

A tale of two nations – Part VIII

Many people, especially non Sinhala Buddhists, have commented on Sinhala people being considered as the protectors of Buddhism, Theravada Buddhism to be precise. These commentators claim that Sinhala nation has thus become a chosen people as it is said in Mahavamsa that God Shakra had sent God Upulvan or Vishnu to protect Vijaya and his men when they landed in Thambapanni, knowing that the Sinhala nation Vijaya was to be the founder would protect Buddhism. Now this is a “passive chosen people” who had to protect and not to attack in order to propagate what they believed. It is to the credit of the Sinhalas that they had not attacked people living overseas nor even the tribe of Vedda living in the country without being absorbed into the Sinhala nation. Now this is in contrast with the Jewish tradition of being a chosen people who even today have no inhibition in attacking others whom they think are working against them, even in what is now known as international waters.

We may also consider the attitude of the Americans who only the other day thanked the God for making them a sovereign nation. In the national anthem of USA we find the following lines. “Oh, thus be it ever, when freemen shall stand Between their loved home and the war’s desolation! Blest with victory and peace, may be heav’n-rescued land Praise the power that hath made and preserved us a nation! Then conquer we must, when our cause it is just, And this be our motto: “In God is our trust”. And the spree –spangled banner in triumph shall wave O’er the land of the free and the home of the brave.”

Why heaven rescued land? I have not heard anybody objecting to these words in the American national anthem though there are millions of American citizens not believing in the heaven of Jefferson and Lincoln. In any event why should heaven rescue America only when there are so many other countries in the world? Not satisfied with all these the national anthem preaches conquering when their cause is just. Now who is going to decide whether their cause is just or not? Surely it is not the Buddhists in the world. The so called R2Ps are based on these attitudes of the Americans and the westerners in general and the non Sinhalas in this country who make a hue and cry on Sinhala nation as a so called chosen nation to protect Buddhism in a non aggressive non conquering manner are silent on these preaching. The Americans are supposed to have their trust in God when there are Atheists including Buddhists in their millions living in America.

Then consider the following lines from the national anthem of Britain (England). “O lord God arise, Scatter our enemies, And make them fall! Confound their knavish tricks, Confuse their politics, On you our hopes we fix, God save the Queen!” Those who do not want the Sinhala people to protect Buddhism are prepared to pray to the God to scatter the enemies of the English meaning of course those inclusive of Theravada Buddhists, confound their so called knavish tricks and confuse politics. It is very clear that this is what the English have been doing over the years with or without the help of the God.

The Sinhala Buddhists do not want Sri Lanka to be the ideal country in the world and they would like to protect Theravada Buddhism at least for another two thousand five hundred years. The vamsakatha written during the fourth and fifth century with the help

of folklore have been able not only to portrait the history in its essence but to give the guidelines for the future of the Sinhala nation. It has to be pointed out that the Dravidian region of Andra Pradesh in Bharat was a stronghold of Theravada Buddhism. Contrary to the propagation of some so called scholars the present Tamilnadu in ancient Bharat was not Buddhist country. However, Andra Pradesh had to face a challenge from Madhyamikas in Andra Pradesh and we have to admit that Theravadins at that time did not have answers to questions raised by Ven. Nagarjuna Thera and others of the Madhyamika school. A Bhikku from Sri Lanka by the name Ven. Ariyadeva was one of the chief disciples of Ven. Nagarjuna Thera and by the fifth century Theravada Buddhism was on the verge of extinction in Andra Pradesh. The Andra Pradesh Theravada Bhikkus would have discussed this problem with the Theravada Bhikkus in Sri Lanka at that time and the latter also would have been aware of the importance of protecting or preserving Theravada Buddhism in Sri Lanka.

Theravada Bhikkus from Andra Pradesh such as Buddhaghosha Thero and Dharmapala Thero had come to Sri Lanka during this time and as a result of discussions it appears that they had taken a decision to translate all the texts into Pali or Pella so called because it was the language of the Pella or texts. This was a move to preserve Theravada Buddhist texts in the form available at that time. If the texts continued to be in Sinhala many people would have access and they would have naturally altered giving various interpretations. At the same time the Mahavira Theras would have instilled in the minds of the Sinhala Buddhists that they have to preserve Buddhism and it is likely that the stories in Vamsakatha regarding God Upulvan interfering to protect Vijaya and his seven hundred men were invented during this time and were instilled in the minds of the Sinhala Buddhists. As we have said the story about the Sinhala people been “chosen” to protect or preserve Buddhism is what we may call a passive notion of selection compared with the aggressive or conquering notion of selection associated with chosen people of Judaic Christian culture. The irony is that it is those who practice aggressive notion of selection who are against the passive notion that has existed for more than one thousand five hundred years without being a problem for the neighbouring countries.

The Vamsakatha thus have added certain stories without distorting the essence of history and have managed to change the attitudes of the Sinhala people as far as future was concerned. If the Sinhala Buddhists still are of the opinion that they had been “chosen” to preserve Theravada Buddhism in a passive way but not in an aggressive manner to propagate their culture economy and politics in the other countries the way nations and countries belonging to the Judaic Christian tradition have done nobody can find fault with that attitude, and especially those critics who are spiritual descendants of the westerners express their hypocrisy and anti Sinhala Buddhist attitudes in attacking the passive notion of selection.

However, I have only one criticism towards the attitude of the present day Sinhala Buddhists in preserving the Theravada Buddhism as it was found in the fifth century. It is clear that the Theravada Buddhists at that time had no answers to the criticism of Ven. Nagarajuna’s school of Madhaymika in respect of Theory of moments and the theory of Dhamma, which are called Kshanavada and Dharmavada. If we cannot find answers to

the questions raised by the Madhayamikas even after one thousand eight hundred years then there is no point in adhering to these theories in the name of preserving or protecting Theravada Buddhism. We should be able to modify the theories and criticise the concept of shunathava (not shunya) found in Madhyamikavada and develop Theravada Buddhism. Madhyamikavada has enough flaws but before the Theravada Buddhists think of criticising Madhayamikavada they should put their house in order. The Sinhala Buddhists should be able to preserve Theravada Buddhism by developing it, especially in connection with Kshanavada and Dharmavada.