Trails Of Antiquity

Posted on



The colourful temple under the rock arch

The unique little temple building stood tucked away under the large natural rock arch in all its grandeur, as if sheltering the shrine from the hands of time. The tiny burst of colour that was the temple against the dark grey backdrop of the large boulder was a most inviting and exceptional surprise as we trudged up the stone steps that took us to the Holombuwa Sthripura ancient cave temple.

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Located in the small village of Holombuwa in the Kegalle District sitting amidst expansive paddy fields and undulating rural landscape, this ancient cave temple can be reached through the Avissawella Road taken at the Galigamuwa junction which lies along the the Kandy – Colombo main road just before Kegalle.

A few more turns later we arrived at the small village temple sitting calmly in the untroubled surroundings against clear blue skies and abundant foliage. As we approached the old wooden doorway, the podi saadu (young student monk) of the temple who accompanied us around the premises took out a large bronze key with which he opened the intricately painted double doors of the image house, which lay deep within the cave. As we each stepped eagerly into the cool dark interior, an inexplicable air of serenity promptly greeted us, taking us back in time to a bygone era. The walls were all covered with statues of the Lord Buddha led by a large single reclining statue; detailed flowery designs veiled the cave roof in hues of orange, yellow, blue and red.

The right hand corner of the cave seemed to extend further inside the rock, tunneling into a far off darkness. Curious, we made our way in, descending a few steps into the approaching blackness. Yet, contrary to our expectations of an extensive tunnel-way we found ourselves standing in a large low-roofed cave lit in the corner by a single light bulb. Against the furthest wall encircled by a low wall was a small pond as old as the cave itself. Blackened by the surrounding darkness, we could hardly discern the water not so far below, but according to the podi saadu the pond rarely runs dry even in the harshest conditions of drought. It is also believed that these waters never turn stagnant.

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According to popular folklore, King Walagamba who had ruled the Anuradhapura Kingdom (103 BC) for a very brief period had used this cave to hide from invading Indian armies. Overthrown from his five month reign by a South Indian invasion, the king had gone into hiding, moving from village to village through an elaborate network of tunnels. It is believed that during this time he had concealed 500 of his queens in this particular cave, the reason behind part of the name given to the temple being ‘Sthripura’ with the meaning ‘locality for women’. 250 years later, having stumbled upon this unique cave, a group of Buddhist Monks had converted it into a place of worship.

Even though closed and sealed off with time, according to folklore the Sthripura cave had been linked to subsurface pathways connecting various other nearby caves such as Yatahal Lena (cave) and Dedigama Kota Vehera, paving the way for the concealed king to move about in the area whilst visiting the queens.

In wonderment of the rich history and abounding folklore that surrounded the

Holombuwa Sthripura temple we soon retreated to find our way through the narrow winding roads back to the city. Then, a few kilometres on the Galapitamada Road we stumbled upon another distinct structure from a distant past.

Kota Vehera (Suthighara Chetiya)
On the side of the road in Dedigama, located on a broad clearing loomed a large brick structure towering high into the sky. Its timeworn red brown bricks damp from recent rains were dotted with tiny shoots of grass and weeds that have coated the ancient stupa completely over time. The overpowering stupa appeared incomplete devoid of its kotha (the pinnacle of a stupa), and as we slowly moved around the circumference of this giant work of ancient architecture we learned the story of its origin.

Ten relic chambers have been uncovered from within the kota vehera

47 feet high and 256 feet in diameter, the Kota Vehera had been constructed by King Parakramabahu the Great (1153–1186) as a memorial of his place of birth. Some believe that the stupa was popularly called ‘Kota Vehera’ because of its incomplete nature; yet others are convinced that it is not incomplete but is built according to a unique tradition of stupa. It has been revealed that Kota Vehera had been built on top of another smaller stupa, parts of which can still be spotted within the larger framework. The smaller form had been built by King Parakramabahu while he was still a regional monarch, housing it with a second, larger stupa once his kingdom was expanded to cover the whole of the country.

Ten relic chambers have also been uncovered from within the Kota Vehera where diverse invaluable relics have been found enclosed, including Buddha statues studded with precious gems, bronze statues, coins and clay pots.

The ancient temples and sites of historical significance where great Sri Lankan Kings have made their mark are aplenty in the district of Kegalle and the surrounding region. They not only remind us of our rich cultural heritage, but also of how fortunate we are to experience their grandeur after centuries of careful preservation.

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