

Kalpana Sunder

Echoes From the Past

Time travelling in Sri Lanka

The magnificent city of Anuradhapura is refulgent from the numerous temples and palaces whose golden pinnacles glitter in the sky. The sides of its streets are strewn with black sand, and the middle is sprinkled with white sand; they are spanned by arches bearing flags of gold and silver on either side are vessels of the same precious metals, containing flowers and in niches are statues holding lamps of great value. In the streets are multitudes of people armed with bows and arrows; also men powerful as gods, who with their huge swords could cut in sunder a tusk-elephant at one blow.

—Translation from a native book by James Ricalton in “The City of the sacred Bodhi tree (Anuradhapura).” (1891)

It is a fascinating destination for both amateur and professional archeologists. One of the ancient world’s largest monastic cities, founded in the 4th century B.C., and sacred to Buddhists, Anuradhapura was once a capital city of the kingdom of Sri Lanka. It was a walled city where the arts, hydraulic technology (there were vast reservoirs around the city), and Buddhism flourished and lasted for 1400 years. It had a royal palace, a quarter for nobles, a place for foreigners. Outside its city walls were the



Bodhi tree

monasteries. Just like the pyramids constructed by the pharaohs of Egypt, the kings of Anuradhapura erected bell shaped *stupas* called *dagobas* which were magnificent architectural achievements of their time.

Legend has it that Anuradhapura was the fabled capital of King Ravana in the *Ramayana*! Today it is effectively two worlds—the well-laid out modern city and the ancient city to the north-west.

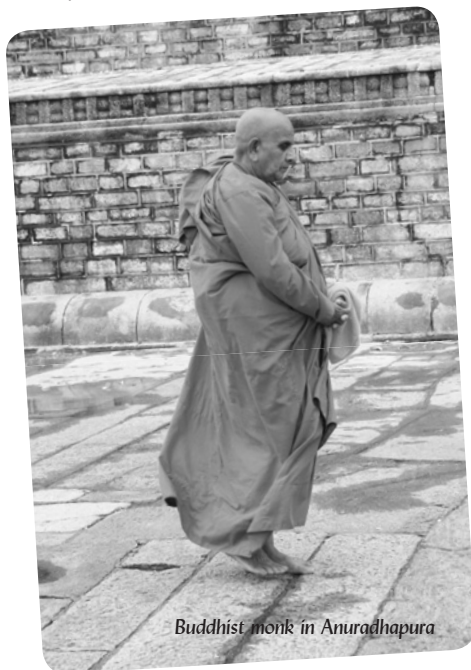
The ancient city is a sprawling complex of shrines, stupas, tanks, temples, and monasteries. We see crowds of pious pilgrims, stalls selling brilliantly colored frangipani in intricately woven baskets, multi-hued prayer flags fluttering in the breeze, and saffron clad monks walking barefoot in mindful contemplation at the bubble shaped Ruwenweli Mahaseya. This is a white washed dagoba initiated by the King Dutugemunu, or Dutthagamani (circa 140 B.C.), and finally completed by his brother after his death. It is said that the brother simulated the finished stupa with bamboo frames and white cloth, so that the king on his deathbed could admire his wonderful creation.

Apart from food, clothing and other extras the king was supposed to have paid 6.4 million coins in wages to the labourers who

built this magnificent stupa. The walls of the dagoba are made up of lime plaster elephants that, according to mythology, carry the weight of the world on their sturdy shoulders. An ancient limestone statue, on the dagoba’s south side, is supposed to represent Dutugemunu contemplating his masterpiece.

Anuradhapura is famous for its Bodhi tree, an offspring of the famous *peepul* tree in Bodhgaya, India, under which Lord Buddha attained enlightenment. In 246 B.C., King Devanampiya asked the emperor Ashoka to send a branch from the fabled Bodhi tree. It was brought to Ceylon (the old name for Sri Lanka), by Ashoka’s daughter Sanghamitra. It is probably the oldest documented tree in the world, more than 2,000 years old, and still looks in the prime of health. It has been tended to for 23 centuries, even when the city was abandoned and shrouded by jungle. It stands on a special platform, protected by a gold railing dotted with younger peepul trees and festooned with colourful prayer flags.

We drive past the red brick Jetavana dagoba, which, at 120 meters, was the third tallest structure in the world after the pyramids of Giza at the time of its construction! This was the work of the heretic king



Buddhist monk in Anuradhapura



Elephant Pond

Mahasena (circa 300 B.C.) and took a quarter of a century to build.

Our guide takes us to the ruins of the Abhayagiri monastery, which remained the largest monastery in the region for over 600 years and housed more than 5,000 monks. It is said that, in 44 B.C., King Vattagamini was taunted by a Jain hermit of the Giri monastery while fleeing after losing his throne to South Indian Chola kings. He remained in hiding in jungle caves for 14 years. When he

came back to power he razed the Jain monastery to the ground and built a Buddhist monastery in its place.

We see the Kuttam Pokuna, ornamental twin ponds which are an ancient engineering marvel. These man-made ponds were created for the use of the thousands of monks who lived on the premises. On one side is a trapping mechanism which filters the mud and dirt, after which the water flows into a chamber before entering the pond. The precise geometry, the flights of stairs with balustrades, and the verdant greenery in the background make it a beautiful and tranquil place. Nearby is the “Elephant Pond” another large pond which was once used by the monks for bathing. It’s fascinating to hear that these ponds are contemporaries of the Roman baths like Caracalla that have been restored to their former glory.

What fascinates me are the “rice-boats” in the remains of the Mahapali Refectory—stone troughs that were once filled with rice. The monks used to line up here with their bowls and food would be doled out to them. Our guide says that this trough could fill 3800 bowls. Famous Chinese monk and traveler Fa Hien visited Anuradhapura and is said to have received alms from this very kitchen.

Close to the Bodhi tree is a building called the “Brazen Palace,” because once it had a gleaming bronze roof. It was once an exalted building nine stories high. The *Mahavamsa* (a historic poem about the kings of Sri Lanka, written in the Pali language) describes it as having a thousand rooms, and an ivory throne inlaid with gold, sil-

ver and pearls. Today all that is left of this magnificent structure is 1600 pillars, set in parallel lines. The rest of the structure was made of wood and was completely burnt over the years.

We end our visit to Anuradhapura at the Isuruminiya Vihara, a stunning rock temple built between basalt boulders. This dates from the 3rd century B.C and stands near mirror-like ponds. It is decorated with statues of frolicking elephants. Our guide points out a mural of two lovers seated on a bench. They are supposed to be Saliya, King Dutugemunu’s son, and his wife. They met in the pleasure gardens, fell in love. Because the girl was not of royal blood, Saliya is said to have given up his claim to the throne!

Anuradhapura has been magical. We feel like intrepid explorers, who have stumbled upon a fabled “lost city.” Our imagination has been fired by images of bygone riches, sprawling palaces, tales of love and war, and an advanced ancient culture.

From Anuradhapura, we drive to another of Sri Lanka’s UNESCO sites—Dambulla. We climb up uneven rocky stairs, taking in the spectacular landscape and panoramic views (including that of the rock fortress of Sigiriya), followed by an assortment of vendors, an enthusiastic band of macaques, and a snake charmer with a king cobra. There are stalls with semi-precious stones, the ubiquitous postcards, and serene Buddhas. Teenage monks in red, orange, and brown robes sprint up the steep stairs effortlessly.

The Dambulla caves in Sri Lanka form a UNESCO World Heritage Site dating back to the 1st century B.C. Buddhism has had a tradition of rock-cut caves where monks meditated or lived away from human habitation. These caves were also occasionally used as a hide-out for dethroned kings. These humungous rock caves once provided refuge to King Vattagamani who lost his kingdom to Tamil invaders in 43 B.C. and was forced into hiding for a period of 14 years. When he reclaimed his throne, he had a temple constructed among the caves as a mark of his gratitude. These temples are a riot of paintings, murals and Buddha statues. King Nissankamalla (1187-1196 A.D.) gilded many of the statues and the caves began to be called Ran Giri or Golden Rock. The rock caves are reached by a flight of steep stairs cut into the rock face. At the bottom of the steps is the kitschy Golden Temple topped by a huge seated Buddha. A sign claims that it is the largest Buddha in the world—it certainly is the gaudiest, with bright colours and gilt!

The caves have gabled entrances and drip ledges to keep the water from seeping in. We start our explorations at the first cave. It is named after the god Vishnu, who is credited with creating these caves. A first century Brahmi inscription outside commemorates the founding of the temple. Inside this narrow



Ruwenuveli dagoba

cave is a sleeping Buddha with gold paint and his disciple Anandha standing near his feet. There are old, eroded murals blackened by burnt incense and some clumsy new repainting. Outside is a *bo* or peepul tree with bright and colourful prayer flags and lit lamps. Pilgrims offer prayers here, lighting incense and offering fruits and lotus flowers.

The “Cave of the Great Kings” is spectacular. Its dull lighting creates an aura of mystique. There’s an enormous collection of Buddhas here, of all sizes and poses, built out of brick, wood, and granite and covered with stucco and paint. The reds and golds of the innumerable statues and deities shimmer in the dark interiors. The only sound that is audible inside the cave is the trickle of water, from the roof, which is said to never run dry. Devotees believe that this water has healing properties. The walls and ceilings are covered in murals with scenes from the Buddha’s life, ranging from a dream his mother had during her pregnancy to his struggle for enlightenment and holding of the first sermon. The murals follow the contours of natural rock formations and look like flowing tapestry.

The other three caves are more recent and are also covered with colourful frescoes and filled with meditative Buddhas and Hindu deities. One cave has a sloping ceiling and looks like a gargantuan tent. All the statues are carved out of solid rock here—an outstanding feat! We see paintings and statues



Wall painting, Dambulla

here in the typical Kandyan (after the historic city of Kandy) style. Outside is a pond filled with brilliant purple lotuses where the king is supposed to have washed his feet before prayers. History, beauty, and artistry can really be a potent combination! ■

Getting there: It is possible to get to Anuradhapura on the A9 highway from Kandy. The drive from Colombo is approximately five hours by bus; or 4 hours by private vehicle. Buses travel along this highway, as well, and there is a bus station in the Anuradhapura New Town. A train service also runs to Anuradhapura from

the south, with two stations being in and near Anuradhapura. (Source: Wikipedia)

Besides Anuradhapura and Dambulla, Sri Lanka’s Golden Triangle of UNESCO Heritage sites has cities like Sigiriya and Polonnaruwa which bear testimony to a advanced civilization where art, architecture and town planning flourished when Europe was still in the dark ages. After years of civil strife, these historical treasures are accessible to tourists, which combined with the good hotels, friendly currency, and warm people make this a great destination.

Kalpna Sunder is a Japanese language special-

