

A Study on the Establishment of the Bhiksu University as Reflected in Newspaper Sources

Ven. Watarakgoda Sumana¹

Introduction

The establishment of the Buddhasravaka Dharmapitaya, commonly known as the Bhiksu University, in Anuradhapura during June 1969, represents a landmark moment in the history of Buddhist education and state-religious relations in post-independence Sri Lanka. For decades, the education of the Sangha had been primarily conducted through the Pirivena system, but by the late 1960s, there was a growing call for a specialized higher education institution that could equip monks with the skills necessary to propagate the Dhamma in a rapidly modernizing and globalized world. This study examines the month of June 1969, a period that saw the university transition from an ambitious legislative concept to a physical reality. However, this birth was not without significant labor pains. As national newspapers of the time recorded, the celebratory atmosphere of the inauguration was almost immediately eclipsed by a firestorm of political and religious controversy sparked by comments made by the Minister of Education, I.M.R.A. Iriyagolle. This research problem is multi-faceted: it involves understanding the state's vision for a "modern" Bhiksu, the institutional structure created to realize that vision, and the inherent tensions that arose when secular politicians attempted to reform monastic traditions. The significance of this study lies in its use of primary archival media—specifically *The Ceylon Daily News*, *Dinamina*, *Lankadipa*, and *The Ceylon Observer*—to reconstruct the public discourse of a pivotal era in Sri Lankan history.

Objectives

The primary research questions and aims of this study are as follows:

1. To document the official proceedings, legislative intent, and ceremonies surrounding the opening of the Buddhasravaka Dharmapitaya in June 1969.
2. To analyse the selection criteria, curriculum goals, and intended societal role of the first batch of student-monks.

¹ School of History, Liaoning University, People's Republic of China.
watarkgodasumana@gmail.com

3. To investigate the nature of the controversy surrounding Minister I.M.R.A. Iriyagolle's speech during the inauguration period and how it was portrayed in the media.
4. To evaluate the media's role in shaping public perception of the university, balancing official government narratives with the criticisms of the Sangha and the public.

Methodology

This research employs a Qualitative Historical Research Design, centered on archival analysis of print media. The primary data corpus consists of 44 unique newspaper pages from June 1969, including major English and Sinhala dailies. The methodology involved several stages: first, a chronological mapping of events from the pre-opening announcements in early June to the peak of the political controversy in late June. Second, thematic analysis was applied to extract the "official" vision of the university as presented by government figures like Governor-General William Gopallawa and Prime Minister Dudley Senanayake. Third, a comparative analysis was conducted between English-language reporting, which often focused on the logistics and global mission of the university, and Sinhala-language reporting, which captured the more visceral and emotional reactions of the local Buddhist community to the political fallout. Visual analysis was also utilized, examining photographs of the new university buildings and the inauguration ceremonies to understand the symbolic weight of the event.

Results

The results of the archival survey reveal a month of two distinct halves: the first characterized by optimistic institutional building, and the second by intense social friction.

The Vision and Inauguration In early June 1969, newspapers announced the culmination of the Buddhasravaka Dharmapitaya Act. On June 3, *The Ceylon Daily News* reported that 25 monks had been carefully selected for the first batch, chosen for their potential to be "true messengers of the Dhamma". Government officials were quick to reassure the public that this new university would not harm or replace the existing Pirivena system but would instead complement it by providing specialized training for international Dhammaduta (missionary) work. The physical site in Anuradhapura was prepared with significant investment, featuring a main administrative building (Dharma Pitaya), residential quarters, and meditation halls.

The official inauguration took place on **Friday, June 13, 1969**. The ceremony was a grand state affair. Governor-General William Gopallawa formally opened the institution by placing a gold-plated casket containing sacred Buddha relics in a specially prepared room. Prime Minister Dudley Senanayake, addressing the gathering, emphasized that the "world yearns for the Buddha's message" and that the university was the vehicle to deliver it. The Minister of Education, I.M.R.A. Iriyagolle, who had been the driving force behind the university's establishment, also spoke at length about the need to protect the "pristine" Dhamma.

The Iriyagolle Controversy The celebratory mood was short-lived. By June 15 and 16, reports began to surface regarding a speech made by Minister Iriyagolle, either at the opening or a related event, that was perceived as a direct attack on the integrity of the contemporary Sangha. According to *The Ceylon Observer* and *Dinamina*, the Minister was accused of using language that insulted the monks, leading to immediate demands for an apology from various Nikayas (monastic orders). The headlines shifted from the university's mission to titles like "Minister's attack did not suit occasion" and "Controversy over Minister's Speech".

The media captured a growing wave of protests. Monk organizations held meetings condemning the Minister, and the controversy began to take on a political dimension, with opposition figures using the incident to criticize the government's handling of religious affairs. Iriyagolle's defense, as reported in the later weeks of June, was that his words were taken out of context and that he was merely expressing concern for the high standards expected of the new university's students. However, the archives show that the damage was significant, with many monks threatening to boycott state functions.

Institutional Details and Curriculum Beyond the controversy, the newspapers provide specific details on the university's structure. The curriculum was designed to be rigorous, focusing on Tipitaka studies, languages (Pali, Sanskrit, and English), and world history. The goal was to produce a "new generation of monks" who were not only scholars but also capable of engaging with modern intellectual challenges. The newspapers even published lists of recommended books and curriculum frameworks, highlighting the academic focus of the institution.

Discussion / Conclusion

The establishment of the Bhiksu University in June 1969 was a complex socio-political event that the newspaper archives capture in vivid detail. The findings suggest that while the government successfully created a physical and

legal entity to modernize monastic education, they underestimated the cultural sensitivities surrounding the reform of the Sangha.

The initial results of this study indicate that the university was born out of a genuine desire to elevate Sri Lanka's role as a global center for Buddhism. The speeches of Gopallawa and Senanayake reflect a nationalist pride and a sense of duty to the international community. The choice of Anuradhapura, the ancient heart of Buddhist civilization, further underscored this intent to bridge the glorious past with a modern future.

However, the "Iriyagolle Controversy" serves as a critical case study in the pitfalls of state-led religious reform. The newspapers illustrate how a single speech could pivot the national narrative from institutional achievement to religious conflict. This suggests that the establishment of the Bhiksu University was seen by the clergy not just as a gift from the state, but as a potential site of state control over monastic life. The media's role was pivotal; while some papers like the *Daily News* provided sober, factual accounts of the university's opening, others like *Dinamina* and *Lankadipa* became platforms for the heated public debate that followed, reflecting the deep-seated anxieties of the Buddhist public.

In conclusion, the newspaper sources of June 1969 portray the establishment of the Buddhasravaka Dharmapitya as an event of monumental importance that was immediately complicated by political rhetoric. The university achieved its primary goal of opening its doors to a specialized batch of monks, but it did so under a cloud of controversy that would define its early years. This study contributes to the field by highlighting the essential role of primary media archives in understanding the friction between modernization and tradition in Sri Lankan history.

Keywords - Bhiksu University, Buddhasravaka Dharmapitya, Anuradhapura, I.M.R.A. Iriyagolle, Newspaper Archive

References

- Dinamina* (1969a). 'A plan for industrial development', 3 June.
- Dinamina* (1969b). 'Don't remove the tea workers', 11 June.
- Dinamina* (1969c). 'Discussing the reduction of food prices', 12 June.
- Dinamina* (1969d). 'Buddhasravaka Dharmapithaya', 13 June.
- Dinamina* (1969e). 'Buddhasravaka Dharmapithaya is a great treasure', 13 June.
- Dinamina* (1969f). 'The ultimate goal of the inauguration', 13 June.
- Dinamina* (1969g). 'Searching for a way to stop university waste', 15 June.
- Dinamina* (1969h). 'Vidyodaya-Vidyalankara universities are full', 15 June.

- Dinamina* (1969i). 'Controversy over Minister's speech', 17 June.
- Dinamina* (1969j). 'Minister explains the goal of the Dharma Peetaya', 18 June.
- Dinamina* (1969k). 'Considering the reasonable demands', 19 June.
- Dinamina* (1969l). 'Life becomes meaningful when people are among people', 19 June.
- Dinamina* (1969m). 'Minister says monks are like vultures', 19 June.
- Dinamina* (1969n). 'New act for the film industry', 19 June.
- Dinamina* (1969o). 'Iriyagolle's speech', 20 June.
- Dinamina* (1969p). 'It seems he came to settle an old score', 20 June.
- Dinamina* (1969q). 'Minister says there was no insult', 20 June.
- Dinamina* (1969r). 'Ban on schools for girls in the city', 21 June.
- Dinamina* (1969s). 'Financial aid for national production', 21 June.
- Dinamina* (1969t). 'The ban is a destruction of democracy', 21 June.
- Dinamina* (1969u). 'Government to buy tea directly', 23 June.
- Dinamina* (1969v). 'Minister's speech should be publicized everywhere', 23 June.
- Dinamina* (1969w). '480 trees to be planted for the Bhiksu University', 24 June.
- Dinamina* (1969x). 'Opinions on the Education Minister's speech', 24 June.
- Dinamina* (1969y). 'Condemning the speech made in Anuradhapura', 28 June.
- Lankadipa* (1969a). 'Buddhasravaka Dharmapithaya to open on the 13th', 3 June.
- Lankadipa* (1969b). 'No harm to Pirivenas from the new University', 3 June.
- Lankadipa* (1969c). 'An example from the Bhiksu University opening today', 13 June.
- Lankadipa* (1969d). 'Buddhasravaka Dharmapithaya Act', 13 June.
- Lankadipa* (1969e). 'May a good service be rendered', 13 June.
- Lankadipa* (1969f). 'Buddhasravaka Dharmapithaya opened by Governor-General', 14 June.
- Lankadipa* (1969g). 'The story of the Buddha', 14 June.
- Lankadipa* (1969h). 'An unforgettable event in modern Buddhist history', 15 June.
- Lankadipa* (1969i). 'Lakspray to be imported', 15 June.
- The Ceylon Daily News* (1969a). '25 MONKS PICKED FOR BHIKKHU UNIVERSITY', 3 June.
- The Ceylon Daily News* (1969b). 'G.G. to open first Bhikkhu university', 11 June.
- The Ceylon Daily News* (1969c). 'MOHAMED UNDER FIRE', 13 June.
- The Ceylon Daily News* (1969d). 'PM: WORLD YEARNS FOR BUDDHA'S MESSAGE', 15 June.
- The Ceylon Observer* (1969a). 'RED LEAFLET WAR IS HOTTING UP', 15 June.
- The Ceylon Observer* (1969b). 'Minister's attack did not suit occasion', 20 June.
- The Ceylon Observer* (1969c). 'Relevant to context', 20 June.