The fertile land of Sembukulam

Posted on



Hén Miris is grown in abundance in Sembukulam

From the main road in Thirappane town we turned onto a by-lane. Soon we were upon the fertile land of Sembukulam where farmers had cultivated acres of land with mixed crops.

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What I wanted to see was chilli cultivation but what I got was much more.As we neared one of the farms, I was surprised by the sheer extent of the work that had been done. There were designated areas in this eight acre property for each crop. Rows of papaw trees laden with fruit, banana, chilli, thalana batu and mango formed their own distinguishable patch while coconut and guava plants were interspersed with the main crops.

A mat with red chillies laid out to dry caught our attention and we walked towards to find sacks full of green chilli (amu miris) prepared inside the farmers hut to be sent to the Dambulla market. They were fresh and green and you would instinctually want to pop one into your mouth—if you did not know how hot they are! Ranjith Karunaratne, who has been growing chilli for about 15 years says that the variety grown in Sembukulam and the vicinity is known as Hén Miris. The original strains of M1 and M2 had been planted in the area around 1967 and the M1 variety had transformed adapting to the climate and soil of the area to give an indigenous strain that provides a greater harvest. There is the lighter shade and the darker shade of chillies—the ones found in Sembukulam are of the darker variety.

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Due to its versatility and high productivity, Hén Miris is planted and grown continuously. Though in the past there had been two seasons for cultivation—Yala and Maha—if there is water chilli can be grown all year around. Water to this property is pumped from a large well, 3,000 feet away, and as such chilli as well as other crops are cultivated throughout the year. The chilli plants, in the allocated half an acre area were five months old. And, according to Karunaratne chillies can be plucked every 60 days or sometimes sooner. The plants were laden with green chillies. At first these are not visible but when you lift the branches hundreds of succulent amu miris can be seen. The soil itself is fertile and as such fertiliser is added once every 20 days.

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The chilli plants are first nurtured in thavan (makeshift nurseries), where the structures are made of Kohomba branches as they are said to be a natural insect repellent. Once little plants reach the required maturity, they are planted in the larger plot. Near the miris thavana (chilli nursery) we were pleasantly surprised to see cabbage being grown as well.

Each property we visited had quarter to half an acre dedicated to chilli. At one such place in addition to chilli, kurakkan, cowpea, mung beans, tomatoes, ladies fingers and papaw had been planted as well. The tomatoe plants were laden with green fruits and we were told that fruit had to be plucked when it starts to become a rosy green so that when it is sold it will be of the required colour, but not too ripe. On another property, the farmers were attempting to grow red onions and had a ‘thavana’, where they were nurturing the plants so that the crop would succeed. We could just about see the top of the onion and wished them well with their endeavour.

The produce from Sembukulama is taken to Thambuththegama or Dambulla where the farmers themselves transport the goods or lorries come and purchase from them.While the harvest is good and cultivation is a lucrative source of income, with all parts of the country now being active partners in the economy, prices of crops fluctuate instantly.At times there is an excess produced and as such a proper mechanism is required so that these crops do not go to waste. After all food is essential for all living beings.

With much food for thought, we left Sembukuluma inspired by this simplistic livelihood that required determination and dedication, but more than all perseverance. We could not help but aspire to be farmers ourselves.