

Inscriptional Evidence bearing on the Nature of Religious Endowment in Ancient Ceylon

(Continued from the previous issue).

PART III.

The Third Phase

THE third class of religious endowments, showing this growing change in the policy of endowing the Saṅgha, is seen in a number of stone inscriptions that belong to the 4th and 5th C. A.D. The cause for this change was the emergence of a new economic factor, that had a marked influence not only on the incidence of wealth in the community, but also in the method of its distribution and utilisation.

This new factor was the rapid growth of commerce and trade with foreign countries, especially with the Roman Empire. From the time of Augustus almost up to the fall of Alexandria in 638 A.D., an extensive trade in pepper, spices, fine muslins, perfumes, pearls and precious stones grew up between India and the eastern Roman Empire, and Ceylon too, being a supplier of most of these products, was inevitably drawn into this stream of trade. The proof of this is the presence at almost every petty port in Ceylon, except Trincomalee, a large number of Roman coins thus illustrating the extensive degree of influence this mercantile activity had begun to bear on the life of the community.¹ The cumulative effect of this new change was two-fold.

The first was an extensive growths of metallic currency in the Island.

This was made possible because of the great quantity of Roman gold that entered the country.² Thus there was not only an appreciable increase in the stock of liquid wealth in the country, but also the growth of coins, in imitation of the Roman ones, brought in a new and convenient medium of exchange.

The second factor was the growth of well organized bodies of mercantile associations or guilds (*gaṇas*) both in the capital city and in the other centres of commercial life in the Island.

The new form of wealth did not displace the earlier ones that were based on an agrarian economy. But they became equally important owing to the greater command they had in facilitating transactions. Even in the

1. Codrington's *Ceylon Coins and Currency* p. 33.

2. Pliny in his *Natural History*, makes a complaint against the draw of Roman gold to India as payment for luxuries that were imported to Rome.

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neighbouring land of India, in the time of the Gupta Emperors, a contemporary development of mercantile associations was seen.³ In South India too, the evidence in the Sangam literature points towards such a development. The description of the city of Ujjain⁴ as given in the Milindaprasna,⁵ and of Anuradhapura by Fa-Hsien⁶ portray vividly the wealth and opulence of these cities in the 4th and 5th C. A.D.

Owing to the growth of these new forms of wealth that could be handled with greater convenience a new type of religious endowment began to appear in Ceylon at this period. The Tonigala Rock Inscription of Sri Meghavarna's reign⁷ is the best illustration of the new type of endowment.

"Hail! in the time of the third year after the raising of the umbrella by the great king Sri Mekavaṇa, son of the great king Mahasena. Two hakaḍas (cart loads) and ten amanas⁸ of paddy, 6 amanas of Udi and ten amanas of beans were deposited (with the stipulation that the capital should) neither be spent, nor decreased, by Devaya, the son of Sivaya, a member of the council of ministers, resident at the village Kaḍubala with the assembly of the merchants' guild at Ka'ahamana (situated) in the northern quarter of the city, and were granted for the purpose of conducting the holy vassa in the new monastery of Yahisṣavaya Of the above mentioned deposit the capital should be left unspent and from the interest received,⁹ the expenses for two and a half hakaḍas of boiled rice, atarakaya (subsidiary dishes before-noon meal and morning gruel) and honey, sweets, sesames butter (?) salt, green herbs and turmeric should be given to the refectory of the monastery &c.

Another example of the same type of endowment may be cited. A stone inscription at Labuṭābāṇḍigala (N.C.P.) records the deposit by Siri Naka, son of minister Sagaya, of 100 Kahavanus with a guild for the purpose of defraying the expense of the vassa festival at Devagiri-vihara with the interest therefrom.¹⁰

Thus the policy behind these endowments, was the deposit on of a fixed quantity of wealth, either in kind or in cash, with a guild and the endowment

3. *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum*: Fleet, Vol III.

4. One of the biggest trade emporiums in ancient India in the 4th C. A.D. lying on the important trade route between the port of Bhrigukaccha and Pāṭaliputra: it was once the capital of Candragupta II Vikramaditya.

5. A Buddhist work of the 1st Cty. A.D.

6. Giles, *Travels of Fa-Hsien*.

7. 362 A.D. E. Z. Vol III No. 17

8. 'A troughful' (E. Z. Vol III p. 184)

9. The rules of interest given work at 50% in case of paddy, interest collected at three different harvest of the year—and 25% in case of beans' Parānavitana E. Z, Vol III P. 177.

10. Further examples of such endowments could be seen in the following inscriptions Nos. 450, 458, 459, 496, 503, 609, 658, 707, 709. in Ep. Summary—vide C. J. of Sc. sec G. Vol II p. 177.

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of the interest thereof to the Saṅgha, for the performance of a specific duty. The guild was to look after both the maintenance of the fund, and the performance of the religious act envisaged by the donor. Such an endowment was made possible not only because a new type of property holding had come to vogue, but also because institutions that could manage such business had become established in the country ; and had earned the confidence of the people. In course of time they began to display a greater interest not only as custodians of temple property,¹¹ but also as benefactors of the Saṅgha.¹³

The abundance of this new wealth in the community manifests itself in the growing worldiness of the Saṅgha that soon becomes apparent in more than one way.

By about the 9th and 10th centuries we come across a series of stone inscriptions¹ that illustrate the growing anxiety of kings, in ordering the administration of temple properties, in order to prevent the corruption of the priesthood, on the one hand, and the growth of maladministration in large tracts of the country⁵ which would be inimical to the good government of the country on the other. The Gal-Vihara inscription of Parakrama Bahu I⁶ is really a document of first rate importance which illustrates the corruption that had set in among the Saṅgha prior to 1153 A.D., and the frequent expulsions of corrupt clergy, by Vijaya Bahu I (1055-1114 A.D.), Parakrama Bahu I (1153-1186 A.D.), and Niśśanka Malla (1187-1196 A.D.), further illustrate the same tendency. Five kings of the Dambadeniya and Kurunegala period soon after had to enforce rules of discipline on the bhikshus and expel from the Saṅgha those who led unworthy lives.⁷ The author of the Rājāvaliya, in explaining the origin of the line of kings of the Minor Dynasty (*cūlavamsa*), states that in the period of these kings there were 'no Fathers endowed with supernatural powers in the Church.'⁸ The writing

11. The Badulla Pillar inscription of Udaya III (945 A.D.) E. Z. Vol III No. 4, and the Vevālkāṭṭiya slab inscription of Mihinda IV (956 A.D.) illustrate the active growth of such communal administrative bodies.

12. The Polonnaruwa slab inscription of the Velāikkāras E. Z. Vol II No. 40

13. E. Z. Vol I No. 14 and E. Z. Vol IV part III No. 18.

14. The 2 tablets of Mahinda IV (956 A.D.) E. Z. Vol I. No. 7

Jetavanārāma sanskrit ins. of 1st half of 9th C. E. Z. Vol I. No. 1.

Anurādhapura slab ins. of Kassapa V (913-23) E. Z. Vol I. No. 4.

Kaludiyapokuna ins. E. Z. Vol III P. 264.

15. The Sanctuaries belonging to the Buddhist Saṅgha.

16. E. Z. Vol. II No. 41. This refers to how King Parakrama Bahu 'crushed out the sinful bhikshus, suppressed the heretics, purged the religion of its impurities, and brought about the holding of the Third Rehearsal of the Dharma.'

17. G. C. Mendis. Early History of Ceylon p. 133.

18. Rajavaliya. Goonesakera's ed: p. 37. Arahants, or Elders endowed with supernatural power, were supposed to have lived in Ceylon in the early days of Buddhism. The chroniclers give ample evidence. esp. Mhv. ch XXIX.

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of such books as 'Sikhavaḷanda Vinisa' and the 'Herapaṣikha Vinisa'¹⁹ consisting of a summary of precepts to be observed by bhikshus and sāmaṇeras (novices) respectively, and the reference in Gal Vihara Katikāvata²⁰ by Parakrama Bahu I of the need of the study of these books by the priesthood, further show the degree of corruption that seemed to have set in among the Saṅgha. All these indicate that the worldiness and corruption that had come about in the rank of the Saṅgha was a matter of public concern.

The cause for this cannot certainly be traced to the growing abundance of wealth alone in the Saṅgha, following the numerous endowments that had been made to it by kings and the rest of the people of the country. But it is sure that this was a primary cause. Other causes both political and religious would inevitably have contributed their respective shares, in bringing about these changes. There was first of all the Chola conquest and occupation of Ceylon between 1017 and 1070 A.D. Even the reigns of Vijaya Bahu I and Parākrama Bahu I, in spite of their attempts at economic reorganisation, were periods of frequent, bitter and expensive warfare. Soon after, the period between 1196-1235 A.D. witnessed the chronic civil wars between the rival princes of the Kālinga and Pāndya royal families, while after 1235 A.D. there was a general though imperceptible migration of both political and economic interests towards the south western parts of Ceylon, following the growths of the Tamil Kingdom in the north ; while the ' Jungle Tide ' began gradually to roll over the ancestral lands of the ancient Sinhalese kings.

Religious causes, in addition to these political ones, enhanced the process of degeneration. Sectarian differences in the Buddhist Sangha had begun as early as the time of Valagambā.²¹ By the 9th and 10th centuries Mahāyānism was particularly strong in Anuradhapura, especially in the Vijayārāma and Purvārāma monasteries, and it had spread to Mihintale itself, the cradle of Buddhism in Ceylon, and though a return to the Orthodox Church²² had been made in the 11th century, yet the Mahāyāna doctrines and practices did not disappear entirely from the land²³ and its Bodhisattvas became identified with the great gods of the Hindu pantheon.²⁴ Mahāyānism not only weaned the priesthood away from their earliest ideals of asceticism and self-denial, but it also made the religion more popular by developing ritualistic ceremonial

19. Works of one author, produced in the first half of the 10th C. A.D.

20. E. Z. Vol II No. 41. IIs. 18-24 p. 277.

21. 43-17 B.C. Mhv. XXXIII. 98.

22. Hīnayāna. The Theravāda sect of the Mahāvihāra fraternity were its adherents.

23. Parānavitana—Mahāyānism in Ceylon, C. J. of Sc. Sec. G. Vol II pp. 35-71

24. Ibid—The Mahayana Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara was worshipped as god Nātha ; numerous archeological and literary records prove it. Vide No. 436 Ep. Summary for inscriptional evidence and Section on Epigraphical evidence in the above article.

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for secular needs. Thus the Buddhist bhikshu became less of a monk and more of a priest. At the same time the Chola occupations and the growth of the Tamil kingdom of Jaffna encouraged the growth of Hinduism in the country,²⁵ and this was a further factor in developing the worldliness of the Saṅgha.

As these various political setbacks handicapped the kings from lavishly endowing the Saṅgha, as ancient times were wont to witness, the maintenance of the priesthood seems to have fallen more and more on the ordinary men of the country. From the 13th C. onwards, there is a marked increase in the endowments of private individuals, while the evidence contained in the Gadaladeniya Rock Inscription of Dhamakirti Sthavira²⁶ shows to what degree co-operative effort had become necessary to maintain the priesthood. This tendency seems to illustrate a growing new distribution of wealth in the country, now that the economic resources of the south-west low country became more and more available,²⁷ though the degree to which this influence worked cannot be precisely ascertained on the evidence of the inscriptions alone. The Saṅgha under these changing conditions could not rest assured that its maintenance would be borne as of old primarily by the State. It had to appeal to the generosity of the people at large, and the writing of the Pūjā-valiya²⁸ seems to be the first indication of such public appeals, on behalf of the Saṅgha.

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25. Plenty of religious endowments to Hindu devalas both by Hindu and Buddhist kings are found vide—No. 597, 598, 383, 354, 446, 485, 546, 547, Ep. Summary. C. J. of Sc. Sec. G Vol II.

26. E. Z. Vol. IV No. 12. U. 18-45.

27. In and after the 13th century, more and more inscriptions are found in the southwest low country and the region round Kandy, thereby showing the drift of the political and economic interest of the country to the southwestern quarter.

28. By Mayūrapāda Thera Buddhaputta, in the time of Parakrama Bahu II 1236-1271 A.D.—Ed. V. Dhammananda 1903-1905.

Note.—Dr. S. Paranavitana's splendid work in editing most of these inscriptions, in the volumes of the Epigraphic Zeylanica, has greatly helped me in writing this article, and I must acknowledge my deep debt of gratitude to him for the same.