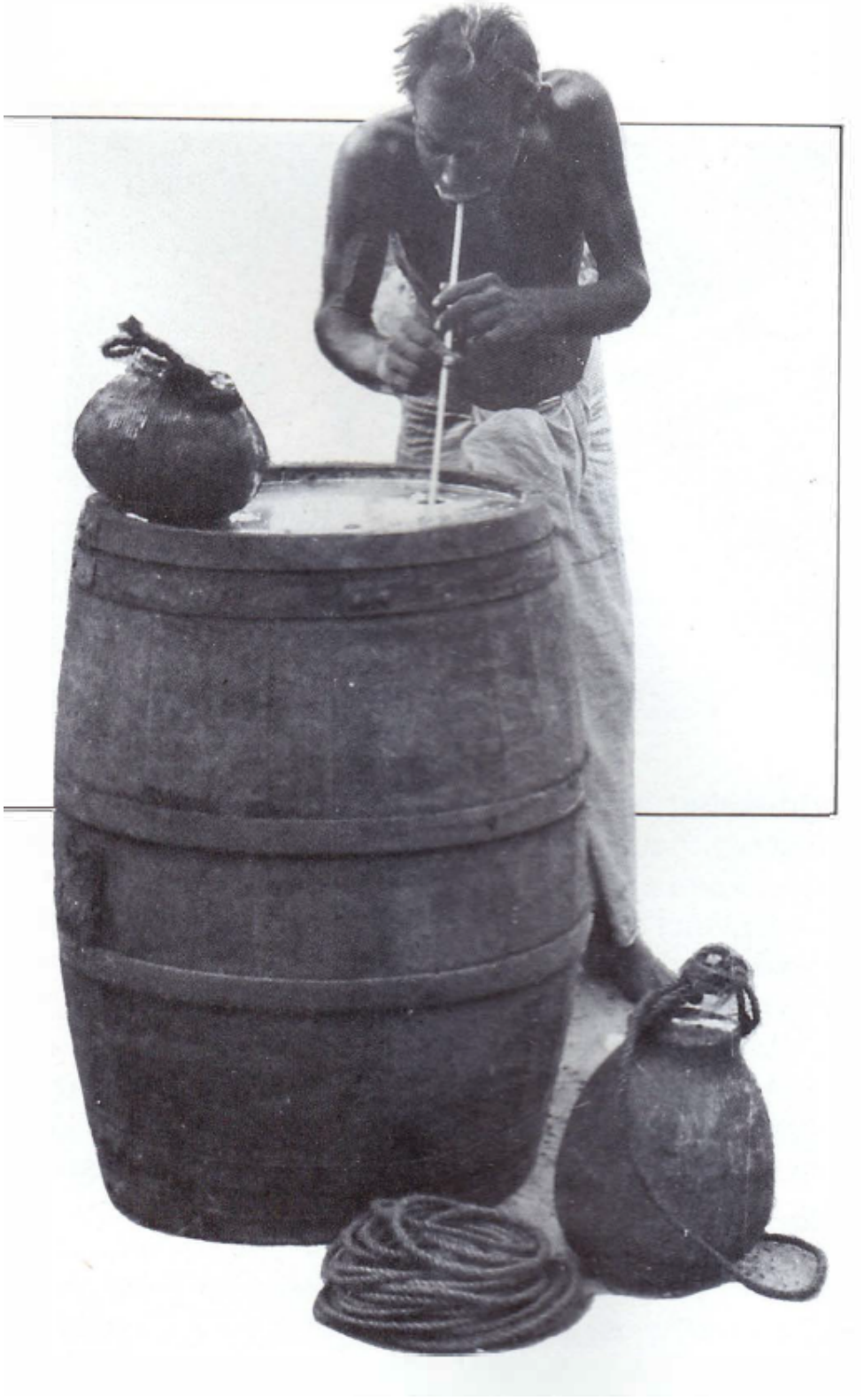
Tap – Tap: It’s the Toddy Tapper

Posted on

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Drinking Toddy straight off the barrel using the hollow stem of a *papaya leaf as* a *“straw” Photo – Pushpakumara Matugama*

Why don’t you try a little of the local stuff?” asked my chauffeur-guide-friend as we cooled off by beautiful Weligame Bay at the end of a pleasant but tiring day. I had already clasped the second can of Heineken to quench the thirst of a whole day. My friend, Siriwardena (“call me Siri”) had already finished one ***tot,*** as he called it, of ***arrack,*** and he was halfway through the second.

“You really think I should?” I asked, temptation already getting the better of me. “Of course you must try it. It is the taste of this country,” said Siri. “I am told it is very strong.”

“Not any stronger than the whisky you drink, and it has its own special flavour. How can you come to a country and not taste its best known drink?” He was persuasive; I decided it would be foolish not to try arrack. He ordered a V.S.O.A. (it means Ve1y Special Old Arrack) and suggested Ginger Ale as a chaser. The drink looked in vi ting-rich caramel hue of deep golden brown. I took the glass to my nose. The alcohol hit me with a clear whiff, but not too strong. I sipped a little. The flavour was not anything familiar. It was dry on the tongue and throat, but with a mellow aftertaste. It was neither scotch, nor brandy, although close to brandy. Close to bourbon, too. As it went down the throat the zap and fire of good Vodka was also noticeable. I was having my first arrack and enjoying it. On Siri’s advice, I put plenty of ice cubes into the glass and poured in a generous portion of Ginger Ale. As the warmth of the arrack coursed through my body, I felt the tiredness of the day drifting away. “How is this stuff made?” I asked Siri. It was his description of it all that made me take an extended break at the Toddy Tapping Zone on he western coast on my return to Colombo two days later.

The ‘TT’ Zone of Sri Lanka is a beachcomber’s delight, with miles and miles of beaches and the graceful palms, without which the beaches would lack beauty and charm. But my search was for Toddy and the Tappers. If you have the nose for it, you can pick up the mildly pungent smell of fermenting toddy as you drive along Galle Road, that runs through all these towns. The symbols of toddy are unmistakable: the large barrels by the road; the smaller pyramid-shaped buckets with the tops open, painted red: the ox carts with huge wooden barrels; the coconut trees with stepping rungs made of coconut husks tied to the trunks; and the ropes that criss-cross the aerial scene.

That is the special world of a Sri Lankan Toddy Tapper. You meet him on the road, a slightly built man, well brown all over, wearing but a narrow loin cloth. Some wear a golden amulet on the upper arm, or around the neck, others a crucifix strung on a black chord. It is easy to tell a Buddhist from a Christian this· way. They are wiry men, not muscular, but with plenty of strength in them. Below the waist, almost in the fashion of gunmen of the wild-west. he wears a toolkit made of wood. It has a wooden mallet, a -sharp sickle-shaped knife, a large knife, a little pouch in which he has the tapping bone, and the herbal paste which is his secret.

A coil of coir rope (made of coconut fibre) is slung on one side of the waist. Also hanging is a large gourd made of a hollowed pumpkin. The Toddy Tapper’s day begins early. With the light of dawn he climbs the first coconut tree. They usually grow from 40 to 50 feet. The days work begin at the crown of the tree. Toddy, in Sri Lanka, is the word used for the extracted sap of the coconut flower. The flowers grow in creamy-white clusters from a single large spray- 2 to 3 ft long- and enclosed in a spathe. In full bloom the spray bursts out of the spathe. To obtain toddy the tapper binds the spathe tightly with string made of coconut fibre to prevent it from opening out. For nearly 14 days he beats the spathe for about 10 to 15 minutes each day with the mallet and the special tapping bone he carries for the purpose. The tap-tap of tapping can be heard throughout the day in any tapping area, somewhat like a woodpecker at work. At the end of this pretapping period, the spathe with its flower enclosed, has been well beaten until it begins to slump downwards. This is the time the real tapping begins: the toddy extraction the tap for the sap.

The tapper now uses his sickle-shaped knife to gently slice away the end of the spathe. The sap begins to ooze into the clay pot that is tied just below. Each day, he takes off a fresh slice of the spathe to extract more. Sometimes, if the flow is not sufficient, he applies a little of the special herbal paste onto the wound on the spathe. He uses the large knife to cut the dry branches, old flowers and clear the crown of the tree where he works. The sheer height of coconut trees and the labour involved in climbing each tree to tap has led to the tappers discovering the most ingenious way of moving from tree to tree. Trees in one plot, numbering from 10 to 25 and each about 20 feet apart from the other, have two ropes strung from tree to tree, from the crown of one to that of another. They are strung with a gap of about five feet between them.

As he finishes tapping one tree the tapper will nimbly step on the lower of the two ropes, holding on to the one above. From there he walks the aerial ropeway, doing his daily trapeze act, high above, with no net to hold him below. He moves from

tree to tree with ease, to tap or collect toddy. The pots that are full are emptied into the gourd he carries and lowered, to be poured into the smaller barrels on the ground. A fresh pot is tied below the flower to collect the sap for the next 12 to 24 hours, depending on the productivity of the tree. Most tappers finish their day’s tapping by noon or early afternoon. They tap about 40 trees a day. Some tappers manage 100 trees a day, which is a full day’s work. Often he treads the aerial ropeway in the evening too, to empty the filled pot of toddy and place afresh one. In the afternoon and in the evening toddy tappers enjoy the toddy they tap. Toddy is a sweet drink when fresh, liked by many Sri Lankans, and believed to be nutritious. But when sweet and unfermented it has no “kick”, which comes from fermenting, and toddy ferments fast. The best, lightly fermented, is available at toddy taverns along the western and northern coastlines of Sri Lanka, at around 10 a.m.

The experienced locals drink it off a coconut shell! Others use large tumblers,which can hold about a litre. It is drunk the way Germans or Australians drink beer -no silly sipping. I have seen some seasoned toddy drinkers take it off a clay pot, drawn with a “straw” which is the hollow tubelike stem of the papaya leaf. Some wine stores in the city sell bottled toddy, but most of that drawn by the tapper is taken in huge barrels to distilleries where it is fermented and distilled into proof arrack. This is the base from which the State and private distilleries make their arrack, of many types and grades. There is the Ordinary Arrack, which is a purely coconut based drink, as one Old Arrack, Double-Distilled Arrack, and V.S.O.A. Extra Special Arrack is a blend of coconut toddy distillate and sugar based spirits. There is Gold Label Arrack, Gold Seal Arrack. Premiums such as Polgoda Walauwa and Mendis Special.

Toddy is also from what good Sri Lankan vinegar is made -am just in the preparation of pickles, and many savoury curries. It is said to be a good meat tenderizer. Toddy also produces coconut treacle and coconut jaggery-a traditional sweet fudge and is used in the making of other sweets. The next time you have your drink of coconut arrack, or break journey at a wayside tavern for a long drink of toddy, don’t forget the Toddy Tapper on his aerial ropeway who makes it possible. Have one more drink to his health.



The Toddy Tapper steps on to its aerial ropeway. Photo – Pushpakumara Matugama



A Toddy Tapper gourd in hand walks beside a barrel of toddy being rolled on the road.