Retracing the Steps of the Bodhi Tree: Dambakolapatuna

Posted on



For Buddhists in Sri Lanka, Sri Maha Bodhiya, or the sacred Bo tree (Ficus religiosa) at Anuradhapura is one of the most revered places of worship in the country. Throughout millennia it has received the reverence of people one generation after the next. During our visit to Jaffna Peninsula, we went in search of the place where this sacred sapling was brought to – Dambakolapatuna.

Words *Thilini Kahandawaarachchi* ***Photographs*** *Menaka Aravinda and Mahesh Bandara*

We reach there in the late morning. By the side of the road, there is a colourful Buddhist flag and a signboard with almost square lettering in Sinhalese identifying the place as Dambakolapatuna.

It directs us to a temple that marks the place where Sangamitta Theri landed on the island in the 3rd Century BC, bringing with her the sapling of the Bodhi tree.

The sacred Bo tree at Anuradhapura is the southern branch of the Bodhi tree under whose shade Lord Buddha attained enlightenment more than 2,500 years ago. For the Buddhists in this country, perhaps it is only second in religious significance to the Temple of the Tooth in Kandy, which houses the Tooth Relic of Lord Buddha.

According to annals of history, thousands of years ago, present day Dambakolapatuna (Sambiliturai in Tamil) was an ancient seaport known as Jambukolapattana. At the invitation of King Devanampiyatissa, Sangamitta Theri, the daughter of Emperor Asoka brought the sacred Bo tree to Sri Lanka and alighted at this very port. Mahavamsa, the great chronicle of history of Sri Lanka relates that the King waded into the sea until the waves reached up to his throat, received the sacred Bo tree with great veneration and welcomed the retinue that came from India. A beautiful high road with stone pillars is said to have been built from

Dambakolapatuna to Anuradhapura and gaily decorated to mark the reception of the Bo tree. The sapling had been brought to the then capital Anuradhapura amidst great pomp and pageantry.

It is also said that along with Sangamitta Theri eighteen different artisans had come to Sri Lanka, to take care of the sacred Bo tree and to carry out elaborate rituals related to it.

At present, a small path leads to the temple that has been built where King Devanampiyatissa went into the water to receive the Bodhi tree. A milky white stupa that very much resembles the shape of a bell stands in the middle of the temple. A statue of Sangamitta Theri stands proud and brings back to the minds of all pilgrims that it was she who brought the most venerable tree to this country. Despite the centuries old history that is related to Dambakolapatuna, everything about the temple has a sense of revival and restoration. There is a small shrine room with a Buddha statue and also two other shrines built in the name of Lord Ganesh and God Vishnu.

The white sandy beach and the turquoise blue waters of the sea in the distance invariably lure the pilgrims who visit the temple. Almost everyone who comes to the temple gets into the water and lets the cool waves of the sea lap up against their feet for a while. Some actually opt for a sea bath in the shallow waters.

Of course for any traveller, Dambakolapatuna has two treats: an interesting story about a tree that runs back millennia and a great beach that this paradise island is well known for. Perhaps that is the reason why pilgrims from all over the country throng at Dambakolapatuna throughout the year.

STORY HIGHLIGHTS

Buddhists celebrate the visit of Sangamitta Theri to this island bringing with her the sacred Bo tree on Unduvap Poya (the full moon day in December). This year Unduvap Poya falls on December 20, 2010.