

A Nation's Prestige

Posted on



The Preamble to the Constitution,
exquisitely carved on the Silver Door,
the entrance to the main Chamber

Rising up from the waters of the Diyawanna Oya is the striking edifice of the Parliament of Sri Lanka. Housing the nation's supreme law-making body, the significant location and ingenious architecture of the building speak volumes about Sri Lanka's remarkable history and the creativity of its citizens.

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Revival Of Ancient Glory

Sri Jayewardenepura Kotte was the glorious capital of the last native king to unify all of Sri Lanka during the 15th Century. Kotte was also the location of the Sacred Tooth Relic during

this illustrious period. □The prosperity of the kingdom gave rise to a flourishing literary culture. The Salalihini Sandeshaya, a classical poem by Thotagamuwe □Sri Rahula, praised the affluence of the city. In the 16th Century however, with the arrival of the Portuguese, □the Kingdom of Kotte began to decline and the Portuguese were soon able to wrest control. Therefore, the location of the current Parliamentary Complex in Sri Jayewardenepura Kotte is seen, in a symbolic sense, as a restoration of or return to that ancient period of plenty.

The new Parliament was designed by architect Geoffrey Bawa. Reclaiming the Diyawanna Oya from the marsh was possibly the most daunting task of the project. However, once accomplished, □it created the 300-acre lake around the island, giving it a moat-like protection. The foundation of the building, as the site is an island, had to be built with special precautions. The whole construction is supported by heavy reinforced piles of concrete. The crowning glory of the building is its high, gently sloping roof. Copper sheets weighing 100 tons have been used to cover the building.

After 26 months of planning and construction, the new Parliamentary Complex was complete. It was ceremonially declared open on April 29, 1982 at 10.28am by J R Jayewardene, President of Sri Lanka at the time.

En Route To The Chamber

The Ceremonial Drive links the mainland with the island. It is the principle access route to the Parliament. With the Diyawanna Oya on either side, the road is lined with Ehela and Na trees, making it a beautiful sight when the yellow flowers are in bloom. □It also heightens the grandeur of the Parliament building as the approach provides a magnificent view of the central building with ornamental pools before it and the high, slanting roof completing it.

The main entrance on the north side of the building is only used by the President of the country. A flight of steps, flanked by terraced slopes with water cascading down, leads to a verandah. Along the verandah are two gigantic ornamental bells. The ceiling designed by Ena de Silva is decorated in colourful geometric patterns using hundreds of tiles. A large bronze sliding door and a smaller bronze door by its side provide access into the building.

It is only at the inauguration of a new session of Parliament that the large bronze door is flung open as the President arrives with great ceremony and regality. When the President visits Parliament on other occasions, he uses the smaller bronze door to enter.

Along the flight of steps in the lobby, the walls are covered in murals. The four guardian

deities of Sri Lanka, God Natha, God Saman, God Kataragama and God Vibhisana, adorn the walls on either side at the foot of the stairs. There are also two conch blowers facing the entrance as if to welcome visitors. Four intricately painted frescoes decorate the walls along the steps. These paintings are based on the Salalihini Sandeshaya and depict various scenes from the poem. The delicate paintings are the painstaking work of Dr L T P Manjusri.

At the top of the flight of stairs is an exquisitely carved copper door, which is silver filmed. This door leads to the Chamber and is often referred to as the Silver Door. Measuring 12 feet by 12 feet and created by metal sculptor, D Wimal Surendra, it is a feat of artistic workmanship. The Preamble to the Constitution of Sri Lanka has been carved on the door in Sinhala, Tamil and English. Engraved in the style of ancient rock inscriptions, the Preamble can be read in a spiral outward motion. Surrounding the words are lotuses and motifs representing ancient Sri Lankan art. The back of the door too has been embellished with a floral design.

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The Chamber

Upon entering through the Silver Door is the Chamber, the focal point of the Parliament building. The rectangular room occupies the space of two storeys. Its floors are covered in a plush, red carpet and the brown tamarind-finish wood panelling. Eighteen silver banners and standards of Kings, Temples and Korales of Sri Lanka hover above the Chamber, giving the room an air of stately magnificence. On either side of the Chamber are doors through which the Members enter the House.

Suspended above all of this grandeur is the awe-inspiring ceiling.

Perhaps the most alluring feature of the Chamber is the elegant chandelier hanging from the centre of the ceiling. Created by artist Laki Senanayake, the giant chandelier is made of beaten copper and plated in silver. It enhances the air of magnificence and gold and brown tones of the room.

Suspended above all of this grandeur is the awe-inspiring ceiling. Curving upwards at the centre, it is made up of 20,000 anodized aluminium trays – each measuring one square foot – linked impeccably together. The ideal acoustics within the chamber are in part credited to this ingenious piece of architecture.

Just within the main entrance of the Chamber is a nickel band on the carpeted floor. This is the Bar of the House and only Members of Parliament are allowed to proceed beyond this point into the Chamber. There are exceptions however, such as on the first day of a session of Parliament after a General Election. In addition, a person summoned to appear before Parliament and new Members of Parliament, who have not yet been sworn in, are required to wait at the Bar. The golden hued Bar is engraved in traditional symbols known to represent intrepidity, perpetuity and prosperity.

The Speaker's Chair, placed at the Southern end of the Chamber, is made of genuine English oak, thought to be around 200 years old. It was a gift from the House of Commons of Great Britain to the Ceylon House of Representatives. The Chair is built out of a wooden beam that was dislodged from the House of Commons when it was partly destroyed in World War II.

The seats of the Members of Parliament, upholstered in plush black leather, are arranged in tiers and separated by a wide central aisle. The Government sits on the right side of the Speaker and the Opposition occupies the left. □The Chamber can accommodate □232 Members in all - 116 on each side. The Gallery is located in the upper section of the Chamber. Directly in front of the Speaker is the Speaker's Gallery, where special guests of the Speaker, such as Ambassadors and other privileged visitors, observe Parliamentary proceedings. On either side of the Chamber is the Public Gallery, which can accommodate over 600 members of the public. The media is housed in the Gallery directly above the Speaker.

A Symbol Of Authority

The Mace, which has grown to be associated by Sri Lankans as synonymous with the Parliament and its proceedings, is the symbol of authority of Parliament and therefore of the Speaker. Parliament cannot sit without the Mace and as the Speaker enters and leaves the Chamber, □the Mace is carried in and out with great ceremony by the Serjeant-at-Arms, who walks before the Speaker. The Serjeant-at-Arms is accompanied by the Secretary General and his Deputies. There is a special bracket below the table of the Secretary General of Parliament, where the Mace is placed while Parliament is in session.

Gifted to the Ceylon House of Representatives by the British House of Commons in 1949, the Mace weighs 28 pounds and measures 48 inches in length. Its staff is fashioned out of ebony and is embellished with silver, 18-carat gold and sapphires.

The design of the Mace was inspired by the architecture of ancient Sri Lankan temples. Occurring regularly along the staff of the Mace is the open and closed lotus design, traditionally associated with eternity, beauty and peace. It also features the sun and moon symbols representing perpetuity, the chakra symbol signifying progress, and a bowl of flowers, which stands for prosperity. The principal component of the Mace is the silver sphere bearing two symbols of the lion with drawn sword.

Surrounding The Chamber

The National Flag at the front of the building is flown at full mast when Parliament is in session. If Parliament is still working after 6.30 pm however, a lantern on the flagstaff is switched on to show that Parliament is at a meeting, as the National Flag never remains hoisted after sunset.

The mahogany-paneled walls of the Members' entrance are adorned with an elaborate carving of a forest scene by Mahinda Abeysekera. □At the staff entrance is a mural of a swamp. This striking creation of birds and animals is the work of Anil Gamini Jayasooriya. The two entrances lead to a corridor that is a veritable museum of the people who have been involved in the Legislature of Sri Lanka. Along the walls of the corridor are hundreds of pictures of past and present Parliamentarians. The style of dress and demeanour of those in the oldest photographs affords a glimpse into a way of life long past.

Moreover, the Parliament has a library, exclusively for the use of Members of Parliament. The 30,000 collection of volumes range from law, politics, economics, history and social sciences. There are about 12,000 monographs as well as documents pertaining to Parliamentary proceedings.

A Monument To A Rich Legacy

Standing amidst beautifully landscaped areas, embraced by the cool breeze blowing over the Diyawanna Oya, Sri Lanka's Parliament Complex appears to be the result of an amalgamation of the majesty of the country's history and culture, the traditions of the processes of its Legislature, the skill and talent of its artists and designers, and the temperate beauty of its natural resources. The nation's heritage, it seems, has been built into its very walls. What more grandiose surroundings to carry out the important work of shaping the character of the future of Sri Lanka.

We wish to thank the Speaker of the House, the Leader of the House and their staff for their assistance.

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