

# Prevalence of Other Religions in Pre Buddhist Ceylon (With Special Reference to Jain Religion)

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The present paper focuses on the religious beliefs which were existed among the Sinhalese people before Buddhism reached in their country around third century B.C. (250-210 BCE) There was no single religion which was widely accepted as the national religion of the country. Nevertheless, there was a wide range of religious beliefs and practices, different from one another, and each individual seems to have freely observed his religion according to his belief.

Sri Lanka is a multi-religious society. Buddhists comprise 70 percent of the population. Though Buddhism is the major religion, other religions such as Hinduism, Christianity and Islam are also followed. Buddhism was introduced to Sri Lanka in the 2nd century BC by Prince Mahinda. A sapling of the *Bodhi Tree* under which the Buddha attained enlightenment was brought to Sri Lanka during the same time. The Pali Canon (*Thripitakaya*), having previously been preserved as an oral tradition, was first committed to writing in Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka has the longest continuous history of Buddhism of any predominately Buddhist nation, with the Sangha having existed in a largely unbroken lineage since its introduction in the 2nd century BC.

Buddhism was introduced to Sri Lanka in 236 b.e. (cir. 250 BCE) and became the national religion of the Sinhalese from that date. It is, however, necessary for a proper study of the history of Buddhism in the island to consider the state of the island and its social and political developments and the culture and character of the people immediately preceding this period. This will enable us to get a clear understanding of the manner in which such a far-reaching revolution in the beliefs, manners, customs and character of a people was affected by the introduction of this new religion and the progress in literature, art and culture that has been manifested through its influence.

The literary sources of Sri Lanka indicate the island came to the light in 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C. The *Dipavamsa* (4<sup>th</sup> c.A.D.) and the *Mahavamsa* (6<sup>th</sup> c.A.D.) give records of how prince Vijaya came with 700 followers and established the Sinhalese kingdom on the day when Buddha got Nibbana (Moksha) in 483 B.C. <sup>1</sup>These chronicles give evidence of king Ashoka (Devanampiya Tissa) introducing Buddhism in this Island. We get evidence of some inscriptions that there were certain aboriginal tribes living in this Island. The *Mahavamsa* gives the records in its account of the foundation of Anuradhapura by Pandukabhya in the fourth century B.C. mentions a number of religious and public institutions established there by that monarch. Anuradhapura became later the holy city of the Sinhalese Buddhist and the monks preserved authentic tradition about its origin. Pandukabhya was the national hero of pre Buddhist Ceylon. <sup>2</sup>

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## **Hinduism**

Hinduism is the second most prevalent religion in Sri Lanka and predates Buddhism. We find the Brahmanic faith that prevailed in India in about the 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C. most eloquently pictured in the two epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. There was a belief in a creator, Brahma and the orderly governance of the world was believed to be ensured by four guardian deities presiding over the four quarters- Indra (East), Yama (South), Varuna (West) and Kubera (North). Other major deities were Vishnu, the preserver and Siva, the destroyer. The priests of the Brahmanic religions were the Brahmins who held this prerogative by birth ( i.e., being born in the Brahman caste). Brahmins had the prominent position in the society in this island prior to the introduction of Buddhism. Upatissa was a Brahmin who came with Prince Vijaya, the founder of Sinhalese kingdom and was very influential to establish in his own named kingdom , Upatissagama ( the capital of the new kingdom). Upatissa was appointed as the Chaplain ( Purohita) to Prince Vijaya.<sup>3</sup> There is a reference that the successor of Vijaya, King Pandukabhaya , was educated by a Brahmin named Pandula. This Brahmin teacher Pandula was a rich man and well learnt in the Vedas and at the end of the education of the prince, he was given enough money to enrol soldiers to wage war and obtain the throne.<sup>4</sup> King Pandukabhaya established a dwelling place for Brahmins in Anuradhapura for holding their rituals recitations.<sup>5</sup> Inscriptions found from different parts of this Island indicate that Brahmins came from different parts of the island and they were a widespread social category. As far as their social position in the society, they refer as “Acharya” (teacher and the Parumaka (chief) indicates their higher status.

Today, Hinduism is dominant in Northern, Eastern and Central Sri Lanka. Hindus are mainly Tamils. Hinduism is mainly practiced by Tamils in Sri Lanka who ethnically belong to South India where Hinduism was predominantly practiced. Around the fifth and the sixth century A.D., the Chola dynasty of South India conquered this island for the throne of the Sinhalese Kingdom, leading to the considerable number of immigrants from South India into the northern Sri Lanka. Thus Hinduism was introduced in Sri Lanka and during the reign of Tamil kings, Hindu shrines were widely constructed.

## **Islam**

Islam is the third most dominant religion in the country, having first been brought to the island by Arab traders over the course of many centuries, starting around the 7th century AD. Most Muslims are Sunni who follow the Shafi’i school. Most followers of Islam in Sri Lanka today are believed to be descendants of these Arab traders and the local women they married.

## **Christianity**

Christianity reached the country through Western colonists in the early 16th century. Around 7.4% of the Sri Lankan population are Christians, of which 82% are Roman Catholics who trace their religious heritage directly to the Portuguese. The remaining Christians are evenly split between the Anglican Church of Ceylon and other Protestant denominations. Christianity first came to Sri Lanka upon the arrival of the Portuguese in the sixteenth century. Under their rule, Roman Catholicism was spread out in a mass scale of the Island with many Roman Catholic schools for the Sinhalese and the

Tamils. With the attempts of the Portuguese to Christianize native people, Buddhism and Hinduism were severely affected. There were an increasing number of both Sinhalese and Tamils converting to Roman Catholicism. When the Portuguese were driven out by the Dutch, Protestantism and the Dutch Reformed Church was introduced. During the British rule conversions to Christianity increased. Later on, due to the nationalism movement among the Sinhalese who held sway the political power; Christianity in Sri Lanka was somewhat restricted.

There is also a small population of Zoroastrian immigrants from India (Parsis) who settled in Ceylon during the period of British rule, but this community has steadily dwindled in recent years. Religion plays a prominent role in the life and culture of Sri Lankans.

The Buddhist majority observes Poya Days in each month according to the Lunar calendar, and Hindus and Muslims also observe their own holidays. In a 2008 Gallup poll, Sri Lanka was ranked the third most religious country in the world, with 99% of Sri Lankans saying religion was an important part of their daily life.

## **Jain**

Jain religion was well founded and followed in Sri Lanka even before the advent of Buddhism. It has been studied in various old Buddhist literature. Ancient texts like 'Mahavansh' and 'Deepvansh' clearly mention that Jainism existed during the reign of many early kings of Lanka. It states that Jainism was destroyed to a greater extent by King Vattagamini. Pandukabhaya built a house at Anuradhapur for the Nigantha Jotiya and Giri and some more Niganthas.<sup>6</sup> The word 'Nagantha' is applied in the Pali text to the Jainas, the followers of Mahavira (Nigantha Nathaputta of Buddhist scriptures) a teacher contemporary with the Buddha. It is true that later Pali writings, the word is used vaguely to denote non-Buddhist sects. It is likely that Mahanama had the Jain as in his mind when he used the word. Vattagamani Abhaya, when he was flying before the Tamil invaders, passed this monastery and the Jaina abbot cried out 'The great black Sinhalese is running away'. The king kept this affront in mind and when he regained the throne he demolished the Jaina Monastery and built Abhayagiri Vihara in that place.<sup>7</sup>

According to Mahavamsa, this monastery was the scene of a tragedy in the time of Khallataga, predecessor of Vattagamani. This king, when he discovered a plot against his life by his nephew went to Giri's monastery and ended his life by entering the fire. At the spot, where this event occurred, khallatanaga's kinsmen built a Cetiya called the Aggipavisaka.<sup>8</sup> The Jainas were perhaps not confirmed to the destruction of the monastery of Giri. Jainism seems to have disappointed from Ceylon about the beginning of Christian era.

Traces of Jainism are seen even before Aryanisation. Ravana, a king of Lanka long ago is said to have erected a Jain temple at Trikutgiri. Another statue of Parshvanatha, the 23rd Tirthankara, is found in the caves of Tripura is also from Sri Lanka.

Geographically Jainism has flourished in India and except for Indian Jains working outside India, there are hardly any Jains or Jain institutions in the countries outside India. All the 24 prophets or Tirthankars of Jains were born in different parts of India, preaching and attaining salvation in this country.

According to the Jain literary tradition in the region of Chandragupta, the Maurya, the followers of Mahavira under Bhadrabahu migrated to South India owing to a severe famine in the North. Chandragupta himself is said to have accompanied Bhadrabahu on this journey and ended his days in South India as a Jaina ascetic.<sup>9</sup> From Tamil literature too, we learn that there were Jainas in the Pandya region from the early times. The tradition of the migration of the Jainas to the South in Chandragupta's region has been accepted by historians as trustworthy. If the Jainas on this occasion travelled from Magadh as far as South India, it is not improbable that some of them crossed over to Ceylon.

According to the chronology of the Mahavamsa, Pandukabhya's region was earlier than that of Chandragupta but the dates of the early kings of Ceylon as given in that chronicle have been proved to be untrustworthy. Pandukabhya was the grandfather of Tissa the younger contemporary of the king Ashoka, the grandson of Chandragupta. Therefore it stands to reason that Pandukabhya himself was a contemporary of the first Mauryan emperor. Then the migration of the Jainas to the South falls within his region and the statement in the Mahavamsa that Pandukabhya patronized the Jainas seems to be historical fact.

It is evident from the chronicles related to the early history of Sri Lanka that before the introduction of Buddhism in the reign of King Devaanampiya Tissa (250-210 BCE) there was no single religion which was widely accepted as the national religion of the country. Nevertheless, there was a wide range of religious beliefs and practices, different from one another, and each individual seems to have freely observed his religion according to his belief.

A noteworthy feature of the pre-Buddhist religion of Sri Lanka is that it was a mixture of the aboriginal cults and the beliefs of the Aryan newcomers.

The worship of Yaksas and Yaksinis was a widely prevalent aboriginal custom of pre-Buddhist Lanka. King Pandukaabhaya, the grandfather of Devaanampiya Tissa, provided shrines for many of these spirits and also gave them sacrificial offerings annually. Some of these Yaksas and Yaksinis mentioned by names are Kaalavela, Cittaraaja, Vessavana, Valavaamukhi and Cittaa. Vyaadhadeva, Kammaaradeva and Pacchimaraajini, though not known as yaksas and yaksinis, also belong to the same category of aboriginal spirits. Trees like the banyan and palmyrah were also connected with the cults of these spirits showing that tree-worship was also prevalent. In Mahavamsa we get references of Yakkha cult prevailed in Sri Lanka. They are considered as minor members of the Sinhalese – Buddhist Pantheon and they figure prominently in the healing rituals of popular Buddhism. Many of the pre historic ritual burials recently unearthed were found adjacent to Buddhist sites, which post date the former might indicate a gradual synthesis being attempted between the earlier religious beliefs and Buddhism.

Many scholars agree that these yaksas and other non-human beings are none but the spirits of the dead relatives and tribal chiefs who, the people believed, were capable of helping friends and harming enemies. This belief, as is widely known, formed one of the main features of the primitive religion and is extant even today.

Accounts relating the pre-Buddhist history of Sri Lanka also show a considerable influence of the religious trends of India on the society of Lanka. Several niganthas (Jainas) such as Giri, Jotiya and Kumbhanda lived in the reign of Pandukaabhaya and hermitages were constructed for them and other ascetics like Ajivakas, Brahmans and the wandering mendicant monks. Five hundred families of heretical beliefs also lived near the city of Anuraadhapura. The Brahmans occupied a high place in society and their religious beliefs were also respected. The worship of Siva too may have been prevalent.

The account in the *Mahaava.msa* of the settling of the adherents of various sects by King Pandukaabhaya does not specifically mention the presence of any adherents of Buddhism among them. But the work refers to three visits of the Buddha to Sri Lanka, a statement which, though not corroborated by other evidence, has not been disproved. Legendary accounts also claim that two stupas — the Mahiyangana and the Girihandu — were constructed before the introduction of Buddhism. Among the newcomers too there could have been some members who were acquainted with Buddhism, especially as Bhaddakaccaanaa, who arrived with 32 other maidens in the guise of nuns, was a close relative of the Buddha.

The earliest inscriptions found in Ceylon, from the 3<sup>rd</sup> century B.C. to the 1<sup>st</sup> Century A.D. indicate that there were immigrants from North West India as well as from Central and North East India. The religions that existed in India as during the few centuries before Christian era would have found their way to Sri Lanka too. Inscriptions and literary sources give evidence that North Indians brought the superior Civilization to this Island Sri Lanka. Brahmanic and Jain civilization seem to be existed in Ceylon. In *Mahavamsha* reference existed in pre Buddhist Sri Lanka is the *Nighanthas*, the followers of Nighantha Nath Putta, the founder of Jainism. King Pandukabhaya built places for Nighanthas Jotiya and Kumbhanda in the region where there was already a hermitage of the nigantha named Giri. Jainism taught the doctrine of fivefold restraint: not to kill living things, not to take articles of use unless they are given, not to tell a lie, to lead a celibate life and not to have worldly possessions except clothes. Since Pandukabhaya's the Jains appear to have been tolerated up to about the Christian era till Giri, mentioned earlier, became involved in a treasonable act and his hermitage was pulled down to make room for the Abhayagiri stupa by king Vattagamini Abhaya ( 43-17 B.C. There are many other references in Mahavamsha and other chronicles as having lived in pre Buddhist Sri Lanka. They are paribhajikas, ajivikas, pasandas, pabbajitas and tapas. All these were referred in Buddhist and other literature that other religious beliefs were prevailed in India and Ceylon before the time of Buddha.

In the 4<sup>th</sup> Century B.C. Pandukabhaya had adopted a universal policy towards religion-accommodating all existing religious systems. According to it, Pandukabhaya built a house at Anuradhapur for the Nigantha Jotiya and Giri and some more Niganthas, Jain tradition takes the history of Jainism in Ceylon even prior to its Aryanization, or the arrival of the Aryans. Ravana, a king of Lanka long ago is said to have erected a Jain temple there at Trikutagiri. Another statue of Parsvanatha, the 23<sup>rd</sup> Jina found in the caves of Terapur is also said to be from Sri Lanka. Jainism was a living religion of Sri Lanka up to the 10<sup>th</sup> A.D.

As we have discussed earlier, Jainism had already been established as an important religion in various provinces of India before Mahavira and the Buddha began their missionary activities. During their period, Magadha, Kausala, Kapilavastu, Vaisali, Pava, Mithila, Varanasi, Simhabhumi, Kausambi, Avanti, etc. were prominent Jain Centers. After Mahavira's Parinirvana, the Sisunagas, Nandas, Kharavela, Mauryas, Satavahanas, Guptas, Paramaras, Candelas, Kalacuris, and others who provided

all possible facilities to develop its literature and cultural activities patronized Jainism. The Southern part of India was also a great center of Jainism. Bhadrabahu and Visakhacarya with their disciples migrated to the South and propagated Jainism very much. Andhra, Satavahanas, Pallavas, Pandyas, Colas, Calukyas, Rastrakutas, Gangas, and others were main dynasties, which rendered sufficient royal patronage and benefits to Jainism and its followers through the spirit of religious toleration, which existed in this region. The Jainas were given magnificent grants for their spiritual purpose. Kings erected numerous Jain temples and sculptures throughout the ages and many facilities were provided for literary services throughout India. As a result the Jain Acaryas wrote their ample works in Sanskrit, Prakrit, Apabhramsa, Tamil, Kannada, Telugu, Marathi, Hindi, Gujrati and other modern Indian languages.

Jainism crossed India from South India at about eighth century B.C., if not earlier, and became one of the most important religions of Ceylon, which was known in those days by the name of Lanka, Ratnadvipa or Simhala. The Mahavamsa (10.65-70; 33. 43-79) refers to the existence of Jainism in Ceylon even before the arrival of Buddhism.

Kalakacarya, another Jain monk, is said to have visited Burma or Svarnabhumi (Uttaradhyayana Niriyukti, 120). Rsabhadeva is said to have traveled to Bali (Bacteria), Greece, Svarnabhumi, Panhave (Iran), etc. (Avasyaka Niriyukti, 336-37). Tirthankara Parsvnatha also went to Nepal. The existence of Jainism can also be proved in Afghanistan. Tirthankara images in the Kayotsarga, or meditating posture has been found in Vahakaraj Emir (Afghanistan). Digambara Jain monks have been in Iran, Siam, and Philistia<sup>31</sup>. Greek writers also mention their existence in Egypt, Abyssinia and Ethiopia<sup>32</sup>. It had also propagated in Kabul, Campa, Bulgaria and some other foreign countries.

Several other types of religious virtuosi are mentioned in the Mahavamsa and other chronicles as having lived in pre-Buddhist Sri Lanka. They are Paribbajakas, Ajivakas, Pasandas, Pabbajitas and Tapas. All these types are spoken of in Buddhist and other religious literature as having lived in India before and during the time of the Buddha. Paribbajakas were male and female, both used to go round for preaching and debating and had no permanent domicile. <sup>11</sup> The Ajivakas too received a monastery when king Pandukabhya planned city of Anuradhapur. <sup>12</sup>

Ajivakas were a religious sect that lived during the time of the Buddha. Makkhali Gosala, a contemporary of the Buddha was the founder of the Ajivaka sect, which believed in the philosophy of man's helplessness in the face of destiny.<sup>13</sup>

Pabbajita means one who has become a monk and Tapas means ascetic and as the sources of the history of religious sects in India at the time of the advent of Buddhism indicate there was a large number of different religious orders practicing asceticism at the time. The Jain scriptures refer to as many as 363 different teachers or thinkers<sup>14</sup> many of whom appear to have advocated different types of asceticism. The word Pasandas means heretic and it is obvious that these references in the Buddhist historical works of Sri Lanka did not make much of a distinction between the various religious sects. These pre Buddhist sects known as lesser known pre historic religious beliefs. While planning the city Anuradhapur, Pandukabhya adopted a universal policy towards religion- accommodating all existing religious systems. While planning the city, "He settled the Yakkha Kalavela on the east side of the city, the yakkha Cittaraja at the lower end of the Abhaya tank. The slave woman who had helped him in the beginning and was reborn as a yakkhini. The king housed the yakkhini within the royal precincts in the form of a mare. On the festival days he used to sit with Cittaraja beside him on a seat of equal

height, and having gods and men to dance before him. <sup>15</sup>The yakkhas as they appear in Buddhist literature are a clan of supernatural beings... to whom sacrifices were sometimes offered. <sup>16</sup>

Pandukabhya paid attention to Tree Deity worship. Another deity was Kammara Deva ( the god of blacksmiths). He installed Paccimarajini, "queen of the West", in a shrine at the western gate of the city. <sup>17</sup>

The Brahmanic and Jain faiths and the various ascetic referred to above would have been popular among elite class, while the mass level various cults were widely prevalent. Archaeological findings have come in recent years and throw light as the strength of the popular religious cults that were practiced in pre Buddhist Sri Lanka. These reports give findings from about 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C. to the 3<sup>rd</sup> century B.C. throw greater light on what has been given in the literary source Mahavamsa regarding the pre-historic cults. Report indicates about funeral rites different from Brahmanism, Jainism as well as Buddhism. Another significant fact which has emerged from these archaeological findings is that these ritualistic burials have counterparts in the southern areas of the Indian peninsula which indicate a cultural diffusion that took place in pre-Buddhist times. <sup>18</sup>

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