

Sri Lanka's contribution to the development of Buddhist studies in the West

Hema Goonatilake¹

Burnouf's *Essai sur le Pali*, published in Paris in 1826 and the English translation in 1837 by Turner of the *Mahavamsa* marked the beginning of Western interest in Buddhist Studies.

British Civil Servants in Sri Lanka in the 19th and 20th centuries who studied Pali and Buddhism from Sinhalese scholar monks eventually became the pioneer Buddhist scholars in the West. Among them were: Turner, Childers, author of the first modern Pali Lexicography, and Rhys Davids, the first to present to the West the Pali Canon and Professor of Pali and Buddhist Literature in the University of London. Others who received assistance from scholar monks included Viggo Fausböll, Wilhelm Geiger, Clarke Warren, Sir Edwin Arnold, Robert Chalmers, Hermann Oldenberg, Max Mueller, Paul Carus, Reinhold Rost, Minayeff, Charles Lanman, Richard Morris, Caroline Rhys Davids, Mabel Bode, Edwin Mueller, Edmund Hardy, Karl E. Neumann and Auguste Barth. The assistance included the supply of Pali manuscripts for editing and publication, collating manuscripts after comparing Sinhala, Burmese, Thai and Cambodian versions; giving references and quotations and answering numerous questions. The monks also revised and corrected translations done by the Europeans, pointing out where necessary, their errors. These monks engaged in serious academic discussions with scholars in the West (UK, Germany, France, Denmark, Russia, Austria, US etc) as well as in Asia (Burma, Cambodia, China, Japan, India, Thailand). By 1861, some temples had become the first centres of modern Buddhist Studies in the world with resident and visiting foreign students - for example, Sailabimbaramaya, Abhinavaramaya and Aggaramaya.

The first major organ in the promotion of Theravada Buddhist studies in the West was the Pali Text Society founded in 1880 by Rhys Davids. Sri Lankan monks provided not only the scholarly assistance and the supply of manuscripts, but also the initial advance for the cost of printing, 74 of 96 persons listed as 'subscribers in advance' being scholar monks. Thus, Sri Lankan monks played a key catalysing role in the development of Buddhist studies in the West. These interactions are briefly compared with the situation today.

Key words: Buddhist studies, Scholar monks, Western Buddhist scholars, Pali text society, East-West discourse

¹ Sri Lanka Association for the Advancement of Science, Colombo, Sri Lanka