Podi Hamuduruwo: A Colossus of his Times

Posted on



Venerable Galboda Gnanissara was the face of the Gangaramaya Temple. The Temple and the chief priest were inseparable for a long time; their identities were fused. The Temple was a staid-built environment that sheltered a man full of life.

Podi Hamuduruwo, meaning junior monk, as he was fondly known, brought with him an endearing and charismatic quality, a persona of a go-getter who could be anywhere and everywhere, all at once. He was the inspiring chief priest of the Temple whose persistence and commitment catapulted the Temple into the national spotlight. He was the spotlight. At his passing, there's so much to be remembered. Of everything we knew about him, we miss his friendship most.

Words Jennifer Paldano Goonewardane.

Impermanence is the foundation of Buddhist teachings, but in the temporariness of the animate and inanimate, parting seems the most dampening of experiences. It is so with the passing of Venerable Galboda Gnanissara, the former chief priest of the Gangaramaya Temple in Hunupitiya Colombo, who was the heart of the Temple and whose identity was deeply entrenched with it. There was something about the man, the monk, that was unmistakably distinct and audacious.

It was easy to be friends with Podi Hamuduruwo, the behemoth of the Gangaramaya Temple, who, even after reaching the pinnacle of monkhood, couldn't shed the nickname he earned as a young priest of just eleven years old in 1954. He was a child from the southern village of Galboda in Matara. Still, it seems he was the chosen one, the preordained, who had to grow up fast as a junior monk to take up the role of de facto leader when his patriarch and high priest, Venerable Devundara Vachissara, lost his sight. At just sixteen years old, he oversaw the Temple's administration on behalf of his superior, and it was a good training ground, a gradual growth from amateur to expert to an impactful life in robes whose social service transformed lives and created better futures.

> One can't help but like Podi Hamuduruwo, cheerful and chatty, he was a people's man, affectionate, caring, and concerned, yet never ceding control and was unflappable even in criticism. He was success-driven and forged strong working relationships with stakeholders in every endeavor he undertook.

Podi Hamuduruwo was our friend too, but he was first our client, hence our friendship grew under extraordinary circumstances. Podi Hamuduruwo, who started

the Navam Maha Perahera in 1979, realizing the event’s potential for the tourism industry, chose the Explore Sri Lanka magazine, which was the one and only travel and tourism magazine with a broad reach, to advertise the annual procession. The first advertisement of the perahera appeared in the January 1989 issue of Explore Sri Lanka. However, the monk’s intentions didn’t sit well with some, one newspaper editor in particular protesting the ethicality of taking a paid advertisement for a religious event, criticizing the monk for commercializing the perahera. Not a man generally flustered by criticism, in this instance he was thrust into an awkward situation. Podi Hamuduruwo was delighted when BT Options offered to promote the event for free.



Podi Hamuduruwo was a remarkable inspiration to many, with an endearing and charismatic quality.



A young Podi Hamuduruwo with his mentor, Venerable Devundara Vachissara.



What it looked like a century ago – the Gangaramaya Temple surrounded by the Beira Lake was a quaint sight in the village of Hunupitiya.

Since then, Explore Sri Lanka and other publications of BT Options has promoted the annual Navam Maha Perahera and featured the Temple and Podi Hamuduruwo right throughout the year. But it was also the start of a lasting friendship of mutual respect and love. He was one of our biggest supporters. Podi Hamuduruwo was always there when we needed him, whether at our functions or a new venture, blessing our every endeavor wholeheartedly. One can't help but like the thero's, cheerful and chatty, he was a people's man, affectionate, caring, and concerned, yet never ceding control and was unflappable even in criticism. He was success-driven and forged strong working relationships with stakeholders in every endeavor he undertook. He not only believed in equality he was committed to creating it in his lifetime, believing that every individual had an ability that could be harnessed for the greater good. Thus he always sought the good of people and country. The

spirited character he was, Podi Hamuduruwo transferred his vibrancy to the Temple, a nineteenth-century edifice pioneered by one of the colonial era's stalwarts of resistance, Venerable Hikkaduwe Sri Sumangala. The Venerable Galboda Gnanissara was an astute pupil and descendant of the generation of Buddhist monks who had the privilege of being molded under the tutelage of the Temple's great founder. The Temple, recorded and supported by photographic evidence, was once surrounded by the Beira Lake and accessible only by boat. Today, it is a historical edifice thriving in a cosmopolitan hub where the spiritual and material coexist harmoniously. Podi Hamuduruwo himself epitomized that unity.

He is credited for transforming Gangaramaya into a versatile place for Buddhism's universality, showcasing the diverse traditions of the Buddhist world, from Southeast Asia's Buddhist territories' unique artistic styles, evident in the Buddha images and stupas situated in gradients, to the ornate lions and nymphs and decorative arches and carvings. The transformed Temple symbolizes the venerable monk's significant interaction with Buddhist countries in Southeast Asia; a green jade Buddha statue festooned in gold ornamentation, a replica of the historical emerald Buddha at the Royal Palace in Thailand sits in its own shrine room – a gift from Thailand. Who else but Podi Hamuduruwo would think of a museum at the Temple? It is a veritable display of more than just artifacts related to Buddhism worldwide. It is a mishmash of collectibles, souvenirs, gifts from people's personal collections, and Buddha images of varying styles and materials. Only Podi Hamuduruwo would think of adding a vintage car collection to the lot.

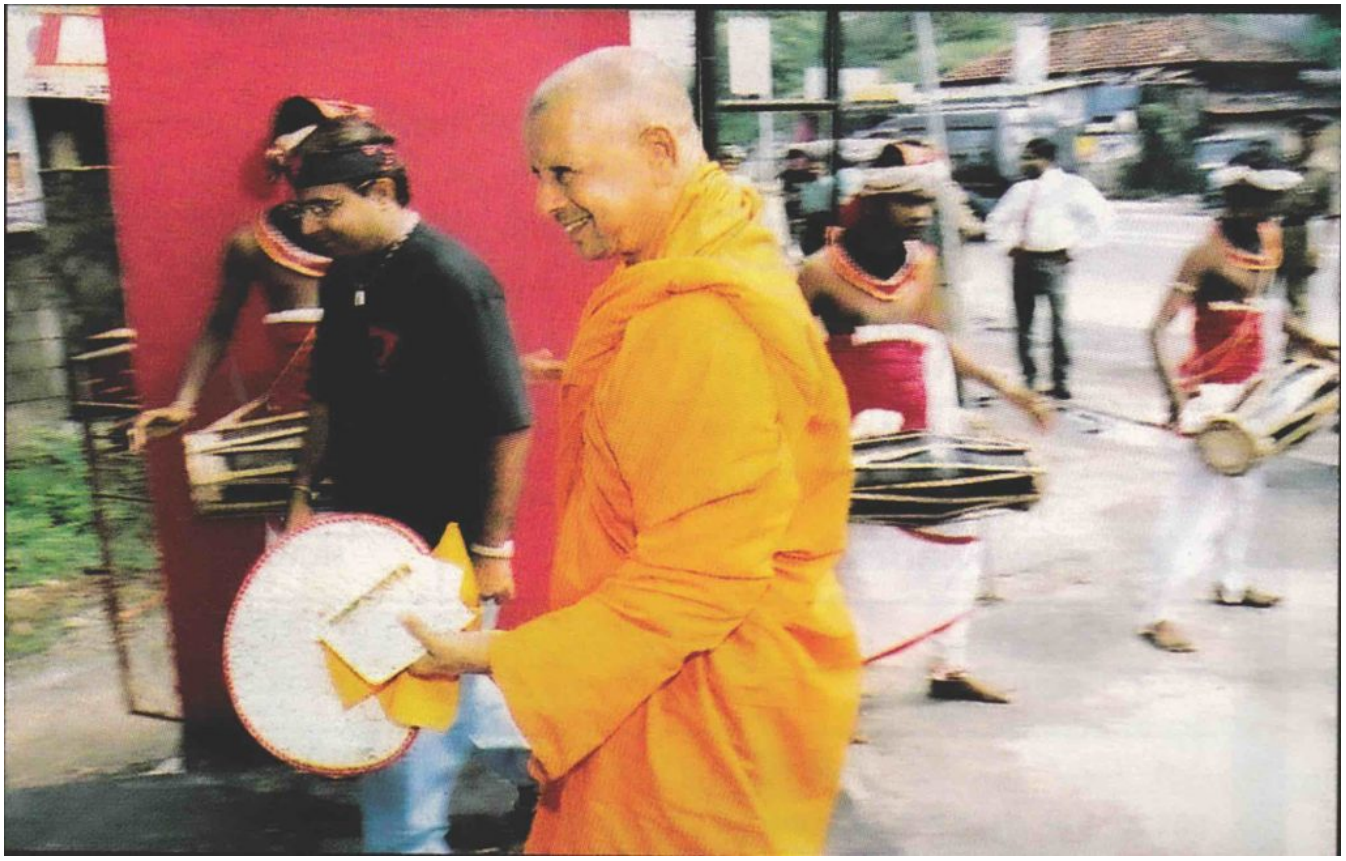


A reflection of our friendship – Podi Hamuduruwo on the covers of the Explore Sri Lanka magazine.

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Podi Hamuduruwo transformed the Gangaramaya temple into a versatile place for Buddhism’s universality.



Podi Hamuduruwo with Mathi K Parthipan during the opening of MindHead in 2002, Sri Lanka’s first ever LAN Gaming Centre.

The museum also has in its display a miniature Buddha image encased in a chamber, visible only through a magnifying glass. His close ties with foreign temples led to Gangaramaya being gifted a hair relic of the Buddha from a temple in Chittagong.

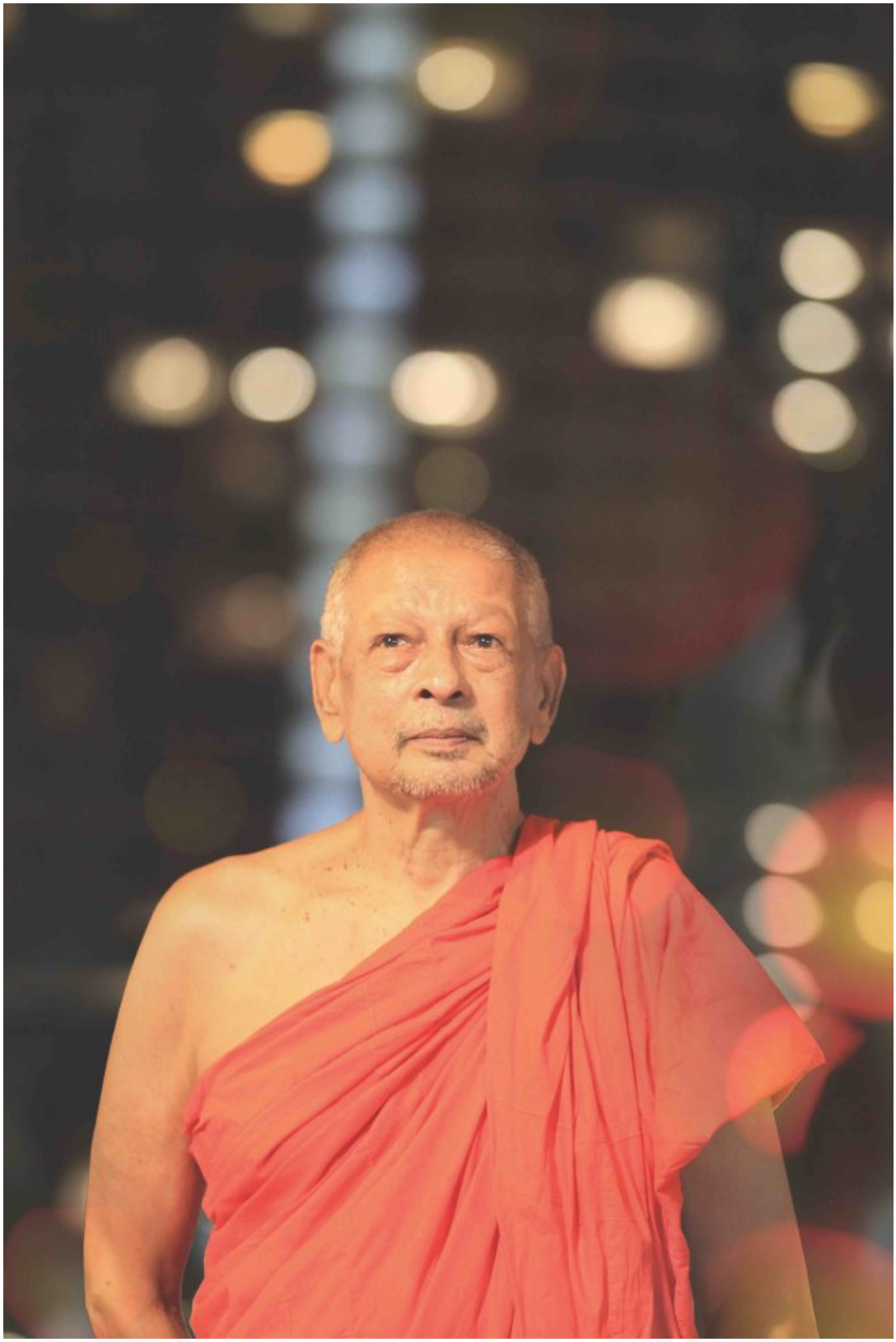
He made the Navam Maha Perahera the best in Colombo. The Thera had declared that the Navam Perahera had contributed to the tourism industry’s growth, marking a significant increase in tourist arrivals in February. The venerable monk ensured that his Temple’s annual procession would be the most spectacular display of culture in Colombo, with nearly one hundred and fifty items of cultural significance performed by over one thousand artists. The Gangaramaya Vesak Zone was his idea. Like all his projects, it became Colombo’s most vibrant street for some of the most creative projects in lantern making, marking the most significant Buddhist festival in the world. Those who knew him knew Podi Hamuduruwo always did

things in his style. And he did them big. From expanding the Temple and enhancing it, Podi Hamuduruwo believed that every space requires resurgence, which he undertook at Gangaramaya, in the interior and the extensive collection of items he introduced in his lifetime.

He was primarily known as a man who walked the talk. Whenever he spoke, he made it a point to express his desire for unity, appealing to people and politicians to transcend barriers of ethnicity, religion, and class. He reflected those values in service.

His service extended beyond the Temple to touch countless lives, helping the marginalized and needy. He had a big heart whose entrepreneurial spirit, self-motivation, and drive were central to his success. The Sri Jinarathana Vocational Training Centre he founded in response to the 1970s youth unrest has produced skilled workers out of young men from needy backgrounds who would have otherwise been relegated to the margins of society. He was passionate about his country, and that drove him to act before others would. Rather than blaming the powers that be for failing the country’s youth, he took the initiative, opening an avenue for skill development. He did the same with community development projects. The Na Sevana Community Development Center in Hambantota is an extensive project aimed at farming communities. It has a comprehensive mission. Its objectives are multipronged in keeping with the nature of issues in the communities it works with. Being rural, school children and youth are vulnerable to their circumstances. Hence, the project provides them direction to complete their education and provide vocational training so that they look to the future with hope. Livelihood opportunities, skill development, health and nutrition, and spiritual enrichment aim to create well-rounded individuals who can live a balanced life within the family and outside.

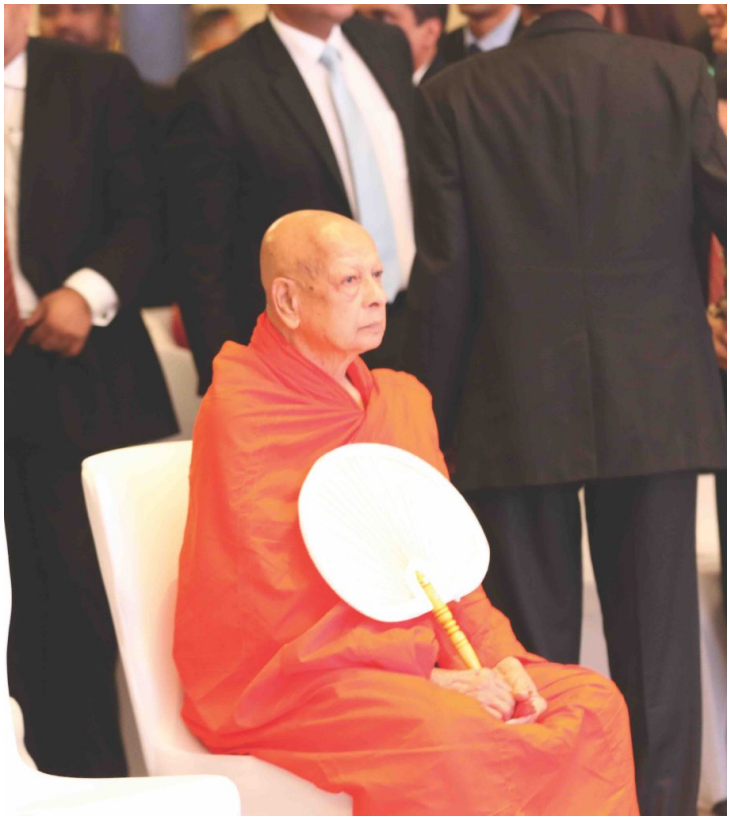
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Podi Hamuduruwo was known as a man who walked the talk.



During the Business Today Top 20, 2010-2011: Ven Galboda Gnanissara thero with Ven Uduwe Dhammaloka thero; Mathi K Parthipan; Prime Minister D M Jayaratne; Ranil Wickremesinghe, Leader of Opposition; Prof Maithree Wickremesinghe and Glenda Parthipan.



The Venerable Thero always extended his support to BT Options wholeheartedly.



Podi Hamuduruwo with Deputy Sangharaja of Thailand.



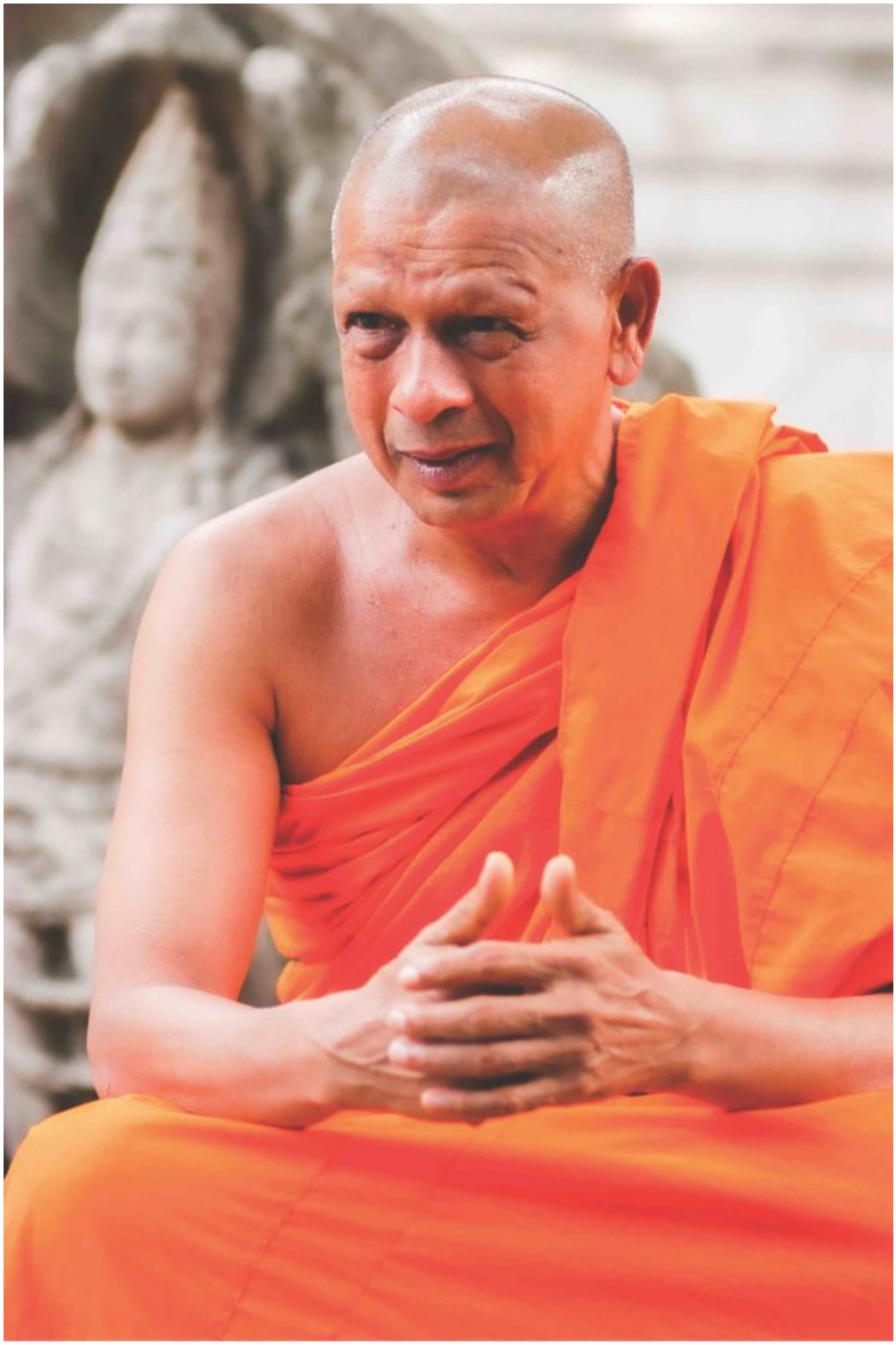
During the Business Today Top 30, 2016-2017: Ven Galboda Gnanissara Thero with Mathi K Parthipan, Chairman/Managing Director, BT Options; Glenda Parthipan; Minister Gayantha Karunatileka; Minister Sagala Ratnayaka; Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe; Prof Maithree Wickramasinghe and Harsha de Silva, Deputy Minister.

Podi Hamuduruwo was a man of many qualities. A man born to rule, who had no place for superstitions, he believed in character and service as defining human attributes. He rose to serve on many occasions. They were innumerable. From forgoing the pageantry of the Navam Maha Perahera to distribute the event's money to the victims of the January 1996 Central Bank bomb attack to helping the victims of the 2004 Tsunami with provisions and housing units designed by the Temple's vocational training center students that could be set up in an hour, the monk in his lifetime empathized with those suffering.

An avid learner, innovation was in his blood. A severe accident in 1971 and the

chance to travel to England for further treatment thrust him into a new opportunity. The venerable monk's visit to the Oxford University's Language Center marked a turning point in audio-visual language learning in Sri Lanka. He followed a course in the technique with the help of generous donors. With the help of the British Council, Gangaramaya Temple was the first to introduce an audio-visual language learning platform for English to Sri Lanka in 1976, which was before any other university in the country did.

The venerable monk has always enjoyed growing trees. "It gives me great pleasure watching a plant grow. What a satisfaction it is," referring to the Tree Bank he set up in a 740-acre property in Akuressa in southern Sri Lanka. Teak, mahogany, jackfruit, and herbal plants are grown and distributed regularly, providing a lesson in conservation and income generation. He introduced plant nurseries in the Temple, setting an example and demonstrating the practicality of small-scale exercises to those who visit the Temple. The venerable monk once said that they donated garden hoes (mammoty) to village temples, creating a practice of lending tools to those who could not afford them. They would return the tools after using them in cultivation. That practice went hand in hand with plant and seed donations. "We did not merely speak about issues; we took action," declared the monk. Under his guidance, unutilized properties in distant Okkampitiya, Weeraketiya, Galaha, and Akuressa were converted into fertile patches of crops worked by local communities who, following training in all aspects of farming, cultivate the lands and benefit from selling the crops. Several hundred families are supported and sustained by this program.



Podi Hamuduruwo, marking 50 years in the robe, has undertaken an inspiring array of projects, notably championing education for the underprivileged.

Always concerned about the underprivileged, Podi Hamuduruwo set up a village in Kataragama and settled over a hundred families, complete with facilities. He established a home for children with disabilities in the Colombo suburbs, which houses 250 children, and another children's and elders' home in Kataragama. The only place providing free accommodation for pilgrims is Podu Hamuduruwo's Kataragama Pilgrims' Rest, and it's for all; whether one is Buddhist or not, whether Sinhala or not is irrelevant to a concept that showcases native generosity. As a monk with a large vision, he transformed a house in Colombo into a lodging for clergy members of any religion visiting Colombo for medical treatment. He set up a meditation center in Kalalgoda for those who seek peace and spirituality.

While he devotedly served people outside the Temple, Venerable Gnanissara's commitment to ensuring the welfare of the clergy and Buddhism's longevity was second to none. He travelled extensively in Sri Lanka, visiting temples and inquiring after their requirements. It was during these travels that he observed the poor sanitary conditions in rural temples and he swiftly acted on the need by financing the construction of toilets and drinking water facilities. He breathed new life into the monk's practice of Pindapata, the collection of food in an alms bowl, an essential practice in monastic conduct, which, although common in countries like Thailand, is rare in Sri Lanka. But he desired a return for that humble practice and did so by introducing new alms bowls of good quality, which he received graciously from Thailand, distributing them to monks around the country. For Buddhism's well-being, he offered scholarships to novice monks, upgraded the sanitary facilities of monastic colleges, and mediated in exempting foreign educational books from taxes.

In his lifetime, he would welcome leaders and politicians of all parties, in and out of power, advising, praising, and chiding them equally. The Gangaramaya Temple was open to all, and Venerable Gnanissara accompanied any politician who entered the Temple seeking blessings before or after a milestone. He didn't hesitate to share his opinion on matters of national importance. As a clergyman, Venerable Gnanissara felt it was his duty to guide the country's political destiny on behalf of the people. He has related many such instances during his interactions with Explore Sri Lanka. As a young monk in 1972, he advised Prime Minister Sirimavo Bandaranaike, who had gained an extension of two years in power, to make the most of the extra years by avoiding making the same mistakes, to accomplish what is good for the contrary, and to speed up things that have hit a snag, warning the premier that failing to do so would lead to an inevitable fall from grace.

He had a great rapport with President J. R. Jayewardene, but that didn’t stop him from censuring the president for signing the Indo-Lanka Peace Accord in 1987. Years later, it was Podi Hamuduruwo that President Jayawardena requested to his bedside to chant Pirith in the final moments of his life. On another occasion, he rebuked President Jayewardene for taxing the ‘brain’ by levying high taxes on books, magazines, and publications; the swift response three days later witnessed its removal. President Ranasinghe Premadasa appointed a mini cabinet for the education ministry as suggested by the monk, who felt that such an important ministry should not be the purview of a minister but the president’s responsibility. He urged Mahinda Rajapaksa upon coming to power to eradicate terrorism, an undertaking he accepted and fulfilled. Venerable Gnanissara’s fearless nature was evident when, six months before the war’s ending, he took out a newspaper advertisement in all three languages, appealing to the leader of the LTTE to surrender and end the bloodshed. At a time when anyone else would have feared reprisal for such a bold act, Venerable Gnanissara didn’t hide.

As we look at a man and a life spent in the service of religion, we see a clergyman who was larger than life, whose presence touched countless, whose friendship was warm and sincere, whose fearlessness and determination bore results and impacted many lives. An optimist to the core, who, rather than complaining, was the change maker, he left an imprint of a monk who did extraordinary things in his lifetime. An experimenter extraordinaire, he shattered tradition and took on a rational outlook to service, mingling the religious role with a worldly obligation. He was a different breed born to make things happen. He was a progressive who fought the good fight and ran the race to the finish. BT Options will dearly miss Podi Hamuduruwo.



Podi Hamuduruwo with Prime Minister Dudley Senanayake.



With Governor General William Goppallawa.



With President J R Jayewardene.



With President R Premadasa.



With President D B Wijetunga.



With President Mahinda Rajapaksa and Ranjith Wijewardene.



With Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe.

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