Lost in Banana Fields

Posted on



Makeshift trenches dug by farmers cross the field
Bananas emerging from the inflorescence commonly known as kesel muwa

Walking in the shade of tall banana shrubs, the distinct aroma of ripening bananas fills your nostrils. It’s the fragrance of culture and village life. Amidst the lush rural setting it’s the picture of serenity.

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Banana, the tropical berry, thrives in the Island’s climatic conditions. We crossed through Embilipitiya where the road is fringed with banana cultivations until we reached Sevanagala. The village marks the border between the Sabaragamuwa and Monaragala Provinces.

Here we slowed down near a makeshift fair, where vegetables, bananas and even curd were displayed for sale. A banana laden lorry had stopped along the road with excited children crowded around. A man, who we later learned was a farmer, was

engrossed in deep conversation with the driver. Once approached, he agreed to give us a tour of his banana estate.

With K H Premachandra as our guide we turned onto the gravel roads. The air was sweet with the pungent aroma of ripening bananas. Torn banana leaves clattered like the fringes of lanterns in the soft breeze. Shrubs though they are many mistake them for trees. Between the banana patches, there were blocks with paddy sprouting in the mud.

At a distance terraced rice fields adorned a hill, but as far as the eye could see, tall shrubs dominated the landscape, mostly bearing the Mysore type *Ambul* (Sour Bananas) or *Seeni* (Sugar Bananas) fruits. *Alu kesel* (Ash Plantains), which are popularly used for cooking and *Kolikuttu* (Apple Bananas) are other popular banana varieties grown in the area. However, farmers only attempt to grow *Kolikuttu* once as the trees contract a disease known as Yellow Fever after the first harvest.

The waters gushed along channels around the plantation, filling rough trenches and seeping into the mud. Flowing from the Udawalawe Reservoir they feed acres and acres of banana and paddy cultivations in Embilipitiya. Both crops need a fair bit of water to flourish.

> From here they are transported to shops across the Island and are even exported.

We ventured into the maze-like plantation, hopping over muddy mounds, crushing dried banana leaves under the weight of our steps and avoiding anthills with great care. The two-acre estate owned by Premachandra was a mature one and needed only bimonthly tending to. This usually involved raking out leaves, loosening the soil, nurturing it with fertilizer and ploughing trenches to ensure an even water flow.

Younger patches however need more care and attention. Before the leaves branch out shielding the soil from the sun, farmers are known to grow other herbs and plants in the same patch. Premachandra showed us a few withered chillie plants that he had cultivated before the patch matured.

The banana shrub, he pointed out, usually has three stems sprouting from the corm. The tall tree trunk-like sprout bears fruit until it is chopped down. The maiden sucker, the shorter sprout, is next in line to bear fruit. Peeping out from the corm is

the youngest of the three, the sword sucker, which in some shrubs we could barely see. With the chopping of the old and sprouting of new the circle continues until the shrub withers with old age. Its usual lifespan is five years.

Heavy bunches of bananas bore down on the shrubs, their dark green skin and small size indicating it was too early to be plucked. The *kesel muwa* or banana inflorescence shoots out from the heart of the tree, over time transforming into a bunch of bananas. The flower that sticks out of the bunch is usually chopped off to save the shrub further burden. Walking through the patch shielded by oblong blade-like leaves we saw these flowers scattered on the ground. All the parts chopped off the shrub are put to good use, especially to make delicious dishes.

An unusual sight was a bunch with green and yellow fruit. Usually the banana bunches are taken down before they are ripe for the eating. When the time to leave the mother plant is close, the *kesel kana* or bunch is covered in plastic sheets or bags. Farmers believe this makes the fruit plump while protecting it from pests. Here, the use of pesticides is rare with farmers spraying oils to ward off flies.

Just a few days ago a fair harvest had been collected from this estate. Usually a two-acre land provides a yield of 150 bunches of bananas per harvest. As always it was taken to the top of the road, where prices were negotiated with passing lorries. Farmers also carry the bananas to the Suriyawewa Fair for sale on Tuesday. From here they are transported to shops across the Island and are even exported.

Sheds stacked with bunches of *Ambul* and *Seeni* bananas were a common sight along the road. These wholesale vendors supply the fruit that adorns our auspicious festive tables to retailers. Amidst the wholesome stack of bananas its leaves had been piled in a hasty heap. It’s not an uncommon sight as the thick leaves are usually used to pad the bananas with a protective cover when they are stocked on to lorries or tied on to bicycles.

As we entered the premises we were greeted by a team busily weighing bananas on large scales. They are sold by the kilogram although consumers purchase a cluster called an ‘*averiya’*. The plump bunches were then heaved into the lorry. A few vehicles stopped by, their passengers making eager purchases to satisfy cravings.

Peeking into the plentiful banana estates and passing vehicles laden with the tropical berry, it seemed Embilipitiya’s bananas were in demand. How could they not be when the fruit is so intrinsically woven into Sri Lankan culture?

