

[READ: 6.2]

THE LOST SHIPS TRILOGY -2

The Mansions of the sea

It was 1930, and a large crowd had gathered, reverent and joyful on the beach at Dodanduwa. None knew that they were last witnessing the end of an era.

Only a few miles north of Galle, Dodanduwa was then a modest port of call for ships from the west coast of India and for the Maldivian *buggalows* calling at other such ports strung along the south western coast of the country. Long past, now, are the days when these sailors spoke to the Sinhala people in *Divehi*, a derivative from Sinhala and yet close enough to it to be understood in Ceylon, but there is still a “Customs Road” and the ruins of a 19th century Customs’ Post and warehouse. And only the people of Dodanduwa remember her as the last home of the *yathra dhony*, or *maha-oruwa*. These were craft unique to the country, and the last product of the logboat technology of Sri Lanka. Seventy-five to hundred foot freighters, they were rigged with jib, main and mizzen sails, rudder and a sturdy outrigger – their signature feature. By 1930 they were essentially cargo ships though, in the distant past, merchants, mariners and monks had taken passage in them to countries fringing the Indian Ocean, if not farther. They were built entirely of wood, by traditional ship-builders using traditional technology.

The crowd that day in 1930, had gathered to see such a ship being launched. She must have taken time to build and must have been a substantial investment. But two friends – one an entrepreneur and the other a seaman – had joined forces to build and this vessel that, though no one knew it, was fated to be the last of her breed. Kariyavasam Patuvata Vithanage Don Siyadoris de Silva, land owner, and Punchi Sinno *Marakkalaehe*, mariner, the *Amugoda oruva*, would do sail fair and do brisk business with south India and the Maldives. Almost everybody in the village had gathered, for these ships were the community’s pride and there were the

impromptu versifiers composing instant ballads to mark her maiden voyage, to Male. Even after more than seventy-five years, some verses have survived:

<i>Gaman yanna naekatin oruva baa</i>	<i>geney</i>
<i>Saman deiyanta puda panduru baenda</i>	<i>geney</i>
<i>Viman sagarey kanu mul soya</i>	<i>geney</i>
<i>Apit yamuva haema deviyanta vaenda</i>	<i>geney</i>

“Auspiciously have we launched our vessel
And made our offerings to god Saman of Adam’s Peak.
Let us now worship all the gods as we go -
In search of the mansions of the sea.”

No god, alas! heard their pious prayers.

She must have hoisted sail on her maiden voyage using the favouring winds of the North-East monsoon. Her destination: the southern atolls of the Maldivian chain. Racing, night and day under full-bellied sails before a following wind, she made good time to her first port of call, Male. There she discharged and sold her cargo.

Whatever happened to her thereafter, we can only piece together from scant surviving memory. It is more than likely that she joined the local ships in the busy inter-island trade, using every opportunity to recoup the cost of her construction. To the Maldivians the seas around them are not barriers but highways between islands. But in the south, the sea is not always a lovely tourist paradise. Sometime the sea is always in turmoil. There are channels through which the monsoon driven waves roar through, rearing up and plunging, frighteningly, to seemingly bottomless troughs. It takes seamen born to the sea, sailing seemingly frail craft built for these seas, to navigate them. How did the *yathra*, cope with these waters ? Was it in these waters, or on the reefs of Male that the proud *Amugoda Oruwa* foundered? For that was her ultimate fate, prayers to gods notwithstanding. We don’t know when and where she came to grief or what had really happened: all that Dodanduwa knew was that she was gone longer that she should. Each

day, the horizon would be scanned for her, but never was she sighted. Never did she come home again. Over time, news filtered through of her foundering on a reef, with the loss of all her crew. It was a cruel blow. Sad were the dirges sung in Dodanduwa, reliving the euphoria of her launching:

<i>Metaenin oruva baa laa gati</i>	<i>varaayata</i>
<i>Diyamba poru sata divve</i>	<i>tharangataya</i>
<i>Kopamana ruval aedala a divvat</i>	<i>sondata</i>
<i>Amugoda oruva tava naeta aavey</i>	<i>gamata</i>

“From here was the vessel taken to the port
And many a league did she race along under sail,
But however many sails she hoisted, however fair she has sailed
Amugoda oruva has not come home again.”

Never again did Dodanduwa build a *yathra*, and the Sinhala ship-building technology died with the *Amugoda Oruwa*. The sea is a cruel mistress.

Ironically, she was not so cruel to the crew. Some, at least, had been rescued, but had not been able to afford a passage home. Seaman all, they had lived and worked in Male for several years, but finally made it home, bringing with them bits and pieces of the last *yathra*.

* * * *

The story now shifts from Dodanduwa of 1930 to me in 1986. I had made it my end-phase-of-life mission to research our lost maritime heritage. I heard of the name and type of a ship called the *Yathra Dhoni*; it could have been from any one of the many people I would talk to, listen and file away bits of information. But anything more substantial was hard to come by. I navigated many a blind alley before I heard of a 100-year old model of one in Kumarakanda Pirivena, Dodanduwa. My informant showed me a blurred photograph which we both agreed was questionable. But after his foray into the temple, the Ven. Dodanduwe Dharmasena, the

Viharadhipathi, was rumoured to chase away would-be ‘researchers’. Knowing how ham-handed my source could be, I was not surprised!

How could I get to see this treasure? For that was what it was to me. As so often in my life, Serendipity now intervened. At a conference at the University of Ruhuna, someone whispered to me that the venerable monk was present, and pointed him out to me. Cautiously, I observed him for a while: he seemed quite extrovert, not standing on his dignity, so I went up to him, worshipped him and introduced myself.

“Oh, I know who you are – you are D.T.Devendra’s son, aren’t you? He was a great man – we can’t find people like that now”.

The long shadow cast by my father – archaeologist, researcher, Buddhist scholar – was still sheltering me, long after he was no more. The Venerable monk and I discovered that we had been up at the University during the same time, and we became instant friends. I told him that I had heard of the model and asked him:

“Can I see it sometime?”

“Of course” he said, “*Mahattayata pennanneey naettam, katada pennaney?*” (If it is not to you, to whom am I to show it?)

. So an early visit was planned and made, and I saw the beautiful, four foot long model made by his father, enclosed in a large glass box. I tried my luck again – could I photograph it? Again, he was positive. So I made second trip, armed with two cameras, one with color film and the other with monochrome film. It was an overcast day and the light indoors was poor and, anyway the glass was in the way. He was unbelievably generous and agreed to let me take it out of the case and out into the garden, where I got some excellent shots, particularly of structural details.

A friendship forged, long were the talks we had about things historical, things philosophical and things about the *yathra*. The model, he said, had been made in the early 1890s, as a boy, by his father. *Yathras*, then, used to crowd the beach front for their annual refit during

the season of unhelpful winds, and the boy would go hopping from ship to ship to see exactly how some feature was made and fitted. He would then scamper home to his model, which was taking shape in the inner courtyard of their house, and add-on his new-found details. The model was therefore accurate and the colonial Governor had awarded a Gold Medal to the boy at a national exhibition. When the monk was ordained, he had brought it along with him to the Temple, along with the pieces of the *Amugoda Oruwa* that the survivors had brought home.

In the Temple there is also a truly wonderful collection of 19th century correspondence with the Kings and *Sangha Nayakas* of Burma and Thailand. There are also letters to and from Olcott, about Buddhism. These were all undergoing conservation by the staff of the National Archives Department. One day, when our talk had turned philosophical, he told me that, however senior a monk he was, he thought that all the good he had done would not help him in his next stay in *Sansaara*. Because, he said, of his attachment to the valuable old library and other old things he had preserved in the temple, he would return as a possessive spirit to guard over these treasures! It would take many a long voyage through *sansaara saagaraya* (the ocean of existence) to wash away that defilement.

One thing more he did because I urged him to. He lent the model to the National Museum to be exhibited when the UNESCO retraced the “Silk Route of the Sea”, calling at Colombo. Years later, when his health was giving up on him, and he was losing confidence in his successors, he gifted the model – and the pieces from the last *yathra* – to the Colombo Museum.

May his voyage through *Sansaara* be shortened by this sacrifice!

* * * * *

Work took me to Galle, again, before that. We had invited maritime archaeologists from the Western Australian Maritime Museum to introduce young University students of Archaeology to maritime archaeology, and to compile a data-base of shipwrecks in Galle Bay. Among the group of experts was Tom Vosmer, a Australian boat ethnographer, with whom I discussed the *Amugoda oruwa* and the model at Kumarakanda Pirivena, Dodanduwa. Tom was

enthusiastic, for this was the last of a type of large single outrigger sailing ships which could be traced back many centuries. He spent days examining the model, measuring, photographing and making detailed drawings of structural details. Tom considered that its accuracy, both in scale and detail, made it an ideal candidate for documentation. The drawings and measurements were tested against a computer programme – “MacSurf”, designed for Alan Bond’s challenge for the “America’s Cup” – for acceptability, and they were found to fit in well within the requirements of a vessel of her size. The net result was a complete set of computer generated structural drawings, and an understanding of her sailing characteristics. And so, Man and Machine combined to retrieve from the wastepaper basket of History, the blue-prints to build another *maha oruva*. When Dodanduwa is ready to build the next *yathra*, the drawings would be there!

Some years after this, the Museum received the venerable monk’s gift to the nation. The Director’s first impulse was to make a media event of the gift, with Ministers present, and beating of drums, blowing of conches, lighting of ceremonial lamps etc. By this time I had made some progress in my research and knew how important it was to educate people in their maritime heritage. Fortunately, the Director listened to me and we decided on another tack. We would mount an exhibition round the model of the *yathra*, tracing the birth and growth of watercraft and of ship and boat-building in Sri Lanka from ancient times to the present. The Museum had a collection of models they knew nothing about, and detailed drawings of many craft made by a German enthusiast. I had photographs, charts and diagrams. The Navy and modern shipbuilders would lend us their models. All I had to do was to put all together. We targeted school children, who come on Museum tours regularly. It turned out to be a quite respectable effort, making copy for feature writers: it was even featured in the electronic media of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam – the ultimate accolade!

One day, I was relaxing at home when a couple of young men – one quite young – came looking for me. They knew me only by name. They had been given it by the Museum curator, but they only knew the road I lived in. What impressed me was how they had found my house, which is off the road. They had started at one end of this long, winding road stopping at every Buddhist Temple (Dehiwela is full of them) asking for me. About halfway they got lucky, because it was our Temple, and there their quest ended. They wanted some help and, because of

the initiative they had shown, I decided to do my best. The younger one said that he was a final year student at the Faculty of Fine Arts, at Horana, and that he was one of a group. It was a Faculty requirement, he said, that they had to research a subject completely alien to the painting, dancing, music etc. they were studying. His group, boys and girls, had been asked to submit a paper on the boat models at the Museum. The staff there, who had worked with me on the exhibition, had been too diffident to explain things and had referred them to me. But they did not know my address or telephone number! So the youngsters had decided to do field work along the coast, asking the help of fishermen, but had found them not quite helpful. All they had gathered was pieces of a jig-saw puzzle, many of which were missing, and which they could not make much of. In desperation they had decided to find me.

They deserved help. I asked them to come as a group, and they did. I introduced them to the basics of boats and fishing craft – their specific focus – and I could see that they began to make sense of the odd bits of information they had picked up. Their problem was language: they could not read even the one little book written on the subject. They needed pictures, photographs, drawings. So we agreed to meet at the Library of the Royal Asiatic Society and had a long session there, digging up the books and images they needed. They were not well off and could not afford to buy prints from the newspaper archives and so I directed them to the National Archives and its microfilm service. They took me by surprise when they went down on their knees to thank me in the way a *guru* was traditionally thanked. I remembered the many English-speaking students from other faculties, whom I had helped in one way or another, but from whom I had not even heard a “Thank you”.

The boys (and a girl) would ring me from time to time, for clarification, and I think they made a good paper. I only asked them to make cyclostyled copies and place them in as many libraries as they could for the use of other students whose only language was Sinhala. They even rang me, one night, to tell me that one of them had met with an accident. It was pleasing that we had forged a personal link and not only an academic one.

My end-phase-of-life mission had borne at least one fruit!