

Buddhism, Xuanzang and Sri Lanka

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Abstract- There are many foreign accounts on Sri Lankan history. The “Record of the Western Regions” of Xuanzang’s having a considerable accounts on Sri Lanka. Although there are many other divergences and discrepancies with *Mahāvamsa* and the other chronicles, we are lucky to gain some controversial historical facts from the above text. This enables us to gain a better understanding of the religious milieu that formed or existed during this period. I have noticed interesting sequel to Divyāvadāna with this. In this research paper I have discussed only very few historical factors in it. The evidence at our disposal is adequate to portray the political, religious as well as the social factors during 7th Century in Sri Lanka. It is also necessary to bear in mind Xuanzang always give more detailed information than the laconic Faxian and is therefore a valuable source which needs, however, careful historical interpretation. There are quite miraculous stories in it. The main objective of this research paper is to identify the authenticity of some historical facts in the report on Sri Lanka in Xuanzang’s “Record of the Western Regions” (Datang Xiyu ji). He travelled to India in seventh century C.E. Although he wanted to visit Sri Lanka, he could not visit the island owing to a famine and political unrest in Sri Lanka. He visited Kānchīpuram, and there he met the chief monks of the Bodhimegheśvara and Abhayadamstra with three hundred other fellow monks. Xuanzang’s records of Sri Lanka was based on, what he has heard from the above monks.

Index Terms- monks, records, chronicles, compilation, legend

I. INTRODUCTION

In this research the attention is made to compare the records of the Xuanzang with the chronicles of Sri Lanka, the *Divyāvadāna*, the records of *Faxian* and the *Jātaka stories*. Xuanzang reports two stories regarding the origin of Sinhalese people. One of the stories is much more similar to the *Mahāvamsa*, and the other is similar to that of the *Divyāvadāna*. It seems as if the two different traditions have been used in Xuanzang’s record. Xuanzang sheds light on the fraternity of the sangha’s, Tooth Relic Temple of Sri Lanka and the ceremonies conducted for the veneration of it, monasteries of monks, trade and the economy. The valuable historical facts can be gathered, which belongs to the 14th century as well. This paper proposes to discuss the significance of all these scenarios.

II. OBJECTIVE

The main objective of this research paper is to identify the authenticity of the historical facts compiled on Sri Lanka, by Xuanzang.

III. METHODOLOGY

Samuel Beal’s English translation of the Buddhist Records of Western world (1906) and Li Rongxi’s Great Tang Dynasty Record of the Western Regions, (1996) were used. Max Deeg’s unpublished English translation of Xuanzang’s text strengthened my knowledge and it contributed to writing this article. Other evidences were collected from Faxian’s travel records and the Pāli *Vamsa* tradition. The inscriptions of Sri Lanka have also been studied. The evidence of the different texts permits us to gain, with some care, insight into history.

IV. RESULT

The geographical location of Sri Lanka has been recorded by Xuanzang. According to him "the Kingdom of Siṃhala has a circumference of more than seven thousand miles. The great capital has a circumference of more than forty miles" (Rongxi Li, 1996, 323). Further he mentions that the land is fertile and the seasons are hot. Although there are differences in the figures, the *Dīpavamsa* which is considered to be the first chronicle of Sri Lanka has and was written in 5th Century gives similar description as Xuanzang (Oldenberg Hermann, 1992, 1:18). As mentioned by Xuanzang, farming is done according to the seasons (Rongxi Li, 1996, 323). The Tōnigala rock inscription to the third year of king Śrīmeghavarnna (303-331 C.E.) shows that farming was done according to the seasons (Wickremasinghe Don Marino De Silva & Codrington, 1933, vol. iii: 178).

Xuanzang (Deeg Max, translation of records of Xuanzang, unpublished) says that this land originally was an island with treasures, (because) there were (so) many rare jewels. The main income of the kings in the Rohana kingdom was the gem trade. This is one of the main reasons why Sri Lanka is known as “*Ratnadīpa*”. The *Mahāvamsa* refers to eight kinds of pearls presented to Aśoka by king Dēvānampiyatissa (circa 250-210 B.C.E.). The eight kinds of pearls are horse-pearl, elephant-pearl, wagon-pearl, myrobalan pearl, bracelet pearl, ring pearl, *kakūdhā* fruit pearl and common pearl (Geiger (1950), 11:14. 78). The Pāli *Abhidhānappadīpikā* also reports the same eight types of pearl as quoted in *Mahāvamsa* (Childers, 1976, 1061).

As reported in Xuanzang’s Record Lanka was inhabited by ghosts. In most of the literary sources evidence of this is also

given. Why was the aboriginal population of Sri Lanka described as ghosts? Sri Lanka maintained very close cultural, political and trade relations with South India. Tamil traders were very active in Sri Lanka from the 4th century B.C.E. to 11th century C.E. Most probably the south Indian traders who gained the maximum profit by the trade might have spread that Lanka was inhabited by ghosts. Hence they could frighten other merchants interested in going to the island and gained the maximum profit from the trade and could not face any competition for the trading activities (Casson, 1991, 8-11). Osmund Bopearachchi notes that during this period the South Indian traders may have played the intermediary role between the Roman traders and the Sri Lankans (Bopearachchi, 2008, 4).

Xuanzang describes the appearance of the people of the lion-kingdom as common and dark; they have square chins and big foreheads; their temperament is rude and violent, and they can bear drinking poisoned wine. The people are mostly brave and strong ((Rongxi Li (1996), 326). Here it looks as if Xuanzang makes an effort to prove the leonic origin of Sinhalese from these characteristic features.

Xuanzang also states that the kingdom of Sinhala formerly was conducted immoral religious worship. This probably refers to the worshipping of ancestors (Geiger Wilhelm, 1950, 10:85), worshipping of trees (Marshall John, vol. i: 63), worshipping of *yaksas* (Geiger Wilhelm, 1950, 10:84), worshipping of gods or *devas*, worshipping of niganthas (Jains) (Geiger Wilhelm, 1950, 10:97) and *śaivism*, *paribbājakas* and *ājīvakas* (Geiger Wilhelm, 1950, 10:101-102), *pāsandas* and *pabbajitas* and many other ascetics, known as *samanas* seem to have been found in fair numbers on the island (Geiger Wilhelm, 1950, 10:96).

According to Xuanzang's description the port situated near to Kāncipura could have given easy access to Sri Lanka (Buddhadatta P. 2014, 311). The *Sīhalavatthupakkāranaya*, the oldest existing literary source written in the 3rd or the 4th century C.E., states that the traders of Sri Lanka sailed from Mahākonda and landed at Kāvēripattana in India, and from there they had further traveled to North India and China. One story reports that nearly sixty monks from the South of Sri Lanka (Rohanadesa) had entered Anurādhapura, embarked from the journey from Mahākonda and disembarked at Kāvēripattana in order to worship the Bō-tree in Uttarāpatha, (Buddhadatta P., 1958, 35). The location of the port Mahākonda is hitherto unknown. It might be the port of Mahātīttha (Mānthai) situated in the Mannar district to the North Western side of Sri Lanka. As mentioned, most of the monks might have used this route to visit the Bō-tree (Buddhadatta P., 1958, 37-39). Perhaps the *thera* Bodhimegheśvara might have used this sea route to visit Kāncipuram. When meeting the eminent monks Bodhimegheśvara and Abhayadamstra who had come from Sri Lanka Xuanzang asked them a few questions on the *Yogācāraśāstra* could they not answer as properly as Śīlabadra with whom Xuanzang had previously studied at Nālandā.

The Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang was in India for about sixteen years from 630-645 A.C (Wang B. & Sen. Tansen, 2011, 95). Although Xuanzang wanted to visit Sri Lanka, he could not visit the island because of a famine and political unrest. According to Xuanzang's biography by Huili, when he visited Kāncipura, he met the eminent monks of the Bodhimegheśvara and Abhayadamstra with three hundred other fellow monks who had come to South India because of the political unrest in Sri Lanka.

Xuanzang's record of Sri Lanka was based on what he has heard from these monks. It is a fortunate fact that the monk Bodhimegheśvara can be identified with the monk Bodhi in Vamsa tradition.

As recorded in the second part of the Mahāvamsa the monk Bodhi dwelled at the monastery of Abhayagiri. Bodhi, who had seen many undisciplined *bhikkhus* in the Abhayuttaravihāra, requested for a disciplinary meeting (*sanghakamma*) (Geiger Wilhelm, 1950, 44:75-80) summoned by the king Silāmēghavanna (623-632 C.E.), accepted the *thera's* request and allowed him to perform the *sanghakamma*. Then all the undisciplined *bhikkhus* who had been expelled from the order, took counsel together, assassinated Bodhi and annulled the act. When the king heard this, he was enraged, seized them all, had their hands cut off and made them guardians of the bathing tanks. Another hundred *bhikkhus* he expelled to Jambudīpa. According to the Mahāvamsa in remembrance of Bodhi's efforts the king cleansed the order. When the king Silāmēghavanna invited the *bhikkhus* of the Mahāvihāra with the others to celebrate together the *uposatha* festival, he was refused. The king became angry he abused and rebuked them with harsh words. Then, without any pardon, he exiled the *bhikkhus* to Dhakkhinadesa. Thereupon the king was attacked by a disease and suddenly died.

As stated in the *Mahāvamsa* Bodhi was killed secretly by a group of monks who stood against his order. Perhaps, however, Bodhi was not really killed but had fled the country. He might be the monk who was met by the Xuanzang under the name Bodhimegheśvara. If, however, Bodhi was really killed a conflict between rivaling groups of monks, there must have been a monk called Bodhimegheśvara among the hundred *bhikkhus* who were expelled by the king to Jambudīpa. By bringing Xuanzang's report into a broader context some historical facts can be compared with the Sri Lankan vamsa tradition. The hundred *bhikkhus* who were exiled to Jambudīpa by king Silāmēghavanna (623-632 C.E.) can be considered to be historical with the help of Xuanzang's report.

The unexpected death of the king Silāmēghavanna caused a chaotic situation in Sri Lanka, and this situation might have triggered other monks to flee to South India too, namely the three hundred monks who were met by Xuanzang at Kāncipura.

According to the *vamsa* tradition Silāmēghavanna had banished only one hundred *bhikkhus*. The question that would naturally arise is: who were the three hundred monks mentioned by Xuanzang? To which monastery in Sri Lanka did they belong? What made them to come to Kāncipura? Xuanzang's biography reminds us that there was a famine and political unrest during this particular period in Sri Lanka. Owing to the above incidence the monks from the Abhayagirivihāra as well as from the Mahāvihāra fled to Kāncipura. It can be presumed from travel records of Xuanzang and Faxian there were two historiographical traditions linked to the two most influential monasteries called Abhayagirivihāra and Mahāvihāra in Sri Lanka. Xuanzang indirectly drew on these two traditions whilst compilation of his historical records.

Xuanzang states that to the side of the royal palace there is a monastic structure, more than one hundred feet high, containing the Buddha's tooth relic. The building is glittering of pearls and is adorned with precious jewels. On the top of the monastic structure a pillar is erected as a sign, on top of which one has installed a big

padmaraga. The padmaraga is considered as a valuable gem. The king bathes the Buddha's tooth three times a day, washes it with scented water or spreads it with incense powder. Senaka Bandaranayake suggests that the building known today as Daḷadāgē Tooth Relic Temple could be the royal palace.

As noted by the Xuanzang, to the side of the monastic structure containing the Buddha's tooth there is a small monastic structure also glittering of and embellished with many jewels. Inside is a golden statue of the Buddha, casted in the full body size. A former king of this kingdom had its *usnīsa* embellished with a very valuable jewel. This building could be easily identified. This could be considered to be an image house built in Sri Lanka as the *gediga* architectural tradition in the period between 7th -9th century. *Gedige* is known as *ginjakavasta* in Pāli and accordingly the whole image house is built using only bricks. It is evident from the arched roof of the structure that it consisted of brick walls. Architectural analysis shows that the structure is designed mainly according to the Pallava architectural style. The patronage of its construction is unknown. No evidence of the image of the Buddha is available at present. As Xuanzang records, a thievish servant had stolen the gem that embellished the *usnīsa*. This story is not reflected in any *vamsa* tradition.

As described by Xuanzan, to the side of the royal palace there is a huge kitchen through which eighteen thousand monks are fed every day. According to the *vamsas* king Devampiyatissa (250-210 B.C.E) constructed the Mahāpāli alms hall for the monks (Geiger Wilhelm, 1950, 20:17-27). When the monks come at the time of the meal, they carry their alms bowls and receive the food, and after they have eaten, each of them returns to his cell. The travel reports in the accounts of Chinese Buddhist pilgrims give realistic descriptions of the sites (Deeg Max, 2003, 8). The record also states that since some decades there is political turmoil in the kingdom, and since then a ruler had been selected to continue the alms giving and the tradition was abandoned. As explained above, this must have been the time of the king Sīlameghavanna in Sri Lanka (623-632 C.E).

V. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Some of the details given by Xuanzang may be carefully verified by comparing the record with other sources, textual as well as archaeological. But it should be kept in mind that, due to the circumstances of his report, Xuanzang is not to be taken as a trustworthy witness in all cases. What Xuanzang saw or reported on does need not necessarily have been conform with the report of, let us say, Faxian who travelled the wider region two hundred years earlier (Deeg Max, 2003, 16). Xuanzang's description contains information about the historical, social, economic and cultural aspects of ancient Sri Lanka, but also helps to restore some details of the Sri Lankan history. Xuanzang draws on two different monastic historiographical traditions when compiling his record of Sri Lanka. Xuanzang always give more detailed information than the laconic Faxian and is therefore a valuable source which needs, however, careful historical interpretation.

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