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Tamil Inscriptions and Religious Interaction in Polonnaruwa Sri Lanka (11th–13th Centuries CE): An Epigraphic Perspective on Buddhist–Hindu Cultural Exchange

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ABSTRACT

Studies of medieval Sri Lankan religious history have traditionally emphasized political conflict, dynastic change and the impact of South Indian intervention on the island's Buddhist institutions. Comparatively less attention has been devoted to the role of Tamil epigraphic evidence in reconstructing the everyday interactions that connected Buddhist and Hindu communities within shared social, economic and administrative environments. This article examines a selected corpus of Tamil inscriptions from Polonnaruwa and related regions dating between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries CE in order to investigate the nature and mechanisms of Buddhist–Hindu interaction during a period of significant political transformation. Drawing upon epigraphic analysis supported by archaeological and historical evidence, the study analyses inscriptions associated with Buddhist monasteries, Hindu temples, mercantile corporations, military organizations and royal administrative networks. Particular attention is given to records of religious patronage, land grants, temple endowments, mercantile activities, military obligations and institutional administration. Through a contextual examination of these inscriptions, the article explores how religious communities participated in broader structures of governance, economic exchange and political authority. The findings demonstrate that Tamil inscriptions reveal a pattern of sustained religious interaction that extended beyond doctrinal or ritual spheres and was embedded within the institutional foundations of medieval Sri Lankan society. Evidence from inscriptions such as the Vēlaikkārar Charter, merchant guild records, temple endowment inscriptions and administrative grants indicates that Buddhist and Hindu institutions operated within interconnected networks of patronage, resource management and political

legitimacy. Tamil-speaking merchants, military corporations, officials and local elites participated actively in the support, protection and maintenance of both Buddhist and Hindu establishments, thereby facilitating forms of cooperation that transcended rigid sectarian boundaries. The article argues that Buddhist–Hindu relations in medieval Polonnaruwa are best understood through the concept of institutional pluralism, whereby distinct religious traditions maintained separate identities while functioning within shared administrative, economic and socio-political frameworks. By foregrounding the evidentiary value of Tamil inscriptions, this study contributes to broader debates concerning religious coexistence, cultural interaction and state formation in South Asia and demonstrates the importance of epigraphy for reconstructing the complex religious landscape of medieval Sri Lanka.

KEYWORDS: *Buddhist–Hindu Relations; Medieval Sri Lanka; Tamil Inscriptions; Polonnaruwa.*

1. Introduction

The religious history of medieval Sri Lanka has frequently been interpreted through frameworks that emphasize ethnic, linguistic and sectarian distinctions. Within much of the earlier historiography, Buddhism has been viewed primarily as a component of Sinhala political and cultural identity, whereas Tamil-speaking communities have often been examined in relation to South Indian migration, Chola imperial expansion and the development of Hindu religious institutions (Indrapala: 2005; Pathmanathan: 2019). Although such approaches have contributed significantly to understanding political transformations and demographic processes, they have often obscured the complex patterns of interaction that characterized the island's religious landscape between the eighth and early thirteenth centuries CE.

Recent scholarship on South Asian religious history has increasingly challenged rigid communal interpretations of the past by emphasizing shared sacred spaces, interconnected patronage systems and overlapping social networks that linked diverse religious communities (Eaton: 2000; Holt: 2004; Thapar: 2004). Rather than existing as isolated traditions, Buddhist and Hindu institutions frequently developed through processes of accommodation, adaptation and mutual engagement. These perspectives have encouraged historians to reassess the nature of religious interaction in medieval societies and to investigate the institutional mechanisms through which religious pluralism was sustained.

In the Sri Lankan context, Tamil inscriptions constitute one of the most important categories of primary evidence for examining such processes. Distributed across major centres including Anurādhapura, Polonnaruwa, Trincomalee, Mannar, Padaviya and Nāgadeepa, these inscriptions record donations, land grants, mercantile activities, military obligations, administrative regulations and religious endowments associated with both Buddhist and Hindu institutions (Indrapala: 1971; Pathmanathan: 2019). Unlike literary chronicles, which often reflect retrospective ideological perspectives, inscriptions provide contemporary evidence produced within specific institutional and social contexts. Consequently, they offer unique insights into the lived realities of religious practice, patronage, and inter-community relations in medieval Sri Lanka.

The significance of Tamil epigraphy for reconstructing Sri Lankan history has long been recognized. Early studies by Paranavitana (1970), Codrington (1926), and later contributions by Indrapala (1965, 2005) and

Pathmanathan (2019) demonstrated the value of Tamil inscriptions for understanding settlement patterns, commercial activity, political authority and cultural exchange. Particular attention has been devoted to the activities of merchant corporations such as the Ainnurruvar and Nānādesi guilds, the administrative structures established during the Chola occupation and the integration of South Indian commercial networks into the island's economy (Karashima: 2009; Pathmanathan: 2019). Nevertheless, the implications of this epigraphical evidence for understanding Buddhist–Hindu interaction remain comparatively understudied.

Much of the existing historiography has tended to examine Buddhist and Hindu institutions as separate entities or to frame their relationship primarily through narratives of political conflict and imperial domination. Such interpretations have often overlooked evidence demonstrating cooperation between religious communities, shared patronage structures, multilingual religious environments and the participation of Tamil-speaking groups within Buddhist institutional contexts (Gunawardana: 1979; Holt: 1991). Tamil inscriptions from Buddhist monasteries, records of Buddhist donations by Tamil merchant guilds, evidence for the protection of Buddhist shrines by Tamil military corporations and administrative documents invoking both Buddhist and Hindu religious authority collectively challenge simplistic assumptions regarding rigid sectarian boundaries.

The present study argues that Tamil epigraphical evidence reveals a long-standing and structurally embedded pattern of Buddhist–Hindu interaction in medieval Sri Lanka. Rather than representing isolated instances of accommodation or temporary responses to changing political circumstances, these interactions formed part of broader institutional networks sustained through commerce, military service, royal patronage and administrative cooperation. The inscriptions indicate that Buddhist and Hindu communities frequently operated within interconnected social and economic frameworks that transcended linguistic, ethnic and sectarian distinctions.

This study therefore seeks to reinterpret Tamil inscriptions not merely as evidence for political authority or ethnic presence but as valuable sources for understanding religious pluralism and institutional interaction. By examining inscriptions dating from the Late Anurādhapura period through the Chola and Polonnaruwa periods to the early thirteenth century CE, the article traces the evolution of relationships between Buddhist and Hindu institutions across several centuries of political transformation. Particular attention is given to the activities of merchant guilds, military corporations, temple administrators and royal officials whose actions facilitated sustained interaction between religious communities.

The objectives of this study are fourfold. First, it examines the nature and distribution of Tamil inscriptions associated with Buddhist and Hindu institutions in medieval Sri Lanka. Second, it investigates the role of merchant guilds, military organizations and administrative personnel in shaping patterns of religious patronage. Third, it evaluates the extent to which Tamil-speaking groups participated in Buddhist institutional life and Buddhist communities engaged with wider Tamil socio-economic networks. Finally, it reassesses prevailing interpretations of Buddhist–Hindu relations by situating epigraphical evidence within broader discussions of religious pluralism in South Asian history.

Accordingly, the study addresses the following research questions:

1. What forms of Buddhist–Hindu interaction are reflected in Tamil inscriptions from medieval Sri Lanka?

2. How did merchant guilds, military corporations and administrative networks facilitate relationships between Buddhist and Hindu institutions?
3. To what extent do Tamil inscriptions challenge conventional historiographical assumptions regarding religious and ethnic boundaries in medieval Sri Lanka?
4. What do these inscriptions reveal about the development of religious pluralism within the broader context of South Asian cultural history?

By addressing these questions, the study contributes to wider debates concerning religious coexistence, cultural interaction and institutional pluralism in pre-modern South Asia. It argues that Tamil epigraphical evidence provides compelling testimony for a complex and interconnected religious landscape in which Buddhist and Hindu institutions developed through sustained engagement rather than mutual isolation. Such an interpretation not only enriches understanding of medieval Sri Lanka but also contributes to broader discussions of religious interaction and cultural exchange across the South Asian world.

2. Sources and Methodology

2.1 Tamil Epigraphical Sources

The primary evidence utilized in this study consists of Tamil inscriptions dating from approximately the eighth to the early thirteenth centuries CE. These inscriptions originate from a wide geographical area encompassing Anurādhapura, Polonnaruwa, Trincomalee, Mannar, Padaviya, Dambulla, Nāgadeepa, Vavuniya and other regions associated with major Buddhist and Hindu religious institutions. The corpus includes stone inscriptions, pillar inscriptions, rock inscriptions, bronze image inscriptions, temple records, mercantile charters and administrative edicts.

Tamil inscriptions provide a particularly valuable category of historical evidence because they were produced within the institutional contexts they describe. Unlike literary chronicles, which were often composed retrospectively and shaped by ideological concerns, inscriptions generally record contemporary acts of donation, patronage, administration and ritual provision. Consequently, they offer direct evidence concerning the relationships between religious institutions, merchant corporations, military communities and political authorities. The epigraphical corpus examined in this study includes inscriptions associated with Buddhist monasteries such as Abhayagiriya, Ruvanvalisaya, Jetavana and the Temple of the Tooth Relic, as well as inscriptions connected to Hindu temples including Tirukketisvaram, Vijayarāja-īśvaram, and other Śaiva establishments. These records document a wide range of activities, including religious donations, land grants, lamp endowments, temple administration, mercantile agreements, military obligations and royal decrees. Collectively, they provide a substantial evidential basis for examining patterns of Buddhist–Hindu interaction across several centuries of political change.

2.2 Archaeological and Material Evidence

Although epigraphical evidence forms the primary basis of this study, inscriptions are interpreted in conjunction with archaeological and material data associated with the religious institutions in which they were discovered. Archaeological investigations at Anurādhapura, Polonnaruwa, Trincomalee, Padaviya and other sites have revealed evidence for the coexistence of Buddhist and Hindu religious structures, artistic traditions and ritual landscapes (Bandaranayake: 1974; Coningham: 2006).

Particular attention is given to the spatial contexts of inscriptions. The location of inscriptions within monasteries, temple complexes, image houses, gateways and mercantile centres provides important evidence regarding patterns of patronage and institutional interaction. Material culture associated with religious practice, including bronze images, architectural remains, sculptures and ritual installations, is also considered where relevant. Such evidence assists in reconstructing the broader social and religious environments within which epigraphical records were produced.

The integration of archaeological and epigraphical evidence enables a more comprehensive understanding of religious interaction than either category of evidence could provide independently. Inscriptions reveal institutional relationships and historical actors, while archaeological contexts illuminate the physical spaces in which those relationships were enacted.

2.3 Literary and Historical Sources

Epigraphical and archaeological evidence is supplemented by literary and historical sources, including the Mahāvamsa, Cūlavamsa and related historical traditions. These texts provide important information concerning political developments, royal patronage, religious reforms and military activities during the Anurādhapura and Polonnaruwa periods (Geiger: 1912; Culavamsa: trans. Geiger, 1929).

However, literary sources are employed cautiously. Modern scholarship has demonstrated that chronicles frequently reflect monastic perspectives and ideological concerns that shaped their representation of historical events (Gunawardana: 1979; Holt: 1991). Consequently, the present study does not treat literary narratives as neutral historical records but rather as complementary sources that may be compared with contemporary epigraphical evidence.

Such comparison is particularly valuable where inscriptions provide alternative perspectives on the roles of Tamil merchants, military communities and religious institutions. In several instances, epigraphical records reveal patterns of cooperation and institutional integration that receive little attention in chronicle traditions. The combined use of literary, archaeological and epigraphical evidence therefore facilitates a more balanced reconstruction of medieval Sri Lanka's religious landscape.

2.4 Analytical Framework

This study adopts an interdisciplinary approach informed by recent scholarship on religious pluralism, institutional interaction and shared sacred landscapes in South Asia (Eaton: 2000; Thapar: 2004; Holt: 2004). Rather than treating Buddhism and Hinduism as discrete and mutually exclusive traditions, the study examines the social, economic and administrative mechanisms through which religious communities interacted within a common historical environment.

The analysis focuses on four principal dimensions of interaction. First, it investigates patterns of patronage involving merchants, military corporations, royal officials and religious institutions. Second, it examines the role of economic networks in facilitating cooperation between Buddhist and Hindu establishments. Third, it evaluates the significance of multilingual religious practices and the use of Tamil within Buddhist institutional contexts. Finally, it explores the extent to which administrative structures and political authority contributed to sustaining religious coexistence.

The concept of religious pluralism employed here does not imply the absence of religious distinctions or political tensions. Rather, it refers to the existence of institutional arrangements through which diverse

religious communities operated within overlapping social and economic frameworks. By analyzing Tamil inscriptions through this perspective, the study seeks to move beyond interpretations that emphasize conflict alone and instead illuminate the complex processes of interaction, accommodation and mutual engagement that characterized medieval Sri Lankan society.

Accordingly, the inscriptions are examined not merely as isolated documentary records but as evidence for broader patterns of social and religious organization. This approach enables a reassessment of Buddhist–Hindu relations in medieval Sri Lanka and contributes to wider discussions concerning religious coexistence in pre-modern South Asia.

3. Tamil Epigraphy and Religious Pluralism in Late Anurādhapura

The Late Anurādhapura period (c. eighth–tenth centuries CE) represents a critical phase in the development of Sri Lanka’s religious landscape. Tamil inscriptions from this period provide some of the earliest unambiguous evidence for the participation of Tamil-speaking communities within Buddhist institutional contexts and reveal patterns of interaction that challenge conventional assumptions regarding rigid religious and ethnic boundaries. Far from indicating isolated instances of external influence, these inscriptions demonstrate that multilingual patronage, mercantile mobility and religious accommodation were already established features of Sri Lankan society before the Chola conquest of the island (Indrapala: 2005; Pathmanathan: 2019).

A notable feature of the Late Anurādhapura epigraphical record is the presence of Tamil inscriptions within major Buddhist establishments. The Tamil inscription discovered at Abhayagiriya records a donation associated with the construction of a paved architectural feature and provides one of the earliest examples of Tamil-speaking participation in Buddhist merit-making activities (Pathmanathan: 2019. 102–107). Its location within one of the most influential monasteries of the Anurādhapura kingdom is particularly significant. Abhayagiriya maintained extensive connections with international Buddhist networks and was historically associated with doctrinal diversity and cosmopolitan exchange (Holt: 2004. 18–22). The presence of a Tamil donative inscription within this environment suggests that linguistic identity did not constitute a barrier to participation in Buddhist institutional life.

Similar evidence is provided by the Tamil inscriptions engraved on the pedestals of dvārapālaka sculptures at Ruvanvalisaya. These inscriptions demonstrate the integration of Tamil language into the ritual and visual environment of one of the most symbolically important Buddhist monuments in Sri Lanka (Pathmanathan: 2019. 108–112). Their placement within the architectural setting of the stupa indicates that Tamil was not restricted to peripheral economic activities but was employed within spaces directly associated with Buddhist devotion and ritual practice. Such evidence challenges interpretations that equate Tamil identity exclusively with Hindu religious affiliation and instead points toward the existence of multilingual Buddhist communities during the Late Anurādhapura period.

Further support for this interpretation is provided by the Pankūḷiya inscription, which records donations intended for almsgiving and monastic maintenance and incorporates formulae commonly encountered in contemporary Sinhala Buddhist donative inscriptions (Pathmanathan: 2019. 111). The use of merit-making terminology and protective imprecations closely parallels established Buddhist epigraphical conventions, suggesting that Tamil-speaking donors participated fully in the ritual and institutional practices of Buddhist

monastic culture. Rather than representing a separate religious tradition, the inscription demonstrates integration into the broader Buddhist merit economy that characterized medieval Sri Lankan society.

The role of merchant communities in facilitating religious interaction is particularly evident in the Nānkunāṭṭār inscription from Anurādhapura. This record documents a collective donation by a Tamil merchant guild originating from Kerala for the maintenance of ritual services at a Buddhist temple (Pathmanathan: 2019. 113–123). The inscription is notable not only for its association with Buddhist patronage but also for its bilingual structure, combining a Tamil donation record with a Sanskrit eulogy praising King Sena II. Such linguistic plurality reflects the operation of multiple cultural and ideological traditions within a single religious act. It also highlights the importance of transregional mercantile networks in sustaining Buddhist institutions and facilitating cultural exchange across the Palk Strait and the wider Indian Ocean region.

The significance of merchant patronage extends beyond individual acts of donation. Across South Asia, merchant guilds functioned as major agents of cultural transmission, linking ports, pilgrimage centers and religious institutions through extensive commercial networks (Champakalakshmi: 1996; Karashima: 2009). The Nānkunāṭṭār inscription suggests that similar processes were operating in Sri Lanka during the Late Anurādhapura period. Merchant communities were not merely economic actors but active participants in the maintenance of religious institutions, thereby creating social spaces in which Buddhist and Hindu traditions could coexist and interact.

Evidence for religious plurality is further strengthened by Tamil inscriptions associated with Hindu temple remains in Anurādhapura. These inscriptions record donations for perpetual lamps and ritual services in Śaiva establishments while simultaneously employing regnal references to Sinhala rulers (Pathmanathan: 2019. 124–129). Their existence demonstrates that Hindu institutions functioned openly within the political and religious landscape of the Anurādhapura kingdom. Rather than existing outside the state framework, these temples operated within systems of royal recognition and administrative legitimacy.

The coexistence of Buddhist monasteries and Hindu temples within the same urban and political environment has important implications for understanding medieval Sri Lankan society. Religious institutions were not isolated entities competing for exclusive authority but components of a broader sacred landscape characterized by interaction, mobility and mutual accommodation. Similar patterns have been identified elsewhere in South Asia, where sacred centres frequently accommodated multiple religious traditions simultaneously (Eaton: 2000; Thapar: 2004). The Sri Lankan evidence suggests that such pluralistic arrangements were already present several centuries before the establishment of Chola political authority on the island.

Collectively, the Tamil inscriptions of the Late Anurādhapura period reveal a religious environment characterized by linguistic diversity, institutional flexibility and cross-cultural patronage. Tamil-speaking donors contributed to Buddhist monasteries, merchant guilds supported Buddhist ritual activities and Hindu temples operated within the same political framework that sustained Buddhist institutions. These developments indicate that Buddhist–Hindu interaction was not a phenomenon introduced by later imperial expansion but a process deeply rooted in the social and economic structures of early medieval Sri Lanka.

The significance of this evidence extends beyond the reconstruction of local religious history. By demonstrating the coexistence of Buddhist and Hindu institutions within interconnected patronage networks, the inscriptions challenge historiographical models that portray medieval Sri Lanka primarily through ethnic or sectarian divisions. Instead, they reveal a complex religious landscape in which institutional cooperation and shared economic interests frequently transcended linguistic and doctrinal distinctions.

Therefore, the Late Anurādhapura epigraphical record establishes the historical foundation for the subsequent developments examined in this study. The patterns of multilingual patronage, mercantile involvement and religious accommodation evident in the eighth and ninth centuries CE created the institutional conditions within which later Buddhist–Hindu interactions developed during the Chola and Polonnaruwa periods. Rather than representing a rupture with earlier traditions, the transformations of the eleventh and twelfth centuries should be understood as an intensification and reconfiguration of relationships that were already embedded within Sri Lanka’s religious landscape.

4. Chola Political Authority and Religious Institutions

The incorporation of Sri Lanka into the Chola Empire during the late tenth and early eleventh centuries CE marked a significant transformation in the island’s political and administrative structures. Historiography has frequently interpreted this period through the lens of conquest, emphasizing military occupation, the expansion of Śaiva institutions and the integration of northern Sri Lanka into the imperial networks of the Chola state (Nilakanta Sastri: 1955; Indrapala: 2005). While these developments undoubtedly altered the political landscape, Tamil epigraphical evidence suggests that the religious consequences of Chola rule were considerably more complex than narratives of cultural replacement or sectarian domination imply.

The Tamil inscriptions of the Chola period reveal not the destruction of existing religious institutions but the incorporation of both Buddhist and Hindu establishments into a broader administrative framework. Rather than producing a fundamental rupture in Sri Lanka’s religious history, Chola governance intensified patterns of institutional interaction that had already emerged during the Late Anurādhapura period. Religious patronage, temple administration and economic organization increasingly operated through formalized systems that linked religious institutions to mechanisms of taxation, land management and commercial exchange.

One of the most significant developments of the period was the expansion of temple-centred administration. Tamil inscriptions from Anurādhapura document the activities of Hindu institutions functioning within the imperial administrative structure and reveal the growing importance of temples as centres of economic management and ritual authority (Pathmanathan: 2019. 133–140). Similar developments are well documented throughout the Chola Empire, where temples served not only as religious centres but also as institutions involved in land administration, revenue collection, employment and the redistribution of resources (Champakalakshmi: 1996; Karashima: 2009).

The Tirukketisvaram inscriptions provide one of the clearest examples of this process. These records document the administration of land grants, taxation systems, festival expenditures, ritual obligations and temple personnel associated with one of the most important Śaiva centres in Sri Lanka (Pathmanathan: 2019. 146–165). The inscriptions reveal a highly organized institutional structure in which religious

activities were closely integrated with economic administration. Temple maintenance, ritual performance, and artistic production were supported through carefully regulated systems of revenue and resource management.

Such evidence is significant because it demonstrates that religious institutions functioned as integral components of imperial governance rather than as isolated centres of worship. The architectural expansion of temples, the commissioning of sculptures and the maintenance of ritual specialists depended upon economic systems regulated through inscriptional authority. Consequently, religious art and ritual practice cannot be separated from the administrative frameworks within which they operated.

The Chola inscriptions from Padaviya further illustrate the relationship between political authority and religious patronage. The inscription of Rājārāja I records donations to a Śiva temple and emphasizes the role of royal authority in supporting religious institutions (Indrapala: 1971. 35). Such records demonstrate how kingship was expressed through acts of temple patronage, linking political legitimacy with religious benefaction. Comparable patterns have been identified throughout South India, where rulers employed temple endowments to reinforce both political authority and sacred legitimacy (Nilakanta Sastri: 1955; Karashima: 2009).

At the same time, the epigraphical record does not support the view that Buddhist institutions disappeared under Chola rule. Although Hindu temples undoubtedly benefited from imperial patronage, evidence suggests that Buddhist establishments continued to function within the same political environment. The survival of Buddhist monasteries, the continued use of sacred Buddhist sites and the persistence of Buddhist patronage indicate that Chola administration accommodated rather than eliminated existing religious traditions (Holt: 1991; Pathmanathan: 2019).

This continuity is particularly important for understanding Buddhist–Hindu interaction during the period. Rather than existing within separate political spheres, Buddhist and Hindu institutions operated under the same administrative structures and participated in the same economic networks. Merchant guilds, local elites, artisans and administrative officials frequently interacted with multiple religious establishments, creating opportunities for cultural exchange and institutional cooperation. The resulting religious landscape was therefore characterized less by rigid sectarian separation than by overlapping networks of patronage and administration.

Evidence from the Trincomalee region further reinforces this interpretation. Tamil inscriptions discovered in eastern Sri Lanka document donations, temple activities and religious patronage associated with Śaiva institutions while simultaneously reflecting broader patterns of regional integration within the Chola imperial system (Thantilage: 2016). These records demonstrate that temple-centred economic and religious organization extended beyond major urban centres and contributed to the formation of interconnected religious landscapes throughout the island.

The wider corpus of Chola-period inscriptions from northern Sri Lanka also highlights the relationship between political authority and religious institutions. Although many inscriptions are primarily administrative in nature, recording royal titles, territorial authority and official activities, they reveal the governmental structures within which religious life operated (Pathmanathan: 2019. 166–177). Temples,

monasteries, merchant guilds and local communities functioned within the same administrative environment, facilitating interaction across institutional and religious boundaries.

The significance of these developments becomes clearer when viewed within a broader South Asian context. Recent scholarship has emphasized that religious institutions in medieval South Asia frequently acted as centres of economic organization, social integration and political negotiation rather than purely devotional spaces (Champakalakshmi: 1996; Eaton: 2000). The Sri Lankan evidence demonstrates similar processes. Buddhist monasteries and Hindu temples were embedded within interconnected networks of landholding, commerce, labour organization and political authority. These shared institutional foundations encouraged sustained interaction between religious communities even when doctrinal distinctions remained significant.

Consequently, the Chola period should not be interpreted solely as an era of Hindu expansion or Buddhist decline. Instead, Tamil inscriptions reveal a more nuanced process in which imperial administration formalized existing patterns of religious coexistence and integrated diverse institutions into common systems of governance. The result was the emergence of increasingly structured relationships between Buddhist and Hindu establishments, supported by shared economic interests and administrative mechanisms.

Thus, the epigraphical evidence indicates that Chola rule represented an important phase in the institutionalization of Buddhist–Hindu interaction. By linking religious institutions to imperial systems of administration, taxation and patronage, the Chola state created conditions that facilitated sustained engagement between Buddhist and Hindu communities. These developments would continue to shape Sri Lanka's religious landscape during the subsequent Polonnaruwa period, when merchant guilds, military corporations and royal authorities further expanded the networks of interaction examined in the following sections.

5. Merchant Guilds and Shared Patronage Networks

Merchant communities occupied a central position within the religious and economic life of medieval Sri Lanka. Tamil inscriptions dating from the ninth to thirteenth centuries CE reveal that merchant guilds were not merely commercial organizations concerned with trade and profit. Rather, they functioned as influential social institutions that supported religious establishments, facilitated cultural exchange and maintained networks connecting Sri Lanka with wider regions of South India and the Indian Ocean world. Through their patronage activities, merchant corporations contributed significantly to the development of Buddhist–Hindu interaction and religious pluralism.

The importance of merchant organizations in South Asian history has been widely recognized. Scholars have demonstrated that powerful guilds such as the Ainnurruvar, Nānādesi, Maṇigrāmaṁ and related corporate bodies operated across extensive commercial networks extending from South India to Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia (Champakalakshmi: 1996; Karashima: 2009; Hall: 2011). These organizations controlled trade routes, organized commercial activities, provided security for merchants and participated in religious patronage. Their activities frequently transcended political and sectarian boundaries, enabling them to serve as important mediators between diverse communities.

One of the earliest examples of merchant involvement in Buddhist institutions is provided by the Nānkunāṭṭār inscription from Anurādhapura. This inscription records a collective endowment by a Tamil merchant guild originating from Kerala for the support of ritual services and commemorative observances within a Buddhist temple (Pathmanathan: 2019. 113–123). The record demonstrates that long-distance commercial communities actively participated in Buddhist religious life and regarded patronage of Buddhist institutions as compatible with their economic and social interests. The inscription is particularly significant because it predates the Chola conquest, indicating that transregional merchant support for Buddhist institutions was already well established during the Late Anurādhapura period.

The role of merchants became even more prominent during the Polonnaruwa period. The Viharehinna inscription from Dambulla records agreements between Tamil merchant groups and a Buddhist monastery, identifying an associated settlement known as Tanmacākarap-pattinam, or “Ocean of Dharma” (Pathmanathan: 2019). The inscription reveals a relationship based on reciprocal obligations, protection, and economic cooperation between commercial communities and monastic institutions. Rather than functioning independently of one another, monasteries and merchants formed mutually beneficial partnerships that facilitated both religious activities and commercial operations.

Such arrangements reflected broader developments within the medieval South Asian economy. Buddhist monasteries frequently occupied strategic locations along trade routes and served as centres of hospitality, storage and communication for travelling merchants (Gunawardana: 1979; Ray: 1994). Merchant patronage provided monasteries with economic resources, while monastic institutions offered merchants social legitimacy and access to established networks of exchange. The Viharehinna inscription demonstrates that similar relationships operated in Sri Lanka and contributed to the integration of Buddhist institutions within wider commercial systems.

Perhaps the clearest evidence for cross-sectarian patronage is provided by the Budumuttava Vīrakkōṭi inscription. This remarkable record documents donations made by a merchant-military corporation to both a Buddhist shrine and the Hindu goddess Parameśvarī following assistance received during a conflict (Pathmanathan: 2019. 351–371). The inscription is of exceptional importance because it explicitly records the patronage of Buddhist and Hindu institutions by the same corporate body. Rather than viewing religious communities as mutually exclusive spheres of activity, the donors appear to have regarded support for multiple religious traditions as entirely compatible.

The Budumuttava inscription challenges modern assumptions regarding rigid religious boundaries in medieval South Asia. Scholars increasingly emphasize that premodern religious identities were often situational and embedded within wider social and economic relationships rather than organized around exclusive communal affiliations (Eaton: 2000; Thapar: 2004). The dual patronage recorded in this inscription provides direct epigraphical evidence for such flexibility and suggests that practical considerations of reciprocity, obligation and community cohesion frequently transcended sectarian distinctions.

Additional evidence for the religious activities of merchant organizations is provided by the Padaviya Vīrasāsana inscription issued by the Ainnurruvar guild. This inscription records the corporate structure, ethical regulations, territorial authority and religious obligations of one of the most influential merchant organizations in the medieval Indian Ocean world (Pathmanathan: 2019. 335–344). The record indicates

that religious patronage formed an integral component of guild identity and that collective resources were allocated for ritual services and institutional maintenance.

The significance of the Ainnurruvar extends beyond individual acts of donation. Historians have shown that the guild maintained an extensive transregional network linking South India, Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia through commercial and cultural exchange (Karashima: 2009; Hall: 2011). Through these networks, religious ideas, artistic traditions, institutional practices and ritual customs circulated alongside goods and capital. Merchant guilds therefore played a crucial role in facilitating the transmission of cultural influences between different regions of the South Asian world.

The Jetavana bronze image inscription further illustrates the contribution of merchants to Buddhist artistic production. This inscription records the donation of a bronze image by the Nānādesi merchant guild and associates the donation with arrangements for maintaining an alms hall under royal authority (Pathmanathan: 2019. 483–488). The record demonstrates that merchant patronage extended beyond financial support for ritual activities and included direct contributions to Buddhist visual culture. Merchant guilds were therefore active participants in the creation and maintenance of sacred landscapes.

Importantly, the patronage activities documented in these inscriptions were not limited to either Buddhist or Hindu institutions. Instead, merchant organizations appear to have operated within broad religious environments characterized by overlapping networks of obligation and support. Economic success depended upon cooperation with diverse communities and religious patronage functioned as an important means of establishing social legitimacy, strengthening institutional relationships and maintaining commercial stability.

The inscriptions also reveal the close relationship between commerce and religious coexistence. Merchant guilds frequently interacted with monasteries, temples, royal authorities, military groups and local communities. Their activities linked institutions that might otherwise appear separate within conventional religious histories. Through donations, endowments, construction projects, ritual sponsorship and administrative cooperation, merchants created networks that connected Buddhist and Hindu establishments within a shared economic framework.

Consequently, merchant corporations emerge as some of the most important agents of Buddhist–Hindu interaction in medieval Sri Lanka. Their patronage activities demonstrate that religious coexistence was not sustained solely through royal policies or institutional accommodation. Rather, it was embedded within everyday systems of exchange, mobility and economic cooperation. Merchant guilds provided the material foundations that enabled religious institutions to flourish while simultaneously creating opportunities for sustained engagement across sectarian boundaries.

The evidence therefore suggests that Buddhist–Hindu interaction in medieval Sri Lanka was closely linked to the operation of commercial networks extending across the Indian Ocean world. Merchant guilds acted as intermediaries between different religious communities, facilitating cultural exchange and institutional cooperation through mechanisms of patronage and economic integration. In doing so, they contributed significantly to the formation of a pluralistic religious landscape in which Buddhist and Hindu institutions developed through interconnected rather than isolated processes.

6. Tamil Military Communities and Buddhist Institutions

The relationship between military communities and religious institutions constituted an important dimension of medieval Sri Lankan society. Historiographical discussions of Tamil military groups have frequently emphasized their role in conquest, political conflict and South Indian intervention, particularly during the Chola and post-Chola periods (Indrapala: 2005; Spencer: 1976). While military activities undoubtedly influenced the political history of the island, Tamil inscriptions reveal a more complex reality in which military corporations participated actively in the protection, patronage and administration of Buddhist institutions. These records challenge conventional assumptions that military and religious spheres operated independently and demonstrate that Buddhist-Hindu interaction was also facilitated through structures of military organization and service.

The most significant evidence for this relationship is provided by the Vēlaikkārar Inscription of Vijayabāhu I from Polonnaruwa. This inscription records a formal agreement in which the Tamil Vēlaikkārar military corporation pledged to protect the Temple of the Tooth Relic and associated Buddhist establishments (Pathmanathan: 2019. 455). The agreement outlines obligations relating to military service, collective responsibility, land assignments and penalties for failure to fulfill these duties. Its historical significance extends beyond the specific terms of the contract. The inscription demonstrates that the guardianship of Sri Lanka's most sacred Buddhist relic was entrusted to a Tamil military organization, thereby illustrating a remarkable degree of institutional integration.

The Temple of the Tooth Relic occupied a central position within the political and religious ideology of medieval Sri Lankan kingship. Control over and protection of the relic symbolized legitimate sovereignty and was closely associated with the authority of the Buddhist state (Holt: 1991). Consequently, the decision to place its security in the hands of a Tamil military corporation indicates that practical considerations of loyalty, military effectiveness and institutional stability often outweighed ethnic or sectarian distinctions. The inscription therefore provides compelling evidence that Tamil military groups were incorporated into the religious and political structures of the Polonnaruwa kingdom rather than remaining external to them.

The significance of the Vēlaikkārar inscription becomes clearer when viewed within the broader context of South Asian military history. Across medieval South India, military corporations frequently served as semi-autonomous organizations that combined military, administrative and economic functions (Karashima: 2009). Their members received land grants, maintained local authority and often participated in religious patronage. Similar patterns are visible in Sri Lanka, where military communities appear not merely as soldiers but as institutional actors integrated into wider networks of governance and religious life.

Additional evidence for the involvement of military groups in public and religious affairs is provided by the Kodaliparichan inscription of the Vēlaikkārar leader Mūvēntavēlān. This inscription records the construction of a rest house, pond and well on land granted to his community during the reign of Jayabāhu I (Pathmanathan: 2019. 412–427). Although the inscription is not explicitly devotional, the infrastructure it describes would have supported pilgrims, travellers, merchants, monks and local populations. Such facilities formed an essential component of the social environment within which religious institutions functioned.

The construction of public infrastructure has long been recognized as a significant aspect of Buddhist kingship and merit-making in South Asia (Gunawardana: 1979). The participation of Tamil military leaders in similar activities demonstrates their integration into the broader social and moral frameworks of medieval Sri Lankan society. Rather than acting solely as agents of warfare, military communities contributed to the maintenance of the economic and logistical systems upon which religious institutions depended.

Evidence for direct Buddhist patronage by military personnel is preserved in the Hingurakdamana pillar inscription of Gajabāhu II. This inscription records the donation of proceeds from the sale of life-tenure land by a Tamil soldier to a Buddhist vihāra (Pathmanathan: 2019. 428–430). The donor not only transferred valuable resources to the monastery but also incorporated religious sanctions intended to protect the endowment. Such actions reflect participation in the Buddhist merit economy and demonstrate that individual members of Tamil military communities could act as committed patrons of Buddhist institutions.

The significance of this inscription lies in its demonstration of personal religious agency. While institutional agreements such as the Vēlaikkārar charter illustrate collective relationships between military organizations and Buddhist establishments, the Hingurakdamana record reveals individual participation in Buddhist devotional practices. It therefore provides evidence that engagement with Buddhist institutions extended beyond formal political arrangements and was embedded within the activities of ordinary military personnel.

The interaction between military groups and religious institutions is also evident in inscriptions associated with merchant-military corporations such as the Vīrakkōṭi. The Budumuttava inscription records donations made by this organization to both a Buddhist shrine and the Hindu goddess Parameśvarī following assistance received during a conflict (Pathmanathan: 2019. 351–371). The dual patronage recorded in the inscription demonstrates that military and commercial corporations frequently operated across religious boundaries. Their patronage activities were guided not by exclusive sectarian commitments but by broader considerations of reciprocity, obligation and corporate identity.

These patterns reflect wider characteristics of medieval South Asian society, where military, commercial and religious institutions were often closely interconnected (Stein: 1980; Karashima: 2009). Military corporations depended upon monasteries and temples for legitimacy, social support and economic relationships, while religious institutions benefited from military protection and patronage. Such reciprocal arrangements encouraged cooperation between diverse communities and contributed to the development of shared institutional frameworks.

The integration of Tamil military communities into Buddhist religious life has important historiographical implications. Traditional narratives frequently portray medieval Sri Lanka through oppositional categories such as Sinhala versus Tamil or Buddhist versus Hindu. The inscriptions examined here complicate such interpretations by demonstrating that Tamil military groups could simultaneously maintain connections with Hindu traditions while actively supporting Buddhist institutions. Religious and ethnic identities were therefore not always expressed through exclusive forms of affiliation but often operated within overlapping social and political contexts.

Furthermore, the participation of military communities in Buddhist institutions reveals the importance of pragmatic accommodation within the Polonnaruwa state. Kings, military leaders, merchants and religious

authorities shared an interest in maintaining political stability and institutional continuity. Buddhist monasteries and relic shrines represented centers of religious legitimacy, while military corporations provided protection and administrative support. The resulting relationships created opportunities for sustained interaction between communities that modern historiography has too often treated as separate.

Consequently, Tamil military communities should be understood as significant contributors to the religious life of medieval Sri Lanka. Through guardianship, patronage, infrastructure development and institutional cooperation, they played an important role in sustaining Buddhist establishments during the post-Chola and Polonnaruwa periods. Their activities demonstrate that Buddhist–Hindu interaction was not confined to merchant networks or royal policies but was also embedded within the structures of military organization and service.

The epigraphical evidence therefore reveals a religious landscape characterized by collaboration rather than simple opposition. Tamil military corporations acted as protectors of Buddhist institutions, benefactors of monasteries and participants in broader systems of religious patronage. In doing so, they contributed to the formation of a pluralistic social order in which Buddhist and Hindu communities were connected through shared political, economic and institutional interests.

7. Reinterpreting Buddhist–Hindu Interaction in Medieval Sri Lanka

The evidence examined in the preceding sections necessitates a reconsideration of how Buddhist–Hindu relations in medieval Sri Lanka have traditionally been understood. Conventional historiography has frequently approached the island’s religious history through frameworks emphasizing ethnic distinction, political conflict and religious separation. Within such interpretations, Buddhism has often been associated primarily with Sinhala political authority, whereas Tamil-speaking communities have been viewed principally through the lenses of South Indian migration, Chola imperial expansion or Hindu religious activity (Indrapala: 2005; Spencer: 1990). Although these perspectives have contributed significantly to understanding political developments, they do not adequately account for the patterns of institutional interaction revealed by the epigraphical record.

The Tamil inscriptions examined in this study present a considerably more complex picture of medieval Sri Lankan society. Rather than revealing rigidly separated religious communities, they demonstrate the existence of interconnected networks linking Buddhist monasteries, Hindu temples, merchant corporations, military organizations and royal authorities. These relationships extended across linguistic and sectarian boundaries and were sustained through practical mechanisms of patronage, administration, commerce and political cooperation. Consequently, Buddhist–Hindu interaction appears not as an exceptional occurrence but as a recurring feature of everyday institutional life.

One of the most significant findings emerging from the epigraphical evidence is the continuity of religious interaction across periods of political change. The inscriptions demonstrate that patterns of multilingual patronage and institutional cooperation were already present during the Late Anurādhapura period, well before the Chola conquest of the island. Tamil-speaking donors contributed to Buddhist monasteries, merchant communities supported Buddhist ritual activities and Hindu institutions operated within the same political environment that sustained Buddhist establishments (Pathmanathan: 2019). These developments

indicate that the foundations of religious pluralism were established centuries before the emergence of Chola political authority.

This observation challenges interpretations that portray Buddhist–Hindu interaction primarily as a consequence of South Indian conquest. While the Chola period undoubtedly transformed administrative and political structures, the evidence suggests that it intensified and formalized pre-existing patterns rather than creating entirely new forms of religious engagement. The institutional frameworks established under Chola rule integrated religious establishments into wider systems of governance, taxation and economic management, thereby expanding opportunities for interaction between Buddhist and Hindu communities. The resulting relationships reflected continuity as much as change.

The inscriptions also demonstrate that economic networks played a fundamental role in sustaining religious coexistence. Merchant guilds such as the Nānkunāṭṭār, Nānādesi, Ainnurruvar and Vīrakkōṭi emerge repeatedly as patrons of religious institutions, facilitators of commercial exchange and intermediaries between diverse communities. Their activities linked Buddhist monasteries and Hindu temples to regional and trans-regional systems of trade extending across the Indian Ocean (Karashima: 2009; Hall: 2011). Religious patronage was therefore embedded within broader economic structures rather than confined to narrowly define sectarian communities.

The importance of merchant patronage suggests that religious interaction should be understood within the context of shared institutional interests. Monasteries, temples, merchants, military groups and political authorities all depended upon stable systems of exchange, communication and social cooperation. Religious patronage provided a means through which these relationships could be maintained and legitimized. Consequently, Buddhist–Hindu interaction was not simply a matter of theological encounter but also a product of material and institutional realities.

Similarly, the evidence relating to military communities reveals the limitations of interpretations based solely on ethnic or religious opposition. The Vēlaikkārar inscription records the protection of the Temple of the Tooth Relic by a Tamil military corporation, while other inscriptions document donations and public works undertaken by Tamil soldiers and military leaders in support of Buddhist institutions (Pathmanathan: 2019). Such evidence demonstrates that military organizations could participate actively in Buddhist religious life while simultaneously maintaining connections to broader Tamil social networks. Their activities illustrate the fluidity of institutional affiliations within medieval Sri Lankan society.

These observations align with broader developments in South Asian historiography. Scholars increasingly emphasize that pre-modern religious communities were often interconnected through shared sacred spaces, overlapping patronage systems and common economic interests (Eaton: 2000; Thapar: 2004; Holt: 2004). Rather than existing as isolated and mutually exclusive entities, religious institutions frequently developed within pluralistic social environments characterized by interaction and accommodation. The Sri Lankan evidence examined in this study supports such interpretations and demonstrates that similar processes operated within the island's medieval religious landscape.

The concept of religious pluralism provides a useful framework for understanding these developments. Religious pluralism, as employed here, does not imply the absence of doctrinal differences, political competition, or occasional conflict. Buddhist and Hindu traditions retained distinct theological identities,

ritual practices and institutional structures throughout the period under consideration. However, the epigraphical evidence indicates that these differences did not prevent cooperation, shared patronage or participation in common social and economic networks. Religious diversity was therefore managed through institutional arrangements that facilitated coexistence rather than segregation.

Equally important is the recognition that linguistic identity did not correspond neatly to religious affiliation. Several inscriptions demonstrate the participation of Tamil-speaking donors within Buddhist institutional contexts, while others reveal the operation of Hindu temples under Sinhala political authority. Such evidence challenges modern assumptions that language and religion functioned as fixed markers of communal identity. Instead, the inscriptions suggest that social, economic and political relationships often transcended categories that later became central to nationalist historical narratives.

The cumulative evidence therefore supports an alternative interpretation of medieval Sri Lankan religious history. Rather than viewing Buddhist and Hindu institutions as separate spheres linked only through occasional contact, the inscriptions reveal a landscape characterized by sustained engagement and institutional interdependence. Merchant guilds patronized multiple religious traditions, military corporations protected Buddhist shrines, royal administrations accommodated diverse religious communities and sacred institutions participated in shared economic systems. These patterns collectively indicate that interaction was embedded within the structures of society itself.

From this perspective, Buddhist–Hindu interaction should be understood as a structural characteristic of medieval Sri Lanka rather than as a series of isolated events. Political transformations, including the Chola conquest and the rise of the Polonnaruwa kingdom, altered the forms through which interaction occurred but did not fundamentally disrupt the underlying networks that connected religious communities. The resilience of these networks across several centuries demonstrates the durability of the institutional foundations upon which religious coexistence depended.

Accordingly, this study proposes that medieval Sri Lanka be interpreted as a pluralistic religious environment in which Buddhist and Hindu institutions developed through continuous processes of engagement, negotiation and cooperation. Tamil epigraphical evidence reveals that such interaction was sustained not merely by ideological tolerance but by the practical realities of commerce, administration, military service and patronage. It was through these mechanisms that diverse religious communities became integrated into a shared social order.

This reinterpretation has implications beyond the study of Sri Lanka alone. It contributes to wider debates concerning religious coexistence, cultural exchange and institutional pluralism in pre-modern South Asia. By highlighting the role of epigraphical evidence in reconstructing patterns of interaction, the study demonstrates how local histories can enrich broader understandings of religious diversity and social integration across the South Asian world.

8. Conclusion

This study has examined Tamil inscriptions from medieval Sri Lanka as a source for understanding the nature of Buddhist–Hindu interaction between the eighth and early thirteenth centuries CE. By analyzing epigraphical evidence alongside archaeological and historical data, the study has demonstrated that

religious relations in medieval Sri Lanka were shaped not solely by doctrinal distinctions or political transformations but by shared institutional, economic and administrative frameworks. Tamil inscriptions reveal a religious landscape characterized by sustained interaction among monasteries, temples, merchants, military groups and political authorities, all of which participated in overlapping networks of patronage and governance.

The findings challenge historiographical approaches that have tended to interpret medieval Sri Lankan society primarily through ethnic, linguistic or sectarian categories. The epigraphical record indicates that Tamil-speaking communities were active participants in Buddhist institutional life, while Hindu establishments functioned within broader political and administrative environments that also sustained Buddhist institutions. Such evidence suggests that religious identities were frequently negotiated within common social and economic contexts rather than expressed through rigid communal separation.

The study further demonstrates the value of Tamil epigraphy as a source for reconstructing patterns of religious coexistence that are often less visible in literary traditions. Inscriptions provide contemporary evidence of institutional relationships, patronage networks and administrative practices, thereby illuminating dimensions of social interaction that extend beyond political narratives of conquest, resistance and dynastic change. Through this perspective, Buddhist–Hindu relations emerge not as isolated instances of accommodation but as a recurring feature of everyday institutional life.

Accordingly, the concept of institutional pluralism offers a productive framework for interpreting the religious history of medieval Sri Lanka. Buddhist and Hindu traditions maintained distinct religious identities, yet they operated within interconnected structures of commerce, administration, patronage and political authority. The durability of these relationships across periods of significant political transformation demonstrates that religious coexistence was supported by practical mechanisms of social integration as much as by theological or ideological considerations.

Beyond its contribution to Sri Lankan historiography, this study contributes to wider discussions of religious interaction and cultural exchange in pre-modern South Asia. The evidence examined here illustrates how epigraphy can illuminate the complex processes through which diverse religious communities negotiated shared spaces and institutional relationships. Tamil inscriptions therefore provide important testimony to the interconnected character of South Asian religious history and highlight the need to move beyond binary models of religious and ethnic opposition toward more nuanced interpretations of historical coexistence and cultural engagement.

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