

Ancient Sri Lanka

Through the Eyes of a Chinese Monk



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Between the years 629 and 645 AD the famous Chinese monk Xuanzang travelled through Central Asia and India to visit Buddhist sacred places, learn from Indian teachers and to collect copies of Buddhist scriptures. On his return to China, his extraordinary journey made him famous and the Emperor himself requested him to write an account of his adventures. The result was a book called '*A Record of the West Compiled During the Tang Dynasty*' (*Da Tang Xi Yu Ji*). The ancient Chinese called India 'the West' because they thought it lay in that direction from their country. Later, Xuanzang's disciple Hwui Li, wrote a biography of his beloved teacher in which was included some supplementary information that Xuanzang had given him. Together, these two books tell us much about the most famous Chinese monk of ancient times. To undertake such a long journey, alone, with neither money, knowledge of the language or even a clear idea of where India was, must have required immense courage and commitment. At the same time, Xuanzang's own words give the impression that he was something of a prig, certain of his own importance and very sectarian in outlook.

More than once we see him oblivious to the fact that his pride and argumentativeness were irritating others. However, it is not biographical data that makes *A Record of the West* and the biography so interesting and important, but the detailed information they give about that lands that Xuanzang travelled through, in particular India. Xuanzang was not just an intrepid traveller and fine scholar, he was also a careful observer, curious about and interested in all he saw. His book tells the historian more about India – its legends and customs, art and architecture, the literature of Buddhism, the location of famous monasteries, how many monks resided in each and what school they adhered to, the politics, religion and everyday life of the people – than any single document until modern times. And this information is not just extensive, it is also quite accurate. For the most part, despite all his sectarian biases, Xuanzang simply recorded what he was told and what he saw for himself. This of course is well-known and few are books on ancient India that do not have at least one or two quotes from Xuanzang. It is less well-known that the books contain a great deal of information about Sri Lanka as well. As a source of facts about ancient Sri Lanka Xuanzang travelogue and biography have probably been neglected because he did not actually visit the island. But making up for this, the Chinese pilgrim spoke to people who had been there and met many Sri Lankan monks staying in India.

Even while still in north India Xuanzang heard a lot about Sri Lanka. When he was in Bodh Gaya he saw the famous Mahabodhi Vihara which had been built by King Megavana. His impressions of the Sri Lankan monks at Bodh Gaya was thus: "The monks of this monastery number more than a thousand...They carefully observe the Dhamma Vinaya and their conduct is pure and correct." The details he gives about the founding of this monastery are too well known to be repeated here. However, another Buddhist establishment that he visited and which had also been built by a Sri Lankan king is less well known. Concerning this place, he wrote: "To the south (of the Kapotika Vihara near Rajagaha, i.e. modern Rajgir) is a solitary hill which is of great height and which is covered with forest and jungle. Beautiful flowers and springs of pure water cover its sides and flow through its hollows. On the hill are many viharas and shrines, sculptured with the highest art. In the exact middle of the main vihara is a statue of the Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara. Although it is of small size yet its spiritual appearance is of an affecting character. In its hand it holds a lotus flower and on its head is a figure is of the Buddha. There is always a number of persons here who abstain from food desiring to obtain a vision of the Bodhisattva. For seven days or fourteen days or even for a whole month they fast. Those who are properly affected see the Bodhisattva with its beautiful marks and adorned in majesty and glory."

This is the story Xuanzang heard about this temple's founding. "In olden days the king of the Simhala country, early in the morning, while looking in the mirror, saw not his own face but the image of a mountain in Jambudipa in the middle of a Tala wood and on its top a figure of Avalokitesvara. Deeply affected by the benevolent appearance of the figure he decided to search for it. Having come to this mountain and finding the figure he had seen in the mirror he built the vihara and endowed it with religious gifts. Then he built the other viharas and shrines also." While parts of this story are obviously legendary it seems likely that the building of this temple would not have been attributed to a foreign monarch had it not been so. Several other sources mention Sri Lankan kings constructing buildings in

India (e.g. Nissankamalla, ruled 1187-1196) and we know that the Mahayana Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara was widely worshipped in the island at one time. Xuanzang's travelogue gives further confirmation to both these facts.

He got some more information, not about Sri Lanka, but about the famous Sri Lankan Aryadeva. After Nagajuna himself, his disciple Aryadeva, was one of the greatest thinkers of the Madhyamika and perhaps one of the most brilliant and subtle thinkers ever. As with other personalities from ancient India, almost nothing is known about Aryadeva. For example, there is a wide variety of opinions between both ancient and modern scholars about where he was born. Some sources say he was of the royal house of Sri Lanka while others contradict this. But Xuanzang very clearly says he was a Sri Lankan. "At a certain time there was a bodhisattva from the island of Simhala called Deva (i.e., Aryadeva) who profoundly understood the relationship of truth and the nature of all composite things. Moved by compassion at the ignorance of men he came to this country to guide and direct the people in the right way." As this was the story circulating in the 7th century, only 500 years after Aryadeva's death, it is most likely to be true. And if it is, it shows that while Indians like Mahinda, Buddhaghosa, Dhammapala and Ramachandra Bharati, were able to have a profound influence on Sri Lankan Buddhism, Sri Lankans were able to have equally profound effects on Indian Buddhism.

After a long stay at Nalanda, Xuanzang continued his journey east and then south with the intention of going to Sri Lanka. He had decided on the usual route from north India, to embark on a ship at Tamrilipti and sail down the east coast, a trip of about fourteen days. However, a south India monk he met and who was presumably acquainted with the way, advised him otherwise. "Those who go to the Simhala country ought not go by sea route, during which they will have to encounter the danger of bad weather, *yakkhas* and huge rolling waves. You ought to rather go from the south-east point of South India from which it is a three-day voyage. For though going by foot you may have to scale mountains and pass through valleys yet you will be safe. Moreover, you will thus be able to visit Orissa and other countries on the way." From this we learn that while the sea route from northern India to Sri Lanka might have been quicker, some thought it so dangerous that they preferred to go overland. Certainly Xuanzang was convinced of this because he decided to take the monks advice. On his way south he passed through the coastal city of Charitra in Orissa, which he described as "a rendezvous of merchants". Apparently these merchants brought back with them tales and stories about Simhala, the legendary and wondrous island to the south and other exotic places. The red lights that could be seen in the evening sky of the coast of Charitra were explained in this way. "Every night when the sky is clear and without clouds can be seen at a great distance the glittering rays of the precious gem placed on the top of the Temple of the Tooth in Simhala. Its appearance is like that of a shining star in the midst of space." So it seems that the fame of the Temple of the Tooth and its fabulous gem had spread far and wide.

When Xuanzang got to Kanchipuram (south west of Chennai) a party of 300 monks from Sri Lanka had just arrived in the city. He apparently got to know them because he had a long philosophical discussion with some and later travelled through the Tamil country with 70 others. Most of what Xuanzang recorded about Sri Lanka he would have learned from these monks, and while some of it must be factual some must likewise reflect the biases and preoccupations of his informants. The names of one of the leaders of these monks, Abhayadanshra, suggest that he and his fellows were from the Abhayagiri. If they were, Xuanzang would have been able to speak to them without need of an interpreter because he was proficient in Sanskrit and this language was also used by the scholars in the Abhayagiri. These monks told Xuanzang that they had decided to come to India on pilgrimage at that particular time because of trouble at home following the death of the king. He was told that "...the present king, a Chola, is strongly attached to the religion of the heretics and does not honour the teachings of the Buddha; he is cruel and tyrannical and opposes all that is good." A little later he recorded: "During the last ten years or so the country has been in confusion and there has been no established ruler..." It was this information that made Xuanzang give up his idea of going to Sri Lanka. Although this trouble must have been happening between about 600 – 642 AD, the *Mahavamsa* and other Sri Lankan chronicles make no mention of a Chola king around this time, or even of a period of

social or political turmoil. This suggests that for some periods, the *Mahavamsa* records only the barest details and neglects to mention others completely.

Xuanzang learned that Sri Lanka was known by several different names – Ratnadipa “because of the precious gems found there”, Silangiri and the Sorrowless Kingdom, which may be related to Ravana’s Asoka Garden as mentioned in the *Ramayana*. Another name, Simhala, was derived from the name of the legendary founder and first king of the island. Xuanzang was told two stories about the origins of the Sinhalese, each different from the other and both differing from the legend in the *Mahavamsa*. The stories are too long to relate here but they suggest that the *Mahavamsa* story was only one of several legends circulating in the 7th century. Xuanzang described the Sinhalese and their island home thus: “The soil is rich and fertile, the climate is hot, the ground regularly cultivated and flowers and fruit are produced in abundance. The population is numerous, their families’ possessions are rich in revenue. The statue of the men is small, they have dark complexions and they are fierce by nature. They love learning and esteem virtue. They greatly honour religious excellence and labour in the acquisition of religious merit.” He adds further: “...they have square chins and high foreheads, they are naturally fierce and impetuous and cruelly savage without hesitation.” This unpleasant side of their natures was, he was told, due to being the descendants of the offspring of a woman and a lion. But this had a positive side as well, for it also made them brave and courageous at the same time.

The Sri Lankan monks Xuanzang met in Kanchipuram were probably from Anuradhapura which would explain why they were able to give him such a detailed and vivid description of the temples in the capital, especially those in the royal compound. The most celebrated of these was of course the Temple of the Tooth. “By the side of the king’s palace is the temple of the Buddha’s tooth which is decorated with every kind of gem and splendour of which dazzles the sight like the sun. For successive generations worship has been respectfully offered to this relic...” The temple was “several hundreds of feet high, brilliant with jewels and ornamented with rare gems. Above the temple is placed an upright pole on which is fixed a great ruby. This gem constantly sheds a brilliant light which is constantly visible night and day and afar off appears like a bright star. Three times a day the king washes the Buddha’s tooth with perfumed water or sometimes with powered perfume.”

It is interesting to note that a few decades after Xuanzang returned to his homeland another Chinese pilgrim in India, Yijing, heard a most strange story about one of his fellow countrymen staying in Sri Lanka. It seems the Chinese monk was in Anuradhapura and had been invited to attend the washing ceremony at the Temple of the Tooth. So enthralled was he by the Tooth that he decided to steal it. Unbeknown to him though, the relic casket was attached to some kind of mechanical device so that when it was moved an alarm was set off and automatically sealed all the doors. The Chinese monk was caught and escaped punishment only because of his yellow robe. Next to the Temple of the Tooth was “a small temple which is also ornamented with every kind of precious stone. In it is a life-sized golden statue of the Buddha cast by a former king of the country. He afterwards ornamented the statues head dress with a precious gem.” Apparently the statue had a slightly bent head and a delightful legend was told to explain this. Once a robber decided to steal the gem in the head dress of the Buddha in the temple which he entered by digging a tunnel. Seeing the huge gem, he reached up to take it but the statue miraculously increased in height so that he could not reach it. The robber said to himself: “Formerly when the Tathagata was a bodhisattva so great was his compassion that he vowed to give up everything, even his own life, for the sake of others. But now the statue which stands in his place begrudges to give up even one little gem. What was said of old about the Buddha seems to differ from what his statue now does.” Suddenly the statue bent over and the robber could reach the gem. He ran from the temple and took the gem to a merchant to sell but the merchant recognized the gem, informed the king and the robber was arrested. When asked by the king where he got the gem from the robber said that the Buddha had given it to him and he related what had happened. The sceptical king sent someone to the temple and sure enough the golden statue’s head was still bent over. Convinced that a miracle had occurred, the king brought the gem from the robber, who escaped punishment, and it was placed once again the statue’s headdress.

Neither this temple nor the delightful legend told about its golden statue survive in any Sri Lankan sources. Another building in the royal compound that Xuanzang was told about was the Mahapali Hall. "By the side of the king's palace there is built a large kitchen in which is daily measured out food for eight thousand monks. The meal time having come the monks arrive with their bowls to receive their allowance. Having eaten it they return, all of them to their monasteries. Ever since the Buddha's teaching has reached this country the king had established this charity and his successors have continued it down to our times." When Faxian was in Anuradhapura in 412 CE he received alms in this very kitchen and left a description of it. The great stone trough of the Mahasali from which the rice was served can still be seen in the citadel at Anuradhapura.

The rest of the information that Xuanzang gives about Sri Lanka consists of brief and fragmentary facts and impressions. For example, he mentions that there were 100 monasteries in the island and about 10,000 monks. About the pearl industry he wrote: "A bay on the coast of the country is rich in gems and precious stones. The king himself goes there to perform religious services in which the spirits present him with rare and valuable objects. The inhabitants of the capital seek to share in the gain and also invoke the spirits for that purpose. They pay tax on the pearls they find according to their quality." This may be a reference to the religious ceremonies used to keep sharks away from pearl divers that Marco Polo noted. He also makes a brief reference to Sri Pada. "In the south-east corner of the country is Mount Lanka. Its high crags and valleys are occupied by spirits that come and go. It was here that the Tathagata formerly delivered the *Lankavatara Sutra*." Sri Pada is of course in the south-west not the south-east of the island, so either Xuanzang misheard his informants or lost his notes and later when writing his travelogue had to rely on his (in this case faulty) memory. The *Lankavatara Sutra* he refers to is the great Mahayana scripture now used and revered in the Zen school of Buddhism of Japan and was supposedly taught by the Buddha during one of his visits to Sri Lanka. Xuanzang knew that Mahinda had introduced Buddhism into Sri Lanka although, in accordance with Mahayana tradition, he called him the brother, not the son, of King Asoka. He made an extremely interesting comment about a monastery that he noticed a few miles from the capital of Malakuta in south India. "Not far from the east of the city is an old monastery of which the vestibule and court are covered with wild shrubs; the foundation walls only survive. This was built by Mahinda, the younger brother of King Asoka." So it seems that the Buddhists of south India had their own traditions and legends about Mahinda and even monuments attributed to him. Sri Lankan legend has Mahinda flying from north India to Sri Lanka but obviously he must have come overland. In which case it is only logical to assume that he had done missionary work in south India before coming to Sri Lanka and Xuanzang's travelogue seems to strengthen this conjecture.

It is a great pity that political trouble prevented the most observant and articulate of the great Chinese pilgrims from visiting Sri Lanka. What other fascinating and detailed information about the island's past would we have if he had he do been able to?