

Exploring Seegala Tempita Viharaya: Integrating Historical Narratives, Archaeological Evidence, and Sustainable Tourism for Cultural Heritage Preservation

K.A.U. Udyā¹

Introduction

From the beginning of Sri Lankan civilization, written and archaeological evidences confirm that architecture evolved with contemporary contexts. Buddhist architecture, starting with cave dwellings for monks, developed over centuries to include Stupas, Chethigharas, Bodhigharas, image houses, Uposathagharas, almshouses, monastery complexes, and large Buddha statues. Tampita Vihara, an architectural style built on wooden platforms supported by stone stumps, is a significant element of Sri Lankan Buddhist architecture, closely linked to Buddha statue carving. According to Shiran Deraniyagala (1999), Tampita Viharas emerged between the 17th and 19th centuries and are found across Sri Lanka, especially widespread in Kurunegala and Kegalle districts. Seegala Tampita Viharaya, the focus of this research, is located in the West Buddhiyagama Grama Niladhari Division of the Weerakatiya Divisional Secretariat Division in Hambantota District, Southern Province. This study examines the preservation of Kandyan-era architectural features in Seegala Tampita Viharaya and explores its limited tourism despite its location. While various studies cover Tampita Viharas, none of them focused on Seegala Tampita Viharaya. Sarath Kumara Rathnayake's book *Tampiti Vihara in Southern Province* offers insights into the temples in Galle, Hambantota, and Matara but lacks detailed analysis or discussion on promoting sustainable tourism for these temples. Despite its archaeological significance, Seegala Tampita Vihara remains under-visited. This research aims to uncover reasons for this and promote awareness. The study objectives include exploring the temple's history, distinctive architecture and art, and proposing strategies to develop local tourism. The research is geographically focused on the Weerakatiya Division, with a temporal focus on the Kandyan era, marking the origin of the Tampita Vihara tradition.

1. University of Ruhuna, Matara, 81000, Sri Lanka. udaniudya95@gmail.com

Methodology

This research employs qualitative approach and historical research approach, utilizing historical methods and primarily secondary sources to gather information. Additionally, data were collected through field studies.

Results and Discussion

The arrival of Arhat Mahinda Thero who advised Buddhism in Sri Lanka, leading to significant development in literature, art, and architecture. Tampita Viharas, a unique architectural form, emerged during the Kandyan period. As described by Gamini Wijesuriya (1999) in *Tampita Vihara Sampradaya* in Sri Lanka, these structures, occasionally called Dewapita, served as image houses in Buddhist monasteries during the 17th to 19th centuries. According to S. U. Deraniyagala (1999), Tampita viharas are found across the island, with higher concentrations in Kurunegala and Kegalle districts. Tampita viharas vary in its design across regions, but they generally follow a common construction pattern. The term 'Tampita' refers to structures built on pillars, typically stone, and occasionally brick (Wijayawardana, n.d.). Beams are laid crosswise on these pillars, forming the base for the temple walls. Old teracotta tiles (Pethi Ulu) tiles are often used for roofing, and murals, painted on whitewashed walls, are a common decorative feature (Wijayawardana, n.d.; Wijesuriya, 1999).

Weeraketiya Seegala Tempita Vihara

This is located in the Buddhiyagama West Grama Niladhari Division, within the Weeraketiya Divisional Secretariat Division of the Mulkirigala Polling Division in the Hambantota District. You can reach this sacred site by traveling from Matara to Beliaththa, then continuing to Pasmanhandiya in Weeraketiya via the Middeniya road. From there, proceed about 1 km along the Walasmulla road and take the road on the right. According to Sarath Rathnayake (2021), Seegala Tampita Vihara is the only Tampita Vihara in the Southern Province with a Heavisi Mandapam (drumming hall) and the only one that has preserved its original Kandyan-era architectural features without significant alteration or damage. Believed to have been built by Sapugoda Nilame during King Keerthi Sri Rajasingha's reign (1747-1782 AD), the temple's history dates back to the Kandyan kingdom. Legend attributes its name 'Seegala' to a stone seat with a Sripada (sacred footprint) symbol, still visible at the temple today. The Tempita image house, supported by 17 stone stumps, is accessible by three cement steps, and the stumps rest on a platform raised 9 1/2 inches above ground. The main seated Buddha statue, adorned with a Siraspatha (five-leafed headdress), has been targeted by treasure hunters. Flanking it are portraits of Arhants Sariputta and Moggallana the main key followers, with walls decorated with images of

Arhants, lotus flowers, Liyawal (festoon work), and a human figure. The temple's paintings follow the Kandyan era's artistic traditions typical of Tampita temples, but a unique feature is the depiction of a male figure believed to be Sapugoda Nilame, a patron of the temple. Such portrayals of patrons are rare in Tampita temples, distinguishing Seegala Tampita Vihara. Another distinctive element is the temple's canopy painting, "Narigataya," which differs from traditional versions. It features four figures, with male and female distinctions made by varying the darkness of colors, showing both genders in trousers-like garments.

Measures That Can Be Taken to Promote Tourism at Seegala Tampita Vihara

The Weeraketiya Divisional Secretariat Division hosts several historical Buddhist sites, including Kasagala, Naigala, and Mulkirigala Rajamaha Viharas, which draw both local and foreign tourists. Despite its significance, Seegala Tampita Vihara attracts fewer visitors than these temples. Several routes to the major Buddhist centers of Kataragama and Devundara pass through Weeraketiya, leading pilgrims to frequently visit Kasagala, Naigala, and Mulkirigala during their journeys, especially during the Kataragama Esala festival.

Tangalle, near Weeraketiya, attracts many foreign tourists, yet Seegala Tampita Vihara remains relatively unknown as a tourist destination. Local tour guides seldom include it in their itineraries, and a long-standing social norm reinforces this trend. Many believe a pilgrimage to Kataragama or Devundara should include stops at Tissamaharama, Mulkirigala, Kasagala, and Naigala, but not Seegala, leading to its exclusion from traditional routes.

A key issue affecting the temple's low tourist attraction is the lack of public awareness. The following measures are proposed to enhance tourism related to Seegala Tampita Vihara:

1. **Signage:** Install a signboard for Seegala Tampita Vihara at Weeraketiya Pasma Junction on Walasmulla Road, which is a route to both Kataragama and Devundara.
2. **Social Media Campaigns:** Utilize platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok to raise awareness about the temple. For example, launching a YouTube channel to share videos about the temple's history, creating a Facebook page dedicated to the temple, and circulating informative content through social media can help attract visitors.
3. **Leveraging the Scenic Location:** The Udukirivila Lake, situated next to the temple, enhances its scenic appeal. This natural setting can be

used to attract tourists by providing facilities for local and foreign visitors to take boat trips near the temple.

4. Partnerships with Local Businesses: Recently, a restaurant called Hela Bojun Hala was established near Udukirivila Lake, which also offers a boat service. Collaboration with this business to promote boat trips to Seegala Tampita Vihara could encourage tourists to include the temple in their itinerary.

Conclusion

Seegala Tampita Vihara stands as a unique and historically significant example of Sri Lankan Buddhist architecture, particularly for its well-preserved Kandyan-era features and rare inclusion of a Hevisi Mandapaya. Despite its rich heritage, the temple remains under-visited compared to other nearby sites like Kasagala, Naigala, and Mulkirigala Rajamaha Viharas. The main challenges identified are a lack of awareness and its exclusion from traditional pilgrimage routes. To enhance tourism, strategic measures such as improved signage, social media campaigns, leveraging the temple's scenic surroundings, and partnerships with local businesses could effectively increase visibility and visitor engagement, promoting sustainable tourism for this architectural site.

Keywords: Buddhist Heritage, Kandyan-Era Architecture, Seegala Tampita Vihara, Southern Province Temples, Tourism Promotion

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