

CONSERVATION OF THE SACRED CITY OF ANURADHAPURA WITH REFERENCE TO ITS HISTORIC CULTURAL SETTING AND URBAN DEVELOPMENT OF THE NORTH CENTRAL PROVINCE OF SRI LANKA

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The North Central Province of Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka was divided into nine administrative provinces during the 19th and the first half of the 20th centuries.*¹ The boundaries of these provinces are extremely arbitrary. One of this is the North Central Province consisting of two districts, viz. Anuradhapura and Polonnaruva.*² This is the largest province and comprises 16% of the land area of the country. Another special feature of this province is that it has the largest area under waters compared with other provinces, i.e. 7.5% of its land area.*³

The province is dry, hot but not humid; the mean annual temperature being 26°C, the average rainfall being 1500 mm and the average relative humidity being 75%. This is excellent weather conditions in a tropical country. It rains heavily from October to January.

The province is the home to 1.1 million (which is 6% of Sri Lanka) at a population density of 106 persons per sq.km. compared to 1455 in the Western Province and a national figure of 286.*⁴ In fact this is the lowest density for any province in Sri Lanka. It is generally flat terrain with occasional hills and rock outcrops. Many of these have been used as monasteries in historical times notably Mihintale and Ritigala.

Historic Setting

The subject area of this paper is Anuradhapura, presently a provincial capital with a population of 60,000.*⁵ Although it is presently situated in the NCP its location needs to be looked at in a wider context. This region has been populated at least since the 9th century BC. (1) Legend has it that a major Aryan settlement took place in the 6th century B.C. (2) There are adequate archaeological remains to conclude that the whole region has been populated from then onwards until the medieval period. As such the region under scrutiny will be the northern plains of Sri Lanka.*⁶

The historical era of the region commences in the 6th century B.C. The establishment of Anuradhapura as a settlement was said to have taken place at that time. The

City was established as the capital of the kingdom in the 4th century B.C. (2) There are vivid written descriptions of the laying out of the city that would stun a modern town planner with amazement at the meticulous detailing of the various functionally different zones specified for the city.*⁷ The whole city and the suburbs were divided into sections that allowed for designated purposes only. The city, the suburbs and the country side were administered through a decentralized system and it is clear that the King in Anuradhapura and later in Polonnaruva was more a symbol of unity than an institution that had anything significant to do with the day-to-day life of the common people.

The single most important influence that the shaping of the physical and cultural environment of the region had was Buddhism, formally introduced to the country in the 4th century B.C. (2) With Buddhism came arts and crafts and an attitude to life and a world-view that was mild, conciliatory and introverted. A welfare-State evolved and Buddhism became the focal point. The most precious royal insignia was the Tooth Relic of the Buddha.*^{8,9,10} What is left of Anuradhapura today is exclusively religious except for the citadel wall and the rather modest Royal Palace.*^{11,12} The religious edifices however tower all above the rest even in their ruined state. It is to be noted that the Jetavana Stupa was the second tallest building in the world in the 4th century; second only to the tallest pyramid in Egypt.*¹³

The other conspicuous feature dating back to this era is the sophisticated irrigation network. (3) A system of cascading tanks joined by a network of canals ensured that water was available for agriculture throughout the year in this dry country.*^{14,15,16} Most of these tanks have been repaired and are still serving the purpose they faithfully performed 20 centuries ago.*^{17,18,19,20,21,22,23}

A high point in this historical narrative would be Sigiriya.*²⁴ It stands up out of a plain imposingly as a solitary rock. It is the most significant secular structure from this era. Moving of the capital to Polonnaruva in the 12th century was marked by another two centuries of building interrupted by struggles and wars.*^{25,26,27,28}

We know that Anuradhapura was reclaimed by the forest even before the capital was shifted again from Polonnaruva. When the King of Polonnaruva visited Anuradhapura in the 13th century, it was “as if the devil had inhabited the place”. (4) When Robert Knox passed this way in 1680, it was just a small hamlet.*²⁹ (5) Even in 1821, John Davy found it a “small mean village in the midst of a forest” (6) But the rediscovery of Anuradhapura and Polonnaruva in the 19th century and the interest that they generated in the western world resulted in many researches being done and the establishment of the Archaeological Survey Department of Ceylon late in the century. Thus began the modern period of Anuradhapura.

Cultural Setting

It is believed that the Buddha predicted that His doctrine would flourish in Sri Lanka and handed over the island to God Visnu to protect. For Sri Lankans Anuradhapura is the most sacred spot in the world. It is believed that all the four Buddhas who lived in this kalpa visited Anuradhapura and meditated at the spot where the Sacred Bo Tree was planted.*³⁰ (2) In fact the Sacred Bo Tree was offered with the Kingdom by several kings. There are eight places in Anuradhapura where the Buddha meditated. These are the Atamasthana and form a very significant part of a pilgrimage. Sometimes the Atamasthana becomes the total pilgrimage.*^{31,32,33,34}

For these reasons Anuradhapura was never abandoned since its establishment. It was the cradle of a culture based on Buddhist values of non-violence and kindness to others. It fostered the notion that this was only one of a number of successive lives and therefore nothing was worth killing for. The primary objective of a Buddhist was to realize enlightenment. In the evolution of Buddhist thought one comes across certain adaptations too; for instance the Mahayana school that accommodated the pleasures of a lay life into the strict monastic-oriented discipline. So the artist became a meditator striving for perfection within himself and in the work.*³⁵ We also come across instances where elements of other doctrines, especially Hinduism, were incorporated to mainstream Buddhism. An interesting point is the literal interpretation of Alakamanda, abode of Kuvera, which was Sigiriya.

All these activities made Anuradhapura a site for pilgrims. Even in its glorious days it was already a pilgrimage site: scholars from all parts of the world visited Anuradhapura to see its festivals and study the doctrine. Famous among them is Fa Hsien from China whose descriptions of Anuradhapura paint a bustling city of prosperity. (8) Even in the dark days when it was claimed by the forest, the Sacred Bo Tree was

protected by the Buddhist monks. In the 16th century King Vimaladharmasuriya of Kandy visited Anuradhapura and built the protective wall to keep the elephants out.*³⁶ Kings and common people came to Anuradhapura on pilgrimage as witnessed by Robert Knox of the 17th century and John Davy of the 19th century. Almost all of these pilgrimages were made on foot. People had to travel distances of 300 kilometers or more to reach Anuradhapura. So we see that Anuradhapura was never totally abandoned.

Over these long centuries Anuradhapura was associated with several traditions that formed part of the life of people. Although the Buddha did not specify any ritual or observance in relation to the day-to-day activities of the people, the Anuradhapura civilization evolved many such traditions. The drying up of a branch of the Sacred Bo Tree is considered as a bad omen for the country. The many religious processions add variety to city life. The Chinese pilgrim Fa Hsien describes a procession in honour of the Sacred Tooth Relic held in the 5th century. It is interesting to note that this procession is still being held annually in Kandy. Some festivals that the chronicles recorded have since been forgotten. However several special festivals have been observed from time immemorial. (7)*³⁷

- Alut-sahal-mangalya: This is a festival to offer the first portion of the paddy harvest to the Sacred Bo Tree usually held in January.
- Parana-avurudu-mangalya: This is held to obtain blessings from the Sacred Bo Tree for the New Year falling in April.
- Alut-avurudu-mangalya or Nanumura-mangalya: This is a festival held in the New Year in April or May and involves all the Atamasthana.
- Karthi-mangalya or Daramiti-poya: This is held in July or August when people bring wood to the Sacred Bo Tree as offerings. It is believed that this harks back to the days when lot of fire-wood was required to ward off elephants.
- Dalada-perahara: A reminiscent of the ancient procession in honour of the Sacred Tooth Relic, this is held in July when the procession starts from the Ruvanvalisaya and ends at the Sacred Bo Tree.

The process of adding to traditions and creation of new festivals that would eventually become tradition has not died. The latent social forces are still at work. Two festivals having their origins in the 20th century are particularly noteworthy.*³⁸

- Sanghamitta-perahara: This is a procession celebrating the bringing of the Sacred Bo Tree sapling from India by Theri Sanghamitta, daughter of Emperor Asoka, in the 4th century B.C. It is held annually on December full-moon day.

- Picca-mal-puja: This is a festival of offering flowers to the Ruvanvalisaya.

Although some of these festivals are primarily patronized by those in the region, particularly the farmers, others are attended by people from all over the country. The biggest of such festivals is the Poson-festival held on the full-moon day in June. This commemorates the day when Thera Mahinda from India arrived in Mihintale (located 11 kilometers east of Anuradhapura) and delivered a discourse on Buddhism to King Devanampiyatissa who was out there on a hunting expedition. It is the day Sri Lankans were converted to Buddhism. It is in fact the beginning of everything that is Sri Lankan.*³⁹

The festivities begin several days before the full-moon day and large numbers of people observe austerities as prescribed in the doctrine. On the full-moon day pilgrims from all over the country flock to Anuradhapura and move on to Mihintale in the evening. No other festival in the country attracts as many pilgrims. Although it is very difficult to keep counting, the official figures hover around the 1.5 million mark. The whole technical and administrative networks of the region prepare themselves for the influx of pilgrims. The tanks of Anuradhapura are filled with water diverted from the Mahaweli River. Temporary sanitary facilities are erected, but these are never adequate. A large number of organizations would arrive with their members and establish *dansal* (alms-giving-shelters)*⁴⁰ They would bring cooking utensils, food items and other necessities and cook food and give them away free-of-charge. All the pilgrims are fed in this manner. As for accommodation the pilgrims would sleep or read under the trees under a full-moon in a gentle breeze comfortable with the knowledge that it never rains in Anuradhapura in June.*⁴¹

It is to be noted that not only in Anuradhapura and Mihintale but also along all the roads to these two places from all directions *dansal* would be established offering soft drinks, tea and refreshments. Almost all pilgrims, irrespective of their rank or status, accept these and they believe that both the giving and accepting carry lot of merit. There are many people who would arrange a *dansala* in his own house by the side of a road and bear the cost by himself. A small kid bubbling with the enthusiasm of serving pilgrims is one of the most heart-warming sights one could ever hope to see.

The Poson festival alone is adequate to indicate that some values that the Sri Lankans inherited from the legacy of Buddhism are still vibrant. These are still part of the society and are not likely to deteriorate or disappear; nay, they are in fact growing. The Sacred Bo Tree is in fact considered as capable of bringing in good luck or ward off evil forces. Many are the pleas written on small flags and hung on the

branches of the tree or the railing.*⁴² We observe that successive plans prepared for Anuradhapura and its surroundings have taken these vital aspects into consideration and made provisions to accommodate them.

Urban Development of the North Central Province

Sri Lanka's urban development policy has unfortunately not been expressed in an articulate manner. However the urban planning efforts indicate that there is an attempt to establish an urban network that promotes non-agricultural employment generation and provision of high-level urban facilities to the people. This envisages the establishment of industries close to but outside designated urban areas affecting the country-side. To understand how this could affect Anuradhapura it is necessary to briefly study the planning efforts of the recent past.

Anuradhapura was in a shabby state by 1940's. The main highway from Colombo to Trincomalee ran through the Sacred Area and there were commercial establishments very close to sacred places destroying the sacred environment. The government adopted the Anuradhapura Preservation Ordinance in 1942 and engaged a town planner to prepare a plan for Anuradhapura. The result was the Anuradhapura Preservation Scheme of 1949 that covered both Anuradhapura and Mihintale.*⁴³ It provided for the creation of a New Town close to the ancient city that would accommodate incongruous activities removed from Anuradhapura. The implementation was done by the Anuradhapura Preservation Board specially created for the purpose in 1961 that discharged its task more or less successfully.

The abolition of the Preservation Board in 1973 and the vesting of the responsibility of implementation in a Special Commissioner were detrimental to Anuradhapura and the conditions deteriorated. In early 1980's the Department of Town and Country Planning prepared plans for Anuradhapura Sacred Area and Mihintale Sacred Area separately and they were implemented.*⁴⁴ Anuradhapura Sacred Area Planning Scheme had as its stated objectives the removal of incongruous activities including residential buildings from Anuradhapura to new settlements and the provision of facilities for pilgrims. These were noble objectives that the government expected to achieve with meager resources. Some success has been accomplished and from 1988 up to date nearly 1000 families have been resettled.

In the late 1990's it was felt that the issues related to urban development exerted undue pressure on Anuradhapura. The

lack of development of other urban centres of the region meant that employment opportunities were available mostly in Anuradhapura only. The sacred area also offered much in the way of employment in the UNESCO-sponsored Cultural Triangle projects and other informal employment in the sacred area. Accordingly the Greater Anuradhapura Development Scheme that was prepared at the turn of this century took into consideration a large area covering almost 5% of the area of Sri Lanka.*⁴⁵ Intensive concentration on urban development was ironically considered as a strategy to save Anuradhapura and Mihintale from cracking down under pressure. The planning concept applied was in fact an extension of that used centuries ago. A third ring was added to the two concentric rings of ancient Anuradhapura. Whereas the first ring surrounding the ancient city was the monastic ring, and the second ring the forest monastic ring, the third ring of the modern times was an agro-based industrial ring.*⁴⁶ The scheme is presently being incorporated into a vast structure plan covering the whole province.

Conservation of the Sacred City of Anuradhapura

Anuradhapura is attractive to many who desire that the place accommodate their requirements.

- Scholars from all over the world: they want high or medium level accommodation, serenity and an undisturbed environment to carry out their studies and research;
- Tourists in search of a touch of the olde world Asian style: they want accommodation, information and the olde environment unspoiled;
- Buddhists who want to meditate in a sacred environment: they want a peaceful environment;
- Traders who want to make a profit by providing services: they want easy access to all the visitors;
- Pilgrims: they want to worship at the sacred places according to their ways;
- Well-wishers: they want to establish themselves temporarily during festival days where they could cook and serve food to pilgrims;
- Inhabitants of the North Central Province: they come to Anuradhapura for the purely secular purposes of obtaining administrative services of the government that are available only in Anuradhapura as the provincial and district capital;
- Government Departments such as the Tourist Board who want to make the place attractive for tourists so that more foreign exchange could be earned;
- Archaeologists: they want to conserve the city and

the monuments conforming to international standards.

It is the conflicts of the contradictory requirements of this motley group that this paper wants to touch upon. But to concentrate on the larger issue, the paper would consider only the conflict of the archaeologist and the pilgrim or the devotee. This cannot be a unique situation because it is obvious that all living monuments would be faced with similar issues.

That the ancient Anuradhapura is a 'living city' and its monuments are 'living monuments' are undeniable facts. As we discussed earlier, the traditions and festivals of Anuradhapura are centuries old and some have their beginnings going back two millennia. Anuradhapura as we have it today is the result of the protection that the devotees and the Buddhist monks provided in the face of attacks by fierce animals and the onslaught of the ravages of the jungle. It was plundered by treasure-hunters. The protectors lived with the basic requirements to sustain life and only the undying religious fervour and conviction sustained their efforts through nearly seven centuries.

Even since the rediscovery and the possession of the city and the monuments by the learned society, the pilgrims claimed them for their own for worship. Elsewhere in the country Anuradhapura has become part of the national conscience. That is why in 1985 terrorists attacked the Sacred Bo Tree when they wanted to provoke the Buddhists. Anuradhapura has been the subject of artistic creation. Its styles and decorative elements have been borrowed by modern architects.*⁴⁷ It has been serenaded in poetry and popular music.*⁴⁸ Pilgrimage to Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa, Dambulla and Sigiriya is one trip that almost every Sri Lankan has taken at least once in his life.*⁴⁹

The archaeologist and the conservator, on the other hand, require that the monuments are not disturbed, that they remain unaltered (unless for conservation purposes but that too done under professional supervision) and that nothing new is added. There are some monuments that could accommodate these wishes of the archaeologist and the pilgrim at the same time, such as the western monasteries.*⁵⁰ But the real conflict is generated at the Sacred Bo Tree, Ruvanvalisaya and other sacred places where the pilgrim wants to worship as millions had done before through those long long centuries.

How can one deny the pilgrim his right to worship at the one place he considers as the most sacred spot on the earth? How can one deny him the right to light a lamp at the place his ancestors protected braving severe conditions and bequeathed on him? How can one deny the celebration of religious feeling in festivities? How dare one try to stultify

the source of inspiration for other artistic creation? How, in short, can one freeze a vibrant culture?

These are questions that have been asked from the archaeologist which went unanswered. It is time that answers are found. Initially it would be profitable if the background is cleared as to the new conditions under which the system operates as compared to the ancient times.

- The population has increased drastically over time (total population of the country increased nine-fold from 2 million in 1871 to 18 million in 2001);
- Consequently the number of pilgrims has increased at a higher rate (given the improved transport facilities and accessibility);
- Consequently the environmental damage has increased to levels that are nearer the breaking point;
- The damage to monuments is increased especially with the dansal using some archaeological lands for their purposes.

On the positive side, there is the increased awareness of this situation among the pilgrims themselves. However awareness is not adequate by itself to resolve the issue. In Anuradhapura and Mihintale the behaviour of the pilgrims and the destruction they cause to the monuments have been recorded and documented.*⁵¹ These records are being studied to formulate suitable strategies and plans to minimize the damage. But most importantly it is necessary to drift into a balanced position where fostering of religion and culture based on the values that they have always been founded and preservation of monuments to ensure that such fostering could continue ad infinitum are allowed. This, as anyone could see, is one way the monuments could actually become part of living culture, rather than mere objects and sites.

It may be necessary even to go as far as to suggest that the UNESCO adopt a Charter for the Conservation of Living Monuments so that expert attention is given to a major issue that affects the core of the cultural conscience of the nations and a consensus is reached as to how to protect culture and monuments at the same time.

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Abstract

In view of the fact that I am presently the Secretary of ICOMOS Sri Lanka and that I am the voting member from Sri Lanka at the Scientific Committee on Historic Towns and Villages, it would be extremely rewarding if I get the chance to participate in the Symposium. However I would wish to inform you that the National Physical Planning Department where I am employed may be able to grant me an amount of only Sri Lankan Rs.30,000 if I were selected to participate and present the paper at the Symposium.

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