Curious Siyambalanduwa

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Farming joys: Children on the playing fields of sugar cane having a barrel of fun

It is the broad Siamese twin faces of Debidigala rock that commands your attention as you near the arid zone of Siyambalanduwa located in the Moneragala District, 290 km southeast of Colombo. Known as the Rock of Siyambalanduwa, it holds sway and has borne witness to the chequered history of the landscape called Uva Wellassa, the land of a hundred thousand rice fields.

Words and Photographs Manu Gunasena

Through the ages, the fertile fields of Siyambalanduwa have contributed in no small a measure to the nation's larder. But what put Siyambalanduwa on the historical map is the major role the village played in the rebellion against the British, staged by its patriotic citizenry known as the Uva Wellassa uprising.

Two hundred years ago with the fall of Senkadagala, the last stronghold of Sri Lankans, the 2400 year old dynastic line of the country's kings were at an end. In 1815, with the king in hiding, Kandyan chieftains signed the armistice and entered into a treaty called the Kandyan Convention, thereby passing on the sovereignty of Sri Lanka and the overlordship of the isle to the British crown worn by a mad king of England, the mentally deranged George the Third.

Two years later, the people of Uva Wellassa revolted. And the forces of opposition to overthrow the British yoke and regain for Sri Lankans the lost land of their forefathers were assembled and directed from here. It is not from the *Siyambala* or Tamarind trees growing in abundance in the area that Siyambalanduwa gets its double barrel name but from the Sinhala phrase '*siya bala aniya*' which means a 'brigade of assembled forces'.

Near the 9th milepost down the Amparai Road a massive rock, resembling the world famed Sigiriya, rises to the sky. A rectangular box type rock in shape, the sheer drop at one end is seen to be hugged by another rock giving it the uncanny appearance of a giant monitor lizard, sort of a Godzilla if you fancy, scaling the crag to conquer the peak. It's called Govinda Hela. Villagers hold the view that its name

is a derivative from the word '*thalagoya*' meaning monitor lizard in Sinhala. Through the years the word '*goya*' became '*goiya*' to finally end up as Govinda. During colonial rule a Britisher is said to have stared at the rock and said that it resembled England's Westminster Abbey and, though it remains unclear as to what made him think it does, the name has remained and the rock is commonly referred to by villagers as 'Westminster *kanuwa*'.

The path to reach the base of the rock is through a temple founded 50 years ago and named Buvenekabahu Temple. As the founder, the chief monk of the temple Ven Buddhama Inndrarathane thera explained, the Kalinga invasion the country experienced during the 12th Century AD forced the Sinhala kingdom to shift from Polonnaruwa to Yapahuwa. Fleeing the Chola invaders was also a provincial governor by the name of Buvenekabahu who fled further south. He arrived at Siyambalanduwa in 1225 and seeing the rock, realised the potential its formidable natural fortifications offered as an unassailable fort. In the manner King Kashyapa had built his palace atop Sigiriya 700 years before him, Buvenekabahu constructed his residence on the tableland found at the summit.

The path from the temple lies through the forest and is about two or three miles long. But the path becomes paved with cement and sometimes with rocky steps. After two bridges are crossed during the initial stage of the long walk the steepness of the incline increases and the going gets tougher. Ladders fixed to the rock are the means by which the ascent to the summit is made. Before the last ladder on the rock is climbed there is a vantage spot called '*Hulang Kapolla*' which offers a breathtaking view of the Siyambalanduwa scenery. The entire iourney to the summit from the temple takes over three hours with pit stops made to recover breath.

At the top there are two approximately 20 feet by 20 feet ponds. The remarkable difference between these two ponds is that while the water dries up in one during the drought, in the other it remains at spill level at all time, drought or not. Also to be found here is a stone pun kalasa, the traditional Sinhala pot of prosperity. A moonstone also graces the area. Large holes can also be seen here providing evidence that treasure hunters have been at work.

Less than two miles from the main Moneragala road is the Sri Manabarana Rajamaha Viharaya, an eight hundred year old temple, which is said to have been built by a sub king of the south, King Manabarana. Archaeological excavation is underway at the site to determine its exact period in history, believed to be in the

12th Century AD. An ancient stupa at the site which had been reduced to a mound of bricks has been restored to its original state. The ruins of the temple's '*padahanagaraya*' the meditation hall is also found with large stones marking the spot.

During restoration work, which ended in 2013, many relics embedded in the stupa were found. Amongst them were three statues of the seated Buddha in the Samadhi state, a relic casket, many ancient coins, coloured beads, broken clay pots and a unique statue of Goddess Tara sculptured from limestone. All the relics and statues found were re-embedded in the relic chamber of the rebuilt dagobas except that of Goddess Tara. Tara's presence in the relic chamber was unusual for no statue of a goddess has ever been found in any other relic chamber so far exposed. Furthermore, it was a mystery that had to be further investigated. For Goddess Tara belonged to the Mahayana Buddhist tradition and not to the country's widespread Theravada tradition. It alluded to the presence of Mahayana influence during the period in which the stupa was built. As such the chief monk of the temple, the Ven Kurudhugahawatte Indusiri Thera decided to gift it to the Badulla Museum where is displayed.

For centuries the fertile rice fields of Uva Wellassa had made Sri Lanka famed as the Granary of the East. But the short lived uprising of 1817, which was ruthlessly crushed by the British within a year, not only claimed the lives of 776 brave Sri Lankan who have now been officially declared as national heroes but also laid the black hand of death on the rice bowl of the land. Villages were burnt, livestock were destroyed and precious water tanks condemned to ruin and waste. Thousands fled the area in search of a better life. Siyambalanduwa, together with the rest in the area, was turned into a ghost village.

In March 1981 the Muthukandiya Wewa, an old massive tank, was rebuilt and commissioned by the then President J R Jayewardene. Today it has assumed its old role and vital function. Once more it has become the lifeblood of the agricultural community.

Today its waters irrigate over 800 rice fields. Its main canal 4km long divides into 70 sub channels and irrigates 800 hectares of paddy in the area. The tank is the only existing reservoir of the Heda Oya basin and has a capacity of 30 MCM with an irrigable extent of 827 hectares. It has a terrain elevation of 91 metres from sea level.

While paddy still ranks as Siyambalanduwa’s main crop, sugar cane follows a close second. Harvesting is done in August and is soon followed by replanting with the sweet bounty expected in February. The bi-annual cycle is repeated in March. It is the same with corn on the cob, which has emerged as another major crop rivalling sugar cane, competing for the limited land and water resources. Another emerging industry is the making of bricks from Siyambalanduwa clay, which are sun dried and then burnt in furnaces of wood fire.

All across Wellassa a sense of optimism pervades the air. Years of neglect and hardship are being overcome by toil and effort. Siyambalanduwa is finally beginning to transcend the tragedy of her people and triumph the blight cast upon the land as a result of the Uva Wellassa rebellion which ended in an apocalypse. It is a new uprising that is brewing today. The Uva Wellassa uprising of hope.

