

Ancient irrigation wonder of Elahera



The ancient gal amuna

STORY AND PICTURES BY KISHANIE S. FERNANDO

We met Vijitha Dissanayake of the Road Development Authority as we stopped to ask the way back to Elahera from Bakamuna. He was with a group of persons engaged in the construction of the road. It so happened that he was

known to Aloy and Daya Ranasinghe who had initiated our drive to Elahera. It was a wonderful coincidence to meet a known party in an unfamiliar area.

We invited him to join us for a cup of tea in the nearby tea shop. The men got busy talking of politics in the area. But my mind was on the

'Gal amuna' (stone anicut) or the ancient irrigation wonder at Elahera. I asked him if he knew of the 'Gal amuna' across the Amban Ganga of king Mahasena's time. "Yes, it is about half a kilometre inside the Wasgamuwa park". Dissanayake was more than willing to show us the way.

The new Aban Ganga anicut at Elahera was on the road side, just within the elephant fence separating the Wasgamuwa Park from the main road. The gate to the premises was locked. But as we stopped our vehicle, the guard whose quarters were on the opposite side of the road came out. We asked him if we could go to see the old Gal amuna. He told us that a footpath, discernible enough leads to it. Would we be safe from elephants? we asked. It was approximately 12 noon. "Usually at this time there are no elephants, but you can never say," he said, confirming our fears. "Mahaththayo, kohomath pravesan wenna" (gentleman any way take care) he warned.

Historical evidence records that the Amban Ganga, a tributary of the Mahaweli Ganga was diverted by the construction of a stone anicut across it during the reign of king Mahasena. (275 - 302 A.D.). The incredible relic of this original off take where the river was diverted is still to be seen.

R.L. Brohier, scholar on our irrigation works says, "This remarkable relic of ancient irrigation is generally assumed to have diverted the waters of the Amban Ganga and to have conducted it ultimately to Thambalgam Bay, linking amongst others the major tanks of Minneriya, Kaudulla

and Kantalai." He further says, "It is today known that mingling its waters with those from other drainage lines tapped on the way, the Elahera canal provided a continuous lifeline to irrigation up to Tambalagam near Trincomalee, 85 miles from the intake."

Brohier also writes how around 1845, the enthusiasm of three gentlemen, Adams, Churchill and Bailey who literally cut their way through a wilderness to discover these abandoned remains of inspiring human skill and human industry.

Now we were on the same quest more than one-and-a-half centuries after, on a terrain much changed and in a time when infrastructure had gained better foothold.

We crossed the new anicut with its well defined concrete walls and boisterous water-rush and walked into the jungle. Very soon we were within the thick twilight of the jungle, with towering trees completely obliterating the brightness of the day. Here and there giant white tree trunks rose to great heights like ghosts in the dark.

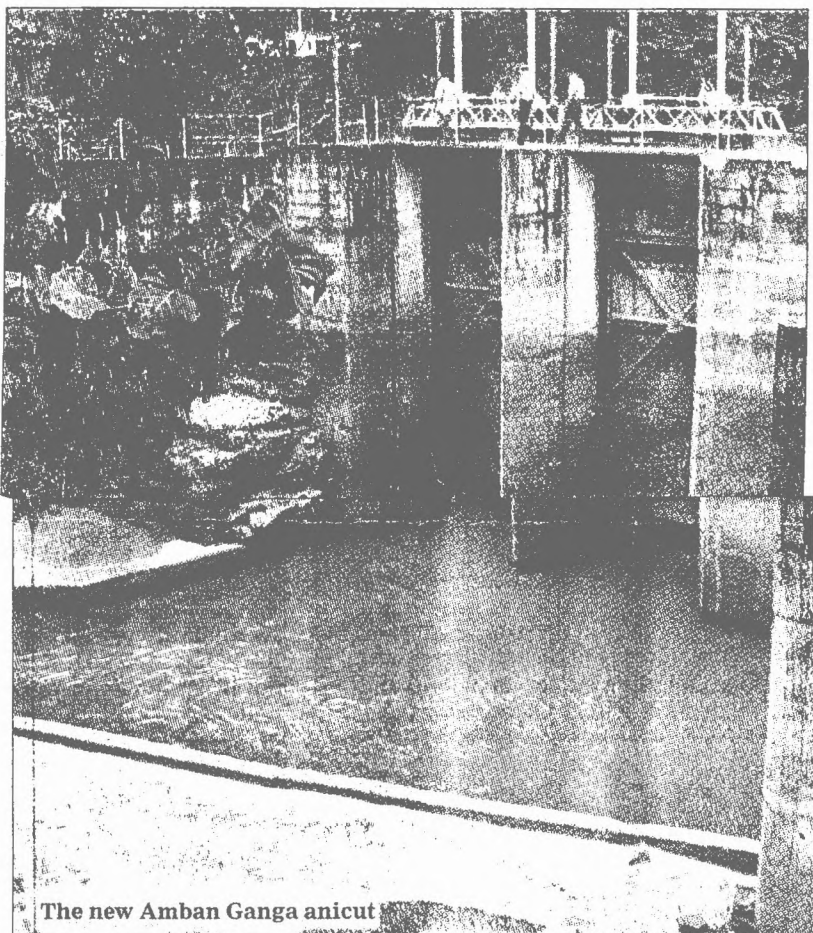
Dissanayake stopped at a tree to break a small branch and hang it up on a bough, mumbling a prayer to the gods of the jungle for protection. The bundle of dry branches that already hung there told us that it was a custom of the area that was not taken lightly. Following jungle lore, we took care not to mention words like 'elephant' referring to the jungle giants, but instead as 'our friends'. At one



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point I accidentally crushed a dry stick under my foot, which made those who were walking a little ahead turn back in terror. Then only I realized the tension that was within us.

another and seemed to stretch to a considerable length and height. At some places huge trees growing close by had their manacle-like roots firmly rooted into its crevices and completely swallowing parts of the wall.



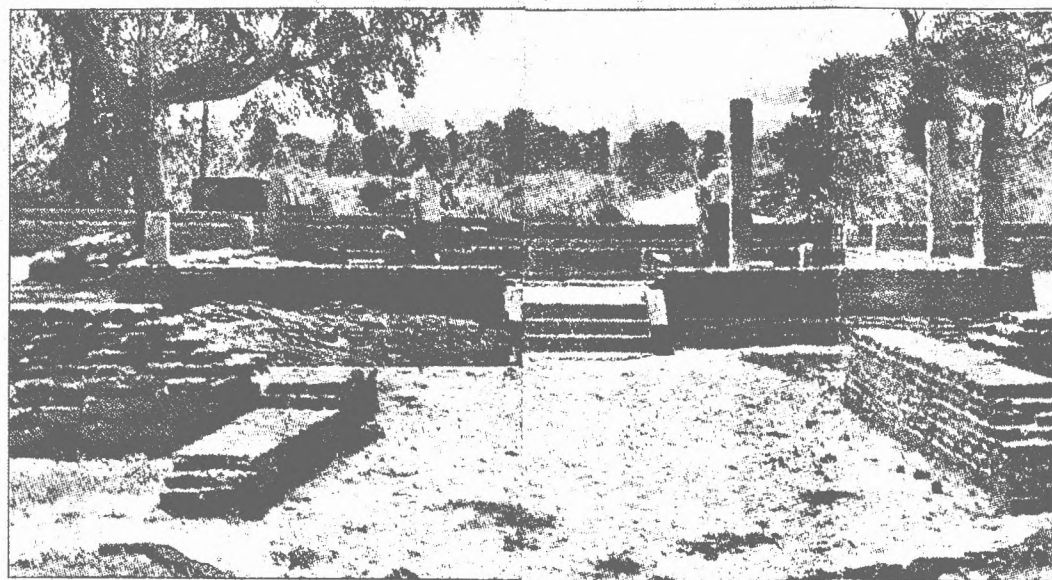
The new Amban Ganga anicut

Kumara Ella: Is it a site of an ancient ayurvedha hospital?

Speeding along the red unsealed expressway (still under construction) from Polathuwadiya in the Polonnaruwa district to the connecting road to Elahera, we were surprised by what seemed to be a well conserved archaeology site with an Archaeological Department board indicating it as being the 'Kumara Ella Archaeological Reserve'.

The site was on the banks of the Amban Ganga. A new bridge spanned the river and the curving road, ribbon like rising slightly uphill, was a pleasing effect from afar. On either side shaggy jungle spread endlessly, gently blending into hazy mountains and fleecy cloudscapes.

The only information we gathered about the site was



that it was an ancient ayurvedha hospital. Foundations of two buildings were to be seen close to each other with a

pathway connecting one to the other.

Bonnet Buffet

It had been a long and fruitful day. We had visited the Buduruwayaya archaeology site close to Bakamuna, the Orubendi Siyabalawa and its adjoining Mahasen Devala at Elahera, and the ancient Gal amuna over the Amban Ganga within the Wasgamuwa Park, also at Elahera.

It was time for a late lunch. We were thankful that we had decided to bring our food along, since it gave us the freedom to choose our lunch time and place. It did not take long for us to find a perfect spot, with shade trees making a thick bower overhead on the banks of a placid stream. We carefully edged our vehicle right into the thicket. I busied myself laying a modest buffet on the bonnet of the vehicle.

The brown rice, dhal, fish ambul thiyal, coconut sambol and tomatoes couldn't have tasted better. The men washed up the plates in the stream taking care to pack up all the remains as well. One of the party, Aloy, described it as a 'bonnet buffet'. And so we began the last part of our journey back home.

We had left home at 4.30 am and reached back home at approximately 10 pm to hear our daughter of 2 plus cheer - "Hurray! Amma has come home!"

Kishanie



The fallen stones choked by the jungle

From that moment I was almost paranoid, looking all around me at the thick jungle that surrounded us.

Suddenly right in the middle of the path was an inscribed stone column. Slender and a little over the height of a man, the inscription ran throughout on one side. This may be the pillar inscription relating to the diversion of the river by king Mahasena.

At last we came to an abandoned watch-hut which was perched on the bund of the dry river bed. A thick concrete wall was built across the width of the river. It was only further down stream that a dark pool of water could be seen hemmed in by boulders. We crossed along the top of the concrete wall to the other side.

The muddy banks held ample signs of recent elephant crossings. Beyond, the jungle grew thicker and blended into a motley mess of creepers, tall grass, scrub and trees.

From here onwards, there was no pathway. We walked along another portion of concrete wall that continued further into the jungle, and quite by accident discovered parts of a giant stone-dressed wall, well hidden in the scrub wilderness. It was the ancient stone embankment - part of the famed Gal amuna of yore, where stone bricks, dressed perfectly one over the other, still witnessed to its past.

Dissanayake was quite excited. There was no stopping him from creeping into the scrub and from time to time proclaiming 'mayka balannako!' (Look at this!). The wall made of perfectly cut gigantic stone bricks fitted flawlessly one on top of

At other points the stones lay fallen in a humongous mess, buried in the jungle.

The exact situation of the stone bund was difficult to make out due to the thick wilderness around. Or maybe, I was disoriented to concentrate, as I saw again the fresh droppings and marks of elephants all around us. As we clambered down one rock wall and another to see a third wall, it made me wonder how the elephants negotiated these embankments, which today seemed to belong to them.

It was a sad scene to observe what remained of the great Gal amuna or rock wall seemingly choking and struggling to survive the jungle tide. A wall and a scheme which once had diverted a large river from its profitless course and thus diffusing wealth and prosperity through a previously barren waste. Many would have been its beneficiaries, sustained by its life giving waters. Generations would have sung its praises.

In fact, this was just one of the many schemes that caused Bailey, (who was Assistant Government Agent of the District of Badulla) to record in one of the ablest reports on irrigation published by order of the Ceylon Government in 1885.

"It is possible, that in no other part of the world are there to be found within the same space, the remains of so many works of irrigation, which are at the same time of such great antiquity and of such vast magnitude as in Ceylon. Probably no other country can exhibit works so numerous and at the same time so ancient and extensive, within the same limited area, as in this Island".