination of a nation towards a grand, remembered past, the narrative of Ravana, by moving a step further, tries to replace these long held memories of a particular glorious past with a past that is even more glorious and technologically advanced. It is a rare case of a nation attempting to give up its past for a better past, as I would like to argue in the course of this Chapter. As a mythical technical site, the narrative of Ravana seems to produce the opposite effect to that produced by the Hydro Electric Scheme discussed in Chapter 2. Instead of mobilising the collective imagination of a community for a fresh, highly industrialised future, the narrative of Ravana attempts to mobilise the imagination for a technologically sophisticated past.

4.1 The tale of two pasts in conflict

According to popular perception, the Sinhalese, the majority ethnic community of Sri Lanka, are inheritors of a great civilization which has a history of thousands of years. Up until the end of the twentieth century the dominant narrative of the Sinhala nation that was circulated among the general public, unchallenged seriously by any other popular narrative, was a simple story. According to this story the Sinhalese descend from the Aryan Prince Vijaya who arrived in the island from North India in 543 BC with his retinue of seven hundred members. Vijaya defeated the Yakkas who were the original inhabitants of the island and became the first of the continuous list of monarchs who ruled Sri Lanka from then. This civilization which was a little over two thousand five hundred years old with advanced irrigation and construction engineering, was at its peak during the periods of the Anuradhapura (fourth

century BC to eleventh century AD) and Polonnaruwa (eleventh century AD to thirteenth century AD) kingdoms. When Buddhism was introduced in 236 BC by Arhat Mahinda, son of the Indian Emperor Asoka, Sri Lanka became a Buddhist country. The protection of Buddhism became the responsibility of the island's head of state, a responsibility handed over by the Buddha himself to the country's leadership. Amidst regular threats by Tamil invaders from South India, the Sinhalese were able to perform their duty and protect Theravada Buddhism, the original version of Buddha's word in its pure form. The Tamils, Muslims, Burgers and other non-Sinhala ethnicities are all communities that arrived in the island of the Sinhalese at different stages, later in history. The *Mahavamsa*, the ancient Chronicle which can be loosely translated as the Great Chronicle, documents this history of Sinhalese.

Even though the main lines of this narrative were challenged as myths in the scholarly world for some time, it survived as the widely accepted history of the Sinhala nation in political, journalistic and popular forums, till the end of twentieth century. There is much to prove that this scenario has changed, with the wide circulation of another narrative, the Ravana narrative as introduced above, which captured the popular imagination of the Sinhalese very quickly in recent times. By positioning itself on the grounds of a technologically advanced past, it contests almost every single element of the previous narrative based on which the Sinhala nation was imagined so far. It rejects the theory of the Aryan origin of the Sinhalese and does not accept that the Sinhalese are Prince Vijaya's descendants. Instead, the Ravana narrative expounds the view that the Sinhalese or Helas or Hela-Yakkas or Hela-Asuras according to the new terminology²⁰², are the descendants of the extremely powerful Yakka [demon] King, Ravana, a character in the Hindu epic *Ramayana*, who ruled Lankapura almost four thousand years ago. He is the major figure in the technically and spiritually advanced Hela dynasty that provided leadership to the entire world (*Map 4* shows the global spread of the Ravana dynasty, as illustrated by one of the key commentators on the Ravana narrative). Interestingly, the narrative uproots Ravana from the *Ramayana* and relocates him on new ground with minimum ties to India. It suggests that the civilisation of the Hela nation has a history longer than two thousand five hundred years and positions the golden era of the nation in much earlier times than the Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa Kingdoms. Advances of the Helas in engineering were in an array of fields such as aviation, sailing, textile engineering and nuclear warfare, in addition to the fields of irrigation and construction engineering.

²⁰² 'Hela' within the current narrative, is the word used to identify the inhabitants of early Sri Lanka, known as Lankapura. Yakka is the preferred term of the Ravana narrative to identify the group of people from whom the Sinhalese descend. The term Asura is not defined well and is used by some commentators to distinguish the forefathers of Sinhala people. These terms are used interchangeably by the popular commentators on the Ravana discourse to refer to the ancestors of the Sinhalese.

According to this new narrative, Buddhism was introduced to the Yakkas, the original inhabitants of the island, centuries before the supposed arrival of Mahinda and the kind of Buddhism practiced by Yakkas was more in line with Mahayana tradition²⁰³ than Theravada tradition²⁰⁴. In the Ravana narrative, the *Mahavamsa* is considered a gross distortion of the real history of Sinhala nation.

Within the context of this radical revision of the history of the Sinhalese around which the Sinhala nation was imagined so far, I would like to assess the degree of the spread of this new narrative among the Sinhalese in order to identify the nature of the technologically advanced Ravana dynasty that is featured prominently in discussions in the popular arena, and to address the question of why there is an urge for a redefinition of the Sinhala nation at this moment of time, and how it is happening.

4.2 The Ravana surge in public space²⁰⁵

The recent surge of interest in Ravana is rather widespread and also unusual when taking into consideration the fact that the memory of a king who lived thousands of years ago has little to do with the multiple socio-political-economic problems the island is entangled with at this moment. This re-adjusting of the collective memory of the Sinhalese of their glorious past is done through a discourse constructed in popular space with the maximum use of traditional and modern media. Radio and television channels have allocated weekly time slots to discuss the Ravana led Hela history by experts of the Ravana discourse²⁰⁶. Many Sinhala language newspapers have published serial articles on the special skills of King Ravana and the contributions of the Hela dynasty²⁰⁷. Newspapers published in English have also fallen in line with this trend²⁰⁸. Interactive websites with a wide readership which have been in

²⁰³ Mahayana is the version of Buddhism that is being practiced in East and Southeast Asian countries such as Japan, Korea, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Tibet, Bhutan, Mongolia, Nepal, etc.. See section 4.5.2.2 with the title “Abhayagiri tradition of Buddhism” for more details on this, as highlighted in the Ravana narrative.

²⁰⁴ Theravada is the version of Buddhism that is being practiced in Sri Lanka as well as in Bangladesh, Cambodia, India, Laos, Myanmar, Nepal, Thailand, etc..

²⁰⁵ Fieldwork regarding this was conducted from 2013 to 2015.

²⁰⁶ V-FM radio and television channels Derana, Swarnawahini and ITN aired a series of programmes. V-FM, Derana and Swarnawahini are private channels and ITN is one of the two state-run television channels. V-FM aired a five month long programme, *Lakviskam Ravana*, from November 2012 to March 2013 which was dedicated to Ravana. Derana *Helawanhsaya* too was dedicated to discussing the Ravana dynasty. This was a weekly programme telecast from 26 September 2013 to 29 May 2014 (www.derana.lk/helawanshaysa).

²⁰⁷ Examples include the weekly newspapers *Randiva* (which carried a series of weekly articles for seven months from March 2012 to September 2012), *Maubima* (under the title *Ravanavatha* ran a series of weekly articles from 2010 to 2011 based on interviews conducted with Mirando Obesekara, one of the key commentators of the Ravana discourse), *Tharunaya* (under the title *Sinhale Ravana* ran 29 weekly articles from November 2013 to June 2014).

²⁰⁸ The English daily, *Daily Mirror* joined the trend lately in 2014 by carrying articles on Ravana once a week.

operation for several years have also played a prominent role in constructing the Ravana narrative²⁰⁹. There are several research initiatives created to unearth evidence to establish a Ravana history²¹⁰. Bookshops in the capital city Colombo and in other major towns display new and re-published books on different dimensions of the Ravana narrative²¹¹. Several fictional accounts involving King Ravana have been written and re-published over the past few years²¹². Songs dedicated to the great Hela King Ravana are available on Youtube²¹³. Some of these are composed by a musical group called the “Ravana Brothers”. At the time of writing, newspapers reported the launch of a film on King Ravana²¹⁴. Commercial institutions also seem to tap into the social capital built by the popular Ravana narrative, by naming institutions using the name Ravana²¹⁵. Exhibitions and ceremonies are held to commemorate Ravana²¹⁶. The involvement of the state in promoting the Ravana narrative was visible when its most popular commentators were felicitated by the Ministry of Culture and the Arts²¹⁷. The Ministries of

²⁰⁹ *Sahurda Thotupala*, a blog administered by Dasun Edirisinghe, that was active from 2010 to mid 2012 was one of the famous sites (124 posts on various aspects of Hela Asura history explained in a very interactive format. Around 214,000 readership by 21 May 2014). *Ravana -The Greatest Emperor of Asia* links to some of the Ravana related sites, books, sources, etc (around 194,000 hits by 21 May 2014). *Ravana Brothers* is accessible only to its membership.

²¹⁰ These initiatives include research being conducted by Manewe Vimalarathana theru, the blog *Sahurda Thotupala*, the site *Ravana Brothers*, Sri Ravana Research Institute, the Head Quarters of Ravana Research and the Ramayana Trail Executive Committee (run by the Ministry of Tourism Sri Lanka).

²¹¹ Examples include Ahubudu (2007[1988]), Vimalarathana (2008[2001]; 2012), Dasanayake (2009), Kiriella (2009), Ranasinghe (2009), Chulawansa (2010; 2012), Cumaratunga (2012 [1938]), Seneviratne (2012[1991]), Obesekara (2006; 2012; 2013; 2014), Siri Dhammalankara (2012a; 2012b), Jayathilake (2013 [2010]), Gunasekara (2013a[2012]; 2013b[2009, 2007]), Siri Sumangala (2013), Suddhami (2012[2006]) and Vithana Gamage (2015).

²¹² Examples include Vimalarathana (2009), Fernando (2013a; 2013b), Susitha (2013, first edition in 2011 and second and third editions before 2013)

²¹³ Examples include *Ravana* by Erandi Madushika created in 2017 (65,403 views by 19th December 2017); *Angam Thulawa* by Jalitha Amarasinghe created in 2009 (45,354 views by 15th December 2014); *Ravana New Year song* by the Ravana Brothers in 2014 (36015 views by 19th December 2017); *Ravana song* by Ravana Brothers in 2011 (11,937 views by 15th December 2014); and *Ravana* by ElaKiri in 2012 (3024 views by 15th December 2014).

²¹⁴ The first of three films on emperor Ravana, *Gagana Serisaranna* [Voyager in the sky] is to be directed by Sanjaya Nirmal (Daily Mirror, 4 August 2014).

²¹⁵ The Ravana Aviation Academy is a private aviation training school (www.ravanaaviation.com) and www.sriravana.com is a private software business selling software on astrology.

²¹⁶ An exhibition of paintings of Ravana, *Indumini Maha Ravana*, was held in Colombo on the 19 and 20 February 2011. The *Devram Vehera* – a popular temple on the outskirts of Colombo, headed by a monk who was a former parliamentarian, started an annual procession called the *Maha Ravana Perahera* which took place in 2013 and 2014. On 9 October 2014, a statue of King Ravana was re-crowned in Kelaniya, near Colombo, to mark 5000 years of Ravana history and the beginning of a new Hela Era.

²¹⁷ Dr Sooriya Gunasekara, Dr Mirando Obesekara and Mr Palitha Galappathi were felicitated by the Minister of Culture and the Art for their great service rendered to promote research on King Ravana, on 1st August 2014 at a ceremony held at the Auditorium of the Colombo Museum (Viewed on 21 January 2015 at http://www.culturaldept.gov.lk/web/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=179%3Aa-felicitatation-ceremony-in-honour-of-the-king-sri-maha-ravana-on-01-august-&catid=3%3Anews-a-events&Itemid=70&lang=en)

Tourism and Technology and Research have indicated interest in exploring Hela history²¹⁸. It is said that secondary school history text books will be soon revised to include new lessons on Ravana²¹⁹.

The narrative of Ravana as informed by the range of sources mentioned above is not coherent and can be best regarded as a collection of sub narratives stored in a single container. Though these sub narratives share a common goal - to establish the grand, spiritually and technologically advanced, civilisation of the Ravana dynasty and to portray the Sinhalese or Helas as descendants of the Yakka nation of Ravana, they also carry contradictions between themselves. This loosely coordinated contemporary narrative of Ravana draws information from at least three important sources: information available on the Internet; interpretations of 'investigative journalism' conducted by popular media channels, linking ancient Sri Lankan archeological sites to the events in the Ravana narrative; and commentaries on *Vargapurnikava*, the mysterious ola leaf that is said to carry the history of one Yakka clan, the Ravi Shailaasha community, whose descendants supposedly exist even today.

The Internet remains a main source of information used to construct the contemporary narrative of Ravana. Freely available information seems to be used liberally by the commentators on the narrative, often with no referencing. Some of the popular ancient texts written originally in Sanskrit, translations and commentaries of which are available in English and easily accessible through the Internet, seem to be used when describing the scientific and technical achievements of the Hela civilization. For example the translation of the Sanskrit manuscript, *Vimanika Shastra*²²⁰, and available on the Internet²²¹ is used extensively to describe the aviation skills of the Hela civilization²²². In the early twentieth century, the

²¹⁸ The Ramayana Trail Executive Committee was an initiative of the Ministry of Tourism that was launched to promote Ravana history. At a meeting held in September 2014 in Colombo at which the author was a participant, a group conducting research on Ravana history revealed to the author that the Ministry of Technology and Research has allocated funds for excavations at sites that are said to be linked to the Ravana dynasty.

²¹⁹ This was told to the author by a prominent commentator on the Ravana discourse, at a private meeting in Anuradhapura, in the North Central Province of Sri Lanka (Informant 1).

²²⁰ "The *Vimanika Shastra*" by G. R. Josyer is said to be the English translation of the Sanskrit text "*Vymanika Shaastra*" authored originally by Maharshi Bharadwaaja. The *Vimanika Shastra* published in 1973, contains a detailed account of parts of an aircraft and aspects of aviation in the past. Even though the *Vimanika Shastra* is the popular text widely referenced in the Sri Lankan narrative of Ravana, there seems to be another document with the same Sanskrit content. This text with a Hindi translation is said to have been published in 1959, more than a decade before Josyer's translation. Mukunda et al (1974) refers to this publication, the "*Brihad Vimana Shastra*", which was written by Shri Bramhamuni Parivrajaka. According to Mukunda et al both publications contain similar content except for a number of technical drawings of different aircraft types, in Josyer's translation.

²²¹ http://upload.vedpuran.net/Uploads/121113the_vimanika_shastra.pdf, accessed on 23rd June 2016

²²² The Ravana discourse refers to many texts that have references to airplanes and air wars such as *Rigveda Sanhithava*, *Hariwansa*, *Makandesa Puraana*, *Vishnu Purana*, *Vickamor Vashee*, *Uththararama Charika*, *Harsha Charika*, *Samaarangana Suthradhara*, *Shathapatha Brahmana* and the Tamil language *Jeevaka Chinthamani*. *Samaarangana Suthradhara* with two

Hela Havula movement which was created to reform and purify the main local language of Sinhala, argued that all Indian languages including Sanskrit, originated from the Hela language, that these Sanskrit texts were written originally in the Hela language and therefore are texts describing the advances in Hela science and technology and not of Indian origin.

One of the main objectives of the series of programmes conducted on radio and television, was to position or reposition archeological findings to fit the new Ravana narrative. It was an exercise of “demythification” in the sense of Obeyesekere, an attempt to rationalise myths by providing ‘proofs’, as discussed in the Introduction. The presenter of the popular programme *Helawanshaya* for example, visited archaeological sites with his crew of cameramen on a weekly basis, in search of new evidence to establish the history of Helas as descendants of Yakkas²²³.

Oral descriptions and written commentaries of *Vargapurnikava*, however, remains the most important authentic source of information within the context of the modern Ravana narrative. In the absence of the mysterious thousand page ola leaf which is said to have been written in the late eighteenth century in Yakka language, supposedly a dead language, the two commentaries written by Thero Manewe Vimalarathana in the Sinhala language under the titles "Unknown Information on Yakka Tribe" (2008) and "The Language of the Yakkas and the Story of Ravi Shailaasha Community " (2012) are said to be based on notes taken from the original ola leaf and interpreted by senior members of the current generation of the *Yakka* lineage²²⁴. *Vargapurnikava* is often referenced by commentators on Ravana discourse and Thero Vimalarathana is highly respected and invited as a chief guest to Ravana related events.

Using the diverse sources as described above to provide primary information and with a whole range of books (semi-factual and fiction), different categories of newspapers and electronic media - including social media, reproducing information available through primary sources, the modern narrative of

hundred and thirty slokas is given as a complete description of vimanas covering the aspects of production of airplanes, take off, long distance flights, landing and constraints and issues.

²²³ Interestingly, Obeyesekere (1984) in his legendary work, “The Cult of the Goddess Pattini”, takes the same example of the Ravana myth to describe and introduce the term ‘demythification’. “In the Ramayanaya there is an elaborate description of the wealth and prosperity of Sri Lanka and an account of how Ravana flew to India in a “peacock machine””, says Obeyesekere (p. 379). According to him, “these accounts are rationalised by educated people so that they believe Sri Lanka had a glorious civilisation before the Indian colonisation of the island in the sixth century B.C., and among the nation’s accomplishments is the invention of an aircraft” (Ibid).

²²⁴ Vimalarathana Thero, a Buddhist monk, identifies himself as a member of the *Yakka* lineage, members of whom are said to still survive in the North Central Province of Sri Lanka, and claims to be a member of the family that has custodianship of *Vargapurnikava* from the previous generation.

Ravana seems to be able to reach different segments of the Sinhala community, including groups with different social backgrounds, belonging to different age and language groups. The advanced status of the Ravana dynasty's technological development occupies a prominent place in the narrative, with a great deal of the promotional material being used to discuss achievements in a variety of fields in engineering.

4.3 Ravana the engineer, and his technological dynasty²²⁵

King Ravana is considered skilled in many trades. Each head of his famous ten-head image is said to symbolically represent his expertise in ten different disciplines; languages, law, philosophy, administration, music, spiritual wisdom, astrology, medical science²²⁶, war techniques²²⁷ and engineering. Descriptions of Ravana's engineering skills, however, overshadow his other skills and hence portray him as an engineer rather than as an expert in any other profession. Contemporary discourse on Ravana goes into minute details of the advanced features of engineering used by him and his dynasty which allowed Hela to be a highly advanced civilisation, even introducing these advances to other parts of the world and to rule the world. The Helas of the Ravana dynasty who were regarded as professionals in energy engineering were said to have used a range of energy sources to fuel the Yakka civilization; solar, magnetic force, gravitational force, nuclear energy and energy channeled through crystals are repeatedly mentioned.

Aviation is highlighted in the range of expertise. The Helas, who are descended from Ravana, were identified as excellent aviators, hence giving a high-tech touch to Ravana's Hela civilization, in comparison to the agriculturally advanced civilisation of the kingdoms of Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa, as represented in the Vijaya narrative. Air travel included space travel to other planets in the solar system. Sophisticated flying machines called *Vimanas* or *Pushpaka Rathas* were said to be used

²²⁵ Details of this section were based on the references mentioned in this section as well as on numerous sources mentioned in the previous section, "Ravana surge in public space", that is reproduced again and again in all forms of communication.

²²⁶ The sage Pulasthi, the grandfather of King Ravana and from whom he has inherited his medical skills, is said to have founded the fundamentals and the practice of the eastern Ayurvedic treatment. Gunasekara (2013a) lists down six medical books authored by Ravana and available for sale in 2013 at the "Modern Book Company" in Nugegoda, just outside Colombo City. They are *Kumara Thanthra* (medical care for children), *Uddeesa Thanthra* (treatment through hypnotizing), *Arka Prakasha* (treatment using spirits of trees), *Naadi Prakaasha* (diagnosing using pulse), *Marma Vignana* (treatment through pressure points) and *Vidi Vaidyaka* (medical ethics). *Uddeesa Thanthra* was available at the Modern Book Company at the time I visited the bookshop in February 2014. Ravana's name was given on the cover as the author of the book.

²²⁷ The martial arts skills of the Ravana dynasty, popularly known as *angampora* and as *gassakatha heralaya* in *Vargapurnikava* are also discussed.

by the Hela for these purposes²²⁸. The most famous was the *Dandumonara*, the personal aircraft used by King Ravana²²⁹. Expertise in aviation helped Ravana and his descendants to establish the authority of the Hela dynasty across the world and within the solar system. Establishing civilizations in the Andes mountains of South America, the Caucas mountains of Southern Europe, the Kashmirian Hindukush mountains and high latitude Romania - all regions that were not accessible by land, was made possible in particular, thanks to advanced air technology. Also mentioned are Ravana's visits to outer space. Mars and Venus appear in the Ravana narrative as the two planets visited by Ravana and members of his dynasty²³⁰. The relatively short time taken to visit Mars, as described in the narrative, is itself an indication of the advanced state of space engineering in the era of king Ravana²³¹. The narrative refers to many texts written originally in the Hela language and later translated into other ancient Indian languages that carry references to airplanes and air wars²³². For example, the *Samarangana Suthradhara* with two hundred and thirty *slokas*, is given as a complete description of Hela *vimanas* covering the aspects of production of airplanes, take off, long distance flights, landing and other technical issues. However, the text *Vimanika Shastra* by sage Bharadvaja is extensively quoted in the contemporary discourse. Quoting from the *Vimanika Shastra*, it describes in great length the details of aviation and flying machines possessed by the Ravana dynasty, including details about airplanes, pilots, aerial routes, food to be taken during air travel, suitable clothing, metals used in manufacturing airplanes, the process of producing these metals, mirrors and their use in warfare and a variety of other related machinery²³³ (Gunasekara 2013a; 2013b). Images of the *vimanas* used by the Ravana dynasty are a common sight in the Ravana related discussions held in public spaces. The most common is the image of the *Dandumonara*, the aircraft used by Ravana himself. By referring to the *Vimanika Shastra*, the Hela narrative also provides sketches of four types of aircraft, with detailed measurements; the *Shakuna*

²²⁸ *Vimanas* or *Pushpaka Rathas* were the terms used in Vedic and Sanskrit texts, said to be originally written in the Hela language.

²²⁹ The Ravana narrative regards the *Dandumonara*, which was run by mercury technology, as a two hundred passenger aircraft equipped with a kitchen and two toilets. The *Dandumonara* is said to have been designed by the greatest engineer of the Ravana dynasty - Maya or Vishvakarma, Ravana's father-in-law who was based in Mannar - the North Western coastal town of Sri Lanka.

²³⁰ The construction of a pagoda on Mars and King Ravana's participation - together with some of the members of his family - in its unveiling, is mentioned in particular.

²³¹ The special flight he used for his regular visits to Mars is said to have taken forty six time units for a one way journey.

²³² Mentioned in particular are the *Rigveda Sanhithava*, *Hariwansa*, *Makandesa Purana*, *Vishnu Purana*, *Vickamor Vashee*, *Uththararama Charika*, *Harsha Charika*, *Samarangana Suthradhara*, *Shathapatha Brahmana* and the Tamil language *Jeevaka Chinthamani*.

²³³ Descriptions cover a depth of detail to the extent of listing thirty two secrets a pilot should know, thirty one components of an aircraft, types of clothing for pilots suitable for the four seasons, sixteen varieties of metal used in the construction of an aircraft, seven sources of power used to run an aircraft, five hundred and nineteen thousand and eight hundred aviation routes in the five regions of the sky and seven types of mirrors used for aviation functions and warfare.

Vimana, Sundara Vimana, Rukma Vimana and Tripura Vimana. As I have observed, these minute details seem to boost the credibility of the story of Hela aviation among sections of Sinhala public, irrespective of whether these details are technically meaningful or not²³⁴. The word *duthaka* that appears in a few inscriptions is considered the Hela word for pilots (Gunasekara 2013b). Also provided as proof are the names of places that were said to have been used for landing Hela aircraft. Variyapola (aircraft landing port) in the North Western province and Thotupola Kanda (a mountain where the aircraft landed) in the Southern province are two such examples²³⁵. The Ravana narrative also provides details of cases where the advanced aeronautical engineering expertise of the Ravana era is used in recent times. Information relating to Hela aviation technology, documented and hidden in Tibetan cave temples was said to have been found by Adolf Hitler, taken to Germany and used to develop new versions of fighter planes (Gunasekara 2013a; 2013b). Kanchana Manamendra - another commentator of the Ravana narrative, writing a series of articles in 2012 on "Ravana - In Search of Hela Era" announced that a new aircraft was being produced by a Sri Lankan based entirely on Hela Vimana technology.

Helas were also considered skilled navigators, within the current narrative on Ravana. It refers to two global marine traditions established by two globally known marine universities; one in Alexandria in Egypt and the other in Kalyani in Lankapura. This great marine tradition in Heladiva is said to have been destroyed by a tsunami, only after which tank based irrigation was founded and perfected by Helas. In the narrative there are references to an inscription found in the North Western region of Sri Lanka which refers to sailors and captains of a giant shipping company *Madukasaliya Pugiyana*. Ships from Lankapura are said to be the longest and largest ships that visited Chinese ports at the time. *Vargapurnikava* refers in particular to the shipbuilding and marine skills of *Kewesastha* Yakka Wansa people who lived in the coastal belt of the island (Vimalarathana 2008; 2012).

²³⁴ Mukunda at el (1974) investigates the historical context of the *Vimanika Shastra* and evaluates the technical feasibility of the four models *Shakuna Vimana, Sundara Vimana, Rukma Vimana and Tripura Vimana*. The technical evaluation concluded that none of the four models were technically feasible (within the existing paradigm of mechanical and aeronautical engineering knowledge). The paper makes a six point conclusion: none of the planes has properties capable of flying; the text describing technology and the drawings do not co-relate with each other; the drawings definitely point to a knowledge of modern machinery; the text as it stands is incomplete and ambiguous by itself and incorrect at many places; the units of speed and temperature are new and do not have any easily decipherable meaning, and; no data have been given about the weights of crafts and their components, a lapse which is very serious in the context of flying of heavier-than-air machines. However, according to the contemporary discourse on Ravana, the technology used by the Ravana dynasty was far ahead of the level of knowledge of modern aeronautical engineering and the role of *manthra* (use of human generated sound waves) in taking off, flying and landing cannot be explained using the principles of modern aeronautical engineering.

²³⁵ The Ravana narrative refers to folklore to list towns and villages that were used to land aircrafts. Gunasekara (2013b) identifies Badulla, Monaragala, Matara, Ratnapura, Kalutara, Kurunegala and Trincomalee as districts where airports of the Ravana kingdom were located.

Tank based irrigation is considered one of the Ravana dynasty's main areas of expertise. In addition to tank based irrigation, the Hela dynasty possessed technology called *Galissa*, as per *Vargapurnikava*, to carry water underground. This network of tunnels connected the central hills where fresh water was available in abundance, with the dry zone and the coastal region. This tunnel network is said to have supplied the famous ports of the Ravana Kingdom with fresh water for ships that passed Lankapura, the island positioned on main sea routes. The Ravana narrative goes to the extent of listing the names of mathematical theories used for irrigation engineering, as if to show that the narrative is not just rhetoric²³⁶. King Dhathusena is said to have used this Yakka knowledge extensively in irrigation and the Jaya Ganga, an artificial river and the Kalawewa, the giant fresh water tank, are said to have been constructed using Yakka irrigation technology.

The palaces of the kings of the Ravana dynasty are considered to be advanced civil engineering constructions. The fiction "Ravana Mission" - a popular novel which contributes to the Ravana narrative gives lengthy details of the Palace of Ravana in Horton Plains, in the hilly region of the Central Province of the island (Susitha 2013). It is said that the stretch across Lankapura from North-West to East was a long line of building complexes. The Helas of the Ravana dynasty were also experts in constructing tunnels for transport and rock cutting. The narrative refers to an underground tunnel that existed from Manewa to Ritigala in the current North Central Province, joining the two yakka power centres Neelagiri and Rakungiri. References are also made to technologies used to cut giant rocks and in the construction of rock caves (Vimalarathana 2008; 2012).

The Ravana narrative claims that iron smelting, discussed in Chapter 1, was a technology practiced by the ancient Sinhalese, as a tradition continued from Yakka days. According to the narrative, Hela Yakkas were experts in iron technology and were a nation that exported iron and steel to other countries in the world. The weapons used by the Ravana dynasty were made out of iron produced in the hill country regions of Matale and Sabaragamuwa, a technology that lasted till recent times. According to Mirando Obesekara, a key commentator on the Ravana narrative, wind-powered iron smelting, the special technique used to drive the furnace using heavy wind flows available on the slopes of the central hills, was a practice founded by the Helas of the Ravana kingdom. The expertise of the Hela civilization is said

²³⁶ *Vargapurnikava* refers to five mathematical theories; *Prakaraksheera*, *Lohithaksheera*, *Vaalamgathksheera*, *Chandarakaksheera* and *Chakradiraksheera*. In addition, *Girikanda Jala* is another mathematical method used in irrigation, architecture and general engineering according to *Vargapurnikava*. It also describes two irrigation traditions used by yakka wansa; *Rakka Vidrasana* irrigation (which includes twelve irrigation techniques) and *Airana* irrigation (which includes twenty irrigation techniques).

to have extended to areas such as mapping²³⁷, surveying, textile manufacturing, construction of statues, gold and silver work, etc. (Vimalarathana 2008; 2012).

However, the most sophisticated technology the Helas possessed was nuclear power. The explosion described in the Mahabharata is seen as evidence for the nuclear technology that of the Ravana people owned. A nuclear explosion is also seen as the reason for the destruction of the civilisation of the Indus River at Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa - a civilisation initiated by the Hela people of the Ravana dynasty. Providing further proof of Hela expertise in nuclear power, the levels of radioactivity in human skeletons found at the excavation sites of the Indus region were said to be similar to the levels of radioactivity found in the human remains at the sites of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki nuclear attacks. Commentators on the narrative argue that the high temperatures that resulted in the melting of buildings and walls at the Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa sites are further proof of the Hela's possession of nuclear power. Nuclear energy is also referenced as a main source of energy used for space travel (Gunasekara 2013a; 2013b).

Before moving into a discussion of the reasons for this sudden fascination among Sinhalese for a technologically sophisticated new past and on why there is an urge for a redefinition of the Sinhala nation at this moment of time, one of the main questions that guides the construction of this Chapter, I would like to briefly investigate the background within which this new scenario emerged.

The Sinhalese people were dissatisfied with the Vijaya narrative as the history of the Sinhala nation, on the one hand, and the narrative of Ravana as an alternative history was in circulation among the Sinhalese for quite some time, on the other.

4.4 The nineteenth century 'moment' of Sinhala nationalism: the Colonial 'moment'

A discussion of how the narrative of Vijaya has become the official history of the Sinhala nation seems to set a useful ground to draw parallels and to address the important question of why there is a surge of interest in Ravana right now, and to find out more about the role of engineering in the process. While it was the widely held understanding among the Sinhala public that the narrative of Vijaya provides the true account of the history of the Sinhala nation, the position of the Vijaya story as 'the' history of the Sinhala past was questioned by scholars on many fronts.

²³⁷ It is said that the section in the *Vargapurnikava* discussing the engineering skills of the Ravana dynasty has around thirty maps.

4.4.1 Background: The scholarly debate so far

The scholarly discourse on Sinhala nationalism revolves around the central questions of when Sinhala identity as a nation began to emerge and whether there is a continuity of this identity from the past to the present, or not. This discourse is a reflection of the general debate in theorising the nation and nationalism between the two camps, the primordial and modernist. While those theorists who belong to the primordial camp argue for a nationalist consciousness that exists from pre-modern times while seeing a continuity of such consciousness from the past to the present (e.g. Anthony Smith: 1986), those who occupy the modernist camp see the emergence of nation and nationalism as a modern phenomena the world began to witness from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (e.g. Anderson 2006[1983]; Gellner 2009[1983]; Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983; Desai 2008). With respect to the discourse on Sinhala nationalism, the two opposing poles are represented by the two positions – seeing Sinhala nationalism as a pre-colonial phenomenon that existed from the ancient past to the present, against the view of considering Sinhala consciousness necessarily as a construct during the colonial times, especially during British rule in the nineteenth century. While appreciating the complexity of the opinions expressed by scholars of Sinhala nationalism and hence highlighting the difficulty of identifying them simply as primordialists or modernists, Rambukwella (2008) still, rather uneasily, positions them in a spectrum with Gananatha Obeyesekere, K. M. De Silva and K. N. O. Dharmadasa more or less on the primordial side and R. A. L. H. Gunawardana, Michael Roberts and John Rogers on the modernist side (pp. 12, 13). Several interesting debates have influenced the discourse on Sinhala nationalism to move beyond this simplistic binary of primordial and modern and to reach a kind of general understanding that makes the categorisation of scholars as primordials and modernists rather meaningless²³⁸. This is the

²³⁸ One of the well known debates was between Gunawardana (1976; 1985a) and Dharmadasa (1992b; 1996). It started with Gunawardana's well formulated argument presented in his paper titled "The People of the Lion: The Sinhala Identity and Ideology in History and Historiography" which argued that the pre-colonial identity of Sinhalese was not static and was amended and expanded at certain stages in the pre-colonial past and that the Sinhala ideology in its contemporary form has radically refashioned the Sinhalese' view of their own history during the last century or so. By referring to additional sources not taken into consideration by Gunawardana, Dharmadasa, however, argued for an existence of a stronger consciousness of Sinhaleanness for a longer duration in pre-colonial Ceylon. The impact of his response to Gunawardana seemed to have frustrated the modernist argument, as it can be seen for example, from the proposal made by Scott (1995) to abandon historiography altogether as a tool to conduct progressive politics. "I shall want to suggest that in order to carry forward the political project of "The People of the Lion" in the wake of recent criticism of it, it is at least worth raising the question whether what our Sri Lankan present demands isn't a *dehistoricised* history", says Scott (p. 13). Another contribution that facilitated a move towards a general understanding among scholars who stood on both sides of the divide was Kemper (1991). While acknowledging that Kemper's general aim is to undermine the modernist interpretations of nationalism and still appreciating Kemper's work as a sophisticated articulation of the role of pre-modern and modern ideas in Sinhala Nationalism, Rogers (1994), who is on the modern side of the debate, calls upon historians to address the issue of Sinhala nationalism with more clarity than they have done in the past (p. 12). Yet another important intervention in this debate that blurred the division

understanding that the identity formation of the Sinhalese goes back beyond colonial times to the pre-colonial era, but that the Sinhala identity underwent transformation during British rule, leading to the formation of the contemporary Sinhala identity one sees today. Whether this transformation is a radical departure from the pre-British Sinhala identity by marking a discontinuation from the past to the present (e.g. Gunawardana 1985a, p.87; Jeganathan 1995, p.107; Nissan 1989, p.64; Rogers 1990, pp. 87-92; Spencer 1990, p.5) or a change that can still traced back to the pre-British identity and hence a change that consolidated the Sinhala identity that existed before the nineteenth century (e.g. Roberts 2003, p. 93) is a matter of debate. The outcome of this debate seems to favour the theory that it is a radical departure. What made this radical change in Sinhala consciousness in the nineteenth century possible?

4.4.2 Defining the colonial 'moment' of Sinhala nationalism

This general understanding that the pre-British consciousness of the identity of the Sinhalese underwent a transformation during British rule in the nineteen century begs the question as to what happened during British rule to provoke this transformation. Juxtaposing three important phenomena, the nineteen century presents a unique moment for making possible this redefinition of Sinhaleanness. The first was the translation of the *Mahavamsa* from Pali to English by elevating the *Mahavamsa* to be the authoritative text describing 'the' history of the Sinhala nation. Gunawardana (1976; 1985a) describes how this elevation of the *Mahavamsa* as the authoritative text established the main features of the history of Sinhala nation. Firstly, Vijaya was crowned as the father of the Sinhala nation by marginalising other theories that described the origins of the Sinhala (Gunawardana 1985a, p.61). Secondly, Sri Lanka is declared as the land of Buddhism and it is claimed that Buddha himself entrusted the island's destiny to the Sinhala people as guardians of his teaching (Spencer 1990, p.3). This declaration was based on the grounds that Buddha visited the island three times; the island was offered to Buddha by the original inhabitants, the Yakkas; Buddhism was brought to the island by Arhat Mahinda and the links between the leadership of the Sinhala nation to Buddha himself (Gunawardana 1976, pp. 53-62). In its translation from Pali to English by George Turnour, the *Mahavamsa* is said to have undergone a set of

between primordialists and modernists was by Roberts. Roberts argued against the position of Anderson to treat print capitalism as an essential pre-condition for nationalism. Roberts proposed to replace print media by media (different forms of media) as the pre-condition to form nations. By taking examples from pre-colonial modes of communication (e.g. written forms of cultural transmission pre-dated print technology, verbal communication, visual communication, etc.) as important and effective modes of communication within the Sri Lankan context Roberts argued for a case that suggested the presence of nationalism in pre-colonial Ceylon (Roberts 2001; 2003; 2014a; 2014b).

violent transformations that laid the foundation of the current form of the Sinhala consciousness (Jeganathan 1995, p.113). The second important phenomena that allowed the redefinition of Sinhalaness in the nineteenth century was the introduction of the language category, 'Aryan languages' that was soon extended to identify races as 'Aryan races'²³⁹. The Sinhala language was grouped under the category of Aryan languages, thus making way to describe the Sinhalese as an Aryan race (Gunawardana 1985a, pp.87-93). The *Mahavamsa* story was then interpreted as the story of the Aryan arrival in the island. The discovery of ruins by colonial archaeologists in Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa was the third phenomena that made the nineteenth century a decisive moment. It consolidated the *Mahavamsa* narrative and supported the theory that the Sinhalese were inheritors of a great civilisation governed by Buddhist values.

4.4.2.1 The Mahavamsa

The *Mahavamsa*, a work in Pali written by Buddhist monks from the sixth century onwards, is still considered the national chronicle, carrying the official history of the island. The text, originally authored by the monk Mahanama who represented the Maha Vihara, one of Anuradhapura's monastic establishments, was updated in the thirteenth, fourteenth and eighteenth centuries. It provides the basis for an understanding of an unbroken national past from the time of the Buddha in the fifth century BC, to the fourth century AD (Nissan 1989, p.66; Rogers 1994, p.12; Spencer 1990, p.5). However, the *Mahavamsa* received colonial attention and was read with renewed interest when it was translated in 1837 by George Turnour. The hegemonic status received by the *Mahavamsa* in the nineteenth century as an authoritative, positivist and historical text, brought the Vijaya myth to the forefront as the narrative describing the origin of the Sinhala nation (Gunawardana 1985a, p. 61; Jaganathan and Smail 1995, p. 6). Turnour's translation of the *Mahavamsa* was the second translation of that text to be published. The first was by Edward Upham in 1833 whose version was discredited because of significant lapses and distortions in the translation, due to his lack of knowledge of Sinhala and Pali and for his reliance on native interpreters. Turnour's translation in contrast, claimed greater authority because he accessed the text in original form (Rambukwella 2008, p.35). Walters and Colley (2006) pay attention to the significant role that could have been played by monk-scholars in the nineteenth century process of translating the *Mahavamsa*, in providing both Upham and Turnour with copies of *Mahavamsa*, a

²³⁹ Max Muller is the nineteenth century philologist and orientalist, whose name appears prominently in initial studies of Indo-European language category and the spread of racial category, Aryan. If the Aryan theory found an influential supporter in Hegel, in Max Muller it found its most effective propagandist, according to Gunawardana (1985a, p. 87).

commentary of the *Mahavamsa* and a range of other Sinhala histories and by teaching them how to read and interpret the texts they provided (pp.158-160). Walters and Colley speculate on a series of conditions under which Turnour's *Mahavamsa* became the authoritative history of the Sinhala nation.

"If Upham's translation had been "better" by the standards Turnour promulgated - if his *Mahavamsa* had been a literal and complete (and unembellished) rendering of the Pali; if those monks had known they would later be held to Orientalist standards for "translation" of *Mahavamsa*; if any of the editors had possessed the necessary linguistic skills - Turnour never would have had to take the task upon his shoulders and the open, dialogical historiography which the monks first presented might never have been so utterly rejected in favour of the authority of a fixed, dead and thoroughly dissected *Mahavamsa* text in Pali" (Walters and Colley 2006, p. 166).

Jeganathan (1995) describes how Turnour's translation of the *Mahavamsa* qualified the 'regime of truth' of the nineteenth century historiography, in a South Asian context where other history texts were disqualified from being considered as 'authentic historical accounts' and instead regarded as a historical fiction. Turnour's *Mahavamsa* suited the nineteenth century positivistic historiography where proper history was expected to remain within the boundaries of scientific knowledge without getting mixed up with 'fantastic miracles', to flow continuously from the 'past' to the 'present' and to progress from 'barbarism' to 'civilisation' or vice versa (pp. 110-111).

4.4.2.2 *The theory of Aryan race*

Language became an important category in colonial discourse in the nineteenth century, with the development of comparative linguistics and its use in defining racial categories. The positioning of the Sinhala language in a separate category of Indo-Aryan languages away from the category of Dravidian languages within which the Tamil language is located, made it easier to confirm ethnic difference between the two communities, Sinhalese and Tamils and to map the categories of Sinhalese and Tamils remarkably easily onto the chronicle history of *Mahavamsa* (Nissan 1989, p. 69; Rogers 1994, p.16). Gunawardana (1985a) provides a detailed account of how the theory of the Aryan race evolved in Europe and how these developments influenced the transformation of the Sinhala consciousness in the island²⁴⁰. Even though there were conflicting opinions among scholars during the first half of the

²⁴⁰ The invention of the Aryan race in the nineteenth century and how it has impacted Indian history have been discussed widely. The contributions made by scholars such as Romila Thapar, Thomas Trautmann, etc. can be mentioned in particular. Thapar (1996), in her paper "The Theory of Aryan Race and India", while discussing how the theory of Aryan race has shaped Indian history and politics, also deliberates how the Aryan and the non-Aryan were segregated through the instituting of caste (how brahmanas of modern times were said to be of Aryan descent and the lower castes and untouchables and tribes were

nineteenth century, the Aryan origin of the Sinhalese gained wide popularity as a theory from about the end of nineteenth century. It provided Sinhala nationalism with a prestigious pedigree by elevating the Sinhalese to the rank of their rulers, the British (Ibid, pp. 89-91). With the marriage of Aryan theory with the narrative of the *Mahavamsa*, Vijaya's arrival came to both represent and prove the historical 'fact' that the Sinhalese originated from Aryan migration from North India and that the Sinhalese as a whole (Aryans) are opposed to Tamils (Dravidians) in absolute terms historically (Nissan 1989; p.69).

4.4.2.3 Discovery of ruins

The discovery of ruins gave the *Mahavamsa* narrative plausibility as the true history of the Sinhala nation. The two clusters of ruins, irrigation works consisting of interconnected systems of reservoirs and civil and religious constructions, located mainly in the North Central Province²⁴¹ of the island, attracted the attention of colonial officers. These ruins represented the golden era of the *Mahavamsa* story and provided proof of an advanced Aryan civilization of the Sinhalese (Jeganathan 1995, p. 120; Nissan 1989, p. 69). Anuradhapura, the centre of Sinhala civilisation according to the narrative of the *Mahavamsa*, continues to remain the place of pride for Sinhala nationalism. Nissan (1989) describes in detail how Anuradhapura was reinvented by colonial and post-colonial archeology from the time it attracted the colonial gaze in the early nineteenth century, to the time it was rearranged as the Sacred City and the New Town, in line with the movement of Sinhala nationalism (pp. 66-67). Jeganathan (1995) goes on to address the colonial psyche of dealing with Anuradhapura which ultimately was "unjungled, measured, marked, sanitized and aesthetisized" and made ready for large scale consumption and tourism, facilitating the construction of the Sinhala consciousness in the nineteenth century²⁴² (p.127).

descended from Dasas) and how this view was gradually discarded when there was evidence to the contrary. While delivering a lecture at the Academic Staff College of the JNU on the title "The Aryan Question Revisited", Thapar (1999) suggests to historians that "it is time now that we moved away from this century and a half old obsession with who were the Aryans, what was their origin, how do we identify them, who has descended from them". In his landmark study, "Aryans and British India", Thomas Trautmann (1997) too examines how the idea of Aryan race was evolved, how it took hold of the minds of the Indian people and how Indo-European or Aryan ideas, based on the principle of linguistic kinship, dominated British ethnological inquiry.

²⁴¹ The region was known as Nuwarakalaviya before it was identified as the North-Central Province (Jeganathan 1995, p. 118).

²⁴² A similar line of argument of how archaeological ruins facilitated a process of reconstructing the past can be found in relation to India as well. For example Guha-Thakurta (2004) in her book "Monuments, Objects, Histories: Institution of Art in Colonial and Post-Colonial India" looks at the process of constructing of lost pasts of India by mobilizing imagination of Indian people around monuments, archaeological relics and art objects.

4.4.3 The Sinhala nation in the face of scholarly challenge

Even though the scholarly discourse described above was powerless to unsettle the widespread narrative of Sinhala identity in the political, journalistic and popular spheres, it was certainly instrumental in dislodging from its hegemonic position the identity constructed in the nineteenth century 'moment' in the sphere of scholarship. The *Mahavamsa*, which was considered 'the' authoritative history of the Sinhalese, was repositioned as another narrative among many others, as a result of this line of scholarly interventions made since publications by the historian G. C. Mendis as way back as in 1930s (Mendis 1932; 1966; 1996). The exposure of the power politics at play during the time the text *Mahavamsa* was written and rewritten and then during the nineteenth century when the *Mahavamsa* was elevated to its status as the most important document, contributed to the relocation of the status of *Mahavamsa* in the sphere of scholarship. Though this scholarly discourse does not deny that the ruins discovered during the nineteenth century point towards the existence of an advanced civilization in the island, the use of them as evidence in the story of Sinhala identity formulated in the nineteenth century was challenged. 'Facts' that were presented as evidence of the history of a Sinhala-Buddhist nation as narrated during the nineteenth century were redefined by this scholarly discourse, as assumptions or myths. The literature in general refers to two main myths; the Vijaya myth where Sinhalese were considered to be descendants of the Aryan Prince Vijaya and the myth of the Sinhalese being nominated guardians of Buddhism. Dewasiri (2012) writing on myths sees that the constructed history of Sri Lanka is situated on five main pillars that are of a mythical nature; the myth of Buddha visiting Sri Lanka, the myth of the arrival of Vijaya, the myth of Pandukabhaya²⁴³ (the myth that the island's kingship is related to Buddha), the myth of Buddhism being brought to the island by Mahinda, and the myth of Dutugemunu²⁴⁴ (the myth that the island was saved from Tamils and was united under a single rule). Rogers (1990) also refers to a series of assumptions based on which Sinhala nationalism was situated; the great Sinhala civilization in ancient times, the great and unbroken Sinhala past, the

²⁴³ Mahavamsa describes Pandukabhaya, the first monarch of the Anuradhapura Kingdom, as a descendant through both his mother and father, of Amitodana, the youngest brother of Suddhodana and the uncle of Buddha. According to the Pandukabhaya myth the kings of the dynasty that Pandukabhaya founded were not only Sakya princes but also descendants of the sole surviving member of the Sakya clan and hence the legitimate heirs of the island Buddha was donated by Yakkas (Gunawardana 1976, p.59).

²⁴⁴ The famous war between Dutugemunu hailing from the Kingdom of Rohana from the South of Sri Lanka and Elara, the elderly king of the Northern Kingdom, is recorded in *Mahavamsa* as the moment that brought the island under a single political authority. Dutugemunu ruled the island thereafter (161-137 BC) and the capital Anuradhapura emerged as an important urban centre that preceded the establishment of the island kingdom (De Silva 2005, pp.16-17).

continuous antagonism between Sinhalese and Tamils throughout the island, the Sinhalese as Aryan descendants and Sri Lanka being an idyllic land with Buddhism as the guiding light of the Sinhala people.

The entry of the Ravana narrative in a big way in the early twenty first century to this rather complex scene of Sinhala nationalism seems to complicate things further. The Ravana narrative can easily be classified as a grander myth compared to the myth of Sinhala nationalism of the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries; a myth that was backed by the nineteenth century translation of the *Mahavamsa*. The narrative of Ravana while being a myth of grand scale responds positively to the challenges posed by the scholarly critique of the Mahavamsa-based Sinhala nationalism. It discards the Vijaya myth, the Aryan myth (by referring to a *Yakka* origin of Sinhala nation) and the myth that Arhat Mahinda brought Buddhism to the island decades after the death of the Buddha (by referring to the existence of Buddhism in the island well before the arrival of Arhat Mahinda). In fact it stands with the Abhayagiri tradition (Mahayana tradition) in opposition to the Mahavihara tradition (Theravada tradition) in which the *Mahavamsa* was authored by Mahanama. What was it that made possible this current surge of unprecedented interest in Ravana? What influenced the reappearance of Ravana-based Hela discourse in a big way in the early twenty first century? How is it possible to explain the mass scale attraction of this discourse for the Sinhala nation to revisit their memories of *Mahavamsa*-based glorious past for a past that is even more fabulous on the basis of its technological advancement?

4.5 The early twenty-first century 'moment' of Sinhala nationalism: the Ravana 'moment'

Will it be possible to identify the twenty first century 'moment', the Ravana moment, that takes the Sinhala nation through another process of redefinition, in the same way that the nineteenth century 'moment' of redefining Sinhala nation was caused by the superimposition of factors such as Turnour's translation of the Mahavamsa, the invention of Aryan theory and the discovery of ruins in Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa? What is the role of engineering in defining this early twenty first century Ravana moment? What follows is an attempt to treat the current Ravana surge within the Sinhala community in a broader sociopolitical context, in search of answers to at least a few of the questions posed above.

4.5.1 Ravana – the story so far

Identifying the Sinhalese as descendants of Ravana and thereby challenging the hegemonic narrative of *Mahavamsa*, is a theory that was in circulation among the Sinhalese for quite some time (Seneviratne 2012, p. 47). Even though the exact origin of the Ravana narrative as a history of the Sinhala nation is not known and is an area that needs further investigation, one can come across instances where Ravana

existed as a Sinhala king in Sinhala consciousness. *Ravana Rajavaliya*, one of the Sinhala language palm leaf manuscripts depicting the political and social life of Kandyan and Kotte Kingdoms during the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries, provides a series of anecdotal references to King Ravana and deals with connections between Ravana and various provinces and places in Sri Lanka. As a reference identified by Obeyesekere as an "intermediate text", a text that can be placed between folk tradition and the classical tradition of texts written by Buddhist monks and lay scholars, the *Ravana Rajavaliya* can be seen as one of the best proofs for the spread of the Ravana narrative among ordinary people, in previous centuries. Interestingly, the *Ravana Rajavaliya* labels the pre-Vijaya history as the era of King Ravana, the powerful and evil king who extended his power even beyond the planet earth (Obeyesekere and Kumara 2005). While ordinary Sinhalese' understanding of Ravana as a Sinhala king can therefore be traced back even to pre-colonial times, the portrayal of him as a righteous ruler and not as a villain as depicted in the Ramayana seems to occur rather later. *Lak Mini Kirula*, a Sinhala newspaper launched in the early 1880s referred to Lanka in its 1st June 1881 edition as a powerful kingdom even prior to the advent of Vijaya and claimed that Ravana ruled Heladiva in about 2837BC, more than 2000 years before the arrival of Vijaya (Dharmadasa 1992a, pp. 119-120; Wickramasinghe 2014a, p.95).

The most prominent intervention to establish the Ravana theory as the history of Sinhala nation was by members of the Hela Havula (Community of Helas) movement that started in the early part of the twentieth century. Munidasa Cumaratunga initiated the movement during the 1930s and 40s to reform and purify the main local language, Sinhala, from the influences mainly of Sanskrit and Pali, was the pioneer in referring to an independently evolved Sinhala civilization away from the influence of the North Indian Aryans²⁴⁵. The term Hela was used to refer to the Sinhala language that was spoken by people living in Heladiva (Coperahewa 2012). Editorials of *Lak Mini Pahana* on 18th September and 23rd October, 1934, editorials written by Munidasa Cumaratunga, refer to the great king Ravana and the great Hela dynasty led by the Ravana lineage (Cumaratunga 2006). In the well known poem *Wawuluwa* [Bat Language] written in 1939 by Rapiyel Tennakoon, another leading figure of the Hela Havula Movement, the Sri Lankan characters in the Ramayana, Ravana and his sister Suparnaka, were portrayed in a positive light. In contrast to how she is portrayed in the Ramayana, Suparnaka is described as a beautiful and friendly woman. Sita, the wife of King Rama, who was kidnapped by Ravana according to the Ramayana, is portrayed as dreaming of going to Sri Lanka to meet Ravana, the great king of Sri Lanka

²⁴⁵ Activities of the Sinhala language purification movement started much earlier than the formal establishment of the Hela Havula in 1941 which represented a strong opinion against those who proposed steps to adopt the equivalent of the spoken idiom for literary purposes (Dharmadasa 1977).

who protected her during her stay in the island (Field 2012). The popular song *Lanka Lanka Pembara Lanka* [Lanka, beloved Lanka] sung by the famous singer Sunil Shantha and written by the popular song writer Arisen Ahubudu who were prominent members of Hela Havula movement, refers to Bali, Taru and Ravana, the powerful kings of the lineage of Hela dynasty. Alaw Isi Sebi Hela is another prominent Hela Havula member who promoted the theory of a pre-*Mahawamsa* Hela civilization (Dewasiri 2011). The stage drama *Sakvithi Ravana* which was produced in the 1980s, was another contribution by Arisen Ahubudu which portrays king Ravana as the hero of the Rama-Ravana story. Writing a preface to the script of the drama, Ahubudu identifies 2554-2517 BC as the time during which Ravana ruled Lankapura (Ahubudu 2007). The relatively influential and widespread Hela Havula community, represented significantly by members of the Sinhala speaking middle class - specially from among school teachers, principals, notaries and Buddhist monks - were at the forefront of the radical social change of 1956 that made Sinhala nationalism a decisive factor in national politics (Coperahewa 2012; Dharmadasa 1974; Dharmadasa 1977).

I came across two more instances where the great Ravana dynasty was referenced in the mid twentieth century. In introducing the history of ancient Sinhala medical practice, the report of the committee appointed in 1950 by the Ceylonese Government to look into the status of traditional Sinhala healthcare systems provides a detailed description of how Sinhala medical practice originated in Ceylon (Committee Report on Ancient Sinhala Medical Practice 1950). According to the report it was developed first by the Asuras who were the initial inhabitants of the country. This knowledge was then transferred to the Yakkas (or Rakshas) who ruled the country after Asuras and developed an advanced civilization in Ceylon. Ravana's family was credited with further developing the Sinhala medical practice in the report. Evidence of the presence of Ravana in the collective public memory in the mid twentieth century can also be found in the work of Beligalla (1995). As a young journalist he documents, the notes of Leonard Woolf's²⁴⁶ visit to the island in 1960, which Woolf undertook after fifty years of his retirement as a government servant of British-ruled Ceylon. These notes cover Woolf's visit to Hambanthota in 1960, the Southern-most part of the island where he served as an Assistant Government Agent before his retirement. The visit was made in the company of Beligalla and the provincial revenue officer of the region, a person called Vithanachchi who was known to Woolf from the days he served as an Assistant Government Agent. In the notes taken by the young Beligalla during the visit in 1960, the name Ravana

²⁴⁶ Leonard Woolf served in Ceylon as a civil servant from 1904 to 1911. Woolf published a series of books after moving back to England at the end of his retirement and his first novel "The village in the jungle" which depicted the difficult lives of Ceylonese peasants during colonial times became famous specially among Sinhalese.

appears often, in dialogues that took place between Woolf and Vithanachchi. References are made by Vithanachchi to Hambanthota as the kingdom of Ravana and to various places in the Hambanthota region as important landmarks of Ravana's reign. Relating the story to Woolf, Usangoda is identified by Vithanachchi as the place where Ravana's palace was located, Velipatanvila as the place where his personal aircraft used to land and Abarana Ella as the waterfall at which the princesses of Ravana's harem committed suicide after Ravana lost the war with Rama. There is mention of Mangara, the Minister of Agriculture of the Ravana dynasty who ruled some of the places Woolf and the team visited and under whose name a temple is now built to worship God Mangara. In his description to Woolf, Vithanachchi estimates that the civilisation of the Ravana dynasty may be older than ten thousand years²⁴⁷. Within my own extended family, as a teenager I recall hearing stories of Ravana as the great emperor of the Sinhala nation²⁴⁸. It was a case of young family members listening to and accommodating the story of Ravana at home, while learning the narrative of *Mahavamsa* at school.

The Hela Havula's attempt to establish the narrative of Ravana as the history of Sinhala nation was the most significant intervention yet it was less effective, and this is a question worthy of attention. Various scholars have expressed their opinions as to why the language purification movement of Hela Havula failed in general to receive wider acceptance in the country. According to Wickramasinghe (2014a) the Hela theory was perhaps too literary and complex to enter popular public space (p.96). The Rama-Sita-Ravana myth did not give Ravana, who stole Rama's wife according to still widespread belief, a persona that people could easily identify with, except within a few pockets in the island where the Hela Havula influence was strong. Another important factor that was disadvantageous to the Hela theory's attempt to capture public imagination at large was its head-on-clash with the power elite of Sinhala society, who acted as a barrier preventing Hela theory's access to the public imagination (Coperahewa 2012). The proposal for the ultra-puristic archaic usage as the standard for written purposes could also have run counter to the populist spirit of the times (Dharmadasa 1977). The fact that the membership of Hela Havula were primarily from a lower caste, *Durava*, the caste of toddy tappers, in a society that was caste hierarchical at the time (Field 2012) may have been another factor that acted against them, in their

²⁴⁷ As a person living in the South of the island, the possibility of Vithanachchi being influenced by the Hela Havula discourse which was also initiated in the Southern coastal belt and might have been in circulation since the early part of the twentieth century in the region, cannot be negated. One can also argue that the folklore on Ravana in circulation may have generated interest in Cumaratunga to propose the Ravana narrative as the history of Sri Lanka.

²⁴⁸ Here again the presence of Ravana in my family memory can be a result of the Hela Havula intervention, through which my parents who were from the South were influenced or as a result of the fact that the Ravana narrative was always there in public memory, at least in the Southern region.

attempt to redefine the Sinhala nation differently from the political elite who were from the traditionally elite *Govigama* caste and especially the *Karava* caste that joined the elite bandwagon during the time of colonial rule (Jayawardena 2007; Roberts 2007).

The early twenty-first century discourse on Ravana contains new features compared to the previous version described above. While the aspect of the engineering excellence of the Hela people remains the most prominent, there are a few more interesting features worthy of one's attention for a discussion to address the question of why the Ravana 'moment' is now and why not before.

4.5.2 Other features of the Ravana narrative²⁴⁹

The current narrative on Ravana contains several features outside the frame of engineering that can also be used to better describe the twenty-first century moment of redefining Sinhala nationalism. Three such features, the special place occupied by women in the Ravana narrative, the relationship the Ravana dynasty had with the Abhayagiri tradition of Buddhism and the regular links the narrative establishes with the contemporary politics of the island, are briefly discussed below. While the prominent role played by women and the relationship with Abhayagiri tradition are discussed in detail in *Vargapurnikava* and reproduced elsewhere, the link that the narrative maintains with the Rajapakse regime appears at regular intervals in songs and fiction.

4.5.2.1 The role of women

The special role played by women in the Ravana narrative is in contrast to the usual portrayal of women in national discourses in general, according to which women are seen to play inferior roles in a society led by men or to play womanly roles in a world where the gender division of labour is clear cut²⁵⁰. Women in the Ravana tradition played a prominent role, arguably even more so than men according to the *Vargapurnikava*²⁵¹. This is also an interesting departure from the narrative of the *Mahavamsa* where the role of women does not go beyond the stereotypical performance of duties. *Vargapurnikava* is full of examples of women's achievements. Women ruled yakka kingdoms and commanded fighting

²⁴⁹ Details of this section were based on the references mentioned in this section as well as on numerous sources mentioned in the section, "Ravana surge in public space", that is reproduced again and again in all forms of communication.

²⁵⁰ Conducting a discussion on the different participation of various social groups, Yuval-Davis (1997) identifies a series of typical roles played by women in nationalist narratives; as mistresses of conquerors, wartime rape victims, military prostitutes or as wives, girlfriends, and daughters waiting dutifully at home. Chatterjee (1986) who divides the Asian nationalist thought into two worlds - outside material world and inner spiritual world, positions women in the inner domain where the spiritual dimension of national culture is safeguarded.

²⁵¹ Commentaries of *Vargapurnikava* by Vimalarathana (2008; 2012) provide descriptions of the wide-ranging role played by women in the Yakka dynasty.

forces²⁵². Women were involved at all levels of administration and held posts in *maha sabas* and *variga sabas*, forums at the higher and lower levels of society. Female education was not discouraged and *Vargapurnikava* provides examples of famous female doctors during the Ravana times²⁵³. References are made to several volumes of *Yakka* laws that were introduced by the princesses of the Ravana dynasty²⁵⁴. There are a few famous *Sandeeshas* (poetry sent through a messenger from a place to another place describing the important landmarks of the route, histories and scenic beauty) written by Yakka women, an activity traditionally conducted by male intellectuals²⁵⁵. Women were equally involved with the local martial art, *angampora*.

Yakka women were at the forefront of spiritual achievement. According to the Ravana narrative, Queen Kavilaashapali, a prominent queen of the Ravana tradition, is the first Sri Lankan to attain the first stage of enlightenment, Sovanhood, even before she heard the dhamma from the Buddha who visited Sri Lanka later, on her invitation. After listening to the Buddha Kavilaashapali attained Arhathood, the final stage of enlightenment. *Vargapurnikava* refers to a long list of Bikkhunis who represented the Ravishalyasha tradition²⁵⁶. Added to the list of achievements by Kavilaashapali are the introduction of the meditation method *Aamaanya* and of the new text, *Kataara Dehen Naari Vilooka Vishakumbana Sutta*. Princess Kashividipali, a sage and the twin sister of Kavilaashapali, is said to have found the

²⁵² Princess Mahapali (i.e. Kuveni in the Vijaya narrative, the Yakka woman who met Prince Vijaya when he landed on the island for the first time) was the ruler of Giri (i.e. Ritigala mountains in the North Central Province) and the Neelagiri regions (i.e. Manewa region in the North Central Province) and is said to have commanded a force consisting of ten divisions with varying expertise. Another prominent woman often mentioned in the Ravana tradition is the Yakka Queen of King Mahanama, Siri Mega Swarnapali (or Rathnapali). According to *Vargapurnikava*, she organized Yakka forces to defeat the forces of the Tamil invader Urdhulaan Neelaweeludu, invited him for a duel and killed him. She saved the Dambulla caves from enemy forces and attacked them when they set fire to the important library of Yakka knowledge, the Munamura Cave. After the death of King Mahanama, Rathnapali became the ruler of Neelagiri a fact, according to the Ravana narrative, not mentioned in the *Mahavamsa*. As a mark of respect for her bravery the Vedda people of Lankapura identified her as Queen of Neelagiri (Vimalarathana 2008). References are also made to Yakka Princess Piumapali Kirimenika who received the honorary title “Rajakaruna” from the King Rajasinghe. She received this honour for the heroic act of taking into custody alive the barbaric Dutchman Kappali Jadhi and handing him over to the King. This declaration of honour is still said to be protected at the National Museum of Sri Lanka (Ibid).

²⁵³ Particularly mentioned are the names of Princesses Mahapali and Uththarapali (Vimalarathana 2008).

²⁵⁴ Princesses Kavilashapali, Siri Mega Rathnapali and Kirimenika Piumapali are considered experts in Yakka law.

²⁵⁵ Rakka Mahila Sandeshaya with three hundred poems was written by the Yakka Bikkhuni Sangikapali and sent from Sangika Mehenawara to Bikkhuni Suwakasardha of the Naga tribe who was living in Ritigalapav Mehenawara (Vimalarathana 2008).

²⁵⁶ The names of Bikkunis Kavilashaali, Suvipalpali, Thambaranujapali, Solidhipali, Kaushadipali, Sudhapali, Suparnipali, Maldineepali, Badramaneepali, Kadhagiripali, Nisardhapali, Gothameepali, Baddhakachchayanapali, Susankapali, Suvasangikapali and Uththarapali are mentioned.

meditation method *sades dehen*. The strong presence of women in Yakka Buddhist institution was marked by the existence a number of monasteries specially allocated for Bikkunis²⁵⁷.

4.5.2.2 Abhayagiri tradition of Buddhism

The Ravana narrative is influenced by *Vargapurnikava* and stands with the Abhayagiri tradition of Buddhism, which is the other major Buddhist fraternity in ancient Sri Lanka, besides the Mahavihara. While the Abhayagiri tradition represented the Mahayana school of Buddhism, Mahavihara represented the Theravada school. The prominence of Abhayagiri was, however, suppressed as a result of the rivalry it had with Mahavihara and the role played by the powerful Mahavihara in documenting Sri Lankan history through the *Mahavamsa*. The longer history of Buddhism in the island and the pioneering role of the female bikkhu tradition suggested by the Ravana narrative, contradict the *Mahavamsa* narrative of Buddhist history in which Buddhism was said to have been introduced for the first time to Sri Lanka by Arhat Mahinda nearly two hundred and fifty years after the death of the Buddha. The Ravana narrative does not deny Arhat Mahinda's missionary visit and identifies it as the origin of the Mahavihara, the new Aryan influenced bikkhu tradition that was established in parallel to the existing Yakka bikkhu tradition. The latter was later known as the Abhayagiri tradition, as a result of the construction of the Abhayagiri monastery, to facilitate the continuity of the *Yakka* bikkhus community²⁵⁸. Bikkhus from Mahavihara were said to have read Buddhist literature in the custodianship of the *Yakka* Bikkhu tradition, debated the content, rejected its validity and set piles of *Yakka* Buddhist literature on fire. The *Vargapurnikava* differentiates teaching at the Abhayagiri school from the more traditional material taught at the Mahavihara school. Within the Abhayagiri tradition as described in the *Vargapurnikava*, medical science, astrology, logic and irrigation engineering were taught along with Buddhist philosophy²⁵⁹. While Mahavihara remained the most powerful Buddhist monastery of ancient Sri Lanka, Abhayagiri is said to have received state patronage during the times of Kings Walagamba, Mahasen, Buddadasa and

²⁵⁷ *Vargapurnikava* mentions a list of famous temples allocated for Bikkhunis; Yashodara Mehenawara (also known as Mahapali Mehenawara), Neelagiri Mehenawara, Mukthalatha Mehenawara (also known as Ratnawali Mehenawara) and Sangika Mehenawara.

²⁵⁸ The Abhayagiri monastery is said to have been established in 1 BCE, two centuries after the establishment of Mahavihara by King Vattagamini Abhaya who constructed and offered Abhayagiri to Thera Mahatissa (Chandawimala 2013).

²⁵⁹ Research paints a somewhat parallel picture about Abhayagiri. By conducting a comprehensive study of the Abhayagiri Fraternity Chandawimala (2013) identifies Abhayagiri as an institution that always welcomed new ideas and adjusted its monastic system in accordance with the time and the socio-religious needs of society. Abhayagiri is considered by Chandawimala to be radical and innovative and maintained foreign relations with India, China and Java and with Mahayana and Tantric Buddhism, whereas the Mahavihara was traditional and conservative.

Mahanama, who were related to the Ravana dynasty in some way or the other (Vimalarathana 2008; 2012).

4.5.2.3 Links with the regime of Mahinda Rajapakse

During the process of construction, the Ravana narrative establishes frequent links with contemporary Sinhala nationalism, which was at a peak during recent times during the rule of Mahinda Rajapakse (2005-2015) that led the nationalist drive, along with the war conducted against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Prominent commentators of the Ravana narrative, in general supported the war conducted by Mahinda Rajapakse's regime against the LTTE. Songs composed by the group Ravana Brothers on the greatness of King Ravana and his aviation capabilities display images of the Sri Lankan army and air force in action against the LTTE. The Sri Lankan forces are often referred to as Ravana forces. The novel "Ravana Mission" which was printed four times during a two year period from 2011 to 2013, is an interesting case in point. In a dramatic unfolding of the events of a single night involving the NASA, the US air force, hackers working for the Sri Lankan military intelligence, media personnel, archeologists, historians and the Sri Lankan armed forces, it links the glorious past of the Ravana dynasty with the regime of Mahinda Rajapakse and identifies the regime and especially the Secretary of the Ministry of Defense who is also the younger brother of President Rajapakse who provided political leadership for the war against the LTTE, as the custodians of the *Hela Asura* nation²⁶⁰.

4.5.3 Defining the Ravana 'moment' of Sinhala nationalism

Even though it doesn't explain the sudden popularity of the Ravana narrative at this moment, the desire of the Sinhala nation for its own independent story of the past - the ownership of which cannot be claimed by others, was present at least during the last century. The *Mahavamsa* story had its advantages that suited the conditions of the nineteenth century and to some extent the twentieth century. It helped the Sinhala nation to claim Aryan status and sit at equal level with its colonial masters.

²⁶⁰ The story begins with the accidental discovery of the palace of King Ravana. The Sri Lankan military, led by the Secretary to the Ministry of Defence, realises the global importance of the site and is on a mission against time to save the palace before the US air force launches an air strike. An archaeologist, a historian and journalist are virtually kidnapped by the armed forces and airlifted to the mountains where the site is located, with a two-hour deadline to reveal the secrets of the palace before the US Air Forces's fighter planes arrive over the island. Over the next two hours the two professors and the journalist discuss what they see inside the underground palace: the history of the "Surya Vansaya" that civilised and ruled the entire world ten thousand years ago. They find this history in the library of the palace, written on plates of gold. Within the discussion Hela is seen as the origin and the centre of the world and the Hela nation as a technologically advanced community of people who used aeroplanes to travel around the world and used nuclear weapons in war. In a last-minute discussion with the Secretary to the Ministry of Defence the journalist starts to live telecast the important news from the site, forcing the Americans who learn about the telecast, to abandon their mission to attack the palace of Ravana (Susitha 2013).

By establishing a direct channel with North India it helped the Sinhalese to keep South India at a distance and to create separate evolutionary paths for the Sinhalese and Tamils which otherwise would have placed the claims by the Sinhalese for sole possession of the island at risk²⁶¹. However, life under the shadow of the giant neighbour was not always a pleasant experience. The *Mahavamsa* narrative is a constant reminder of the dependency of the Sinhala nation on India. This need of the Sinhala nation to keep India at a distance is best described by Spencer (2014) when he says “something is missing in many maps of Sri Lanka. If it isn’t missing it is simply reduced, faded and played down. That something is India”. Antagonism with India is also a regular feature of Sinhala nationalism. Anti-Indian sentiments against the Indian migrants ran high during the mid 1930s, a period of economic depression in the country. Indian workers were seen as competitors for job opportunities that were scarce (Wickramasinghe 2014a, p.127). Granting citizenship to South Indian Tamils who were brought to the island mass scale by the British to work in the plantations, led to a conflict between the Indian and the Sri Lankan governments igniting anti-Indian sentiments once again. While the Nehru government wanted the Indian workers to settle in Sri Lanka on the basis of their contribution to the economy and their long settlement in the island, the Sri Lankan government took steps to pass the Citizenship Act in 1948, disqualifying a majority of Indian Tamils from citizenship. The long-drawn friction between the two governments on this issue was ultimately settled in the 1960s with some people of Indian origin receiving Sri Lankan citizenship and the Indians agreeing to accept the rest (Kanapathipillai 2009, pp. 68; Wickramasinghe 2014a, p.179). The fear of Indian expansionism, however, was a major cause of concern. By the time of independence Ceylonese political leadership was worried that India would replace the British as masters of the island and that India would use Indian Tamil workers as the avenue for interference (Kanapathipillai 2009, p. 69, Samaraweera 1981, p. 157). Indian expansionism was one of the key theories around which the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), one of the radical left-wing parties, mobilised youth in the South to rebel against the central government of Sri Lanka in 1971 (Alles 1976). Anti-Indian opinion of Sinhalese was at its peak during the 1980s, firstly as a result of Indian training provided to Tamil militants who led an armed struggle against the Sinhalese government in the North, and then on the account of forcing the Colombo government to sign a peace accord with India,

²⁶¹ *Yakkas*, the community King Ravana belongs to, can itself be a problematic unit unless India and especially South India is not kept at a distance and forgotten, as the presence of India could reinforce the claim by the Tamils to Ravana as a Tamil king who ruled Lankapura (Coomaraswamy 1986). Anagarika Dharmapala, the vigorous campaigner of Sinhala nationalism in the early 20th century, too identified Yakkas as a tribe related to Tamils while appraising the Aryan origin of Sinhalese (Dewasiri 2011).

which resulted in India sending their forces to the island as peace-keepers to maintain peace between the Sri Lankan armed forces and the LTTE.

Discursively speaking, attempts have been made in the past to break away from India. The Hela Havula movement played a prominent role, as described above, in establishing the Hela nation, the Sinhala language and Sinhala music as an independently evolved community and with unique traditions, by indicating a history that goes well beyond the narrative of the *Mahavamsa* (Coperahewa 2012; Cumaratunga 2006). Cumaratunga portrayed Hela civilization as a centre of global civilization and sought to remove both North and South Indian influences in the Sinhala language by getting rid of Sanskrit, Pali and Tamil loanwords. The well-known singer Sunil Shantha who became the symbol of the Hela music tradition, used Western musical influences to fashion a modern Sinhala national music that was not North Indian. Cumaratunga went to the extent of bestowing new Sinhala language names on the standard Indian terms for musical notes (Field 2012; 2014). Science and technology are recent additions to this list of traditions that are 'rescued' from Indian influence. The initial signs of this trend could be found in the *Jathika Chinthana* [national thinking] discourse led by Nalin de Silva. *Jathika Chinthana* can be described as a movement initiated in the early 1980s in the South of Sri Lanka, questioning the limitations of western science which gradually transformed to an extremist form of Sinhala nationalism (Witharana 2002). The *Jathika Chinthana* discourse identified the ancient tank-based hydraulic civilization of Sri Lanka as a phenomenon unique to Sri Lanka that originated and developed within the boundaries of the island. The contemporary Ravana narrative has extended these unique developments in the island to other areas of science and engineering, and to the history of the Sinhala nation itself, by entirely erasing the significance of the presence of India from the picture.

The desire of the Sinhala nation to sever links with India however, provides just the background to develop an explanation for the sudden mass scale surge of interest in Ravana. It still does not demonstrate why the Ravana narrative became so popular during the past few years and not before.

Another theory that could explain the Sinhala community's strong engagement with the Ravana narrative was presented by leading artist and academic Jagath Weerasinghe, when he introduced the Werner Herzog film "Cave of Forgotten Dreams" on 19 February 2016, in Colombo. Commenting on the mass scale interest of the Sinhala community in Ravana, Weerasinghe identified the claim by the Tamil separatist movement to declare the North-East region of the island as the traditional homeland of Tamils as the factor that triggered the re-emergence of the Ravana narrative in recent times. Weerasinghe was of the opinion that the theory of the traditional homeland of the Tamils demanded

from the Sinhala side a better story than the *Mahavamsa*, to counter claims by Tamils for a homeland. However, Weerasinghe's argument still does not fully explain this unprecedented surge of interest in Ravana now and not before. The claim for a traditional homeland of the Tamils is nothing new and was in the discourse of Tamil struggle for quite some time²⁶² and the condition, as suggested by Weerasinghe, was available at least from the 1950s.

Compared to the story of Ravana that was in circulation among the Sinhalese for several centuries, the twenty first century narrative contains a range of elements that make it attractive to different segments of modern Sinhala society. The recent attempt to reinterpret archeological ruins to fit the narrative of Ravana has injected credibility to the otherwise mythical story. The *Vargapurnikava* adds an element of authenticity to the Ravana narrative. The prominent role played by women in the Yakka nation, as informed by *Vargapurnikava*, has given a liberal outlook to the otherwise traditional narrative of the Hela nation. The connections established with the Abhayagiri tradition of Buddhism have contributed to further improve this progressive image of the Ravana narrative. A number of commentators have worked tirelessly in promoting the sub narratives of the Ravana discourse. Sooriya Gunasekara (who wrote extensively on the advances of science and engineering of the Ravana dynasty), Gayan Sandakelum (producer of the popular television programme *Helawanshaya* which devoted time to trail the historical landmarks of Ravana history) and Thero Manewe Vimalarathana (who published commentaries of the *Vargapurnikava* as the custodian of the ola leaf) provided the deciding combination in the effective promotion of the discourse²⁶³. The spread of electronic media with dozens

²⁶² According to De Silva (2005) the history of the concept of traditional homeland of Tamils goes back to the 1950s (p.84). A resolution urged at the inaugural convention of the Federal Party in 1951 refers to "inalienable right to the territories" which have been traditionally occupied by the Tamil-speaking people (p. 86). The famous Vaddukoddai Resolution, the expression of the desire of the Tamil people for a separate state at the first national convention of the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF), adopted on the 14th May 1976, uses the concept of traditional homelands as a fundamental principle to build up its argument (Vittachi 1995, pp.28-37). A year later the TULF in its manifesto to the General Elections 1977, while referring to traditional homelands, went further to say that "even before the Christian Era the entire island of Ceylon was ruled by Tamil kings" (Bandarage 2008, p.72).

²⁶³ Even though one can see the surge of Hela narrative of Ravana in recent times as a continuation of the Hela Havula discourse on the origin of the Sinhala nation, there are clear differences between the two projects when it comes to the expected objectives, leading commentators and the audiences they addressed, contents and the modes of spread. While the main objective of Hela Havula remained as the purification of the Sinhala language from the influences, especially of the Indian languages, the current discourse with a broader mandate expects to replace the narrative of the *Mahavamsa* with the narrative of Ravana, as the history of the Sinhala nation. In contrast to the Hela Havula approach of moving into a confrontation with the power elite of Sinhala society, the commentators of the contemporary Ravana discourse were in favour of maintaining cordial relationships with the leadership of the Sinhala polity and especially with the powerful Rajapakse family. The low caste factor that acted as a barrier to the campaign by Hela Havula is not visibly present in the contemporary project. While Hela Havula was mainly a literary exercise confined to a segment of educated middle class of the Sinhala society, the Ravana discourse

of FM and television channels in operation and of social media with platforms such as Facebook pages, websites and blogs has facilitated the transmission of the Hela Ravana story among ordinary people in quick time in comparison to the slow spread of the narrative in the past, presumably within pockets where the narrative generated interest.

I would like to argue, however, that the early twenty first century 'moment' of Sinhala nationalism that left open the space for a new reading of the Sinhala nation through the narrative of Ravana, is made possible by the superimposition of two important phenomena. Special conditions at the time which are described below, demanded a new reading of the Sinhala nation on the one hand, and a reading that suited the demand that emerged in the form of a Ravana narrative, on the other. A careful look at the recent Ravana surge shows that the surge overlaps with the years leading to the defeat of the LTTE in the decades-long war between Tamil militants and the Sinhalese government. Most of the material (books, newspaper articles, radio and TV programmes, websites, Facebook sites and blogs) were produced after the war against the LTTE (after May 2009) and the rest during the final stages of the war during which the LTTE started weakening (during the years leading to 2009). Sinhala nationalism, the driving force behind the war effort by the Sri Lankan government, seemed to reach a peak with the defeat of the LTTE. The *Mahavamsa* history with its messy links to India and with the myth of origin of the Sinhalese from Vijaya whose aristocratic lineage is challenged by many, starting from the Hela Havula group, became inadequate as a history for the Sinhalese after the victory against the LTTE. Vijaya's ancestry as it is described in the folklore - of his grandfather being a lion, an animal and his father and mother being brother and sister, while relating him to a line of heroic 'lion blood', has nevertheless made it difficult to showcase in the context of a modern world. Achieving the defeat of the LTTE is so significant for the Sinhalese in general and the governing regime in particular, that they deserve a better, grander history. The victory against the LTTE provided the boost of confidence desperately needed by a nation that had nothing significant to claim except the glory of an irrigation civilisation of ancient Sinhalese kingdoms, and perhaps the victory at the cricket World Cup in 1996²⁶⁴. The government's propaganda reached its zenith after defeating the LTTE, to portray Sri Lanka as a great nation and its leader President Mahinda Rajapakse, as one of the great leaders of the world. The Ravana

seems to catch the popular imagination of the Sinhala community at a rapid pace, through its spread in all popular mediums such as newspapers, tabloids, books, novels, radio and television programmes and the Internet.

²⁶⁴ The Sri Lankan victory in the fifty-over cricket world cup against Australia is still hailed by the Sinhala community as a major achievement for the nation. The twenty-over cricket world cup title in the finals against India in 2014, however, has not received equivalent fame.

narrative with the technologically advanced Hela nation extending its influence within the planet earth and even beyond, with Ravana as its mighty leader, fitted well with the self-generated fame of the post-2009 Sinhala nation. In contrast to the technological achievements of Sinhalese as mentioned in the Vijaya narrative, that are confined to the achievements of an agriculturally advanced civilisation, the engineering accomplishments of the Ravana dynasty in an array of fields that included air travel, space travel, seafaring and the use of nuclear energy, have placed the technological advancements of the Helas on par with the technical expertise of global superpowers in the modern-day world. If the theory of Aryan descent provided the Sinhala nation with access to relate as equals to the colonial master in the nineteenth century, advances in the fields of modern engineering in the Ravana dynasty have allowed the Sinhala nation to be identified with the club of other superpower nations.

The perception of a nation which is mobilised on the basis of its shining past can assumed to be unstable at a time when the said past of the nation, the main guideline in defining national identity, is contested (by another past). An attempt to give up the past of a nation for a past that is radically different to the previous one is hence, a risky exercise from the point of view of the stability of the nation. As Billig (1995) pointed out, nations need to be reproduced on a daily basis under normal circumstances. Reminding its citizenry of its existing unique past on a regular basis is a part of this process of reproduction. The Ravana moment motivates one to revisit this general wisdom. Even though a nation is situated in general on a base of a national past (or a future), I would like to argue that a nation can have its own existence, its own life, independent of its past at certain rare moments where the nation is at its peak of confidence. The success of the war with the LTTE which was considered one of the most powerful guerrilla movements in the world and the ultimate victory in 2009, has provided the Sinhala nation such a moment in the history of the nation where the enemy, the other, has disappeared from the national landscape at least for a short period of time. With the absence of an 'enemy' the tendency to strictly guard the mainstream Sinhala history provided by the *Mahavamsa* seems to be absent or relaxed. It is a rare moment at which a nation can afford to replace a past with a new past. The emergence of the Ravana narrative in the early twenty first century therefore, does not fall in line with Smith's (1999) theory that myths emerge at a time when a backward ethnic community is faced with an external threat and a time of prolonged war (p. 84). The Ravana myth reached its zenith when the external threat was about to be removed and disappear. Even though it didn't exist in material form as in the cases of Hydro Electric Scheme or the Accelerated Mahaweli Development Project but as an imaginary construction, engineering as described in the Ravana narrative provided the kind of ideal past the confident and victorious Sinhala nation was looking for and was proud of having. While both the

AMDP and the technologically superior Ravana dynasty are examples of 'engineering sites' that facilitated journeys of the Sinhala nation to its past, the Hela Yakka dynasty differs from the AMDP in the special role it played in attempting to replace the existing past with a new past and, hence adding a new dimension to our discussion.

4.5.4 The future

It is still too early to predict the future of the Ravana narrative in relation to its success in redefining the Sinhala nation. One could argue that the Ravana narrative will have to sort out issues on three fronts if it is to continue its forward march. The fall of the Rajapakse regime in the presidential elections in January 2015 can be seen at first glance as a serious setback. However, the ten year rule and the victory in war achieved by the Rajapakse family have left their influence on Sinhala nationalist ideology, to be marked decisively irrespective of whether they are in power or not. The authorities of Sinhala nationalist ideology dealt with both the *Mahavamsa* and the Ravana narratives carefully while sympathizing with the latter²⁶⁵. The Ravana narrative also has to engage with the academic front whose response towards it, in public media, is diverse. While the natural tendency is to consider the Ravana narrative as a greater myth compared to the myth of Vijaya²⁶⁶ there seems a sympathy among certain sections of academia towards the theory of considering the Sinhalese or Helas as descendents of Yakka²⁶⁷. The gap between the academic sphere and the popular public sphere has let the surge of the Ravana narrative in the popular sphere remain relatively unaffected. The third front that the Hela discourse on Ravana has to engage with is the Tamil community, who consider Ravana to be a Tamil king. This meeting, as far as I'm aware, has not taken place yet²⁶⁸.

²⁶⁵ The approach by Nalin De Silva, who became a key spokesperson of Sinhala nationalism and of the Rajapakse rule, is a case in point. Writing under the title "The Mahavamsa Myth" to *The Island* on the 25th February 2014, De Silva refers to *Vargapurnikava*, not as a text unavailable in public space but as a "bookcompiled during the last phase of the Sinhala kingdom [revealing] that other Bududahamas and Vamsakathas were existing at that time".

²⁶⁶ Dewasiri confronts the narrative of Ravana head on in his newspaper article under the title "Ravana, a truth or a lie?". Based on the argument that the facts presented in the narratives are more fictional when one goes back in time and that the supposed 'archeological evidence' in support of the Ravana narrative could also mean imagination rather than facts of reality, Dewasiri concludes that the Ravana narrative is a myth (Ravaya weekly, 07 and 14 September 2014).

²⁶⁷ The findings of his latest excavations, Somadeva, as reported in a newspaper under the title "Archaeological findings open new chapter: Prof Somadeva" provide evidence of a well organised society of Yakka people who were practicing Buddhists who lived more than 2000 years ago (Daily Mirror, 02 September 2014).

²⁶⁸ The language barrier has prevented this meeting so far. While commentators of Hela Ravana used to construct their discourse mainly in the Sinhala language, the treatment of Ravana as a Tamil king is done by Tamils in Tamil language. It is interesting to observe a parallel surge of interest within the Tamil nation to reclaim Ravana as a great leader of the Tamil community. For example, the article series written by N. K. Thiruchelvam which appeared from January 2014 to March 2015 in the Tamil daily *Tinakkural* by arguing the case for Ravana as a Tamil king, has not triggered any response from the Hela Ravana community, yet.