

SIR EDWIN ARNOLD AND HIS “LIGHT OF ASIA”

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Sir Edwin Arnold published his “Light of Asia” in the year 1879. This charming and delightful poem deals with the life of the Buddha and his main teachings. Through the medium of this poem the Buddha and his teachings were given wide publicity in the West during the last century or so. Soon after publication it achieved a phenomenal success and was translated into most of the European languages and ran into as much as 60 editions in England and 80 editions in America. As the copyright for English publications was not protected in America during this time several American publishers printed and distributed pirated editions of this poem at a very cheap price. The estimated sales exceeded over a million copies. In Ceylon 4 editions were published by two Buddhist publication societies.

Apart from Sir Edwin’s preface and the introduction by Sir Denison Ross, Director of the London Society of Oriental Studies, the book covered 177 pages. It contains 5,300 lines of verses comprising 41,000 words. The poem is divided into 8 chapters. Sir Edwin resorts to various rhetorical devices and employs several meters to match the themes of the verses he deals with. After 8 years of publication Dr. Arthur Fungust brought out a German translation of the 24th English edition. In 1891 Conrad Vernon produced a second German translation. In 1903 Albert Schopper translated it for the third time to the German language. A Dutch translation appeared in 1895. In 1899 a French translation, in 1900 a Czechoslovakian translation, and in 1909 an Esperanto and Swedish translations were published. A Sinhalese translation was published in Ceylon some time ago. This poem was dramatized and staged in California for 35 days. In 1909 a film was produced in America. The elephants, horses, camels and uniforms for the film were provided by the Maharaja of Jaipur.

At the time this book was published, books on Buddhism were not available in English. The Pali texts had not been translated. The few books available on Buddhism were written by missionaries who had been to the East. They were ill-informed works containing misrepresentations and distortions and were coloured by the prejudices of the authors. Hence westerners had no authoritative knowledge of the Buddha and his teachings and whatever knowledge they had come from erratic sources.

By reading this magnificent poem presented in fascinating and delightful verses Westerners were able to get a correct picture of the Buddha and his teachings. For a pioneer work it contained a few mistakes but it is not important to dwell on them here. It came as a revelation to Westerners to know that five centuries

before Jesus there had been a gentle and compassionate teacher who was equal to him in virtue and wisdom if not superior. Therefore having read the repeated editions of this poem they obtained a fairly accurate and authoritative presentation of the Buddha, his life and teachings. Thereby this book had a tremendous impact on the spread of Buddhism in the West. During this time even the Indians and their leaders did not know correctly of the Buddha and his teachings. Their knowledge was confined to the distorted version of an incarnation of Vishnu presented to them by the Brahmins after they managed to expel Buddhism from India. Hence reading this poem, Indian leaders obtained an accurate and authoritative knowledge of the Buddha and revised their ill-informed ideas. Sir Edwin was a life member of the Maha-bodhi Society of India, a co-worker with the Anagarika Dharmapala, and a pioneer of the British branch of the Maha-Bodhi Society.

This poem was written when Sir Edwin was the editor of the London “Daily Telegraph”. This was a busy period in his life and he managed to snatch the time he spent in travelling to and from his office by train and similar occasions whenever he managed to obtain some respite. Sir Edwin was a gifted linguist who knew 19 foreign languages. These included Sanskrit, Persian, Hindi, etc. Undoubtedly his knowledge of Sanskrit would have introduced him to the classical poets of India during the heyday of Buddhism who verified the life of the Buddha in their immortal works, e.g. Kshemendra’s Mahabhinishkramana, Asvaghosha’s Jinacharita, and also the Mahayana work – Lalitavistara Bhadantachariya Medankara’s Jina charita etc. Even when he was a student at Oxford, Arnold displayed his poetic talents by writing a poem “The Feast of the Belshazzar”. This won him the coveted Newdigate prize. On the ceremonial occasion of the presentation of this award, Arnold was asked to read out the poem to the audience. At the end of the poem, the then British Minister Disraeli who was present warmly congratulated Arnold and remarked that he had a bright future as a poet.

This illuminating and delightful poem was hailed with joy by the Buddhist world soon after publication. Invitations from Buddhist lands such as Ceylon, Burma, Siam and Japan began to flow to Sir Edwin to visit these lands so that the people may honour him. When he came to Ceylon well over a thousand monks led by the Ven. Walane Sri Sumangala met him and received him at the Rankot Vihara, Panadura. The laity flocked to the reception in their thousands. At that assembly an address paper was presented to Sir Edwin which hailed him as “a scholar who had eclipsed the fame of other learned men as a mountain of diamond would outshine in lustre mountains of other precious stones”. After the reception Sir Edwin explained to the Nayaka Theras the necessity to organise themselves under the Aegis of the Maha-Bodhi Society and work for winning over Buddha-gaya from the Saivaite Mahant. Later the poet was received at the Vidyodaya Pirivena – the foremost centre of Buddhist learning

in Ceylon by the Buddhists under the leadership of Ven. Hikkaduwe Sri Sumangala Nayaka Thera and Col.Olcott. Here too he was presented with an address paper which honoured him for “shedding a moonlight lustre on the Dhamma”. In 1879 the King of Siam honoured him with the Order of the White Elephant. In Japan the Emperor and the people honoured him and arranged for him to address the flower of the Japanese youth assembled at the Tokyo University. There too he spoke of the need for the Buddhists to organise themselves and work for winning over Buddha Gaya for the Buddhists. The King of Persia conferred on him the “Order of the Lion and the Sun”. Likewise the Sultan of Turkey decorated him for services in the field of archaeology and Turkish literature. The University of America wanted him to lecture there, and the President of the U.S.A. honoured him with a reception at the White House.

After the demise of Lord Tennyson the post of Poet Laureate of England fell vacant. Many friends, admirers, and some of his countrymen thought Sir Edwin fit to fill the vacancy. In fact Sir Edwin was one of the three eligible poets considered for filling the coveted honour. Queen Victoria herself favoured Sir Edwin, but the then Prime Minister Gladstone did not favour him on account of his religious prejudices. Some ardent Christians thought that Arnold had harmed Christianity in giving publicity and honour due to Christ and Christianity to the Buddha and his teachings. In fact one W.C. Wilkinson published a book entitled “Edwin Arnold as a Poetizer and Paganiser” in which he castigated Arnold for propagating a heathen creed. One of his friends appealed to Sir Edwin to heal the wounds inflicted on Christianity by writing a poem on Christ entitled “The Light of the World”. Although Arnold did comply, the work turned out to be a flop. Sir Henry Stanley the friend who persuaded Arnold to write this poem was sorely disappointed, and he wrote, “My friend did not hit the right chord. His style is feeble and vapid, his soul is not in his song, though there are beautiful passage in it. It has the tone of an unbeliever”.

There were many critics who praised Sir Edwin’s “Light of Asia”. Among them was the great American writer O.W. Holmes author of the “Breakfast Table Series”. He considered it a classic to be reckoned with the New Testament. R.H. Stoddard compared it’s verses with those of Rosseti, Swineburne, and Mathew Arnold. However his chief adverse critic W.C.Wilkinson described Arnold as anti-Christ. In spite of his dislike and antipathy Wilkinson could not deny that the “Light of Asia” was immensely popular and had a great influence. Another critic S.Kellogg was alarmed at the publication of the “Light of Asia”, and wrote a book to “combat the Buddhist menace”. Inspired by the “Light of Asia” a young undergraduate of Trinity College Oxford – Sydney Arthur Alexander wrote “Sakyamuni – The Story of Buddha” as the Newdigate Prize poem for 1887. Besides him Arnold had other imitators.

Concluding his preface to the “Light of Asia” Arnold expressed the wish that this poem may help to perpetuate his memory as one who loved India and her peoples. That wish has been amply fulfilled and Arnold has joined the ranks of the Indian poets of old who immortalised themselves by writing their classical works on the life and teachings of the Buddha. Arnold will be remembered by posterity as a great scholar who held aloft the Buddha and his Dhamma to a benighted western world grouping in ignorance. Even the chair used by Arnold at the time he wrote the poem is preserved and shown to visitors to the Buddhist Society, London. Truly did the Sanskrit poet of old say “*Swadeshe pujiyate raja vidvan sarvatra pujate*”. The monarch is honoured only within his territory – the scholar is honoured everywhere. In honouring one worthy of honour with his popular poem in the most widely read language in the world, Arnold earned for himself the honour of his fellow men, thus reminding us of the Buddha’s words, “*Pujako labhate pujam, vandako pativandanam*”. One who offers due honour to the worthy, himself becomes entitled to offerings and salutations of his fellow men”.

It is true that Arnold avoided making a public avowal of the fact that he was a Buddhist. He could not have hoped for the Poet Laureateship otherwise. The state at that time would have looked with acute disfavour on a Christian knight who changed his religion. In fact becoming a Buddhist does not demand a public declaration of one’s faith failure of which would merit punishment in hell. After his studies in Buddhism, Arnold abandoned his erstwhile pastime-hunting. It is on record that he turned his private ship back to Sicily when he found that one of the crew had caught some lizards and had taken them on-board only to find that the ship had no food for the creatures once they left the island and had travelled a considerable distance. Arnold proceeded only after he had safely restored the lizards to the land where they could find their food.

Some have disputed the fact that Arnold was a Buddhist. All that we can say is that his life, his thoughts and associations were Buddhist-oriented. The concluding verses of the “Light of Asia” are a pointer to the faith Arnold had in the Triple Gem:- the Buddha, Dhamma and the Sangha.

“Ah Blessed Lord, O High Deliverer,
Forgive this feeble script which doth thee wrong.
Measuring with little wit thy lofty love.
Ah! Lover! Brother, Guide, Lamp of the Law,
I take refuge in thy name and Thee

I take refuge in thy Law of Good
The dew is on the lotus! Rise Great Sun
And lift my leaf and mix me with the wave,
Om mani padme Om! The sunrise comes.
The dew drop slips into the shining sea.”

