

Colombo: Where Four Religions Meet

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A. Felician Fernando



All Saints' Church at Borella. Photo – Harsha Krishanta



Giant statue of the Buddha opposite the Bandaranaike Memorial International Conference Hall in Colombo.

Photo – Fred R. Majvenna

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 or religious worship that dot the streets or dominate the sky line. In very many such examples it is one religion that tends to hold sway throughout that particular city and spread 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 BC to 10th century AD) and Polonnaruwa (11th and 12th centuries AD) 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, over looking 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 Compassionate One bathed in the Kelani and left his footprint on the riverbed, as he did on the pinnacle of the holy mountain of Siri Pada (Adam's Peak), but that no human eye will see that impression. Buddhism took strong roots on the eastern borders of Colombo, too, where the new capital of Sri Lanka, Sri Jayawardenapura, Kotte, now

stands. In the 15th century, Sri Jayawardenapura, 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 still seen at Kotte. To the south of the city, just a few kilometres from the city limits, stands the Bellanwila Raja Mahaviharaya, 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 now 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 Two centres of the 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 bazaar area, 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 jewellery trade, is the starting point of the main annual Hindu festival in Colombo, known as Vel. The insignia of God Skanda are taken from this temple in a giant vel chariot, a masterpiece of wood carving, drawn by majestic, horned, white bulls to another temple in the south of the city about six kilometers 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 Vel chariot on alternate years. The tradition is that these two temples house the consorts of 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 Mariamma, a goddess in the Hindu pantheon noted for her benevolence. Many devotees go here to plead for favours.

As far as Colombo is concerned, Islam could be considered the religion that first took root in the city. Records show that by the 10th century, there was a well-established settlement of Arab traders in Kolontota or Kolonpura, the early names for 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 Hejira, which works out to 959 AD. Strangely, however, Ibn Battuta, 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, sitting cheek-by-jowl with the Town Hall, home of the city council. But that semi-gothic structure dwarfs in age to the centuries-old shrine.

The mosque’s domes and turrets stand out, specially 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 oil, 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 color scheme and its minarets and clocktower are a photographer’s delight. Christianity came to Colombo with the coming of the Portuguese at the dawn of the 16th Century. Dom Laurence 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. 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 antiCatholic movement that the Dutch, the next conquerors of Colombo, brought with them.



Spire of the Anglican Church at Hulftsdorp, near the Supreme Court. Photo – Fred R. Malvenna



Typical Buddhist Temple in Colombo. This is the Gotami Vihara. Borella.
Photo – Fred R. Malvenna

The Dutch, in turn built churches dedicated to their own Dutch Reformed faith, and one of the most outstanding of these structures is the Wolfendhal Church, two kilometers from the city centre and sited on a hill dominating the northern approaches to the city. It was built in 1749 and several monuments within it speak of the period of nearly 150 years when Dutch rule held sway over 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 that dot 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, celebrates its centenary this year. Jutting into the 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 by 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 Baudhdhaloka 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 the British rule in Sri Lanka. It replaced the former cathedral in Aluthmawatha Road in Colombo north, popularly known as the Ga.l Palliya, 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's much co-operation especially when festival time comes around and whether it is Vesak, the foremost

Buddhist feast, Vel, the Hindu street procession, St. Anthony's Day at the Catholic shrine or Prophet Mohamed's Birthday, everyone joins in to help and share in the joy and naturally in the fun that follows.



Hindu Kovil at Captains Garden. Colombo.



Davatagaha Mosque near Lipton Circus.



Mosque at Old Moor Street. Colombo Photo – Impex Lanka



The Dipaduttaramaya, Kotahena, with its Siamese style dagaba.
Photo Fred R. Malvenna