

Anagarika Dharmapala shines as the brightest star among many other distinguished stars of the galaxy of heroes

“Of the many heroes who are remembered in numerous ways and who will live in our hearts and minds of a grateful nation, Anagarika Dharmapala shines as the brightest star among many other distinguished stars of the galaxy of heroes”.

Why?

Because at a time when the Sinhalese had degenerated into sloth and complacency, and totally given up fighting the gargantuan might of the colonizer, succumbing to their pressures with passive submission; when a strong missionary influence was attempting to turn the Buddhist island into its Christian faith; when many were converting for material gain and making it a status symbol, while Buddhists were made to feel second rate, Dharmapala came forward alone; roaring like an enraged lion to convulse his people to get up and give up their imbecilic fear of the ‘white man’.

“Awake ! Oh Sinhalese !”, was his cry from town to town, village to village. He shook Ceylon with his oratorical wrath and the use of the media to reach the masses, setting up his own press and writing copious articles to newspaper and Buddhist journals, in Sinhala and English, here and in England. He was the writer, printer, publisher. It worked. The Sinhalese got up again.

What made him so? His own formative years were spent in Missionary schools ending at the prestigious St. Thomas’ College where he always won the Scripture prize and was caned for taking a holiday on Vesak. It was by listening to a much advertised debate in Panadura at the age of sixteen by Ven. Migettuwatte Gunananda, ranged against a battery of high-powered Christian padres. Ven. Gunananda’s decisive victory was the spark that lit Dharmapala. The spark that became a fire which consumed him totally, and lit awake the entire island from its indolence, its stupor. And, from this tiny island spread out to the world.

It is possible that Dharmapala’s birth into an extremely wealthy and prominent family kept his spine erect and fearless. He was not in need of favour or status. He could have led a luxurious life as the eldest scion of such a family.

The family paid dearly for his son’s bravery. The Raj panicked. The 1915 riots that broke out in 1915 between the Sinhalese and Muslims gave the British an excuse. As Dharmapala was out of the island, they arrested his brother Edmund and under a hurried Court Martial, convicted him of treason and sent him immediately to Jaffna as a hard-core criminal. The Hewavitarne family challenged the verdict by appealing to the Privy Council in Britain. An apology to the family for a miscarriage of justice came too late. Edmund was dead in two months.

National Renaissance and Buddhist Revival in little Ceylon was but a prelude. A visit to Buddha Gaya galvanized him to no longer think only in terms of his own people. Buddha

was completely forgotten in the land of his birth. The places hallowed by Him, should belong to the Buddhists of the world.

He established the Maha Bodhi Society in Colombo and in India's then capital, Calcutta (now Kolkata), commenced a court case to obtain the management right to Buddha Gaya when friendly overtures failed, and began an English monthly journal, the '*Maha Bodhi*' to awaken the world to Buddhism and its plight.

At the age of twenty nine, he addressed the 'Parliament of Religions' held in Chicago. The newspapers there described him as a familiar portrait of Jesus. Contempt for Oriental Religions gave way to respect and admiration as Dharmapala brought Buddhism to the attention of America with his magnetic personality and eloquence. It led Mr. C.T. Strauss of New York, a life-long student of philosophy and comparative religions to become the first Buddhist in America in a simple ceremony administered by Dharmapala.

At Honolulu, Mrs. Mary Foster Robinson, a descendent of King Kamehameha the great of Hawaii, now a widow of a wealthy American, heard of a 'yogi' on the ship in the harbour, and asked him how to overcome her temper. She became his Foster-Mother, contributing vast wealth to Dharmapala's work throughout his life.

In England, he established the London Buddhist Vihara to bring the Dhamma to the attention of the British. His Vihara in the deer park at Saranath, where the Buddha first preached his philosophy, is a Masterpiece.

There are a few Buddhists who want to appear cosmopolitan and call Dharmapala a racist. If there was anyone cosmopolitan in that era, it was Dharmapala. He addressed the Sinhalese because at that time in our history, the island was peopled overwhelmingly by the Sinhalese. The land was theirs.

He was the first in our island to circle the globe in his travels. Inspired by the Industrial Schools he visited in the United States, London and Liverpool, Italy, Denmark and Japan, he opened the Hewavitarne Industrial School, the first of its kind in the island with just twelve students. Ceylon's need to industrialize was 100 years ahead of time. It was from this school that a future Burtol for carpet cleaning and dyeing began and the future weaving instructors for cloth came. Dharmapala opened a similar school in Saranath which has reached University standards.

Dharmapala had a galaxy of international friends and stayed with the best. In England, Sir Edwin Arnold of '*Light of Asia*' fame, was his host. In India, it was the philanthropist Neil Kamal Mukherjee. He was in correspondence with the Royal families of Asia, drawing them within the fold of the Maha Bodhi Society. That he was the greatest Buddhist Missionary of our century bringing Buddhism to the attention of India, Europe and America is uncontested.

When his ashes were brought to Ceylon from Saranath, Sir Baron Jayatilleka, Leader of the State Council at the time said; *Without doubt, it was the Anagarika Dharmapala who*

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brought about the National Regeneration of Ceylon. He showed the way and others followed. Indeed, it may be said that there has not been here in Ceylon in the last two or three centuries, a national leader who served his people and his religion with such self-sacrifice, singleness of purpose and altruism as the Anagarika Dharmapala”.

Article by : Sri Lankan Supreme Court Justice Shirani Bandaranayake