

William Gopallawa: a dignified symbol of the nation



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By
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William Gopallawa, MBE, LLD (Honoris Causa), LLD, D. Litt served as the Governor-General of Ceylon from 1962 to 1972 and President of Sri Lanka from 1972 to 1978 under two Prime Ministers Sirimavo Bandaranaike and Dudley Senanayake. He was highly conscious of his role as a unifier of all Sri Lankans.

President Gopallawa upheld the law and the Constitution to the letter and won respect and admiration of all political parties. He represented an era where politics was conducted with a dignified aura and he had a reputation as being a man of integrity and humility.

His career has very many unique features which no one else in this country ever achieved or can ever hope to achieve. All these positions which he filled with distinction and honour were never sort after by him. He was simple, unassertive and dutiful throughout his life.

The coastline of Ceylon came under the Portuguese from 1505 to 1658, the Dutch from 1658 to 1796 and the British from 1796 to 1815. With the surrendering of the last surviving Kandyan Kingdom to the British, under a Convention the entire island came under the British rule in 1815.

In 1948, Ceylon gained her independence as a Dominion in the British Commonwealth of Nations. In 1972, Sirimavo Bandaranaike, in terms of a Republican Constitution, drafted by a Constituent Assembly of Ceylonese statesmen, declared Ceylon a Republic and changed its name to Sri Lanka.

Gopallawa's outstanding trait was his composure which reflected in his character of goodwill and compassion to all around him with a simple smile and a kind word. He never had any difficulties whatsoever when dealing with people of ethnic, religious or political parties.

He started his life as a proctor, and was also an educator and a non-career diplomat. He dabbled in politics for a while in Matale. He excelled and exemplified in public service throughout his life; a little-known fact is that he also was a teacher early in his career.

Birth and education

William Gopallawa was born on September 17, 1897 at "Dullewa Maha Walauwa" in the beautiful village of Aluvihare, a suburb of Matale in Asgiri Udasiya Pattuwa. His father was Tikiri Banda Gopallawa, a scion and an icon of a distinguished family from Gokarella in the Kurunegala district.

His mother, Tikiri Kumarihamy Dullewa was a descendant of the Dullewa Maha Adikaram, who was one of the signatories on behalf of the Sinhalese to the Kandyan Convention of 1815, ceding the Kandyan Kingdom to the British.

His father died when he was just three years. Gopallawa had his primary education at Dullewa village school and St. John's College (now Mahanama Maha Vidyalaya) at Getambe, Kandy. In 1909, to be educated in English, which was a sine qua non of the time, he continued his education at Dharmaraja College, Kandy where he was a scout.

To qualify in science, he was shifted to St. Anthony's College, Katugastota, Kandy. Having passed the Cambridge Senior Certificate Examination conducted by the Cambridge University in 1917, he returned to Matale and joined the tutorial staff of the Buddhist English School (now Vijaya College) and pioneered the setting up of the Boys' Scout team and the library for the school.

In 1920, he joined the Ceylon Law College, Colombo and was enrolled as a proctor and notary public in 1924. He commenced his legal career as a junior in the Chambers of Bernard Aluvihare in the unofficial bar of Kandy and went on to develop a practice in Matale, Dumbara and Kandy.

Marriage and family

On March 8, 1928, Gopallawa married Seelawathie Rambukwella and they were blessed with five children and one died very early. Amongst the four other children, his eldest daughter Chandrika Iranganie married Dr. Mackie Ratwatte, a brother of Sirimavo Bandaranaike.

His eldest son Asoka Punchi Banda was an entrepreneur businessman, his second daughter Chinthamani was a teacher and landed proprietor and his youngest son Moithra Cudabanda "Monty" Gopallawa was a Member of Parliament and an affable Cabinet Minister in the Government of Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga and later the Governor of the Central Province.

William and Seelawathie were blessed with 13 grandchildren - Chandhaka, Dharmika, Mano, Anushka, Devika, Avanthi, Sureka, Lehka, Shiranthani, Ashani, Mahen, Shanika and Dilani.

Career progression

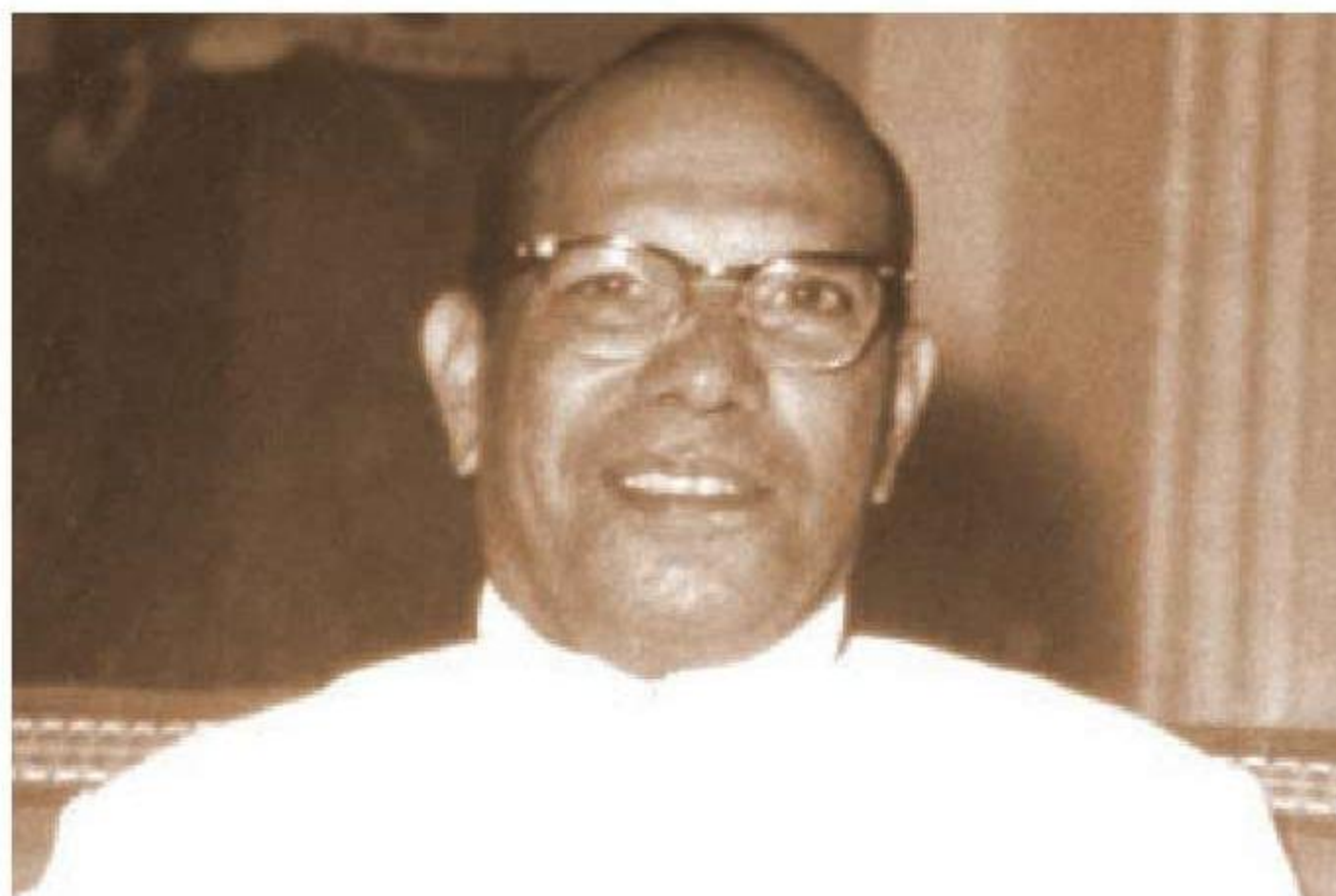
He devoted his spare time for social service activities and inaugurated the Social Service League at Matale and took the message of Temperance mooted by Anagarika Dharmapala to the Matale area. In 1926, he won the Matale Urban Council elections and served in the council for a continuous period of 13 years until 1939.

Gopallawa served as the Chairman of the Matale Urban Council for five years, and was the youngest Chairman serving in Ceylon. As the Chairman his main concerns were high transparency in the work of the Council and redress the grievances of the poor people. He re-named, 'Pannagama Road' which had a distinct caste connotation as 'Vihara Road,' to develop harmony amongst communities.

In 1936, he unsuccessfully contested elections for the State Council from Matale. In 1939, Kandy Municipal Council was established and Gopallawa was appointed as the first Municipal Commissioner of Kandy. He was a tower of strength to find redress to the innumerable difficulties faced by the citizens of Kandy during World War II.

During his tenure of office, he pioneered the Dangolla Scheme, to prevent the devastation of Dangolla area of Getambe by severe over flooding of the Mahaweli river. His services during the ravaging floods of Kandy brought relief to almost all the flood victims in 1947.

He continued his legal career at regular intervals besides his role in the Municipality until 1951. He served as the Municipal Commissioner of Colombo from 1951 until his retirement



William Gopallawa

THE INSTALLATION OF THE FIRST 'RAN VETA' AROUND THE SACRED BODHI SAPLIN, SRI MAHA BODHIYA, ANURADHAPURA IN 1969, WAS HIS MOST OUTSTANDING RELIGIOUS AND CULTURAL CONTRIBUTION. HE NEVER HAD ANY DIFFERENCES BASED ON RACE, CREED OR CASTE

in 1957. The first royal visit by a reigning monarch to Ceylon took place in 1954, when Queen Elizabeth II, after just five months of her coronation visited with Prince Philip, the Duke of Edinburgh. They were accorded a civic reception at the town hall.

Ambassador of Ceylon

With the installation of diplomatic relations by the Prime Minister S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike with the then socialist countries, William Gopallawa was chosen as Ceylon's first Ambassador to the People's Republic of China. He presented his credentials to the President of China Mao Tse-tung on June 18, 1958.

S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike was assassinated in September 1959 and Sirimavo Bandaranaike was sworn in as the Prime Minister after the General Elections of July 1960. She recalled Gopallawa from China and posted him as the Ambassador to the United States of America.

He presented his credentials to the President of the United States, John F. Kennedy on September 7, 1961.

Whilst functioning as the Sri Lanka's Ambassador in the United States, he was accredited as the Ambassador to the Republic of Mexico as well as Cuba. Then, he was recalled to the island in February 1962 by the Prime Minister Sirimavo Bandaranaike.

Governor General of Ceylon

The crowning moment of Gopallawa's illustrious career was when he assumed duties as the 4th Governor-

tween Vidyarthi College, Kandy and Ananda College, Colombo.

Gopallawa found time to walk every day without failing irrespective of his commitments. In Nuwara Eliya, he was very fond of walking from President's House, cut across St. Andrews Golf Course and go to Cargill's which was a landmark back then in old Nuwara Eliya.

He always dressed modestly in shirt, waist coat, jacket and had his walking stick. He was never a sloppy dresser but neither was he flashy and vulgar. He never wore bling.

In May 1970, Sirimavo Bandaranaike returned to power, as the Prime Minister. The new Government continued its previous policy of nationalisation. The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), led an insurrection against the Government in April 1971, resulting in a high number of casualties, and the imposition of a State of Emergency that lasted for 6 long years.

Until 1972, Ceylon was a Commonwealth dominion with Queen Elizabeth II as the Head of State and Queen of Ceylon.

President of Sri Lanka

On May 22, 1972, a new Constitution was enacted and the Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka was established with Sirimavo Bandaranaike as the Prime Minister. William Gopallawa took oaths before the Constituent Assembly, as the first Non-Executive President of Sri Lanka at Navaranga-hala.

He addressed the Parliament: "I take this opportunity to call upon everyone to shoulder the great responsibility of making the future prosperity of the country and the nation a reality. May the people achieve this prosperity, which they expect to realise through the inauguration of the republic."

The 5th Summit of the Heads of State or Government of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) was held in Colombo in August from 16 to 19, 1976. Eighty six nations participated along with additional 30 observers and guests representing all the continents in the world. Gopallawa served as the Secretary General of the NAM from August 16, 1976 to February 4, 1978.

President Gopallawa stepped down from office on February 4, 1978 when then Prime Minister Junius Richard Jayewardene became the country's first elected Executive President following Constitutional changes that effected the creation of an Executive Presidency.

As the President, Gopallawa used a blue flag with the national coat of arms in full colours above a white bordered red inscription, "Sri Lanka."

A devout Buddhist

He was a simple genuine Buddhist, not a publicly pious fake one and he respected all religions. He never failed to attend the annual Vel Hindu ceremony and to host Christmas Carols and also attended various Muslim ceremonies in his role as titular Head of State.

As the Governor-General, he introduced Buddhist religious, cultural and traditional customs and values to the President's House, after many years. President's House doors were opened to the ordinary people.

One of his first acts as the Head

of State was to construct a Buddhist shrine in a room at the President's House, Colombo. On every full moon Poya Day, he along with the First Lady observed 'sil' with other devotees.

Gopallawa diligently observed Meththa, Karuna, Muditha and Upekka and was truly a gentleman who did not know religious, social or political barriers in his public or private life. He had said, many a times, that it was his education at Dharmaraja College, Kandy that made him a cultured person. The installation of the first 'Ran Veta' around the Sacred Bodhi Saplin, Sri Maha Bodhiya, Anuradhapura in 1969, was his most outstanding religious and cultural contribution. He never had any differences based on race, creed or caste.

Honours and tributes

He was made a Member of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire (MBE) by Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II in 1953 Coronation Honours. In recognition of his enormous services to the country, he was accorded: LLD (Honoris Causa) by the Ceylon (Peradeniya) University in 1962; LLD by the Vidyalankara (Kelaniya) in 1962; D. Litt by and the Vidya-daya (Sri Jayewardenepura) in 1962.

He was awarded the King Birendra of Nepal Coronation Medal on February 24, 1975. A road in Kandy is named after him as "William Gopallawa Mawatha." In 1998, a multi-colour commemorative stamp of Rs. 2.50 face value was issued in his honour.

William Gopallawa passed away on January 30, 1981 in his house in Matale, at the age of 83 years. His wife Seelawathie Gopallawa, the country's inaugural First Lady from 1972, preceded him on October 4, 1977. Both donated their eyes to the Sri Lanka Eye Donation Society following their deaths.

It is opportune from among the numerous accolades showered on him by politicians, statesmen, scholars, civil servants, Maha Sangha and many of his associates to select the observations made on him by minority community members, in view of the mistrust that continue to rage among the two main racial groups in view of the barriers created by man between Sinhalese and Tamils.

On a condolence vote passed by the Parliament on February 20, 1981, A. Amirthalingam, Member of Parliament for Kankesanthurai and leader of the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) observed: "He was a humble person who never asserted himself or threw his weight about whatever position he occupied.

He won the affection and regard of everybody who came into contact with him. He never bandied words with anybody. I do not think he would have hurt the feelings of anyone. Yet he rose to a position of pre-eminence."

S. Thondaman, Member of Parliament for Nuwara Eliya-Maskeliya and the leader of the Ceylon Worker's Congress (CWC) said laconically, "He rose to many high positions.

The more he rose to high positions, the more he was acceptable to everybody. He was very simple and fair. The fact that he was able to serve two Governments and be acceptable to both shows how much he was trusted."

William Gopallawa, the simple villager from the remote village of Dullewa, Matale fulfilled his responsibilities and obligations towards his nation without any fear or favour.