

## RELIGIOUS LIFE OF WOMEN IN ANCIENT SRI LANKA

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The objective of this study is an analysis of the religious life of women in ancient Sri Lanka with special reference to the Anuradhapura period. Anuradhapura served as the capital city of Sri Lanka for thirteen centuries from 394 B.C. to 1017 A.D.

The religious life during the period was primarily influenced by the value systems enunciated in the teachings of Buddha. The arrival of Thēra Mahinda during the reign of King Devanampiyatissa (247 B.C) marked the acceptance of Buddhism as the religion of the State. For many centuries this tradition continued. During the Anuradhapura period Buddhism was virtually unrivalled as the national faith. The teachings of Buddha as relating to the societal and family role of women are relevant to the study. The paper will make references to such preachings. The order of Buddhist nuns (**Bhikkunis**) flourished in Sri Lanka with its inception in the reign of King Devanampiyatissa for almost the entire duration of the Anuradhapura period. However, the historians observe a deterioration of the order of Buddhist nuns towards the latter phase. An analysis of social, economic and political roles of females are beyond the scope of this study. However, relevant inferences are drawn wherever necessary.

### Sources

The primary source material for the study are the inscriptions and the chronicles of Sri Lanka. Both rock (cave) inscriptions and pillar inscriptions in Brāhmī script, made between third century B.C and second century A.D. provide much useful information. The chronicles *Mahāvamsa* compiled by Mahanama Thēra in fifth century A.D. and *Cūlavamsa* Volume I by Dharmakīrti Thēra in the thirteenth century and *Dīpavaṃsa* in the fourth century A.D. contain information about the Sinhala dynasty. Of the 121 rulers who reigned from Anuradhapura there were only two queens.<sup>1</sup> This naturally tends to restrict the importance of the chronicles as a source of study on women. However, *Mahāvamsa* is not only a chronicle of the Sinhala dynasty. Being compiled by the monks (bhikkus) from the *Mahavihara* - it is also a chronicle of *Mahavihara* - the main religious establishment of the period. Thus the chronicle contains detailed descriptions of the important religious events of the period. Numerous references are found of the participation of the females in such religious activities.



The references to females in the teachings of Buddha is largely drawn from *Anguttra Nikāya*, *Samyutta Nikāya* and *Vinaya Pitaka*. *Saddharmālamkāraya* the sinhala translation of the Pali text *Rasavāhini*, written in the 14th century too provides important references on the Anuradhapura period. Two other important sources are *Siṃhala-bōbhi-vamsaya* and *Thūpavamsa* written in the 13th century. However, it needs to be emphasized that most of the sources used in the study, with the exception of the inscriptions, have been compiled by Buddhist priests in a patriarchal social organisation. Further the objectives of the authors of the source documents in their compilation were different. Hence we are compelled to restrict our references to a limited number of sources.

### Buddhism - its attitude towards women.

Equality is one of the basic values enunciated in the teachings of the Buddha.<sup>2</sup> Lord Buddha was very critical of the semi - servile position held out to woman in both social and religious lives in contemporary Indian society. Professor DhiraSekera establishes this fact by drawing lengthy references from *Samyutta Nikāya* and *Anguttara Nikāya* in his study *Buddhist Monastic Discipline*<sup>3</sup>. He refutes the opposite view expressed by A. S. Altekar,<sup>4</sup> who maintains that both Buddhism and Jainism did not bestow the women with the respect that is their due in an egalitarian society.<sup>5</sup>

Motherhood was idolized and revered. For example in Buddhism the metaphors *Brahmā* (estimable), *Pubbācariya* (Ancient teachers) and *ahuneyya* (persons worthy of support) were used in admiration of the mother and father in family.<sup>6</sup> The wise and devoted children were expected to revere their parents and to look after their five basic needs, namely food requisites, clothing, bedding, bathing and washing their feet.<sup>7</sup> The lengthy excerpt from the *Anguttara Nikaya* perhaps is the best description of the household duties expected of a wife in the Buddhist value system. ... "She will get up before him, retire after him, be obedient to his wishes, lovely in her ways and gentle in her speech" are the qualities that a woman should possess.<sup>8</sup> She should organise the household work efficiently. "Whatever her husband's home industries, whether in wool or cotton, there in she is deft and nimble, gifted with an inquiring turn of mind into all such undertakings," she should be able to arrange and carry them out.<sup>9</sup> Moreover she should reverence, honour, esteem and respect whosoever who is honoured by her husband.

In the *Avyākata - vagga* of *Anguttara Nikāya* wives are classified into seven types.

- |                              |  |
|------------------------------|--|
| 1. <i>Vadhakā ca bhariya</i> | — wife like a slayer                   |
| 2. <i>Corī ca bhariya</i>    | — wife like a robber                   |
| 3. <i>ayyā - ca bhariya</i>  | — wife like a mistress                 |
| 4. <i>māta ca bhariya</i>    | — wife like a mother                   |
| 5. <i>bhagīni ca bhariya</i> | — wife like a sister                   |
| 6. <i>sakhi ca bhariya</i>   | — wife like a companion                |
| 7. <i>dāsi ca bhariya</i>    | — wife like a hand maid" <sup>11</sup> |



The term 'māta ca bhariya' does not denote that such a wife expects to be honoured and respected by her husband as his mother. It in fact means that "she should care her husband with loving sympathy" as does a mother for her only son.<sup>12</sup> The sister type wife and companion type wife received peer treatment by the husbands. However hand maid type wife was to obey her husband's every word and of "all things enduring calm and pure in heart" even if he lashes her with a stick.<sup>13</sup> Such wives (mother type, sister type, companion type and slave type) are born in heaven after their death. But on the other hand not only the slayer type and robber type wives but also the mistress type wife, "who are harsh, immoral and lacking in respect will wander in a miseries of hell."<sup>14</sup>

From the above excerpts from the teachings one can observe that the Buddha had laid down a code of good living for women. The *Samyutta Nikāya* points out clearly the high spiritual attainments of some women.

### The Establishment of the order of Buddhist Nuns (Bhikkuni Order)

The establishment of the order of Buddhist nuns was a decisive factor in the importance of Buddhism in fashioning the religious life of women. The Buddhist religion as an institution comprises of a triad - *Buddha*, *Dhamma* and *Sangha*. It was left to the Sangha (Buddhist priests) to perpetuate the *Dhamma* the teaching of Buddha with the three aspects forming the triad. The institution of Buddhist priests in its inception was limited to the males. The order of Buddhist nuns was established only after five years of the Enlightenment of the Buddha. Once established the order of Buddhist nuns expanded rapidly. Many key figures in the order of Buddhist nuns received recognition from the Great One himself. For Example,

"Mahāpajāpati Gotami	— For seniority
Khema	— Profound wisdom
Uppalavanna	— Supernatural powers
Patācāra	— Knowledge of Vinaya
Dhammadinnā	— Gift of preaching
Nandā	— Devotion to profound trances
Sonā	— Accomplished exertion
Sakula	— Supernatural vision
Bhaddā Kundulakēsa	— Instantaneous exercise of transcendental realization.
Bhaddā Kapilani	— Ability to trace lineage of prior skandhas
Bhaddā Kaccāna	— Great transcendental Knowledge
Kisāgotāmi	— Users of rough robes and
Sigala Mata	— for absolute faith." <sup>15</sup>



Theri - Gātha is a compilation of verses on 73 women who entered the order of Buddhist nuns. It provides evidence of the high knowledge of Dhamma possessed by these nuns. References to the inception of the order of Buddhist nuns provides an illuminating insight into the attitude of Lord Buddha towards the women. The initial reaction towards the request for the establishment of the order of Buddhist nuns was scepticism. For example in *Cullavagga* the request was not accomodated with the observation that

“Seyyathāpi Ananda sampanne salikkhette  
setatthikā nāma rogajāti nipatati evan tam  
sālikkhattam na ciratthitikam hoti evan  
eva kho Ananda yasmini dhammavinaye labhati  
mātugāmo agāasmā anagāriyām pabbajjām na  
tam brahmacarivam ciratthikam hoti”<sup>16</sup>

“As when the disease known as mildew attacks a whole field of rice that field of rice does not last long, even so Ananda in whatever *dhamma* and discipline women obtain the going forth.”<sup>17</sup>

The repeated refusals to the request for the establishment of the order of Buddhist nuns three times in a row, made “Gotami, Pajapati the Great having had her hair cut off, having donned saffron robes, set out for Vesali with several *Sakyan* women. Her feet swollen, her limbs covered with dust; with tearful face and crying.”<sup>18</sup>

The Lord Buddha finally acquiesced and permitted the establishment of the order of Buddhist nuns with the proviso that eight by-laws of conduct are strictly adhered to.

1. “A nun who has been ordained (even) for a century must greet respect fully, rise from her seat, salute with joined palms, do proper homage to a monk ordained by that day. And this rule is to be honoured, respected, revered, venerated, never to be transgressed during her life.”
2. “A nun must not spend the rains in a residence where there is no monk. This rule is to be .....
3. “Every half month a nun should desire two things from the order of monks: the asking (as to the date) of the observance day and the coming for the exhortation. This rule is to be .....
4. “After the rains a nun must ‘invite’ before both Orders in respect of these matters: what was seen what was heard what was suspected. This rule is to be .....



5. "A nun offending against an important rule, must undergo discipline for half a month before both Orders. This rule is to be ....."
6. "When, as a probationer, she has trained in the six rules for two years, she should seek ordination from both Orders. This rule is to be ..."
7. "A monk must not be abused or reviled in any way by a nun. This rule is to be ...."
8. "From to-day admonition of monks by nuns is foibidden, admonition of nuns by monks is not- forbidden. This rule is to be ....."<sup>19</sup>

The establishment of the order of Buddhist nuns in a patriarchal society where the task roles of females were rigidly constrained to a subserviant one,<sup>20</sup> was a revolutionary event. Lord Buddha perhaps was concerned of the possible unsalutary effects of radical changes in a traditional society on the propagation of Buddhism. His statement to Ananda Thera that the time is not yet ripe for the females to enter the Order of *Sangha* was perhaps based on this concern for the future of the Buddhism. The more relevant fact of the issue is that Lord Buddha permitted the establishment of order of Buddhist nuns only just five years after his enlightenment and that decision was of immense benefit in improving the status of women in the contemporary society.

#### The establishment of the order of Buddhist nuns in Sri Lanka

The order of Buddhist nuns in Sri Lanka was established in the reign of King Devanampiyatissa by Sanghamitta Maha Theri who was invited to Sri Lanka for the specific purpose.<sup>21</sup> Dipavamsa mentions that she was accompanied by Uttarā Hema, Pasādapāla, Aggimitta, Dāsaka, Pheggu Pabbata, Mattā, Mallā and Dhammadasiya.<sup>22</sup> Another important event was the bringing in of Bodhi - sapling from the *Jaya Siri Maha Bodhiya* in India, *Sinhala-bodhi - vamsaya* mentions that in addition to the ordaining of consort Anula, thousands of women too were ordained and they contributed to the propagation of Buddhism.<sup>23</sup>

The chronicles provide several references that enable a rough estimation of the expansion of the order of Buddhist nuns in Sri Lanka. According to *Dipavamsa* there were twenty thousand Buddhist nuns in ancient Sri Lanka. The *pooja* ceremony at Mirisavetiya was patronised by 90,000 nuns and one hundred thousand monks.<sup>24</sup> The ceremony for the construction of the *Mahā Thūpa* was graced by 18,000 monks and 14,000 nuns.<sup>25</sup> *Mahavamsa* mentions that king Maha Chula Maha Tissa offered robes to 60,000 monks and 30,000 nuns.<sup>26</sup> Geiger observes that it is not possible to give too much credence to these figures as probably the numbers are exaggerated.<sup>27</sup> A valid statistical inference however is that the figures enable the historian to arrive at the ratio of nuns to monks. The ratio is 10 : 9 at the Mirisavetiya ceremony; 9 : 7 at the



Maha Thupa ceremony and 10:5 during the reign of Mahachula Mahatissa. Even the least favourable ratio i. e. 10 : 5 indicates that the order of Buddhist nuns has made rapid strides during the first three centuries of its establishment. This argument is strengthened by the fact that the authors of the chronicle had no reason to exaggerate the numbers of the nuns by a greater measure than their supposed exaggeration of the number of monks.

The rapid expansion of Buddhism led to increasing numbers of nuns who were vested with *Upasampada*. Several years of priesthood was followed by conferment of the honorary titles *Therī* and *Maha Therī*. Sanghamitta is referred to as *Maha Therī* and the accompanied nuns as *Therī* in the *Mahāvamsa*. *Dipavamsa* contains a list of nuns who have obtained *Upasampada* ordination in Sri Lanka. Some of these were Sammuddanāva, Nāgapali, Nāgamitta, Mahila and Nāga.

Several other nuns were recognised experts on Buddhist philosophy. For example following the *Baminiya* famine during the reign of King Vattagāmini Abhaya (29 - 17 B.C) the *Vinaya Pitaka* (the book of the Discipline), Pasmaha Sangi and the *Abhidharma sapta prakarani* was taught by nuns who were versatile in all scriptures. *Dipavamsa* refers to them as nuns who were devoted to the "true religion and discipline... (and) who were free from passion, and possessed of great miraculous powers."<sup>29</sup> According to *Dipavamsa* the two nuns Sivalā and Mahāruhā of India were invited to Sri Lanka by the King Vattagamani Abaya for the explicit purpose of coaching the nuns who were experts not only in *Dhamma* and *Vinaya* (discipline) but also in religious history (*Saddhamma - vamsa*). According to Dr. Malalasekera the first instance in which a nun has been entrusted with the task of teaching religious history was in the reign of King Dutugamunu<sup>31</sup> (101 - 77 B.C). Of the 72 nuns teaching *Dhamma* and *Vinaya* referred to in the book *Saddhamma-vamsa*, 8 were historians.<sup>31</sup> Their preachings would have been undoubtedly more devoted to the females of the laity. The combination of the teaching of the Buddha with the knowledge of cultural traditions would have exerted a powerful influence in fashioning the life-styles and value systems of women in ancient Sri Lanka. There were, in fact, many lay women who possessed an indepth knowledge of *Abidharma*.<sup>\*</sup> For example the consort of King Jettatissa could recite the sacred texts and was well versed in *Abidharma*.<sup>33</sup>

By the 5th century A.D. the order of Buddhist nuns has established its reputation even internationally. This is evidenced by the fact that nuns from Sri Lanka were instrumental in establishing the order of nuns in China. This is referred to in '*Biography of the Bhiksunis*, written by Pao Chang in 526 A.D.<sup>34</sup> It refers to 'Nandi', a captain of a foreign ship who accompanied nuns from Sri

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\* *Abidhamma* is the third part of the Buddhist cannon, in which its philosophical content is systematically summerized.



Lanka to Nanking in 429 A.D. for the conferment of the higher ordination in China. The number of nuns were insufficient and a new group of nuns led by *Therī Trisarna* was taken to China in 433 A.D for the ordination ceremony.<sup>35</sup>

The Nāgarjunikonda inscription refers to Buddhist missions to the region by the monks and nuns from Sri Lanka.<sup>36</sup>

The order of nuns which flourished during almost the entire twelve centuries of the Anuradhapura period shared in the misfortunes that befell the kingdom and withered away by the 10th century A.D. Historical evidence as to the casual factors for the decline is virtually non-existent. The *Kukurumahandama* pillar inscription of the 10th century A.D. refers to a hospital (*ved-hal*) located opposite Mahindarāma, nunnery situated along the high street of Anuradhapura.<sup>37</sup> The Jetavanarāma inscription of Mahinda IV, too refers to the repair of nunneries belonging to communities of helpless nuns.<sup>38</sup> It is a noteworthy fact that no reference is made in the *Mahāvamsa* about the order of nuns after the reign of Mahinda IV (956 A.D. - 972 A.D). It could be hypothesized that the South Indian invasions which led to the collapse of Anuradhapura as the seat of the royalty, inflicted heaviest damage to the royal city. In fact the incessant wars would have compelled the resident population to flee from the war ravaged areas. The nunneries being situated mainly in the city and its immediate suburbs and depending primarily on the patronage of the citizens would have been subjected to greatest deprivation and possibly the excesses of the invading troops. It should be reiterated that there is no historical evidence to support this hypothesis.

#### Nuns of different sects

The Buddhist dogma as introduced by Mahinda Thera was Buddhism in its pure pristine form.<sup>39</sup> Different interpretations of the dogma by latter day Buddhist intellectuals resulted in the evolution of different sects expounding varied versions of the Buddhist Philosophy. Hence in addition to the *Theravāda* sect - the school which claims to espouse Buddhism in its pristine form, *Māhāyāna*, *Vetullavāda*, *Dhammarucika* and *Sāgalika* schools of thought too developed in India. These naturally found their way to Sri Lanka and centres propagating the new schools of thought existed side by side with the Theravada tradition.<sup>40</sup> *Mahāvihāra* the oldest Buddhist centre continued with its *Theravāda* tradition. *Abeyagiriya* which was a very important centre of Buddhist teachings opened its doors to the new interpretations too. Evidences suggest that *Abeyagiriya* accommodated the *Māhāyāna*, *Vetullāvada* and *Dhammarucika* in addition to *Theravāda*. The monks belonging to *Sāgalika* sect were sheltered in lodgings constructed within the *Mahavihara* precincts in the *Jetavana Vihara* by King Mahasen<sup>41</sup> (274 A.D - 301 A.D).

The evidence suggests that each sect had its order of nuns too. For example the abode for nuns constructed by Vajira, the wife of commander-in-chief Sakka during the reign of Kassapa V (913 A.D - 923 A.D) in Sri Pāda,<sup>42</sup> and the



*Mahāmallaka* nunnery of Mahinda IV<sup>43</sup> (956 A.D-972 A. D) were abodes offered to the nuns of *Theravada* sect. Dr. Leslie Gunawardena is of opinion that both the nuns at Tissarāma who were rested with the responsibility of protecting the Mahabodhi at *Mirisavatiya* and *Nālārāma* and who were entrusted with the task of watering the *Sri Maha Bodhi* in *Mahavihara*<sup>44</sup> belonged to the *Therāvada* sect.<sup>45</sup>

The *Cūlavamsa* refers to the Rajina nunnery offered to the nuns of *Sāgalika* sect by Mugalan I<sup>46</sup> (496 A.D to 513 A.D). In all probability the two nunneries (*Uttarā, Abaya*) constructed by King Mahasen, the great patron of the *Mahāyāna* tradition, would have been offered to the nuns belonging to *Mahāyāna* sects.<sup>47</sup>

### The female as a devotee

The offering of places of abode to *Ubatho Sangha* (both monks and nuns) was an important form of expression for devotion. These abodes were primarily rock shelters, often natural caves made habitable by effecting alterations to ensure protection against rain and winds. These were offered to the monks who opted to gain higher order through meditation. Of the 1276 inscriptions (including the additional numbers) referred to by Professor S. Paranavitana in his *Inscriptions of Ceylon, Early Brāhmi Inscriptions*, Volume I, 196 inscriptions refer to the donation of caves by the faithful.<sup>48</sup> Of these 91 have been offered by males (*upāsakas*) and 105 by females (*upāsikās*)<sup>49</sup> The generic term used for the female devotee the *upāsikā* was at times substituted by other special terms. To the latter belonged queens, princesses, nuns and ladies of high position (*parumakalu*)<sup>50</sup>. The fourteen cave inscriptions in *Kottadamūhela* of Hambantota District mention that the caves were donated by princess (*Abi*) Savera, the wife of prince (*Aya*) Tisa, the daughter (*jhita*) of prince Mahatisa.<sup>51</sup> Most of the female devotees belonged to the royalty or the nobility. Some examples are *Abi Anuradi*, the daughter of King Gamani Abaya,<sup>52</sup> *Mahabi*, the daughter of *Diparajha*,<sup>53</sup> *Abi Kana*, the wife of *Gamani Abaya*<sup>54</sup> and *Abi Anuradhi* the wife of *Rajha Uti*.<sup>55</sup>

Another noteworthy characteristic is that a large number of these devotees were elderly. This is borne out by the incidence of special references as *mataya upasika*<sup>56</sup>(the devotee-the mother of) *bariya*<sup>57</sup> (wife *Abaka upasika*<sup>58</sup>)(the devotee-the wife of) and *Jhaya*<sup>59</sup>(wife) in the cave inscriptions. The term *jhita* (daughter) and *bagini* or *bakini* was rarely used.<sup>60</sup>

The reader is perhaps intrigued by the fact that in most inscriptions which refer to donations by female devotees, the family connections to the male in the household too have been mentioned. Rarely one does come across an inscription in which the male donor has been linked to a female elder.<sup>61</sup>

The donation of caves took the form of either individual offerings, family offerings or group offerings. *Erupotana* inscription is a case in point of a family offering. In group offerings, the group comprised of people of different status.



For example a cave in *Tittavela* was offered to the *Maha Sangha* (Buddhist monks) by a group comprising of a female devotee-(*upāsika Tissā*) chief *Reta* and elder (*tera*) *Humana*.<sup>62</sup>

The inscriptions referring to donations of caves have almost always used the phrase to the sangha of the four quarters, present and absent', (*agata - anagata - catudisa - sagasa*), to identify the beneficiary of the donation. Even if one is to interpret the term *sagasa* did include the *ubatosangha* (comprising both the *bhikku* and *bhikkuni sasanas*) as mentioned in *Mahavamsa*, it does not follow that nuns (*bhikkuni*) lived in caves. Generally the caves provided the abodes for meditating monks, and the nuns resided in the nunneries in more populous settlements - the villages and towns.<sup>63</sup> Both rock inscriptions and chronicles testify to this fact. The archaeological remains of an old building has been found near a rock inscription in *Assadduma* in *Vanni Hatpattu* in the *Kurunagale District*.<sup>64</sup> The inscription refers to a nunnery termed *Nakara-gana*.<sup>65</sup> The pillar inscriptions of 9th and 10th centuries refer to several such nunneries. The paucity of historical data about nuns residing in caves coupled with the fact that the by rules of discipline for nuns too prohibited isolated residence, it can be deduced that the nuns as a rule did not live in caves.

In addition to offering caves to those monks who preferred a monastic life, the construction of temples monasteries and nunneries was another form of expressing devotion by the females. The *thupa* and the temple built in the court yard of the Great Bodhi Tree by *Potthā*,<sup>66</sup> the consort of King *Vasabha* (127 A.D. 171 A.D.), *Katthaka - cetiya* and *Jayasena* rock temple built by the consort of *Dappula II*<sup>67</sup> (792 A.D - 797 A.D) are such examples. It is interesting to note that the *Jayasena* rock temple was granted to Tamil *Bhikku* community.<sup>68</sup> In addition to these a nunnery named *Silamegha* too was donated by the consort of *Dappula*. *Sanghā*, the consort of *Sena I*, (831 A.D.-85A.D) (a dwelling house called *Mahindasena*), the consort of King *Sena II* (851 A.D - 855 A.D) (two temples - *Abhayuttara* and *Samghasena*),<sup>70</sup> *Vajira*, the consort of *Kassapa V* (913 A.D - 923 A.D) *Vajira Pirivena*),<sup>71</sup> and *Kati* the consort of a king named *Gamani Abaya* (a temple - *Milakkha - tissa*)<sup>72</sup> are some other female devotees of royal families. In addition to the royalty ordinary devotees too engaged, in such offerings. The *Brahmanayagama* inscription refers to a temple (*vihāra*) constructed by two female devotees named *Anudiya* and *Citta*.<sup>73</sup> Construction of ponds,<sup>74</sup> flights of steps<sup>75</sup> and bed places<sup>76</sup> are some other examples of offerings by female devotees.

These offerings at times involved heavy financial commitments. For an example consort of *Vankanāsikatissa* (III A.D - 114 A.D) spent 100,000 pieces of gold (*Kahavanu*) for the reconstruction of *Abhayagiriya* and the rock *chetiya* in *Mahavihara*.<sup>77</sup> The cost of the repair of *Girikanda* and *Purvārāma* was borne by the consort of *Dappula II*<sup>78</sup> (792 A.D-797 A.D 297 A.D). Some others offered in kind, the building material. The slab inscription in *Ruvanveli Dagaba* mentions of a female devotee *Citta* who donated twenty stone bricks to be used in the constru-



ction of *Mahatupa*.<sup>79</sup> Still others whose economic conditions were poor, accumulated merit by offering their labour. *Mahavamsa* refers to two female devotees whose meritorious deed was to offer their labour in the construction of *Mahatupa* being re-born in *Tavutisa*, heaven of 33 gods.<sup>80</sup>

Bequeathing of one's landed property to the *sangha* was another form of devotional expression. *Kok-ebē* rock inscription refers to princess Talata Laci who donated her entire property to the monastery of *Harayada*.<sup>81</sup> *Molahitiya vele gala* rock inscription and *Vilēvāva* rock inscription refers to property offerings by Anula consort of King Kūtakannatissa and the Mother of Gamini - abaya respectively.<sup>82</sup> Damila Devi, the consort of King Candamukha Siva (103 A.D - 112 A.D) allotted the entire revenues from the village Manikāragama to *Issarasamana Vihara*.<sup>83</sup> (Isurumuniya). Yet others redeemed the mortgaged temple properties and offered them back to the temples. This illustrates that temple properties were saleable and mortgagable. In addition to the repair of buildings, proper clearing and maintenance of temple gardens, decorations by colourful flags, streamers and buntings as a mark of honour were some other means of expressing devotion.<sup>84</sup>

The females were very closely connected with ritualistic *poojas* (offerings) associated with *Sri Maha Bodhi* from the inception. *Simhala - bodhi - vamsa* mentions that King Dharmasoka sent four female attendants from the royalty (*Peraharabiso*) to pour water on the Bodhi tree.<sup>85</sup> King Devanampiyatissa too appointed four royal virgins for the same purpose. *Simhala-bodhi-vamsa* states that "the four royal virgins bedecked with jewellery and provided with gold and silver pots were rested with the responsibility of watering the *Mahabodhi* by the King who crowned them and bequeathed with the title of *Peraharabiso*".<sup>86</sup> *Simhala - Bodhi - vamsa* also states that four *perahara biso* maidens went into the royal palace in great splendor. The ceremony is reminiscent of the Hindu temple maidens. Dr. Charles Godakumbura has maintained that the protection of these royal maidens was the King's responsibility and quotes two instances (Coranaga 1st Century B.C and Kudda Pārinda 441 - A.D - 456 A.D) in which the Kings abdicated as they failed in discharging this responsibility.<sup>87</sup> An examination of historical evidence however, does not provide adequate proof of this assertion. Accordings to *Mahavamsa* King Coranaga met with his death by partaking a poisoned meal.<sup>88</sup> *Rajavaliya* states that the King was executed by the people. The *Mahavamsa's* portrayal of Coranāga is that of a wrathful King with a vengeful mind who destroyed 18 temples and was born in hell. It is therefore impossible to percieve King Coranaga to commit suicide as penance for his failure in protecting the *Peraharabiso*. The other primary sources too do not contain any evidence to support the assertion by Dr. Godakumbura. The tradition of appointing maidens from royal families to water the *Mahabodhi* continued for several centuries. *Mahavamsa* refers to a water-pooja ceremony by King Dhatusena (455 A.D - 473 A.D). According to the Geiger English translation of the *Mahavamsa*, the King set up "sixteen bath maidens of bronze



and arranged for the adornment".<sup>89</sup> The Buddhadatta edition refers to this as *Dhovana loha navayo*.<sup>90</sup> The Sumangala edition interprets the term as sixteen receptacles made of bronze (*Dovina loho horu solosak*.)<sup>91</sup>

*Mahakalattawa* pillar inscription (found in Galkulama, Anuradhapura District, presently in the inscription-gallery of the Colombo museum) of Sena 11 (853 - 887 A.D) or Kassapa IV (898 - 918 A.D) provides valuable information about the water ritual of Maha Bodhi.<sup>92</sup> According to the inscription the King endowed the entire revenue of the village Gitelgamuwa to provide the four-fold requisites of the seven chief bhikkunis *Mehehi-vat-Hambhuvan* who were engaged in the task of daily watering the bodhi tree. It also states that the income of the village was exempted from income tax. This inscription provides proof that by 9th century A.D., watering the *Mahabodhi* was the responsibility of the chief *bhikkunis* (nuns). Perhaps the royal maidens (*Perahara-biso*) have been replaced by the nuns (*bhikkunis*). A supporting piece of evidence is provided by *Mahavaṃsa* which refers to the fact that the nuns of Tissārama were entrusted with the responsibility of looking after the Mahabodhi at Mirisavetiya.<sup>93</sup>

### Religious Observances by the laity

The women of the Anuradhapura period observed the Buddhist precepts diligently. They were very devoted to the religion and participated in both the ritualistic and other religious ceremonies. *Dhātuvāṃsa* describes a religious ceremony during the reign of Kavantissa (2nd century B.C) in which five hundred princesses including the chief consort Soma went in procession with offerings of scented flowers and incense to the temple.<sup>94</sup> Some ceremonies lasted seven days. In certain such ceremonies the more faithful, especially the females donated even their jewellery as offerings.<sup>95</sup> According to Fa-hien who visited Sri Lanka in the 4th century A.D, the temples were full of devotees during the poyadays.<sup>96</sup> Many females observed *sil* on such days. *Dhamma* discourses were the norm of the poya days. The anecdote in *Saddharmalamkaraya* of a female devotee who restrained from disrupting the audience at a *Dhamma* discourse even when her little child was bitten by a poisonous reptile is illustrative of the religiosity of the period.<sup>97</sup> *Saddharmalamkaraya* contains several such stories of females who offered their own clothes to the *bhikkus*; of females who offered the only piece of cloth they possessed whilst they covered themselves with bark and branches<sup>98</sup>, and of a poor woman who performed menial labour for a piece of cloth to offer to the Sangha.<sup>99</sup> *Manorathapurani*, commentary to the *Anguttara Nikaya* written by Buddhaghosa Thera too contains many such anecdotes.

### Female value system

The teachings of Buddha resulted in the development of a value system in which religiosity, tolerance, affection, love and benevolence were the key elements. The female in her social and family roles observed behaviour pattern in close accord to these value systems. Fidelity and chastity were two important



characteristic of the female behaviour system. The story of *Nandi Vanijya* eulogised the life of Nandi who resisted the amorous advances of a minister who proposed marriage with the saying "that as long as my husband lives I do not have another one."<sup>101</sup> The life histories of the brave and patriotic females of the time who volunteered to sacrifice their lives for the nation are illustrative of the deep influence of the Buddhist teachings. Princess Devi, the daughter of King Kelanitissa who volunteered to offer her life as a sacrifice to tidal waves to protect the country from the wrath of the sea,<sup>101</sup> Somadevi, the consort of King Walagamba who alighted from the fleeing vehicle to enable the King a fleeting chance of escape from the chasing marauding Tamils,<sup>102</sup> and the mother of King Ilanaga who advised the King to refrain from executing the royalty of the *Lambakarna* clan<sup>103</sup> are examples of such religious, intelligent, patriotic, heroic females of the day.

#### NOTES

1. Queen Anula ruled Sri Lanka from 12 A. D to 16 A.D for four years and Queen Seevali for a period of 4 months in 93 A.D.
2. In ancient India birth of a female child was not regarded as "a cause of joy as that of a male child. For example King Kosala Pasenādi was not pleased when he got the news that his wife had given birth to a daughter. On this occasion, the Lord Buddha discerning that matter altered these verses.

'A woman child, O lord of men, may prove Even a better offspring than a male  
For she may grow up wise and virtuous, Her husband's mother rev'rencing, true  
wife The boy that she may bear may do great deed And rule great realms, yea,  
such a son Of noble wife becomes his country's guide Samyutta-Nikāya, Kosala  
Samyutta, translated by Mrs. Rhys Darids, *The Book of the Kindred sayings* Part I,  
Pali Text Society, (Hereafter, will be referred to as P.T.S.) Translation Series, No. 7  
London, P. 111.

3. Jotiya Dhirasekara, *Buddhist Monastic Discipline* Sri Lanka, 1982, pp.137-157.
4. *Ibid*, p. 138.
5. Altekar, A.S., *The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization*, p.108.
6. Brahmā ti mātāpitaro pubbācariyā ti vuccare  
Anuneyyā ca puttānam pajāya ānukampakā  
*The Anguttara - Nikaya*, Vol. I, Tikā Nipājta Bevadūta-vagga, edited by Rev.  
Richard Morris, P.T.S. London, 1961, p. 132.
7. Tasmā hi te namasseyya sakkareyyātha pandito,  
Annena atha pānena vatthena sayanena ca  
Ucchādanena nhāpanena pādānaṃ dhovanena ca. *ibid*, p. 132.
8. *The book of the Gradual sayings* (Anguttara Nikaya), Vol. IV, Translated by E. H. Hare,  
PTS, (London), 1978. p.p. 176 - 177.
9. *ibid*, pp. 176 - 177.
10. *ibid*, pp. 176 - 177.



11. *Anguttara Nikāya*, Sattaka - Nipāta, Avyakata - Vagga, translated by E. Hardy, PTS. (London), 1958, p. 93.
12. *The Book of the Gradual Sayings*, *op.cit* pp. 57 - 58.
13. "Akkudhasantā vadhadanda tajjitā  
adutthacittā patino titikkhati  
akkkodhanā bhattuvsānuvattini,  
yā evarūpa purisassa bhariyā  
dasi ca bhariya ti ca' sā pavuccati"  
*Anguttara Nikaya*, Sattaka Nipata *op. cit.*, p. 93 and also *The Book of the Gradual Sayings*, *op.cit.*, pp. 57 - 59.
14. *Book of the Gradual sayings*, *op.cit.*, p. 58.
15. *English Translation of the Eka, Duka and Tika Nipāta of the Anguttara Nikaya*, published by P. T. S. in London, 1885 pp. 33-34.
16. *Vinaya Pitakam: The Cullavagga*, edited by H. Oldenberg, PTS Text series, No. 148, London, 1977, P. 256.
17. *Book of the Discipline (Vinaya Pitaka) Vol. V. (cullavagga)* translated by I. B. Hornerr PTS, (London), 1975, p.356.
18. *ibid.* p. 354
19. *ibid* pp. 354 - 355
20. According to the Law of Manu "in childhood a female must be subjected to her father in youth to her husband, when her lord is dead to her sons, a woman must never be independent."  
  
*The Law of Manu sacred Books of the East*, edited by F. Max Muller, Vol. 25, p. 19, 5, V. 148.
21. *Mahāvamsa*, (translated in to English by Wilhelm Geiger, 1912) Chapter 15. V. 19-22.
22. *Dipavamsa*, Chap. 18. V. 11 - 12.
23. *Simhala - bodhi - vamsaya*, edited by D. P. R. Samaranayaka, 1970, p. 194.
24. *Mahavamsa* Chapter 26. V. 15-16
25. *Mahavamsa* Chapter 29 : V. 68 - 69
26. *Mahavamsa* Chapter 34 : V. 8
27. Wilhelm Geiger, *Culture of Ceylon in mediaeval Times*, 1960, Wiesbaden, p. 185.
28. *Dipavamsa* Chapter 18, Verses 34 - 36 and V. 43.
29. *Ibid*, Chapter 18, Verses 14 - 46
30. *Ibid*, Chapter 18, V. 31 - 32
31. G. P. Malalasekara, *The Pali Literature of Ceylon* (Colombo), 1950, p. 137.



32. *Ibid*, P. 137
33. *Mahavamsa* Chapter 44, V 109 - 110.
34. W. Pachow - "Ancient Cultural Relations between Ceylon and China," *University of Ceylon Review* Vol. XII, No. 3, July 1954, pp 182 - 191, p. 183.
35. This event took place just 13 years after Fahien's visit to Ceylon. He went back to China in 416 A.D. *ibid*, p. 184
36. Amaradasa Liyanagamage & Ranaweera Gunawardena, *The Anuradhapura Period*. Vidyalandara Press, (1965) p. 131.
37. *Epigraphia Zeylanica*, Vol. II p. 22
38. Jetavanarama Slab Inscription of Mahinda IV *EZ*, Vol. I, p. 213.
39. Wilhelm Geiger, *op.cit* p. 207.
40. Walpola Rahula, *History of Buddhism in Ceylon*, (Colombo), 1956, pp.87-195.
41. *ibid*, p. 195.
42. *Culawamsa*, Part I Edited by Wilhelm Geiger in 1925 and 1927. (Hereafter will be referred to as *CV*.) *Cv*. Chapter 52 V: 63.
43. *CV*. Chapter 54. V. 48
44. *Cv*. Chapter 52 : V. 26  
No. 31, Pillar Inscription from Mahakalathawa, *E.Z*, Vol. V., Part II, pp.333-345
45. R. A. L. H. Gunawardena, *Robe and Plough, Monasticism and Economic Interest in Early Mediaeval Sri Lanka*, (1979) p. 38.
46. *Cv*. Chapter 39, V. 43
47. R. A. L. H. Gunawardena, *op. cit.*, p. 38
48. S. Paranavitana, *Inscriptions of Ceylon, Early Brahmi Inscriptions*, (1970), Volume I, p. CXVII
49. *Ibid*, p. CXVII  
For examples see Appendix I
50. There are eight inscriptions in which the title in its feminine form *parumakalu* is borne by females.  
S. Paranavitana, *op. cit* pg. IXXXIII. Ten inscriptions refer to names of nuns as donors of caves. For an example see Appendix II.
51. S. Paranavitana, *op.cit*, Numbers 556-569, pp. 43-44.  
For an example see Appendix III.
52. S. Paranavitana, *op. cit* Inscription No. 994 in page 78 and plate CIV.
53. *Op. cit* Inscription No. 37 in page 4 and plate IV..
54. *Op. cit* Inscription No. 18 in page 2 and plate I.
55. *Op. cit*, Inscription 550 in page 42 and plate LX.



56. S. Paranavitana, *Op. cit.*, For examples see the inscriptions 71, 112, 233, 545, 632, 1181, 1127, 1146, 1158 and 1181.
57. *Ibid.* For examples see the inscriptions 2, 23, 31, 279, 724, 790, 990 and 1028.
58. *Ibid.* See inscriptions 1138 and 1161.
59. *Ibid.*, see inscriptions 178, 610 and 1009.
60. *Ibid* For examples, Inscriptions 2, 5, 34, 1133 and 1135. see appendix IV.
61. *Ibid.* For example, the inscription No. 30 in page 3. It says that the chief Asamana is the son of lady Manalikaci. "Batiya Manalikaciya puta parumaka - Asamanaha lene sagasa"
62. S. Paranavitana, *op.cit.* Inscription No. 1196 in P. 96 and plate XI.
63. For details see page 7-8 of this article.
64. Malini Dias, *Epigraphical notes* No. 20, December 1983 (Department of Archives) pp. 6 - 7.
65. *ibid.*
66. *Mahavamsa*, Chapter 35, 3, Vs 90- 9.
67. *Cv.* Chapter 49, Vs 23 - 27.
68. *ibid.*
69. *ibid* Chapter 50 V. 79.
70. *ibid* Chapter 51, V. 86.
71. *ibid.*, Chapter, 52, Vs. 62 - 64.
72. S. Paranavitana *op. cit.* No. 193, p. 16 and plate XX.
73. *ibid.*, No. 161 C, P. 13 and plate XVI
74. Kirti, the consort of Sena V (972 A.D - 981 A.D) constructed three bathing tanks for the use of the monks.  
*Cv.* Chapter 54, Vs 51 - 53.
75. The inscriptions at Panikkankulama and Halmilla - Kulama refer to two female devotees who constructed a flight of steps.  
S. Paranavitana, *op. cit* No. 208 P. 17 and No. 95.p. 8.
76. *ibid.* No. 1137, p. 90, See also Appendix V of this article.
77. *Mahavamsa* Chapter 35, Vs 116 - 119
78. *Cv* Chapter 49, V 29
79. Ruvanveli Dagaba Slab Inscription, S. Paranavitana, *Inscription of Ceylon, Late Brahomi Inscriptions*, Vol. II, Part I, P. III.
80. *Mahavamsa* Chapter, 30 Vs 44 - 50



81. Kok-Ebe Rock Inscription, S. Paranavitana, *op. cit.*, Vol II, Part I, p. 120.
82. *Ibid* P. 5 and pp. 98 - 99.
83. Mahavamsa. Chapter 35, V. 48.
84. Cv. Chapter 49, V. 48 and Cv. Chapter 54, V. 52.
85. *Simhala-bodhi - Vamsaya*, *op. cit.* p. 210.
86. *Ibid*, p. 222
87. C. E. Godakumbura, 'Sinhalese. Festivals,' *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, New Series, Vol. XIV, 1970, pp.91-134, p. 105.
88. *Mahavamsa*, Chapter., 34, VV. 13-14
89. *Culavamsa* (being the more recent part of the Mahavamsa), Part I, translated by Giger, 1929, (Oxford University Press), p. 34.
90. *Mahavamsa*, The Buddhadata edition
91. The author owes a deep debt of gratitude to Prof. Jotiya Dhirasekara & Miss Manel Vitanavasam for their willing help given in this part of research.
92. Pillar inscription from Mahakalathawa, *E.Z.* Vol. V, *op.cit.* pp.336-337.
93. Cv. Chapter 52, V. 26.
94. *Dhatuwamsa*, edited by Vidhya Prakasana company-in 1890, p. 35.
95. *Simhala Thupavamsa*, edited by Pandit Baddegama Wimalawansa in 1958, p. 161.
96. Fa - Hien, *A Record of Buddhistic Kingdoms being an account by the Chinese monk Fa-Hien of his travels in India and Ceylon. (399 - 414 A.D)* Translated by James Legge, 1965, (New York) p. 104.
97. *Saddharamalamkaraya*, (edition by M. D. Gunasena & Company) pp. 416 - 419.
98. *ibid*, pp. 634 - 641.
99. *ibid*, pp. 630 - 634
100. *ibid*, pp. 687 - 703
101. *Mahavamsa* Chapter 22 V. 21.
102. *Ibid*, Chapter 33, V. 46.
103. *Ibid*. Chapter 35. V. 42 - 44.



APPENDIX I



4



5



6



1138

4. Maharajhaha Gamani-Tisasa bariya upasika-Kitakaya lene sagasa.  
(The cave of the female lay-devotee Kitaka, wife of the great king Gamani Tisasa, (is given) to the Sangha.)
  5. Gapati-Vega-jhitaya upasika-Visa (kaya) lene.  
(The cave of the female lay-devotee Visakha, daughter of the house-holder Vega.)
  6. Upasika-Tisaya lene. (The cave of the female lay-devotee Tissa).
1138. Parumaka-Gudaha abaka uvasika-Hujataya lene catu-disika-sagaye niyate  
(The cave of the female lay-devotee Sujata, wife of the chief Guda, has been dedicated to the Sangha of the four quarters.)

Extract from S. Paranavitana, *Inscriptions of Ceylon, Volume I, Early Brahmi Inscriptions*, Ceylon, 1970, pp. 1 and 90 and plates 1 and CXXXII

APPENDIX II



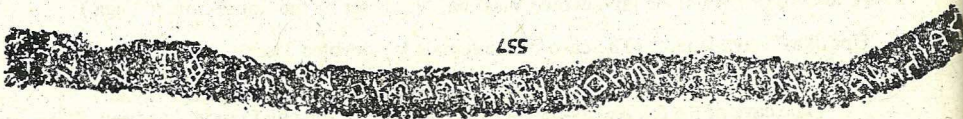
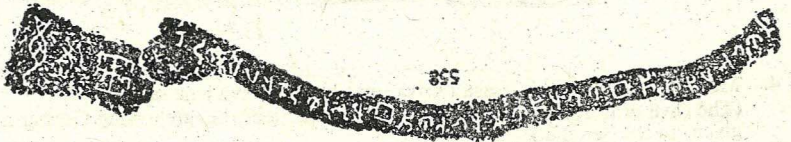
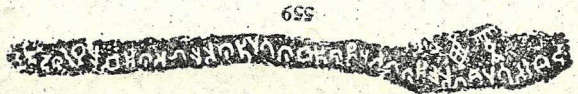
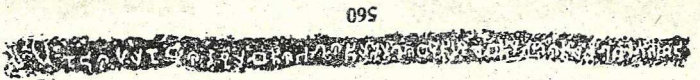
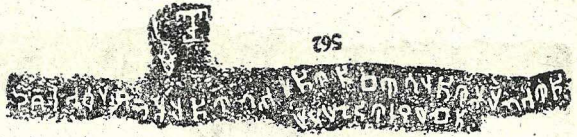
8

Tisa-samaniya lene sagasa  
(The cave of the nun Tissa (is given) to the Sangha.)

Extract from S. Paranavitana, *Inscriptions of Ceylon, Volume I, Early Brahmi Inscriptions*, Ceylon, 1970, p. 1 and plate I.



APPENDIX III



Extract from S. Paranavitana, *Inscriptions of Ceylon, Volume I, Early Brahmi Inscriptions*, Ceylon, 1970, pp. 43 and plates LX and LXI.



APPENDIX IV



1135

- (1) Upatissa-teraha baginiya lene agata-anagata catu-disa-saghaya
- (2) niyate

The cave of the younger sister of the elder Upatissa has been dedicated to the Sangha of the four quarters, present and absent.

Source - S. Paranavitana, *Inscriptions of Ceylon, Volume I, Early Brahmi Inscriptions, Ceylon, 1970, p. 90. and Plate CXXII.*

APPENDIX V



1137

Upasika-Rugaya lene upasika-Tisaya lene upasika-Sivaya maca-tana agata-anagata-catu-disa-saghasa.

The cave of the female lay-devotee Ruga, the cave of the female lay-devotee Tissa, and the bed-place of the female lay-devotee Siva, (are given) to the Sangha of the four quarters, present and absent.

Extract from S. Paranavitana, *Inscriptions of Ceylon, Volume I, Early Brahmi Inscriptions Ceylon, (1970), p. 90 and plate CXXII.*