

Weheragala Reservoir diversion - history is re-written

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"We forget that the water cycle and the life cycle are one."

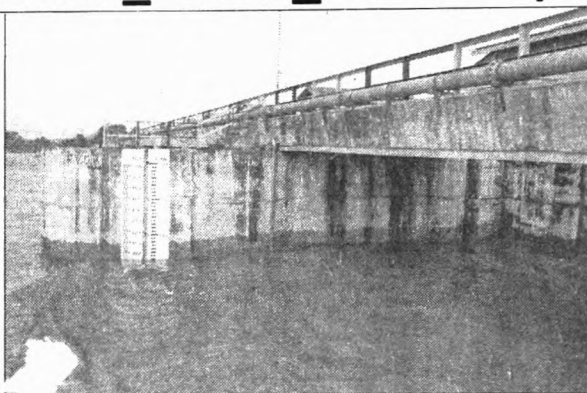
I was reminded of the above quote by Jacques Cousteau, the famous French scientist who studied all forms of life in water, as I was watching the 2,030 metres long Weheragala Dam built across the Menik Ganga in the Yala National Park. For once, Cousteau was proved wrong. Our great King Parakramabahu did not forget the value of water when he proclaimed that not a single drop of water should flow to the sea without utilization. The Weheragala Reservoir project, *per se*, a brainchild of President Mahinda Rajapaksa, is based on this premise. This reservoir has been built in keeping with the aspirations of King Parakramabahu as part of 'Mahinda Chintanaya' concept.

Mahinda Chintanaya does not stop there. In addition to Weheragala project, there are six other schemes to complete shortly. The Deduru Oya and Rambukan Oya projects are already started. The uniqueness of all these projects is that neither foreign aid nor foreign personnel will be utilized.

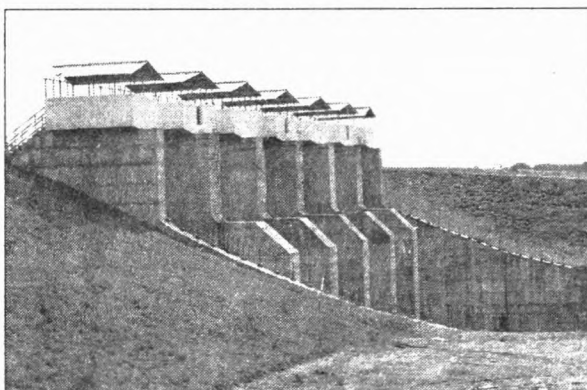
Challenges

Each year, a surplus of water from the Menik Ganga, uncontrollably flows into the sea, inundating and causing much havoc and devastation to life and property in transit. This vast, unutilized water resource will be trapped by a dam of 2030 metres long and collected into Weheragala Reservoir with a capacity of 75 million cubic metres. Water from this reservoir will be conveyed to Lunugamvehera reservoir through an environmentally friendly shallow contour canal of 23 kms and it would carry a capacity of 65 million cubic metres of water annually. Lunugamvehera is a multi-purpose reservoir, which was constructed in 1987 by damming the Kirindi Oya under the Kirindi Oya Irrigation and Settlement Project.

I met Eng. W.M. Gunadasa, Chief Project Engineer, at the site of the dam. He was involved in the project from the start and talked about the various challenges he and his team of workers had to face to make the project a reality.



Lunugamvehera reservoir. Courtesy: Media Unit, Irrigation Department



A close-up of Weheragala dam. Picture by P. D. Ranjith, Information Department

ty. He said a number of benefits will flow down to the people once the project is commissioned. The scheme will develop an area of 5700 hectares, and uplift the livelihoods of 5,600 farming families engaged in paddy and minor crop cultivation. Four thousand one hundred hectares of land would be brought under paddy cultivation. The farming community in Weerawilla, Debarawewa, Thanamalwila and Pan-negamuwa will have the ability of cultivating both the Yala and Maha Kanna. Therefore the present risk of cultivation of the 6,000 hectares of land extent in the new area under the Lunugamvehera reservoir would be minimized. There are several minor tanks in the vicinity of Kataragama. All these tanks do not hold water for successful cultivation of both seasons and this diversion will ensure water for these tanks during both seasons to stabilize cultivation.

One of the major problems at the Kataragama area is the supply of water for drinking and bathing during the festival season when Menik Ganga goes dry. During the months of July and August there is hardly any flow in Menik Ganga at Kataragama and the National Water Supply and Drainage Board finds it

difficult to supply water even for drinking. The Weheragala diversion ensures continuous flow throughout the year and this would benefit not only devotees and residents of Kataragama, but fauna and flora along Menik Ganga between Kataragama and Yala.

Local expertise

The utilization of solely indigenous know-how, expertise and resources in the project, is another unique and salient feature to be noted. Similar projects in the past have been undertaken by foreign contractors at comparatively high costs, resulting in the loss of valuable foreign exchange to the country. The budgeted cost of the project which started in 2006 was around Rs. 2900 million whereas it is now estimated under Rs. 2000 million by completion.

The project has generated around 750 job opportunities for the villagers, in the neighbouring areas of Kataragama, Hambantota, Weerawilla, Tanamalwila and Tissamaharama. An allocation of Rs. 275 million has been set aside as wages for the whole project. More engineers, too, have been recruited.

The project took slightly over two years to complete. Considered in the perspective of its local funding and

skills, it was a good achievement. I asked Director General of Irrigation, Eng. H.P.S. Somasiri what factors accounted for the success.

"Total commitment from top to bottom. That is the secret. Minister, Chamal Rajapaksa was right behind us throughout the project and ensured funds were available without interruption. Coupled with that fact and a willing team of workers made us complete the project within the targeted deadline". Somasiri also had a word of gratitude to Eng. A.D.S. Gunawardena, ex-Secretary of the Ministry of Irrigation, for the hard work he had put in to move the project off the ground and maintain the momentum at steady speed.

Eng. Ivan de Silva, the present Secretary of the Ministry of Irrigation said that the main objective of the Government's irrigation projects is not only to supply the farming community with sufficient water for their cultivation but also to assist them to grasp and implement the high-tech agricultural systems such as drip system of irrigation. For example, drip irrigation has proved to be a success in terms of increased yield in a wide range of crop including paddy.

Its ability of small and frequent irrigation applications have created interest because of decreased water requirements, increased production and better quality produce.

When asked about local expertise, Eng. de Silva said, "Our engineers have developed considerable expertise in the irrigation sector and have proven they can match the international standards. As a matter of Government policy, as far as possible, in future projects we will seek and use local talent."

As I turned back from the site, a subtle thought crossed my mind. Throughout the history we were deeply rooted in an agriculture based economy. And, still we are! Modern irrigation system networks will make a substantive contribution to the development of an efficient agriculture sector and take us back to the glory of King Parakramabahu era. That is the gist of the 'Mahinda Chintanaya' concept.

Weheragala reservoir project is just one giant step towards the realization of that concept.