

Representation of the Bodhisattva Concept in Sri Lankan Literary Texts

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Introduction

The Bodhisattva ideal occupies a central position in Mahāyāna Buddhism, representing the aspiration to attain Buddhahood for the welfare and liberation of all sentient beings. Although Sri Lanka has long been recognized as a stronghold of Theravāda Buddhism, historical, archaeological, epigraphic, and literary evidence demonstrates that Mahāyāna Buddhist traditions also exerted a considerable influence on the island's religious and cultural development. Among these influences, the Bodhisattva concept emerged as an important religious and literary tradition, shaping Buddhist thought, devotional practices, and artistic expression over several centuries. The evolution of Bodhisattva veneration in Sri Lanka reflects the interaction between Theravāda and Mahāyāna traditions, resulting in a distinctive religious culture that is preserved in Sinhala, Pāli, and Sanskrit literary sources.

Sri Lankan literary works provide valuable evidence for understanding the development of Bodhisattva traditions. Chronicles, religious narratives, *Sandesa* poetry, inscriptions, devotional literature, and ritual texts preserve numerous references to Bodhisattvas such as *Metteyya* (Maitreya), *Avalokiteśvara* (*Nātha*), *Upulvan*, and *Pattini*. These literary sources portray Bodhisattvas not only as future Buddhas or compassionate saviors but also as protectors of the Buddhist religion, guardians of the island, and models of moral perfection. The literature further illustrates how Bodhisattva ideals of compassion, generosity, wisdom, and self-sacrifice became integrated into Sri Lankan religious life and cultural identity.

The Bodhisattva concept also occupies an important place in Sinhala literary tradition through devotional songs (*Bhakti Gīta*), folk literature, ritual chants, and classical poetic compositions. These works employ symbolic language, religious imagery, and ethical narratives to communicate Buddhist teachings while encouraging spiritual reflection and the cultivation of virtues associated with the Bodhisattva path. Literary compositions frequently portray Bodhisattvas as embodiments of compassion and social responsibility, demonstrating the close

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relationship between Buddhist philosophy and the cultural life of Sri Lankan society.

Despite the availability of substantial literary evidence, previous scholarship has generally examined individual Bodhisattvas or specific literary texts rather than providing a comprehensive analysis of how the Bodhisattva concept is represented across diverse Sri Lankan literary traditions. Consequently, there remains a need for a systematic study that synthesizes evidence from Sinhala, Pāli, and Sanskrit sources to examine the literary evolution of Bodhisattva ideals and their contribution to Sri Lankan Buddhist culture. This gap limits a comprehensive understanding of the historical interaction between Theravāda and Mahāyāna traditions and their influence on Sri Lankan literary heritage.

Accordingly, this study investigates the representation of the Bodhisattva concept in Sri Lankan literary texts by analysing references to major Bodhisattvas, including Metteyya, Avalokiteśvara (Nātha), Upulvan, and Pattini, in selected Sinhala, Pāli, and Sanskrit works. Through a qualitative examination of literary, historical, and epigraphic sources, the study explores the religious, philosophical, and cultural significance of these Bodhisattva traditions and demonstrates their contribution to the development of Sri Lankan Buddhist literature and religious identity. The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the continuity and transformation of Bodhisattva ideals within Sri Lankan Buddhism and highlight the important role of literary texts in preserving this rich religious heritage.

Objectives

The main objective of this study is to examine the representation and significance of the Bodhisattva concept in Sri Lankan literary texts and its contribution to the religious, literary, and cultural development of Sri Lanka. In addition, the study aims to analyze the depiction of major Bodhisattvas, including Metteyya (Maitreya), Avalokiteśvara (Nātha), Tārā, Upulvan, and Pattini, within selected Sri Lankan literary sources. It further seeks to investigate the influence of Mahāyāna Buddhist thought on Sinhala, Pāli, and Sanskrit literary traditions in Sri Lanka, to evaluate the religious, philosophical, and cultural significance of the Bodhisattva concept as reflected in these texts, and to assess the role of Sri Lankan literary works in preserving and transmitting Bodhisattva traditions across generations.

Methodology

This study employs a **qualitative research methodology** based on documentary and textual analysis. Data were collected from primary sources, including Sinhala, Pāli, and Sanskrit literary texts, Pali chronicles, inscriptions,

devotional literature, and other historical records related to Bodhisattva traditions in Sri Lanka. Secondary sources, such as books, journal articles, conference papers, and previous scholarly studies, were also consulted to establish the theoretical and historical background of the study. The collected data were analysed using descriptive, historical, and comparative methods to examine the literary representation of major Bodhisattvas and to evaluate the influence of Mahāyāna Buddhism on Sri Lankan literary traditions. This approach provides a comprehensive understanding of the historical, religious, and cultural significance of the Bodhisattva concept in Sri Lankan literature.

Results

The analysis of Sinhala, Pāli, and Sanskrit literary texts reveals that the Bodhisattva concept occupies a significant position in the literary and religious heritage of Sri Lanka. The findings indicate that, despite the predominance of Theravāda Buddhism, Mahāyāna Buddhist traditions substantially influenced the development of Sri Lankan literary culture. References to Bodhisattvas are found in Buddhist chronicles, classical Sinhala literary works, *Sandesa* poetry, devotional literature, inscriptions, and ritual texts, demonstrating the continuity and adaptation of Mahāyāna beliefs within the island's Buddhist tradition.

The study identifies **Metteyya (Maitreya)**, **Avalokiteśvara (Nātha)**, **Tārā**, **Upulvan**, and **Pattini** as the principal Bodhisattva figures represented in Sri Lankan literary sources. Among these, **Avalokiteśvara (Nātha)** receives the greatest literary attention and is consistently portrayed as the compassionate protector of Buddhism and guardian of the island. Numerous literary works describe Nātha Bodhisattva as an embodiment of compassion and a spiritual guide who safeguards the Buddhist dispensation and supports devotees in overcoming suffering.

The findings further reveal that **Metteyya (Maitreya)** is represented as the future Buddha whose anticipated appearance symbolizes hope, moral renewal, and the continuation of the Buddha's teachings. Literary references encourage the cultivation of wholesome conduct and merit-making to attain rebirth during the era of Metteyya Buddha.

The analysis also demonstrates that **Tārā Bodhisattva** occupies an important position within Sri Lankan literary and devotional traditions. Literary evidence portrays Tārā as a compassionate female Bodhisattva associated with protection, healing, wisdom, and the removal of fear and suffering. Her representation reflects the influence of Mahāyāna devotional practices on Sri Lankan Buddhist culture.

Furthermore, the study finds that **Upulvan** and **Pattini** became closely integrated into the Sri Lankan Buddhist religious tradition through processes of cultural adaptation and literary reinterpretation. Although these figures possess local and regional characteristics, literary sources associate them with Bodhisattva ideals, particularly in their roles as protectors of Buddhism, guardians of the country, and benefactors of society. This demonstrates the ability of Sri Lankan Buddhism to incorporate diverse religious traditions while maintaining its Buddhist identity.

The findings also indicate that Sri Lankan literary texts portray Bodhisattvas not merely as religious figures but as embodiments of fundamental Buddhist virtues, including compassion (*karuṇā*), loving-kindness (*mettā*), generosity (*dāna*), wisdom (*prajñā*), patience (*kṣānti*), and selfless service. These ethical ideals are consistently reflected in literary narratives and devotional compositions, illustrating the educational and moral functions of Bodhisattva literature.

Another significant finding is that Bodhisattva traditions contributed substantially to the preservation and dissemination of Mahāyāna philosophical ideas within a predominantly Theravāda Buddhist society. The literary evidence demonstrates a harmonious interaction between Theravāda doctrine and Mahāyāna devotional traditions rather than a relationship of conflict. This interaction enriched Sri Lankan Buddhist literature and promoted religious pluralism within the broader Buddhist tradition.

Overall, the findings confirm that Sri Lankan literary texts constitute an important source for understanding the historical development of the Bodhisattva concept and its religious, literary, and cultural significance. The study demonstrates that Bodhisattva traditions have played a vital role in shaping Sri Lanka's Buddhist literary heritage and continue to represent an integral component of the island's religious and cultural identity.

Discussion / Conclusion

The Bodhisattva concept represents one of the most significant features of Mahāyāna Buddhism and has exerted a lasting influence on the religious, literary, and cultural traditions of Sri Lanka. Although Sri Lanka is historically recognized as a centre of Theravāda Buddhism, numerous literary, epigraphic, and historical sources reveal the continued presence and adaptation of Mahāyāna Bodhisattva ideals within the island's Buddhist heritage. This study examines the representation of the Bodhisattva concept in Sri Lankan literary texts with particular attention to its historical development, literary expressions, and cultural significance. A qualitative research methodology based on textual and historical analysis is

employed, drawing upon Sinhala, Pāli, and Sanskrit literary works together with inscriptions, chronicles, devotional literature, and previous scholarly studies. The study analyses the literary representations of major Bodhisattvas, including Metteyya (Maitreya), Avalokiteśvara (Nātha), Tārā, Upulvan, and Pattini, and explores their transformation within the Sri Lankan religious tradition. The findings demonstrate that the Bodhisattva concept became deeply integrated into Sri Lankan literary culture through chronicles, religious narratives, devotional poetry, *Sandesa* literature, folk traditions, and ritual texts. These sources portray Bodhisattvas as embodiments of compassion, wisdom, protection, and moral perfection while illustrating the interaction between Theravāda and Mahāyāna traditions. The study further reveals that Bodhisattva ideals significantly influenced the religious imagination, ethical values, and cultural identity of Sri Lankan society. It concludes that Sri Lankan literary texts preserve substantial evidence of the adaptation and continuity of Mahāyāna Bodhisattva traditions, thereby contributing to a broader understanding of the historical and literary development of Buddhism in Sri Lanka.

Keywords - Bodhisattva Concept, Mahāyāna, Sri Lankan Literature, Buddhist Literary Tradition

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