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Posted on



At work in the heart of the feathery frond

Like many other delicacies from that region, the homely brew peculiar to Northern Sri Lanka originates from the Palmyrah tree.

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It requires great agility to be a toddy tapper

The sun is rising in the North. By the road are silhouettes of many new gopurams being constructed. Old houses which had gaping mouths and eyes and empty souls have been painted afresh and are now lived in, full of homeliness and life.

We were in Kilinochchi, searching for the real spirit of the North. This was not as elusive a quest as one might imagine. In answer to our queries in this regard, we got the same answer. The true spirit of the North springs forth from that tall sentinel of these landscapes, the Palmyrah tree. It is ‘Palmyrah toddy’, or *Thal raa* in Sinhala and *Pannang kallu* in Tamil.

The Palmyrah tree is part of the pulse here. It is not for nothing the Tamils call it ‘the celestial tree’. At almost all stages, the Palmyrah nut makes for a tasty and nutritious food. The seed as well as the shell of the seed, the kernel as well as the outer layer: they all have their own taste that the Tamils hold dear.

More elegantly called ‘palm wine’, toddy is made from the sap of the Palmyrah. The Palmyrah flowers are cut and clay pots are tied to the flower stump to collect the sap. The Palmyrah has a male tree as well as a female tree, and the latter gives 50 per cent more sap than the male specimen.

At the tail end of August no male trees were in flower, their season being from January to April. Only female specimens were available. So we drove through yellow fields in an evening to meet with a seasoned, wizened toddy tapper of Kilinochchi. Though the landscape was dry, it was blue, green and clean, with the yellow scrub by the roadside that crackled as some mammal or serpent moved through it.

We were soon met by the toddy tapper who, after greetings, chatted away freely in Tamil. He was sinewy, his sarong tucked up, his feet shod with black leather straps and a beedi in his mouth: quite a nonchalant figure.

He was as friendly as he was chatty. It was with a merry twinkle that he posed for the photographs. When he crawled up the tree it was with quick, measured, agile movements. Years of taunting gravity seemed to have given him a cocky confidence.

He climbs each tree morning and afternoon. With only his feet gripping the trunk, in an acrobatic position, he would collect the sap already gathered into a big blue can. Then the pots will be tied back. The toddy collected will be sent to be distilled.



The pot will collect and ferment the sweet white Palmyra sap

Once his feet are back on terra firma the tapper staggered with the weight of the can. The smell of the fermented toddy assailed our nostrils. It was part sweet but the other part seemed very strong and rancid: a fiery liquid strong enough to satisfy and appease the hard working Northerner at the end of a long day, as the sun sets in deep red against silhouetted Palmyra.

Toddy tapping is a livelihood and a way of living that is part of the texture of North Sri Lankan life. It will be so as long as Northerners crave their toddy, and as long as the Palmyra flourishes in these soils.



