

# How Buddhism Fostered Sinhala Culture

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In the opinion of some scholars the sinhalese nation hails from the race started by king Vijaya. But others believe that Ravana was its founder. However, if the people of this Island, called *sinhaladveepa*, had any former culture. It has been furthered by the blessing it received from Buddhism, after the advent of Arahamth Mahinda. Ever since the sinhalese race came in to being there evolved a language and literature of their own along with customs and habits, forms of worship as well as arts and crafts, all peculiar to the sinhalese for their culture is the aggregate of all these. The most, important component among these can be considered the language and literature.

Only the sinhalese nation speaks the sinhala tongue. That is why its evolution forms an integral part of sinhala culture. The language that is more than two thousand years old has gone through its progress with the mighty influence it received from Buddhism.

There is no evidence to show that the art of writing existed before the time of Devanampiyathissa in Sri Lanka from the results of researches that have been carried out so far,

it is to be assumed that the Brahmic letters in the rock inscriptions or carvings in this country are identical with those of the alphabet used in the Asokan edicts.

The skill of the sinhalese in the field of poetry or their capacity for appreciation of beauty, or their erudition developed as a result of Buddhist influence. *sandesa kavyas* such as "selalihiniya" or historical works such as "Bodhivansa" amidst a host of other literary works, bear ample evidence to this.

Mention also can be made here of the sigiri graffiti which have attracted the attention of all the world. It is with a clear understanding of the poetry contained in Sigiri writings that Dr. Paranavithana attributed a superior place to their quality than what is found in the verse produced having regard to the rules of prosody and rhetoric apart from these the number of various contributions that have added to sinhala literature up-to date is considerable. To say that the greatest number of these additions have been produced during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, is no exaggeration.

During the pre-Buddhist period education was the heritage of a favored few who studied from Brahamins. This is confirmed by story of prince Pandukabhaya who was tutored by a Brahamin called Pandula. But after the arrival of Buddhism in Sri Lanka, the bhikkhus were the leaders in the field of education. They established study centres for all to receive knowledge. This resulted in ordinary people being highly literate therefore there was no need for people to go with presents and gifts to Brahamins for their education.

The Bhikkhus had a significant place not only in the field of education but, also in society in general. Therefore Buddhist morality achieved its dignity.

It has already been observed that the ethics of Brahaminism had their influence on Sri Lanka even during olden times. The geographical gap between India and Sri Lanka is so narrow, therefore trade and commerce between the two countries may have had their influence upon the cults and forms of worship of this country. Therefore were the people in the habit of venerating yakkhas and nagas or the sun and moon, or even inanimate objects such as trees and stones, believing these to be possessed of supernatural powers. They were also in the habit of making offerings and sacrifices or performing various ceremonies pertaining to the worship of these. At that time it is mentioned

that temples and kovils dedicated to god "Shiva" were in existence. Almost every form of worship in Bharatha had had its influence in this country. Nevertheless, not one of them had taken deep root. The result was that the message of the Buddha brought by Ven. Maha Arahant Mahinda spread far and wide throughout Thri-sinhala in no time.

The arrival of Buddhism caused a new revolution in this country. undoubtedly our forefathers embraced this new doctrine because they realized that there - in lay the road to complete emancipation. There was freedom of worship and the final result was "Vimukti". The gift of Mahavihara to the sungha established Buddhism as the state Religion in Lanka.

The cultural valve of Buddhism was so very high that it was considered a necessary qualification to have any claim to the throne of Lanka. It was because this influence persisted that powerful kings like Elara who was a non-believer, encouraged Buddhist religious ritual

The contemporary social order as it existed in Bharatha, in the form of caste differences had had its impact on Lanka. The existence of races such as nagas and yakkhas and the presence of differences in caste here too, bear evidence to the fact that the people were divided and heterogeneous. With the propagation of the noble teaching caste differences

ces slowly died down among the citizens of Lanka. Even slaves received the respect of kings when they entered the holly order.

The sovereign was at the head of all religious affairs customs, rituals or worship. All festivals and ceremonies were conducted with peace and goodwill and fellow - feeling towards all.

One can understand from the story of Devanam piyathissa's going on a hunting trip, how ancient kings of Lanka celebrated festivals before they were converted to Buddhism. Thereafter the king and his subjects got accustomed to derive satisfaction by taking part in religious ceremonies instead of indulging in pursuits like the hunting of innocent animals. Celebrations such as 'Girihanda puja and Maha chetiya puja' are good examples. By taking part in religious ceremonies how far people refrained from cruel performances is made clear from the declaration of laws. Prohibiting the killing of animals or the causing of destruction of life on upostha days a punishable offence or from the declaration of the eating of beef a crime that needed expulsion from caste. The different modes of life of people began to undergo fast changes as the daily life of people was moddled according to the Buddhist way of living. Guided by the new religion people began to practise harmless vocations such as agriculture and

trade which could be carried on avoiding harmful ways of living. It may be with reference to this purity of living, that the saying arose that the Sinhala farmer was "fit even to rule when his mud besmeared body was washed clean."

As the Buddha's doctrines was established the Lankians evinced a desire for listening to discourses. Generosity is one of the cardinal virtues of Buddhism. With the knowledge gained from Buddhism the sinhalese acquired the noble quality of being generous. The estimate of man in relation to his position or caste or status ceased to be the criterion, for taking part at religious festivals or at obserances held at temples and Viharas. A cosmopolitan feeling was extended towards each other. This was taught by Buddhism. The monarch, too, spent his day with the crowds on uposatha days, when the laity observed the eight precepts. All people made it a habit to observe the five precepts before they started any undertaking as required by their moral code. It is not to be doubted that even Buddhist names such as Buddhadasa, Dammapala and Mahinda bigan to be usedqs a respect for Buddhist-principles. The chanting of "pirith" (protection) became a social custom. Howfar this became abundantly popular, can be imagined from the fact that the blessings of pirith were received on every occasion when a child was

conceived a mother had the blessing of pirith being chantod Occasions such as giving of the first rice meal or birthday celebrations or weddings necessitated the protection from pirith These customs continue up - to - date.

After the arrival of Buddhism the possession of the Tooth Relic by the king was a sinequanon for sovereignty. With the making of Buddhism the state Religion, kings considered it their bounden duty to protect the Buddhist religion.

Arts and crafts flourished in this country after the arrival of Buddhism In what a sorry state the art of building was before that, can be imagined from the fact that Mahinda Thero had to deliver his sermon in the palace premises in the stable of king Devanampiyathissa. The progress that sculpture and architecture received was mmense after the great event of arahanth Mahinda Thero's comming here.

It is mentiond that eighteen categories of people skilled in various arts and crafts accompanied the vanceable nun<sup>b</sup> Sanghamitta. In fact, these comprised professionals, skilled workers, artisans and literary artists etc. who were necessary organs of a civilized society. The extant ruins of 'Bodhigharas,' 'padhana gharas' 'pathima gharas,' 'uposatha gharas,' 'Jantha gharas,' 'Sannipatha salas,' and Gediges' bear ample testimony to show the grandeur of Lanka's ancient glory.

Moveover, it was due to Buddhism that wonders of art such as the moonstone (Sandakada pahana,) and the samadhi statue which have gained world fame, hnve had their origin in this island. In the light of these facts the Sinhalese race cannot boast of a culture other than a Buddhistic culture. All the progressive features that one can see up to now have been due to the religious awakening.