



Pouring the boiled mee kiri into the clay hatti

I hid behind my friend as fear gripped me, I covered my mouth with my hand so that I will not make a sound. I was screaming inside my head wondering how I got myself into this situation. But I had to have a look and slowly peeped, yikes! A herd of female buffaloes had surrounded us, each watching us intently, cautiously coming towards us. I looked behind, it was thorny shrub jungle... We had nowhere to go!

Words Udeshi Amarasinghe **Photographs** Menaka Aravinda and Indika De Silva

Well, you may think I am exaggerating but that is not so, it was almost like in the movies. How did we get into this situation? We wanted to know how authentic curd was made. The first step was to see how the milk is collected. We met Lokugamage Manoj in Pallemalala, Hambantota on his way to milk the cows. At first he was hesitant, "harak kulappu wei" (the herd will get excited), he said. But we assured him that we will not disturb them. He agreed that one person can accompany him, but yours truly had to have a look. So my friend and I

followed Manoj to where the milking cows were supposed to be, while the other four stayed in the vehicle.

We walked along a small path away from the houses, into the shrub jungle that is prevalent in Hambantota. The Pallemalala tank was just across. There was a small enclosure where the calves had been kept for safety and I was wondering why Manoj had been hesitant in the first place. He asked us to stay near a tree and that he will bring the herd and we said "ok". Suddenly huge cows (female buffaloes) came into our view and they were not at all happy to see us. Their reaction was instantaneous as they sensed outsiders. All of them kept staring at us slowly edging towards us. Manoj called out to them and released one of the calves who quickly latched on to his mother's nipple to drink milk. Once the calf released it, Manoj started milking the cow. While all this was going on, the cows still refused to let their eyes off of us. My friend who was taking photographs just managed to do so, as any sudden movements would have surely made them angry. Manoj came up to us and smiled reassuringly, but advised us, "dodan nathuwa inna" (do not talk). I just nodded my head. Manoj was not scared of them at all, and whenever he gave an instruction they would listen to him, but their heads were always turned towards us.

Once he had finished milking, he came towards us and asked us to slowly follow him without looking at them. I must say I have never been so obedient in my life! Phew we were back on safer grounds and we soon learnt that these buffaloes were fierce because they were bedde harak but now domesticated wild buffaloes. During the day, they would go into the Bundala National Park, which was just across the tank and return in the evening. This was only the adult cows as the little ones were kept in the enclosure for safety. Apparently two litres of milk can be obtained from one cow, if there is sufficient water and food for them, and on a good day, a total of 25 litres of milk is collected from the entire herd.

Manoj and his family has had herds of buffaloes for generations and the current herd includes decedents of those that belonged to his family. As he has been with them since childhood, he is not scared of these animals and has a good command over them. So where does this milk go?

Our next stop was at Pradeep Kiri Hala in Pallemalala, where authentic buffalo milk curd is made. Gamhewage Punchi Manike had already started the day and was heating a large saucepan containing 14 bottles (10L) of buffalo milk. The milk is first heated well, until it starts to boil and rise to the surface. Then a specially made large spoon that has a coconut shell head, is used to stir the milk. As it boils a large spoonful of milk is taken and drawn out and stretched. This process has to be repeated another three times to make a total of four cycles. Nothing else is added to the milk, it is only the pure buffalo milk that is boiled. If the

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milk is not stirred and stretched when it boils, it will spillover. After the milk is stretched the level subsides until it starts to boil again. Once the four cycles are completed the consistency of the milk is at the required level. Buffalo milk has a thick consistency and is the best for curd while dairy milk is much thinner and as such will not set properly. This entire process takes about half an hour depending on the heat of the fire.

Punchi Manike took the milk off the heat and carried it to another room where new and cleaned hatti (clay containers) had been placed in two rows. She then took a small jug and started pouring the steamy milk into the containers. The room soon became filled with the flavoursome milky aroma.

“Api dan muhun ekathu karanna oney,” she said. Muhun is actually a sample of the curd that is made the previous day, which is collected in a cup to use for the next set of curd. Firstly half a cup of the Muhun is stirred vigorously so that it becomes a thick liquid, then half a cup of water is added and the concoction is mixed well. A tablespoon each of Muhun is added to the individual containers of boiled milk, which is then kept to set. These should not be covered, because then the curd will not set. It is always best when the containers are open so that the fresh breeze can cool it. From ten litres of milk, ten hatti can be made. By evening the milk will be completely set. Usually if curd is made the proper way, then the container can be turned upside down and the curd will not fall. Punchi Manike demonstrated this to us saying that she makes curd the proper way so that the people who buy from her get the best curd. Once the curd has set each container is covered with tissue paper and then it is ready for sale.

From this batch, Punchi Manike will collect another sample of Muhun. While we were waiting, Manoj came with a full can of milk, which he poured into the large saucepan and Punchi Manike started the process all over again. Punchi Manike makes curd daily and four people supply buffalo milk to her—three give her 14L each and another 28L. Pure curd made in this manner can be kept outside for a day and another five days if kept in the refrigerator.

Punchi Manike has been making curd for 45 years where her father had owned buffaloes and her uncle had owned a curd shop. Her skill and experience was very much evident in the manner in which she expertly made the curd.

The six of us sat around the table with a large hatti of curd in front. We served ourselves the fresh and creamy curd and added a generous helping of kitul pani (treacle). Yummmm, the flavour was delicious and the consistency creamy. We were happy that we had witnessed the making of creamy and delicious mee kiri...

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