

Buddhist Feminism in Ceylon



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IN THE FOLLOWING ELOQUENT STRAIN speaks the report of the Wesleyan Mission in the Galle District for the year 1888:

But the greatest force of Ceylonese Buddhism is not in the Bo-tree, the priesthood, the wealth of Temple lands, or even in the sacred books. The dominant force for Buddhism in this island is WOMAN. Something to see, something to touch, something to worship; these cravings of humankind are met in the Buddhistic worship of today; the feminine instinct which brought that sprig of the sacred tree was unerring in its aim; that appeal to the sight won the crowds for Songhamitto. Under the ban of the Brahmans, woman was again enslaved in India; but in Lanka, the successors of the princess have never lost their liberty. Buddhist woman is not imprisoned in the *zenāna*, or denied the right of free worship at the shrine. Unchecked she can climb to the peak where the footprint of BUDDHA is made out of holes in the rock, and fearlessly she can go on pilgrimages to the ancient temples of her faith. You see women in “*upāsika*” or devotee robes of white, on the *paya* or sacred days of Buddhism, leading trains of mothers and maidens to the *dumb idols*. [?] ¹ In the home she guards that altar where the image of the dead Teacher stands on its pedestal behind the veil. Woman, there, can take herself and give the family *mahasil*, the three great precepts: or *pansil*, the five binding vows: and *dasasil*, the ten embracing laws of Buddhism.

Woman in Ceylon, like any other Buddhist woman, has always been free and even on a par with man, as above stated, in religious functions. It is then but fair to contrast her position with that of Christian woman during the early centuries and the Middle Ages. The Buddhist woman owes her position to Buddha’s noble and just law, and the Christian to her intolerant and despotic Church. Of this we are assured by Principal Donaldson, LL.D. in his article on the prevalent opinion that woman owes her present high position to Christianity, in the September *Contemporary Review*. As confessed by him, he “used to believe in it,” but believes in it no longer however much he would like to, for the facts of history are against the claim; and he proceeds to show that “in the first three centuries I have not been able to see that Christianity had any favourable effect on the position of women, but, on the contrary, that it tended to lower their character and contract the range of their activity.”

¹ Does the adjective “dumb” mean to infer that as Christendom is in possession of several *speaking* “idols” — as we have seen in France and Italy — while Buddhism has none of this kind, therefore, is Christianity superior to Buddhism? Pity the Missionary *Report* does not make it clear. — Editor, *Lucifer*. [H.P. Blavatsky]

Paul, he denounces as a “woman hater.” Widows had very nearly as bad a position as the Hindu widows have now. In the Church women could be seen only in three capacities “as martyrs, as widows and as deaconesses” — but the office of the latter was simply nominal! They had no spiritual functions, and while duly and legally ordained, they were precluded from performing any priestly office, such as we find entrusted to the Buddhist women. “Let them be silent,” says Tertullian, “and at home consult their own husbands.”¹

As to widows, who had as few spiritual functions as Deaconesses, they were forbidden to teach, and the Church said of them:

“Let the widow mind nothing but to pray for those that give and for the whole Church, and when she is asked anything by anyone let her not easily answer, excepting questions concerning the faith and righteousness and hope in God . . . But of the remaining doctrines let her not answer anything rashly, lest by saying anything unlearnedly she should make the word to be blasphemed.” And the occupation of the widow is summed up in these words, “She is to sit at home, sing, pray, read, watch and fast, speak to God continually in songs and hymns.”

A curious contrast is found, as pointed out to us by Dr. Donaldson and noticed by the reviewers, between the pagan Roman women of that day, and the Christian women. This is how he describes “the higher pagan ideal,” the —

. . . more remarkable because in Roman civilization, which Christianity sought to overthrow, women enjoyed great power and influence. Tradition was in favour of restriction, but by a concurrence of circumstances women had been liberated from the enslaving fetters of the old legal forms, and they enjoyed freedom of intercourse in society; they walked and drove in the public thoroughfares with veils that did not conceal their faces, they dined in the company of men, they studied literature and philosophy, they took part in political movements, they were allowed to defend their own law cases if they liked, and they helped their husbands in the government of provinces and the writing of books . . . The exclusion of women from every sacred function stands in striking contrast with heathen practice. In Rome the wife of the Pontifex Maximus took the lead in the worship of Bona Dea, and in the religious rites which specially concerned women. The most honoured priest attached to a particular God in Rome, the Flamen Dialis,² must be married, and must resign his office when his wife died, for his wife was also a priestess, and his family were consecrated to the service of the God. And the vestal virgins received every mark of respect that could be bestowed on them, and the amplest liberty. The highest officials made way for them as they passed along the streets, they banqueted with the College of Pontifices, they viewed the games in the company of the Empress, and statues were erected in their honour.

¹ Tertullian was only quoting Paul. — Editor, *Lucifer*.

² [High Priest of Jupiter]

What the early Christians did [says Dr. Donaldson], was to strike the male out of the definition of man and human being out of the definition of woman. Man was a human being made for the highest and noblest purposes; woman was a female made to serve only one. She was on the earth to inflame the heart of man with every evil passion. She was a fire-ship continually striving to get alongside the male man-of-war to blow him into pieces. This is the way in which Tertullian addresses women:

“Do you not know that each one of you is an Eve? The sentence of God on this sex of yours lives in this age: the guilt must of necessity live too. You are the devil’s gateway; you are the unsealer of that forbidden tree; you are the first deserter of the divine law; you are she who persuaded him whom the devil was not valiant enough to attack. You destroyed so easily God’s image, man. On account of your desert, that is, death, even the Son of God had to die.”

And the gentle Clement of Alexandria hits her hard when he says:

“Nothing disgraceful is proper for man, who is endowed with reason; much less for woman, to whom it brings shame even to reflect of what nature she is.” (It is curious to note that the doctrine of laying all the guilt on women, against which modern reformers protest, has thus Christian authority on its side.)

Here, finally, put together from Dr. Donaldson’s apostolic researches, is the whole duty of woman, according to the Fathers of the Church. Her first and great duty was to stay at home, and not let herself be seen anywhere. She is not to go to banquets. She is not to go to marriage feasts; nor to frequent the theatre, nor public spectacles. Does she want exercise? Clement of Alexandria prescribes for her: “She is to exercise herself in spinning and weaving, and superintending the cooking, if necessary.” Any personal adornment is characteristic of “women who have lost all shame.” The bearing of children was “perilous to faith,” and it was a great spiritual gain to a man “when he chances to be deprived of his wife” — that is, by death. Meanwhile, during her life, her duty was plain. She was to stay at home and to be subservient to her husband in all things. — *Pall Mall Gazette*.

What a difference between this terrible and degrading position of the Christian wife, mother and daughter, during the early days of Christianity and the Middle Ages, and the past and present position of the Buddhist woman at all times. Nor was the Brāhmanical, or Hindu woman, less free and honoured before the Mussulman invasion of India. For she was on a par with man in Āryāvarta before that calamity, even more free than the Ceylonese woman is now. But the position of the latter, and her great influence in her family are so well known to the Christian missionary and proselytizer that he seeks to turn this knowledge to advantage. Thus having described this enviable position, the *Report of the Wesleyan Mission* suddenly unveils its batteries by adding the following remarks:

Buddhism will never be vitally touched in Ceylon, until the female population is more universally Christianized and educated. Let a thousand girl's schools be opened in this land and efficiently maintained for one generation, and long before 1919 we should see our churches doubled, both in numbers and in strength. Have not the missionary bodies erred in this? It is the girl, the mother, and the wife, who cling to their religion, with all it can yield to elevate and transform: and when woman has done so much for the dead BUDDHA and the soulless creed, she could and would do more for the living Christ, the ever-present saviour, the real redeemer from death and sin. [!!]

This is a most sincere statement of their hopes and aspirations. No wonder it has provoked the wrath of the Colombo *Buddhist*, which we find, while quoting this testimonial to the devotion and piety of our Sinhalese sisters, giving voice to the sentiment of the whole Buddhist community of the Island, orthodox and theosophical. Saith our contemporary:

Much of what is above stated by this missionary writer is most true, and the debt which Ceylon owes to her faithful Buddhist daughters cannot be overstated. Throughout a period when too many of her sons, bowed down by the succession of foreign yokes imposed upon them, had fallen away from their high calling and let the unequalled advantages which are their birthright slip through their fingers, the great majority of the women of Ceylon have shown their loyalty and devotion to our great Teacher by standing firmly round His banner, and holding the lamp of truth on high with unfaltering hand. That, in spite of the unscrupulous use made of its power and wealth by Christianity, they have been on the whole so successful in preventing the perversion of their sons to the degrading superstitions of our conquerors, shows how great is the power of woman, and how important the work undertaken by the Women's Educational Society. The object of this Society is to rescue the rising generation of the daughters of Ceylon from the wily snares of the cunning missionary, and to ensure that the mothers of the future shall be actuated not merely by traditional devotion but by an intelligent faith in their religion, and when that object is fully achieved the honey-tongued deceivers, who try with such diabolical art to seduce the weak-minded into apostasy, may pack up their trunks and go back to try to Christianize and civilize their own land (which sadly needs their help by all accounts) for their occupation here will be gone forever. Then when the shade of the upas-tree¹ of Christianity with its terrible concomitants of slaughter and drunkenness, is removed from this fair island, we may hope for a brighter future of peace, happiness, and revived religion that shall rival the glories of our ancient history. May that day soon come!

The expressions of hostility towards the Protestant missionaries who are doing their work out there, while sounding bitter and intolerant to Western ears, may be excused on account of the long train of social calamities which have followed the successive evangelising labours of the Portuguese, Dutch and English conquerors of "Fair Lanka." Not merely the disruption of families and the confiscation of property,

¹ [*Antiaris toxicaria*]

but even bloodshed, rapine and persecution have entered into the long record of these efforts to extirpate the national religion and supplant it by exoteric Christianity. As the Waldenses and Albigenses had good reason to execrate the name of Roman Catholicism, so have the descendants of the sufferers from Christian persecution equal reason to couple mission work with what is most cruel and abhorrent.

As I am ending this interesting testimonial to women in general, and those of Ceylon in particular, I find in our Colombo weekly *Supplement to the Sarasavisandaresa — The Buddhist*, the sad news of the death of one of the best, noblest and kindest of all the ladies of Ceylon, a devoted Theosophist, and one who has been for almost half a century an ornament to her sex. I quote from *The Buddhist*, *verbatim*.

Just as we are going to press the news reaches us of the death of Mrs. Cecilia Dias Ilangakoon, F.T.S., after a long and severe illness. She will long be remembered as a generous and high-minded Buddhist, and most especially for two actions, the result of which will be seen not only in the present but in the future. We refer to her donation of the money to publish the first English and Sinhalese editions of Colonel Olcott's *Buddhist Catechism*, and to her magnificent present of a complete set of the sacred books of the Southern Church to the Adyar Oriental Library — this last a work which she has lived only just long enough to finish. May her rest be sweet, and her next birth a happy one!

AUM, so be it! is the heartfelt concurrence in this wish of a

EUROPEAN BUDDHIST



“Why women should avoid the Church like a plague” in the same series.