

An Investigation on Sri Lankan Tipiṭaka Manuscripts and Cultural Heritage

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Introduction

The Tipiṭaka, also known as the Pali Canon, is the scripture of Theravāda Buddhism, consisting of the Buddha's teachings, ethical guidelines, and monastic rules. In Sri Lanka, the Tipiṭaka holds profound religious, historical, and cultural significance, shaping the country's identity, practices, and worldview. The preservation and dissemination of these ancient manuscripts not only protected the teachings of Buddhism but also had a lasting impact on Sri Lankan culture, including its art, education, and social material. This paper aims to explore the cultural importance of the Tipiṭaka manuscripts in Sri Lanka, tracing their historical journey, preservation, and their role in shaping contemporary Sri Lankan society. The oldest manuscript, the Cullavagga in the possession of the library of Colombo National Museum, dates from the reign of king Parākramabāhu II. The colophon, states that the book was copied by Sumedha Mahāthera on the instructions of the Medhaṅkara Mahāsāmi.

Historical Significance of the Tipiṭaka in Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka's association with the Tipiṭaka dates back to the 4th Buddhist Council, held in the 1st century BCE during the reign of King Vaṭṭhagāmiṇī. This council was convened at the Ālokavihara in Matale, where for the first time, the orally transmitted teachings of the Buddha were transcribed onto palm leaves. The decision to commit the Tipiṭaka to writing was driven by fears that political unrest and invasions could lead to the loss of these teachings. This act marked the beginning of a long tradition of preserving Buddhist scriptures in Sri Lanka, placing the island at the heart of the global Buddhist community.

Preservation and Manuscript Culture

The Pali Canon was written in the Pali language, the liturgical language of Theravada Buddhism. Sri Lankan scribes scrupulously inscribed the teachings onto ola (palm) leaves, which were then bound into bundles to form books. These manuscripts were stored in monasteries, where they were protected by

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generations of monks. The monastic tradition of preserving the Tipiṭaka adopted a deep sense of reverence toward written texts, reflecting their sacred role within Buddhist practice.

The preservation process was not limited to mere physical maintenance but included regular chanting and recitation to ensure the oral transmission of these texts. Buddhist monks played a crucial role in both copying the manuscripts and teaching them to successive generations. The Temple of the Tooth Relic in Kandy, one of the most important religious sites, is a key center where the Tipiṭaka is venerated and studied. Some monastery collection, especially the ones in special display rooms, are relatively well kept, there are also collections where the manuscripts are stored among tableware in cockroach ridden cupboards or in badly kept libraries. In some collections manuscripts have disappeared. It regularly happened that although a manuscript is listed in a catalogue, it is not there anymore.

Cultural Influence of the Tipiṭaka

The Tipiṭaka's teachings filled Sri Lankan society, influencing its moral, legal, and social codes. Sri Lankan kings, such as King Duṭṭhagāmiṇī and King Parakramabāhu I, ruled in accordance with Buddhist principles derived from the Tipiṭaka, particularly its emphasis on non-violence, compassion, and righteous governance. These manuscripts shaped the ethical and philosophical outlook of the country, extending their influence into everyday life. In the realm of art and architecture, the influence of the Tipiṭaka can be seen in the construction of stupas, monasteries, and temples. Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa, two ancient capitals, house some of the most iconic Buddhist structures in the world, which were inspired by the teachings contained in the Pali Canon. Murals and sculptures that depict scenes from the Buddha's life, as described in the Tipiṭaka, further highlight the manuscripts' impact on visual culture. The tradition of Dhamma preaching, a form of religious sermon derived from the Tipiṭaka, remains an integral part of Sinhala Buddhist culture. These sermons are often conducted during significant life events such as marriages and funerals, illustrating the continuing relevance of the Tipiṭaka in both ritualistic and moral contexts.

Conclusion

The Tipiṭaka manuscripts are not merely religious texts; they are a living part of Sri Lanka's cultural and intellectual legacy. Their preservation and influence over two millennia have helped shape the ethical, social, and artistic framework of the nation. Sri Lankan manuscripts, particularly the Tipiṭaka, are invaluable treasures that embody the rich cultural and spiritual heritage of the island. Their preservation reflects centuries of dedication by monastic

communities, who have safeguarded these texts through meticulous copying and recitation. The manuscripts serve not only as religious scriptures but also as historical documents that provide insight into Sri Lanka's ethical frameworks, artistic expressions, and societal values. Ultimately, the Sri Lankan manuscripts are a living legacy that continues to influence contemporary society. By fostering a deeper understanding and appreciation of these texts, future generations can ensure that this vital aspect of Sri Lanka's identity remains vibrant and relevant in an ever-changing world.

Keywords: Tipiṭaka, Preservation, Cultural Heritage, Manuscript

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