Buddhism in Sri Lanka and South India: Interactions among Monastic Centres
Pluralism has been the key parameter in measuring advancement, progress and prosperity of human society today. In a way the basics of pluralism has been embedded into the human civilizational processes throughout the ages. As such, the conceptual designs of pluralism have gone through certain changes. Perhaps the concept has transcended boundaries of human imagination.

The philosophy expounded by Gautama Buddha too harps on pluralism. The essentials of plural societies have been the basis for the present day humankind which is encompassed by the processes of an increasingly globalized world. While religions deal with enlightenment and emancipation, every religion stresses on the importance of inclusiveness.

Rediscovery of pluralism based on the present day need has also become essential prerequisite and perhaps there is also space for deconstruction. Such efforts require integrity and alternative paradigms.

The Sri Lanka Deputy High Commission in Chennai in 2003 embarked on a unique experiment in exploring alternative avenues to rediscover the common heritage of pluralism in South Asia. Thus far we have been able to create substantive awareness on the concept of shared cultures between Sri Lanka and India through various activities. One of the most striking features among these is the Vesak Commemoration Lecture constituted since 2003. The first in the series of this discourse was delivered by Professor Sudharshan Seneviratne and the second lecture was delivered by Dr. Siran Deraniyagala. The Third lecture was delivered by Professor K N O Dharmadasa.

The Fourth Lecture will investigate the interactions of Buddhist monastic centers between Sri Lanka and South India. We thought such an inquiry is appropriate while we commemorate the 2550th Buddha Jayanthi in 2006.

We hope that the Fourth Vesak Commemoration Lecture-2006 by Professor S. Pathmanathan would further our understanding of the historical and religious interactions between the two countries.

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May 14, 2006

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Fourth Vesak Commemoration Lecture - 2006
Russian Center of Science and Culture, Chennai, Tamil Nadu
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Buddhism as a major world Religion

Buddhism, which had developed as a major religion in the Indian sub-continent under the Mauryas, spread rather rapidly in Central Asia and China in the north and in South East Asia during the early centuries of the Christian era. Missionary activities were undertaken by monks attached to some of the principal monasteries, which were affiliated to particular sects into which Buddhism was divided in post Asokan times.

In the course of its expansion within and outside South Asia, Buddhism absorbed local cults and religious traditions in varying degrees. In the realm of thought and practice there was a continuous interaction with Hinduism in India and to a lesser degree in the kingdoms of South East Asia. This interaction and the assimilation of local cults had the effect of modifying Buddhism. It led to a considerable measure of diversity and pluralism in the tradition. Besides, in many instances the distinctions had a regional orientation.

The Buddhist sects have been classified rather arbitrarily into two major categories: the Hinayana otherwise called Theravāda and the Mahāyāna. The Theravādins resisted to the utmost, over a long and continuous period of time, the deviations from the original tradition in matters relating to doctrine and discipline as transmitted by the community of monks in pupilary succession since the days of the Buddha. Yet, inspired by the speculative philosophy of Nāgārjuna and his associates the Mahāyāna rapidly gained ground and became ascendant in the Buddhist world. It was in Sri Lanka that the Theravāda held ground because of royal patronage and the circumstance that its monastic establishments had flourished with an unbroken continuity almost throughout the historical period.

The spread of Buddhism had provided the impetus for the penetration of Indian cultural influences over a large part of Asia. Buddhist and secular literature in Sanskrit were studied at monasteries and schools attached to them in far off lands. There was a search for manuscripts and a yearning for enhancing knowledge with zeal and a spirit of adventure. Monks and scholars travelled widely visiting sacred sites and monasteries reputed for their traditions of learning and scholastic activities. Some of them have left behind records of the impressions they had formed. The accounts of the Chinese travellers, namely Fa - Hsien, Tsuan Tsang and I'tsing are particularly significant as
contemporary records depicting traditions, beliefs and practices relating to Buddhism in India and several other countries.

Monarchs and merchants who had espoused Buddhism had invested enormous resources in establishing monastic centres, colleges, libraries and temples. Buddhism had provided the inspiration for spectacular developments in art and architecture in India, Sri Lanka, Central Asia and Southeast Asia where some of the Buddhist monuments were of unsurpassed magnitude and grandeur. The paintings of Ajanta, the cave temples of northwestern Deccan in India, the temples of Anuradhapura, Angkor, Borobodur and Pagan, the colossus of Bamiyan, and the paintings of Tun-Huan are some of the leading examples of such creations. In the first millennium of the Christian era Buddhism had contributed remarkably towards the progress of humanism and civilization in a major segment of humanity occupying a large part of Asia.

The Sri Lankan Phenomenon

According to tradition recorded in the Pali chronicles, Buddhism was established at Anuradhapura under royal patronage in the third century B.C. by missionaries sent in accordance with a resolution of the third Buddhist Council, which met at Pataliputra in the reign of Asoka. Thera Mahinda, a son of Asoka, led the mission. Mahinda established the community of monks who took up residence at the Mahavihara in the neighbourhood of the royal palace. Subsequently, the theri Sanghamitta came to Anuradhapura and established the Bhikkhuni order. The sapling of the Bo tree at Buddha Gaya, which had been brought by her was planted at Mahamevavana and in course of time it became an object of worship. The Mahabodhi became one of the most sacred centres of Buddhist worship. The Collar-bone of the Buddha was brought to the island around this time and deposited ceremonially at the Thuparama, which developed into another sanctified centre of worship. Buddhism, which was established under royal patronage soon spread to all parts of the island as attested by a large number of Brahmi inscriptions engraved mostly on the ledges of caves, which had become the abodes of monks.

Buddhism exerted a pervasive influence in the island during the Protohistoric and Early Historic periods. Its introduction coincided with the great leap from the Mesolithic culture to the formation of sedentary pastoral and agrarian communities. It was a consequence of the penetration of iron-using megalithic communities of South Indian origin. There was at the same time an assimilation of the elements of Vedic religion and culture among the class of elite because of the impact of progress in sea-borne trade in the South Asian region. Under the influence of Buddhism new social and cultural identities were forged. The art of writing was developed and a hybrid variety of the Brahmi script was widely used. The Prakrit language was adopted as the medium of learning and communication. It had the effect of displacing the local languages in course of time.

It is significant that in the conservation and transmission of Buddhist literary heritage the Buddhist establishments of Anuradhapura held a unique position. The whole range of Early Buddhist literature that had been transmitted to them from India during the early stages of their development were preserved, copied and distributed among leading monasteries where they were deposited and studied with assiduity by generations of learned monks. The study, recital and reflection on them had been their principal avocation. These could not be preserved in the monastic centres in India because of political upheavals and sectarian rivalries among the Buddhist orders. Early Buddhist literary heritage, which is also an important component of Indian cultural heritage, was preserved almost in its entirety on the island, and transmitted from the Sri Lankan monasteries to Myanmar, Thailand and other South East Asian countries. Another notable contribution by the Sri Lankan monastic orders was the development of a wide range of commentarial literature, which served as the foundation for the extensive treatises of Buddhaghosa, which are unsurpassed in Pali literature because of their encyclopaedic character, a mastery of the tradition and intellectual vigour in exposition.
A third contribution, which as an achievement was unique to Sri Lankan Buddhism, was the development of a historical tradition epitomized in the Pāli chronicles, the Dipavamsa and the Mahavamsa. This tradition has its origins in the historical traditions of early Buddhism, which focused on the life and career of the Buddha and the course of subsequent developments leading to the third Buddhist Council in the reign of Asoka. A notable feature of this tradition was the development of a scheme of chronology reckoned from the parinibbana of the Buddha. This tradition was the precursor and the prototype for historical traditions that were developed in the island. There was a shift of focus from Buddhism to dynastic history and this dynastic history was a version from a Theravāda point of view. As sources of information the chronicles are unique. It is also necessary here to note that the Pāli chronicles record relevant and relatively more authentic information on the history of Magadha. Until the discovery and publication of the Asokan inscriptions the traditional views on Asoka were largely coloured by the traditions recorded in these chronicles. They are also of great relevance for the study of the history of Buddhism in the island and particularly the interactions between Indian and Sri Lankan monastic centres.

The Development of Buddhism in Tamil Nadu

Buddhism does not seem to have had a decisive impact on Tamil society in India until the fourth century AD. In the Brāhmī inscriptions of Tamil Nadu, which belong to the same period as those of Sri Lanka, there is no reference to Buddhism. They record in Tamil the donations made to Jaina monks living in caves. In the whole range of early Tamil literature there are no references to Buddhism and its institutions. The progress of Buddhism could be traced from the fourth century AD on the basis of textual notices and archaeological remains. The remains of a Buddhist monastery excavated at Kāvērīppaṭṭinam, which could be assigned to the fourth century, are believed to be the earliest archaeological relics of Buddhism in Tamil Nadu. Close contacts with Sri Lanka in the South and Andhra Pradesh in the North had provided the impetus for the development of Buddhist sects since the fourth century and Buddhism had flourished at the principal cities of Kāvērīppaṭṭinam, Vaiṣṇī and Kaṇṭicāpuram. Unlike Jainism, Buddhism could not penetrate the rural landscape. It was an urban phenomenon and even in towns and cities its adherents were always in a minority. Its influence was confined to the class of elites and its patrons were mostly merchants. Unlike in Sri Lanka, the connections that Buddhism had with the monarchy was a tenuous one. It encountered competition and powerful opposition from Jainism, Saivism and Vaishnavism.

In Tamil Nadu there were two distinct periods of Buddhist activities. The first one corresponded to the early phase of the Pallava period (A.D. 400-650) and the second coincided with the peak period of Cōla imperial power. During the first of these periods Buddhism flourished in cities and towns that had a multicultural setting.

There was considerable diversity in the Buddhist tradition as found in the Tamil country. There were adherents of four principal sects: the Sthāvira, Yogācāra, Vaiṣṇava and the Dhyāna School. Close contacts were maintained with monastic centres in the Andhra country and those of Sri Lanka. The compendium of commentarial literature called the Andha-aitthakatha was available for study in some monasteries. The influence of the Mahāyāna was strongly felt through the connections with the Andhra country. The adherents of the Sthāvira School wrote in Pāli and the monastic centres of Anurādhapura with which they had maintained close connections were their major sources of inspiration.

During the Pallava period there were some outstanding monks in Tamil Nadu who had made remarkable contributions for the cause of Buddhism and the development of the major branches of Buddhist learning. The commentators of Buddhadatta (5th century A.D) earned for him a wide and enduring reputation in the history of the Theravāda tradition. Another great commentator on the
Pāli texts was Dharmapāla who was residing at Kāñcipuram when Tuan-Tsang was visitor there. In his commentary on the Nettipakarana Dharmapāla says that he wrote this commentary while he was residing at the monastery at Nākapaṭṭinam, which is like a port for embarking on the ocean of Dharma. The Paramatthī Dīpāni, an exposition of the Khuddaka – Nikaya and the Parammatthī Mahājusa, which is a commentary of Buddhaghosa’s Visuddhimagga are the principal commentaries attributed to Dharmapāla.

There was another monk called Dharmapāla who became the head of the Nalanda monastery in Magadha. Dharmapāla had incomparable skill in debate and disputation. He had traveled widely in India. During the course of his journeys Dharmapāla had many successful encounters with the champions of rival sects. His election to the headship of the Nalanda monastery provides an indication of the reputation he had among his contemporaries. It was because of his vast knowledge and extra-ordinary abilities as a propagandist and dialectician.

Another renowned Buddhist scholar from Kāñcī was Dīnāgā. He lived during the early part of the sixth century. In his travels in the north he had come under the influence of the great Mahāyāna theoretician, Vasubandhu. He wrote extensively on Buddhist logic. In the History of Buddhism Dīnāgā occupies a special position as the founder of Buddhist logic. Bodhidharma of Kāñcipuram acquired fame in another direction. He was an exponent of the Dhyāna School and in that capacity he had gone to China and engaged in missionary work. His activities there had laid the foundation for the development of the “Lotus School”, which had a wide following in Japan.

Vajrabodhi was yet another remarkable South Indian monk who lived in the seventh century. He studied at Nalanda and went on pilgrimage to sacred sites in North India before returning the South India around AD 689. He visited Sri Lanka and during his sojourn there lasting for a period of six monks, Vajrabodhi was engaged in propagating the Mahāyāna. Later, one of his disciples, Amoghavajra, had undertaken the task of consolidating the progress of the Mahāyāna in the Island.

The close connections that had existed among the Buddhist communities of Sri Lanka and Tamil Nadu is attested by the Manimēkalai, which could be ascribed to the sixth century A.D. Sri Lanka is referred to as Ilankā Tivakam. It also refers to two parts of the island, nākanāṭu and irattina tivakam corresponding respectively to the northernmost and the central and southern parts of the island. The island of Manipallavam located between nākanāṭu and Tamilakam is represented as a sacred site because of the existence of a Buddha image, which is believed to have had miraculous powers. According to this text śrāvakas and other devotees from Tamilakam, Čāvaka and Īḷam assembled there and experienced the removal of obstacles against the goal of enlightenment. The Manimēkalai, is a product of a tradition of learning cultivated in the leading monastic centres of Tamilakam. It is essentially a work expounding doctrines and propagating the values of Buddhism. In this work renunciation becomes the highest goal of human life and the noblest path towards relief from sorrow and suffering and that these are caused by deeds committed by individuals in previous births is a recurring theme. The triple gem – the Buddha, Dharma and the Sangha are described in several places in the text with deep veneration.

The Manimēkalai does not seem to have been written with a view to promoting the claims of any particular sect of Buddhism to superiority over others. It is essentially synthetic in character and the emphasis is uniformly on the fundamentals of Buddhist teaching and practice. The inexcusable laws of karman, the misery of earthly existence, transcending the cycle of rebirths through renunciation and compassion to all living beings are items highlighted in this poem.

It is significant that the pārāmitā are referred to in some places in the text. The belief in the miraculous powers associated with the alms bowl called amitacurapi is one that was alien to early Buddhism. The monk and the
upāsaka as described in the *Manimēkalai* are not merely engaged in individual salvation but also deeply involved in matters pertaining to society and in providing relief to the distressed and those in want. On the whole the text projects the ideals of a synthetic Buddhism. Cattanār, the author, of the poem highlights the fundamentals of Buddhist thought common to all the principal sects of Buddhism. The ethical ideas articulated by him are derived mainly from the traditions of early (Theravāda) Buddhism and the idealism of the Mahāyāna. Such an impression seems to be supported by his emphasis on cilam (conduct), tānām (liberality) and tavam (meditation) as being the highest virtues.  

Buddhism depicted in the *Manimēkalai* is a tradition confined to the urban setting, and presumably to the merchant community. The traditions which were developed into narrative proportions by Cattanār seem to have mercantile connections and the metaphors and similes found in the text suggest a background of association with mercantile activity. The main events of the story are associated with three principal towns: Kāvripūṁpaṭṭinam, Kānci and Vaṇci.

The allusion to the presence of the cāṇḍar (wondering monks) from *irattina-tivakam* at Vaṇci is significant. It suggests that Sri Lankan monks were found in Tamil Nadu in some capacity. and this tradition is confirmed by Tsuan-Tsang who says that there were around 300 Sri Lankan monks at a monastery at the southern sector of Kāṇḍapuruam. The account of *Pattini-teyvam* as found in the *Manimēkalai* is of special relevance in comprehending an aspect of the complex and multifaceted connections Sri Lankan Buddhism had with the tradition in South India. The Pattini cult had become very popular in medieval Sri Lanka. Buddhism assimilated it and Pattini was reckoned as one of the four guardian deities of Lankā. That the cult of Pattini had its origins and early development in South Indian Buddhism is clearly attested by the *Manimēkalai*. Pattini had already become a Buddhist deity in South India when the poem was written. Besides, the account of the Buddha image at Manipallavam as found in the poem presupposes a close familiarity with the tales pertaining to the visits of the Buddha to the island as recorded in the Pāli chronicles. Such a situation suggests that the traditions relating to the early history of Buddhism as found in the island had been transmitted to the Buddhist monasteries in Tamil Nadu through a process mutual interaction.

In the seventh century Buddhism in South India was in a state of decline. Although Buddhism had not faded out many of the monasteries were in a state of dilapidation. It had ceased to win over adherents among the local inhabitants. The monasteries in the principal cities of Kāṇḍapuruam and Kārvalippaṭṭinam were eventually abandoned. Under the imperial Cōḷas there was a revival of Buddhism in Tamil Nadu. Nakapattinam on the Coromandel Coast became the centre of Buddhist activities in South India. The principal monastic establishment was the Rājarajaperumāḷi otherwise called Cūḷāmaṇivarman - vihāram. It was constructed by the Sailendra kings, Cūḷāmaṇivarman and his son and successor, Sri Maravijayottungavarman at the beginning of the 11th century. It developed into an extensive establishment under the patronage of the Cōḷa kings and merchant communities. The Rājendraśāl - perumāḷi was subsequently set up by local kings as an adjunct to this establishment. The Akkakālaip-perumāḷi, another institution that came into existence in the premises of this monastic establishment was, as suggested by its name established and maintained by artisan communities affiliated to the Patinenviṣaiyam, the most influential among the itinerant merchant communities of medieval South India. The most notable development in the Buddhist tradition was in art, particularly in the production of bronzes of which a substantial number have been unearthed at Nākapatṭinam. They are deposited in archaeological museums in India.
Sri Lanka, Myanmar, U.K and the USA. The inscribed labels on the pedestals of these bronzes reveal the characteristics of Buddhism as found in Tamil Nādu.

There was a considerable body of Tamil literature on Buddhism written during this period and fragments of some of the texts have been preserved in the commentary of Viracōliyam. The Viracōliyam, a treatise on grammar and poetics, was well known to some Sri Lankan monks as attested by the Sīdat Sangarava, a Sinhalese text on grammar. There was a revival of Theravāda centres in parts of Tamil Nādu and it led to a revival of the interaction between the monastic centres in the two countries. Some South Indian monks of high reputation were invited by the kings of Sri Lanka and engaged in the task of re-establishing the monastic orders and colleges.

The Abhayagiri Vihāra, Jetavana and Buddhaghosa in Anurādhapura

A notable development in Sri Lankan Buddhism during the first four centuries of the Christian era was the penetration of Mahāyāna influences into the monastic establishments of Anuradhapura. The inspiration was from South India and the consequence was a schism in the Sangha leading to the formation of three nīkāyas, which were respectively affiliated to the Mahāvihāra, the Abhayagiri Vihāra and the Dākkhina Vihāra. The conservative Mahāvihāra, which had a monopoly of royal support at the early stages, was successful in stemming the tide towards innovations in the initial stages. But, when it lost the support and patronage of the king during the height of the controversy under Mahāsena, it suffered major reverses and the two rival sects gained ground and became firmly established.

Vattagamani Abhaya (89-77 BC) who constructed the Abhayagiri Vihāra in Anuradhapura had recourse to the unusual step of handing it over to a certain Tissa therā as a special favour. Tissa had supported the king while he was in distress once he was dislodged from power by a group of invaders. The king’s action was viewed with disfavour by the authorities of the Mahāvihāra. As they were unable to demonstrate open hostility against the king, the authorities of the institution accused the therā Tissa for committing the offence of visiting the houses of laymen. As a measure of enforcing discipline they expelled him from the order. One of the disciples of the victim, Mahāvihāra Tissa protested against this action. He left the Mahāvihāra with a following of 500 monks and took up residence at the Abhayagiri vihāra. This event led to a division of the sangha for the first time since the establishment of Buddhism in the country.

The fraternity of monks occupying the Abhayagiri Vihāra came under the influence of the adherents of the Mahāyāna. The disciples of Dhammaruci of the Vajjiputta Nikāya had arrived there from “Pallavārāma” in South India. The inmates of the new vihāra accepted their teachings and thenceforth they were known as the Dhammaruci Nikāya. “The Vajjiputtakas admitted the pāṭigala, a sort of soul in disguise, and thus differed from all other sects of early Buddhism in subscribing to a heresy at variance with the doctrine of anatta, the corner-stone of Buddhist philosophy.” The location of Pallavārāma cannot be precisely determined. As the early Pallavas had exercised control over Vengi it is probable that this monastery was somewhere in Andhra Pradesh.

In the reign of Bhātikā Abhaya (BC 22-7), there was a dispute between the monks of the Mahāvihāra and those of the Abhayagiri Vihara. It was provoked by disagreements on the interpretation of a passage in the vinaya-pīṭaka. The king had to intervene and hold an inquiry, which was conducted by a learned bhāhmāna named Dīgha Kārāyana. The dispute was settled in favour of the Mahāvihāra.

In the reign of Vohārika Tissa (214 – 236 AD) there was a decisive shift towards the Mahāyāna. The monks of the Dhammaruci Nikāya adopted the Vaitulya - Pitaka as embodying the essence of the teachings of the Buddha. Their action provoked hostile reactions. The matter was reported to the king who ordered an inquiry under his minister Kapila. Kapila reported adversely against the Vaitulya - Pitaka. On the orders of the king the Vaitulya texts were
burnt and the monks who had adopted them were severely punished. However, the progress of the Mahāyāna could not be suppressed by royal proclamation and the disputes between the two sects assumed serious proportions in the subsequent period.

Dispute arose once again between the adherents of the orthodox sect and the Mahāyānists in the reign of Goṭhābhaya (253–266 AD). Some of the monks of the Abhayagiri Vihāra propagated the doctrines of the Vaitulya-vāda. The king intervened and suppressed the movement with stern measures. Commenting on the king’s action the Mahāvamsa says: “Purifying the doctrine by suppression of heresy he seized bhikkhus dwelling in the Abhayagiri (Vihara), sixty in number, who had turned to the Vetulya doctrine and were like a thorn in the doctrine of the Buddha, and when he had excommunicated them, banished them to the farther coast.”

As events proved subsequently, the arbitrary and partisan conduct of the king was the prelude to a great disaster. His son, Mahāsena, had become a convert to the Vaitulya-vāda, and during his reign the Mahāvihāra was for a time disestablished and disendowed under a royal proclamation. The conversion of the new king is attributed to Sanghamitta, a monk of youthful vigour and exceptional talents, from a monastery in Kāverippattinam. It is in connection with him that one encounters in the Pāli chronicles the earliest authentic notice of Sri Lankan connection with a monastic centre in Tamil Nadu.

Around this time there were some Buddhist monasteries in and around Kāverippattinam in the Cōḷa country. As an exponent of the Mahāyana Sanghamitta was supremely successful. His mastery of Buddhist learning, debating skills and intellectual powers had attracted Goṭhābhaya. The king appointed Sanghamitta as the teacher of his two sons, the princes Jeṭṭha Tissa and Mahāsena. Jeṭṭha Tissa had a strong partiality towards the Theravāda, but the younger of the two princes, Mahāsena, succumbed to the influence of Sanghamitta. He became a zealous advocate of the cause of the Mahāyāna.

In the reign of Mahāsena (278–301) the Mahāvihāra suffered major reverses. It was abandoned for a period of nine years because of hostile action on the part of the king. In the meantime; the Abhayagiri Vihāra forged ahead with enlarged buildings and extended establishments. Mahāsena, who is one of the two greatest builders among Sri Lankan kings, was responsible for the construction of the Jetavana temple of unsurpassed magnitude and grandeur. The new establishment became a pivotal centre of Mahayanism. It is significant that some extracts from the Prajñā - pāramita engraved on copperplates has been discovered in the course of archaeological excavations conducted under the auspices of the Cultural Triangle in 1983 at the Jetavana Rāma site.

The progress made by the non-orthodox sects in the reign of Mahāsena were consolidated and thereafter the fraternities of monks attached to the Abhayagiri and the Dakkhina monasteries were generously supported by the kings of Anuradhapura. They seem to have been larger than the Mahāvihāra. The Chinese pilgrim Fa-Hsien who visited the island during the early fifth century found that there were 5,000 monks in the monasteries of the Abhayagiri Vihāra whereas there were only 3,000 monks in the Mahāvihāra.

Since the fifth century the monasteries of the rival sects at Anuradhapura instead of engaging in confrontation among them directed their energies towards the development of monastic libraries and traditions of learning which acquired an international reputation. Many monks from several parts of India and China visited them for the purpose of study and copying manuscripts that could not be found elsewhere. It was in such a situation that the contacts between the monastic centres of South India and Sri Lanka assumed an unusual importance. There is however, no evidence of any institutional affiliation. The interactions were personal and yet they were highly significant because of their decisive impact on the conservation and enrichment of literary heritage that was of considerable diversity. It became part of a shared heritage that was transmitted to countries beyond the region of South India and Sri Lanka.
The contributions of Buddhagotta and his junior contemporary Buddhaghosa represent the peak period in the development of Pali literature. Buddhagotta who was born at Uraliyar in the Cōla country, was ordained as a monk at the Mahāvihāra in Anuradhapura. He had studied deeply the early Buddhist literature recorded in the Pali language and preserved in the monastic libraries of the Mahāvihāra. His life and work had provided the impetus for the development of Buddhist learning of Theravāda orientation in the Tamil country. The Abhidhammāvatara, Maduraththa-Vilāsini, Vinaya - Vinicchaya and Uttara - Vinicchaya, which are attributed to him, are extensive works that were learnt with assiduity by the inmates of monasteries in South India and Sri Lanka over a long period of time. The Uttara - Vinicchaya is said to have been written while he was residing at Anuradhapura. The other texts were written after his return to South India. “At the end of his book, the Vinaya-Vinicchaya, we are told that it was written by Buddhagotta of Uragapura (uragapureṇa buddhadattena racito’yam), and the same appears at the close of the Abhidhammāvatāra.”

In the introductory stanzas of this work he says that he wrote the text while residing at the monastery established by Venhadasa at Bhūtamaṅgala-gama, in the Cōla country, during the reign of Ac cha Vīkka ma. A Sri Lankan tradition attributes to Buddhagotta the authorship of Madurattha - Vilāsini, and the Jñānaṅkāra. The former is a commentary on the Buddhavamsa, which is a compilation of legends dealing with the lives of Gotama.

The works of Buddhaghosa are the most extensive and outstanding in the entire range of Pali literature produced after the days of Asoka. Buddhaghosa had travelled widely in India before he had come to Anuradhapura. He had spent some years in the monasteries of Tamil Nadu prior to and after his visit to the island. He was according to a tradition recorded in the Pali chronicle, born at Buddha Gayā. The Mahāvamsa says:

“A Brāhmaṇa youth born in the neighbourhood of the Great Bodhi tree, accomplished in arts and sciences, one who had mastered the three Vedas, was well versed in knowledge, skilled in all disputes, himself a schismatic wanderer over Jambu - dīpa, assuming the character of a disputant.”

“Having there (in Jambu - dīpa) composed an original work called Nānodaśyam, he at the same time wrote the chapter called Attha-sālinī” on the Dhamma - Sangiṇi.”

As a staunch adherent of the Theravāda, Buddhaghosa set upon himself the task of defining and reformulating the Theravāda tradition in such a manner that it would not be overwhelmed by the advancing tide of the Mahāyāna. He accomplished this basic task with superb skill. He wrote comprehensively and extensively and his numerous works had the effect of illuminating the Theravāda tradition. The commentaries on the Tripitaka were available in several versions in the monasteries of Anuradhapura. These were modified and elaborated versions of an original tradition developed in India as suggested by a reference in the Sūmangala-Vilāsini. In the opening stanzas of that look, Buddhaghosa says that the commentary on the Dīgha-Nikāya was rehearsed by 500 monks at the first council.

"His Visuddhimagga is the only book in which the whole of the Buddha’s system is well depicted in an abridged compilation of three pitakas, together with quotations from the commentaries on the passages from the pitakas mentioned therein.” The Visuddhimagga, which was the first work he had written in Anuradhapura, is an encyclopedia of doctrine.

A monumental composition of Buddhaghosa was the Samatapāsadikā. It is a voluminous compilation dealing with the vinaya texts. Apart from its value as a commentary to explain the rules of morality etc., embodied in the vinaya, it contains a great mass of social, political, moral and religious, and philosophical history of Ancient India. A monk named Sanghabhadra in 489 AD translated it into Chinese quite soon after.

Buddhaghosa wrote commentaries on the Dīgha – Nikāya, Majjhima - Nikāya, Samyutta - Nikāya and Anguttara - Nikāya. They are respectively the
Sumangala - Vilāsini, Pāpanca-sūdani, Sāratthā - ppakāsini and the Manorathā - pūrani, Buddhaghosa says that at the time of compiling the work he was living at Kāncipuram with his friend Jotipāla. Besides, it is also significant that he wrote the Pāpanca - Sūdani while he was living with the Thera Buddhāmitra at Mayūrапattinam. In the seventh century, Dhammapāla, who was born at Kāncipuram wrote the Paramattha - Mañjusa as a commentary on the Visuddhi - magga of Buddhaghosa.

Information pertaining to parallel developments in the monasteries of the Abhayagiri and the Dākkhina - vihāra establishments is not recorded in local chronicles. It would seem that they had maintained close connections with centres in foreign countries and directed their energies to missionary work. In the seventh century, Vajrabodhi, a native of South India, had visited Sri Lanka and stayed there for six months. Vajrabodhi who was born in 661 AD, had studied at Nālanda and had gone on pilgrimage to Kapilavastu. During his sojourn in the island he was engaged in propagating the Mahāyāna. He returned to Kānci and from there left for China. On his instruction one of his disciples, Amoghapāra, came to Sri Lanka from Canton in China. He was honoured by the ruler Silāmēgha and is credited with having fixed the Mahāyāna doctrine in its final form.

There was a revival of Buddhism in Tamil Nadu under the imperial Cōlas in the tenth and eleventh centuries. The history of this development could be traced only in outline on the basis of fragmentary information from extant sources. It had a multifaceted character as in the earlier period. In the polemical writings of the Jaina and Saiva Siddhānta traditions considerable attention was paid to Buddhism. The Madhyāmika, Yogācāra, Saṅgārāṅika and Vaibhāṣika doctrines are reviewed in considerable detail in the Civaśānicītiyār, which was written in the 14th century. They were highlighted as the principal schools of Buddhism probably because of the fact that they had a considerable following and influence in contemporary South Indian society.

In recent times there has been a steady increase in the accumulation of Buddhist antiques in Tamil Nadu. There is a considerable number of Buddha images scattered at isolated sites in many parts of the country. A preponderant majority of the images are from the heartland of the Cōla kingdom. Among the antiquarian remains, those pertaining to the Cūḷāmāṇivarāma - vihāram are the most impressive. The tower of Nākapaṭṭinam, which was described sometimes as the 'China Pagoda' had survived until the mid-nineteenth century as the only architectural remnant of medieval Buddhist temples in the country. The Leyden plates are of the utmost importance as sources of historical information pertaining to the temples of Nākapaṭṭinam. The bronzes unearthed at the premises of this temple and the inscribed labels on their pedestals reveal in considerable measure the facets of ideology and practices of the Buddhist tradition established at Nākapaṭṭinam. It was essentially a mercantile Buddhism with international connections. The sources of inspiration in art and ideology were from the kingdoms of the Pālas in North India and the Sailendras in Čāvakaṃ.

There was a considerable body of Buddhist literature in Tamil. The Kuṇṭalakēci was written for the purpose of propagating Buddhism. Only fragments of this work have survived in the form of quotations in Jaina polemical writings and in commentarial literature. The Pimpicērāk - katai was another such text. The Viṅcēliyām, a treatise on Tamil grammar and poetics was written by a Buddhist author, Puttīmanṭar of Pūpara, in the reign of Viṅarajendra. The introductory stanzas contain a eulogy of the Cōla king, Peruntēvanar, who wrote the commentary on this work, has recorded in the form of quotation fragments from a variety of Buddhist texts in Tamil that have subsequently been lost. In the tradition that could be gleaned from the Tamil texts there is a strong Mahāyāna flavour.

The fragments of the Tiruccōpuram inscription of the reign Jāṭ̹avarmāra Sundara Pāṇḍya provide some idea of the organization of a Buddhist monastery in Tamil Nadu. It refers to a certain Cārṇiputtra - Pāṇḍita who made some arrangement for some temple services from the incomes from lands over which he had authority. It is noteworthy that he is referred to in the first person.
Engaged in a co-operative endeavor in sustaining and enriching a common heritage that was considered to have been inspired by the teachings of the Buddha. The role of some of the Sri Lankan monarchs in fostering this tradition of interaction was particularly significant.

One of the earliest exponents of the Theravāda in the Cōla period was Anuruddha who summarized the Abhidhamma in two works called Paramatthā - Vinicchatya and Nāmarāpa - Pariccheda. He was from Kāveringamara of Kālicī but lived in a town called Tanja in Tambaraṇa. Another monk who attained celebrity was Kassapa who had come from a brāhmaṇa family. In the Sāsanavamsa he is said to have lived in Damilaraṇa.

In the Vinayasārthā - Dipaṅkara of Vācissara, Kassapa is described as one who was famous in the Cōla country. This was because of his strong views regarding the observance of Vinaya rules. The Vimațivinodani, the third sub-commentary on the Vinayatthakathā is ascribed to him. A controversy arose between the Cōla and Sinhalese monks over a passage in that text concerning the consumption of liquor. "This was settled by Buddhappiya Mahāthera who held that demerit resulted from taking intoxicating liquor consciously or unconsciously." But, Sāriputta, had said, in his Sāratthā - Dipāni Vinayaṭikā, that no offence was committed by drinking liquor unintentionally. Besides, some acrimonious disputes seem to have prevailed with regard to the proper procedure in fixing the boundaries for the performance of Sanghakammas. "In the work on this topic composed by Vācissara, he boasts that he has refuted all views accepted by the Colians and established those approved by the Sinhalese."

Attention may now be focused on Ananda Mahāthera who had a decisive influence on the community of monks in the Cōla country. The fragmentary inscription of Sundaramahādevi, a consort of Viṣṇubahu I (111-1133) records a eulogy of Ananda Thera. It translates: "Ananda Mahāthera who has attained psychic power, who is like unto a banner raised aloft in the land of Lankā, who is a therā... the monks of Tambaraṇa and who, the wise one, has effected...of the religious discipline among the Colās." Evidently Ananda therā had spent some time in the Cōla country where he had performed the task of purifying the Sangha. When the inscription was set up in A.D.1137 he had returned to the island and was probably at Polonnaruva where he was honoured and rewarded with some benefaction by the royal court.

A dignitary called Ānanda therā is described in contemporary texts as the teacher of Buddhappiya Dipāṭikara and Veha who were eminent theras of the 12th and 13th centuries. In the colophon of his grammatical work Rūpasiddhi,
Buddhapiya gives the following information on himself and his teacher: “This perfect Rūpasiddhi, was composed by that monk who received the title of Buddhapiya and was named Dipāṅkara – a disciple of Ānanda, the eminent preceptor who was like unto a standard in Tambapanni – he (Dipāṅkara) was like a lamp in the Damila country, and being the resident - Superior of two monasteries including Balādicca, caused the religion to shine forth”10

There is here a reference to two eminent monks. One of them was the teacher and the other was his disciple. The teacher, Vanarathana Ānanda mahāthera was from Tambapanni and the other was from Damilāṛtha. The relationship between them is symbolic of the close interaction between the monastic centres of the two countries. Buddhapiya Dipāṅkara claims that he was the custodian of two monasteries including Balādicca. The commentary on the Rūpasiddhi asserts that the other monastery was the Cūḍāmanikārāma.11 Because of the reason that ārāma and vihāra have the same connotations; the Cūḍāmanikārāma could be identified as the Rājarājap - perumpalli at Nākapāṭtinam. The custodial function that Buddhapiya Dipāṅkara had over that establishment presupposes that it had at some stage passed under the control of the monks affiliated to the Theravada sect in Tamil Nadu.

In the early years of the 13th century monks had to leave the island in considerable numbers and seek refuge at the monastic centres of Tamil Nādu because of the turmoil in the island under Māgha of Kalinga who adopted policies hostile to Buddhism.

Commenting on this unprecedented development the Mahavamsa records:

“Now some of the grand theras with Vācissara at the head, who sought that protection for Lankā on which depended the continuance of the order, had crossed the vast ocean despite its raging waves, had betaken themselves to the lands of the Pāṇḍus, Cōḷas and other (peoples). Now Vijayabāhu sending forth his great dignitaries summoned all these theras who were a mine of mercy back from there.”12

One of such theras was Bhadanta Ānanda, the author of the Upāsaka - Janālakārā. It was written by him during his sojourn in the Pāṇḍya country during the first half of the 13th century. In the introductory stanzas of this work the author records vital information about some aspects of Buddhism in Tamil Nādu, which is otherwise unknown. Ānanda therō says that he wrote this text while he was residing at the Gunākara - perumpalli at the town of Sirivallabha. It was under Cōḍaganga, who was a vanniyar feudatory prince in the Pāṇḍya kingdom. Three monasteries including the Gunakara - perumpalli were established by Cōḍaganga at the behest of the monk called Lokuttama, who was born of a wealthy and illustrious family settled in that town. It is interesting to note that Bhadanta Ānada was living there with several others who had fled from the island because of a great confusion that was prevailing there.”

While confirming the Mahāvamsa account of the exodus of monks from the island to South India the Upāsaka - Janālakārā informs that some of them were accommodated in the monasteries established by Cōḍaganga.

When conditions of peace and normality were restored the Sri Lankan monks returned to the island. Vijayabāhu III (1232-1235), who established a new kingdom in the southwestern part of the island, initiated measures to facilitate their return. The chronicle states: “Now Vijayabāhu sending forth his great dignitaries summoned all these theras who were a mine of mercy back from there.”13

In the reign of Parākramabāhu II (1236-1271) some of the leading theras from the Cōḷa country were invited to render assistance in re-establishing the community of monks on a formal basis. In this connection the mahāvamsa says:
"Then the king (Parākramabāhu II) sent many gifts to the Cōla country and caused to be brought over to Tambapanni many respected Cōla bhikkhus who had moral discipline and were versed in the three Pijākas and so established harmony between the two orders."

Parākramabāhu invited to Sri Lanka also a leading mahāthera named Dhammakītthi “radiant in the glory of moral discipline” from Tambaraṭṭha.

Commenting on the relations between the Buddhists of Sri Lanka and Tamil Nadu the Sri Lankan historian Amaradasa Liyanagemage makes the following pertinent observations:

"Parākramabāhu II was also keen to improve the knowledge of the Dhamma in the bhikkhu community, which was then at very low ebb. With the reflection that theras who were acquainted with the sacred texts were rare in the island he had all the books brought from Jambudvipa, had many bhikkhus instructed in the sacred texts, as also in all sciences such as philosophy, grammar and the like, and thus made of them cultivated people. Although Jambudvipa meant the entire Indian subcontinent and even much more, in this context, in all probability, it meant the Cōla country where Theravāda Buddhism was very much alive during this period." 76

He further continues:

"Learned treatises were composed by Cōla monks on Abhidhamma, grammar and so forth, subjects on which books are said to have been brought to Sri Lanka from Tambaraṭṭha during the reign of Parākramabāhu II, have come down to us. Some of them indeed were written not too long before the age of his rule. Thus not only the mahātheras from the Cōla country but also their learned treatises on the Dhamma and so forth, some of them written by themselves, came to the aid of Parākramabāhu II in his efforts at the restoration of Buddhism... At the conclusion of the Higher Ordination (upasampada) ceremony held towards the end of Parākramabāhu’s (II) reign, when lavish gifts were distributed among the participant bhikkhus their colleagues in South India were not forgotten. Parākramabāhu (II) sent many articles of use to the bhikkhus settled in the Pāṇḍya and Cōla countries." 77

The close relations between the Buddhist dignitaries of Sri Lanka and those of South India continued into the 14th Century. Parākramabāhu IV (1302 - 1326) of Kurunagala elevated to high office an outstanding Cōla mahāthera. “To the office of royal teacher the king appointed a grand therā from the Cōla country, a self-controlled man versed in various tongues and intimate with philosophic works.” He became the head of the prestigious Sirighanānanda Parivena that was established and assigned to him by the king.
Foot Notes and References


2. In Sri Lanka, Myanmar and Thailand, where the Theravada was securely established Buddhist sacred literature was in the Pali language.

3. Fa-Hsien had visited India and Sri Lanka in the early fifth century. His account of Buddhist practices and institutions is of exceptional importance as a source of historical information. Tsuan Tsang had traveled widely in Central Asia and India. He was a contemporary of Sri Harsa of Kanauj. He had a proneness to record what he saw and heard rather uncritically in his narrative. His notice on the state of Buddhism in the Tamil country is particularly interesting. L-tsing arrived at Tamluk in India in 673 AD. He visited many of the sacred sites of Buddhism in North India. He was at Nālanda for ten years until 685 when he returned to China by the sea-route. On the way he disembarked at Sri Vijaya where he lived for two years. His memoirs were written during his sojourn in that city. L-tsing did not visit South India and Sri Lanka. K.A. Nilakantha Sastrī, Foreign Notices of South India, University of Madras, 1939, pp. 13-18.

4. Mahāvamsa (Mv), 12:1-8

5. Mv, 18:4-5; 1953.

6. Tradition claims that the Alms Bowl and the right Collar-bone of the Buddha were brought to Anuradhapura and deposited there soon after Buddhism was formally established by Thera Mahinda.

The Mahāvamsa records: “Sakka, the lord of the gods, took from the Cūḷāmaṇi - Cetiya the right Collar-bone (of the Buddha) and gave it to the sāmanera. Thereupon the ascetic Sumana took the relic and the bowl with the relics likewise and returning to the Cetiya Mountain he handed them to the therī.”

“And here the King founded a vihāra, the thūpa of which had been built before; for that reason this vihāra was known by the name Thūpārāma”


9. Mv., Chapters II – V, XII - XIII

10. “There were more than 100 Buddhist monasteries with over 10,000 Brethren all of them of the Sthavira School... This country had been frequently visited by the Buddha, and the King had erected topes at various spots where the Buddha had preached and admitted members into the order. The capital was the birth place of Dharmapāla Pusa who was the eldest son of a high official of the city.” K.A. Nilakantha Sastrī, Foreign Notices of South India, pp. 102-103.


12. Ibid. p.49.

13. The Madhurattha – Vilāśini, Abbidhammāvatārā, Vinaya - Vinicchaya and Uutta - Vinicchaya are the commentaries attributed to Buddha’s father, Ibid. 39.


15. Dinnaga was born in a Brahmin family at Simhavaktra, which is identified as Ĉiṅkapperumāl Kōyil in Kāṇci puram. He was the founder of the school of Buddhist logic, and is often referred to as the founder of the medieval system of nyāya as a whole. He joined the Vatsipuriya School. Finally, he became a disciple of Vasubandhu, studied all aspects of Buddhist philosophy and attained celebrity as a versatile scholar, Ibid., p.41.


17. Vajrabodhi, a native of South India, was born in 661 AD. He studied at Nālanda till his twenty-sixth year, and then went on a pilgrimage to Kapilavastu in 689 before he returned to Southern India. Soon he had a vision in which he was ordered to visit Sri Lanka and to go and worship Mañju Sri in the Middle Empire of China. He crossed the sea and was solemnly received in the island. There he spent six months in worshiping the holy relics. Foreign Notices of South India, pp. 17-18.


19. Ibid.


21. Ibid. P.40

22. Ibid. P.42

23. Ibid. P.44

24. The author of the Manorikamalai had the notion that monks from Tamil
Nadu went on pilgrimages to Sri Lanka. The monks called căranar who had gone on pilgrimage to the peak of Samantakūya details are said to have gathered at the town of Vañci. Ibid., p.49.

26. "A careful examination of the references to Kaññaki in the Manimēkalai suggests that Kaññaki had been elevated to the position of a deity when the poem was written. She is described as māperum Pattini, "the Goddess of immeasurable virtue", whose images were installed in temples dedicated for her worship. The heroine Manimēkalai is said to have visited a shrine of Pattini at the town of Vañci. In the Manimēkalai Pattini is represented as a deity closely connected with Buddhism and as one who promotes the cause of Buddhism." Ibid, p.47.

27. The mattavilasa of Mahendravarnan contains a description of monks living in Kāñci. It refers to a monastery called Rājavihāram in the city. As Devasoma, one of the characters of the play, remarks that heaps of riches collected from the revenues of many other monasteries were accumulated at this monastery it may be assumed that the Rājavihāram was the headquarters of a sect to which many institutions were affiliated. Tsuan Tsang asserts that in the Dravida country of which the capital was Kāñci, there were to be found about a hundred monasteries with over ten thousand monks. Besides, he adds that there was to the south of Kāñci a sanghārāma, which was the resort of the most eminent men of the country. The Chinese pilgrim also testifies that he had seen 300 monks from Sri Lanka sojourning there.

Ibid., p.46; C.Minakshi, Admistrati and Social Life Under the Pallavas, University of Madras, pp.223-225


32. Scholars have discerned traces of the influence of the Vīracōḷiyam on the Sīdat – Sāngarāva, a Sinhalese text on grammar written in the reign of Parakramabahu II (1236 – 1271). In connection with the Vīracōḷiyam it has been claimed that it has been classified as a transfer grammar for Buddhists speaking an Indo- Aryan language who had to learn Tamil. “Anne Monnius has made it clear that this grammar anticipates an audience of multilingual connoisseurs who are not only well versed in literature, but have a sophisticated grasp of literary theory as well. It represents a self – declared effort at mediating between two literary languages, at attempting to incorporate into Tamil grammatical and literary theory a variety of Sanskrit linguistic and literary forms.” Buddhism among Tamils... Editor – in - Chief: Peter Schalk, Uppula, 2002, p.523.


34. Mv, 33:95
35. Mv, 33:96

38. Ibid.
39. Ibid.
41. Mv, 36:41.
42. Mv, 36:111-112.
44. Mv, 36: 117.
45. Mv, 37:5-8.
47. Foreign Notices of South India Ed. K.A. Nilakanta Sastri, University of Madras, 1939, Pp. 68-73.
49. Ibid, p.106.
50. Ibid.
51. Ibid.
52. Ibid.
53. Ibid. p.80  
54. Ibid. p.90.  
55. Ibid. p.85.  
56. Ibid. p.95.  
57. Ibid., Pp. 91-92.  
59. Ibid.  
60. Foreign Notices of South India, Pp. 17-18.  
62. The Kuntalakeci, Cittantattokai, tirappatikam Vimpicārakkatai and Manimēkalai are the Buddhist texts that were written in Tamil. ma.ci Vēnkaṭacāmī, Pauttamum Tamilum, Cennai, 1964 (1950), pp.134-154.  
64. Ibid., pp.662-665.  
67. Ibid.  
68. UCHC Vol. I, Pt. 2, p.577  
70. Ibid. p.318.  
71. Ibid. p.319.  
72. Ibid. p.310.  
73. Ibid., p.306  
74. Ibid. p.310.  
75. Ibid. p.328.  
76. Ibid., p.328.  
77. Ibid. p.329.

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