In Search of Devagiri Raja Maha Viharaya

Posted on

Merchants from the third century BC have contributed to the construction of the temple.

Driving past Bingiriya on the Chilaw – Wariyapola road, we were on the lookout for a path that would lead us to the Devagiri Raja Maha Viharaya. It is an ancient temple patronized by Royalty from the Anuradhapura to Kandyan Eras.

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Photographs Menaka Aravinda and Anuradha Perera.

Towering trees spread over the extensive landscape and hidden among the foliage,

birds twittered and chirped overhead. The Devagiri Raja Maha Viharaya is set within a 952-acre land, most of which is overgrown with a wilderness that is home to wild animals. Through gaps in the greenery, we glimpsed evidence of the remnants of the temple. Walking past an ancient brick wall that continues to surround the temple grounds, we made our way to the tall white stupa.

Dating back to the third century BC, Devagiri Raja Maha Viharaya is believed to have been built during the reign of King Devanampiyatissa. During his reign, a port situated in Chilaw had allowed merchants and traders to access Anuradhapura from the coast. The merchants traveled to the bygone capital through Bingiriya, and they are believed to have constructed the temple. The kings that followed, continued to add structures and features to the temple.

We encountered an ancient *Tampita Viharaya*, a two-storey building built during the Kandyan Era by King Keerthi Sri Rajasinghe. It is known as *Tampita Viharaya* because it is an image house built on a raised wooden platform supported by sturdy stone pillars. Considered to be the largest Image House of its kind, the *Tampita Viharaya* had an air of delicate strength. It was currently under renovation, and a temporary roof made with coconut leaves protected the clay tile roof. We were intrigued by the unusual structure, and approached it to admire the intricate craftsmanship. Walking beneath the wooden platform upheld by the pillars, we arrived at a staircase that took us to the Image House on the first floor.

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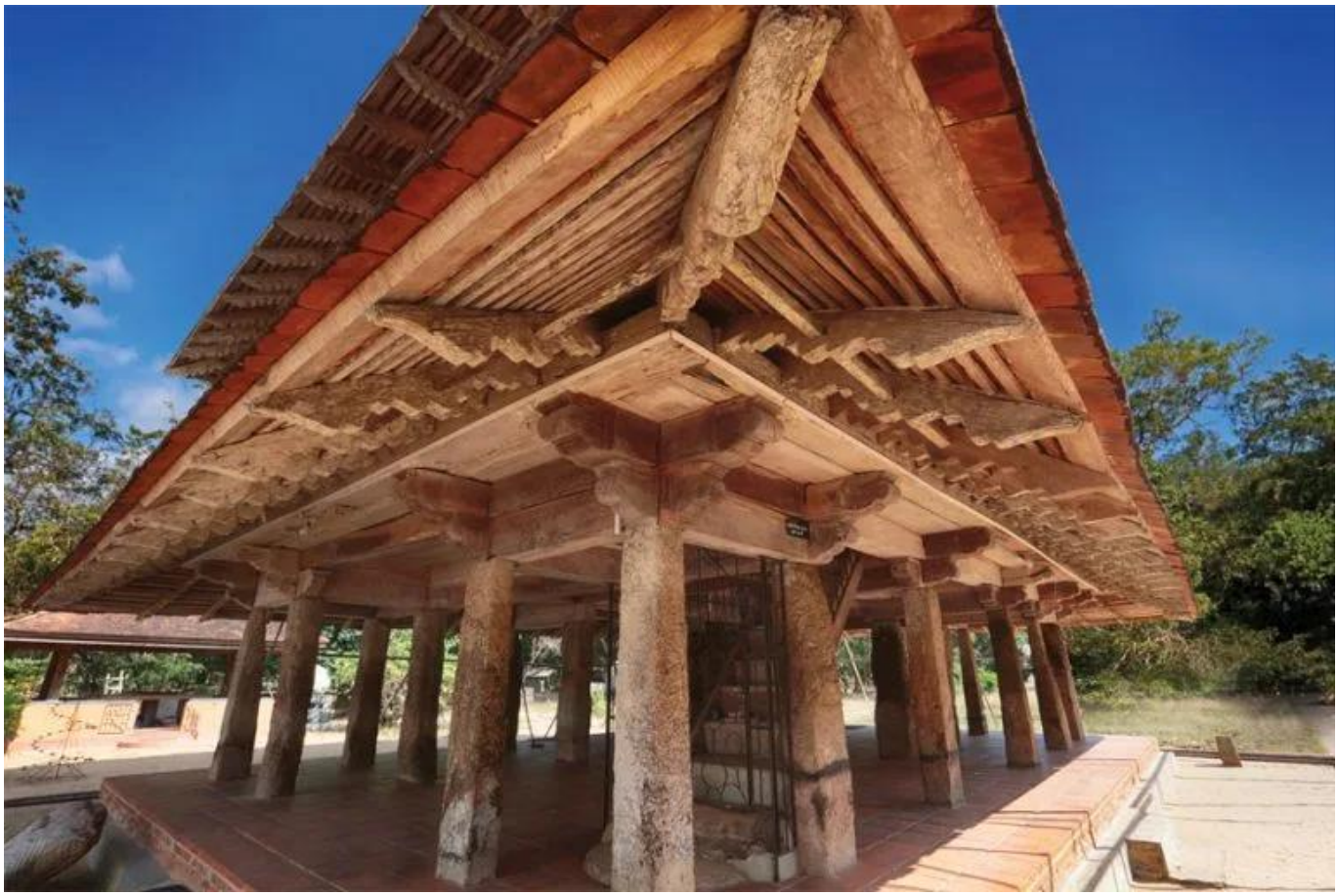
Wooden beams carved with intricate traditional designs and motifs extended to the ceiling, supporting the roof. The clay walls of the image house featured fading temple art from the Kandyan era. Within the chamber, bright murals and motifs had been painted around the image of a seated Buddha.

After immersing ourselves in the beautiful art, we headed towards the stupa encircled by an *Eth Paura* (elephant wall). Nearby, a small image house opened to reveal a statue of the seated Buddha and vibrant wall paintings. Remnants of an old bell tower stands near the stupa, with distinctive features reminiscent of colonial

buildings.



Tampita Viharaya is an Image House built on a raised platform supported by stone pillars.

The leaves of the sprawling Bo Tree, believed to be many centuries old, rustled as we continued our exploration.

We came across the remnants of a Chapter House, which is believed to have been a multi-storey structure. However, today only stone pillars and the foundation can be seen.

An ancient temple built on a serene and verdant land, the Devagiri Raja Maha Viharaya provides a glimpse into the past. The many structures on the sacred grounds each have a story waiting to be discovered.