

## ABSTRACT

**A Socio-Historical Study of the Origin and Development of the Nātha Cult. (With special reference to the main Nātha Devalāyas in the Kandy District)** The main research problem of this study is to identify the origin of the Nātha deva worship and to examine its socio-historical importance. Research methodology used in this study is historical methodology which involves basically an in-depth analysis of the primary and secondary sources and field surveys. The worship of Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva became popular in Sri Lanka during the 7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> century. The conceptual change that took place during the 14<sup>th</sup> century is of special importance. At this time, Avalokiteśvara Nātha Bodhisattva who had become famous in the Mahāyāna School evolved into Lokeśhwara Nātha or God Nātha. A priority was given to him in the pantheon of gods during the Gampola and Kotte periods. A belief exists in the society from that time onwards that materialistic and spiritual expectations can be achieved by worshipping the above god. Avalokiteśvara Nātha who had appeared as Bodhisattva in one time, became a god later and he had again become a Bodhisattva at present. He has been the only god that has achieved this position. His devotees believe that he will become a future Buddha by the name of Maitri. The God Nātha has become prominent among the other gods towards the latter part of the Kandyan era. This change had occurred particularly after the accession of Nayakkar kings to the Kandyan throne. Special place has been given to God Nātha in the rites and rituals related to the Sinhala kingship. The fact that the worship of God Nātha was popular is evinced by the Devalāyas located at Kandy, Vegiriya, Pasgama and Dodanvala. However, in these devalāyas there are differences in the rituals performed even for the same god. The rituals which were prevalent in the past have undergone various changes at present. In the past there were lands for the maintenance of Devalāyas and those lands were used by the people belonging to different castes. However, with the change of society, the tenants have kept themselves away from the traditional services. The daily and annual celebration and rituals of the Nātha Devalāyas have been interrupted to a certain extent. In these circumstances, the existence and continuance of these Nātha Devalāyas are under serious threat.

**Key words: Avalokiteśvara, God Nātha, Mahāyāna Buddhism, Maiththri Buddha, Rituals.**