

THE INFLUENCE OF CASTE ON THE BUDDHIST SANGHA IN ANCIENT AND EARLY MEDIAEVAL SRI LANKA

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A survey of the history of Buddhism in India and beyond, especially in the regions of South, South East and East Asia, reveals a local evolution of the religion and its institutional framework.¹ Buddhism and Buddhist institutions evolved in the socio-economic setting prevailing in each country. Thus, though Buddhism had a common Indian origin, separate paths of local development, conditioned by different environmental factors, can be traced. Indeed early Buddhist missionaries, at least in Sri Lanka, seem to have been quite conscious of the need for adaptation, for which there is early historical testimony. King Devānampiya Tissa (250-210 B.C.) who was emperor Asoka's contemporary in Sri Lanka, in whose reign Buddhism was established in the Island, on the completion of the initial ceremonial formalities, asked the leader of the mission, Mahinda Thera, whether Buddhism was now established in the Island. The Pali Chronicles, the *Dīpaṅśa* (circa 4th c.A.D.) and the *Mahāvamsa* (6th c.A.D.) state that Mahinda Thera's reply was that Buddhism would be established once the *sīmā* (boundary) of the place set apart for the performance of *uposatha* and other disciplinary acts of the Saṅgha, was demarcated.² The *Samantapāsādikā* (5th c. A. D.), Commentary to the Vinaya Piṭaka, records a different answer to the question: 'The Dispensation, Great King, is established, but its roots have not descended deep'. A further question followed: 'When, Sir, will the roots have descended?' The answer: 'When, Great King, a youth born in the Island of Tambapanni, of parents belonging to the Island of Tambapanni, enters the Order in the Island of Tambapanni, learns the *Vinaya* in the Island

1. Sukumar Dutt, *Buddhist Monks and Monasteries of India*, London, 1962; *2500 Years of Buddhism*, edited by P. V. Bapat, New Delhi, 1956; Melford E. Spiro, *Buddhism and Society: A Great Tradition and its Vicissitudes*, London, 1971; *Buddhist Monk Buddhist Layman, A study of urban monastic organisation in central Thailand* by Jane Bunnang, Cambridge, 1971; Herbert Gunther, *Tibetan Buddhism without Mystification*, Leiden, 1966; Masaharu Anesaki, *History of Japanese Religion*, first published London, 1930, Reprinted Tokyo, 1963.
2. *Dīpaṅśa*, edited and translated into English by H. Oldenberg, London, 1879, XIV, 21-23; *Mahāvamsa* (Mhv.), edited by Wilhelm Geiger, P.T.S., London, 1908, Eng. Tr. by Wilhelm Geiger, P.T.S., London, 1912, Reprinted Colombo, 1950, XX, 180-181.