

ideological Dharmapala is an equally originary figure representative of racist and exclusivist Sinhala majoritarianism.

The two positions, though politically opposed, ironically mirror each other. One affirms authenticity by romanticising Dharmapala; the other implicitly upholds Dharmapala's nationalist authenticity by failing to account for his historical complexity. Was Dharmapala himself interested and invested in a sense of authenticity? If so, what shape and form did it take? Why and how does post-independence Sinhala nationalism see Dharmapala as a nationalist father figure? And why does liberal scholarship take Dharmapala as a master signifier of Sinhala nationalist thinking? These are the key questions explored here. First I position Dharmapala in his historical context; then I trace his own relationship to Sinhala identity, Buddhism and other ethnic and religious communities of his time; and finally I look at Dharmapala's contemporary afterlife as a nationalist father figure. By doing so I demonstrate that the authenticity ascribed to Dharmapala is a shifting and malleable idea that arises from present-day concerns about nationalism. As we shall see in the chapter on Gunadasa Amarasekara, Dharmapala's nationalist reconstruction flattens the multidimensionality of his life – ascribing to him a nationalist authenticity that is rarely visible in the life he lived or the world in which he moved. In Sinhala nationalist teleology Dharmapala is *the* originary figure – the person who intuitively tapped into a millennia-old consciousness of Sinhala-ness and 'revived' it for a project of postcolonial nation-building. Yet, as we shall see, for Dharmapala authenticity meant many things shaped by his immediate historical context. Authenticity, like nationalism, therefore appears 'real' and 'tangible' when viewed from within, but, viewed from outside, its ontological existence collapses. The critical task is to explore the protean manifestations of authenticity and what informs it – without succumbing to its allure or dismissing it as mere fantasy.

Contextualising Dharmapala's life and career

The historical period in which Dharmapala emerged as a leading Buddhist activist and public figure was one in which a modern Sinhala identity was in the making. In scholarship – as discussed in the introduction and the [Chapter 2](#) – there are some standard frames through which this period is understood. What I do below is to look at the significant contexts of Dharmapala's life, such as his class background, the Buddhist 'revival' and his overseas Buddhist activism, to counter

received wisdom and to provide a sense of the complex and contradictory forces that shaped his life. In doing so, my general approach follows Steven Kemper's (2015) argument about the need to 'rescue' Dharmapala from the 'nation'. However, my overall approach in the chapter differs from Kemper's by critically exploring the reasons why Dharmapala is positioned as an authentic representative of Sinhala and Buddhist identity in subsequent nationalist reconstructions: it is not enough to 'rescue' Dharmapala from the nation; it is also important to see how Dharmapala as an ideology becomes part of Sinhala nationalist discourse.

Dharmapala's father, the Mudaliyar Don Carolis, was a successful furniture manufacturer and retailer (Jayawardena 2003, 153). He was a man from a middle-class rural background who married into a family of landowners and entrepreneurs and managed to establish himself financially by taking advantage of opportunities for trade created by the colonial economy. Despite the relative privilege of his background, Dharmapala appears to have had a difficult childhood. Roberts (1997, 1012) notes that he was born with a deformed leg, which may have exposed him to bullying and discrimination as a boy. His schooling was mostly in Christian missionary boarding schools – an experience Dharmapala appears to have disliked. The dominant image of Christian missionaries in Dharmapala's writing is of an excessive and undisciplined lifestyle characterised by the consumption of alcohol and meat: 'The *padres* were great pork-eaters. I thought: "The dirt pigs eat is disgusting. These fellows must be very dirty"' (Guruge 1991 [1965]: 683).

Obeyesekere (1976) interprets Dharmapala's negative view of Christian education as reflecting the problems Buddhist students encountered in the nineteenth-century Christian-dominated education system. As Malalgoda (1976) and Gombrich and Obeyesekere (1988) point out, establishing a network of Buddhist schools was one of the major elements of Buddhist activism in late nineteenth-century Sri Lanka. Obeyesekere (1976) also suggests that Buddhist entrepreneurs like Don Carolis represented an emergent upwardly mobile class that was attempting to displace the socio-political influence of more established Sinhala Protestant families who wielded greater influence in colonial society. Other scholars, such as Amunugama (1985; 1991; 2016), go a step further and see Dharmapala as a figure representing an 'organic' rural Sinhala Buddhist ethos and its nationalist cultural emergence in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century colonial context.

These interpretations of Dharmapala are consistent with the view that the nineteenth-century 'Buddhist revival' in Sri Lanka served as a nascent nationalist movement in Sinhala society (de Silva 1981;

Dharmadasa 1992; Peebles 2006). However, recent scholarship has complicated this interpretation. Anne Blackburn's (2010) nuanced exploration of Hikkaduve Sri Sumangala – an influential scholar monk who played a key role in the Buddhist revival and was Dharmapala's teacher and mentor – suggests that many other entanglements besides opposition to colonial domination and Christian missionary activity shaped the meaning and form of Buddhism in this period, including debates over monastic control of holy sites, caste controversies and the influence of translocal Buddhist networks that extended to Southeast Asia.

Dharmapala's formal education was limited but he seems to have read widely and eclectically, if not systematically. His schooling ended at age 18 when he joined the Education Department as a clerk. In 1886 he left that job to join the Theosophists. He was attracted to the movement by the charismatic Henry Steele Olcott, the son of a Presbyterian minister, who publicly converted to Buddhism after visiting Sri Lanka in 1880 (Prothero 1996). Dharmapala's emergence as a public religious figure was facilitated by his decision to join the Theosophical Society – a decision that his family initially opposed, but that was swayed by the influence of Helena Blavatsky (Guruge 1991 [1965]), who along with Olcott was a leading figure in the global Theosophical movement.

As Malalgoda (1976) notes, the Theosophical intervention provided a crucial impetus to the Buddhist revival movement that had been initiated by Buddhist monks in the mid nineteenth century. The secular organisational skills needed to broaden the movement were provided by Olcott, who mentored Dharmapala until the pair fell out over personal and ideological disagreements. Dharmapala's break-up with Olcott and Theosophy in general was also related to Dharmapala's focus on promoting Buddhism. He had little interest in Theosophy's emphasis on forging a general alliance of Eastern religions, which Olcott saw as an authentic spiritual counterpoint to Christianity. For Dharmapala, Buddhism alone was authentic. As Prothero (1995, 298) notes, Dharmapala's increasingly anti-Hindu stance became awkward for Olcott. Dharmapala's establishment in 1891 of the Mahabodhi Society, which aimed to secure control of Buddhagaya, the place where the Buddha is believed to have attained enlightenment, foreshadowed the later divergence of Theosophical and Buddhist interests. The site was occupied by Hindu priests, and the legal proceedings initiated by Dharmapala to establish Buddhist control threatened to alienate Hindus. Olcott's support for this project was decidedly reluctant (Prothero 1996). However, although Dharmapala fell out with Olcott and the Theosophical

project proper, he maintained a lifelong relationship with Blavatsky and by extension a universalist vision of Buddhism (Kemper 2015, 59).

The universalism of Dharmapala's Buddhist vision and mission was most evident in his 1893 visit to the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago – a defining moment in his career. At the Parliament, Dharmapala portrayed Buddhism in universal terms, as a religion that had the capacity to transcend cultural and geographical divisions. This contrasted with his activism in Sri Lanka, where he portrayed Buddhism as much more particularistic and Sinhala-centric (Uyangoda 2016). This duality is not unique to Dharmapala; it is a structural feature of Sinhala nationalism, which often sees Buddhism both as a highly particularistic legacy of the Sinhala community and also as something that gives identity and location to the nation in the global order. However, Dharmapala's universalism abroad and particularism at home undermine the authenticity attributed to him in later nationalist recuperations. Rather than a die-hard nationalist, we may see a man who strategically shifts position to operate in a translocal world. It was also on this 1893 trip to Chicago that Dharmapala first made contact with Mary Foster, one of his major benefactors. By this time Dharmapala had also established contact with Edwin Arnold and Annie Besant – which places him squarely within the discourse of the 'Western' appropriation of Buddhism (Lopez 1995). In much of Dharmapala's writing, the influence of Western intellectuals and scholars is clearly evident. He was attracted to the 'scientific' status their interpretations gave Buddhism, and by the implicit and explicit anti-Christian sentiment in their work.

Parallel to Dharmapala's westward-looking imaginary was a substantial and lifelong connection to India. He first visited Sarnath, Benares and Buddhagaya in 1891 and formed the Buddhagaya Maha Bodhi Society – which became the Maha Bodhi Society – with the express aim of asserting Buddhist control over this holy site (Guruge 1991 [1965], xxxvi). At the same time, Dharmapala established a long-term relationship with the city of Calcutta, at the time the Indian colonial capital, and with the influential community of intellectuals called the Bhadrakok, whose support was significant in the eventual success of the Maha Bodhi Society (Amunugama 2016, 23). In 1892 Dharmapala established the *Maha Bodhi Journal*, which was published from Calcutta. Although Dharmapala spent a major part of his adult life in India and maintained significant relationships with Indian religious and intellectual leaders such as Swami Vivekananda and Iyothee Thass, the South Indian anti-caste activist, he was never part of the socially reformist anti-Dalit Buddhist movement led by B. R. Ambedkar – one of

the most significant modern interpretations of Buddhism in the Indian context. Uyangoda (2016) speculates that this was because of the politically conservative nature of Buddhism in Sri Lanka and its long historical links to the state and institutional structures of governance. However, such a view is shaped by the assumption that Dharmapala was a 'political' figure and a Sinhala nationalist. His lack of interest in the more politically conscious forms of Buddhist activism in India could be attributed to the fact that he was primarily a religious figure.

Dharmapala also maintained strong links with Japan. His first visit to the country was in 1889, when he accompanied Olcott on a trip seeking to unify 'southern' or what was later called Theravada Buddhism with 'northern' (Mahayana) Buddhism (Kemper 2015, 117); another dimension of the universalist aspect of Dharmapala's Buddhism. On this trip Dharmapala seems to have been overshadowed by Olcott, who had more international visibility at the time. Dharmapala's second visit was on his return from Chicago, when he was received with much greater recognition thanks to his reputation as a charismatic Buddhist missionary. This visit saw him touring Japan, giving lectures and talks and meeting with a number of influential Japanese Buddhists (Kemper 2015, 117–21). Dharmapala admired Japan as an Asian country that had achieved modernity and technological progress while preserving its 'spirituality'. He also looked to rich Japanese Buddhists to fund his Buddhist missionary activities in India – particularly in securing control of the Buddhagaya site. Though initially impressed by the Japanese negotiation of modernity within a traditional frame, on later visits he appears to have become disillusioned with what he saw as the impure practices of the Japanese priesthood, such as the consumption of liquor (Kemper 2015, 117). Dharmapala was also not very successful in securing funding for his Indian activities from Japanese donors. One of the reasons for this was that the Japanese saw India as a mythical rather than real place and were unable to reconcile their romantic notions of India with the mundane politics of monastic control for which Dharmapala was seeking funds (Kemper 2015). One significant feature of Dharmapala's connection with the Japanese was that he presented himself to them as a representative of Indian Buddhism rather than as a Sri Lankan Buddhist (Kemper 2015, 119). These transnational and shifting positions adopted by Dharmapala provide an ironic counter-commentary to his later Sinhala nationalist appropriation in post-independence and contemporary Sri Lanka.

Though based in India for much of his adult life, Dharmapala maintained many links with Sri Lanka. He made a number of extensive tours of the island. In 1886 he did a tour with Olcott which, as

the editor of his writings (Guruge 1991 [1965], xxxv) observes, was an eye opener for the young Dharmapala about the conditions of rural Buddhists – a fact that problematises the romantic notion prevalent in popular discourse and scholarship on Dharmapala that he represented a rural Buddhist culture. In 1906, having broken with Olcott and the Theosophical movement, he established the *Sinhala Bauddhaya* newspaper and the Maha Bodhi Press – marking the duality in his career of being universalist abroad and ‘nationalist’ at home. He donated private property and money inherited from his family to establishing Buddhist schools in Sri Lanka and successfully lobbied his benefactress Mrs Forster to donate to educational causes. He wrote and published extensively in English and Sinhala for Sri Lankan audiences. Much of this writing was condescending towards the Sinhala peasantry and reformist and didactic in tone when it came to the Sinhala middle classes. Dharmapala was also keen to see Buddhist monks receive a modern English-language education because he saw this type of education as vital for the global spread of the religion.

Dharmapala was never overtly politically active in Sri Lanka. He appears to have been largely marginalised by the local political elite of the time (Roberts 1997), though hagiographic post-independence accounts attribute to him a subversive political gloss (Karunaratne 1964). One of the reasons this political role is ascribed to Dharmapala owes to the 1915 anti-Muslim riots, which the colonial authorities misconceived as an anti-colonial protest (Roberts 1990). The British authorities jailed a number of prominent Sinhala and Buddhist activists, and also suspected Dharmapala of sedition. He was confined to Calcutta’s city limits for the five years from 1915 to 1920. However, despite the rhetoric of his writing and speeches, Dharmapala saw himself as a loyal subject of the British Empire (Kemper 2015, 19–21). He even donated to British efforts in the First World War by purchasing war bonds, and his tone was deferential in his correspondence with British officials. His critique of colonialism was mostly on moral rather than political grounds. As discussed in [Chapter 3](#) in relation to Bandaranaike, the Ceylonese political elite of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was politically conservative and benefited economically and socially from colonialism. In Dharmapala’s lifetime, elites did not agitate for full independence (Samaraweera 1981). Dharmapala, though not part of the political elite, cannot be abstracted from this larger social and political milieu. As Roberts puts it, ‘Anagarika Dharmapala was occupying the wings of a “cathedral” where the nave that fronted up to the “British” altar was occupied in the period 1880–1930 by personnel committed – no doubt in varying measures

to – Ceylonese nationalism’ (Roberts 1997, 1012). In the latter part of his life Dharmapala distanced himself from Sri Lanka. The last words of this man, who is today reimagined as a Sinhala nationalist, are recorded as a wish ‘to be born again in India in some noble Brahman family ... and to become a Bhikkhu to preach Dhamma to India’s millions’ (cited in Kemper 2015, 421). Ananda Guruge’s hagiographic nationalist introduction to Dharmapala’s writings includes these words but with the reference to India struck out (Guruge 1991 [1965], xliii).

Dharmapala’s vision of the Sinhala past

Dharmapala, like many other educated Sri Lankans of his time, was fascinated by the Sinhala past. He invokes it in much of his writing. These references to the past are often taken as evidence of his exclusivist Sinhala nationalist mindset. But, as I explore below, Dharmapala’s historical orientation cannot be understood in terms of how history functions in contemporary Sinhala nationalist discourse. In Dharmapala’s time the turn to history was not nationalist in the political sense it is today. One of the dominant themes in Dharmapala’s writing is the contrast between the past glory and the present apathy of the Sinhala people. A rather simple logic informs this turn to the past: if the Sinhalese were once a great nation, what is to prevent them from achieving such greatness in the present? The following passages from an article entitled ‘History of an Ancient Civilisation’ are representative of Dharmapala’s historical vision:

There exists no race on this earth today that has a more glorious, triumphant record of victory than the Sinhalese. Sons of Aryan ancestors, they built their first city and called it Anuradhapura, after the prince Anuradha and the constellation Anura. Fifty-four years before the Battle of Marathon, the Sinhalese had conquered Ceylon; nine years after the conquest of the Kingdom of Candahar by Alexander the Great; and one hundred and eleven years before the destruction of the Carthagian Power; and forty-three years before the consolidation of the Roman Empire, the Religion [sic] of the Buddha was established ...

This bright, beautiful island was made into a Paradise by the Aryan Sinhalese before its destruction was brought about by the barbaric vandals. Its people did not know irreligion. The pagan beliefs of monotheism and diabolic polytheism were unknown to the people. Christianity and polytheism are responsible for the vulgar practices of

killing animals, stealing, prostitution, licentiousness, lying and drunkenness. Read the 'History of Ceylon,' by Sir Emerson Tennent, and the 'Records of the Western World,' by Fa Hian and Hwen Thsang, for they have written what they observed. This ancient, historic, refined people, under the diabolism of vicious paganism, introduced by the British are now declining and dying away. The bureaucratic administrators, ignorant of the first principles of the natural laws of evolution, have cut down primeval forests to plant tea; have introduced opium, ganja, whisky, arrack and other alcoholic poisons; have opened saloons and drinking taverns in every village; have killed all industries and made the people indolent.

(Guruge 1991 [1965], 481–2)

A comparative perspective is immediately apparent in this extract from a booklet published in 1902 for an American audience. Sri Lankan history is narrated in terms of significant events in European history. A desire to claim what Johannes Fabian (1983) has called 'coevalness' to Europe is evident in the list of local historical events that either predate or closely coincide with ones in European antiquity. One reason for this need for comparison is the general tendency of the time to regard Europe as the universal referent of history. The very antiquity of Sinhala culture and especially its demonstrable antiquity in relation to European culture are interpreted as giving it a classical genealogy. Another more immediate reason is the way that colonial historiography represented the Sri Lankan past. As John Rogers (1990) suggests, the work of British historiographers, mostly scholar-administrators, helped to establish an authoritative narrative of the island's past by the mid nineteenth century. This historical narrative based on Pali-language *vamsas* like the *Mahavamsa* posited a three-stage model of history. It traced in Sri Lanka, as in Europe, an ancient classical civilisation that went into a kind of dark middle age because of invasion and disease. The European intervention was the logical next step in this model. Sinhala society was seen as stagnant and decadent; further progress and entry into modernity had to be facilitated by the coloniser. The two most influential historiographies of the period, William Knighton's *History of Ceylon from the Earliest Period to Present Time* (1845) and Emerson Tennent's *Ceylon* (1977 [1860]), cited above by Dharmapala, conformed to this pattern. The local intelligentsia of the period also largely accepted this narrative (Rogers (1990, 102–3).

But Dharmapala interrupts the teleology of this model. He glosses over the decline of Sinhala civilisation in precolonial times and attempts to place the blame squarely on the British administration. In

Dharmapala's scheme it is Christianity and the British who are responsible for a host of social evils that have resulted in the decline of Sinhala civilisation. The image of the Sinhala past is of a proud and conquering race – an image of virile masculinity. As Nandy (1983) has argued, one result of colonial rule was a sense of emasculation among the dominated population. The despondent images of alcoholic Sinhala people in the passage above imply a similar lack of vitality. But by turning to history Dharmapala can retrieve a positive image of the people which can be used as inspiration for the present. The supposed Aryan origins of the Sinhalese – a linguistic cleavage in the categorisation of Dravidian and Aryan languages which gained a racial dynamic in the nineteenth century (Gunawardana 1990) – provides further genealogical support.

The passage also suggests that Dharmapala is questioning the moral authority of British rule; as rulers who have failed to govern responsibly. But this does not amount to a direct challenge to colonial rule. It is more of an appeal to the colonial government to ensure the welfare of the Sinhalese. The Aryan genealogy is used to appeal to a paternalistic dimension of colonial rule, which might see certain races as being worthy of preservation purely because of their antiquity and demonstrable links to a classical heritage. The protection of primeval forests, an ecological concern that appears incongruous with the general thrust of the passage, may also possibly relate to this logic. This discourse of preservation is more explicitly articulated later in the same pamphlet:

The history of evolution can point to no other race today that has withstood the ravages of time and kept its individuality for so long a time as the Sinhalese people. More marvellous it is that there is in the same island the most primitive savage tribe on earth, known under the name of the Veddahs.

For the student of ethnology the Sinhalese stand as the representatives of Aryan civilisation and the Veddah as the product of primitive savagery, and to witness the spectacle of an ancient race slowly dying out under the despotic administration of Anglo-Indian bureaucracy is indeed sad. In the name of Humanity and Progress, we ask the British people to save the Sinhalese race from the jaws of the demon of alcohol and opium let loose by Christian England for the sake of filthy lucre.

(Guruge 1991 [1965], 483)

The Veddahs are considered the island's indigenous inhabitants. Their representation as primitive or savage people, Obeyesekere (n.d.) suggests,

has a colonial genealogy in the way that European writers like Robert Knox categorised them as wild men. Dharmapala appears to be drawing upon this colonial sociology and presents Sri Lanka almost in terms of an ethnographic menagerie. The implication in the passage seems to be that both the Sinhalese and Veddahs are worthy of preservation; the former for their culture and civilisation and the latter for their primitiveness. The coexistence of these two groups also serves to highlight the civilised nature of the Sinhalese and adds further justification to the call for their protection.

But the discourse of preservation in Dharmapala also coexists with one that desires to see 'progress'. This is a seemingly contradictory impulse but it is premised on an understanding that progress will not endanger the essential and unchanging characteristics of Sinhala identity – in effect a belief that the 'authenticity' of the Sinhala people will not suffer. This is partly because Dharmapala believed that industrial/material aspects of life were not something alien to Sinhala culture. For instance, he speaks of how '[i]n the eleventh century after Christ the Sinhalese had a regular navy, a fleet of sailing vessels which was used for fighting purposes, and all the country round about the coast seemed "like one great workshop constantly busied with the constant building of ships"' (Dharmapala 1907, 287). Dharmapala also associated Buddhism, something seen as uniquely Eastern or Sri Lankan, with a discourse of science and progress (McMahan 2004).

Dharmapala could express admiration for industrial Europe but at the same time separate it from European culture, which he equated with Christianity – a religion he saw as non-modern and regressive. Dharmapala is able to make this critique because there were a number of discourses that supported it at the time. A strong fin-de-siècle rationalist–scientific discourse was challenging the place of Christianity in the public sphere, but at the same time Buddhism was being constructed as rational and scientific thanks to the work of Orientalist scholars within the larger discourse of the Oriental Renaissance (Lopez 1995, 6–10; McMahan 2004). The work of Theosophists also gave Buddhism and other Eastern religions an avant-garde position in relation to Christianity, though Theosophy's emphasis was more mystical than scientific (Owen 2004, 6–8). The following passage is representative of Dharmapala's positive view of industry and science:

Europe is progressive. Her religion is kept in the background for one day in the week, and for six days her peoples are following the dictates of modern science ...

The Sinhalese, Bengalese, Madrasees, Bombayites, Panjabees, Burmese, Chinese and Koreans that go to Europe and America to study in the colleges [sic] law and medicine return after several years thoroughly Europeanised. The Japanese are the only practical people who have sent their sons to learn the technical sciences. They are reaping the fruits of practical wisdom.

(Guruge 1991 [1965], 717–18)

There is admiration for Europe because of its material/scientific advancement. The separation of religion from the public sphere is seen as positive in Europe. This is only because Dharmapala views Europe as Christian and Christianity as a non-modern: ‘The mythical stories of the Jewish Bible, have no scientific foundations. They are unfit for the advanced thinkers of the 20th century’ (Guruge 1991 [1965], 717). But if the religion is Buddhism it need not be hidden away. The Japanese are held up as a positive model because they have been able to achieve this fusion of Buddhism and indigenous culture with material progress. Although Dharmapala became disillusioned with Japanese society and religiosity later in life, the ideal of a modern, technologically advanced society that remains true to its Buddhist spiritual values seems to be something Dharmapala held on to as an aspiration. Overall, Dharmapala’s vision of Sinhaleanness appears to have been a reformist one – divided between pride in a glorious Sinhala past and embarrassment with present impoverishment. Authenticity signals a return to lost grandeur.

Buddhism and Sinhala identity

Dharmapala’s identification of Buddhism as an inextricable part of Sinhala identity is another important aspect of his imaginary. Buddhism in Dharmapala is an index of authenticity – in short, to be truly Sinhala one also needs to be Buddhist. Historically, this represents a narrowing of the definition of Sinhala identity, which emerged with the Buddhist revivalist movement in the mid nineteenth century. It anticipates the politicised Sinhala Buddhist discourse of authenticity that emerged in the mid twentieth century but is also distinct. Although Sinhala Buddhism denotes a certain kind of cultural and moral authenticity for Dharmapala, it does not translate into the kind of Sinhala Buddhist majoritarianism that became visible in the twentieth century. Also, as Roberts (2000, 114) observes, many of Dharmapala’s contemporaries were Sinhala Christians who promoted Sinhala identity without the

Buddhist dimension. Even within Dharmapala's writing, as I will discuss later, there is ambiguity. Broadly inclusive terms like 'Ceylonese' exist alongside more exclusive understandings of the nation as Sinhala or Sinhala Buddhist. Given this context, the sharpest vision of a Sinhala Buddhist nation is visible when Dharmapala writes about the past rather than about his present.

The conflation of Sinhala identity with Buddhism emerges through the Sinhala historical grand narrative that began to take shape in the nineteenth century. The *Mahavamsa*, the main Pali-language chronicle used by European scholars and later adopted by local scholars and historians as a primary precolonial historical source, was written by monks and has a distinct Buddhist bias. As Kemper (1990, 188–90) suggests, it is a didactic work that narrates a mytho-historical account of the island's past ordered by a vision of an ideal moral and political order between the king, the *sangha* and the people. A good king in this vision is one who governs according to Buddhist principles and is able to unify the island. It also conflates the relationship between king and people. Any nationalism based on the *Mahavamsa*, therefore, Jonathan Spencer (1990, 6) argues, will have an inherent Buddhist bias.

As a number of scholars have suggested, the reification of the *Mahavamsa* as a historiographic text and the use of modern conceptual categories like nation and ethnicity in reading it have suppressed the heterogeneity of precolonial identity discourse on the island (Gunawardana 1990; Rogers 1990). Dharmapala was heavily influenced by the *Mahavamsa* narrative. In an article entitled 'Buddhism, Past and Present', which he contributed to a coffee-table book called *Twentieth Century Impressions of Ceylon* (1907), the relationship between Buddhism, the nation and Sinhala identity is clearly articulated:

In the year 237 B.C. the Tamil invader Elala [Elara], usurped the Sinhalese throne ... The Tamils fiercely antagonistic to Buddhism, committed acts of vandalism in the sacred city of Anuradhapura, and – for a time – there was none to deter them. At this crisis there arose a wonderful prince, whose father was then reigning in Southern Ceylon ... Particulars of [his] birth are given in the Mahavansa [sic], chap. 22. This young prince Gamini Abhaya [Dutugemunu], when he had reached maturity made war upon the usurper, Elala. After a series of pitched battles, the Sinhalese prince defeated Elala in single combat and slew him on the battlefield. Then began the building of magnificent temples (monuments), by the conqueror, who, reducing [sic] Lanka (Ceylon) under one rule,