

A quick stop in Illagolla

Posted on



The fields after a successful crop

Earthen tones of yellow swayed and glowed. The farmers of Illagolla had just collected their bounty from the land.

Words Keshini de Silva **Photographs** Menaka Aravinda and Vishwathan

Tharmakulasingham



The row of trees between the fields guards a stream

We had waved goodbye to a troop of mischievous torque macaques near the Victoria Reservoir. With the sun rising high, the drive became a hilly one. As the vehicle climbed through a bend in Illagolla, an expansive field of amber sprang into view. We stopped by to breathe in the fresh balmy air and enjoy the scene. A row of green divided the yellowing land and that coupled with the hushed sound of gushing water hinted at the existence of a stream.

A gravel road seemed to lead to the picturesque space, and there our quest began. The path was truly a rustic one, with only dry bushes in sight. The vehicle travelled as far as, what seemed to be a village school, and then it was time to hike. As we hopped off, grey langurs scurried into the thicket. There were two paths, we took the one that seemed to lead downwards, for the other seemed to be a climb.

The footpath did indeed reach the stream, where on its banks water buffalo grazed and bathed. Yet, we would have been better served taking the other, as the bridge we saw out yonder was connected to that path.

Unflustered we journeyed to the bridge, balancing over rocks, slipping in the mud and clinging onto thorny sprigs. The flat rocks near the tall steel bridge beckoned for a moment's respite to enjoy the zen of the flowing water that lulled the environs. We later learnt that the stream is fed by the Belihul Oya. And then over the bridge we went, where on the other side the sweet smell of paddy and grass kissed us in greeting.

Paddy cut with a sickle spread over the ground, colouring the field in the golden hues that caught our attention from the road above. We trudged over, trying our best to stay on the *niyara* (a thin footpath), yet with sandals and feet unused to the movement we kept slipping off. A great big water buffalo tied to a tree stared at our frolics in disapproval. Laden with a heavy sack, a man walked by, calling to us to watch out as the buffalo might attack.

We surveyed the land from a hut strapped onto a stone. The paddy fields of Illagolla neatly carpet the sloping land. As we looked on, a cheeky mongoose darted past, pausing momentarily to give us a daring look. Afar, underneath an immense mango tree, a crowd of men congregated. Despite being unannounced guests, no one shooed us away. Curious and trailing the scent of mangoes we walked over.

Once the rains start, the farmers would prepare the land for sowing, which takes place by the first week of December.

The farmers, it seemed, had been busy all morning, relieving the tree of its fruitful burden. In sacks, this high fibre *kohu amba* are laden in trucks that sell them off to markets in Dambulla.

While the others toiled on, two farmers John and Ranbanda, gave us a tour of their fields. They had just harvested the *Yal Kanna*, one of the two main paddy harvests in Sri Lanka, a couple of weeks ago. The haul was a commendable one, they said, showing us their own

personal stocks. Currently they are getting ready for the *Maha Kanna*, the main harvest. The amber paddy that painted a pretty picture, was being allowed to decay on the land. Once the rains start, the farmers would prepare the land for sowing, which takes place by the first week of December. And the decaying paddy of the *Yal Kanna* would nourish the soil for the *Maha Kanna*. It is this harvest that the farmers will rejoice in before the Sinhala and Tamil New Year in April.

We sat at the *kamatha* (threshing fields) sprinkled with *bol vee* (empty paddy), whilst the two farmers shared with us more details of their livelihood, offering us a few bananas in a show of true Sri Lankan hospitality. Each farmer's plot is divided by a *maha niyara* or tree, demarcations only they could clearly identify. Despite the invisible boundaries, it's a team effort. Ranbanda owns his own plot and during the labour intensive tasks of ploughing, harvesting and clearing everyone comes together to help him. It is the same for John, who rents his plot from a school master for a share of the profit (a system called *andey ta* in Sinhala). Pointing at the steep gradients of their field, the two said machine use was low due to this unique geography. Yet, they have no complaints, only prayers that the rains will start soon.

As mid afternoon approached, it was time to depart, as the busy farmers had much to do and we had far to go. An eagle perched on a tree watched us leave, almost as if to ensure we left only our footprints.

