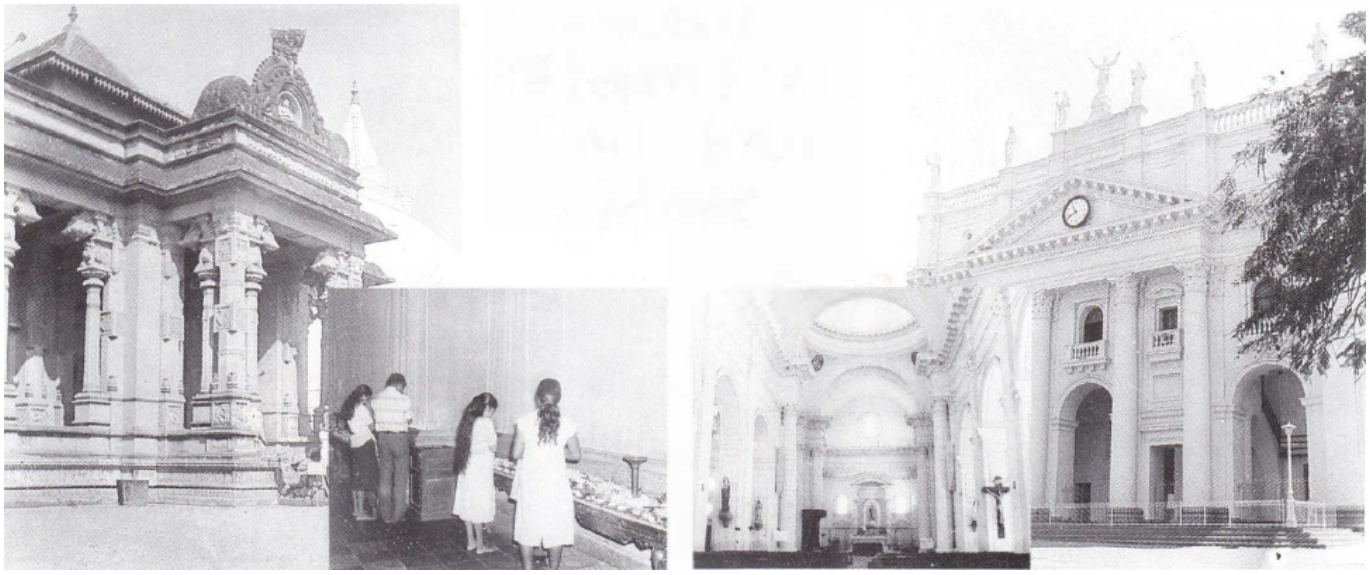
Colombo: Where Four Religions Meet

Posted on

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A sense of religion, if not its practice, pervades many great cities of the world. The outward manifestation of this religious sense is the number of places of religious worship that dot the streets or dominate the skyline. In very many such examples it is one religion that tends to hold sway throughout that particular city and spreads its influence among its citizens.

Colombo is a happy exception. Within its city limits, there are over a hundred religious edifices, divided between four world religions – Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity and Islam.

Buddhism came to the city late, for Colombo was never the capital of the Sinhala kings who fostered Buddhism as the state religion. When the great civilisations of Anuradhapura (2nd Century B.C. to 10th Century A.O.) and Polonnaruwa (11th and 12th Centuries A.O.) flourished and Buddhism saw its heyday, Colombo, sitting on the south bank of the Kelani River, was known only to hardy Moorish seafarers.

But strangely enough, on the northern border of the same river, overlooking where

Colombo is now, stands a Buddhist shrine that goes back to the time of the Buddha. This is the Kelaniya Raja Maha Viharaya built, according to tradition, on the site visited by the Buddha 2,500 years ago. The same tradition says that the Comp□□sionate One bathed in the Kelani and left his foorprint on the riverbed, as he did on the pinnacle of the holy mountain of Sri Pada (Adam's Peak), but that no human eye will see that impression.

Buddhism rook strong root on the eastern borders of Colombo, too, where the new capital of Sri Lanka, Sri Jayewardenepura, Kotte, now stands. In the 15th Century, Sri Jayewardenepura, the "victorious fortified city" was the capital of the Sinhala kings of Kotte. And where the king was, the palladium of the Buddhists – the sacred Tooth Relic of the Buddha – was also. The ruins of a Temple of the Tooth, which must at that time have been a centre of devout worship, are sti 11 seen at Kotte.

To the south of the city, just a few kilometres from the city limits, stands the Bellanwila Raja Maha Viharaya, another place of great significance to Buddhists. The Bo tree that grows there is said to be one of the seven saplings brought to Sri Lanka from the tree under which Gautama attained enlightenment. Despite these centres of Buddhism that surrounded the area that is now Colombo, the religion as manifested by its places of worship came to the city in a significant manner only after Colombo became the country's capital in the early 19th Century.

One of the oldest Buddhist centres within Colombo's municipal limits is sfruated in the northern area uf Kotahena. The Dipaduttararnaya shows a Thai influence in its architecture and, in fact, among its devotees it is known as the Siam temple. The origin of the popular name can be traced to the munificence that the temple has received from members of the Thai royal family.

The Gothami Viharaya, to the east of the city centre, is outstanding for its murals depicting the main incidents of the life of the Buddha painted by the doyen of ri l.anka' artists, George Keyt. The Asokaramaya, at Thimbirigasyaya, presents the serenity and quiet of a ,illage temple in the bustling heart of the city.

Two centres of Buddhist learning, scholarship and meditation are the Vajiraramaya and the Mettaramaya, both at Bambalapitiya, to the south of the city centre.

Whereas Buddhism is the religion of the majority in Sri Lanka, Hinduism comes next in numerical strength. Hindu kovils are found in several parts of the city. There is also a concentration of them in the area of the Pettah, – the bazzar – where,

especially during British rule Indian traders held sway and brought their religion along with them.

In fact, one of the kovils in the Pettah, the Hindu temple at Sea Street (the Street of Gold as it is called since it is the centre of the jewellry trade), is the starting point of the main annual Hindu festival in Colombo known as Vel. The insignia of the God Skanda are taken from this temple in a giant vel chariot, a masterpiece of woodcarving drawn by majestic, horned ·white bulls, to another temple in the south of the city about ix kilometres away. The chariot is preceded by tom-tom beaters, dancers and flag-bearers. The sacred procession starts at an auspicious time in the morning but takes almost the whole day to reach its destination. The delay is due to the many stops the chariot makes to receive the offerings of devotees along the route and impart the god’s blessings to those who seek it.

There are two temples. one at Wellawatte and the other at Bambalapitiya, which form the destinations of the Vet chariot on alternate years. The tradition is that these two temples house the consorts of the God Skanda.

Two kilometres from the city centre in the Fort is a recent Hindu kovil, built entirely of massive granite blocks, giving an impression of impregnable strength. Just a kilometre away from this temple is another dedicated to Mariamman, a goddess in the Hindu pantheon noted for her benevolence. Many devotees go here to plead for favours.

As far as Colombo itself is concerned, Islam could be considered the religion that first flourished in the city. Records show that by the 10th Century, there was a well-established settlement of Arab traders i1 Kolontota or Kolonpura, the early names fo Colombo. Excavations carried out in 1826 in the old Moorish cemetery of Colombo unearthed a tombstone bearing the date of the 337th year of the Hegira, which works out to 959 AD. Strangely however, Ibn Batuta, that indefatigable traveller and propagator of Islam who visited Kalanbu (Colombo in 1344 and called it “one of the finest and largest towns in Ceylon”, does not mention its Islamic traditions.

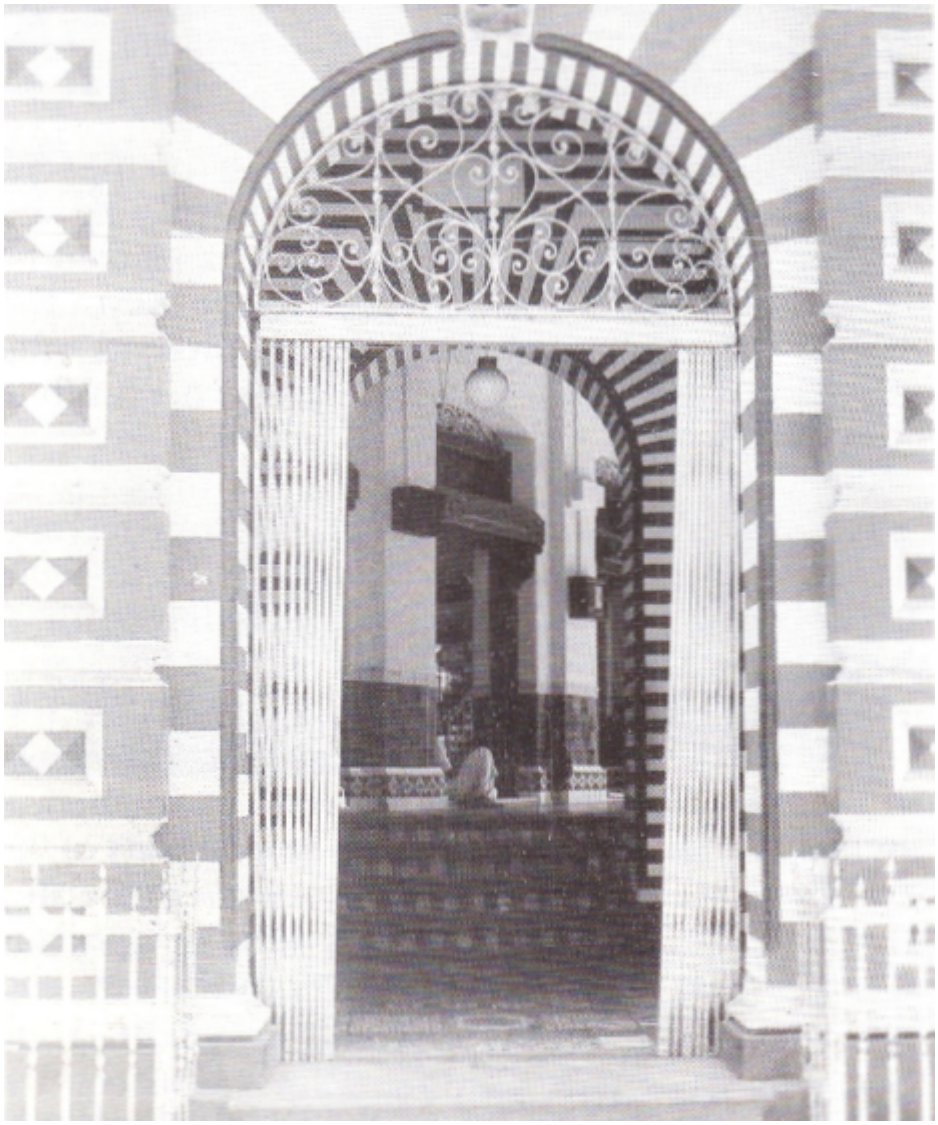
One of the oldest and most revered Muslim shrines in Colombo is the Dawatagaha Mosque, near the Town Hall, the home of the city council. The mosque’s domes and turrets stand out, especially, against the evening sky. On Tuesday evenings and Thursday nights hundreds of devotees come to the mosque to make their offerings – a bottle of coconut 0il, a measure of green gram and packets of cooked rice for the many who seek alms there.

Another architecturally eye-catching mosque is the Jami-UI Alfer Jumma Mosque on Second Cross Street, Pettah. Its contrasting colour scheme and its minarets and clock tower are a photographer’s delight.

Christianity came to Colombo with the coming of the Portuguese at the dawn of the 16th Century. Dom I.aurenco de Almeida, the commander of the first Portuguese flotilla to enter the port of Colombo, built a fortress in the area which is now the Fort and within it had a small Roman Catholic chapel constructed, named after St. Lawrence in honour of his patron saint. Up until today St. Lawrence remains the patron saint of Colombo, and though there is no trace of the structure, there is a remarkably attractive new church dedicated to the Saint at Wellawatte to the south of the city centre.



Jami-Ul-Alfer Jumma Mosque in Pettah.



The entrance an hallway of the mosque where the Muslims pray five time a day.

Though the Portuguese must have constructed several other churches in Colombo during their nearly one and a half centuries of occupation of the city, the places of worship must have been prey to the anti-Catholic movement that the Dutch, the next conquerors of Colombo, brought with them.

The Dutch in turn built churches dedicated to their own Dutch reformed faith, and one of the most outstanding of these structures is the Woljendhal Church, two kilometres from the city centre and sited on a hill dominating the northern

approaches to Colombo. It was built in 1749 and several monuments within it speak of the period of nearly 150 years when the Dutch ruled this port city. History is recorded in the Dutch tombstones that lie within the church precincts.

Though the Dutch suppressed the Catholic religion, the faith remained alive among its adherents as evidenced by the many Catholic churches scattered throughout the city. The Cathedral of St. Lucia, sited on another northern city hill and looking across at the Wolfendhal Church, is the seat of the Catholic Archbishop of Colombo. The five silver-painted domes of the shrine dominate the northeastern environs of Colombo. The cathedral, built on the site of a much earlier church, celebrated its centenary last year.

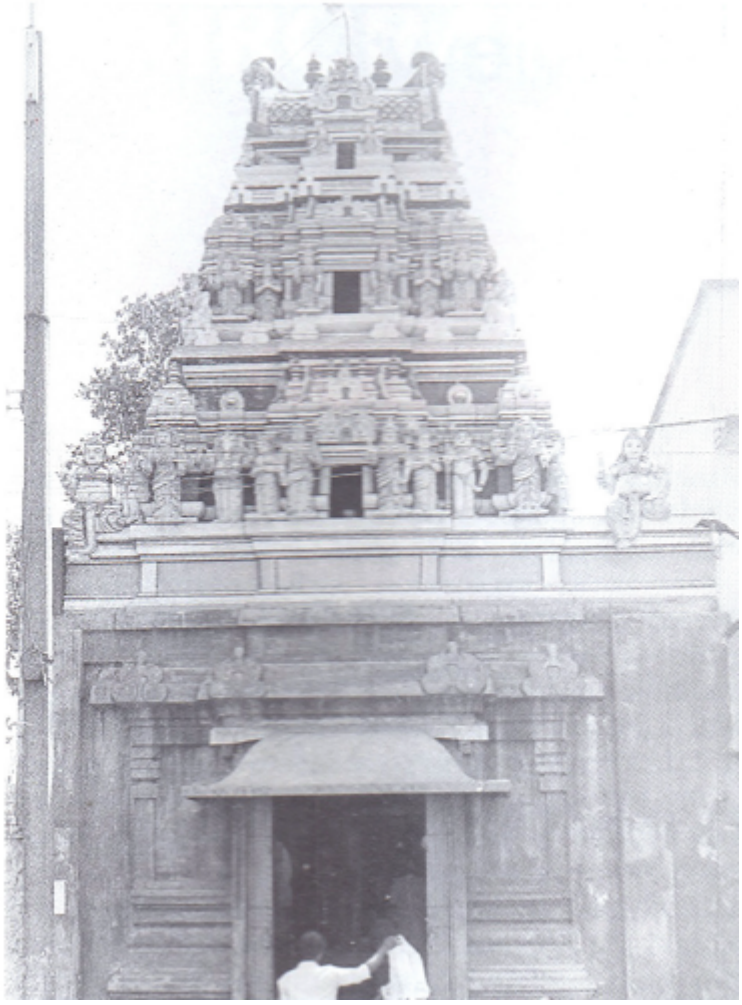
Jutting into Colombo Harbour and a kilometre from the Kotahena Cathedral of St. Lucia is the Catholic Shrine of St. Anthony, 150 years old and a pilgrimage centre for devotees of many faiths. Especially on Tuesdays the church is crowded with followers of the Saint of Padua who come with their candles and garlands of jasmine to make their supplication or offer their thanks for favours received.

The beautiful Cathedral of Christ, the Living Saviour on Bauddhaloka Mawatha to the south of the city centre is the premier place of worship for the church of England community in Colombo, the Christian persuasion that came with British rule in Sri Lanka. It has replaced in importance the former cathedral on Aluthmawatha Road in north Colombo which is popularly known as the Gal Palliya or the stone church since it is built of granite blocks. This is a noble and fascinating structure, still used for divine service.

St. Peter’s Church in the heart of the Fort, right in the centre of the commercial area of Colombo, once formed the banqueting hall of the residence of the Dutch Governor of Ceylon. It was consecrated as a place of worship by the British in 1821.

Like the places of worship in Colombo, also its citizens are scattered throughout the city, with no great concentrations of the followers of any one faith in any one area. There are of course city wards in which a majority of adherents of one religion reside, but never to the exclusion of others.

Hence, there is much co-operation, especially when festival time comes around. Whether it is Vesak, the foremost Buddhist feast, Vel the Hindu street procession, St. Anthony’s Day at the Catholic shrine or Prophet Mohammed’s Birthday, everyone joins in to help and share in the joy and also in the fun that follows.



The Sri Veerama Kaliamman Kovil.



Devotees preparing for a ‘pooja’ (religious offering) inside the kovil.