

Hewavitarne Industrial School

Many people remember Anagarika Dharmapala for his religious zeal. But there was another aspect to this national figure - his practical vision regarding the alleviation of poverty. The Hewavitarna School, though neglected now, remains a testament to this vision.

Few associate the Hewavitarne School, a rather nondescript building in Rajagiriya with one of Sri Lanka's foremost religious figures, Anagarika Dharmapala. Today, though neglected, the school remains a testament to the Anagarika's pragmatic vision, an aspect of this great man often overshadowed by his religious zeal.

In an era when the Sinhalese were succumbing to the pressures of the British Raj, and nothing was being done to overcome their lethargy and passive submission, rose the voice of Anagarika Dharmapala who waged a historical struggle for freedom and to gain the rights over Buddhagaya, the revered birth place of Gauthama Buddha.

The rot had already set in, when Dharmapala came with a sledge hammer of effective speech to awaken the slumbering Sinhalese. When people sat content, not questioning the British rule and not thinking beyond the comfortable agrarian society, Dharmapala saw the need to revolutionize the system.

He realized that the changing world would demand that Sri Lankan society change accordingly. His belief was that spiritual elevation itself was inadequate if the society was poverty stricken. He began speaking of the importance of a firm educational and economic foundation if the struggle for freedom was to succeed, and poverty be alleviated.

"We allow our cow to die of starvation in our own field, while we feed the cow in distant Switzerland or Denmark. We are the custodians of our property, and must look to the future to protect the interest of the coming generations," he said. He had a vision of a newly emerging Sri Lanka which could effectively link up with other countries and forge ahead.

Born to a privileged family in 1864, Dharmapala, from the outset had different, fresh thinking. At 21, he renounced worldly pleasures and became a Buddhist lay preacher (Anagarika) committed to propagating Buddhism.

When scholar Ananda Coomaraswamy was leaving our shores to settle in England, his bungalow and several acres of land were bought by Dharmapala. The bungalow known as "Obeyesekara Walauwa" was used by the Anagarika, and part of the land subsequently was given to house the shelterless and slum dwellers. This area is known today as "Obeyesekerapura". This was the era when the missionaries exercised great control over Ceylon, and loyalties were bought over the counter. Many converted to Christianity for material gain, and this also became a status symbol for some. Dharmapala urged the people to cherish and look after their heritage instead of succumbing to pressure.

According to Ven. Thalagala Gnanaratana, chief priest of the Sudharmarama Purana Viharaya in Rajagiriya, Anagarika Dharmapala had been aware that a missionary school was to be set up in Welikada (now Rajagiriya) way back in 1888. So he promptly put up a cadjan hut and roamed the area seeking young people who could be enrolled as students. Aththiligoda Nanayakara Gamage Mangonona was the first student of the institution. With twelve students, Dharmapala commenced conducting classes just the night before the missionary school was to come into operation. The church eventually abandoned the idea of starting a school there. In 1912, this was expanded and it became the first industrial training school in the country.

The Hewavitarne Industrial Centre though founded by Anagarika Dharmapala and Walisinha Harischandra as an act of rebellion, offered a variety of courses which only few institutions could provide. In addition to the normal courses of study there was weaving, pottery, sewing and similar arts and crafts.

"This great institution was the first industrial training school in the country, and it is believed that the idea was to provide academic education coupled with necessary technical training.

"In time to come, it would have been upgraded to the level of a university of unique standing if not for the neglect which followed," said the chief priest.

Dharmapala having visited several industrial schools in the United States, London, Liverpool, Italy and Denmark was inspired by the progress achieved by other countries. In 1904, he commenced an industrial training school in Saranath, India. According to the records maintained, Dharmapala had personally financed the entire training of U.B. Dolapihilla and sent him for industrial training in Japan. Mr. Dolapihilla subsequently became the Principal of the same institution.

Anagarika Dharmapala's visionary act was not well received by the British Empire. The authorities viewed him with suspicion, and called him "an instigator of a scheme for sending young Sinhalese to Japan for technical education in the belief that the students would return with anti-British views....". Yet, he continued his work and strengthened the Centre.

A century later, what has become of this legendary Hewavitarne Industrial Centre? When we visited this historical place there was no industrial training centre, the only signs of its former existence being the small weaving room housed inside a crumbling old building within the Hewavitarne Maha Vidyalaya school premises.

The foremost school in the area a century ago, Hewavitarne Maha Vidyalaya is a backward school today, devoid of its past prestige.

A mixed school with a student population of 1400, the school needs much attention and support if the legend and the services rendered by the late Anagarika Dharmapala is to be perpetuated.

However, some philanthropists and students have built a monument in memory of the late freedom fighter, which takes pride of place within the school premises. The school hall is also named after him.

As the incumbent Principal S. Garusinghe explained, little has been done by the authorities to preserve the good work of the dedicated founder.

Sheer neglect has led to the closure of many departments which existed then. Only the weaving and handicraft sections function today, that too in a small way.

All these years, the centre has continuously produced weaving instructors and teachers. Administered by the Department of Handloom Textiles now, each batch comprises 25 students who undergo two years training. They are paid a small allowance and provided a uniform. The certificate is accepted by universities and technical schools.

Mr. Garusinghe believes that the late Dharmapala has been portrayed in a communal light by some sections. "He was a true radical whose role has never been properly assessed or understood."

To perpetuate the memory of a man who selflessly committed himself to the political and economic freedom of his country, he has proposed the establishment of a small museum.

(Source: Article by Dilrukshi Handunetti in The Sunday Times)