

Podi Hamuduruwo – A Heart Full of Kindness

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Podi Hamuduruwo, a source of strength and guidance for all

On December 14, 2016, Ven Galaboda Gnanissara Thero, Chief Incumbent of the Gangaramaya Temple turns 74 years. His life is one of kindness that has been devoted to the upliftment of the nation.

Words Yomal Senerath-Yapa **Photographs** BT Images

The Gangaramaya Temple is an oasis in the heart of Colombo, an escape from the commercial hub into a cool, shaded spiritual haven. It is a temple that engages in charity with much altruism. Ven Galaboda Gnanissara Thero, who is fondly known as Podi Hamuduruwo, has guided and led the Gangaramaya Temple over the years with great courage, dedication and motivation thereby reflecting the teachings of the Buddha.



Na Sevana, Hambantota

Podi Hamuduruwo was ten years old when he was ordained as Ven Galaboda Gnanissara Thero, at a time when one had to take a boat across the Beira Lake to reach the temple. He was at the tender age of 16 when his guru and the then Chief Incumbent Ven Vacissara Thero was left completely visually impaired. Podi Hamuduruwo had to take on the responsibility to lead the Temple at that young

age. It was a task the young monk undertook courageously and competently.

Podi Hamuduruwo has ensured that the Temple is a spiritual place for everyone, and the building of the Seema Malakaya by the Moosajee family is an early example.

Podi Hamuduruwo has always focused on spiritual, cultural and social welfare. Supporting the youth through skills training as well as employment and providing for underprivileged families are endeavours that started during the early days and continues to date.

The joy of reaching the 74th milestone will be celebrated by supporting those in need. Five acres in Seenigama, which was donated by Mrs Edwin Tillekeratne, is in the process of being converted into a complex of 20 shop-house units for 40 families of technicians. The ground floor will function as a workshop for the breadwinner while the family is accommodated upstairs.

Another, far sighted endeavour is the vocational centre that is to be opened on the same day. This will cater to the children of personnel of the Armed Forces who have dropped out of school, thus providing them with a guiding light for the future. The youngsters will be able to master a number of useful skills in motor mechanics, electronics, fire fighting, fibre glass manufacturing, breeding of ornamental fish, gardening and landscaping as well as English language and IT. They will be given accommodation in the hostel, where discipline will be instilled in them. This centre is also to function as a day training centre for youth from Seenigama and surrounding areas.



The complex of shop-house units at Seenigama

With many of the paddy farmers being affected by the recent severe droughts, the Venerable Thero aims to donate hand tractors to these farmers, which will enable them to use this vehicle for various agricultural activities as well as to generate electricity. Thereby providing alternative forms of income.

As far back as the 1970s, the Venerable Thero saw the importance of establishing a vocational training centre. This endeavour began during a period marked by youth unrest, in order to direct disoriented and misled youth towards the right path. The Sri Jinaratana Centre, in Colombo 2, has so far enabled 4,000 young people to gain employment. The training programme is up to date and includes electronics, motor mechanics and hardware systems amongst other subjects.

Gangaramaya Temple has also sown seeds in order for the rural communities to reap harvests. Unutilised properties in far away Okkampitiya, Weeraketiya, Galaha and Akuressa have been converted into fertile patches of crops. Local communities benefit from working in the fields and selling the crops. The property in Sooriyawewa supports approximately 412 families. Gangaramaya extends further

support by providing training on all aspects of farming.

Another major project is Na Sevana, a huge community project that impacts the vast Hambantota district, focusing on economic, educational and spiritual development as well as health and wellbeing.

Podi Hamuduruwo has always looked for innovative ways to sustain the values of the country and its people, irrespective of religion or race. The Kataragama Pilgrims' Rest provides ample accommodation for anyone visiting the ancient shrine. A comfortable and spacious house in Borella has been transformed into a place of lodging for members of clergy, of any denomination, visiting Colombo for medical treatment. Then, a meditation centre has been opened in Kalalgoda for those who seek peace and spirituality.



The Great Valley Estate in Galaha

Elders and children, the most vulnerable sections in society are especially taken care of by the Gangaramaya Temple. Thus, the Madiwela orphanage provides a safe home and learning space for differently abled children, while in Kataragama a home has been established for both the elderly and the young.

Podi Hamuduruwo epitomises the teachings of the Buddha. His life is one dedicated to the betterment of others, where the country always comes first.



The Seema Malakaya on Navam Perahera night

Podi Hamuduruwo has fostered long standing relations with temples overseas with the aim of ensuring cross-cultural learning. A Sacred Hair Relic of the Buddha was gifted to the Temple as a result of the warm and cordial ties between Gangaramaya and a temple in Chittagong. Furthermore, General Pradeeth Virakshadhi of the Thai Army, donated the golden casket to enshrine the Sacred Hair Relics of the Buddha. The latest token of devotion sits in its own shrine room: a glowing green jade Buddha adorned in gold jewellery – which is a replica of the historical emerald Buddha placed at the Royal Palace of Thailand – was donated by Madam Pabachudha Virakshadhi.

Listing all Podi Hamuduruwo's endeavours, past, present as well as future, would be impossible. But one project close to his heart has been that of providing "*paththara*", the alms bowls that were part of the Buddhist monk's ensemble from the Buddha's time. The ancient tradition of gathering alms from door to door has been declining of late, one reason being that the salt and acidity of the food offered made the inferior metal rust speedily. It was much more than reviving a tradition when Podi Hamuduruwo began distributing over 10,000 stainless steel *paththaras* each year. It ensures that humility, the hallmark of the monk, would not get corroded and will be preserved for posterity.

The Navam Perahera is also the brainchild of the Venerable Thero. It is a wonderful act of resuscitation, of keeping our traditional arts alive through a colourful,

magnificent pageant. It also incorporated elements of other faiths, in keeping with the spirit of Gangaramaya. Only someone with the courage and determination of the Ven Thero would have dared do so.

At the threshold of his 74th year, Podi Hamuduruwo hopes to start further projects that would continue to touch the lives of people. Podi Hamuduruwo of the Gangaramaya Temple has dedicated his life to the betterment of others, where the country always comes first.

