

The Role of Sri Lanka in the Growth of Buddhism in India in the New Millennium



By Dr Ananda W. P. Guruge

May I begin by expressing my grateful thanks to the Indo-Sri Lanka Buddhist Network, SUCCESS Sri Lanka, German Dharmaduta Society, Buddhist Cultural Centre, Nedimala, International Buddhist Centre, Wellawatte, and in particular Venerable Kirama Wimalajoti Thero and Mr Senaka Weeraratna for the privilege accorded to me to speak to you on the role of Sri Lanka in the growth of Buddhism in India in the new millennium.

Being a part of the Indian subcontinent Sri Lanka's relations with the mainland date back to the distant past. Even before the arrival of Aryans in our Island, trade relations are said to have existed between the two countries.

According to the Tamil Buddhist classic Silapathikaram, a shipwreck happened near Sri Lanka and only one of its Tamil-speaking victims could speak the Naga language and seek assistance. Onesicritus, the admiral of the naval force of Alexander the Great around 320 before Christ has recorded that a regular maritime commercial route existed between Sri Lanka and the Indus Region in modern Pakistan. He mentions the time taken to go from the Island to that region and compares the quality of Sri Lankan ships with his own.

Megasthenes, the Greek Ambassador to the Mauryan court of Chandragupta makes reference to Sri Lanka in his book Indica.

Asoka the Righteous makes two references to Tammapanni in his edicts and sent Buddhism through his own children Arahants Mahinda and Sanghamitta. The voyage of the latter bringing a sapling of the sacred bodhi-tree establishes that a regular sea-route connected the Indian port of Tamralipti in Bengal with Jambukola in the Jaffna Peninsula. Gokanna, the present day Trincomalee, was also a seaport, in addition to Mahatittha or Mantai, with connections to India.

It is with the establishment of Buddhism in Sri Lanka that our relations with the mainland became stronger, perennial and fruitful. Sri Lanka does owe an immense debt to India for giving us Buddhism along with significant cultural attributes contributing to the development of religion and philosophy, art and architecture, literature and a serene life-style. Ever since, Sri Lanka has also played an important role in the development of Buddhism in India.

A cursory survey of the history of Buddhism in India shows that Sri Lankans were deeply engaged in Buddhist activities in several main centers. The Sinhala Commentaries, which are said to be an initiative of Arahant Mahinda, continued in the Island until about the first century before Christ and appear to have been used by Indian Buddhist Sangha. It was the evolution of the languages in our two countries which made it difficult for the Indian Sangha to use our Sinhala commentaries seven centuries later.

The impetus for Buddhaghosa, Dharmapala and Buddhadatta to translate them into Pali came from the fact that Sinhala commentaries were indispensable for the study of Buddhism in India as well. A Prakrit inscription at

Nagarjunakonda, dated around the second century of the current era, refers to a Sihalavihara there and credits its monks for the promotion of Buddhism in Kashmir, Gandhara, China, and several parts of the mainland.

King Silamegha of Sri Lanka is known to have negotiated with the Gupta Emperor Samudragupta to establish a pilgrim rest in Buddha Gaya for the convenience of Sri Lankan pilgrims. An inscription by a Sri Lankan monk named Mahanama of that time as well as several epigraphical records show that the Vihara, thus established, was frequented by Sri Lankan pilgrims up to the time of the disappearance of Buddhism from India.

It is also well-known that Aryadeva, the renowned disciple of Nagarjuna and his successor as the abbot of Nalanda University, was a Sri Lankan prince. His work *Catusshataka* is a major contribution to the development of Mahayana Buddhism. Our history records several waves of Mahayana Buddhism influencing Sri Lanka. Of the three main monasteries of Anuradhapura, Abhayagiri and Jetavana were partial to the Mahayana tradition, used Sanskrit and had relations with Indian Institutions.

Apart from the massive Buddha statues of Aukana, Maligawila, Buduruvagala and Galvihara, the gold plates with the Sanskrit text of *Prajnaparamita*, discovered in Jetavana, provide proof for the impact of Mahayana. So is the exquisite image of the seated Bodhisattva found in Weragala. In India Fa-hien could not find a written Buddhist Vinaya and came to Sri Lanka in search of Vinaya texts. It is here that he found the *Dharmaguptika Vinaya* and enabled the Mahayana tradition to regulate its Sangha. The Kashmir King Gunavarman abdicated his throne and came to Abhayagiri Vihara and became a specialist in Vinaya before proceeding to China.

Sanghamitra, a disciple of the Mahayana monks who were banished to South India by Gotabhaya came to Sri Lanka and prompted Mahasena to campaign against the Mahavihara.

Hsuan-tsang or (Xuan Tsang) in the seventh century wanted to come to Sri Lanka for further studies of Buddhism. When prevented from doing so, he wrote the last chapter of his *Si-yu-ki* on the state of Buddhism in the Island on the basis of information he could gather in Tamil Nadu.

It is also significant that Vajrabodhi, who hailed from India and his pupil Amogharajra departed for China from Sri Lanka.

It is also possible that Sri Lankan monks held positions of authority in Indian monasteries. Ajanta seems to have had such an eminent monk for the arrival of Sinhalas in Sri Lanka to be illustrated in one of the largest and most prominent murals in one of its caves. Thus was the close interaction between our two countries until Buddhism degenerated into Tantric practices and ultimately disappeared when Buddhist institutions and the Sangha succumbed to the Muslim onslaught around the twelfth century.

The restoration of Buddhism in India was therefore left to Sri Lanka and this was done by Anagarika Dharmapala who was guided and encouraged by Venerable Hikkaduwe Sri Sumangala and Ven. Weligama Sumangala and ably supported in early stages by Colonel Henry Olcott and Sir Edwin Arnold.

This was gratefully acknowledged by Dr. Suniti Kumar Chatterjee, as the Speaker of the Legislative Assembly of West Bengal, who presided over the golden jubilee celebrations of the Maha Bodhi Society in 1941 and declared that Anagarika Dharmapala has fully repaid the debt that Sri Lanka owed to India for the gift of Buddhism.

The main contribution of Anagarika Dharmapala and Colonel Henry Olcott was that they made the intelligentsia of India aware of the prestige their motherland accrued due to the Buddha. The campaign to have Buddhist shrines of India restored to the Buddhists had tremendous success in that the Sangha from Sri Lanka could be placed in them to assist pilgrims, develop the institutions and bring the doctrines and philosophy of Buddhism to popular attention.

Buddhism ceased to be a lost religion in India and especially its egalitarian principles against caste became a source of solace to depressed communities and tribes. Both Anagarika Dharmapala and Colonel Olcott had a message for the 141 million untouchables in India that their redemption from the oppression of 'high caste' Hindus could be conversion to Buddhism.

An eminent untouchable of the Dalit caste to respond to this call was Babasahab Bhimrao Ambedkar who commenced his in-depth study of Buddhism quite early in his life. As described by Dr Narendranath Jawahar in his book "The Untouchables," Ambedkar inspired all around him to study Buddhism and to give the highest possible education to children. While urging them to use education as the social elevator for the untouchables, he advised them to seek spiritual upliftment through Buddhism.

As the Minister of Law, drafting the Constitution of the Republic of India, he came to Sri Lanka to attend the founding conference of the World Fellowship of Buddhists in 1950. Foreseeing his role in the revival of Buddhism, Dr Gunapala Malalasekera introduced him on that occasion as a Bodhisattva.

Further developing his conviction with Buddhist scholars he decided on October 14, 1956 – the year of the 2500 Buddha Jayanti - to embrace Buddhism as his personal religion. He took refuge in the Triple Gem and recited the five precepts in Nagpur at a ceremony presided over by the Sri Lankan scholar-monk Venerable Dr Hammalawa Saddhatissa Thero.

Many thousand Indians of Dalit and other scheduled castes embraced Buddhism along with him. Urged by him, millions have followed in his footsteps and the current Buddhist population of India is estimated to be at least twenty million and growing.

Sri Lanka did play an effective role in the early stages of the new movement. Monks trained in Sri Lanka like Kosambi Dharmanand, Rahul Sankrityayan, Jagdish Kashyap and Anand Kausalyana provided the spiritual leadership to the new Buddhists. So did the Sri Lankan monks of the Maha Bodhi Society, as well as those from the Chakma Hill Tracts of Bangladesh. Books were produced in Hindi and Marathi. Monks like Venerable Rahul Bodhi spent long years in Sri Lanka to become conversant in monastic practice and have provided leadership to the new Sangha emanating from among them.

Even while Babasahab Bhimrao Ambedkar paved the way for mass conversion to Buddhism, the indigenous Indian Buddhists of Ladakh, who were adherents of the Tibetan tradition of Vajrayana grew in strength. The arrival of the His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama with a stream of Tibetan Buddhists and the establishment of Dharmasala as their spiritual centre further enhanced the influence and presence of Buddhists in India.

Today the cooperation and interaction of these traditions have made Buddhism a living force in India. Their vocal presence in international Buddhist fora like the World Fellowship of Buddhists (WFB) and the World Sangha Council is quite impressive. The multiplicity of associations and societies causes some concern as the lack of communication, consultation and coordination among them results in dispersed effort. It also may indicate obstacles to unity and solidarity.

Over the last several years, India under the leadership of the Ladakhi monk, Venerable Lama Lobzang has taken steps to set up the International Buddhist Confederation to present the collective wisdom of Buddhism to the world in a united voice. It was officially inaugurated in New Delhi in September 2013 in a founding conclave attended by a representative body of the international Buddhist community. It chalked out a comprehensive program of action ranging from the propagation of Buddhism to the preservation and development of the Buddhist heritage. Role of Sri Lanka in the growth of Buddhism in India in the future

The question before us is whether Sri Lanka has a role to play in the growth of Buddhism in the new millennium. If we have a role what should be the road-map that we should adopt.

Let me begin by listing what Sri Lanka has to offer India in the present situation. With the twenty three centuries of unbroken presence of Buddhism and a series of unique contributions made to the promotion of Buddhism in Asia in the past and all over the world in recent century or so, Sri Lanka has a wealth of experience which would be very helpful to India. Among them, the close relationship between the Sangha and the laity is of special significance.

The Sri Lankan Sangha has tremendous experience in ensuring social well-being through education, spiritual development, social services and institution building. The high standard of Buddhist scholarship is revealed by an extensive and constantly growing treasure house of treatises, research papers and popular literature by both Sangha and lay scholars.

What the Indian Buddhists need most urgently is a committed Sangha with a very high level of education, comprehensive monastic training and expertise in organizing the lay society to sustain the Buddhist dispensation. Can the Sri Lankan Sangha undertake the task of providing facilities for the recruits to the Indian Sangha to acquire these qualifications through our temples, Pirivenas, the Buddhist and Pali University, the Bhikkhu University of Anuradhapura and the Departments of Buddhist Studies in other universities? The most important thing that both countries should do in collaboration is to safeguard and develop Pali Studies so that the language of the Buddha is preserved and the invaluable resources of Pali literature are utilized for the better understanding of Buddhism. I am aware of several institutions which already exist to serve this purpose and many foreign monks are their current beneficiaries. All that is needed are more resources to cater to the increasing needs of the growing Sangha of India.

When speaking of the Sangha, it is necessary to highlight the importance of the Bhikkhuni Sasana to enlist Indian women to play an enhanced role in the promotion of Buddhism. Sri Lanka has over a couple of decades developed a viable order of Bhikkhunis with the capacity to ordain and train women. The development of a Bhikkhuni Sasana in India could be another of the initiatives which Sri Lanka is capable to embark upon.

Already in India are a fair number of Sri Lankan monks who are effectively engaged in safeguarding the sacred Buddhist shrines, assisting pilgrims and educating the people. Sri Lanka should be able to send more Dharmaduta monks to support the relatively meagre human resources at the disposal of the Indian Sangha.

Equally important is to involve the lay Buddhists of the two countries to cooperate in joint operations to promote Buddhism and attending to the needs and challenges they encounter. Solidarity and unity among them is a vital need.

Buddhist channels in radio and television in the two countries can function as social media among Buddhists and develop intellectual and social communications. Similarly the sharing of information, opinion and knowledge through the Internet can be explored. Exchange of students, seminars and conferences can bring scholars and students together.

Pilgrimage already functions as a means of taking Sri Lankan Buddhists to sacred sites of India. A significant element of tourism could be added to the usual pilgrimage sites by adding popular centres of Buddhist art and architecture like Sanchi, Ajanta, Ellore, Karle, Bhaja and other cave temples of western India.

Reciprocally, Indian Buddhists should be provided facilities to come as pilgrims and tourists to Sri Lanka to our sacred monuments to be inspired by how the Buddha's teachings had impacted the cultural and spiritual development outside its borders. There is no dearth of things that can be done to bring the Buddhists of the two countries to appreciate how each country has contributed to the promotion of Buddhism.

Already Anagarika Dharmapala is remembered and honoured in India with statues, memorials and publications. The steps taken to erect a statue of Dr. Babasahab Bhimrao Ambedkar at the Headquarters of the Maha Bodhi Society in Colombo and establish an Ambedkar Centre in Arawwala, Pannipitiya to educate and train monastic and lay Buddhist leaders of India can go a long way in creating an awareness of this eminent Indian Buddhist leader's services to humanity.

Honouring those who have worked hard and struggled to revive and spread Buddhism in our two countries will be a direct way of encouraging the present and future leaders to emulate them. The efforts of Buddhists to cooperate in joint activities will have significant benefits in building better understanding between the two countries. We have been neighbours whose interaction in diverse fields has had invaluable results. Ignorance of each other's aspirations and the unintended consequences of what each country has done in self-interest, result in prejudices, misunderstanding and even hostility which are inevitable in the present world.

Buddhism with its emphasis on loving kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity has the capacity to enhance tolerance, accommodation, and forbearance. It is a task for the Buddhists of the two countries to undertake together and severally. With our spiritual goals and training, we certainly can and should preserve and build upon the friendship between India and Sri Lanka.

(Above is the text of speech delivered on October 27, 2013 at the "[Sri Sambuddhathwa Jayanthi Mandiraya](#)", Colombo. The talk was sponsored by the newly formed Indo – Sri Lanka Buddhist Network in association with SUCCESS Sri Lanka, German Dharmaduta Society, Buddhist Cultural Centre and International Buddhist Centre, Wellawatte).

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