Panama beyond the surface

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The Panama Lake amidst the forest

We sojourned farther south of Arugam Bay to stumble upon a quiet village with unexpected stories, mysticism and bewildering traditions.

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Heading towards the Panama town from Kumana, we had resorted to a past time of restful gazing as we journeyed.

Admiring the pastel shades of the paddy fields at each stretch, what we did not expect to see amidst them were crocodiles! Yet there they were – a water logged paddy field, teeming with the stealthy reptiles. We spotted up to seven or eight before losing count. This spot is aptly referred to as Crocodile Lake and draws many visitors to see this spectacle and instantly wonder at how farmers could ever brave a foot into the murky fields. Amidst the crocodiles were an abundance of painted

storks lining the narrow bunds like sentinels, adding an ornamental touch to the unusual display of man and nature.

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The small town of Panama unravelled with its pockets of shops aligning the busy streets, and gave way to quieter precincts. Our first signs of rural life emerged with the golden paddy harvests laid out to dry. This quaint, laid back life and its people held a charm that we were eager to discover. Our guide, a man of these parts as well, promised to lead us to a long standing member of the community who would be able to shed light on a seemingly simple way of life.

Shedding all traces of the busy town, we found ourselves in acres of farming lands with plots of crops grown intermittently. The only sound here was the sweeping winds and distant conversation amongst a few villagers. We met Abeysinghe, at his little makeshift refuge or pela, a watch post to guard the many crops such as mung beans and peanuts.

We huddled inside the small hovel and Abeysinghe, a well known Ayurveda practitioner of the parts, obliged us with tales of Panama that came flooding from his memory – those that have been passed down as word of mouth from his forefathers.

The Panama village consists of five divisions and many of its inhabitants had arrived seeking refuge from a freedom struggle famously known as the Uva-Wellassa rebellion in the 1820s. However, fragments of clay pots unearthed from four feet underground serve as evidence of a civilisation that date further back in time. It is believed originally 20-25 families lived in the precinct. Aside from the Uva-Wellassa uprising, attacks from wild animals had also drawn many families from other regions to Panama. Today approximately 5,000 families reside across Panama which remains the only Sinhala village in the East.

This has been a result of marriage limited within the families, notably between cousins, over a period of time. However, the migrant families, who first found refuge here in the 1800s, comprised of more men than women and thus sought marriage from neighbouring villages. Abeysinghe retold a way of life where villagers collect honey from bees, hunt for game which they eat after preserving the raw meat in honey and consume tubers collected from the forest. Though there was a scarcity of

water the pond in the nearby vicinity – Magul Pokuna, never dried up and was where villagers bathed and drew drinking water from.

The Magul Pokuna exists even today and this Division of Panama comprising of 260 families carries the namesake of the pond to this day. In the present day it is paddy and chena cultivation that is prevalent with numerous crops grown and then taken to the Panama town. Others have also found livelihood by selling dry fish or making fresh curd. All in all, it appears to be a self supported, simple and unhurried lifestyle.

A more unconventional and somewhat intriguing amongst the village practices is the Ankeliya, a festival in veneration of the Pattini Goddess

Spiritual beliefs and faith intertwine irrevocably with the quiet everyday life in the village. The community harbours much faith in the blessings of the Pattini Deity and is venerated at the Angpiti Devale. The statue of the idol was first conveyed from Kandy and kept at Punchi Kebiliththa for safe keeping during the Uva-Wellassa uprising and then moved to Panama. Abeysinghe recollects the many mystical tales of first hand accounts of villagers. The appearance of a woman in white at the verge of disasters such as a conflict crossfire and the tsunami and the resulting salvation of the village are those that are told and retold and held in great faith amongst villages.

A more unconventional and somewhat intriguing, amongst the village practices is the Ankeliya, a festival held in the month of August in veneration of the Pattini Goddess. As Abeysinghe launched into the many baffling details, we felt compelled to visit the site of the festival at the temple premises to gauge a better idea of this complex ritualistic practice.

The rules and regulations in preparation for the festival are extensive and predictably women are not allowed to participate. It is even customary for pregnant women to leave the village to neighbouring precincts till the end of the festival that lasts for 12 days. Villagers also refrain from eating fish or meat during this period. The festival or the Ang Edeema Uthsavaya, (the horn tugging festival) is where the roots of the Andara Tree, which have hook like ends (ang or horns) are used. Two opposing teams, Udupila (upper team) and the Yatipila (lower team) participate in a tugging ritual. The horn roots are carefully selected for each team, and it is even regarded an accomplishment for a villager who is able to provide good roots for the festival.

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The horn of the upper team is latched to the Andara Tree at the Devale premises. Another tree trunk is rested in a ten foot deep rectangular hole cut into the ground. This is referred to as the Hena Kanda (thunder bolt). The lower team tie their hook to this tree trunk and the two hooks are then tied together linking the Hena Kanda and the Andara Tree. A rope is then tied to the opposite end of the Hena Kanda and both teams try to pull the Hena Kanda forward creating tension in the horn root link. This link eventually gives way and the team whose horn that remains intact is declared winner. What follows after is probably the most peculiar, as the winning team proceeds to unleash a tirade of expletives at the losing team! Here all men are on an equal plane, regardless of social class, creed or any other manmade distinctions. It must surely serve a means to diffuse one's anger and frustration, we thought amusedly.

The basis of this festival however, remains a little unclear. Some base it upon a legend in relation to Goddess Pattini, on an occasion where the Deity had gone flower picking with her first consort. Their hooks had intertwined and after a brief 'tug-o-war' the Goddess successfully released her hook from the entanglement.

There are two segments of the Ang Keliya sport, where the first five days is allocated for the young males of the age groups 12-15, called the Kolu Ang Keliya and the remaining seven days for the adults to test their luck. It is only after all these tests of masculine strength that villagers step inside the Pattini Devale. The Goddess is summoned by the villagers and a temporary shrine is built in each house. The lay custodian visits each house bearing the statue to invoke blessings. The entire village then proceeds with the Idol Pattini to the sea where the 'diya kapeema' or water cutting ceremony is conducted. Villagers then return to normalcy and conduct Buddha Pooja in their houses.

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Having observed the various elements used for the festival at the Angpiti Devale we headed on our way, a little perplexed and intrigued. We had already encountered more than we had bargained for but Panama had still more in store. Culture, livelihood and spirituality had enriched our experience, but its beauty too held a special allure.

Our guide led us to the Panama Wewa, located farther inland. The drive led us up to the Wewa or lake embankment and the rest of the journey was to be on foot.

We felt as though we stepped into a cocoon, as the arid landscapes and blue skies fell away. We trudged alongside the glassy surface that conjured a canvas of reflections for the trees that crowded both the embankment and the waters. Cradled in its shade and enchantment we fell into a reverie as we walked along the gravel path. According to our guide boat rides can be pre-arranged for tours along this pristine lake. ‘Crocodile Rock’ is a spot along the way where often large sized crocs are seen basking in the sun; however, we had arrived all too late for this spectacle.

From the Panama Wewa we made our way out towards the coast, to the Panama Beach. Unlike any ordinary beach, the coast here is arid desert-land, stretches of undulating sand leaving you a distant traveller cast out on a strange and unfamiliar terrain. Powdery mounds rose all around us as we careened through the dunes laced with creepers. Herds of cattle were camouflaged along the dunes as they nimbly descended the powdery curves. The dunes rolled out to eventually merge with the sea and we climbed upon the rocks to enjoy the views across the horizon.

This was a far cry from the vivid tales of mysticism, boisterous festivals and green fields and forests. But all about Panama had been anything but ordinary beyond its deceptively quiet existence.

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