Kokilai Island: A Way Of Life

Posted on



The estuary where we set off to the Island. Container trucks await fresh harvest of fish from Kokilai fishermen

Across the waters lay an island, quiet and unobtrusive. Within its limits nestled a fishing village, home to a steadfast community who have remained for decades amidst the changing tides and times.

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We had arrived at the Kokilai lagoon passing Pulmoddai at the farthest end of the Trincomalee District. Kokilai is believed to be the largest lagoon in the Island, and we had arrived upon its banks, dotted with speed boats belonging to fishermen. Across the waters were several islands, and a few lone fisherman waist deep in water, casting fishing nets or lines. All at once the sky above us burst into a feathery chaos as egrets, brahminy kites, comorants, herons and other wading birds flocked to the vicinity. These were indeed rich waters for both man and nature.

A container truck heavy with craters full of large prawns drew our curiosity. The driver of the truck spoke of an island across the lagoon where a community of fishermen called home. Soon we had our sights set on ‘Kokilai village’, that lay across the gently lapping water, at the outer edge of the lagoon. From the lagoon embankment the route led us on foot across sandy paths to reach the estuary.

Under an unrelenting sun we scanned the sandy expanse of the estuary where all was still. From here we had a view of the village where numerous speed boats were stationed around the island. We had to wait till a boat arrived to our shores so that we could ‘hitch a ride’ to the island. We milled about the sandy coast waving to a few fishermen across the lagoon as they cast their lines until at last we heard the sound of a motor boat ripping the waters in the distance.

Past the mouth of the estuary, we arrived at the island and parked amidst a throng of motor boats bobbing along the embankment

Once the motor boat filled with fresh fish was first unloaded into a container parked nearby, we had ample space to fit in along with the fishermen. Following a ten minute cruise along the waters, past the mouth of the estuary, we arrived at the island and parked amidst a throng of motor boats bobbing along the embankment. This was an island dedicated entirely to a fishing lifestyle. On the very shores were fishermen untangling their nets or putting out fish to dry in the sun.

We walked along narrow paths aligned with rows of houses that appeared to be temporary abodes. Yet their occupants reveal that families have been living here for many decades. Some have been here since childhood, growing up on the island and naturally dedicating their lives to the fishing trade. We found Upekha placing fish on an overturned boat curtained by a fishing net. She talks of the island of Kokilai with pride. Their lives had weathered the many storms that transpired in the past. Not natural disasters such as the tsunami nor the perils of war could drive away the communities although they suffered great losses at the hands of such events. What’s more fishing in the waters, their sole lifeline, had proved a challenge during these times.

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Kingsiri Peiris at a nearby house also reflected on a tumultuous past however, the times had changed. Today fishermen set off to sea in the early hours of the morning only to return by evening. Families of approximately 250 reside on the island, and

have been living here for the past 50 years. There grandparents or forefathers hail from Negombo, arriving on the island to better their fortunes fishing in the fertile waters of Kokilai. Mary Waas another resident on the island, who we encountered cleaning fish beside a tree said that villagers continue to return to Negombo for special occasions such as the Christian holidays during ‘pasku’ (Passover) or weddings. The village of Kokilai does have its own churches situated at two ends of the island where villagers seek spiritual respite.

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While provisions have to be transported to the island across the lagoon, there are a few shops that stock basic necessities, such as bottled water, soap, and rations. For any other needs the villagers must course the waters of the lagoon to visit the mainland. Walking along the narrow path observing a cross section of Kokilai Village, we found that many navigate the island on foot while a handful are owners of motorbikes or trishaws. The houses linked together on either side almost haphazardly, presented a collage of activity. In the late afternoon the atmosphere was laidback. Families were either resting, or untangling nets in the refuge of their homes. Some others were sorting the day’s catch to stock in ice and sell to merchants who journey with the fresh goods to Colombo and Negombo.

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Looking at the daily life and the close confines of houses, we wondered about access to drinking water. A villager making a run, carrying a bundle of cans, beckoned to us and we followed suit. While bottled water can be purchased if the need arose, freely available consumable water devoid of strong salinity was, a chance occurrence, we soon discovered. We arrived at the sandy shores of the waterfront to find villagers digging deep into the sand. The water that has seeped below the sand is the only freely available drinking water that can be found on this island. Villagers dug deep till the water appeared and promptly set about to fill the cans. Spots like these occur by chance, and usually last for almost a month before the salinity sets in again. Among the many who had gathered one woman dipped her cup with relish and drank directly to wipe away any doubt that we had.

A contemplative quiet ensued. This was their time, a few hours refuge from the chaos and hubbub that tomorrow would bring

Having visited the many humble homes and the ways of life in the Kokilai village,

we awaited our transport to carry us back to the mainland. We rested our feet as did the fishermen, sitting amidst their boats, and nets. A contemplative quiet ensued. This was their time, a few hours refuge from the chaos and hubbub that tomorrow would bring once more.

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