

Chola Religious Policy in Medieval Sri Lanka

by

W. M. K. WIJETUNGA

Department of History, Vidyodaya Campus

During the greater part of the eleventh century A.D., the Cholas were the masters of the northern half of Sri Lanka, which was comprised of Rajarata, and the northern parts of Rohana and Dakkhinadesa. Prior to their occupation of these areas there had been a number of invasions of Sri Lanka, also undertaken by the Cholas. The earliest of those invasions had been led by Parantaka I (906-955 A.D.) towards the latter part of his reign (c.947-949). Another invasion took place around 964 A.D., while more frequent invasions were under way during the greater part of the eleventh century. The Sinhalese chronicles are unanimous in their opinion that during the course of such invasions, and during their political hegemony the Cholas did not spare the Buddhists and their religious institutions and establishments. There are harrowing accounts of wilful and deliberate destruction of the same by the Chola invaders.¹ Following these traditional accounts the recent historical studies have also assumed without much deliberation, the possibility that much wanton damage was perpetrated on the Buddhists and their institutions by such invaders.² It is our endeavour here to examine further the veracity of these accounts, both traditional and more recent.

According to the Sinhalese chronicles the places of Buddhist worship in Rajarata were desecrated and plundered by the Cholas. It is said that they sacked the country like blood-sucking *yakkhas*, siezed the relics of the Buddha, and "in the three fraternities and in all Lanka (breaking open) the relic chambers (they carried away) many costly images of gold, and violently destroyed all the monasteries everywhere".³ The *Rajavaliya* adds that all the *bhikkhus* were put to death by them.⁴ At the end of their rule in Sri Lanka, we are told, that the country was completely drained of its spiritual resources in the form of ordained *bhikkhus* and sacred scriptures.⁵ The land itself is said to have revealed a spectre of destruction and desolation, being literally littered with the remains of damaged buildings. It is further said that after expelling the Cholas from Sri Lanka, Vijayabahu I, revived the ordination of *bhikkhus*, with the assistance of those brought from Burma, and also undertook the repair of damaged buildings.⁶ Further restorations were carried out in the

1. *Culavamsa*, (Cv), pt. I, tr. W. Geiger, chap. Iv. 17-18, 20-21, lx.56-80, lxxiv. 1-4, lxxvi. 1053-London, 1929; *Rajavaliya*, (Rv), tr. B. Gunasekera, p. 42, Colombo, 1900; *Rajaratnakaraya*, (Rjr), ed.S.de. Silva, pp. 32-33, Colombo, 1907; *Pujavaliya*, (Pjv), ed. A. V. Suraweera, p. 104, Colombo, 1961.
2. *University History of Ceylon*, (UHC), vol. I, pt. II, p. 562, Colombo, 1960; *A Concise History of Ceylon*, C. W. Nicholas and S. Paranavitane, p. 262, Colombo, 1961.
3. Cv., lv. 17-18, 20-21.
4. Rjv., p. 42.
5. Cv., lx. 4-9; Pjv., p. 105; *Nikayasangrahaya*, (Nks), ed. W. Amaramoli, p. 23, Colombo, 1955.
6. Cv., lx. 6-8, 16-17, 56-64. Pjv., p. 105; Nks., p. 23.

CHOLA RELIGIOUS POLICY IN MEDIEVAL SRI LANKA

reign of Parakramabahu I⁷ However we have mainly these statements in the *Culavamsa*, and the other very general remarks in the Sinhalese chronicles regarding these destructive activities of the Cholas. The archeological remains also do not lend any definite support to the literary statements. However some of the remains from ancient Buddhist sites, which have been subsequently restored, seem to reveal, at least to some extent, the damage and decay at those sites. Sometimes the materials for such restoration themselves seem to have come from other ruined buildings.⁸ But owing to problems of dating, it is not possible, on the available archeological evidences to place all the guilt on the Cholas alone.

Perhaps it is not impossible to concede that the destructive activities of the Cholas would have been very disastrous to Buddhism in Sri Lanka, but its decline and decay would not necessarily have been a result of their activities alone. As a matter of fact there have been instances of the destruction of Buddhist religious buildings, and discrimination against the *Sangha* (Buddhist clergy), by some of the Sinhalese kings and princes themselves⁹ Other foreigners, such as the Keralas and the Pandyas are also said to have destroyed many establishments, both before and after the period of Chola rule in Sri Lanka.¹⁰ Natural factors such as famine, drought and plague have also had an adverse effect on Buddhism, and had led to neglect and ruin, of many religious buildings. However while Buddhism had suffered at the hands of such diverse hostile elements, many Sinhalese kings and nobles had exerted themselves in repairing such damage, and putting the religion back on a sound footing.

The *Sangha* or the community of Buddhist monks had always enjoyed a highly privileged position in Sri Lanka. It enjoyed the exclusive patronage of practically all the Sinhalese kings, queens and other dignitaries, and of the people at large. Costly gifts had been lavished on the *Sangha*. Large tracts of lands, sometimes whole villages, had been granted to its members, or to the Buddhist *viharas*. At times revenues derived from large reservoirs had been transferred to the *Sangha*. From the time of the establishment of Buddhism in Sri Lanka in the time of Devanampiyatissa (3rd century B.C.) all the kings, but for a few exceptions, had been its loyal patrons. The hold of religion on the society was so great that even some of the Tamil kings, Tamil officials and Tamil mercenaries, who had made their way to Sri Lanka, had to reckon with this factor and show their consideration and generosity to the *Sangha* and the Buddhist establishments.¹¹ Unfortunately however, the increasing wealth of some of the monasteries had sometimes aroused the envy of some of the Sinhalese kings, as much as that of the foreign invaders. We have on record at least a few instances when kings had appropriated to themselves the wealth of the Buddhist institutions.¹²

7. Cv., lxxviii. 96-101, lxxiv. 1-14, lxxiv. 104.

8. *Archeological Survey of Ceylon, Annual Report, (ASCAR)*, 1949, pp, 11-12, 1950, p.12.

9. *Mahavamsa*, (Mv), tr. W. Geiger, xxxvii. 1-39, Colombo, 1950; xlv. 131-5, 138-142, xlv. 29-35, xlvi. 8-9, li. 120.

10. Cv., xxxviii. 37-38, 1.33-36, li. 22-25, lii. 45, xlv. 134-5.

11. Mv., xxi. 21-26; Cv., xxxviii. 31, xlvi. 19-25.

12. Cv., xlv. 131-4, 137-42.

At the time the Cholas invaded Sri Lanka, the *Sangha* was divided into a number of fraternities, among which the most important were the Mahavihara, Abhayagiriya and the Jetavanarama fraternities. The *Sangha* also had been continuously racked by internal disharmony and divisions. Such divisions were at times identified with doctrinal differences often based on different interpretations of Buddha's teachings. Differences among the *Sangha* were further accentuated by the partiality shown by some of the Sinhalese kings to particular fraternities, while openly neglecting and discriminating against the others.¹³ At times the various factions openly and shamelessly haggled over special privileges and the boons of royal patronage. There had been even demonstrations by one faction against the others, and canvassing of the support of the rulers against their rivals.¹⁴ Thus at the time the Cholas arrived in Sri Lanka, Buddhism and Buddhist institutions were no longer on a very sound footing, but subjected to much division and already on the way to decline.

The death of king Mahinda IV in 972 A.D., is an important land-mark in the history of Buddhism in Sri Lanka. During the hundred years which followed this event there is hardly anything on record to have been done to assist Buddhism in the country. As a matter of fact the unanimous verdict of all the Sinhalese sources is that Buddhism was in a sorry plight during the ninety years which preceded the accession of Vijayabahu as the ruler of Lanka.¹⁵ This includes the period of Chola occupation of the northern half of Sri Lanka. Thus it seems that the decline had already set in by the time the South Indians were able to establish themselves here. Furthermore, some of the last Sinhalese kings in Anuradhapura not only neglected Buddhism, but also had attached themselves to base forms of Tantric worship, as reflected by their attachment to alcohol and other sensual pleasures. In fact the *Nikayasangrahaya* refers to an earlier ruler, named Kumaradasa (508-516 ?), who had been attached to some corrupt *bhikkhus* in blue robes who preached that the three incomparable boons in life were the indulgence in vice, women and drinks.¹⁶

There is a statement in the *Culavamsa* that not even five ordained *bhikkhus* were left in the country, following the Chola occupation of Sri Lanka. There had been a similar state of affairs in the eighteenth century, after the long spell of Portuguese and Dutch rule in the maritime provinces of Sri Lanka. At that time Buddhism had been revived with the assistance of *bhikkhus* brought from Thailand. But there is, however, a sharp distinction between these two periods. The Chola period lasted less than a hundred years, while the Portuguese alone were in Ceylon for nearly a hundred and fifty years. The Cholas, unlike the Portuguese and the Dutch, had no missionary intentions either, and followed no such deliberate policy of proselitization. Therefore it is not easy to conceive how the country would have been so devoid of *bhikkhus*, not even a handful required for an ordination ceremony.

13. *Mv.*, xxxvii; *Cv.*, xliv. 74-80.

14. see n. 13 above.

15. *Cv.*, lx. 1-23; *Pjv.*, p. 105; *Rjr.*, pp. 33-34; *Nks.*, p. 23; *Epigraphia Zeylanica*, (*EZ*), vol. II, pp. 202-218, V, pp. 1-27.

16. *Nks.*, pp. 21-22; *Cv.*, liii. 40-41, liv. 70-72, lv. 3; *Ceylon Historical Journal*, (*CHJ*), IV pp. 115-6.

CHOLA RELIGIOUS POLICY IN MEDIEVAL SRI LANKA

The history of the *Sangha* in Sri Lanka bears witness to the fact that it was a fairly viable community, and was quite capable of existing even under the most trying conditions. The account of the revival of the ordination of *bhikkhus* at the instance of Vijayabahu in fact suggests that there were *bhikkhus* in Sri Lanka, perhaps un-ordained, or no longer keeping the vows of ordained *bhikkhus*. One may however suggest that the impossibility of finding even five Sinhalese *bhikkhus* may have been due to the flight of some to India or South-east Asia, while the passing away of the others also may have left no one competent to continue the ordination ceremony. The stresses of life at the time could also have driven others to revert to lay life, thereby creating a complete vacuum in the monastic circles. However plausible some of these reasons may seem, yet they appear to portray an extreme position. But on the other hand, it is possible that there were not only un-ordained *bhikkhus* (*samaneras*), but also ordained ones, but none of whom for some reason, or other, may have been considered fit enough to be the preceptors of new members. This assumption is in fact confirmed by the *Nks.* and the *Rjv.*, which state that Vijayabahu was thoroughly disheartened in failing to find even five pious or well-conducted *bhikkhus* in the whole country.¹⁷ Under these circumstances Vijayabahu would have been inclined to make a fresh start by getting down *bhikkhus* from Burma. All this would further enhance the suggestion that as much as external pressures, internal decay had also undermined Buddhism in Sri Lanka.

Now we may turn to the Cholas themselves, who were predominantly worshippers of Shiva. Shaiva traditions speak of a time when there was strife and disharmony between the Shaivites and the Buddhists and the Jainas of South India.¹⁸ A few centuries before the rise of the Cholas of the Vijayalaya line Buddhism and Jainism had counted many adherents in South India, and as a result they had to face many verbal attacks of the Shaivites. The Buddhist and Jaina monks had to engage in hair-splitting disputes with the Shaivites, and the literary works of the latter claim the defeat and humiliation of the former. It had been the aim of the Shaivites to win over the people to their side, and also obtain the exclusive patronage of the South Indian kings to themselves. By the middle of the tenth century, when the Cholas of the Vijayalaya line came into prominence, the Buddhists and the Jainas had been pushed to the background, and the Shaivites held sway over the minds of the greater majority of South Indian kings and peoples.¹⁹ As a result it is difficult to assume that there would have been any further need for continuing religious rivalry between the Shaivites and other religionists. Under these circumstances it is also difficult to assume that the Cholas who invaded Sri Lanka would have been motivated by any religious rivalry to seek the destruction of Buddhism and Buddhist institutions. What in all probability guided their actions in Sri Lanka was not religious bigotry or fanaticism, but the desire for the wealth in the form of costly jewels, precious stones, gold and silver images etc., which had for centuries accumulated at the centres of Buddhist worship.

17. *Nks.* p. 23; *Rjv.*, p. 42; *Rjr.*, p. 33; see also *EZ.*, II, pp. 253-4.

18. V. G. R. Aiyar, *Economy of the South Indian Temple*, pp. 45-7, Annamalainagar, 1946; *Indian Antiquary*, (IA), xxv, pp. 113-6; K. A. Nilakanta Sastri, *The Pandyan Kingdom*, pp. 18-19, London, 1929.

19. For Buddhism and Jainism in S. India, see *South Indian Inscriptions*, (SII), III, Intro. pp. 1-5; *Jl of the Gr. India Society*, (JGIS) xi, pp. 17-26; IA., xl, pp. 209-218; *Annual Reports on Epigraphy*, (ARE), 1936-7, pp. 60-61; *Epigraphia Indica*, (EI), xxii, pp. 213-281; *Bul. of the Madras Govt. Museum*, vii. pt. i; B. C. Law, *Geographical Essays*, vol. I, pp. 52-63, London, 1937.

From ancient times it had been the tradition in India to refrain from doing harm to religious recluses and religious buildings during times of armed conflict. The Cholas, however, seem to have departed from this salutary practice. It is not only in the Sinhalese chronicles that they have been charged with the crime of wanton cruelty and damage to religions other than their own. In South India too they have been accused of the same towards Buddhists, Jains and Brahmins. The Hottur and the Gawarwad inscriptions of the Chalukyas of Kalyani accuse the Cholas of persecuting Brahmins, and defiling and desecration of Jaina temples.²⁰ But on the other hand, according to the *Kalingattupparani*, some adversaries of Kulottunga Chola had escaped unscathed in the disguise of Buddhist and Jain monks.²¹ This would suggest that cruelty towards religious recluses was not universal among the Chola monarchs. However it would seem that their hostile activities made no distinction among religions other than Shaivism.

The Chola attitude towards the Buddhists, Jains and the Vaishnavas on the other hand, is differently expressed by their own epigraphs. These not only indicate their friendly attitude towards them, especially in South India, but also absolve them from being completely culpable of religious fanaticism or intolerance. There is an example from Sri Lanka too, of their solicitous attitude to Buddhism here. Like the Chudamanivarman-vihara at Negapatam,²² the Velgam-vehera in the Trincomalee District in Sri Lanka²³ appears to have enjoyed the patronage of the Cholas in Sri Lanka. There is also an interesting reference to a reputed Buddhist monk from Sri Lanka seeking refuge in the Chola country itself from the Cholas here.²⁴ Other similar instances however are not readily available, and the present ones themselves are more exceptions than the general rule.

The Chola attitude to Buddhism in Sri Lanka, if indeed it was hostile, may also have been dictated by political expediency. The Sinhalese *bhikkhus* were not only a strong spiritual force, but also a virile nationalist and political force. The *bhikkhus* have often been the passionate defenders of the freedom of the island, and advocates of the superiority of its cultural attainments. In fact at times they have even assumed the position of fervent custodians of the land and its people and culture. Sinhalese kings themselves had to reckon with the influential position of the *bhikkhus* and often maintained cordial and friendly relations with them. It would appear from their own records that the Cholas were not completely averse to maintaining friendly relations with those *bhikkhus* who were well disposed towards them, while they may have been compelled to take very stern measures against those who defied them and became their enemies.

However, the Cholas themselves do not refer to any attacks on religious establishments in Sri Lanka. The archeological evidences which suggest such damage also do not conclusively prove the veracity of the accounts in the Sinhalese chronicles. It is possible that the *Culavamsa* may have to some extent exaggerated the hostile attitude of the Cholas, as is suggested by one

20. *El.*, xv, pp. 345-6, xvi, pp. 74-5.

21. canto. xii, stz. 63-65. *IA.*, xix, p. 336.

22. *El.*, xxii, pp. 213-283; *JGIS.*, xi, pp. 17-26.

23. *ASCAR.*, 1953, pp. 9-39; *Ceylon Journal of Science*, II, p. 199, no. 596-7.

24. *Upasakajanalankara*, ed. H. Saddhatissa, p. (PTS), London, 1966.

CHOLA RELIGIOUS POLICY IN MEDIEVAL SRI LANKA

of its remarks, and also to some extent contradicted by the remains at Velgam-vehera. It is said in the *Culavamsa* that after the expulsion of the Cholas Vijayabahu proceeded to Anuradhapura and made obeisance to the various places worthy of honour there.²⁵ Of course this may not necessarily contradict the earlier statements, because even in their dilapidated and ruined state those places would have been worthy of worship and reverence. The remains at Velgam-vehera, on the other hand suggest the existence of a Buddhist *vihara*, enjoying the patronage of the Chola monarchs, and called Rajaraja-perumpalli, after one of their illustrious monarchs, and emulating the Chola styles in some of its architectural details.²⁶ Here again, one can cite this as another exception, being the only one of its kind known so far in Sri Lanka. Nevertheless one cannot also ignore the fact that in the *Culavamsa*²⁷ all descriptions of foreign attacks on Buddhism in Sri Lanka are couched in almost identical terms, and therefore, it is not altogether impossible that such opportunities were not made the occasions to vent their antipathy towards the Tamils, and also to give expression to the sufferings of the *Sangha* and the *Sasana*, thereby arousing the emotions of the pious.

The accounts in the *Culavamsa* of the subsequent repairs carried out by Vijayabahu and Parakramabahu in Anuradhapura, the unanimous statements of all the Sinhalese chronicles as to the revival of the *Sangha* and the *Sasana* by the former soon after the expulsion of the Cholas from Sri Lanka, and last but not least, the indirect archeological evidences of damage and also of subsequent repair, however would suggest that Buddhism had indeed suffered much damage at the hands of the Cholas, and also was denied the usual patronage and the protection customary under Sinhalese rule. Furthermore their occupation of the greater part of Sri Lanka for nearly three quarters of a century would have further exposed even the remaining places of worship to a long period of neglect and disrepair, which in itself would have been as detrimental as wanton destruction itself.

While Buddhism remained neglected and discriminated by the Cholas, their special attention seems to have turned on Shaivism, and Shaiva temples here. There is however no direct evidence of official patronage towards Shaiva establishments here, although a number of the Shaiva temples have been erected at this time, and named after the contemporary Chola monarchs and their queens.²⁸ There is on the other hand the well-known inscription from the Tanjore Shaiva temple²⁹ recording the grant of revenue from Sri Lanka to the Tanjore temple by Rajaraja I. The inscriptions in Sri Lanka do not refer to any royal grants as such to Shiva temples here, but it is possible that many of them were built by Chola officials in Sri Lanka.³⁰ The inscriptions themselves record gifts of money, land and land revenues, cows, oil, ghee, coconut palms and images to the shrines by Tamils, at least some of whom seem to have been Chola officials.³¹ These records are in Tamil, and are often dated

25. *Cv.*, lix. 3.

26. *ASCAR.*, 1933, pp. 9-39.

27. *Cv.*, 1.36, liv. 66-67.

28. Vanavan-madevi-Isvara-mudeiyar (Polonnaruwa), Rajaraja-Isvara-Mahadeva (Mahatittha), Uttama-Chola-Isvara-mudeiyar-mahadeva (Atakada).

29. *SII.*, ii, no. 92, pp. 424-8.

30. *SII.*, iv, no. 1412, 1414B; *ASCAR.*, 1950, pp. 13-15. v

31. *SII.*, iv, no. 1388, 1391-2, 1395, 1408, 1411-12, 1414B, *ASCAR.*, 1906. p. 22.

W. M. K. WIJETUNGA

in the regnal years of the contemporary Chola kings. It is interesting to note that these Shaiva temples did not suffer any wilful damage at the hands of the Sinhalese, once they had expelled the Cholas from Sri Lanka. In fact they appear to have enjoyed the good-will of the Sinhalese kings, including Vijaya-bahu himself, who declared that *devalayas* (Hindu temples) should continue without hindrance³².

32. *Cv.*, lx. 77-78; see also *Jl. of the Royal Asiatic Society, Ceylon Branch, New Series*, iv, pt. i, p. 65.