

BRITISH POLICY ON BUDDHIST TEMPORALITIES AT ANURADHAPURA (ATAMASTHANA) 1815-1900

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This study deals with the management of Buddhist temporalities of the Atamasthana establishment in Anuradhapura, under the British administration, specially during the nineteenth century. The term Atamasthana connotes eight ancient Buddhist sacred shrines at Anuradhapura i.e. Sri Mahabodhi (the Sacred Bodhi Tree / **Udamaluwa**), Thuparama, Mirisawetiya, Lowamahapaya, Ruwanweliseya, Lankaramaya, Abayagiriya and the Jetavanaramaya. The Chief Priest of the Atamasthana, referred to as Atamasthanadhipathi or Annunayaka Unnanse resided at the temple of the Bodhi tree. It is noteworthy that from well before the middle of the 18th century, the management of the Atamasthana complex rested with the Annunayaka referred to above and the head of the Nuwerawewa family at Anuradhapura, acting as the lay custodian of the Sri Mahabodhi, the principal shrine of the Atamasthana.¹ From at least the time of the Kandyan kings a committee-like body had been entrusted with the administration of the Atamasthana. This Atamasthana committee, headed by the chief of the Nuwerawewa family consisted of 17 Vanniyas who were the native officials in charge of Pattus.² Later on, in 1908, this Committee was reconstituted and duly recognized by the Government. Thereafter it acquired legal status under an ordinance passed by the Legislative Council.³

It is a well-known fact that since the introduction of Buddhism to Sri Lanka in the third century B.C., the rulers of the Island continued to make generous donations of land and various other forms of property for the maintenance of shrines and other monastic institutions. Among the donations, land indeed was the most prominent. It was the practice of the Sinhalese kings to donate entire villages to these religious institutions. When a village was thus donated, the recipient monastic establishment was entitled to receive either the income of that village or the services of its inhabitants, or both. Furthermore, from very ancient times the Atamasthana formed a centre of pilgrimage at which Buddhists from all parts of the island congregated every year during the full Moon Days of the months of Poson, Esala and Nikini. On such occasions, it was customary for pilgrims to make donations of money and articles of value including jewellery to these shrines. Thus the main source of income for the Atamasthana, were the lands belonging to the Atamasthana and donations made by the devout pilgrims. In this paper an attempt will be made to examine the revenue and expenditure of the Atamasthana, paying special attention to its management, while noting the impact of British policy on the changing fortunes of the ancient Buddhist shrines and the connected temporalities.