

S. MAHINDA THERO: THE SIKKIMESE  
WHO GAVE LANKANS THEIR FREEDOM SONG<sup>1</sup>

PEMA WANGCHUK DORJEE  
*Gangtok*

Poems penned by S. Mahinda<sup>2</sup> are celebrated to this day as Freedom Songs<sup>3</sup> in the island nation of Sri Lanka. Lankan historians are unanimous in endorsing these verses as having infused the Lankan freedom struggle of the late 1930's through to the 1940's, with the courage, strength and impetus required by the movement to inspire nationalism among the people and wrest freedom from British colonial rule. The man himself remains an enigma: a monk who engaged in the Sri Lankan freedom struggle—but not as a politician as is common there—and at a more community and social level which is rare anywhere in the world. He spoke of national pride and responsibility with such conviction and mass appeal that even the increasingly chauvinistic present-day politics of Sri Lanka tend to invoke his poems as political slogans. But S. Mahinda was not a Sri Lankan by birth, he was of Sikkim extract, a young lad who left home in the Himalayas when he was 12 and achieved iconic status in a country beyond India's southernmost tip.

*Childhood*

Recognised in Sri Lanka as 'Tibet Jathika S. Mahinda Thero,'<sup>4</sup> he was born Pempa Thondup (more commonly known Sarki Tshering) in 1901 into the Shalngo family of Sikkim which traces its ancestry back to Khye Bumsa's grandson Guru Tashi to whom even the royal family of Sikkim traces its lineage.

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<sup>1</sup> This article would not have been possible without the felicity with which Dr. T.R. Gyatso of Gangtok shared information on his granduncle S. Mahinda collected by his family over the years. Thank you.

<sup>2</sup> Although S. Mahinda was born Pempa Thondup and was also known as Sarki Tshering, this article refers to him throughout as S. Mahinda because that is the name he took and also to avoid confusion.

<sup>3</sup> S. Mahinda's collection of poems invoking Lankan nationalism is famous as 'Nidhase Dahana' (mantram of independence).

<sup>4</sup> 'Tibet Jathika' is probably a signifier of S. Mahinda's Tibetan ethnicity and the 'S' in his name is for Sikkim. Sri Lankan sources refer to him unanimously as Sikkim Mahinda.

S. Mahinda belonged to a generation of siblings who definitely had a difficult life, but still managed to seek destinies which remain unrivalled. His eldest brother from his father, Shalngo Nimpenjo's first marriage, was Kazi Dawa Samdup, 34 years his elder, and a celebrated translator of Tibetan scripts. From the second marriage were born three sons and a daughter, family records reveal. Sarki Tshering [S. Mahinda] was the middle son, his elder brother, Phurba Dhondup preceded him to Sri Lanka to study Theravada Buddhism and is still remembered there as Sikkim Punnaji. The youngest, Bhyapo, sought a completely diverse career—he changed his name to sound more Gorkha and joined the British Army during the First World War. He died in action in Mesopotamia.

While Pempa Thondup might have been the name given to S. Mahinda by religious elders on birth, he is recorded in most transactions of the time, and in the family records, as Sarki Tshering.

Not much is known about the early life of the siblings, but it is reasonably well established that they were orphaned young. Records put together by the family suggest that the younger siblings were brought up by relatives, but no specifics are readily at hand on their early upbringing.

Some Sri Lankan sources, specially the more celebratory treatises to S. Mahinda, mention that his father was the head monk of the Bhutia Busty Monastery in Darjeeling. This remains unsubstantiated, but subsequent Sri Lankan references tease out details which suggest that S. Mahinda's family must have been associated with the monastery at Ging in Darjeeling instead. These narratives of S. Mahinda's early life contend that his father was a monk driven to despair when his monastery was moved away from its original location in Darjeeling<sup>5</sup> on the complaint of British residents, specially the nearby church, that the 'noise' of prayers at the monastery disturbed the 'tranquillity' of the area. This was the reason why the Sangchen Thong Delling Monastery is said to have been relocated to Ging in 1879.<sup>6</sup> More commonly known as the Ging Monastery, this is a branch of the Pemayangtse Monastery, and since the Shalngo family shares its bloodline with the royal family of Sikkim, they would have been more closely associated with the Ging

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<sup>5</sup> Where the Gorkha Rangmanch at the end of Mall, below St Andrew's Church, stands now in Darjeeling.

<sup>6</sup> This is when the new site was allotted to the monastery for relocation. Some sources mention that the monastery itself was completed only in 1898.

Monastery.<sup>7</sup> This, incidentally, is also the area where Kazi Dawa Samdup grew up. As for the Sri Lankan invocation of this episode, one must bear in mind that the Lankan freedom struggle was essentially mounted as a confrontation to the Christian missionary work underway in the island; the chance to flesh out a Buddhist-Christian conflict in faraway Darjeeling in the life of the most celebrated national hero would be too tempting to pass up, especially since most of the write-ups on S. Mahinda even in Sri Lankan mainstream media continue to be written by Theravada monks.

By the time S. Mahinda was orphaned, his eldest brother, Kazi Dawa Samdup, had already served a rewarding career with the British India administration and was in Sikkim as Headmaster of the Sikkim State Bhutia Boarding School in Gangtok, a charge he took over in 1905. The school itself was opened on 16 May 1906 with 16 boys (*History of Sikkim* 1908).<sup>8</sup> S. Mahinda, barely four or five years old at the time, would have been younger than the regular school-joining age of the time, but his elder brother must have been part of what the *History of Sikkim* introduces as the “nucleus of the school.” The school progressed well under Kazi Dawa Samdup and the future king of Sikkim, Tashi Namgyal, was also enrolled there a few years later. This could have coincided with when S. Mahinda came of school-going age. This mention is included here because one of the names that many Sri Lankan students continue to associate as S. Mahinda’s ‘Sikkimese’ name is—Tashi Namgyal, recorded in all Sri Lankan text books as ‘SK Tasilmgyal!’<sup>9</sup>

A recently published Sinhala book on S. Mahinda’s childhood conjectures an interesting explanation for this confusion:

It [the Sikkim State Bhutia Boarding School] was no doubt an elite school as royalty itself had been admitted to it. The prince’s name was S.K. Thashinamgapal and Ven. Mahinda, his robes no obstacle to play his pranks, had used this name as a pseudonym here. When Ven. Kamalsiri Thera had inquired in Sikkim as to a person who carried this

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<sup>7</sup> While the monastery at Ging is a branch of the Pemayangtse Monastery of West Sikkim and belongs to the Nyingmapa school of Buddhism, the ‘Bhutia Busty Monastery’ belongs to the Kagyu lineage and comes under the Phodong Monastery of North Sikkim.

<sup>8</sup> The *History of Sikkim* (1908) by Chogyal Thutob Namgyal and Maharani Yishey Dolma, translated by Kazi Dausamdub. Unpublished typescript.

<sup>9</sup> An obvious corruption of Sikkim Kumar Tashi Namgyal. Although he would become king in 1914, till then Tashi Namgyal was only a prince. At the time when he was enrolled into the Bhutia Boarding School, Sidkeong Tulku was the Crown Prince of Sikkim.

name the people there had laughed and said that was the name of the last king of Sikkim.<sup>10</sup>

A biography of S. Mahinda [in Sinhalese], released on his death anniversary on 16 March, 2009, mentions that S. Mahinda and ‘Sikkim Kumar’ Tashi Namgyal were friends at school. Unfortunately, there are no local references on this friendship, but it can be reasonably surmised that since they joined the Bhutia Boarding School at around the same time, even though Tashi Namgyal was at least nine years his senior, they would also have been friends. This is interesting because, family records also suggest that when S. Mahinda returned to Sikkim in 1920, by when Tashi Namgyal was king, he was offered appointment here as a Tibetan Teacher. S. Mahinda did not take up the offer and returned the same year to Sri Lanka.

### *To Ceylon*

Unfortunately, there is not much literature available on Mahayana Sikkim’s interactions with the Hinayana form of Buddhism through Sikkim or the Sikkim-Sri Lanka connection, even though it was obviously accidental and through secondary sources and indirect experiences. There was however substantial exchange in the first decade-and-a-half of the twentieth century and it was through this connection that S. Mahinda discovered Ceylon and the Theravada form of Buddhism which was in stark contrast to the Mahayana Buddhism that his eldest brother was a respected exponent on.

Sometime in 1913-14, three boys from Sikkim took the train from Darjeeling to Kolkata and then a steamer to Ceylon. Records put together by the Cultural Affairs & Heritage Department of the State Government of Sikkim suggest that Sarki Tshering took this journey along with his elder brother Phurba Dhondup and another youth from Pendam village in East Sikkim, Tempa Rinzing Lepcha. The same record mentions that they were chaperoned to Ceylon by Reverend Kali Kumar.

But why was Sikkim sending students to study Theravada Buddhism and Pali in Ceylon?

As mentioned, there are only secondary sources available to explain this, and even these make only passing references. Coming under British India domination as a Protectorate State in 1861, by the turn of the century, and especially after the Younghusband Mission to Tibet in

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<sup>10</sup> Translation included in “Ven. Tibet S. Mahinda’s childhood,” by Padma Edirisinghe, published in Daily News, Sri Lanka, 20 May, 2009.

1904, Sikkim offered convenient access to Western Buddhist scholars. Darjeeling had already developed as a popular tourist destination and offered an agreeable stopover for Hinayana scholars researching in Burma and travelling onwards to Ceylon by way of Calcutta. Also, the Crown Prince Sidkeong Namgyal, who had received a reasonably well arranged Western education and was well travelled, was experimenting with reforms in Sikkim. By 1912, he was already officially in charge of education and ecclesiastical affairs, and already mooting monastic reforms. Many western travellers who came by Sikkim and met him have remarked how he was keen to reform the manner in which Buddhism was pursued in Sikkim. Even Sri Lankan sources mention that S. Mahinda was part of an experiment to groom Sikkimese youth in the Hinayana form of Buddhism so that they could return and adapt its stricter codes to Sikkim.

The *History of Sikkim* records that among the dignitaries present for the inauguration of the Bhutia Boarding School in 1906 was a “Buddhist scholar named Dharmananda (Budhopasak).” This must be Acharya Dharmananda Damodar Kosambi, a Goan who had studied Pali in Ceylon, was an ordained Theravada monk and was in neighbouring Darjeeling in 1906. He would go on to become more famous as the scholar under whose influence Dr. BR Ambedkar selected Buddhism when he decided to change his religion. Interestingly, Dharmananda was also friends with a German Bhikku, Nyanatiloka Mahathera,<sup>11</sup> an acquaintance he made while studying Buddhist texts in Burma where Nyanatiloka was studying to become a monk.

This link perhaps explains why upon their arrival in Ceylon in 1914, S. Mahinda and his brother were admitted to the Island Hermitage<sup>12</sup> started by Nyanatiloka in 1911. Exact records, as mentioned, have remained difficult to source, but the 1929 edition of *The Buddhist Annual of Ceylon*, makes a very interesting comment while introducing the Island Hermitage.<sup>13</sup> An extract from this article reads: “This picturesque little island in the midst of the palm-bordered Ratgama Lake... is the seat of a little band of European and Asiatic Buddhist monks under the leadership of Ven. Nyanatiloka Thera.”

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<sup>11</sup> Nyanatiloka Mahathera (February 19, 1878, Wiesbaden, Germany—May 28, 1957, Colombo, Ceylon), born, Anton Gueth, was the first non-British European in modern times to become a Buddhist monk.

<sup>12</sup> Located in midst of the palm-bordered Ratgama Lake near Dodanduwa in the Galle district of southern Sri Lanka.

<sup>13</sup> *The Buddhist Annual of Ceylon*, Vol. 3, No. 3; 2473/ 1929, p.189.

The 'Asiatic Buddhists' mentioned here have to be the trio from Sikkim since there are no records of the Island Hermitage having any other 'Asiatic Buddhists' in its rolls.

Family records suggest that S. Mahinda's elder brother, Phurba Dhondup [Sikkim Punnaji], preceded him to Ceylon and that S. Mahinda volunteered to follow him there when a new opening was announced. One of the brothers arriving ahead also explains frequent references in Sri Lankan sources of how the brothers helped set up the Island Hermitage. If this had indeed been the case, then it also explains the conflicting dates in circulation for S. Mahinda's arrival in Ceylon which shift between 1912 and 1914. It is probable that Phurba Dhondup arrived in 1912 and S. Mahinda followed in 1914.

*Through the war years*

The timing of S. Mahinda's arrival in Ceylon was however very unfortunate. No sooner had he arrived there that the First World War broke out. German monks in Sri Lanka were first kept under surveillance at the Island Hermitage itself and then incarcerated at the Diyatalawa Army Camp.<sup>14</sup> Nyanatiloka was subsequently shipped away to a prison camp in Australia, thence to China, repatriated to Germany and allowed back to Ceylon only a decade later in 1926.

How the young S. Mahinda and his brother managed to get through this traumatic phase remains only vaguely known. Some Sri Lankan sources record that they were interned along with Nyanatiloka at Diyatalawa. It is possible that when the German monk was being prepared for further internment in Australia, the British authorities realised that citizens of a Protectorate State [Sikkim] posed no threat and released S. Mahinda and his brother.

Sri Lankan sources also quote archival records from Sikkim as confirming that S. Mahinda received an annual stipend of Rs. 6 while he was studying in Ceylon. Even a century ago, this would have hardly have been enough to get by on and how regularly this must have been sent during the war years is also open to speculation. These years must have definitely then been difficult times for the brothers. The only home they knew in Sri Lanka was the Island Hermitage, and with Nyanatiloka and his European disciples sent away, the two brothers would have been left disoriented and without patrons. All this, even

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<sup>14</sup> Diyatalawa is a garrison town in the central highlands of Sri Lanka, in the Badulla District of Uva Province.

before he could settle down in an alien land with its alien culture, faith and unfamiliar language.

*Into monkhood*

S. Mahinda soon found himself back in Dodanduwa, in the vicinity of the Island Hermitage he was familiar with. Family sources record that he spent the war years living in a temporary shed at Dodanduwa, moving between monasteries at Matara, Hikkaduwa, Gonapinuwela and Haputale in the vicinity. These records also inform that by the time the war ended, S. Mahinda's brother had returned home, given up the robes and settled down to a lay life in Kalimpong. His youngest brother, as mentioned earlier, had been killed in action in Mesopotamia. Even the Crown Prince of Sikkim, Sidkeong Tulku, who had sponsored S. Mahinda's departure to Sri Lanka, was no more, having ruled for a brief 10 months in 1914 and died. S. Mahinda was left truly alone in Sri Lanka.

Although there are no records at hand authenticating who initiated S. Mahinda as a novice monk on his arrival in Sri Lanka, since he was based at the Island Hermitage, it must have been Nyanatiloka, which, in turn, must lead to the conclusion that he was introduced to the Theravada school of Buddhism under the Amarapura sect.<sup>15</sup> This reference is important because S. Mahinda enjoyed the rare luxury of moving from one sect to another as he progressed in his pursuit of understanding faith and refining his religious grounding. His poetry celebrates his initial grooming as an Amarapura novice monk in that his writings always addressed the people, spoke of their plight, responsibilities and pride. None of the translations of S. Mahinda's poetry accessed at the time of writing this update reflects any subservience to the State or paeans to the powers that be; his poems were about patriotism and ideas of nationalism, but never about leaders and icons. S. Mahinda was born in a monarchy and lived under a colonial regime, both systems where celebratory tributes were often made to the 'masters' by poets. To find this characteristic replaced by a firm sensitivity towards the sentiments of the lay people in S.

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<sup>15</sup> The Amarapura Niyaka (school/sect) is a Sri Lankan monastic fraternity founded in 1800. It sources its name from the city of Amarapura, the former Burmese capital. The Amarapura Niyaka was a kind of a reform movement against the prevalent form of Buddhism in Sri Lanka at the time which had restricted ordination on caste lines. The Amarapura Niyaka opened its doors to all castes and people. It also revolutionised the social dynamics of faith in Sri Lanka in that it received patronage from the 'middle class' and not the royalty or the government.

Mahinda's poetry, convinces one that this instinct was honed by the Amarapura school of thought which, while it did not pursue power or riches, sought to play the role of the moral anchor for society.

At the close of WWI, S. Mahinda was still a Samanera,<sup>16</sup> but as the lad grew more familiar with monasteries and the teachings accessible to him, he gravitated towards the Saraswati Mandapa Pirivena at Sailabimbaramaya near Dodanduwa. It was here that S. Mahinda was ordained as a monk under the tutelage of Ratgama Siri Culasumana.

The Theravada rules require an incumbent to be at least 20 years of age before he can be ordained as a monk. This would mean that S. Mahinda lived as Samanera at least till 1920-21. How he spent what must have been the rather confusing and displaced years between 1914 and 1920, remains unclear. The inability to access sources in Sri Lanka (most of which would be in Sinhala) leave events in S. Mahinda's life through these years rather hazy. Information collected by his descendents in Sikkim suggests that he lived and studied in Colombo with his elder brother through some of the war years. Available sources in Sri Lanka however date his arrival in Colombo and his further studies there to the years after he had received his ordination. It might be a safe guess then to suggest that S. Mahinda remained in Dodanduwa and studied at Sailabimbaramaya, where he also received his ordination and continued his studies for a while, before proceeding towards Colombo.

It also appears that before taking his vows, S. Mahinda returned to Sikkim on his only recorded visit since leaving for Sri Lanka. Records put together by the Cultural Affairs & Heritage Department of Sikkim inform that S. Mahinda returned to Sikkim in the year 1920. While here, he was offered employment by Chogyal Tashi Namgyal as a teacher at a Gangtok school, an offer he turned down and returned to Sri Lanka. It was upon his return from Sikkim to Sri Lanka, that he is believed to have taken full ordination and entered the monk body.

Sri Lankan sources highlight that his years at the Saraswati Mandapa Pirivena were of intense learning, a place where he gained proficiency in Pali, Sanskrit and Sinhala languages and acquired enviable erudition in the Buddha Dhamma. Remarkably for a non-native Sinhala speaker, he was among the most notable in his group as an orator, a skill he appears to have developed even before he discovered poetry. His being noticed among the pupils at Saraswati Mandapa Pirivena is a tribute to his scholarship because studying alongside him was a generation of Sri Lanka monks, a sizeable number

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<sup>16</sup> Novice Theravada monk.



of whom would go on to head monasteries and schools across the country and beyond in later years. Lankan sources are unanimous in revealing that it was also at this monastery that S. Mahinda discovered poetry when he came in contact with an obscure poet-monk Sri Jinaratane who resided in a hut next to S. Mahinda's.

As he continued his studies and practised his poetry, an opportunity arrived to shift to a new place. He found a mentor in Makada Dhirananda Thero and moved into his monastery in Saugatavasa on Slave Island near Colombo. Here he immersed himself into refining his grasp over Sinhala, Pali and Sanskrit and also began learning English. Some of his earliest published works in magazines and other periodicals date back to this time. He was also gaining in popularity for his religious discourses which were eagerly subscribed and much appreciated.

It was in the course of delivering such sermons that S. Mahinda found himself, sometime in mid-1930, at the Purana Rajamaha Vihara, Ratmalana, near Colombo. Among his audience on the day was the monastery's head, Dharmarama Indrajyoti Nayaka Thero, who was so impressed by the erudition of this foreigner monk that he invited him to study and reside at his monastery. Dharmarama Nayaka Thero was an icon of his times and S. Mahinda was captivated by the expanse of his learning and wisdom and accepted the offer. The same year, with Dharmarama Indrajyoti Nayaka as his main tutor, S. Mahinda took his second ordination as a monk. As his introducer to the faith (preceptor), he had Dharmananda Nayaka Thero. Interestingly, S. Mahinda's second initiation<sup>17</sup> was under the Siyamopali Niyaka<sup>18</sup>, which, like the Amarapura Niyaka that S. Mahinda had his first ordination under, was also reform-oriented in its genesis.

This association with the two masters saw S. Mahinda bloom as a scholar and develop into a poet with a strong social involvement.

Dharmarama and Dharmananda were visionary scholars of Sanskrit and Pali and had done substantial work in translating texts from these languages into Sinhala. Dharmarama Thero is reputed to have developed scholastic traditions in Sinhala to such a refined level that he is revered to this day as the scholar who saved the language and its literature from further decay. This was a trend that S. Mahinda would sustain, and apart from his poems which make him popular among the Sri Lankan laity, the religious bodies there still refer to the substantial

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<sup>17</sup> Dated in some Sri Lankan sources as having taken place on 16 June, 1930.

<sup>18</sup> Also known as Siam Niyaka, named after the Thai monk who introduced it to Sri Lanka in the late eighteenth century.

amount of translations he worked on. Dharmarama, and Dharmananda after him, were also heads of the Vidyalankara Pirivena in Sri Lanka. This was a chain of religious schools (open to both monks and lay persons) with a progressive attitude much beyond its times. The school encouraged experimentation with modern literary forms, and, in a marked departure from the regulated scholastics of religious schools, adopted methods of instructions which promoted creativity in literature and art—traits which perhaps encouraged S. Mahinda to write more poetry. Its syllabus included, apart from Buddhism, Pali, Sinhala and Sanskrit, also subjects like History, Archaeology, Arithmetic, English, Tamil, Geography and Psychology. The Vidyalankara Pirivena also participated in active political and social agitation and encouraged monks to get involved in social works and reform, characteristics which define S. Mahinda's poetry.

While at the Ratmalana Rajamaha Vihara, S. Mahinda devoted himself to religious studies and cleared his preliminary and middle Pracin examinations. He cleared his higher ordination within a year from the Malwatte monastery in Kandy, the monastery which along with the Asgiriya monastery there, is considered the Centre of Buddhism in Sri Lanka and are also the most important monasteries of Siyampoli sect into which S. Mahinda was now ordained. With his higher ordination, he received the title 'Wahala Naga.'

In the four years that he was based at Ratmalana Rajamaha Vihara, he also studied at the Mahabodhi College in Colombo and acquired a substantial reputation as a scholar. It was perhaps this reputation that earned him an appointment as a lecturer at the renowned Ananda College in Colombo. In continuing recognition of his erudition, he was handed the charge to teach three subjects—Pali, Buddhism, and remarkably, again, for a non-native speaker, Sinhala. When he accepted his chair at Ananda College, S. Mahinda moved back to his Slave Island monastery which was closer to the college. The Ananda College website continues to highlight to this day that S. Mahinda was one of the faculty who taught there. S. Mahinda, however, remained on the job only for two years and moved on in 1936 to Maha Bellana in Punadura to the south of Colombo, the place that would be his home for the remaining 15 years of his life.

#### *Among the people*

When S. Mahinda moved to Maha Bellana, he took up quarters in the Sri Sudharnarama Temple there. The family records mention that this monastery belonged to one of his teachers, but does not specify which.

S. Mahinda began work here by developing the temple, starting by erecting a proper boundary wall for the monastery, then raising funds to construct a new hostel for the monks, a preaching hall for the people. Then began his involvement in the welfare of the people in his immediate vicinity. The process started with S. Mahinda starting a Sunday Dhamma School at the monastery, recorded in some Sri Lanka texts as Nawalanka Dhamma School. As enrolment increased, S. Mahinda added an English School to service the local population. As his interaction with the lay people grew, so did the scale of his assistance in alleviating their travails. Soon, S. Mahinda was raising funds to setup a dispensary for free distribution of medicines among the underprivileged. This he did ingeniously by setting up a series of collection centres stretching from Maha Bellana to Colombo where people could donate medicines for onwards distribution to those who could not afford it.

These were still engagements at a very social service level, but the winds of change were already sweeping through the island and a resistance developing against British colonial rule. Within a year of his arrival in Sri Lanka, the nation witnessed its first anti-British rioting in 1915 and this must surely have left an impression on S. Mahinda especially since the movement was spearheaded by monks. By the time he arrived in Maha Bellana, the Sri Lankan freedom struggle was more organised and the presence of monk representatives in the struggle very pronounced. It was only a matter time then, that S. Mahinda found himself positioned in a more confrontationist stance against the British.

As part of his social work in the area, he brought the Temperance Movement to Punadura. The temperance movement in Sri Lanka was, like in the rest of the world, positioned against the sale and consumption of alcohol. In Sri Lanka it acquired a nationalist position because the British regime saw it as a direct confrontation—the exchequer was earning substantial revenue through excise tax. Records indicate that this movement was very successfully led by S. Mahinda in Maha Bellana.

Next came the more dramatic exhibition aimed at discouraging people from consuming beef, which again, the British establishment was seeking to promote in the area (some Sri Lankan records contend that this was to defile Buddhism and assist the Christian missionary work afoot across the island). To get his appeal across to the people, S. Mahinda arranged for a gigantic procession of oxen through town, reminding people of the life they snuffed out when they put meat on their tables and highlighting the service these animals render. This one

initiative has achieved legendary status in Sri Lankan historiography, with reference included whenever S. Mahinda is referred to in connection with more than his poetic achievements.

He also worked hard at reviving interest in and understanding of the Dhamma among the people. The Sunday School was already doing reasonably well, and then S. Mahinda brought to Maha Bellana the unique to Sri Lanka form of sermons—the Suvisi Vivarana, sermons which include a great deal of singing and dancing. These can sometimes last up to six days, but S. Mahinda played these out for an entire month, the song and dance routines sharing the stage with an exhibition of L.T.P. Manjushri's Suvisi Vivarana series of paintings.<sup>19</sup>

All this while, S. Mahinda was also producing copious amounts of translation works and revolutionary poetry.

### *The national poet*

As mentioned earlier, S. Mahinda was in Sri Lanka through the turbulent times of two World Wars and a resurgence of the freedom struggle. The Sri Lanka freedom movement was not among the best coordinated in the early 1930's, plagued as it was with sectional, regional and ideological differences. The involvement of the lay people was still hesitant with too many distractions, from famine to wars, leaving the movement uninspired as much as in invoking Lankan pride to marshal mass support was concerned.

At around this juncture, S. Mahinda's patriotism-fuelled poetry started getting published and were soon being picked up by leaders of the freedom struggle for wider circulation of the inspiring verses. S. Mahinda's poetry consistently sought out inherent instincts of nationalism and faith and commandeered these to address the need for the people to stand up and claim their freedom.

A rough translation of one of his verses is suggestive of the tone of his writings:

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<sup>19</sup> The L.T.P. Manjushri–S. Mahinda association is very interesting one. Manjushri was a year younger than S. Mahinda and joined the Sangha, like S. Mahinda, at the age of around 13. Like S. Mahinda left for foreign shores and found his faith, so did Manjushri, who went to Shantiniketan in West Bengal to study Chinese. There he also discovered art, and like Mahinda used his poetry, Manjushri used his brush and is today recognised as the most significant modern artists of Sri Lanka. Like S. Mahinda translated, Manjushri travelled through Sri Lanka, visiting monasteries and making copies of paintings there. In many cases, Manjushri's copies are the only evidence left of the original art.

*Es Gedi Dekata Hena Gahalada Sihalune...  
Ennu Idiriyata Nethahoth Nidahasak Nehe*

Oh! Sinhala folk, are your eyes too bedazzled by lightning...  
That you cannot even see—unless you step up, there can be no freedom<sup>20</sup>

Unfortunately, English translations of S. Mahinda's works have not been attempted yet and only snatches of his poetry can be accessed by non-Sinhala speakers. What can be ascertained though is that S. Mahinda was already an established poet when he arrived in Maha Bellena in 1936.

In 1935, when a group of young Sri Lankan poets got together for an informal meet in Colombo, they ended with a resolution to form an organisation under which to collaborate and hark in a new era of Sinhala poetry. The Colombo Kavi Samajaya (Colombo Poetry Association) was born out of this meeting and the young poets unanimously decided to have S. Mahinda as the Association's first patron; S. Mahinda accepted the offer.<sup>21</sup>

His powerful verses triggered unrivalled pride and patriotism among the Sri Lankans and much has been written on this aspect of S. Mahinda's contribution to the Sri Lankan nation. It is also in this role of a Patriot Poet that he receives universal celebration in the country. His statue stands on the road leading out of Ceylon railway station towards Maha Bellana and commemorative stamps have been issued by Sri Lanka to celebrate his memory. Stories from his life are included in Sri Lankan textbooks and his poems form part of the syllabus there. Every Sri Lankan student knows of S. Mahinda and most can recite his poems by heart. Many also have childhood memories of being lulled to sleep by lullabies composed by this virtual polymath. He is also credited with having developed children's literature in Sinhala and many of his rhymes are aptly the favourites of the young to this day. Even many of his patriotic poems were directly addressed to the young, like this one:

*Nidahasa Maha Muhudak ve  
Ebawa Sihikota Melove  
Ebawa Sihikota Melove  
Yutukama Itukalayutu ve*<sup>22</sup>

<sup>20</sup> "Ven. S. Mahinda and the Dalai Lama," published in Daily Mirror, Colombo, 16 April, 2008.

<sup>21</sup> "Sixty Six Years of Sinhala Poetry," by Mervun Senaratne, Daily News, Colombo, 12 January 2002.

<sup>22</sup> Facebook page dedicated to Tibet Jathika S. Mahinda Thera.

If the Ocean is Freedom  
 Its fount is the baby in the cradle  
 A child who has learned to care for the motherland  
 From the affection his mother indulged in him

An interesting anecdote traced down by his family in Sikkim relates to the All Ceylon Verse Competition held at the Royal College, Colombo. The record does not mention the year, but details that S. Mahinda participated in this contest and won. He however refused to collect the cash prize set aside for the winner because it went against his monastic vows which disallowed him from partaking in material profits.

At the cost of endless repetition, one cannot help but get awed by the commitment and confidence of the teenager who volunteered to study an alien faith in an alien land back in 1914 and managed to achieve such excellence in it, that a country which is now grappling with ethnic divisions, factionalism and violence, continues to find relevance in his poetry and invokes it often to reinforce Lankan nationalism. In the most handsome recognition of the emotional thread of S. Mahinda's poetry, his verses are used equally by the right wing chauvinist politicians as well as the civil society eager to find a Lankan identity which rises beyond ethnic segregations. Activist playwrights and right-wing politicians, both fall back on the sensitivity of S. Mahinda's poetry to further their arguments. The ethnic strife in the island nation has in fact led to a rediscovery of S. Mahinda, with his death anniversary on 16 March, observed across the country by a multitude of organisations with special book releases and poetry recitals. Publishing houses announce essay-writing contests on the life and teachings of S. Mahinda at around this time of the year and several compilations get published in the subsequent months of the prize-winning contributions.

S. Mahinda's memory is important to Sri Lanka and is consciously sustained by the people themselves. When the school syllabus in Sri Lanka was reworked in the year 2000, a chapter on S. Mahinda got dropped from the class IX history text books. This led to nationwide outcry and demands to have the chapter included in the text books again. The movement succeeded and Sri Lankan students continue to read about S. Mahinda and study his poems in school.<sup>23</sup>

National recognition had arrived for S. Mahinda during his lifetime itself when he was heralded across the country as the national poet. When he died in 1951, within a few years of Sri Lankan independence

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<sup>23</sup> "Text book war of words in Sinhala," *The Island*, published from Colombo, 24 March 2000.

of 1948, he was accorded a state funeral and commemorative stamps have been issued in his name since.

Mahinda is often referred to as ‘Tibet Jathika S. Mahinda,’ a qualifier which marks his Tibetan ethnicity, but many take this too literally and invoke the role he played in the Sri Lankan freedom struggle to demand that the Lankan government find its backbone in condemning Chinese occupation of Tibet.<sup>24</sup> Venerable Dhammika, writing nearly a decade ago, sought for a more proactive role from the Lankan Government in supporting the Tibetan cause and shared a very interesting incident. He wrote: “Recently, the Chinese government sent a scholar to Sri Lanka to research into Mahinda’s life and writings with the purpose of highlighting the supposed ‘Chinese’ contribution to Sinhalese literature. When it was discovered that Mahinda was born in Sikkim, not Tibet, the scheme was quietly dropped.”<sup>25</sup>

In one of the rare celebrations of the Dalai Lama’s birthday in Sri Lanka [on 06 July, 2009], the special programmes organised by the Friends of Tibet [Sri Lanka], included recitals of S. Mahinda’s poems.

S. Mahinda was many things and meant many different things to the Lankans, but his most lasting contribution to the nation’s memory was a sense of pride. His name continues to invoke passionate reactions from the Lankans and it was through one such display that Dr T.R. Gyatso, who shared information put together by his family to make this article possible, learned of what a ‘great man’ one of his grandfather’s brothers had become. Dr. Gyatso is the grandson of S. Mahinda’s eldest brother Kazi Dawa Samdup. He recollects that it was during a World Health Organisation meeting in Jakarta in 1981 that he ran into some monks from Sri Lanka. While talking to them on the sidelines of the meeting, he mentioned to them that one of his grand uncles had gone to Sri Lanka and become a monk there. When he told them that his granduncle was S. Mahinda, the group of stoic monks broke into a gaggle of excited Sri Lankans. They posed for photographs with him, took his autograph and address and insisted on treating him to dinner. It was through this reaction that the celebrity status of a granduncle who had left home in Sikkim and settled down in Sri Lanka sank in.

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<sup>24</sup> For example, “Ven. S. Mahinda and the Dalai Lama,” published in Daily Mirror, Colombo, 16 April, 2008. The theme of this article was to remind people that S. Mahinda came from the same country as the Dalai Lama has been forced to flee from by China.

<sup>25</sup> “Tibet and Sri Lanka,” by Ven. Dhammika, *The Middle Way*, May 2001.

Nearly a century since Sarki Tshering left Sikkim for Sri Lanka to become S. Mahinda, the creator of rousing verses of Sri Lankan nationalism, he remains an enigmatic figure; the story of life known only in snatches. This narrative is superficial at best, but not for want of interest or effort, but because of the absence of note-sharing between sources in S. Mahinda's place of birth and the land where he inspired a freedom struggle. Hopefully, this is a start towards undertaking a deeper enquiry into understanding how a 13 year old Sarki Tshering of Sikkim grew into the much venerated Tibet Jathika S. Mahinda Thero of Sri Lanka.