

SUBTILE SILKS OF FERREOUS FIRMNESS
Buddhist Nuns in Ancient and Early Medieval
Sri Lanka and their Role in the
Propagation of Buddhism

I

In the versions of the history of Buddhism in Sri Lanka presented in the *Dīpavaṃsa* and the *Mahāvāṃsa*, the most ancient of the chronicles preserved in the island, women assume a prominent role as ardent supporters of Buddhism during the initial phase of its expansion, and the establishment of the order of nuns is traced back to the earliest years of the new faith. The patronage extended by women to Buddhism during the early stages of its expansion within the island is also documented in a large number of inscriptions indited in the early form of the Brāhmī script which may be dated in a period between the third and the first century B.C.¹ Twenty-one of the fifty-eight such inscriptions at Mihintale and fourteen of the twenty epigraphs found at Koṭṭadāmūhela in the southernmost parts of the island are among those which record donations made by women.² These records which attest to the ability of women in early Sri Lankan society to divert resources to ends of their choice also reveal the enthusiasm displayed by female patrons in their support for a new faith.

Eleven of the donors in these early Brāhmī inscriptions describe themselves as nuns. Six of the records set up by nuns are to be found in the area which falls within the present Anurādhapura District, and, of these, two were set

¹ For comments on the dating of these records, see S. Paranavitana, *Inscriptions of Ceylon*, Vol. I, Colombo: Archaeological Department, 1970, p. xvii; R.A.L.H. Gunawardana, "Prelude to the State: an Early Phase in the Evolution of Political Institutions in Ancient Sri Lanka," *The Sri Lanka Journal of the Humanities*, Vol. VIII, 1982, p. 13.

² Paranavitana, *op. cit.*, pp. 1-5, 43-4.

up by the nuns Tiśa (I) and Śavera who donated caves to the monks living at Mihintale.³ A third inscription, found at Vessagiriya, records the donation of a cave-dwelling at the site by a nun called Yahaśini.⁴ A record found at Brāhmaṇayāgama in the Hurulu Palāta and another found at Maha Ālgamuva in the Kalāgam Palāta refer to two nuns, Sumana and Raki, each of whom donated a cave, but the nun Pala, also from Brāhmaṇayāgama, joined a group of other would-be patrons to undertake the construction of a cave-dwelling for the Buddhist saṅgha.⁵

Among the other nuns known from inscriptions of this period are Rohaṇī, mentioned in the Erupotāna inscription in the Vavuniyā District, and Revati, who set up the Dāgama inscription in the Hiriyāla Hatpattu of the Kurunāgala District to record the donation of a cave.⁶ Two of the nuns were from the eastern parts of the island. Tiśa (II) is mentioned in the Mullikōdumalai inscription in the Ampāre District and Naga indited the Vāla-ellūgoḍa record in the Monarāgala District.⁷ An inscription from the site of the well-known shrine at Daṁbulla appears to have been the last of this series.⁸ It records that the nun Macaka instituted an endowment which was expected to bring in an income to the monks residing at a cave-dwelling and probably dates from about the latter part of the first century B.C.

The eleven nuns mentioned above, Śavera, Tiśa (I), Yahaśini, Pala, Raki, Pala, Tiśa (II), Macaka, Revati, Rohaṇi, and Naga, whose inscriptions have been dated in the three centuries before the Christian era, are the earliest Sri Lankan nuns whose historicity is clearly beyond doubt.

³ Paranavitana, *op. cit.*, p.1 No.8; p.2 No.14.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.7 No. 69.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.13 Nos. 159, 161b; p.18 No.224.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.26 No.332; p.76 No.969.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p.37 No.482; p.55 No.725.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p.66 No. 357.

As evident from the preceding description, the distribution of the inscriptions cover the area represented by the modern districts of Vavunīyā, Anurādhapura, Ampārē, Monarāgala, Dañbulla and Kurunāgala. The dispersal of these records over such a wide area within the island suggests that the nuns took to missionary activities at an early time of their history and devoted themselves to the expansion of their order. What could be gleaned from these inscriptions is not merely that there were nuns at these localities. As implicit in an inscription from Asvādduma, an order of nuns (*bikūṇi-saga*) had been formally established, and, despite their dispersed location, these nuns would have considered themselves to be members of a single and distinct community with its own traditions. Some of these records, like the ones at Mihintale, are among the earliest inscriptions found in the island. They tend to support the view expressed by the authors of both the *Dīpavaṃsa* and the *Mahāvaṃsa* that the history of Sri Lankan nuns goes back to the earliest years of Buddhism in the island.

According to the chronicles, very early after the arrival of the Indian missionary monk Mahinda in the island, enthusiastic female converts at Anurādhapura began to request that they be admitted into the order of nuns. The words that the chroniclers put into the mouth of Mahinda are particularly noteworthy, especially in the context of an episode in the history of Buddhist nuns in China which will be examined later on. When Devānampiyatissa (250-210 B.C.) requested Mahinda to ordain Anulā, the consort of his brother, and "the five hundred women" in her retinue, the monk replies:

It is not allowed to us, O great king, to bestow pabbajjā on women. But in Pāṭalīputta there lives a nun, my younger sister, known by the name

⁹ C.W. Nicholas, *Brāhmī Inscriptions*, Manuscript deposited at the University Library, Peradeniya, 1965, Vol.V, p.77.

Saṅghamittā ... When this therī is here she will confer the pabbajjā upon these women.¹⁰

Both chronicles state in unequivocal terms that it was "improper"¹¹ for the monks to ordain females. The presence of nuns was essential for this purpose. The statement attributed to Mahinda raises an important point. The first nuns in the Buddhist tradition, Mahāprajāpatī Gotamī and her followers, were ordained by monks and, at that time, the Buddha permitted monks to confer the upasampadā on nuns.¹² Hence it could be questioned whether Mahinda could not have ordained Anulā and her companions. The message presented very clearly in the Sri Lankan chronicles is that such an ordination, even if it were to be performed under the leadership of an arahant like Mahinda, was not valid or permissible.

Though the first nuns did receive the upasampadā from monks, this was evidently considered an exception, and the Vinaya Piṭaka lays down a clear procedure for future guidance. A nun seeking the upasampadā was to do so under the leadership of an experienced preceptress and a competent nun (vyatta) to teach her. The formal request of the candidate seeking the upasampadā was conveyed to the assembly of nuns by a senior and competent nun. On their approval the candidate herself directly requested the assembly to confer the upasampadā. After the assembly of nuns approved the request and conferred the upasampadā, further approval by the assembly of monks was necessary. A competent monk informed the assembly of monks about the nun's request, and then their approval was personally solicited by the candidate. Thus, unlike in the case of a

¹⁰ Mahāvamsa ch.15 vv.20-3. Cf. Dīpavamsa ch.15, vv. 74-6.

¹¹ akappiyam. Dīpavamsa ch.15 v.75; na kappiyam. Mahāvamsa ch.15, v.20.

¹² anujānāmi bhikkhave bhikkhūhi bhikkhūpiyo upasampādetunti. Vinaya Piṭaka, ed. Hermann Oldenberg, London: Pali Text Society, Vol.II, 1964, p.257.

monk, the upasampadā of a nun had to be approved by both sections of the saṅgha, the nuns as well as the monks.¹³ In subsequent instances the Vinaya Piṭaka repeatedly defines a nun as a person who had received her upasampadā from both orders of the saṅgha.¹⁴ However, it would appear that, of the two elements in this lengthy procedure, the conferment of the upasampadā by the nuns was the more important. After this stage, it was possible for the candidate to solicit the approval of the monks even through a messenger.¹⁵ The greater importance attached to participation of nuns in the ordination of a new nun is also evident from the stipulation that a monk who advises a nun who has been ordained only by the order of nuns would be committing an offence of the dukkaṭa category while if he advises a nun ordained only by the order of monks, he would be guilty of a more serious offence of the pācittiya category.¹⁶ The importance attached this tradition in Sri Lanka is reflected in the chronicles when they state that women could not be admitted into the order in the absence of nuns.

The Dīpavaṃsa and the Mahāvaṃsa present rather lengthy accounts of the arrival of the nun Saṅghamittā in the island in response to a message that Mahinda sent to invite her. In the Mahāvaṃsa account the emphasis is almost exclusively on Saṅghamittā and her role, firstly as the person who brought the Bo-sapling which was to be planted at the Mahāvihāra and secondly as the founder of the order of nuns. In the earlier chronicle Dīpavaṃsa, however, a good

¹³ Vinaya Piṭaka, Vol.II, pp.272-4.

¹⁴ Vinaya Piṭaka, Vol. III, pp. 206, 235; Vol. IV, pp.52,60, 61,63,65, 67-8, 122, 176-7.

¹⁵ Vinaya Piṭaka, Vol.II, pp. 277-8.

¹⁶ Samantapāsādikā, ed. J.Takakusu & M.Nagai, London: Pali Text Society, Vol.IV, 1967, p.803. Dukkaṭa or "misdeed" denoted offences of the lowest category while the pācittiya, denoted a higher category. See John. C. Holt, Discipline: the Canonical Buddhism of the Vinayapiṭaka, Delhi: Banarsidass, 1981, pp.35,133.

deal of attention is also paid to the group of nuns who accompanied her. In fact, this chronicle presents three different lists of the nuns. One list has the following ten names: Uttarā, Hemā, Pasādapālā, Aggimittā, Dāsikā, Pheggu, Pabbatā, Mattā, Mallā and Dhammadāsī. Another account in the same chronicle has the names Hemā, Aggimittā, Mallā and Dhammadāsī in common, but gives the names Māsagallā, Mitamvidā, Tappā and Pabbatachinnā in place of the others. The third list gives the names Mahādevī,¹⁷ Padumā, Hemaśā (Hemā?), Yasassinī, Unnalā, Añjalī and Sumā.¹⁸ Chronological information in the chronicle suggests that Saṅghamittā was in her early thirties at the time she led the mission to Sri Lanka.¹⁸ Some of her retinue are said to have been quite young and are described as *dahara bhikkhuniyo*.¹⁹ It is implicit in this account that, after the arrival of Saṅghamittā with this retinue, there was a sufficient number of nuns to perform formal ecclesiastical acts like the ordination of new members for which the participation of at least ten nuns was required.²⁰ The earlier description of Saṅghamittā's own ordination, as presented in the *Dīpavaṃsa*, directs attention to the roles played by the two renowned nuns Dhammapālā²¹ and Āyupālā as her *upajjhāya* and *ācariyā* at this ceremony. The spiritual descent of this tradition of nuns was traced back to Mahāprajāpatī Gotamī. The *Dīpavaṃsa* makes it quite clear to the reader that it was such an ancient and continuous tradition that was brought to the island by Saṅghamittā and maintained there by her Sri Lankan successors.

Like Mahinda, Saṅghamittā is described as a person who had attained the position of an *arahant* but, unlike Mahinda who, according to the chroniclers, came flying

¹⁷ *Dīpavaṃsa*, ch.15, v. 77; ch.18, vv.11-2, 24-5.

¹⁸ *Dīpavaṃsa* ch.7 vv. 21-2; ch.12 vv.42-3.

¹⁹ *Dīpavaṃsa* ch. 18 v.12.

²⁰ *Vinaya Piṭaka*, Vol.I, p.58.

²¹ *Mahāvaṃsa* ch.5, v.208.

through the air with the miraculous powers that arahants were supposed to possess, Saṅghamittā is presented in the *Dīpavaṃsa* as a missionary who followed a lengthy and difficult route, travelling across three kingdoms and the Vindhya forest till she and her companions reached the sea when they took ship.²² In the *Mahāvamsa*, however, the legend is recast to suggest that the ship in which they travelled came down the river Ganges up to Tāmalitti and then across the ocean to the port of Jambukola in Sri Lanka. It is thus presenting an account which was in accord with the navigational practices current at the time it was being composed. It is implicit in the accounts presented in both chronicles that missionary activities by nuns had a very old history and that travel to distant regions on the part of nuns, despite the inconvenience and the physical hardships it involved, was essential if the order of nuns was to be established in new locations. Thus the expansion of the order of nuns was dependent on the role that women were prepared to play as roving missionaries. For later nuns, the legend of Saṅghamittā probably presented a paradigm of a woman who, with indomitable courage, undertook arduous travel by land and sea to distant lands to enable other women to seek membership in the order of nuns.

Another aspect highlighted in the legend of Saṅghamittā was the special relationship between the nuns and the Bo-tree at the Mahāvihāra. In both the *Dīpavaṃsa* and the *Mahāvamsa* the primary focus of emphasis was the role of Saṅghamittā in bringing to the island the southern branch of the Bo-tree at Buddha Gayā. In fact, it was believed that, in accomplishing this task, she was merely reenacting a role played by earlier nuns in the mythical times of the previous Buddhas. After the birth of the Buddha Kakusandha the nun Rucānandā had brought the Bo-tree to Abhayapura, the city which had stood at the site of Anurādhapura. Subsequent to the enlightenment of the Buddha Koṇāgamana, the nun Kanakadattā (var. Kantakanandā, Kanakanandā) had brought the Bo-tree to the city of Vaḍḍhamāna located at the same site and, again in the times of the *sāsana* established by the Buddha

²² *Dīpavaṃsa* ch.16 vv.2-3.

Kassapa, the nun Sudhammā accomplished the same deed.²³ Thus the close association of the nun with the Bo-tree was presented in these myths as an invariable part of a regular pattern of events which had been always beneficial to the island.

Two nunneries at Anurādhapura were supposed to be the most ancient in the island and had a reputation of being the residences occupied by Saṅghamittā herself. One was a large complex of buildings among which was the Upāsikā-vihāra or "the residence of the female devotees" where, according to tradition, Anulā had lived while awaiting the arrival of Saṅghamittā. It is said that she took to wearing the yellow robe and observed the ten precepts while she hopefully waited for formal ordination at some future date.²⁴ The life that Anulā led in a special residence as a yellow-robed devotee practising the ten precepts provided, like this phase of the life of Mahāprājapatī Gotamī before her, a variant of a paradigm for women in the Buddhist world in pointing out the way open to them in situations where the order of nuns had not been established and admission into the saṅgha was denied to them. It is on the very same paradigm that the movement of the dasasilmātās is based even in modern times.²⁵ The chronicle and its commentary differ as to the origin of the residence occupied by Anulā. The Mahāvamsa describes it as a beautiful convent in the city built by the king, but, according to the Vamsatthappakāsini, it was a house belonging to a royal functionary named Doḷa. It is said that, on their arrival, Saṅghamittā and her companions also took up residence at the same building. Subsequently, Devānampiyatissa had three more mansions,

²³ Dīpavaṃsa ch.17 vv.16-21; Mahāvamsa ch.15 vv.78-83, 112-7, 147-52.

²⁴ Mahāvamsa ch.18 vv.9-12.

²⁵ For an interesting account of the movement of the dasasilmātās, see Lowell L. Bloss, "The Female Renunciants of Sri Lanka: the Dasasilmattawa," The Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies, Vol.X, No.1, 1987, pp.7-31.

namely, Cūlagāṇa, Mahāgāṇa and Sirivaddha as well as nine other minor buildings constructed at this site. It is also stated that the mast (kūpayatṭhi) of the ship that brought the Bo-tree was kept at Cūlagāṇa, its rudder (piyaṃ) was kept at Mahāgāṇa, and the helm (arittam) was kept at Sirivaddha.²⁶ Thus, the principal objects displayed at this complex were expected to remind its inmates of the traditional association of the nuns with travel to foreign lands for the cause of the propagation of Buddhism.

It would appear that the more imposing set of buildings and the more complete on grounds of suitability as a site for formal acts of the order of nuns was the Hatthāḷhaka nunnery.²⁷ It had its own ceremonial boundary (sīmā) for the performance of the uposatha and pavāraṇa ceremonies, a stūpa inside a pavilion (cetiya-ghara), mansions and smaller cells. It is said that it was built by Devānaṃpiyatissa in response to the wishes of Saṅghamittā and that, on its completion, she took up residence there. Evidently, the ceremonial boundary of this nunnery extended in one direction up to the river Malvatu, but when the city-wall came to be built in the reign of Kuṭakappa Tissa (B.C. 41-19) it cut across this boundary, leaving part of the grounds of the nunnery within the "inner city" and a part outside.²⁸ The violation of the ceremonial boundary by the builders of the "inner city" would have affected the suitability of the nunnery as a site for formal ecclesiastical acts, but the chroniclers do not elaborate on this point. The Mahāvamsa and its commentary leave the impression that the Hatthāḷhaka became the main centre of the nuns who accepted the leadership of Mahāvihāra. The two texts emphasize that the earlier complex remained under the control of the Hatthāḷ-

²⁶ Mahāvamsa ch.19 vv.68-70; Vamsatthappakāsīnī, ed. G.P.Malalsekera, London: Pali Text Society, Vol. II, 1977, II, pp.408-9.

²⁷ rūpasampattiyā ca sīmāsampattiyā ca yuttattā. Vamsatthappakāsīnī, Vol. II, p.411.

²⁸ Vamsatthappakāsīnī, Vol. II, p.411.

haka even after the rise of other nikāyas like the Abhayagiri (Dhammarucika).²⁹

The Mahāvamsa which provides such a detailed account of the activities of Saṅghamittā and Anulā mentions nuns again only in its last chapter, and this is a very brief reference to the construction of two nunneries in the reign of Mahāsena.³⁰ The intriguing silence that this chronicle maintains regarding the development of the order of nuns subsequent to its establishment, and even regarding the history of the nunneries the foundation of which was described with much interest, places the student at a considerable disadvantage. Fortunately, the Dīpavamsa has preserved a good deal of information on the early phases of the history of nuns. Of the nuns who lived in the earliest phase, this chronicle refers to individuals like Somā, Giriddhī, Dāsiyā (I), Dhammā, Dhammapālā, Mahilā (I), Sobhanā, Sātā, Kālī (I) and Uttarā (I) who all were evidently local³¹ women who had received the upasampadā during this phase. It is likely that the nun Uttarā (II) who is described as the leader of a large group of nuns belonged to a second phase.³² Uttarā and her companions were followed by Mahilā (II) and Samantā, who are described as daughters of Kākavannatissa, and Girikālī, the daughter of a purohita, as well as Dāsī and Kālī (II). These nuns are said to have come to Anurādhapura from Rohana in the time of King Abhaya who may be identified with Duṭṭhagāmaṇī Abhaya (161-137 B.C.). Implicit in the statement in the Dīpavamsa is the expansion of the order of nuns to the Rohana region by this time. As pointed out by the present writer in an earlier contribution, clear evidence from inscriptional sources points to the expansion of Buddhism into the southernmost parts of the

²⁹ Mahāvamsa ch.19 v.71; Vamsatthappakāsini, Vol. II, p.409.

³⁰ See infra p.33.

³¹ Dīpavamsa ch.18 vv.14-6.

³² Dīpavamsa ch.18 vv.18-9.

island before the time of Duṭṭhagāmaṇī.³³ That the order of nuns had also expanded into the south by this time is evident from epigraphic sources. The nun Nāga, mentioned in the early Brāhmī inscriptions from the Monarāgala District, was the wife of the military leader Agidatta (Aggidatta) and the daughter of the clan-leader Puṣādeva (Phussadeva) who was himself a military leader.³⁴ It seems reasonable to identify the father of this nun with the Phussadeva mentioned in the Mahāvamsa as a military leader who served Duṭṭhagāmaṇī.³⁵

A fairly long list of names represents the nuns from the time of Vaṭṭagāmaṇī (103-2, 89-77 B.C.). It includes Mahāsoṇā, Dattā, Sīvalā (I), Rūpasobhinī, Nāgā (II), Nāgamittā (I), Dhammaguttā, Dāsiyā (II), Sapattā, Channā, Upālī, Revatā, Mālā, Khemā and Tissā. They are described as the first group of nuns to resume the task of teaching the Vinaya after the troubled period which lasted from 102 to 89 B.C.³⁶ They were joined by two other nuns, Sīvalā (II) and Mahāruhā.³⁷ More information about the last two nuns will be provided later on. A subsequent reference in the chronicle to a king described as a person who listened to advice from nuns at appropriate times and gave³⁸ them whatever they wished for may relate to the same reign. The next group which included two nuns of royal birth, Samuddanāvādevī and Sīvalā (III), and others like Nāgapālī, Nāgamittā (II), Mahilā (III) who is described as "a supervisor of nuns" (bhikkhūṇipālā), Nāgā (III) and Nāgamittā

³³ See Gunawardana, "Prelude to the State ..." The Sri Lanka Journal of the Humanities, Vol.VIII, 1982, p.33.

³⁴ Parānavitana, op. cit., p.55 No. 725.

³⁵ Gunawardana, "Prelude to the State ..." The Sri Lanka Journal of the Humanities, Vol.VIII, 1982, p.37.

³⁶ Dīpavaṃsa ch.18 vv.27-30.

³⁷ Dīpavaṃsa ch.18 vv.31-3

³⁸ Dīpavaṃsa ch.19 v.13.

(III), were from the time of the king Kuṭakaṇṇa Tissa³⁹ (41-19 B.C.). They, too, taught the Vinaya at Anurādhapura. In a later context, the chronicle adds that a bathing-house with provisions for hot water (jantāghara) was built for the use of the nuns during this reign.⁴⁰ The next group of nuns in the list is presented without any reference to the time they lived in. It may be inferred from the context that Cūlanāgā, Dhaññā, Soṇā, Saṅhā, Mahātissā, Cūlasumanā, Mahāsumanā, Mahākālī, Samuddā who was from Rohaṇa⁴¹ and Lakkhadhammā lived after the time of Kuṭakaṇṇa Tissa.⁴¹ However, it is not at all clear whether the author is presenting a group of contemporaries from a particular reign, as in earlier contexts, or is citing the names of leading nuns from different epochs of history. After writing about these groups in a passage in which verbs of the past tense were used, the author changes to the present tense to speak of his or her own time, and clearly, at that time, the order of nuns was flourishing in the island. "At present there are other nuns of senior and intermediate ranks as well as novices," the author states, "who uphold the Vibhajjavāda and are versed in the Vinaya. They safeguard the tradition of the sāsaṇa. This⁴² earth is illuminated by these learned and virtuous nuns."

In presenting information on the order of nuns the *Mahāvamsa* restricts its attention in spatial terms to Anurādhapura and in chronological terms to the earliest phase of the history of Buddhism in Sri Lanka. In contrast, the *Dīpavamsa* not only provides information on the subsequent history of the order but also specifically refers to the presence of nuns outside the confines of the capital. In two instances, in the reign of Duṭṭhagāmaṇī and in the period after the time of Kuṭakaṇṇa Tissa, it speaks of the presence of nuns in Rohaṇa. Despite the hyperbolic quality

³⁹ *Dīpavamsa* ch.18 vv.34-7.

⁴⁰ *Dīpavamsa* ch.19 v.34.

⁴¹ *Dīpavamsa* ch.18 vv.38-42.

⁴² *Dīpavamsa* ch.18 v.44.

of the strophe which speaks of Samantā and Mahilā (II) as coming from Rohaṇa with "twenty thousand nuns," the total impression the chronicle conveys is one of the expansion of the order of nuns to areas outside the confines of the capital. As noted earlier, this impression does, in fact, gain support from the earliest epigraphic records in the island.

In its account the *Dīpavaṃsa* forcefully directs the attention of the reader to the prevalence of a strong tradition of scriptural study among the nuns of Sri Lanka from the time Saṅghamittā and her companions began their teaching work at Anurādhapura. Some of the strophes in the eighteenth chapter of the chronicle refer to the presence of Sri Lankan nuns who taught the five categories of the Sutta collection of the Canon and the seven *pakarāṇas*. The main texts of the Abhidhamma, i. *Dhammasaṅgani-pakarāṇa*, ii. *Vibhaṅga-pakarāṇa*, iii. *Dhātukathā-pakarāṇa*, iv. *Puggala-paññatti-pakarāṇa*, v. *Kathāvatthu-pakarāṇa*, vi. *Yamaka-pakarāṇa* and *Paṭṭhāṇa-pakarāṇa*, were the seven texts of the *pakarāṇa* category.⁴³ However, the pride of place was given to the study and exposition of the Vinaya, and the continuity of this practice is emphasized in the chronicle. The leading nuns in this tradition are described with obvious admiration, using qualifying adjectives denoting "great wisdom" (*mahapaññā*), "great fame" (*mahāyasā*), "cleverness" (*paṇḍitā*), "discerning wit" (*vicakkhanā*), "confidence based on the knowledge of the Vinaya" (*vinaye visāradā*) and "deep understanding of the tradition of the dhamma" (*saddhamma-vaṃsa-kovidā*). Some of them had gained repute as "foremost preachers of the Dhamma" (*dhammadakathikamuttamā*) and others were known for their composure and restrained conduct, their commitment to the strict adherence to the norms, and their devotion to the Dhamma and the Vinaya. Three such prominent figures, Sumanā, Mahilā (II) and Saphā are described as nuns endowed with *abhiññā*.⁴⁴ In the Buddhist terminology of this period *abhiññā* denoted superior intelligence and supranormal

⁴³ See A.P. Buddhadatta, *Pāli Sāhityaya*, Ambalangoda: Ananda Book Company, 1960, Vol. I, p.128.

⁴⁴ *Dīpavaṃsa* ch.18 vv. 17,20,38.

powers of cognition such as clairaudience, grasping the thoughts of others, recollecting one's own previous births, and discerning the passing away and reappearance of other beings.⁴⁵ Thus, for the chronicler, these nuns from the past were individuals with high spiritual attainments. It is interesting to note that, in this account in the chronicle, no names of monks occur as teachers of nuns. On the other hand, it presents a succession of female teachers as individuals who had gained renown for their scholarship and intellectual ability as well as for spiritual attainments and had, as such, become "leaders of the island" (*dīpanayā*). The implication seems to be that the order of nuns was not just a minor appendage, dependent on the order of monks: in the *Dīpavaṃsa* it was obviously conceived as representing a distinct and independent tradition which was traced back to Saṅghamittā and her companions and, through them, to Mahāprajāpatī Gotamī.

The *Dīpavaṃsa* is a unique source of information on the history of the nuns, and, in fact, in comparison, the *Mahāvamsa* or any other chronicle does not provide such detailed information on the succession of monks in ancient Sri Lanka. The only comparable source in this respect seems to be the *Samantapāsādikā* which, in its *Bāhiranidāna* section, presents a list of leading monks who taught the Vinaya in the island. Here are to be found thirty lines or fifteen strophes attributed to the *Porāṇā*, meaning the "ancients."⁴⁶ There is a striking similarity in style between the two sets of strophes in the *Dīpavaṃsa* and the *Samantapāsādikā*, and this points to the likelihood that the strophes in the *Dīpavaṃsa* were derived from the same source, the *Porāṇā*, unless, of course, they were composed in deliberate imitation of that style. On recognizing such a close relationship between the *Samantapāsādikā* and the

⁴⁵ See, for instance, *Visuddhimagga*, ed. H.C. Warren & D. Kosambi, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1950, pp. 343-368.

⁴⁶ *Samantapāsādikā (Bāhiranidāna)*, ed. N.A. Jayawickrama as *The Inception of Discipline and the Vinaya Nidana*, London: Luzac, 1962, pp. 181-2.

Porāṇā, on the one hand, and between the *Dīpavaṃsa* and the *Porāṇā*, on the other, it also becomes clear that the *Samantapāsādikā*, which had access to the *Dīpavaṃsa* as well as the works of the *Porāṇā*, selected only the list of male teachers for inclusion within its account while it excluded the list of female teachers. Similarly, the chronicle deliberately limits itself to listing the names of nuns while excluding the names of the succession of male teachers which was also available to the author. The information given in the chronicle provides greater detail and is more extensive than the information on the succession of male teachers in the *Samantapāsādikā*. The first forty-four strophes in the eighteenth chapter purported to be an account of the *saṅgha* in the island, male and female. However, only the first six verses pertain to the monks. Evidently, even this was but a mere formality, and no names were mentioned here. Thirty-six strophes deal with the history of the nuns and, of these, twenty-seven are devoted to Sri Lankan nuns. It is interesting to note that, apart from the first Sri Lankan monk Ariṭṭha, the participants at the ceremony which marked the beginning of construction work on the Mahāthūpa, and the popular preacher Deva who lived in the third century A.D.,⁴⁷ no other Sri Lankan monks are mentioned by name in the *Dīpavaṃsa*. Even these names occur not in the eighteenth chapter but in scattered locations within the text. By far the larger number of clerics mentioned in the *Dīpavaṃsa* are nuns, not monks. In terms of the priority assigned to the sexes, the *Dīpavaṃsa* presents an inversion of the picture presented in texts like the *Samantapāsādikā*. Thus, if certain ancient texts tended to ignore the history of the nuns in Sri Lanka, there appears to have been a comparable reticence on the part of the *Dīpavaṃsa* to present a balanced account of both sections of the *saṅgha*: the version of history it presents is somewhat tilted in favour of the nuns to give them greater prominence.

⁴⁷ *Dīpavaṃsa* ch.16. v.40; ch.19 vv.5-8; ch.22 vv.41,50. The term *duṛmitta* (ch.22 v.70) may be interpreted as an allusion to *Saṅghamittā*, the opponent of the Mahāvihāra, and, if so, it would be another reference to a monk, but it may also have been a term used to qualify *Soṇa*, a functionary in Mahāsena's service.

The preceding examination of the approach adopted in the *Dīpavaṃsa* in its treatment of the early history of the Buddhist *saṅgha* in Sri Lanka leaves the impression that the nineteenth-century antiquarian Hugh Nevill was probably pointing in the right direction when he suggested⁴⁸ that this chronicle was a work of the community of nuns. Nevill's views have received some support from Malalasekera and A.P.Buddhadatta,⁴⁹ but, in general, historians have failed to assign to them the importance they deserve. Nevill's interpretation of the term *saddhamma-vaṃsa-kovidā* in the eighteenth chapter of the chronicle as denoting nuns who were historians may be problematic. He clearly made a mistake when he stated that, unlike the *Dīpavaṃsa*, the *Mahāvaṃsa* paid no attention to the myths about the four Bo-trees being brought by nuns⁵⁰ in the times of the four mythical Buddhas of the past. Nevill argued that the *Dīpavaṃsa* was not likely to have been written by a member of the Abhayagiri monastery since it "passes over the history of that wealthy, royal foundation with a well-calculated but short notice that could offend no one."⁵¹ We may further add that the *Dīpavaṃsa* makes no mention at all of the foundation of the main monastery of the Jetavana *nikāya*. While it ignored the Jetavana and paid scant attention to the

⁴⁸ Nevill's writings on the *Dīpavaṃsa* were incorporated in his manuscript, *List of Pali, Sinhalese, Sanskrit and other Manuscripts*, deposited at the British Museum. However, Malalasekera included an extract from these writings in his own work. See G.P.Malalasekera, *The Pali literature of Ceylon*, Colombo: Gunasena, 1958, pp.136-7.

⁴⁹ See Malalasekera, *op. cit.*, p.137. Buddhadatta attributes these views to G.C.Mendis who had, however, expressed the opinion that the *Dīpavaṃsa* was a product of the community of monks at the Thūpārāma monastery. See A.P.Buddhadatta, *Pāli Sāhityaya*, Vol.I, p.148-9; G.C.Mendis, "The Pali Chronicles of Ceylon," *University of Ceylon Review*, Vol.IV, 1946, p.14.

⁵⁰ See *Mahāvaṃsa* ch.15 vv.57-165.

⁵¹ See Malalasekera, *op. cit.*, p.136.

Abhayagiri, it used terms which were highly complimentary when it referred to shrines and important monuments attached to the Mahāvihāra.⁵² The *Dīpavaṃsa* refers to the suppression of Mahāyāna views in the time of Vohārika Tissa (A.D.214-36) with obvious approval.⁵³ However, one has to remember that, in comparison with the *Mahāvāṃsa*, the *Dīpavaṃsa* pays little attention to the history of monasteries or even nunneries, and, as such, provides no clues as to the identity of the specific institution where it was compiled. It makes no reference to the Hatthāḷhaka, the Upāsikā-vihāra, or to any of the other nunneries. What is known at present about the Hatthāḷhaka nunnery, which appears to have been the main centre of the nuns of the Mahāvihāra nikāya, is based on the information provided by the *Mahāvāṃsa* and the *Vamsatthapakāsini*. This may appear to be particularly puzzling since, according to the *Vamsatthapakāsini*, the commentary on the *Dīpavaṃsa*⁵⁴ did contain some information on the Hatthāḷhaka nunnery. The *Dīpavaṃsa* preferred to focus its attention on the achievements of the order of nuns as a group, and on individual nuns and their accomplishments rather than on other institutional aspects. Despite the weaknesses in some of the specific arguments he adduced, Nevill was probably justified in suggesting that the *Dīpavaṃsa* was a work of the nuns. Whatever the identity of the institution which produced the chronicle might have been, the approach it adopted in its treatment of the past history of the saṅgha is strongly suggestive of its origin among nuns, and the implication is significant, for, it would appear that nuns not only excelled in their study of the Buddhist Canon but were also among the pioneers in historiography in the island.

⁵² See, for instance, *Dīpavaṃsa* ch.21 v.36; ch.22. vv. 24,36,40.

⁵³ *Dīpavaṃsa* ch.22 vv.43-5.

⁵⁴ The information in the commentary *Dīpavaṃsa-aṭṭha-kathā* pertained to the construction of the city-wall in the reigns of Kuṭakanna Tissa and Vasabha, cutting across the ceremonial boundary (*sīmā*) of the nunnery. See *Vamsatthapakāsini*, Vol. II, p.411.

Even if the historical tradition represented by the *Dīpavaṃsa* showed some partiality to the Mahāvihāra, it is unlikely that the prominence given to the nuns and the accompanying failure to give adequate recognition to monks met with the approval of the Mahāvihāra. In the *Vinaya Piṭaka* preserved among the monks, the assessment of the role of the nuns within the *sāsana* tended to be equivocal. Some of the rules of discipline give the unmistakable impression of being based on the idea of the superiority of the male. In fact, this idea is given such emphasis in the ideology embodied in the *Vinaya Piṭaka* that even the character of the Buddha appears to have been cast in a manner which would support it. In the *Cullavagga* section of the *Vinaya Piṭaka*, the Buddha is not presented as a person who was sympathetic to the desire of women to play an active role as members of the Order. The *Cullavagga* would have us believe that he refused to allow ordination for women on three consecutive occasions; it was on the intervention of ⁵⁵Ānanda that he finally yielded on the fourth occasion. Further, the *Cullavagga* attributed to the Buddha the view that the *sāsana*, which would have lasted a thousand years had admission into the order been restricted to males, would last only five hundred years as a result of the institution of the order of nuns.⁵⁶ The provision that women could not be ordained in the absence of nuns was, to a certain extent, an acknowledgement of the distinct status of nuns within the *sāsana*, but their subordinate status was emphasized in certain specific arrangements. As noted in an earlier context, the ordination of a nun had to be approved by the assembly of monks. The nuns had to spend the rainy (*vassa*) season only at a nunnery which was situated in close proximity to a monastery.⁵⁷ The initiation and termination of the *vassa* observances of the nuns had to be approved by the assembly of monks at that monastery. Another element in these arrangements was the appointment of an "advisor to

⁵⁵ *Vinaya Piṭaka*, Vol.II, p.253.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p.256.

⁵⁷ *Vinaya Piṭaka*, Vol.II, p.255; *Samantapāsādikā*, Vol.IV, pp. 792-3.

nuns" ⁵⁸(*bhikkhuvādaka*), usually made by the assembly of monks. Some of these arrangements, like the appointment of advisors, may have been beneficial to the interests of the nuns. However, not all the rules are explicable in such a manner. According to the Vinaya, for the same offence, a nun would receive a more severe penalty than a monk. ⁵⁹ Further, the monk was always entitled to a higher status than the nun. ⁶⁰ It is stated in the Cullavagga that Mahāprajāpatī Gotamī pleaded for the recognition of the principle of seniority as the basis of relations between monks and nuns, but her request was turned down. ⁶¹ Consequently, it was maintained that a nun, even if she had completed a hundred years after her ordination, was of lower status in the order of precedence than a young male novice who had just been ordained. In their relations with monks, all nuns were expected to unfailingly demonstrate their subordinate status through appropriate modes of address and salutation. ⁶²

In respect of some of the principles on which its organization was based, the Buddhist saṅgha had represented a new and radical concept of status. The status of the monk within the order was not related to his previous social status as a layman and to such criteria as caste, wealth, access to power and kinship ranking. On admission into the order, the cleric was expected to lose his old social identity, and, from that moment onwards, his status was determined on the basis of two criteria: his seniority as a monk and his personal achievements in the path of spiritual progress. Practice tended to lag behind these aspirations, especially in later times, but the ideal was maintained. These criteria provided the bases of the internal organiza-

⁵⁸ *Vinaya Piṭaka*, Vol.II, pp.263-4; *Samantapāsādikā*, Vol.IV, pp.789-90.

⁵⁹ See, for instance, *Samantapāsādikā*, Vol.IV, p.902.

⁶⁰ *Vinaya Piṭaka*, Vol.IV, p.52.

⁶¹ *Vinaya Piṭaka*, Vol.II, pp.257-8.

⁶² See *Samantapāsādikā*, Vol.IV, p.792.

tion of the order of nuns. Hence the failure to recognize the same criteria as the bases of relations between monks and nuns would have appeared, at least to the nuns, to be an anomaly, especially since, in lay society in ancient South Asia, relationships between the sexes varied in accordance with the relative status of individuals, and, as such, were not governed by a single absolute principle of the superiority of one sex over the other.

The principles operative in ancient Sri Lankan society do not appear to have been in accord with the ideology embodied in the Vinaya Piṭaka as preserved in the Mahāvihāra. The exercise of the authority to divert economic resources was not monopolized by men, and, as noted earlier, there are instances of women playing the role of patrons of Buddhism and announcing decisions taken on the disposal of the property of their lineages.⁶³ Some women held the position of the clan-leader and, on certain occasions, they even assumed ruling power over the island.

Among the members of the order of nuns in ancient Sri Lanka were women from the highest ranking lineages in the island. According to the tradition preserved in the *Dīpavaṃsa*, women of the royal household and princesses were among the first nuns ordained in the island.⁶⁴ Later recruits included women of royal birth as well as members of prominent families from the hinterland.⁶⁵ Brāhmī inscriptions cited earlier also attest to the fact that some of the pioneer nuns came from among the more privileged families in Sri Lankan society whose members bore titles which distinguished them from the commoners. Revatī, who set up the Dāgama inscription, was the daughter of a village-leader

⁶³ See, for, instance, the Tīm̄birivāva inscription, dated in the fourth century A.D., which records that a certain Princess Anulā donated a part of the property owned by her lineage. *Epigraphia Zeylanica*, Vol. IV, pp. 221-2.

⁶⁴ *Dīpavaṃsa* ch. 16 vv. 38-9.

⁶⁵ See *Dīpavaṃsa* ch. 18 vv. 18, 36, 39-40.

(gamika).⁶⁶ Rohani of the Erupotana inscription and Naga, mentioned in the Vāla-ellūgoḍa inscription, were both daughters of parumakas or "clan-leaders".⁶⁷ In fact, Naga whose father Puśadeva was a military leader (śenapati), was married, to another military leader before she became a nun.⁶⁸ Saverā who donated a cave at Mihintale belonged to an even more prominent lineage, being the daughter of a chieftain (raja) who ruled over the settlement at Kaṇagama. The social origin of some of the nuns was probably one of the factors responsible for the construction of nunneries within the "inner city" of Anurādhapura while the monasteries were always located outside the city-walls. One also gets the impression that nuns did not easily forget their status at birth, as was expected of them, especially when they were of high status. In inscriptions as well as in the *Dipavamsa*, the social status of the "high-born" among nuns was frequently given prominence. It is not surprising that, within such a milieu, an awareness of the past contributions made by female clerics and an ideology which emphasized the distinct and important role they played in Sri Lankan Buddhism did develop at an early period in history. It would appear that the attraction of the life of the nun for women of the higher rungs of society was not a temporary phenomenon limited to the initial phase of the history of the order. As in Japan, life in the nunnery was a way out of unpleasant situations in lay life.⁶⁹ When Jetṭhatissa III (632) committed suicide on realizing the futility of

⁶⁶ Paranavitana, *op. cit.*, p.76 No.969.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p.26 No.332; p.55 No. 725.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p.55 No. 724.

⁶⁹ One of the most moving passages in the *Heike Monogatari* is devoted to a description of the last days of the Dowager Empress Kenreimon-In who, following an unsuccessful attempt at suicide after the defeat of the Heike clan, became a nun and retired to a cloistered life at Ōhara. See *Heike Monogatari*, tr. Hiroshi Kitagawa and Bruce T. Tsuchida as *The Tale of the Heike*, Tokyo: University Press, 1978, Vol.II, pp.763-82.

opposing the South Indian troops hired by his rival, Aggabodhi III, his queen became a nun.⁷⁰ Similarly, Aggabodhi VI (733-772) made his daughter ordain herself as a nun when he heard that she was⁷¹ being maltreated by her husband who was the vice-regent. This does not mean, of course, that the order of nuns was the preserve of the privileged sections of society. Not all the nuns who set up inscriptions had titles, and it is noteworthy that there are also references to nuns with humble origins in the lower segments of society. For example, two nuns from the time of Duṭṭhagāmaṇī, Dāsī and Kālī, are described as the daughters of a dhutta.⁷² In early Pāli texts, the term definitely had a pejorative connotation and denoted individuals who were "crafty, wicked, fraudulent and wild." One particular meaning, when used as a noun, was "highwayman or robber."⁷³ Despite, their social origin, the two nuns were ranked among the leading members of the order in their time. Thus, though high birth was given prominence, the order of nuns remained open to individuals from the lower rungs of society, and the position accorded to them within the order depended on their seniority and individual achievements.

Since many of the recruits into the order of nuns were from the upper echelons of society where women were used to wielding authority over members of both sexes, it does not seem likely that they were content with the subordinate social position accorded to them by the dictates of the Vinaya as preserved among the monks. It is very tempting to surmise that it was this contradiction between the dictates of the Vinaya and prevailing social practice within the island which found expression in the independent spirit displayed by nuns.

⁷⁰ Cūlavamsa ch.44 v.114.

⁷¹ Cūlavamsa ch.48 v.57.

⁷² Dīpavamsa ch.18 vv.21. It is most likely that the phrase *sabbapāpikā* which qualifies these two nuns is corrupt.

⁷³ See Vinaya Piṭaka, Vol.II, p.277.

The concern shared by some monks about this situation is evident from the *Samantapāsādikā* which devotes a lengthy passage running to about seven pages to emphasize the subordinate status of the nuns, the importance of paying homage to all monks irrespective of their position in terms of seniority, and the need for nuns to constantly depend on the advice of the monks.⁷⁴ The passage reflects a situation in which learned nuns were claiming to know the *dhamma* as proficiently as the monks, implicitly holding to question the superior position accorded to the monks. The response of the monks to this challenge was presented in the form of the general proposition that women are inherently inferior in their intellectual abilities and, consequently, have no other alternative but to be dependent on the monks. The following extract helps to illustrate the combative mood:

iti bhagavā aññassa kammaṣṣa okāsaṃ adatvā
nirantaraṃ bhikkhuñīnaṃ bhikkhūnaṃ sēntike
gamaṇameva paññāpesi. kasmā? mandapaññattā
mātugāmaṣṣa. mandapañño hi mātugāmo. tassa
niccaṃ dhammasavanaṃ bahūpakāraṃ. evañca
sati yaṃ mayaṃ jānāma tadeva ayyā jāna-
tīti mānaṃ akatvā bhikkhusaṅghaṃ payiru-
pāsamaṇā sātthikaṃ pabbajjaṃ karissantīti
tasmā bhagavā evamakāsi.

Though it is not easy to bring out the flavour of the passage in a translation, it may be rendered into English as follows:

Why did the Blessed One decree that nuns should constantly go to monks [for guidance] without allowing them an oppor-

⁷⁴ *Samantapāsādikā*, Vol.IV, pp.792-800.

⁷⁵ In considering passages in the *Samantapāsādikā* one has to constantly keep in mind that the punctuation inserted by Takakusu and Nagai may need reconsideration. The punctuation marks appearing in the above quotation have been inserted by the present writer. See *Samantapāsādikā*, Vol. IV, p.794.

tunity for any other mode of action? It was ^{or}₆ consideration of the lack of wisdom among females. Females lack wisdom, and, for them, listening to the dhamma is particularly helpful. Such being the situation, the Blessed One did so in order that they pay due homage to monks and lead a fruitful life in the Order without proudly thinking, "It is what we know that the Lords (i.e. monks) themselves know."

To a considerable extent, the ideology embodied in the *Samantapāsādikā* reflects the impact of the attempts made by a long line of commentators to creatively develop a code of conduct for the monks, basing it on certain fundamental ideas inherited from the past, but also incorporating certain local modifications that had taken place over the centuries. It was, to that extent, an attempt at adaptation. However, in respect of the attitude towards women, this does not seem to be the case. It gives the impression that an attempt was being made to impose values derived from the past, or from outside, and these values clashed with those which were operative in contemporary local society. One difficult question that confronts a historian is whether the opinions expressed in this commentary were representative of the community of monks in general. Unfortunately, sources available at present are inadequate to permit a proper understanding of other points of view on such crucial questions. After the fifth century, the *Samantapāsādikā* did become one of the most authoritative guides for the interpretation of the Vinaya, but it is indeed most doubtful that its authority was unquestioned by at least the members of the order of nuns.

In this context it is interesting to note that, according to the same text, one of the points of controversy between the Mahāvihāra and Abhayagiri monasteries related to a passage in the Vinaya Piṭaka concerning a punishment meted out to a nun. It is stated in the Samatha-khandaka division

76 *paññā* may also be translated as "intelligence."

of the Cullavagga that a nun called Mettiyā falsely accused the monk Dabba Mallaputta of having violated her chastity. The Buddha inquired from Dabba whether this was true, and, on his denial, ordered that Mettiyā be expelled from the order.⁷⁷ The phrase used here is *tena hi bhikkhave Mettiyaṃ bhikkhuṇiṃ nāsetha*.⁷⁸ Evidently, the Abhayagiri monastery had a variant reading of the passage. It had the words *sakāya paṭiññāya nāsitā*, which would mean that Mettiyā was expelled on the basis of her own confession. The dispute as to which of the readings was authentic assumed such proportions that the king at that time, Bhātika Tissa (A.D. 143-67), commissioned an official named Dīghakārāyapa to hold an inquiry. The *Samantapāsādikā* records that Dīghakārāyapa gave a verdict in favour of the Mahāvihāra.⁷⁹ The furor caused by the variant readings becomes understandable when one recognizes that this passage relates to certain important aspects of the administration of ecclesiastical justice: the proper procedure to be followed when a nun makes an accusation against a monk, and the relative weight that should be attached to the word of a nun as against the word of a monk. Despite the authoritative verdict of the royal commissioner, who is described by the commentator as a proficient linguist, it appears that the version preserved in the Mahāvihāra tradition raises formidable problems. According to this version, the accusation made by the nun was summarily dismissed, and, in addition, she was severely punished merely on the strength of Dabba Mallaputta's word. On the other hand, the Abhayagiri version points to a situation of a more detailed investigation being held. Mettiyā was punished, not because greater weight was attached to the testimony of a monk, but because she herself finally admitted her guilt. It carries the implication that an accusation made by a nun against a monk, even if it seems to be false, has to be carefully investigated. Further evidence pointing to the presence of recensions of the *Vinaya Piṭaka* which varied from the version preserved at the Mahāvihāra is

⁷⁷ *Vinaya Piṭaka*, Vol.I, pp.78-9.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p.79.

⁷⁹ *Samantapāsādikā*, Vol.III, pp.582-4. Some scholars have identified this king with Bhātikābbaya (19 B.C. - 9.A.D.).