

Tributes to Col. Henry Steel Olcott **For His Work with Buddhist Education in Ceylon (now Sri Lanka)**



Commemorative Stamp in honour of Col. Olcott
issued by the Sri Lankan government in 1967

Every year on February 17, a group of Buddhist Sri Lankans make their way down Olcott Avenue and into the mad market hustle of the Pettah neighborhood of Colombo, the capital city of Sri Lanka. They march peacefully across the street to the railway station where they pay tribute, these Buddhists all dressed in white, to an American Civil War colonel. They lay a wreath around the golden statue of Henry Steel Olcott, make offerings, and give thanks. In temples across the country, Buddhist monks hold religious ceremonies in his honor. Schoolchildren make offerings in memory of an American who most Americans have never heard of.

‘The Man from New Jersey’
Understanding Buddhism
By Stephanie Anne Golberg
www.thesmartset.com
03/12/2012

The American national Col Henry Steel Olcott (1832 - 1907) is a revered figure in the history of Buddhist revival and education in Sri Lanka. He was initially trained in agriculture, and then excelling in both law and journalism, he had a distinguished career in the military and government before taking to full time spiritual advocacy and cross-cultural understanding. Working with like-minded Lankans, he was instrumental in starting leading Buddhist schools in Sri Lanka such as Ananda College in Colombo, Mahinda College in Galle and Dharmaraja College in Kandy.

‘Creators of Modern Education in Sri Lanka’
Nalaka Gunawardene & Vindana
Ariyawansa
archives.dailynews.lk

Having arrived in Sri Lanka, then Ceylon, Col Olcott was much moved by the unjust practices perpetrated on the benign majority by an unscrupulous minority who wielded administrative power.

He took to the cause of the Buddhists as his own 'calling' in life. Thus, with the patronage of the local patriots and philanthropist the Buddhist Theosophist Society (BTS) was formed to uplift the lot of the Buddhist in 1880.

The situation in Sri Lanka at the time could only be left to anybody's imagination. The Sinhalese and Buddhist values were looked down upon as 'uncivilised' in the eyes of the colonial masters and their local lackeys.

Having realised this glaring discriminatory practice in educational facilities and more importantly to lay the foundation for Sinhala Buddhist revival in Sri Lanka, Col. Olcott mobilised the local philanthropist in Galle to help the Buddhist school at Dodanduwa.

It must be appreciated that initially Col. Olcott's activities were centred around Galle since he was inspired by his teacher, Ven Migettuwatte Gunananda and Ven. Hikkaduwe Siri Sumangala. He was also ordained as a Buddhist at the Viyayananda Viharaya in Galle.

The activities of Col. Olcott however, was not limited to opening up of schools for the commoners. He realized the importance of a literate society and to this end he initiated the first Sinhala newspaper called 'Sarasavi Sandaresa' in 1883. Col. Olcott died on the 17th of February 1907 in Madras.

The greatest homage we can pay to this extraordinary American personality, who meant so much to so many in this country, is to contemplate that his contribution to the Sri Lanka's liberation on enlightenment has been truly without a parallel. May he conquer the 'truth' that he always considered to be above all else.

Olcott – the Searcher of Truth
by Palitha Senanayake, *Lanka Daily News*,
Feb 17, 2007

Tribute to Col. Olcott

Even after shedding the colonial title Ceylon in 1948 people of independent Sri Lanka continued to adore and venerate Col. Olcott the great American who played a leading role in uplifting the morale of the Buddhists from the utter chaos they were in.

On February, 1967 commemorating the 60th anniversary of his death his statue was erected opposite the Fort Railway Station on the Olcott Mawatha named after him (formally Norris Road). Olcott Commemoration Volume was published in the same year and also issued a special postage stamp.

Recently the people of Galle too erected his statue in the Galle town and renamed the road running opposite Mahinda College as Olcott Mawatha. Almost every school then run by the Buddhist Theosophical Society still carries his portrait to honour him. All the colleges founded by him still annually have an alms-giving in February to commemorate his death.

‘Col. Henry Steel Olcott:
Ushering in the Buddhist Revival in
Ceylon’
by Justice P.H.K. Kulatilaka
Sunday Observer, 12 May 2013

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