

The seascape echoes with spiritual serenity

—Text & Pix by—
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Amid the blue ocean and lagoon, stands this thousand-year-old historic temple known as Samudragiri Vihara. Trincomalee and its suburbs were just as exotic as I had imagined. Under a brilliant blue sky, people in colourful costumes and prostrating pilgrims jostled with selfie-obsessed local tourists. The highlight of our tour on our way to Trincomalee, after Seruvila, was the visit to Lanka Patuna, a once forgotten ancient Buddhist site on the edge of a lagoon facing the Indian Ocean on the East coast. The visit to the temple left us with a deep impression – both for the climb and for its historical significance to Buddhism.

The first view of the sea and the lagoon took our breath away. We stared spellbound for a long time before we parked our vehicle and made a dizzying trek up to the rocky hillock between the Indian Ocean and the Ullackalie lagoon. The drive to Lanka Patuna was spectacular, with views of swamps and lagoons.

Trincomalee is home to most of the natural swamps and lagoons in the country and sparkling tributaries branched out in all directions. Trincomalee offered us a diversity that we had scarcely seen during any other tour. The Lanka Patuna temple premises occupies the highest point in the sea coast, azure lagoons and verdant groves – Trincomalee had it all.

Vibrant hues

We arrived at our destination late evening when the sun was setting on the Western horizon, displaying vibrant hues. I remember my grandparents had been travelling for over ten days visiting many religious places in the North and East before the unrest in the country. It was called *Vatavandanawa* when a group of villagers get together and travel to religious sites in a bus staying at pilgrims' rests. Now, col-



The Dagaba at the Samudragiri Vihara of Lanka Patuna

loquially, it also means a round of journeys. When we reached Lanka Patuna, 50 kilometres South of Trincomalee, in the distance we spotted the dagaba on the hillock, and a bridge across the lagoon loomed in front of us. Since it was damaged due to the Tsunami, a new bridge has been constructed in the recent past. We crossed the bridge and headed towards the temple walking under a thick grove.

Lanka Patuna known as Samudragiri Vihara (temple on the rock by the sea), holds a significant landmark in the annals of Sri Lanka. During the unrest in the North and the East, the Lanka Patuna historic site being a strategic point, had been occupied by the terrorists to put up a transmission station. However, after the Eastern Province was freed from the terrorists, the ancient glory has been restored on the venue by building a new temple.

When we ascended the hillock, a resident bhikkhu at the temple appeared from the *Avasa Ge*. "There isn't a single Buddhist here. We always make our livelihood with your generous contributions. We depend on pilgrims who come here from the South". I felt a tremendous respect for the

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young bhikkhus who have held on to this culture and faith with tenacity, rebuilding the temple gradually.

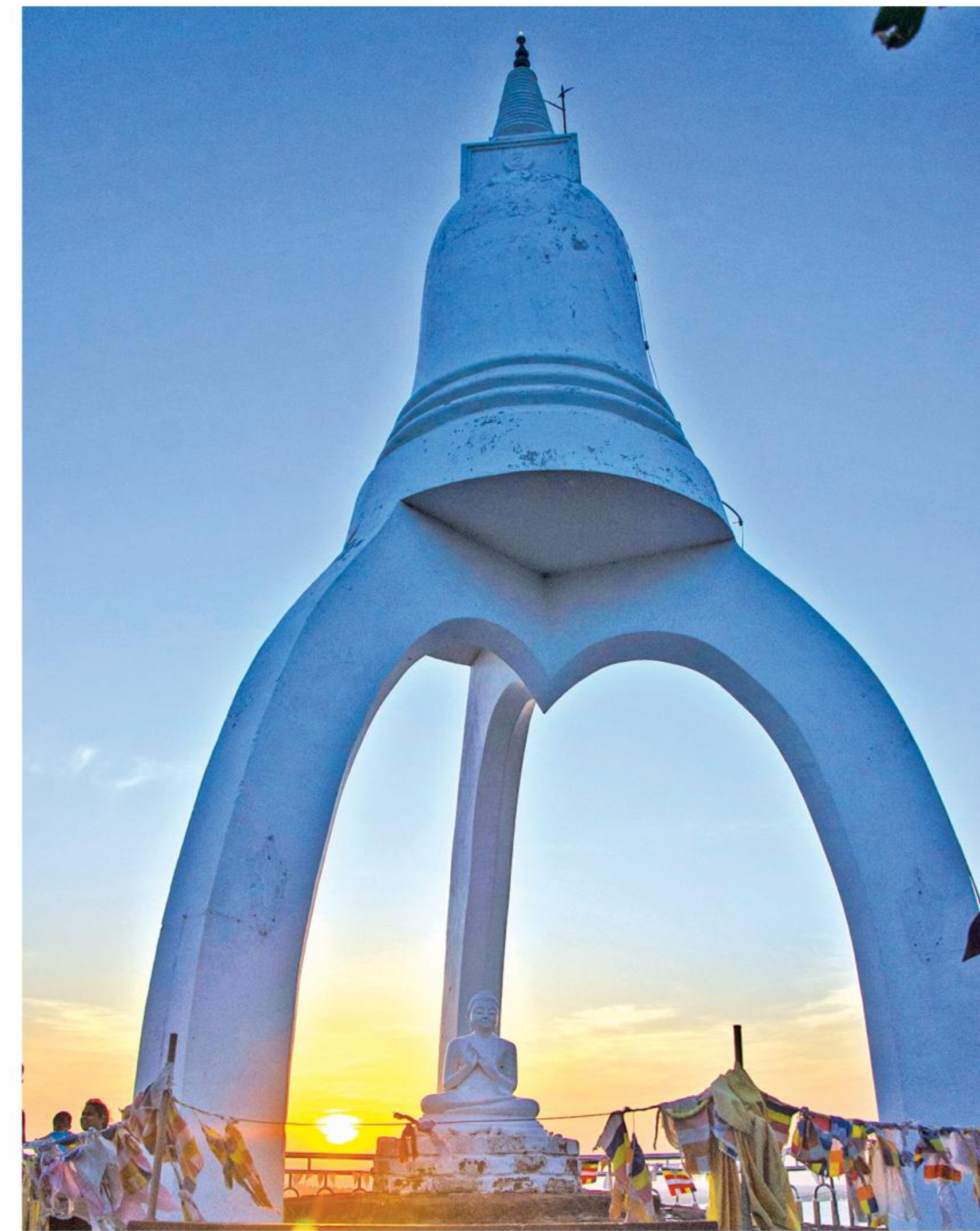
Sacred Tooth Relic

According to archaeological findings and legend, Prince Dantha and Princess Hemamala set foot in Sri Lanka, carrying the Sacred Tooth Relic of the Buddha. Since India faced great threats during that time, King Guhasiva of Kalinga sent the Sacred Tooth Relic (*Dantha Dhathu*) through his son and daughter-in-law to King Meghavanna of Sri Lanka for protection, in around 320 AD. The royal duo brought the sacred package amid great difficulty and secrecy, and landed in Lanka



The standing Buddha statue built on the rock

Patuna where they stayed the night before proceeding to Anuradhapura. To this day, certain traces of the ancient temple exist in the form of a pond and a ruined stone flight of steps. Climbing a circular ascent, and pausing to take a look at some of the brick remains, we came to the rocky summit of the temple, where an ancient pond full of water glistened in the shade of trees. Beside the pond, on a rock is a recently-built gold colour standing Buddha statue. Observing these additions, as well as the ancient monuments of the temple, we climbed to the top of the rock boulder. It is the highest point of the Lanka Patuna temple where the dagaba stands on arched columns.



The Dagaba with its three arched columns at sunset

As we ascended to the top, a magnificent panorama of white beaches, lagoon, bridges and roads in many shades of grey greeted us. From the top, we could see the vast expanse of the Ullackalie lagoon and the Lanka Patuna beach. I tried to imagine that day, as legend has it, when the Royal duo in disguise landed on this part of the Eastern coast intent on completing their mission.

Aesthetic touch

Evening is a favourite time in Lanka Patuna. The sun was setting in the distance at the Ullackalie lagoon and the sky was running riot in all the co-

lours you can imagine.

The waters were shimmering in an amber shade. Beyond, the dim rays cast shadows on the bridge, adding a subtle aesthetic touch to the environment. The surrounding was quiet and tranquil. A golden Buddha statue stood serenely seen through the trees overlooking the blue ocean. The view was breathtaking. Being on the top of Lanka Patuna, I captured the vibrant sunset, a rare opportunity for a photographer, relishing the visual treat of nature.

Dusk was nearing and we descended the rock taking leave of the resident bhikkhu. We were soon back on the road to Trincomalee.