

Gal Siyambala And Gaduguda

Posted on



Lucky dip: bagful of Gal Siyambala plucked, cleaned and packed—ready for the market (Photography Dr D S A Wijesundara)

Call it by its fancy English name Velvet Tamarind or refer to it by its high flown Latin tag as Dialium indum if you must, but it hardly matters for the good old humble Gal Siyambala taste as tangy as they come and then there is Gaduguda too.

Words and Photographs Manu Gunasena

Growing in the wilds on large trees that soar to a height of over 25 metres in

the Anuradhapura, Moneragala and Ampara districts in the semi dry regions of Sri Lanka, Gal Siyambala is found in South East Asia and even in the bushes of Africa. It is generally regarded as a pleasant pulp that tickles the palate and makes one yearn for more. It's the sugarplum of rural Sri Lanka coming with the acidic flavour instead of the powdery saccharine, which has made a bee line to the city bazaars with a buzz. Life sucks without it; and its addictive taste has made this nation a land of Gal Siyambala lovers, in search of a seasonal fix.

It's a taste that takes me back to school, to the days of the satchel and pencil, of books and leaky pens, and to the welcome interval breaks which provided the mercy of Gal Siyambalas that made it possible to bear the studious drone of a teacher's continuous prattle about History's chaps and Geography's maps; and made me realise life's little pod of sour delight came packaged in nature's velvet casing.

And what of Gaduguda, the olive shaped fruit that contains life's sweet and sour sunshine. Never did sourness taste so sweet as when one took a bite of the pungent fruit and savoured its fullsome flesh with relish. Together with Gal Siyambala, it shows one that life's small delicacies need not come at a fancy price. Gadugudas sell for less than a rupee per fruit while Gal Siyambalas carry a street value of 40 rupees per 100 grams.

And today, once more the seasonal cycle has turned and the Gal Siyambala and Gaduguda trees are blossoming with the flowers that will soon, in June and the months thereafter, make way to the ripened fruits that once held me and a nation in a schoolboy swoon.

Though the sweet and sour flavour of Gal Siyambala is similar to Tamarind, it is drier and more powdery. The encasing shell, too, is more brittle and cracks easily between the fingers to reveal the slightly acidic powdery pulp. And it is not only Sri Lanka that can proudly boast its presence. In Malaysia the fruit is called 'keranji' and in Thailand it is used as a candy snack, dried, sugar coated and laced with spicy chillie. In Nigeria it is known as 'icheku', in Ghana as 'yorvi' and, in English, the African variety is generally referred to as black velvet tamarind.

The seed is approximately seven millimetres across and three millimetres thick and come with a sheen with a thin coat of starch. Two varieties of the fruit are found in Sarawak, Malaysia, one 25 mm long and having a reddish brown powder loosely packed with the shell while the other is larger at 38mm with the pulp more sticky.

This bigger variety is also found on two Gal Siyambala trees that grow in the Gampaha Botanical Gardens. These trees appear stouter. The fruit comes in the same velvet casing but is bigger and the concentrated tanginess found in its smaller brother is here more blandly dispersed, its powdery taste more pronounced.

Gal Siyambala trees grow to a great height and its bark contains medicinal properties and is used as an antidote for snake bites. The wood, brownish red in colour, is used for native building purposes and its pinnate leaves are used as fodder. The fruits come in clusters, small ovate pods about one and a half centimetres long, cased in a brownish black velvet skin. It is low in calories but high in vitamins, minerals and fibre and contains anti oxidants and doctors strongly recommend it. It can also be used in a drink and can be used in the preparations of 'fine' chutney.

But the writing is on the wall for the Gal Siyambala tree and if effective steps are not taken now it may soon face extinction. For the fruits grow at the end of the branches, at a point where the branch is too fragile to bear the weight of a human; and thus to harvest the Gal Siyambala fruit, branches of the tree have to be cut and the fruits plucked on the ground.

Gaduguda on the other hand faces no such problems. The tree, which can rise to thirty metres in height, grows in many diverse areas and is found in Gampaha, Hanwella, Horana, Avissawella to name but a few areas close to Colombo and in these areas it is also found in home gardens. The fruits grow in bunches and sprout directly from the bark of the tree. Gaduguda also has two varieties, the common one which is bitter sweet and a smaller fruit known as 'beheth' or medical Gaduguda though it is not used for any known medicinal properties but purely due to its ultra bitterness. The tree is also smaller in size. A specimen of this rare variety is also found at the Gampaha Botanical Gardens.

If Gal Siyambala is considered as a fast food, nibble on the run, then Gaduguda becomes the dish served à la carte, to be eaten with a touch of class. It can, not only be gobbled raw in a hurry, but it can also be canned in sugar syrup or used to prepare candy or wine. It can also be cooked, or added to a mixed fruit cocktail or a fruit salad with ice cream. Chefs are also experimenting with new ways of blending Gaduguda and Ma-dam, and other local fruits with western and international food.

The fruit is grown widespread throughout the South East Asian region and is also known by many names in different countries. Apart from its scientific name of

Lansium domesticum. In Malaysia it is called *langsat*, in the Philippines as *lansones*, in Thailand as *langsad*, in Burma as *lansak* or *duku* and in Indonesia as *langsat* or *duku*. In Sri Lanka, it is known as *Gaduguda*, but in the villages it is popularly referred to as ‘*toku gedi*’ probably from the Indonesian word *duku*. Botanists consider that there are three species namely *duke*, *lansat* and *duku-lansat*.

The tree also has many uses. The wood is heavy and resilient and is often used in the construction of houses in villages. The bark of the tree is often used in the treatment of dysentery and malaria and the powdered bark is used to treat scorpion bites. The seeds are pounded and mixed with water to make a deworming and medication for ulcers. The skin of the fruit is used to treat diarrhea and can be dried and burnt to repel mosquitoes. And the dried skin can also be burnt as incense.

Walking back with a nostalgic bent to the old college by the sea, I can still remember the old ‘cart man’, who had the monopoly of the school’s interval trade, doing brisk business with his newspaper cones of *Gal Siyambala*s. Some of the fruit were promptly chewed, sucked and eaten, the balance went into the pockets to be reached for during class sessions. The shells were furtively cracked with the thumb and fore finger inside the pockets. The pulp was carefully extracted and secretly popped into the mouth without the class master noticing it, followed by a form of regurgitation until the class ended or the pocketed supply ran out. Due to the velvety texture, suede shoes were even called *Gal Siyambala* shoes, at school.

Nature’s seasonal *Gal Siyambala* and *Gaduguda* drought has ended and spring has joyfully come and in June the *Gaduguda* summer will be upon us again, followed by the *Gal Siyambala* season in September. They will make their way from their lofty rural tree tops to the street markets in cities and towns; and at every school and at every Sunday fair the familiar fruit vendor will flaunt for sale his prized ‘*gotta*’ of the unforgettable velvet tamarind seed and the light olive green *gaduguda* to the insatiable delight and rousing cheer of its fervent fans, both young and old. The fiesta will soon be on.

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