The Hustle of Hasalaka

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A lush corn field that sprouted from bright pink seeds just weeks after being sown

Surrounded by the Batagala mountain range, a little farming hamlet and its residents set out to work one afternoon…

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A luffa nearly ready for harvest

We were travelling from Mahiyanganeya through Hasalaka heading to Colombo, when a tidy field of dark green caught our attention. Corn seemed to be growing widely in Sri Lanka and so with curiosity on our sleeves we turned to a narrow road

to get a closer look. But what we stumbled upon was not just a corn field, it was a vegetable patch surrounded by hilly mountainous views. Tended to by people who had stories to tell with subtle smiles on their faces.

A little boy and his family walked us to the field where the villagers almost in unison looked up. The croft didn't belong to one particular family. Each villager had their own section, but everyone helped each other during the season. They would work in one vegetable patch till harvest then move on to the other, coexistence helped sustain them. The system also kept them busy till the arable land cultivated rice and ensured an income throughout the year.

The season for paddy cultivation had already waved goodbye to the zealous villagers. During our visit they were tending to another livelihood, growing vegetables. These succulent fresh rewards of labour that are nourished by the moist soil of Hasalaka, have a demand in the nearby towns and the city of Colombo farther away. Yet, for these farmers this was more of an occupation of necessity than of choice. Growing up in sleepy Hasalaka, running in fields their fathers and forefathers had worked in and dancing with hay as youngsters, these villagers enjoy the simple pleasures of life. Karunawathi in a *reddai hettai* (cloth and jacket) was planting something we had never seen before. Bright pink corn seeds that looked like magic beans that would produce a giant corn once planted. Her timid voice broke into giggles every time we asked a question as what was novel to us had been familiar to her throughout her entire life. Once the corn harvest is reaped and gathered, the corn plant becomes infertile, unlike the other plants here that keep producing three to five times per harvest. Then it must be uprooted and replanted. However, the nearby *thalanabatu* (thai eggplant) patch bears fruit every week for three weeks according to Karunawathi.

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Watakolu (luffa) grew in a vineyard like patch. With tiny yellow flowers budding, it gave notice to the farmer that the harvest could soon be collected. However, these vegetables require great care. The harvesters call the treatment *Saaththukaranawa,* where compost is made in the backyard of the farmers' residence and fertiliser is sprayed particularly on *wambatu* (brinjals) a day after harvesting. After about three

rounds of harvesting, the plant would eventually become of no use. Yet the cultivation of onions, pumpkin and snake gourd would keep the farmers in the field.



The hard-working women of the hamlet

They buckle down to work in the afternoon, before sunset, when the kids have returned home from school. Raveendra, an owner of a snake gourd patch made rounds with his son observing the plants that sprouted even with low rainfall. The weather changed whenever it felt like but the unpredictable changes didn’t stop the farmers of Hasalaka from doing what they needed to do.

> *These succulent fresh rewards of labour, nourished by the moist soil of Hasalaka, have a demand in the nearby towns and Colombo.*

While most live close to this large multi-crop plot, some live beyond the Batagala mountain range in another village, a two-hour journey by foot. Yet, the fast approaching darkness resulted in a reluctant turning down of the invitation extended to us by the farmers to visit their homes.

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Tip toeing around and slipping off mud mounds our feet found ways to linger in the moist hamlet for seconds longer. The little boy sprang to his mother’s arms and hid

himself behind her floral skirt. The farmers were almost done with their day’s work and we waved goodbye to the boy whose hat was lost in the haystack, leaving with the hope of getting to taste the reward of his family’s hard work back in Colombo.

