

The Role of the Bhikkus in Ancient Sri Lanka and Bhikkhu Katikavat in Inscriptions

Shyama Kumari Ranasinghe *

Some stone inscriptions of the late Anuradhapura period have been categorized as codes of disciplinary rules for the perpetuation of the Buddha Sasana. The kings, in order to protect the Buddha Sasana worked for the purification of the order of the monks when it was beset by corrupt practices. The documentation of regulation of the Buddhist Order by the kings in the form of the rock edicts continued up to the late Anuradhapura period as Kathika, which later came to be known as Kathikawathas. With the formal introduction of Buddhism to the island in the 3rd century B.C. by the mission led by Arahata Mahinda, the Sangha was established in a more organized manner. What we witnessed after that was the rapid expansion of the Sangha with overt royal patronage. The rapid expansion and institutionalization of the sangha created the need, from time to time, to protect it from deviations, disorders and interpretations. As a result, the enactment of disciplinary rules (Patimokkha) for the sangha took place to address the need of the day. In this process, the conventions reached for the protection and progress of the sangha are identified as Bhikkhu Katikavat. This research is meant to analyze the content of this Bhikkhu Katikavat as depicted in inscriptions of the period from the 8th to the 15th centuries AD. The Bhikkhu Katikavat, as depicted in both the archaeological and the literary sources, can be categorized into two branches: the Sasana Katikavat and the Vihara Katikavat. The content of the Katikavatas will be analyzed in comparison with the relevant sections of the Vinaya Pitaka. Under the impact of a variety of economic, political, social and environmental forces, the Bhikkhus, collectively as an order and also individually, underwent a marked transformation in relation to the attitude and moral behavior in the latter part of the Anuradhapura period. In this context it became necessary to have an agreement between the political leadership (the King) and the sangha to develop conventions to maintain the disciplinary code and the monastic life that was expected from the Bhikkhus. The research, by analyzing the content of these agreements reached between the Sangha and the political leadership traces the impact of the Katikavat on the Bhikkhu order. At the same time it will pay attention to the internal situation of the Bhikkhu order and how the Katikavatas addressed these issues.

Keywords: Deviations, Disorders, Katikavat, Patimokkha, Convention

* Rajarata University of Sri Lanka, shyamiuni_stas@yahoo.com