

Dusk at a Fisher Hamlet

Posted on



The fisher hamlet of Nayaru tinted in the purple hues of dusk

Laughter echoed through the air, the shrill voices standing out from the hoarse roar of the sea. The fishing village of Nayaru was enjoying an evening of lightheartedness, for at midnight the boats must set out to hall in the catch of the Eastern waters.

Words Keshini de Silva | **Photographs** Menaka Aravinda

The Eastern sky shone in shades of bright pinks and oranges that man is yet to name. Thick bushes dominated the view, although scenes of the calm ocean stole the spotlight for short spells. Amidst the unkempt terrain, coconut leaf huts popped up just before a scenic causeway. It was the fishing village of Nayaru in Mullaitivu where fishermen from the West Coast spend nearly six months of their lives when the waves on their usual turf are unrelenting and unwelcoming.

Curiosity taking the better of us we strolled through the little village. The unmistakable aroma of fish and sea salt lingered in the air. Neat coconut leaf huts stood in an organised

manner for as far as my eyes could see. The women of these huts laid fish to dry on sacks. Some were inspecting fish, clearly laid a few days ago, and flipping them with sticks to ensure both sides were well exposed to the final rays of the setting sun. They were counting on the dried fish fetching a good price at the market once transported in lorries to Colombo and the Central Fish Market.

Despite the dimming light, village life was in full motion. Mothers, daughters and children drew water from the well and carried bucketsful home. Families bathed nearby, taking care to ensure splashes and suds did not contaminate the wells; they were after all the only source of fresh water for the community.

At the makeshift verandas of huts the menfolk lounged, catching some respite before their nightly journey to the waters. Three generations sat here. The older dabbling in the serious subject of politics and the days of yonder, while the young folk made frivolous conversation dominated by jests and jokes. Little ones raced about, all smiles and cheek. These chilled evening sessions were important to the strengthening of family and communal bonds in the village.



All in a day's work: a basket laden with today's catch

The scintillating sound of a bell rang through the village. A travelling salesman with worldly tales of 'what's in' called on to the women and children with his collection of colourful

material and exciting toys. Both salesman and shop set a striking scene against the earthy unassuming backdrop of the fishing hamlet. Yet, within minutes the pattering three wheelers that arrived stole his spotlights. The delicious aromas of the baked delicacies they carried quickly sought out the villagers. Most had their coins and notes ready, an indication that this was a routine operation. The children with faces pressed against the glass were thrilled by the prospect of eating a warm jam or cream bun; a highlight of the day.

A burst of merriment drove my attention to the boat shacks at the beach. Calling out to my friends and mindful of the fish laid out to dry, we approached the fishermen toiling with preparation. Most were tending to their boats, carrying out careful inspections of the hull and refilling the tanks. Some women were washing the fish baskets in the sea. A fisherman sat mending his net. Slickly the thin thread moved with his fingers creating strong knots. Blisters on his sunburnt hands hinted at the years of training that went in to mastering this skill. One passed down from father to son.

“We’ll be setting out to sea from midnight, but most will push out to the waters at 2am and return around 8am”, said his mate Gerard in answer to my questions. Some had gone out, but would return soon with a catch. He seemed intrigued by my inquisitiveness yet was thrilled to answer my questions. Apparently, the fishermen from Chilaw, Negombo and Marawila travel to this spot on the east coast annually, when it’s unsafe to fish in Western waters. Most families have been voyaging here for generations, obviously by boat, he said. When they leave for their homes in the months of November and December, these huts and shacks will be left in tact, to welcome them next year, even the shrine for Mother Mary. A quick stop before the shrine beseeching protection was a must for the seafarers whose families light a lamp for their safe return.

As we spoke, a few folk heaved past with a heavy basket of small fish, their faces jubilant over their good fortune.

Darkness was seeping in to the sky, it was time for us to head on our way. We bade goodbye and good luck to the fisher folk, they retorted that yes, they pray for a good catch that would fetch a great price.

