Through grounds of reverence

Posted on

The Mahiyangana Stupa highlighted with the glow of lights during night time

Overhead the skies darkened ominously, foretelling impending rain. Even as people scurried about, some to escape the rain, others to find a better vantage point to either participate or to observe the unfolding activities, a slow drizzle engulfed the periphery. Unwavering, we stood our ground while the unrelenting drops of rain cascaded down, overlooking the buzz that surrounded the Mahiyangana Stupa…

Words Krishani Peiris **Photographs** Indika De Silva

‘Sadhu Sadhu Sadhu’, the sacred words of worship resounded through the air, the sound rising as one from the countless people surrounding the Mahiyangana Stupa that towered towards the darkened skies. Circling the Stupa, people stood forming several lines while still more had managed to scramble atop the lower level of the Dagaba. At the end of each line, several men stood unravelling cloth rolls—either of Buddhist flags or saffron robes—that people who stood in line passed over their heads in single form to those who were atop the dagaba where it was draped right around. As we stood there watching, the sound of the horanawa and the davula announced the arrival of a new group of people who proceeded, single form, to

encircle the Stupa with a cloth of saffron robes held high above their heads before stopping to join in the unfolding pooja. “This is called a Kapruka Pooja”, we heard a voice drifting over the crowd comment. Kapruka is said to be a mythical tree, which fulfills any wish and exists in the realm of gods and as such the Kapruka Pooja is known as a pooja that fulfills any wish.

As we stood there observing, more and more groups of people joined in, undaunted by the rain, while many more stood with their hands clasped together in reverence, undoubtedly a multitude of hopes and dreams flowing through their minds. Stepping away from the revered pooja we made our way across the sanctified grounds of the Temple, bent on uncovering and exploring the evolving face of Mahiyangana…

> There are three routes to reach Mahiyanganaya—via Hasalaka, Weragantota and Minipe—Randenigala Dam. From Mahiyanganaya, turn to Bibile-Uraniya-Mahiyangana Road to reach the Mahiyangana Temple

According to the annals of history, Lord Buddha has visited Sri Lanka on three occasions with Mahiyanganaya being the first place to be blessed with his presence. His visit is said to have fallen on a Duruthu full moon poya day (January), nine months after He attained enlightenment, during a period when the country was ruled by three tribes—yaksha, naaga and deva. The chronicles narrate that Lord Buddha’s visit to Mahiyangana was to mainly settle a dispute between the Yaksha and Naaga tribes. It is said that when the two sides, having amassed their armies at a place named the Mahanaga Garden—situated along the right bank of the Mahaweli river—was about to commence battle, Lord Buddha had arrived to deliver a sermon to the belligerent crowd, calming and resolving their issues.

Listening to this sermon, among the crowd, was God Saman who earnestly requested Lord Buddha for an object of worship. Lord Buddha offered a lock of hair and God Saman had built a stupa enshrining the sacred object within its confines and this is considered to be the beginning of the chronicles surrounding the Mahiyangana Temple.

The next significant record in history was when, 45 years after the passing of Lord Buddha, Arhant Sarabhu Maha Thero brought down the left clavicle or collar bone relic of Lord Buddha to be enshrined within the Stupa along with the hair relic. At

the same time it is said that the Stupa was raised to a height of 18-feet. Throughout the history various kings and ministers have dedicated much time and resources to built the Mahiyangana Stupa, which had boasted a height of 45 feet and 120 feet during the times of King Devanampiyatissa (307-267 BC) and King Dutugemunu (161-137 BC) respectively. As such the Mahiyangana Stupa was kept from ruin through gracious benefactors who built structures for the Bhikkus to reside, carried out poojas and bequeathed land. Though much has been done during the course of time, by 1940s the Stupa was in a state of neglect and steps were taken to restore and rebuild the Temple and the Stupa to its former glory. After the restoration, the Stupa was ceremonially unveiled in 1961, marking a new beginning.

> Undaunted by the rain, many stood with their hands clasped together in reverence, undoubtedly a multitude of hopes and dreams flowing through their minds

Today the Mahiyangana Stupa stands tall, its pristine white pinnacle extending skyward. Surrounding the Stupa, the shrine rooms, the bodhi tree, the Saman Devalaya and other revered edifices call on worshippers to stay a while in reverence. To escape the rain at one point during our traverse, we stopped at a building that could best be described as the announcement room where countless flocked to donate and give in the names of their loved ones to be read aloud, evoking blessings of the Mahiyanagana Temple to protect and safeguard them from evil. The next stop that arrested our attention was the two storied museum that held a display of remnants, some found from within the relic chamber of the older structure of the dagaba during restoration and others brought in from around the Island. Relics found from the Stupa include paintings, faded with time, small statues and much more while coins used during different eras, yet more statues and curious relics such as a wooden boat where coins were put captured our inquisitive minds...

As we made our way to the Bodhi tree, we were greeted by an old gentleman who requested our help in tying some flags around the Bodhi tree as a form of blessing. Taking the flag from his hand, we tied them to a string attached to the trunk of the Tree and stepping back we bowed our heads and clasped our hands in reverence, feeling the warmth of the blessings flowing over us and reaching out to the crowd that filled the hallowed precincts of Mahiyangana.