

Builders of Our Nation:

**Sir Ponnambalam Arunachalam –
Father of University Education in Sri Lanka**

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Family and Education

Ponnambalam Arunachalam (14 September 1853 – 9 January 1924) was a prominent Ceylonese civil servant and political figure. Born in Colombo, he belonged to a distinguished Tamil family and was the third son of Gate Mudaliyar A. Ponnambalam. Sir Ponnambalam Ramanathan was his elder brother. His education at the Royal Academy in Colombo (now Royal College) and later at Christ's College, Cambridge, where he earned BA and MA degrees in law and history, marked the foundation of his career. After being called to the bar at Lincoln's

Inn in 1875, Arunachalam joined the Ceylon Civil Service, becoming the first Ceylonese to do so through open competition.

Career in the Public Service

His early appointments included positions as a police magistrate and district judge in various regions. His work caught the attention of Chief Justice John Budd Phear, leading to rapid promotions, including serving as acting Registrar-General and Fiscal of the Western Province. Notably, he was appointed Superintendent of Census in 1900 and recognized for his roles in managing the 1901 census. Arunachalam also initiated efforts to codify Ceylon's law but completed only one volume of 'A Digest of the Civil Law of Ceylon' before retiring in 1913. He was knighted in February 1914 in recognition of his distinguished public service.

Post Retirement Activities & Political Life

Arunachalam shifted towards politics, stimulating political reform advocacy while serving. He established the Ceylon National Association and Ceylon Reform League in 1917, later co-founding the Ceylon National Congress in 1919, serving as its first president. Disputes over communal representation led him to depart from the CNC in 1921, prompting the formation of the Ceylon Tamil League in 1923. His leadership also extended to the Royal Asiatic Society and various social and labour organizations, including co-founding Ceylon's first trade union, the Ceylon Workers' Welfare League.

Founder of the Ceylon University Association

He was instrumental in promoting higher education and is often referred to as the "father of the Ceylon University," having founded the Ceylon University Association in 1906. Ponnambalam Arunachalam died on a pilgrimage in Madurai, India, leaving a significant legacy in civil service, politics, and education in Ceylon. His literary contributions included works on Ceylon's history and law.

Sir Ponnambalam Arunachalam's Vision & Achievements

- His Vision throughout his life was a United Sri Lanka with all its communities living in concord in a single sovereign state.
- He was the first Ceylonese to enter the prestigious Ceylon Civil Service through open competition
- He was a founder member of the Ceylon National Congress with high potential for national unity.
- He was the Founder President of the Ceylon Saiva Paripalana Sabhai to foster and practice Hinduism. He and his wife founded the Arunachaleswarar Temple at Mutwal.
- He made an outstanding contribution to the establishment of the Ceylon University College. It is remembered by naming the first residential hostel for undergraduates with the shifting of the University of Ceylon to Peradeniya as Arunachalam Hall.
- He was the first Ceylonese to be elected president of the Ceylon Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society (1917).

He has been honoured by the erection of a statue in the Parliamentary compound (now Presidential Secretariat) at Galle Face, Colombo. The inscription at the base of the statue reads as follows.

SIR PONNAMBALAM ARUNACHALAM (1853 -1924)

Scholar, Statesman, Administrator, Patriot erected by a Grateful People in testimony of a life nobly spent in the service of his country and signal services as the champion of a reformed legislature and of his matchless devotion and steadfastness in the cause of the Ceylon University.