The long and winding road

Posted on
Hoisting the Sri Lankan flag in 1948

The celebration of the 68th anniversary of Sri Lankan independence on February 4 recalls not only the lowering of the Union Jack in 1948 but also the end of a period spanning 450 years during which Britain, Holland and Portugal ruled over the Island. But how was independence gained? And who were the people that mattered?

Words Richard Boyle


The first Independance Day Parade

Independence Day provides the people of Sri Lanka with the opportunity to reflect on the resistance shown down the ages to intruders and `colonisers. It became a Chinese outpost subsequent to an invasion in which the king was captured; the Cholas from South India conquered the Anuradhapura Kingdom; and in more recent centuries the Europeans imposed their culturally alien colonialism.

However, it’s the independence movement against the British that is most particularly remembered. After Britain had ousted the Dutch in 1795 from the lowland regions, attention turned to complete British dominion over the colony of Ceylon, with the capture of the highland Kingdom of Kandy. This was accomplished

in 1815 by stirring up the aristocracy against the king.

Commemorative Stamps

The Rebellions

In 1817 one of the collaborators, Veera Keppetipola Dissava, was sent by the colonial administration to put a stop to agitation against British rule in the Uva Province. But Keppetipola (Dissava means “district governor”) betrayed the British by launching the Uva Rebellion (also known as Great Rebellion). Kandy and Matale were captured but, ill-planned, the rebellion ultimately failed.

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The Matale Rebellion of 1848 was notable for the recapture of the town by Hennedige Francisco Fernando, alias Veera Puran Appu, and Gongalegoda Banda, who went on to be consecrated king of the Kandyan Kingdom by the chief monk of the Dambulla Viharaya. Inevitably, they succumbed to the British, but these rebels are recognised as National Heroes of Sri Lanka (Jathika Weerayo in Sinhala) in the struggle for independence from British colonial rule.

The Matale Rebellion, achieved without the leadership of the deposed king or his chiefs, whose power was diminished after the Uva uprising, marked a vital shift from the feudal form of anti-colonial revolt. The new band of leaders at Matale comprised ordinary people.

A lone character on the periphery of the independence movement was Utuwankande Sura Saradiel. The ‘hero of Utwan Mountain’ was hailed as the country’s Robin Hood for robbing the rich to give to the poor, but because many of Saradiel’s raids targeted the British and their local supporters, he is considered a rebel rather than a highwayman.



The Resurgence of Buddhism

During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the leaders of the independence movement realised that it was pointless to fight the British militarily. Instead they began to think of eroding colonialism by awakening the subjugated identity of the colonised. The new fight involved campaigning for national resurgence, encouraging traditional values and promoting the revival of Buddhism.

The latter occurred both as a rejection of the Protestant Christian education foisted on certain sectors of society useful to the British, and the unexpected intervention of an outsider, the American Colonel Henry Steel Olcott. Co-founder of the Theosophical Society, he helped establish prestigious Buddhist schools such as Ananda College, Colombo (1886), Dharmaraja College, Kandy (1887), and Mahinda College, Galle (1892).

The major reformer and revivalist of Buddhism in Ceylon was Anagarika Dharmapala, the son of a rich merchant who became a mixture of monk and layman. He was the first *anagarika* – a celibate, full-time worker for Buddhism – of modern times. As a young man Dharmapala assisted Olcott in his work, particularly translation. Later he was one of the founding contributors of non violent Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism.







Demands in the State Council

The first party to demand independence was the Marxist Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP). Its deputies in the State Council after the 1936 general election, National Heroes N M Perera and Philip Gunawardena, called for the abolition of inequalities due to race, caste, creed or gender. They also demanded the replacement of English as the official language with Sinhala and Tamil.







The Second World War

The start of the second world war brought about an intensification of the struggle for independence. There was opposition to the gifting of taxpayers' money to support the British war machine, a wave of strikes in the British-owned plantations, LSSP leaders were arrested, and three Ceylonese soldiers stationed in the Cocos Islands mutinied.

After a wave of post-war strikes in Colombo, an islandwide LSSP-led bus strike, and then two general strikes, the second of which saw the police firing on a strike meeting, it became clear to the British that they had no choice but to grant the Island its independence. A new constitution was introduced and National Hero D.S. Senanayake, who founded the United National Party (UNP) in 1946, formed a coalition after the 1947 general election. It was to Prime Minister Senanayake's government that the British relinquished most of their power.





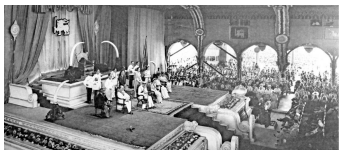
Independence Day, 1948

The Duke of Gloucester, the brother of King George VI, presided over Ceylon's Independence Day. *CeylonIndependence* (1948), the British Pathé newsreel that captured that momentous event, is available to view online today. Beginning with the touch down at what is now Bandaranaike International Airport of a silver-liveried RAF Avro York, the film shows the Duke and Duchess of Gloucester being greeted by the Governor of Ceylon, Sir Henry Monck-Mason Moore.

On the morning of February 4 the Duke of Gloucester was driven, with a vanguard

of mounted soldiers, from Queen’s House to the specially prepared, fabric-roofed Assembly Hall to deliver the Declaration of Independence from a dais overlooked by two sets of elephant tusks. It was hot inside: the select audience busily fanned themselves with programmes, while a vast sea of ordinary Ceylonese surrounding the hall stoically endured the tropical sun to witness this historic occasion.

The fact that Monck-Mason Moore became Governor-General at independence illustrates how the country’s freedom was not yet absolute. Ceylon remained a dominion within the Commonwealth of Nations from 1948 to 1972, when the country’s formal name was changed to the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka.



Independence Day, Now

The main celebration takes place at Sri Jayewardenepura, where, after a series of parades, the President raises the national flag to the accompaniment of the national anthem, *Sri Lanka Matha* (*Mother Sri Lanka*), followed by the traditional lighting of the lamp. But all over the country similar celebrations take place in a spirit of patriotism and national pride, remembering the sacrifices made by so many in the realisation of precious independence.



