

Recollection of a foregone era

Posted on



The crescent passageway that runs along the length of the Old Kachcheri courtyard

Sri Lanka is enriched with a history and culture of more than 2,500 years, where great kings and colonials alike have ruled the Island. Chronicles of these times could be envisaged through the edifices built during that time and which still remain, enduring the tests of time. They paint a picture of what has come to pass, though some particulars may have been lost in time, leaving traces of its beauty and existence for future generations to witness...

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Sri Lanka was renowned around the globe as Ceylon while it remained a colony of Great Britain. The period between 1815-1948, the duration of their rule, was marked with great many changes, especially in terms of industry and culture. Tea, Coffee and Rubber

industries were all introduced during the time and most of the administrative systems that still exist were pioneered under their rule. As such, numerous facets have been added to the culture of Sri Lanka, from which the influence on Sri Lankan architecture could be duly noted from the southern to the northern coasts of the Island. Therefore, the Jaffna Peninsula is strewn with structures built during the British Colonial era or renovated to enforce their influence. And the age-old magic could still be seen in some of the slightly decrepit structures.

Old Park

A mere three kilometre drive from Jaffna Town will bring one to Old Park, which was once celebrated for its breadth and beauty. A fascinating history surrounding the Park tells of its establishment in 1829 by Percival Acland Dyke, British Government Agent of North for 32 years. Dubbed 'the Rajah of the North', Dyke has purchased the 27 acre piece of land with his own funds to set up his residence. Records detail the beauty of his residence and garden, during the time, where a charming pond, flower gardens, fruit bearing trees and rare plants amply decorated the extent of Old Park.

At present, nearly 185 years later, the only remnant to be clearly seen of the glory days is the pond, which is situated in the now reduced premise of the park. Protected by a fence, the somewhat rundown appearance that seemed to contrast with the otherwise renovated grounds serve as an attestant to the age of the park. Manicured lawns, interrupted here and there with trees and benches has lend an air of modernity. Families and people frequent the park now, enjoying their time while the joyous squeals of young ones playing about has become a recurring sound.

The Old Kachcheri

Opposite to one side of Old Park is the Old Kachcheri or the Jaffna Secretariat. Built during the time of Dyke, the building is a perfect example that showcases British Architecture in Jaffna in its prime. The entrance alone is a magnificent structure, encompassing countless Roman arches, round or semi circular in form. Depicting telltale features of Neo Renaissance architecture, the Kachcheri would have fitted snugly into the Victorian Era.

A typical feature that sets apart architectural feats of the Victorian Era is the blending of different types of stones together to provide a patterned exterior. As such coral stones running along the corners and bases of the structure with plastered brick infills—though in most places the plaster has peeled off to expose the underlying red bricks—embellished the Kachcheri. A balustrade ran over the porch and the grand verandah of the building where a

balcony must have existed long ago. Walking inside, one would be at once entranced by the floor of one room, decked in an intricate mosaic that seemed to have been created using broken crockery. Artfully broken plates had been arranged paces apart. Going further in, one would come to the courtyard. On one side a crescent passageway or colonnade runs the length while the other side consist of a squared pattern.

The Kachcheri must have been a two storied structure at one point, consisting of a wooden floor and a timber roof. Rose windows for better light and ventilation, and broken structures of eaves depict a typical adaptation in tropical countries to prevent rain water from seeping in.

Jaffna Railway Station

The construction of the railway line to Jaffna was initiated in July 1900. In March 1902, the service was opened to the public with trains operating from Kankesanthurai to Chavakachcheri, which later extended to encompass Palali as well. Though it is said that at the commencement of the train service, the station at Jaffna was small, it must have been developed at a later stage. Here the architecture seemed to have been influenced by the Dravidian architecture of South India. A two storied building with stairs at either ends—inside—leading to the upper floor, depicts the splendor of a bygone time. The most discerning feature of the building is the colonnade, where each eight sided column consists of four sided ornamental plaques and pendants (Pekada) at the top base. The oriental influence is strong in these compositions as lotus flowers and hansa puttus (two intertwining swans) deck the columns.

St John the Baptist

Most of the existing churches in Jaffna were built or extensively renovated during the British colonial era and embrace many of their architectural features, though renovated and augmented with time. One such structure is St John the Baptist, which follows the Neo Renaissance architectural style. Roman arches decorate the entryways and windows of the edifice. The front of the building resembles a typical Renaissance façade while the front porch is deemed to be a later addition to accommodate the growing number of devotees who attend religious functions. A nave or an aisle runs along the length of the building on both sides, arrayed with countless pillars. The campanile or the bell tower remains a separate structure from that of the main church building. Rose windows and the tower that rises above the altar, towards the back of the church, all reinforces the Neo Renaissance architectural approach.

Our Lady of Refuge

Pointed arches in doorways and windows reveal that this church belongs to the architecture style of Neo Gothic. Pointed arches allow more freedom in design as a doorway or window will not be limited in size. The building plan incorporates a Latin cross—a long centre nave with extending two side arms. A semi-circular apse is situated to the rear of the building while similar to all churches the altar is located right below the main tower of the church.

One more defining feature is that the main tower is built on top of the intersection of the Latin cross. The church includes two bell towers from which one can be called a clock tower as well. Inside of the church is exemplified by an elevated ceiling, built with wood. The congressional seating area arrayed at either side of the central nave stretch the length of the church only to end near the altar and the pulpit.

Clock Tower

Designed by J G Smither, the Clock Tower situated in the midst of the Jaffna Town is a famed landmark built during the British Colonial era. Smither's influence of oriental architecture could be clearly observed in the towering structure. Therefore the architectural style surrounding the Clock Tower could be best described as a Neo Colonial cum Oriental architectural style. Built to commemorate the visit of Albert Edward, Prince of Wales to Sri Lanka in 1875, the design depicts some Moorish architectural influences, especially with the dome on top. Extensively damaged during the 1980's, His Royal Highness Prince of Charles during his visit in 1998 pledged to restore the Clock Tower. As such with the donation of the British Government, the Tower was once again renovated to reflect its former glory and re-opened in 2002.

British Colonial Houses

The city of Jaffna is literarily strewn with houses following the traditions of colonial architecture. Most of the houses seemed to have been built not just following one architectural tradition but by mixing many together. One house located in Kachcheri Nallur Road exhibits many characteristics of Neo Renaissance architecture blended with elements of other architectural styles, particularly Gothic—seen from the front arch. Roman pillars and pilasters—an imitation of a pillar on a wall—ornamented with Corinthian capitals, flamboyant leaf-like decorations, seemed to be a common component. The front part of the building is projected forwards and the windows are slat windows. The unique aspect of such windows are that, if following the Spanish tradition, they are to be kept open during the night to let the cool air in while closed during the day to trap the cool air inside.

Another house situated near Old Park showcased an architectural style that could be best related as belonging to the Baroque style of architecture. Capitals in the pillars are decked with Ionic capitals with spiral designs. The pediment has been broken into three different parts with flamboyant and over the top architectural features.

It is clear that when it comes to houses in Jaffna during the British Era, architects tended to be more adventurous mixing and matching different styles to establish their own signature styles. However, be it houses or public spaces built during the time, the wonders of their architectural beauty still remain.



