Brimming with mystery

Posted on
The vast waters of the Kala Wewa conceal many enigmas and tragedies

A repository of legend and lore, Kala Wewa has seen so much human drama

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The fresh breeze that whirled around was a signal that we had arrived. This breeze came skimming over the vast waters of the Kala Wewa, refreshing and sweet: more so, probably, because this ancient tank occupies such a significant place in the collective imagination of Sri Lankans.

No other tank in the country's history is connected with so much lore; a number of them very moving tragedies. As we walked on the tank's tall embankment that evening, my mind kept tugging itself from the present to the past, to the 5th century when Kala Wewa was in the thick of human drama crucial to the country's history.

On the February evening when we visited, the watermark of the tank was comparatively high. Many trees were half submerged. We stood on the shore at dusk, just where King Dhatusena may have stood more than 1,600 years ago. The king's son Kasyapa, egged on by mercenary friends, wanted to know where Dhatusena kept his treasure hidden. The old king came to this tank, his masterpiece, and, cupping its water into his palms said, "This is all my treasure." The frustrated prince had his father killed by entombing him in a wall of the tank.

By the embankment of the tank today, in a shadowy glade, there is a shrine dedicated to Kiing Dhatusena. A life-size statue of the king stands, looking straight towards the waters he harnessed. Stopping at this temple of a king venerated and deified, I was reminded of a little-known, quirky tale according to which king Dhatusena really had a literal treasure concealed in the depths of the *wewa*. It is said to be deposited in the exact place where the painted eye of the Avukana Buddha statue falls. No one, of course, would succeed in locating that place today. The eyes of the stone statue lost their painted lustre centuries ago.

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The *wewa* is one of the largest, in a country whose ancient people were the most remarkable for their skills in irrigation engineering. Its ripples are almost waves; its horizons so distant they are almost invisible.

Due to the swollen water level in February, birdlife was abundant. Herons, egrets, cormorants and darters floated gracefully, perching on half submerged trees and looking for fish. Plovers and lapwings kept themselves to the shores. An occasional eagle or a kite soared disdainfully above the rest.

But high water levels also mean that elephants do not care to approach the farther shores of the wewa, so visitors during this period will miss what is otherwise a regular spectacle of elephants enjoying an evening drink and a romp.

As darkness enshrouded the surroundings, we thought it best to leave. Dhatusena's is not the only spirit that haunts the Kala *Wewa*. Kadawara, another personage lifted to superhuman heights, is just as renowned.

Kadawara was a wild man of the forests who ultimately became a Yaksha divinity. He provided king Dhatusena with information about a *'kala'* creeper in the forest that blocked water and created a natural reservoir. The king built the Kala *wewa* on this spot, and Kadawara was ennobled for his contribution. Jealous courtiers, however, conspired to destroy the wewa. In his attempts to save the tank Kadawara was killed.

Two people, now important regional deities, sacrificed their lives for this one tank. Perhaps that explains the mystique and allure of Kala Wewa?