

THE ORIGIN OF THE NĀḌAGAMA TRADITION IN SRI LANKA

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1. Introduction

The purpose of this study is to analyse the origin of the Nāḍagama 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 Nāḍagama 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 Nāḍagama, are contradictory and should be accordingly clarified.

There are three scholars, Professor Sarachchandra¹ Bishop Edmund Peiris,² and M.H. goonatilleka³ whose attention has recently been focused on this particular issue. However, opinions were presented about the origin of the Nāḍagama even before their theories. The earliest records on the origin of the Nāḍagama were made by D.P.D Alwis⁴ and W. Arthur de Silva⁵ 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 Nāḍagama in Sri Lanka.

1.1 The Nāḍagama tradition

The Nāḍagama was popular on the western coast of Sri Lanka from Halavata (Chilaw) in the North down to Tangalla in the South.⁶ Belonging to the folk tradition, it was a type of drama which had a story set with songs and South Indian Karnatic 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 Nāḍagama performance was serialized, which led to the duration of staging ranging from a fortnight to about a month or two. The Nāḍagama 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 Bahubūṭaya or Kōlama or Kōnangiya (jester), Sellamlamā (literary playful