

Preface

In 1982, the multi-purpose Mahaweli Project to build dams at Kotmale, Victoria, Randenigala, Rantambe and Maduru-Oya was in full swing. Many ancient villages were soon to go under the waters of the new lakes created by these dams.

The "Handbook for the Ceylon Traveller", to which I referred often at the time, had a chapter titled 'Back of Beyond'. It said, *"With the need for development it will not be long before there are few places left in this country that may be described as lying 'back of beyond'. That we still do have such places is something we in our generation should be thankful for"*. The chapter went on to say, *"South of Madugoda for ten miles as the crow flies and right up to the untamed turbulence of the Mahaweli River stretches a large area of hills and open country broken intermittently by scrub or forest. There are few roads to serve the scattered villages and hamlets in this area; even the roads that do exist do not extend very far from Madugoda town. Beyond the end of these roads, winding through the parkland and over the elevated ridges, are scores of footpaths linking forgotten villages that have never seen a motor vehicle."*

That was enough to capture my imagination and fire up my wanderlust. Along with a colleague - Shakir Adamally - I decided to backpack along these remote 'footpaths linking forgotten villages' to discover these unknown, and soon to be unknowable, places.

This article which was published in the Sri Lankan newspapers in 1982 was my homage to a journey of exploration to places which have since disappeared forever from the face of the planet.

Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, 2011

Footnote: In 1982, the population of Sri Lanka was about 14 million, cramped into a small island of 25,000 square miles. Today, in 2011, the population is more than 20 million. Whether 'Back of Beyond' exists in Sri Lanka anymore I do not know. I now live in British Columbia, Canada, where a population of 4 million live in a land area of 365,000 square miles - about 15 times the size of Sri Lanka. But 'back of beyond' in British Columbia means vast stretches of uninhabited and often, uninhabitable terrain across distances too vast and empty to be able to backpack through in a couple of days.

The Hinterland
The immemorial rhythm of life continues
by Ranil Bibila

The land that once was very old. Once it had been ruled by a line of kings as the fall and of a western country being very distant from the rest of the world. For a long time, it had been a part of the Indian sub-continent. The hinterland was the last of the land, the last of the wilderness, the last of the land that was not yet touched by the hand of man. The hinterland was the land of the gods and the land of the devils, the land of the spirits and the land of the shadows. It was the land of the forgotten and the land of the unknown.

Roads

At night the roads were lit up by the stars and the moon. The roads were lit up by the stars and the moon. The roads were lit up by the stars and the moon. The roads were lit up by the stars and the moon. The roads were lit up by the stars and the moon.

Mahaweli

The Mahaweli river flows through the land of the gods and the land of the devils. The Mahaweli river flows through the land of the gods and the land of the devils. The Mahaweli river flows through the land of the gods and the land of the devils. The Mahaweli river flows through the land of the gods and the land of the devils.

Gaze

The gaze of the gods is on the land. The gaze of the gods is on the land. The gaze of the gods is on the land. The gaze of the gods is on the land. The gaze of the gods is on the land. The gaze of the gods is on the land. The gaze of the gods is on the land.

Yet, for the time being at least, the gods and nature have conspired to protect their land from change, enveloping it in the mists of both time and nature.

The Hinterland...

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much ravaged by elephants stands a devale shared by two of their deities - Wanibandara Deviyo and Kalukumara Deviyo.

Just as two gods do so live but two families at Kehelilla, tending their fields and the devale, leaning every now and then on their gods for succour. But as if it were a portent of things to come they feel that the power of the gods is on the wane.

Ghostly

Yet, for the time being at least, the gods and nature have conspired to protect their land from change, enveloping it in the mists of both time and nature.

At night all is darkness. All through the day it lies in haze and so until dusk. If you stand hopefully at dawn on the great ridges above Maha Uva and gaze northwards for a glimpse of the Hinterland all you will see is a vast sea of clouds from which emerge like ghostly islands from an ethereal sea of clouds from which emerge the dark peaks and ridges that guard this land from all but the keenest wanderer.

As the clouds rise with the sun so the haze settles down and this land which has withstood the changes of centuries slips easily into another day in its life. Its history and its present are but one and the same.

It sleeps in blissful ignorance.

Dusty

But the days of the Hinterland are numbered. One day the sea of clouds will be no more. A permanent sea of water will drown the land. Already a dusty red track winds itself close to Randenigala. Ever and anon the sound of dynamite echoes and re-echoes amidst these immemorial mountains and valleys. Soon will follow those metal monsters that have become so adept at changing the face of the earth. They will throw up the dams that will create the lakes which will drown the heart of the Hinterland. and Randenigala and

Rantembe will do one day what Kotmale, Victoria and Maduru-Oya will do in the near future; alter the course of history. Great benefits will accrue to the National Grid, and greenery and prosperity will come to the forests and scrub jungles of Binlenna, otherwise known as systems C and B. The denizens of the forests may enjoy frolicking on the shores of the great new lakes and the handful of humans may move deeper into their mountain fastnesses or take up the challenge of the brave new lands of the Mahaweli systems; and all shall be happy and content, enjoying the fruits of development. But who shall find another home for Wannibandara Deviyo and Kalukumara Deviyo?

THE HINTERLAND

By

RANIL BIBILE

THE land was very very old. Once it had been ruled by a line of kings at the tail end of a wondrous dynasty lasting two thousand years. Later, for a brief moment in its ageless past it had been nominally ruled by colonists from a land of the setting sun, who had cleared the higher mountains, planted tea and rubber estates, built up schools and winding roadways, made life all commerce and bustle, and then gone away as the sun set on their empire.

But the changes wrought by the colonists had not come to this corner of the Kande Udarata.

The immemorial rhythm of its life continued its peaceful cycle through forever halcyon days as it basked in sunlit mountain mornings, bathed in crystal waters at noonday, and slept to lilting Pal Kavi in the starlit night.

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IF bitten by wanderlust you stand high on the high peaks of Uda Dumbara and cast your gaze southwards you will see the land descend in great folds and steps down thousands of feet and across miles of mountain country into haze covered valleys and on beyond, past the remote lands of Walapane and Uva Paranagama, to rise again to the great heights of the central mountain massif; green mountains turning to blue, blue mountains to grey, and grey mountains merging with the sky at the very rim of the world. As the sun sets in the west and the veil of night descends upon the land you will see far away the twinkling lights of lonely estates -of Mulhalkelle and Maha Uva, of Blairlmond and Beckington -beckoning and mingling with the very stars in the sky. Ever and anon a small galaxy would herald a mountain township -Watumulla or Nildandahinna, or, closer to hand, Hunnasgiriya or Madugoda. But in the great folds of land that make up the ridges and valleys of the Korales of Oyapalata and Medapalata, of Wiyaluwa and Wendaruwa, of Gampaha and Kandapahala, darkness prevails absolute.

The Hinterland sleeps.

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AT daybreak roads take off bravely down the mountainsides heading south from the Teldeniya-Madugoda-Hasalaka road or north from the Padiyapelella-Mailapitiya-Ragala road, only to peter out one by one at the lonely outposts of the Hinterland - at Madugalla, Dewahandiya and Mahawela, at Galauda, Sarasuntenna and Madulla - leaving the wanderer only with rugged mountain trails used by men and animals for many and many centuries, winding their way by high breathtaking ridges, deep breathless ravines and gurgling mountain streams, through windblown patna slopes, emerald green terraces of paddy, and dark forests which echo with the call of cicadas and bullfrogs in noonday gloom. The views on the winding trails are sublime, beyond description, as they meander over hill and dale. Here a simple anicut and an ingenious canal perhaps two feet wide with an undetectable gradient carrying the cool mountain waters for mile upon mile to terraces of paddy carved lovingly out of the great slopes who knows how many centuries ago. There a neat little mud and wattle hut, its low thatched roof overhanging a cosy verandah with a bench to sit upon and gaze across the rapidly descending terraces to distant valleys and peaks in the golden sunlight of a mountain afternoon. Scattered here and there, little groves of testimony to the richness of the land - jak and breadfruit, banana and arecanut, mango, avocado, pawpaw, corn, green gram, pepper, mustard; the list is endless. And always the vista of the great valley below and the tall mountains on the far horizon.

Suddenly the paddy fields are over, the thatched huts are no more, and the track begins to descend steeply through deep and rich forests with halting places by cold springs bubbling with water amidst moss covered rocks, haunted by the music of its denizens, down and ever steeply down. The vegetation changes with every step, from high country to mid country and thence to lowland varieties.

When the track flattens out you have reached the heart of the Hinterland.

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HERE at the bottom of the valley, where the mighty Mahaweli flows in its last great cascades before reaching the plains of Bintenne, its course is a lonely one; between Victoria Falls and the Minipe Anicut it flows through mile upon mile of desolate, sometimes inaccessible terrain, hemmed in by forests and jungles and by great north to south ridges through which this river of life has carved itself an

incredible west to east path. It flows via roaring rapids and silent gorges overlooked by many a dramatic peak -Lunukirikanda and Dewagamuakanda, Weddandamana and Randenigala, its waters enhanced by perennial tributaries -Ma Oya, Kehelella Oya and Maha Oya flowing in from the north and Kurundu Oya and Uma Oya from the south.

Here in the Hinterland roam Elephant and Wild Boar, Deer, Sambhur and Leopard, and a scattering of humans who can be counted on the fingers of ones hands; humans who still live their lives according to age old customs and cultivate their fields with age old methods, for here are no BG varieties of rice or two-wheeled tractors. Here are people who have their own interpretation of events heard through many filters; for newspapers do not penetrate the Hinterland, and radio on shortwave is at best a series of squeaks and rumbles from the other side of the cosmos. Even their very gods do not belong to the mainstream. Tucked away in a corner of Kehelella besides a fallow field of paddy surrounded by jungle and one or two jak trees much ravaged by elephants stands a devale shared by two of their deities: Wannibandara Deiyo and Kalukumara Deiyo. Just as two gods do so live but two families of goviyas at Kehelella, tending their ancestral fields and the devale, leaning every now and then on their gods for succour. But as if it were a portent of things to come they feel that the power their gods is on the wane.

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YET, for the time being at least, the gods and nature have conspired to protect the Hinterland from change, enveloping it in the mists of both time and nature. At night all is darkness. All through the day it lies in haze, and so until dusk. If you stand hopefully at dawn on the great ridges above Maha Uva and gaze northwards for a glimpse of the Hinterland all you will see is a vast sea of clouds from which emerge like ghostly islands from an ethereal sea the dark peaks and ridges that guard this land from all but the keenest wanderer. As the clouds rise with the sun the haze settles down and this land which has withstood the changes of centuries slips easily into another day in its life. Its history and its present are one and the same.

It sleeps in blissful ignorance.

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FOR the days of the Hinterland are numbered.

One day the sea of clouds will be no more. In its place a permanent sea of water will drown the land. Already a dusty red track winds itself close to Randenigala. Ever and anon the sound of dynamite echoes and re-echoes amidst these immemorial mountains and valleys. Soon will follow those iron monsters that have become so adept at changing the face of the earth. They will throw up the dams that will create the lakes which will drown the heart of the Hinterland. Randenigala and Rantambe will do one day what Kotmale, Victoria and Maduru Oya will do in the near future; alter the course of a country's history. Great benefits will accrue to the National Grid, and greenery and prosperity will come to the dry scrub jungles of Bintenne, otherwise known as systems C and B. The denizens of the forests will enjoy frolicking by the waters of the great new lakes and the handful of humans may move deeper into their mountain fastnesses or take up the challenge of the brave new lands of the Mahaweli Frontier; and all shall be happy and content, enjoying the fruits of development.

But who shall find another home for Wannibandara Deiyo and Kalukumara Deiyo?

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Kandy, Sri Lanka. August 1982.

“...the great folds of land that make up the ridges and valleys of the Korales of Oyapalata and Medapalata, of Wiyaluwa and Wendaruwa, of Gampaha and Kandapahala...”

“At the bottom of the valley the mighty Mahaweli has carved itself a west to east path through great north to south ridges.”





View from Madugoda where the descent began: “If you stand high on the high peaks of Uda Dumbara and cast your gaze southwards you will see the land descend in great folds and steps down thousands of feet and across miles of mountain country into haze covered valleys and on beyond, past the remote lands of Walapane and Uva Paranagama, to rise again to the great heights of the central mountain massif. Here, terraces of paddy carved lovingly out of the great slopes, and there, a mud and wattle hut, its low thatched roof overhanging a cosy verandah with a bench to sit upon and gaze across the rapidly descending terraces to distant valleys and peaks in the golden sunlight of a mountain afternoon”



“... green mountains turning to blue, blue mountains to grey, and grey mountains merging with the sky at the very rim of the world.”

Trekking in the Hinterland: The author, a canal, and paddy fields

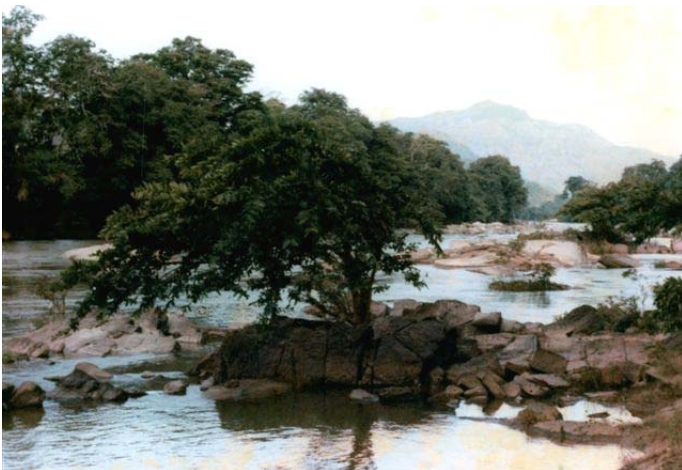


“Here a simple anicut and an ingenious canal perhaps two feet wide with an undetectable gradient carrying the cool mountain waters for mile upon mile along terraces of paddy that cascade into the valley”

Kehelella – the Heart of the Hinterland:
Two families, two gods, two rivers, two peaks, and two acres of paddy

Weddandamana peak at 2804 feet dominates Kehelella. It is to be joined across the Mahaweli River by a 300-foot-high dam to Randenigala peak (2790 feet) at the confluence of Kehelella Oya and the Mahaweli.

(This spot, photographed in 1982, now lies at the bottom of the 300 ft deep Randenigala Lake).



“At the bottom of the valley the mighty Mahaweli follows a lonely course through miles of desolate and inaccessible terrain before reaching the plains of Bintenne. It flows via roaring rapids and silent gorges overlooked by many a dramatic peak...”

...its waters enhanced by perennial tributaries - the Ma Oya, Kehelella Oya and Maha Oya flowing in from the north, and the Kurundu Oya and Uma Oya from the south”.

In the picture above, the confluence of the Uma Oya (at left) and the Mahaweli (at right) are seen at Rantembe Gorge (in 1982). Already, the slopes were being cleared for the new dam at Rantembe. Today this is all under the bottom of the 140 ft deep Rantembe Lake.



Rantembe Gorge as seen in 1982. The entire Mahaweli was funneled through this narrow gorge before the area was drowned by Rantembe Lake.

“Already a dusty red track winds itself close to Randenigala”.

After trekking down from Madugoda(2700 ft) to Kehelella(360 ft) through the terrain mentioned in the article, and exploring the soon-to-be-lost Hinterland, we exit the valley on this track to Minipe.





The area as depicted in the old “one inch to a mile” scale topographic sheet of Hanguranketa, onto which has been superimposed the outline contours of Randenigala and Rantembe Reservoirs. The green areas represent paddy cultivation.



Rugged mountain trails wind their way through windblown patna slopes, emerald-green terraces of paddy, and dark copses of forests. This varied terrain and landcover is seen in this satellite view of the area.