



Original Article

## SIGNIFICANCE OF THE SERVICE TO BUDDHIST SCHOLARSHIP RENDERED BY THE BRITISH SCHOLAR PROFESSOR RHYS DAVIDS DURING THE BRITISH COLONIAL PERIOD

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### Abstract

Buddhism and Buddhist Culture in Sri Lanka suffered a ruthless set back by the mid-nineteenth century due to the withdrawal of state patronage and foreign missionary activities. Buddhism lost its pristine and perfect strength, self-respect and its real philosophical background. Then there was an urgent need of Buddhist revivalist movement with proper Buddhist education. At this juncture, three British Civil servants who were appointed to Sri Lanka, George Turnour, T.W. Rhys Davids and R.D. Childers took an unshakable interest in the study of Pali language and Buddhist Culture of Sri Lanka. Rhys Davids by his untiring effort introduced the significance of Pali language and Buddhist Doctrine to English speaking world. His indefatigable efforts contributed to the opening up of the eyes of scholars to the significance of studying Pali language and Buddhist Doctrine. This paper examines the intensive study, humane qualities and intellectual strength of Prof. Rhys Davids and points out that it was the remarkable advantage that Sri Lankans and the Buddhist academic world had during the British Colonial period.

**Keywords:** Buddhist Canon, India, Inscriptions, Oriental school, Pali language

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## INTRODUCTION

This paper is based on secondary data analysis. Collected data and information from books written on the British Colonial Period in Ceylon and gathered information from the British Library pertaining to Prof. Rhys Davids, London in 2001, has been used in the explanatory analysis of the research paper.

## FOREIGN INVASIONS

1505 A.D. marked an exceptional turning point in the history of Sri Lanka for arrival of Portuguese and their deliberate destruction of the culture of the island. Sinhalese had to face severe struggles to safeguard their nation and culture. Blaze (1921) writes: “The Portuguese held the law country for a hundred and fifty years (1506 – 1640 A.D.) and during all that time had to fight continually against the Sinhalese kings in the hill country.”<sup>(1)</sup> Referring to the unjust administration of Don Geronimo De Azavedo, a cruel Portuguese, Codrington states: “His character is stained by the atrocious cruelty with which he carried on the war with Kandy and suppressed the revolts in Portuguese territory.”<sup>(2)</sup> Explaining his ferocious brutalities of war with Sinhalese, Codrington further reports his destiny thus: “His methods did not meet with the approval of the authorities in Portugal, and his imprisonment in Lisbon, though on another account, was thought by some to be a retribution for his brutalities in Ceylon”<sup>(3)</sup>

Under the title, “The Portuguese and the Moors” Blaze(1921) adds: “We come to know end of what may be called the Sinhalese period of the history of Lanka, and to the beginning of a long struggle which the Sinhalese carried on for three hundred years

to keep themselves a free and independent nation..... The Sinhalese were now to meet a much more powerful enemy from a country very far away, a country which was not much larger than their own but whose people were better trained for fighting both on land and on the sea, which larger ships and far more dangerous weapons for war.”<sup>(4)</sup> In accordance with many historical works on Sri Lanka, this Portuguese administration marks a darker period of the island.

## PERIOD OF DESPOTISM

After this tragic period, there comes a period of Dutch administration (1658 – 1796) and the Sinhalese again had to face with a number of socio-economic and cultural problems. During that unlucky time of the Dutch administration, they established the Roman-Dutch law and traditional Sinhalese law were ignored. It is also the era of horrors of war in every aspect of Sri Lankan culture.

Thirdly, the British occupation commenced in 1796 and continued to 1948. It is considered a period of despotism and under the thumb of that despotic power traditional Sinhalese culture experienced severe setback with disastrous consequences. Codrington explains: “...cultivation had decreased, because of the tax, the collection of which was vexations to the people”<sup>(5)</sup>

The afore-mentioned three major foreign invasions paved the way for a number of disastrous consequences on the cultural aspects of their island, viz: total change in Economy, land occupancy and religion, introduction of Roman Catholicism, destruction of Buddhist and Hindu temples, handing the temple-maintenance-villages (Aramika Gamas) over to Roman Catholic Order, prevention of the worship of other



religions on and off, deterioration of traditional social concepts, exploitation of island resources, encouragement of caste system, establishment of Roman-Dutch law, and the confiscation of temple properties, and so on.

### **DECLINE OF BUDDHIST EDUCATION**

At this juncture, Buddhism suffered a severe obstruction and it gained no royal support at all, hence it lost its perfect vitality and self-respect. There appeared a philosophically deteriorated form of Buddhism and people laid emphasis on mere rituals. The downfall of the pristine state of Buddhist monks directed to drastic decline of traditional Buddhist education.

During the course of the four and half centuries of foreign yoke in the island, Sri Lankan Buddhists experienced a hundreds of ruthless attacks and ugly response from foreign missionary activities. Hence, there arose a strong-minded Buddhist response to the foreign missionary challenge. Some Buddhist monks started the Pali and philosophical studies of Buddhism to safeguard the traditional Buddhist culture in Ceylon. Fortunately, there was a similar interest in Pali and Buddhist Studies among the well-known European scholars. The result of these dual fervent actions created a field for various research works on ancient Sri Lankan culture.

### **A BRITISH CIVIL SERVANT**

At this time, a truly extra-ordinary British civil servant was posted to Sri Lanka. He was the Thomas William Rhys Davids, the eldest son of a clergyman and was born in England at Colchester in Essex in 1843.

When he was barely ten years old, his mother Louisa Winter passed away and it was a serious heartbreak for Rhys Davids. At first, his education was at the Brighton school and at the age of seventeen he attended a college in Finchly Road in London. There he had a comprehensive knowledge of Latin language. As a motherless student without family loving and affluences, he used to realize many hardships and challenges of life.

Rhys Davids's decision to join the Indian civil service was a turning point not only in his life but also in Buddhist Philosophy and the traditional Buddhist culture in Indian sub-continent and Sri Lanka. Dr. Lorna S. Dewaraja (1998) asks: "..... was it a Karmic call which led him to aspire for a career in India."<sup>(6)</sup>

### **YATRAMULLE UNNANSE**

In Germany, he started giving tuition in English and there he studied Sanskrit language under the guidance of Prof. A. F. Stenzler, a well-known Sanskrit scholar. In 1863, he sat for the examination of the Civil Service Commissioners offering German, English, French, and Sanskrit. His training under Prof. Strenzler was a proper direction for him to turn his attention to Pali and Buddhist Studies. While working at the Colonial Secretary's Office in Colombo, he was also expected to learn Sinhala and Tamil languages. With his philological training he was able to learn Sinhala and Tamil very quickly.<sup>(7)</sup> His devoted teacher for Pali and Buddhism was Yatramulle Unnanse (Venerable Yatramulle) and his teaching was a source of inspiration and motivation for Rhys Davids.



## **GOVERNMENT AGENT OF NUWARAKALAVIYA**

He was posted as the Assistant Government Agent of Nuwarakalaviya zone in 1871. The administrative center of Nuwarakalaviya was the ancient city of Anuradhapura where we find hundreds of Buddhist monuments. Rhys Davids loved Anuradhapura and was so enthusiast of having wide-ranging knowledge of Buddhism and ancient culture of this dead city and hidden stories of its silent stones.

He was astonished with the Buddhist archaeological monuments of Anuradhapura and cleared the sites of Ruwanweliseya, Jetavana Vihara, Isurumuniya and Abhayagiriya. He was able to discover a number of inscriptions from various parts of Sri Lanka. He wrote a series of research papers for the Royal Asiatic Society relating to these ancient inscriptions, coins and measures of ancient Ceylon.

## **PALI TEXT SOCIETY**

Rhys Davids was the first scholar who introduced Pali Canonical Buddhism to the Western academia. World scholars frequently used to practice the term, 'Pali Buddhism' after his revolutionary researches and exertion. He was the founder of the Pali Text Society in 1881 in London to promote the study of Pali Texts. It was a fulfillment of a long-drawn-out need. He highly admired the value of Pali manuscripts and considered them as the best authorities for understanding Early Buddhism.

For Rhys Davids's endeavor of editing, translating and publishing Pali Canonical Texts, Buddhist monks gave their guidance and support. Because of this appropriate guidance, he was able to issue 64 separate Buddhist texts. Buddhist monks, at the time

of his academic struggle understood that his indefatigable effort for preserving Buddhist manuscripts was invaluable.

## **ROYAL ASIATIC SOCIETY**

He was the Professor of Pali in the University of London from 1882 to 1904 and also elected to be the secretary of the Royal Asiatic Society. His enthusiastic labors paved the way for establishing an Oriental School in the London University. In 1905, he accepted the Chair of Comparative Religion in the University of Manchester.

While he was engaging in editing, translating and publishing fundamental Pali Texts, he labored for 40 years to prepare the Pali-English Dictionary <sup>(8)</sup> and it is really a great achievement of his life and the unlimited contribution for Buddhist academia and Pali Philologists. After his death in December 1922, his service continued by his wife, Caroline Augusta Foley Rhys Davids until her death in June, 1942.

## **CONCLUSION**

Although Rhys Davids's service is forgotten in our day, he was the great revivalist of Pali Studies in the British period of Ceylon and he was the scholar who had revealed the utmost value of studying Palm-leaf manuscripts written in Pali to study ancient form of Buddhism. He was the great source of intellectual strength to Pali scholars and Buddhist researchers of Post-Colonial Ceylon. His service infused a sense of dignity and self-confidence of ancient culture to Post-Colonial Ceylonese, and he had shown the appropriate path to trace the teachings of Early Buddhist Philosophy through the telescope of Pali language.



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