

The Royal Bathing Site: Raja Pihilla

Posted on



Gushing water that cascades from the central pihilla

We set off early morning to Kotmale to seek the Raja Pihilla. Located amidst the central hills of the Nuwara Eliya district, Kotmale is a beautiful countryside where the traditional village is still preserved and historical legends are still spoken of in awe.

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Rare land snail species *Ravana politissima*

Located 39 km from Kandy, in the Central Province, for someone coming from Colombo, there are two scenic routes to reach Kotmale. One is via Nawalapitiya and the other via Gampola. However, if you are travelling from Nuwara Eliya, the best way would be via Ramboda to the final destination at Mahawela in Kotmale.

Passing Nawalapitiya, we headed towards the Kotmale Dam through the Nawalapitiya-Gampola road, and finally reached Kotagepitiya where the ancient legend begins. We were attracted to an ancient site that was situated by the side of the road, the Morape Kataragama Devalaya. As we stopped to inquire more about the legendary stories of the 17 years that Prince Dutugemunu spent in Kotmale, it was the Kapu Mahattaya who narrated the ancient tales and the importance of the historic village of Kotmale. Although the current building of the Kataragama Devalaya was a recent one, the ancient temple and devalaya had dated back to

1341 AD, and was amongst the many temples that were submerged during the construction of the Kotmale Dam. A few remnant stones are the only survivors of the ancient building.

The legend dates back to over 2000 years ago, when Prince Dutugemunu had fled from the Ruhunu Kingdom after having angered his father King Kavantissa. The prince lived in Kotmale for 17 years in disguise. He had entered Kotmale from an entrance known as Kadadora, and his sword was hidden in a location known as Dehadukadulla, prior to entering the village. After his long and exhaustive journey, he had rested in the porch of a house, known as the Vee-suru-gedara of a farmer, where he worked and lived during this time.



Kotmale reservoir and dam

The Raja Pihilla was situated a little beyond this point in a paddy field called Mahawela. As its name implies, this was an enormous cover of paddy fields, and was said to have been entirely ploughed by the prince himself, thereby showing his great strength and perseverance.

We trekked our way uphill through Mahawela, and reached the royal bathing site. The preliminary point of this endless cascade of water is a grove carved on stone of the pihilla, which is located a few metres beyond. Looking down from here was purely magical, where the surroundings made us feel nostalgic. At the base of the hill was the valley of one of the main branches of the river Mahaweli, the Kotmale Oya. Just beyond were stretches of forest cover, which holds the waters for the rivers to flow. My memory went back to nearly ten years ago when we worked to relocate the population of the endemic and rare land snail species *Ravana*

politissima, which was threatened at the time due to a construction of the Upper Kotmale Reservoir. The entire slope was one whole stretch of green paddy, suggesting the richness of the soil that had once been.

The Raja Pihilla bathing site was surrounded by stones with a recent addition of a resting place, which was similar to that of an ancient ambalama. While we were there, everyone who came to bathe at the Raja Pihilla had their own story of the legend to tell, which made the journey even more interesting.

As we bid farewell to the legends of the great prince who went on to become one of the greatest rulers of Sri Lanka, we were mesmerised by the fact that these waters have gushed through at the Raja Pihilla for so many years and for this site to have existed for this long was indeed inconceivable.

