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Impact of environment on worlds oldest wooden bridge

The worlds oldest wooden bridge is reputed to be the Bogoda bridge situated in the Bogoda valley with the still relatively unspoilt mountain terrain of Uva. Bogoda is encircled in protection by a ring of mountains including the Narangala and Uva Ketawala ranges. Bogoda also has an ancient temple, the Bogoda Raja Maha Viharaya which lies some 30 kilometres from Bandarawela and 10 kilometres from Badulla, off the Hali-Ela junction. The wooden bridge spans the Gallanda Oya which flows down a rocky mountain slope. The warm air flowing from the mountains around, the humidity created by barren rocks of caves in the vicinity and the cold wind made so by the Uma Oya, which Gallanda Oya flows to, adds to the equilibrium of its environment. Although newly cultivated land around Bogoda has destroyed its previous habitat, it has contributed to the preservation of environment by man. This rich heritage includes rare indigenous medicinal herbs and valuable trees whose timber has been obtained to build the bridge entirely of wood. Although the present Bogoda bridge dates back to the 16th century the first bridge was probably a few logs thrown across the stream. The base consisted of a single standing log a huge Kumbuk tree 35 feet in height. Three huge Jack trunks were flung across the stream to form the platform on which during the Kandyan Era the elaborate wooden structure was built. This timber used in the building of the bridge, provides us ample evidence to determine that the environment around Bogoda with its rare flora and fauna and other greenery existed unharmed for centuries. Also the use of Na trees (iron wood trees), Jak and Kumbuk trees, in the building of the bridge, signifies variety within a diverse habitat. It also shows the capabilities of our ancient constructors whose knowledge in preserving the yields of nature were exemplary. They were ingenious as to the use of foundation beams of the wooden bridge placed on boulders to serve more than one purpose. It lifted the timber above ground level protecting them from dampness and termites. The preservation of wood then were done by biological and simple practical means.

As the bridge is made entirely of timber, the riveting of the present structure has also been done by 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 as stated earlier, Na or Iron Wood trees one of the longest lasting timbers in our country. The use of such trees and its biological knowledge even by our country's early craftsmen implies their awareness about protecting the environment. The structure of the bridge is supported in the middle by two strong timber up rights, and these have been set into rock in the stream below. On the structure described above is laid a timber deck from which carved posts (eleven on each side) 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 which makes this bridge unique is four sided and covered in flat tiles, which lend grace and dignity to the structure. This bridge is believed to have been constructed by a father and son team of wood craftsmen. The roof of the bridge is supposed to serve two purposes. One to give shelter, and the other of being a wind breaker to the air current flowing in from the surrounding wilderness. Also the roof has distinctly Kandyan style tiles and even the modest decor on the wooden pillars holding up the roof is reminiscent of that era. The bridge would have served not only as a crossing point but as an 'Ambalama' because above all travellers could find clean fresh water to quench their thirst and for bathing purposes. Because of this the traveller should be mindful not to pollute the bridge and its vicinity thus contributing to its preservation. Although the bridge is called the 'Ambalama Palama' it would be beneficial that this heritage site is protected. The Gallanda Oya which flows under this historic bridge has the appearance of a small water fall. The water with its continuous flow in excessive rain conserve the purity of it while cooling the heated rock. The destruction of the habitat in its vicinity could dry up the flowing waters making the rocks barren and exposed to the elements.

This would result in cracks in the rock which could affect the timber used for the base of the wooden bridge. Across the bridge lies the hamlet of Mahakumbura, and the route then leads to Uva Ketawela. The bridge is still the road link used by many villagers around. The excessive overflow of water along Gallanda Oya could also endanger this wooden bridge. **In 1984, when the waters of the oya rose and the bridge tilted to a side unable to summon any kind of official support in a hurry, those living within its vicinity used strong cables to sustain the bridge until the Department of Archaeology came in and concreted its base. Although this has been done, it has not been taken up for serious study, documentation, and conservation by the Department. Unless this is done soon the bridge may not survive for long.** The literature available on this bridge or on Kandyan wooden architecture is limited. The bridge 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. Bogoda without doubt is famous for its Rajamaha Viharaya which was built in the first century B.C. It could be assumed that this great Vihara inspired our craftsmen to build the bridge in 1600. In the famous literary work, Sandesha Kavya, a chapter called, Maga Salakunu spells out the route from Badulla to Kandy by foot and invites other travellers to worship at the Bogoda temple on their way. It was under King Valagamba's instructions that this temple was built. With the kings patronage the temple became known as the Bogoda Raja Maha Viharaya. **This magnificent temple too has not been spared by treasure hunters.** As there is no chetiya but the remains of one, it too has been despoiled. The cave in the vicinity is subject to seepage of rain water, and a tunnel is to be seen behind the temple which gives shelter to bats. Various types of edible fruits, flowers, and leaves around this cavern might be the reason for their existence. Apart from wild animals, numerous birds, and other creatures. These bats too contribute to environments harmonious existence, **King Valagamba fleeing from Indian invaders had sought refuge within the environs of Bogoda.** Leaving devotees a much venerated temple and a bridge of significance to the historian, the ancient inhabitants of Bogoda join our history's elite as able and worthy men and women of their age.

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