

How agrarian utopianism shapes Sri Lanka

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The idealised “village” was at the core of the people’s struggle last year. As a fundamental of Sri Lankan nationalist thought, agrarian utopianism helps to explain the country’s past and imagine a different future.



A Buddhist temple on a road to Galle, circa 1890. The agrarian utopia captured in the trope of *vavai*, *pansalai*, *gamai*, *yayai* (tank, temple, village and paddy field) became a concrete political project in post-independence Sri Lanka. Embedded in this is the case for a radical devolution of power.

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In Sri Lanka, during last year’s *aragalaya*, or people’s struggle, the concept of the *gama* or village in Sinhala, came to the forefront of political discourse. Gota Go Gama on the Galle Face Green in Colombo, demanding that President Gotabaya Rajapaksa resign amid a dire economic crisis, not only became the main site of resistance but also came to represent an anarchistic revolutionary movement. Many other Gota Go villages emerged elsewhere in the country as well.

At the height of the *aragalaya*, Colombo’s Gota Go Gama site had its own library, a makeshift movie theater called Tear Gas Cinema, and a “people’s university” where local academics engaged in conversations and debates. There were even attempts at farming on the site. A food supply chain emerged almost organically to keep the protesters fed. Gota Go Gama began to function as an organic and self-sufficient entity, almost like a syndicate. Despite the movement’s failure to articulate a concrete vision for the future of the country, many protesters at the site were utopians. They longed for a future free of corruption, racism, sexism and even capitalism, although they had no clear plan to achieve this ideal. Thus, the Gota Go Village – and it is of great importance that it was a “village” – was anarchistic, utopian and also syndicalist.

The village has long been a powerful trope in the Sinhalese Buddhist consciousness, and was presented as such in Sri Lanka’s nationalist political vision throughout the 20th century and till today. It represents an idealised, utopian past that Sri Lankans must strive to recover. Arguably, this bucolic utopianism has been a catalyst for politico-historical progress in the country. The *aragalaya* – which was also, after a fashion, “village”-centred – can be understood as part of this trend.

Utopianism in the Sri Lankan case has been reoriented to strive towards a nationalist purpose – a nationalist and Sinhalese Buddhist utopia. The much-critiqued concept of *gama*, *pansala*, *wava*, *yaya* – or the village, temple, irrigation tank and paddy field – is the quintessential summation of utopianism in the Sri Lankan context. The social anthropologist Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah, in

Buddhism Betrayed?, claims that this concept emerges from the work of Martin Wickramasinghe, a leading Sri Lankan Sinhalese Buddhist writer of the twentieth century. Along with Wickramasinghe, the cultural critic and philosopher Ananda Coomaraswamy should also be considered a leading proponent of Sri Lankan agrarian utopianism. Wickramasinghe and Coomaraswamy are among the most influential Sri Lankan intellectuals of the last century, and their role in shaping the Sri Lankan national consciousness cannot be understated.

The myth of the Sinhalese Buddhist agrarian utopia, the “natural” aim towards which the nation must strive, has shaped the Sinhalese Buddhist vision of nationhood at least since a Buddhist revival swept the island of Ceylon in the early 19th century. Not only is the mythos of *gamai, pansalai* potent politically, as the scholars Tambiah and Serena Tennekoon have pointed out, it has also largely determined Sri Lankan economic policy since the country’s independence. It is the vision of an agrarian utopia that underpins large development projects such as the Gal Oya irrigation scheme, the Mahaweli Development Programme and the Gam Udawa or the Village Reawakening programme, as well as Gotabaya Rajapaksa’s ill-starred push for organic agriculture while he was still president. Tennekoon, especially, has drawn attention to the utopian underpinnings of the Accelerated Mahaweli Project that sought to recreate the “nostalgic, nationalist landscape of Sri Lanka’s ancient hydraulic culture”, which, according to many nationalist historians and critics, signified the high phase of Sinhalese Buddhist civilisation.

Critics of this concept of agrarian utopia are often quick to dismiss it as crudely nationalistic and atavistic. It is also thought of as hampering economic growth and industrialisation. Reading the work of Wickramasinghe and Coomaraswamy, however, one can argue that dormant in the concept is the potential for a political praxis that transcends narrow Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism. Moreover, it suggests an economic philosophy that challenges neoliberal “progress.” Nationalist utopianism bears affinities with, and necessarily emerges from, a broader tradition of cosmopolitan utopianism and also syndicalism. Ironically, both the critics and the proponents of Sri Lankan nationalist utopianism often fail to recognise that utopianism is a cosmopolitan ideology rather than a nationalist one, and has had a long career in Western thinking.

In Wickramasinghe’s work, we find a philosophy of life that could challenge the neoliberal vision of development that has been imposed upon countries such as Sri Lanka to their great detriment.

The term “cosmopolitanism” itself suggests the union of the city (polis) with the universe (cosmos). A notable work in this tradition of thought is the Christian theological classic *The City of God*, in which Augustine understood historical progress as a conflict between the City of Man and the City of God. In this view, human history is to culminate when Man reaches the City of God, thus resolving the perennial historical conflict and bringing history to a halt. It is arguably this same utopianism that paved the way for varied later brands of syndicalism – Christian, socialist, libertarian, etc – that emerge from thinkers as diverse as Karl Marx, Georges Sorel, T S Eliot and Noam Chomsky. The ideal syndicate, one way or the other, is always a version of God’s city on Earth.

Wickramasinghe and Coomaraswamy are also utopian and syndicalist in many respects. Throughout Wickramasinghe’s evolution as a writer and thinker, he remained constant to a much romanticised and idealised view of the village. One of his most beloved works, the semi-autobiographical *Ape Gama* (Our Village), published in 1940, has generally attracted a young-adult readership. This exquisitely written text has been translated into English by Lakshmi De Silva as *Lay Bare the Roots*, a very apt and revealing title. The village in *Ape Gama* is possibly Wickramasinghe’s own: Koggala, a coastal village near Galle in the “deep South” of Sri Lanka. Wickramasinghe depicts the village as

self-sufficient not only economically but also spiritually. "Our Village" is an organic unit made up of symbiotic relationships. Wickramasinghe writes (my translation):

Back then since there were many cattle in our village, milk was plentiful. The cows provided the vegetable gardens with manure. The manure attracted beetles and the beetles attracted lizards. The lizards prevented the infestation of insects that could harm the cultivation, as the lizards would feed on the beetles. Since milk and vegetables were also plentiful, the villagers, with their undiminished physical vigour, lived happily. Yet sometimes those who threatened this balance were humans themselves. Because the motor car replaced the bullocks, manure became scarce, and that led to the disappearance of the beetles and lizards.

As the narrator goes on to say, it is the arrival of the motor car that destroys the "symbiosis" and "equilibrium" of this system and ultimately destroys the self-sufficient and contented village way of life. Undoubtedly, here Wickramasinghe is resorting to a number of romantic tropes. The village before the intervention of modernity remains an idyllic and harmonious organic entity. The intervention of modernity - symbolised by the motor car - destroys this internal unity. But in this romantic vision - which could be far too easily dismissed for its romanticism - there is still an immanent subversive potential. This vision, while it has been appropriated into Sinhalese Buddhist nation-building, presents an alternative not only to the unified (unitary) Sinhalese Buddhist state, but also to neoliberal economic progress. (It is pertinent to note here that Wickramasinghe's landmark novel *Gamperaliya* has a more nuanced representation of a feudal village, one in decline because of its inability to adapt to change and to overcome class and caste distinctions.)

Wickramasinghe's vision of the self-sufficient village has affinities with the leftist, anarcho-syndicalist tradition. In particular, his philosophy in *Ape Gama* is close to that of the Russian anarchist historian Peter Kropotkin's in *Mutual Aid*. Both Wickramasinghe and Kropotkin were naturalists. Wickramasinghe was deeply interested in evolutionary theory and wrote several Sinhala-language books on the subject. Both Wickramasinghe and Kropotkin envisioned a natural order that is sustained through mutual cooperation rather than Darwinian competition. What underlies Wickramasinghe's vision of the self-sufficient village is this particular understanding of nature as a self-contained network of simultaneously independent and interdependent actors. With Wickramasinghe, this understanding is also rooted in the Buddhist dialectical theory known as *paticca samuppada*, or "co-dependent origination", which amounts to the central metaphysical explanation in Buddhism. Grossly simplified, it holds that nothing can originate independent of other things. In critiques of Wickramasinghe, this deeper philosophical and scientific basis of his thinking is often overlooked.

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In Wickramasinghe's village, Buddhism unifies and guides independent actors. In this sense, the temple functions as the centre of the network, and the entire village culture is depicted as revolving around it. Wickramasinghe admired village life a great deal and thought of himself as a villager. In his work, village life is often juxtaposed against "decadent" and "materialistic" city life that has embraced Westernisation. The "mature" villager in Wickramasinghe's work is almost a sage. If for the Italian Marxist thinker Antonio Gramsci every man was a philosopher, for Wickramasinghe every villager was one, and it is Buddhist culture that turns the villager into a philosopher.

In one of his later works, *Kalunika Sevima* (In Search of Kalunika/Panacea), Wickramasinghe writes (my own translation):

The villager observes and feels the world through his inner mind rather than wisdom. His intuition has been sharpened by his senses. The intuition of the intellectual who has experienced the world lacks this perceptive quality. His inner nature is more attuned to what could be grasped through intelligence rather than what could be intuitively and emotionally felt. It is the villager, who embraces the earth, that can intuitively experience reality.

While this dichotomy between the “mature” villager tempered by Buddhist culture and the Westernised urban intellectual is rather crude, what is important to note is that in Wickramasinghe’s imaginary village life represents an alternative to the materialistic way of life promoted by capitalism. Rather than understanding the village way of life that Wickramasinghe depicts as necessarily Buddhist, it is more productive to understand it as a “classical” or “philosophical” way of life; it is both stoic and epicurean, and an alternative to the neoliberal way of life that we find unsustainable in Sri Lanka today, now that the economic crisis has exposed its folly.

In Wickramasinghe’s work, we find a philosophy of life that could challenge the neoliberal vision of development that has been imposed upon countries such as Sri Lanka to their great detriment. However, Wickramasinghe’s “classical” vision has been reduced in most people’s minds to one promoting an essentially Sinhalese Buddhist way of life, and that is its key limitation. By stripping down and neutralising the ethno-religious elements of this vision, it can be turned into a more inclusive and “cosmopolitan” vehicle for Sri Lanka’s future.

Ananda Coomaraswamy’s reading of the Kandyan village in *Medieval Sinhalese Art* parallels Wickramasinghe’s reading of the southern Sri Lankan village. It is relevant that although Coomaraswamy acknowledges that much of Kandyan art - which he understands as “medieval” - is of South Indian origin, he holds that the “Dravidian” influence is ultimately absorbed into the broader Sinhalese Buddhist “aryan” tradition. Coomaraswamy notes, “the [Tamil] craftsmen thus from time to time imported, very soon became part and parcel of the Kandyan Sinhalese people, Buddhist by faith; the style and feeling of their work was modified under the influence of the living local tradition, something of the Hindu-Dravidian element lost, and the Buddhist-Aryan acquired.” There is much to debate in this, but it is safe to assert that Coomaraswamy’s vision is evidently more pluralist than that of Wickramasinghe.

In *Medieval Sinhalese Art*, Coomaraswamy’s admiration for the Kandyan village and villagers is unrestrained. Just like Wickramasinghe’s southern, coastal village, Coomaraswamy’s upcountry village is a necessarily enclosed and self-sufficient entity:

The villages were to a great degree isolated and self-contained, dependent on the outside world for little but salt. A small external trade in Indian cloth and such things may have been carried on by the Muhammedan ‘tavalam merchants’ who carried goods on pack bulls along the steep and narrow jungle paths that led from village to village. No doubt Hindu and Muhammedan traders resided in Kandy.

Although this is not explicitly stated, it is the outsiders - in this case, Muslims and Hindus - who bring commercial values into a pristine agrarian civilisation. Like Wickramasinghe, Coomaraswamy praises the villagers’ supposed capacity for communal action, “shown in the frequent cases of combination amongst villagers, to erect and endow viharas.” And here again, we find that village life is structured around the vihara, or temple. It is the temple that unifies the villagers into a workforce. As the historian and politician Leslie Gunawardana has pointed out in the classic *Robe and Plough*, in medieval Sri Lanka there was a close relationship between the monastic and the agrarian life.

Monks were not merely spiritual leaders, they were also landowners who received the surplus that was generated from the village's labour. As such, the monks' relationship with the peasantry was similar to that between the European aristocracy and peasantry.

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Coomaraswamy's also shares Wickramasinghe's romanticism, while also expressing some admiration for aristocratic and feudal social arrangements sustained through supposedly voluntary labour:

There is great charm as one walks along the narrow village paths, in coming suddenly upon some hillside clearing where, twenty or thirty men are at work, singing in chorus with an old man leading them; or a party of women weeding and singing as they work across a field with stooping backs in the hot sun. They say that the singing makes the labour less arduous and irksome.

It is doubtful that the men and women who laboured enjoyed their work to the same extent that Coomaraswamy - an elite outside observer, a cosmopolitan intellectual - enjoyed the sight of it. The deeper point, however, is that Coomaraswamy found in village agrarian life a perfect unity between work and the aesthetic life. This unity is of great significance in his thinking, as he argued for an organic way of life that combined the aesthetic, ethical and material aspects of existence. In works such as *Medieval Sinhalese Art* and 'The Christian and the Oriental, or True Philosophy of Art', Coomaraswamy sees no essential difference between work and worship, between art and artifact - or, by extension, between artist and artisan. This, according to Coomaraswamy, is a defining feature of "classical life" that has disappeared in modernity.



Watercolour of the exterior of the Temple of the Tooth at Kandy. Lt-Col Harry Hemersley St George, 1876. Just like Martin Wickramasinghe's southern, coastal village, Ananda Coomaraswamy's upcountry village is a necessarily enclosed and self-sufficient entity.

Photo : The British Museum.

Coomaraswamy, in much the same way as Wickramasinghe, finds in village culture this perfect unity between aesthetics, ethics, work and, arguably, also politics. Such a way of life seemed infinitely preferable to capitalist modernity for both men, with its attendant alienation of individuals and atomisation of society.

Perhaps the most important and consequential aspect of Wickramasinghe's and Coomaraswamy's vision of the village is the implicit (or perhaps not so implicit) case that both men make for the sovereignty of the villager and farmer. This understanding carries profound political implications. Wickramasinghe writes in *Kalunika Sevima* (my translation):

The ancient monarchs of Sri Lanka were known as "village leaders." The term "gamini" in "Duttagamini", the name of a Sinhalese king of Anuradhapura, reveals that our most ancient kings who ruled before his time ruled Sri Lanka as village heads. Although subsequently, they became kings, they never dropped the term "gamini" which

betokened their rural origins and genealogy.

Duttagamini, more commonly referred to as Dutugamunu, is the hero of the mytho-historical chronicle *Mahavamsa* – a text often invoked to establish nationalist claims of a historically continuous and cohesive Sinhalese Buddhist nation. Duttagamini is remembered as defeating the Chola Tamil king Elara and unifying a Sinhalese Buddhist country. By suggesting that Dutugamunu himself was a villager, Wickramasinghe draws a connection between national sovereignty and rural, village-level sovereignty.

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In *Medieval Sinhalese Art*, Coomaraswamy notes, “Great chiefs were not ashamed to hold the plough in their own hands, and it was thought becoming for the young men to reap at least part of the harvest every year; for which damascened and ivory-handled sickles were sometimes used.” This follows Robert Knox, a sea captain of the British East India Company, who in his *An Historical Relation of the Island Ceylon* repeats a Sinhala proverb (often incorrectly attributed to Knox in the popular discourse in Sri Lanka) referring to upcountry farmers: “Take a plough man from the plough and wash off the dirt and he is fit to rule a kingdom.” Coomaraswamy appears to be in agreement with this understanding of the farmer. However, this idea of the “noble farmer” is by no means limited to Sri Lanka. In the classical Western tradition, Cincinnatus, the Roman statesman and farmer, serves as the primary model for the “Farmer King,” closely akin to the “Philosopher King”.

While figures such as Wickramasinghe and Coomaraswamy laid the ideological foundations for a discourse of agrarian utopianism in Sri Lanka, it was S W R D Bandaranaike, the country’s fourth prime minister, who gave it definitive political shape. The national transformation that Bandaranaike spearheaded after his party’s landslide electoral victory in 1956 was in many ways underpinned by the romantic, agrarian, utopian discourse evident in Wickramasinghe and Coomaraswamy’s writing. The *pancha maha balavegaya*, or “five-pillared force”, that he valorised – *sangha, veda, govi, guru, kamkaru* (the clergy, vedic physicians, farmers, teachers and labourers) – signified the return of the same sovereignty of the villager that Wickramasinghe and Coomaraswamy implicitly endorsed. Bandaranaike’s utopianism is well recorded in the political scientist James Manor’s biography of him, aptly titled *The Expedient Utopian*. As Manor notes, Bandaranaike “was fond of invoking utopian imagery in presenting his political goals to audiences (and probably to himself), yet he also carried short-term and often short-sighted opportunism to excess.” Unfortunately, Bandaranaike’s malleable and politically opportunist utopianism was deployed to serve a tangibly Sinhalese Buddhist national agenda.

The utopia that Bandaranaike imagined – or at any rate the utopia his supporters clamoured for – was exclusively Sinhalese Buddhist. As the scholar Harshana Rambukwella has pointed out, it is possible that Bandaranaike’s vision was influenced by classical studies, for he studied classics at Oxford and carried an “Arnoldian conception of high culture.” Here, Rambukwella refers to the English poet and cultural critic Matthew Arnold, whose most famous work, *Culture and Anarchy*, argues for a return to classical or “hellenic” values to resurrect Greek classical antiquity in 19th-century England. So perhaps Bandaranaike’s vision was not always exclusively Sinhalese Buddhist, rooted as it was in a broader tradition in Western thinking. But even so, Bandaranaike’s Western, arguably “cosmopolitan” vision ultimately morphed into a narrow, racialised ethos with grave consequences for the country. This was demonstrated in the unrest that followed the Bandaranaike government’s passage of the Sinhala Only Act, which made Sinhala the sole official language, and

the annulment of the Bandaranaike–Chelvanayakam Pact, designed to devolve power to regional councils and allow a measure of political autonomy to Sri Lankan Tamils. Both were key steps on the road to the Sri Lankan civil war.

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This is how the pursuit of a self-sustained agrarian utopia, captured in the formulation of *vavai*, *pansalai*, *gamai*, *yayai* (tank, temple, village and paddy field), became a concrete political project in post-independence Sri Lanka. Yet this vision, aimed at solidifying a unitary (rather than united) Sinhalese Buddhist state, has greater affinity as a political ideology with anarcho-syndicalism rather than nationalism. There is a great contradiction here: while nationalism seeks to impose coherence and homogeneity over a diverse people, anarchist syndicalism attempts to break from centralised authority altogether in pursuit of smaller units (syndicates) of self-governance.

But the fact that the expansion of this syndicalist vision into a nationalist ideology has backfired – its most devastating consequence being the civil war and Sri Lanka’s lasting ethno-religious tensions – does not mean we must reject the myth of the agrarian syndicalist utopia in toto. Georges Sorel, one of the most influential and controversial syndicalists, has pointed out the radical potential of myth as a politically motivating force. It is myth that enables radical politics.



Protesters’ campsite at the Gota Go Gama in Colombo, April 2022. This not only became the main site of resistance but also came to represent an anarchistic revolutionary movement in Sri Lanka.

Photo : NurPhoto / IMAGO

Although the myth of agrarian utopia has been evoked time and again to establish and defend the unitary Sinhalese Buddhist state, embedded in this myth is a case for a radical devolution of political power. In a small, diverse country such as Sri Lanka, a union of syndicates could offer some solutions to our many ethnic and economic woes. Syndicalism would enable a greater devolution of power than the Thirteenth Amendment which, under the aegis of the Indian government, established the present system of provincial councils in the late 1980s to try to address Sri Lanka’s ethnic conflict. It would allow greater devolution of power than any version of federalism, encourage direct participation in democracy and foster more grassroots-level activism. Moreover, the syndicalist stress on production – the agrarian utopia necessarily produces everything that it consumes – has the potentiality to shift Sri Lanka from a consuming economy to a producing economy.

In Sri Lanka, where there is still some sense of organic life and community, such a syndicalist vision could become a material reality. The Gota Go Gama on the Galle Face Green, and other “villages” elsewhere, despite all of the aragalaya’s ideological limitations, succeeded at ridding the country of a ruler whom many saw as despotic, incompetent and chauvinist. It is the essential anarchism of the “village” as a political category that fuelled the aragalaya and was able to bring together many competing factions to achieve a singular end that most people in Sri Lanka desired. Although the aragalaya ended anti-climatically, with Ranil Wickremesinghe coming to power and continuing the rule of the same old establishment, its real achievements should not be dismissed. Nor should anyone dismiss agrarian utopianism as a naive nationalist fantasy, as it could be the blueprint for a

cosmopolitan future.

Dhanuka Bandara is a freelance writer based in Kandy, Sri Lanka. He holds a PhD in English literature from Miami University in the United States. He has taught English at Miami University and the University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka. You can reach him at bandard@miamioh.edu

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