

# WHITE WOMEN, ARRACK FORTUNES AND BUDDHIST GIRLS' EDUCATION

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The Buddhist revival in Sri Lanka has been represented as a predominantly male movement with emphasis on charismatic patriarchs such as Bhikku Migettuwatte Gunanada, Colonel Olcott and Anagarika Dharmapala, with fleeting appearances by Helena Blavatsky and Annie Beasant. As a result of neglect—if not gender bias—we know little about either the role of women in the movement or of their efforts to promote Buddhist female education. This article brings together issues of gender, ethnicity, race and class in a preliminary attempt to delve into the beginnings, one hundred years ago, of a modern education for Buddhist girls.<sup>1</sup>

One of the most important aspects of the Buddhist revival in Sri Lanka in the second half of the 19th century was its emphasis on education. As a counter to the education offered by missionary schools, it spoke of the necessity of giving Buddhist boys an education based on Buddhist values and in a Buddhist atmosphere.

The education of girls did not receive the same emphasis; early efforts to give girls of the Sinhala Buddhist bourgeoisie a modern education had a chequered history and even led to bitter controversies and quarrels in the Buddhist Theosophical Society.

In the movement for female education, race became a crucial factor; since there were few Buddhist women with formal education, and no local women graduates or trained teachers were available to sustain a school, appeals had to be made to foreign Theosophist women to come to Sri Lanka as teachers and principals. Many of them were the early beneficiaries of women's university education in the West, who had given up Christianity for Theosophy and Buddhism. As qualified white principals, they gave immediate 'status' to Buddhist schools; but there was also a subversive element in their very presence and in their activities in the context of race and gender in colonial society. For they were unusual in their rejection of the conventional role of carriers of the white woman's ideological and political burden; some like Annie Besant had even been imprisoned (in India) as seditionists and Mrs. Marie Museaus Higgins came under suspicion of the police in Colombo during the First World War because she was German. At a time when 'white women' were being demonised by nationalists as *Suddis*, ('immoral, promiscuous, and shameless white women'), foreign women Theosophists like Higgins were cast as *sudu ammas* ('white mothers') who were giving Buddhist girls an education in

English, and rescuing them from the clutches of the missionaries.

The education of Buddhist women also had an important class content. The availability of finances for Sinhala Buddhist women's education was determined by the nature of Sri Lankan capitalism of the period. By the late 19th century there were wealthy Sinhalese, both Christian and Buddhist, who had made capital accumulations in the liquor trade, plantations and graphite. Their daughters went to prestigious mission schools and convents; but they were only prepared to make modest donations for Buddhist girls' schools. Important advances were made in Buddhist secondary education for females only after the intervention, in 1917, of a pioneer Sinhala woman entrepreneur, with access to large liquor and plantation profits.

## "We Want Companions"

In 1881, the literacy rate for women was 3%. Some girls went to government mixed schools (in Sinhala and Tamil) and single sex schools for girls run by missionaries and nuns. Even after the formation of the Buddhist Theosophical Society in 1880, and the establishment of the first Buddhist boys' English school (later known as Ananda College) in 1886, wealthy Buddhists desiring a modern education in English for their daughters had no choice except the Catholic and Protestant schools such as Good Shepherd Convent, Colombo (started in 1869), the Methodist Girls High School, Colombo (1886), the Girls' High School, Kandy (1879), and many others established subsequently.

The lack of Buddhist schools for girls was noted by Colonel Olcott (the founder of the Theosophical Society), who often spoke of the need for schools where girls could be educated in a Sinhala Buddhist atmosphere, based on the view that "the mother is the first teacher" (*The Buddhist*, 24 Oct. 1890 & 6 Dec. 1894). By the late 19th century, Buddhist middle-class men were also complaining that they did not want to marry "ignorant" women; "We want companions who shall stand shoulder to shoulder with ourselves" (*The Buddhist*, Oct 3, 1890).

The more national-minded Buddhist intelligentsia and especially the middle level Sinhala Buddhist shop-keepers and traders were concerned to have their daughters educated in a Buddhist environment. Marrying Chris-



tians or non-Sinhalese was held to be a threat to Sinhala Buddhist identity. While deploring the frequency of inter-marriage, Buddhists also lamented that “young men... imbued with European customs and manners” had difficulty in finding “girls among Buddhists to suit their tastes” (*The Buddhist*, 13 March 1891). There was much discussion on the need for educated Buddhist wives, presentable in bourgeois and colonial society, as well as educated mothers who would reproduce and correctly socialize the next generation of Sinhala Buddhists. Thus local Buddhists and foreign Theosophists formulated the demands for female education not in terms of women’s emancipation, but in terms of religion and the need for good wives and wise mothers (See K.Jayawardena: 1992).

### The Womens’ Education Society and the Sanghamitta School

A turning point was the formation on March 30th 1889 of a Women’s Education Society (*Nari Shiksha Dana Samagamaya*) by Buddhist women; its membership had increased to 1800 by December 1891 (*The Buddhist*, 2 Feb.1894:25). The president was Mrs. Weerakoon and Miss M.E.de Silva was secretary; support came from the Buddhist Theosophical Society and some foreign sources. For example, in September 1889 *The Buddhist* published a long letter “To the Young Ladies of Ceylon” by Sarah A. English, a Theosophist from Massachusetts (who later taught in Sri Lanka); she spoke of the importance of education for women, described the progress of women’s education in the U.S.A. and urged Buddhist women to resist Christianity; “If women of Ceylon were educated, they would be able to do more to protect their ancient philosophy from the inroads of a noxious faith, than men possibly can.”

In its first year, the Womens’ Education Society started four small schools teaching in Sinhala at Wellawatte, Kandy, Gampaha and Panadura and in 1890 one in Ambalangoda, but its ambitious project was the Sanghamitta School (teaching in English) started at Maradana with 20 pupils. Among the 1000 persons present to inaugurate the school were 400 women; the guests included Colonel Olcott, P.Ramanathan other leading luminaries of the Buddhist revival: Rev. Hikkaduve Sri Sumangala, Pandit Batuvantudave, A.E.Buultjens, Dr.Bowes Daly, Tudor Rajapakse and Anagarika Dharmapala. The grounds were decorated and the motto at the entrance, reflecting the prevailing view on female education, was “From daughter to wife, from wife to mother” (*The Buddhist*, 2 Feb. 1894).

The school was run mainly by foreigners and Burghers. The principal for the first six months was Miss A. J. Ferdinands. After six months, a foreign woman, Miss

E. Neile, became the temporary principal; she was succeeded by an Australian Theosophist, Kate Pickett whose death by drowning in June 1891 was a setback. In recognition of her contribution to girls’ education, there was a crowd estimated at 6000 at her cremation (*The Buddhist*, 20 Nov. 1891). Olcott who had recruited Pickett was instrumental in getting Marie Museaus Higgins (1855-1926) a German, (widow of an American Theosophist, Anthony Higgins) to become the next principal. The head teacher was Louisa Roberts and the other teachers included Viranjini Kumarasinghe of the Women’s Education Society. Olcott also campaigned abroad for the school and spoke about it in London to the Women’s Suffrage Society (*The Buddhist*, 6 Dec.1891); there is record of a donation of 44 and “goods for the use of the Society” by an “English lady” (*The Buddhist*, 18 Dec. 1891).

Support had come mainly from outside Ceylon and “the Sinhalese Buddhists themselves have contributed but little” remarked the *Buddhist* (1893:84). The Women’s Education Society lacked sufficient funds, personnel and publicity. P. Ramanathan, who supported the Society, gives us a glimpse of its limitations: “These dear ladies had done their work in silence and modestly without public clamour. In fact so quietly, that... no one suspected what was going on” (*The Buddhist*, 3 October, 1890). Although there was some male patronage and moral support, there was little financial backing, resulting in a continuous crisis for the school.

Serious problems arose in the Women’s Education Society mainly because of the “want of hands to cope.” Olcott stepped in to help in the reorganization and a new president, Mrs. Livera, took over, with Louisa Roberts as the secretary and Mrs. Higgins as advisor: a standing committee of 15 “respectable Buddhist gentlemen” was appointed, with four Buddhist businessmen as trustees—U.D.S.Gunasekera, N.S.Fernando, H. Don Carolis and D.D.Pedris (*The Buddhist*, 18 Dec.1891). By 1893, Mrs. Higgins was the Society’s president, raising Rs. 2,611 for the building fund. At the prize giving in 1893, (presided over by P.Ramanathan), the manager of the school, A.E.Buultjens, spoke of the progress of the school, which by then had 111 pupils.

### Sanghamitta Vs Museaus

There were serious differences of opinion over the running of the Sanghamitta school, chiefly between Buultjens and Peter de Abrew, which reached a point of crisis in 1894. Higgins then left to start another school, Museaus College, on land donated by de Abrew. With her went some students and teachers (including the foreigners Sarah English, Dr.Susan English and Miss Alison) as well as a piano “subscribed for in America” (*The Buddhist*, 1894:182). Museaus College was able to

sustain itself, while the Sanghamitta school was unable to attract large donations from the leading Sinhala Buddhists. Each month, subscriptions had to be raised for teachers' salaries. Monthly commitments were made through subscriptions of Rs. five or ten from the best-known Colombo Sinhala traders and wealthy Buddhists; H. Don Carolis, N.S.Fernando, C.Mathew, C.Batuvantudave, R.A.Mirando and D.D.Pedris were among them. In one month in 1894, Rs. 643/- was obtained by way of donations ranging from Rs.50/- to Rs.5/- from 31 persons; the pledges had been increased to overcome a crisis, and as the *Buddhist* noted: "If it were not for the timely help of these gentlemen, the Sanghamitta school would have been closed, as its enemies had expected" (*The Buddhist*, 1894: 182-3).

The fortunes of Sanghamitta School fluctuated. In 1896, its management was transferred to the Buddhist Theosophical Society, and in 1898 to the Mahabodhi Society (founded by Anagarika Dharmapala). The Sanghamitta School became more religious and conservative and was linked to a religious order started by one of Dharmapala's friends, Countess de Souza Canavarro, an American (married to a Portuguese); she had renounced the world and proclaimed herself a Buddhist in 1897, and travelled to Sri Lanka with Dharmapala to found a Buddhist religious Sisterhood.

Calling herself Sister Sanghamitta, Countess de Souza took on the title of 'Mother Superior' of the school, with Miss C. Shearer (Sister Padmavane) as the 'Head Sister', and Miss S.La Brooy (Sister Dammadina) as 'Manager of the Household.' There were also two local *dasa sil upasikas* attached to the school to teach Sinhala. The object of the Sisterhood was "to educate and elevate the Sinhalese women and spread the doctrine of enlightenment." A boarding school, orphanage and poor school were established with a 'convent' for the Sisterhood. The Sanghamitta School adopted a "graceful uniform" for girls, described as a "slight modification of the sari" (*The Buddhist*, 2 Oct. 1898), in response, no doubt to Dharmapala's criticism of the dress of Westernized Sinhala women. But there was a breakdown of the friendship between Dharmapala and Canavarro; the Sisterhood was disbanded but the Sanghamitta School continued.<sup>2</sup>

However, the rival breakaway school, Museaus College, became the more fashionable one for Sinhala Buddhist women. Having given her own maiden name to the school, Marie Museaus Higgins had a personal stake in its success. In 1907 she started a Sinhala Teachers Academic Training College for women and in 1908, a boarding school with 80 students, catering to middle-class Buddhists in the provinces. There were a few early academic successes; by 1897 Elsie de Silva passed the Junior Cambridge examination and Lucy de Abrew was the first Sinhala woman doctor, entering Medical College

in 1902, also winning the Jeejeebhoy scholarship (Denham, 1912:426). With the Sanghamitta School stagnating, Museaus College for many years remained the main English girls school for middle and lower middle class Buddhists- a situation which Mrs. Higgins' critics found intolerable.

### Renewed Agitation

**B**y 1913, the need for a good Buddhist girls' high school, on the lines of missionary schools, was discussed again; a Buddhist Education Board was set up to promote "fully equipped girls' English schools in the important towns of Ceylon." This move may have been influenced by the example of Ramanathan College, started with a big fanfare in 1913 by P. Ramanathan to give Jaffna Hindu girls a modern education in a Hindu environment with Florence Farr, a Theosophist and ex-actress from the London stage (close friend of Shaw, Yeats and Ezra Pound) as the unusual choice for 'Lady Principal.'

With the outbreak of World War I in 1914, however, the Buddhists abandoned their project. But it is revealing that Buddhist women continued the discussion showing some feminist awareness; *The Buddhist Companion* of 1914, for example, had a dialogue between two women critical of the Sinhala classics: "Our Sinhala men are still trying to confine us to the kitchen. They are not interested in teaching us anything beyond that." In 1916, *The Buddhist* deplored the fact that in all the large and small towns, Buddhist girls were still being educated in Christian secondary and high schools. Sinhala Buddhists were again castigated again on this issue; "that sense of responsibility... which characterised the ancient Sinhalese seems to have departed from amidst their descendants who have proved to be unworthy of even the name they bear" (*The Buddhist*, 22 Jan 1916). Hints of twenty year old rivalries were seen in the editorial in *The Buddhist* where Museaus College was somewhat derogatorily described as a "middle school" run by Mrs. Higgins, "where she claims to impart English education to Buddhist girls' (*ibid*).

### Selestina Dias and Visakha Vidyalaya

**W**hile most of the leading Buddhists were content merely to deplore the lack of good Buddhist girls' schools, Selestina Dias stepped in to change the situation. Born in 1858, she was the daughter of Solomon Rodrigo of Panadura, a leading liquor merchant and land owner of his time. She married Jeremias Dias of Panadura who was a member of the powerful Arrack Syndicate which dominated the liquor market, and a leading plantation owner of the late 19th century. After her husband's death in 1902, she took control of the business, "the manufacture of arrack in all its forms, in addition to

the management of the estates" which included tea, rubber, coconut and cinnamon (A. Wright, 1907:678). It was unusual at the time for women to run businesses, but she did so very effectively, and was known popularly as 'Rainda Nona,' (Lady of the Arrack Rents).

Jeremias Dias had already contributed generously to Buddhist temples in Panadura, but it was Selestina Dias who saw the need for extending support for Buddhist education. She had earlier given Rs.12,000 for a laboratory for Ananda College, following this with the unprecedented "handsome donation" of Rs.100,000 to the Theosophical Society for girl's education. Significantly, while Mrs. Dias was praised for her munificence, a "Buddhist gentleman who had donated a large sum for the repair of Ruanwelisaya" was criticised for spending money on monuments that could have been better spent on education (*The Buddhist*, 20 May 1916). The Sinhala Buddhist press was also lavish in their praises of her. There were no words adequate to describe her generosity, said the *Sarasavi Sandaresa* of 16 May 1916, upholding Mrs. Dias as a wealthy, meritorious person whose example should be followed by other rich Buddhist women. Many referred to Mrs. Dias as *Mahopasikava* (Great Lady Devotee) and compared her to Visakha, the famous benefactor of Buddha's time, also the wife and daughter of leading merchants.

With the Dias money, the Buddhist Girls College was begun in 1917 with 47 pupils; Dr. Bernice Thornton Banning, an American Theosophist (with an MA and Ph.D) was the principal for the first year. The art teacher was Florence Mason, who had studied at the Slade School of Art; she later became the Secretary of the Ceylon Society of Arts.<sup>3</sup> A "sumptuous garden party" was held to celebrate the school's inauguration, "to which those in high society flocked in gay attire" (*The Buddhist*, 21 July, 1917). It was clearly an important, though overdue, day for the Buddhist bourgeoisie.

By 1922, the new school had 107 pupils of whom 66 were boarders; there were two local trained teachers, Miss Ada Rajapaksa (later Mrs. E. M. Wijerama) and Miss Dharmasena. In 1927 the school changed its name to Visakha Vidyalaya and moved to new premises, costing another Rs.150,000; this was also funded by Selestina Dias. By the time of her death in 1933, she had contributed Rs.450,000 to the school. She was awarded an M.B.E. by the British government in recognition of her generosity (S. Saparamadu, *Dinamina*, 16 Jan 1992). But not surprisingly, the main hall at Visakha Vidyalaya was named after Jeremias Dias and not his wife.

While a concern for Sinhala Buddhist identity was never far from the minds of Buddhist ideologues, they continued to be fairly liberal and eclectic in their approach to the employment of foreigners. In the period up to 1933,

Visakha Vidyalaya had a succession of eight foreign principals, one of whom was Miss Hilda Westbrook, later Kularatne, (1920-21). From 1933 to 1945, the principal was an American, Clara Motwani, nee Heath, married to an Indian Theosophist; she was succeeded by Susan George Pulimood of Kerala who was principal from 1945-67. It was only in 1967 that the school had its first Sinhala Buddhist principal, Mrs. Hema Jayasinghe, even though qualified Sinhalese women had been available for some time.<sup>4</sup>

But why did it take 40 years after the beginning of the Buddhist revival for the first high school for Buddhist girls to appear? The reasons may lie in the nature of local capital. To the emerging Buddhist trading class and petty bourgeoisie, female education was desirable but not affordable; and moreover, some Buddhists were content to get a "free ride" from missionaries, taking advantage of the good education in Christian schools, while rejecting Christianity as superstition. In any case, the profits or wealth of this group of urban Sinhala traders and shopkeepers was not comparable to those entrepreneurs who had made their initial capital accumulation in retailing arrack and toddy, and later investing in plantation and graphite ownership. The majority of these capitalists were Christians. Their sons where possible went to Oxford and Cambridge and prestigious medical schools, while some of their daughters had foreign governesses at home, or went to mission school. But it was the Buddhist element of this class that was faced with a real dilemma; for if they sent their sons abroad for higher education, there were few well-educated Buddhist women for them to marry.

Nationalism was in the air in the early 20th century, and the rich Sinhala Buddhists were also on the verge of making political gains, through electoral and constitutional reform which would bring more representative government. With the prospect of power, identity came to the fore and this was also a gendered identity, where Sinhala Buddhist womanhood had to be equipped to play its role. Since large sums of money were not forthcoming for Buddhist female secondary and higher education from male benefactors, it was left to Selestina Dias, a woman of this class, to dip into her fortune and make a spectacular gesture, thereby creating a school in Colombo which would continuously supply educated wives for the Sinhala Buddhist bourgeoisie.

#### Notes:

1. This article is part of an on-going study of Buddhist women's education.
2. I am grateful to Tessa Bartholomeusz and Elizabeth Harris for the information on the Sanghamitta Sisterhood.
3. One of Sri Lanka's best-known woman artists, Maisie de Silva (nee de Mel) who in 1917 left a Christian school to join the Buddhist Girls College, was a pupil of Florence Mason.

