

# BUDDHISM AND STATE IN CEYLON BEFORE THE ADVENT OF THE PORTUGUESE

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## INTRODUCTION

HISTORICALLY SPEAKING, BUDDHISM CAN CLAIM TO BE THE FIRST missionary religion in the world. In fact, its messianic purpose was expressly declared nearly five centuries before Christ when, soon after his enlightenment, the Buddha himself exhorted his disciples to "preach the truth" and spread the gospel "out of compassion for the world, for the good . . . for the welfare of gods and men."<sup>1</sup>

However, it was during the reign of emperor Asoka (269-232 B.C.) that Buddhism — till then a regional faith — spread beyond the Indian peninsula to many countries of Asia to the extent that at one time, it was in a position to influence the lives of nearly one fifth of the whole human race.

Resuscitated nearly two centuries after its inception and considerably changed in its 'inner structure'<sup>2</sup> due to competition with other sorterologies in India, Buddhism was introduced in Ceylon in the third century B.C. The absence of any organised religion in island at that time, the charisma of the Buddhist monks, and the royal patronage which Buddhism received from the beginning were some of the major reasons for its quick propagation.<sup>3</sup>

Ceylon was one of the first countries in Asia to come under the sway of Buddhism and to assimilate its essential characteristics in evolving the island's culture and civilisation. In fact, so all pervasive has been the influence of Buddhism in Ceylon that the recorded history of traditional Ceylon is virtually the history of Ceylonese Buddhism. Under such a setting it was natural that religious and political authorities were not only close but often drew sustenance from each other. This paper is an attempt to describe the emerging pattern of Buddhism-State inter-

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<sup>1</sup> C.P. Malalasekera, *2500 Years of Buddhism* (Colombo, n.d.)

<sup>2</sup> Max Weber, *The Religion of India: The Sociology of Hinduism and Buddhism* (Hans Gerth and Don Martindale trans., Illinois, 1958), pp. 233-47. Also refer to Sukumar Dutt, *Buddhist Monks and Monasteries of India: Their History and Contribution to Indian Culture* (London, 1962).

<sup>3</sup> G.C. Mendis, *The Early History of Ceylon or the Indian Period of Ceylon History* (Colombo, 1949), pp. 13-14.

action during the first two thousand years of the recorded history of Ceylon.

#### RELIGIOUS SYNCRETISM IN CEYLON

In India, Buddhism was almost absorbed in Hinduism but in Ceylon Theravada Buddhism continued to be the state religion for more than a millennium; in the process it absorbed within its fold aspects of magical animism, Mahayanism as well as lay Hinduism without either compromising with its basic tenets or with its predominant status in the religious system.<sup>4</sup>

In its canonical form Theravada Buddhism has been a cause of annoyance to scholars who tried to find a general and cross culturally valid definition of religion. Durkheim, for instance, refuted Frazer's minimal definition of religion being "the belief in spiritual beings" solely on the ground of Theravada Buddhism in which according to him the 'idea of God' was absent, or at least played a minor role. Even Max Weber, while describing "ancient" Buddhism in his classical works on Religion in India, wondered as to whether a system of "ethics without God" could be called a "religion."<sup>5</sup> Elsewhere, Max Weber commenting on the highly individualistic nature of Buddhism went to the extent of concluding that there was no nexus between Buddhist ideology and social action.<sup>6</sup>

Taking Buddhism as a religious system of thought and simply in historical development of Buddhism in Ceylon and elsewhere indicates its canonical context, these views might perhaps be entertained but the canonical Buddhism as only one aspect of the religious system of Theravada Buddhist societies. In all these countries two religious systems — canonical and lay — existed side by side which were "kept clearly apart in theory and served by different religious specialists" but were used by the laity simultaneously and were viewed by them as "complementary and interdependent."<sup>7</sup> The situation is no different today: in fact it is this dualism of the Buddhist system that has facilitated its sustenance to a considerable extent.

This dualism seemed to be inevitable once the religion of 'cultured professional monks' was made the religion of the people.<sup>8</sup> Salvation —

<sup>4</sup> Michael M. Ames, "Magical-Animism and Buddhism: A Structural Analysis of the Sinhalese Religious System," *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 33, June 1964, pp. 21-49.

<sup>5</sup> Hans Dieter Evers, "Buddha and the Seven Gods: The Dual Organization of a Temple in Central Ceylon", *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 27, No. 3, May 1968, p. 511.

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in E. Sarkisyanz, *Buddhist Background of the Burmese Revolution* (The Hague, 1965), p. 37 and pp. 240-41.

<sup>7</sup> Evers, n. 5, p. 511.

<sup>8</sup> Weber, n. 2, pp. 204-56.

the final goal — was not possible for everybody but merit making was the nearest possible way to achieve salvation (*Nirvanaya*). The more the merit was earned, the better were the chances of salvation. In other words, while the philosophical doctrines of Ceylonese Buddhism gave it abstract orientation and emphasised the other-worldly goal i.e. salvation, its popular aspect led to an emphasis on the importance of immediate and more practical goal of merit making in this world as a step towards salvation. And this accumulation of meritorious deeds could be achieved no better by the laity than by giving alms, grants and endowments to the monks. The more holy the monk was, the more meritorious it was to give alms to him. Perhaps this was one of the motivating factors for the masses and the elite to give their best to the monks and the monasteries.

The implications of this were obvious. No doubt there were some hermit monks (*Vanavasiu*) who lived in jungles, meditated in the caves and kept themselves secluded from the varied trappings of society. But their number at no time was big. Once the religion became the state religion and thereby the religion of the people it was natural that preaching to the laity would become a more pressing and immediate duty for many monks than exclusive meditation in seclusion. Consequently, the number of monks who lived very near or in the village (*Gramvasins*) and were actually involved in village life was bound to be large. In other words, thanks to the continuous royal patronage, notwithstanding the individualistic character of Buddhist cosmology, in Ceylon it gradually yielded to the societal needs. The debate over the superiority of learning over meditation in Ceylon as early as 1 century B.C. and the recognition of the superiority of the former over the latter<sup>9</sup> was one of the more obvious manifestations of the socialising character of Buddhism. So was the veneration of the relics of Buddha, the construction of stupas in which relics were preserved as well as the worship of Buddhist images.

In the process of becoming the Bahujanya — religion of the people — Buddhism not only adapted itself to local needs but also exploited the local gods and indigenous customs for its propagation. In Ceylon, one of the instances in this context was that of the *Pirith* ceremony one aspect of which was to exorcise evil spirits and to that extent was a substitute for the charms to which the people were already accustomed. However, the monks used the form of ritual to chant certain texts of Pali canons which explained the significance of the Buddhist code of ethics in the day to day life of the laity.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Walpola Rahula. *History of Buddhism in Ceylon: The Anuradhapura Period 3rd Century B.C. to 1st Century A.D.* (Colombo, 1956), pp. 157-61.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 278-80. Wilhelm Geiger. *Culture of Ceylon in Mediaeval Times* (ed., Heinz Bechert. Wiesbaden, 1960), pp. 173-4. Also see Mendis, n. 3, p. 10.

HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF THE MONK-FRATERNITIES  
(NIKAYAS)

During the first two centuries of its advent in Ceylon the *Mahavihara* (great monastery), founded by Bhikku Mahinda almost immediately after the introduction of Buddhism in Ceylon, held the position of a national church with a hierarchical structure in which all the monasteries (*Viharas*) in the island owed ecclesiastical allegiance to it and were virtually affiliated to it "more or less as its branches."<sup>11</sup> The absence of authority in the cosmology of Buddhism coupled with the canonical justification of schism did not however facilitate the continuation of its monolithic position for long. Thus, by the fourth century A.D. the power and status of *Mahavihara* as the "national church" was already challenged by the Jetavana and Abhayagiri viharas which were founded by the dissident monks from the *Mahavihara*.<sup>12</sup> In due course, several groups of religious institutions conforming to various sects, congregations or fraternities emerged due to doctrinal or personal differences. All of them however followed the rules and constitution common to all. This was significant: though Sangha was a self-governing democratic body, it had no power to prescribe new laws that contradicted the teaching of the founder. The precepts of Buddha were declared to be the pattern and guidance for all laws for the regulation of the conduct of the monks. This gave some sort of uniformity to the organisation, structure and function of the various fraternities. The popularity and power of these subjects or fraternities varied depending on the historical context, the charisma of their leaders, as well as their influence over the king.

The internal organisation of the Sangha closely reflected the ideological principles of Buddhism inasmuch as it vested authority in learning: its organisational structure closely formed the pattern of the democratic state of the Buddhist republics of the era. By the thirteenth century the supreme head of the Sangha, called Mahasami or Nayaka (and at times *Sangha Raja*); next to him were two dignitaries called

<sup>11</sup> Rahula, n. 9, p. 303.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. The Abhayagiri vihara came into being by virtue of the fact that king Vatthagamani (29-17 BC) and his generals donated the vihara to a particular monk named Mahatissa. This donation was resented by the monks of Mahavihara who might have considered this act as an encroachment on the exclusive prestige and authority enjoyed by the Mahavihara till then. Consequently the monk was charged with an offence of *vihaya* — frequenting the families of laymen — and was expelled. A disciple of Mahatissa raised objection to this charge and he in turn was also expelled. Consequently, this monk left Mahavihara along with his large number of followers to live in the new vihara.

The Jetavana vihara owed its inception to king Mahasena who, having been angry with Mahavihara patronised another sect called Sagalia sect and donated the Jetavana vihara to a senior monk of this sect. C. W. Nicholas and S. Paranavitana, *A Concise History of Ceylon: From the Earliest Times to the Arrival of the Portuguese in 1505* (Colombo, 1961), pp. 111-12.

Mahatheras who were in charge of the fraternities dwelling in towns and village (*Gramavasins*) and forests (*Vanavasins*) respectively. Lower down in the hierarchy were the heads of the organisations into which the order was divided, and of the various colleges.<sup>13</sup>

#### CASTE IN BUDDHISM: A PROP TO STATUS QUO?

Through Buddhism did act as a leaven to develop new intellectual perspectives, it did not bring about any revolutionary change in the social organisation of traditional Ceylon. To illustrate, though caste had no sanction in Buddhism, it continued to remain an integral part of the Ceylonese social system. In fact, one might further argue that the Buddhist concepts of *Karma* (action) and rebirth,<sup>14</sup> in a way, provided an explanatory justification for the stratification of the Ceylonese society based on caste. Was not the fact of a person being born as a Goyigama, i.e. the high caste, the result of his past actions (*karma*) in earlier births? Once the basic factor of his ascriptive status was explained in Buddhist terms it followed that the low caste people also accept their social status on the same ground. The rulers, thus were born to rule by virtue of their past *karma* and the ruled to submit to their present position. An acceptance of such a state of affairs was bound to facilitate maintenance of the *status quo* in the Ceylonese social structure.

#### CRITERIA FOR RECRUITMENT OF THE MONKS

This was however part of the story. Recruitment to the Buddhist priesthood, at least doctrinally, was open to every one irrespective of his ascriptive status. A low caste monk for instance could, at any time, join priesthood and thereby receive the deference due to the robe. But here again a question arises: No doubt a low caste man could be a monk but could he attain the highest positions in the hierarchy of the Sangha? Canonical Buddhism did not recognise any hierarchy amongst the monks except the one based on learning. With the emergence of various monasteries and sects, though the canonical criteria of learning remained a dominant factor in determining the Sangha hierarchy, it did not seem to be the sole criteria. How important was the factor of caste in Sangha hierarchy is a point on which virtually no data is available. As an anachronism in Buddhist tenets even if it was a factor to reckon with at times, it had to be covert.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, in a

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 329. Also see Rahula, n. 9, pp. 169-72.

<sup>14</sup> For a general understanding of the basic tenets of the Theravada Buddhism, refer to various papers in Kenneth Morgan, ed., *The Path of Buddha* (New York, 1957) and Narada Mahathera, *Buddhism in a Nutshell* (Colombo, 1954).

<sup>15</sup> Even today, the question on which the monks show reticence is about their caste. The reason given is that once a person renounces lay life, these distinctions are meaningless and irrelevant.

society the high caste (i.e. Goyigamas) being also the most numerous caste, might have been a factor blurring if not mitigating the caste considerations. But the compulsions inherent in the social system in Ceylon leads one to infer that while there might be some exceptions, by and large, perhaps the highest position in the Sangha hierarchy went to the high caste people.

A passage in Wilhelm Geiger's celebrated work on the culture of mediaeval Ceylon is relevant in this context. Referring to the various attempts made by the kings to invigorate the Buddhist church, the author, quoting Mahavamsa, (the foremost historical chronicle of Ceylon) maintains: "From the sixteenth century the stress is laid on the fact that the candidates were born in the noble houses" and were 'sons of good families' (*Kulputra*).<sup>16</sup> One wonders whether the situation would have been any different earlier. Besides, it was a belief that giving a son to the Sangha was one of the most meritorious deed. In view of the preponderant number of the Goyigama as the most numerous caste<sup>17</sup> it is also probable that in traditional Ceylon there were many more high caste monks with better credence and opportunities (at least by birth) to compete for a position in a religious hierarchical structure, than the low caste monks.

#### BASES OF THE MONK'S POWER IN CEYLON

Whatever be the social background of the monks there is no doubt that their vestment itself conferred upon them certain status and power in the Ceylonese social system. The sources of their power were canonical as well as non-canonical. To begin with, unlike the other religions, the *Sangha*, defined as the "associated brotherhood of Buddhist monks," formed an organic part of Buddhism itself. The three sacred symbols — the triple gem which every laity had to invoke were "I take refuge in Buddha, I take refuge in the *Dhamma* (doctrine) and I take refuge in the Sangha (monk fraternity)." As the dominant status group in the religious system, the monks "set the standard of legitimacy for all religious ideas held by the Sinhalese"<sup>18</sup> and evoked deference from other groups. Initially this deference was derived from their skill function as sole interpreter of the supernatural. In due course, their increasing involvement in social activities brought about ramification to their position in a variety of ways in the Ceylonese society. The social role of the monks as educators, doctors and counselors to the rulers and the ruled became more and more significant.

<sup>16</sup> Geiger, n. 10, p. 205.

<sup>17</sup> For an exhaustive account on the Sinhalese caste organisation see Bryce Ryan, *Caste in Modern Ceylon* (New Jersey, Brunswick, 1953).

<sup>18</sup> Ames, n. 4, pp. 21-2.

Not only this, the monks comprised a sector which had to its credit several pioneering efforts in various fields. Sinhalese script, for instance, derived as it was from Pali, was mainly shaped by the monks. It was they who taught people the art of writing. Sinhalese painters and sculpturists were mostly monks who evolved their theme around Buddha. Sinhalese architecture evolved around stupas and monasteries which were the abode of the monks.<sup>19</sup> Apart from being the centre for worship and meditation, the monasteries were also the centres of cultural activity and transmitted cultural traditions. The intellectual and social contribution of Buddha's followers was felt all over Ceylon for virtually every village had a Buddhist temple. The charisma of Buddha thus, to use Max-Weber's phrase, was gradually 'routinised' in the island.

Besides the social resources the clergy also derived power through the royal patronage. Moreover, rulers like Dutugemunu in his battle cry "not for kingdom but for Buddhism," against the Tamil ruler virtually fused Buddhism with the Sinhalese national identity. At his request the monks accompanied his army "since the sight of the Bhikkhus is both blessing and protection for us."<sup>20</sup>

Apart from lending political support to the monks' activities, many rulers also secured for them the sanction of state machinery to look after the extensive and lucrative landholdings which were endowed to the Sangha. In these landholdings the royal endowments had a lion's share.<sup>21</sup> These temple landholdings, administered by the monks and laity and worked by slaves and tenants made some of the temples very rich. No doubt the monks, committed to a life of poverty, were simply trustees of the rich monasteries<sup>22</sup> still, their position as trustees itself was an important source of power.

#### SOURCES OF WEAKNESS OF THE PRIESTHOOD

Conversely, some of the sources of monk's power had also certain vitiating features. To begin with, the handling of temple estates by the monks, at times of crisis in particular, made him so worldly as to affect his image as a renunciator. This was bound to impinge on his social base of power.

Besides, the individualistic nature and autonomous character of canonical Buddhism<sup>23</sup> coupled with recognition of schism as "constitu-

<sup>19</sup> For the contribution of the monks in the culture and civilisation of Ceylon see Nicholas and Paranavitana, n. 13, pp. 116-21; G.P. Malalasekera, *The Pali Literature of Ceylon* (London, 1928); Martin Wickremasinghe, *Sinhalese Literature* (E.R. Saratchandra trans., Colombo, 1949) and Mendis, n. 3, pp. 14-16.

<sup>20</sup> Rahula, n. 9, pp. 79-80.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 135-52.

<sup>22</sup> Kotagania Washissara Thero, *Velavita Saranankara and the Revival of Buddhism in Ceylon* (Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, London, 1961).

<sup>23</sup> Buddha himself said in the Mahavagga — "Now, look you Kalamas, do not be led by reports, or traditions, or hearsay. Be not led by the authority of religious

tional" provided it was based on "honest differences"<sup>24</sup> was another factor thwarting to some extent the evolution of an organised Buddhist church. As time passed, the Monk community was divided into many sects. One might appreciate Rev. Rahula's comment on the dissension in the *Sangha* in the context of its evolution during the first few centuries as "not a symptom of decay and degeneration, but a sign of movement and progress,"<sup>25</sup> but it is difficult to sustain this view throughout this period. Besides, dynamism, often, did not synchronise with stability, organisation and consolidation of the *Sangha*. One also wonders whether an organised Buddhist church was ever the goal of its founder. Whatever be the explanation there is no doubt that throughout this period the emergence of various fraternities and the intense rivalries between some of them was a limitation on the *Sangha's* power.

One of the redeeming factors in this context was monarchy. As the temporal Head of Buddhism, some of the rulers did try to unify and resuscitate the *Sangha*. But here again, if the royal patronage could promote the unification of the various sects, it could also be instrumental in creating or perpetuating the division. Coexistence with all the sects was not the policy of *all* the Sinhalese rulers. In fact some of them strengthened one sect as a counterpoise to the power of another. "Serious affliction," for instance, "was suffered by the Theravadins who had their residence in the Mahavihara during the reign of Mahasena, 334-362, who favoured the Abhayagiri monastery at the expense of Mahavihara."<sup>26</sup> In other cases support to one or the other sect was given by the rulers as a prop to their power. In the sixth century the heretic sects were favoured by the rulers "possibly because they were more tolerant of their misdeeds than the Theravadins."<sup>27</sup> Finally, advent of rulers belonging to other faiths, also affected the power of the *Sangha*. During the rule of Magha (from Malaya) in the thirteenth century for instance, the monasteries were ravaged and plundered.<sup>28</sup> The political disintegration of the country also led to the disintegration of the monk-community. However, while the civil wars affected the *Sangha* partially, foreign invasions affected it totally.

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text, nor by mere logic or inference, nor by considering appearances, nor by delight in speculative opinions, nor by seeming possibilities, nor by the ideas. This is our teacher." Christian Humphreys, *The Wisdom of Buddhism* (London, 1960) p. 71. In other words, the Bhikkhus were bound neither by "any vow of obedience to a higher supreme authority, nor by a creedal statement, nor by rituals." Ibid. The obedience expected of the Bhikkhu was to the Dhamma and to his seniors in the *Sangha* he simply owed a respectful submission. B. Ananda Maitreya Nayaka Thero. "Buddhism in Theravada Countries" in Morgan, n. 14, p. 125.

<sup>24</sup> Dutt, n. 2, p. 84.

<sup>25</sup> Rahula, n. 9, p. 85.

<sup>26</sup> Geiger, n. 10, p. 208 and Rahula, n. 9, pp. 93-6. The dates of the rulers of the period for which they ruled vary in Rahula's book and Paranavitana's list.

<sup>27</sup> Geiger, n. 10, p. 210.

<sup>28</sup> Nicholas and Paranavitana, n. 12, pp. 277-8.

## BUDDHISM AND THE STATE

Redemption of Ceylon from foreign domination during this period as well as later was a political goal the religious undertones of which were no less significant. Ceylon was not considered to be just an island but the land destined to be the citadel of Theravada Buddhism that had to be saved by the Sinhalese rulers from foreign onslaughts. The Buddhist chronicles—the major source of the history of this period (and written by the monks)—emphasized time and again this special destiny of the Sinhalese kings as the chosen guardian and savior of Buddhism.

If the Sangha found a source of powerful support in the king, it also wielded tremendous power over the kingship by holding the sacral resources of power. In a society saturated with religious values the interaction of the monk community and the kingship was not only close but also diffused. The nature and significance of this interaction in the maintenance of a dynamic equilibrium in the Ceylonese social system could perhaps be best appraised by a brief analysis of the sources, structure and functions of political authority in traditional Ceylon.

## POLITICAL AUTHORITY IN TRADITIONAL CEYLON: THE BASES

Traditional Ceylon had monarchical form of government with the king as the repository of political power and authority. This was the case with the Sinhalese principalities as well as with the Tamil kingdom in the north which came into being in the thirteenth century.

As in the case of other traditional monarchical states, kingship in Ceylon was based on theological assumptions. As such, it was logical that the main sources of political authority were derived from religious precepts as well as from traditions. The Hindu and Buddhist doctrine of *karma* provided a major *rationale* for the authority of the ruler over his subjects. The theory of causation while explaining and justifying the exalted position of the king implied the allegiance of the less favoured towards him. Religious values thus legitimated the status structure.

Besides the doctrine of *karma*, tradition had it that a king had to be a Buddhist. Many Tamil rulers professed Buddhist faith, observed Buddhist customs and supported Buddhism. Later, under the Mahayanist influence in Ceylon, it was believed that the king had not only to be Buddhist but also a *Bodisattva* (one who had gained sufficient merit and was destined to achieve Buddhahood).<sup>29</sup> It was maintained that both the Buddha and the *Chakravarty*—universal emperor—were identified by the thirty-two marks on their body.<sup>30</sup> While one remained in the

<sup>29</sup> Rahula, n. 9, p. 62.

<sup>30</sup> In the later period it was maintained that the ruler was *Bodhisattva*. This affirmation reflects the influence of Mahayana over theravadins for while the prota-

temporal world to rule, the other renounced the material world to be the conqueror of the other world—the spiritual. Despite their different domains both headed for the same goal—Buddhahood. As the representative of God on earth the king had ‘charisma’ and was endowed with supernatural powers. Kingship as such was divinely sanctioned<sup>31</sup> popular traditions as these lent powerful support to the authority of the king.

As regards the people, the Sangha was symbolised by its religious relics. Whosoever, for instance, had Buddha’s tooth relic and alms bowl had the allegiance of the people. In later times, the possession of these relics was considered essential for the popular recognition of kingship.

The fact that according to the customary law of the island, a ruler was deemed to be legitimate only if he was a Buddhist, emphasised the dominant position of religion *vis-a-vis* state. One might as well say that the ruler’s position and role as the promoter and defender of Buddhism confirmed his legitimacy. The ritualisation of the coronation ceremony during this period further reflected the growing importance of the religious institutions *vis-a-vis* the kingship. Originally a secular affair, with the growing prestige of the Sangha, the ceremony was recognised only if it was sanctioned by the “Mahasangha” and performed in the vihara itself. This was crucial “for, since the King’s charisma was qualified by the absence of a strict rule of succession by hereditary right, the coronation did more than simply cap an acknowledged claim to the throne. Legitimacy was created by the ritual, not merely confirmed. Thus the movement of the coronation from unconsecrated public space into the sacred grounds of the temple reflects the Sangha’s authority as a *prime of political force* which conferred the kingship.”<sup>32</sup>

#### SANGHA AND THE SUCCESSION

Apart from the ritual of coronation shifting to the monastery and thereby symbolising the authority of the Sangha, individual monks seemed to play a significant role in the political game of succession. This happened at different levels and in different ways. As advisors to the court, their opinion and consent was sought by the ruler as well as his counsellors on policy matters and often it had a salutary effect on the decision making process. Several rulers, for instance, decided the ques-

gionists of Hinayana knew only one Bodhisattva, according to Mahayana the way to Buddhahood was open to everyone. Geiger, n. 10, pp. 210-11. Also see Ralph Pieris, *Sinhalese Social Organization: The Kandyan Period* (Colombo, 1956), p. 10.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>32</sup> Arnold L. Green, “Sangha and King: The Structure of Authority in Mediaeval Ceylon” (Cyclostyled Paper read at a symposium on Problems in the sociology of Theravada Buddhism at the tenth Pacific Congress, Honolulu, 22 August 1961, p. 6.

tion of succession only after consulting the eminent monks<sup>33</sup> and having obtained their consent.

However, there were also cases where the monks were directly and actively involved in enthroning the ruler. Some of them are mentioned as active participants in the palace intrigues.<sup>34</sup> These kingmakers "went to the extent of selecting princes for the throne and supporting favourites even to the extent of violating the laws of succession."<sup>35</sup>

Besides influencing the succession of rulers the monks also acted as mediators in royal disputes<sup>36</sup> and in few cases, even cast off their robes to enter the battlefield and later ascend the throne in the interests of religion and state.<sup>37</sup>

The importance ascribed to Buddhism and Buddhist monks in body politic was not merely the result of a conscious or concerted effort on the part of either party but a reflection of the basic characteristics of a value system in which religious ideas held precedence over the others. Thus, offer of the kingdoms by rulers to the Buddha *Sasana* was symbolic gesture to indicate that the state was run for Buddhism.<sup>38</sup> In exercising the duty as defender and protector of Buddhism the kings had a full-fledged department to promote religious activities. They levied taxes for the maintenance of Sangha and endowed lavish grants in the form of paddy lands, forests and gardens. Lay managerial and working staff became necessary to administer the lands because the monks were prohibited from either carrying on business or doing menial work. As such, these religious endowments, usually referred to as Buddhist temporalities,

<sup>33</sup>e.g. after the death of Saddha Tissa (59 B.C.), the royal councillors with approval of the Sangha, consecrated the prince Thullathana as king. Vijayabahu (1055-1114 A.C.) decided to enthrone Jayabhhu in conformity with the advice of the Bhikkhus. After his demise his sister invited the high dignitaries and eminent monks to a conference to decide the question of succession. Agattu Parakramabahu II (1236-1271 A.D.) conferred the throne on the eldest son in accordance with the advice of the monks. Rahula, n. 9, pp. 69-71.

<sup>34</sup>In his thesis Rev. Dr. Wachissara gives several illustrations of this type. According to him, "The Mahanama Thera was the chief organiser of Dhatusena's campaign against the Tamils. . . . Thera Nanda accompanied the three princes Sanghabodhi, Sanghatissa, and Gothabhaya from Mahivangana to Anuradhapur with the express intention of enthroning the Princes on the thrones of Rajarata. Parakramabahu IV ascended the throne with the unstinted support of Vidagama Thera. Rajavalia refers to the Machiavellian tactics of this Thera who was responsible for the death of Alakeswara in order to make Parakkrama Bahu the King of Kotte. Washissara, n. 22, p. 76.

<sup>35</sup>Rahula, n. 9, p. 69.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., p. 82 and Geiger, n. 10, p. 130.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., pp. 99 and 101.

<sup>38</sup>e.g. Devanamapiyatissa offered his kingship to the Mahabodhi. Duttagamini is reported to have bestowed the kingdom of Ceylon on the *Sasana* five times — each time for seven days. King Tissa offered the Kingdom of Ceylon to Kala Buddharakkhita as a gift for his sermon. Sirimeghavanna offered the whole kingdom to the Tooth Relic. Moggalana I, after his victory over his brother Kassapa, went to the Mahavihara and offered state-parasol, the symbol of kingship, but it was duly returned. Aggabodhi II, after the restoration of Thuparama, offered the whole country to the thupa. Rahula, n. 9, p. 75.

were governed by rules and regulations "laid down by the king with the approval of the Sangha" and were administered by the state officials.<sup>39</sup> However, the inability of the Sangha to administer its temporal affairs, by itself made its action "subject to the proximate authority of the King."<sup>40</sup> In other words, in the position of the ruler as the defender of faith lay the king's strongest source of power over the faith.

#### KING THE PURIFIER OF THE SANGHA

Implicit in his position as the protector of Religion lay the King's jural authority over ecclesiastical affairs of the Sangha. Thus it was the duty of the state "to suppress by law or expulsion of undesirable heretical elements that stained the purity of the *Sasana*."<sup>41</sup> In order to guard the Sangha against corruption from within, the kings set up ecclesiastical courts to enforce monastic discipline and to take action against heretic monks.<sup>42</sup> At times he himself acted as a judge over religious disputes.<sup>43</sup> The kings also invited learned Bhikkhus to prepare a code of religion and to help edit commentaries as well as Suttas<sup>44</sup> and finally to hold courts where there could be a thorough discussion on the basic tenets of Buddhism. Often the kings actively participated in such conferences and some of them even went to the extent of preaching and exhorting the Bhikkhus to keep the pristine purity of the Religion.<sup>45</sup>

#### KING THE UNIFIER AND RESUSCITATOR OF THE SANGHA

Besides, rulers like Parakkramabahu I (1153-1586) also tried to unify the *Tayo-nikaya* (Three Sects). However, by providing one platform for discussion and discourses to all the three fraternities, the king succeeded in unifying it after more than a thousand years.<sup>46</sup> Finally, the King resuscitated the Sangha at times when it completely broke down as an Order. According to the Vinaya, the higher ordination of upasampada ceremony necessitated the presence of five learned *theras* (senior monks) and at times, even five *theras* could not be found. Under such circumstances,

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 72.

<sup>40</sup> Green, n. 32, p. 5.

<sup>41</sup> Rahula, n. 9, p. 67.

<sup>42</sup> Nicholas and Paranavitana, n. 12, p. 263 and pp. 328-9; Geiger, n. 10, p. 206 and B.C. Law, *A Manual of Buddhist Historical Traditions* (Calcutta, 1941), pp. 42-43.

<sup>43</sup> Rahula, n. 9, p. 68.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid. e.g. Mahinda IV, 10th century, entrusted the learned Thera Dhanmamma with the commentary on the Abhidhamma; King Parakramabahu II brought several Bhikkhus to Ceylon from Cola well versed in the tripitaka. Geiger, n. 10, p. 205.

<sup>45</sup> This is reported of Moggallana I. about the year 500, of Kumaradhatu-sena, 6th century, of Moggallana III, 7th century, of Aggabodhi VII, 8th century, of Sena II, 9th century, of Kassapa IV, 896-913, of Kassapa V, 10th century, of Bhuvanekabahu V, 14th century and of Kittisirirajasiha 18th century. Geiger, n. 10, p. 205.

<sup>46</sup> Nicholas, n. 12, p. 263.

the rulers reinforced it by inviting learned monks from other theravada countries, like Burma, India and Thailand. Special assemblies were held under royal patronage for the admission of monks for higher ordination and the King himself "had to approve the higher appointments of the Order."<sup>47</sup>

### Conclusion

Traditional Ceylonese society derived its ideological orientations almost solely from the doctrinal precepts that were then prevalent in the north of the Indian sub-continent. Introduced in the island as early as the third century B.C. Buddhism, confronted with a tribal religion initially and Hinduism in its later phase, subsumed both. This capacity to absorb change, was in the main, due to a sustained state patronage for more than thousand years. During this period Buddhism had gained sufficiently strong roots and found a wide base to withstand alien pressures of the later period. The intellectual professional monks, by their pioneering contributions in various socio-cultural fields had created enough resources to make people rally round religion. Besides, the monks, as preachers, social workers and teachers seemed to be the most effective communicating elite of the era. As learning was the monopoly of religion, religious values and symbols predominated the cultural orientations of society and provided the mores for its socio-cultural integration.

It is significant to note in this context that notwithstanding the close relationship of the religious and political institutions, both maintained some sort of distinctiveness. In other words, though the king had an important role to play in the Buddhist hierarchy, the religious hierarchical structure was distinct from that of the political hierarchy. However, the line of demarcation was always a faint one in terms of royal and priestly functions. Furthermore, although, the deification of kingship was incompatible with pure Buddhism, kingship in practice was not secularised. On the other hand, the Buddhist priesthood, though not a part of ruling elite in Ceylon still, by virtue of its power potential, turned out to be a "parallel, intertwined elite."<sup>48</sup> "The Sangha and State," to quote Green, were "connected by a mesh of cross cutting ties that did

<sup>47</sup> Bhikkhus were brought on the invitation of Vijayabahu in 1065 from Ramanna, by Vimala Dharma II in 1696 from Arakan (D.B. Jayatilaka, "Sinhalese embassies to Arakan," *Journal of Royal Asiatic Society (Ceylon Branch)*, 35(93): 1940: pp. 1-6 and by Vijayaraja Singha and Kirti Siri Raja Singha from Siam in 1740 and 1750 respectively. The present Siam Nikaya traces its origin to this. P.E. Pieris gives a very interesting account of King Kirti Siri's embassy to Siam in his article "An Account of King Siri's embassy to Siam in 1672 Saka (1750 A.D.)" in *Journal of Royal Asiatic Society (Ceylon Branch)*, 18(51): 1903, pp. 17-47. This account in fact is a translation of *Vimana Wastuwa* by Ratanpala Sthavira. Also see Geiger, n. 10, pp. 198 and 203-5.

<sup>48</sup> Marshal R. Singer, *The Emerging Elite: A Story of Political Leadership in Ceylon* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1964), p. 19.

not differentiate their respective areas of authority but rather superimposed them. The result was not a separation but a broad complex fusion in which the jurisdiction of each party was partial, constricted and in a real sense confounded.”<sup>49</sup>

This mutual interdependence of Sangha and State could be explained in terms of the stakes of both the parties in sustaining such a state of affairs. The final goal for the monk as well as the monarch was no doubt salvation but the immediate identical goals which both the Sangha and the monarchy had set was the welfare and moral amelioration of the people. Conflict of any sorts — social, economic, political or ideological — affected the equation between the religious and political institutions. What was desired by both in this context was the maintenance of a stable *status quo* society. Buddhist doctrine of *karma* gave a further support to this idea of *status quo* for, any challenge to the then existing social order must mean a challenge to the Buddhist doctrine of *karma*.

Political coordination and religious organisation, however, did not always go side by side. Emphasis on individualism in Buddhism seemed to cushion the impact of the *karma* doctrine to some extent. This was however more a part of monk ethics, not the lay ethics. In the temples of course there were revolts leading to the establishment of new sects. Inter-sectoral and intra-sectoral dissensions created tensions and led to conflicts resolutions of which seemed to be possible only under a strong ruler.

On the other hand, the rulers of Ceylon, in the process of mobilising their resources, seemed to be fully conscious of the force of the Dhamma and Sangha as the locus of social as well as secular legitimacy. Thus, soon after coming to power they built or repaired monasteries, held grand religious festivals and bestowed lavish grants on the Sangha. These endowments served a two-fold purpose — religious as well as political; the support of the Sangha delivered goods in this life as well as in the life to come. Apart from legitimising the authority of the kings the monks helped in rallying the masses through their religious, educational and cultural activities. “They helped the king to rule the country in peace. It was the duty of the bhikkhus according to the Vinaya to side with the kings.” The kings found a powerful means of propaganda in the Sangha who had close contact with the people and great influence over them. Using their influence over the masses the monks lent “support to the king who, in return, looked after their interests. It was a matter of mutual understanding, though it was never explicitly stated.”<sup>50</sup>

This pattern of relationship between the religion and political institutions came under a heavy strain when there were political upheavals in

<sup>49</sup>Green, n. 32, p. 10.

<sup>50</sup>Rahula, n. 9, pp. 75-6.

the island. Political disintegration of the country inevitably affected the monastic organisations as was evident from the outcome of the frequent invasions from South Indian kingdoms during the Polonnaruva period (11th to 16th century A.D.). Dynastic disputes leading to civil wars as well as foreign invasions appeared to have reached a phase far beyond the influence of the Sangha and also beyond the strength of the local political authority to control, even if some of them were occasionally strong rulers. During this period the three fraternities seemed to have disappeared and the Sangha reverted to the old categories of the village fraternity and jungle fraternity. The great monasteries were abandoned, religious endowments were expropriated and indiscipline and decadence within the Sangha increased. The disturbed political conditions blurred the common destiny which the monarchy and the Sangha had evolved by tradition but was not altogether effaced. A further blow to this historical continuity occurred with the advent of the European powers who not only challenged the local political authority but also the indigenous religion when they imported christianity in the island.