



# FAREWELL NADUNGAMUWE RAJA: THE KING OF TUSKERS

**DISHAN JOSEPH**

**T**his is the first time I am writing a farewell to a tusker. This elephant was more than a tusker; Nadungamuwe Raja will always be venerated and remembered as an iconic tusker who was deeply associated with Buddhism in Sri Lanka.

When I got the message of his demise, I immediately called Ven. Sarananda Thera who has been associated with temple elephants for decades. He was deeply saddened and shared many memories of being with this glorious tusker during many peraheras. He recalled the days when Nadungamuwe Raja came to Sri Lanka, from India with his brother Navam Raja. The latter passed away years ago. I had a close bond with him too as I used to go to see him at the serene Gangaramaya Temple in Colombo.

Nadungamuwe Raja, the departed tusker was the main figure at the splendid Esala Perahera of the Sacred Sri Dalada Maligawa. I have had the blessed honour of seeing him and befriending him over the past two decades. His mahout Wilson was known affectionately as Kalu Ayya. I last wrote about this wonderful tusker on September 8, 2021 in the *Daily News*. I am sharing some thoughts about my departed pachyderm friend from my last visit to see him. Having seen him many times I was always mesmerised by his regal appeal and calm disposition during his sacred duty to the Sri Dalada Maligawa.

I recollect some thoughts of his kind owner Dr. Harsha Dharmavijaya, an amiable gentleman who has known this tusker for decades. Nadungamuwa is the quiet village where the tusker resided. Dr. Dharmavijaya is an Ayurveda physician, just like his late father who was a famous physician. He once explained, "This tusker has been in the care of our family since 1978. He was born in India in 1954 and belonged to a Maharaja (the 25th Maharaja of Mysore). The Maharaja had become seriously ill and a native physician monk from Ceylon travelled there to cure him. Once he recovered, the grateful Maharaja rewarded the monk of Nilamhara (from Piliyandala) with two baby elephants. After a few years, the monk could not maintain the elephants and interestingly, Raja was sold to a timber mill in Horana where he had to engage in work - lifting and moving logs. My father had heard of him and he realised the value of this elephant. A few days later we went to see the tusker. My father loved this amazing elephant and purchased him. Raja has been with us ever since. He is part of our family. Since the time of my great grandfather we have been taking care of elephants."

Nadungamuwe Raja aged 69 years at the time of death belonged to a clan of Asian elephants known locally as *Saddhantha Kula* (Magnificent Tribe) and proudly displayed the characteristic *hathpolaya* - seven features that define this unique elephant caste. Even

as a young elephant he was impressive, standing at ten-and-a-half feet, a giant in comparison to the others. His long tusks enriched his majestic appeal. For decades he had been under the loving care of his mahout Wilson Kodithuwakku, a man of few words. Wilson is a humble man. With decades of experience, he perfectly understood the body language of this tusker who represented Sri Lanka, to the world. Wilson wielded gentle control over this powerful elephant that is revered as the prince of all temple elephants in Sri Lanka.

I recall Dr. Dharmavijaya saying, "As you can see Raja is a big tusker and he requires a special diet. We feed him with coconut palms, jackfruit, kitul palms and an assortment of fruits - pineapple, mango and bananas. He requires many kilograms of food a day. He likes his occasional treat of jaggery. He also consumes lots of water from our well. He is taken for a bath in the river by mahout Wilson. The elephant likes the walk to and from the river. Raja never liked travelling in a lorry. As all Sri Lankans know he walks almost 85 kilometres to Kandy to partake in the Esala Perahera. It takes him seven days, but he walks patiently. This is his annual routine. Each day he will stop at a temple on the way, where he is given a bath. People line the streets to greet him and some offer him fruits."

In 2005, the tusker was nominated to be the main bearer of the Sacred *Karamduwa* which carries the Sacred Relics of the Buddha. The elephant adapted to this role as the 'central tusker' since then. He was caparisoned in a special costume that took 180 knots to secure. He wore an embroidered *hettaya* (jacket) and *honda wesma* (trunk cover), *gigiri walalu* (anklets). Once the *Karamduwa* is placed on his back, the magnificent tusker became aware of his noble religious obligation and his being resonated with a different vibe that enriched the entire pageant.

As the colourful centuries-old procession moved along the Kandy Lake, Raja was always the centre of attraction. Hundreds of tourists came to see him in his moment of acclaimed religious splendour. Dr. Dharmavijaya has rendered a great service in caring for our nation's beloved tusker. Nadungamuwe Raja had transcended religion and culture and was loved by all Sri Lankans.

Ven. Sarananda Thera mourned and said no other tusker can fully replace Nadungamuwe Raja.

I totally agree. By his life and duty, this tusker embodied the teaching of the noble Buddha, showing humility amidst all his acclaim and grandeur. Farewell, my dear gentle giant. Sri Lanka mourns your demise. You will live in our hearts, always.

*Nadungamuwe Raja aged 69 years at the time of death belonged to a clan of Asian elephants known locally as 'Saddhantha Kula' (Magnificent Tribe) and proudly displayed the characteristic 'hathpolaya' - seven features that define this unique elephant caste. Even as a young elephant he was impressive, standing at ten-and-a-half feet, a giant in comparison to the others.*

