

The Home of the Black Prince

Posted on

A chieftain's fame lives on in his old mansion, discovers Gamini G. Punchihewa



Nestling in the valley of Kolonne in the province of Sabaragamuwa where awe-inspiring hills roll and meandering streams and rivulets wind like silvery ribbons, lies the sprawling wilderness of Maduwanwela. There, along the mountainous highway of Embilipitiya/Kolonne, off the 15th mile post, is an arched stone gateway. Beneath the spreading boughs of a giant Bo tree stands a still stately looking edifice; the Walauwa of the Maduwanwela Dissawa.

I first visited this mansion (walauwa) in 1970. Then it was in shambles, neglected and forsaken. Now it has been fully restored to its pristine state, conserved and preserved by the Archaeological Department.

The great wilderness of Maduwanwela was bequeathed to the Dissawa (a rank similar to that of duke) who was better known as Kalu Kumaraya (Black Prince), by his great grandfather. The Dissawa was the Rate Mahatmaya (a chieftain as a government official) who reigned from 1900 to 1929.

The Dissawa was famous for his proud independence and fear-lessness. He was never supine to the British who ruled the provinces as Assistant Government Agents. Many are the splendid stories that speak of his bold exploits.

During his time, the present highway did not exist. Instead, there were tortuous tracks ending in foot paths. The elite travelled by dolawa (palanquin).

From the frontier of Rakwana there were horse-drawn carriages to Colombo. Maduwanwela Dissawa was one of the proud commuters of this prestigious stage coach. One day when he wanted to make use of the coach, he found that it was booked by some German princes. When he was making enquires, a German prince, not knowing that the Dissawa knew English, blurted out: "Don't allow that black

fellow to get into the coach. We are princes from Germany, and we have booked • the coach for ourselves."

No sooner were these words of disdain uttered than Maduwanwela Dissawa, smarting in anger, retorted in peerless English: "If so, I am the Black Prince here, called the Kalu Kumaraya, and I shall take the coach myself."

So saying, he directed the coachman to offload their baggage and threw them out of the carriage and rode off with regal bearing like young Lochinvar. The helpless German princes ate humble pie and travelled by bullock cart.

Many such stories are rife in the mountain country of the Kolonne Valley. Once a British Assistant Government Agent came to visit Maduwanwela Dissawa on horseback. He would not allow anyone, even the highest authority in the land, to ride into his walauwa. Anyone on horseback had to get down and walk. The Maduwanwela Dissawa ordered the visitor tied to a kitul palm tree for defying this instruction.

Anyway, it is said that the good, but warrior-like Dissawa, professing his proud independence, entertained the Briti officer in champagne and the bitter feelings were sedated. Dissawa was reputed for his overwhelming hospitality to treat people of high rank with champagne. He was equally hospitable towards his subjects.

In the spacious drawing room of the mansion is found a life size portrait of the chivalrous Maduwanwela Dissawa. He still looks a gallant knight of old, with a silvery flowing beard and dynamic personality.

The doors of the drawing room are heavy, wooden ones with a broad metal handle. The doorways are dwarf-sized, designed so the Dissawa could keep his prestige since anybody entering a room would have had to bow in obeisance to him. There are still a few medamidulas (open courtyards). His antique bed and champagne room are evocative of his lifestyle. The floor of the verandah is studded with pieces of refined crockery. There were empty grooves which are supposed once to have held precious stones.

The imposing courthouse where Maduwanwela Dissawa dispensed justice with awe and decorum, some years ago was on the verge of collapse. Now under the protective umbrella of the Archaeological Department which has preserved this antique edifice as a protected monument it has been well restored to its original state.

This great walauwa was originally built by one of the Dissawa's ancestors, Kodituwakku Nilame, a chief of the Kandyan king's army during the regime of the Dutch. On some of the heavy wooden doors there are dents perpetrated by the then invading Dutch, when they unsuccessfully besieged the premises.

Dr R.L. Spittel, a surgeon who attended Maduwanwela Dissawa during the last stages of his life when he was bed ridden, gives a lively account of his visit to Maduwanwela in 1929. In his fascinating book *Far Off Things* (1932) Dr Spittel devotes a chapter about Maduwanwela Dissawa entitled "A Chieftain of the Wilderness."

"Surrounding the house were magnificent forest giants prominent among them a sacred Bo tree of vast age, encircled by a low wall niched for oil lamps: on a granite altar was an offering of withered flowers. We entered the house, by a narrow doorway, and came to a small square courtyard open to the sky, with a marble statue in its centre. Bounding the courtyard was a square verandah on to which opened the doors of dark rooms.

"In a recess of the verandah, all huddled up on the antique wooden bed on which he had been born, lay the wizened old chief. Cobwebbed bottles of old champagne stood on the ground by the wall. He was in high fever, and his leg was swollen with a painful cellulitis. All the spirit was knocked out of him; he spoke barely a word.



The tiles in front of the old court house are for the restoration of the Black Prince's home.



The stone arch gateway to the Black Prince's home.

"It was sad to see, reduced to such doddering incapacity, the proud wilful being who had maintained efficiently the autocratic traditions of Sinhalese chiefs, despite the iron laws of British administration. That he lay on his death-bed was evident. "He willingly submitted, contrary to my expectations, to the necessary operation. Hardly was he out of the anaesthetic than, true to this reputation for hospitality, he

mumbled orders for our refreshment to the bare-bodied servant, who attended him hand and foot. Then he quietened into a stupor again. He lasted longer than I anticipated, lingering a month after I had seen him." Maduwanwela passed away in 1929. His tomb lies in the walauwa premises close to the road.

Though Maduwanwda Walauwa is a far cry from Colombo, it is a fascinating place to visit. How to get to Maduwan Walauwa. From Colombo alone the Ratnapura/Pelmadulla/ Nonagama highway. Embilipitiya lies more or less at the 166km post from where you take the deviation along the Embilipitiya/Kolonoc mountain roadway. On this road near the 1 5th mile post lies the Maduwanwe/Walauwa. There are buses plying between Colombo (via Ratnapura) to Embilipitiya and Kataragama. From Embilipitiya there are private vans and buses operating Kolonne Sooriyakanda. There are hire cars available at Embilipitiya. Where to stay: Centauria Tourist Hotel overlooking the serene Chandrika Wewa (tank), about 1.6km from the Embilipitiya town. Wa/awe Guest Hotel – by the main road about 800m from the Embilipitiya bazaar. Gamini G. Punchihewa is the author of the recently published book souvenirs of a Forgotten Heritage available from Lake House Bookshop, Colombo; Rs 263. 75.