

An introduction to Buddhist Thoughts and Institutions in Sri Lanka

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The community of the Sangha can be considered as a social unit that operates upon a number of simple and noble objectives that exhibit organized and institutionalized traits based on certain aims and principles. Further, openly demonstrating the features of a model a community while realizing their path of liberation through the attitudes of the community of Sangha, for making the life of others fruitful, maintaining a simple life style and keeping away from narrow social aspirations the community of Sangha functioned as an organized institution in the early stages.

With the increasing of the membership of Sangha and with regional expansion, through dialogue and accords, maintaining their essential qualities in the same way, how the monks worked is clearly seen in the history of the Order. A number of agreements were made for the well-being of the community through a number of '*Katikāvat*' (ecclesiastical codes) and *Sangāyana* (council or convocation), on every such occasion the monks had acted giving preference to the Dharma-Vinaya and common welfare over personal gains and interests. The community of monks had progressed successfully by working on such ideals that they acted as a well organized community fulfilling their main objectives of attaining goals of welfare of the community.

The institution of the Bhikkhus which originated in the 6th century B.C. representing the *Indianśramana* movement came to be better organized. This happened in India in the 6th century B.C., but after 3 centuries, Sri Lanka felt its influence as the direct result of the Indo-Lankacultural relationship developing at the time. However, according to some scholars, early immigrants from India may have had some knowledge of Buddha and his religion before the arrival of Ven. Mahinda and other monks to officially establish Buddhism

in the Island. Through literary and archeological evidence it has been clearly proven that it was in the 3rd century B.C. that the institution of the Sangha originated in Sri Lanka.

Activities of the Sangha from that time has been marked until the present era, the Sangha had played a very prominent role in the history of the island. Therefore it is important to study how the Sangha became an organized community and to examine the occasional conflicts among the Sangha and how those conflicts and new views affected the social attitudes of the Sangha. We shall focus on the period from the 3rd century B.C. up to the end of the Kandyan period for understanding the evolution of the Sangha during that time and its structural basis.

In this study special attention will be paid to 'institutions.' The Mahavihara in Anuradhapura was the first monastery of the Sangha in Sri Lanka and also it is known as the place of origin of the culture of the island. Further, a unique tradition of the Sangha developed at the Mahavihara. Members of the Mahavihara were known as the *Theravadins*, as they upheld the Theravada traditions. The Mahavihara School contributed immensely to the development in the religious and cultural fields in the island while shaping the socio-economic and political sectors of a new pattern. The Mahavihara School continued to make their contribution in these fields for a long time.

A rival movement of the Sangha of the Mahavihara arose at the Abhayagiri Vihara, which developed fast into an institution. The breach which occurred like this resulted not only directly but also indirectly in the establishment of various ideologies hostile to the Theravada, but also it affected every aspect of society. The doctrines embraced by the members of the Abhayagiri Vihara, changed drastically under the impact of the ideas of the *Dhammaruci* monks who came to the Abhayagiri and occupied it. It did not take a long time for the Mahayana champions of the Vaitulyavada doctrine to bring monks propagating new radical ideas. Due to the conflicts between the Mahavihara and Abhayagiri involving foreign monks bringing in new ideologies and interpretations those two monasteries gained international fame. While those two great monasteries upheld different views, their differences widened into a serious conflict before long. The division in implementation and tradition continued up to the 12th century while it aggravated into sectarian conflicts.

Having the Jetavana Stupa at the center, a new Nikaya or sect of monks

developed by the name '*Jetavana*.' This Stupa was built within the boundary of the Mahavihara disregarding the protest of the Mahaviharabhikkhus. Although located within the Mahavihara the members of the Jetavana did not accept the Theravada tradition of the Mahavihara. It was obviously a new sect that emerged against the Mahavihara tradition. Jetavana monastery had agreed with the ideas of the Abhayagiri to some extent only. They existed as an independent sect up to the 12th century. Further, the monks of the Jetavana had accepted to some extent the views of the Abhayagiri. After the 8th century Bhikkhus who had embraced the ideas of the Vajiriyavada and the Nilapatadarshana arrived in the island where they made attempts to spread their views. In the meantime we find a new development in Sangha of the island with the introduction of *Mūlāyatana* within the institution of Sangha which was already divided into various Nikayas. By the 10th century these schools were established as '*Mūla*', which means 'community' or 'group'. This name can be found in some of the ancient inscriptions as well. Among those '*mulas*', '*Uturumula*', '*Seneviratmula*', '*Vahadumula*', and '*Kapārāmula*' are some of the prominent ones.

While the '*Sāsana*' or the Order of the Bhikkhus was getting divided into many Nikayas or sects, they had attempted new interpretations of the Dharma and Vinaya. Hence we can see a change in the functions and attitudes of the communities of Bhikkhus after the 6th century. While some monks begin to concentrate on the 13 *Dhutangas* (austere ascetic practices) highlighted in the early Buddhism we can see after the 5th century emergence of some Bhikkhus who tried to participate in the social activities rather than monks who accepted views of other Nikayas relating their principles to it.

Those schools which arose from 8 principal Pirivenas around the 7th century, and continued to grow, emerged by the name of '*Mūlāyatana*' within the institution of Sangha in addition to the Theriyavada and Vaitulyavada maintained at the Mahavihara and Abhayagiri Vihara. Among the '*mulas*', '*Uturumula*', '*Seneviratmula*', '*Vahadumula*' and '*Kapārāmula*' belonged to the Abhayagiri Vihara. The remaining four '*mula*' or establishments belonged to the Jetavana and Mahavihara factions. The '*mulas*', as institutions of presented different views representing the 3 main Nikayas as well as lineages of highly respected scholar monks. Each '*mula*' may have borne the views of the Chief Monk of that *Mula*. Although in the beginning the principles or the doctrine was given prominence in the order of monks, later on that was replaced by the '*paryāpti*' or learning and then with the development of *Mūlāyatana* at Pirivenas. From this development also we can see that a structural change was

taking place in the life of the monks.

King Vijayabahu managed to reunite the country politically and establish an indigenous leadership in the 11th century who took opportune measures for the welfare of the Sasana. However, the conflicts among the Nikayas and the propagation of heretic views had not been completely wiped out. The extremely difficult task of re-building unity and harmony in the institution of Sangha who had been divided on ideologies, sects and '*āyatana*' or '*mula*', was undertaken by Parkaramabahu I during the Polonnaruwa period in the 12th century.

It was at that time that the emergence of a new feature- the Chief position of '*Māhimi*' or '*Mahāsamai*', was established. The '*Māhimi*' represented the supreme leadership of the entire community of the Sangha. At the same time a hierarchy based on leadership in the Sangha was formed. In the meantime the '*Mūlāyatana*' became more prominent than in the earlier periods and those institutions claimed the privileged positions enjoyed by the Nikayas until then. According to a strong hierarchy of the community of monks, it was the '*ubhayavāsa*' (the village living and forest dwelling monks) that became more active and powerful.

The next layer of the community of monks was led by the '*pirivenpati*' or the principals of the '*pirivenas*' or the monastic schools. Such schools existed in a number of areas in the island and the head monks of them were called either '*piriventera*' or '*pirivenpati*.'

By the Gampola period what is seen from the state of the Sāsana is that in the '*Sāsana*', which was controlled by means of '*Katikāvat*' and 'accords', once again the personality became instrumental and the leaders functioned who were alienated from ecclesiastical duties. Further, it seems that by this time the monks of Sri Lanka were involved in the religious activities in other South Asian countries. The reign of King Parakarmabahu VI of Kotte (1416-1468) is noteworthy as a flourishing era of the *Sāsana*- the order of Monks. There was an active relationship between the Buddhist monks of Sri Lanka with those of South Asian countries during that period.

With the Portuguese advent in the Island in 1505 A.D. there begins a decline of the Order of the Sangha. Buddhist monks as well as Buddhist laity fell into a pathetic state at that time while a number of obstacles appeared which threatened the existence and activities of the monks.

Active relationship of the Bhikkhus with the rulers of the Island, which

started during the Anuradhapura period continued up to the last kingdom in Kandy in the 19th century. Further decline was seen of the institution of Sangha as the result of the competition for power that developed among the members of the Royalty as well as officers holding high positions. Beginning of this decline could be seen clearly since the 16th century.

An institution of 'Sāmanera' or novice monks called 'Ganinnānse came to be established during the Kandy period. At that time the traditional system of 'teacher- student' relationship was replaced by the new 'gnāti-shisya' system and the resulting 'relative- pupil' relationship gets established among the Sangha. Then the ordination as Bhikkhus also became confined within family circles. The Bhikkhus at that time were practicing as devil dancers, astrologers, land owners and maintaining families sacrificing the Vinaya or the 'code of conduct.'

The movement called the 'SilvatSamāgama' (Company of Virtuous monks) led by Venerable Welivita Saranamkara was successful in cleansing the Order of corruption and violation of Vinaya rules etc., marked the dawn of an era of revival. From this movement the basic structural features of the Order of Bhikkhus of Sri Lanka, the role of the members and the changes taking place and also the measures adopted for introducing 'katikāvat' and agreements and attempts to connect the aims of monks to society. Despite all these, the Bhikkhu organizations have moved forward.

However, institution of the Sangha that is formed upon a common foundation being divided into groups with the emergence of various institutions and individual leadership and the rise of personal objectives over common objectives caused decline of the 'Sangha' as an institution. Its progress at some other times will be discussed in this project. We shall discuss further, as the establishment of foreign rule had an adverse effect on the local leaders and how the loss of their power led to struggles for political power and the future of the Order of the Monks.

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