

‘Chandasa’ (form), ‘Viritha’ and the Sinhala Poetry Tradition

ABSTRACT

The history of the Sinhala poetic tradition dates back to thousands of years. According to folk tradition, Sri Lanka had a developed poetry tradition even in the B.C era. The ‘Paramaththajōthika Attakathā’ states that 60 Bhikku attained the ‘Arahathship’ (Spiritual enlightenment) by listening to the folk singing of peasant women, who were harvesting in the paddy field. The first written evidence of the Sinhala poetry tradition can be seen among the epigraphic list from the 3rd Century B.C. Later, the Sinhala poetry tradition reached its the peak with the Seegiri poetry, Kavisilumina, Mayura, Selalihini and Girā sandēsha poetry, Kāvyaśhēkaraya, and Guttila Kāvya. After the golden era of the Sinhala poetic tradition (the Kotte era), there seems to be a decline in poetry. The Matara and Colombo eras belong to this period of decline. The periods that followed them are also an extension of that decline. The new poetry which refused the popular Colombo poetry tradition, questioned the identity of form in literary aspects, which was identified as a poem by Sinhalese readers. As a result of this whole process, the present Sinhala poetry tradition faces challenges. The condition is clearly visible in thousands of copies of poetry books not being sold, though 90% of the population is literate. Instead of the poetry which was embedded in rural life, other aesthetic features have gained that position. Therefore, it is evident that, the Sinhala poetry is less appealing to the audience. Some scholars observe that trying to write poetry, ignoring traditional ‘Chandasa’ and ‘Viritha’ is the cause for this decline. Gunadasa Amarasekara, Erik Ileyapparachchi, Dayasena Gunasinghe, Thissa Abeysekara, Monika Ruwanpathirana are leading figures among them. They hold the opinion that ‘Chandasa’ is a unique feature of Sinhala poetry, and one cannot write poetry excluding ‘Chandasa’. They have expressed their ideas through academic publications, magazines, and newspapers. Some of them are Amarasekara (Aliyā Saha Andayā 1966), Sinhala Kāvya Sampradāya 1996, Bhaāvageetha 2009, Asak dā Kava 2009, Ileyapparachchi (Vichāra Pathrikā 2005), Gunasinghe (Doramadalāwa 1991) Abeysekara (Nawa sāhithya Sanvāda) Sanskruthi, Samudra Wettasinghe 1997, Ruwanpathirana (Wathmana 1997 Sep. edition). This opinion cannot be put aside, as Sinhala poetry detached itself from the public due to the origin of free verse, and most of the said scholars are excellent Sinhala poets themselves. However, to evaluate the truth and falsity of this opinion, no research has been conducted so far. The few documents prepared against this are not theoretically sufficient to break the point established by the said scholars. It is a vacuum for conducting a thorough research on this opinion, paying special attention to Sinhala poetry criticism. From the beginning, the Sinhala poetry tradition has had an inseparable bond between ‘Chandasa’ and ‘Viritha’. It was seen in the epigraphy of Kassagamakanda, the foremost evidence for written Sinhala poetry

until the origin of free verse. 'Chandasa' and Sinhala poetry had an inseparable bond. Certain changes occurred after the origin of free verse. As highlighted by the said scholars, by examining the bond between Sinhala poetry and 'Chandasa', initially it was investigated as to how the deterioration was caused as a result of the negligence of form in poetry; 'Chandasa' and 'Viritha'. Through that, the objective of this research is to provide an academic guide towards the future path of the Sinhala poetry tradition. The first chapter provides information about 'Chandasa', the origin of 'Chandasa', the evolution, the origin of 'Chandas Shāstra' and its evolution. The 'Māthra, GaNa, Virith Chandas' concept and graphing of 'Chandas' and counting 'Virith' are discussed later. The second chapter is on the 'Chandas Shāstra' studying tradition and a review of literature. The history of the 'Chandas' tradition has a long history. Parallel to this, various books were published. The limitations and advantages of such books are also analyzed. The origin of Sinhala 'Chandasa', the unique features, the influence of other 'Chandas Shāstra' visible in therein are discussed in the third chapter. An analysis of how Sinhala 'Chandasa' took its origin from local sources and influenced and improved by Sanskrit, Pāli and Prakrit 'Chandas Shāstra' takes place. In the Sinhala poetry tradition 4 poetic forms can be seen - 'Chandas'. These are Seheli, Gee, Siupada and Silō. Though 'Sandeslakuna' talks of two lined poetry, there is no documented evidence. Silō is a form influenced by Sanskrit Shlōka. The fourth chapter is to show how these poetic forms were subjected to evolution from the ancient past. The free verse is an attempt to create poetry without considering the 'Chandas' tradition. Therefore, Sinhala poetry lost its identity in form. Free verse caused the deterioration not even in Sinhala poetry but also in Sinhala songs. The fifth chapter discusses why free verse is not a form of poetry, its limitations and how it caused the decline of Sinhala poetry and songs. In the analysis of Sinhala poetry 'kāvyaya' and 'padyaya' are used as synonyms. However, in ancient books 'kāvyaya' was used to mean literature, not just poetry. The terms used by Gunadasa Amarasekara, such as "Sinhala kāvyā sampradāya" cause difficulties in explanations. Therefore, this study attempts to use 'padyaya' to give the meaning of 'poetry'. The spelling and word division are used in a simple way while respecting the Sinhala language tradition as well as considering practical needs. When there are several ways of using spelling, the simplest and the accepted (by scholars) ways were selected. The spelling and word division in quotes are used as they are. Though there is ample research at present about 'Chandas Shāstra' in Sanskrit, Prakrit Chinese and English, no research is done on Sinhala 'Chandas Shāstra', thus this research would lay the foundation for this.

Keywords: Chandas, Free verse, Sinhala poetry, Viriths