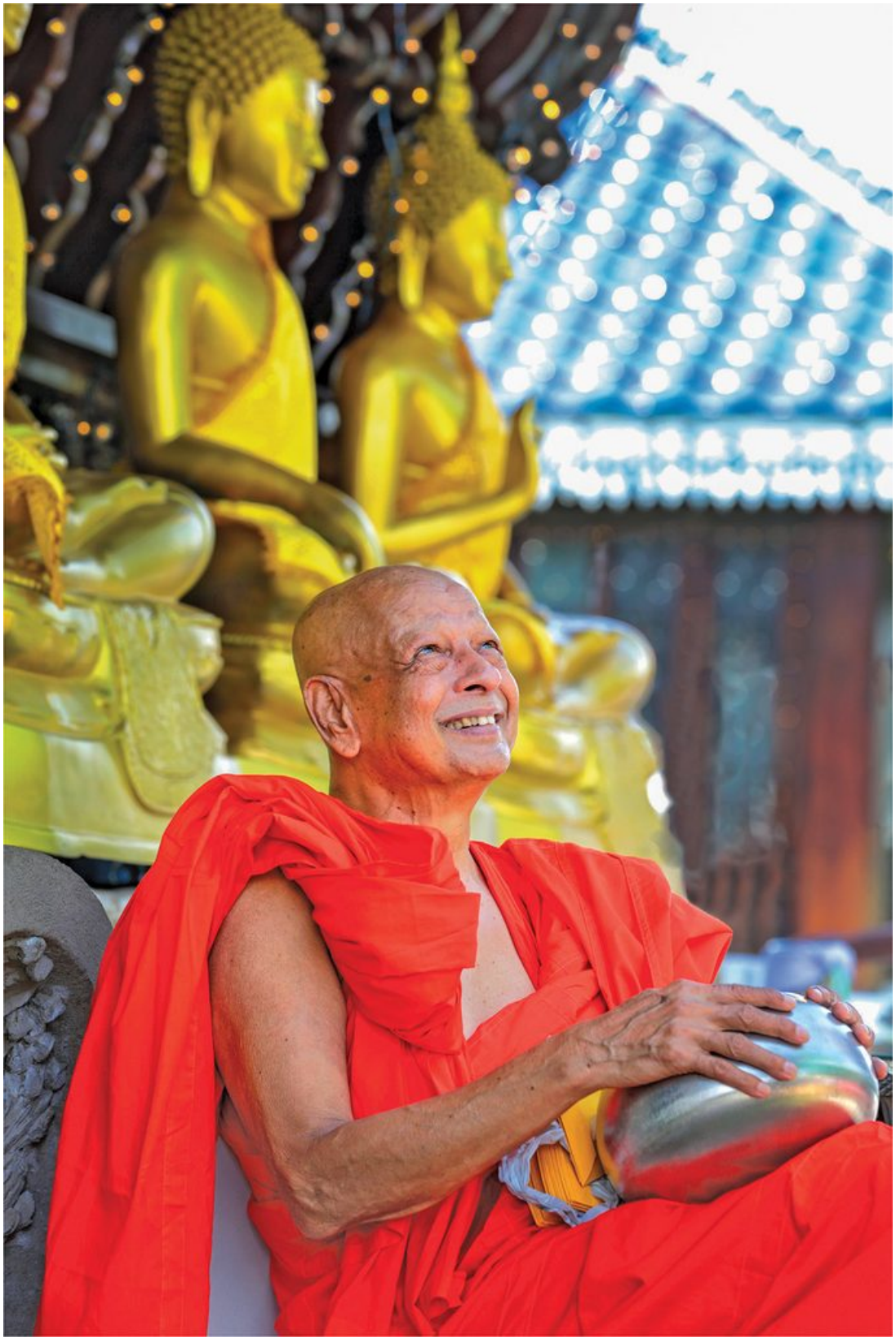
Podi Hamuduruwo

Posted on

A Life That Continues To Inspire Generations



As December marks the birth anniversary of Podi Hamuduruwo, Most Venerable Galboda Gnanissara Thero, whose extraordinary life was devoted to the teachings of the Buddha, the upliftment of society, and the betterment of people, Explore Sri Lanka remembers a remarkable spiritual leader. His compassion, courage, determination, and vision that transformed Gangaramaya Temple into an institution whose influence extended far beyond its religious boundaries.

Photography: BT Images.

Gangaramaya is much more than a place of religious worship. It is an institution that has played a significant role in education, social welfare, cultural preservation, and national development. The transformation of this temple into one of Sri Lanka’s most respected religious and humanitarian institutions is inseparable from the life of the Most Venerable Galboda Gnanissara Thero, affectionately known throughout the country as Podi Hamuduruwo. His was a life of extraordinary dedication, in which the teachings of the Buddha were not confined to sermons and religious observances but were translated into meaningful action that improved the lives of people from every community.



A young Podi Hamuduruwo with Chief Incumbent Ven Vacissara Thero.

For many decades, Podi Hamuduruwo was a familiar and reassuring presence at Gangaramaya. People from different walks of life came to seek his guidance. His concern was not limited to the spiritual well-being of those who approached him. He believed that a person’s ability to lead a dignified life depended equally on education, employment, health, discipline, and the opportunity to develop individual

abilities. This understanding shaped his approach to Buddhism and influenced the numerous initiatives that emerged from Gangaramaya under his leadership. He was a Buddhist monk who understood the practical realities of society, and he recognized that compassion could achieve its greatest purpose when accompanied by determination and action.



The beginnings of a lifetime dedicated to Gangaramaya and its people.



A glimpse of Gangaramaya in its early years, surrounded by the Beira Lake.

Born in December 1943 in Galboda, in the Matara district, the young boy who would become one of Sri Lanka’s most influential Buddhist monks entered the monastic order on November 8, 1954. He was given the name Galboda Gnanissara Thero, but because he was among the youngest monks at Gangaramaya, he became affectionately known as Podi Hamuduruwo, meaning the little monk. It was a name that remained with him throughout his life, even as his responsibilities increased and his influence extended across the country and beyond. The affectionate manner in which people continued to address him reflected a relationship that transcended formal religious titles. To many, he was not simply the Chief Incumbent of a prominent Buddhist temple but a spiritual guide, a teacher, and someone who could be approached with confidence.



Podi Hamuduruwo (last row, fourth from left) as a novice monk among students of Sri Gnanissara Pirivena.

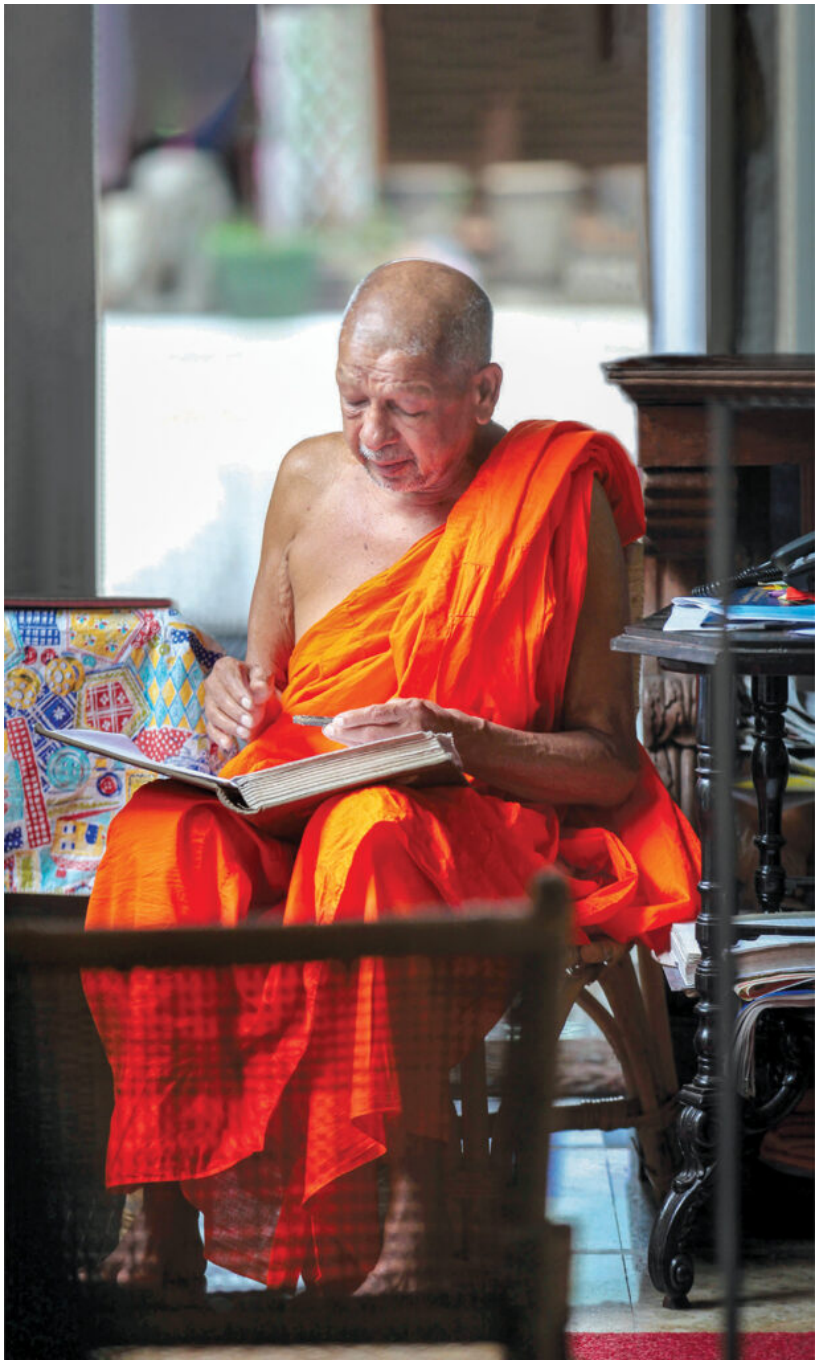
The Gangaramaya of his childhood was very different from the institution familiar to visitors today. Colombo was changing, and the temple's surroundings were closely connected to the waters of Beira Lake. In those early years, reaching Gangaramaya involved crossing the lake by boat. The young novice entered a religious environment that required discipline, obedience, patience, and commitment. However, circumstances soon demanded much more of him than the ordinary responsibilities of a young monk. When he was only 16 years old, his teacher and the then Chief Incumbent, Venerable Devundara Sri Vacissara Thero, lost his eyesight. The responsibility of looking after his teacher and attending to the administration of the temple fell upon the young Podi Hamuduruwo. At an age when most young people were still dependent on their elders' guidance, he was required to make decisions, manage responsibilities, and ensure the temple continued to function. Rather than allowing the situation to overwhelm him, he accepted the challenge with courage and determination. Those formative experiences developed the qualities that would distinguish his leadership for the remainder of his life.



Podi Hamuduruwo, whose vision shaped Gangaramaya.

His early responsibilities also taught him the importance of understanding people. A temple was not merely a collection of buildings, religious objects, and ceremonial traditions. It was a place where individuals arrived carrying their worries, aspirations, and expectations. The needs of devotees were varied, and addressing them required patience, understanding, and the willingness to listen. Podi Hamuduruwo gradually developed an approach in which religious leadership was closely associated with service to society. His belief was that the teachings of the Buddha should guide every aspect of life, including how people treated one another,

the opportunities they created for the less fortunate, and their responsibility towards the country.



A life devoted to wisdom, learning, and spiritual guidance.

Perhaps one of his most significant contributions was his understanding of the

importance of practical education. He recognized that Sri Lanka had talented young people who were often prevented from realizing their potential due to a lack of necessary training, facilities, and opportunities. Academic education alone could not meet all the requirements of a developing nation. Young people needed practical skills that would allow them to earn a livelihood, become independent, and contribute meaningfully to society. His interest in technical education was strengthened by his association with the engineer and inventor Ray Wijewardene, whose knowledge and innovative thinking encouraged him to appreciate the possibilities of technology and engineering. Podi Hamuduruwo was also willing to learn from the achievements of other religious institutions. He openly appreciated the vocational training programs conducted by Christian organizations, recognizing that meaningful service to society should be valued regardless of the religious institution responsible for it.



A gentle moment reflecting Podi Hamuduruwo’s love for animals.

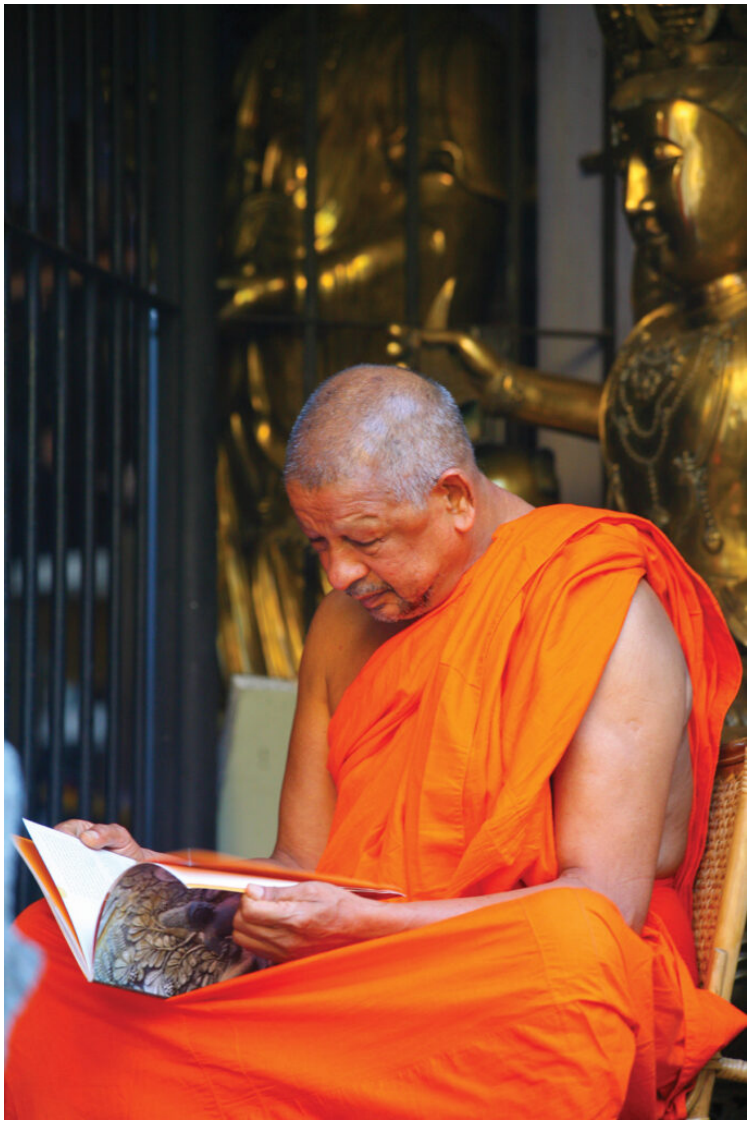
This vision resulted in the establishment of the Sri Jinarathana Vocational Training Center, which was formally opened in 1979 by President J R Jayewardene. The institution offered young people opportunities to develop practical skills in fields relevant to the country’s economic and social needs. Among the earliest programs were blacksmithing and metalworking training, skills essential for the manufacture and repair of tools and equipment. Tire and tube vulcanizing was another initiative that reflected Podi Hamuduruwo’s ability to identify practical requirements and provide solutions. Training facilities were subsequently developed in different parts of the country, extending opportunities to young people who might otherwise have remained without access to technical education. His objective was not merely to establish a training center but to create a culture in which practical knowledge, craftsmanship, and honest employment were respected.



Podi Hamuduruwo at the Navam Perahera, a celebration of Buddhist tradition.

Podi Hamuduruwo understood that a nation could not progress without people who

possessed the skills to build, repair, manufacture, and innovate. He was concerned that society often placed greater emphasis on academic qualifications while overlooking the value of vocational expertise. For him, the dignity of labor was fundamental. A young person who acquired the ability to repair machinery, operate equipment, or develop a technical skill was gaining more than an occupation. That individual was acquiring independence, confidence, and the opportunity to support a family. The Sri Jinarathana Vocational Training Center therefore represented his belief that education should lead to meaningful improvements in people's lives.



A moment of reflection amidst the serenity of Gangaramaya.

His interest in education extended beyond conventional vocational training. During a visit to England following a serious motor accident in 1971, Podi Hamuduruwo encountered audiovisual methods of language instruction at Oxford University. He immediately recognized the possibilities such technology offered for Sri Lankan students, particularly those seeking to improve their English proficiency. Despite the difficulties in obtaining equipment and meeting the financial requirements of his studies, he persevered with assistance from well-wishers and religious contacts overseas. His efforts eventually led to the establishment of an audiovisual language laboratory at Gangaramaya, which was opened in 1976 by Governor General William Gopallawa. At a time when such facilities were unfamiliar to many educational institutions in Sri Lanka, Podi Hamuduruwo was already exploring how technology could improve the effectiveness of teaching and learning.

His understanding of communication and education was also influenced by the historical association between Gangaramaya and printing. He appreciated the importance of the printed word in preserving knowledge and making information accessible to society. Printing technology subsequently became part of the vocational training curriculum, with equipment provided through international assistance. The inclusion of such programs demonstrated his belief that a religious institution could contribute to national development by embracing useful innovations without compromising its spiritual foundations. He did not regard tradition and modernity as opposing forces. Instead, he believed that knowledge, technology, and religious values could complement one another when directed towards the well-being of society.



Podi Hamuduruwo’s dedication extended beyond spiritual guidance.

The same spirit of innovation was evident in his interest in agriculture and environmental conservation. Podi Hamuduruwo believed that the country’s prosperity depended on making productive use of its natural resources while protecting the environment for future generations. His initiatives included model farms, agricultural development projects, and the introduction of new techniques that could improve cultivation. During a visit to Japan, he observed developments in agricultural technology that inspired him to explore the possibilities of tissue culture in Sri Lanka. Although early attempts encountered difficulties, he remained determined to pursue the idea. For him, an unsuccessful experiment was not a reason to abandon an initiative but an opportunity to understand what had gone

wrong and attempt it again. His interest in tree banks and environmental programs further reflected his appreciation of the relationship between human wellbeing and the natural world. He understood that protecting the environment was not simply an act of conservation but an investment in the country’s future.



Podi Hamuduruwo, actively involved in every aspect of

Gangaramaya.

The development of Gangaramaya under his leadership also reflected his belief that Buddhism should be accessible to everyone. Although the temple remained firmly rooted in Buddhist traditions, its activities embraced people of different religious, ethnic, and social backgrounds. He valued the contributions of individuals and organizations willing to work towards the common good, irrespective of their beliefs.

The Seema Malaka on Beira Lake, with its distinctive architectural character and tranquil surroundings, became one of the most recognizable symbols associated with Gangaramaya. Its development, supported by the Moosajee family, represented the spirit of cooperation and religious harmony that Podi Hamuduruwo encouraged. Situated amid the busy commercial environment of Colombo, the Seema Malaka offered visitors a place for reflection and spiritual contemplation. It also demonstrated how a sacred space could contribute to a city's cultural and architectural identity.

His vision extended to the preservation and celebration of Sri Lanka's religious and cultural traditions. The Navam Perahera, which became one of Colombo's most significant annual Buddhist processions, reflected his determination to bring together religious devotion, cultural heritage, and public participation. The procession, with its beautifully adorned elephants, traditional dancers, drummers, and Buddhist clergy, became an occasion that attracted devotees and visitors from across Sri Lanka and overseas. Beyond its ceremonial splendor, the Navam Perahera served an important cultural purpose by providing a platform for traditional performers and helping preserve artistic practices passed down through generations. Podi Hamuduruwo understood that the continuation of such traditions depended on opportunities for younger generations to experience and appreciate them. Through the Navam Perahera, Gangaramaya became not only a center of religious activity but also a guardian of Sri Lanka's cultural inheritance.

Yet the grandeur of religious ceremonies was only one aspect of Podi Hamuduruwo's work. His greatest concern remained the well-being of ordinary people, particularly those who lacked the resources to overcome their difficulties. Gangaramaya became closely associated with charitable activities that addressed the needs of underprivileged families, children, elderly people, and communities affected by hardship. The temple's involvement in social welfare extended to providing essential supplies, educational assistance, and support during national

emergencies. Podi Hamuduruwo believed that religious institutions had a responsibility to respond when people were suffering. He did not regard compassion as something that should be expressed only through words of sympathy. It required the willingness to identify a problem, mobilize available resources, and provide meaningful assistance. This approach strengthened the relationship between Gangaramaya and the wider community, establishing the temple as a place where people could seek practical help as well as spiritual comfort.

His concern for society was particularly evident during periods of national difficulty. Whether communities were affected by natural disasters, economic hardship, or other challenges, Gangaramaya sought to provide assistance wherever possible. The temple's humanitarian activities reflected the values that Podi Hamuduruwo had promoted throughout his life. He recognized that suffering did not distinguish between religions, ethnicities, or social positions, and that assistance should therefore be extended according to need. This understanding gave his work a national significance that extended beyond the Buddhist community. People who had never visited Gangaramaya for religious purposes could nevertheless recognize the importance of its social contribution.

For Podi Hamuduruwo, service to society was closely connected to the responsibility of nurturing good character. He was deeply concerned about the direction the younger generation was taking and frequently emphasized the importance of discipline, honesty, respect, and a willingness to work hard. He believed that education without values could not produce the kind of society that Sri Lanka required. The development of an individual, in his understanding, involved much more than the acquisition of knowledge or professional qualifications. It required an appreciation of responsibility towards family, community, and country. His advice was often practical, reflecting the experiences he had gained through decades of dealing with people from every level of society. He encouraged young people to acquire skills, become self-reliant, and understand that meaningful achievement demanded perseverance.

His own life provided a remarkable example of that perseverance. From childhood, Podi Hamuduruwo experienced circumstances that tested his physical strength and determination. At the age of three, he was bitten by a cobra and remained unconscious for several days before recovering with traditional medical treatment. Later in life, he survived a serious motor accident that required surgery overseas. He also endured significant health challenges, including kidney disease and a kidney transplant. These experiences might have caused another individual to

withdraw from demanding responsibilities, but Podi Hamuduruwo continued to pursue his work with determination. His encounters with illness and adversity deepened his concern for the nation’s health. He increasingly emphasized the importance of clean drinking water, nutritious food, and public awareness of illnesses that could affect the well-being of communities. His interest in health was another expression of his practical approach to religious leadership. He believed that people should be encouraged to understand the relationship between their daily habits and their physical wellbeing. He was particularly concerned about the increasing prevalence of health problems among younger generations and the consequences of poor nutrition and unsafe drinking water. Rather than regarding these matters as responsibilities exclusive to medical professionals or government institutions, he believed that religious leaders could contribute by raising awareness and encouraging healthier ways of living. In his understanding, the protection of life and the reduction of suffering were fundamental Buddhist responsibilities, including taking practical steps to prevent illness and improve living conditions.

Those who encountered Podi Hamuduruwo often recognized his remarkable breadth of knowledge. He could discuss religious teachings, education, agriculture, engineering, technology, public health, national development, and international affairs with equal interest. His curiosity was not confined to subjects traditionally associated with monastic life. He was constantly seeking ideas that could be adapted to Sri Lanka’s needs, and he valued the opportunity to learn from people with different experiences and areas of expertise. His association with national leaders, members of the diplomatic community, business personalities, educators, and professionals reflected the respect he commanded across society. Yet his attention was not reserved for those who occupied positions of influence. The concerns of an ordinary individual seeking employment or assistance could be just as important to him as a discussion about a national development initiative.

Over the years, Explore Sri Lanka had the privilege of documenting different aspects of Podi Hamuduruwo’s life and work. Through conversations and observations recorded in earlier issues, a portrait emerged of a Buddhist monk who was deeply committed to the future of his country. His reflections revealed an individual who appreciated the achievements of the past but was equally concerned about the opportunities and challenges of the future. He believed that Sri Lanka possessed the natural resources, human talent, and cultural strength necessary to achieve much more. What was required, in his view, was the determination to use those advantages wisely, develop practical abilities, and cultivate a greater sense of

collective responsibility. His message remained consistent throughout the years. Progress could not be achieved through expectation alone. It required commitment, discipline, knowledge, and sustained effort.

> For many decades, Podi Hamuduruwo was a familiar and reassuring presence at Gangaramaya. People from different walks of life came to seek his guidance.

The temple itself became a reflection of his personality. Gangaramaya was never intended to remain an isolated religious institution separated from the everyday concerns of society. Its educational programs, charitable activities, cultural initiatives, and spiritual services developed alongside one another, creating an environment in which religious practice and social responsibility were closely connected. Visitors encountered a place rich in Buddhist heritage yet responsive to the needs of a changing world. This combination of tradition and innovation distinguished Gangaramaya and contributed to its reputation among Sri Lankans and international visitors. It also demonstrated Podi Hamuduruwo’s conviction that the relevance of a religious institution depended not only on preserving sacred traditions but also on making a positive contribution to contemporary society.

His approach to leadership was characterized by a willingness to make decisions and accept responsibility. Having assumed demanding duties at a young age, he understood that worthwhile initiatives were rarely accomplished without difficulties. Financial limitations, administrative obstacles, changing circumstances, and occasional setbacks were challenges to be overcome, not reasons to abandon an objective. The institutions and programs associated with Gangaramaya were developed through years of sustained effort, often requiring the cooperation of individuals and organizations who shared his vision. His ability to bring people together for a common purpose was one of his greatest strengths. He recognized that meaningful achievements were seldom the result of individual effort alone, and that progress depended on encouraging others to contribute their knowledge, resources, and abilities.

> The Navam Perahera, which became one of Colombo’s most significant annual Buddhist processions, reflected his determination to bring together religious devotion, cultural heritage, and public participation.

Podi Hamuduruwo also understood the importance of maintaining religious harmony in a country enriched by different faiths and cultural traditions. His association with people from different religious backgrounds, and his encouragement of cooperation across communities reflected an inclusive understanding of service. He believed that the fundamental values of kindness, generosity, honesty, and concern for others could bring people together despite their differences. In a society that had experienced periods of division and hardship, this message carried particular significance. Gangaramaya's charitable and educational activities demonstrated how a Buddhist institution could remain faithful to its religious identity while extending friendship and assistance to everyone.

As the years passed, Podi Hamuduruwo continued to explore ways in which the temple could contribute to the spiritual and social wellbeing of the country. Meditation facilities, educational initiatives, environmental projects, and programs supporting disadvantaged communities remained important areas of interest. His vision was never limited to the immediate requirements of Gangaramaya. He considered how the institution could contribute to Sri Lanka's broader development, particularly by creating opportunities for young people and preserving values he believed were essential to a stable and compassionate society. His work reflected an understanding that spiritual progress and material wellbeing were not necessarily separate aspirations. When guided by wisdom and ethical conduct, they could strengthen one another.

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The passing of Podi Hamuduruwo on August 2, 2024, marked the end of an extraordinary chapter in the history of Gangaramaya. His final rites, conducted with State honors on August 5, brought together people who wished to pay tribute to a religious leader whose influence had extended across generations. The respect shown at his passing reflected not only his position within the Buddhist clergy but also the affection and gratitude of those who recognized his contribution to society. For many, his departure was deeply personal. They remembered a monk who had offered guidance during difficult moments, encouraged them to pursue opportunities, or helped them when they most needed assistance. His life had become intertwined with countless others, and his absence was felt far beyond the

temple’s boundaries.

December holds special significance as it marks the birth anniversary of Podi Hamuduruwo, providing an opportunity to reflect upon the values that defined his life. He would have been 83 this December, and although more than two years have passed since his passing, the institutions he nurtured and the ideals he championed continue to hold significance. His contribution cannot be measured solely by the buildings constructed, the training centers established, or the religious ceremonies organized. Its true value lies in the opportunities created for young people, the assistance extended to families in difficulty, the cultural traditions preserved for future generations, and the understanding of compassion that he demonstrated through his actions.

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The story of Podi Hamuduruwo is also the story of a young novice monk who accepted responsibility when circumstances demanded it and transformed that responsibility into a lifetime of service. From the days when Gangaramaya was approached across the waters of Beira Lake to its development as a prominent center of Buddhist worship and social activity, his journey reflected the changes experienced by Sri Lanka itself. He witnessed different periods of the country’s history, encountered people from successive generations, and remained committed to the belief that the nation could achieve greater progress through education, discipline, cooperation, and compassion. His life demonstrated that spiritual leadership could influence society not merely through religious instruction but through the creation of institutions and opportunities that empowered people to improve their circumstances.

At Gangaramaya, the temple remains a reminder of the extraordinary contribution of the monk whose name became inseparable from its identity. The activities that continue within its premises reflect the spiritual and humanitarian traditions he worked to strengthen. For those who knew him, his memory remains associated with courage, determination, wisdom, and an unwavering concern for others. For younger generations, his life offers an example of what can be achieved when knowledge and conviction are accompanied by a genuine desire to serve.



Podi Hamuduruwo in a moment of prayer and devotion.

Podi Hamuduruwo believed that the teachings of the Buddha should be lived rather than merely spoken. As Explore Sri Lanka remembers the Most Venerable Galboda Gnanissara Thero this December, it is with gratitude for a life that exemplified the highest ideals of service and compassion. The young monk who became known as Podi Hamuduruwo grew to become a guiding presence for a nation. His physical journey has ended, but the values he embodied, the opportunities he created, and the kindness he extended remain an enduring legacy.