

**MODERN TRENDS OF NON-THERAVADA IMPACT ON
SRI LANKAN SOCIETY**

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Abstract

Although Sri Lanka is considered to be a Theravada country, it is almost impossible to write of Sri Lankan Buddhism without mentioning the Mahayana impact on the religious culture of the country. After the introduction of Buddhism to the island by Elder Mahinda Thera in the 3rd century B.C.E., Mahayana Buddhism came into being with the rise of the Abhayagiri fraternity in around the 1st century C.E.¹ Soon after the rise of Abhayagiri, another school branched off from it by the name of Jetavana. These two schools are said to have maintained the doctrines, received from the neighboring sub-continent, that were at variance with those of the Mahāvihāra monks. Many scholarly works have shown that the fraternity of Abhayagiri was Mahayana. This implies that the impact of Mahayana Buddhism on Sri Lankan society began at an early phase of Sri Lankan Buddhism. The epigraphical, monumental, literary, and sculptural evidence all points to this fact.

By the reign of first Parākramabāhu, also called Parākramabāhu the Great, we see a restoration of the unity and maintenance of the purity of the order of monks of the three schools (all Theravada schools).² Despite the restoration of the primacy of the Theravada, we cannot assume that the Mahayana impact, which was active through Abhayagiri and Jetavana fraternities, completely vanished. Scholars have collected much evidence of the continued the Mahayana impact on the island even after the reign of Parākramabāhu-I as well as its continuous existence up to recent centuries.

In this article, we aim to discuss the modern trends of the Mahayana impact on Sri Lankan society, which continued throughout Sri Lankan Buddhist history after the introduction of the Mahayana. Here, we will examine three main areas within which we can see the Mahayana impact: 1. Buddhist *vandanā-gāthā*, 2. *Paritta*, and 3. Sinhalese songs.

Keywords:

Mahayana Impact, Sri Lanka Society, *Vandanā-gāthā*, *Paritta*,
Sinhalese Songs

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***Vandanā-gāthā* (stanzas recited in act of worship)**

While the monks of the Mahāvihāra remained conventional in the sense of adhering to Theravada doctrines and practices, and did them to protect their teachings, the monks of Abhayagiri were in touch best with the latest doctrinal developments in the Indian sub-continent and offered access to those newly developed doctrines such as the Madhyamika.

As a result of this Mahayana influence, numerous Buddhist Sanskrit texts became well-known in Sri Lanka. Among those texts, the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* ('Descending into the Conduct Leading to Buddhahood') of Śāntideva is considered to have had a great influence over Sri Lankan culture. When the Mahayana bodhisattva ideal was spreading rapidly throughout the island, it, no doubt, must have been enhanced greatly by the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*. Śāntideva's classic work *Bodhicaryāvatāra* is one of the central texts for inspiration and practical knowledge of the bodhisattva path as given in the Mahayana. It describes the qualities of the Bodhisattva and six perfections to be developed by a practitioner who is on the bodhisattva path. It treats in depth both the philosophy and practice of the path, with the first nine chapters describing the practical aspects of the way of the Bodhisattva while the last chapter focuses on philosophical teachings. In presenting the key philosophical teachings of the Mahayana, the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* discusses the Mahayana view of emptiness with special reference to the *Prajñā-pāramitā*.

We can see how this important Mahayana work has exerted its influence upon Sri Lankan religious culture by examining some instances from Sri Lankan history. The story of the Sri Lankan King Siri Saṅghabodhi³ (siri saṅgabo) demonstrates that the conduct of many important religious and secular people were strongly influenced by the ideal of the Mahayana Bodhisattva. It can be assumed that important works such as the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* were guiding his virtuous practices while he was resolved to stop the harmful actions of a malicious demon⁴ which was engaged in widespread harm to the people.⁵ In this case, the King sacrificed his personal well-being in order to control the demon for the public good. The King made a compact with the demon in which he sacrificed his own body in exchange for a promise that the demon would cease hurting other people.⁶ When the people are experiencing struggles the Bodhisattvas do not feel comfort.⁷

This kind of generous attitude can also be seen in the *Vyāghra-jātaka* that is found in the Mahayana literature such as the *Jātakamālā*⁸ and in the *Bodhicittaparigraha* chapter of the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*.⁹ Therefore, it is possible to infer that at the time the *Hattavanagalla Vihāravamsa* was composed, the concepts of Bodhisattva found in the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* was widely prevalent in the Sri Lankan Society.

The commonly accepted date of the *Hattavanagalla Vihāravamsa* is in the 11th century CE. There is no doubt that by this time Sri Lanka had received Sanskrit literature. The translation of the Sanskrit *Kāvyaḍarśa*¹⁰ into Sinhalese language, titled the *Siyabaslakara*¹¹ is one piece of evidence to that effect. Also significant is that King Kumāradāsa¹², the author of the *Jāṇakīharana*¹³ was living in Sri Lanka. This means that Sanskrit literature was not strange to the Sinhalese at all.

As a result of this widespread dissemination of Sanskrit literature, Pali literature as well as classical Sinhalese literature were also influenced by the Bodhisattva concepts formerly unique to the Mahayana. The *Bodhicaryāvatāra* influenced not only Pali texts but also some Sinhalese texts. The *dharmapradīpikā*¹⁴ which was composed in the Polonnaruwa period was one of them. In the *dharmapradīpikā* by Guruḷugomi, we encounter two *śloka*-s quoted from the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*,¹⁵ which describe the blemish of hatred and how to get rid of it.¹⁶

If one would get angry at the thrower not the stick he also set in motion by hate it would be better for me to hate the hatred¹⁷

How many bad people, more numerous than space itself, will I need to kill? When the angry mind is slain, then all enemies die¹⁸

The above two *śloka*-s, in the *Dharmapradīpikā*, quoted from the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, prove that the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* has been instrumental for Sri Lanka's ancient literary figures in commenting on doctrinal matters.

It is also quite interesting to see how this work had a great impact on ritual practices in ancient Sri Lankan society. Surprisingly, even today we see this impact in the common ritual practices of everyday Sri Lankan people, namely in the act of Buddha worship (*buddhavandanā*). When practicing this act of Buddha worship, they recite aspiration stanzas (*patthanāgāthā*-s) at the end. Among these aspiration stanzas, we confront one that is already known to us in the *parināmanā* chapter of the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*.

Bodhicaryāvatāra:

May the rains fall in time, and bring about a rich harvest! May the world thrive in prosperity, and may the king be ever righteous!¹⁹

Patthanāgāthā:

May the rains fall in time, and bring about a rich harvest! May the world thrive in prosperity, and may the king be ever righteous!²⁰

There is no doubt that this stanza, recited in common ritual practices by Buddhists in Sri Lanka, originates from the translated Pāli stanza of the *śloka* of the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*. It should be noted here that two stanzas that are somewhat similar to the above stanza are found in the Pāli commentaries.

May the master of world rain also rain well at proper time, world engaged in dhamma may instructed by the Dhamma.²¹

May the Dhamma be long lasted may all beings have respect in Dhamma and may the the rain also rain at proper time.²²

These two stanzas were composed by the well-known commentators Elder Dhammapāla and Elder Buddhaghosa. Sri Lankan Theravada Buddhists have chosen the translated Pāli stanza of the *śloka* of the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* for daily practices like the act of Buddha worship. This clearly shows how deeply the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* has influenced Sri Lankan Buddhist society from past times up to the present day. We

conjecture that this stanza began to be recited with *vandanāgāthā*-s in the 18 and 19 centuries CE in the colonial period. At that time, the British, having captured the island, put an increasing tax burden on the people on almost everything from dogs to grain and so on. According to the historical evidence, these taxes put pressure on the island and people,²³ and they sought relief from British taxes. Therefore, following religious custom, they recited this stanza, wishing the ruler (the governor) to be righteous, and for such a righteous governor to offer tax relief.

Paritta

Chanting by monks to get rid of human, natural, and supernatural harm is common to all Buddhist traditions. Such an act of chanting by Theravada monks to assure protection²⁴ is called *Paritta*. In Sri Lanka, the *Paritta* ritual has been given the highest respect. In the inscription of Jetavanārāma by King Kassapa IV, it is mentioned “no one was allowed to enter the order of *saṅgha* unless he knew at least four sections of the *Paritta*”.²⁵ This shows how much the *Paritta* was important in the early phase of Sri Lankan society.

Even today, the *Paritta* is a prominent ritual for both the *saṅgha* and the general public. The *Piruvānā-potvahanse* (the book of collected *sutta*-s of *Paritta*), also called *Piritpota*, is the religiously prescribed book for chanting. Though it mainly consists of some selected texts from the Theravada Buddhist canon, non-canonical protective texts can also be seen therein. Some of them are mantra-like sutras. From the Buddhist philosophical viewpoint, they are not objectionable. Although the *Dīgha Nikāya* of the Theravada canon strongly criticized magical practices as *tiracchānavijjā*²⁶ (animal science), some mantra-like *sutras* have found their way into the *Piruvānā-potvahanse* as a result of the impact of Tantric Buddhism. Since Buddha sometimes prescribed *suttas* for monks to recite in order to assure protection,²⁷ it is not wise to consider that the recitation of all types of *Paritta* necessarily categorized as *tiracchānavijjā*.

The date of amalgamation of these non-canonical texts and mantra-like *sūtras* in Sri Lanka is unknown. However, some available evidence leads us to think that as other Mahayana beliefs and practices clearly began to amalgamate with Theravada Buddhism with the establishment of the Abhayagiri tradition, these mantra-like *sūtras* should also have begun to blend with previous Buddhist practices.

There are references to a monk named Saṅghamitra who arrived in the island from south India in the reign of King Goṭhābhaya (3rd century C.E.). According to the *Mahāvamsa*, this monk was well-versed in the exorcism of spirits and magical formulae.²⁸ He is said to have greatly enhanced the Abhayagiri fraternity with the doctrinal development of Mahayana Buddhism. Therefore, it is fair enough to assume that through Saṅghamitra’s activities, these mantra-like *sūtras* began to be popular in Sri Lankan society from that time. At present, at the end of the *Piruvānā-potvahanse*, we read a number of minor *sūtras* in which we see a considerable influence of Tantric Buddhism.

The *Jalanandana-paritta* can be taken as one of the most popular *sūtras* with Tantric influence, included in the *Piruvānā-potvahanse*. It consists of seven Pāli stanzas and two Sanskrit *śloka*-s which seem to have been added at a later time. In addition, some

sporadic Sanskrit wordings are found within the Pāli stanzas. The story attributed to this *sūtra* is found in the *Divyāvadāna* but not in any Theravada text. However, this story, along with the *suttas*, is still quite popular in Sri Lanka. Apart from the *Jalanandana-paritta* other minor *suttas* such as *Gini-paritta*, *Sīvalī-paritta*, *Randene-gāthā* can be found in the *Piruvānā-potvahanse*, which seem to have been influenced by Tantric Buddhism.

Sinhalese Songs

As discussed above, the recent Mahayana impact on Sri Lankan culture is explicitly found within the *Vandanā-gāthā* and *Paritta*. Now, we enter into the last part of our study concerning Sinhalese songs. Today, we hear a few Sinhalese songs playing on the radio, within which we can discern Mahayana ideas which have been intentionally or unintentionally put into the song by the Lyricist. We will take as an example the song that begins with *Vahinnata hæki nam gigum dī*, composed by Professor Sunil Ariyaratne. Let us quote the song and translate it first.

If (I) can rain, producing thunder over dried village areas

If (I) can, in secret, be cooked being rice in a cottage where rice is not cooked

If (I) can remain in the lips' edge of children crying, being a smile

If (I) can bloom on each tree, being a wild flower that can be plucked

If (I) can sleep within the (others') eyes, being a fortune dream that comes true

If (I) can be sung in front of every door, being a song that would make the entire world happy²⁹

One can argue that the song has been more impacted by the ideals of socialism than by Mahayana Buddhism. That is because some scholars intentionally skip investigating the Mahayana features contained within the song. However, when we closely look into the song, we understand that the song is closer to Mahayana concepts than to socialism. The context of the whole song teaches how one can develop universal compassion, though it does not prescribe setting forth on the path of Buddhahood. One who is developing universal compassion does not think about the suffering that comes to him along with the endeavor to follow the path for the good of all beings. He always thinks of how to reduce the suffering of those around him. That is why the one of this song's inner dialogues wishes to be a rain, rice, fortune dream, song, smile, or wild flower. This concept of being a form of instrument for the benefit of suffering beings reminds us of one of Śāntideva's sayings below.

“May I be an inexhaustible treasure for impoverished beings.

May I wait upon them with various forms of offering.”³⁰

In this song, it is stated that he wishes to be cooked secretly, being rice in a cottage where rice is not cooked. The term *rahasin* (secretly) in this line is very powerful. It seems to me that this is the initial concept of the song, and it allows us to conceive the deeper messages of the song. The one who really wants to become a Buddha for the good of others and reduce others' suffering does not hope for anything. He hopelessly and secretly gives up everything including his body. Having done so, he never hopes to

receive honour from society. Most interestingly, this great attitude of a Bodhisattva is mentioned by the term of *rahasin* in this song.

Another powerful line that we need to pay attention is “*pipennata hæki nam turin tura - neḷā gatahæki vana malak vi*”. A flower in a garden belongs to the owner of the garden and can be claimed only by the owner. But a wild flower differs from it. It can be claimed by any being and can be plucked by anyone. In the second verse we read that the one in this song wishes to bloom on each tree, being a wild flower that can be plucked. Therefore, it is clear that to a great extent, this song portrays the universal compassion a bodhisattva develops.

Finally, what grabs our ears in this song is the last line. The one who sings this song wishes to be a song that makes the entire world happy, being sung in front of each door. He does not categorize houses or people that he wishes to be sung in front of. He designates the entire world and therefore implies the concept of equality. This almost leads the listener to see deeply into the concept of universal compassion and greatly serves the writer’s intent of the song.

Conclusion

The main concern of this article was to examine the modern trends and impact of Mahayana Buddhism on Sri Lankan society. It first aims at providing a short introduction to how and when Mahayana Buddhism began to amalgamate with Theravada Buddhism in Sri Lanka from an early period of time. Then, in terms of the modern impact of Mahayana, we examined three genres which exhibit this amalgamation: Buddhist *vandanā-gāthā*, *Paritta*, and Sinhalese song. Within these three genres, we have discussed how the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* and mantra-like *sūtras* had a considerable influence on the *vandanā-gāthā* and *Paritta* respectively. Finally, we have shown that Mahayana concepts have crept into popular Sinhalese songs that play on the radio today. It would be impossible fully understand modern Sri Lankan Buddhism and Sri Lankan religious culture without mentioning the Mahayana impact.

Abbreviations

As.	<i>Atthasālinī</i> (PTS edition)
Bcv	<i>Bodhicaryāvatāra</i>
Dp.	<i>Dharmapradīpikā</i>
EZ.	<i>Epigraphia Zeylanica</i>
Hatvg	<i>Hattavanagalla</i>
Jāmā	<i>Jātakamālā</i>
Mv (b).	<i>Mahavamsa</i> (Burmese Chaṭṭhasaṅghāyanā Edition)
Mv (S).	<i>Mahavamsa</i> (Buddhist Cultural Center)
Pd.	<i>Paramatthadīpanī</i> (PTS edition)
Pj.	<i>Paramatthajotikā</i> (PTS edition)

Vin. *Vinaya Piṭaka* (PTS edition)

Endnotes

¹ Mudiyanse 1967 p: 2

² Mv (s) LXXVI, 27. See also EZ I, 130; EZ II, p:106

³ A The history of Ceylon recodes the King Siri Sanghabodhi ruled Sri Lanka in the 246 AD.
Alwis, 1866

⁴ As the text records, the devil was a real one. The modern people are not ready to admit that they were true, but just literary imaginations. However, we believe the commentary to the Ratana-sutta and the Dhammapada where clear descriptions are presented regarding the devil. Because we have no right for Procrustean bed, the devil comes in this text has to be understood as real.

⁵ So yakkho matamate nirāsaṅke khādati. Taṃ yakkhaṃ adasvāpi ye ye narā tenāturā te te passanti, tepi so rogo āvisati. Evaṃ na cironavayakkhabhayena rogena ca janapado viralajano jāto. Hattavg – 58 para

⁶ ‘mama sarirato diyamānaṃ jivamaṃsaṃ jivarudhirañca mayi anuggahena sampatiçchā’ti rakkhassa vatvā sallakattābhimukhaṃ dakkhiṇabāhuṃ pasāresi maṃsakattanāya - Hatvg – 74 para

⁷ Ādipata kāyasya yathā samantān – na sarva kāmairapi saumanasya∞
Satatvavyathāyāmapī tadvadeve – na prityupāyāsti dayā mayānā∞ - Bcv – 6 - 123

⁸ Jāmā p: 3

⁹ Krīḍantu mama kāyena – hasantu vilasantu ca
Dattastebhyo mayā kāyas-cintayā ki∞ mamānayā – Bcv – 3- 13

¹⁰ The author of this text was Dandin who is known lived in 6th century AD.
Encyclopedia of Indian Literature Vol. I, 1987 p: 606

¹¹ It is believed that this text was composed in Sinhalese language in the 9th century. M. A.G. Sameera Jayani, *Prabhā Vol. IV*, 2014-2015 p: 58

¹² King Kumaradasa lived in the 6th century AD (512 AD). He ruled the island for 9 years.
Swaminathana. 1977 p: 24

¹³ The Jāṇakīharaṇa is a great poetical work on the story of Rāma and Sitā.

¹⁴ Which is translated into English to be the “Lamp of Law”. (the translators, Soma and Piyadassi theras have used this in their translation)
Soma and Piyadassi 2008

¹⁵ Dp. 157

¹⁶ Thera Soma and Thera Piyadassi say that not only *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, but different Sanskrit boos have been quoted by the author of *Dharmapradīpikā* “Though it is easy to trace the origin of the Pāli quotations, scholars have found it difficult to trace some of the Sanskrit verses to their original sources. Some are from the works of āryaśūra, śāntideva, Harṣa and the logician, Dharmakīrti” Ibid. p: 5

¹⁷ *mukhyaṃ daṇḍādikaṃ hitvā prerake yadi kupyate|
dveṣeṇa preritaḥ so’pi dveṣe dveṣostu me varam||* (6-41)

¹⁸ *kiyato mārayiṣyāmi durjanān gaganopamān|
mārite krodhacitte tu māritāḥ sarvaśatrava||* (5-12)

- ¹⁹ *devo varṣatu kālena sasyasaṃpattirastu ca|*
phīto bhavatu lokaśca rājā bhavatu dhārmikaḥ||(10, 39)
- ²⁰ *devo vassatu kālena - sassasampatti hetu ca,*
phīto bhavatu loko ca - rājā bhavatu dhammiko
Buddharakkhita 1980 p: 33
- ²¹ sammā vassatu kālena – devopi jagatīpati,
saddhammanirato lokaṃ - dhammeneva pasāsātūti.
Pd 436.
- ²² ciraṃ tiṭṭhatu saddhammo, dhamme hontu sagāravā;
sabbepi sattā kālena, sammā devo pavassatu.
As 430.
- ²³ James Madden 1851p:12
- ²⁴ The key aim as well as the meaning of the term paritta was receiving protection.
- ²⁵ මහණ කරන් පිරින් සන්ථ මහණවන්නවුන් EZ I 45.
- ²⁶ *na bhikkhave tiracchānavijjā vācetaḥ. yo vāceyya, āpatti dukkaṭassā' ti*
Vin II 139.
- ²⁷ For instance, we can take the metta sutta and maṅgala sutta. In the commentary it is stated that “...uggaṇha ānanda imaṃ maṅgalapariyāyaṃ uggahetvā bhikkhū vācāpehī' ti”. Pj 155, “...imaṃ parittaṃ uggāṇhatha, etaṃ hi vo parittaṃ ca kammaṭṭhānañ ca bhavissatī' ti idaṃ suttam abhāsi” Pj 235.
- ²⁸ *saṅghamitto'tināmena, bhūtivijjādikovidō* Mv (b) 37-113.
- ²⁹ *Vahinnata hæki nam gīgum dī - viyaḷi gambimvalata ihaḷi*
idennata hæki nam bataḷ vī - bataḷ noidena pæḷaka rahasin
ræñdennata hæki nam ḷamā kæḷa - hañḍana detolaga sināvak vī
pipennata hæki nam turin tura - nelā gatahæki vana malak vī
Nidannata hæki nam denet tuḷa - Sæbævana subha sihinayak vī
Gæyennata hæki nam dorin dora - Lowama pubudana gītayak vī
- ³⁰ *daridrāṇaṃ ca sattvānāṃ nidhiḷ syāmahamakṣayaḷ|*
nānopakaraṇākārairupatiṣṭheyamagrataḷ|| (3-9)
Crosby and Skilton 1995 p: 20

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