

IMPACT OF BUDDHISM ON THE SOCIETY OF ANCIENT LANKA

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Abstract

The Pali chronicles Dipavamsa and Mahavamsa, serves as a valuable source to study the island of Lanka. The chronicles give detailed insight into the history of the island, from the arrival of an Indian Prince Vijay (6th century B.C.E) to the reign of king Mahasena (4th century A.D.). The introduction of Buddhism is seen as the most important event in the history of Lanka, as soon after its introduction, it succeeded in converting the major section of the society. As Buddhism shared a close relationship with mainland India, any development or changes in India had impacted the island. Thus, Buddhism brought many new concepts and ideas along with it, which left a lasting impact on the society and culture of the island. The article explores how the introduction of Buddhism has altered the society of the island.

History about the island prior to the arrival of Buddhism is scarce although the two Pali chronicles (Dipavamsa and Mahavamsa) provide a glimpse of the life of inhabitants prior to 4th century B.C.E. According to the chronicles the island prior to the 6th century B.C.E was inhabited by aboriginals called Yakshas. In the 6th century B.C.E an Indian prince called Vijay along with his seven hundred followers arrived at the Tambapanni, just after their arrival they had to fight with the Yakshas to maintain their dominance in the island. After a few skirmishes, Vijay and his followers succeeded in pushing the Yakshas to the inland and maintaining their dominance in many parts of the island. The intruders were attracted by the fertility of the soil and the favourable climate of the island, the earliest evidence of their settlement can be found through pre-Christian inscription in an Aryan dialect (Mendis, 1940). (Mendis, 1940) argued that the archaeologist had found an Aryan dialect inscription in the pre Christian era, which proves that there were settlers in the island who were from the northern region of India. On the basis of the inscription the immigrants from mainland India were settled around the northern, south-eastern and eastern part of the island.

The early settlers introduced many new ideas in the island, for example the Aryan in India during this period were practicing sedentary agriculture, thus they introduced sedentary lifestyle and agriculture in the island of Lanka. Agriculture since then became one of the most widely practiced occupation, keeping in mind the importance of agriculture in the life of inhabitants all the major early settlements were built near water resources such as Anuradhadagama near Kadamba River (Geiger, 1912, p.58), Upatissagama near Gambhira River, and the settlements without regular supply of water huge tanks, Anuradha- tank and Abhaya – tanks were built. The existence of such reservoirs proves the importance of agriculture in the life of early settlers (Rahula, 1956). On the basis of little information provided in the chronicles, it can be argued that the immigrants along with the knowledge of agriculture introduced the concept of caste in the island (J. E. Tennent, 1860). Casteism prevailed in the island, though it was not as rigid as in mainland India but

similarities are evident. Brahmans in both the regions were considered the most respectful and learned individuals. Similar to untouchables, the Chronicles mentions a community in ancient Lanka called chandals who were restricted to engage in manual work such as cleaning the street, sewers, and a work related to the dead bodies. The immigrants seem to have introduced ancient Indian religious philosophies as the inhabitants of the island prior to Buddhism were followers of Brahmanism, nigantha and ajivakas. The geographical location of Ceylon is very crucial as in terms of distance it is very close to India separated by a narrow stretch of sea and this had an inevitable result of linking the fortunes of Ceylon very closely with those of India. Every major change in India, be it political, religious, social and economic had an impact on the island.

Introduction of Buddhism by Mahinda Thera in the 3rd century B.C is considered the most important event in the history of Lanka. Buddhism, soon after its introduction gained immense popularity among the masses, and a massive number of people together with King Devanampiya Tissa embraced the faith. "It's doctrine of karma, the law of cause and effect, showed at least the more intelligent people that happiness or suffering depended partly on themselves and not on the whims and fancies of gods and demons. Its lofty moral code helped them to develop an ethical turn of mind" (Mendis,1940, p. 15). Another reason for large numbers of converts can be the acquaintance of the inhabitants of Lanka with the philosophy of Buddhism prior to the arrival of Mahinda Thera. Devanampiyatissa, adopted the teachings of Buddha as the state religion and encouraged the masses to embrace the faith, he requested Mahinda Thera to deliver teachings and sermons which helps the subject in acquiring more knowledge about the teachings. His patronage helped in strengthening the hold of the faith in the island, he not only built viharas and monasteries but also brought the relics of buddha and bodhi tree from India, which served as a place of worship for the followers.

The advent of Buddhism profoundly transformed the island's societal structure, political landscape, culture identity and economic framework. Brahmans who played an important role in the society, they were the most influential and learned men often serving the rulers as royal Chaplain, lost their position in both political affairs and society to the Bhikkhus. But that doesn't mean that they totally disappeared from society, there is multiple evidence in the chronicles of their presence throughout the course of history of ancient Ceylon. De Silva (1981) believes that "the tolerant atmosphere of a Buddhist society ensured the survival of Hinduism with only a marginal loss of influence" (p.41) Buddhism provided its followers the choice to renounce their worldly life and lead a life devoted to the teachings of Buddha, the teachings help the followers break the social and cultural barriers and join the sangha. Thus, adding to the social composition, Buddhism introduced a new section: bhikkhus, bhikkhunis and laymen or upasakas. As mentioned in chronicles many people chose the life of sangha throughout ancient Ceylon. Initially Bhikkhus lived as per the Vinaya rule by begging for alms in return for preaching, but as the popularity of the Buddha's teaching grew in the island the number of individuals who joined the sangha also increased. Over time it became difficult for them to sustain solely on the alms, thus their dependency on the patronage of the state increased. To maintain and upkeep the growing

number of monasteries, it was essential to establish a permanent source of income to avoid any hardship to the members of the sangha. By the beginning of the Christian era, the influence of priesthood on the state had increased to the extent that it converted their precarious eleemosynary dependency into a permanent territorial endowment, (W. Geiger, 1912) there are multiple evidence in the Pali chronicles where the monarch had donated land and tanks to the viharas, “the temples of Ceylon absorbed a large proportion of the landed property of the Kingdom, and their possessions were not only exempted from taxation, but accompanied by a right to the compulsory labour of the temple tenants” (Tennent, 1860, p.364).

By the reign of Duttagamini (2nd century B.C.E.), bhikkhus and the sangha became an important composition of the society, the status of Bhikkhus by this time has elevated and they shared a close relationship with the state; one such example is bhikkhus participating in the war along the sight of Duttagamini. The relationship between the two were in mutual interdependence with the purpose of maintaining and stabilizing each other's status and power in the society. The relation between the two doesn't always go smooth, bhikkhus interfering in the political affairs sometimes created a rift between the two resulting in revoking the patronage of the sangha by the monarch. The monarch also kept a check on the sangha to maintain its sanity, which resulted in the banishment of bhikkhus from the sangha.

Buddhism introduced the concept of merit in the society of Lanka. Merit plays a key role in Buddhism because according to the law of karma, it helps not just in securing this life but also after life. Thus, performing merit became an important act in society, efforts were made by the followers of Buddhism to perform merit and sangha is seen by them as a ground for performing merit. Pali chronicles provide ample evidence of kings and followers of Buddhism earning merit by providing patronage to the sangha with all the essentials and also by constructing viharas, stupas and monasteries across the region as a place of worship.

Buddhism played a significant role in the development of architecture and sculpture in the island of Lanka. It brought the knowledge of the use of bricks and stone in structures. As Buddhism shared close ties with mainland India the knowledge of architecture and sculpture also travelled with Buddhism to the island. The first Buddhist structures to be built in the island were viharas to accommodate the renouncers: Issarasamanaka, Thuparama, Kalapasana-parivena etc. (W. Geiger, 1912). The construction of religious edifice began during the reign of Divanampiyatiss, he patronised the construction of both viharas and stupas. The ruler after him followed his path and contributed to the rich architectural heritage. The chronicles have mentioned their contribution “record with pious gratitude the series of dagobas, viharas, and temples erected by him and his successors” (Tennent, 1860, p.344). The spread of Buddhism also helped in the development of sculpture, the custom of constructing an image house in every vihara gave a boost to the development of sculpture. “The spread of Buddhism thus helped considerably to the development of architecture in the island, and the art of sculpture received great impetus when it became the custom to have an image house in every Vihara that was built” (Mendis.,1940, p. 19). Both architecture and sculpture borrowed their ideas, concept and knowledge from India, thus their

earlier work reflects Indian influence but with time they adapted and evolved a distinctive Sri Lankan style of art and architecture “bearing the stamp of its Indian origin no doubt, but not identical with that of any particular region of India” (De. Silva, 1981, p. 52).

The introduction of Buddhism marked the dawn of a celebratory culture in Sri Lanka, as there is no evidence of widespread festivities prior to this period. Chronicles record that following the arrival of Buddhism, the island saw the inception of large-scale celebrations such as the celebration at the arrival of Bodhi tree, tooth relics etc which lasted for days with every one participating in it with zeal and piousness. Buddhism also introduced new festivals such as Vasakha festivals which are celebrated every year by the followers of the Buddha. Apart from these celebrations, rulers such as Duttagamani hold a great ceremony for the consecration of Viharas and stupas. (Tennent,1860) argues that flowers and garland played an important role in these celebrations, it not only increased its production but also gave an impulse to the progress of horticulture in the island.

Introduction of education in the society of Lanka started with Buddhism. Buddhist centres such as Mahavihara, Abhayagiri Vihara served as an education institution in ancient times where both monks and lay people were taught. The curriculum wasn't only monastic education and Buddhist teaching but they were also taught Suta (language, religion and philosophy) and sippa (practical skills such as agriculture, astrology and carpentry. Mookerji (1947).states that “the Buddhist world did not offer any educational opportunities apart from or independently of its monasteries. Education, sacred as well as secular, was in the hands of the monks”(p.394). Thus, bhikkhus and bhikkhunis played an important role in the society, it was in their hand to educate the entire nation. Hence, as bhikkhus were the teachers, the learning involved Buddhist values and symbols which according to Phandis, (n.d)”predominated the cultural orientation of society and provided the mores for its socio-cultural integration” (p.132) . One such example of contribution of Buddhism in the field of education was the introduction of the art of writing. Historians believe that Thera Mahinda along with the doctrine of Buddha might have brought the knowledge of writing from mainland India to the island of Lanka. According to Mendis (1940) “the characters in the earliest inscriptions of Ceylon, which are yet to be seen above or below the drip-ledges of caves (e.g., at Dambulla), and from which the modern Sinhalese script developed, are almost the same as the Brahmi script in the inscriptions of Asoka” (p.18).

The most important contribution of Buddhism to the island of Lanka was its role in national unification. Buddhism soon after its introduction successfully established a unified system of worship across the island which created a certain sense of unity amongst the people. As the people across the island were using common language, and script, rapid spread of Buddhism further added as a “potent factor of unification, primarily cultural no doubt, but one which strengthened the process of political unification within the island”(Silva, 1981, p.12).

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