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# **Veiling the modular: literary language and subjective nationalism in Sinhala radio song of Sri Lanka, 1957-1964**

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This article examines ‘intratextuality’ of Sinhala-language radio songs and the socio-historical and institutional forces behind the production of these songs. The purpose of the article is to reflect on the conception of nationalism as elaborated by historian Manu Goswami. According to Goswami, nationalism is a globally transposable ‘module’ that social agents since the mid-nineteenth century have used to assert the uniqueness of their nation. In this article, I argue that this conception is illuminating because of its sensitivity to sub-global or global configurations that factor into the celebration of local particularities. And yet emphasizing the ‘doubled’ form of nationalism as simultaneously local-and-global should not overlook the way in which the particular, in the form of literary language, has the power to veil the global or ‘modular’ formations, the very formations that have set the parameters for celebrating the local. Using three Sinhala radio songs as examples, this article suggests that such veiling can become a crucial feature of ‘subjective’ nationalism. Subjective nationalism refers to the articulations of nationalism made through written and spoken communication and the effects of these discourses on the public consciousness.

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## Introduction

In this article, I examine the literary language of three Sinhala-language radio songs broadcast in Sri Lanka between 1957 and 1964. I also investigate the socio-historical and institutional forces behind the production of these songs. The purpose of the article is to reflect on the conception of nationalism as elaborated by historian Manu Goswami. She contends that nationalism is a globally transposable ‘module’ that social agents since the mid-nineteenth century have used to assert the uniqueness of their nation (Goswami 2002: 770–799). She emphasizes this aspect of nationalism to resuscitate Benedict Anderson’s notion of ‘modular nationalism.’

Anderson’s postulation about modularity had fallen by the wayside after Partha Chatterjee argued in *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (1993) that Anderson’s idea of ‘modular’ nationalism unhelpfully suggested that anti-colonial nationalism of India was only an imitation of the ‘original’ nationalism that western Europeans invented in the nineteenth century. Chatterjee maintained that one crucial reason why Anderson did not comprehend the different nature of nationalism in colonized countries was because Anderson had failed to discern how nationalism came into being in colonized countries *before* the state was a matter of contention. Chatterjee claimed that nationalism was born in colonized countries when native elites asserted that an ‘inner domain’ of national sovereignty existed in cultural realms like language, arts, and family values (Chatterjee 1993:

9). Native elites, in this conception, conceived of the inner domain in relation to the West, but believed the inner domain was forever uncontaminated by the influence of Western colonialism.<sup>1</sup>

In *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (2000), Dipesh Chakrabarty further refuted Anderson’s assertion that nationalism was modular. Similar to Chatterjee’s critique, Chakrabarty suggested that notions like ‘modular nationalism’ were indicative of a larger bias in Western historicism that envisioned the history of modernity through the statement of ‘first in the West, and then elsewhere’ (Chakrabarty 2000: 6). To prove this contention wrong, Chakrabarty explored how the cultural nationalism of Rabindranath Tagore possessed Indian features that could not be discounted as a mere imitation of European cultural nationalism. More specifically, Chakrabarty critically reflected on the term ‘imagination,’ which Benedict Anderson adopted in his phrase ‘imagined communities’ to describe the subjective production of nationalism. The term ‘imagination,’ Chakrabarty argued, remained a ‘mentalist, subject-centered category’ indebted to the European thought of Immanuel Kant, F.W.J. von Schelling, David Hume, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge (Chakrabarty 2000: 175). Yet Tagore’s ‘imagination’ in his poems about Mother India evoked notions of *darshan* (divine sight), a concept with no

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<sup>1</sup> For critiques of Chatterjee’s emphasis on anti-colonial nationalist movements that defined themselves in relation to the West, see Field 2012: 8, 21; and Field 2014: 1043–1058.

clear correlate in the West. Tagore's evocation of the notion of *darshan*, Chakrabarty believed, reflected an 'unconscious [Indian-Hindu] habit' that was not only cognitive but firmly 'sedimented in the [Bengali] language itself' (Chakrabarty 2000: 173). Chakrabarty thus contended that a European bias could be found lurking behind notions like 'modular nationalism' and 'imagination.'

Goswami claims that critiques like those made by Chatterjee and Chakrabarty tend to overstate the particularity of local nationalism in colonized countries. Chatterjee and Chakrabarty, she contends, thus overlook local nationalism's roots in sub-global or global processes (Goswami 2002: 779). Goswami faults Anderson for making the opposite mistake: according to Goswami, Anderson overemphasizes the global nature of modular nationalism and fails to explain in sufficient detail how the circulation of nationalist modules were linked to their local contexts of production (Goswami 2002: 780). Nonetheless, Goswami asserts that Anderson's failure to specify how nationalism became modular in particular places and during specific periods is not reason enough to dismiss the truly transposable (i.e. modular) aspects of nationalism. If one dismisses this fundamental aspect of nationalism, one rejects the fact of the universal spread of nationalism.

In this article, I argue that Goswami overlooks an important feature of subjective nationalism related to the literary language of song. 'Subjective' nationalism refers to the articulations of nationalism made through written and spoken communication and the effects of

these discourses on the public consciousness. 'Objective' nationalism refers to the institutional and socio-historical configurations that give rise to nationalism. I take issue with Goswami's emphasis on the 'doubled' form of modular nationalism. She contends that modular nationalism has a 'doubled' form because it is simultaneously local-and-global and simultaneously subjective-and-objective. As she writes, 'I will emphasize the doubled or the simultaneously universal/particular and objective/subjective character of the nation form' (Goswami 2002: 784).<sup>2</sup> I question Goswami's assertion of 'simultaneity' because it fails to account for the experience of the literary language of song, an experience that is asynchronous, not simultaneous, with an experience of modularity. It is thus, in my judgment, misleading to argue that the objective and *subjective* character of the nation is simultaneously local-and-global.<sup>3</sup> Local literary language, I argue, has the curious power to veil global or 'modular' configurations, the very configurations that have paradoxically set the parameters for celebrating the local. Using three Sinhala radio songs as examples, this article conjectures that such veiling by literary language can become a crucial 'subjective' feature of modular nationalism.

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<sup>2</sup> Goswami may have developed her idea of the 'doubled' nature of nationalism from the work of Roland Robertson. Robertson argues that globalization 'has involved the *simultaneity* and the interpenetration of what are conventionally called the global and the local, or—in more abstract more vein—the universal and the particular' (Robertson 1995: 30, emphasis added).

<sup>3</sup> See Goswami 2002: 771–786.

The idea that language can ‘veil’ global (or sub-global) processes deserves to be further explained before I turn to my case study. First, I do not mean to suggest that literary language of song always casts a shadow over global processes. Sometimes literary language may expose global formations. Second, the idea that language can veil the modular is only a phenomenological speculation. I have not conducted interviews to learn about the reactions of Sri Lankans who heard the original broadcasts of the radio songs analyzed below. Third, the word ‘veil’ may suggest that songwriters at the radio station used literary language to trick audiences into being ignorant of the modular processes underlying the creation of their new songs. I do not believe that the songwriter discussed below intended to use literary language to conceal global processes in an act of subterfuge. But I would argue that most people who heard these songs broadcast on the radio became more immersed in the act of listening to the songs’ language and music than aware of the songs’ underlying modular features, such as the global ideology of musical nationalism, the worldwide establishment of radio stations, or the pan-South Asian trend of hiring poets at radio stations in the mid-twentieth century. If the *subjective* character of modular nationalism is, as Goswami suggests, simultaneously global and local, than it would seem to me that the modular features would need to be experienced immediately with the local characteristics.

#### *Internal and External Factors*

The English-language historiography of post-independence Sri Lanka between

1956 and 1964 overwhelmingly discusses how the Sri Lankan government began to systematically espouse a vision of a majority nation of Sinhala-speaking Buddhists, after S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike became the fourth prime minister in 1956.<sup>4</sup> The vision of a Sinhalese Buddhist nation in Sri Lanka reflected the very constituency who had mobilized to vote Bandaranaike into power. The 1956 election was the first election in Sri Lanka determined by the strength of a nearly unanimous vote by the Sinhalese Buddhist masses. Between 1956 and 1965, the Buddhist rural voter became to a much greater extent the arbiter of Sri Lankan politics (De Silva 2005: 525–526).

Students of modern Sri Lankan history know that Bandaranaike did not only establish the Ministry of Cultural Affairs in 1956 to offer state funds to assist in the revival of Sinhalese art, literature, and Buddhism (Warnapala 1974: 270). Two months after his victory, Bandaranaike also assuaged the vociferous campaigns for ‘Sinhala Only’ and enacted the Official Language Act, which switched the state language from English to Sinhala. The Official Language Act stipulated how to change the language of the bureaucracy to Sinhala within four years and six months (Warnapala 1974: 296).

One fact often omitted from the historiography of this period is that the Official Language Act was passed only one year after Sri Lanka became a member

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<sup>4</sup> For English-language studies of this period, see Wriggins 1960: 228–270, 326–369; Kearney 1964: 125–136; Kearney 1967; Manogaran 1987: 41–49; Dharmadasa 1992: 239–260; Tambiah 1992: 42–65; Roberts 1994: 297–316; DeVotta 2004: 73–142; De Silva 2005: 510–532; and Wickramasinghe 2006: 186–187.

of the United Nations. The internal political and sociolinguistic transformation of Sri Lanka in the late 1950s was not isolated from external forces, such as what Immanuel Wallerstein describes as the ‘gravitational force’ to join the world-system of nation states (Wallerstein 1997: 96). For most countries, joining the United Nations was impetus to maintain certain naturalized features of nation states. Within the world-system, for example, every nation would necessarily comprise a majority that possessed a national culture, history, economy, territory, and language. In Sri Lanka’s case, S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike likely believed that elevating the language of the majority, Sinhala, to the status of official language was as progressive a step as nationalizing the economy.

Within the country, Bandaranaike’s staunch campaigns for Sinhalese Buddhist culture appealed to a wide cross-section of the Sinhala-educated population, which included Buddhist monks, Ayurvedic physicians, village headmen, teachers who worked in Sinhala-language schools, landed peasants, youth educated in the Sinhala language, as well as Sinhalese journalists, minor officials, notaries, petition writers, and small businessmen (Vittachi 1958: 19; Warnapala 1974: 243; Manor 1989: 250; Roberts 1994: 298). The songwriter and composer discussed in this article hailed from these segments of the population, predominantly a middle-class group that scholars have designated in English as the ‘rural elite,’ ‘revivalist elite,’ or ‘rural intelligentsia.’

The political climate of the 1950s that privileged the Sinhalese Buddhist rural intelligentsia (and discriminated against

non-Sinhalese Buddhists) set the stage for Sinhala music reform at the state radio station, ‘Radio Ceylon,’ then, the most powerful and widespread form of electronic media circulating on the island. Although General Directors of the station since the 1930s had instituted various projects to improve the quality of musical programming, there emerged in the 1950s a new emphasis on developing *Sinhala* music. Station officials hired Sinhalese lyricists, composers, and vocalists to create a unique genre of music that came to be known as *sarala gā* (Sinhala: light song). *Sarala gā* is often translated into English as *light-classical* song because of its orchestra of sitars, violins, tablas, flutes, sarods, and guitars (Sheeran 1999: 972).

Although *sarala gā* is a Sri Lankan genre of Sinhala radio song, similar musical changes were happening at the national radio station in India. The use of the Sinhala word *sarala* (light) most likely stems from the category of ‘light music’ created by B.V. Keskar at All India Radio (AIR). Keskar was India’s Minister of Information and Broadcasting between 1950 and 1962. He used the English phrase ‘light music’ to name a genre of music that could counterbalance popular film music. In 1953, Keskar created ‘light music units’ at various AIR stations that hired classical musicians and poets to create two radio songs a week (Lelyveld 1994: 121).

Although it is well known within Sri Lankan studies how Bandaranaike’s Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism favored the Sinhalese, discriminated against Sri Lanka’s minorities, and ignited ethnic conflict among the Sinhalese and Sri

Lankan Tamils, Anglophone scholars have only begun to investigate Sinhala radio song composed in the immediate aftermath of Bandaranaike's victory and enactment of the Official Language Act. Anne Sheeran explores 'the gradual dominance of Sinhala interest at Radio Ceylon' and argues that a great deal of the discourses that the radio station produced about Sinhala music in the 1950s focused on the idea that the Sinhalese lacked their own unique style of music (Sheeran 1997: 178–182). Jim Sykes suggests that when the Sinhalese elites at the radio station fashioned *sarala gī* they not only excluded minority communities but also the music of the *berava*, the low caste of Sinhalese Buddhist ritual musicians who performed a sophisticated form of music and dance (Sykes 2011: 179). According to Sykes, elites at the radio station tacitly discriminated against the *berava* and propagated the idea that the music of the *berava* was a form of Sinhalese 'culture' but not a suitable source for new Sinhalese 'music' (Sykes 2011: 181–182). Sykes and Sheeran's studies are important because they emphasize the discourses and practices of exclusion that accompanied the creation of Sinhala *sarala gī*. And yet they are insufficient because they do not provide translations of *sarala gī* songs produced at this time. Lacking analyses of the texts of Sinhala *sarala gī* at a pivotal moment in the history of Sri Lanka is not only problematic for Sri Lankan studies but also for scholars interested in the comparative study of cultural production in twentieth-century South Asia.

*Song Lyrics, Radio Station Poets, and Musical Nationalism*

Throughout the early-twentieth century experts in the Sinhala language had little social mobility. The profession of Sinhala teaching, for instance, was a low-pay, low-prestige occupation. Conversely, fluency in the colonizer's language, English, held promise for employment in government, politics, medicine, and law. English was the language used in the law of the country as well as court proceedings and official documents. One could not send a telegram without translating from Sinhala to English. Licenses, permits, and applications were filled out in English. Further, a complaint to the police had to be documented and signed in English (Kearney 1967: 59). Despite the importance of English for social mobility and public affairs, nearly ninety percent of the population could not speak or write in English with literacy, defined as the ability to write a short letter and read the reply (Kearney 1967: 56).

In this sociolinguistic environment, Sinhala song lyrics for gramophone records were commercial texts that lacked literary cachet. In other words, Sinhalese lyricists and composers did not think of song lyrics as an artistic medium for an 'elevated' form of poetic expression. During the first four decades of the twentieth century, Sinhalese lyricists worked for producers of the growing Sri Lankan gramophone industry. Yet these lyricists' names did not appear on gramophone discs, which suggests the lack of importance accorded to songwriters. Further, gramophone producers generally believed that the appeal of a song depended not on memorable song lyrics but on the artful selection of already-composed Hindi or Tamil film melodies

(Ariyaratne 1986: 55). Sinhala song lyrics functioned like a ‘lacquer’ applied to the preexisting rhythm and melodic contour of the already-composed film melodies (Ariyaratne 1991: 2).

The 1950s was the decade in South Asia in which state and institutional politics became inextricable from linguistic nationalism. In southern South Asia, we find this most evident in the Tamil and Telugu populations in south India and the Sinhalese in Sri Lanka.<sup>5</sup> It is not a surprise, then, that during the 1950s the national radio station in Sri Lanka, Radio Ceylon, started to hire professional Sinhalese songwriters to compose *literary* songs in the Sinhala language. In 1953, Radio Ceylon appointed a commission that recommended hiring ‘scriptwriters’ (songwriters) for the Sinhala-language channel of the radio station (Karunanayake 1990: 116). According to my interpretation, only after the radio station began to give stable jobs to Sinhala poets who were tasked with writing literary songs, did the Sinhalese public began to consider the lyrics of Sinhala *sarala gā* as a form of literary expression.

Hired in 1954, Madawale Ratnayake (1929–1997) was one of the first to hold the position of scriptwriter. At this time, Ratnayake had not yet published his popular novel *Akkara Paha (Five Acres of Land, 1959)*, but he was known by the Sinhala reading public as early as 1948 for the poems he regularly contributed to

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<sup>5</sup> On Tamil and Telugu linguistic nationalism, see Ramaswamy 1997 and Mitchell 2009. One should not, however, assume that affective ties to language always become linked to institutional politics in South Asia. Regarding this point and the case of the Punjabi language, see Mir 2010: 185.

popular Sinhala poetry journals, like *Dēdunna (The Rainbow)*, and *Mivadaya (Beehive)*. M.J. Perera, director general of Radio Ceylon between 1952 and 1956, recalls when the station hired new employees like Ratnayake to improve the Sinhalese channel (‘service’) of Radio Ceylon:

When I held the position of director general at Radio Ceylon, we worked to raise the standard of the Sinhalese service. We created new positions and Ratnayake was a suitable candidate...He joined others that were hired to develop the Sinhalese service like Dunstan De Silva (music), P. Walikala (drama), and Karunaratna Abeysekera [broadcaster, scriptwriter] (Perera 1997: 67).<sup>6</sup>

In addition to composing songs, Ratnayake’s duty was to review all song texts before they were broadcast. If he felt the lyrics of a particular song were inappropriate, he would request the scriptwriter to edit the words and resubmit for review.<sup>7</sup>

Amid mounting evidence, it appears that radio stations throughout South Asia were new sources of patronage to poets in the twentieth century.<sup>8</sup> More comparative data, however, is required to confirm this hypothesis. Radio stations hired poets to write songs, produce programs of original songs, provide guidance on how to draw on the literary tradition of the regional language, and ‘raise the standards’ of modern song in the regional language. In

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<sup>6</sup> All translations are by the author unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>7</sup> Sunil Ariyaratne interview, March 25, 2012.

<sup>8</sup> The film industries were another source of patronage. This issue will not be discussed here.



English, these jobs were called ‘scriptwriters,’ ‘producers,’ and ‘advisers.’ Consider a few examples outside of Sri Lanka: in the 1930s, the Bengali poet Kazi Nazrul Islam composed songs for All-India Radio, Calcutta (Chakravarty 1968: 39). In 1942, All-India Radio in Delhi hired the Urdu poet Miraji as a scriptwriter (Patel 2002: 61). In 1950, the Hindi poet Bhagwati Charan Verma served as an advisor in Hindi to the All-India Radio in Lucknow (Shukla 1994: 33).<sup>9</sup> In 1956, the Kannada poet Dattareya Ramachandra Bendre began to work as an adviser for the Dharwad station in Karnataka (Amur 1994: 15).

Ratnayake’s first radio show was entitled *Jana Gāyanā* (*Folk Singing*). As he would later explain in his book of songs, Ratnayake attempted to use folk songs, considered unsophisticated by urbanites at the time, as a cultured source for an evening radio show:<sup>10</sup>

*Jana Gāyanā* consisted of five radio programs based on Sinhala folk songs. In some of these broadcasts, the radio program consisted of several sections. Some were limited to a half hour like our first show,

‘Ṭikiri Liya’ (Village Damsel)... We experimented with the tunes of folk songs and wove a storyline in between songs...to bring folk song to the listeners. In the style of *churnika* [prose sentence that expound on the purport of Buddhist *gātha*<sup>11</sup>], I joined the songs to each other in a story. This was part of my attempt to preserve the values of the village and rural life. (Ratnayake 1992: 9)

In 1955, the Sinhala press criticized *Jana Gāyanā* for ‘destroying’ folk music and so Ratnayake stopped the program (Ratnayake 1977: 9–10). Ratnayake teamed up with composer W.D. Amaradeva in 1957 to restart the show. It met with critical acclaim (Ratnayake 1977: 10). Arguably, the populist shift in politics in 1956 created favorable conditions for the positive reception of Ratnayake’s attempt to ‘preserve the values of the village and rural life.’

From a broader perspective, Ratnayake’s ‘musical nationalism’<sup>12</sup> partook in an ideological movement spreading among musical elites in South Asia at the time.

<sup>9</sup> Srilal Shukla writes, ‘All India Radio became Akashvani in independent India. It did not mean a change in nomenclature only, but an effort to bring about a qualitative change. Many eminent Hindi writers were appointed as either Hindi advisers or producers. This began with the appointment of Shri Sumitra Nandan Pant’ (Shukla 1994: 32–33).

<sup>10</sup> Ratnayake’s fascination with folklore was not unprecedented. Prior to independence, Deva Surya Sena had made attempts in the 1920s and 1930s to perform Sinhala folk songs on the radio and for British audiences (Sykes 2011: 179). Ratnayake’s project was different from Sena’s for two reasons: (1) Ratnayake’s efforts were part of a broader state-sanctioned project in post-colonial Sri Lanka, and (2) Ratnayake used Sinhala folklore as a source for new Sinhala-language radio songs.

<sup>11</sup> Verse from the Pali canon of Theravada Buddhism.

<sup>12</sup> I use the term ‘musical nationalism’ to refer to the incorporation of folk elements into art music to evoke national sentiment, preserve tradition, and venerate a disappearing rural way of life (Turino 2000: 190).



Figure 1: Ratnayake (center) and Amaradeva (right) at Radio Ceylon (courtesy of Nandana Karunanayake)

Musical nationalism came to Sri Lanka mainly via one cosmopolitan individual: S.N. Ratanjankar. Ratanjankar was the principal of the Bhatkhande Music College in Lucknow. Ratanjankar had first visited Sri Lanka in 1949 to audition Sinhalese musicians for radio posts. In April of 1952, M.J. Perera, the general director of Radio Ceylon, invited Ratanjankar back to the island to audition musicians and advise the station on how to best fashion a Sri Lankan national music. Ratanjankar gave ‘grades’ to 716 musicians who came to the auditions (Karunanayake 1990: 292).

During his visit, Ratanjankar gave a lecture in English at the Royal Asiatic Society titled, ‘The Place of Folk Songs in the Development of Music.’ He expounded on the antiquity and purity of folk music. And he encouraged Sinhalese musicians to create a modern song based on Sinhalese folk sources. Ratanjankar believed true Sri Lankan music was found in the villages. He appealed to composers and songwriters to create a refined modern music based on folk music:

The proper DESHI SANGEET [*sic*, local music] of Lanka is in its villages. The Vannams, Astakas, the Sivupadas, the Stotras, the Pirits are the proper DESHI SANGEET of Lanka. They are still retained in their traditional forms. But much refined music can be built upon the basis of these. I have already pointed out one or two instances, which supply the basis for full-grown melodies that can be treated and composed on artistic lines. (Ratanjankar 1952: 119)

That Ratnayake and Amaradeva took Ratanjankar’s recommendations very seriously will become evident in the next section of this article, which reveals that they created radio songs based precisely on the texts Ratanjankar mentioned in his speech: *vannama* (defined below), *sivupada* (folk song based on quatrains with end-rhyme) and *strōtra* (panegyric).

Ratanjankar’s romantic nationalism and policy-like recommendations struck a deep chord with Ratnayake and Amaradeva. Ratnayake noted the importance of Ratanjankar’s suggestions and chided those who were not up to the task:

A few people understood the importance of Ratanjankar’s speech. In them a desire was born to create compositions that preserve national traits of the Sinhalese. Others blindly lost their way. We wonder whether that was because they did not have the capacity to carry out a systematic research into the syllables of folk poetry. (Ratnayake 1977: 9–10)

W.D. Amaradeva also spoke highly about Ratanjankar’s message:

S.N. Ratanjankar, who came to Sri Lanka to audition musicians for the radio, gave a speech about thirty-five years ago. It stated that we, the Sinhalese, have not created a complete musical form that we can call our own...We possess a folk music that possesses native features that ought to be fused into Sinhala music. Using Sinhala folk music to create a Sinhalese musical form would partake in a time-honored praxis of musicians around the globe...There is no other form of music as suitable as folk song to please our people who have grown up in the Buddhist religion and are used to a more moderate way of life. (Amaradeva 1989: 65–66)

Ratnayake reminisced about the kinds of folk genres he drew upon for the show *Jana Gāyanā*:

W.D. Amaradeva returned to the island after training in North Indian music. I then restarted the program with his assistance. We modeled our songs on folk song. The first one we created was ‘Ran Van Karal Salē’ [The Golden Paddy Sways] for the radio program ‘Tikiri Liya.’ In later radio programs...we would showcase songs influenced by the *vannama* [this genre is discussed below], *bali kavi* [this genre is also discussed below], *goyam kavi* [sung poetry for farming], and *nelum kavi* [sung poetry for cultivation]. (Ratnayake 1977: 10–11)

### *Veiling the Modular*

In his speech at the Royal Asiatic Society, Ratanjankar singled out certain forms of Sinhala music that he deemed worthy sources for modern song: *vannama*, *sivupada*, and *strotra*. In this section, I

explore how Ratnayake and Amaradeva modernized these forms by using them as sources for radio songs.

One fascinating feature in these new songs is the relationship between the new song texts and the folk sources that Ratnayake and Amaradeva drew upon. Ratnayake and Amaradeva’s poetic meters, lexicon, and grammar may have come straight from Sinhala folk or classical poetry, but they opted to create songs that commented on the meanings of the original texts to varying degrees. They sometimes made a slight twist to the original and other times replaced it altogether. The songs and poems studied in this article would thus be instances of what Michael Riffaterre calls *intratextuality*, ‘where the intertext is partly encoded within the text and conflicts with it because of stylistic or semantic incompatibilities’ (Riffaterre 1980: 627). I believe that it is through the use of intratextuality that the language in these songs could effectively mask these songs’ modular conditions of possibility.

The first genre Ratnayake mentions in the quote above is the *vannama*. *Vannama* are songs originally commissioned by King Narendrasinghe, the last Sinhalese King of Kandy (r. 1707–1737).<sup>13</sup> The King solicited a Buddhist monk to compose poetic verse. He also ‘hired’ a Tamil musician to set these verses to South Indian raga-based melodies (Kulatillake 1976: 23–24). Many of the *vannama* texts describe the behavior of animals. Others

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<sup>13</sup> It is unclear why Ratnayake considered the *vannama*, created for a royal court, to be a sub-category of *jana gī* (folk song).

narrate stories of deities like Sakra, Ishwara, and Ganesh.<sup>14</sup>

As Ratnayake stated in the excerpt above, the first song aired on the *Jana Gāyanā* program was entitled ‘Ran Van Karal Salē’ (The Golden Paddy Sways). Ratnayake produced the song from a particular *vannama* known as the *turaṅga vannama* (*vannama* of the horse). The original text tells how Prince Siddhartha mounted the back of his horse Kanthaka, departed from the royal castle, jumped across the Anoma river, and renounced the world to become the Buddha.

Beyond its Buddhist theme, the text of the *turaṅga vannama* also has a unique rhythmic feature, known as *tānama* in the Sinhala language. *Tānama* is a spoken rhythmic pattern using syllables like ‘tat,’ ‘ta,’ ‘nat,’ ‘ne,’ and ‘na.’ In the case of the *turaṅga vannama*, the particular pattern is ‘tat tat ta nat ta ne na / tat tat ta nat ta ne na / tat tat ta nat ta ne na / tā nā.’ When recited, it creates a ten-beat pattern notated in the figure below.



Figure 2: ten-beat *tānama*

It is well known that Ratnayake sought to evoke this *tānama* as the rhythmic structure in his song lyrics. This is demonstrated by the comparison in the figure below between the rhythm of the *tānama* of the *turaṅga vannama* (meas. 1–

4) and the rhythm of Ratnayake’s song text (meas. 5–8):<sup>15</sup>



Figure 3: Comparison between *tānama* of the *turaṅga vannama* and Ratnayake’s song text

The use of the *tānama* as the rhythmic basis for the song text calls to mind what Riffaterre terms ‘connectives,’ or ‘words and phrases indicating on the one hand, a difficulty—an obscure or incomplete utterance in the text—that only an intertext can remedy; and, on the other hand, pointing to the way to where the solution must be sought’ (Riffaterre 1990: 58). In this case, one could extend Riffaterre’s notion of connectives to include additional linguistic devices like the *tānama*’s distinctive spoken rhythmic pattern. Ratnayake used the *tānama* as a ‘connective’ that would point the listeners of the new song to the older text. I would conjecture that for the radio listeners, such local features veiled the modular or global features behind the production of this song, such as the global ideology of musical-nationalism, the worldwide establishment of radio stations, and the pan-South Asian trend of hiring poets at radio stations.

Ratnayake retained the *tānama* of the *turaṅga vannama* but the meaning of the lyrics in ‘Ran Van Karal Salē’ departed

<sup>14</sup> These pieces were originally vocal compositions. The king’s court musicians, however, used the rhythmic texts as the basis for a new Kandyan dance style that had roots in the Sinhalese ritual dance, the *kohomba kankariya*.

<sup>15</sup> Amaradeva intensified the effect of Ratnayake’s lyrics by employing the melody putatively composed by the Tamil musician commissioned by King Narendrasinghe. This melody can be heard in the first three lines of the song lyric.

from the *turaṅga vannama*'s theme. The text of the *turaṅga vannama* depicts an episode in Siddhartha's story of renunciation. Ratnayake's song, in contrast, portrays a village in the midst of a prosperous paddy harvest. In the first stanza, one finds a simile that conceptually links ripened paddy with a devout Buddhist woman. Because the ripened paddy is heavy it will not sway in the wind. The steady mind of the Buddhist woman is like the ripened paddy because it will not waver when she observes *sil*, the precepts of Buddhism.<sup>16</sup> Below is a translation of the first three stanzas in 'Ran Van Karal Salē':

The golden paddy sways  
With profound calm  
Like the woman who observes the  
precepts.

In the gentle breeze,  
The paddy husks shake, and the  
village  
Blossoms in happiness.

Because of overflowing reservoirs  
and rivers,  
The paddy fields are flowering  
Sadness drifts away<sup>17</sup>

Amaradeva's musical setting of this stanza further enhanced the textual imagery because he wrote the music for a

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<sup>16</sup> Observing *sil* typically begins with a visit to the temple and the recitation of the *pan sil* (the five precepts). The day is spent listening to *bana kata* (sermons), reading *gātha* (Pali verses) or *śloka* (aphorisms), and practicing meditation. While observing *sil* one should not sit on chairs, lie on bed, or chat with others. People who observe *sil* wear all white clothes and refrain from eating meat.

<sup>17</sup> The song can be heard here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CUBgqxwoaio>  
The Sinhala text and the full text of the show 'Tikira Liyā' can be found in Ratnayake 1992: 10–29.

group of vocalists whose voices called to mind real-life villagers. Amaradeva also included an *udākki* folk drum in the orchestration to reinforce the mental association with the village.

From a local political perspective, 'Ran Van Karal Salē' was well suited to Sri Lanka post-1956 because the imagery articulated populist and nationalist sentiment. Ratnayake referenced ancient man-made 'overflowing reservoirs,' flowering paddy fields, and alluded to the existence of Buddhist temples where a woman observed the Buddhist precepts. The imagery of tank, temple, and paddy field (*vāva*, *dāgāba*, and *yāya*) is striking because Sinhalese cultural nationalists popularized these three elements as authentic markers of Sinhalese culture in the twentieth century (Spencer 1990: 286). Tank, temple, and paddy field represented the ethos of Sinhalese culture in the nationalist imagination.

Ratnayake and Amaradeva did not only create radio songs from the *vannama*. They also drew upon *sivupada* (sung quatrains with end-rhyme) and *strōtra* (panegyric), two genres that Ratanjankar, in his influential speech at the Royal Asiatic Society, had singled out as folk music suitable for modern song. For instance, Ratnayake wrote 'Bamareku Āvayi' based on *sivupada* verse recited for rituals to propitiate deities and ward off bad planetary influence. Ratnayake wrote 'Min Dada Hī Sara' to experiment with the language and meaning of a fifteenth century *strōtra* (Sinhala panegyric). Let us now examine how the intratextuality in the literary language of these two songs could veil the global forces behind the song's production.

In 1964, Ratnayake and Amaradeva's song 'Bamareku Āvayi' (A Bee Came) aired on Ratnayake's new radio program 'Swara Varna' (Tone Colors). The song lyrics in 'Bamareku Āvayi' called to mind poetry sung in village rituals that propitiated deities, especially the *kohomba kankariya* ritual, performed to appease deities believed to reside in the Sri Lankan city of Kandy.<sup>18</sup> More specifically, it evoked one comedic interval of the *kohomba kankariya* known as the *guruge mālāva* (garland of the teacher) (Herath 1997: 234). Here, a dancer would act as a guru from South India who spoke with a Tamil accent. Another dancer, or drummer, would play the straight man, a Sinhalese person who asked the man questions (Reed 2010: 63). Below are the stanzas from the *guruge mālāva* that inspired Ratnayake to write 'Bamareku Āvayi':

ahase gosin ahase	sāngavunādō
polove gosin vāli yaṭa	sāngavunādō
mūde gosin rala yaṭa	sāngavunādō
leda kala dēvatā kotanaka	giyādō

ahasē gosin ahasē sāngavunat	<b>varen</b>
polowē gosin vāli yaṭa sāngavunat	<b>varen</b>
mūde gosin rala yaṭa sāngavunat	<b>varen</b>
leda kala devata kotānaka giyat	<b>varen</b> <sup>19</sup>

Did you go hide in the sky?  
 Did you go hide under the earth?  
 Did you go hide under a wave in the sea?  
 Deity of sickness, where did you go?

Although you hide in the sky, come here  
 Although you hide under ground, come here  
 Although you hide under a sea wave,  
 come here

<sup>18</sup> On *kohomba kankariya*, see Reed 2010: 23–73; Dissanayake 1988; and Dissanayake 1998.

<sup>19</sup> Text of the *guruge mālāva* cited in Herath 1997: 234.

Deity of sickness, wherever you go,  
 come here

When we compare the diction with the song lyrics of Ratnayake's 'Bamareku Āvayi,'

bamareku āvayi nirita	digēya
hada pārūvayi miyuru	rasēya
mal paravūvayi sōken	bōva
kañdulu gālūvayi elō	gābēya

sīta himē lenakaṭa	pivisuṇādō
āta epiṭa giri kulakaṭa	giyādō
māta mepiṭa mē hadehima	lagīdō
dāsa aṇḍuru vī mā tani	vuṇādō

salamin sumudu poḍi attaṭu miyuru saren  
 nala mudu suvaṇḍa vindagannaṭa giyat  
**varen**  
 bala biṇḍa damā hiru yanaviṭa avaragiren  
 balamin pipuṇu mal pāni bonu risiva  
**varen**<sup>20</sup>

it becomes clear that Ratnayake evoked the *kohomba kankariya* stanzas in two fundamental ways. First, Ratnayake crafted the song as a *sivupada* (quatrain with end rhyme). Second, his song lyric employed the same grammatical constructions found in the recited poetry like the literary question marker, -dō, which I have bolded in both examples above, and the colloquial imperative word for 'come here,' *varen*, also in bold in the two excerpts above. Further analysis reveals that the diction of the song simultaneously evoked other village rituals like the *bali* ritual, performed to minimize or ward off bad planetary influence (Obeyesekere 1984: 46).

Consider the suffix 'ēya' at the end of lines one, two, and four:

bamareku āvayi nirita	digēya
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<sup>20</sup> Text cited in Ratnayake 1977: 68.

hada pāruvayi miyuru      rasēya  
mal paravūvayi sōken      bōva  
kaṇḍulu gālūvayi elō      gābēya

Noting this particular suffix, composer W.D. Amaradewa writes,

Most of the songs of the radio program ‘Swara Varna’ were composed according to folk materials. Madawale Ratnayake has penned the song lyrics of ‘Bamareku Āvayi’ closely aligned with Sinhala folk poetry. Here he has been influenced by the *bali* ritual. That is why one finds the diction of this ritual in the song. ‘Digēya,’ ‘rasēya’ etc. are examples of this...It is clear that he is drawing on folklore. (Amaradeva 2007: 52–53)

The meaning of the text added an additional layer of complexity. Similar to the way in which the song ‘Ran Van Karal Salē’ simultaneously evoked the formal features of the *tānama* of the *turaṅga vannama* but departed from the text’s original meaning, Ratnayake’s ‘Bamareku Āvayi’ was not about appealing to gods to avoid astrological danger. It was, rather, reminiscent of Sinhala folk poems in which a bee and a flower symbolized a man and woman. The song was an allegory about a woman who is pleasurable ‘stung’ by a man but now ‘withers’ in sadness because he has left her. Below is a translation of the refrain:

A bee came from the southwest  
Stung the heart with the sweet *rasa*.  
Now the flower withers from sadness.  
Tears overflow and I feel like I am  
in another world<sup>21</sup>

Amaradeva’s orchestration for ‘Bamareku Āvayi’ supported Ratnayake’s objective to create more folk-based radio songs: in addition to violins, sitar, guitar, and tabla, he employed the *raban*, a traditional Sinhalese percussion instrument. The *raban* performed on the chorus while the tabla played on the two verses. The sound of the *raban* like that of the *udākki* for ‘Ran Van Karal Salē’ conjured ideas about Sinhalese village culture.

If the intertexts of Ratnayake and Amaradeva’s ‘Bamareku Āvayi’ were *sivupada* quatrains from the *kohomba kankariya* and *bali* rituals, the source for the song ‘Min Dada Hī Sara’ was a fifteenth-century *strōtra*, or praise poem, entitled *Pārakumba Sirita* (*Account of King Parākramabāhu VI*, c. 1415). Although the author is unknown, scholars believe that he was a poet in the court of King Parakramabahu VI (Wikramasinghe 1970). Consecrated in 1411, Parakramabahu was the last king to unite the entire island under the sovereignty of one Sinhalese king. The poem comprised one hundred and forty quatrains, many of which were meant to be recited along with drums and other instruments used at the court to accompany dancers (Godakumbura 2013: 222).

*Pārakumba Sirita* is narrated almost exclusively from the standpoint of an omniscient narrator who elaborately extols King Parakramabahu’s life.<sup>22</sup> Stanzas 127 through 129, however, are exceptions because they are told from the perspective of the king’s courtesan. In stanza 129, she

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<sup>21</sup> Text cited in Ratnayake 1977: 68.

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

pleads with the king to pay her a visit in the evening:

bandā min dada mada aravindā  
saralā sara yāne  
mandā nila turaṅguṭa negemindā  
viyovaga nan vāne  
chandā nalalesa viya neta nindā  
noladimi tani yāne  
kāndā vare pārakum naranindā  
sakisaṅda saṅda pāne

Hoisting the fish flag, and preparing  
the bow with the lotus arrow,  
Cupid comes on the horse of soft  
breezes fanning the fire of  
separation.  
The moon is like fire. I could not  
sleep with my eyes closed all alone  
on the bed.  
Good friend, please summon King  
Parakramabahu here in the  
moonlight.<sup>23</sup>

The stanza details the courtesan's romantic frustration. The cupid and his equipment are metaphors for her erotic love. The cupid hoists his flag (*min dada*), prepares his 'lotus-arrow' (*mada aravindā*), and rides into the courtesan's room on the horse of gentle breeze (*mandā nila turangu*). The lotus arrow has pierced her heart, i.e., she has now fallen for King Parakramabahu. She tells her friend (*sakisaṅda*) to summon the king (*pārakum naranindā*) to visit her at night. And she blames her frustrating love experience on the breeze and moon because they make her burn with love. Although the cool breeze is usually a relief from the hot evening, it exacerbates her burning feelings of lust. The moon comes to symbolize her burning love: she complains

'the moon is like fire' (*chandā nalalesa viya*).

Ratnayake and Amaradeva based the song 'Min Dada Hī Sara' (The Cupid's Arrow, 1964) on this particular stanza. Whereas in 'Ran Van Karal Salē' and 'Bamareku Āvayi' Ratnayake evoked the formal features of the older text but departed from the text's original semantic content, in 'Min Dada Hī Sara,' he does the opposite. He abandons the strictures of the original stanza's formal features but embraces the semantic content of the original. One thus finds a similar scenario of the courtesan in *Pārakumba Sirita*. Consider the refrain:

mindada hī sara vādī sālena hada  
nanvana duk gī obaṭa āhenavada  
chandana mal aturā āti yahanāṭa  
kanda kapā pāyan ran pun saṅda<sup>24</sup>

Do you hear my sad song  
From my heart that quivers from the  
cupid's arrow?  
The sandalwood flowers are  
scattered on the bed  
Oh moon, please rise beyond the  
hill!

Amaradeva contends that Sinhalese listeners grew to love this song although they may have not known the literal meaning of some of the song lyric's fifteenth-century poetic lexicon. Amaradeva suggests that the phonetic sounds from stanza 129 in *Pārakumba Sirita* had its own unique power to attract listeners:

The song 'Min Dada Hī Sara' remains popular. It features Ratnayake's poem and my composition and voice. When the

<sup>23</sup> Translated by Wikramasinghe (1970: 284).

<sup>24</sup> Cited in Ratnayake 1977: 58.



song was broadcast on the radio some people did not know the meaning of ‘mindada’ [cupid’s flag]. Yet this did not prevent the song from becoming popular. That is why I have expressed the idea that the sound of the words, rather than the song’s meaning, made the song appealing to listeners...When I was composing music to the song lyrics I could hear the sound patterns of the lamentation of separation from the *Pārakumba Sirita*. (Amaradeva 1997: 118)

### Conclusion

Bearing in mind Goswami’s emphasis on the transposable features of nationalism, I would like to conclude by further exploring how Ratnayake and Amaradeva’s goals were shared by ‘contemporaries’ in south India despite the fact that Ratnayake and Amaradeva had had no direct contact with these contemporaries. Commonalities, for instance, exist with the composers who participated in the Tamil Music Movement of the 1930s and 40s. Like Amaradeva and Ratnayake, the composers of the Tamil Music Movement desired to create music for their region’s majority population by privileging the language of song as the site of cultural authenticity. Just as Radio Ceylon hired songwriters and composers like Ratnayake and Amaradeva to compose Sinhala-language songs for the Sinhalese majority, so did Raja Sir Annamalai Chettiar spearhead a movement to musically represent the Tamil-speaking majority of Tamil Nadu by giving large cash awards to composers who won Tamil-language songwriting contests (Weidman 2006: 168). As Ratnayake and

Amaradeva sought to ‘raise the standards’ of Sinhala music, Tamil composers like Papanasam Sivan, Dhandapani Desikar, and Mariappa Swamy hoped to put Tamil songs on par with the ‘classical’ Telugu and Sanskrit compositions that had become central to the Karnatic music canon of the twentieth century. Further, the participants of the Tamil Icai (Music) Conference of 1943 tried to assert the value of Tamil culture by resolving to make forty percent of radio broadcasted songs in Tamil (Weidman 2006: 168). Similarly, in 1957, Dunstan De Silva, the officer in charge of Sinhalese music at Radio Ceylon, banned the broadcast of Sinhala songs that imitated melodies from English, Tamil, or Hindi tunes (Ariyaratne 1997: 99, 153).

Significant contrasts do exist, however, between *sarala gī* and the Tamil Music Movement. Caste politics served as a catalyst for the Tamil Music Movement. That is, many advocates of the Tamil Music Movement framed it as a crusade against Brahmin exclusivity. Their goal was to integrate Tamil songs into an exclusive canon of Telugu and Sanskrit compositions that the Brahmins population deemed ‘classical’ (Weidman 2006: 180–183). In Sri Lanka, tacit discrimination against the *berava* caste may have factored into why songwriters at Radio Ceylon excluded this music from the folkloric sources they used to fashion *sarala gī*. But caste politics was not a catalyst for *sarala gī* to the extent it was for the Tamil Music Movement. Ratnayake and Amaradeva, by contrast, had no intentions to integrate Sinhala songs into an existing canon previously created by the highest Sinhalese caste (the Govigama). No such

body of compositions existed. In the 1950s and 1960s, Ratnayake and Amaradeva created a new canon that many Sinhalese

people today consider as the ‘classical’ music of Sri Lanka. 🙏

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