

BUDDHIST CIVILIZATION FOSTERED BY MERCANTILE ACTIVITIES

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It is well known that before the advent of Elder Mahinda, Buddha Sasana was not formally established in Ceylon. Yet it is to be admitted that this island had been gradually passing into the pale of Buddhism even in those earliest times. The mercantile and the cultural relations between India and Ceylon, ever increasing with the advance of Vedic Aryan Civilization throughout India during the pre-Buddhistic times had reached the zenith at the beginning of the Buddhist Era. According to the views of historians, the Vedic Aryans not only had trade contacts with the Far East and the South East Asia but also had carved out colonies in those regions and had settled therein. Ceylon too had become an Aryan settlement in this manner.

As revealed from Vedic Literature, the Aryans who had immigrated to India about 25th century B.C. began to feel with fast growing population and cultural complexity, the need of a social organization which would safeguard and preserve their civic rights in economic, political and spiritual fields such as trade and agricultural enterprise, social security, governmental authority and religious worship. It was probably to promote the steady progress of the society that the Aryans organized themselves into four Varnas or divisions, viz. Brahmana, Kshatriya, Vaisya, and Sudra. Out of these four Varnas it was the Vaisyas or the mercantile folk who took upon themselves the responsibility of carrying the Aryan culture far and wide. According to the Brahmanic Dharma-Sastras or duty texts, sailing overseas by the three Varnas other than the Vaisyas was prohibited. It was the Vaisya who braved high mountain passes, waterless sands, inaccessible forests, and angry waters that enjoyed the privilege and freedom of carrying on trade and establishing contacts with foreign countries. To what extent the Indo-Aryan Mercantile Corporations had progressed during the pre-Buddhistic times can be seen in the fact that, as early as the Beginning of the Buddhist Era, not only had the Aryan Civilization penetrated into the other parts of Asia including Ceylon but also there existed a number of Aryan settlements in those parts. This Indo-Aryan trade monopoly of the Vaisyas seems to have maintained a certain kind of colonial policy as a part of its activities. It was probably under this policy that Ceylon had become an Aryan

settlement. As described by S. Sadhanand in his celebrated work, Hindu Culture in Greater India, the Indo-Aryans had been carrying on trade with their overseas settlements not only in Ceylon but also in South East Asian countries, Java, Sumatra, Borneo and far Eastern countries like Japan as early as 6th and 7th centuries B.C. The facts revealed by Maha Niddesa and Jatakas also do support this view.

Thus, the Aryan merchants who came from Vedic India during the pre-Buddhistic times must have no doubt propagated their Brahamanic faith in Ceylon, long before the arrival of Buddhism. This is proved by the fact that the beliefs in primitive gods, sown by them, stands unassailed to this day deeply rooted in the minds of the Buddhists.

Accounts of trade relations between Vedic and Buddhist India and Ceylon are revealed by the Jatakas too. Further, these accounts are corroborated by Greek and Chinese historical accounts as well as by Hindu and Jaina literary sources. The Valahassa Jataka provides a typical example. That it mentions of a lake called Tambapanni and a trade centre called Kalyani is relevant to the present Kelaniganga and the regions adjoining the mouth of that river. Mention also is made in Ksemendra's Avadana Kalpalatha, of a Buddhist lady named Muktalatha of Ceylon whose former life is said to have been referred to by Lord Buddha in answer to a question raised by Elder Ananda. In this episode Muktalatha who heard the news of Lord Buddha from the merchants that had come from Buddhist India is said to have sent, through them, a message to the Lord. This episode provides valuable information about the Indo-Ceylon trade relations then existed. An episode in Lord Buddha's life itself clearly points to the part played by the Indian merchants in permeating the light of Buddhist culture outside India, Viz. the episode of Japassa and Bhallika, the first two devotees who adopted the two shelters Buddha and Dhamma (Sanga the third not existing then). It can be implied that the merchants' guild to which these two merchants belonged maintained trade relations far and wide in the countries in both East and West. These two merchants, who had set on their trade tour, having heard of the auspicious news on their way, came to the Lord who had attained the supreme state of Enlightenment. The two merchant brothers who offered to the Lord, honeyed porridge and sweetmeat, heard the Truth from Him adopted His teaching and made their names eternal in the annals of Buddhist history as the first two disciples of the order.

The service thus rendered by the merchant folk in the task of propagating the Buddhist teaching is ever remembered by the posterity of the Buddhist world. The pinch of the Hair Relics received by the two merchants is invaluable when looked at from the cultural point of view. For this became an effective means of propagating the new teaching in Asian countries with which the Indian

merchants had contacts. They seem to have distributed the Hair Relics, as a token of goodwill, among a number of countries with whom they maintained trade relations. One such was Ceylon, the second Burma, and the third Bhalk in Oxus Valley in Central Asia.

One of the principal ports in Ceylon during 6th century B.C. was Gokanna, modern Trincommallee. In the time when Japassa and Bhallika came to Ceylon there lived at Tiriyayi in the vicinity of Trincommallee, a Naga merchant Nila by name, who was the chief agent of the Indo-Ceylon trading establishments. It was probably to him that the two merchants presented a part of the Hair Relics as a token of their cordial relations. This explains how the Hair Relics of the Lord were enshrined in the Girikhanda Chaitya at Tiriyayi. Inspiring the veneration of the Buddhists stands the Girikhanda Chaitya, to this day, on the summit of a hillock with beautiful surroundings at Tiriyayi. Giving the information of enshrining The Hair Relics brought by Tapassa and Bhallika, an inscription there reads thus:

"Trapussyakair Vallikair Vanigganaih
Krtam krtartham Girikhanda caityam"

The legend of enshrining the Hair Relics brought by the two merchant brothers is also recorded in the Pujawali which belongs to the Dambadeni period (Vide Puja. Chap.12. page 206 K. Gnanavimala edition)

According to Burmese chronicles the Hair Relics brought there by the same two merchants were enshrined in the Swedegon Chaitya. It might be that the two merchant brothers went to Burma, and as in Ceylon, presented another part of the Relics to the people there too. Moreover Huentziang, the Chinese pilgrim monk, mentions in the account of his travels, one of the two merchants as having taken the Hair Relics to Central Asia and caused to erect a colossal stupa there. He claims to have visited and paid his homage to a great Stupa of the Sakyamuni's Hair Relics erected by Bhallika at the well-known town called Bhalk, situated in Central Asia not far away from India. This information has drawn the attention of historians and archaeologists. According to one historian, this town was named after Bhallika who erected this great Buddhist monument in order to perpetuate his memory (Vide India and Central Asia by.....P32)

The foregoing account of Tapassu-Bhallika brothers and the Hair Relics which may be fairly too long, has been given in this context, for two purposes. One is to show how religious culture spreads through trade contacts. The other is to refute the contention held by some critics who jump into the conclusion that this tradition is a mere legend not based on historical truth. This class of critics

question how a number of countries can get the same Hair Relics brought by the identical persons Tapassu and Bhallika. The above survey would show that the doubt they entertain in this respect is not reasonable.

Lord Buddha's visits recorded in our chronicles are also doubted by some learned critics. If we carefully consider the trade relations between Ceylon and North India (Buddhist India) at the time there can be no difficulty in believing that, not only was the Lord well informed of the conditions prevailing among the indigenous population here but also did visit this island from time to time on their invitation. From the very accounts recorded in the Mahawansa we can have an idea of this fact. There can be no doubt as to the fact that some Ceylonese who had heard the reputation of Lord Buddha travelled to North India paid their veneration at Jetavanaramaya and communicated to Him the rapid progress of the Aryan Culture in the island. It might be that at times when they were faced with threats of the savage aboriginal tribes, they sought the refuge of the Lord and solicited His good mission in order to avert the danger. It can be presumed that the first visit of the Lord took place on such an occasion. We should try to derive the historical essence out of the account which the Mahawansa enshrouds with legendary tales related in epic style.

The Mahawansa says that Lord Buddha paid His first visit to Mahanagavana on the bank of the Mahaweliganga (ganga tire manorame.... Mahanagavanuyyane....) in order to bring under subjugation the Yakkas who were holding a congregation there. The historical gist of this story may be that the Yakkha tribes, the aboriginal inhabitants, confronted with the ever growing Aryan settlements, in the region of Bintenna, had summoned a great conference, probably, in order to discuss the formation of a confederation to wage war upon the latter. This enterprise on the part of the Yakkha tribe, whose patriotic feelings must have been roused by the Aryan expansion, would have ended in hostilities, had it not been for the intervention of the Lord. The Yakkas displayed their aggressive attitude even before the Lord. However, they were calmed down at last by the awe-inspiring miracles performed by the lord. Some tribes who were indocile in their savage life were compelled to retreat to far away mountainous regions. The Mahawansa makes us believe that Lord Buddha brought down an island called Giri, and packed them off in it to its original place. Whatever it may be, the Vedda tribes who inhabit the wild tracts of the remote parts of the island to this day can be regarded as the remnants of the uncivilized life relegated to the background by the expansion of the Aryan civilization.

The second visit of Lord Buddha was also necessitated under similar circumstances. Our chronicles say that the Lord came here to effect a peaceful settlement to a serious dispute which arose between two Naga families of

Vadunnagala and Nagadipa, the bone of contention being a jewelled seat. The Mahawansa makes us believe that these so called Nagas were the serpents known by that name; but it is now universally accepted that they were a totemistic tribe bearing the emblem of the serpents. They seem to be a trading folk as their Vaisya counterparts of India were. It was probably these Nagas that carried on the prolific gem trade between India and Ceylon.

The Mahawansa speaks of a god named Samiddhi Sumana who is said to have escorted the Lord to Ceylon in order to settle the dispute of the Nagas. He is said to be a citizen of Ceylon in his former birth, and having passed away from that birth, was reborn as a sylvan deity in a Kiripalu tree near Jetawanarama. He accompanied the Lord in His journey to Ceylon bearing the Kiripalm tree as a parasol over Him, and afterwards planted it at the spot where the Nagas were disciplined. The historical gist of this legend may be that Samiddhi Sumana who was a head of merchants in Ceylon was compelled to leave for India in a mission, to solicit the intervention of the Lord to prevent the fratricidal struggle of the Nagas, and as a memorial to this event, he planted a Kiripalu sapling, probably, brought from Jetawanarama.

The third visit of the Lord was to the Naga principality of Kalyani. The Naga king Maniakkhika of Kelani, who had gone to Nagadeepa with an army to support his nephew Mahodara, invited the Lord to visit his kingdom after He had settled the dispute. The Lord accepted the invitation but postponed it to a later occasion and went back to India. Afterwards Maniakkhika went himself to India, renewed the invitation and came back along with Lord Buddha as well as some members of the Maha Sanga. The Mahawansa relates the event thus:—

“Tato so tatiye vasse nagindo maniakkiko upasamkamma sambuddham saha sangham nimantayi.” M. V. Chap. 2.71

According to this, it was in the third year after the second visit that the third visit of the Lord took place. Maniakkhika himself must have been the head of a merchants' guild. This episode reveals that the Ceylonese merchants were in the habit of travelling to and from India, and also they did frequently pay visits to Jetawanarama. If so, it is not difficult to believe that the light of Buddhism came to Ceylon through trade contacts and the visits of Lord Buddha were also caused by the same agents.

Buddhism and its culture spread in two streams. The first was the one which began to emanate from the lower Gangetic valley during the life time of the Lord Himself. This spread to Ceylon, Burma, Siam, Cambodia, Malaya, Java and Sumatra and the other South Asian countries; the other found an access from central Asia to far eastern countries like China, Korea, and Japan, during

the time of Kaniska about the beginning of the Christian era. It can be seen that both these streams were facilitated by mercantile enterprise.

It is commendable therefore that the Ceylonese merchants of Singapore seem to be conscious of their illustrious heritage and tradition, and are endeavouring to keep them in force. They have embellished Singapore, the rendezvous of the Eastern and Western trade, with temples like world famous Lankarama. They have rendered an invaluable service especially for the fostering of the Theravada form of Buddhism, and thereby have won the esteem of the Buddhist world.

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