

Third Buddhist Council of Emperor Aśoka

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Abstract- In this research article we have focused our attention only to the 3rd Buddhist Council which patronized by Emperor Aśoka. We have not discussed about the previous life of Asoka, his conspiracy to the kingship or war against Kalinga. There is no mention at all either of the thēra Moggaliputata Tissa or of his third council in the Aśokāvadāna. Aśoka's legend is found in the fifth century chronicles of Sri Lanka, the *Dīpavaṃsa* and the *Mahāvāṃsa* as well as in Buddhagohosa's commentary on the Vinaya. In addition to this, the commentary on the *Mahāvāṃsa*, the *Thūpavaṃsa* and the *Bōdhivaṃsa* were studied. The discrepancies in *Mahāvāṃsa* and *Divyāvadāna* has been discussed here.

Index Terms- vams, tradition, patronized, council, Buddhist.

I. THĒRA MOGGALIPUTTA TISSA

A Brahmana Moggali had a son called Tissa. Tissa was well versed with mantras. Tissa's surname was Moggali. Moggaliputta tissa was made pabbja by the Siggava and Chandavajji thēras.¹ At the age of sixteen he mastered the whole Veda.² As mentioned in the *Dīpavaṃsa* in the second year of Chandragupta's coronation, fifty eight of king Pakuṇḍaka having elapsed, Siggava having just completed his sixty fourth year, Moggaliputta received from Thera Siggava the Upasampadā ordination.³ Maury Chandragupta reign from 321 B.C.E to 297 B.C.E.⁴ His second year was 323 B.C.E., and this is the year of thēra Siggava, had completed his 64th year. The King Pakuṇḍaka or Paṇḍukābhaya reign from 437 B.C.E. to 367 B.C.E.⁵ When Pakuṇḍaka was 58 years old thēra Moggaliputta received from thēra Siggava the Upasampada ordination. According to the *Dīpavaṃsa* thēra Moggaliputta has his ordination in the 379 B.C.E. *Dīpavaṃsa* further emphasized that the thēra Moggaliputtatissa learned the Vinaya from thēra Caṇḍavajji.⁶ All the pitakas have been taught to Moggaliputtatissa by thera Siggava and thēra Caṇḍavajji. Thēra Moggali was named as the Chief of the Vinaya by thēra Siggava and attained Nibbāna after having completed seventy six years.⁷ King Chandragutta ruled twenty four years, when he had completed fourteen years, thēra Siggava attained parinibbana.⁸ Most probably thēra Siggava had attained

to parinibbana by the year 307 B.C.E. Once G.P. Malalasekara has mentioned "Ceylon was in possession of continues and written chronicles, rich in authentic facts, not only presenting a connected history of the island itself, but also yielding valuable materials for elucidation that of India." The chronicles in Sri Lanka most of the time have been associated with the authentic dating system. But this is not compatible with the all the time but most.⁹ Thēra Moggali dwelled in a forest. When the King Dhammasoka has completed his eight year of the coronation, the thēra Moggali was 60 years.¹⁰ After Sambuddha had attained parinibbāna following theras taught Vinaya

Thēra Upāli
Thēra Dāsaka
Thēra Sōnaka
Thēra Siggava
Thēra Chandvaggi
Thēra Moggaliputtatissa
Thēra Mahinda¹¹

At the twenty sixth regnal year of the king Dhammasoka, thēra Moggaliputta has attained to Nibbana.¹² Tissa Moggaliputta, chief of the vinaya attained Nibbana eighty six years after his upasampada.¹³

II. THE HERETICS AND THEIR UNRULINESS

As the revenues of the brotherhood were exceeding great, those who were converted later privileged it. Hence the heretics who had lost revenue and honour took likewise the yellow robe, for the sake of revenue, and dwelt together with the bhikkhus. They proclaimed their own doctrines as the doctrine of the Buddha and carried out their own practices even as they wished. Under these circumstances thēro Moggaliputta had committed his great company of bhikkhus to the direction of the thēra Mahinda, he took up his abode, all alone, further up the Gangese on the Ahogaṅga Mountain and for seven years he gave himself up to solitary retreat. As *Mahāvāṃsa* further records the great number of the heretics and their unruliness, the bhikkhus could not restrain them by the law; and therefore the bhikkhus in Jambudīpa for seven years held no upōsata ceremony. When the king was aware

¹ D.v, 1992, 5:57, 142.

² Ibid, 1992, 5:61, 143.

³ Ibid, 1992, 5:69, 143.

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chandragupta_Maurya

⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pandukabhaya_of_Anuradhapura

⁶ D.v, 1992, 5: 70, 143.

⁷ D.v, 1992, 5: 72, 144.

⁸ Ibid, 1992, 5: 73, 144.

⁹ Malalasekara, G. P., 1994, 130.

¹⁰ D.v, 1959, 5: 21, 146.

¹¹ Ibid, 1992, 5: 95, 145.

¹² Ibid, 1959, 5: 43, 149.

¹³ Ibid, 1959, 5: 48, 149.

of this, he sent a minister to the Aśōkārāma to settle this matter and let the upōsata festival be carried out by the community of bhikkhus in that ārāma. When the minister asked them to follow the upōsata ceremony bhikkhus refused to hold the upōsata with heretics. Hence the minister stuck off the head of several thēras, one by one with his sword. When the king's brother, Tissa, saw that crime he came speedily and sat on the seat nearest to the minister. When the minister saw the thēra he went to the king and told him the whole matter. When the monarch heard, it he was troubled and went with all speed and asked the community of bhikkhus, greatly disturbed in mind; "who, in truth is guilty of this deed that has been done?" The King wanted to meet a bhikkhu who is able to set his doubts to rest and to befriend religion? The bhikkhu mentioned the Moggali thēra's name and as a result of this king sent the bhikkhus, ministers and the people to invite him restore Buddhism. In the third time when they invited by saying "be our helper venerable sir, to befriend religion", then only he agreed to come. They brought the thēra by ship on the Ganges and the king went to meet him. The king went down knee deep into the water and respectfully gave his right hand to the thēra, as he came down from the ship.¹⁴ As mentioned in the *Mahāvamsa* thēra was accommodated in the pleasure garden called Rativaḍḍana.¹⁵ When the king asked the thēra whether or not he himself shared the guilt of the murder of the bhikkhus by the minister. The thēra taught the king; there is no resulting guilt without evil intent, and he recited the Tittira-Jātaka.

III. THE THIRD BUDDHIST COUNCIL

Mahāvamsa mentions that all the bhikkhus were assembled by sending two yakkas. King seated with the thēra on one side and asked from the bhikkhus "What did the blessed one teach? Those who answered "he teaches the Sāssata doctrine" expelled from the order. Those who answered "he teaches the Vibhajja doctrine" held for the upōsata festival. The number bhikkhus who were expelled were sixty thousand. Thenceforth the brotherhood held the uposata festival. Out of the great number of the brotherhood of bhikkhus the thēra chose a thousand learned bhikkhus, endowed with the six super normal powers, knowing the three piṭakas and versed in the special sciences to make a compilation of the true doctrine. Mahākassapa and thēra yasa had held the council. In the midst of this council the thēra Tissa set forth the *Kathāvattuppakarāṇa*. This council was held under the protection of King Aśōka at the Aśōkarāma, ended by the thousand bhikkhus in nine months. *Mahāvamsa* says the seventeenth year of the king's reign the wise thēra who was seventy two years old closed the council with a great pavārana ceremony.¹⁶ *Dīpavamsa* records that the wise Moggaliputta, the destroyer of the schismatic doctrines, firmly established the Theravada and held the third council, having destroyed the different doctrines and subdued many shameless people and

restored splendor to the faith, he proclaimed *Kathāvattuppakarāṇa*.¹⁷ The thēra Moggaliputtatissa taught Pasmahasagiya (Five Nikāyas)
Saptaprakarana (seven sections of Abhidharmma)
Ubhatovibhaṅga (two vibhaṅgas of the Vinaya)
Parivārapāli
Kaṇḍaka¹⁸

One of the important stories in the *Mahāvamsa* that is absent in the *Aśōkāvadāna* tells how Aśōka convenes and participates in the Third Buddhist council at Pāṭaliputra. John S. Strong says that the whole thrust of this account is to associate the great King Aśōka with the specific sect of the Theravādins favoured by the authors of the *Mahāvamsa* and, by implication, by the island of Sri Lanka in general.¹⁹ In the *Aśōkāvadāna* however, there is no mention at all either of the elder Moggaliputta Tissa or of this Third Council. The L. A. Waddell is trying to identify the high priest of Upagupta with Moggaliputta.²⁰ Jone S. Strong's point of view is that there are difficulties with this parallelism.²¹ Following the account of the Third Council in the *Mahāvamsa*, there is another episode that does not figure at tall in the *Aśōkāvadāna* the dispatch of missionaries to spread the Buddhist faith.

"The converting of different countries" the twelfth chapter of the *Mahāvamsa* contains the nine adjacent countries which sent the dhamma after the Buddhist council of the third. Those countries and the thēras as follows.²²

thēra Majjhantika sent to Kasmīra and Gandhāra
thēra Mahādeva sent to Mahisamaṇḍala
thēra Rakkhita sent to Vanavāsa
thēra Yōnka Dharmarakṣita sent to Aparantaka
thēra Mahādhammarakkita sent to Mahārāṭṭha
thēra Mahārakkhita sent to Yōna
thēra Majjhima sent to Himalaya
thēras Sōṇa and Uttara sent to Suvanṇabhūmi
thēra Mahinda sent to Taṃbaparṇṇi

Buddhism spread more rapidly in Sri Lanka, than in the Northern countries.²³

The episode of dispatching the missionaries to the above countries can be testified with archaeology. The relics of some of the thēras mentioned in the *Mahāvamsa* have been unearthed by archaeologists at Sānchī. B.M. Barua says, that Buddhists are eager to show, Aśōka's adherence to their religion. We should not, therefore, take them seriously since they are nothing but the "mendacious fictions of unscrupulous monks."²⁴

IV. KING DEVĀNAMPİYATISSA AND THE EMPEROR AŚŌKA

King Devānampiyatissa became the king after his father's death. At the time of his consecration many wonders have happened. As mentioned in the *Mahāvamsa* treasures and jewels of the whole island of Lanka, that had been buried deep rose up to the surface of the earth owing to the meritorious effects of king.

¹⁴ M.v, 1950, 5:250-256, 47.

¹⁵ Ibid, 1950, 5:257, 48.

¹⁶ M.v, 1950, 5:280, 50.

¹⁷ D.v, 1992, 7: 40-41, 157.

¹⁸ Ibid, 1992, 7: 43, 157.

¹⁹ Strong S. John, 1989: 24.

²⁰ Waddell, L. A, 1899: 70-75.

²¹ Strong S. John, 1989: 24.

²² M.v, 1950, 12: 2-7, 82. *Pōjāvālī*, 1999: 759-760.

²³ Vajirapani. D.G.O 1966: 395.

²⁴ Barua, B. M, 1968: vol. I, 2-3, & Strong S. John, 1989: 14-15.

Having seen the treasures the king in Sri Lanka thought of sending them to king Dhammāsoka. As reported in the vaṃsa tradition Devānampiyatissa and Dhammāsoka had already been friends for a long time, though they had never seen each other.²⁵ The king in Sri Lanka, four persons appointed as his envoys; his nephew Mahāritṭha, a Brahman, a minister and an account. The priceless jewels, the three kinds of precious stones, and the three stems (like) wagon-poles, a spiral shell winding to the right, the eight kinds of pearls were gifted by these envoys.²⁶ The *Mahāvamsa* refers to eight kinds of pearls, presented to the Emperor Aśoka by the King Dēvānampiyatissa (circa 250-210 B.C.E.). The eight kinds of pearls are horse-pearl, elephant-pearl, waggon-pearl, myrobalan pearl, bracelet pearl, ring pearl, kakūḍha fruit pearl and common pearl. The Pāli literature *Abhidhānappadīpikā* also reports that, these eight types of pearl as quoted in *Mahāvamsa*.²⁷ Devaraj and Ravichandran say about one million chanks of different varieties are collected each year in the Gulf of Mannar region in recent years.²⁸

At the beginning of the second rock edict, Aśoka refers to the border people such as the Cōlas, the Paṇḍyas, the Satiyaputras and the Kēralaputras and Tāmraparṇi.²⁹ Tāmraparṇi has been generally identified with Sri Lanka, rather than with the river "Tāmraparṇi".³⁰ It is with the emergence of the Mauryas in the third century B.C.E. and particularly with the reign of King Aśoka that there is definitive reference to the development of maritime routes.³¹ Under the Mauryas this coastal network was expanded all along the coast to include Sri Lanka and it was through the sea route that Dhamma missions, reached Sri Lanka, even before the voyage of Mahinda (13th rock edict).

The envoys embarked at the Jambukola in seven days and thence in another seven days taken to reach the Pāṭaliputta. As mentioned in the *Mahāvamsa* envoys gave those gifts into the hands of king Dhammāsoka. As further mentioned, the monarch, in his joy bestowed on Ariṭṭha the rank of commander in his army, the dignity of chaplain on the Brahmana, the rank of staff bearer on the minister, and the guild lordship on the treasurer.³² The question that would naturally arise is why, King Aśoka bestowed the ranks to these four envoys? What is the authority that he had? Although the vaṃsa tradition gives evidence on political institutions in early Sri Lanka (before the 3rd Century B.C.E) this cannot be testified. In a way this symbolized introduction of the political institutions to Sri Lanka by the emperor in India. King Aśoka has sent everything needed for the consecration of a king. As elaborates in the *Mahāvamsa* a fan, a diadem, a sword, a parasol, shoes, a turban, ear ornaments, chains, a pitcher, yellow sandalwood, as set of garments that had no need of cleansing, a costly napkin, unguent brought by the nags, red coloured earth, water from the lake Anotatta and also water from the Ganges, a shell winding in suspicious wise, a maiden in the flower of her

youth, utensils as golden platters, as costly litter, yellow and embolic myrobalans and precious ambrosial healing herbs, sixty times one hundred wagon loads of mountain rice brought thither by parrots, nay all that was needful for consecrating a king was sent by the emperor by the king in Sri Lanka.³³ This consecration ceremony symbolized the transition of local leadership to the kingship in Sri Lanka. The kings in Sri Lanka did not have a proper coronation before this. This might be the reason for the request behind the second consecration for the king Tissa.

Aśoka sent the gift of the true doctrine by saying "I have taken refuge in the Buddha, his doctrine and his order; I have declared myself a lay disciple in the religion of the Sakya son, seek then even thou."³⁴ The envoys stayed seven months in India and having embarked at Tāmalitī landed at Jambukōla, arrived Lanka on the twelfth day. The ruler of Lanka consecrated for the second time by the envoys. The *Mahāvamsa* denotes that king Tissa used the name of the "friend of the god" (Devanpiya).³⁵

V. BŌDI TREE

As mentioned in the *Mahāvamsa* following the counsel of the Aśoka's minister Mahādeva,³⁶ had invited the community of bhikkhus and asked whether the great Bodhi tree be sent to Laṅka. The *Mahāvamsa* noted that thēra Moggaliputta answered "It shall be sent thither, as five great resolutions that the Buddha gifted." When king Aśoka having heard this, he was glad and had ordered to clean the road, seven yojanas long, leading to the great Bodhi tree.³⁷ And also he brought the gold to make a vasa to plant the Bodhi tree which is going to be sent to Sri Lanka. *Mahāvamsa* denotes that Vissakamma who appeared in the semblance of a goldsmith, having moulded gold with his hand made a vase in that very moment and departed. The *Mahāvamsa* further says that the measuring of the vase is nine cubits around and five cubits in depth and the three cubits across, being eight finger-breadths thick, having upper edge of the size of young elephant's trunk, being equal to the young (morning) sun.³⁸ There is similar description in *Bōdhivamsa* to the above.³⁹ The eighteenth chapter, the receiving of the great Bodhi tree further says that having seen the miracle of the Bodhi tree, the way that the king Aśoka worshiped the great Bodhi tree by bestowing kingship, consecrating the great Bodhi tree the king of his great realm thrice.

VI. PLANTING THE BODI TREE IN THE VASE

This incident has been depicted quite miraculously in the vaṃsa tradition. As reported in the vaṃsa, great Bōdi tree departed the southern branch itself and with thousand roots planted in the vase.⁴⁰ It is ten cubit height. Five branches extended to four cubits.

²⁵ *M.v.*, 1950, 11:19, 78.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 1950, 11:22, 78.

²⁷ Childers 1976: 1061.

²⁸ Devaraj, M. and Ravichandran, V., 1991: 102.

²⁹ Bellana, N 2000: 31.

³⁰ Ray, H.P. 1994: 22.

³¹ *Ibid.* 1994: 21.

³² *M.v.*, 1950, 11: 23-24,79.

³³ *Ibid.*, 1950, 11: 27-32,79.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 1950, 11: 34, 80.

³⁵ *M.v.*, 1950, 11: 42, 81.

³⁶ *Bodi.v.*, 1999, 188.

³⁷ *M.v.* 1950, 18: 23, 124.

³⁸ *Ibid.* 1950, 18:29,125.

³⁹ *Bodi.v.*, 1999, 189.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 1999, 191.

It consisted of thousand small branches.⁴¹ Bōdi tree disappeared seven days, among the clouds. The vamsa tradition attempts to portrait this miraculously. The king Aśōka had anxiously waited for seven days to see the Bōdi tree. King has arranged many Bōdi Pujā ceremonies with the consort of Asandimittā and twelve thousand city women.⁴²

VII. CONSORTS OF THE KING

The Bōdhi tree was planted at the Mahāmeghavanārāma in the eighteenth regnal year of the Dhammāśōka.⁴³ Afterwards, the dear consort of the king, Asandhimittā died.⁴⁴ She is a faithful believer in Buddhism. The king raised the treacherous Tissarakkhā to the rank of queen in the fourth year after this. Tissarakkhā being jealous of the king's fondness of the Bodhi tree, destroyed it with Madu-thorn.⁴⁵ The king fall into the power of mortality in the fourth year after this. It was his thirty seventh regnal year.⁴⁶ The Aśōkāvādāna depicts a quite similar story to the above. Aśōka's faith was aroused by the Bōdhi tree, as that was where the Blessed one had realized complete unsurpassed enlightenment. He therefore sent to the place of Bōdhi an offering of the most precious jewels which made Aśōka's chief queen Tiṣṣarakṣitā annoyed.

John S. Strong has shown the basic difference in outlook between the Mahāvamsa and the Aśōkāvādāna as follows. "The dissimilarity in their world view resulted not only in their emphasis on different stories about Aśōka, it also led to radically different treatment of one and the same legend. For example he mentions both texts related the story of Aśōka's wicked queen, Tiṣṣarakṣitā (Pāli, Tissarakkhā) and her use of black magic on the Bōdhi tree at Bodhgaya. In the *Mahāvamsa*, she seeks to injure the tree soon after Aśōka sends one of its branches to Sri Lanka for transplanting, and her endeavor meets with success when the original tree withers and dies. The implication is, of course clear: Sri Lanka is now in the sole possession of the living tree of the enlightenment; what has died in India still thrives on the island. In the Aśōkāvādāna, however, Tiṣṣarakṣitā is not successful. She does not carry through with her plan, and the Bodhi tree, instead of perishing, recovers through Aśōka's devoted care.

VIII. CONCLUSION

Aśōka patronized the third Buddhist council which was held at the Ptaliputa. Mahinda thēra, one of his sons, and the daughter therī Saṃghamittā played a significant role introducing the Buddhism and the order of nuns to Sri Lanka. As a symbol of Maury Empire, Saṃghamittā arrived with the branch of the Bōdhi tree. It is well-known that Sri Lanka was one of the few countries in the world where Buddhism has been practised without interruption from the time of its introduction to the present day. The honorific term Devānampiyā was also conferred by Aśōka as an imperial honour upon the king of Sri Lanka, whose name was

only Tissa. No king in Sri Lanka before Devānampiyatissa seems to have used this prefix.

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⁴¹ Ibid, 1999, 191.

⁴² *Bodi.v*, 1999, 192.

⁴³ *M.v.* 1950, 20: 1,136.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 1950, 20: 2,136.

⁴⁵ Ibid. 1950, 20: 4-5,136.

⁴⁶ Ibid. 1950, 20: 6,136

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