Maradana: Reading shared public space shared

For this assignment I have chosen the public space in ‘Ist Division Maradana’, an area that connects me with my early childhood accompanying my mother to visit relatives living opposite Ananda College, purchasing religious publications at Samayawardana and accessories for Buddhist monks (Atapirikara) getting a picture framed at Semages and view relics of disciples of the Buddha at the Maha Bodhi Society. I have attached the introduction to the ‘Diversity Walk’ called ‘Wheels of Modernity’ conceptualized by me here, because this area has been of great cultural and commercial importance when Colombo experienced transport by rail, tram and steam ships early in the 20th century\(^1\).

The boundaries of the public space, I have re-visited, is from the Maradana Railway Station to the Ananda College. I walked along the Arabipasha Mawatha, which was one of the most important roads even during the days of trolley busses, connecting Maradana with Fort (see image 1). I have selected the 14th April 2017 around 9.30 am to begin my walk. Being the day of celebration for Buddhists and Hindus and just after rituals of welcoming the New Year were over, it was a very calm day to walk through this public space which is otherwise very busy. The Maradana Railway Station too was quiet and the announcement in Sinhala of the train that arrived from Matara did not bring many passengers to this final destination. Maybe because most Sinhalese Buddhists do not travel just after the dawn of the New Year, the foyer of the railway station was quite empty. The façade of the railway station that was once the main railway station, had been painted white and the clock displayed outside, which seems to be a feature of many railway stations in the British Raj, was in working condition (see image 2). The board announcing the departure of trains seems to be operated manually, maintaining the old world charm like the circular mahogany ticket selling counter and the information booth(see images 3,4 and 5). A new addition to this entrance to the station is the electronic display of departure times (see image 6). The auspicious time of the beginning of the New Year was an advertisement of the Sinhala Sunday weekly. Sadly the arrival and departure times were given only in Sinhala, in an area where there is a large population of Tamil speaking Muslims.

My walk begins at the important junction where the road to Fort via the present Postal Head Quarters, Central Mail Exchange, Lake House and the new Casinos by the Beira Lake takes the western route. To the left is the road leading to Borella. To the right walking down Arabipasha Mawatha, one arrives at the junction where the Technical College stands leading
further north to Hulftdorf, Pettah and Fort. The road behind to the east leads to Panchikawatta, Maligawatte, Armour Street linking Maradana junction to Kandy and Negombo Roads (see map 1). It is also a railway junction for four mail lines (see image 7). In the past, this was to me the most exciting junctions were trolley busses shrieked through chaos of traffic between Maradana, Borella and Fort. Hand painted hoardings advertising films dominated the point of convergence of the important streets in the sixties (see image 8) I quote a photograph from an early publication (Bandaranayake 1978: 93-94). The overhead bridges and walking lofts provide the walker with an overview of the flow of traffic on a normal working day (see images 9 and 10).

The street I now choose to begin my walk is named ‘Arabipasha Mawatha’ written as one word, which does in no way indicate that this is the name of an Egyptian freedom fighter who was exiled to Ceylon in 1883 (see image 11). As Orabi Pasha for the most time of his exile lived in Kandy one may question why his name should appear here. One may guess another link, that because the majority who live here are Muslims, the street carried a strange name. The domes and minarets of the Maradana Mosque and Zahira College (Al-Madrasathul Zahira ) are visible above the tree tops. The foliage covers the signage of the most important Mosque and the first school for Muslim students here (see image 12). A recent publication by Ramla Wahab-Salmin gives a historical reason for the naming of the street, after Orabi Pasha. M. C. Siddhi Lebbe, I. L. M. Abdul Aziz and Arasi Marikar Wapchie Marikar were the pioneers of Muslim education in English, the location is marked by Zahira College which was founded in 1892 as the pioneer institution of education of Muslim boys and formally intended also for girls (Wahab-Salmin 2016 and De Silva 1998:236). Strangely no prominent signage marks the location. The school today is managed by the mosque, as such it is the name of the mosque that is visible from the road (see image 13).

Most of the shops are closed on New Year’s Day. The signage demonstrated that there is a concentration of Chinese shops here (see image 14). The history of Maradana informs us that the entire line of shops once belonged to Chinese merchants who arrived in Ceylon from Hubai about 1920s and from Xandong 1940s and set up enterprises that sold silk and other fabrics imported from Honk Kong. They were also well known for affordable dental care (see image 15).

One may not forget that the closeness to the main railway station was a decisive factor for this section that is called Maria Kade to become a commercial hub competing with Pettah. My
research through the Diversity Walks has shown that Maradana became a commercial hub already in the 1880s also was a residential area, mainly opposite Ananda College, today as the names Stork Place, Tichbone Passage, Zaleski Place indicate.

New additions in recent times such as employment agencies recruiting Sri Lankans to Gulf States, SEW Gunasekara’s pawn brokering establishment and the super market called Food City mark larger commercial spaces, whereas the old furniture businesses like Globe Furnishers and Gamini Furnishers still survive occupying large spaces as show rooms (see image 16). It is interesting to note that some of these shops actually manufactured furniture at the back of the shop, with living quarters for carpenters too and printing presses actually printed Sinhala books in the same premises that sold the books. One such establishment was the Epa Book Shop, where Ephemeris by the descendants of Don Philip De Silva Epa Appuhamy was printed. He first introduced the printed form of the almanac, as early as in 1854, introducing New Year customs to the English educated Sinhalese (see image 17).

Most printing establishments now have diversified into printing Dime Novels (see image 18). The Atlas Hall, which published cyclostyled model answers for school children in the 1960s, also located in Maradana, is now catering to readers of popular novels. Similarly steel furniture is replacing solid wooden furniture (see image 19). The mix of commercial and residential quarters of the old establishments of Maradana are fast vanishing. The Salgadu Bakery that serviced the entire area is now a vacant block.

Huddled between the upcoming commercial spaces, I noticed a “Wine Stores” giving the name of the license holder license number as “Grape Expectations” (see image 20). Also a another very familiar signage “Rooms” is visible in this cramped advertising space, indicating the land line and mobile number that can facilitate the early booking of a room by the hour. A Bhadrakali Kovil too seems to have emerged in the close vicinity accessible through a small alley (see image 21). I have noticed similar small very modest places of worship in many areas where Muslims live predominantly such as in Grand Pass and Mutwall – a very positive sign of religious tolerance handed over from the multicultural legacy of Colombo.

The only shops that were kept open on this holiday for Hindus, Buddhists and Christians were run by Moors. They were predominantly selling sweets using the brand name “Bombay Sweets” that was formally the monopoly of the Parsee community in Colombo. Being Good Friday the 14th April 2017 was also a holiday for Christians. On the streets mostly Muslims
were seen identifiable by the chequed sarongs for men and veiled women. Only one woman wearing a Niqab was seen, indicating a less radical Muslim population here.

The many book shops selling Sinhala books such as Sadeepa, Samayawardana, Dayawansha Jayakody and Wijesoorya, were naturally closed. One may wonder why so much publishing, selling Buddhist devotional objects and Sinhala books are concentrated in an area where commercial space are now predominantly owned by Muslims, making this area still essentially multi-religious and multi-ethnic. One may remember the Colombo Picture Palace that printed Wesakh Cards was owned by Hindu Tamil family. The Muslim printing houses and book shops are today mostly located in the Vajiragnana Mawatha, where Chinese dental clinic and a ‘Beheth Kade’ selling Sinhala Ayurveda old and herbal products stand side by side.

Walking further to the south towards Borella, one sees two statues of Buddhist monks painted gold, by the side of the road that is now called S. Mahinda Mawatha (see image 22). Here the Arabipasha Mawatha ends abruptly and this road is now called Kularathna Mawatha, named after the eminent educationist and former principle of Ananada College P. de S. Kularathna. The whitewashed buildings of the Ananda College with sloped “Kandyan Roofs” surmounted finials called “kotha”, cusped arches above the windows and the Shrine Room imitating the lofty brick built image houses of Polonnaruwa mark the end of my walk (see image 23 and 24). Maybe the school was conscious to create an architecture harking back at Sri Lanka’s past. The space is punctuated heavily with monuments of Sinhala-Buddhist revival movement of the late 19th and early twentieth century (Thilakasiri 2000).

Tracing back my footsteps to the two gold painted statues I read inscriptions: The standing shorter statue is supposed to represent Ven. Sikim Mahinda unveiled by the late President Hon. R. Premadasa in 1979 and the seated statue representing Ven. Gangodawila Soma Thero. The inscription for the first monk who had passes away in 1951 in my interlinear translation reads “he who redeemed Sri Lankan sovereignty from the enslaved mentality and awakened national devotion racial belongingness, not second to any Sinhalese in national sentiments and poetic talents”. Names like Dayawansha Jayakodi from the local printing community, Kularthna from the family of trustees of Ananda College appear as principal sponsors of this monument. The inscription for Ven. Soma reads “In this Sinhala Buddhist country, with the noble intension of building a just (Sat Purusha) society, preaching a new truth, vanquishing false beliefs (Miytadrushthi), awakening the country and race by preaching untarnished Buddhism (Nirmala Bududahama), he who was born because of the merit of the nation (Jatiye Pinata pahalavu),
Son of the Buddha (Buddha Puttra). Hon. Ven. Soma Thero! There is no moment that we do not think about you.” There seem to be no sponsors of this commemorative statue and emotionalized plaque.

Moving further towards Borella one discovers a standing statue of Piyadasa Sirisena inaugurated on 22nd May 1979 by Prime Minister R. Premadasa under the guidance of President J. R. Jayawardana (see image 25). Very little research is available on this author in English, albeit one article by Sarath Amunugama (1977). As one may read the plaque and the frieze behind him hailing him as a doyen in the Buddhist Revival Moment through this journalistic activism and his success as the father of the Sinhala novel. Very little is known about the satires parodying the English educated middle class and the critique on Buddhist monks in his most popular novel ‘Dingiri Menika’ and ‘Donation Box of Ven. Vimalatisssa’ using the format of a detective novel.

The friezes behind the Sirisena statue show the national heroes imprisoned by the British. The figures can be identified as F. R. Senanayaka, D. B. Jayatilaka, Walisinha Harischandra and Anagarika Dharmapala. Ven Hikkaduwe Sumangala and Ven. S. Mahinda too who are regarded as freedom fighters of Sri Lanka are visually remembered here. Below this register Piyadasa Sirisena seems to be writing on the back drop of the Temple of the Tooth and Ruwanveli Seya with the Lion flag fluttering behind him. The plaque praises Sirisena “At a time when the people were defeated and depended on others, he who woke up the love of language and love for religion people by his linguistic competence and ability compose” (see Annex B). All three monuments seem to have been sponsored by the Sinhala Buddhist businessmen of the area, just as their forefathers financed the projects of the Buddhist Revival Movement.

Recent renaming of surrounding roads in Maradana is interesting. From the railway station one reads the road names, in the northern section of Maradana: Sri Vajiragnana Mawatha, Maligakanda Place, Rev. Hikkaduwe Sri Sumangala Thero Mawatha, Ven. Baddegama Vimalavamsa Mawatha, Ananda Mawatha marking a strong Sinhala Buddhist presence to an area where now predominantly Muslims live. It is on the Maligakanda that the Vidhodyaya Pirivena was established by Ven. Sumangala adjacent to the Mahabodhi Society of Anagarika Dharmapala, in a property partially donated by Anagarika’s maternal grandfather and grand uncles Perera Dharmagunawadana and Don Phillip de Silva Epa, Sinhala businessman of Maradana (Blackburn 201:37). To the left of the Arabipasha Mawatha we read Ven. S.
Mahinda Mawatha, Piyadasa Sirisena Mawatha names connected with the Buddhist Revival Movement. Nevertheless Stork Road, has managed to retain its old name. The memory of Mr. T. B. Jaya, the pioneer of Islamic education and a former principal of the Zahira College hugs a larger area, covering the New Olympia cinema, connecting to the Arabipasha Mawatha at Zahira College (see Annex C).

The Sinhala-Muslim mix of demarcated space is less polarized in the ‘Second Division of Maradana’, where the Catholics are predominant, centered around the Bishop’s House and Aquinas University with the Catholic Press in the close vicinity. This is an area south of the Bodhi Tree in Punchi Borella, where large plots of land were owned by the Catholic entrepreneurs of Colombo.

Concluding my final assignment ‘Maradana: Reading shared public space’, in which I wish to document Maradana in a state of constant redefining spaces between Buddhists and Muslims: The Buddhist hegemony established in the early 20th century in Maligakanda, Maradana is silently contested by the Muslim majority living on western side of the Arabipasha Mawatha. The three monuments discussed here and the constant renaming of streets after Buddhist monks demonstrate the engagement of the Sinhala Buddhist mercantile community to claim space for the Buddhists. As the signage demonstrates the by-roads have many new Islamic organizations and some old book stores and newer mosques, some very new Islamic schools as well. The mid 20th century architecture of Ananada College speak implicitly for a link with the Srilankan Sinhala-Buddhist past, just as the new architecture of the Maradana Mosque too demonstrates the influence of Wahabi-Architecture. The signage at the mosque and Zahira college is most unobtrusive as against the signage of the newer more modest mosques and Islamic schools on the Vajirajnana Mawata, where the dominant color for buildings is maintained green. I make an assumption that the traditional Muslim organizations of Colombo are less assertive to claim physical space marked by Islamic signifiers (Kufic Calligraphy, predominance of green, crescent-and-star symbols). Colombo’s first police station was located here close to the first railway station, where places of amusement such as theatre, taverns, brothels as noted in Martin Wickramasinha’s novel ‘Yuganthaya’ stood in the past. Very much resembling the protagonist “Tissa’s” nocturnal visits to Maradana, night time walk reveals another face of Maradana today, the signage of ‘Wine Stores’ and ‘Rooms’ provide evidence. If a multi-ethnic balance of intermingling ethnic spaces as in the past is not maintained here, Maradana could well become another “Crucible of Conflict”.

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References:


Map of Maradana
Wheels of Modernity

The last two decades of the nineteenth century 1880-1900 mark the first phase of modernization of Colombo. This walk located in the Ist Division of Maradana begins at the location where passengers boarded the first railway to Kandy extending to Matale in 1880. Passing the Zahira College, one of the first Muslim schools of Sri Lanka founded in 1892, we head for Maria Kade, passing the Chinese shops which were famous for importing silk. A short stop at the premises where Don Philip Epa Appuhamy introduced the printed form of Epa Ephemeris and Almanac in 1854, we pass Ananda College which in 1889, moved from Prince Street to Maradana to a 3.2 acre plot donated by Mr. Tudor Rajapaksha in 1895. Here the shops today cater to Buddhists in search of devotional items. We move further Maligakanda, where the Vidhyodaya Pirivena which was the first Buddhist Pirivena in 1873 publishing ‘Lakrivikirana’ the same year and the Mahabodhi Society founded in 1891 by Anagarika Dharmapala. Here, in the water shed of the Buddhist Revival Movement, we discover the oldest Methodist churches of Maradana. The walk titled ‘Wheels of Modernity’: It begins at the Railway station which connected the seaport with coffee and tea growing areas, passing locations where printing houses where newspapers in Sinhala and Tamil were printed using the Rotary Printing Machine caring news to a reading public even in Singapore and Malaysia and the head quarters, where Anagarika Dharmapala set off propagating Buddhism in a motorized van also playing gramophone records and a diorama to show holy sites of India.

1. මරදාන දුම්රිය - maradna railway station
2. මරදාන ප්‍රත්‍යදුම්රිය - old maradana railway station
3. යාහිරා විද්‍යාලය හා මුස්ලිම් පොල්ලිය - Zahira College and mosque
4. සේරිලාන්කීක් ජනතාව හා අර්ධක පුනරුදුම්වය - srilankan chines community
5. අටපිරිකර ප්‍රජාව - eightfold requisites cultural
6. නුවම භාවිකම් පිරිවවණ - Vidyodaya Pirivena (පිරිවවණය) – epa appuhami and national renaissance movement

7. අළංක සාංස්කෘතිය - book shop cultural
8. අනන්ද විද්‍යාලය - Ananda college
9. මහකාමණි විශේෂීම (මහබොධි විහාරය) – mahabodhi society
10. මහබොධි විහාරය - vidyodaya pirivena
11. ගොඩබොධි ගොඩබොධී, ගොඩබොධී - kuppiyawaththa jayasekaramaya
Annex A Sign Boards.
Annex B. Road Names.