

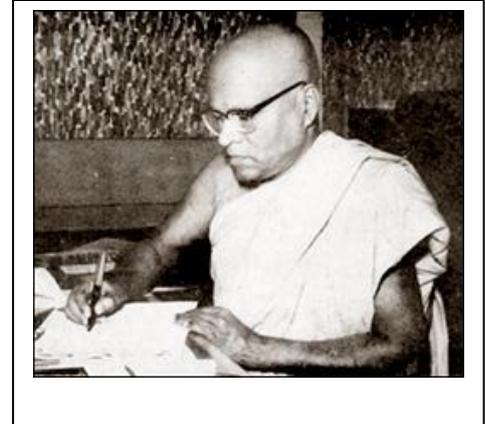
Ven. Udakendawala Siri Saranankara, The legendary freedom-fighter

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The legendary freedom-fighter by W. A. Abeysinghe

The life of Venerable Udakendawala Siri Saranankara is inseparable from the history of the world peace movement. His service to mankind as a peace champion, disciple of the Buddha and an internationalist is remarkable.

My humble attempt in this essay, therefore, is only to dwell upon a few noteworthy aspects of his great life, with special reference to his association with the world peace struggle.

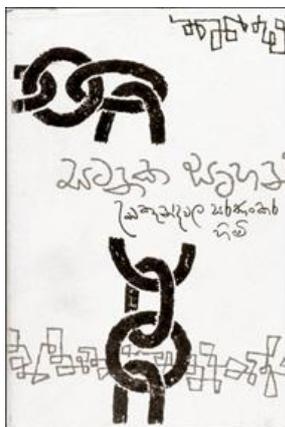


His life is a fascinating story of a village boy who joined the Order of the Compassionate Buddha and fought the British, both in his motherland and in India, for the sake of national independence, and, when that cherished goal was attained, he became a peace champion striving to deliver the world and entire mankind from the horrors of war.

He was born on the seventh day of January in the year 1902. Ven. Saranankara has mentioned that fact in his autobiography published in 1965, under the title "Sketches of a Struggle" . (Satanaka Satahan)

At that time the British rule in Sri Lanka, (then Ceylon) was at its peak. It, therefore, became his destiny to devote his entire life to the anti-colonial struggle in the country. At least some forty five years of his life were devoted to the independence movement in both Sri Lanka and India.

Saranankara's mother died when he was two years old. He lost his father too during the days of his early childhood. The responsibility for his upbringing then fell on his elder sister, who thereupon became "a mother unto him."



He joined the Buddhist Order as a novice in his early teens at the village temple. Then he came to the Kospillewa Vihara near Gampaha, where he lived for many years. Then he found his way to Colombo, the capital city, when his teacher took him to the Paramananda Pirivena, Kotahena for higher education. As he has mentioned in his autobiography, he didn't like this place and returned to Gampaha.

The First World War broke out and its impact on the colonial Ceylon was heavy. The Sinhala-Muslim riots and the resultant Martial Law of 1915 shocked and baffled his mind. Then followed, the epidemic of Malaria which took the lives of many thousands of people. In the prime of youth, as a novice monk, Saranankara realized that it was all due to the colonial yoke under which the people of this country had to suffer.

It was during this time that he took to writing. The first article which he wrote was published in the then popular newspaper, "Sinhala Jathiya" (The Sinhala Nation) edited by Anagarika Dharmapala, the greatest national and Buddhist leader of the time. In this very first article, he condemned the feudal and caste system that was

prevalent among the Kandyan people of Sri Lanka, and he vehemently attacked the way the higher strata of society kept on suppressing the oppressed. Motivated by the national renaissance movement headed by Dharmapala and other national leaders, Saranankara gradually came to hate the British rule over the country. He continued writing anti-imperialist articles to all national and anti-imperialist newspapers and journals, published at that time in the country.

The year 1921 was a turning point in his life. Anagarika Dharmapala wanted to go on a Buddhist mission to India. Saranankara met the great Anagarika at his residence, but was told that he was too young for the difficult vocation of a missionary in a foreign country. Nevertheless, Saranankara did not give up his effort to join the mission. He pleaded with Dharmapala's mother and managed to get the consent of Dharmapala. So in April 1921, at the age of nineteen, Saranankara went to India to become a Buddhist missionary of the Mahabodhi Society.

Shantiniketan

One of Saranankara's main motives in coming to India was higher education which had been interrupted a number of times when he was in Sri Lanka. Dharmapala also liked the idea of higher education for those who served in the mission. Thus Saranankara became a student at Shantiniketan of the great Indian scholar Rabindranath Tagore. Shantiniketan was not a mere school or a seat of learning. It was a place where thousand blossoms of independent thought, bloomed. This seat of learning was open to past and future and to East and West. Tagore started mixed education there, and the education the pupils received was cosmopolitan on one hand, and oriental on the other. Saranankara liked Shantiniketan and zealously pursued his studies.

It was at Shantiniketan that he came into contact with the Indian National Movement and its main personalities. In his autobiography he recalls the visit of Prince of Wales to India. When the Prince came, the Hartal movement started in many parts of India. This movement was initiated by Mahatma Gandhi, and all the shops in all the cities were found closed. The Mahabodhi Society requested the Buddhist priests to chant pirth (paritta) at the arrival of the Prince. Though some priests complied with the request, Saranankara protested and turned it down.

Thereupon, the authorities at the Mahabodhi asked him to go to Calcutta to take over the duties at the Buddhist Vihara there. Saranankara did not like this idea of being an incumbent in a Buddhist Vihara and thought that he should come back to Sri Lanka. At the railway station he changed his mind and came back to Shantiniketan. But he had no money to pursue his studies.

He saw the great guru, Tagore. "As long as you have your begging bowl with you, have no fear about money. Go back and study," the savant of Shantiniketan told him. And Saranankara recommenced his studies.

Life at Shantiniketan was a source of inspiration to him. He liked the independent atmosphere there and he later found himself in the midst of varied activities of the Indian Independence Movement. He was involved more in politics than in studies. The deeper he went into the Indian Swaraj Movement, the more he came to hate the British rule. He came into contact with the young independence fighters. The experience and inspiration thus gained evoked in him a desire to write more and more for the journals published in his own country, informing his people of how the Indians were fighting the British. At the same time, he wished to cultivate in the minds of the people of Sri Lanka, the spirit of anti-imperialism through his writing. He continued writing to most of the Sri Lankan journals such as "Sinhala Jatiya" , "Swadesha Mitraya" , "Sarasavi Sandaresa" , "Saraswati" , "Lakmina" and "Sinhala Balaya" which published many of his articles at that time.

Independence from the British rule was the main theme of his writing. One other subject he discussed was the caste system in our country. He also attacked certain sections of Buddhist clergy who amassed wealth and utilized it for their personal luxury. The open and radical thoughts and ideas of Saranankara were the main characteristics of his writing, even during his mature age.

Caste system

At Shantiniketan he learned Bengali, rather easily. This fluency in Bengali was very helpful to him when he started translating many Bengali literary works into Sinhala during the latter part of his life. His other subjects at Shantiniketan were Comparative Religion, Political Science and History. But when he came to Sri Lanka in 1930, he left his studies at Shanthinikatan unfinished.

Saranankara was moved by the state of affairs in his own country. The British rule was extremely oppressive and the attitude of submission of the people was shameful. In a booklet he wrote entitled "My Country", he attacked both the British rule and the slavish attitude of the people, especially of those who worked for the British. Ten thousand copies of this booklet were distributed among the people. For this offence, he was interrogated by the Colonial Criminal Investigation Department and was warned to be obedient to the King!

This was an eye-opener to him. He realized that fighting the imperialists was no easy task. The only organization to fight the enemy would be a movement along the lines of the radical activists of East Bengal. So he went back to India. It is from that time onwards that the most dramatic period of his life began.

Buddhist peasants

He came to Calcutta, and from there proceeded to Chittagong, predominantly a Buddhist area. His mission was not only religious, but also political. He met the Chittagong young revolutionary patriots in secrecy and started his campaign against the British among the Buddhist peasants there. He campaigned that all the Buddhists including the clergy, should rally around these young revolutionaries who broke into the British arsenal to obtain firearms to fight the imperialists.

During this time, having passed the London Matriculation Examination, Saranankara entered the City College of Calcutta University for higher education.

He was the only Buddhist priest who studied there at that time. By the end of 1931, he was elected the president of the Students Union there.

The time was extremely tense. The West Bengali radicals, with their anti-imperialist fighting traditions, began to resent the Non-violence Movement of Mahatma Gandhi, saying that it was not the proper organ to fight the British. In his autobiography, among other things, he writes: "Non-violence may be a great concept of Dhamma. Nevertheless, it has no meaning to the common man. More so, it has no bearing at all on a movement of national liberation."

Dark dungeon

Saranankara witnessed a number of terrorist activities of the Bengali radicals, when they killed British officers in broad daylight. Among these radicals were a number of girls. Two of these schoolgirls shot a British government agent dead, when he came to attend a ceremony in their school. Many other such incidents followed.

In March 1932, Saranankara was detained by the Calcutta Police. He was charged with having helped the Bengali radicals in their "subversive activities". Though he was acquitted at the trial, he was again taken into custody and was kept in a dark

dungeon for a number of months by the colonial police without any trial. Later he was exiled to Benares where for nearly four years; he lived the life of a prisoner.

In Calcutta and in Benares Saranankara came into contact with the main personalities of the Indian National Movement, including men like Subas Chandra Bose. Although British officials tried to tempt him with various promises and pledges, he remained an anti-colonial fighter and went deeper and deeper into the Indian liberation struggle.

During his exile in Benares, Saranankara formed a Bengali Literary Circle which attracted young radical patriots. The education he received in India made him an internationalist, and this doctrine of internationalism with regard to the liberation, progress and peace of mankind, remained his living philosophy to the end of his life.

The secret police followed Saranankara wherever he went. Nevertheless he never lost touch with the national movement. His assistance was often sought by the radical youth. In the beginning of 1936, Saranankara was seen at the head of a Hartal procession in Benares when the people demonstrated against the British Governor visiting the city.

Despite the police restriction against him, he left Benares and came to Calcutta in April 1936. There he met his guru Rabindranath Tagore and the young luminaries of the Indian National Movement, namely, Jawaharlal Nehru and Dr. Kripalani. A few weeks later, Saranankara was exiled to Sri Lanka by the colonial authorities.

In Sri Lanka he joined the Lanka Samasamaja Party, which was the main organization of the Sri Lankan Socialists at that time. Within a short time he became a prominent figure in the party. It was Saranankara who wrote the first book on socialism in Sinhala, discussing why people should choose a socialist form of government.

Later, the United Socialist Party came into being with Saranankara as one of its founding members. It was the nucleus of the Sri Lanka Communist Party which was formed under the leadership of Dr. S. A. Wickramasinghe in July 1943.

The Second World War broke out. The British colonial authorities were out for the blood of the Communists and other radicals in the country. Saranankara was charged with agitating against the imperialist war at a public meeting. He did not plead guilty, but instead, denounced the British imperialists in court. Saranankara was sent to jail for a period of two years.

"I was only sent from a bigger jail into a smaller one. The whole of Sri Lanka under the British yoke is in itself a big jail," he wrote in his "Sketches of a Struggle."

He was released in June 1944, and the first thing he did was to visit the headquarters of his dear party. From there onwards, his main mission was to devote his time and energy to party work for the realisation of its noble ideals.

It was during this time, that he started his monthly journal "Nava Lokaya" (The New World). It was the first progressive Sinhala monthly to be published in our country. When he passed away in November 1966, the journal was in the twenty fifth year of continuous publication.

Nuclear explosion

The service rendered by this journal to the cause of world peace is significant. It was a window open on the new world of socialism, progress and peace.

In 1954, when the American imperialists wanted to carry out nuclear tests in the Pacific, he offered to sacrifice his life. By this time, the Sri Lanka Peace Council was

already in existence. When it was formed in 1950, it was Saranankara who pioneered this great task and became a dynamic force in the movement to protest against the nuclear explosion planned to take place on our region.

For this unrivalled feat of bravery and for the contribution to the cause of peace in general, Saranankara was awarded the coveted International Lenin Peace Prize, in 1958.

The International Peace Conference which he organized in Sri Lanka in 1957, to protest against the American imperialists who attempted to explode nuclear bombs in the Pacific, was a significant event in the history of the peace movement in our country.

During the American aggression in Vietnam, it was he who helped create a public opinion in Sri Lanka to condemn the genocidal activities perpetrated by the imperialists.

Saranankara attended a number of international forums as an indefatigable champion of peace and his voice had made a deep impact on the peace movement of the world. The writer came into contact with this legendary freedom-fighter and internationalist in the year 1960, during the formative years of his literary career. This memorable relationship remained until his death, on the 13th of November 1966.

As a writer, Saranankara's service to the cause of peace, socialism and progress was of great importance.

He was the first to bring the Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim writers of our country into one powerful organization in 1964, a prestigious organization presided over by Martin Wickramasinghe, the GOM of Sinhala literature. Incidentally, this writer was its assistant secretary.

Ven. Saranankara's was a life, every second of which was devoted to the cause of peace and progress of the mankind. It was also a highly exemplary life of a Buddhist monk, who gave a comprehensive and a practical meaning to the immortal teachings of the Compassionate Buddha.