

MAHĀSĀMI SANGHA RĀJA INSTITUTION IN SRI LANKA

Its Origin, Development, Status, Duties and Functions

MENDIS ROHANADEERA

Literary and eipigraphic records belonging to the period from the twelfth century A.D., to at least sixteenth century A.D, contain occasional references to a number of famous monks with the appellation "Mahāsvāmi", "Mahāsāmi" or "māhimi", and in later times, "Sangha Rāja", attached to their names. A detailed examination of these data reveals that there prevailed in Sri Lanka, an office of the supreme chief of the Sangha, designated by the above mentioned names.

This office as well as the title Mahāsāmi assigned to it, seems to have come into vogue some time after the unification of the Sangha in 1165 A.D.. By the middle of the 14th century this office had evolved into an institution with it's own traditions and norms. This article attempts to study the origin, development, evolution of this office, the status it enjoyed and the duties and functions assigned to it.

The first monk to bear this title was Sāriputta Mahā Thera the famous Tikācariya of the Polonnaruwa Period. He was the pupil of Dimbulāgala Kāsyapā Mahā Sthavira under whose presidency the unification of the Sangha was carried out in 1165 A.D. How and when Sāriputta came to be referred to as Mahāsāmi has to be discovered from contemporary sources.

Sāriputta himself had a number of pupils who were highly esteemed authors about the beginning of the 13th century A.D. In most of their works either at the beginning or in the colophon they refer to their teacher Sāriputta as Mahāsāmi.¹

Out of these Buddhanāga Thera's refernce to his teacher as "Sāriputta Mahā Thera Mahāsāmi" in his *Kankhāvitarāṇī Tikā* seems to be the earliest one to which a definite date can be assigned. The wording in a stanza given in the colophon of this work suggests, that the book was completed at a time

1. For example, Sangha Rakkhita Thera in his *Khuddakā sikkha tika* refers to his teacher as Sāriputta Mahāsāmi; P. Buddhadatta Thera, *Pāli sāhityaya*, Ambalangoda, Sri Lanka, 1962, p. 394. cf. Dhammakitti Thera's reference, in his *Dāthāvamsa*, 'Sāritānuja mahādisānipāda'; *Dāthāvamsa*, ed. by Migamuve Asabhatissa Thera, Colombo, 1888, p. 110.

when Parākarmabāhu was still living.² This is clear evidence that Sāriputta was called Mahāsāmi before 1186 A.D., the last year of the reign of Parākrama bahu I.

On the other hand Sumangala Thera, in his *Abhidhammattha Vibhāvinī and Abhidhammattha Vikāsinī*, paying homage to his teacher Sāriputta who was at that time residing at Jētavana Vihāra at Polonnaruva, refers to the latter as “Thera” but not as “Mahāsāmi.”³ The Jētavana Vihāra mentioned here, was built by Parākramabāhu I, evidently after the great event of unification of Sangha in 1165.⁴ This proves that Sāriputta had not attained the status of Mahāsāmi until even some time after 1165 A.D. As such we can tentatively conclude that the title Mahāsāmi in respect of Sāriputta has come in to use some time after 1165 A.D. but before 1186 A.D.

It is interesting to note that this is exactly the time that Sāriputta was emerging as the virtual leader of the whole Sangha of the Island. Let us now examine as to how this process took place.

The great event popularly known as “Nikāyasāmaggi,” the unification of the three fraternities, actually appears to have been a purification of Sangha in the Island. This was achieved by Dimbulāgala Kāsyapa Mahā Sthavira, under the direct and strict supervision of Parākramabāhu I.⁵

All the monks belonged to the three fraternities in the Island were summoned to Polonnaruva, the capital city. Members of the Mahāvihāra were first examined. Then members of the other also were subjected to similar examination. Those who were found corrupt and guilty, were expelled from the Order, and were offered suitable jobs. Some were demoted from the rank of Mahā Thēra to sāmaṇera and so on.⁶

The Sangha thus purified was disciplined under a common code of law promulgated by a board of judges with Dimbulāgala Kāsyapa Mahā Sthavira as the president.⁷ With this great and laborious exercise the three different

2. “Parakkanti bhujō rājā pulatthimhi purē vasanto, yo tēsu samanēsu nīccam mahogham viya catuppaccaya vattayanto, tō gantha vipassanāsu yojeti, tēna yasassinā kāritesu vihāresu” *Kankhā vitaranī tīkā*, ed. by U. P. Ekanayake, Colombo, PTS., the colophon, the present participles, “vasanto,” “vattayanto,” and the present tense verb “yojēti,” suggest, that the King was living at the time of the committing of the writing.

3. *Abhidhammattha vikāsinī*, ed. P. Buddhadatta Thera, Ambalangoda, Sri Lanka, 1961, p. 456.

4. *Culavamsa, CV.*, PTS., 78, 34.

5. *Nikāyasangrahaya*, ed. M. Kumaraṅga, Colombo, 1936, NS., p. 20.

6. *CV.*, 78, 26-27.

7. This was inscribed on the rock at Galvihāra, Polonnaruva, and now popularly known as *Polonnaru Katikāvata*, see *Epigraphia Zeylanica, EZ.*, Vol. II, pp. 263-268.

fraternities of Mahāvihāra, Abhayagiri and Jētavana lost their separate identities and ceased to function separately. Thus for the first time after 1254 years, since the time of Vaṭṭagāmanī Abhaya, all the bhikkus in the Island became one community, disciplined under one code of ethics and under one leader.

Evidently this leadership at the initial stage seems to have been provided by Dimbulāgala Kāsyapa Mahā Sthavira, regarding the affairs of the Sangha and the sāsana in general. The King was in the practice of consulting Dimbulāgala Kāsyapa. Regarding state assistance or patronage necessary for any exercise in which the Sangha would be involved, Kāsyapa communicated with the King as the spokesman of the Sangha.⁸ Thus Kāsyapa Mahā Sthavira began to be regarded as the spiritual leader of the Sangha, on a par with Parākramabāhu I, the secular leader or the leader of the laity. This was the basis which gave rise to the office of the Supreme Leader of the Sangha although the concept behind the basis was contrary to the wish of the Buddha himself.⁹

Although Mahā Kāsyapa thus became the first de facto supreme leader he was never called Māhasāmi; instead he has been referred to as 'Mahāsthavira' in the *Galvihāra Katikāvata* of Polonnaruva,¹⁰ the most contemporary source, and as "Mahā Thēra" and "jetṭha" in the *Cūlavamsa*.¹¹ His pupil Sāriputta in his works refers to Kāsyapa as "Sanghassa parināyaka", meaning the leader of the Sangha, and "Sanghassa pitaram" the father of the Sangha.¹² Even the *Dambadeni Katikāvata*, the only source which speaks of the status of Mahāsāmi, does not refer to him with that title, instead he is referred to as "Kāsyapa Mahā Sthavira", whereas in the same line his pupil Sāriputta is referred to as "Sāriputta Mahāsvāmi."¹³

8. An interesting legend has been recorded in the *Saddhamma Sangaha*, written by a Thai monk, who studied in Sri Lanka under Sīlavamsa Dhamma kitti Mahāsāmi, during the latter part of the fourteenth century. According to this, some time after the great event of unification of the sangha, the Sangha Thera, Dimbulāgala Mahā Kāsyapa Mahā Sthavira, has explained to the Sangha, the need for writing new commentaries to the tripitakas, for the existing commentaries were out of date. Then the Sangha had told Mahākāsyapa that they should obtain royal assistance for that task. Accordingly when the King came to visit him, Mahā Kāsyapa informed the King of the wish of the Sangha. Then the King provided with all the necessary assistance. *Saddhamma Sangaha*, PTS., pp. 58, 59.

9. Buddha refused the proposal of Devadatta to appoint a leader to rule the community of Sangha after him. Buddha's wish was that, after him, his Dhamma and vinaya be the leader of the Sangha; *Mahāparinibbāna sutta*, *Dīgha Nikāya PTS.*, 1903, Vol II. Chapter VI. p. 154.

10. *EZ.*, Vol. II, p. 264.

11. 'Mahā thēra dhuraṃ katvā;' *CV.*, 76, 6; "Mahā Kassapa jetthēna" *CV.*, 76, 56.

12. For example, see; *Sārattha Dīpanī*, *PTS.*, Opening stanza.

13. *Katikāvata Sangarā*, *KS.*, ed. D. B. Jayatillake, Colombo, 1955, p. 7.

These instances point to the fact that although Mahā Kāsyapa became the sole leader of the Sangha in the Island after the unification, the title Mahāsāmi was not yet introduced to denote that position.

Mahā Kāsyapa does not seem to have favoured living in the Capital. He seems to have preferred the quiet of the Dimbulāgala forest monastery, for we see that shortly after the event of unification, Sāriputta was receiving special patronage from Parākramabāhu. *Cūlavamsa* having concluded the narrative of the great event, records that Parākramabāhu built a great Vihāra called Jētavana, and in that Vihāra he erected a mansion with balconies and inner chambers specially meant for Sāriputta.¹⁴

This clearly shows that Sāriputta by this time had been elevated to the position of Supreme Leader of the Sangha, which previously held by his teacher Mahā Kāsyapa. Even the leaders of the eight famous institutions to which the Sangha was divided during the mediaeval times in Sri Lanka, seem to have been brought under the supervision of Sāriputta, for we see that the King had made them to reside within the vicinity of Sāriputta's mansion, by providing them with three storied eight mansions within the precincts of the Jētavana Vihāra¹⁵.

It was during this period, that Sāriputta residing at the Jētavana Vihāra and receiving patronage from Parākramabāhu, wrote his *Sārattha Dīpani*. In that work he has not introduced him as Mahāsāmi. Moreover Sumangala Thera in his *Abhidammattha Vibhāvinī* refers to his teacher who, at that time was residing at Jētavana, as Thera, not as Mahāsāmi. But we noted above that Buddhanāga had referred to his teacher Sāriputta as Mahā Thera Mahāsāmi while the latter was residing at the Jētavana Vihāra being patronized by Parākramabāhu.

We would therefore conclude that the use of the title Mahāsāmi in respect of Sāriputta has commenced some time after he came to reside at Jētavana Vihāra, while Parākramabāhu was still living. As such we can reaffirm that the title Mahāsāmi had come in to vogue in Sri Lanka for the first time in respect of the office of Supreme Leader of the Sangha some time between 1165—1186 A.D.

In the earliest evidence cited above, we found the title Mahāsāmi coupled with another well known term Mahā Thēra.¹⁶ The same usage has been

14. *CV.*, 78, 34.

15. "Tatthāyatana vāsīnaṃ — Thērānaṃ thīrasīlinaṃ,
Mahagēhē aṭṭha pāsādē — Kārāpēsi ti bhūmakē; *CV.*, 78, 33.

16. "Sāriputta mahā thēra mahāsāmissa..." *Vinayattha Manjusā*, PTS., Colophon.

employed by Vācissara Thera, another senior pupil of Sāriputta, when he referred to Sāriputta as “Mahāsāmi Mahā yatinda” in his *Vinaya vinicchaya tikā*.¹⁷ ‘Mahā yatinda’ here is also another word for Mahā Thera.

We also come across the expression “Mēdhankara Māhimi Svāmīn Vahansē” in the colophon of a palm leaf manuscript of the *Cullavagga*.¹⁸ The present writer has pointed out elsewhere,¹⁹ that Mēdhankara mentioned here could be identified with Vanaratana Mēdhankara Mahāsāmi who presided over the convocation held at Dambadeniya in 1266 A.D. In the three instances cited above we noted that the title Mahāsāmi or Māhimi has been used along with another common term like Mahā Thera, Mahā yatinda or Svāmīn vahansē.

It is noteworthy that this use of a supporting term can be seen only at the initial stage. After Dambadeniya period we only see Mahāsāmi or Māhimi, being used to qualify the famous monks who held this supreme position.

Why was it necessary at that initial stage to couple the term Mahāsāmi with another generally known term? The only feasible explanation is that the title would have seemed novel and strange at that initial stage to be used alone; as such it had to be used with a known common term, but this was not necessary after the people got used to it.

It may be recalled here, that some scholars have taken Mahāsāmi to be a foreign term introduced to Sri Lanka from the south-east region. For example, the French specialist on south-east studies, G. Coedes has held that the term Mahāsāmi was common in Siam and Tambaraṭṭha, and Sri Lanka would have borrowed it from those countries. Coedes’ opinion has been based on evidence emanating from *Sukhodaya inscriptions*. It is true that these inscriptions bring in to light two prominent monks bearing the title Mahāsāmi. One is Sri Sraddhā Rāja Cūlamuṇi Sri Ratana Lankādīpa Mahāsāmi, a prince of the Sukhodaya ruling family, who visited Sri Lanka at the beginning of the Gampola period, middle of the 14th century. The other is called Mahāsāmi Sangha Rāja, a Sinhalese monk who was invited by King Li Thai to Sukhodaya, in 1362. The Thai inscriptions in which these two Mahāsāmis figure, have now been accepted as belonging to the middle of the fourteenth century.²¹ We

17. “Yō dhamma sēnāpati tulya nāmō — Tathūpāmo sīhala dīpa dipo,
Mamaṃ māhāsāmi mahā yatindō — Pāpēsī vuddhā jina sāsananthi,
See; *Thēra vādi bhōdhācāryavarayo*, P. Buddhadatta Thero, Ambalangoda, Sri Lanka, 1946, p. 98.

18. M. Rohanadeera, *The Sangha Organization In Sri Lanka*, Nugegoda Sri Lanka, 1974, p. 6

19. Palm leaf Manuscript, (photostat), No. 69L, Colombo Museum.

20. G. Coedes, *Rucueil des Inscriptions du Siam*, Vol. I, part, I, pp. 41, 46.

21. Chand Chirayu Rajani, *Guide through the inscriptions of Sukhothai*, Working Paper, No. 9, South east Asian Studies Programme, University of Hawaii, 1976; Also see Michael Vickery, *Review Article*, p. 212.

have seen above that the office Mahāsāmi was already in use even before 1186 A.D. in Sri Lanka. We therefore have to dismiss the view that the prevalence of the title Mahāsāmi in Thailand during the middle of the 14th century, to be responsible for the use of that title in Sri Lanka.

Reginold Le May has taken the title Mahāsāmi to be one, that was awarded by the King of Sri Lanka to foreign monks who came to Sri Lanka in order to study Sīhala Buddhism.²² It is not clear what evidence led Le May to arrive at this view. But it is clear that he has taken the title to be a Sri Lankan one which was sent to foreign countries, a view quite opposite to that of G. Coedes.

It is noteworthy in this context, that we find two leading monks from Burma visiting Sri Lanka, precisely during the period under discussion. The first was "Panthagu Mahā Thera", the spiritual advisor to the King of Burma. He came to Sri Lanka in 1167 A.D., and studied Sīhala Buddhism for six years. Then "Uttarajīva Mahā Thera", also Royal Preceptor to the Burmese King, came to Sri Lanka some time after 1173 A.D. and stayed here for ten years studying Sīhala Buddhism.²³ The position they held as spiritual advisors to the King, suggests that they could have been the two successive Supreme Leaders of the Sangha in Burma.

It is interesting to note that these two Burmese Prelates were staying in Sri Lanka, exactly during the time in which the office of the Supreme Leader of the Sangha was being established with Sāriputta as the first holder of the position. It is therefore, reasonable to believe that their stay in Sri Lanka during this period would have influenced the fashioning of the supreme ecclesiastic office in Sri Lanka. But whether their stay was responsible in introducing the title Mahāsāmi for that office is doubtful, for this term was not known in Burma during their time. Under these circumstances we are left with the only choice of looking for the origin of the term in Sri Lanka.

There is a legend recorded in the *Cūlavamsa*, which speaks of a Mahāsāmi tradition prevalent in Sri Lanka during the 7th century A.D.

Dealing with the lineage of King Dappuḷa I, 659 A.D., *Cūlavamsa* states, that Dappuḷa was the second of three sons born to a daughter of a person called "Rohaṇasāmi." The first son Aggabōdhi ruled in Rohaṇa for some time and was succeeded by the younger brother "Dappuḷa Sāmi". Since this Dappuḷa Sāmi became extraordinarily popular among the people of Rohaṇa, they called him "Mahāsāmi."²⁴

22. Reginold Le May, *A Concise History of Buddhist Art in Siam*, 1938, p. 129.

23. G. B. Harvay, *History of Burma*, Longman Green & Co. 1925, p. 49, 50.

Also see; S. Paranavitana, *University of Ceylon, History of Ceylon, UCHC.*, Vol. 1, Part, II, p. 569.

24. *The Culavamsa, Translation*, W. Gieger, PTS., CV., tr., p. 93.

According to this legend a term called “Sāmi” meaning “Lord” has been used in respect of the political leader of Rohaṇa. Dappuḷa in this episode has inherited this term from his mother’s father, Rohaṇasāmi. As Dappuḷa became exceptionally popular among the people, he was called “Mahāsāmi”, the great lord. Since then this title has been used in respect of the political leader of Rōhaṇa.

A similar legend is also found in the *Cūlavamsa*, in the story of Vijāyabāhu I, 1055 — 1110 A.D. In this instance, the purpose of the legend seems to be to connect Vijāyabāhu with the lineage of Mānavamma, 684-718 A.D. But the hero of the episode seems to be not Mānavamma, the King by that name, but his elder brother, who is said to have refused the throne and entered the Order.

According to this legend the elder brother of Mānavamma had been chanting a charm seated on the bank of a river in the neighbourhood of Gōkaṇṇa, the present Trincomalee. He was praying for a boon from Skandha Kumāra, presently known as the God of Kataragama. Being enchanted by this act, God Kumara appeared there, on the peacock, his vehicle. The peacock feeling thirsty, pecked at the oblation plate with his beak. Not finding water in the hollow coconut shell, the peacock went towards the face of the praying Prince. The Prince expecting the fulfilment of his objective, offered his eye, which the peacock split and drank the liquid therein. Thereupon God Kumara being pleased with the Prince bestowed the boon which he was praying for. Thus having been blinded, the Prince refused the throne and opted to enter the Order. Mānavamma, the younger brother subsequently ascended the throne and fetched the blind brother to Abhayagiri Vihāra, where he was admitted to the Order. The king built the “Uttaroḷha Pirivena” in the Abhayagiri Vihāra, for his brother, assigned six hundred monks and placed the custodians of the Tooth Relic under him. The monks of Abhayagiri Vihāra became his followers, and the King ruled rightiously receiving his counsel.²⁵

This legend clearly indicates that the elder brother of Mānavamma had the right to the throne, but having been blinded refused the Kingship and entered the Order. He was made the leader of the Abhayagiri Vihāra with the honour of being the custodian of the Tooth Relic and the counsellor to the King.

The last stanza of this episode has a direct relevance to our discussion. It runs as follows,

“Janā tabbaṃsajā kēci - Pabbajja nirapekkhakā,
Nivasimsu yathā kāmaṃ - Mahāsāmi padaṃ sitā.”²⁶

25. *CV.*, I, 57, 3-24.

26. *CV.*, I, 57, 24.

The literal translation of this stanza would be as follows :

“Some people born in his lineage, but not interested in renouncing the world, lived as they wished, enjoying the title Mahāsāmi.”

What does this statement imply? It implies that the title Mahāsāmi was originally meant for those who entered the Order from the lineage of Mānavamma. The first to enjoy this title was Mānavamma Thera, who became the leader of the Abhayagiri monks. His kinsmen of later generations, who entered the sāsana were also entitled to it. Although this was the practice, some people who did not like renunciation, lived as they wished also enjoying the title Mahāsāmi.

It will be interesting to note that Dappuḷa the main character in the first legend quoted above was the maternal uncle of Mānavamma Thera who was the main figure of the second legend. We know from the *Cūlavamsa* that the sister of Dappuḷa had been given in marriage to the King of Anuradhapura, and that King was Kassapa II, (650-659 A.D), the father of Mānavamma. We also observed above that Dappuḷa inherited the right to the Kingship of Rōhaṇa and the title “Sāmi”, which later enhanced to “Mahāsāmi”, through his mother’s line.

We were informed indirectly by the second legend that Mānavamma had the right to the throne and bore the title Mahāsāmi, which his maternal uncle Dappuḷa held. This implies that Mānavamma Thera also had the right through his mother, the sister of Dappuḷa.

These circumstances lead us to believe that matrilineal descent has been favoured by the Royal family of Rōhaṇa. Some Princes of Rōhaṇa who occupied the throne of Anuradhapura seem to have followed this tradition. For example, Mahānāga having come from Rōhaṇa occupied the throne of Anuradhapura from 569-570 A.D. He was succeeded by his “bhāgineyya”, the sister’s son, Aggabōdhi I, (571-604 A.D.) who also came from Rōhaṇa.²⁷ His successor Aggabōdhi II, also the bhāgineyya of the former, was a Prince from Rōhaṇa.²⁸ We again see Kassapa II inviting Mānaka his bhāgineyya, from Rōhaṇa to occupy the throne of Anuradhapura.

All these instances clearly support the view that at least from the latter part of the 6th century A.D. onwards there prevailed among the royal family of Rōhaṇa, a tradition of favouring the succession from the maternal uncle to his nephew, bhāgineyya. It was in accordance with this tradition that Mānavamma Thera, the bhāgineyya of Dappuḷa, had the claim to the throne as well as to the title Mahāsāmi, which his maternal uncle held.

27. *UCHC.*, I, I, p. 306.

Both the legends discussed above seem to throw light on the origin of the usage of Mahāsāmi in Rōhaṇa during the 7th century A.D. According to the first legend, the title originated with Dappuḷa, while according to the second, with Mānavamma Thera, the sister's son of Dappuḷa. In the first, the title Mahāsāmi was associated with the political leader of Rōhaṇa, while in the second it was with the head of the saṅgha of Abhayagiri Vihara. But basically both legends seem to be depicting one and the same tradition of a Mahāsāmi usage prevalent in Rōhaṇa during the 7th century A.D. It is therefore reasonable to assume that these two episodes are in fact two versions of one legend recorded on two different occasions to deal with two different situations.

Let us now examine what these two different occasions and situations are? In the first occasion, the legend was introduced while dealing with the reign of Dappuḷa I, 659 A.D., in the first part of the *Cūlavamsa*. This part which continues the chronicle from Kittisirimeghavaṇṇa (301-328 A.D.) up to the fall of Anuradhapura, in the reign of Mahinda V (1017), has been suggested as having been written during the eleventh century A.D.²⁸. We therefore have to treat this version as depicting a legend based on the origin of the title Mahāsāmi as known to the author in the eleventh century. His knowledge has been, that the title Mahāsāmi originated with Dappuḷa, the political overlord of Rohaṇa, in the middle of the seventh century A.D.

The second version of the legend is recorded at the opening of the story of Vijayabāhu I (1055-1110 A.D), in order to trace his lineage. This part of the *Cūlavamsa* has been written at the end of the twelfth century or at the beginning of the thirteenth. The belief that the title originated during the seventh century in Rohaṇa seems to have been still prevailing. But in this occasion it is given as having originated with a rightful heir to the political leadership, who refused it and became the leader of the Sangha. Thus the author of this section has shifted the emphasis from political leader to religious leader, by making both one and the same person.

Why did the author writing at the close of the twelfth century, think it necessary to shift the title Mahāsāmi from political leader to political cum religious leader? Why did he make a specific statement that "certain people of Mānavamma's lineage, but not interested in renouncing the world, also lived as they wished, enjoying the title Mahāsāmi"—a statement which implies that the title Mahāsāmi was meant generally for those descendants of Mānavamma, who renounced the world. Again why was it necessary for him to make a reservation regarding those descendants who did not renounce the world, saying that they also enjoyed the title and lived as they wished?

28. Amaraḍāsa Liyanagamagē refers to this view, advanced by Sirimā Wickramasinghe, in the chapter on sources of her thesis submitted for Ph.D. to The London University. Amaraḍasa Liyanagamage, *The Decline of Polonnaruva and the Rise of Dambadeniya*, Department of Cultural Affairs, Colombo, 1968, p. 29.

For this purpose we have to look in to the practice in this regard, current at the time the author made this statement. We saw in the foregoing discussion, that apparently by this time, the office of the supreme leader of the Sangha had already taken shape and the title Mahāsāmi had been assigned to it, and also Sāriputta had been holding that highest ecclesiastic office. It is therefore natural that the author had to recast the legend in keeping with the practice current in the day, viz. the use of the Mahāsāmi title in respect of Sāriputta who was holding the office of the Supreme Lord of the Sangha.

Why then, did the author have to speak of “some people of Mānavamma lineage, who were not interested in entering the Order, yet lived as they wished enjoying the title Mahāsāmi” ? Answer to this, contains in the second version of the legend. In this part we meet a very important personage called Moggallāna, the father of Vijayabāhu, whose descent was the main theme of the episode here. This Moggallāna was a direct descendant of Mānavamma who, without entering the Order was enjoying the title Mahāsāmi²⁹. The author therefore would have made reservation before hand, in order to justify Moggallāna, a layman of the Mānavamma lineage who enjoyed the title Mahāsāmi.

Thus it will be clear that the legend pertinent to the usage of the title Mahāsāmi in Rōhaṇa during the seventh century A.D., when being recorded in the eleventh century A.D., by the author of the first part of the *Cūlavamsa*, his knowledge seems to have been that the title was used to denote the princes of the royal family of Rohaṇa, who were the descendants of Dappuḷa with whom the title originated.

But when the author of the second part of the *Cūlavamsa* at the close of the twelfth century A.D., wanted to explore the legend for the purpose of tracing the descent of Vijayabāhu, the title had already been accepted as the appellation of the supreme leader of the Sangha, and not the political leader as in the previous instance.

Thus it is clear that the author of this part of the chronicle has recast and expanded the legend to be in keeping with the current practice of his time. He shifted the origin of the title from Dappuḷa, the political leader to his sister's son Mānavamma Thera, who could be regarded as political cum religious leader. Thus the author could explain satisfactorily, why the title Mahāsāmi which was originally meant for the political leader, was in his time being used in respect of the religious leader, viz. Sāriputta, the supreme leader of the Sangha, and also he could explain why then Moggallāna, a lay descendant of Mānavamma also enjoyed the title Mahāsāmi.

It was seen in the above discussion that the position of the supreme leader of the Sangha was taking shape after the great event of the unification, and that Sāriputta was being elevated to that position. Further we saw, that

29. *CV. 57 25-30*; cf. “Mugalan mahasami;” *EZ. Vol. V*.

some time before 1186 A.D. Sāriputta had been referred to as Mahāsāmi. It is therefore possible to conclude that the title Mahāsāmi has been originated in Sri Lanka, firstly in respect of the political leader of Rohaṇa, in the seventh century A.D., secondly in respect of the religious leader some time prior to 1186, it had come in to use in Sri Lanka.

According to the author of the second part of the *Cūlavamsa* this title was a heritage of the descendants of Mānavamma Thera, who received a boon from "God Skandha Kumāra." Whether Sāriputta had the right to hold this title by virtue of being descendant of Mānavamma Thera, is a question to which we cannot find an answer directly from any source.

There seems to be a clue to this, in a reference made by Srī Rāhula Sangha Rāja of the fifteenth century, in his *Pada sādhana tikā*. In the colophon to this book, Sri Rāhula says that his grand father Uttaramūla Rāhula Mahā Thēra was born in the lineage of Sāriputta Mahāsāmi.³⁰

It is well known from the fifteenth century literature that not only the grand father, but also Srī Rāhula himself was belonged to a clan called "Kandavuru Kula".³¹ If according to Srī Rāhula, his grand father was born in the clan of Sāriputta the latter also should have belonged to the "Kandavuru Kula."

What is this "Kandavuru Kula"? "Skandhavārānvaya"³² and "Khandhāvāra vaṃsa" are the Sanskrit and Pāli forms of this name. Scholars have expressed diverse opinions about this name. The most convincing view however is that of Ratmalānē Srī Dharmārāma Thera. According to him this clan has descended from Mānavamma Thēra, whom we discussed above.³³

In the second version of the legend discussed above we saw that this Mānavamma Thera received a "vara" (boon) from God Skandha Kumāra. As such it is quite logical that the name of the boon would have been known as "Skandha vara" or "Kandavara" meaning, the boon bestowed by God Skandha. It is also quite possible and logical that the clan originated from the person who received the Skandhavara or Kandavara, would have come to know as 'Kandavara Kula'.

If this interpretation, which is the most convincing, be accepted, it may be presumed that not only the title Mahāsāmi, but the lineage of Kandavuru Kula also has commenced with Mānavamma Thera. This in other words,

30. "Sāriputta mahādisāmi jananē jātassa sambhāvite,
Nattā uttara mūla rāhula mahā thērassa sikkhā garū;
Siri Rahal Pabanda ed. R. Tennakoone Colombo 1967 p. 542.

31. *Kāvya sekaraya*, Canto, I, Verse, 23; *Girā Sandēsaya*, Verse, 232; *Kōkila Sandēsaya*, Verse, 81.

32. *CV.*, 78, 37.

means that the lineage of Mānavamma Thera has been known as “Kandavara Kula”, and for easy pronunciation as “Kandavuru Kula”, and that those who were born in Mānavamma Thera’s clan, viz. Kandavuru Kula, and renounced the world had the right to bear the title Mahāsāmi. We learned earlier from Srī Rāhula Sangha Rāja, who was a scion of Kandavuru Kula that Sāriputta also was born in the same clan. Thus it is clear that Sāriputta belonged to Kadavuru Kula, originated from Mānavamma Thera, as such being a descendant of Mānavamma’s lineage he had the right to enjoy the title Mahāsāmi. We can now emphasize that Sāriputta received the title Mahāsāmi not for no reason, but for valid reason that it was his legitimate right which had come down through generations.

We are now in a position to conclude safely that the title Mahāsāmi in respect of the office of Supreme Leader of the Sangha, commenced with Sāriputta, and as such it was a title which originated in Sri Lanka, and not one of foreign origin, as some scholars think.

It was a term used in respect of Dappuḷa of the seventh century A.D., to denote the overlordship of Rohaṇa. In the next generation, since the heir apparent Mānavamma refused the throne and became the leader of the Sangha of Abhayagiri Vihāra, the title was used to denote the leader of the Sangha as well.

After the unification of the Sangha when a new office of the Supreme Lord of the Sangha was emerging with Sāriputta the traditional title Mahāsāmi, to which Sāriputta had a hereditary right seems to have been accepted as suitable designation to the newly constituted highest ecclesiastic office.

We noted earlier that the term Mahāsāmi and its synonymous forms like Mahāswāmi and Māhimi would have seemed too strange at the initial stage, that they had to be introduced with another generally known term. We saw the practice of Sāriputta being referred to as “Mahāthēra Mahāsāmi” and “Mahāsāmi Mahāyatinda”, whereas Dimbulāgala Mēdhankara was known as “Māhimi Svāmīnvahansē.” But once the term became customary it was used without any such supporting word. Thus “Mahāsāmi”, “Mahāswāmin” and “māhimi”, the three synonymous terms have been in vogue throughout the period, at least up to the beginning of the 16th century A.D., after which this supreme ecclesiastic office seems to have ceased to function.

Sangha Raja

By about the middle of the 14th century, the term Sangharāja has come in to use as an alternative to Mahāsāmi and Māhimi. The earliest trace of this usage can be found in the *Hatthavanagalla Vihāravamsa* attributable to the latter part of the 13th century. In the opening stanza of this work, the author says that he was employed in that exercise by Anōmadassi, who held the office of “Sabbayatirāja.”³⁴ This term “Sabbayatirāja,” literally means,

34. *Hattha vana galla vihāra vaṃsaya*, ed. C. E. Godakumbura, PTS., London, 1956, Opening stanza.

“The King of the whole Sangha.” The *Pūjāvalī* refers to this Anōmadassi as “Māhimi”³⁶ and the *Cūlavamsa* as ‘Mahāsāmi.’ It is therefore, quite clear that the term “Sabbayatirāja” meaning the King of the whole Sangha has been used in this instance as an alternative to Mahāsāmi.

We come across more clear evidence in this regard towards the middle of the 14th century. Assuming the *Vuttamālā* to have been written during 1344-1351 A.D., we find by that time, the term ‘Sangha Rāja’ meaning ‘the King of the Sangha’ has come in to use as almost a synonym to Mahāsāmi for the author of the *Vuttamālā* has used both terms ‘Sangharāja’ and Mahāsāmi alternatively for one and the same person.³⁷

Sīlavamsa Dammakitti and his pupil Jayabāhu Dēvarakkhita Dammakitti who held this supreme office successively, during the latter part of the 14th century, have been referred to as “Mahāsvāmi” in the *Nikāyasangraha*³⁸ and “Sangha Rāja” in the *Sāddharmālankāraya*.³⁹ Since the author of these two sources was Jayabāhu Dēvarakkhita Dhammakitti himself, his treatment of these two terms as synonyms, has to be taken as demonstrating the current practice of the day.

The author of *Hansasandēsaya* while employing the term Māhimi in respect of Kāragala Vanaratana in it’s verses, uses in the prose sentences the term, Sangha Rāja.⁴⁰ This evidence establishes the fact that at least since the middle of the 14th century, the term Sangha Rāja has come in to use as a synonym for Māhimi, Mahāsāmi and Mahāsvāmi.

It should be emphasized here, that the titles mentioned above has been employed in the contemporary sources, both literary and epigraphic for the specific purpose of denoting the persons who held this office of the Supreme Leader of the Sangha at different times.

We noted above that the *Dambadeni Katikāvata*, the only source which speaks of the status of Māhāsāmi (Māhimi), had referred to Dimbulāgala Mahā Kāsyapa as “Mahāsthavira, where as in the same line his pupil Sāriputta as “Sāriputta Mahāswāmi.” *The Nikāya sangrahaya* which relates the history of the Sāsana, has been very particular in using the term Mahāsāmi only with reference to those who held that office.

35. *Pūjāvaliya*, ed. A. V. Suravira, Colombo, 1961, p. 126.

36. *CV.*, 84, 73-79.

37. *Vuttamālā*, Verse, 58, for detailed discussion on the date of the *Vuttamala*, see, Rohanadeera, *Sangha Organization*, p. 230.

38. *NS.*, p. 29

39. *Sāddharmālankāraya*, ed. J. D. Fernando, Colombo, 1920, p. 769.

40. *Hansa Sandesaya*, ed. Ratmalane Sri Darmarama Thera, 1955, p. 159.

The *Dambadeni Katikāvata* promulgated in 1265 A.D., gives us first hand information, though very sketchy, about the status and responsibilities of Mahāsāmi. In order to understand the place held by Mahāsāmi, it is necessary to examine the hierarchial pyramid of the Sangha organization portrayed in the *Dambadeni Katikāvata*.

The "Pirivenas" or "Vihāras" which were generally regarded as educational centres of monks, formed the base of this pyramid. The Pirivenas owned "Darugamas" and "Vaṭanāpasa." "Darugam" were the villages bestowed for the general maintenance of the Pirivenas, whereas "Vaṭanāpasa" were the lands specially meant to meet the provisions for the four requisites of the dwellers in the Pirivena.⁴¹

Among these Pirivenas there was a special category called "balavat pirivenas", meaning, influential Pirivenas. They were considered so, because they were "māterun muḷa nāndi," belonging to the Muḷa of the respective Mahā Thera.⁴² The Pirivenas had their heads with the qualification of being at least "Nissaya Muttaka," relieved from probationary status. These heads were called "Pirivenas" or "Pirivensāmi" or "piriven therā sāmī."⁴³ Above these heads were "Āyatan vālatas," the deputy leaders of Āyatanas or Mūḷas.⁴⁴ Above them were "Āyatan nāyakas" or "Āyatanādhipatis," leaders of Āyatanas, eight in number. Over the eight leaders of Āyatanas, were the two Mahā Theras, one placed over the community of "Grāmavāsins" or village dwellers, and the other having "Vanavāsins" or forest dwelling monks under him. Māhimi or Mahāsāmi was even above these two Mahā Theras, thus being the supreme head, at the top of the hierarchial pyramid.

Appointments to the posts of heads of the influential Pirivenas, deputy leaders and leaders of the eight Āyatanas had to be made with the assent of the Sangha, and required the formal approval of the King. The monks to be appointed as the heads of the influential Pirivenas and the deputy leaders of the Āyatanas had to be agreeable to the leaders of the respective Āyatanas and at least should have passed the period of probation, (Nissaya muttaka).

For the appointments to the office of heads of the eight Āyatanas, several qualifications were essential. Monks to be appointed to these posts should have attained the stage of Thera, belonged to the unbroken line of families in the villages of "Sangamu" and "Gaṇavāsi,"⁴⁵ but should not have attachment

41. For details, read, "Sangha santaka gam bim" *Vidyodaya*, Journal of Arts, Science & Letters, 1980, p. 53.

42. "Māterun muḷanāndi balavat pirivenata.", *Katikavat Sangara*, ed. D. B. Jayatillake 1955; p. 28.

43. *ibid.*, p. 28.

44. *ibid.*, p. 28.

45. For "Sangama" and "Ganavasi" see, *Paranavitana*, *UCHC.*, I, II, p. 747.

to the abounding income of the “Darugam” and “Vatanāpasa”, and should be loyal to the Sāsana. These appointments also had to be made with the unanimous assent of the whole Sangha in the Island, and required the formal approval of the King.

To be appointed to the office of two Mahā Tharas, Grāmavāsa Maha Thera and Vanavāsa Mahā Thera, a monk had to have completed twenty years⁴⁶ after the higher ordination and a good reputation of religious and intellectual attainments. Appointments to these posts also had to be made with the unanimous vote of the Sangha of the whole Island, and formally invested by the King, bowing down to the recipient of the office, and that King should be the overlord of the three kingdoms of Sinhala.⁴⁷

When the office of Mahāsāmi fell vacant, it had to be filled from one of the two Mahā Theras⁴⁸ and that appointment also seems to have vested formally by the overlord of the three kingdoms of Sinhala, although this requirement is not specifically mentioned in the *Katikāvata*.

A system of gradual promotions from the office of head of the Pirivenas right up to the office of Mahāsāmi had evolved at least by about the latter part of the 14th century. Mangala Sāmi, head of the Sunetrā Mahā Dēvi Pirivena, of the 15th century seems to have climbed this ladder of promotion comfortably.

Sunetrā Mahā Dēvi Pirivena was built by Parakramabāhu VI, 1415-1467 A.D., in memory of his deceased mother Sunetrā Mahā Dēvi. The King had bestowed a considerable amount of lands and servants in order to ensure the self maintenance of the Pirivena. It was therefore no doubt, a “balavat pirivena,” an influential Pirivena, with regular patronage of the King.⁴⁹

Mangala Sāmi had been appointed head of this Pirivena in 1454 A.D., when he was still in the stage of “Nissayamuttaka,” just relieved from probationary period. He attained the stage of Thera in 1459 A.D.⁵⁰ After Vīdāgama Maithrēya became Mahāsāmi, Mangala seems to have been promoted to

46. D. B. Jayatillake has taken this word to be “Visi pas” meaning ‘twenty five; but gives in the foot note “Visi vas” as a variant reading, this “Visi Vas” to mean ‘twenty years’ seems to be the correct word. see, *KS.*, p. 27.

47. “Tri sinhalādipati rajun vaṇḍavā.” *KS.*, 28.

48. *ibid.*, p. 8.

49. For details read, “Pahalosvāni siya vase bauddhārāmayaka aya vāya sālāsma,” (The budgetary system of a Buddhist Monastery in Sri Lanka in the 15th century,) *Vidyodaya*, Journal, Silver Jubilee, 1984, pp. 222-224.

50. With regard to the prominent place held by this Mahāsāmi, read, M. Rohanadeera, *The Sangha Rajas of Jayavardhanapura*, Nugegoda, Sri Lanka, 1978, p. 49.

the head of the “Mahanetpā Muḷa” and then to the office of Mahā Thēra. Subsequently he became Mahāsāmi after the demise of Vidāgama Mahāsāmi. some time before 1489 A.D.⁵¹

Thus it becomes clear that a monk had to come a long way passing through a number of stages to ascend the supreme office of Mahāsāmi or Sangha Rāja. First he had to be head of a Pirivena, preferably an influential Pirivena, which belonged to Muḷa of one of the Mahā Thēras of the day, for this he should pass at least five years after the higher ordination. Secondly he had to become a leader of one of the eight Āyatanas, for which he required at least ten years of experience after the higher ordination, and he had to belong to the unbroken line of families who lived in “Sangamu” and “Gaṇavāsi” villages, belonging to the Āyatana concern. In addition, he also should win the confidence of the Sangha of the whole Island and be acceptable to the King too. After this he had to be promoted to the office of one of the Mahā Thēras, again with unanimous assent of the Sangha of the whole Island. He had to have the formal approval of the King bowing down to him. After receiving due experience in this position only one could ascend to the supreme position of Mahāsāmi.

This system seems to be on a par with the promotional pattern followed by the Kings of medieval times in Sri Lanka. They also had to receive experience at various stages before coming to the throne. An heir apparent had to perform duties of the “Ādipāda” first, and had to wait until the post of “Mahādipāda” or “Yuvarāja” falls vacant. Having gained experience in this office of “Yuvarāja” for some time, when the throne fell vacant, he will have his turn.

Thus we see the office of the Mahāsāmi or Sangha Rāja the spiritual leader of the country, has in due course evolved into an institution with its own subordinate ranks and traditions bearing an institutional pattern parallel to that of the King, the secular leader of the country.

Duties and Functions of Mahāsāmi Sangha Rāja

Since the Dambadeniya period the Mahāsāmi has been introduced as “Tatkāla sāsānānusāsaka,” meaning, the spiritual adviser of the day. According to the *Dambadeni Katikāvata* the higher ordination had to be conducted with the participation of the “Tatkāla sāsānānusāsaka” or a delegate sent by him.⁵² Vijayabāhu III (1232-1236 A.D.) is said to have performed a higher ordination festival for seven days.⁵³ Parākramabāhu II (1236-1272 A.D.) held 8 grand festivals of higher ordination in his 3rd, 6th, 8th, 11th, and 21st regnal years.⁵⁴

51. *ibid.*, 50.

52. *KS.*, p. 10.

53. *Pujavaliya*, ed. A. V. Suraveera, Colombo, 1961, *PV.*, p. 10; *CV.*, 79. 48-50.

54. *PV.*, p. 139; *CV.*, 87, 47-64.

His successor Vijayabāhu IV has performed a grand festival of higher ordination for fifteen days, at the 'Sahassa tittha' of Mahavāli Ganga. All the monks in the Island said to have gathered for this occasion. According to the rule of the Katikāvata mentioned above all these higher ordination ceremonies should have been conducted under the presidency of the Mahāsāmi or a delegate sent by him.

Special convocations have been held from time to time in order to reform the Order. All such convocations held in 1222, 1265, 1351, 1369, and 1396 had been conducted by the Mahāsāmi of the day, with the patronage of the contemporary ruler.⁵⁵

Special higher ordination ceremonies held in 1424 A.D. and 1450 A.D. for the monks who came from Burma, Siam and Cambodia were also presided over by the contemporary Mahāsāmi.⁵⁶ Appointments to the hierarchial ranks mentioned above seem to have been announced during the higher ordination festivals. We are informed that Parākramabāhu 11, conferred high ranks such as Thera, Āyatanādhipati and Mahā Thera, during higher ordination festivals. During the last festival held by him, he is said to have conferred the ranks of Mahāsāmi, Mahā Thēra, Āyatanādhipati and Piriven Thera, to those who were qualified to receive them.⁵⁷

When Vijayabāhu 111 felt that his end was approaching, he entrusted his son and heir apparent Parākramabāhu to Sangharakkhita Mahāsāmi, the spiritual advisor of the day.⁵⁸ Having heard of the corrupt practice of the monks, Alagakkōnāra the Prime Minister met Silavaṃsa Dhammakitti Mahāsāmi in 1369 A.D., and stressed the need for the purification of the Sangha.⁵⁹ These and many other instances show that not only in religious affairs but in political affairs too the King, the chief of the laity used to consult the Mahāsāmi, the King of the Sangha, and the spiritual advisor of the day.

It was perhaps for this reason that the Kings in mediaeval Sri Lanka had made arrangements for Mahāsāmi Sangha Rāja to reside in the Capital. We see from the reign of Parākramabāhu 1, (1153-1186 A.D.) of Polonnaruwa, to the reign of Parākramabāhu VI, (1415-1467 A.D.) of Jayawardhanapura, all the Mahāsāmi Sangha Rājas resided in the Capital city with the eight leaders of the Ayatanas.⁶⁰

55. For details see, Rohanadeera, *Sangha Organization*, pp. 76, 96, 138, 141.

56. *ibid.* pp. 152-154.

57. *ibid.* p. 163.

58. *ibid.* p. 119.

59. *NS.*, p. 27.

60. Rohanadeera, *Sangha Organization*, p. 136.