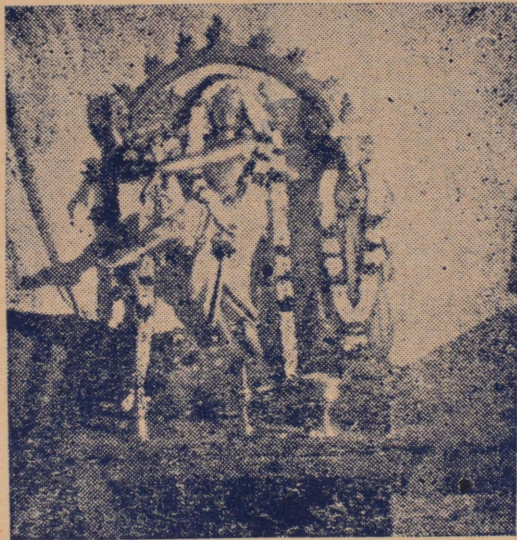


Sri
KAILASANATHA
SWAMY KOVIL



CAPTAIN'S GARDEN
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(By V. Somasundaram)

The oldest and first Kovil in this city of Colombo was built by the Vaniga Vaishya Chettyars (Thiruvilanga Nagarathar) who landed on the soil of this fair city of Colombo, nearly two centuries ago. They came from different parts of South India. Poetess Auvai's maxim "Acquire wealth by even crossing the deepest seas" seems to have dominated their lives. They migrated to this country to invest what little gold they had with them on trade and thus make their living.

The period when these Vaishyas set out by sea and land and arrived in this city can be said to be the latter era of the Dutch and the period when Rajadhi Raja Sinha was ruling as the King of Kandy. The Dutch (Hollanders) at the time were established along the Maritime Provinces and carried on trade in spices. Shortly after these Vaishyas arrived in this island their trade improved considerably and in course of time they were strongly established along with other foreigners who were trading in this city.

The garden called Gilmabhoodhawatte or Kadur-gahawatte in Captain's Garden was the centre of their business activities. In this garden stood the cinnamon and pepper stores, copra and oil godowns, coconut and coir rope stores. There were also in the adjoining lands godowns for storing arecanuts, cardamons, cloves etc.

The foreign trade in cinnamon was mostly in the hands of the Dutch merchants. To ensure that high grade cinnamon was delivered at the cinnamon godowns and to prevent improper persons trespassing the godowns, the Dutch Governor at the time employed a superintendent. This officer was also known as 'Captain' or 'Chief of Cinnamon'. The extensive portion of land where this captain resided and had his sway came to be known as Capittawatta (Captain's Garden). In this place also resided the interpreter in the Malayali language to the then Dutch Governor of the Maritime Provinces of Ceylon. This Interpreter afterwards became a convert to Christianity and adopted the name of Franciscus Paulus Sooriya Moorthy.

It was to this internal market that merchants from inland brought the produce of the land, making use of the water-route through Grandpass. Cinnamon and copra from Puttalam, Chilaw and Negombo were directly brought to the stores at Captain's Garden by padma boats. The land adjoining these godowns was used as an inland outport for cargo destined to Travancore, Nagapatnam, Karikkal, Goa and Far Eastern Ports.

When all business was over, at night, these Vaniga Vaishya Chettyars gathered at the copra-godowns and discussed matters relating to their business and social matters.

Saivism was the religion of these chettyars and to this faith they adhered strictly and practised its tenets. In the evenings, they gathered under the shade of a tree at the base of which was installed a Sivalingam for worship. This Sivalingam was maintained and looked after by a devotee named Sri Veerapathran Chettyar. At this shrine under the tree, poojas were conducted regularly on Friday evenings.

Having come from a land of shrines, temples and sacred rivers, the idea of meeting in the evenings

under a tree for worship did not give them satisfaction. Some of the members of the gathering gave vent to their spiritual needs by proposing that a temple be built for enshrining that Sivalingam. The proposal was accepted unanimously and subscriptions were fixed to be collected monthly from every Chetty-merchant trading in the city, to build the temple.

The foundation for the Sivan Temple was laid on the land owned by Sri Veerapathran Chettyar in the year 1783. The merchants appointed Sri Veerapathran Chettyar to collect the monthly subscription fixed for each merchant and construct the temple. It was this Sivan Temple that in course of time came to be known as the "Sri Kailasanatha Swamy Kovil" Capittawatte. Gradually as the funds increased lands belonging to the sons and grandsons of the Malayali Interpreter were bought to extend the temple.

Sri Veerapathran Chettyar looked after the management of the Kovil during his lifetime. After his death in 1828, Sri Sithambaram Ramiah Chettyar, nephew of Sri Veerapathran Chettyar, was appointed warden of the temple, by the Vaniga Vaishya Chettyars assembled in the temple. Like his uncle, Sri Sithambaram Chettyar collected the offerings from the worshippers as well as from the Vaishyas trading in the city, to maintain the shrine. Donations were also received by him from the Vaishyas from South India, who visited this shrine on the Thiruvathirai Day, to celebrate which festival even Bharatha Natya artistes were brought from Tanjore and other places.

Sri Sithambaram Chettyar died in 1851. Shortly after his death, a general meeting of the "Thiruvilanga Nagarathar" (Vaniga Vaishya Chettyars) was held at the premises of the Kovil. At this meeting of the community it was resolved to have a Board of Trustees to manage the poojas of the temple and to be responsible to its appurtenances. Five Vaishya Chettyars were selected as trustees for the temple, viz.

Sri Mutthiah Cumaraswamy Chettyar, Sri Muttuveeran Thoondhi Chettyar, Sri Sidambaram Kaliappa Chettyar, Sri Kalyana Kuppamutthu Chettyar and Sri Suppan Govindan Chettyar. From this time onwards the Kovil has been managed by a Board of Trustees appointed from time to time by the congregation.

A few generations ago this Kovil held pride of place and to its annual celebrations of "Thiruvathirai" there thronged pilgrims to this festival which was conducted with all pomp and pageantry akin to the Adi Vel. The bronze image of Lord Shiva, in his classic Nataraja pose, taken out in procession on this festive occasion, has not been equalled by any similar reproduction in the other Hindu Kovils in Ceylon. There was a time when all trade passed through the members of this community but with their decline the Kovil also experienced a period of decadence.

The Railway Department acquired the temple lands in 1913 with the result that the Kovil became encircled by the railway lines. The closing of the Norris Road entrance caused much inconvenience and as years passed on the gathering of votaries to the shrine also dwindled.

Having stood the test of time the shrines needed renovation on a large scale and fortunately the task of restoring the temple was undertaken by the Thiruvilanga Nagarathar, before further ravage was done by rain and sunshine.

Mr. P. C. Kathervel Chettyar, the Chairman of the Restoration Committee, spared no pains to collect the necessary funds to restore the shrine. The congregation has already arranged to have the temple lit with electric lights. The construction of the Rajagopuram has been postponed until further funds accumulate.

Sri Kailasanatha Swamy Kovil is a landmark in the history of this city of Colombo. In the early days of the British Government people from India and all parts of Ceylon paid homage to the holy shrine in this temple and visited it for purposes of worship.

