

The beautiful Bogoda wooden bridge: a gem of Kandyan woodwork

by Noel Fernando

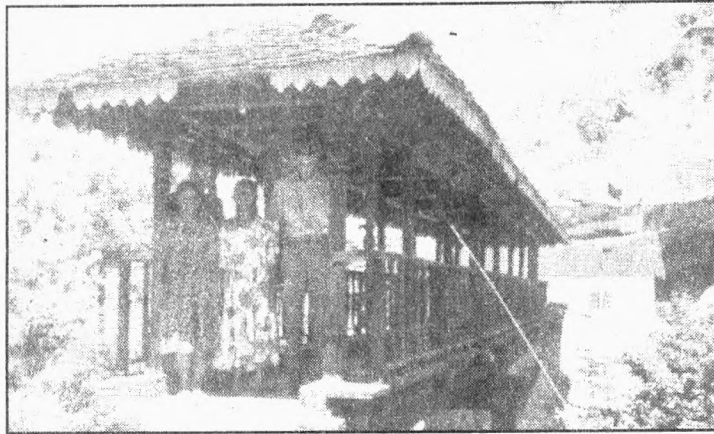
A recent visit to the hill country took me into the heart of the still relatively unspoilt mountain terrain of Uva. In the Bogoda Valley is the ancient Bogoda Rajamahavihara, and spanning the Gallanda Oya below the vihara is the wooden, roofed bridge: one of the most striking and beautiful objects or artefacts I have seen in this country.

The Gallanda Oya flows down a rocky mountain slope and has the appearance of a small waterfall. The Oya eventually flows into the Uma Oya, one of the principal rivers of the Uva basin, and the Uma Oya in turn is a major tributary of the Mahaweli Ganga. Bogoda is encircled as if in protection, by a ring of mountains including the Narangala and Uva-Ketawala ranges. The road to Bogoda branches from the Hali-Ela Junction, about two miles from Badulla on the Badulla-Bandarawela main road. Turning north from Hali-Ela, the winding road leads to the Jangulle Junction, a distance of about 5 miles, and from there westwards, for a further two-three miles, to the hamlet of Bogoda. Tall arecanut trees, vegetable gardens and paddy fields are to be seen on the way. The motorable road terminates at the more recently built *sanghavasa*, from which a fairly steep footpath with constructed steps leads to the valley below, the oya, the Rajamahavihara and the bridge a walk of about ten minutes.

The bridge

The bridge is made entirely of timber - the riveting has been done in wood, and there are no metal fittings. The basis of the structure is formed by three gigantic, whole, untrimmed tree trunks: they rest across the ravine on a firm rock boulder on one side and a raised structure on the other. These are *Na* or ironwood trees - one of the longest lasting woods in the island. Two strong timber up rights support this structure in the middle, and these have been set into rock in the stream below.

On the structure described above is laid a timber deck from which rise carved posts (eleven on each side) and these support the roof. Protecting the sides of the bridge are baluster railings of carved wood. The bridge is roughly seventy feet long, six feet wide and eight feet high. The baluster railings are two feet high. The roof is four-sided and clad in flat tiles which lend grace and dignity to this unique structure. The timber is beautifully carved in Kandyan style, including the roof timber, and is a perfect example of the architecture of the age. The use of



The Bogoda wooden bridge.



The Cavern below the Vihara which is believed to terminate at the Kande vihara in Wellawaya.

foundation beams placed on boulders served more than one purpose: it lifted the timber above ground level protecting them from damp and termites; and at the same time it provided seating facilities and ventilation.

On one side of the bridge is the vihara temple complex. The bridge would have enabled the villagers and devotees on the further bank to reach the temple easily for worship - and they do so today. The bridge was also probably on one of the important pathways which criss-crossed the hill country and may have been used as a pilgrim route to Mahiyangana. These paths were much used by pilgrims, traders and travellers. The pathways were dotted with ancient resthouses or *ambalamas*. The bridge would have served not only as a crossing point but as an *ambalama*. Travellers could rest and stay overnight in safety, cook their food, and eat it in reasonable comfort. Above all they could find clean fresh water to quench their thirst - as well as for bathing. Undoubtedly the Bogoda bridge with its protective roof would have served this purpose, and has been called the "*ambalama-palama*".

The Rajamahavihara

The vihara has become well-known

time. There is no *chettiva*, but the remains of one are to be seen; it seems to have been despoiled.

The temple is in use by devotees today. The cave is subject to seepage of rain water from the roof and some attempts have been made to repair the leaks.

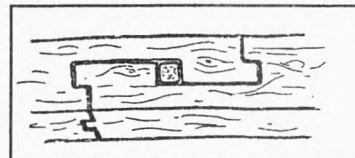
On one side of the vihara, below it, and reached by a short flight of steps is a cave-cavern. The entrance is about ten feet by nine feet, but the cave narrows rapidly as one goes inside: the cave is said to terminate at Wellawaya at the Kande vihara! The vihara and the cavern are said to have been used as a hiding place by King Valagambahu. This is said of several temples in Uva including the Dowra Temple. The cave contains several inscriptions, which have not yet been deciphered.

Up the hillside some distance from the vihara on a large terrace lies the present *sanghavasa* (mentioned earlier). This is of more recent construction and the vihara itself would have served this purpose earlier. This is a large building consisting of several sections: a large hall; 6 cells for monks; a kitchen; a store room; an enclosed garden; and a verandah. The architecture and woodwork are of the Kandyan era.

A deed in copper (*Sannasa*) dating from the Kandyan period and relating to both the Bogoda and Passara temples is said to be at the Malwatta Vihara, Kandy.

The bridge is "off the beaten track" and on the morning of our visit we were alone (which may be just as well). It has been used as background in a teledrama some years ago giving it some publicity. The bridge has been taken up for conservation by the Archaeological Department only in the recent past. The annual report of the Commissioner for 1963-64 mentions that some conservation work was done by a local village committee under the supervision of an officer of the department. Today it seems to be under more formal supervision. But this bridge has not been taken up for serious study, documentation and conservation by the Department. Unless this is done soon, it may not survive for long.

The literature available on this bridge or on Kandyan wooden architecture is limited, which is surprising as it was a dominant feature of Sri Lankan architecture. The bridge, as evident from the above narrative displays excellent carpentry work and ornamental wood carving: it remains as a tribute to the skill and devotion of the anonymous carpenters, joiners and wood carvers responsible for this and similar work. It was an age in which what was functional and useful could also be beautiful.



Scarf joint in large beam of the form seen on the Bogoda bridge roof.

because of the bridge. It is an ancient cave temple in existence from pre-Christian times and older than the bridge: this is evident from inscriptions in pre-Brahmi characters on the roof of the temple cave. One of these states "The cave of Brahmadatta, son of the Chief Tissa, is established for the Sangha of the 4 quarters, present and absent". Nearby is another inscription in the same characters which may relate to an offering by a female devotee. Only one word is clear: "The female lay devotee".

Inside the cave are three Buddha statues in three aspects: reclining, sedent and standing; and a statue of a monk probably Ananda. An image of Vishnu is in a recess above the reclining Buddha. Two gate keepers and a statue of a king guard the entrance. On the cave ceiling are murals which show evidence of touching up from time to