

Helena Wijewardene: The Matriarch of an Illustrious Family



Helena Dep Wijewardene, a lady of great strength and character

A lady with great strength of character who nurtured a family that has made history in Sri Lanka, Helena Wijewardene was a landed proprietress, philanthropist and Buddhist patron. She was a lady with a purpose who rendered a great service to our country.

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Born in 1864, this versatile lady with a charismatic personality, Wewage Dona Helena Dep Weerasinghe married Muhandiram Don Philip Wijewardene, hailing from the Sedawatte area. Don Philip was a timber merchant who had at the time expanded immensely into construction and was also part of several major projects in Colombo. He was a great businessman having invested his earnings on property, and therefore had land in Colombo, Kurunegala and Puttalam. He was a great patron of the Buddhist faith, and this ardour was shared by his wife, Helena as well. The ancient Weheragodella temple in Sedawatte was one such temple that received the patronage of the Wijewardene family. They did much towards the development of many temples.

Don Philip and Helena had nine children; seven boys and two girls - Don Philip Alexander, Agnes Helen, Don Louis, Don Richard, Don Edmund, Lizzie Harriet, Don Charles, Don Walter and Don Albert. Helena was widowed at the age of 38 with the demise of Don Philip in 1903. The entire responsibility of bringing up the nine children as well as taking care of the business and property fell on her. Though it was a challenging era, especially for a woman, Helena Wijewardene took up the task with great fortitude, says Ven Galaboda Gnanissara Thero, Chief Incumbent of the Gangaramaya Temple. She made sure her children, received a good education, each of whom became a specialist in their respective field. The family later moved from Sedawatte to Sri Ramya their residence in Colombo in 1923.

Helena Wijewardene continued her husband's work successfully and further

developed their businesses, ensuring nothing went in to decline. Her many entrepreneurial activities showed her business acumen. It was she who purchased extensive land in Colombo 3, Colpetty, Maradana, Fort and Pettah. She continued to manage and develop the family estates. As Podi Hamuduruwo explained, during that time, the family owned an estimated 20,000 to 30,000 acres. Thus, setting up a legacy that would benefit the family for the years to come.



Helena's greatest work is evident in the revival of Buddhist temples, an aspect that her husband too had been greatly involved in. While the Weheragodella ancient temple continued to receive her patronage, she was also a great benefactor of many temples including Bellanvila, Kuruwita Aramaya, Kuppiyawatte, the Ratnapura Purana Viharaya, Dematagoda Abeysingharamaya, Peliyagoda Vidyalkara Pirivena and Maligakanda Vidyodaya. She provided temples with property and alms, ensuring the longevity of these religious institutions.

The renovation and revival of the Kelaniya Raja Maha Viharaya, the site of the Buddha's third visit to Sri Lanka, was one of her significant contributions. The temple, had been destroyed by the Portuguese. During a visit to the Viharaya, Helena was saddened by the condition of this historical temple and thus decided to restore its former glory. Helena's first contribution was in 1888 and it was the beginning of her strong, close relationship and thereafter her family's bond with the Kelaniya Raja Maha Viharaya.

In 1902, Helena, together with her husband, replaced the wooden flower altars with marble ones. Extensive renovations began in 1927 and the skilled services of master painter and artist Solias Mendis was acquired to completely redo the Temple's beautiful murals. This was completed over a period of 20 years and these paintings are known to be some of Sri Lanka's finest work of art. For his outstanding services, the Wijewardenes gifted the artist a four-acre coconut land in Mahawewa. However, the last few murals of the temple were the work of Karl Kassmann, a Russian artist living in Sri Lanka at that time. Throughout her life she was a patron of the arts.

In 1937 the renovated temple was presented to the Sangha by Lady Wijewardene

Through the revival of Kelaniya Raja Maha Viharaya, Helena and her family performed a great service to the country. The Kelaniya Duruthu Maha Perahera held annually was inaugurated during her time and it is continued to this date. Through her initiative the entire Wijewardene family have become patrons of the Kelaniya Raja Maha Viharaya.



In January 1937 the renovated temple was presented to the Sangha by Helena Wijewardene, which was her ardent wish. This was the last time the great patroness visited the temple. Helena ensured the temple would continue to enjoy financial stability by donating a large portion of her wealth including a 250-acre paddy land to the Temple. Moreover, in accordance with her final wishes, her jewellery was enshrined in the Dagaba of the Kelaniya Temple.

The Wijewardene family are also patrons of the Gangaramaya Temple, Hunupitiya. The family, to date, are the main Dayakas and have been a great sources of strength to the Temple over the years. “The sacred casket gifted to Lady Helena by the Nayaka Thero of the Kelaniya Viharaya after the completion of renovation work was later donated to the Gangaramaya Temple by Bertie Weerasinghe after her demise”, said Podi Hamuduruwo.

With great foresight, she set up the Wijewardene Charitable Trust Fund that

would serve any family member in distress. Secured with finances from estates and other properties, the fund also supports the development of Buddhism through the preservation temples and sacred relics. Helena was also benevolent in ensuring her staff and those who worked for her were well looked after, thus she even gifted land. "A lady whose father who was raised by and later worked for Helena, recently donated a land in Thalawathugoda, that had been gifted to the family by Lady Helena, to the Gangaramaya Temple for a meditation centre", said the Thero.



A mural at the Kelaniya Temple depicting Helena Wijewardene laying the foundation stone of the new viharaya in 1927

The children of Don Philip and Helena Wijewardene were eminent personalities of Sri Lankan society. They were very prominent figures in the then National Movement for Independence. D R Wijewardene, was the founder of the Associated Newspapers of Ceylon, which was quite pivotal in shaping the political landscape of the country. In fact, their grandson J R Jayewardene was the Island's first Executive President. Ray Wijewardene, another grandson was an inventor and developed the landmaster tractor that became of immense use to the paddy farmers. Upali Wijewardene, was one of the country's significant businessman. Their great grand children too are key figures; current Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe is their great grandson.

Helena was a great patron of the arts and she did much to revive the Sri Lanka's traditional art as well as culture. The preservation and the painting of the Kandyan Murals of the Kelaniya Raja Maha Viharaya is one such example, which

enabled the protection of this unique art for posterity. Nalini Wickremesinghe, her granddaughter, was key to the revival of traditional dance, drama and art while Anoma Wijewardene, a great-granddaughter, is today an internationally renowned artist.

The distinguished family tree founded by Don Philip and Helena Wijewardene (the roots of which can be traced as far as the Kingdom of Kotte) still continues strong with branches reaching far and wide. The Wijewardene family has played a major part in nurturing and shaping the political landscape of Sri Lanka. From the couple's nine children to their spouses, grand children and great grand children, the legacy continues.

The roots are firm and therefore the tree flourishes strong. They have, through evolving times, stood by the country and always walked side by side with the people. It was Helena Wijewardene, the matriarch of this illustrious family, who has undoubtedly set the path for their future journey.

Images from "The Tudugala Wijewardene Family"

