

# FROM TEMPLE BELLS TO SCHOOL BELLS

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WHEN King Chulalongkorn, Rama V of Siam,<sup>1</sup> mounted the throne of his fathers, he was just another king. When he left it, he was the idol of his people and the saviour of his country. Nowhere in space or time has one man accomplished more within the span of a single life. He initiated many far-reaching reforms, but none of more consequence than the reform of education. In his father's day, poorly trained priests taught religious observance, the courtesy due to superiors, and some small amount of reading and writing to those who really wished to learn. Now, the Government insists on a suitable education for all. Compulsory education for peasant, noble, and prince, with well trained teachers provided and rewarded by the Government, forms a startling contrast to the former uninterested, take-it-or-leave-it educational policy of Siam.

If one is to grasp the extent of this achievement, one must realize the condition of the kingdom when Chulalongkorn ascended the throne, as well as its condition at his death. If one is to understand how education of the type now found in Siam could grow in fifty years from casual instruction by holy men, more interested in attaining Nirvana than in preparing children for the work of their adult years, one must grasp the essential nature of an absolute monarchy, and must know something of the powerful and vigorous intellect that was Rama V.

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King Monkut, Rama IV, was the first of the so-called "enlightened" monarchs of Siam. He was the friend of Sir John Boring, and he entertained Rajah Brooks before that enterprising Englishman had found his kingdom of Sarawac. He was wise enough to foresee the coming importance of England in the Orient, and to desire cordial relations between Siam and Great Britain. His regard for the British caused him to sign a treaty with them unfavourable to Siam. It is, perhaps, because of that treaty, the basis for many later ones, that some people to-day think of his

<sup>1</sup> Grandfather of the present king.

country as an English Protectorate, or even as an English possession. Surrounded as it was by the most vigorous colonizing nations of the world, England in India, Burma, and the Federated Malay States, France in Annam, Cambodia, and Cochin-China, Holland in Java and Sumatra, there was every opportunity for political autonomy to slip away for ever from the "Land of the Free", (the only Siamese name for the country we call Siam). There was a good chance that Chulalongkorn might be a king in name only. The task of preserving autonomy to his country called to the young king so insistently that, before he was fully grown, he was attacking his problem and laying the foundations for the solution which was to be his life work.

It was easy for his keen intelligence to see that an uneducated people is at a disadvantage when dealing with an educated people. It was easy for him, unbiassed by blind racial prejudice, to observe that Occidental learning was overcoming Oriental learning,—as nation after nation had fallen before the men of the West. He examined education, and found it to be of two sorts: preparation for the life, or for the lives, to come (or instruction in the way to attain Nirvana); and preparation for the life that is here. Had Siam not been faced by a serious material crisis, the king, as a good Buddhist, might well have been content to think of eternity rather than of the present and to leave instruction in the hands of the monks. But Siam was faced by a situation so immediately serious that it threatened her very life. She must turn her attention, and turn it right speedily, to considerations of present importance, or she would cease to exist as a free nation. Priests are not the best purveyors of that learning most valuable to workers in the world of deeds, the world where treaties are made and goods are produced. If one is to meet the Occidental on his own grounds, and the Occidental sees to it that he is met on his own grounds, he must know much of many *things*. The Buddhist priest, perfectly at home in the world of pure ideas, neither knows nor wishes to know much of the world of things. All of these facts were early clear to Chulalongkorn. He saw at once that Siam would need more education than had ever been necessary before, and he saw clearly that it would not be enough to increase the bulk of instruction—there must be a change in type of education. There must be a new curriculum, taught in a new way, by teachers trained in the new subjects.

The following complaint of Chao Phya Thipakon, with Alabaster's comment, shows something of the nature of temple instruction and of the Siamese feeling toward it:

"I propose to write a book for the instruction of the young," says the Chao Phya, "being of the opinion that the course of teaching at present followed in the temples is unprofitable. That course consists of the spelling book, religious formulae, and tales. What knowledge can anyone gain from such nonsense as:—

Oh, Chan, my little man,  
Please bring rice and curry nice,  
And a ring, a copper thing,  
Round my little brother's arm to cling?

Jingling sound without sense—a fair example of a large class of reading exercises! I shall endeavour to write fruitfully on various subjects, material knowledge and religion, discussing the evidence of the truth and falsity of things. The young will gain more by studying this than by reading religious formulae and novels, for they will learn to answer questions that may be put to them. My book will be one of questions and answers, and I shall call it, *A Book Explaining Many Things.*"

"We can, from our own experience," Alabaster adds, after quoting the above, "confirm the character thus given to the education of children in monasteries, which are the only extensive establishments in Siam. The pupils who remain long enough in them learn to read and to write their own language, and also, if clever, the Pali language in the Kawn, or old Cambodian character; but when the language is mastered, the literature it opens to them is for the most part silly and unprofitable... full of stories of genii stealing women... and even those works which profess to teach anything teach it wrong."<sup>1</sup>

If this report of instruction in Siamese temples is a fair one, it is easy to understand the need for change. This need was met by the establishment of the Palace School in the courtyard of the old Chakri Palace. In the organization of the school, English influence was obviously powerful. It is hard to say how much this influence owed to Mrs. LLeonowens,<sup>2</sup> Chulalongkorn's English governess, a woman of intelligence and worth, and how much to His Majesty's sure knowledge that the English were to be the most important factor in all affairs of the Far East. In any event, the choice of English education as a model for Siamese education was a wise one, for the purpose of the new training was to provide future diplomats and statesmen for the kingdom; English education has produced public servants whose worth needs no comment. The Palace School was originally intended for the instruction of the

<sup>1</sup> Alabaster, Henry. *Wheel of the Law*; Trubner and Co., London, 1871.

<sup>2</sup> Mrs. LLeonowens was retired on pension and ended her days in Nova Scotia.

royal children of Siam, the brothers, sons, uncles, nephews, and grandchildren of the king, for princes of the blood were all destined for government office of some sort. No country can hope to maintain hordes of royal sons (King Chulalongkorn himself had forty-two children) in princely style without getting some service from them.

Since public service is of two sorts,—internal, the execution of the king's will at home, and foreign relations, the representation of the king in foreign countries, two "Sides" were included in the organization of the school. The Siamese "Side", with curricula covering all that the monks had taught, and much more of a material nature added; and the English "Side" where a boy might study, in English, very nearly the same subjects as were taught boys in England, and have for his teacher the same class of Englishman as taught in the English schools.

One or the other of these "Sides" *must* be chosen by each prince if he hoped for royal favour. Since only the feeble-minded or insane care to risk being "out of favour" in an absolute monarchy, there was no question of the popularity of the new school. Its value was soon proved. Men trained there are to-day able to take their place in the world of scholars with no cause for shame or regret. Of more importance to the king, these men were soon able to hold their own with "ferang" statesmen, and to carry out his directions with intelligence and understanding. Education soon became a sort of cult. Chulalongkorn, convinced of its universal value, permitted his plans to expand and his organization to grow. Joining the duty of caring for this new department of government to the existing Ministry of Religion, he created a new Ministry, the Ministry of Religion and Education, and appointed to it the young brother whose scholarship, vigour, and interest indicated greatest promise for successful direction of its destinies—Prince Damrong. The appointment was a wise one. From that time, education swept forward with increasing power and scope. Very soon, the momentum of the machine was added to the will of the king; and when that aid had been secured, there was no longer doubt of the permanence or of the future growth of public education. From royalty it spread to the aristocracy, from aristocracy to wealthy commoners, and, at last, was offered to all, peasant as well as prince. In fifty years time, education moved from the temple school type described by Alabaster to an elaborate system of compulsory general education with primary, secondary, trades, professional, and special schools, and included an extensive plan of travelling scholarships for study in foreign lands. All of these schools are installed, con-

trolled, financed, or enthusiastically represented by His Majesty and the officers of his government.

It is interesting to see how the aim and purpose of education has grown and shifted to meet the changing requirements of the kingdom of Siam. In the beginning, the single idea was to prepare Siamese of the ruling class for the duties of modern statesmanship. When education spread to other classes, this idea became embarrassing. Each schoolboy thought that completion of his school work should mean instant installation in a fat government office. There were not enough offices for all, and there was a great and increasing need for skilled artisans and business men. (For centuries, skilled craftsmen in Siam had been Chinese, as had been all of the merchants and shopkeepers.) Chao Phya Dharmasaktri, late Minister of Religion and Education, dramatically described his first act as Minister, showing clearly how carefully the leaders of education kept in touch with the country's material needs. "The book used by all of the schools as a reader," he said, "contained a picture of a man borne along the road in a palanquin. He was surrounded by many servants, and the people he passed were showing him the greatest respect. Under the picture was this: 'Be a good little boy and mind your book and you will be even as this man.' " He paused impressively, and made a vigorous tearing motion with his hands. "With my own hands, I *tore* this page from every book in every school and *destroyed* it!" and he waved both hands to show how entirely he had obliterated that phase of Siam's public education.

It is this power of reading the country's needs, and of carefully defining and redefining the purpose of education to meet those needs, which has made possible the vast strides in Siamese education. Those in control of education know exactly what they hope to accomplish through it. They are restricted by no fears of popular clamour, they are not intimidated by complaints of angry parents, they are not hampered by limitations imposed by an elected body of untrained men. Over all schools is the Director General of Education, with the Minister immediately over him. Over the Minister is only the King. Both Minister and King are working for the same end,—the education of the people of the kingdom in ways that will be best for the ruler of the kingdom. Together, they formulate a general plan, a purpose which will serve as the touchstone for further plans. Chao Phya Dhamasaktri explained it thus: "To each child in Siam we hope, expect, and intend to give just so much education as he needs to make him as valuable to his King as he can be made. Such knowledge must be given

him as he will need to cope with conditions in Siam to-day, and with conditions likely to exist there to-morrow."

Just so much education as each child may use for the benefit of his King, and no more! Here is a sharply outlined utilitarian purpose, with a strong economic basis arranged in the most economical manner possible. Its aim is frankly and avowedly material. Their plan must be economical, for Siam is not a wealthy country, and it is underpopulated. Its leaders have enunciated two points to keep before them, with which to measure all proposed changes in their educational organization:

1. Through education must the improvement of the economic conditions of the country be effected.

2. Labouring and ruling classes must be created and trained by education. (Education must be selective as well as preparative, and must be adapted to the occupation which each child will follow.)

They keep ever before them the enrichment of the country through the trained activities of its productive subjects. That the improvement of the individual should follow from the means taken to secure this enrichment of king and country is desirable, but totally unimportant so far as the schools are concerned. In an absolute monarchy, there is no need to show advantage to the individual in order to secure the acceptance of a plan designed to advance the general welfare. The King considers the plan, he finds it desirable, and adopts it. That is quite enough at present. It remains to be seen whether the aim has been so carefully considered and formulated that state-wide compulsory education of a decidedly cultural nature, cultural despite its announced utilitarian purpose, will foster and protect a despotic political organization; or whether distinctly modern education, designed and brought into being by the King himself to preserve his country from foreign control, may not accomplish the purpose of its creation but destroy its creator.