Reminiscences of Independence

Posted on

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It was the time when top hat and tails were in fashion in Ceylon. When there were no tourists, but leisurely travellers. When the Galle Face Hotel was the best known caravanserai east of the Suez for passengers on P & 0 liners, which made Colombo one of their important stops.

On February 4, 1948 Ceylon, as Sri I.anka was then known to the world, kept her own ·tryst with destiny. The Duke of Gloucester, brother of the King of England, was here to represent the British Crown, and a Prime Minister, complete in the top hat and tails of the departing colonial power, raised the new flag of independent Ceylon at Independence Square.

It was a week of unprecedented celebration on the island: parades by the armed services, pageants and tableaux by school children, and grand Independence Balls at the Galle Face Hotel and Grand Oriental Hotel (now Hotel Taprobane) in Colombo, Mount Lavinia Hotel, Queens Hotel in Kandy, the New Oriental Hotel in Galle and the Grand Hotel in cool Nuwara Eliya. Streets decorated with festoons, flags and buntings and public buildings lit up at night in myriad colours; fireworks illuminating the night sky.

That was the first Independence when people lining the streets in thousands waved both the Lion Flag of Ceylon and the Union Jack of Great Britain and cheered the Duke and Duchess of Gloucester. It was independence received when Ceylonese had not yet broken away from the long links with the British, when most Ceylonese were still proud to be part of the British Empire turned Commonwealth.

For many years since that first dawn of independence in 1948, Colombo remained the centre of all Independence commemoration celebrations. The crowds would flock in their thousands to Galle Face Green for the morning parade of the anned services, which was the highlight of the celebrations. They would enjoy watching the brisk, perfect stepping of heavy boots to Western marches, the music of John Philip Sousa and Kenneth J. Alford ringing in their ears.

As the British presence grew distant, nationalistic feelings grew, and the reality of independence was slowly grasped, the military parades gave the lead to cultural pageants. Dancers from the hill and low countries performed in the sweltering sun, and the sound of traditional drums vied for attention with Western brass.

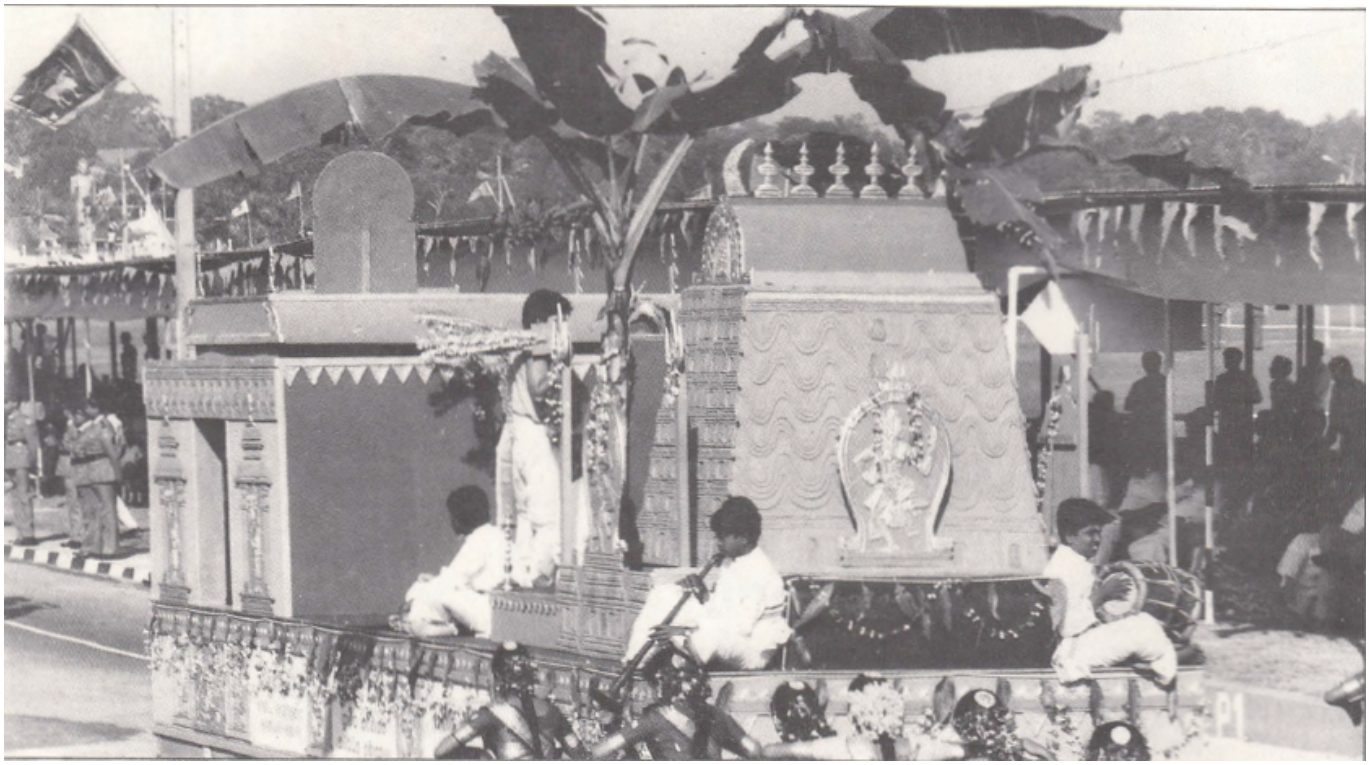
This was still the time when visitors came to Ceylon by steamer, travelled and enjoyed the sun riding in convertibles with their hoods down provided by the Jetty Hiring Car Company. There were hardly any travel agencies then, save for the pioneering Ceylon Tours, with their first luxury coach service, followed soon by the Ebert Silva Touring Company, both still well-known names in the travel trade. Most tour arrangements were done by the shipping agents themselves.

The usual tour for a visitor who came by steamer included a quick spin through Colombo, a visit to a Buddhist temple, watching snake-charmers putting on their show on the kerb, shopping for gems in the Fort, doing some bargaining in the Pettah bazaar, and returning to the ship. Those who could stay longer did a journey by car to Kandy, for lunch at the Queens, more shopping for gems and curios, a visit to the Temple of the Tooth Relic and a drive round the picturesque lake before the

return to Colombo.
Some who could have just one day in Colombo decided to head straight for the Mt. Lavinia beach for a day with the sun and sea, while others who broke journey in Colombo ” did the sights ” of the country in a quiet tour which could have taken anything from three weeks to two months or even more.

That was the time when the late P. A Ediriweera, the founder of Ceylon Tours, went on a promotional visit to the United States and made his sales pitch by asking Americans to come to a country where there was no Coca-Cola. But Ceylon, or Lipton’s Tea Garden, remained too much of a long haul for most Americans.

The style of Independence celebrations changed significantly with the political changes of 1956. Prime Minister Bandaranaike, a great admirer of India’s Jawaharlal Nehru, soon introduced schoolchildren to the Independence celebrations as lead players, as India had already done. His aim, like Nehru’s across the Palk Strait, was to make the new generations of the island realise the meaning and content of independence and be participants in the march of freedom.



One of the floats in the procession for Independence Day Celebrations depicting various aspects of Hindu culture.

Freedom Day parades took on a new colour from this time on, with schools and districts competing in dance and rhythm, and school brass ensembles playing music for marching which were medleys of well-known Western marches in combination with popular Sinhalese songs.

As the participation of schools increased each year; the pageantry took a broader national scope, with the diverse dancers from the various provinces of the island performing under the ancient flags of the old kingdoms and districts of Sri I.anka.

Celebrations in the mid-sixties saw the emphasis shift to progress and development. With the expansion of the State sector in the economy and its direct involvement in industry and trade, the ” Development Float ” was established as a pan of the Independence parade. Each State sector department or corporation attempted to display their achievements before the public with colourful floats varying in style and concept.

Many were papier-mache giants mounted on open trucks. Some used pantomime to convey the message, some paraded a mass of statistics, while others used a chorus of singers to sing out the happy message of profit and progress (where it could be sung).
The emphasis on development and the theme of progress saw the venue of Independence celebrations shift from Colombo. Each year a provincial capital was chosen as the site for the celebrations and the pageantry of Freedom Day went to Kandy, Anuradhapura, Kurunegala, Matara and other provincial centres, where the rural people could share in the festivity of freedom commemoration.

As Ceylon became the Republic of Sri l.anka in the early seventies, reinstating her old name lost to the world under the continued occupation by Portuguese, Dutch and British which lasted 450 years, the emphasis on national culture increased. More and more the dances and music of the people were depicted in the annual celebrations. The songs of reapers, chants of fishermen, and ballets depicting the daily work of tea-pluckers took pride of place. The spit and polish of the armed services and the music of John Philip Sousa took second place as the message of youth and development came to the fore.

With Sri Jayawardanapura-Kotte being established as the new political and administrative capital at the dawn of the eighties, the celebrations now take place at the new promenade beside the House of Parliament and the ancient Diyawanna Oya, a river mentioned in Sinhalese poetry. Here each February 4th a colourful

pageant dominated by schoolchildren marks a re-dedication to keep alive the flame of freedom lit at Independence Square forty years ago.

