

Chapter 3

Impact of Buddhism on Sri Lanka: The Indian Influence

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ABSTRACT

This paper is a historical study of the mutual exchanges in the religious and cultural traditions, in the context of Buddhism between India and Sri Lanka. As a powerful medium of trans-acculturation, Buddhism enriched several countries especially of South and South-East Asia. Though Asoka used Buddhism as a unifying instrument of royal power, he was considered as the ruler par excellence who ruled as per dhamma and righteousness ensuring peace and harmony in the kingdom. He was emulated by several rulers in the Buddhist world including Sri Lanka. Royal patronage of the Buddhist Sangha in Sri Lanka was reciprocated by support for the institution of kingship. Kingship played an important role in the political unification of the country, whereas Buddhism provided the ground for ideological consolidation. The Indian impact is clearly visible in all aspects of Sri Lankan life and identity—religion (Buddhism), art architecture, literature, language. However the culture and civilization which developed in the island nation had its own distinctive variant despite retaining the Indian flavour.

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INTRODUCTION

The belief, patterns and contours of culture or religious traditions of a society get their various dimensions from the sweep and course of history of the region. However, to understand the entire gamut of the historical, religious and cultural traditions of a nation, one has to not only look into the interplay of various local factors, such as its cultural moorings, prevailing religious beliefs and practices and different aspects of societal configurations, as manifested in the various constituents of its social fabric, but also the impact of extraneous factors, including the influence of cultural elements impacting from outside and the country's interaction with other nations, especially those located in the immediate vicinity.

This paper attempts a historical study of the mutual exchanges and interface relating to the religious and cultural traditions, especially in the context of Buddhism, between India and Sri Lanka and the impact of the various strains of religious and cultural vicissitudes as emanating from India upon Sri Lanka. This paper will be looking into the role, influence and impact of the religious-cultural events and trends, primarily relating to Buddhism, in the context of contacts and interaction between the two neighbouring nations, in the history of the ancient period.

As a powerful medium of trans-acculturation, Buddhism enriched several countries, especially of the South and South-east Asian region. Buddhism is viewed as a philosophy and an ethical system with an emphasis on intellectual understanding. Buddhism includes within its purview not only religious doctrines and ethical teachings, but also a bevy of traditions, rituals, and religious practices. When it was taking roots in various nations, while it introduced new religious and philosophical ideas in these areas, but at the same time it also accommodated several elements of the local cultures and absorbed diverse practices and beliefs prevailing among the indigenous people, thereby forging a fine eclectic blend between the local and outside ethos of cultural and religious traditions. Buddhism thus not only became a transforming agent in various countries where it arrived, but simultaneously it also metamorphosed into an amalgamation of various ingredients rooted in diverse cultures and civilizations.

Though Buddhism originated and developed in India, it did not survive continuously or ceaselessly as a major religious sect in the country of its origin, having suffered a decline and virtual disappearance by the beginning of the 13th century A.D. and witnessing a revival only in the recent past. It nevertheless contributed immensely towards enriching the religious and cultural traditions of India during the period it thrived here (circa 6th century B.C.-12th century A.D.). The imprints and contribution of Buddhism are clearly discernible and epitomized in India's National Flag and the State Insignia.

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