

AN INVESTIGATIVE EXAMINATION ON COMMENCING THE SINHALA ALPHABET WITH THE LETTER අූ [æ] AS PROPOSED BY CUMARATUNGA MUNIDASA

Ven. G. Vipula¹

Cumaratunga Munidasa, a distinguished authority on Sinhala grammar, has contended that the Sinhala alphabet should begin with the letter අූ [æ], position sibilants at the conclusion their respective class of stop letters, position the cerebral ෙ [ɲ] prior to the alveolar ෙ [l] within the category of semi-vowels, and assign the voiced glottal sibilant (අ) [ɦ] to the conclusion of the sibilants class, among other propositions. Thus far, comprehensive academic scrutiny of these claims has been noticeably absent. This investigation is singularly dedicated to exploring the proposition that the initial letter of the Sinhala alphabet should be අූ [æ]. It seeks to determine the academic validity of beginning the Sinhala alphabet with the letter අූ [æ] on logical grounds. A qualitative research approach was employed to address this question, focusing on an in-depth examination of relevant textual sources. Data were collected through a thorough textual analysis of pertinent library resources, and linguistic theories of alphabetisation were applied as analytical criteria. The findings of this study reveal that modern languages like Sinhala, stemming from Sanskrit and Pali, do not adhere to the distinction of back vowels and front vowels as a basis for the placement of letters in the alphabet. Although advocates of the Hela Havula, such as Alaw-isi Sabihela and Hemasiri Cumaratunga, have consistently argued in favour of Cumaratunga's proposition, the arrangement letters in the alphabets of modern Indo-Aryan languages adheres to the classification of letters based on their places of articulation. Consequently, the letter අ [a], which produces a glottal sound, is positioned as the first letter of the Sinhala alphabet, owing to the quantitative preeminence of simple vowels, followed by the letter අූ [æ], which produces a velar-glottal sound. Even upon close examination of the arguments of Hela Havula, it becomes evident that the letter අ [a] is a back-glottal sound, while the letter අූ [æ] is a front-glottal sound. Therefore, this study concludes that the proposition of beginning the Sinhala alphabet with the letter අූ [æ] contradicts established linguistic conventions and stands at odds with the conventions of the Indo-Aryan language family in the Indian subcontinent. It is, thus, evident that the scholarly consensus supports initiating the alphabet with the letter අ [a] and not with the letter අූ [æ].

Keywords: alphabet, අූ [æ] sound, alphabetisation, places of articulation, letter sequence

¹ *Department of Languages, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Rajarata University of Sri Lanka, Mihinlata. gvipula260@gmail.com*