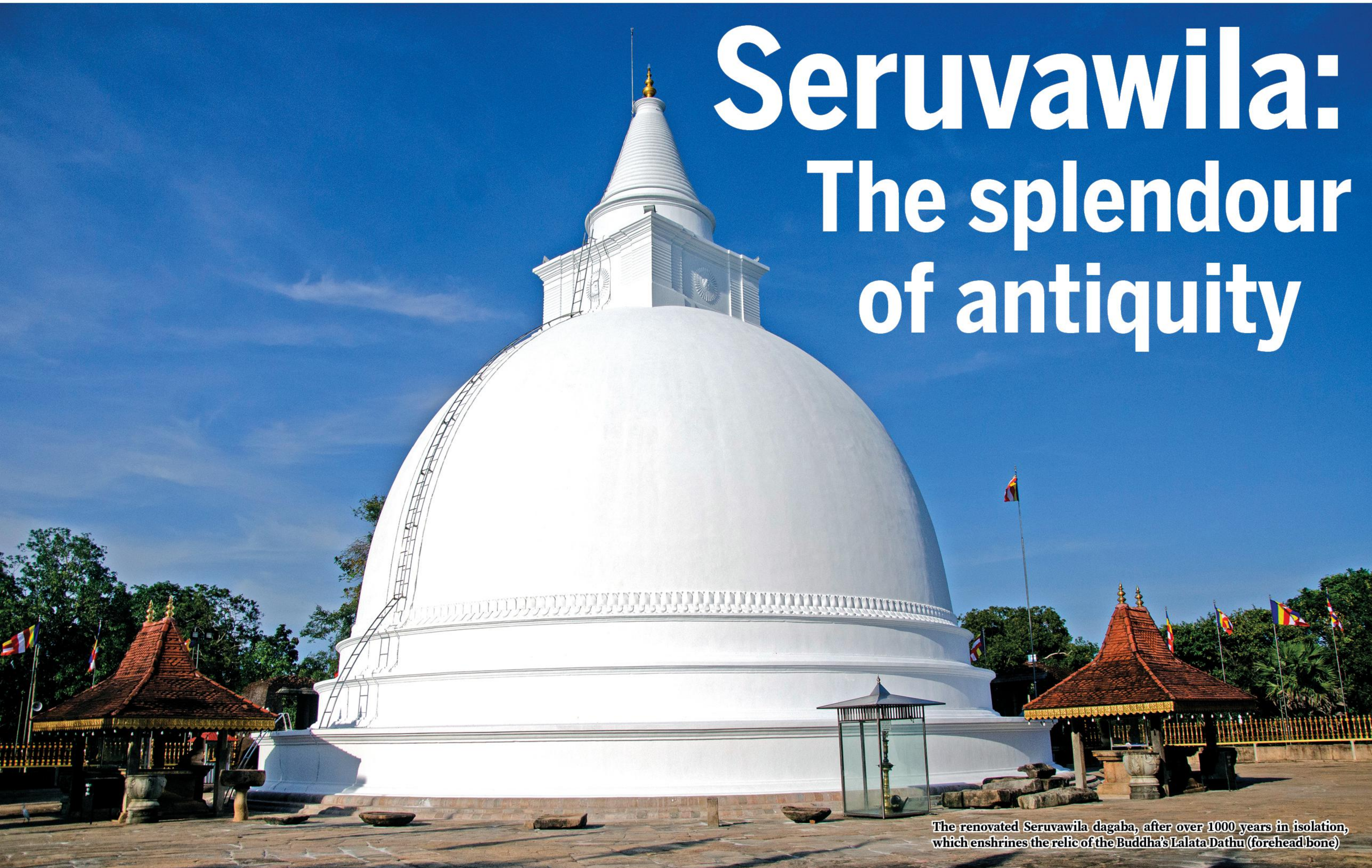


# Seruvawila: The splendour of antiquity



The renovated Seruvawila dagaba, after over 1000 years in isolation, which enshrines the relic of the Buddha's Lalata Dathu (forehead bone)

—Text & Pix by—  
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On our journey, in search of the beauty of Trincomalee, we spent another day visiting some ancient, historic Buddhist sites in Seruvawila near Mutur in the Trincomalee district. We proceeded from the Somawathiya flood plain National Park, towards Seruvawila, crossing the Ali Oluwa junction on the Trincomalee highway. Our destination was a unique Buddhist worshiping place, most important to Buddhists in the East, - the Seruvawila Mangala Raja Maha Vihara.

Most roads leading to the temple which previously had ferry points to cross the numerous waterways, now had new bridges and carpeted roads that provided greater connectivity. We were thrilled to be able to explore many exciting sites along the way.

The sun was blazing, although it was evening by the time we reached Seruvawila also known as Seruwila. It is said the name Seruwila or Seruvawila had originated from the fact that a large number of Arahats Bhikkhus had visited a pond (villu), and thus the area was named *sivru-wila* meaning the pond the saffron robes visited.

## Swamp

In another tale, according to the book, 'Seeing Ceylon' by R.L. Brohier, the Seruvawila region was a vast swamp or *villu* where the flood waters of the Mahaweli Ganga collected. This *villu* was the home of large flocks of teal (*seru*) during migratory period. Perhaps, that was how the place came to be known as Seruvawila. Its history goes back a few centuries.

A couple of pilgrims look lost in the antiquity of the temple, while an old gentleman sells booklets about the temple in the courtyard, to share his story. He told us a fascinating tale of Seruvawila, considered to be one of the most revered sites as it is linked to the Buddha's third visit to Sri Lanka.

It is said that the relics of the three Buddhas prior to Gautama Buddha, Kukusada, Konagama and Kashyapa too had been enshrined in this region. Following the *Parinibbana* or passing away of Gautama Buddha, the Lalata Dathu or the forehead bone relic was enshrined in the Chaitya at Seruvawila, according to His wish.

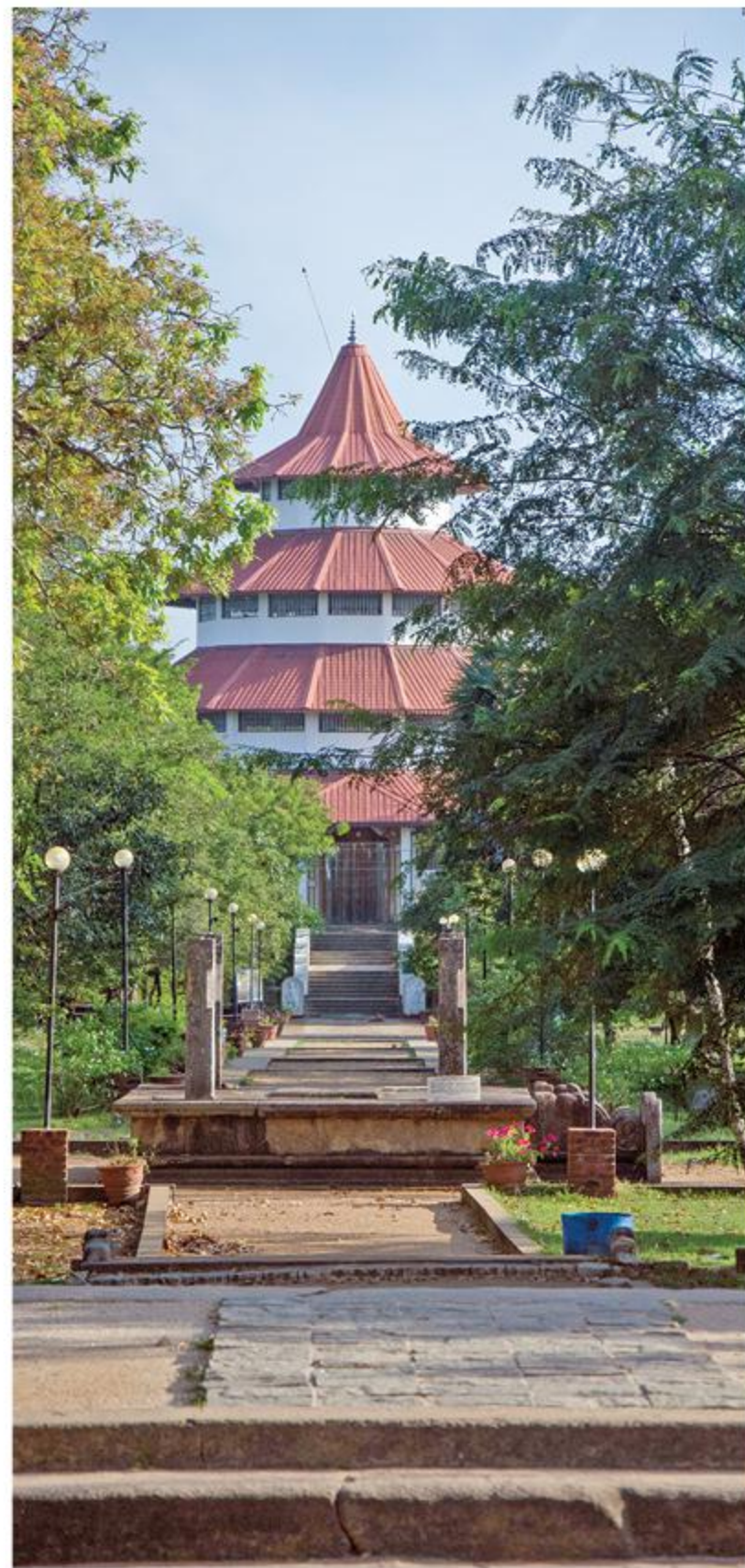
The significance of the Seruvawila Mangala Raja Maha Vihara has not diminished with time. Even today, the temple is crowded with devotees, who brave the hot sun to pray and reflect in the spirituality of this site. The white glistening dagaba with its brick-built four ancient doorways was the focal point. Some devotees were seated under an ancient tree worshipping, while others placed flowers at the altar.

A few yards away from the *dagaba* was a newly built shrine room (*Budu Ge*) with a large seated Buddha statue. Modern paintings of the Buddha's life adorned the walls. Walking around the temple premises, we came across numerous ruins strewn across the ground. The remaining structure of the ancient Bodhigaraya that once protected the sacred Bo tree still protectively shades a Bo sapling.

## Legend

The legend concerns King Kavantissa (209-165 BC) of Ruhuna, who left his mark here several centuries ago. The story, we are told, begins during his reign of Ruhuna which was threatened by invaders. The king had to evolve a strategy to prevent disaster. He was well aware that there was a buffer state of Seru on the North Eastern seaboard of Sri Lanka, ruled by a Prince by the name of Siva. The king eventually had been able to solve the problem avoiding military confrontation and as a result he had to build a *dagaba* at Seruvawila with a complete temple complex, structures and Buddha statues which were unearthed through archaeological excavations at the site.

Having extended the king's authority to the Seru district, King Kavantissa had caused the marsh in the vicinity of the dagaba to be drained and converted into a lake. He then dedicated



A newly built *Budu Ge*

the lands around the shrine, an extent of eleven miles for cultivation, so the harvests could be used for the maintenance of the sacred shrine and the 500 Bhikkus who were the residents there. There is evidence of the Arahats residing in the caves around the dagaba premises. In the vicinity of the dagaba is an ancient inscription going back to the 2nd century.

We walked to the site and found another inscription at the temple belonging to King Kassapa IV (898-914 AC), which mentions the Arahants and identification of the place named Tissa Maha Vehera. A group of pilgrims walk around the many panels of sculptures carved in limestone. They are strewn around, broken but glistening in the afternoon sun. These ruins too dated back to 2nd century, built by King Kavantissa and then renovated by several kings in later years.

The site is a treasure trove of antiques, but the most priceless treasure

belonged to King Kavantissa's era - a magnificent Buddha statue carved in stone, with a nine-headed cobra circle found in the excavation site, has been kept for display in a museum lying a little away from the main dagaba. We are told this could be the first finding in the site.

After the reign of King Kavantissa, this sacred site was once again restored and patronised by several kings. With the downfall of the Ruhuna and Magama kingdoms, over the years, the dagaba fell into decay under pressure of North Indian Chola invasions.

## Discovering dagaba

Buddhists must be grateful to the erudite Bhikkhu, the late Ven. Mangala Dharmakirithi Sri Dam-bagasare Sri Sumedhankara Thera, for discovering the long forgotten Seruvawila dagaba in 1922. After the re-discovery, a foundation stone was laid for the stupa restoration with financial contribution from devotees forming a Seruvawila Temple Development Society in 1925. In 1930, the dagaba was opened for public veneration.

The Seruvawila *dagaba* and its environs covering around 85 acres had been declared an archaeological reserve in 1962. The Department of Archaeology has carried out conservation work in several stages.

Due to unrest in the North and the East, during the past three decades, there was slow progress in the restoration work. With the battle being over and peace returning to the Eastern Province, now, we see pilgrims through the Seruvawila temple premises. Once again, Seruvawila has become a prime pilgrim location in the East.

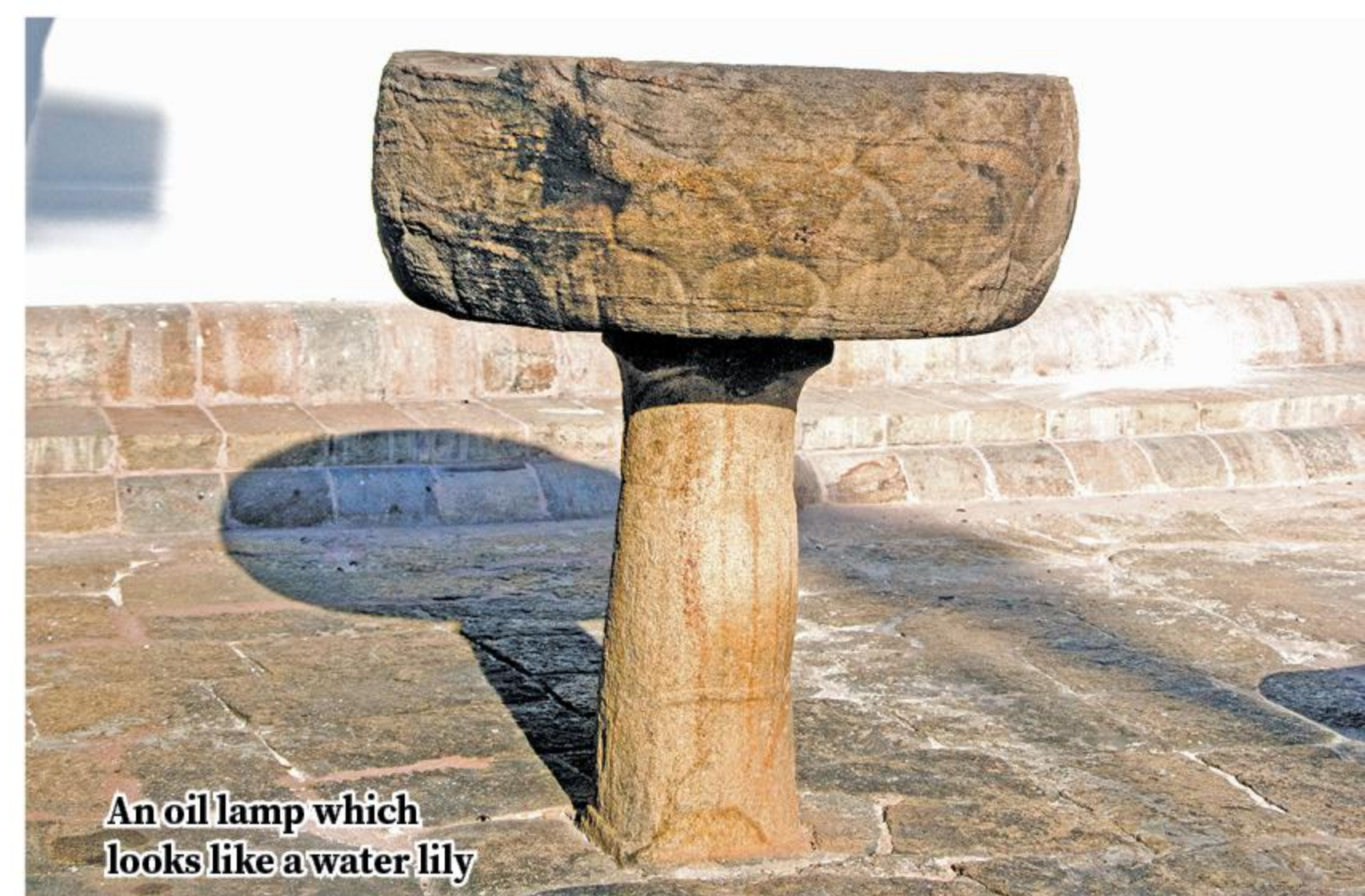
We are joined by the pilgrims as we look at the sculptures and ancient ruined monuments strewn on the temple ground. We learnt that the conservation of the dagaba had been done years ago. A new image house is also being built a few yards away from the main dagaba. As we peered at the restored ruins and walked past the Buddha sculptures, we marvelled at how a simple journey into the rustic Eastern village could turn into a historic and spiritual one.



One of its ancient brick doorway



One of the villu surrounded by the temple premises



An oil lamp which looks like a water lily