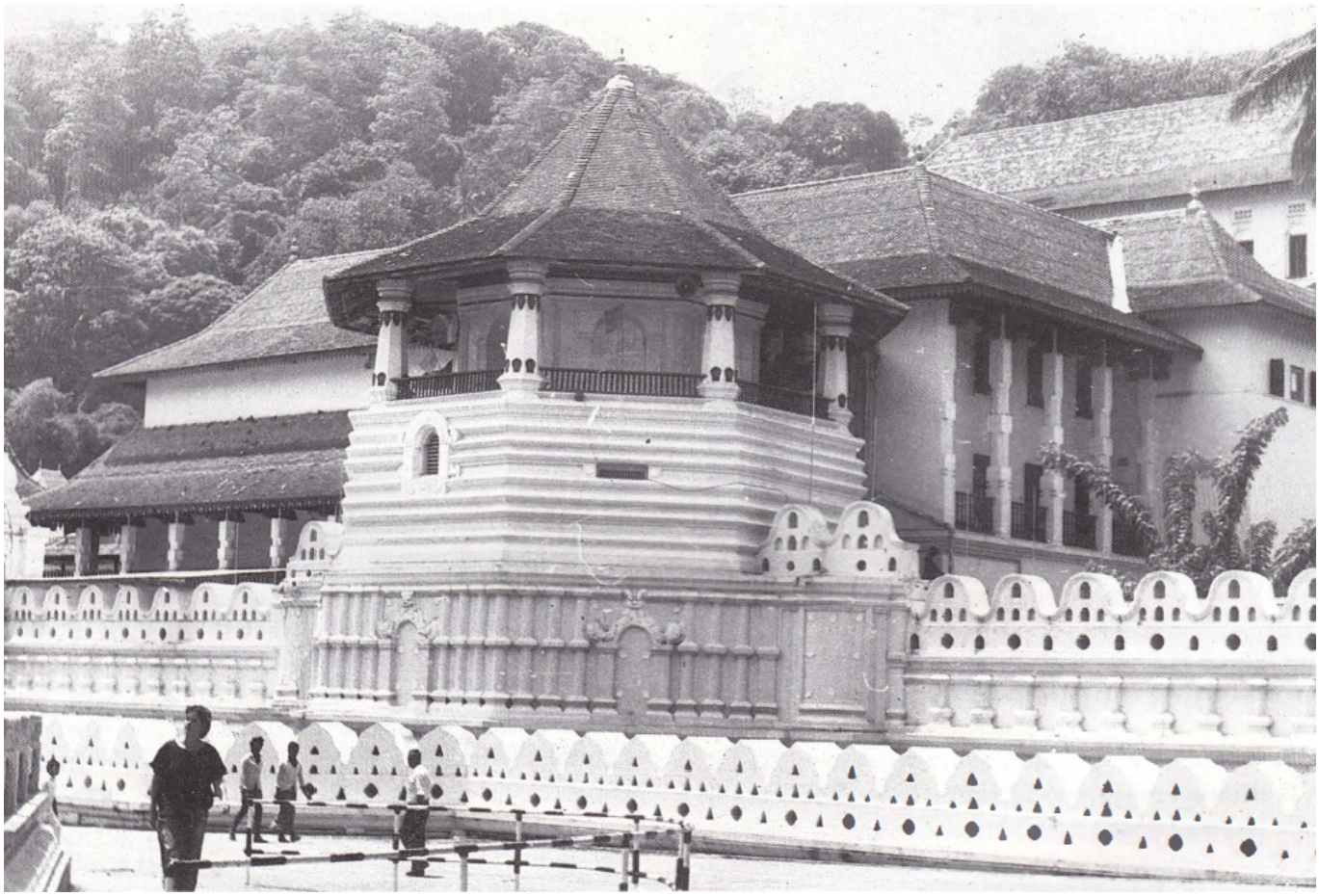
Kandy’s Temple of the Tooth Relic

Posted on

M B Dassanayake



Kandy’s Dalada Maligawa – the temple of the sacred Tooth Relic of the Buddha, with the octagon in the foreground.

Dalada ***Maligawa,*** or the Temple of the Tooth, is the very heart of Kandy, Sri Lanka’s hill capital. It is today the most sacred Buddhist shrine in the country, and a place held in veneration by Buddhists the world over, for here is enshrined a Tooth Relic of Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha, brought to Sri Lanka many centuries ago.

The ***maligawa,*** as it is commonly referred to is both a centre of pilgrimage, as well as, one of Kandy’s key tourist attractions. It forms part of a complex of buildings remaining from the days of the Kandyan kingdom, which finally fell to the British in 1815. As was the tradition in the days of the Sinhalese kingdom, the Maligawa is situated next to the former palace of the king which is now an archaeological museum, with many exhibits from the Kandyan period ofSri Lankan history.

The temple, which is the best known symbol of Kandy, is situated near famous Kandy Lake. The octagon of the temple, which now houses a museum of priceless ola leaf manuscripts, was the place from which the King of Kandy reviewed the historic Esala Perahera.

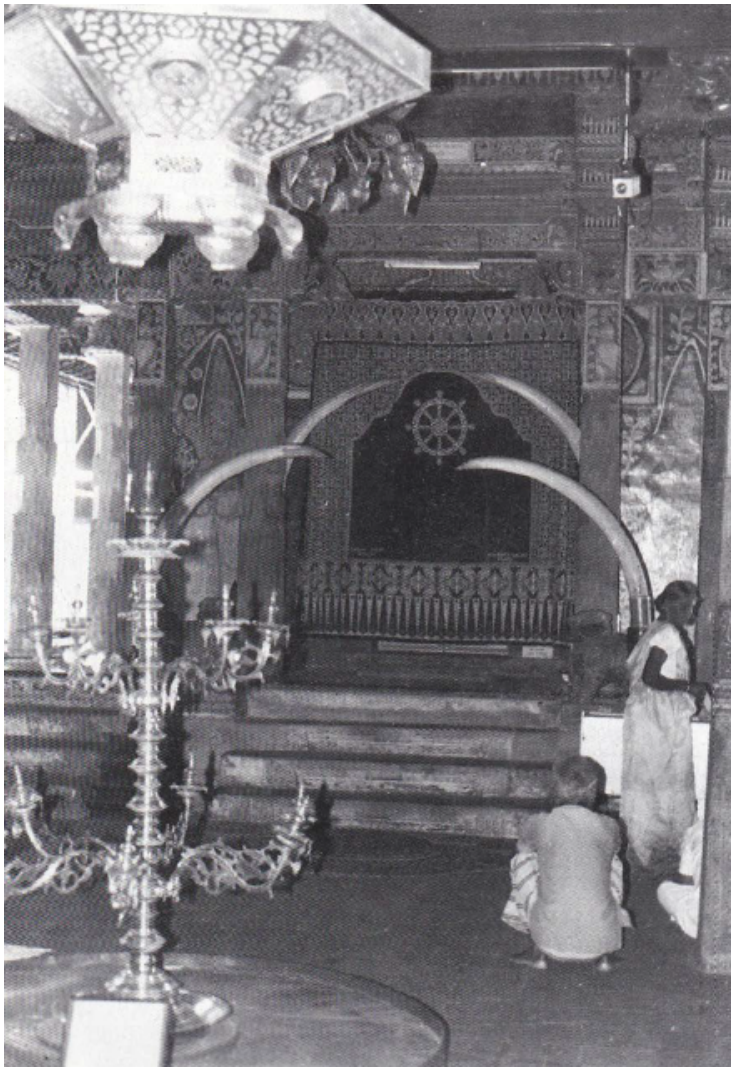
The temple stands at the southern end of the king’s palace in line with it south of the temple, on the shore of the lake stands the former queen’s ‘ulpenge’ or bathing house. North of the temple and behind the palace stands the Audience Hall. The temple was thus in the midst of royal buildings.
Along the front of the palace and the temple runs a brick wall of typical Sinhalese design. The openings in the wall are intended for the lighting of lamps on festival days. Behind this is another wall in the same style and between them a moat or ‘diyagala’. A brick porch called ‘mahavahalkade’is built on a bridge over the moat. There are hinges on either side, but the old doors are gone.

At the foot of the steps that lead from the street to the porch lies carved stepping stone called a ‘moonstone’ in Sri Lanka, such as is usual at the en trance to religious building. The elephants carved on the slabs on either side of the entrance are typical of Kandyan art. A slab representing ‘Lakshmi’ anointed by elephants leans against the wall of the temple facing the entrance porch. Both sides of the doorway are carved with elaborate designs and with two guardstones on ‘doratupala’.

In the courtyard stands the shrine where the temple rituals, are conducted. It is built on an oblong platform paved with stone. The mouldings have been developed out of earlier types. Upon this platform are engraved pillars of stone with capitals of wood supporting a triple corbel. The skirting of the lower floor is rendered in stone, covered outside with flat square tile in vertical and horizontal rows. Conventional lions are embossed on these tiles. Some retain older design·s in black and gold on pink while those that have been re-painted are in yellow on blue and red on light blue.

There are three entrances to the shrine: the main one in front. and two side entrances. The ground floor has two rooms. A small inverted brass lotus hangs over the door that leads into the east room. This room is the sanctuary; they call it the ‘Etulmaliga wa ‘(inner shrine) or ‘Vedasitina Maligawa’ (The shrine of abode). The Sacred Tooth Relic is kept within this enclosure.

Compared with the age of Buddhist shrines and temples in Sri Lanka, the Dalada Maligawa is not old. The Maligawa proper, where the relic is enshrined, was built 300 years ago. The buildings surrounding it are even more recent. The imposingly beautiful ”pattirippuwa” or Octagon, which today houses the unique oriental library of ola leaf manuscripts, was built in the early years of the last century, and some of the buildings that rise behind, dwarfing the sacred temple, were completed barely three decades ago.



Entrance to the main shrine room at the Temple of the Tooth relic.

Architecturally, most of it is a happy muddle of bits and pieces of diverse patterns and traditions. The storeyed inner temple where the relic is kept is traditionally Kandyan, while outside is a mixture of every influence that has come its way. At the entrance, the granite sculpture of two elephants brought from the King’s palace at nearby Kundasale, is today mounted with two pillars donated by a Japanese Buddhist prelate, Inside a drummer leans on a pillar donated by a devout Burmese,· while on one side is a Japanese prayer gong mounted on a modern geodesic frame. But all these rub shoulders amicably together, not disturbing the essential piety and devotion of the Buddhist who comes unshod to offer a tray of lotus buds or jasmines before the sacred relic.

The relic itself is rarely been. Held up by a twist of golden wire sprouting from a golden lotus, it is encased in seven jewelled golden caskets, in the shape of dagabas. On special occasions it is exposed for veneration, when all the ancient ritual is enacted and queues form for miles just for that bowed second, when the long-clutched flower is offered and the pilgrim passes by hardly looking at the relic he was waiting so long to see.
Just a glimpse of the golden caskets alone would suffice to bring a we to the visitor, devotee or not. Bedecked with every known gem, the seven caskets and the many offerings made to the Tooth Relic make the Maligawa treasures worth the ransom of several kings.

Heavy golden chains, all the gems of Sri Lanka, a Buddha image carved out of a. single emerald, a casket covered with wine-red rubies, figures in priceless ivory and a whisk made of the hair of a Siamese princess are some of the known offerings made to the relic. Burma sent two embassies to buy the relic from the Sinhala kings, and Siam once offered 50.000 pounds when the pound had more sterling. But the relic has never been for sale.
Each day there are three offerings to the Tooth Relic- the three “poojas” at dawn, before midday and at dusk, when offerings of food and drink are made and the devout come to the anteroom to worship before he simple curtain of golden satin which hides the golden caskets. It is at this time that the sound of Kandyan drums and the “horanewa” – the local oboe- draws one into the Maligawa.

It is in the midst of the thevava – the beating of drums and the chanting of Buddhist stanzas that the daily poojas are conducted. The sound of drums reverberate in the temple and echo outside, until the ritual is over. The morning pooja. begins at 5 a.m. and concludes by 7 a.m. The door of the shrine room is again opened around 10 a.m. for the next pooja, which is the ritual offering of a meal comprising 32 curries prepared in the special kitchen of the temple. Once again the drumming continues for aw hole hour. The next pooja, at dusk, is at 6p.m. and terminates around 8 p.m.

The best times to visit the maligawa are when the poojas are being conducted, because of the unique experience of being in the midst of the captivating drum-ming, and the opportunity of witnessing some of the ancient Buddhist rituals being re-enacted each day.