

# Tipitaka Studies in Oriental (Prācīna) Examinations of the Oriental Studies Society of Sri Lanka

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The Buddha is renowned as an accomplished teacher, and his sole purpose was to propagate the truth of life as he understood it. The *Ariyapariyesana Sutta* of the *Majjhima Nikaya* (Collection of middle-length discourses) explicitly indicates that through the dissemination of his doctrine, he strove for the well-being of all living creatures. While it is apparent in the literature that the Buddha considered education to be a noble cause, he advocated teaching only what is necessary—in the *Ambalatthika-rahulovada Sutta* of the *Majjhima Nikaya*, he advises his son Rahula to learn only such matters as will be beneficial for the betterment of himself and society. In this regard, the Buddha considered discipline to be a prerequisite for education, which he viewed as a process in which parents, the clergy, and students should participate equally. This resulted in a tradition of education that produced the early Buddhist universities in India and the Pirivena institutes in Sri Lanka, which served both monastic and Buddhist lay students.

To achieve the levels of required discipline, the Pirivena students were placed directly under the head monk throughout their education. As dictated in the *Vinaya Pitaka* of the *Tipitaka*, monks are bound by 220 precepts, which include being awake before the head monk, cleaning the premises, taking care of the older monks, and generally conducting themselves respectfully when interacting with both their fellow monks and ordinary members of society. The lay students were expected to behave and conduct themselves under the directions of the head monk. The teachers, on the other hand, were to guide the students with correct discipline and knowledge, as well as being sensitive to the students' needs. For example, the *Culagosinga Sutta* of the *Majjhima Nikaya* states that the Buddha forbade teaching when a student was hungry. Such rules given by the Buddha himself are followed in the Pirivena system of education to this day.

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Sri Lanka's Pirivena system of education pre-dates the 16th-century missionary education introduced by the colonial invaders by around 1,400 years. The term "Pirivena" is the Sinhalese variant of the Pali word "Parivena," which means the living quarters or the official residence of Buddhist monks according to the *Visuddhimagga* (Path of purification), written in Sri Lanka by the Indian monk Buddhagosha in around 430, the term implies that the living quarters are "large-scale." The Chinese monk-pilgrim Faxian (337–422) states in his travelogue that he visited the first Pirivenas of Sri Lanka the Mahavihara and Abhayagirivihara, within the Kingdom of Anuradhapura (337 BCE–1017 CE) and indicates that they housed around 3,000 and 5,000 Buddhist monks, respectively. These facts notwithstanding, Pirivena is primarily regarded as a tradition of education that is esteemed for its quality, its contribution to society, and its historical value.

The Pirivena tradition dates back to the 1st century CE, when the Mahavihara and Abhayagirivihara were commissioned through royal patronage. Other Pirivena institutes were created throughout the island during the rule of successive kings. The Sri Lankan rulers and the Sangha (monastic) community considered the education of both monks and lay people within a Buddhist society to be of utmost importance. The resulting Pirivena education significantly assisted in the propagation of Buddhism not only locally, but also overseas.

As Buddhism declined in India, Buddhist universities like Nalanda also deteriorated, and the traditional form of education soon died out there. However, despite numerous Indian invasions, Pirivena education prevailed in Sri Lanka over the centuries. The syllabus for both monastics and lay people was originally separated into two streams: the "Suta" part included such subjects as languages, religion, philosophy, history, economics, and geography, while the "Sippa" included skills such as agriculture, astrology, and carpentry.

Sri Lanka was subject to colonial invasions from 1505 onwards, when the Portuguese arrived on the shores of the Kotte Kingdom (1415–1565). Following the conversion of King Dharmapala (r. 1551–97) to Christianity, the royal support for Buddhist education ceased. With the ensuing destruction of temples and Pirivena structures, together with the associated traditions, the Pirivena education system saw a rapid decline in Sri Lanka's coastal areas. The Portuguese, Dutch, and English invasions resulted in a constant relocation of kingdoms within

Sri Lanka, and this constant shift in the center of power led to the traditional Pirivena and Sangha residences being forced to move as well. However, the Pirivena education in the Kingdom of Kandy (1469–1815) continued to function as the region resisted the invasions until its fall to the British in 1815. Even at such times of upheaval, the Sangha community worked towards continuing the Pirivena system where possible.

Currently, there are three levels of Pirivena in Sri Lanka, serving both monks and lay people. At primary (*mulika*) level they offer five years of education, during which the students are taught six subjects—Pali, Sanskrit, Sinhala, English, *Tipitaka* studies and Mathematics—followed by an examination enabling them to study at the senior (*maha*) Pirivena. At the senior level the students continue the six subjects they studied at primary level, with additional studies in subjects like philosophy, the history of religions, linguistics, Ayurveda, and astrology. It is intended that with this advanced knowledge, the Pirivena students will be able to gain entrance to university-level Pirivena institutes. The Pirivena Vidyayathana, or affiliated higher educational Pirivenas, were first recognized by an act of Sri Lankan government in 1957, and in accordance with this act, in 1959 the Vidyodaya and Vidyalandara Pirivenas of Colombo were given university status. At present, there are 794 Pirivenas on the island, serving a student community of approximately 62,000. The Pirivena students are trained for three examinations conducted by the Oriental Studies Society of Sri Lanka annually.

The Oriental Studies Society of Sri Lanka is one of the oldest learned societies in Sri Lanka with a history of over 115 years. It was established on July 24, 1902 by S. M. Borose who was holding the Post of Director, Department of Public Instructions (which later became the Department of Education) with the co-operating of eminent scholars who lived at that stage.

The under mentioned extract of the speech made by S. M. Borose on the occasion of the inaugural ceremony of the Society on the above date will provide us with an understanding of the back-ground which paved its way for the establishment of the Society.

*"I was able to grasp an understanding of the Pirivena Educational Institutes on the occasions when I had the privilege of touring various parts of this country. I find that these Institutes had been established in order to provide studies in Sanskrit, Pali and classical Sinhala.*

*Those who study in these Institutions are elders. This Educational system which originated as a result of an honest endeavor with a view to acquire self prosperity, has been expanded to a great extent.*

*I believe that this Academic service being performed by oriental scholars in various aspects should be streamlined under one General Syllabus and thereby fulfil the noble aspirations in the field of Education, by adapting the previous components embodied in this Educational process made to run as one unique system."*

The above statement reflects the honour and respect and the innermost feelings of Borose towards the significance exhibited in the academic studies in oriented languages in the Pirivena Educational Institutes at that time and the fact that the Society was capable, through the immense dedication and intuition of the teachers led by the priests in charge of the Institutions in uplifting education system relating to oriental studies in them.

Most Venerable high priests in our country, namely, Hikkaduwe Sri Sumangala Nayaka Thero, Ratmalane Sri Dhammarama Nayaka Thero, Waskaduwe Sri Subhoothi Nayaka Thero, Heiyantuduwe Sri Dewamitta Thero, Madugalle Siddhartha Thero, Mahagoda Gnanissara Thero, Thelwatte Seelananda Thero, who were the pioneers of the Classical Educational system in Sri Lanka were in the fore front of this inaugural meeting.

Reverend Fathers F. A. Edirisinghe and C. W. de Silva who were leading scholars of oriental languages were also present then. From among the distinguished local scholars who excelled in their knowledge in oriental languages, C. W. Fernando, J. G. C. Mendis, D. B. Jayatillake, A. Mendis Gunasekera, A. Simon Silva and D. S. Dissanayake also participated for this meeting. Newspaper editors representing the journalists in our country, namely were J. Karunaratne (Sandaress) C. Don Bastian (Daily News) G. H. Perera (Dinakara) C. M. Silva (Sarasaviya) A. J. Wickremasinghe (Shat Bhasa) attended this memorable meeting.

As government officers, Gate Mudaliyar W. S. Gunawardane, translator of languages of the education department being led by S. M. Borose, Director of Education was present at this meeting.

Thus the Oriental Studies Society of Sri Lanka was established as a state institution, controlled by the Department of Education for the purpose of improving Pirivena educational institutions and the educational system leading to language studies implemented within them under state sponsorship. The Post of Patron of the Society, which was established and conducted as a State Institution was throughout held by the Head of State in our country.

The society offers three examinations in oriental languages i.e. Sinhala, Pali and Sanskrit. The examinations are named as Prācīna examinations which consist of three levels Prārambha, Madhyama and Avasāna respectively. These examinations are conducted by the Department of Examinations, Sri Lanka. The final examination is considered to be equivalent to any other first degree examinations conducted by any subject area.

The extensive knowledge in oriental languages possessed by Pracheena Pandit Degree Holders was utilised for the benefit of a handful of students who endeavored to absorb local expertise each as Indigenous medicine, Astrology etc. when they were engaged in studies in Pirivena Educational Institutes. The need of utilizing the massive knowledge in oriental languages for the development of General National Education system was strongly felt in the middle part of the 20th Century.

As a result of drawing the kind attention of late Dr. Wijayananda Dahanayake, the then Minister of Education towards this aspect, with the intervention of the Society in June 1958 a Cabinet Memorandum dated 13.11.1958 was forwarded which created an opportunity to get the salaries and privileges of Pracheena Pandit Graduates to be equal to those of General Art Degree holders and thereby an opportunity was provided for Pracheena Pandit Degree Holders to utilize their services for the prosperity of the General Education system with this approval, 134 Pracheena Pandit Degree holders were granted teaching appointments in Government Central Colleges in year 1959. It should be mentioned that there was a new change in the education in oriental language system.

This group was successful in the act of improving their student community, as individuals endowed with love for their language by using their knowledge for literary creations and inquisition and being engaged in a deeper study of oriental fundamental on inquisition which is

used for prudence and clarity of the language with the possession of a massive knowledge in the field of grammar.

Pursuant to the submission of a Cabinet Memorandum by the late His Excellency R. Premadasa in his capacity as the Minister of Education, on 02 May, 1991 for grant of Government appointments holders of the Pracheena Pandit Degree by accepting the Degree as equivalent to the General Arts Degree issued from Universities along with equivalent salary scales and privileges, the Public Administration Ministry Circular No. 1/543/E552D/V of 20th June 1994 was issued.

As such the Government is bound to accept that the General Arts Degree from a University and the Pracheena Pandit Degree are of equal recognition and that the holders of Pracheena Pandit Degrees are treated as eligible for employment purposes and they should be provided with equal salary scales and privileges. The '*Grantha Visharada*' Degree Project is yet another Educational Section of the Society. A member of the Society or a Sannasa holding Pandit Graduate will be allowed to undergo these studies.

The function assigned to the student will be to get prior approval from the society in respect of an academic field and to compile a book with his own ideals established by indicating investigative and the critical facts based on them and to submit it to the Society. Those Pandits who successfully complete the Project will be honoured by the award of title '*Grantha Visharada*' along with a 'Sannasa' certificate. This Project is made statutory from year 1928.

Another academic service conducted by the Society is the Journal of Oriental Studies Society. It is recorded that the first issue of this Journal comprised one article written by Rev. Suriyagoda Sumangala Thero under the title 'Asoka Great King', in year 1918. The second issue of this publication was a well organized Journal carrying 16 articles published in year 1919 being edited by Mudaliyar Mendis Gunasekera and Mr. W. A. Samarasekera, Inspector of Pirivenas. The journal of the 2001 was launched last year. The initiative of this academic journal is to bring the large number of research these written by eminent scholars of the island to the access of these who are badly in need of them.

Editing and publication of rare classical books is yet another academic field implemented by the Society. During the past decade, the Project was implemented with the assistance

extended by the Sinhala Department of the University of Colombo. Under this program books like, '*Sikha Walanda*', and '*Sikha Walanda Vinisa*' '*Saddharmalankaraya*', '*Sanskrit Shadbarnawaya*', '*Saddharmaratnawaliya*' were printed and released. Arrangements have been made to print '*Amawatura*'. While respecting the efforts made by eminent scholars headed by Prof. M. B. Ariyapala, Prof. G. Hemapala Wijewardane, it is expected that these books will fulfill the aspirations of those who study them.

As at present the curriculum is composed of Tipiṭaka studies, Sri Lankan History, Tarka and Nyāna, Prakrit in addition to the key subjects of Sinhala, Pali and Sanskrit. Mahākkhandhaka Mahāvaggapāli, Brāhmaṇa Saṃyutta, and first ten vaggas of the Dhammapada are studied in the Prācīna Praāmbha examination while Mahādukkhakkhandha, Alagaddūpama, Rathavinītha, Piyajātika and Indriyabhāvanā suttas of the Majjhimanikāya are studied for Prācīna Madhyama. Brahmajāla, Kuṭadanta and Mahānidāna suttas of Dīghanikāya and Pārāyana vagga of Suttanipāta are learnt for Prācīna Avasāna examination. Abhidhamma is covered from the Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha; a popular manual of Abhidhamma. Teachers use traditional and modern methods when they teach this curriculum.

Prācīna education system has been developed on the basis of some basic principles. This education gave emphasis on the moral, mental and physical development and also to divert the students towards the Sangha rules and guide them to follow it. The main stress was given to have a clear idea of Tipiṭaka which consists of Sutta Pitaka, Vinaya Pitaka and Abhidhamma Pitaka. The entire Tipiṭaka consists of Buddha's teachings, message, philosophy and rules for the Bhikkhus and Bhikkhunis. The curriculum was chiefly spiritual in nature.

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