

Nai Natavana Minissu

Posted on



Anthony plays to a mesmerised audience



The old man holds the flute to his lips. He blows the first notes and what appears to be a glistening silver rope glides across his shoulders. He looks frail but his fingers are steady as he continues to play. With a gentle slithering movement the snake slips from his shoulders to the ground. The old man looks up and sees his audience backing away; his face breaks into a broad smile. “Come” he says laughing, “Why are you afraid?”

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Of all the customs and livelihoods found in Sri Lanka, snake charming is one of the most unusual; it evokes a range of emotions, ranging from curiosity to fear. Snake charming is usually practiced by members of the Ahiguntaka (gypsy) community.

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Our search for the Ahiguntaka people takes us to Andarabedda, a small village off the Galgamuwa- Anuradhapura road. Andarabedda is not an easy place to find; at first, it seems as difficult to locate as the elusive gypsies who wander from place to place. We stop numerous times on the way to ask for directions to the village, which is home to the ‘nai natavana minissu’ (snake charming people), the popular name by which the Ahiguntaka community is known. Finally a small gravel path winding between dry shrub jungle takes us there. In the noon day heat the quiet village seems to be slumbering. Small houses appear at intervals. Vehicles are a rarity; a group of children turn to stare at our jeep. We overtake women walking home, they carry their parcels on their heads gypsy style, it’s mystifying to see how well they manage this balancing feat.

We are looking for one of the oldest inhabitants of the village, the Arachchi (headman) Rengasamigey Massanna. Everyone seems to know him, a chorus of voices points us towards his home and when we arrive we find a slender white haired elderly man, dressed in sarong, an amulet hung around his neck. He is happy to talk to us – “Come, sit” he says calling us inside and indicating the pedura (mat), the only adornment in the verandah of his small house.

There are many things that Massanna is eager to tell us, it's hard to know where to start. As the name implies the Ahiguntaka people traditionally had no fixed abode and travelled from place to place. We are curious as to how the gypsies settled in this village and Massanna explains that they moved here only in the 1990s after being given government land. He remembers that his parents used to load their goods on donkeys and travel from place to place in Puttalam and Mannar.

Even though they have settled homes the gypsy lifestyle still persists. Says Massanna, "We travel to far off places; Gampaha, Minuwangoda, Kegalle, Rambukkana, Matara, Hambantota, Tangalle... we walk everywhere to practice our trade of snake charming – some of us do fortune telling and work with animals as well." We can see this from looking around Massanna's garden where a small monkey balances on a wooden pedestal and looks at us curiously. Massanna takes his animals with him and travels to fairgrounds and markets to entertain people. Some of the poison fangs of the snakes are removed in order to make them less venomous, he says.

The village is a small one and news travels fast. As word goes around that strangers are here, more people appear and join the pedura or simply sit in the garden of Massanna's house. The women are dressed in redda and hetta and the men in sarongs but the presence of chains and amulets proclaims their gypsy heritage.

Massanna speaks to us in fluent Sinhalese, but we can hear the gypsies speaking amongst themselves in an unfamiliar language. "Telugu is our mother tongue" Massanna tells us. He points to one of the boys "We call him kurka (son). Kuthura means daughter." As he talks, another gypsy woman chips in with more words and phrases, everyone is eager to teach us something. Massanna speaks three languages, Sinhalese, Telugu and Tamil and can write in Sinhalese. "I have to be able to speak with people from anywhere in the country – otherwise how can I earn a living?" he says philosophically. He sounds regretful though that among young gypsy children, the use of Telugu is waning.

As we talk Massanna's brother Anthony disappears into the house and comes out carrying several flat baskets. He places the baskets on the ground in front of the house, removes the lids and takes out several flutes. The two brothers begin to play and gradually several snakes emerge, swaying and moving with sinuous movements, the dark markings on their hoods glistening in the sun. One snake slithers onto the ground and winds itself around Anthony as the sound of the flute echoes around the garden. It looks intimidating and in spite of Anthony's beckoning,

we refuse to get too close, much to his amusement. Unafraid he grabs hold of the snake with a practiced hand. The surrounding villagers watch, small children among them; this is obviously a sight they are familiar with.

The sound of the flute is hypnotic and the swaying snakes hold the eye; it's tempting to linger. But evening is falling and we have a long way to travel from this small village. As we prepare to leave, Massanna coaxes the snakes back into the baskets and carefully places the baskets back inside his one roomed house. To our eyes it seems a strange place to keep snakes; but for Massanna and his people, snakes are not a threat but an asset. For this old man who travels the road with his flute and his basket, his snakes are his livelihood, the means by which he survives. In his eyes, it's fitting that he chooses to keep them close.

Disappearing lives; the Wadiga people

The Ahiguntuka people are one example of a community that persists with its traditional way of life in the face of change. Other such communities exist in Sri Lanka, some already dying out as its members change to fit in with the society around them. About an hour's drive from Andarabedda is another small village; Ralapanawa which is home to some of the last descendants of the Wadiga community. It's believed that the Wadiga people have a Northern Indian origin. According to popular myth it's said that they came to Sri Lanka with King Sri Wickrama Rajasinghe, the last king of Kandy and the community is reputed to have had their own language and cultural practices. 71-year-old Gunapala is one of the earliest settlers who came to Ralapanawa. However he was not always called Gunapala. "Earlier I was called Mutthasami Weerappa Ponnaiyagey Mutthaiah. We came from the 'Wadiga paramparawa'. Later we changed our names and now I use the name Sandanayake Mudiyanalagey Gunapala," he says. Many villagers in Ralapanawa have now taken Sinhalese names. The use of their language too has declined. Gunapala remembers that his grandparents spoke a different language. "It was different from Tamil or Sinhala," he says, but he now cannot remember any words from it.

He, along with 13 other families came to Ralapanawa in the early 1970s and started the settlement that is now a small village. "Our children have all intermarried and now there is no longer a Wadiga generation," he says.

He seems to feel a sense of pride at their assimilation but there is also a sense of loss at how quickly a language and a way of life can disappear. (Refer 5-copy)

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