

Selestina Rodrigo: Convinced the British colonial government that education is a right for Buddhist women

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ABSTRACT

Education was a significant tool of colonial policy in the consolidation of political power, and in the acculturation of a colonial society. In the 19th century among colonial rulers, British administrators encouraged Christian missionaries and educationists (both male and female) to introduce cultural imperialism, social class values and gender ideology prevalent in the Western societies. By doing so they anticipated to generate intermediaries of colonial acculturation in the local social organizations. With this intention in mind missionary schools were established for boys and girls. As a result, educational facilities as well as systematic education and native culture were deprived of advancement among Buddhist women (girls) in the Island. However, a few exceptional categories of women from the privileged class perhaps became privately versed in Sanskrit, Sinhala or Tamil. It was the Buddhist *pirivena* (Monastic Colleges) education carried out in the temples and monasteries that survived this cultural deprivation for men. It was under these circumstances that Selestina Rodrigo (Mrs. Jeremias Dias) broke ranks to identify and cause the upliftment of the underprivileged rights of Buddhist women, by establishing a school called *Visakha Vidyalaya*. Her intentions were clear and appropriate in the context of the status of the women's education in Ceylon (now Sri Lanka). During this period, Selestina's vision was to guide female students to become good housewives. Further, without abandoning the country's Sinhala and Buddhist identity, she introduced an element of modernization which went with the learning of the English language, by engaging students in western music (eg. piano playing), and participating in popular sports such as tennis. However, her main focus was to persist on a national educational curriculum. For this landmark intervention, Selestina was elevated and honoured as a Member of the British Empire (MBE) in 1929 by King George V of England. At a later stage, this innovative model of enhancing feminism was applied by pre and post independent rulers.

Keywords: Colonial, missionaries, imperialism, culture, gender, freedom, indigenous, deprived, education, women, Buddhist, rights, underprivileged, self-government, feminism.

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INTRODUCTION

Under British colonial regimes the finances of the Department of Education (DoE) was borne by the Central Government. DoE was under the Director of Public Instruction. The Government maintained school buildings and paid salaries to teachers. Teachers were also entitled for a pension. Education in the Government schools was in vernacular languages of Sinhala and Tamil, while a few privileged schools such as Royal

College, conducted classes in English. Private schools were run by missionary organizations. Royal College was the first Government boys elementary school founded in 1836 (Wenzlhuemer, 2008). (Table 1)

Main intention of pioneer missionaries was to establish schools of their respective denominations in Northern Province and Jaffna peninsula in order to build the Christian character among the Hindu communities, and to

Table 1. List of schools (girls and boys) and founders.

Year	Founder	Name of School	Boys/Girls
1851	Anglican Church of Ceylon	St. Thomas' College	Boys
1866	Methodist College	Melodist Church	Girls
1874	Wesleyan Methodist Mission	Wesley College	Boys
1892	Colombo Muslim Education Society	Zahira College	Boys
1896	Cathartic Education Institute	St. Joseph's	Boys
1900	Church Missionary Society	Ladies' College	Girls
1902	Roman Catholic Church	St. Bridget's Convent	Girls
1903	Nuns of H.F. Order Bordeaux	Holy Family Convent	Girls
1917	Seletina Rodrigo (Mrs. Jeremies Dias)	Visakha Vidyalaya	Girls
1918	Fatima Muslim Ladies' College	Sri Lanka Muslim Educational Society	Girls
1941	Ceylon Moor Ladies' Union	Muslim Ladies' College	Girls

Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_the_oldest_schools_in_Sri_Lanka.

Table 2. The number of schools setup in the 19th century.

No.	Province	No. of schools	No. of girls schools
1	North	20	6
2	West	13	2
3	South	9	1
4	East	8	2
5	Central	7	
6	North East	1	

Source:
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_the_oldest_schools_in_Sri_Lanka.

teach English and Tamil languages to initiate a revolution in the field of English education (Table 2).

According to the Department of Census and Statistics data, in 1911 the adult literacy rate for males was 47.2 per cent, whereas females corresponding rate was 12.5 per cent, which was a very significant indicator of the low level female education when compared to male education.

The systematic education of girls and women does not seem to have had a place in this country until late colonial times - barring a few exceptions where women from the upper strata were perhaps privately versed in Sanskrit, Sinhala or Tamil. The Buddhist *pirivena* education in temples and monasteries was open principally to men (Wickramasinghe, 2014), which meant that during pre-colonial times the indigenous population, and especially the female population had been deprived of a recognized place in education.

Prof. (Mrs.) Swarna Jayaweera, who conducted women studies in Sri Lanka during the period from the colonial era to the time of political independence, explained the objectives of the education policy of colonial rulers as follows:

Education was an important instrument of colonial policy in the consolidation of political power, and in the

acculturation of colonial society. In colonial Sri Lanka in the 19th century and early 20th century, British administrators and other European and North American Christian missionaries and educators (both male and female) were imbued with the cultural imperialism, social class values and gender ideology prevalent in their own societies. Western women educators tended to have a secondary position in the hierarchy of religious and educational institutions transplanted in Sri Lanka, but they were authority figures in their own school environment, the urban elite English schools. They played a crucial role in denationalizing many women members of the colonial elite and in efforts to reproduce western norms of domesticity and Christian patriarchy in Sri Lanka through narrow elitist who were expected to be the intermediaries of colonial culture in local society (Jayaweera, 1990).

According to the above explanation it is evident that the objective of the colonial rulers was to strengthen their political power and transform the native society into a colonial mode through missionary education. Sri Lanka's education was centred on *Pirivenas* which were usually the living quarters of Buddhist monks.

The *Pirivena* System of education dates back to the first century AD, which was first commissioned through

royal patronage throughout the country during the rule of successive kings. The syllabuses for monastic and lay streams were separated into two modules, namely the *Sutta* and the *Sippa*. *Sutta* included subjects such as languages, religion, philosophy and history while *Sippa* included subjects such as agriculture, astrology and carpentry. The system was well standardized with visiting scholars from countries such as Thailand, Cambodia and Burma participating as teaching staff (Global Buddhistdoor, 2014).

The Womens Education Society of Ceylon, decided to improve the educational opportunities for girls, with instructions in English combined with Buddhist principles. It had the backing of the Buddhist Theosophical Society (BTS). In 1891, Musaeus Buddhist Girl's school was founded by its founder principal was Marie Musaeus Higgins, supported with the generosity of Peter de Abrew, the first Manager. This was the first Buddhist school to be started with the medium of instructions in English.

Against this backdrop, in 1917 Selestina Rodrigo (1858-1933), the widow of Jeremias Dias (known locally as Robo Singho Rainda Rala) of Panadura, founded a Buddhist Girls School in Colombo in memory of her third son, Edmund Wilson Dias, who died in 1908. Selestina mooted the idea of formulating a Buddhist womens' education project when she was visiting Ladies' College to meet her youngest daughter, Rosalind. It is interesting to understand the reasons for Selestina to establish a Buddhist Girls School. This was an era when girls education was not a priority even among affluent families. The tradition was for girls to be confined to the home as well as to look after the welfare of the family, and to become skillful housewives and faithful mothers. The Friend-in-Need, was a Society instituted by the Rodrigo family to help distressed family members to educate their children by granting loans, health care monthly pensions to elders, arranging dowries for daughters given in marriage etc. Selestina's ancestral home in Panadura was the meeting place of this Society (Tampoe, 2013).

Against this backdrop Selestina planned for a steady source of income and an administration setup, while, profits allocated from the Good Hope Estate, a 120 acre rubber plantation in Kalutara District, became a source of income. As the Buddhist Theosophical Society (BTS) in Colombo experience in establishing a good Buddhist boy's school (Ananda College) in 1886, she decided to select BTS as the implementing agency. She instituted a legal agreement with Dr. W.A de Silva, a veterinary surgeon by profession, to manage the income of the Good Hope Estate as Dr. de Silva was greatly involved in the Buddhist revival movement and had connections to Selestina's family in Panadura. Dr. de Silva was also the General Manager of Buddhist schools at BTS.

With this management mechanism in place, Selestina was able to develop her main ambition of establishing a school that was not only an educational institute, but also an organization committed to the advancement of

Buddhist girls in the Island. Her target group was the wealthy families resident in Colombo and the suburban areas where families adopted the so-called European lifestyle. To attract these families she induced students to follow modern lifestyle with English as medium of instructions, and providing hostel facilities to enable the resident students the use of fork and spoons at meals, playing of tennis and piano music etc. The hostel regulations prevented conversing in Sinhala among students even outside of school hours. To facilitate this process, the school hostel introduced conditions where a student found conversing in Sinhala would be liable for a small fine. Due to this type of structured hostel regulations even parents living close to the school decided to send their daughters to the hostel to gain such experiences and knowledge.

Foreign personnel were selected as the Principal and the teaching staff of the school (Sarasavi Sandarasa, 1916). Dr. (Miss.) Bernice T. Banning who had her education at the University of Wisconsin in the United State of America was selected as the first Principal, while Miss. Florence Mason from Massachusetts, USA, taught art, clay modeling, needlework and embroidery. In addition, following the syllabus of the Education Department, subjects such as model drawing and designing were also included. Music and singing were taught by Mrs. Harding, the wife of the Principal of the Government Teacher Training College (Tampoe, 2013). To assist these foreign teaching staff, educated girls from among local families such as Evelyn Nivera Pandita Gunawardena were selected. She was a niece of Pelene Siri Vajiragnana Mahahayaka Thera of Vajirarama Temple, Bambalapitiya. Although it was a girls' school, well known personalities such as Dudley Senanayake (second Prime Minister of Ceylon in 1952) and R. G. Senanayake had their primary education in the Buddhist Girls School (later Viaskha Vidyalaya).

During May to November 1916, Dr. de Silva, Trustee of Good Hope Estate, and Director, BTS Schools' Committee, decided to establish a Buddhist Girls' College by leasing "The Firs" mansion (which had a large garden) in Turret Road (now Dharmapala Mawatha), Kollupitiya, to setup the school. It is interesting to note that the private girls' school, St. Bridget's Convent, one of the earliest mission schools of the Roman Catholic Church, was also founded in the same location on 1st February 1902. On the 16th of January 1917, at 8.00 am in the hall of "The Firs" mansion, without a formal ceremony, a group of parents, well-wishes, Dr. de Silva, Director BTS, Dr. Banning Principal, enrolled 20 students. After observing the Five Precepts (*Pansil*), the assembly recited together the *Mangala* and *Metta Sutta Pirith* stanzas (Tampoe, 2013).

Ten years later in 1927, this Buddhist Girls' School was relocated in a three acre block of land in 11th Lane (now Vajira Road), Bambalapitiya, Colombo 4, and given the name Visakha Vidyalaya. The buildings were architect-

designed according to ancient architectural traditions, and constructed by Walker and Sons under the close supervision of the architects to ensure the ancient cultural features.

In 1920, Selestina appointed Messrs. T.S. de Silva, D.B. Jayatilaka and D.S. Senanayake (who was later to become the first Prime Minister in Ceylon in 1948) as Trustees to manage her funds. The Trustees appointed by Selestina would have believed that when they selected the land for the Buddhist girls school, the presence of a Temple in the vicinity was essential.

At the inauguration (in 1927) of this school D. B. Jayatilaka in his report defined the values of the school as follows:

"The aim they set before them was to teach the girls the fundamental principles of Buddhism and also that which was best modern learning. They were taught love of home, modesty and deep devotion to their ancestral faith, which had characterized the women of their faith" (Tampoe, 2012).

This shows that even ten years since launching of this girls school, it had retained the original objectives without any distortion.

The year 1927 was an important year for Sri Lanka, because of the new constitutional reforms. A royal commission under the Earl of Donoughmore visited Sri Lanka during the same year to ascertain why representative government as chartered by the 1924 constitution had not succeeded, and to suggest constitutional changes necessary for the island's eventual transition to self-government. To remedy these shortcomings, the commission proposed universal adult franchise and an experimental system of government to be run by executive committees.

Although the school was established to transfer merit in memory of Selestina's dead son, Edmond Wilson Dias, the inauguration ceremony was performed according to western customs because the invitees were not only the Governor but also members of the Donoughmore Commission who were in the Island to introduce self-rule. This was a good initiative to facilitate reconciliation between the Buddhist leadership and the British Colonial Government. This aspect was confirmed in the Governor's speech at the opening ceremony.

"He welcomed a school which taught Buddhism to the Buddhist children and a school which taught the ancient language of the country to its students. People were apt to think a predominantly Ceylonese institute must have an anti-British flavour. It was not so. He was confident that schools of this type would not only be raising better educated young women in the country, but they would be better citizens of the country and of the Empire. He thought they could look to the Buddhist community to spread feelings of goodwill rather than hatred and

selfishness" (Times of Ceylon 1927).

The Governor's thoughts of Buddhist education and their national education was that these were positioned as two different institutes. Within this framework, Vajirarama Temple offered not only Buddhist education but also its culture. In the 1880s, a Buddhist Group in Bambalapitiya formed a Dhamma Samagama (Dhamma Company). This Samagama decided to invite a young monk to conduct sermons regularly. They identified a resident monk, the Ven. Pelene Siri Vajiranana Thera and got a donation of a land in 11th Lane Bambalapitiya in 1909. With the arrival of this resident monk's (Ven. Vajiranana) a temple named Vajirarama was established, and the 11th Lane was renamed as Vajira Road. Ven. Vajiranana Thera started with the erection of a *Bana Salawa* (Preaching Hall) in Vajirarama, and transformed the premises into a temple, which functioned as the Centre to spread Buddha's teaching to the world with the help of his renowned set of scholarly monks as ambassadors of Buddhism to guide the younger generation to be useful citizens as well. Traditional preaching which was conducted all-night, was reduced to one hour sermons. Further, *Poya* (Full Moon) Day *Sil* observation was introduced to promote temple-assisted *Poya* meritorious activities. For the use of the resident monks, a library was opened by the Colonial Secretary, Cecil Clement in 1924. Instead of using artificially treated yellow robes, the traditional dye of the bark of *nuga* tree which gave a brownish shade was identified as the Vajirarama Colour. This was the period when the monks generally disliked the learning of English. However, the knowledge of English of Ven. Narada and Ven. Piyadassi Thera helped not only global missionary work, but also to conduct discourses among the local English educated community (Ranatunga, 2009). This temple thus facilitated Buddhist activities not only to the students of Visakha Vidyalaya, but also for the teachers and parents associated with the school.

Ven. Narada Maha Thera was the chief monk at Vajirarama Temple, and associated with him was Ven. Piyadassi Maha Thera, who thus oversaw the religious activities at Visakha Vidyalaya. Before walking to the temple that short distance along Vajira Road, or when he visits the school on a *Sil* programme day, Visakhians were said to place bets that the Venerable priest would not fail to refer to the dresses to be worn, which he used to say should extend below the knee. He would also not fail to remind the students to avoid the consumption of eggs (Boralessa, 2012). It was compulsory for the hostellers to attend the Sunday school held in the school premises on Sunday mornings to prepare for the examinations conducted by Young Men's Buddhist Association (Tampoe, 2013). These were two examples which clearly indicated that Buddhist education and culture were not mixed with the school curriculum.

This also reflects the influence of scholarly monks of Vajirarama Temple towards Visakhians. Although,

Buddhism was included in the school curriculum, all religious activities were conducted outside the main syllabus. Both hostellers and day scholars were expected to observe *Sil* on full moon days. *Poya* Days were school holidays to enable girls to observe *Sil*. Every Saturday the hostellers would walk to Vajirarama Temple at 8.00 in the morning to attend Dhamma sessions conducted by the scholarly monks of the temple.

In 1927, ten years after the establishment of the Buddhist Girls' College, it was moved to a new location at Vajira Road, Bambalapitiya with its new name as Visakha Vidyalaya. At the inauguration ceremony of this school D.B. Jayatilaka, in his report defined the values of the school in the following terms:

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Currently, there are approximately 4,500 students with a qualified academic teaching staff of 215. Students are enrolled from Grade 1 to Grade 12. English medium classes are conducting from Grade 6 upwards under the national curriculum (Website VisakhaVidyalaya).

CONCLUSIONS

The various Christian denominations launched schools in the island. Within the school premises, there was characteristically the relevant church building specially constructed for the religious services. Priests (both fathers and nuns) were assigned to conduct religious classes, in addition to their normal subjects. However, Selestina did not mix Buddhist education with the authorized syllabus. Buddhist studies were conducted on Sundays, but not during school hours. Selestina created a new wave of feminism by establishing a school in 1917, sanctioning educational rights to Buddhist women. The Domoughmore Commissioners in 1931, realizing this special phenomenon were greatly influenced in recommending the grant of universal adult suffrage (voting rights) for women over 30 years, irrespective of ethnicity and educational standards. Selestina was also responsible in appointing two nationalist leaders D.B. Jayatilaka and D.S. Senanayake, as members of the school's Board of Trustees. Significantly, a few decades after the opening of this school, independence was granted to Sri Lanka in 1948, and Mr. D.S. Senanayake became the first Prime Minister and Head of State of the country. The school was thus very fortunate to benefit from the fact that the new Head of State was a person who was fully conversant with the mandate of the school.

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