A Journey of Discovery

Posted on
One of the many waterways: the Induruwe river

Winding roads and small waterways that babbled merrily poised a picturesque backdrop as we slowly ascended the narrow pathways in search of the small villages of Siripagama and Sri Palabaddala. It occurred to us that perhaps we were now treading the same route that our ancestors journeyed in pilgrimage to Sri Pada many centuries ago and where discoveries of mythical beings were made.

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A turn from the Ratnapura town on to the Ratnapura–Wewelwatte road carried us onwards passing the village of Malwala. Soon after reaching a fork we proceeded on the Malwala–Siripagama road to reach our destination. From here the scenery became more breathtaking, compelling us to stop every now and then to appreciate the rare sights that spread as far as the eye could see.

The narrow road, first thought to be built and developed to a tar road during the British regime, fell through dense vegetation on either sides that at intervals gave way to vistas of tea, rubber or even cinnamon plantations along with waterfalls that spilled its waters to small pools of water or streams that trickled through. It is mentioned that the road was first cut through to make way for the horse of a plantation owner by the name of Carney during the British rule. Here and there we passed several shops, unassuming in nature, and houses that seemed to either blend in or lay almost hidden amidst the tree leadened path. At times the veiled sides parted to present far away mountains that dotted the horizon and every now and then we overtook people slowly making there way either up or down the ascending roadway.

Making our way through the village of Gilimale we soon arrived at Siripagama. A village with a few grocery stores and scattered houses greeted our curious eyes. It is said that Siripagama was established in the late 1980s when a tea plantation that spread across an area of 1,500 acres was divided into 50 acre slots. Siripagama was built on a plot of land that was leftover after the division. Proceeding through Siripagama, all to soon we found ourselves at the door step of the Sri Palabaddala

Temple bringing our journey to an end.

Folklore and legends weave through this ancient village that lay at the footsteps of the sacred Adam's Peak. As such an interesting tale is told of the origins of the village name, Palabaddala. In Pali, Palabaddala is known as *Putabaddasena*, which can be translated to *Pala-bath-gala.* Long ago in the times when the Island was ruled by kings, a poor man set off on a pilgrimage to Adam's Peak. As he did not have money to afford rice, he packed a meal made of *mallung* or a salad made of edible leaves. The man reached a river that flowed at the foot of Adam's Peak by noon, and decided to have his lunch. After sitting down on a rock by the river, he untied his lunch to see that instead of *mallung*, it now contained steaming rice. It is believed that due to this miracle, the area came to be known as *Pala-bath-gala* (leaves, rice and rock), which evolved to Sri Palabaddala.

The importance of the village lies in the fact that it falls through the famed trail to Sri Pada (Adam's Peak) named the Ratnapura–Palabaddala trail. Also known as the Raja Mawatha, it is said that the existence of this route go back many centuries to that of King Valagamba (First Century BC), who sought refuge from a Chola invasion in the forest surrounding the Peak. The legend explains that the King discovered Sri Pada as he chased after a stag, which turned out to be a manifestation of a deity. Chronicles also narrate about King Vijayabahu (Polonnaruwa Kingdom), who had provided villages on the way to the Peak, with facilities and improved roads to make the ascent easier for pilgrims. Another tale relates that King Nissankamalla, who built resting places along the way, had visited the site on many occasions.

However, the most captivating tale is that of a story relating to the discovery of Raja Mawatha by King Keerthi Sri Rajasinghe that is popular amongst the villagers of Sri Palabaddala. It is believed that the King had a flower garden or a *Saman Watta* where jasmine among many other flowers grew by the bunches. At one point every morning, there were tell-tale signs of flowers being plucked and the King appointed a watcher to catch the thieves. However, no matter how many watchers he appointed none could catch the thieves. The King then ordered that anyone who believed they could catch the thieves should come forward. A short person with no limbs came forward to take on the challenge. The King questioned him as to how he would catch the thieves with no hands or feet. Replying that he would still be able to accomplish the task, upon his request the King built a small hut in the garden. Sitting within the hut, he started to recite the *Satipattana Suttraya*. The thieves, who happened to be two goddesses from the Deva realm heard the sombre recitation and approached the hut asking the dweller as to who he was. As he

revealed his condition of being unable to come out and that he could eat only when somebody brought him food, the goddesses were saddened and were compelled to help him. Telling the dweller that if he is able to touch the shawls of the celestial beings he would be able to gain his hands and feet, they snaked the soft shawl through the key hole of the hut. As soon as the dweller touched the shawl, he gained hands and feet and he quickly tumbled out of the hut to catch the shawls of the goddesses. Unable to move, they stood there until the message reached the King. As soon as the King arrived, the goddesses explained that they visited the garden each day to pick flowers to offer to Sri Pada. Upon hearing this the King stated that he would let them go if they show him the way to the sacred Peak. Accordingly, the goddesses scattered flowers along the path leading the King to the mountain and it is said that this was the origin of Raja Mawatha.

Bidding adieu to this place we made a little detour to witness the Mapalana Ella. Looking from afar at the breathtaking waters that gushed out in torrents we turned back heading towards the Ratnapura town, marking the end of another adventure.

