Bodhi at the River Kalu

Posted on
The Kalutara Maha Bodhi Dagoba lying on the banks of the Kalu Ganga

It is a place of religious worship set in the midst of the horn and din of roaring traffic on one of Sri Lanka's busiest roadways. But despite the disquiet, faith throngs the air to create the required sanctity that makes it possibly the nation's most worshipped roadside temple. The hustle and the bustle is never far away but found right on its doorstep. But, evoked perhaps by the soothing rustling leaves of its Bodhi trees, the peace and quietude is ever present within its hallowed precincts. Of course it was never planned that way.

Words and Photographs Manu Gunasena

This centuries old temple complex existed as a single unit in times gone by. Called the Gangatilleke Vihara, it lay on the banks of the River Kalu at the point where the river meets the sea. Today the site is popularly called the Kalutara Bodhi and is 43km from Colombo on the main Galle Road, the A2.

Its religious and historical significance stems from the genealogy of the Bo tree, *Ficus religiosa,* growing on its soil. The site is considered to be the chosen home of one of the 32 Bo saplings of the sacred Sri Maha Bodhi at Anuradhapura, which itself is a descendent of the sacred Bodhi, which gave shelter to Lord Buddha. These 32 saplings were the second generation off shoots from it and were distributed by King Devanampiyatissa over 2300 years ago to be planted throughout the country for worship. The Mahabodhivamsa, an ancient chronicle, records that a Bo sapling from that period was planted in a certain village known as Maha Jallika Gama. Historians have since identified Kalutara as the village so named; and thus today the Bo tree, growing on the upper terrace of this site, is regarded as a descendent of the sacred tree.

The Bo tree, lying below on the roadside, nestled between Galle Road and the train track is said to have been brought by an Indian prince named Vickrama Pandya in 1042 AD. The chronicles hold that he had come as Kalutara's Viceroy, and had planted it near a hillock on which the Gangatilleke Viharaya was situated.

With the arrival of the Portuguese in the 16th Century and their subsequent colonisation of the coastal areas of the land, the temple premises were commandeered by the foreign invader to be the site on which they would build their Kalutara Fort and fly their flag. The temple was destroyed but the Bo tree survived.

For over four hundred years it was thus occupied by the Portuguese, the Dutch and finally by the British who used the upper part of the complex where the sacred Bo tree grew as the Government Agent's residence. They also located the main road to Galle from Colombo right in the middle of the temple premises. In 1877, the British attempted to cut down the Bo tree to make way for the southern rail track but residents of the area protested and thwarted the plan. But it was only permanently halted when Ven Waskaduwe Sri Sumangala Thero made a personal appeal to Queen Victoria, which elicited a prompt and terse royal order to the Governor: "Don't touch the Bo Tree."

It was around the time when the sun was setting on the British Empire that a resident of Kalutara entered into the story of the Kalutara Bodhi. A supplier to the Railways Department, Sendanayake was in the habit of offering flowers and lighting a lamp at the Bodhi tree, now part of the Government Agent's residence. It is said that he even had to pay an annual tithing of one rupee, then a considerable sum, to the Government Agent for this privilege. But it was not the tax that made him bemoan but the despair he felt when he saw each day the neglect to which the revered tree had fallen. When by chance he happened to meet a wealthy young lawyer and poured the sadness in his heart at the wretched state of the sacred Bodhi, a scion of the noble tree that had given shelter to the Buddha to gain enlightenment, the wilting flowers he had laid at the Bodhi's roots bloomed afresh and the fading light of the lamp he had lit flared forth with new oil and flame.

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The young lawyer was Cyril de Zoysa, himself a scion of a well known and respected family in Balapitiya, and after listening to Sendanayake's emotive plea, he made it his life's mission to see the old sacred Bodhi tree elevated to its former pride and status. The resurgence of the Kalutara Bodhi was thus born.

With the British leaving for good in 1948, Cyril de Zoysa knew the hour had come to launch his crusade. He persuaded the Government to relocate the Government Agent's residence. After 400 years, the area on which the Bodhi stood was once more returned to the people as a Buddhist temple. With the land secured, Sir Cyril established the Kalutara Bodhi Trust in 1951 which had as one of its primary objects the protection and development of the Kalutara Bodhi. Six eminent lawyers were the main founding trustees. Even today the entire complex is managed by the trust. There are no resident monks at this temple.

He then began to build a dagoba on the upper terrace. It was an ambitious plan and it was unique. It was to be the world's first hollow dagoba with a smaller dagoba within. It was built on a pre-stressed concrete frame, with the dagoba, the Vatada Maha Seya, having a diameter of 95 feet and a circumference of 300 feet. It took ten years to complete with its pinnacle being crowned in 1974. The relics were placed in the inner chamber and the pinnacle was officially unveiled in 1980. Inside the hollow area of the dagoba, a smaller dagoba occupies the centre with its pinnacle soaring towards the dome of the larger one that covers it.

Today the Kalutara Bodhi Trust provides many services to the devotees. Apart from the Bodhi-Gnana Library, which contains over 40,000 books, it also conducts meditation programmes every Saturday from 8 in the morning to 5 in the evening, in the meditation hall on the upper terrace. Most of the funding to maintain the temple complex comes from the donations that flow unabated every day from the thousands of vehicles passing the Bodhi. It has become a custom, originally introduced by the fleet of buses Sir Cyril operated, for people to stop their vehicles at the tills conveniently provided on the road side to 'drop a coin' and obtain the blessings of the Bodhi for a safe journey.

This month on Vesak Full Moon Poya Day thousands will, as usual, visit the Kalutara Bodhi to worship at the foot of the tree, a direct descendant of the sacred Bo tree, which gave shelter to the Buddha as he gained enlightenment 2559 years ago in India. As they kneel in respect and pay homage to the Buddha on the thrice blessed day of his birth, enlightenment and passing away, they should also do well to ponder over the last words of Sir Cyril de Zoysa who died at the age of 82 in 1978.

The man whose name is forever entwined with the resurrection and resurgence of the Kalutara Bodhi and who made it Kalutara's living symbol of Buddhism, who became one of Sri Lanka's biggest businessmen and one of her greatest philanthropists and donated his immense wealth to charity, left this life with the

following profound, thought provoking words: “Now I am free. Whatever wealth I have is of no use. They do not have any use for me. I was born without any wealth. I die without any wealth. My joy, my consolation, my strength is Buddha Dhamma. As long as I live the Gods will protect me.”

