

The unwritten story of how Eppawala was saved

by Malinda Seneviratne

A couple of weeks before the People's Alliance came to power in 1994, I predicted (as I am sure many others did) that Chandrika's party would win. I added that this would be a default win because the people were more concerned about kicking out the UNP than they were about who would replace them. I also observed that all the noises made by Chandrika after the PA secured power in the Southern Provincial Council indicated that the PA would go the UNP way, i.e., selling off national assets, facilitating the expansion of capital, plundering of natural resources and exploitation of the people.

All this happened, but one thing I said would happen, did not. Or, I thought it did not until a few days ago. I wrote that all our ancient gods would be watching and would take care to protect the people and punish their enemies if Chandrika's government acted in an anti-people way. I had thought that the gods had failed until I went to the villages around the scenic and historical Kala Wewa recently.

I visited Eppawala, where Freeport-McMoran, with the full support of the PA government sought to get at our phosphate deposits and turn that fertile and peaceful area into the tragedy that is Ilan Jaya. I talked to the people who lived there, the heirs to an ancient civilisation and torch bearers of a way of life that is everything that the World Summit on Sustainable Development (to be held later this month in Johannesburg) ought to idealise but which the World Bank, IMF and other agents of multinational capital would do everything to destroy. The people of Eppawala, and with the active support of trade unions, civil society organisations, academics, professionals and ordinary, law-abiding people who had a sense of justice and strength of character, managed to roll back the insidious designs that Freeport-McMoran and their local lackeys had on Eppawala. There was only one question that I asked: "How did you manage this?"

I had heard stories about activism, mobilisation, the maturing of objective preconditions and other such easily spoken but difficult to understand explanations. The people of Eppawala acknowledged all this and said so in a language that was audible and coherent. They had another story to tell as well.

According to them, it was the gods

that intervened and saved them. They had made pledges at the Jaya Siri Maha Bodhiya, the one live artefact that had been blessed with the touch of the Siddhartha Gauthama, the Samma Sambuddha. They had made offerings to all the gods they knew, Kalu Kumara Bandara and Kadawara. This is what they had to say about Kadawara.

Kadawara, apparently had been the official in charge of the construction of Kala Wewa. The dam had breached twice and King Datusena had issued instructions that it should be rebuilt so that this would not happen a third time. It had breached a third time as well and the official had jumped into the "Kala Wala" (the point of breaching), killing himself. It was a sacrifice which had saved the Kala Wewa. The dam did not breach again and the man was venerated first as "Kadawala" and later as "Kadawara" the god who protects the Kala Wewa and its people.

Rev. Mahamankadawala Piyaarachana, who led the campaign to save Eppawala, told me that a wewa is the nucleus in which life is born. Those who build such tanks are therefore creators, gods. He related to me how the area now known as Anuradhapura was once an arid place and how the ecology was wonderfully transformed when the Malwatu river was diverted and the Halpanu Oya was built. King Pandukabhaya built the Abhaya Wewa (literally, the "life giving tank") and how, with time, the arid land was replaced by a lush and fertile environment which could ensure prosperous livelihoods of several hundred thousand people. "Someone who builds a wewa gives life to millions of organisms. He is therefore a living god. Mahasen is a god. So is Kadawara."

And so the people believe that the "Buddha balaya" and the "Mahanubhava" quality of these gods intervened on behalf of the people to save Eppawala. But what struck me most was the observation made by an old farmer, a historian in his own right and a store house of folk lore and traditional knowledge. He said, "Putha, not only do the gods protect the good, they punish the evil." I asked him to elaborate.

He said, "There are beings we refer to as bhumatu deiyo. That is, they live among us. They carry our petitions to the vruksha devatavo, the tree spirits and they in turn convey our concerns to the akasasta deiyo, the ones above, those with the power to intervene."

"We struggled for many years to



Kalawewa whose waters and the people and lands they feed are protected by the gods (Pic, courtesy Nihal Fernando, Studio Times)

save Eppawala, our lands, our birth right, our heritage and way of life," he continued. There were many who worked against us. There was a minister who was intent on betraying us and selling off our birth right to a violent, corrupt and inhuman intruder. This minister was killed in a bomb blast, along with his wife and many in his entourage. Then there was a national leader who too was the victim of a bomb. That bomb almost took this person's life. A business leader who held a top advisory position not only lost his job but was charged with fraud in a number of cases.

He then went on to say that this is true not just of Eppawala, but is a general principle that covers all people at all times. He told me about Rohana Wijeweera, a man who had contributed massively towards dragging our society to the most tragic lands they had ever encountered. He rattled off other names too, whose demerits far outweighed their merits, and suffered equally violent ends.

"Putha, there are man-made laws. Then there are laws of nature. We are not a people who wish death on anyone. But there is a dharmathava which is above all these things. Gods and demons are also part of and subject to this dharmathava. People too. This is the order of the earth and it will always be so."

Today the government, in the throes of a constitutional crisis, having granted legitimacy to and in effect surrendered part of the country to terrorism, are trying to slip 36 laws through parliament. All of them against the national interest and against the people of this country. Eppawala was a battle which these vile

forces lost. They are intent on winning the war through other means, some "legally", some not.

The sun was setting. I was seated under a massive tree on the Kala Wewa bund. The breath of Lord Kadawara was on my lips. It whispers: "Who is next?"