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Temples, Taste, and Power: Objectified Cultural Capital and Bourgeois Appropriation of Buddhist Patronage in Colonial Sri Lanka (18th–19th Centuries)

Abstract

This paper examines the transformation of Buddhist temple patronage in colonial Sri Lanka, with particular emphasis on the Low-country regions. The collapse of the indigenous monarchy and the subsequent decline in royal sponsorship created a vacuum in religious patronage, which was increasingly filled by a new colonial bourgeois elite most notably, the Mudaliyars. These individuals held key administrative and social positions within the colonial system and often converted to Christianity to gain access to privileges such as education, property rights, commercial opportunities, and political appointments. Nevertheless, their religious affiliations were frequently nominal. Many Mudaliyars maintained discreet but active involvement in Buddhist establishments, employing temple construction, ritual sponsorship, and artistic patronage as means to cultivate local legitimacy, maintain power, and assert moral authority. As the main research question, this study examines the multifaceted role of bourgeois patrons in the construction and support of Buddhist temples, with particular attention to how their aesthetic preferences influenced religious art, architecture, and visual culture. The research also explores the deployment of objectified cultural capital manifested in commissioned temple artworks and architectural innovations as a vehicle for expressing power, consolidating caste hierarchies, and gaining social mobility. The phenomenon of dual patronage, wherein some Mudaliyars supported both Christian and Buddhist institutions, is examined as a strategic effort to navigate the colonial order while maintaining indigenous legitimacy. A key focus of the paper is the emergence of the Southern School, an artistic idiom that reflects the incorporation of colonial aesthetic sensibilities into Buddhist temple art. This development exemplifies how the tastes and hybrid identities of bourgeois patrons reshaped religious visual traditions to align with their socio-political ambitions. Ultimately, the paper argues that Buddhist patronage in colonial Sri Lanka was not simply an expression of piety but a deliberate exercise of cultural power. It reveals broader processes of changing aesthetic values, social negotiation, and the formation of a colonial bourgeois identity embedded in both imperial modernity and traditional religiosity.

Keywords: Bourgeois Taste, Buddhist Art, Objectified Cultural Capital, Southern School of Art, Temple Patronage

Introduction

The shift in temple patronage of Sri Lanka from indigenous monarchs to bourgeois patrons during the colonial period had a profound impact on temple construction, as well as on associated art and architectural projects, particularly in the western and southern maritime provinces, commonly referred to as the Low-country. This paper focuses specifically on the class of Mudaliyars in the Low-country and their role in temple constructions, art projects and religious activities. It is well established that, with the introduction of Buddhism to Sri Lanka in the third century BCE, temple patronage was integrally linked to kingship. Local rulers made lavish donations of material wealth and monastic lands (*viharagam*) to temples across the island, as recorded in *Vaṃsakathā* narratives and donor inscriptions.

This long-standing relationship between kingship and temple patronage was disrupted under colonial rule, particularly following the British annexation of the Kandyan Kingdom in 1815. The resulting political transformation led to the emergence of a new generation of influential temple patrons from the bourgeois or comprador classes. These new patrons differed significantly from traditional royal benefactors. They acquired social status and influence through close ties with the colonial administration, access to missionary education, wealth accumulated through new commercial ventures, and their proximity to colonial structures of power.

These bourgeois elites deployed their cultural capital to support temples in ways that aligned with colonial ideologies and social hierarchies. They sponsored to establish new religious fraternities, often structured along caste lines, funded temple construction, commissioned mural paintings, supported Buddhist rituals, and promoted reformist models of Buddhism. In doing so, they were not merely sustaining religious institutions - they were actively asserting authority over the direction of Buddhism itself. This paper explores this critical transformation in temple patronage, examining the socio-cultural background of the bourgeois patrons, their influence on temple architecture and art production, shifts in aesthetic preferences and power dynamics, and the role of objectified cultural capital in shaping Buddhist art and identity during the colonial period.

Theoretical and Conceptual Perspectives

This article considers several theoretical perspectives, namely; objectified cultural capital, taste, and power, in examining the transformation of religious patronage during the colonial period. Cultural capital refers to non-economic assets that facilitate social mobility, enabling emerging social groups to gain influence in traditionally authoritative fields such as religion. It also grants them legitimacy to shape cultural norms and ideals. In the context of colonial Sri Lanka, bourgeois patrons replaced traditional royal authority by leveraging Western-style education, moral reform ideologies, and access to cultural resources to redefine Buddhist monastic art and values.

Pierre Bourdieu (1986), in his seminal work *The Forms of Capital*, identified three forms of cultural capital: objectified, embodied, and institutionalized. Objectified cultural capital refers to material objects that possess cultural value and serve as markers of social status. These include cultural goods such as monastic buildings, paintings, sculptures, monuments, and books - assets that can be owned, displayed, and utilized to signal one's cultural distinction. In the Low-country, bourgeois patrons actively employed objectified cultural capital by

constructing monastic complexes, commissioning Buddhist mural paintings, funding sculptures, printing Buddhists texts, and incorporating colonial aesthetics into religious embellishments.

According to Bourdieu, individuals or groups possessing cultural capital often assert their preferences, values, and interpretations as dominant or "legitimate." In colonial Ceylon, bourgeois patrons utilized their cultural capital to reshape the parameters of accepted Buddhist practices and values through architectural projects, mural commissions, and the orchestration of public rituals. The concept of "taste," in Bourdieu's framework, refers to an individual's preferences for cultural goods, which are shaped by and reflective of their social class. Taste is not an innate or purely personal phenomenon; rather, it is socially constructed and deeply influenced by one's upbringing and access to cultural resources. In *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (1984), Bourdieu argues that dominant classes deploy notions of "good taste" to distinguish themselves from subordinate groups, thereby legitimizing their social status. Taste, as part of the *habitus* the system of dispositions shaped by one's social environment plays a central role in determining what individuals perceive as aesthetically valuable or culturally legitimate.

Furthermore, Bourdieu (1991) contends that religious patronage functions as a form of symbolic power, closely linked to symbolic capital and the process of legitimation. By supporting religious institutions such as temples, churches, or schools the bourgeoisie were able to affirm their authority as cultural leaders. Such patronage not only differentiated them from other social groups but also allowed them to align with sacred authority, thereby enhancing their prestige and reinforcing their dominance in the socio-religious hierarchy.

Brief Historical Context of Temple Patronage: Pre-Colonial and Kandyan Models

A strong political affiliation between kingship and Buddhism in Sri Lanka can be observed from as early as the third century BCE, when the religion was first introduced to the island. As recorded in Chapters XI to XX of the *Mahavaṃsa* (1912), King Devanampiyatissa (250–210 BCE), the reigning monarch at the time, offered his full support for the establishment and institutionalization of Buddhism. Thereafter, royal patronage of Buddhism became an essential and defining responsibility of Sri Lankan rulers. Ancient chronicles such as the *Deepavaṃsa* (1879), *Mahavaṃsa* (1912), and *Chulavaṃsa* (1925-30) provide ample evidence of donations made by monarchs to Buddhist monasteries. A notable example is the detailed account of King Duṭugamaṇu's (161–137 BCE) patronage described in Chapter XXVI of the *Mahavaṃsa*.

Between the third century BCE and the mid-thirteenth century - encompassing the Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa eras - Buddhist art and architecture flourished under the patronage of Sinhalese kings. Following the decline of the Polonnaruwa Kingdom, political instability resulted in the relocation of the administrative capital across multiple sites, preventing the consolidation of centralized power.

Despite these periods of political crisis, many Sinhalese rulers continued to offer substantial patronage to Buddhist monasteries. The reigns of the Dambadeniya, Gampola, and Kotte kingdoms provide notable examples of continued royal support. In particular, the flourishing of Buddhism under the Kotte Kingdom (1412–1597) is reflected in classical literary works known as *Sandesha Kavyas*. Portuguese records from the early colonial period also remark on

the wealth of Sri Lankan temples, noting that they surpassed the churches of Lisbon in opulence (De Silva 1995: 33). Thus, royal patronage in the pre-colonial period played a pivotal role in shaping temple construction and cultural activities in Sri Lanka.

Following the Portuguese conquest of the Kingdom of Kotte in 1597, the Kandyan Kingdom in the central highlands became the stronghold of local political authority. By the eighteenth century, Kandyan kings had assumed a dominant role in directing the island's religious activities, becoming the new epicenter of Buddhism. Through extensive land donations, Kandyan monarchs enabled Buddhist monasteries in the highlands to evolve into self-sufficient and prosperous centers. These donated lands were cultivated by tenant farmers, while a diverse range of craftsmen - granted land in exchange for their services contributed to the upkeep and embellishment of the monasteries (Knox 1958: 116).

The reign of King Kirthi Sri Rajasimha (1747–1782) represents the most vibrant phase of Buddhist revival during the Kandyan period. His enthusiastic patronage is reflected in the numerous visual representations of him - both painted and sculpted - found in Buddhist temples across the island, including the Dambulla cave temple, the Temple of the Tooth in Kandy, Diyakelinavela Rajamaha Viharaya in Kandy, and Veheragampita Rajamaha Viharaya in Matara. A key event during his reign was the restoration of higher ordination in Sri Lanka in in 1753 (Malalgoda 1976: 62–63; *Chulavaṃsa*, Chap. C, vv. 137–138). As a result, the monastic order expanded significantly, and a large number of Buddhist monasteries and educational centers were established throughout the Kandyan Kingdom (*Mandarampura Puvata* 1958: vv. 155, 643, 644).

Kandyan kings were regarded as the custodial patrons of Buddhism across the island. As such, they were expected to support not only temples in the Up-country but also those in the Low-country. Monasteries such as Mulgirigala Rajamaha Viharaya, Kelaniya Rajamaha Viharaya, Veheragampita Rajamaha Viharaya, etc., received patronage from Kandyan kings, even though these rulers did not exercise direct political control over all regions of the island (Ferguson 1911: 197–235; Bell and Gunasekara 1916: 145–161; *Kalyani Vihara Varṇanava* 1890).

In addition to King Kirthi Sri, other Kandyan monarchs who extended significant support to Buddhist monasteries include Vimaladharmasuriya I (1591–1604), Vimaladharmasuriya II (1687–1707), Narendrasiṃha (1707–1739), and Rajadhi Rajasiṃha (1782–1798). Scholars such as Coomaraswamy (1908: 56) and Somathilaka (2002, 2006) have documented numerous grants and donations made by these rulers to temple artists. These endowments included land grants, material donations, and honorary titles bestowed upon artists for their services. Kandyan kings typically concentrated their support on prominent temples located in politically strategic locations, thereby reinforcing their sovereignty and religious authority.

The fall of the Kandyan Kingdom in 1815 marked a watershed moment in the history of Buddhist patronage in Sri Lanka. The British annexation severely disrupted the traditional systems of temple patronage in the Up-country. Although the British, through the Kandyan Convention (*Uḍaraṭa Givisuma*), pledged to uphold Buddhist religious institutions and the rights of the sangha, these promises were not realized in practice (Malalgoda 1976: 81–90; Gnanavimala 2001: x–xii). As a result, dissatisfaction grew among the Kandyan Buddhist establishment, leading to several uprisings against British rule in 1818, 1830, and 1848. Despite the support of local monks, all these rebellions were ultimately suppressed by the colonial regime.

Buddhism in the Low-country and Strategies for Asserting Caste Power

The geo-political and cultural landscape of the Low-country - comprising the southern and western maritime provinces of Sri Lanka - differed significantly from that of the Kandyan region or the Up-country. These Low-country areas were successively occupied by three European colonial powers: the Portuguese (1505–1658), the Dutch (1658–1796), and the British (1796–1948). Of these, the Portuguese era - particularly the period from 1597 to 1658 - was marked by open hostility toward Buddhism. The Portuguese exercised direct military power against Buddhist institutions by destroying temples, plundering monastic properties, prohibiting Buddhist rituals, and reallocating temple lands and assets to Christian missionaries (Rebeiro 1847; *Chulavaṃsa*, Part II: 95:5–8; Gnanavimala 2001: 71; Pagnaloka 2002: 243). According to the records of Queyroz (1930: 300–301), the Portuguese even assassinated Buddhist monks who resisted their rule.

While Dutch colonial rule also had a generally detrimental impact on the Buddhist establishment, the latter phase of their governance saw a modest relaxation of restrictions. During this time, the Dutch permitted the reconstruction of some ruined temples and allowed public performance of Buddhist rituals (De Silva 2000: 69). These concessions were largely political in nature, intended to win the favor of the local population and mobilize them against the encroaching British. Certain Dutch officials, such as Governor Ivan Willem van de Graaf (1765–1785), made goodwill visits to Buddhist temples in the South. Furthermore, the Dutch colonial administration issued circulars expressing their intention to support Buddhist institutions (Ferguson 1911: 218; Malalgoda 1976: 83).

A pivotal development during the Dutch period was the restoration of the higher ordination, facilitated by the Siamese (Thai) sangha under the patronage of King Kirthi Sri 1753. This event marked a significant religious revival, not only in the Up-country but also within restricted areas of the Low-country. As a result, the *Siam Nikaya* (Siam Chapter) rapidly spread across the maritime provinces. Low-country monks were granted access to education in Kandyan monastic schools known as *Shilpashala* (Devaraja 1995: 292; Pagnaloka 2002: 336–361). However, a caste-based conflict in 1768 led to a schism between Kandyan and Low-country monks, creating enduring divisions within the sangha (*Mandarampura Puvata* 1958: vv. 823–862; De Silva 2000: 70).

In 1796, the British captured control of the maritime provinces by taking over Dutch-held territories (De Silva1995: 11-35, Mendis 1944). While the Buddhist establishment in the Kandyan region declined under British colonial rule, the Low-country Buddhist community experienced unprecedented growth, setting the stage for a significant cultural and intellectual renaissance in the late nineteenth century. One of the principal factors contributing to this resurgence was the emergence of a new class of bourgeois temple patrons in the Low-country. The involvement of the colonial bourgeoisie in the establishment of new Buddhist fraternities was a critical factor contributing to the revitalization of Buddhism during the nineteenth century. In turn, this involvement served as a strategic means for these elites to enhance their status within the prevailing caste hierarchy. The emergence of several new fraternities in the coastal regions can be understood as a direct response to the exclusion of non-*Govigama* monks from the Kandyan Siamese higher ordination lineage, a development of profound significance in the socio-religious landscape of the period.

In 1768, the Siamese Higher Ordination (*Upasampada*) was formally restricted to monks belonging to the *Govigama* caste, which was regarded as the highest caste among the Sinhalese. This restriction systematically marginalized other prominent castes in the Low-country, such as the *Salagama, Karava,* and *Durava*. The exclusion generated considerable resentment among Low-country monks and lay elites, paving the way for the emergence of several new fraternities from the coastal region. Bourgeois patrons played a leading role in this process, and numerous examples illustrate their involvement. For instance, Mudaliyar Sahabandu and Mudaliyar Vijayasriwardena - two prominent *Salagama* elites from the South-were instrumental lay facilitators in the establishment of the *Amarapura* fraternity, which was introduced from Burma in 1802 (*Sinhala Vishwakoṣaya*, Vol. I, 1963: 639). These Mudaliyars also sponsored the founding of Ambagahapitiya Mulamaha Viharaya and Velitara Pushparamaya, both of which became significant religious institutions in the South.

The formation of the *Amarapura* fraternity in 1802 marks a crucial milestone in the history of Buddhism during the colonial era (Mendis 1944: 27–28; Malalgoda 1976: 87–105). Subsequently, additional fraternities emerged, including the *Kalyaṇiwamsa* (1810) and Ramañña (1864) fraternities, as well as several subdivisions of the *Amarapura Nikaya* itself - such as the *Amarapura Dharmarakkhita* (1807), the *Amarapura Mulawaṃsa Nikaya* (1834), and the *Amarapura Sri Saddhammavaṃsa Nikaya* (1862) (*Sinhala Vishvakoṣhaya*, Vol. I, 1963: 640–643; Malalgoda 1976: 147–151). Today, the existence of 22 sub-fraternities affiliated with the Amarapura Sanghasabha testifies to the extensive institutional growth of the order and its expansion into regions such as Sabaragamuwa and the Kandyan interior.

The proliferation of these new fraternities - strongly supported by bourgeois patrons - greatly facilitated the expansion of the Buddhist monastic order in the Low-country. It also enabled non-*Govigama* monks to gain access to higher ordination, a privilege that had previously been monopolized by the *Govigama* caste (Malalgoda 1976: 103–104). Consequently, the construction of new temples and the renovation of existing ones became an urgent necessity to accommodate the growing monastic population. This context fostered significant innovation in Buddhist art and architecture across the maritime provinces.

The economic success of emerging bourgeois patrons provided them with the capital to sponsor Buddhist institutions. As a result, the class of Mudaliyars emerged as the most prominent group of temple patrons during the colonial period. In many instances, these Mudaliyars appear to have supported monastic institutions along caste lines, aiming to ensure that monks from their own caste or community could attain influential positions within the Buddhist order. This strategic patronage allowed them to consolidate and reinforce their socio-political authority in the localities under their control. Their calculated support for new fraternities and religious institutions not only contributed to the revitalization of Buddhist practices but also facilitated their own ascent within the complex matrix of caste hierarchy and colonial power.

The Role of the Mudaliyars in Temple Construction and Socio-Political Activities

Among the colonial bourgeois elites, as noted above, the Mudaliyars emerged as the most influential group of temple patrons in nineteenth-century Sri Lanka. As Peebles observes, “early nineteenth-century sources unanimously agree that the highest status Sinhalese in the Low-country were those men known as Mudaliyars” (Peebles 1995: 3). The prevalence of the temple name ‘Mudalindaramaya’ in the Low-country attests to their significant role in temple

patronage. Notable examples include Dadalla Maha Mudalindaramaya, Vatugedara Sri Vijaya Srivardhana Mudalindaramaya, Hiththatiya Gunaratana Mudalindu Maha Pirivena, and Velipitiya Abhaya Karunaratne Mudalindaramaya, all of which reflect the enduring legacy of Mudaliyar involvement in temple construction and Buddhist institutional development.

Until the mid-nineteenth century, the title of Mudaliyar was conferred exclusively upon individuals serving in the colonial administrative service (Peebles 1995: 137). However, in 1853, during the tenure of Governor G.W. Anderson (1850–1855), this system was restructured to also include individuals outside the civil service. The British began to bestow the Mudaliyar title upon wealthy and socially influential persons in recognition of their loyalty to the colonial rule or for their philanthropic contributions (Jayewardena 2007: 309). This change served as a political strategy aimed at cultivating a class loyal to colonial interests (Peebles 1995: 137).

Mudaliyar Mututantrige Simon Fernando, also known as Mudaliyar Sri Chandrasekara, was one such emerging figure in Panadura who received the title due to his wealth, social standing, and religious engagements. He accumulated his wealth through the timber trade, graphite mining, the arrack business, and service as a government contractor (Jayawardena 2007: 187). Later, he became a prominent patron of Ven. Hikkaduwe Sumangala and made substantial contributions to temple constructions, including Horeduwe Gangaramaya (Dharmabandu 1949: 138–148). Other notable recipients of the honorary Mudaliyar title include Joronis de Soysa, Don Carolis Hewawitharana, and Mahawaduge Andiris Perera, recognized for their charity, religious support, and loyalty to colonial authorities. Joronis de Soysa, the first to receive the title outside of colonial administration, was a Christian who nonetheless made donations to Buddhist institutions (Jayawardena 2007: 174–179). Don Carolis Hewawitharana, a furniture industrialist, supported the Buddhist Theosophical Society and Vidyodaya Pirivena (Dharmabandu 1949: 270–273; Jayawardena 2007: 270–271). Andiris Perera received his title for constructing public decorations during the visit of the Prince of Wales in 1874 (Peebles 1995: 164).

The Mudaliyar class comprised both *Govigama* and non-*Govigama* castes. Notable *Govigama* families included the Saram, Illangakoon, Goonaratne, and Jayasinghe families, while individuals such as Susew de Soysa, Sri Chandrasekara, Don Carolis Hewawitharana etc., were of non-*Govigama* origin. Some Mudaliyars were educated in English, Sinhala, and Pali, representing the products of both colonial and traditional educational systems. For instance, Edmund Roland Goonaratne of *Atapattu Walawwa* translated *Kavyashekharaya*, a classical Sinhala poetry text, into English (Goonatilleke 2012: 185).

Some Mudaliyars donated their personal residences (known as *walawwas*) to the Buddhist monastic order for use as temples, reflecting both their piety and desire to establish lasting religious legacies. For instance, the Dadalla Maha Mudalindaramaya was formerly the *walawwa* of Gate-Mudaliyar A.D. Vijaya Gunaratne; the Keembi-Ela Sri Vijayawardhanarmaya was donated by Mudaliyar Don Abraham Wijayawardana Gunasekara; and the Kuppiyawatta Jayasekararamaya in Colombo was originally the residence of Chief Mudaliyar Arnolds de Abrew Rajapakse Wijayasekara. A plaque at Jayasekararamaya states that, according to the last will of Lady Dona Maria de Silva Siriwardena, the land - formerly the *walawwa* of Chief Mudaliyar Arnolds de Abrew Rajapakse Wijayasekara - was donated to the Buddhist Sangha on 25 October 1823, thereby institutionalizing the transformation of elite residential space into a religious foundation.

Grate-Mudaliyar Adrian de Abrew Wijeyagunaratne Rajapakse of *Maha Kappina Walawwa* was another major patron who reportedly built and restored approximately thirty temples and *kovils* in Velitara. His son, Gate-Mudaliyar Samson de Abrew Vijeyagunaratne (1830–1888), supported many *Amarapura* sect temples, including Goduwa Gangaramaya in Balapitiya (Mangalasiri 1996: 167). He also acted as the chief facilitator during the visit of the Burmese monk Ven. Jagara. Another family member, Mudaliyar Tudor Rajapakse (1868–1959), an artist in the Ceylon Society of Arts, later donated the family *walawwa* to the *Amarapura Saddhammawamsa* fraternity.

Some temples originated as private family shrines of Mudaliyars. For instance, *Kotahena Deepaduttaramaya* - which became a center of Buddhist revival in the late nineteenth century - was initially the personal temple of the Ubhayakulatunga Vijaya Siriwardane family in Kotahena, Colombo. It was transferred to the monastic order in 1806 and opened to the public in 1835 (Manatunga 2005: 7; Kaluarachchi 2004: 334).

Some Mudaliyars deliberately displayed their status and patronage through architectural inscriptions. The stupa archway at *Ashokarama Maha Viharaya* in Kalutara, adorned with the British royal coat of arms, bears the name of Mudaliyar J.S.F. Jayasekara Dharmasiriwardana in both Sinhala and English, inscribed within a medallion placed between two official animals - the lion and the unicorn (Plate 01).

Besides the examples mentioned above, a significant number of Mudaliyars in the Low-country actively participated in temple construction by providing financial assistance, donating materials and land, and employing craftsmen and laborers. Among other notable figures who supported such monastic endeavors were Mudaliyar Bastian Mendis Gunasekara (Watugedara Vijayasrivardhana Mudalindaramaya in Balapitiya), Mudaliyar Edmund Roland Goonaratne (Goonaratne Mudalindaramaya in Matara), Mudaliyar Don Andiris De Siva (Kalutara Kalupahana Viharaya in Kalutara), Mudaliyar Galabada Liyanage Don Allias Amarasiri Jayasinghe (Nagoda Jayasingharama Viharaya in Galle), Mudaliyar Don David Abraham Nicholas Abeysinghe Amarasekara (Mihiripanne Padumaramaya in Galle), Mudaliyar David de Saram (Godapitiya Jetawanaramaya in Matara), Mudaliyar Bastian Freddy Nandiris Obeysekara, (Nawamunise Purana Vihāraya), and Mudaliyar Andris Perera Abhaya Karunaratne Dissanayake (Velipitiya Abhaya Karunaratne Mudalindaramaya in Panadura), to name a few. The patronage extended by these Mudaliyars was generally acknowledged by monastic communities through eulogies composed in literary texts, which served to publicize their acts of generosity among the wider lay population (Gunasena 1999: 460–465).

In addition to temple construction, Mudaliyars supported various Buddhist activities, including the organization of public rituals, the facilitation of religious debates with Christian missionaries, and the establishment of Buddhist educational institutions. For example, the *Gangarohaṇa Puja*, a significant religious ceremony held at the Nilvala River in 1806, was organized by Mudaliyar David de Saram (Weerasuriya 2006: 93). Mudaliyar Andiris Perera supported the Buddhist cause in the renowned Panadura Controversy (*Panadura Vādaya*) (Jayawardena 2007: 266). Ven. Kapugama Dhammakkhanda (1768-1816) was sponsored by Mudaliyar Adrian Abrew Vijesundara Rajapakse for a pilgrimage to Burma in 1806, and the temple now known as Daḍalle Valukaramaya was also donated by him. Mudaliyars William de Abrew Rajapakse, Peter de Abrew Rajapakse, Tudor Rajapakse, and Don Carolis Hewavitharana played significant roles in the founding of Buddhist schools and *pirivenas*.

Owing to the active involvement of Mudaliyars in religious life, their figures frequently appeared in mural depictions of religious processions in temple image houses during the nineteenth century. Moreover, at Ovitigala Sri Sunandarama Viharaya in Kalutara, two imposing figures resembling Mudaliyars stand on either side of the image house doorway in the position traditionally occupied by guardian deities - perhaps visually reflecting the westernized Mudaliyar's symbolic role in monastic patronage.

It is found, however, that the majority of Mudaliyars in the Low-country were either Christian converts, descendants of converts, or individuals raised in environments that were not antagonistic to missionary activity. The exclusive appointment of Christians to high-ranking government positions encouraged Sinhalese nobility and emerging elites to adopt the "government religion" (Malalgoda 1976: 45, 93–94, 208). As Goonawardena (1958: 87–88) observes, colonial authorities viewed the conversion of Mudaliyars as a strategic means to ensure the loyalty of the indigenous populace. However, as Malalgoda (1976: 31) and Pieris (1918: 136) point out, many of these conversions were largely nominal, undertaken primarily to secure positions within the colonial administration.

Several additional factors motivated the Low-country elites to convert, including access to missionary education for their children, entry into new business ventures, and legal recognition of marriages, land ownership, and property rights. The emerging Low-country elites generated substantial profits from ventures such as graphite mining, the arrack trade, plantation agriculture, and the furniture industry (De Silva 1981: 335–337). Engagement in such non-traditional economic activities enabled elites from non-*Govigama* castes such as the *Karava*, *Salagama*, and *Durava* to attain elevated status or recognition as a distinct "status group" within colonial society (Jayawardena 2007; Roberts 1982).

Some Mudaliyars from the maritime provinces actively supported both Christian institutions and Buddhist establishments. A notable example is Chief Mudaliyar Don David Abraham Nicholas Abeysinghe Amarasekara, who patronized the church at Baddegama while simultaneously supporting numerous monastic projects initiated by Ven. Mihiripanne Dammaratana. Mudaliyar Amarasekara contributed building materials for mural projects, financed artists' salaries, and allocated paddy lands to sustain artisans. In recognition of this support, Ven. Mihiripanne composed approximately sixty-nine panegyrics extolling Amarasekara's patronage (Gunasena 1999: 427, 475–476). Another example of dual patronage is Gate Mudaliyar Jeronis de Soysa (1797–1862) of the Moratuwa-based De Soysa family, who provided substantial support to both temples and churches along the coastal region (Dharmabandu 1949: 172–179; Don Bastian 1904). Temples such as Moratuwa Soysaramaya, Dodamduwa Shailabimbaramaya, Kalutara Pulinatalaramaya, and Borella Gotami Viharaya all received patronage from the De Soysa family.

In addition to their support for Buddhist institutions, several Mudaliyars pursued strategies to curry favor with the colonial administration. For instance, Mudaliyar Samson de Abrue Wijeyagunarathne who was an influential Buddhist patron in the South established a scholarship fund of Rs. 8,000 at St. Thomas' College to commemorate the visit of Prince Alfred, Duke of Edinburgh and son of Queen Victoria in 1870 (Dharmabandu 1949: 154–155). Prince Alfred was the first member of British royalty to visit Ceylon (Jayawardena 2007: 312). Mudaliyar Samson subsequently founded another Rs. 8,000 scholarships in the name of Governor William Gregory and also contributed Rs. 5,000 towards the construction of a statue of Governor Gregory, which still stands in front of the National Museum in Colombo (Dharmabandu 1949: 155). In 1870, Mudaliyar Susew Soysa and Charles De Soysa

organized a grand banquet in honour of Prince Alfred, the son of Queen Victoria, during his visit to Sri Lanka. These affluent Mudaliyars are reported to have spent approximately Rs. 100,000 on the event, which was held at *Bagatelle Walawwa* in Colombo (Dharmabandu 1949: 176–177).

Reporting on the royal feast in 1872, Capper wrote: "Two thousand guests were provided with a variety of Eastern and Western entertainments. This was symbolic of the cultural mixture that had taken place among the local bourgeoisie… While all the jamboree was going on in the garden, the Soysas were entertaining the Prince, the Governor and his wife, and a selected group of Europeans and local guests to dinner and dancing to the music of the Rifle Band" (Cited from Jayawardena 2007: 319). Skeen (1870: 383) interpreted this event as an opportunity for the local elite to reaffirm their loyalty to the British Crown. In 1875, two new schools named the Prince of Wales College and the Princess of Wales College were founded in Moratuwa by the De Soysas, with an initial investment of £30,000. This act commemorated the visit of the royal couple to Sri Lanka (Jayawardena 2007: 319). Thus, the Mudaliyars actively engaged in both Buddhist and pro-colonial activities within their respective territories, thereby affirming their status as an influential social group.

Taste of the New Temple Patrons and Objectified Cultural Capital in Practice

The affiliations of bourgeois patrons with colonial systems particularly in education, administration, and religious conversion - had a substantial impact on the transformation of their cultural tastes. This transformation significantly influenced Buddhist art and architecture in the Low-country region. The evolving aesthetic preferences of these patrons also posed a challenge to traditional artistic practices, ultimately contributing to the decline and marginalization of the hegemonic status of the Central Kandyan School, which had been patronized by the Kandyan monarchy, in temple art. A revealing statement by the renowned artist M. Sarlis (1880–1955) helps to contextualize this shift:

> "… at that time, those who followed European lifestyle and attitudes were considered as the foremost in the society… Therefore, Sinhalese value systems, art and crafts deteriorated day by day. Although we had known the traditional methods, we never had a chance to use them in our ordinary art practice as we had to adjust to suit with the demand of the country… Mural works are mostly being carried out according to the ideas of the custodian monks of the temples and the elite patrons.… If the painter is given his own freedom, he can decide the quantity of images and their scales fitting in the location and do the job using traditional Sinhala colours. But, the situation we have faced is quite different."
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> (*Kaladeepa*, 15 May 1953:2)

The above-mentioned statement by M. Sarlis underscores the profound influence that bourgeois patrons exerted on the art-making process during the colonial period. Furthermore, his interview published in *Kalādeepa* (15 May 1953) offers several key insights:

1. The transformation of aesthetic taste among the new bourgeois patrons during the British colonial period critically impacted temple artists, who were compelled to cater to these altered preferences. These patrons' tastes were shaped by colonial aesthetic ideals and Eurocentric artistic paradigms.

2. Within the colonial context, the highly stylized Kandyan art tradition came to be viewed as primitive and lacking sophistication. Colonial aesthetic standards, grounded in notions of Western superiority, rejected the traditional art forms of Sri Lanka as products of ignorance.

3. Temple artists who failed to adapt to these new colonial expectations faced the risk of professional marginalization and loss of livelihood.

The widespread incorporation of Western-inspired artistic and architectural elements into Buddhist temples in the Low-country clearly reflects the aesthetic preferences of the patrons behind these projects. Mudaliyars, the dominant patron class during the colonial period, integrated European design features such as verandahs, porticos, gables, pediments, Tuscan columns, pointed and Florentine arches, stilted arches, awnings, lattice-work, wide overhanging tiered roofs, etc., in their residences known as *walawwas*. Examples include the Kataluwa Aṭadahewatta Walawwa, Veligama Halalle Walawwa, Matara Illangakoon Walawwa, Balapitiya Maha Kappina Walawwa, Kotahena Walawwa, and Meerigama Botale Walawwa.

Similar architectural features are visible in many temples in the Low-country such as Panadura Rankoth Viharaya, Dodanduwa Shailabimbaramaya, Ambagahapitiya Mulamaha Viharaya, Kuppiyawatta Jayasekararamaya, and Dadalla Maha Mudalindaramaya. The image house of Panadura Rankoth Viharaya, for instance, resembles an elite mansion more than a conventional Buddhist image house (Plate 02). Notably, a British coat of arms molded in relief is found above the main entrance to Aṭadahewatta Walawwa, a motif that later became common in many Low-country temples (Plate 03).

The desire among colonial bourgeois elites to emulate European customs and Western lifestyle is affirmed by missionary priest Selkirk, who noted in 1844 that these elites aspired to resemble Europeans by adopting Western dress and customs (Selkirk 1844: 60). Consequently, trousers, coats, shirts, frocks, jackets, hats, shoes, and socks became popular among the bourgeois elite. Even the official dress of the Mudaliyars, the *Kastana* dress, was derived from Dutch colonial fashion (*Sinhala Vishwakoshaya*, Vol. III, 1967: 148–149). These influences are evident in the temple murals of the Low-country, which frequently depict figures dressed in European attire.

When Kandyan temple artists portrayed kings, courtiers, and elites in the traditional regalia of the Kandyan aristocracy, Low-country artists - under the patronage of colonial elites - replaced these with Western models. Consequently, temples in the Low-country are replete with visual elements drawn from the colonial milieu. Bodhisattvas, kings, and queens appear in Western-inspired garments in murals at many temples such as Kataluwa Purwaramaya, Thotagamuwa Subhadraramaya, Dodanduwa Shailabimbaramaya, Panadura Rankoth Viharaya, Karagampitiya Subodharamaya, and Sapugoda Sri Maha Viharaya. For instance, Plates 04 and 05 respectively show a group of royals in European attire and upper-class women in Western-style frocks within the Buddhist narrative murals at Thotagamuwa Subhadraramaya.

In terms of interior décor, Mudaliyars prominently displayed symbols of colonial authority, such as British coats of arms, imperial medals, Western-style furniture, flags, European ceramics, lamps, clocks, guns, and portraits of the British royals. These objects, which were

usually absent from traditional Sinhalese aristocracy, signaled their power and social elevation. In temple murals across the Low-country, such items are frequently depicted as attributes of high status. For example, Western furniture, clocks, ceramics, weapons, and English inscriptions can be seen in murals at Karagampitiya Subodharamaya, Sapugoda Sri Maha Viharaya, Kataluwa Purwaramaya, Thotagamuwa Subhadraramaya, and Dodanduwa Shailabimbaramaya (Plate 06).

Although these Western elements are historically anachronistic in the context of Buddhist narratives, neither the patrons nor the custodian monks in the Low-country appear to have objected. These visual choices seem to reflect a conscious aesthetic accommodation to colonial modernity. It is unlikely that educated monks were unaware of these contradictions; rather, their silence may indicate a shift in taste aligned with the colonial elite's lifestyle. The rejection of Kandyan artistic conventions is further evident in the decorative motifs of Low-country temple art. Traditional motifs such as lotus petals and *liyawela* scrolls were replaced by Western-inspired designs including roses, cherubs, grapevines, and other floral patterns. A ceiling adorned with roses, instead of the traditional lotus, can be observed at Dodanduwa Kumara Maha Viharaya.

Temples built after the 1850s show a deliberate attempt to integrate Victorian aesthetics and inspirations of the Academic Realism of the West into Buddhist visual culture. Techniques of light and shade, spatial depth, and naturalistic features - valued by colonial patrons - are observable in murals at Panadura Rankoth Viharaya, Sapugoda Sri Maha Viharaya, Maramba Purana Viharaya, and Karagampitiya Subodharamaya (Plate 07). Material practices also shifted under bourgeois patronage. The introduction of commercial products in the West enabled artists to expand the limited, flat Kandyan colour palette into a broader range of vibrant tones. After the 1870s, Low-country temple artists increasingly employed a wider range of colours, incorporating tonal gradations to simulate three-dimensionality.

These transformations led to the erosion of traditional indigenous art training, which had been based on stylized features - largely characterized by linework (Coomaraswamy 1908: 64–69). The devaluation of Kandyan artistic standards in the colonial territories contributed to a radical transformation of the island’s Buddhist art landscape. Additionally, new practices emerged within the artists’ professional culture, such as the formal signing of contracts between artists and patrons or monastic authorities.

Sculptures and other embellishments were similarly influenced by colonial styles. Traditional stylized Kandyan Buddha statues evolved toward more naturalistic versions. Sculptural elements in archways - such as those at Kalutara Ashokarama Maha Viharaya -incorporate Western features including unicorn and lion figures, neo-Gothic pointed arches, sunken columns, floral motifs (particularly roses), and ornamental moldings, all of which reflect colonial artistic inspiration.

As a whole, nineteenth-century Buddhist murals in the Low-country developed into a hybrid visual language that merged Western and indigenous aesthetic elements. Art historians have identified this syncretic style as the "Southern School." More than a mere stylistic development, this hybrid aesthetic reflects a deeper cultural shift: a transformation of taste rooted in the social aspirations and symbolic capital of colonial bourgeois elites.

Agendas behind Temple Patronage

A range of motives underpinned the support extended by bourgeois patrons in colonial society toward temple construction and other religious activities in the Low-country. While some of these elites offered donations out of a genuine commitment to the development of Buddhism, others appear to have pursued personal agendas such as gaining social prestige comparable to that of the Kandyan *Radala* aristocracy. The most prominent motivations for their involvement in temple-related initiatives are outlined below, not in any particular order of importance.

a) A significant number of bourgeois patrons had nominally professed Christianity the official religion of the colonial state to avoid persecution by colonial authorities and to gain access to various privileges, including high-ranking positions in the colonial administration, education in missionary schools, business opportunities, and legal recognition of land ownership. Consequently, covert affiliations between these nominally Christian *Mudaliyars* and their former faith, Buddhism, were a common feature of the colonial era. When the colonial administration—particularly under British rule relaxed its religious policies, many of these elites were quick to reassert their ties to Buddhism through public acts of patronage.

b) The support extended by bourgeois patrons was often reciprocated by monastic custodians through panegyrics and other forms of public praise, which in turn bolstered the patrons' local influence (Malalgoda 1976: 206). Maintaining close relationships with influential monks thus served as a strategy for *Mudaliyars* to preserve or enhance their social respectability and political leverage.

c) c) Some Low-country *Mudaliyars* had previously been lay disciples of Buddhist monks, resulting in strong personal bonds between members of the new elite and the Buddhist clergy. For example, Gate Mudaliyar Samson de Abrue Wijeyagunaratne, who resided at *Mahakappina Walawwa*, studied under several prominent monks, including Ven. Balapitiye Dheerananda, Ven. Kahawe Gnanananda Tissa, and Ven. Vansapala Dheerananda (Dharmabandu 1949: 152–153). Similarly, members of the Soysa family—such as Mudaliyars Jeronis De Soysa and Charles Harris De Soysa, who supported both Christian and Buddhist institutions received their early education at the Palliyagodella Temple (Dharmabandu 1949: 173–174).

d) d) The consolidation of the Higher Ordination (*Upasampadā*) for *non-Govigama* fraternities (e.g., Karāva, Salagama, and Durāva), which had been previously rejected by the Kandyan monastic system, was closely linked to the upward social mobility of these castes within the colonial hierarchy. As a result, many *non-Govigama Mudaliyars* were eager to support new monastic fraternities, often aligning their patronage along caste lines in an effort to legitimize and elevate their social status.

e) e) The British colonial government took philanthropic and religious contributions into account when conferring imperial titles and honors. This incentivized many members of the emerging capitalist class to engage in charitable and religious activities, including contributions to both Christian and Buddhist institutions, in order to secure recognition from the colonial authorities.

f) f) Temple construction and the commissioning of inscriptions provided patrons with a means to publicly display their benevolence, piety, and elevated social standing. By

officiating at public ceremonies and religious functions, these patrons gained visibility, and coverage in the Buddhist press extended their reputation beyond the immediate locality. For some *Mudaliyars*, especially those who had accumulated wealth through stigmatized ventures such as the liquor trade, temple patronage served as a tool for moral rehabilitation and social respectability, allowing them to "whitewash" their reputations through religious merit.

Towards a Conclusion

The transformation of temple patronage in colonial Sri Lanka - particularly in the Low-country - reflects a complex interplay of religious, social, and political dynamics under colonial rule. With the decline of traditional monarchical support, a new class of bourgeois patrons, particularly the Mudaliyars, emerged as key benefactors of Buddhist temples. While some individuals within this elite class engaged in religious patronage out of genuine devotion or as lay disciples of the monastic community, many others strategically used temple construction, art projects and associated religious activities as vehicles to secure social legitimacy, consolidate caste-based hierarchies, and gain political recognition from both the indigenous populace and the colonial administration. Christian affiliation of bourgeois patrons, often nominal, allowed them access to colonial privileges, while their visible support for Buddhist establishments sustained local reverence and reinforced traditional social authority. In many cases, religious patronage was not simply an act of piety but a deliberate expression of social power, moral rehabilitation, and cultural identity. The shifting patterns of temple patronage during the colonial period thus illuminate broader processes of social mobility, colonial accommodation, and religious negotiation. The aesthetic preferences and objectified cultural capital of these bourgeois patrons significantly reshaped Buddhist monastic art and architecture in the Low-country, transforming traditional aesthetic norms and artistic conventions in Sri Lanka. This new artistic idiom, often referred to as the Southern School, redefined the visual culture of Buddhist institutional life and contributed to the formation of a distinct colonial bourgeois identity - one that navigated the imperatives of empire while preserving ties to indigenous religiosity.

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Plates

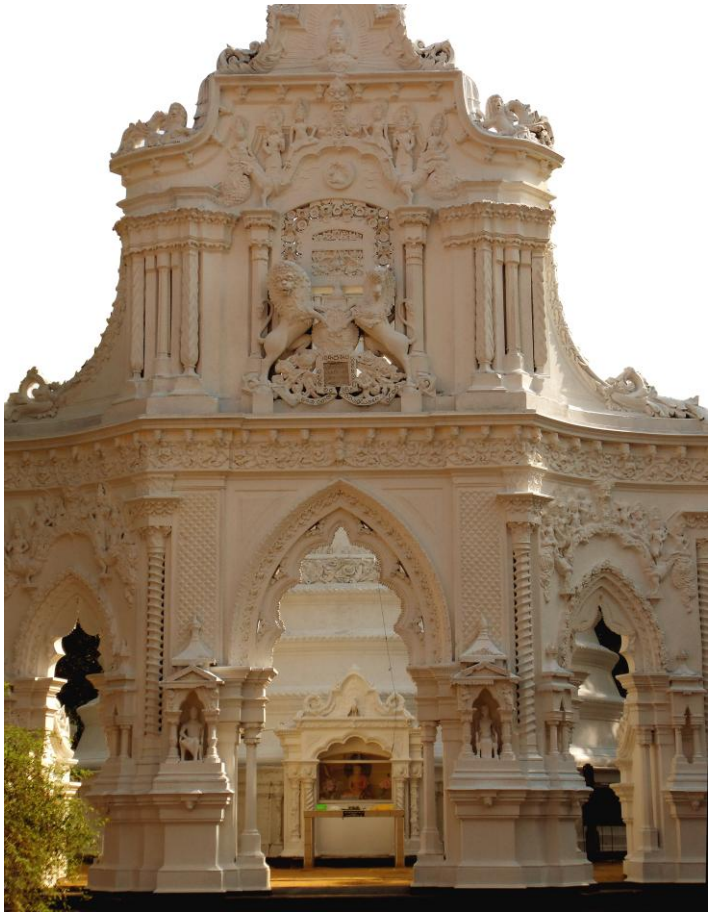


Plate 01: Archway at Ashokarama Maha Viharaya, Kalutara, late 19th century.



Plate 02: Image house of Panadura Rankoth Viharaya, Kalutara, late 19th century.



Plate 03: British coat of arms at the image house of Dodanduwa Shailabimbaramaya, Galle, late 19th century.



Plate 04: A group of royals in European attire, Story of King Maha Kappina, Thotagamuwa Subhadraramaya, Galle, 19th century.



Plate 05: Upper-class women in Western-style frocks in Buddhist narrative murals, Thotagamuwa Subhadraramaya, Galle, 19th century.

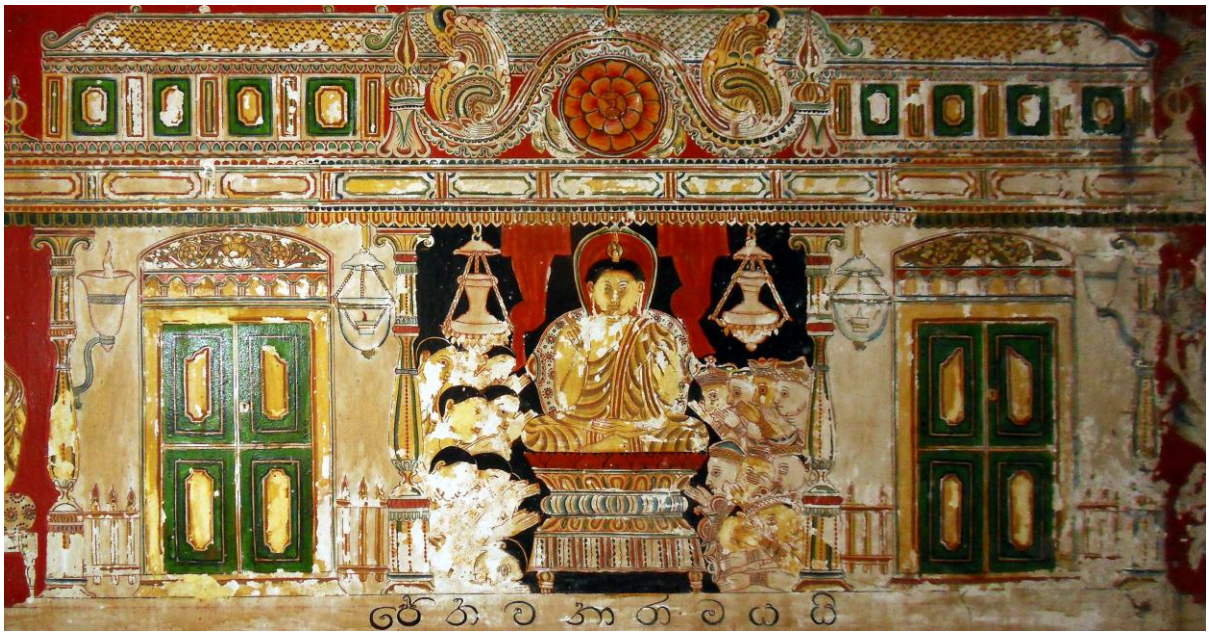


Plate 06: Jethavanaramaya decorated with Western lamps, utility objects, and architectural features, Kataluwa Purwaramaya, Galle, 19th century.



Plate 07: A scene from Ummagga Jataka story, Panadura Rankoth Viharaya, Kalutara, late 19th century

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