

The Ruins of a Majestic City

O

Jalandhar Dev

ur train reached Anuradhapur at 1:30 p.m. It was drizzling and a cold wind blew. Although I was apprehensive that the journey would be an uncomfortable one, it had turned out to be very pleasant indeed. Anuradhapur, a town or a village depending on how you look at it, lay at a distance of about four miles from the station.

Anuradhapur has a population of about 4000. As a matter of fact, it is a small town of little significance. However, it is the principal town of the northern central part of Sri Lanka. The government agent and the district judge have their offices here. There is very little that is worth visiting in this town. Here I am speaking of Anuradhapur, the modern city. What was Anuradhapur like in ancient times? This was a centre of power during the reign of Buddhist kings in Sri Lanka. For several centuries after the 14th Century B.C.E. this city was a witness to the abundant wealth, commercial prosperity and the exquisite artistry of a highly civilized race. Today, the ruins of a magnificently majestic city bearing testimony to this great civilization lie buried in Anuradhapur. One cannot be sure how large this city was when Buddhism had reached its zenith in Sri Lanka; however, some books inform us that it spread over an area measuring not less than 100 square miles. The city

comprised two parts. The Buddhist priests and monks lived in one part and kings, rich subjects and ordinary people resided in the other. The city included gardens and farm fields. How could one ascertain the size of the population of the city when one cannot even form an idea of its area? However, it has been mentioned that the city was home to 92 thousand Buddhist monks. In a city where parasites numbered nearly a hundred thousand, it is easy to imagine the number of wage labourers and their employers who lived here. Whenever Buddhism arrived in a country, its king built monasteries, temples dedicated to the sacred relics and resting places to achieve undying fame and tried to render their cities more splendid to surpass the glory of other kings. If the sight of the remains of the civilization established by the people of Sinhala fills one with amazement, the information that Hindus inimical to Buddhism destroyed this city saddened my heart. To express their hostility to Hinduism, Muslims ravaged Hindu temples and vandalized images. Hindus, for their part, had also destroyed Buddhist monasteries and other places sacred to them. What terrible examples of religious intolerance! Will the Muslims who have demolished Hindu temples go to paradise? Or will the Hindus who destroyed Buddhist places of worship be admitted to heaven?

The modern city of Anuradhapur has been built on the ruins of the ancient city. Even the house where I stayed stood on ruins. Wherever I cast my eyes, I saw the remains of a mansion, a pillar, an image or some other such things. It is futile to hope that the ancient city of Anuradhapur can be restored through diligent excavations carried out by the government. To see whatever lies on the surface or what has been retrieved from the earth would have required a long stay. I had very little time at my disposal. So, I thought I should see whatever I could manage to during my short stay and stepped out of my residence without delay. It was not easy to find means of transport in this city. Somehow I managed to hire a vehicle. The driver had a

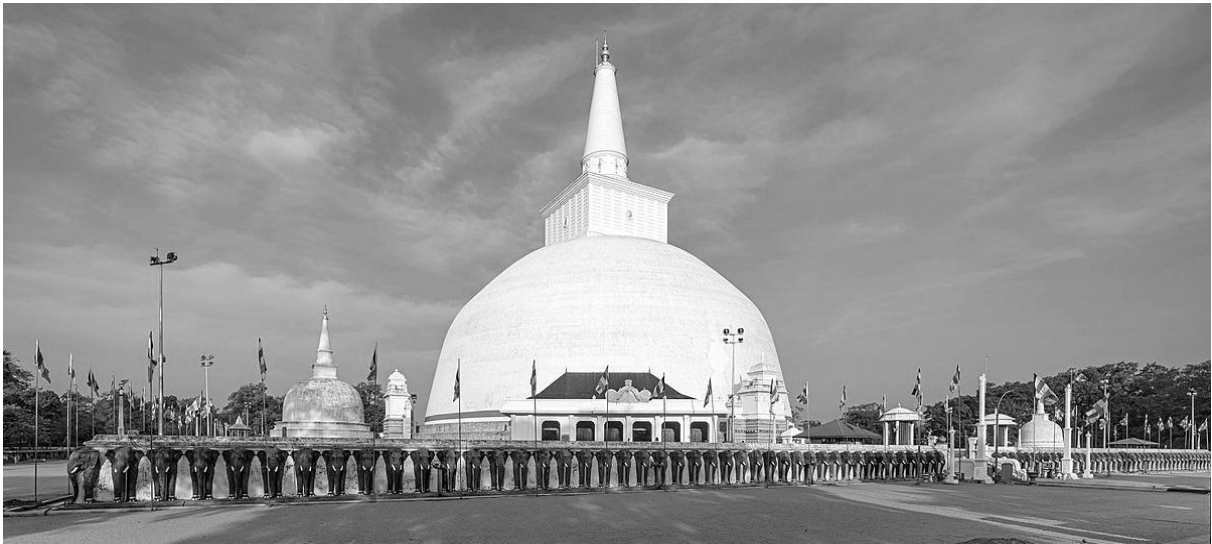
my servant spotted a snake and warned me. It was a viper russelli, a venomous snake. As evening was falling, I did not want to court any danger and returned to my place of residence. On the way back, I climbed two more dagobas, which were two dome-shaped shrines containing relics of the Buddha or a Buddhist saint. The stairs of KendaramVihar are very beautiful. Many visitors from Europe and America express their deep admiration for these. However, the building these lead to has vanished without trace. At the bottom of each stairs or on a bathing ghat were placed semi-circular stone plaques. Each plaque carries exquisite carvings of elephants, bulls, swans and lotus flowers and creepers.

In the evening, I went to the famous Bodhi

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smattering of English.

I first paid a visit to Ishwaramuni Dagoba. This Buddhist Vihar was carved out of a small hill. There is an image of the Buddha here and on the stone wall has been carved the image of Kapila Muni. The huge water tank called Disha Devi, which spreads over 400 acres, lies close to it. It brims with crystal clear water and is carefully maintained by the government. Besagiri lies at a distance of one mile from here. It is a small cave built into a low hill. The remains of massive mansions lie near the hill. Their excavated foundations have been carefully preserved. The skills employed to construct these buildings and the purposes these served are easily imagined and cannot be described. Beautiful stone images lay scattered. Before I stepped into the cave, tree to meet the chief priest of Anuradhapur. The abode of the chief priest lay in a compound very near to the Bodhi tree. The tree stands in the middle of a huge yard enclosed by a boundary wall. To enter this yard, one has to climb a number of steps. On either side of the steps vendors sold white lotus flowers, palm and other white flowers. I went into the yard and my servant followed me bearing a basket of flowers he had purchased. Whenever he saw flowers being sold at any temple, my servant never failed to buy flowers worth an anna or five paisa and would never bother to take my permission to do so. Poor fellow did not know that Buddhism is not a religion followed by Hindus and he also was not aware of the Sanskrit Sloka: Even if you force an elephant to enter a Jain temple, it would not go in.



The Bodhi tree: Sakya Singha had attained enlightenment while meditating under a huge pippul tree that stood on the bank of river Niranjana, which flows through the Kingdom of Magadha. For this reason, Buddhists regarded the Bodhi tree as supremely sacred. This tree lived for a very long time and was worshipped by Buddhists. The Chinese traveller, Hieun Sang, who toured India in the 7th C.E., mentions in his travel narrative that he had seen this tree. Anyway, during Emperor Ashoka's reign in India, Tissa, the king of Sinhala embraced Buddhism. At King Tissa's request, Emperor Ashoka sent a branch of this tree to Sinhala. Sanghamitra, Ashoka's daughter, planted this in Mahamegha Garden in Anuradhapur. It is believed that the same has remained alive. The tree is a massive one and it should be at least 2,218 years old, for this tree is supposed to have been brought over to Sri Lanka in 306 B.C.E. Of course trees live long, but as long as no botanist has certified that this tree is the same as the one planted by Princess Sanghamitra or has sprouted from a seed of this tree, one can never be sure. When Hindus believed that a small banyan tree could be six or seven thousand years old, why should one be surprised when Buddhists claim that the Bodhi tree is 2,218 years old. It is perfectly possible that this claim like those made by believers of other religions may be unfounded, but a Chinese traveller, FaHien

writes that he saw this tree at Anuradhapur in 4th C.E. Buddhists offer worship to this tree with great devotion.

It is the fourteenth day of the bright fortnight of the month. Tomorrow it would be a full moon night. So, countless pilgrims have assembled at Anuradhapur. Innumerable men and women, knelt at the foot of the Bodhi tree chanting, "Buddham Saranang Gachchammi, Dharmam Saranang Gachchammi, Sangham Saranang Gachchammi." Gender distinctions were forgotten. Everyone held white flowers. Some carried bottles of oil, others, candles and some others, joss sticks. They kept pouring a little oil into the clay lamps; some lighted candles and others burnt aromatic incense sticks. In this way, all the temples were brightly lit up day and night and the air was thick with the smell of incense. No priests were to be seen anywhere; nobody gave anyone any instructions and no food offerings were being distributed. Hearts full of intense devotion, everyone was feeling deeply fulfilled. Whoever wanted to give a donation dropped it into a padlocked iron box. The left hand did not know what the right hand gifted. Standing under the shade of the Bodhi tree, I felt that the place was as hallowed as the mode of worship offered here was selfless. A temple stood near this tree. In the hugely expansive space of the grand hall of the temple is installed a splendid image of the Buddha.

The temple and the hall are both built in modern style. The statue of the Buddha is at least ten feet tall, which depict him in a meditative posture. It is believed that this beautiful statue actually resembles the real Buddha Dev. The priest lived in a house behind the temple. His name was Reverend T. SumanRatnapal. He was about 50 years old and a very learned man. It feels odd to see the word Reverend prefixing his name. But now-a-days it has become a popular fashion and religious priests have started using this word before their names. However, the Muslim clergy have refrained from following this practice. When I raised objections to the custom of worshipping Buddha's images in Sinhala, he replied, "It is true that Buddha Dev never advised his disciples to offer worship to him and that he was never interested in idol worship. But his disciples introduced image worship in order to perpetuate his memory. Buddhists of ancient times favoured this practice. If you go through texts such as *Karmanidana Sutra*, *Stuparatna* and *AbhidharmarthaSangraha*, you will be convinced of the necessity of venerating the image of the Buddha." He added, "Three things must be kept in mind if one wishes to preserve the memory of someone: meditation on his qualities, meditation on the relic of his body and the adoration of his image. The Buddha's image was sculpted by people who had seen him. All these images have been modelled on that image. So we are confident that these bear a likeness to the real Buddha. Although presented as an incarnation of the Buddha, Lord Jagannath does not resemble him." (During my discussion with him. I had given him a description of the image of Lord Jagannath. He did not know anything about it.) I took leave of him after a prolonged debate. He gave me his visiting card and advised me to form opinions about Buddhism after reading the books mentioned above. He asked me to write to him, in case I have any queries. However, I did not take the trouble of reading the books. Had I not taken down the name of these books in my

notebook, they would have completely escaped my memory.

Next day in the morning I went out to see the other archaeological remains in the city. The roads were packed with crowds of people. The full moon night had made them throng the city. To Buddhists, a full moon night is very auspicious. In the past, on this day, Buddhists used to congregate in one place and confess their sins in public. Whether this practice is followed at present or not, simple village folk visited major temples on a full moon night. So Anuradhapur was very crowded today for this reason. What kept me busy differed from what kept them occupied. However, some of them stopped for a moment when they saw me making sketches or taking notes. But this did not cause me any inconvenience. In fact, it helped me when I found someone among them who knew English.

Even if one had a look at a small part left of the ruins at Anuradhapur, one will get a clear idea of the heights Sinhalese civilization had scaled in the past. Anuradhapur is situated in the middle of the northern central province of Sri Lanka. Although the climate was not a congenial one the vast open spaces enabled them to build a city and made it their capital. Since water sources were not available nearby, they dammed streams flowing forty miles away and brought water to the city through canals. They had built a huge reservoir to collect enough water to supply it to the inhabitants of the city for eight months in a year. Long pipes connected this reservoir to stone wells in every house in the city. These pipes were not made of iron. These were like sluices made of stone. To release water or to stop it from flowing according to need, gates were fitted at different places. These exist even today. Monasteries were built for the accommodation of the monks. Dagobas were constructed to preserve relics of the Buddha or other famous saints. There are many Buddhist Stupas in India, but it is doubtful if there are any such tall dagobas or relic centres in

our country. The place in Mathura, which is called the dais of King Kansha, is to my mind a Buddhist Stupa. However, all these pale into insignificance when compared with the dagobas in Sri Lanka. The dagoba in Abhayagiri is a brick-built edifice. Sri Lanka is a hot country, which receives heavy rainfall. So with the passage of time, these have developed cracks and trees growing here from seeds in birds' droppings have destroyed the lime mortar joints of the dagobas. So the dagoba now looks like a hill overgrown with trees and creepers and has become a favourite haunt of snakes. Pilgrims rarely climb to its top. They go away after offering worship at the foot of the hill. When someone saw me climbing up the hill, he asked me, "Why are you going to a dangerous snake-infested place? You had better go down and offer worship below." I replied, "I have other things in mind. I have climbed hills much taller than Abhayagiri. There are only snakes here, but I have climbed hills where one encounters snakes and tigers. So, why should I feel scared of climbing this hill?" He went away and I went up the hill accompanied by my servant. As we moved up, we

felt as if we were climbing not a man-made monument but a hill. Finally, we reached a platform, from which rose a winding staircase having ninety steps. Its upper part lay open. This has been built by a society for preserving ancient monuments. When we reached the top, a sublime sight presented itself to us. At a short distance rose a mountain named Mihintaal. At the bottom of this mountain spread a gigantic artificial lake called Nuwara Beba. Water brought from this lake supplied the needs of the residents of Anuradhapur. Thanks to the government's initiative, the lake is now full of water.

Wherever you cast your eyes, to the south, north, east or west, you see vast fields dotted with colossal ruins. When we reached the top of the hill, a very cool breeze caressed our bodies and dispelled our fatigue. I sat for a few moments in silence and thought about the past civilization of Anuradhapur. My servant told me, "This was Ravana's kingdom and this mountain is Mountain Subalaya." When he did not receive any response to his inspired suggestion from me, he took my silence for acceptance of his view. After a while, when he



saw other people had written their names on the wall, he wanted to write our names on it. At his request, I carved my name in Odia with the help of my pen-knife on the wall. He also wrote his name. We now descended the hill. Down below, we came across ancient pictures on a broken boundary wall, which featured some figures and the picture of an exquisitely rendered seven-headed cobra raising its hood. An ancient garden, which had become a jungle, came into view. Louba Mohopaya or Lanka Rama Vihar stood close to it, which is a magnificent building. This house had boasted 1600 beautifully carved granite pillars. Many of these still remain standing even today. It is said that this building had nine storeys and was covered with copper plates. This was built by DattuJemunu and Dhuparam Dagoba lies close to it. Legend has it that, at its relic centre was preserved a bone from Buddha Dev's neck. This dagoba has been restored to a good state of repair. Apart from this, some other dagobas have been renovated. The renovation of Raon Beli has also been undertaken. The wall of this dagoba was adorned with a thousand expertly carved stone elephant heads.

When Anuradhapur was a prosperous city, innumerable Buddhist monks arrived here to receive alms. As it was impossible to serve rice and gruel to them individually, rice and gruel were put in a huge boat made of stone. From here, each monk took his share of food and helped himself to it. Each boat was sixty feet long, four feet deep and four feet wide. It was built from thirteen stone slabs using amazingly ingenious techniques. Another boat, which was ten feet long, four feet wide and three feet deep was carved out of a single stone slab. Many containers like these lay scattered around.

When I returned to the place where I stayed, a thought crossed my mind: What ideas someone ignorant of the history of Sinhala would form when he would see these ruins at Anuradhapur? While this thought exercised my mind, my servant was feeling extremely happy. He thought his life was

fulfilled through his visit to Lanka. He was familiar with descriptions of the city of Lanka from the *Ramayana* and of the palaces of Ravana and Indrajeet and the forest of Asoka trees. He had also heard of the fierce battle fought and the devastation of Lanka. Now, he has seen the island with his own eyes. His happiness therefore knew no bounds. When he would return home, he will narrate his experiences vividly and people would happily credit his account. But, if anyone would ask me about Sri Lanka, I would say, "Yes! We came across ruins, but these were not ruins of Ravana's Lanka, but of a Buddhist city." The same journey thus can give rise to two different accounts. On the top of Abhayagiri, my servant thought that he was in Ravana's palace, and, on the steps of Lanka Rama Vihar, he heard of a blind man singing a beautiful song, which mentioned Lanka Devi a couple of times. A huge ruined garden lay nearby and he had a glimpse of Mihintal Mountain rising at a distance. Therefore, he had every reason to take Anuradhapur for the city ruled by Ravana. Since I know a little about the history of Buddhism, I challenged his views based on unsubstantiated belief. Was Anuradhapur really the city of Lanka? This question arose in my mind again and again. I thought I should write a few things about the *Ramayana*. But I thought doing so would amount to unwarranted audacity. The discussion of the *Ramayana* has no place in this diary and would be utterly irrelevant and would be an inexcusable offence. My tour of Lanka at last came to an end. I saw the city of Lanka in a state of decline. I had nothing more to do here. What is left for me in the city of asuras? Let us quickly cross the seas and return to India, a country populated by humans and monkeys and pay a visit to the temple of Lord Rama or Shri Rangan in Trichinapali, the city of monkeys. So, I packed my things and began my return journey. ☺ ☺

(excerpted from *Fragments of a Diary*)

Translated by **Aditya Nayak**

About Jalandhar Dev:

Born in 1872 in the royal family of Bamanda, a feudatory state in colonial India, Jalandhar Dev served the kingdom as dewan for more than two decades. He played a pivotal role in introducing several administrative and social reforms in the state. His reformist initiatives included widow remarriage, abolition of child marriage, questioning caste divisions and restrictions.

He was widely read in traditional scriptures, and at the same time promoted a scientific and rational outlook on life. He wrote polemical commentaries on the *Vedas*, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. At the Temple of Science established in Bamanda, he used to observe the movement of celestial bodies with the help of a powerful telescope and authored several articles on comets, planets and stars. His articles written in Odia and Bangla were published in reputed journals such as *UtkalSahitya* and *Prabasi*. He himself edited the magazine *Alochana* at the turn of the century and later, the well-known literary periodical, *Sankha*. In 1910, he undertook a journey to Sri Lanka and an account of his travel was serialized in *UtkalSahitya*. It was published under the title *DiaryraKiyadansa*[Fragments of a Diary] in 1951. The book also includes a lively narrative of his experiences in various parts of southern India.

After Independence, he joined active politics and represented Bamanda (1949-1951) at the Odisha Legislative Assembly. Jalandhar Dev died in 1952.

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