Seemamalaka – The Shrine on Beira Lake

Posted on

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Sedately seated amidst the placid waters of Colombo's Beira Lake is an imposing structure of Oriental architecture which lends to its urban surroundings a quiet and serene beauty. The ***Seemamalaka,*** as it is called in Sinhalese, refers to a terraced chapel in a Buddhist temple or monastery which is used by the resident company of monks to recite the code of obligatory rules relating to their spiritual and corporate life. The actual origin of this type of structure dates back more than two thousand years, to the very beginnings of Buddhism, when the rules of conduct and spiritual

exercise of the ***Sangha*** were formulated. The ***Mahavamsa,*** the Great Chronicle of Sri Lanka and the Sinhalese, records that the first ever seemamalaka in this country was built by King Devanampiyatissa, in the 3rd Century B.C. Through the centuries, seemamalakas, which have been part of large Buddhist temples and monastic complexes, have been used for a wide range of Buddhist rituals and spiritual activities, in particular for the ritual of the ***Upasampada*** or higher ordination of Buddhist monks.

The architectural forms of this “chapel” have gone through a long and varied process of historical evolution before assuming the present functional type. However, in its ultimate transformation, it has retained the basic architectural features of a terraced enclosure, with unrestricted accommodation within for the seating of at least 20 to 30 Buddhist monks on the floor.



The statue of the Buddha in meditative pose.

The Seemamalaka at Beira lake, which is part of the Gangarama Temple, Monastery and Educational Complex at Hunupitiya, Monastery Colombo, is situated at the site where a much celebrated seemamalaka was constructed over a century celebrated ago, with the revival of Buddhism in this country. It was built on the advice of Buddhist monks from Burma, who were responsible for the aspects of design.

The former Seemamalaka was a quaint structure built of wood, and supported on wooden stilts planted on the bed of the Beira. It had a low wooden stilts planted on

the bed of the Beira. It had a low wooden roof and just one enclosure, which was approached by a narrow wooden bridge. It was repaired and renovated on many occasions, but collapsed nearly collapsed nearly three decades ago, while a religious activity was in progress.

Several years after this old wooden Seemamalaka collapsed, the building of the present ‘Chapel’ was undertaken by the Rev. Devundara Sri Jinaratana Thero, the Chief Incumbent of the Gangaramaya Temple, which is nearby on Hunupitiya Road.

With the need for a more permanent and lasting Lankan structure, the idea of rebuilding in wood was abandoned. The service of Geoffrey Bawa, S Sri Lankan who is one of the leading names in modern Asian architecture and known for its innovative skills in blending traditional styles with modern functional needs, was obtained. The result is the present structure of beauty, rising above the waterline of Beira Lake about a hundred yards away from the main road to which it is linked by a low walkway.

Those who cross the bridge to the shrine discover a place of rare serenity; a place at once removed from its busy surroundings from which one can watch or let the city go by. One section of the Seemamalaka is a shrine room, with a well-sculpted statue of the Buddha in a seated, meditative pose. There is a bo-tree growing on the premises, providing that special rustle of bo-leaves in the cool breeze wafting across the lake. At the centre of the Seemamalaka is a Buddhist museum, with interesting objects of Buddhist worship, many donated by devotees from Thailand, Burma and Japan.

As one approaches the shrine, there is a beautiful white marble statue of the Buddha in reclining position. In front of this i a large cylised imprint of a footstep, depicting the footstep of the Buddha, which is much venerated by the Buddhists of Sri Lanka. The devotees who come daily to the Seemamalaka drop offerings of coins imo this recessed footprint.

The Seemamalaka. therefore, combines three main symbols of Buddhisl worship: the image of the Compassionate One himself. the bo-tree under which he meditated to gain enlightenment and the footprint of the Buddha.

Tradition holds that the Buddha honoured Sri Lanka with three visits, and on each occasion placed his footprint on a spot in the island. The most famous such place is Adam’s Peak, or Siri Pada, the mountain of the Holy Footprint; the other two places

are the Kelaniya Raja Maha Vihara, and the site of the Abhayagiri Dagaba at Anuradhapura. For many years after the introduction of Buddhism to the country there were no images of the Buddha made. One of the earliest symbols of the Buddha has been a footprint, which is still seen in many ancient temples.

As the sun goes down in Colombo, the gentle lighting of the Seemamalaka gives it a special beauty with its lights being reflected in the surrounding water of the Beira Lake. Soft spots light up the bo-tree. and the statues of the Buddha.

In this gentle light many go about carrying trays of flowers to be offered to the Buddha. Some engage in religious conversation with the monks from the Gangaramaya who are frequently seen there. Of late, many Buddhists in Colombo and the suburbs have made it a practice to bring their children to the Seemamalaka for worship and offerings on the anniversaries of their birthdays.

Ordination ceremonies are not very frequent events, but on such occasions the Seemamalaka becomes the special sanctum of yellow-robbed monks as they go about the age-old rituals involved in admitting new monks to the Order established by the Buddha.

The Gangaramaya Complex and Seemamalaka are associated with the Navam Maha Perehera, the biggest Buddhist cultural event in Colombo which takes place on the night of the Navam Full Moon, usually in February each year. The Navam Perehera is one of the most colourful pageants in the city, with more than a hundred caparisoned elephants participating, showing all the grandeur and pageantry of traditional pereheras in Sri Lanka.

The Perehera, with its many Buddhist monks chanting stanzas from the Buddhist scriptures, the flag and standard bearers and hundreds of drummers and dancers, proceeds along several streets of Colombo on the night of the Navam Full Moon, enhanced by the light of torches burning copra.

The impact the Navam Perehera has on the city’s calendar of cultural events is noticed by the fact that the two roads near the Seemamalaka, one which runs beside Beira Lake on its south and the other which crosses the lake on the north, have names associated with the event. The one on the south is Perehera Mawatha (mawatha means road or street), and the other is Navam Mawatha. To the city dweller in Colombo who finds it increasingly difficult to reach a place of peace and quiet, the Seemamalaka is an undisturbed haven of tranquillity. It offers relaxation

from the pressures of city life and a place of meditation and learning. Seated on the edge of the shrine or on the ornamental wall built around the section of Beira Lake in this area, one could watch the bird life of the lake, especially the large-beaked white pelicans and the long-necked black cormorants.

The story of the Seemamalaka is not complete without that of its special benefactor. It has been the singular generosity of Mr and Mrs S H Moosajee, believers in Islam that helped the Rev Jinaratana Thero in the construction of this beautiful shrine. Mr Moosaje, a prominent businessman had been impressed by the service done by the Rev Jinaratana Thero and the monks of the Gangaramaya in the Hunupitiya area, especially in the education of youth and training them in technical skills. He began associating with the monks of the Gangaramaya and even learning the principles of Buddhism. As a special gesture of appreciation he offered to bear the cost of construction of the Seemamalaka. It is a fine example of the unity of faiths in Sri Lanka.



A cluster of Japanese-style bells on a granite belfry at the Seemamalaka.