

It's a Pambaya!

Posted on



The pambaya resembles a human figure. Many can be seen on the way from Arugambay to Whisky Point

Amidst the lush green paddy fields from Arugambay to Whisky Point, guardians stand at attention. Yet, looking closer it is apparent that these are not humans at all, but make-shift figurines that have been used since bygone days to protect paddy fields from hungry birds.

Words Udeshi Amarasinghe

Photographs Menaka Aravinda, Geeth Viduranga and Anuradha Perera



Scarecrows disguised in various forms

While many new innovations may have been introduced at times it seems the most effective are the simpler methods that were used in the past. The scarecrow or pambaya were made in the form of a human to protect fields and crop from birds who would be frightened away thinking that it was the farmers. From afar these mannequins, attired in various outfits, do look like humans.

The body of the scarecrow is made of straw and it is then dressed in shirts and trousers. The face too is at times made of straw and then covered with material and a cap or hat to cover. Alternatively, a clay pot or muttiya may also be used as the head. Thereafter, the figure is supported on a wooden frame to keep the scarecrow straight and tall.

As we journeyed along the Arugambay - Whisky Point road, we came across scarecrows dressed in shirts with clay pots as heads carrying bags and other utensils or tools; similar to a farmer going to work. Another was all in white, wearing trousers as well a cap; looking quite smart in appearance. Some took on amusing forms, with disproportionate figures and at times no face but a simple cap on top! At one point we even mistook a scarecrow for a person, but when we looked closer

we realised our mistake. This scarecrow had an umbrella as well. Some scarecrows were dressed in striking colours such as red and green, and would definitely make birds and animals think twice before swooping down on the paddy field.

The pela can be seen over lush paddy fields creating picturesque settings.

Similarly, other traditional methods are also utilised to ward off birds, such as old tin cans that are strung together on wire fences. Thus, when birds perch on the wire, or an elephant passes through the tins clatter and clang, warning both animal and man.



A row of tin cans create a rattling sound

Even in the present day farmers watch over their paddy fields at night. They stay in tree houses or pela and as an elephant approaches they will either flash a torch or make a loud noise. The pela can be seen over lush paddy fields creating picturesque settings.

While one may think that only human figures are used as scarecrows, another interesting method used in Whisky Point to ward off birds from littering or stealing food, is to place a hand-made figure of a crow. At first one would assume it is an actual bird and it is only when you take a closer look that you realise the bird is literally a 'scarecrow'.



Handmade crows - another interesting method seen in Whisky Point

Reconnecting with the past reflects the timelessness of these ingenious and nature friendly methods, an inheritance of knowledge from our ancestors. It is indeed refreshing to see these simple features of daily life that are invaluable traditions.

It's a Pambaya!

