

An icon of change: Fort Jaffna

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A piece of colonial history spanning the 17th and 18th Centuries, the Portuguese, Dutch and British have all woven its elaborate past. Although the bustling town lies just beyond, the Fort Jaffna turns a deaf ear as it takes on a life of its own. Here everything seems to play in black and white as if to speak of olden days and weathered storms.

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Situated southwest of the peninsula in Jaffna town, past prominent landmarks such as the public library, it overlooks the lagoon scattered with vibrantly coloured fishing boats. The walkway to the entrance – the “Land Gate”, falls across the large moat, which at the time of our arrival reflected a metallic glint. The inscription atop this arched entrance that tunnelled into the Fort reads “ANNO 1680,” a date of its beginning set in stone.

It was the Portuguese, the first Europeans to set foot in Sri Lanka and capture the Jaffna Peninsula, who constructed the original fortress in 1618 – a small square shaped Fort. But the Dutch who next invaded the country gradually advanced the Fort and as they strategically impeded the entry of supplies the city dwellers within were forced to surrender. Thereafter it fell into the hands of the Dutch. As a result of the battles leading up to this event the original Fort was largely destroyed. In spite of this, the Dutch rebuilt a far superior and technologically advanced structure on the remains of the old. Each successive stage of the new Dutch Fort had been built according to the latest design of the times. Completed in the year 1680 it was said to be the best and strongest in Asia.

The Dutch Fort was characteristic in that, aside from its superior technology, it was large in size, run without the involvement of citizens and considered a security centre. It was also a Dutch architectural monument. Of the various categories of forts around the Island the Jaffna Fort was of a polygonal type in the shape of a pentagon. It consisted of an inner pentagon of thick ramparts and five bastions named Zeeland, Holland, Gelderland, Utrecht and Friesland, the namesakes of provinces in the Netherlands. Along the outer circuit was a deep and wide star shaped moat. The Land Gate and Water Gate were the two entrances

with the latter main entrance still in use today. In its prime this main entrance also had a drawbridge to add to its imperial effect. It is said that either side of the main entrance bore iron spikes to discourage war elephants from approaching. Above the entrance also stood a bell tower used by the Church and to sound the time every hour.

At the centre of the Fort was the Garrison parade ground. Surrounding this many other buildings of importance have been known to exist. One of the most significant buildings in the Fort was the Dutch Church, Kruys Kerk, admired for its architectural value, designed by Martin Lenskama in 1706. Other structures included the Queen's House, a warehouse, Dutch guard room, a single storey Dutch architectural style Governor's residence which also served as visiting quarters for ministers, and other significant figures on their tours in Jaffna.

Even when the British arrived in the Island and took control over the Jaffna Fort in 1795, the Dutch retained ownership of the Church within the Fort until a monetary acquisition took place. The Church was then handed over to the Jaffna Christian Union for a period of 50 years and this organisation took on its renovation (through the aid of the Churches of Holland). While the British paid much attention to cultural heritage, in 1890 they set up the archaeological department and took on the Fort as a protected memorial monument. It was well-preserved till 1930 and in 1971 was gazetted as a protected archaeological site.

While the war situation that persisted in the country over the decades saw the destruction of this Fort, when the army liberated Jaffna, many of its structures had been destroyed.

In the receding daylight we trudged along uneven footings against buffeting winds, to explore every nook and cranny of a fortress that conveyed a former glory. It still stands a mute witness having withstood the many changes and tribulations of the peninsula. Stubborn remnants of thick walled fortifications remain in disjointed sections. Within the premises the most prominent is what some refer to as the hangman's tower. One is dwarfed by its sheer height, and thick columns and it is visible from all parts of the Fort, even from a distance outside. Its high arches frame the surrounding landscapes from all sides. Alighting the highest points of the Fort one has a view of the Duriappa Stadium, the Jaffna Library beyond and the clock tower in the township. From the front end one can see over the moat and beyond the lagoon to the fishing harbour in the farthest distance. The evening brings many a visitor to admire this historical site and they trickle into the Fort arriving in busloads. Scattered in little groups or wandering idly alone, maybe it is the Fort's solemn mood that envelops them as they shift along with few words exchanged.

The Fort is once more cleared and is being conserved and developed for future generations to experience the echoes of bygone eras and value its rich heritage. Much like the Dutch rebuilt a bigger and better Fort from the rubble it once became, maybe the Fort can return to its ancient glory once again.