The Oldest Historical Tree in the World

Posted on

A living link with the past described by Derrick Schokman
Photos by Suresh De Silva



The Sacred Bodhi Tree is a focal point of worship and pilgrimage.

The introduction of the Sacred Bodhi Tree, the oldest historical tree in the world and the most venerated is commemorated by Buddhists in Sri Lanka on Unduwap Poya (full moon) day, which this year falls on December 1.

Unduwap Poya is more popularly known as Sri Sanghamitta Day. because it was the missionary nun Sanghamitta who brought the sacred Bodhi here. It was a branch of the original Ficus Religiosa under which the Buddha gained enlightenment when meditating in a park at Buddha-Gaya, India. Sanghamitta was the sister of the Apostle Mahinda, who introduced Buddhism to this country. His missionary work during the reign of King Devanampiya Tissa (250-21 OBC) was singularly successful. Many men and women wanted to be ordained as monks and nuns. The rules of the priesthood, however, forbade Mahinda from ordaining women. Accordingly, he advised the king to request the Emperor Asoka of India to send his sister, Sanghamitta, with a party of nuns for this purpose. He also suggested that the Emperor be requested to send a branch of the Bodhi Tree at Buddha-Gaya which would be planted here as an object of veneration and would keep the devotees always in mind of his teachings.

King Tissa commissioned his nephew, Arittha, for this job. His mission was successful and Sanghamitta duly arrived with a chapter of nuns and a branch of the Bodhi Tree in a golden pot. The king, who had rushed to the port to meet her, went neck-deep in the sea to take the sacred branch, and in a gesture of proud humility took upon himself the duty of acting as a guard outside its temporary residence on the shore. From there the sacred sapling was taken with great ceremony to the capital city of Anuradhapura. On the way, the royal party broke the journey at Tantirimale. where a large shrine was later built to mark this occasion. All that is left of that shrine today is a vandalised 10-metre long reclining image of the Buddha, and a Bodhi tree that is said to have been raised from a sapling taken from the tree at Anuradhapura.



In Anuradhapura, the Sacred Bodhi still stands where it was originally planted in the king’s pleasure garden, although the garden is no more. Other kings after Tissa improved the site with ornamental gateways, flights of steps and channel systems for watering the tree.

Even after Anuradhapura was given up as the capital city, and the jungle tide overtook the dagabas (stupas) and other monuments, the Bodhi Tree was protected by the villagers. They lit bonfires around it every night to ward off wild beasts. The firewood required for this purpose was collected in toto for the whole year and brought there in a procession on the night of the Nikini Paya, or August full moon. This procession is continued even today in memory of those bygone times. It is called the Daramiti Perahera, or the procession of the bundles of firewood. In old Anuradhapura, now declared a sacred city, the once ostentatious buildings are no more today than an inanimate patchwork of the stone mason’s and craftsman’s art. The only living thing is the Sacred Bodhi Tree. Propped on platform upon platform, enclosed by whitewashed walls and an iron railing, and surrounded by altars laden with perfumed flowers and spluttering candles, it still remains green, once again a focal point of worship and pilgrimage. In the words of historian Paul E. Peiris: “It is doubtful whether any other single incident in the long history of their race had seized upon the imagination of the Sinhalese with such tenacity as the planting of the Sri Maha Bodhi. “Like its roots which find sustenance on the face of the bare rock and cleave their way through the stoutest fabric. the influence of what it represents has penetrated into the innermost being of the people.”

> No other tree has a continuous historical record from its planting 2235 yea.rs ago.

It is fitting that the Sacred Bodhi, once part of the tree at Buddha-Gaya, continues to grow in Sri Lanka where the teachings of the Buddha, almost forgotten m India, continue to flourish. The Sri Maha Bodhi is 2,235 years old. Carbon dating tests have shown other trees to be older: the cedars of Lebanon, some olive groves in Palestine, the baobabs of Africa, and some of the California Redwoods which are 3,600 years old. But none of these trees has a continued historical record like the Sri Maha Bodhi from its planting in 245BC to the present day. The leaves of this unique tree were described by Robert Knox, an English captive in Sri Lanka in the 16th century, “as shaking m awe at what they saw m Buddha-Ga ya.” Devout Buddhists listening to the pattering sound are certainly reminded of the Great Enlightenment and left in no doubt of its momentous consequences to themselves. How to get there: Anuradhapura is best visited as part ofa round trip tour of Sri Lanka which could also take in the ancient sights of Polonnaruwa, Sigiriya and Kandy. It is 206km from Colombo. A popular train, the Raja Rata Rajini, leaves Colombo Fort station every day for the five hour journey to Anuradhapura. At weekends the train leaves Galle at I l.l5hrs, Colombo Fort at l4.05hrs. For the return. there is a departure from Anuradhapura at 05.05hrs, arriving back at Colombo al 09.4/hrs. The fare in 2nd class (no /st) is Rs96.50 one way.•



Monks walking in the tree’s shade.



The most venerated tree m the world.

