Handagalakanda Viharaya: A Boundless Space

Posted on



The white Dagaba on top of the rock boulder

A white clad Buddha statue rose majestically, presenting a striking contrast with the boulder of rocks situated behind it, engulfed in green. Atop the rock, another seated Buddha Statue, and a Dagaba, gleaming in white and towering towards the sky completed the picture… or so we thought…

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A gravel road that looked almost scarlet in the scorching sun rays led us to the entrance of the Handagalakanda Viharaya, an ancient cave temple located in Ratmalgahawewa, Anuradhapura and accessible via Horowpothana-Medawachchiya

road. Upon stepping into the temple grounds, our gazes were pulled towards the white Buddha statue that appeared to be newly built. Raised above a green pool of water, a narrow bridge led towards the statue so that pilgrims may approach the sacred figure to worship. Disturbing the uniformity of the pond, a thin layer of stones fashioned in a circular ring remained and we were informed that it is deemed to be the remnants of an ancient well.

Skirting around this pond, we came upon a flight of stone steps and began our ascent in the quest to see if there is more to this temple than what meets the eye. Before long we were surrounded by fascinating structures, caves and countless inscriptions scribbled onto the rocky surfaces of the caves.

Spread through an area of about 700 acres, it is believed that the Temple Complex dates back to the time of King Devanampiya Tissa (250-210 BC). Considered to have been built by sub-king Mahanaga, younger brother of King Devanampiya Tissa, the temple is also known as Chandagiri Vihara in Pali. There are several versions as to how the name ‘Handagala’ or ‘Chandagiri’ (moon rock) came to be. The most plausible might be the one that relates to the shape of the most prominent rocky outcrop, called the ‘ball rock’, within the Temple Complex. When viewed from a distance it is said that this rocky outcrop resembles the full moon rising from the eastern sky and as such since the bygone days the Temple has been known as the Handagalakanda Viharaya.

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The whole site encompasses nearly 45 caves, some easily accessible while others require much effort to reach. From these caves 15 have pre-brahmin inscriptions believed to date back to the Third Century BC while 16 more caves are engraved with post brahmin inscriptions. As such stopping by a plaque erected by the Department of Archaeology we read a description which detailed the phrase inscribed in the cave wall before us. Chiselled between the period of Third Century BC and First Century AD, the scrawling was that of early Brahim script and read ‘The cave of the chief Bhagineya Vela, the cave also of the Chief Datta, son of Ahali, given to the Sangha’.

Sitting at the steps and surveying the view from atop we were unable to tear our gazes from this breathtaking sight

On we continued to climb up through the stone steps, where etched names revealed that some of the steps were donated as recently as the early 20th Century while others showed signs of having being treaded on for centuries past. We passed by newly built structures and a pool of water bordering a rugged wall that must have persisted for a long time, collecting water droplets that dripped continuously down the rocky surface during rainy days. The few caves that we saw had dripledges carved to ensure that the water does not drip inside to disturb the serenity of the meditating monks.

Breaking the silence that was only pierced by our ceaseless pitter patter, a chanting reached our ears. What started with one voice singing praises of Lord Buddha was soon joined by countless others. The voices wove around us weaving a thread of faith and beckoning us to partake in the devout gathering. Drawing near the voices, we beheld a group of people, dressed in white and deep in their revere, seated just outside the Shrine Room. Taking care not to disturb the faithful following, we stepped into a small section before entering the Shrine Room – built into a cave – which was deluged in darkness. A steady stream of sunlight penetrated through the open door illuminating the reclining Buddha statue. The roof of the cave was decorated with paintings that were faded with age and presented a contrast with the brightly hued paintings and images that graced the entrance.

In the far distance, another white dagaba soared over the landscape pinpointing the sacred site of Mihintale

More climbing awaited us once we were outside and eagerly we clambered on to the top. A white dagaba, newly constructed and another dagaba, built from bricks in an olden time, stood facing each other at the pinnacle. Lush greenery, fragmented by lakes, gravel paths and small abodes decked the area below as far as the eye could see. In the far distance, another white Dagaba soared over the landscape pinpointing the sacred site of Mihintale. Sitting at the steps and surveying the view from atop, we were unable to tear our gazes from this breathtaking sight. Therefore we sat for a long time drinking in the beauty, which presented the perfect conclusion for our journey.

