Rest - Hall at Panavitiya

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The subject of this book is carvings on the wood work of the ambalama (rest-hall) at Panavitiya in Mayuravati Korale of the Dambadeni-hatpattuva of the District of Kurunegala (One inch per mile Map Reference I. 18/19).

Before we describe this particular building of very modest proportions, it is desirable that we form an idea as to the significance of the term ambalama, and consider the general pattern of buildings which go by that name.

The Tamil word ambalam means "an open space for use of the public", "abode", "dwelling - place", "village revenue office", etc. The Sinhalese word ambalama is used to mean a building of simple construction meant to provide a resting place for way-farers. These were indeed a great necessity when people had to cover long distances on foot. They were a great boon to people going on pilgrimages or visiting relative. The ambalama also served as a meeting place for the village-folk. It was the place where they exchanged gossip and talked politics, and an ambalama was built on a rocky site, so that the weary traveller who had not even a shade from sun or rain could find a place of refuge. Some ambalama halls were located at the edges of stretches of fields; others were located near rivers or streams in order that the fatigued way-farer could find an easy supply of water for bathing and washing.

Sinhalese literature, particularly Sandesa poems, a literary form which contains descriptions of journeys, make mention of ambalama rests. The Girasandesaya, a poem of the mid-fifteenth century describes an ambalama which was situated at the village of Vellitota, south of Bentota.

"People gather from various directions and rest here. Some of them relate the stories of Rama and Sita. Some recite poetry in contest with each other. Among them are those who commit to memory songs of praise produced in honour of the reigning king. The old people recite quatrains which were composed to praise the virtues of former sovereigns. Foreigners coming from countries such as Cola, Pandy, Gujarat, Tula country, Maharashtra, Andhra and Vanga learn the teachings of the Buddha in Sinhalese and recite it. Some challenge each other in solving riddles. There are those who relate the manifold mighty deeds of the King Parakrama-bahu VI (A.D. 1410-1467)."

The above description clearly shows the purpose which an ambalama served.

The Salihihinisandesaya written in A.D. 1437 has the following description of a resting hall called Valambalama, which was built close to a water pool on the road from Kotte to Kelaniya, not far off from Colombo:
“Joyously take thy flight, Wallamblam viewed
Close to the pool margent green with shrubs of colon
With fresh springs where lave fair maids
The heat to mitigate, whoselocks are wreathed.
With flowers, and sweet with aromatic fumes”.
Macready’s translation - verse 33 (1865).

The Nilakobosandésaya of the 18th century describes ambalama situated by a stretch of paddy-field in the village of Palonnaruva in the Southern Province. The building was under the shade of a tree, and on its walls were painted figures of lions and leopards. Mention of another ambalama at Uduvela in the same district is made in the Diyasūvulasandésaya (A.D. 1813). An ambalama built in the middle of a stretch of paddy fields by the Däduru-oya in Kurunegala District is described in the Astanarisandésaya written in A.D. 1833.

We thus see that ambalama rest-halls were important landmarks on the routes taken by pilgrims and other travellers. With the introduction of modern methods of quick transport and travel, the usefulness of these buildings diminished, and they went into a state of neglect and disrepair.

The building of an ambalama was a co-operative effort by villagers. The Sinhalese Buddhist believe that it was a meritorious act to erect an edifice like a dagoba or an image-house. Similarly it was a pious deed to provide shelter for the weary traveller and the homeless. The size and grandeur of an ambalama depended on the ability of those who took part in its erection.

In the ambalama at Panavitiya, the carvings from the wood-work of which is the subject of this booklet, is situated on a flat land at the border of a stretch of paddy fields. It may have been on an ancient foot-path leading from Dambadeniya to Kurunegala and Yapahuwa.

This ambalama is of the simplest type of such buildings. The principle of construction of such a structure is to raise a platform about a foot from the ground, then place four logs, transversely on blocks of stone, raise wooden pillars on top of the logs, and construct a simple roof. If the building is rectangular there will be a short ridge-plate on top. There will be two bosses and two pinnacles. The roof will be thatched, covered with straw or tiled, according to the ability of those who support its construction. The logs on which the pillars rest serve also as benches to sit on.

The ambalama at Panavitiya stands on a platform 12 feet 4 inches by 9 feet 6 inches raised about a foot from the ground with rubble. The marshy nature of the land has necessitated a foundation of rubble. Beams 9 inches to 1 foot square, 14 feet long, are placed on stone blocks. The floor consists of a grid of two parallel beams on each side. The outer set of nineteen posts are 5 feet 8 inches high. The nine inner posts are 6 feet 2 inches high. The building is 11 feet 5 inches high from the rubble foundation to the ridge of the roof. The roof is 18 feet 3 inches long on the longer sides and 16 feet 6 inches on the shorter, whilst the ridge plate is 3 feet 6 inches in length. The members of the wood work of the roof consist of beams, posts, rafters and reepers.

Though small in size, the value of this ambalama is in the ornately carved wood-work of beams and posts. Among
these carvings which may date to about the eighteenth century, are scenes of everyday life, wrestlers, musicians, dancers, acrobats, floral patterns, figures of animals, and birds (See Figures 1-20).

The fragments of tiles found at the site indicate that originally the roof was tiled. During an inspection in 1960 the top of the roof-frame was found to have been broken and the rafters dislodged by a coconut tree falling on it. (See Report of the Archaeological Commissioner for 1960, p. G. 90). In this very badly damaged and neglected state the Archaeological Department undertook its conservation and restoration with funds provided by the Department of Cultural Affairs. The work is now completed.

The accompanying plates illustrate a selection of some of the carved panels on the wooden members of the ambalama.