

# Fertility Cult in Pre-Buddhist Sri Lanka

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## Abstract

*The Mahāvamsa contains a significant description of the faiths and beliefs of Pre-Buddhist Sri Lanka. The belief of Yakṣa and Yakṣani has been a major among these faiths. The Yakṣa and Yakṣani beliefs of Sri Lanka are often similar to the Hindu beliefs of ancient India. The purpose of having these kinds of rituals is to generate wealth. In Hinduism, Śiva and Pārvatī appear under other aliases in the chronicles of Sri Lanka. The goddess Pārvatī appears as Valavamukhī, and it is clear from the chronicles that Śivika Śāla was associated with Śiva Linga. Hence, worship of Śiva was established in Sri Lanka. The remanence of Yakṣa belief in Pre-Buddhist Sri Lanka was present after the arrival of Buddhism, and it is clear that the carvings of Yakṣas and Yakṣanis are found in several places in Sri Lanka. The Yakṣa images in Abhayagiriya, Yakṣani images of Kubera in Dhakkina thūpa in Anurādhapura, and Kaṇṭaka chaitya in Mihintalē could be considered worthy examples.*

**Keywords:** *Valavāmukhī, fertility cult, Pārvatī, Yakṣa and Yakṣani*

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## **Introduction**

The Mahāvamsa, the foremost chronicle of Sri Lanka, contains a comprehensive description of the cults and beliefs of Pre-Buddhist Sri Lanka (Mahāvamsa, ch. 10, vv. 73-106). Although the author of the Mahāvamsa was a Buddhist monk, he has not forgotten to include the non-Buddhist religious beliefs in early Sri Lanka, as it inseparably rooted among the Sri Lankans. The chronicler wants to emphasize the beliefs that prevailed before the introduction of Buddhism endured a severe setback after the arrival of Buddhism.

It presumes that the other religions were undoubtedly behind in confronting this new religion. It assumes that most non-Buddhist religions were not significantly different in disposition from the non-Buddhist religions of India. However, these Hindu deities had rooted in Sri Lankan society with different names.

The royal patronage was undiminished to the non-Buddhist religions. The chronicles explicitly mentioned that King Paṇḍukābhaya was involved in various religious activities. The royal garden became the main premise for religion. Apart from the Nakṣāstra Krīdā, the royal garden became the central point for Dada Keliya (hunting games) and Rati Krīdā.

## **Research Problem**

The disposition of the Pre-Buddhist religious beliefs and how they remained after the arrival of Buddhism is also subject to investigation. It is also expected to study how these formalities are compared with the Indian context.

## **Research Methodology**

The Mahāvamsa is the primary source to study the cults and the beliefs of Pre-Buddhist Sri Lanka. Thus, the written sources, including the Mahāvamsa, were used for this research. These cults and beliefs, included in chronicles, are also elaborated

based on physical remains. Therefore, to gather evidence from the archaeological remains, special attention was paid.

This article aims to discuss concepts regarding the fertility cult that existed in Sri Lanka from ancient times to the introduction of Buddhism during the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE. The existence of different religious beliefs is attested by the archaeological excavations carried out in different parts of the island, historical chronicles of Sri Lanka (*Vamsakatha*), and epigraphical and art historical evidence.

An identical cult of worship existed in India during the said period: The main objects of worship Yakshas and Yaksinis in both countries were that main features of this cult were yakshas and Yakshanis mainly connected to the fertility cult. The main features of this cult were sacrifices of various types, erotic activities, water festivals, and so on. The chronicles have given a more prominent place to the fertility cult than the other beliefs that existed during the period Viz. Jainism, Ajiivakas, Paribrajakas Brahmanism, and other beliefs. This shows that the fertility cult and worship of Yakshas and Yakshanis had received royal patronage.

The authors of Sri Lankan Chronicles Mahāvamsa, Vamsatthappakasini, etc. were written by Buddhist monks. The chronicles had ignored the fertility cult and connected ceremonies since the introduction of Buddhism. This may be because the aim of the chroniclers might have been the record of the history of Mahavihara thereby giving prominence to Buddhism. That does not mean the complete eradication of the fertility cult. Cult worship has been part and parcel of popular belief and as such complete eradication of it might have been impossible. But, as royal patronage was given to Buddhism, I presume that there was a certain setback of the other religious beliefs. But it seems certain cult practices had been absorbed into Buddhism with certain modifications, for instance, the most sacred relic of the Buddha Tooth Relic and Sri Maha Bodhi (the sacred pipal Tree under which the Buddha attained Enlightenment) were annually bathed to invoke the blessings to receive rain and prosperity.

Dr. C. E. Godakumbura holds the view that the water ceremonies had their origin in the pre-Buddhist water ceremonies (Godakumbura, 1970: 92- 92).

As I have mentioned earlier, the fertility cult was interwoven with the worship of Yakshas and Yakshinis. Yakshas and Yakshinis are mentioned in the chronicles from the time of the first visit of the Buddha to Sri Lanka. But they were elevated to the position of divine beings only during the reign of Pandukabhaya (circa 4th Century B.C.). The Yakshas and Yakshinis mentioned in the chronicles before the reign of King Pandukabhaya were ordinary human beings who worshipped Yakshas and Yakshinis. But the Yakshas and Yakshinis mentioned in the chronicles during the time of Pandukabhaya were divine Personalities (Mahāvamsa, ch. 10, Dissanayaka 2010, 153 - 156).

These terms today denote monstrous beings who terrify humans. But earlier they denoted the beings who possessed spiritual powers. According to the Mahāvamsa, the reign of Pandukabhaya shows the appearance of a fertility Cult and adoration of the Yakshas and Yakshinis. Such a Yakshini named Valawamukhi (Wadabamukhi = mare-headed Yakshini) became the most popular and sacred Yakshini (Mahavamsa, ch.10).

It is stated in the Mahāvamsa that this Yakshini was responsible for Pandukabhaya's victory against his enemies. After his enthronement, King Pandukabhaya made necessary arrangements for her to reside in the palace garden (- do -, ch. 10, vv. 85 - 86). We can suggest from this that a shrine dedicated to this particular Yakkshani must have been erected as a mark of gratitude. What was the reason for him to erect a shrine in the royal garden itself? The answer to this question is found in the subsequent stanza of the Mahāvamsa. There it is stated that King Pandukabhaya having seated with Yakkha named Chittaraja on the same platform witnessed the dances of human and divine beings while indulging in Sexual pleasure. This ceremony was held at an auspicious time which coincided with the fertility cult. The royal garden had been very often selected for these ceremonies (Nakshatra Kreedā).

The most important feature of these ceremonies was erotic rituals connected with universal fertility.

The erection of a shrine for this Yakshini in the royal garden where all the ceremonies and rituals connected with the fertility cult were held proves beyond reasonable doubt that Valavamukhi was an important goddess connected with the fertility cult.

This goddess or Yakshini is more or less the same viz. Parvathi of India is considered the mother goddess who is connected with the fertility cult. This concept may be found all over the world. According to Fraizer, different names have been used to denote the mother goddess in Western Asiatic countries. He thinks that this can be proved by an analysis of Mythology in various countries. Indian Mother Goddess Parvati and the Sri Lankan mother goddess have several similarities. We can conjecture that Sri Lankan Valavamukhi and Indian Parvathi are more or less identical. Parvati in her aspect of Durga is identical to Sri Lankan mother goddess Valavamukhi. Parvati is also known as Uma Hemavati and Ambiga and all these names suggest that she is associated with mountains. According to Mahāvamsa, Valavamukhi the Mother goddess of Sri Lanka is connected with the mountain of Dhūmarakha or (modern) Dimbulagala (- do -, ch.10, vv. 53 - 54). Another identical feature of both is the leadership attributed to them in war. Kottravai, the South Indian Yakshini or goddess connected with the fertility cult was ferocious and cruel in exterminating enemies, and She dances on the dead bodies of the fallen enemies. These ferocious qualities were later absorbed in Durga-another aspect of Parvati.

The prominent place that Valavamukhi played in the wars of Pandukabhaya against his enemies shows beyond a reasonable doubt her war-like character of Indian goddesses of fertility cult.

Mahāvamsa clearly mentioned the existence of Brahmanism during the reign of Pandukabhaya (- do -, ch.10, vv. 102). It also says the establishment of Sivika Sala (- do -, ch. 10, v. 102). What is meant by Sivika Sala? The Vamsattappakasini

(commentary to the Mahāvamsa) gives two interpretations of the word (Vamsattappakasini: 296). One is the hall where Siva Linga (Phallic) was placed. The other is a lying-in-home (maternity hall). If we accept the interpretation of the commentary, we can conclude that Saivism was in existence during this period.

According to the interpretation of the commentary, we can conclude that Saivism was in existence during this period. If it is so, Parvathi the consort of Siva was known to the people during that period. The earliest sculpture found in the frontispiece of the Kantaka Chetiya which was built in the 1<sup>st</sup> century A.D. depicts a low relief sculptured figure of Ganesha who was the son of Siva. According to Alice Getty, this is the oldest sculptured figure of Ganesha found in the world (Premathilaka 1980: 325). This frontispiece sculpture of the Kantaka Chetiya shows pre-Buddhist religious beliefs. This is a glaring example of the existence of Saivism before the advent of Buddhism, further, in the early Brahmi cave inscriptions of Sri Lanka (3rd century B.C. to 1<sup>st</sup> century A.D.) are found names of personalities like Maha Siva, Sivaguta, etc. which proves the existence of Saivism in Pre-Buddhist Sri Lanka (Paranavitana, 1970).

There are no other personalities that could be compared with Parvati in our chronicle other than Valawamukhi. The other Yaksha connected with the fertility cult of Sri Lanka is Chiththaraja (Mahāvamsa, ch. 10, v. 87). According to some scholars, Chiththaraja is synonymous with Siva. According to the Mahāvamsa, Chittarāja was also a demon or a demon soul. The Mahāvamsa mentions that Chittarāja lived in the lower half of the Abhaya Wāwa. This means there is no doubt that a Devāla or a temple was built for the demon Chittarāja or Chittarāja. This is confirmed in Chapter 10<sup>th</sup> of the Mahāvamsa. This reference mentions that “the Kāvela Yakśa dwelled to the east of the city or built his devāla” (Mahāvamsa 10:84). Thus, it is clear that King Paṇḍukābhaya heard and performed the dance hymn in his garden not with a living person but with a demonic spirit. On the other hand, building a temple is not a tradition or a necessity for a living person.

The other important deity connected with the fertility cult is Vaisravana or Kuvera who is the god of wealth (- do -, ch.10, vv. 88 -89). The prominent place given to Kuvera in the Sculpture of the frontispiece (Wahalkada) of ancient dagabas in Sri Lanka suggests that he was very popular and sacred.

The sculptures in frontispieces which are considered to be the first carvings of Sri Lanka, are another place where you can get an idea of the beliefs of pre-Buddhist Sri Lanka. It is not difficult to identify the princely dressed figure at the top of the pillars as Kubera, in the frontispieces of Kantaka Chethiya in Mihintale, Dhakkina Dagaba in Anuradhapura, Mirisaväetiya, Abhayagiriya and Deegawapi Stupa in Ampara decorated with ornate carvings. A dwarf or a Bahirava wears a conch as a helmet on one side, and on the other is a dwarf who wears a Padma as a helmet. The two servants of Kubera are called Sanka and Padma. The coins falling from Kubera's hand are also among these sculptures. The coins are also a symbol of Kubera. Since Kubera was the lord of wealth, it is reasonable to assume that these were pre-Buddhist memories of the practice of fertility. On the other hand, even after the advent of Buddhism in Sri Lanka, this is a piece of vital evidence to prove the existence of Hinduism. The image of Ganesha at the Kantaka Chethi in Mihintale also elaborates on this idea.

In conclusion, I would like to state that the fertility cult and the connected religious beliefs were deeply rooted in the pre-Buddhist society of Sri Lanka.

There is no evidence of the existence of any other religion than Buddhism and Hinduism during the period of Polonnaruwa. This shows that the beliefs of Paribbrajaka and Ajīvaka etc. had faced a significant setback or had disappeared entirely by that time. Hindu power rose due to the colonization of Sri Lanka during the reign of Raja Raja. The fact that the king was a Sri Lankan, and his consorts were Hindus, may furnish this environment. The direct reference to Brahmins during the reign of Parakkramabāhu I is found in the chronicles. Afterward, during the Polonnaruwa period, the Mahāvamsa and other chronicles were almost entirely silent about other beliefs.

## Conclusion

According to the details in the Mahāvamsa, Hinduism was restored in Sri Lanka in the form of demonic religion, from Vijaya's arrival to the introduction of Buddhism.

Apart from the Śivaism, the Ajivaka, Nighanṭha, and Pribbrājaka lived in this country with mutual understanding and harmony. Although the Mahāvamsa, the primary chronicle of Sri Lanka, gives us details about the religions of Pre-Buddhist Sri Lanka, it is silent in mentioning the other religions that prevailed after the introduction of Buddhism. The purpose of this should be to highlight that the new religion was the greatest among the existing religions. The early carvings in Sri Lanka provide an excellent basis for studying the beliefs of Pre-Buddhist Sri Lanka. Hinduism is prominent here. The chronicles also mention the constructions related to the non-Buddhists in several places. The distinguishing feature is the religious beliefs opposed to Buddhism, such as water sports associated with these events. Garden games are often associated with water and garden games, Rathi Kṛīdotsava, and bold sacrifices. The dearth of evidence is observed during the Polonnaruwa and the period after that. The references to Brahmins are obliquely included in the chronicles during the reign of Great Parakramabahu. That was the culmination of Hinduism.



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