

**THE ROLE OF BUDDHISM IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF
URBAN
CENTRES IN MALDIVES ISLANDS**

*Synopsis of the Thesis to be submitted to
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Introduction

The research work entitled **The Role of Buddhism In The Development of Urban Centres In Maldives Islands** is an attempt to investigate the archaeological potentials of Buddhist remains of Maldives islands in time and space and derives a proposition that urbanism developed in Maldives due to the Indian Ocean Trade supported by religious activities. This research also brings out a cultural sequence, relative chronology and assesses the finds and locates Maldives in the Indian Ocean trade.

Maldives, a group of islands located towards the south west of India and Sri Lanka, occupies a significant position in the archaeology of South Asia. This group of islands are gifted with the strategic position in the most travelled Ocean and has lots to offer in terms of archaeology, history, language and culture. The position of these islands facilitates early sea going merchants and thus continues to play crucial role in the socio-cultural scenario of Indian Ocean activities.

There is a considerable amount of reference to these islands in ancient literary texts, especially the *Pali* chronicles (Geiger 1912). In addition to these, these islands are also mentioned by the Indo-Greek and Chinese travellers (Gray 1882), (Stevenson 1932) and (Rolfe 1937). The prominent presence of cowrie shells from several early historic settlements and also their isolated presence during its preceding chalcolithic phase signals a cultural link between Maldives and the mainland India in antiquity. All these suggest that Maldives enjoyed a significant position in the Indian Ocean socio-cultural interaction. A variety of foreign contacts with Maldives is contained in the records that can be summarized under navigation, trading, religion, political and documentary. Recent archaeological investigations carried out in these islands exposed large number of Buddhist Monastic establishments in the form of stupas, monasteries, and other related vestiges prior to the Islamization of the country in 1153 AD. The first attempt to investigate the ancient settlements in these islands was initiated by a British civil servant H.C.P. Bell who recorded many archaeological sites in the outlying atolls and also encountered many large mounds of coral stone and rubble, locally known as '*Havittas*' (Bell 1940). His account was entirely based on the field explorations he made. For the first time, in the history of the country he clearly and empirically identified the presence of Pre-Islamic occupation in these islands.

In later years, Archaeological expeditions were carried out in various Islands like Thoddu and Ariadhoo (Mohamed 2008), (Maniku 1993). During 1980s the Maldivian Government in

collaboration with Kon-Tiki Museum of Oslo carried out excavations in Nilandhoo island which unearthed evidence of a Buddhist Chaitya (Skjolsvold 1991). They also explored islands like Vadhoo and Gan and found various antiquities related to Buddhism and fragments of architectural elements having decorations and mouldings associated with Buddhist monastic settlements (Skjolsvold 1991). Period from 1996-1998 witnessed the research collaborations between The National Centre for Linguistic and Historical Research, Maldives and University of Oslo, Norway. This led to the excavations at Kaashidhoo island in Kaafu Atoll and brought to light evidence of Buddhist monastic settlement (Mikkelsen 2000). This substantial evidence is more than enough to indicate that Maldives was an integral part of a wider cultural arena of South Asia and had numerous economic, political and ideological interactions with the adjoining regions. But due to the small size and scarcity of minerals and other resources, these islands have tended to be overlooked by archaeologists. The limiting of the research provide only partial support for a holistic synthesis of the cultural development of the area. No real attempt has been done to evaluate the emergence of Buddhist settlement in these islands from a holistic point of view. Under these circumstances, the establishment of Buddhism and the emergence of urban centres in these islands require a special study.

It is very crucial to explain certain problems to establish the role of Buddhism in the development of urbanisation in these islands. They are:

- How and why did the area under study in this Research become urban?
- Which were the causative factors of this urban transformation?
- If Buddhism was one of the causative factors, then how and why did Buddhism reach Maldives?
- What were the different mechanisms that gave rise to Buddhist settlement in Maldives
- What is their Cultural locale/ backdrop?
- How did Buddhism come to an end in Maldives

Within the above broad framework, the main objectives of the proposed research are:

- To document and study the Pre-Islamic remains of Maldives with a view of understanding the nature and character of the cultural traits prevailed at that time.

- To identify the spatial and temporal distribution of sites and their proximity to natural resources.
- To make a comparative study of the Buddhist Art and Architectural features of Maldives and India.
- A proposed model to understand the emergence and development of urban centres in Maldives and the role of Buddhism as a major contributing factor.

With the above purpose the various methods of studies adopted were Literature survey, reappraisal of the information of the excavated and explored sites in Maldives, if necessary, to expand the database, thorough survey in the accessible islands in Maldives in order to determine the distribution of sites using computer applications like Geographical Information System and other databases, recording and Cataloguing of material remains obtained from various excavations and field survey and typo-technological analysis of ceramics and other artefacts recovered from excavations and explorations. Thus a combination of methods has been considered for analysis.

The following is the proposed order of chapters of the thesis:

Chapter I Introduction

This chapter presents an overview of the structure of the thesis and outlines the significance of the research. It consists of the background in which the study was carried out, theoretical perspective, objectives of the research, overview regarding the concept of Urbanisation, methods and materials used by earlier investigators and will discuss the ideas used in formulating the research problem.

Chapter II Maldives Islands- The Region

This chapter deals with the Physical and Ecological Milieu of the region under study; the Maldives islands, present land use, the regional settlement history in an archaeological point of view with the help of the evidence of explorations and excavations carried out in the island.

Chapter III Methods of study

This chapter deals with the methods adopted for study. It includes literature survey, Surface survey methods, recording methods, data analysis and other strategies adopted for sampling and justification for the selection of methods for analysis. Each method has been dealt individually with explanations.

Chapter IV Archaeology and History of Maldives until 12th century AD

This chapter includes identification and classification of sites and cultural phases by making use of the analysis of structural remains in Maldives islands, artefacts, ceramics, sculptures, coins and inscriptions. Using all these, efforts are made here to reconstruct a cultural sequence and historical sequence of these islands up to the Islamisation of these islands around 12th century AD.

Chapter V Results

This chapter will discuss the major results and test the validity of the model and its applicability within the context of archaeology of Maldives islands. The propositions derived from this study will further be used to assess the nature of various Buddhist sites in Sri Lanka and Indian mainland to appreciate the level of cross-cultural interaction between these areas and also to situate Maldives islands within the domain of South Asian Archaeology.

Chapter VII Urbanism in Maldives: A Discussion

This will outline the development of urban centres in Maldives islands based on the available archaeological and historical evidences. This will further evaluate the predictive model and put forward its revised version by incorporating the new finds, thereby highlighting the scope of future research in the field.

Chapter VI Conclusion

This chapter will conclude the major results and test the validity of the model and its applicability within the context of archaeology of Maldives islands. The propositions derived from this study will further be used to assess the nature of various Buddhist sites in Sri Lanka and Indian mainland to appreciate the level of cross cultural interaction between these areas and also to situate Maldives islands within the domain of South Asian Archaeology.

Appendix

The details of data recovered from the study will be presented here.

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STATEMENT I

(Statement showing the particulars, on which the work is based, the discovery of new facts and of new relationships between facts observed by others and how the work tends to help the general advancement of the knowledge)

Investigation into the richness and diversity of Maldivian archaeology has been one of the most important developments in the study of the Indian Ocean archaeology during recent times. The substantial evidence unearthed during these years in the form of Buddhist remains is more than enough to indicate that Maldives was an integral part of a wider cultural area of South Asia. But it is to be taken into consideration that the raw-material resources of Maldives are not sufficient enough to generate a settlement that could have given rise to its monumental architecture. Therefore alternate models need to be developed to appreciate the dimensions of urbanism at Maldives.

The major results of the study are:

1. 'This islands' geographical location indicates that the people, their cultures could not have evolved, developed and survived in isolation from sea and its neighbouring lands. As these islands are not far away from the main land of India and Sri Lanka, two major nations, its immediate cultural predecessors need to be identified from either from these nations. Therefore, from this study it is possible to assume that Maldives could have played a significant role either acting as a counter part to Sri Lanka or to India to monitor the movements of ships.
2. The earliest type of pottery indicative of long distance trade noticed in Maldives is the Rouletted ware which is considered to be a Roman pottery or its South Asian variation. This evidence points to the fact that these islands attracted Roman traders. If we take into consideration of the longer chronology of Rouletted ware suggests by scholars like Deraniyagala (1992) and, it would mean that traders were active at Maldives during the peak time of ancient Indian Ocean trade. However, presence of artefacts like Roman Denarius and Byzantine coins demonstrate that the Roman trade and other cultural linkages were crucial in these islands.

3. The Buddhist and its related artefact types found from Maldives have Sri Lankan and Indian correlates and show similarities in basic adaptation and difference in raw material due to its regional identity.
4. The earliest structural evidence unearthed in Maldives is the Buddhist monastic settlements in the forms of stupas and viharas. Stylistic features like congested layout in a small area shows that it is clearly derived from Sri Lanka and Indian mainland as similar architectural complexes can be found in sites like Kantarodai in Northern Sri Lanka which is considered as parallel to Andhra Buddhism (Raghupathy 1987) and Ratnagiri in Orissa (Mikkelsen 2000).
5. The political interactions that the Maldivians had with South India are mentioned in Sangam literature. Inscriptions of Narasimhavarman, Loamafaanu Copper plates from Maldives and various foreign travel accounts suggest that the contact between South India and Maldives existed from the beginning of the Christian era without any doubt. Sangam literature, while describing Maldives points to a Chera Naval expedition which suggests that by then Maldives had caught the attention of the rulers around the region. Such expeditions are only required to counter an equal political agency either situated with Maldives or exerting political or administrative supremacy on Maldives from elsewhere. Therefore all these literary evidences show that Maldives did have a place within the cultural interactive spheres of ancient South Asia.
6. Palaeographical and Epigraphical studies show Maldivians cultural Interactions with other countries actively participated in Indian Ocean trade. For instance, a coral stone inscription earlier assigned to written in Brahmi of Pallava style by Mohamed and Raghupathy (2003) has been attested to Maitraka Brahmi from Gujarat by the author of this thesis. This shows the definite evidence for the involvement of this region in the long distance cross-cultural interactions.
7. Studies on the legends on coral caskets written in the ancient Maldivian script known as Eveyla akuru and other Copper plate grants datable to 12th century AD reveal that Maldivians were influenced by different scripts of South Asian region

8. Further Observations in Linguistic studies indicate that the Maldivians were borrowing terminologies from languages around the region and also experimenting various scripts in communication i.e., Maitraka Brahmi, Chola Grantha, Nagari of Eastern India, Sinhala, Vattezhuthu, Telugu and Kannada as evident from various inscriptions from Maldives. In their language Divehi and the Scripts used Eveyela Akuru (Old) and Dives Akuru these influence is evident. This shows the inter-relationship with south Asian languages attained through cultural interactions.
9. The archaeological record of Maldives in many ways refutes the understanding of the concept of socio- cultural & political orders, phrased as “Urbanism”. Assessing the identity of the aforesaid urbanism using the existing models of Childe (1950), Erdosy (1995) Coningham (1995) and Dhavalikar (1999) is not easy in the case of Maldives. Studies by Coningham and others (2007) suggest that evidence of religious centres in the form of monasteries and temples even if in smaller size indicate the influence of greater economic and political power than larger villages and towns. The available archaeological evidence at Maldives suggests that the cultural history of Maldives islands begin with the sudden appearance of Buddhist structures and urbanism began here only with the arrival of Buddhist settlers. Evidence of Trade and development of Maldives through the same is available from 1st cent. AD.
10. Based on the records of the historical period and the travelogues it is clear that the Maldivians had skills to adapt to changing political scenarios of neighboring countries and that of the Indian Ocean traders, which benefitted them.
11. New religious thoughts were accepted by the Maldivians who followed Buddhism with the arrival of new mercantile community from Arabian Peninsula. Conversions began with elites who with the support of traders established religious canters for the benefit of common people.
12. The overgaining popularity of tantric Buddhism through traders among the local people without understanding its philosophical dimensions slowly gave way to the advent of Islam which did not have much paraphernalia of the other South Asian religions. This was accomplished by the Islamization of Maldives by 12th century AD.

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STATEMENT II

(Statement indicating the sources of information and the extent to which the thesis is based on the work of others and the portion of the thesis claimed as original)

The study is based on artefact assemblage of Maldives through systematic exploration and excavation. The published books, reports, translations of chronicles, travelogues, reviews and articles by previous researches helped in understanding the environmental, archaeological and cultural aspects, formulating strategies of exploration, data collection, and artefact analysis. For comparison and correlation excavation reports of Mantai, Anuradhapura, and Kantarodai in Sri Lanka and Kaundinyapura and Arikamedu in India were referred. The following is the list of selected references consulted for the present study:

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This work introduces results from a systematic research work and offers a new insight into the archaeological and cultural resource of Maldives islands. The unique geological, topographical and geomorphological parameters of these islands were outlined and explored, with particular reference to how these factors influenced not only past populations, but also its impact on the ancient explorers. The documentation of the artefacts, its analysis and interpretation and comparison with other sites is the novel part of this thesis. An attempt has been made to devise a predictive model of 'Theocracy' to understand the social and political management of Maldives. Here a combination of methods has been considered and successfully tested and are to be considered as original contributions of this work.