

## **THE WORSHIPING OF STŪPA AND “INVENTION OF TRADITION (BASED ON THE SRI LANKAN BUDDHIST CULTURE)**

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### **Introduction**

“Invention of tradition” is a term which was used by Eric Hobsbawm (1983) and it became very popular in discussing about the concepts of ‘nation’ and ‘nationalism’ in the end of 20<sup>th</sup> century. Observing the national movements in the world Hobsbawm states that while invention new entities like national anthems and national symbols there was a trend to revive the traditions with the intention to inculcate certain values and norms to their communities. Thus, ‘Invention tradition’ means an essential process of adaptation of old models in new conditions for new purposes (1983: 1-14).

This concept is somewhat debatable, as it fails to touch the essence of ‘nation’ completely (Smith, 1994). Nevertheless, it could be accepted that some cultural elements underpinned to aggregate a certain community as a ‘nation’, as Hobsbawm has observed. A ‘nation’ has a secular part which was invented, constructed and formally instituted through cultural materials. It has a spiritual part which urges people even to sacrifice their lives as well. When scrutinizing the history of the national identity of Buddhist Sinhalese there are so many materials which built that consciousness. Stūpa also can be considered as an one element which constructed their sense of nationality throughout the history.

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## **Aim**

The aim of this research is to scrutinize the social utility of building new Stūpa to commemorate the victory of war in Sri Lanka

## **Materials and Methods**

This qualitative research basically depended on primary sources. Necessary data were furnished by historical chronicles and archaeological evidences. Secondary sources were also referred to build up the theoretical back ground.

## **Results and Discussion**

The Stūpa is considered as the most significant and remarkable construction of all Buddhist monuments due to the repositories of the corporeal relics or consumable relics of Lord Buddha. To seek the aimed phenomenon in this research the attention was paid to the inter communication among Stūpa, rulers and the public in ancient Sri Lanka. As it was recognized, Stūpa has been a symbol of power, though it was a sacred religious monument. Here, power means both the ruling power and the power of mass.

Ruling or political power has been attributed with Stūpa in multiple ways. One way was, by building new Stūpa. The narrative of three great Stūpas in Anurādhapura is a conspicuous example for that. Building Jētavanaya and Abhayagiriya was a result of the political conflicts of the contemporary society and separate identities also were created around those Stūpa cultures. Likewise, by constructing new Stūpa in peripheral areas in the country, rulers could propagate their political power and it was labelled as a type of *dharma vijaya*. The king Kāvantissa had followed this as a political device to unify ancient Ruhuna. He could establish his authority in Sēru Nuvara (Sēruvila) by constructing Sēruvilastūpa enshrining corporeal

relics of Lord Buddha (Dhātuvamsa, 1940). Secondly, rulers could maintain their authority by preserving Stūpa. Often, kings in ancient Sri Lanka have patronized to renovate old Stūpa. Thirdly, by following various Stūpa ceremonies rulers have maintained and strengthened their authority. Mahāvamsa reveals much attractive details about Stūpa ceremonies which were done by ancient kings (Mahāvamsa, 2003/2012: 39, 146-148).

As a religious monument, a Stūpa was a place which gathered people together. The dialogue between the Stūpa and people was created in several ways. Firstly, their labour (*shramapūjā*) and wealth were donated to build it. Then, they joined with Stūpa ceremonies as devotees. Thēravāda and Mahāyāna texts have exaggerated the mundane and supra mundane benefits of Stūpa worshiping, emphasizing that it is a great meritorious deed (Handurukanda, 1978: 75-77). Apparently, mass power was also centralized around Stūpa in this context.

By worshiping Stūpa people gathered not only around the sacred object but around the political power also. It can be defined as a spontaneous consent which was denoted to the political authority. This situation shows that political power of rulers and social power of people were both centralized around Stūpa.

Moreover, devotees were connected as one community by the shared experience of cult of Stūpa. It continued linking people together to vanquish the boundaries of gender, caste, class and regions. No one was subordinated there and even non-Buddhists participated sometime. Therefore Stūpa, especially Mahā Thūpa (Ruvanvālisāya) became a symbol of nationality in Sinhala nationalist movement in the colonial period. According to a legend, the finial of Ruvanvālisāya has broken on 3<sup>rd</sup> March in 1815 as an inauspicious sign of the decline of Sinhalese autonomy (Dhammakittitissa, 1949: 46). Moreover, legends assert that the meritorious



deed of renovating this Stūpa caused to get relieved from the colonialisation (Dhammavisuddhi, 1949: 14).

### Conclusion

As investigated through this research Buddhist Stūpa was a symbolic expression of supremacy, and public power was gravitated to the ruling power by worshiping Stūpa. In this context, building new great Stūpa in nine provinces in Sri Lanka after defeating the terrorism is not a mere construction of a certain monument of the victory. It is a symbolic expression of the autonomy and propagating the power throughout the country. Therefore this attempt can be defined as an invention of a tradition in a new situation for a new purpose.

**Keywords:** invention tradition, nationality, symbol, Stūpa

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