CHAPTER FOUR

Buddhist Festivals, Ceremonies
and Role of the kings

Every festival or ceremony has its own rituals to provide an insight into the lives and beliefs, custom and culture of the people. Grimes says that formalisation and stylisation (i.e. specification of time and place, formulaic speech and gesture, etc.) are indicative of a ceremony's scripted character as "intentional" or self-conscious behaviour.¹ A ceremony is fundamentally a self-reflective performance. As such ceremony is essentially "self-symbolising" and has representational intent.²

Most of the Buddhist ceremonies and festivals show an implicit trust and dependence on the Buddha, Dhamma and the Sangha, the three Refuges or the triple Gems (Tisarana). Articulation of the three Refuges, leads the way. This, in so many words signifies the Buddha as the teacher and guide through life; the Dhamma, the law of life, and the Sangha, the guardian of the life. Therefore, most of the Buddhist festivals and ceremonies are held by Buddhists on the basis of honour or commemoration to the three Gems (Tisarana), or some objects which are related to Tisarana such as relics, Bodhi tree, etc. Further, with the spread of Buddhism after third century B.C. in India as well as Sri Lanka, many kings who lived in south Asia provided patronage to Buddhism and some ceremonies, festivals and rituals and were personally involved in such religious activities.

With the widespread adoption of Buddhism, Sri Lanka entered into a phase of intense cultural activity, which brought it into close relations with other countries. Buddhism raised Sri Lanka to a new vista of spiritual, social, and political values which the island has treasured all through her long history. Although rituals, ceremonies and festivals were not in keeping with the spirit of Buddhism, they were natural and inevitable developments bound to come when the teaching of the Buddha became a popular religion. Further, involvement by the laity in Buddhist activities led to the creation of many ceremonies and festivals based on the three sacred objects (vattutvaya) of Buddhism and Buddhist sacred things or three type of Cetiyas, viz. (I) Śārīrika Cetiya, containing a relic of the body of the Buddha or Arahanta (II) Pāribhogika Cetiya, containing an article such as bowl used by the Buddha. The Bodhi tree was also considered to be in this group (III) Uddesika Cetiya, those things that have been erected on his account or his sake and are reminiscent of him e.g. images.

The Chronicles refer to the introduction of Buddhism during the reign of king Devānampiya Tissa (250-210 B.C.), its systematic organisation and wide acceptance in the island. Information on the religious beliefs that prevailed among the people during the pre-Buddhist period in ancient Sri Lanka is very scanty and very little is available on this subject. Even the meagre information available has not yet received the attention that is due.

4 Rahula, op. cit., 1966, p. 266.
5 Mahāvamsa, Ch. XII, V. 28, Ch. 85, V. 48.
According to the Chronicles and the commentaries, the worship of Yakkha, Yakkhini, and other aboriginal customs were widely prevalent in pre-Buddhist Sri Lanka as in India. King Pandukabhaya who was the grandfather of king Devānampiya Tissa, provided settlements for many of these spirits and also gave them sacrificial offering annually.\(^8\) Some of the Yakkha and Yakkhini mentioned, are Cittarāja Kālavela, Vessavana, Vyādhadeva, Kammāradeva, Jutindara, Cetiya, Valavāmukhi Paccimarājani.\(^9\) The two Yakkhas, Kālavela and Cittarāja have been considered the two chiefs of the aborigines of Sri Lanka whom king Pandukabhaya treated with special honour, as a matter of policy, to reconcile these savages who had been dispossessed of their land by the invading Sinhalese.\(^10\) Others argue that Cittarāja and Kālavela were not chiefs of the aborigines or Vaddās, but that king Pandukabhaya in venerating the spirits of the dead only followed a current popular belief.\(^11\) The Māhāvamsa mentions, some religious festivals, relevant to the cult of Yakkha that were held at this time. The king also participated in these festivals. “On festival days king Pandukabhaya sat with Cittarāja beside him on an equal seat, and having gods and men to dance before him the king took his pleasure in joyous and merry wise.”\(^12\) It has been suggested that perhaps the images of these Yakkhas were placed on equal seats by the side of Pandukabhaya to emphasise his majesty and greatness.\(^13\) Other evidence has also been cited to suggest that the Yakkha named Cittarāja was the object of a popular cult in ancient India.

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\(^8\) Māhāvamsa, Ch. X, V. 86.
\(^12\) Māhāvamsa, Ch. X, V. 87, Vamsatthappakāsini, Vol. p. 288.
In the Kurudhamma Jātaka,\textsuperscript{14} it is said of Danañjaya, king of the Kuru that every third year, in the month of Kārttika (November) the king used to hold a festival called the Kārttika feast. While keeping this feast the kings used to deck themselves out in great magnificence, and dress up like gods, they stood in the presence of a goblin (yakkha) named Cittarāja. Further, they would shoot to the four points of the compass arrows wreathed in flowers, and painted in diverse colour. This king, then, in keeping the feast, stood on the bank of a lake, in the presence of Cittarāja, and shot an arrow to the four quarters.\textsuperscript{15}

The worship of the tree was another popular cult of the pre-Buddhist period of Sri Lanka. In this period we can identify two trees which were considered sacred. King Pandukābhaya fixed a Banyan tree near the western Gate of Anurādhapura as the abode of Yakkha Vessavana.\textsuperscript{16} The other sacred tree was the Palmyra. The king Pandukābhaya settled Vṛdhadeva (god of Hunters) in a Palmyra tree near the western gate of the city.\textsuperscript{17}

Accounts relating to the pre-Buddhist history of Sri Lanka also show considerable influence of the religious trends of India on the society of Sri Lanka. King Pandukābhaya had built a dwelling place for Nigantha named Jotiya to the east of the lower cemetery. The Niganthas, Kumbhanda and Giri had also lived in the same locality.\textsuperscript{18} The Paribbājakas and Ājivakas, the sect founded by Makkhalighosāla, a teacher contemporary with the Buddha, were known in Sri Lanka at that time. The king

\textsuperscript{14} Jātaka, Vol. II, p. 254.
\textsuperscript{15} S. Paranavitana, “Pre Buddhist Religious Beliefs in Ceylon,” JCBARS, Vol. XXXI, No. 82, 1929, pp. 303-304.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., Ch. X, V. 95; Vamsatthappakāsini, Vol. I, p. 290.
Pandukabhaya built a monastery for Paribbājakas and a house for Ājivakas. Further, various Pāsāndas and Šramanas (ascetics) lived in Anurādhapura during the reign of king Pandukabhaya. The Brāhmaṇas occupied a high place in society and their religious beliefs were also respected. The earliest inscriptions too, bear testimony to the presence of Brāhmaṇas in Sri Lanka just after the introduction of Buddhism. They must therefore, have been living in pre-Buddhist Sri Lanka. And the presence of the Brāhmaṇas gives evidence of their religious beliefs. Unfortunately, archaeological evidences have not yet identified any remains related to pre-Buddhist beliefs.

According to archaeological sources and the Chronicles, the religious background of the island was built up after the arrival of Arahanta Mahinda in the third century B.C. It is clear that after the introduction of Buddhism in Sri Lanka, Buddhism spread through the patronage of rulers from Jambukola in the north to Kajaragāma and Candanagāma in the south of the island. The primary sources of Sri Lanka show that Buddhism and its culture influenced every strata of society since ancient time.

Further, introduction of Buddhist ceremonies, festivals and rituals had a deep impact on the social strata. Its contributed in building alliances among social groups and linked these to Buddhist Sangha as well as the ruled and ruler also. Many Buddhist festivals and ceremonies such as preaching of Dhamma, Ariyavamsa Desanā Mahinda ceremony, Tooth relic ceremony, Vēsak festival, Giribhandapujā, Gangārohanapujā and Pirit ceremony etc., were highlighted by Buddhism, in Sri Lanka during this period.

22 Paranavitana, op.cit., 1929, p. 322.
4.1 Preaching of Dhamma festival (Bana Pinkama)

The Preaching of Dhamma was a popular festival in ancient Sri Lankan society. Though preaching of Dhamma was initially an exposition for the edification of the listeners, with the spread of Buddhism in Sri Lanka, it assumed the form of a festival. The first sermon (Cullahattipadopapama Sutta) was said to have been held by Arahanta Mahinda for king Devānampiya Tissa and his followers at Mihintale during the third century B.C. On his second day of arrival in Sri Lanka, Arahanta Mahinda is said to have visited the royal palace of king Devānampiya Tissa and preached a sermon (Petavatthu, Vimānavatthu and Sacca Samyutta) for the king, his relatives and people. Further, he preached many valuable sermons (Devaduta Sutta, Bālapandita Sutta) for men and women gathered in the Hattisālā and Nandana park at Anurādhapura. King Devānampiya Tissa offered his contribution to Arahanta Mahinda for preaching the Dhamma in Anurādhapura as well as at other places. Further, to popularise the preaching of Dhamma among the people, many new customs were added to this ceremony and it developed as a main festival of Buddhism in Sri Lanka.

According to the accounts of the commentaries, people built a pavilion or hall for preaching of Dhamma in the cities or villages and they organised whole night sermons (Sabbarattim Dhammasavanam). The pulpit was decorated with ornaments as golden festoons. Generally, in most of the monasteries such a sermon started after sunset, and it was announced by beating a gong. Men and women gathered at the pavilion for

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24 See pp. 257-258.
25 Mahāvamsa, Ch. XIV, V. 22.
26 Ibid., V. 58, 63, Ch. XV, V. 1-4.
27 Samantapāśādikā, p. 388.
listening to the sermon. Many of the people came from long distances and spent the whole night at the preaching places.29

In the later period the preaching ceremony, probably spread over both day and night, and three monks took part as preachers at different stages. The first preacher was Divābanaka (preachers of daytime), the day preacher. His duty was only to recite the text. Next came Padabhānaka, the word reciter. Evidently his duty was to paraphrase the Suttas word for word in Sinhala without details and explanations. This preacher was more educated than the previous preacher. The third preacher was more educated than the other two preachers. He preached the sermon with details and explanations during the greater part of the night on the sermon day.30

The people listened with devotion to such a sermon, even though they did not understand the language. It was the rhythmical sound of the chant that held their attention. The preacher may also have preached a sermon in the Sinhala language on some subject of the Buddhist doctrine. It seems that preachers of this kind were referred to with the term Bhānaka or Dhamma Bhānaka, whilst they were otherwise called Dhammadesaka or Dhammakatika,31 or the group of monks to whom the different sections of the Tripitaka were entrusted. Their pupils after them preserved the teaching of the Buddha by learning and reciting the same. Thus they came to be known as the Bhānaka or the ‘reciters’ of the respective section of the Canon.32 With regard to the three divisions of the Canon: the Sutta, the Vinaya and the Abhidamma we find that

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29 Dhammapadathakatha, p. 128; Papañcasudani, p. 205; Manorathpurani, pp. 385-386.
those who recited and handed them down were not known by the name Bhānaka but were designated Suttantikā, Vinayadharā and Abhidhammikā respectively. Dhammadharā was another name for Suttantikā.33

According to insessional evidence in India and Sri Lanka, some Buddhist monks were specialists in various parts of the Tripitaka. They introduced themselves as a Bhānaka (reciter or reader) or Dhammakathika. According to Indian insessional evidence, one of the Sāñchi Brāhmi inscriptions mentions a Bhānaka monk34 and another inscription refers to a Dhammakathika.35 Bharhut inscriptions provide many details about Bhānakas. e. g. Aya Isidina,36 Bhadanta Kanadasa,37 a monk resident in Nandagiri38 and Kanhila39 introduce themselves as Bhanakas. Karle cave inscription mentions a Bhanaka who gave the gift of a pillar and came from Sopārā.40 Bodhgaya41 and Amaravati42 inscriptions give details about Dhammakathikas.

In Sri Lanka, the Miyugunavehera cave inscription mentions that Thera Phussdeva was a reciter (Banaka) of the Anguttara Nikāya.43 The Gōnagala cave inscription indicates that Thera Tissa was the reciter of the Samyutta Nikāya.44 Thera

34 EI, Vol. II, No. 33, p. 36.
Upasona was introduced as a reciter of Majjhima Nikāya in the Mulkirigala cave inscription.\textsuperscript{45} Thera Tissa, the reciter of Majjhima Nikāya, is mentioned in the Dambulla cave inscription.\textsuperscript{46} One of Kaduruvava inscriptions gives details about a monastic residence for possession by the school of Halana, the reciter of the Suttanta text.\textsuperscript{47} The Pāli commentaries also mention Bhāṅkas and their activities.\textsuperscript{48}

According to literary sources, many Suttas (sermons) were popular among the people at that time in the island. The Dakkhiṇā Vibhanga Sutta\textsuperscript{49} was one of the popular sermons (it deals with the various degrees of merit acquired by giving alms). The Devaduta Sutta gives description of the tortures and pains which result from evil doings and was also popular at that time.\textsuperscript{50} More difficult Suttas like the Dhammacakkavattadatta Sutta and Satipatthāna Sutta were also preached to the public.\textsuperscript{51} The Andakovinda, Asivisopama and Mahāsihanāda Suttas,\textsuperscript{52} Vessantara Jātaka, Kapi Jātaka etc.\textsuperscript{53} were famous sermons in ancient times.

Fa-Hi.en also provides information about the Dhamma preaching festival of Sri Lanka at that time. He says that at the head of the four principal streets preaching halls were built, where, on the eighth, fourteenth, and fifteenth days of the month, they spread carpets, and set forth a pulpit, while the monks and commonalty from all quarters come

\textsuperscript{46} "tisaguta-retaha sadivihariya bata-majhima bunaka...", "IC, Vol. I, No. 852, p. 66; AC, p. 442.
\textsuperscript{49} Rasvāhinī, part II, p. 163,189.
\textsuperscript{50} Manorathapurani, Vol. III, p. 191.
\textsuperscript{51} Rasvāhinī, part II, pp 136,191.
\textsuperscript{52} Ibid., Vol. II, p. 63; Manorathapurani, p. 386.
\textsuperscript{53} Mahāvamsa, Ch. XV, V. 31, Ch. XXXVI, V. 38.
together to hear the law. The people say that in the kingdom there may be altogether sixty thousand monks, who get their food from their common stores. The king, besides, prepares elsewhere in the city a common supply of food for five or six thousand more. When any want, they take as much as the vessels will hold, all returning with them full. 54

The rulers assisted in promoting the preaching of the Dhamma. Often Bhikkhus who were distinguished preachers were invited by kings to preach the doctrine and they received gifts or salary for their sermon. King Dutthagamani ordered the preaching of the Dhamma at all Buddhist monasteries of the island and supported these by providing for requisites to the preachers. 55 King Saddhā Tissa is said to have made eighty four thousand offerings in honour of the eighty four thousand sections of the Dhamma (Dharmakkhandha). 56 Further, King Saddhā Tissa offered his kingdom as a gift to Thera Kāla Buddhakkkhita after listening to his Dhamma sermon at Mihintale. 57 King Bhātikābhaya assisted Buddhist monks by providing subsistence to enable them to learn the Dhamma. 58 The sermon chairs (Dhammasana) were provided at all monasteries in the island by king Mahādātika Mahānāga. 59 A monastery was offered to Thera Mahāpaduma by the king Mahanāga after listening to the Kapi Jātaka. 60 King Vasabha ordered the four requisites to be provided, including Ghee to Dhamma preachers (dhammakathika). 61

According to the Sumangalavilāsinī, some Dīghabhānaka Theras were reciting the Mahasudassana Sutta of the Dīgha Nikāya at the Lohapāsaḍa when king Vasabha went

54 Legge, op.cit, 1971, p. 105.
55 Mahāvamsa, Ch. XXXII, V. 44-45.
56 Ibid., Ch. XXXIII, V. 12.
58 Mahāvamsa, Ch. XXIV, V. 66.
59 Dipavamsa, Ch. XXI, V. 31; Mahāvamsa, Ch. XXXIV, V. 70.
60 Mahāvamsa, Ch. XXXV, V. 30-31.
61 Dipavamsa, Ch. XXII, V. 4; Mahāvamsa, Ch. XXXV, V. 92.
there and, on listening to it, was greatly pleased.\textsuperscript{62} The King Buddhadasa, in fourth century A.D., is said to have fixed the salaries of the preachers in different places.\textsuperscript{63} King Moggallāna II, in sixth century A.D., honoured preachers who recited the whole \textit{Tripitaka} together with its commentary.\textsuperscript{64} Further, King Vijayabhāhu I, also followed the same.\textsuperscript{65} It is clear that the patronage of the rulers was important for preaching of the Dhamma and that the Dhamma festivals were held at various places in the island.

4.1.1 Preaching of the Ariyavamsa

According to literary and archaeological sources, the preaching of \textit{Ariyavamsa} sermon\textsuperscript{66} was the most popular sermon in ancient Sri Lanka many centuries before and after the fifth century A.D. The \textit{Ariyavamsa} was not only a popular sermon, but also an important institution held in high esteem for the perpetuation of kings, ministers, nobles and rich persons of that time.\textsuperscript{67} The fact remains that kings and ministers and many other well to do persons contributed generously towards the performances of the \textit{Ariyavamsa}.\textsuperscript{68}

Some stories, which are included in the commentaries and other literary sources are more valuable to understand the nature of this ceremony and its popularity. According to the \textit{Rasavāhini}, during the reign of Dubbitthi Maharāja (Mahādātika Mahānāga) the \textit{Ariyavamsa} sermon was preached once every six months at Udumbara Mahāvihāra (Dimbulāgala in north central province) and many people assembled there from within

\textsuperscript{62} \textit{Sumangalavilāsinī}, Vol. II, p. 635.
\textsuperscript{63} \textit{Cūlavamsa}, Ch. XXXVII, V. 149.
\textsuperscript{64} \textit{Ibid.}, Ch. 41, V. 58.
\textsuperscript{65} \textit{Ibid.}, Ch. 60, V. 8.
\textsuperscript{67} Rahula, \textit{op. cit.}, 1966, p. 268.
\textsuperscript{68} Rahula, \textit{op. cit.}, 1943, p. 67.
four *yojanas*, (measurement of distance) and elaborate preparations were made for the festival.\(^6^9\) The commentary of the *Anguttara Nikāya* says that a woman, who lived in Ullabhakola Kannika village, came from a distance of five *yojana* for listening to this sermon with her child and while suckling her child she was listening to the sermon, the *Ariyavamsa*, by Thera Dīghbhānaka Abhayanāga.\(^7^0\) In the same commentary another story states that thirty Bhikkhus who were in retreat for the rainy season (*Vassa*) at the place of Gavaravalaka Angana, preached the Maha Ariyavamsa Sutta fortnightly on full moon days. A monk, in the village of Kuddunajja, went to Mahāvīpi Vihāra from Māgāma to listen to the preaching of the Ariyavamsa Sutta, which was an annual occurrence of the place at the time.\(^7^1\) Another instance in the *Rasāvahini* about *Ariyavamsa* festival says that the preaching of the *Ariyavamsa* was held as a festival at a monastery near Kumbala Tissa (near Hambantota in the southern part of Sri Lanka).\(^7^2\)

The *Mahāvamsa* says that king Voharika Tissa had established all over the island regular alms giving places wherever the *Ariyavamsa* sermon was preached.\(^7^3\) The Tonigala inscription, fourth century A.D., which is dated in the third year of king Sirimeghavanna records certain gifts made to the Yahisapavata monastery for the purpose of *Ariyavamsa*.\(^7^4\) Two rock inscriptions from Labu-āta Bāndigala in the north central province also contain the word *Ariyavamsa*. One of them says that a person called Sirinaka, deposited hundred *kahapanas* for the purpose of *Ariyavamsa* (*Ariyavasa vatataya eka satakā kahavana dīni*) in a great monastery known as Devagiri.\(^7^5\) The other

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\(^6^9\) *Rasavāhinī*, part II, p. 183.


\(^7^2\) *Rasavāhinī*, part II, p 190.

\(^7^3\) *Mahāvamsa*, Ch. XXXIV, V. 38.

\(^7^4\) *EZ*, Vol. III, pp. 177-178.

\(^7^5\) *Ibid.*, p. 250-251
records that another person named Natalavitiya Siva gave twenty kahapanas to the same monastery for the purpose of conducting the Ariyavamsa annually (Anahavajarana ariya) in this place. Bōvattegala rock inscription mentions that Tisā Aba, the daughter of minister, granted twenty kahapanas for the purpose of maintaining Ariyavamsa during the reign of king Jettatissa.76 Situlpavuva rock inscription refers to Karala Upala who gave kahapana for the maintenance of Ariyavamsa that accrued to all beings.77 Chief Kalanahi who resided at Cetigaya gave ten kahapanas for the purpose of continued preaching of Dhamma, while the merit of the action is given to all beings, mentioned in the Kongala rock inscription.78

There is ample reason to suppose that the Sri Lankan tradition was a continuation of the Indian tradition, which was prevalent in the sub-continent during king Āsoka’s time. In this connection, Ariyavamsāni in Āsoka’s Bhābru edict is of interest. In this inscription, addressed to the Sangha, Āsoka recommends to the brethren and sisters of the order, and to the lay disciples of either sex, to frequently hear seven selected texts from the Pāli canon, among which Ariyavamsāni is included. Thus, perhaps, the tradition of celebrating the Ariyavamsa may have come from India to Sri Lanka, where it flourished for centuries.79

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76 "raja Apsyaha puta jetatisa (maharaja) Apsyaha catalagitsa tavanka (va) sahi... avamesi sama va ... mata... jata tisa Aba... Aruvavasa vedi kotu visi... likhina," ASCAR, 1934, p. 18, EN, p. 93.
77 "Karala Upala ava... rivasavatu (pula) kahava (na) na savasatanata pati," EN, p. 92.
78 "Cetigayehi Vasanaaya nayama Kalanahi bana vati... ya kotu dasa kahavana palavasa satanata peti," EN, p. 94.
79 Rahula, op. cit, 1943, p. 68.
4.2. Bodhi Tree festival and ceremony

Since the Buddha attained the highest enlightenment (sambodhi) when meditating under a Pippala or Pippahala tree or Assatta (Pāli) (Sanskrit Asvattha)) near Gaya in Magadha, this tree called the Bo-tree, is sacred to all Buddhists. The Pāli word Assatta (Sanskrit Asvattha) is derived from Asvasta meaning Horse Stand. The term 'Peepul' (tree) is obviously derived from 'Pippala' or 'Pipphala'. Also the term 'Pipal' or 'Pipli' in the Nepali language is believed to have come into use. 'Pippal' and 'Pipal' are the words used respectively in Bengali as well as in Panjabi and Hindi. In Sri Lanka it is known as 'Bō', a short term of 'Bodhi' or enlightenment. In English it is written as 'Bo-Tree', while in Japanese it is referred to as 'Bodaiju' of which the Botanical term is 'Ficus Religiosa', which belongs to the family of Moraceae. 80

The Bodhi tree became a sacred object belonging to the Pāribhogika group of the threefold division of sacred monuments. 81 Homage and veneration is paid to the sacred Bodhi tree because under it the Buddha attained enlightenment and after that he paid his own respect to the tree. Buddha spent one whole week standing in front of it, gazing with unblinking eyes full of gratitude and love. Later on he himself gave his sanction and authority to worship the Bo-tree at the request of some devotees. In the Parinibbāna Sutta of Dīgha Nikāya Buddha says that by reason of the fact, Thera Ananda, here did the Tathāgata (Buddhā) intuit the unsurpassed intuition of true enlightenment, the place of the Tathāgata’s enlightenment is worth seeing by a man of faith for inspiration. 82

81 See page no. XXIV
82 “Ida tatagato anuttaram sammasambodhim abhisambutto’i ananda, saddhassa kulaputtassa dasaniyam samveganiyam thanam,” Dīgha Nikāya, Vol. III, p. 123; Although the ficus religiosa (Assatta, Asvatth), is most sacred tree in the Buddhist world, but it has inspired the religious sentiments of the Indus valley
4.2.1 Bodhi festival and King Aśoka

The first archaeological evidence related to the Bodhi tree or about the Bodhi festival, comes from the Mauryan period. The Mauryan emperor Aśoka himself had gone personally to the Bodhi tree in the tenth year of his Abhiśeka (Devanampriyo Priyadasirājā dasavaśasbhisito ayāyi sambodim). The Pāli Chronicle dates Aśoka’s visit to Bodhgayā to his eighteenth regnal year. The Divyāvadāna records emperor Aśoka’s offering of the best jewels to the Bodhi tree.

Further, the Divyāvadāna describes queen Tisyaraksita’s jealous attempt to destroy the tree by magic charms and consequently Aśoka’s grief for the withering Bodhi tree; clarification of the misunderstanding of Tisyaraksita who had taken the Bodhi tree for a woman; counteraction against charm; showers of milk at the root; revival of the Bodhi tree; announcement of five year festival and copious sprinkling on the Bodhi tree with a thousand vessels of milk and various perfumes. So, we can assume that

inhabitants (A. L. Basham, The Wonder that was India, London, Sidgwick and Jackson, 1954, p. 23; K.N. Sastri, New Light on the Indus Civilisation, Vol. II, Delhi, 1978, pp. 105-107.) The Rgveda which is the oldest text makes no mention of the Asvattha tree. However, it is possible to surmise by corroborating with other Vedic texts, that the Rgveda had meant the Asvattha when it referred to a tree besides which Yama drinks in the company of gods (Rgveda, X. 135) Its wood has been used for the preparation of sacrificial implements, and producing fire by attrition (Ibid., II.35.8; X97.5.) The Atharvaveda records that gods of the third heaven dwell at the foot of the Asvattha. (Athravaveda, V. 4. 3.) Ṣatapatha Brāhmaṇa says that a fire sacrifice performed with Asvattha wood saturated with ghee brings about the accomplishment of the cherished goal. (Ṣatapatha Brāhmaṇa XVI. 1.1) the Upanisad too contains interesting information regarding the Asvattha. The Chandogya Upanisad mentions that gods of the third heaven abide by the Asvattha and that it yields the sacred Soma juice (Somasavana) (Chandogyo Upanisad, VII. 5. 3.) According to the Anusasana Parva of the Mahābhārata, Asvattha is a symbol of Visnu. (Mahābhārata, Anusasana Parva, XIII, 126. 5) The Gobila Grhya Sutra states that the Asvattha belongs to Sun. (Gobhila Grhya Sutra, IV. 7. 2.) These accounts clearly show us the non-Buddhist ideas regarding the sanctity of the Asvattha from pre historic time. When such ideas associated with Asvattha were getting consolidated, the Buddha’s enlightenment at the foot of an Asvattha tree, exerted a tremendous influence on the folklore of the Asvattha. As Buddhism spread far and wide, the Asvattha became an object of worship as the Bodhi tree, the symbol of enlightenment. (Lily de Silva, “The Cult of the Bodhi Tree its Antiquity and Evolution,” Ceylon Studies Seminar, Serious No. 3, 1975, p. 6.)

84 Dipavamsa, Ch. XVI, V. 1-25; Mahāvamsa, Ch. XVIII, V. 23-67.
85 Divyāvadāna, pp. 85-87.
Bodhi worship and Bodhi ceremonies were popular among the Buddhists in Indian society even after the Mauryan period. There is inscriptive and literary evidence, which shows that some foreign pilgrims also arrived in India to worship or participate in the Bodhi ceremonies. Details of king Aśoka’s visit to the Bodhi tree are included in the account of Hiuen-Tsang. Hiuen-Tsang says that after the Bodhi was destroyed by the queen, King Aśoka bathed the roots (of the old tree) with perfumed milk to fertilise them. On the morning of the next day, the tree sprang up as before. The king, seeing the miraculous portent, was overpowered with deep emotion, and he offered religious gifts, and was so overjoyed that he forgot to return to the palace also. The queen, who was an adherent of the heretics, sent a messenger secretly, who, after the first division of night, once more cut it down. Aśoka rājā next morning came again to worship the tree, after seeing the mutilated trunk, he was filled with exceeding grief. With utmost sincerity he prayed and worshipped; the king bathed the roots with perfumed milk, and in less than a day again the tree was restored. The king was moved by deep reverence at the prodigy and surrounded the tree with a stone (bricks) wall ten feet high, which still remains visible. Representation of the pilgrimage of Aśoka to the Bodhi tree occurs on the eastern gateway front side, bottom architrave at Sāñchi. The right half of the panel depicts the emperor Aśoka dismounting from his kneeling royal elephant while his queen stands beside him. The following panels have been identified (I) their figures are then represented to the left, bowing reverently before the tree (II) the left half of the panel

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87 See Ch. III, p. 143.
88 Beal, op.cit., 1969, pp. 117-118
portrays a crowd of courtiers with water pots in hand ready to water the tree; other figures hold lotus and bananas, while a group of musicians play upon a variety of musical instruments. While the narrative mode is continuous in that the tale unfolds clearly from right to left, it is influenced by the static mode in having a strong centralised focus around the shrine of the Buddha who attained enlightenment beneath the Bodhi tree. 

According to this sculptural panel of Sāñchi, it is clear that emperor Aśoka arrived at Mahābodhi with his followers and musicians to participate in the Bodhi festival. Further, we can assume, on the basis of the Sāñchi, Bhārhut and Amarāvati sculptures, that the worship of the Bodhi tree or Bodhi ceremonies were popular in Indian society after the Mauryan period. In Sāñchi, the adjoining face portrays a rail-enclosed Asvatta tree (Bodhi tree) hung with garlands and sheltered by a parasol, while flying divinities hover above. According to the observation of Marshall, he says that among the Sāñchi sculptures, we can identify not only the Bodhi of Gotama Buddha but also seven Bodhis of the seven Buddhas.

Among the Bharhut sculptures the names of six out of the last seven Buddha’s have been found; but the Bodhi tree of Kakusanda is broken, although his name is quite intact. The earliest of the Buddhas whose Bodhi tree has been found is Vipassi. This tree has a throne or Bodhi mandala in front, before which two people are kneeling, whilst a crowd of others with joined hands are standing on each side of the tree. His Bodhi tree was Pātali or trumpet flowers (Bignonia Suaveolens). The sculpture is inscribed

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92 Dehejiya, op.cit., 1997, p. 78.
94 Cunningham, op.cit., 1962, p. 113.
Bagavato Vipasino Bodhi”. The third of the seven Buddhas named Vessabhu, is in excellent order, and is duly inscribed “Bagavato Vessabhuno Bodhi Sālo.” His Bodhi tree was the Sāl (Shorea Robusta). The next Bodhi tree is that of Kakusanda, the first of the four Buddhas of this Kalpa (aeon), which was Sirisa Bodhi. This sculpture is unfortunately broken, but the inscribed label is still perfect. The Bodhi tree of the next Buddha, Kanakamuni, was an Udumbara (Ficus Glomerata). It has a Bodhimandala throne in front, supported on pillars, with two kneeling females before it. Under the tree, which has garlands on its branches, are two male figures offering respectively a bowl and a garland. The sculpture is inscribed “Bagavato Konigamanasa Bodhi”.  

The Bodhi tree of Kasyapamuni, the third Buddha in this Kalpa, is similar to those already described, with the exception that one of the females is sitting on a Morha before the throne, instead of kneeling. The tree of this Buddha was the Niygroda or Banian (Ficus Indica). The sculpture is labelled “Bagavato Kāsapa Bodhi”. The Bodhi tree of the last Buddha Śakyamuni is more

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96 Cunningham, op. cit., 1962, p. 113 and No. 3, p. 132
97 Li, Vol. XXI, 1892, No. 84, p. 234; Cunningham, op. cit., 1962, p. 114 and No. 72, p. 137;
100 Cunningham, op. cit., 1962, p. 114.
elaborately treated than any of the others. This was the Pippla (*Ficus religiosa*), the trunk is entirely surrounded by an open pillared building with an upper storey, ornamented with niches containing umbrellas. Two umbrellas are placed in the top of the tree, and numerous streamers are hanging indicating offering of garlands. On each side there is a male figure raising a garland in his right hand, and holding the tip of his tongue with the thumb and four fingers of the left hand.  

102 This sculpture is inscribed “*Bagavato Sākamunino Bodhi*.”  

4.2.2 Bodhi ceremony and Sri Lankan kings

The main centre of devotion in Sri Lanka today is, of course, the ancient tree at Anurādhapura, which, in addition to its religious significance, has an historical importance as well. As the oldest historical tree in the world, it has survived for over 2,200 years. The oldest and most sacred Bodhi tree of Sri Lanka was that of the Mahā Vihāra in Anurādhapura. According to tradition a branch of the holy tree of Gayā was brought to Sri Lanka by king Devānampiya Tissa and planted in the court of the monastery founded by him. This “king of tree” had miraculously sprouted instantaneously on Sinhalese soil.  

104 That took place in the eighteenth year of the reign of king Aśoka. The veneration of the Bodhi tree was as common and widespread as that of the *Cetiya* in ancient Sri Lanka and it exists so up to the present day.

According to the *Samantapāśādikā* and the *Mahāvaṃsa*, the southern branch of

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the sacred Bodhi tree at Gayā was brought to Sri Lanka a short time after the arrival of Mahinda. The great chronicler, *Mahāvamsa*, states that the Thera requested the king to send a message to emperor Aśoka to invite Theri Sanghamittā to Sri Lanka as well as for obtaining the southern branch of the Bodhi tree to be planted at Anurādhapura. The king was sitting in his own city with Thera Mahinda and had taken counsel with his ministers. Arittha, the king’s nephew, who was the envoy to the court of Pātaliputra earlier, was once again sent by Devānampiya Tissa to accomplish the mission.105

The literary sources of Sri Lanka say that after getting a message from Arahanta Mahinda and the king Devānampiya Tissa, in response, emperor Aśoka having performed several rituals at Bodhgaya, sent the sapling of the southern branch of the Bodhi tree placed in a golden vase through Theri Sanghamittā and eleven other Bhikkunis accompanied by several groups of nobles and artisans along with the envoy Arittha to Sri Lanka.106

The ship which carried Theri Sanghamittā and the branch of the Bodhi Tree, sailed from Tāmralipti and after seven days arrived at the port, which was known as Jambukolapattana and which was situated in the north of the island of Sri Lanka. The king of Sri Lanka on hearing the arrival of the ship,

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105 *Mahāvamsa* Ch. XVIII, XIX, Samantapāsādikā, pp.34-35.
decorated the road from Jambukolapattana to the capital city of Anurādhapura and visited the port to welcome the Theri Sanghamittā and the sapling of the Bodhi tree. On arrival of the sacred Bodhi tree the Sri Lankan king offered the sovereignty of the island to the Bodhi tree. After a series of sacred festivals for the Bodhi tree on the sea-shore as well as at a port where the Pāchinārāma or the eastern monastery was established in Nāgādīpa, the sacred object was taken to Anurādhapura in a beautifully decorated chariot. The planting of the sacred Bodhi tree was held amidst the Bodhi festival by the king with representatives from all parts of the island from north as well as south present on the occasion.107

The first eight saplings sprung from the seeds of the Bodhi tree of Anurādhapura were distributed in areas such as Jambukolapattana, the village of Tivakka Brāhmaṇa in the north, Kajaragāma and Candanagāma in the south. Later thirty two saplings were distributed all over the island. Thus, religious ceremonies became a unifying force across the island.108 This is particularly noticeable in the efforts of king Devānampiya Tissa to bring princes from distant places such as Kajaragāma, Candanagāma and Tivakka Brāhmaṇagāma to attend the Bodhi festival. One wonders whether Devānampiya Tissa tried to impose a moral obligation upon these two distant royal houses in Rōhana which recognised no loyalty to him. This may perhaps be regarded as a small scale application of the policy of Dhammavijaya.109

According to literary sources, king Aśoka despatched the following persons along with the Bodhi tree to Sri Lanka in order to protect the Bodhi tree

107 See foot not No. 81.
108 See Ch. III, p. 257
109 Ibid.
(Mahabodhirakkhanatthāya) and performed rituals necessary for its maintenance. They are: eight families of royal blood (deva kula), eight families of Ministers (Amacca kula), eight families of Brāhmaṇa (Brahmana kula), eight families of wealthy householders (Kutumbika kulas), eight families of headmen (Gopaka kula), eight families of Taracchkula, eight families of Kālinga natives (Kālinga kula). These were sent with eight gold and silver pots for the purpose of sprinkling water on the Bodhi tree sapling.  

According to the Bodhivamsa the eight members of the royal family and eight others representing various guilds and artisan families were entrusted with the specific duties to be performed at the Bodhi tree. The Bodhivamsa refers to those princes as kinsmen of Aśoka and gives specific duties, viz. Prince Bodhigutta to protect the sacred Bodhi tree, Prince Summitta to perform rites and rituals in honour of the sacred Bodhi Tree, Prince Candaraguttta to play the golden drums during the great festival in honour of the sacred Bodhi tree, Prince Devagutta to carry the Paritta water in a golden goblet riding on an elephant and tour round the city during the Bodhi festival, Prince Dhammagutta to blow the conch at the ‘Bo’ festival, Prince Suryagutta, to sprinkle Paritta water on the Bodhi tree with the golden goblet, Prince Gotama to hold the white parasols over the Bodhi tree, Prince Jutindara, to guard the Bodhi tree during the festival. Whatever the origin of the practice was, its cult in Sri Lanka existed from the time of Arahanta Mahinda.

The Bodhivamsa gives another list of Kulas or families and their duties. They also arrived in Sri Lanka to render service to the Bodhi tree, viz. the chief of the guild lords to be in charge of guarding the Bodhi tree holding the sword during the nights; the

\footnote{Samantapāśāṅkā, p. 37.}  
\footnote{Bodhivamsa, pp. 319-320.}
chief of the Brāhmins to bless the Bodhi tree; the chiefs of the Kelambi families to raise gold and silver parasols during the festivals of the Bodhi tree; the chiefs of the merchant families to offer incense; the archers to guard the Bodhi tree with bows and arrows in order to protect it from crows; the chiefs of Saras families to hold umbrellas; the chiefs of the Kālinga families to offer new flowers to the Bodhi tree; the chiefs of Kapu families to offer five kinds of flowers to the Bodhi tree; the chief of the Balat family to guard the main entrance to the premises of the Bodhi tree; the chief of the weavers to provide strainers and threads; the chief of potters to provide pots; the chief of flower suppliers to provide garlands; the chief of incense suppliers to provide four different kinds of incense; the chief of the tailors to provide screens, flags and hangars; the chief of the cooks to provide alms for offering; the chief of the blacksmiths to provide scissors, knives etc., the silversmiths to provide gold and silver mirrors etc., the goldsmiths to provide gold and silver lamps and pots; the chief of the carpenters to provide stages and canopies necessary for the Bodhi tree festival; the chief of the painters to provide painted and decorated canopies; the chief of the musicians to provide hevisi (drum) music thrice a day; the chiefs of the parasol families to provide white parasols necessary for the Bodhi tree festivals; and the chief of the curator of the park to plant the necessary flowering trees used in ritual offering. All these people were to take orders from prince Summitta. In addition, four royal maidens were to sprinkle water on the Bodhi sapling.\footnote{Ibid.}

Along with the large retinue that was sent to attend on the Bodhi tree, Aśoka also sent four maidens to pour water on the tree during the festivals that took place at the port.\footnote{Ibid. p. 202.} The Bodhi tree was sprinkled with water by virgins of the Kśatriya, Vaiśya and
Brāhmaṇa clans. At Anurādhapura the duty of attending on the Bodhi tree fell to the nuns, the order which was founded in Sri Lanka by Theri Sanghamitta. The Sinhala king, Devānampiya Tissa, also appointed four Ksatriya princesses (Perahāra Bisōvaru) to sprinkle water on the Bodhi and they lived in the royal palace.114

The Chinese travelogues, which supply invaluable material for reconstructing the history of south Asia, possess detailed description of the Bodhi Trees in India and Sri Lanka. Fa-Hien also gives some information about the Bo-tree of Sri Lanka. He says that a former king of the country had got a slip of the Pātra tree from central India, (This should be the Pippala or Bo-Tree), which he planted by the side of the hall of Buddha, where a tree grew up to the height of 200 cubits. As it bent on one side towards the south-east, the king, fearing it would fall, propped it with a post eight or nine spans round. The tree began to grow at the very heart of the prop, where it met (the trunk); (a shoot) pierced through the post, and went down to the ground, where it entered and formed roots, that rose (to the surface) and were about four spans round. Although, the post was split in the middle, the outer portions kept hold (of the shoot), and people did not remove it. Beneath the tree a Vihāra was built, in which was placed a sacred image (of Buddha), which the monks and laity revered and looked up to without ever becoming weary.115 In another English translation of Fa-Hien’s records, some new information has been added.116 It may be noted that Fa-Hien does not mention the place where

114 Ibid., p. 215.
115 Legge, op cit., 1971, pp. 103-104.
116 "A former king of this country (Sri Lanka) had sent a messenger to the middle kingdom to fetch a seed of the Pātra tree (probably the Bodhi tree at Bodhī Gaya) planted beside the hall, and this grew some two hundred feet high. This tree inclined towards the south-east and, fearing that it might fall, the king set up a huge pillar that required eight or nine men to encircle it, to support the tree. At the place where the tree was propped, a branch grew out from the trunk and pierced the pillar, then sent down roots to the ground. This branch was so thick it took four men to encircle it. Though the pillar is cleft in two, since it still supports the tree it has to been removed. Under this tree is a rest house containing a seated image of
actually the branch of the Pātra tree was planted in Sri Lanka. In the fifth century Fa-Hien found the Bo tree at Anurādhapura healthy, and its guardians displaying towards it the same vigilant tenderness which they exhibit at the present day.\textsuperscript{117}

According to the identification of Albert Grunwedel, the sculptures of the lower and middle architrave of the east gate of the Sānchi Tope are representations of the tale of the arrival of the sapling of the Bodhi Tree from Bodhagaya to Anurādhapura in Sri Lanka.\textsuperscript{118} Geiger and Rhys Davids also presented the same view as a Grunwedel.\textsuperscript{119}

It is clear that the arrival of the Bodhi tree was one of landmark incidents in Sri Lankan history. The bringing of the Bodhi branch and the relics of the Buddha along

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\textsuperscript{117} L. A. de Silva, \textit{op. cit.}, 1974, p. 47.

\textsuperscript{118} “Above the pillars there rise three transoms, which we shall call architrave; the lowest of them rest upon the capitals, while next two are laid upon supporting blocks, which are about as high as the architraves themselves. The relief on the central potion of the first architrave is reckoning from below (front), belong to the narratives representations. In the middle is to be seen a large fig tree with the same kind of building (a chaitya) encircling it as on the relief of the left pillar: it is, therefore, once more the Bodhi tree at Gaya. A large and solemn procession is windowing round it. To the right, on the relief, a man in royal garb is getting down from his elephant, supported by a dwarf, surrounded and attended by women, chariots with worriers, elephants with mahuats, archers and musicians, fill up the background. On the left, great procession approaches with flowers, vessels with perfumed water, flags etc., a large band of musicians with drums of different kind flutes, and conch shells as trumpets, fill up the rest of the relief. It is therefore a procession to the Bodhi tree at Gaya, perhaps on the occasion of Mahinda’s embassy to Ceylon. The winged lions in the inlaid panels may possibly be intended to suggest this. Lions are the armorial bearings of Ceylon: ‘the lion island’ - Sihaladvipa (Pali sihaladipa). The ends of the architraves, in the corners under the volutes, have a pair of peacocks of unusual size in their relief n both sides. On the right end a pair of lovers is represented behind the peacocks. In Pāli the peacock is called Mora (Sanskrit Maurya); and as peacocks are the symbol of the Mauya dynasty, their representation on the first architrave might indicate that the central incident, which refers to Ceylon, takes place in India. The middle relief of the second architrave shows a small fig tree in the centre; this- if the previous relief has been correctly explained, may indicate the newly planted ship. Again a great procession appears, just leaving a city. The princes have dismounted; their horses are following the procession. The right side of the relief shows a king kneeling before footmarks. Presumably Buddha’s, surmounted by servants with sacrificial vessels, umbrella, etc., evidently the worship of the Buddhāpāda, the footprints of Buddha, which he is said to have left on the Sumanakuta (Adam’s peak) on the occasion of his mythical visit to Ceylon. There a giant footprint has been regarded as sacred from ancient times and all the religious prevailing in Ceylon. On the reception of Buddhism, it became a proof that Buddha had walked upon the island, and thus was taken as a pattern for similar footprints in further India.”\textsuperscript{118} Albert Grunwedel, \textit{Buddhist Art in India}, New Delhi: S. Chand & Co. Ltd, 1990 (re print), pp. 70-72.

\textsuperscript{119} Mahāvamsa, p. XX; T. W. Rhys Davids, \textit{Buddhist India}., Delhi, : Motilal Banarsidass. 1971,(re print) p. 302.
with his Pātra (alms-bowl) further strengthened the cultural link between India and Sri Lanka. The planting of the Bodhi tree was thus a symbol of the establishment of Buddhism and Buddhist culture.\textsuperscript{120}

The Chronicles very often refer to Mahābodhi pūjā or festivity in honour of the Bodhi tree but their nature is not explained in detail. The early kings may have carried out various construction works at the site of the Bodhi tree in its honour and for its safety. King Devānampiya Tissa, the first Buddhist king of Sri Lanka, is said to have bestowed the whole country upon the Bodhi tree and held a magnificent festival after planting it with great ceremony.\textsuperscript{121} The entire country was decorated for the occasion.

The Mahāvamsa refers to similar ceremonies held by his successors as well. It is said that the rulers of Sri Lanka performed ceremonies in the tree’s honour every twelfth year of their reign.\textsuperscript{122}

The Chronicles provide information about the construction and restoration and Bodhi ceremonies at the Bodhi shrine by different monarchs, the earliest works dated after king Devānampiya Tissa. King Dutthagāmani performed such a ceremony at a cost of one lakh pieces of money.\textsuperscript{123} King Vasabha built a temple in the courtyard of the Bodhi tree and embellished it with the statues of the four Buddhas (Kakusada Kongamana, Kāsyapa and Gautama).\textsuperscript{124} King Sirinaga I is said to have restored the steps of the four entrances leading to the Bodhi tree.\textsuperscript{125} Two bronze images were set up on the eastern side of the Bodhigara by king Vohārika Tissa.\textsuperscript{126} It is likely that the outside

\textsuperscript{120}Rahula, \textit{op.cit.}, 1966, p. 58.  
\textsuperscript{121}Mahāvamsa, Ch. XIX.  
\textsuperscript{122}Ibid., Ch. XXXVIII, V. 57.  
\textsuperscript{123}Ibid., Ch. XXVIII, V. 1  
\textsuperscript{124}Ibid., Ch. XXXV, V. 89.  
\textsuperscript{125}Dīpāvamsa, Ch. XXII, V. 45; Mahāvamsa, Ch. XXXVI, V. 25-26.  
\textsuperscript{126}Ibid., Ch. XXXVI, V. 31.
enclosure of the Bodhi tree up to the time of king Abhayanāga was not a complete stone wall for the Mahāvamsa states that it was that monarch who caused a stone wall to be constructed round the great Bodhi tree. This wall seems to have become dilapidated within a short time and the king Srinaga II had to restore it. He also constructed a pavilion beyond the sand-spread compound of the Bodhi tree. King Gothābhaya constructed a railing around the Bodhi tree as well as an arched gateway at the northern entrance and placed stone pillars surmounted by the Dharmachakra at the four cardinal points. He also placed three statues at three of the four entrances and at the southern entrance he set up a stone throne. Further, king Jettatissa I built three gateways to the Bodhigahara. King Sirimeghavanna built a stone terrace and a wall beside the Bodhi tree.

Further, between the fourth and tenth centuries A.D., several kings restored or renovated the complex of structures at the sacred Bodhi tree at Anurādhapura. The kings such as Silākāla, Moggallāna II, Udaya and Mahinda provided patronage for constructions around the Mahābodhi and organized Bodhi festivals.

The precinct of the Bodhi tree was undoubtedly an important centre of ritual and pilgrimage from the beginning. While it is reasonable to assume that almost all the Buddhist rulers at Anurādhapura participated in regular rituals at the Bodhi tree, the chronicles specifically refer only to a few of the kings in this connection. Perhaps rituals

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127 Dipavamsa, Ch. XXII, V. 37; Mahāvamsa, Ch. XXXVI, V. 52.
128 Dipavamsa, Ch. XXII, V.45; Mahāvamsa, Ch. XXXVI, V. 55.
129 Dipavamsa, Ch. XXII, V.54; Mahāvamsa, Ch. XXXVI, V. 103-104.
130 Ibid., Ch. XXXVII, V. 126.
131 Ibid., Ch. XXXVII, V. 131.
132 Ibid., Ch. XXXVIII, 55-57.
133 Cūkavamsa, Ch. 41, V. 29, 78-79.
134 Ibid., Ch. 48, V. 121-123.
135 Ibid., Ch. 48, V. 55-58.
performed by kings specifically mentioned excelled those of the others in splendour.\textsuperscript{136}

The chronicle reports events connected with the Mahābodhi tree up to the tenth century A.D. but after that it is, strangely enough, seldom mentioned.\textsuperscript{137} Sacrifices and feasts, sometimes connected with irrigation of the sacred tree, were instituted by many kings from Duttagamani to Mahinda II.\textsuperscript{138}

The king Devānampiya Tissa at the very beginning mentions the complexity of the rituals. Sprinkling water on the Bodhi tree by four virgins\textsuperscript{139} (a practice, which continued for a long period of time) is a fertility ritual associated with the sacred tree. King Aśoka also sent four royal maidens to pour water on the tree during the festivals that took place at the port.\textsuperscript{140} The Bodhi tree festival instituted by king Devānampiya Tissa was continued by other later kings also, but some part of the ceremony was modified by them. King Dhātusena overcame the difficulty by replacing the four live young girls with bronze figures. The Mahāvamsa says that this king ordered a bathing festival for the Bodhi tree as was done by king Devānampiya Tissa. He set up there sixteen bath maidens of bronze. These bronze figures of maidens were set up for the purpose of pouring water on the holy tree with some mechanical device, because he found it difficult to undertake the responsibility of looking after real live virgins. Since the planting of the Bodhi tree, the rulers of Sri Lanka held festivals for the Bodhi tree every twelfth year (of their reign).\textsuperscript{141}

\textsuperscript{136} Siriweera, \textit{op.cit.}, 1996, pp. 7-8.
\textsuperscript{137} Geiger, \textit{op.cit.}, 1960, p. 187.
\textsuperscript{138} \textit{Mahāvamsa}. Ch. XXVIII, V. 1, Ch. XXXIV, V. 58, Ch. XXXVIII, V. 55; \textit{Cūlavamsa}, Ch. 41, V. 29, Ch. 44, V. 45, Ch. 48, V. 124.
\textsuperscript{139} \textit{Bodhivamsa}, p. 215.
\textsuperscript{140} \textit{Ibid.}, 203.
\textsuperscript{141} \textit{Mahāvamsa}, Ch. XXXVIII, V. 55-56.
It is said that king Dutthagamani held a ceremony of gifts of great splendour for the Bodhi tree. Mention is made in the Mahāvamsa of the institution of an annual festival in connection with this tree by king Bhātikābhaya. It is known as the Bodhi Isna Puja (bathing the Bodhi tree). King Vasabha had a thousand lamps lighted in each of the four places, namely, the Cetiyapabbata, Thupārāma, Mahāthūpa and Mahābodhi. King Sirimeghavanna ordered that to commemorate the Thera Mahinda, an image be made of the latter and a large religious festival conducted at Anurādhapura. During the festival, the image was kept in the courtyard of the Mahābodhi for three months. Later on, a bathing festival of the Bodhi tree was conducted by Dhatusena. King Silakāla participated in daily rituals at the Bodhi tree. Further, king Dappula II is referred to as having performed a ritual ceremony of unimaginable splendour at the Bodhi tree.

4.2.3 Bodhi tree, ceremony and rituals

At the time that Buddhism was becoming established in Sri Lanka, several religious objects and customs believed to be capable of producing rain were introduced. The first of these objects which had this power to produce rain and fertility was the sacred Bodhi tree itself. As mentioned above, this tree became very significant in the establishment of Sinhalese kingship.

A miraculous feature of the Bo sapling was that it was said to be associated with rain clouds. When it was planted at Meghavana park it rained. After reverence and

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142 Dipavamsa, Ch. XXI, V. 22, Mahāvamsa, Ch. XXXIV, V. 58.
143 See foot note No. 124.
144 Mahāvamsa, Ch. 37, V. 37.
145 Ibid., Ch. 37, V. 55-56.
146 Culavamsa, Ch. 40, V. 29.
147 Ibid., Ch. 47, p. 78.
offering to the Bodhi tree the devotees generally expected timely rain. So it came to be believed that when prayers were made and rituals performed in honour of the Bodhi tree it would rain. Therefore, the expectation of the people from the auspicious Bodhi tree was the life giving rain. Earlier, king Bhätikābhaya also held a festival in honour of watering the great Bodhi tree. King Dhātusena had performed a Nanumura festival for the Bodhi tree.\textsuperscript{149} Once this bathing ritual is performed, it is supposed to being rain as expected. Referring to king Dhātusena the chronicle says that "for the Bodhi Tree to whom was vouchsafed the highest enlightenment he instituted a bathing festival like the Bodhi tree festival instituted by Devānampiya Tissa. He set up sixteen bath maiden in bronze and arranged for the adornment and consecration of the Bodhi tree.\textsuperscript{150}

Although particular reference is made to watering festivals, making gifts and lighting lamps in connection with the rituals at the sacred precinct in which the royalty of the Anurādhapura kingdom participated, it may be reasonably surmised that the rituals there were much more complex. Watering or pouring milk on the tree was important as the ritual could sustain the tree. Besides, this could be a continuation of a tradition which embodies the belief that watering a sacred tree could cause the rain to fall during periods of drought.\textsuperscript{151} There is specific evidence to suggest that the Bhikkhnis were involved in the ritual of watering of Bodhi tree during the last part of Anurādhapura period. The Mahākālattāva inscription, belonging to the reign of Kāssapa IV, located in the North central province, records a decree of amnesty granted to a village called Gitalgamuva, which had been set apart for the supply of the four fold requisites to the nuns who daily

\textsuperscript{149} Čīlavamsa, Ch. 37, V. 55.
\textsuperscript{150} Ibid., Ch. 37, V. 55-57.
\textsuperscript{151} Siriweera, \textit{op.cit.}, 1996, p. 8.
watered the great Bodhi Tree of the Mahāvihāra. The Bhikkunis were from a nunnery called Nalārāma which was presumably located close to the Bodhi tree. According to the practice of this nunnery, seven of the Bhikkhunis were entrusted with the task of daily watering the Bodhi tree.

The Mihintale slab inscription of king Mahinda IV mentions two kinds of Bodhi Pūjā, namely (I) Ruvan asun mahabo mangula (II) Somnas mahabo magula. There are controversies over the meaning of both these phrases and also over the place of the pūjā, as the reference may be either to the Mahābodhi at Anurādhapura or to the Bodhi at Mihintale. Whatever the place may be, the first ceremony mentioned may refer to Buddha’s enlightenment under the Bodhi tree and the second to a victory celebration which may have been a thanksgiving ceremony by the ruling king, in honour of the Bodhi tree. Even today, there are four great festivals held at the Bodhi tree annually, namely: (I) Alutsal Mangalle (the new rice festival) (II) Avurudu Mangalle (the new year festival), (III) Nānuvara Mangalle (anointing ceremony), (IV) Kārtike Mangallé (the festival of Kārtike). On the full moon day of Durutu in January, the annual Alutsahal Mangalle is performed at the Bodhi tree. The Purāṇa Avurudu Mangalle or the old year festival is held on a day selected before the dawn of the New Year that falls annually on the fourth of April. This special festival held during the New Year is called the Nānuvara Mangalle or the anointing ceremony of the New Year. An auspicious time for the anointing ceremony or bathing ceremony is fixed in consultation with the astrologers. The Nānu which is a shampoo needed for the ritual bath is prepared with lime and herbs. The chief

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monk of the Bodhi Vihāra performs the bathing ceremony in the early morning by wishing a long life and good health to the Bodhi tree and in general to all beings. The bathing ceremony is performed at the Buddha image in the shrine and the jewellery put on to the sacred Bodhi tree. The Kārtike festival is performed on the full moon day of the month of 'Ile' which falls in November. According to Buddhist tradition Kārtike is celebrated because it marks the beginning of the rainy season. Lighting of oil lamps in veneration of the god is the main feature of this festival. It started because the king Asoka made an offering of Kārtike lamp to the Mahābodhi at Bodhgaya. It is clear that the Nānuvara festival existed due to the patronage of the rulers since ancient time, and it may be assumed that other Bodhi festivals may have been related to that time.

The first of these objects which had the power to produce rain was the sacred Bodhi tree itself. Further, this tree became significant in Sinhalese kingship. The artisans who had been sent to Sri Lanka to accompany the Bodhi tree ensured the continuation of the rituals associated with it at Bodhagayā. No doubt these rituals would have been practised in Sri Lanka just as they had been in India. The Bodhivamsa, gives details of the officers assigned to the persons of royal rank and the duties of each of the castes in relation to the Bodhi tree. From that day up to the present the Buddhists in Sri Lanka have paid and are paying the utmost reverence to this branch of the Bo tree under the shade of which the master received his enlightenment.

156 Paul E. Pieris said that it is doubtful if any other single incident in the long story of their race has sized upon the imagination of the Sinhalese with such tenacity of the planting of the aged tree. Like its pliant roots, which find sustenance on the face of the bare rock and cleave their way through the stoutest fabric, the influence of what it represents has penetrated into the inmost being of the people till the tree itself has become almost human.” Paul. E. Pieris, Ceylon and Portuguese, Vol. I, Colombo, 1927, pp. 3-4.)
4.3 Giribhanda Pūjā: the great Buddhist festival in Sri Lanka.

After the introduction of Buddhism in the third century B.C., Giribhanda Pūjā was an important festival, which was held in ancient Sri Lanka. In the Mahāvamsa the Giribhanda pūjā performed by king Mahādāthika Mahānāga (67-79 A.D) is described thus:

"After the death of king Bhatikabhaya his younger brother named Mahādāthika Mahānāga reigned for twelve years, intent on works of merit of many kinds. He had Kincikkha stones spread as plaster on (the square of) the Great stūpa and he turned the sand-path way round (the stūpa) into a wide court. In all the Viharas he had (raised) chairs put up for the preachers. The king built the great Ambattala-stūpa, but since the building was not firm he lay down in that place, bethinking him of the merit of the sage (Buddha), risking his own life. When he had made the building firm and completed the Cetiya (stūpa) he set up at the four entrances four bejewelled arches that had been well planned by artists and shone with gems of every kind to be fastened to the Cetiya. He spread a cover of red stuff and golden balls there and festoons of pearls.

When he had made a round of the Cetiya-mountain (a tract of land measuring a Yojana) and had made four gateways and a beautiful road round about (the mountain). Then he set up (traders) shops on both sides of the road and adorned (the road) here and there with flags, arches and triumphal gates, and illuminated all with chains of lamps. The king commanded mimic dances, songs, and music. That people might go with clean feet on the road from the Kadamba river to the Cetiya-mountain, the king had it

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157 He reigned in Anurādhapura from 38 to 66 A.D., Mahāvamsa, Ch. XXXI, V. 68.
158 Kincikkha means stamens of lotus blossom, or appear to be some sort of marble or other ornamental stone.
159 Ruvanwaḷi Sāya in Anurādhapura.
160 Sand compound (Wali Midula or Maluva)
161 On the Cetiya-pabbata (Mihintale)
162 He ran a risk of being killed by falling stones during his meditation.
163 About sixteen miles.
laid with carpets. The gods themselves might hold a festival assembly (*samajja*) there with dance and music. He gave great largesse (*mahadanam*) at the four gates of the capital. Over the whole island he put up chains of lamps without a break, and over water of the ocean within a distance of a *Yojana* around. At the festival of (consecrating of) the *Cetiya* these beautiful offerings were given by him: the splendid feast is called here (in the country) the great Giribhanda offering.

The king, as the lord of the earth, had commanded alms giving in eight places to the Bhikkhus who were to gather in the festival assembly. With the beating of eight golden drums that were set up even there, he allotted lavish gifts to twenty-four thousand Bhikkhus. He distributed six garments, permitted the remission of the prison-penalties and ordered the hair cutters to carry on their trade continually at the four gates. Moreover, all those works of merit that had been decreed by the kings of old and that had also been decreed by his brother, those did he carry out without neglecting anything. The King gave himself and the queen, his two sons; his state-elephant and his state horse and gifts worth six hundred thousand to the brotherhood of the Bhikkhus. He gave (such gifts) worth a hundred thousand to the company of Bhikkunis and in giving them, with knowledge of the custom, various possessions suited (to their needs) he redeemed (again) himself and the rest from the brotherhood.  

This ceremony was introduced in the *Dīpavamsa* as *Giribhandagahana Pūjā*.  

In the *Vamsatthappakāsini* which is a commentary of the *Mahāvamsa* the event is referred to as *Giribhanda Mahā Pūjā* which was a *Pūjāsamāgama* (festival of offering) and seven verses supply details of the *Puññakamma* (meritorious acts) performed-mainly the gifts of alms and robes to the monks.  

The *Pūjāvaliya*, which is a Sinhala prose work, elaborates on the performance on

"having compactly stationed canoes over the ocean to a distance of about a *Yojana*,

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164 *Mahānamsa*, Ch. XXXVI, V. 68-89.
165 *Dīpavamsa*, Ch. XXI, V. 32.
having erected platforms on the canoes, having erected pavilions at various places and having invited 24000 of the great fraternity of monks and assembled them over the ocean...." It is noteworthy that the event, though mainly centered around the Cetiyawa mountain 167 was held on a national scale with popular participation inclusive of even coastal boatmen, as seen above.168

The Visuddhimagga was composed by Thera Buddhagosa and its Sinhala Sannaya (Sinhala translation) compiled about eight centuries later refer to this as Giribhandavāhana Pūjā and the latter introduces this as the great offering of lights performed over the whole of the Sinhala Dīpa (Sri Lanka) and over the ocean to a distance of a Yojana (around) with the Cetiyagiri as the chief venue.169

The Rasavāhinī refers to this ceremony as Girimanada Mahā Pūjā, 170 and the Sinhala prose work the Saddharmālankāraya containing translations of the Rasavāhinī stories renders it as Girihandu Pūjā. 171

There is no doubt that the terms Giribhandagahana Pūjā, Giribhandavāhana Pūjā and Girimanda Pūjā refer to the same event. Giribhanda means ‘articles or goods’of or belonging to the mountain. Giribhandagahana means ‘the taking of goods of the mountain’ and Giribhandavāhana means ‘the conveyance of goods to the great mountain. Giribhanda Mahā Pūjā means the great mountain offering.172 The term Giribhanda can also mean a mountain of goods as suggested by Rahula.173

167 Mihintale located ten miles to the east of Anurādhapura.
168 Pūjāvali, p. 725.
171 Saddharmālankāraya, p. 720.
The *Giribhanda Pūjā* is so called because this ‘giri’ no doubt signifies the hill or mountain which formed the venue for the festival; but there seems to have been no association with any goods or commodities connected with it.\(^{174}\)

It is significant that this event was a religious festival a ‘*Pūjā*’ (offering) performed in honour of the Cetiyagiri (Mihintale). The hillock was said to be hallowed by the visit and residence of the Arahanta Mahinda who introduced in the island the doctrine of the Buddha. And of particular importance is the fact that it took the nature of a *Samajja* in which dancing, singing and orchestral music were commanded by the king. It is said, in order to ruin the festival, caused a rain of coal which was prevented by the miraculous power of an elder. Among the gifts given on the occasion was a costly garment, which a young novice named Thera Tissa, who lived in Lonagiri Vihāra, wore on account of his proficiency in the *Sāraniya Dhamma*.\(^{175}\)

Although the nature of the celebration is evident from the above reference, this does not lead directly to identify what it was, or why it was so called. There is also no record of a repetition of this festival in Sri Lanka. Rahula describes that it was like a carnival,\(^{176}\) but admits that it is not quite clear as to why it was so called. Kekulawala says that there was a relationship between this festival and Mahāyāna religious practices, but unfortunately he does not elaborate.\(^{177}\)

According to the description of the *Mahāvamsa* and the commentaries, we can assume that this ceremony may have given a new interpretation from the Buddhist point

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\(^{174}\) Vitarana, *op.cit.*, 1985, p. 47.


of view to the worship of the mountain or *Giraggasamajja*, which was held on the mountain.

Many festivals for prayer, homage, sacrifice or pleasure have been closely associated with hillocks and mountains among several peoples of the world throughout the course of human history.\(^{178}\) According to the *Rgveda* homage was paid to the Parvata, the mountain Divinity, and his protection was sought.\(^{179}\) Mountains were also considered as doors to heaven.\(^{180}\) The *Mahābhārata* refers to participants to a sacrificial festival worshipping a mountain.\(^{181}\) There appear to have been two outstanding social festivals, viz., the *Samajja* and the *Giragga samajja*. The *samajjamakaruma*,\(^{182}\) a term first used in the *Mahāvamsa* with *Giribhanda Pūjā* was evidently held at convenient places in or near cities, while the other was held on ‘the top of a hill’ (*giri+agga*). Its nature can be understood by an appreciation of the term rendered variously as *Samaja* or *Samajja* or *Samāja*. The difference, however, between an ordinary *Samajja* and *Giragga samajja* is, likely, in respect of geographical location only.\(^{183}\)

According to the *Mahābhārata*, a *Samajja* appears to have been a tournament. Dhṛtarāṣṭra and Drōṇa are referred to as having got the ground cleared, a *preksāgāra* (auditorium) constructed and a *bali* (sacrifice or offering) offered along with the performance of music before the show began. Many men and women attended it. On the occasion of Draupadi’s *svayamvara* the arena for the sixteen days *samajja* was also designed with walls, moats, doorways and arched gate ways: it was also perfumed, and

\(^{178}\) *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, p. 322.

\(^{179}\) *Rgveda*, VI. 4.14; VII.34.23; *Maitriya Śmhitā*, III. 12. 2. 9, IV. 2. 4. 3.

\(^{180}\) *Taittiriya Śmhitā*, III.12. 2. 9, IV.2. 4. 3.


\(^{182}\) *Mahāvamsa*, Ch. XXXIV, V. 79.

\(^{183}\) Vitarana, *op.cit.*, 1985, p. 43.
performances of drama, dancing and music were held. There is also reference to a religious *samaja* held at a Saiva festival where singing, dancing and drinking provided the diversions.\(^{184}\)

The *Harivamsa* describes the *Samajja* as a grand feast of meat, savouries and sweets which was followed by a wrestling match.\(^ {185}\) At another instance reference is made to a *Giriyajna* (sacrifice on the mountain), at which a three day holiday appears to have been declared and a sacrifice of cattle was on the agenda. The participants worshipped the mountain with perfumes, flowers and incense.\(^ {186}\) The *Kāmasūtra* indicates that at a temple at *Sravasti* people gathered to hear songs and see dances.\(^ {187}\) The *Arthaśāstra* refers to three recreative performances viz.; *Utsava*, *Samaja* and *Yātrā* where unrestricted drinking took place for four days, and declared that a conqueror should respect the *Samaja* institution of a subject people.\(^ {188}\)

Many Pāli works also make reference to the *Samajja*. At Rājagrha a *Samajja* was organised by a company of five hundred who gave periodical performances to the king and obtained rich rewards. One of their outstanding performances was by a girl who walked, danced and sang on a horizontal bar. It was an open air event held in the afternoon and was well attended by members of all social ranks of the Anga and the Magadha regions.\(^ {189}\) The more eminent of them sat on special seats to view, particularly, nautch dances.\(^ {190}\) Another in the same city was held on a hill, and there was much

\(^{186}\) Ibid. II. 4. 2. 6.
\(^{188}\) *Arthaśāstra*, II. 24. 5.
\(^{189}\) *Sumangalavilasini*, Vol. IV, p. 59.
dancing, singing feasting, etc. A Samajja was held on a hill (giragga samajja) and it is said to have been an annual festival of Jambudvīpa (India) from the time of the Dipankara Buddha (former Buddha). It was the custom of members of the Sangha (monk) to attend it, and the Buddha took appropriate steps to prevent them.

The Samantapāsādikā says that a Samajja was held for seven days on level ground under the shadow of a hill outside the city. Further the Samajja is described as a festival on a mountain, or on a high place on a mountain itself.

The attendance of monks at such shows was definitely discouraged. The Brahmajāla Sutta refers to pekkam (show at fairs), which were explained by Buddhaghosa as dancing festivals (natasamajja). The Sigālovāda Sutta describes the dancing, singing, music, recitation, conjuring tricks and acrobatic shows and refers to recitation of stories in mixed prose and verse (akkhana) that took place in a Samajja. The same Sutta also indicates that samajjabhicarana (the hunting of fair) was one of the six means of enjoyment. What one experienced at these shows was sensual in the extreme, and repulsive at least to those with a spiritual bent. So it was particularly to Sāriputta and Moggallāna, the two chief disciples of the Buddha, who as layman were so disgusted with their experiences at a Samajja that they renounced the world and entered the order of monks.

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192 Paramathādiṇī, p. 102.  
The term *Giragga samajja* also occurs in two Sinhala classical works the *Dhampiyā Atuā Gātapadaya*\(^{197}\) and the *Kankhāvitarani*\(^{198}\) both exegetical work in which textual portions from the original Pāli works also occur.

What generally conforms to the description of a *Samajja* in pre-Buddhist Sri Lanka is the periodical festival held by king Pandukābhaya, “in which he sat with Cittarāja (*yakkha*) beside him on a seat of equal height and having gods and men to dance before him.” Geiger, in translating the *Mahāvamsa* text\(^{199}\) here, fails to do justice to the phrase ‘*ratikhiddāsamappito*’ which however has been appropriately rendered into Sinhala by the Sumanagala and Batuvantudava as “*rati kridāvenyuktava*” i.e. (complete with erotic sports).\(^{200}\) Evidently, this was replete with the constituents of a *samajja* referred to above.

The *Samajja* was so much associated with sensual pleasures that it did not appeal to the Spartan tastes of king Aśoka. In the Gīnār rock edict I, he proclaims: ‘Here not a single living creature should be slaughtered and sacrificed nor should any *Samāja* be held for his sacred and Gracious Majesty sees not much objective in such *Samajja*: \(^{201}\)

This monarch also went to extent of replacing the royal *Vihārayātṛā* (excursions for enjoyment or pleasure tours) where hunting, drinking, gambling, keeping company with courtesans and such other diversions took pride of place, by *Dhammayātṛā* (excursions for the doctrine). According to the Gīnār edict he substituted the usual items of a *Samajja* with *divyānirupāni* (heavenly shows) consisting of sights of chariots of the

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\(^{197}\) *Dhampiyā Atuā Gātapadaya*, p. 318. (samaja performed on a hill top... dancing).

\(^{198}\) *Kankhāvitarani*, p. 146.

\(^{199}\) *Mahāvamsa*, Ch. X, V. 87-88.

\(^{200}\) *Mahāvamsa*, (Sinhala translation), part I, Sri Sumangala and Batuvantudawe, Colombo: Tripitaka Printer, 1912, Ch. X, V. 87.

gods etc. It is also significant that some consider the Giragga samajja of India as being identical with the Giribhanda Pūjā of Sri Lanka. There is, no doubt, some justification for such a conclusion as both possessed the all-pervading atmosphere of a carnival with the only difference that the latter had the complexion of a religious festival or Pūjā, (offering) performed on a holy hillock where meritorious activities would certainly have taken pride of place. 202 It appears that in Sri Lanka it had only changed its complexion from what it originally was to a Buddhist festival without a change of venue and the venue itself had gathered novel importance by having been visited by a historic Buddhist mission from the court of a great emperor of the neighbouring Jambudīpa. 203

The Gribhanda Pūjā 204 was held by King Mahādātikamahānāga at Mihintale, and was a major Buddhist festival in ancient Sri Lanka. Although Giribhanda Pūjā was famous, we do not hear of its celebration by other kings. 205

The festival of Giribhanda Pūjā was not only religiously important but also had political significance. According to the Mahāvamsa, kings, ministers, other nobles, Buddhist Sanghas and subjects participated on this occasion. Giribhanda Pūjā, therefore had binding effect on the minds of the Buddhist Sangha, king and subjects.

4.4. Vesak festival and ritual activities.

Vesak is the most sacred holy day of utmost significance to all Buddhists in the world. It is the most important festival of the Buddhists, and is celebrated with great

203 See, p. 348.
204 Vitarana, op. cit., 1990, p. 48. (It is popularly referred to also as ‘Kiribada pavu dāgaba vehera’. This is undoubtedly the corrupt from of Giribhanda (Kiribhanda> Kiribhanda> Kiribad> Kiribat) Kiribat means rice milk.), Rahula op. cit., 1966, p. 276 ff. 2. (of course ‘giri’ means ‘mountain’, ‘bhand’ means ‘goods’, ’pūja’ means ‘offering’ or ‘ceremony’.
enthusiasm. Vesak, in Pāli Vesākha and Sanskrit Vaiśākha, means simply the full moon day in the month of May and is the most eminent day in the Buddhist calendar. This sacred day is connected with three important events in the life of the Buddha: his birth, enlightenment, and Parinibbāna or decease, all of which happened, it is believed, on a Vesak day. Vesak is celebrated everywhere, where there are Buddhists, but many visit the holy places on this day of special significance.

The significance of Vesak is further heightened for the Buddhists, as Sri Lankan tradition holds that it was on the Vesak day, in the eighth year after his enlightenment, that the Buddha paid his third visit to Sri Lanka, visited Kāleniya on the invitation of the Nāga king Maniakkhika. Further, to Sri Lanka, the day has yet another remembrance. It was on this day, according to the Mahāvamsa, that prince Vijaya who came from Lāta Rattha in the north of India, landed in Sri Lanka and founded the Sinhala monarchy.

Vesak is celebrated all over Sri Lanka on the basis on these reasons, with the greatest of rejoicing since ancient times. A special feature of the festival is the erection of pandals, gaily decorated and magnificently illuminated. On these pandals are to be found paintings depicting scenes from the life of the Buddha or scenes of historic importance as the landing of Vijaya. Some of these scenes are enacted on platforms set in the pandals or erected at key points in various places. Illuminations are symbolic of the light of the Dhamma. They symbolise the supreme enlightenment of the Buddha on the Vesak full moon day. Further most of the people engage in religious and meritorious activities

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207 Mahāvamsa, Ch. II, V. 72-73.
208 Ibid., Ch. VII, V 1-7.
209 Raghavan, op.cit, 1962, pp. 7-8.
such as observance of precepts, alms giving, preaching of Dhamma and visit the holy places on this day of special significance.

According to Fa-Hien, Vesak is considered to be one of the Buddhist festivals, celebrated in India from very early time. Fa-Hien states that a procession was held in the “second month” which according to the Indian calendar is Vesak. It is therefore quite likely that Fa-Hien’s description was none other than that of the Vesak festival, though he does not call it by that name. Fa-Hien explains that there were in the country four great monasteries, not counting the smaller ones. Beginning on the first day of the fourth month, people sweep and water the streets inside the city, making a grand display in the lanes and byways. Over the city gate they pitch a large tent, grandly adorned in all possible ways, in which the king and queen, with their ladies brilliantly arrayed, take up their residence (for the time).

The monks of the Gomati monastery, being Mahāyāna students, were held in greatest reverence by the king and took precedence over all the others in the procession. At a distance of three or four 'Li' from the city, they made a four-wheeled image car, more than thirty cubits high, which looked like the great hall (of a monastery) moving along. The seven precious substances were grandly displayed about it, with silken streamers and canopies hanging all around. The (chief) image stood in the middle of the car, with two Bodhisattvas in attendance on it, while Devas were made to follow in waiting, all brilliantly carved in gold and silver, and hanging in the air. When the car was about hundred paces away from the gate, the king put off his crown of state, changed his dress for a fresh suit, and with bare feet, carrying in his hands flowers and incense, and with two rows of attending followers, went out at the gate to meet the image. He did
homage at its feet, and then scattered the flowers and burnt the incense. When the image was entering the gate, the queen and the brilliant ladies with her in the gallery above scattered far and wide all kinds of flowers, which floated about and fell promiscuously to the ground. In this way everything was done to promote the dignity of the occasion. The carriages of the monasteries were all different, and each one had its own day for the procession (ceremony) which began on the first of the fourth month, and ended on the fourteenth, after which the king and queen returned to the palace.\textsuperscript{210}

The Vesak festival was introduced in Sri Lanka by Arhanta Mahinda and Buddhist missionaries. There is some historical evidence which mentions that this festival existed from very early times in Sri Lanka. The first reference to this festival in Sri Lanka is to be found in the \textit{Mahāvamsa}, according to which, the great and revered Buddhist king, Dhuttagāmani, celebrated twenty four Vesak festivals and three times he did bestow the three type of garments (robes) on the brotherhood of the island during his time.\textsuperscript{211} It is very likely that he revived a festival that had been in existence earlier and celebrated it on a grander and bigger scale than before. Then after him many kings, no less than seven, are mentioned as having organised this festival annually. The \textit{Mahāvamsa} mentions that after him many kings celebrated the Vesak festivals and twenty-eight Vesak festivals were held by king Bhātikabhaya.\textsuperscript{212} King Vasabha also celebrated this festival at least forty-four times.\textsuperscript{213} King Vohārika Tissa king Gothābhaya and king Jetthatissa I are all mentioned as kings who organised the Vesak

\textsuperscript{210} Legge, \textit{op.cit}, 1971, pp. 18-19.
\textsuperscript{211} \textit{Mahāvamsa}, Ch. XXXII, p. 35.
\textsuperscript{212} \textit{Dipavamsa}, Ch. XXI, V. 27; \textit{Mahāvamsa}, Ch. XXX.IV, V.59.
\textsuperscript{213} \textit{Ibid.}, Ch. XXX.V, V.100.
festival.\textsuperscript{214} The king Sena II, in the ninth century A.D, celebrated the Vesak festival with the poor, giving food, drink and clothing, as they desired.\textsuperscript{215} According to these literary instances, it is clear that the king supported the Vesak festival and participated personally to celebrated this festival.

4.5 The Relic and Tooth Relic festivals.

Physical relics are seen as the most powerful focus for Buddhist devotion. They act, first, as reminders of a Buddha or saint, their teachings and the fact that they have actually lived on earth.\textsuperscript{216}

4.5.1 Relic ceremony in India and Sri Lanka.

The Mahāparinibbāna Sutta in the \textit{Dīgha Nikāya} remarks that eight claimants for the corporeal remains (sārirāni) after cremation requested Drona Brāhmaṇa to divided them equally among them. Accordingly, the remains of the Buddha were equally divided among king Ajātasattu of Magadha, the Licchavis of Vaisali, the Śākyans of Kapilavattu, the Bulis of Allakappa, the Koliyas of Rāmagāma, the Brāhmanas of Vethadipa, the Mallas of Pāvā and the Mallas of Kusinārā. The Brāhmaṇa Drona who divided the remains took away the vessel with which the relics were measured. The Mauryas of Pippalivana, who came late carried away the embers from the place of cremation. Those who took the remains enshrined them in stūpa built in their respective areas. The Brāhmaṇa Drona built a stūpa enshrining the measuring vessel and the Mauryans

\textsuperscript{214} Dipavamsa, Ch. XXI, V. 58; Ibid, Ch. XXXVI, p. 40, 109, 130.
\textsuperscript{215} Cūlavamsa, Ch. 58, V. 84.
enshrined the embers in a stūpa built in their region. Thus were ten stūpas built, after the cremation of the Buddha.\textsuperscript{217}

The lowest architrave of the south gateway of Sāñchi uses continuous narrative to portray the ‘siege of the relics’. The besieged town of Kusinagar, those Malla chieftains had taken possession of the relics of the Buddha, occupies the centre of the architrave.\textsuperscript{218} Although it depicts the siege in progress, nevertheless it gives a clear hint of the victory that is to follow for the seven chiefs, by showing their figures repeatedly—three on the left and four on the right side (including the false caps) and the architrave ends as they ride off with the relics on their elephants. Furthermore, the western pillar of the northern gateway illustrates the worship of the Buddha’s relic stūpa by the Malla king of Kusinagara.\textsuperscript{219}

Archaeologists, in their excavations, have been able to discover a stūpa built by the Śākyas. Peppé who took great care in the excavations, and found some relics too in it. An inscription found from this stūpa, carries the words “this tomb of the Buddha, the blessed one, belongs to( erected by) the Śākyas who have devout sisters, wives and children.”\textsuperscript{220} Further, inscriptions found on reliquaries contained in Sāñchi stūpa II, Sonāri, and Āndre stūpas indicate that the bone relics within them belonged to famous Buddhist saints and teachers who had lived during the Mauryan period, some of whom apparently participated in Aśoka’s third Buddhist council and others who travelled to the

\textsuperscript{217} Dīgha Nikāya, Vol. II, pp. 94-95.
\textsuperscript{219} Ibid., p. 124.
\textsuperscript{220} “Iyam salīnādhiḥ budhhasa bhagavato sakyāna suktibhatānām sabhaginīkānām saputadalanān,” JRAS, 1898, p. 387f; Führer, Annual Progress Report of the Archaeological Survey Circle, North-Western Provinces and Oudh, for the year ending 30\textsuperscript{th} June 1898, 1898, p. 3; Peppe, JRAS, 1898, pp76 ff;
Himalayās to preach.²²¹ Bhājā Buddhist stūpa inscriptions,²²² Bhattiprolu casket inscriptions²²³ give information about relics of Buddhist saints.

The *Sumangalavilāini* describes the nature of the Buddha’s relics: which relics scattered, and which did not? The seven relics, namely, the four eye-teeth, the two collar-bone relics and frontal bone relic did not scatter. The others scattered. The smaller of those relics were like mustard seeds. The larger were like rice grains broken into halves, and the largest were like green-pea grains broken into halves.²²⁴ The *Paramatthajotikā* too gives this idea with a slight difference. According to the account in the *Suttanipāta* commentary, all the relics of Gautama Buddha scattered like gold dust.²²⁵

There is evidence which reveals that some Indian kings also celebrated the relic festivals of the Buddha. Fa-Hien gives details about the occurrence of such a festival in India. He says that the king of the country, revering and honouring the bone, and anxious lest it should be stolen away, selected eight individuals, representing the great families in the kingdom, and committed to each a seal, with which he should seal (its shrine) and guard (the relic). At early dawn these eight men come, and after each has inspected his seal, they open the door. They wash their hands with scented water and bring out the bone, which they place outside the Vihāra on a lofty platform, where it is supported on a pedestal of the seven precious substances, and covered with a bell of lapis lazuli, both adorned with rows of pearls. Its colour is of a yellowish white, and it forms an imperfect circle twelve inches round, curving upwards to the centre. Every day, after it has been

²²¹ See Ch. II, pp. 105-106.
²²² ASWI, Vol. IV, 1964, No. 2, p. 82, No. 3, p. 82, No. 4, p. 83, No. 5, p. 83, No. 6, p. 83, No. 7, p. 83
²²³ EI, Vol. II, Nos. 6, 7, p. 328, Nos. 9, 10, p. 329.
²²⁵ *Paramatthajotikā*, p. 194.
brought forth, the keepers of the Vihāra ascend a high gallery, where they beat great drums, blow conches, and clash their copper cymbals. When the king hears them, he goes to the Vihāra, and makes his offerings of flowers and incense. When he has done this, he departs, going out by the door on the west as they had entered by that on the east. The king every morning makes his offerings, performs his worship, and afterwards gives audience on the business of his government. The chiefs of the Vaiśyas also make their offering before they attend to their family affairs. Every day it is so, and there is no remissness in the observance of the custom. The kings of various countries are also constantly sending messengers with offerings.²²⁶ Fa-Hien does not, however, mention the name of the relics.

With the introduction of Buddhism to Sri Lanka by Mahinda Thera in the third century B.C., Sri Lanka became the proud custodian of some of the most important corporeal relics, such as the collar-bone of the Buddha, the right tooth (dakkhina Daladā), the hair relic (Keśa Dhātu), the Alms Bowl (pātra Dhātu), etc.²²⁷ Arahanta Mahinda declared that seeing a relic of the Buddha is similar to seeing the Buddha himself.²²⁸ As a result of this statement the ownership of a stūpa Šārīrika or Pāribhogika object of Buddha served as a strong means of effecting changes in society and in the ruling system. Once the people accepted Buddhism, relevant rites and rituals of worship had to be established among them.²²⁹ Firstly, king Devānampiya Tissa built a stūpa called Thupārāma on the advice of Thera Mahinda for enshrining the relics at Anurādhapura.²³⁰

²²⁷ Mahāvamsa, Ch. I,V, 33-34,37-38.
²²⁸ ibid., Ch. XVII, V. 2-4, Samantapāsādikā, p. 31.
²³⁰ ibid., Ch. XVII, V.4-21 Samantapāsādikā, p. 32.
When relics were needed for enshrining in the Thupārāma, the novice Sumana Sāmanera who went to India, on Arahanta Mahinda’s instructions, met emperor Aśoka and brought the Buddha’s Alms-Bowl, filled with his relics.\textsuperscript{231} It was the right-Tooth relic of the Buddha, according to legend, firstly it was under the possession of the god Indra who worshiped it in his heaven. When Sumana Sāmanera received from Indra the Buddha’s right collar bone he left him the Tooth to honour.\textsuperscript{232} The collar-bone relic was then enshrined in the Thupārāma.\textsuperscript{233} The Rājaratnākaraya, records that the mole-hair relic of the Buddha, which was in the possession of emperor Aśoka was brought by Arahanta Mahinda on his visit to Sri Lanka, and was enshrined in the Cetiyagiri stūpa (Mihintale).\textsuperscript{234}

It was from the Nāga abode that Thera Sonuttara brought relics to be enshrined in the Mahātūpa, built by king Duttagāmanī.\textsuperscript{235} The Mahāvamsa says that the kingdom of Sri Lanka was offered these relics for seven days.\textsuperscript{236}

The Pūjāvaliya remarks that the waist band relic of the Buddha was brought here during the time of king Mahāsena and was enshrined in a Jetavana stūpa.\textsuperscript{237} The Dhātuvamsa carries an account of a provincial king named Giri-Abā, who lived during the time of king Kākavanna Tissa, building a stūpa in the Soma city, giving it the name of his queen Somādevi and enshrining the right eye-tooth of the Buddha which was “being used for worship” by a Thera named Mahinda.\textsuperscript{238} Further, the Dhātuvamsa says

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{231} Ibid., V. 9-19; Ibid
\item \textsuperscript{232} Mahāvamsa, Ch. XVII, V. 14-15
\item \textsuperscript{233} Ibid., V. 50
\item \textsuperscript{234} Rājaratnākaraya, p. 9
\item \textsuperscript{235} Mahāvamsa, Ch. XXXI, V. 66-68.
\item \textsuperscript{236} Ibid., V. 111-112.
\item \textsuperscript{237} Pūjāvaliya, p. 721.
\item \textsuperscript{238} Dhātuvamsa, p. 34.
\end{itemize}
that a stūpa was erected in the Seru city during the time of Kākavanna Tissa and the frontal-bone relic of the Buddha was enshrined there.²³⁹ This is the present Seruwila stūpa.

4.5.2 Tooth relic and Ceremony

A few centuries after the planting of the sacred Bodhi Tree at Anurādhapura, a Tooth relic of Buddha was brought to that capital from the country of Kālinga during the reign of the king Sirimeghavanna. During the period of the Anurādhapura kingdom, the Bodhi tree was an important object in Sinhala kingship, but from the Polonnaruwa period the cult of the Tooth relic gains importance. The Bodhi tree could not be taken to the new capital, where the Tooth relic was removed. This sacred object was endowed with the powers of making rain, and a belief developed among the Sinhalese people that he who possessed this relic had the rightful and legitimate claim to the Sinhalese throne.

According to the Dhāthāvamsa, the ancient historical chronicle of the Tooth relic, the king of Kālinga, in whose personal care the relic had lain, was in fear of an imminent invasion from his hostile neighbour. Therefore, this relic was brought to Sri Lanka from Kālinga (in India) in the ninth reign year of the king Sirimeghavanna by the prince Danta and the princess Hemamālā, who during a time of war are said to have fled to Sri Lanka for safety with the sacred tooth, concealed in coils of the princess’s hair. Further, the Dhāthāvamsa says that the sacred Tooth relic was sent to the king’s father, king Mahāsena, who was a very strong supporter and patron of Mahāyāna Buddhism in Sri

²³⁹ Dhāthāvamsa, V. 22.
Lanka. It had been sent to him for protection, but he had died before its arrival. The sacred Tooth relic was first brought to Meghagiri Vihāra (modern Isurumuni Vihāra at Anurādhapura), but immediately afterwards it was removed and installed at the royal palace in the same city. When this precious relic was brought to Sri Lanka, the king received it with great honour and veneration by offering the whole of Sri Lanka to it.

The great chronicle the Mahāvamsa states that the king had it installed in a shrine known as Dhammacakka-geha (which later become known as Dāthādhātughara or Tooth relic shrine) and arranged there a great festival in honour of the sacred Tooth relic with a proclamation that every year, at the time for exposition it should be brought to the Abhayagiri Vihāra. Successive monarchs continued to bestow reverence and personal attention on the sacred relic and they housed it in a shrine, which is a part of the royal palace. With the establishment of the Sinhalese kingdom in Kandy, the Tooth relic found a permanent home in the Daladā Māligāwa. Often the kings instituted a sacrificial festival (mahāpūjā) in honour of a sanctuary or a relic, in the later time chiefly of the Daladā (the Tooth relic). In the tenth century the temple was destroyed by fire, but restored by king Mahinda IV, and we hear that it was situated in the centre of the town. At the end of the eleventh century, after the Cōla invasion, the king Vijayabhāhu I, built a beautiful and new temple for the tooth relic at Pulatthinagara (Polonnaruwa) and he instituted permanently for it a great festival. Festivals were instituted in its honour and

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241 Dhātuvams, V. 55-70.
244 Cūlavamsa, Ch. 50, V. 45.
245 Ibid., Ch. 60, V. 16., CJS (G), Vol. I, p. 162.
offerings were presented to it by many kings. King Moggallāna, ²⁴⁶ Aggabodhi III, ²⁴⁷ Sena I, ²⁴⁸ Sena II, ²⁴⁹ organized the great festival to honour the tooth relic.

The left right-tooth (Vāma dāthādhātu) ²⁵⁰ of the Buddha is the most important and precious of all Buddhist relics ever brought to Sri Lanka. The left Tooth relic, called Vāma dāthā-dhātu in Sinhalese, is by far the most revered and most popular relic. Before it was brought to Sri Lanka this relic had received the utmost respect and reverence for nearly eight or ninth centuries in India (from 6th century to 3rd century B.C.) and, for fifteen centuries (from 3rd to 18th century A.D.) it was in the custody of pious Buddhist monarchs in Sri Lanka. It was regarded with such great honour that it became the palladium of the Sinhalese kings.

The Chinese Buddhist traveller Fa-Hien, who visited Sri Lanka at the beginning of the fifth century, also gives a vivid account of this annual festival as he saw it in Anurādhapura. This sacred relic witnessed an annual festival held in Anurādhapura in its honour and he has left us an interesting account of it. According to Fa-Hien, the Tooth relic of the Buddha was always brought forth in the middle of the third month. Ten days before hand the king grandly caparisons a large elephant, on which he mounts a man who can speak distinctly, and is dressed in royal robes, to beat a large drum, and make the following proclamation:- “the Bodhisattva, during three Asankēyya-Kalpas, manifested his activity, and did not spare his own life. He gave up kingdom, city, wife and son; he plucked out his eyes and gave them to another. He cut off a piece of his flesh to ransom

²⁴⁶ Ibid., Ch. 42, V. 46.
²⁴⁷ Ibid., Ch. 47, V. 44.
²⁴⁸ Ibid., Ch. 49, V. 22.
²⁴⁹ Ibid, Ch. 51, p. 37.
²⁵⁰ Dhaṭṭavamsa, V.114, 119.
the life of a dove; he cut off his head and gave it as alms; he gave his body to feed a
starving tigress; he grudged not his marrow and brains. In many such ways as these did he undergo pain for the sake of all living beings. And so it was, that, having become Buddha, he continued in the world for forty-five years, preaching his law, teaching and transforming, so that those who had no rest found rest, and the unconverted were converted. When his connection with the living was completed, he attained Parinirvāṇa (and died). Since that event, for 1497 years, the light of the world has gone out, and all living beings have had long continued sadness. Behold! Ten days after this, Buddha’s tooth will be brought forth, and taken to Abhayagiri Vihāra. Let all and each, whether monks or laics, who wish to amass merit for themselves, make the road smooth and in good condition, grandly adorn the lanes and byways, and provide abundant store of flowers and incense as offering to it.”

When this proclamation is over, the king exhibits, so as to line both sides of the road, the five hundred different bodily forms in which the Buddha had appeared in this previous birth according to the Jātaka stories. All their figures were brightly coloured and grandly executed, looking as if they were alive. After this, the Tooth of the Buddha is brought forth, and is carried alone in the middle of the road. Everywhere on the way offerings were presented to it, and thus it arrived at the hall of the Buddha in the Abhayagiri Vihāra.

There the monks and the laics collected. They burn incense, light lamps and perform all the prescribed services, day and night, without ceasing till ninety days had been completed, when the Tooth is returned to the Vihāra within the city. On the first-day the door of the Vihāra was opened, and forms of ceremonial reverence were observed
according to the rules.\textsuperscript{251} This account is invaluable because it shows the extent to which ritual had become a part of the Buddhist religion by the end of the fourth century A.D.\textsuperscript{252}

According to Hiuen-Tsang's details, the Vihāra of Buddha’s Tooth relic is located by the side of the king’s palace. It is decorated with every kind of gem, the splendour of which dazzles the sight like that of the sun. For successive generations worship has been respectfully offered to this relic. The king three times a day washes the tooth of the Buddha with perfumed water, sometime with powdered perfumed, whether washing or burning, the whole ceremony is attended with a service of the most precious jewels.\textsuperscript{253}

The Daladā Sīrīta (history of the Tooth relic) provides many details about the annual festival celebrated on the occasion. Paranavitana gives a summary of this account as follows “the Tooth relic festival started at a time when it was declared auspicious by the astrologers. The shrine of the Tooth relic was beautifully decorated and the king along with the ladies of the harem, the courtiers and the townsfolk made offerings to the relic for seven days. On the afternoon of the seventh day in the presence of the high dignitaries of the Uttaramula fraternity the casket containing the relic was removed from the sanctum by representatives of the noble families of Ganavasi and Kālinga; and was placed in a decorated car. Two members of the above-mentioned families mounted the car and carried the casket in their hand. The chariot drawn by a richly caparisoned elephant was taken through the streets which were especially decorated for the occasion.

\textsuperscript{251} Legge, \textit{op. cit.}, 1971, pp. 105-107.
\textsuperscript{252} Adikaram, \textit{op. cit.}, 1953, p. 138.
\textsuperscript{253} Beal, \textit{op. cit.}, 1969, pp. 248-249.
In front of the chariot marched the members of the Sangha who chanted the *Pirit* holding in their hands a string (in Sinhalse *Pirit Nula* “thread of protection”) tied to the car. Water charmed by the utterance of the sacred texts (*piritta*) was sprinkled from a silver pitcher over the city as the procession wended its way through the streets. This duty was performed by a member of the aristocratic family of Doranavasi. On both sides of the chariot stood persons holding white umbrellas and Chauris. Immediately following the car marched the musicians attached to the Temple of the Tooth followed by those of the royal palace. Next followed the officers of the state and army. Having circumambulated the city in the manner aforesaid the procession returned to the temple where in the presence of the chief monk of the Uttaramula fraternity the temple officials and representatives of the two families of Ganavasi and Kālinga the casket was opened and the sacred relic exhibited. It was first shown to the assembled monks and then to the king who received it in his hand with marks of the greatest respect and placed it on a dais specially prepared so that it may be seen by the assembled multitude. The ordinary folk had to be satisfied with a glance of the relic from a distance. When the assembled populace had paid their respects to the relic it was once more deposited in the casket which was sealed with three seals including that of the king. To those worshippers who had made any kind of offering, *Prasāda* in the shape of sandal paste was given by the priests. While all these rites were gone through *Paritta* was chanted incessantly by five or seven monks.”

After the fifth century many kings of Anurādhapura organized festivals for the sacred Tooth relics. Two other objects of worship attracting veneration from both the

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254 See the Pirit Ceremony.

rulers and the ruled during thirteen centuries of the Anurādhapura era were the sacred Bodhi tree and the sacred Tooth relic. Nine kings bore the name "Aggaboddhi", or "Sanghabodhi" which suggests the continued importance of the holiness of the sacred Bodhi tree. Royal names such as Dhātusena, Dāthāpabhuti, Dala Moggallāna, Dāthopatissa and Hatthādātha,256 continued to be attached to the sacred tooth relic. When the capital of Sri Lanka was moved from Anurādhapura to Polonnaruwa in the middle of the eleventh century, the importance of the sacred Tooth relic increased.

In the Polonnaruwa period beginning in the eleventh century and ending in the early decades of the 19th century with the downfall of the Kandyan kingdom, the importance of the sacred Tooth relic, both as an object of religious value and as an emblem of kingship, is seen in the following historical incidents which need to be considered in order to understand the rituals connected with the relics. The following is a brief summary of that long history. King Sirimeghavanna’s rule is especially noteworthy as it marked the acquisition by the Buddhists of Sri Lanka of a sacred object which was eventually to receive a principal share of royal religious devotion. Furthermore, possession of the relic symbolised the right.

The Tooth relic and the Alms Bowl relic of Buddha cannot be separated from each other, as during the second half of the medieval period their fate was always linked. According to the Chronicles, Sumana Samanera brought the Alms Bowl relic of Buddha to Sri Lanka during the reign of king Devānampiya Tissa.257 It seems that it was kept in the royal palace in Anurādhapura. When king Vattagāmani, in the first century B.C, was conquered by south Indian invaders and fled from the town, he could not take the Alms

256 Mahāvamsa, Ch. XXXVIII, V. 35, Cūlavamsa, Ch. 40, V.42, Ch. 42, V. 128, Ch. 44, V.45.
257 Mahāvamsa, Ch. XVII, V. 21.
bowl relic with him. Thus it fell into the hands of one of the invaders who carried it away to India. At the end of the fourth century A.D. it was again in Sri Lanka, for king Upatissa I made use of the stone Alms bowl relic of the Buddha in a rain charm instituted by him when the island was vexed by the ill of a famine and plague. In the twelfth century A.D. the offerings presented by pious people to the Alms bowl relic and to the Tooth relic were forcibly taken by king Jayabhāhu I. From that time onward the two relics formed an inseparable pair in the Chronicle up to the fourteenth century A.D.

4.6 Pirith festival and Gangarohana Pūjā

The Sinhala word Pirith (pronounced Pirith) is commonly known as a correct form from the Pāli term Paritta which is supposed to be connected with Sanskrit Paritra or Paritrāna meaning ‘protection’ or ‘safety’. The gradual evolution of this word can be seen through canonical and commentarial literature as it acquired a ritualistic connotation. This fully developed ritualistic significance is explained in the following. Paritta is so called because:

(I) it protects warding off danger

(II) it gives protection on all sides or from calamities.

(III) by the power of its great majesty and danger arising from all quarter.

The word Paritta first occurs in the Cullavagga of the Vinaya Pitaka and the Anguttara Nikāya in connection with the Kandha-Paritta which was ‘allowed’ by the Buddha “as watch, a guard, a protection for oneself” for the use of the order.

Ibid., Ch., XXXIII, V, 47.
Ibid., Ch., XXXVII, V, 192.
is a popular ritual. Its widespread popularity seems to be due to the fact that it can be performed at any time according to need, at any place for a variety of purposes both secular and religious with dignified simplicity by anyone who wishes to have it performed.

The use of a protective spell—variously known as Paritta, Rakkhā, Mantra, Dhārani, Kavaca etc., against various dangers has been a common practice from very early times. It is possible that the Paritta was adopted by the Buddha in place of the Rakshanamantras (protection of incantation) of the Brāhmanic religion in order to replace pure magical rite with something more meaningful and of religious value. The public recitation of Ratana Sutta at Vaisali is the best known instance. The Khanda Paritta, Metta Sutta, Ātānatiya Sutta, Mahā Kassapatthera Bojjhanga, Mahā Moggallāntthera Bojjhanga, Girimānanda Sutta etc. are some Parittas that received the sanction of the Buddha himself.

A collection of texts taken from the Khuddaka Nikāya, the Anguttara Nikāya and the Majjhima Nikāya are recited on special occasions to ward off illness and danger. The term Paritta means protection. The Milindapañha gives a list of the chief protection Suttas including the Ratana Sutta, Khanda Paritta, Mōra Paritta, Dhajagga Paritta, Angulimāla Paritta. To these are generally added, in the extant collection of Parittas,
the Mangala Sutta and the Metta Sutta. The Khanda Paritta, was allowed by the Buddha as a watch, a guard, a protection for oneself, for the use of the order. The occasion of the delivery of this general injunction was the death of a monk from snake bite. The Ātānātiya Sutta is the most important and powerful in the matter of exorcism. The Manorathapuranī says that the Paritta such as the Ātānātiya, Mōra, Dhajagga and Ratana Suttas are said to have influenced over ten thousand Koti (one hundred thousand million). As the Paritta generally embody statements of truth as taught in Buddhism their recitation is regarded as an ‘assertion of truth’ (saccakiriya) whereby evil or disease can be averted. It draws its power by wishing the listener safety after affirming the excellent qualities of the Three Gems of Buddhism, Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha.

The Pirit or Paritrāna is a collection of certain Buddhist texts (catubanavarapāli), which are recited on special occasions to ward off illness or dangers. The power of sound of Paritta waves resulting from the sonorous and rhythmic recitation also play a part in exercising this beneficial influence. The vibrating sound waves produced by the sonorous and mellifluous chanting adds to the effect of the truths enunciated.

275 Papañcasudāṇi, p. 231.
There is a common belief that most of the afflictions that men suffer are due to the malice of demons or evil spirits and there are a number of ceremonies that profess to have the sanction of the Buddha. When laymen were ill, it was customary for the people to invite the Bhikkhus to recite the *Paritta*. The *Samantapāśādikā* describes the forms of invitation which should be accepted and which are not to be accepted. No household or social function, no religious festival or ceremonial is complete without the chanting of *Pirit*. It could be a simple ritual or it could be a most elaborate ceremony.\(^{278}\) According to the Sri Lankan tradition, the words of the Buddha in the original Pāli, the words of the sacred select Buddhist texts, are chanted by the monks, seated on the *Pirit Mandapa* (a special hall, is prepared for *Pirit* chanting) and the Sutta with thoughts of love foremost in the devotee’s heart is recited. After the end of the *Pirit* ceremony, the thread, sanctified by the chanting, is broken into pieces and tied round the wrist and neck of those assembled and at the same time the sanctified water is given to the assembled people to drink and sprinkled on all.

### 4.6.1 Pirith ceremony and role of the kings

The collection of the *Paritta* is from ancient time to this day, more widely known by the laity of Burma and Sri Lanka, for exorcising the evil spirit and dispelling diseases, blessing an auspicious occasion, both individual and national. The *Mahāvamsa* says that when prince Vijaya landed in the island, God Uppalavanna (*Vishnu*), according to Buddha’s demand, sprinkled charmed water (*Pirit pān*) on the men and tied sacralised thread (*pirit nul*) on their hands for their protection from demons.\(^{279}\) It is interesting to

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\(^{278}\) L. A. de Silva, *op. cit.*, 1974, p. 81.

\(^{279}\) *Mahāvamsa*, Ch. VII, V. 1-5.
note that during the time of king Upatissa I in Sri Lanka this *Paritta* was used to bring relief when the island was afflicted by drought, disease and distress.

King Upatissa I had the honour of inaugurating the Buddhist ceremony called *Gangārohana Pūjā* in the fifth century A.D. at the time the island was affected by famine and disease as in Vaisali (in India) at the Buddha’s time. The then king inquired from the Sangha if anything was done by the Buddha in such a situation to alleviate the suffering of the people, and the Buddhist Sangha described to him how the Ratana Sutta was recited by the Buddha when Vaisali was visited by such a calamity.²⁸⁰ The Ratana Sutta was chanted by the Buddha when the people of Vesali (in India), were stricken by pestilence, drought and famine caused by malignant spirits. By the power of this Sutta the evil spirits were driven away, the people were freed from fear and sickness and torrential rain poured down, bringing prosperity to the troubled city again.²⁸¹

On the advice of the monks, the king requested a body of them to walk about in the streets throughout the night chanting the Ratana Sutta and sprinkling water. Hence, the city was beautifully decorated and a large crowd of monks following the chariot with the Buddha’s golden image walked the whole night round the streets reciting the Ratana Sutta and sprinkling water. The king himself took part in the ceremony, walking with the monks. Thereupon the king Upatissa had an image of the Buddha made, and placing in its hands the Buddha’s stone Alms-Bowl filled with water, mounted it on a chariot. As a result of this it is said that at sunrise great clouds gathered and there was a downpour of rain. There was great rejoicing in the land and the king issued the following decree: “should there at any time be another affliction of drought and sickness in the island, do

²⁸⁰ *Cūlavamsa*, Ch. XXXVII, V. 189-190
²⁸¹ *Suttanipāta*, see Ratana Sutta pp. 66-72; *Paramatthajotikā*, pp. 54-55.
you observe the like ceremony”. This is the first recorded instance of a *Paritta* being recited for the public in Sri Lanka.\(^{282}\)

In the medieval period king Sena II had the same ceremony performed to ward off an epidemic calamity on the island. He decorated the cart and placed the Buddha’s image and Thera Ananda carried round the streets followed by monks reciting the *Pirit* and sprinkling *Pirit* water (*Prit pān*).\(^{283}\) According to the Chronicles, when king Kāssapa V was threatened by the danger of famine, Buddhist monks were involved in reciting the *Pirit* around the city to avoid the famine on the patronage of the king of the city.\(^{284}\)

The slab inscription of king Kāssapa V lays down that only those who are familiar with the *Catubhanavara Pāli* should be admitted to the order.\(^{285}\) The tablets of king Mahinda IV at Mihintale conjoin that monks should recite and practise *meth Pirit* (Pāli *metta Paritta*) before partaking of their morning meals.\(^{286}\)

The *Piritta* is an equivalent to exorcism and faith healing which all popular religious are compelled to offer to the believing masses. The development of the full-fledged *Pirit* ceremony as we know today can be seen only after the Polonnaruwa period.

### 4.7 Poson and Mahinda festival.

About a month after the Vesak festival comes the Poson festival in Sri Lanka. Poson day commemorates the momentous significance of the introduction of Buddhism

\(^{282}\) *Cūlavamsa*, Ch. XXXVII, V. 191-198.

\(^{283}\) *Ibid.*, Ch. 51, V. 80-81.

\(^{284}\) *Ibid.*, Ch. 52, V. 80.


into the island. This Poson day is a reminder of all the Sri Lankan social and cultural ties with India, and the spiritual and cultural tradition common to both Sri Lanka and India. 287

The full moon day of Poson, that is the third lunar month of the Sinhalese Year, which falls in the month of May or June is also now chosen as the time to honour the memory of Arahanta Mahinda, missionary of Buddhism to the Sinhalese kingdom of Anurādhapura. The period during the full moon of Poson day was indeed an occasion of festivity in early Sinhalese times even before the introduction of Buddhism. The Poson full moon time marked the season for a festival coming down from pre-Buddhist times, but it was of quite a different type. That was an ancient rain-making rite and a festival of fertility. 288 It was, however, a different kind of festival that was held during the asterism of Jettamūla. At this festival water sports took the most prominent place. It is identified as a water festival that was held in the month of Jettamūla. The king Devāmnampiya Tissa also participated in such a festival. 289 This water-sport involved a fertility cult. It is true that Thera Mahinda is recorded to have arrived in the island during the Poson festival, but ceremonies in honour of Thera Mahinda were formerly held at quite a different time of the year. 290 Towards the end of king Dutthagāmani’s victorious campaign against the foreign invader, the usurper king Elāra, celebrated a Poson festival. The Vamsatthappakāsini says that the king, that is Duttagāmani, as he approached Anurādhapura pitched his camp at the foot of the Kāsa mountain. When he had made a tank there (by the name of Pajjotavāpi), in the month of Jettamūla, he held a water

287 Raghavan, op. cit., 1969, p. 78.
289 Mahāvamsa, Ch. XIV, V. 1-2.
290 Godakumbura, op. cit., 1970, pp. 92, 94.
festival. Although the Poson festival was held for fertility in the pre-Buddhist period, after the introduction of Buddhism, this day is considered the day of the introduction of Buddhism in Sri Lanka and the day of the arrival of the Arahanta Mahinda and Buddhist missionaries to Sri Lanka.

Arahanta Mahinda was remembered on the anniversary of his death or Parinibbāna, and meritorious deeds in his name were carried out on that date. This account shows that ceremonies and festivities in honour of Arahanta Mahinda were held in the ancient period in Poson as well as in the month of Vap. According to the Mahāvamsa, Arahanta Mahinda passed into Nibbāna on the eighth day of the bright half of the month of Assayuja. The Assayuja is the name of the Sinhala month Vap (October-November).

The description of the Arahanta Mahinda festival in the reign of king Sirimeghavanna enables us to have an idea as to how this event was celebrated at other times. In the reign of king Sirimeghavanna, a new festival was inaugurated in honour of Thera Mahinda. He had a life-size image of the Thera for the occasion. From Anurādhapura to Mihintale, the road was beautifully decorated. A day before the anniversary of the Thera's death, the image of Mahinda was taken from Anurādhapura to Ambatthala (Mihintale). The statues were then left at Ambatthala on the eighth day, that is, the anniversary of the Parinibbāna of Thera Mahinda, which was a Poya (Full moon) day, for the devotees to pay their homage. It was on the ninth day that the dwellers of the city including the members of the royal inner apartments went to Ambatthala. Most of the Bhikkhus of the island are said to have gathered there. It was a time of amnesty.

292 Mahāvamsa, Ch. XX, V. 33.
Offenders were freed from prison, and they too joined the crowd that went to Mihintale. There was great alms giving, not only for human beings, but for all living beings, which included birds and beasts as well. The gifts were given to the poor, wayfarers and beggars, and the fourfold necessities were provided for the Bhikkhus. Thereafter, the statue was taken in procession from Mihintale to Anurādhapura. Two days after that, in a mammoth procession of monks and laymen led by the king himself, the image was taken to a Vihāra built by the king in Sottiyākāra near the eastern gate of the city where it was kept for three days and then taken in procession through the city to the Mahā Vihāra and was exhibited in the courtyard of the Mahābodhi for three days in order to be venerated by the masses. Ultimately, the image was lodged in a house specially built near the royal palace. The king also had a house built of images for Thera Ittiya and other companions of Arahanta Mahinda. Endowments were made for the maintenance of that place and the keeping of the festival, which the king decreed, should be held annually by all succeeding kings. In course of time it appears that this festival did not receive much attention but it has recently been revived. Along with it a Theri Sanghamittā festival too has been revived and is now held annually. 293

In the fifth century, king Dhatusena is mentioned as one who held the great Arahanta Mahinda festival, at which the recital exposition of the Dipavamsa, formed a special feature. 294

4.8 Funeral Ceremony

Among the Buddhists death is regarded as an occasion of major religious significance, both for the deceased and for the survivors. Both aspects of death-the

293 Cūlavamsa, Ch. 37, V. 66-90.
294 Ibid., Ch. 37, V. 58-59.
message of impermanence, and the opportunity to help the departed loved one-find expression in the Buddhist funeral rites of Sri Lanka. Naturally, the monastic Sangha plays a prominent role in the funeral proceedings. One of the most important part of the funeral rites is the ritual called “offering of cloth on half of the dead” (mataka-vastra pūjā). After offering it, the close relatives of the deceased sit together on a mat, assume a reverential posture, and together they pour water from a vessel into a cup placed within a plate until the cup overflows. While the water is being poured, the monks intone in unison the following stanza extracted from the Tirokuuddha Sutta of the Suttanipāta.

The context shows that the pouring of water in this manner is a ritualistic act belonging to the field of sympathetic magic, symbolizing the beneficial inheritance of the dakkhinā offering. This is done prior to the cremation or the burial of the body. Monks are assembled in the home of the dead person or in the cemetery.295

The funeral ceremony of monks and kings were another ceremony which was held in ancient Sri Lanka. Fa-Hien has provided valuable information regarding the funeral rites in fifth century Sri Lanka. This description refers especially to the cremation ceremony of a monk who was recognised as an Arahanta of the day. He says that four or five Li east of the Vihāra there was reared a great pile of firewood, which might be more than thirty cubits square, and the same in height. Near the top were laid sandal, aloe, and other kinds of fragrant woods.

On the four sides (of the pile) they made steps by which to ascend it. With clean white hair-cloth almost like silk, they wrapped (the body) round and round. They made a large carriage-frame, in form like our funeral car, but without the dragons and fishes.

At the time of the cremation, the king and the people, in multitudes from all quarters, collected together, and presented offerings of flowers and incense. While they were following the car to the burial-ground, the king himself presented flowers and incense. When this was finished, the car was lifted on the pile, all over which oil of sweet basil was poured, and then a light was applied. While the fire was blazing, every one, with reverent heart, pulled off his upper garment, and threw it, with his feather-fan and umbrella, from a distance into the midst of the flames, to assist the burning. When the cremation was over, they collected and preserved the bone, and proceeded to erect a tope. Fa-Hien had not arrived in time (to see the distinguished Śramana) alive, and only saw his burial. Fa-Hien states that the king accordingly, when he died, was buried like the fashion of an Arhanta (Arahanta monk), as the regular rule prescribed.

From the Mahāvamsa we can gather some details about the funeral ceremony in ancient Sri Lanka, as it refers to the funeral ceremony of Arahanta Mahinda and Theri Sanghamittā during the reign of king Uttiya, who was the brother of king Devānampiya Tissa. The pattern of cremation ceremony of Arahanta Mahinda is similar to that described by Fa-Hien. The Mahāvamsa provides few details about the funeral procession of King Mahāsena. According to this account, some officers had also gone to the funeral procession behind the corpse of the deceased king upto the funeral pile.

The corpses of deceased monks as well as kings were always disposed of by burning (Karesum antimam Vidim). When in the year 496 A.D. king Kāssapa I, in the
battle against his brother Moggalāna saw that his soldiers were yielding, he cut his own throat. Moggalāna, glad at his brother’s death, because he had by his suicide spared him the necessity of meting out justice himself for king Kāssapa’s parricide, carried out the ceremonies of burning the king’s corpse in the usual manner (*Katvālāhanakiccam*). 301

We see from this example that the burning of the predecessor’s corpse was not only an act of piety, but also a symbolic act. The new sovereign always wished to make it manifest to the people that he was the legitimate successor of the deceased king and he ascended the throne in his own right. 302

After Buddhism was officially recognised the king took every measure to spread the faith and tried his enthusiasm to preach the Dhamma himself. Popular festivals were converted into religious ceremonies and the king took a leading part in them. When popular ceremonies were converted to religious festivals, Buddhist monks gave the king an opportunity to appear in public and perhaps to display glamour as well as his righteousness. Apart from this such ceremonies turned out to be a common ground where the ruler and ruled met striving for a common cause and to glorify the faith they both avowed. Hence, the religious ceremonies must have brought the king and the subject close to each other and the Sangha became a constant link between them. Therefore, the more the king participated in such ceremonies the more he won the hearts of his subjects.

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