

*Builders of Our Nation:***Dr. C. W. W. Kannangara**

Dr. Cristopher William Wijekoon Kannangara (1884–1969) was a prominent Sri Lankan lawyer and politician, widely recognized as the **"Father of Free Education in Sri Lanka."** He played a pivotal role in the country's independence movement and profoundly reformed its education system.

Early Life and Education

Born on October 13, 1884, in Wewala, Hikkaduwa, Kannangara was the son of John Daniel Wijekoon Kannangara and Emily Wijesinghe. He received his primary education at a free Wesleyan Missionary School, where his academic prowess earned him a Foundation Scholarship to **Richmond College, Galle**. Excelling in mathematics, he topped the Ceylon and British Empire list in the Cambridge Senior Examination in 1903 and was an all-round student, captaining the cricket team and playing soccer.

Early Career

After graduating, Kannangara taught mathematics at Richmond College, Prince of Wales College, Moratuwa, and Wesley College, Colombo. Concurrently, he studied law at Ceylon Law College, qualifying as a Proctor in 1910. He then established a successful civil law practice in Galle. He was also an active member of Galle society, involved in various clubs and associations, including the Temperance Union. In his family life, Kannangara married Edith Weerasooria in 1922, and they had two children

Political Career

Kannangara's political journey began with the **temperance movement** led by Anagarika Dharmapala. He gained public recognition for defending detainees during the **Riots of 1915**, many of whom were future leaders of the independence movement.

In 1923, he was elected to the **Legislative Council of Ceylon** and re-elected in 1924. In 1931, he became President of the **Ceylon National Congress**. The same year, following the Donoughmore Commission's recommendations, he was elected to the newly established **State Council of Ceylon**. He was appointed the first chairman of the Executive Committee of Education, thereby becoming **Ceylon's first Minister of Education**. He was re-elected in 1935, retaining his ministerial position. He is also notable for being the first minister to wear the National dress in the State Council

Education Reforms

During his 16-year tenure as Minister of Education, Kannangara introduced groundbreaking reforms throughout the 1940s aimed at providing **equal educational opportunities** for all children. Key recommendations, eventually passed by the State Council in July 1945, included:

- **Free education from Kindergarten to University.**
- Mother tongue as the medium of instruction in Primary Schools.
- English to be taught in all schools from standard III.
- A comprehensive curriculum to develop students' "head, heart, and hands."

He established a network of **Central Schools (Madhya Mahā Vidyāla)**, modeled on Royal College, Colombo, to bring high-quality secondary education to rural areas. The number of central schools grew from 3 in 1941 to 50 by 1950. He also initiated an annual scholarship program for underprivileged students, now better known as 5th standard scholarships. He also upgraded ancient *pirivenas*, educational establishments for Buddhist monks. Kannangara worked to abolish the two-tier school system (English for the privileged, vernacular for the masses) and supported the establishment of the **University of Ceylon**, which later awarded him an LLD (Honoris Causa).

Kannangara faced significant opposition to his free education proposals, particularly from economically privileged groups and some political colleagues, including D.S. Senanayake. Despite this, he successfully championed the Free Education Bill. Kannangara spoke for six and a half hours to convince other members of the council to vote for the bill, and was supported in his efforts

Post-Independence

After losing his parliamentary seat in the 1947 general elections, Kannangara served as Ceylon's **Consul General to Indonesia** from 1950 to 1952. He returned to politics, winning the Agalawatta electorate in the 1952 general elections, and was appointed **Minister of Housing and Local Government** and **Chief Government Whip** in Dudley Senanayake's cabinet. He was a strong advocate for spreading Buddhism in the West.

He retired from active politics in 1956 and was awarded a DLitt by Vidyodaya University in 1961. He passed away on September 23, 1969, at the age of 84.

Family

Dr. Chitraranjan Swarajweera Wijekoon Kannangara and Kusumawathi Wijekoon Senevirathne.