

A Temple on the Brink

Posted on



The modern image house of the Gallen Raja Maha Viharaya

The Gallen Raja Maha Viharaya is one of the vanishing breed of ancient cave temples. Despite their immense historical and spiritual value, they are today on the verge of extinction.

Words Yomal Senerath-Yapa | **Photographs** Vishwathan Tharmakulasingam and Geeth Viduranga



The temple, once large and prosperous, has shrunk as manifested by the size of its stupa

It was a relief to escape from the town of Maradankadawala. The sun was baking

everything and the yellow and silver glare off tin roofs was unpleasantly blinding. A trishaw promised to whisk us off to somewhere more natural, and the little road we were taken on was promising. It became more and more darkly shaded and wild, and soon we were breathing with pleasure air that was laden with wild blossoms, over-ripe fruit and other good smells.

The trishaw grumbled to a halt where an ancient stairway, made up of stone steps that were all awry, began to climb.

We were greeted by the sound of sweeping – the swish of *ekel* broom against sand – a noise to be expected at this time of the day in any temple. It was the chief monk, Nayaka Hamuduruwo himself, cleaning the compound. He greeted us with a nod that was more than benign. Sweat was pouring off his brow but he was hospitable, as if he was expecting us, and requested that we wait for a couple of minutes; time, obviously, for him to douse his face with cold water and don his full robes.

The temple, the Gallen Raja Maha Viharaya, was not in good shape. Ancient drip ledges could be seen on brows of rocks sheltering tawdry modern interiors. The new image house was a shock of colour, with thick, gleaming paint of every shade imaginable, while the orange tracery of elegant ancient frescoes, probably as old as the Anuradhapura period, were left to the mercy of sun, rain and wind outside.

The name of King Valagamba, which seems to attach itself to any old cave temple in the country, is enshrined here as well. Whether he really did live here cannot be ascertained, but that is not to question the historic value of this place. There is evidence to show that the Gallen Viharaya existed at a very early period, the most valuable of which being an unadorned moonstone in the early stage of evolution and those frescoes, now almost completely gone.

The past splendour of the Gallen Viharaya can be gleaned from some of the treasures the temple had until recent times

The hamuduruwo, seated in the verandah, cast his mind back to the past. His eyes were glazed as he talked about a millennia-old past he knew from oral tradition; a past nonetheless as real to him as the present moment.

This neighbourhood had then been called Pansalgama ('the village of the temple'), and the temple had owned extensive land. Villages were assigned to provide the

temple with services. The hamuduruwo recalled names of some of the old feudal villages that rendered services: Hapidiyagama, which provided canopies, and Etaweerawewa, the village of *hewisi* (drum) players.

The past splendour of the Gallen Viharaya can be gleaned from some of the treasures the temple had until recent times. These included some Buddha statues, carved out of rock and now preserved in the museum at Anuradhapura, and a map in *ola* leaf which charted all the ancient *wewas* (reservoirs) in Anuradhapura. This priceless document is now the property of a museum in England, as far as the hamuduruwo can recall.

Though its influence has greatly diminished over time, the temple today still renders some valuable services to the villagers, predominantly as an ayurvedic centre. The hamuduruwo explained that they distill *hena raja* oil, which protects the possessor from any firearm, and *sarasvati* oil, which increases memory. There is also the annual *Vishnu Mangalaya*, the festival of Vishnu, in the month of Vesak (May). But none of them, of course, can compensate for a past when this 'royal' temple owned more than a hundred acres with many outbuildings, a great number of servitors, and a treasure trove of items of intrinsic or historical value.

A Temple on the Brink

