

# Folk Poems and Songs to Empower Human Resources Engaged in Sri Lankan Paddy Farming – An Empirical Study

S. Panapitiya<sup>1\*</sup> and R. P. Mahaliynaarachchi<sup>2</sup>

Received: 18<sup>th</sup> January 2023 / Accepted: 11<sup>th</sup> May 2023

## ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** Folk poetry was used to alleviate the drudgery and harshness of agricultural life. The research problem here is whether folk poetry has been used for the spiritual thinking and mental development of people engaged in agriculture since ancient times. The main objective of this study is to reveal that these poems and songs stimulated the rice farming of the farmers.

**Research Method:** The method used for this purpose is the Ethnographic research method. In those songs, the words used and the rhythm are considered prominent for this. Folk poems and songs related to farming recorded from different places in Sri Lanka from 2000 to 2015 are used for this research.

**Findings:** One of the major features of Sri Lankan farming was singing folk poems and songs while working in farming aiming to mitigate work stress. Those poems and songs have influenced the physical and mental wellness of the farmers. It is evident that the communication ability and mental freedom that attracts agriculture are based on the work's utility and the song's rhythm. Poems and Songs created by farmers are not just for entertainment. They express their efficiency and the nature of their work in those poems and songs.

**Research Limitations:** Only the songs performed during tasks from mudding to harvesting in fields related to rice farming in Sri Lanka were investigated.

**Originality/ Value:** These poems reveal the nature of the industry and the mental and creative nature of the people who work in it.

**Keywords:** Dry season, Mental changes, Mental development, Paddy cultivation, Spiritual thinking, Tediousness

## INTRODUCTION

Archaeologists believe that wetland cultivation or paddy farming originated in China. This occurred between 13,500 and 8,200 years ago south of the Yangtze River in present-day China (Gross and Zhao, 2014). According to Gross and Zhao (2014), it belongs to the Hang generation in China. In Sri Lanka, paddy farming is mentioned as follows (Sannasgala, 1964).

*Sadahas Sasiya Panasak Thunlaka*                      *Wevya*  
*Thudus Laksha Susetak Bedi*                      *Alavalya*

*Depanas Laksha Heththe dahasak*                      *Kethya*  
*Asu dekela visilakshaya Mul*                      *Bijuya*

(Eng: There are Six thousand six hundred and

<sup>1\*</sup> Department of Ethnomusicology, Faculty of Music, University of the Visual and Performing Arts, Colombo 7, Sri Lanka.  
saman.p@vpa.ac.lk

<sup>2</sup> Department of Agribusiness Management, Faculty of Agriculture, Sabaragamuwa University of Sri Lanka, Belihuloya, Sri Lanka.

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5879-8823>

fifty lakes. Ten, three hundred and sixty-four canals have been constructed, there are fifty-two hundred and seventy thousand paddy fields, eighty two million and twenty hundred thousand, Types of seeds that sprout)

The above poetic verses demonstrated that paddy farming was once very popular in Sri Lanka. Harvesting is an important part of people's lives in *Hela Diva* (Sri Lanka), an agricultural country (Soratha, 1947). Gamlath (1997) describes paddy farming as below.

“*Rasawathiya, den nevathuva, malak men sithkalu thepi, sada hirues vida kese goyam kapuda*” .

(Eng: Beautiful woman, stop now, you look like a flower, how to harvest in the hot sun)

According to the literature, folk songs have been used in connection with agriculture since ancient times. This article investigates the effect of the poem on the development of physical and mental strength of the people engaged in agriculture. The type of poetry known as folk poetry was passed down from generation to generation not as a gift but by studying its use. It is clear that many songs related to agriculture are directly related to the people involved in the industry. They chanted them and performed their work according to the rhythm used (Panapitiya, 2021). The aim of this research is to investigate how those songs affected the physical and mental changes of people. This investigation is carried out on the basis of communicative ability and mental freedom, the utility of the work, and the rhythm of singing, which attracts the agriculture industry. The songs produced by agriculture are not just for entertainment. They express their efficiency and the nature of their work in those poems.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

This research was conducted using a qualitative research methodology in accordance with

the theories of sociological research and the findings were conceptualized. The subject area of this research is Sinhala folk songs created along with agriculture. Since it is a musical imagination creatively presented by mankind, the Ethnographic research method was directly used for this research. The understanding and interpretation of the cultural creations of a particular population group from within the culture belong to this research method. Being able to get practical observations is the main feature here. Instead of a hypothetical approach, the grounded theory research method and empirical research method were used to present empirical analysis. An analysis of folk songs recorded in different places in Sri Lanka was done here. They are sung by villagers. Songs from the C. D. S. Kulatillake Conservatory of the University of the Visual and Performing Arts and songs recorded by the researcher were used for this purpose.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A *Kumbura* or *Ketha* (paddy farming area) is the land on which farmers cultivate paddy. Rice is the staple food of Sri Lanka; paddy cultivation is given the utmost importance in agriculture. Ancient and traditional farmers were self-sufficient in rice production and ancient Ceylon is said to have been among the foremost paddy exporters in the world (Rupasena, 2012). Paddy production in the country flourished during the reign of Sri Lankan kings, who fostered and nurtured production in various ways including, most notably, the supply of water through the construction of large-scale irrigation tanks – Ceylon was popularly known as the ‘The Great Barn of the East’ during the reign of King *Parakramabahu* who is renowned for his hydraulic construction and renovation in aid of agriculture (Panapitiya, 2021). As the main reason for the success of agriculture, we can identify the folk art that was born in connection with it. *Jana kaviya* (Folk song) should be considered the main among them. This research will discuss the impact of those folk songs on the success of agriculture. It is mainly expected to be discussed through several points. Here the topics

of the development of spiritual thinking, creation of mental and physical freedom, stimulation of work, and influence of the people dependent on agriculture are mainly taken into consideration. Discussing and classifying the folk songs related to the paddy field is very appropriate according to the occasion and action.

### **Puranketeema**

At the beginning of paddy field work, the first step is to prepare *Wakkada* and *Niyara*. *Puranketeema* is the first task after collecting water. After the main farmer starts working, other farmers also start working. *Puranketeema* is done in the same direction. If two directions are used for that purpose, it is called *Iraleveheema*. *Thaalaketeema* is used in various provinces. *Thaalaketeema* means that several farmers simultaneously pick up spades and carve a mound into the rhythm. For that, they use to sing poetry. Below is a poem that will be sung on that occasion.

<i>Man Soda devi venda Avasara</i>	<i>ganne</i>
<i>Pem vadavana kavi Nithara</i>	<i>kiyanne</i>
<i>In varadak Aethimuth</i>	<i>Duralanne</i>
<i>Pin athi gana devi Nuvanak</i>	<i>Denne</i>

(Ranbanda, 2010)

(Eng: I seek permission from all Gods, and I often recite love poems. If there is a mistake, leave it. Lord Gana, give me wisdom.)

The singing of these poems takes place to a certain rhythm. It can show a clear rhythmic image. It can be divided into periods as follows.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
<b>Mán</b>	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	<b>So</b>	-	-	-	<b>Da</b>	-	-	-
<b>Dē</b>	-	-	-	<b>Vi</b>	-	-	-	<b>Ve</b>	-	-	-	<b>Da</b>	-	-	-

(Source: authors)

**Figure 01:** Rhythmic expression related to singing poetry

The main emphasis of this song is on the number 1 and 9 positions. When the poem is sung, everyone gathers at places number 1 and 9 that we have mentioned and hits them with the hoe at the same time. They use the same singing and rhythm to use the technique of group work together. *Puranketeema* is when several people join together to finish the work of a field belonging to one person.

### **Plowing**

After the *puranketeema* more water is collected and muddied paddy. Cattle and buffaloes, adapted to life in wetlands, are the most common work animals in paddy farming. Buffaloes are commonly used for mudding the paddy. The loosening of the soil is done here by pushing with the plow. When the plow is pulled by two buffaloes, the man who drives it is singing. They are called *Andhera*. Rice farmers used buffalos and let out a cry known as *Andahera paama* when preparing paddy fields (ploughing) and threshing paddy. In the field, men recite *Andahera* verses (Samarasinghe and Nethsinghe, 2023). The *Andahera* singing is done to lead buffalo. Humans have succeeded in developing language by imitating the cries of buffalo. Such is the language used in these songs. They respect and love buffaloes. They never try to scold or trouble the Cattle. It is the teaching given to them by their own religions. They use these songs to keep their minds clear and sensitive while working. Below are the verses of *Andahera* songs.

*Thisarana Saranayi budun deka nivandekapan  
mage vahu daruvo* voov vo.

*Appa voo..voo... voo..voo... voo..voo...*

*Hoo.. Kelin paara budun dakinda mage vahu  
daruvo* voov. vo....

*Appa voo..voo... voo..voo... voo..voo*

(Wevelpole Gedara, 2002)

(Eng: The poet wishes the cows to see Gautama Buddha and attain nirvana.)

They know that animals cannot understand Nirvana. But their spiritual thinking is contained in these poems. The self-satisfaction they get in singing poetry brings inspiration to the task. Researchers have sought to document that a brief state like compassion is a proximal determinant of social behavior. They believe that compassion for animals is a human virtue.

In order to perform an *Andaheera* song, the various sounds, pitches, and colors of the voice should be changed. Following are some such methods. The vocal tract shape has to be adjusted to accentuate. The muscles of the inner larynx should be gently moved through special resonance methods. In order to pronounce the letters, the mouth, tongue, and jaws have to be connected very well.

The *Andaheera* (Yodeling) song shows a formal academicism in the musical investigation.

This song is unique from other songs. It's very difficult to sing. One should have a clear mind to sing that song. Being committed to the work they are doing and recognizing it from within will lead to the successful performance of this song. It can be understood that the performer of this singing is doing his work correctly and clearly. Farmers composed these songs knowing well the nature and necessity of their work. They knew that those chants would provide a direct stimulus to their work.

### **Planting**

After initial preparation, farmers will choose to sow rice seeds or plant seedlings. Nursery seedlings of rice are grown in a specific area and then planted under field conditions. Nursery seedlings of rice are grown in a specific area and then planted under field conditions. Planting is done by a group of women. There they sing poems to protect their relationship. Those poems are called *Nelum*. These poems are sung only by women. The use of voice is different from other songs because it is a song performed while planting plants. The voice used for singing is divided into three parts. Those three types can be described as follows. Chest Voice, Mix Voice, and Head Voice (McKinney, 1994).



(Source: authors)

**Figure 02: Planting seedlings in the field**

When planting plants, women bend their bodies from the waist to the ground (Figure 02). Therefore, they have to use only the head voice of the three types mentioned above. The body must be upright to use the other two methods. Therefore, the singing of *Nelum* poetry is performed nasally. There is a leader and a group singing these poems. The leader sings the first part of the song and the group sings the rest. Through that singing, their human relations are developed. They must have thought of acquiring positive attitudes through stimulation for the work they are doing. It is their ritual to seek permission from all the goddesses at the beginning of each song. It is possible to maintain mental freedom at the beginning of the work. It is a common practice for Sinhalese to pray to Buddha or God in performing all auspicious activities (Somananda, 1986). The following example song illustrated that pray to Buddha or God in performing all auspicious activities.

*Namaskara Karamuva Hiru                      Deviyanta*  
*Namaskara Karamuva Sada                      Deviyanta*  
*Namaskara Karamuva Gana                      Deviyanta*  
*Namaskara Karamuva Sema                      Deviyanta*  
 (Premalatha, 1975)

(Eng: The purpose of this is to seek permission from the sun god, moon god, and the god of ganadevi,)

By singing these poems, they hoped for honor in their duties. They may believe that doing something with dignity and mental freedom can make it successful. All these chants gave them extra energy to work.



(Source: authors)

**Figure 03:** *Jaya Piritha* (Part of a *pirith* hymn sung in Buddhist philosophy for protection)

*Waram waram mata maha babu Athin      Waram*  
*Waram waram Siwvara devi Athin      Waram*  
*Waram waram Mihikath devi Athin      Waram*  
*Waram Goyam Nelumata Deviyange      Waram*  
 (Patabedi Gedara, 1970)

(Eng: This is done by invoking the permission of all the deities to start planting.)

The melodies in which these poems are sung correspond to the Buddhist chant systems. In particular, it seems to correspond with the *pirith sajjayana*. Below are two melodies images of a *Pirith* singing and a *Nelum Kavi* singing.

The word *Pirita* is derived from the Pali word *Paritta*. There are many *piriths* in Buddhism. All of them include the great qualities of Lord Buddha and the value of his teachings. However, some of them are believed to carry positive messages to society. Above we have given the musical notes that occur when singing *Jaya Piritha*.

The melodies shown above show similar characteristics. *Pirith* singing is performed by monks, and *Nelum* singing is performed by women. The women who chanted the *Nelum* poems were often closely associated with the Buddhist temple. The constant chanting of *Pirith* in the temple directly influenced their singing of these poems. The nature of church chants can be seen in the chants of Catholic women. This should explain that their singing was naturally influenced by the melodies they heard.



(Source: authors)

**Figure 04:** *Nelum Kavi (Planting song)*

### Harvesting

Harvest songs are sung during the harvest season. The *Dēkeththa* (Sickle) is used to cut grain. A sickle is a tool designed to cut grain spikes. Real metal sickle, complete with a black handle and curved edge. Sickle blades found during this time were made of flint, straight, and used in more of a sawing motion than with the More modern curved design. The percussion instrument used for this is the *Bummediya*. Harvesting is done according to the rhythm with which the *bummediya* are played. If the play of *bummediya* is two beats, the crop is harvested twice. If the play with three beats, the crop is harvested three times. The frequency of harvesting is determined by the drumming. Table 01. illustrated the interrelationship between playing and harvest.

This drum, unique to Sri Lanka, is known by different names (Figure 05). *Kelē Beraya*, *kala Beraya*, *Ekkath Beraya*. slung over the shoulder and played with both hands. The drums played are called *Ahura Pada*. A drum similar to the *baummedi* is found in Nigeria. It is called *Udu* Drums. It is a pot-shaped drum made of clay. The difference is that it uses a hole in the middle and does not cover the mouth with skin. The middle hole is used to change tones during playing. The same is true of *Teri Urdu*, which is used in Middle Eastern countries. It is drum-shaped like a bowl with one side covered with leather. It can be considered a combination of a bass drum and an upper drum. All these singing and playing are designed to improve the efficiency of the tasks being performed and to create interest in them.

**Table 01:** *The interrelationship between playing and harvest.*

<i>Bummedi Padaya</i>	Number of times played	The number of times the crop is harvested
	02 (Two)	02 (Two)
<i>Dahith Thakkita</i>	03 (Three)	03 (Three)
	04 (Four)	04 (Four)
	06 (Sixth)	06 (Sixth)

(Source: authors)



(Source: authors)

**Figure 05:** Playing the *Bummediya*

## CONCLUSIONS

Throughout human prehistory and history, listening to recorded music was impossible. Common people sang poetry during their work and leisure. Most of the tasks of economic production were done by human labor. They were not paid anything in the past. They willingly contributed to their own and others' work. There the spiritual and mental relationship between them improved. For that, they mainly used folk poetry and singing. The aesthetics and rhythm used in folk poetry facilitate their work.

Singing helped to overcome the physical fatigue felt during that work and to get the stimulation needed to do it systematically. They may enjoy the mental freedom that comes from listening to music. In this research, we could confirm that folk poetry was not created or used to eliminate loneliness but to achieve the usefulness of the work. It was clear that the poem was successfully used to clearly outline the physical and mental labor involved in the growth of the agricultural industry.

## REFERENCES

- Gamlath, S. (1997). *Elu Sades Lakune Nidasun Padya*. Godage and Brothers. Colombo. 26PP
- Gross, B. and Zhao, Z. (2014). Archaeological and genetic insights into the origins of domesticated rice. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Science*. 111(17), 6190 – 6197. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1308942110>
- McKinney, J. (1994). *The diagnosis and correction of vocal faults: A manual for teachers of singing and for choir directors*. Reprint Edition. Waveland Press.
- Panapitiya, S. (2021). Modern performing arts related to the folk arts associated with the Lifestyles in Sri Lanka. In: *Timbres of Identity: Ethnomusicological Approaches to Music-Dance and Identity*. (Ozlem Dogus, V. Eds.). Association of Ethnomusicology, Turkey. 70 – 90.
- Rupasena, L. (2012). *Yapum krusikarmanthaya krushi Vyavasayakathvaya kara (Dependent Agriculture towards Agri-entrepreneurship)*. In: *The Pride of the Century (1912-2012) Annual Magazine*. Department of Agriculture. 334P.

Samarasinghe, K. and Nethsinghe, R. (2023). Social processes that shaped Sri Lankan Sinhala folk music and its characteristics based on the purposes of usage. *Journal of Research in Music*. 1 (2). Unpublished.

Sannasgala, P. (1964). *Sinhala Sāhithya Wansaya*. Lakehouse Press, Colombo. 169P.

Somananda, T. (1986). *Sinhala Malakavi Sangrahaya*. Sri Lanka UNESCO National Board, Colombo. 189P.

Soratha, W. (1947). *Elu Sandas Lakuna*. Samayawardhana

### ***Recorded Songs***

Ranbanda, G. B. 2010. *Interview with S. Pannapitiya*. 22 October, Kuda Uduva, Horana.

Wevelpole Gedara, B. 2002. *Interview with S. Pannapitiya*. 10 February, Pannampitiya, Veligepola, Balangoda.

Premalatha, J. 1975. *Interview with C. de, S. Kulatillake*. Hanguranketha. CD 09, Cut 10. Sri Lanka, Broadcasting Cooperation.

Patabedi Gedara, P. A. 1970. *Interview with C. de, S. Kulatillake*. Kalundeva, Mathale. CD 04, Cut 21. Sri Lanka Broadcasting Cooperation.

Gunawathē, A. 2005. *Interview with S. Pannapitiya*. Sirigalla, Monaragala.