

THE NATIONS DECLINE

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Rivalries within the royal house aided the Tamils, who, already firmly established in the north of Ceylon, rapidly pushed their borders southwards, and fortified themselves round Anuradhapura. In 1001 they looted and demolished the city. A few years of Tamil dominion, and the once resplendent capital was a waste, for the Tamils destroyed never to restore.

Foreign invasion, civil war, recurrent epidemics of malaria, climatic changes bringing in a decreased rainfall, intellectual and aesthetic exhaustion following a long period of forced productivity, social disorganisation, political decay and government disintegration, all these have been assigned, at one time or another, by different writer, as the causes for the decline and final eclipse of the Sinhalese civilization that centred round Anuradhapura.

While some of these factors undoubtedly played their part in that decline, especially foreign invasion and civil wars, we believe the chief agency which brought about the fall and abandonment of the old Sinhalese Capital was an age-old economic principle, the law of diminishing returns. After a thousand years of intensive occupation, the Anuradhapura region had been gradually transformed from a heavily forested area to vast man-made waste lands. The forests were replaced by scrub-land, and agriculture, as practised by the Sinhalese, came to an end.

For their sustenance the Sinhalese cultivated rice under irrigation, and produced subsidiary food-crops, by clearing a patch of forest. The agronomic system of these two processes, as practised by the Sinhalese, had serious drawbacks.

In spite of an irrigation system which had attained perfection, the methods of rice cultivation tended to impoverish the soil, as no attention was paid to crop-rotation, soil-fertilization and denudation.

It is now held that a single crop of rice removes from an acre of soil 80 lb. of nitrogen, 10 lb. of phosphoric acid and 50 lb. of potash. When two crops are taken from the soil every year, in a thousand years, without returning to it what was taken from it, a stage would eventually have been reached, when rice cultivation as practised by the Sinhalese would have had to come to an end.

The primitive system of raising subsidiary food-crops, practised by the Sinhalese, consisted in clearing and burning a patch of forest in the dry season, and planting it at the season of the beginning of the rains. The drawback to this pre-Aryan agronomic system, which is called 'hena' cultivation, after the Sinhalese word 'hena', is more serious than the first.

When the Sinhalese made Lanka their home, its rich top-soil-accumulations of decayed vegetable matter for centuries, on the surface of the soil—was the most valuable heritage they received. And in their system of cultivation, which is in vogue even today, the Sinhalese paid no attention to the problem of the conservation of this priceless inheritance which Nature had bequeathed to them.

With every downpour, millions and millions of tons of top-soil from the burnt chenas were washed off, into the Indian Ocean and the Bay of Bengal. Nobody paid any attention to it. Why should they? There was plenty of virgin land; if one chena was 'washed off', another could be had almost for the clearing. So with no human hindrance, the erosion went on until the 'blood of the soil' was drained to the ocean. Thus most of the total area available for cultivation must have been lying fallow, when the population was much denser than it is today awaiting reforestation, so that it would be cleared and burned again.

Today, depending on the natural fertility of the region, this process of reforestation takes from fifty to seventy years. If these repeated burnings are continued long enough, a point is eventually reached, where the process of reforestation is retarded, and, instead of woody growth returning to the abandoned chenas, they become overgrown with grass and scrub. When this stage had been reached, agriculture as practised by the Sinhalese was at an end.

Support for this view is furnished in a passage in the historical chronicle, the *Rajavaliya*, the author of which, mourning over the extinction of the Great Dynasty and the decline of the country, makes the significant remark: 'Because the fertility of the land was decreased, the kings who followed were no longer of such consequence as those who went before'.

This naturally did not take place all at once, but slowly, with the diminishing rice-crops and the forest gradually retreating before the advancing scrub. The ancient Sinhalese, surely, must have foreseen what was impending; and many, if not most, of the ceremonies performed in the processes of paddy and chena cultivation that have come down to us from our forefathers represent special appeals to the Deities to send more abundant crops. Archaeological evidence, however, indicates that the Deities did not hearken to these prayers.

The first Aryan civilization of Lanka, after history lasting over the thousand years, vanished and left no trace behind it except the Sacred Bo-tree, the great stupas and the ruins of temples, palaces, tanks and the like. Coming upon the disordered stones of these ruins, once neatly aligned but now separated by writhing roots and overwhelmed by tropical vegetation, one cannot help appreciating, amidst the grandeur that was Anuradhapura, the victory the Sinhalese won over the jungle.

But alas! the Sinhalese civilization was two thousand years too soon. It was two thousand years in advance of scientific agronomy, without which we now know that all victories are temporary. Our forefathers won the jungle, but lost a civilization.

With what jealous subtlety the giant creeper extends its insidious embrace! With inhuman patience the vegetable world strives to re-assert its sway! When the Sinhalese civilization of Anuradhapura disappeared, the jungle immediately re-asserted itself. The Sinhalese walked out, and the jungle walked in.

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