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Ananda's role in Buddhist education

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In the aftermath of the Great Debate of Panadura (1873), Buddhist leaders, both lay and monastic, focussed their attention on the necessity for a system of education that suited the needs and aspirations of the Buddhists of this country.

Thus began the search for 'Buddhist education' and the establishment of institutions to impart it. Two important leaders of this movement were the Theosophists, Colonel Henry Steel Olcott and Madame Blavetsky, who arrived in this island in 1890.

As Prof. Heinz Bechert, the famous German Indologist rightly points out, "The fact that two prominent Westerners came to Sri Lanka out of sympathy and admiration for Buddhism restored the self-confidence of the Buddhists in a period when Christian powers seemed to dominate the whole world." ('The World of Buddhism', edited by Heinz Bechert and Richard Gombrich, p. 274).

The Theosophists were instrumental in founding the Buddhist Theosophical Society in Sri Lanka, which had as its main aims, the preservation of the heritage of Buddhism, and the promotion of Buddhist education. The first educational institution to be established was Ananda College in 1886.

Today, as it celebrates its 115th birthday, Ananda has become the premier Buddhist educational institution in the land. What was the vision of the founders of Ananda, and what was precisely meant by 'Buddhist education'?

Buddhist education, in the view of the founding fathers, was two-fold: the teaching of Buddhism in a scientific and rational way, and the imparting of the system of Buddhist values. The Theosophists held Buddhism in great esteem, and for them, it was not merely a religion but a philosophy with a rational appeal.

Western scholars were beginning to study Buddhism in its original form, as preserved in the Pali scriptures. As H. G. Wells, the English historian says, in his 'Outline of History': "The fundamental teaching of Gautama, as it is now being made plain to us by the study of original sources, is clear and simple and in the closest harmony with modern ideas. It is beyond all dispute the achievement of one of the most penetrating intelligences the world has ever known." (p. 315)

The Buddhist leaders who were inspired by the Theosophists to re-examine the philosophical value of Buddhism in the light of contemporary modes of thought, wanted this body of philosophy to be taught in the schools so that the new generation of Buddhist youth would be able to defend themselves against inroads from external powers.

The second goal of Buddhist education was to impart the system of values fostered by Buddhism. The founding fathers of Buddhist education thought that it was necessary for Buddhist children not only to be aware of this system of Buddhist values, in an academic sense, but also to grow up in an environment in which these values were put into practice.

Tolerance, for instance, acquires real meaning only when it is practised in everyday living, in school and outside.

Thus new educational institutions such as Ananda had a special role to play in promoting Buddhist education in this country - a role different from that of those

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public schools moulded by the colonial masters to suit their needs and aspirations.

A typical public school product of the time owed his loyalty mainly to the British. The Anandian, on the other hand, had the interests of the people at heart. While principals such as Sir, D. B. Jayatilaka, P. de S. Kularatna. Prof. Gunapala Malalasekera and L. H. Mettananda inspired the students to champion the cause of nationalism. Young men such as N. M. Perera, S. A. Wickramasingha, Philip Gunawardhana, Bernard Soysa, who were later to lead the masses to political freedom, had their education at Ananda.

A typical public school product had his education in English, while his counterpart in the so-called 'vernacular school' had his education in the language of his people. For the former, the glory of English knew no bounds. He could quote Shakespeare or Wordsworth as any Englishman could, but he was an alien in his own language and culture.

The Anandian, on the other hand, appreciated the value of English, but certainly not at the expense of his own language - be it Sinhala or Tamil. Of course, the public school product ridiculed the Anandian for his inability to keep the 'o's and 'aw's apart in his English pronunciation, but that did not deter him from the study of English.

What the Anandian objected to was not the English language or literature but the sheer social snobbery that accompanied it. Principals such as S. A. Wijetilake made us enjoy the passages of the English Bible as well as versus from the Dhammapada and the Bhagavat gita.

The mood of the day was that the languages of the populace - the swabhashas - were inefficient media of science and technical education. The brown sahibs maintained that subjects such as science and mathematics were beyond the reach of the native languages. This challenge was taken up by Ananda, while principals such as Kularatna, and veteran teachers such as Karunananda, published a series of text books on mathematics and science in Sinhala. Principal Mettananda championed their cause in public.

All this paved the way for the resurgence of the swabashas in the wake of nationalist revival of the early fifties.

The Anandian grew up in an environment in which other ethnic groups, languages and creeds were held in high esteem. Tolerance was a value that he learnt by example. Among some of my best friends and teachers at Ananda were Tamils and Hindus. In fact, I had my first lessons in Tamil under the guidance of a Tamil teacher who had earned much respect among us.

C. Suntharalingam, who later become the Professor of Mathematics at the University College, . V. T. S. Sivagurunathan, the author of the popular series of textbooks "Raja's Picture Lesson in English", and T. Thanabalasingham were among some of the best Tamil teachers of Ananda.

Many were the principals, teachers and students who built the new tradition of Buddhist education at Ananda during its span of 115 years. Its role, however, has not come to an end, for the need for Buddhist education seems to be greater today than ever before. May Ananda succeed in fulfilling this role with vigour so that the people of this country can live together in peace, harmony and dignity.