

## **The Rise of Popular Asceticism in Sinhalese Buddhist Culture: Some Significant Concepts and Practices**

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### **Abstract**

The briefest explanation that could be provided for asceticism in the original Theravada Buddhist tradition is that it is a physically and mentally lived enterprise for fulfilling enlightenment (*nibbana*). As such, the enterprise demands serious practical and intellectual commitment. In total contrast to this original Theravada Buddhist concept of asceticism, a contextual frame of asceticism has been developing in Sinhalese Buddhist culture in recent years. The frame will be defined in the present discussion as ‘popular asceticism’. The frame is profoundly influenced by specific developments in Sinhalese Buddhist culture among which are some noticeable concepts and practices. These concepts and practices are assumed in this discussion as part of an underlying structure of a dynamic historical process which exemplifies a framework involving beliefs and practices of diverse social groups in Sinhalese Buddhist culture. The investigation of the practice of *upavasa maghata* (abstinence from killing animals on special ceremonial days), spirit worship and the concept of caste will help comprehend their contribution in forming the ‘popular’ ascetic context in Sinhalese Buddhist culture.

**Keywords:** Buddhist religion, Hindu religion, asceticism, Sri Lankan cultural history

## The ascetic culture in the pre-Buddhist and original Buddhist contexts

The following account will provide an understanding of the original Theravada Buddhist context of asceticism and how it differs from the popular Sinhalese Buddhist context. It thus marks a place of disjuncture, of a breaking up of linear (written) history and its religio-cultural application today in a Sinhalese context.

### Pre-Buddhist ascetics

Excavations in the Indus Valley Civilization (2500-1500 BCE) have contributed to the understanding that before the arrival of the Aryans on the Indian sub-continent, a highly advanced culture had already been flourishing in the north-western parts of India. Surviving material from the Indus Valley Civilization indicates a highly developed spiritual culture in which prevailed religious ideas such as meditation, renunciation, rebirth and liberation from the cycle of rebirth. A figure commonplace in this culture is the ascetic whose image ranges from forest hermit to wandering mendicant. The terms used for expressing the concept of an ascetic in the pre-Buddhist social context, *bhikku*, *sramana* and *brahmana*, are founded on broader meanings expressive of a specific way of living. Ascetics were a distinct social category whose goal was the search for emancipation (*moksa*) through the mediums of ascetic practices (*yoga*) and penance (*tapas*). These ascetics who were often described as *yogin* (one whose mind is yoked), *muni* (silent one), *kesin* (one with long hair) or *vatarasana* (one whose girdle is air (*vata*)), were also celibate, naked or clothed in the most meager of garments and without a permanent abode (Chakraborti, 1973, 5-6). This implies that they represented simplicity and frugality. There were also other dominant categories of ascetics such as the *Ajivaka* (also *Acelaka* or the naked ones) and *Hatthapalekhanas* (those without a begging bowl) and the *Sramanas* (those who strive). The *Sramanas* were wandering mendicants of non-Brahmanic castes. Unlike the *Ajivakas*, the *Sramanas* were dressed in tawny-colored robes. In the course of time, the ideas and practices of the *Sramanas* influenced the sages of the Vedic tradition. The *Sramana* movement was a reaction to the societal changes when kinship groups in the Indian sub-continent were in decline and when a class and caste oriented state formation was progressing.

### Buddhist ascetics

The origins of the Buddhist ascetic fraternity – *bhikku sangha* – stretch to the *sramana* movement. The Buddhist ascetics are often defined as *bhikku* (one who eats begged food or a beggar while striving for liberation from material bondage) and *sramana* (one who strives strenuously for the acquisition for liberation). *Sramana* signifies recluse and wanderer (Anguttara Nikaya, 1.67; Digha Nikaya, iii.16). *Sramana* also range as *samana uddesa* or *samanera* (novice), *samana kuttaka* (one who wears the dress of a *samana*) *samanaka* (some sort of *samana*) and *samana brahmana* or *samana* and *brahmana* who are leaders in religious life. The *sramana* is also described as a son, *puttha*, of the great Sakya, Gothama (Mahavagga, 1.39.6-40.2). The absence of a drastic distinction between *bhikku* and *sramana* is evidence for both terminologies manifesting similar conditions pertaining to the mendicant life. As such, *bhikku* is viewed as *samana* and almsman.

The rise of *bhikku sangha* coincides with the social and political situation of the Middle Ganga Valley region of approximately the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE. The era represents a pristine freedom entombed within the *gana sanghas*, republics in which decisions were made by assemblies and where the collective ideal was explicit (Chattopadhyaya, 1959, 468). The *gana sanghas*

developed in the region of Magadha in the south-east which existed outside the pale of Vedic culture (Oldenberg, 1881, 7-8). The application of some of the vanishing social realities of the *gana sangha* into the fraternity of the *bhikku sangha*, such as the collective ideal and freedom from class and caste, is what Thathagatha Gothama sought to communicate to the masses. The endeavor was pre-eminently ascetic and intricately linked to the socio-cultural issues of his lifetime – specifically, the gradual rise of a class and caste-oriented society of the Gangetic valley:

In building up his *samghas* the Buddha could provide the people of his times with the illusion of a lost reality of the dying tribal collective. And it was only the great genius of the Buddha which could have built this coherent and complete illusion. Not only did he successfully build up his *samghas* on the model of pre-class society but he took great care to see that the members therein – the *bhikkus* within the *samghas* – lived a perfectly detached life i.e. detached from the great historic transition going on in the society at large, whose course was obviously beyond his power to change. (Chattopadhaya, 1959, 485)

‘Detachment’ was central for *bhikku sangha*. In order to re-live the classless and casteless simplicity and innocence of the *gana sanghas*, the *bhikku* detaches himself from material bondage. He lives a specific way of life in which frugality is central so that he is content with any kind of robe, alms food, abode and seclusion (Anguttara, 1.240 = Book of the Threes, 3,10,93). The focus of his way of life was the burning away of defilements.

### **Asceticism**

Asceticism in the Buddhist context is an explicit medium for renunciation from material constraints. It embodies a commitment incorporating such meanings as torment, punishment, penance, religious austerity, self-chastisement, ascetic practice, mental devotion, self-control, abstinence or practice of morality (Rhys Davids and Stede, 1955, 297; Monier-Williams, 1899, 436-7). Asceticism (*tapas*) is described as a way of living incorporating a rigorous personal commitment in a process of burning away of defilements. Pali and Sanskrit meanings of asceticism reveal meanings of hot, warm, to shine (*tapati*) and to be bright as the sun (*divatapati*) (Blair, 1961, 45; Gamlath, 2009, 316; Kaelber, 1989, 22). The process of burning away defilements involves most specifically renunciation from sensory pleasures. The endeavor is the specific focus in Buddhist teachings (Sekha Sutta, 53.23 = Majjima Nikaya, i.358). The Pali meaning of the ascetic (*tapassin*) expands as one devoted to religious austerities, as one who exercises self-control and attains mastery over his senses (Rhys-Davids and Stede, 1955, 297).

Asceticism as practiced in the original Buddhist context differs from asceticism in the pre-Buddhist context. Asceticism in the pre-Buddhist context fluctuated between two extremes:

Asceticism could have had either of two purposes: to acquire more than ordinary powers by extraordinary control over the physical body, as in *yoga* and through *dhayana*, meditation; or to seek freedom from having to adjust to an increasingly regulated society by physically withdrawing from it evidenced by the practice of renunciation at a young age being regarded as a distancing from Vedic ritual and from rules of the normative texts. (Tharpar, 2002,132)

Asceticism in the pre-Buddhist stage was hence a unique effort to acquire either superhuman potential or total renunciation from material constraints (Monier-Williams, 1899, 437). The acquisition of magical potential, in the original Buddhist context, is subordinate to the process of renunciation (*pabbaja*) and removal of material stains (*tapas*). Acquisition of magical potential was clearly not the goal of the *bhikku sangha* although it may have been a significant accomplishment from their way of living.

### **Non-violence (*ahimsa*)**

The Buddhist theory of non-violence is a cardinal feature within the confines of the Buddhist ascetic life, in the form of abstinence from killing (Saleyyaka Sutta, 41.8 = Majjima Nikaya, i.286; Sandaraka Sutta, 51.9 = Majjima Nikaya, i.344; Pataliya Sutta 54.4 = Majjima Nikaya i.360; 54.6 = i.363; Jivaka S.55.12 = Majjima Nikaya, i.371; Sevittabba S.114.5 = Majjima Nikaya, iii.47; Culakammavibhanga S.135.5 = Majjima Nikaya, iii.203-4). It is expressed predominantly as *sila* (stem *sil*; *samadhi*; *upadharana*, *silanga*, *silacara*, *silakatha*, *silakandha*, *silacarana*, *silatittha*, *silabbata*, *silamattaka*, *silamaya*, *silasanvuta*, *silasampatti*, *silasampada*, *silasampanna*), the channel for fulfilling total renunciation from material constraints. The *sila* of the ascetic is such that no ascetic harms another (Mahapadana S.14.3.28 = Digha Nikaya, ii.52):

As long as they live, the Arahants, by abandoning the slaying of creatures, are abstainers from the slaying of creatures, have laid aside the rod; they are modest, show kindness, they abide friendly and compassionate to all creatures, to all beings.’ (Anguttara Nikaya, 1.211 = Book of the Threes, 111.7,70 (= ‘having gone forth and possessing the *bhikku*’s training and way of life abandoning the killing of living beings with rod and weapon laid aside, gentle and kindly he abides compassionate to all living beings. (Kandaraka Sutta, 51.13 = Majjima Nikaya, i.345-6)

In the pre-Buddhist context *ahimsa* was a magico-ritualistic taboo on life and had nothing to do with ethics. There was no restriction on killing animals for food. The assumption that vegetarianism and *ahimsa* were originally separate ideals but that with the distorted traditions of thought negotiating the introduction of the laws of Manu there arose a ban on meat finds clear expression in Ludwig Asldorf (Alsdorf, 1962). Vegetal substitutes were late and were a part of the movement which was opposed to the ritual of killing animals for sacrifice (Tull, 1996, 227-8). The ban on meat and sacrificial violence was rooted in injury and death (Tull, 1996, 228).

The regular flow of Buddhism into Sri Lanka from India, which has operated as a significant cultural factor in defining the Buddhist way of living, becomes especially strong in the Mauryan period (322-185 BCE). This is when king Asoka (269-232 BCE) committed himself to a propagandist enterprise of popularizing Buddhism within which non-violation of animal life was integral. Concern for animal life exerts its influence on the Indian religious environment with the commitment of emperor Asoka whose services are notable in the form of an imposition of a ban on slaughter of animals (Asokan Rock Edict, 1,3,4) and measures taken among others for the preservation of animal life (Asokan Rock Edict, 2). The edicts are, however, silent on a ban on beef in particular.

## The bull and meat consumption

The food consumption habits of the *gana sangha* social context does not reveal a ban on meat. The slaughter of animals for food formed a vital part of the society in Buddha's time (Rhys-Davids, 1911, 93, 94, 246). The culture familiar to the Thathagatha did not reflect conditions restraining the consumption of meat. The Thathagatha's lineage and household life are testimony to the absence of a ban on consumption of beef. His lineage, the Gothama *gotta*, the stem of which stretches to the *go* (*gava*, *gavi*, *gavassa*, *gavena*, *gavan*, *gavamha*, *gavamhi*, *gavimhi*) has the bull as its totem animal. There is no specific English word which describes *gotta* and includes all those descended from a common ancestor (Rhys-Davids and Stede, 1959, 255). This does not mean there was a totemic or ancestral ban on the consumption of beef (Rhys Davids and Stede, 1959, 254). The food consumed in the household of Suddodhana, the Thathagatha's father consisted of meat: '[A]gain, whereas in other men's homes broken rice together with sour gruel is given as food to slave-servants, in my father's home they were given rice, meat and milk rice.' (Anguttara Nikaya, 1.145).

Theravada Buddhist teachings do not impose a taboo on the consumption of meat although there is a ban on the meat of specific species such as human beings, elephants, horses, dogs (Mahavagga, 6.23.10-13) snakes, lions, tigers, and hyenas (6.13-23). The Vinaya Pitaka records examples of permission for the use of animal substances for a variety of requirements. In cases of illness the tallow of the following animals is permitted to be used as medicine such as that of bear, fish, alligator, swine, donkey as well as the consumption of meat broth (Mahavagga, 6.14.7-15.2; 22.4-25.2). Meat-broth is recommended for the sick *bhikku* (Mahavagga, 6). The Vinaya Pitaka permits the consumption of meat provided the fulfillment of the three conditions of purity, when it has not been seen, heard or suspected that a living being has been slaughtered for the *bhikku* (Jivaka Sutta, 55.5 = Majjima Nikaya, i.369). The Thathagatha himself is recorded as having consumed meat (Waley, 1931-2, 343-54; Reugg, 1980, 234-41). When addressing Devadatta, the Thathagatha explains that it is not absolutely necessary for the ascetic to practice vegetarianism:

Whoever wishes, let him be a forest-dweller; whoever wishes let him dwell in the neighborhood of a village; whoever wishes let him be a beggar for alms; whoever wishes let him accept an invitation; whoever wishes let him wear rags taken from the dust-heap; whoever wishes let him accept a householder's robes. For eight months, Devadatta, lodging at the foot of a tree is permitted by me. Fish and flesh are pure in respect of three points; if they are not seen, heard or suspected (to have been killed for him). (Vinaya Pitaka, 3.171-172)

The sociocultural context in the time of the Buddha is testimony to the assumption that the consumption of beef was a common practice. The occupation of slaughter of animals was fairly widespread in Buddha's time (Rhys-Davids, 1911, 54, 57, 93). The practice of cow veneration is grounded in the post-Vedic era (Brown, 1964, 245-55). The cultic importance of the cow is attributed to the rise of the concept of *ahimsa* (Brown, 1964, 93-4). The Vedic ban on killing cows fluctuates between the cow's ritual importance and the significance conferred to *go* and *gomat* (Tharpar, 1984, 25). There is, however, evidence of *ahimsa* and sanction of the cow in post-Vedic texts (Brown, 1964, 93-4; Hesterman, 1984, 119-127; Schmidt, 1963, 625-55;). The original Vedic context is free of vegetarianism (Bryant, 2006, 194-203; Smith, 1990, 177- 205).

Asceticism, in the Buddhist and pre-Buddhist contexts, was a serious endeavor that required close and constant focus on eliminating material obstacles for the acquisition of enlightenment

(*nibbana*). Asceticism in the original Buddhist context is free from a ban on meat consumption. But a strict ban was imposed on violence toward animals. The meat of specific animals was permitted to be consumed. Since the establishment of Buddhism as the state religion in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century. BCE, specific developments in Sinhalese Buddhist society have contributed to the rise of a context which the present study designs as ‘popular asceticism.’ The practice of *upavasa maghata*, spirit worship, and the concept of caste, can be considered as having contributed to the growth of this specific context. They reflect a notable ‘difference’ from the original Buddhist character of asceticism.

### *Upavasa maghata*

The practice of *upavasa maghata*, abstinence from killing animals on special abstinence days, is a specific development in Sinhalese culture which promoted non-violation of animal life. The program negotiates the commitment of Sinhalese kings to maintaining their patronage to Buddhism. The practice of *upavasa maghata* is most profoundly connected to the image of *bodhisattva* (Schmithausen, 2003, 21-46; Rahula, 1951, 247-8). The *bodhisattva* ideal is a specific ideal prevalent in Buddhist thought:

In the discourses collected in the Pāli Nikāyas of the Theravāda tradition, the term *bodhisattva* (or more precisely its Pāli counterpart, *bodhisatta*) is used predominantly by the Buddha Gautama to refer to his pre-awakening experiences, the time when he was ‘the *bodhisattva*’ par excellence. Such usage occurs as part of a standard formulaic phrase, according to which a particular event or reflection occurred ‘before (my) awakening, when still being an unawakened *bodhisattva*’, *pubbe va (me) sambodhā anabhisambuddhassa bodhisat tass’ eva sato* (henceforth referred to as the ‘before awakening’ phrase). (Annalayo, 2010, 15).

The *bodhisattva* ideal, in Sinhalese Buddhist culture, is a key theme for the perpetuation of primarily, *dhamma* and secondly, conversion. Ancient Sinhalese kings are represented in the light of promoting Buddhism. Their untiring efforts contributed to a consciousness which was free from the true and original spirit of Buddhism. As secular heads of state they are untiringly engaged in the perpetuation of Buddhism and distinguishing themselves in the form of the *bodhisattva* ideal which was not without the absence of a personal program of establishing themselves (Epigraphica Zeylanica, 1,11). Ancient Sinhalese kings, to whom the *bodhisattva* ideal is applied, are described as having introduced *upavasa maghata* (ceremonial abstention from meat on special observance days). Imposition of the order of *maghatha* is attributed to King Sena I in the form of a ban on meat, fish and intoxicating liquor on *Uposatha* days (Culavamsa, 49.49). King Amandagamini decreed not to kill (Mahavamsa, 25.6-7; Dipavamsa, 21.37). Aggabodhi VIII imposed a ban on meat, fish and intoxicating liquors on *uposatha* days (Culavamsa, 49.49). Aggabodhi IV commanded not to slay (Culavamsa, 46.40) and so did Aggabodhi V (Culavamsa, 48.34). Voharika Tissa imposed a ban on bodily injury as penalty (Culavamsa, 36.28).

Alms provided by the kings to the *bhikkhu* community is mentioned as having consisted of meatless items such as rice milk (Mahavamsa, 22.70,74; 24.56), rice (33.28), milk rice and honey (35.79), sugar (30.37, 31.113, 34.6, 32.46, 35.92; Cula. 89.52-3), sugar water (30.38), rice foods with honey (32.39), rice gruel (36.69,100; Culavamsa, 41.98; 42.63-4; 49.88; 50.75; 51.133) rice with oil, cakes, baked in butter and ordinary rice (32.40) sour millet gruel (32.30,49), butter, molasses and licorice (32.46,35.92), clarified butter (31.113), milk (35.65), melons (35.8), milk (37.125; 45.25), milk rice (Culavamsa, 45.2; 89.45), milk broth (Mahavamsa, 38.27), sugar syrup (Culavamsa, 44.66), honey (54.24), oil (54.24), rice with

sour milk (45.25; 51.133), butter (44.66; 89.52-3), melted butter (54.24), sugar, juice of garlic and betel (54.22), fruits (39.48), grain, sweet and sour milk (89.52-3).

### Spirit worship

The worship of spirits or demons (*yakkhas*) has become popular among many Sinhalese Buddhists in contemporary times. Spirit worship reflects the idea of abstinence from meat – a key element in the contextual frame of ‘popular’ asceticism. The spirit cults satisfy personal needs of the people:

Spirit cults, oriented to worldly (*laukika*) concerns, deal with the misfortunes of daily life; Buddhism is concerned with personal destiny, with what is beyond (*lokottara*) the ordinary. It is the ultimate solution to evil, while magical-animism is only a temporary one. And the Sinhalese, both literate and non-literate, both urbanite and villager, both sophisticate and folk, participate in both sub-systems. (Ames, 1964, 41)

The *yakkhas* are offered blood sacrifice (Yalman, 1973, 295-6; 1964,297). The *yakkha* may be offered ‘five kinds of burned things or three kinds of flesh (*mas tun vage*) i.e. land pig (*uru malu*), air peacock (*madara malu*), sea fish (*magula malu*) which are all polluted condiments (*kili malu*).’ (Yalman, 1964, 131). Fowl, blood and meat were ‘favorites’ of the *yakkhas* (Yalman, 1964, 126). Among fried foods offered to demons are fried rice, oil cakes, *jak* fruit, *manioc*, juggary (sugar) and grain (Yalman, 1964, 122,124). *Yakkhas* frequent polluted places (Yalman, 1964, 131). They are associated with types of pollution such as blood, death, meat, fried foods, oil cakes, excrement, poison and possession by a goblin (Ames, 1964, 38). The worship of the *yakkhas* signifies that purity can be maintained by abstinence from meat although they have to be appeased by these foods. Purity in food consumption is a key element in the ‘popular’ ascetic context in contemporary Sinhalese Buddhist culture. The ascetic culture which has developed in recent decades in Sri Lanka reveals the taboo of dried fish, meat and eggs, specifically for those who join in rituals related to the *yakkhas*. Food taboos in the form of abstinence from meat are also observed in several instances. Some of the worshippers of *yakkhas* could be strict vegetarians (Gombrich and Obeyesekere, 1988, 81). The worship of gods of Hindu origin, however, favored the rise of a ‘popular’ ascetic culture in Sri Lanka through the medium of abstinence from meat consumption. Hence, vegetarianism in Sri Lanka has been observed as cult-oriented, incorporating a personal commitment of the worshipper of some particular god or goddess:

A regular is a strict vegetarian. Sociologically viewed the food taboo demarcates the cult as group apart from the outer world where ‘impure’ food habits prevail. Members are pure as opposed to the impure mundane society round them. On the individual level it is a deliberate act of renunciation that establishes the individual’s strong commitment to the deities of the cult. It is strongly believed that violation of the taboo may cause illness or perhaps death. Even involuntary violation may cause grave anxiety. (Gombrich and Obeyesekere, 1988, 81)

There are however exceptions regarding the form of sacrifice offered to a god on account of the specific ‘social status’, as for instance in the case of a god at Kataragama who is of non-Buddhist origin. This god is usually offered the meat of venison and iguana while the meat of peacock was taboo since the bird was the *deva*’s vehicle (Gombrich and Obeyesekere, 1989, 175). Pilgrims at Kataragama are repeatedly recorded consuming beef, ham, pork (and being involved in orgies and drinking liquor) (Gombrich and Obeyesekere, 1998, 192). This aspect,

however, is not considered a hindrance to the maintenance of an ascetic life style by those who worship this particular god.

While the original Buddhist teachings contained an explicit ban on violence in the form of a ban on beef in the cult of Siva, the doctrine of non-violence begins to become rooted in Sri Lanka by the 6<sup>th</sup> or 7<sup>th</sup> century CE. Although the cult of Siva in and its ban of beef in Sri Lanka becomes notable by the 10<sup>th</sup> century CE, there is reference to the practice of slaying goats in the port of Manthai, revealed in a particular word on a Sinhalese rock edict – *elumaruwa* (*elu* is goat; *maruwa* is killer). According to Gunawardhana (1979, 160), the killing of goats in Manthai suggests a reference made to the Saiva population who did not eat beef. Not matter whether it was goats or bulls that were killed, what can be assumed is that the imposition of the ban on meat (i.e. beef) in Sinhalese culture is a clear indication of the Hindu Brahmanic influence in Sri Lanka. The ban reveals the spread of the cult of Siva, among other cults of South Indian Hindu origin. Siva worship dates from the Anuradhapura period (Pathmanathan, 2003, 152-6). Siva (also as Natarajah) is one of the most popular and significant images of the Polonnaruva period (Godakumbura, 1961, 239-53). Archeological evidence is rich in bronze material contributing to the worship of gods of South Indian origin among whom the most significant is Siva (Arunachalam, 1916, 189-222; Indrapala, 2005, 280; Rasanayagam, 1926,186). Siva worship specifically favored the doctrine of non-violence. The cause for the spread of non-violence is a strong wave of Hinduism stemming from South India by the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries CE which informs such religious cults as Saivism and Vaisnavism. These religions were a result of the arrival of mercenaries, artisans, warriors and mercantile communities from South India, especially during the rule of the Tamil Colas dynasty (c. 900-1100 CE), whose settlement in the island reinforced Tamil influence as in the case of the worship of Hindu deities. These religions are usually more prominently diffused in the areas closer to the northern part of Sri Lanka where most of the Tamils reside and Hindu influence is strong to date, for example in the Trincomalee district (Balendra, 1953, 176-98).

### **The concept of ‘purity of caste’ and meat consumption**

Division of people, on account of the concept of ‘caste’ – a notion of superiority of birth – existed in Sinhalese culture since early times. *Goigama* forms the highest caste in Sri Lanka:

Birth, office, wealth and military authority combined with a specific style of living and conspicuous status symbols made the *radala* a socially privileged group. The clothes they wore and the color style of their head gear too revealed their higher status in society. (Dewaraja, 1972, 63)

The idea of ‘purity of caste’ (*jati*) developed in post-Vedic times and is specifically infused with the concept of one’s social class (Tharpar, 2002, 23). The concept of *jati* was so strong in determining one’s social status that specific foods like beef were considered as taboo for those who were ‘inducted in to higher-caste status.’ (Tharpar, 2002, 66). The idea of ‘purity of caste’ is traditionally assumed as having claims to specific cultural norms which contribute to what the present study defines as ‘popular’ asceticism in Sinhalese culture. ‘Purity of caste’ merges in to Sinhalese culture at a historically early date. ‘Purity of caste’ is considered as an important personal advantage in Sinhalese Buddhist society as it is one that provides social distinction and associates the occupation of those who belong to that caste (Yalman, 1973, 297).

A particular set of beliefs often associates members who belong to a specific caste. These beliefs reveal their centrality for the evolution of a key element within the ‘popular’ frame of asceticism in Sri Lanka – abstinence from meat consumption.

The concept of ‘purity of caste’ has favored the development of the practice of vegetarianism in Sinhalese society. Meat consumption was restricted to the ‘low’ castes such as the consumption of beef by the *berava kula* (caste of drumbeaters in Sri Lanka (Gunawardhana, 1979, 166). The *karava* caste, caste of fishermen, is known as ‘impure’ as its members catch fish as an occupation (Stewart, 2016, 21). An early tradition survives with claims of cannibalism and the *karava* caste (Stewart, 2016, 21). The *sakuro* caste is considered as ‘pure’ on account of their maintenance of forest renunciation and vegetarianism (Stewart, 2016, 22). The *Vellala* caste in Jaffna, in the northern part of Sri Lanka, is reported as having consumed vegetarian food for centuries. (Rasanayagam, 1926, 155)

Specific Sinhalese myths of origin indicate the association between improper sexual relations and meat consumption. In these myths sexual relations between those of low and high castes are considered as specifically improper; for example, sexual relations between a woman of a ‘high’ caste and a man of a ‘low’ caste (Yalman, 1965, 454). The result of a female having sexual relations with a male below her caste will be her being given to a person who belongs to the caste of *rodiya*, the lowest of castes in Sri Lanka (Yalman, 1963, 42-3). The origin myth of the caste of *rodiya* embodies a conception of cannibalism or meat eating as well as sexual relations between a high caste female and low caste male:

Female sexual purity’ was so earnestly sought among those who belonged to the ‘high’ castes that the union between a woman of the ‘high’ castes and a man of a ‘low’ caste was a disgrace sufficient enough to dispel the woman from her family and relatives. (Yalman, 1963, 43).

In such cases the woman is often given to a *rodiya*, the lowest in the hierarchy of castes (Yalman, 1963, 42). A Sinhalese origin myth describes the tale of a woman whose practice of cannibalism was a reason for her marriage with a *rodiya*:

Once upon a time there was a King, Parakrama Bahu, whose daughter, Ratna Valli (Gem Valli), became addicted to flesh. She demanded that some kind of flesh be given to her every day. One day the people who were charged with the duty of finding provisions for the palace could not find any flesh, so they substituted human flesh instead. The daughter liked this so well that she became addicted to it. One day, a barber (or at times a weaver) discovered what was going on. He broke the news to the anxious people whose youths had been disappearing. Thereupon the King expelled his daughter and gave her to a Rodda, a ‘sweeper’ who was a poor relative of the royal household in the palace. The progeny of these two formed the Rodiya caste. (Yalman, 1965, 454)

Consumption of meat, in this case a dreaded affair as it is cannibalistic, is a practice that most often does not agree with ‘normal’ social norms. The girl who commits cannibalism, even though she is of the royalty, is considered as an ‘outsider’ – an outsider from her people, family and, above all, her caste. She cannot continue living within her caste and is therefore made to unite with a man outside her caste, a man of very low and ‘polluted’ status. The myth serves as an important factor for the ‘pollution’ associated with meat consumption. Meat, and this case, not animal, but human flesh, is a strong candidate for ‘pollution.’ The ‘pollution’ is more

overwhelming when it is connected with another element of ‘pollution’ – ‘low’ caste. The connection between meat and pollution is thus strong in the ‘popular’ ascetic context.

### **Conclusion**

This article began by briefly discussing the development of vegetarianism and asceticism in India through anthropological, religious, linguistic and cultural lenses. It then analysed the introduction of Hindu belief systems regarding vegetarianism into Sri Lanka and the subsequent reaction of the Sinhalese community to this religious infiltration. This reaction included the rise of *Upavasa maghata*, spirit worship, and very specific local caste-isms. All of these have favored the growth of a specific frame of ‘popular’ asceticism in Sinhalese culture in recent years. These developments are not in agreement with the original Theravada concept of asceticism or non-violence, but their impact is such that they are pivotal in forming a frame of ‘popular’ asceticism in Sri Lanka.

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