

Quarterly Tours – No. 16



National Trust – Sri Lanka

27th November 2010

Compiled by Nilan Cooray

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Quarterly Tours – Saturday, 27th November 2010.

Programme

0700 hrs.	Leave PGIAR
0745 - 0815 hrs.	Arrive at Maturajawela Visitor Centre and the introductory lecture on the Maturajawela Marshes
0815 - 1015 hrs.	Boat ride along the Hamilton Canal across the Marsh and to the Negombo lagoon
1030 – 1100 hrs.	Visit Pamunugama Church and the passion play stage
1115 – 1145 hrs.	Visit Bopitiya Church
1200 – 1300 hrs.	Visit Leprosy Hospital at Hendala
1315 – 1515 hrs.	Lunch at Pegasus Reef Hotel
1530 – 1600 hrs.	Visit Palliyawatte Church
1630 – 1700 hrs.	Visit St. James Church, Mutwal
1715 – 1745 hrs.	Visit St Lucia's Cathedral, Kotahena
1830 – 1945 hrs.	Visit Chitrasena School of Dancing and the Dance performance
2000 hrs.	Arrive PGIAR

Mthurajawela Marshes

In order to establish an inland link between the stations in Colombo and Negombo, the Portuguese in the early decades of the 16th century commenced the construction of an inland waterway connecting the Kelani Ganga with the lagoon of Negombo across a fertile wetland originally producing a type of rice in the shape of pearls (thus the name *Mthurajawela*). However, it was the Dutch who completed the project during their occupation in Sri Lanka's Maritime Provinces. The effect of the opening of this canal was considered to be disastrous in terms of the rice cultivation as the land was submerged with salt water from the Negombo lagoon. Continuous mixing of water within the wetland with the seawater that is brought daily due to high tide over several centuries, has ultimately led to a brackish, integrated marshy coastal ecosystem that is biologically diverse and teeming with life.

Covering an area of approximately 6,000 ha inclusive of the Negombo lagoon, Mthurajawela is at present, the largest saline coastal peat bog in Sri Lanka, located on the west coast between Negombo Lagoon and Kelani River. The northern section of the marsh covering an area of 1,777ha was declared a sanctuary in July 1996 under the Fauna & Flora Protection Ordinance. A variety of mangroves and other types of flora including medicinal plants are found in the marshes alongside numerous types of birds, butterflies and fish, some of which are endemic. Crocodiles and monitor lizards that are native to Sri Lanka and several varieties of migrant birds (during the period from September to February) could also be seen.



The Mutturajawela Visitor Centre, originally established by the Central Environmental Authority with technical and financial assistance from the Dutch Government, as a component of a project to preserve the Marshes is at present run as a community based activity to give an introduction to the visitors of the significance of the Mutturajawela Marshes and to provide opportunities to feel the charm of nature in its most pristine form through guided tours. This Centre is located on the banks of the Hamilton Canal off Bopitiya Junction. Its profit is used for the conservation of flora and fauna of the Marshes and also for the preservation of the socio-economic traditions of the communities associated with the Marshes.

The visit to the Centre will enlighten the tour group of the National Trust on the ecological and cultural aspects of the Mutturajawela Marshes through a documentary movie. A

guided tour by boat along the Hamilton canal across the Marshes to the Negombo lagoon and back, will present the rich diversity of the wetland plant and animal life, as well as the glimpse of the fisherman at work from their dugout canoes. The 15km boat ride will take about 2 hours.

Leprosy Hospital at Hendala

Of all the diseases that continue to plague humanity, leprosy has the most notorious history as a cause of deformity, disability, loathing and fear. The English word LEPROSY is derived from the Greek LAPROS (indicating a scaly disorder of the skin). The disease is anecdotally mentioned in the Holy Bible. From ancient times until the recent past, the disease was considered both highly contagious and impossible to cure. Victims were universally shunned, their physical suffering compounded by the misery of being treated as social outcasts. During the Middle Ages in Europe ‘lepers’ were the subject of ridicule and disgust. They had to carry a bell wherever they went. Everyone who heard the bell moved far away to avoid any contact with ‘lepers’. Even at the medical level the sole option for control was the isolation of patients in colonies or leprosaria. Though Dapsone Monotherapy was started in late 1940’s segregation was the main mode of control carried out till the early 1970s.

Before the advent of the Europeans in the 16th century, leprosy was never heard of in the Island and it is believed that this disease came along with the arrival of the Portuguese. (Sinhalese called leprosy as *parangi rogaya*, the Portuguese disease).

In 1685 the Dutch Political Council in the Island noted that the disease was spreading among women married to Portuguese and their children and that this could spread to Dutch nationals who were relatively free from leprosy. Around 1691, special Dutch commissioners recommended that afflicted persons should be housed outside the city of Colombo. The council requested the Dutch Governor in Batavia (Indonesia) to construct an asylum in the Island, and that affected persons be prohibited to be on public roads or in public company; and, that those who contravened this order be banished to Tuticorin in India and not be permitted to return.



By the end of the 17th century leprosy was prevalent among considerable number of Dutch occupants and other European decedents as well as local inhabitants. It is reported that the Dutch Surgeon Siebertsz also

contracted the disease in 1694. The Dutch administration, therefore, commenced the construction of a leprosy asylum in 1701 on the south bank of the Kelani River (near its outlet), 5 km north of Colombo in the then unpopulated area of Handela. The Leprosy Asylum cum Hospital was opened by the Dutch in 1708 and all the patients who had contracted the disease were banished for life to this location. It is said that this is the first formal leprosy hospital to be established in South Asia and also the first civil (non-military) hospital to be established in colonial Sri Lanka. Some even claim that this is the longest functioning leprosy hospital in the world, which

commemorated 300 years of its continued service to humankind, in the year 2008.



The early British architectural characteristics of the present buildings at the hospital suggest that its buildings have undergone a major renovation during the British occupation of the Island. However, the building facing the original approach to the hospital across the Kelani River (probably functioned as the reception hall) still has the date 1708 carved on the decorated stone slab fixed on to the wall above its entrance. The ground plan of the hospital was published in the *Edinburgh Medical and Surgical Journal* in 1842. Apart from the wards and administrative buildings, the service buildings such as the laundry and the kitchen are still in use. The washing machine installed at the laundry is said to be the oldest functioning machine of its kind in the country. Although not functioning at present, the prison cells and the incinerator for the medical waste all still exist. The Leprosy Hospital therefore, offers valuable information for the study on hospital planning and architecture of the early period of medical care in the region. The hospital also has a Roman Catholic chapel of



historical and architectural significance and a Buddhist *vihara*. The two carriages constructed out of timber and used for the movement of dead bodies are notable artifacts of antiquarian and aesthetic significance that have been preserved so far.

In 1920, the total number of inmates were around 1000, but at present, due to the introduction of MDT in 1982 as a cure for the disease, the number has dwindled to a mere 47. Admission to the Leper Hospital has also been completely stopped at present. Although the 47 patients are now fully recovered and there is no leprosy germ in them, they still suffer from various disabilities as a result of the disease. On the other hand, there are other factors such as the non existence of relatives that make them difficult to re-join society. Since most of these patients have been admitted against their will, the Government policy as practiced in other countries is to look after the ex-patients for the rest of their life.

Due to the small number of inmates at the hospital, most of the buildings are underutilized or neglected. Lack of maintenance has also contributed negatively for the sustainable use of the structures of this hospital. On the other hand, due to the introduction of MDT, the country no longer needs a Leprosy Hospital, and there are several ideas among the policy makers with regard to the future of this institution. As from a heritage point of view it is important to use this resource for a sustainable function through adaptive re-use to preserve the history and built characteristics of this place.

Catholic Architectural Tradition

With the liberal policy adopted by the British colonial rule on religious practices, a series of grand churches were built particularly by the Roman Catholic Church in the latter part of the 19th century. The architecture of these churches favored the Italian Baroque style. At the same time the existing churches of the old Catholic missions were also re-built following the grandiose Baroque style. Parallel to these, modest churches combining all that was best in the island's architectural traditions, these continued to be built by local communities. All these three types of churches were built largely along the Island's coastal belt, and the stretch from Colombo up to Puttalam provides the best representation of this tradition and there is a high concentration of such examples from Colombo to Negombo.

Pamunugama Church and the Passion Play Stage



Located at Pamunugama, the St. Joseph's Church was established in 1872. This is one of the best representations of a church re-built outside a city following the grandiose Italian Baroque style introduced to the Island during the latter part of the 19th century. Its masonry dome over the central altar is unique and it dominates the hierarchical architectural composition of the church complex. The front façade however, is a variant of the conventional Italian Baroque style, and it is



spectacular and grand in the surrounding villagescape, as it is so elegantly composed of orchestrated columns, pediments, arches, gables, decorative vases, statues, bells, etc. The nave behind the front façade is quite large in terms of its spatial volume with the organ loft located immediately behind the front facade. The wide verandah with low eaves is a design element adopted from the native architectural tradition which flanks the sides of the nave and continues behind the central unit. This verandah, which protects the congregation from glare and torrential rain, is also hidden behind the elaborated front façade.

The church possesses perhaps, one of the two examples of permanent “Passion Play” stages or *Pasku Maduvas* found in Sri Lanka (the other being associated with the church at Pitipana located north of the same area). These structures have been constructed to a distinctive style of their own, where the *Pasku Maduva* is located along the principal axis of the church, facing the façade of the main edifice with sufficient room for a gathering of near ten thousand people to witness the passion



play enacted traditionally every second year. The passion play stage is a roofed building with two green rooms on either side meant for the male and female actors to change and await their turn for the performance. In front of this

enclosure is a walled courtyard, which space provides for the wooden platform to be installed prior to any stage performance with an elevation of around seven feet with head clearance underneath. It is said that the two churches share the same Passion Players performing the Way of the Cross every alternate year.

Churches at Bopitiya and Palliyawatte



Interior, Bopitiya Church



Exterior, Palliyawatte Church

These two churches roughly fall in to the third type, where the construction was initiated by the respective local communities. Compared to the architectural characteristics of Pamunugama

Church, these are of a modest scale. However, their scale is quite adequate to surprise any visitor to these villages and seeing the magnificence of the edifices when viewed suddenly and unexpectedly through the coconut trees as one travels along the coastal roads. The spatial volumes of the naves of these churches are small, when compared to their facades. Bopitiya was built in 1891 and dedicated to St. Nicholas, and the church faces the sea while that of Palliyawatte, dedicated to St. Mary faces away from the sea.

St. James Church, Mutwal



The construction work of the present church commenced in 1866 and was completed in 1872. It is believed that there was a small church at the site originally before the erection of the present church. It is a massive structure of imposing pillars. This majestic church which is located on an elevated site and can even be seen as an imposing edifice in the distant horizon of Colombo when viewed from the sea. The belfry was constructed in 1887, along with a clock tower. There are four bells hung up in this tower where the main bell was originally brought from Spain. This belfry which is the tallest of its kind

in Sri Lanka was constructed in the true style of Italian Baroque.

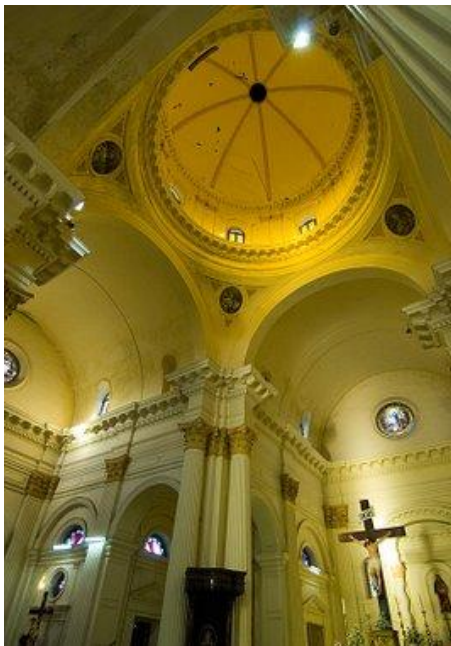
The grand interior of the church has a ceiling with paintings of Jesus Christ and the assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary. These were painted by the late Mr. Hendricus between 1913 and 1918 years, no doubt, influenced by the concepts of the master Michael Angelo. However, at present, the paintings have survived on either ends of the nave.

St. Lucia's Cathedral at Kotahena



Constructed on the site of an ancient church, this is the finest example of Italian Baroque style in Sri Lanka in a series of grand churches built throughout the Island by the Roman Catholic Church in the latter half of the 19th century. The construction of the present structure commenced in 1873 by an

Italian architect specially brought to Colombo, Fr. Stanislaus Tabarrani. Construction work was completed in 1878 and became the cathedral church of the vicariate of Colombo. Inspired in its facades by St. Peter's Cathedral in the Vatican City, the church is crowned by a masonry dome which rises 50



meters above the floor and is supported on four great arches, each with a span of 12 meters. Its facade stands on ionic columns and its interior is beautified with a number of statues positioned along the nave. There are several sculptured depictions of saints inside this cathedral. In the year 1924 most of these statues were installed in the cathedral by the renowned artist, Rev. Fr. J Milliner. Its confessionals are also diligently designed.

At right angles to the church axis and on the northern side, are perhaps the most beautiful flight of steps in Colombo, leading to the convent of the Good Shepherd. On the south side and at the right angles to the cathedral is a Benedictine monastery, built in 1865, with cells for monks surrounding an arcaded internal courtyard.

Chitrasena School of Dancing in Colombo

After almost forty five decades of the Island's colonial occupation, and the traditional dances of the country were left impoverished, it was left to Chitrasena (born: Amaratunga Arachige Maurice Dias), in 1921 to infuse in to the local community a new dynamism with rejuvenated concepts. He is, indeed, one of the few revivalists of the traditional Sri Lankan dance.



Chitrasena challenged the mood of the 1930's and 40's and influenced the mind of a generation, in establishing himself as an artist unparalleled in the dance annals of this country. He was the pioneer of the modern dance theatre, which proved a viable alternative to the changing social milieu that sustained the traditional dance rituals. Chitrasena steered the course of dance forms along uncharted paths infusing it with a dynamism that flowed from his visionary seal and dedication, creating a distinct, yet meaningful medium of expression. He brought about an infusion of the Theatre, the Stage, and the world of the Audience, including confrontation and entertainment to the Sri Lankan Dance. He revolutionized and extended the scope of dance, forging a link between the traditional and the contemporary with a vision of one who was seeking to extend the horizons of his creations, by going back to the roots of Sri Lankan heritage. He transferred Sri Lankan folk dance to the modern theatre and from that transformation created a vehicle

of artistic expression for the Sri Lankan Ballet. He was, indeed, the pioneer of the national ballet.

In 1944, he established Chitrasena Kalayathanaya, the first school of dance in a rented house situated a few yards away from the Kollupitiya junction, gifted by the philanthropist Sir E.



P. A. Fernando. The school started as a small nucleus with only a handful of students who lived and worked in the Studio. Chitrasena along with his wife Vajira introduced a creative dance form based on indigenous rhythms to these young artistes. It was where Chitrasena lived and worked for 40 years and established a renowned cultural centre for the dance enthusiasts and for the connoisseurs of the arts.

The school subsequently became a cultural haven to leading artistes of that period whose talents become highly recognized. There has hardly been a name in the world of arts and letters, which has not at one time or another been associated with the Chitrasena School of Dance. Ananda Samarakoon lived and worked with Chitrasena and created the National Anthem

whilst living in the School. Sunil Santha after his return from Lucknow, Bathkande College of Music, held his musical classes at this Studio. W. D. Amaradeva's early days were closely linked with the Chitrasena School. Dramatists like Henry Jayasena and Ernest Macintyre conducted rehearsals at this centre.

The school has won repute and fame that is international and received rare reviews for the productions both here and abroad. In the realm of creative work, the Dance School has played a vital role in the evolution of the contemporary dance theatre of Sri Lanka.



In 1984, the land on which the Chitrasena School of Dancing stood was unfortunately acquired by the Urban Development Authority, and the building was razed to the ground. In 1998, H. E. Chandrika Kumaranatunga, the then President of Sri Lanka, bequeathed a piece of land on Park Road / Elvitigala

Mawatha, Colombo 5, to establish a permanent location for the Chitrasena school. Subsequently, Chitrasena and his family raised sufficient funds to construct the present dance school there. Since Chitrasena's death in 2005, the school is managed by his wife, Vajira and the two daughters Upeka and Anjali.

The visit to the school by the National Trust's team is to pay their gratitude to the great family and the school of dancing, that the Island has established in the post-colonial era. The visiting team will be most fortunate to view a special dance performance of some of their recent repertoire as arranged by Ms. Vajira and Upeka, including items from 'Dancing for the Gods' and some items not seen before, being parts of their performances presented in New Delhi a few weeks back.