

Kelaniya Raja Maha Viharaya

Posted on

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Buddhist devotees climb the steps of the Kelaniya Vihara to worship. Photo: Pushpakumarn Matugama

The most important centre of faith for Buddhists in Colombo and its suburbs is at Kelaniya, seven miles north-east of Colombo Fort. Amongst the Sinhalese the religious significance and deep veneration for Kelaniya is felt in the popular Sinhala folk verse or gami kaviya.

“All sins from birth are absolved
If you worship once at Kelaniya”

Sri Lanka’s ancient cities, as those in all other parts of the ancient civilized world, have been established close to rivers. Likewise Kelaniya, close to the Kelani river , was known as Kelani Desha in ancient times. It is mentioned in the Walahassa Jataka as Kallyanipura. The Jataka stories are an important component of the literary and religious history of the Buddhists. Each Jataka story is that of a previous incarnation of the Buddha, the collection comprises 550 stories.



A Buddhist devotee carries a pot of water which will be poured on to the Bodhi tree at the Kelaniya Vihara. A traditional form of Buddhist worship.

In the Hindu epic Ramayanaya Ravana’s brother Vibishana who lived in Kelanipura was handed over the kingdom of Lanka. Tradition has it that in response to an invitation from Maniakkika Nagaraja in the eighth year after Buddhahood, on the full moon day in the month of January, the Buddha visited Kelaniya, sat on a gem studded throne to preach the dhamma to the Nagas. It is also believed that the

Buddha had bathed in the Kelani river on this visit.

King Yatalatissa (3rd century B.C.) is known to have built the city of Kelaniya, made a temple in it and reigned there. In the 2nd century B.C., a feudatory King Kelanitissa, disturbed over a love affair between his queen and his brother, rashly executed an innocent Buddhist monk, by burning him in a cauldron of boiling oil. The guardian deities of Lanka were angered and the sea began to encroach the land. As an offering to placate the deities the King set his daughter Devi afloat, out to sea in a closed boat. The boat landed at Ruhuna in the south and the King of Ruhuna, Kavantissa, married her. She was the mother of Dutugemunu, the warrior king, the most esteemed and idolised king of Sri Lanka. The town of Kelaniya which was at that period said to be seven gawwas (28 miles) distant from the sea, is now much less than four. The original paintings on the walls of the shrine have been attributed to the King Voharikatissa (209 to 231 A.D.).

In 1213, during the invasion of Kalinga-Maga from South India, most of the temples held in great veneration were plundered and destroyed. After nineteen years of destruction, King Vijayabahu III rebuilt all the temples including the temple at Kelaniya, repaired the dagaba which was in ruins and crowned it with a pinnacle.

Kelaniya has occupied a prominent place in Sinhalese literature. In the *Selalihini Sandesaya*, one of the more famous poems of the Sinhalese, Sri Rahula, a poet-monk of the past, gives a vivid and imaginative description of Kelaniya, its famous temple and the surrounding landscape to Vibishana, the guardian deity of Kelaniya. The *sandesa* is a poetic form highly developed in Sri Lanka. It is written in the form of a message (*sandesa*) sent from one person to another, and usually carried by a bird. Kelaniya is also mentioned in other *sandesayas* such as *Kokila* (nightingale), *Hansa* (swan), and *Mayura* (peacock) *sandesayas*.

During the Kotte period of Sri Lanka's history, when the Portuguese came to this country and conquered the maritime regions (16th century), Kelaniya and its famous temple were sacked. Captain Diego de Melo and his Portuguese men plundered and razed most of the historic temple. However, in 1767, Kirthi Sri Rajasinghe, the King of Kandy, rebuilt the temple. As the Portuguese chronicler de Queyroz, observes referring to the reconstruction of shrines at Devundera, Kelaniya and Nawagamuwa: "The Kings of Candea on retaking possession of the lowlands, made it their first care to rebuild the Pagodas we demolished especially those of greater veneration like that of Tanavare, Calane, Nagao and others of the kind, though not with the former grandeur."

During this period the Makara Thorana at the entrance to the temple was constructed. The Makara, which is a symbol of protection, is a stylised depiction of animals combine into an elaborate pattern. It had the trunk of an elephant, the feet of a lion, the ears of a hog, the body of a fish, the teeth of a monkey and the tail of a swan. Makara Thoranas or archways of this type are often found at entrances to temples. In 1888, Mrs. Helena Wijewardena, a relative of His Excellency, the president of Sri Lanka, J R Jayawardene, had been deeply distressed at the state of the buildings of the temple. She had it renovated and restored to nearly its former glory. Then, for twenty years under her patronage, Solius Mendis, an artist who revived the tradition of temple paintings, painted frescoes depicting events in the life of the Buddha and scenes from Buddhist history of Sri Lanka such as the Sri Maha Bodhi sapling being brought over from India, princess Hema-Mali bringing the Tooth Relic of the Buddha hidden in her hair, and some scenes from the Kelaniya Temple's history. Geometrically patterned ceiling paintings adorn the hall of the temple. According to commentators on Sri Lankan art, such as D.B. Dhanapala, "Kelaniya frescoes are a throw back in easy but masterful handling of mass composition of the original Ajanta Art in the picturisation of a story.

Solius Mendis, this master painter of modern Ceylon has fitted the incidents of the stories into the wall spaces with imagination. At Kelaniya we get a series of historical panels that light up the dry bones of the past into something rich and strange. The colors are subdued they are pleasant to the eye.

A good deal of research work has been done which gives an authentic background to those bits of history imprisoned within the panels." The main shrine consists of two sections. It is built on a rock platform three feet high and measures 150 feet in breadth, 90 feet in length. The outside of the shrine has three rows of carved stone swans, dwarfs and elephants. These second row of dwarfs are known as Bahiravayo. These comical beings are holding up the edifice in the manner of Atlas, in playful attitudes and with grimaces on their faces. Above these on the outside walls, statues of Hindu deities are hewn into the rock surface right around the shrine. They are of Gana, the Hindu God of wisdom, Goddess Ganga of the rivers, Vishnu, the guardian deity of Sri Lanka, Vibishana, the guardian deity of Kelaniya, Maitri Bodisatva, the next Buddha to be, King Maniakkika and Skanda, God of war. At the entrance to the shrine the ever familiar Sanda Kada pahana, or Moonstone, an ornamented stone slab in the shape of a half or moon, leads to a few steps, flanked by two Gajasinha images with the heads of elephants and the bodies of lions. Gajasinha means literally Elephant-Lion (Gaja-Elephant and Sinha-Lion).

The 18th century paintings are in two long halls. The influence of South Indian art in these frescoes is evident. In the long hall in the inside chamber adaha ata riyen 27 foot long reclining statue of the Buddha takes pride of place. There are two statues of the Buddha in Samadhi (meditation) posture, and statues of several deities at the feet of the reclining Buddha statue. Adjoining the shrine, to the right, the paddy heap shaped (dhanyakara) dagaba marks the spot where the Buddha at the request of King Maniakkika sat on a gem studded throne to preach to his subjects and convert them. The gem studded throne is believed to be enshrined in this dagaba which is the best existing example of a Dhanyakara dagaba today. On the left of the shrine on a high stone platform stands the verdant Bo-tree (*ficus religiosa*), the same species of tree that gave the Buddha shelter during his meditation. It is said the Buddha, in gratitude, stood one week in thankful gaze upon the tree. Buddhists therefore have made it an object of worship, hence the presence of a Bo-tree in every temple. Lately a gilded fence has been built around it more for ornamentation than protection. Devotees light coconut oil lamps, joss sticks, candles and camphor around the tree, hang prayer flags in homage and fulfilment of special vows.

Almost all important Buddhist temples in Sri Lanka have their own pereheras once a year. In commemoration of the Buddha's visit, the Duruthu perehera. at Kelaniya was inaugurated in January 1927. Various religious festivities that take place for about a week culminate in the Duruthu Perehera. It is so colourful and spectacular pageant of elephants, torch bearers and dancers. The villagers and spectators from other parts of the island flock to Kelaniya for this annual Duruthu festival. During the festival, numerous stalls selling clay utensils and ornaments cater to the crowds around the temple grounds. This decorative pottery has been a cottage industry of Kelaniya from ancient times. The terracotta work on sale has incised decoration on goblets, flower pots and ornamental pots. The gaudy clay animals have native beauty of their own, catching the eye of the souvenir hunter. The Kelaniya temple is situated 7 km from Colombo. The approach is across the Kelani Bridge, and the first diversion on the Colombo-Kandy road. A bus could be taken from the Central Bus Station pettah. There is also a Railway Station at Kelaniya. If public transport is used it is easier to get there by bus than by train.



A view of the Kelaniya Raja Maha Vihara. The dagaba on the right is believed to contain the gem-studded throne from which the Buddha preached.

Photo: G. Hettirachchi