

History of the Sacred Precincts of the Sri Maha Bodhi at Anuradhapura

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Every society has adopted and imposed on its members an attitude of mind and behavior towards certain objects which may be called the ritual attitude.¹ Of these objects, trees have played an important role, particularly in southern Asia from prehistoric times. The seals and the funerary pottery found at Harappa and Mohenjodaro indicate that tree worship was practised more than five thousand years ago in the Harappan civilization. Some of the trees and the heart-shaped leaves with thin elongated ends and well-defined veins in the Mohenjodaro and Harappa seals have been identified as representing the **Asvattha** tree which was later referred to by Buddhists as the **Bodhi tree** (*Ficus Religiosa*).

The **Asvattha** tree was considered sacred in Vedic India and was believed to have possessed mysterious powers over adversaries.² The **Upanishads** and the **Mahabharata** consider **Asvattha** as the Cosmic Tree of Life.³ The Buddhist and Jain literary texts as well as Buddhist sculpture indicate that a primitive religion flourished particularly in Middle and Eastern India, an element of which was the worship of a holy tree or a grove of trees. These trees were considered to be the abodes of gods or spirits known as the **Vrksadevata** or **Yakshadevata**.⁴ It is against the background of beliefs regarding trees, that the Buddha attained enlightenment at the foot of **Asvattha** tree at Gaya, the site was consequently identified as **Bodhi-Gaya** or **Buddhagaya**.

As in India, the tree worship was an important religious belief of the pre-Buddhistic people in Sri Lanka. King Pandukabhaya is reported to have fixed the Banyan tree as the abode of the god **Vessavana** and the Palmyrah Palm as that of the **Vyadhadeva**, "the god of huntsmen".⁵

In the initial phase, Buddhism accommodated and synthesized the beliefs of other contemporary religions. Tree-worship was also accommodated in Buddhist ritual particularly because the **Asvattha** tree gave shade to Siddharta when he attained enlightenment. As Durkheim has pointed out, religious rites are the rules of conduct which prescribe how a man would comfort himself in the presence of a sacred object.⁶ The followers of the Buddha had every reason to venerate the tree which had given shelter to the Master to realize the ultimate truth.

Likewise, the **stupa** in which the corporeal remains of important personalities were deposited in the pre-Buddhist era, was integrated into Buddhist beliefs and rites. This was done by depositing the relics of the Buddha and his key disciples in **stupas** and by considering them as sacred objects.

The **Mahaparinibbana sutta** in fact, approves the worship of places associated with the Buddha's birth, enlightenment, inaugural sermon and demise.⁷ Thus the **stupa** and the **Bodhi tree** which were usually located next to each other; became two important symbolic places of congregation for the Buddhist community. In fact, a new meaning to pre-existing symbols was attached and the **Stupa-Bodhi** symbols represented symbols of acculturation and integration.⁸

The **Dipavamsa**, **Mahavamsa**, **Samantapasadika** and several other chronicles and literary works refer to the dispatch of the southern sapling of the **Bodhi tree** at Gaya by the emperor Asoka through **Theri Sanghamitta** to Sri Lanka during the reign of Devanampiya Tissa (250-210 B.C).⁹ As Gunawardena has pointed out, it is implicit in the accounts preserved in chronicles that missionary activity by nuns had a long history and travel to distant places. Despite the physical hardships involved, long-distance travel was essential if the order of nuns was to be established in new locations. In the legends, Sanghamitta is portrayed as re-enacting a role played by nuns in mystical times of the previous Buddhas Kakusandha, Konagamana and Kassapa.¹⁰ According to the events narrated in the texts, Anula - the consort of Devanampiya Tissa's younger brother Mahanaga, along with five hundred women expressed their desire to be admitted to the order. The **Thera Mahinda**, who had introduced Buddhism to Sri Lanka, however, pointed out that it was not permissible for him to ordain women. The **Thera** requested the king to send a message to the emperor Asoka to invite the **Theri Sanghamitta** to Sri Lanka for that purpose as well as for obtaining the southern branch of the **Bodhi tree** to be planted at **Maha megha vana** in Anuradhapura. Arittha, the king's nephew, who was the envoy to the court of Paraliputra earlier, was once again sent by Devanampiya Tissa to accomplish the mission. In response, Asoka having performed several rituals at Bodh-gaya, sent the southern sapling of the **Bodhi tree** placed in a golden vase through the **Theri Sanghamitta** and eleven other **bhikkhunis** accompanied by fifty four groups of artisans alongwith the envoy Arittha and his companions. The group embarked at Tamralipti in Eastern India and arrived at the port of Jambukolapattana in Sri Lanka.¹¹

This event is portrayed in two bas-reliefs on the Eastern Gateway at Sanchi carved not long after the event. In the middle of one of the architraves is the **Bodhi tree** at Gaya, with a large and solemn procession winding round it. A person in royal garb, presumably Asoka, is descending from his elephant. The middle relief on another architrave shows a small **Bodhi tree**, again with another great procession. The right side of the relief shows a noble personage kneeling before the footprints representing the Buddha. On either side are sculptures of peacocks and lions, the symbols of the Mauryas and the Sinhalese respectively.¹²

King Devanampiya Tissa, **Thera Mahinda** and the retinue that had come to Jambukolapattana from Anuradhapura received the sacred object with great honour. After a series of festivals on the sea-shore as well as at a spot where the Pacinarama or the Eastern Monastery was established in Nagadipa, the sacred object was taken to Anuradhapura in a beautifully decorated chariot. The route probably was from Jambukola pattana through Vavunikulam, Omantai, Pavatakulam and Rambava to Anuradhapura.¹³ Along the route the village of the Brahmana Tivakka is mentioned specifically

as a place where homage to the sapling was paid. Even at the ceremonies connected with the planting of the sapling at Anuradhapura, the Brahmana Tivakka is particularly mentioned¹⁴. This signifies the integration of the believers in Brahmanic religion into the community of followers of Buddhism.

The presence of the **Kshatriyas** of Kacaragama and Chandanagama when the sapling was planted on the terrace prepared for that purpose at Anuradhapura and the planting of eight saplings sprung from the seeds of the branch and thirty two saplings which arose later in the same manner at different places in the island¹⁵ throw some light on the legitimation of royal authority by means of religious ritual. Although Devanampiya Tissa was the most important king in the island at the time contemporaneously there were several independent rulers in various parts of the country, as attested by inscriptions and chronicles. The planting of forty saplings, sometimes in localities far away from Anuradhapura can be regarded as a symbolic acceptance of Buddhism all over the country, and more importantly the acceptance of Devanampiya Tissa as the foremost king in the island by petty rulers in outlying provinces.

The **Mahavamsa** repeatedly emphasizes the fact that Asoka and Devanampiya Tissa were worshipped, the sapling of the **Bodhi tree** by "bestowing upon it... kingdom and kingship".¹⁶ This is yet another instance which supports Bardwell L Smith's point that in the chronicles such as the **Mahavamsa** "...bare fact was always less important than what the fact signified".¹⁷ The fact here is the symbiosis between the monarch and the Buddhist order and between the monarch and the people. The monarch symbolises his own recognition of the state's purpose and by bestowing the kingdom on the **Bodhi tree** acknowledges that royal authority is both delegated and responsible. It is also stated in the **Mahavamsa** that when the sapling was transported by ship from Tamralipti to Jambukola, the **nagas** dwelling in the sea wanted to obtain it to themselves and that the **th** Sangamitta terrified them by taking the form of a griffin or **garuda (suparna)**.¹⁸ As the Buddha terrified the **yakkas** at Mahiyangana, this instance points to the fact that in the political ideology of the **Mahavamsa** author, causing fear was condoned in the interests of a mission for the furtherance of the Buddhist order in the island of Sri Lanka.

Around the high terrace in which the sapling was planted, a **bodhighara** or a shrine had been developed in subsequent centuries with railings as well as an outer wall enclosing the complex structures in the compound. The outer wall contained four entrances at four cardinal points. Paranavitana has pointed out, later developments however, have swept away all ancient features and the **Bodhi**-shrine at Anuradhapura as it exists today may not contain any vestige of the architecture of the third, second and first centuries B.C. and the early centuries of the Christian era.

The chronicles provide information about the constructions and restorations at the **Bodhi** shrine by different monarchs, the earliest work after Devanampiya Tissa being that of Vasabha (c. 11 A. D.) Vasabha added a temple in the courtyard of the **Sri Maha Bodhi** with statues of the four **Buddhas**.²⁰ It is not known for certain when the four entrances to the great **Bodhi** shrine were constructed. Perhaps at the initial stage of the planting of the sapling during Devanampiya Tissa's reign, an enclosure with four entrances was constructed. However, the earliest direct reference

the four entrances is during the reign of Sirinaga I (189-209) who is said to have restored the steps of the four entrances leading to the **Sri Maha Bodhi**.²¹ Later on Voharaka Tissa (209-231) set up two bronze images in the eastern side of the **bodhighara**.²² It is likely that the outside enclosure of the **Sri Maha Bodhi** up to the time of Abhayanaga (231-240) was not a complete stone wall for the **Mahavamsa** states that it was that monarch who caused a stone wall to be constructed round the great **Sri Maha Bodhi**.²³ This wall seems to have been dilapidated within a short time and Sirinaga II (240-242) had to restore it. He also constructed a pavilion beyond the sand-spread compound of the **Sri Maha Bodhi**.²⁴ Gothabhaya (249-262) constructed a railing around the sacred precincts as well as an arched gateway at the northern entrance and placed stone pillars surmounted by **dharmacakras** at the four cardinal points. He also placed three statues at three of the four entrances and in the southern entrance set up a stone throne.²⁵ Although the **Mahavamsa** states that Jetthatissa (263-273) built three gateways to the **bodhighara**,²⁶ it can be assumed that he really renovated three entrances which may have been in a state of decay.

The **Sri Maha Bodhi** was in very close proximity to and an adjunct of the **Mahavihara**. The tree, however, was sacred to all sects. Mahasena (274-310) destroyed monasteries such as the **Lohapasada** or the Brazen palace of the **Mahavihara** fraternity, but the sacred site of the Bodhi Shrine was spared. Irrespective of Mahasena's attitude of persecution of the Mahavihara monks, he built a temple for the **Sri Maha Bodhi**.²⁷ It is most likely, that the monks from the Abhayagiri monastery were newly accommodated in this temple. Thus even if the Mahavihara was abandoned for nine years during Mahasena's reign²⁸, one can conclude that the ritual importance of the sacred **Sri Maha Bodhi** continued uninterruptedly. When the Mahavihara was rebuilt and **bhikkhus** began to occupy it once again, Mahasena made two bronze images and set them up on the west side of the **Bodhi Shrine**.²⁹

Between the fourth and the tenth centuries A.D., several kings restored or made improvements to the complex of structures at the sacred **Bodhi Precincts**. For instance, King Sirimeghavanna (310-328) built a stone terrace and a wall beside the **Bodhi Shrine**.³⁰ The account of Fa-hein, the Chinese monk who visited Anuradhapura during the reign of Mahanama (406-428) indicates that at the time the tree at the shrine was in a good state of preservation.³¹ According to the **Culavamsa**, Datusena (455-473) spent a thousand gold pieces to improve the **bodhighara** while Kittisirimegha (551-569) covered the **bodhighara** with tin plates.³² Mahanaga (565-571) having built an irrigation trench round the **Bodhitree complex** renovated the roof of the **bodhighara** and set up images of the Buddha at several places.³³ Dappula II (815-831) too renovated the complex of structures associated with the "**Sri Maha Bodhi**" and donated a golden image of the Buddha to a monastery in the complex.³⁴

The precinct of the **Sri Maha Bodhi** was undoubtedly an important center of ritual and pilgrimage from the beginning. Whether the groups referred to in the **Mahavamsa** such as eighteen persons from royal families, eight from families of ministers, eight from **Brahmana** families, eight from families of traders, persons from cowherds and from **Taracca kula**, weavers, potters, etc.

participated in rituals from the third century B.C. itself is not known. The **Mahavamsa** reference however, clearly indicates that by the time the **Mahavamsa** had been written, i.e. in the sixth century A.D., such groups were assigned the task of supervising and performing rituals at the **Bodhi-shrine**.

While it is reasonable to assume that almost all the Buddhist rulers at Anuradhapura participated in regular rituals at the **Sri Maha Bodhi**, the chronicles specifically refer only to a few kings in this connection. Perhaps rituals performed by kings specifically mentioned excelled those of the others in splendour. After Devanampiya Tissa, it is said that Dutthagamani (161-137 B.C.) held a ceremony of gifts of great splendour for the **Sri Maha Bodhi**.³⁵ Bhatikabhaya (22 B.C. A.D.) conducted annual festivals of watering the tree, while Vasabha (67-111 A.D.) had a thousand lamps lighted in each of the four places namely the **Cetiya Pabbata, Thuparama, Mahathupa, and the Sri Maha Bodhi**.³⁶ Srimeghavanna (301-328), in order to commemorate the thera Mahinda, made an image of the latter and conducted a splendid religious festival at Anuradhapura. During the festival, the image was kept in the courtyard of the **Sri Maha Bodhi** for three months.³⁷ Later on, a bathing festival of the tree was conducted by Dhatusena (455-475).³⁸ The next king referred to in the chronicle is Silakala (518-531) who is credited with participating in daily rituals at the **Bodhi Shrine**.³⁸ The last of the Anuradhapura kings to be mentioned is Dappula II (815-831) who is referred to as having performed a ritual ceremony of "unimaginable splendour" at the **Sri Maha Bodhi**.⁴⁰

Although particular reference is made to watering festivals, making gifts and lighting lamps in connection with the rituals at the sacred precincts in which the royalty of the Anuradhapura 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, it 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. There is specific evidence to suggest that by the end of the Anuradhapura period, the key figures involved in the ritual of watering were the **bhikkhus**. This may have been a tradition continued from the time of Sanghamitta onwards. The **Mahakalattaya** inscription datable to the reign of Kassapa IV (899-914) records a decree of amnesty granted to a village called **Gitelgamu [va]** which had been set apart for the supply of four-fold requisites to nuns who daily watered the great tree of the **Mahavihara**. The **bhikkhunis** were from a nunnery called **Nalarama** which was presumably located close to the **Sri Maha Bodhi**. According to the practice of this nunnery seven of the chief **bhikkhunis** were entrusted with the task of daily watering the tree.⁴¹ The **Kalinga Bodhi Jataka** enumerates the honours that could be bestowed on the **Bodhi** as bathing the tree, offering flowers, lighting lamps, hanging garlands, hoisting flags and banners, burning incense, placing vases of plenty or **punnaghata**, sprinkling the **Bodhi** compound with sand, playing ritual music and circumambulation.⁴²

The ritual component centered around these, as well as the protection and maintenance of the ritual complex therein, had necessitated the employment of a vast number of service personnel to look after the sacred tree. The **Samantapasadika** mentions eighteen groups that came with saplings for this purpose during the reign of Devanampiya Tissa, however, it enumerates only six groups. The **Mahavamsa** enumerates eight,⁴⁴ while the number had risen to twenty four in the fourteenth century.

century chronicle **Sinhala Mahabodhivamsaya**⁴⁵ which is considered to be a translation of an earlier **Pali Mahabodhivamsa** written during the reign of Mahinda IV (956-972). The **Sinhala Bodhivamsaya** helps us to understand the nature of the services and rituals at the sacred precincts of the **Bodi** during the late Anuradhapura period in which the Pali original was compiled. Some of these which are identical with those mentioned in the **Kalingabodhi Jataka**, of course, have continued until modern times. Circumambulation, blowing conches, watering, hanging banners and garlands, reciting stanzas, burning incense, holding **sesat**, covering the tree top with a white cloth and drumming in the sacred precinct are some of the rituals enumerated in the text.⁴⁶ Among various services supplied to the sacred precinct were the protection of the tree day and night, chasing away crows from the tree, provision of pottery, clothing, iron and steel implements, painting the clothes utilized for hanging on the tree and looking after the compound of the **Sri Maha Bodhi**.⁴⁷

After the capital was shifted to Polonnaruwa, the ritual importance of the **Sri Maha Bodhi** as well as its symbolic importance for the legitimation of royal authority had diminished. The supreme place of sanctity held by the **Sri Maha Bodhi** was taken over by the Tooth Relic from the beginning of the Polonnaruwa period onwards and almost all the Sinhala Buddhist kings thereafter, constructed the Temple of the Tooth near the palace. When the centre of political authority shifted to Polonnaruwa, the sacred centres at Anuradhapura do not seem to have received the same degree of attention and patronage they had received earlier. For instance, the **Culvamsa** states that before Parakramabahu I (1153-1186) started restorations at Anuradhapura; **Ratnavaluka Chetiya**, the **Jetavana Thupa**, the **Abhayagiri Thupa** and the **Mariccaveti Thupa** were overgrown with great trees. It further states that bears and panthers were found in the surroundings and that the ground of the jungle scarcely offered a foothold due to the piling up of bricks and earth.⁴⁸

Nevertheless, the **Sri Maha Bodhi** was not completely neglected. Vijayabahu I (1070-1111) who re-established the Sinhala Buddhist sovereignty by defeating the Cholas restored among others, the temple of the **Sri Maha Bodhi** at Anuradhapura, and granted land to the restored temple for its maintenance.⁴⁹ The **Rajaratnakaraya** states that when Parakramabahu I (1153-1186) restored the former capital of Anuradhapura, he renovated the **Vatadage** of the ritual complex at the **Sri maha Bodhi**.⁵⁰ Subsequently, during the reign of queen Kalyanawati (1202-1208) **Sri Maha Bodhi** is mentioned as one of the three important sacred centres at Anuradhapura, the other two being the **Thuparama** and the **Ruvanveli Chetiya**. An inscription found at the Ruvanveli Chetiya datable to her reign, refers to offerings of camphor, lamps, and banners to these centres and to pious monks living in monasteries associated with them.⁵¹

However, the neglect and ruin of the sacred centres at Anuradhapura which had started with the shift of the capital to Polonnaruwa had further intensified in the subsequent decades. Once the capital had been removed from Polonnaruwa to Dambadeniya and subsequently to Yapahuwa the Sinhala monarchs were not in a position to maintain the sacred centres at Anuradhapura or even at Polonnaruwa. According to the **Culavamsa** Vijayabahu IV (1270-1272) of Yapahuwa went to Anuradhapura and cleared the forest growth around **Thuparama** and appointed a chief thera of the **Senanatha Parivena** to look after the restoration of the **Ratnavali Chetiya**. Subsequently, he

entrusted the protection of the city of Anuradhapura to **Vanni Chieftains** and proceeded Polonnaruwa.⁵² This would indicate that when the Rajarata civilization began to wither away in the middle of the thirteenth century, the Vanni Chieftains who assumed authority over the isolated pockets of Rajarata settlements, were entrusted with the task of maintaining the sacred centres at Anuradhapura. Whether their human and material resources were sufficient for the task is doubtful. Most likely a small number of dedicated monks living in monasteries at Anuradhapura continued to maintain sacred precincts such as the **Sri Maha Bodhi** as well as they could even without royal patronage or the patronage of the Vanni Chieftains.

While the centres of political and cultural activity shifted to areas outside the Rajarata region after the middle of the thirteenth century, Anuradhapura had not been abandoned completely. Robert Knox, speaking of Anuradhapura (Anurodgburro) which he passed in escaping from captivity in 1679 states that the plains around Anuradhapura and small towns among them on every side, were inhabited by Malabars a distinct people from the Sinhalese (Chingulayes). However, Anuradhapura was certainly under the king of Kandy at the time for he states that at this "...city Anurodgburro is a watch kept, beyond which are no more people that yield obedience to the king of Candy".⁵³ The Dutch writer, Francois Valentijn who was a contemporary of Robert Knox, states that "the sacred tree could be seen from the great pagoda or the Ruvanveli Chetiya."⁵⁴ It can reasonably be surmised that at least a few Buddhist monks continued to live in some of the sacred centres at Anuradhapura when the jungle encroached upon its environs. Perhaps the history of **Sri Maha Bodhi** in the fourteenth, fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth centuries has to be viewed as the history of the preservation of the tree as well as the continuation of the ritual therein by the dedicated monks.

During the period of the Kandyan kings, the most important centres of ritual were the Temple of the Tooth in Kandy, the **Mahiyangana Thupa** and the **Sumanakuta** or the Adams Peak. Several kings including Vimaladharmasooriya II (1687-1707) and Sri Vira Parakrama Narendrasingha (1707-1739) have made pilgrimage to **Mahiyangana Thupa** and the **Sumanakuta**. Nevertheless, Anuradhapura had not completely lost its importance. For instance, Narendrasinha went to Anuradhapura to make offerings and Sri Vijayarajasingha (1739-1747) celebrated religious festivals both at Mahiyangana and Anuradhapura.⁵⁵ Kirti Sri Rajasingha (1742-1782) went with his retinue to Anuradhapura, participated in rituals at the **Sri Maha Bodhi**, and granted the **Bodhi** and the sacred **Chetiyas** elephants, horses, gold and silver.⁵⁶ The **Sulubodhivamsaya** written in the reign of Rajadhirajasingha (1782-1798) provides details of the services and rituals performed at the **Maha Bodhi**, the groups involved in such services and remuneration paid to them. The text refers to the period of Devanampiya Tissa but it is most likely that the author is describing the conditions prevalent in his time.

According to the text, there were three categories of functionaries numbering twenty five groups involved in administration, the performance of ritual and the provision of services in connection with the **Sri Maha Bodhi**. The administrative functionaries were **situvan** or chief

perhaps the descendants of the **Vanni** chieftains. These chiefs had been allotted the region called **Setthikulama** in recognition of their administrative duties in the **Bodhi** precincts. The ritual functions were in the hands of several groups of varying social status, a tradition that had continued from the early part of the Anuradhapura period. The **Brahmanas** were entrusted with certain forms of prayer and the reciting stanzas at the **Sri Maha Bodhi**. The female devotees of higher castes continued the tradition of performing the watering rituals. A group indicated by the term **patakara** was entrusted with ritualistic drumming and music thrice a day. The provision of requisites and other services were entrusted to a large number of groups. For example, the provision of oil was entrusted to a group of merchants, the provision of strainers, thread and so on to **pesakaras** or weavers, the provision of pottery to **kumbalun** or potters and the supply of iron and steel implements to **kamburan** or blacksmiths. All these groups were provided with maintenance land (**gamvara**) by the king.⁵⁷

Thus the rituals of the sacred **Bodhi** precincts were as complex in the days of the Kandyan kings as it had been in the Anuradhapura period. The same importance was given to the protection of the tree. The chasing away of crows was considered as important as it had been earlier and a group of archers who were provided with maintenance land, were entrusted with that task.⁵⁸ The **Service Tenure Registers** of 1870/71 throw some light on the assignment of land for services rendered to the sacred **Sri Maha Bodhi** in the nineteenth century. Obviously the allocation of land was done by the Kandyan kings earlier. The allottee of **pangu** or plot of land number one, called **kirihamige panguwa** belonging to the **Sri Maha Bodhinvahanse** and situated in Nuwaragam Korale was required to send a man to guard the **Sri Maha Bodhinvahanse** in four turns, each turn lasting for five days and nights. While on guard duty, the man was expected to supply flowers and to keep watch over the premises and drive away monkeys and bats. The **pangu** holder was also expected to put up a **thorana** (pandol) in front of the **Wahalkada** and to fence the compound of the **Pansala** (temple) once a year. Besides, he was expected to spend three days for repairs and in smearing cowdung on the floor of the temple.⁵⁹

Irrespective of the arrangements that had been made by the Kandyan kings, the sacred centres at Anuradhapura including the precincts of the **Sri Maha Bodhi** had fallen into decay by the nineteenth century. Major Forbes who visited the former city of kings in the first few decades of the nineteenth century, states that ~~all the~~ ruins at Anuradhapura, even the lofty monuments which contained the relics of the Buddha, were either entirely covered with jungle or were partly obscured by forest. The only place clear of jungle was in front of the **Mahavihara**. During his time, the court of the **Jayasirimaha Bodhin Vahanse** had an enclosure three hundred and fifty five feet in length by two hundred and sixteen in breadth. Within the walls were the remains of several small temples. The tree was the principal object of veneration to the numerous pilgrims who annually visited Anuradhapura. Not a single of the several stems or branches of the tree was more than two feet in diameter and several of the largest, projected through the sides of the terraced building in which it was growing. This structure consisted of four platforms, decreasing in size as one ascended it and allowing enough room to walk round each of them. Major Forbes further, states: "From the self-renovating properties of the **Bo** tree, it is not at all impossible that this one might possess the great antiquity claimed for it by the sacred guardians."⁶⁰

James Emerson Tennent writing in 1859 held a similar view and stated that

The conjecture (had it ever been hazarded) that the original tree might have died and its place been supplied by one secretly substituted, may fairly be regarded as an hypothetical impossibility. He further stated: At the present day the aspect of the tree suggests the idea of extreme antiquity, the branches which have rambed at their will far beyond the outline of its enclosure, the crude pillars of masonry that have been carried out to support them, the retaining walls which shove up the present stem, the time-worn steps by which the place is approached, and the grotesque carvings that decorate the stonework and friezes: all impart the conviction that the tree which they encompass has been watched over with abiding solicitude and regarded with an excess of veneration that could never attach to an object of dubious authenticity... The marvelous tree is situated in an enclosure approached through the porch of the temple, the priests of which are charged with its preservation. The principal building is modern and plain but amongst the materials of which it is built are some antique carvings of singular excellence.⁶¹

Henry Cave who describes the conditions at the end of the nineteenth century states

... the venerable tree is still flourishing after more than twenty centuries. Its offspring have formed a grove which overshadows the ruins of the once beautiful court and the tiers of sculptured terraces which were built around it. All that is left of the magnificent entrance to the enclosure is... a few bare monoliths and the two janitors (guardstones) still at their post.⁶²

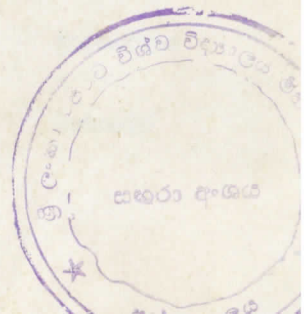
Along with the colonization programmes in the Dry Zone in the first part of the twentieth century, and because of interest shown by the imperial government in preserving monument historical importance, it is likely that the sacred precincts of the **Sri Maha Bodhi**, received greater attention than in the nineteenth century. Once independence had been gained, there was no interest both among Buddhist clergy and the political leaders in the improvement of the sacred precincts, but this of course, is more recent history.

Thus the **Sri Maha Bodhi** at Anuradhapura had stood the test of time and has survived for more than two thousand two hundred years. Although the building complex of the **Bodhi** precincts has been renovated and improved time and again without leaving any trace of its original structure, religious rituals in the complex have continued throughout history. The vicissitudes in the political trends have not seriously affected them. Perhaps the nature of the rituals as well as the services rendered by different groups have changed from time to time, more so in quite recent times. The history of the Sri Maha Bodhi and its ritual complex, particularly from the time of the collapse of the Rajarata civilization in the middle of the thirteenth century until the end of the nineteenth century, also suggests that irrespective of the depopulation of the Dry Zone during this period, dedicated monks and lay disciples of the villages living in isolated pockets of settlement in Anuradhapura have been able to preserve the sacred precincts.

NOTES

01. Redcliffe-Brown, A. R. *The Structure and Foundation in Primitive Society*, London, 1976, p.123.
02. Silva, Lily de, *The Cult of the Bodhi Tree: Its Antiquity and Evolution*, Ceylon Studies Seminar Series, No. 3, University of Peradeniya, 1975, pp. 1-5.
03. *Ibid*, pp. I-II.
04. Ray, N., *Maurya and Post-Maurya Art*, New Delhi (ICHR) 1975, p. 2; See also Sudarshan Seneviratna, *A Life After Death: Continuity and Change in the Religious Symbolism of the Early Iron Age, Perspectives in Archaeology*, ed. by Sudarshan Seneviratna, University of Peradeniya, 1990, pp. 145-152.
05. *Mahavamsa*, Ch. X, 89.
06. Durkheim, E. "The Social Foundations of Religion" in *Sociology of Religion*, ed., R. Robertson (Penguin), 1972, pp. 42-54.
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