

## **Buddhist Education in Sri Lanka at the University Level**

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### **History**

Sri Lanka has millennia long tradition of Buddhist Education dating back to third century B.C. According to historical evidence there had been three main schools of Buddhist education in Sri Lanka disseminating knowledge on a wide variety of disciplines related to Buddhism. These were the Mahavihara (3<sup>rd</sup> Century B.C.), the Abhayagiri Mahavihara (1<sup>st</sup> Century B.C.) and Jetawana Mahavihara (3<sup>rd</sup> Century A.D.) (Mendis et.al 2006). These institutions of higher learning continued for many centuries in Anuradhapura, the ancient kingdom of Sri Lanka until the 11<sup>th</sup> Century A.D. Again from the 12<sup>th</sup> century this continued in Polonnaruwa, the next Kingdom. The archaeological remains indicate that in Polonnaruwa, there had been an elaborately laid out monastic university, the Alahana Pirivena with residential facilities, (Bandaranayake 2006).

However, this ancient monastic education was interrupted by European invasion in the middle of the last millennium. As in many other Asian countries, European invasion, occupation and colonization brought an immense disruption to our culture, economy and society. However, it also helped us to get contact with emerging modern world with new ideas, concepts, economic and political systems, culture and life styles. For the last 150 years, Sri Lanka was continuously finding its own way, own place in this new global system, forming its own structures within national and global frameworks (Bandaranayake 2006).

### **Present situation**

The present university system in Sri Lanka dates back to the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century with the establishment of the Medical College, Law College and the Technical College in the period from 1970 to 1983. With this, parallel development of monastic Buddhist Education took place. In 1873 and 1875, two prime institutions of monastic Buddhist education, namely Vidyodaya Pirivena and Vidyalandara Pirivena were established. These institutions headed by scholarly Buddhist priests who excelled in their fields of Philosophy and Linguistics because the two prime seats of higher learning in Buddhist studies. Also, the first Sri Lankan University degrees were offered by the Vidyalandara Pirivena in 1930s. In 1959, these two institutions of higher learning devoted to Buddhist education were converted to the modern day Universities by a Parliamentary Act. Today these two Universities, which have their roots in Buddhist monastic education, are known as the University of Sri Jayawardene pura and the University of Kelaniya.

Today in Sri Lanka there are 15 Universities which have been established under the provisions of the Universities Act No. 16 of 1978 and these come directly under the University Grants Commission (UGC). There are two Buddhist universities established under different Parliamentary Acts which are devoted only for Buddhist studies, namely the Buddhasravaka Bhikku University and the Pali and Buddhist University. These are not under the UGC but come directly under the Ministry of Higher Education. There is another University, namely the Defense University which was established recently with a separate Parliamentary Act which comes under the Ministry of Defense.

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Further, there are 8 postgraduate institutions and 8 undergraduate institutions attached to some of the 15 universities established under the Universities Act. These have been established under different Ordinances. Of these postgraduate institutions, one institution is exclusively devoted for postgraduate studies in Buddhist Studies. This is the Postgraduate Institute of Pali and Buddhist Studies, which is attached to the University of Kelaniya.

In this Institute there are 3 separate academic departments. These are the Departments of Buddhist Philosophy, Buddhist Culture and Buddhist Literary sources. Fully fledged Departments of Buddhist Studies exist in 5 Universities in Sri Lanka. These are the University of Peradeniya, University of Colombo, University of Ruhuna, University of Sri Jayawardene pura and University of Kelaniya (UGC 2008).

### **Academic Staff**

Academic staff strength in these Departments is given in Table 1.

**Table 1 – Academic staff strength in Pali and Buddhist Studies in Sri Lankan Universities (Source MOHE 2007).**

University	Total No.	Highest qualification			No. of Professors/ Senior Professors
		Ph.D	M.A./ M.Phil	B.A.	
Colombo	03	2	1	-	-
Peradeniya	7	3	4	-	-
Sri Jayawardene Pura	12	2	4	6	-
Kelaniya	15	9	3	3	5
Ruhuna	11	5	3	3	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>48</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>7</b>

Table 1 indicates that there are nearly 50 members of academic staff at these Departments and about 45% of them hold Ph.Ds. and about 30% hold M.Phils. The balance is young teachers who are reading for their postgraduate degrees (MOHE 2007).

In all these departments, Pali, Buddhist Culture and Buddhist Philosophy are taught as subjects for the B.A. degree. In addition, facilities are available to read for postgraduate degrees.

The University of Kelaniya which was started in 1959 by transforming the then existed prime institution of higher learning in Buddhism, the Vidyalkara Pirivena, has today the largest academic department of Pali and Buddhist Studies in Sri Lanka with an academic staff of 15 members of which 9 have obtained Ph.Ds and 3 have got M.Phils. The rest are reading for their Ph.Ds. Further, of the seven Professors in Pali and Buddhist Studies in Sri Lanka, the University of Kelaniya has five.

### **Bachelor of Arts degree programmes for foreign students**

With this strong academic staff, the University of Kelaniya provides learning opportunities not only to local undergraduate students. Many students from several Asian countries come to the University of Kelaniya to follow the B.A. degree courses in Pali and Buddhist studies. These countries include Bangladesh, Cambodia, Vietnam, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, Peoples Republic of China, Taiwan, India, Indonesia and Korea. In other Universities such as Peradeniya, Sri Jayawardene Pura and in Pali and Buddhist University also, such courses for foreign students are conducted.

### **Diploma programmes**

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In addition to the B.A. degree programmes, 2 year diploma programme is also taught in English medium for the foreign students at the University of Kelaniya. With this diploma, students can register for the B.A. degree programme. They are exempted from following the 1<sup>st</sup> year of the B.A. degree programme.

### **Open and distance learning**

In addition to catering to in-campus students, the B.A. general degree programme at the University of Kelaniya, University of Peradeniya and the University of Sri Jayawardene Pura, is conducted through open and distance mode also. This programme offered by the University of Kelaniya is not confined to Sri Lanka. It is offered in Malaysia and Singapore too. The University of Kelaniya is willing to offer the B.A. degree courses in Pali and Buddhist studies through open and distance mode in other countries too.

### **Postgraduate studies**

A two year M.A. degree programme is also offered by the Department of Pali and Buddhist studies of the University of Kelaniya. Similar courses are offered by other Universities which have the Departments of Pali and Buddhist studies.

In addition, facilities are available to read for Ph.D and M. Phil degrees too.

The Postgraduate Institute of Pali and Buddhist Studies (PIPBS) which is affiliated to the University of Kelaniya also conducts M.A., Postgraduate Diploma and Postgraduate Certificate courses in Pali and Buddhist Studies for local as well as foreign students. Further, the facilities are available there too to read for M. Phil and Ph.D degree too. Recently, a Postgraduate Diploma programme in Buddhist Psychology was also started at the PIPBS which also has a high demand.

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