Ambalama: A Stopover On A Journey

Posted on



Karagahagedara ambalama

Back in the days, journeys, pilgrimages and carters' travels lasted weeks or even months. These long journeys were often by foot or by cart. Each carried his own provisions and stopped for rest at ambalamas; simple structures that provided shelter for travellers. It was also where they

shared news of their whereabouts, slept and even prepared their meals. Replaced by modern establishments for rest and respite, present ambalamas have been transformed into destinations in themselves. Like the writer Jean Arasanayagam, we also searched for an ambalama and came across quite a few during our journeys…

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Inspired by these wayside rest stops, Jean Arasanayagam has compiled a collection of poems titled, “Searching For An Ambalama.” In a poem titled “Ambalama” she captures the essence of what an ambalama looks like today,

> “On this journey I glimpse an ancient ambalama deserted now,
> abandoned walls part hidden by unkempt mana grass, trees and thickets,
> half-walls open to the elements yet the roof tiles patterned in diamond
> shapes still set firmly on the wooden roof beams.”

Panavitiya ambalama

Dating back to the 18th Century Panavitiya ambalama is believed to have been on the footpath from Dambadeniya to Kurunegala and Yapahuwa. Resting on a stone structure, this ambalama has elaborate carvings on its wooden pillars. They are decorated with carved animals, mythical beings, leaf designs and other carvings that are usually found on woodwork of the era. As Arasanayagam writes, these amabalamas must have been a

> “Shelter for travellers, mendicants, pilgrims, a place to lay the head,
> wakeful, watch the stars and constellations, feel the wind blowing through
> branches moving like outspread fingers to catch the light and shadow.”

Karagahagedara ambalama

In close proximity to Panavitiya ambalama is the Karagahagedara ambalama. Resting on four boulders atop a granite outcrop it looks a bit precarious, but it has been there for centuries providing a roof over many a traveller. It must be this

ambalama that Arasanayagam describes in her poem “A long ago journey – Embekke”

> “We passed by that ancient resting place, the vele ambalama set atop that flat outcrop of rock in the middle of the paddy fields.”

The picturesque setting of a fertile paddy field with the lush green paddy provides the travellers much needed rest and relaxation even this day.

> “The fragrance of wild flowers brush against the senses, night birds call disturbed in sleep as predator wings and beaks probe their secret perches huddled on leafy branches” As Arasanayagam describes in her poem “Ambalama”, all seem possible here even today. She has brought it to life with her words, “A flowing stream whispers among the fern banks, water syllables weave their spells of ancient dreams into the travellers’ ears.”

It is also said that long ago ambalamas were often built next to a stream, even if not, an ambalama always had a pinthaliya, a drinking water pot, which was filled by the villagers. According to the Tripitaka, or the religious text of the Buddhists, those who establish gardens with fruits and flowers, build bridges and put up fountains and such facilities to quench the thirst of travellers would be prosperous and have a good life after death. Perhaps taking these words into heart, people built ambalamas as a form of charity that would benefit them in their afterlife.

Kadugannawa ambalama

> “I think to myself as I drive past, ‘what if I had to seek shelter here before I continue my journey…”

She writes in the poem “Ambalama.” Lying along the Colombo – Kandy main road, Kadugannawa ambalama must have been a popular stopover for merchants and carters who travelled between the ancient hill capital and the lowlands. It is perhaps the best known ambalama in the country. What is unique about this ambalama is that, unlike other ambalamas elsewhere, it has a separate space for cooking. Even

at present, many who travel down the road to Kandy stopover at Kadugannawa, to sneak a peek at this ambalama.

Ambalama at the Galle Fort

At the centre of the Galle Fort is a simple structure with four pillars and a roof and is referred to as an ambalama. In a poem titled “Return to Galle” Arasanayagam writes,

> “The landscape has changed in a once familiar route this, then, for me is a new journey going past houses in ruins gaping spaces of emptiness a stare caught and held in space.What’s left of habitations now deserted, filled with the silence of absent humans.”

Similar to how Galle itself has changed over time, this structure at the Galle Fort has changed from the days when it provided shelter to many in the days gone by. Though the times have changed, there are still people who find a spot to rest a while here.

With many routes that were used by pilgrims, merchants, carters and kings and nobles alike, there are many ambalamas that a traveller would come across in this country. It is said that while the elaborately designed ones were for the use of kings and the nobility, the simpler ones were for the common people.

References to these wayside rests are found in ancient local texts as well as in the chronicles of foreign travellers such as Robert Knox. Ambalamas are also mentioned in local folklore as well.

The ambalama was a point of rest for the weary travellers and also a point of interaction. Who knows who might’ve stopped by any of these ambalamas; nobility and commoners, travellers from far away lands and merchants on journeys, sharing the warmth of a fire. Who knows what news they exchanged over a shared frugal meal, or while feeding the bulls that drew their carts and what incidents came to pass.

Travel itself has changed over time and today ambalamas stand along the highways reminding us of the days gone by. Though they are now invaluable pieces of history these shelters still remain at duty serving the odd traveller seeking rest.

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