Fishing Hamlet to Tourist Resort Hikkaduwa through the Centuries

Posted on

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A tourist once proudly claimed that he had received a letter from home in Europe merely addressed to him by name at the postal address “Hikkaduwa” Yet Hikkaduwa is only a small coastal village in Sri Lanka’s southwest. It began as just another little fishing hamlet where the coconut palms sloped down to the sea’s edge and where the beach was wide and white. If the fishermen have made way for the reson, they have certainly not moved too far away. Neither has Hikkaduwa been totally abandoned to tourism! The people live and move and practice their age old

occupations in the environs of both places – even if they have also learned to produce the goods and services holiday-makers from all the world over are after.

While its fame as a beach resort has spread worldwide, little is known by those who enjoy the charms of the sea and surf and the fascinating beauty of coral, of the history of the place. To many a visitor Hikkaduwa would mean a trip in a glass-bottomed boat to view the coral and tropical fish below and many hours of sunning and surfing. But Hikkaduwa is not only of sun, sea and sand. It's history goes back thousands of years. It has been the venue of battles and a great seat of learning. It is the place of famous temples and the inspiration for poets. Hikkaduwa was settled, albeit scantily, from very early times. It was a coastal hamlet in the Ruhunu or Southern Kingdom from at least the fifth century before Christ, but there is reason to believe – and so legend has it – that prehistoric peoples lived by and from the sea round the beautiful bay, though few traces of their habitation have been or can be discovered in a coast lashed annually by the southwest monsoon – and this for millenniums .. However, the" fisherman's god " – the Devol god of might and power – has had his shrine in the little off.coast islet nearby for thousands of years, and to date he is placated and supplicated before the fishing season commences and rich offerings made to him after a successful season has been completed. The nan1e Hikkaduwa is also the name given to the Hikkaduwa ganga, though in the ancient chronicles the river was known as Salagamu-Oya. It forms a lake near its mouth into which sea water keeps seeping so it is always brackish and salinated. It is believed that " Hikkaduwa " was once " Sipp-kaduwa " (from the shells that abound on its shore) or it could have been derived from "shilpa-kaduwa" (the place of the great temples and places of learning). It is interesting to note that " learning " has always been considered a " kadduwa " (sword) to 'cut' or 'vanquish' ignorance ; strangely, the symbol is used in the language to this day!



Fishing harbour for outrigger canoes at Hikkaduwa.

The earliest mention of the hamlet-though not by its present name – in the ancient Sinhalese chronicle, the ” Culavamsa “, is in the 12th century A D. when King Parakrama Bahu I of Polonnnaruwa waged a decade-long civil war with the southern rebels. On one occasion they had fortified themselves at Gintota on the Galu-nadi (the Ginganga or river) not far from Hikkaduwa, which they had converted into a temporary fortress but were taken by SUiprise by the king’s generals. They were wiped out at the battle which ensued and this part of the southern region (the southwest) was brought under the kings control.

The village of Titthgama, as it was called in the early medieval period, was hard by the modern town and was of some importance being a place of a ford on the route to and from the south of the island, developing rapidly with the movement of the capital to Sri Jayawardena Kotte in the late 14th century, A D. Kings of the Dambadeniya period (early 14th century) had already founded temples and

monasteries in the area.

The famous Totagamuve Vihara – also n as Rahats Vihara because 500 Rahats (saints) dwell there in the 15th century – was founded at a much earlier date, approximately in the 10th century. an inscription dating to that century and referring lO it was found in the temple premises. Vijayabahu IV, who reigned in turbulent times from 1271-1273 had added to the existing foundation. About fifty years earlier a minister of the then reigning king, Parakrama Bahu II (1236-1271), had visited Hikkaduwa (Titthagama) and built a bridge there 40 staves long (300 feet). He built another bridge across the swamp. This bridge was 100 cubits in length. He also planted a large grove of jak trees, clearing the forests on the river banks and erected an image house and a cetiya (stupa).

Hikkaduwa in the 15th and 16th centuries – was reputed for the learning of its monks and savants. In fact, Hikkadwuwa has long been famous for its learning. In recent times it produced a great Buddhist scholar, Hikkaduwe Sri Sumangala, known all over Asia for his knowledge of Buddhism and eastern classical languages and to whom scholars and pandits came from India, Burma and Siam and even Europe to consult. Among the best known of Sinhalese poets, the priest-poet, Totagamuwe Sri Rahula, who lived in the 15th century hailed from Hikkaduwa.

It is curious that a statue of the god Ananga, (Kamadeva), lord of sexual love and comparable to Eros in Greek mythology, in Sri Ulllka the only one of its kind, is found in the temple at Telwatta in **Hikkaduwa.** The statue, larger than life-size, erected facing the doorway to the shrine has a sugar cane bow in one hand and a sheaf of arrows in the other. There is no other reference to this cult in Sri Lanka. “He is usually represented as a handsome young man, with a bow of sugar-cane, a bowstring formed of a line of bees, flower-tipped arrows and a banner bearing the emblem of a makara or sea monster.” (M. B. Ariyapala: Society in Medieval Ceylon).

Two other temples, restored in modem times but dating to the medieval period, are the **Kumarakande Raja Maha V ihara** with its murals of the sacred footprint, mythic be□□ts and perahera-processions and the **Sailabimbaramaya** temple, half a mile away. In the image house are many exquisite murals relating the life story of the Buddha.

Hikkaduwa comprises the four villages of Hikkaduwa, Totagamuve, Sinigama and Telwane to the north. As an old Railway Guide dating to the beginning of this century has it: ‘This station (Hikkaduwa) serves a population of about 4000 (then)

engaged in the cultivation of coconuts, areacanuts, tea, paddy and cinnamon and in the preparation of coral lime, plumbago mining and the manufacture of coir yarn, lace, drum frames and metal bowls for the use of Buddhist monks." To reach it today one would travel 60½ miles from Colombo, crossing the Hikkaduwa Ganga past lines of smoking coral pits where, in spite of strict regulations, these coral pits yet lead the way to the now so-popular beach resort.

If shrines dedicated to the Hindu deities, especially god Kattaragam or Skanda, are found in the premises of the Buddhist monastic shrines in Hikkaduwa, it is well to remember that the whole of the deep south is dedicated to this deity from remote times. Kalutara, only a few miles north on the south road, was the boundary Qf Ruhuna and was known as Velapura (the city of the lance-god: the lance being god Kattaragama's emblem). "Vela" also means 'boundaiy', the boundaiy city of Ruhuna; Hikkaduwa falls well into and within these boundaries.

It is interesting to find that apart from its learning, the knowledge of arts and sciences of the medieval period studied, researched and documented in the monasteries in Hikkaduwa, there was also a knowledge of the dramatic arts taught to pupils at the Totagamuwa vihara. "The 'Giri-Sandesaya' (circa 1450-1460) explicitly mentions. that the pupils of Totgamuve Pirivena of Sri Rahula studied besides Sanskrit, Pali, Sinhala and Tamil, the art of poetry and drama (nalu)." Scholars agree that the arts of Sinhala Nadagam, mixed with many elements from South India and later European influences after the arrival of the Portuguese and Dutch in the 16th and 17th centuries A.O., has had some of its origins in the South of the island, in the environs of Hikkaduwa.

There is much to make a holiday in Hikkaduwa so fascinating. Here are much more than wide, white beaches and a warm blue sea; much more than water sports where waters meet: surfing, skin diving, undersea exploration – all of which of course abound in the coral seas hardly a stone's throw from the beach. Hikkaduwa is indeed an ocean sanctuary, once enthusiastically described as the "Great Barrier Reef' in miniature! Much of the coral is, alas ferried away for building purposes, in spite of checks and restraints and punishments enforced by law, but what is there and what keeps growing undersea is certainly spectacular.'A resplendent coral garden under the sea is what Hikkaduwa offers the visitor: a veritable underwater kingdom where jewel-like coral fish spark in between the waving masses of rainbow-hued coral formations, reminiscent of every leaf and branch and twig one has ever seen on terra firma. For those who dive deeper, the bigger fish are also there, lurking among the delights of the ocean bed.

Hikkaduwa is indeed far more than sun and sea sports. Not too far away are the people, their houses and fields. Crops of paddy flourish in the hinterland. Coconut thrives and generates several small industries like fibre making and coir processing, the firing of charcoal out of coconut shells, and the brewing of toddy, which in turn is distilled to make coconut arrack; the spirituous liquour for which Sri Lanka is famous. A sight not to be missed is the toddy tapper balancing on ropes drawn from one tree to another as he goes about collecting the liquid of the “coconut flower” (spathe) from the pots hung beneath it on every tree, in season. It might be a trapeze act performed specially for you, except that it is no act but his unerring kill in performing what is simply his daily task.

Hikkaduwa itself simply “growed” – as one might put it and with it the elements of a touristic beach spot are also obvious and at times not to everybody’s taste. But no-one would want to miss the charm and beauty of the large bays, the sprawing soft-sand beaches, the seascapes, the coast, the enchantment of the fishing hamlets and the people, so hospitable in a most natural and friendly way.



The bell-shaped dagoba of the Thotagamuwa Temple v.here the famous monk Sri Rahula lived.