History laden suburb still keeps step with time: Cosmopolitan Kotahena

Posted on
Sivam Kovil: Sri Ponnambalawaneswarar Devastanam

Take a walk down Kotahena’s bustling streets and you will discover the many mile posts of history that mark its passage of time. Cramped into an area less than five square miles are the landmarks of an era time has not forgotten: Colombo 13

Words and **Photographs** Manu Gunasena

With the Colombo harbour on its waterfront, Kotahena was the first port of call for every visitor. When the flag followed trade and the merchant vessels and the naval armadas sailed in—one to carve a lucrative niche, the other to claim a strategic base—so did Ceylonese society rush to establish their trading posts to deal in commerce.

Three hundred years ago, when Kotahena went Dutch, everyone joined in the feast. There was nothing like being too close to the action for greater comfort. None wanted to miss out on the golden opportunities that surged and swelled from the sea; that sailed in from foreign climes. Out of all the suburbs of Colombo, Kotahena was the sorbet of the banquet. It became the ‘best address’ in town for the then upwardly mobile generation to possess.

Amidst the wheeling and dealing, the hustle and bustle of business, the spiritual needs of the populace did not go unattended. While the temporal affairs were left in the hands of the secular authorities, religious missionaries became the custodians of matters spiritual. Their efforts were not in vain. This is proved by the edifices they erected, which still exist.

The first crusaders to establish their reformist creed were the members of the Dutch Reform Church, introduced over 370 years ago in Galle. In 1749, construction began on a church in Kotahena on Wolvendaal Hill. The walls bear three family crests of important Dutch heads of the time. Its organ is said to be over 200 years old.

Around the church grounds, are many tombstones dating back to the 17th Century, the epitaphs inscribed in Dutch. In the front lawn of the church is a stone slab inscribed with the Church motto “Spes Est Regerminat.” which is “therefore if a tree is cut down there is a hope that the branches and roots will sprout again”. Hundreds of years after its founding, a small congregation of the Dutch Reform Church members walks up Wolfendaal Road every Sunday morning to attend the Sunday mass at this, the oldest Protestant Church in Sri Lanka.

Less than half a mile away is Bonjean Road, which leads to the citadel of Catholicism in Kotahena: the magnificent St Lucy Cathedral, modelled on St Peter’s Basilica in the Vatican, built on the foundations of a small chapel used for worship during the Dutch occupation. In 1838, the church was elevated to cathedral status and was confirmed as the St Lucy Cathedral by the Vatican. It is the oldest and the largest Catholic church in Sri Lanka.

Gunanada Mawatha is home to Colombo’s oldest Buddhist temple with a history of nearly 300 years. Formally constructed in 1785, the Deepaduttaramaya became famous as the epicentre of Buddhist revival when the Ven Migettuewatte Sri Gunanada Thera took up residence in 1862 to launch the famous Five Great Debates, known as the *Pancha Maha Vadaya.* It was from this temple that he spearheaded the Buddhist defence to the arguments raised by the Christian missionaries.

The temple has also come to be known as the Thai Temple in Sri Lanka. This is due to a royal prince from Thailand being ordained at this temple in 1904 where he lived until 1911. The outstanding feature of this temple is the stupa which has been built according to the Thai style and is the only Thai stupa in Sri Lanka.

DID YOU KNOW?

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Close to the sea is a Catholic church with a fascinating history. It was literally built on the sea shore over 200 years ago when sea erosion threatened the area. It is said that a missionary, Father Antonio, with a wooden cross in his hand, walked to the spot most threatened by the invading sea. There, he planted his cross and

prayed, keeping vigil for three days when miraculously the waters receded and a sand bank became revealed to all. Impressed by this miracle, the Dutch granted the priest's wish to build a chapel with mud in honour of St Anthony of Padua.

Not even fifty yards away from this church is the Sri Ponnambalavameshwarar Devasthanam, popularly known as the Sivam Kovil or the Gal Kovil. Built in 1857 by Gate Mudaliyar Arunachalam Ponnambalam and by his three sons Sir Ramanathan, Sir Arunachalam and Kumaraswami, it is the biggest Hindu kovil in Colombo and is one of the oldest as well as being the only kovil in Sri Lanka built entirely in stone.

TRUE OR FALSE?

Is Sivam kovil the biggest kovil in Colombo?

yes it is, the kovil is also the only kovil in Sri Lanka built entirely in stone

However, Kotahena is not only about religion. In the midst of the spiritual, pulsates the vibrancy of trade. Lined on every street are rows of small narrow shops, with many storeys, containing even more shops and offices. They have sprung from no grand design having evolved from necessity. Thus next to a jeweller's shop is found a food shop selling vade, thosai gram and murukku. Next to it maybe a car spare part shop or a telecommunication outlet.

On Bloemendal Road is the Sugathadasa Stadium, the multipurpose stadium which has hosted many international sporting events. Next to it is the newly developed indoor sports complex, which has Sri Lanka's only international swimming pool.

FAMOUS PEOPLE…

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Kotahena is also known for hosting two world famous figures. Mohandas Gandhi and

Swami Vivekananda both stayed for two days at the Ramlal Maharaja Dharma Chatram down Jinthupitiya Road. The Chatram, a place of rest for travellers, was built by an Indian Maharaja in 1813. Today it is occupied by the seventh generation of the same family who were the original trustees.

Kotahena is a truly multi racial society with the cultures of the Sinhalese, Tamils and Muslims existing side by side and fusing splendidly. Add to this mixture the cultures of the colonialists, the Portuguese, the Dutch and the British which still pervade the Kotahena air and you get a cultural cocktail that makes this Colombo suburb uniquely cosmopolitan.

