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RELIGIOUS ACTIVITIES AND
THE DEVELOPMENT OF A NEW
POETICAL TRADITION IN
SINHALESE, 1852 - 1906.

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ABSTRACT

The period from 1852 to 1906 in Ceylon is, though comparatively recent, a period which has been misinterpreted and treated without a proper consultation of the existing materials. After the British conquest, during this period we find the employment of modern techniques in the field of literature by the Christian missionaries, and the adoption of the same methods by the Sinhalese Buddhists to combat Christian writings and to propagate Buddhism.

This adoption of facilities like the printing and selling of books paved the way and the interest for the evolvment and the development of a new poetical tradition in Sinhalese which I have discussed in these pages.

A few devoted scholars of the period encouraged learning and they have developed the traditional knowledge. When the Theosophists arrived in Ceylon on the pretext of safeguarding Buddhism, the activities of the Buddhist Theosophical Society created a new lay leadership in society who were ready to accept responsibilities in the country while lessening the place enjoyed by the bhikkhus in religious and social

affairs. With the advent of this new group of leaders through the Young Men's Buddhist Association and the Buddhist National Congress, the religious zeal of the earlier priest leaders subsided and a group of new writers who were not recognised by the traditional scholars pursued the literary career they had already started with the printing presses which emerged through the religious struggle. These poets and their creations were the forerunners of the new poetical tradition which came into being after the death of old Sinhalese poetry in the first quarter of the nineteenth century.

Materials for this study are drawn mostly from Sinhalese documents hitherto unexplored by Sinhalese writers, Wesleyan Missionary records, the collections of the British Museum, Royal Commonwealth Society library, and the Public Record Office in London, Śrī Praṅṅāśekhara Library, Navagamuva, Ceylon, and other personal collections in Ceylon. The accounts we come across of the activities of the Theosophists and their followers were written in English but the reality behind those documents can only be assessed with the assistance of the documents in Sinhalese, the language of all the participants of these religious activities.

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