Artisans Of Kotabakina

Posted on

The woods were silent. The clay houses mimicked the silence and the quiet dignity of the woods. A sultry breeze lulled the heat of the day. The tap tapping of Heen Banda’s hammer on a piece of wood broke the surrounding quiet at a rhythmic pace. The piece of wood slowly took the shape of an elephant, its trunk raised in a tense movement.

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Heen Banda is a member of Sri Lanka’s Veddha community who according to many historians are Sri Lanka’s original inhabitants. He is an artist who makes his living by carving various shapes on pieces of wood and cultivating a bit of Chena. Curious to see his art and listen to him talk about his work, we set upon a journey to Kotabakina, Dambana.

By the time we reached Kotabakina the sun had just risen above the trees and we were greeted by a group of men chatting under a cool corner behind a cluster of trees. On inquiring about Heen Banda we were told that we would first have to talk to ‘Nayakathuma’, current leader of the community. After a few pleasantries at the Nayakathuma’s house we were introduced to Heen Banda.

Sitting on a mat in his compound surrounded by his tools and a few of his artefacts Heen Banda started his narration. He started out by whittling wood as a kid and to this day he continues to do so. Wild elephants, leopards, deer and hunters with bows and arrows are his subject matters. We spotted two identical jet-black spear shaped curios on the mat. Heen Banda told us the spears represent ‘Kalubandara Deviyo’s’ jewels and many request those as they are considered harbingers of good luck. ‘Kalubandara Deviyo’ is a revered benevolent ancestral spirit of the Veddha people. Sans the more complicated patterns and details, Heen Banda’s art depicts the minimalistic charm of his own way of life. Nevertheless, all his miniature animals and men seem to bear unique characteristics. The half finished elephant appeared a little tense with its trunk raised in protest. The huntsman with his bows and arrows seemed to be lost in deep thought.

Heen Banda is not the only artist in his village. He told us about Seethavanniya who makes his own wood carving tools. After bidding a friendly goodbye to Heen Banda we wended our way towards Seethavanniya’s house and workstation.

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On our way we bumped into Vanni who was carving a yet another miniature elephant. Vanni proved to be less talkative than Heen Banda.

Seethavanniya is a middle-aged man and we caught him hammering away at a piece of ‘seru’ wood. Apart from animal and human figures Seethavanniya carves small wooden mortars, pestles and spoons. Pieces of dry Kaluwara, Burutha, Seru and Gammalu timber from the nearby woods take these various shapes in his hands. As none of the three men use paint the artefacts retain the original colours of the timber.

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All three men sell their artefacts to both local and foreign tourists. They usually carve artefacts on whim but sometimes they even get orders for specific pieces. Seethavanniya introduced us to his friend who works as a go between and a salesman between him and his buyers.

A man adroit in multi-tasking, Seethavanniya kept on shaping his piece of ‘seru’ wood while chatting to us amicably. As we watched in admiration the piece of wood became a quaint spoon within half an hour in Seethavanniya’s deft hands. He kept on tapping and shaving the spoon adding finer touches to it. The breeze blew around him making the creamy wood shavings flutter and his hammer continued its even rhythm.

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