

Post-Independent Sinhalese Literature, Literary and Linguistic Debates, and R. Tennakoon's *GAMI BANA*: A Book Review

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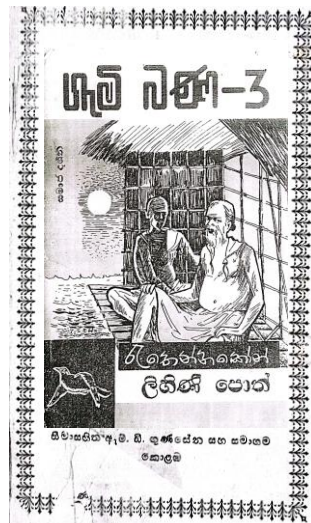
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Introduction

This article reviews R. Tennakoon's *Gami Bana*, a work in three parts published in the early 1950s by M. D. Gunasena, the publisher of Sinhalese books during this period. "Gami Bana" is a reprint

of a series of articles that the author wrote for the Sinhalese daily, Lankadeepa. After gaining



independence, this newspaper enjoyed a large circulation and provided room for social and political criticism of the Sinhalese-educated people.

Description of the Book and Objectives

The term *Gami Bana* depicts the language of Sinhalese rural subjects. These were published as articles by the author in Lankadeepa (a Sri Lankan Sinhalese daily newspaper). In the book, Tennakoon aimed to vehemently criticize some aspects of contemporary society. This analysis caters to two themes. The first is the nature and the significance of his social and political criticism. The second is the change of his language from "pure" Sinhalese called "*Hela Basa*" to a style that was more close to spoken Sinhalese. His style is here examined to understand its relation to his ideological approach as a writer.

Firstly, it is necessary to define the term "Gami Bana". The word "Gami" means relating to a village. Their lifestyle is very simple in contrast to that of urban people. Their cultural patterns are specific to them. The noun "Bana" has rich connotations and its

approximate meaning is 'wisdom'. “*Bana*” refers to Buddhist teachings or instructions leading to correct behaviour in social and personal life. They are based on ethical values upheld in the Sinhalese villages. Its meaning is connected to Buddhist ethics and is related to the village culture around the Buddhist temple. Villagers learn “*Bana*” from the Buddhist priests in order to organize their lives righteously. The village ideal is to spend one's life according to the tenets of Buddhism. Succinctly, “*Gami Bana*” can be described as the wisdom of the villager.

Tennakoon has introduced a high level of social criticism in these popular articles included in the book: the themes of most of these criticisms are a continuation of the criticisms of *Hela Havula* of which he was a leading member. The *Hela Havula* had to carry out an unending campaign for the implementation of these proposed reforms as the state authorities tended to reject them. After the achievement of independence, supporters of the *Hela Havula* had to continue the agitation in an altered political situation. This campaign for reforms was also

connected intimately to the evolution of his language, literary style and creative writing. In order to understand the context of these criticisms, it is necessary to examine the themes which were taken up in the book. Those included different themes are reviewed from here onwards.

Swabhasha or the National Languages

A recurrent theme in the articles included in the book is the clamour to make National Languages. To understand his criticisms of this agitation, it is necessary to understand the political background in which he wrote. These articles were written in the early 1950s which was a period in which agitation was gaining ground. The agitation began in the 1940s as a call for "Swabhasha" or national languages to be made official languages (Pieris, 2020). This meant Sinhalese and Tamil to be made official languages. This demand was coupled with the demand to make Swabhasha the medium of instruction in schools. Later, in the 1950s, the demand for Swabhasha was gradually changed by

a majority of agitators into a demand to make Sinhalese only the official language. He exposes the fact that the promise to implement Swabhasha as an Official Language had not been honoured even after 6 years.

Through these criticisms, he seems to be a creative writer who is most sensitive to the complex aspects of the problems. For instance, he treats Swabhasha's agitation with contempt. He says that what should be done is to prevent the extreme marginalization of Sinhalese by giving a privileged position to English. Tennakoon was a frequent commentator in this agitation. But, his comments were always critical. There is no record of him participating in the agitation that had been characterized by some critics as communalist.

Independence from the British Rule

He criticized many aspects of this issue in *Gami Bana* articles. In the article “Dawn of Independence” he exposes all the post-independent agitation issues as

frauds. His attitude is not one of the oppositions to the demands involved: but, he speaks as a person who is firmly convinced that the rulers have no intention at all of fulfilling these demands. Agitation issues that he has identified are; Buddhist outcry, Swabhasha outcry, temperance outcry, prime ministerial outcry, poetry outcry, cultural outcry, art outcry and indigenous medicine outcry. His criticisms are harsh and full of irony. It is as if he has no confidence at all in the genuineness of those who lead them.

Education and Free Education

Tennakoon condemned the policy of "Free Education" as a fraud. This was a bold position to hold during that time. He does not oppose the policy of free education as such. However, his criticism is that the government's motives are not honest. As a result of this dishonesty, the reforms have become a fraud and people do not get the expected benefits from it. On this basis, he sees the establishment of junior schools, senior schools and central schools as part of this fraud. Here it should be noted that he speaks during a period

in which the medium of instruction was English. English was the medium of instruction in these schools. This was retained by the government even after independence. But, the change into Swabhasha was not made. We must also understand that establishing these schools therefore benefited only a minority of students of the middle class who could afford to send their children to fee-levying English medium schools in the cities or urbanized areas. Tennakoon argues that these schools which offer preferential treatment by the government hinder the development of Swabhasha education. He proposes that preference should be given to Swabhasha schools and people should first correct this. He states in *Gami Bana 2*:

එක සෙන්තරල් ඉස්කෝලයක් සිනියාරු
ඉස්කෝලයක් ජුනියාරු ඉස්කෝලයක් නම් සිය
බසට වින පමුණුවන්නට වළලාපු හුනියමක් බව
ඕනෑකම නැමැති දරුණු ලෙඩින් පෙළෙන මහ
ජනයාට පෙනෙන්නේ නෑ. සයින් පවසින් පෙළෙන
හිව්හා ලබා ගත හැකි දෙයක් කාලා බීලා සුදහ
ගින්න නිවා ගන්නට බලනවා මිස ඒ අහරේ කැප
අකැප බවක් වත් වස විස ඇති නැති බවක් වත්

හොයා බලන්නට කරම් ඉවැසින්නක් ඇත්තෙක්
නො වෙයි. (පිටුව. 152)

(Those who suffer from extreme want cannot see
that these schools are aimed at harming
Swabhasha.)

On this theme, he also makes the point that what is
necessary is an ideological revolution, a campaign to
change the minds of people. In *Gami Bana* 3, he
asserts:

රජයේ නිලමෙවරුන් හට සුව බාසාව හුරු
කරවන එක නො වෙයි රට වැසියා කල යුතු,
රජයේ ඇත්තන් ඇඟට නො දන්වා ම
ඉංගිරිසිය නැති ව බැරි වන තැනට හෙමින්
හෙමින් කරුණු සලස්වා සුව බාසාව වැද්දන්
හට ගිය කලදසාව ම යන තැනට වැඩ මානා
තිබීම වළක්වා ලීමයි. මේකට මුල පිරුයේ මේ
රජය නො වෙයි. අපේ රට වැසියා ‘නිදහස්’
කියන තනි වචනේ මන්ත්‍රයෙන් පිස්සු වැටී සිටී
අවදියේ නිදහස් අද්දියාපනේ කියන වහංගත
රෝගෙ බෝකරපු රජයයි.

ඒ පිස්සුව රටවැසියාට තවමත් හරිහැටි සුව
වෙලා නෑ ඒ නිසයි. ඒ උදවිය ‘ අපේ ගමට
ජුනියාරු ඉස්කෝලයක් සිනියාරු

ඉස්කෝලයක් සන්තරාල ඉස්කෝලයක් කිය
කියා කෑ ගහන්නෙ. ඒ දියාරු ඉස්කෝල තමා
අපේ අයගෙන් අර ඉංගිරිස් මහත්තයන් වාගේ
සැලකිලි ලබන්නෙ, සිංහල ඉස්කෝල,
පිරිවෙන් කියන ඒවා නිකම් හිගන්නන්,
පඬයන් වාගේ තමයි සැලකිලි ලබන්නෙ.
සුවඛාසා ගෝසා කාරයන් විසින් කළ යුතු
ලොකුම වැඩේ රට වැසියාගේ ඒ පිස්සුවට
බේන් දිදී අර ඉංගිරිස් මහත්තයාලාට අයින්
ගැස්සීමයි. (පිටුව. 258)

In this passage he argues that the rulers cannot compel to people learn Swabhasha. They should change the situation where English has been made indispensable in Buddhist education. Through the article "*Buddha Adyapana Gottiya*" he intervened in the ideological battle that took place in the Buddhist Theosophical Society in 1954. The controversy centered on the opposition to the views expressed by E. W. Adikaram who was the president of this society. Tennakoon does not mention Adikaram by name but it was well known because the controversy became a heated public issue. Dr. Adikaram was a reformist Buddhist who was one of the first Sri Lankan academics to write a modern

history of Buddhism in Ceylon. He was a strict vegetarian, an extreme pacifist who opposed all forms of violence and an opponent of racism who argued that race is a myth. He opposed all Buddhist rituals, advocating individual adherence to Buddhist precepts. Adikaram campaigned against the observance of rituals, arguing that they encourage fraud. People break these precepts but observe the ritual of repeating the words. The radical political and social atmosphere that prevailed during the period before the war made it possible for such a person to assume a post in a conservative milieu.

Theosophical Society was formed by Henry Alcott, an American reformist and democrat who campaigned for the extension of Buddhist education in Sri Lanka. Tennakoon deals with this controversy as an educational issue. Adikaram was the general manager of the Buddhist schools controlled by the Buddhist Theosophical Association. The factional struggle within the association erupted when he stated that Buddhist education did not exist for two thousand

years. It is significant that though he sympathized with Dr. Adikaram, he did not take sides directly but wrote the article as an independent writer. But, he was using irony to defend the general manager. He states that Adikaram's unorthodox ideas on Buddhism did not prevent him from being elected by the members of the society earlier. He was elected in a period when criticism and dissent were tolerated after independence intolerance developed. The shift from Swabhasha to Sinhalese only as the official language also seems to be part of the same process.

Sinhalese Dictionary

One of the chief campaigns carried out by the *Hela Havula* under Kumaratunga's leadership was a campaign against the delay in compiling the Sinhalese dictionary. In these articles too, Tennakoon makes several references to the chaotic situation that has arisen. According to *Hela Havula* and Tennakoon, millions of rupees were spent on this project while a large office was set up with a permanent team of experts. In the references to this scandal, articles in

Gami Bana, Tennakoon subjects this project to scathing criticism. It should be noted that even today, the project has not been completed. In the article, "*Ivarayakneti Dath Kekkuma*"(unending toothache) in *Gami Bana*, he deals with this question. In the same article, the author deals with the question of translating and printing textbooks from English to Sinhalese and Tamil. Here too, he points out the inordinate delay in implementing decisions in this country.

Education

Problems of education are one of the themes that Tennakoon dealt with within the book. In the article, *Iskola Dadayama* (School Hunt), he discusses some educational problems that exist even today. One is the indiscriminate publication of textbooks written by unqualified authors interested in easy money. The problem has become more complicated as the government ignores it: there is no proper supervision and no standards are set according to him. After a book is written and published, the author uses undue influence to get his work approved as a text prescribed

by the government for school children. Tennakoon says that authors justify their efforts by saying that an author could get his book sold only if it is made a book prescribed for schools. He counters this argument by pointing out the popularity of *Piyadasa Sirisena's* works which he has read during his youth. Pointing out that writing cheap novels has become a craze, he states that works so produced are of low literary value. He suggests to correct this state of affairs: young writers should start translating world classics into Sinhalese. Tennakoon contrasts the problems which exist with the cry for making Sinhalese the Official Language. He implies that this campaign for official language is dishonest.

Tennakoon's Language and Literary Style

It is important to note here that articles reviewed here have been written by him bearing in mind the general newspaper readers. In these articles, he does not deal with academic or theoretical topics. His subject matter is limited to contemporary Sri Lankan social and political themes. His comments are light-minded social

criticism written mostly in a humorous mode. Tennakoon belonged to the Sinhalese linguistic and literary association *Hela Havula* of which he was a leading member. Led by *Munidasa Kumaratunga*, this association developed in the decade of 1930s and 40s into a prominent group that advocated and vigorously campaigned for language reforms as a part of the national movement. Under British rule, English was the official language and medium of instruction in education. Movements arose in this period to make "Swabhasha" or national languages/official languages and languages of education. *Hela Havula* advocated the adoption of the ancient Sinhalese as the literary language. This was the language used by the Sinhalese in ancient times before the influence of migrations from India produced a language which was mixed with words of Pali and Sanskrit. *Hela Havula* termed this as "pure" and "uncontaminated" Sinhalese.

Tennakoon and Kumaratunga had a clear attitude toward the development of the aspect of Sinhalese language. They understood that foreign rule had retarded the development of language. They had no

faith in persuading the colonial government to achieve reforms. They aimed to create a refined language to raise the cultural level of the people. Thus, they believed that 'pure' and grammatical language should be used by people. Experimenting with several language systems, they adopted a language using pure *Hela* words and discarded Sanskrit and Pali terms that had been extensively used by contemporary writers. The style, vocabulary and grammar of the new 'language' were, however, alien to most of the Sinhalese readers and their writings were understood only by an educated elite. On the other hand, some *Hela Hawula* intellectuals also took the initiative in creating new Sinhalese words for English technical words.

The *Hela Havula* believed that once Sinhalese is restored to its due place as the official language and the language of education, this form of writing will become popular as it is more expressive and flexible than the language then in use. In the post-independence period, his journalistic and creative writing became close to the colloquial language

spoken by ordinary people. In an article in *Gami Bana* the author states that he has written this book in the language really spoken by Sinhalese rustic villagers. The intention was to reach a wider audience. For Tennakoon, *Gami Bana* was not a mere language experiment. The choice of language style was for him a necessary medium to achieve a larger aim: to reach a broader audience for his social criticism. For this, he created a new conceptual world. Here he counterpoised his creations of what he terms as village wisdom against the bad governance of the rulers. He praises village wisdom and ridicules government policy.

This change can be shown by comparing his earlier work with *Gami Bana*. In 1955 the second edition of Tennakoon's long poem *Vawuluwa* (The Saga of the Bat), which is considered as his poetic magnum opus, was published. Tennakoon wrote an introduction to this edition titled, “දෙවැනි වර සකස් කිරීම”. (The second editing). The second edition appeared seven years after the publication of the first edition. The language used in this introduction does not differ much

from the language he used earlier. The language used in *Vawuluwa* and the contents of the introduction to the second edition are academic. But in *Gami Bana*, he used the language spoken by the rural people.

The following passage is from *Gami Bana* that reflects the above-mentioned language nature:

මහා චන්දියේ හිටින ලොකුම උපාසක රාල තමා මගේ
ටිකිරි මාම. ගොවිතැන් ආලාපාලු කිරීමේ වරදට
දවසකට වල මුරුගයන් හැට අට දෙනෙකුත් මේ ලොවින්
මැ පලවහරිනවා මිස උන්ද වෙන කිසි පානාතිපාන
අකුසල කර්මයක් කරනවා තියා හිතන්නේවත් නෑ. වෙන
මිනිසුන් ඒ ඇත්තන්ගේ හේන වලට එන කුරුල්ලන්
පලවනවට පවා උන්දෑ දොස් කියනවා. “ඔය තිරිසන්
සතකු කුරක්කන් ඇටයක් දෙකක් කාවට හේනක්
පාලු වෙනවද (ගැමි බණ 2 පිටු. 149).

(Tikiri-uncle the biggest Buddhist devotee living in the deep *Vanni* (remote settlement in the dry zone forest) is my uncle. He would send to the other world a few wild creatures which destroy his cultivations. But, he would never think of breaking the precept of not harming life. When others drive away birds that eat the grains in their fields he would admonish them saying, would the field be harmed when a bird picks up a grain of millet?)

He follows a style based on the language used by villagers. It closely follows the grammatical usage of the customary spoken language of the Sinhalese villagers.

Sinhala is a language that is characterized by diglossia (Dharmadasa, 1999; Wickramasinghe, 2015). According to linguistic theories, a language with diglossia has two varieties which are called High and Low (Ferguson, 1959). The written language belongs to the High variety and the spoken language is called the Low variety. It is this low variety that Tennakoon used in *Gami Bana*. This makes it possible for a wider readership to understand his writings more clearly. This is supposed to be the method followed by Lord Buddha when he preached his system to the common man. He named it “The System of Aanupubbi kata” (Lord Buddha would consider the level of understanding of an audience or a person before preaching and choose his language accordingly. Thus, the concept *Gami Bana* used by Tennakoon to name his writing fully agrees with its content.

The words; මහවන්නිය (great forest), වනමූර්ගය (forest creature), උපාසක රාල (the Buddhist devotee) are some such language usages of villagers. Such colloquial words do not belong to the vocabulary of classical Sinhala literature. Kumaratunga and other members of *Hela Hawula* never used such words. But here, Tennakoon took a different approach by using these and other such words in his writings. Without using them indiscriminately, he was able to manage their use carefully. He wrote the *Gami Bana* in Low-form of style because he felt that colloquial language used in popular writings, plays a functional role in regard to the dissemination of knowledge. Tennakoon was in search of a radical solution to the problem of popularizing his ideas. Unlike other academics like S. Paranavitana and Yakkaduwe Pragnarama Thera, who adopted the colloquial language wholesale in their writings, Tennakoon attempted to adapt the spoken language in his writings.

The Importance of *Gami Bana* and Concluding Remarks

Gami Bana articles are an important stage in the writings of Tennakoon in this book. Its grammar arose out of a pioneer attempt to create a written style of language from spoken rural language and establish a standard grammar in it. This language style had been ignored in academic and intellectual circles until then. Using this style, Tennakoon has written about social problems, village life, political and religious affairs, etc. He has aimed to develop people's critical thinking and vision through his work. In *Gami Bana*, Tennakoon recreates some aspects of the rural life of Sri Lanka which was disappearing during this time. It brings out the social background of villagers, their habits, culture, and livelihood. This is generally a life of simplicity based on agriculture. In their slash-and-burn plots and fields, they cultivate paddy, millet, long beans, and types of corn. Their common varieties of food are rice, milk rice, millet, roti, millet porridge, *maniyok*, etc. Their main protein requirements are

obtained from hunting and fishing. Villagers do not understand these activities as sins. If the climate is normal, the villager is physically strong. He can perform hard work according to his writing in this book.

To produce scholarship in the depicted society, universities or other academic institutions were not necessary mainly because the society was not industrial. Tennakoon has captured the social conversation of the villager in the article titled, “*Gammadi Hali*” in *Gami Bana*. This gives an accurate picture of the village as revealed in the everyday social discourse. It reveals aspects of their life and culture. In this, Tennakoon offers us a casual discussion between a few people. It is a simple exchange where they talk on cultural and social matters of interest and exchange gossip. The social situation can be compared to a Western pub or a club. Dialogue reveals the social concerns of the villager as well as their understanding of the problems. As Tennakoon suggests in the articles, the villager possesses a high level of understanding. What is

portrayed by Tennakoon is a considerable level of democracy existing in this social discourse. Tennakoon also discusses Sinhalese proverbs critically. Proverb is a medium to express social criticism and promote wisdom and understanding. Coining of such proverbs involves new social criticisms and takes the listener to a higher level of understanding: it also aids the process of development of the language. Simply, the book *Gami Bana* contains the power of attraction and immersion of facts into the mind and, about the ruling system, religious things, human thinking, contemporary social information, and feelings of the general public critically and candidly.

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