

the Donoughmore Commission in 1931. Such converts were derisively called 'Donoughmore Buddhists' (Ames 1963, 45–53). The history of Bandaranaike's extended family, which had changed religious persuasion with successive colonial rulers (Portuguese, Dutch and British), probably added to this public perception (Gooneratne 1986, 3–6).

If the popular appeal of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism is to a mytho-history combining land, religion and race (Bartholomeusz and de Silva 1998; Spencer 1990), in Bandaranaike's writing this remains a peripheral theme. The dominant conception of Buddhism in Bandaranaike is of a rationalist and ethical discourse that operates as a spiritual complement to modern life. In Bandaranaike's writing, Buddhism is largely seen as a universalist discourse with no particular ethno-cultural grounding. Nonetheless, this understanding of Buddhism is at times interrupted by a more exclusive and ethno-culturally grounded idea of Sinhala Buddhism. When Bandaranaike reflects upon his own beliefs the former dominates, but when he attempts to relate Buddhism to the nation the latter becomes more prominent. These two aspects of Buddhism exist in an uneasy dialectic in Bandaranaike's writing. This tension is apparent even though his actions in the public arena shaped the institutionalisation of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism more than those of any other political figure before him.

In an article from the early 1930s, entitled 'Why I Became a Buddhist', Bandaranaike seeks to explain his choice of religion even though 'a man's religious convictions are surely ... matters he shrinks from exposing and parading before the public gaze' (Bandaranaike 1963, 287). Yet in his public role as a national leader this public-private distinction collapses and private choices are invested with larger public importance. Bandaranaike observes that he wrote the article in response to numerous requests to address the issue of why he converted to Buddhism. Though he does not reveal who made such requests or why they were made, one could surmise that suspicion about the motives of his conversion played some role. Bandaranaike seems self-conscious about public perceptions and stresses the personal nature of his choice: 'I proceed to a dissection and analysis of the innermost workings of my mind and heart on this theme. I hope to conduct that operation in as dispassionate a manner as possible' (Bandaranaike 1963, 287).

Bandaranaike begins by talking about how Christianity was an ascribed inheritance. He suggests the religion was never appealing to him because of the restrictions placed on individual freedom by an authoritative and distant God figure. 'While acquiring for Christ a sort of personal affection as towards a kind elder brother ... I never was able to attain

a conception of God' (Bandaranaike 1963, 287). The narrative suggests that the intuitive ambiguity about Christianity in childhood hardened into scepticism at Oxford, where he encountered various rational critiques of the existence of God. Bandaranaike largely agrees with the rationalist understanding of theism – as something originating in the human imagination from the fear of the unknown – but argues that this critique is limited because it does not take into account the historical continuity of religion in human society. He refers to George Bernard Shaw's *The Adventures of the Black Girl in Her Search for God* (2007 [1932]) – a story about Christian conversion and disillusionment – and agrees with the text's interpretation that the idea of God is man-made and historically contingent. However, he argues that religion continues to exist because it serves a functional purpose in human society. Quoting one of his favourite Roman proverbs – '*homo homini lupus*' (Bandaranaike 1963, 288) (man is a wolf to man) – Bandaranaike makes the familiar argument that religion provides a necessary moral counterbalance to the power of human intellect, which, if left unchecked, can bring about its own destruction. The narrative posits this as a dilemma: the idea of a supernatural God figure is problematic because it can be seen as a human construct, but the denial of God does not obviate the need for religion. The resolution for Bandaranaike lies in a rationalist conception of Buddhism: '[In Buddhist] doctrine ... there is no need for man to be dependent on the will of God ... It is left to me to say that the Buddha Dhamma [doctrine] has emerged triumphant from the test of my reasoning' (Bandaranaike 1963, 290–1).

The article as a whole stresses that Bandaranaike's conversion to Buddhism was a deeply personal choice informed by his rational approach to life. Significantly, it makes no attempt to suggest that he adopted Buddhism as part of his cultural heritage. Two dominant themes, Buddhism's rationalism and its ability to act as an ethical discourse in modern society, permeate Bandaranaike's views on Buddhism. In a public address in 1951, entitled 'Religion and Human Progress', Bandaranaike analyses the role of Buddhism in what he sees as a largely secular, science-dominated and capitalist world order. He refers to James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* (1995 [1890]) – another indication of the rationalist framework in which Bandaranaike approaches the idea of religion – and argues that Frazer's evolutionary perspective of religion is largely accurate. But he disagrees with Frazer's belief that as human civilisation progresses the need for religion will altogether disappear and be replaced by science.

In this speech Bandaranaike argues that religion will serve the functional purpose of being a 'protective coloring for the human mind'

(Bandaranaike 1963, 311). He does not invoke Buddhism as a particular cultural legacy of the Sinhalese. He is also careful to note that religion as a whole, not just Buddhism, has an important role in the modern world. Turning again to one of his favourite themes, that the materialism of capitalism has precipitated a moral crisis in modern society, he contends that 'Asia had for some hundreds of years been subject to western capitalist imperialism, and her great religions languished during this period of servitude' (Bandaranaike 1963, 312). When he calls for a Buddhist revival in Sri Lanka he also notes that 'You will remember that I stressed earlier the importance of the religious idea as such. So that Buddhists, in performing this task [of revival] for Buddhism, should not do injury to any other religion' (Bandaranaike 1963, 313).

A more ambiguous position regarding Buddhism and its relationship to Sri Lanka emerges in a national address Bandaranaike made on Vesak in 1953, three years before his ascension to power on a Sinhala Buddhist political platform. Vesak is a crucial day in the Buddhist calendar. The Buddha's birth, enlightenment and death are thought to have occurred on this date. For Sinhala Buddhists it has a further ethno-cultural significance because in nationalist readings of the *Mahavamsa* mytho-history the founding father of the community, Prince Vijaya, is said to have arrived in Sri Lanka on the day of the Buddha's death. Historian K. M. de Silva (1981, 4), though sceptical of the chronicle's chronology, upholds the ideological link between land, religion and race by arguing that the *Mahavamsa* foretells that Sri Lanka and the Sinhala race will be the future protectors of his doctrine.

Bandaranaike's opening words in the radio broadcast move from what is arguably universal to the particular:

This day on which the Buddha was born, attained Enlightenment, and passed away, is not only sacred to all Buddhists generally, but has a special significance for the Sinhalese race, because of the Vesak Full-Moon Poya day landing of Vijaya in Sri Lanka. We are told by the Mahawamsa that the Buddha Himself entrusted the care of this land and the nascent race to God Sakra.

(Bandaranaike 1963, 318)

This passage is resonant of what Gananath Obeyesekere (1995) calls the tension between Buddhist doctrine and Buddhist history. Writing for *Fundamentalisms Comprehended* edited by Martin R. Marty and R. Scott Appleby (1995), Obeyesekere makes a comparative argument that, unlike the monotheistic religions of West Asia, Buddhism does not

have a doctrinal basis that can support a modern fundamentalist project. Obeyesekere contends that Buddhist doctrine carries no particular validation of the idea of forming a ‘just’ community – something he argues is central to a fundamentalist project – and also no doctrinal basis for making such communities in the world through “‘just” wars or “holy” wars’ (Obeyesekere 1995, 233). However, Obeyesekere argues that Buddhist history often sanctions violence, as in the *Mahavamsa* where the iconic Sinhala King Dutugemunu’s killing of his enemies is justified because it is done to protect Buddhist institutions. Obeyesekere’s attempt to draw a neat distinction between Buddhist doctrine and Buddhist history is problematic. It replicates the demarcation between a pure doctrinal Buddhism and an impure popular version, which is evident in the Orientalist–rationalist appropriation of Buddhism in the nineteenth century. The impossibility of this distinction is visible in Sri Lankan history, where Buddhism has played a central role in the state. Bandaranaike’s speech reproduces the tension of attempting to separate doctrine from history.

Although the extract above moves from a universal Buddhism to a more particularistic one, the entire speech oscillates between these polarities. Having invoked the narrative of the Sinhala Buddhist past, Bandaranaike does not dwell upon the historical or particularistic relevance of the religion to the Sinhala community. Instead he embarks on an explication based on the kind of rationalist understanding of the religion expressed in his other writing. At the end of the speech, there is a movement from this universal–rationalist aspect to the more particularistic, and once again back to the universal. Adopting a reformist tone, Bandaranaike urges a return to the doctrinal basis of the religion and argues that such a return

shall not only more adequately do homage to our Great Teacher, not only benefitting ourselves individually, but also fostering the true interests of our sore-stricken race, which the Buddha Himself honoured with His compassionate concern.

Lastly, we shall be able to rise above the bounds of nationality, to embrace all life itself and sincerely to say, and say most fittingly on this day of all days, those simple and oft-repeated, but magnificent words: ‘May all living beings be well and happy’.

(Bandaranaike 1963, 321)

The religion is once again identified in terms of its relevance to a particular group – the Sinhala race. However, the race will benefit not

simply because the Buddha blessed it but because the fundamentals of the doctrine are adhered to – values such as compassion which are in fact universal. Paradoxically, therefore, embracing the Buddhist ideal will lead to the transcendence of the very idea of ‘race’, which is posited as synonymous with ‘nationality’. As the words at the end of the passage suggest, the Buddhist ‘prayer’ for happiness and health is for all human beings and not limited to a particular community. Such a limitation could be read as a violation of the religion’s ethical principles.

This interplay between the universal and the particular is not a tension unique to Buddhism. Arguably all religions have such a universal–particular dichotomy. As movements arising from particular socio-historical contexts they are marked by the traces of their historicity, yet at the same time they desire to overcome such socio-historical specificity to become transcendental discourses. Bandaranaike’s speech, though embedded in the particular historical context of Sri Lanka, demonstrates this more general feature of religious discourse. But read within Sri Lanka’s specific ethno-religious history, and articulated by a political leader who is clearly aware of its political significance, this example of the universal–particularist dynamic suggests a man who is trying to present himself as both transnational and nationalist. Though this is a position Bandaranaike can sustain rhetorically, it is something he failed to do politically. The damaging consequences of Bandaranaike’s implementation of the Sinhala Only policy and his courting of the Sinhala Buddhist movement are still felt in Sri Lanka today.

## **The Sinhala-only debate: Bandaranaike as the advocate of Sinhala interests**

The most defining legacy of Bandaranaike’s political career was the establishment of Sinhala as the sole official language of the country, a policy that led to the institutionalisation of Sinhala nationalism. Before Bandaranaike came to power in 1956, Prime Minister D. S. Senanayake’s regime had initiated programmes that exclusively benefited the Sinhala majority, such as the irrigation schemes and resettlement of Sinhala farmers mentioned earlier in this chapter. But the enactment of the Sinhala language policy was a symbolic and institutional act around which Sinhala and Tamil nationalism decisively crystallised separate visions of nationhood. In the Sinhala nationalist narrative it signifies a long-awaited realisation of the promise of decolonisation. For Tamil nationalism it signifies both the independent nation’s symbolic and

institutional refusal to recognise Tamil interests, and the accompanying threat of cultural and institutional marginalisation. The policy also marks the beginning of a process that increasingly folded the notion of 'nation' into a mono-ethnic and mono-religious Sinhala Buddhist discourse. In Bandaranaike's Vesak speech we saw a rhetorical slide from the Sinhala race to the idea of nation. This became an institutional reality in the decades after 1950. As Jayadeva Uyangoda notes, the Sinhala term for 'nation', *jathiya*, connotes both race and nation, and the Sinhala term *jathiya godanageema* (developing the nation), which gained currency in the 1970s, came to mean developing the Sinhala as opposed to the Sri Lankan nation (Uyangoda 1994, 13).

Here I look at the speeches Bandaranaike made in the legislature while the Official Languages Act was being debated. Though Bandaranaike invokes a number of elements that relate to Sinhala nationalist consciousness, his rhetorical strategies at times position him at a distance from the very exclusionary ideological interests he represents. The consciousness of a majoritarian Sinhala right to the nation informs these speeches. But the immediate reasons for making Sinhala the single official language, the fear that Sinhala language and culture are under threat, is something Bandaranaike seems hesitant to endorse.

The need to vernacularise a number of aspects of public and institutional life had been proposed as early as 1932 with the adoption of the Donoughmore constitutional reforms (Dharmadasa 1992, 239). Universal franchise in 1931, and hence the need for mass political appeal, was one of the main reasons the local political elite adopted the promotion of vernaculars as a political cause; for most of them English remained affectively and practically their primary language. As a result of the structural political changes of the Donoughmore reforms, the need to use vernacular languages in law courts and administration and to displace English from its pre-eminent position was expressed in motions presented to the State Council in 1932 and 1936 (Dharmadasa 1992, 240–8). However, in the earlier phases of this indigenising movement, called the *swabasha* (local languages) movement, the emphasis was on both Tamil and Sinhala. It was only in 1943 that J. R. Jayawardene, who in 1978 became the first executive president of Sri Lanka, made the first State Council proposal to make Sinhala the single official language of the country, though this proposal was later amended to include Tamil (Coperahewa 2009, 104). Most historians and linguists tend to read this shift towards an exclusively Sinhala position as a natural outcome of universal suffrage (de Silva 1981; Dharmadasa 1992; Coperahewa 2009), but such a reading fails to take into account the early history of

the language movement, in which both Sinhala and Tamil politicians supported both languages. The shift to Sinhala, as Bandaranaike's career illustrates, was a politically expedient move. He supported granting equal status to both languages in 1943, when the original Official Languages Act was proposed, and maintained this position till 1953 (Wilson 1994, 58). It was only with the prospect of the 1956 general election that Bandaranaike began openly campaigning on a Sinhala Only platform.

In speeches made in parliament in 1955, before his election victory, and in 1956 following it, Bandaranaike unequivocally advocated that Sinhala be made the single official language. In making his case Bandaranaike drew heavily upon some cardinal elements of the dominant Sinhala nationalist narrative, projecting the Sinhalese as a threatened community attempting to assert its rightful position in the nation:

... the fears of the Sinhalese, I do not think can be brushed aside as completely frivolous. I believe there are a not inconsiderable number of Tamils in this country out of a population of eight million. Then there are forty or fifty million [Tamil] people in the adjoining country. What about all this Tamil literature, Tamil teachers, even films, papers, and magazines? ... I do not think [there is] an unjustified fear of the inexorable shrinking of the Sinhalese language. It is a fear that cannot be brushed aside.

(Bandaranaike 1963, 394–5)

This passage is a clear expression of the insecurities invoked by Sinhala nationalists to rationalise their desire for hegemony. Scholars like Neil DeVotta have called this aspect of Sinhala nationalist consciousness a 'majority with a minority complex' (DeVotta 2004, 62). One of the fears invoked here is the threat of pan-Dravidianism. The perceived ethno-cultural affinities between Sri Lankan Tamils and Tamils in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu are seen as a potential threat that could swamp the cultural and political identity of the numerically smaller Sinhala group. Thus, though a clear numerical majority in Sri Lanka, the Sinhalese see themselves as a minority in the regional context. But as the first line of the quotation above suggests – 'these fears of the Sinhalese, I do not think can be brushed aside as completely frivolous' – there is an element of exaggeration to these claims which Bandaranaike implicitly acknowledges. He presents the Sinhala perspective but at the same time maintains some distance from it. A comparison of Bandaranaike's comments with those of Sri Lankan historian K. M. de Silva, writing just over two decades later on the same subject, reveals the continuity

of such Sinhala nationalist thinking. This comparison also reveals commonalities in how the 'liberal' Sinhala intelligentsia invoke such popular nationalist polemic but at the same time maintain a distance that allows them to appear more liberal or enlightened. De Silva writes in *A History of Sri Lanka*,

The fact is that the Sinhalese, although an overwhelming majority of the population of the island, nevertheless have a minority complex vis-à-vis the Tamils. They feel encircled by the more than 50 million Tamil-speaking people who inhabit the present-day Tamilnadu and Sri Lanka. Within Sri Lanka the Sinhalese outnumber the Tamils by more than three to one; but they in turn are outnumbered by nearly six to one by the Tamil-speaking people of South Asia.

Historical tradition and geography separate Tamils of Sri Lanka and Tamilnadu from each other, and in the early years of Sri Lanka's independence the Tamils of the North and East of the island had showed little inclination to identify themselves with the Tamils of Tamilnadu. The only link between the two groups was language. Nevertheless, the Sinhalese feared this possibility, and the campaign for federalism aggravated these fears.

(De Silva 1981, 513–14)

De Silva writes these words as contextual background to explain the Sinhala Only Act of 1956 and the resulting ethnic violence. Though they acknowledge that such claims may have no realistic basis – since historically and politically the Tamils of Sri Lanka do not identify themselves with the Tamils of India – they nevertheless subtly legitimise the Sinhalese fear of Tamil domination. To paraphrase this, if rather crudely, it is as if the historian is saying, 'I do not completely agree with these fears but I can appreciate the perspective of the Sinhalese.'

A similar dynamic is evident in Bandaranaike's legislative speech made in favour of Sinhala-only in 1956. The arguments are similar to the those in his 1955 speech:

They [the Sinhala people] felt that as the Tamil language was spoken by so many millions in other countries, and possessed a much wider literature, and as the Tamil-speaking people had every means of propagating their literature and culture, it would have an advantage over Sinhalese which was spoken only by a few million people in this country ...



These were all factors that created the feeling that whereas the Tamil language did not run any real risk of disappearance, although given a position of parity, the Sinhalese language in fact did. People may or may not agree with that point of view, but at least take this as fact, that the vast majority of the Sinhalese felt that way very strongly. That at least is a fact. Whether you consider them to have been absolutely justified is another question.

(Bandaranaike 1963, 418–19)

Though one may be cautious about reading too much into it, the use of the third-person pronoun, ‘they’, is significant. Rhetorically, it places Bandaranaike at a distance from the Sinhala people on whose behalf he is speaking. This rhetorical distance also relates to the ideological distance at the end of the passage. Bandaranaike acknowledges that there is a Sinhala perception of a Tamil threat and that this perception is an important factor in giving credence to the Sinhalese refusal to grant the Tamil language equal status. Whether this threat has some factual basis is something that Bandaranaike leaves for the listener to decide. This kind of distance between Bandaranaike and the popular demand for Sinhala Only was also visible historically.

This distancing strategy renders the credibility of Bandaranaike’s argument problematic. He is advocating the implementation of a policy that would alienate a large portion of the population simply on the basis of a perception. Conversely, had Bandaranaike closely identified with the Sinhala position, his policy justification could have been potentially stronger. But such identification would have positioned him as accepting ‘parochial’ and ‘irrational’ fears, which would have been inconsistent with the kind of liberal and rational public image he sought to cultivate. James Manor’s (1989) political biography presents Bandaranaike as a liberal with a utopian life vision who for reasons of political expediency capitulated to majoritarian demands. As Sankaran Krishna (1999) argues, this disjuncture between a liberal, cosmopolitan self-identity and a public-political role that promotes exclusive majoritarian ideals is common to many Sri Lankan as well as South Asian political leaders. Krishna suggests this could be understood in terms of the ways the post-colonial nation views the state apparatus as an instrument to be used to redress injustices of colonialism. Within the historical imaginary that runs through Bandaranaike’s thinking, and Sinhala nationalism in general, the precolonial nation is understood to be a Sinhala one. Thus the injustices of colonialism were visited upon a Sinhala nation and

decolonisation needs to address Sinhala grievances. The interests of other communities remain peripheral.

Bandaranaike's liberal elitist nationalism also underscores the protean nature of nationalist discourse. While Bandaranaike's adoption of national dress, Buddhism and using the Sinhala language in public oratory point to his attempts to authenticate himself, his engagement with the discourse of authenticity appears to have been superficial. For instance, to the extent to which Bandaranaike was affectively connected to mid twentieth-century social and cultural trends relating to the Sinhala language is unclear in his writing. There is no reference to the thought of Munidasa Cumaratunga, who led the *hela* (indigenous) movement advocating an extreme form of language loyalty which sought to purify the Sinhala language of all foreign influences, including those of Sanskrit (Coperahewa 2011). In its early phase in the 1930s the movement's emphasis was largely linguistic, but from the late 1930s until Cumaratunga's death in 1944 *hela* became an ethno-linguistic discourse that advocated an autochthonous theory of Sinhala origin, which contrasted with the popular allochthonous theory that traces the Sinhala race to North India and the arrival of Vijaya (Coperahewa 2011, 7). Cumaratunga played a key role in making language a central concern in Sinhala nationalist thinking. The absence of Cumaratunga from Bandaranaike's thinking is curious. When Bandaranaike formed the *Sinhala Maha Sabha* in 1936 he wanted to change the name to *Swadesiya Maha Sabha* (Great Association of the Indigenes) to gain the support of non-Sinhala communities but Cumaratunga defeated this motion (Coperahewa 2012: 31). Bandaranaike was therefore clearly aware of Cumaratunga and his linguistic politics but does not seem to have seriously engaged with them. This is suggestive of the incongruity in the ways that members of the elite like Bandaranaike exploited discourses they felt had popular currency and political legitimacy but did not relate to these discourses affectively or engage with them substantively.

## Conclusion

Bandaranaike's unresolved turn to authenticity reflects a larger dilemma in elite political culture in modern Sri Lanka. Early in his political career he sought authenticity by claiming racial coequality with the British upper classes. Subsequently the focus shifted to a kind of Gandhian organicity and critique of modernity. In Buddhism, Bandaranaike seems to combine

the two – in a discourse that provides anchorage in a sense of hoary authenticity but at the same time accesses a rationalist, modern outlook. In backing the discriminatory Sinhala language policy, he appears unconvinced by the Sinhala narrative of beleaguerment but nevertheless supports it for political gain. Faced with the necessity to engage in mass-based politics in a decolonising context, elite Sinhala politicians turned to what they saw as a common cultural heritage they shared with the people. In essence this was an idealised vision of culture fashioned in the nexus between colonial knowledge production and its appropriation by nationalist thinkers. The movement towards authenticity also remains, as in the *perahera* short story and its protagonist's removal of his shirt, at the level of a change in external markers. One could, if somewhat unkindly, argue that Bandaranaike adopted native dress but cognitively and affectively remained anglophile – albeit inflected by a sense of cosmopolitan decolonisation.

It is, ironically, as part of the idea of a transcendental Sinhala collective consciousness that Bandaranaike the postcolonial martyr becomes important to later developments in Sinhala nationalist discourse. As we shall see in the [next chapter](#), Gunadasa Amarasekara – one of the intellectual architects of possibly the most effective and intellectually rigorous expression of Sinhala nationalist thinking, the *Jathika Chintanaya* movement (loosely translating as 'National Consciousness/Philosophy') – argues that Bandaranaike instinctively tapped into a millennia-old Sinhala Buddhist consciousness (Amarasekara 1980). Amarasekara makes this claim as part of a grand teleology of postcolonial Sinhala nationalist revival in which Anagarika Dharmapala is the founding father figure and Bandaranaike his successor.

There is irony in Amarasekara's attempt to show Bandaranaike, who struggled to fashion a notion of authenticity, tapping into an organic sense of the authentic. This irony is intrinsic to the reality of the postcolonial afterlife of authenticity. Sinhala nationalism, like other nationalisms based on a precolonial cultural imaginary, such as *Hindutva* in India, is a prisoner to this imagination. This story of the constant shaping and reshaping of authenticity points to an intimate relationship between nationalism and the notion of authenticity. Although it is easy to argue that Bandaranaike 'used' or 'exploited' authenticity, what is clear is that he was shaped and dominated by this discourse as well. The persistence and influence of this discourse as a structural feature of Sinhala cultural and political discourse become more clearly apparent in Amarasekara's writing, where authenticity is an overarching concern that shapes his aesthetic and political imagination.

## 5

# Gunadasa Amarasekara: the life and death of authentic things

## Introduction

The layout of an ancient Sinhala kingdom came to Piyadasa's mind as he walked along the lake bund in the dusk. Wasn't that layout still well preserved here? On one side the lake bordered by the distant hills. On the other side the large paddy fields fed by the waters of the lake. The blue green of these paddies stretched as far as the eye could see. Houses were located in little islands amidst the paddies. All of this dominated by the massive stupa that rose embracing the sky.

(Amarasekara 1992, 19)

These thoughts occur to Piyadasa, an educated rural Sinhala youth, who is the main character of one of Gunadasa Amarasekara's novels, *Inimage Ihalata* (Up the Ladder) (1992). It invokes both an aesthetic and political imagination that took shape in the late 1950s and informed many aspects of Sinhala social and political life well into the 1980s. It draws upon but also reconfigures an immanent structure of feeling that has characterised the Sinhala nationalist imagination for well over a century and has shaped significant aspects of Sinhala social and political life, including state policies on economics, development and culture. The essence of Sinhala identity in this thinking lies in the village – in its organicity and in the morality represented by its people; at the same time, the imprint of a grander civilizational legacy from the past can be traced in the village. This is also a discourse deeply intertwined with the notion of *apekama*, the idea of an essential Sinhalaness, or authenticity, which can be traced as an unbroken narrative over a 2,500-year history.

In Gunadasa Amarasekara's writing the idea of Sinhala authenticity plays a foundational role. For Amarasekara authenticity is both an aesthetic and political category, and the aesthetics of authenticity are inseparable from its politics. What we saw in Dharmapala and Bandaranaike as a scattered discourse of authenticity, constantly shifting between the universal and the particular, the personal and the political, and the historical and the contemporary, becomes a more clearly articulated and defined postcolonial politics of authenticity. As we shall see, the historical moment Amarasekara occupies is also central to the emergence of authenticity as a foundational category. In the decades following the 1950s the institutionalisation of Sinhala nationalism gained rapid momentum and Amarasekara's writing is a cultural barometer of Sinhala nationalism's postcolonial vicissitudes. But his writing is not just a reflection of Sinhala nationalism. It also seeks to directly intervene in and shape the historical destiny of a nation. It begins with postcolonial euphoria and a vision for building an 'authentic' Sinhala nation. In the 1980s disillusionment sets in, signalling what I identify as a crisis of authenticity. Amarasekara's career marks the crystallisation and high point of authenticity as a cultural and political discourse, but it then witnesses authenticity's decline and death.

## **Amarasekara's early career and the politics of Sinhala cultural nationalism**

Gunadasa Amarasekara was born in 1929 in Yatalamatta in the southern district of Galle about 72 miles south of Colombo, an area often referred to as the 'deep south' in political discourse, and one that served as a locus of post-independence Sinhala nationalism (Orjuela 2009, 151). He was educated at Mahinda College in Galle and later at Nalanda College in Colombo – both schools associated with Buddhist middle-class education and the legacies of the Buddhist revival. He later entered the University of Peradeniya to study dentistry. He became a dental surgeon and spent some time in England doing postgraduate work. During his time at Peradeniya, Amarasekara emerged as a leading voice in Sinhala poetry and prose and was closely associated with Ediriweera Sarachchandra (1914–96), a pioneering post-independence Sinhala intellectual, literary critic, writer and dramatist. Later Amarasekara was also influenced by Martin Wickramasinghe (1890–1976), one of the most prolific and significant mid twentieth-century Sinhala writers, who is credited with establishing the novel as a major prose genre in Sinhala.