High as a Kite

Posted on

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The breeze whips in from the sea. All about me there are people. People drawn to the place for their ‘constitutional’ evening walk. The younger lot, dressed in their designer track suits, wearing designer track shoes, jog at designer specified speeds! I wasn’t. I was at Galle Face Green – for that’s ‘the place’ – looking up at a clear evening sky of deep blue and red and black and yellow and other colours that defied simple, oneword description. The sky over Galle Face was alive with kites.

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As a kid there was this gang of school pals I used to join, who -when the mood was right – used to go to Galle Face to fly kites. We used to have a crazy time. Kite ‘fights’ used to be a favourite game. Two kites were armed, meaning that’ part of the guide-wire used to be treated with glue and broken -glass. The kites were then launched, and engaged in combat. The object of the whole game -and it was just that, a game – was to sever the guide-wire of the opponent’s kite. Winning did have its drawbacks, though. The winner had to buy the loser a kite. Another favourite pastime used to be getting your kite as high as possible. We weren’t in the habit of consuming alcohol at that time, so the only thing that got high were the kites! Launching a 3′ X 2′ kite and sending it so high that you had to look twice to see it gives one a strange feeling – a type of elation that’s difficult to describe. And then the string breaks. And you watch, mouth agape as your kite drifts over Colombo.

Colombo is the ideal city in which to fly kites. There is the Galle Face Green and the Parliamentary Complex in Kotte. Johann Raymond goes back to his childhood days of ‘kite fights’.

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This vast expanse of green ringed by cool shade trees is situated beside the waters of the Diyawanna Oya, a lake that provides a breeze as strong as the sea breeze, and that means a breeze strong enough to fly kites in. Yet these two places do not

have a monopoly on the kite-flying populace. Colombo, while being developed at quite a rapid pace, still has a charm about it. London's character and New York's vitality are all very well . . . but I've never seen kids flying kites from the sidewalks in those cities like they do in Colombo. Mounds, playing fields, sidewalks, and even narrow lanes. Colombo abounds with them all. As a result, one needn't go far to find a place to launch a kite from. What one needs to be wary of is the air space. To be sure, Colombo has all the space you need to fly kites. But it's also a deadly place for the unwary trainee kite-flyer. The streets of Colombo are lined with trees – some as old as 200 years – and that's not good news, as anyone who has flown kites would well know. Then there are the notso-appealing telephone and power cables. In the development plan of the city, these cables -or as many of them as possible – are going to be relocated, underground.

The Vihara Maha Devi Park – or Victoria Park,as it was called during the time of the British – is full of trees. Beautiful spreading banyan trees, or outrageously colorful flamboyant trees. Trees that spread out branches, like open arms, to the young lovers in the city. Trees that at first glance might deter even the bravest of kite-flyers from launching. But the Vihara Maha Devi Park isn't all trees, fortunately, and it provides ample space to fly kites. Especially the area of the park that's the kiddies' comer, with its maze and slides and swings and other 'fun' things that vie for kids' attention together with kites. Attempting to describe the shapes and colours of kites available locally would be like attempting to describe the imagination of a nation! For kites don't conform to rigid laws of form – just to the aerodynamics of trial and error. Still, there are a couple of favourite shapes. There's the snake: a kite that has a small framework forming the head of the snake and a long, long tail for the bcxly. These kites are a thrill to watch, as they glide effortlessly on the breeze, with their tails wiggling about. One of my favourites is the crow, a complex kite which actually has two 'feet' that not only give the kite an authentic look, but make it sound like a crow in flight as well. Of course, the common shape -the diamond – is the glittering king of the skies. The shape makes it the easiest kite to manufacture and decorate. As a result you get them in a variety of motifs and splashes of colour . . . not forgetting the diamond kites with flags on them, instead of motifs. The Union Jack and the Stars and Stripes soar over Galle Face practically every even-ing, even though the 'official' kiteflying season is in September. I find this ironic, considering the fact that Colombo has ideal kiteflying weather practically all year round. I suppose that the organization of a kite-flying contest around September helps to justify the 'officiality' of the period. The contest itself is a spectacle that shouldn't be missed. You find the high flyers of Sri lanka's

kite industry submitting soaring designs and shapes. The shapes of the kites entered for this contest have been wide and varied. Interestingly, there has been a tendency in the recent past to go for shapes that depict the culture of our country, like devil masks and dagobas and even a Kandyan dancer! Some of the kites entered in this contest are so large that it requires a team to actually launch it. A good time is had by all, though, and that, I feel, is the main thing.

“Small-time industry. Big-time enjoyment.” That’s what the kite industry in Sri lanka is all about, I was told. And I believe it! There were a couple of kids once who launched this kite, their pride and joy, in a narrow lane. Their uncle, seeing the fun, came down to join them and soon got carried away with the whole thing. He sent the kids – brothers, they were – scurrying to find string. After every nook and cranny of the house had been searched and all the string there was found, the kids watched their uncle send the kite so high that they could hardly see it. And then - wonder of wonders they watched their uncle skilfully bring their precious kite down unharmed! That was one of the happiest moments of those kids’ lives. And I should know. I was one of them. And now, ‘high as a kite’ means something quite different to me! May be if I ever reach my second childhood in one piece …

