

The Spectacle of the Tanks

Posted on

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“Let not one drop of water reach the sea without first serving mankind. “- King Parakramabahu I, 12th century AD.

On first hearing, one is bound to be unimpressed. What could be so spectacular about “ tanks “? But, engage in conversation with a Lankan for a while and you will be struck by the pride with which the tanks are mentioned.

If Buddhism was the spiritual sustenance of the Sinhalese civilization, then the tank, or more precisely the irrigation reservoir, was its physical counterpart. Not surprisingly, the two principal symbols of Sri Lankan culture are the dagaba and the tank.

Even the most brief discussion of Sri Lankan history is invariably interspersed with the names of several tanks, the reservoirs of history as it were. They could range from the Nuwarawewa and Basawakkulama in Anuradhapura to the huge Kalawewa and Minneriya which have given their names to whole districts; from Polonnaruwa’s mighty Parakrama Samudra, the Tissawewa in the deep South, to the post-independence Senanayake Samudra at Inginiyagala in the East completed in the early 1950s, and right down to the present-day Victoria, Kotmale, Randenigala and Maduru Oya, which are part of the ambitious Mahaweli River Diversion Scheme, funded with international aid.

The eternal struggle against drought, and the necessary harnessing of rivers provides the backdrop to the history of the Sri Lankan people. The northern half of the island, where the ancient kingdoms of Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa rose, is a country of alternating floods and droughts. To turn the urgency of flood to a blessing in droughts. To turn the urgency of flood to aa blessing in drought, the Sinhalese, from the very beginnings of Sri Lankan history harnessed the rivers and streams of the land and also provided for the storage of rain-water in reservoirs.

Rice was the staple food of the Aryanized IndoGangetic plains from which the

ancestors of the present-day Sinhalese migrated to Sri Lanka. They were, therefore, aware of the constant thirst of wetfooted grains like paddy. Happily, they also possessed the knowledge of basic irrigation required to convey water along excavated canals to paddy-fields situated away from the source of water. Later they developed their skills into the construction of the water storage facilities themselves, the tanks.

The focus of irrigation in Sri Lanka from these early days has been the tank. It could be anything from a small tank watering a minor extent of land around a village, to the larger tanks which served a cluster of villages, or the huge marvels of irrigation which highlight the landscape of the North Central and Eastern Provinces and part of the Northern Province.

These tanks have been called the wealth of the nation. People estimate that there are more than 35,000 village tanks and 277 larger ones that irrigate over 200 acres apiece. We can trace the island's social and natural history through them.

The details of hundreds of these tanks have been recorded in the Pali Vansa Chronicles, that most important of Sri Lanka's historical literature, compiled by Buddhist monks from the 4th century B.C.

The first tanks built soon after the early Sinhalese settlers arrived in the 4th century B.C. were small several hundred yards across-surrounded by about half a mile of bund. As time passed, the needs of the population grew and the engineers became more skilled in the hydraulics of irrigation; bigger tanks were built and water conveyed over larger distances. In time the kings of the Sinhalese looked to tank building and irrigation as the greatest of achievements, comparable with the patronage they gave to the spread and sway of Buddhism. To this day most of the great kings of Sri Lankan history are remembered for the gifts of reservoirs they gave the people. Some were even deified for building tanks, and legend has it that the spirits of some kings still protect the tanks and anicuts they caused to be built which continue - to serve the people, many of them more than a thousand years later.

A tank that is still considered one of the most beautiful the one at Minneriya near Habarana, has a circumference of thirty miles. It was built by the famous King Mahasena in the 3rd century AD. He spared nothing and nobody in the building of his tanks. At one it is believed a virgin was buried alive as a ritual offering to assist in keeping the bund strong. At Minneriya he was willing to sacrifice his sister's son.

But because he overcame what appeared to be supernatural difficulties, even demons, it seemed that he had assistance from “invisible agents”. For that, later generations deified him. He became known as the god of Minneriya Tank, and the Bodhisattva King who is still guarding the tank.

King Dhatusena considered the Kalawewa tank he built between 459-477 AD. his finest treasure. A canal, with a gradient of only six inches over the first 17 miles, led water 54 miles to Anuradhapura. After he was killed by his son, it was at this great work, it is said, his spirit stayed. For three centuries after Dhatusena there was a decline in the building of large tanks. However, the ones that already existed were kept fully repaired. When they were breached they were fixed; some were augmented with waste-weirs to catch the overflow of surplus water; decayed bunds were restored.

Then Indian invaders came, and before they were expelled severe damage was done to the tanks. Sri civilization continued to decline through an evil time of several centuries when officers of opposing monarchs “set fire to many flourishing villages and market towns, pierced tanks filled with water, destroying weirs of the canals, (and) hewed down all useful trees. . . .” Finally in the 12th century Parakramabahu I brought in a period of affluence and development. He restored 53 tanks and built 3 huge ones. The Pali chronicles state that “To put away famine from living creatures that most excellent of men created the king of reservoirs.” This was the Parakrama Samudra near Polonnaruwa, nine miles long and forty feet high. Tank building had reached its zenith and a general was even sent to South India to build four there. Today water still rushes through sluices built as early as the 3rd century irrigating miles upon miles of rich paddy-land, a blessing conferred by the ancient kings of Lanka.

