

BOOK REVIEW

MODERNISING KANDYAN GIRLS: FROM HALMITA ISKOLE TO NATIONAL SCHOOL

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Indrani Meegama, 2003, *With a Fistful of Rice: Buddhist Women and the Making of Mahamaya Girls' College*, Colombo: Mahamaya Girls' College, p. 255.

Having been at Mahamaya Girls' College, Kandy, during the thirteen years of my primary and secondary education, and receiving the full dose of its history, Indrani Meegama's *With a Fistful of Rice* provided me with a new perspective and many fresh insights into the school's history.

Meegama describes the economic and social changes that took place by the end of the 19th century within colonial Sri Lanka, and discusses the breakdown of the traditional economy, the rise of the indigenous middle-class, the migration of this entrepreneur group from the Low Country to the Kandyan region, and the effects of these changes on Kandyan society. She then goes on to describe the increasing success with which Christian missionaries operated within the colonies and how they came to be the providers of an English education based on the English public school system, which "encouraged the students to emulate Christian and English ideals...." (p. 31). With the capture of the Kandyan kingdom in 1815, and the subsequent abrogation of the Kandyan Convention, Meegama traces the decline of *viharas* and *devalas* through lack of economic support, and the disruption of free education provided through the *Pirivena* schools. She describes the Buddhist revival that took place in the South and the development of a Sinhala consciousness that ran parallel. The influence of Anagarika Dharmapala and the Theosophists in general on this movement, as well as the establishment of Buddhist schools, is described at length.

The text is organized in two main parts divided between the colonial and postcolonial historical periods. Part One deals with the colonial beginnings of Mahamaya while Part Two describes the changes it underwent with the introduction of free education and later liberal economic policies.

The forming of the Kandy *Sadachara Baudha Kulangana Samithiya* was with the primary objective of the establishment a Buddhist girls' secondary school teaching in the English medium. Even though Buddhist educational institutions for boys had been functioning since the mid 19th century, the availability of Buddhist girls' education had not improved, especially in Kandy. This factor

is exemplified by Dharmapala's words spoken in 1924 when he stated "Kandy is no more a Buddhist town... Kandyan girls attending Hillwood College become either Christians or indifferent Buddhists".¹ Meegama describes the extensive efforts made by the women of the Kulagana society to collect funds towards this effort, going door-to-door in the Kandyan region as well as making personal trips to areas such as Colombo and Panadura in an attempt to involve the Southern entrepreneurs. She also points out that the Kulangana Samitiya had to compete with the already established missionary schools, which gave a training in western social accomplishments to girls, which was seen as the kind of necessary education to enable girls to move in middle-class social circles and make marriages to upwardly mobile young men of the time. As Jayawardena points out, girls' education was not concerned with the "emancipation of women," but aimed at producing "good wives and wise mothers" (1992: 14). This endeavor to map out the socio-political history within which the school was established and developed, contextualizes the changes it underwent at a greater depth.

Meegama acknowledges measures and counter-measures the founders had to take at the inception of the school project in order to gain social recognition. She places the men in a prominent role in this women-led project, where men played the role of primary advisor and sanctioner. *Bhikku Attadassi*, Cuda Ratwatte, and Bennet Soysa were among those whose authority was required in making key decisions. Also, even though the initiative towards founding of the school was Sarah Soysa's, after the death of her child, the prominent positioning of Ratwattes with Chitravo Ratwatte as the president of the Kulangana Samithiya, was a measure taken to gain recognition in the eyes of the Kandyan people. Yet another measure taken to gain recognition was the hiring of a London-University graduate, Anglo-Indian, Bertha Rodgers, of Calcutta as the principal. After an attempt at find a local principal, the management had to acknowledge the fact that a Western-educated woman was needed to gain status for the school. During this period, Jayawardena notes that beneficiaries of women's university education in the West, namely: "qualified white principals" gave "immediate 'status' to Buddhist schools". (1992: 13).

Personal histories of the school's founders and the key Principals add detail and richness to the text. For example, Meegama

establishes the influence on Sarah Soysa's early life of her family's association with the Buddhist revival movement and Anagarika Dharmapala. Similar roots are identified of the longest-standing principal of the school's history -- Soma Poojitha Goonewardene -- whose "scholastic, literary and Buddhist nationalist background ... had a marked impact on her education and subsequent career" (p. 168). Through this focus on personal histories, Meegama traces the financial contribution made to the founding of the school by Bennet Soysa, whom she firmly places in the new class of entrepreneurs "who made their fortunes by migrating as traders to Kandy and the upcountry districts" (p. 53). Jayawardena establishes the class dimension of the financial backing that was available to support education of Buddhist women by the late 19th century as that of wealthy Sinhalese who accumulated capital through the liquor trade, plantations and graphite (1992: 13). This factor is supported by the Government Agent C.R. Buller's assertion that the colonial government had established 133 taverns in Kandy after the 1848 rebellion, but that there were only four schools.

Anecdotes, humorous or otherwise, such as that of *the Haalmita isckole*, that of how the founders canvassed for the enrollment of students, and various details of hostel life provide opportune departures from the main text, making it an entertaining read. The account of Sarah Soysa's insistence on a bath before mid-day for the hostellers which resulted in the loss of a class period for some of them, recollections by Old Girls of how they looked forward to hostel meals due to the delicious meals they received, outdoor poetry recitations with Bertha Rodgers, and how they celebrated Rodgers' birthday at the Peradeniya Botanical Gardens are examples of these.

By tracing the school's stages in relation to its principals, Meegama illustrates how heavily the school's successes and failures depended on the merits of each principal. Bertha Irene Rodgers was chosen for her foreign educational qualifications and for the status she could bring to the school, despite her youth. She introduced modern methods of education by reducing regimented schedules of the classroom, and encouraged teachers to make learning a creative experience. Rodgers was able to convert the school to a modern English school with classes from primary to secondary level. Various efforts were made to improve spoken English, while Sinhala was taught from grade three onwards, unlike in other English schools. She also encouraged girls to continue in school by promoting the Senior Cambridge School Certificate in the face of opposition from the Kulangana Samithiya, as well as many other Kandyan parents. In a sense, Rodgers did not restrict herself to the task of producing suitable wives for modern young men, which

some girls' education institutions of that period were expected to follow. Soma Poojitha Goonewardene, taking over the school after a period of setbacks that even had the affect of a drop in the number of students, took early measures to restore and develop the school. She encouraged strict discipline among teachers and students and maintained the Buddhist religious background of the school, while reorienting the school to prepare "students to enter university or other professions" (p. 175). To this end, she introduced the science stream, restructured the Higher School Certificate and University entrance class in Arts subjects and hand picked young graduates of the University of Ceylon to teach these classes. Meegama describes the period under Lalitha Fernando, as well as Nita Pilapitiya during which time the school became a National School with numerous achievements in sports and aesthetics, and acquired various facilities. It is a pity that Meegama does not focus on the politicization of the school's management after it became a prominent school in the country. Politicization of the appointment of teachers and principals to the school, as well as its management, brought about many adverse effects that could have been documented.

Meegama's acknowledgment of the diversity of the founders of the school, and her emphasis on the role played by the late Sarah Soysa, a low country-woman, establishes the school's not-so-Kandyan roots. The need of financial support, social recognition and an indomitable human spirit to the success of a venture is aptly demonstrated through her description of the opening of the school. She carefully traces the transition from an institution with an emphasis on teaching English to the daughters of the Kandyan elite, to that of "imparting quality secondary education to a large number of students from different strata of society" (p. 184). Overall, Meegama makes a good effort to bring new light to the history of the establishment and progress of Mahamaya, and gives the reader a general overview of the context.

Reference

¹Guruge A., (ed) 1965, *Anagarika Dharmapala, Return to Rightousness, A Collection of Speeches, Essays, and Letters by the Anagarika Dharmapala*, Colombo, Ministry of Education & Cultural Affairs.

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