

# Devil's Dam On The River Ma

Posted on



Rocks are piled up at this spot only while the rest of the river meets a small rocky reef and forms a pool before spilling over

**It's an idle enough place for the devil to build his dam; but no man or giant or yaka or demon could construct a barrier formidable enough to withstand the relentless flow of the Ma Oya river.**

**Words and Photographs** Manu Gunasena

The Ma Oya makes its descent from the central regions of Lanka and meanders through the districts of Kegalle, Kurunegala and Gampaha. As it winds its way down its 130 kilometre journey to merge with the great waters of the Indian Ocean, it reveals at one particular spot, how efforts to dam its sea bound flow had been effectively dashed by its mighty torrent.

And the great battle between man and nature's forces happened approximately 60 kilometres away from Colombo in Kotakedeniya where, hundreds of years later, it is still the talk of the town and the boast of its residents.

The dam maybe no more but this placid and pleasant agricultural area is awash with a whole host of enchanting legends and myths surrounding the origins of the dam doomed to disintegrate, its rocks strewn like pebbles on a sandy bed.

At this spot, the river appears to be more like a shallow pond with a whole lot of stepping stones. The gentle flow makes it an ideal spot for a river bath and the rustic environs turn it to a perfect place for a picnic. And to remind you that others have had the same idea, the burnt remains of a campfire lie nearby as substantiating evidence.

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As you view the scene and drink in its picturesque beauty, gaze your eyes towards the direction from whence the river flows and you will notice on either bank the remains of two

structures made up of large rocky slabs. These mark the beginning of the dam and the rest of the rocks of this ambitious project lie scattered in the middle of the river, veritable tombstones of the Devil's Dam.

Here it was, it is said, that one of the ten giants of Lanka's most popular monarch King Dutugemunu, the Giant Gotaimbara decided to build a dam when he came down to this part of the island over two thousand years ago. At this very spot, the legend goes, the giant planned out to build a rocky dam to channel the waters of the Ma Oya to the nearby Bala Ella, a major canal. This canal would then transport the waters to the Ma Kadura Wellyaya, a large tract of agricultural land which comprised fields of paddy. This lay approximately 15 miles from this spot.

Using his immense and legendary strength, Gotaimbara completed his gigantic task in record time but hardly had he slept satisfied with his labours that he discovered the following morn the dam had been breached. His work lay in ruins. But undaunted he built it again but, lo and behold, the following morning it had been broken down again. He built it again but met with the same scene of destruction the following morning. This scenario was repeated for a few days until at last the baffled Gotaimbara resolved to keep a night watch on his beloved dam.

The vigil paid dividends. During the night he saw a yaka, a devil or a member of the yaksha clan that used to inhabit the island during that era, dislodging the rocks and destroying the dam. Enraged he immediately seized the devil and killed him in one swift blow. Then as a warning perhaps, to other yakas so bent on creating devilish mischief, he tied the dead yaka to the dam. Hence the name 'yaka bandhi ella' or 'the dam to which the devil was tied'.

Another folklore doing the rounds is one that portrays the devil as the engineer of the dam. The king decided to construct a dam and offered a reward to anyone who could accomplish it. The reward promised to anyone who could successfully dam the Ma Oya and divert its waters to the large Ma Kadura fields of paddy, was marriage to the King's daughter. The test of successful accomplishment was that the king should be able to glimpse the sea whilst standing atop the piled up paddy reaped as a result of the diverted Ma Oya waters.

No one took up the offer until a yaka or devil turned up and accepted the challenge. The yaka built the dam and when the paddy harvest was piled, the yaka stood atop it and said he could see the sea but when the king stood on the pile he saw no sign of the coastline. He refused to give his daughter to the yaka claiming the yaka had not succeeded. The devil in the yaka burst forth in hell's fury and he gave the dam a helluva kick that broke it into pieces. In this version the name of the dam is different. It becomes yaka bandha ella or 'the

dam that the devil built'.

Whichever tale may take your fancy as light entertainment, the evidence exists to show that a dam was indeed built here. The two structures of the dam which begin from both the southern and northern banks mark the start of the dam. As for the middle of the dam which should have been there on the middle of the river joining these two structures, well, it is still there in the middle of the river, albeit in the form of individual slabs.

Furthermore the grooves made on certain rocks and the protruding heads of other rocks carved out to fit each other as corresponding pieces like pieces in a Lego set, prove it has been made by man for this particular purpose. Also the existence of many rocks in rectangular and square shapes show that it has been cut into size and shape by man to fit as building blocks for the dam. The body of evidence is further bolstered by the fact that at no other spot in the Ma Oya is found such a concentrated cluster of rocks than here at Kotakedeniya.

There is also a canal on the right bund of the river which has been cut to take excess water to ease pressure on the dam. This canal makes a half circle into the land and falls again into the river about three hundred yards away. Part of it is still visible. The rest has been blocked by land filling and buildings.

So what breached the rocky dam and sent its large slabs tumbling like skittles? One theory is that the flow of the Ma Oya eventually proved too much for the dam to bear and that a sudden gush of water caused the rocks to dislodge. Only forty years ago the width of the river at this spot was much narrower and, as a result, the water pressure would have been much stronger. Today, villagers claim, the river has widened due to indiscriminate sand dredging. But dam or no dam, it is still a lovely spot to visit for a bath and a picnic and to wash it down, legends and all, with a gulp or two of the devil's brew.

