A Fisherman’s Tale

Posted on

The gates to the Yala National Park were just ahead and a small byroad on the right led to the little cove beyond. And it was there we found the make-shift village of Amaduwa on a bright sunny day…

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They welcomed us with warm smiles to their temporary abodes. These fishing villages are also known as ‘maalu wadi’, where fishermen from various parts of the country travel to each location during the optimal fishing season and setup their temporary homes for a period of three to six months. Here in Yala we met fishermen who had come from as far as Negombo, Chilaw and Wennappuwa while others were from Dickwella or from the Yala area itself. Some had come with their families while others had travelled alone.

The beach was peppered with boats and as the sun started to rise a few more returned with their morning catch. For lobsters, these fishermen set out early to sea for a distance of about three kilometres to collect the lobsters that have got tangled in the nets that they had laid out the night before. From what they had caught it did not seem much, making us wonder why they go through the trouble. But though the numbers were less, each lobster would bring a good price due to their weight. As another boat approached, all the men rushed to help bring the boat ashore. This had various types of fish such as red mullet, ranna, handaya and para maalu. They separated the fish into groups according to their varieties and then a few fishermen collected a couple of fish to prepare as their morning meal.

With fisherfolk coming from various areas in the country, they are of different religions and each have their own way of doing things. Some do not cook or eat their catch while others do. It depends on their beliefs as well. For many, the fishermen’s life is all that they know of, they are nomads never stationed in one place for long. The change of tide and wind had been late this year, as such it had given them an extra month in Amaduwa. With the warakan (rough seas) approaching, these fishermen will move on to the East—Sangamankanda and Komari. They know the change in the currents and wind by experience. On a wall

they had marked all the dates as and when they determine the change of tide. It is something that they have learnt with time, the ways of the sea are ingrained within.

> The main Mudalali, for whom these fishermen worked for was loading a truck with ice boxes full of fish. “Enna miss balanna” (come and have a look)

We were welcome guests, their hospitality was genuine. Offering us tea and biscuits, they spoke to us about their daily routine and stories at sea. The main Mudalali, for whom these fishermen worked for, was loading a truck with ice boxes full of fish. “Enna miss balanna” (come and have a look), he said and I got into the truck. He opened each box and one by one placed fish in my hand, explaining that the red one was a mullet and the dotted small one was a gal kossa. Apparently these fish were being taken directly to the airport for export. The surprise was when he opened a large rectangular box with a massive fish inside. This was called a gal bula and weighed 29kg. It was full of slime and apparently this was essential for the sale of this type of fish, because if the slime is not there then the fish will be rejected by the customer. They put the gal bula back into its box and covered it with ice.

A shout from the beach indicated that another boat was on its way in. We all ran to the beach to assist. They had caught three large fish—tuna, para and thora. The way in which these fishermen work is that in the evenings or early mornings they fix the bili koku (fishing hooks of various sizes) at various locations so that by the time they return, there would be fish to collect. The Mudalali called me again to touch and carry the fish, saying that I was the only one who had the guts do so from among my friends. I must say that these fish were pretty heavy and I was soon smelling very fishy myself!

While these fishermen do line fishing and use nets, they also go deep sea fishing when they need to catch larger fish such as tuna or travelly.

The wadiya of these fishermen are made of dried coconut leaves. When they travel a lorry is hired so that the boat and all other necessary furniture and equipment are transported. After six months as they move on to another location, they leave the wadiya only to return the next season to rebuild it. Since this village is on the

border of the Yala National Park, wild animals are known to cross this way as well.

As the morning became hotter, each fisherman went to their homes to mend their nets and spend time with their families. At one such home a fresh chilli fish curry was being made using chilli powder, turmeric, cardamom, pepper and salt. The family was gathered in the kitchen while the meal was being prepared. The man of the house was the centre of it all, they understood the dangers he faced daily as he ventured out to sea…

