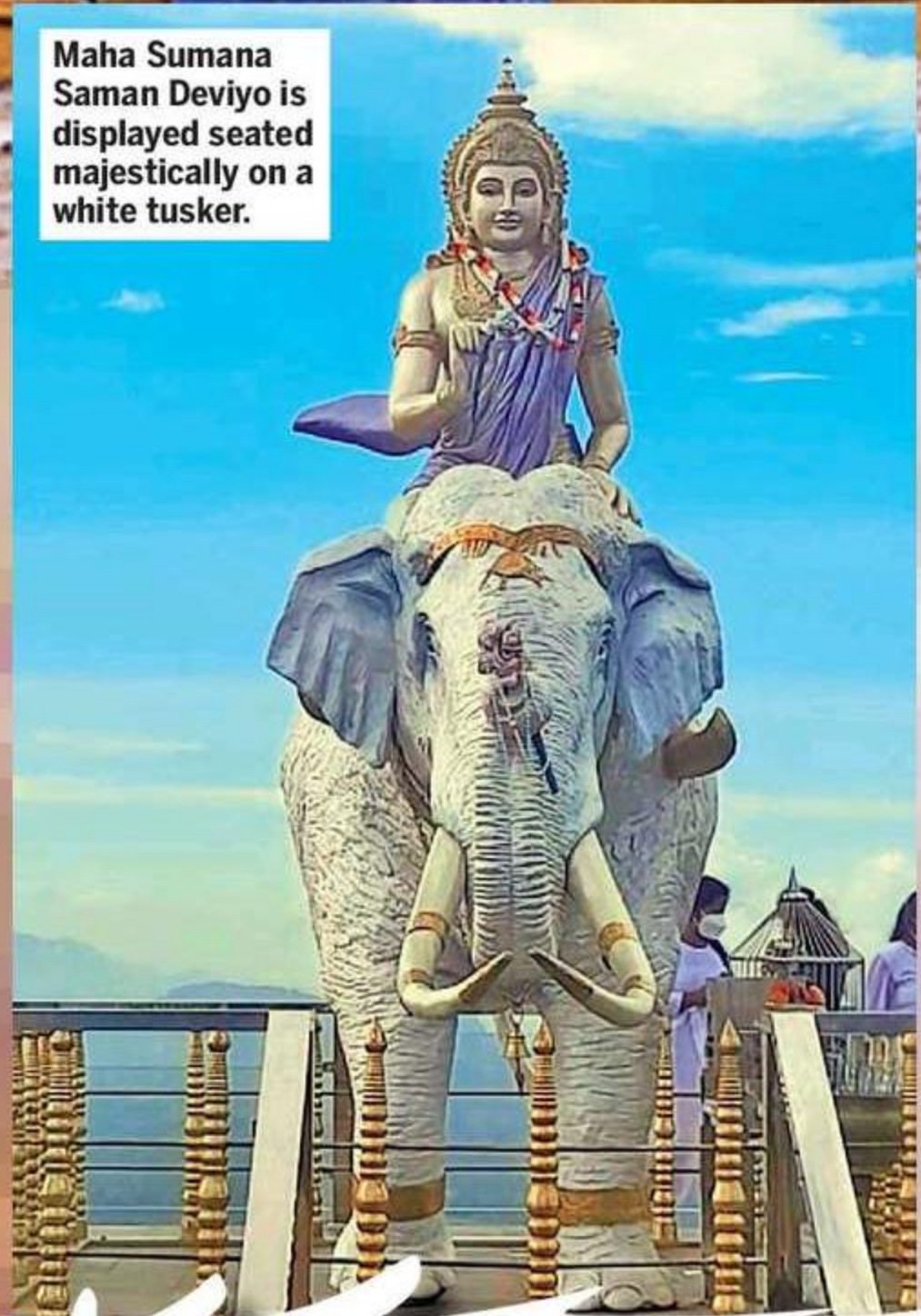


The celestial allure of Nelligala Temple



Maha Sumana Saman Deviyo is displayed seated majestically on a white tusker.



The chambers surrounding the relics were embellished with beautiful paintings. On the right-hand side, there are large statues of Buddha accentuating the temple's religious serenity. Adjacent to the viharage is the Sacred Bo tree. From here I noticed another Stupa painted in white. Its border is adorned with a unique fence of large swans, also painted in a golden hue.

DISHAN JOSEPH

Sri Lanka has a rich history of Buddhism. In this backdrop, our island is embellished with ancient Buddhist temples that have inspired generations of ardent devotees. The Central Province and Kandy in particular has some of our important temples, of which the Temple of the Tooth, the Sri Dalada Maligawa, remains the most significant Buddhist sanctum.

Influenced by continuing religious zeal, another temple is steadily becoming popular - the Nelligala Temple. I set off on Monday morning with my Buddhist friend Kumuduni to gain a deeper insight into this peaceful Buddhist abode that is located at the top of a mountain.

We boarded an intercity bus from Pettah at 5 am. Most of the city was still awakening as the bus moved out of the city limits. By 6 am, we were passing the town of Ambepussa. By 8 am, we were in Pilimathalawa. We were advised to get off at a point called Aladeniya, a quaint village. Right next to this bus stop, there is a three-wheeler park and these obliging taxi drivers will take you to the temple. The distance is roughly about five or six kilometres. There are buses that go to the temple, but one has to wait.

On the way, we passed a small town where time seems to standstill. The shops here still displayed the vintage charm of the 1970s. The early morning mist in the village of Muruthalawa still prevailed and enhanced the stunning views along a winding road. We could make out mountains covered with lush foliage. The final kilometre of the road leading to the Nelligala International Buddhist Centre was neatly carpeted. At regular intervals, there were large pots, painted in gold paint standing like sentinels along the way. The temple has been wisely planned and built. There is a large and safe car park.

A friendly police sergeant who was on duty greeted us. There are shops selling fresh flowers and other Buddhist offerings. The unblemished air was so refreshing. One of the impressive first visuals is that of three massive Buddhist flags, flying jubilantly from a rock. A beautiful stone stairway leads to a celestial setting. For senior citizens and people with mobility impairments, there is a separate safe path which provides wheelchair access. This is highly commendable as all people can access this temple and worship.

As we climbed the stairway, on our left, we saw a pond with a statue of the Buddha. On the right-hand side is a modern *dhana shalawa* (dining hall). Within minutes, we reached the summit and the panoramic view was amazing. This spectacular landscape of hills, green tea estates and lush woodlands set the positive mood to appreciate this wonderful International Buddhist Centre. I must also emphasise that at some temples which I have visited, there is a rush as people move, but at serene Nelligala, there is so much space due to prudent planning, which allows for a true spiritual engagement.

On the left-hand side of the summit is a gold colour Stupa, which brilliantly reflected the sunlight. As I stood and gazed at this imposing structure, I could imagine the effort of its builders. We walked a few feet away and observed a large bell. Suspended by a sturdy red iron frame, the inscription read that it is a donation from Thailand, a gesture of friendship. A paved path leads to the *viharage*, where the Sacred relics are enshrined. This beautiful building has two golden lions at the entrance. I was just in time to click a photo of the temple's musicians, three drummers neatly attired. The chambers surrounding the relics were embellished with beautiful paintings. On the right-hand side, there are large statues of Buddha accentuating the temple's religious serenity. Adjacent to the *viharage* is the Sacred Bo tree.

From here I noticed another Stupa painted in white. Its border is adorned with a unique fence of large swans, also painted in a golden hue. From this side, you can see the distant hills.

In Buddhism, birds are symbolically used to teach ethics and concepts. When Prince Siddhartha was a child, he went with his cousin Devadatta towards the forest. On seeing a flight of swans, Devadatta, using his bow and arrow pierced the wing of a swan. However, kind Siddhartha ran to the injured bird and gently took out the arrow, nursing the injured swan. His cousin Devadatta insisted that the

swan belonged to him. A wise old man told them: "The prized possession of every creature is its life. As such a creature belongs to the one who protects it". This advice is still relevant today. Another bird symbolic in Buddhism is the peacock as the Buddha and his monks encountered this bird during their monsoon season retreats.

My friend pointed out another beautiful statue of Saman Deviyo. The name Saman means "rising morning sun". He is the presiding guardian of Sabaragamuwa; this is why his main shrine is found in Ratnapura. The statue at Nelligala is definitely one of the best man-made manifestations of this deity. Maha Sumana Saman Deviyo is displayed seated majestically on a white tusker. Even the crown on his head is efficiently chiselled to detail. The artist who fashioned this magnificent elephant deserves respect and appreciation. From its commanding tusks to other minute details, the tusker has been creatively brought to life. He is positioned on a ledge. From this vantage point, depending on the cloud formation and visibility, you can see the Sacred hill of Siri Pada, miles away. Adam's Peak is a holy pilgrimage site for Buddhist and Hindu devotees. On this morning, the sky was clear and we were blessed with this view. One side of the summit has beautiful flower trees, full of yellow flowers. The temple also has a book shop. You can spend an hour on the summit indulging in religious observances. For those desiring deeper awakening and spiritual connection, they can spend more time as desired.

For the return journey, there are taxi drivers at the temple car park who will take you to Aladeniya town (Rs. 500) or to the Kandy town from where you can take the train or AC bus to Colombo. I convinced my friend to do a walk covering about half a mile, from the temple premises. I did this to further enjoy the stunning natural views. We observed pepper trees and clove trees growing amidst the other trees. Wild roses and bougainvillea plants were also spotted. Birds flew about chirping. The sky kept changing like a live canvas looking different in every photograph. A visit to the Nelligala International Buddhist Centre is a rewarding experience. I encourage my fellow Sri Lankans to take this beautiful journey, for it is in discovering our religious diversity that we consolidate national unity. As a sage told me once we are all branches of one tree.



The temple's three drummers

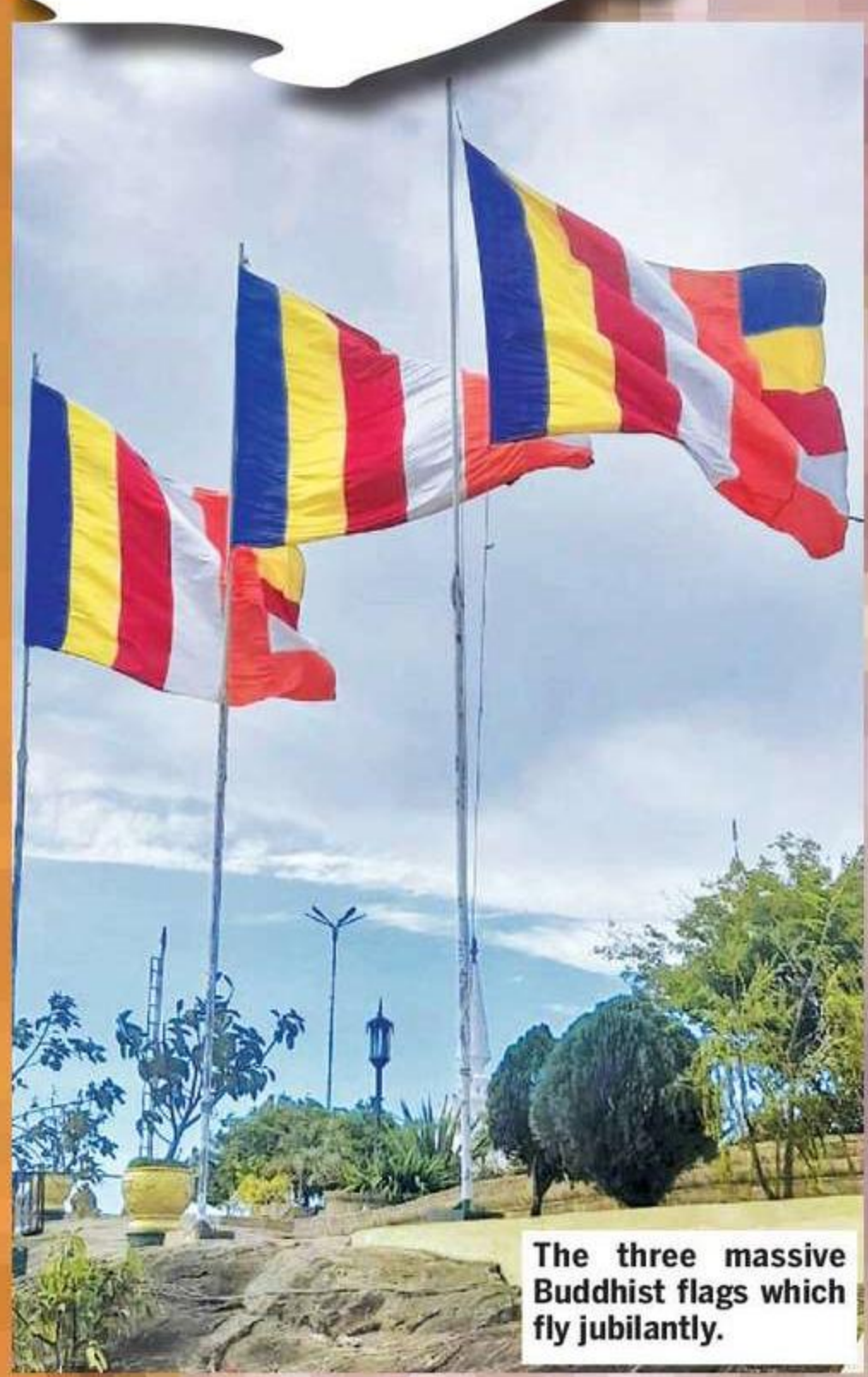


Bo tree



A unique fence of large golden swans.

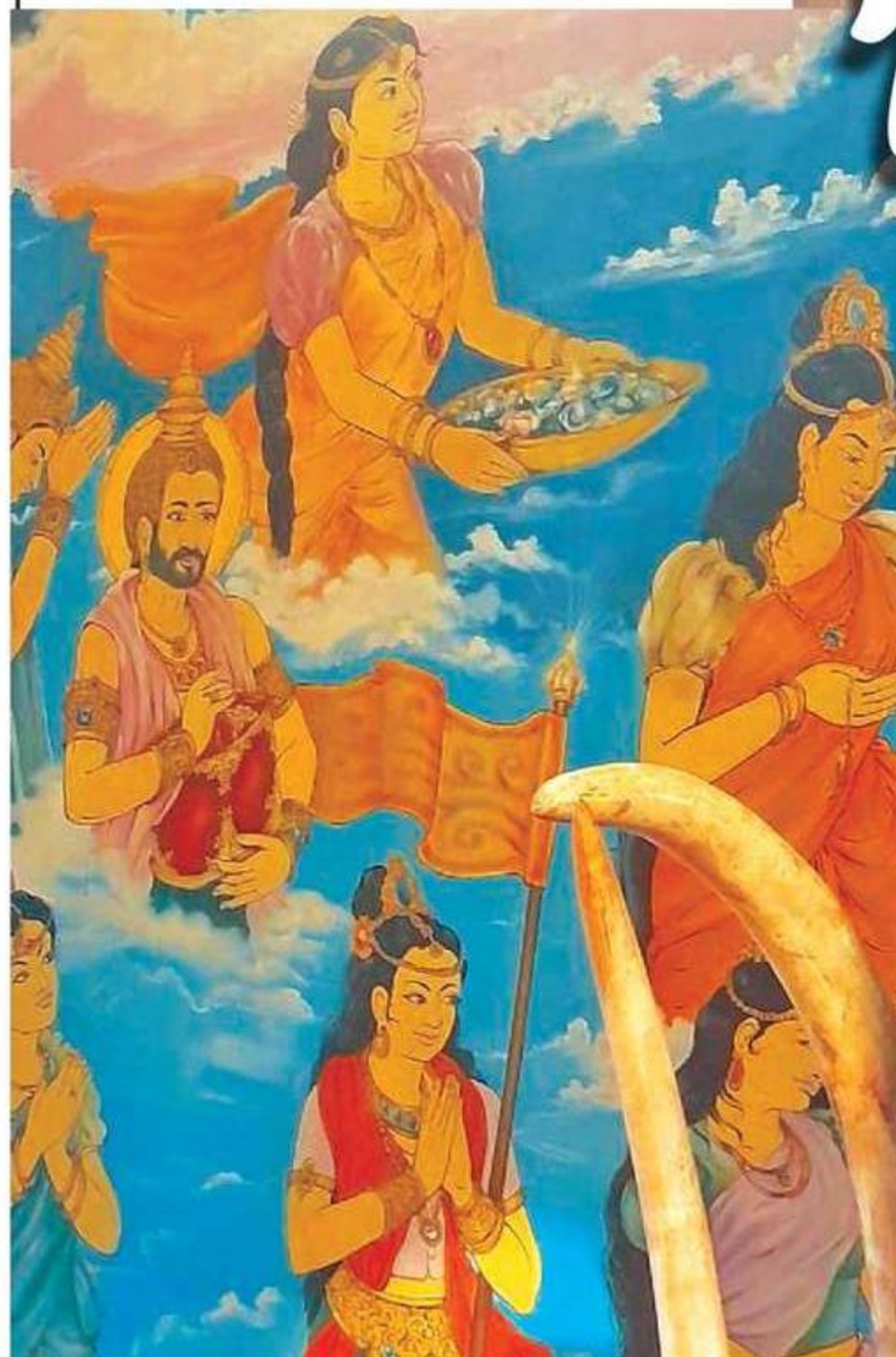
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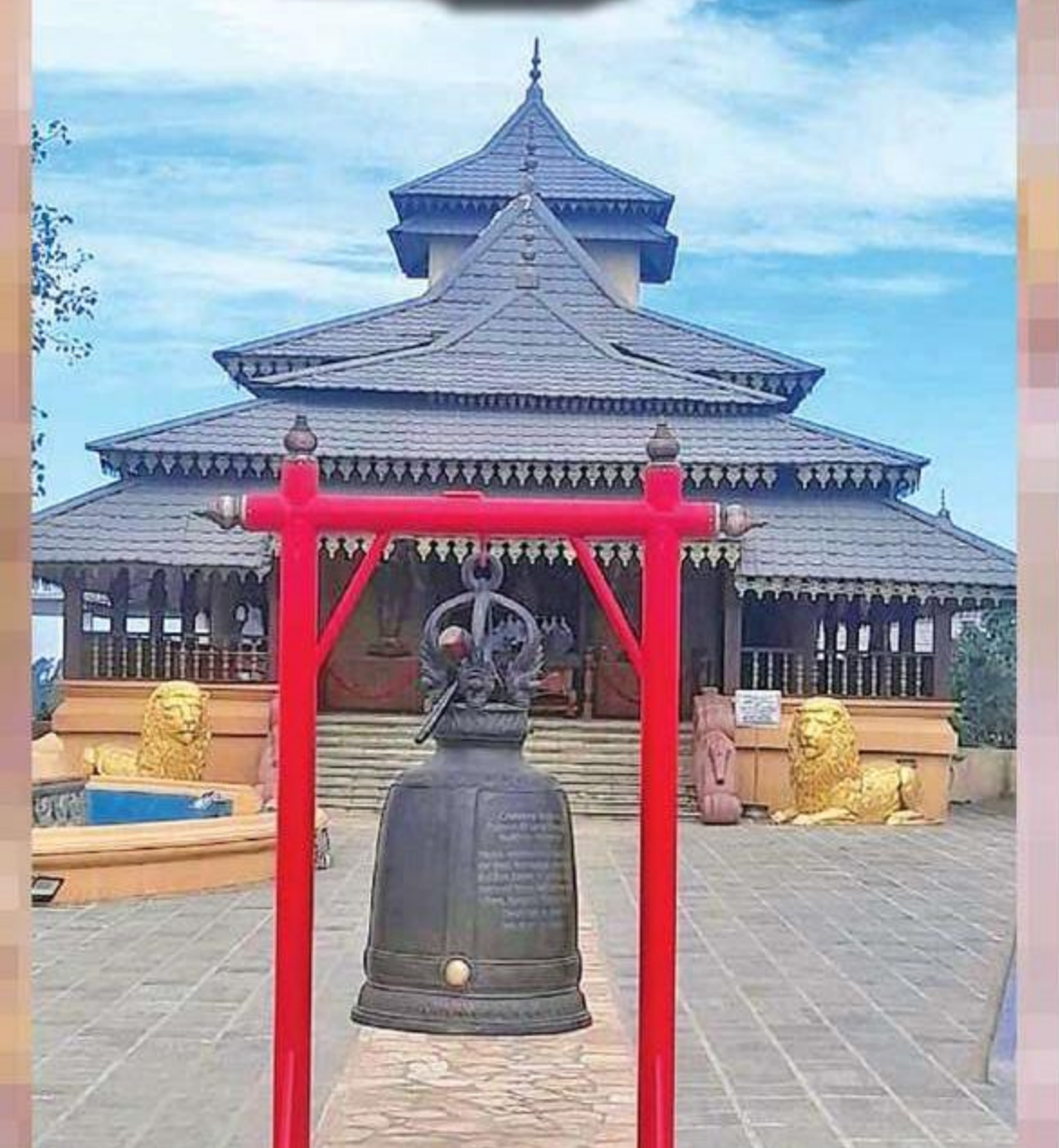
The three massive Buddhist flags which fly jubilantly.



Golden Stupa



The chambers surrounding the relics are embellished with beautiful paintings.



Suspended by a sturdy red iron frame, the inscription on the large bell read that it is a donation from Thailand.