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History of Sri Lanka 4

THE ISLAND THAT CULTIVATED PHILOSOPHY

Sri Lanka & The Lucky Break

DAVID SWARBRICK

THE POCKET PROFESSOR
HISTORY OF SRI LANKA
BOOK 4

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& The Editors of The Ceylon Press



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"Would you tell
me, please,
which way I
ought to go from
here?"

Alice's Adventures in
Wonderland
Lewis Carroll
1865.

ONE

The Dynasty That Was Textbook Perfect

Sri Lanka's first recorded monarch was to found a dynasty that would last over 600 years.

Expelled from either Bengal or Gujarat (scholars argue, as scholars do) by his father, Prince Vijaya, the founding father of an eponymous royal family, arrived on the island in 543 BCE, his landing kicking off the start of recorded Singhala history despite its first 100 years being anything but plain sailing.

Occasional bouts of regicide, lassitude, rebellion and navel gazing aside, the dynasty was as textbook perfect as it could reasonably be expected to be and Prince Vijaya's thirty-six successors did all that was necessary to embed, improve, and make dominant the tiny state they had first instituted in the northwest of the land.

Not one to sit upon their laurels, and with a flair for marketing well ahead of their time, the Vijayans relaunched their realm barely a quarter of the way through their term, branding it as the kingdom of Anduraupura.

They ruled it, according to the later Stone Book or Galpota Inscription, as human divinities, their almost-but-not-quite-divine authority, the result of personal merit earned by virtue of their unusual and holistically philosophical approach to life and governance.

Their capital city would become one of the planet's longest continuously inhabited cities, enriched by cutting edge industry, resources, structures, administrators, soldiers and all the other many disciplines critical to a successful

ancient kingdom. Expanding with elastic ease, their kingdom soon grew far beyond the Rajarata, or traditional royal lands, to encompass most if not all the island.

To the east and south lay Ruhunurata, or Ruhana, a linked but junior principality founded around 200 BCE by Prince Mahanaga, brother to Devanampiya Tissa, the 7th or 8th monarch of the dynasty, and great-great-great-great-great nephew of Prince Vijaya himself.

To the west lay the third, much smaller principality of Mayarata, another linked family fiefdom, said to have been founded in the fourth century BCE by Prince Vijaya's nephew, Panduwasdev, the dynasty's third monarch. Like light bulbs experiencing the almost reassuringly familiar power cuts and surges of the current Ceylon Electricity Board, a state company forever preoccupied by internal disputes, both principalities rose, fell and rose again, depending on quite how strong the Anduraupuran king was at any one time.

All this was, of course, good wholesome leadership – but it was hardly groundbreaking. Seen from the perspective of the Shang, Hittites, Achaemenids, Ptolemaics, and Thutmosides; the Punts, Medians, Seleucids, Mauryas or other numerous successful ancient dynasties, there was little to differentiate the Vijayans from the usual preoccupations of sound hegemonic hereditary rule.



TWO

Changing Everything Forever

It was only halfway through the span of the Vijayan rule that, in welcoming to the island, Mahinda, the Buddhist son of the Indian Emperor Ashoka, they did something that changed everything.

In this, their simple act of hospitality, they were to remodel their kingdom to be so profoundly different to any other, anywhere, as to endow it with an authority and energy so inimitable, that, even today, it is protected and characterised by that misty encounter of 247 BCE.

Not only did the Vijayans welcome the young royal missionary; they took him, with fervent haste, into their hearts, and with it, his evangelising philosophy of Buddhism.

Like all Buddhists, Mahinda did not acknowledge a supreme god, and despite the later shorthand references to Buddhism as a religion, it is more suitably described as a philosophy. In welcoming Mahinda, the Vijayans crossed the line from standard overlords to philosopher monarchs governed by a formidable moral code and a preoccupation to achieve a state of transcendent bliss and well-being.

If being an island was the first and foremost explanation for why Sri Lanka became Sri Lanka, Buddhism is of course, its second explanation. And a much more impressive one too, for it was a deliberate act – one that no less comprehensively than geography was to profoundly colour the country as if it had been dyed in Tyrian purple itself, that ancient and legendary dye, reserved by threat of death, for the clothes of the Roman emperors or the sails of Queen Cleopatra's royal barge.

but most tried to, and all were ultimately judged against its teachings. As they are still today by ordinary citizens in towns and villages across the land. For however ordinary are ordinary Sri Lankans, they are also unexpectedly religiously minded too.

Religion today, to the astonishment of many observers, is holding its own.

Right across the world, experts, and pollsters have had to rethink their view of what would befall religion as countries modernised. Atheists, agnostics and all who are religiously unaffiliated account for a shrinking 16% of the global population, even if the balance of believers has a whiff of the secular in their spiritualism.

But as the west has become more secular, the rest has become less so - with God ever more likely to be best seen by Muslims or Hindus, but not Christians. Nor Buddhists, for Lord Buddha's followers make up a shrinking 7% percentage of their share of the world's peoples.

But not in Sri Lanka, where Buddhism is estimated to hold its own at around 70% of the island's population.

Hardly surprising then that in repeated world polls, Sri Lanka is almost always to be found amongst the top five most religiously minded countries.

THREE € €

Suffer Not The Suffering

Once, most of Asia was Buddhist - but such countries are now a rarity as alternative religions, politics, and secularism have shrunk their reach.

Yet in Sri Lanka, Buddhism remains an indisputable force, supported by over six thousand monasteries, thirty thousand monks, and its own government ministry. Other gods retain a modest purchase.

Christianity probably arrived sometime after Thomas the Apostle's visit to Kerala in 52 CE, though it took the arrival of the Portuguese in 1505 for things to really get going. Even so, just 7% of today's population is Christian, less than the near 10% who practise Islam following the arrival of Arab traders in the seventh century CE; or the 13% practicing Hinduism - here since even before the Chola invasion of the tenth century CE.

Buddhism and Sri Lanka are almost synonymous. It is impossible to understand one without comprehending the other.

The Buddhist mindset – that life is one of suffering, only alleviated by enlightenment through meditation, spiritual and work and doing good – is stitched invisibly into every fibre of island life. From its first beginnings, it has driven the country's language and culture, morality, education, politics, family, finance, prosperity, health, work, and its approach to the environment. Presidents, for example, may win elections, but they are not taken seriously until they have received the blessings of the Chief Prelates of the Malwathu and Asgiri chapters, the two most important Buddhist orders in the

land. Indeed so great is the continual rush of ambitious politicians to the doors of both prelates that a traffic light system might usefully be considered to ease the bottlenecks.

Although Buddhism sets out to help its followers get rid of suffering and achieve enlightenment, it cannot be said that paradise beckons with a visa stamp on arrival at Colombo's Bandaranaike Airport.

Even so, despite invasion, colonization, civil war, corruption, climate change, and bankruptcy, the country is miraculously identified in survey after survey as the one with the least number of people feeling distressed or struggling – a mere 14%, compared with, say, 51% in the UK or 41% in India.

There is no science or branch of logic or forensic deduction that might empirically account for this; but only the most reckless gamblers would bet that Buddhism plays no part in this remarkable reality.

Of course, the nation has its fair share of crooks and gluttons, killers and narcissists, manipulators, attention seekers, lairs, and demigods, payday lenders, pimps, mobsters, sharpies and blackmailers. Buddhism has not made the country sin-free – but it has equipped it with a shrewdly guileless approach to life that marks it out as rare. And it is stylishly understated.

You won't notice it unless you can notice it.

You might glimpse it at an unruffled alms giving, or in passing a busy temple on a poya day; in the flash of blue sapphire, or cat's eye in a Nawarathna Ring; on tables piled with plenty of vegetarian food; in how money is used, school lessons taught; how people turn to traditional and Ayurvedic medicine as much as science when ill; or in its deep - though occasionally destructively nationalistic - reach into politics.

And most especially, you see it in homes. Life in Sri Lanka revolves around the family; its interests come before those of the individual in ways more profound, all-embracing, and palpable than in most other countries.



FOUR

Shapes of Philosophy

Everything came down
to one man converting
on one day in 247
BCE on a small
mountain near
Anduraupura when he
ran into Mahinda, the
missionary son of an
Indian Emperor.

The legacy of that meeting is encapsulated in a type of structure exclusive to Buddhist countries: stupas. The shape is made for perfect skylines, as much as for philosophy. Bells, bubbles, pots, lotuses – even heaps of paddy: Sri Lanka's many thousands of stupas were built in a range of complimentary shapes, and in such numbers that it is unlikely that a five-minute car journey anywhere in the country will fail to take you past one. They are still being constructed to this day – in Kandy, Kalutara and Kotmale, to name just three.

Whatever their shape or age, they are outstanding architectural creations, mesmerizingly graceful as they rise over their visiting pilgrims, providing them with a place to meditate and a home for the relics and religious objects they venerate. The eleven most important are found in the island's heartland - Anuradhapura.

The largest stupa by far is Anuradhapura's Jetavanarama stupa, for centuries the world's only man-made structure eclipsed in height two others (ancient Egypt ancient pyramids); and still thought to contain, within its vast and elegant bulk, part of a belt tied by Lord Buddha. Older and smaller is the Ruwanwelisaya stupa whose relic chamber has resisted all attempts at excavation. Within it is said to be a vessel filled with Lord Buddha's artifacts, placed atop a seat of diamonds, encased in a golden container adorned

with gems, and set inside a room decorated with murals and a silver replica of the Bo Tree. The Mahavaṃsa Chronicle, from the fifth century CE, notes its sovereign importance:

“The relic-chamber shall not shake even by an earthquake; flowers that were offered on that day shall not wither till the end of Buddha Gotama's Dispensation; the lamps that were kindled shall not be extinguished; the clay that was mixed with perfume and sandalwood shall not dry; even a single scratch shall not appear within the relic-chamber; stains shall not appear in any of the golden goods that were offered.”

Older still is the Abhayagiri Stupa, whose monastery acclaimed Mahayana Buddhism, a progressive interpretation of Buddha's teachings that were considered heretical by the country's more traditional Theravada Buddhists. It was here that the country's famous tooth relic first found a home.

Other, lesser stupas, rise up around Anduraupura: the unusual shell of the square Naka Stupa; the Mirisawetiya Stupa, built to celebrate the defeat of the distinguished Tamil invader, King Elara in 158 BCE; the Lankarama stupa, built by the twice-times king, Valagamba; the ruins of the mysterious Milk Rice Stupa; the truncated remains of the Dakkhina Stupa, possibly constructed over the cremation ground of an avenging King, Dutugamunu; the Thuparamaya stupa, the island's earliest

documented stupa; and the modern Sandahiru Seya Stupa, commissioned by the Rajapaksa family to commemorate the ending of the Civil War in 2009.

But great, beautiful, or important as any of these are, all are outdone by the modest Ambastala Stupa, a small edifice, and the first thing you see on climbing the near-2000 steps of the ancient monastery of Mihintale, situated just across Anuradhapura's massive Nuwara Wewa tank built by the first century BCE king, Valagamba.

Still surrounded by the pillars of a later Vatadage erected protectively around it, the Ambastala Stupa looks deceptively unimportant.

But it is not.



FIVE

Meeting the King

It was here, at this very spot, where Sri Lanka converted to Buddhism.

Here where now stands the Ambastala Stupa is where the missionary prince, Mahindra, met up with and won over one of the earliest and most imaginative of the early Anuradhapuran kings, Devanampiya Tissa, the five times great nephew of Prince Vijaya. The king, by then comfortably into a most successful reign, adopted the new religion or philosophy without, it seems, much of a second thought.

The life changing power of the Buddhist message at its most intimate and personal would have been reason enough for the king, as an individual, to shrug off his existing beliefs – probably Hindu – for this new one. For this, the power of the message, is one that all converts know, regardless of which religion they are converting to or from.

Its royal adoption ensured that it caught on fast, rapidly replacing the Hindu, animist and Aboriginal cults of the original or other early islanders.

And as it spread, it took with the ever-stronger political reach of the new kingdom, expanding its authority and character, embedding a common language that would become known as Sinhala, and a common script that evolved from ancient Brahmi. Religion became the glue of an unusually early unified state that for well over a thousand years would reach right across the island, invasions, rebellions, and occasionally competing statelets

notwithstanding. Four hundred years of later colonialism may have dented it, but it failed to stop it.

But however personal was Devanampiya Tissa's conversion, its implications were profoundly political. All governments from here on in would gain their actual abiding authority, not from being the strongest, or the most royal, or later, the party with the most votes, but by also being the temporal expression of Buddhism itself, its guardian, enabler, and champion.

Come to power however you like, realpolitik seemed to say; but it is Buddhism that will then give you the moral and spiritual legitimacy to stay in power and to execute it with the continuing assent of the people. This is the island's unspoken covenant.

As the centuries pushed Buddhism into the corners of Asia leaving it survive in just a handful of countries such as Bhutan, Cambodia, Myanmar, Thailand, Mongolia, and Laos – in Sri Lanka it stayed fast, a flourishing rarity.

And although today the country is defined by its current constitution as "the democratic, socialist republic" of Sri Lanka, the document goes on to add that "The Republic of Sri Lanka shall give to Buddhism the foremost place and accordingly it shall be the duty of the State to protect and foster the Buddha Sasana." This 1978 constitutional enshrinement and

protection of Buddhism is simply the most recent expression of just how deeply woven are religion and politics on the island.

As the national religion it meant - and still means - that to be Buddhist is to be nationalist – and via versa.

Whatever rights and values other religions in Sri Lanka possess, none but Buddhism has the mainstream task of protecting and embodying the national character at the heart of the island, its real Sri Lankaness.

This political-religious compact explains a great deal of government policy, be it to rice farmers, the IMF, or the forces of devolution; foreign affairs or petrol subsidies, political parties and lobby organizations run by monks. It explains why the first action of any newly elected president - even today - is to be photographed receiving the blessings of the religious Sanga.

For such a notably secular state, the island has always been and remains still a theocratic one too, a peculiarity of expression that is considered to be utterly normal and correct by most of its citizens.

It is worth considering all this when you come across an ancient, much weathered, almost vanquished statue at the Ambastala Stupa, for this is said to be a likeness of King Devanampiyatissa himself. The statue's very existence is

remarkable as there are almost no surviving paintings or statues of any of the country's near-300 kings today. That one should - and this one at that - is an astonishing piece of good fortune.

Gaze into his stony eyes and consider how a single decision from this man did more than any other subsequent human intervention or invention to make Sri Lanka Sri Lankan.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Swarbrick is a publisher, planter, hotelier, hermit, and writer.

He was born in Colombo and raised, with few concessions to modernity, in India, Singapore, and the Middle East. Cornish, he gained his degrees on the Celtic fringe: at the Universities of Wales, and Stirling, prolonging an introduction to accepted working hours for as long as was decently possible.

Having worked at News Corp's HarperCollins UK as board director for various otherwise homeless departments including sales, marketing; and HarperCollins India, he ran Hachette's consumer learning division. Prior to this, he launched Oxford University Press's first commercial online business, Oxford Reference Online.

When the doubtful charms of boardroom bawls, bottom lines, and divas diminished, he returned to Sri Lanka, the land of his birth hundreds of years earlier, to rescue a spice plantation and set of art deco buildings that had gone feral in the jungle.

Today, as the Flame Tree Estate & Hotel, it has become one of the country's top ten boutique hotels, run by the kindest and most professional of hospitality teams; and overseen by several small schnauzers.

It also helps fund The Ceylon Press, set up to make Sri Lanka's rich and complicated story, a mystery to many, and a secret to most, more accessible. The Press' books, companions, podcasts, blogs, and guides are freely available at theceylonpress.com. The Press also publishes Poetry from the Jungle, a podcast that recasts the orthodox view of the world's best poets and poems.

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