

SRI LANKAN BUDDHISM: MAHINDIAN HYBRID OF PRE-BUDDHIST RELIGION

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According to accepted historical records Buddhism was officially introduced into Sri Lanka during the reign of King Devanam Piyatissa, in the third century B.C. It was brought by the Buddhist mission headed by the Venerable Thera Mahinda. It may also be noted here that the Buddhist mission to Sri Lanka was one of several such missions sent to different parts of the then known world by the Emperor Asoka, after the conclusion of the third Buddhist Council held at Pataliputra under the guidance of the Venerable Thera Moggaliputta Tissa.

The Buddhism which was thus introduced to Sri Lanka was the Buddhism of the Pali canon, which has been accepted as the most authentic of the records of the teachings of the Buddha. The Pali tradition of Buddhism, which was brought down as an oral tradition like many other textual traditions of Indian religions, was committed to writing in the first century B.C. at the Aloka Vihara in Matale during the reign of King Valagambahu and has been available in textual form ever since.

In spite of the fact that the Sri Lankan Buddhist tradition has maintained that its tradition of Buddhism is that of the Pali canon, it is becoming increasingly difficult to accept this insistence because of the gross deviations from the canonical expectations in the Ritual religion. A clarification is needed here. It is clear from historical records that from the very first few days of the introduction of Buddhism to Sri Lanka, its teachings had received the attention of two sets of people. One was those who had grasped the importance of the teachings of Buddhism and made a bold decision to attain the emancipation taught by it. According to historical records, there were large numbers of such followers and the political authorities of the period had made adequate provision to cater to their needs at the monastic centres. It is these followers of the path who kept the light burning on Buddhist spiritual training. The extent of the impact which this commitment had on the religious environment of the day can, I think, be gauged from the devotion of the famous Buddhist commentator's epoch-making work *Visuddhimagga* to a

logical and systematic presentation of the canonical knowledge on spiritual training. It is pleasant to note that this spiritual tradition is being kept alive even today by the (ranya sen) anas and the meditation centres which have been established throughout the Island, though to cater to small numbers.

The second are those who were followers of the pre-Buddhist tribal religions and were content with the type of ritual-based religion to which they were used. It is to cater to these that the Venerable Mahinda sought to bring a sapling of the Bodhi tree and also got down relics of the Buddha which were enshrined in the stupas erected for the purpose.

It is difficult to understand why the Venerable Thera Mahinda introduced ritual practices to Sri Lankan Buddhists when such practices did not form part of the Pali canonical texts, the teachings of which his tradition claimed it adhered to. It is not difficult to find the answer to this question if we take a close look at the massive religio-ritualistic syncretism which was taking place in and around the border regions of the Mauryan empire in India at the time. Such understanding becomes important and highly relevant because it was able to bring about a complete change in the traditional Brahmanic religion and in its claim of Aryanness. With the stability of the central political machinery of the Mauryan Empire, there were no more powerful enough tribes who could be considered a threat to the central state. This, in other words, meant that the thousands of smaller tribal groups who lived scattered in the border areas of the massive empire were under no threat from the central state either, unlike the smaller tribes of the Buddha's day who were under threat from the Kosalan or the Magadhan empires. Although the tribal lands across the border regions of the empire were not in demand for the further expansion of the central state, the peace and lack of suspicion which ensued assisted the peaceful integration of the tribal peoples with the major community living adjacent to their lands. But, though political power or force was not used, nor needed, the expansion of the borders of the central state continued unhindered through peaceful

means, bringing with it massive transformations, as we shall see.

It was pioneered by the Brahmin priest who by this time had considerably declined from his sixth century B.C. prestigious social position. According to Kosambi, "The Brahmins gradually penetrated whatever tribes and guild castes remained; a process that continues to this day. This meant the worship of new gods, including Krishna who had driven Indra out of the Panjab plains before Alexander's invasion. But the exclusive nature of tribal ritual and tribal cults was modified, the tribal deities being equated to standard Brahmin gods, or new Brahmin scriptures written for making unassimilable gods respectable. With these new deities or fresh identifications came new rituals as well and special dates of the lunar calendar for particular observances. New places of pilgrimage were also introduced, with suitable myths to make them respectable, though they could only have been savage, pre-Brahmin cult-spots. The Mahabharata, Ramayana, and especially the Puranas are full of such material. The mechanism of the assimilation is particularly interesting. Not only Krishna, but the Buddha himself and some totemic deities including the primeval Fish, Tortoise and the Boar were made into incarnations of Vishnu-Narayana. The monkey-faced Hanuman, so popular with the cultivators as to be a peculiar god of the peasantry with an independent cult of his own, becomes the faithful companion -servant of Rama, another incarnation of Vishnu. Vishnu-Narayana uses the great earth-bearing Cobra as his canopied bed to sleep upon the waters; at the same time, the same cobra is Siva's garland and a weapon of Ganesha. The elephant-headed Ganesha is son to Siva or rather of Siva's wife. Siva himself is lord of the goblins and demons, of whom many like the cacodemon Vetala are again independent and highly primitive gods, still in popular, village worship. Siva's bull Nandi was worshipped in the south Indian Neolithic age without any human or divine master to ride him; he appears independently on innumerable seals of the Indus culture..." (D.D. Kosambi, *Culture and Civilization of Ancient India*, 168f.).

One very important outcome of this religio-ritualistic syncretism was the emergence of Siva and Vishnu into Brahmin acceptance. It must be noted here that none of these two gods is found mentioned either in the Brahmanic or the Buddhist literature prior to the time of the Mauryan empire. Of these two, not only does Siva enter the Brahmanic pantheon, he becomes its chief god which is a remarkable promotion for a non-Aryan god under the hands of the Brahmins who were very proud of their Aryanness. Sir Mortimer Wheeler, commenting on Siva's ascension to the

position of chief god of the Aryan pantheon remarks, "Indra had won the battle, but Siva won the war" (Wheeler, *Five Thousand Years of Pakistan*, 33).

The Aryans were patriarchs and they had only male gods in their pantheon, while the non-Aryan indigenous Indians were matriarchs who worshipped female deities. Therefore, another important change which Brahmanism adopted during this phase of religious syncretism was the acceptance of the marriage of male and female deities. While the marriage of the male and female deities implies the recognition of marriage as a social institution in society, here these marriages imply the intermixing of two or more hitherto separate tribes while these at the same time gained membership of the main society. Thus, the marriage of Siva and Parvathi implied the coming together of the former worshippers of Siva with the worshippers of Parvathi while both groups at the same time became members of the Mauryan state, but retaining their separate traditions in endogamy and commensality to a certain extent.

These new gods of the Mauryan religio-ritualistic syncretism, though conceived of as having the shape and form of human beings, were given as many heads and hands as were required to bear or hold the totemic symbols of the tribes they represented. As a result, Siva is depicted as having several heads and as many hands as were required to represent the tribes which gathered round his leadership. Therefore, the increase in the number of the implements borne or held by Siva, Vishnu or by any other god or goddess indicated the number as well as the identities of the tribes which were thus mixed with the larger society.

It must be noted that the principal factor which was made use of by the Brahmin priesthood to bring together the people of the tribe and the people of the main society was the accommodation given to the ancestral worship of the tribe(s). This contributed in large measure to the peaceful integration of the tribal peoples with the people of the principal society who were themselves god worshippers. What was required was only a redesigning of the tribal worship to make it acceptable to the principal society or a redesigning of the worship of the principal society to make it acceptable to the tribal peoples. A perusal of what really happened shows that the process has worked both ways, as the principal god who surfaced as the chief god after the integration was an un-Aryan indigenous god who came to be accepted by the principal society. At the same time he combined in himself the forms of worship of all the tribes which were brought together. The main point however is that the process did not

cause any problems because both or all parties to the process were god worshippers or those who were recently elevated thereto and as a result there was no conceptual conflict.

It seems that the religio-ritualistic syncretism which resulted in breaking down the isolation of the tribes of the forestlands adjacent to the borders of the empire did influence the entire social structure as it resulted in the adoption of new gods, new forms of worship and new rites to be performed for these gods. These gods could only have been those who were elevated into the rank of the gods recently, or were those who were the totems of the tribe, now transformed into divine rank like Siva's bull Nandi. At the social level this swelling of the former Brahmanic pantheon meant the amalgamation of innumerable small as well as big tribal communities with the accounted population of the central political State.

It is relevant to ask how this sweeping wave of reforms affected the other religions in India, as Brahmanism was not the only religion which prevailed in India at the time. Let us take the case of Buddhism. Unfortunately, there are no written records of what really happened to Buddhism at the social and religious level, though we have some records of divisions among the members of the Order of disciples on matters of doctrine. The more important matters relating to how the Buddhists were affected by the reforms which swept over Hinduism have not been written upon or been taken up for discussion or debate in any Buddhist forum as the Councils of the period. But it can be gathered that by the time Emperor Asoka was converted to Buddhism, the Buddhists seem to have accepted rituals and rites as essential components of the practice of the religion, in spite of the fact that ritual and rites are totally absent from the texts of the Pali canon.

Here, a clarification has to be made regarding the use of the term 'Pali Canon'. It refers to the texts of the four Pali Nikayas which belong to the earliest part of the Pali canon. The famous commentator Buddhaghosa too has accepted that the texts of the fifth Nikaya are post-canonical but his view seems to have been overruled, apparently by the Mahavihara sector. The differences, it must be noted are ideological because the later texts support practices which are either absent from the early texts or more importantly go counter to the cardinal teachings of the Buddha.

Now going back to our discussion, that the Buddhists at the time had accepted the worship of sacred places and pilgrimages to such places as part of the practice of their religion is confirmed by the fact that Emperor Asoka had

thought his visit to Lumbini important enough to be marked by erecting a commemorative pillar.

It can also be deduced that the Buddhists had accepted by this time, the worship of the Bodhi tree as Asoka honoured Venerable Mahinda's request for a sapling of the Bodhi tree at Buddhagaya. Asoka is reported to have erected stupas throughout his empire enshrining the relics he obtained by opening the stupa erected by the Koliyas of Ramagrama enshrining their share of the Buddha's relics. This shows that relic worship too had been adopted by the Buddhists by this time.

There is an interesting legend regarding the relics of the Ramagrama stupa. When King Dutugemunu wanted relics of the Buddha to be enshrined in the Ruwanweliseya, the thera Sonuttara was sent to the Nagaloka which according to later Buddhist cosmology was under the ocean bed. The Sri Lankan legend further records a beautiful story to say how the relics reached the Nagaloka. The stupa in Ramagrama was washed away by a flood and the casket of relics was washed away by the flood waters to the sea whereupon it was recovered by the Naga king. On the ground facts which apparently were not available to the weavers of the legend show that in spite of the fact that a very heavy flood would have been needed to wash away the stupa as Ramagrama is located to be in the foothills, both Ajatasatthu and Asoka found it intact, (D.D.Kosambi, *Myth and reality*, 106f.; M.M.J. Marasinghe, *Gods in Buddhism*, 116).

While rites and rituals thus seem to have been adopted by the Buddhists or for the Buddhists, it is not clear whether such adoptions had been made only after ensuring that they did not go counter to the teachings of the Pali canonical texts. The total absence of any discussion or debate on the uses and relevance of rites and ritual to the practice of Buddhism goes to show that it had not attracted the attention of the authorities of the Sasana and this, with disastrous results for the important contribution that the proper presentation of Buddhism should have been capable of making to the present society.

According to the Theravada conception, the Buddha was the human teacher who attained the highest spiritual attainment capable only by man and devoted his entire life to the propagation of his teaching. Therefore, he is revered as the great human teacher. His disciples and other followers of his day did not worship him, but followed his teaching and won liberation or lived as contented members of their society. Today we worship him with all items of offering given to

other gods and pray to him, thus making him an object of prayer and offering, thereby going against his very teaching that there are no gods or other beings who are capable of accepting sacrifice, offering or of responding to prayer or supplication. Thus, it is clear how the Buddha has been degraded to the level of a tribal or other god and is made capable of helping man upon request. The more serious matter for concern is how such practices have continued without hindrance to the present day.

Another form of ritual worship which draws our attention is the worship of the Bodhi tree. The Buddhists venerate the Bodhi as the tree under the shelter of which the Buddha attained Buddhahood. When the Bodhi was planted in the Mahameghavana park at Anuradhapura it came to be worshipped with great fervor by the people who were up to that time worshippers of trees like the Banyan and the Palmyra. What really happened was that they brought all their items of worship of the former tree and worshipped the new tree with perhaps the same ritual. While the Banyan and the Palmyra trees were worshipped because they were believed to be the habitats of certain spirits, the Bodhi tree is believed to this day to be the habitat of good spirits who are prayed to in addition to invoking the healing and other powers of the Bodhi. If you visit the Sri Mahabodhi at Anuradhapura, you cannot fail to brush against the large number of Kapuwas who are engaged in a lucrative sale of charms and make blessings for a fee.

Another important form of worship which existed at the time of the introduction of Buddhism was the worship of individual gods who possessed personal cults of their own. It is recorded that Venerable Mahinda spent a few months in Vedisagiri, the home town of his mother which was close to the border regions of the empire which were at the time witnessing the religio-ritualistic and cultural syncretism which we described above, after he was selected to lead the Buddhist mission to Sri Lanka. The knowledge he would have gained from this exposure seems to have been used to win over the tribal tree worshippers and god worshippers to Buddhism by providing them with convenient entry points to gain admission to the new religion. But what really happened was that the expected transformation never occurred. Not only has it become clear that the pre-Buddhist Sri Lankans stubbornly persisted practicing their pre-Buddhist tree and god worship under the protection of the new religion, they have desecrated the purity of the Theravada tradition by bringing in superstition and lenience on theism both of which were clearly and emphatically rejected by the Buddha. Instead of the

conversion of ancestor and cultic deity worshippers into non-theistic Buddhism, ancestor and deity worship was made part of the new Sri Lankan version of Buddhism by giving these beliefs prominent placements in its ritual structure.

As these changes seem to have been effected during the very early days of Buddhism in Sri Lanka, it is quite likely that the Venerable Thera himself authored these adoptions. The very important question which this raises is whether in fact the Venerable Thera or any other(s) did possess the authority to do so. According to the Four Great Authorities (cattaro mahapadesa) promulgated by the Buddha in the Mahaparinibbana Sutta of the Daghā Nikāya, it is quite clear that no individual Thera or a group of Theras whether small or big has the authority to introduce changes to the practices of the religion or to the interpretations of the teachings, without their being tested as to their conformity to the teachings of the Pali canonical texts—these meaning the texts of the four Nikāyas. The fact that both ancestor worship and deity worship go directly against the teachings of the Pali canonical texts shows that the Four Guidelines have been totally disregarded by the Venerable Thera.

Despite the above very clear promulgations by the Buddha made during the last three months before his parinibbana, it seems that both the political authorities and the members of the Order have introduced rites and ritual practices into Buddhism with disastrous results to the purity of the tradition. We have already noted how the great human teacher had been degraded by the Sri Lankan Buddhists by making him sit surrounded by vast arrays of offerings usually made to the gods in primitive and other theistic religions. According to our historical records, it was King Sena III who introduced the offering of food and garments to statues of the Buddha (Geiger, *Culavamsa*, 175). Another instance of unauthorized introduction of ritual is the starting of the ritual called “Bodhipuja” by a monk called Ariyadeva, which became a ritual of high popular demand.

There are those who argue that as most ritual, in the forms that they are used in religious practice today, caters to the religious needs of the uneducated ordinary masses, who call and believe themselves to be Buddhists but in actual make up and practice are still primitive ancestor and deity worshippers, to keep them in the fold. It must be emphatically stated here that it is a crime to leave them at their level without any attempt to educate them and establish them on the correct path of progress to spiritual maturity. But, if the Buddha too did what our pundits did and are persisting in doing purely

because they do not want to part with their superstitions, he would have left Culapanthaka to go back to lay life without finding for him the technology to mature him to his liberation. It is this technology that must be applied, not reveling in the quagmire of primitive superstition as these innocents have been left for long enough in their almost unredeemable state.

Thus, the need of the hour is not the indiscriminate promotion of the present day superstition and god worship infected tribal religion calling it Buddhism of the Pali canon, but at least establishment of a mechanism to bring back the purity of Buddhism, if it is to face the multiple challenges of the new world, as the stranglehold which the present day powers, both religious and political, have on it, will lead it to its demise

fairly soon. The authority, according to the Mahaparinibbana Sutta of the Digha Nikaya, empowered to take decisions on what is in keeping with the teaching of the Buddha or not is the Dhamma itself as recorded in the Pali canonical texts, and not in the post-canonical texts. It is quite clearly stated that any new practice or interpretation of the teaching must be tested as to its validity against the teachings contained therein, before either acceptance or rejection. The hybrid version of the Sri Lankan Buddhism of today has to be thoroughly cleaned and purified if it is to be Buddhism, lest some country in the Western world will soon become the centre of pure Buddhism and we be labelled as holders on to a primitive form of the religion which it has become today.

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Karthigesu Sivathamby

Professor Karthigesu Sivathamby who passed away recently, was one of the early members of the Social Scientists' Association, which was formed in 1977 with G.V.S. de Silva as the first Chairperson. Professor Sivathamby was then working at the newly formed University of Jaffna and frequently came to Colombo to participate in SSA seminars and other activities. In the first issue of the SSA's journal *Social Science Review* (Sept. 1979), he published an important critique of the educational and socio-religious activities of Arumuka Navalar (1822-79) entitled "Hindu Reaction to Christian Proselytization and Westernization in 19th century Sri Lanka." In December 1979, the SSA organized a seminar on "Nationality Problems in Sri Lanka" which was pathbreaking as Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim intellectuals discussed and analysed the social, economic and ideological roots of the ethnic conflict, especially highlighting the myths and misinterpretations of both Sinhala and Tamil nationalism. He organized a similar conference of the 1979 seminar in Jaffna, but the deteriorating political situation made it difficult to hold. Professor Sivathamby's paper "Social Composition of the Tamils of Sri Lanka" later published in the SSA book *Ethnicity and Social Change* (1984), dealt with the various segments of Tamil society and the development of a "Tamil consciousness". With a background in Left-wing scholarship, Sivathamby's pioneering contributions were an important input into the on-going controversies on nationalism. In spite of all the hazards of the conflict, Sivathamby continued to come to Colombo and associate with the scholarly community. He remained intellectually productive despite poor health and the vagaries of politics in Sri Lankan Tamil society.

The SSA deeply mourns his loss, and condoles with his wife and daughters.