

How Buddhism Influenced the Origin and Development of Libraries in Sri Lanka (Ceylon): From the Third Century BC to the Fifth Century AD

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The aim of the paper is to discuss the influence of Buddhism on the origin of libraries in Sri Lanka from the third century BC to fifth century AD. Contributions made by Buddhist monks and Buddhist kings in this connection too are discussed. A developed education system and scholarly personnel are essential prerequisites for the establishment of a library tradition. Throughout much of history, education systems developed side by side with religious systems. Sri Lanka was not an exception to this regard. Arahata Mahinda introduced Buddhism to Sri Lanka in the third century BC and it soon took root in the country. With the establishment of Buddhism, Buddhist education came into existence and that education enabled Buddhist monks to hand down the Tripitaka and its commentaries orally for centuries. In the first century BC Buddhist scriptures were written and manuscripts were kept at Mahavihara centres for the first time in history. Subsequently, copies of these manuscripts were sent to other temples. Thus, depositing of the Tripitaka and commentaries can be regarded as the origin of libraries in Sri Lanka. These libraries consisted not only of the Tripitaka and its commentaries, but also other Buddhist books too. Buddhist scholars were motivated to write religious books as it was considered to be a meritorious act. Further, libraries had the reputation for production and distribution of Buddhist texts, which attracted foreign scholars to the country.

The history of libraries on the island of Sri Lanka can be traced back to the pre-Christian era. According to early chronicles, the knowledge and practice of writing in Sri Lanka (Ceylon) dates back to the sixth century BC, with the arrival of Aryans from northern India. But knowledge in book form had already appeared on the island after the introduction of Buddhism in the third century BC. Buddhism originated in

India in the sixth century BC with the Enlightenment of Gautama Buddha. His discourses were based on the four noble truths, which were considered as the basic Buddhist doctrine. These were: the realization that there is suffering in this world; the understanding of the origin of suffering; the cessation of suffering; and the path to the cessation of suffering. After the death of the Buddha, Buddhist councils were held to preserve Buddhism and the third council decided to propagate Buddhism among the neighbouring countries under the patronage of emperor Asoka. During the reign of King Devanampiya Tissa (250–210 BC) of Sri Lanka, Buddhism was introduced to the island by Arahata Mahinda thera.¹

The Pali chronicles recorded that the first meeting between Mahinda thera and king Devanampiya Tissa, who was on a hunting expedition, took place on the Missaka-pabbata, now known as Mihintale, which is close to Anuradhapura, the capital of the kingdom. The king and his thousands of attendants listened to the preachings of Buddha, delivered by Mahinda thera, and thereafter Buddhism was adopted as the state religion of Sri Lanka. In a very short time the entire population became Buddhist. Buddhism observed the rites and ceremonies of the old folk cults and religious beliefs prevailing on the island. The coming of Buddhism to Sri Lanka helped the growth and development of Sinhalese culture and society. The most notable contribution is seen in the development of language, the writing of the Buddhist scriptures, and its commentaries, which deeply influenced Sinhalese literary growth.

The establishment of Buddhism in Sri Lanka brought with it Buddhist education. It is interesting to note how it originated. According to the Samanthapasadika, Mahinda thera told the king that 'when a son born in Ceylon of Ceylonese parents, became a monk in Ceylon, studies the vinaya in Ceylon and recites it in Ceylon, then the roots of the sasana (Buddhism) are deep set'.²

Buddhist education came into existence as the response to the request of Mahinda thera. Buddhist monks became the custodians of educational activities. The Sigala-Sutta of the Digha-Nikaya said that education and guidance of the laity was a duty devolving on the monks. They performed this duty by taking into their hands the education of the whole nation.³ As Radha Kumud Mookherji wrote in 1960:

The history of the Buddhist system of education is practically that of the Buddhist Order or Sangha. Buddhist education and learning centered round monasteries as Vedic culture centered round the sacrifice. The Buddhist world did not offer any education opportunities apart from or independently of its monasteries. All education, sacred as well as secular, was in the hands of the monks. They had the monopoly of learning and of the leisure to impart it. They were the only custodians and bearers of the Buddhist culture.⁴

Radha Kumud Mookherji made this statement with reference to ancient Buddhist education in India. It can easily be applied to ancient Buddhist education in Sri Lanka too.

As the result of Buddhist education, Buddhist scriptures (teachings of Buddha), known as the Tripitaka, which consisting of three parts (Vinaya Pitaka, Sutra Pitaka, and Abhidamma Pitaka) were brought to Sri Lanka by Mahinda thera and his missionaries. These had been handed down orally by the Buddhist monks for centuries. Sinhala commentaries, which had been prepared by Mahinda thera and other monks for the the Pali Tripitaka, had also been handed down orally.⁵

But by the first century BC a number of circumstances had emerged: such as the Baminitiya famine, political unrest, the rebellion of Brahmana Tissa, the South Indian invasion, the formation of new fraternity such as Abhayagiri from Mahavihara, and irresponsible and irreligious people entering the order. As a result of the twelve-year famine monasteries in Anuradhapura were abandoned. The monks made their way either to India or to the hilly districts in the island and preserved the Tripitaka. The continuation of the oral tradition of the Tripitaka and commentaries appeared no longer possible under the prevailing adverse circumstances. Thus, far-seeing Buddhist monks assembled at a rock temple called Aloka Lena in Matula Danawwa, under the patronage of a local chief, and for the first time in history committed to writing the Tripitaka and its commentaries in Sri Lanka.⁶ According to the folklore, the first set of Tripitaka and commentaries were written on gold plates and deposited in the rock of Aloka Lena. It is believed that the copies which were written on palm leaves, known as Puskola (leaves of talipot *Palm-Coryphya urnbra culifera*), and were deposited in the main five temples of Mahavihara, namely Thuparamaya, Mirisawetiya, Issarasamanaramaya, Vessagiriya, and Chetiyaigiri.⁷

There was a systematic programme of copying and distributing the Tripitaka and commentaries among the principle temples of the island.⁸ According to early historical records there were many libraries attached to the temples. They were known as 'Potgul' (the Sinhala term for library), where books were carefully preserved and made available to the scholars for reference. In addition to reference purposes, religious books had been considered as sacred objects, equivalent to the relics of Buddha. Therefore some Buddhist Sutras written on gold or bronze plates had been deposited in the pagodas known as dagabos.⁹ Archaeological excavations support the statements of the chronicles regarding such accounts. Recent excavations in Jethavana Dagaba in Anuradhapura led to the discovery of one of the Buddhist Sutra written on gold scrolls.¹⁰

At the beginning there were only Mahavihara centres, following Theravada Buddhism. But by the first century BC Abhayagiri centres had emerged, following Mahayana Buddhism which was introduced by Buddhist monks, who arrived from India during the first century BC. These monks brought books written in Sanskrit. Though the basic doctrine was the same, there were some doctrinal differences between Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism. In addition to Mahavihara and Abhayagiri, the Jetavana centres, which arose in the third century AD, also followed Mahayana Buddhism.

The main education centres attached to above three centres were called Mulayatana: Galaturumula (Selantaramula) and Wilgammula (Sarogamamula) belonged to Mahavihara; Kapararamamula, Wahandumula, Uttaramula and Mahanethpamula belonged to Abhayagiri; and Dakunumula and Senevirathmula belonged to Jethavana. These eight mulayatana were centres of learning, holding the positions of universities for higher studies. The curricula of all these institutions held Buddhism in high esteem while different centres favoured different sects of Buddhism. For instance, Mahavihara gave prominence to Theravada Buddhism, while at Abhayagiri and Jethavana both Mahayana and Theravada sects received equal prominence.

As every temple in the country served the purpose of a school, it is believed that they had a collection of books in their libraries. There is archaeological evidence for

such libraries — for example, at the Tantrimale rock temple, which is situated forty-five miles from Anuradhapura. Its library was built on the top of a large rock. It is believed that, because the books were considered as sacred objects, the library was built here. There was another monument below the library. It is believed that this was built for the purpose of reading books, which were borrowed from the upper library.

Basically, both the Mahavihara and Abhayagiri contributed to the growth of Sinhala and Pali literature. As education was closely linked with Buddhism, most of the literature of the period is religious. The libraries of this period consisted not only the Tripitaka and commentaries, but also other Buddhist books. Buddhist scholars were motivated to write religious books, as it was considered to be a meritorious act. According to Buddhism, there are eight worldly benefits arising from the compilation of commentaries on Buddhist doctrine in native languages.¹¹ Therefore, libraries had substantial collections of religious books, such as Buddhist chronicles, Buddhist historical books, and merit books. Thus, we find that much of the historical literature of Sri Lanka can be considered either as historical accounts of the island or stories of different places. Basically these books were written in Sinhala, the native language of the island. But later they were translated into Pali, the learned language. 'Sinhalese was in a state of flux and possibly no fixed literary form was established until about the sixth century AD, and thus there was the desire to keep the records in a language whose literary form was fixed by grammar.'¹²

The main Buddhist historical chronicles, namely, *Dipavamsaya* and *Mahavamsaya*, written by Buddhist monks at the end of fourth century AD, give us a unique sequence of history. One of the religious establishments with records of its history was the Mahavihara of Anuradhapura. This history also devoted much space to the deeds of the kings who rendered great service to Buddhism.

Historical literature can be considered either as stories of different religious places or objects associated with Buddhism, such as the bringing of the Bodhi tree, building the Maha thupa, or the arrival of the Tooth relic. There was a practice of keeping records of all meritorious acts. These records were called 'Punnapottaka' in Pali, or 'Pinpoth' in Sinhala. The motive from the king down to the poor peasant was acquiring merits of various kinds as security for the next world. According to Buddhism, wealth, health, beauty, longevity, intelligence, power and the like, which the people desired, were considered to be the results of good work.¹³ Therefore, the laity tried to do well and to be good in order to obtain these desirable things, and they wrote their meritorious acts in books. These were usually intended to be read at the death bed, so that the dying man might gladden his heart and purify his last thoughts to ensure a good re-birth.

At that time admirable service was given by Sinhala Buddhist monks who acted as custodians of education and libraries. The rulers, leaders, and general public were educated and trained by Buddhist monks. The main responsibilities of the monks were learning, educating, and guiding the laity, writing, copying, and distributing the Tripitaka and commentaries, writing and preserving the religious books, etc. In fact, the writing and preservation of religious books were regarded as highly meritorious deeds. Also, Sinhala monks were famous throughout Asia for their learning and teaching and they attracted visitors and scholars from other Asian countries.

Further, Sinhala Buddhist kings did much work to develop the learning activities of the citizens and provide facilities for both adults and children to learn. They took responsibility for the welfare of citizens. They thought that educating citizens was a duty of royalty. In order to enlighten the public, some of the kings built preaching halls in every village of the kingdom and kept Buddhist books in them.¹⁴ They patronized the writing of books and kept personnel libraries too. Some of the kings were scholars and wrote valuable books. Buddhist kings did all these things in order to gain merits by contributing to the people's welfare. This Buddhist meritorious concept helped considerably in the origin and development of libraries in Sri Lanka.

With the help of Buddhist monks and kings, by the early fifth century AD, Anuradhapura had become a great education centre on the island. The rich collections of the libraries attracted famous foreign Buddhist scholars such as Buddhaghosa, Buddhadatta, and Dhammapala from India and Fa-Hien from China in search of Buddhist texts and commentaries and to undertake research. The teacher of Buddhaghosa, Rewathe thera, had asked him to visit Sri Lanka for the particular purpose of consulting Sinhala commentaries, which were not available in India.¹⁵ He came during the reign of king Mahanama (405-428 AD) and studied the Tripitaka at Gantakara pirivena, which belonged to Mahavihara. When Buddhaghosa made a request to translate Sinhala commentaries into Pali, he was asked to demonstrate his skills and scholarship. In order to fulfil the request, he submitted the *Vissuddhimagga* (the path to cessation) which clearly indicates that Buddhaghosa had used many books for reference. It can be regarded as a type of doctoral thesis.¹⁶

The Indian scholars who came to Sri Lanka wrote a series of commentaries on the Pali texts of the Buddhist scriptures and a number of compositions in Pali. Buddhaghosa had written commentaries such as *Samanthapasadika*, *Kanka Vitarani*, *Sumangalavilasini*, *Papancasudani*, *Saratthappkasini*, *Paramattajotika*, and *Dhammapada* for the *Sutta Pitaka* texts. Also, *Atthasalini*, *Sammohavinodini*, and *Paramatthadipani* had written for the *Abhidhamma Pitaka* texts. The *Samanthapasadika* written by him showed that he had used many Sinhala commentaries.¹⁷ Buddhadatta also wrote commentaries, such as *Vinayavinichaya*, *Uttara Vinichaya*, *Abidammavatara*, *Ruparupavithagga*, and *Madurattha Vilasini*.¹⁸ Dhammapala wrote commentaries to *Itiuttaka* and *Therigatha*.¹⁹ Their contribution, especially to Sri Lanka Pali literature, is significant and libraries in Anuradhapura were enriched with their collections.

Also the growth of the Mahayana literature at Abhayagiri centres encouraged scholars from other countries to visit the Abhayagiri. The Chinese traveller Fah-Hien, probably a contemporary of Buddhaghosa, came and resided at the monastery and refers to it as the most important religious institution in Anuradhapura. According to Fa-Hein, the Abhayagiri monastery gave accommodation to five thousand monks, while the Mahavihara had three thousand monks.²⁰ He recorded that the monasteries on the island had collections of Buddhist texts, which were not available to scholars in other countries. On his way back to China he had taken away with him a copy of the *Vinaya Pitaka* of the Mahimsasaka School, *Dirghagama*, *Sanyuktagama*, and *Sanyukt Pitaka* which belonged to Mahayana Tripitaka. They were all copied from books that were then available at the Abhayagiri libraries.²¹

Notes

- ¹ Kirielle Ghanawimala (tr), *Deepavamsaya* 12 (Colombo: Gunasena, 1959) 39.
- ² A. Dhammakusala (tr), *Sinhala Samanthapasadikawa: Parajika Kandaya* (Colombo: S. M. Gunatunga, 1975) 80-81.
- ³ Buddhist Cultural Center (tr), *Sinhala Digha Nikaya* (Dehiwala: Buddhist Cultural Center, 1996) 333-335.
- ⁴ R. K. Mookarji, *Ancient Indian education: Brahmanical and Buddhist* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1960) 394.
- ⁵ Sumangala and Batuwantudawe (trs), *Mahavamsaya* 33 (Colombo: Godage, 1996) 103.
- ⁶ Sumangala and Batuwantudawe (trs), *Mahavamsaya* 33, 103-104.
- ⁷ M. Wimalakirithi, *Sasanawamsa Pradeepaya* (Matara: N. B. Cooray, 1954) 48.
- ⁸ D. M. De Z. Wickramasinghe, *Catalogue of Sinhalese manuscripts in the British Museum* (London: British Museum, 1900) xi.
- ⁹ K. D. Sri Sumanasara (ed), *Saddharmarathnakaraya* (Colombo: Rathnakara Book Shop, 1955) 322.
- ¹⁰ M. H. F. Jayasuriya, *The Jethavanarama gold plates* (Kelaniya: University of Kelaniya, 1988).
- ¹¹ Kirielle Ghanawimala (ed), *Pujawaliya* (Colombo: Gunasena, 1959) 17-19.
- ¹² A. Amaravamsa and H. Dissanayaka (trs), *Vamsatappakasini* (Colombo: S. M. Gunatunga, 1975) xxxvii.
- ¹³ Walpola Rahula, *History of Buddhism in Ceylon* (Dehiwala: Buddhist Cultural Centre, 1993) 254.
- ¹⁴ Kirielle Ghanawimala (ed), *Pujawaliya*, 772-773.
- ¹⁵ Sumangala and Batuwantudawe (trs), *Mahavamsa* 37, 227-232.
- ¹⁶ Sumangala and Batuwantudawe (trs), *Mahavamsa* 37, 243-244.
- ¹⁷ E. W. Adikaram, *Early history of Buddhism in Ceylon* (Colombo: Gunasena, 1946) 16-23.
- ¹⁸ G. P. Malalasekara, *The Pali literature of Ceylon* (Colombo: Gunasena, 1928) 105-112.
- ¹⁹ Malalasekara, *The Pali literature of Ceylon*, 112-116.
- ²⁰ Samuel Beal (tr), *Travels of Fah-Hian and Sung-Yun Buddhist pilgrims from China to India* (New Delhi: Asian Educational Service, 1993) 151-159.
- ²¹ Beal (tr), *Travels of Fah-Hian and Sung-Yun Buddhist pilgrims from China to India*, 165-166.

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