

# Brāhmaṇas in the Early Sinhalese Kingdom

IN his paper on "Pre-Buddhist Religious Beliefs in Ceylon<sup>1</sup>", Parānavitana recounted all the historical references<sup>2</sup> to Brāhmaṇas in the Chronicles up to the time of Devānaṃpiya Tissa. He also gave the substance of 2 early inscriptions<sup>3</sup> in which Brāhmaṇas had donated caves to the Saṅgha. He stated that "the Brāhmaṇas held an honourable place in society in those early days" and some of them "were in sympathy with the Buddhist movement". A brief summary of the historical evidence which he adduced is as follows:—Vijaya, Paṇḍukābhaya and Devānaṃpiya Tissa had Brāhmaṇa Purohitas: Paṇḍukābhaya was instructed in the art of kingship and assisted in his campaign against his uncles by the rich and learned Brāhmaṇa, Paṇḍula, and his son Canda: the Brāhmaṇa, Tivakka or Tavakka, was given a prominent place in the ceremonies connected with the arrival and planting of the Bodhi Tree: the kings endowed Brāhmaṇa shrines in the City: and the Brāhmaṇas were generally people of influence and wealth.

The historical and epigraphical evidence is now continued to the end of the 3rd century A.C.

## 2nd and 1st Centuries B.C.

The Brāhmaṇa, Kuṇḍalī, a merchant, lived near Cetiyaṃpabbata (Mihintalē) during the reign of Eḷāra, but, though resident in Eḷāra's territory, was a supporter of the Sinhalese Royal family then represented by Kākavaṇṇa Tissa, ruler of Rohaṇa<sup>4</sup>. Girikālī, the daughter of the Purohita of Kākavaṇṇa Tissa, entered the Bhikkhuṇī-sāsana<sup>5</sup>. A young and powerful Brāhmaṇa named Tissa of Rohaṇa raised an insurrection against Vaṭṭagāmaṇi Abhaya in B.C. 103. The *Mahāvamsa* states that Damiḷas from South India invaded Ceylon at the same time, defeated Vaṭṭagāmaṇi Abhaya and then slew the rebel Tissa, and reigned here for 14 years<sup>6</sup>. But the Pāli Commentaries give a different and far more vivid and harrowing account of this period which they style "the Brāhmaṇatissa peril"<sup>7</sup>. What claim to kingship the Brāhmaṇa

1. J.R.A.S. (C.B.) (*Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society, Ceylon Branch*), Vol. 31, No. 82, pp. 302, 321 to 323.

2. M. (*Mahāvamsa*) 7, 44; 10, 20 to 26, 102; 11, 20; 19, 27, 54, 61; and *Mahābodhi-vamsa* 136.

3. At Sassōruva and Yāngala.

4. M. 23, 23 to 29.

5. D. (*Dīpavamsa*) 18, 21.

6. M. 33, 37 to 41.

7. E.H.B. (*Early History of Buddhism in Ceylon*, by E. W. Adikaram) 73 to 77.

made, who his adherents were, and what support he relied upon from a people already predominantly, if not wholly, Buddhist to maintain himself on the throne at Anurādhapura, are not stated.

In B.C. 44, a Brāhmaṇa named Niliya, the Purohita, was made King by the infamous Queen Anulā and reigned 6 months<sup>8</sup>. In the reign of Bhatikābhaya (B.C. 22-A.C. 7), the King appointed a Minister, the Brāhmaṇa Dīghākārāyana, to settle a dispute which arose between the fraternities at Mahāvihāra and at Abhayagiri as to the interpretation of a Vinaya rule<sup>9</sup>.

Nearly all the early inscriptions which contain references to Brāhmaṇas belong to the 2nd and 1st centuries B.C. Four have been published, namely, those at Mihintalē<sup>10</sup>, Riṭigala<sup>11</sup>, Molagoḍa<sup>12</sup> and Ranagiriya<sup>13</sup>, the last-named being the latest in date. The revised text of the Mihintalē inscription is:—(4) BAMAṆA PUTA (RE)TAHA LEṆE ŚAGAŚA. The texts of the Sassūruva and Yāngala inscriptions referred to by Parānavitana are, respectively:—(5) BAMAṆA VAŚAKAṆI PUTA ŚOMADEVAŚA CA GA . . . and (6) BAMAṆA KAŚIKA PUTA VIJITAŚENAŚA LEṆE. Two of the earliest inscriptions containing references to Brāhmaṇas are at Piccandiyāva<sup>14</sup> and the King named in them may be identified, on palaeographical grounds, with Devānāpiya Tiṣṣa:—(7) MAHARA(JA)ŚA DEVANAPIYAHA ACIRIYA BAMAṆA GOBUTIYA LEṆE, and (8) MAHARAJAŚA DEVANAPIYAŚA GAMINI TIŚAŚA VEJA BAMAṆA GOBUTIYA LEṆE ŚAGAŚA. The Brāhmaṇa, Gobuti, was both Teacher and Physician of the King. Another, somewhat mutilated, inscription at the same site reads:—(9) . . . BAMAṆA PUŚAKA PUTAHA PUNAŚUGUTAHA LEṆE. The Bambaragala inscription<sup>15</sup> is equally interesting:—(10) POCANI RAJA NĀGAYAHA JAYA BAMAṆA KOJA(RA). JITAYA UPAŚIKA DATAYA LEṆE. Nāga Aya, the “King of the east” has not been identified: he was married to the daughter of a Brāhmaṇa and she was a Buddhist upaśika and the donor of the cave. Cave inscriptions at Dambulla, Diyabātṭa<sup>16</sup> and Tōrava Mayilāva<sup>17</sup> read respectively:—(11) PARUMAKA BAMAṆA TIŚAHA LEṆE ŚAGAŚA DINE, (12) ŚAGAŚA BAMAṆA MEGALI PUTA PARUMAKA MAJIMA

8. *M.* 34, 24 to 26.

9. *E.H.B.* 88. Adikaram points out that the dispute was probably not of a doctrinal nature.

10. *A.S.C.A.R.* (*Archaeological Survey of Ceylon, Annual Report*), 1911-12, 99, No. 8.

11. *E.Z.* (*Epigraphia Zeylanica*) I, 145.

12. *C.J.S.* (*Ceylon Journal of Science, Section G*), II, 227, No. 754.

13. *C.J.S.* II, 225, No. 747.

14. *A.I.C.* (*Ancient Inscriptions of Ceylon*, by E. Muller), 84.

15. *A.S.C.A.R.* 1935, para 42; with it, read *A.I.C.* 34.

16. *A.I.C.* 48.

17. 7 miles west of the 39th m.p. on the Kurunāgala-Anurādhapura road.

## BRĀHMAṆAS IN THE EARLY SINHALESE KINGDOM

PUTA DATAHA LEṆE, and (13) BAMAṆA GA(DA) BOJIKE PARUMAKA ŚOṆAHA LEṆE. Two inscriptions at Haṇdagala Vihāra<sup>18</sup> read :—(14) BAMAṆA ŚUGA PUTA PUŚADEVAŚA . . . LEṆE ŚAGAŚA, and (15) PARUMAKA BAMAṆAHA PUTA DATAKAYAGUTAHA LEṆE (Symbol) ŚAGAŚA. Inscription No. (15) is assignable, palaeographically, to the end of 1st B.C. or beginning of 1st A.C. The remaining inscriptions are in Rohaṇa and their texts are as follows :—(16) Situlpavuva<sup>19</sup>, BAMAṆA VACA PUTA . . . (LE)ṆE ; (17) Kandōgamakanda<sup>20</sup>, PARUMAKA BAḌIHARAMITA PUTA PARUMAKA BAMAṆA UTIYA LEṆE AGATA ANAGATA CATUDIŚA ŚAGAŚA ; (18) Kōngala<sup>21</sup>, BAMAṆA ATIMATAKAHA LEṆE ; and (19) Maṇḍagala<sup>22</sup>, BAMAṆA ŚUMAHA LEṆE ŚAGAŚA.

All the grants recorded in these 19 inscriptions were donations of caves to the Saṅgha. Therefore, the Brāhmaṇa donors patronised, if they did not practise, Buddhism. The Ranagiriya inscription is a grant by an individual who was the son of a Brāhmaṇa and the brother of a Thera : the Thera, therefore, was himself a Brāhmaṇa by birth, and he and his brother, the donor of the cave, were apparently converts to Buddhism. This record of a Brāhmaṇa having become a Buddhist monk, and the Bambaragala inscription of a Brāhmaṇa's daughter who was a Buddhist upaśika, lend strong support to the probability that all the Brāhmaṇa donors named in the inscriptions had, similarly, adopted the Buddhist faith.

The Purohita and his assistants at the Royal court were there, primarily, it may be assumed, for the performance of those necessary rites of abhiśeka, marriage, birth and death in which Buddhist monks played no part. Hence, they were indispensable to the King, and their learning and skill would have been relied upon by the monarch in high affairs of state.

Six Brāhmaṇas or their sons named in the inscriptions held the rank of Parumaka (Chieftain), the highest degree of nobility below royalty. The inscriptions supply corroboration of the Chronicles and Commentaries that in the 2nd and 1st centuries B.C. Brāhmaṇas continued to hold high positions and to possess wealth. The titles of some of them, Purohita, Minister and Parumaka, and the absence of titles in others suggest that they had their own social gradation : all were not nobles, but their general social level was high.

### 1st, 2nd and 3rd Centuries A.C.

The Kirinda and Tissamahārāma inscriptions, the texts and translations of which are given in Paranavitana's paper on "Brāhmī Inscriptions in

18. *A.I.C.* 96.

19. *A.I.C.* 16 ; *A.S.C.A.R.*, 1934, para 75.

20. *C.A. (Ceylon Antiquary)*, III, 208, 209.

21. In Pānama Pattu, Batticaloa District.

22. *A.S.C.A.R.*, 1934, para 77.

Sinhalese Verse”<sup>23</sup> are unique in their subject-matter. As he has pointed out, the 2 inscriptions are contemporaneous and the script resembles that of the Maha Ratmalē inscription<sup>24</sup> of Mahādāthika Mahānāga (A.C. 7-19). One may go further and say that it resembles the script in the inscriptions of Kuṭakaṇṇa Tissa (B.C. 44-22) and his successors upto Āmaṇḍagāmaṇi Abhaya (A.C. 19-29), and that there is little room for doubt that the Uvaraja Naka or Nāga of the inscriptions is identical with the later King, Mahādāthika Mahānāga, the Uvaraja and successor of the pious Bhātikābhaya (B.C. 22—A.C. 7). The interesting fact which these 2 inscriptions disclose is that an heir-apparent of the Sinhalese royal family at the end of the 1st century B.C. or beginning of the 1st century A.C. was converted to Buddhism. The “false beliefs” which he abandoned are not specified, but they could scarcely have been heterodox doctrines within Buddhism itself. The only other religious influence under which a Sinhalese prince is likely to have come was that of the Purohita and the other Brāhmaṇas at the Court, and the probability is that the “false beliefs” of the Uvaraja Naka were Brāhmaṇical beliefs. The Chronicles give us to understand that from B.C. 247 onwards Buddhism was the firm and only faith of the Sinhalese monarchy and people, and the accuracy of that assertion is not impugned by this solitary instance of one dissident Prince professing other beliefs and then recanting them in favour of Buddhism. This singular event is not recorded in the Chronicles or Commentaries, but it was apparently of sufficient local importance for the recantation to be publicised by the engraving of 2 inscriptions, one at the Uvaraja’s seat and the other at the Vihāra where the conversion occurred.

References to Brāhmaṇas in the Chronicles and epigraphs of the 1st, 2nd and 3rd centuries A.C. are very scanty. An inscription of the 1st century at Sassēruva mentions the village Bamaṇagama. The list of fields mentioned in the 2nd century inscription at Kiralagala<sup>25</sup> includes one named Mahabamaṇa vi-keta. The Dakkhina Vihāra inscriptions, probably of the reign of Kaniṭṭha Tissa (167-186), refer to a grant by the grandson of the minister, Maha Bamaṇaya. The only reference in the Chronicles is to the destruction of 3 Śivaliṅga temples, one in the village of the Brāhmaṇa Kalanda, by King Mahāsena<sup>26</sup>.

The paucity of historical and epigraphical references to Brāhmaṇas in the first 3 centuries A.C. as compared with the last 3 centuries B.C. is striking and suggests a decline in their numbers, power and influence. The office of Purohita continued long beyond the 3rd century A.C. The Dakkhina

23. *J.R.A.S.* (C.B.), Vol. 36, No. 98.

24. *E.Z.* I, 61.

25. *A.I.C.* 54.

26. *M.* 37. 41; *J.R.A.S.* (C.B.), Vol. 31, No. 82, p. 327.

## BRĀHMAṆAS IN THE EARLY SINHALESE KINGDOM

Vihāra inscription furnishes evidence that a Brāhmaṇa held office as minister about the middle of the 2nd century. The destruction of Brāhmaṇical temples by Mahāsenā is not conclusive evidence that decline reached the point of fall in his reign, because Mahāsenā practised severe religious intolerance against the Mahāvihāra fraternity and would have had little compunction in persecuting non-Buddhists: in this respect he was singular, and it is possible that the Brāhmaṇas resumed their customary religious freedom in his son's reign.

The Chronicles and epigraphs establish a wide regional distribution of the Brāhmaṇas, in the Northern, North-central and North-western Provinces, and in the Mātalē, Kandy, Batticaloa and Hambantōṭa Districts. The Brāhmaṇical temples destroyed by Mahāsenā appear to have been on the East coast. There is evidence that some Brāhmaṇas, like the rest of the community, adopted Buddhism as their religion in the early Buddhist period, but whether this was general in their case or not, is conjectural.

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