

# Additional Evidence bearing on the Nature of Religious Endowment in Ancient Ceylon

## PART I.

### The Earliest Phase.

RELIGIOUS bodies have always depended for their existence on the charity and the benevolence of their patrons, and the history of Buddhism in Ceylon is no exception to the rule. The Mahāvamsa records how king Vaṭṭagāmaṇi (43-17 B.C.) allotted lands to the Kupikkala Vihāra of therā Mahātissa, 'recording it upon a Ketaka-leaf.'<sup>1</sup> But the large number of stone inscriptions,<sup>2</sup> that contain similar records of grants to the Saṅgha, date much earlier. These inscriptions broadly fall into three classes—cave, rock and pillar inscriptions,<sup>3</sup> and form by far the largest body of evidence, except the chronicles, for the study of religious endowment in Ancient Ceylon. Though 'as a rule royal donations were recorded on copper plates, or might be on silver and gold plates,'<sup>4</sup> yet such records are comparatively rare. King Kīrti Niśsaṅka Malla (1187-1196 A.D.) claims to have introduced into the island the copper plate grants.<sup>5</sup> The Palkumbāra Sannasa of Sri Mat Siri Saṅgabo Sri Bhuvanaika<sup>6</sup> and the Oruvala Sannasa<sup>7</sup> are examples of such copper plate grants, while a gold plate grant, belonging to the reign of King Vasabha (127-171 A.D.) has been recently discovered at Vallipuram;<sup>8</sup> which however S. Paranavitāna, believes was not a document meant for public information.<sup>9</sup>

It is difficult to confine within precise geographic boundaries the distribution of these stone inscriptions. But it may be generally said that they chiefly abound in the present dry zone of Ceylon within the North Central, North Western, Southern and Uva Provinces,—the inscriptions being found in large numbers close to the ancient capitals of Anurādhapura, Polonnaruwa, Galle and Kurunegala; while in the Hill Country and in the Jaffna Peninsula they occur very rarely.

<sup>1</sup> *Andanus Odoratissimus*, Mv. Ch. XXXIII, 50.

<sup>2</sup> The Epigraphical Summary of 17th October, 1933 mention 766 such inscriptions in *Ceylon Journal of Science*, Sec. G., Vol. II.

<sup>3</sup> A few slab inscriptions are also met with.

<sup>4</sup> Geiger, *Litteratur und Sprache der Singhalesen*, pp. 24-25; Mv. Ch. XXVII,

<sup>5</sup> *E.Z.*, Vol II, p. 166.

<sup>6</sup> *E.Z.*, Vol. III, No. 25.

<sup>7</sup> *E.Z.*, Vol. III, No. 3.

<sup>8</sup> By Rev. W. Rāhula. *E.Z.*, Vol. V, No. 29.

<sup>9</sup> *E.Z.*, Vol. V, p. 236.

Two general features are common to most of these stone inscriptions. Firstly, the inscriptions prior to the 12th century, A.D. are undated from any calculable era such as the Saka era, or the Nirvāna of the Buddha.<sup>10</sup> But the majority of them, especially of the 10th and 11th centuries, bear the name of a King,<sup>11</sup> or are dated from the regnal years of the ruling monarch.<sup>12</sup> In spite of the painstaking work of eminent scholars in recent times, the chronological arrangement of these inscriptions for purposes of historical study is difficult and the arrangement in most cases is arbitrary.<sup>13</sup> But, one fact remains clear: none of the inscriptions so far discovered date before the 3rd century, B.C. Two reasons are primarily responsible for this chronological limitation. The majority of these inscriptions being records of grants to the Saṅgha, such records can only occur after the introduction of Buddhism to Ceylon, which was in the 3rd century, B.C. Further, the art of writing itself came to Ceylon with the introduction of Buddhism to Ceylon,<sup>14</sup> and hence in an age when writing itself was unknown, the keeping of records would not be a possibility.

Secondly, as the largest number of these inscriptions are records of religious endowments,<sup>15</sup> their text generally follows a few stereo-typed patterns. Hence there is a general possibility of these records following a conventional classicism, and thus making the veracity of the *details* they record doubtful in their portrayal of contemporary conditions.

Hitherto, these inscriptions have been studied mainly for the light they throw on the philological development of the Sinhalese language, or on the history of its ancient script, or for the examination of the political history and the nature of the political institutions of ancient Ceylon.<sup>17</sup> A deeper historical significance attaches however to these long and elaborate catalogues of grants, *viz.*, the evidence they show of the varying character of the form of property holding that was in vogue at the dates when these records were made. Further,

10. 'The inscriptions of Parakrama Bahu I, and onwards, are dated from the Nirvāna of Buddha and in a few instances from the Saka era'—Müller, *Ancient Inscriptions of Ceylon*, p. 6.

11. Given usually in the *birudas* or titles, *e.g.*, Abhā Salamevan.

12. *E.g.*, 'Hail! Prosperity! on the tenth day of the waning moon of Mādu in the twelfth year of His Majesty Siri Sangabo'—E.Z., Vol. III, No. 5.

13. Having to depend on 'palaeographic evidence and coincidence of name'—Müller, *Ibid.*, p. 24.

14. G. C. Mendis, *Early History of Ceylon*, p. 18.

15. Mostly to the Buddhist Saṅgha and in a few instances to Hindu devāla shrines. A fair number of endowments to individuals (Ep. S. No. 876): or to institutions, *e.g.*, a hospital, E. Z., Vol. II, No. 5, or a lying-in-home, E. Z., Vol. III, too occur.

16. A cave inscription reads "*Parumaka Visadevasa leṇe agatu anagata ca sagasa.*" (The cave of the Chief Visadeva is given to the Saṅgha of the four quarters present and absent).

17. '*Ancient Land Tenure and Revenue in Ceylon*' by H. W. Codrington, freely to these inscriptions in his study of the Tenurial systems of Ancient Ceylon.

reflect the profound changes which took place in the constitution of the State in ancient Ceylon, transforming it from a self-denying sect of monks as we first meet it in its history in Ceylon, to be one of the largest and most powerful interests in the country with large social and political obligations and thereto and a development parallel with that which took place in the West. The Christian church of Europe prior to the 12th century, A.D.<sup>18</sup> However, the evidence available to us in the early chronicles of Ceylon, and voluminous be the evidence available to us in the early chronicles of Ceylon, *viz.*, the Mahāvamsa and the Mahāvaṃsa, and their allied works,<sup>19</sup> yet for this purpose they are of little value; hence these stone inscriptions have to be made the main basis for such a study.

It does not seem possible to establish a priori a direct or unique relationship between the time between the abundance or lack of wealth in the community, and the appearance among the clergy. Where a priesthood is strong in its adherence to the monastic vows of poverty, its resistance to indulgence in new forms of wealth is likely to be great, and consequently a longer or shorter period of time is likely to elapse before they profane the altars of self-denying piety. On the other hand, in a priesthood where signs of decadence have begun to show themselves, that time-lag is likely to be much shorter, and new wealth and new forms of wealth would find their way immediately into the precincts of the temple. Which of these factors is the stronger at any particular time can be determined only from historical considerations, and must be sought in other contemporary evidence relating to the economic life of the period. But so far as ancient Ceylon is concerned such evidence is relatively meagre.

When looked at from this angle, the evidence of the inscriptions fall into three classes.

The first class of inscriptions records the gift of caves and monastic establishments to the Saṅgha, and these broadly occur between the 3rd century, B.C. and the 1st century, A.D. Müller found these inscriptions 'in hundreds and hundreds' over the island. He was greatly disappointed with them for they being 'religious grants to temples' he found 'no historical information' in them.<sup>20</sup> The majority of these caves gifted to the Saṅgha, were natural rock caves—for excavated caves are rare in Ceylon<sup>21</sup>—'whose insides were almost all less white-washed and even plastered, and a mud or brick wall'<sup>22</sup> (the

18. See *e.g.*, Westfall Thompson, *The Middle Ages*, 300-1500, Ch. IX.

19. Such as *Pūjāvaliya*, *Rājāvaliya*, *Nikāya Saṅgraha*, *Thūpavamsa*, *Mahābōdhi-vamsa*, *Dāhāvamsa*, *Daladā Siritā*, etc.

Müller, *ibid.*, p. 17.

20. Hocart—*Archaeological Summary*. C.J.Sc. Sec. G., Vol. I, pp. 57-60. 'Excavated caves so far discovered are ones at Lankārama in Anurādhapura, and Ven. Moggallāna is supposed to have lived' Müller, A.I.C., p. 27—the Tantrimalai caves and the Gal Vihare at Polonnaruwa.

21. Pidurugala cave near Sigiriya—9th-10th centuries, A.D.

latter occurring about the 9th century, A.D., says Hocart) built so as to form protected or enclosed rooms under the shelter of the rocks.<sup>23</sup> These caves were either owned jointly by families, e.g., the 23 caves at Vessagiriya,<sup>24</sup> the caves of Riṭigala, which the 'Son of Mahamata Bamadata, his eminence Bahika, his eminence Puṣaguta, his eminence Mita and his eminence Tissa had developed into the great village Ariṭa';<sup>25</sup> or individually, as such referred in inscriptions to ownership as—'the cave of Tisaguta, son of the brahmin Sumana'; 'the cave of the lay devotee Citrā, wife of Parumaka Puleya, daughter of Parumaka Sunahita'; 'the cave of Utiya, son of villager Tissa, son of Warakapi the villager'; 'the cave of the merchant Tisa'; 'the cave of the physician Tisa'; 'the cave of village headman Abhaya'; 'the cave of the Chief Abhaya'; 'cave of Kaṇatisa, the minister of the Great King Gamiyapita' and 'the cave of Amirada, the treasurer of the village headman Kandiyana—all show. But it is not clear what value was attached to the possession of these caves whether they were used as ordinary dwelling houses by the people or not.

Whether these caves were the property of nobles only—in which case they could not be used as dwelling houses<sup>27</sup>—or of the common people as well is also doubtful. The leading evidence in understanding this seems to be connected with the exact significance in the use of the title "Parumaka"—a word that is freely found in these cave inscriptions. Etymologically the word means eminent, or chief.<sup>28</sup> Hence its appropriate use should be by 'persons of importance'; though inscriptional evidence is quite clear that it was also used by men of lesser importance as village headmen,<sup>29</sup> as well as by women.

The above evidence also leaves little doubt that 'there was an ownership in caves quite apart from the land they stood in—for we sometimes get a number of caves crowded together where it can scarcely be supposed that the boundaries of the land coincided with the partitions of the caves.'<sup>31</sup> Interesting though this question is it need not be pursued further, not only because the available evidence is insufficient, but also because the use of these caves for secular

23. Hocart believes that the walling of these caves was begun when they had passed into the hands of the monks, for he says that it is a rule of the Vinaya re Pārājikā—that a monk should sleep with doors shut lest his person should happen to be exposed during sleep. C.J.Sc., Sec. G., Vol. I, p. 58.

24. E.Z., Vol. I, p. 18.

25. E.Z., Vol. I, p. 152.

26. Parker, *Ancient Ceylon*, p. 419.

27. Hocart, C.J.Sc. Sec. G., Vol. I, p. 58.

28. Sanskrit—Pramukha, Pali—Pamukho or Pāmokkhō, Sinhalese—Pāmok.

29. See above list and Parker, A.C., p. 440.

30. Riṭigala inscriptions Nos. 2, 3 and 8a. E.Z. Vol. I, No. 10, mention 'Parumaka Anudiya.'

31. Hocart, C.J.Sc. Sec. G., Vol. I, p. 58.

poses would have lost its value, as the society advanced, and that certainly so at an early stage in Ceylon's history.

The early ascetics—precursors of Mahinda (?) as well as his followers<sup>32</sup>—leading a life of self-denial, as Vanavāsikas, sought habitations for themselves in lonely retreats, 'far from the madding crowd,' and the gift of these caves was quite handy for them. But these cave endowments went *pari passu* with another type of religious endowment, which came into existence when Buddhism became the state religion of the country, following the conversion of King Devanampiya Tissa by the apostle Mahinda in 240 B.C.<sup>33</sup> By this situation, the Buddhist brotherhood became one of the four traditional limbs that formed the ancient Aryan state, as symbolically suggested in the Purusa Sukta of the Rgveda.<sup>34</sup> The spate of conversions that followed the conversion of the king,<sup>34</sup> led the king to request Mahinda to accept the site of the pleasant Mahamegha 'park, neither 'too far nor too near the city'<sup>35</sup> as their new abode, and in emulation of King Bimbisāra of Rājagriha<sup>36</sup> he built the Mahā Vihāra there as the first centre of Buddhist life and activity in the country, and thus, like his contemporary Asoka of Magadha, Devanampiya Tissa 'dragged Buddhism from the convents into the city.' Henceforth the majority of Buddhist monks became 'Gāmāntasenāsanavāsikas'<sup>37</sup> and in the lavish habitations provided for them by the kings and maintained by the royal treasury, the Saṅgha came into close contact with the people of the country at large.

Thus the gifts of these cave dwellings and the monasteries were really parallel movements. The one was the grant of the ordinary people,<sup>38</sup> the other of the kings. The one was attached to the villages, the other to the capital city. It was a healthy and inexpensive way of bearing up mutually the cost of this new institution that was regarded as essential to their living 'the good

At the same time the gift of these rock caves would appear to indicate on the one hand a rudimentary economic organisation, and on the other a very close adherence by the priesthood to the rules of the Vinaya. Which

32. That some knowledge of the Buddha and his teachings were known to the people of Ceylon prior to the time of Devanampiya Tissa seems a reasonable contention—vide Senekera, *History of Pali Literature in Ceylon*, p. 17. In such a case itinerant Buddhist monks would certainly have come to Ceylon by the usual land routes. The Royal Mission of Mahinda was what that struck the imagination of the early chroniclers.

33. Rgveda, 10th Maṇḍala.

34. Mv. Chs. XIV and XV.

35. Mv. Ch. XV, 6-9.

36. Mv. Ch. XV, 17.

37. Monks who dwelt in monasteries close to the villages and towns.

38. Mv. Ch. XVI, 12-13, records the gifts of 68 rock cells at Mihintale by King Devanampiyatissa to Mahinda and his converts, while the inscription on Cave No. 9 at Riṭigala bears evidence of the grant of a cave to the Saṅgha by Vattagāmini Abhaya.

39. E.Z. Vol. I, p. 138.

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of these two circumstances was more powerful in determining the character of the gifts cannot be determined without further evidence.

The contemporaneous grant of urban monastic dwellings is evidence that the priesthood was beginning to abandon its conventure retreats to share increasingly the urban life of the cities. This does not necessarily imply a deliberate seeking on the part of the priesthood for the luxuries of a world life—for Mahinda declines explicitly the first of such gifts by Devānampiyatissa.<sup>39</sup> It seems more indicative of the desire on the part of kings to use the 'power of the Church' to inculcate greater religious devotion in their subjects or enhance the strength of their own rule.

The immediate result of this new relationship thus established between the Saṅgha on the one hand and the king and laity on the other was that in the case of the former it led to a numerical increase in the Order of the Saṅgha, who were becoming more and more useful socially, and in the case of the latter it was not only the growth of a greater desire for more munificent acts of piety, but also a growing desire for more colourful forms of worship.

The second class of religious endowments, was to reflect these changing conditions of the times.

*(To be continued in the next issue).*

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39. Mv. Ch. XV, 8.

40. At Mihintale monastery alone, in Bhātikhābhaya's time (38 A.D.-67 A.D.) the number of monks residing there was assessed at 1,000, while Fa-Hsein (5th century, A.D.) estimated it at 2,000. E.Z., Vol. I, pp. 81-82.