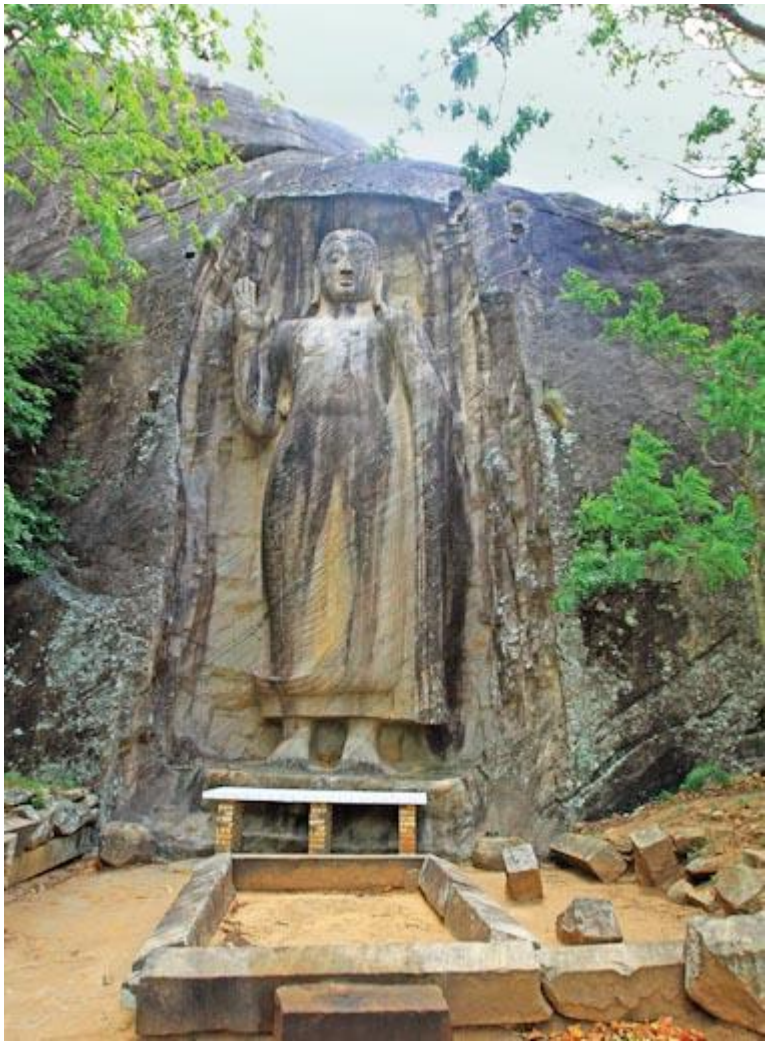
Sasseruwa: Where Time Meets

Posted on



The 14ft statue of Lord Buddha, carved out of a single rock

Well, I do not mean that in a literal sense but more metaphorically as there is no better way to describe Sasseruwa, which is situated in Meegalawa in the Kurunegala-Anuradhapura border. Finding it is another matter, because no one seems to know Sasseruwa by this name. But, find it we did!

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Sasseruwa is popularly known as *Ras Vehera*. The reason being that Buddha Rashmi or *Budhu Ras* had emanated on the occasion of planting one of the 32 saplings of the Sri Maha Bodhi, at this site by King Devanampiyatissa. Hence the name *Ras*

Vehera. Furthermore, it is also thought that this was when the temple was established. Another thinking is that King Valagamba gathered his troops here, which in Sinhala means ‘Senaga Ras Karapu Viharaya’ that resulted in the name *Ras Vehera.*

The temple premises are quite unassuming and at first glance it is not apparent that this is a place of great history. Why do I say “where time meets”? It is because the temple has had the patronage of kings from various eras. King Devanampiyatissa established the temple. King Valagamba during his 13 years of exile from the capital, sought refuge at *Ras Vehera* from foreign invaders and built the two *len vihara* (cave temples); Maha Viharaya and Sath Pilima Viharaya. Then, King Mahasen was believed to have commissioned the sculpture of a rock standing statue of Lord Buddha, which is one of the highlights of the visit. It is because of this statue that the temple is also known as Sasseruwa, which is derived from *Sahalgath Ruwa* (meaning carved image). There is a reference to King Bathiyatissa, with a cave designated in his name. Though Sasseruwa had been abandoned for some time we see a renaissance during the Kandyan era under the patronage of King Veera Parakrama Narendrasinghe.

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Enough history, what did I see?

Spread over 1,400 acres the temple complex is said to consist of 99 caves of which only nine can be seen today. This was a site of great spirituality as it was the home to over 300 Arahat Buddhist monks and though today what remains is only a fraction of its past, in its secluded environment a sense of peace prevails. As the Chief Incumbent of the temple Ven Nugegoda Vajiratissa says, “Wild elephants come this way but they do not harm the temple as it is a place of great divinity.”

From the main path you can see a great flight of stairs made of stone rising up, and only trees remain visible at the top. At the base of the steps are two buildings. One is the Dharma Shalawa or the hall where devotees listen to the sermons of the priest. This has been built during the Kandyan period and this is evident from the architecture. However, the steps leading to the hall have been made of stone flower pedestals that were used during a period before the Kandyan era. The stone pillars were previously obelisks with the king’s commands and on top is what remains of a sculptured crown.

We began our ascent, and before long we came across a Bodhi Tree, which was ancient but not the one planted by King Devanampiyatissa. A boulder at the location had steps carved on its side suggesting its previous use, which is yet to be determined. A few steps farther along the main staircase, a sign board directed us to the Maha Viharaya. What can I say? The environment was quiet and calm except for the sound of the wild. An ancient Bodhi Tree rose majestically, its surrounding *bodhigaraya* consisting of brown stone was equally ancient, which enhanced the feel of the place. The branches spread far and wide. This was a sapling of the Sri Maha Bodhi that had been planted thousands of years ago by the King who instated Buddhism in Sri Lanka. The sand was soft under our feet and the leaves rustled in the cooling breeze, which by evening became stronger.

The mountain crop is scattered with caves, which had previously been *kuti* or rooms where priests resided. One such cave, that was larger than the rest was the Sath Pilima Viharaya meaning the Temple with Seven Pillars. Due to the renovations during the Kandyan era, the cave temple built by King Valagamaba during the Anuradhapura period was more in line with Kandyan tradition. A vibrant *Malaga Thorana* (dragon pandol) adorned the entrance. And, the inside was breathtaking. There were seven ancient statues including that of Lord Buddha and God Vishnu. Two statues; Lord Buddha and Goddess Paththini had been added during a later period thus bringing the total number of statues within the cave to nine.

Ven Vajiratissa explained to us that the Paththini Devalaya, which is a room within the cave holds the anklet of the Goddess and many come from far and wide to obtain the blessings of the deity. Furthermore the roof of the cave is decorated with the epic narration of the defeat of Mara by Lord Buddha. The walls depict *Swarna-kakkata, Dhaham Sondha* and *Manichora Jathaka* Stories, which reflect the past births of the Buddha.

At the entrance of this temple is a moonstone, which depicts six animals; namely elephant, mythical *gavaraya*, horse, lion, an extinct animal similar to a canine and a bull. It is well known that the bull is removed from the Polonnaruwa period as such this has to be from the Anuradhapura era and the guard stones also depict the *pun kalasa*, which was characteristic of that era explained Ven Vajiratissa.

The *Hamudurowa* beckoned us to follow him and up another flight of steps which had a moonstone and guard stones belonging to a very early period in history. As there were no carvings on both, we were led to the Maha Viharaya. And, was I up for a surprise! Ven Vajiratissa opened the door and inside was a large cave with a

reclining Buddha statue said to be of 11.7m in length. The chamber was beautiful and had other statues of Lord Buddha in the sitting and standing positions. But the centre piece was the reclining Buddha statue. The Maha Viharaya too was built by King Valagamba but was rehabilitated during the Kandyan era. The unique aspect of the statue is that a cotton *siura* or the robe was first draped on the statue prior to plastering and the creases in the plaster had been achieved by drawing a cotton thread. The ancient *siura* is still visible from the sections where the plaster has come off. Another feature is that people can walk around the massive statue and that is what I did. Outside the main chamber is a side room, which is the Devalaya dedicated to the Gods Vishnu, Kataragama, Dedimunda and Gambara.

On the face of the rock was an ancient inscription and the manmade grooves prevented rain water from seeping into the cave. This was apparent at almost all the caves.

We returned back to the main stone staircase, a little bit farther…and the serene smiling face of Lord Buddha was visible. A little bit more and we were at the top…here was a 14ft statue of Lord Buddha sculptured into the face of the rock. King Mahasen had commissioned this sculpture and it was breathtaking. I went close to the statue and looked up and it seemed as if Lord Buddha's kind gaze was upon me. According to Ven Vajiratissa the finer details of the sculpture had faded with time but what remains is perfect. Though some say that the statue is incomplete Ven Vajiratissa says that that is not true as all elements of the statue are present, "the *siraspatha* should be the size of our palm. A small groove has been kept on the top but if they had kept a *siraspatha* according to the size of the palm it would have collided with the top of the stone. That could be one reason it is not there. The other thing is a *siraspatha* will not match the statue as this statue has a different face structure. The face in this statue is more flat and it is smiling. Archaeologists say that this is the first and the oldest statue that follows the Maha Vihara tradition in Sri Lanka."

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I sat on a small rock facing the massive statue of Lord Buddha, the wind was blowing and the sun was going down. I could have stayed there forever…

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