

The Pre Buddhist Religious Beliefs in Ancient Sri Lanka

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Abstract: - There was evidently no national or state religion systematically organized in the island before Buddhism introduced to Sri Lanka in the third century B.C.E. The *Hsiuen Tsiang* says the kingdom of Sinhala formerly was addicted to immoral religious worship. *Divyāvadana* shed light to prove the visit of traders during the time of Lord Buddha. The worshipping of ancestors, worshipping of Yakṣas, worshipping of gods or Dēvās, Nigaṇṭhas, Śaivaism can be identified. Paribbājakas and Ājīvakas, Pāsaṇḍas and Pabbajitās and many other ascetics, known as Samaṇas seem to have been found in fair numbers in the island. Almost all the important deities who survived after the introduction of Buddhism became Buddhist sooner or later. This paper proposes to discuss the significance of all these above mentioned factors. Before Buddhism was introduced to Sri Lanka in the third century B.C.E, there was evidently no national or state religion systematically organized in the island (Rahula Walpola, 1956: 34). We can categorized the pre Buddhist beliefs in ancient Sri Lanka as follows: The worship of yakṣas, the worship of yakṣanis (female yakṣas), the worship of Nāgās, the Ancestor worship, the worship of deities, the worship of female deities, the worship of trees, Brahmanism, Nigaṇṭhas. Śaivism, Paribbrājakas and Ājīvakas and Buddhism.

Key words: beliefs, Buddhism, ancient, worship

I. THE WORSHIP OF YAKṢAS

The worship of yakṣas seems to have been a popular and prevalent cult in ancient Sri Lanka. As recorded in the chronicles in Sri Lanka the Lord Buddha has visited three times to Sri Lanka, in his life time. In the ninth month of his Buddhahood, at the full moon day Buddha himself set forth for the island of Lanka, to settle a dispute of yakṣa who lived near Mahānāga garden (*M.v.* 1950, 1:19-20, 51). The king Paṇḍukābhaya (5th B.C.E) has constructed houses for the yakṣas such as Chitrarāja and Kālavēla. The mention is made in *Mahāvamsa* as follows “he settled the yakṣa Kālvēla on the east side of the city, the Yakṣa Cittarāja at the lower end of the Abhaya tank” (*M.v.* 1912, 10:84, 51).

II. THE WORSHIP OF YAKṢANIS (FEMALE YAKṢAS)

The same king has housed the yakṣani Valavāmukhī within the royal precincts and made early sacrificial offerings them and to other yakṣas (*M.v.* 1950, 10:86, 54).

III. THE WORSHIP OF TREES

The trees are called as chetiyas. It is believed that the Bo tree was worshipped in Mohanjodaro (Marshall John:1940, vol, i: 63). The king Paṇḍukābhaya settled Vyādha dēva the god of

huntmen in Palmyra tree near the Western gate of the city (*M.v.* 1950, 1:89). There is no other evidence to prove that the Palmyra palm was included in the category of sacred trees. The *Mahāvamsa* further mentions banyan tree was dedicated to the yakṣa king Vaiśravaṇa (*M.v.* 1950, 1:89).

IV. ANCESTOR WORSHIP

The mention is made that the slave woman who had helped the king Paṇḍukābhaya in time past and was reborn of yakṣhini, to thankful to her the king has made a house at the South gate of the city (*M.v.* 1950, 10:85).

V. THE WORSHIP OF NĀGĀS

Although the worship of Nāgās is not mentioned in the chronicles of Sri Lanka but there are many evidences about the people of Nāgās who dwelled in ancient Sri Lanka. The *Mahāvamsa* mentions in the fifth year of his Buddhahood, a war caused by a gem set throne, was like to come to pass between the nāgas Mahōdara and Cūlōdara, uncle and nephew, and their followers (*M.v.* 1950, 10:86). *Dīpavaṃsa* says that the mountain serpents and the sea serpents fought a battle in the island, having arranged their arrays on both sides an awful struggle (*D.v.* 1992, 2:4). The worshipping nāgās is a famous cult in South India in the later period of time, the symbols of Nāgās has been used to protect of the Buddhism. The unusually respectful treatment of the cobra among the Sinhalese villagers even today indicates the place that serpents had occupied among the cults in ancient Sri Lanka (Rahula walpola 1956: 41).

VI. THE WORSHIP OF DEITIES

The god Sumana of Samantakūta is also a pre Buddhist deity. The lord Buddha has gifted handful of hairs to the god of Sumana in his first visit to Sri Lanka (*M.v.* 1950, 1:33). When Buddha was lying on the bed of his nibbāṇa in the midst of the great assembly of gods spoke to Sakka asked him to protect prince Vijaya with his followers and Laṅka (*M.v.* 1950, 7:2,55). When the lord of gods heard the words of the Tathāgata he handed over the guardianship of Laṅka to the god Upulvan (*M.v.* 1950, 7:5,55).

VII. THE WORSHIP OF FEMALE DEITIES

There is a female deity named pachchimarājini “western queen” whom Paṇḍukābhaya installed a house near the western gate of the city.

VIII. BRAHMANISM

Brahmanas lived in pre Buddhist Sri Lanka. As mentioned in the *Mahāvamsa* a Brahman named Paṇḍula, dwelt in the southern district in the village Paṇḍulagāmaka (*M.v.* 1950, 10:20,69). He was the teacher of the prince Paṇḍukābhaya. The son of the Paṇḍula Brahmana was the Chandra and he was the chaplain of the king Paṇḍukābhaya (*M.v.* 1950, 10:23,48). The king is reported to have also put up a building called *sotthisālā* (*M.v.* 1950, 10:102). The *Mahāvamsa* gives two interpretations to the term, one is that, it means a hall where Brahmanas utter *sotthivacana* and the other is that it is a hospital (*Mahāvamsa* 2001: 223). The hermitage of Brahman Diyavasa was located near the place called Hiyagala. The *Mahāvamsa* further says the Bodhi tree was set down at the entrance to the village of the brahman Tivakka (*M.v.* 1950, 19:376,131). *Rasavāhini* shed light on a Brahman person called Sirināga who ruled the kingdom of Anurādhapura for a short period (*Rasavahini*, 2002: 161).

IX. NIGAṆTHAS

There were three famous Nigaṇthas called Jotiya, Giri and Kumbaṇḍa. The king Paṇḍukābhaya built a houses for these nigaṇthas (*M.v.* 1950, 10:97-100,75).

X. BUDDHISM

According to the description given in the chronicles in Sri Lanka, Lord Buddha had visited three time to Sri Lanka.

1st visit of Buddha to Sri Lanka

As recorded in the *Māhāvamsa*, in the ninth month of his Buddhahood, (*Bodī.v.* 1999, 170) the day that the Uruvelakashapa organized a grand arms giving at the full moon of Pussa, Buddha himself set forth for the island of Laṅkā, to win Laṅkā (*M.v.* 1959, 1:19,2). Buddha visited the Mahānāga garden three yojanas long and a yojana wide, the meeting place for the yakkhas, there was great gathering of all yakkhas dwelling in the island. As reported in the *Dīpavaṃsa* assembled hosts of Yakkhas saw the Sambuddha standing there, but they did not think that he was the Buddha, they supposed him to be another Yakkha (*D.v.* 1992, 1:51, 121). Yakkhas were expelled to the Giridīpa, by the Buddha. *Dīpavaṃsa* expounds, there were highly satisfied Yakkhas and the highly pleased Rakkhasas, having received this excellent island which they desired, all began to laugh with great joy, and all went to celebrate the festival called Nakkhattamaha (*D.v.* 1992, 1:79, 123). This incident would be hazardous for the present time to base further conclusions.

Vaṃsatthappakāsini (*Mahāvamsa* 2001) of the *Mahāvamsa* shows that this meeting is scheduled to be held very full moon day (*Vaṃsatthappakāsini* (*Mahāvamsa* 2001, 48). Buddha visited the midst of the yakkhas assembly and banished the fear distress of the yakkhas. *Vaṃsatthappakāsini* says seeing the power of Buddha, yakkhas became afraid, and they dedicated all the Island to

him (*Vaṃsatthappakāsini* (*Mahāvamsa* 2001, 50). In this visit Buddha preached the dhamma to sura asura, gandamba and the kinnara people as well. *Dīpavaṃsa* describes the Lord Buddha has visited to Sri Lanka to driven out the hosts of Yakkha, The Pisācas and the Avaruddhakas and establish peace in the island and cause it to be inhabited by men (*D.v.*, 1992, 1:21).

The god Mahāsumana of the Sumanakūṭa Mountain asked something to be worshipped to remind Buddha. Having bestowed on him a handful of hairs, having deposited the hairs and build a thūpa. After the demise of the Buddha, the thera named Sarabhu, disciple of the thēra Sāriputta, by his miraculous power received, even from the funeral pyre, the collar bone of the Buddha and brought it to Laṅkā and he there laid it in the same thupa (*M.v.* 1959, 1:37-38, 5). *Mahāvamsa* further remarks the son of king Devānaṃpiyatissa's brother, named Uddachūlābhaya, saw the wondrous cetiya and again covered it over and made it thirty cubits high (*M.v.* 1959, 1:41, 5). As stated in the *Mahāvamsa* Buddha converted the many koṭis of living beings to Buddhism. If this news is accurate enough, it can be stipulated that there was Buddhism before the introduction it by the Mahinda thēra. The *Mahāvamsa* describes the god Mahāsumana of the Sumanakūṭa Mountain had attained to the fruit of entering into the path of salvation (*M.v.* 1959, 1:33, 5). The first chapter, of the *Dīpavaṃsa*, Buddha's subjection of Yakkhas, doesn't speak of god Sumana. If there is accuracy in this mythical story, it can be speculated that there were Buddhist before the arrival of the Mahinda thēra to Sri Lanka. As a historian we are unable to rely on this mythical story and come to a conclusion on this. This is merely an assumption or a hypothesis.

2nd visit of Buddha to Sri Lanka

As reported in the *Mahāvamsa* whilst the Buddha was dwelling at Jētavana monastery in the fifth year of the Buddhahood (*Bodī.v.* 1999, 171), saw that a war caused by a gem set throne, was like to come to pass between the nāgas Mahodara and Cūlodara, uncle and nephew (*M.v.* 1950, 1:47, 6). The *Mahāvamsa* elaborates the cause for the war. As stipulates in it Mohodara had a sister. The author of *Mahāvamsa* do not mentioned the sister's name this void can be fulfilled from *Vaṃsatthappakāsini*. Her name was Tirachjikā (*Vaṃsatthappakāsini* (*Mahāvamsa* 2001, 69). She married to a king who ruled the mount Kaṇṇāvaḍḍhamana (*M.v.* 1967, 1:47, 6). Their son was Cūlodara. Cūlodara's mother's father had given to his mother a splendid throne of jewels. After the demise of the mother's father Mahodara asked for the splendid throne of jewels. Mahōdara fought for it. Mahodara was excited by pride but Chūlodara was not (*D.v.* 1992, 2:8,124). As portrates in the *Dīpavaṃsa* Nāga Cūlodara and Nāga Mahōdara, the maternal uncle and the nephew.

Mahāvamsa says the god Samiddhisumana also arrived with Buddha with the Rājāyatana tree, holding it like a parasol over the Buddha (*M.v*, 1950, 1:54-58,6). *Dīpavaṃsa* also shed light on this account. Following the due clarification in the *Mahāvamsa* both nāgas gladly gave up the throne to the Buddha. Consequently Buddha gave over the rājāyatana tree and the precious throne seat to the nāga king to do homage thereto. The nāga king Maṇiakkhika of Kelaṇiya, mother's brother to the nāga Mahodara, who had come thither to take part in the battle, having heard the doctrine invited the Buddha to visit his dwelling place. *Rasavahini* also mentions about the Buddhas visit to Nāgadīpa (*Rasavahini*, 2001, 169-170).

3rd visit of Buddha to Sri Lanka

The nāga king Maṇiakkhika invited the Buddha together with his brotherhood to visit Kelaniya in the eight year of Buddhahood (*D.v*, 1992, 2:51, 127, *Bodi.v*, 1999, 171). The *Dīpavaṃsa* says the Buddha rose up into the air in the Jetavana, and proceeding through the air, he came to Laṅka to the mouth of the Kelaṇi River (*D.v*, 1992, 2:53, 128). The Buddha visited the Kelaṇiya with the five hundred bhikkhus on the second day of the month of Vesak. As stipulated in the *Mahāvamsa* under a canopy decked with gems, raised upon the spot where the Kalyāni cetiya was built, he took his place, together with the brotherhood of bhikkhus, upon a precious throne seat (*M.v*, 1959, 1:74, 6). In his third visit he visited many more places in Sri Lanka. The Buddha left the traces of his footsteps plain to sight on Sumanakūta, set forth for Dīghavāpi, went to the place of the later Mahāmēghavanārāma, where the sacred Bodhi tree came afterwards to be, the place where the great Thūpa and the Thūpārāma is going to be located, as well he visited the place of the later Silācētiya (*M.v*, 1959, 1:78-83, 9).

The many Indian traders have visited Sri Lanka at the time of the Lord Buddha. *Divyāvadāna* mentions the construction of the prāsada called Chandanamala by using the Sandalwood of Sri Lanka to dwell the Lord Buddha (Senevirathna Ariyadasa 1999: 59).

A trader called Poorna has visited six times to Sri Lanka and later he listened the doctrine of Buddha and became a Buddhist monk (Senevirathna Ariyadasa 1999: 59). The author of the *Mahāvamsa* has gained an affect to linked the Sri Lankan history with Buddhism, it mentioned the prince Vijaya arrived to Sri Lanka on the day that, Tathāgata lay down between the two Sāla trees to pass into nibbāna (*M.v*, 1950, 6:47, 54). As further mentioned in the chapter sixth of *Mahāvamsa* when Buddha was lying on the bed of his nibbāna in the midst of the great assembly of gods, spoke to Sakka stood there near to him "Vijaya, son of king Sihabāhu, is come to Laṅka from the country of Lāta, together with seven hundred followers. In Laṅka, O lord of gods, will my religion be established, therefore carefully protect him with his followers and Laṅka" (*M.v*, 1950, 7:2, 55). When the lord

of gods heard the words of the Tathāgata, he from respect handed over the guardianship of Laṅka to the god Upulvan (*M.v*, 1950, 7:5, 55). Here it is quite miraculously attempting to make a link with Buddha's nibbāna and the establishment of Ārayan settlement in Sri Lanka. Professor Max Deeg in his article called "*secular Buddhist lineages: The Śākyas and their royal descendants in local Buddhist legitimation strategies*" says "It can be concluded that the making of a family connection between the Ceylonese rulers and the clan of the Buddha was such a strong imperative, that stories were created proving this link to the extent of narrative overkill, repeating motifs and dramatizing the plot to the utmost limit" (*M.v*, 1950, 7:5, 55).

The prince Paṇḍuvāsudēva and thirty two sons of ministers embarked in the disguise of mendicant monks (*M.v*, 1950, 8:12, 62). The Paṇḍuśakya's daughter Bhaddakachchāyanā landed robed like nuns together with thirty two women friends (*M.v*, 1950, 8:23-24, 64). Here we can observe the author has made an attempt, to make the family ties with the Śākyas. In a way these two stories have quite miraculous facts. Prince Paṇḍuvāsudēva arrived with thirty two sons of ministers as well as the princess Bhaddakachchāyanā arrived with thirty two women. Here my claim is not to have verified or falsified the facts in *Mahāvamsa*. But here it is quite convinced, that the author of *Mahāvamsa* do not prefer to mix the Aryans with the Sri Lankan's indigenous people. The utmost pious people are the Aryans according the vamsa tradition in Sri Lanka. The present archaeological evidences testify that there was a civilized culture in Sri Lanka. The question that would naturally arise is, what made them to compile in this manner. Is it because as they attempt to show, to the world that Ceylonese culture entirely build up on the influence of Buddhism.

The author of *Mahāvamsa* doesn't mentioned the existence of Buddhism before the arrival of Mahinda thēra. Prince Bhaddakachchāyanā's grandfather was Amitoḍana Śakya or one of the brothers of the Buddha's father. Hence prince Bhaddakachchāyanā is a close relative of Buddha. It is undoubtedly clear that she must be knowing the Buddhism. Having heard of the coming of prince Bhaddakachchāyanā her six brothers Rāma, Ūruvela, Anurādha, Vijita, Dirgāyu and Rohaṇa disembarked Sri Lanka (*M.v*, 1950, 9:9-10, 65). By embedding to the vamsa tradition it is quite clear that Buddhist were in Sri Lanka before the arrival of Mahinda.

XI. ŚAIVISAM

The evidence is also available for the existence of the śaivisam. The *Mahāvamsa* shed light on the Sivika Sāla build by king Paṇḍukābhaya. The *Mahāvamsa* *ḥkā* gives two interpretation as, a hall where the śivalinga was deposited and a lying in home (*Vamsatthappakāsini (Mahāvamsa ḥkā)*, 2001: 223).

XII. PARIBBRĀJAKAS AND ĀJĪVAKAS

Mahāvamsa says at the time of the prince Vijaya's arrival god Upulvan sat down at the foot of a tree in the guise of a wandering ascetic (paribbrājaka) (*M.v*, 1950, 7:7, 55). The king Paṇḍukābhaya has built a monastery for praibbrājakas and a house for ājivakas (*M.v* 1950, 10:101-102). The various Pāsaṇḍas and samanās also live during this period. These two categories were known in this island as Paṇḍuvāsudēva disembarked here in the guise of Paribbrājakas and princess Bhaddakachāyanā disembarked as nuns. Tāpasa were also lived during this period (*M.v* 1950, 10:96). It further gives details that the five hundred families of various beliefs also lived (*M.v*. 1950, 10:100). The king Paṇḍukābhaya has built a hermitage for many ascetics at the Northwards from the Gāmani tank (*M.v*, 1950, 10:96, 75).

XIII. CONCLUSION

Sri Lanka was so closely and intimately connected with India that every great change that took place in the main continent whether political, social, economic or religious influenced considerably the life of the people of Sri Lanka. The many of these pre Buddhist religious beliefs were prevailed in the Indian sub-continent. On the other hand, Buddhism offered to the people of Sri Lanka a new order of life which was far superior to that which they had known and followed so far.

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