Saparagamu Maha Saman Devalaya: Revered Through Time

Posted on



The special pooja in progress

The echoing sound of the tolling bell grasped us, urging us to hasten our steps. Quickening our pace, we weaved in and out of the crowd to reach the shrine room where we joined the multitude that had their heads bent in reverence. Clasping our hands together we lent our voice to the gathering prayer, partaking in the blessings of God Sumana Saman at the Saman Devalaya, Ratnapura.

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During the time when the Yaksha, Naga and Deva clans ruled the isle of Sri Lanka, the people in Saparagrama (now Sabaragauwa) who belonged to the Deva clan was presided over by a strong yet kind-hearted leader by the name of Sumana. Following Lord Buddha's visits to Sri Lanka, he became a devout follower taking prominence in building the Mahiyangana Stupa and of requesting Lord Buddha to leave His footprint atop Adam's Peak for worship, inspiring a pilgrimage that exists to this very day. After Sumana's death he was deified and remained a symbol of peace and tranquillity due to his magnanimous nature. Or so the tale goes…

Then…
The history of the Saparagamu Maha Saman Devalaya could be traced back to the Kingdom of Dambadeniya, to the time of King Parakramabahu II (1236–70). According to historians, his rule is depicted in the annals of history as a golden era marked with much exuberance and opulence. However, it is deemed that the devalaya had originally been a temple named the Saparagrama Maha Viharaya.

Many chronicles surround this hallowed precinct starting from the tale of Seelawansa Thero that is narrated in the poem of 'Saman Siritha' written in the Kotte Kingdom. Seelawansa Thero, while on pilgrimage to Adam's Peak sought respite in a cave where he fell asleep. As he slept, in his dreams a Brahmin had appeared revealing to him of a hidden statue of God Sumana Saman in a cave. Waking up, the monk beheld the statue and proceeded to bring it to the Saparagrama Maha Viharaya amidst much ceremony and the temple was subsequently named the Saman Viharaya.

It is said that during the Dambadeniya Kingdom Arya Kamadeva, a minister of King Parakramabahu II had visited the Saman Viharaya seeking to make a vow of constructing a devalaya for God Sumana Saman, if he was able to find a trove of gems in the area. After succeeding in his quest, the minister had built a Devalaya—fulfilling his vow—where the Saman Viaharaya had stood. Furthermore, it is told that another minister named Pathirajadeva has brought a statue of God Sumana Saman made of sandalwood from Gampola to be placed within the Devalaya. The Sandalwood statue that is kept in the confines of the Galpoththawa temple in Palmadulla, ceremoniously borne to Adam's Peak each year signaling the beginning of the pilgrim season, is said to be this same statue—deemed to be the oldest statue of God Saman.

Standing resilient through the times, the Devalaya had remained a place of worship receiving much ministrations from kings who ruled through the kingdoms of Kotte,

Seethawaka and Kandy. When the Tooth Relic of Lord Buddha has been hidden in a quern at the Delgamuwa Temple in Kuruwita, King Rajasinghe has brought the tooth relic to the Devalaya 11 consecutive years to hold the Dalada Perehara. This perehara continues to this very day—albeit the tooth relic—as one of the oldest processions held annually in Sri Lanka.

Evidence remain within the premises of the Devalaya showing that the space was once occupied by the Portuguese, who according to history ruled the area for 43 years. Ending their occupation, King Rajasinghe II (1635–1687) was able to reclaim the area, building the Devalaya, yet again, infusing the characteristic architecture of the Kandyan Kingdom.

The most significant event of the Devalaya—the Saman Devala Perehara—will be held in August/September. Spanning 15 days, the perehara will attract thousands of devotees exhibiting the unique culture that has been carried forward for generations past.

Now…
Through the Devalaya grounds we made our way up the steps leading towards the three storeyed shrine of God Sumana Saman. Entering the lower terrace our attention was drawn to the mahout who called out to people, tempting them to walk under the elephant to quell their nightmares, while the elephant cheerfully swayed lifting its trunk to a rhythm that only he could hear. At the top of the stairs before entering the shrine of the god, we proceeded to the image house of Lord Buddha.

As the bell began to toll while the drums and the *horanawa* resonated through the premises, we silently took our place inside the shrine room to witness a special pooja, initiated by Kamal Ratwatte, the Basnayake Nilame or the lay custodian of the Sumana Saman Devalaya. We observed as several relics were carried in and out to the prayers of the gathered crowd. After the conclusion of this pooja, people carrying pooja baskets lined up in a passageway leading to a side door of the shrine room, before filing in and sitting down on the ground after handing over their baskets laden with fruits and a thousand of hopes and vows. The priest started to chant stanzas and silence permeated only to be interrupted by a low hum of voices that filtered through the open doors.

Remnants of the bygone eras are scattered throughout the Devala grounds. A timeworn gun hued gold, which is still used to signal the start of the temple perahera, an emblem of a Portuguese soldier, inscriptions belonging to the

Dambadeniya Kingdom can still be seen within the Devalaya. Observing all these, we traversed through The Saparagamuwa Maha Saman Devalaya unwilling to bid adieu just yet to a place where the past and the present mingles and where age-old traditions of a forgotten era are still remembered and carried forward with diligence.

The museum holds an impressive collection of relics found from the ford of the Kalu ganga (river) that flows by the Devalaya. It is believed that the old devalaya has been once destroyed and thrown into the river where the age old secrets of kingdoms gone by are still hidden beneath the murky depths.

Situated 4km from the Ratnapura city, The Saman Devalaya can be accessed via Horana, Awissawella and Pelmadulla.

