Fruit & Nut, and Mountain Pass: Some landmarks on the Kandy Road

Posted on

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The Kandy Road, which every visitor to Sri Lanka will drive along at least twice – that is, up and down – to Kandy, the hill capital and back to Colombo -is haunted by a thousand ghosts of the island's history, while affording panoramic views of entrancing beauty, and, in some parts, excellent examples of engineering skill. It is one of the best maintained stretches of road in the country, being, as it is, one of the main trunk roads from Colombo – city – the metropolis, to the Central province.

Travelling along it, you cannot but fail to see a cross section of Sri Lankan life – urban, suburban, rural – with all its varied charm and piquance; luxuriant forests, foaming waterfalls, awesome granite rocks and distant mountain peaks. Today it is difficult to imagine as you skim its smooth, 'carpeted' surface, easing round gentle curves and bends, stopping for refreshment at any of the innumerable 'cool spots' along the way, that once a Chief Justice of the island, Sir Harding Gifford, was constrained to write of this same road:

“Marshes and quagmires, puddles, pools and swamps,
Dark matted jungles and long plushy plains,
Exhaling foetid airs and mortal damps, By Kandyan perfidy miscalled a road;
Through which the luckless traveller must wade,
Uncheered by sight of man or man’s abode.”

But that was way back in 1820 when the then British Governor of ‘Ceylon’ (as it was known) began to build the road to Kandy, ‘violating’ as it were, and by this highway almost completely, the ‘sovereignty’ of the Interior Kingdom, destroying forever its isolation and exclusiveness from the rest of the country. Only five years previously that same ‘sovereignty’ had been taken from the hands of the King of Kandy, by his own Chief-Ministers and handed to the British Government and a king “across the water”.

In 1820 Kandy was still inaccessible, every entrance to the city in a state of wild jungle till Sir Edward Barnes, appointed Governor of the Colony in that year, decided that if proper government was to be established in the country, what was needed was “first roads; second roads; and third roads” ! Even before it was gravelled or metalled, the Kandy road was opened to traffic, hence Harding Gifford’s melancholy stanzas!

Almost unconsciously you will breathe a sigh of relief as you finally get outside congested Colombo. The Kandy road almost literally beckons. You can feel the pulse of it: steadily busy, rarely traffic-jammed, full of vital interest almost from its beginnings. There is never a lonely stretch anywhere along it – at the same time there is no hassle, no bustle, you can claim it as yours quite legitimately for the whole, long length of your drive!

As for landmarks a road which has been in existence for more than one and three-quarter century needs must have gathered a few. While that same road that carved its way through territory almost as old as time, must needs also have taken in many of the landmarks of the past. And when that past goes back into a history over two thousand years old, then would you have any doubts about the sites and scenes the Kandy road offers to all who traverse it ?

Almost as you leave Colombo you drive into Kelaniya: hoary with history. The birthplace of one of the heroines of Sri Lanka’s ancient history: Queen Vihara Maha Devi, daughter of the sub-king of Kelaniya who became the wife of another sub-king

in the deep South and the mother of the hero-king, Dutugemunu, overlord of all I.anka. It was from the bay of Kelaniya, where the great river by that name meets the sea, that she drifted away – sent off in a gilded boat – to brave turbulent, angry seas: an offering to the sea-god-except that he was merciful and set her on a fair breeze to the landing-place in the island's South from where she was rescued and hailed as its heaven-sent queen. At Kelaniya is an ancient temple and its stupa built over relics of Lord Buddha who, himself, so legend has it, visited the spot and preached from there to the people.

At Kelaniya also are fine pottery works, dating back to ancient times, where traditional, stylized pottery, especially delightful animal-figures, are yet made. The art is now becoming avant – garde – and flourishing. In modern times many a factory producing industrial goods like soap, tiles, metal items of diverse kinds – both utility and ornamental, domestic pots and pans, plastic ware of every imaginable kind, furniture, brooms and brushes and other such household equipment have sprung up along the Kandy road with booths of the products usually placed almost pat on the main road! Some of the artefacts are quite fascinating and you might well pick up a bargain if you are tempted to stop – and look.

At the same time you might pay far more than you intended to: the salesman's guile is overlaid with charm! Fruits of the tropic earth of Sri Lanka you will find irresistible all along the way. Delicious papayas, bananas, melons in season, mangoes ditto, and pineapples – pine-apples – pine-apples! A whole large village growing nothing else, it seems, but pineapples -large, juicy, sweet-as-nectar-pine-apples and all strung up, to tingle your palate, hard-by the road! Many other varieties of more exotic fruit like the custard apple, the local olive, damsons, berries and citrus fruit of all kinds, rambuttans, avocadoes, would also be displayed and available at whatever season you make your way along this road. The village of Kirillawala is famous for its pines: you have barely left Colombo twenty kilometres behind as you reach it -but what first reaches you is the heady scent of ripe pine. You cannot miss it. About another twenty kilometres away from Colombo, on this road, is one of the most famous Cave-temple-clusters in Sri I.anka: the Warana Caves, as they are known. You branch off from the main road at a village called Tihariya,,only a few kilometres, but surely a 'must', well worth detouring for, to see rising from the plain a giant bull of a cave, its drip ledges having been cut over two thousand years ago; inhabited by ascetics long, long before Buddhism was brought to Sri I.anka from India. But it was in the early Buddhist era – the 3rd – 1st centuries

B.C. that Warana achieved its true greatness. A fugitive king of I.anka - Walagambahu – made it his dwelling place for some time, and later, after he had been restored, gave hugely to make the temple the wondrous structure it is today. Even more sacrosanct than Warana is the Raja Maha Vihara at Attanagalla, again a short distance from the main junction of Nittambuwa along the way. Here a king gave up his life to establish peace and concord during a time of civil war: a heroic, voluntary sacrifice. King Sri Sangabodhi is venerated at the site to this day and all Lanka's rulers who came after him were proud to use his name co-joined to their own royal titles. At Pasyala, travelling through rural scenes, with lush paddy fields ripening on either side, you find the popular "Cadju Girls" as they are called: beautiful damsels selling dried, roasted and devilled cadjunuts in attractive little rustic booths. Few can resist either the nuts or the charming maidens with their dove-like looks and dark flashing eyes! At this point you can almost see the hill country rising before you. The view is panoramic. Ambepussa has a comfortable and clean Resthouse where the tea served is delicious. It is yet only about 2¼ hours since you left Colombo – if you have not stopped along the way, – there you are in the hills!

Kegalle is a busy town and full of active, commercial life. Its bazaar has a great deal of bric-abrac to offer if you. have time to wait and see. Beyond the town, the road opens out into a defile with extensive rice-fields on either side. The curious, jagged crag ahead – known as Uttuwankanda – was once the abode of Ceylon's (Sri Lanka's) Robin Hood, Saradiel, a highway robber who used to hold up travellers in the early days of British rule, robbing from the rich to give the poor to whose descendants. he is still a popular folk hero. Below the rock you might well see an elephant (a tame one, of course!) lumbering along with his dinner of leaves in his trunk.

As you reach Kadugannawa, even in this day and age of engineering marvels, you cannot help but remark on the skill and precision of the British engineer, Captain Dawson, who at the point of the road that reaches over 2000 feet, created and "cut" his famous "pass" which one could thereafter traverse with ease (though modem improvements have made it an even easier spot to negotiate today). A great tall white tower was built in memory of his achievement he died prematurely while working on the site. An old Sinhala prophecy had it that Kandy would not really be 'conquered' till a horseman rode through a hill : Dawson confounded it ! He rode through his "pass" triumphantly ! You now pass through and alongside the tall mountain ranges to reach Peradeniya famous for its Botanical Gardens, once the

Royal Pleasure Parks of the Kandyan kings. The Gardens are 150 acres in extent and contain one of the finest collections of tropical flora in the whole world. Its Orchid House is unparalleled. During the Second World War the Gardens held the Headquarters of the Allied South East Asia Command. Peradeniya is also one of Sri Lanka's best known 'University' cities. And from Peradeniya, once over the bridge that spans the Mahaveli River – the "Great Sandy River" of Lanka's history and of its present hopes for development – here is : Kandy! The word is a corruption of the Sinhala "Kanda" (mountain). Kandy was founded in the 15th century by King Vickramabahu (1475-1510 AD.). Its historical name is Senkadagala Nuwara : the town of the hermit Senkada, who lived on a rock Kandy is your destination – and has its own exclusive aura, its unique atmosphere, its truly delightful and most invigorating essence. It is the Great City (the Maha Nuwara) of the Sri Lankan people, the stronghold of the later kings, the home of the last defiant remnants of a once-proud race, the last to fall into the hands of the foreigner. It is fitting that year after year the flag of freedom is unfurled here as a memory of the pride and freedom regained in modem times. It is fitting you arrive in Kandy at the 'terminus' of your journey along the Kandy Road.



Dawson Pillar – built in memory of the British Engineer who,. cut through sheer rock to build the road to Kandy. (Suresh de Silva).



Kirillawela has wayside fruit stalls displaying luscious pineapples in heaps to catch the eye of the passing motorist. (Suresh de Silva).



Kadugannawa Pass — cut through the rock. A constant reminder of British Engineering skills. (Suresh de Silva).



Pasyala — the village of the charming 'cadju girls' is a must for commuters on the Kandy - Colombo road. (Suresh de Silva)