The Colombo Club

Posted on



A view of the old Galle Face Walk. The premises of the old Colombo Club which now houses the Club Colombo is seen at extreme right.

The quaint elliptical building with colonial architecture and a panel of windows facing the Galle Face Green which has been preserved in the Taj Samudra premises today was once the grandstand when the green was the race course of the city. These races were well attended by the Ceylonese as well as the Europeans. The Ceylonese watched in silence this novel game of the foreigners who gustily cheered on the horses and riders. In Dutch times, on this site was a Dutch seminary and adjoining this a Dutch burial-ground. As horse racing grew in popularity a cadjan thatched oval bungalow was built here for the grandstand. The building was the highest point on the Galle Face green and an ideal site in all Colombo for a good view of the races on the flat piece of ground in front. In the second half of the last century a wave of Bohemianism swept Victorian Britain and the eighteen sixties saw

the formation of some of Britain’s leading clubs. The Colombo Club came into existence just one year later. There is a popular belief that the ‘club’ is an essentially English institution. It is described as a sporting, gambling, political, gastronomic, bibulous, or literary place for gentlemen.

The club which is normally ” leathery, masculine, is different from either the salon or the beerhall it is an English institution”, describes one English writing about the earliest English clubs. Hence it is no surprise that the Colombo Club which was started as a social meeting place for the ruling Europeans was exclusively for them and all natives were barred, even as guests. In 1871 clubs were few and far between and the need for social gatherings and hostel accommodation urged the opening of a club. As the grandstand on the green was not an impressive or commodious building they decided to construct a building which could be used for sporting and other social functions. At their first meeting the members decided to name it The Colombo Club and not the original name they had planned ‘ The Ceylon Club ‘ . They rented the race-stand and public hall and made it their club headquarters. As the inaugural meeting had only fourteen members present it was decided to make a list of the civil service, medical, military, merchant, educational, scientific personnel and invite them to become the pioneer members of the club. The entrance fee was fixed at £ 6 and military officers were exempted from this fee. Thus the Colombo Club was formed for the purpose of establishing and maintaining reading, billiards, card and refreshment rooms in Colombo for the benefit of members.

The club received the seal of official approval on July 15, 1871 when the Governor Sir Hercules Robinson agreed to become both Patron and President. The club chose as its crest an elephant in the centre with a garter round bearing the inscription – ” Colombo Club 1871 ” and surmounted by a crown. The opening of the club coincided with the introduction of gas lighting in Colombo. The Colombo Club, Queen’s House, the Customs building, and the Galle Face Hotel were the first to be illumined with gas. The club was so well patronised in the earliest years of its existence that in 1876 it had Rs. 10,000 to spare for the construction of residential chambers. The bar was of course the main attraction. The club applied to the Government for a block of land adjoining the club’s premises and the Governor supported the application. In 1935 in what amounted to a ” Women’s Lib ” movement of the day the European women insisted on admission to the club. After several unsuccessful attempts, the ladies were allowed during the weekends. The club was a focal point in the celebrations of the Golden Jubilee of Queen Victoria’s

reign held on Galle Face Green in 1887.

During the Second World War the club provided a ” home ” in their backyard, for the war memorial which was standing on the Galle Face Green and feared to attract enemy planes. Later on, it was installed at the Vihara Maha Devi Park The British who established the Colombo . Club, rigidly excluded the Ceylonese from membership or even as admission as guests. In protest, the upper class of Ceylonese reacted, by forming the Orient Club on Darley Road which was a residential area at that time. This club was open to all communities other than Europeans – even as guests. In 1950 the first Prime Minister of Independent Ceylon the honourable D. S. Senanayake requested the club to grant honorary membership to delegates to the Commonwealth Foreign Ministers’ Conference that was to be held in Colombo. The club readily agreed and offered the Prime Minister honorary membership as well. He accepted and continued to be a member of this club till the day he died almost on the doorstep of the club, while riding his horse on Galle Face Green. In 1956 the Government acquired the club building for a Government office and later it was handed over to the Tourist Board which had its headquarters in the residential quarters behind the Hotel School and the Hotel Samudra opened in the main club premises. Colombo Club then moved to Ceylinco House on the 9th floor where a glorious view sought to compensate for the uprooting from a long established venue. From there they moved to Hotel Taprobane overlooking the Harbour and finally to their present niche at the Galadari Meridien where they seemed to have captured the olde world charm of the exclusive Englishman’s club – a place as close to his heart as his castle or home. In 1958 the club accepted Sri Lankan members. Few clubs in Sri Lanka today maintain this atmosphere of the white Rajahs in their invincible glory and stateliness during their powerful years as the conquerors. The Hill Club at Nuwara Eliya and the Colombo Club are two such places who have managed to capture this atmosphere and maintain high standards. In the latest of its many transformations the old Colombo Club premises which was until recently used as the Crystal Ballroom of the Taj Samudra Hotel is now to get back its old name in transposition and will from this month house the Club Colombo, a new casino adding colour to the city’s nightlife.



An artist’s impression of the activity at the old Race Course on Galle Face Green. The thatched roof structure on the left was the first Grandstand.