St Anne’s Shrine Talawila

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The sacred shrine of St Anne’s in Talawila

From the 1st to the 7th of August over five hundred thousand people are expected to throng a narrow stretch of land on the north western coast of Sri Lanka to celebrate the annual seven day feast of a catholic saint held in a church over 250 years old.

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They come from all walks of life, from all parts of the island, from all diverse paths of varied religions to unite as one in a common sea of humanity; and to collectively kneel in worship with faith in their hearts and a prayer on their lips.

The ‘miracle’ statue of St Anne, mother of the Virgin Mary

They come to what was once a sleepy, sandy, sparsely populated fishing village situated on the Kalpitiya peninsula 100 mile from Colombo. Here lies the sacred ‘miracle’ statute of St. Anne, mother of Virgin Mary and grandmother of Jesus, lodged in a catholic shrine, wedged between the Puttalam lagoon and the deep blue sea. They make this pilgrimage to rejoice in the main annual feast held in honour of the resident saint which begins this month on the 1st and culminates on the 7th Sunday as it has been done every year for over 150 years on the first Sunday in August.

As July ends, suddenly the sandy pallor of the terrain turns into a colourful celebration; and the barrenness of the arid land transforms into vibrant life with hardly a patch of the church’s surrounding area of over 20 acres left unoccupied by pilgrims. Make shift camps are put up with hundreds of tents dotting the landscape as the faithful try to eke out their brief sojourn as best they can on the sea sand. The pilgrims come equipped with cooking utensils and dry rations. Most of them are determined to live rough in honour of the saint and are willing to undergo their hardship as a token of their gratitude for favours granted and the manifold blessings received from Saint Anne, the patron saint of unmarried women and childless couples. During the festival, many will remain rooted here for the entire seven days and will participate in the many religious activities in the build up to the final mass on Sunday,

Throughout the years what has magnetically drawn not only the Catholics but also those of other faiths to plant their tent upon this desolate spot blown by strong winds for the better of the year and not even a hundred yards from the sea, is its long litany of recorded miracles. Strange tales of the inexplicable abound. Some have even attained the status of legends but they are not confined to the hoary past. Many who flock here annually have their own miracle to tell. The rest await the day when they can relate their own.

But that’s not surprising when the origin of the church itself is built on a miracle. Two stories exist of how the church came to rise on the Kalpitiya shoreline. The most popular account relates how a European trader in the 18th century came to be shipwrecked off the Kalpitiya coast. He had been aboard a Portuguese ship dedicated to St. Anne and carrying her wooden statue when it floundered on the rocks off the Kalpitiya coast and sunk. The survivors, including the trader, had miraculously made shore.

About a mile away from the place where they had been swept to shore, they spotted a banyan tree and took refuge under its shade to escape the unbearable heat. Before they left, the captain vowed that should his business prosper, he would return to the banyan tree and build a church dedicated to St. Anne in gratitude for saving them. At Kalpitiya, however, he learnt that there was no hope of salvaging the cargo on board the wreck and he left to make his fortune in Galle where his home and business lay.

A few days later a group of fishermen found the statue of St Anne. It was found lodged in a hollow of the banyan tree. They began to pray to the statue and news soon spread that many of their prayers had been answered. Other Catholics in the area also began to converge upon the banyan tree and the popularity of the statue grew leaps and bounds. Later the European trader, his business having prospered, returned to the banyan tree and built the St. Anne’s Church in fulfillment of his vow.

The second account of the miracle is more interesting. It relates the story of how a poverty stricken Portuguese went in search of employment from Mannar to Colombo. Finding none, he made his way back up the coastal. Travel weary he fell asleep under a big banyan tree which grew on the sea shore at Thalawila. In his sleep he had a vision. He saw an image at the foot of the tree surrounded by lit tapers. He found himself jolted out of his sleep to find the image was actually there, physically present before him. As he fell onto his knees and started to feverishly pray, he was struck by a dazzling light, a’ great awakening light’, to reveal in heavenly glory, the form of St. Anne. She told him that the image in his dream was a depiction of her and commanded him to build a church at that very spot and dedicate it to her. It is believed that the image he found is the same statue that now adorns the church altar.

But the first repository was the hollow of the Banyan tree. Thereafter, a cadjan shelter was built to house the image, followed by a structure of daub and wattle where for eighty years since 1762 the statue remained thus enshrined. But its fame

was spreading. Its miracles were adding up. And the Catholic Church decided to give its official sanction. In 1837, the foundation stone was laid to build a new church. And in 1843, it was completed.

The miracles may have brought the first pioneering pilgrims, even as it still does. But the most endearing and enduring feature that the Thalawila Church dedicated as it is to Saint Anne, Mother of the Virgin Mary, is that for many who come to pray in its sacred environ. It is one of the most spiritual and blessed churches they have ever found on the island.