The Basket Weavers of Alavala

Posted on



A woman weaving a bamboo reed strip through the stiff frame

The hands wove in and out, quick and precise, guiding a strip of bamboo reed along the frame. Soon a basket took shape and the weaver held it at arms length to examine his handy work. Seemingly satisfied he tossed it to the growing pile of baskets in the small sandy garden in front of his house.

Words Krishani Peiris **Photographs** Damith Wickramasinghe

Basketry in Sri Lanka runs back to many centuries and was identified as a caste-based craft. During these olden times, the use of baskets were regarded to be more utilitarian than decorative and certain areas or villages were dedicated towards the art of basket making. However, through times, this has changed and the basket weaving culture of Sri Lanka has embraced all decorative as well as utilitarian purposes while a commercial element has been added to present a lucrative market for the weavers.

Though the practices of ancient Sri Lanka has scattered now, there are still some villages where many families are employed in the traditional craft. One such village is Alavala, located in the Gampaha District. It is believed that about 80 to 90 percent of the families living in this village specialise in making bamboo reed baskets to be used in the exportation of betel leaves to Pakistan. Though the beginning of this industry in the village is shrouded in mystery, the villagers credit a man named Adiris for the start of this industry. Apparently he has first commenced this industry by cutting and shipping bamboo reeds to other locations in the country. However, as time passed on, basketry was introduced and the natives of Alavala believe that the village has been involved in basket making for more than 60 years.

If asked about how they obtain the bamboo reeds nowadays, many villagers would not be able to resist first recalling how they used to go into the forest areas located nearby in search of bamboo reeds. Many would reminisce the hardships of prowling through dense thickets as thorns and branches scraped their feet and hands. However, now due to the depletion and restrictions in carrying bamboo reeds, villagers buy reeds from sellers that obtain stocks from far away places such as Ratnapura and Girimale.

In order to commence weaving, first a reed is slit into four to six stakes where some are made thicker and slender than others in order to make the sturdy frame. A sharp knife is used in the process and the villagers stress the importance of being careful as the newly slit bamboo stakes have sharp edges that could easily injure one’s hand. From the remaining stakes, the bark is scraped off and the stakes are further slit into thinner strips. Thin strips are deemed easier to weave and as they weigh less, it is also considered to be more economical. A completed basket should weigh around 400g.

After slitting the reeds, a piece of paper with a circle – 14 inch in diametre – drawn in the middle, is used to make the frame as one quickly and deftly arranges and assembles the thicker stakes using the circle as a guide. Another stake is then snaked around creating a circular base after which the protruding ends are bent to form the outer frame. Next the long strips are woven, from bottom up, through the frame and as a final touch a lid is also made to complete the basket. The height of the finished basket is about nine and a half inches.

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One basket weaver makes at least 15 baskets each day and buyers cruise the area everyday picking up the finished lots from the villagers. At times even the children help out with small tasks such as making the frame of a basket – after school – as they are keen on aiding and learning this fascinating art. However, during the time of Ramazan, the demand for the baskets is less and the villagers take this as an opportunity to make more baskets so that when the time comes they would be able to sell more.

Simple and unadorned the baskets may be, they showcase the time and dedication of a group of people that has made these betel leaf baskets their main livelihood. Therefore, the basket that the Alavala basket makers weave, are intricate yet simple, reflecting their way of life that continues to flow onwards amidst times of happiness and hardship alike.

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