

The Bullock Cart: Sustenance To Life

Posted on



Though now a symbol of simple country living and an almost extinct sight in even the smallest towns, the bullock driven cart has a past simultaneously illustrious and commonplace, embedded in Sri Lankan life.

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To introduce the bullock cart in Sri Lanka, it's always a two wheeled vehicle led by a bullock as per the name-sake, sometimes hooded and some-times not but most often open and airy. The style of bullock carts differed by regions and cultures but the basic structure always remained uniform.

As the sole mode of road transport for Sri Lankans not so long ago, the bullock cart not only aided in transportation for villagers on their journeys but also in relieving the burdens of their livelihoods, being used in carrying items such as wood, grain,

hay, vending items and any heavy loads from kerosene to laundry over longer distances.



The barabage enhanced by a protective mesh for carrying coconuts

Bakki karaththe

Traditionally...

as a mode of commuting it was a symbol of social status with differing varieties used by the commoners and the elite. The thirikkale and the bakki karaththe, were often used by the higher echelons of traditional Sri Lankan society. The thirikkale, a single-seater bullock cart was used mainly for racing by their affluent owners. The comfortable bakki karaththe, so called due to its basin (bakki) like space at the bottom, which allows legroom for its passengers to be seated comfortably, was often used by the likes of the village headman or dignitaries. It was also considered an essential part of the wedding retinue in the past as the vehicle that the couple set out on, in their new wedded life.

The larger *bara karaththe*, driven by two bulls and its half the *barabage*, driven by a single bull were used by the common folk for travelling purposes and for the conveyance of heavy loads. Often when transporting grain rice the carts had a hood covering usually made out of dried coconut palm leaves for the protection of the staples from the elements.

Vendors transporting goods of all sorts in a procession of *bara karaththe* and *barabage* was a common sight in the olden days. An entourage as such travelled great distances in search of marketplaces for their goods and drew strength against loneliness and thieves as a coalition. In long journeys the larger *bara karaththe* was attached with a space for rest or sleep beneath its underbelly for the carter.



Hauling coconuts with the help of a cart, Girtland Estate



A modern version of a *barabage*



A *thirikale* in Galle

As Part And Parcel Of Sri Lankan Life...

it was these two latter types of carts that were closest to the hearts and souls of the

masses, becoming a source of inspiration for storytelling, poetry and song. Perhaps greatly influenced by the Buddhist standpoint of the unending trailing of karma compared to “the cart wheel following the steps of the bullock,” the common carter’s life hand in hand with the bullock’s was depicted as one of hardship.

Evolving With Times...

and occupations the bullock carts are seen less often as a mode of commuting and transportation. The use of the thirikkale and bakki karaththe has died out since many decades ago and the bara karaththe and barabage are now an almost exotic sight in the midst of the city, to be seen infrequently in the suburbs and progressively lesser in the countryside.

A Sustenance To Life...

The bullock and cart are rooted in the country’s past and present, as a confidante of both noble and commoner, as a friend who proudly took on the burdens of the natives’ livelihoods, as a provider of prosperity to the household, and as an inspiring muse for the literary mind. It has throughout time imparted nourishment for body and soul and still continues to do so.

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A kerosene cart making its way through Marine Drive



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A carter in Kalmunai going about his daily work



Allimulai junction, Nindaur,
Akkaraipattu Road

