Malwana Fort: Back To Life

Posted on
New constructions built on top of the old fortifications

A narrow path, lined on one side with a small stream and the other with overgrown weeds, led us to an area shrouded with tall trees, in the midst of which we glimpsed a house. The bark of a dog cautioned us from proceeding any further and we looked about us uncertainly, wondering where the search for the Malwana Fort had led us to…

Words Krishani Peiris | **Photographs** Indika De Silva and Isuru Upeksha

Over the din of the barking, a man’s voice called out, silencing the dog, and we saw a figure walking towards us from the direction of the house. The owner of the land greeted us, and hesitantly we inquired where we could find the Malwana Fort. He confirmed that we have indeed reached our destination. Apparently the fort is located within his land and he invited us to have a look. On one side of the land was a stone wall running the length, albeit with gaps in between; the only remaining indications of the Malwana Fort.

The colonial legacy

In the distant past, Sri Lanka was governed by first the Portuguese, then the Dutch and finally the British beginning from 1506—a time span amounting to about 443 years. The first Portuguese to arrive in the Island was Lorenzo de Almeida who succeeded in forming a friendly relationship with the King who ruled over the Kotte Kingdom at the time. By doing so he was able to secure a monopoly in the spice and cinnamon trade for Portugal. In exchange they frequently helped the rulers of Kotte in their struggles against other kingdoms and slowly but surely spread their influence over the low country and the coastal regions.

The growing power of the Portuguese posed a constant threat to the Kandyan King, the main authoritative figure of the country at the time. Help was sought from the Dutch, who arrived in the shores of Sri Lanka in 1656, and together they successfully ousted the Portuguese. Then it was the turn of the Dutch to expand their hold, which yet again threatened the sovereignty of the Kandyan Kingdom. The rule of the Dutch ceased with the arrival of British in 1796 and by 1815 the whole Island was under their rule, which only came to an end in 1948 when Sri Lanka gained its independence.

The Malwana Fort

It is believed that the military outposts, built by kings of ancient Sri Lanka taking into consideration strategic locations, accessibility and defense, were soon taken over and turned into military centres or stockades by the Portuguese, Dutch and British. Further, most of these places served a dual purpose of becoming a storage space for exported and imported commodities.

Malwana is thought to have been one such outpost, which was first acquired by the Portuguese, then the Dutch and perhaps the British. Historians believe that there was a strong military presence of the Portuguese under the leadership of Azawedo in the Malwana area. Evidence unearthed at the site shows that the fort was developed considerably during the Portuguese and Dutch eras, while it was once a stronghold of the kings of Sri Lanka. Remnants found through excavations and conservation efforts carried out by The National Trust of Sri Lanka along with other parties have uncovered remnants characteristic to a typical fort. Further, they have also found evidence of transport and defence specifications, technology utilised in the construction of ramparts, drawbridges and of timber, which had supported bridges.

In the past, according to an old document on the subject, Malwana was called

Maltuana. The document further details a fort located ‘down stream of Kelani River in between Hanwella and Kelaniya’. This is the fifth such fort to be uncovered along the Kelani River and the closest to the Colombo Fort, during the Dutch period. Further, according to the annals of history Malwana was a main administrative centre of the Portuguese while more than 70 soldiers were stationed at the fort during the Dutch period.

A drawing of the fort can be found in R K de Silva’s book about the Dutch in Sri Lanka and experts have been able to relate the traces of the bastions and earth mounds created to form the rampart walls to the sketch. The fort is believed to be comprised of four sides, rectangular in shape, along with four bastions—Northeast, Northwest, Southeast and Southwest. While the Northwest and Southwest boundaries of the fort faced the Kelani River, the Northwest and Northeast sides were restricted by a canal. Theremaining two sides were bordered by a ditch, believed to have been a moat. During low water seasons, timber poles embedded onto the waters can be seen and historians cite these as evidence for the existence of a bridge that may have rested on the poles, providing passage across the river from the fort.

In the Present…

As we looked around the site, it was clear that much work remains to be done to restore the fort to its former glory. Such conservation efforts are to be admired and most likely history buffs will be able to see the evidence of yet another architectural wonder from the colonial past without having to travel far from Colombo.