

The Archaeology of Buddhism: fame of Tantric tradition in Sri Lanka
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Introduction

Buddhism is one of the more significant Asian spiritual traditions. As we are aware, there are two bodies of data available for the study of the history of Buddhism - a large body of literary materials and archaeological and epigraphic materials. But, traditionally most of the studies of Buddhism (including other religions) are textual oriented. On the basis of textual materials, it is accepted that the Sri Lankan Buddhist tradition was anxious to maintain a basic history of the Sthaviravāda (Pāli: Theravāda). This having its origin in the words of the Buddha himself, codified at the First Council and re-affirmed in two subsequent Councils was transmitted by Arahat Mahinda to Sri Lanka. Thus, it is acceptable that the Sri Lankan Buddhism was coming under Theravāda tradition.

As Gregory Schopen pointed out literate almost exclusively male oriented and certainly atypical professionalized subgroups wrote, but rather with what religious people of all segments of a given community actually did and how they lived. Buddhism has manifested a flexible approach adapting itself to different conditions and local ideas while maintaining its core of lofty dictums.¹ As a result of its wide geographical expansion, completed with its tolerant spirit, Buddhism embraces a number of multitude customs, traditions and practices not highlighted in the original Buddhist texts. There is and was a debate on finding much more accurate sources for the study of Buddhist culture. Archaeological remains as contemporary records they reflect the conditions of the time they relate to, much more accurately than literary records. The extreme forms of some esoteric carvings at ancient Image houses lead scholars to identify the hidden picture of the nature of Buddhist culture in Sri Lanka. It reveals the popularity of extreme forms of Tantric Buddhist rituals in the Island which was not mentioned in the Theravāda canonical texts. In this article attention has been paid to the popularity of Tantric Buddhist ideas in Sri Lanka on the basis of archaeological remains. Before enter to the discussion attention should be paid on the significance of archaeological remains for the studies of history of Buddhism.

¹ Gregory Schopen, *Bones, Stones and Buddhist Monks*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1997, p. 1.

Archaeology of Buddhism:

As we are aware, there are two bodies of data available for the historical studies of Buddhism - a large body of literary material and archaeological materials including epigraphy.² At least up to the mid- nineteenth century, the assumptions that were made with regard to the history of Buddhism were text oriented. While translating Pāli and Sanskrit texts, European scholars namely Burnouf, Senart, Oldenberg, T.W. Rhys Davids, Windisch, George Turnour, Major Jonathan Forbes and Sir James Emerson Tennent laid the foundation for the historical studies of Buddhism and Buddhist culture.³ All these scholars attempted to bring out valuable issues on the literary material regarding the beliefs and practices of the Buddhist community both lay, and monastic: monks and nuns.

Burnouf is one of the pioneer scholars who have done much research on Indian Buddhism based on textual material. Considering his historical studies of Buddhism, J.W. de Jong says,

Burnouf stressed the fact that Indian Buddhism had to be studied on the basis of Sanskrit texts from Nēpal and Pāli texts from Ceylon.⁴

W. Geiger also well aware of the fundamental importance of texts for the historical studies of Buddhism.⁵ Not only the pioneer scholars, but modern academics too emphasized the capability and importance of textual materials for the understanding of the reality of Buddhism and Buddhist culture. In 1975, J.W. de Jong suggested:

Undoubtedly the literature (which was producing three main divisions/vehicles of Buddhism) is the most important source of knowledge of Buddhism. Buddhist art, inscriptions and coins have supplied us with useful data, but generally they cannot be

² Ibid.

³ N. N. Bhattacharyya, *History of Researches on Indian Buddhism*, New Delhi: Munshiram Manohar Lal. 1981, pp. 1-18.

⁴ P. Ratnam referred this statement from J.W. de Jong; article on 'The Study of Buddhism, Problems and Perspectives' in P. Ratnam, ed. *Studies in Indo-Asian Art and Culture*, New Delhi: Vol. IV, 1975, p. 21.

⁵ W. Geiger, *The Dīpavaṃsa and Mahāvāṃsa, and their Historical Development in Ceylon*, Colombo: Government Publication, 1908.

fully understood without the support given by the texts. Consequently, the study of Buddhism needs first of all to be concentrated on the texts.⁶

From the mid nineteenth century there has been a major shift in the direction of Buddhist studies, because, on the one hand, literary works of Buddhist traditions came to be discovered one after another, and on the other hand, archaeological and epigraphical sources were considered a powerful historical witness of the studies of Buddhism. Thus, while considering the archaeological sources are more relevant than the textual materials for the studies of Buddhism, most of them were attempted to made various issues on the effectiveness of texts-bound historical studies of religion.

The most important, debatable consideration is the chronology of the Buddhist literature. During the last few decades various views have been expressed on the issue of their Chronology. According to the Sri Lankan historical tradition, it is generally accepted that the Pāli sources were the earliest historical materials on Buddhism. This canonical text can be dated to the last quarter of the first century BCE. – Presumably the date they were written at Alu-vihāra in Sri Lanka.⁷ Most of the modern scholarship attempts to question the actual context of the canon that was committed to writing in the first century BCE. As G.P. Malalasekera stated:

.... how far the *Tripiṭaka* and its commentaries reduced to writing at Alu-vihāra resembled them as they have come down to us now, no one can say....⁸

Much more ancient manuscripts (of the first and second centuries CE) such as the *Gāndhāri Dhammapada* and the recently discovered Kharōṣṭhi fragments of *Suttanipātha* and other portions of the *Suttapiṭaka* make it impossible to doubt that the Pāli canon is faithful to truly ancient originals in some order.⁹ The *Gāndhāri Dhammapada* discovered near Khotan has been dated probably to the second century CE.¹⁰ The dating of the Bibliothéque Nationale

⁶ Jong, op.cit, 1975, p. 21.

⁷ D. J. Kalupahana, 'Schools of Buddhism in Early Ceylon,' *The Sri Lanka Journal of the Humanities*, Peradeniya: University of Peradeniya, Vol. I, No. 2, 1970, p. 165.

⁸ G. P. Malalasekera, *The Pāli Literature of Ceylon*, Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1994, (1st publication 1928) p. 44.

⁹ Jonathan S. Walters, 'Mahāyāna Theravāda and the Origin of the Mahāvihāra,' *The Sri Lanka Journal of the Humanities*, Peradeniya: University of Peradeniya, Vol. XXIII, No. 1 & 2, 1997, p. 101.

¹⁰ John Brough, *The Gandhari Dhammapada*, London: London Oriental Series, 1962.

fragments have been problematic, but it has been suggested that they may be from the second and the third centuries CE.¹¹ A date probably in the first century CE has been suggested for the British Library Scrolls and a date probably in the second century CE has been suggested for the Senior Scrolls that were found near Hadda in Afghanistan.¹² Thus, the dates of these fragments move forwards to rethink above assumption: Pāli sources were the earliest historical material on Buddhism.

The other important consideration is the purpose of the authors of the Buddhist literary sources. Most of the modern scholars of the history of Buddhism, clearly pointed out that the themes of these canonical texts were amplified for certain objective reasons. In 1981 A.K. Warder says:

... the authors of the canon were ready to turn everything to account in developing and popularizing their ideas and in presenting a comprehensive world view.¹³

Similar statements have been made by most of the scholars regarding this matter. For example attention should be given to the statement by G. Panabokke regarding the Sri Lankan Chronicles. He has stated that the traditional Chronicles of Sri Lanka and all the themes therein were amplified for certain objective reasons. The missionaries who first came and established Buddhism and the monastic order in Sri Lanka belonged to the Theravāda tradition.¹⁴ Thus, the Emperor Aśoka, under the advice of monk Moggaliputta attempted to end the unorthodox developments of the Buddhists by giving his support to conduct the third Buddhist council at Pāliputra in the third century CE.¹⁵ The Chronicles clearly state that the Theravāda School gained supremacy over the other Buddhist sects in India and it spread all over the world as a result of this Council. According to the details in the Chronicles the other non-Theravāda

¹¹ R. A. L. H. Gunawardana, 'Recent Discoveries of Buddhist Manuscripts in Afghanistan,' *The Sri Lanka Journal of the Humanities*, Peradeniya: University of Peradeniya, Vol. xxvii, Nos 1&2, 2001-2002, p. 222.

¹² Ibid. p. 220.

¹³ A. K. Warder, 'The Pāli Canon and its Commentaries as Historical Sources,' *Historians of India, Pakistan and Ceylon*, C.H. Philip ed. London: 1981, pp. 46-47.

¹⁴ G. Panabokke, *History of the Buddhist Sangha in India and Sri Lanka*, Kelaniya: University of Kelaniya, 1994, p. 69.

¹⁵ *Dīpavaṃsa*, ed. and tr. H. Oldenberge, New Delhi: Asian Education Services, 1982, chap. VIII, v. 12; *Mahāvāṃsa*, tr. by Wilhelm Geiger, Oxford: London, P.T.S., 1934, chap. XII, p. 7.

doctrines were refuted and pure Theravāda was re-established.¹⁶ To give weight to their views they added the story of the Uposatha ceremony for the expulsion of unworthy monks and the complete rehearsal of the Dhamma and Vinaya at a council held in Pāṭaliputra. Further they traced the lineage of the Vinaya teachers from Upāli to Moggaliputta Tissa and to give more prestige to Mahinda, placed him within this lineage as having studied directly under Moggaliputta Tissa and is linked with Pāṭaliputra.¹⁷ R. Gombrich says that Moggaliputta Tissa is the chief Theravāda intellectual and hence regards his role as having been exaggerated in the Pāli sources.¹⁸

In the same way we can account for the missionary activities of Aśoka with the Buddhist monk Upagupta in the North Indian literary tradition as preserved in the Sanskrit *Avadāna*.¹⁹ *Aśoka Avadāna* recorded Aśoka's relationship with Upagupta, a monk who accompanied Aśoka on his pilgrimages to different sites that were associated with the life of Buddha.²⁰ Considering these descriptions some have pointed out that not only the Theravāda sect but other sects as the Sarvāstivādin also associated Aśoka's name with contemporary leading figures of their respective sects in order to add importance to themselves.²¹ In the same way Aśoka as an impartial ruler must have offered equal treatment to the Buddhists and as well as non-Buddhists. It may be inferred that he would not support one sect against another. Subsequently, it is noteworthy that the Theravāda and Sarvāstivāda schools both claim special association with Aśoka. Most probably, he would not have attempted to patronise any special Buddhist school

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ E. W. Adikaram, *Early History of Buddhism in Ceylon*, Dehiwala: The Buddhist Cultural Centre, 1946, p. 88.

¹⁸ Richard F. Gombrich, 'Aśoka - the Great Upasaka,' in Annuradha Senevirathne ed. *King Aśoka and Buddhism Historical and History studies*, Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1994, pp. 13; H.P. Ray, 'Early Urban Centres in Peninsular India and Sri Lanka: A Study in Linkages and Contrasts (1000 BC to 100 BC),' a Paper presented to the Seminar on Indo-Sri Lanka Relations, Peradeniya: University of Peradeniya, 2001, p.3.

¹⁹ J. Ph. Vogel, *Buddhist Art in India, Ceylon and Java*, tr. by A. J. Barnouw, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1828-30, p. 22.

²⁰ H. P. Ray, 'Early Urban Centres in Peninsular India and Sri Lanka: A Study in Linkages and Contrasts (1000 BC to 100 BC),' a Paper presented to the Seminar on Indo-Sri Lanka Relations, Peradeniya: University of Peradeniya, 2001, p. 4-7.

²¹ Steven Collins, 'The Very Idea of the Pāli Canon,' in *The Journal of the Pāli Text Society*, Vol. XV, 1990, pp. 89-126; Walters, op.cit, 1997, pp. 10-119.

but was interested in the purity of the saṅgha and may have assisted in the unification of the saṅgha community.²² So, most probably, the traditional literary sources amplified selected themes for certain objective reasons according to their wish.

However, modern academic approaches were widely used in evaluating the history of Buddhism using archaeological sources. As a modern scholar of the history of Buddhism, Gregory Schopen made a valuable statement regarding the importance of archaeology for the historical studies of religions. Archaeological sources are more relevant than the text-bound studies of Buddhism. Gregory Schopen says:

... it would have been preoccupied not with what small, literate almost exclusively male and certainly atypical professionalized subgroups wrote, but rather with what religious people of all segments of a given community actually did and how they lived.²³

On the basis of pioneering archaeological explorations which were started by Alexander Cunningham, researchers made to focus their attention on archaeological and epigraphical materials to uncover the nature of Buddhist religious culture in southern Asia.

Writing in 1949 on the impotence of inscriptional details for historical studies, L.S. Perera states:

...the inscriptions are contemporary records. These therefore reflect the conditions of the time they relate to, much more accurately than literary records, would, because the latter (literary records) were first handed down by word of mouth and then set down in writing. Further these have again gone through much editing before being put in the final form in which they have come down to us. ...The authors of the literary records, however, subject the material they had to the requirements of the story they had to relate, the moral they wished to teach or the point of view they wanted expressed.²⁴

²² Romila Thapar, 'Aśoka and Buddhism as reflected in the Aśokan Edicts' in Anuradha Senevirathne ed. *King Aśoka and Buddhism –Historical and History studies*, Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1994, pp. 11-15; Gombrich, op.cit, 1994, pp. 1-10.

²³ Schopen, op.cit, 1997, p. 114.

²⁴ L. S. Perera, *The Institutions of Ancient Ceylon from Inscriptions*, Sirima Kiribamune and Piyatissa Senanayake eds. Kandy: International Center for Ethnic Studies, Vol. I, and Vol. II, Part I & II. 2001, p. xvii.

Thus, it is clear that the archaeological and epigraphical details are more accurate, truthful and contemporary. On the basis of archaeological and epigraphical details, modern scholars began to re-examine the various statements that were made in textual oriented.²⁵

The geographical distinction of the Buddhist world is an important area which made on textual oriented details. On the basis of the details reflected in Buddhist canonical texts, both Pāli and Sanskrit, the ancient Buddhist world was divided into two major geographic regions.²⁶ The first region, Sri Lanka and South East Asia belongs to the Sthaviravāda, Theravāda or Southern Buddhism (Hinayāna) and has been named as “The world of Theravāda Buddhism.”²⁷ The second geographic region which corresponds to another major Buddhist tradition is North India and Central Asia up to China. The Buddhism that prevailed in all these countries was called Northern Buddhism. It represents a wide spectrum of Buddhist doctrine and practice within Mahāyāna Buddhism. They used Sanskrit as their religious language.²⁸ This has been reviewed by Gina L. Barnes as follows:

... King Aśoka’s enthusiasm into all centres of South Asia, Sri Lanka, perhaps Myanmar, into Central Asia and perhaps all the way to China. Both Hinayāna and Mahāyāna forms were spread in all directions beyond India in the early centuries, but many areas saw the predominance of one or the other at different times. In general, Southeast Asia – after an initial period of entertaining both types – became strongly Hinayāna in the medieval era, whereas Mahāyāna Buddhism seemed to win over in Central and East Asia.²⁹

Gina L. Barnes clearly pointed out that the archaeological remains show both Theravāda and Mahāyāna forms were spread in all directions beyond India in the early centuries, but many

²⁵ Gombrich clearly states that it is difficult to date Gautama Buddha without looking at archaeological sources. Richard F. Gombrich, *How Buddhism Began: the Conditioned Genesis of the early Teachings*, New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1996, p. 13.

²⁶ N. N. Bhattacharyya, *History of Researches on Indian Buddhism*, New Delhi: Munshiram Manohar Lal, 1981, pp. 1-18.

²⁷ R. A. L. H. Gunawardana, ‘The World of Theravāda Buddhism in History,’ *Dhamma–Vinaya: Essays in Honour of Venerable Professor Dhammavihari (Jotiya Dhirasekara)*, Colombo: Sri Lanka Association for Buddhist Studies, 2005, pp.56-89.

²⁸ Bhattacharyya, op.cit, 1981:1-18.

²⁹ Gina L. Barnes, ‘An Introduction to Buddhist Archaeology,’ *World Archaeology*, Vol. XXVII, No. 2, 1995-96, p. 169.

areas saw the predominance of one or the other at different times. As stated in the Sri Lankan Pāli Chronicles, though the Sthaviravāda tradition spread over the South Asian region in the third century BCE., other popular religious practices including Mahāyāna and local religious practices were also absorbed from time to time.

From the article titled “The Axial Age in Asia: The Archaeology of Buddhism” H.P. Ray clearly raised the importance of archaeological materials for the study of the history of Buddhism and its expansion across the Bay of Bengal.³⁰

Gregory Schopen also made a remarkable contribution to examine the nature of the Buddhist culture based on archaeology.³¹ However most of the time, he attempted to critique the details in the literary tradition by comparing them with the archaeological remains. But it can be clearly stated that the archaeological remains are the most valuable path for the understanding of changing ideological affiliations and the nature of Buddhist culture within any time and space.

Thus, it is clear that the archaeological reflections are extremely important for the study of the history of religions. Most of these materials play a significant role as windows for the understanding of religions practices, rituals and beliefs in the society. They contain a number of sufficiently powerful symbols as contemporary sources.³²

Tāntric Buddhism and Eroticism

From the middle part of the first millennium CE.. (seventh century onwards)³³ Mahāyāna Buddhism started developing another tradition called Tantric Buddhism. This affected a significant revolution among the Buddhists towards ritualistic and devotional Buddhism. New Buddhist concepts were evolving, as traditional Mahāyāna worship was transformed into the beliefs, rituals and practices of esoteric forms. So Tāntric Buddhism was also called ‘Esoteric

³⁰ H. P. Ray, ‘Archaeology and Empire: Buddhist Monuments in Monsoon Asia,’ *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, Vol. 45, No. 3, 20 06, pp. 417-449.

³¹ Schopen, op.cit., 1997.

³² Kenneth Clark, *Monuments of Vision*, London: John Murray Publishers, 1981, p. 68.

³³ Bhattacharya, op.cit, 1932: 48.

Buddhism' since its principal doctrine expresses it in an esoteric way. Tāntrika or Esoteric Buddhism which includes both Vajrayāna (Thunderbolt Vehicle) and Mantrayāna (Spell Vehicle) transformed Buddhism into a new faith.³⁴

Though there are some scholars who attempted to discuss the age and the inventors of Tāntric Buddhism,³⁵ it is said that Tantric ideas were already prevalent in Mahāyāna Buddhism and it was handed down by secret means from the time of Asaṅga i.e. fourth century CE. to Dharmakīrti, i.e. seventh century CE. After that it attained a full-fledged form.³⁶ Hence it is reasonable to suggest that Tāntrism was not introduced into Buddhism by a particular person at any particular time. But it is generally accepted that it was a growth within the fold of Mahāyāna Buddhism which appeared in a marked way in the seventh century CE., onwards.³⁷

With the development of Tāntric Buddhism a new path of enjoyment - *Panchamakāra* is opened to reach the final goal of emancipation. A new body of texts called *tantras*³⁸ arose to record the esoteric and functional details of the five types of *makāras* - *pancha makāras*, religious practices which are offered to the deity.³⁹ They are described as *Madya* (wine), *Mangsa* (meat), *Matsya* (fish), *Mudra* (parched grain) and *Maithuna* (sexual intercourse). The followers of the *Guhyasamāja-tantra* are allowed to take wine of any quality and quantity.⁴⁰ Symbolically, the five elements represent five aspects of the Goddess, five parts of Her Body.

³⁴ G. H. Malandra, *Unfolding a Maṇḍala: The Buddhist Cave Temples at Ellora*, Delhi: Sri Satguru Publication, 1993, p. 4; Wayman, 'Observations on the History and Influence of the Buddhist Tantra in India and Tibet,' *Studies in History of Buddhism*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1980, pp. 359-363; B. Bhattacharyya, 'Tāntric Culture among the Buddhists,' *The Cultural Heritage of India*, Calcutta: Vol. IV, 1956, pp. 263; S. K. Moharana, *Tāntric Buddhism: An Obscure Aspect of the Cultural Heritage of India with Special Reference to Orissa*, New Delhi: Aryan Book International, 1992.

³⁵ B. Bhattacharya, *An Introduction to Buddhist Esoteric*, Mysore: Oxford University Press 1932, pp. 48-49.

³⁶ Moharana, op.cit, 1992, pp. 11; Bhattacharya, op.cit, 1932, pp. 63-82.

³⁷ Gombrich, op.cit, 1984, pp. 86; Bhattacharyya, op.cit, 1932, pp. 63-82.

³⁸ In the Tibetan canon, these *tantras* were divided into four general classes, *Kriyā Tantras*, *Carya Tantras*, *Yoga Tantras* and *Anuttarayoga Tantras*, the first two, often called Mantrayāna Buddhism and the latter two called Vajrayāna Buddhism. It is important to note that these teachings were not entirely independent thus for example *Mandala* of the *Yoga* and *Anuttarayoga* classes retain element of *Mandala* describe in the *Manjusrimulakalpa*' a tantra of the *Kriya* class. Lal Mani Joshi, *Studies in Buddhist Culture in India*, (7th century and 8th century A.D.) , Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas, (1967) 2002, p. 236.

³⁹ Panchamakara <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Panchamakara>

⁴⁰ *Guhyasamāja-tantra*, Tntr., p. xii.

These five elements moreover have various meanings and its popularized both among the Buddhist and Hindus. However, a number of secret and immoral practices are found introduced in the Tāntric works such as *Guhyasamāja-tantra* and *Sādanamalā*. It is interesting to note that the *Guhyasamāja-tantra* recommends sexual intercourse with women or engaging in freely available sexual relations as in fifth *makāras*.⁴¹ Thus the *Guhyasamāja-tantra* also recommends freely sexual intercourse with any woman even near relatives for attainment of perfection.⁴² Additionally, *Guhyasamāja-tantra*⁴³ introduced a new process of attaining Buddhahood within the shortest time possible, even in one birth by indulging in all objects of enjoyment figured.⁴⁴ This can be concluded as follow: the religion expounded in Tantras, is a peculiar mixture of mystic syllables (*mantras*), magical diagrams (*yantras*), ritualistic circles (*mandalas*), physical gestures (*mudras*), sex play (*maituna*) with psycho – physical discipline (*yoga*), a fearful pantheon, elaborate worship and ritualism, magical sorcery, necromancy, symbolism, astrology, alchemy, co-efficiency of the female element and a monistic philosophy.⁴⁵ Thus it is clear that the *maithuna*, sexual union with *śakti* is considered as the highest bliss.

Another element which was introduced into Buddhism, is that of *śakti* (woman considered a manifestation of divine energy) particularly for obtaining emancipation through *yoga* and *samādhi* (highest concentration).⁴⁶ Various forms of female Buddhist deities were introduced by the Tāntric tradition. These female deities can be basically divided into the emanations of independent Bodhisatvas and the female consorts of the Tathāgatas, known as ‘*prajñās*’ or ‘*śaktis*’,⁴⁷ In the *Vāstuvidyāśāstra*⁴⁸ and *Citrakarmaśāstra*⁴⁹ of the

⁴¹ B. Bhattacharyya (Ed), *Guhyasamāja-tantra or TathagataGuhyaha*, (Sanskrit) G.O.S. , No. 53, Baroda, 1949, p. 120.

⁴² Ibid, chapters, 7 – 8.

⁴³ B. Bhattacharyya (Ed), *Guhyasamāja-tantra or TathagataGuhyaha*, (Sanskrit) G.O.S., No. 53, Baroda, 1949.

⁴⁴ Ed. By B. Bhattacharyya. Ibid., pp.264.

⁴⁵ Lal Mani Joshi, op.cit, 2002, p. 236.

⁴⁶ B. Bhattacharyya, op.cit, p. 263.

⁴⁷ Ibid, p. 264.

⁴⁸ *The Vāstuvidyāśāstra ascribed to Mañjuśrī*, ed. E.W. Marasinghe, New Delhi: 1989.

⁴⁹ H. Ruelius, “*Mañjuśrībhāsita-Citrakarmaśāstra*: a Mahayanistic Śilpaśāstra from Sri Lanka [dating from the 5th–7th c.]”, *BCRSBC*, Ed. Heinz Bechert, 1978, PP. 88-89.

Mañjuśrībhāṣita-Citrakarmas-śāstra of Sri Lanka state that Tārā, Locanā, Prajñā, Māmakī, Vajralāsyā, Vajradhūpā are the Buddha *śaktis* or female consorts of five Tathāgatas: Aksobhya, Vairocana, Ratnasambhava, Amitābha and Amoghasiddhi.⁵⁰ In the Buddhist tradition the associated consorts of the Tathāgatas are known as *prajñās* ('wisdom'), whereas in Hinduism the term is *śakti* ('energy'). Consequently, it is clear that the Tāntric Buddhist doctrine, ritualistic values had been given to sexuality. These developed ideological factors have been expressed not only in the literary tradition but also depicted in the carvings, inscriptions and ichnographically as well. From 6th Century onwards, Tantrayāna including Vajrayāna nad Mantrayāna Buddhism were spreading rapidly throughout India and beyond to Nepal, Tibet, China, Japan and South East Asia.⁵¹

Popularity of Tāntric Buddhism in Sri Lanka

It is traditionally believed that the developed Buddhist traditions, both Mahayanism and Tantrism affected the purity of Sri Lankan Theravāda Buddhism. To prove this, most scholars refer to the details which were given by the authors of the Sri Lankan Chronicles such as the *Mahāvamsa*, *Nikāyasaṅgrahaya*. For example: The *Nikāyasaṅgrahaya* states that king Voharika-tissa (215-237 CE) ordered the burning of the *Vaitulya-piṅgavās* because they did not contain the true word of the Buddha.⁵² Then forty years later, king Gotabhaya (254-267 CE.) also burnt the texts and sent them into exile, branding the bodies of sixty heretical monks who accepted the Vaitulya doctrine as the true word of the Buddha.⁵³ The author of the *Nikāyasaṅgrahaya* clearly states that the king Sena II (853-867 CE.) stationed guards all around the coast to prevent the entry of "pseudo-Buddhist monks" to Sri Lanka.⁵⁴ Similarly many references are given by the authors of the Chronicles regarding the Sri Lankan rulers who came forward to protect the orthodox Theravāda teachings being affected by the later Buddhist traditions. These factors were highlighted by the authors of the Chronicles because they believed

⁵⁰ This list is not necessarily valid for various sectarian groups of the Mahāyāna tradition developed in Sri Lanka.

⁵¹ Ibid, p.15.

⁵² *Nikāyasaṅgrahaya*, 11.

⁵³ *Mahāvamsa*, cha. XXXVI, vs. 111-117; *Nikāyasaṅgrahaya*, pp. 14-15.

⁵⁴ Ibid, p. 21.

that the later traditions would destroy the purity of Sri Lanka Theravāda Buddhism. So, on the basis of Pāli literature, modern scholarship has also attempted to highlight Mahayanism and Tantrism as having corrupted Sri Lankan Buddhism.

The most famous teachers of the Buddhism in China were Vjrabodhi and Amoghavajra. They were played a significant role in the propagation of Tāntric Buddhism in Sri Lanka too. The visit of Vajrabodhi, the great Tantrayana teacher who was a guest at Abhayagiri vihāra during the end of the seventh century must have added much to the contents and prestige of Tāntrayāna Buddhism in Sri Lanka. He is said to have preached the Tantrayana doctrine to the ruler of 'Rohana' the Southern region of Sri Lanka. Vajrabodhi was a graduate of Nālanda University and perhaps also of the Valabhi University and was a *Tripitakācārya* and a master of Tāntric Buddhism. He travelled to Sri Lanka and later went to China where he died in 732 CE., having translated 11 Tāntric texts into Chinese⁵⁵. His pupil Amoghavajra, a Sri Lankan monk also began his journey from India in 741 AD. and came to Sri Lanka on his way to China. In Sri Lanka he was honored by king Silāmegha in 742 CE and was throught by Sri Lankan Guru, Achārya Samantrabhadran.⁵⁶ Amoghavajra collected more than 500 Tāntric texts, Sūtras, Sāstras and other accessory texts and then he went to China in 746 CE.⁵⁷ So, it seems that Tāntrika Buddhism had established itself in Sri Lanka at the initial stage when originated in India. On the other hand these Chinese reports clearly show the Sri Lankan contribution for the establishment and propagation of Tāntric Buddhism in China. Amoghavajra translated about 110 Buddhist texts into Chinese and promoted the Manjusri cult in China. Amoghavajra's description shows that Samantrabhadra is said to have performed the ceremony of *Vajjradhātu* and *Garbhadhātu-mandalas* and to have taught the secrets of the five *abhisekas*⁵⁸. This has been further confirmed by an inscription dated to the 10th century from the monastery known to have come within the fold of Abhayagiri at Buddhanegala. It records that the rites of *Abhisheka* were known and practiced at this monastery⁵⁹. According to the commentary of the *Mahavairochana sūtra*, the

⁵⁵ W. Pachow, 'Ancient cultural relation between Ceylon and China,' *UCR*, Volume XII, 1954, pp.182-191.

⁵⁶ Lal Mani Joshi, op.cit, 2002. p.169.

⁵⁷ Ibid, p.169.

⁵⁸ Lal Mani Joshi, op.cit, 2002. p.168.

⁵⁹ *Epigraphia Zeylanica*, ed. D.M.De. Z. Wickremasinghe, London: Oxford University Press, Vol. I, 1912, p. 196.

Abhisheka was an essential rite which had to be performed before a teacher of the Tantra began to instruct a disciple.⁶⁰

Among the literary references to the activities of the Sri Lankan scholars in India and the Indian scholars in Sri Lanka, the propagation of Tūntric teachings is recorded by the famous Tibetan monk Taranatha in the sixteenth century CE.⁶¹ According to Taranatha's record, Ratnakarasanti, one of the most famous teachers of the Vajrayana in Eastern India, came to Sri Lanka along with an envoy sent by the king of the Island to fetch him and brought along with him two hundred texts of the Mahāyāna doctrine. He preached in the Island for seven years and on his return to India left behind five hundred monks belonging to Mahāyāna schools in Sri Lanka. R.A.L.H. Gunawardana stated that the period of Ratnakarasanti's arrival in Sri Lanka dates to the later part of the tenth century⁶². Taranatha also mentions the Tāntric teacher 'Lanka Jayabhadrā' (Jayabhadrā of Lanka) who is credited with the writing of several works on *Cakrasamvara* and who became the *Tantra-acarya* of the famous Vikramasila monastery in Northern India.⁶³ These foreign references clearly reveal not only the popularity of Tāntric Buddhism in Sri Lanka but also Sri Lankans' contribution towards its spread throughout the Buddhist world. That apart, archeological remains are the most significant evidence which clearly demonstrate the popularity of Tantric Buddhist culture in the Island. The extreme form of ideological factors of Tantrism such as mystic syllables (*mantras*), magical diagrams (*yantras*), ritualistic circles (*mandalas*), physical gestures (*mudras*), sex play (*maituna*) with psycho – physical discipline (*yoga*), a fearful pantheon, have been discovered from the carvings, inscriptions and ichnography in the Island.

⁶⁰ R. A. L. H. Gunawardana, *Robe and Plough, (Monasticism and Economic Interest in Early Mediaeval Sri Lanka,)* Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1979. p.32. See also, *Encyclopaedia of Buddhism*, pp.125-130.

⁶¹ *Taranatha's History of Buddhism in India*, tr. By Lama Chimpa and A. Chatthopadhyaya, Simla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1970.

⁶² *Archaeological Survey of Ceylon, Annual Reports*, Colombo: Government Publication, 1927, pp. 105-106.

⁶³ *Taranatha's History of Buddhism in India*, tr. By Lama Chimpa and A. Chatthopadhyaya, Simla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1970.

Maituna Carvings in Sri Lankan Buddhist Temples

It is noteworthy that eroticism is not a pervasive phenomenon in early Sri Lankan art and extreme forms of its are very few and far between.⁶⁴ H.C.P. Bell has identified two panels of erotic carvings at Nālanda-Gedigē⁶⁵ and given details in the *Archeological Survey Report* of 1910/11. One is on a pillar, the other is on the stereobate.⁶⁶ In 1967 Nandasena Mudiyanse pointed out that one carving is on the stereobate but the other has eluded him. He said that it is probably with the other pillars which had fallen face down.⁶⁷ Unfortunately, until year 2008 no one attempted to identify the panel. As a young archeologist, Viraj Balasuriya made a great effort to find out the hidden pillar with the panel of erotic carving.⁶⁸ The panel on the stereobate is an erotic sculpture that contains a scene where a man and woman are shown in physical union with an animal (Fig. 1). The other panel which is on the pillar depicts a man and a woman in physical union (Fig. 2). At a glance, these sculptures can be compared with figures on the Hindu temples in India such as the Konarak temple in Orissa (13th century) and at the Kandariya temple at Khajuraho (11th century)⁶⁹. Considering the iconographic similarities, some have attempted to say that the Sri Lankans used esoteric figures as a decorative item in the Buddhist temples because of the Hindu cultural influences from India.⁷⁰ Chronologically, it is clear that these Indian examples cannot be compared with the Sri Lankan counterparts because Sri Lankan carvings are two, three centuries earlier than the Indian Hindu temple examples.⁷¹

⁶⁴ Sirima Kiribamune, Photographic documentation of Women as depicted in early Sri Lankan Sculpture and painting, p. 35 (unpublished).

⁶⁵ There is no doubt that the Nalanda-Gedige, situated in the central part of Sri Lanka, is an Image house of the Buddha belong to the 8th or 9th century CE. The other archeological remains and inscriptions are a clear proof that there was a Buddhist monastery and iconographically the image of Avalokiteśvara, shows that the Mahāyānic rituals were practised in the monastery.

⁶⁶ *Archeological Survey Report*, 1910-11.

⁶⁷ Nandasena Mudiyanse, *Mahāyāna Monuments in Ceylon*, Colombo: M.D. Gunasena and Company, 1967.

⁶⁸ Viraj Balasuriya, "Erotic Carvings at Nālanda Gedigē.", *Lankādīpa*, dated 08. 04. 2008, p. 11.

⁶⁹ Devangana Desai, "Some Rare Sculptures Depicting Offering of Hair and Maituna," *Journal of the Indian Society of Oriental Art*, Vol. V, 1912-13, pp. 86-90.

⁷⁰ Viraj Balasuriya, op.cit, 08th 04.2008.

⁷¹ Architecturally, Nalanda-gedige can be easily compared with the South India Pallava architecture. These similarities led scholars to suggest that the Pallava cultural influences played significant role on architectural tradition in ancient Sri Lanka. But there is no any esoteric sculptures attached to the Pallava architecture.

On the grounds of style, the Sri Lankan examples can be dated the 8th or 9th centuries.⁷² So, these extremely rare examples lead us to observe a unique picture of the Buddhist religion and cultural history of Sri Lanka.

It should be noted here that this is not the one and only Sri Lankan Buddhist site which used esoteric carvings in the shrine edifices. Among the number of erotic sculptures Sirima Kiribamune has been identified two extreme forms of *maithuna* sculptures from the ancient Buddhist shrines. One is at the balustrade flanking the steps of a building near the Thūpārāmaya at Anuradapura and the other is painted on the walls of the Tivamka Image house at Polonnaruva.⁷³ The initial one - a composite sculpture is an erotic embrace involving more than two people composite sculpture, which seems to represent a mythical scene. It is thought to belong to the 8th century CE.⁷⁴ The second is a scene, an illustration of the Asamkha jātika, a man and woman having intimate physical relations.⁷⁵ This image house is dated to the 12th or 13th century CE. Thus these carvings contain a number of sufficiently powerful symbols as contemporary sources of the popularity of Tantric Buddhism in the Island.

Other than that inscriptional remains also reveal the popularity of these extreme forms of Tantric beliefs in Sri Lanka. *Dhāranis* - Tāntric incarnations, and *mantras* were among the symbols deposited as relics in the stūpa. They have been described as magic formulas of mystic forms of prayer or spells of Tantric order.⁷⁶ This has been a clear evidence for the popularity of Tāntric practices in the contemporary Buddhist world.⁷⁷ *Dhārani* stones from Abhayagiriya contain the words “*rati pūjā pravarttaya hum*” and “*guhya pūjā pravarttaya hum*” inscribed in North – Eastern Nāgari characters of about 9th century CE.⁷⁸ The word “*Rati-pūjā*” furnished the

⁷² *Archaeological Survey of Ceylon*, Annual Reports, Colombo: Government Publication, 1910-11, pp. 42 – 50.

⁷³ Sirima Kiribamune op.cit, Pho.129.

⁷⁴ Ibid, Pho. 130.

⁷⁵ Ibid, This picture taken for a copy made in as early as 1909 can be seen at the National Museum in Colombo. The paintings of the Tivanka image house can be dated to the 12th or 13th century. Pho. 131.

⁷⁶ Nandasena Mudiyanse, op.cit, 1967, p. 99.

⁷⁷ Debala Mitra, op.cit, p. 228./ B. Bandyopadhyay, *Buddhist Centers of Orissa, Lalitagiri, Ratnagiri and Udayagiri*, Sundeep Prakashan, New Delhi, 2004, p. 27. A fairly large number of sculptures, stone and terracotta plaques bearing *dhāranis* were found in the remains around the Main *stupa* in the several other *stupas* at Ratnagiriand.

⁷⁸ *Archaeological Survey of Ceylon*, Annual Reports, Colombo: Government Publication, 1940-45. p. 41.

epigraphical evidence to the existence of the erotic forms of Tāntric Buddhist practices in Sri Lanka about the 8th century. “*Rati-pūjā*” in the inscriptions is sculptured in stone at the Buddhist temples where the Tāntric rituals were practiced. Though these practices seem to be quite a contrary to the Theravāda moral doctrines, these archaeological sources reveal that they have influenced Sri Lankan Buddhism.

In this context, I would like to pay attention to the Indian Buddhist monasteries with erotic sculptures which are chronologically comparable to their Sri Lankan counterparts. The monastery at Ratnagiri Mahāvihāra in Orissa, provides significant examples in this regard.⁷⁹ The Mahāvihāra at Ratnagiri in Orissa is an elaborate complex dominated by a main stūpa and two vihāras. The larger of the two vihāras is designated Monastery I, which is built primarily of brick that has four carved stone façades. The site also includes numerous subsidiary stūpas, two smaller vihāras and several square and rectangular temples.

Among the sculptural remains of monastery 1, there are erotic panels which contain a scene where human beings are shown in physical union but not with animal as we have seen at Nālandā Gedigē. On one of the façades at monastery 1, an explicitly sexual scene is introduced (Fig. 3). The scene has one man and two women, for it shows a man in intercourse with a woman while a second woman is holding the man’s hair tightly. The next panel that is identified on the other shrine façade at the same monastery which has a close connection between the two façades is substantiated by the existence of a *maithuna*. This *maithuna* panel (fig. 17, central relief) is badly damaged, but it appears very similar to the previous one in its *maithuna* position (Fig. 4). In both examples, a man and woman shown in sexual intercourse, and both couples being in the same position with a third person standing behind the man. Unfortunately, the latter panel too is damaged, because of that it is difficult to say where the standing person is holding

⁷⁹ The site is described in *Indian Archaeology*, ed. by A.Ghosh (New Delhi, 1957-58), pp. 39-41; *Indian Archaeology*. 958-59, pp. 33-36; *Indian Archaeology*, 1959-60, pp. 38-39; and *Indian Archaeology*. 1960-61, pp. 28-30. It is also described by Debala Mitra, "Ratnagiri: Unearthing of a new Buddhist Site in Orissa," *Indo-Asian Culture*, Vol. IX, No. 2 1960, pp. 160-175 in her *Buddhist Monuments*, Calcutta, 1971, pp. 225-232 also in her *Ratnagiri, Memories of the Archaeological Survey of India*, 1958-61, No.80, Two Vols., New Delhi: Archeological Survey of India, 1981. and Charles Fabri, *History of the Art of Orissa* Bombay, 1974, pp. 46-63.

the man's hair. But the overall similarity to the second shrine façade panel suggests that this is a possibility.⁸⁰

Considering iconographical similarities to the sculptures found at Ratnagiri in Orissa, three other scenes have been compared by Devangana Desai, from the temple at Mysore, the Linghanātha temple at Bhubaneswar and the Surya Deul temple at Konaraka in Orissa which were dated to the 11th -13th centuries CE.⁸¹ Devangana Desai suggested that they “represent a Tānttic rite, the fifth *makāra*, offered to the deity”.⁸² However these erotic carvings are later than the Buddhist counterparts.

Apart from the sculptures found at Ratnagiri in Orissa, there are insignificant instances of *maituna* sculptures in the Buddhist Temple No. 45 at Sānchi.⁸³ And two other depictions of *maituna* couples in narrative, Jātaka panels have been identified by Devangana Desai from the Buddhist railing pillars of Mathurā.⁸⁴ It should be noted here that these erotic figures were introduced as decorative items at the Image houses of the Buddhist temples, surely indicative of the development of the religious philosophy of Trāyāna Buddhism.

Conclusion

In this context, it should be noted that the developed Buddhist traditions played significant role in introducing new rituals to Buddhism. The Tāntric rite of *maituna* and the fifth *makāra*, were also among these rituals. These ideas have been sculptured as decorative items in the shrine temples in India as well as in Sri Lanka from the sixth century onwards. As there were some socio-cultural barriers against exhibiting the sex act it was not widespread throughout the Buddhist world as in the case of the Brahmanical counterpart. The *maituna* sculptures in the Image house at Nalanda Gedige, Tūparama and at Rathnagiri Mahavihara in Orissa were not

⁸⁰ Robert L. Brown, ‘The Four Stone Facades of Monastery 1 at Ratnagiri,’ *Artibus Asiae*, Vol. 40, No. 1, 1978, p. 7.

⁸¹ Devangana Desai, “Some Rare Sculptures Depicting Offering of Hair and *Maituna*,” *Journal of the Indian Society of Oriental Art*, Vol. V, 1912-13, pp. 86-90.

⁸² *Ibid*, p. 89.

⁸³ Y. Krishan, ‘The Erotic Sculpture of India,’ *Artibus Asiae* Vol. XXXIV, No. 4 1912, p. 339.

⁸⁴ Devangana Desai, *Erotic Sculpture of India* New Delhi, 1975, p. 22.

chronologically comparable with near Brahmanical counterpart in India. It is therefore reasonable to suggest that the Tāntric Buddhist practice of *maituna* was sculptured in stone at Nalanda Gedige was not influenced of any Brahmanical counterpart. And it gives us a complicated picture of the history of Buddhism in the Island which was not highlighted by Sri Lanka Chronicles. It reveals the popularity of extreme forms of Tantric Buddhist rituals and practices in the Island significantly.



Fig. 1 Erotic Carving at Nālanda-Gedigē



Fig. 2 Erotic Carving at Nālanda-Gedigē



Fig. 3 Erotic Carving – Ratnagiri Mahāvihāra