

RELIGIOSITY, SYMBOLISM AND POWER: THE DEVELOPMENT OF ORGANIZED POLITY IN EARLY SRI LANKA SOCIAL FORMATIONS*

GAMINI WICKRAMASINGHE

Abstract

This paper attempts to describe and analyse the political institutions which prevailed in the dry zone of Sri Lanka till the thirteenth century. The focus is on the development of a 'political system' and its continuity. A political system is part of and is related to the general structure of the wider society; therefore in order to understand the nature of the polity, one has to know the total structure of the society. It is argued here that the King or rather the institution of Kingship, exercised very little 'real power' but played a more important role in terms of a system of symbols which included rituals and magical powers (in addition to Buddhist ideology). It is these rituals that served to preserve the order by cohesion and the solidarity of the community, which strictly speaking are the functions of all political systems.

The General Nature of Early Social Formations in Sri Lanka

The early Settlements of Sri Lanka were located in its dry zone which receives its significance from the availability of land and its suitability for agriculture. It covers approximately two-thirds of the island's total land area, and is an undulating plain with a number of valleys. It receives rain from the north-east monsoon which is concentrated within a few months of the year; the average annual rainfall for most stations is around sixty inches (Farmer, 1972). During the reference period i.e. until the 13th century, which includes what the historians identify as the Anuradhapura period and the Polonnaruwa period, the rest of the island—the wet zone—remained largely uninhabited due to it being covered with rain forest. In the early social formations of the dry zone several social and economic features may be distinguished. First of all, the colonization of Sri Lanka took place over a long period of time. The people who came to settle, although belonging to the Indian Cultures, did not share a common set of symbols, as often they originated from different regions of India (Nicholas and Paranavitana, 1961: 17—19). Furthermore, their ethnic, occupational, religious and social backgrounds varied significantly from each other. For example, there were Aryans and non-Aryans; merchants and warriors; craftsmen and agriculturalists (Nicholas, 1956). Economically, some of these settlers lived in port-based settlements pursuing trade interests; while others lived in agricultural settlements situated further interior in the country pursuing wet-rice agriculture, Swidden agriculture, home-gardening and horticulture. Then there were the

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aborigines dwelling in the jungles who maintained their nomadic style of life by hunting and gathering food. All these different peoples lived within well-defined ecological niches. In the dry zone where the settlements grew, the conditions that had a determining influence over their nature were the availability of water and the land suitable for paddy cultivation. (Nicholas, 1959) *Mahawamsa* ch. 7, vv 43—5). Society was organized in accordance with communal production relations. The principal means of production, paddy lands, forest land, water reserves, labour instruments were collectively owned, that is, either by the family or the community. With the consent of the community, communal resources could be transferred to individuals. But the communal ideology retained predominance over the individual while the wider belief system, the animistic belief and the other world consciousness, reinforced this pattern (Wickramasinghe, 1981). If the individuals behaved in a manner benefiting the community, after their death, they would be reborn as spirits and live within the same environment to protect and help friends, relatives and the others. Thus, if one were good, he would be protected by these spirits. Conversely, if one were good he would never leave his near and dear ones. These beliefs reinforced the way in which economic activities were organized.

By the end of the third century B.C. there were three major areas of settlements existing for the most part independently of each other; the first extending up to and beyond the Mahaweli Ganga in the east and the foot-hills of the central highlands in the south; the second in southern region established along the four rivers the Kumbukkan Oya, the Manik-Ganga, the Kirindi Oya and the Walawe-Ganga; and the third being confined to the lower basin of the Kelani-Ganga in the west (Nicholas, 1959; Rahula, 1956: 21). There were two forms of settlements in these areas, one known as "*gama*" or the village, and the other as '*pura*' or the city. The latter was generally the residential area of the ruling class. However, the *pura* proper came into being only after the formal introduction of Buddhism in the third century B.C. Theoretically, all land of the island was regarded as belonging to the King. This is the meaning of the concept of *Bhupathi* or the lord of the soil. Generally, this did not prevent anyone who could muster labour from creating *gama* by construction of tanks and asweddumization of land below such tanks. (Personages who could mobilize and organize labour were recognized as leaders and such local leaders had proprietary rights (though not in the modern sense) over the tanks built this way while the community had the actual ownership (Ellawala, 1969; Wickramasinghe 1981). With agriculture being the most predominant economic activity, great emphasis was laid on the provision of irrigation, and the system grew from crude forms of water conservation methods to sophisticated irrigation systems by the fourth and fifth centuries. In this latter case, the provision of water was centrally controlled, which also connected the villages to the central administration (Nicholas, 1959; Gunawardena, 1971), this providing and adequate material base for the creations of a longer polity.

The Development of an Organized Polity

In its formative stage, Sri Lanka's political organization was characterized by popular forms of government which rarely extended beyond local communities. Leadership was there; but it was not an expression of a political structure (Wickramasinghe 1981). The practice of the use of such titles as *Gamani*, *Parumaka*, and *Maparumuka* have been identified as denoting the popular forms of government whose authority was derived from popular sanction (Paranavitana, 1936). The title of *Gamani*, in Sri Lanka, was associated with royalty, but it was also adopted by office holders such as village headmen, leaders of any kind of corporation or association, whether political, military, mercantile or otherwise (Paranavitana, 1936, 1960/61). Structurally, the king often recognized the local personage whose power, position and authority were derived from the people within the community through kinship and other social ties, through the grant of titles thereby seeking to integrate them within the state. Conversely, such titles often served to enhance the prestige and status of these men. For two obvious reasons the popular form of political organization could not continue indefinitely. Firstly, in their original homeland of India, society was hierarchically organized with the caste system sanctioned by the Hindu value system, as the basis of hierarchy. In Hindu ideology, the *Kshatriyas* were the rulers whilst the *Brahmins* were the learned, priestly caste. The *Vaisyas* were the merchantmen and the farmers. The *Sudras* constituted the stratum of the low-caste men of the society. It was also expressed as a four-fold varna (colour) system which accepted the ascriptive nature of social differentiation, the hierarchical arrangement of the castes and their varying degrees of ritual purity or impurity. Although, even in Indian social structure, the three dimensions of social power, namely, status, authority and wealth, did not converge on one and the same group, the people who came to Sri Lanka, possessed the knowledge of the form of social organization prevalent in India and sought to adopt it to their new situation. But, because Sri Lanka was still being colonized, a value system binding the different segments of the society was yet to develop. In a frontier situation, accordingly, the people did not generate a social need for the services of the priestly class, although the *Brahmins* did exist. The *Kshatriyas* did rule, but not all the rulers were necessarily from this caste (Paranavitana, 1936; Thambiah, 1936). Although the *Kshatriya* rulers were heterogeneous, the important point to remember is that they were referred to as *Kshatriyas*. Consecration ceremonies (*abhishekamangalya*) proper was non-existent; the *Kshatriya*-administrator ruled with the assistance of a staff, but here again the popular sanction was the rule. Secondly, as the settlements grew up through the natural increase of population and continual immigration, they often resulted in more authoritative forms of government. It is perhaps important to note that the *Kshatriyas* in Sri Lanka were keen to keep contacts with *Kshatriyas* of India.

This latter connection led to the development of social distance between the commoners and the royalty on the one hand, and the monarchical and republican forms of government on the other. The most important of the Indian connection was the relationship between the Emperor Asoka of India and the Sri Lanka King,

Tissa. The former consecrated the latter as the King of Sri Lanka, according to the Mauryan tradition of India and offered him the Mauryan title, "*Devanampiya*" (meaning beloved by the Gods), a title held by Asoka himself (Paranavitana, 1936). Thereupon, the Anuradhapura King, Devanampiya Tissa established his rule throughout the island, so the legend goes, which was further consolidated through his active participation in the missionary campaign of the Emperor Asoka to promote and propagate Buddhism. As part of this programme, a mission consisting of Buddhist monks and a lay disciple, was sent to Sri Lanka headed by the son of the Indian Emperor. His subsequent action included the sending of the bo-saplings and female monks. Several years later at the beginning of the fourth century, the King of Kalinga of India sent the *Dalada*, the Sacred Tooth Relic of Lord Buddha in the custody of his daughter to the King of Sri Lanka. The sending of the bo-saplings and the Sacred Tooth Relic resulted in instituting a tradition of elaborate rituals which were symbolic devices that ensured social order while the female monks established monasteries for females. More importantly the ideology that came, namely, Buddhism, provided an overall unity to the total social system that was developing by also incorporating elements of peasant beliefs which included magico-animism, Hinduism, and Astrology. The process of incorporation served to fulfil the religious needs of the peasantry on the one hand and legitimize the social order on the other. Devanampiya Tissa made Buddhism the state religion, and donated the entire island to the *Buddha Sasana* (Buddhist Order). The *sangha* presented it back to the King with the advice to rule it in accordance with the Buddhist principles and traditions. The four-fold Buddhist community that emerged i.e., *Bhikkhu*, (male monks) *Bhikkuni* (female monks) *Upasaka* (male laity) and *Upasika* (female laity) brought forth a sense of belonging to one moral community, for, it accepted people of all different backgrounds as *Upasaka* and *Upasika* contributing to reduce the gap between the socio-political system and the symbolic order. It had the effect of naturalising the social power relations on the one hand and institutionalising the imposition of the cultural arbitrary of the dominant social group on the other (Holltart, 1974). Thus, in the Buddhist-state, the *Sangha*, or the order of monks and the polity reinforced each other (Wijetunga, 1969/70 ; Rahula, 1956).

Kinship and Kingship in the Consolidation of Monarchy

The early kings such as Vijaya and Panduvasadeva observed the practice of marrying princess of the *Kshatriya* caste from India (Mahavamsa, ch, 7 vv 47-57). At the early stages when the monarchy was yet to be entrenched economically and socially, this practice ensured the exclusiveness of the ruling group. Later on, however, the practice ceased as internal unity was gradually achieved. King Devanampiya Tissa's brother, Mahanaga, established a territory in the south which he ruled from Magama or Mahagama (Mahavamsa, ch. 22, vv. 9). His great grand-son married the daughter of the King of Kelaniya. The King of Kelaniya was also at the same time, the grand-father of the King of Magama (Ellawala, 1969 : 20). Only the *Kshatriyas* of Kataragama were unrelated to the Anuradhapura kings. Later on,

however, the King Dutthagamani of Anuradhapura, killed the ruling family of ten brothers of Kataragama (Thambiah, 1963). From the time of Duttha-Gamani, the suzerainty of the king of Anuradhapura was acknowledged by all the local rulers (Nicholas and Paranavithana, 1961 :104).

The succession to the throne was patrilineal, but there were two principles in operation ; from father to the son, and from brother to brother, according to seniority (Thambiah, 1963). Thus, it was always confined to the immediate family of the royalty. The provincial rulers usually had the regional autonomy, so long as they accepted the authority of the king of Anuradhapura. This was also symbolized: for the first time the symbol of authority of the rulers, the *yatthis* (wooden-staff) assumed regal honours during the reign of Devanampiya Tissa (Paranavithana, 1936). According to Mahavamsa, three *yatthis* appeared miraculously in different parts of the island, at the beginning of the reign of King Devanampiya Tissa (Mahavamsa, ch. 11, vv. 9-14). These *yatthis* contained magical qualities, and one was an improvement of the famous 'red of Aron'. Paranavithana finds evidence to the effect that they symbolized the sovereignty of the King Devanampiya Tissa (Paranavithana, 1936). The significance of these symbols is that they made the rule of the monarchy acceptable to the people at large, and also to the provincial rulers whose rule then became acceptable to the people because it derived from the chief source of power, the political system and the sovereignty of the monarch. In terms of general social cohesion as well as of their own social status, this was the cost (loss of autonomy) the local rulers had to pay. However, when the King of Anuradhapura gained more power and strength as a result of his alliance with the Emperor of the neighbouring sub-continent, the provincial rulers did, in fact, need on their part, a system of symbolism and status not so much as a medium for the exercise of power but as a charter for the political system which gave power to all leaders. This is vouched by the fact of the disappearance of the popular titles such as *Parumaka*, and *Maparumaka*, whose places were taken up by *Amatya* (Minister) and *Mahamatya* (Chief Minister), indicates bureaucratic appointment to particular position by a higher authority. The title, *Gamani*, continued to be used by some kings as part of their throne-names and titles, but lost its significance over time and was reduced in many cases to a personal name. Henceforth, the rulers of Sri Lanka (who ruled from Anuradhapura) were referred to as *Raja* and *Maharaja* (King or His Majesty) which indicates the highest position and status of the political order.

Kingship and Religious Symbolism

With the establishment of the Buddhist Rule or the *Buddha Sasana* in Sri Lanka, two parallel developments took place which had implications for the sovereignty of the monarch. Firstly, the role of polity in relation to the "Buddhist state", and secondly, the development of the monastery as total social institutions. In the Buddhist state the King was the upholder of the Buddhist tradition in which the protection of the "begging-bowl and the robe", that is the *Sangha* and the Dhamma, of the Orthodox *Theravada* tradition, and the Sacred Tooth Relic were the essential

parts. Lord Buddha, so the belief grew, had prophesied that Sri Lanka would become in time the only land where Theravada Buddhism prevailed. Therefore, the protection of Buddhism was the prime duty of the king. Keeping the state and the people formally Buddhist was regarded as the most important duty. These in turn ensured the conditions of existence for the Buddhist Order which in turn ensured the same for the political and social order. In this connection, the polity undertook to purify the *Sasana* when required, by expelling the "unworthy" monks, by destroying the heretical ideologies, by waging national wars against foreign domination, and by making extensive donations to the monastery (Wijetunga, 1969/70). Although, unlike the Brahmins of India, the *Sangha* was not appointed as *purohita* or royal advisors, there was close association between the *Sangha* and the King. The fact that the *Dalada*, right from the day it was brought here, was placed in a special temple built on the royal ground by the king (Geiger, 1960 : 214) in particular is symbolic of this close association. Many elaborate rituals grew around the *Dalada*. It achieved a unique significance since it began to perform the legitimising functions of kingship. The People regarded the possession of the *Dalada* as the right to rule the country, King Parakramabahu (1153—86) of Polonnaruwa waged several wars to capture the kingdom of Manabharana and the *Dalada* for "without " the *Dalada* his right to sovereignty remained imperfect and challengeable" (Nicholas and Paranavitana, 1961 : 218).

Further, the kings identified themselves with the ideal of *Bodhisatva*, the person who is achieving perfection to be born as the Buddha in the future. They also entertained the ideal of *Chakkavatti*, the universal monarch. Both these ideals symbolized the omnipotence of the King. Consequently, obedience of the subjects to the rule of the King was achieved primarily through ideological means. Further, there were Kings who identified themselves with the *Lokapala* gods (gods ruling the world) such as *Yama*, *Alakadhipathi* and *Devaraja* (Paranavitana, 1953; 1961).

The development of political ideology can now be seen through these concepts and titles which are associated with kingship: when they are arranged within a continuum, their meanings range from popular or communal leader to universal monarch and even future Buddha. They are *Parumaka* (leader/chief) ; *Maparumaka* (great leader) ; *Gamani* (settlement/territorial head) ; *Devanampiya* (beloved by the Gods) ; *Devaraja* (God King), *Bhupathi* (Lord of the soil) ; *Chakkavatti* (universal monarch) and *Bodhisatva* (a being perfecting the (*Paramithas*) to be born as Buddha).

Taken together, the titles assumed by the king are pervasive in their connotations. *Parumaka* and *Gamani* connote popularity and proximity to people. *Devanampiyatissa* shows approval of the king by the gods. *Devaraja* and *Bhupathi* implied a formal distance and unchallengeable superiority. *Chakkavatti* meant that by being a universal monarch the king had established peace in his own time.

The last concept as applied to the kingship implied identity with or the following of example set by Indian Emperor Asoka who caused Buddhism to be carried in Sri Lanka. A *Bodhisatva* who is a king is explicitly the promoter and protector of *Theravada* Buddhism. Through this concept, a king claimed wisdom, true action and righteousness that belonged to the Buddha. Even the words originally used in reference only as the *Buddha* and *arahants* came to be applied to rulers of Ceylon, i.e. *pirinivi* ; *vaathimi* (Rahula 1956 : 66). The kings from the fourth to tenth centuries used throne-names and titles such as *Abhyaya*, *Sirisangabo*, *Buddhadasa*, *Salamevan*, which were associated with those ideals (Nicholas and Paranavitana, 1961 : 165). As *Bodhisatva* the king also promised that those who supported him in this world would be shown the path to *Nibbana* (the ultimate bliss) in the subsequent birth when he became Lord Buddha (presumably *Maithriya*). In this final claim, each individual irrespective of his caste and other status, was bound in respect and obedient relationship to the person, not just the roles of king. It must be noted that the "*Bodhisatva*" claim was not made lightly by the king. Often it grew out of the people's consciousness, reinforced at times by the monks and lay preachers, sometimes after the king was dead.

The uniqueness of Sri Lanka lay in its ordained role as the eternal keeper of Buddhism. The Sri Lankans, now the "Sinhala" nation, became the chosen people who one day, at the arrival of the future Buddha, will spread the true faith to the rest of mankind. Buddhism thus became a religion of the people as much as it did to the ideology of the ruling classes.

In addition, at a more popular level, it was believed that the soil received fertility on account of the personal qualities of the King. Similarly, all other natural phenomena such as rain, harvest, etc., were deified in association with the King. The possession of the *Dalada* which is believed to be endowed with magical powers in the hands of the king, reinforced such beliefs. The worldly economic activities such as the construction of tanks and irrigation canals which were undertaken by the state came to be identified as "meritorious activities" of the king ; thus they served political and religious purposes as well, in addition to the economic ones. The cumulative effect was the existence of a system of symbols in relation to the kingship.

The second development I mentioned above arose as a result of the extensive donations made in favour of the monastery. These included tanks, canals, fields, villages inclusive of the people, slaves, residential places, money and other materials. In addition, various other immunities were granted. The King's officials could not enter the monastic property without prior permission being obtained from the abbot even for the purpose of arresting criminals. The monasteries owned large extents of paddy lands and had a considerable section of the peasant population as temple-tenants (Nicholas and Paranavitana, 1961 : 160). According to Rajaratnamkarayn, there were 364 *viharas* (Monasteries) belonging to Mahavihara in the capital of Anuradnapura alone (Wijetunga, 1969/70). When king Mahasena (275-301) A. D. attempted to move the Mahavihara boundaries, the *Sangha* disagreed

and walked out in protest which brought a public opinion against the king who ultimately had to come to terms with Mahavihara (Mahavamsa vv. 22—46). The big monasteries had paid officials to administer their property. However, whenever strong personalities occupied the kingship, they asserted their authority and sovereignty that the kingship deserved. Yet, neither the State nor the Buddhist Order could exist without the help and assistance of each other ; the more religious the king was visibly and in practice, the more political he really became. Thus, the King's very religiosity was symbolic of his power.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the state and the *Sangha* grew up in a frontier situation which lasted a long time. The essentials of these institutions existed in ideational forms that the migrants brought with them from India. But the actual expression of the ideas and the social institutions that they helped to create in Sri Lanka, were not mere copies of India. In Sri Lanka, it was Buddhism, not Hinduism that found acceptance and the kingship was basically affected by that acceptance.

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