Rottaikulam’s Lulls of Life

Posted on

Boats seamlessly blend with the natural scene at Rottaikulam

The sun set over the banks of the Rottaikulam reservoir in the East Coast, creating a mesmerising picture of the co-existence between man and Mother Nature.

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Pottuvil, except for the towns, is an endless landscape of lonely fields and pools of water. Scattered man-made structures and herds of goat and water buffalo are the only indication of life. Travelling from Whisky Point along the main road in Urani we made a swift turn entering a small gravel road. After a few minutes the landscape

changed.

Small houses with gardens where bicycles were parked came into view. Children peeped over the short fences while women seemed to be engaged in animated conversations near the gates. The scene on the left was much different. It was an unending view of green paddy fields. At a distance we saw the dam of what we later learnt was the Rottaikulam reservoir. From atop it we enjoyed a 360-degree panorama of an eternal landscape showing the seamless integration of man and nature.

Reservoirs, called *wewa* in Sinhala or *kulam* in Tamil are invaluable to Sri Lanka’s agricultural industry. To strengthen the economies of their Kingdoms, Kings of the ancient saw to the creation of reservoirs. Though the name of the ruler who sanctioned the construction of Rottaikulam had been lost with time, years on it continues to serve its purpose. The livelihood of the village centred on this tank.

The soft winds touched over the water creating ripples before flowing over the fields and making the paddy sway to the same tune. Water from the reservoir gushed through small streams, feeding the fields. Men squatted near them with their fishing lines cast, hoping for some luck before dinnertime. We were amazed at their patience. Makeshift wooden huts protruded from the fields. From here farmers guard their crop at night from wild animals. On days of hard ploughing, planting and harvesting with the hot sun bearing down, the farmers use these shacks to catch their breath in the shade. Here they would sit and sip a cup of tea, before heading back to work. Hanging over one hut was a tin used to make noise to drive off elephants at night. A slingshot indicated a farmer had been here guarding his crop from the birds that peck at it during the day.

A fisherman casts his net

Beyond the reservoir there was a patch of green and in it a lone bull elephant was having its fill of the foliage. Oblivious to us watching from afar, it went about its business pausing momentarily to fill its trunk with water and squirt around. An eagle soared over the reservoir; herons carefully took aim from a tall tree; they were on the hunt.

An excited yell from the bushes on the left drew us to a small pool of water. On its sandy banks a crocodile was lazing. At the crunch of a foot stepping on dead leaves it slipped into the water. Momentarily it peeked its head, but only for a brief second. They seemed to be camera shy. As we headed back onto the bank of the reservoir the sky was a shade of orange and pink. Undisturbed the elephant continued to feed. Birds were flying towards the grove of trees nesting on familiar branches. A silhouette of the hills between forest and sky completed the backdrop.

As we strolled along the dam a canoe set out to the waters. We were enjoying the clean air and breeze that kissed away the heat of the sun. By the time we reached its mooring place, the boat was near the rocky island in the reservoir. Other boats were lined up on the shoreline ready to be cast out. These are traditional Sri Lankan canoes with an outrigger to maintain balance. Their owners scattered in groups chatting hurriedly in cheery voices.

Laden with nets a few fishermen squeezed themselves into one and set out. One steered, guiding the canoe to deep waters with experience. Another stood ready to cast the net, gathering it in his hands he looked like he was checking the net. After all, fish slipping out would be a waste of an effort! The boat came to a stop. The

fisherman cast his net. He gave it a few minutes before pulling it back in. Gripping the net with one hand he pulled it in a bit at a time to ensure the net would not slip. He held the end filled with fish against the boat, draining the water. The catch was a success! There would be fresh fish for dinner tonight.

As the sun dipped further crowning the skies with darkness more boats set out. With a fresh catch of “*wew malu*” as they are called in the local vernacular we headed back to our hotel Paper Moon Kudils. After an evening well spent, the night and good catch called for a beachside BBQ.