Avurudhu: Spring revival and revelry

Posted on

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Saluting an elder with a sheaf of betel. (Suresh de Silva)

We prepare for this springtime revelry rather early in the year. Or rather the koel, popularly accepted in Sri Lanka for the cuckoo, does. It is the season he likes, of which he makes a loud and frenzied declaration from every garden tree. And so do we. The harvest is done, and the people are smiling. Village lofts are full of grain and the hives drip with honey. The mango groves are wreathed in drifts of golden blossom. The cashew trees are loaded with sweet rosy pears which promise a goodly harvest of nuts. The silk-cottons are aflame with their brilliant scarlet rockets and on the rose-apple trees there is more fruit than foliage. A time of youth, of revival. The time of the NewYear. Many people hold that the New Year is a harvest festival or the almost universal spring revival rite. Whatever its origins and purposes, it is certainly the season to be jolly. Spring fever grips us all. The air of reveille that wraps the countryside is a thin veil for the busy domestic bustle underneath. Rice is pounded with mortar and pestle in huge quantities for the making of prodigious amounts and varieties of sweetmeats. Houses are whitewashed and new clothes are made.

New Year usually falls on the fourteenth day of April, a great national festival that spans across racial and regional barriers to unite Sri Lanka’s Sinhala and Tamil communities in bonds of age-old ritual and festivity. Astronomically it is the day on which the sun passes from Meena Rasi to Mesha Rasi.

Everyone comes close to ruin in the way of new clothes, all in the prescribed auspicious colour, new pots and pans and an endless array of goodies such as kevum – honeycomb – textured, mushroom – shaped fried batter-cakes, contributed from ground rice and treacle and so delectable, that the Dutch in the seventeenth century, refusing to believe such perfection could be man-made, asked if they grew on trees ! Or aluwa and kaludodol, indescribably fragrant and sweet and bursting with nuts. And asmi – dainty, lacy white batter turnovers, frosted delectably with sugar. The ushering out and in of the’ old and new year is accompanied by much ceremonial and symbolism and a calculated play of the prescribed and proscribed. On the last day of the old year, hearths and cooking fires are extinguished at an astrologically prescribed time, all activities are suspended and a lull ensues.

This very negative time is called the ‘nonagathe’, meaning ‘inauspicious’. Then on the Day, there is a particular astrologically calculated time for lighting hearths again, facing the auspicious direction. Kiribath is then cooked in a new clay pot.



The family seated for the first meal of kiribath (milk rice) and sweetmeats on New Year’s day

Kiribath translates into milk-rice, which is a good descriptive name for this unsweetened rice-pudding cooked in coconut cream. Quite delicious, not a mere breakfast dish in Sri Lanka, but a ceremonial specific, which is featured conspicuously in every festive spread from birthday teas to state banquets. Such astrological precision and nicety goes into the preparation of the kiribath on New Year’s day that eating it must, but has to, do some good !

Then there is a time for formally receiving the New Year – the “fullness of time”. Careful clock-watching is followed by deafening explosions of fire-crackers that rock the countryside. The New Year’s first meal is also astrologically timed; till this auspicious time arrives no formal sit-down family meal is taken and the first meal of the day could well be in the evening. Families sit facing the prescribed lucky direction at tables groaning with kiribath, sweetmeats, ripe bananas and illuminated by a traditional brass oillamp. A traditional curry at new year luncheons is the savoury ‘hath maluwa’, a hot-pot of seven vegetables which underscores the plentiful larders of harvest – time. Meats are notably absent from new year menus – it is rice and other fruits of the earth that figure prominently at the festive board. This gives a pleasing humaneness and purity to this eastern-rite thanksgiving, a kindly influence shed by the Buddhist and Hindu faiths. Children gracefully sink to their knees to greet parents, elders and teachers; they also present them with the traditional gift of betel (Piper betel) leaves.

And then the merriment begins with everyone flinging into the celebrations with a

youthful gaiety. Everyone is a little drunk – but only with the joyful spirit. Vintage village games are played – the young contend while the old survey, often with withering criticism of the style and prowess of the rising generation. Among favourite games are buhukeliya – a kind of oriental coconut shy, involving hundreds of nuts, and gudu so much like Tip – cat that we believe this game of the British village green was borrowed from Sri Lanka during colonial times. The women-fold disdaining rough sport, play panachy, a dainty and decorous game with cowrie shells as counters.

And everywhere one hears me lilting ‘swing ditties’ as grown men and women ride high into the treetops on great swings of stout rope. A favourite swing-song, probably as old as the festival itself runs thus-

‘Swing, swing, swing high and low

Along the beach the brambles grow

I cannot reach into the thorny tree

Little brother, pick some berries for me’

From hill and vale echoes the resonant beat of the rabana, a round rawhide bass open-at-one-end drum, heated at a fire before play t0 give a hot and throbbing sound. The rabana is mainJy played by women who sit round it and play in stylised rhythms -always set to words. These lyrics are delightfully folksy, wacky even and catchy in the extreme in their original Sinhala; they also nostalgically recall the sweet, unhurried rural life.

‘Little hen has brushed her teeth And packed the rice in dishes neat, Now plays the dr11m with merry beat.’ ‘Tarry awhile little sister, wait,
And chew some betel, you won’t be late’

All else too is done just so and in time and season, with an unerring and organic rural timeliness. Such as worshipping at temples, anointing with herbal salves to ensure good health in the new year; the first bath, visits to friends and relatives and even business transactions. Fortune thus coaxed and cajoled has to be kind and the time that is coming needs must be good





Climbing the grease-pole and pillow fighting – traditional events at New Year celebrations. The women of the village gather round the Rabana, to beat out age-old rhythms. (Suresh de Silva)