

Buddhist Sinhala Literature: A Brief Historical Survey

(From the Beginning up to 15th Century)

(This paper was presented in the First International Seminar on Buddhism and Literature held at Nava Nalanda Mahavihara, Nalanda, India on Feb.14-16 2002

By Ven. Maduruoye Dhammissara Senior Lecturer (Sanskrit)

Gampaha Wickramarachchi Ayurveda Institute,

University of Kelaniya, Yakkala, Sri Lanka.

It is believed that Sinhala language came to Sri Lanka with the original migrants. According to the *Mahāvamsa*, the great chronicle of Sri Lanka they who came from Bengal, Magadha and Kālinga (MV.vi,vii), are traditionally considered to be the founders of the Sinhala nation. They spoke Indo-Aryan local languages depending on the areas from which they migrated. Further, the *Mahāvamsa* states that King *Vijaya* (6th century BC) communicated (MV.vi.51) with kings in India to arrange marriages, etc. and for this commonly understood language and script would have been required. It proves that original migrants also brought with them the *Brāhmī* script. Later, the "Sinhala Language" came to be influenced by Pali, which is the language in which the Buddhist canonical writings were preserved. It can be accepted because, it is believed that Ven. *Mahinda* brought the commentaries, which was in Pali and was translated in to Sinhala by him self. (Hettiarachchi, Introduction p.6)

Later, in Anuradhapura period both Sanskrit and Pali appear to have influenced the Sinhalese. New sounds were added to the language as words were taken into Sinhalese both as derivatives and in the pure form. Verse however remained "*Elu*" or pure Sinhalese.

Further, it is also to be considered that *Siyabaslakara* and *Elu Sandas Lakuna* too refer to earlier works and on poetics shows us that there must have been an earlier literature which is lost to us.

Here it is a brief historical study on Buddhist Sinhala Literature. Considering the easy way to make the discussion, the method has been followed here is after having mentioned about Sinhalese Inscriptions, Sinhalese Commentary Literature and *Sigiri* Graffiti, history of Sinhalese literature has been discussed according to the periods called *Anuradhapura*, *Polonnaruwa*, *Dambadeniya* etc. That is also has to be limited from the beginning up to *Kotte* Period (15th century AD). Periods have named according to the changing of the capital in the history.

Sinhalese Inscriptions:

The earliest examples of Sinhala writing are contained in the inscriptions, which can be dated from the 3rd century BC. Two examples are given below.

1. *maharajhaha gamaNi*
abayaha devana piyasha
(ra)ma[Ni]ba(ri)ya milaka tisha
vihare kaa(ri)te katiya. (Kosgamakanda)
2. *aparimite lokahi budha-*
same nati athaana parama dulabe
sva~nta pate anutare sathe
maha saraNe lokacata budha nama sayabhuvu (Kirinda)

According to Prof. Senarat Paranavithana (JRAS.p.58) Sinhalese has been an inheritor to a literature, which is drawn since more than two thousand years long past. *Brāhmī* inscriptions in Sinhalese verse, found from *Kosgamakanda*, *Kirinda*, *Tissamahārāmya* and *Demædaoya* etc., dated to the later 3rd century BC. have been stated the evidence for the fact. There is no literally records written other than in poetical compositions. The earliest extant specimens of Sinhalese metrical compositions may be dated to the first century BC. A fragmentary inscription found from *Abhayagiriya* in