A Throwback to the Time of Kings

Posted on



Despite the modern façade the cave temple has existed here for more than two millennia

Visiting a little-known but ancient temple in Avissawella, we surprised a hive of activity as the village prepared for a centuries-old festival

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Preparing the elephant attire

The temple, the ancient Maniyangama Raja Maha Vihara, was shaken of the torpor of late afternoon. Men were fixing lights on gorgeous decorative throws sprawled all over the verandah of the image house, readying them for their elephant owners. Girls practiced dance steps in the preaching hall, wielding winnowing fans with a

coy grace. The new paintings on the outer walls of the image house were still wet. Young boys ran in and out chasing each other and the various dogs of the neighbourhood.

It all created a deafening but cheerful cacophony. The temple was getting ready for the Karal Perahera, a post-harvest procession that has taken place annually since 1776, when it was started by the Kandy king Kirti Sri Rajasinha.

The procession is still enacted as it was 240 years ago, down to the last detail. Villagers even still carry *dekumkadas*, tributes for the king, despite the fact that the country has had no monarch for precisely two centuries. It was exciting to witness a whole village preparing for a festival. The atmosphere harkened back to a halcyon age when Sinhalese peasant life centered on the paddy field, temple and reservoir.

The history of Maniyangama, as a human settlement and a habitation for monks, goes as far back as the 3rd century BC. The drip ledges in the temple's caves speak loud and clear: they have witnessed human life here for well over two millennia.

It is not a surprise therefore that Maniyangama is associated with the Anuradhapura king Valagamba. For only a very few old cave temples in the country do not claim to having been one of his hiding places. Even allowing that the 1st century BC monarch may have stayed in numerous caves while raising an army in hiding, the number of locations associated with his name is impossibly large. There is no solid proof in fact that he stayed here at all.

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The temple itself is small; a visit takes less than 15 minutes. But dominated by the rock cave with its drip ledges and stone steps, the place is both ancient and sacred. Unlike a cathedral that intimidates with its architectural glory, this little temple, like so many ancient *raja maha viharas* scattered across the country, works its magic by blending in with nature.

After passing a small stupa and a Bodhi tree we entered the image house. It was cool and dark, with only the rocky cave for a ceiling. Peeling Kandyan murals of stylized animals and plants bloomed in the darkness, seeming to stare at us from

the gloom.

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During the Seethawaka period, in the 16th century, the temple rose in royal esteem. It was the chief incumbent of Maniyangama who prepared the horoscope for the patricide prince Rajasinha, son and heir of King Mayadunne. Rajasinha, the last great Sinhalese king, was a great cause of terror for the Portuguese.

But it was during the Kandyan period, which lasted into the early 19th century, that Maniyangama had its heyday. The image house and the small shrine dedicated to the god Kataragama date back to this time. Among the treasures the temple houses are Kandyan statues depicting the Buddha in sandalwood, copper and gold.

The temple’s most precious artefacts were the palm leaf manuscripts from the Seethawaka period, which would have divulged information priceless to an historian. A portion of the manuscripts has been recovered and published. Sadly, however, the majority of this precious document has been lost to a combination of weevils and damp. As a result, though the Seethawaka monarchs lived relatively recently, they remain very little understood.











