Rich Green Valleys of the Mahaweli

Posted on

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Mahaweli…one could hardly spend a few days in Sri Lanka without the word reaching you. In print, on radio and TV, in advertising, in commerce, politics, music and the arts, Mahaweli will strike you almost as a constant punctuation mark in the story of contemporary Sri Lanka.

Why not? In this lovely island watered by four great rivers, the Mahaweli Ganga, or

to use its older name the “Maha Ganga” -the Great River -continues to play a vital role in the cultural, historical and political revolutions underway in Sri Lanka.

The Mahaweli is to Sri Ianka what the Ganges is to India, the Nile to the Egyptians, and the tributaries of the Amazon are to the native South Americans. The fact that it was known as an important river in ancient times is borne out by the fact that its path is indicated in the great Egyptian cartographer Ptolemy’s 5th Century map of Taprobane, as Sri Lanka was then known to the world. Ptolemy has also mistakenly named it as the Ganges.

The upper Mahaweli Basin, which drains almost the entire hill country of Sri Lanka, has been known for its scenic beauty and mist-laden hills. Some of the most picturesque waterfalls in the island such as Ramboda and Dunhinda falls, form part of the Mahaweli River System.

The Mahaweli Ganga is Sri Lanka’s longest river. It originates in the cold Hatton plateau, in the fastness of the Adam’s Peak range of mountains, at an altitude around 1350 metres above sea-level. The river flows through and across the varied terrain of Sri Lanka. The Dik Oya, the head-stream of the Mahaweli, flows in a straight course through the wettest area of the island where the annual rainfall exceeds 5000 mm. Much later it wends its way through the arid Dry Zone of Sri Lanka where king and commoner have long looked at the Mahaweli as a possible source of an end to the constant fear of drought. The Mahaweli almost girdles Kandy in a beautiful loop which takes on one bank all the exotic greenery of the Peradeniya Botanic Gardens, and swings into the picturesque Dumbara Valley of the Central Hills through a series of deep ravines and gorges. For centuries it has flowed beside the ancient cities and magnificent monuments of Sri Lanka’s past. As it begins to meander in the low plains it forms extensive marshy tracts which exhibit ecosystems of their own, with their own characteristic flora and fauna, and then debouches itself into the Koddivar Bay on the East Coast near Trincomalee.

‘Throughout the history of Sri Lanka,” says the ‘Mahaweli Saga’ (Mahaweli Authority) the taunting challenge of the Mahaweli rolling into the sea excited in the more resourceful kings their “Ulysses factor”. This goaded them to get even with the might of the Mahaweli. And as far back as the 1st Century B.C., starting with Kutakanna Tissa, the more resourceful Sinhala kings grappled with the main stem of the mighty Mahaweli. Mahasena, Dhatusena, Aggabodhi I, and Parakramabahu I left behind tangible evidence that they had had the measure of the daunting Mahaweli, and had harnessed its resources for irrigation.

What one hears of today is certainly a continuation of this dream of harnessing the Mahaweli – with the difference that it has now been finally achieved in large measure. In an accelerated programme of development initiated after 1977, the Mahaweli has been diverted, telescoping a 30-year programme of development into less than a decade, in a development strategy, both in scope and the changes it brought about, rarely seen in the Third World. In its sweep and content, the Mahaweli Scheme is the latest act in that undying drama of Sri I.ankans and their struggle to harness the two “R’s” of nature – rain and river.

The Mahaweli saga of today is one of great dams spanning mountains like those at Kotmale and Randenigala, and others rising high above valleys as at Victoria and Maduru Oya. It is the story of a river harnessed for irrigation and power, and the rise of a whole new economy, life-style and concept in Sri Lanka life.

The Accelerated Mahaweli Programme has been intended to benefit some 150,000 families from direct agricultural re-settlement. The spin-off from this settlement will throw up new avenues in the service sector benefiting another 150,000 persons. In human terms the totality of the programme envisages the exodus of over a million people into the new development areas in the fertile plains of the Rajarata, from which their ancestors retreated in the 13th Century AD.

Set against the background of massive structures – the many large reservoirs, power houses, miles of tunnels, canals and transmission lines – is a human drama in which the Mahaweli settler is the unquestioned hero, in his acceptance of the challenge to bring back under the plow the lands once abandoned to the advance of the jungle.

Today Mahaweli means rich green valleys where once jungle stood. New townships bringing modem amenities of life to rural people, long forgotten in the metropolitan-based development of more than a century. It is the new robustness seen in the rural cultivator who has the time and capacity for developing his skill in woodwork, sculpture or to develop a line of trade which will give him added benefits in the rural environment. The success of the Mahaweli is seen in the new fields of gherkins grown for export to the West and Middle East, and whole new areas grown with chillies to lace the hot curries that Sri Lankans all over prefer. It is a new land of mango groves and citrus orchards.

Mahaweli is also a new scene of culture in Sri Lanka. Of folk dancing revived until a Mahaweli Dance Troupe has made its name in local entertainment. It is a land of

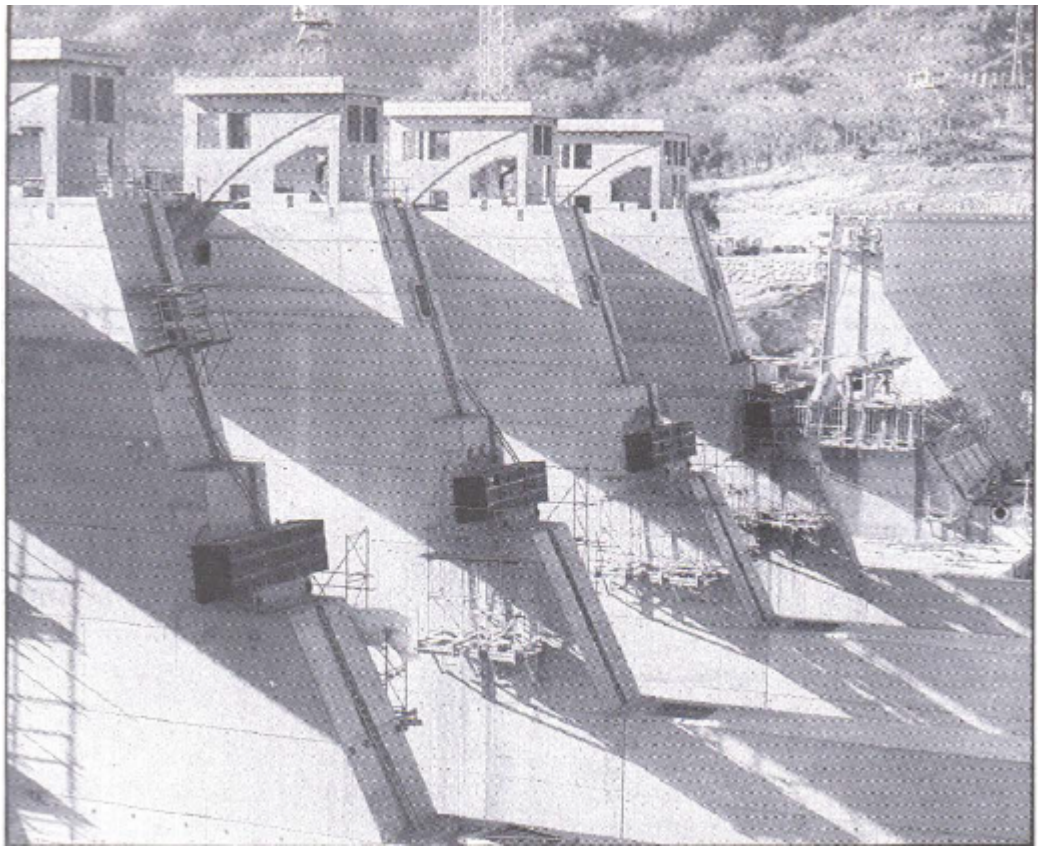
new temples and dagabas as at Maduru Oya, and the Mahaweliseya at Kotmale which was built by the settlers to commemorate twelve old temples which were submerged in building the Kotmale Reservoir and Dam. It is also the land where many more temples have been reclaimed from the jungle and preserved. An area where folk museums abound in the artefacts discovered in opening up the jungle and preserve the implements of a life-style of the peasant which is fast vanishing.

Archaeology was given an important place in the Mahaweli programme and helped in saving, discovering and protecting many a monument which would otherwise have been lost to posterity. One of the more important of such monuments preserved is the Nalanda Gedige, a monument of remarkable beauty with a unique vaulted roof. It was removed stone by stone from the bed of the Bowatenne Reservoir and re-assembled on higher ground. The Nalanda Gedige is reputed to be an example of Pallava architecture from South India. It is said that the Pallavas built the Gedige on the exact centre of Sri Lanka, and that a routed map of Sri lanka would balance on a pin, if the pin-point is placed exactly where the Gedige is located. One base of the Gedige is a rare frieze of erotica.

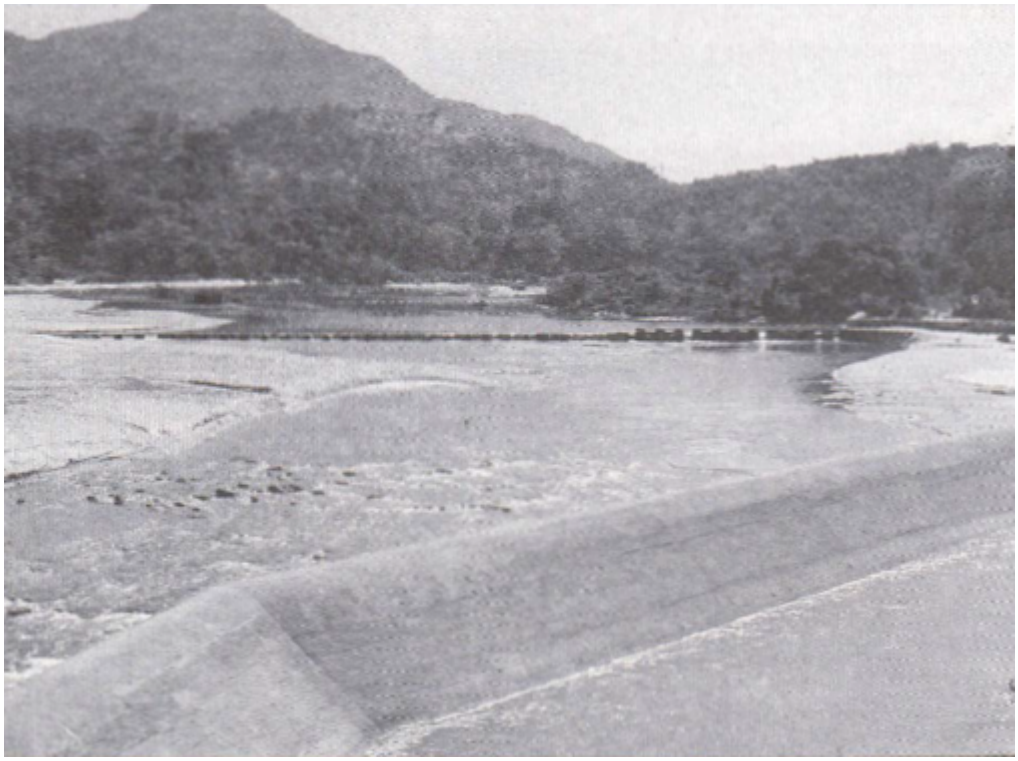
In 1981 the workers clearing the dam-site at Maduru Oya stumbled on an ancient breached earthen dam at the very spot where foreign and local engineering experts of the UNDP team had decided to straddle the river. This dam, about 23 metres high and pitched with round stones along the upstream slope to break the ripple action, indicated the magnitude of the reservoir which had been built there by the ancient Sinhalese. The ancient dam was protected and the new dam-site shifted.

Later workers on the same site discovered a complete sluice structure almost intact, which on carbon dating of charcoal remains indicated it had been built in the 5th Century A.O., at the time of Dhatusena the builder of the mighty Kalawewa, which also receives water from the diverted Mahaweli today. Visiting the Mahaweli Zones is an interesting break from the usual circle tour of Sri lanka. The four main dam sites will take one to the cool mountains, the lower hills and the plains below. It will take one through a land green in continuity, from the dark green of tea, to the many shades of green of paddy on mountain terraces and vast stretches of paddy-land in the lower fertile plains watered by the Mahaweli. The visitor to the Mahaweli Zones travels on some of the best roadways in the island, and the several circuit bungalows built in the new towns afford welcome hospitality in a typically Sri lankan setting. Prior reservations are necessary for use of circuit bungalows. But none of the Mahaweli Zones are too far away from towns such as Kandy, Anuradhapura, and Polonnaruwa where good hotel accommodation is readily available.

For those interested in more. information about the scope of the Mahaweli Programme and the ancient systems of irrigation, a visit to the Mahaweli Museum situated at the Mahaweli Centre at Ananda Coomaraswamy Mawatha, Colombo 7, is recommended. The show-piece here is a working plaster-cast model of a “Bisokotuwa” or valve pit which ancient Sri Lankan engineers invented to regulate the issue of water from massive dams under conditions of immense pressure. Also on display is a model of typical ripple bands – Relapanawa – seen in the ancient dams which absorb the wave-breaking action of massive reservoirs.



The dam at Rantambe (©Mahaweli Centre)



The Mahaweli flowing through Minipe. {Courtesy : Mahaweli Centre)