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THE CONTRIBUTION OF SRI LANKAN HISTORICAL
TRADITION TO THE RECONSTRUCTION
OF THE HISTORY OF ANCIENT INDIA

1. *Indian Historiography: The Problem of Historical Sense*

Few civilizations – with perhaps the exception of that of the Chinese – have preserved as vast a mass of literary evidence of their growth and evolution over several millennia as the conglomeration of cultures and civilizations which rose and flourished in the fertile soil of the Indian sub-continent. The voluminous Vedic literature whose origins are traceable to at least fifteen centuries before Christ is among them the most ancient. Thence, right up to the modern times, the multitude of literary works, which had been produced in Sanskrit as well as several Prakrits, embody not only the creative talent in poetry, drama and prose narrative but also philosophical and religious thought and memories of a number of distinct cultural groups. The very richness and the diversity of the gigantic literary heritage of the Indian sub-continent are, indeed, impressive.

With such a wealth of literary sources one would expect the task of reconstructing the ancient history of the Indian sub-continent an easy and orderly task. But the reality is exactly the opposite.

This mass of literature actually resembles an archaeological site disturbed frequently by cataclysmic earthquakes and volcanic action. The more one digs and the more artifacts one gathers from jumbled

layers, the more complex it is to interpret them and, for this purpose, to establish a reliable chronological order. The juxtaposition of materials relating to different ages is further confused by similarities of some artifacts and the possibility of piecing together bits and fragments of different objects into reasonably convincing but false reconstructions.

When the imagery of such an archaeological site is applied to the enormous literature of the sub-continent, one could understand the difficulties which a historian has to confront not because he lacks data but because what he has is in disarray.

Pargiter¹, as a pioneering analyst of the Indian historical tradition, examined the data in a class of literature whose name suggests its preoccupation with history (i.e. Purāṇas = ancient times or past records) and came to the conclusion that «the lack of the historical sense was a fertile source of confusion». He identified six causes of such confusions:

- i. confusing different persons of the same name;
- ii. confusing kings, rishis and others with mythological persons of the same names;
- iii. not distinguishing between different periods and often misplacing persons chronologically and bringing together as contemporaries persons who were widely separated in time;
- iv. obliterating the difference between reality and mythology;
- v. misapplying freely historical or other tradition to new places and conditions to subserve religious ends;
- vi. taking a person or incident from historical tradition and fabricating edifying religious tales thereon.

The lack of the historical sense on the part of the people of the Indian sub-continent has been noted by several foreigners visiting or working in India. The Arabian traveller Alberuni wrote in 1030: «Unfortunately, the Hindus do not pay much attention to the historical order of things; they are very careless in relating the chronological succession of their kings, and, when they are pressed for information

1. F.E. PARGITER, *Ancient Indian Historical Tradition*, Banarsidass, Delhi, 1972, pp. 63-77.

and are at a loss, not knowing what to say they invariably take to romancing»². Macaulay in his famous Minute on Education passed what Betty Heimann calls a «damnatory verdict» when he contrasted «true history» which an English education could impart against «history abounding with kings thirty feet high and reigns thirty thousand years long»³.

The Indian attitude to history has, of course been explained by such scholars as Betty Heimann and A.L. Basham who account for the predilection of Indians for the fabulous, the legendary and the mysterious⁴. But the fact remains that this attitude which one can justifiably describe as the lack of a historical sense had made the voluminous literary heritage of the Indian sub-continent well-nigh worthless as sources of its ancient history.

2. Sri Lankan Key to the Interpretation of Asokan Edicts

Nothing would demonstrate this fact more dramatically than the difficulties experienced in the 1830s by James Prinsep and others in identifying the earliest known real historical figure who had, in fact, left behind an unparalleled wealth of information on his thoughts, aspirations and actions in no less than two hundred lithic records dotting the whole of the sub-continent and a part of its western neighbour. There was nothing in Indian records which could help them to identify «*Devanapiya Piyadasi*» of these edicts and inscriptions with Asoka, the third king of the Mauryan dynasty – by scholarly acclamation today, the greatest of rulers of India if not the whole world.

The essential assistance in Prinsep's quest came from an English civil servant in Sri Lanka. The circumstances as well as the result are described by Rhys Davids in the following words: «For in Ceylon

2. E.C. SACHAU, *Alberuni's India*, English Edition II, p. 10.

3. Quoted in BETTY HEIMANN, *Indian and Western Philosophy - A Study in Contrasts*, Allen and Unwin, London, 1937, p. 116.

4. See BETTY HEIMANN, *ibid.*, pp. 118-119; A.L. BASHAM, *The Wonder that was India*, New Age Publishers, Calcutta (Second Edition) 1955, p. 44.

[i.e. Sri Lanka] there was a history, indeed several books of history, whereas in Calcutta the Indian records were devoid of any reliable data to help in the identification of the new names Prinsep thought he could make out. It is not too much to say that without the help of the Ceylon books the identification of Piyadassi of the inscriptions with the king Asoka of history would never have been made. Once made it rendered the subsequent steps comparatively easy and it gave to Prinsep and his co-adjutors just that encouragement, and the element of certainty, which were needed to keep their enthusiasm alive»⁵.

3. Sri Lankan Attitude to History

Before examining what actually was the contribution of the Sri Lankan historical tradition in this respect, it is necessary to investigate how Sri Lanka had gained such an asset in the form of what Rhys Davids called «*a history, indeed several books of history*».

The Sinhala, who founded the kingdom of Sri Lanka around the sixth century B.C. and developed their own national identity, actually came in several waves of migration from northern parts of the Indian sub-continent. On the basis of both legendary accounts of such migrations and the evidence gleaned from linguistic palaeontology, these early ancestors could be traced to such diverse parts of the sub-continent as Panjab, Bengal and Gujarat.

As such, they brought to their new land the same cultural traits, attitudes and value systems that the Hindus of these regions had upheld. As far as available data go, they brought the religious beliefs and practices – including some new developments like Jainism and schools of wandering ascetics – and held on to them until the introduction of Buddhism two hundred years later. To begin with, therefore, their attitude to history could have been no different from that of the other peoples of the Indian sub-continent.

But very early in their sojourn in Sri Lanka, the Sinhala had

5. RHYS DAVIDS, *The History and Literature of Buddhism*, (First Edition 1896) Fifth Edition, Calcutta, 1962, pp. 31-32.

begun to keep records – though not necessarily in a written form – pertaining to:

- (a) their kings;
- (b) settlements;
- (c) waves of migrations;
- (d) palace intrigues;
- (e) military actions;
- (f) town-planning and building operations; and,
- (g) the development of water resources.

Not only are the various versions of these records persistingly consistent as regards essential details but an extensive war of succession in the fourth century B.C. by Paṇḍukābhaya – the fourth king in their historical tradition – is described with such minute details on strategic aspects of his campaign with special reference to the terrain covered as to establish its plausibility. Did the pride of new nationhood give them this extraordinary historical sense? Did the fact that they constituted an island-nation contribute to it? Did their isolation from their original stock by an intervening mass of Dravidian and fast Dravidianizing states compel them to cling to the historical evidence of their identity? Perhaps, each of these factors had played a vital role.

4. The Part Played by Buddhism

But the introduction of Buddhism and, with it, a literary tradition and an effective human organization of intellectuals (in the form of the Sangha) had certainly given a fresh motivation for perpetuating historical information and provided the requisite facilities and personnel for the purpose. The role of Buddhism in this respect could be better understood when the current explanations for the lack of historical sense in the Indian sub-continent are considered.

Basham points out that what interest India «had in her own past was generally concentrated on the fabulous kings of a legendary golden age, rather than the great empires which had risen and fallen in

historical times»⁶. Heimann traces the reason for not evolving any exact methods of historic research to India's natural conditions. She says: «For it is inevitable that a people living in a timeless and, in its main characteristics, almost unchanging natural environment could never develop uniqueness, singleness and individualism as their standards of value... Instead, therefore, of definite historical periods and personalities it is always some "type", marked by exaggerated proportions reflecting the exuberance of nature, that serves the Hindu as his criterion of value (natural vitality)»⁷.

The early (or, as some scholars prefer to call, «the primitive») form of Buddhism which came to Sri Lanka was founded on the remembered teachings, actions and experiences of a historical person – an individual who was considered unique and worthy of emulation. And this person – the Buddha – was regarded not as anyone divine, nor a divine messenger, but a human being placing before humanity a message meant for all men, women and children. The testimony for the efficacy of the Path of Deliverance he preached also came from a group of individuals who strove singly and reached their spiritual attainments by the dint of diligent effort – each at his own pace according to highly individualized courses of training.

The emphasis of the individual in early Buddhism appears to have precluded the tendency to deal with people as «types». Once the individual's experiences and attainments were given due stress, each became a person to be remembered, venerated and, above all, emulated. Biographies of individuals – which constitute the basic raw material for history – acquired a unique importance in Buddhist literature. Due to the religious significance of the message which one's life was expected to convey, a biography extended beyond the current life and encompassed sometimes several previous lives. Despite this exaggeration of the treatment of a person's biography which, no doubt, baffled early Western scholars, the Buddhist historical tradition overcame the tendency of inhibiting uniqueness, singleness and individualism, which Heimann attributes to Hindu thought. With a plethora of real

6. BASHAM, *op. cit.*, p. 44.

7. HEIMANN, *op. cit.*, p. 118.

historical personages to be perpetuated in memory for either their dedicated spiritual quest or their munificence, the Buddhist «historians» had no need to resort to fabulous kings of a legendary golden age.

In addition to these factors, Buddhism also brought in the self-perpetuating institution of the Sangha. By its very organization, it encouraged the preservation of a collective memory and, by its own need for survival and development, had a need to perpetuate the memory of its benefactors on whose generosity the system depended. It is by no means an accident that the earliest lithic records to be found in every country in which Buddhism found a foothold happened to be reports of donations. The Sangha thus provided not only a motivation for historiography but also the historians or rather the record-keepers.

5. Sri Lankan Historical Sources

In Sri Lanka, the psychology of an island-nation asserting its cultural and political identity and the Buddhist attitude to history seem to have found a happy synthesis. The Sinhala Sangha appears to have emerged as the earliest known custodians of history in and around south and south-east Asia. They kept their records in a variety of forms – ballads, narratives, memory-verses (i.e. mnemonic devices which enabled details of an event to be recalled from popular knowledge) and «Books of Virtue or Pious Deeds» (a record of a person's munificence and piety). Very early in their efforts, these original sources were codified, synthesized or recast into *Sinhala-Aṭṭhakathā-Mahāvamsa*, which had been available even around the tenth and twelfth century A.C. in several slightly diverging recensions which were identified with different monasteries of ancient Sri Lanka. This important archetype of the island's history was in Sinhala, the national language, just as the entire commentarial and exegetical literature was until Buddhaghosa and others rendered it into Pali around the fifth century A.C.

The same source-materials had found their way into the *Aṭṭhakathās* (i.e. Commentaries on the Buddhist Canon) as exemplified by the historical introduction to the Vinaya commentary, the

Samantapāsādikā. But the most important of the historiographical achievements of the Sinhala Sangha are the two chronicles in Pali, the *Dīpavaṃsa* (an imperfect first effort, but nevertheless very informative) and the *Mahāvāṃsa* (a conscious effort to produce a concise and balanced history of Buddhism in Sri Lanka). Despite the emphasis on ecclesiastical history, both chronicles throw abundant light on the political history of the country and to a lesser degree on its social evolution. The latter chronicle has been periodically updated – thus conferring on Sri Lanka the unique asset of an unbroken recorded history of twenty-five centuries.

6. Data on Indian History

What is noteworthy is that the Sri Lankan historical tradition, so recorded and preserved, has served not only Sri Lanka but, more significantly, India. As stated at the very outset, the most important contribution was in relation to Emperor Asoka. The Sri Lankan records not only helped in identifying *Devanapiya Piyadasi* (Piyadasi the beloved of the gods) with Asoka but also provided more information on his life and career than any other source. In fact, the mainstream Indian tradition and literature (i.e. non-Buddhist literary sources) are virtually silent on this great monarch. Purāṇas record hardly anything other than the «prophesy» that he would succeed Vindusāra and thus be the third monarch of the Mauryan dynasty with a reign of thirty-six years. The information on Asoka in the twelfth century Kashmirian chronicle of Kalhaṇa – namely, *Rājataranṅgaṇī* – is so garbled and confusing as to render the entire account unreliable. Asoka mentioned here has no connection with the famous monarch of that name. The only historically significant statement is the inscription of Rudradaman at Junagadh, which associates Asoka's name with an irrigation project⁸.

8. For a detailed discussion on this question, see my article «Emperor Asoka's Place in History: A Review of Prevalent Opinions», in *Sri Lanka Journal of Buddhist Studies* (Buddhist and Pali University of Sri Lanka) Vol. I, 1987, pp. 139-170.

Without the detailed accounts preserved in Sri Lankan sources, the interpretation of Asoka's edicts and inscriptions – particularly as they concern his affiliation to Buddhism and his policy of Dharmavijaya (Conquest through Righteousness) – would have been well-nigh impossible. There are, of course, several apparent discrepancies between these lithic records and the Sri Lankan tradition. But on closer analysis they could, almost all, be resolved as the information they supply are more complementary than contradictory⁹.

Around the beginning of this century, several scholars had been questioning the reliability of the Sri Lankan historical tradition specially with regard to the Third Buddhist Council and the Buddhist missions attributed to Asoka. Disregarding the fallacy of *argumentum e silentio*, they rejected the information in Sri Lankan sources on the basis that no other sources corroborated it. Since then, the reliquaries in Sanchi and Sonari bearing inscribed names of Moggaliputta Tissa: the President of the Third Buddhist Council and of Majjhima, Kotiputta Kassapagotta and Dundubhissara of the mission sent to the Himalayas have proved beyond doubt that Sri Lankan historical tradition contained rare factual information which had not been so preserved elsewhere¹⁰. Archaeology thus has underwritten – as it continues to do in Sri Lanka as more monuments and inscriptions are being discovered – the veracity of the Sri Lankan historical tradition.

7. Sri Lankan Sources Versus Buddhist Sanskrit Sources of India

The reliability of Sri Lankan sources as regards Asoka and his times has been further established by the incongruencies discovered

9. For such an analysis, see my article «Emperor Asoka and Buddhism: Some Unresolved Discrepancies between Buddhist Tradition and Asokan Inscriptions in *Vidyodaya Journal of Arts and Science* (Sri Jayewardenapura, University of Sri Lanka) Vol. 14 (1987) pp. 1-37.

10. See WILHELM GEIGER, *The Mahāvamsa*, Information Department, Colombo, 1950, pp. XV-XX. Cf. also ANANDA W.P. GURUGÈ, *Mahāvamsa: An Annotated New Translation with Prolegomena*, Associated Newspapers of Ceylon Limited, Colombo, 1989.

in the Buddhist Sanskrit sources which originated in India and found their way to China and Tibet. Not only did they confuse Mauryan Asoka with Kālāsoka of the Śiśunāga Dynasty and thus placed the former at least a hundred and eighteen years before his actual date, but, in attempting to synchronize eminent monks of two different generations, created a puzzling chronological muddle. In addition, they sought to over-emphasize the legendary and fabulous elements to such an extent as to make Asoka so very unreal. The emerging picture of Asoka from these sources is that of a «type» – a foolish and naive «monster» who excels in piety, a confused and confusing personality which would exist only in one's imagination. Here one sees exactly the operation of the phenomenon of «typifying» characters in Indian «history» to which Heimann made reference as discussed above.

What we see by comparing Buddhist Sanskrit sources of Indian origin with Sri Lankan sources is that both had access to identical facts: in the former they got transformed into the legendary, the fabulous and the mysterious in the same way as Hindu data got transformed, whereas in the Sri Lankan tradition a greater identity with the historical personage and events was maintained¹¹.

8. *Sri Lankan Approach to the Fabulous and the Miraculous*

It is true that Sri Lankan sources, too, contain their share of the legendary and the miraculous on account of the demands of faith and religious propaganda. But a stronger sense of history than in the Indian sub-continent seems to have exercised a restraining effect. An exceedingly interesting evidence of this phenomenon is to be found in the accounts of the three visits of the Buddha to Sri Lanka which these sources report in identical details. Scholars question the veracity of these accounts by referring to the fact that the Buddhist Canonical literature makes no reference whatsoever to these visits, to the sermons delivered in Sri Lanka or to any of the persons associated with the events.

11. This situation is also discussed at length in my article referred to in Note 8 above.

What is remarkable is that the Canonical literature was first orally handed down for over two centuries and then reduced to writing by the Sangha of Sri Lanka. They could have easily reinforced the national tradition on the Buddha's visits by interpolating it into the Canon. Similarly, the tradition on the Buddha's «prophesy» regarding the role of Sri Lanka in the preservation of Buddhism and action taken to protect Vijaya and his entourage could have found a place in the Canon.

What prevented the Sangha from doing so? What prompted them to safeguard the authenticity of the Canon even when some interpolations could have reinforced national traditions? What restrained them from doing what Mahāyana Buddhists did in India in the form of creating mythical texts like the *Lankāvatāra Sūtra*? The most probable explanation is that the Sangha in Sri Lanka exercised a very high degree of objectivity and rigour which were nurtured by their historical sense and astute devotion to authenticity.

9. Conclusion

With the scholarly care which the quality of the information evinces, the Sri Lankan sources provide invaluable assistance in reconstructing the history of ancient India for three crucial centuries. *Firstly*, by establishing the concept of an era which commenced with the death of a historical personage, a sound chronological framework is provided in the form of the Buddhist era. *Secondly*, by dating certain political events like the reign of Ajātasattu, the rise of the Sisunāgas and the Nandas, the foundation of the Mauryan dynasty, the reigns of Candragupta and Bindusāra and the coronation and the religious policies of Asoka, with recourse to that chronological framework, the ascendancy of Magadha from the time of Bimbisāra to the zenith of Mauryan power and influence is substantially documented. *Thirdly*, details such as the names of the nine Nandas and the role of the brahman Cānakya in overthrowing the Nandas have been preserved from oblivion.

If one steps beyond the confines of political and ecclesiastical history, one could elaborate the manner in which the wealth of data incorporated in the Buddhist commentarial literature of Sri Lanka

contributes to the reconstruction of the social and cultural history of India from the fifth century B.C. to the Christian Era¹².

This, in short, is the contribution of the Sri Lankan historical tradition to the reconstruction of the history of ancient India. The extent to which this tradition – rather the vast literary sources which incorporate it – is made use of has remained uneven, specially on account of the prejudices of early scholars who arrived at arbitrary and untested conclusions. These continue to have a deleterious effect on the work of many a modern scholar whose linguistic equipment for research in this field is limited.

The importance of reviewing these conclusions cannot be over-emphasized as a greater light is thrown on the constraints under which the early scholars worked and as more efficient tools and facilities for research on an interdisciplinary basis are being made available to their modern counterparts. The assiduity with which the Buddhist Sangha of Sri Lanka endeavoured to preserve and transmit historical information to posterity deserves recognition in the tangible form of an unbiased evaluation of their efforts.

12. See such works as RHYS DAVIDS, *Buddhist India*; R. FICK, *Social Organization of North East India in Buddha's Time*.