

## Upulvan, the Patron God of the Sinhalese:

An attempt to rediscover the God's identity through  
literary and archaeological evidence

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The Sinhalese trace their historical origin to the Indian prince named Vijaya who is said to have arrived in the island from north India. According to the earliest historical chronicles of the Sinhalese, namely, the *Dīpavamsa* and the *Mahāvamsa*, this prince and his seven hundred followers had the blessings of a god named Upulvan (Pali: Uppalavanna) when their ship anchored near Tambapanni (var : Tammānā) in Ceylon.

Both Vijaya and Tambapanni and also other proper names that occur in the narrative of this prince as found in the Island's chronicles have become nothing more than legendary on account of the absence of acceptable data regarding their historicity. Thus Vijaya, Tambapannī, Kuvenī and other names have receded into oblivion with the passage of time. But one individual in the Vijaya episode has left a lasting impression on the minds of the Sinhalese people and his presence was felt even after several centuries of his initial appearance. This was Uppalavanna, the god who undertook to protect the forefather of the Sinhalese and the religion of the Buddha in the island of Lankā (Ceylon).

God Upulvan who initially appeared in the Vijaya legend had receded into background until he appeared for the second time after a passage of several centuries. His second appearance known to literary sources was in the seventh or the eighth century A.D. Then again after a lapse of several centuries he appeared as the god par-excellence in the fourteenth-fifteenth centuries, only to be forgotten thereafter by his votaries, after a short span of recognition. The disappearance of this once puissant god-head who has played no less significant a role in the socio-religious history of the island, is quite puzzling to the student of history who is pliant on finding the hidden history of the god. Several messages invoking the blessings of the god Upulvan on the ruling monarch of Ceylon and his subjects were sent in the form of poems versified by men of letters of the day, in the mediaeval centuries, to the most famous shrine of the god. These errands were to end at the city of the god (Devapura) known as Devundara in modern times, in the extreme south of Ceylon where lies the special abode of the divine-being.

In the sixteenth century this famous seat of god Upulvan was sacked by the Portuguese<sup>1</sup> who conquered the southern and western littoral of

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1. S. Paranavitana, *The Shrine of Upulvan at Devundara*, Memoirs of the Archaeological Survey of Ceylon, vol. vi, Colombo 1953, p. 21 ; Paul E. Peiris, *Ceylon and the Portuguese*, Telippalai, 1920, p. 109. f.

Ceylon. After the pillage and destruction of the Divine abode of god Upulvan the Portuguese have set up a Roman Catholic church within the very precincts of the city of god Upulvan. But this church was not to last long as a subsequent Sinhalese monarch (Rajasimha II of Kandy) in one of his retaliatory campaigns against the Portuguese, razed this church to the ground and re-instated the propriety of the premises to the custodians of the Upulvan shrine at Devundara.<sup>2</sup> These notices in regard to the study of god Upulvan need not be mentioned at length here as these were already made known to the reader in a specific study of the god Upulvan by Dr. Senarat Paranavitana who had published a memoire in an attempt to identify this famous god-head of Ceylon.<sup>3</sup>

Numerous were the attempts made before S. Paranavitana towards disclosing the identity of god Upulvan, but none of them were specific studies than cursory remarks just made while writing on other topics.

In a study to trace the historical origin of this god, the writings of Senarat Paranavitana could be considered most valuable, as this scholar has seemingly not kept a single stone unturned in the gravel-yard of literary references, in his attempt to bring out the god's hidden identity. We feel that this scholar's identification of god Upulvan could not be correct in view of further evidence that has come to light through recent researches. Ergo, it is expected to make a fresh attempt to identify the god Upulvan in the light of current material and counter evidence that are available to us.<sup>4</sup>

We believe, Paranavitana has struck very close to correctness in his identification of the god Upulvan with the all embracing Mahāyāna Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara when he made a passing remark on the god. This identification was made by Paranavitana before he embarked on a deeper study of the god in a subsequent attempt, to prove that god Upulvan is a syncretistic form of the Vedic god "Varuṇa". To quote Paranavitana's own words—"In my paper on Mahāyānism in Ceylon,<sup>5</sup> after having conclusively established that the god now known in Ceylon as Nātha is none other than Avalokiteśvara, I suggested that Upulvan, too, might have originally been a form of that all embracing Bodhisattva".<sup>6</sup>

But, further investigation by this scholar seem to have convinced him that the origin of Upulvan had to be looked in a different direction.<sup>7</sup> Thus he devotes a complete memoire, a result of several years, if not decades, of

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2. S. Paranavitana, op. cit, p. 3.

3. Ibid.

4. S. Paranavitana in his attempt to identify divine cult worship in early Ceylon, seems to have for some time been obsessed with the belief that ancient Ceylon, in pre-Buddhist times was a veritable source of Vedic and Epic culture of Indian origin. Thus he tries to identify the Isurumuniya sculpture of a man and a horse's head with Vedic Parjanya and Agni respectively. The God Saman of Sri-Pāda (Adam's Peak) he identifies with Yama of Vedic Indian tradition and again in regard to God Upulvan he brings in Varuna of the Vedic repertory. See, S. Paranavitana, *The God of Adam's Peak* Ascona 1958 ; id, *The sculpture of a man and a horse's near Tisavava at Anuradhapura, (AAs) Artibus Asiae*, Vol. xvi, 1953, pp. 167 ff ; id. *The Shrine of Upulvan*, op. cit.

5. S. Paranavitana, *Mahayanism in Ceylon, Ceylon Journal of Science, Sect. G, Vol. ii*, pp. 35-71.

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid.



exhaustive study on Upulvan in an attempt to identify the god with the Vedic Varuṇa. Our own observations in regard to Upulvan have convinced us that the explanations given by Dr. Parānavitana in identifying god Upulvan with Varuṇa have to be re-examined on more recent researches. On the other hand the original belief of Dr. Parānavitana, that Upulvan could be an aspect of the all embracing Buddhist divine concept, namely Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara, could be better substantiated with more evidence. Hence it is hoped in this paper to pursue a study for a new identification of god Upulvan, who among the present day Sinhalese, is only a fading divinity having lost both his former glamour and popularity.

In our study of a relief sculpture at Isurumuniya we made a passing remark on an inscription of the earliest period discovered in the precincts of this early Buddhist shrine at Anurādhapura (Ceylon).<sup>8</sup> In this particular inscription, one can find the word 'Bo-Upulvan' as part of the name given by a Sinhalese monarch to this shrine in the fifth century A.D. (King Kassapa I, cir. 473-491 A.D.). We do not wish to make this instance where the word 'Upulvan' occurs in an early inscription as a specific case for the prevalence of the cult of Upulvan worship in early Ceylon. But we can assuredly say that there is no justification in the explanation (given by the *Māhavaṃsa* author) that the two shrines built by King Kassapa I, were given the name 'Bo-Upulvan' to perpetuate the name of his two daughters, Bodhī and Uppalavannā. It is true that in ancient times the donors' names were associated in naming the edifices which they cause to be built. But in this particular instance it is rather difficult to understand that the two princesses in whose memory the shrines are believed to be so named, were the donors.

It is also somewhat difficult to explain a feminine name-ending in the compound form wherein the word 'Bo-Upulvan' occurs. If the princesses' names were intended to be incorporated in naming the shrine (or shrines) it would have been a form at least equivalent to 'Bo-Uppalavannā' or 'Bodhi-Uppalavannā - Kasubgiri - Radmahavehera'. Analogous are the names of such early shrines like for example - Subhaddā Cetiya,<sup>9</sup> Rupavati Cetiya, Sunetrādevī Pirivena, Somāvatī Cetiya, Padmāvatī Pirivena (at Kāragala), which have received their names after female benefactors. The naming of these monuments however, had not resulted in the elimination of the feminine name-endings peculiar to Sinhalese (or Indian languages). An early inscription discovered sometime back at the (modern) Vessagiri premises gives the form 'Boya-Opulavana - Kasapigari - Rajamahavehera'.<sup>10</sup> Here too it could not be possible that an original feminine term caused the derivative form in the compound. These earlier records are of Mahāyāna character and would help to determine substantially the type of worship that had prevailed at Isurumuniya in the early centuries of the present era, (here we do not wish to discuss the Mahāyāna affinities of the early records discovered at Isurumuniya). Hence we may surmise that these early inscriptions were evidence to prove that the shrine Isurumuniya was once dedicated in honour of the great divine concept of the Sinhalese Buddhists, namely the god Upulvan. However in view of the

8. A. D. T. E. Perera, A possible identification of a significant sculpture at Isurumuniya Temple, Anuradhapura. A man and a horse's head. *East & West (EW)* vol. 20, nos. 1-2, March-June 1970, pp. 122.

9. *Mhv.* 78, verse 51.

10. *EZ*, vol. iv, p. 132.

non-availability of further evidence we do not wish to make a positive claim that 'Bo-Upulvan' and 'Boya-Opulavana' in these early inscriptions were compound forms of the name of god Upulvan, conceived as an aspect of the Mahāyāna Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara in his special attitude of the lotus bearer, that is, "Padmapāni".<sup>11</sup>

Nonetheless we take these inscriptional references to be the earliest instances where the word 'Upulvan' occurs in literary sources. In this connection we wish to quote a remark made by S. Paranavitana — "The name of Upulvan or any of its equivalents has not been met with in an inscription of the Anurādhapura or Polonnaruva period, nor has any representation of the god in sculpture or painting come to light which can be assigned to a date earlier than the fifteenth century, and with the exception of the shrine at Devundara no remains are known to exist of a temple dedicated to this god at any ancient site in Ceylon".<sup>12</sup>

The inscriptions which yield the names 'Opulavana' and 'Upulvan' amongst other personal names found in the very lithic records make the above contention of Paranavitana somewhat puzzling. The discovery of the existence of images and shrines that were dedicated to this particular god in sites other than Devundara makes the statement of Paranavitana still more faulty and unacceptable in the face of critical reasoning.<sup>13</sup>

We have mentioned elsewhere that the possibility of identifying god Upulvan with the Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara has been facilitated further by more recent investigations. With this intent we may discuss the cult of Upulvan as it had originated and prevailed in Ceylon. Only when and where it is necessary we may take into consideration those contradictory theories that have been proposed by others in regard to the identification of Upulvan.

God Upulvan's first appearance was on the day when prince Vijaya is supposed to have arrived in Ceylon. This was in the sixth century before Christ.<sup>14</sup> This incident has however been recorded in the chronicles, the *Dīpavaṃsa* and the *Mahāvāṃsa* several centuries after the Christian era, possibly thousand years after the supposed landing of Vijaya (cir : 544 B.C.).<sup>15</sup>

The next occurrence of the name of god Upulvan (if the lithic records referred to above are excluded) is in the fifteenth century panegyric *Pārakumbāsirita*<sup>16</sup> which ascribes to King Dāpulasen the installation at Devundara of a red sandalwood image of god Upulvan. The reference to god Upulvan in the

11. See. A. D. T. E. Perera, op. cit. p. 142, n. 70.

12. S. Paranavitana, *The Shrine of Upulvan*, op. cit. p. 19 ; see also, id, *The God of Adam's Peak*, op. cit, p. 45 f, and fig. 6, where he observes the existence of an image of Upulvan painted in green at the Dambulla shrine which he ascribes to the date of King Nissankamalla (13th. cent. A.D.)

13. N. Mudiyanse, *Śāstriya Lipi Sangrahaya* (in Sinhalese) Colombo, 1971 ; *Mhv.* 90, verse 101, f.

14. *Dpv.* 9, verse, 24 ; *Mhv.* vii, verses, 2-9.

15. S. Paranavitana believes that the reference to Upulvan in connection with the legend of Vijaya indicates that he was one of the gods worshipped by the Sinhalese before they embraced Buddhism. See, S. Paranavitana, *The Shrine of Upulvan*, op. cit, p. 22.

16. *Pārakumbāsirita*, ed. Sri Charles de Silva, Colombo 1954, verse, 24.



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reign of King Dāpulasen is further corroborated by the *Cūlavamsa* which records that King Dappula I (cir : 659 A.D.) the south Ceylon (Rohana) potentate, had erected the Khadirāli Vihāra and offered it to the god. According to the same reference King Dappula I had also caused to be built a statue of the Bodhisattva Maitreya (Pāli : Metteyya), about fifteen cubits (approx : 22 1/2 ft.) in height.<sup>17</sup>

In the Daṁbadeniya period, prince Virabāhu, the sister's son of king Parākramabāhu II (cir : 1270 A.D.), having defeated the Jāvaka forces betook himself to Devanagara (Devundara), worshipped there the god Upulvan and celebrated a divine sacrifice to the god. He also erected there a pirivena named Nandana.<sup>18</sup> In the reign of the same king Parākramabāhu II (of Daṁbadeniya) the shrine of god Upulvan was renovated and an Āsala (Pali : Āsaḷha, Skt : Āṣāḍha) festival was instituted by the king himself.<sup>19</sup>

Uppalavanna (Upulvan) god is mentioned again in the reign of king Parākramabāhu IV of Kurunāgala (cir : 1302-1326 A.D.). This king is said to have founded a new town in the Māyādunuraṭa and there he had erected a shrine for the god Upulvan and celebrated a great sacrificial festival.<sup>20</sup> This king had earlier constructed new wings at the Devundara shrine of god Upulvan.<sup>21</sup>

*Daṁbulusirita*, an edict of a royal grant by king Vīraparākrama Narendrasimha of Kandy (1707-1739 A.D.) given to a monk named Atthadassī and *Daṁbuluvihāra Tuḍapata*, a similar edict of a grant by king Kīrti Śrī Rājasimha of Kandy (1747-1787 A.D.) to a monk named Potuhara Ratanapāla, enumerate among other cults of god worship at the shrine of Daṁbulla, the cult of the god Upulvan.<sup>22</sup>

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17. *Mhv.* 45, verses, 55, 56 & 62, 63. Note that the statue of Metteyya (Maitreya Bodhisattva) erected by king Dappula I, was mentioned in the *Cūlavamsa* which keeps a notorious silence on the name of the god at Devundara patronised by the same king.
18. *Mhv.* 83, vv. 49-50 ; Geiger commenting on the incident states thus :-  
“Here for the first time we have a notice of the shrine of Visnu celebrated in the middle ages. According to tradition, it was built in 790 A.D. It was plundered and destroyed by the Portuguese, in 1588 A.D. (See Paul E. Peiris, op. cit. p. 109 f. ), It is significant that Vikramabāhu offered his sacrifice of victory in a Hindu sanctuary. At the same time, however, he builds a Pirivena for the Buddhist order thus putting his attitude towards their parity beyond doubt. Even today a Hindu Devalaya and a Buddhist Vihara stand side by side in Devundara, (see, *Cūlavamsa*, II, Geiger's translation, p. 152, note. 3). Geiger's misconception of the personality of Upulvan is excusable, as no research has been done on this particular god when Geiger embarked on his *magnum-opus*, the translation of the Great Chronicle of the Sinhalese. The *Mahāvamsa*.
19. *Mhv.* 85, v. 85.
20. *Mhv.* 90. vv. 101 f.
21. If Devundara was the exclusive seat of God Upulvan as S. Paranavitana believes, it is very unbecoming of King Parākramabāhu iv, to erect a new shrine for the god at Māyādunuraṭa, after having attended to construction works at the shrine of Upulvan at Devundara. Māyādunuraṭa was the district of which the capital was Sitāvaka, the present township by that name, about twenty five miles east of Colombo (see Geiger's translation of the *Cūlavamsa*, ii, chapt. 90, v. 100, and p. 209, note. 8). This is yet another shrine of God Upulvan which S. Paranavitana has unwittingly or consciously omitted to recognise in his study of God Upulvan (but see, S. Paranavitana, *The God of Adam's Peak*, op. cit, p. 43 ; *University History of Ceylon*, ed. LaBrooy, Nicholas, Natesan and Paranavitana, I, pt. 2, p. 578 ; In the Gaḍalādeniya inscriptions Upulvan is mentioned, see. *EZ.* iv, p. 93. f ; *JRASC*, vol. x. no. 34, pp. 83 ff.
22. N. Mudiyanse, op. cit, pp. 50-70.

According to the first edict of king Narendrasimha (i.e. *Daṁbulusirita*), king Valagambā (Vaṭṭhagāminī Abhaya, cir : 103-37 B.C.) was the founder of the original Vihāras at Dambulla. One of these Vihāras was named (in subsequent times) the Mahārāja Vihāra, in which was erected a stone statue of the Buddha under a wooden arch, flanked by the statues of the gods - Maitreya, Nātha, Upulvan and Saman.<sup>23</sup> Herein was also erected a portrait sculpture of the king Valagambā himself. During the reign of king Vimaladharmasūriya II, a village that originally belonged to the Upulvan shrine in Kandy was transferred to the Dambulla Vihāra.<sup>24</sup>

According to the second edict, namely the *Daṁbuluvihāra Tuḍapata* of king Kīrtiśrī Rājasimha (1747-1782 A.D.), two images of Upulvan were installed in the cave shrine of Dambulla by king Valagambā.<sup>25</sup> According to this edict, king Vaṭṭhagāminī not only erected two images of god Upulvan, but also caused to be built statues of gods Maitri, Nātha and Saman and his own portrait sculpture in the vihāra wherein he constructed recumbant images of the Buddha and an image of therā Ānanda.<sup>26</sup> The same edict further records that king Narendrasimha of Kandy renovated the "Ot Pilima Vihāra" at Dambulla which has the recumbant Buddha images, the image of Ānanda and god Upulvan. Further more he reconstructed the "Mahārāja Vihāra" which has a wooden Makara arch, a stone seated image of the Buddha and forty six other images of the Buddha, the statues of Maitri, Nātha, Upulvan and Saman and other statues of kings Valagambā and Nissankamalla.<sup>27</sup>

These notices would suffice to prove that the cult of Upulvan was not restricted to a particular shrine in south Ceylon at Devundara (as we were led to believe in the thesis on 'Upulvan' by Dr. S. Paranavitana). Evidence is ample to accept that god Upulvan had a special niche in the shrines at the famous Buddhist site at Dambulla and separate shrine in honour of god Upulvan had existed in Kandy in the time of king Vimaladharmasūriya II which in all probability would have been founded before that king. Upulvan was worshipped in the Māyādunuraṭa (a mediaeval territorial division close to Colombo). At Lanḱātilaka and Gaḍalādeniya vihāras near Kandy, god Upulvan was haloed as the supreme protector of the country and was elevated above god Viṣṇu.<sup>28</sup>

23. Ibid. p. 63.

24. Vaṭṭhagāminī Abhaya, cir. 103-77 B.C.; Ibid. pp. 65. f; *Mhv.* is silent on any such image of God Upulvan being erected at Dambulla by king Vaṭṭhagāminī. A later lithic record tends to prove that the ancient site known as Vessagiri where Vaṭṭhagāminī had associated himself with during his exile was the same as the present day Dambulla (S. Paranavitana, Dambulla in ancient times, *The Vesak Number*, 2513, Dept. of Cultural Affairs, Ceylon, 1969, pp. 65 f)

25. N. Mudiyanse, op. cit. p. 65; What is noticeable in the two edicts is that the Devarāja Vihāra in the former edict is the same as the Ot Pilima Vihāra of the later, as it was in this Vihāra where the statue of Therā Ananda was found. The former edict however confuses the statue of Upulvan with Viṣṇu. Again the reference to two images of Upulvan too is confusing. It is probable that in later records the Upulvan images set up separately in two different caves, namely, the Ot Pilima Vihāra and the Mahārāja Vihāra, were listed together. One can also surmise that original smaller caves at Dambulla were at subsequent times enlarged by breaking the separating natural wall of the cave in order to provide more room for the devotees to gather and also for the cult images that were installed periodically.

26. N. Mudiyanse, op. cit. pp. 67-68.

27. Ibid, p. 68.

28. *JRASC*, vol. x, no. 34, pp. 83; *EZ.* iv. no. 2, pp. 8 f, 27 f.



The 'Alutnuvara Devale' in the Kegalle district was originally a shrine dedicated to god Upulvan, but at present is believed to be dedicated to a local deity of the name of Dādimuṇḍa Baṇḍāra.<sup>29</sup> When such was the wide prevalence of the cult of Upulvan up to the mediaeval times in Ceylon, it is extremely unreasonable to pronounce that Upulvan cult was confined to a temple in the southernmost corner of Ceylon, at Devundara (Anglicised Dondra).<sup>30</sup>

We have already observed that in the ancient chronicles, namely, the *Dīpavamsa* and the *Mahāvamsa*, Upulvan acted as the saviour god of the supposed fore-father of the Siṃhala people, who was prince Vijaya in this instance. The Vijaya tradition was preserved by the Theravāda fraternity of Mahāvihāra at Anurādhapura. According to another legend preserved in the Mahāyāna tradition (which often rejects the Mahāvihāra tradition in Ceylon), the first human colonisation (Āryanisation) of the island was begun by one Siṃhala, a merchant prince from India.<sup>31</sup> In the case of Siṃhala he was saved from the blandishments of rākṣasīs by a divine horse whom the narrators identified with the Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara.

This could be considered as an early instance in which god Upulvan's position was taken by the Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara. The two legends, although belonging to two traditions, both speak of a single episode that is, the earliest colonisation of the island of Laṅkā (Ceylon). The appearance of Upulvan and Avalokiteśvara in the same instance to render divine help (in the two legends) speak of the preservation of an original tradition by two separate schools often opposed to each other — namely, the Theravādins and the Mahāyānists. It could be presumed that the worship of Upulvan was practised widely and was highly recognised by the early Sinhalese when one considers the fact that this god has taken such a prominent role in the origin of the nation, however mythical or legendary it may appear today.

We have already suggested that god Upulvan could be identified with the "lotus-bearer" — Padmapānī aspect of Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara and this has been alluded to in a study that was not directly meant for this purpose.<sup>32</sup>

29. *EZ.* iv, no. 34, p. 261, note 1 ; H. C. P. Bell, *Report on the Kegalle District*, Colombo, 1904, pp. 46. ff ; Prof : G. P. Malalasekera, informs the present writer that according to an early version of the origin of God Dādimuṇḍa, this god is said to be the sole divine-being who braved Māra's attack on the Buddha when the rest of the gods took to their heels. According to a rare ola manuscript discovered in the Kegalle district and quoted by H. C. P. Bell (vide, his Report) the shrine at Alutnuvara was constructed in order to install the image of God Upulvan, which had been brought there from Devundara. This image was on a subsequent date transferred to another shrine in Kandy. This indicates that the ruling monarch was desirous of bringing God Upulvan, or at least his image, within his capital. The tradition of Dādimuṇḍa's faithfulness to the Buddha at the time of Māra's attack tallies with the *Kokila Sandesaya* reference.

See further, the foot-note. 44 below.

30. S. Paranavitana, *The Shrine of Upulvan*, op. cit.

31. S. Beal, *Chinese Accounts of India*, Si-Yu-Ki, Indian edition, Calcutta, 1958, vol. iv, pp. 438-442 ; See also *Siṃhala Avadāna* in the *Divyāvadāna*, ed. Cowell and Neil, Cambridge, 1886, pp. 522-23.

32. See, A. D. T. E. Perera, op. cit, p. 141, note. 70. Mitravān, Vivasvan, Cyāvan, Rāvan, Rāghavan, Kesavan, Bhagavān, Sīlavan are analogous forms that could be adduced in regard to the possessive meaning in compounds with vat/van (also mat/man, e.g. Hanuman) suffix, forming a possessive compound in early Sinhalese. Although S. Paranavitana believes 'Upulvan' has stood as 'Uppala Vaṇṇa' and the second part of the compound was derived from an original Vaṇṇa which gives Varuṇa, we consider that such a possibility is too far fetched.

In early and mediaeval forms in lithic and literary records 'Upulvan', 'Opulavana' (also Uppalavanna), preserves a dental 'N' in the van/vana suffix which again denies a derivative from an original vana (meaning varuṇa or varṇa) signifying the Vedic god Varuṇa and colour, respectively, which has always retained a cerebral 'ṇ'.<sup>33</sup>

Although Avalokiteśvara is often depicted in more than one aspect of which the most prominent was the 'lotus-bearer' aspect, we cannot be definite if this particular form of the 'lotus-bearer' god is of true Mahāyāna origin. Tentatively we may suggest that this form of the lotus-bearer god had had a pre-Mahāyāna origin both in Ceylon and in India. Whatever be the origin of the lotus-bearer god it could be definitely said that Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva had acquired this special attribute with the passage of time.

By the time the ancient chronicles of the Sinhalese, namely the *Dīpavaṃsa* and the *Mahāvāṃsa* were compiled, Mahāyānism was well established and widespread in Ceylon as is evident from innumerable finds of Māhayāna cult objects, and particularly those relating to the worship of Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva. Innumerable representations of Avalokiteśvara in various aspects but with this distinctive attribute of the 'lotus' could be cited from various places within and outside Ceylon. Thus we may suggest that the lotus-bearer form of Avalokiteśvara was named "Upulvan" (he who possesses a lotus - Upul) by the Pāli chronicler, who did not and could not wish to do away with a religious cult that had by the time gained wide and popular currency. With the further spread of Mahāyāna Buddhism, this particular form of Avalokiteśvara would have crept into the popular religion of the Sinhalese.<sup>34</sup>

Evidence is not sufficient to believe that the cult of Upulvan was wide spread in ancient Ceylon, but the cult of Avalokiteśvara was prevailing throughout the island from the very early centuries of the present era. The discovery of icons of this particular Bodhisattva from such a wide range of localities enables one to believe that no other god concept had received so much popularity in ancient Ceylon. The only reason for the Pali tradition in Ceylon to have disregarded the popularity of the worship of Avalokiteśvara or any other aspect of the Bodhisattva is his Mahāyāna affiliation. Upulvan would have by the time of the late Anurādhapura period, become well established as an aspect of Avalokiteśvara. By bringing Upulvan (the lotus bearer national god) below the position of Śakra, the Theravāda bhikkhus of Mahāvihāra had contrived to lessen the importance of Upulvan.<sup>35</sup>

33. *EZ.* I, No. 2, pp. 29, 31, 33, 35, 38.; *EZ.* iv, No. 2, pp. 83, 131; *EZ.* iv, No. 2, pp. 15, ff; *EZ.* iv, No. 3, 4, pp. 261.

34. This particular aspect of Avalokiteśvara, if at all it had originated in Ceylon, would have resulted in subsequent times, the formation of the 'Padmāpanī' aspect of Avalokiteśvara in analogous to Vajrapānī, Viśvapānī, Ratnapānī, and so forth during the course of its spread abroad. It could be noted here of other Mahāyāna divine cults of exclusive Sinhalese origin, e.g. Simhaladvīpe Arogyāśālā Lokanātha, Simhaladvīpe Jambālah, Simhaladvīpe Maricī (A. K. Coomaraswami, *Bronzes of Ceylon, chiefly in the Colombo Museum*, Colombo, 1914.; A. Foucher, *L'Iconographie Bouddhique de L'Inde*, catalogue No. I, 20).

35. *Mhv.* vii, verses, 2-9.



Most of the original Bodhisattva icons discovered in Ceylon (identified or not with Avalokiteśvara), do emphasize the 'lotus-bearer' aspect of the god, which came to be known by the popular title "Padmapānī" by later Māhāyānists.<sup>36</sup> In many of the early bronze figures, the lotus flower is missing, but there is evidence that these icons were once depicted with a lotus flower in one hand. The thumb and the fore-finger of the left or right hand in most of the early icons were brought so close and kept in a position as if to hold a flower stalk. Faint traces of a stalk are not invisible in most of these icons. In other types the lotus flower is shown arising from the seat and emerging above the shoulder (cf. Buduruvagala (Fig. 1) and other finds from Ceylon (Fig. 2) with the 'Padmapānī' forms from India quoted in f.n. 37). The best representation of the lotus-bearer aspect of Avalokiteśvara is available from Ajantā cave paintings (Fig. 3) where the great Bodhisattva is depicted holding a white lotus flower in his right hand. This figure from Ajantā recalls the "Tribhaṅga" bronze miniature of Nātheśvara (Fig. 4) from Anurādhapura.<sup>37</sup> It seems that in early Indian cave temples of the Buddhists (e.g. Aurangābād, Bāgh, Ajantā etc.), the lotus bearer aspect of the great Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara had taken a prominent place.

Sinhalese literary works in and after the fifteenth century furnish evidence for the prevalence of a separate cult of Upulvan worship. The number of so-called 'Sandesa Poems' (of mediaeval Sinhalese literature) dedicated to this particular god is oft quoted by Dr. Senerat Paranavitana in his thesis on Upulvan. Documents of two Kandyan kings, recently discovered, making allusions to this deity have already been cited.

We may quote a few more of these already referred to, literary sources, whereby we would be able to bring further weight on our new theory on the

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36. A recently discovered original statue of God Nātha from Kandy bear close resemblance to the earlier Padmapānī icons of the Mahayanists in the Mahārājajīla or the pose of 'royal-ease' (see, A. D. T. E. Perera, the discovery of the original statue of God Nātha in Kandy, *Sun*, published by the Independent Newspapers of Ceylon Ltd., 10th. June 1971, p. 5; Id. The evolution of a great Bodhisattva cult in Ceylon, *The Buddhist*, Vol. xlii, No. 1, YMBA, Colombo, May 1971, pp. 18. ff; Id, Isurumuniya, an Abode of Mahāyāna divinities, *The Buddhist* vol. xLii, No. I p. 1972, pp. 42 ff). The close resemblance of this icon to the early type Avalokiteśvara seated images, tempts the present writer to take this particular statue to be that of Upulvan which was once enshrined in the Upulvan Shrine in Kandy. One can never say that this could be the icon that had experienced transportation from Devundara to Alutnuvara and thence to another shrine in the kingdom of Kandy (see H. C. P. Bell, *The Report of the Kegalle District*, op. cit, pp. 46 f.)
37. For other examples of the Lotus-bearer aspect of the Mahāyāna Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara see, G. Tucci, *EW*, Vol. 19 for 1958. No. 4, pp. 279-328, figs ; 4, 10, 13, 14, 18, 19, 22, from Gandhāra; *The Way of the Buddha*, Govt. of India Publication, 1956, p. 171, fig. 84, from Nalanda, p. 174, fig. 90, Vajrapānī, but he holds a lotus in the left hand, p. 197, fig. 20, Vajrapānī, with a lotus rising from the seat of the left side. p. 198, fig. 21, Padmapānī only the stalk is visible, the flower missing. p. 200, fig. 25, Lotus-bearer in the aspect of Mañjusri, from Bengal. p. 201, fig. 29, Mañjusri, p. 203, fig : 32, Lotus-bearer in the aspect of Simhanāda from Mahoba, p. 203, fig : 33, Lotus-bearer Lokanātha from Bihar, p. 205, fig : 35, Lotus-bearer Lokesvara from, Nalanda, p. 205, fig. 36, Lotus-bearer Avalokitesvara from Kurkihar; *Ency. Bsm*, Vol. ii, fascle, 3, pl. xxiii, Lotus-bearer Lokānatha from Bihar, pl. xxvi, Lotus-bearer Avalokiteśvara from Aurangabada Cave temple; ; Anil De Silva — Vigier, *The Life of the Buddha*, Phaidon Press, London. 1955, pl. 38, from Bagh caves, 7th century A.D., op. cit, pl. 48, Padmapānī from Ajantā. For the association of Mahāyāna Bodhisattvas with the 'lotus' see, *Ency. Bsm*. Vol. ii, fascle, 3, p. 400 f, "Avaiivartacakra".

identification of god Upulvan. According to the *Tisara Sandesaya*<sup>38</sup> (verse 22) :-

“ *Naran rakina lesa sapāmini mesura radun—  
Lalanu vavanu kima amutuva mitara nadun* ”.

Upulvan seemingly gave up his divine happiness to come down to earth and protect human beings through compassion. This is quite consistent with the ideal and trait of a Bodhisattva and even more so in the case of Avalokiteśvara. According to the Bodhisattva doctrine of Mahāyāna, the Bodhisattvas gave up their happiness for the sake of human beings through sheer compassion. In the *Mayūra Sandesaya*<sup>39</sup>, verse 142, the palm of the god Upulvan is likened to the lotus flower. One can even guess an allusion to a lotus flower in the god's hand :-

“ *Iti atulē nam padarutanurū kalē  
Himi atulē siri sirikoṇḍa melōtalē* ”.

In verse 148 of the same poem, the god's compassionate nature is again emphasised, which is peculiar not to a divine-being of the Hindu pantheon but to the Mahāyāna Bodhisattva pantheon :-

“ *Suranindu kulunu saṅḍa yadi sidi vannēya—  
Sihikaḷa saṅḍama ama siri pamunannēya—  
Sihinendutev parihata duralannēya—  
Yasateda suva nuvana āsiri dennēya* ”.

In verse 163 :-

“ *Loset kara bābāli kihirāli' pul surinduveta — Sata mit sumit rāki — Met  
silila piri sayurev* ”.

Here too the emphasis is on the compassionate nature (Mettā-Karunā) of the god Kihirāli — Upulvan. In the *Paravi Sandesaya*<sup>40</sup> (verse. 4) :-

“ *Vipul Kuḷunu men met gunayen levpusna—  
Kopul ata dalasa lesa teda rās isna—  
Tepul gena suriṅḍu rakinev lev sasna—  
Upulvan suriṅḍu dāka dev me asna* ”.

Here again his compassionate nature is mentioned. In the verse (194 of the same poem Upulvan is addressed as 'Lō-isuru', that is 'Lokēśvara' which recalls the similar epithet of Avalokiteśvara :-

“ *Desavan namāsan Suraniṅḍu Lō-Isuru* ”.

In the same poem (verse 195), reference is made to Upulvan as 'Kihirāli Upulvan' of 'Girihela Pura'. Verses 200 and 201 of this poem refer to the

38. *Tissarasandesaya*, ed. M. Cumaranatunga, Ratnakara publishers, Buddhist era, 2496. 2nd edition, verse. 22.

39. *Mayūrasandesaya*, ed. M. Cumaranatunga, Colombo, 1959 v, 142.

40. *Paravisandesaya*, ed. W. F. Dharmavardana, Colombo 1949, v. 4.



UPULVAN, THE PATRON GOD OF THE SINHALESE

divine consort of Upulvan 'Saṅdavan Bisō' and his companion, 'Dunudevraja' :-

“ Saṅdavan yasa rāsin helikala mulu diyata—  
Saṅdavan sirin danamana koṅda kaḷa dimuta—  
Saṅdavan suriṅdu piya tunuran karaṅḍu pata—  
Saṅdavan Bisō saṅda vāṅda kiyava mepuvaṅa ”.

“ Dunukam ramraju men lova puvaṅarava—  
Dunuparasuram gana ran dunu saradarava—  
Dunupulvan devraja kula garutarava—  
Dunudev raju haṅada metepul sālakarava.”

In the Hindu pantheon Śiva is often depicted with his consort Umā and two sons Gaṇa and Kārtikeya. But according to the Mahāyāna pantheon Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara is shown attended by his consort 'Tārā' and 'Sudhankumāra' his compere, on either side. The best representation of Avalokiteśvara with the two attendant deities Tārā and Sudhankumāra is available from Burduruvagala near Wāllavāya (Ceylon). In some early Indian cave temples of the Buddhists, the trio is represented in their relief carvings.<sup>41</sup> We may surmise that before the Upulvan shrine at Devundara was devastated by the Portuguese, there was installed in the shrine an image of Upulvan flanked on either side by his consort the Saṅdavan Bisō goddess and the male devinity Dunudevraja, just in the same manner the Buduruvagala Avalokiteśvara is depicted with the attendant deities. Such a depiction of a divine being is not in conformity with Hindu concepts. However as we have mentioned above Śiva alone is sometimes shown in Indian sculpture with his consort and two sons.<sup>42</sup>

The description of Upulvan as found in 'Sandesa Poems' referred to above, tallies with the portrayal of Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara in Mahāyāna legends. His compassion towards worldly beings (mettā-karunā), his liberality (dāna-varada) varada is incidentally one of Avalokiteśvara's best known poses in iconography), his fame spread in all quarters, his power to grant wisdom (Tārā the consort of Avalokiteśvara is also personified as Prajñā i.e. wisdom).

According to stanza 28 in the *Kōkila Sandēsaya*, Upulvan was the only god who dared to remain at the Buddha's side when the hosts of the Evil One (Māra) began to unleash his attack on the great sage seated on the adamant throne under the Bodhi Tree. Pāli *Nidhāna Kathā* says that all the denizens of the heavenly worlds and the nāgās of the nether world who had come to

41. N. Mudiyanse, *Mahayana Monuments in Ceylon*, Colombo 1967, pp. 28, 28, 39 ; D. T. Devendra, *Classical Sinhalese Sculpture*, London, 1958, p. 80.

42. Parānavitana elsewhere identifies the god Saman of Ratnapura with Yama. But a mediaeval Sinahala Poem, viz. *Savul Sandesaya*, referring to this god (verses, 203-205) mentions his consort 'Bisobandāra' and attendant 'Kumaradevidun'. Here again the trio is in conformity with the depiction of Mahāyāna Bodhisattvas, Avalokiteśvara and Mahāsthama, see S. Parānavitana, *The God of Adam's Peak*, op. cit. pp. 23, 27, 39, 40, 60. According to the same poem, God Saman has a green coloured body, (verse. 147). At Dambulla Upulvan too is painted in dark green colour, S. Parānavitana, op. cit, p. 45 ; it is mentioned in Mahayana literature that the primordial Bodhisattvas are having similar physical features. The colour of their bodies too is same (M. T. De Mallmann, *Introduction A L'etude D'Avalokitesvara*, Paris, 1948, pp. 22. ff). Thus when Upulvan was depicted in green it is not disagreeable to portray Saman too in green if these gods had been originally associated with the Mahayanists of Ceylon.

attend on the Buddha on the supreme occasion of his Enlightenment took to their heels when they saw Māra and the Evil One's myrmidons.<sup>43</sup> Senarat Paranavitana, however, simply rejects the above stanza as of no value. Although Pali tradition in Ceylon (from Mahanāma of the *Mahāvamsa* onwards) associates Upulvan with Sakka (Devānamiñdō, the lord of gods) the *Kōkila Sandēsaya* (verse 28) shows that there was yet another tradition that did not take into account the power of the divine denizens represented in the Pali tradition. If Sakka was one of the first to flee at the sight of Māra, Upulvan who was subordinate to Sakka according to Pali tradition would not have dared to stay at the Buddha's side. However we get a clue to the *Kōkila Sandēsaya* reference, from the Mahāyāna tradition, according to which the Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara stood by the Buddha's side when Māra unleashed his attack.<sup>44</sup>

The above notices would suffice to strengthen our thesis that Upulvan was the original Buddhist god concept Avalokiteśvara derived from Mahāyāna tradition. The diversified character of Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara in the Mahāyāna field however did not have much effect in Ceylon, where Theravāda predominated. Only few aspects of this all embracing Bodhisattva have remained, having been mixed up with Theravada cults. Thus Nātha, Upulvan, and such syncretistic gods like Dāḍimunḍa, Aiyanāyaka, Galebandāra, Gambāra could be several aspects of the same divine concept, developed and survived in Ceylon, just as in the same process Avalokiteśvara cult ramified into various cults in other Mahāyāna countries. The introduction of Bodhisattva Maitreya (Metteyya) by the early Theravādins of Ceylon and also in several other Buddhist countries, seems not to have mattered in constituting a challenge to the popularity of the Upulvan – Nātha cults of Avalokiteśvara worship in Ceylon.

Few more factors could be adumbrated for the identification of Upulvan with the all embracing Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara.

It is mentioned that the famous shrine of Upulvan at Devundara received presents from the Chinese imperial court too. One wonders why the Chinese emperor had recognised the divine authority of a fading divinity in Ceylon.<sup>45</sup> This could be possible only if the Chinese emperor had pursued an earlier practice of recognising the divine authority of Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara who had become famous amongst the Chinese Buddhists as 'Kuan-Yin', (Kuan-Yin is more famous among the mariners as their patron-god). Surely there is no necessity for a Chinese Buddhist emperor to send gifts to a Hindu god worshipped at Devundara. Although Upulvan was popular as Viṣṇu in the fifteenth

43. S. Paranavitana, *The Shrine of Upulvan*, op. cit, p. 50.

44. A. Grunwedel's *Buddhist Art in India*, translated by Agnes C. Gibson, 2nd edition, edited by Susil Gupta, London, 1965, p. 76. S. Paranavitana who takes the authority of Sandesa poems and other mediaeval literature in his attempt to identify Upulvan with Varuna, simply brushes aside the above reference in the *Kōkila Sandesaya* with the following comment— "One could well believe this statement if one were to give credence to the stories told in the epics, of the gods from Brahma downwards and with Asvaghosa take Māra to be no other than Kāmadeva" (S. Paranavitana, op. cit, p. 50). When S. Paranavitana wished to prove his own idiosyncracies, he takes into authority the very Epics and other literary sources, but when they fail to give any clue or support to his theories, he casts aside the very literary references as of no value (see also, foot-note. 29 above). On Māra's attack see *Mahāvastu*, II, 238 ; *Lalitavistāra*, 327.

45. *EZ.* III, pp. 335, f. S. Paranavitana, op. cit, p. 2.



century, when the Chinese mission arrived, the fame of Upulvan as an aspect of Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara would have still persisted in other Buddhist lands, including China, and the most famous shrine of Upulvan (Avalokiteśvara-Kuanyin) could not have so easily been forgotten by the Mahāyāna Buddhists outside Ceylon even as far as China.

Senarat Paranavitana believes that the shrine of Upulvan was built close to the sea-shore in order to emphasise the god's association with the element of water (i.e. the ocean) as Varuṇa of Vedic tradition.<sup>46</sup> The discovery of shrines dedicated to Upulvan, further away from the sea-shore and especially in the hilly-regions of the country would however render nugatory Paranavitana's thesis. On the other hand the very shrine of Upulvan (or the Galge at Devundara) which Paranavitana identifies as the exclusive abode of the god, is nearly two miles away from the sea-shore, as the crow flies and is on a small hill. If at all the ancient patrons of Upulvan who regarded him to be the sea-god Varuṇa the original shrine of Upulvan (sic) would have been founded close to the sea-shore. In fact there are later Hindu shrines erected close to the sea-shore at Devundara, just in the same manner the sea-shore shrines of the Pallavas at Māmallapuram were constructed.

The elevated position selected for the erection of the shrine of god Upulvan, tends to give a better clue to our identification of the god with Avalokiteśvara. According to Mahāyāna tradition the abode of Avalokiteśvara is associated with a mountain and the Mahāyānists named it 'Potāliaka'.<sup>47</sup> As if in keeping with this tradition the Māhāyanists of Ceylon too would have always selected a mountain or a hilly place in erecting shrines for Avalokiteśvara. The later syncretistic gods like Galē Deīyo, Gale Bandēra (Gala = rock) whose origin could be traced back to the Avalokiteśvara cult in Ceylon could be mentioned in favour of the above thesis. In the like manner the shrine of Upulvan too was built on an elevated place at Devundara and not close to the sea-shore. The original shrine at Devundara is referred today even by the name 'Galgē' (= rock house). It is also pertinent here to note that most of the fanes of god Upulvan which we have tentatively identified above were either constructed entirely in neatly dressed slabs of stone (e.g. the Galgē at Devundara, the Nātha Devalāya at Kandy, the Alutnuvara Devālaya near Kegalle,<sup>48</sup> the Bārāndi Kovil near Sītavaka) or founded in rock-hewn caves (e.g. Dambulla) as if to emphasize the rocky nature of the god's domain.<sup>49</sup>

God Upulvan was described by several writers in the past decades as of blue in colour. This could possibly be an error in confusing the literal meaning of the word 'nil' (in Sinhalese) as prevailing in the present day. The Sinhalese word 'nil' stands for both blue and green colour. Monier Williams in his Sanskrit-English Dictionary gives the meaning 'green' too for the word 'nīla' (according to the same Dictionary "Mañjuśrī an aspect of Avalokiteśvara is called Nīlabhaṭṭa).

46. Ibid.

47. See, A. D. T. E. Perera, *EW. op. cit.*, p. 131.

48. See, "Dāḍimunda" in H. C. P. Bell's *Report of the Kegalle District*, op. cit.

49. This should not however be taken as an absolute factor in support of our thesis. It is a custom in the ancient Orient that Shrines of gods alone should be constructed in permanent material. Even kings dared to construct their palaces with anything other than perishable material in many Asian kingdoms, probably in pursuance of this tradition.

The image of Upulvan in the Daṁbulla rock temple (see note : 12) is coloured in green. We have already mentioned that the image of god Saman (in the Sabaragamuva Devālaya near Ratnapura, Ceylon) whom we prefer to identify as another aspect of Bodhisattva Mahāsthāma (Maitreya ?), developed in Ceylon, was referred to by a mediaeval writer as green in colour (see above note : 42). On the same analogy it would not be incorrect if we suggest that the god Upulvan at Devundara too was coloured green. *Nikāyasamgrahaya*<sup>50</sup> a mediaeval book on the history of the Buddhist Church in Ceylon refers to a heretical doctrine (darśana) called 'Nīlapaṭa ? One could conjecture that this was a reference to a Mahāyāna Tāntric practice centered round the worship of Avalokiteśvara or Tārā, dressed in green, (Nīla paṭa = green robe). Tārā too was at certain instances represented in green colour.<sup>51</sup> In the thirteenth century a Tibetan itinerant monk named Dharmasvāmin (Chaglo-tsa-ba-Chos-rje-dpal) who had visited India, found in the famous Mahāyāna Buddhist centre at Nālandā, a four-armed life size image of Jñānanātha (an aspect of Lokanātha Avalokiteśvara) green in colour.<sup>52</sup> The colour of god Upulvan given in Sinhalese as "Nil" if taken to mean green would provide further strength for our identification of Upulvan with the all embracing Mahāyāna Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara.

We have observed in the preceding pages that god Upulvan could be a development of the cult of Avalokiteśvara worship that spread in Ceylon with the advent of Mahāyānism after the first few centuries of the Christian era. The spread of the cult of Upulvan too is noticed above with the location of shrines dedicated to this god at places other than Devundara.

It is very likely that the Theravāda opposition had reduced the popularity of Upulvan, although he figured as the patron god of the Sinhalese. The introduction of various forms of Mahāyāna divine cults headed by the cult of the all embracing Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara had to be checked by whatever means by the Mahāvihārins. The chronicles (*Dpv* and the *Mhv*) record the continuous religious feuds between the two factions, namely the Mahāvihāra of the Theravadins and the Mahāyānists of Ceylon. But the Mahāyāna which was the more popular creed always had the support of the masses and could not be suppressed totally by the Theravadins. Hence means other than open attack had to be adopted by the Mahāvihāra fraternity.

It could be presumed that the Bodhisattva cult with Maitreya was one such device adopted by the Theravadins. But subsequent to the fifth, sixth centuries there was an absorption of Mahāyāna forms of cult worship by the Theravadins. Maitreya a Theravada Bodhisattva, himself was depicted in the same garb and described in similar terms, as a Mahāyāna Bodhisattva. The physical features in the images of Avalokiteśvara (Nātha) Maitreya and Upulvan, Saman found in the Daṁbulla cave shrine (Svarnagiri guhā) bear close affinity to one another. In later literary references 'nātha', which was originally an exclusive epithet of Avalokiteśvara was used in reference to Maitreya too.<sup>53</sup>

50. N. Mudiyanse, *Mahayana Monuments in Ceylon*, op. cit. p. 9,

51. N. Mudiyanse, op. cit. p. 56.

52. George Roerich, *Biography of Dharmasvamin*, K. P. Jayaswal Research Institute, Patna, 1959, pp. 552, f.

53. In the time of king Kassapa V, (cir. 914—923 A.D.), Bodhisattva Metteyya was called Lokanātha (*Mhv.* 52, verse, 47).



