

Kala Wewa: The Lure Of An Ancient Lake

Posted on



The quiet ripples of Kala Wewa at dusk

The ripples lapped gently upon the banks like silk upon the skin. The sunset in the distant horizon veiled the serene surroundings with a dusky enchantment. People strolling along or on bicycle turned to silhouettes. All was quiet save the gusts of wind or the whispers of the lake's waters. This was Kala Wewa, an old soul that has seen the ages pass by since the days of Kings. Today it had laid its banks bare with the dry season and I stole a rare indulgence of straying my feet upon it.

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The impending rainy season would leave none of these sights to spare, I thought, as I gazed across a greening tank bed. There was something about being at the threshold of an ancient tank that tugs at you with its pulse of life and lore. The quiet livelihood it draws around it, the welcome pitstops for weary travellers and refuges for birds, elephants and other animals of these parts have merged seamlessly with its existence.

During the prolonged dry season the Kala Wewa yielded an altogether different nature. Where the water had receded, grass sprouted intermittently and restless feet took to strolling along its length and breadth. Instead of an ancient lake brimming with rippling water it had transformed to a lakeside park for hours of recreation for families who arrived in small pockets.

I walked to the water front where an abundance of shells and fish lay drying ashore. A few fishing boats floated across the water and fishermen whipped the water to drive fish into nets. Another villager herded his goats about as he made his way across. The roadside face of the Kala Wewa provide ample access points to the Wewa.

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The opposite end was crowned by trees that led to heavily forested areas fringed by mountains in the horizon. Along the shaded bund that cruised around the limits of the Wewa a villager had found a restful spot in the shade of trees to sell his day's catch of fish harvested from the Kala Wewa. A frequent bystander to the happenings of the tank he revealed that elephants numbered in the 100s arrive at the lake. Though the reigning dry season had quelled the numbers greatly and machinery excavating mud from the sand bed served as another deterrent to the arrival of elephants, I still hoped to catch a glimpse of one. Till then the long stretch of the bund appealed to the restless wanderer where the minutes and hours could be spent strolling along or bird watching at the sloping embankment.

Along the bund stood a small kovil dedicated to the divine protector of Kala Wewa – the Deity Kadawara. The custodian of the shrine launched into a long winded tale of lore and history. Contemplating the degrees of lore and factual history that have together prevailed through word of mouth, I ventured along further to at once glimpse an unmistakable figure bathing in the water. A large lumbering tusker, he was, and a familiar one to the villagers as he was a frequent lone visitor, I learn as I

stood amongst many fascinated onlookers. Ailing from wounds, the tusker is regularly administered medicine by the Wildlife Department officers who track its visits to the tank. A silent calm prevailed as the tusker continued to passively flush large sprays of water across its back. In the sultry afternoon sun, he carried on in a serene rhythm of routine, unperturbed by the gathering presence around.

Hours later with the dying sun approached another lone pachyderm stepped on to the uneven plains of the Kala Wewa. Less accustomed to human presence it remained close to the farther boundary making quick retreats into the forest on sensing an unwelcome presence.

All was quiet at the Kala Wewa as darkness gathered and gusts of wind lapped against me. The wind carried distant voices and an occasional whir of vehicles passing by. The placid reservoir waters rippled in a metallic glow under the setting sun that cast shades of silhouettes all around. Standing in the reservoir basin was to be ensnared in its charm.

Legend and Lore

This famous ancient reservoir was an ingenious feat engineered by King Datusena (459-477 AD) and is a primary example of the hydraulic civilisation of the time. With a circumference of 60 miles the ancient irrigation reservoir supplies water to Anuradhapura via the Jayaganga. The Kadawara Deviyo, or the deity that is worshipped by the communities around is regarded the guardian and protector of the reservoir. Legend has it that a man named Kadawara saved the bund from ruin when he bodily blocked a breach till the workers repaired it. It is said that Kadawara died in the event and was declared the divine guardian and protector of the Kala Wewa. Villagers make offerings at the shrine nearby the bund in the hope that the Deity will heed their grievances and troubles.

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