

## Danno Budunge – A genesis by Mahendra Gonsalkorale

“The power of music to provide a common platform for the meeting of people of divergent races, creeds and interests” – Devar Surya Sena

The song Danno Budunge is a much loved and venerated song. It has given me immense pleasure to have done some research on the origins of this great song and the influences that impacted on the lyrics and music of the song. The majority of sources have been obtained by trawling the web and a few are from my collection of books. I have also contacted some friends with knowledge. I hope the contents of this article represent those sources accurately but some aspects will continue to be challenged as firm evidence is still lacking. As this is not meant to be a scholarly treatise, I have not provided a list of references.

This article is a brief adaptation of a more detailed one published in the Colombomedgrads1962 Blog (<http://colombomedgrads1962.blogspot.com/2019/01/research-on-danno-budunge-song.html> –

In more contemporary times, some have referred to Danno Budunge to being Sri Lanka's national song. It was beautifully sung with feeling by Sri Lankan Soprano Kishani Jayasinghe two years ago at the 68th Independence Day celebrations at Galle Face Green (2016) but unfortunately caused quite a furore with a mix of enthusiastic rave reviews as well as unseemly vilification.

Harsha Makalanda, the great grandson of the composer spoke for the majority when he commented thus on Kishani's version; “Kishani sang Danno Budunge beautifully. The lyrics were written by my great grandfather Makalandage John De Silva for his immortal play ‘Siri Sangabo’ which stirred a wave of patriotism in real Sri Lankans in people who march forward into battle. Kishani's rendition is majestic as well as Spiritual, that unique combination my great grandfather wanted.”

Pioneer musicians, Hubert Rajapksa, H.W. Rupasinghe, Rukmani Devi, Pandith Amaradeva, Nanda Malini and several others have sung this beautiful song and no doubt it will continue to be sung in years to come.



The lyrics of Danno Budunge was written by Makalandalage John de Silva (1857-1922) playwright and play-producer, a pioneer in the field of Sinhala drama, for his drama ‘Sirisangabo Charitaya’.

Born in Kotte on 13 January 1857 to Catholic parents, he first attended Christian College, Kotte and then went to the Colombo Academy which later became Royal College, and at age 20 he taught at St. Joseph's College and later at Wesley College. As he moved closely with oriental scholars like Pundit

Batuwantudawa, he acquired a good command of the Sinhala language too. But the theatre beckoned him and with the writing and producing of ‘Siri Sangabo’, began the second and the best phase of his career as playwright and producer.

First staged in 1903, Siri Sangabo is perhaps his most popular play and a perennial favourite. After Siri Sangabo, his group of actors (no actresses as females were not allowed to act then, and it was usual for males to dress up as females for feminine parts), became professionals, known by the name ‘Arya Suboda Natya Saba’. They entertained audiences every night, and regular theatre-goers wouldn't miss a John de Silva play.

### **Danno Budunge composition- 1903**

The melody was composed by the Indian musician Viswanth Lauji (also spelt Lawjee). Siri Sangabo was first performed in 1903 and the song Danno Budunge from it contains three verses sung separately by Sanghatissa, Sangabo and Gotabhaya as they approach Anuradhapura after crossing a wooden bridge and saw the city of Anuradhapura in the distance. The play is based on the story found in the thirty-sixth chapter of the ‘Mahāvamsa’.

The 36th chapter is about a virtuous king named Sirisānghabo who with his two friends Gothābhaya, and Sangatisa travel to the royal city of Anuradhapura to serve the Sinhalese king. The following is an English translation:

Sānghanatissā: Behold in this mansion-like town  
 Many monks adhering to the precepts  
 Destroying their defilements  
 And abiding by Buddha's dharma teachings

Sirisānghanabo: . Like heaven on earth!  
 The shade of the many monks  
 Who travel by air  
 Destroy hot sun rays

Gothābhaya: I see flocks of ducks wading  
 In deep ponds, where stems of  
 Lotus and lily flowers  
 Rise to the top

The song describes the environment created by the large number of monks and the beauty of the city with lakes full of flowers and whistling fowls. It describes the beauty of the city of Anuradhapura and is not directly a Buddhist song as such. But the words proclaim the wisdom of following the Dhamma. The religious and patriotic feelings aroused made the song very popular and became a favourite among the early musicians who made an attempt to create a place for the Sinhala song. Among them was Hubert Rajapakse, famous Tower Hall singer.

Hubert Rajapakse, was the brother of Gate Mudaliar Tudor Rajapakse, a great philanthropist who donated land to build Ananda College and the Medical College. Their main house was 'Gatherum' and they had two ancestral homes one Maha Kappina Walauwa and the other in Muthuwadiya near Negombo. Hubert Rajapakse is believed to have sung this song in the 1920s. The public did not react well to his 'western' style of singing. Hubert is said to have been trained by the famous German opera singer Madam Mathilde Marchesi although hard evidence is lacking.

According to Dr. Tissa Abeysekera, Devar Surya Sena and Hubert Rajapakse were attempting to bring about a Sinhala music culture at a time of imperial rule and relaunched Danno Budunge with a few modifications.

It must be remembered that Hubert Rajapaksa sang this song in the 1920s, long after Siri sangabo. His style of singing was apparently very different from the original which was sung in the Hindustani (vedic) style. He, for some reason, sang the first words as 'Dharma Budunge'. A popular notion is that being very western educated, he had some difficulty pronouncing Sinhalese words properly and Danno became Dharma. Being the gramophone age, he recorded under the HMV (His Master's Voice) label and the record was titled 'Dharma Budunge' (in Sinhala) – Ode to the Sacred City'.

An interesting comment was made by "U.S" in his Sunday Times article in April 2016. I don't know what evidence he has for this but I quote: "The first run of 'Siri sangabo' did not include Danno Budunge. This and two more songs were added in the second or third "edition", to provide more time for changes of sets. Maybe in this situation Lavji was not that finicky about their origin? (In opera, for this purpose, rarely, a producer added a piece by a lesser-known composer!)"

It is said that 'Danno Budunge' was popular with both Governor General Lord Soulbury and Prime Minister D.S. Senanayake. In fact, Lord Soulbury's daughter Joan Ramsbotham reportedly sang the song. In 1948 she recorded two other songs, 'Olu Pipeela' and 'Handapane', both sung in operatic style. According to Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, when the Queen visited Sri Lanka on two occasions, 'Danno Budunge' was sung at receptions both times.

The SLBC once played it as the signature tune when announcing election results.

The Clock Tower in front of the Central Bank always chimes the first two lines of 'Danno Budunge' before it strikes the time. This Clock Tower is a historical monument because it was from this point that distances from Colombo were measured. It was not properly maintained till recently. However, the Governor of the Central Bank decided to renovate this historical monument and to maintain it, and for this, the country should be grateful to the Governor of the Central Bank.

The other singers who sang this popular song include Lawrence Perera and Mohideen Baig in the 1950s, Doreen Arnolda, Soul Sounds, Sudath Samarasinghe, Coreen Almeida, Janaka Wickremasinghe, and Kapila and Nelu Adikari, and the well-known cricketer Sidath Wettimuny.

The “operatic” version sung at the 68th Independence Day celebrations in 2016, by the talented internationally famed Sri Lankan Soprano, Kishani Jayasinghe, causing such a storm has been referred to already. She had impeccable credentials. She was a member of the Jette Parker Young Artistes Programme at the Royal Opera House from 2006 to 2008. She is also an Associate of the Classical Opera Company, an Alumni Laureate of the University of Nottingham, Zonta’s Woman of Achievement for the Performing Arts (2010) and the Asian Woman of Achievement for Art and Culture in the UK. Even her worst critics admire her musical talent.

Her husband Kaveenga who was surprised and disappointed by the overreaction says, “She is a Sinhala Buddhist woman, the former Head Prefect of Sri Lanka’s leading Buddhist Girls’ school Visakha Vidyalaya, who has mastered a revered and exalted form of singing – Opera, who has gained international fame and recognition, who sang a beloved Sinhala song in opera, wearing a traditional saree, in gold and maroon nonetheless, in dignified demeanour, meaningfully and respectfully but is vilified by a segment of her very same people, for petty political reasons, which has nothing to do with her. Those who say that she Christianised a traditional Sinhala song, despite singing it in the same melody with the exact original lyrics written by John De Silva, (who happens to be related to her), are being disingenuous.

Singing a song in opera does not make it Western or Christian, if that was so everything written or said in English or Italian should be considered as such. Singing a Sinhala song in opera is not an insult to the Sinhala language, yet some people seem to think so.” In Siri Sangabo what was intended was patriotism and by all musical terms Kishani conveys it and it takes someone who had studied music to properly understand it. The reaction to Kishani’s song broadly ranged from mostly favourable to non-committal with fortunately only a small minority resorting to vile and insulting language. Some moderates commented that although the song was sung beautifully, the occasion was not right for it; a minority view but understandable in a way.

### **Pundit Viswanath Lauji**

(Also known as Vishwanath Lawjee, Vishvanath Lowji, Vishvanath Lowji, Viśvanāt Lauji, Viśvanāt Lauji).

John de Silva was not a musician. He was more a lyricist and the melody for Danno Budunge was written by his Indian Musician friend, Pundit Viswanath Lauji, who came from Bombay. Lauji came to Ceylon with the Parsi theatre but stayed behind. It is said that Lauji was impressed by Western music and that he moved in circles which included Mendelssohn and Wagner. The story goes that John de Silva had met the Indian maestro of music, at a Christmas party hosted by Sir Solomon Dias Bandaranaike (the father of the late Prime Minister SWRD Bandaranaike) at his manor in Kotahena.

John de Silva invited him to compose fitting tunes to the songs in his dramas. He would describe the scene and the character around whom the song is written and read out the Sinhalese poetry and Lauji would hum various melodies and John de Silva would choose the one he liked. In other words, Lauji composed suitable ‘airs’ to the poetic verses in John de Silva ‘libretto’. They have been compared to the famous Gilbert and Sullivan theatrical partnership.

Thus it can be seen that Danno Budunge music was composed by an Indian musician schooled in the Ragadhari tradition. Considering Sri Lanka’s cultural diversity, this could well be considered its national song by some. John de Silva’s songs have become a part of Sinhala dramatic heritage as indeed was his intention. He was convinced that musical dramas portraying the finest periods of Sri Lanka’s history could arouse a sense of true patriotism; hence his choice of plays around Dutugemunu and Sri Wickrema Rajasinghe.

It is debatable whether Danno Budunge can be called a ‘Buddhist’ song but the popular view that it is a Buddhist song is understandable in the context of evolution of the song. The lyrics describe the beauty of the city Anuradhapura. It does praise the virtues of pursuing the Buddha dhamma and does arouse religious and patriotic feelings. On the other hand, throughout history, Buddhism was not associated with music although Art, on the other hand has been heavily influenced by it. Buddhism is

associated more with chanting than singing. But over time, the association of Sinhala history with the predominant religion in Sri Lanka has made it in the eyes of many people, a Buddhist Sinhalese song.

### **Alleged connections with Mendelssohn and Wagner**

It has been stated many times, without firm evidence that Danno Budunge is based on a Wagner Organ concerto. Nobody has so far produced any firm evidence to substantiate this. Another favoured Western influence is Mendelssohn. Mendelssohn's Duetto op. 38 no. 6, in 'Songs Without Words' (MWV U119) does have a lot of similarity to the opening two lines of DB.

Mendelssohn also had an indirect connection with Ceylon, and this is referred to in an article which appeared in the Sunday Times Plus Sri Lanka dated 17 April 2016 by U.S referred to earlier. "In 1829, when Ceylon was a British colony, Alexander Johnston, its ex-Chief Justice, asks Mendelssohn to compose music to given lyrics to mark legal changes in Ceylon including the abolition of "slavery". Mendelssohn does so. Johnston is impressed by the piece and says it can reform the Empire.

"In 1832 Mendelssohn composes #38-6. A sequence of notes at the start (of its first "voice") is identical to that at the start of the Western version of Danno Budunge. Therefore, maybe he had written the same beginning for the Johnston piece, it was sung here, the melody survived, reached nurti, and Lavji altered it a bit."

It is still largely speculation but interesting. It is possible that composers such as Mendelssohn and Wagner did influence the melody on Danno Budunge. Mendelssohn appears to be a more likely candidate but definite evidence is lacking.

### **Hymn for Ceylon**

The next to consider in this historical piece is the Christian Hymn, "Hymn for Ceylon". This was written in 1923 by the Rev Walter Stanley Senior. The notion that Danno Budunge was influenced by Hymn for Ceylon is clearly incorrect as Danno Budunge was composed in 1903, long before the composition of Hymn for Ceylon. In fact the converse appears true; Hymn for Ceylon clearly borrowed the melody from Danno Budunge.

Rev Walter Stanley Senior came to Sri Lanka in 1906. By that time 'Sirisangabo nurthiya' had been shown in Ceylon for at least three years. Senior wrote the Hymn for Ceylon at a much later stage. Devar Surya Sena (1899-1981), composed music for this song in the 1950s using the Danno Budunge melody which was slightly modified to suit Church singing. Devar was a pioneer who introduced Sinhalese folk songs to Western audiences and his influence could be compared to that of Ravi Shankar on Indian music.

I hope, the reader will now be more aware of the genesis of the magnificent song Danno Budunge, and what influenced its composition and music and what it in turn influenced.