Discover Cinnamon Gardens

Posted on
Racecourse, 1913

A town house with large turrets, towers, conical roofs and balconies stood tranquil as traffic moved briskly past its gates. The building, not dissuaded by the volley of explosive traffic, maintained its dignified stateliness as a testimony to affluence and an era of sophisticated vanity. It was an attestation to the grandeur of a period in history that signified the rise of new industrious castes and ethnicities in colonial Ceylon.

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In the 18th and 19th Centuries, this area in Colombo was only a suburb to the bustling business centres of Fort and Pettah. Deemed fit for agriculture, it is barely possible to summon an image of wilderness of Cinnamon Gardens in Colombo 7, a locale esteemed as a swanky quarter in the entirety of Colombo. It was indeed the backwoods of Colombo more than two centuries ago, when nearly 289 acres of land was cleared by Cornelis de Cock, the Disave of Colombo to cultivate cinnamon in the 1780s, a wooded area away from the busy township of coastal Colombo.

The British continued what the Dutch had started. Commercial cultivation was

eventually abandoned with the decline in cinnamon trading. What resurrected this area to a position of great glory was the decision by the English in 1850 to shift the Racecourse of the Ceylon Turf Club to a larger property in the former cinnamon plantation. Naturally, the rich and the powerful, who flaunted their eminence through membership in clubs, moved to the limits of the new Racecourse. Their new homes were expectedly imposing and elegant in appearance. And the old name, Cinnamon Gardens continued to identify the area.

The old Cinnamon Gardens had a sense of identity and quality that is retained to this day, along with a personality that was intricately bound with the geographical location and the people. Its street names were those of aristocratic Englishmen who served Ceylon.

The crowning glory of Cinnamon Gardens is undoubtedly the Independence Avenue and its surroundings. Led by a long drive bordered by the National Archives and the National Library on the right and the Colombo Cricket Club (CCC) on the left, the oldest cricket club in the country (1832), the national monument to commemorate the independence of Sri Lanka in 1948, was designed similar to the celebration hall of the Kingdom of Kandy. The water fountains, the trees and the well kept lawns are a sight to behold. The neighbouring Racecourse is a stunning revival of colonial legacy just as the ‘Maligawa’, an old mansion built in the late 19th Century by another influential clan of British-Ceylon and Royal College Colombo, the oldest public school in Colombo, endures that opulent history. Charles Henry de Soysa, hailed as the greatest philanthropist of 19th Century Ceylon, once owned nearly 100 acres in the area, of which he donated a large part to establish the University of Colombo.

Beyond the Independence Arcade, a new and exclusive mall that was once the Auditor General’s Department, the adjacent Maitland Crescent is mainly taken up by the Sinhalese Sports Club (SSC) and the Nondescripts Cricket Club (NCC), their beginnings in the colonial era. The SSC is testimony to the movement in early 20th Century of establishing sports clubs along ethnic lines. Parallel is Gregory’s Road, where one may notice the many impressive homes both old and new, along with trendy office buildings, ‘Winyatts’ being one such mansion built at the turn of the 20th Century, now the office of the Japanese Embassy. Horton Place, a bordering road is another witness to the great wealth acquired by anglicised masses of old Ceylon, Jefferson House, built in 1914, a striking monument of old world charm is the official residence of the Ambassador for the United States in Sri Lanka.

Exposing more of Cinnamon Garden's splendour, adjoining Nelum Pokuna Theatre, the state-of-the-art theatre built on the former Nomads Cricket Ground, which was also filled with cinnamon shrubs even in early 20th Century, is the National Museum, the gigantic Renaissance building, commissioned by Sir William Gregory in 1873. Its grand entrances, verandas with large pillars and rounded arches made it an emblem of modern architecture.

The Town Hall, the administrative building of the Colombo Municipal Council, was deemed too far when it was proposed for shifting from its original home in Pettah. The grandeur of the magnificent structure is the tower and the dome, with a pleasing view of the area from all angles, especially overlooking the Viharamahadevi Park. Created on the orders of the Colonial Secretary as a recreational area for the residents of Colombo in 1866, the park was named Victoria Gardens in honour of HRH's golden jubilee and renamed Viharamahadevi in 1956 to coincide with the Buddha Jayanthi. The World War Memorial in the park is a silent sentinel to multitudes of lives laid down for a cause.

Moving away from the quaint surroundings of Cinnamon Gardens, the bustling locality near Town Hall is the Lipton Square. Sir Thomas Lipton established a successful company for the distribution of Ceylon tea in the 1890s. Thus, Lipton and Company had its head office at the same building occupied by United Motors today. Described as the'Roundabout Church' the Cinnamon Gardens Baptist church had its beginnings also in a warehouse in Pettah, but moved to a more peaceful location in Cinnamon Gardens in 1877, hardly a feature of Lipton Square today. In the intersection of Lipton Square is the impressive 19th Century Dewatagaha Mosque, today an icon of reverence and times past.

In close proximity at Ward Place is the Victoria Memorial Eye Hospital, with multiple domes and red bricks, the building was designed according to Hindu architectural tradition. Commissioned by Lady Ridgeway, the location for the memorial eye hospital along with the first national hospital had been chosen because it was deemed a less populous area. The present eye hospital was once known as the Mango Lodge, a rest house for the Dutch Administrators during their many hunting trips.

Limitless would be the historical landmarks of Cinnamon Gardens, which individually would have a unique story to recount. Whether the name is Sir Arthur Havelock, Lord Rosmead, Sir Edward Barnes or Sir James Longdon, it goes without saying that the locals take pride in these English street names. And the maxim 'a city without

old buildings is like a man without a memory’ came to mind while passing through this well known precinct in the heart of Colombo.