



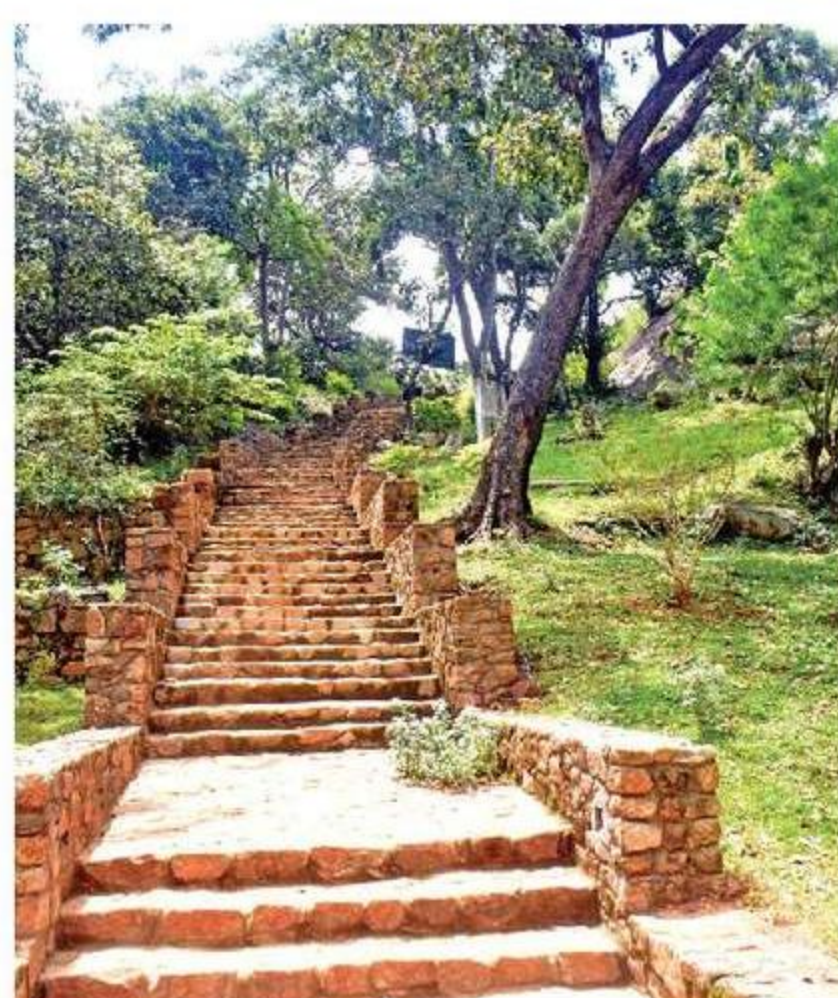
'Revival of Kuragala' to coincide with State Vesak Festival

BY LAHIRU FERNANDO

The 'Revival of Kuragala' program was completed in 13 months. The founder of the project, Ven. Wathurakumbure Dhammarathana Thera launched this rapid revitalisation project in March 2021 with plans to complete it prior to the dawn of the Vesak Full Moon Poya Day this year. The completion of the project was symbolised by the State Vesak Festival at the Kuragala sacred site this year.



Ven. Wathurakumbure Dhammarathana Thera



Located in the Kalthota Divisional Secretariat Division in the Ratnapura District, Kuragala has been identified as a pre-historic archaeological site which houses the ruins of an ancient Buddhist cave temple complex.

The written historical evidence of over 2,300 years has proved that the *Arahat bhikkhus* had lived on this sacred site. Kuragala is considered as the oldest archaeological site in the Intermediate Zone. It was known in ancient times as the 'Mahathittaka Wel Yaya' (Mahathittaka Line of Paddy Fields).

The Kuragala Cave inscriptions belonging to the Second Century B.C. are in the early-Brahmin script. According to these inscriptions, in ancient times, this cave temple complex was called the 'Cave of Datta and Samudda'.

Archaeological excavations in Kuragala have found stone tools, fossilised bone fragments and remains of a human skeleton which is believed to date back to more than 16,000 years.

These findings showcase that humans have lived in this area in the prehistoric period. Investigations have also found that these humans might have had close links with the coastal areas as the excavators had found the remains of seashells from Kuragala.

The Kuragala historical site is on the Balangoda-Kalthota

Road about 24 kilometres away from the Balangoda town.

Due to its location, at an elevation of 360 metres above sea level, it is the first mountain that is visible when entering from the Hambantota area. Sailors can see this mountain which rises above the Kalthota Valley from the sea off Hambantota.

The Buddhist community in the country had lost the right of this sacred site for 50 years as it fell into the hands of a certain religious extremist group that had forcibly occupied the place since 1971.

Numerous attempts were made throughout these five decades to rescue the sacred site.

In 1971, Ven. Wataddara Gnanissara Thera launched a movement to liberate Kuragala. Later, the struggle was continued by Ven. Deltota Dhammajothi Thera. This sacred place was handed over to Ven. Wathurakumbure Dhammarathana Thera, who is the present incumbent of the temple, in February, 2021.

Revival of Kuragala

The 'Revival of Kuragala' program is the result of the five-decade-long struggle by the Maha sangha and the Sri Lankan Buddhists to rescue the ancient heritage of Kuragala.

After the Kuragala Temple was taken over by the Ven. Dhammarathana Thera, who is also known as the *Nelligala Hamuduruwo* in 2021, a well-planned and scheduled program

was launched to rebuild the pride of the Buddhist community in Kuragala. This program named the 'Revival of Kuragala' was launched on March 28, 2021.

At the launching ceremony of the program, Ven. Dhammarathana Thera assured that Kuragala would be rebuilt by him within 13 months.

Under the project, the sacred site has been revived through four separate zones, namely the Amisa Zone, Spiritual Zone, Educational Zone and the Economic Zone. This is the first time in the history of the

country that a sacred site covering all these four areas has been constructed.

Throughout the Kuragala site, which is 150 acres in extent, over 80 different structures have been constructed.

They include the 130-foot high 'Asadisi Shakya Sugatha Maha Seya' (the stupa), a *Dharma Shala* (sermon hall) which can accommodate nearly 3,000 devotees at a time for *sil* campaigns, a monastery, a sacred relics house, a bodhi pavilion, a Buddha statue, a four-storey building for the *Sanghawasa* and the administrative office, a statue of God Saman which is similar to the statue at Nelligala Temple, a 500-foot high staircase, a lion statue to pay tribute to all those who fought, dedicated and saved the Kuragala sacred area since 1971, access roads, garden area and also a reservoir called 'Kuragala Wewa'.

The Amisa Zone consists of all the constructions belonging to a temple such as the stupa, the sermon hall, the sacred relics house, the bodhi pavilion, the Buddha statue and the statue of God Saman while the Spiritual Zone consists of a separate place for the bhikkhus to practise meditations. This area (monastery) will provide accommodation to 50 bhikkhus at a time.

In the educational zone, the Shakya Sugatha Vocational Training and Cultural Centre will be constructed to provide opportunities for the youth and those who need assistance. The economic zone aims at setting up an industrial zone to uplift the economy of the area residents. Constructions in the spiritual, educational and the economic zones will be completed within this year.

The 'Asadisi Shakya Sugatha Maha Seya' is considered to be the largest such Stupa in the Sabaragamuwa Province which will be visible from six districts in four provinces once the construction is completed. The ceremony to enshrine sacred relics in the stupa was held in January, 2022.

Dr. Helaruwan Pasan Kumara and Neranjala Sarojani had extended their contributions to construct the 'Asadisi Shakya Sugatha Maha Seya' while, Disna Wanigasekara and Chandrasena Wickramaratne had contributed to construct the sermon hall.

According to Ven. Dhammarathana Thera, Rs.1.5 billion, received from donors and Buddhist devotees, has been spent on the Kuragala Project.

Nearly two million people have contributed to the project with labour.

en to develop several Buddhist temples and under-privileged schools in the Kuragala area.

The Government institutions have taken steps to develop infrastructure facilities such as the Balangoda - Kaltota Road and electricity supply in the area to uplift the living conditions of the area residents.

Ven. Dhammarathana Thera and the project committee faced numerous challenges when implementing the 'Revival of Kuragala'. The project was launched amid a global pandemic which had severely affected the country.

The Associated Newspapers of Ceylon Limited (Lake House) is the print media sponsor of the 'Revival of Kuragala' project.

State Vesak Festival - 2022

The State Vesak Festival - 2022 was inaugurated at the Kuragala sacred site yesterday. The Government sponsored event is held with the participation of the Maha Sangha, political authority, devotees and those who supported the rebuilding of the Kuragala temple complex.

The Government will declare Kuragala as a sacred area through a gazette notification.

The State Vesak Festival will be followed by a series of religious and traditional Vesak commemorations during the Vesak Week from May 14 - 22. Around 2.5 million visitors are expected to visit the Kuragala Temple during the Vesak Week. The State Vesak Festival will also symbolise the completion of the 'Revival of Kuragala' project.

"KURAGALA SHOULD NOT BE A POLITICAL TOPIC FOR ANY PRESENT, PAST OR FUTURE POLITICIAN AS THE SACRED SITE HAS NOT BEEN CONSTRUCTED WITH PUBLIC MONEY. I WILL NOT ALLOW ANYONE TO POLITICISE THE KURAGALA BUDDHIST HERITAGE."
- VEN. WATHURAKUMBURE DHAMMARATHANA THERA

(Pix: Gayan Pushpika)

