Sri Lanka’s First Dalada

Posted on
The Flag Train: A long Buddhist flag is carried in procession
by a stream of people to drape the circumference of the stupa

Five hundred years before the Sri Dalada arrived, the Buddha’s Right Tooth lay embedded in a jungle stupa.

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Mystery sights and sounds, miracle light shows, wild elephants keeping dusk to dawn vigil, even baffling reports of alien visitations continue to enthral thousands of pilgrims who throng an ancient stupa set deep in the jungles 25 miles north east of Polonnaruwa, to worship and venerate the sacred object it enshrines.

For here embedded in the inner chamber of the stupa known as the Somawathie Chaithya built in the Second Century BC, is the sacred Right Tooth Relic of Gautama the Buddha, Sri Lanka’s first Dalada.

With the fall of Anuradhapura in the face of Chola invasions in the Tenth Century AD, the Sri Lankan kingdom was constantly on the move. As besieged Kings retreated further down south west, the North Central Province was abandoned to the wilds and the forest soon reigned supreme and regained possession of the lost terrain.

The flourishing civilisation that had existed for over 1500 years in the Tenth Century AD, the man made monuments and engineering feats that would later marvel the world, the towering dagobas that rivalled the Giza Pyramids of Egypt were soon camouflaged in dense jungle green and lay hidden. But the jungle concealed and stubbornly refused to yield its prized possession: the Buddha’s Right Tooth Relic.

It had existed on Sri Lankan soil, embedded in this small stupa named after a woman, five hundred years before the arrival of the Left Tooth Relic of the Buddha hidden in a stupa shaped hairdo of a royal princess—a safe keeping gift from an Indian king which, as befits a Buddha’s sacred relic, was accorded all the pomp and

pageantry of royal patronage and the fervent devotion and worship of the multitude, no sooner it made shore after its voyage from India.

Whilst this Left Tooth Relic of the Buddha famed as the Sri Dalada is enshrined in the Temple of the Tooth in Kandy today, and is annually paraded on the city’s streets in August, the Right Tooth Relic has received no such recognition, no such veneration and no such explicit explosions of reverence mainly due to its solitary existence in vaulted secrecy in an uninhabited jungle.

Known simply as the *Dakunu Dalada* or right tooth, it remained unknown, unsung and unworshipped for over a thousand years till it was discovered by a wandering monk in 1947 by a miraculous chance.

Sirimalwatte Piyaratana Thero and a few other monks were walking through this remote jungle area in the northern part of the Island, when they happened to notice rays of light emanating from the jungle canopy and streaming towards the sky. Puzzled by this visual phenomenon and curious to determine its source, they made haste to the spot from whence it seemed to originate.

They soon arrived at the site and stumbled upon a small stupa cloaked in dense forest cover. They had discovered the fabled lost Chaithya of Somawathie; in which, legend and lore held and ancient historical chronicles recorded, lay enshrined the sacred Right Tooth Relic of the Buddha. The thousand year secret was out. The two thousand two hundred year old dagoba had been finally found.

Ancient chronicles record that when the Buddha passed away in India, over two thousand five hundred years ago, the right tooth relic had come into the possession of the King of the Nagas, King Jayasena, who in turn had gifted it to a Buddhist Arahath monk. Another version states that the sacred relic was in the possession of the King of the Gods, Sakkra who had gifted it to Sri Lanka’s first Arahath, the Enlightened Aritta. The monk in turn had gifted it to Prince Giri Abha a powerful sub king of the area whose wife, Princess Somawathie was the younger sister of King Kavantissa who ruled the Southern Province of Sri Lanka known as Ruhunu. Kavantissa was the father of King Dutugamunu who built the Ruwanwelisaya in Anuradhapura.

This priceless, precious gift kindled a great desire in the heart of Princess Somawathie to enshrine the treasure in a stupa for a people’s veneration. Both her husband and her brother supported in her mission and the search soon began to

find an ideal place to build a stupa. In the course of their explorations to find a suitable location they came upon an area where Bhikkus led by Arahat Mahinda resided.

The place was Somapura and the Somawathie Chaithya was erected and the Right Tooth Relic of the Buddha was duly enshrined in its relic chamber. In later years the stupa was renovated by King Kannitta Tissa, King Kurtakanna Tissa, King Gamini Abhaya better known as Valagamba and King Amanda Gamini. Several stone inscriptions detailing the history of the stupa have also been found at the site and inscriptions in the Brahmi characters have been identified by scholars as dating back to the Second Century BC.

With the discovery of the stupa in 1947, government archaeologist began excavation and restoration work commenced a few years later. And with every digging they made, more illuminating details emerged of its origins. The Chaithya had been built 2,200 years ago in the floodplains of the Mahaweli River. Though ancient records stated that the Chaithya was built on the eastern banks of the Mahaweli, what the archaeologists found was that it was located on the west bank. This discrepancy was resolved when it was later found that the river itself had changed course through the long passage of time. The present road leading to the temple is said to be the river bed of the Mahaweli prior to its natural shift to the west approximately eight hundred years ago.

The Somawathie Chaithya stands today in the Somawathie Chaithya Sanctuary and is part of the Wasgomuwa Strict Natural Reserve, the Flood Plains National Park and Trikonamadu Natural Reserve. In this statutory protected reserve roam large herds of elephants, wild buffaloes and deer. There are also other ancient stupas in the area, namely, Kumbanacchaduwa, which has been since identified as the place where King Dutugamunu’s royal tusker *Kadol Atha* died—the Gal Amuna, Sangabodhigama and the Surangala Viharaya.

Whilst excavation work proceeded on the main stupa, archaeologists found a smaller stupa at a depth of five feet into the main stupa. They determined that it was the original Somawathie Chaithya build by Prince Giri Abha in the Second Century BC. The larger stupa covering was the work of King Kanitta Tissa in 164 AD. Also unearthed were several ruins of structures amongst them were a wall surrounding the stupa, four moonstones, flower pedestals and six *‘siripa gal’,* 3 ½ feet long rocks carved with the image of the Buddha’s sole, referred to as *‘Sri Pathula’.*

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As restoration work progressed painstakingly for a number of years, it has to be halted due to disturbances that flared in the area thirty years ago. Later when a security post was established to protect the site, those on duty were surprised to see a group of elephants arriving at the stupa every night for no other reason, but to keep a silent all night vigil over the Buddha’s Right Tooth Relic.

Meanwhile miracle stories abound, photographs of mysterious light shows proliferate at the site. But whether or not the miracles are true, whether they meet the test of credibility, whether they enchant, mystify or baffle the pilgrims who are treated to a surfeit of its occurrences, one thing remains clear.

What really draws the thousands of devotees who throng this once long forgotten jungle stupa is the inspiring sublime presence of the sacred Tooth Relic of the Buddha, enshrined therein. They come with zeal and fervour in their hearts to worship and pay their homage to the *DakunuDalada* of the Buddha, though long overdue; and, by such veneration, they realise Princess Somawathie’s sole purpose of building the Chaithya and enshrining the Buddha’s sacred relic in it for a nation’s reverence, however belated.

