

Hayleys sows seeds for silent green revolution

The drive to the Maho AGA Division in the Yapahuwa electorate in the North Western province in an air-conditioned van on a working day last week was soothing considering the heat and the drought conditions on the ground, especially in the arable land in the locality. The severe drought hadn't fully destroyed the vegetation in the North Western Province or Yapahuwa, as the greenery was still intact in most areas. But the unusual drought has had its toll on the province, more severely among the farmer community. Given the heavy reliance on agriculture or farming, the Yapahuwa electorate in particular and the North Western Province's survival hinges on the availability of water.

This is reflected by the fact that the province has over 1,000 tanks, some built centuries ago, supplying water for irrigation. Ironically the very lifeline of the farmer community in the area has been neglected or under developed over the years.

A host of reasons could be cited for this sad state of affairs. One is lack of adequate resources to undertake regular repairs of tanks, while some had been abandoned totally due to lack of use. Another factor could be the apparent mismanagement of the once rich and world famous irrigation system in the country.

One such historic tank, which was a victim of sheer negligence, was the Kattambuwawa in the village bearing the same name located in the Maho AGA Division.



The abandoned tank originally

According to historic records, Parakramabahu constructed the Kattambuwawa tank, which falls in Mi-Oya basin, before he became the King of Polonnaruwa. This tank was operating as a feeder channel from Mahamadagalla to Mediyawa, Hettipola-Kuliyapitiya and from there to Chilaw. Construction of this tank was detailed to Parumuka (a designation) by Parakramabahu and as per the Chulawansaya the construction had taken place between 1158 and 1186. When compared with the materials available it is almost equal to Bathalagoda Scheme and Mahamadagalla scheme. After the death of King Parakramabahu this tank with a catchment area of 1.15 square kilometres, was abandoned. It was only in 1941 an Engineer by the name Parkar had rehabilitated it. Thereafter the tank suffered the same fate.



Harnessing support of the village level leaders and farmers

Around 100 farmer families coming under the tank were handicapped, their cultivation and a stable revenue stream were under threat or they were unable to maximize their economic potential. A predominantly paddy cultivating area, the Farmer Organisation in the area, Government agencies had endeavoured to address the issue but they had been piecemeal and the results inconsistent. The extent available under the tank is 14.5 hectares and most paddy farmers cultivate only the Maha season and forego the Yala season or switch to other crops due to lack of water. Their income levels have been subject to the vagaries of the weather.

Hayleys Ltd., one of the most respected diversified blue chips in the country with an extensive presence in the value added agriculture sector of the country for export (many of its initiatives have been pioneering in nature), had heard about the predicament of this village and many others who face similar problems.

As a company that serves the farming community with an array of products its prospects and endeavours are also stifled by villages facing big risk in their survival, let alone income streams. To some it may resemble the popular phrase 'Live and let live' but Hayleys gesture if expanded and emulated by other blue chips and banks that claim they are socially responsible or good corporate citizens, has a deeper meaning - perhaps it signifies sowing seeds for a silent green revolution led by the private sector.

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"Hayleys involvement must be looked at in a proper perspective. It is important that quality of life and income of farmer community needs to be enhanced. This could be done by helping in whatever possible way to address their problems. Such a course of action in addition to helping the farmers, will also benefit the people through affordable vegetables etc, the country and other stakeholders such as us who service the agriculture sector," Hayleys Chairman Sunil Mendis said.

"We undertook to rehabilitate the Kattambuwwa tank with those objectives. While it may be a small investment (the Company spent around Rs. 4 million) there are larger benefits overall especially with our extension work and helping farmers to improve yield, try out cash crops and improve their income levels," he added.

Encouraged by the success of the rehabilitation of the Kattambuwwa tank and connected activities, Mr. Mendis said that Hayleys is willing to explore similar opportunities more on a social consideration and developing the crucial agriculture sector.

Judging by the feedback from the villagers in Kattambuwwa tank area in recent history no corporate in the private sector has ventured into an activity such as rehabilitating or renovating a tank. While there may be many a willing corporate to rehabilitate a tank, the sensitivities associated with such a task such as political pressure, misunderstandings or perceptions that private sector efforts always have vested interests or it is not socially responsible etc, discourages most corporates.

However the way Hayleys structured the project and carried out the task is a model for those corporates who are interested. Late last year Hayleys undertook the project to rehabilitate the tank and recently it completed the work and re-vested it with the people and the Farmer Organisation of Kattambuwwa.

The process was itself a big learning exercise and the Company harnessed the village, farmer organization, experts from the Irrigation Department, Extension Officers, the Grama Niladari, Principal of the village school and others in the rehabilitation work. Through dialogue and feedback the project was modified and expanded to meet the village's needs. This process also won support from the entire village as opposed to misconception that private sector is encroaching with a vested interest. It also brought the entire village together for a common project.

The project was facilitated by Power and Energy Minister Karu Jayasuriya whose support was symbolized by being invited as the chief guest for the groundbreaking ceremony last year.

Having struck the right chemistry, the involvement of Hayleys was even extended to helping the Konweva Maha Vidyalaya, which has 600 students to build a playground and the Company staff enriching the village Library with donations.

The eventual rehabilitation of the tank, strengthening and widening of the 150-metre bund (geo textile was used to hold the bund) and connected work had a further bonus for the village in terms of it getting a second small tank. R.M.W. Rathnayake, Technical

Assistant with the Divisional Engineer's Office at Maho confirmed that the second tank was a unique outcome of the rehabilitation project.

With the tank now fully rehabilitated and expanded (to 40-acre feet) the paddy farmers in the area can cultivate the Yala season also in full in addition to the Maha. The farmers are also encouraged to try out new crops and Hayleys Agro with a full time young Extension Officer has launched a pilot project with around 50 farmers in the area to undertake home gardening trial crops.

Hybrid seeds and other planting material, fertilizer are provided for the test plots each spanning one acre for the farmers who are willing to become more enterprising than traditional farming.

Hayleys Agro provided hybrid seeds for chillies, okra, ladies fingers, bitter gourd, Bell pepper, either as means for their domestic use or a micro farming initiative during the off season. Heat resistant cauliflower seeds were also provided with advice on best agricultural practices and technical advice.

Several farmers spoke their heart out to the Daily Mirror FT about the immense benefits the rehabilitated tank would have on them and the village. "When the tank is full with the return of the rains we are confident that the entire village would look rich in green and prosperous once again," the paddy farmer Karunaratne said.

Upali Ratnayake and his wife who are also paddy farmers but opted to try out some new crops were brimming with enthusiasm over the success of their new initiative. "Because the yields are high, the produce looking very good fetching a good price, we naturally get encouraged and more involved," they said adding that they hope to expand the trial cash or subsidiary crop farming.

The farmer support program carried out with new vigour by Hayleys Agro is result of the restructuring the diversified blue chip did a few years ago leading to a higher contribution to Hayleys performance.

The initiative by Hayleys is an excellent example of how a small investment (of around Rs. 4 to 5 million which is a pittance considering the Rs. 1 billion plus profits made by banks and diversified blue chips) can transform an entire village, lift their hopes and make them productive and innovative. Such initiatives are certainly a win-win proposition and help build confidence and trust on the private sector and collectively stimulate socio-economic growth in the country.