# A different way of life

Posted on
The roaming farmers’ territory is beyond this perimeter of mangrove

**Making a stopover during a boat ride in Irakkandi, we stumbled across some nomadic farmers, who have been cultivating this land since the 1970’s**

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A hop to the bow and another hop down and we were standing on land reminiscent of Robinson Crusoe’s island. Our boatman had pulled ashore in a gap in the thick mangrove. Where we landed vegetation was growing low on the ground, clinging to an ochre earth.

We had paddled some distance inshore from Irakkandi Lagoon in Trincomalee to reach this spot. A welcome breeze ruffled our hair and played around the clean blue and green landscape. The birdlife was profuse, the fresh air scintillating and energizing after our boat ride.

A short walk into the bush and we came in view of some shacks in the midst of

cultivated land – one of the temporary homes of the roaming farmers of Irakkandi.

The land here is divided among many farming families, who cultivate paddy as well as peanuts, black-eyed peas, pumpkins and ash gourd (*puhu*l) among a number of other crops, their land spreading out as far as the eye could see.

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The harvest of the season was in evidence around the hut: not bountiful but enough to survive.

When we visited, Rafai Deen’s family was lounging in the sun, and greeted us with welcoming smiles. Their dwellings, clothes and appearance spoke of hardships beyond normal endurance. We could barely stand upright in Rafai Deen’s shack, so low was the ceiling. But it provided shade and a place to shelter the family’s modest assortment of belongings.

These farmers do not lead a settled life. Though they own the land they cultivate, they shift between locations annually, relying on collected rainwater to water their crops. Procuring fresh water is the biggest difficulty the farmers face. The nearest source of water, the Puliyankulama *wewa* (reservoir), is too distant for regular use. So the biggest gift that God can grant them is rain. It was with a humble, wistful smile that Rafai declared, “the more rain the better.”

After hardly more than quarter of an hour spent with Rafai’s family, whatever ice there was had been broken. The men confessed the daily hardships they endure with stoical smiles. The women lost their nervousness around us, giggling freely when the mood took them.

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Our visit took place during the best time of the year for the nomadic farming

community. The harvest had been gathered, and men and women alike were savouring the respite. This is a cycle they have been living since the 1970’s; after a long interruption for 30 years of war, Rafai’s family and the rest of the community were able to resume the old way of living in 2009.

To someone who cruises by, the lives of these people may seem miserable. But some time spent with them proves otherwise. Their lives are varied: they do not live in the same place throughout the year; they do not do the same thing year-round.

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