

Builders of our Nation:

Sir D. B Jayatilaka (1868–1944)
Statesman, Scholar, Social Reformer and
National Leader

by

Sudeep Perera

(A Great-Grand Nephew of Sir D.B.)

Don Baron Jayatilaka was born on 13 February 1868 in Waragoda, Kelaniya. He was the eldest son of Don Daniel Jayatilaka and Elisa Weerasinghe Jayatilaka. His father was a road contractor and a founding member of Vidyalankara Pirivena, while his mother came from the respected Weerasinghe family and was a devoted Buddhist.

Jayatilaka received his early education at Vidyalankara Pirivena, Kelaniya, where he studied Sinhala, Pali, Sanskrit, and Buddhist literature under eminent monks such as Ven. Ratmalane Sri Dharmaloka and Ven. Ratmalane Sri Dharmarama. He later continued his studies at Wesley College, Colombo. A brilliant scholar, he pursued higher education abroad, obtaining a BA from the University of Calcutta and an MA from the University of Oxford. He also qualified as a barrister and became an advocate of the Supreme Court of Ceylon.

Sir D.B. played a significant role in the Buddhist revival and national awakening during British colonial rule. He was the founder and first president of the Young Men's Buddhist Association (YMBA), serving in that position for 46 years. He also held leadership positions in several important organizations, including the All Ceylon Buddhist Congress, the Vidyalankara Sabha, and the Royal Asiatic Society of Ceylon. His contributions to education were immense. He served as the first Buddhist

Sinhala Principal of Ananda College in Colombo, founder principal of Dharmaraja College in Kandy, and the first manager of Visakha Vidyalaya in Colombo. He also helped establish and manage several Buddhist schools and was the founder of the Sri Dharmaloka Maha Vidyalaya in Kelaniya.

As a scholar, Sir D.B. contributed greatly to the revival of Sinhala literature and Buddhist studies. He was the founding Chief Editor of the *Sinhala-Sinhala* etymological Sinhala dictionary and supported the establishment of the *Dinamina* newspaper. He was also a leading figure in the Temperance Movement and was unjustly imprisoned during the 1915 disturbances under martial law due to his nationalist activities.

In politics, Sir D.B. emerged as a leading figure in the independence movement of Ceylon. He became President of the Ceylon National Congress in 1923 and later served in the Legislative Council. Following the constitutional reforms introduced by the Donoughmore Commission, he was elected to the State Council from the Kelaniya electorate in 1931. He became Leader of the State Council, a position equivalent to that of Prime Minister, and Minister of Home Affairs. This made him the first elected national leader of Ceylon under universal franchise. Due to his strong leadership and popularity, he was re-elected uncontested in 1936.

Sir D.B. strongly supported national development and progressive reforms, including C.W.W. Kannangara's Free Education Bill. He was also instrumental in religious and cultural initiatives such as the renovation of the Ruvanveli Maha Seya. In recognition of his distinguished service to the country, he was knighted by the British Crown.

During the food shortage caused by World War II, with respect to the British Governor's request, Sir D.B. sacrificed

his leadership position of the State Council in 1942 to serve as Ceylon's representative in India. Through his strong relationships with Indian leaders, he successfully secured food aid for Ceylon. He passed away on 29 May 1944 while returning to Ceylon for medical treatment.

Widely respected as the **“Uncrowned King of Ceylon”**, Sir Don Baron Jayatilaka was honoured with the first state funeral given to a Ceylonese under colonial rule. His leadership, scholarship, and dedication laid a strong foundation for Sri Lanka's independence in 1948.



Sir D. B Jayatilaka's Statue at the Public Trustee Department in Bauddhaloka Mawatha, Colombo 07 named Thurban House - a palatial building which was his own house that was gifted to the state

