

The Pettah Bo Tree

Posted on

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On April 22nd this year, separatist terrorists exploded a bomb at the central bus stand in Colombo's Pettah, a few yards away from the Pettah Bo-Tree. There were many killed and hundreds injured. In a few days after the incident, the Pettah and the precincts of the Bo-Tree returned to normal and regained its usual daily bustle of colourful activity. In July this year President J.R. Jayawardene signed an accord with Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi of India, ending the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka and restoring peace to the island. It also gave new life to the Pettah, with more produce coming in from the North and East for distribution to other parts of the country and more goods from other regions going through the Pettah to their distant destinations.

In this article Theja Weeratne writes about the history of the Bo-Tree and the life that goes on around it every day.



Long before the Ficus Religiosa became significant as a religious symbol to Buddhists, it was known as the council tree in India.

It is likely to have occupied a most central position in the earliest villages of the Vedic India – the Vedas being the earliest records of Aryan Literature. The village householders met under its shade and nominated the Panchayat – the Council of Five. It was the debating place where the elders discussed their common problems. So it is not by mere chance that the Siddhartha Gautama chose the Bo-tree to sit under in his final determined effort to attain Nibbana. Since then the tree has come to be an inseparable part of the Buddhist tradition and is one of the three major elements included within a Buddhist temple. The other two being a stupa and a housed Buddha image.

Moreover, the shape of its leaf has become a motif of decoration in Buddhist art. The Sri Lankan flag has Bo leaves in the four corners representing the predominant religion – Buddhism. Buddhists all over the world seek the peace and tranquility

under the spreading branches and find it a haven for meditation, with the wind rustling the shiny heart shaped leaves making soothing music. Devotees deck the tree with prayer flags and drape the trunk with white cloth. They make special worship known as Bodhi – Pooja, bathing the tree piously with perfumed water and milk. Since the sapling of the great Bo-tree at Buddha Gaya was brought to the island in 272 B.C. Buddhists have made all Bo-trees objects of veneration. In Pettah, the heart of the city of Colombo, at the head of the Central Bus Station where Olcott Mawatha meets Gas Works Street (renamed Bodhiraja Mawatha) today stands such a tree. This tree is believed to have stood on the bund of the Beira lake before parts of it had been filled up for development and construction.



Good luck bazaar. There are many lottery ticket sellers near the pettah Bo-tree.
Photo : Fred R Malvenn

In 1521, a Portuguese Captain Lopo de Brito recommended the damming of the stream in the Grandpass area, which was a overflow of the Kelani river to form a lake – the Beira lake, as a part of the city's defences with 'champongs' sailing the lake on guard. The crowds that jostle into the Pettah today would never believe that it was once a fashionable and leisured residential area. The Burghers of Colombo occupied the old colonial Dutch houses, some with luxuriant gardens and others one storeyed villas with their roof strung from a common ridge. Pettah was the nucleus around which Colombo grew. it was the domain of Asiatic sojourners drawn by trade. Over the last century it has become a slummy commercial sector crowded with shops and warehouses. The Dutch called the area 'Oude Stad' meaning 'old town'. It was re-christened Pettah in the early British era following as Indian practice of referring to an extra-mural suburb of a British fortress the 'Pettai'. The junction where the Bo-tree is in Pettah is known as the Bogaha Handiya (Sinhalese – Bo-tree-junction).

The very first devotees had been the rickshaw pullers of the area. Before their daily trek with the rickshaws, they faithfully came to worship at the little shrine and tied a Pandura (a votive coin wrapped in a piece of cloth). At the first attempt to hew the tree down, Buddhist monks jealously guarding their holy places, opposed the Government strongly. Subsequently, when a second attempt was made, a Tamil merchant of the neighbourhood had come forward to rescue it. Over the years all

traders in the area, regardless of their religions or nationality, took it upon themselves to protect and venerate this tree. Five years ago, with money collected from the tills at the shrine, reverently donated by the never ending stream of people passing by,, a three storeyed building was constructed round it. It was designed in such a way, protecting the tree, yet enabling every branch to spread out and grow in its own direction. This building has a belfry at one entrance. The ground floor houses the shrine room with a wall right round the trunk of the tree with recesses giving access for worship and bathing of the tree. An alcove on the wall has a white marble Buddha statue. There are seven shrines devoted to the Hindu and Sinhala folk deities – Vibishana,, Eashwara. Skanda, Vishnu, Pattini, Saman and Gambara (deities protecting the different areas and aspects of the island.)

The Vessantara Jataka (the story of an earlier incarnation of Buddha as a Bodhisatva or seeker of enlightenment) is depicted in the murals on the wall. The second storey of this building has two flights of steps from the outside reaching a shrine room with a large gold painted seated Buddha statue. The top story accommodates the Suvisi Vivarana Chaitya with twenty-four miniature Buddha statues embedded at the base of the chaitya.-Pettah being the centre of Colombo's bazaar district and the key point of the wholesale trade in consumer goods, is easily the busiest place in the city. The Bo-tree is situated almost at the heart of this vortex of life and activity, where pavement hawkers cry out drawing attention to trinkets and fancy goods, office workers pass through in hurried shopping rounds, labourers push their loaded handcarts and trolleys or carry packed gunny bags on their bare backs, and myriad lines of traffic blend into a colourful scene of an oriental metropolis. The precincts of the Pettah Bo-tree is a vibrant contrast of many aspects of city life. While amplifiers at the shrine broadcast Buddhist religious chants and the bus and train travellers pause to pray or offer a flower to the Buddha, the smaller amplifiers and hailers of numerous sweep ticket sellers offer instant luck with just a scratch on a ticket. Fruit vendors offer bargains in delicious Sri Lankan mangoes or plantains or imported apples and grapes. The sound of popular sinhalese and Hindi songs from the stands of lottery ticket sellers mingle with the clink of metal spoons on glass as sellers of sherberts and cool drinks attract customers. Little children refuse to give in to the urging on of parents and make stubborn demands for plastic toys on the pavement and a wayside musician will sing an old favourite in expectation of a few coins thrown in appreciation. Amidst all this din and that of the traffic sound, with the Fort Railway Station just a few minutes walk away and the bus stand almost under its shelter, the pettah bo-tree gives one the impression of a large green umbrella

unfurled in the heart of the city, giving its shelter to those from a hundred walks of life and more.



Fruit sellers carry on a brisk trade near the Bo-tree



The Pettah Bo-tree is situated at one end of this busy street, in Colombo's oldest shopping centre. Photo: Ceylon Tourist Board.