THE UNSEEN OF MAHIYANGANA

Posted on



The Ulhitiya Reservoir with Unukirigala mountain veiled in clouds

When speaking of Mahiyanganaya, locals often point to the more renowned places of interest. The Mahiyanagana Raja Maha Viharaya, Sorabora Wewa and Dabana where the indigenous communities reside, are the names that are instantly mentioned often times. Journeying around the outskirts of the town, we stumble upon tales of the lesser known.

Words Prasadini Nanayakkara **Photographs** Indika De Silva

Along the Mahiyangana–Ampara road we hoped to venture into the unfamiliar territories of Mahiyanganaya. Picking up a few tips from the locals in the area, we

venture in search of Ulhitiya and Rathkinda reservoirs. The quest takes us off the main route casting behind the urban sights and sounds as our route fell through the lush charm of village life. While the clouds lined the skies heavily,young green fields added a zestfulvibrance to an otherwise gloomy day.Approximately 16km in we find our way to Keselpotha, having heardof an ancient temple—Rambaken Purana Viharaya.

With the intermittent rains, much of Keselpotha had taken a dewy character. The Rambaken Viharaya stood in almost isolation as we arrived.A podi hamuduruwo ventured out as we sought information on what was evidently a temple steeped in ancient history. A striking dome shaped brick stupa stood as the defining feature of the temple premises.

It is said that the Viharaya dates back to the Dutugemunu Era. Prince Dutugemunu on his way to war arrived in the area via Magama.As he stopped to organise his army,the Prince found to his amazement a loyal following of relatives that had travelled for days bearing offerings. Unwrapping the many parcels of bananas, the relatives discovered that much of it had spoilt. It is believed the name of the area Keselpotha, where Kesel stands for bananas, arose due to the piling of discarded bananas. Another version of the story states that it is to mark the ‘place where the Prince was offered bananas.’ Furthermore, as a mark of his appreciation, the Prince built a stupa where the piles of banana were stocked along with a Viharaya, collectively known as the Rambaken Viharaya today.

The ruins of the stupa and the palace dwelling of the prince still remain to this day. Farther away in the premises is a stone inscription that is believed to belong to King Sena II. The one metre high inscription had been discovered a short distance away from the temple premises and is named the Ridimaliyadda stone inscription, after the official who discovered it. From Rambaken Viharaya, the resident monk, point us to another ancient temple, this time a cave temple named Senasungala Raja Maha Viharaya located father away in Keselpotha.

The gravel road reaches a dead-end and we are met with a steep climb of steps laced in moss—a formidable sight to the travel weary. Undeterred we made our ascent.As we reach the summit, the view expanded to unknown distances, unraveling the length and breadth of Mahiyanganaya below. At the temple premises all is still save the rhythmic drops of water hitting a tin roof placed for shelter and the soft cooing of the pigeons that had taken hostage in the cosy crevices of the large rock boulder. The rock formed the main structure of the temple looming to a

height beyond visibility in its vertical rise. The summit of this rock seemed impossible to reach however a ladder, feeble in appearance leaned along its length. We marveled at the thought of anyone attempting this climb, as the resident monks of the temple must do regularly. While the largest ‘Lena’ or cave housed a large image house and dwellings for the monks, on either side of the cave were two ponds brimming with water.

Having explored the isolated premises, it was on our way back that we had a chance encounter with a resident monk of the Sensungala Raja Maha Viharaya.

From the Thero we learnt that Sensungala Viharaya was not only the oldest in Mahiyanganaya but also housed a 26-foot reclining Buddha statue—the longest in the area. The murals of the image house it is believed, belong to the Kandyan era. Letterings of a stone inscription recovered from the premises indicate that the temple belongs to the time of King Devanampiyatissa, placing the temple at the very inception of Buddhism in Sri Lanka.

There are other events of significance related to the temple. The visit of King Dutugemunu to the temple premises, during which time128 Arahat monks occupied the premises, and the building of a stupa by his brother King Sadatissa are among them. The ruins of the stupa situated at the very summit of the rock, referred to as the Girimudun Seya, can be seen today. From this summit one can have a rare view of the Sorabora Wewa and the Mahiyangana Raja Maha Viharaya in the distance.

Leaving behind a wealth of history, we headed our way back on to the Mahiyanganaya–Ampara road. We resumed our journey towards the Ulhitiya reservoir situated nearby the Rathkinda village. A vast expanse of water, Ulhitiya reservoir is fed by Randenigala via the Minipe River to ultimately supply water to the adjacent Rathkinda reservoir and the Maduru Oya. We paused at several spots along the way, by the banks of the reservoir to enjoy picture perfect moments rendered by the glassy surface of the water and the mountainous landscape in the distance.

A villager from Rathkinda who had stopped for rest and refreshment by the banks, identified the cloud draped mountain in the distance as Unukirigala. This particular spot,we learn is often frequented by elephants although not at the time of our visit. Further along we reach the bund where the seven gates of the reservoir were being opened to a greater extent to release more water—a result of heavy rainfall that prevailed. The water gushed out to the canal as we indulged in the peace and

tranquillity of the reservoir and the surrounding environs.The gently sifting veil of clouds rendered continually evolving imagery of the surroundings. We were transfixed by the scenic beauty that carried on all the way to the Rathkinda reservoir.

As the rain fell liberally, finally relieving the angry clouds that hung low, Mahiyanganaya succumbed to a watery guise and it was time to head back.

