

For the People

Until the mid-1950s Sinhalese poets and songwriters hesitated to create modern works based upon premodern Sinhala-language folk or literary traditions. They tended to regard such traditions as unsuitable sources for present-day expression. Lyricist Madawala Ratnayake (1929–97) and poet Gunadasa Amarasekera (b. 1929) altered this tendency. They drew on folk and literary traditions and infused into song and poetry formal features such as poetic meters, lexicon, and grammar. Ratnayake and Amarasekera discovered these attributes in orally transmitted folk poems (*jana kavi*) as well as in compositions that court poets or Buddhist monks etched on palm-leaf manuscripts between the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Yet Ratnayake's and Amarasekera's formal revolution is just one part of the story. Equally fascinating is the relationship between the semantic content of their new works and the semantic contents of the original sources on which they drew. Sometimes they made a slight twist to the meaning of the original. Other times they replaced it altogether. The songs and poems studied in this chapter are therefore 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."¹ That is, Ratnayake's and Amarasekera's poems and songs simultaneously evoked and departed from Sinhala folk and literary sources.

Why did Ratnayake and Amarasekera feel compelled to preserve old forms but create new meanings? They came to believe Sinhala poetry and song would need to possess relevance for "the people," whom they predominantly defined as Sinhalese Buddhist villagers. Yet why art-for-the-people in the *late 1950s*? One important reason for this shift is the fact that 1956–65 was the period when the Sinhalese

rural voter became, to a much greater extent, the arbiter of Sri Lankan politics.² From the standpoint of the sociopolitical fabric, then, it makes sense that Ratnayake and Amarasekera reformulated song's and poetry's purpose, content, and audience with rural Sinhalese people in mind.

Such a project was confined not only to song and poetry: consider Ratnayake's first novel, *Akkara Paha* (The five acres, 1959). The novel is about a Sinhalese Buddhist boy, Sena. He is born into a family of farmers. His parents send him away to the city of Kandy to receive a prestigious English education. The story documents Sena's rude awakening when he is forced to adjust to life in the city. In a defiant concluding act, Sena disavows the city, returns to the village, marries his village sweetheart, and takes up farming. Ratnayake prefaced the novel in this way: "After I moved from the city back to the village, I began to feel that national development, regardless of historical period, begins with those who hold the nation's most fundamental occupation—farmers."³ As this quotation implies, the central idea discussed in this chapter is the belief that farmers—and, by extension, the *villages* where they work and the *folklore* they know—have value for the Sri Lankan nation.

RATNAYAKE'S RADIO SONG

The 1950s was the decade in South Asia when state and institutional politics became inextricable from linguistic nationalism. In southern South Asia we find this evident in the Tamil and Telugu populations in South India and the Sinhalese in Sri Lanka.⁴ Given that 1950–56 witnessed a peak in Sinhala linguistic nationalism (the Official Language Act was passed in 1956), it is not a coincidence that this sentiment found its way to the national radio station, Radio Ceylon. In the early 1950s the station began 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.⁵ In my judgment, only after the radio station began to give stable jobs to Sinhala poets tasked with writing literary songs did the Sinhalese public begin to consider the lyrics of Sinhala song as a form of literary expression.

In chapter 4 I discuss how the political climate in the 1950s privileged the Sinhalese Buddhist rural intelligentsia and created conditions ripe for the reform of Sinhala music through the radio opera. The emphasis on developing *Sinhala* music led to the creation of another form of music as well. Station officials hired Sinhalese lyricists, composers, and vocalists to create a genre of music that came to be known as *sarala gī* (light song). *Sarala gī* is often translated into English as "light-classical song" because of its orchestra of sitars, violins, tablas, flutes, sarods, and guitars.⁶

Sarala gī was a Sri Lankan genre of Sinhala radio song, but similar musical changes were happening at the national radio station in India. The use of the

Sinhala word *sarala* (light) most likely stemmed 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.⁷

Hired in 1954, Madawala Ratnayake was one of the first to hold the position of scriptwriter. He was thus a major force in the creation of *sarala gī*. At this time, he had not yet published his popular novel *Akkara Paha*, but he was known by the Sinhala reading public as early as 1948 for the poems he regularly contributed to popular Sinhala poetry journals such as *Dēdunna* (The rainbow) and *Mīvadaya* (Beehive). 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.⁸

Amid mounting evidence, it appears that radio stations throughout South Asia were new sources of patronage to poets in the twentieth century.⁹ We know that radio stations hired poets to write songs, produce programs of original songs, provide guidance on how to draw on the literary tradition of a particular regional language, and “raise the standards” of modern song in the regional language. In 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.¹⁰ In 1942 All India Radio in Delhi hired the Urdu poet Miraji as a scriptwriter.¹¹ In 1950 the Hindi poet Bhagwati Charan Verma served as an adviser in Hindi to the All India Radio in Lucknow. As Shrilal 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.”¹² In 1956 the Kannada poet Dattareya Ramachandra Bendre began to work as an adviser for the Dharwad station in Karnataka.¹³

Ratnayake’s first radio show was titled *Jana Gāyanā* (Folk singing, 1955). For the program, Ratnayake attempted to use folk song (*jana gī*), considered unsophisticated by urbanites at the time, as a cultured source for an evening radio show.¹⁴ The program consequently popularized the concept of *jana gī*, a term that referred to the same body of texts collectively referred to as *jana kavi*. The difference was that the term *jana gī* placed more emphasis on the *performance* of these texts. Ratnayake described the program like this:

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, 'Tikiri 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 expounds on the purport of Buddhist *gāthā*, a verse from the Pali canon of Theravada Buddhism], 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.¹⁵

The Sinhala press criticized *Jana Gāyanā* for “destroying” folk music. Ratnayake stopped the program.¹⁶ Yet in 1957 he restarted the show with the composer W. D. Amaradeva, and it received critical acclaim.¹⁷ Arguably, the populist shift in politics in 1956 created favorable conditions for the positive reception of Ratnayake’s attempt to preserve the values of village life.

From a broader perspective, Ratnayake’s interest in folklore partook in an ideological movement spreading among musical elites in South Asia at the time. Musical nationalism came to Sri Lanka from North India mainly through S. N. Ratanjankar. As discussed in chapter 2, 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 1952 M. J. Perera, the director general 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 also auditioned 716 people who applied to work as musicians for the radio station.¹⁸

During his visit to Sri Lanka, 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. He encouraged Sinhalese musicians to create a modern song based on folk poetry and folk music. His concerns, then, were the familiar concerns of “musical nationalism”—the incorporation of folk elements into art music to evoke national sentiment, preserve tradition, and venerate a disappearing rural way of life.¹⁹ Ratanjankar believed true Sri Lankan music was found in the villages. He appealed to musicians to create a refined modern music based on folk song: “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.”²⁰ 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 *strōtra*. In what follows, I explore how Ratnayake and Amaradeva modernized these forms by using them as sources for radio songs.

Ratanjankar’s musical nationalism and policy-like recommendations struck a deep chord with Ratnayake and Amaradeva. Ratnayake noted the importance

of Ratanjankar's suggestions, and he 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."²¹ 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, had not created a complete musical form that we could 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.²²

Ratnayake reminisced about the kinds of folk genres he drew on 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 Säleyi' [The golden paddy sways] for the radio program 'Tikiri Liya.' In later radio programs . . . we would showcase songs influenced by the *vannama*, *bali kavi*, *goyam kavi* [sung poetry for farming], and *nelum kavi* [sung poetry for cultivation].²³

The first genre Ratanjankar mentioned in his speech at the Royal Asiatic Society was the *vannama*, songs originally commissioned by King Narendrasinghe, the last Sinhalese king of Kandy (r. 1707–37).²⁴ The king solicited a Buddhist monk to compose poetic verse. He hired a Tamil musician to set these verses to South Indian *rāga*-based melodies.²⁵ Many of the *vannama* texts describe the behavior of animals, while others narrate stories of deities, like Sakra, Ishwara, and Ganesh.²⁶

As Ratnayake stated in the previous quote, the first song aired on the *Jana Gāyanā* program was titled "Ran Van Karal Säleyi." He had 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 beloved 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 had 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 rhythmic pattern, notated in the figure:

EXAMPLE 4. Tānāma in the turaṅga vannama.



It is well known that Ratnayake sought to evoke this tānāma as the rhythmic structure in his song lyrics. This is demonstrated by the comparison in the figure between the tānāma of the turaṅga vannama (meas. 1–4) and the song text (meas. 5–8).²⁷

EXAMPLE 5. Rhythm of the tānāma in the turaṅga vannama compared with the rhythm of Madawala Ratnayake’s “Ran Van Karal Säleyi.”

The use of the tānāma as the rhythmic basis for the text calls to mind what Michael 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.”²⁸ In this case, one could extend Riffaterre’s notion of connectives to include devices like tānāma because Ratnayake used the tānāma as a “connective” that would point the listeners of the new song to the old intertext.

Ratnayake retained the tānāma of the turaṅga vannama, but the meaning of the lyrics in “Ran Van Karal Säleyi” departed in theme. The text of the turaṅga vannama depicted an episode of Siddhartha’s story of renunciation. Ratnayake’s song, in contrast, portrayed a village in the midst of a prosperous paddy harvest. Consider the first three stanzas of the song. The simile of the first stanza conceptually linked ripened paddy with a Buddhist woman: the ripened paddy hardly sways in the wind like the steady mind of the woman barely wavers when she observes *sil*, the precepts of Buddhism.²⁹

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 away³⁰

Amaradeva's musical setting of this stanza further enhanced the textual imagery because a group of vocalists performed the song and their voices called to mind real-life villagers. Amaradeva also included an *udäkki* folk drum in the orchestration to reinforce the mental association with the village.

From a local political perspective, "Ran Van Karal Säleyi" was well suited to Sri Lanka post-1956 because the imagery articulated populist and nationalist sentiments. Ratnayake referenced ancient manmade "overflowing reservoirs" and flowering paddy fields and alluded to the existence of Buddhist temples where a woman observes the Buddhist precepts. The imagery of tank, temple, and paddy field (*väva*, *dägäba*, and *yäya*) is striking because in the twentieth century Sinhalese cultural nationalists popularized these three elements as authentic markers of Sinhalese culture.³¹ Tank, temple, and paddy field represented the ethos of Sinhalese culture in the nationalist imagination.

Ratnayake and Amaradeva created radio songs from not only the vannama but also other genres like *sivupada* (folk song based on quatrains with end-rhyme) and *strötra* (panegyric), which Ratanjankar singled out as important local forms of music. For instance, Ratnayake wrote "Bamareku Ävayi" based on *sivupada* verse recited for rituals to propitiate deities and ward off bad planetary influence. In "Min Dada Hi Sara," he experimented with the language and meaning of a fifteenth-century Sinhala panegyric. Let us now examine these two songs.

In 1964 Ratnayake and Amaradeva's song "Bamareku Ävayi" (A bee came) aired on Ratnayake's radio program Swara Varna (Tone Colors). The song lyrics in "Bamareku Ävayi" called to mind poetry sung in village rituals that propitiated deities, especially the *kohomba kankariya*, which was performed to appease deities believed to reside in the Sri Lankan city of Kandy.³² Here are the stanzas that Ratnayake reworked for "Bamareku Ävayi":

ahase gosin ahase sängavunädö
polove gosin väli yata sängavunädö
müde gosin rala yata sängavunädö
leda kala dēvatā kotanaka giyädö

ahasē gosin ahasē sängavunat varen
polowē gosin väli yata sängavunat varen
müde gosin rala yata sängavunat varen
leda kala devata kotänaka giyat varen

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
 Deity of sickness, wherever you go, come here³³

When we compare the diction with the song lyrics of Ratnayake's "Bamareku Āvayi," it becomes clear that Ratnayake evoked the *kohomba kankariya* stanzas in two ways.

bamareku āvayi nirita	digēya
hada pārūvayi miyuru	rasēya
mal paravūvayi sōketi	bōva
kandulu gālūvayi elō	gābēya

sīta himē lenakata	pivisunādō
āta epita giri kulakata	giyādō
māta mepita mē adehima	lagīdō
dāsa anduru vī mā tani	vunādō

salamīn sumudu podi attatu miyuru saren
 nala mudu suvanda vindagannata giyat **varen**
 bala binda damā hiru yanavita avara giren
 balamin pipunu mal pāni bonu risiva **varen**³⁴

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, and the colloquial imperative word for "come here," *varen*, also in bold in the two excerpts. 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.³⁵ Consider the suffix *-ēya* at the end of lines 1, 2, and 4,

bamareku āvayi nirita	digēya
hada pārūvayi miyuru	rasēya
mal paravūvayi sōketi	bōva
kandulu gālūvayi elō	gābēya ³⁶

Noting this particular suffix, composer W.D. Amaradeva writes, "Most of the songs of the radio program 'Swara Varna' were composed according to folk materials. Madawala 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,’ and so on, are examples of this.”³⁷

The meaning of the text added another layer. Recall how the song “Ran Van Karal Säleyi” simultaneously evoked the formal features of the *tānama* of the *turaṅga vannama* but departed from the text’s original meaning (a story of Prince Siddhartha’s renunciation) to tell a story of a prosperous village harvest. Similarly, Ratnayake’s “Bamareku Āvayi” was not about appealing to gods to avoid astrological danger. It was reminiscent of Sinhala folk poems in which a bee and a flower symbolize a man and woman. The song was an allegory about a woman who is pleurably “stung” by a man but “withers” in sadness because he has left her.

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

If the intertexts of Ratnayake’s 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 panegyric titled *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 Parākramabāhu VI.³⁸ Consecrated in 1411, Parākramabāhu 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.³⁹

Pārakumba Sirita is narrated almost exclusively from the standpoint of an omniscient narrator who elaborately extols the ancestors of King Parākramabāhu and glorifies the events of his life.⁴⁰ Stanzas 127 through 129, however, are exceptions, because they are told from the perspective of the king’s courtesan. In stanza 129 she pleads with the king to pay her a visit in the evening:

Bandā min dada mada aravindā sarala sara	yāne
mandā nila turaṅguṭa negemindā viyowaga nan	vāne
chandā nalalesa viya neta nindā noladimi tani	yāne
kandā vare pārakum naranindā sakisaṅḍa saṅḍa	pānē

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 Parākramabāhu here in the
 moonlight.⁴¹

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 (*manda nila turangu*). The lotus arrow has pierced her heart, that is, she has now fallen for King Parākramabāhu. She tells her friend (*sakisañda*) 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 Hi 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 intertext but departed from the text's original contents, he accomplished the opposite in "Min Dada Hi Sara." That is, he abandoned the strictures of the original stanza's formal features but embraced the semantic content of the original. One finds in the song a similar scenario of the courtesan in *Pārakumba Sirita*. Consider the refrain:

mindada hī sara vādī sālena hada
 nanvana duk gī obata āhenavada
 chandana mal aturā āti yahanata
 kanda kapā pāyan ran pun sanda

[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!]⁴²

The first half of this chapter has attempted to reveal the ways in which Madawala Ratnayake reformulated the rhythms, lexicon, diction, and semantic content of Sinhala folklore and court song to produce modern radio songs that would appeal to the Sinhalese Buddhist population. In the next half of this chapter, I turn to Ratnayake's contemporary, Gunadasa Amarasekera, to explore how he experimented in similar ways in the realm of poetry.

AMARASEKERA'S POETRY

Gunadasa Amarasekera's *Bhāva Gīta* (Meaningful song, 1955) was a collection of thirty-eight poems. It caught the attention of the reading public because it was the first modern collection of Sinhala poetry to experiment with the characters, scenarios, sentiments, and sometimes even the syntax and lexicon of jana kavi.⁴³ The first and second generations of Colombo poets had rarely considered jana kavi or even the lived experiences of villagers as suitable sources for new poetry.⁴⁴ Yet

Amarasekera believed that such poetry could resonate with the modern-day experiences of the Sinhalese. He informed his readers in the preface to *Bhāva Gīta* that it was necessary to create a new style that could dynamically reflect the “real life of the people” (*sajīva janakāyaka gē bhāvika jīvitaya*): “Artists ought to not be afraid to find a new path for Sinhala poetry and raise it to an elevated position. We need to create a dynamic poetic tradition that can illuminate the real life of the people. This book is an effort to fulfill this necessity.”⁴⁵ Amarasekera believed it was crucial for modern Sinhala poets to absorb the tradition of folk poetry and channel it into contemporary works:

Young poets can gain much from a critical appreciation of our folk poetry, which has been flourishing from the Kandy and Matara [eighteenth- and nineteenth-century] periods as tributaries that branched off from the mainstream of Sinhala poetry when it came to a halt during the Kotte period [fifteenth century]. These tributaries had been fed by the folk poets down the ages and, as a result of their contact with the living speech, retained what is viable in the main stream of our poetry. The task for a major poetic talent today is to unify these viable elements and create the poetic diction needed for the present. In other words, poets should strive to make the tributaries that branched off converge to form the main stream once again.⁴⁶

Four poems in *Bhāva Gīta* stood out as endeavors to present portraits of village culture. In “Aluten Pareyi Joḍuwak Ävillā” (A new pigeon couple has come) Amarasekera evoked the folk belief that two pigeons that come to live in a house bring a spell of good luck for the family of that residence.⁴⁷ The narrator of the poem is a small child delighted because the pair of pigeons has come to roost on the rafters of her house. The narrator in “Uñduvap Ävillā” (The month of Unduvap has come) is a male villager who praises nature during the months of December and January but also becomes sexually aroused, for the moon reminds him of his lover’s face.⁴⁸ In “Vakkaḍa Bañdimu” (Let’s construct an opening in the dam), village men thank the gods for bringing rain that cools their bodies as they toil in the hot sun to create a hole in the dam to let off water from the paddy fields.

The fourth poem in *Bhāva Gīta* that sought to depict the life of villagers was “Añdura Apē Duka Nivāvi” (The darkness will soothe our sadness). The poem reworked one particular stanza, translated here, that is found in a subcategory of jana kavi known as *karatta kavi* (cart poetry), traditionally recited by carters who drove bullock carts.⁴⁹

Leading the cows of this cart,
I beat the cow to avoid the grasslands.
I see the Haputale Mountain ranges and sigh:
“Drag the cart O sinner-cows and head to Haputale!”⁵⁰

The carter believes his cows suffer because of the karma they accumulated from the sins (*pav*) of previous lives. The *eli samaya*, or end-rhyme, of this *karatta kavi*

stanza is achieved by simply ending each line with four present-tense colloquial verbs (in bold). I present the transliterated form of this poem here as Sinhala metered poetry appears, that is, with the final *eli samaya* word separate from the rest of the line.

taṇḍalē denna depalē	dakkanavā
kaṭukālē gāle nolihā vada	denavā
haputalē kanda dākalā baḍa	danavā
pav kaḷa gone ādapan haputal	yanavā ⁵¹

Dakkanavā means to lead, *denavā* to give, *baḍa danavā* to sigh, and *yanavā* to go. All four words, as do all colloquial Sinhala-language verbs in the simple present tense, end in the suffix *-navā*. Because each foot ends with *-navā*, the like-phoneme(s) necessary for *eli samaya* is produced. Constructing *eli samaya* with verbs in the simple present tense is especially common in folk poetry, perhaps because such syntax imitates standard word order in Sinhala (subject-object-verb), thereby allowing Sinhala speakers to easily understand the meaning of the poem.

Amarasekera depicted in “*Añdura Apē Duka Nivāvi*” a similar scenario to mirror the previously cited *karatta kavi* stanza. The carter, for example, was also one who believed his cows suffered because of their karma.

It is because of karma that we have to suffer like this
This is what Lord Buddha taught in order to eradicate suffering⁵²

Amarasekera also utilized colloquial language, as found in the *karatta kavi* poem. In the first couplet of his poem we find the colloquial terms for the words “like” (*vagē*), “body” (*ānga*), and “very” (*harima*) (in bold), as well as *eli samaya* with colloquial Sinhala-language verbs in the simple present tense, that is, those that end with the suffix *-navā*. Amarasekera, however, went a step further: he shortened the final syllables of the simple present-tense verbs—*enavā* is to come and *dānenavā* is to feel—from a long *-vā* to a short *-va* (in bold) because speakers tend to end simple present-tense verbs with a short vowel.

yaman kaḷuve gedara yanna, kanda uḍin añdura	enava
umbāṭa vagē mage ānga ṭat hari ma viḍāvak	dānenava
Let’s go Kaluwe, take us home as darkness creeps over the mountains	
My body feels very tired like yours ⁵³	

Amarasekera also sought to create poetry for “the people” in *Bhāva Gīta* through a particular poetic meter he called the *pas mat virita* (lit. meter having five syllabics).⁵⁴ He discovered the meter, known earlier as *vṛitta gandhi*, in various genres of folk poetry, including *tovil* stanzas sung to cure diseases related to demonic possession, and in the *Sihabā Asna* and the *Kuveni Asna*, poems that narrated the origin

legend of the Sinhalese people.⁵⁵ The meter has twenty syllabics per line with a caesura after every five. Amarasekera claimed the meter's structure had a deep-rooted compatibility with the Sinhala language and was "ideal for expressing contemporary experience."⁵⁶ He powerfully employed the *pas mat virita* meter to imitate the sound of rain in the five-syllable onomatopoeic phrase (chi-chi-ri-chi-ri) featured in the poem "Vāssa" (The rain). Consider Ranjini Obeyesekere's translation:

Chi-chi-ri-chi-ri, chi-chi-ri-chi-ri dripping from morning
Falling in endless drops, penetrating, spine chilling,
Roads and lanes, leaves and trees in grey mist smothering
The rain rains, the rain rains, all day unceasing⁵⁷

In 1961 Amarasekera published his third collection of poetry, *Amal Biso*. In the preface to the second edition he strove to link the folk ethos in *Amal Biso* to the works featured in *Bhāva Gīta*. Yet one fundamental difference existed between the two collections of verse: "If *Bhāva Gīta*," Amarasekera suggested, "was a journey I took unconsciously toward the tradition of Sinhala poetry, *Amal Biso* was a conscious journey."⁵⁸ Amarasekera had become conscious of the historically important role played by folk poets in the seventeenth century.

Amarasekera believed that the so-called Sītāvaka period (1530–1620) commenced a dark age in Sinhala poetry. After the Portuguese annexed the Sītāvaka court in 1594, they not only demolished Buddhist temples and gave prestigious government positions to Roman Catholic converts but also suppressed Sinhala-language literary expression and dismantled the system of courtly patronage to learned Sinhala poets.⁵⁹ Amarasekera noted how court poetry disappeared to such an extent that we know of only one active Sinhala court poet during the period: Alagiyavanna Mukaveti.⁶⁰ Amarasekera thus argued, "Our scholarly poetic path did not evolve in the seventeenth century. Our last scholarly poet was Alagiyavanna Mukaveti."⁶¹

The Sinhala poets who carried forward the tradition at this dark time, in the judgment of Amarasekera, were the *folk poets*, figures who never received the recognition they deserved. Therefore, the common assumption that scholarly classical poetry ("great tradition") and so-called unlearned folk poetry ("little tradition") existed at two fundamentally opposed ends was false. As Amarasekera wrote, "We cannot conceive the great tradition (*mahā sampradaya*) and little tradition (*cūla sampradaya*) as separate entities."⁶² He believed, rather, that the histories of literature and folklore together constituted one literary history, because after the Portuguese put an end to courtly patronage of learned Sinhala poets, many of the messages of scholarly poetry came to be transmitted through folk poems. Amarasekera wrote, "The folk poet drew on his own everyday language to make for himself more concrete the language of the erudite poet, a language about which he had little knowledge. This is evident in [orally transmitted] works like the *Vessan-*

tara Katāva (The story of Vessantara), *Yasōdara Vata* (The legend of Yasodhara), *Sañda Kiñduru Kava* (The poem of the Satyresses), and *Pattini Hālla* (The tale of Pattini), as well as in the *Bali Tovil* verses [sung to cure demonic possession]. The folk poets did not create scholarly works of poetry. Yet they were successful poets because they unconsciously carried forward our tradition.”⁶³

Vessantara Katāva, *Yasōdara Vata*, *Sañda Kiñduru Kava*, and *Pattini Hālla* are part of a subset of popular folk poems known colloquially as *gāmi kavi katā* (village narrative poems).⁶⁴ If anonymous folk poets were indeed the ones who carried on the tradition of Sinhala poetry through such orally transmitted poems at a time when the court poets had died out in the seventeenth century, Amarasekera felt justified to deliberately draw on the sentiments, diction, and style of these poems in his new book, *Amal Bisō*. He maintained the conviction that folk poetry was relevant, despite the fact that many of his contemporaries denounced folk poetry as a source that prevented poets from engaging with the complexities of contemporary life.⁶⁵

For example, in *Amal Bisō* Amarasekera displayed his mastery of one genre of Sinhala jana kavi through the poem “Āla Vaḍana Raban Kavi” (A raban poem that nourishes love). As the title indicates, Amarasekera turned to *raban pada*, verses customarily recited by women in villages who would simultaneously drum on the large *raban* frame drum at Sinhalese New Year festivals in April. Amarasekera started the poem with a *tānama*, the same type of rhythmic pattern that we encountered earlier in this chapter:

tam denā tanena tanena tanena tānenā⁶⁶

Because the *tānama* provided the firm rhythmic basis for the diction of *raban pada*, Amarasekera attempted to use it as the foundation for the seven stanzas of “Āla Vaḍana Raban Kavi.” The unusually tricky challenge he faced was to create a meaningful poem while simultaneously mimicking the nineteen-beat rhythm of the *tānama*, particularly its subgroups of five, three, three, three, five (notated in the first line). And he had to produce *aga mula eli samaya* (like-phonemes at the end *and* beginning of a line) with the syllable *na*. Consider how the first line of poetry—*de nuvanā saraya obē dilena gini genā* (the essence of your two eyes is its flame)—matched with the *tānama*.

EXAMPLE 6. Rhythm and like-phonemes in *tānama* of *raban pada* compared with rhythm and like-phonemes in Gunadasa Amarasekera’s “Āla Vaḍana Raban Kavi.”

4

tam - de - nā ta - ne - na ta - ne - na ta - ne - na tā ne nā

denu - va - nā sa - ra - ya o - bē - di - le - na gini ge nā

The message of the poem, a man's attempt to console and then seduce his lover, almost takes back seat to the formal strictures of rhythm and rhyme rooted in the *raban pada*.

The book *Amal Biso* is titled after a long poem of the same name. Amarasekera began "Amal Biso" with precisely the kind of language and tone that one hears in village narrative poems, a language easy to understand and capable of capturing the attention of an audience.⁶⁷

Once upon a time there was a lake.
And in the lake lived demons.
They spit fire like lightning
And they devoured any animal they saw.

A flower one day blossomed in the lake.
It was small but smelled nice.
It had a face that resembled a flower.
It was not really a flower, but a small child.

A princess was born out of this flower.
Her form and her beauty were just like that flower.
Her scent wafted a far distance.
The demons couldn't yet see her. (vv. 1–3)⁶⁸

He crafted the poem in the style of time-honored village narrative poems, yet the semantic content of the poem was a response to critics' arguments that folk poetry prevented poets from engaging with the complexities of modern life. "Amal Biso" was an allegory about a contemporary issue yet to be broached in the realm of Sinhala verse: the enforcement of chastity. Society, Amarasekera thought, stigmatizes women who act on their craving for bodily pleasure before marriage. Yet repressing this desire, he believed, brings horrible consequences. Amarasekera contended that however much parents imprison their daughters at home and scare them with stories about evil men, such strategies could not destroy bodily urges. Instead of blaming innocent women for acting on their natural urges, Amarasekera maintained that the whole societal system was to blame. Societies, he argued, should not vilify women who desire intimacy, because lust is an integral part of human life.⁶⁹ He prefaced the poem with words to console a woman who has suffered by the hands of society:

Do not weep, Wimala.
I know what happened is humanity's fault.
I will announce this so that the whole world hears.⁷⁰

The allegory revolved around a beautiful little girl, Amal Biso, who is born from a flower in a lake filled with demons (vv. 1–3). It is the duty of the swan-women of the lake to prevent Amal Biso from falling prey to the demons of the lake (v. 4). Amal Biso represents young women, the demons symbolize men, and the swan-

women overprotective parents. The swan-women imprison Amal Biso in a golden mansion on a snowy peak of the Himalayan Mountains (vv. 5–8), narrate horrifying stories about the demons (vv. 13–26), and construct a golden tree (v. 28), where three parrots stand guard and give Amal Biso advice (vv. 29–30). Perhaps the parrots represent her *superego*.

Amal Biso longs to feel the touch of the demons (v. 39), dreams about opening the door of the golden mansion to meet them (vv. 41–48), and even cracks open the door to peep outside (vv. 49–50). Then one day a demon comes to the golden mansion to entice her to open the door (vv. 67–68). The parrot tells her to keep the door shut (vv. 70–72). The demon becomes angry and burns the first parrot to death (v. 73). The demon comes again. This happens two more times (vv. 74–93). Finally, the demon returns a fourth time, and there are no parrots to advise Amal Biso against opening the door (v. 99). In the climactic concluding stanzas that narrate Amal Biso opening the door, Amarasekera ended six stanzas (vv. 101–5, 111), like the two translated here, with the word “opened.”

The golden door of the palace she	opened
With desire in her mind she	opened
To the voice of the demon the door she	opened
The door Amal Biso	opened (v. 101)

The golden door of the palace she	opened
The sandalwood door she	opened
To the voice of the demon the door	opened
The door Amal Biso	opened (v. 102) ⁷¹

Then the demons gruesomely kill her (vv. 112–14). The last two lines of the final stanza ends with the message of the preface:

Pouring tears of sadness, do not cry my girl
 My sweetheart, I'll explain your innocence so that the whole world hears (v. 115)⁷²

This chapter sought to elucidate the way in which one lyricist and one poet in postcolonial Sri Lanka attempted to modernize song and poetry by channeling formal and semantic features of folklore and classical literature into their compositions. At times they emphasized the formal features of the prior texts. At other times they emphasized intratextual semantic features. Such movements were not confined to Sri Lanka and may have occurred in many places in South Asia in the mid-twentieth century. For instance, regarding Bangla literature, Sudipta Kaviraj writes, “From the 1940s, due to radical influences, there were attempts to accord *literary* recognition to folk traditions, which had been treated with indifference if not contempt by the early creators of high Bangla. This is reflected in an interest in the recovery and inventorization of Bāul songs and tales told by grandmothers.”⁷³

In Sri Lanka Amarasekera and Ratnayake were the first to emphasize that new poems and songs had to reflect the lives of Sinhalese Buddhists raised in villages.

The preceding two chapters explored how the Sinhalese rural intelligentsia responded in song and poetry to the new political and sociolinguistic climate, owing to the watershed general election and the Official Language Act of 1956. In the final chapter before the conclusion I continue to focus on this moment. I analyze the way one songwriter-poet benefited from the political and sociopolitical shifts of 1956 but grew disillusioned with parochial nationalism and campaigned to fashion a more tolerant society.