

DEVELOPMENT OF ORAL TRADITION AND ORIGIN OF PRINTING METHOD THROUGH WRITING SYSTEM

Ariya Lagamuwa

The objective of this paper is to review when, why and how the oral tradition in the early period came to be writing on palm-leaf Manuscripts. This paper will also examine why oriental people (especially scholars) continued the oral tradition even though many of the palm-leaf manuscripts and printed books were available.

Historical Perspective

The art of writing was probably used by Aryans as early as 300 B.C.¹ When the Sanskrit alphabet had been developed in India². But the important thing to remember is that, even when the art of writing came in to vogue, the advantages it offered were deliberately avoided for purpose of instruction by the teachers and educationists. They deliberately avoided making use of it, and it was only later that writing was used to preserve and propagate the sacred literature³. Therefore it is not surprising to find the first Aryan colonizers and the first Buddhist Missionaries from India were continuing to follow the same tradition.

The art of writing was not only known but also made good use of in Sri Lanka by Prince Vijaya and his ministers in the 6th century B.C.⁴ from the time of King Devanampiyatissa (247-207 B.C.) up to the time of King Duttagamini (101-77 B.C.) there are evidences to show that writing for communication was used between kings⁵, officers, prominent citizens⁶ and lovers.⁷

Duttagamini found records carefully preserved in a chest in the palace. In building the Lohapasada he acted on the information given on a gold plate⁸ tracing back to hundred and thirty six years. The records of Duttagamini, which were carefully entered in a book,

were read⁹ by a scribe at the time of his death. Though those records pertaining only to his religious activities, we can assume that other events were also chronicled.

Those historical events kept on record is again proved when the Mahavamsa refers especially to Vijayabahu I (1005-1114 A.D.) keeping annual records of events. "From the time that he was Yuvaraja, the wise prince, that best of men had seventeen years chronicled in writing. Having taking it himself hereupon to Anuradhapura and well versed in custom, had enjoyed the high festival of the coronation after the manner of tradition, keeping not to evil but keeping firmly to pious action, he (secure in the royal dignity), had the eighteen years, chronicled¹⁰" King Valagamba it is recorded on a kataka leaf,¹¹ lands granted to the Kupikkala Vihara wherein dwelt Mahatissa.

All this evidence shows that writing was used for various purposes but at least elite before and after the Tripitaka was put down to writing. The art of writing had been made use of for various purposes more widely than it is generally accepted. Unless the practice of writing had been prevalent among the learned, the monks could not have executed the 'sudden' decision to put down the texts to writing. It is reasonable to suppose that literary style had developed sufficiently prior to the first century B.C. Adikaram says: "How far the bhikkhus helped the lay folk in the art of writing we are unable to say. If the practice adopted by Duttagamini of recording his meritorious deeds and was a general one, we shall not be wrong in assuming that the ancient Sinhalese possessed a very satisfactory and complete system of education"¹². Writing was chiefly used for purposes like writing letters, keeping historical records regarding grants etc. before it came to be used to write down the sacred texts, there was some form of writing material and a literary language suitable for the purpose. Yet the oral tradition continued. Why did the oral tradition continue when it could have been easily replaced by writing? In India too though writing was first used chiefly for trading and similar purpose it was long after the 5th century B.C. that it was used for recording the sacred books¹³. Keay says. Probably these books were considered too holy to be committed to writing, and there was also the fear that they might get into the hands of unauthorized persons. The continuance of the oral tradition insured learning against risks says Mookerji. "There were no centralized libraries wherein the wisdom of the ages was accumulated, so that to strike at them would mean striking at the sources of knowledge. There was the widest possible diffusion of learning through the millions of the 'living braries' and domestic schools of ancient India that helped to ensure her culture against the risks alike from nature and political revolutions"¹⁴. The teacher had an obligation to conserve and disseminate knowledge. The possession of knowledge alone was not sufficient. One had to be morally sound and worthy of it. In this respect the

oral tradition had an advantage. The teacher had a control over knowledge and he would transmit it only to those who would abide by an accepted code of discipline. Learning had necessarily to depend on the teacher and pupil living together, so that, the pupil would not only master the theory but also follow it in practice. The teacher was always held before him as an ideal. The writing of the doctrine meant a lesser dependence of the pupil on the teacher and the close association of the integration of the theory and practice of the Dhamma (patipatti and pariyatti) would lead to a dualism when the teacher was replaced by a book. This was perhaps another important reason why the oral tradition continued.

Preservation of Knowledge

But with the passage of time the monks who were realistic found that even the oral tradition was no safeguard for the preservations of the purity of the doctrine with the infiltration of corruption into the ranks of the Order. We know that to preserve the purity of the Vedas the Braahmins debarred the study of it to the other castes. But the Buddhist order was open to all and sundry. Therefore, the only insurance against corruption of the doctrine was to fix it by putting it into writing. Hence the Mahavamsa says, "as the people were falling away (from the religion) the bhikkhus came together, and in order that the true doctrine might endure, they wrote it down in books¹⁵ for instance at the end of the famine prior to the writing of Texts, one of them, the Mahanidessa of the Sutta Pitaka was nearly getting lost. There was only one Thera who knew it but it was immoral. When a bhikku named Maharakkhita was asked to learn it from him, he refused to do so on the ground that he was immoral. After great persuasion Maharakkhita was made to learn it and thus the text was preserved¹⁶. Mahatissa thera who was learned in the four Nikayas, was another monk expelled by the Mahavihara for discipline though he was much recognized by the king and ministers¹⁷. As people were falling away from religion many also have referred to the actions taken by the king and his ministers in establishing the Abhayagiri and other Viharas and presenting them as gifts for certain services rendered to the King¹⁸. This is the first record of a Vihara given as a personal gift to a monk says Rev. Walpola Rahula¹⁹. The other causes leading to the writing of Texts were the invasion and rebellion, which led to the abandonment of the monasteries and 'the separation of the pupils from the teachers-the living books', and the Brahmanatissa famine which took the lives of many learned monks²⁰. The best safeguard against such calamities in future was to commit the Texts to writing. Unlike the Vedas, it was not considered unholy to write down Buddhist texts, which were not considered as revealed. Except for this reason, the other reasons for the continuations of the oral tradition beyond the period when it could be put writing were probably the same in India and in Sri Lanka

due to practical considerations. The texts were finally committed to writing, in both countries and the oral tradition continued for a period beyond that date. The texts, in order to facilitate learning and preservation of learning, were divided into sections and entrusted to different groups of pupils. The origins of these groups go back to very early times. The Patakomiya parampara which preserved the Vinayapitaka for instance has been traced in the following manner, to the time of the Buddha. After the parinibbana of the Buddha, the Thera Upali taught the Vinaya for full thirty years. Upali taught the Dasaka and Dasaka in turn having learnt all the Pitakas taught it just as his teacher. The great teacher (Upali) entered nibbana, after having appointed his pupil, the clever Dasaka, (to be chief) of the Vinaya' Sonaka a "respectable merchant from Kasi" who received his ordination from Dasaka in his turn, having made his pupil Thera Sonaka chief of the Vinaya, attained nibbana in his sixty – fourth year²¹. It is in this way that Mahinda and his followers in Sri Lanka could trace back to the succession of the Acariya sisya parampara to preserve the many – fold doctrine²². The commentaries were also traditionally handed down along with the Texts by these schools. In this way we can explain the addition of certain parts of the commentaries to the texts by the particular school which interpreted them²³.

Oral Tradition and Dissemination of Knowledge

For nearly four and half centuries, the message of the Buddha was preserved and propagated solely by the oral tradition. The original system of the specialist school or the Bhanake system continued to be useful in spite of the fact that the Text were written. The reasons for this are not difficult to find. There was no cheap and durable writing material, which could be widely used, for dependence entirely on a few copies would have been suicidal to the preservation of knowledge. There is also to be considered in this connection, the difficulty of bringing an abrupt end to a tradition which had gathered force for a number of centuries. Probably the most important reasons for the continuance of the oral tradition was its necessary dependence on the teacher because one could not be through with various interpretations (the acariyavadas) unless one learnt it from a teacher. Monks may also have realized that books alone would deprive a student of the very important influence of the teacher. This was really the most important part of education. The episode connected with the students days of Tripitaka Culabhaya well versed in the Tripitaka was proclaimed by neat of golden drum that they would preach the Pitakas. But the bhikkus did not allow him to preach anything not learnt from a teacher. As a result of this protest when he went to the preceptor he found that he could

not answer questions on the acariyavadas. Then he was asked to learn them from Mahadhammarakkita Thera of Tuladharapabbata Vihara in Rohana. After completing the course under this teacher he taught the doctrine many times at Lohapasada.²⁴

In the days when books were scarce, the preservation of knowledge and ready reference to it had to depend on one's memory. The possession of a good memory was regarded as a great gift of nature for a learner. This view was held not because a good memory is less useful today but because education was thought of as storing up knowledge in one's memory. It is from this angle that educational psychology was studied till the early decades of this century. In ancient times more exacting demands were made on the student. He had to listen to the teacher, discuss subjects with him in their various aspects and retain them in his mind. There was no other record available for reference within his reach. Therefore, one who was learned was necessarily one who had heard much' (bahussuta). It should not be thought that a mere storage of knowledge entitled one to be called a 'bahussuta'. There were necessary conditions, to be fulfilled. The classes of people who fall in to the category of 'appassutta' those who have heard less were considered as oxen. To be considered a 'bahussuta' the Saddharmaratnavaliya insists that one should be versed in certain sections of the Texts. It also gives another interpretation of the term. It says: "If one is engaged in meditation after the proper selection of a suitable object, he is certainly bahussuta²⁵. The two interpretations of the term 'bahussuta' would have been necessary only in later times when a distinction was made between 'granthadhura' and 'vidarshanadura'. There was no such division of vocation in the original texts²⁶. Though the term 'bahussuta' had different meaning attached to it, we say that the term was used in a general sense to denote one who had in his memory a vast store of knowledge.

We hear of scholars in the past, who had performed great feats of memory. There were 'bhanakas' who knew the whole of a Nikaya by heart and could recite it from beginning to end without making a single mistake. When the bhikkhus left behind in Sri Lanka during the Brahmana Tissa famine compared the Texts with those were returned from India after a lapse of twelve years, it is said that there was not a word of difference of a word in the two versions²⁷. "Majjhimabhānaka Rēvata Thera, we are told, knew the Majjhimabhanakaya so well that he could recite it from memory though he was out of touch with it for twenty years. In a similar manner, Thera Naga of Karaliyagiri could recite the Dhatukatha after an interval of eighteen years"²⁸. How these learned monks reach such his proficiency in mastering the vast fields of knowledge with great exactitude? It is not difficult to understand it when we know that the monks of old were

heavily involved, in the task of preserving the knowledge at all costs. The self-involvement was so high in this matter that nothing else in the world could distract their mind. In addition the very healthy filial relationship, the pupil and the teacher had towards each other and also the traditional practice of their living together as long as they lived, helped a great deal towards that end. When Mahasumana after being thorough in the Vinaya Pitaka left his teacher Upatissa to reside away from the teacher, Mahapaduma another pupil of Upatissa resented his action, saying that as long as the teacher lived one should stay with one's teacher studying as many times the Vinaya Pitaka along with the commentaries.²⁹

Max Muller's comment on the powers of memory possessed by the ancient Indian scholars enables us to obtain an understanding of those powers from our own experience of the contemporary world. He says, "We confirm no opinion of the power of memory in such as we have now and then, show that our notions of the limits of that faculty are quite arbitrary. Our own memory has been systematically undermined for many generations. To speak of nothing else, one sheet of the Times newspaper every morning is quite sufficient to distract and unsettle the healthiest memory"³⁰. The present generations of students have an erroneous impression of the ancient concept of rote learning. It must be said that mere cramming was never encouraged in the ancient educational world. The ancient scholar was not only thorough with what he learnt but also he was in a position to expound the meaning and discuss the implications of various viewpoints. The Saddharmaratnavaliya amplifies the above statement when it says, "Without the retention of what is heard there is no knowledge, there is no 'thinking' without deliberation and there is no reasoning without meditation"³¹. This shows clearly that learning was not mere retention of subject matter but realization. These three steps are similar to those mentioned in the Upanishads viz., Sravana, Manana and Nididhyasana. Sravana meant listening to the words pronounced by the teacher, Sabdha by itself had its own potency and value. It also had its intrinsic attributes like rhythm and vibrations to be captured 'Sabdha is Brahma'. (The word is God or Lord) Manana meant deliberation of reflection on the topic which was the result of an intellectual appreciation of the meaning. The third stage, Nididhyasana was the stage of learning of realization. It was only through meditation that the truth could be attained.³² There were special devices to help memory. I-Tsing speaking of Indian scholars refers very obscurely to some interesting aids to memory, by which he says the students felt 'his thoughts rising like a fountain and could commit to memory whatever he had but once heard'. He adds, 'This is far from a myth, for I have myself met such men'³³. Some of the methods that helped to fix the knowledge in memory will be discussed now. The classes conducted for teaching the Texts must

have been necessarily small so that individual attention could be given. An idea of the procedure adopted in teaching can be had from the procedure adopted in preaching as reported in Manorathapurani. First the whole discourse was presented to the audience without comment by the divakathika thera (the thera who preached during the daytime). He is followed by the padabhanakas (reciters of the words), who very probably recited word by word along with the specific meaning attached to each word. The final preacher who came for the night explained the doctrine in detail³⁴. The term 'udessa' is explained in Visuddhimagga Sannaya as reading the text and 'paripucca' as teaching the meaning. From this we know that the texts were first recited and secondly the meanings were explained³⁵. From these we may conclude that in oral instruction, meaningful sentences, sufficiently long were first recited by the teacher followed by his pupil. Secondly the meaning of each word was given by the teacher. The third stage was to discuss in detail the whole sentence. If there were many students, probably each student repeated the same process thereby enabling him to receive individual attention. This was more or less the method followed in the traditional Vedic schools in India³⁶.

When books came into vogue the method would have been exactly similar to what has been indicated in the Visuddhimagga Sannaya. It is only a slight modification of the method mentioned first. Small portions in the text were first explained to students by the teacher and when the pupils understood, each one was expected to commit them to memory. In this way pupils learnt whole books by heart. This method was allowed in Indian non-vedic schools³⁷. What had been learnt already, had to be recited or repeated and recapitulated. 'What has been learnt has to be repeated', says Saddharmaratnavaliya³⁸. The repetitions of the lesson by the monks at Abhayagiri monastery are described in the slab-inscription of Mahinda IV.

It says the vihara "where dwell bands of scholars directing their wisdom to great literary works.... resound with the voice of those versed in the scriptures, expounding the Dhamma"³⁹. Without doubt the teacher himself repeated along with the pupils as in the old vedic schools, where the monotonous recitations by the teacher and his pupils are compared in a Rigveda hymn to the croaking of frogs exhilarated by the approach of rain⁴⁰. Out of class hours whenever one was free, recitation of what had been learnt was a common practice⁴¹. The frequent repetition in ancient text books which may annoy the modern reader was an aid to memories long texts. The repetitions which may be inartistic and clumsy today appeared highly natural when handed down orally⁴². Unless one was able to recite from memory, a section already learnt, new sections were not attempted as

a principle.⁴³ The pupil was thus sure of the ground previously covered and on that foundation he could build new structures.

Exposition of knowledge was regarded as important. The teaching was accompanied by extensive texts with the freedom to the pupil to raise questions and participate in it fully. Commentaries to different Texts served the same purpose. They were really the collections of such learned explosion. Tripitaka Culabhaya's scholarship as pointed out was at first not considered sound, because he did not have the chance to benefit by a teacher's exposition. It is only by following this method that one was able to be convinced of the reasonableness of one's position. Exposition became almost indispensable when it came to the reaching of certain branches of knowledge in a condense form to facilitate memorizing. Unless the teacher supplied, the necessary information, much that was valuable, was lost to the pupils. For instance the image of Siva Natha in Rupavali's (verse 4, 5) gives only the skeleton. "A fair face with three eyes, a bow and arrow, a garland of serpents, ear flowers, a rosary, four hands, a trisula, a spear having a deer impaled upon it, hands pointing upwards and downward, a garment of tiger skin, his vehicle a white bull, these are the marks of Siva Natha". This is true of many of the ancient works like Dipavamsa and Sidatsangara. Though put down in writing they were meant to be orally transmitted.

A pupil was even free to disagree with his teacher. Tripitaka Cullanaga who was qualified in the Tripitaka disagreed with his teacher who was equally qualified. The teacher giving deep thought to the point at issue held that his pupil was correct and accepted the pupil's view before a gathering that came to listen to Culla Naga.⁴⁴ Saddharmaratnavaliya said "the wise people are not content with the knowledge possessed; they visit the learned and know their deficiencies, and errors in the course of discussion, thereby improving it"⁴⁵. The freedom of discussion was an important feature of monastic education from very early times. It was out of these debates that a methodology known as Abhidhamma evolved. Instruction was through of as a two way process between the teacher and pupil. The teacher was expected to be one apart in "instructing the pupil in what pertains to the Dhamma, in what pertains to the Vinaya, in discussing or making another discourse, according to the Dhamma a false doctrine that might arise"⁴⁶. At the same time the pupil is enjoyed to "combat by discussion any false doctrine that the teacher might take to or to get others to do it"⁴⁷. Rules were laid down with regard to the procedure to be adopter in formally submitting points at issue to a committee of judges of the Sangha. Even their verdict was ascertained by a ballot (Salaka), individual conviction was not stifled at any stage. In a monastic fraternity there

was always the freedom to argue, dispute and debate, and decide individually matters relating to both the Dhamma and the Vinaya.⁴⁸ The traditional method of discussion and debate as a method of advanced education was followed in the monasteries of Sri Lanka. The two convocations held at the Mahavihara twice annually, gave opportunities to discuss difficult problems and debate abstruse points in the midst of celebrated specialists and clear the doubts regarding them.⁴⁹ These conferences helped to eliminate any irrelevancies that had crept into the memorized passages.

Thus we see, that a variety of methods were used to fix in the mind of the learner the knowledge handed over from generation to generation. Such titles like Tripitaka, Vinayadhara, Abhidhammika, Catumikayika, Bhanaka, Atthakathika, etc., may have served as incentives to attain high standards of scholarship. An interesting development was the accumulation of subject matter pertaining to disciplines like language, grammar, history, logic etc., and their preservation. Knowledge pertaining to certain subjects were recorded very early in history and preserved in monasteries. The presence of Uttara Vihara Mahavamsa shows that different sects were in the habit of preserving records of their own communities. Numerous references made in the Mahavamsa-text, to works like Dipavamsa atthaakatha Mahabodhivansakatha, Sumedha Katha and Sahassavatthu show the existence of a large number of works preserved in the monasteries of the Island. These works mostly formed part of the commentaries to the Sacred Texts.⁵⁰ Malalasekara states that the Commentaries must have existed in book form, because by their very nature they could not have been handed down orally.⁵¹ It would be incorrect to say that there were no written books at all in the early period. As writing was used to keep official records and for communication, scholar monks would not have failed to make the best use of writing material available long before the Christian era. Samanthapasadika which was composed in the fifth century A. D. makes an indirect reference to the reading of books by lamp light says Rev. Rahula.⁵² If this the period referred to can be ascertained it will be of important to us. The manuscripts pertaining to different subject were most probably available for reference in the leading monasteries. There were difficulties to be overcome in the expansion of knowledge in various subjects. Earlier granthadhura meant only the study and dissemination of the Tripitaka. The Buddha debarred monks from taking an interest in subjects dealing with kings, battle, villages, cities etc. He described them as 'animal talk' (tirraccchiana-katha).⁵³ This difficulty on the path of expanding knowledge can be judged from an injunction to monks as late as in the 18th century. It says that no books whatsoever should be written by monks unless without the consent and direction of the body of monks. It further says, no permission will be given unless the book decidedly furthers the cause of the Sasana.⁵⁴ But monks were able to overcome such

restriction by circumventing prohibitions with various interpretations. For example, the historical works like Dipavamsa and Mahavamsa could not have been written if the authors did not by their skilful devise means of adding a paragraph on impermanence.⁵⁵

The writing of the Tripitaka in the first century A. D. gave an impetus to a movement, which encouraged the development of libraries in monasteries. From the story of Tripitaka Chalabhaya⁵⁶ we know that by the 5th century, the monks had started the practice of learning the Texts from books. Though the oral tradition was gradually giving way, learning from expositions made by the teacher (acariyavada) was insisted on. It appears that by the fifth century A. D. large collections of books were available to scholars in all the important monasteries. The teacher would now read the book and explain it to the pupil, followed by exposition of the subject. To memories direct from the text would have been the exception rather than the rule at the beginning. But as we approach the 6th and 7th centuries it seems to be the rule rather than the exception.

Writing and Writing Materials

Writing and writing material had a bearing on the methods of preservation and transmission of knowledge. The absence of a durable and cheap material to write in was one of the reasons, which delayed the production of books. Writing on the other hand has a long history. It is mentioned in the Nahavagga. The parents of Upali discuss alternative forms of employment thus: "But Upali learns writing his fingers will become painful. If Upali were to learn calculation, so would Upali, after our demise, live at ease and not be in want".⁵⁷ The scribe mentioned in Mahavamsa as early as the 2nd century B.C., were very probably employed by kings.⁵⁸ This occupation was held in high honour as it was an essential craft without which important records could not be kept and probably because of this people of high social status took to it. There were families that specialized in the art of scribing.⁵⁹ It is said that one of Mahasena's favorite wives was the daughter of a scribe.⁶⁰ In the first half of 12th century there were many who had taken to scribing. Mention is made of peripatetic teachers who taught boys the art of writing.⁶¹ In the 13th century Vijayabahu III collected not only a large number of laymen who were clever scribe but also writers of books.⁶²

The scribes were not people who could merely write. They were people of attainment. This becomes clear from the following citation. "Thereupon he ordered his skilled scribes to make an estimate of the king's revenues, of his stocks of grain, of his troops, of his war materials and so not with the charade: record them by stealing into the various

departments of the administration.⁶³ It can be understood from this, that they were versed in figures and accounts as well. They were also “endowed with a good memory and with knowledge, pious, well instructed, free from indolence and skilled in quick and fair writing...”⁶⁴

The materials used preserve important records in early times were durable kinds. Gold plates,⁶⁵ copper plates⁶⁶ and stone were used for such purposes. It required great skill to engrave letters in these materials and the people engaged in them developed their own techniques. Considering the skill and the special techniques necessary in the performance of this important work, it is no wonder why the practitioners of the art were held in high esteem. It is difficult to know all the different kinds of material that would have been used for the writing of letters and books. There is a tradition that the Tripitaka was written on leaves of gold. Copper plates too would have been used for writing books. But these were not suitable for extensive use as writing material for books. It is said that these were used to record a grant to a Vihara by Vattagamini.⁶⁷ From a consideration of the nature of the writing material and from the extent, it can be said that books came to be written in appreciable numbers only after the discovery of the ola-leaf made of the dry shoots of the talipot palm. This discovery was made, probably very early in the Christian era, providing the people with a cheap, easily accessible and durable writing. Writing on ‘Pus-Kola’ or ola-leaf was popular by the 5th century A.D. Yet it could not be extensively used commonly resorted-to as we use pen and paper today. Though there is evidence to show that many could write, there would have been a lesser number of men versed in the art of writing. If an analogy is to be drawn from the modern methods of lettering, it may be stated that writing on ola-leaf as a specialist job held a position similar to typewriting in the present day. This analogy should only help us understand that proficiency on working in ola-leaf required special skills and the use of special techniques. That is why writing continued to be practiced, as a vocation till paper and pen became available. The knowledge of preparation and processing of the talipot leaf, storing in reels, cutting them into standard sizes, etc. was often preserved as a family tradition by scribes. The different kinds of stylus that were in use, the art of using the stylus on the leaf, the size of letters and the speed to be attained were all taken into account in judging the attainments of a scribe.

Letters

An idea of the standard of good writing is conveyed by a Sanskrit verse current in the old temple schools:

“Samani Samapadani Samam Sani Samah Sirah
Aksharani Pratishathavyah Mruduni lalitanica”

“Well –formed letters should be similar in size similar in their tails and in their heads, and (written) with a light accepted standard was thirty words per minute.⁶⁸ It will be of interest to know that there was developed a decorative art characteristic of ... ola-leaf writers. Nidayssangrahaya refers to the burning of a collection of books belonging to the Abhayagiri Vihara, in the 3rd century A.D.⁶⁹ Buddhagosa’s request to the Community of monks at the Mahavihara. “Show the qualification! Once we have seen it, we shall give these all the books” and the subsequent statement: He “dwelling in the Ganthakara Vihara rendered the whole of the Sinhala Commentaries in to the tongue of the Magadhas”⁷⁰ This shows that there was a large collection of books at the Mahavihara in the 4th century A.D. This was only a few decades after the destruction of the Mahavihara. Such large numbers of books would have been available only if a writing material like ‘puskola’ or ola-leaf was used. The slab-inscription of Nissanka Malla enables us to surmise that in the early centuries of the Cristian era, palm leaf had been widely used. The inscription says: “..... he did not (as hereto-fore) have them written on talipot (Plam leaves), which were liable to be destroyed by white ants, rats and the like, but had such grants engraved on copper (plates), and so established the practice which had not been in vogue foretimes in Sri Lanka.”⁷¹ The writing of books was considered so important by the 10th century that the cutting down off the talipot palm was prohibited⁷² because its leaves were now indispensable for the spread of literature and learning. A careful observation of how the books (manuscripts) came to play an important path in the preservation of knowledge will show that the frequency in the mention of scribes, written of books and the teaching of writing has a close relationship to the development of the writing material. It has to be mentioned that the Sigiriya graffiti ranging from the 6th to the 12th century is enough evidence to show that the skill in writing was possessed by the mass of the people. The visitors to Sigiriya seem to have carried with them a stylus just as we carry a fountain pen today. The stylus they carried may have been the same that was used to write on ola-leaf.

Religious Books

Probably because of the greater dependence on books we observe in course of time the veneration that was paid to teachers of the past, were paid to books as well. Such a development is not unnatural among a people who were always prepared to give the highest regard to the learned. The weakening of oral tradition and the gradual decrease in the number of 'walking libraries' gave rise to a tendency to take great care in preserving books and also to venerate them on the same score. Even today the people hold books in high veneration. Great ceremonies were arranged for the books that embodied the dharma. They were kept in special houses.

A doctrinal book was titled recently called, 'Pot Vahanse' (pota means book, 'Vahanse' is an honorific title used when addressing monks). Even today temple libraries are worshipped by people. During Silakala (524-537 A.D.) the (book) Dhammadatu brought from India was kept in a special house close to the palace and taken in a procession annually to Jetawana.⁷³ Kassapa V (913-923 A.D.) had the Abhidhammapitaka written in tables of gold and the book Dhammasangani adorned with all kinds of jewels placed in a specially built temple in the midst of the town.⁷⁴ This new stage in the 'evolution of knowledge', having a 'separate existence' in the form of the books, 'independent' of the person of the monk is important educationally. It was only by this way that, the 'ancient' learning could have been preserved for us today. A reference was made earlier to the existence of collections of books in ancient monasteries of the island. They were important for the preservation of knowledge. The rulers too took an active interest in multiplying the number of books and granting them to Viharas. Writing and causing to write books on the doctrine were regarded as meritorious. Dutugamunu (101-77 B.C.) in order to acquire merit distributed a 'bana' book to every vihara in the island, for the use of preachers.⁷⁵ "These who write books having bearing on the doctrine and those who cause others to write books will as a result enjoy the wealth of universal kings, as many times as the number of words in them"⁷⁶ says Pujavaliya. This highly religious motive helped in many ways to increase the number of books and thereby to preserve knowledge. The Mahawamsa state that when monks and laymen copied the sacred books and presented to Kirtisirirajasingha, he showered them with money and other gift and 'thus in his pious zeal took a share in the merit of other dwellers in Lanka'.⁷⁷ Rajaratnakaraya mentions a library as an indispensable part of a monastery. It says that a place of worship was to contain relics, an image, a library and an avasa for monks.⁷⁸ The 'collectors of books in the early monasteries were the libraries. We don't know how books were stocked but they were available for reference. When

permitted to use the books Buddhagosa translated the atthakatha at the Ganthakara Vihara.

Book Collection – Libraries

This probably refers to the library of the Mahavihara. The earliest reference to a library is during the reign of Kutakannatissa (16-38 A.D.). He is said to have built a large Vihara and a library (pusthamalakaya).⁷⁹ In the 12th century Parakkramabahu I restored one hundred and twenty eight libraries in the province of Rohana.⁸⁰ For the Jetavana monastery at Polonnaruwa, he built two libraries.⁸¹ Prakkramabahu VI in the 14th century constructed a vihara including a library.⁸² The 128 libraries restored in Rohana is significant. These libraries must have had large collections of books. The great contributions made by these 'repositories of learning' in Rohana for the re-establishment of the centers of learning in Rajarata after many an invasion and strife are enormous. What necessitated their restoration must have been the destruction caused by the Chola armies that invaded Rohana.

The leading monasteries like Abhayagiri, Mahavihara and Tissamahavihara must have had the largest libraries. Tibetan accounts of Nalanda in India inform us that its library was situated in a special area known by the poetical name of Dharmaganja (Mart of Religion). The library consisting of three huge buildings was nine-stored and specialized in the collection of rare scared works.⁸³ This given an idea of the organization and the size of a library in ancient times. That the Nalanda library was situated in a special area will help us from an idea of what the Ganthakara Vihara was, when Mahavamsa says it was situated "far from all unquiet intercourse"⁸⁴ A safeguard that was adopted to preserve valuable books, was to make large number of copies and distributes them in the monasteries in every part of the island in order to prevent their being completely lost by the recurring invasions. Large libraries could not be removed to safety.⁸⁵ By monks at short notice. (It is said that monks led by Sangharaja Saranankara removed books to safety when the Dutch invaded the Hill country, and thereby protected the Order).

Coping and Translocation

Vijayabahu I is said to have made copies of the Tripitaka and presented them to the bhikkhus.⁸⁶ After the invasion of Magha (1215-1235 A.D.) whose armies are said to have thrown at the winds many know and famous book torn from their showed, the succeeding

rulers were active in increasing the number of copies of books and distributing them. The loss was so great that some books had to be brought from India.⁸⁷ “Deeply grieved in hid in his heart that on the island of Lanka so many books that dealt with the true doctrine had been destroyed”, Vijayabahu III had a large number of books written,⁸⁸ Parakkramabahu IV and Bhuvanekabahu I had copies of the sacred Texts written and had them preserved ‘here and there in the Viharas of Lanka’.⁸⁹ The oral tradition may have temporally ceased before the 10th century A.D. As acquaintance with the sacred texts was rare Parakkramabahu II had all books brought from Jambudipa for the education of the bhikkus in them.⁹⁰

It was perhaps because of the very board outlook adopted by monks in the preservation of learning which enable them to obtain the texts from other countries when they were lost in Sri Lanka under tragic circumstances. From the time of Buddhaghosha greater weightage was given to the preservation of the text in pali, the international language of Theravada Buddhism. Two citations would be sufficient to substantiate this point. On Buddhagosa’s translation of the commentaries into pali, Mahavamsa states “he rendered the whole of the Sinhala commentaries into the tongue of the Maghadhas, the original speech of all. For beings of all tongues this (rendering) became a blessing and all the teachers of the Theravada accepted them as the original text”⁹¹ The author in the prologue to Dhammapadatthakatha states “A subtitle commentary thereon has been handed down from generation to generation in the island of Sri Lanka. But because it is composed in the dialect of the Island, it is of no profit or advantage to foreigners. It might perhaps be conducive to the welfare of all mankind. This was the wish expressed to me by the Elder Kumara Kassapa, self-conquered, living in tranquility, steadfast in resolve. His earnest request was read to me because of his desire that the good law might endure”.⁹² It was because of this commendable attitude of the monks, that Sri Lanka was able to obtain help from India, Myanmar and Thailand⁹³ and at the same time help them⁹⁴ when they were in need of textual knowledge. This information reveals that, in Sri Lanka, the tradition of writing palm leaf manuscripts has been in practice since the 4th century B.C. Over a long period this tradition has developed as a result of the cumulative effects of several important factors such as the decline in the ‘Bhanaka’ generations which were capable in learning by heart, various ‘Nikayas’, foreign invasions, the need for educating future generations, and increased availability of written books in other subjects. Buddhist monks authored the majority of the palm leaf manuscripts. Priests of other religions and scholars have contributed to the writing of palm-leaf manuscripts.

At present, the writing of palm leaf manuscripts has become less popular as a result of the expansion and the development of the printing industry which is a good substitute for palm-leaf manuscripts. In order to maintain the Buddhist tradition of writing palm leaf manuscripts and due to the high value of the subject matter that is written in such manuscripts, even today, the writing of palm leaf manuscripts is taking place in limited quantities. However people also have paid attention to edit and print palm leaf manuscripts writing of which has been in practice since the 4th century B.C. In the course of time this tradition has developed as a result of the cumulative effect of several important factors such as the decline in the 'Bhanake' generation which was capable in learning by heart, the split of various "Nikayas", foreign invasions, the intention of educating.

Conclusion

Even though historical documentary source witness the existence of the art of writing in India and Sri Lanka in the sixth century B.C. as discussed above, with certainty we can say the art of writing started and expended in India and Sri Lanka in the Fourth century B.C. because we have enough historical, archaeological and paleographical evidence in both countries to prove it. Therefore the practice of oral tradition and method of writing on palm-leaf have existed and continued parallely from the Fourth century B.C. to the Kandian period.

Palm-leaf manuscripts were thus composed because of the need to preserve the oral tradition from perishing, the need to continue the doctrine of the Theravada Buddhist Tripitaka and to propagate it, to impart knowledge of the different subjects to the public and because of the need to conserved the knowledge of the different subjects so far confined to a group, a generation or several individuals spread throughout society at large. For the purpose of recording, leaves like Sri Lankan Vatakeya, Palmyrah and Talipot were used.

Special reports to be preserved for a long time were recorded on stone slabs clay slates, metal sheets, and as well as on ola-leaves. There were both scribes and artisans assigned to this task. Valuable and voluminous subjects like the Tripitaka were edited and recorded on ola-leaves by the monks communally. The copying of Buddhist scripture so compost was done by both clergy and laity. Similarly the composition of texts related to different subjects and their copying was accomplished by the scholars trained in writing and reading and by experts in the subjects. There was also a set of scribes trained from

their childhood in the art of writing on ola-leaves. Therefore the art of writing on ola-leaves continued unbroken till the introduction of printing in the 1880 A.D.

Even after printing became popular and printed literature became available this local tradition continued to operate. Even at present where print medium and electronic medium are available, the palm-leaf recording takes place. Especially in the task like copying the Thripitaka this method is used. At present the 'Piruwana Poth Vahanse' is present in every temple while many people still prefer to get their horoscopes written on palm-leaves. This reason for that may be both longevity of the palm-leaves and a desire to follow the local tradition. The reason for the perusals of these palm-leaf records seems to be the use of reading them to obtain clear knowledge about different subjects.

Notes

-
- ¹ Altekar, A.S., Education in Ancient India, Benares, 1944, p.173.
Key F.E., Indian Education in Ancient, And Later Times, Oxford. 1956, P.33.
 - ² Mookereji, R.K. Ancient Indian Education, Macmillan. 1951, P.211.
Key F.E., op. cit P.P.33, 34.
 - ³ Mookereji, R.K. op.cit p.211
 - ⁴ Mahavamsa; Cha. 7, Vs 51, 58, 83, Tr. By W. Geiger, 1950.
 - ⁵ Ibid, Cha. 11, V. 19
 - ⁶ Ibid, Cha. 23, Vs. 23,25,33
 - ⁷ Ibid, Cha. 22, V. 15
 - ⁸ Ibid, Cha. 27, Vs. 5-8
 - ⁹ Ibid, Cha. 32, V.25.
 - ¹⁰ Ibid, Cha. 59, Vs 7-10.
 - ¹¹ Ibid, Cha. 33, Vs. 49, 51.
 - ¹² Adikaram E.W. – Early History of Buddhism in Ceylon. Colombo. 1953, P. 131
 - ¹³ Key F.E. op. cit. p. 34, & Mookeriji, RK, op.cit P. 211.

- ¹⁴ Mookeriji, RK, op.cit.p. 216.
- ¹⁵ M.V., Cha 33, Vs. 100,101.
- ¹⁶ මහාවග්ගය, විනය පිටකය, ඉච්ඡා, 1964, කොළඹ. 20. 25 පිටු.
- ¹⁷ MV, Cha. 33, Vs. 92, 95.
- ¹⁸ Ibid, Cha. 33, Vs. 81. 82.92.
- ¹⁹ Rahula, rev. Walpola, History of Buddhism in Ceylon, Colombo. 1962, P.88.
- ²⁰ Adikaram, EW, op.cit, p.79.
- ²¹ නිකාය සංග්‍රහය. සංඝ සයිමන් ද සිල්වා හා වෙනත් අය. 1922. කොළඹ, 13පි.
- ²² MV. P.XIVIII,(Introduction)
- ²³ Malalasekara, GP. The Pali Literature of Ceylon, London, 1928.pp.89,90
- ²⁴ Adikaram. EW; op. cit.pp.83, 84.
- ²⁵ සද්ධර්ම රත්නාවලිය. සංස්. සර් .ඩී. බී. ජයතිලක, කොළඹ, 1936, 635පි.
- ²⁶ Rahula, Rev. Walpola, op.cit.pp. 159, 160.
- ²⁷ Adikaram, EW., op.cit.p. 77.
- ²⁸ Ibid, p. 127.
- ²⁹ Ibid, p. 127.
- ³⁰ Mookeriji, RK, op.cit.p. 212.
- ³¹ සර්.635 පි.
- ³² Mookeriji, RK, op.cit. PXXXI.
- ³³ Altekar, AS, op. cit, pp. 169,161.
- ³⁴ Adikaram, EW., op.cit.p. 131.
- ³⁵ Malalasekara, GP, op.cit.pp. 89,90.
- ³⁶ Adikaram, EW., op.cit.pp. 131.
- ³⁷ Ibid, pp. 83, 84.
- ³⁸ සර්.557 පි.
- ³⁹ Epigraphia Zeylanica, Vol. 1 No. 1, London. 1912, P.19.
- ⁴⁰ Mookeriji, RK, op.cit.p. 26.
- ⁴¹ Adikaram, EW., op.cit.pp. 76, 127.
- ⁴² Malalasekara, GP, op.cit.p. 135.
- ⁴³ සර් 116, පි.
- ⁴⁴ Rahula, Rev. Walpola, op.cit.p.2997.
- ⁴⁵ සර් 389, පි.
- ⁴⁶ මහාවග්ග 12,36 පිටු.
- ⁴⁷ එම. 20,25 පිටු.
- ⁴⁸ Bapat, PV. 2500 years of, Buddhism, pp. Delhis, 1956, 180, 181.
- ⁴⁹ Rahula, Rev. Walpola, op.cit.p. 134.
- ⁵⁰ Malalasekara, GP, op.cit.p. 134.
- ⁵¹ Ibid. p. 57.
- ⁵² Rahula, 'Rev. Walpola, op.cit.p. 290.
- ⁵³ Ibid. p. 162.
- ⁵⁴ ජයතිලක සර්. ඩී.බී. කතිකාවත්සඟරා, කීර්ති ශ්‍රී රාජසිංහ කතිකාවත, කොළඹ, 1955.
- ⁵⁵ එම 162පි.
- ⁵⁶ Adikaram, EW., op. cit.pp.83,84.

- 57 මහාවග්ග, 96,97, පි.
- 58 M.V., Cha. 27, VS. 5-8
- 59 තෙන්නකෝන් විමලානන්ද පැරණි ලංකාව හා ශිලා ලිපි කොළඹ, 1957, 128 පි.
- 60 MV, Cha. 27, VS. 5-8
- 61 Ibid, Cha. 66, V 138.
- 62 Ibid, Cha. 81, VS 42-45.& රත්නාකාරය.සංස්. වැලිකර සද්ධානන්ද හිමි. කොළඹ, 1887. 438 පි.
- 63 MV, Cha.66, Vs. 154,155.
- 64 Ibid, Cha, 81, Vs 42-43.
- 65 Ibid, Cha 27, V 5.
- 66 EZ; Vol. II, No. 4, 1914, Colombo, p. 156.
- 67 MV, Cha. 33, V. 154, 50.
- 68 Ariyapala, MB.
- 69 නි ස 13 පි.
- 70 MV, Cha 37, Vs. 234,244.
- 71 EZ; Vol. II, No. 1, P. 156.
- 72 Ibid, pp. 87,185.
- 73 MV. Cha. 41, Vs. 38-41.
- 74 Ibid, Cha 52, Vs. 50-51.
- 75 පූජාවලිය,සංස්. වලානේ ධර්මාරාම හිමි. 1922, කොළඹ,679, 680 පිටු සහ රාජ. 14, 15 පිටු.
- 76 පූජා.17,18 පිටු.
- 77 MV, Cha. 99, Vs, 34, 35.
- 78 රාජ, 14 පි.
- 79 එම162 පි.
- 80 MV, Cha. 79, Vs. 70, 80.
- 81 Ibid, Cha. 78, Vs. 37.
- 82 ජයතිලක සර්.ඩී.බී.ක.ස. පැපිරියාන සෙල්ලිපිය.
- 83 Mookeriji, RK,op.cit.p. 574.
- 84 MV. Cha. 37, V 244.
- 85 Ibid, Cha. 99, Vs. 151, 152.
- 86 Ibid, Cha. 60, V 22.
- 87 Ibid, Cha. 84, V 26.
- 88 Ibid, Cha. 81, Vs. 41-45.
- 89 Ibid, Cha. 90, Vs. 84-97.
- 90 Ibid, Cha. 84, V 26.
- 91 Ibid, Cha. 37, Vs. 244-246.
- 92 Ariyapala, MB., op.cit.p.22.
- 93 MV.Cha.60, Vs. 5-8,Cha. 84,V.26, Cha. 100,V 73.
- 94 Ibid, Cha. 37, 226-232,Ch. 76, V. 32.