

Mahavamsa- The Great Chronicle of Sri Lanka

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Mahavamsa, (The Great Chronicle), is one of the most celebrated literary works written in Pali language in Sri Lanka during the sixth century A.C. by a Buddhist monk named Mahanama of Dighasandasenapati Pirivena, Anuradhapura in Sri Lanka. It consists of thirty seven chapters describing the founding of Sinhala kingdom by Vijaya who migrated from India during the sixth century B.C.E. and the political as well as history of Buddhism upto the king Mahasena who lived during the third century C. E. The tradition of writing chronicles on great historical events was a popular literary practice in Sri Lanka in ancient times. The first such chronicle written was Dipavamsa (the Chronicle of the Island) during the fourth century. Dipavamsa is considered in many ways as an imperfect composition full of repetitions, poor language, improper arrangement, broken meter and so forth. It may probably be due to that it was the first attempt of writing a chronicle. It is generally believed that the Dipavamsa was composed by Bhikkhunin in Sri Lanka. On the other hand, Mahavamsa can be considered as a fine product due to its beautiful Pali language, diction, sleekness and so forth, although there are minor things like filling words to protect the meter of verses. We have many chronicles written in this line in Pali such as Thupavamsa, Mahabodhivamsa, Dathavamsa, Hatthavanagalla-viharavamsa, Buddhavamsa, Anagatavamsa etc. But the Mahavamsa stands above all these as the national chronicle of Sri Lanka.

Mahavamsa was first translated into English by George Turner in the

nineteenth century (1837 C. E.). Subsequently, it was translated by Wilhelm Geiger, a German Orientalist. Having seen many mistakes in this translation, Ven. Polwatte Buddhadatta, published '**Correction of Geiger's Mahavamsa**' correcting misinterpretations made by Geiger. **Dr. Ananda W. P. Guruge** translated and published this **Great Chronicle** for the first time in 1989. The present work under review is the revised second edition of the Mahavamsa translation which was published in 2005.

It should be mentioned, at the outset, that this is a stupendous work which includes six hundred and eighty nine pages. The book is divided into two parts: Part I Prolegomena and the Part II the Mahavamsa Translation. Prolegomena has eight chapters which is the critical study of the contents and the subject matter of the Mahavams. And also there is a brief introduction in which certain important matters are discussed. In the introduction the usefulness of Mahavamsa in constructing Sri Lankan as well as Indian history has been briefly discussed. Especially in determining the Emperor Asoka's place in Indian history for the historians of India this Great Chronicle was a very valuable historical source. There is a brief mention about the continuation and prolongation of the chronicle by Thera Dharmakirti, in the thirteenth century, Tibbatuwave Buddharakkhita, Yagirala Pannananda and Polwatte Buddhadatta. These extensions are called Culavamsa (small Chronicles). According to some scholars, the period of great dynasties was over with Mahavamsa. It has been pointed out that not only Mahavamsa influenced a wide audience in South-East Asia including Burmese and Cambodian traditions too.

The chapter one of Prolegomena is entitled as **Mahavamsa as an Epic Poem**. At the beginning of this chapter it has been pointed out that the historical source materials were preserved in the form of

legends, folktales, ballads, narratives of heroes and their heroic deeds, historical introductions of commentaries on Pali canonical texts, Puññapotthakas (records of meritorious deeds), Sihlavatthupparakana, Sahassavatthupparakana etc. during the pre-chronicle period. Unlike the author of Dipavamsa, Mahanama made use of all these source materials in writing his epic poem, Mahavamsa. The Sihlavatthakatha Mahavamsa which was written in Sinhala Prakrit was one important historical source used by the author of Mahavamsa. In this chapter reference is made to Geiger's remarks on Mahavamsa who translated the same into English. And also remarks made by Maurice Winternitz, seven years after Geiger's translation, on the question as to Mahavamsa – A Perfect Poem? It is mentioned that both the German scholars Geiger and Winternitz concluded that Mahavamsa is an epic poem superior to earlier chronicle Dipavamsa which is in their assessment an imperfect literary work.

In the next section: **A Critical Review of Earlier Assessments** is an appraisal of Mahanama's skill in using the Pali language, ability of versification, poetic embellishments, and so forth. It has been pointed out that though the Pali language of Mahavamsa is very beautiful compared to that of Dipavamsa many unnecessary filler words like *tato, atha, tu, hi, pana, khalu* have been inserted into verses. According to Indian rhetoric even though the poet has full freedom to use such words in composing verses it would have been better if it was avoided. The opinion has been already recorded that Mahanama cannot be justifiably credited with a conscious effort to produce poetry.

It has been mentioned that both chronicles, Dipavamsa and Mahavamsa, have followed two styles in dealing with the stories of Pandukabhaya (Pakunda in

Dipavamsa) and Dutthagamini Abhaya. Dipavamsa has only five Pali verses for Pakunda (Pandukabhaya) and thirteen verses for Dutthagamini Abhaya. The reason inferred in this section is that Sihlavatthakatha Mahavamsa did not have much to talk about these two kings. On the other hand it is indicated that the author of Mahavamsa had rich different source materials on Pandukabhaya and Dutthagamini Abhaya. So Mahanama had too much to say about both kings. The last paragraph of the chapter one is the comparison of the characteristics of Sanskrit Mahakavya and Mahavamsa. The conclusion is that Mahavamsa does not have all the features of a Mahakavya like Sarga (Cantos) (Sargabandho mahakavyam), change of meters and so forth. It has been pointed out that both Geiger and Winternitz have overrated the poetical merits of Mahavamsa.

The second chapter is an investigation of Mahavamsa's importance as a religious document. Probably writing a historical document might have been considered inappropriate for a Buddhist monk due to the fact that he has to deal with some prohibitive talks (thirty two). It is inappropriate for a Buddhist monk to talk about kings, ministers, wars, polity and so forth. Therefore, Mahanama combined the political history of the island with the Buddhist teaching of impermanence and the history of Buddhism. And also the history of Buddhism cannot be separated from the political history of the island. So the author of Mahavamsa whenever and wherever possible has attempted to adopt a didactic theme combining it with Buddhist principles. Writing the history of Buddhism of the island and explaining the pious works done by Sri Lankan kings are not inappropriate for a Buddhist monk to explain. Even the recording of episodes of wars was considered pious in the sense that everything is impermanent. Mahavamsa indicates that all these were done by kings in the name of Buddhism. In considering these points one can rightly say that Mahanama followed a didactic

theme in writing Mahavamsa. Readers are well informed about the strategic measures followed by Mahanama. The second chapter of the book emphatically mentions that at the end of each chapter Mahanama has achieved his strategic objective: Mahavamsa has been written in order to inculcate serene joy and emotion of the pious (Sujanappasada samvegathaya kate Mahavamse....). And also in this chapter mention is made of that the truth of impermanence is enunciated by the author of Mahavamsa. Again it is stated that the relics of the Buddha and the Bodhi tree are the symbols of Dhammadipa (righteous island). In the concluding remarks it has been emphasized that Mahavamsa was written to achieve a didactic objective.

Chapter three is 'The Place of Mahavamsa in the Historical Tradition of Sri Lanka.' At the beginning of this chapter mention is made about the assessment of Sri Lankan historical tradition by some European scholars. The assessment made by Emerson Tennent (1859) as to the historicity of our chronicles is quoted. And also the ideas regarding the historical value of Sri Lankan chronicles by Portuguese writers like De Barros, De Couto and Valentyn who wrote during early eighteenth century have been mentioned in order to apprise readers.

Next section is on Indian Historiography: The Problem of the Historical Sense. The lack of historical sense on the part of Indian people has been noted by foreigners. What Alberuni said about the historical records of India has been quoted. It has been pointed out that to identify the great emperor, Devanampiya Priyadarshin, the third king of Maurya dynasty in India, how the Sri lankan chronicle, Mahavamsa, has contributed to reconstruction of Indian history.

After the introduction of Buddhism the role played by the new faith in literary activities and keeping the historical records properly by learned monks is evaluated. It has been pointed out that even though the Sri Lankan sources contain legendary and miraculous accounts like those of Indian, Sri Lankan historiographers had a strong sense of recording historical events. And also the form of Buddhism brought to Sri Lanka did not favor miraculous and supernatural events. In this respect one finds a short discussion of Buddha's arrival in Sri Lanka which is not recorded in the Pali canon. It has been pointed out that the Sangha could have easily interpolated Buddha's visit into Pali canon, but they did not do it in order to safeguard the authenticity of the canon. On the other hand Buddhist Sanskrit texts like Lankavatara sutra records that it was preached by the Buddha while he was in Sri Lanka. This comparison was made to emphasize that the Theravada tradition is more reliable in keeping historical records.

Discussing the nature of Sri Lankan historical sources it has been mentioned that asserting its cultural and political identity and the Buddhist attitude to history have been synthesized by Sangha of Sri Lanka. Sangha kept their historical records in the form of ballads, narratives, memory-verses, records of pious deeds (Punnapotthaka) and so forth.

Chapter four, **The Mahavamsa in Relation to its Fore-runners and Follow-ups**, includes such useful topics as Evolution of the Pali Literature in Sri Lanka, From the Nebulous and Isolated to the Systematized, The Dipavamsa, The Dipavamsa as a Source of or Model for the Mahavamsa, The Samantapasadika, The Mahavamsa as a Commentary on the Dipavamsa, A Stream of Popular Tradition in Sinhala, From the Mahavamsa to the Extended Mahavamsa. All these can be considered as many aspects of evaluation of the role played by Mahavamsa in the construction of the

history of Sri Lanka. First the role played by chronicles in the history of Sri Lanka has been briefly explained. The necessity of recording chronologically such great historical events like founding of Sinhala nation, introduction of Buddhism to Sri Lanka by Arahant Mahinda, arrival of Sanghamitta, planting the Bodhi tree and so forth were considered as very important events in the history of island. Some very important paragraphs are quoted regarding the nature of Pali exegetical literature and also efforts of maintaining historical records side by side as introductions to commentaries. It is enunciated that there were several versions of Sihala-atthakatha Mahavamsa with interspersed Pali verses and these are considered as forerunners of both the Dipavamsa and Mahavamsa. Suggestion is made that the Dipavamsa became the model as well as the source of Mahavamsa. Referring to Samantapasadika which was written during the intervening period between the Dipavamsa and Mahavamsa, it is stated in Geiger's words Samantapasadika preserved the older tradition in keeping historical records.

Next a very controversial idea has been taken up for discussion. A statement which appears in the Culavamsa, i.e. King Dhatusena, having granted one thousand gold pieces, ordered to write a Dipika for Dipavamsa (Datva sahasam dipetum Dipavamsam samadisi) has been taken up for discussion. Earlier interpretations of this statement by Geiger and Fleet have been quoted in this section and the conclusion made is that Mahavamsa is not a commentary on Dipavamsa due to the fact that it does not have any characteristics of a commentary and it is an independent work written in poetic diction.

The section entitled **From the Mahavamsa to the Extended Mahavamsa** throws some light on the

author of the Mahavamsa. It was composed by a monk named Mahanama of Dighasndhasenapati Pirivena, Anuradhapura. His relationship to the king Dhatusena is discussed. But it is stated that the Culavamsa which is the continuation of the chronicle, Mahavamsa, does not mention Mahanama as the author.

Some information about the dates of **Vamsatthappakasini**, the Tika on Mahavamsa, and also the **Extended Mahavamsa** is given in this section. Even though the tradition ascribed the authorship of the Extended Mahavamsa to a monk named Moggallana, it cannot be ascertained that he was a Sri Lankan or Thai.

A Comparative Content Analysis is a brief study of the contents of both chronicles, Dipavamsa and Mahavamsa. The external characteristics of both the Dipavamsa and Mahavamsa have been taken up first for discussion. In that the arrangement of chapters and Bhanavaras are compared. In this comparison one can see that how the authors of two Chronicles began writing of their works. For example we are told that the Dipavamsa begins with the Buddha's arrival in Sri Lanka, coming of the relics and Bodhi tree, three major Buddhist councils in India and founding of Sinhala kingdom. Next the Pandukabhaya episode, the arrival of Thera Mahinda and introduction of Buddhism and so forth have been dealt with in both chronicles. Both chronicles are in perfect agreement in regard to major historical events and their chronological sequence. And also some minor, but noticeable, differences have been pointed out too. It is interesting to note that a critical analysis of some controversial events has been made with meticulousness in this section.

It is commendable that discrepancies of both chronicles regarding major and extremely important historical events and personage have been included. According to this, for example, Dipavamsa was not

very much interested in Dutthagamini Abhaya's campaign and his pioneering Buddhist activities. But in the Mahavamsa, Dutthagamini is the principal protagonist, the hero who organizes the freedom struggle to end South Indian domination in the northern part of Sri Lanka. **The Age of Religious Turmoil** is an analysis of activities of two sons of Gothabhaya, Jetthatissa and Mahasena, uprising of Mahayana (Vaitulyavada) in Sri Lanka and the fate of Mahavihara, the stronghold of Theravada tradition. Two chronicles have two approaches to this period of religious turmoil. Dipavamsa devotes only ten verses to describe events of this period. But Mahavamsa gives a fairly good account and Mahanama shows his unhappiness by calling Sanghamitta as Dummita and minister Sona as Pاپasona.

The next section is entitled as Mahavamsa and the Vamsatthappakasini or the Mahavamsa Tika. Referring to Vamsatthappakasini, it is stated that it is a work of critical acumen which elucidates and corrects information found in Mahavamsa. In support of this statement Malalasekara's concluding remarks of the introduction to Vamsatthappakasini has been quoted.

'Buddha's visits to Sri Lanka' and 'An overview of Buddhism in India' can be considered as interesting sections. There is some valuable information regarding Buddhist councils in India. The section entitled Popular tradition on the Mauryan Dynasty and Sri Lankan Kings: Vijaya to Devanampiyatissa is mainly based on the information provided by Vamsatthappakasini. Vamsatthappakasini has drawn this information from Uttaraviharattakatha.

The section, Devanampiyatissa, the Thera Mahinda and the Introduction of Buddhism, provides some information of Arahant Mahinda's arrival in Sri Lanka, establishment of Buddhism in

the island and important historical places mentioned in the Mahavamsa. The section called Dutthagamini Abhaya- the Hero of an Unexhausted Popular Tradition gives the genealogy of Dutthagamini who is the principal protagonist of Mahavamsa.

In the sub-section called Mahavamsa and the Extended Mahavamsa or Cambodian Mahavamsa there is a comparison of historical events mentioned in the Mahavamsa and the Cambodian Mahavamsa. In this comparison it has been clearly pointed out that the Extended Mahavamsa has more information derived from different sources. Both the Extended Mahavamsa and Mahavamsa have the same information regarding Asoka, the third Buddhist Council, his conversion to Buddhism and his religious activities.

Chapter five is named as the Earliest Phase of Sri Lankan History. An examination of Sri Lankan history in legend has been made at the beginning of this chapter. Dipavamsa, Mahavamsa, Vamsatthappakasini and Extended Mahavamsa have been taken as historical sources. These four are collectively taken as Pali Chronicles. According to these chronicles, the founder of Sinhala kingdom is Vijaya who is the eldest son of Sinhabahu. After a brief history of founding of the Sinhala kingdom by Vijaya, history of Pandukabhaya or Pakunda is given in details. Pandukabhaya has been considered as the first national hero. Then we find an examination of Mauryan Sri Lankan Relations and the Introduction of Buddhism. There is a detailed description of the arrival of Mahinda and establishment of Buddhism in Sri Lanka.

Next major historical examination is entitled as The Rise of Mahagama in Rohana. The Establishment of Rohana kingdom is traced back to the king Devanampiyatissa. Mahanaga the brother of Devanampiyatissa established Rohana kingdom. Lineage of Rohana rulers starting from Mahanaga is given from

Mahanaga to Kakavannatissa the father of Dutthagamini. Struggle between Duttha Gamini and his brother Tissa for the throne of Rohana kingdom, Sangha's interference and reconciliation between two brothers, Duttha Gamini's accession to the throne and freedom struggle have been explained according to these four historical sources.

A chart of revised chronological table of kings of the Mahavamsa starting from Vijaya to Mahasena is included in this chapter. An Epigraphical and Territorial map too is inserted at the end of this chapter.

The chapter six is named 'Towards a Definitive History of Sri Lanka.' Its subtitle is From Legend and Epic Poetry to Matter-of-fact History. The title indicates that the early history of Sri Lanka can be reconstructed from legends. There was no tradition of preserving historical records in early Sri Lanka but history was buried in legends, folk tales and oral tradition. The whole chapter is devoted to Sri Lanka's religious and political history. Starting from Saddhatissa, immediate successor of Dutthagamini Abhaya, to Mahasena, the youngest son of Gothabhaya, history of the island has been dealt within detail. Turmoil during Vatthagamini Abhaya, south Indian invasion, dissension between Mahavihara and Abhayagiri, arrival of Vaitulyavada and so forth have been discussed and critically analyzed.

Part II of the work being reviewed comprises the English translation of Pali Mahavamsa. Pali Mahavamsa contains thirty seven chapters. First five chapters of Mahavamsa are regarding the visit of the Buddha to Sri Lanka, Dynasty of Mahasammata, the First, Second and Third Councils. The sixth and seventh chapters are on Vijaya, the first ruler of Sri Lanka. The last chapter is on Mahasena who was the last king of the chronicle Mahavamsa.

One notable feature of this translation is that it is not like earlier translations from verse to verse. It is a rendering made chapter by chapter. It is like a prose composition done in English. Earlier translators of Mahavamsa followed verse to verse translation into English. The translation is lucid and for general reader. There are three Appendices at the end of the book. Appendix I is an explanation of place names of Sri Lanka and their identification. Appendix II is a glossary of Pali words and names. Appendix three is the chronological table of kings of Sri Lanka from Vijaya to Mahasena.

Many mistakes and shortcomings of earlier translations of Mahavamsa have been corrected. It is full of historical information that can be used by students, researchers and teachers. This work is a depository of historical information of Sri Lanka. In the reconstruction of history of Sri Lanka it can be utilized as a valuable historical source.

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Dharma-Vinaya Essays in honor of Venerable Professor Dhammavihari (Jotiya Dhirasekera)

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The Sri Lankan tradition of honoring eminent scholars with felicitation volumes to mark birth anniversaries and the like has resulted in invaluable compilations of research articles by their colleagues, students and friends. The eighty-fifth birthday of Venerable Dhammavihari, whose services for the promotion of Buddhist studies are as diverse as they are