

Challenges of Sri Lankan Buddhist scholarly tradition to create Sri Lanka as the hub of Pali and Buddhist education

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ABSTRACT

This article is for the purpose of examining the challenges that Buddhist scholars have to face when making Sri Lanka a hub of education. These challenges can be understood in two areas. They are: Challenge of language skills and Challenge of subjects' knowledge. Original Theravada Buddhist tradition is unique to Sri Lanka. Its sources have been preserved in Pali language. Thus, the knowledge of Pali language is compulsory for the study of Buddhism. During the Anuradhapura period Sanskrit language came into vogue. So, study of Pali, and Sanskrit Languages and teachings prescribed by them is the challenge for Sri Lankan Buddhist scholar tradition. During the colonial period English language influenced Sri Lankan Buddhist education. Today, as English has become more prominent as an international language acquisition of fluency in English is the challenge faced by Sri Lankan Buddhist scholars. As an immense amount of researches have been done in English, English language knowledge with Pali and Sanskrit turned to be a decisive factor in Sri Lankan Buddhist scholasticism. However, as Buddhist research stands at present proficiency in English with a sound knowledge of Pali and Sanskrit is not enough. Since, Pali, Sanskrit, Chinese, and Tibetan are recognized as primary source languages for Buddhist studies, knowing these four languages and doing comparative researches on literature written in these languages is a new arena for Buddhist scholar tradition. So, the aim of this paper is to examine challenges faced by Sri Lankan Buddhist scholar tradition in the past and present and try to discuss its path and direction towards the building of Sri Lanka as a hub of Buddhist education.

Key words: *Buddhist monastic education, command in Pali language, oriental language studies, university education, proficiency in English, global requirement.*

INTRODUCTION

Sri Lanka has suffered greatly over the last three decades due the brutal civil war. It resulted in the loss of a large number of human lives and a large amount of material resources of the country. Now it is four years after the war ended. Sri Lanka should now find its way back to normal and to quick development to catch up with time lost. Comparatively Sri Lanka is a small island but its resources are immense. The most necessary thing is to recognize these resources and take necessary measures to manage and use them in the appropriate manner.

In the present globalized world, since economic competition is high, all countries are engaged in the provision of high quality and attractive productions to win the global market. Hence, this is

the responsibility which should be shouldered by every single individual and all institutions of the country. There is a plan to build Sri Lanka as the hub of education. This is a commendable programme, very forward-looking in its approach. In this, the higher education sector of Sri Lanka can play a vital role, if it correctly identifies the resources and challenges. The education sector is a wide sector. In this there is one unique segment in which Sri Lanka excels and rises above most of the other Asian countries, and perhaps even most of the other countries of the world. This is the study pertaining to Theravada Buddhism and the Pali language in which its techniques are couched. Among the Theravada Buddhist countries in South and South East Asia, namely Thailand, Myanmar, Cambodia, and Laos, Sri Lanka stands prominent. Pali and Theravada Buddhist education of Sri Lanka is highly recognized. This has been the case from the time Buddhism was introduced. This is what made Sri Lanka famous as the repository of Buddhism in its pristine purity. Just as it gained recognition in the ancient times as the centre par excellence for Theravada Buddhism, in modern time, it has risen to the height of fame. This is because Sri Lanka managed to keep pace with time and blended the traditional approach with western scientific methodology while taking on the English language. This hybrid education system is well developed in Sri Lanka more than in other Theravada Buddhist countries. As a result, many foreign scholars' and students' interest in the study of Theravada Buddhism naturally led them to choose Sri Lanka over the past several decades. However, at present the Sri Lankan Buddhist scholarly tradition shows a downward trend when compared with what it was about five to six decades ago.

There are Buddhist universities, departments and institutions in present Sri Lanka to produce Buddhist scholars. Two such main universities are the Buddhist and Pali University, and the Buddhasravaka Bhiksu University. Five Buddhist studies departments are available in the main universities and one international Buddhist institution in Pallekale, Kandy. Yet, as the Sri Lankan education system uses Sinhala and Tamil languages as the main media of instruction, perhaps, there is a doubt as to whether these universities and departments produce graduates who are capable of fulfilling the global requirements and demands. This article will examine the ground situation that influenced the waning of the Sri Lankan Buddhist scholarly tradition and explore how it should be restructured to achieve the goal of making Sri Lanka a hub of higher education in this particular field. To achieve this goal, there are two challenges that should be taken into consideration. They are: challenge of language skills and challenge of subject knowledge.

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

The Sri Lankan Buddhist scholarly tradition began during the Anuradhapura Period with the arrival of Buddhism from India. At the very beginning, there were two main tasks to be discharged by Buddhist monks and nuns who newly entered into the order; they were: I. to learn the orally preserved Buddhist texts and II. to propagate the doctrine through preaching and teaching. To fulfill these two tasks, a fair knowledge of the Pali language was essential. At the beginning, Sri Lankan bhikkhus and bhikkhunis had a problem of understanding the Pali language. Perhaps this was the reason that required the translation of Pali Aṭṭhakathās, the commentaries to main texts, into Sinhala language.¹ These Aṭṭhakathās. (Canonical Commentaries) were originally in Pali, and were brought to Sri Lanka by the Mission headed by Ven. Mahinda. For such a huge translation project both in Sinhala and Pali language knowledge was required. Hence, it became necessary to train local resource persons, and consequently, a monastic education centre called Pirivena emerged.

Since the entire Buddhist teachings were grouped into three baskets (piṭakas) along with their commentaries, sub-commentaries, and also compendiums, and have been preserved in the Pali language, the knowledge of Buddhism and Pali language became a decisive factor of Sri Lankan Buddhist scholasticism. This teaching-learning method was quite effective and this is well evidenced by the spread of the Dhamma and the appearance of Sīhala-aṭṭhakathās². With the passage of time and change in circumstances, this system underwent modifications. Those modifications led to more systematization of the teaching-learning process, gradually giving rise to a graded system with areas of study fixed according to the grade to which a learner belonged. The *Samantapasādikā* explains what these grades are and also the syllabuses assigned to each grade³. From this account it is also seen that by this time the monastic education system had got formalized with areas of studies clearly demarcated and syllabuses approved and fixed⁴.

Subsequently, Sanskrit language also came into vogue. Proficiency in Sanskrit widely opened the doors of education to a much wider range of subjects, mostly secular. With this, the curricular of monastic education got expanded, and new subjects such as prosody, astrology, palmistry, medicine architecture, sculpture, etc. were included. By about the early Anuradhapura period, the major monasteries of Mahāvihāra, Abhayagiri, and Jetavana had their own affiliated centers

of learning where most of these subjects were taught. It is possible that widening of the curricula narrowed down, at least to an extent, the focus on Pali and Buddhist studies, for the students' interest shifted to other secular subjects. But this did not seriously affect the Pali language studies and Buddhist studies. This was because Pali and Sanskrit were related languages. In fact, proficiency in Sanskrit contributed to produce erudite writers of Sanskritized Pali. On the other hand, this widening of curricula made laymen also pursue studies at these centers. Some scholars such as Dīghakārāyana and Kapila were highly recognized even by the royalty for erudition and expertise in their respective fields of study⁵. During the Anuradhapura period, study of Pali and Sanskrit languages and teachings prescribed by them was the challenge for the Sri Lankan Buddhist scholastic tradition. This was so throughout the Sri Lankan history up to the time Sri Lanka became a British colony.

At the dawn of the 20th Century, Pali language studies happened to be vibrant with a large number of highly renowned scholars who had won the admiration and veneration not only of the local public, but also the deference and respect of international scholars, specially of the west that was gradually rising into prominence in the field of Buddhist and oriental studies. It is in this background that British civil servants, engaged in the administration of Sri Lanka, got involved in the field, and through that handling ecclesiastical issues, became intrigued by the wealth of knowledge hidden in the Pali language, the knowledge which, they rightly realized, would facilitate the efficient performance of their duties⁶. Curiosity led them to learn Pali with commitment, through this they found that it provided access to a very rich philosophical tradition and they were enthralled by this new finding. Many westerners such as Childers, Charmers, and Rhys Davids were attracted to this area of study⁷.

ESTABLISHMENT OF THE ORIENTAL STUDIES SOCIETY OF SRI LANKA

This interest paved the way for the setting up of the Oriental Studies Society of Sri Lanka (Sri Lanka Pracheena Bhasopakara Samagama) on the 24th of July 1902⁸. Under this system, oriental studies was 'streamlined' adopting a 'General Syllabus' with a set pattern of examinations. This is the beginning of certain 'new trends' in Pali language studies. Under this new scheme there operated a graded system with three levels: Preliminary, Intermediate, and Final. This new system had two clear features. The 'General Syllabus' appears to have clearly narrowed down

the area of study, with the system becoming more ‘examination oriented’ than ‘knowledge oriented’.

This limitation and narrowing of focus seems to have gone unnoticed at the inception of the system. This was because the new system did not completely break ways from the old traditional system, for it did not completely discard rote-learning, practical application of aphorism to solve grammatical problem, prose composition etc. At the same time, early candidates who presented themselves for this new examination system were all trained and instructed by expert traditional teachers who did not limit their teaching only to the General Syllabus. Hence, in spite of the General Syllabus’ limitation, knowledge wise these early candidates possessed knowledge expertise in their subject areas.

This is seen by a perusal of the question papers set for these examinations in the early decades of the 20th century. Such a perusal makes it quite clear that even though the area of Pali studies had got limited, the scope covered was yet wide enough to imbibe candidates, who successfully completed the Finals, with good knowledge and proficiency in the use of the Pali language. Contributions made by a large number of early Pracheena Pandits for the uplifting of Pali language studies speak volumes for this⁹. But this situation began to change as time passed and signs of decadence were seen in the latter decades of the 20th Century.

PALI STUDIES AT THE UNIVERSITY

The other major factor that influenced the rise of ‘new trends’ in Pali language studies was the introduction of the study of oriental languages into the university curricula. This new trend began in the early part of the 20th Century, when the idea was first mooted by Sir Henry Macallum, the British Governor of the Island (1907-1913). This got further strengthened and established by more concrete proposals of Sir Robert Chalmers, Governor (1913-1916), who himself became a reputed Pali scholar. In 1920 when Mr. E. B., Denham, the director of education, recommended the appointment of one lecturer to teach all three oriental languages¹⁰, Sanskrit, Pali and Sinhala at the university, this was really a turning point. While making this proposal he suggested exploring the possibility of appointing Ven. Suriyagoda Sumangala, who was at the time studying at Manchester College, Oxford, on a two year scholarship. However, it was in 1922 that this appointment came into effect¹¹. English was the medium of instruction, and this restricted

the admission of bhikkhus who have had Pirivena training and who possessed a deep traditional knowledge, but lacked English proficiency.

In the university the study of Pali was not considered different from the study of any other subject that came under the broad category of 'Humanities Studies'. The main aim of this university system of education was to produce graduates who were suitable as 'resource persons' to help the colonial administration of the island. The authorities were right in thinking that English medium graduates with some acquaintance with oriental languages will be efficient administrators because of their better understanding of the local culture, custom, and even the ways of thinking of the local. As language studies involved critical essay writing, précis writing and summarizing, all became handy for administrators who were required to take minutes, write summaries of issues, take down notes, make written observations, and write reports. As there was demand for such resource persons, Pali studies at the university was also mainly focused on developing these extraneous administrative abilities of students, rather than on developing their Pali language skills. Thus, study of oriental subjects, especially languages including Pali, became the 'key' to enter civil service and other high echelons of the colonial administration. There were good oriental scholars, but there were hardly any lucrative opportunities for them to serve the development of oriental studies. Therefore, they used this as a 'vehicle' for their personal progress, and joined the administrative service, a far cry from the field of study they dedicatedly engaged in.

With the change of medium from English to Sinhala, at the beginning there was not much demand for Pali studies at the university. This was because oriental language studies carried out in the Sinhala medium did not open up opportunities to obtain decent jobs in the government service and hence, there was no demand for such studies at secondary school level. Consequently, at the outset there were not many students to pursue these subjects at the university. This state of affairs is clearly brought to light by Prof. G. P. Malalasekara, the pioneer of oriental studies in the university. Observing that no candidates offered oriental languages for Entrance Scholarship Examinations during the Academic Year 1930-31 he said: "this is undoubtedly due to the fact that the vast majority of the secondary schools of this island make no adequate provision for the study of these subjects in the higher classes"¹². To keep students at this university interested in study of Pali in the English medium, he kept on trying and finally succeeded in getting it included in the Civil Service Examination for the first time in the year

1935-36. He was rightly hopeful that such a move would help to produce a ‘change of heart’ among parents, school authorities etc regarding the pursuit of these subjects.

The final outcome of these changes was that the university produced brilliant oriental scholars, even experts, but as there was no scope in the ‘open job market’ for Pali they had to take up appointments at such departments as the Income Tax Department as assessors etc. Scholars were now available, but they had few avenues to make a decent living. Most of these Pali graduates, after securing a decent job, did not think of pursuing Pali language studies any further. What happened was that once they joined some profession, mostly one that was not even remotely connected with Pali, they completely forgot even the little Pali they knew. It was only the select few who joined the university academic staff who continued with such studies. But, among them too very few really committed themselves to in-depth Pali linguistic studies. This is evident from the postgraduate research studies these scholars have been engaged in¹³. One reason for this dearth in Pali linguistic studies could be that at the university Pali was taught just to suffice as a tool to read some primary texts. The emphasis was more on Buddhist studies which involve modern, scientific techniques, critical appraisal and comparative approaches etc, which were all aspects of the teaching methods employed and encouraged at both Oxford and Cambridge Universities. Under such training, the university was able to produce some brilliant scholars in Buddhist studies, and this definitely brought fame to Sri Lanka.

These lesser emphases on linguistic studies also explain why the Sri Lankan Pali scholars produced by the university were not inclined towards editorial and lexicographical work, or to engage in editing texts and compiling lexicons, translating texts, commentaries, sub-commentaries, etc. This paucity of Pali linguistic studies by scholars produced by the university system of education becomes apparent when one examines the academic journal (in Sinhala) of the Pracheena Society. The dissertations submitted to qualify to obtain the Pracheena Pandit degree in the latter part of the 20th Century are mainly pertaining to conceptual studies, and this is so even now. The Pracheena system began to show signs of decadence as time passed by. The university system of Pali teaching might have had some indirect bearing on these signs of decadence. The Pracheena system was pursued, at the early stage, by those who aimed at learning for the sake of knowledge. But, being tempted by the benefits enjoyed by the BA degree holders, the Pracheena Pandits degree holders also began to agitate for equality in status and salary. When this monetary interest came into play, the academic interest began to wane.

This was happening for some time, and the authorities attempted to remedy this by laying down a new rule which required candidates to submit a minor academic dissertation as a part fulfillment of the final examination. This rule which came into operation in 1928 had to be repealed in 1952. Unlike before, the Pracheena candidates were not motivated to learn for the sake of knowledge, but to pass examinations to secure a teaching appointment. By the time the Pracheena Pandit degree was given equal status as the BA degree 1991, the standard of the examination had deteriorated to considerably low levels. Though this trend was beneficial monetary wise for Pracheena degree holders, it was a hindrance to the acquisition of knowledge. With the Sri Lanka Pracheena Bhashopakara Samagama taking over of the teaching of and holding examinations in oriental languages, the traditional monastic Pali education system gradually lost its control and say over these matters. As the system remains now, it belongs neither to the old traditional monastic system nor to a scientifically structured new system. It is just another system of teaching and examination which is capable of neither turning out good Pali scholars nor good scholars in Buddhism.

At one time the university produced a large number of distinguished administrators, a fair number of internationally renowned scholars of Buddhism and also a few Pali scholars. But the change that took place with the enactment of the Official Languages Act no, 33 of 1956 had much adverse effect on university Pali education¹⁴. This Act did not stop at making Sinhala and Tamil languages the medium of instruction at universities, but went to the extent of discarding English completely. This dealt a blow to oriental studies, especially Pali and Buddhism, that had gained international recognition for Sri Lanka. This closing of the door to English learners amounted to the closure of the door to the international arena of Pali and Buddhist studies as well as to acquisition of new knowledge. In a background in which all degrees followed in the national languages (Sinhala or Tamil) have lost almost all monetary and market value, both locally and internationally, it is not surprising to find that there are only a very few students, some of them from other disciplines, and some from other countries, interested in learning Pali. The complaint of these students, though few they may be, is that there are not enough competent teachers, especially those well acquainted with both the traditional monastic Pali teaching and university system of teaching, who could teach in the English medium.

Though the picture of oriental studies, especially that of Buddhist and Pali studies, is not quite rosy at present, it does not mean that it is completely dead. It is good to note that there is life in

it, and it is yet breathing, even though with difficulty. In spite of all handicaps, this new band of young scholars, both clergy and lay, are braving their way to invigorate the much cherished traditional legacy of Sri Lankan education, namely studies in Pali and Theravada Buddhism. These young bands of scholars appear to be well geared to raise studies in Pali and Theravada Buddhism to great heights. What they need is a strong helping hand from the educational authorities. Both Pali and Buddhist studies are our traditional 'saleable products'. Sri Lanka was able to attract many from foreign lands who were keen on these specific subjects. Even today, if we are ready to produce good teachers and a well-structured system of education that accords with international standards, there is no doubt that many from foreign countries, especially from other Asian countries, including China, Korea, Japan, would opt to come to Sri Lanka and pursue their higher studies. Unfortunately, the authorities do not seem as to be interested in tapping this lucrative venture, for they do not seem to notice the potential of such a venture.

A study of the present global context clearly shows that there is much interest in Theravada Buddhism. Though Sri Lanka does not show much interest in Mahayana, students from many Mahayana countries show much interest in the study of Theravada Buddhism. Even with the meager facilities available at present there are many foreign students who are pursuing higher studies in Theravada and Pali at local universities. If opportunities and facilities are provided, there is the possibility of attracting a fair number of students from Asian countries of the Far East, such as Burma, Thailand, and Vietnam, and even an appreciable number of students from some western countries. Openings should be increased for such students in reputed universities. The educational structure should be reorganized to suit their interests, with Theravada Buddhism and Pali as the foundation. Sanskrit should be made available for those desiring to pursue comparative studies. It is too early to go in to Chinese and Tibetan due lack of teachers who are proficient in these areas.

CONCLUSION

When restructuring the system, the authorities should consider the teaching of Theravada Buddhism and Pali as sort of a business venture with potential for good returns. In fact, there is no gainsaying of the fact that in the present world, education is a business. What is necessary is to do it in the best way possible, maintain the long-cherished academic standards for which Sri Lanka is well known. This could be accomplished and should be accomplished through many

projects undertaken to make Sri Lanka the hub of higher education. Theravada Buddhism and Pali with their rich doctrinal philosophy, ethics, social philosophy etc. have a great demand both in East and the West. Theravada Buddhism is the foundation of a great culture going back over two and half millennia. Sri Lanka is the legitimate heir to this great culture. There are many foreign students interested in these areas of study. So, when restructuring the study on Theravada Buddhism and Pali, not only doctrinal philosophical aspects but also the cultural and fine arts aspects should be affiliated. There are ministries and departments for these subjects, their help and services should be solicited to enhance Theravada and Pali studies. Cultural and aesthetic studies would be reciprocally benefitted through such an approach. Thus, when viewed from this kind of a broad perspective, it is possible to make Buddhist education a vibrant aspect of the envisaged programme of making Sri Lanka the hub of education.

End Notes

¹Chandarātana L, (1968,) *Pali Atthakatha Sahitya*, Author Publication, Colombo-10, p v.

²Ibid p36.

³*Samantapasadika*, II, (2000) The Tripitaka Publication Society, Colombo 10, p 577.

⁴Rahula, W., (1996) *History of Buddhism in Ceylon*, (2nded) Gunasena and Co Ltd, Colombo 10, p307-321.

⁵Ibid p311.

⁶Saddhatissa, H., (1990) *Sinhalese Studies by some European Scholars, Ananada(Papers on Buddhism and Indology, A Felicitation Volume, Presented to Ananda Guruge)* ed, Karunadasa Y, The Felicitation Volume Editorial Committee, Colombo-04, p6.

⁷Jaini P.S., (1956) Some Great Eminent Buddhist Scholars: In India and Europe, *2500 Years of Buddhism*, ed, Bapath P. V., Ministry of Broad Casting, Government of India, p 427.

⁸Pannarama M, (2002) *Sambhāsa*, Vol. 12, (*Journal of Sri Lanka Oriental Studies Society Centaury Volume*, 1902-2002) Vidyalankara University Press, Colombo 10, pXVII.

⁹Ibid p9-16.

¹⁰Handurukanda R., (1994) *Orientalia in the University*, *Sri Lanka Journal of Humanities*, University of Peradeniya, Kandy *Journal of Pali Text Society*, p 266.

¹¹Nanayakkara S., (2013) Monastic education in Sri Lanka, its origin, development and decline, *Dialogue* vol. 9,ed, Aloysius Peris , S.J., Ecumenical Institute for Study and Dialogue, Colombo 06, p25-39.

¹²Handurukanda R., (1994) *Orientalia in the University*, *Sri Lanka Journal of Humanities*, University of Peradeniya, Kandy, p275-285.

¹³Pannarama M., (2002) *Sambhāsa*, Vol, 12, *Journal of Sri Lanka Oriental Studies Society Centaury Volume*, 1902-2002) Vidyalankara University Press, Colombo 10, p19.

¹⁴Kopparaheva S., (2008) *Bhasamatavadatmaka Lipi*, S, Godage and Brothers, Colombo 10, p70.

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