

## Review

**James W. Gair and W.S. Karunatilake (Eds.), *The Sidat Sangara: Text, Translation and Glossary*, American Oriental Society, New Haven: Connecticut, 2013. Pp. 244.**

The publication of Professors James Gair and W.S. Karunatilake's long awaited English translation of *Sidat Sangarava* (*Sidat* hereafter) is a valuable contribution not only to South Asian linguistics but also to Sri Lanka Studies in general. It is also remarkable that *Sidat's* new translation into English appears 160 years after the first translation by James de Alwis in 1862.

South Asian linguistics (like any other form of linguistics for that matter) is not a field of study that attracts the attention of younger scholars. For many good reasons, language studies today seems to be under an obligation to connect itself with other subjects having a greater degree of immediacy and relevance. Thus, recent scholarly work on language, more often than not, comes to be related to issues of gender, nationalism, power, colonialism and so on. While there is no doubt that this new need to make connections to the larger picture of social life in our times has resulted in excellent scholarship in language and literature, it has undermined a long tradition of scholarly work in philology where extensive learning of languages and meticulous attention to all aspects of human language constituted its trademark and the success. Moreover, such a 'social scientific' focus in South Asian Studies has made language and literature just handmaidens of studies in politics, gender, nationalism and the like. Very few scholars are left to study language *as* language or literature *as* literature, making philological classics such as Eric Auerbach's *Mimesis*, for example, an extremely rare genre today.

In recent times, the need for carrying on the orientations of philology, if not returning to philology, has been convincingly emphasized.<sup>1</sup> *Sidat* in English offers all the pleasures a great piece of philology is capable of giving to the reader who enjoys the slow and careful reading of classical texts. In the present day scholarly atmosphere where even some exalted areas of the humanities are called on to attend to immediate issues and concerns of the day-to-day world, to have this translation is to remind oneself of certain merits of textual studies for which many generations of scholars dedicated their lives, spending long and lonely hours meditating on a word, a phrase or a verse. Hence, one of the delights of this new translation of *Sidat Sangarava* is the fact that it brings back the flavours philological studies offered us long ago. *Sidat* is a grammar; and this book is a translation. Grammar and translation were two central foci of philology, and both elements require one to pay attention to even the minutest detail of language, stopping at every word and punctuation mark.

### ***Sidat* as a Text in South Asian Cultural History**

*Sidat* is not just a medieval Sinhala grammar but a text crucial in understanding the cultural history of Sri Lanka and South Asia. As a language, Sinhala appeared to have aspired to have its own identity from a relatively early phase in its history. *Sidat*, the thirteenth century Sinhala grammar, was pivotal in holding together a stream of ethnic or linguistic consciousness that links the cultural history of the before and after of that century.<sup>2</sup> Though the length and continuity of that stream of consciousness is debatable, the *Sidat* certainly constitutes a key text in it. When the [Sinhala Buddhist] nationalist struggle against British colonialism was gathering momentum in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the *Sidat* was brought

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<sup>1</sup> Pollock, Sheldon. *The Language of the God in the World of Men: Sanskrit, Culture, and Power in Premodern India*. Delhi: Permanent Black, 2009. In this landmark work, the Columbia Sanskritist Pollock not only stresses the importance of the tradition of philology but also exemplifies in many of its chapters how one could still make use of the methods of philology in our times.

<sup>2</sup> Though the *Sidat* was published in the 13<sup>th</sup> century it helps us understand a great deal of the literary cultures before and after that century.

back into the ideological revitalizing of vernacular/Sinhala consciousness, making it more a text of cultural politics than a mere grammatical text. That was when James de Alwis first translated the *Sidat* into English in 1862. Prof. K. N.O. Dharmadasa's well-known study *Language, Religion, and Ethnic Assertiveness* is invaluable in providing insights into the *Sidat*'s significance in this period of anti-colonial nationalism.<sup>3</sup>

It is difficult to turn the *Sidat* into a parochial text that speaks for linguistic or cultural isolationism and the purity that nationalist movements often aspire to. The identity formation of the Sinhala language had intricate relationships with other South Asian languages such as Pali, Sanskrit and Tamil. The *Sidat*'s new translation, as well as previous ones, makes it abundantly clear that Sinhala linguistic identity cannot be understood properly if one were to ignore Sinhala's intricate relations with Aryan and Dravidian languages. Sinhala is unique, certainly, in having closer affinities with North Indian languages rather than with South Indian ones; however, Sinhala is even more unique in having enriched itself with resources drawn from languages like Tamil. This new translation makes it clear once again that the *Sidat* as a classic Sinhala text that reminds us of the shared cultural history of the Sinhala and Tamil languages--a fact often ignored in contemporary popular imagination.

Drawing on some rare scholarship on the *Sidat*, the translators make this inter-language relation a central point in their introduction. For example, Professor Herbert Gunther's 1942 German translation (World War II bombings destroyed its 'official copy'), which was incidentally the only other modern translation of the *Sidat*, and Professor Gunther's other writings on the *Sidat* are brought into the discussion in a way that highlights the many sources of influence on the Sinhala grammatical work. Thus, the introduction demonstrates what it meant to be a scholar in medieval Sri Lanka: a scholar writing in Sinhala had to develop a keen understanding of what was taking place in other languages in addition to having a considerable understanding of the religious traditions of South Asia.

Professors Gair and Karunatilake, in their introduction and elaborate notes, labour to preserve the integrity of the *Sidat* by presenting the classic book the way it is rather than holding it under the microscope of the modern linguist. Thus, their translation achieves the quality of being a lucid, accessible text in English; and it is accessible even to general readers who have no background in linguistics. Interestingly, with the entire original text being presented both in Sinhala and Roman scripts (IPA to be precise), the *Sidat* of Gair and Karunatilake in English is likely to be much more accessible to bilingual Sinhala scholars than any other modern Sinhala commentaries on the *Sidat*. In this translation, the theoretical thought of the author or the tradition that the author represents comes to the fore of the text without being obstructed by the modern linguistic paraphernalia of the translators who are known to have applied the conceptual categories of modern linguistics in analyzing and describing the Sinhala language. For example, the translators as linguists might debate the *Sidat*'s notion of cases,<sup>4</sup> but in their notes they do not engage in such theoretical debates. Since, in this translation, they do not bring modern linguistic notions to bear on the 'traditional linguistic concepts' explained by *Sidat*, the voice of the *Sidat* is heard in English uninterrupted by dense theoretical notes and cross references.

The fact that the *Sidat* is not a comprehensive grammar but a guidebook for writing poetry is now more or less accepted by a majority of scholars. The translators identify themselves with that majority when they write a follow-up note to their translation of the opening verse of the *Sidat*:

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<sup>3</sup> Dharmadasa, KNO. *Language, Religion, and Ethnic Assertiveness*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993.

<sup>4</sup> For Example, both Gair and Karunatilake have used only four cases in describing the workings of Sinhala nouns in colloquial Sinhala in their textbooks for Sinhala language teaching. See Gordon Fairbanks, James Gair and M.W. S. de Silva *Colloquial Sinhalese*, South Asia Program, Cornell University, 1968 and Karunatilake, W.S. *Introduction to Spoken Sinhala*, Colombo: Gunasena, 1994.

**Translation:** “Homage to the feet of the Buddha!

Having made my heart a perfumed chamber for him who has comprehended fully (literally ‘exhausted’) all things knowable, I write the *Sidat Saṅgarā* for the knowledge of the beginners.

**Note:** This sutra clearly sets forth the didactic purpose of the work as a guide for those who are beginners in the study of Sinhala language and poetry.”

One of the delights and puzzles that the reader encounters in studying the *Sidat* is the last two chapters. They are “on the Auspicious and Inauspicious Use of Letters and Forms in Poetry” (Chapter 11) and “The Chapter on Poetic Embellishments” (Chapter 12). The first of these opens by saying that those who have mastered the grammar explained so far need to take into consideration “characteristics such as auspicious and inauspicious” when writing poetry. The Chapter explains certain combinations of letters and syllables that are deemed auspicious and inauspicious. Interestingly, the author also seems to consider certain grammatical infelicities to be inauspicious as well: “One who composes poetry having duly considered (and having properly understood) the grave defects like these such as gender disagreement (*bun liṅgu*), number disagreement (*bun basa*), and superior vs. inferior similes (*ukatanisuvam*), will gain fame in the assembly (of the learned).”

The last Chapter explains what was taken as the essential formal elements in poetry, and it provides invaluable insights into the pre-modern literary cultures of Sinhala. In fact, since the author cites examples from classical poems, some of which are no longer in existence, in order to explain grammatical points, the *Sidat* can be considered a veritable archive of classical poetry. In addition, there are glimpses scattered throughout the book, which provides insights into how poetry might have been read in and around the 13<sup>th</sup> century in Sinhala literary culture. The translators have taken especial care to preserve that aspect of the book in its English version. Arguably, for a bilingual Sri Lankan reader, this translation would be more accessible than the original Sinhala book; and even some modern Sinhala commentaries on the *Sidat* have been written in such an archaic and pretentious language that they do very little to help the reader to comprehend the 13<sup>th</sup> century classic.

The long glossarial index, which makes up nearly a half of the book, is extremely useful in consulting this translation as well as other editions of the *Sidat*. One may even use it as a dictionary that covers a large vocabulary of *elu* Sinhala – a variety of Sinhala that was deemed more suitable for writing poetry almost throughout the history of Sinhala poetry. Since the translators often provide Pali and Sanskrit loan words for *elu* Sinhala words, the glossary stands out as a meticulously finished work, which reminds one of the virtues of classical philology.

This new translation of the *Sidat* is sure to help us better understand both the uniqueness of Sinhala as a language and literature and their intricate relationships with other South Asian languages.

## References

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