THE ORIGIN OF THE NĀDAGAMA TRADITION IN SRI LANKA

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1. Introduction

The purpose of this study is to analyse the origin of the Nādagama tradition since there exist many diverse opinions and conflicting views within this area of scholarship. Various writers have clearly and extensively analysed the structures and techniques of the Nādagama and it is therefore unnecessary to discuss these features in detail in this study. However, their opinions with regard to the historical origins, social and religious background and the development of the Nādagama, are contradictory and should be accordingly clarified.

There are three scholars, Professor Sarachchandra, Bishop Edmund Peiris, and M.H. goonatilleka, whose attention has recently been focused on this particular issue. However, opinions were presented about the origin of the Nādagama even before their theories. The earliest records on the origin of the Nādagama were made by D.P.D Alwis and W. Arthur de Silva and their views contradict those of the others. It is not easy to agree with any of the above scholars if one observes comprehensively the available evidence on the origins of this tradition. Therefore, this study, while considering the existing theories, will endeavour to present a more plausible opinion on this issue based on sources which throw light on the social and historical factors which gave rise to the Nādagama in Sri Lanka.

1.1 The Nādagama tradition

The Nādagama was popular on the western coast of Sri Lanka from Hálavata (Chilaw) in the North down to Tangalla in the South. Belonging to the folk tradition, it was a type of drama which had a story set with songs and South Indian Kāmatic music with intermittent verses and stylized movements. This tradition consisted of theatrical elements which were not found in the other folk drama traditions of Sri Lanka.

Usually the Nādagama performance was serialized, which led to the duration of staging ranging from a fortnight to about a month or two. The Nādagama was commonly performed throughout the night. The prelude acted by the stock characters was repeated on each occasion. The purpose of this prelude was solely for the purpose of introducing stock characters such as Bahubūtaya or Kōlama or Kōnangiya (jester), Sellalamā (literary playful