

Rhys Davids: His contribution to Pali and Buddhist studies

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Having had to face several challenges due to intense Christian missionary activity and the withdrawal of state patronage, the indigenous religions in Sri Lanka suffered a severe set back by the mid-nineteenth century. Buddhism in particular had lost its pristine vitality, its cohesiveness and its self-respect, but not to the point of becoming moribund.

Hence there arose a strong Buddhist response to the missionary challenge. The revivalist movement manifested itself in many ways, one of which was a spectacular reawakening in Buddhist and Pali studies spearheaded by the Sri Lankan scholar monks.

This intellectual upheaval was contemporaneous with a similar interest in Pali and Buddhist studies in Europe and the two movements fuelled and inspired one another.

At this juncture three British Civil Servants who were posted to Sri Lanka, George Turnour, R. D. Childers (1838-1876) and T. W. Rhys Davids (1843-1922) took an abiding interest in the language, religion and culture of the island and by their indefatigable efforts introduced to the English speaking world the wealth of Buddhist scholarship hitherto unknown to the West. This monograph will deal with the activities of T.W. Rhys Davids who spent his entire life labouring for this cause.

It was an administrative requirement that all Civil Servants should be familiar with the language, literature and culture of the land in which they were posted. Thus in order to acquire this knowledge within a short time and pass their efficiency bar examinations both Childers and Rhys Davids sought the guidance of eminent scholar monks such as Yatramulle Dhammarama, Hikkaduwve Sri Sumangala and Waskaduwve Sri Subhuti.

Under their tutelage the young British officers not only grasped the intricacies of Sinhala, Pali and Buddhism but it became with them not an administrative requirement but a life long obsession which resulted in significant developments in oriental scholarship both here and in Europe.

It has to be mentioned that British Christian clergymen such as Rev. D. J. Gogerly (1792-1862) had made an intensive study of Sinhala, Pali and Buddhism and wrote extensively on their areas of study. However, their missionary zeal prevailed and

the sole objective of their studies was to further their evangelical purpose. Rhys Davids on the other hand was essentially a scholar and the aim of his intellectual exercise was to make the Western world aware of Buddhism and its civilising influence.

Caroline Rhys Davids named her husband the "Max Muller of Buddhism," but though Muller is well known, his friend and contemporary Rhys Davids is less famous even among scholars. The explanation to this lies in the fact that India was the jewel in the British Crown and hence Sanskrit and Hinduism were the star attractions; while Buddhism confined to the periphery of the Raj - to Sri Lanka and Burma received less attention.

Hence as the exponent of Buddhism Rhys Davids was little known even in England, the country of his birth. In Sri Lanka he is known specially by Westernised Buddhists whose knowledge of Buddhism was derived from English writings on the subject.

Since of late, however, one of his works, Buddhist India 'has been translated in to Sinhala as Bauddha Bharataya and the Rhys Davids Memorial Volume (1965)' was brought out in Sinhala with a few articles in English. As a result, he is known to a certain extent among Sinhala educated Buddhists of Sri Lanka specially the Buddhist clergy.

Like R. C. Childers, T. W. Rhys Davids was the son of a clergyman. He was born in Colchester in Essex in 1843 as the eldest son of Reverend Thomas William David, a Welshman who had settled in Colchester. He was a popular minister who had a flair for preaching. In addition he was a scholar of ecclesiastical history and Rhys Davids inherited from his father, his eloquence, indefatigable energy and patience.

His mother Louisa Winter a devout Christian was the daughter of a London solicitor. A Sunday School attached to her husband's church was so efficiently managed by her that it was regarded as a model school. So competent was she in her task that the treatise she wrote on the management of Sunday schools was published and ran into several editions. She died in 1854 when Rhys Davids was barely ten years old. This was the first of a series of tragedies that he had to face throughout his life.

Rhys David's early education was at the Brighton School which was situated close to his home and run by his uncle Robert Winter. At the age of seventeen he went to London and attended the school now called New College in Finchley Road. Here he studied Latin under the famous scholar, Sir William Smith. Rhys Davids undoubtedly inherited the academic inclinations of his parents, yet motherless at a tender age and lacking in family fortunes he realised that he had to rely on his own sweat and toil. While at New College he decided to join the Indian civil Service.

With his devoutly Christian background and sound knowledge of Latin what attracted him to the Indian Civil Service is difficult to say. In the heyday of the British Raj the Indian Civil Service must have been an exotic dream for the educated young Englishman with no financial resources, or was it a Karmic call which led him to aspire for a career in India.

Rhys Davids realised that to achieve his ambition he had to have an University education which his father could not afford. Therefore he left for Germany where he could earn his expenses by giving tuition in English. He soon realised that there were many English students who paid for their education in this way.

He selected Breslau where there were not many English students. He became a very popular English teacher and earned sufficient money to pay his university fees. He moved easily with all strata of German society and made friends very easily. In Breslau he had the opportunity of studying Sanskrit under A.F. Stenzler, a distinguished scholar and Professor of Sanskrit at Breslau from 1833 till 1868. The philological training that Rhys Davids received under Stenzler could be regarded as a landmark on the road to Pali scholarship.

He returned to England in 1863 and appeared for the examination of the Civil Service Commissioners offering Sanskrit, German, French and English. Although his ambition was a posting in India he was appointed to Ceylon and this became the turning point of his life. He was attached to the Colonial Secretary's Office in Colombo and was expected to learn the local languages.

"With his philological training he was able to learn Sinhala and Tamil very quickly and a certain incident directed his interest to Pali and Buddhism. As Magistrate of Galle a case was brought before Rhys Davids involving questions of ecclesiastical law.

A document written in a language that no one could read was tabled in court. Inquiries revealed that the language was Pali in which the sacred books of Buddhism was written. Accomplished linguist that he was, he immediately resolved to make himself acquainted with it.

He was put in touch with Yatramulle Unnanse under whose tutelage he made rapid progress. Later in life Rhys Davids paid a striking tribute to his teacher. "When he first came to me the hand of death was already upon him. He was sinking into the grave from the effects of a painful and incurable malady. I had heard of his learning as a Pali scholar, and of his illness, and was grateful to him for leaving his home under such tragic circumstances, to teach a stranger. There was a strange light in his sunken eyes, and he was constantly turning away from questions of Pali to questions of Buddhism."

Having worked for short periods in Colombo, Kandy, Avissawella and Matale, Rhys Davids was transferred to Galle as Police Magistrate. In 1871 he was posted as Assistant Government Agent of Nuwarakalaviya of which Anuradhapura was the administrative centre.

The Governor Sir Hercules Robinson aware of the young civil servant's special talents wanted to make use of him in archaeological work for which Anuradhapura presented innumerable opportunities. The Governor's aspirations were realised for Rhys Davids loved Anuradhapura and its ruins and spent much of his time among them.

Unlike his predecessor, who was overcome by melancholia and depression by the dead city and its silent stones, Rhys Davids found them eloquent monuments which sang the saga of the once glorious city and inspired him to unravel the religion and culture which these stones mysteriously represented. He loved to move with the peasants of Nuwarakalaviya, learnt their language and did away with interpreters. In the field of archaeology his superiors gave him encouragement and freedom of action. His stay in Ceylon coincided with the setting up of an Archaeological Commission in 1868 by the Governor, Sir Hercules Robinson.

This was only a modest beginning and the work was confined to clearing and taking photographs. Further progress was hampered by the lack of funds and a permanent labour force. To the young Rhys Davids this kind of work was a labour of love unlike the routine duties of administration. A number of

notable sites were cleared namely, Ruwanvelisaya, Jetavana, Abhayagiri and Isurumuniya. These excavations provided him with the material to write his future research papers to the Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society.

In the course of his travel Rhys Davids had discovered a number of inscriptions in places such as Galle, Matara, Dambulla, Matale, Tamankaduwa, Anuradhapura and Padawiya. He realised that Ceylon was exceedingly rich in inscriptions and these if deciphered would unveil the drama of the island's past. For the successful deciphering of the inscriptions as many should be collected. In an article to the Ceylon Branch of the Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society:

He appealed to all readers for copies of inscriptions, even eye copies and suggested methods of sending facsimiles of inscriptions. He wrote a series of articles for the Ceylon Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society Journal from 1870-72, relating to several inscriptions found in Sri Lanka. These prove how well he was acquainted with the traditional literature of the island as well as with the philological works of the Ceylonese contemporaries like James de Alwis and Louis de Zoysa.

The Governor, who had taken a keen interest in oriental research was very impressed. The Governor had decided to collect books and ancient manuscripts lying in temple libraries with a view to establishing an oriental library in Colombo. Rhys Davids wished to enhance the scope of the work by adding them to his collection the island's epigraphical resources.

He had seen how valuable epigraphs were destroyed by the ravages of man and nature. He noticed that inscriptions were destroyed by chena cultivation, while at Dondra, writings were going under water due to sea erosion.

Meanwhile Sir Hercules Robinson had been succeeded as governor by Sir William Gregory who like his predecessor was an admirer of the island's ancient heritage. Soon after his appointment Gregory made an extensive tour of the Anuradhapura district in the company of Rhys Davids.

Rhys Davids' interest was not confined only to antiquities. As Assistant Government Agent of Anuradhapura he tried to improve the economic conditions of the people by fostering paddy cultivation, improving irrigation, introducing new crops like tobacco and cotton and also introducing cattle rearing.

Rhys Davids' diaries which are in the Sri Lanka National Archives give an idea of the various administrative functions which the Assistant Government Agent had to perform. However, everything did not go smoothly for the young civil servant for he was constantly pulled-up by his superior, the Government Agent, C. W. Twynham who kept a watchful eye on his subordinates.

The machinations of Twynham and a series of unfortunate events resulted in arousing the displeasure of the Governor and Rhys Davids' stay in Ceylon and his career in the Civil Service was brought to an abrupt end. The details of the circumstances that led to his dismissal which does not fall within the scope of this paper are given in Ananda Wickremaratne's work, *The Genesis of an Orientalist*.

Rhys Davids returned to England frustrated and humiliated. The Civil Service at the time was prestigious with considerable pecuniary advantages. This was lost to him for no fault of his own and apart from the sense of embitterment that he must certainly have felt he had no family resources to fall back on. He then studied law and was called to the bar in 1877. But his heart was elsewhere.

Legal career

A legal career, though lucrative did not interest him. His interests centred round Buddhism and the vast field of Pali canonical literature. His wife Caroline Rhys Davids left on record that during this phase of his life, "Rhys Davids was haunted and pursued by the spiritual legacy bequeathed to him from Ceylon". He embarked on his career of oriental scholarship, knowing fully well, its poor prospects and lack of proper remuneration.

The papers in the Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society (GB & I) in 1875 on "Inscriptions of Parakramabahu", "Sigiri, the lion rock", and "Two old Sinhalese Inscriptions" ushered the well equipped scholar to the field of research. These articles which were written for the Ceylon branch of the JRAS were printed in London. In 1877 he published in the *International Numismata Orientalia*, an essay on "The Ancient Coins and Measures of Ceylon".

His first book on Buddhism which he wrote for the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, in its series on non Christian religions, was a noteworthy one. It gives in compact form, the life of the Buddha, the essence of his teaching and the formation of the order of monks. Rhys Davids' works should be viewed

against the background of the prevailing English books on Buddhism written by missionaries like Spence Hardy and officials like Emerson Tennent which were based on comparatively recent Sinhala manuscripts and not on the Pali Canon and were also given to theological prejudices. Rhys Davids was the first to interpret and present to the Western world the Buddhism of the Pali Canon.

At the beginning of the twentieth century when Western Europe dominated the world, it was thought that supremacy would last for ever. Therefore only that which contributed to the rise of the Western Europe was considered as history and not the totality of human experience. The other great cultures of the world which pre-dated Europe such as India, China and Central America were not even supporting actors in the spectacular European drama. It was at such a time that Rhys Davids wrote *Buddhist India* with an insignificant corner of north eastern India as his focus. He visited the ancient Buddhist shrines of India and felt that a survey of the social and political conditions in which Buddhism arose was greatly needed as a setting for the Buddha's activities and the labours of his disciples.

Pali Text Society

Of all his innovative acts Rhys Davids is best known for the founding of the Pali Text Society in 1882 on the model of the English Text Society. He had the support of many distinguished scholars from England, France, Holland, Germany and the US who were interested in Oriental Studies. There were large collections of Buddhist manuscripts scattered in many libraries in Europe and plentiful in Sri Lanka.

It was proposed to publish them in the Roman script with English translations. In a report of the PTS, Rhys Davids' comments on the value of these manuscripts are given: "They are our best authorities for the early history of that interesting system of religion so nearly allied to some of the latest speculations among ourselves, and which has influenced so powerfully, and for so long a time, so great a proportion of the human race - the system of religion which we now call Buddhism".

Despite their value Pali literature was not a popular field of study for reasons which Rhys Davids was painfully aware. It was not financially rewarding. Rhys Davids undertook the work of editing and publishing the Pali texts as a labour of love and in this he had the unstinted support of the scholar monks of

Sri Lanka. In the PTS report of 1882 he wrote as follows: "In the spring of 1882 there came the welcome intelligence that more than seventy of the most important of the members of the Buddhist Order in Ceylon had shown their appreciation of the work, and their trust in its promoters, by subscribing in advance to the cost of the printing.

It is no slight thing that an established clergy should have come forward so readily to support the publication of the sacred books of their religion in an alien alphabet by scholars of an alien faith. We need not perhaps be surprised that so liberal minded a body as the Buddhist Bhikkhus should have acted so". Unlike many other Englishmen of his day Rhys Davids had great regard for the Buddhist Sangha, won their confidence and they in turn gave them every form of support and guidance.

Under Rhys Davids and his equally eminent wife and helpmate, Caroline, the PTS grew in strength; its finances were stabilised and its output was prolific. At the time of his death the Society had issued 64 separate texts in ninety four volumes extending over 26,000 pages besides many important articles and notes by European and Oriental scholars.

The service rendered by the PTS to the cause of Buddhism in the West is inestimable and the Buddhist World owes a deep debt of gratitude to Rhys Davids for his untiring efforts towards preserving the Pali Canon for posterity.

While engaged in the work of the PTS he was active in the Royal Asiatic Society as well. He was first an office bearer and in 1887 was unanimously elected by the Royal Asiatic Society Council to be the Secretary. As such he had many responsibilities to shoulder.

In addition to printing and publishing the journal, he had to manage the Society's finances, keep accounts and also function as Librarian for which he was paid pounds 200 and residential facilities.

During this period (1882-1904) he was Professor of Pali in the University of London, a post which carried no fixed salary, other than lecture fees. Rhys Davids was appalled at the dismal state of Oriental learning in England due to the fact that higher education was often funded by private benefactors according to whose wishes the funds had to be administered.

Therefore the traditional disciplines like theology, classics and mathematics were heavily endowed while new studies had to struggle on under great financial

stress. In his introduction to Buddhist India he complains, "There is no chair of Assyriology, for instance, in England and whereas in Paris, Berlin, in St. Petersburg, in Vienna, there are great seminaries of Oriental learning, we see in London the amazing absurdity of unpaid professors obliged to devote to earning otherwise of their living, the time they ought to give to teaching or research.

And throughout England, for instance, the state of things is as bad. In all England for instance, there are two chairs of Sanskrit. In Germany the government provides for more than twenty - just as if Germany's interest in India were more than ten times as ours.

"The keen interest in Oriental learning that prevailed in the continent was not evident in Great Britain. Perhaps the British were more keen on exploiting the wealth of the colonies, rather than their culture. Pali and Buddhist Studies is not a marketable commodity even in Sri Lanka today and the situation was not very different in Britain in Rhys Davids' time.

Oriental School in London

The realisation prompted the Royal Asiatic Society and Rhys Davids to take up the cause of Oriental learning and urge the government to establish an Oriental School in the London University. It was pointed out that a knowledge of Eastern language, literature and history would be helpful for the better administration of the Raj.

There was already a widening gap in India between the rulers and the ruled and it was indicated that a familiarity with Eastern cultures would help officials to view certain issues with sympathy. As a result of the vigorous agitation of the Royal Asiatic Society and Rhys Davids, the government accepted the proposal for an independent oriental school in 1908.

Considering the dozens of Sri Lankan scholars who have entered the portals of the London School of Oriental (and later) African studies during the last 100 years and benefited from its concentration of academic resources, it is clear that Rhys Davids' labour has paid rich dividends in Sri Lanka. His contribution to this cause is now forgotten but even today there is a Senior Fellowship in Pali, Sinhalese and Theravada Buddhism reserved for a Sri Lankan in the School of Oriental and African studies.

While being the energetic secretary of the Royal Asiatic Society, the President of the PTS, Professor of Pali in the University of London, Rhys Davids continued with his translations and research work. His

intuitive knowledge of Pali and Buddhism is reflected in his remarkable translations in which each Sutta is preceded by an introduction containing material of sociological, literary and philological interest.

In 1905 he resigned from the Royal Asiatic Society to accept the Chair of Comparative Religion in the University of Manchester of which he was the first distinguished incumbent. Besides his new position provided him with a reasonable income.

Rhys Davids had expressed bitterness over the fact that scholars are shabbily treated by society; they are poor and on that account despised. Manchester however gave Rhys Davids academic status and monetary rewards but it was the opinion of many that the University gained more by Rhys Davids' presence than vice versa. In 1905 when Rhys Davids left London to reside near Manchester the President of the Royal Asiatic Society made a presentation on behalf of a large number of members.

His reply shows Rhys Davids' scholarly humility and his concern regarding the continuation of the work he had initiated. "Whatever work I have been able to accomplish on the history of thought in India, or towards the publication and elucidation of the historically important literature of the early Buddhists, will I hope soon be superseded by better work, done partly on the basis of those labours. And the greater my success in inducing other scholars to devote their attention to those matters, the sooner will that desirable end be reached."

Continuing his speech Rhys Davids made a strong case for the study of humanities specially, Oriental studies which is of relevance to this day, when even in the universities of Sri Lanka, Pali and Sanskrit have become endangered disciplines. "The study of nature looms so much more largely in the public eye than the study of man, that our own pursuits and specially the history of philosophy, literature and religion, of economic and social institutions in the East seem to be left out in the cold.

We have no quarrel with science - quite the contrary. But we have a reasonable hope that the contempt in which Orientalism is now regarded is but a passing phase and that our work is really helpful in a modest way, to that increase of knowledge, broadening of ideas, which is the very basis of the welfare and progress of mankind."

At Manchester, while teaching the history of religions Rhys Davids found the time to put out a book, Early Buddhism (1908) and a chapter for The

Cambridge History of India on the Early History of Buddhism. In the meantime he was concentrating on the preparation of the Pali Dictionary for which the PTS had provided so much of fresh material. There were many European scholars who were interested in the same project and it was hoped at the Oriental Congress at Copenhagen, in 1908 that a scheme of international cooperation could be organised.

Certain letters were entrusted to fellow workers. The work did not progress according to schedule and finally with the outbreak of the war all academic links with Germany were severed and the execution of the plan devolved on the shoulders of Rhys Davids alone. His greatest achievement was the Pali English Dictionary on which he laboured for 40 years with the collaboration of other renowned scholars. Unfortunately he died before he could finish his work but the task was completed by his pupil W. Stede.

In 1915 at the age of 72 Rhys Davids left Manchester. Many years before the University of Edinburgh conferred on him a LLD and Manchester made him a Doctor of Letters. Copenhagen and Sheffield enrolled him as a Doctor of Science. In 1902 he had been one of the original founders of the British Academy.

The service that Rhys Davids rendered to the Buddhists of Sri Lanka cannot be over estimated. The late nineteenth century was the time that Sri Lanka was facing the full onslaught of Christian missionary activity. The Buddhists did not have the organisational strength or the political and economic clout to face this challenge, though they deeply resented the attacks which missionary organisations made on Buddhism in their publications and on public platforms.

Intellectual strength

In this situation western scholars of the calibre of Rhys Davids was a great source of intellectual strength to the Buddhists of Sri Lanka and also infused them with a sense of dignity and self respect

at a time when they were weighed down by their own inferiority. He completely lacked racial prejudice and in his Hibbert lectures given in the USA, he refers to his teacher Yatramulle, "Go and talk to the yellow robed and tonsured recluse - not of course through an interpreter, or out of a book of phrases: you must know not only his language but something of Buddhist ideas; and you must speak to him as man to man, not as the wise to the barbarian. You will certainly be courteous; for whatever else a Buddhist Bhikkhu may be, he will be sure to give proof of courtesy and a dignified demeanour. And it will be strange if you do not find a new world of thought and of feeling opening out before you."

Modest and humane

In spite of his academic distinctions Rhys Davids was a modest and humane person. He shared the fruits of his research very generously with his colleagues; he was particularly generous to young scholars and pupils and was forgiving in the face of misunderstandings. Rhys Davids was convinced of the Buddhist truth of Dukkha or Sorrow, having experienced the early demise of his mother, the unexpected and humiliating dismissal at the beginning of his career, frequent bouts of ill health, the result of contracting malaria in Ceylon and the final devastating blow when his brilliant and only son left Eton to join the Air Service and was killed in a crash. He refers to the concept of Anicca Impermanence frequently, and even the rise and fall of nations seemed to him a manifestation of that idea.

It is said that Rhys Davids was only excelled by his wife Caroline, an eminent Orientalist in her own right, who gradually shared more and more of his responsibilities ever since she married him in 1894 and after his death in 1922 became the Professor of Buddhist Philosophy at the University of London and also President of the P. T. S. Her vast contribution to Pali Studies which is the crowning glory of her husband's work deserve a separate study.