When a King Reigned in Colombo

Posted on

Royal Day Recalled by Maureen Seneviratne



The Portuguese buildings occupied the area of the President' House.

Colombo, a royal city? Yes, it was once, even if many of its citizens have forgotten that a king did reign in Colombo.
We have to go back to the 16th century to discover him. His name was impressive enough: King Don Juan Dharmapala and he became king in 1551. Yet this very name is a paradox and a symbol of the tortured history of his time.

King Don Juan Dharmapala was a tragic figure who ruled in Colombo from 1562 until 1597. He has been described by historian S. G. Perera in A History of Ceylon as " ... the most pathetic figure in Ceylon's history who brought trouble on himself and all connected with him."

An effigy in miniature of Dharmapala as the then King's heir made in gold, was crowned in Lisbon by John III of Portugal in the presence of all the nobles of that country on March 12, 1543. The golden statue had been taken to Portugal at the request of the king's grandfather, King Bhuvenika Bahu of Kotte. This extraordinary event was a consequence of the old king's determination to set aside all the rules of inheritance traditional to Sri Lanka and place his grandson on the throne.

Bhuvenika Bahu had no legitimate sons, only a much loved daughter, Samudra Devi. His brother was entitled to the succession but he had long been at war with him, using the Portuguese ho had appeared in Colombo harbour in 1505 against his own kin. It was the Portuguese who developed the tiny harbour town into a major city. They had other possessions on the coast of Lanka but Colombo, within easy sailing distance for the East India fleet from the great harbour of Goa in India, was their preference. In return for the monopoly of the cinnamon trade, which had lured them to these shores, they gave their military support to the king of Kotte.

Little of the once "royal" city of Colombo in Portuguese times exists today. Much of it was pulled down by the Dutch and later by the British. Yet according to the travellers of those times and to the writers who were Portuguese themselves, the city was elegantly Espanic in design and architecture. King Don Juan Dharmapala's palace stood where the Republic Square in the Fort stands today. It was part of a Franciscan monastic complex consisting of a huge church ("the finest m Asia"), office and secular buildings, a hall of audience, a meeting room for the ruling clique, monastic cells, and private rooms for the king and his family. The buildings occupied an area which also encompasses the present President's House. Outside

was a great square or quadrangle. The Franciscan m1ss1onaries were the first Roman Catholic order to visit Sri Lanka and find a place for themselves in the court of Dharmapala’s grandfather in Kotte, as well as in hou es they built for the monks and priests in Colombo. Young Dharmapala’s tutors were erudite Franci cans and he was exposed to their influence from a very early age. They built and maintained many of the schools and colleges which were establi hed in Colombo.



The old township extended to Kayman·s Gate.

After the death of King Bhuvenika Babu in mysterious circumstances (he was shot by one of his Portuguese guards), Dharmapala, supported by the Portuguese, was acclaimed and crowned King of Lanka, even if it was to be an empty title. At the same time, his granduncle and long-time enemy, Mayadunne of Sitawaka, also proclaimed his right to kingship. This naturally led to war. When his granduncle marched upon Kotte, the young king’s Portuguese guardians, given the power by his royal forebear, resisted. Mayadunne was forced to withdraw. He remained a

bitter foe and as long as he lived, the threat to Kotte remained.

On orders from Goa, Sri Jayawardhana Pura Kotte was abandoned and King Dharmapala and his nobles were removed to Colombo. From that year, 1562, Colombo has remained the capital city of Sri Lanka, even if “royal” for only few decades. King Dharmapala and his queen had already converted to Roman Catholicism, taking the names of the king and queen of Portugal, Don Juan and Dona Catherina. “Colombo, which was a Portuguese fort with the rights and privileges of a Portuguese city and governed by a Portuguese captain, became the refuge of (this) king and his metropolis. The city accordingly enlarged to include the old township of the modern Pettah extending to what is now Kaymans Gate. On the south it was protected by a stretch of swampy land periodically submerged by the floods of the Kelani River. The swamp was turned into a lake which effectively prevented attacks from that side.” (S.G.Perera History of Ceylon). What remains of that lake is what we call Beira today.

From writing6 of that time, most of them by Portuguese friars, military men and public officials, it seems that King Don Juan Dharmapala, although holding court with great dignity in Colombo, was a tool in the hands of his Portuguese masters. They treated him with immense public regard and esteem but privately in a very casual manner, even with holding grants until he was almost forced to beg.

Letters written by him to the King of Portugal and even to the Pope in Rome bear witness to his sorrowful plight. All through his career he merely reigned while the Portuguese strutted around him and despotically ruled his domain.

One of the most extraordinary acts on his part was the drawing up of a “Donation” or “Deed of Gift” of the sovereign isle of Sri Lanka to the Portuguese. In other words, as he had no heir (inspite of three marriages), he gave away his royal inheritance to the alien invaders. Actually, history has recorded the loyalty and love his subjects bore for their Maha Bandara as he was known to them. And Peri ya Pandaram as the Portuguese interpreted the title in their allusions to him did keep a grandeur of sorts in his restricted court. There, Portuguese Christian and Sinhalese-Buddhist customs must have mingled in a most bizarre and fascinating fashion.

The dress, the music, the conversation, the food served, the liquors drunk, the games played, were all a combination of Porto-Sinhala. If the monuments of that time have mostly disappeared from the Colombo of today, a number of those invisible factors remain. They remind those with a high sensitivity to past events,

that royal Colombo is not altogether dead, not totally forgotten.



The Portuguese developed the tiny harbour town in to a major city.