
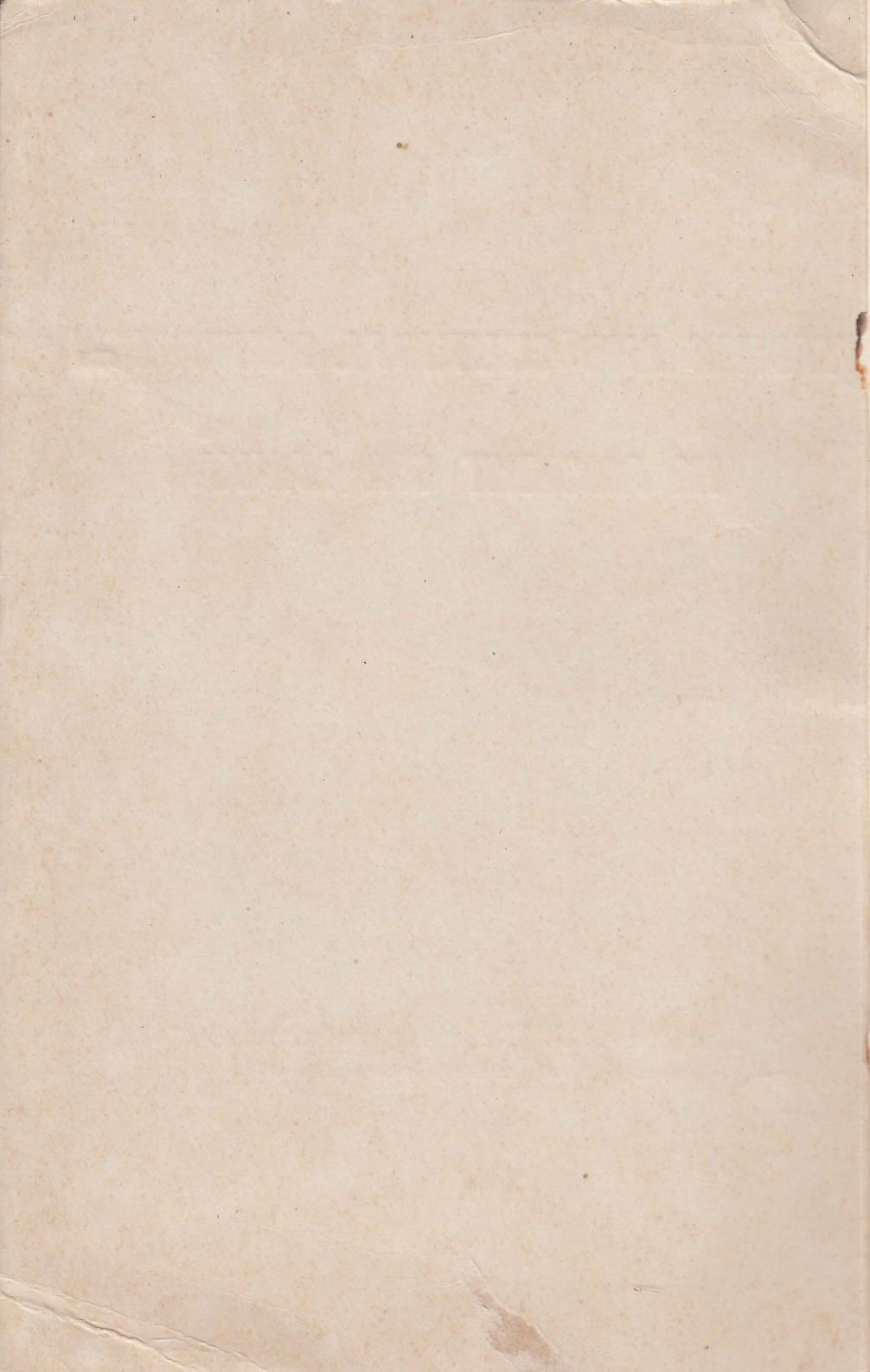


TAMILS AND CULTURAL PLURALISM IN ANCIENT SRI LANKA

Appropriate Technology Services
121, POINT PEDRO ROAD
NALLUR, JAFFNA


By

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(Lecturer, Theological College of Lanka, Pilimatalawa.)



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No.

*The Brahmi Inscriptions Reveal Tamil
Presence And Multi-Cultural
Interaction In Earliest Sri Lankan
Social Strata*

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The Rev. D. J. Kanagaratnam, Ph. D.
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*Dedicated to the
Tamil Kala Sangam
of the Theological College,
Pilimatalawa.*

Introduction

Written history is unable to recapture the wealth of material embedded in the rich everliving oral tradition. The history of a multi-racial linguistic and cultural nation cannot be entirely understood by the written sources alone. The many sources of folk culture-language, stories, symbols, myths, dance and ritual-portray very often the multi-facets of the pluralistic passionate participation of peoples in the making of their destiny and history. If we bear this fact in mind it will not take us very long to realize how much of nuances and insights of popular history we have lost sight of because of an over-emphasis on the written sources of history of the Theravada Buddhist tradition such as the Dipavamsa, Mahavamsa and the Chulavamsa for the understanding of the early history of Sri Lanka.

There is also a considerable bulk of early Brahmi inscriptions in Sri Lanka which are another valuable source which help us to reconstruct the multi-faceted nature of our ancient society and history on the basis of the popular folk culture and social life they portray. Dr. S. Paranavitana had done tremendous service in the field of epigraphy and archaeology through his painstaking research and editing of the ancient Brahmi inscriptions of Sri Lanka. But his strong inflexible commitment in trying to trace the origin of everything to a Buddhist Aryan source and limiting the impact of the Dravidian to a bare minimum has proved the limitations of his methodology and his failure to acknowledge fully the multi-cultural facets and interactions in the earliest Sri Lankan social and cultural milieu.

The purpose of this paper is to bring out these aspects in the Brahmi inscriptions which have been ignored or overlooked by many recent scholars of history and archaeology. And it is also hoped that this study will have some measure of influence in changing the chauvinistic attitudes of people who refuse to acknowledge the pluralism of our society which comes down from very ancient times.

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I

Aryan-Dravidian Cultural Fusion On The Mainland

When one examines the earliest Brahmi inscriptions of Sri Lanka one cannot ignore the fact that the Aryan and Buddhist communities resident in the island had come under strong Dravidian and Austric influences on the mainland of India before they met these peoples here. Dr. S. Paranavitana is quick to show in his historical and archaeological writings the extent to which the Dravidian people had come under the influence of the Aryans of the north whenever he has to explain any Sinhala-Tamil connection but with all his scholarship he does not make any attempt to show the extent to which Dravidians had shaped Aryan culture and life during their very long years of co-existence on the mainland before they penetrated to the southern parts.¹

Dr. Suniti Kumar Chatterji, Emeritus Professor of Comparative Philology of the University of Calcutta writes about this interaction as follows:

"In the broad lines of the development of Indo-Aryan in the course of over two millenia, we see a tremendous influence of Dravidian, and partly of Austric (Kol). The nature of this influence is not superficial or just literary, but it is that of a substratum, profound and at the same time wide in scope. There has been through some 3,000 years a gradual approximation of the Aryan speech towards the Dravidian in its system of sounds, in its trend in morphology in vocabulary, and above all in its syntax or order of words".²

1 University of Ceylon, History of Ceylon, vol. 1, p. 94f.

2 Tamil Culture, vol. VIII, no. 4 Oct-Dec 1959, p. 301

Scholars of Dravidian and Indo - Aryan such as R. Caldwell, H. Gundert, F. Kittel, T. Burrow and others have made significant contributions in appraising the Dravidian loan - element in Indo-Aryan. The publication in 1961 from the Clarendon Press Oxford of the most valuable "Dravidian Etymological Dictionary" through the collaboration of two eminent Dravidianists, Prof. J. B. Emeneau of California and T. Burrow of Oxford has helped further in exploring Dravidian - Aryan linguistic interaction. Dravidian and Aryan interaction was confined not only to language but took place in other areas of culture too. The Dravidian and Austric races developed a pantheon of gods of their own: sun gods, moon gods, mountain gods, tree gods and serpent gods, a mixture of nature worship culminating in the mysterious cult of the earth mother, Kottiravai or Ellamma, forerunner of the Shakti cult of later Hinduism. To unite the Aryan and non-Aryan peoples it became necessary to combine the individual sky - gods of the Aryans with the cosmic nature divinities of the non - Aryans and make one great symphony of gods and goddesses including Siva and Uma, Vishnu and Sri and Skanda and his two consorts. Dravidians seem to have influenced Aryan life profoundly through Shamanism Animism, Totemism, taboo, demonology and ritual.³

As a result of the fusion of the Dravidian and Aryan elements, the symbolic marriage of the Sky and Earth element in the mentality of these two ancient races of India there arose one of the richest yet least understood cultural synthesis in Asian history. Irrepressible abstract speculative transcendentalism was fused into irresistible elemental concrete naturalism and gave birth to the gorgeous symbolism that is Indian culture. This glorious fusion and interaction have to be borne in mind when one studies the early history of the Aryan and Dravidian peoples of Lanka.

3 Kalidas Nag, Greater India, Bombay 1960, p. 410f.

II

Proximity to South India

In pre-historic times Sri Lanka must have been part of South India. Early Tamil literary works refer to land submergences in ancient times in the southernmost parts. Anyone who travels by air from India to Sri Lanka or vice versa does not fail to perceive in the many rocks and shoals forming what is known as Adam's Bridge now, the one time territorial links between South India and Sri Lanka. The University History of Ceylon clearly says:

"The close geological link with the island's early history has meant that the island's early human history has been closely bound up with that of the sub-continent. The early settlers came from there bringing with them arts, crafts and culture to their new home".⁴

In pre-historic times there must have been free movement of tribes from South India to Sri Lanka. Even after Sri Lanka became a separate island movements of tribes and people and close contact between both lands continued because of close proximity. Dr. Paul E. Pieris writing about these movements has expressed:

"It stands to reason that a country which is only thirty miles from India and which would have been seen by the Indian fishermen every morning as they sailed out to catch their fish would have been occupied as soon as the continent was peopled by men who understood how to sail".⁵

4 University of Ceylon, History of Ceylon, vol. 1, p. 7.

5 JCBRAS vol. XXVIII, no. 72, p. 65.

A critical examination of the pre-historic stone implements and material remains discovered in South India and Sri Lanka confirms without the slightest doubt that human beings originally migrated from South India to Sri Lanka. The same technique of stone flaking was followed, the same animistic cults and practices were observed and the same demonological beliefs, healing arts and hill sacrifices were indulged in.

Archaeological work in many of the megalithic remains in the Deccan and far south of India and in Sri Lanka in places such as Rambukkana, Katiraveli, Konvava, Ponparappu, Ratnapura and elsewhere is throwing new light on the spread of what may be the earliest Dravidian peoples into the south of India and Sri Lanka. The urn burials of Sri Lanka are so very similar to those in South India and the rituals and ceremonies connected with these urn burials are attested in the earliest Tamil literature of the Sangam period.⁶

Dr. Senerat Paranavitana has explicitly stated that these megalithic monuments and burial urns belong to the Dravidian-speaking people:

"These megalithic sites and urnfields are found throughout the regions inhabited by Dravidian-speaking people. The burial customs to which they bear witness are referred to in early Tamil literature. It is therefore legitimate to infer that the people who buried their dead in dolmens and cists, as well as in large earthen-ware jars were Dravidians... The few megalithic monuments and urn-burials discovered in Ceylon are obviously an overflow from South India. The archaeological evidence is supported by literary sources. The Dravidian peoples influenced the course of the island's history about the same time they gained mastery over the South Indian Kingdoms."⁷

There is therefore sufficient evidence to prove the presence of Tamil people in Sri Lanka from pre-historic times.

6 Purananuru nos. 228, 234, 249. The ancient inhabitants of the South generally buried their dead as also seen in "Pura Porul Venba".

7 Senerat Paranavitana, *Sinhalayo*, Ceylon, 1967 p. 8 & 9.

III

Pictographic Language And the Language Of Symbolism

Dr. Paranavitana in his research on the Brahmi inscriptions had discovered forty three pictographic symbols among them. He as well as other scholars⁸ have seen resemblances and links of these symbols with those in the Indus Valley script, in Cretan symbols and in the Sumerian, Egyptian and Hittite scripts. Another script which was of great help to some scholars was the proto-Chinese script which has been recently discovered. These pictographic symbols have a long and interesting story and background. They undoubtedly belong to the earliest settlers of Sri Lanka, the Nagas and the Yakshas who were culturally very close to the Dravidian people. These Nagas and Yakshas living in many parts of the island who being nearest to the neighbouring continent, had the facilities to evolve for themselves a civilization similar to that prevailing in South India, were no doubt acquainted with a system of communication and a system of cultivation of rice before the advent of the Aryans. The Brahmi inscriptions of Sri Lanka and South India contain a number of references to the Nagas, the Yakshas and their cultures. There are a number of personal names bearing the pre-fix "Naga" and the Tamil form "Naka" shows Tamil presence and links.

Besides these pictographic symbols other ancient symbols have been found by archaeologists in different parts of the island. Pictographic symbols on coins or "puranas" were discovered at Mullaitivu in 1885.⁹

⁸ Dr. G. R. Hunter, Fr. Heras, Marshall etc.

⁹ H. Parker, Ancient Ceylon, p. 460.

The common designs on them were the sun, a circle with six emblems such as the bull, dog, trees and three arched structure. Father Heras, an eminent authority on the Indus Valley symbols, examining the symbols on these coins says:

"The fact that the system of writing was not yet developed like the Brahmi scripts proves that the coins are prior to the Christian era".¹⁰

A large number of phallic terracottas or lingams were found in Illukwewa near Sigiriya and also in numerous other places in the island. The "Naga gals" or stones depicting the cobra have been found near ancient tanks streams and wells. They represent the sacred guardianship of water.¹¹ Symbols such as geometric circles, suns, moons, fish, tortoise serpent, lingam and lotus in a form of mystic representation were found in Tissa Wewa.¹²

A careful study of these symbols helps us to enter into the world of their deep mystic meanings of fertility and fecundity cults and to understand the cultural interaction with Dravidian, Aryan, Hindu and Buddhist cultures.

The Naga people and the Tamils being agriculturists shared a common mystic culture of fertility and fecundity cults. Sounds begin to acquire mystic incantative value. and pictorial and other representative symbols become icons communicating a cosmic vision and a living divine presence to the community. The earth and the whole of life are animated by a life force within and by the sky, sun, moon, stars and water without. The marriage of earth and sky, feminine and masculine, moon and sun is absolutely essential for earth and life to go on meaning-fully. Here we observe the myth of the cosmic pair and the "coincidentia oppositorum", which were the primordial ways of expressing the paradox of reality and which become a very significant aspect of the religion, art and sculpture of later times.

10 JCBRAS vol. XXXIV, no. 90, p. 52,

11 R. L. Brohier, *Ancient Irrigation Works in Ceylon* 1935, vol. II, p. 11, vol. III, p. 24.

12 C H J, vol. I, no. 4, 1952. p. 287.

Mircea Eliade comments on this phenomenon as follows:

"These assimilations do not simply serve a function of classification. They are obtained by an attempt to integrate man and the universe fully into the divine rhythm. Their meaning is primarily magic and redemptive; by taking to himself the powers that lie hidden in "letters" and "sounds", man places himself in various central points of cosmic energy and thus effects complete harmony between himself and all that is. "Letters" and "sounds" do the work of images, making it possible, by contemplation or by magic to pass from one cosmic level to another".¹³

Regarding the symbolism of bringing together sky and earth, sun and moon he writes:

"The unification of the two centres of sacred and natural energy aims—in this technique of mystical physiology—at reintegrating them in the primal undifferentiated unity, as it was when not yet broken up by the act that created the universe; and this "unification" realizes a transcendence of the cosmos".¹⁴

With this background in mind one is in a better position to decipher many of the pictographic symbols in the early Brahmi inscriptions as given by Dr. Paranavitana in page XXVI of his "Inscriptions of Ceylon", Vol. I. Number 1 in the list is the plain symbol of the swastika. This symbol has been found in the Indus Valley as well as in Mesopotamia. It is definitely a fertility sign symbolizing prosperity. In number 2 the swastika sign stands on a straight line with four marks which is a symbolic sign for mother earth and the regenerative life force indicated by the four tiny shoots. It is a symbol which indicates a prosperous harvest. The symbols from 2a to 4d belong to another group which can also be interpreted from the fertility and fecundity cults. The most important line in this group is the middle line like a pole connecting two signs, one below and one above or one on the right and one on the left.

13 Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, Sheed and Ward, Lond, 1958, p. 178.

14 Ibid, p. 179.

Numbers 6, 9, 15, 23, 29, 30, 39, 40, 41, 42 also have resemblances to this group of symbols.

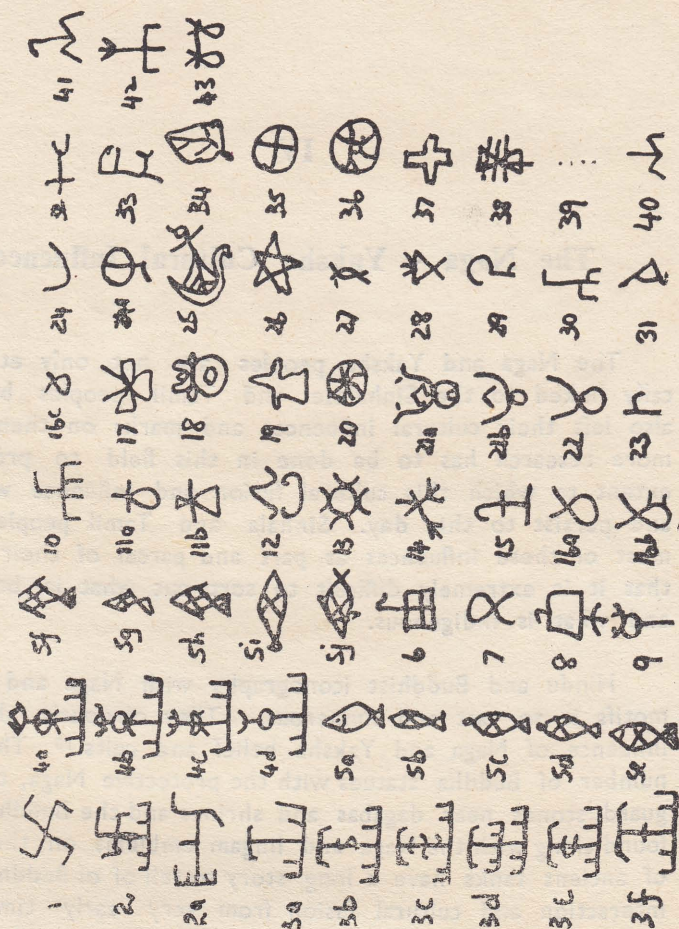
Myths and legends which relate to the tree of life often indicate that it stands at the centre of the universe, binding together earth and sky, becoming a symbol of the cosmic pillar which upholds the world. In these myths the pole or tree expresses absolute reality in its aspect of norm of a fixed point supporting the cosmos. It is the supreme prop of all things and consequently communication with heaven and the forces above can only be effected by means of it. Heaven and the other cosmic forces are symbolized by a horizontal protective sign above the pole. Number 3c and 3d are the tree of life with branches. The pole and the tree spring from the Great Goddess Personifying the inexhaustible energies and forces of the earth, the ultimate basis of all reality and the source of cosmic fertility. In the pre-Aryan civilization of the Indus Valley studied from the excavations at Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro, the identification of the Great Goddess with vegetation is represented by nude goddesses beside a "figus religiosa" or by a plant emerging from the goddess's genital organs. Numbers 3b, 3c, 4a, 4b, 4c, 4d and 9 show a few cosmological emblems such as the snake, the sun and the moon. The whole pattern of the meaningful combination of serpent, sun, moon goddess and tree symbolize the fertility and fecundity energies which sustain all earth and life. The separate sun symbol in numbers 13, 20, 35 and 36 and the star symbol in 26 indicate the solar and astral sources of energy and fertility. The fish symbol from 5a to 5l and the snake symbol are the emblems of water governing the fertility of the earth. The fertility, fecundity, healing and ritual power in leaves are symbolized in the leaf symbol in numbers 14, 17 and 34. The sanctity of the betel, the mango and the margosa leaves is part of Naga culture. 16a, 16b, 43 and probably 11a may be a fertility sign such as the "purnāghata" or jar of fullness which symbolizes the womb of the Mother Goddess,

The phallus symbols of lingam and yoni are noticeable in the signs in numbers 12, 18, 19, 21a, 21b and also in 40 and 41. They resemble very much the lingam-yoni symbols found in Illukwewa, Tissawewa and other places and bunds of tanks in the island.¹⁵ They are symbols of regeneration and fertility. The "lingam" and the "yoni" are parents of all life and nature. Only in conjunction can they

15 R. L. Brohier, *Ancient Irrigation Works in Ceylon*. vol. II, p. 15, and Nevill, *Asst. Govt. Agent, Mullaitivu, Diary*, 1889.

NON - BRAHMI SYMBOLS

CHART I



create anything in the human and the natural world, Agriculture is possible only as the outcome of the union of the earth and the sky, the sun and the moon and the male and the female principles and forces.

A deep theological and social vision is expressed by these primordial people of Sri Lanka in their pictographic language and symbolism. They express the creativity and harmony that underlie the whole of life and nature in the rhythmic union of opposites — the "Coincidentia Oppositorum".

IV

The Naga - Yaksha Cultural Influence

The Naga and Yaksha peoples are not only ethnologically linked to the Sinhalese and Tamil peoples but have also left their cultural influences and marks on them. Much more research has to be done in this field to prove the extent to which this cultural fusion and influence were felt and persist to this day. Sinhala and Tamil people accept most of these influences as part and parcel of their culture that it is extremely difficult to sort out what is borrowed and what is indigenous.

Hindu and Buddhist iconography with Naga and Yaksha motifs is so vast and numerous. They obviously show the influence of Naga and Yaksha belief and cults.¹⁶ The large number of Buddha statues with the protective Naga, the Naga guard stones near dagabas and shrines and the Buddha statue found along with the Naga and lingam emblems on the banks of ancient tanks have a long story to tell of of Buddhist-Naga interaction and cultural fusion from very early times. The Brahmi inscriptions of Kirinda and Tissamaharama¹⁷, and the early chapters of Mahavamsa give glimpses of how Naga and Yaksha peoples became Buddhists. The cults of the Siva — lingam and Nagathambiran and the fertility cults taken over by certain Hindu deities such as Murugan (Skanda), Indra. Pillaiyar (Ganesha) and Kali bring out vividly the Naga-Hindu interaction.

16 Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, *History of Indian and Indonesian Art*, Dover, New York, 1965. p. 5f.

17 JCBRAS. vol. XXXVI, no. 98, 1945, p. 63—65.

There are a large number of Buddhist—Sinhala and Hindu—Tamil ceremonies and customs where one could discern the influence of the Naga and Yaksha fertility and fecundity cults. The “Kap” (tree) planting and water cutting ceremonies in the temple festivals in the month of Esala (July), the marriage, puberty, funeral, harvesting and sowing ceremonies, the ceremonial and cultic uses of leaves, plants and fruits such as the Betel, Mango, Banana, Margosa, Coconut etc., and the ceremonial use of the “Punkalas” or “Niraikudam” all show the influence of Naga and Yaksha cultures. There are also large number of words in the Sinhala and Tamil languages which have been borrowed from the Nagas and Yakshas. For example, the word “linda” meaning “well” with its plural “ling” is a borrowing from the Nagas and has fertility connotations connected with the word “lingam”. Place names, names of fruits, plants, herbs and terms connected with demonology etc., also show traces of this influence.

Linguistic and cultural research in this field is bound to reveal much more of this influence and interaction, which is also bound to prove the extent to which primitive Sri Lanka was rich in pluralistic cultures.

V

Tamil Presence In Earliest Sri Lankan Social Strata

Many books on Sri Lankan history and archaeology have erroneously stated that there was no civilization in Sri Lanka, no art of writing and no peoples of significance before the coming of the Aryans and the introduction of Buddhism. The Nagas and the Yakshas are very casually dismissed in these writings as invisible spirits of the underworld or as primitive tribes with very little or nothing of the civilization which the Aryans and Buddhists brought to this island. In the case of the Dravidians they are dismissed as intruders and invaders who came after the Aryans to conquer and destroy the Aryan — Buddhist civilization.¹⁸ All this bias, prejudice and errors are due to the fact that historians and writers rely too much on the written works such as the Dipavamsa, Mahavamsa and Culavamsa which were written by Buddhist monks to defend their Sinhala — Buddhist vested interests. The new interest in epigraphical, archaeological, linguistic and mythological resources for historical study is bound to throw much new light on our ancient history. The importance of epigraphical and linguistic evidence in historical studies is now widely recognized and cannot be under-estimated by historians and scholars.

¹⁸ University of Ceylon, History of Ceylon, vol. I, p. 95

VI

Damela Before Sinhala In Earliest Inscriptions

The word "Sinhala" does not occur in any of the earliest Brahmi inscriptions. Dr. S. Paranavitana as usual when it comes to prove anything Sinhala and Aryan resorts to fanciful guesswork. In the introduction to the "Inscriptions of Ceylon", Volume I, he has the following explanation:

"As these inscriptions are in the old-Sinhalese language, the vast majority of the persons who had them indited must have been of the community known as "Sinhala". But this name does not occur at all in them, for the good reason that as almost everyone in the land was a Sinhalese, it was not sufficiently distinctive to refer to a person by that designation".¹⁹

Statements such as these in his many historical and archaeological writings have diminished his reputation as a scientific historian in spite of his painstaking enormous research and study in the field of archaeology.

The explanation for the lack of the term "Sinhala" in the Brahmi inscriptions has to be sought elsewhere. Etymologically the word "Sing" can be traced to a Munda Austric origin. The Nagas and the Mundas as Austric peoples have much in common. The supreme God of these Austric peoples is "Sing Bonga". His revelation and visible symbol is the "Sun" called "Singi". It was from "Singi", that place names in India such as "Singbhum",

¹⁹ Inscriptions of Ceylon, vol. I, p. LXXXIX.

"Singapura" and "Singur" have their origin.²⁰ When the Aryan immigrations took place in the northern regions, these place names were given Aryan interpretations. The Buddhist story of Singhabahu and Singhasivali and their lion father originated as an explanation of the place-name "Singapura". The "Singa" tradition meaning "Lion" was carried by traders and monks from these regions to Sri Lanka and some parts of South-East Asia.

During the period of the Brahmi inscriptions, "Sinhala" meaning an ethnic or tribal group had not fully been articulated. Another inference was made that the Sinhala were of totemistic origin. Even this is without any foundation. The Mahavamsa mentions Lambakanna, Moriya, Tarachcha, Bahbhajaka and Kulina but not "Sinhala".²¹ Dr. Paranavitana tries to prove the original location of the Sinhalese in the Indus Valley by referring to HsuanTsang's (Chinese pilgrim) statement that the western border of the kingdom of Sinhapura was on the river Indus and by referring to two Kharosthi inscriptions of the first or second centuries A. D., where Sihila, Simharakshita, Simhamitra, Sihilaka are used as personal names.²² Here again Paranavitana indulges in fanciful guesswork. As stated earlier "Singha" has a pre-Aryan meaning used in many place and personal names and in post-Aryan times too it was a common name and in no way proves the existence of the Sinhala people as a national and ethnic entity. It is therefore very clear that the term "Sinhala" was not used during the period of the early Brahmi inscriptions to refer to the Island or its people. The names "Lanka" and "Vijaya", though all these names acquire tremendous national connotations in later ages, are not found in these earliest inscriptions. The legends connected with these names were deduced from the Buddhist Jatakas and were used by the

20 The ancient (sic) fables of the Singalese represent their country as having been first governed by a descendant of the sun" — Philalethes 1817 — vide English Literature in Ceylon, 1815 — 1878 ed. by M. Y. Gooneratne, p. 75.

21 G. C. Mendis, Problems of Ceylon History. Colombo, pt. III, p. 49f.

22 University of Ceylon, History of Ceylon, vol. I, p. 90.

Buddhist monk who composed the epic "Dipavamsa" which cannot be earlier than the fourth century A. D. The Mahavamsa which has an expanded version of the legends, has been placed by scholars about the sixth century A. D.

The earliest strata of Sri Lanka society consisted of various tribes, ethnic groups, social and caste groups such as Dameda (Tamil), Kabojhiyas, Pulayas, Muridis, Velir, Brahmanas and traders. These groups were ruled by local leaders called "Perumakans" and "gamanis". Words such as "raja", "Maharaja", "Raja-Raja Siva" are used in the inscriptions but there does not seem to have been a monarchical institution before the advent of Mahinda.²³ Even after that there seem to have existed tribal rulers of clans such as the Moriyas, Lambakannas and Damedas. The earliest Buddhist and jaina monks to whom the ordinary people belonging to different groups, and their leaders and traders donated cave dwellings were those who were very close to the ideals of the Buddha and his teachings. They lived and worked sincerely among the people of the land who supported them and were attracted to their teachings. This is evident from the various ethnic groups and communities who supported them and even adopted Buddhist and Jain names. By the fourth century the Sangha came to exist as a seat of learning and its members thrived on the lands and endowments bestowed on the vihares. The monks therefore had to defend their vested interests and support the King and the community he represented. Also by the fourth century the immigrants from North-East India, where Buddhist influence was strong, to Sri Lanka, formed a sufficiently strong body called the "Sinhala". They, their King, nobles and leaders were ardent supporters of the Buddhist monks. It was during this time that the Sinhala were given a distinct and special national consciousness and destiny tied up with Buddhism and the country. By the time the Mahavamsa was being written not only were there Buddhist sectarian rivalries and rivalries between monasteries but also open hostility towards the Damilas who were very strong in the northern

23 Saddhamangala Karunaratne, Origin of Sinhala, Daily News, Jan 22nd. 1961.

regions of the island. Monks involved themselves in these rivalries and supported the Sinhala King against the Tamils. The Mahavamsa mirrors vividly these rivalries and hostilities of the 6th century in the descriptions of the past Kings whereas the Dipavamsa is very restrained and realistic about the past in the 4th.

Delving into the etymology of "Damela" and "Sinhela" one finds that "ela" comes from the Austric languages of pre-Aryan times. In Mundari "Elaka" or "Ilaka" means country. From the Naga word "il" meaning "place" the Tamils got the same word. "Dam" and "Tam" are from Tamil, "Then" meaning South. Hence "Tamila" or "Damila" means the language or people of the southern country.²⁴ When the people of Singapura in North-East India came to the southern country they gradually acquired the name "Sinhela" which means the language or people of the Sinhala-land. Sri Lanka is still called by the Sinhala people as "Ela rata" while the Tamil people call it by a very old name "Eelam". The word "Eelam" has been used by the Tamils from the time of the Brahmi inscriptions up to now. Many of the plants, fruits and animals which are indigenous are referred to in Sinhala as ela-dhena (cow), ela-batu (brinjal), ela-valu (vegetables).

24 J. T. Xavier, *The Land of Letters, Ceylon*, 1977. p. 23f.
Swami S. Gnanaprakasara, *The Tamils their Early History and religion*, Jaffna, 1920. Ibid. *Tamil Culture*, vol. 1, no. 2, p. 132.

VII

Epigraphical Evidence For Dravidian Presence

There are four Brahmi inscriptions where the ethnic name "Dameda" occurs.²⁵ It is the Prakrit prototype of Demela, Damila and Dravida. The fact that this ethnic name is used in these inscriptions proves that by the 3rd century B. C. the Tamil people had a distinct ethnic and national identity in the southern regions, which was clearly articulated. It was during this period that the Tamils moved from pre-history into history and literary records reflecting contemporary events are available. Asoka in his inscriptions refers to the kingdoms of Southern India (the region comprising modern Andhra Pradesh, Madras, Mysore and Kerala) as those of the Cholas, Pandyas, Satiyaputras and Keralaputras. The nucleus of Tamil nationality and culture was the region south of Madras city. The Kingdom of Pandya played a very significant part in articulating this culture. Madura was doubtless the most famous and important town in Tamilakam at this period, being the capital city of the Pandyas who were renowned as the most powerful of the Tamil Kings and munificent patrons of poets. This old town was famous for its gates and high towers. Valmiki's Ramayana refers to Pandya as follows:

"Then hasting on your way behold
The Pandyas gates of pearl and gold"²⁶

25 Inscriptions of Ceylon, vol. I, no. 94, p. 7, nos. 356 and 357 p. 28, no. 480, p. 37.

26 Valmiki, Ramayana, trans. Griffiths, bk. IV, ch. XLI.

All the earliest Brahmi inscriptions in South India are concentrated in the Pandyan country.²⁷ Two inscriptions, one a donation by a householder from Sri Lanka (Eelakkutumbikan) to the monks at Tirupparankunram and another from Sri Lanka mentioned at Muttupatti and the four inscriptions discovered in Sri Lanka where Tamils are mentioned, (1) at Anuradhapura where a Tamil householder's terrace was discovered, (2) a cave donated by a Tamil trader and householder to Buddhist monks at Periapuliyankulam, (3) a flight of steps for the cave donated by the same person to the monks and (4) a cave donated by the sons of a Tamil woman, show clearly the movements of people between the Pandya country and Sri Lanka. Terms such as "navika" and "vanijha" show the trading activities and economic status of these people. The words "kutumbika" and "gapati" indicate that they lived as families and householders. The place name "Illubarata" is from "ela" and "eelam" and can mean the Tamils of Eelam. There were also cultural connections between the Tamils of Sri Lanka and the Tamils of Pandya. The earliest Tamil poems before and a few years after the Christian era were collected in the early years of the Christian century in Madurai by the Sangams, encouraged by Buddhist and Jain monks. Among the earliest Tamil poets mentioned are some from Sri Lanka such as "Eelathu Puthan Thevan" and "Madurai Eelathu Puthan Thevanar".²⁸ These titles distinguish one poet from Sri Lanka and the other from Sri Lanka but residing at Madurai. Some of the poets were Nagas which shows that they were highly literate in Tamil.²⁹ Names such as Theradaran, Siru-ven-theraiyar and Ilambodiyar show that some of the Tamil poets were Buddhists.³⁰

All these references are sufficient proof that the Tamils of Sri Lanka were not only a distinct ethnic group in the social strata of the country from the earliest times but

- 27 K. V. Raman, *Some Aspects of Pandyan History* Madras, 1971.
I. Mahadevan, *Corpus of Tamil Inscriptions*, Madras, 1968.
K. V. Raman, *Brahmi Inscriptions of Tamil Nadu, Sri Lanka*
Journal of S. Asian Studies, vol. I, no. I, 1976.
- 28 Nattrinai 366, Agam 88, 231, 307, Kurunthogai 189, 343, 363.
- 29 Nattrinai 151, 205, 231, Kurunthogai 114, 282 Puram 381 ect.
- 30 Kurunthogai 195, Puram 363, Nattrinai 72.

also had a very high standard of literacy and culture. As years passed their power and status in the country increased though not without conflicts.

A. L. Basham in an article called "Prince Vijaya and The Aryanization of Ceylon", says:

"In my opinion Vijaya is not an individual, but a type, the bold and ruthless Aryan pioneer, who was one of the elements responsible for the spread of Aryan culture all over India and beyond. The other element is perhaps typified by Panduvasudeva, who is said to have landed in Ceylon with his followers in the guise of religious mendicants. These two Aryan types, the man of action and the man of thought, together no doubt with Dravidian and aboriginal elements, produced the great civilization of Ceylon".³¹

"Equally easy to account for are Vijaya's second wife, the princess of the Pandyas, and her enormous retinue. Dravidian infiltration into Ceylon must have been going on from the earliest historical times and probably before. The story of the princess arose from the need to account for the presence of Tamils in Ceylon, and to provide them with a place in the social and ethnic structure".³¹

Practically all the Tamils in Sri Lanka mentioned in the inscriptions have Aryan-Buddhist names. This shows to what extent there was strong Buddhist and Aryan influence from very early times on the Tamils. In spite of such strong organized impact of foreign influences the Tamils were able to maintain and continue their ethnic and cultural identity.

³¹ C H J, vol. I, no. 3, Jan. 1952, p. 171, 167.

VIII

Scriptal And Phonological Evidence

The Kingdom of Pandya was the great centre of not only Tamil emigration and cultural migration to Sri Lanka in very ancient times but also from where the ancient Tamil script spread to different parts of South India and Sri Lanka with the help of Buddhist and Jain monks and the Brahmanas. Tolkappiyam, the most ancient Tamil grammar speaks of Tamil literature from a very early age and the Pandyan Kings were great patrons of literature. All this early literature could only have been written in a Tamil script. Two Jain Agamas of the 2nd century B. C. the Samavayangana and the Pannavana sutras mention the names of a number of scripts of which Tamili is a contemporary script with Brahmi. Buhler calls the Mauryan script "Brahmi" and the Southern script "Dravidi". According to this definition the earliest Sri Lankan inscriptions should be called Dravidi and not Brahmi. Buhler also states that the Dravidi script is a century or two earlier to Asoka and may have been introduced by Indian colonists to Sri Lanka.³²

There is very close affinity between the Sri Lankan script and the Dravidi or Tamili script. Both inscriptions are carved in a similar manner on the drip ledges of ancient caves. In Sri Lanka and South India similar symbols are found for some vowels and consonants which are not found in the Brahmi records of Asoka. The letter "i" (இ) consists of a vertical stroke on the either side of which at the centre are two dots. The first occurrence of this "i" in North India is in the 2nd century A. D. The Arikamedu pottery

32 Buhler, Origin of the Brahmi Alphabet, Lond. 1940.

EARLIEST SAMPLES OF TAMIL IN BRAHMI SCRIPT

[illegible]

(KAMIL ZVEEBIL)
CHART II

in South India also has this symbol. This letter is still found in the Tamil and Sinhala alphabets of today for the long "i" (ஈ ீ) through the influence of the Tamil Grantha alphabet whereas it is absent in the North Indian alphabets. The letter "ma" (ம) formed of a U tube like curve with a horizontal line somewhere in the middle is obviously another symbol of the Tamil script. It is not found in any inscriptions in North India. The retroflex cerebral "zha" (ழ), a sound very distinctive and peculiar to the Tamil language in the form of an O with a line starting from the middle and becoming a hook curved towards the left resembling very much the present letter "D" is not known and used at all in the Brahmi script of Asoka. The "ma" and "zha" symbols are of very great antiquity and were part of the Tamil script of old.³³ The letter "e" (ஏ ே) in the form of a triangle with a dot in the middle also seems to be very old and belonging to Tamil. The Asokan letter is more cursive. The symbol has very much resemblance to the present Tamil "ஏ". Sinhalese has also developed a more cursive style influenced by the Grantha of the Chera country. The present Tamil letter "pa" (ப) and "ya" (ய) show a very close connection with the "pa" and "ya" of the inscriptions. These are sound scriptal evidence for the antiquity and distinctiveness of the Tamil script and that the present Tamil script contains many clear characteristics of the ancient Tamil alphabet in spite of the many dominant North Indian influences. The fact that the Southern Tamil script and phonological system were used by the Jain and Buddhist monks in their religious activities in the earliest period and then changed the phonological structure of the script to suit new needs is another clear and strong proof for the existence of Tamil people and Tamil culture in the island before the arrival of Mahinda. Dr. Sadhamangala Karunaratne in an article entitled "Did Mahinda give writing to Ceylon?" to the Daily News in 1962, said:

"The contribution of Mahinda to the evolution of the script in Ceylon can be assessed by the changes that

33 Saddhamangala Karunaratne, *Palaeographical Development of the Brahmi Script of Ceylon*, I. C. S. T. S.

the Dravidi alphabet underwent in Ceylon. The Mauryan forms completely ousted the earlier forms and gave an impetus to the development of the script. For example the earlier form of the "i" went out of vogue. The tabular form of the "ma" was replaced by the Mauryan form. The dental "sa" was introduced by the missionaries and the palatal "sa" completely disappeared at the commencement of the Christian era. The cerebral "la" found in the Sanchi alphabet was introduced and the "la" of the Southern alphabet disappeared. Thus it can be said that although Mahinda and his fellow missionaries did not introduce the art of writing they made a lasting contribution to the evolution of the script in Ceylon".³⁴

This is understandable as the monks came to Sri Lanka from a different and alien cultural milieu with a linguistic phonetical system and background different from the southern regions. It is remarkable that the Tamil script up to now has managed to survive as an alphabet without the aspirates, conjunct consonants and multiplication of letters for each sound difference which are characteristics of the North Indian languages.

34 Ibid., Did Mahinda Give Writing to Ceylon, Daily News, 1962.

IX

Other Cultural Influences on Tamili Script and Tamil Linguistic Theology

Dr. Paranavitana saw a close link between the Pictorial symbols in the inscriptions of Sri Lanka and those of the Indus Valley. Professor Kamil Zvelebil of Czechoslovakia examined the pictorial signs on pottery discovered in ancient burial sites and observed that they are survivors of the sign introduced by the people of the Harappan civilization.³⁵ Many of the symbols of the ancient Tamili script can be related to those of the Indus valley which in turn can be related to the Semitic scripts of Near Eastern peoples. Scholars have still not proved the original source of these scripts but links and resemblances are obvious. Chester C. McCown points out in his book "The Ladder of Progress in Palestine", that Aramaean came to be regarded as a holy language in the copying of the books of the Old Testament. The Aramaean was based on the Phoenician alphabet (C 1500 B. C. or earlier) and was borrowed by the Israelites from the Canaanites.³⁶ The Phoenicians of old had commercial contacts with the peoples of the Indus valley, South India and Sri Lanka. The writing methods and the linguistic theology of the Tamils bring out these cultural links very clearly.

The cave inscriptions of Sri Lanka written from the right to the left indicate that Sri Lanka had preserved an

35 Kamil Zvelebil, *An Introduction to the Comparative Study of Dravidian*, Archie Orientalni, 33, 1965.

Ibid., Proceedings of the Second International Conference Seminar of Tamil Studies, 1968.

36 Chester C. McCown, *The Ladder of Progress in Palestine*, Harper, London, 1940, p. 117 f.

earlier style of writing which was discarded by the Mauryan writers. This earlier style was the Tamil which was widely used in Pre-Mauryan times in South India and Sri Lanka. The Tamil word for letter is "eluthu", which is from the root "elutu" (to write). Writing was known to the Tamil people even before the cave inscriptions of the Jain and Buddhist monks. The Tamil letters are found used by the common Tamil people on the pots and vessels as found in the excavations at Korkai, Uraiyur, Alagarai and Arikamedu in South India and in Ponparappu and other sites in Sri Lanka. The burial rites and ceremonies connected with these vessels are mentioned in the Sangam literature. There is also reference to the custom of writing the names of the heroes on their tomb stones.³⁷ These practices and the art of writing from right to left are also found through excavations in Near East countries.

The phonetic structure of Tamil developed from a liturgical and cultic source. The few vowels and consonants of Tamil acquired mystic theological connotations as a result of their use in mystic incantations and invocations to the great goddess Kottravai and her son, the hill god, Murugan. The Tamil people along with the Nagas believed deeply in the generative power and sanctity of the earth. A powerful all pervading female creative power or Sakti resided in the bosom of the earth. The whole earth was considered the Mother goddess. This belief is still strong among the Tamil and Sinhala people. The Tamil word for god "Kadavul" (கடவுள்) means the reality deep within which transcends. The ability to see the synthesis between the inner and outer realities (the "ul" and the "kada", the "agam" and "puram") is the supreme theological, personal and social axiom for the ancient Tamils. This theological axiom has played an important part in the development of the principles of language. The ancient Tamil grammar "Tolkappiam" upholding old traditions says that vowels in Tamil are called "uyireluttu" (உயிர் எழுத்து) life-letters, and consonants "meieluttu" (மெய்

37 Purananuru No. 263, 264.

K. Kanapathi Pillai, The Art of Writing and the Transmission of Tamil Literature, University of Ceylon Review, vol. III, no. 1, April, 1945, p. 108f.

எழுத்து) body-letters. A word (சொல்) consists of the marital relationship (புணர்ச்சி) between the life-letter vowels and the body-letter consonants which give meaning to the word (பொருள்) and life to the language (மொழி) by speech.³⁸ The word used for vowel “uyireluttu” (உயிர் எழுத்து) is of deep theological significance. Vowels are the deep mystic Sakti and inner force of the word and consonants are the phenomenal macrocosmic outer reality. The Synthesis of these two are important in life and language. The Tamils had no conception of the duality of the body and soul as the Greeks and the Brahmins. The word “uyir” like the Hebrew “nephesh” means life and breath and man in both cultures is an animated being. Hence language is animated by its vowels and embodied by its consonants. Thinking is associated with the heart (ullam) in Tamil and this is so in Hebrew too. All thinking is intuitive thinking where the whole personality is involved and not confined to abstract speculative mental processes alone as in some cultures. Tamils from very ancient times have had and developed a meaningful linguistic theology.

38 Tholkappiam, ed, S. Rajam, Madras, 1960, pt. I, Eluthadikaram.

X

Morphological, Etymological And Sociological Evidence

The presence of Tamils in the pre-Mahinda social strata and later can also be proved by the critical examination of the pure Tamil words found in the earliest inscriptions. One such important word is "Parumaka", used extensively for chiefs who had donated a very large number of caves to Buddhist monks. Some bearing the name "Parumaka" are related to the donors, others bear high offices of state. Dr. Paranavitana again indulges in far fetched speculation regarding the etymology and linguistic palaeontology of this pure Tamil word. In his introduction to the Inscriptions of Ceylon, volume I, his interpretation of the word is as follows:

"The word "parumaka" is the old Sinhalese form of Sanskrit, "Pramukha", Pali, "Pamukha" or "Pamokha", which is often used to denote the president of a guild or corporation. It was also used of the nobles who were members of the assemblies of aristocratic republics in ancient India.... It is most likely that these "parumakas" were the descendants of the Indo-Aryan pioneers who established village settlements in various parts of island during the early days of its colonization by the immigrants from North India and thus played a vital role in introducing a settled agricultural life and the elements of Indo-Aryan culture, including the Sinhalese language to this island".³⁹

³⁹ Inscriptions of Ceylon, vol. I, p. LXXIV and also footnote on "parumaka".

In the footnote on the same page he makes the following comment:

"Equally untenable is the effort to derive "parumaka" from Tamil "Perumakan", which itself has to be taken as derived from Sanskrit "Pramukha". The word perumakan" is attested in Tamil literature for a period which is at least two centuries after that of the latest of these records".³⁹

Dr. Paranavitana's far-fetched etymological efforts to connect "Parumaka" with Sanskrit and Pali become a miserable failure when we examine the word carefully phonologically and morphologically. The word consists of the Tamil prefix "peru" (பெரு) and suffix "makan" (மகன்). The adjective "peru" is from the word "perithu" (பெரிது) meaning big, large, great, famous etc. Bishop Caldwell, the foremost Tamil philologist in his "Comparative Grammar of the Dravidian Languages" says that the final shortened "u" is an enunciative "u" in consequence of its being impossible for Tamil organs of speech to pronounce hard consonants without the help of a succeeding vowel.⁴⁰ This is why the hard consonant "r" is followed by a "u" in the adjectival prefix "peru". Hence in meaning as well as according to the rules of phonetics and morphology "paru" in parumaka has to be derived from Tamil "peru" rather than from the Sanskrit "Pra" and Pali "Pa" the vowel "u" is an important clue. The noun "makan" which is the suffix of "perumakan" is also a very pure Tamil word meaning, son, person or human being. The shortened form "maka" has been used in the colloquial language from very ancient times for son or daughter. It is the height of absurdity for Dr. Paranavitana to trace the etymology of the word "parumaka" to the Sanskrit "Pramukha" and Pali "Pamokha" when from every rule of philology it is obviously a pure Tamil word. Though it is understandable that the Buddhist monks would have found it difficult to pronounce certain Tamil sounds and introduced changes as we found in the letters earlier, here we find that they had not changed

40 R. Caldwell, A Comparative Grammar of the Dravidian Language Harrison, London, p. 342f.

the word so radically as not to know that they were using the well known Tamil word "perumakan" which means a chieftain or leader of the community.

Dr. Paranavitana makes another two howlers when he says that the Tamil word "perumakan" itself is derived from the Sanskrit "Pramukha". Though Tamil has a large number of Sanskrit words which are only additions to pure Tamil words, it is the mother of all Dravidian languages and it is the only Dravidian language which could stand on its own without the help of Sanskrit. Sanskrit derivations and pure Tamil words can be easily distinguished by any Tamil scholar and there is absolutely no doubt that the word "Perumakan" is a pure Tamil word. The other howler is that the word "perumakan" is attested in Tamil literature for a period which is at least two centuries after the inscriptions. It has to be noted that the Sangam poems collected in the beginning of the Christian era contain compositions, words, traditions and customs which go back centuries earlier. Also the Tamils have had a strong sense of tradition in carrying forward names and titles through many centuries. For this reason many recent scholars have resorted to the Sangam works to understand and interpret many features in the early inscriptions. Dr. K. V. Raman, Professor of Ancient History and Archaeology in the University of Madras has stated in one of his recent articles:

"They (inscriptions) throw useful light on the place-names, names of chieftains, kings, social and economic institutions like guilds, tradesmen and also religious sects and their practices and provide interesting data comparable to the data available in the Sangam literature and other sources elsewhere like the Asokan, the Satavahana and Sri Lanka inscriptions".⁴¹

Dr. Paranavitana's superficial comments show that he has closed his eyes to the most valuable data provided in the Tamil Sangam literature.

41 The Sri Lanka Journal of South Asian Studies, vol. I, no. 1, 1975, p. 71.

The feminine forms of "parumakan" as used in the inscriptions are another strong and valuable proof that the words and the grammatical useage are pure Tamil. The common feminine form found in four inscriptions is "Parumakalu" (பெருமகளு). "Parumakala" and "Parumakali" are found in two inscriptions respectively. The feminine of "makan" (மகன்) is "makal" (மகள்). All three forms follow the Tamil rule for feminine form and have "makal" (மகள்). The ending with a vowel is a Tamil feature explained by Dr. Caldwell. It is called paragoge in linguistic terminology. It is a very common feature in Dravidian languages for the sake of euphonic purpose. It is a feature of Telugu to allow every word without exception to end in a vowel. It is of great significance that this usage is found in the earliest inscriptions of Sri Lanka. "Makalu" and "Makala" are found in Tamil colloquial usage even today in some Tamil villages outside the Jaffna peninsula. The term "magali(r)" is found in classical Tamil. The feminine from of "perumakan" also shows the social and economic status of women in earliest times. This is also a feature of Tamil society which gave a very significant place to women in the cultural life and was matrilineal. The "perumakan" as leaders of respective communities are described in various ways in the inscriptions as well as in the Sangam literature. They have held various offices such as treasurers, leaders of the army and overlords of villages. In order to understand their role in the social structure it is necessary to understand how society was organized and governed.

It is clear from the inscriptions that in the 2nd century B. C. there were several provincial rulers who styled themselves "raja". Sometimes a raja was called "maharaja" when his colleagues in a particular district accepted him as their leader. The Mahavamsa states that Dutthagamani brought the island under one banner after vanquishing thirty two Tamil kings.⁴² The Sangam literature also refer to a number of chieftains ruling different parts of the country. They were independent or were bound by allegiance to one or

42 The Mahavamsa, trans. William Geige, Colombo, 1960, chap 25, v. 75.

another of the three kings of South India.⁴³ The earliest form of Tamil rule was a sort of communal republic wherein each adult male member of the community had a voice in the direction of public affairs. Though there was much Aryan Brahminical influence Dravidian society was still very much free from the yoke of the Brahmin caste system. Next to the sages (arivar), the highest place among the Tamils was held by the landowning class (the Velirs and the ulavers) after who ranked herdsmen, hunters, arisans, soldiers, fishers and scavengers. Geographical space and social function were more important than social status. From the inscriptions and the Sangam literature it is clear that there were "perumakas" (leaders) for the various social groups, who owned land and were in a position to donate them to Buddhist monks.

Dr. Paranavitana assumes that agriculture was introduced to Sri Lanka by the immigrants from North India.⁴⁴ This is not correct. As we had observed earlier the fertility and fecundity cults, practices and symbols are a clear proof that agriculture was practised in pre-Aryan Sri Lanka. The inscriptions and the Sangam works refer to a number of persons who have the name "Vel", "Vela" and "Velu" referring to their community, added on to their personal names or as their personal names.

They belonged to the agricultural "Velir" community. The Sangam poems very often refer to them as "Thonmudhir Velir" (தொன் முதிர் வேளிர்) which means that they were a very old community.⁴⁵ Dr. Caldwell in his "Comparative Grammar of the Dravidian Languages" has expressed the view that very old words such as "er" (plough), "Velanmai" (agriculture) which also means sharing, prove that Tamils were well acquainted with agriculture from very ancient times. Agriculture and irrigation were considered very im-

43 S. Vithiananthan, *Tamilar Salpu* (Tamil), Madras, 1971, chap. II, p. 43f.

V. Kanagasabai, *The Tamils Eighteen Hundred years ago*, Madras, 1956, chap. VIII, p. 102f.

44 *Inscriptions of Ceylon*, vol. I, p. LXXIV.

45 Kuruntogai no. 164, Agananuru no. 258.

portant by the chieftains and kings of the Kingdom of Pandya from very early times. According to some Sangam poems the whole land was divided into "good land" (நன்செய்) or the alluvial soil in the river valleys and the "poor land" (புன்செய்) which was solely dependent on rain. Very extensive irrigation works were carried out by the ancient Tamil kings. The Nagas, Tamils and the Aryan settlers are jointly responsible for extensive agriculture and irrigation in Sri Lanka in ancient times. In one of the Sangam poems of old a Tamil poet advises a Pandyan King as follows. It contains the Tamil theology of agriculture. The King is considered the life of the nation whose just rule gives fertility and abundance:

"Without water the body cannot be sustained.

Food gives life to all and nurtures the human frame,

Food is brought forth when earth to water is married.

This union brings forth the harmony of body and life.

Of what use to the kingdom is arid land,

If men sow seed and look up to the sky for rain?

Hence listen to me, O ruler of this wide land,





Increase the reservoirs in every direction of your domain".⁴⁶


Words such as Uyir (உயிர்), Udambu (உடம்பு), Nir (நீர்), Nilam (நிலம்) are of significance. The Sri Lankan inscriptions also refer to the "perumakas" of the "Ayimara". It is easy to trace the etymology to a Tamil source. Dr. Paranavitana guesses that it is the name of a vedic deity. There is no such popular Vedic deity. The Tamil source is "Ayar-mar Perumakan" (ஆயர்மார் பெருமகன்) which means the chieftain of the "Ayar" who were the Tamil herdsmen. The word "ayi" (ஆய்) also means herdsmen. The vowel "a" is added by the Aryan speaking Buddhist monks to the word "Ayimar" (ஆய்மார்). If the "marutha nilam" (மருத நிலம்) or the river valleys were the tradi-

46 Purananuru no. 18, vv. 17 - 25.





CHANGES

DRAVIDI OR TAMILI LETTERS





 "k" "ma" "la" "sa"


 "zho"

POST - MAURYAN LETTERS





 "k" "ma" "sa" "la"

TAMIL WORDS

PERUMAKAN
 PERUMAKALU
 VEL, VELA, VELU
 AYIMAR
 PULAYAR
 MARUMAKAN

PRAKRIT WORDS

GAMANI, GAMIKA
 GAPATI, BADAARIKA
 PUROHITA, GANAKA
 GOPAKA, ADAKA
 DOVARIKA, RATIYA
 NAGARAKUTTIKA

TAMIL PHONETICAL INFLUENCE

ACIRIYA, (ஆசிரியர்), Aya (ஐயர்)
 ADIKA, ADEKA (அதிகர்) Naka (நாக)
 PUTALA (புதல்வன்), TIRI (திரு)

CHART III

ional regions of the agricultural "ulaver" and "Velir", the forest lands (Mullai - முல்லை) were the regions of the "Ayar". Another name of a community which has a very long historical and sociological background in Tamil culture and which can be traced to a Tamil etymological source is the word "Pulaya" (புலையர்). The word occurs in two inscriptions where the donors are referred to as perumakas with the name "Pulaya". Dr. Paranavitana as usual erroneously traces the word to a Sanskrit source Pulaha" and is satisfied by saying that it is the name of an ancient "rishi" (sage) completely ignoring the wealth of historical, sociological and cultural background for the word in Tamil.

The Pulayars (புலையர்) are a community engaged in services such as drumming, washing, cleaning and other menial work. Even a community such as the "pulayars" though lowest in social rank, had in ancient times villages of their own, leaders (perumakas) of their own and rights to property, food and other social necessities.⁴⁷ It was in later centuries when the laws of Manu began to exercise a strict influence on society in the south, the rigid caste system of the north began to seep into the Dravidian way of life and the pulayars were reduced to the status of slaves with no social and property rights. The reference to these Dravidian social groups in the earliest inscriptions of Sri Lanka is further proof of Tamil presence.

47 K. Kailasapathy, *Adiyum Mudiym* (Tamil), Madras, 1970, chap 5, p. 168f.

XI

The Rights Of Nephews And Women

There are about eight inscriptions which have the pure Tamil term "Marumakan" (மருமகன்) in various forms which all sound Tamil, "Marumakana", "Marumakane", "Marumakana", "Marumakanaha" etc. These are certainly phonetical forms which a Tamil word ending with the consonant "n" can assume in usage in different contexts. Dr. Paranavitana found it difficult to trace this word to a North Indian source and admits that it is a Tamil word. But he gives it the meaning "grandson" because the Sinhala word "munumburu" or "munuburu" is given the meaning "grandson" by some scholars. This word which has no connection at all with the Tamil word "Marumakan" is used in a number of instances in medieval Sinhala literature such as the "Rajasimhasirita", "Mayura Sandesaya" and the "Dhampiya—Atuva — Gatapadya" and means "descendant".

The term "Marumakan" definitely means "nephew" and "son-in-law" in Tamil. "Maru" (மரு) means "marriage ceremony" and "Makan" means "son". It applies to a sister's son where a man is concerned and a brother's son where a woman is concerned. The person concerned by right of relationship should also be one's son-in-law. Cross — cousin marriages are very much encouraged and allowed by law among Tamils from very early times. Under "Tesawalamai" the traditional laws of Jaffna, partners to marriage "should not be related by blood than brother's and sister's children".⁴⁸ Such marriages are greatly favoured because they

48 M. D. Raghavan, Tamil Culture in Ceylon, Colombo, chap. 29, p. 199f.

help to safeguard the property of the family and strengthen the family ties. Nephews have a very important part to play on certain occasions in the family in Tamil and Sinhala traditions and this shows the strong influence of very early customs. It is of significance that the nephews of important persons using the Tamil term are mentioned as donors of caves as monastic residences to Buddhist monks. A very large number of donors of caves and property to Buddhist monks in the inscriptions have been women. We have already noted the use of the female forms "perumakalu" and perumakali (r) earlier. An inscription from Kuduvil in the eastern province mentions the name of a Tamil wife of merchants.⁴⁹ All these inscriptions clearly show the important role that women played in pre-Aryan times and later and the rights they had to ownership of property. The Tamil customary law from very ancient times recognized the economic independence of women. Her dowry property gifts received by her were her separate property. But "the Dharmasastras of North India started with the principle that a woman could not hold property and gradually ameliorated her condition by recognizing certain species of property as her own", whereas the Tamil laws including the "Thesawalamai" of Jaffna and the "Marumakattayam" of Malabar "recognized the right of a woman to own dowry property and cast both moral and legal obligations on the males to provide the dowry".⁵⁰ Sir James Emerson Tennent writing about Jaffna Society in 1850 says:

"It is a paramount object of ambition with Tamil parents to secure an eligible alliance for their daughters by the assignment of extravagant marriage portions. These consist either of land or of money secured upon land; and as the law of the land recognizes the absolute control of the lady over the property thus conveyed to her sole and separate use, the prevalence of the practice has, by degress, thrown an extraordinary extent of the landed property of the country into the

49 Inscriptions of Ceylon, vol. I, p. 37, no. 480.

50 H. W. Thambiah, The Contents of Thesawalamai Tamil Culture, vol. VIII, no. 2, 1959, p. 108f.

hands of females and invested them with a correspond-
ing proportion of authority in its management".⁵¹

The rights to own property by women which are evi-
dent in the inscriptions are so similar to the rights enjoyed
by Tamil women in Tamil traditional customs and laws. Their
rights and religious devotion were recognized by the Budd-
hist monks who bestowed upon them the honorific title
"Upasika".

The inscriptions bear ample evidence of the influence
of Mahayan Buddhism, introduced by local merchants
and missionaries. New words such as "Mahayana", "Buddha",
"Gautama", "Bodhisattva", "Parinirvana", "Samsara", "Karma",
"Dharma", "Nirvana", "Mudra", "Mudra", "Mudra", "Mudra",
to give an important part to the social, political and econ-
omic life of the country. Some of the pure Tamil words such
as "petamaka", "yala", "Ayamara", "galya", and "mala"
are out of use after a few centuries. This is very
clear proof of the very strong North Indian influence on
the Tamil's social and political life. It has to be explained
why the name "petamaka" and the position the "pet-
amaka" held in society disappear after the first century

51 J. E. Tennent, Christianity in Ceylon, London, 1850, p. 157.

XII

Strong Buddhist Missionary Impact And Rapid Social Changes

The Buddhist impact on Sri Lanka was much stronger than on South India. They imposed not only their phonological system but also new words from Magadhan Prakrit, new cultural forms and new political and social ideas. It was already noted how the Tamil or Dravidi alphabet was changed by the Magadhan monks to conform to the phonetic system to which they were used. Magadhan Prakrit had already come under the influence of Dravidian phonetics. In the Sri Lankan inscriptions words such as: — “aciriya” (அசிரியர்), “aya” (ஐயர்), “adika,” “adeka” (அதிகர்), “naka” (நாக), “putala” (புதல்வன்) “Tiri” (திரு) show the strong influence of Tamil phonetics.

The inscriptions bear ample evidence of the indelible impact of Magadhan Prakrit, influenced by local phonology and morphology. New words such as “Gamani”, “Gamika”, “Gapati”, “Badakarika”, “Purohita”, “Ganaka”, “Adaka”, “Gopaka”, “Dovarika”, “Nagarakuttika” and “Ratiya” begin to play an important part in the social, political and economic life of the country. Some of the pure Tamil words such as “perumaka”, “Velu”, “Ayimara”, “pulaya” and “marumaka” go out of use after a few centuries. This is very clear proof of the very strong North Indian influence on the island’s social and political life. It has to be explained why the name “perumaka” and the position the “perumakas” held in society disappear after the first century A. D.

The "perumaka" social system as seen in the inscriptions and the early Tamil Sangam poetry reveals that each community such as the "Velas" (வேளர்) "Ayimara" (ஆய் மார்), "Pulayas" (புலையர்) "Aviyas" (ஆவியர்), "Oviyas" (ஓவியர்), "Vicchiyas" (விச்சியர்) and even "Brahmanas" had their own "perumakas" or leaders. This obviously shows that each community had its geographical region, social and economic functions which were meaningfully and organically related to the rest of society. The "perumakas" were recognized as land-owning leaders and the elites of each community and from them were drawn the higher officials.⁵² As a result of the influence of the Aryan Brahmanas of the North, the social structure in South India and Sri Lanka begins to change very radically. This influence was stronger in Sri Lanka than in South India considering the fact that twenty one inscriptions mention Brahmanas as donors of caves to the members of the Buddhist Sangha and as following important occupations in the different parts of the country. Their presence must have helped the rapid Aryanization of different sections of social life. There were also Ksatriya princes in some parts of the country.

Three inscriptions from an ancient site called Bovattegala about thirty miles east of Kataragama refer to ten Ksatriya princes who were the sons of "Gamani".⁵³ The fish was their dynastic symbol. It is of interest to note that the Pandya dynasty of South India had the double fish as their emblem. The Vaisyas were the traders and merchants whose activities are referred to in many inscriptions. All these references indicate that the social structure and caste distinctions of the North were exerting their strong influence in the southern regions. It should also be noted that all Tamils in the Sri Lankan inscriptions have Buddhist names whereas in the South Indian inscriptions many of them retain their Tamil names. This again is evidence of the stronger Buddhist activities and influence in Sri Lanka. The political structure of the island also begins to

52 T. N. Subramaniam, Second International Conference of Tamil Studies, 1968, Handbook p. 176f.

53 Inscriptions of Ceylon, vol. I, p. 42.

change a great deal with these influences. The inscriptions refer to a large number of local rulers as in South India. The evidence for the existence of local rulers is supplemented by literary sources which refer to petty local ruling houses in various parts of the island. Devanampiya Tissa would have been supported by the local Buddhist rulers both Tamil and Sinhala and by the Buddhist monks whose status and prestige in the island would have increased as a result of the social and economic support given by rulers. Elara, the Tamil prince must have come into power and remained in power for a long time because of the support of a very large number of local Tamil rulers. and "perumakas" especially in the northern parts of the island. Dutthagamani subdued a large number of these local rulers who supported Elara in order to bring the northern regions under his rule.⁵⁴ The authority of a particular king must not be thought of as supreme. The royal power was limited because of the continued existence of local "rajas" in different parts of the island many of whom were Tamil. "Diparaja" is a term used in one of the inscriptions found at Mihintale. The term means "King of the island."⁵⁵ and can refer to the local ruler of Nagadipa or Jaffna. The "Sammohavinodani" a literary work mentions a "deparaja" who was the ruler of Nagadipa. The Mahavamsa states that a Kingdom existed in Nagadipa in the 6th century B. C. The Vallipuram gold-plate inscription which is dated by Dr. Paranavitana as belonging to the second century A. D. runs as follows: "Hail in the reign of the great king Vaha (ba) and when Isigiraya was governing Nakadiva, Piyaguka Tissa caused a Vihara to be built at Badakara Atana".⁵⁶ This inscription is interesting because it brings out two important historical facts about the Jaffna peninsula. First it was ruled by local rulers, sometimes independently and sometimes under the northern king at Anuradhapura. Second when examining the potential and morphological aspects of

54 "Evam dvattimsa Damilarajano Dutthaganhitva ekachattena Lamkarajjam akasi so" (Mahavamsa 25: 75).

55 Inscriptions of Ceylon, vol. I, p. 4, no. 37.

56 E. Z. vol. IV, p. 229.

the inscription, it is absolutely clear that the language of the northern parts was Tamil in the early years of the Christian era.

A Prakrit speaking Buddhist monk influenced by the local Tamil idiom and phonetics is the author of this piece of writing. The name "Isigiraya" reveals Tamil phonetical influence. "Irayan" (இரையன்) is a Tamilized Sanskrit word meaning "King". In the later history of Jaffna we come across the names of chieftains such as "Pallavarayan" and "Kanagarayan" which are place names today. There are also ancient Tamil personal names such as "Villavarayan", and "Malavarayan". "Nakadiva" is also phonetically Tamil. "Badakara" is a Prakritized form of the pure Tamil word "Vadakarai" (வடகரை) which means "northern coast". There are many Sinhalese who believe that many of the place-names in the Jaffna peninsula are Tamilized Sinhalese names and therefore they assume that this region was occupied by the Sinhala people before the Tamil colonization. To any skilled etymologist who has a good knowledge of the Kolarian, Dravidian and Aryan languages it becomes obvious that the place-names of Jaffna true to its ancient history can be easily traced to Naga and Tamil sources and roots. Because Sinhala has a large number of Naga and Tamil words through "Elu" they sound Sinhala to the Sinhala people. There are also a large number of Naga words in Tamil.

In these early years though there were religious rivalries and dynastic wars between adjacent kingdoms and local rulers, there were no signs of communal antagonism because the territorial, social, economic and political rights of the different communities were recognized. It was only after the 5th century A. D. that vested interests had to be protected and religious and communal rivalries were aroused and perpetuated.

XIII

Tamil Religion, Theology And Transition To Saivism

Tamil religion from the very beginning was deeply sensitive to the double realities of microcosm and macrocosm, noumenon and phenomenon, the inner (agam) and the outer (puram). It was also deeply appreciative of the sacramental values of the iconic and symbolic representations of inner and transcendental realities. It began with the awareness that the earth is filled with a cosmic force or life (Uyir - உயிர்) and represented that awareness in the worship of the earth and Mother goddess through iconic symbols such as stones, trees and branches of trees. This awareness in the realm of linguistics and agriculture has already been noted. Also in Tamil the woman and the king are life - giving potent forces. The early Sangam poetry speak of women as possessing a latent sacred power as that of god (Kadavul - கடவுள்) and of kings as the life - force of the whole earth: ("மன்னனுயிர்த்தே மலர்தலையுலகம்")⁵⁷. Gradually male gods such as Murugan and Siva were closely linked with the female. goddesses but the life - force and power (Shakti) resided in the female.. The phallic symbols such as the lingam and yoni became the iconic representation of the link of the male and female, sky and earth, being and becoming. It is a deep rooted Tamil practice to give the names of the gods and goddesses they believe in as personal names to children. Here again there is a deep iconic and symbolic religious sensibility at play where it is believed and hoped that the person who bears the

⁵⁷ Purananuru nos. 186, 198.

divine name would represent the divine force and spirit. Names in the inscriptions such as Kada, Kadali (கந்தழி கந்தம்), Kubira, Kumara, Rama, Kali, Siva, Sivabuti, Sivanubuti etc., and place names such as Sivanagara show the Hindu and Saivite influences on Sri Lanka in such distant times. The names also reveal the Aryan transformation of many pre-Aryan and Dravidian divinities. Siva, the earlier Dravidian deity associated closely with Shakti and the ecstatic dances on hill tops and phallic worship became gradually transformed into the lord of the cosmos. He became the favourite god of the upper classes in southern society. In the magnanimous Tandava dance of Siva one has the glorious testimony to the Hindu genius of synthesizing and transfiguring various cultural and religious traditions. All the earlier concepts of the bringing together of the microcosm and macrocosm, being and becoming male and female, action and inaction, inner and outer of the Tamil religious tradition are⁵⁸ seen in the symbols of Siva and Shakti.

58 Kalidas Nag. *Indian Iconography*, Modern Review, January 1922.

XIV

Tamils And Buddhism

The Tamils who are referred to by their ethnic names and the Tamil "perumakas" bear Buddhist personal names. Also the fact that Tamils donated caves and property to Buddhist monks reveals that large numbers of Tamils became Buddhists in Sri Lanka and South India as a result of Buddhist missionary enterprise. Dr. Paranavitana, writing about the "perumakas" in his introduction to the "Inscriptions of Ceylon" volume I says that they supplied the leadership in winning back the sovereignty of the island to the Sinhalese after a period of usurpation by the Tamils. Such a statement is not at all correct as it involves an attributing to earlier centuries the communal rivalries which took place after the 5th century A.D. The truth is that many Buddhist "perumakas" were Tamils, while they were loyal to their religion and ethnic identity and culture.

A year after the publication of the "Inscriptions of Ceylon", Volume I in 1970, an important rock inscription in Brahmi characters was found at the Thalgahagoda Vihare in the Matale district. It was deciphered by Dr. Saddamangala Karunaratne of the Department of Archaeology and read as follows:

"These two caves of the Tamil Bhikkhus were donated to the Sangha of the six directions".⁵⁹

This inscription is clear evidence of Tamil bhikkhus having lived and worked in Sri Lanka as far back as the 2nd century B. C. Nagarjuna Konda inscriptions of East

⁵⁹ Ceylon Daily News, Nov. 2nd 1971.

India prove that there was a Mahavihara for Buddhist monks of different nationalities among which "Damila" is mentioned. All these Buddhists belonged to the Theravada sect.

Sinhala writers very often erroneously assume that all Sinhala people in ancient times were Buddhists and Tamil people were Hindus. This error is perpetuated whenever ancient Buddhist ruins are excavated in Sri Lanka. But the inscriptions from very ancient times and literary works from the 1st century A. D. prove that Buddhism made strong inroads among the Tamil peoples and large numbers of them were converted to that faith. Gandhavamsa and other Buddhist literary works reveal that Kanchipuram in South India was one of the main centres of Pali Buddhism and Tamil monks were trained and sent to different parts of the country and to Sri Lanka. Madurai in the Pandyan country was also a very important centre of Theravada Buddhism which sent monks to Sri Lanka. Prominent monks such as Buddhamitta, Buddhaghosa, Buddhadatta, Bodhidharma and Dharmapala were Tamils. There was close intellectual, religious and cultural contacts in early times between the Theravada centres of Sri Lanka and the Theravada centres of South India such as Kanchipuram, Kaveripattanam, Madurai and Nagapattanam. Buddhism influenced the cultural, religious and moral lives of the Tamils in many ways and they in turn brought out their cultural and religious gifts in interpreting and communicating Buddhism. Unfortunately many of the earlier Tamil works on Buddhism are lost. But the few which have survived the ravages of time such as "Manimekalai", "Kundalakesi" and the later grammar, "Virasoliyam" give us vivid glimpses of the deep devotional spirit, social vision and feminine zeal and sensibility of Tamil Buddhism.⁶⁰

60 M. S. Vengadasami, *Baudhamum Tamilum* (Tamil), Madras, 1940.

XV

Unity In Diversity

In conclusion it has to be said that this study was not undertaken because of a purely historical and archaeological interest in the past but with the fervent hope that the pluralistic cultures and ways of life revealed in the earliest epigraphical writings will throw some light and illumination on our present political, social and cultural problems and guide us into the future. The two major communities and religions of Sri Lanka have their roots and origins in India. The fundamental trait of Indian civilization has been described by scholars as a harmony of contrasts or as a synthesis creating a unity out of the many linguistic, ethnic and cultural diversities.⁶¹ The earliest epigraphical records are a wonderful storehouse which reveal this diversity and cultural interactions within the island of Sri Lanka and also with North, South, East and West India. The Dravidian religious and cultural outlook which unites microcosm and macrocosm, noumenon and phenomenon "agam" (subjective) and "puram" (objective) and experiences a sense of unity of all life as an expression of an unseen spiritual life force and reality which is both transcendent and immanent (Kadavul) (கடவுள்) as the old Tamil word for divinity puts it) and the Buddhist doctrine of "Anicca" (impermanency of everything) along with the ethical virtues of "Ahimsa", "Metta" and "Karuna" (non-violence, love and compassion) should be able to undergird and unite our estranged communities without destroying or damaging their ethnic, linguistic and cultural identities.

61 Suniti Kumar Chatierji, *The Indian Synthesis and Racial and Cultural Inter-Mixture In India*, Tamil Culture, vol. VIII, no. 4, 1959, p. 267f.
Idem., *Dravidian*, Annamalai Univ. 1965.

I would like the last words of this study to be quotations from Sri Lanka's great cultural scholar and leader, who gave her many deep and lasting insights for the reviving of her cultural and national life, Ananda K. Coomaraswamy:

"Human culture is a unitary whole, and its separate cultures are the dialects of one and the same language of the spirit".⁶²

Regarding nationalism he had said something very relevant to our contemporary situation:

"A nationalism which does not recognize the rights and duties of others but attempts to aggrandize itself at their expense, becomes no longer nationalism but a disease generally called Imperialism".⁶²

May these great thoughts be the guidelines for the present and future leaders of our multi-racial and multi-religious nation, which is heir to a very glorious multi-dimensional cultural heritage coming down from the dim past.

62 Ananda Coomaraswamy's favourite quotation from Alfred Jeremias' book "Handbuch der Altorientalischen Geisteskultur", Berlin, 1929, chap. XVII, p. 508.

The second quotation is from Coomaraswamy's speech on "India and Ceylon" to the Ceylon Social Reform Society in April 1907 Ceylon National Review, vol. II, no. 4, 1907.

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