

The Great Waters of Randenigala



The majestic landscape of a man-made marvel

The rays of the evening sun glimmered over still waters that are the lifeblood of this land...

Words Keshini de Silva

Photographs Menaka Aravinda and Vishwathan Tharmakulasingham

Dusk was slowly and leisurely approaching as we stopped by the Randenigala reservoir. As the sun bade goodbye, rain clouds hovered over the waters. Against the blue shadows of the central hills, glowing rays seeped through. It was a heavenly sight, almost as if the tank was receiving news of oncoming showers from the sky.

To many it would be difficult to imagine that this mesmerising scene was the result of a man-made wonder. Completed in the 1980s, it mimics the grandeur of the reservoirs built by the great kings of the Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa eras. Munching on chilli-infused mangoes, we walked along the banks enjoying picturesque views of the surrounding Victoria, Randenigala and Rantambe sanctuary.

The source of water and vegetation that prospers around it attracts many an animal, even at times herds of elephants. Grey-headed fish eagles or tank eagles as they are commonly called for their partiality for tanks, soared above the waters, taking their pick of the abundant aquatic prey. The rilawas or monkeys of course were up to their usual trickery.

Across the body of water is the Randenigala Power Station

The giant rock-filled Randenigala dam stood tall at a height of 94 metres, its strength that held the waters in place spanning a length of 485 metres. Three magnificently symmetrical spill gates curved down like giant play slides. During the Northeast monsoon, which feeds the reservoir, the spill gates will unleash the ferocious might of Poseidon with a roar like thunder. Across the body of water is the Randenigala power station, where two mammoth turbines supply 20 per cent of the Island's power demand.

We traversed through the sanctuary until we reached another mini dam, its structure was different to that of the reservoirs of Victoria and Randenigala. It was the Minipe Anicut. While Randenigala craved for the energy of water, this anicut lusted after its life giving and nourishing properties. The water that has served its purpose at Randenigala is diverted by the Minipe anicut for the use of cultivation and village life. A system that pays homage to the famous words of King Parakramabahu of Polonnaruwa, "Let not even one drop of water that falls on the earth in the form of rain be allowed to reach the sea without being used by man".



The giant spillways and dam of Randenigala reservoir

Two streams of water from the Minipe Anicut carries these treasured waters; the right stream flowing through Maduru Oya until Welikanda and the left through Wasgamuwa to the Eastern coast.

Like a mirror, these waters reflected its backdrop of mountain ranges and lush green trees. As the rains were yet to arrive, the waters were low, they would rise once the mighty turbines of Randenigala re-commences operations at night. Just beyond there seemed to be another strange dam-like structure. We sought answers from Pradeep Sanjeewa from the Mahaweli Authority at the Minipe Anicut. The village of Minipe he said, was an ancient one, and archaeologists found evidence that a dam had been built farther away from the anicut to distribute water for the village's use during the time of King Agbo II. Driven by the historic evidence, the first Prime Minister of Sri Lanka, D S Senanayake then commissioned the building of another dam to replace and preserve the ancient one of stone and log.

With the sanctuary bordering this barrier, our curiosity was peaked at the thought of potential elephant visits. Especially, during the dry season, herds hover about in the nearby forest cover. While their visits are exciting, Pradeep said they are rare. However, he mused that our queries about elephants would herald their coming tonight, it was a popular expression within their community he said.

Our minds fuelled with information, we were back on the road again. As we began to cruise along the Mahiyanganaya Road, for a moment tarmac was flanked by paddy fields. Lime green sprouts flourishing in the moist mud, nurtured by the prosperous waters of Randenigala.

