

Railway to the Sacred City and Pilgrims from the South: This presentation envisages the connection between building railways and pilgrimage to Anuradhapura

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Abstract

From a larger research on the “Rediscovery of Anuradhapura” by the British Orientalists and its elevation from a “Buried City” to a “Holy City”, I wish to present how modern transport enhanced pilgrims to visit Anuradhapura which triggered off events that finally led to the Anuradhapura Riots in 1903. I also argued in this study, that maybe the most affluent “new Buddhists” from the maritime mercantile sector of the coastal region from Chilaw to Colombo, supported this venture and not the Buddhists of the Upcountry Kandyan or Sabaragamuwa Region. During the times of the last Kandyan Kings only a few sites such as the *Sri Maha Bodhi* and *Ruvanveliseya* were visited by pilgrims. As there were no excavations of Anuradhapura prior to the British occupation of Ceylon, the city remains as recorded in the writings of colonial administrators as a “buried city” that had to be excavated? In 1890 the Archaeological Survey of Ceylon undertakes the clearing of the sites and in 1894 four years later, publishes its first to seventh progress reports with actual drawings of embellishments on pillars and ground plans of stupas by Hocart. This marks the earliest endeavors to re-discover Anuradhapura from a “Buried City” of the mid eighteenth century to a “Ruined City”. Walisinha Harischandra’s (1876-1913) advent to the Buddhist Nationalist Movement seems to mark lobbying for the liberation of Anuradhapura to reclaim the city for the Buddhists and rebuild it for the pilgrims in its past glory, challenging the British who wished to preserve it as an archeological park of ruins. In 1894 Anagarika Dharmapala proposes Harischandra to take the position of secretary of the Mahabodhi Society branch in Anuradhapura. Harischandra seems to be following the trials of the colonial administration using Western knowledge, not the vernacular handed down by the pilgrims to Anuradhapura, in his initial quest to discover the city unknown to the western educated Sinhalese of the coastal region. Harischandra visits Anuradhapura for the first time as late as in 1899. He, like all other westernized Buddhists living on the coastal belt, does not seem to have acknowledged the value of the first capital till then. Just as Dharmapala wished to institute a “Holy City” in Bodhgaya, Harischandra was to make Anuradhapura the “Holy City” in the island. In 1902 the ‘*Ruvanväliseya veli chaitya Samvardhana Samithiya*’ was inaugurated as the focal point for more organized activism independent from British intervention. The next year of the performance of ‘*Sirisanga Bō Charitaya*’ (1903) by John de Silva in Colombo gives the “Emotional fundament” for English speaking Buddhists in the quest of a National History of the Sinhalese. The Anuradhapura riots

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