Forest Dwellers Of Rathugala

Posted on



A typical indigenous home, made of ‘sticks and mud’ with the Rathugala mountain in the distance

He stared incredulously at my query, and his fervent response followed. “Why do we stay inside the forest so long? Why, if you go there you wouldn’t want to come out again either.” Pointing at some distance out of sight as he offers his simple explanation, this wiry and energetic man of the forest, is the next leader of the Rathugala indigenous clan. For now though, he is more than willing to be our tour guide…

Words Prasadini Nanayakkara Photographs Menaka Aravinda and Indika De Silva

They are the Rathugala Veddas, the lesser known of Sri Lanka's indigenous heritage. And we set out in search of them on the B562 that leads to Ampara. Approximately 30km in, is Rathugala, placed amidst a mixed forest out of reach from the modern day trappings. Along the main route we first stumbled upon a wizened old lady seated cross-legged in a roadside mud house amidst young children and women. She, we soon discover, is the mother of the Rathugala Chief. There was a distinct timbre to her speech that hinted at an unfamiliar dialect. Details of her past were distant memories that held no specifics beyond rough surmises. She herself too of indigenous descent had married the then Chief who in her words "kendang giya", or came and took her away. As it appeared she had arrived at a pitstop for rest following a day's foraging in the forest for aralu, a medicinal fruit. She tells us that there are about 110 families scattered about in Rathugala and their ancestors once resided at Danigala rock where they were – back in the day – primarily cave dwellers. However, the Danigala Veddo had to relocate further north to Rathugala, where they now live, due to the construction of the large water tank, Senanayake Samudraya.

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Further along the road and a hidden turn off into the forest leads to Chief Danigala Mahabandalage Suddha Wannilaaetto's. However we were first ambushed by a mob of 'little men'. The clan's children excitedly followed till we reached the refuge of the Chief's residence. A man of small build, he held an unassuming air about him and equally so did his humble abode, another small mud house. Eased within its cosy confines he talked at length about their ancestry. While ascertaining what we had already gathered from his mother, the Chief further spoke of an ancestry that dates back to the earliest known existence of communities in the island, during King Vijaya's time. That is, the Rathugala indigenous bloodline traces back to Kuweni's era of cave dwellers. Hailing from a generation known as Mahabandala who once inhabited Danigala, the clan had arrived in Rathugala in the 1930s and for generations the leadership has been carried from father to son. However the generations that followed in Rathugala experienced marked changes in their livelihoods. They no longer hunted or lived in caves, instead they managed cultivation in a small scale, growing tubers, corn and paddy; the women would venture into the forest to collect aralu, bulu, nelli and other medicines and all families occupied the simple mud houses seen today.

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Rathugala in the 1930’s and for generations the leadership has been carried from father to son.”

While the Rathugala indigenous lineage is unrelated to the famous Dambane communities they maintain friendly relations. The two groups however share similarities in that the language, and the symbolic axe borne on the shoulder remain the same. We also meet a member from Pollebadde – a second region where part of the ancient Danigala community migrated to during relocation. Marriages between these two communities occur frequently keeping the indigenous ancestry alive. It is here that we also meet the Chief’s successor, his son-in-law Thalabandalage

Wijeywannilaaetto, complete with betel stained lips, and tangled shock of hair and beard, he appears as wild as his surroundings. Graciously he volunteered to escort us across the many households scattered along the region. Through unseen meandering paths, prickly bushes, muddy groves and streams he went, along with his less than accustomed stragglers. Busily chatting about all things indigenous he provided more glimpses into their elusive lives. For instance, living in the pristine jungle the spring water and stream-lets offered an easy source of water. Collecting bees honey makes for another means of making a living where sellers would arrive at the village shop to write-off the debts of the community members on purchase of honey.

“He spoke earnestly of venturing into the deep jungle… There, he says, nothing is to be feared, not even the wild animals that include leopards, bears and elephants.”

As we reached house after house belonging to a brother, a sister, a cousin, an uncle, it soon became evident that this was a tightly linked community. However only 30 families remain of original descent diluted amidst a total of 110 due to marriages outside of the indigenous population. Despite this their livelihoods continue to hold an unspoilt charm. Each home was built of the characteristic mud and sticks, with the tall sun dried iluk grass for the roofs. The little garden spaces often accommodated a shrine where offerings are made to a Buddha statue and additionally the forest dwellers also pray to a number of deities including Kalu Bandara Deviyo and Kande Deviyo. Crop cultivation, such as corn and manioc are also seen in their gardens and at the time of harvesting all would gather around and portions would be distributed amongst families. Although, from some of the homes the men-folk had gone away on labour work, it is not a mode of earning that is encouraged by the Chief who condones a more simple symbiotic existence with the

forest.

It can be seen that the future leader of the Rathugala forest dwellers takes much after his father-in-law. He speaks proudly of their upheld ideals, especially of an occasion where vehicles had been offered to the community. However, having turned down the offer, the two men had agreed to accept axes instead. He spoke earnestly of venturing into the deep jungle often practiced usually in groups of 10 to 15 to spend days on end lost amidst vast rock outcrops. There, he says, nothing is to be feared, not even the wild animals that include leopards, bears and elephants.

Discovering each individual house, it dawned upon us that had it not been for our resourceful guide none would be the wiser of their existence as they were easily lost, amidst the brimming landscapes, complete with the mountainous outcrops of either Rathugala or Nahegala rocks. Seeing us off, Thalabandalage Wannilaaetto broke into song about a hunting tradition of the Rathugala ancestry…

Mammini mammini ma denna...

Mada gale yamu denna...

Go akuma tika mama kanna...

Go Bada wae tika tika denna...

The rhythmic tones rose to greet the silent rustles of the forest that reveal nothing and even as the twilight crept over its well kept secrets I wondered, for how much longer…

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