Gramodaya Folk Art Centre

Posted on

Preserving Unique Traditions

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It is a place where artists and craftsmen can practise their skills and talents undisturbed; it is a place where young enthusiasts can learn artistry and craftsmanship from the masters themselves; and it is a place where tourists and visitors can leisurely walk about and experience first-hand the exotic, antique and much-heralded folk art of Lanka, all concentrated in one place. The Gramodaya Folk Art Centre in Sri Jayawardenapura Kotte, (10 kilometres southeast of Colombo) now open to visitors, has established, perhaps for the first time, an entire village dedicated solely for the purpose of rejuvenating and preserving traditional folk art, cherished in this _country for over two millennia. Gramodaya, the Sanskrit word for “awakening village”, was a concept initiated in Sri Lanka by His Excellency President Ranasinghe Premadasa, where government energies were to be directed toward building the country’s economy by revitalizing industry in the village at grassroots level. Fashioned after similar ventures, such as the famous Bansai Folk Art Centre in the outskirts of Bangkok, the Gramodaya Folk Art Centre offers all the trimmings of an attractive venue for an exhilarating day out for the tourist. But unlike the others, this one goes a step further by labouring to preserve the country’s indigenous folk crafts, in the very same atmosphere they were started by

our forefathers many centuries ago. Traditional folk art, according. co most people, slumped into a state of decay as an urgent need for urbanization engulfed the country during those early stages of economic development. As the inbred village talent migrated to the cities, Lanka not only began to lose a way of life cherished for over 2,500 years, but it also began close touch with an important part of its cultural heritage – folk art. That is why the Gramodaya Folk Art Centre in Sri Jayawardenapura Kotte, Sri Lanka's governing capital since 1985, stands above the concept of a place for entertainment and enjoyment. In addition to that, it is a reminder, in all its traditional glory, that folk art, or the art of the people, is alive and well in Sri Lanka. Nestled between the historic Diyawanna Lake, where the 16th Century Lankan King Rajasinghe II often bathed and played with his harem, and the Parliament, where present-day governors debate rules and regulations, the Gramodaya Folk Art Centre is quite inconspicuous to passers-by. It contains no tall buildings, no fancy auditoriums and training centres and no tell-tale signs of forced ruralization. Instead, this 26-acre spread of land is home to a dozen or so of Lanka's finest artists and craftsmen who have come here from all parts of the country to perfect, practise and preach their talents to 220 young trainees, also from around the country. Mentor and protege, both reside in nearby cottages and dormitories, in close proximity to their passion and livelihood, the workshop.

The entire village shines with its charming simplicity-its vernacular architecture of mud-walled and thatch-roofed buildings serving the purpose of its inhabitants, perhaps much the same way it was made centuries ago.

Each of the buildings houses one of the eleven workshops now operating in the village, where the master-craftsmen pass on their inherited expertise to the next generation, eager to learn.

These workshops, each consisting of 20 trainees, are: lacquer-work, natural silk, lace-making, rush and reed, leather, coir, woodwork, woodcarving and maskmaking, brass and silver-ware, pottery, lapidary and jewellery.

Each of the workshops is sponsored by an organization such as the National Crafts Council, Department of Small Industries, Export Development Board, Ministry of Youth Affairs and Employment and the Sri Lanka Handicrafts Council which assists in the establishment and conduct of the workshop.

Even though the village gives out an atmosphere of a rural and traditional setting, these workshops are far more comfortable and conducive to healthy production

than today’s industrial workshops. They are also equipped with all the appropriate technology enabling the craftsmen to incorporate tradition and modernity for the manufacture of a speedier and superior quality product. To assist the holistic independence of this artistic village, there also exists a health centre with both ayurvedic (indigenous) and Western medical treatment facilities, a herbarium, a herbal beverage kiosk, a canteen and a snack-bar, a sales centre, an exhibition centre, a children’s park, a playground and an open-air theatre, all of which simultaneously benefit the inhabitants as well as the visitors.

In addition to providing you with a window to many of Lankan’s traditional folk arts, weekly cultural shows are also held at the open-air theatre. Moreover, visitors may observe the preparation of local food and drink and taste them piping hot at the restaurant. Here you may witness a block of clay being sculptured into an attractive ornament, and then buy that same ornament at the sales centre.

Another popular event at the Gramodaya Folk Art Centre is the monthly pola or open market, held on the last Friday, Saturday and Sunday of each month. This event, which already attracts many bargain hunters from Colombo and the surrounding areas, is a perfect example of a jostling village market. Only here the merchandise is fresh, be it vegetables from nearby villages or handicrafts by the masters, sold by the producers themselves with the same kind of care that went into producing them. Perhaps this is the only market in Sri lanka that has done away with the middleman and brought the producer and the buyer face-to-face in an attempt to give both parties a valuefor-money deal. All this, however, goes beyond providing a show for the visitor. It is still very much the livelihood of an ancient and proud people yearning to preserve a way of life which has persisted for centuries. Irrespective of the visitors, the inhabitants go about their task of working, resting, playing and sleeping. Just like a regular village, this too is never “closed” to the public at any time. As a matter of fact, it is not unusual for the artists and craftsmen to be deeply engrossed in their work, during the wee hours of the night. As you walk this historic land inhaling the balmy effervescence of the ancient Diyawanna lake, imagine that you are stepping back in history. You are a Portuguese soldier occupying 16th century Lanka. You are walking through a mall village gazing at the inhabitants who quietly go about their tasks, undisturbed by your foreign presence. Quietly you move from one mud hut to another, observing carefully these cultured people existing in harmony with their surroundings. Snap out of it, and find yourself at the Gramodaya Folk Art Centre in Sri Jayawardenapura Kotte in Sri Lanka. Please note: workshops are closed on Monday and Tuesday.

However, visitors are welcome every day of the week. For more information, you can contact Mr. Felix Samararatne, Director of the Gramodaya Folk Art Centre, at 566716 or 507763.



The simple cottages of the craftsmen at the Folk Art Centre (Ishnals Samarasinghe)