# Vihara Maha Devi Park: Garden in the ‘Garden City’

Posted on

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The gold painted statue of the seated Buddha at the entrance to the Vihara Maha Devi Park.

It was not far back that Colombo was described by many as the “Garden City of the East.” Even in the late nineteen sixties many of the city’s streets were lined with beautiful flowering trees, which gave the city the ambience of a large garden. This is today confined to a few streets of Colombo Seven, the posh residential quarter. While most of the trees that line Colombo’s avenues have given way to the axe and

bulldozer marking the rise in urban population, the Vihara Maha Devi Park and its environs, situated in Colombo’s fashionable Cinnamon Gardens area, still retains more than a touch of the flavour of the old Garden City. “Where is the Cinnamon?” a curious visitor may well ask, when a Sri Lankan guide speaks of Cinnamon Gardens. The Cinnamon is certainly no more. But the spice of the area is still seen in its well manicured lawns, streets with sheltering trees and the many old houses of character in construction, seen as one drives or walks along in the area. The truth is the area derived its name from the largest remaining Cinnamon plantation in the Colombo area, which had virtually turned into a Cinnamon Jungle (Sinhalese: Kurundu Kelle) at the turn of the century. The Vihara Maha. Devi Park, the city’s largest park, is what is left of the old Cinnamon plantation which at one stage extended to within half a mile from the Colombo Fort. It is situated amidst the best laid roads and avenues of the city such as Albert Crescent, Edinburgh Crescent, Guildford Crescent, Sir Marcus Fernando Mawatha, Ananda Coomaraswamy Mawatha and Dharmapala Mawatha-where the upper crust of Colombo society have their homes.

As was to be expected during the days of British rule when the Park was established, its original name was not that of a Sri Lankan queen. It was named Victoria Park, after Queen Victoria, in honour of the queen who reigned over the empire, over which the sun never set. Then, as now, it was a place of pleasant walks in the cool of spreading trees, a delightful escape from the urban press and the tiring humidity of Fort and Slave Island. A place to pause on a park bench and enjoy the seen t of flowers and bird songs in the middle of a city.

Time was when at the Edinburgh Crescent end of the Park there was a Garden Club which was established “for the amusement and recreation of a limited circle of friends, and for the making and maintenance, for their use, of lawn tennis and other recreation grounds.” The club maintained 4 Croquet courts and 16 Tennis courts, covering in all 10 acres of land. It had a membership of 300 persons, mainly European. The entire area of the Park had an approximate area of 80 acres.

Records of the city show that at one time the area of the Vihara Maha Devi Park was a site for duels among Europeans who preferred the direct approach to settling issues of personal pride. The best known of such duels was between the then Chief Justice, Sir Charles Marshall, and the General Officer Commanding the Troops, Sir John Wilson. The cause of the duel was certain remarks made in a speech in the Legislative Council by Sir John Wilson which were resented by the Chief Justice, who was at the time the legal member of the Council, and certain unparliamentary com-

ments about Sir John Wilson later made in his absence by the Chief Justice.

On January 7, 1836, a letter appeared in the “Colombo Observer” from a certain Captain Macready of the 30th Regiment, which stated for the general information that Sir John Wilson had received full satisfaction from Sir Charles Marshall for the expressions, personally offensive, delivered at the Legislative Council. The use of the Cinnamon Plantation as a duelling ground did not last long. It was converted into parkland and became a place of popular relaxation for city residents. In the course of time, the sports and recreational sections of the park have been severed from the main park. One finds the Sri Lanka Lawn Tennis Association situated a little away from the park, and the Sinhalese Sports Club, which was at one end, now situated further away at Maitland Place. It was barely a quarter century ago that the park was renamed after Vihara Maha Devi, the best know queen of Sri Lanka. The renaming took place after the political changes in 1956 which saw a rise in Sinhalese nationalism.

Vihara Maha Devi, whose statue is seen in the park facing the entrance from Dharmapala Mawatha near the lotus shaped pool, was the mother of King Dutugemunu, who unified the country in the lst century B C., defeating the Chola invaders from South India who had captured the ancient capital of Anuradhapura. He was the builder of the great Buddhist dagaba, the Ru wanveliseya, and is respected as much for his contribution towards the furtherance and protection of Buddhism, as for his martial prowess. Tradition and the records of ancient chronicles attribute much of the credit for Dutugemunu’s success to his mother, Vihara Maha Devi, who encouraged him in his concern for the Buddhist religion, and the unity of Sri Lanka. Another reason for renaming the park was the fact that Vihara Maha Devi was a princess from Kelaniya, the ancient royal seat beyond the Kelani River, which flows by what is Colombo today.

The Vihara Maha Devi Park is a complex of several attractions. There are the well-laid out pathways, with neatly tended flowering shrubs and the fountains playing on evenings and holidays. There are the huge tropical trees, some preserved and some planted with an eye for their season of florescence which ensures that the park gives the impression of being in perennial bloom.

At one end of the park is the terraced open-air theatre, where cultural performances by many Sri Lankan and foreign troupes are held, as are frequent weekend fund raising fairs and carnivals, which form and a variety of birds, which bring delight to children who frequent the park. Almost at the centre of the park is a narrow winding

path running through a fernery and some dense tropical flora, aptly named by visitors as Lovers’ Lane, for the quiet and privacy it affords to many young couples who seek refuge in the park.

For tree lovers the park is a delight in discovery. Among the fascinating trees here is the Cannon Ball Tree (Couroupita quianensis; popularly called a Sal tree in Sinhalese, and Nagalingam in Tamil), a huge tree with beautiful flowers with thick petals in a reddish pink hue, and a captivating scent. The flower is considered special by Buddhists for the fragrance, and for its inner core which curiously resembles a miniature white dagaba, sheltered under a large petal. It is much sought after for offerings at Buddhist temples. The flower is noticed all the way up the tree trunk, as are the cannon ball like fruits, from which the tree gets its name. There is also the leguminosae-pterocarpus Indicus- a native of India, Malaysia and China, which spreads its branches over a large area and offers good support for a large tree-house which is “must” in the itinerary of children.

The nooks and crannies of its massive root network also provides a hideout for children in a dream world of hide and seek, and for many lovers who hide and seek each other. The park is a firm favourite of families seeking relaxation and an inexpensive outing on holiday. There is plenty to do here for children, with parents pushing the little ones on the many see-saws, and the older children riding high on swings or chuting down on mat-slides, and the still bigger ones trying out their muscles and reflexes on cross-bars.

A particular favourite of both parents and children is the”Little Train.” A recent introduction to the park, this is a narrow gauge rail, of the type that still runs from Colombo Fort to Homagama on the Kelani Valley line. The small engine pulls its brightly coloured buggies in an arc from one end of the park is another, honking a warning of slow progress as it proceeds. Of wide green lawns the park has plenty and also of monuments. Apart from the statue of Vihara Maha Devi facing the northern boundary of the park and Dharmapala Mawatha, there is the statue of Anagarika Dharmapala, patriot and Buddhist revivalist at the corner nearer Lipton Circus on the Dharmapala Mawatha side: and at the junction of Kannangara Mawatha and FR Senanayake Mawatha is the statue of F R Senanayake, another patriot who campaigned for freedom from British rule. The many columned monument on the western side of the park is the War Memorial, commemorating the dead of two World Wars. It was sited at Galle Face Green, but dismantled stone by stone at the outbreak of hostilities in the Second World War, and later rebuilt here in memory of the dead of both wars. At the two ends of the western boundary

are monuments commemorating 50 years each of the Boy Scout and Girl Guide movements, which are well rooted in the country. Across the well-shaded road which runs by one boundary-Ananda Coomaraswamy Mawatha-is the National Art Gallery, with regular exhibitions of the work of Sri Lankan artists.The Mahaweli Centre, which has an exhibition of aspects of the huge Mahaweli Development Scheme, is situated next to the Museum of Natural History, leading on to the National Museum. The John de Silva Memorial Theatre behind the Art Gallery is a popular venue for Sinhala Theatre. No mention of Vihara Maha Devi Park and its environs would be complete without mention of the Colombo Town Hall, the imposing completely white building which faces across F.R. Senanayake Mawatha. This is the hub of the city administration in Colombo, and when built in 1927 won an award for its beautifully proportioned architecture. With its Gothic columns, and capitol-like dome, it still remains one of the best buildings in the city. Facing Town Hall as you enter the park from its main entrance, is a gold painted statue of the Buddha seated in meditative posture.

The statue was unveiled in 1962. It was erected to mark the 2500th anniversary of Buddhism, which was celebrated in 1957. The view of the Town Hall from the Vihara Maha Devi Park has always been a very imposing one, more so when the fountains at the centre of the park’s main walk are switched on. It remains the picture postcard image of the park, which captures the beauty of the park’s walkways and the Town Hall at the distance.

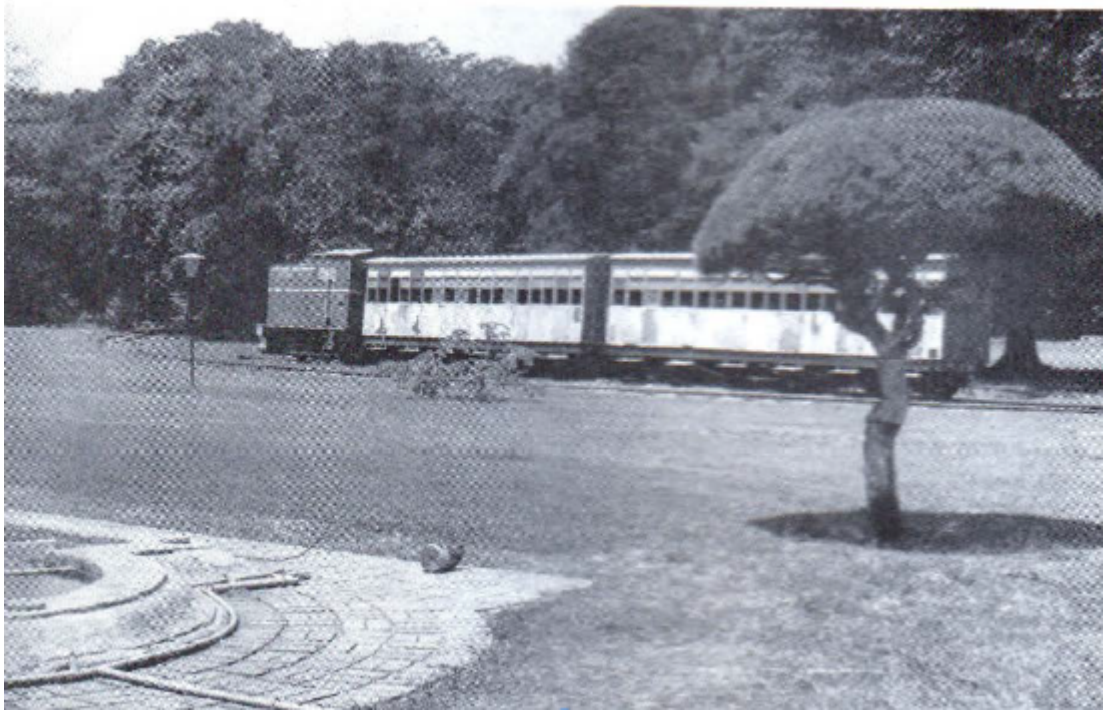
There is a story told of how an imaginative Sri Lankan student who was studying in London had used a photograph of the Town Hall taken from this angle to out do two friends, one English and the other Indian, who were bragging about the palatial proportions of their homes. The English student had shown a Medieval Castle as his home, and the Indian had shown a photograph of a Maharajah’s palace as his home Undaunted, the Sri Lankan student had stunned them into silence by showing a photograph of the Town Hall, taken from the Vihara Maha Devi Park. He had said the Town Hall was his home and the park its garden. It is certainly is the best laid garden in all of Colombo.



Statue of Vihara Maha Devi at the park.



The tree-house at the Park, a favourite place for the many children who come here.



The kiddies’ train which is a special attraction at the Park.

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