

The Contributions of Vidyalankara and Vidyodaya to the Political, Intellectual and Social Discourse in Sri Lanka

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Vidyalankara and Vidyodaya Pirivenas were the key centres of learning that transformed the Sri Lanka mindset from a colonial one to that demanding full Independence, not only politically, but also economically and culturally. With the British allowing a limited degree of freedom of religion, Paramadhammacetiya Pirivena was formed as a centre of ferment in 1841 leading the way to the establishment of Vidyodaya Pirivena in 1873 and Vidyalankara Pirivena in 1875. These two institutions, especially the latter provided a close dialogue among the people and made a think-tank of the Independence movement. It revived the former university type of Buddhist education lost in the sacking of key pirivenas by the Portuguese. Those associated with Vidyalankara and Vidyodaya provided intellectual support for the key anti-colonial debates culminating in the Panadura Controversy while closely associating with Buddhist schools which were an indirect creation of those who helped launch the social conscience movement (almost all Left leaders were products of Buddhist schools) . Its graduates followed the tradition of Buddhists engaged in social action, long before engaged Buddhism became fashionable. Their social liberation discussions preceded by several decades, liberation theology. Their Unilateral Declaration of Independence for the country was a key-marker in monastic activism in line with monk revolts of 1818 and 1841. Internationally, Vidyalankara became a centre of debate and discussion for many oriental and Left - oriented oriental scholars in the region. The paper traces these developments and the major difficulties Vidyalankara underwent.

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