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Culture

## CULTURAL RELATIONS BETWEEN SRI LANKA AND NORTH INDIA DURING THE ANURADHAPURA PERIOD

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The geographical location of Sri Lanka in relation to India is such that any major upheaval in the mainland, whether political, cultural or social was bound to generate repercussions in this island, sooner or later. Due to the close proximity and resultant impact of India on Sri Lanka, G. C. Mendis<sup>1</sup> has gone to the extreme limit of naming the period upto the arrival of the Portuguese in 1505 as the Indian Period of Sri Lankan history. He has again divided the Indian period into North Indian and South Indian Periods; since Sri Lanka was largely influenced by North India up to the Cola conquest of 1017, and by South India from that date up to the arrival of the Portuguese in 1505. The North Indian Period is further divided by Mendis into two periods. The North Indian Period I begins with the reign of Devanmpiya Tissa (c. 250—210 B.C.),<sup>2</sup> the contemporary of Asoka (274—232 B.C.) and ends with the reign of Mahasen (274—301 A.D.), the great tank builder. This period was marked by four South Indian invasions, but the benign influence of Buddhism and Asokan civilization preponderated over all else.

The North Indian Period II begins according to Mendis with the reign of Mahasen's son, Kirti Sri Meghavarna (301—328) and ends with the Cola conquest of Sri Lanka in 1017 in the reign of Mihindu V (982—1029). A significant change had taken place in North India. The Indian emperor Samudragupta (c. 325—275) brought the greater part of Northern India under his sway and ushered the Golden Age of the Guptas when the traditional Vedic civilisation reasserted itself and Hindu genius flowered in profusion. During the fourth, fifth and sixth centuries Sri Lanka benefited by the cultural impact of the Gupta civilisation. The evidence of political contact, however is limited.

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1. G.C. Mendis, (1948) *The Early History of Ceylon*, Fifth Edition, Y.M.C.A. Publishing House, Calcutta, pp. 16 — and 17
  2. All dates mentioned in this study are taken from the *University of Ceylon, History of Ceylon* (1959) Vol. I, Parts I,II, Ceylon University Press, Colombo.

The influence of North India waned after the tenth century as this region was overrun by the Muslims and its Hindu civilisation received a set back. Hinduism flourished in the south and three great empires, the Cola Pandya and Vijayanagara rose in succession. Sri Lanka had several direct relations, both cordial and hostile with all three empires and for short periods came under the rule of the Colas and Pandyas.<sup>3</sup> As a result the island felt the strong cultural impact of South India from the Cola conquest to the coming of the Portuguese.

This in brief is Mendis' thesis which he propounded almost 50 years ago and which was later followed by a few other writers. This approach could be misleading since it adopts a purely external standpoint. In the same way it is erroneous to speak of a Portuguese and Dutch Period between 1505 and 1796 when the independent Kingdom of Kandy had demonstrated her strength, ability and will to survive and had commanded the loyalty of the majority of people living in the island. This form of periodisation suggests that Sri Lanka was merely a passive receiver of foreign influences, whereas this was not so. For instance the most salient feature in Sri Lankan civilisation during the first ten centuries (which Mendis calls the North Indian Period) is the irrigation system which alone formed the basis of the renowned hydraulic structure, "giving life and water to the plains which nature had condemned to lie parched and desolate" is entirely the product of Sri Lankan genius owing nothing to Indian influences. Although Buddhism was an Indian import it soon became indigenised with a Sinhala Sangha preaching in the Sinhala tongue. Although Buddhism disappeared from India yet Sri Lanka enshrined the faith in her bosom never to be forsaken, thus evolving culture entirely her own. Sri Lankan history cannot be viewed from a purely Indo centric or Europa centric perspective. Every period of history is an admixture of various elements: a fabric woven with threads of diverse textures and hues. To extricate one such thread and label the whole fabric under its name could be a misleading simplification.

In the present paper the more modern approach is adopted and the focus of Sri Lanka's history during the early phase will be the local base and that is Anuradhapura, which was the seat of Sinhala civilisation for over a thousand years and which from the point of longevity surpassed many capitals of the world. On the score of steadfastness alone, the early period deserves to be named after Anuradhapura. While Sri Lanka's relations with

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3. G.C. Mendis, *Opcit* pp. 65 and 66

South India had been peaceful as well as hostile, her relations with North India had always been one of cordial cultural intercourse. The purpose of this paper is to examine the various aspects of this relationship, ethnic, religious, linguistic and cultural during the time when the capital of the island was Anuradhapura.

The geographical divisions of India mentioned in this study will be demarcated as follows: By North India is meant that part of the sub continent watered by the Indus and Ganges and lying north of the Narmada river and Vindhya mountains. South of the Narmada and the Vindhya range and north of the Krishna—Tungabhadra is the Deccan Plateau. The third region, which is generally called South India lies to the South of Krishna and Tungabhadra, and during the period under review consisted of the three Tamil Kingdoms of Cola, Pandya and Chera.

The recorded history of Sri Lanka begins when about the sixth century B.C, the island was colonised by migrants from North India, who spoke an Aryan language and called themselves "Sinhala". Today after the passage of 2500 years, about seventy five percent of the people in Sri Lanka are known as Sinhala: so is the language they speak. The early migrants gave the same name to their new home, which is referred to as Sinhaladvipa in classical Sanskrit literature and more often as Sihaladipa in later Pali writings, whence are derived all its later designations, the Arabic, Sarandib and the Portuguese, Ceilao and modern Ceylon.<sup>4</sup>

It is generally accepted by scholars<sup>5</sup> that an Aryan speaking people entered India from the North West about 1500 B.C. and gradually spread along the entire Indo Gangetic plain south of the Himalayas and north of the Vindhya mountains. The area of their occupation was known as Aryavarta. Historians hold the view that the final blow to the Indus Valley Civilisation that had flourished for centuries in parts of Northern India was dealt by the Aryan invaders.<sup>6</sup> As the Aryan invaders spread in stages throughout Aryavarta and penetrated to the south as well, they were influenced by the existing cultures of the people they subdued or absorbed. By the

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4. M. D. Raghavan (1964) *India in Ceylonese History Society and Culture*, Asia Publishing House, Bombay, p. 11

5. E. J. Rapson Ed (1921) *The Cambridge History of India*, Vol I, S. Chand & Co. New Delhi, p. 68

6. Sir Mortimer Wheeler (1960) *The Cambridge History of India. Supplementary Volume, The Indus Civilisation*, Cambridge University Press, pp. 96-97

sixth century BC when the Aryan speakers first established contact with Sri Lanka, they had evolved a complex social organisation based on the fourfold *varna* or caste system, knew the use of iron and the iron plough, were skilled in agriculture, specially rice and wheat and were versed in various arts and crafts. Though the Aryan civilisation was mainly a rural one, a few cities and sea ports had grown up together with overland trade, river communications and maritime commerce.<sup>7</sup>

It is against this background of the expansion and development of the Aryan speaking communities in Northern India that one has to view their first settlements in Sri Lanka. With the exception of the Pali Chronicles of Sri Lanka the *Dipavamsa* & *Mahavamsa*<sup>8</sup> all other evidence points to the fact that the earliest settlers were sea faring merchants who came to the island from some part of North India.<sup>9</sup> The author of the *Mahavamsa* who lived about thousand years after the first migrations has made a dramatic event of a gradual process of colonisation and has understandably conferred royal status on Vijaya whom he considered was the progenitor of his race. Apart from such understandable inaccuracies the evidence of the Pali Chronicles relating to the migrants and the country of their origin, when divested of the miraculous elements, receive remarkable confirmation from linguistic and epigraphical evidence. The Sinhala language is closely related to the Indo Aryan tongues of Northern India, the oldest form of which is Vedic Sanskrit. As far back as 1937, Wilhelm Geiger has stated that, "the Sinhalese language belongs to the Aryan group of Indian dialects and has descended, through Pali Prakrit from old Indian (Sanskrit) Its evolution proceeds on the same lines as that of the modern Indo Aryan Vernaculars such as Sindhi, Gujerati, Marathi, Hindi, Bengali etc."<sup>10</sup> This evidence confirms the tradition recorded in the Pali Chronicles of

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7. C. W. Nicholas and S. Paranavitana (1961) *A Concise History of Ceylon*, Ceylon University Press, Colombo. p. 18
  8. *Dipavamsa*, (1879) edited and translated into English by H. Oldenberg, London, *The Mahavamsa* or the Great Chronicle of Ceylon, (1934) translated into English by Wilhelm Geiger, P.T.S. London.
  9. Nicholas and Paranavitana, *Op. cit.*, p. 19
  10. Wilhelm Geiger, "The linguistic character of Sinhalese" in *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Ceylon*. Vol. XXXIV. No. 90, 1937, p. 18

the Sinhala that their ancestors came from Northern India.

Further investigations into the phonology, vocabulary and grammar of many Indo Aryan languages together with an analytical study of the Pali Chronicles and Brahmi Inscriptions of Sri Lanka confirm that there were very likely two major migrations of Aryan speaking people from the Gujarat area in the West and the Bengal area in the East. Their language was a Prakrit language similar to Pali or to the language of the Asokan inscriptions. The island was at the time inhabited by a race of people whom the chronicler called yakkhas and with whom intermarriage was inevitable. Due to the geographical proximity, intermarriages and continuous communications began with the people of South India leading to admixture of blood and acculturation. Soon after the first settlers arrived a lively intercourse began between Sri Lanka and the North Eastern area of India such as Bengal, Bihar and Orissa. A comparative study of the oldest Brahmi Inscriptions of Sri Lanka with the Asokan Edicts has led to the conclusion that the Sinhala language is very likely the result of a fusion between elements from the East and West of Aryavarta.<sup>11</sup> The evidence of the distribution of the Brahmi Inscriptions of Sri Lanka indicates that by the third or second century B.C. the early Sinhala had spread throughout the whole island.<sup>12</sup>

After the first settlements it is clear from the Pali Chronicles that the intercourse between North India and Sri Lanka continued unabated and as a result the Sinhala language in spite of its geographical isolation evolved in the same way as the other dialects of North India passing through the Sinhala Prakrit, Proto Sinhala, medieval and modern stages which it had attained by about the 8th century A.D.<sup>13</sup>

The fact that bands of migrants followed in the wake of the first settlers is echoed in the *Mahavamsa* accounts of the arrival of Panduvasudeva and his followers and Bhaddakaccana and her retinue<sup>14</sup> some

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11. Wilhelm Geiger, *Op. cit.*, p. 20; Nicholas and Paranavitana *Op. cit.* Chapter II Aryan Settlements and the Early kings of Ceylon.
  12. Paranavitana (1970), *Inscriptions of Ceylon*, Vol. I. Early Brahmi Inscriptions, Department of Archaeology Ceylon, p. xvi.
  13. Wilhelm Geiger, *op. cit.*
  14. *Mahavamsa*, viii, 11-16; 20-25

time after the death of Vijaya. According to the *Mahavamsa* the grandson of Panduvasudeva and Bhaddakaccana, Pandukabhaya, founded in the fourth century B.C. the city of Anuradhapura.<sup>15</sup>

When the early Aryan migrants came they brought with them the religious beliefs which they practised in the country of their origin. In North India at the time, Brahmanism was the accepted religion, Brahma was the Supreme Creator and the world order was maintained by four protectors, Indra, Yama, Varuna and Kuvera. The Yaksha cult similar to that in India was practised in pre Buddhist Sri Lanka. Yakkhas and Yakkhins such as Cittaraja, Kalavela, Vadavamukhi and Pacchimarajini were honoured and propitiated. There were in Sri Lanka adherents of almost all the sects prevalent in North India at the time. Jainism seems to have been popular since the names of several *Niganthas* are mentioned in the *Mahavamsa*. *Paribbajakas* and *Ajivakas* who were also the adherents of North Indian sects were known in Sri Lanka.<sup>16</sup> The migrants coming from different parts of North India brought with them not only their religious beliefs but also their priests. The followers of Panduvasudeva came in the guise of mendicant monks and Bhaddakaccana, the Sakya Princess and her retinue arrived in the guise of yellow robed nuns.<sup>17</sup> This shows that monks and nuns were not unknown before Buddhism was officially introduced to Sri Lanka.

Thus it seems that even before Tissa's reign North India had been an important contributory factor in the evolution of language, culture and religion.

Devanampiya Tissa's reign coincided with that of the Mauryan emperor Asoka one of the most renowned, personages in history and the close links which Sri Lanka forged with North India at the time changed the island's destiny and enriched every aspect of its life and culture. The fame of Asoka had spread to Sri Lanka and Tissa eager to establish contact with his illustrious contemporary inaugurated diplomatic dealings with the court at Pataliputra. According to the *Mahavamsa* account friendly exchanges between the two rulers had prevailed for some time.<sup>18</sup> Tissa sent a delegation headed by his nephew and

15. *Mahavamsa* X 75-77

16. *Mahavamsa*, x, 94-104; also see Paranavitana, "Pre Buddhist Religious Beliefs in Ceylon", *JRAS*, (Ceylon) Vol. xxx, 1929, pp. 302-328

17. *Mahavamsa*, VIII, 11-16; 20-25

18. *Mahavamsa*, XI, 18-19

chief minister Maharittha together with priceless gifts which were the products of his realm.<sup>19</sup> The gifts sent by Tissa were graciously accepted by the Mauryan emperor who in return sent his royal friend all the paraphernalia needed for a coronation.<sup>20</sup> According to the chronicler at Asoka's request Tissa was consecrated the second time.<sup>21</sup> The reconsecration of Tissa undoubtedly strengthened the existing ties between the two rulers and paved the way for the more fruitful contact that followed.

Dr. Paranavitana<sup>22</sup>, basing his evidence on a much older source mentioned in the commentary to the *Mahavamsa*, arrives at the following conclusion regarding the second consecration. It is said that when the envoys of Tissa arrived in the court at Pataliputra, Asoka inquired about the consecration ceremonies prevalent in Sri Lanka. He was informed that there was no *abhisekha* or consecration at the time in Sri Lanka, but instead the kings exercised power by the assumption of a staff or *yasthi*. Paranavitana holds the view that the titles held by the early rulers of Sri Lanka such as *gamani* and *mahaparumaka* which are not royal titles point to the same conclusion. If we accept Paranavitana's view, then it follows that when Tissa began his rule he had only the title of *gamani* (literally, village chief) and the real motive behind the mission to Pataliputra was to get the support of the great Mauryan emperor for the assumption of royal honours.<sup>23</sup> The adoption by the Sinhala ruler of the epithet Devanampiya (beloved of the gods) which was used only by Asoka and his successors seem to indicate that kingship was an institution introduced to Sri Lanka with the help of the Mauryan emperor Devanampiya as Asoka was known in his inscriptions.<sup>24</sup>

The introduction of Buddhism to Sri Lanka is an event of exceptional significance and its impact has been felt on every aspect of Sri Lankan society right up to modern times. This took place in the reign

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19. *Mahavamsa*, XI. 20-26

20. *Mahavamsa*, XI. 40

21. *Mahavamsa*, XI. 40

22. *University of Ceylon, History of Ceylon*, Vol. I, Part I, p. 134.

23. *Ibid.*

24. *Ibid.* p. 135, Regarding Asoka's Titles as given in his inscriptions. see R. Mookerji (1928), *Asoka*, Mc. Millan & Co. London. pp. 11-12.

of Asoka whose conversion to Buddhism was an event of importance in the history of humanity. During his early years he followed an expansionist policy and his attempt to annex Kalinga to his realm resulted in untold suffering to man. Overcome with remorse the king was attracted to the compassionate word of the Buddha. In his own words he abandoned war or *digrijaya* and embarked upon a *dhammavijaya* or a campaign of moral conquest. The details of Asoka's missionary activities and specially the mission to Sri Lanka are given in considerable detail in the Pali Chronicles.<sup>25</sup> The Third Buddhist council was held in Pataliputra under the sponsorship of Asoka with the Elder Moggaliputta-Tissa as its convenor. At its conclusion the Elder Tissa despatched missionaries far and wide from Greece in the West to Suvannabhumi in the East, and from the Himalayas in the North to Lanka in the South. The mission to Sri Lanka was entrusted to Mahinda, son of Asoka<sup>26</sup> and his four disciples, Itthiya, Uttiya, Sambala and Bhaddasala.<sup>27</sup>

According to the *Mahavamsa* when Asoka was yet a prince his father sent him as viceroy to the province of Avanti and there in the town of Vedisa he married Devi and had two children by her, Mahinda and Sanghamitta.<sup>28</sup> However, in Asoka's own inscriptions discovered so far, no mention is made of his son or of the mission headed by the latter, although he refers to Tambapanni (which was the ancient name for Sri Lanka) twice in his Rock Edict XIII and Rock Edict II.<sup>29</sup> Asoka's obvious silence regarding such an important mission headed by his own son has led scholars to express doubts regarding the *Mahavamsa* account of Mahinda's mission to Sri Lanka. However, the *Mahavamsa* account of the mission to the Himalayas has received striking corroboration from archaeological evidence at Sanci. Further an inscription on a relic casket at Sanci reads, "Sapurisa Mogaliputasa", proving beyond

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25. *Mahavamsa*, V

26. According to Chinese Sources, Mahinda was the younger brother of Asoka.

27. *Mahavamsa*, XII, 1-8

28. *Mahavamsa*, XIII, 8-11

29. There is a river in the Pandya country called Tampapanni. However, there is a consensus of opinion that the Tampapanni of the Asokan Edicts is Sri Lanka. See R. Mookerji, *op. cit.*, p. 132, Footnote 2.

doubt that Mogaliputta Tissa who according to the *Mahavamsa* was the convenor of the Third Council was a historical figure.<sup>30</sup> Here we have contemporary archaeological evidence to corroborate the historicity of the *Mahavamsa*. If the *Mahavamsa* is so reliable with regard to the Third Council and the Himalayan mission it is justifiable to conclude that the account of the arrival of Mahinda is not mere myth. The supernatural element and the numerous miracles connected with Mahinda merely serve to emphasise the greatness of his personality and the impact he had made on the minds of people and posterity.

Mahinda's achievements during his first few days in Sri Lanka were significant, namely the conversion of the king to Buddhism,<sup>31</sup> the conversion of Anuladevi, (consort of the king's younger brother Mahanaga) and her retinue<sup>32</sup> and the conversion of the citizens of Anuradhapura.<sup>33</sup> The facility with which the Thera was understood by the elite and commoners makes it clear that the language he spoke was closely allied to the indigenous tongue. There is evidence that Buddhism was known and perhaps practised before Mahinda's arrival and this was only an official acceptance of the religion by the king; a culmination of a process that had been going on for a long time.

An event of great importance was the donation by Tissa of the Mahamegha Park in Anuradhapura to the *Sangha*.<sup>34</sup> The ground plan for all the future religious edifices were marked<sup>35</sup> and this was the origin of the famous Mahavihara complex which developed into one of the greatest Theravada monastic establishments of the Buddhist world. A second monastery was started at Mihintale (the hill of Mahinda) where the caves on the hillock were prepared for the occupation of the sangha during the rainy season.<sup>36</sup> These caves with drip ledges cut on top of the entrance to prevent rain water dripping into the interior of the cave, are still seen on Mihintale. Thirdly, the Thuparama dagaba or relic chamber was construc-

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30. Gieger, *Mahavamsa*, Introduction pp. XIX and XX

31. *Mahavamsa*, XIV, 23

32. *Mahavamsa*, XIV, 59

33. *Mahavamsa*, XIV, 64

34. *Mahavamsa*, XV

35. *Mahavamsa*, XV 30-52

36. *Mahavamsa*, XVI

ted by the king at the request of Mahinda, as a place of worship for the Buddhists with the collar bone of the Buddha obtained through the good offices of Asoka enshrined in it.<sup>37</sup> These three sacred places have been visited by Buddhists in Asia for centuries and even today after 2300 years their ruins are objects of veneration.

Meanwhile many of the converts wished to join the Order of monks. Among them was Abhaya, the king's younger brother who was ordained by Mahinda together with his followers.<sup>38</sup> Having accomplished a multitude of tasks for the propagation of the Dhamma, Tissa asked Mahinda whether Buddhism was established in Sri Lanka. According to the *Samantapasadika* the Thera's reply was, "O great king the *Sasana* is established but its roots are not yet gone deep." "When will the roots go deep?" Mahinda's answer to this question is thought provoking. "When a son born of parents who belong to Tambapannidipa (Sri Lanka) learns the Vinaya in Tambapannidipa and recites the same in Tambapannidipa then will the *Sasana* take root in the land."<sup>39</sup> One point is certain from Mahinda's answer and that is he did not wish to retain for himself or for his king (Asoka) who was responsible for the establishment of Buddhism in Sri Lanka any authority or any special power. He did not wish the Sri Lankan Buddhists to have any extra territorial loyalties to any spiritual or temporal power in Mauryan India. His only concern was that the Buddha Dhamma should secure a firm hold in Sri Lanka; with no strings attached and no hidden political or economic motives.<sup>40</sup> Walpola Rahula has pointed out that the establishment of Buddhism in a given geographical unit is quite foreign to the teaching of the Buddha. No where has he given instructions as to how the *Sasana* should be established in a particular country.<sup>41</sup>

Perhaps the idea of institutionalising Buddhism as the state religion of a particular country with an indigenous sangha was a part of Asoka's master plan—the great moral conquest or Dhammavijaya.<sup>42</sup> Thus arose in Sri Lanka the Buddha *Sasana*, based on triparite relationship

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37. *Mahavamsa*, XVII

38. *Mahavamsa*, XVII 57–58

39. *Samantapasadika*, Vinaya Commentary. Simon Hewavitarana Bequest Series, Colombo. p. 60. *Mahavamsa* (XV 180–87) gives a slightly different version.

40. Also see Walpola Rahula (1956) *History of Buddhism in Ceylon* M. D. Gunasena, Colombo, p. 54

41. *Ibid*

42. *Ibid*, p. 55

between the king, the sangha and the people which provided the infrastructure for Sinhala civilization. Ever since Buddhism had been an important factor on the political history of Sri Lanka; it symbolised the unity of the community and legitimated political authority specially in times of strain and stress. The Asokan model of the king as the benefactor of the people, the preserver of the sangha and the defender of the faith was emulated as long as Sinhala kingship lasted. The Buddha Sasana in Sri Lanka had no extra territorial loyalties to Mauryan India nor had the sangha any affiliations with their Indian counterparts in doctrinal or disciplinary matters. If this was a part of Asoka's plan, Mahinda accomplished it to perfection for even the disintegration of the Mauryan empire and the disappearance of Buddhism from Northern India, did not impede in any way the triumphant progress of Buddhism in Sri Lanka.

Meanwhile Anuladevi, wife of the sub-king Mahanaga expressed a desire to become a *bhikkhuni* or nun. Since it was not permissible for Mahinda to ordain women, the envoy Arittha was sent to Pataliputta requesting the emperor Asoka to send Theri Sanghamitta sister of Mahinda to Sri Lanka bringing with her a branch of the Bodhi Tree at Gaya under which the Buddha attained enlightenment.<sup>43</sup> It is evident that throughout Mahinda's career in Sri Lanka close communications were maintained with the court at Pataliputra. Asoka pleased with the success of Mahinda's mission sent his daughter Sanghamitta with a branch of the Bodhi Tree. A delegation consisting of several *bhikkhunis* headed by Sanghamitta and accompanied by Arittha embarked from Tamralipti at the mouth of the Ganges and arrived at Jambukolapattana not far from Point Pedro. At the seaport she was received by the king in person and taken in procession to Anuradhapura where the sacred branch was planted amidst great ceremony.<sup>44</sup> Henceforth the spread of the Bodhi Tree symbolised the spread of the faith. Saplings from the seeds of this tree were planted all over the island symbolising the rapid spread of the faith. For over 20 centuries this tree, the oldest historical tree in the world has been the cherished object of veneration of Buddhists.

Sanghamitta then accomplished her most important task, that of establishing the *bhikkhuni* Order by the Ordination of Anuladevi and her retinue.<sup>45</sup> Judging from the *Dipavamsa* and *Mahavamsa* accounts

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43. *Mahavamsa*, XV 18-23

44. *Mahavamsa*, XIX

45. *Mahavamsa*, XIX, 65

the *bhikkhuni* order was a flourishing institution throughout the Anuradhapura period.<sup>46</sup>

The arrival of Sanghamitta cannot be dismissed as a mere legend. Vincent Smith states, "I used to reject absolutely the story of Sanghamitta, but am now disposed to admit her real existence."<sup>47</sup> Some scholars have expressed doubts about the historicity of Sanghamitta and the arrival of the Bodhi Tree on the grounds that there is no other evidence to corroborate the Sri Lankan Pali Chronicles. Geiger who firmly upholds tradition is of opinion that the archaeological evidence at Sanci<sup>48</sup> confirms it. "At least Grundwedel, in an ingenious and to me convincing way points out that the sculptures of the lower and middle architraves of the East Gate of the Sanci Tope are representations of that event. Since the Sanci sculptures belong to the second century B.C. the representation is distant from the event by roughly speaking only 100 or at most 150 years."<sup>49</sup> Here we have near contemporary evidence on stone to substantiate the Sri Lankan Chronicles regarding the arrival of Sanghamitta and the Bodhi Tree.

Archaeological excavations carried out over 50 years ago have brought to light the existence of several Buddhist remains at Kantarodai (near the Jaffna Town) which has been identified as the ancient Kadurugoda.<sup>50</sup> In fact so extensive were the ruins that Paul E. Peiris remarked, "Kantarodai appears to me to be a miniature Anuradhapura buried in the Tamil country."<sup>51</sup> Kantarodai lies along the ancient highway from Jambukolapattana to Anuradhapura and there is strong tradition still prevailing among the villagers that Sanghamitta and her retinue of nuns rested there while on their way to the capital.<sup>52</sup>

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46. E. W. Adikaram (1946) *Early History of Buddhism in Ceylon* published by D. S. Puswella, Ceylon. p.
47. Vincent Smith (1962), *The Early History of India*, p. 196, footnote 1.
48. Sanci is in Vidisa the birth place of Mahinda & Sanghamitta
49. Geiger (1934) *Mahavamsa*, Introduction p. XX
50. For the identification of Kantarodai see Paul E. Peiris, "Nagadipa and Buddhist Remains in Jaffna" *J.R.A.S.* No. 70 x1917, p. 13
51. *Ibid* p. 29
52. During her visit to Kantarodai in 1971, the villagers living in the locality gave this information to the author.

Hallowed by the sojourn of the Theri and the Bodhi Tree, the sacred precincts came to be known as the Kadurugoda Vihara. The fact that Kadurugoda had affiliations with Sanci, the childhood home of Sanghamitta lends support to this tradition. Several stupas have been unearthed which are similar in style to those at Sanci. Numismatic evidence proves that there had been continuous communication between Kadurugoda Vihara and religious centres in North India.<sup>53</sup>

The example of Sanghamitta who could be regarded as the world's first woman ambassador carrying a message of peace from one head of state to another, evidently had an impact on the position of women in Sinhala society very early in its history. The activities of learned *bhikkhunis* and the towering personalities of Sanghamitta, a royal princess and Anuladevi, the wife of the subking who were pursuing independent religious careers of their own would certainly have inspired Sinhala women. Hence they traditionally enjoyed a higher position and greater freedom in society than women in contemporary Asian cultures and were free of the extreme forms of discrimination such as the immolation of widows and seclusion of women prevalent in India.

The patronage of Asoka and the personality of Mahinda brought the island within the sphere of the great Mauryan cultural tradition and linked Sri Lanka with North India during one of the most creative ages of Indian thought opening new vistas of artistic, spiritual and intellectual expression. The missionaries brought not only the Dhamma but also a whole civilisation, then at the height of its glory. The Buddhist scriptures, the Pali canon or Tripitaka were the first literary works that came to the country. Mahinda is also said to have brought to the Island of the Sinhalese the commentaries of the Tripitaka and translated them into Sinhala for the benefit of the people of the Island.<sup>54</sup> He thus made Sinhala a literary language and began its literature.

The earliest writings in Sri Lanka which date from the third century BC are the inscriptions recording the grant of caves to the Sangha by pious individuals. The script known as Brahmi is on the whole similar to that of the Edicts of Asoka; of the records found on the railings at Bharhut and Sanci and some of the other early Prakrit

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53. P.E. Pieris, "Nagadipa and the Buddhist Remains of Jaffna", JRASCB, Np. 72 1919, p. 45 ff.

54. Walpola Rahula, *Op. cit.* p. 60. Rahula quotes Buddhaghosa's commentary on the Majjhima Nikaya

inscriptions discovered in India.<sup>55</sup> It is therefore reasonable to assume that the art of writing and a ready made alphabet came from Mauryan India with the Buddhist missionaries or about the same time. The language of the Asokan inscriptions of the third century B.C, and Sri Lankan inscriptions of the same time were almost similar. It was so close that speakers of the two languages could understand one another and this explains the rapidity with which Buddhism spread in Sri Lanka.

Since there was such brisk intercourse between Sri Lanka and Northern India it is relevant to examine the various routes that were used by traders, pilgrims missionaries and others. There were three routes and all started from Pataliputra. The first which was used frequently by monks passed through Prayaga (modern Allahabad), Kosambi, Bharhut, Vidisa, Ujjain, Mahishmati (Mandhata) and Pratishthana (Paithan) to the mouth of the Godavari and the Krishna and thence to Sri Lanka. This explains the close connections that Sri Lanka had with the Avanti area and later with the Andhra country. The second continued from Ujjain to the seaport of Bharukaccha (modern Broach), from where people sailed southwards along the coast of Western India to Sri Lanka. Ujjain was a great trading centre and the meeting place of several trade routes. Along the third route people travelled directly by ship across the Bay of Bengal, starting from Pataliputra they sailed along the Ganges to Tamralipti and from there to Jambukola along the East coast of India. This was the route used by the Theri Sanghamitta.

From the capital Anuradhapura there were two highways leading to the two important ports of the kingdom. One road went northwards to Jambukola<sup>56</sup> in the northern tip of the island from whence ships set sail to North India. Tissa's envoys carrying gifts to the Mauryan court went by foot to Jambukola and from there sailed for seven days to Tamralipti and reached Pataliputra in another seven days.<sup>57</sup> Those proceeding to South India used the highway from Anuradhapura to Mahatittha or the Great Port (modern Mantota) and crossed the sea to the Pandya country. Similarly those coming from South India whether

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55. Paranavitana (1970) *Inscriptions of Ceylon*, Vol I. Early Brahmi Inscriptions Vol. I. Introduction p. XVII

56. Modern Jambuturai or Sambalturai. see J.R.A.S. No. 70 1917, p. 35

57. *Mabavamsa*, XI 23-24

with peaceful or hostile intentions usually landed at Mantota.

It was the contact with Mauryan India and the enthusiasm for the new faith that first inspired the Sinhala people to creative activity in the fields of art, architecture and sculpture. Paranavitana has pointed out that with the possible exception of a single dolmen and three groups of cists there are no structural remains so far brought to light that can be dated as pre Buddhist.<sup>58</sup> The idea of using stone for building purposes and rock abodes for monks was introduced from Mauryan India.<sup>59</sup> The stone monasteries and caves of the early period in Sri Lanka present in common certain features due to the influence of early Indian Buddhist art. The similarities are evident in sheer size and grandeur, monolithic character, precision of outline and refined dignity. Mauryan India was renowned for its building techniques and the Greek envoy at the court of Asoka's grand father Chandragupta Maurya declared that "his palaces surpassed those at Susa and Ectabana". With so much of friendly intercourse with Sri Lanka, both trade and pilgrimage an exchange of skills, ideas and goods was inevitable. Besides Asoka is said to have sent to Sri Lanka guilds of artisans and craftsmen to look after the Bodhi Tree.<sup>60</sup> The earliest Sri Lankan sculptures found at the Kantaka Cetiya in Mihintale are similar to the earliest school of Indian sculpture at Bharhut and Sanci near Vidisa<sup>61</sup> where lived Mahinda's mother.<sup>62</sup>

The oldest Buddhist monument par excellence is the stupa which enshrines the physical remains of the Buddha or a saint. The idea of building a stupa was first mooted by Mahinda, and Tissa built the Thuparama enshrining the collar bone of the Buddha. Thus stupa worship and the relic cult was introduced. The Sanci influence was very strong in the Thuparama. Although the Sri Lankan stupas developed independently surpassing in size and refinement their counterparts anywhere in the Buddhist world, they preserved the basic components of the Indian models. It is clear that with the benevolent tide of Buddhism many civilising forces from Mauryan India submerged the

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58. *University History of Ceylon*, Vol. I, pt. I, P. 256

59. Andreas Nell, "The Influence of Indian Art in Ceylon," in *The Influences of Indian Art* (1925), The Indian Society, London, p. 146

60. *Mahavamsa*, XIX. 1-4

61. Paranavitana, *University History of Ceylon*, Vol. I, Pt I. pp. 264-265

62. *Mahavamsa*, XIII. 6-7

island; but these were modified, developed and transformed by local genius and South Indian influences into essentially Sri Lankan products.

The Maurya empire did not long survive Asoka's death for the last of the Mauryas was slain by his commander-in-chief Pushyamitra Sunga in or about 184 B.C. Once the firm grip of the central authority was removed, the centrifugal forces operated; the distant provinces broke away and an incessant flood of invaders flowed in such as the Bactrians, Indo Greeks, Indo Parthians, Saka and Kushana. This infusion of fresh blood and new influences resulted in a spiritual upsurge and unprecedented philosophic activity & creative art centering around a new development in Buddhism known as the Mahayana or Great Vehicle as opposed to the Theravada. The great Kushana king Kanishka who began the Saka era of A. D. 78 is known in history as a patron of Mahayana Buddhism, responsible for the convening of the fourth Buddhist Council. It was here that the new doctrines were examined and codified in the presence of intellectual giants like Vasubandhu and Asvaghosa.

The changes in Buddhism became inevitable due to certain historical circumstances. There was a Brahmanic revival resulting in a reversal to the worship of gods and practice of ritual. Mahayanism was the response to man's innate need for a saviour to seek refuge in times of distress. The doctrinal changes were justified by abstruse, profound, philosophical arguments. The virile representations of the Greek gods reinforced those ideas and resulted in an exuberant outburst of art and sculpture known as the Gandhara school.

From the early centuries of the Christian era Mahayanism entrenched itself in the South and its main centres were Amaravati, Dhanyakataka and Nagarjunikonda in the Andhra country. The last mentioned place was the home of Nagarjuna, the founder of the Madhyamika philosophy. The impact of the new ideas was soon felt in Sri Lanka. In the reign of Voharaka Tissa (263-285 A.D.)<sup>63</sup> the Vaitulya Vada, identified as Mahayana, made its appearance in Sri Lanka. It is possible that Mahayana ideas had trickled down from Andhra to Sri Lanka even before that but in the reign of Voharaka Tissa they were numerous enough as to cause alarm among the orthodox Mahavihara monks. Paranavitana has shown that the periods when the Vaitulyas were active in Sri Lanka synchronise with the dates assigned to some signifi-

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63. *Mahavamsa*, XXXVI, 40-41

cant development in Mahayanism in India.<sup>64</sup> The head quarters of the revolutionary doctrines was the Abhayagiri Vihara and Gothabhaya (249—262) had to take drastic action against 60 monks dwelling in the Abhayagiri.<sup>65</sup> However, they were active again in the reign of Mahasen when a monk from Cola curried favour with the king and instigated him to do immense damage to the Mahavihara.<sup>66</sup>

Again in the time of Silakala (518—531) the Dhammadhatu, a Mahayana text was brought to Sri Lanka from Benares by a merchant and the king housed it near the royal palace, he ordered that every year the Dhammadhatu be taken to the Jetavana Vihara where a festival was held in its honour.<sup>67</sup> In the reign of Aggabodhi I (571—604) the Vaitulyas were humiliated in a public debate.<sup>68</sup> Although this was an official victory for the Theravada, Mahayana ideas had infiltrated into orthodox Buddhism and the theistic and ritualistic tendencies became popular. An eighth century fragmentary Mahayana inscription written in Sanskrit has been found in Mihintale, the cradle of Theravada Buddhism.<sup>69</sup> Even the extreme form known as Vajrayana, which made the distinction between Buddhism and certian forms or Saivism nominal, appeared in Sri Lanka in the ninth century.<sup>70</sup> Since the Mahayana scriptures were in Sanskrit the Abhayagiri Vihara became a centre for Sanskrit learning. As such it gained an international reputation, attracted scholars from abroad and was receptive to new ideas.

During the fourth, fifth and sixth centuries North India passed under the sway of the Imperial Guptas. Samudragupta who came to the throne sometime after 320 A.D. and died before 380 A.D. was renowned for his military exploits and his cultural accomplishments and his name and fame spread far beyond the confines of his dominions. His Sri Lankan contemporary Sri Meghavarna (301—328) had established friendly relations with his illustrious neighbour. The Allahabad

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64. "Mahayanism in Ceylon", in *Ceylon Journal of Science* G. II, pp. 35 ff.

65. *Mahavamsa*, XXXVI, 112

66. *Mahavamsa*, XXXVI, 1—16

67. *Mahavamsa*, XLI, 37—40

68. *Mahavamsa*, XLII, 35

69. Paranavāṭana "Mahayanism in Ceylon" in *Ceylon Journal of Science*. G. 11. p. 42

70. For details see Paranavāṭana, *University history of Ceylon* Vol. I, pt. I, pp. 383, 384

Pillar Inscription of Samudragupta mentions Saimhala (the people of Sinhala or Sri Lanka) among those who paid tribute to the Gupta Emperor. It is possible that many of the neighbouring kings including Sri Meghavarna sought to maintain close contact with the most powerful empire in the mainland and thought it politic to win the good graces of the great emperor by sending rich presents or showing respect in some other way.<sup>71</sup> This inscriptional evidence regarding Sri Lanka's relations with the Gupta emperor is confirmed by Chinese sources namely *Wang—Hiven, —Tse's Missions to India*.<sup>72</sup> It says that a king of Sri Lanka named Sri Meghavarana sent two monks to visit the monastery built by Asoka to the east of the Bodhi Tree at Gaya. The two Sri Lankan monks paid their respects to the Bodhi Tree but the monastery did not offer them hospitality. The two monks reported this to the king on their return. On hearing the complaint, Sri Meghavarna, sent envoys with gifts of precious stones to Samudragupta requesting his permission to build a Sri Lankan monastery at Buddha Gaya. Up to the time of Wang—Hiuen—Tse's writing the monastery was occupied by Sri Lankan monks.<sup>73</sup> In this connection reference could be made to a Sanskrit inscription found at Buddha Gaya which records that a monk named Mahanama from Sri Lanka caused a shrine to be built at the holy spot. This may perhaps refer to the same event. Sri Lankan sources do not make any references to this activity; nevertheless, it is certain that there were friendly relations and that monks and pilgrims travelled to and fro, from the Buddhist centres in North India to those in Sri Lanka.

The Gupta period saw the revival of Hindu genius in the realms of art, religion, philosophy, literature, drama and music. The impact of these can be detected in Sri Lanka as well. "The Gupta imperial impulse was as strong and as enduring in its effects as the Asokan imperial impulse"<sup>75</sup> The well known relief the Isrumuniya lovers and other

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71. For details see, *The History and Culture of the Indian People: The Classical Age* (1962). Bharatiya Vidya Bhawan Bombay, pp. 11–12

72. See, "Chino—Sinhalese Relations in the Early and Middle ages" in *JRAS* (Ceylon) Vol. XXIV, No. 68, 1915–1916 pp. 74–123. This is an English translation of M. Sylvain Levi's Article in the *Journal Asiatique* on Chinese references to Sri Lanka.

73. *Ibid.*

74. Paranavitana, *University History of Ceylon*, Vol. I, pt. I p. 288, p. 392

75. Andreas Nell, "The Influence of Indian Art in Ceylon" in *The Influences of Indian Art* (1925) The India Society, London, pp. 145–151

sculptures found at the same premises have the vigour and refinement of the Gupta period. The changes in the Sri Lankan stone sculpture followed the changes in India. There was a distinct moving away from the austere simplicity of the Asokan stone. The rail beams are carved. The rosettes at the intersections become more ornate and figures are embellished with more floriation. Some scholars believe that the fresco paintings of Sri Lanka such as those found in Sigiriya are "Gupta" in style and character. Like its precursor, the Asokan impetus, the Gupta imperial impact was absorbed and assimilated but remained vigorous and alive for centuries.

The Gupta period witnessed the glory of classical Sanskrit literature. With Sanskrit learning flourishing at the Abhayagiri Vihara, the scholars came in touch with the works of literary giants like Kalidasa. A highly rated Sanskrit work composed in Sri Lanka by Kumaradasa,<sup>76</sup> known as the *Janakiharana* or the *Abduction of Sita* shows unmistakable influence of Kalidasa's *Raghuvamsa*. Kalidasa's *Meghaduta*, a love message written in a little over hundred verses by a yaksha to his separated beloved, inspired the Sinhala poets of later times to produce the Sandesa literature.

The Hindu revival in North India under the Guptas led to a corresponding upsurge in South India in the seventh century and from there it spread to Sri Lanka. Mahayana and Tantric beliefs were in fact the result of Buddhism conceding to the strength of resurgent Hinduism. The distinctive feature of Mahayanism was the importance attached to Bodhisatvas or incipient Buddhas. In Sri Lanka Mahayana Bodhisatvas were worshipped in the guise of Hindu deities and vice versa.

From the tenth century North India had to face the Mohammedan onslaught which effectively ended the cultural contact with Sri Lanka. Indian Buddhism in its later debased forms found its last refuge with the Pala dynasty of Bengal and Bihar till the Palas and their faith were both uprooted by the Mohammedan conquest of 1197. Whatever was left of Buddhism was absorbed into Hinduism. In Sri Lanka the victorious armies of Rajaraja Cola dealt the final blow to Anuradhapura (c. 1017). Having made Polonnaruwa their capital, the Colas ruled Sri Lanka for 60 years during which period South Indian influences became stronger than ever before.

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76. For details see Paranavitana, *University History of Ceylon* Vol. I, pt. I, pp. 303-304