

A Historical Analysis of the Political Role of the Buddhist Monk in Sri Lanka during the Anuradhapura Period (3rd Century B.C. to 10th Century A.D.)

A.M.M.C. Magammana

Department of History, Faculty of Arts, University of Peradeniya

The discourse on the political role of monks is a prominent theme in present-day social and political enquiry. Although some scholars have attempted to state that politics do not directly relate to the role of monks, others strongly point out that it is not logical to accept that Buddhist monks cannot be politically involved. Scholars who emphasise the fact that politics is entirely concerned with social issues, further attempt to highlight that their major objective is to serve the society. Therefore, they do not question the opportunity available to monks for that purpose. However, at present, Buddhist monks have emerged as a political pressure group actively involved in politics. Thus, it is timely, as well as important, to investigate: (1) the status of monks when Buddhism was introduced to Sri Lanka; and (2) the manner in which the Buddhist monks are politically integrated.

During the last few decades, more attention was paid to the social function of monks. It can clearly be seen that there was an attempt to establish the role of monks from different perspectives. Previous studies have succeeded in attempting to emphasise the social function of monks in an academic background. When attention is paid to such studies, it can be seen that Buddhist monks evolved as an organized social group. However, the political participation of the early Buddhist monk was significantly different from the present. The major objective of this study is to critically examine the above mentioned phenomenon, focusing on the primary sources related to the political and religious history of Sri Lanka.

The Anuradhapura period can be considered as the beginning of social, economic, political and cultural development in Sri Lanka. The evolution of the Sri Lankan political structure within a Buddhist framework can also be seen as a trend which emerged in this period. Within this background, the Buddhist monk was able to function as leading characters in politics as the "Buddhist State" was integrated into society. They became not only the advisers of the rulers, but also teachers to the governing elite. Moreover, since the coronation of kings, the contribution of monks was considered a highly important factor to maintain all political activities. It should be noted that monks served in a significant way in leading rulers to an ideological path that helped the well-being of the state. Thus, Buddhist monks can be identified as a community that has made strong contributions to the development of the political system of this country. It is clear that the role of the Buddhist monk was a key factor that clearly contributed to the development of the state on the one hand and the development of the Sangha community on the other hand.