Simple yet Intricate Baskets of Weeravila

Posted on

Caught in a trance I watched as the hands threaded in and out, conjuring an intricate pattern with a palmyrah leaf. By and by, a dainty basket with shots of pink entwined in the natural yellowish hue of the leaf took form, depicting the handy work of the people in Weeravila, Thissamaharama.

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What are you looking for? How about a small basket to take flowers to the temple, or a basket to carry to the market? Hounded by numerous such questions we

crowded into a small shop – from the many that dotted the roadside of Weeravila – to take a closer look at the products that were on offer. Winsome smiles greeted us as eager hands shifted through the baskets, hats and other various items keen to show the best wares in the shop.

The products were fashioned out of palmyrah leaves and obtaining raw materials have proved to be quite difficult in recent years due to restrictions, making villagers travel as far as Thirukkovil, Ampara to get leaves for their treasured vocation. Leaves obtained thus are transformed into simple yet cunningly crafted patterns that can be utilised in day to day life. Layered with either tin or thatched roofs, the lives of the people in the shops depicted a lifestyle synonymous with their craft, simple yet hard working, as they strove to earn their upkeep while doing what they love.

Palmyrah Leaves are transformed into simple yet cunningly crafted patterns that can be utilised in day to day life

Spread in the small courtyard of the shop were palmyrah leaves that were being dried in the scorching rays of the sun. At another corner of the shop we observed as a weaver took a curious looking equipment to shred the wide leaves that were already dried to smaller strips. Made out of what seemed like iron, the instrument, secured to the table, had four evenly spaced blades through which the leaves were split and was an invention devised to make work more efficient. The ends of these strips were then snipped off to make uniform pieces and some were kept apart to be dyed in a variant of colours that are brought down from India and sold in Galle.

In order to dye the strips, first water was heated up in a frying pan and the dye, dark pink in colour, was added. When water reached the boiling point, a bundle of strips were placed and were mixed using sticks to coat each strip evenly with the colour. As we watched each thread became almost a luminous pink. After about five minutes the bundle was removed and soaked in cold water before being spread out in the sun to be dried again. Once the strips are thoroughly dried and crisp, the colour sticks and does not rub off. Though only 12 colours are available, villagers have expanded their selection by blending different hues together.

Dexterous hands quickly wove through, starting from the bottom of the basket or bag

Once the strips were ready, the weaving took place and dexterous hands quickly

wove through, starting from the bottom of the basket or bag. The bottom of the bag was woven with much care with thicker strips, with a weave called ‘the knot’ by the villagers, resulting in a tight knit that was both sturdy and intricate. From there on the body of the bag was constructed alternating between coloured and natural threads – at times diverting from the mundane to create a motif such as a flower. A fancy handle or even a simple one topped off the finished product presenting an eye catching merchandise.

While we were engrossed in watching the basketry that presented a distinctive experience, we were being equally scrutinised by the inquisitive gazes of several children who darted away as soon as we made eye contact. As they drifted from our gaze, their fading laughter brought a smile to our faces as we relaxed amidst the familiarity and warmth that encircled the surrounding. This amiability could be seen and felt in each design that is undoubtedly touched with the villagers’ skill and affection for the art that provides the sustenance in their everyday life.