

Sir Baron Jayatilaka (1864-1944): unique among Ceylon's great men

(EXCERPTED FROM
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BY HAJ HULUGALLE)

Among the great men produced by the country, Sir Baron Jayatilaka was unique. He was the village lad from an obscure family who rose to the top by his own ability and strength of character. He learned his first letters and laid the foundations of oriental scholarship at a temple school, but thereafter obtained a modern education at Wesley College. At 21 he was a graduate of Calcutta University, and twenty years of work and study intervened before he was able to go to Jesus College, Oxford, where he became an M.A.

Jayatilaka was a school-master before he entered the legal profession and a political career. He seemed to take everything in his stride, biding his time, but never lost the respect of those he left behind in the race.

He died 19 years before this article was written, and in this land of short



Indo-Ceylon talks in Colombo 1941. Sir Baron Jayatilaka who was the country's representative in India together with Pandit Nehru and other representatives of the Government of Ceylon led by Mr D.S.Senanayake.

meeting of the Ceylon National Congress, he was proposing the main resolution and was interrupted. The report of that meeting has the following passage:

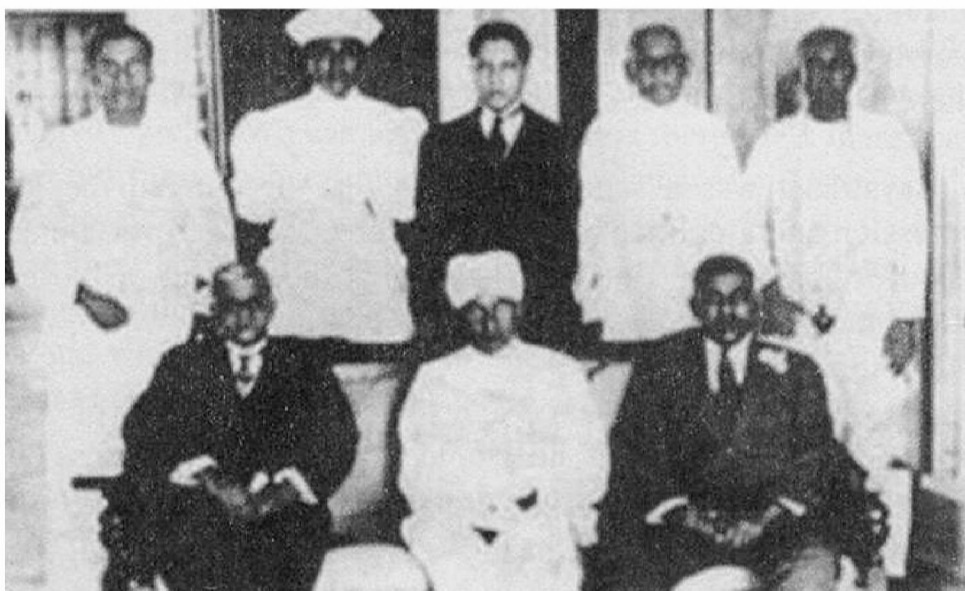
Mr. Jayatilaka: I predict victory for us if we exercise self-restraint and moderation....

A Voice: Cowardice?

Mr Jayatilaka: I am prepared to accept the challenge from that quarter...

A Voice: Cowardice.

Mr Jayatilaka: I challenge that gen-



D.B. Jayatilaka with the Ministers of the Second State Council and the Speaker Waitilingam Duraiswamy

memories, it looked as if he would be forgotten by those who came after him. Nobody suggested a statue of that broad-shouldered and squat figure with a defiant air in times of crisis. His portrait is not to be seen in public places nor is his Roman profile perpetuated in a postage stamp. A street may have been named after him, but I have not heard of it.

In his life Jayatilaka did not need reclame, and in the Elysian fields, or where-ever else he may be, he would be the first to laugh at any efforts to preserve his memory in wood or stone. He would have said *exigi monumentum acre perennius* ("I have completed a monument more lasting than brass.")

He seemed to reflect in his life all that is best in our culture, in the Buddhist tradition and in oriental philosophy, and possessed in full measure those gifts and graces which characterize a civilized person such as tolerance, fair-play and compassion.

He had married the very intelligent and charming daughter of a great scholar. Their home, where they lived simply and modestly, was an intellectual centre for men of learning. Long before "D.B." became a member of the Legislative Council he was the leading Buddhist layman in the country. His influence on the priesthood of all the Nikayas was decisive, for in scholarship and personality he was the equal of the best among them. He was president of the YMBA as long as he lived. His editions of the Sinhala classics are prized by other scholars. His articles in the *Dinamina* made that paper the leading Sinhalese daily.

There were times when he took his courage in his hands and fought for unpopular causes. It was touch and go whether the Legislative Council would accept the Donoughmore reforms. He advised the country to try to work them. Many of his close friends, such as E.W. Perera, were against him, but he carried the day.

He fought for the report of the Akbar Commission on the University site, of which he was a member, against a formidable array which included James Peiris, Ramanathan, Marcus Fernando, George Wille, Marrs (the Principal of the University College) and the hierarchy of two churches, and won. He was a splendid debater and gave as hard as he got. No heckler could have the better of him. On September 20, 1920, at a special

man to get up and say where he has shown bravery which I have not been equal to. (Tremendous applause which prevented Mr. Jayatilaka from continuing for several seconds).

Mr. A.E.Goonesinha: We never meant it for you. We acknowledge you as the greatest man who has come forward. When we spoke of....

Mr. Jayatilaka: It is only a distinction without a difference.

As a young journalist whose business it was to interview leaders of the reform movement, I first met D.B. Jayatilaka in 1918. Not being a Buddhist or a Sinhalese scholar myself, the occasions when I came into close contact with him were few, but from the outset I was an admirer. He possessed not only the qualities of a statesman but also the courage of a leader. He had intellectual honesty and refused to play down to the masses. He stood for national unity.

I remember his presidential address to the 1924 Congress when he said: "if we are determined to attain responsible government we must bestir ourselves and bring about that condition of national unity that is indispensable for the realization of our goal. Full responsible government can only be demanded by and granted to a united people". I doubt whether he would have become a politician if he did not believe in national unity. He would have felt betrayed had his successors thought otherwise.

Jayatilaka began his public life in the temperance movement, but education was his major interest. In both these fields he was the associate of men with high ideals like Colonel Olcott, the Ven. Hikkaduwa Sri Sumangala, Anagarika Dharmapala, W.A. de Silva, Arthur V. Dias and the Senanayakes. He spent 20 years guiding the destinies of Dharmaraja College and the Buddhist Theosophical Society. It was as a result of these activities that he was arrested and kept in prison for 46 days during the 1915 riots. He tasted injustice but it did not embitter him.

The fight for political reforms began in earnest when the country's leaders decided that never again will such arbitrary action by the military be permitted. Jayatilaka made many journeys to London to press for reforms and impressed Lord Milner, the Secretary of State for the Colonies, and his officials, by his moderation and good sense.

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In 1924 he was elected unopposed to the Legislative Council as the member for the Western Province. Very soon he was the unofficial leader of the Council, and when the Donoughmore Constitution was introduced in 1931 he became Leader of the House, Vice-President of the Board of Ministers and Home Minister. He held these offices for 10 years.

Although Jayatilaka never lost the mastery of the State Council, when he reached his seventies he had lost a great deal of his fire. He was easy-going and lenient. He had lost the sureness of his touch, and signed papers which he had not read. His ability to see both sides of a question was not appreciated by contestants for power. He was the Asquith of Ceylon politics, a noble mind ill at ease in an atmosphere of intrigue and tension.

The mistakes he made were often the result of manoeuvring by others when

he himself was too old to play political chess. The Bracegirdle affair was a ludicrous interlude, and the pan-Sinhalese Board of Ministers was a foolish move, both out of character with the elder statesman.

He resigned in 1940 to become the first Ceylon representative in India, a country in whose culture and history he was deeply interested. No one could have represented Ceylon better, but it seemed as if he had been kicked upstairs by more dynamic men. The extremes of the Delhi climate did not suit him and he kept bad health. He died in the aeroplane which was bringing him back to Ceylon. There was perhaps no more appropriate way for a great Buddhist to attain Nirvana but he would not have minded an honoured and leisured retirement on earth to round off his career and arrange his papers. It is given to few mortals to order their exits and entrances suitably.

Many eloquent tributes were paid to Sir Baron in the State Council when a vote of condolence was moved. His doughty opponent Mr. G.G. Ponnambalam summed up his qualities when he said: "Mr. Speaker, there might have been, individually, a greater scholar, a greater administrator or a greater politician. But in the remarkable combination of qualities of scholarship, of statesmanship and erudition, I think Sir Baron will not be easily surpassed in the future. He was a happy blend of eastern culture and western poise".

A man like "D.B." would probably be a misfit in the political scene of today. We are all socialists now. His work was over when he succeeded in bringing Ceylon to the threshold of independence. His thinking and actions helped to shape events in Ceylon for half a century. The ethos of our people was embodied in his life and work more than in those of any other man of the century.