

Religions co-exist on St Michael's

Posted on



The Elanthoppu Shakthi Amman Kovil built in 1947

Also known as Polwatte, the area in and around St Michael's Road in Kollupitiya reflects religious diversity and mutual respect.

Words Udeshi Amarasinghe and Swetha Ratnajothi

Photographs Menaka Aravinda and Vishwathan Tharmakulasingham

A busy street that has many shops, offices and also vehicular traffic, St Michael's Road begins from Galle Road. It is an interesting area with residential buildings intermingling with the commercial and many smaller lanes connecting to the main road that completes the locality known as Polwatte.

The area had been named in this manner, as there was a coconut estate before communities settled on the land. With more and more people from around the island migrating to the city, Polwatte became a place where all religions congregated. Wandering along the street starting from the Galle Road side, this becomes more apparent.

Elanthoppu Shakthi Amman Kovil

Distinctive yet modest with its red and yellow stripped wall, Elanthoppu Shakthi Amman Kovil creates a spiritual haven. A single tree stands resolute next to the Kovil, providing shade to those passing by. The gopuram is elaborate with a large golden statue of Goddess Durga taking the prime of place.

The Kovil was built in 1947 and is dedicated to Shakthi Amman – Goddess Durga. The main statue of Goddess Durga is accompanied by the statues of Gods Ganesh and Murugan. The interior of this quaint Kovil is spacious and statues of other Gods of the Hindu pantheon have been placed on the periphery. Though on a busy street, the Kovil is quiet and peaceful, providing spiritual reflection.

The Kovil holds its annual Ther Thiruvilla (festival) in the month of July for ten days. The chariot procession takes place along the streets of Kollupitiya. Poojas are held daily both in the morning and evening. Tuesdays, Fridays and festival days sees many devotees

participating in the poojas.

We continued along our way to reach the round-about from which one direction leads to Temple Trees, the other to Duplication Road and straight, the continuation of St Michael's Road.

Kollupitiya Jumma Masjid



On Fridays, the Kollupitiya Jumma Masjid sees large numbers gathering for prayers

We had reached the pristine white mosque that towers impressively. Having started in 1792 as a small prayer room for Muslims in the area, today the Kollupitiya Jumma Masjid has grown significantly to be a landmark place of worship.

On Fridays, the entire area becomes a gathering of devotees, with Muslims from all walks of life congregating for prayers. Discipline and revered silence could be felt among those present as the *Azhan* (call of prayer) was heard. The Mosque is a three-storey building and can accommodate up to 4,000 devotees. Through- out the day, followers of the Islamic faith worship, all five times of prayer, at the Kollupitiya Jumma Masjid, its hallowed grounds providing solace for those who venture forth. As a prominent Mosque in Sri Lanka, all Islamic heads of state have visited the Masjid during their stay in the country. Further, all diplomats are members of the congregation. A special event held annually is the Muslim religious ceremony for members of the armed forces, especially Sri Lanka Army and Sri Lanka Air Force, which are attended by the commanders.

We proceeded along St Michael's Road. We passed tinkering and repair shops as well as vehicles parked on the side of the road at times limiting the space for others to pass.

St Michael's Church Polwatte



St Michael's Church, Polwatte is also known as the Gal Palliya

Also known as the Gal Palliya in Sinhala, St Michael's Church Polwatte is an iconic place of worship. The magnificent stone structure has a great spiritual presence.

The Church was established in 1887 as St Michael's and All Angel's Church. Having first been a Chapel for St Thomas in a small building a short distance away from the current location, the Chapel had been primarily for the residents of the locality who had migrated from other areas to practice the Christian faith. Following a fire in 1864 that destroyed the Chapel, the new church was built on the current premises, which had previously been a coconut estate. In order to cater to the European community at that time, further improvements were made over the subsequent years and St Thomas' Chapel, Kollupitiya became St Michael's and All Angel's Church.

Today, as you step into the sanctified premises, great devotion can be felt. Service time is a moment of reflection and prayer. The interior of the church is immense yet simple with wooden pews. The large blocks of stone from which the Church was built, stands as a testament of time. Interestingly, Queen Elizabeth II and the Duke of Edinburgh visited and prayed at St Michael's Church on Palm Sunday during their official visit to Sri Lanka in 1954.

Venturing out in deep thought, we made our way on a small road, situated on the opposite side of the Church. Along quiet, narrow lanes passing houses, we journeyed to reach the end of the road that connects to the Duplication Road.

Sri Dharmakeertyaramaya



Sri Dharmakeertyaramaya Temple, a tranquil place in the heart of busy Colombo

Here, the tranquil and spiritual grounds of Sri Dharmakeertyaramaya Temple lay behind the Temple Trees. This modest Temple was established around 1906 by Ven Induruwe Sri Wimalatissa, and it is his students that continued to provide spiritual guidance and the teachings of the Buddha to those of the area over the years. The tenth Maha Nayaka of the Ramanna Nikaya Ven Induruwe Uttarananda, who stayed here from 1972 to 1986 was from this lineage of Buddhist Monks. The present Chief Incumbent is Ven Wetara Mahinda, who was attached to the University of Peradeniya as an academic.

The tranquillity of the Viharaya premises was such that it was quite difficult for one to imagine that they were in the heart of Colombo. The leaves of the Bo tree rustled in the afternoon breeze and the white stupa glistened in the sun. The Image House (*Budu Ge*) was filled with spiritual charm with the serene image of the Buddha and the beautiful murals completed on the walls and the roof several decades ago.

Sri Dharmakeertyaramaya is historically important particularly for the fact that on February 4, 1948, following the Independence of Sri Lanka from the British, the first Sri Lankan Prime Minister, Hon D S Senanayake planted a mango tree at this Temple to signify the importance of the occasion. Premier D S Senanayake had been quite closely associated with the Temple and especially with the then Chief Incumbent Ven Hanchapola Wimalawansa, who happened to be from his hometown. The mango tree planted here on that special day can still be seen with a statue of the Father of the Nation, later placed in its vicinity. It has become customary that the morning Buddhist religious celebrations of the National Day are held at this Temple with the participation of the leaders of the country every year.

The Buddhist Temple, Hindu Kovil, Christian Church and Islamic Mosque all co-exist in this vibrant area along St Michael's Road, Polwatte, Kollupitiya, Colombo, signifying the harmony and understanding between religions.

All religions and communities co-exist here and work peacefully as human beings respecting each other. It is indeed inspirational.