



Celebrating the individuality of an ‘anonymous’ road

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The Devale of Kabalewa

The Hettipola- Kuliypitiya road is a stretch where you experience semi-rural Sri Lanka in her mélange of colours and cultures. Right in the heart of Hettipola where we began stood a church in grey-blue, crowned with four beatific angels, in the midst of a sandy compound. This was the Sacred Heart Church, a prime example of how a faith with roots in a cold, grey climate had changed colours in a warm, tropical background.

With tiled roofs, shades of blue, red and white, the church reflected the nature of local, rural Christianity.

An explosion of colours

The weekly Saturday *pola* (market) in the heart of Hettipola was the tropical version of a huge Arabian bazaar. It was like entering a pungent, colourful, magical world under a dark, low canopy. Inside the labyrinthine maze were heaps and mounds of vibrant tropical produce of every colour and shape as well as anything else you will need. No one in Hettipola foregoes the gigantic *pola*. It is a point of pride for them and a wonderful place to

haggle, gossip and enjoy, shaking off the dull monotony of the week.

Pretty plumes

Though Hettipola itself was busy and scintillating under the bright midday sun, after passing the town's perimeters the road ran under glades that created cool, dappled shadows. One of the first visions we enjoyed was of a small wewa (reservoir), thickly carpeted with lily leaves that created a haven for water birds. Elegant brown whistling teals with beaks prettily shaped like ladies' shoes swam gracefully while preening their feathers. The Purple coot hen, a grand dame coloured bright red, purple and green, picked her way gracefully through the mat of leaves with her beautiful, elongated, spidery feet.

Some water buffaloes were grazing in grassland. These animals, were almost always attended to by the immaculate stork who cherishes pickings off the buffalo's hide, a classic symbol of wild Ceylon due to their omnipresence in rural landscapes with paddy fields and perhaps their wild virility.

A Kammala

By the road stood a *kammala*, a blacksmith's workshop complete with an old leather bellows or "*mayina hama*". The blacksmith was rather proud of his bellows made in England, now aged a good century but still hale and hearty. He obliged us by showing how air is blown to the fire by handling the bellows. It was a treat to watch a village *Kammal Baas Unnehe* at work in an age when traditional blacksmithing is a dwindling craft. To oblige us he showed us how to bend metal on an anvil and how to punch a hole as well as grind. The shifting, fiery, red-gold heart in the dark, cavernous *kammala* was a hypnotising sight.

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A peek at rural life

The small lanes around here that snake into the interior from the road were lined with fences made up of woven coconut leaves: brown, primitive 'walls' efficient in providing privacy as well as a good degree of protection. Following a dust track that nosed its way to a village, we stopped by a house whose compound was awash with coconuts. Positively mountains of shells and nuts sprawled across the garden. Here an enterprising family turned their coconut into *Koppara* or dried coconut, which will then be turned into oil at a

mill nearby. You must climb a wooden stairway to peep into the blackened furnace where coconut halves are dried. Underneath the furnace fires are lit. After a couple of days in the furnace, the meat would shrivel up and can be scooped from the shell easily. While the *koppa* goes to the mill to become oil the shells are sent away to be turned into charcoal.



Coconut estates in the last hour of dusk

Art on wheels

The most common vehicle on the road is the lorry. Covered with colourful, if sometimes lurid, art, they blast past with goods strapped on to their roofs, often engaged in long journeys from one end of the country to the other. “Lorry art” is mostly idyllic pastoral scenes, painted on the wooden flanks. The letters spelling names of the proprietor and his company are works of art themselves, filled with anything from fancy scrolls to idyllic riverscapes and beachscapes. Such spectacular lorries, however, are getting increasingly rare today.

If you loiter off the beaten track just a bit, you will come across the coconut estates that are

the pride of Kuliyaipitiya. They spread on and on, groves of palms like spindly candles topped by feathery green and yellow fronds. In the golden evening sunlight, the estates are lit up, and the shadows of the palms fall like black stripes crisscrossing the gold. At the edges of these vast estates, by the roadsides, we were greeted by men selling bags bulging with roasted peanuts. There was also a miniscule 'house' on wheels, with its top compartment stuffed with plump loaves of bread for dinner and the lower compartment heaped with sugar loafs and other tidbits.

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Devale of Kabalewa

The last leg of the trip led us to Kabalewa. Almost before the end of the road we turned off and, after a kilometre's drive, surprised a devout mass of humanity. Incense streamed out from the entrance to the ancient devale of Kabalewa and prayers and urgent drumming throbbed, exciting in the dusk air spread out with the prettiest, mellowest colours.

Kabalewa is the main seat of god Siddha Suniyam, the god who protects villages and houses of the whole country, revealing himself in his good avatar or bad, as occasion demands.

In Kabalewa, Suniyam is represented with the statue of an old man with the mount of a white horse. Coiled around his neck and feet are black cobras. On his face is stamped a stern, admonishing look. In his earthly life in a mythical age, he is said to have been a contemporary of god Kataragama, according to folklore a "protector of the law." Even after being deified this is still the hallmark of Suniyam: he ensures that justice is carried out in society.

The temple was overflowing with devotees seeking blessings and grants from the god as it was Saturday, the day of pooja. Suniyam was being placated with the offerings he favours particularly: basketfuls of white Pichcha or jasmine, roasted rice and a cup of honey.

Our journey ends...

Kabalewa was the climax and the finale. We soon emerged upon the bright lights of Kuliyaipitiya, twinkling in synchronization with the stars beginning to dot the skies. The day had come to an end.

A Road Little Taken

