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I never thought I would photograph in Thanthirimale. I imagined the inaccessible jungle leading to the sacred site of Thanthirimale looked like nearly 2,300 years ago where glory, peace and serenity prevailed. For three decades, Thanthirimale being a border village lay in the Wilpattu National Park, often deserted.

It was a safe haven for LTTEers who are believed to have come via Thanthirimale to attack the sacred Jaya Sri Maha Bodhi in Anuradhapura. Most villagers are farmers who left the area during that troubled period and have now returned to their ancestral lands. Farmers are busy once again and acres of lush paddy fields are a relaxing sight. We first visited the Thanthirimale sacred site in 2002 after the Cease Fire Agreement was signed between the UNP Government and the LTTE.

The landscape has changed and dusty gravel roads have been replaced with carpeted roads and the lifestyle of the villagers has changed in an imaginable fashion. Travelling 45 kilometres on Anuradhapura-Thanthirimale carpeted road, we saw farmers drying maize along the edge of the road under scorching sun and children with their mothers bathing in village tanks that were covered with lotus flowers blossoming beautifully. The whole landscape was enriched by lush greenery.

Wilpattu jungle

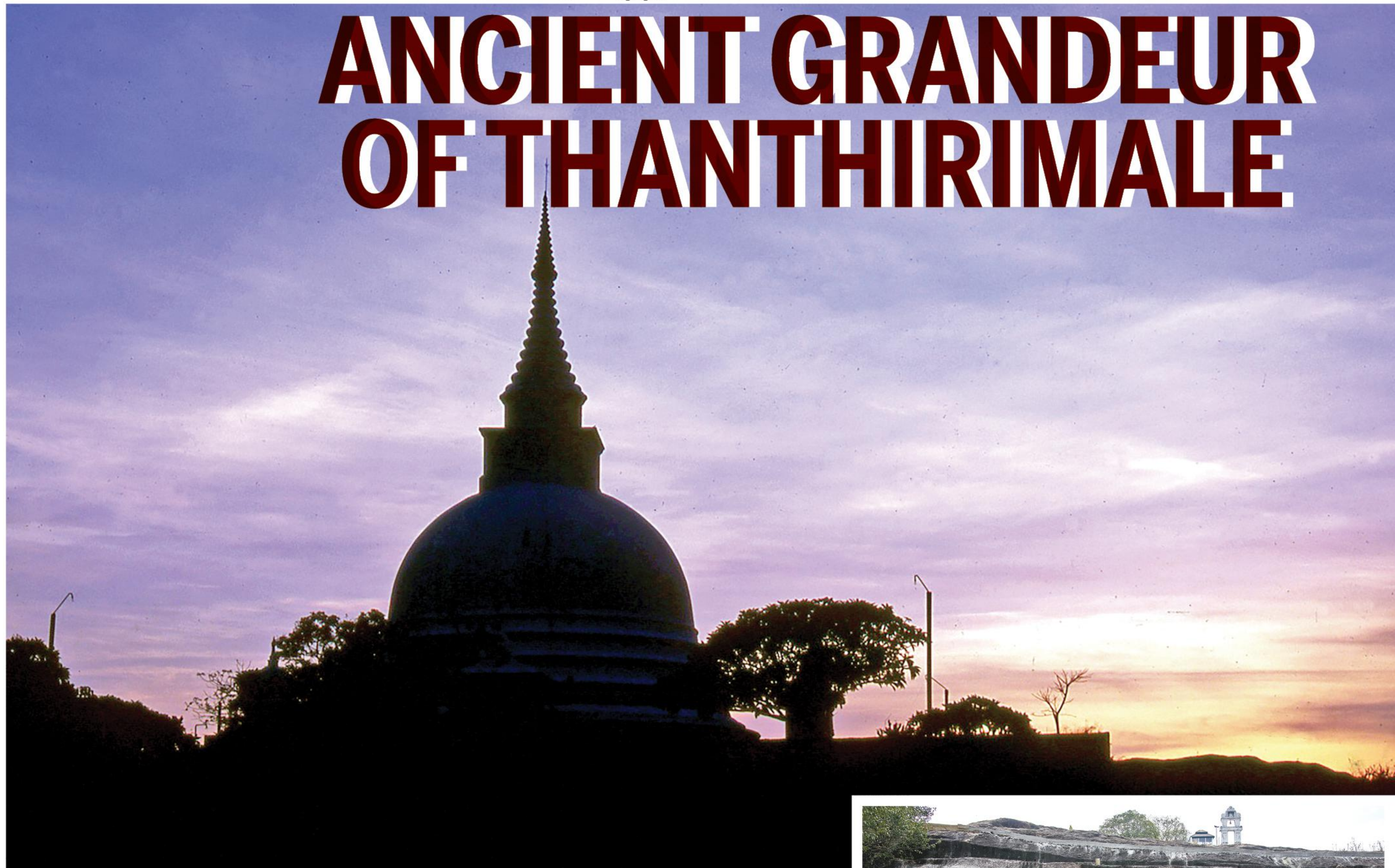
As we reached the Thanthirimale site I saw a huge rocky boulder spanning the horizon in the plain landscape of the vast Wilpattu jungle.

We rushed to the chief incumbent's office and met the chief incumbent of the Thanthirimale Raja MahaVihara, Ven. Thanthirimale Chandrarathana Thera. He readily gave us information about the place.

It might be interesting to note how the name Thanthirimale originated.

When Prince Vijaya arrived in Thambapanni, he had advised his followers to establish settlements in different areas. According to his advice, a minister known as Upatissa has established a settlement in this area. Thus, this area was once called Upatissa Grama.

According to folklore, Saliya, son of King Dutugemunu, who was expelled from the royal family for marrying



The sunset over the Dagaba at Thanthirimale

Asokamala, a girl from a lower caste, lived in Thanthirimale for years. Eventually, the young couple was forgiven and restored to the king's good graces. Then, the king had given them a gold necklace having a shape of a butterfly known as Thanthiri. It is believed that the name Thanthirimale was derived in relation to that.

History has it that when King Devanampiyatissa first visited Thanthirimale, it was known as - Tiwakka Bamunugama, home to a Brahmin known as Tiwakka. The name of this village came from the Brahmin's name. It is said that one of the eight offshoots of the Jaya Sri Maha Bodhi at Anuradhapura was planted at Tiwakka Bamunugama in the 3rd Century BC.

The Bodhi tree in Thanthirimale counts nearly 2,300 years and still stands majestically on the top of a rock boulder and venerated by thousands of pilgrims. The small but beautiful Dagaba which lies on the rocky landscape adds beauty to Thanthirimale. The two Buddha statues carved out of rock gives ancient splendour to Thanthirimale. The reclining Buddha statue carved on the northern slope of the rock is 45 feet long and is said to be similar to Gal Vihara but not many details are visible on the figure.

Sadly, we saw that the face of the statue had been destroyed by treasure hunters, though it has now been restored. The 2.16 metre high crossed-legged statue is in a cave carved out of rock, well-preserved from sun and rain in the Southern side of the rock boulder.

Stone pillars in front of the statue indicate a stone structure or roof made to cover the statue in the past. Beside the statue, there are three unfinished images of deities dimly visible in the rock surface. Archaeologists believed that these unfinished imagers indicate that sculptors had abandoned their task unexpectedly perhaps due to sudden enemy invasion.

When we climbed down the rock, we saw a museum housing numerous stone artefacts found in the site. The most important was the Bodhisatva

head and guard stones that belong to the 3rd Century. Further below, there is a natural pond filled with lotus blossoms to add beauty to the rocky landscape and serve as a bathing pond for Bhikkhus at the temple and villagers.

Rock caves

The water is fresh and remains so even during the drought. Passing the pond we walked into the forest canopy and found a stone structure called Pothgula, the library of the hermitage entirely built on a rock and stone structure served for meditating bhikkhus to live and continue their rituals. We saw a few rock caves deep in the forest of Thanthirimale and one of these caves had aboriginal paintings which were a sight to behold.

The history of Thanthirimale dates back to the reign of King Devanampiyatissa. Thanthirimale seems to have grown as a large monastery by the end of the Anuradhapura period. The Mahavansa recorded that Arhat Theri Sangamitta, daughter of King Asoka of India, rested at Thanthirimale when they brought the Sacred Bo sapling to Anuradhapura.

Thanthirimale was first civilised by a minister of King Vijaya called Upatissa who chose this site surrounded by the Malwatu Oya to build his future city and named Upatissa Grama.

King Vijaya is believed to have met Kuveni in the jungle of Wilpattu where



The Bodhisatva head at the museum



The reclining Buddha image



The sacred-Bodhi tree



The cross-legged Buddha image flanked on either side by unfinished rock carvings

the ruins of a stone mansion belonging to Kuveni can still be seen in the Wilpattu National Park. It was revived and restored in 1960 by Ven. Kudakongaskada Wimalaghana Thera, the founding monk of the Thanthirimale Raja

MahaRaja MahaVihara.

The present chief bhikkhu, Venerable Thanthirimale Chandrarathana Thera works hard to uplift the living conditions of the farming families to restore its past glory.