

## MAHĀTHŪPA TRADITION AND REPRESENTATION OF POWER

Sameera Prasanga<sup>1</sup>

Ven. Suhadagama Anuruddha<sup>2</sup>

With the arrival of Buddhism, Sri Lanka got the art of creating Stūpa. At the beginning they were not so large (small in size). Within nearly two centuries, the art of constructing small Stūpas gradually change up to large ones in size. This may be a great change of the indigenous technology. The kings who belong to the Rohana clan kept the foundation to the *Mahā Stūpa* tradition. Tissamahārāma and Seruvila *mahā Stūpas* which belong to king Kāvantissa's regime are good examples for *mahā Stūpas* at the beginning. The above two Stūpas can be comparatively considered as huge Stūpas in comparison with Anuradhapura Stūpas which were built in later time. The Ruwanweliseya and Mirisawetiya *Stūpas* were the first two large Stūpas which were built by king Duṭṭagamunu centralizing Anuradhapura. Apart from that the following can be considered as *mahā Stūpas*. They are Abhayagiriya and Dakkhina *thūpa*, belong to King Vaṭṭhagāmini Abhaya regime and Jetavanathūpa which was built in king Mahasen's period. Although there is no a particular time period found, Yaḷādāgaba, Mahiyanganaya, Kirivehera in Katharagama and Kelaniya are said to be built at the latter part of Anuradhapura kingdom. All these large scale *dagabas* were out of Anuradhapura city. Dīghavāpidagaba which belong to Saddhātissa regime is another example for this. Next Mahā Stūpa tradition is can be seen in Polonnaruwa period. Dedigama and Yudaganavamahā Stūpas,

---

<sup>1</sup> Temporary lecturer, Department of History, University of Peradeniya.  
Sammeraprasanga1983@gmail.com

<sup>2</sup> Visiting lecturer, Department of Pali and Buddhist Studies, University of Peradeniya. anuruddhasuhadagama@gmail.com

built by king MahāParākramabāhu were situated out of the capital city. DemalaMahāseya, Kirivehera, and Paliguvehera were vast Stūpas belong to the same period. Rankothvehera, belong to Nissankamalla period was also a huge one in the Polonnaru period.

Amidst the political and economic trends after the Polonnaruwa period, the focus towards *mahā Stūpas* was neglected. The withdrawal of kingdoms towards South-West and geographical features of the area would have mainly caused. Instability of kingdoms and internal and external conflicts also would have caused for not building up huge Stūpas. And also the difficulty of assembling labour and economic degeneration caused for this. Therefore, this tradition confined only to the above two kingdoms. The largest ones created in these eras were built around the centre of kingdom. These have been setup close to the urban area of Anuradhapura. The same can be seen in Polonnaruwa period. It is problematic that on what purpose they have built them close to their kingdom and is it only a religious purpose? It can be realized with their popularity and the people's consideration towards them.

The respect and homage which were given to Jayasri Mahā Bodhi were transferred Ruwanweliseya later on. All the Buddhist in the world believe that the large quantity of Buddha's relics have been enshrined in this Stūpa. It is clear that how ancient people had been paying homage to this Stūpa with the respect of present people. The chronicles like Mahāvamsa named this as '*Mahāthūpa*'. The word *Mahāthūpa* implies its volume and size. Abhayagiriya or Uttaramahācetiya becomes second only to the Jetavana. There was a free minded *bhikkhu* community in Abhayagiriya center than Mahāvihāra. According to Fa-hian's records, it is reported that how people in the fifth century, gave their consent towards Abhayagiriya. This is considered as the world's biggest brick monument. In addition to that,

Mirisawetiya and Dakkhinagiri *thūpa* are considered as huge *Stūpas* laid in the centre of Anuradhapura city. It is very clear that the kings have paid their special veneration with faith for these *Stūpas*. It is recorded that large scale of religious rituals had been done under the patronage and contribution of the kings. In these occasions many people gathered not only for the performance of rituals but also to see the kings. The offering made by king Bhātikābhaya was very good example for this. It is mentioned that a *pūjā* called '*Giri Bhandā*' had been performed by the people. The rituals which were made to build up the upper part of the *Stūpa* which is called '*catra*' in the earlier time were considered as very rare offerings. Most of the rulers got involved in these ceremonies.

The rulers' expectation was not only to give his support to the religion. Through this, the kings expected to spread his power to the people and to get the consent of the people toward him. While *Mahā Stūpas* symbolized labour, wealth and power, it had many social symbols. Among them the priority was given to the concept of power. In the capital as well as in the rural areas, *Mahāthūpas* could have been found. It also display that the length of the king's power spread. The consent given by the common people to the Kāvantissa when he was building up the Seruvila *dagaba* is a good account for this. The hidden meaning of constructing *Mahā Stūpas* is not a mere religious task but spreading kings' power throughout the country.