The Eastern Jewel Padaviya

Posted on



A raging current gradually disappears into the dense Vanni jungles

The less-than-often plied road leading from Kebetigollewa to Weli Oya could, in all probability, leave nothing to write home. That is of course, with the exception of the occasional wild elephant who may decide to inquire on the pliers of the path, or the feel of freedom to squeeze the juice out of the accelerator over the neatly paved road. However, halfway through towards Weli Oya, a weather beaten, weary and stubby concrete notice on the side of the road invites the curious traveller to catch a glimpse of the "Eastern Jewel" – The tank at Padaviya. A short detour just over a mile on the turn off opens the gateway to a soothing sight amidst the rather featureless jungle terrain where an ocean of hope has been harnessed for nearly two millennia.

Words and Photographs Shyam Ranasinghe

The origin of the gigantic reservoir has been debated amongst the academic community. However, detailed architectural work in the early decades of the 20th Century, along with supportive documentation in ancient scriptures, have suggested that it was built by the great king, Mahasena. It is also said that King Parakramabahu the Great, had renovated the tank. Yet, having fallen into disuse, the Padaviya tank had lain in a dilapidated and desolate state. Many a colonial administrator had made the arduous journey to the ruined tank and been aptly impressed by its work. Incidentally Governer Sir Henry Ward had commented, describing it as “the most gigantic of all works”. However, thanks to an ambitious renovation project undertaken by the Irrigation department in the 1950s the largest irrigation tank in North Eastern Sri Lanka was brought to life.

Trapping the water flowing along the Ma Oya, the Padaviya tank retains water to the capacity of 85,000 acre feet

As one begins to explore the tank along the impressive bund overlaid with a gravel road, a neat notice board opposite the main sluice gate describes the brief history and capacity of the tank. Trapping the water flowing along the Ma Oya, the Padaviya tank retains water to the capacity of 85,000 acre feet. Having graced the water body in the dry season the full majesty of the tank had vanished. Nevertheless, the sluice control tower gave an indication on its glory with the graduated capacity markings being visible on the side all the way to the bottom. The full weight of the water can be comprehended by two factors. They are the impressive build of the bund and the reinforced granite protection, laid to withstand the gradual sweep of the earthen bund. Nevertheless, the churn of the water through gaps in the granite laid wall, compelled a mild hand dip to appease the senses. And this went on to the level of a gentle face splash. It was only the lack of preparation that prevented a spontaneous dip in the otherwise inviting lake.

Even at this dried up stage, the Padaviya tank was able to give an impressive gush of water spewing out of the controlled sluice for irrigation. The roar of the water outlet was clearly audible from where the sluice stands and I wasted no time in tiptoeing down a narrow flight of steps that led me down the outer side of the steep bund.

The sight at the outlet was nothing but refreshing and soothing. The calm and resplendent water on the other side of the bund was unleashing its torrential power as it thrust itself out into the waterway. The ripples of foam that laced the surface of the water flow carried the emotions of life that had been latent. It was certainly an

inviting sight for a weary traveller, but surely not for greater indulgence such as a dip. The teeming aqua life in the water flow was rather obvious as a Great Egret (Casmerodius albus) perched close to the control gates slightly downstream. The water carried itself off in a gradually increasing calmness and disappeared into the dense Vanni jungles flowing with hope to many hectares of paddy cultivation, which is coming back to life after decades of respite.

In comparison with other giant works of irrigation found in the dry zone, Padaviya tank seemed relatively less exploited. However, upon close inspection, a fleet of fishing boats were visible in a far end, perhaps indicating that the local fisher folk had taken the day off. It was not however, the case for their avian counterparts as flocks of birds (of many species) seemed quite gay picking on the odd catch. It gave a mixed impression on a tank which is arguably the largest in North-Eastern Sri Lanka.

But surely the sweat, blood and tears of thousands of men is enshrined in the Eastern Jewel that continues to be a pillar of strength, as well as a source of life

Scaling back up to the bund it was always refreshing to catch a glimpse of the majestic body of water beaming with life. A few hundred metres further along the bund road that seemed to snake into the jungle brings to light a landscape where the water is in perfect harmony with the jungle and sky. With the receded waterline, the lush green grass flats of the lake had broken through to blend in to the equilibrium. With the Kachchan winds blowing steadily, swirling through the jungles and splashing over the waters of Padaviya, this is one sight that an adventurer, nature lover and moreover a patriot should not miss.

Upon the exit of the tank, a curious observer would not miss a stone pillar bearing the inscription in Sinhala and Tamil languages, revealing the story of the resurrection of the tank. It still keeps alive the names of those gentlemen of the likes of T B Bulankulama Dissawa (The then Minister of Land and Land Development), W T I Alagaratnam (Director of Irrigation), and others. Although not inscribed in that narrow stone tablet, but surely the sweat, blood and tears of thousands of men is enshrined in the Eastern Jewel that continues to be a pillar of strength, as well as a source of life.

