

—Text & Pix by—
Mahil Wijesinghe



After two-hour drive on the Avissawella-Hatton A-7 Road, we reached Ginigathena town early in the morning with a mist-laden mountain range visible in the distance.

We drove a little further on the Hatton road, turned right and again along the picturesque Norton Bridge Road to the Central Province town of Maskeliya. The effects of the long drought could be seen and felt everywhere. Waterfalls as well as the Kelani Ganga had dropped to less than a trickle in various places.

On the right side of the road to Maskeliya, we glimpsed the forest clad Seven Virgin hills (*Sapthakanya*) mountain range in the distance.

Shrouded in many mysterious legends, the most famous and sorrowful being the 1974 crash of Martinair Flight 138, the worst aircraft disaster in Sri Lanka which killed 191 passengers and crew.

The Adam's Peak (Sri Pada) could be seen in the background across the hauntingly beautiful Moussekelle reservoir.

Maskeliya is one of Sri Lanka's little known towns. Thousands of pilgrims, both, local and foreign, travel through it every year on their way to Adam's Peak. Since the climbing season lasts only six months, Maskeliya is forgotten by visitors for the rest of the year.

A glimpse of ruins

The drop in water levels at many reservoirs, due to drought got me to revisit the Moussekele reservoir in Maskeliya for a glimpse of the ruins of the Buddhist temple, kovils, mosque and the old bridge that went underwater when the Moussekele reservoir was built.

The diminishing water levels mean the temples are visible in all their ruined glory once a year during the drought. The reservoir has become a tourist magnet, especially, with large



A Ganesh Kovil of the old town of Maskeliya

The rise of old Maskeliya

groups of pilgrims en route to Sri Pada thronging the reservoir bed to pay homage to the spectacular ruins of religious monuments submerged, as the reservoir was built.

The villagers of old Maskeliya sacrificed their ancestral lands and properties for the sake of development of the Moussekele project. The reservoir was built five and a half decades ago, inundating the old town of Maskeliya in 1968. The new town was relocated just uphill.

The seated Buddha statue of the temple, Bodhigaraya (Bo-tree enshrine), Sri Kadireshan Hindu Kovil,

mosque and Ganesh Kovil, close to each other in the old town of Maskeliya have reappeared after the water levels dropped drastically. The stone bridge that nestled across the old town which led to Sri Pada via Nallathanniya has emerged.

In 1964, the Government had planned to build a reservoir at Moussekele damming the Maskeliya Oya at an elevation of 2,200 feet above sea level. Maskeli Oya is the main tributary of the Kelani Ganga originating from the hills of Saamimale which nourished the reservoir of Moussekele.

Hydropower complex

Along with the Castlereigh dam, the Moussekele reservoir supplies water to the Laxapana Hydropower Complex, involving a number of dams and hydroelectric power stations, such as Nawa Laxapana, Polpitiya, Canyon and Wimalasurendra power stations.

The Moussekele reservoir is the biggest reservoir nestling in the slope of the present Maskeliya town and spreads across 93,000 ha, which embraces lands from the Nuwara Eliya District.

With the construction of the Moussekele reservoir, the people of Maskeliya town and the suburbs faced drastic changes in their daily life. This resulted in the displacement of 155 ancestral homelands with business

properties, and the submerging of the Maskeliya town and Gagewatta, after the dam was constructed. Although many buildings in the old town, such as, schools, the Police Station, Post Office and three tea factories had been dismantled to make

ly submerged. Most businessmen got new lands uphill the new Maskeliya town and Nallathanniya, and settled down in the new places.

Before the reservoir was built, the road to Sri Pada lay across Maskeliya and Gagewatta towns and the pilgrims travelling in buses from Hatton to Nallathanniya stopped at Gagewatta.

Since the bridge is narrow at Gagewatta for big buses, the pilgrims used to take small buses from Gagewatta to Nallathanniya

and then to Sri Pada. It had been a lucrative business for traders in Gagewatta during the Sri Pada season.

The ruins of the Sri Kadireshan Hindu Kovil are spectacular. Especially, the stone sculptured statue of Skanda lies in the stone covered chamber and other stone sculptured pillars with various floral motifs and mythical figures adorning the pillars of the ruined Kovil.

The stone structure remains intact even after 50 years under water.

Coming out of the Kovil, we next visited the ruins of a mosque just a few yards from the Kovil.

Only two ruined concrete pillars remained at the site, while the structure was heavily damaged.

Stone bridge

Walking on the old road, we reached the arched stone bridge, believed to have been built by British tea planters.

The ruined Buddhist temple with a heap of rubble and a decayed seated Buddha statue was our next stop. A decayed log of a Bo-tree still stands in front of the temple ruins.

The statue and Bo-tree have been wrapped by saffron robes by the devotees who visited the site. Walking around a kilometre further down on the edge of the reservoir, we saw another stone built Kovil that had just re-appeared from the water. It was a Ganesh Kovil, we were told by Kengan, a self-appointed priest and contained stone sculptured floral motif slabs scattered here and there. We saw some pillars half buried in the water.

These ruins, which lay under water for over 50 years, are a nostalgic reminder of past life in the old Maskeliya town.

They make a rare reappearance during a severe drought, in what is a bittersweet reminder of days gone by and the sacrifices that an entire village made for the country's uplift.

No one knows how long the calm splendour of the old town of Maskeliya will remain as we pray for rain. However, the ruins are a rare sight and can be witnessed only according to the whims of the weather gods.

THE SEATED BUDDHA STATUE OF THE TEMPLE, BODHIGARAYA (BO-TREE ENSHRINE), SRI KADIRESHAN HINDU KOVIL, MOSQUE AND GANESH KOVIL, CLOSE TO EACH OTHER IN THE OLD TOWN OF MASKELIYA HAVE REAPPEARED AFTER THE WATER LEVELS DROPPED DRASTICALLY



A submerged Buddhist temple at the Moussekele reservoir



The British built arched stone bridge